



apothēca

The 2019 ICAlettes Literary & Art Supplement



apothēca

These days, there are no more apothecaries, no more medicine men with their herbs and potions, no more witches with their spells and curses. Gone with the apothecary is the age of talking trees and haunted lakes, the age of fairy stories and bad wolves. With every day, it only draws further from our grasp. With every day, we grow older, and more is lost: innocence, concern, freedom. We forget the taste of medicine from a spoon. We forget the uncertain.

With this in mind, the ICAlettes presents apothēca: a collection of all these things and more. Here are stories from the breeze and songs from our youth; here are the things we did not know we were taught. With three parts, we give you a celebration of all that we once thought uncertain and all that we go on to face, because no matter how deep a city winds, there is always some enchanted forest beckoning, some monster in the weeds, some wish left ungranted. For all that we and our world has grown, we have not stopped falling to demons, losing our hopes, and searching for cures.

Take a step into a world of lights and shadows, corners and clearings, dusks and dawns. Here we play an endless game of connect-the-dots with the stars; here we release joys and sorrows into the wind; here, our burdens come to make their peace. We revisit nostalgia in its old wood cabin, and we ask, in our loneliness, to be healed.

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1. world in color

ARTWORK BY TRISHA TAN
LAYOUT BY ARIANNE NGSY

sunbent

by Caitlin Ching of 12-Hope

i am wheat-gold and honeymilk
cornflowers before the blood
it is said that sometimes the sun
will gaze upon my knowing eye
lovingly and lavishing / the warmth of a hand
— sun-bent



ARTWORK BY LIANNA TAN
LAYOUT BY ARIANNE NGSY



ARTWORK BY SARAH HUANG
LAYOUT BY ARIANNE NGSY

GOLDEN.

by Sarah Huang of 11-Goodness

I know who I am

I am no fool

I am not

As bountiful as the river silt

Or as proud as the palms that I see every day

I am not as alive as the sun at dawn

To whoever who says

My skin is beautiful

They are wrong

(Read this in reverse.)

ARTWORK BY SARAH HUANG AND KATE DEE
LAYOUT BY ARIANNE NGSY

[*YEARNING*]

by Amara Lee of 7-Dignity



Every note,
Sung in perfect pitch,
Golden voices
Resonating through the room

The room,
Filled with the hymn
Of so many different voices,
Each blending in perfect harmony

The harmony,
A mixture of altos and sopranos,
Every note in perfect symphony,
Creating one song

One song,
Created by so many,
But united by talent,
And sung with absolute passion

Absolute passion,
Burning in the hearts
Of every singer,
Burning like a spreading fire

A spreading fire,
Running on pure passion,
For a song that would bring back
The light they once knew

The light,
They wished could be revived,
A dampened cheer,
And a spark of hope

ARTWORK BY NICOLE UY
LAYOUT BY ARIANNE NGSY



ARTWORK BY SIMONE TAN
LAYOUT BY GAB LIM

intervals of horrible sanity

by Neale Sy of 11-Counsel



01:39

"I want to defeat him."

Drab and easy to overlook as it is, he'd never noticed the apothecary before; it's tucked in an alcove surrounded by drooping dead trees, a dirty pond beside it. Inside, the air is thick with spices and herbs, and unlabeled medicine bottles line the shelves, along with glass containers that hold... *questionable* ingredients. Earlier, he thought he'd seen an eyeball, but it had just been a jar of off-white fluid.

He thinks about that now, because it feels like someone's watching him, and it's not the person behind the counter. A divider separates them, so all he sees is a pair of hands sticking out from a small opening; one hand is human and the other wooden like a marionette's. The pale human hand is motionless—the wooden one restlessly drums its fingers.

("What do you sell?"

"Wishes."

Their voice is unnerving: natural yet robotic, human but not.)

Click-clack. "Who?"

"My... rival." He hesitates. "He's infuriating. Always saying he's better than me, how being a doctor is boring. A-and he just proves himself right, because he *does* do everything better than me, even without studying."

Silence.

A little desperately: "You said you sell wishes. T-there's my wish. I want to—"

The wooden hand stills; the *click-clacking* stops, throwing the apothecary into an eerie quiet. The human hand disappears inside, and barely a second afterwards, comes out with—

"... What?"

"Here you go." The flat, robotic tone is gone, making all the difference; their voice is clearer, kinder, more human. Both hands withdraw into the divider this time, and the opening closes.

On the counter rests a library card.

—

19:20

"What do I gain from seeing him everyday? He just comes over to bother me and show off how he can deduce the culprit in a murder-mystery novel by reading the book blurb! And he eats in the library, like some—barbarian!"

He'd gone down the same path at least thrice in the past few days, but he hadn't seen the apothecary again until tonight. The place still has its headache-inducing medicinal stink, but now it's tinged with incense smoke. He can hear birdsong, windchimes, and the gentle whirring of gears somewhere. It's more... welcoming.

But when he says that, the whirring stops and starts again, the system stuttering. "If you won't think, how can you expect to succeed?"

He crumples the card in his grip, more than he already has. "I want to defeat him. Not—"

"You already have."

(The eyeball swims into view in his peripheral, and he turns to look—but it's only that fluid again, disgusting as ever. For some reason, he could swear the eye had had color, this time. Blue? Green?)

"W... What do you mean?"

"If you won't think—"

"I *am* thinking!" he shouts; glass clinks on the shelves. "It just looks like spending time with him makes me feel like even more of a complete failure than I already do! My father—he wants me to succeed. If I don't—"

His voice cracks, breaks, falls. Shatters.

"I... I have to defeat him. Be smarter. Better."

Click-clack. "Would you do anything?"

He hesitates. Remembers *his* face, bright and cheery and insensitive, lending him books he stays up all night for reading, because of course they have the same taste. Remembers *him* solving mysteries, puzzles, and cases long gone cold, calling detectives buffoons, because *he's* the smartest person in the world, of course, no one can defeat *him*.

He remembers quiet, lonely nights, when he hadn't had anyone but college textbooks. Now he remembers afternoons in a golden library, where sunshine filters in just *right*, and...

And Father, frowning, laying heavy hands on his shoulder.

"Ye—"

"You hesitated," the voice says, smooth and serene. "That's answer enough."

The windchimes ring in the distance. Their human hand retrieves a scrap of paper. "Here. If you—"

"—won't think, I know—"

“—If you *think*,” they interrupt. “You’ll know what to do.”

—

05:21

He walks by the apothecary’s general area a million times, thinking about wishes and wants, but only after a month does he see it again, in the light of the sunrise.

The hunchbacked dead trees are now in bloom; the crystal-clear pond bubbles with koi. Inside, though, it looks like it’s grown centuries older; every step on the decrepit floor sends clouds of dust flying, and the dilapidated shelves are falling apart. When he looks for the container that had held the eyeball, only emptiness greets him.

But there’s still birdsong, windchimes, spinning gears. The counter is the same as ever, as are the two hands patiently resting on it.

“Hey.”

No response. He speaks anyway. “Thank you. I never thought I’d like writing. I’m... doing better at it than I did in med school. And the editor is kind, too—my poem might be published in a magazine soon.”

Still nothing—then, as he’s wondering if he’s just dreaming, “Did you get your wish?”

“My—?”

“Did you defeat him?”

He smiles. He doesn’t mean to, but he smiles. “No. *I don’t think so. But I see him in the library everyday. He read my poem and said he understood what it meant in under a minute, and then he was surprised when I said there wasn’t any mystery to solve. Now he recommends me poetry books, and says he wants to write too, because there’s nothing he can’t do. I’ve noticed him staring at me sometimes, he thinks he’s being subtle but he’s really not; I don’t know what it means, but—*”

“You did.”

“Huh?”

He thinks they smile. “Show him your works when they’re done. He’ll have something to tell you, by then.”

“R... Really?”

“Yes.” The hands withdraw, but they don’t come out to give him a library card or a slip of paper, an editor’s number written on it. “Our business is finished, so you won’t be able to find me anymore. But I still like telling customers to come again.”

(The eye—green, sharp, vivid as the bells of Ireland—like *his*.)



when “I love you” won’t do

by Misha Lirios of 10-Perseverance

When I say I love you, I’m not sure if I mean it
Well I do; but those three words don’t fit
It satisfies barely the tiniest bit

Perhaps those words are a waste
When you finally get to taste
The sphere that the sunflowers have always chased

I want to feel the warmth of your rays
Gently scorching like prime summer days
Filling me with words nobody says

For the words I seek defy
The epitome of the societal lie
Under our secluded afternoon sky



winter

by Jade of 9-Kindness

at the end of the line
maybe our paths will cross again,
take us back to the time
we were six more than ten

i will tell you how blissfully
in love i was with you,
your words, bittersweet,
eyes brighter than the moon,

and we can laugh about how
we broke each other's hearts
side by side on the snow,
before midnight fell apart

tindahang mahika (magic shop)

by Maya Tuviera of 8-Collaboration

I. introduction

Through a rainbow blur of *sari-sari* stores and crumbling concrete roads, children run around with bare feet. Their ribs are protruding from under their skin, their clothes are dirtied with smog and mud. It is 2 p.m. They're fresh from Aling Ising's *karinderya*, stomachs half-empty but eyes wide and full.

As they run around, the braver ones dodge speeding cars and motorcycles for fun. The rest sit on the roadside and teach each other colors through passing vehicles. The school buses, the motorcycles, the trucks: *dilaw, pula, puti*. As they play tag in fields full of discarded construction material, they laugh and talk about the future: their hopes, their dreams, and all the in-betweens.

Each dream of theirs is small, nothing like "become a millionaire" or other such things. Instead, every one of their fantasies is filled with oversaturated store signs that hang above wooden shacks: *prutasan, kainan, tindahan*. They dream of taking over the streets, littering all of Manila with their huts and bright tarpaulins.

II. being lost

After they are tired out from their games, the children discuss their dreams. One of the girls, more quiet than the rest, always slips away during this time. The kids always notice, of course, but they know that she's got no parents to give her a family *tindahan*, so they keep quiet. The girl, whom they call Ria, goes around from store to store and helps out. After all, you take what you can get.

In a cottage-like structure that is secluded from the rest of the small shacks, a looming figure is seen inside the window. His shop is just across the *bulalohan*, and so everyday, he sees Ria slip away. Sometimes, when he's short on ingredients, he goes out at night to buy them and walks slower when he passes by the kids, and listens to them brag.

“Me, I’ll take over my *ina’s prutasan* in a few years. Earlier than all of you!”

“Well, my father is training me to cashier for him when *nanay* is off doing housework. I can do double the work she can, and in half the time!”

The looming figure frowns inwardly. He is not old, well, maybe a little, but he already knows that when he is gone, there will be no one to take care of his quaint apothecary. In fact, his sign, his once-bright sign that said *apothecary*, is fading into washed out browns as the years go by.

III. intervention

But one night, when you could *almost* see a constellation in the city sky, Ria and the apothecary man crossed paths, and they stared at each other before she asked, “Hello, sir. Do you need any help with your bags?”

The apothecary man looked at her, with her wide, open eyes and innocent half-smile. He smiled back, nodded his head and gave her the lightest *supot* in his arms. When he did this, Ria saw a wooden mannequin hand in the place of flesh and fingers. The plastic bag slid off his wooden palm and into Ria’s, and she continued on.

Together, they walked to the apothecary. When they came to the door, the man turned its knob with his prosthetic hand and gave it a firm kick, and it swung open. Rows of shelves filled with glass jars stretched across the room. Candelabras hung from the ceiling, and a large oakwood counter held bits and bobs of magical looking things.

“This is a fine shop, sir.”

“Thank you, *anak*. It does get lonely oftentimes, though.”

A powder in a glittering jar that was slightly smaller than the rest caught Ria’s eye. “What’s that, sir? Is it fairy dust?” Ria grinned, with her teeth and excited eyes.

The apothecary man laughed at her earnestness, and said, “No, that’s turmeric. Rub two tablespoons into an open wound and the bleeding stops.”

