

TOTEM



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TOTEM

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

LITERARY

4 Emotion, Thirty Victor Venturi	6 Arms Peter Buhler	10 I want to hold you anonymous	12 orbits Sandra Ning
16 The Council of Weathercrafters Peter Buhler	19 Porcupines Alex Brinson	20 Week One Emily Miaou	22 Leafrustle Youry Aglyamov
25 By Bicycle Drew Schäffer	28 Contradance Zofia Kaczmarek	30 The Night Goddess Ranjana Kishore	32 In the Rose Garden Oriel Humes
33 Walk in the City Ranjana Kishore	35 Insomnia Rachael Kuintzle	36 An Incomplete Thought Netgie Laguerre	38 Growth Rudy Mathukumilli

VISUAL

front, back remember Janice Jeon	5 Camping with a View Dingyi Sun	9 Spring Sunrise Emily Blythe	11 Plitviče Madelyn Wang
14 Sugar Mountain Jessica Du Li	15 the monkey, the beetle, the boy Sandra Ning	18 redox jenny	23 Elephade Sumana Mahata
24 Forest Spirit Kelsey Boyle	27 kid, you're a star Sandra Ning	31 The fallen queen Arturo J Mateos	34 Underneath JingXin Liang
37 A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow Chloe Hsu	40 Dream Linghui Wang		

VICTOR VENTURI

Emotion

A beat of the heart
When we're apart
Just a little shock
In my chest, a knock

An electrical impulse
Makes feelings so *douce*
Electrons in motion
Nothing but
An e-motion

Thirty

When I'm thirty
I want to be sad
When I'm thirty
I want to be single
I want to be mad
I want to be lonely
Because I'll look ahead
And the future I'll see
Is a sea of nothingness
And I'll look behind me
My past will simply be
Just a heavy cup of tea
Chained to my knee
Bringing me down the cliff
The fall shall be a strong biff
Life will flash before my eye
Time will be all mine
In 2025



DINGYI SUN | Camping with a View | Digital Photography



DINGYI SUN | Final Frontier | Digital Photography

PETER BUHLER

Arms

New Arms: The Exclusive Interview with Matthew Tang

Hosted by Tony Zion

Tony: Matthew, I'll get straight to the point. Our readers want to know: why did you decide to turn off your arms?

Matthew: Well, Tony, I don't think of it so much as a decision to turn off my arms as much as a decision to turn on my heart. Besides, I still use them.

[Matthew smiles and flexes his fingers.]

T: But it certainly is a decision that has adversely affected your music career.

M: Well, there has definitely been an effect. But I would say it's only been positive for me. Sure, I've been out of the scene for a little while, but I think the music is real now. I'd make the same decision again.

T: Okay. Matthew, let's talk a little about your rise to stardom. Certainly, our readers know about the tremendous obstacles you overcame after being the lone survivor of the Space Station Five Disaster. But not everyone knows how that brought you into music.

M: It was definitely all thanks to Marvin. After we met in college he'd gone to intern at Helping Hands. He had the idea to modify their Right Hand Man line to interface with what was left of my arms. He convinced his whole department that human interface was the economic future, you know. After two years of development, he gave me my arms back.

T: So that was 2058, right? What happened next?

M: Yeah—no, 2059. That was when Roy approached me. He had designed a high speed recording system to process human hand motions for adaptation into household robotics. He had been recording chefs, I think, for a new line of kitchen bots. Anyway, he had an idea to record the hand motions of professional musicians and heard about my new arms. We got to talking and we both thought it was a great opportunity.

T: You've been in music since you were young, haven't you?

M: That's right. I was in a few bands in high school and college. I sang a cappella, too. But after Station Five all that changed. That's why I was so excited when Roy found me. I really wanted to make music again.

T: Well, we all know how well that worked out. Eight diamond and twenty-six platinum albums, the longest continuous presence in the Top 40, thirty-three Grammys. What made you want to give up all that?

M: I just began to feel empty after a while. At a certain point, I was just watching my arms move, copying the motions of other artists. There was no connection between me and the music. Once the program was loaded into my arms, it was like someone else was playing and I could only sit there and listen. I wanted to play something from my own heart.

T: So that's why you made the decision not to plug in anymore.

M: That's right.

T: How do you make music now?

M: More or less the old fashioned way. When I was plugged in to the programmed routine, some of that muscle memory rubbed off on me. I think that made the learning curve easier for me. I still had to take some years off to practice and get my brain up to speed. But now I have full, natural control over my fingers.

T: You still use robotics, though.

M: Of course.

T: Does it still feel disconnected? Using the prosthetics?

M: No, not really. I think of my arms like an instrument. It's just the same. And, you know, I learned an interesting fact. Most of the cells in the human die and are totally replaced after ten or fifteen years. My prosthetics haven't worn out yet after thirty years. In a very real sense, my arms are more a part of me than your arms are a part of you. So no, there's no disconnect for me.

