

Halfway Home XIII

Beginnings



Department of English

香港城市大學
City University of Hong Kong

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Table of Contents

Table of Contents	i
Foreword.....	iv
Preface	vii
List of Contributing Authors	ix
Editorial Board.....	x

Short Story

Beginning of a New Era	2
Leung Ching For, Marvis	
Hospital	9
Tsik Yan Tung, Denise	
Writer's Block.....	16
Ho Lok Yan, Elsie	
Someone You Love	24
Lam Sum Yee, Ingrid	
Once Again	33
Johanna Muliani	
Colour Blindness.....	40
Wong Kwan Yin Mendoza	
The Road to Betterness.....	46
Cassidy Law	
Sunday.....	53
Magnolia Maninggo	

The Beginning	57
Marc-Andre Noel	
The Wounded Deer.....	62
Ng Kai Yeung, Kenny	
The Beginning	69
Cheuk Chun Ming, Theodore	

Poetry

When the Celebration Begins	76
Leung Ching For, Marvis	
I Believe.....	77
Ali Raza Jatoi	
(Untitled)	78
Charis Lo	
Two Sonnets of a Melancholic Feminist in Love.....	80
Chu Ka Nam, Keith	
Nanay Rosita.....	82
Elisha Ariana F. Andres	
The Thirty Fourth Beginning of Spring.....	84
Liu Meilong	
As the Bell Rings.....	86
Ng Hang Yu	
Plath	88
Riccardo Marco	
Swept Away — A Villanelle	89
Yeung Nga Yee, Winnie	

Non-Fiction

Beginnings of the Insatiable92
Cheng Yee Nga, Andrea

The Beginning from an End — a Widow’s Ordeal.....96
Adedipe Demilade Tunrayo

The Beginning100
Ali Raza Jatoi

Fulfilment.....102
Lai Chun

Alpha.....105
Wong Yu Yan

Foreword

Why do we write? Manifestly, to communicate, especially when that which we wish to communicate requires a degree of sustainability not afforded by the spoken word. Frequently, of course, we write because we are required to: emails, reports, tax returns, and thank-you notes are all examples of written genres which are produced at least in part out of obligation rather than choice. For students, that category of must-write texts includes assessment writing: essays, reports, exams, slides to accompany presentations...the list goes on; in fact, at certain pressure points in the academic year, it may seem to go on endlessly.

That fact—that being a student inevitably involves a heavy writing load—makes the works in this collection all the more remarkable. Their creators, tasked with a long “must-write” list, nonetheless chose to spend their discretionary time writing more. This demonstrates eloquently that one of the reasons we write is because we find some sort of reward in it. Searching for the truest words to describe a nuanced emotion in a poem can require considerable effort, but it is repaid when the words lead to a new way of understanding that emotion. It takes commitment to keep sweating that idea for a short story to cultivate the original and slough off the formulaic, but the process not only requires but also reproduces creativity. Relating an autobiographical moment to unknown readers places that moment in a new frame, providing a new perspective on it. Turning a wordy text into a concise one demands—and confers—the ability to work out what we really mean to say. Taking and using feedback teaches the ability to adopt the reader’s perspective, to close the gap between what we mean and what is understood. Choosing to sit and write and resist distractions cultivates discipline. Perhaps best of all, there is sometimes the satisfaction of having nailed it, of having expressed an important idea with elegance.

Writing gives us all of this and more. Very few people find the act of writing to be effortless, but like a good workout in the gym or a month of healthy eating, what is hard in the moment pays off for a long time afterward.

And that is, above all, a reason to celebrate the volume which you hold in your hands. It features a range of creative, expressive works which are a pleasure to read, and that would be reason enough. It is the result of hard work and determination on the part of the students who produced it, and that too is a very good thing. But most importantly, the works in this volume signal that their authors recognise that writing is learning. In choosing to write, they have made an investment which will pay lifelong dividends.

Professor Diane Pecorari
Head of the Department of English
City University of Hong Kong
April, 2023

Foreword

Spring is upon us and the world itself seems to be awaking from the enforced slumber of the COVID years. If we grow sleepy in the fall, slouching towards the shorter days, in the spring semester, we thrill to feel the bustle of the campus start up again, as CMC grows abuzz with eager students beginning yet another semester. This academic year, the halls of campus again rang with the clapping footsteps of harried students and professors, trying to remember where classrooms are, how long it takes to run to the cafe for a snack, the excitement of introducing oneself to a classmate, face-to-face. In so many ways, we are beginning, yet again—learning new things, yes, but also learning old things anew. It is fitting, then, that the theme for *Halfway Home* this year is “Beginnings.” I sometimes jokingly refer to the pre-COVID moment as the before times, but the truth is that every ending also constitutes a new beginning—a fresh approach, a novel outlook, a creative work-around. As you flip through the pages of this journal, we invite you to reflect on the fresh starts of the previous year and the various ways we are beginning again. Emily Dickinson wrote that “forever is composed of nows.” And every now, is, after all, an opportunity for a new beginning.

Dr. Jerrine Tan
Assistant Professor
Department of English
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Preface

The EN Student Publication Team had one question in mind when planning Halfway Home XIII: Every story has a beginning, what's yours? Beginnings is an all-inclusive term. Inception, de novo, or rediscovery all encapsulate what beginnings can be, and this is exactly what the team wanted to know from talented writers.

Evolving from last year's theme, nostalgia, the theme "beginnings" aims to look forward instead of backwards. Just like many lost souls, I have also found myself struggling to move forward from a life that was in stasis. Lamenting at how perfect life had been before COVID-19, what I failed to realise was that looking backward kept me from exploring new possibilities. When the idea dawned on me, new dreams and goals surfaced, and hope resurfaced.

After the enforced pause of the pandemic years, it's good for us to reflect on what it means to begin again. Whether those who seek to look for new beginnings, or those who wish to pick up and continue where their life was in 2019, there are countless stories to tell after this experience. Perhaps the introduction of a terrible event is essential to what beginnings are. After all, the old high German word *in-ginnan* means to cut up and begin. Broken items become much prettier after *kintsugi*, as the breakage in pottery is mended by gold. So, it seems perfect for us to delve into what beginnings could be given that our lives and plans have been cut short and changed by the pandemic. Every piece featured in this year's publication is an encapsulation of what 'beginnings' could mean for Hong Kong, a place that is more beautiful than ever.

Ng Kai Yeung, Kenny
Editor-in-chief
EN Student Publication Team

Acknowledgments

The EN Student Publication Team would like to express our gratitude to our supervisors Dr. Jerrine Tan and Dr. Jeffrey Mather. We are thankful for all the support towards our strange and unruly ideas. Your active involvement has guided the team into creating a successful publication, going the extra mile just to ensure this year's book would be just as good, if not better than the previous volume. Your help has been vital for the book, and for our growth.

Special thanks to Dr. Jakub Morawski, Dr. Klaudia Lee, Dr. Jenifer Ho, Dr. Paul Corrigan, Ms. An Ko, and Ms. Belinda Ko. Whether it be a judge, an editor, or allowing us to promote the publication in class, we are grateful for your contributions to our project. Your careful eye and edits helped polish Halfway Home into the publication that it is. Thank you for devoting your time to making Halfway Home XIII a great publication.

A hearty thank you to the administrators Ms. Cecilia Chan and Mr. Chris Leung. Your patience and kindness kept our project running well and organised. We especially appreciate your generosity and help when the team stumbled across difficulties.

The team would also like to give thanks to Darren Budiman, who graciously provided the team with his picture "Hong Kong in the Morning", used on the front cover.

We would also like to give credit to user ANTON icon on The Noun Project for his works "Reforestation", "Rose", and "Apple" which we used on our section dividers.

Finally, please accept our deepest gratitude to all the authors that contributed to our magazine. Your stories have helped create a beautiful book that encapsulates what creative writing is.

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SHORT STORY



Beginning of a New Era

Notable Piece

Leung Ching For, Marvis

Diocesan Boy's School

The entire place felt like a dream come true. Beneath the clear azure sky stood overarching skyscrapers, each dignified and prominent. The bridges were filled with racing cars and trucks, vibrant and exuberant as they were always meant to be. Alleys and streets were full of life as people swarmed in and out of buildings from one place to another, all carefree and oblivious to the events that had occurred to allow this peaceful serenity in the first place. As an old figure limped around the vitality-filled streets, he couldn't help but sense a long-since-forgotten feeling blossoming within his chest. The feeling of hope. The feeling of a new beginning.

The gaping black sky hovered not far from the earth's surface, with a deathly blood-red hue seeping underneath. Sheltered within what remaining darkness the night could provide, the unrelenting bells of gunshots chimed.

At the beginning of the end, Esperan contemplated. He clutched the grip of his rifle until his fingers turned white. Even with situations as dire as they were, he didn't seem too affected. All that remained in the black void of his soulless eyes were bloodshot drained pupils, nothing more. The blood on his battered suit had dried, emitting a foul stench he was already all too familiar with.

Since they'd begun, the days had gone by with velocity far beyond a speed any bullet could have imagined going in their wildest dreams. It also took more than any arsenal could ever wish to, Esperan checked his remaining firepower. Whenever he let his hefty eyelids fall shut, even if momentarily, the only afterimage he could perceive was the manifestation of the graves

he'd helped fill. Those who had believed in him, those who had devoted their lives to his cause, who'd fought for their families in his name, honour and influence. Those who he'd called friends...

He checked his remaining ammo once again. The magazines were filled, he'd make sure of that each and every time. He reached into a space in his belt and produced a silenced pistol, it was for when he ran out.

All around the bunker was where some of his teammates lay, slumped up against the walls while the others were out there fighting for their lives. As the last line of defence for the world they believed in, they had to keep fighting. Regardless of how much their candle of hope dwindled in this brutal storm. There were times when Esperan would come to question himself. When he'd stare down at a pool of his pale reflection and contemplate his decisions. We're too far in this to quit now, too many sacrifices have been made. We can't have empty hands to show for it, they won't forgive us, they won't forgive... me.

Esperan gingerly pushed the hatch open, producing an ear-piercing screech in the process. But he didn't flinch, compared to the other things he'd had to hear, the noise sounded like music. He stared up at the night sky as a light breeze whispered away into his ear, he treasured the cool as it lasted on his face a moment more, then diminished into nothing altogether. The stench of gunpowder wasn't leaving any time soon, and he made a silent prayer as he glanced up at the jet-black sky. It was almost entirely devoid of stars, with only one managing to seep in through the endless sheets of pitch black. Back at the beginning of the war, he and his soldiers had looked up at it as the insignia of their hope, a sign that one day they would prevail utterly victorious in the war. They titled it the beginning of a new era.

Esperan suddenly felt old as he emerged from the hole entirely. The last time he checked he couldn't have been more than 50, now his legs felt weak and frail as they carried the weight of his armour, and possibly something more, on his shoulders.

In the periphery of his vision, Esperan caught sight of the Launching Zone. The one sight that had the ability to alleviate his peace of mind. Paradoxically enough, though it was built and utilized during the war, it certainly felt like a machine from aeons ago. It was evident proof that even if they lost, they wouldn't have failed everybody. I hope the civilians out there are safe, Esperan had ordered its construction as soon as the war broke out. It was an evacuation centre for the ones who believed in his cause but were not suitable for fighting, with the whole exodus being led by his most trusted ally, Fortalez. They were launched off into the cold bottomless void of space in search of a new home and were to report once they'd found a satisfactory planet. Esperan's heart sank as his bundled memories unravelled and he once again recalled not having any recollection of a report since then.

He looked up at the sky as if seeking comfort. But amidst the mood of the sky, the star's brilliance no longer penetrated the endless shrouds of darkness, if it was even there at all. Esperan was at a loss. But he had vowed to himself to never show negative emotion, with morale at an all-time low, he was the teams' final anchor that bound them to sanity.

As the drums of gunshots ebbed away, he paced back to the lip of the hatch. Dropping down on his haunches, he looked down the hole, "Break is over fellas, we make our last stand here and now." The team started in a caterwaul, only to have the noise die away as they recognized what must be done. And before long they had all dragged themselves out of the hatch, looking as battered and wary as ever before.

There weren't a hundred of them in total. And deep down Esperan knew, had known, that this wasn't an effort at reclaiming their ideologies. That phase was far behind them. This was their farewell to one another, where they would part ways for eternity and achieve a final rest. This was their requiem to those who had gone before them, to tell them that they had given it their all. It had never been enough.

On their final march, Esperan mulled over the events of the entire course of the war, determining if it had ever provided any semblance of contribution to their cause. The rifle was now more tightly gripped in his hand than ever before.

The team walked on in silence, letting the remaining gunshots echo through what once had been a flourishing city. Through the charred perimeters of what had once been dazzling infrastructures, one could easily imagine the near-utopian place this particular city once was. Where the empty sky laid unoccupied was where towering skyscrapers had once stood tall and proud. Where cavity-filled pillars now stood dully were where bridges had once perched, accommodating the vitality of the city as cars raced through its pathways. Where empty streets now lay dormant was where the shops had used to be, with neon signs filling the air and ubiquitous ambience all around. Except now imagine was all one could do.

As the team rendezvoused with the rest of the soldiers on the battlefield, they got a rundown of the situation, and to no one's surprise, it was far more dire than imagined. The enemy had broken through all of the lines so far and the team had been forced off into the far back of the field. Not to mention the fact that their numbers were dwindling in the wake of the enemy's overwhelming forces.

It was then that Esperan finally broke. He propelled his rifle onto the floor at full force and punched a nearby ruin, feeling his knuckle crack at the

impact. This entire time he'd been trying to make some meaning out of the war, to prove that in the clash of ideologies, he was ultimately correct. But nothing mattered now, especially not when it was about two hundred of them going up against an armada of countless battalions.

Esperan felt his breathing rasp as his head seemed to implode inwards. Hyperventilating as his eyes grew ferocious with intensity, he stared at the floor and clutched his head tightly with both hands. The blood on his hands suddenly grew more apparent, and the empty promises he'd made were feeling heavier than they'd ever been. He fell on both knees and felt his teeth grind against one another. He couldn't tell what the others made of this scene. Not like it mattered anymore.

The bottled-up emotions, the dread and uncertainty he'd felt since the beginning, the people whose lives he'd cost, plus the inevitability of the defeat. It was all starting to burst through at once. And he couldn't contain it anymore. He needed to release it all.

As the people around him shot uncertain looks at each other, Esperan started chuckling. Then the chuckle burst into tearful hysterical laughter. As more fear seeped into the eyes of the many, the gunshot sounds suddenly seemed distant and far away. One of Esperan's closest friends reached out a hand to his shoulder as an act of comfort, but before the touch connected, Esperan fell quiet. At a moment's notice, he was on his feet again. All solemn and sober.

Then he started walking. Alone. Towards the legion of enemies.

The general of the enemy awaited him, guns down and fists raised. As if he'd been waiting his entire life for this one moment. Esperan's eyes darted from the floor straight into the gaze of his adversary, with deep hatred running between the contact. As everyone around them put away

their weapons and surrounded in to watch the epic brawl that was about to ensue, something out of the blue happened. A soldier spotted it first, then another, and then soon all but the two generals were gazing in awe at a massive object burning into the atmosphere, crashing in at a rapidly accelerating speed.

What happened next was a blur to Esperan: The object was revealed to be a high-tech spaceship, and from within emerged hordes of soldiers. As they emerged, they started gunning down the enemy in batches. Soon, more spaceships landed, and before long, the land was flooded with such soldiers. Before long, one soldier marched up to him and knelt down on one knee. Esperan was so shocked he was almost dazed. *Fortalez?* And when the soldier looked up, a bright grin on his face, Esperan couldn't have felt better.

