



TOTEM



2018

TOTEM

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DREW SCHÄFFER

Why Not Degas?

No, no, not like that! First you come rushing in from the rain, sling off your overcoat, and make yourself a hot toddy: now you open the magazine to my story with your cat purring by your side. I get it—you want to be comfortable—but really? I should’ve learned by now that you can’t expect much from a reader. After all, it’s not like consulting the *I Ching* or your daily horoscope would have told you that you should not be reading this story right now.

As a writer it’s always been difficult for me to give up control of my work. Scarcely have I twisted a few sensations—the spacious freedom of bicycling, a dead friend’s smile, the tightening in my chest when that one girl passes—into the straitjacket of grammatical form than a publisher swoops in and puts it in a magazine with a still life from the Dutch Golden Age on its cover. I don’t know anything about the Netherlands! Weren’t they owned by the Spanish then anyway? The painting shows a leg of cured ham on a platter, some flat bagel-like loaves, three wheels of cheese, and a silver ewer the painter put in probably just to show how prosperous his patron was: nothing to do with this story. But hell, if you’re not a subscriber you probably even chose this magazine over the others in the bookstore—all with monochromatic covers set in stern sans-serif—exactly for a night like this, with your cat and your damned hot toddy (with nutmeg, even!), to curl up with something domestic, familiar, quaint.

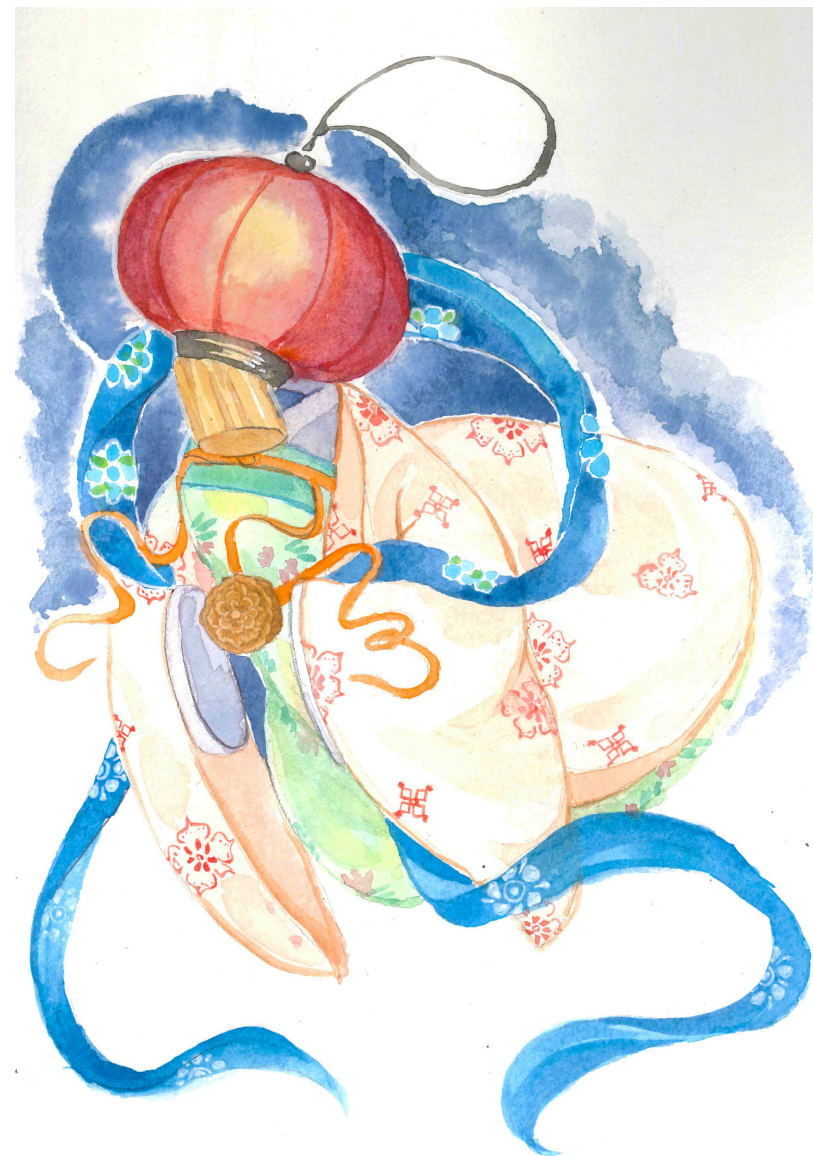
There’s another painting I know that would have gone perfectly with this story. I saw it in some big-city museum in my twenties, but it’s stuck with me. It shows a ballerina in blue practicing in her studio, but, her head bowed in concentration, she withholds her face from the viewer’s gaze. Her figure is maintained only by frail wisps of black at the tutu’s edge: you can’t tell whether the painter is trying to conjure the vague form of his desire or rather build a bulwark against memories’ flow toward the void. I remember now: Degas, that’s the painter. Why not Degas?

The reason I’m so worked up is because this wasn’t supposed to be a night for us to slink together in an invertebrate slump like two opioid addicts: we were supposed to unite in exultation of that human truth common to us all. There are stories for fuzzy nights like tonight, stories that I myself have written, even, but this is not one of them.