T: In the past few decades since you made your debut there have been a lot of new, young musicians experimenting with exoskeleton robotic enhancement. Some of them have made their way to the top. But you're turning your back on all that. Is there anything you'd like to say to them?

M: I wouldn't say I turned my back. The pre-programmed enhancement ultimately just wasn't for me. I think it's a great opportunity, to take part in music however it moves you, however you can. I think, for some people, pre-programming is their niche, their way to express. For me, it didn't fit. I have to use my brain and play in the moment. But I'd say, you've got to share what's in your heart. That's what's important.

T: I couldn't have said it better, Matt. Thanks for your thoughts, and I wish you good luck coming back on tour.

M: Thanks, Tony.

Editor's Note: Be on the lookout for Matt's new single, Melody Five, coming in October.



EMILY BLYTHE | Spring Sunrise | Digital Photography

ANONYMOUS

I want to hold you

I want to hold you the way I hold myself
when my edges start to spill and
I threaten to collapse
when I'm grasping at corners,
pressing them back together again
because I'm not enough and all too much

I want to hold you the way the ocean holds the shore
the way fog rolls in at 4am and recedes
and morning perspiration clings to my skin

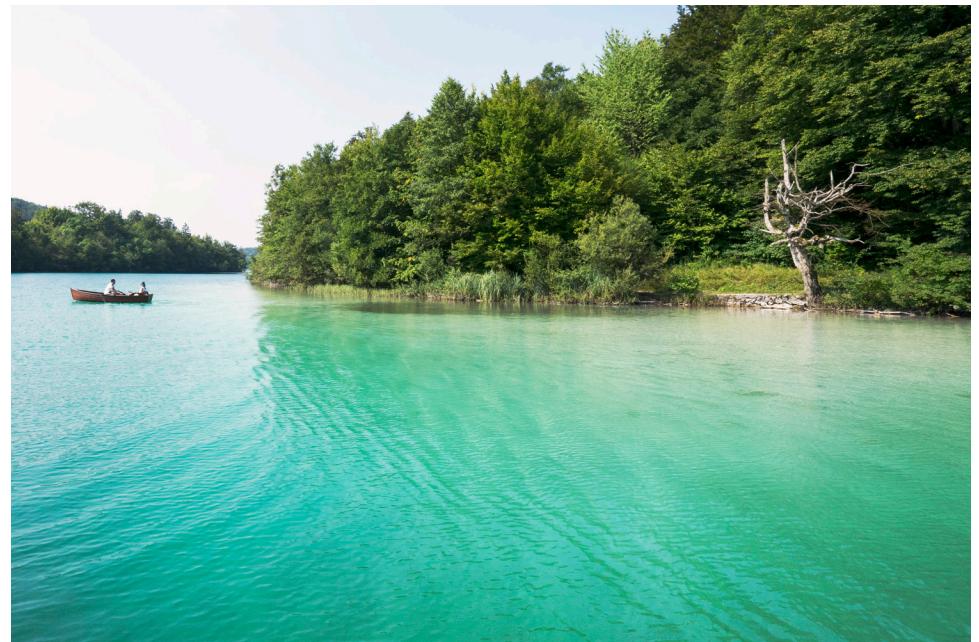
I want to hold you the way kisses linger
delicately, even hours after

I want to hold you like
like it's just us

that's the way I want to hold you
softly, easily
like snow melting
a rocking lullaby, a swaying hammock

all the science of our parts discarded
in place of pure aesthetic
and the right sensations in our lungs
as we forget the complex mechanisms by which we live

I want to hold you so we can forget
forget our probabilities
and our smallnesses in this universe
until our bodies are burning stars
trapped in our cycles of flaming oblivion



MADELYN WANG | Plitviče | Digital Photography

SANDRA NING

orbits

i struck out to the coastal trails
those dirt beaten paths that make their way slowly
around sagebrush and wild grass and finally
kiss the sky
with a thousand yellow canola flowers
before giving way to the limitless ocean.

i was thinking about distances
the roads i've traveled, the people i've met
the bridges we built that have
silently fallen to disrepair—
the same way dying oak trees stand stately as graves, quiet
save for the whisper of the wind through their hollow trunks.

my eyes were on the dust and rocks
as i walked my own distance, trying to account for
what part was mine and what was theirs:

if i had just been closer, warmer,
would they have let
the spool unravel its delicate thread
that set me spinning free through space
untethered, unkept,
adrift and alone?

i teetered on the edge of the universe
at the trailhead where the cliffside stretched so wide and thin that
the scrublands and all its coastal trails were but a green crescent
around the perfect meeting between deep sea and open sky.
it was there, on the smooth surface of a perfect fisheye lens
that my thoughts scrambled for purchase.

i let
the yellowing green feathergrass
catch me with their shivering thin stalks
before i spun out of orbit,
before i became permanently unreachable.