After the chaos that ensued had settled down, Esperan found his adversary tied up against a poll. At the mercy of him and him alone. In the final days of the war, where Esperan had not once, even in his wildest dreams, imagined standing over the enemy in a victorious light, now found himself exactly where he was.

It hadn't been for naught after all.

It took another decade to get the place back out of the state of ruins that had previously been engulfed. But after years of work from Foralez's architects, the region was back in shape. And hope had begun to blossom in everyone's hearts.

Years later, the entire place felt like a dream come true. Beneath the clear azure sky stood overarching skyscrapers, each dignified and prominent. The bridges were filled with racing cars and trucks, as vibrant and exuberant as they were always meant to be. Alleys and streets were full of

life as people swarmed in and out of buildings from one place to another. As a battle-worn but smiling Esperan limped around the vitality-filled streets, he couldn't help but sense a long-since-forgotten feeling blossom and swell within his chest. The feeling of hope. The feeling of a new beginning.

Hospital

Tsik Yan Tung, Denise

St. Paul's Co-educational College

Hamilton, Scotland, 2300 hours, December 31, 2022

A low incessant whirring filled the room as the girl blinked slowly at her unfamiliar surroundings, her eyes gradually coming to focus as she overcame her grogginess. She grimaced at the sight of her IV insertions and placed her left arm awkwardly at the far end of her bed. She'd always hated the sight of that thing. With vague snapshots of the events from the previous hours, she gingerly reached towards the right and pressed the "nurse" button. A small smile creased her lips as she thought about her last hospital visit not six years ago.

Cambuslang, Scotland, 0600 hours, September 1, 2017

"She's perfect," the young mother whispered as she pressed her newborn to her chest. The baby let out a tiny whimper as she stretched her stubby fingers for the first time, pink skin looking almost translucent under the fluorescent light. "Let us take her for a minute, Sarah, we'll be back shortly," a nurse suggested gently, showing a curt smile. The swarm of medics left the room and shut the door behind them, but not before a sympathetic remark from the nurse snuck its way back into the room.

"Only 17... what a shame..."

Lying limply on the bed, Sarah had no strength to scream at the nurse, nor did she have any grounds to do so. Her eyes misted as she glanced around the deserted room, her mind wandering, eyes landing on the fogging window.

Could she know that she was now a grandmother? Did mother's intuition allow her to feel the pain that had just taken place in this room? Her fingers itched to reach for her phone and dial that familiar number, even if she would only be met with cordial disappointment, just to hear that homely voice.

What about him? Could he know that his daughter had been born? Did he even care? The room's vastness loomed as she blinked away her unsolicited feelings. Sarah bit the hangnail sticking out of her right thumb, gnawing at the stray bits of nail and skin peeling from the side of her raw fingertip as she stared at the faded sickness-prevention posters on the wall.

Adrenaline was still pumping strongly through her veins as the weight of the future began to wear her down. The bedside calendar marked today as September 1st, the start of a new school year. 17 years old...she was supposed to be starting her senior year, yet here she was, lying in bed in a hospital gown, school the farthest thing from her mind after being suspended for the last six months. For the first time since she was asked to leave, Sarah let herself imagine what her friends were up to—the pre-school jitters, the shared stress of public exams, the camaraderie shared in a class... Instinctively, her arms stretched to hold her heaving belly, only to stop before touching the thick bandages atop her fresh scar.

A cool autumn breeze intruded upon the secluded silence of the hospital room, a shrill whistle announcing its arrival. At the interruption, Sarah grew entranced by the hollow clarity of the sound, its brevity causing her to remember her boyfriend's whistling. A lump grew in her throat as she pictured his bloodshot eyes as he stood at her doorstep, leaning against the moulding wooden edges of her door, a crack developing in his voice as he told her how he was forced to cut contact with her and the baby.

Sarah grew hot and bothered as the hatred she had at the time came back in haunting realism, it was not toward him nor herself for what their impulsive actions had caused, but at the life growing within her. Her fists were vaguely reminiscent of clenching up, wanting to punch her baby to death, wanting to rip the baby out and be done with it, yet the punches never landed. Her fingers would soften as they stroked the strained material of her clothes, they would dance animatedly atop her stomach as she recited fairytales to her unborn child, all alone in their musty apartment.

Shaking her head to block out the memories dragging her down, Sarah took a deep breath hesitantly, wary of her newly-acquired scar. She stared at the blank white sheets, laid upon the blank white mattress, in front of the blank white wall. Feeling alienated in this perfectly white world, her mind began to spin.

“Shhh... it’s okay, you’re back with your momma now,” a bubbly nurse whispered toward the baby. Sarah felt a buzz in her head, as if she were hearing voices from afar, as if she were sinking into the sheets and the world was fading into a fuzz. For a second, it felt nice, as if she were leaving everything behind, as if her misery had come to an end. Then, it was as though her mind hit the brakes, her baby! Just as she was about to scream out, she felt a warm bundle crash against her chest, a firm weight that her arms unpromptedly cradled. The heap on her chest wriggled and cooed, each delicate movement seemed deliberate and exhausting for the little life. Saucer-like eyes bore into Sarah’s soul, watery and round, as if they were looking beyond her, as if they weren’t looking, but simply feeling.

She ran her blistered fingers over the baby’s tiny face, taking in each perfect feature, each heaving breath that caused its entire body to rise and

fall. The new mother found herself at a stalemate, waiting patiently for her baby to take the lead, as if it were to tell her what should happen next.

Hamilton, Scotland, 2310 hours, December 31, 2022

The hallway grumbled with hurried footsteps beyond Sarah's closed door, she couldn't help but grin with anticipation at the sounds of her excited family. "Momma, momma!" a girlish voice squealed, breaking the silence of the room. Five-year-old Amber sprang into the room wearing a "I'm a BIG SISTER" shirt, the bold letter print fully reflective of her excitement. Sarah watched as her fiancé gave her a wan smile before gently tugging their child away from the hospital bed, his bloodshot eyes squinting at the bright lights.

Glancing around the room, Sarah's pulse quickened as she felt an unspoken blanket suffocating each adult. Her parents exchanged concerned glances as her fiancé busied himself with the air conditioning switch, fiddling with each knob in absentminded focus. Amber tugged at her father's sleeve, "Let's show mum the baby!" At the stab of this sudden request, her father's face turned bright red, and he turned to usher her out the room with a gruff mutter.

Sarah's pulse quickened immediately.

Where was her baby? What had happened to it? Why was her fiancé crying? Her stomach twisted into a knot as her heart shook vigorously, tears pricking at the corner of her eyes as she imagined the worst possible scenario. With her mind spiralling off into a sea of anxieties, the icy wind howled a sinister melody, slamming against the windows noisily. Sarah's father quickly latched the windows shut as her mother walked over to the bed. "Darling," she whispered, reaching over to stroke her hair, "the baby is in the NICU right now..."

“They say everything’s alright,” she quickly added, “but he probably won’t be home for a couple days.”

Without a second’s room for hesitation, “I want to see him,” Sarah said simply, and adamantly crept off the bed, holding her IV as she slowly stepped toward the door. Her parents followed her, sharing a look of concern as they walked silently to the NICU. Peering through the glass, Sarah saw a room filled with vacant cribs, with only a few babies resting in their solitary incubators. A nurse checked Sarah’s hospital band, nodding with sympathy as she opened the doors for them to enter.

Within the room, silence was a sound of its own, there were no baby cries, nor were there the excited whispers of new parents. Only two nurses stood in the corner of the room, tinkering with some monitors and charts. Sarah absent-mindedly took her mother’s hand, squeezing it tight as she was guided to her baby boy. The young mother stifled a cry as she stared at her son lying silently in the incubator, his skin suckled with various tubes and bandages, a tiny sliver of paper cradling his tiny wrist, number 2MXI6801. With a pounding heart, Sarah raised her hand and brushed her fingers against the cold surface of the glass, a barrier between his world and hers.

All of a sudden, the monitor next to the incubator began to screech, the graphs jumping in strange directions before flatlining. Sarah screamed in horror, her hands clawing at the glass, trying to retrieve her baby who laid in absolute silence. Her fists marred the glass strike after strike, her desperate grumbles unheard by the baby inside. Whipping her head around, she was appalled to see that her parents were no longer by her side, nor were the nurses at their station.

“Doctor! Help! Somebody, help!” Sarah cried out in helpless earnest. As she began to swoon toward the ground, her thumb grazed a previously

unnoticed latch on the side of the glass chamber. Sarah quickly undid it and lifted her son out, his head lolling lifelessly against the crook of her arm.

“Doctor!” she screamed desperately as she noticed a white-robed man approaching the large glass pane at the end of the room. Her son’s head banged against her chest as she rushed to the glass, gesturing for the doctor to help her. To her shock, he turned away from the glass and conversed with a colleague in eerie calmness. Unable to hear a word through the glass, Sarah wailed in distress as her body gave out and slid toward the ground, her son’s skin turning completely cold under her fingertips.

Hamilton, Scotland, 0000 hours, January 1, 2023

“We’ll have to up her dosage of clozapine, this is getting out of hand,” a middle-aged man said, “would’ve done it sooner, but the ban doesn’t lift till tomorrow.”

Next to him, a young man glanced at the chart in his hand. “Will her heart be able to handle it? She has a history...”

He stopped as he heard his mentor sniff—it was his sniff of disappointment.

“I’ll go fill in the form for the meds now,” the houseman muttered. He looked at the patient, unable to meet her crazed eyes as he pursed his lips in reluctance.

“Wait.”

The houseman turned away from the door to face the attending doctor. Could there still be another way?

“Happy New Year,” the doctor said, adjusting his thick-rimmed glasses as he nodded toward the clock.

“Yes,” the houseman replied, “Happy New Year.”

As he turned away from the hall once more, the houseman caught a glimpse of the woman shaking her doll frantically, mouth ajar in a muted scream. He thought he saw his mentor let out a light sigh, but probably not, he thought, shutting the door firmly, its lock announcing a binding click.

Writer's Block

Ho Lok Yan, Elsie

St. Mary's Canossian College

Ada was 70% certain that she was the only real living thing in this never-ending loop of a world.

To be fair, it wasn't until the sixtieth run that she began to notice that chairs would suddenly change colours. Nameless pedestrians would glitch and move in ways that defied human biology. There was also this whole thing where everyone would stare at her whenever she was in public, their eyes as blank and soulless as surveillance cameras, void of any human emotion.

Then there was this 'loop' thing that she couldn't break out of no matter what. The setting was never quite the same, sometimes even polar opposites (once she woke up in a submarine, the other time in the Cretaceous period when she witnessed the fiery meteorite strike the earth and burn everything to a crisp), but it always went like this: her in the middle of something, running into a girl, and getting to know her. They'd never gone past the talking stage. Something always happened before they could, and then Ada would again be thrust into unconsciousness before waking up to another world.

Frankly, she was unmoored. She just wanted to find a crack in this fabricated reality and tear it apart. There must be a way to freedom somewhere, waiting to be discovered.

Meanwhile, the day went on. While her hands were working to decorate the bouquets in her flower shop (which she had no memory of owning. She also possessed nary a recollection about her past, but she refused to dwell), her head was miles away. Still, she didn't miss the way the

sunflowers got replaced by purple lilies, or the way the same old lady passed by twice in the span of three seconds. The man enjoying his afternoon tea across the street was holding his cup with his wrist twisted in the wrong way. The entire city was a hoax filled with peculiarities. This was a normal day.

Not a minute later, Helia entered the shop with haste in her steps. Ada knew her because she always looked identical in every loop, and because her gilded blonde hair was impossible to forget. “Excuse me, do you have anything that symbolizes fortune and hope? It’s my niece’s graduation day and I’m running late.”

“Contrary to popular belief, florists don’t have flower languages recited,” Ada wiped her hands on her apron, walked over and picked a bouquet of golden sunflowers wrapped in pink paper. “What we know is the general public’s preferences. And my years of experience tell me that you’re looking for sunflowers.”

“Oh, thank you! You saved my life.” Helia broke into a smile and dipped her hand into the handbag that hung from her elbow—then she retrieved her hand. As if struck by lightning, the grin vanished from her face. She resumed a straight standing posture, so still that one would have mistaken her as a mannequin. There was no feeling on her countenance. This lasted for a mere second. Soon, she started smiling again, said “Oh, thank you! You’re a lifesaver,” and this time, took out the wallet for real.

“What was that?” Ada frowned, sticking her arms to her sides.

“What was what?”

“The thing that you did. You were... just gone for a moment there—”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Helia answered with rapidness and precision, almost like a programmed messenger.

“The thing. You blanked out and then repeated—”

“Please do not go off-topic.” Helia snapped.

Behind her, Ada noticed, people had halted all movement and were collectively glaring at her from outside. Their unrelenting eyes burned through her, boring into her soul. It was as if her inquiry had offended the entire population. Even the flowers spun their stalks to face her.

Ada swallowed. “I just—”

“No.” Helia swung her hand forward before Ada could even get her scream out, slammed her palm onto Ada’s face and sent her right into the realm of darkness.

Ashes. Gunshots. Wails that got buried under debris.

Ada had barely woken up, and she was already thrown into a vacant city drowning in delirium, but this was not the same city as the previous one. The cobblestone streets and old British architecture had been replaced by meteorites cascading onto the jagged, rocky ground and slender buildings painted in a uniform grey. The sky was— for the lack of a better word, wounded. Mutilated planets and writhing stars filled the vast, dark canvas. Sharp-edged spaceships flitted through space like shooting stars, only they didn’t bring luck. They were harbingers of war.

A stream was ejected from a spaceship, and after flashing in a sharp arch landed way too close to Ada. It’s either fight or flight. She scrambled to her feet and picked up the nearest firearm before taking off.

The airship was adamant. Another stream. The ground exploded and rumbled. Then another. Then another. Ada could only hear the gasps in her inhaled and feel the numbness in her legs.

The barrel zeroed in on the back of her head as she swerved from street to street.

“Watch out!”

A hand jerked her roughly to the left. Where she had once been standing was all but a burning crisp. There was no time to gape. She was immediately hoisted up and dragged into a darker, secluded spot in an alley.

It was only after the spaceship was out of sight that she allowed herself to relax and meet her knight in shining armour.

“You aren’t in the raid force, are you?” Helia jutted her jaw towards Ada, tapping on a small monitor installed on her advanced bodysuit.

“I’m not. As a matter of fact, I don’t even know where this is.” Ada grunted, now turning to the entrance, watching for any sign of danger.

A pause. “It’s alright. I’m Helia, captain of the raid unit. Let’s get you back to the base.” She grabbed Ada’s wrist and started leading her away, but the latter stood her ground. After a few pulls and grunts, Helia twisted her head back and glared at Ada. “Let’s get you back to the base.”

“Yea, I’m not going,” Ada said through gritted teeth. Having already followed the script umpteen times, she knew for a fact that wherever the exit of this absurd and sadistic world was, she would be hard-pushed to find it by following Helia. That’s only what the person behind everything—the Maker—wanted.

Sensing her rebellion, the air shifted. Noises of engines and crashes dwindled and faded out. The planets overhead began to inch closer, peeking into the narrow gap between buildings, the holes on their bodies squelching and churning until—

“That’s not your line.” Helia’s eyes were almost bulging, her face crooked with betrayal, disappointment, rage, and impatience. “I know you, Ada. Come with me!”