Ria weighed the jar in her hand, then put it down and saw another one. A golden liquid, almost sparkling in the dim lamplight of the apothecary. “How about this one?”

On and on they went, circling the rows of wooden shelves. Every time she picked one up, the apothecary man explained its use to her. Basil, oregano, ginger, clove — each one with a new cure to a different ailment. Whenever Ria touched a jar, it shimmered slightly. The apothecary man smiled at her, at the little girl whose hands had just the lightest Midas touch.

IV. being found

Decades later, Ria's friends have, sure enough, taken over every *sari-sari* store across their block. Their children play tag in fields full of discarded construction material, and one of them trips on a low stump in the ground. And a little girl, who has Ria's eyes, smile, and the same Midas touch, takes her hand and leads her to the apothecary just across the *bulalohan*. She pushes open the door and she shouts for her mother.

Unlike years before, the apothecary is bustling with customers, all looking for a cure to different problems.

"*Nanay*, my friend fell in the field. Have you got any turmeric?"

Ria tosses her daughter a glittering jar and she scoops out two tablespoons and rubs it onto her friend's open wound carefully. Within seconds, the bleeding stops.

The apothecary man appears from behind a shelf, and takes the jar. His wooden fingers clink against the glass. "*Ang galing!* Where did you learn that?" He says.

Ria's daughter grins proudly, "*Sa iyo, lolo.*"



ARTWORK BY JULIANA GONO
LAYOUT BY ALESSANDRA AMPIL



WONDERLAND

ARTWORK BY JULIANA GONO
LAYOUT BY ALESSANDRA AMPIL

NORMAN'S HIDDEN *Wonderland*

by Karissa Chuayap of 12-Sobriety



*~Hush now, quiet now,
be a good child and sleep...
If your eyes lie awake
and your mind remains a busy bee,
go and count the shepherd's lost sheep...
Sleep, little one, sleep,
because wonderland's carriage
will come to take you at midnight~*

A slender creature sits on the edge of a stage. He twirls a cane in his gloved hands, elegant movements matching the tune of his song... Spin left, right, throw, *hup* and catch—a flurry of crow feathers flutter about, and frantic caws of black birds echo against the empty stadium walls. He rises, tips the black top hat over his messy nest of red hair and spreads his arms out to address an audience—

*~It's two til' midnight
and just a minute after this,
they'll come from sleep,
flooding like nightingales in bliss...
Come on, are you ready
to see this place turn from netherworld to wonderland?
Hup, two, three, the magic soon begins;
Ready, steady, go,
and it's time to prepare
tonight's grand show~*

With the flick of a finger, strings, lights, and marionettes explode into existence, filling the stage with life and color. The two-faced masked creature danced through the stage and allows the magic to flow from his nimble steps. At last, he stops on the spot where he began and raises a hand. *Snap!*

*~Now, children, come to wonderland,
the place where little Alice once came to.~*

A set of great doors pop into existence. They crack open, inviting into the hollow room the sound of young and gay laughter.

*where you see no window
that show you the ocean,
or any break in the canopy tree
that frames the starry night...
Non, non, dear;
here, you can only see
the colonies of red roots
intertwining like shriveled snakes
framed in cement...~*

A night of dreamy cheer begins. He stops before a sea of spinning teacups, where a crowd of young children look from the side, uncertain of the stage, but nonetheless, curious. He hops to the front, steps on the rim of the nearest teacup, then faces his audience.

*~These teacups that spin,
all have pastries within...
Come indulge in the sweetest of dreams,
but be warned of the one
with a different spin...
Why?
There's nothing in it, not one dream;
you'll just be sad
you even picked it at all~*

The treasure hunt begins and the children rush into the stage. He leaves them be, turning heel towards another section of his carnival. He stops before a section filled with holes on the smooth floor and stand full of plastic hammers. A young boy curiously watches as he strides forward and picks up a hammer.

*~You see these holes on the ground?
They're for my favorite game.
I call it 'whack-a-clown,'
Just take the hammer right here;
pick it up, chop chop,
and when you see a clown come up,
bam!
Go and whack-a-clown!~*

He places the hammer on the young boy's hands and drifts off like a gentle wave in the sea, to the next section where there is a puppet's theater full of wooden dolls dressed in pretty sequins. A young girl approaches, pulling behind her a flowing red ribbon.

He bends to her level and snaps his fingers, causing a ring of red spider lilies to bloom. He gently takes her ribbon and ties it into an intricate bow around her neck. He gestures to the puppet's theater of dolls.

*~You see the strings?
Go pull them as you please,
for these wooden dolls before you
will dance to your every whim
Make them twirl, sway, or fall to their knees...
The music will follow your lead,
so go play away the day~*

Her eyes bright with excitement, the little girl with the bow runs to the theater. He stands up, brushes his hands, and turns away, heading for the last section that remains—a large carousel, frozen stiff, full of stone-gray sculpted animals and creatures. As he faces the carousel, he waves his cane, causing glitter to explode.

*~Ah, the beast's carousel carved from stone,
with my magic alone,
can breathe life again
Come watch as the ugliest duckling
transforms into a beautiful swan,
and as the roaring serpent
becomes tame like a mouse.
Tonight, they will cease
to become monsters,
but only until before morning dawns~*

The bells chime, crows start flying. The magic begins to fade as morning light begins to filter through invisible holes on the red, earthly roof. He looks at the invisible sky and shakes his head, seemingly dismayed.

*~Ah, ah—time's up, my children,
it's time for the carnival to come to a close
Your mothers and fathers are waiting for your return,
beyond the gates of wonderland~*

A chorus of sadness, but nothing can be done. As the children gather around the gate, he gives them one last twirl and a bow, eyes glinting with gleeful hunger behind the slits of his two-faced mask. He snaps his fingers, causing doves to erupt from under his black cape.

*~Please come again, my children,
Noman's Hidden Wonderland
will always be waiting for your next return.~*

One last trick, until you come again.

ARTWORK BY SARAH HUANG
LAYOUT BY ERYNN YAP

For The Ones Who Heal

by Sophia De Galicia of 11-Counsel



The night had never been so cold in the Forest of the North. Holding a flickering flame in an oil lamp, Iris wondered how long Adira would survive in this raging frostbite. The traveller wondered if she could make it in time for her.

Snow covered the entirety of the path before her. Growls of wolves resounded in the distance, as if to imitate the grumble in her stomach. Evergreens faded into leafless trees as she ventured deeper into the Forest; all the while the dark clouds slowly covered the waxing moon. She heaved a deep sigh and continued on miles of endless white.

Skulls watched her every move, as if they knew something she did not. The decaying bones reminded Iris how it felt like when she found Adira gone. She looked down at the object given to her and pressed her fingers onto it. She didn't know how it would work, but if that apothecary two (or was it three?) nights ago truly were her last hope, she couldn't do anything except hold on to it.

She only sought refuge that fated day but instead came out with a wish worthy of Schrodinger's approval.

"I want my friend to be safe."

Iris remembered how the Wish-Granter stopped drumming his mannequin-like fingers against the counter after she had said that. Abrupt. He let out a grunt from the other side of the divider and traced glowing blue symbols onto the ancient mahogany. They morphed into the somber face of Adira, light shining only on the upper portion of her face.

Iris looked away from her. That was the same face she looked at every single day. They met up at a worn down coffee shop and traded bread and laughs and maybe more. They treated each other like siblings, and to know where she had gone after everything they shared...

"This friend of yours is in the middle of the Forest of the North. Why dare? No man has ever attempted to—"

"I am no man," she pressed, her voice unwavering.

A brief chuckle.

The snow thickened on the windowsills of the store. In the horizon, hues of orange blended into the painful bite of navy blue. Not a single splash of white dotted the sky that night.

The Wish-Granter slid his hands back into the hole in the wall before the traveller heard a small shuffle of feet along the cabinets behind the translucent door. She heard some glass bottles crack, the smell of chamomile and lavender and other herbs circulated the air.

He returned with a pair of timeworn doll shoes. Sunflowers were carefully embroidered on the heels.

She tilted her head to one side and blinked. The Granter was rumored to never give away wishes in the way they were intentioned, but then again, what choice did she have? If this pair of shoes was what Adira really needed, then so be it.

"It won't be an easy journey for you."

"I didn't say anything about an easy journey. I just want her to be safe."

His wooden fingers tapped on the surface of the fabric. The light from the wisp of Adira's bruised face softly illuminated the unfinished paintings along the back of the room.

Iris rubbed on the pair of shoes that rested on the palms of her hands. Suddenly, the wind picked up even stronger than before and threw her into the Forest.

She stared at the path before her once again, “KEEP OUT” signs lying on the ground. There was a pathway scraped on the snow, footprints accompanying it at the sides.

She paused, heart pounding. *Her friend has been in this hellhole for days.*

“She’s innocent,” Iris whispered. “She did nothing wrong.”

The traveller willed herself to hurry towards the middle of the Forest, as if it were ready to snap her neck at any moment now. A pinch formed at the back of her throat, a cough racking her lungs as blood thudded in her ears.

Iris remembered how Adira would fight back against anything and anyone. No matter how her family always criticized her revolutionary tendencies or how she was a “menace to society,” it never showed if she were bothered by it. Adira was always so strong...

Wait, and she caught herself here, why the past tense? Adira’s still alive... right?

Soon enough, the figure of her friend tied up against a tree emerged, just like how it was in the sigils of the Apothecary. She hung slouched over, hands limply clawing at the black chains loosely wrapped around her neck. Her ankles shone with hues of dark purple and blue, some connected by red lines scratched along her graying skin.

Adira’s sunken eyes lifted to meet Iris’.

Iris rushed to unravel the chains after checking if anyone were around. Her voice came out in a shaking whisper as Adira came loose. “Hold on to me.”

“You didn’t have to come. They might see—”

“Please, just let me help you.”

Adira hadn't seen sunlight in days. She longed for it. The marks of the chains on her wrists said it all. She hadn't expected anyone to come for her anymore, but *maybe maybe maybe* her captors lied to her.

The men made her think she was alone, that her screams will never be heard. She almost believed it would only be her and *them*, that she should be grateful they kept her alive for so long.

If there was one thing she learned from her capture, it was that she had to rely on herself. Deep down, she knew that she couldn't keep doing that forever. And she realized that when Iris came for her. Adira looked at the earth-toned shoes Iris held—those same shoes Adira wore the first time they met.

“Let's go back, Adira. We can do this.”

“I walk slow.”

“It doesn't matter.”

Adira slipped on the shoes given to her and held onto Iris. She sighed, ready to face the long way home.