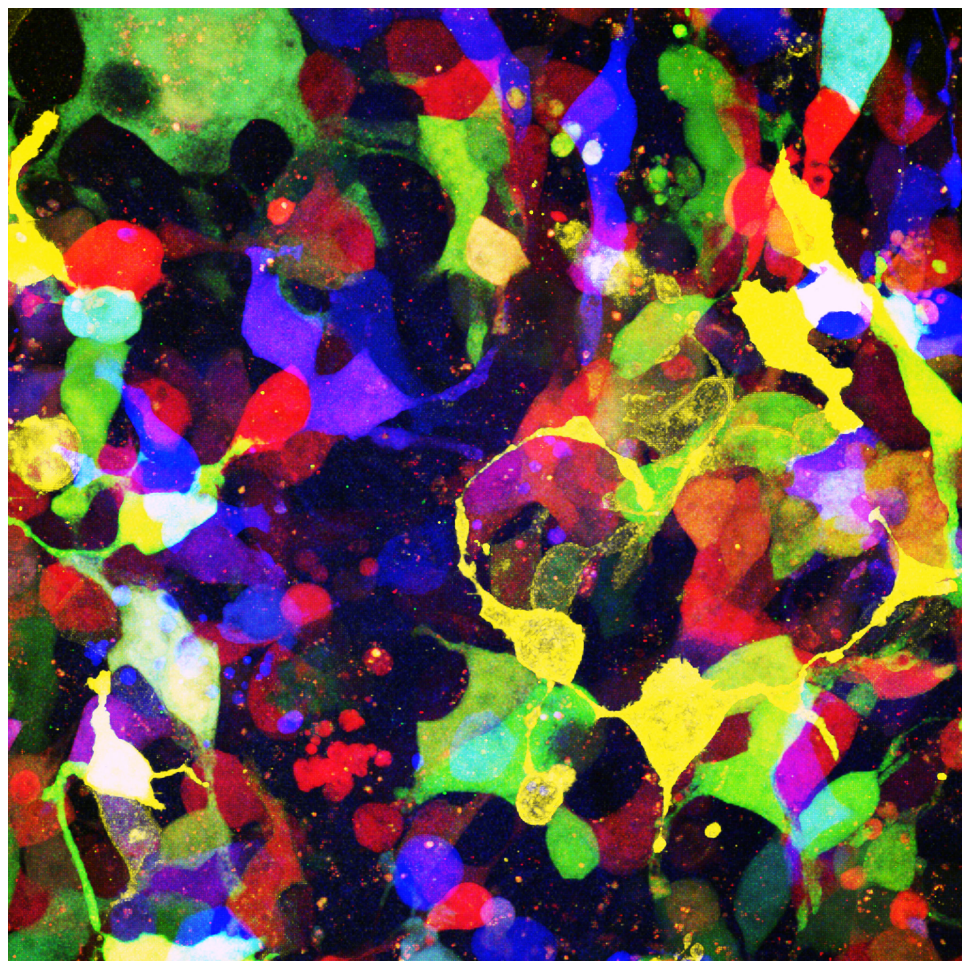
Let me tell you how today was supposed to go. Waking up a few minutes before your alarm, you notice a portent: the return of a hummingbird who yearly graces your planter box, or a low sun projecting a branch’s aquatic sway onto your wall. Wordlessly, you realize that today is a special day, though a pleasant but unexciting morning prolongs your expectation. Around five o’clock you run into the girl from your Italian class: her eyes aren’t just brown as they seem from a distance but green and amber too. *Ci prendiamo un caffè?* you inquire. *Con piacere*, she smiles, and together you walk to the coffee shop. Lightly, clearly, you walk home, and on the way you glimpse a spider web catching the wind like a kite: only then do you read my story. Tonight, though, you have other plans, or maybe it’s fate that does, but in any case I hope this story meets you again. Until then, enjoy your hot toddy.



SANDRA NING | Dive | Watercolor



SANDRA NING | Ghost of Lunar New Years Past | Watercolor



RAJIB SCHUBERT | Nature's Renoir | Microscopy

PETER BUHLER

The Great Fire Balloon Migration

A garden variety Saturday morning in Providence. The sophisticated chatter of National Public Radio buzzed in the background. I was probably eating cereal at a tike-sized table. The table was probably clogged by matchbox-car rush hour. I was probably four. It was certainly sunny.

The lot next to us was empty. I later learned that, decades earlier, it had once housed a fraternity, until the wife of a two-doors-down Brown professor simply could not tolerate the earthy sounds of rock n' roll and beer swilling any longer. The professor bought the property and buried the house in its foundations for their wedding anniversary. That's why the land was so lumpy and treacherous for my little ankles.

But I digress. The point is this, that the picture windows of my childhood kitchen had a sweeping, unobstructed view of the sky. A view that was about to grant me an immaculately magical experience.

A dot, then two, then three. They flew in a great streamer across the sky. Plaid and polka dotted, pinstriped and paisley they came. Right past the picture window and straight over the breakfast table they came. It was great dollops of rainbow, a parade of ice cream, an endless river of bubbles. It was the great fire balloon migration.