Her last command was so loud and sudden that Ada flinched out of her hold. Run, run, run. She turned on her heels and threw herself in the opposite direction, ignoring the booming footsteps that followed. Outside the war seemed to have been put on hold. A shadow was cast over the city. Ada arched her head backwards and came face to face with an eye.

The Maker.

The eye was gigantic. It loomed over her the way the bottom of a boot would loom over an ant. Stars scattered within its iris, as if there was another galaxy inside. It didn’t blink, only pulsed from time to time.

The eye was sentient. Silent accusations were laced in the red veins in the sclera, while the deep, dark pupil was trained on her like a black hole. It was horror. It was home. It was familiarity. It was a prison. It was hungry and desperate for her.

Without a word ever being uttered, the black hole reached up and gobbled her up.

There had been a plethora of ways in which Ada had woken up. Nothing was quite as tranquil.

For the first time, she was in bed, which installed in her a false hope that she had been dreaming everything up. The photo frame on the nightstand perished that hope effectively.

With each blink, the shape of the Maker's eye plagued her vision. While it shot fear through her heart, there was something about its cosmic horror that arrested her.

She knew that, even now, it was watching her.

Noises from outside the minimalist bedroom pulled her out of bed. The house was foreign, yet her vessel navigated through the corridors adorned with photos and delivered her to the destination with zero hesitation.

There she was, Helia, bending over the kitchen counter with a recipe book in her hand. Her face loosened and drooped like melted slime when she spotted her at the door. "Good morning, darling. Had a good sleep?"

Unlike all the previous versions, Ada almost felt at peace here. There was no feeling of an imminent encounter, no monsters chasing her, and no living in a post-apocalyptic wasteland. The ominousness that had been so inseparable from each situation was now replaced by belonging, rightness, and love.

"I... did," Ada said tersely. Helia proceeded to ask something else, but her words eluded Ada like water off a duck's back. She was too occupied trying to make sense of the comfort engulfing her. It was out of place and made her skin itch all over. Standing here felt like being put in a toddler's clothes when she was an adult.

The photo by the bed crept up on her. "Where... where is our daughter?"

Helia forced her facial muscles to form an almost smile. “You must be wondering how we got here.” She spoke with suppressed excitement, body leaning forward. The tone in which she spoke was so mechanical that it almost felt like she was speaking to an audience.

“What?” Ada frowned. “Where is our daughter, Helia?”

“You must be wondering what happened...” Helia trailed off, gazing off into the air. Ada grimaced and waved her hand in front of Helia.

“Hello?”

With startling sharpness, Helia’s head dropped, “Let me start from the very beginning— very the from start me let happened what—”

Words spouted out of her fleshy lips in reverse, her limbs moving like someone was turning back time with remote control. Without warning, Ada felt her body comply too, pacing backwards through the labyrinth of hallways and pinning her body back onto the bed. The last thing she registered was a loud click before she was, once again, deleted from this world.

“Where are you at with your new work?” My brother came into the room without knocking. I clicked my tongue in annoyance and lifted my finger from the backspace key.

“Nowhere. I can barely figure out how to start this story,” I turned my rolling chair to face him. “I’ve tried everything. Telling it in chronological order, in the middle of an action scene, from the end, you name it. I even tried like, five thousand genres. Nothing worked. It’s like I can’t control my characters and my eyes hurt from staring at the screen for so long.”

“Ohh,” he chuckled mischievously. “I know why that is.”

“Please, enlighten me.” I shot my eyes skyward.

“You’re in writer’s block. Aww, that’s too bad— ouch!” He yelped mid-sentence as I flung a cushion at him. Sensing danger, he stuck his tongue out and left the room with the door open.

“Writer’s block? That’s just a myth,” I scoffed to myself as I turned back to the desk, getting ready for another draft. “I just need to find the right beginning.”

My focus was once again trained on the screen, my fingers dancing frantically on the keyboard. The sentences burned themselves onto my eyes as a new world was created:

Ada had been a knight since she was young, her small body concealing the remarkable dream to serve her kingdom...

Someone You Love

Lam Sum Yee, Ingrid

St. Mary's Canossian College

I need somebody to heal

Somebody to know

Sydney strode into the classroom; her head held high as she glanced around it, taking in its every detail, from the small crevice on the wall to the dimness of the lights. She could faintly hear the teacher introducing her in the background, seeing that she had her earphones on. She walked up to the only seat available.

She drifted in and out of consciousness while the teacher droned on and on about the school rules. *Who even bothers?* She wondered. She could feel herself drifting back into the darkness when a tapping sound caught her attention.

It'll stop soon. She comforted herself. *He always does.*

She flinched when someone tapped her arm. Her desk mate drew back immediately, her eyes widening in surprise.

“I didn’t mean to scare you,” she apologized tentatively. Sydney stared at her for a moment before removing her earphones, realizing she was no longer living in her whimsical dreams. “Are you alright?”

“I will be.” She rubbed her arm.

Her desk mate paused for a moment to observe her. All indications of being offended had now completely vanished from her face, leaving it blank without emotion. She decided to drop the subject for now. “Alright, I’m Sienna. How about you, new student?”

It's a fresh start. “Sydney. Pleased to make your acquaintance.”

“This is crazy,” Sydney whispered frantically. “We’ll be caught and scolded—”

“Calm down, Sydney,” Sienna laughed when she saw her grab a cloth from the sink and drape it over the beaker in a futile attempt to conceal it. “Nobody will know it’s us.”

“As if it isn’t obvious that the only people who’d dare to smuggle fish from the biology laboratory would be us!” Her cheeks flushed red as she recalled their previous pranks on their classmates. Those were merely harmless jokes, but she could get a demerit for stealing from the laboratory!

“Oh, come on, enjoy your first experience of breaking the rules,” Sienna scoffed and ripped the towel off the beaker, then proceeded to snap photos of the fish with her cell phone. “Look at these beauties!”

Sydney eyed her warily. “I should turn you in for breaking a dozen school rules and being a bad influence.”

Sienna looked at her with her cute puppy eyes and she groaned. “Fine, but this is the last time I’m putting up with your deeds.”

“You’re the best, Sydney,” she cooed and slung an arm over her shoulder. Sydney almost immediately stiffened and she removed her arm quickly, frowning. “Are you alright?”

“I’m... I’m fine,” she stuttered. “Excuse me.”

Sydney rushed off.

“I’m not ready,” Sydney whispered, staring at the rink. Dozens of children and teenagers were skating effortlessly across it, but that did nothing to ease her anxiety.

“Yes, you are,” Sienna sighed. “Get yourself out there, girl.”

Sydney stepped into the rink, gripping the handles tightly and moving at a snail’s pace. Sienna, on the other hand, soared across the rink gracefully like a swan.

“You’re brilliant,” Sydney gaped at her best friend in awe.

Sienna glided towards her and held out her hand. “It’s easy once you get the hang of it. Now, step forward and grab my hand—”

Sydney gasped as she tripped herself. Yet, instead of crashing facedown on the ground embarrassingly, she found herself landing on a warm and fluffy marshmallow. She turned around awkwardly to see Sienna, who’d softened her fall.

“You didn’t have to,” she said, scrambling away from Sienna, refusing to meet her eyes. However, in her hurry, she fell again, and the next thing she knew, Sienna was towering over her, dominating her.

All of a sudden, she felt as if she was that girl again, the girl hiding from fear of his wrath.

“You thought you could escape from me?” He towered over her, and she felt the familiar sting across her cheek.

The shattering of glass. The hissing sound of the whip. His vocal cords rose and fell as her scars were ripped open again and again.

“You’re a nobody.” He told her. “You’re worthless.”

“A worthless nobody like you does not deserve to smile, laugh, or love. Remember.”

Another slap. Was it her cheek, or her legs?

She cannot remember.

“Sydney!”

I need somebody to heal

Somebody to know

Sydney whimpered as she felt wrapped tightly in Sienna’s arms. Her first instinct was to shrink away, but the hug was comfortable and soothing, unlike the repulse she usually felt with physical contact. She snuggled into Sienna’s warm embrace, soaking it up for what it was worth.

Somebody to have

Somebody to hold

“I cannot be a model.”

Sienna’s face blanked. Sydney’s heart clenched, seeing her hurt expression, knowing her effort in designing the costume and her longing to show off her skills in the upcoming fashion show held by the school.

She had just refused to become Sienna’s model.

“But... why?” Sienna asked. “You have the perfect body figure, and Syd, you’re my best friend.”

Sydney suddenly had the urge to tell her everything, but her ex's snake-like voice then slithered into her brain.

You're worthless.

Your scars are ugly.

How can you possibly compare to your so-called best friend?

She turned away, her tears threatening to spill.

I can't let her know I'm such an ugly person.

“Just leave me alone,” she snapped. She sank facedown into the sofa, avoiding Sienna's gaze.

Sienna stilled.

Sydney's top was slightly pulled up when she plopped down, revealing the scars that littered her body.

Sydney gasped when she felt a hand brush against the scars on her waist. She instantly leapt up to confront Sienna, whose eyes were tinted with unnatural darkness.

“Happy now?” Sydney hissed. “How can I possibly be a model with these scars? Your designs and the fashion you adore are both sensual and revealing. My scars and I will ruin your clothing line.”

Sienna stared back at her, her expression unreadable.

“Is that pity I see in your eyes?” Sydney laughed bitterly. “Of course. I was kicked, I was slapped, I was abused. I was worthless then, and I still am.”

Just a nobody who is unworthy of modelling such attire and embracing such friendship.”

She was ready to make a grand exit, but she was trapped in a warm embrace. “You’re not worthless,” she heard her whisper. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to me.” She gently caressed her face, and her scars, and locked eyes with her. Sydney’s tears finally spilt, and she buried herself in Sienna’s shoulders. It was too much for her. She thought she heard Sienna whisper something, but she was too broken to take it in.

*And I tend to close my eyes when it hurts sometimes
I fall into your arms
I’ll be safe in your sound ‘til I come back around*

“This is insane,” Sydney muttered.

“But you’re smiling,” Sienna pointed out as she applied another layer of makeup on Sydney.

“I still can’t believe I agreed to this.”

“You look stunning!” Sienna exclaimed, snapping photos of her regardless of her protests. “You have to win the Best Model prize,” she demanded.

Sienna had adjusted her design so that although it was revealing, it ensured that all of Sydney’s scars were concealed.

“Yes, madam,” she replied cheekily, gazing into her hazel brown eyes. Was it just her? Or did Sienna look even more attractive up close, even though she’s not the one with makeup on? She didn’t know if she’d imagined it, but Sienna’s gaze flickered to her lips just as quickly as it returned to her.

Just as she was starting to wonder if they were going to stare at each other for eternity, a staff member reminded them it was showtime. Sienna flushed and broke their trance by adjusting her waistband.

Sydney trembled slightly when she strode toward the stage, but Sienna suddenly stopped her. She raised her eyebrows questioningly until Sienna planted a kiss on her lips.

She froze, her brain unable to process and justify what had happened. Only when Sienna pushed her with a faint smile did she stop ogling at her lips, which were now faintly tinted with a trace of her lipstick.

“Show them what you’re worth, babe.”

“I don’t know about this... I can’t think straight,” Sydney begged. “It’s one thing to date, but being bisexual? Dating a female?” She willed herself to look past the hurt expression on her friend’s face.

Or perhaps she should say, her admirer’s face.

“Maybe I’m wrong to break this to you,” Sienna said quietly. “But... I love you. I love you to the moon and back. I love how worried you are for me when we break the rules. I love your confidence when you rule the stage. I love your scars even if you feel vulnerable, and I love you too much that I cannot bear to leave even when it’s obvious you don’t feel the same way as I do.”

She lowered her head.

“I’m sorry. I’ll leave, I promise. I won’t disturb you anymore.”

Tears were trickling down Sienna's face, and Sydney, for once, was at a loss for words. She could feel the gap in her heart widen as she imagined Sienna drifting away from her, and her heart contracted painfully.

Only then did Sydney come to the realization that she could no longer live without her.

Only know you love her when you let her go.

“No, I should be the one who's sorry,” she whispered. “I'm a fool for not understanding my emotions. You stood by me even when I was jeered at. You never questioned me. You love me for who I am, regardless of my past.” Her tears were welling up. “I just refused to believe that I was already madly in love with you. I was scared—” She tightened her grip on the person she now knew she loved more than anything else. “I don't want to be hurt no more.”

“Sydney,” Sienna said, her voice barely a whisper. “I swear on my life that I will love you until the ends of the earth.” She dried her tears and extended her hand. “Shall we embrace our new beginning?”

Sydney stared at her through her tear-stricken eyes and gripped her hand firmly.

“And now, it's time to exchange the wedding vows.” The priest announced.

Sydney took a deep breath and looked into Sienna's eyes, which sparkled with love and support. She then walked over to the stand and cleared her throat.

“Sienna,” she began. “Today is another beginning for us. As cliché as it may sound, you came into my life when I was least expecting it. You saved me from my self-pity, accepted me and all my imperfections, and taught me what true love is.” Her voice cracked.

“I am not a perfect person, but I promise to try to become a perfect lover, the one you want and deserve. I promise to hold your hand through the ups and downs and embrace you publicly and privately. You gave me a new life, so I promise that my life is yours for the rest of our lives. I’m yours.”

She gazed into Sienna’s eyes.

“They often say ‘till death do us part’ in wedding vows. But that’s not what I want to say.”

Her heart was brimming with love.

“I want to tell you that even death will not part us .”

She smiled through her tears. “I love you.”

I let my guard down

And then you pulled the rug

I was getting kinda used to being someone you love

Once Again

Johanna Muliani

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It was this cold too that night, five years ago. Oddly cold for April; Genji remembers. Or at least, that's how he remembers it. He doesn't know if it was the air or the incident and everything that came after that chilled him to the bone. But tonight, the alcohol in his veins will keep him warm. He sets down his fourth can of beer on the ground and leans back, the park bench digging uncomfortably into his neck.

The leaves of the tree behind him rustle ominously as the wind blows harder. He should be heading home to get away from the weird weather. He should be preparing for work tomorrow. But he can't bring himself to. Not tonight.

"Hey, mister. You can't sleep here, you know!"

Genji snorts. "And why not, kid? I'm a salaryman, we get drunk in public all the time." And then he realizes the presence beside him.

He shoots up, bewildered, and stares at the kid that has appeared. He didn't hear anything, and he sure as hell chose an empty bench to drink. Am I drunk already?

The kid just smiles up at him. "That's exactly why you can't sleep here! Mister, you know that's not good for you."

Dealing with a kid is too much for him tonight. "Why not pick on someone else, kid? There's lots of other drunk men like me in the park. Leave me be."

“But you look like you have a story to tell,” the kid says, “and need a stranger to listen.”

Is that really something a kid would say? It shocks the laughter out of him. Ridiculous as it is, the kid’s not wrong. “Heh,” he says, “you’re a smart one, aren’t you?”

The kid’s smile grows cheeky. “I sure am. So, what’s your story?”

He’s too young to understand, really. But the kid reminds Genji of Haru, and he can’t help letting his guard down, especially tonight. So, he speaks. “Tomorrow is my son’s birthday.”

The breeze picks up again, and Genji shivers in his ratty suit. (Faintly, he remembers Yui gently scolding him for not replacing his old, tear-ridden clothes, but he brushes it away.)

“Why aren’t you home with him?”

“He’s dead.”

The wind dies. Genji has learned to live without Haru—it’s been five years, after all—but he can’t help the twang of pain every time he says it out loud. It never hurts any less. “He would’ve been around your age now,” he says. Black hair, smooth skin, the little bit of baby fat still on his cheeks. Genji wonders if Haru would look like him. “Twelve years old.”

