

WRITERS' BLOCK

Term One 2021/2022



WRITERS'
SOCIETY

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COVER PHOTO BY MARA DINU



Editorial

The stigma of creative blocks

We all have those strange days where nothing seems to work, nothing looks appealing, nothing is inspirational in any way. Like food, for example. It can be an art, right? You spend hours carefully following the most difficult vegan eggs with vegan cheese pie recipe measuring the quantities like a mad scientist, and then you look at it, it looks at you and no chemistry happens. You are not a mad scientist; you are just not in the mood for food.

Or let's think of visual arts, painting, drawing. You have all those ideas stuck in your head, piled there pressing on the inner dome of your skull so all you get is a headache and no artsy fartsy mood. This "not in the mood" idea can be stretched anywhere, actually. It somehow means that, at a particular time and space, your inner feelings, being them fantastic entities or, you know, neurotransmitters, they don't match the outer stimuli. So, you can't react to them, because that would be fake. We fake lots of things and I think this is the most astonishing paradox of this story - we are, in fact, not that good at faking our emotions, at least not in our actions or behaviour.

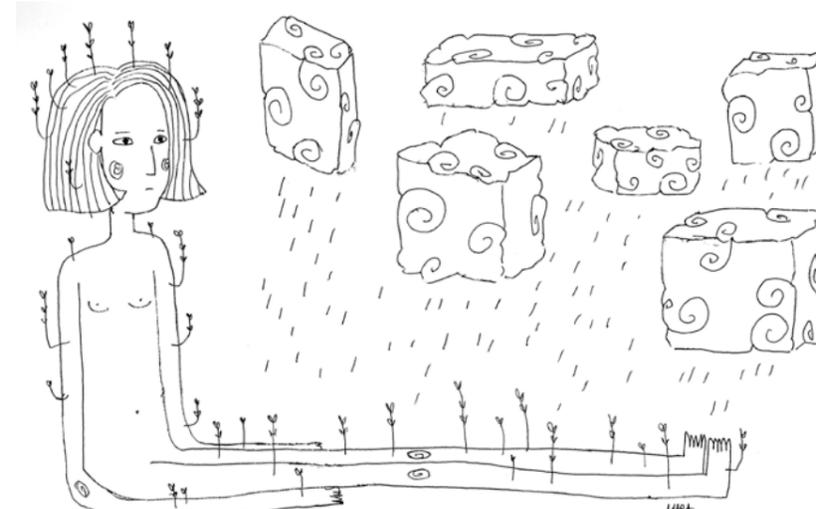
You pull a happy face, that tricks a few baristas at Pret, the cute girl from your course and maybe even a couple of friends. But you can't trick yourself - you still feel like shit underneath that smile full of lipstick and nothing else, not convincing enough to make you fall for it. Maybe Bojack Horseman was right when he said that if you keep telling yourself something, you will end

up believing it. But what is the point in doing so? Would you really rather live in the Matrix, which is just someone else's perfect fantasy, or would you keep living your personal reality, the one hidden deep inside to which only you have access?

Maybe this is art - sharing a little bit of that reality with the world. That's brave, really. Then what is a creative block? For me, it is a disconnection from myself while I sometimes get "too involved" in the outer reality. It can feel overwhelming, or like I am not productive enough, or that I am not doing anything, or that I can't feel myself in this mix of bones and muscle and skin. But that's just the social standards talking.

When writer's block happens, it doesn't mean anything - it just means that you are spending some time exploring other people's thoughts and adsorbing then processing whatever it is that is happening to you. It's neither bad, nor good. No extremes are good, you can't forget about yourself for the sake of others, but you can't hide within yourself either. I know a lot of people feel ashamed of experiencing this creative block, but it is okay not to concentrate that much on your thoughts from time to time. The world around also needs to settle in you, it's not just you adjusting to it. So, we can embrace the writer's block and trust our creative selves with sorting out the ball of realities orbiting around.

EDITOR IN CHIEF
MARA DINU



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Editorial Team



MARA DINU
EDITOR IN CHIEF
DTP, COVER PHOTO
ILLUSTRATOR & PHOTO

I play with DNA and cells, so I think our ideas of life are taken too seriously, maybe a change of perspective would help. Zadie Smith, Kundera and Agla-ja Veteranyi are mad geniuses.



CRISTINA ARAMA
SUB-EDITOR, ILLUSTRATOR

I'm in my second year of BA Comparative Literature and I dedicate my non-university reading time to Kurt Vonnegut, Hunter S. Thompson and Hito Steyerl. I often feel that freedom and a lack of direction are nearly synonymous states of being.



ANNA SHIRSHOVA
ILLUSTRATOR

My name is Anna, and I am a proud procrastinator of essays for my degree in Politics and International Relations. I enjoy making Spotify playlists, color coding tasks in my planner, and buying way too many candles. I also really like pigeons and baby goats.



CHRISTINE MARTIN
SUB-EDITOR

I am a second year sociology student originally from California.



KIERON GOH
SUB-EDITOR

"Art, the ability to make it, gives meaning to sadness that many aren't able to experience" - Anne With an E



SAM
SUB-EDITOR

Hi I'm Sam, a third year chemical engineer. I enjoy working out and sleep. Still waiting for Winds of Winter...



DYLAN GARCIA
PHOTOGRAPHER

Hi I'm Dylan. I enjoy film photography, and love finding interesting shots.



HOZEFA RAMGADWALA
SUB-EDITOR

Passionate literature tutor. Nature enthusiast. Keen to advance my professional abilities.



FRANCES CHASSLER
ILLUSTRATOR

Someday art will end capitalism.



ALANKRITA SINGH
PHOTOGRAPHER

I'm Alankrita, pursuing masters at IOE. I'm a law enforcement officer by profession and an artist/photographer by passion. People photography, stark light/shadow and geometry is what interests me as a photographer.



TARA MONJZEB
SUB-EDITOR

Literature student with a love for stickers, pastries, and Mary Oliver.



FRANCESCA PARROTTA
SUB-EDITOR

I'm Fran, a maths student with a passion for both numbers and words. I'm in my second year in the writers' soc committee and proud of cooperating to the realisation of this magazine.



SUPRAVO RAHMAN
SUB-EDITOR

Hi, I'm Supravo, a second-year undergraduate from Bangladesh. I am a big fan of sci-fi and fantasy, both as a reader and a writer. Feel free to talk to me about Discworld or Ghibli or any of that other stuff anytime (or if you need a reader for your story)!