ARTWORK BY SIMONE TAN
LAYOUT BY ERYNN YAP

わさび
「水薬 × 巫術」

ハーブ・ホ

スタッフ

ARTWORK BY ASHLEY SIOCO
LAYOUT BY ERYNN YAP

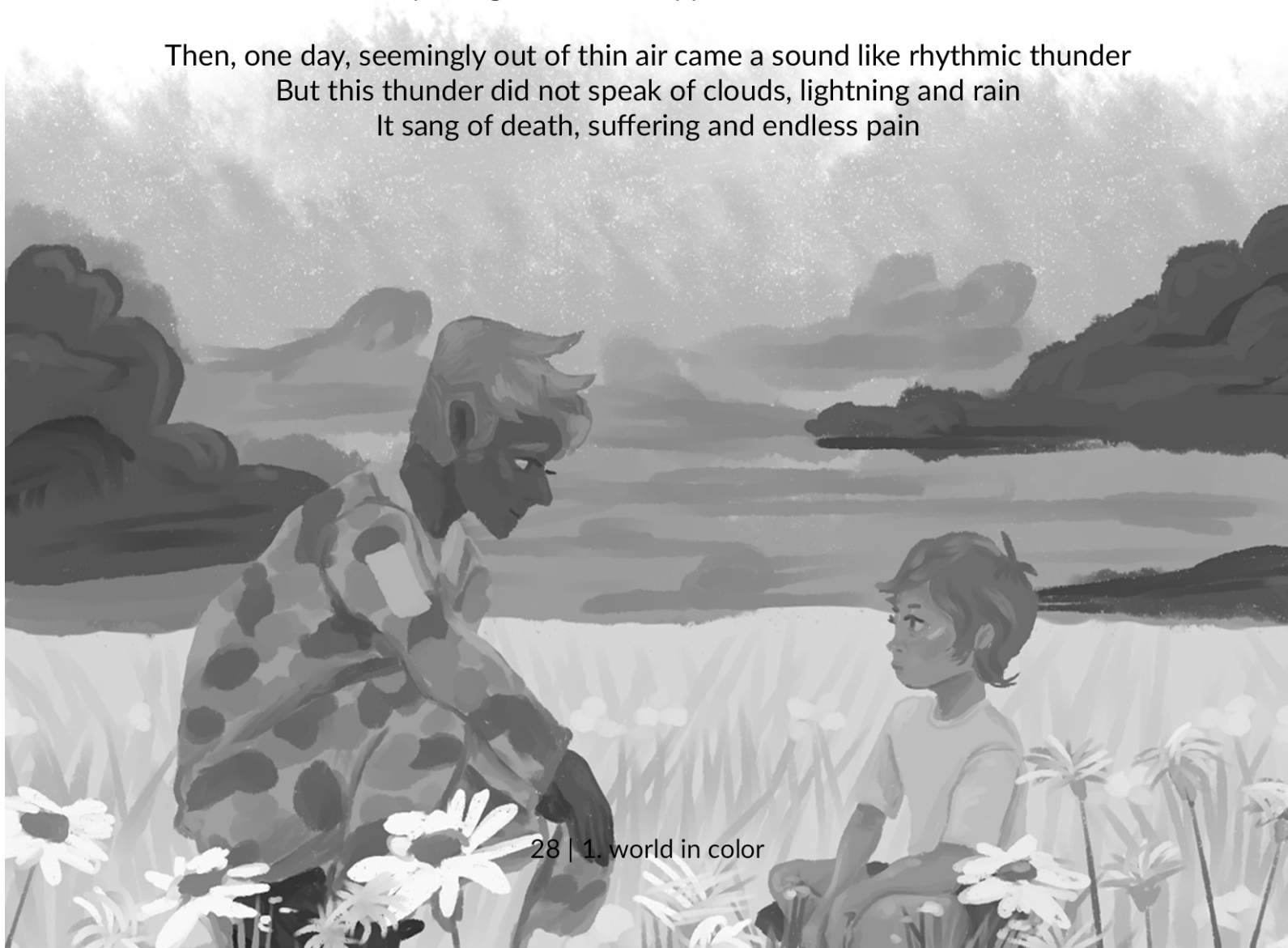
Mother Earth Tells a Story

by Margarita Cabochan of 9-Prudence

There was this little girl,
One who ran in my meadows and climbed my trees
All the while singing about the sun and moon and her dreams

Her song carried on the wind,
And oh, what lovely tunes they were!
Every being with ears stopped to listen to her!

Then, one day, seemingly out of thin air came a sound like rhythmic thunder
But this thunder did not speak of clouds, lightning and rain
It sang of death, suffering and endless pain



And she saw on either side of her then,
A sea of green and a sea of blue
And each and every one of them saw her, too

They stopped, unsure of what to do next
But with her little arms she urged them to continue
And forward they went, hesitantly, as to her next action they had no clue

A soldier approached her then,
“Little girl, where are your parents?”
“Sir, why do you have a rifle?”

And every man and boy on that field saw her innocence
And pondered at once at what happened to theirs

She received silence,
For not any one of them had it in their heart to tell her
That they were there, simply, to annihilate as much as they can of the other

The soldier gently, wordlessly led her away
And the rest looked on at the man, and beside him a beacon of purity
In the quiet of the moment eyes found eyes from both sides and finally they saw
humanity

And from that fateful day on in the world,
Enemies continually turn into comrades
And not a single life is lost as violence and hatred fades

ARTWORK BY SARAH HUANG
LAYOUT BY THEA SY

across the sky, a series of haiku

by Joanne Ng of 11-Fortitude

dawn
the sun burns the sky,
paints it a new beginning.
can you hear birds sing?

day
warm sheets, warm bed. you
remember it's saturday.
you go back to sleep.

noon
see the summer's noon,
watch birds fly, hear insects chirp.
daylight soothes your soul.

dusk
stars cover embers
of yawning twilight. for now,
you bid them, "good night."

dreams
you dream of skies, which
you've never seen before. you
dream of new worlds far.

A black and white illustration of a person in a dark forest, looking startled, with a large, glowing, ethereal figure in the background. The person is in the foreground, wearing a long coat and pants, looking back over their shoulder with a concerned expression. The background features tall, thin trees and a large, glowing, ethereal figure that appears to be a large, winged creature or a giant, standing in the distance. The overall atmosphere is dark and mysterious.

2. wandering at dark

ARTWORK BY SARAH HUANG
LAYOUT BY THEA SY



ARTWORK BY GABY MAGNO
LAYOUT BY THEA SY

inferno

by Marie Entao of 11-Fortitude



your eyes turn in my direction
and I am forced to shield myself
from your smoldering gaze
and though I am profusely tempted,
I do not dare lift my chin in fear of
your stare searing my flesh and bone,
perhaps even scalding my eyes and
inducing tears that would cause my eyelids to sting

yet I find myself drawn
to the scorching heat,
the vehement words
and the screams
erupting from each glance,
from each blink,
from each instant

and when I tell myself
I won't give in
to the inviting warmth
that seeps through my clothes
and tickles my skin
with embers dancing across the pores,
pricking the surface,
and penetrating my system,
I know I'm lying again

so I glance up
and I catch myself
on the verge of
falling into the pit
of your inferno;
I see the flames rising and
I feel my heart beating,
my eyes watering,
my hands shaking,
my lungs tightening,
my mind racing against
this perpetual cycle
and I know I can never win

so I let go
once again

ARTWORK BY SIMONE TAN
LAYOUT BY THEA SY

Canals

by Neale Sy of 11-Counsel



I was dreaming of
things that should have been,
things that could have been.

(the sound of your voice, telling me
that i could do it, that i wasn't as bad
as i always thought i was—telling me
that i had potential, that i could
be better than i thought i'd ever be)

well
maybe some dreams should just stay dreams
—it's about time to wake up.

LAYOUT BY THEA SY

Life Vest

by Misha Lirios of 10-Perseverance

How does it feel to see her face?

It feels like seeing your first prom dress
Embellished in gold and silver lace

How will it feel to squeeze her hand?

It will feel like all the cells in your body
Are part of the world's largest marching band

How would it feel to see her flee?

It would feel like wearing a life vest
Yet still drowning at sea

PERENNIAL

by Faith Dytian of 9-Purity

I took upon an oath to alight hope in my dreams. But what suffers because of it?

You deprived me of my serenity, held me captive in the desires of your world. As you run endlessly like the host of stars above, I lay still watching; hoping for a specific way to choose my joy.

I cursed you with fervent sincerity, my words set free to the heart of nothingness. My cries falling obscure to your heed. But what of it?

You are the gush of water, cascading ferociously against rocky mountains. You are the great abyss, the sunset of my days drawing near. You are spiteful against all odds, the very source of desperation.

There is no fight with you, no battle worth partaking as all my endeavors fall short and useless.

You are indomitable, as we stand powerless.

So what of it?

There is nothing anyone can do, no matter if they draw their swords. Because you are the oil that sets the world aflame.

KIBI

by Karissa Chuayap of 12-Sobriety

There is an old building at the edge of town that everyone always steers clear of. However, it looks like any other building, only older and stranger, made of ancient wood in a town of concrete. She steps past the 'welcome' mat and enters. The small, bronze bell hanging at the door chimes to signal her entrance.

"Welcome."

Looking around, she sees jars of strange items, spices, herbs, plants and roots. On the walls hang old maps, paintings, the skeleton of a strange animal pinned on one part of the wall, and a couple of framed dried and preserved insects.

A tall and pale man stands at the counter of the peculiar shop. He has a bald head and wrinkles on his face. He wears a tuxedo with a tie and a golden monocle over his left eye; his left hand is a wooden limb with intricate carvings.

"Mister, do you grant wishes?" She asks him.

The old man merely smiles. "What's your name, little miss?"

"Valliah."

"Valliah. So, what kind of medicine do you need? This li'l old Apothecary has almost everything."

"Um, I just want a friend at home."

The old man chuckles. "An easy feat."

He moves from behind the counter and begins rummaging through the shelves.

"What kind of friend are you going to give me?"

"What kind would you like?"

"A nice one," Valliah responds. "Someone whom I can talk to a lot."

The old man cracks open a jar. Inside is a large almond-shaped, green and gray seed that looks very much like a mossy stone. The old man takes it and hands it to the little girl.

“Plant it in soil and water it daily,” he instructs her. “Treat it with love and care, and it will turn into a kind friend.”

Valliah takes the seed. She looks through her pockets, and frowns. “Ah—mister, I have no money. I can't pay you for this.”

The old man chuckles. “Just take good care of that seed. That will be payment enough.”

“Okay! Thank you, mister!”

That night, Valliah returns home. She wishes to go into the backyard to plant the seed, but decides to wait until her father is in his room, asleep. Valliah plants the little seed in the corner of her backyard. In her dreams, she watches it grow. She lived the rest of her days in excitement.

Valliah soon finds that the seed has become a large, leafless tree. She approaches it, and realizes that it was not at all a tree. It is a creature with an ugly face, like an old druid. He has horned antlers on his head and limbs like thin branches, with long fingers and stubby legs. His eyes were black and marble-like.

“Who are you?” Valliah asks.

“Kibi,” the creature responds. He sounds surprisingly young. “What do you need?”

“I just want you to be my friend.”

“Okay, I'll be your friend.”

Valliah begins talking to Kibi about everything. She tells him about the weather, the events of the town festival, school—Kibi would listen and share his wisdom. Even though he was a great listener, Valliah found that he was a better storyteller, especially with the stories of his kind.

“Back when trees were abundant all over these hills, so were my kind. We are creatures that live among nature, but humans were scared, so they cut us.”

"But why would they be scared? You don't bite, right?"

"Creatures don't need to bite to be scary. For humans, the mere thought of being strange makes something scary, and scary things need to be destroyed."

Valliah didn't understand. One thing she knew, though—she couldn't tell anyone about Kibi.

"Do you like the moon?" Valliah asks. She couldn't see it.

"I prefer the sun. I get nourishment from the sun. Plus, at night, it's cold. I'm not fond of the cold."

"Really? I like the moon. It looks mysterious and you can look at it directly." Valliah responds. "You can't look at the sun. You'll burn your eyes."

"That's true. The sun is too bright."

"You know—"

The door to the house swings open. Valliah gasps.

"Father!"

"Valliah... what is this creature?"

"He's—" she couldn't explain. "He's not harmful!"

"Nonsense! There's a demon in my backyard, I need an exorcism!"

Valliah's father turns on his heel and runs off. Valliah knows what was coming next. She pales and turns to Kibi in a panic.

"We have to leave! If father comes back to find you, who knows what he'll do!"

"We won't make it out of this town. I'm a literal walking tree. No way will anyone miss that."

"But—!"

"It was nice having you as a friend," Kibi says with a smile. "No one's ever asked to be my friend before. Thank you."

Valliah begins to shake. She doesn't want to lose him. Not now, not ever. Outside, she can hear the neighbors gathering. The smell of fire penetrates the night air. She can almost see them holding torches and pitchforks, like the stories of witch hunts she read in books.

"You have to go."

"No! I won't..."

The door from the house to the backyard flies open. People swarm in—but with their forms aglow with fiery flames, Valliah doesn't see people. She sees monsters.

"That thing has possessed my daughter. Kill it, exorcise the demon with fire!" Her father cries.