“Tell me about him.”

Genji looks up at the stars twinkling among the leaves. They look blurry. “Haru was the sweetest little boy.” He never let himself linger too long on memories of his son, but tonight, they all come back to him. He smiles. “He was kind. He’d cry if he saw an insect getting killed.” Once, Yui had to distract Haru with playtime while he took care of a cockroach in the

kitchen. He chuckles. “Made it hard to get rid of them in summer, let me tell you that. All the teachers loved him and always talked about how well-mannered he was. He was a little quiet in class, though, and had trouble making friends. He was just a little shy, you see. I guess he took after me in that one.

“And he was talented. Now that, he got from his mother. I don’t have a single artful bone in my body. But he had a talent for drawing. You know your generation, always reading manga or watching anime. Haru was like that too, but it really inspired him to draw. He was even making his own comics, and I always loved reading them. Now, I know parents always say their kid’s drawings are amazing when really, they’re just a bunch of squiggly lines, but Haru had real talent. He had promise. Reading his comics after work was always the best part of my day. Seeing his smile, hearing his narration. I still have one of them, you know. I put it up on my fridge. He would’ve been a great artist if the world had been kinder to him.”

Genji falls silent, only then realizing the tears building up in his eyes. Talking about Haru fills him with indescribable joy; it’s been far too long since he let himself do so. But he also feels the hollowness; the gaping hole where something once had been and was then violently taken away from him. If the world had been kinder to him, he thinks, and had given him a better father.

“What happened?” the kid whispers, indistinguishable from the wind.

Genji closes his eyes. “He was hit by a drunk driver,” he says. “He was waiting for me to come home to show me his new comic. He was sitting on the steps outside our house. Yui told him to stay inside, but he was quite stubborn sometimes. Just like me.

“But I was working overtime. I wanted to go home—Yui told me Haru was waiting for me. But my boss kept forcing me, and with the way our finances were... I told myself I’ll work harder to get Haru a better, bigger present. But on my way back, Yui called me, crying, and...”

His old suit is scratchy against his tear-streaked face. He remembers the devastation he felt when he got home. Yui was on the street, screaming, their neighbours comforting her as best as they can. The paramedics lifted Haru’s mangled body from the wreckage. He was still clutching the comic. They gave it to Genji when he begged to see it, that he needed to see it, but it was torn and far too stained with his son’s blood. A few panels were still legible, though. On one, a child hugged his parents and said, “I have the best Mama and Papa in the world!” The guilt and sobs wracked his body, and he didn’t say anything when the paramedics slowly took it away from his shaking hands.

The sharpness of the cold night air shocks his lungs. The kid is still beside him, listening patiently. Genji can’t make out his face through the tears. “The wake and cremation went by in a blur. We burned some of his comics, pencils, and books with him so he could still draw in the afterlife.” When he picked Haru’s bones from his ashes with chopsticks, he sorrowed over how small his son was. He couldn’t believe that all that was left of his sweet boy was just these small, broken bits of bone.

“The driver that killed him later died in the hospital. He was a drunk salaryman. Just like me. His family were kind and paid part of our funeral costs, but...” For a long time after, Genji continued living while carrying his anger with him. Even now, he feels his fist clenched at the thought of the driver. “I hate him.”

No, that’s not the truth. He knows that, deep inside. It’s not the whole truth. The truth is something he’s been running away from for years. He’s

thrown himself even deeper into his work to avoid it. He's doing more overtime than ever, sacrificing his sleep, and ignoring the fatigue with the help of alcohol. But it's been slowly building in the corner of his mind, growing bigger and bigger, and now it's staring him in the face, shadowing over him. He laughs bitterly, his nails digging into his palm. "But maybe..." He hurts, and through it, he finally recognizes his anger for what it truly is. "I just hate myself. Because I am no different from that man."

The words ring in his ears, and he laughs even more through the tears. "Every day, I wonder, what if I hadn't worked overtime? Haru would've been safe inside instead of waiting for his good-for-nothing father to come home. But instead, I killed him, my son, and what do I do? I work even more."

Genji can't stop laughing. Now that he's finally admitted it, he feels strangely light, and all at once like a condemned man. The words continue spilling and being wrenched out of him. "My marriage suffered too. I couldn't stay in the house. Everything was a reminder of him; everything was a reminder of that night. The office was where I ran away to, to bury myself in work.

"But Yui buried herself in Haru's memory. She insisted on keeping everything, cleaning his room regularly, and keeping his sandals in the entryway. I get it. I wasn't there for her, so she ran to her only other source of comfort: our son. We frustrated each other but never said anything. We just hurt in our own ways.

"Until a year later, I came home drunk and accidentally broke Haru's mug. We fought, we yelled, and then... we divorced. I let her take the house, and I moved into an apartment. And I continue to work."

Are the sounds coming out of him laughter or sobs? He picks up an empty beer can and it crushes under his force. The sharp angles dig into his hand with a satisfying pain as his body shakes and cries.

Then a light hand touches his shoulder, and another gently takes the can from him. He looks up at the kid and sees his soft smile through his blurred vision. “You’re a good dad, you know,” the kid says. “Haru must be really happy to know that his dad still cares and thinks so much about him.”

The kid says it so truthfully, so confidently, that Genji’s heart aches. “Really?”

“Mm-hmm. He’s proud of you for making it this far! And he’ll be even prouder if you take care of yourself more.”

He clutches at the kid’s hands, desperate for his next words. “You think so?”

The kid smiles up at him, his biggest smile, and it looks just like Haru’s. “He was very happy and couldn’t have asked for a better dad. But”—he pouts—“he’ll be happier if you forgive yourself, because he never blamed you. It hurts him to see you like this.”

Genji laughs, and cries, and hugs the kid close to his chest. “I’m sorry,” he sobs. “I’m so, so sorry, Haru. Forgive your father, won’t you? I’ll make you happy, I promise. I’ll make you as happy as I can.”

Small arms encircle his waist, pulling him closer. “It’s okay, Papa,” he says, and how did Genji not recognize him earlier? His voice, his smell, his kindness, it was all Haru. He hugs his son tighter. “You’ve made me happy and given me everything. Now, it’s your turn to be happy.”

Genji wakes up the next day in his bed, clean and lighter than he's ever felt in ages. His head is clear and on his chest is Haru's comic. He reads through it again, smiling, and gets out of bed. He calls in sick for work. Then, he showers and changes into his nicest clothes.

He buys a bouquet and a slice of fruit cake, Haru's favourite. At the grave, he prays and arranges his gifts. He frowns at the grime building up on his son's tombstone. As he's wiping away, he hears a familiar voice. "Genji?"

He looks up and is still. "Yui." It's the first time he's seen her since he moved out. She had always visited Haru before him; he always saw the flowers she left. But now, here she is, carrying the rest of Haru's comic books and another bouquet. Her eyes are puffy, but there's a light there that he hasn't seen in five years. Just like his.

She sits down beside him and, finally, they are a family once again.

Colour Blindness

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Everything had no colour. At least for Dan. Being colour-blind was not easy, that's what he told himself every day. He sat on a queen size bed. The birds were singing outside, an orange, almost amber hue, was shining into the room, basking in the mahogany walls with the promise of a new day.

"Hey," a soft voice whispered. Turning his head, Dan saw his lovely wife, grey-scaled, standing by his room door. Her eyes were colourless and yet still so warm and caring.

Dan just silently looked at his wife, before getting up and hugging her. A pair of arms wrapped back around him tightly, warming him slowly before Dan detached from the mirage and walked towards his kitchen. Single footsteps echoed through the halls.

"Honey, what's wrong?" his wife said, as she sidled up beside him and began making her coffee. Mornings were the worst. Everything seemed so perfectly fine. Everything seemed so peaceful.

"I don't know dear," Dan said, as he poured out his coffee and placed two pieces of toast into the toaster, "I just feel like I'll never be able to move on, you know?" Dan said. His voice was trembling, almost watery.

"Honey," a female voice laced with sympathy said. "You're going to be fine. Everything is still here. That job doesn't mean anything, anyway. Besides, you can always apply for another pilot job somewhere else. Cathay Pacific was stupid for letting you go like that."

“Dad!” a young voice yelled. Excited footsteps were thundering down the stairs, the echoing of footsteps was drowning out silence.

Eyes small and brown but so full of colours stared at Dan. Dan looked at his daughter. It all felt so surreal. The colours around him faded in and out, almost pulsing. One moment, she had colours, and the next it was all grey. The doctor said this was normal, “Take the pills once a day before bedtime,” she said. It will eventually fix this issue.

“Dad, are you making salmon avocado toast for breakfast again?” the voice said, excitedly. Dan smiled fondly and then paused for just a bit, swallowing silently.

“Yes,” he whispered. Then he said a bit louder: “Yes, it’s your favourite, isn’t it?”

Small hands grabbed his sleeves and Dan instinctively stopped what he was doing and picked up his daughter. Smiling, he gently spun her around. A sense of sadness was momentarily washed away by this pleasant memory.

Giggling could be heard. It was a nice day, maybe he could go out with the family later?

“Come on, let’s go eat breakfast,” Dan said. By then, his wife was already setting the table. Putting down his daughter, he picked up the rest of the utensils and food and brought them to an empty table.

The food didn’t taste very good, but then again, usually, it was Dan’s wife who made breakfast, so this couldn’t be helped.

“Is the meal good?” Dan asked. After a while of silence, Dan added: “I didn’t really think so, but you always asked me to eat more anyway.”

After eating breakfast, Dan took his family out for a walk in the mall.

“So, what do you think of that teddy bear?” Dan asked. His voice sounded a bit tired. The mall wasn’t very packed with people weaving in and out of Dan’s view. Some of them muttering to themselves, others walking briskly away from Dan.

“It’s beautiful. I love that pink teddy bear,” his daughter cheerfully said. His wife was busy somewhere, probably looking at the perfumes like she always did.

“Sir, I’ll have to ask you to leave,” a person said in the distance. A man was causing a commotion nearby, shouting random stuff and generally being unpleasant.

“Dear god, what is happening?” Dan’s wife asked. She gripped his arm and dragged him out of the store, most likely to avoid that crazy person.

“I don’t know but that crazy person seemed dangerous,” a woman beside them uttered, walking away from Dan and the store. Dan agreed.

“A family set please,” Dan said the moment he sat down at an Italian restaurant. After a long day of walking, his daughter would always say that she was hungry and insisted on eating there.

“Are you sure? It’s a large set, sir,” the waitress asked, looking at Dan with a gaze that was very difficult to decipher.

“Of course, I can share it with my family.” Dan motioned to his wife and daughter. “Add three cups of water as well,” he said.

There was a pause. The waitress was looking at Dan before writing something down on her notepad. “Alright, sir,” the waitress said before briskly walking away.

His wife was busy replying to a call from her friend using loudspeakers on her phone. Occasionally, Dan would pipe in, laughing at his wife's antics. Their table would get weird gazes from other patrons, but no one cared. Family outings were always the best.

There was a crash and a loud explosion coming from the television that caught Dan's attention. A scene of disaster was being displayed. It looked like a wreckage of some sort. Dan thought that the news anchor could not possibly have been more bored with her job. She droned on and on about the event and the casualties. It looked a bit familiar.

"It's one of those things people usually talk about beside the water cooler," Dan said, making fun at the television and making his wife chuckle.

"Was today a fun day?" Dan asked his family.

"Yeah! Thank you, dad," his daughter said. His surroundings were still quite dull in colour, but his memories seemed to be filled with warmth.

Time seemed to pass by quickly and, somehow, Dan returned home. He cooked dinner and sat at the table. No one was there as usual. The clanking of utensils echoed throughout the house. He popped two pills before washing them down with water and began eating his meal slowly. The TV buzzed with something irrelevant. White noise drowned out Dan's mounting uneasiness. Slowly, his surroundings began to gain colours again. The doctor said the pills were necessary to help him function properly, but Dan hated the feelings that the pills gave him. The doctor said he would be 'normal' again. Who needs to be normal? What's the point? How else is he supposed to talk to his family?

"Who needs to be normal? What's the point? How else is he supposed to talk to his family?"

Colours burst sporadically in and out of Dan's view. Yet, Dan felt even more lonely. A hollow feeling of numbness spread through him, filling his eyes with tears. A crushing sense of breathlessness momentarily staggered Dan. Dry heaving didn't work, and Dan returned to the table and sat down on a random chair. For a while he hyperventilated, crumpled onto the table, and cried.

"So, how are you feeling?" a doctor in a white coat asked. Dan looked up. The room looked sterile. The table was dark brown in colour. The ticking of the clock droned on. A crushing silence enveloped the room.

"Fine," Dan responded.

Neither comforting voices, nor any hugs will ever grace him again.

"Are the pills working?" the doctor's monotonous voice asked while she wrote something down on her notepad.

"Yep, it works."

"Good, I'm glad you're feeling better," an echo said. Dan looked around. When did he arrive here?

What's the purpose of living if the will to live had already died in the plane crash? Why was he alive?

"Is anything bothering you?" After a pause, the doctor added, "did you go anywhere lately?"

"...U-um, I went to the mall, It... it was fun," Dan said in a calm tone, masking the sense of numbness spreading throughout him. The realization that this was his life began to sink in. It seems the pills were working. Hopefully, the pills would work.

What's the point of it all when everything to live for is gone?

“It's good that the pills are working. Glad you're able to see some colours in your life again, Dan.”

The Road to Betterness

Cassidy Law

St. Mary's Canossian College

I had no idea who I was.

According to the tabloids, I was Eloise Lang, a sixteen-year-old teen pop star who had risen in popularity drastically enough to have skyrocketed to the top of the charts. That was, until the bomb attack at my concert three weeks ago, during which I lost all my memories and nearly my life.

In the one week since I had regained consciousness, I had been actively trying to remember my life. It was torture, for the world to know every small thing about you, yet you remained the only person who had not an inkling of any of it. The doctor told me that I ought to be thanking the forces above and below for being alive. I didn't feel particularly grateful. It was hard to be anything but frustrated when your mind remained blank.

Today, a girl claiming to be my best friend came to visit me. After a teary outburst at how terrible this ordeal was, Cayden started telling me about the bomb attack at my concert. "It felt like the world was aflame when the bomb went off. Sometimes I can still hear the screams." Her eyes filled with tears once again as I picked apart my brain, trying to locate a sliver of fright that would indicate I was starting to remember the event which had changed my life. Yet I felt nothing. It was like I was listening to someone else's experience.

"Have you read the latest tabloid news yet?" There was a note of hesitation in her tone. When I shook my head, she deflated with relief. "Just let yourself rest for a few days, alright?"

The moment she left, I checked out the latest news. The headline in bold letters stared back at me from the phone: Eloise Lang: deserving of a bomb attack?

With shaking fingers, I scrolled through the article.

According to her drummer Darren, she is two entirely different people in front and away from the crowd. “She is just nasty... thinks she is so much better than everyone else, as if being a pop star gives her the right to treat everyone else like dirt.”

“Remember that scandal about Kaye doing drugs? That’s not true. Eloise lied to the paps because she felt threatened by Kaye. You have no idea how many careers she has ruined to climb to the top.”

“Honestly? I’m not surprised someone tried to kill her with a bomb. I’m only surprised they didn’t do it sooner.”

“Those fans died for a downright awful person. They should have lived instead of her.”

There were dozens or so articles similar to this on the Internet. I forced myself to read through every one of them. It was clear that a lot of people hated my guts and thought I deserved to die. Wished I had died, even.

The next day, Elton, my manager, and Lexi, my publicist visited me. They got down to business right away. “You were supposed to go on tour, but that seems to be out of the window as of right now. Many people are demanding a refund of their money.”