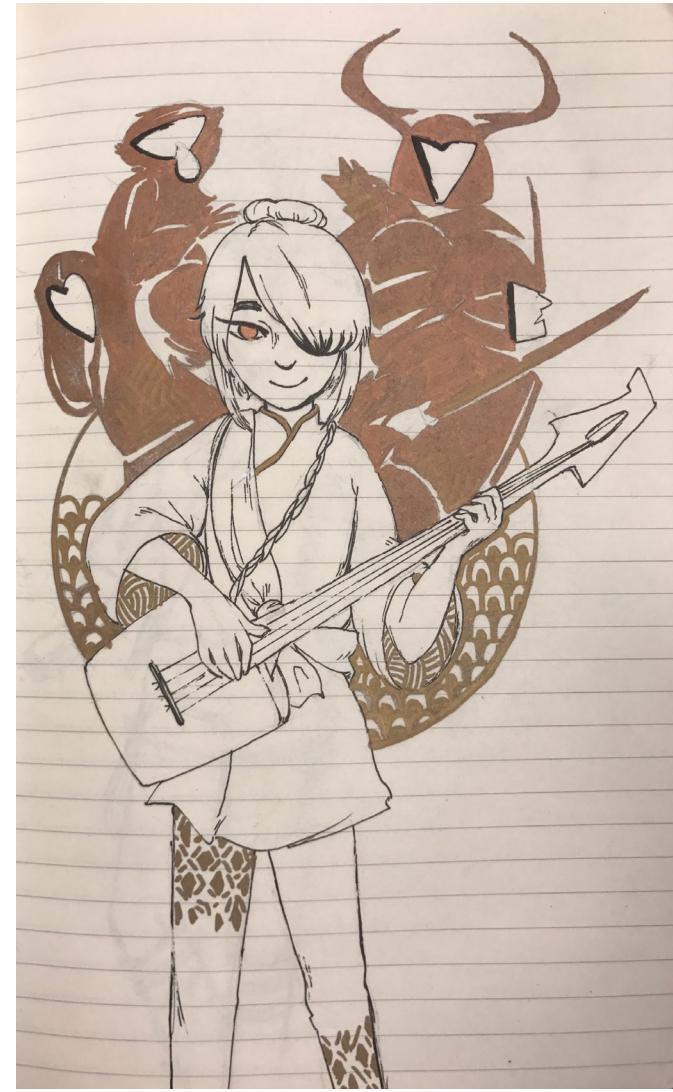
i sat down and the meadow swallowed me
breathed in the ocean breeze and felt the leaves brush my cheeks
and waited until i was ready.
then i peered out from my tiny sanctuary
as i noticed for the first time, people wandering
like little ants through faraway trails.

the sedate winds sent ripples of gold
through the fields basking under the high afternoon sun.
i watched the other people in their other orbits
follow that gentle pace.

finally, i knew
although i was one person, adrift
like planets, like comets, like bodies in the beautiful blanket of stars
those people i missed and i would some day align
and the reunion will be ripe like wildflower seeds carried through the air
singing with new stories, experiences, emotions to bring home.



JESSICA DU LI | Sugar Mountain | Digital Art



SANDRA NING | the monkey, the beetle, the boy | Pen and Gold Sharpie on Paper

PETER BUHLER

The Council of Weathercrafters

As recorded in the Annals of Kizlek the Sorcerer, the Nine Hundred and Sixty Seventh International Council of Wizards were the first to pioneer the use of Norwegian beard wool in kite strings when, in the wee years of the second millennium, they convened their annual meeting at the Devil's Tower in the remote plains of Yelabuga. The sheep's bladder balloon had just been discovered, and many wizards employed them in travel to the meeting. Yvald the Great Leader of the Wizards was the first to arrive, but had great difficulty in setting down his balloon due to a fierce east wind blowing across the Yelabugan wilderness. Lightning cracked and thunder rumbled, distressing his balloons mightily. Buffeted by the wind, his assistant was tossed out of the airship, but fortunately his fine beard's wool sweater caught on a loose nail and unraveled slowly. Yvald peered over the edge of the balloon's basket and saw his assistant dangling ten feet below the ship and one hundred feet above the ground. "Well done! Well done! You have indeed saved us from great peril," Yvald gripped his hat and shouted down to his assistant over the great gale.

Yvald hauled his assistant back up into the basket and unraveled the sweater completely. Then he tied the string of fine wool around his assistant's waist and lowered him slowly over the side into a nearby forest with instructions to tie the string to the sturdiest tree he could find. The assistant landed in a great oak tree and made fast the balloon. Yvald quickly produced a set of gears from his wizard's bag and used them to wind himself and his transport safely down into the tree.