Hands drag her away from Kibi. She screams, crying for them to spare him, saying he was no demon—but of course,

People don't listen.

Kibi's ghastly screams kill her ears. She tries to shut them out by covering her ears, but she can see it. The fire sears his skin; it burns his green and gray into an ugly black.

"Everything is fine now, Valliah,"

"Don't worry, it's gone—"

"You're safe now—"

Safe. From what?

Valliah screams angrily and shoves past people. She doesn't know this place, doesn't know these strangers who call themselves her family, her community. There is only one place left that she can turn to.

Valliah runs through the cold night, down the empty streets and alleys. She comes to the old building at the edge of town, the building of wood, the Apothecary.

She barges in; the bell rings wildly. The old man stands by the counter. He holds a jar of herbs, which he gently sets down.

“Please, sir! Save Kibi!”

The old man looks at her, and his expression tells her all that she needs to know.

She only had one wish. She had used it, and now, there was no more that he could do for her.

Valliah falls to the floor, tears streaming down her face. One wish. She made just one wish, and she received it—a taste of true friendship that would never return again.



LOST

by Amara Lee of 7-Dignity

I have awaited the day
When we are together
Watching the setting sun
On the hill we call our own

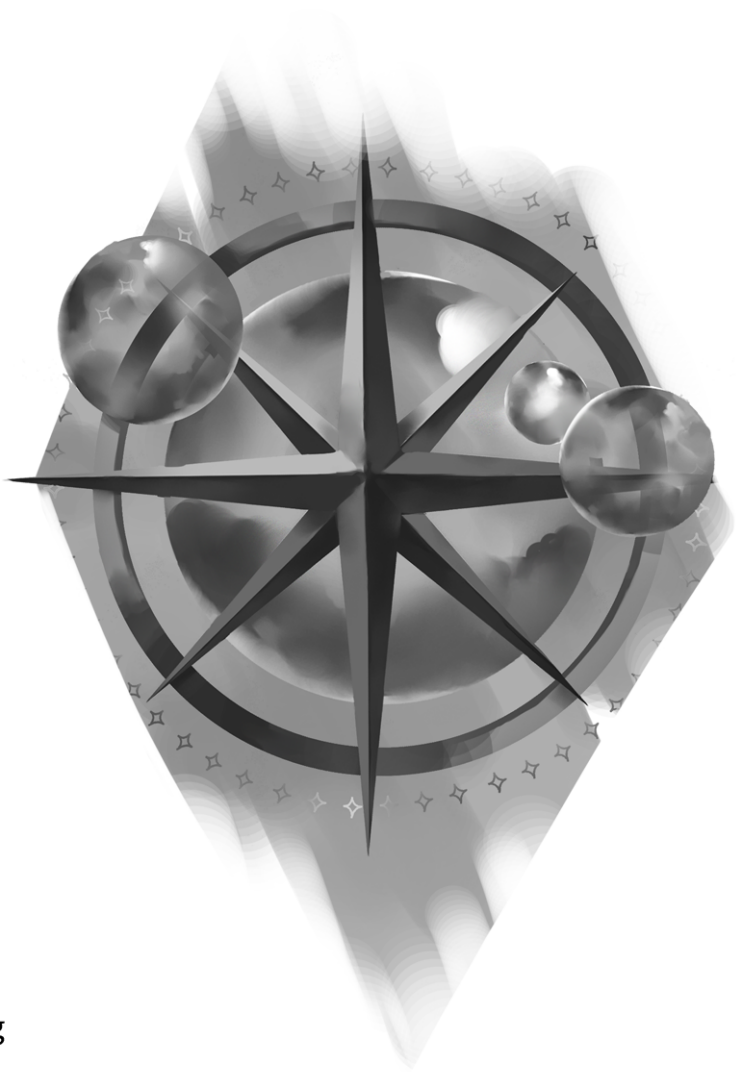
But I have seen that
The sun should not set
Lest my troubles stay unsettled,
And you are not home

For how could a hill
Bring me back home,
When my home is with you
And I remain restless

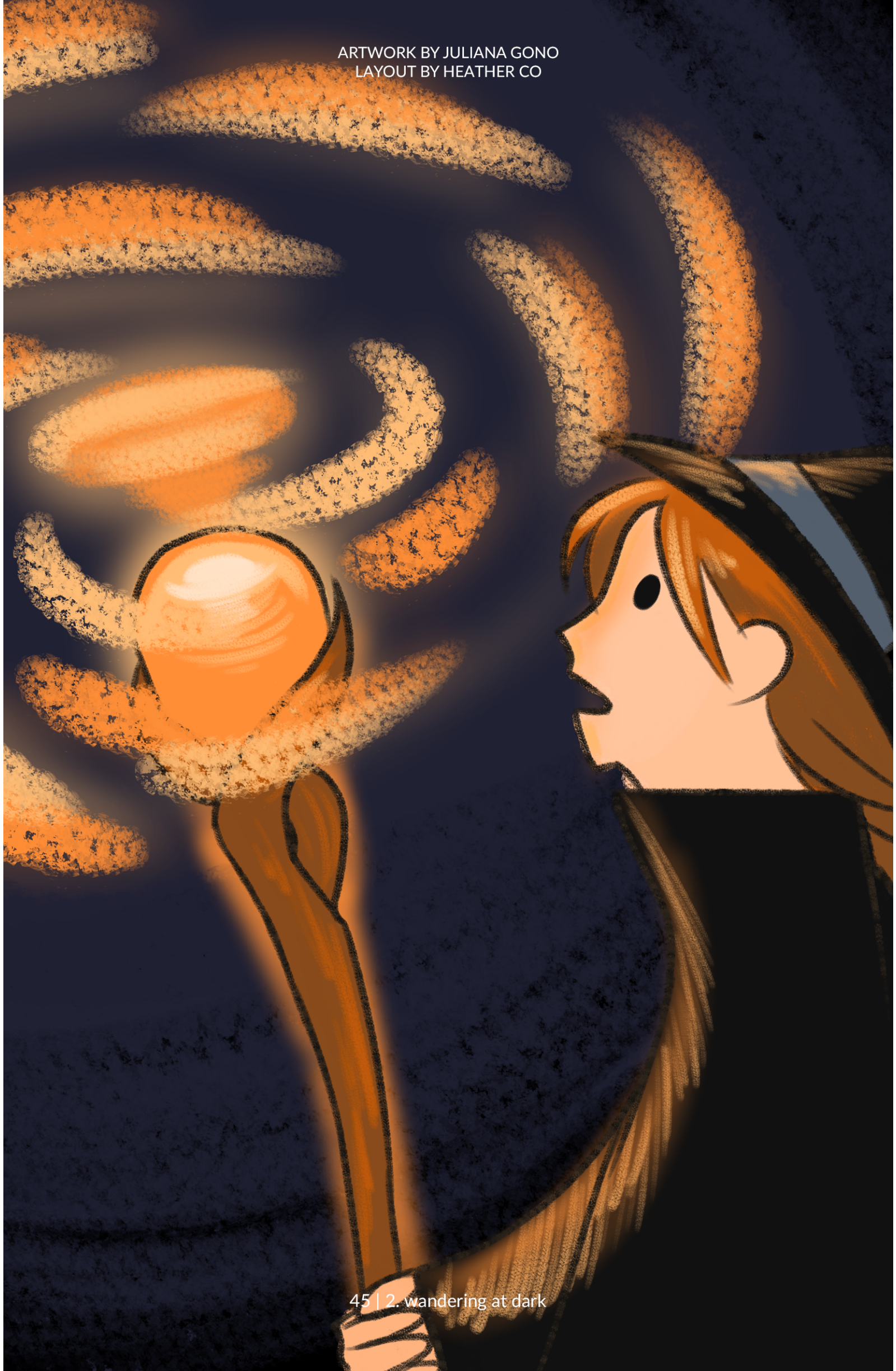
Restless for the permanence
I seem to seek wholeheartedly,
And for an untroubled heart
I seem to not possess

But I have realized
My restlessness is not caused
By my relentless troubles,
But the absence of my sun

But an absence should not bring
The sorrow I am facing,
But I seem to have lost
My sense of direction



ARTWORK BY JULIANA GONO
LAYOUT BY HEATHER CO

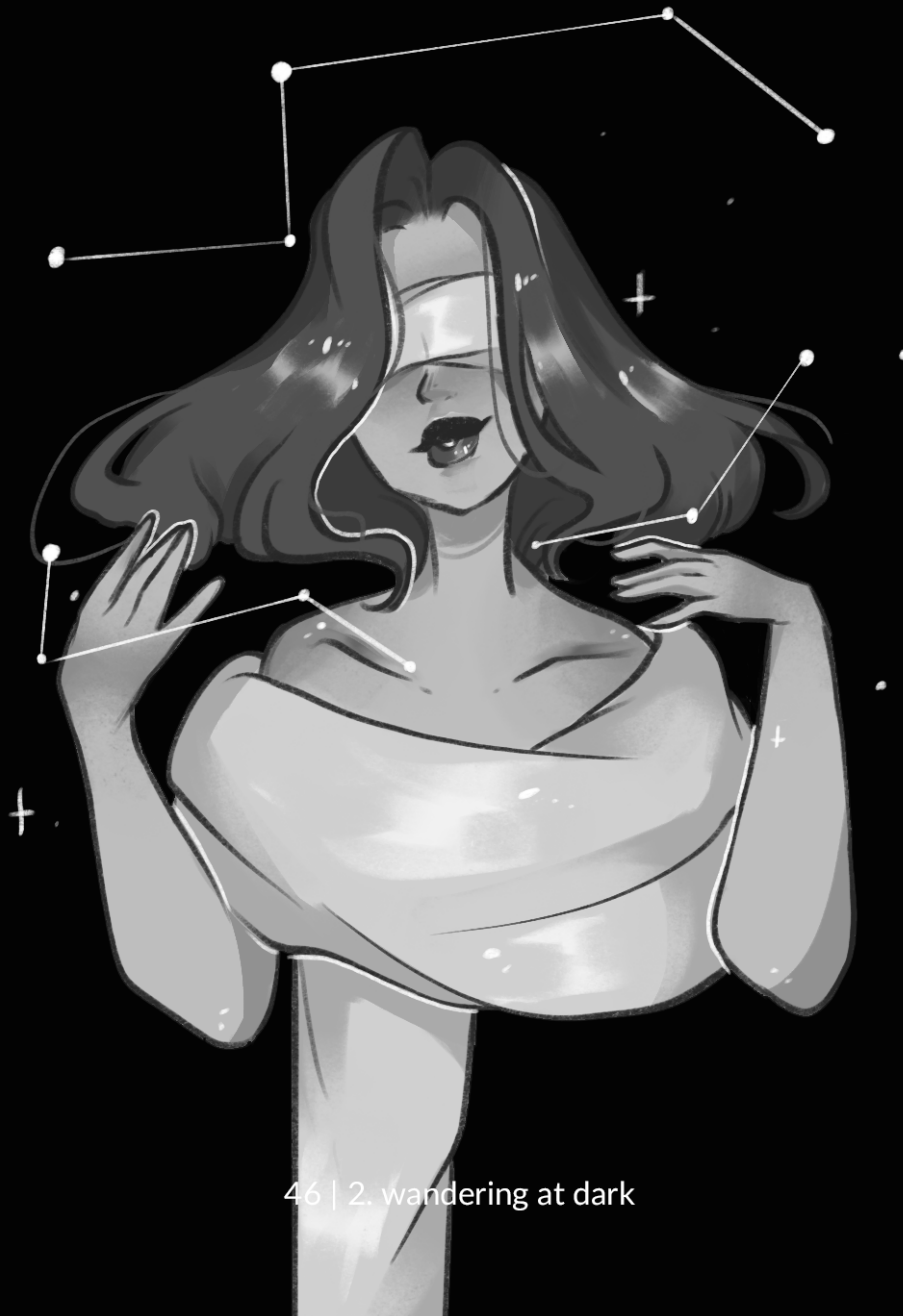


ARTWORK BY TRISHA TAN
LAYOUT BY HEATHER CO

ASTROLOGY

by Gaby Magno of 11-Counsel

what kind of fools are we, to so religiously
believe in something as absurd as celestial bodies
governing the way our lives are lived?
we know this very well, and yet, we strain our ears to listen
to the musings and ramblings of star-crazed maniacs, eyes riddled with
constellations—
perhaps we are drawn to the illusion of having direction,
drawn to the illusion that control over one's life is possible,
drawn to the idea that maybe there is something,
someone out there pulling the strings.