I rubbed my forehead. “Well, it’s only fair if they get their money back, right?”

Elton and Lexi exchanged an unreadable look.

“I guess you really lost all your memories,” Elton muttered. “Alright, the next thing on our agenda is to figure out how to break the news of your... current situation to the public.”

“Should I arrange an interview with one of the big magazines?” Lexi asked.

My heart drummed against my rib cage. “I can’t do an interview now.”

“It’d be more powerful and personal coming from you than a statement from us,” Lexi explained. “It’s crucial if you ever want to restart your career.”

“But—” how do you expect me to “restart my career” when my life is a pile of broken puzzle pieces that I can’t put together? “I can’t go in front of a camera. Not right now.”

Lexi blinked. “In that case, we would release a statement on your behalf.”

Oddly enough, I had the feeling that they actually expected me to tell them no, that I would do the interview after all.

When I was finally discharged from the hospital, my stepmom drove me back home. Another piece of my life that I didn’t remember: my dad had remarried a model two years after my mom’s death. “So, Eloise, how are you feeling?” My stepmom smiled at me nervously.

I leaned my head on the window. “Aside from the occasional headaches, I’m good. Thanks for asking.”

Tears welled up in her eyes.

I sat up, alarmed. But she just shook her head and smiled. “You never used to thank me.”

How awful of a person had I been, for my stepmom to be so touched when I uttered a single simple word?

When we got home, my band was already there, waiting for me. I openly gawked at the large house - or rather, mansion - which I still had trouble believing I owned. "Given your reaction, one would think that you do not live here," the guitarist Julian commented dryly.

"I didn't expect it to be this big." I knew I had earned some big bucks before, but this? This mansion was something that only billionaires could dream of having.

Julian looked at me disbelievingly. "When you first bought the house, you asked the designer why it only had 18 bedrooms instead of 20."

My face flushed red with shame. I shouldn't be surprised anymore; up till now, I had discovered that I was a rude stepdaughter, a condescending singer, and a ruthless competitor in the music industry. Now I had one more word to add to my list of who I was: ungrateful. "I'm sorry."

Julian arched a brow. "And that. You never used to apologize for anything. You have changed."

The boy with the spiked hair - Darren, the very same one who talked to the paparazzi - scowled. "People don't change, not really. Once she remembers everything, she will go back to being conceited and all."

Thankfully, Julian spared me a reply by interjecting, "Elton said you're cancelling the tour."

I nodded. "I can't get back onto the stage. Not so soon. I'm sorry."

He shook his head. "That's alright. We aren't ready to go back there, anyway."

I was reminded that the band had been there when the bomb went off. So had Cayden, for that matter. How traumatic had it been for them? Would they ever be able to stand on a stage without images of the incident bombarding their minds?

If the paparazzi were to be believed, the bomb attack was my fault. Aside from taking lives, I might have crushed people's dreams and left a trauma in their hearts that might never be erased. Guilt overwhelmed me. It seemed that everything I had done in the past had only brought pain to others.

"But there's still Adam's concert," Julian continued, naming one of the most popular singers of our time. "He invited you to be a guest there. You should find a way to get out of it."

I knew it wouldn't do any good, but I couldn't stop myself from typing my name on the search bar. My heart sank. Currently, my image was darker than the deepest bottom of a well. Publicity was so bad no efforts of Lexi's could save me. Cayden, who had come to visit me, said, "You shouldn't read it."

"Why not? It's true what they are saying about me, isn't it?"

Cayden didn't deny it. "It's not healthy."

"Was I a terrible friend to you?" I pressed. It was like someone had stabbed me with a knife, and I was wrenching it in deeper. It was hard, but this past that I did not remember was something I had to face. "If I was, I'm sorry. I don't remember anything, but I can promise to be a better person from now on."

Cayden was quiet. "It wasn't easy being your friend," she finally said. "You could be pretty hurtful sometimes, and the worst thing was you weren't

even aware of how much damage you were causing. Losing your memory isn't good, but maybe it's what you need. You know - well, you don't know, but I've always believed in fate. I believe that everything happens for a reason, and every awful person gets a chance to redeem themselves now and then. Maybe this is your second chance. You can start from scratch and forge a better future for yourself."

Her words kept echoing inside my head. A thought formed in my mind. It wasn't much—but it was a start.

"Do me a favour?" I asked.

I rang the doorbell, shifting on my feet and holding my breath. The pretty brunette who emerged from behind the door froze when she saw me. I barely registered the shock in her eyes before her whole posture changed and became tense, like an arrow before it took flight. "What are you doing here?" she spat out, venom dripping from her voice.

Kaye Wu, former teenage heartthrob and my rival, glared at me as if she wished she could pierce me with her eyes. I squared my shoulders and met her eyes. "I have come to apologize."

She barked out a laugh. "Oh, so you'd have me believe that you really lost your memories? C'mon, I know a publicity stunt when I see one. You are just trying to make people feel sorry for you."

It hurt to know that people automatically assumed the worst of me, but I was getting used to it, and Cayden was right: I had been given a second chance to change. That was all that mattered.

"I am sorry that you think that," I said calmly, handing her the piece of paper I had been holding. Her eyes narrowed in suspicion. "But I really won't be getting back on stage for some time. I was supposed to make an

appearance at Adam Cheng's concert. Since I won't be going, I promised him I will find someone else. Right there is his phone number. What you do with it is up to you."

Her mouth fell open. She unfolded the paper, stared at it, and then back at me. Some of the wariness faded from her eyes. "I won't say thank you."

"I didn't come here for your gratitude." I stepped back from her porch. "Goodbye, Kaye."

As I walked on the street, I felt lighter than I had ever been. On my phone, I had created a checklist of the things I would do to make it up to the people around me, some of them with Cayden's help. I ticked the box next to "apologizing to Kaye Wu". Beneath it was "family dinner", "getting to know Cayden better", "visiting the wounded from the bomb attack", and "band practice". I didn't know what exactly I would do for the last one, but I had time to figure it out.

It might not be enough to redeem myself in the eyes of the public. It probably wouldn't change a thing. Too many questions still lingered in my mind. Who planted the bomb? Why did they want me dead? Would my memories ever return? Would I ever perform on the stage again? Would I even want to? My future was as uncertain as the wind, but one thing I did know: I was done looking for answers in my past. Losing my memory had given me a second chance at life, an opportunity to reinvent myself. In a way, this was a new beginning for me, and what I did from here on out was entirely up to me. I would not hold on to the past futilely. From now on, what mattered was the present—and the future.

Sunday

Magnolia Maninggo

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I've never liked Sundays.

At an early age, I was taught that Sunday was never a day for myself.

To my mother, it was a day for God. A day that was a minute to spare for worship and peace. The bare minimum she had set as a quota for her love and fear for life and death. Anything and everything else that had nothing to do with her religion was useless. Worthless obstructions in her tantalizing round eyes. Every other day. Monday. Saturday. School day. Picnic day. Those were days dedicated to visitations to loud markets. The rotting smells of blood and dirt from meat and vegetables. Those days, she would come home in sweat and exhaustion. Her lips rarely twinkled into a smile. She was silent mostly, keeping her business to herself. Unless, of course, she was provoked. When poked, her anger and frustrations tend to burst into a passionate frenzy, leading those around her to tears and silent stings.

To her, Sundays made her beautiful.

This was the day she would pull out clothes I had never seen her in before, adorning herself with pearls and fabrics dyed in reds, yellows, greens, and blues. The church had stained its windows in those colors, but my mother glowed a light more ethereal than the beams shining through the glass on Sunday. I had never seen her happier than she was on Sunday. It was the only day she smiled and laughed with the corners of her mouth pointed from ear to ear. The only day she sang her mind and soul in praises only sung by nightingales. The only day she forgot her own sorrows so she could be happy for someone else. It was all for church, she would say to

me, piercing diamond studs into the lobes of her ears. For some indistinguishable reason, the words mindlessly shot through my eyes, tears falling down my face.

She did all of this for no one.

No one else but God.

I have never known God as anyone but a figment that squeezed out our fear in the hopes of drinking our love and care for him. I had always wondered why God had a hold on people, why they felt choked in awe and suspense at the sight of sudden light. I feared the captivation that this unknown figure had. The ability to concoct tongues that once were lost cacophony and twist them into symphonious similarity.

I remember the first time I felt alone was on a Sunday at church when I was ten.

Nobody had turned on the lights, so my body was curled up in the darkness of the bathroom stall. I closed my eyes and sunk into a more profound silence in hopes that black nothingness would render my existence null and void. The cold air pricked my skin over and over again in almost eternal purgatory. My mouth barricaded my voice with the expression of mere tolerance for my emotions. At that moment, in that stall, time was paralyzed for fifteen minutes into forty days and forty nights.

To me, Sunday was like every other day. Monday. Friday. Parent's day. A day that should be skipped to make the passage of time go by faster and faster until I didn't have to sustain myself with the human experience. But Sundays confined me excruciatingly. I wanted to crave and love Sunday as

my mother did. The devotion and worship of a day in dedication to a familiar stranger who toys with humanity.

I tried to gain some form of sensation through the fabric I had put on in the morning. A short, striped dress with a black bow ornamented on my chest. My fingers gripped the cotton fabric. A dress that my mother insisted on putting on. She told me I was beautiful. It's all for church, she said as she put the pink T-shirt and blue jeans back into my closet. I wish that the dress didn't cling to my skin. But the elastic band at the bottom of my dress, curtained with grey polka dot lace, tightened its reminder of other churchgoers blessed with the unique ability to watch and judge you. The others that gape and enable my mind to spin webless questions of why I was there. It was as if they knew of my disbelief in the character they had venerated. The shame of sin washed me clean of faith and hope and bathed me in fear of being alone and surveilled.

But the sustained quietness broke me when she called my name.

I lifted my head up.

She called my name again.

I slowly got up from the floor of the unease of hearing my name again. I was greeted with the sight of myself in the mirror once the bathroom door had been unlocked.

I touched my face as my reflection touched hers, my shadow following me. Yet, the shadow couldn't capture the wetness of my face. Nor could the reflection sense the sudden bounce of emotion I tried to stuff to the back of my mind. Turning to my right, I noticed her unreadable expression before recognizing the pearls on her ears and the fiery red of her dress shirt.

She was there.

Not getting any closer, my mother told me to pray to God and find peace. The figure I cursed and cried to for his dispassionate position to churn our compassion for him.

I looked back at her as she explained that we would go down the steps to rejoin the mass. Come on, she said as she held her hand out.

I couldn't read her face. I only wondered whether she felt something, if her love for God triumphed over her love for me. But I took her hand, walking down with her with the firm understanding that I did not understand what love was.

The Beginning

Marc-Andre Noel

Diocesan Boys' School

BOOM

A deafening noise woke me up and shot me out of bed. I looked outside and saw a massive expanding ball of fire in the distance. I jumped to take my phone out and checked the news.

“Beginning of the end: America has declared war on Russia with its nuclear weapons,” read the headline.

Sweat dribbled down my face profusely as I took the news in. Being an intelligence specialist with the CIA, I knew this was it: this war had the potential to destroy the world.

Sprinting into the bedroom of my father—whose job was relocated to Moscow a couple of years ago, resulting in our immigrating there—I told him we needed to stock up on supplies in case we had to take refuge in a shelter. We grabbed the keys and left the house cautiously. We drove to the local Magnit and piled up on canned food. The bill came to 20,000 rubles. As we were paying, I heard some shouting outside but thought nothing much of it.

We left the building, dragging, and hulling the hefty bags of food and supplies we'd just purchased. We walked past a forsaken alleyway when suddenly, a bulky stranger shoved me onto the ground. My dad tackled the man as I jumped back up and saw two more masked men lunging at me. I sidestepped them and whipped around to kick one of them. The other man swung at me with a blunt object and bludgeoned my shoulder. A jolt of pain shook through my body, and I felt my collarbone shatter. Running

on adrenaline, I shook the pain away and threw a punch at the man with my uninjured arm. He fell over and dropped the blunt pipe he was using. I picked it up and bashed my dad's attacker unconscious with it. We grabbed as many of our groceries as we could and ran home.

We sprinted non-stop and didn't turn back, not even once. We stormed through the front door of our house and slammed it shut. My dad went to call the police while I checked if there was anyone outside. To my dismay, two of our three assailants managed to follow us. I grabbed a knife and stormed out in a rage to confront them. Suddenly, police sirens were flaring from outside, and the men turned around and fled. Exhaling a sigh of relief, I was glad I didn't have to partake in another useless fight with these goons.

I limped back inside, now feeling my excruciating injury. My mother came running to me and quickly tended to my crippled collarbone as she informed us, sobbing, that an American friend in Russia called earlier with bad news. Apparently, our friend's twelve-year-old son was found mutilated in an alleyway on the streets just going out to get a drink. As the news sunk in, I began to worry there could be a pogrom forming against Americans because of the war. Russia wasn't safe for us anymore.

That night we discussed what we should do to ensure our safety. My voice was trembling as I quipped that perhaps we could migrate to a safer country like Thailand. There was an eerie feeling in the room and a short silence followed. Then, my parents nodded. We started packing our stuff to prepare to leave the country. Thailand wasn't likely to take part in the war; besides, we owned a nice holiday home there.

48 hours later, we were already on our way to the airport with everything we could take with us. The ride was going to be around one and a half hours, so we stopped by a gas station halfway through to refuel. The

station was deserted. As I was filling the car, my parents went into the store to search for food. Suddenly, I heard a massive “Boom!” and my feet were knocked off by a shockwave. There was ringing in my ear and my back felt as if it were being crushed under a ton of weight. Once back on my feet, an expanding ball of fire was engulfing me, so I took off running as fast as my body could bear, legs aching, shoulders collapsing, until I made it to a nearby motorcycle. I hopped on it, my mind focused on survival, as my training took over and my feet pressed down on the accelerator.

Miles and miles went by, and I slowly came to my senses and realized that my parents weren't with me. I swore at myself and frantically drove back to the area of the explosion to find them. I failed. There was not a sign of life to be found in the desecrated piece of land. A dead silence had descended upon the entire area. Buildings had collapsed in what was now a ghost town. I fell to my knees and began sobbing violently, realizing that my parents had died a gruesome death while I escaped. Somehow, I managed to retrieve some of my belongings from our car which was, miraculously, still intact. Dazed and confused, I grabbed my stuff and left for the airport. There was nothing I could do about my parents. They were dead. As I landed in Bangkok, I thought of what could've been if we hadn't stopped at that cursed gas station.

Now I have been living in Thailand for the past seven years. Early on, I was quite depressed. I had recurring flashbacks of the explosion that killed my parents. The ringing sound, the dust in my eyes, the screams. These flashbacks haunted me. Thailand's beaches, temples and even food all seemed bland to me. The guilt of failing to protect my parents was devouring me from the inside.

One day, as I was drinking myself to oblivion, my phone buzzed, and an unknown number popped on the screen. Despite my hesitation, I picked up the phone anyway out of curiosity. It was the CIA.

“We have a job for you.”

I calmly told them I was finished with the damned war and hung up. But they persistently called me back until I gave in and picked up the phone.

“You can have your well-deserved revenge.”

For a few seconds, I thought about it, maybe revenge was what was needed to fill the hole in my soul.

“We have a few elite kill teams that need training. Maybe you could help.”

“No. I’m done with violence,” I replied.