Our house had a balcony. I ran to it and lay on my back, watching the wizardry float by for hours. I had never seen a hot air balloon before in my life. The wondrous beauty of this passing herd of gentle sky giants filled me with the deepest kind of inexpressible joy.

The coming weeks were filled with the burden of that joy, a desperate expectation that the balloons would return. Every morning I awoke with excitement to gaze at the horizon with hopeful disappointment. I checked the sky involuntarily throughout the day. I felt antsy indoors without a window. Surely they would return.

Years passed. I finally accepted they would never return. I suppose, even if they did, they could not supply that same novel wonderment. But my ever-hopeful human heart is unperturbed, filled with the flickering expectation that once again a bold and surprising *something* will appear to restore that visceral beauty. What great yearning grips me: the hope of recapturing the feeling of the fire balloons.

JULIETTE HU & NOELLE DAVIS
Untitled

I want to drink a
cup of orange juice and
taste the golden sunset



MADELYN WANG | Storm at Reynisfjara | Digital photography

AMANDA LI
Sooty Earth

Chuck stands
In a dusty stream of muted sunlight
Filtering from the cracked plaster ceiling.
Around him, scattered in haphazard piles,
Lie mops in buckets of sludge, half of Juliet's balcony, and the severed wings
Of twenty-seven paper-mâché parrots.

His name is not really Chuck, of course.
The pudgy janitor with sagging jowls calls him that
Because on their last day
The Class of 1976 chucked him off the roof
In some valiant effort to leave their mark.
That was back when he lived in a display case
And his helmet lacked its seventy-seven stripes of rust.

On a dismal Monday morning,
After a forty-year summer break,
Chuck is heaved through the half-rotten doorway,
Dragged past empty classrooms,
And installed on a golden pedestal behind flimsy velvet rope.
As the kids trickle in they rub sleep from their eyes and stare,
Openmouthed, at his creaking plates of steel.

He must have been a knight, they whisper.
He fought bearded barbarians and ripped five thousand souls
From their shells with ruthless abandon.
His breastplate was slashed by enemy spears
And stamped by rogue horses' hooves.

Maybe he was a demon in disguise, some say.
He rode wild tempests and skewered bloody sunrises with his sword.
When seized by an artistic fever
He carved up the countryside
Into gross gouges of earthy gore.

No, he was just a man, others claim.
Too small for his armor, he was drafted out of the fields
To dance on a king's deadly chessboard
While three generations waited for him to come home.
By the time he returned, there might have only been two.

As the stream of students trickles past,
Their fingers scrub Chuck's shield to gleaming.
He watches a generation of children come and go,
And another, and another, and another.
He endures fluorescent lights, security cameras, and fifteen polishings,
And all the while the faces change, but the expressions never do.

Every year, the mouths gape anew, and Chuck is reborn.
He becomes Rusty, and Emily, and George.
The janitor's great-great-grandson clangs his visor shut,
But that doesn't stop the ensuing wars from reaching his eyes
While he stands idle, joints full of want but not enough grease.
Eventually, the stream runs dry and the ceiling closes in.

He returns to the sooty earth
And the plaster above him splits wide
So the yawning maw of night can swallow him whole.
Then the day spits him out, and the night takes another bite,
And the day, and the night, and the day, and the night,
And he, too,
Crumbles to dust.



ROSITA FU | Jump for the Masses | Digital photography

VICKI WING-KATE
Boomerang Butterfly

Boomerang butterfly
 Sent with an echoing question
 Flies back with the answer
 Just be patient with me
 And I can give you the key
 I sing to the birds
 Awarded silently
 They fly forward only
 Except for the hummingbird
 Except for the humming angel
 I went into shock when you
 Asked me a question
 I couldn't reply
 I answered with a lie
 To cover up the truth
 You'll know why
 I held your black ring
 I cry inside
 I've lost it
 I sing
 Just wait
 I'll find everything in my mind
 My voice, my lock, my key
 Love me no differently
 Treat me with a laugh
 And I can go on like always
 With my golden jade
 I don't care what you give me
 Because you gave me a name
 The humming angel
 Boomerang butterfly