NIVETHA NANDAKUMAR
SUB-EDITOR

MAXINE AVASADANOND
SUB-EDITOR

KAT STEEL
SUB-EDITOR

KHADIJA CHOUDHURY
SUB-EDITOR

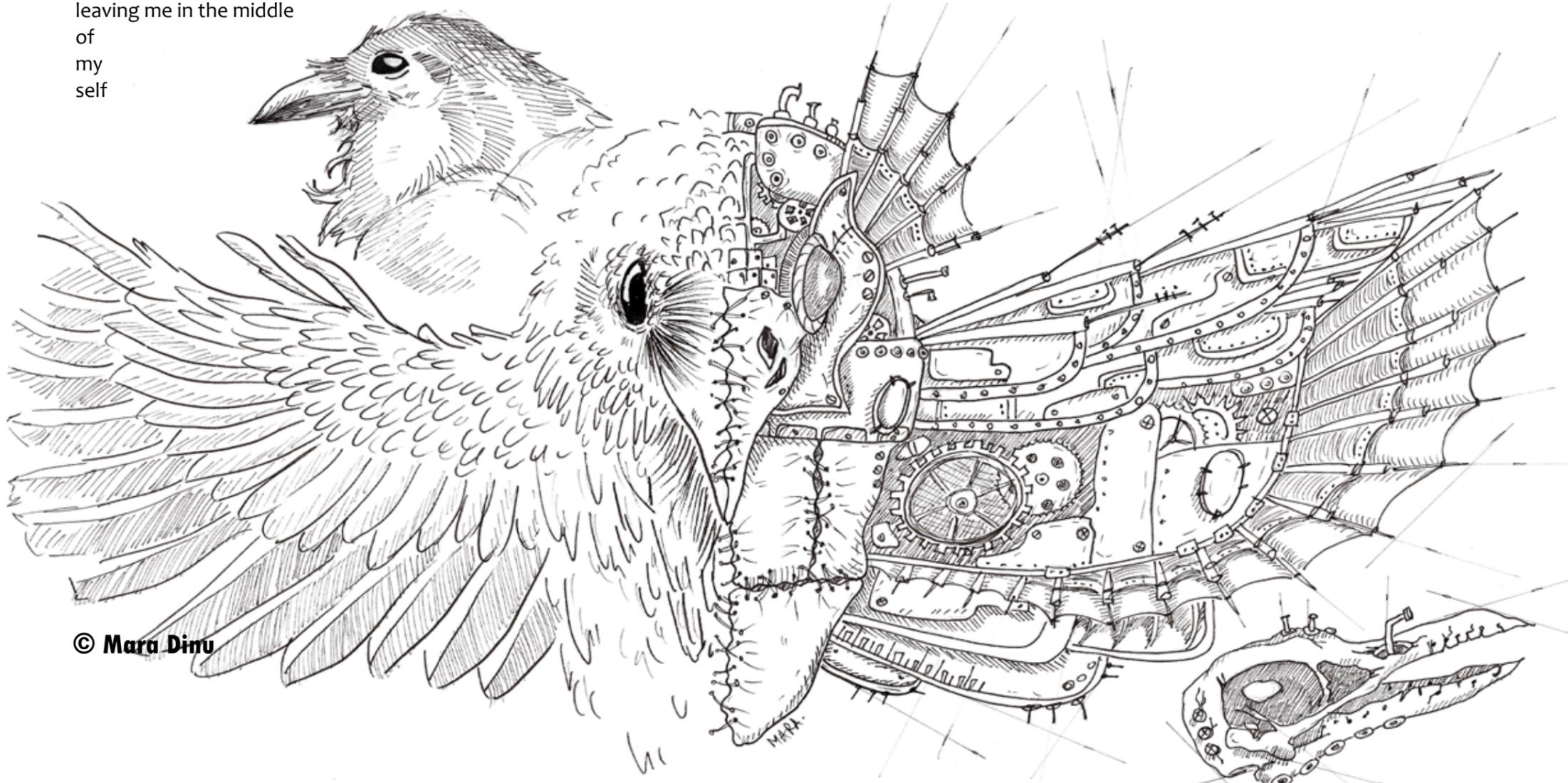


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POETRY

by Yasmina Bauly

after our first kiss a pair of wings started growing on my back
 progressively the skin was pierced by points of bone
 as they pushed through day after day it should've been excruciating
 but the pain just felt like a pleasant itch
 and slowly feathers grew
 you liked to run your mouth over their ends
 one day you kissed me for the last time
 and ripped them off one by one
 first pulling on the ends
 sending feathers flying
 then with extraordinary strength you wrenched them off at the stem
 I didn't scream when the flesh tore at the seam
 or when the blood dripped out of the open wounds
 onto the pillows and sheets
 you dropped them on the bed where I sat
 in a mess of angelic red and crimson white
 splinters of bone and remains of flesh
 sprouting irregularly on my back
 you walked out the door
 leaving me in the middle
 of
 my
 self



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The Dying Light by Eleanor Corney

all of this time
 i've repeated it like a mantra
 "i'm ready to give up"
 and each time i've expected
 the heavens to open up
 take me home
 and lay me to rest
 among the others.

i've scribbled enough notes
 thanking my parents
 reassuring my friends
 letting everyone know
 that it wasn't them.
 i had simply had enough
 i had 'given up'
 and they'd be
 free of me now.

but each evening
 i stare out of my window and
 remember when someone
 told me that i'm not alone
 when he told me
 that i'm loved
 when she told me
 that she'd never leave.

slowly the world
 regains colour - a masterpiece of a
 child
 with a scratchy paintbrush
 and piss-cheap paints.

each and every time
 i rip the notes to shreds
 during my sleepless nights
 and i think about greeting
 the morning sun with
 warmth and a smile

no matter how much the sun
 has been drenched in rain or
 frozen in the winter
 or covered by the menacing clouds
 the light never dies.

i'm clawing for the ropes
 and i'd do any fucking thing
 to survive in this world
 i have only ever
 wanted to escape.
 so yes, it's true
 i have lied to you all
 i'm not ready to give up
 or to give in to the darkness
 that blocks
 my windows.

Gunshot by Liu Sicong (Sam)

Someone shot herself in a dream
Image of pink and red sleeping on the desk
ahead

A woman pointing her forehead
The gun rises while I climb up
From the stairs I raise my head and
Complete the dream with my arrival

Office lady behind the desk
Without a hint undertake silence, work, and
suffer
The boundary of my dream
Within, I'm heading to friends from childhood
Only summoned by the gunshot and her death

A dream, where a suicide happened
Happened before other things happened again
Shall we give up our desire to play

Whispering, holding discussions
To witness, to respect
Weaving a dream about her death
Or can she be forgotten
In that dream
And suffer a one-time pain?

Inside a man happened the death of a strange
face
Confused when he awoke, when somewhere
The shadow of the underground scraping the
tunnel wall
Confused when he climbed the same stairs and
peeped above
Knew a new colleague and lived
Behind the same desk. He may feel the familiar
Desire
To own a gun, or
To hide in a stranger's dream

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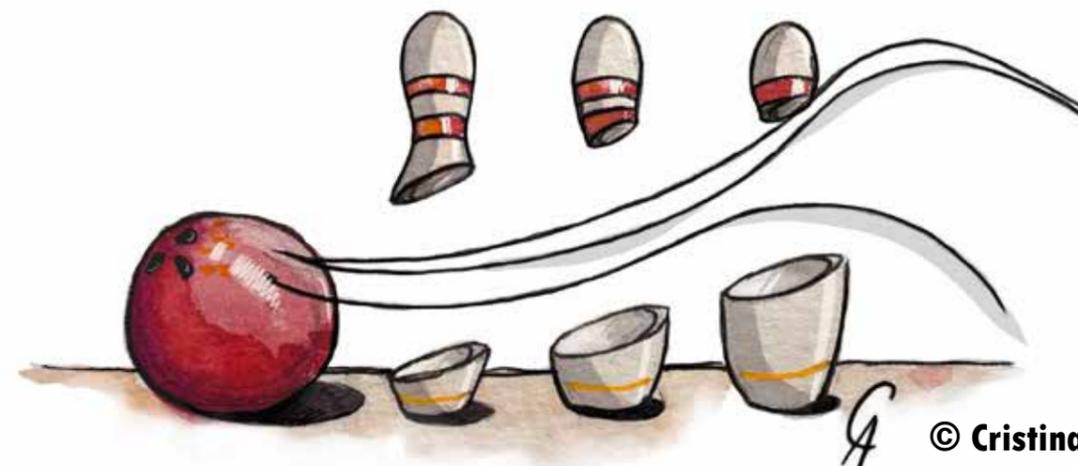
They call it *miss* in bowling by Lea Rauser

It smells old and
back then
I thought this smell belonged
to you and I held onto it

fragrance brands
like a dog
so I wouldn't lose my memories
I kept your scent with me
just to see
that it never belonged to
you
shared it
with the thrift shop down
and the new
old neighbour
across the road

Even the old boxes in the basement
store this scent
it's basic
basically belonging
to everything but you
you just wore it while you were still here
while you still were
back then
you borrowed it
like bowling shoes

they call it
miss
in bowling
when you knock over no pin.