Adventure of a Silversmith and a Spyglass That Isn't His

by Joanne Ng of 11-Fortitude

Sky, clear. Birds, singing. Sinclair, bored.

Mouth open and eyes drooping, the silversmith was the picture of lethargy. Sunlight bounced off the sculpture on his desk. What was supposed to be a filigree bird taking flight looked more like a lump of silver. He glanced at his mass of overcomplicated sketches for the sculpture and sighed.

He was halfway to sleep when there was a knock on his workshop's door.

"It's Leo, sir." A pleasant youth with an air of unfaltering politeness entered. "How's the commission? I understand the deadline is nearing, but your art's brilliant—"

Room, empty. Veranda, open. Sinclair... gone.

Leo's eye twitched. "Not again!"

...

"I get where Leo's coming from," said Sinclair. "But people have *moments*." He sighed again, turning to the cat. "Don't you agree?" It only meowed, hissing at something behind him, then scampered away.

"—!?" Sinclair turned just in time to see a bedraggled woman barrel past him.

"I'm so sorry. Were you hurt?" Blue-eyed and slim, she would have been



slim, she would have been pretty if not for her wild eyes and constant fidgeting. Her clothes had stiff brown splotches like something had spilled all over and hung loosely on her frame.

“...No, just startled.”

The woman was silent for a moment, then a nervous smile spread across parched lips. “Meeting you must be fate.” She pushed a short, slate-colored spyglass into Sinclair’s grasp. “Keep this for me.”

“I can’t—!” Sinclair whirled around, about to protest, but she was gone.

“Excuse me?”

Before Sinclair could process the woman’s departure, a dark-haired gentleman approached. He was impeccably dressed, to the point where every single one of his coat’s creases seemed to be strategically wrinkled.

“Has a woman with a spyglass passed by?” He sounded as good as he looked, like glass cut clear and smooth.

“She... Uh.” Words were failing Sinclair at the moment. There was a reason he was a silversmith and not a writer.

“...That way.”

The gentlemen bowed slightly. “My thanks.”

Only when the gentleman left did Sinclair register that he’d asked for both woman and spyglass. Curiosity piqued by the spyglass’ apparent weightiness despite it being so *small*, he decided to look through.

Instead of sky, he saw a dark-haired violinist with the beauty of a full-bloom rose. She stood against a glass window. Black silk flared out from the glass, predatory but bewitching. It wrapped around her—as gentle and as suffocating as one’s first love—and tightened until she moved no more. Her violin fell, neck broken like its her own.

Sinclair almost dropped the spyglass. He tried to catch it, fumbling around as if juggling a melting candle. Fingers closed triumphantly around the spyglass, only for him to suddenly stumble backwards through the doors of what looked like an apothecary.

(At the back of his mind, Sinclair was sure their town never had an apothecary before. Take it from him, he’d lived there for 10 years.)

“Welcome. Quite the spyglass you’ve got.”

Sinclair turned to the counter. It was odd, but he couldn’t see the shopkeeper’s face. Despite the afternoon sun, all he could see was a purple apron and one of their

hands. It was made of varnished wood and golden joints, segmented like a marionette's.

"Who— You know what it is?"

"It's my job to know anything and everything." The shopkeeper extended their prosthetic, Sinclair's eyes following its every move. Before the silversmith knew it, he'd already given the spyglass and the shopkeeper was looking through.

"...This lets its owner view what they want the most. A spyglass for desire, one could call it."

After a while, the shopkeeper put the spyglass down, albeit reluctantly. The wood-and-gold hand toyed with it.

"Say, could you leave this with me?"

"...Well, alright," Sinclair said, starting for the door a bit too quickly. The shopkeeper unnerved him, and he also had work waiting. Leo was definitely angry with him. "I'll be off."

"Of course." The shopkeeper waved and the spyglass blinked away. "See you soon."

...

Leo, *furious*. Sinclair, *scared*.

Eager to escape his manager's wrath, Sinclair promised to finish the bird in two days. The spyglass encounter slipped his mind the deeper he fell into concentration. It was late at night when the woman reappeared at the veranda, twitchy as ever.

"I've come for what I left."

Sinclair was too absorbed in work to look. "It's not with me anymore," he mumbled, trying to bend a stubborn wire.

"Return it," the woman said, louder. "It's mine."

The bird's wings were coming together. Sinclair didn't want to stop now. "Don't have it."

"You don't have it!?" The woman leapt forward, grabbing Sinclair's collar and knocking the bird over. "GIVE IT BACK! IT'S MINE! SHE'S MINE—!"

"Apothecary!" Sinclair couldn't breathe. With the hands around his throat, he was reminded of the violinist. "I left it there!"

The woman abruptly let go. Sinclair fell to the floor. "Apo...thecary?" She smiled sweetly, a change so whiplash it made Sinclair's neck hurt. "I see."

Like earlier, she was gone. Unlike earlier, Sinclair was going to follow her.

...

Fog swirled around his ankles as Sinclair walked. It wasn't long before he found the

apothecary, yet *it* felt more like *it* had found *him*.

The door was open, with the woman raging away inside. Judging by the glass shards on the ground and the missing bottles on the shelves, she had done more than just scream. The shopkeeper's composure was remarkable.

"—GIVE IT BACK!"

"Why?" Sinclair watched as the shopkeeper withdrew the spyglass, dangling it in from one hand. "I wonder what you'll say. It's no ordinary spyglass, I should know." They seemed to glance at Sinclair, head tilted in greeting. "An invention of mine, when I still dabbled in alchemy—"

"I DON'T CARE!"

Sinclair blinked, and the counter was empty.

"You loved her, that violinist." The shopkeeper's voice was everywhere, raising goosebumps on Sinclair's arms. "Enough that you wanted to die together. So I lent you the spyglass." Then they were back, like they hadn't moved at all. "To tell the truth, pharmacy is my true calling, but reflecting desires, turning them into reality... I think I outdid myself."

"You LIED!" The woman tried to throttle them like she'd throttled Sinclair, surging forward over the counter, but the shopkeeper simply leaned to one side.

"Did I?" They held the spyglass by its eyepiece, letting it extend. One by one, they removed their fingers until the spyglass was left precariously pinched between thumb and index. "My spyglass worked, didn't it?"

The puppet's hand let go, the spyglass shattering into a million pieces.

The woman fell to her knees, wails as piercing as the shards. "No...!" She scrabbled for the fragments. "NO!"

Sinclair flinched at the sound of pain. He thought of the unfinished bird lying on his workshop floor, and sighed. *I should stop shirking work*. A finger of flesh dragged him out of his thoughts, guiding his gaze to the woman's feet which were whispering away into ash.

"The price of the forbidden arts," said the shopkeeper, laughing mirthlessly. "But I made the spyglass anyway, and look. The brother of the violinist you murdered is here, come to avenge his sister. Isn't that nice?"

From the fog, a gentleman entered. The woman's foil in every way, he was groomed where she was rumpled and calm where she was hysterical. His cloak was solid shadow, every crease where it should be. As black and as soft but firmer than the spyglass silk, he swept his coat around the woman.

Like twice before, without warning nor sound, she disappeared for the final time.

TINNITUS

by Neale Sy of 11-Counsel

the buzzing in my head
gets louder when we're apart.

it wasn't always this way;
i used to like the sound of solidarity.
then you came,
made me think i'd met my match,
made the buzzing go away,
if only for a little bit.
i forgot everything
i used to think i like.
(faced with you, they all became boring.)

then you left, again,
without knowing what i thought,
without knowing what i felt,
that day.
you made me think i'd met my match,
you made the buzzing go away,
and then—
gone.
(and now i'm bored again.)

there are things i can never tell anyone
—including you, especially you—
because i don't know what you'd say,
and it scares me, not knowing
something.
like when you'll be coming back.
if you will be coming back.

i forget the things i said to you,
that day;
more because i don't want to remember.
but you will be coming back, won't you?
there's no chance i can let you go,
when being with you makes everything
go quiet.



SONNET 012

by Audrey Ty of 11-Fortitude

What of Her love if not whispers of flo'ers?
Slivers of breaths, of petals unfettered
By thorns, by storms, 'til past all Her showers,
'til midnight's of past, thus life Thee inspired.
Her love light as silk whilst blest with life's strife,
Weaved of Her prayers, falling stars alike.
Alast! Comes Thy moon, Thy sun loved alive
To bring forth above apast our unlike.
Sometime too bright whilst the heavens may shine,
Others too dark as waning stars imply,
But Thy waters, Thy skies shall not confine
Nor hamper our blossoms 'til Death goes 'wry.
This love may be so but only ignored
For Her true love isn't one we can afford.



ARTWORK BY KATE DEE
LAYOUT BY ANDREA LIBORO

cross my heart

by Sophia De Galicia of 11-Counsel

cross my heart



I had once held your hand
tight enough to know where we stood
(you had a very loose grip.)

I still remember that day
the smell of waffles hung in the air
you said that what we had can never be broken

(darling, tell me, how can it be broken when it was never whole?)

coffee spills and chocolate stains
you were once like that chocolate, dear
the type that had a bitter aftertaste

Remember that I once loved you
long enough to think it was forever
(your forever was only seconds of every day)

ANYTHING

by Pauline Wee of 10-Meekness

I.

Tonight's snow shows no mercy; it seeps through the seams in Marla's boots and stabs through her jacket, skin, bone, and skin again, all the way through. Some time ago, she would have tugged her jacket close over her stomach, maybe even gone home to have dinner and set an ultrasound appointment. Tonight, there is nothing left to protect.

She turns into Maybrook Avenue. The street bustles by day, but at night, the storefronts are silent, cold faces of corrugated steel. In the dark, the wind sings deeper and slower; the road stretches longer and steeper. Even the lamplights struggle to stay awake.

Only one store has kept its vigil; a shack by the left turn into Baybrook, its awning half-attached and its sign wet with snow. Apothecary, it reads. The whole building seems to flicker with energy.

Without thinking, she steps inside.

II.

The day it happened, the instincts from medical school just kicked in: clean up the blood, call family, call the hotline. Her sister Lisa made it to the hospital just as the ambulance did, but calling her had been the first mistake.

The last thing she had needed to see as they dragged the last of the tissue out of her body was her four-year-old nephew playing with his train, and her month-old niece, sleeping soundly in her mother's arms.

III.

Even quicker than the rush of warmth as she steps inside is the stink of age, brine, and old vegetables. Boxes and amber-colored bottles line up on shelves that cover every inch of the first three walls, but the back wall opens into a counter shadowed by a curtain, from which protrude a veined, thick-fingered right hand and a mahogany, gold-jointed left. They are hands of long work, if the calluses on the right are any indication, but the gold also speaks of vanity. Almost imperceptibly, they beckon.

She nears it on instinct. An old, crackling voice comes through the curtain.

"You can call me what you wish," it drawls. "I know all things. You have come here because you have lost something, and you want it back."

IV.

From the start, she and Lisa had always been so different. By the time Marla got her pediatrician's license, two-years-younger Lisa was a good few years married, with a house in the suburbs, an infant on her hip, and a Toyota Camry in the garage.

Thankfully, it didn't take long for her to catch up, meeting Martin and buying her first home with him not long after. All that was left was children—but even as she and Martin tried and tried, the tests did not lie. Three years after their marriage, the nursery in their home remained as quiet as the day they purchased the house.