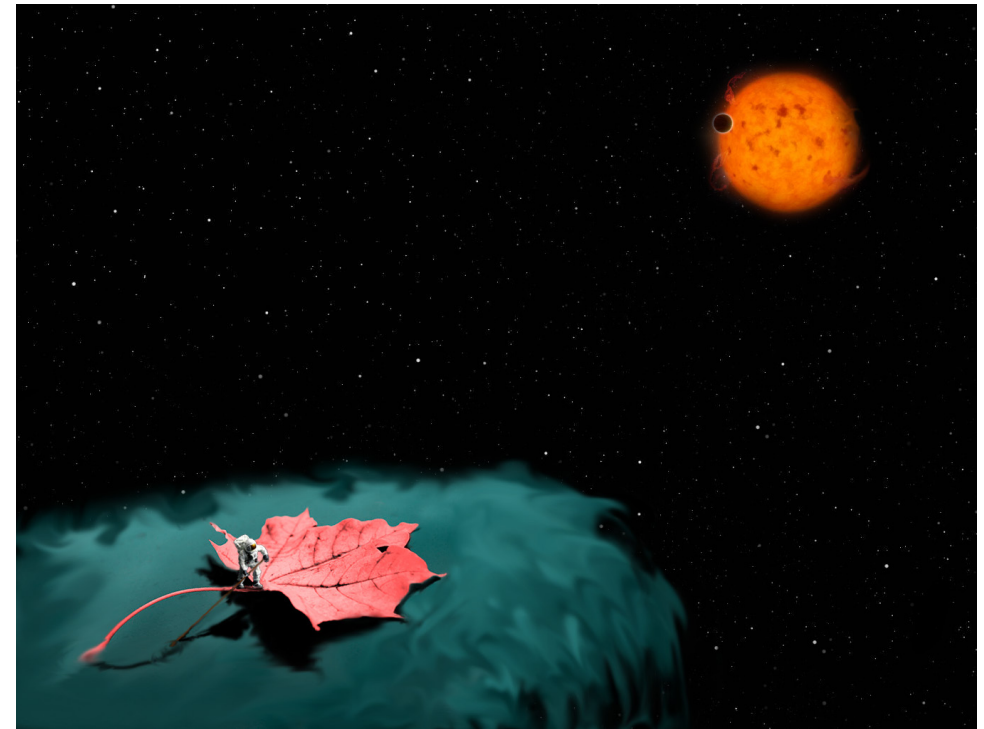
RANJANA KISHORE
The Storm

Today, on the lake a glint, like gray steel
Leaves huddle and whisper of now and then

Slanting rain starts to fall
Easy and light

The green branches wave accusing fingers
At the rust brown train sliding past

And the road dips
like a plunge of heart.



PETER BUHLER | Adrift | Digital art



JESSICA DU LI | Rose | Digital art



JESSICA DU LI | Summoning Ritual | Digital art

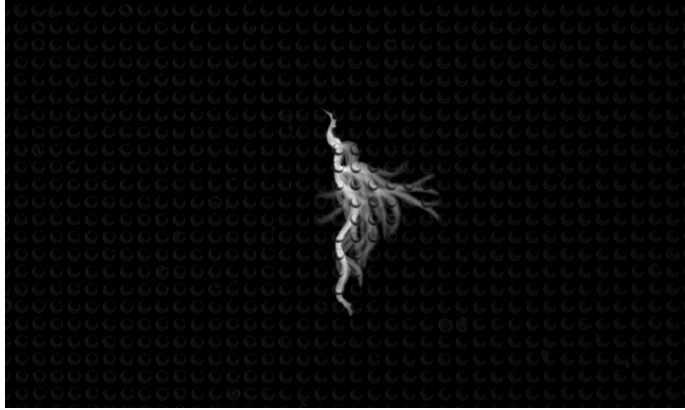
AMANDA LI

I'll Tell You When I'm Hammered (Keep Count)

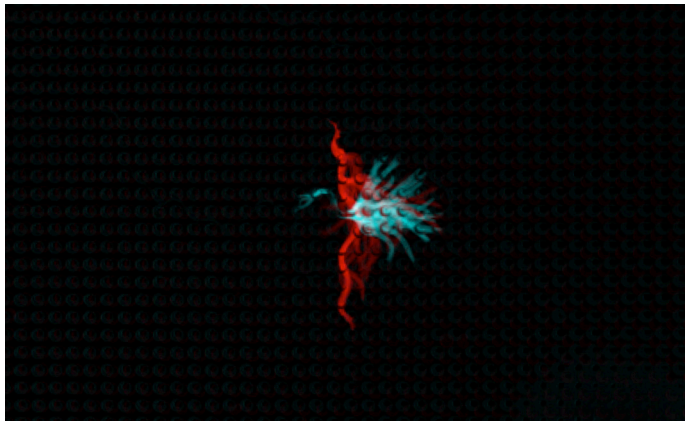
1. Sometimes I feel like drowning in my own head.
When the alarm rings and the landlord knocks and the traffic
Just. Won't. Move.
I can swim, I tell myself.
I can breathe underwater.
I can last long enough to see the blackness supernova into sparks of red.
I can last long enough.
2. The weather here is just so abysmal,
you know.
How many days
in a row
have we been deprived of blue skies and white clouds?
I really need the heavens to stop being so
depressed
so I can stop too.
3. Our souls are sustained
by the light of dead stars, so
does that mean
that we when lean our heads back
and crane our necks towards the sky,
we are being watered by ashes?
4. I like you. Maybe not
exactly in the way you want to be liked, but
I like you. Maybe not
enough to say at any time other than 2am
and any place other than here,
where the obsidian sky can swallow me whole
if your silence doesn't do the trick.
5. Are we all just products of some malicious god's
fantasy? How does the world even work
Where do thoughts come from
How can I be sure that I am real? Maybe the
natural motion of the world is meant to
rock us to sleep
and dreams are when we actually come
to life
Please
I want to come to life.
6. I want to dance
My heart is made of music and its beats
pump blood through my veins in a never-ending crescendo
louder Louder LOUDER until
it stops
7. Sometimes I think
about falling into the abyss
and what happens after the music stops
pulsing
Does everyone rewind or fast-forward to
their prime selves or just stay
the age they died
because if so I want to
die young
But what happens to tiny babies and
toddlers on unsteady feet
Do they ever learn how to walk
or does the never-ending tide of time
just bear them on until they reach
the next life
8. How can I justify
to myself something that
all the greatest minds
in science cannot explain
to my satisfaction
What is the point of
what I can do what
I can say what I can
be when everything will die
and the murals on the walls become grains of
dust
scattering in the imploding universe
because empty space is so massive and
I am
so
small
9. It terrifies me
that when I die, my obituary
might not mention how much
I loved you.