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Indiana Jones by Catherine Leng

the gentle people
should all be
fossils.

underground
and hidden
away.

protected from
the messy outside

thick soil
shielding
heartbreak.

In the Countryside Where my Heart Lives by Tahira Siddiqi

In the countryside where my heart lives
is my manse, alone and nil,
peeping through foliage and moving fur
to welcome newcomers from within:

A retro brigade, infant-darlings and youth,
a stream of soul, spirited and good,
emanating and emulating all things couth,
deserting suburbia for real fruit.

California by Francesca Parrotta

My mother once said I am like California
because of the earthquakes
Because when people move to California
they must know what's at stake
they must make a pact with the fact
One day they might be on foot
and the day after thrown to the ground,
downed by a violent attack
they did not expect
One day blazing architecture in the sunlight,
in the fresh summer air
after one day nothing but despair
there is not one intact roof
after one day — ugh — after ten minutes
Because when people move to California
they must know their limits
they must build their houses
to be 100% smashproof
otherwise the earth will tremble,
and the bricks will crumble
and their dreams will get numbed
Have you ever been in the middle of a hurricane?
Have you ever felt that sorrow when everything
shatters
when your furniture clatters and does anything
matter
except the burning kiss of this pain?
And have you ever hoped there was no tomor-
row?
No future to weigh on you with its promise of
ashes
And have you ever doomed your construction
So at least when the earthquake will smash it
there would be nothing good for destruction?
Because when people move to California
they must account for this kind of interruption
they must know, they might never recover
Well, let me uncover
there could be another
way to live in this whirling river
called California (or, if you'd like, anxiety)
without resigning yourself to the quiver
to the shiver to the stutter to the shutter
of your mind
without resigning yourself to leave behind
all that once mattered
And when my mother

said I am like California
she also said the sunsets there are the most
beautiful ever
It's a question of healing, of dealing, of feeling,
of dyeing
your hair red in the middle,
of smiling despite the ground's wiggles...
We have never been to California, my mother
and I
And I am sure the earthquakes there
are not as bad as she described
that comforting me was her only intention
and the rest was invention
But now I am proud of my earthquakes
and next time the sky shakes
I will pronounce my vows
and ascend into the clouds
and they will be my wharf
so, when I'm ready
I will surf

Mouth of a fish by Cristina Arama

Fighting to keep my accent from slipping,
I'm keeping an intervertebral disk in place,
like my first girlfriend, whose knee cap slipped
and ligaments tore and she hasn't ridden a bike since.
Sometimes I miss her in German,
trying to soften words like pebbles
smoothed by freezing water
and I speak with the mouth of a stranger,
I speak with the mouth of a fish, until
sharp ribs turn to toothpicks
and I dig out words between my teeth.
I want to turn my knees into bicycles,
beg my vertebrae to hatch into birds,
pop pebbles like pills under a bright high lamp
as it blooms into a sun and floats up:
up into the wet sky of the night,
forever young and naive
and wishing for permanence,
wishing me to become a plum,
fresh-faced and blue. Bursting raspberries
with my tongue will make magenta spill
and canines turn lavender,
but when I think of lavender I think of her,
and the sidewalks that I trust
become slippery with absence



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October Soliloquy by Inkyoo Lee

halfway through autumn and still the sky hangs low

I tore all the unsent letters apart
but I didn't dare to set them on fire because deep down
perhaps I wanted to be understood
split into pieces like what the first philosophers wrote

I know that waiting is a predicament
but I'm certain someone will interpret my silence
as the only language compatible
with this miraculous world, cold and bitter as it is

because choice is not always a thing
an arid heart must live on without moisture
so I burn my letters and it seems
smoke is not enough to make the heavens weep

halfway through autumn and still the sky hangs low



Catch (TW: suicidal feelings)
by Kexin Huang

Losing a looming end when your safe screen of soft voice fell into a shattered knock on the door when they caught your keys of pending pills that you may use to lock yourself in eternity with your hands shielding it catching your secret of fading away when the panic waves of alcohol were dancing but not caught yet no hope to stay crawling up in a room of warmth when caught by night to move A&E never blinks at midnight nor do the noises when other lost souls were caught shouting in agony that may be louder than your heartbeats there was just a busy 'alright' and caught to move to lost places shattering more souls into moonlight and you were caught not to prove innocent for not being hurt yet and being pushed out to hurt with the shiny sharp word 'selfish' carved into your face and the glacial phrase of 'personal choice' repeatedly stirred your heart with despair so you were caught in the middle of the road away from screams of passers-by pushed by a mighty hand and caught in the corner incarcerated by streams of hands until a threat of handcuffs caught you back to nothing and nowhere when dead paper was signed not by you but by you getting caught when sitting with your own head caught you with limited space inside out even freedom doesn't understand how to catch a day when it is a surface of a random dream with some dirt of death decorated to scratch

Ape Fable
by Nivetha Nandakumar

Does the scapyard dog
remember the brain throb of wolves on the run
as he watches the pale moon move
across the quiet cosmos?

Do migrating geese,
steering themselves by the paw of the Great
Bear,
remember the heaviness of tuber-feathers
dusting their humped, landbound shoulders?

Does the octopus
wonder how she managed with the fixed color of
a lobster?
Does she worry over how eight tentacles
could be borne of one muscular foot?

Does the placid goldfish
think of his warring Jurassic mother,
plated like a rhinoceros,
armed with the alien beak of a squid?

Does the rattlesnake
long for his old legs, as he winds across the rip-
pling desert
and slips uncontrollably down sand sierras
as the evening sun drags its monkish robe?

Does the cuttlefish,
swimming by like a billowing cloud,
give the nervy chameleon a brotherly wink,
and catch, for a moment, the swiveling reptilian
eye?

Does the stocky alligator
dream of the liquid neck of her plesiosaur cousin
when held fast in the ebb and flow of an estuary,
a tangle of roots in a shadowy mangrove?

When the dolphin
flirts and dances with life
at the light surface of the glittering sea,
Does he remember the slow primordial crawl?

Does the shot tiger's
groan, rumbling through the heavy doldrums,
mask a sob for his bygone
saber-toothed glory?

Does the shorn elephant
think wistfully of the mammoth's hooped tusks
and long for the strength of that colossus
when he is robbed of his ivory?