It didn't help that she looked after the most precious little darlings in her clinic. As much as she tried to stay logical, watching her nephew outgrow his pacifier and graduate from his crib made something black and evil claw through her mind. Visiting a pregnant Lisa grew unbearable.

V.

Marla steps back.

"I don't want anything, and you don't know anything about me."

"I do." The hands clasp and unclasp. "One morning last January, your husband Martin collapsed at work. The cancer that took his father had come for him, too. He lived only one more month."

"How do you—" Heat pricks at her eyes. "Y-you have no right."

She pulls away from the counter, but a force holds her to the spot. "Let me go!"

"You found out about the baby a week after the funeral. Despite the grief, you had never been happier—finally, a child of your own, to love and to cherish. Too bad he never came to fruition, hmm? If only someone could help..."

"Stop it! Let me go! I don't want anything you can give me!"

"Then," the hands press flat on the counter. "You must vastly underestimate my abilities."

Suddenly, all the flickering lamplights outside snuff out. The light seeping from the overhead fluorescents dies with a sigh. Smoke rises from behind the counter; as if playing a projection, it takes shape and color. The twisting coils form the figure of an infant deep in slumber, hands curled into fists. The sound of the howling wind gains tone and pitch. It is her own voice, singing.

"Rockabye, baby..."

"No—no, it can't—" Marla clutches at the counter, heart jackrabbiting. "An illusion, there's no way—"

"But it is. She is right there. You can have her, to love and cherish—but at a cost."

The smoke fizzles; the baby's image grows faint. From the candle comes soft crying, a girl's voice.

"Mama? Mama?"

"No, no!" She swipes at the smoke, but the cries only intensify. "Please, give her to me, please—"

"A child is no small wish to grant. What could your measly life possibly offer in exchange?"

For the last piece of a perfect life, for sweet laughter and pride for decades to come, for the greatest gift of all, lying just there for the taking—

"Anything! I'll give anything!"

The hands release a thunderous clap; the candle sputters to black and the lights blink back to function. The curtain snaps shut. In an instant, she is on the sidewalk,

and where the apothecary stood is only grass and weeds. The only things left of her encounter are the stinging of her cheeks and the hum of a passing wind, whispering,

"Thank you for doing business with me."

VI.

This is Katherine Robinson, with today's morning news.

A Mitsubishi Adventure and a Toyota Camry were involved in a deadly collision along Baybrook Avenue at 10 p.m. last night. The passengers of the Adventure remain in critical condition; the two in the Camry, Lisa Blake-Morrison, 28, and her husband Ethan Morrison, 30, were declared dead on arrival at the hospital.

Mr. and Mrs. Morrison leave behind two children, a four-year-old boy and a two-month-old girl. The orphans will fall into the hands of Mrs. Morrison's widowed sister, Marla Blake-Thompson. Although shaken by the accident, Mrs. Blake-Thompson stepped up to the task admirably and will serve as the children's legal guardian from hereon forth.

Once again, this is Katherine Robinson, reporting for Daily Herald News.

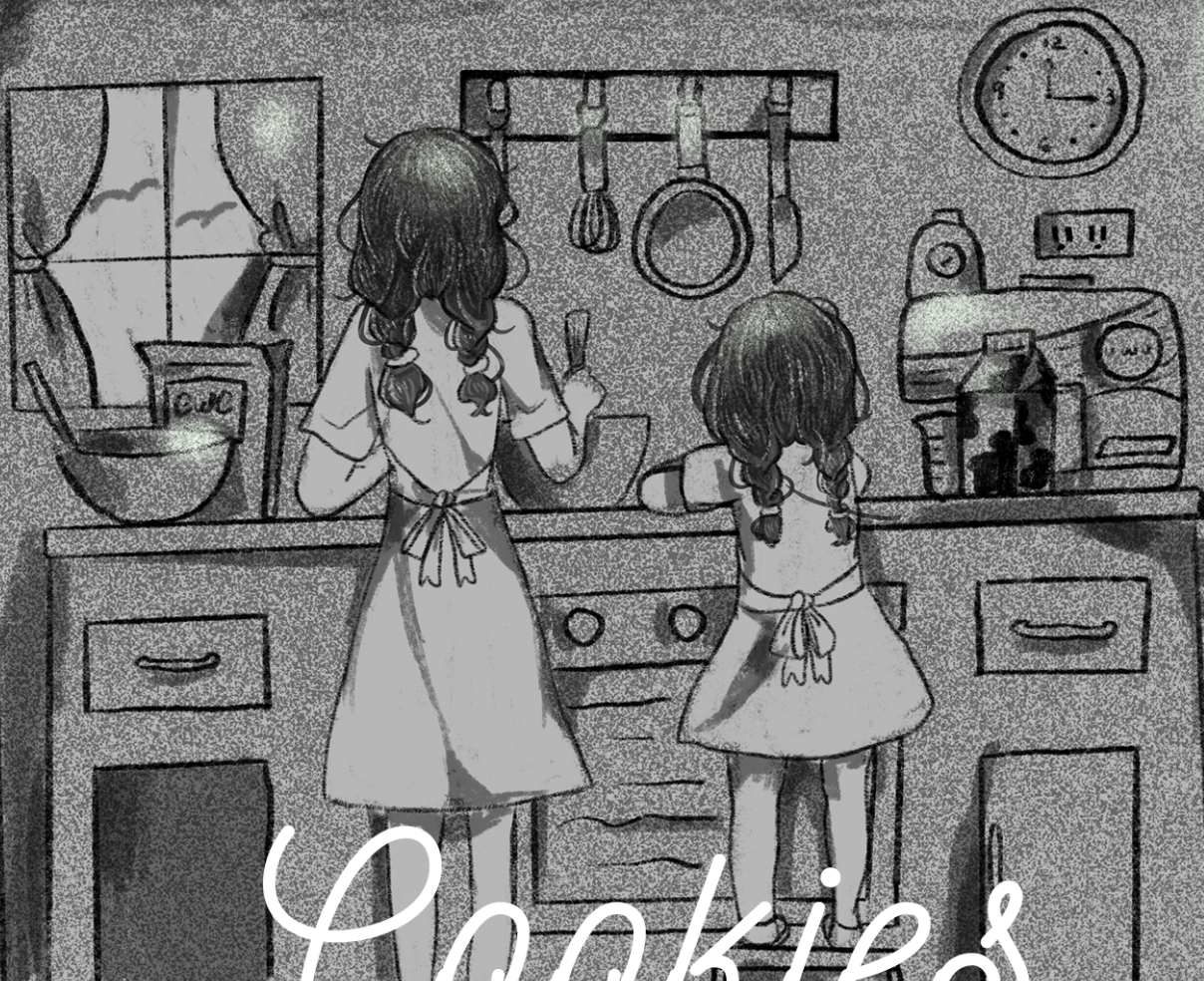




3. wish back home



ARTWORK BY NICOLE LUY & ANGELINE CAI
LAYOUT BY ABBY CHUA



Cookies

by Jenna Tan of 12-Sobriety

A little girl, not more than three years old, stood in front of the kitchen counter. She couldn't see much with the counter looming over her and blocking her sight, but she could still see the stray chocolate chips and white flour scattered all over the countertop as the aftermath of her mom's baking that morning. She tried to get a better view of the countertop by leaning on her tiptoes, her big round eyes searching for one specific thing. A little jar with the word "COOKIES" written on it.

Her eyes roamed the whole expanse of the countertop before she finally found the cookie jar. Her breath hitched at the sight and if it were virtually possible, her eyes grew just a bit wider. It was truly love at first sight like never before. No love story could compare to the little girl's love for cookies.

The sweet smell of the chocolaty delight filled the room with brio, making the kitchen feel like a bakery on a warm sunny afternoon. Her mouth watered and her tummy grumbled with want as she stared longingly at the jar of cookies.

She couldn't help herself, even if her mom told her no cookies before lunch. Her chubby little hands tried to reach the jar but to no avail. She was just too short to reach for it on her own. A pout found its way onto her lips and her arms crossed over her chest in frustration. She stared at the jar for a few minutes before she

mumbled under her breath with determination.

"One day I'll get that cookie."

Baking cookies seemed to become a regular thing her mom did because even after a year, Lena found herself staring at the kitchen counter once again. She was a bit taller than she was a year ago, but she was still too short to reach the jar.

Sunlight seeped through the open windows and cast the room in a warm glow of yellows and orange. Lena's mom was hunched over the counter, wiping away the little grains of sugar and spilled milk when she spotted her daughter looking up at her with bright eyes. She chuckled and set the grimy on the countertop. "Do you want a cookie, Lena?" She asked.

Lena smiled and nodded her head with vigor, her hands reaching up while waiting for her mom to give her the delicious treat. Lena's mom took the little jar in her hands and popped open the lid. Lena couldn't help but hum at the smell of the freshly baked cookies. Once the cookie was in her hands, she wasted no time and bit into the soft confection. The dough was chewy and the chocolate melted in her mouth. The crunch of every bite was music to her ears. Lena closed her eyes and smiled, savoring the taste little by little. She never felt this exuberant in her life as she did in that moment, munching happily on the cookie.

"One day I'll get the cookie without any help," she thought to herself.

It was the first week of kindergarten when the teacher asked the question. "What do you want to be when you grow up?" Lena knew exactly what she wanted to be. She looked at the teacher with unwavering attention and answered without hesitation: "I want to be a baker."

The teacher chuckled and patted her on the head. "That's sweet, Lena. Keep dreaming and maybe one day you will be a baker." Lena smiled and nodded her head. Never will she let go of this sprouting dream and her love for cookies.

When she got home later that day, she told her mom about her dream of becoming a baker. Her mom smiled and picked her up so that she was sitting next to her on the living room couch. "Well isn't that cute," she stated. "Why don't I teach you the basics of baking then? What do you say, sound fun?"

Lena gasped and nodded her head furiously. "Yes!"

"Alright, what shall we bake then?"

"Cookies!"

Lena's mom laughed as she stood up from the couch. "You and your cookies..." She says in exasperation as she shakes her head, a small smile on her face as she took Lena by the hand. Together they went into the kitchen.

Lena was now 12 but her love for cookies remained as thriving as ever. She still loved those small chewy biscuits with all her heart. The only problem was that her mom had stopped baking them. She said that she had no time anymore and it was best for Lena too since she shouldn't be eating too much of it.

Lena stood in front of the empty oven. The lights were still off and the room felt chilly from the cold weather outside. It's been years since the last time she was welcomed into the kitchen with the sweet scent of chocolate and the delicate warmth of the oven. Even the cookie jar was no longer on the kitchen counter. It laid untouched at the top shelf as dust and cobwebs collected on top of it.

Lena took out a small piece of worn-out paper from her pocket and unfolded it. It was the recipe for chocolate chip cookies her mom gave her a long time ago. She read through it briskly, setting her mind on baking by herself for once.

Hours passed and the smell of smoke suddenly filled the kitchen and seeped through the whole house. Lena's mom came rushing in to see her daughter looking down at a tray of burnt cookies held in her hands.

Lena looked up after hearing footsteps coming towards her. Her eyes were wide with fear as she took in her mother's face. She was not at all pleased. Her face morphed into a frown and her arms were crossed over her chest. The next thing she knew, the tray was knocked out of her hands, the charred cookies hitting the ground and rolling across the floor. Her mom's voice rang inside her ears as she reprimanded her for doing something so risky without her knowing.

The sun was starting to set, casting shadows against the furniture and Lena's small body. The temperature seemed to drop a few degrees from when she first started baking and she felt as dark and empty as the burnt cookies that lay abandoned on the kitchen floor.

Lena didn't know what to do but to apologize.

"I'm sorry," she said softly, her head bowed down and hands hung limply at her sides. The smell of smoke penetrated her senses and made her eyes brim with tears. A sense of heaviness started to fill her heart as she stared down at the black crumbs that surrounded her like a colony of tiny little ants.

"I just wanted a cookie."

Clouds were looming over the house, signifying an incoming storm. The wind was howling and the leaves of the trees outside rustled. The air swept passed the open window and into the kitchen, ruffling Lena's hair.