JAMES LEE & PEI-YIN SHIH

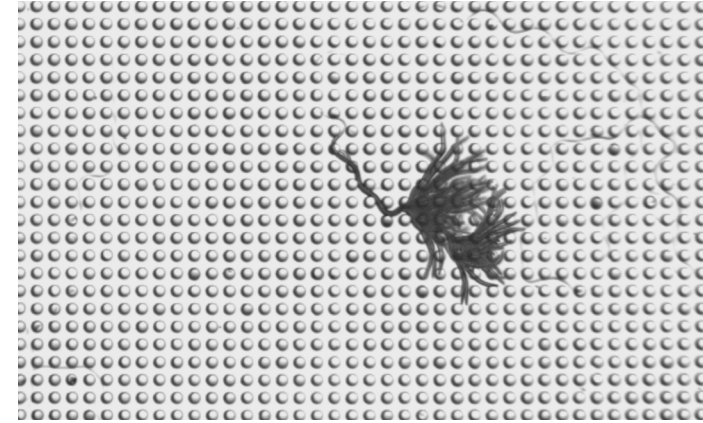
Kimagure



一心千針



気紛れ



*Passion is where your heart returns to
Over the long course of time
It doesn't even have to be
That intense of a feeling*

Caenorhabditis elegans roundworms can respond to environmental stress by entering into a spore-like larval stage. These larvae acquire new behaviors that allow them to exploit larger animals as "taxis" to improved environments. In the Sternberg lab, we have taken time-lapse images of one such behavior where the roundworm stands on its tail and waves its body to try to attach onto passing animals.

These images capture a capriciousness, and a quiet sense of struggle, that seemed familiar to me. The images form a series titled "Kimagure," a Japanese term that translates to "capriciousness of the heart."

ANDREW CHAN

A Poem About Freshman Chemistry

I'm not in love with you;
I'm in love with chemistry.

Tan, cream-walled lab
the same *drab color* of the lecturer's voice.

My axons firing like a Bunsen burner,
heart lit red like a strontium methane flame,
while *my mind is decomposing* like a
metal hydrate.

The white chalk writing is on the blackboard already telling me
what I'm about to do wrong.

I never wanted to be in this lab,
but
it's 7:59 AM
and *I may never leave.*

Liquid nitrogen chill on the soul,
24A Power supply to the lungs.

Deep breath in and out.
Ammeter measures the current of my veins
but
it doesn't register.

I have a confession:
I don't know what linear sweep voltammetry is and frankly
I don't give a damn.

The perfume of chemicals engulfs my lungs.
One solution at a time.
Pour,
swirl,
test,
repeat.
One solution
at a time.

Every precipitate formed has the same color of emptiness
but
at least my boiling emotions can be calmed down by calcium carbonate
stones in a Pyrex beaker.

Hey girl,
you should come with a precautionary statement P305
because it's dangerous for me to have
you
in my
eyes.

My head spins like a vortex mixer that has no ability to turn off.
The music quietly played in the background makes my soul vibrate at the
rate of my Titanium Dioxide solution in a sonicator.

And every lyric is a drop of
acetone
thinning my emotional woes and melting the plastic guard around my heart.
with
Every note breaking down my organic molecules in
diethyl ether
with
a mild danger to explode.

I don't want to be a chemist when I'm older.
but
for now I play god to water soluble molecules in dark brown containers.
I mix ingredients like emotions
I pipette my feelings into vials sealed by
wax parafilm,
record the way they look,
and lock them in a dark grey lab cabinet
with a 4-colored diamond warning label.

I bury my chemistry in the pages of a college ruled lab notebook
marked on every single crisp white page with a felt tip black pen
where I *sign my integrity.*

the professor must be my self-
confidence
because every time I need him
he seems to magically
disappear.

I would melt in your gaze like a gummy bear in
potassium perchlorate
solution
but
I blew up a lightbulb in high school
Biology class because
I love to watch things burn.

I want to dispose of my problems in a red plastic waste container
but
mine is already full.

My heart was an acid base titration flushed a little rose for my
Phenolphthalein indicator;
I used to consume feelings like disposable gloves
and now
my boxes are all empty.

You are a nitrate ion, I am a nitrite.
Your resonance means that you're little more stable than me,
but
we're still one and the same.

So
I look across the well-ventilated tan room
but
I don't talk to you because
I'm afraid of basic solutions
but
I'm ever more afraid of acidic ones.
and
even that doesn't change
the potentiostat shock
to my heart.