Does the whale
meditate during the slow months of his great
arctic passage
a peaceful blimp floating in cool glacier light?
Does he feel an ancient, toothed god stir within?

Does man
still think of his old nose,
like a coconut hull, nostrils like two cavernous
pits
and his fumbling simian arms?

Does the ape preserve the pure memory
of the golden thing that made *him*?



The only woman that had ever lived by Klára Kozlayová

i'm the only woman
that had ever lived,
that had ever loved,
that had ever thrown
her fishnet stockings
in a ball next to the bed,
pulled her velvet dress over her head,
put her palm
against the small of back,
a curve of neck
ball of foot
pointed toe
hands in air -- all aux american.
bass
beat
drop
i am --
i am simply marvellous
when i'm not a wreck.



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Missing by Shourya Shrivastava

Missing; 9 years old,
Wheatish, skinny,
Suffering from virtually nothing,
May or may not require medication
To stop growing older.

Missing; 12 years old,
Wheatish, can be called chubby,
Suffering from childhood nonchalance,
May require immediate medication
To stop growing older.

Missing; 14 years old,
Still wheatish, quite bulky, Suffering from lack of
nonchalance-
Amongst other things,
Might require reversal medicines
Or time travel.

Missing; 16 years old,
Wheatish, quite literally the elephant in the
room,
Suffering from virtually everything,
Might attempt ends of existence.
May require a coffin, preferably small,
To bury a 9 year old.

glasshopper by Mel Benedichuk

Every yester-year
We fade behind our windows,
Rancid eyes carved out in the wall,
Confessing to the wrath of our incapable hands

You
The window passer-by, a purple cloud of smoke
A spiteful shadow of my every yester-year.

Don't open the window.
Give me your incapable hands.
Accept.
That shards of neon outside
Will show you how to live your life better.

Our incapable hands.
Enraged,
They carve out windows.
Engulfed,
Without glass the world has weight.

We can carve out a window.
Look at the world --
Fox stomped by a contractor.
A bear cub begging by a highway.
The cub is given fruits.
A pipe is being built,
And workers said: "we'll use it
To pour shit
Into that little river"

It's safe
Behind the window.
Without glass the world has weight.

Shards of neon.
They tell you to do more

Cemented in this munching world, but
Glass is fire-proof.
Pain-proof.
Proof.
Pain.

Don't break the glass.
Hand me your incapable hands.
Hand me the fate you never knew
How to build.
I promise.
We'll kill it together

When I'm behind your glass.
Smoked through, with eyes dried out
Along with withered flowers on your wallpaper.
Our incapable hands.
It's better if we stay inside.

Our windows will love us.
Nothing else will.

See --
I smoked in the park yesterday.
A Christian missionary passed me by and even
she
Decided that my soul does not deserve salvation.

The Feast of Narcissus by Harry Speirs

He watched glaring whirlpools down beneath,
above were skies showered o'er with clashing clouds;
and the torrent waters, cup his mirrored face in feast,
let mingled waters whirl to join this sodden crowd.

- In threaded films across the glistening water,
on the stained glaze from down below, and from on high,
he watches himself, an in turn an image glares back
and breathes into this murky liquid a surfacing sigh.

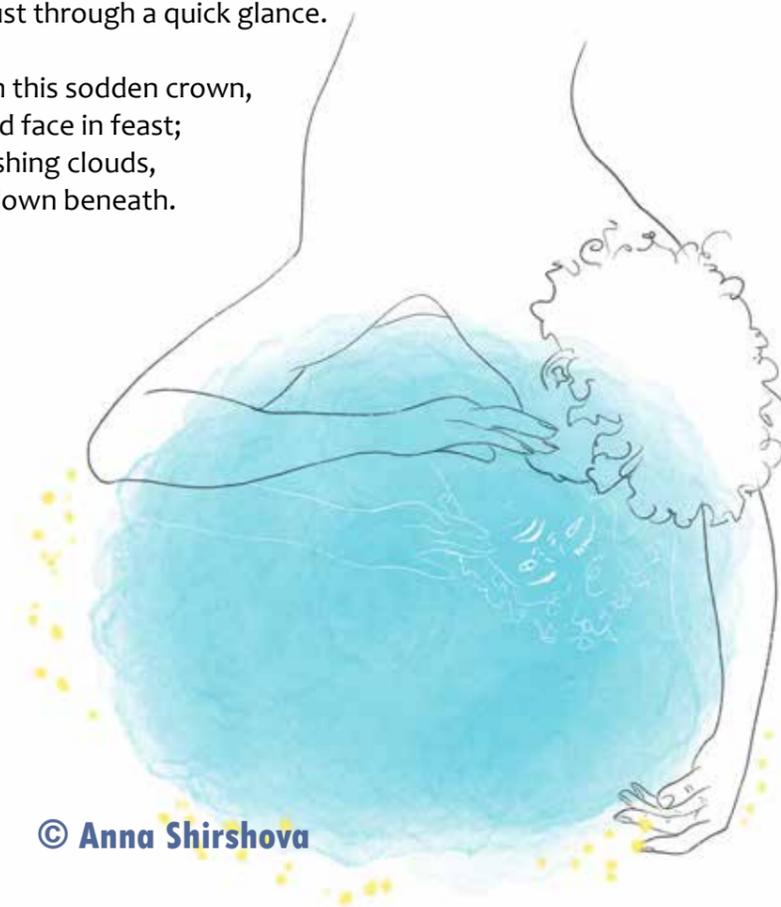
Held between tortured eyes that find him caught
this rippling figure, touching sunlight's beams to slowly fade,
for within these fingers, or in their image slightly above,
these ripples in water take his sunken treasure far away.

- O, pull away Narcissus; away from this shadowed water,
I'm tired of finding reflections of myself in you.
Though neither your love, nor you, nor I, will last.
We remain in old books, as water images seeped through.

So now, watching the windowpane on the train home
and seeing my face in the dark expanse of the glass,
looking through a blank book page, or sometimes my phone screen,

- I see Narcissus, or myself even, just through a quick glance.

Let mingled waters whirl round to join this sodden crown,
and the torrent water cup my mirrored face in feast;
above the sky showered o'er with clashing clouds,
so I, can watch this flaring whirlpool down beneath.



in this poem by Yuliya Charnyshova

in this poem, I use the language of imperatives and empires
to reach you. take care. stay kind. be pound
to my eliot: take all of my wastelands and make them
waster & vaster.

deprived of languages, we are constructing a dialect
of our own. deprived of proximity, we re-examine
the abused in ourselves, the abusive. you know who is who;
hence, it changes. at this point of my life,
too much depends on my competence to do the line-breaks
properly. alas, I've decided to decline your rejection.

*

so, the sexiest part about you
is the way you own up and the way you trip over reading
in my mother-tongue, which consists of two.

and I can't even speak them. all I'm capable of are
those greetings from <... >

where underbed monsters get out at night to play,
hide and sneak through the cracks of your decency for a cuddly sleepover. and no one truly waits for
the green light — they just go go go. please, do
not leave unattended.
unless

*

“Thou art more lovely and more temperate.”
but at the end of the day, not enough
to make art of a still place.

you do you. I write poetry out of it. always watching
the city spilling over its edges. the skin is also liquid
and looks pretty welcoming.

in that entire moment, you made me read “dog” backwards,
though I have heard it howling at the moon when you were not
listening.

in this poem, I use the language of imperatives and empires.
and it will reach you.