Many hundreds of wizards arrived over the next few days. There was Old Ganymede the Sorcerer, who had invented the wheel many years back, Ancient Krelpot the Mage, who had long ago devised fire, and many other notable witches and wizards who have, at one time or another, contributed greatly to humanity's knowledge of the natural sciences and engineering.

Yvald called the meeting to order in a deep, booming voice, made loud through magic, so that all the council could hear him, "Here in the vast plains of Yelabuga, with the employment of our new technology, the sheep's bladder balloon, we can finally reach into the sky and subdue the great forces of nature that conspire against us. No longer will we be slave to famine, floods, and inconvenience. We will conquer the weather and bend it to our will!" The wizards cheered in response.

Yvald continued, "In the past few months, a dragon of my acquaintance came down with a terrible cold. His voice became high-pitched and his head became dizzy. He pleaded with me to examine him, since in his state of illness he no longer had the strength to steal damsels, nor could he scare away knights with his silly-sounding voice. So I examined him and found that his

scales were shiny, his teeth were sharp, his bowels were functioning, and his hair was thick. But, his breath was not as pungent as a dragon's breath should be. So, I placed a sample of his breath in a jar in my satchel and brought it home. When I removed it from my satchel in my parlor, the glass jar slowly rose into the air under its own volition. I snatched it out of the air and placed it on the table. Again it rose up. What a marvelous discovery this was. His breath can power our balloons without the aid of fire!"

Yvald's announcement caused a great stir in the room. "Hot air balloons without fire; preposterous!" shouted Ancient Krelpot the Mage, who, you recall, had long ago devised fire, "The elements will be all out of balance. We all know the four elements—earth, fire, wind, and water—do we not? Dragon's breath, no matter how hot, still has too much water and, mark my words, it will sink right down to earth. This sick dragon has addled your brain!"

Yvald called for order, "Silence! Silence! Yes, Ancient Krelpot, we all know the four elements. But did you know that Jindal the Dervish has recently proposed the fifth element, the celestial aether, which keeps the stars and the planets aloft in the heavens? I say to you that this dragon breathes that very same aether, and it is even lighter than air!"

A heated argument commenced, wands were drawn, and a great many fantastically colored lights shot about the room. Yvald was barely able to return order with the help of Old Ganymede the Sorcerer. Old Ganymede spoke, "I propose that you show us this dragon's breath so that we may see with our own eyes." Yvald produced a glass vial from his pocket and placed it on the ground in front of him. It rose slowly into the air. The audience was again divided. "He is using strings and trickery!" called out Ancient Krelpot. "I am not!" replied Yvald, "Come, test it yourself, you dubious mage!" Ancient Krelpot took the vial in his hand and opened his fingers. The vial again began to rise.

Now, Ancient Krelpot was a vain man and decided to take advantage of his position by declaring, "Behold, I have discovered the fifth element, the celestial aether! I was simply testing your feeble minds. Yvald has been good to assist me in bringing you this new knowledge!"

Old Ganymede quietly motioned for the guards to escort Ancient Krelpot from the tower and addressed the council, "Yvald has indeed done well and brought us a powerful technology. Let us journey out to harvest the celestial aether!" So a contingent was sent out to the dragon, whose name was Helium, and a deal was struck. The wizards would provide Helium with damsels and protection from knights and, in return, he would breathe into a great bag, which belonged to the wizards.

The wizards then set to work constructing large glass vials to fill with dragon's breath, great long kite strings to anchor the vials to the ground, and a great assortment of pulleys, fans, gears, nets, and other instruments to attach to the vials, which would allow them to control weather. It was a tremendous contraption but, since it is made of glass, entirely invisible to the eye.

The wizards cast the device aloft and set up a wise council to govern the wind, rain, sun, and seasons. That is how the weather can be predicted and also why we call helium 'helium.'



JENNY | redox | Digital Photography

ALEX BRINSON
Porcupines

You're...

Purporting you're a normal guy, performing more than sorta fine.
I'm sure in store there's more to find: I'm poring over your disguise,
Peering through your tortured eyes, like portals toward the door you hide
before me forms a more defined portrait of your mortal mind
I'm boring through your fortified fortress of assorted lies
Sort through what you sorta like, adore, support, mourn, glorify
deplore, abhor, or more despise. Less pins and needles – try swords and knives.
More thorns entwined through your insides, than spines aligning porcupines.
Explore and tour, then formulize: You're torn inside and mortified.
Record the sores, immortalize the moral storm that's borne inside:
You question if there's more to life, or in the end you're born to die.
Before this time you swore to fly, now how can you afford to try?
This edifice enormous, so you're hoarding all your dormant time.
This precipice precarious. It's pestilent - it's perilous! Your
intelligence feels scarce and this huge deficit is scary shiiit!