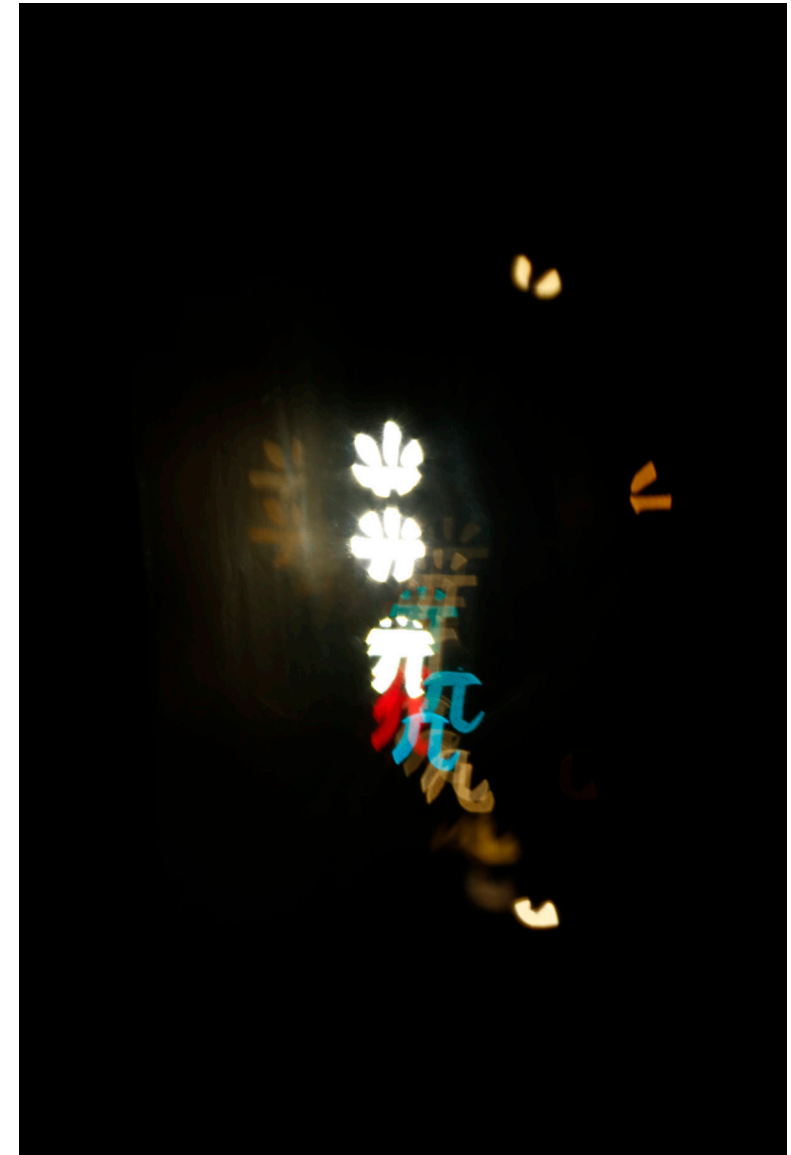
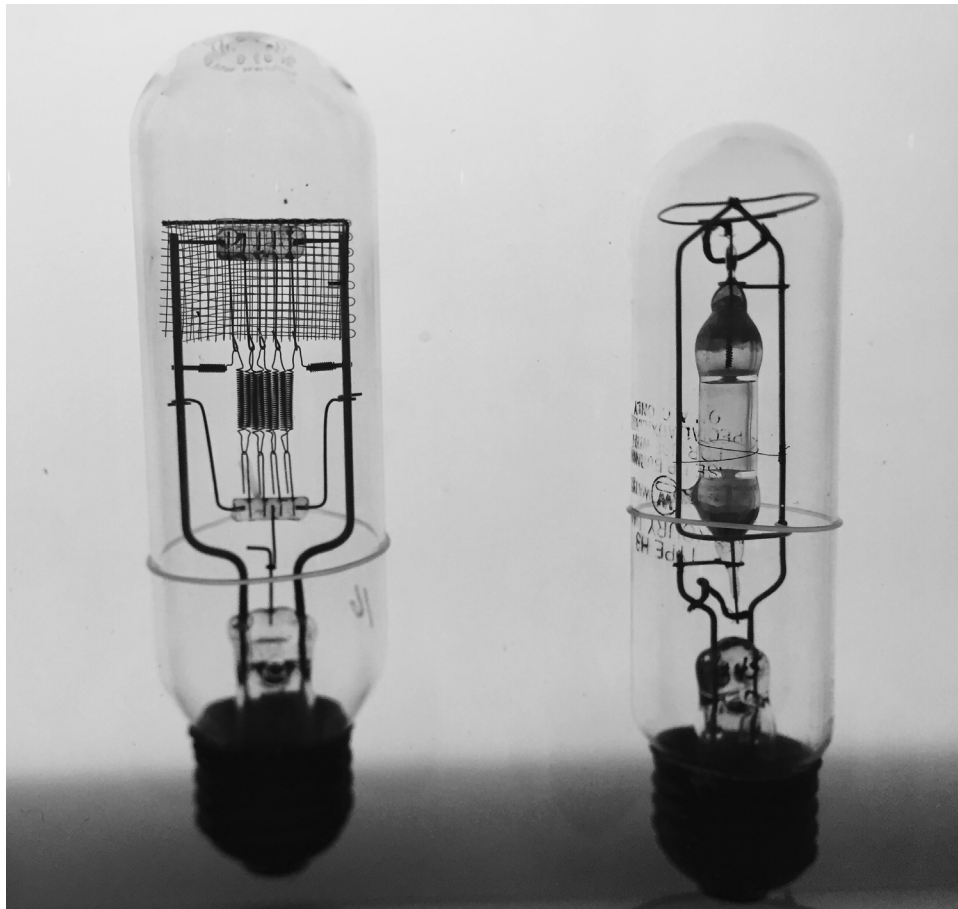
Because even at the end of a lab period I still can't understand how this damn
experiment
works,
And because, like any good love at first sight, you and I had
chemistry.