Light as feather by Ann Nguyen

Eyes open to the neon red waves streaming in, undulating colubrine line, slithering across the pale waxed ceiling, cars purring outside in the wintry autumn like slumbering cats, all curled up outside in that radiating coldness, my fingers poke out and recoil from the icy air, I get up, toes touching the warm carpet, tip-toeing, pirouetting across the floor, dancing to the rhythm ring cling click of a bicycle that strolled by it's only just 5 a m.



© Alankrita Singh

Linger by Christine Martin

It's a shame clouds so often bother the moon
As if drunk I reach and extend my embrace
Amidst this pale light tender thoughts of you flow
And I'm allowed a moment to elude both time and space

But when there is no moon, I look for you in the wind, echoing your impatience
And I search for you between raindrops, nourishing as your laughter
When spring flowers grow, you're there in the gentle mist and the quiet hope
When autumn leaves fall, you're stretched between a thousand shades of colour

So, as I try to grasp, I must ask, would you linger
I can claim allegiance to no god, stranded in this world without tether
But when I look upon your face, meaning fades from existence
And I suddenly know what 'all faiths seek to remember'

This world constructed without reprieve, comprised of the fleeting
And in the centre there's you, enchanting us all to wait



© freepik

I Could Have Been by Claudia Nashef

I could have been tangerines in winter.

I could have been vitamin supplements and
tubs of Sudocrem and Vicks.

I could have been two litre bottles of water
and plasters and Argan oil and steaming mugs of Tetleys.
Hot showers, cold showers, and Max White toothpaste.
I could have been your five a day.

I could have been a hot water bottle, or a pair of gloves,
eight hours of sleep and going for a walk before twelve.
I could have been a gratitude journal and face masks,
meditation and dancing,
and maybe even regular exercise.

I could have been good for you.

Adrift by Rob Moya

They sail alone. Downwind they're blown.
The gentle breeze dictates with ease
the path to take. For what will wait,
they're unaware, without a care.
But innocence is not defence.
Through storms and strife, some kind advice
they'll need. Astray they'll go. Their way,
themselves, they will not know. The chill
of wind and spray do not outweigh
the cold of solo voyage. With no
support, no friend to help them mend,
they'll drown, despair alone. For they're
Unknown.

Water lily by Kieron Goh

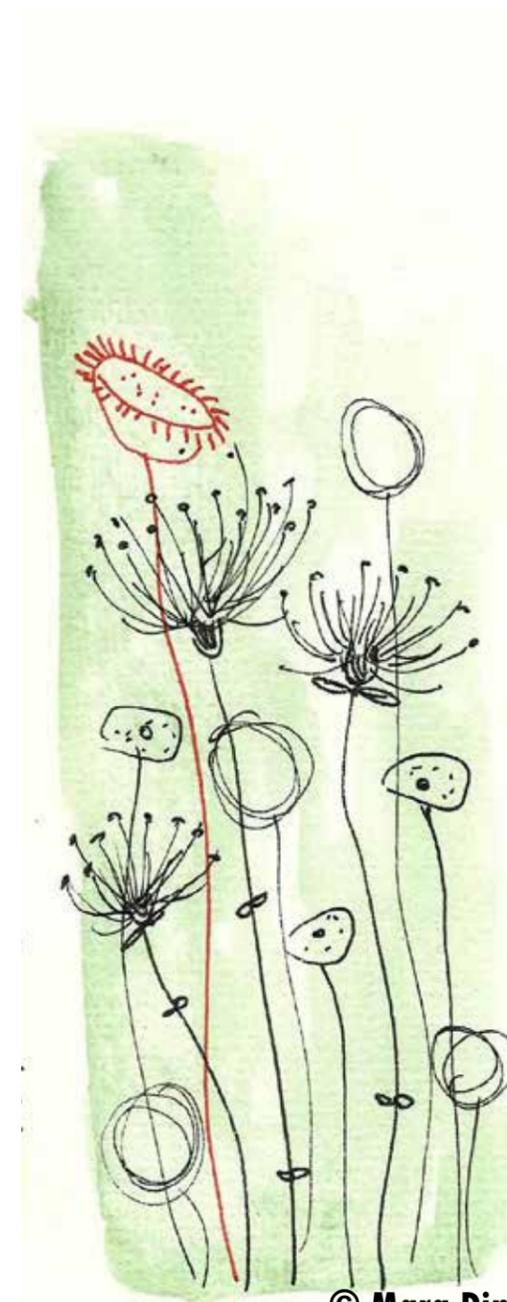
I've had to learn how to make places my home
everytime my feet taste new soil.
There's a certain beauty in growing roots, that
I have never known.
Drifting from corner to corner as they all ripple
away from me.
The life of a water lily must be a lonely one.

Standing upright is difficult when you use all your
strength to believe in yourself
even then, it is not enough: not all stalks are
destined to grow.
Some, like me, will wilt because the sun doesn't
shine on
water lilies without a home;
Left to sink, without someone to trim the petals.

I'm tired of fidgeting with life and death between
my fingers,
Hearing the whispers of hysteria creep through
my veins
like an infection that paralyses my tongue and
forces my hands to my throat
daring to squeeze because waking up tomorrow
was now a debate
I needed to win.

Even when my eyes open, my stomach clenches.
because I can't look the mirror in the eye and tell
them I love them.
and when the loveless reflection on the weighing
scale is more familiar than my own breathing,
living turns into surviving, in a sea of too many
too-perfect blossoms.
If it was someone else was in the mirror I'd tell
them they're beautiful
no matter what.
Sometimes, water lilies are hypocrites.

But we grow, and sometimes I will see my
reflection in the blue moon
and bloom.
The pond can be a beautiful home
and maybe -
next time someone goes, I'll know they're not
leaving.



© Mara Dinu

Seeding by Elynor Kamil

This isn't my first poem to you.
The first to survive the bin, true,
but expectations? Keep them low.
Let them hit the ground. Know
they could grow but you can weed them.
If that fails, cut their stems,
and if that works, tell me.
I'm overgrown. Got trees

rooted firms, vines that curl
up bark, down rock, more unfurl
and I'm stuck. Got distracted
by pruning mirth,
your laughter rain that leaves me
soaked while I maintain
this garden, waiting for flowers;
until then, picking metaphor.



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PROSE



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Stained Glass by Sermila Ispartaligil

In the metal factory, shades of black reach out to coalesce with shades of white, turning everything into a metallic grey. There is no sound except for the machinal ups and downs echoing through the dark corridors. Nobody dares to disturb the silence - as they have become in sync with the machines. Like piano keys, they keep going, keep bowing to the players. The husky symphony of the machines fills in all the rooms but isn't truly heard. Of the pieces of zinc, most are sent to even darker places. They are loaded on a large truck to be carried to other factories or to be sold. The smallest pieces are fortunate enough to leave their birthplace and start anew. It begins with them getting loaded on some of the more petite trucks. They don't seem to be prisoner transport vehicles. The carriers have less traces of sorrow on their faces. They don't have to carry the same heavy burden of tonnes of zinc. Their ears have broken free from the numbness stemming from the sounds of metal.