I returned to the bar a week later and to my surprise, there was a band playing. The music was very... different; different from what I was used to hearing. It was extremely fast and aggressive, with weird vocals. And the drumming. The sheer speed was mind-boggling. My feet involuntarily tapped to the beat. Well, it was a bit too complex to tap to the beat on time, with many time signature changes and such. I never thought I’d be into something like this. When the band finished, I followed them outside and asked them what music they were playing. They said it was “Technical Death Metal.” The last I’ve heard that name was when my Christian friend was ranting about how death metal was “satanic” and should be punished with death. He was a very zealous fellow. I do admit, the drummer looked like he was having a blast playing those insanely fast beats. I inquired about the band’s name, and they told me it was Archspire.

When I got home, I began listening to some of their music and it was pretty good, but I was especially listening to the drumming. I looked up the drummer, Spencer Prewett, and saw a couple of videos of him playing in the studio and looked up the blazing-fast beat he was doing. They were apparently called “blast beats”. It sounded like the sound of my old job. Just without the dead people.

Next thing I knew, my entire search history was filled up with “how to do blast beats”. I eventually decided to order a new drum kit to start learning again.

For a few months, I practised every night for hours until my arms and legs were sore and sweat poured down my face. YouTube helped me a lot in learning how to improve my technique and I began learning how to play blast beats. It was tough at first and I’d get completely burned out after blasting for over fifteen seconds but I slowly improved. I even took a few lessons from Spencer before Archspire returned to Canada and he helped me improve my technique. Drumming was exhilarating. It also eliminated any kind of anger or frustration I would have at the time. Gone were my guilt and the recurring explosion flashbacks that were haunting me.

A few years after picking up drumming, I formed a band called Thalassophobia. We released a song I wrote about the death of my parents, and it unexpectedly became a hit. It’s funny to think of it, but music helped me cope with everything that was going on in my life, from my alcoholism to my depression. Finally discovering a new part of life that, after so much turmoil, and as much as it pains me to say it, I would probably never have found it if I hadn’t dodged death the night I left Russia. And when I look at the sky, I can sometimes see my parents wink at me. Maybe they like my beats too!

The Wounded Deer

Ng Kai Yeung, Kenny

City University of Hong Kong



The Wounded Deer (1946) by Frida Kahlo; Frida Kahlo, CC BY-SA 4.0, via www.FridaKahlo.org

A formless evil stirred within us, yearning to assimilate with our minds. Most died from it, and the lucky few were crippled by it. When it first started, they all laughed, thinking it was just another simple adversity for humanity to triumph over. Then the poor started to drop like flies, and districts started crumbling. The rich started cowering in fear inside their bunkers and land, but even their wealth and power proved useless. I could still remember my parents holding tightly onto the door, struggling to keep it shut as I ran away from the horde. I couldn't even hear their last words.

When the first patient showed symptoms, it unleashed carnage with half the district infected and consumed. Those who barely survived couldn't even comprehend the horrors they had witnessed, let alone gain the strength to escape from another wave of the infected. I was the only fortunate one who managed to escape, thanks to the sacrifice of my parents. Quarantine zones set up by the government slowed the evil, but it persisted. Those who turned were cast out, labelled as a burden to society, and seen as monsters. Families were torn apart just so the children wouldn't be lynched by mobs. Every night I burrowed under a piece of damp cardboard next to a dumpster and hid from people, my thoughts occupied with old friends trying to kill me. I could never forgive what these people had done.

Despite the hopelessness of it all, humanity endured. Our collective misery ended at the mark of a new decade. Scientists speculated it could have been dormant within us all, and those who were susceptible were eliminated by natural selection. There were no more casualties, but discrimination remained. It was as if that true evil had finally shown its face, our face. How could I possibly begin anew if old problems never fade? Neighbours who scorned and feared me greeted me with awkward smiles, but I saw through their facade. I tried going to support groups, and what I saw disgusted me even more. Wallowing cowards who felt sorry for something they had no control over, letting go of the injustices that had happened. I would never let go as they did.

"Sorry, we do not believe you are a fit for our company," the cleanly dressed businessman scoffed.

"Son, we don't need new hires right now," said the local supermarket chain manager.

"Get the fuck out of my restaurant!" the owner of the local diner shouted.

Having lost everything, I eventually found myself on the verge of starvation. Then the final straw finally landed; a crinkled newspaper landed on top of my head while I was sleeping. Big, black, bolded words boiled my blood. It told a story of the glamorous style that the sole heir to the Lee fortune lived, how the mansion itself was the heart of the city, and the decade of torture inflicted upon us barely put a dent in her bank accounts.

It dawned on me: The rich are to blame for this. These people waited in their ivory towers while the world burned. And the worst of them all? The Lees. Hypocrites who were seen as Gods of the city who were hailed as our saviours when all they had done was leave us at the most critical moment. By eliminating their sole heir, I would be righting a wrong.

It was much easier than I thought to commit deicide. The sole heir of the Lee fortune was willing to meet with a man like me, I almost felt pity for her. Her servants led me into the mansion, a hollowed shell of what used to be a shining jewel of the city. Owned by philanthropists, this land hosted fundraisers that helped when quarantine camps desperately needed rations. Unfortunately, these saints disappeared halfway through, and thus the situation recoiled to its original form. If we had a saviour that didn't give up, there would've been fewer casualties.

When I went inside the empty room, a weeping goddess dressed in white silk sat by the window waiting for me; her hazel eyes reached deep inside my soul. The mansion looked nothing like what they said in the newspapers, there was no lavish lifestyle, nor was there an inhuman god that none shall understand. She was sombre like the rest of us, or maybe I was projecting. The grip on the gun in my pocket was ice cold, and I tried to warm myself up to it by holding it tight. She stood up slowly, gesturing for me to sit next to her. There was a long silence in the room. I gazed

back into her soul; what greeted me was a mirror towards my own. It was as if we were speaking to each other, our eyes communicating with a language only we understood. My sidearm had never felt colder.

Before any of us spoke, the goddess stood up and started walking. Confused, I dared not move. She looked back at me, signalling me to walk with her. The mansion was an enigma. One would be expecting something new at the turn of the corner, but it would be more hollow corridors, devoid of any destination. Left and right then round and round, the white walls and wooden floorboards never seemed to end. We finally stopped in front of a garden, where flowers that once bloomed were left to wither. I couldn't help but reach my hand out to the dead daisies, their dried-up petals longing to become one with the Earth again.

Walking deeper into the blighted garden, rows of dead daisies were all I saw. By now the goddess was no longer visible, and I had been consumed by the garden. I was still drawn to its heart like something was calling me. There had to be something in here, something that was alive. I wandered deeper, and I finally saw something bloom. It was another mirror. An Aconite, its bright purple radiating hatred. My hands moved closer to it, hoping to finally take control of it. Before I could give myself to hate, the goddess stepped in. Her hand grabbed tightly onto mine. I struggled at first but soon found myself letting go.

Why did it have to be like this? I wanted it all back the way it was. Before the formless evil struck, I had parents who would nag me. My life was that of a normal University student, I was a good person, so what warranted this punishment? They wouldn't have died if I hadn't told them to bring me shopping that day. Why did the evil have to take them? I found myself crippled by these thoughts. Could things be better by killing this goddess?

The deity took me back into the halls of nothingness. I recognised the same stains on some of them, while others were unrecognisable from each other. Its lack of decor reminded me of myself, I couldn't think of anything else after my parents' death. I tried distracting myself, but it all proved to be useless. All roads brought me back to the piece of myself that could never be found again. Out of all the hallways I've been in, one enticed me.

A piece of art hung on the wall, an oil painting of a deer with a human face that was covered in arrows, and the word "Carma" was written in the lower left corner. I felt connected to the wounded deer, its physical and emotional anguish ran through my veins. I too had to live with unbearable pain after the evil struck. The deer looked hopeless but accepting of its unchangeable fate. Perhaps the ugliness of this painting was why the goddess walked away without a glance, even its owner could not stand the sight of such a sorry creature. Every stroke was torturous for the viewer and painter. *Why can't we change our fate? Is it because God is cruel, or was it because we could not move on?* To focus its wrath on a singular being was cruel, and I can't help but notice our similarities. I was the wounded deer, and the wounded deer I.

I contemplated my plan; would I have done the same if my family weren't infected? No, it wasn't fair. Her family could have done something, but they didn't. It was only fair that she paid for the sins of her parents. *I was going to kill her. I was going to shoot her with a pistol. I was going to take an innocent life.* There was a melancholy surrounding the atmosphere, and I could feel my eyes struggling to become sorrowful like hers.

By the time I was done convincing myself, we were sitting back where we started. The large, empty room. At this point, my whole body was

trembling, and my muscles stiffened right as I wanted to pull the gun out. The goddess put her hands on my shoulder, had she figured out my plan? I looked into her eyes, and she hugged me tightly. But I felt no reassurance because there were no emotions of sorrow or empathy in her eyes. Instead, they were angry and vengeful like my eyes. Her hug was strong and violent as if she was taking her anger out on me. When I first saw her, I thought we were alike, I even pitied her for what I was going to do. But she was like the rest of them, hateful and discriminatory. I bet it was all a ploy to keep up her family's reputation.

She was still holding me tight when I pulled the gun out, pointing it straight at her stomach. She felt the cold steel and backed away looking betrayed. For the first time, I finally heard her speak.

“What are you doing?”

Her voice was cracked like she had been crying. I heard the disappointment in her soft voice, her face looked just like mine. I told her I was going to kill her, as revenge for my family and those who had suffered a similar fate. She was abhorred as I explained my resentment for the abandonment by her parents, an amalgamation of disgust, anger, and sorrow introduced onto her face.

“After everything we had done for you, you have the gall to blame it on us? If we didn't do a thing, you'd all be dead. My parents, they—”

She choked up. Frustrated, the goddess held the barrel of my gun to her head. Looking straight into my soul, she begged for release.

“I never asked for any of this! My parents risked their lives to help you all, and what did they get in return? Death! It was people like you who took them from me, the evil in your body! While the rest of us cowered in fear,

you people killed the only ones who were willing to help you! Where's my revenge? Go ahead, shoot! I don't want to live anyways!"

I felt my hands losing strength, and tears welled up in my eyes, as I fell to the ground with the girl. Having lost so much to the evil, we finally received catharsis and retrieved a tiny piece of ourselves again. As the both of us hugged each other tight, the warmth of our bodies reminded us that we were all wounded deer.

The Beginning

Cheuk Chun Ming, Theodore

St. Paul's Co-educational College

Long ago, all humans in Skirvland were united under one fair and just ruler, elected by the people, and the kingdom prospered in peace for many years to come. But there came a day, a man by the name of Clanwell Borst, whose needs weren't satisfied and blamed the ruler of the kingdom for this. After assassinating the ruler, Borst put himself on the throne, and the kingdom erupted into chaos, dividing into 5 smaller countries fighting for power. Using the late ruler's riches, Borst recruited an army so large, he quickly conquered all of Skirvland and declared himself supreme dictator. The most famous revolt was led by a group called Skirvrebels, but they disappeared after the defeat in the battle of the Chamberic River. Since then, Borst's descendants continue his reign over Skirvland till this day.

Closing my book 'A Short History of Skirvland' shut, I thought I'd had enough of the boring reading task. Standing up, I walked out of the house, hoping to have a breath of fresh air. The streets of Stammen, the capital of Skirvland, were littered with pieces of rubbish and smelled of horse manure. The alleyways branching out from the main street were packed with beggars, hoping for a coin to fill their stomachs.

"Hello there, Adam!" a voice cried out. Swinging my head around, two of my best friends, Will and Ben strolled over.

"Good to see you too, what brings you here?" I replied.

"We were both bored, so we decided to go for a walk, care to join?" Ben said, coming to a stop in front of me. Nodding, I joined them and we set off towards the town centre.

The current king Rounsden Borst's elite corps were standing guard in front of the royal palace, each hefting a wicked-looking shotgun. Although there were plenty of peasants and homeless people scattered around the square, sometimes coming to the soldiers begging for money, just to buy the smallest morsel of food that would be their dinner, the soldiers ignored them. Worst of all, the soldiers didn't even feel annoyed, they just looked at the beggars with indifference. Just the pure act of the soldiers not replying at all infuriated me, and I felt as if they lit a fire inside me that burned with desiring justice for the people.

I turned to Will and Ben. "Don't you think we should do something? Look at all the things Borst has done, or should I say not done. The streets are downright filthy! The poor people deserve to be acknowledged! Borst, as ruler, bears the responsibility of maintaining the welfare of his cities and citizens. I say, we, citizens of Skirvland should have the right to choose our leader. Don't you agree?"

Nodding in assent, Will said, "I've had enough as well, it's time to fight back." Ben hesitated at first, but agreed too.

Together, after recruiting several more friends whose thoughts echoed our own, we secretly devised numerous plans to cause Rounsden Borst some mischief. We started from simply stealing the uniforms of soldiers, to laying traps for patrols, cranking up the intensity each time, until we started to plot their biggest operation yet—a train strike.

Huddled around the blueprints of a bridge, the few friends listened intently to me as I laid out the whole plan. The day before, I had already prepared the materials needed for the coming mission, which mainly involved the bomb I bought on the black market.

“Listen up, Will and I are going to sneak to the bridge and plant the bomb, while the rest of you will act as decoys and distract the enemy. The train will arrive at noon. We know that something the king needs greatly to sustain his rule is on the train, as well as numerous weapons. Let us be off at once!” I said, determined.

We split up into two groups, and Will and I arrived at the bridge hours before the train would pass by to set up the trap. I put the detector on the rails and connected it to the bomb. Meanwhile, Will was communicating with the decoy team on the radio, adjusting the volume and frequencies. At the same time, the sun continued to rise. When it was nearing its peak, Will and I began our descent from the bridge, just as when we heard the sound of a machine gun pouring out round after round of bullets seeming to come from the area around another train station.

“The decoy team’s doing their job well,” Will remarked with a grin.

An hour later, I exclaimed, “I’m done. The trap is set. Let’s get out of here.”

Will was usually outgoing and friendly, but I received no reply. Puzzled, I turned around just to see the barrel of a pistol point at me. It was the king’s troops, who somehow got wind of our plan. I couldn’t believe I went to such lengths, starting a rebellion, and buying explosives illegally, just to be snuck up upon. Behind the soldier, I saw Will, gagged and cuffed to the handles of the walkway beside the rails, struggling but to no avail. The person standing next to him looked towards me and—I stifled a gasp—it was Ben! The lying traitor betrayed us all to the authorities! I shouted furiously at him, “How could you! We were a team together!” already oblivious to the threat before me.

Ben shrugged and just said, “I got money,” then turned away again.

I turned my attention back to the soldier again, but I didn't utter a word to him, at the same time racking my brains desperately for an escape plan. Even as an idea popped into my mind, Will suddenly broke free of his restraints and with a lightning-fast punch, knocked Ben out. At that moment, I carried my plan out as well. When the soldier was distracted by Will's movements, I took out a dagger that I had kept on my belt, just for situations like these. With a swift jab to the stomach, the soldier fell lifeless onto the ground.

Staring at the ground, I noticed that my shadow had disappeared and the heat from the sun beat down on the top of my head. Swivelling around and facing the rails once again, I saw that the metal had started to vibrate.

"The train's coming!" I shouted to Will.

"Something's wrong with the bomb. You must've accidentally cut the wire connecting the bomb with the detector. It doesn't work now!" Will exclaimed, sounding very exasperated.

I mentally shouted at myself, frustrated that the train was approaching ever so closer and we were held up just because of my clumsiness.

I hesitantly said, "Why don't I-" Will cut me off.

"Go. I'll activate it manually," he said grimly.