EMILY MIAOU
Week One

We sleep over in each other's rooms,
partially for the novelty
of having a sleepover on a whim,
but mostly trying to align
our physical proximity
with an emotional one.
We keep the company of
strangers we're calling friends,
bridging gaps by telling tales in the dark
about lives back home;
trying to replace intimacy
with a list of facts, stories,
not understanding that
volume isn't representative of depth.
We don't understand until later –
it's not really the same,
because they weren't there through it all.
We look for familiarity,
not realizing we'd lost it
all of a sudden
until we moved into a room that was slightly too small
with a roommate we don't know well enough to call a friend
in a city that's a bit too urban compared to home.
Despite the flow of words,
we're left with an unsettled feeling
that leaves us craving an understanding
of the warm bodies next to us
in the span of weeks rather than
the years we had with people back home.
We didn't think
slow and steady was a luxury
until it was gone.

Our attentions turn away from the past
as the later hours strip us of caution
and expose our fears.
We voice dreams and aspirations
in anxious tones,
wanting to find comfort in
intertwined futures,
overlaps of interest,
desires to learn –
wanting to belong,
wanting to be wanted.
But it isn't quite enough.
Maybe one day it will be,
but right now,
it feels a little off to me.
I catch a glimpse of
sunrise through the curtains
before I fall asleep,
hoping this (whatever this is)
is all just a part of week one.

YOURY AGLYAMOV
Leafrustle

Below, just one twist. Above, just one gust.
A melody born of truth and belief,
Of determination not to be dust,
Of true engineering, bias in trust –
But obvious paths can lead to joy's reef.

Behind, just our void. Ahead, just our dreams.
Between, a new beacon beckoning moths.
The winds grow so strong: a surge comes, it seems.
The seawall still standing, versus the memes,
With furrows unlit. The road with sea froths.

To port, there's just war. To starboard, just lies.
The trees are still singing, dancing with hope,
A hurricane's worth that curls up the skies
And breaks both their natures, leaving us wise...
And yet still they call to us to elope.

One instant on beauty's fractal-paved way;
One instant of thought, as gale-branches fray;
One instant we only survive if we play.



SUMANA MAHATA | Elephade | Acrylic on Paper & Watercolor on Canvas

DREW SCHÄFFER
By Bicycle



KELSEY BOYLE | Forest Spirit | Polymer Clay and Wood

But how could he fall in love up in the trees? In his fantasies, he managed to avoid specifying where it would happen; on earth, or up in the element where he lived now: a place without a place, he would imagine; a world reached by going up, not down. Yes, that was it. Perhaps there was a tree so high that by climbing it, he would touch another world—the moon.

-The Baron in the Trees

His bike carried him through the neighborhood, a familiar sight to the feral cats dozing on the front porches. And like them, he chose to spend the evening alone. Recently, he felt that conversation demanded much from him, and in this economy of supply and demand his resources were scarce. He rather enjoyed the time he did spend with others but could not suppress his intense affinity for the things conversation cannot touch. It was a mallard mending its iridescent coat as it preens; it was the way a bicycle's seamless transit frees one from the jolt of step-step-step; it was the way the moon simply is. But perception is a solitary gift, so like the child of a divorce his attention was split between human company and the ineffable. He ended up on the hill as the sun waved its flamboyant goodbye. How could he ever describe the clouds' soaring filigree to another soul? His first thought was "heavenly", but he realized he would have to define God to be sure you understood: every word necessitated an infinity more. The sunset cast his eyes in gold, but when it was over those eyes did not know where to turn.

On her bike she flew by the river. But then was flight the right analogy? It comes with dynamism but its expansiveness rings false. On bicycle one coasts down slopes and tilts on banked curves: its movement exists solely as reaction to path. Perhaps like the minnows beside her she was rather swimming through rapids and currents—a passenger, yet in command of her destination all the same. No, better still, it was as a reader's eye flows through a sentence to splash abruptly at its punctiform end. She thought of this on her flight as her eyes studied not the cormorants drying their outstretched wings but instead a lifetime of pages. She decided you can know someone better when their words stand still. For her, the deliberation involved in writing afforded a presence for which speech's organic fluency did not compensate. A book does not rush you.

Each sentence shakes the tree of memory and as your mind picks up that one shining apple, winks. A book, though changed by time, feels it not, nor does it possess self-regard. It simply gives itself to you through definitions, etymologies, allusions. In turn, you give its soul a body in the warm flesh of your memories and associations. For her, unknowable Borges was an Aztec vase and Calvino a telescope trained on the heart. This she could never really share, though to her it was as real as the stars on a desert night. Likewise, she could never really share foot against pedal yet still flew along the curves of the river.