The trucks travel through urban areas to finally reach the destination of escape. They arrive at the stained glass workshop. There are no machinal highs and lows, no faded faces, no sounds of metal. However, they carry it through with them. If you move close enough to the pile of zinc, you can still hear the broken pieces of black and white piano keys colliding, creating their own tunes. Though not heard, they are buried within. The stained glass workshop is filled with colours other than grey. Pieces of glass without any tunes of their own are standing on the shelves. People can still hear - hear the paint brushes, hear the sounds coming from the windows, hear each other. With the uneasy sounds from within, the bits of zinc wait to be blended into the workshop.

The chunks of glass slowly leave their shelves as the pieces of zinc cling to their confining boxes. Finally, the tables are set to create the stained glass. They are cut in different sizes, broken into pieces, harshly trimmed, sharpened around the edges, and moulded into different shapes. The process is repeated dozens of times, slowly. The table is covered in paint, bits of metal, broken glass, dust, and the tools that hold them all together. Once the zinc and glass come together, they are blended, never to be torn apart. The husky symphony of the factory is no longer heard by the zinc, even from within. However, it is now touching the glass pieces, giving them a tale of their own.

The large works of stained glass leave the workshop with trucks moving gingerly. On the last junction, the trucks take a different turn. As the carriers look around with surprised eyes, the pieces of zinc travel through the same old roads. They are back at the metal factory. The guard thinks there must have been a mistake and attempts to turn down the carriers trying to get the stained glass inside the factory. They show him a drivers' note and the guard is left with no choice to let them in. Everything is still the same. Not a single grey corner has shifted its shade, not a single pause to the machinal symphony has been made, and the metallic sounds created by broken pieces of black and white ivories are still buried under zinc, and felt through the dark corridors.

All of a sudden, a disruption that hasn't been seen for decades is made by the works of stained glass. They replace the old smoked glass windows and are hung on each room and on each dark corridor. The ivories within the pieces of zinc on the stained glass now come together to be unearthed and alive for the first time, ready to disturb the universe.

Even Diamonds Tarnish by Wilbur Dublin

Of all the times of the day, I just had to pick that moment to drink. In a situation where water was limited and nutrition even more so, all I could do was watch as the floor and my clothes consumed my morning ration. One portion closer to inevitable starvation. The onboard bioreactors could only provide so much, and for so long. The recyclers could only work for so long. The air and water purifiers could only hold so much toxicity.

There wasn't any point in dwelling on the thought.

Once my vessel was no longer at the mercy of the tempest, I salvaged what little I could. Drinking off the floor wasn't an option, but at least my clothes were now (reasonably) clean while having some nourishment. After all these weeks since losing my way, it was the first botched mealtime. There must've been some pride in that, but I was hardly in an enviable position.

Breakfast done, I left the cramped dining cabin to the next thing on my agenda. The only thing on my agenda. Watching the weather.

Despite the title, there was no control in the control room. My vessel had no means of propulsion. All of the dials, screens, and switches only served to observe and maintain. If I saw a capsizing gust or wave coming. If I saw a horde of Devils coming, out for an easy meal. Even if I saw my salvation descending from the heavens, I could only strap in and pray.

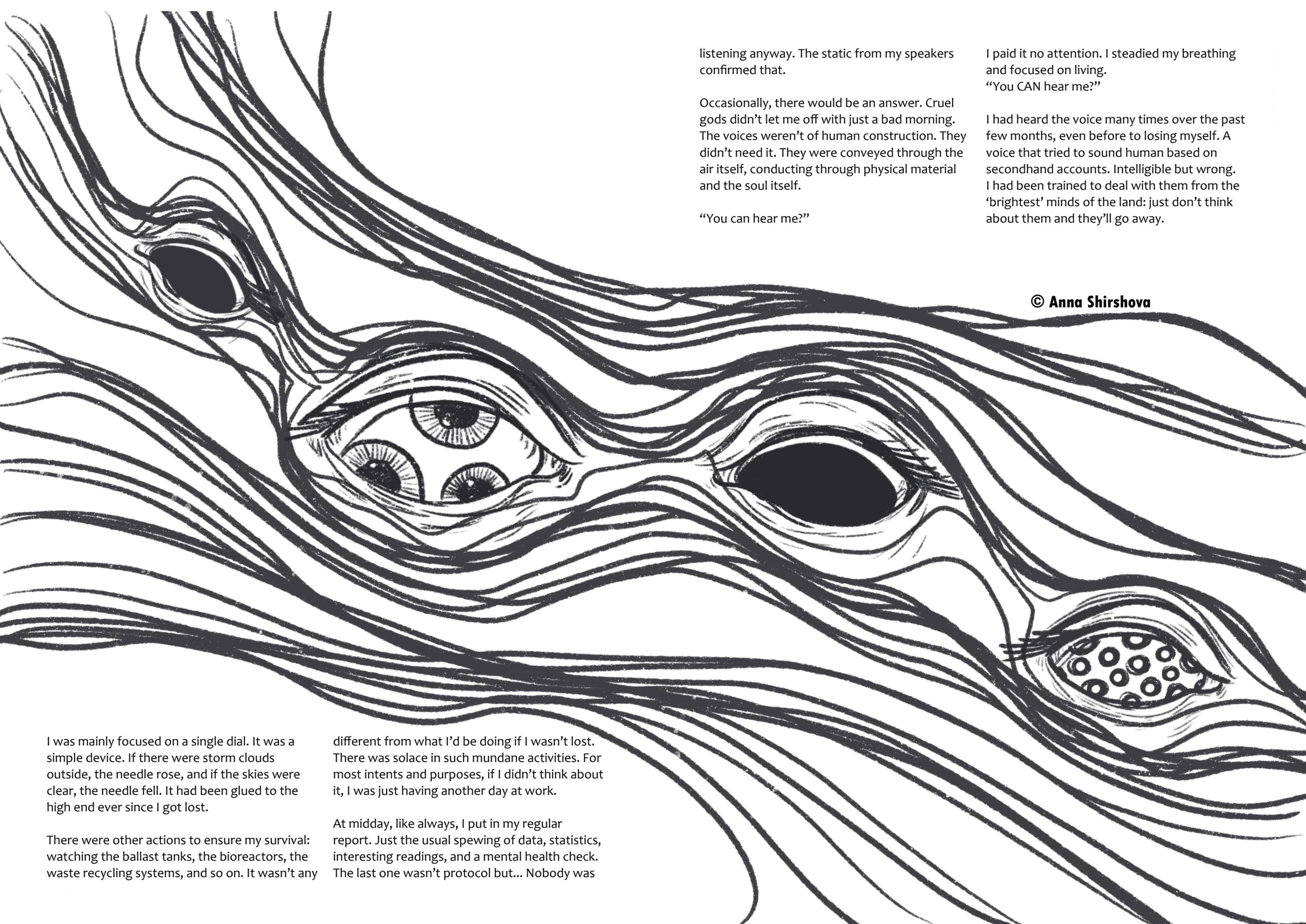
"Pray..." I chuckled derisively.

They told me my suffering would free me. They told me that I would be protected if following their orders as if God's will. They said my selflessness was for the greater good. Those were the only reasons I took the post, sitting alone in a metal capsule on the border of civilization. My mind endured for so long, but my vessel didn't.

Cast adrift in a sea of insanity.

I should have followed my brother's footsteps. A faithless man who became a pastor. Licking the dirt off the clergy's shoes all the way up to the spires of Kunlun. I did wonder how he was doing. If he knew what had become of me. If any of them told him in the first place.