For once, Lena was not smiling when she entered the kitchen. For once, she wasn't looking for the warmth of the oven or the chipped old jar she used to dream of constantly. She stood leaning against the kitchen counter listening to her mom complain about how "poor" Lena's life choices were.

"You're graduating this year, Lena. You need to start taking life seriously."

"And I am being serious right now."

Lena's mom scoffed.

"I'm not joking," Lena said through gritted teeth. "I really do believe this is the best path for me."

"And how do you expect to keep yourself afloat if you choose to actually pursue baking?"

Lena's lips turned downward and her face creased into a frown. Who knew a place that held so much warmth just by a twist of an oven's knob could turn to a barren piece of land with nothing but ice in just one moment.

She crossed her arms before taking a deep breath and locking eyes with her mom. "Well maybe it's because I know there's more to life than earning a living, Mother."

She leaned down to grab her bag that sat on the floor and headed out of the house through the back door. Never turning back to see the look on her mom's face. As she slammed the door shut behind her, thunder rumbled and the rain started to pour.

It was the start of Christmas but Lena doesn't spend it in her childhood home. Five years have passed since she had that fight with her mom but she doesn't think much about it. The snow was falling endlessly outside, covering the ground like a white blanket.

Lena was busying herself with the fireplace, trying to get it started, when she heard the shrill sound of the kettle. She stood up once she saw a spark of fire and headed to the kitchen. The water she had put in earlier was now steaming hot and ready to be turned into a nice warm cup of hot chocolate and as she prepared the warm drink, her eyes caught a small jar by the edge of the table.

Lena smiled and brought out a plate to place the extra cookies she baked at work the other day. She took the jar from the table, the glass smooth between her fingers as she empties it out onto the plate. Once she had both the cookies and her hot chocolate ready, she went back to her living room, ready to curl up on the couch to watch a good movie.

As she settles down and starts the movie, she finally takes the first bite of the cookie. She couldn't help but hum and smile as she chewed the little biscuit.

The cookie tasted sweet between her lips.

PLANET 13



Paper Stars

by Dorothy Tiu of 12-Solidarity

[PLANET 1: PAST, 11:57 P.M.] Little hands grabbed hold of the nebulae and ripped it to ribbons, then smoothened and folded it carefully into a single, tiny, red paper star.

"Look here," says Thana to her glitter-faced little sister, slipping the

folded red paper into her pocket. "That's the one hundred... fifty-two-th star I've made for you—oh! Ooh, fireworks!"

Merula puts a hand to her pocket as the first string of fireworks break across the New York sky, gasping blues

and oranges over the neon fervor of New Year's revelry. New Year's—already. But still... the air in her lungs rattles with that archaic tint, that one-second-too-late cinch in the air that snakes through her bloodstream.

"Dance with me," giggles Thana, taking her sister's arms and pulling them, outstretched, around her own neck. They tangle in the pinpricks of space: two girls, dancing and laughing amidst the bodies gathered in the square. Light shoots over and through them, leaping to and fro the flashing billboards and catching at the glitter smeared all over their faces.

"Faster, faster, don't stop!" Merula screams. She feels her pocket for the five blunted edges and reels back, panicked, when her hands come away empty. "Thana?"

"What? Why'd you stop?"

Her lips quiver. "I think it fell out."

1 . . .

2 . . .

Countdown's over; it's
past the Eve.

The bodies dance around them, blues and oranges bursting through the New Year sky, and Merula, empty-handed and short of one paper star, cries.

"It's okay," her sister murmurs. "Mama, we gotta go. It's over, Merula. We'll just stay longer next year."

But she can't stop her tears and she doesn't know why and her knees are weak all of a sudden, her shaved head bowing, eyes searching frantically for

that little bit of red paper pressed somewhere deep into the soil.

"I'll make you a new one," her sister urges. "It's easy. I'll teach you how. No, no—look up. Maybe the star just went back home to the sky. We're going home, too. There's so many stars in the sky, Merula. You can pick any star you want."

"But there are so many," Merula wonders in awe.

"How
will
I
find
your
star?"

[PLANET II: PRESENT, 2:50 A.M.] A girl sits before a panorama of the city, watching rain fall from beyond the dark glass. Her hands swirl glow-in-the-dark paint over the clear surface, sketching the outline of a rocket ship, then an out-of-sorts dog with a squiggly tail. She will, long into her adult years, remember those days fondly—when she and Merula would empty the old coat box and haul it all the way to their room, donning swimming goggles and scribbling "ROCKETSHIP" over the side. It wasn't until Mark the dog took a few quick bites off their ship, that the girls were forced to end their travels to Mars.

Thana looks at her sister now, head shaven and fast asleep in a cocoon of wires and machines. She couldn't stand the monitor's incessant murmur those first few days, but now she thinks she wouldn't know what to do without it. Everywhere around the room stood some tether to the world of the living, but the air itself seemed like a portal to

another place, abysmal like the rain-doused darkness outside...

Whatever place it was, surely, it summoned the letter on the desk.

The letter came in the mail two days ago, and Merula had been ecstatic. "Look here," she'd said. "It's from Make-A-Wish. They're willing to grant my request!"

"What'd you ask for, anyway?"

"Don't laugh. But..."

And wasn't it so innocent, the way she said: "I know what mama means when she says I'll be going soon, but I don't wanna go alone. She doesn't know just yet, you know, but I asked them... if they could name a star after you. So you could

go
up
with
me
to
Heaven."

[PLANET III: FUTURE, 10 P.M.] In the beginning, it was Thana and Merula: two hazy green stars stuck to the ceiling of their room back in Virginia. Then Merula had fallen, betrayed by the once perfectly sticky magic tape, and had crash-landed onto the carpet.

They buried her beneath a white lily on moving day. Now Thana floated, listless and alone, on the chlorine surface of the hospital pool. Yellow fluorescent lamps tinted the water at her feet. The atmosphere closed in, sterilely indistinct; the glass roof framed no stars tonight.

Stars. Yellow. They'd send it out into the cosmos when it was ready: Merula's own, highly longed-for star. It was synthetic, but strong enough to withstand atmospheric and galactic conditions and whatnot—the specifics, she cared nothing for. But that star, its core, they were making out of her sweet sister's memories. Thana recalls touching it, that one time. It held the barest scrapings of a finished anything: clear plastic sphere cut down the middle; an orb glittered within, shooting static, like little lightning bolts trapped in their own crystal universe. How it felt. That sharp, prickling jab of absolute finality.

It was almost morning now, and Merula was already on her way off. They'd send the star MERULA out too, the same time it'd happen. Would it be okay? If she'd look up, she'd see her sister amongst the stars. Wouldn't she?

*I'll trace your name in the constellations.
I'll trace your memories.*

ARTWORK BY GABY MAGNO
LAYOUT BY KATRINA TAN

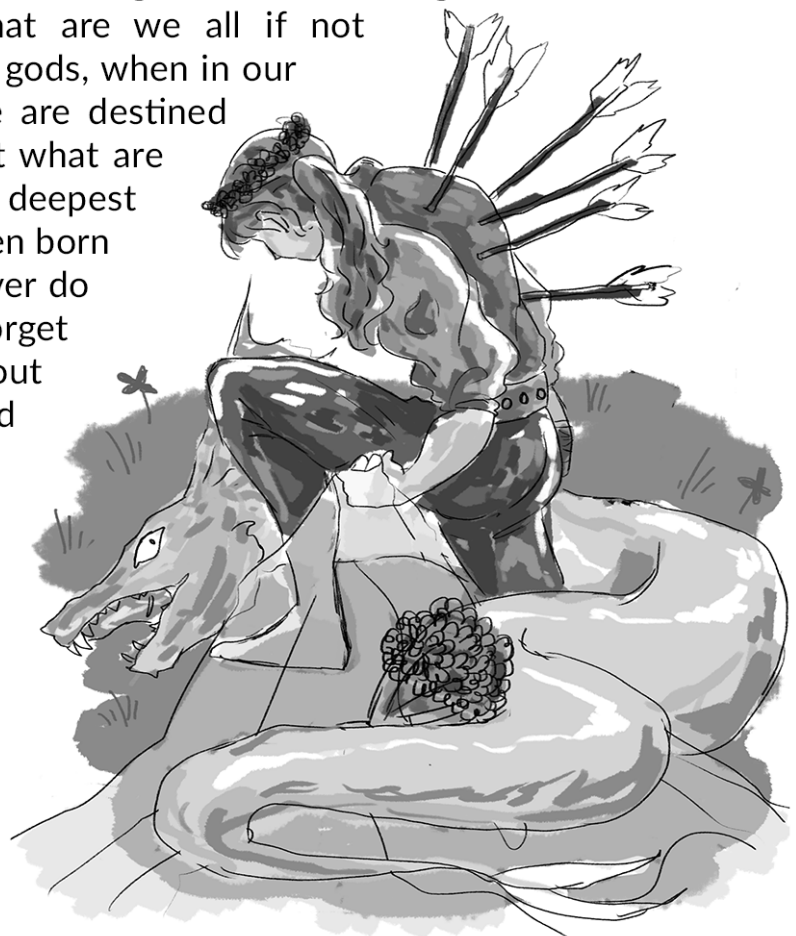


Hour of The Dragon

by Neale Sy of 11-Counsel

The sparrows are singing. I can hear them in through the open window my lady always forgets to close, the open window I imagine my life and soul fly out of whenever I go to sleep, those slices of death. The cake they cut in that wedding, the slices were uneven, I remember, and later on someone had dropped the knife and almost spilled blood onto the carpet. It would never have washed out, I should think. The carpet we have in our living room is beginning to fall apart, too, threadbare from all its years of sitting there, trampled underneath excitable children. My youngest, he was sick for months, the doctor said we had to starve him — at night I listened to him cry from hunger, listened to the cries of the damned, the sinners burning in Hell. What does it mean, anyway, for a baby fated to go up in flames? It'd be almost pitying if he were not a child of mine, child of the Devil, child of — what? What am I? The window, left open and forgotten by she who should love it most? The scattered slices, the almost-blood on the ragged carpet, the starving baby, the dead? The sparrows must be singing, but now all I hear is the laughter of the gods, the derision, the regret from creating someone like me. The gods, the gods — what are we all if not ants playing humans playing gods, when in our darkest hearts we know we are destined to burn? The gods — ah, but what are they if not a figment of our deepest desires, the need to have been born with purpose when all we ever do is wander and wonder and forget about the window, forget about the cake and the blood and the carpet and the sinners?

The sparrows are singing.
The gods are leaving their
windows opened, cutting
their cakes, spilling blood,
trampling carpets. The
gods, they are singing to
their sinners.



remnants of a memory

by Marie Entao of 11-Fortitude

there, we stood
amid tangled wires and broken appliances,
among pencils flung halfway across the room
and wrinkled papers bound by paper clips.
i saw these things for what they represented:
a room meticulously reduced to its skeletal system,
and the foundation for the next few years of our lives.
(i wonder if any of you saw it the same way)

i often recall
the flickering lights, the creaking of the door
and the occasional critter roaming the place.
but i also recall the lighthearted screams
and the laughter that followed;
they still ring in my ears to this day.
(i kind of miss it all, don't you?)

the room spoke for itself—
a dingy, cluttered, cramped space,
and i loved it anyway.
(i know we all did)

now here we stand
on a spotless floor,
amid neatly wrapped wires
and brand new equipment.
we've picked up the pencils
and sorted our papers
and somehow it still feels like home.
(but when i listen for your voices
in the hope to hear those same words back,
i realize i should have covered my ears instead)



Mother's Lament

by Audrey Ty of 11-Fortitude

In our old lands, we would sing
of the blossoms, the blessings She brings
that they may grow
through oak or through snow,
that they may outlive us all.

Before in our lands, we would sing
of all of the beauty She brings.
Now open your eyes,
look to the sky.
Oh, why must the clouds weep like so?