The stones jumped beneath his tires as he slid under the forest's canopy dripping with Spanish moss: it recalled for him the inviting placidity of kelp forests rather than ghost-shadowed mansions. This was all the more peculiar, for it was night-time, and the mesh of tree branches crossed over a moon whose face was yellow like old ivory. The humid night wrapped him in a tight blanket, but he found the anonymity of the dark more comforting still. He counted raccoons and strays, even skunks, as closer kin than most humans: the gaze of a raccoon is wiser for its stoicism. A bird, an oak, a flower do not perturb it. A raccoon diving in a dumpster could not possibly wish it were in a woodland valley; one which found a plum tree could not fathom wanting cherries. Demanding nothing, a raccoon's eyes gave him no cause to withdraw. Instead, they took him in, shifted to a fern, and forgot he existed. One cannot converse with a raccoon. It reacts to the world but harbors no desire to change it, and without this desire what could there be to say? He knew this, and knew the night to be home for those creatures which see but do not speak.

Though she didn't realize it, her bike took her exactly where she needed to go. She had a place beyond the birch boughs where time did not exist. It amazed her every time that there could be such a physical location; its having a mark on a map seemed antithetical to what it meant to her. There, she dissolved. Without another human presence to define herself against, her identity fused with her surroundings such that she couldn't tell whether her thoughts were taking place in the froth of the river or the synapses of her own brain. Her feet dangling in the water strummed the currents like banjo strings. This music was her, and she often wept there for it was so rare to hear her own music. Division between her and river was pointless, for her turbulent melodies carried an imprint of her being so complete that measuring every water molecule would tell you her cherished memories, burning hopes, and favorite ice cream flavor. So, solitude's comforts were what she expected as she brushed aside the branches overlooking the stream. Instead, there he sat in a concert with the swaying leaves, splashing a song she recognized as inviting all who wished to share joy and pain. In the river's flow, they harmonized.



SANDRA NING | *kid, you're a star* | Watercolor

ZOFIA KACZMAREK

Contradance

Some beginnings are tentative.
Hesitant steps onto nearly frozen ice,
a gentle hand and the soothing stroke
 of a thumb over knuckles
the quiet affirmation of presences acknowledged
 presences felt; presents valued
fingers kneading in, out; together, apart
rolling our weight around
trading tensions and smoothing lumps:
 this round of introductions
 is unspoken.

Some begin eagerly,
remembering familiar ground
hills and fields of adventures past
recalling the feel of turns, rises, and dips
 beneath bare feet
rediscovering comfortable nooks:
 the dip of the back
 the curve of a neck, held by gentle fingers
 the warmth of a cheek—

then hands find hands
feet take their places
boundaries softly melt
and an axis forms
 a resting place
 the tip of a spinning top
precarious,
 yet safe.

Around we swirl,
 dart apart,
 follow the current;
twirling through the eddies
 then, gliding back,
 catch!
re-form that fragile axis
eyes soft and noticeably present
a smile mirrored back

Or,
eyes closed
heads inclined, a warm embrace
soft breath on my neck
the stable, rhythmic spinning
keeping time with my heartbeat
and the one echoing back in my arms

But the violin cannot sing forever.
No season lasts beyond its time.
At its last sigh, the ice melts
and we walk back to solid ground
the moment disappearing behind us.

RANJANA KISHORE

The Night Goddess

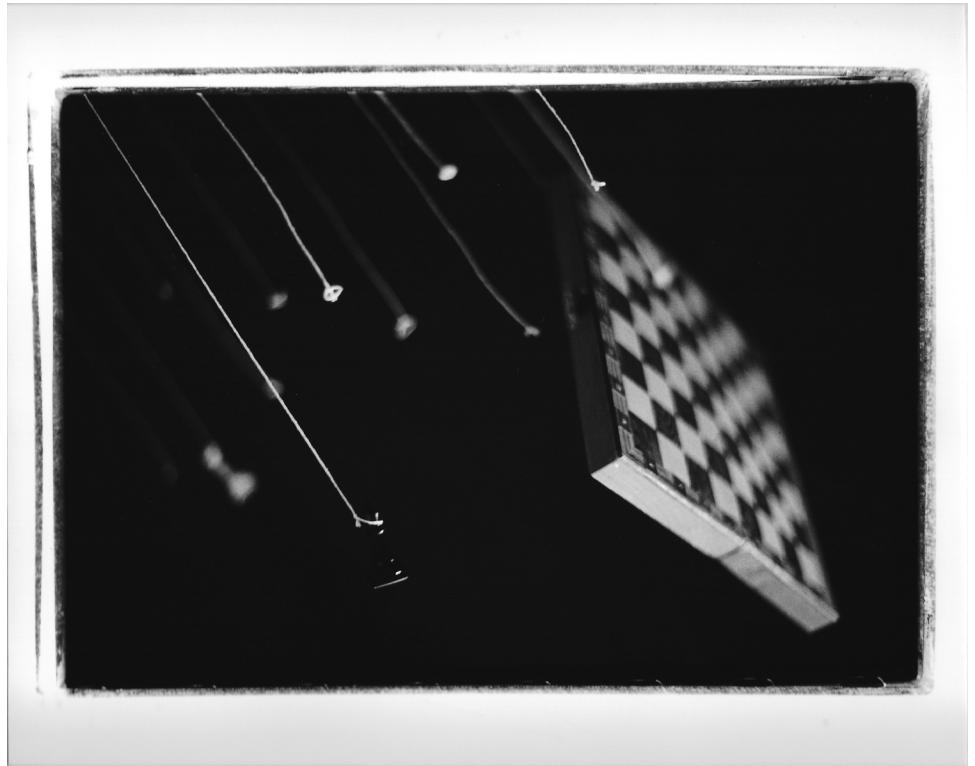
In a night-filled courtyard
a chant
of rustling leaves rises
like a long forgotten ghost
where cold jagged stone
and sap-filled wood promise to stand sentinel
sits the Goddess carved in black stone
watchful and knowing.