ELLEN CHUAN | Burano | Digital photography

NEYMIKA JAIN & ROSITA FU
BURNT OUT

The incandescent
Tungsten - light and fire to life.
Till heat shatters glass.



VICKI WING-KATE | Into the Light | Digital Photography

TIMOTHY LIU

Fishing With Dynamite

Crystals of frozen tea clung to Zhong's mustache. He licked his lips, melting the flavored ice and sending a hint of taste into his mouth. Even in the early spring the temperature was 10 below, in spite of the blinding sunlight that reflected mercilessly off the ice. But Zhong didn't mind the cold or the punishing bright light. He took a short, satisfying breath in. This beat digging coal out of a mine in Shanxi Province by a long shot. Zhong returned to the rugged, worn out drill bit that he was attending to. Through his thickly gloved hands, Zhong replaced the broken piece with a fresh drill bit with as much precision as his stiff hand would permit.

"You got that piece in yet? We've got another three to hit before sun-down!" reminded Mei Hwa, Zhong's supervisor, impatiently from the snowmobile. She had served with the Chinese Air Force for nearly a decade and was not someone to be tested. Even though the days were rapidly getting longer, staying out on the ice at night was rightfully frowned up. Captain Xin, who ran the base, had a strict rule that everyone be back in the dome twenty minutes before the sun went down. He wasn't actually a captain, but everyone listened to him anyways.

Zhong raised his head to yell an affirmative when a gust of wind blew a dinner plate sized shard of ice into the side of the drill. It smashed an exposed radio transmitter, blowing the parts across the ice like small black pebbles strewn against the otherwise flawless white. Zhong exchanged a look of exasperation with Mei Hwa. She started rummaging in the snowmobile's storage compartment, looking for a replacement. The other drills would have to wait until tomorrow. There really was no easy day on the ice.

The sun hung lazily near the horizon, preparing to dip below until the next day. It was an unrivaled blessing to see the sun again after a winter of darkness. Zhong and Mei Hwa zoomed back into the hanger that adjoined the domed base they called home. The modular structure stood on raised feet that made it easy to disassemble and move several kilometers inland every few months so it wouldn't be swept out to sea. In a sense, it was like methodically running on a treadmill. A crawling, icy treadmill.



AMANDA LIN | Untitled | Digital photography

On the way to the mess hall, Zhong ran into several other women and men who worked at the base, all preparing for dinner. The tunnels they walked through between the base's domes were low semicircles, gently lit blue by the setting sun shining between the girder structure that supported them. The workers were separated by thousands of miles from their actual families, that is if they had any family at all. It made the communal meal, which Captain Xin insisted upon but that everyone agreed to regardless, all the more important.

"Hey Dan, how's it going out there?" Zhong called to a seismologist that appeared around a corridor. Like a few others at the base, Dan had been educated in the United States and picked up an English name that he liked to go by. As a seismologist who listened to the vibrations they put through the ice, Dan had no need to go out into the blistering cold. But he liked checking on the equipment in person, and his hefty build made him useful for lugging around equipment.

"That little devil Da Bing beat me in go on the way again! Can't understand how she does it; she's been training with the AI again I bet." Da Bing had also grown up in Shanxi like Zhong, except she worked at a giant state run steel mill before it was shut down for excessive pollution. Her name wasn't actually Da Bing, but she had picked up the nickname within days of joining the base. Dan paused to shake his head, "The sonics are singing, and we can hear them just fine on the other side. You got those boreholes finished yet?"

"We're almost done, but Zhong let one of the transponders get smashed by ice," interjected Mei Hwa with a smirk.

"How's this my fault?" demanded Zhong.

"I saw it all myself. If you had stood a meter to the right that ice would have broken your back instead of the transponder," taunted Mei Hwa.

Dan threw an arm around Zhong and shook him like a younger brother while the other workers nearby laughed. One of them mock shoved Zhong like a flying projectile. As if to remind them of the constant dangers, a salvo of snowy chunks crashed against the outside of the corridor, sending violent pings down the hall. One of the newer arrivals looked at the wall nervously, as if expecting the dreadful cold to wel-

come itself in and extinguish the cheery atmosphere. But the seasoned workers strode on to the mess hall without missing a step.

Like the rest of the rooms that made up the base, the mess hall was a geodesic dome that arched above the heads of the workers. A criss crossing network of hardened plastic gave the impression of being inside of a giant, lit up golf ball. Small plastic tables were neatly arranged in rows throughout most of the space, with a kitchen and a serving line jammed to the side. A bright red Chinese flag hung from the center, adding to the golden hue that basked the dining hall.