Will, being stubborn, and determined. There wasn't anything I could do to change his mind. I started to walk away, glancing back one more time, and then ran.

I was just in time. A few hundred yards away from the bridge, I saw the silver metallic tube roaring on the rails, coming closer every second. I stared at the train, speeding past me. Turning my head, I kept my eyes on

the train as it came to the bridge and erupted into a sparking orange fireball, sending debris flying everywhere. I felt no elation or satisfaction at this victory but stared at the burning wreckage with grim eyes.

When I arrived back at the rendezvous, there was nobody to meet me there. I stayed at the rendezvous for an hour just in case, but I was still alone. A few days later, I returned to the base. Everything inside was as messy as before, the same as when Wil— I stopped myself then, there was no point in feeling guilty now, it was already over. I sat on the couch, thinking intently about what to do then. From the corner of my eye, I spotted an unfamiliar white envelope on the table. Curious, I walked over and picked it up. Surprisingly, it was addressed to me, but a thought crossed my mind, the address of this base should be a secret. I hesitated, but at last, my curiosity got the better of me. Ripping the seal open, I pulled the enclosed letter out.

Dear Mr. Curtons,

We have heard of your feats such as the recent train strike. After observation and discussion, we want to offer you a proposition: To join the Skirvrebels, now an underground resistance, and fight Borst on a much larger scale. You have great potential and will be a useful ally in our fight. Please consider our offer. When you have a reply for us, drop it in the mailbox at 3 Paterson Avenue.

Yours sincerely,

Executive Board of the Skirvrebels

I closed my mouth, unaware that it had been hanging open since I started reading. A smile pushed its way out. I briskly strolled over to my desk, feeling rejuvenated. I picked up my pen, smiled and thought, *Forget the past and live for the future. This is only just the beginning.*

POETRY



When the Celebration Begins

Notable Piece

Leung Ching For, Marvis

Diocesan Boy's School

A crimson orb retreats to the barren fields,
A red streak left behind as it strode.
The luminescent pearl ascends from its turquoise alcove,
Colossal by far compared to what the land yields.

A soft fragrant foliage adorns the terrain,
A young serpentine bark perched above.
Insatiably the speckles of light dance,
Minute green blades watch on with glee, entranced.

The beasts of the land arise from their den,
Aroused from their slumber, for the festivity that awaits them.
To the audience of blinking a parliament croon,
And beneath the blue streaks is where the marine sings their tune.

When the sun sets is when they begin their celebration.
When the sun sets is when they come out to play.
Without us to contaminate their nation,
They are happy to stay all day.

I Believe

Ali Raza Jatoi

City University of Hong Kong

Look into the sky, it's a brand new day.
Time to leave the old and start a new way.

Gotta take the bad and turn it into good.
Life has been hard, but I know I could.
I'm ready to move, ready to grow,
Forget what's been done and just let life flow.

Here's to new beginnings, and life starting fresh,
Never look back, no more regrets.
A new life is waiting, so I'll never fear.
Ready for new beginnings, telling life loud and clear.

It's more than just a thought in my head.
It's a feeling that's alive when I get out of bed.
I'm ready for what's coming, there's no turning back.
Making all my dreams come true, so I won't look back.

I'm breathing in the sweet stillness of the night,
The stars beaming out their silver light.
I'm wading deep in my own reflections,
Ready to take a leap of faith and find some new directions.

Just when I'm about to break, I find the strength inside,
Finding courage to push through and learning how to survive.
Life is a journey, in this journey I believe.

(Untitled)

Charis Lo

SKH Lam Woo Memorial Secondary School

The galaxy fell from the sky,
stars from it sang and laughed,
like a silver dragon lingering,
like a bridal veil,
thin and transparent.
Like the bride's tears,
fell to the ground splashing like a flower.

A symphony was played,
water splashed on stones,
they woke up,
and sang a beautiful song,
joining the natural chorus.
The water flowed through the vines,
washed away all the dust.
The galaxy followed her and fell into the water.

Squirrel running among the branches,
accidentally a leaf fell into the lake.
The fish in the water thought there was food,
chaotic scrambled.
The turtle was lazy,
faced its belly to the Sun,
having a nice sunbath peacefully.

The wind in evening blows,
the stars are back to the sky,
only their reflections are left in the lake.
Waterfall continues endlessly,
And moonlight continues to illuminate the world.
Everything seems to stay still at this moment.

Two Sonnets of a Melancholic Feminist in Love

Chu Ka Nam, Keith
Diocesan Boys' School

1

Don't let me go, don't you already know?
There ain't no forever so begin now.
I don't want no words, I don't need no vow.
Come with me, for you, I'll put on a show.
I can teach you things, I can make you grow.
Queen of your heart babe, I'll watch as you bow.
When I lift you up, you can ask me how.
The night's more sensual than this afterglow.
Drop the cigarette, leave the glass of beer,
All I need are beginnings of your love.
Take off your glasses, vision of a bat,
The world looks better when things are unclear.
Choose a song, you played *Girl Like Me* by Dove—
“Have you never let a woman do that?”

2

You and I, we moved it to the bedroom,
In your bed, we were hugging and kissing.
You and your body, so overwhelming,
Say, I saw—I made you blossom and bloom,
Like a flower, but now I feel such gloom...
“They call me *feminist*,” I was saying.
Thoughts in my head were fighting and fisting,
My melancholy woke up from the tomb.

“What time we’re in? Old ideas collapse.
New ones rise. Nothing wrong. I have heard of,
“The history of men’s opposition to
Women’s emancipation is perhaps
More interesting than the story of
That emancipation itself,”” said you.

Nanay Rosita

Elisha Ariana F. Andres

City University of Hong Kong

It hurts again...

Yet again... I heard it alone...

Yet again... I'm crying at night...

I pray for it not to be true...

Hoping not to feel the pain of losing you too...

I thought they'd wait to tell us...

But now, it's out in the open...

I hear their cries...

Losing you, I hoped they were lies...

We were supposed to see you again...

Maybe one last time...

But I guess God had other plans...

He probably relieved you of your pain...

I know you are probably with Him now.

He probably met you right as you closed your eyes and opened them again.

Now I wish I didn't stay up late to hear the news...

To hear my father cry out from the news that you are gone.

To hear my mother speak out the words to us.

To hear my sister whimper and sob.

But I know, to know that you have passed, is what you would have wanted...

I think we all needed our own time to grieve...
Our own space to cry for a beautiful life gone...

I would have hoped to have seen you one last time...
I regret not going back with them to see you then...

But to have seen you force a smile...
You were strong...

Now, we all need to live our lives anew...
Beginning of a life without you...

Not able to hear your voice.
See your smile.
Feel your warmth.

Beginning of a life where I know you're at peace.
Beginning of a life where I can't see you again... Not yet...

The Thirty Fourth Beginning of Spring

Liu Meilong

City University of Hong Kong

Walking through the drizzling Ngau Tau Kok one early spring morning,
I stir the flammable tender within my thirty-three years' solitude.
The multiplicity of a faraway quartet cracks open my worldly dumbness.

I wake up crying every time I dream of you, Grandpa,
at the end of the Tai Wai moat.

You smiled with the same wrinkled eyes as twenty years ago along the
bank of the Hutuo River.

Your stubborn quietness filled with the filigree frost of the poplar leaves,
melting the overgilding foxtail grass on Mount Tai Hang.

The sonnets of life revisit the wounds, the haunts, the lived love and the
loved lives.

The psalm of history obliterates the flesh, the joys and the pains.

The very turn of the world glorifies the sun, the moon, the ephemeral
flower, the stars and the orchestra.

Climb up the winged crests when we meet in the northern cornfields.

Through the sunken dynasties the northern poplars are juggling the half-
burned future,

in the gloomy chestnut cottage at the feet of Mount Tai Hang.

Over the blade of time carved my thirty-three days and nights.
I sip the gentle immortality of the sentences sung by the eyebrows of the literature professor.

I see the beginning of the future life in the red chambers,
texting my confrontation with death to an old friend deep at night,
pining for the overgilding foxtail grass in the mid-afternoon Chi Lin Nunnery.

The slanting rain perished beneath Beacon Hill.
The moistened drawing paper gallops in the shadow of the light globe,
in the gloomy chestnut cottage at the feet of Mount Tai Hang.

Wed yourself, I hear you say, bite your dew-like lips' fragrance,
Assemble your midnight reminiscence on the Loess Plateau, the highland
of your father, grandfather and many more,
with the rust odour of the emerald dress your grandma once wore.

Ride the white horse alone,
Breathe your lot and the death till the end of that flammable tender,
when plenty of you and your lovers meet in the wild briars and the
silvering graves.

Don't look back, the thirty three you were dead.
A tiny wrinkled new born just comes to life.

As the Bell Rings

Ng Hang Yu

St. Paul's Co-educational College

My thoughts wander.
The mysteries of the universe I ponder.
Look at the birds soaring
into the sky, higher and higher!
Can I ever be like them? I wonder.

As the bell rings,
Ding-dong, Ding-dong, it squeaks.
And reality it brings.

Chained in boxes of grey
are faces ever so gay.
All longed for freedom,
when all that awaits
is eternal boredom.

Long, exasperated, perpetual sighs I hear,
coming from everywhere.
Eyes that once sparked light,
are now filled with everlasting darkness.

Words dumb and dull
on sheets of plain paper
and a speaking tree standing
are all I can see in
this wondrous world.

I tremble,
swirling tornado in my stomach.
I pant,
sweat drips from my palms like it's raining.
I suffer,
Big Bang happening in my head.

As the bell rings,
I become a bird
with bound wings.
I never learn to fly,
I am taught to walk.

Plath

Riccardo Marco

City University of Hong Kong

You put your head in the oven,
along with the cookies for your kids.
I hope at least the smell of live gas
mixed with the warm sugar:
Tell me, did you think of your childhood?
While the hot, broiling elements
cauterized your short hair forever?
Did you see the dusty yeast,
the shapeless dust, the dead/alive dust,
growing old in your place?
Did you notice the infernal red lights,
distorting reality one last time?
I bet you breathed in the rising fumes,
and when had come the night of your senses,
you did not feel any different.
And if you did, what could you have possibly thought of?
The yeast burning to new colours?
New shapes?
New life?

Swept Away — A Villanelle

Yeung Nga Yee, Winnie

St. Paul's Co-educational College

Boats against the current, each and every day.
A year of expectation, I leave this all behind.
Silently and swiftly, the past is swept away.

I did not understand. I did not want to stay.
Not in the present—but to dwell in the past—'twas blind.
Boats against the current, each and every day.

Even when the thunder crashed, I had been astray.
Dreaming about bygone days, an illusion in my mind.
Silently and swiftly, the past is swept away.

To fight, to push, to slip away.
The future is inevitable; beginnings borne, combined.
Boats against the current, each and every day.

My memories, my history, plainly on display.
My nostalgia—to search, but never to find.
Silently and swiftly, the past is swept away.

The ending of a chapter means the beginning of today.
No more attempts, no more efforts to realign.
Boats against the current, each and every day.
Silently and swiftly, the past is swept away.

NON-FICTION



Beginnings of the Insatiable

Notable Piece

Cheng Yee Nga, Andrea

True Light Girls' College

How had I learned to become this self?

Young, my mother had to teach me, again and again, things that I couldn't understand: *don't put your elbows on the table, don't talk when you're eating, ask before taking, say please when you want something.*

Child, I didn't know what most of it meant. I was only greedy the way all children are, chubby short hands reaching out, always reaching out to grasp what has not been offered yet. My mother taught me patience when that happened: withholding a piece of candy, saying not yet, not yet, and yet I watched hungrily, uncomprehending, hands poised on my knees, thinking that it was mine to take.

Now I am grown and yet I am still crippled with this greed, like I have not learnt, like the hours of staring at a wall being punished for my intemperance as a child had never taught me anything. Before, I could have been stalled by the threat of a heavy blow to my cheek, the shadow of a looming reprimand staying in my outstretched hand.

But now, alone, I am the only person who will see my own greed. The sole judge and the sole witness. What persecution I suffer will be executed from my own hand.

This is what I know: I have never been strong enough to follow the path of righteousness.

One night I dreamt the whole of my greed had swallowed me.

Like a dark ocean, Charybdis unhinged its gigantic maw. In the void I saw spirals of a pummelling abyss calling to me, augural rings plunging down hypnotic depths.

This is what you wanted, it said to me, and for the first time in my life, it seemed that without reaching my hand I could hold all that I wanted. To let myself plunge into dark whirling waters. Infinite waves of infinite desires. I closed my eyes and felt the enormity of its presence pressed into the hollowness of my chest, the pounding of its beat louder than whatever organ pumped my blood.

I try to exercise control.

I put two clementines on a table in front of me.

I was to eat one, wait ten minutes, and eat the other.

The first clementine burst sweet and round, citrus wafts of orange curling tart around the slick of my mouth. To savour it all, because I was no more than a starving man, I licked clean the fading sweetness from each rind edge, then from the whorls of my fingertips.

When all was picked clean, I began to wait.

Like training a dog, I trained myself to sit by the edge of a chair like some mutt resting its head on its paws. I watched the clock in the corner of the room, each hand not at all moving, taunting and mocking when my eyes could not help but stray to where the second clementine awaited.

To pretend I wanted nothing, I looked away and closed my eyes. As if without the object to desire, I could become liberated from my own greed.

And yet in my mind I saw golden curlicues of honeyed orange twine through the air, the sugary taste of its flesh ambrosiac where it ghosted along the back of my throat.

And now, bidden by this image, my greed was insuppressible, rendering me into that child with hands poised on knees, ravenous eyes following the path of an unattainable sweet.

My hands were violent as they tore into the skin of the clementine.

As I have said, I never learn.

I swallowed every piece that I pried from the peel, hungry like a wild beast, clumsy as my fingers slicked with juice clawed into ruptured flesh. Eve biting into the first fruit from the Garden of Eden, the beginning of transgressions to come.

I ate, and the clementine rinds watched accusingly from where they laid, bared and ripped open, pulpiness revealed, the spat-out evidence of my greed.

Later, sickness overturned my stomach, each note of sweetness souring into biting acidity on my tongue.

Now and then I taste that acridness cloying by the gaps of my teeth.

From young, my parents could not help but define me by my greed: how could I want all that, all that, all that? As a child, pointing to garish plastic wrappers in brightly-lit mall aisles, I first learnt of greed. My parents, as all parents are, tolerated this greed until they could not tolerate it anymore. Then they had to sit me down and teach me that to be given something was to give something in return.

I thought I was still a child, where things could be offered to me without expectation of repayment, where I could take and take and never offer anything in exchange.

But herein lies the paradox: my greed was infinite. Thus my repayment was infinite.

When you wanted something immeasurable what could you offer in return?

Jokingly, my family had said that when I was born, I had arrived not head-first but hand-first, fingers reaching out into the light before I could even take a breath.

This was the greed I was born with.

Now even what I think and what I know is shaped by this greed. Back to a child, spitefully declaring what I want and what I deserve.

I began to want as part of human nature, and now inseparably, that want has become part of my nature.

What could come now, if I continue tearing clementines? Hands dirtied with no blood but the reminder of what I am: someone that cannot learn, forever circling again and again to become a mere child, desirous hands outreached.

I began with greed. I hope not to end in greed.

The Beginning from an End — a Widow’s Ordeal

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...Even the tiny mouse in our small home couldn’t get food crumbs to feed on. “Hope” was our most surplus meal, we had it in bags...