Oceans so deep
whilst lulling to sleep
leaves, fallen grace,
Her remains.



Valleys so wide,
oh, so much pride!
Look,
wildlands astray,
stumps of decay!

Deep in my lands, they would sing
of tales, of the whispers I bring.
Once 'pon a time, with daffodils and
light,
there was a land filled with awe.

Once in my lands, they would sing
of the life, the future they bring.
Joyful their laughs,
endless their songs,
are these just stories spun from gold?

Shadows so high
They left them behind!
Whilst they race, go,
fly away!
But with their greed running deep,
the night starts to seep
'to my blood and veins,
what will remain?

—Now,
in my lands,
they would sing

of the change,
the hope
they could bring.

—Words of deceit,
eyes of defeat.

Oh how,
how long will they sing?



emitted/ committed

by Sophia de Galicia of 11-Counsel

i. there were far too many times i knew nothing lasts forever, as they say. i had chosen to live in the moment, consciously fogging my own future with you. though i knew how much the fog and the smoke suffocates, i stayed.

all for you.

ii. we were hidden in that fog—an illusion. we were an illusion to the rest of the world. we seemed to live in an alternate universe when alone together. you said it was because “everything is much more interesting as a secret.”

you were interesting to me. that wasn’t a secret.

iii. as long as i still make you look forward to the rising of the sun and the meteor showers at night, then darling, that’s when i know i can stay. i’ll stay as long as you want me to, even if i have to be invisible outside.

that’s what makes you happy, right?

iv. when your eyes glisten in the light while you tell me what your dreams are made of, i still believe nothing can hurt us—but that was us, what about me?

i believed in the idea that as long as you were happy, i would be too. i didn’t think, nor did i know, that the light in your eyes was nothing but the cracking of a fire—

smoke. your precious smoke, fogging me up.

v. there were far too many times i knew what we had wouldn’t last forever, but how would it last forever when it never actually started?

SMOKED COLORS

by Alicia Uy of 11-Counsel

red
it is the rim around your eyes on harsh days, when the bad weather is
more than just the bad
weather — it is the epitome of your mood. your tears fall simultaneously
with the raindrops.
red; it is the color of your chapped lips as it wraps around the
orange
tip of the smoke dart. you inhale the smoke and it fills your lungs with
the temporary promise of a
blank-slate mind. it fogs your thoughts of her. she was the one you called
love. she was the one
who giggled like she was seven, but screamed like she was on top of the
mountains. she had
freckles dusted around her nose, and her eyes were a beautiful shade of
hazel and her hair, god, her hair — it was
yellow
like the stars when you looked up at the black sky. when smoke darts
didn't work so you had to
look at the cosmos and ask questions and make promises. to you, looking
up made it seem like
nirvana could be genuine, but you knew it was all a lie. the ground
reminded you, patched with
grass that's as
green
as the envy bubbling up inside of you each time you recall the casket
being lowered into the
ground. you'd let out a sigh that carried the universe, and you'd watch as
the smoke faded up in
the sky just like the envy, just like the image of her
blue
lips when she took her last breath and claimed it was her first. was she
that selfish? did she not
think of you? did she think you would enjoy throwing those
purple
flowers she had specifically requested before she was inevitably buried
six feet under forever?

did she think you enjoyed being lonely? loneliness is a companion that
splinters you in half and
punches you until you see black and white at the same time. loneliness is
a secret yelled and no
one's there to hear it but you still feel the shake in your bones, afraid
you've been ousted to the
world. it's wherever you go, in whatever you see and hear and feel.
loneliness is — it's — purple. it's
green. it's orange. it's red. it's blue. it's yellow.
it's her.

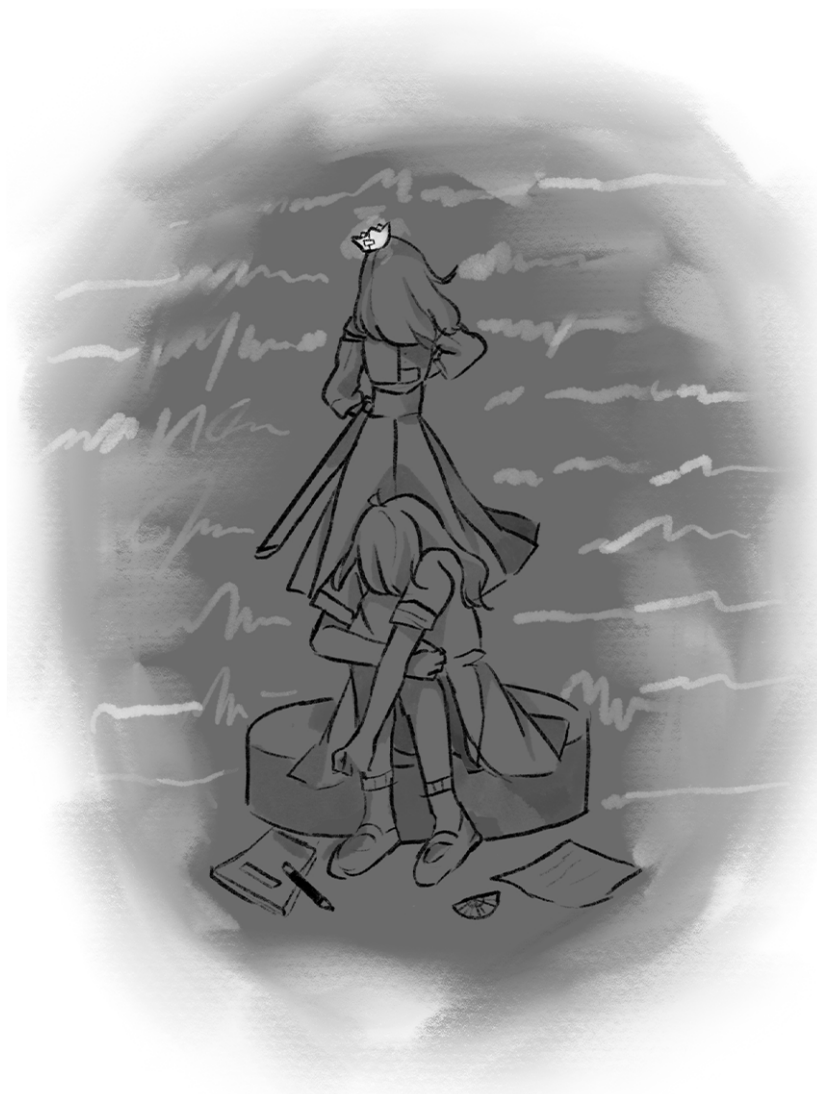


of: the actor

by Joanne Ng of 11-Fortitude

once
fast,
once
slow.
can be
yes,
can be
no.
can be
agree,
disagree,
accept,
disprove.
positive
negative
and never ever never.
i am loud—
full of life,
with vigor,
and vibrance.
and then
i am soft,
and quiet,
unbroken silence and
oh
so
very,
awfully
private.
i've been hero,
and outlaw,
magician

and lover.
maybe queen.
i've been explorer,
wise man,
child of prophecy unseen.
master of disguise,
master of change,
master of anything thrown
well out of place.
i am ego and soul and self
all
at
once,
a myriad of plenty
with the solitude of none.
and sometimes it's hard
to
pick
just
one.
(but in the end,
i'm me)





ARTWORK BY ASHLEY SIOCO
LAYOUT BY ABBY CHUA

where roads converge

by the Literary Staff



Timothy had never really believed in wishes. If anything was too good to be true, he called it witchcraft and went the other way.

The door in front of him was a perfect example. He'd just escaped his grandma, and there he was, staring at a place right out of her apothecary stories. It matched everything she said, right down to the doormat pattern.

Well, there was only one way to know if her stories held any truth.

The door creaked open at the lightest push. At the far end of the room, an old man stood behind a counter.

"Welcome."

"Hi." Timothy studied the bottle-laden shelves that lined the walls on either side. "What do you do here?" He looked over to the man's jointed wooden hand. This was no mistake. Here was the man of legend and the place where he did his deeds.

The apothecary man hummed and stroked his chin. "What do we do here?"

"Don't you grant wishes?" Timothy narrowed his eyes. "A lot of the villagers talk about an apothecary. Say it's evil magic."

"Do they?"

"Mm-hm. They say that when people ask for things from the apothecary, they don't really get what they want. Grandma tells a lot of these stories."

"Which stories, then?"

"There's the girl who asked for a friend and got a tree-thing that her village burned to a cinder. There's the one about the murdered violin lady in the spyglass. Then there's the lady who wanted a kid—the apothecary guy made her sister die, so the lady adopted her niece and nephew."

The man sighed and drummed his wooden fingers against the counter. "They don't know a thing. They never tell about the happy endings: the traveler in the woods, the library boy, the orphan girl in the barrio... They paint our kind as such a menace."

"Wait—what do you mean, 'our kind'?"

The man smiled. "We go way back. You call it evil, but it's really more misunderstood magic. Centuries ago, around the medieval ages, one man believed he could bend ancient magic to grant his own selfish desires. It backfired on him, of course—the magic lashed out, took away his left hand for such arrogance. In exchange, he gained the ability to grant everyone else's wishes except his own."

"Afterwards, he started up a... shop for wishes, if you may. He figured he could at least profit from his curse. Soon, he met another exceptionally selfish person who demanded a wish. The magic he used on that person reacted much the same as it had with him—they lost their left hand and could grant other's wishes, so they were tasked to continue the apothecary.

"Our community only grew after that." He shrugged. "There are happy endings, yes; there was one instance where an apothecary was taken over by a selfless young girl instead of one of us. But I am not surprised you have not heard of that—the selfish people in this world far outnumber the ones who aren't, after all. They never seem to realize that everything in life has a price."

Timothy contemplated this. "Still, sir, that's not fair." He stepped forward. "Sometimes selfish people aren't really selfish. They're just lost and hopeless and looking for a way out."

The man paused and scratched his chin again. "Well... frankly, never in my thirty years of running this apothecary has anyone ever bothered to say that. It's just how things are. Life isn't fair. Wasn't fair to me, and it'll never be fair to anyone except those with full pockets." He waved his hand. "Now, never mind that. What's your wish, kid?"

Timothy recalled the people the man's kind had hurt, everyone who had needed help. He knew what it was like to need help.

"Sir, I only have one wish." The boy stuck out his index finger. "I want people to be okay. I want the people who came here or who will ever come here to know that everything will be okay in the end."

The man let out a surprised laugh. "That's a first. No one's ever wished for people they've never met."

He looked to the side, and Timothy followed his gaze to a small silver key hung up on the wall beside a thick mahogany traveler's chest. The coat of dust told Timothy it hadn't been opened in years.

"What's in there? Will it help?" He blurted.

The man huffed, amused. "That depends."

(He could still say exactly all that lay within: the documents that orphaned and abandoned him, the clothes from his days of factory work, the contract into the curious profession of wish-granting. If only he had known, back then, that left hands could be sold but not bought, that life was more than the evasion of hunger and thirst, and that everything would be alright in the end.

Maybe then he would have realized that his misery was not hatred but loneliness, and that this profession was not a power, but a curse.)

He sighed and shook his head. "Kids these days, curious about everything."

Timothy crossed his arms. "I'm almost ten! That's nearly a grown-up."

"Alright, alright. Let's crack a deal, then."

"Mm-hm?"

"The selfish people who wish in our apothecaries—they'll still get what they deserve. However, from now on, with every curse will come new blessing. For every thing or person taken away from them, another will be made to come into their life within the week. That way, they'll have their redemption."

"That sounds fair, but..." Timothy looked at his shoes. "...What do you want in return?"

"Oh, don't worry about that. You've paid more than enough already." The apothecary man smiled, more genuine this time. His eyes flickered back to the chest. "Run home to your grandmother now. Thank her for her stories; they've taught you and me a great deal today."

Timothy nodded and set off towards the door. The apothecary man paused him one last time with a tip of his hat and a wave of his human hand.

"Thank you for doing business with me."

acknowledgements

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