Zhong jostled into line with the rest of the workers. Work was picking up as the ships neared the coast, but the lengthening days had the men and women in good spirits. The drillers, seismologists, and other inhabitants of the state run base laughed and smiled as they greeted Eddie, the base's cook. Eddie had studied in Europe before joining the Chinese Navy and was well liked by the workers. The piles of rice and fish that he was heaping onto plates also helped his popularity.

At the end of dinner, Captain Xin sat on the back of his chair, elevating himself above the rest of the workers. He was a tough looking man with an iron exterior who unceasingly looked after the people who lived in the base. A scar across his face hinted at what he would do to anyone who threatened the base's safety. Captain Xin ran through a list of announcements followed by his usual reminder about safety protocols. Finally, Captain Xin raised his half empty glass of water. He always chose to close dinner with a reminder why they were here, at the bottom of the world thousands of miles from their home.

"Ràng Zhōngguó xiān hē." *Let China drink first.*

The workers all lifted their glasses and repeated the line before pausing for a moment. At the captain's cue, they emptied their cups in unison and replaced them onto the tables with a smattering of thuds.

A week later, Zhong stood idly in the base's operations control center watching the wide, beaten up screens. Two broken pink strips ran down the left side of the monitor, but the money to replace such nonessential equipment didn't exist. He and Mei Hwa had replaced the remaining bits several days earlier, and the drills had just reached their target depths less than 36 hours ago. As a drill operator Zhong's work was done, but he, like the other workers not directly involved,

liked watching the big finale. Eddie stood next to Zhong and looked at another screen, with arms crossed.

“Sonics still sounding good. All listeners are operating, and we have good connection with APS,” said Dan the seismologist. He had headphones clamped around his head and was watching two monitors intently.

APS stood for Antarctic Positioning System. This far down, the navigation satellites that the rest of the world depended on - Compass and the aging American GPS - didn't provide fine enough resolution. After the Antarctic Treaty expired nearly two decades ago, early oil prospectors set up a network of towers for providing more accurate location data. The oil drillers didn't stay, but their APS navigation towers were still maintained.

“Demo team, status,” barked Captain Xin.

“Status green, charges ready,” said the demolition supervisor.

“Recon?” queried the Captain.

“Three drones in position; feeds look good,” replied another voice.

The captain nodded to the demolition supervisor. “When you're ready.”

Several kilometers from the base where the ice met the sea, a volley of dynamite explosions shattered the calm morning. A cleanly cut rectangular seam suddenly appeared in the ice, as if a giant had stamped the edge of the ice with a massive cookie cutter. Along the newly formed fissure, a violent cloud of snow and ice shot into the blue skies and the choppy, turbulent seas, obscuring the view from the drones. A low groaning sound filled the air, like an angry monster painfully awakened from its sleep. The sound reverberated through the chilly Antarctic ice sheet and swept across the base several seconds later. With a great crash and a mighty wave, 100,000 tons of ice plunged into the water. The ice weighed as much as an aircraft carrier and yet could only supply Hong Kong, its final destination, with water for less than two hours worth of the city's consumption.

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ELLEN CHUAN | Hall of Mirrors | Digital art

ANONYMOUS
Untitled

tell me a story
not the fairytale
a real tale

where the princess and frog waltzed
to the tune of the moon
sucking on lemons
sweeter than honey

but the frog was just that
she left looking back
and lost mother's pearls
on the way to no home for dinner

she was found on the ground
after falling so fast
past shining faces
her eyes shut to stars high above
barely caught by the song
that coaxed the sun back to sky

she laughed
skin of tears tinged with fear
to think that love so blue
wasn't worth keeping
gone too soon
and so much was lost to be happy

she thought
what if
people were rich enough
to trade a carton of niceties
a dusty can of pleasantries
for one grain of sincerity
to exchange
for a warm cup of tea
between strangers

she saw
these strangers floating up
in giant balloons
as they twirled sipped their aged whine
clawing each other to be first
carefully spilling drops of pity and pain
thirsting to stain the dirt below

she dreamed
of spitting words out like seeds
to make people cry
and shake
and dance
and finally decide on the meaning of life

she ran
ran for forever
but the gold crumbled too soon
slipped like sand through her hands
the hands that built brick by brick
before it all shook and cracked
and down came her golden throne
cutting skin to pieces
and out slipped the whispering voices
faster try again not good enough

so how was that for a tale?
as real as could be

but how does it end?

well

she stopped
listened
turned back around
past the sign that warned
no wandering
and started to wonder

she built
a sturdy stool from the golden shards
to rest her restless scarred feet
returned to the stains in the dirt
where sweet sweet lemons sprouted
out from the seeds in the tainted ground
and she took those lemons
squeezed them into the warm tea
she bought with dusty cans and cartons
and offered tea to the hiding faceless
as balloons came gliding down

some drank
some didn't
but all remembered the invitation

she let lostlove leave
but kept the saving songs and memories
and never found those precious pearls
but found home
where she planted her stool
and drank her tea
and the frog undisguised took flight in a blur
left only a trail in the moonlight
as she soaked in strange mysteries around her

OLIVIA WILKINS & ALEXANDER SAUERS
Vom Bahnhof Wuppertal-Vohwinkel

Of all different tracks,
diversity is beauty.
This is my platform.





MICHELLE DAN | shiny bug | Watercolor

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