Every night at 8 p.m., we would sit by the curtains, waiting to see light rays from my dad’s white beetle car. Then, we would jump out to welcome him back from work. The routine didn’t end well on New Year’s Eve of 2007. Yes, Dad did come back but he couldn’t hug or smile at us gorgeously as he always did. He was gone! He didn’t open his eyes again. Losing our dad was a big blow and an unforgettable experience. Although dad left, he left with us the most priceless gift, my mum. The beginning to the end of having our dad around.

The start of the widow’s ordeal

My mum, Lady Lola grew up as a lone child. She was barely eight when she detached from her lovely nuclear family...her dad, mum and siblings. She had juggled through the years, not being close to her family. This isn’t my story yet. Years later, Lady Lola got married and she lost her sweet husband just “a few moments later”. Life isn’t always a golden highway. Lone again, no— this time she had two beautiful little princesses and a bouncing prince to call her own.

The years following Dad’s death revealed to me that most of the events I had never imagined were actually potential realities. In 2012, I was close to writing my final A-Levels exams when I fell ill. My school was about 85 miles from home. My then proprietor, Mr. Flourish had called to inform my mum over the phone. Back at home, my mum dropped the call in a rush. She had dashed to the well to fetch water, so she could prepare and head to my school to check on me. After she had pulled the water bowl to

the mouth of the well...the windlass rolled off her hands and she fell, hitting her face against the handle. That left her with a super deep cut. Blood gushed out of the cut and soaked her entire body. Typically, this event should have stopped a mere “human” from taking a two-hour journey to see me in school. Guess who I saw barely one hour and fifty minutes later, it was my mum. Mums are extraordinary beings! My friends came to my hostel room to tell me that I had a visitor. I stepped out and didn’t find my mum, she had refused to enter the school. It was strange, so I ran to the gate and found her seated by the pavement with a large scarf and bloodstains all over it. I screamed and she told me what had happened back home. My woman said to me, “I needed to see my daughter first before I take care of myself.” Tears rolled down her face as she said that. I immediately forgot about the fever I had.

In between the years, when we (my siblings and I) got back from school for the holidays, my mum would sit on a small wooden stool, deep in thought about how she could make those days fun for us. But there was obviously little she could do. Her small savings were safely kept to partially cover payment for our tuition the following school term. So, she would hold us close to her, pray for us, and tell us stories while time passed. In the evening, we would stroll to our small green farm in the backyard, get some okra, and then eat it with cassava. Maybe the meal at the time had no beef or chicken laps dancing through it, but it was our most sumptuous option. We ate it in elegance, and we were grateful!

Here’s another moment amidst the years. It was cold and raining, close to the second hour of the deep night, when we heard clapping sounds of water. The water dropped from ceiling to floor, beside our single shared bed. A roofing sheet had worn out and the rain had found its way through it. The ceiling was leaking as a result. My mum said to us, “Don’t worry, go back to sleep.” She tried to tame the situation and made it seem like it was nothing. That night, I pretended to have returned to sleep. As I hid

my face behind the palm of my hand, I saw my mum cleaning, and mopping as the rainwater dropped uncontrollably. When she grew tired, she sat on the floor by it and cried as she murmured my dad's name, Femi, as she had fondly called him while he was still alive.

The old will say... on the thighs of a poor mum sits a rich kid. My mother barely had time to rest, she was a queen of all trades, from rearing pet hens to selling "zobo", a local drink made from edible hibiscus in our town. She needed all the money piled up to take care of the three humans she cherished most, us. Her consolation and encouragement were our good grades after every school term, some of which got us scholarships. Most importantly, she never wanted to let my dad's legacy fade.

Maybe, this was not even the highlight yet. I woke up on a Saturday morning and my mum wasn't inside the house. I stepped out and found her in conversation with two middle-aged men while she pointed towards my dad's storeroom. I was not sure what was happening, so I stepped back inside. A few minutes later, I saw the two men lifting out our power generator and some other electronic appliances. The gist was that my mum had sold all the gadgets to the two men for prices that wouldn't have been able to get us new ones even three years earlier. I ran back to the room, but I put on a smiling face. I didn't want my mum to feel extra bad when she got back in. My sister had just finished high school and would need some extra money for her final high school exams. That was my mum's reason for the sales.

If I was not one of the little girls in these memories, I would have stood on a podium and declared that humans weren't capable of making so many sacrifices. I would have been right though, because mothers are not mere humans, they are angels! We might all be in a better place now, but it is sweet to remember all of those moments and commemorate them in writing. Beyond the scope of these scenes, a lot of emotions ran through

my veins as I placed my half-broken pen on paper to tell my solemn story. Beyond the width of these moments I have shared, it was beautiful to know that happiness...better still, contentment—is intentional and, at most times, free. Maybe the little we have can also go a mile further to help others around us. And favourably, good deeds come back to us healthy. Amidst all our plights, my mother had maintained strength, a giving nature, kindness, hard work, hope, and smiles.

To dad, thank you for this wonderful gift that is our mother. I have emulated your beautiful hair and handwriting, and a quarter of your unwavering resilience. There are a million and one more scenes of mum... but I stay here for now. Dad's demise left in our home a new routine, a new way of living and a new setting and adaptation. It was a *beginning* from an *end*.



The Beginning

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Do you ever look at the night sky with hundreds of stars billions of light-years away, wondering how it all began? The Beginning was always an enigma. It was a thought as old as time, even before mankind existed. It was a concept that could not be explained but could only be experienced, yet there was no one there to experience it. That was what made it so special.

In the Beginning, there was simply nothingness. Nothing but an empty void, the universe was in its embryonic form, there was utter stillness. Nothing stirred, the sky was black, and the stars cast an eerie glimmer in the void. It was as if nothing had ever been and nothing ever would be. And then, out of that nothingness, something burst forth. A spark that illuminated the entire world. A beautiful light, full of colour and life. The light shone so brightly that it cast a beautiful, golden hue across the whole universe. The stars twinkled and swirled in the sky, like diamonds crafted in the heavens coalescing into larger and larger forms, until finally, the galaxies and planets began to take shape. The planets and moons spanned across the sky along with the stars, each boasting its unique beauty. The galaxies spun, the planets revolved, and life began to appear everywhere, giving the universe a sort of soul. It grew and flourished, with its unique beauty and mysteries that have captivated humans ever since. Time, space, and matter seemed to exist in an ever-shifting interplay as the universe continued to evolve and expand. But, while science has unraveled many of its secrets, some remain a mystery.

That spark, in the Beginning, is us today, igniting curiosity about it all, igniting suspicion about how it all began, igniting evermore conjecture about our origin, purpose and end. That spark is miraculous, a beautiful

microcosm for the universe itself, as 14 billion years of evolution contributes incessantly to its present existence. The Beginning was such a powerful force that it could never be forgotten nor replicated. Every generation has looked upon the Beginning with awe, with wonder and with respect. It was an event that will always be remembered and always be revered. Because no matter how far we go, no matter how much we change, the Beginning was the foundation of it all. It will always be a reminder of the power of beginnings, a reminder of how light emerged from utter darkness, almost as if to say that hope must exist even on the gloomiest of days, a reminder of how something as insignificant as a spark birthed everything we know of—from subatomic particles to clusters of galaxies—almost as if to say that the most minor things can make the most significant differences, and a reminder of the possibilities, that may seem unachievable are yet to come. Many aeons have passed, and the universe remains as mysterious and beautiful as it did in the Beginning, and we can only imagine what its future holds. While the mystery remains, and we may never know the true Beginning, we can take solace in the fact that, no matter how long it lasts, we are here now and part of this incredible story.

Fulfilment

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It was a fine spring day. A gentle sunshine kissed my forehead, the gusty wind grazed my skin, and the warmth enveloped my physique. A perfect day to go cycling. At least, that was what I had convinced myself. In truth, I had limited knowledge of riding a bicycle. At the ripe age of fifteen, cycling still seemed to be a gruelling task, while others of my age breezed through mountains and valleys on their trusty partners. "It was time to change it," I thought to myself. With dedication and slight reluctance, I set off to the nearby bicycle park, starting my adventure. Or rather, a trial.

A few miles later, the park was in sight. Upon stepping my foot into the zone, I was greeted with the briny odour of the sea as the wind calmly brushed my hair. Instinctively, I thought to myself that there was no turning back. I would master the art of cycling right there. I proceeded to rent a bicycle and adjusted the height of the seat. The texture of the leather seemed rather familiar, yet it was still a stranger. I faintly remembered the last time I had taken hold of a bicycle, the polished metal surfaces and rubbery grips left a faint imprint on my mind.

Before I knew it, the impatient me had decided to skip the adaptive stages and rushed to put both feet on the rusty pedals. This was followed by a loud crash that certainly shook the people in the area. Embarrassed, I crawled back up with new scrapes on my palms, turning to see the desperate attempts of bypassers to hold their laughter. The quote, "There is no shortcut to success", truly hit home at that moment. To cycle, I must first walk with the bicycle, which was exactly what I did. Meticulously, I placed the bicycle on my side, pushing it forwards as if I were a babysitter.

"Easy enough," I gave myself a few words of encouragement.

Walking with the bicycle should have been a simple task. Yet, there were still obstacles blocking my progress, little stepping stones felt like knolls on plains. The bicycle and I were beings of different minds, refusing to cooperate despite my futile efforts in pulling it back on track. In time, however, I found my grasp, eventually being able to babysit the bicycle with little to no difficulties.

This was only the first stage. Little did I know the struggles that awaited me in the second, which was to balance myself on the bicycle. Throughout my childhood, I was no natural at balancing. Teachers in kindergarten specifically criticized my ability to balance. It was no surprise that my first twenty minutes of balancing attempts were to no avail. To say that I had no thoughts on giving up would be a lie. But as the saying goes, no pain no gain. To succeed, I could not have given up having come this far. Despite constant failures, I pat myself on the back and got ready for the next step. Body went numb from the falls, yet my mind refused to succumb to tiredness.

“99th attempt.”

As usual, I placed my right foot on the pedal, gave it a slight push, and off it went.

“7...8...9...10!” I exclaimed in joy.

At last, I gained the ability to balance on a bicycle for 10 seconds. To any ordinary person, it was nothing worthy of compliments. To me, it was a moment of fulfilment, knowing that the effort in the last hour was finally rewarded.

It was time for the final reckoning. The ultimate goal, which I must achieve. The initial push by my right foot could only get me so far. To become one with the wind, I must let the momentum of the push carry

on, achieved only by adding my left foot into the formula. Realising that bicycle accidents happen on a daily basis, I was hesitant to put both feet on the pedals. Nevertheless, the idea of imminent success fuelled determination in my heart. One deep breath, and my left foot was on the pedal, a familiar sensation mirrored by my right. As the bicycle slowly lost momentum, my left foot delivered the second push. A creaking sound was heard, followed by the speeding up of the bicycle in response to the push. By some miracle, the bicycle managed to keep its balance. For the first time, the wind was pushing against my cheeks while slight resistance presented itself when riding the bicycle. Excitement grew within me as I strived to gain more speed. The bicycle received another push, speeding it up further.

We cruised through the cool summer breeze, appreciating the wings of freedom obtained through eternal damnation. I was captivated by the succulent frames of trees and nature, readily left in the dust. The flowery scent invaded my nose while, lost in the moment, I struggled to make words of my enjoyment. My joy did not last long, as it was soon followed by another loud crash that, once again, certainly shook the people in the area. However, there was not a slight sense of embarrassment within me. I let out a scream. Not a scream of pain, but a scream of gratification, for I have broadened my horizons on a seemingly simple ability—cycling.

I walked home with rivers of sweat, feeling more refreshed than ever before. As the sun began to set, the pale sunshine commended my hard work. The roaring of my stomach did not trigger my sense of hunger. Rather, I felt full, as if I had just eaten a luscious meal. Perhaps, it was due to the adrenaline rushing through my body. In other words, a sense of fulfilment.

Alpha

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Second after second, day after day, month after month, decade after decade, our world evolved, generations engraving mottled and tiny traces in the endless river of time. The insignificant seconds we cherished; all became a part of history in an instant. Whenever I desist my hurrying steps in life, I would always wonder: since we will all reach the end of our lives and turn into a strand of soul, our identity no longer existing, our flesh slowly withering, our mind dormant for eternity, what's the purpose of living? Is keeping ourselves alive just a soulless instinct? No matter how resplendent our lives are now, they will eventually be forgotten. But it seemed like the powerlessness of being unable to impede myself from aging didn't stop my soul from burning, my heart from pulsing, or the trillions of cells in my body from supporting me. The first time I had this idea was at my grandmother's funeral.

I hadn't spent much time with my mother's mother. We might have met once a year or even less, so we hadn't developed a lot of affection. When my grandmother passed away, I didn't feel much pain. To me it was reasonable, but maybe I was purely cold-blooded. Wrapped in black clothes, I attended the funeral. Staring at the pale funeral parlour room and the black-and-white photograph, a horrible guess arose from my mind. Will I lie in the coffin one day too? How terrifying it was to know that the earth will continue to rotate, and others' lives will go on after I take my last breath.

I was 10 years old the summer my grandmother left, when I began to fear death.

The second time I had this idea was during the summer holiday after I graduated from primary school.

That July my mental situation was rather poor due to stress, peer relationship problems and body shaming from my old classmates. I would lie awake all night and wait for dawn, walk around the promenade repeatedly while looking at the sea, wondering what I did to deserve the worst month among the 147 of them in my entire life. I went to play badminton occasionally, but hitting the ball repeatedly for an hour was too dull to continue. Thirty-five unbearable days passed, I witnessed every daybreak and nightfall in my dark room but missed the beautiful midsummer. I tried so hard to collect the bits and pieces of my dilapidated July but forgot to put them down and await my opportunistic August.

Being alive while being engulfed by emptiness, after all, is a sad nomadism for a soul.

The last week of August I went for a bus ride. I travelled through Central and bought snacks for my family and a book for myself. I got on the bus heading home and chose a nice seat on the upper deck. Looking at the fleeting scenery through the window, I sank into a trance. 840 hours of a not so relaxing trip almost wiped away my memories of happily travelling. I didn't feel too thrilled, but my mental situation had improved over the month. The bus passed a cemetery as the first stop, and the following route felt like a reversed life. A hospital where lives dissipated and bloomed, a residential area where people stayed for their whole life, a secondary school where teenagers wanted the enjoyment of youth, and a primary school where children experienced their first stage of growing up.

My twelve-year-old life lasted for so long, long enough for me to leave my childish eleven-year-old me, long enough for me to be hurt by peers, long enough for me to learn to heal.

Maybe my twelve-year-old self will just be a small part of my life, maybe its unforgettable moments will be forgotten when I get older, maybe it isn't worth my tears.

Maybe, before the moment my soul disperses, this year will be my last glimpse of life.

For two years I had thought about life and death, turning thoughts over and over but not getting a conclusion.

I was still twelve when I had this idea for the third time.

I bought some nice red roses from the flower market at the beginning of 2023. Every day when I had time, I would look at them, allowing my thoughts to drift while I caressed the crimson petals with my fingertip.

Days passed and soon the roses languished. The bright red of the petals faded away and the edges turned brown. Staring at the shrivelled flowers, I linked them with mortals like me. We started off looking so gorgeous, and as we grew, we started to be haggard. How pitiful is death to us.

However, I can't seize the sand slipping away from the hourglass of my life.

The only luck is I no longer waste time pitying my dying self.

At first, when we came to this world, we didn't have a choice. At last, when we leave this world, we won't have a choice.

The alpha of life is so vibrant and exciting while the ending seems out of reach but feared by us.

Three times I had thought about death.

But no matter how scared and worried I was, I continued to stay alive.

If a moment is worth eternity, why submerge dread in death?