Thoughts aside, I returned to the weather.



listening anyway. The static from my speakers confirmed that.

Occasionally, there would be an answer. Cruel gods didn't let me off with just a bad morning. The voices weren't of human construction. They didn't need it. They were conveyed through the air itself, conducting through physical material and the soul itself.

"You can hear me?"

I paid it no attention. I steadied my breathing and focused on living.
"You CAN hear me?"

I had heard the voice many times over the past few months, even before to losing myself. A voice that tried to sound human based on secondhand accounts. Intelligible but wrong. I had been trained to deal with them from the 'brightest' minds of the land: just don't think about them and they'll go away.

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I was mainly focused on a single dial. It was a simple device. If there were storm clouds outside, the needle rose, and if the skies were clear, the needle fell. It had been glued to the high end ever since I got lost.

There were other actions to ensure my survival: watching the ballast tanks, the bioreactors, the waste recycling systems, and so on. It wasn't any

different from what I'd be doing if I wasn't lost. There was solace in such mundane activities. For most intents and purposes, if I didn't think about it, I was just having another day at work.

At midday, like always, I put in my regular report. Just the usual spewing of data, statistics, interesting readings, and a mental health check. The last one wasn't protocol but... Nobody was

“You can hear me.”

I felt a chill. There were no windows and my screens only showed static. But I could feel their gaze. I needed help.

I lay an old, stained book atop my workspace – The Compendium – a masterfully compiled tome of knowledge of the storm’s inhabitants. But that was all it was. A compilation. Not a self-help book. With it, I had the ability to characterize every single Devil that came knocking. Frustratingly, thousands of species had the same ‘recommended’ course of action: Strap in and pray.

“You CAN hear me.”

I was so focused on the disappointment of that morning, mentally calculating the days I had left, that I forgot to strap in. The onset was immediate. I didn’t know when my breaths turned shallow and rapid, or when my heart started to flutter. The trembling got so bad that I could no longer grasp a single page of the Compendium.

The Devil had full control of my mind, prying deep within myself, unearthing things that should’ve stayed buried. Individual thoughts became impossible as the memories forced themselves at the forefront of my mind, threatening to burst out and spill all over my workspace.

Why did I choose this godforsaken job? Why did I need to be so ambitious? Why couldn’t I just have accepted my place, our place, my shame, our shame, in this world? Why did you abandon me, brother? Why did I abandon you, brother? How many chances did I have to avoid these events? How many times could I have just said ‘Enough.’ and ended the suffering?

The monster in my mind played with me with deft precision. It saw my life like a book, pulling out the worst pages and erasing the best. A sadistic creature that saw thoughts and the mind as little more than toys to break. And what were actions, other than thoughts in motion?

I was compelled to get out of my seat. I tried resisting but the mental strain was too great. Pain only existed in the mind, and the Devil exploited that fact greatly. Resisting only meant passing unimaginable agony to the already-stressed mind. I was a puppet, dancing not by strings but fire at the feet.

I stumbled through the vessel to the door. The only door.

Three inches of layered metal, insulation, and airtight sealing protected me from whatever it was that eagerly awaited. The only way to compromise this bubble of habitability in the monster-infested seas. The single point protecting the only human for miles around. Despite being perfectly sealed, there was a lingering stench of dampness surrounding it.

“Open the door.”

The voice was gentle, coaxing, inviting.

But I knew better. The monster conveniently hid my memories of those that fell to the temptation. Some were complete strangers and others were closer to me. Images of broken capsules, open doors, and mangled corpses had been branded into my mind – no amount of devilish meddling could erase that. And then there were those that survived... The lucky ones lived to regret it. Most couldn’t even do that.

“Open the door, and you’ll be free.”

Indeed, I would. My worst moments were still playing out, a theatre of continuous mockery. Forced to watch my failures again and again while suffering pains that could never be relieved. And I knew

there was no persisting through it. The Devils will return and force me to experience these moments of hell once more. Opening the door seemed like the better option. Who was I to the rest of the world? It wasn’t as if I was coming back anyway, trapped in my unnavigable vessel. My end was not an if, but a when.

But... I couldn’t.

Whether I was still clinging on to that rapidly dimming hope, or out of primal self-preservation that no amount of pain could override, I didn’t know. I was already grasping the deathly cold door handle. A momentary lapse in self control was all it needed... just one push...

But I backed away, wracked with guilt. The internal turmoil was so great that I no longer knew which sensations came from myself and which came from the Devil.

Instead, I turned to the only great invention of the brilliant minds before me: Sedatives. The pain of defying the Devil couldn’t possibly compare to the bliss of that simple chemical formulation. The dispenser was positioned by the door because they knew. They knew what the Devils wanted.

They knew how we would react to the Devils down to a science. But in all their brilliance, they never found a way to fight them. They just made running away easier. They made it so that we had to suffer before finding the will to save ourselves.

I didn’t have to think. A single slap of the dispenser coated my palm in potent tranquilizer. Liquid euphoria.

Arcane energies met the best of chemical engineering, and chemistry won. My mind slowly disassociated with my body. I fell to the ground through a roaring inferno, burning with the infuriated Devil’s futile efforts to bring me to them. But below that inferno was an ocean, deeper than the one I was floating on. Freezing cold yet warming in a way. Sinking further into oblivion. I could’ve died right there and then.

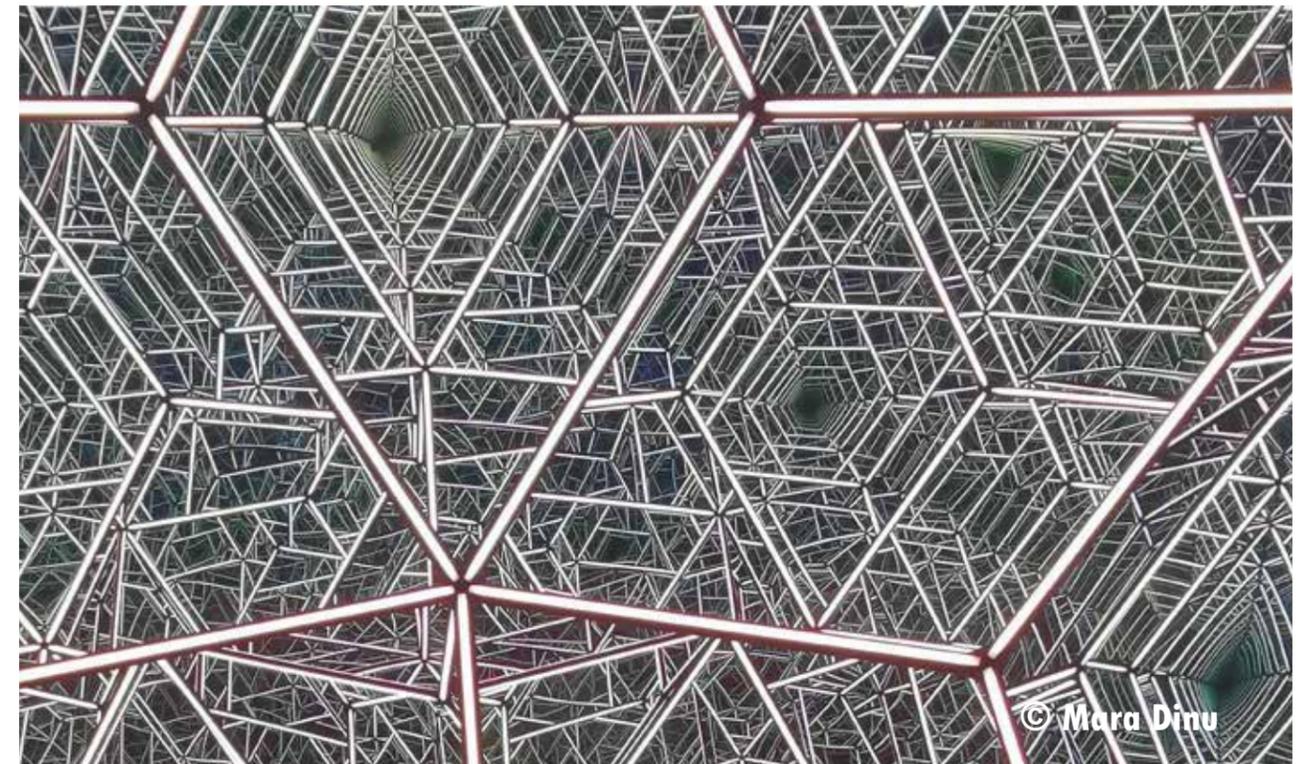
But I survived.