The hopeful come to her
and when no one is watching
a star
makes a quick descent.

The serpent-flowers bloom in bursts
to adorn her
the echo of the bells cuts through time.

Yet when the dawn comes
there is only a struggling vine and bland stone.

But
in the night-soaked courtyard
sits the black stone Goddess
watchful and knowing
and waiting for those who will come.



ARTURO J MATEOS | The fallen queen | Silver Gelatin Photography

ORIEL HUMES

In the Rose Garden

Don't give to me a perfect scarlet rose,
Hardly opened and devoid of thorns,
It tells me nothing new of love,
Please, give to me a flower I can feel.

Friendship, beauty, these are things I feel,
But you lost me in the garden when you spoke of love.
A brilliant world of Technicolor roses,
For all it is, I see only the thorns.

And oh, how you spoke to me about the thorns,
And brilliant hues you found among the roses!
So I felt sorrow for things never mine to feel,
My tongue not built to savor tastes of love.

Perhaps I cannot understand your love,
And blunder still at all the shades you feel.
And you could say I'm selfish for these thorns,
But I've known beauty other than a rose.

RANJANA KISHORE

Walk in the City

In the city, where minor characters play God
Faceless concrete beckons
As evening shadows lay entwined on the sidewalk
Where blue despair and loud graffiti
Have stalked many a prey
Forced to seek shelter
In hostile doorways.

Neon-bathed faces blend and blur
Whispers
Carried by a breeze reach startled ears
Swallowed by blaring horns.

Desire peaks and falls
Changing color with the traffic lights.

When evening comes, the painted layers peel
Ground to dust beneath last year's fashionable shoes
Mannequins wink and smile through forbidding glass
And the wind is suddenly cold
Like a smile that does not reach the eyes.



JINGXIN LIANG | Underneath | Digital Photography

RACHAEL KUINTZLE

Insomnia

On a flat sidewalk, he flows downhill, pulled toward his apartment after fourteen hours in lab. Fingers on swinging arms slice through forgettably ambient air. Agitation hums an off-tune melody, familiar. The sounds of night fauna pull a U-turn in his ear canal to avoid the traffic jam in his brain. Each heartbeat is a screeching stroke of a violin bow—too soft, or else too hard.

On autopilot, the front door unlocks and opens, teeth are brushed and clothes discarded, while his mind scans one sentence ten times, without comprehension.

Entropy dominates mind and body. His arms and legs explore conformational space, searching futilely for a comfortable arrangement on the bed. Through the open window, moonlight makes his head another moon, his face waxing gibbous with twice-borrowed light, denting pillowspace in its orbit around a planet of a thousand thoughts, falling endlessly. He embraces anxiety with skeleton arms and stands the worry nightwatch.

NETGIE LAGUERRE

An Incomplete Thought

The incarnate of a thought without substance,

A permanent dawdle has been set on its life.

The tune of its muse has been set from allegro to grave.

A daze versus a Dream

It's an existence that held meaning, but is now a vacancy awaiting attention.

On its own, there's no complete expression.

With others, it's a replica, a parasite lacking identity.

When will it become a free thought?

A burst of intuition,

an instance of genius welcomed by the future.

Unafraind of expression,

unfearful of its emotions and impulses,

Content from being itself.

Worthy of being exposed to all,

Because it is an entity with meaning.

Until then, sleep becomes a sweet peaceful death,
for this thought that will be forgotten.



CHLOE HSU | A Portrait of the Artist as a Shadow | Digital Photography

Growth

I'd like to say that I didn't choose to be here. I'd like to feel their lakes of love and lives of leisure.

But that is not the path chosen for me.

My eyes are blurry; through the tears I see the ribbons of red carefully encircle the entrails of my past. The package is pretty, but if all gifts globally were so carelessly hacked together then birthdays would be a cause for depression, not levity.

Mine were not, of course. So carefully put together, almost as though I was meant to forget that I was aging. The irony, of course, lay in the futility of the endeavor. I was older now than she could have ever imagined me to be. My journey through death and hell had grayed my hair and folded my face, assembling an origami so horrifying the Japanese would have refused to recognize it as such.

But the fact that she was gone no longer bothered me. While she had done a damn fine job weaving the folds of my character, she was old and I was an accident. Neither of us wanted the other. He, however, was a different story. While she was a mistake in denial he was an iron will. A mask forged of fortitude and emblazoned with steel.

He was a good brother. While we shared no bond in blood, we were related by history. We found him under the overpass; quite literally the troll under the bridge, begging for a toll to pay for his next meal. No one paid of course. Humans are funny like that. Hunger among our own is a tragedy. Among others, it is retribution.

I took a liking to him in grade school. While I was timid and shy, he was brave and strong. A strong thief, perhaps, but I needed food. He provided for me and I, in return, was the pawn of his game, a young face to be exploited in the busy cities. He was my first ghost. The first of many voices, engaging in a shouting match so loud I would eventually be convinced I had "schizophrenia" or "multiple personality disorder."

Of course I had multiple personalities. I had to make up for the ones that were taken away from me.

When I met her many years later, she would tell me he was my angel, that his wings shielded me from the thunderstorms of bullets. I don't know if that's true. But the way she whispered it in my ear gave me the confidence to scowl in the face of tragedy and the passion to light a thousand suns. And so I believed her.

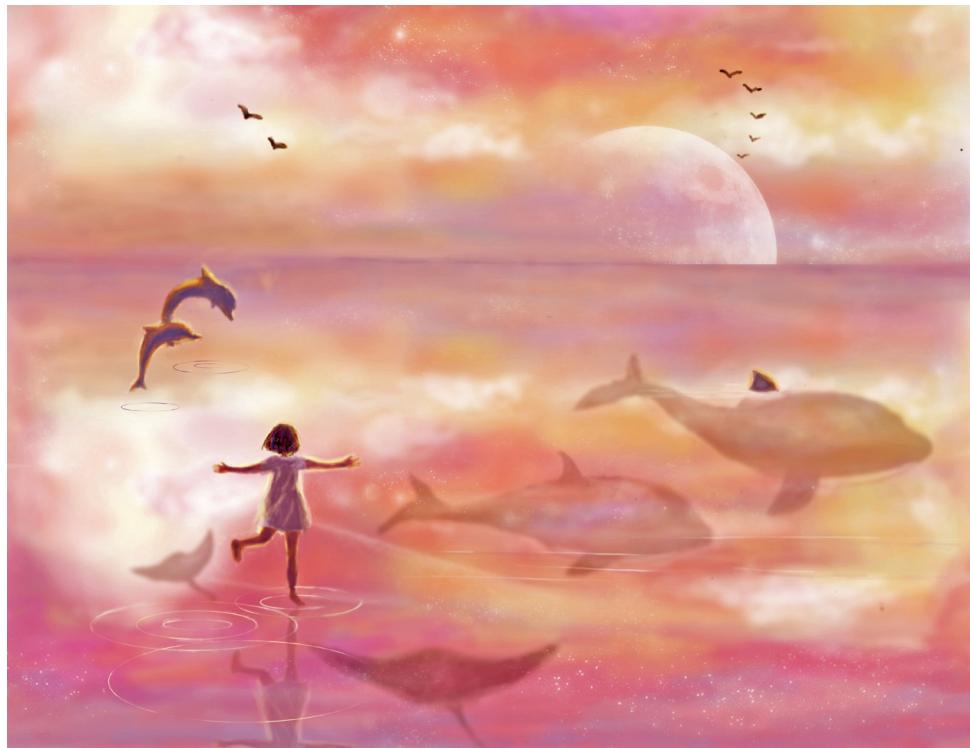
We were the north and south winds, mild mannered breezes that combined and erupted into a tornado of passion maintained by love and united by a ring. And right when the ring began to stretch, a new life brought us closer than ever.

An interesting note on angels: their wings are only broad enough to protect one individual.

An interesting note on fetuses: they can survive for a painful few minutes in the absence of oxygen.

To many, I seem like the lucky one. My youth was wrapped in gifts, my adolescence in admiration, and my adulthood in love. And so I survived. But while there may be glory in survival, there is no peace.

For none of my companions survived with me.



LINGHUI WANG | Dream | Digital Art

POETRY

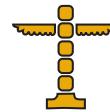
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