I awoke on the floor, drenched in sweat and saliva. The Devil was gone for now. My thoughts were mine for now.

The clock by the door showed that it was almost time for breakfast once more. Another day had begun. Calmly, for now.

Another day under the looming threat of it returning.

“How long can I keep doing this?” I choked.



LinkedIn Airport by Sanjoli Mathur

It was a crisp winter evening. I was sitting in my pyjamas and an oversized jumper, munching on some chips, and aimlessly scrolling through my LinkedIn feed. As the crumbs rolled off my chin and settled into the warm crevices interspersing the knitted yarn, I came across this peculiar post by someone who works for one of the big online payment platforms. Let's just say it was PayPal. It was a post of anguish; an appeal – asking people to call customer care instead of sending them messages when facing any trouble with the app. I came across this post in the midst of people looking for jobs, asking for jobs, talking about their jobs, doing surveys for their jobs, describing an ideal job – basically, people doing important things.

It was at that moment that I realised – LinkedIn is like the airport. Everyone is doing important things, thinking important thoughts, anguishing over the anguishing acts of others. There are the overachievers – the pilots in their uniforms, the ones unhappy with their jobs – those demanding they be compensated for their delayed flight, and the gems who share motivational messages – that guy who tried talking to you while you waited for boarding. When I picture LinkedIn, I can see a person in a suit, looking up at the schedule screen, holding their boarding pass in the hand where hangs their jacket, and resting their other hand on a black wheeled bag – the kind that are so tiny, you know their owners are seasoned packers and travellers. The suit is almost always light blue and grey.

Everyone is on their own journey, looking for their gate, checking if their flight is on time, lugging around luggage, and no one wants to be bothered by requests that should ideally go to the Airport Manager.

Drowning in Camden Town by Suzanna Chen

A nauseating mix of cheap perfume and nicotine wafts by, trailing behind a boisterously bright red candy floss of a head.

My lips twitched.

Heck. Me, her, and that neon-yellow mohawk over there can direct the traffic with our heads. It's a casual evening in Camden Town: the streets are bustling with vendors selling everything from fake Gucci belts to edible diabetes.

I feel like crying.

You won't notice my peril; you can't even find me.

I am perfectly camouflaged in my thrifted leather jacket and boots with metal spikes and vibrant turquoise hair. Even my legs, barely protected from the chilly October winds in my distressed denim, merge indistinctly into the collage of nude skin with insignificant speckles of a garment.

I suppose I should savour the community of lovers for jeans so ripped that they might as well not be worn. But as swinging belt chains of a striding stranger knock into my whitening knuckles, the icy touch tore through my façade, making me tremble under the equally frigid internal hail of irony.

A choked sound escapes my throat as if grabbed by an intangible hand. No one can hear it. It disappears without a trace into the boundless ocean of eccentricity that, in the end, exists under an atmosphere of suffocating normalcy – a universe of uniformity.

I stand still as all of society's outliers swarm around me in an apparent protest.

I want to scream. I want to holler into those pretentiously-pierced ears that it doesn't matter.

Everything – the hair, the chains, the spikes, the eyeliner – is all a faux: a grotesque game we play to humour the typical world.

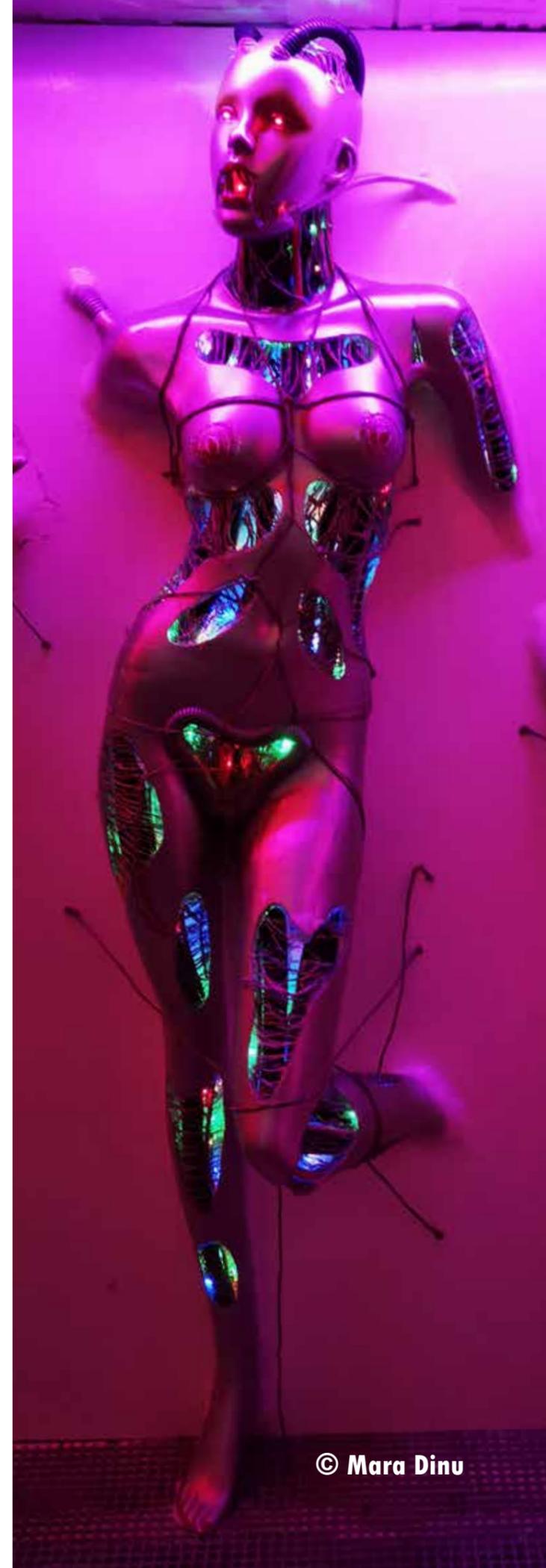
It exploits us into wearing “clothes” that feel (and look) like barbed wire on our skin, punching holes into our bodies to insert costly metals, and willingly crafting our faces into moulds of “weirdness” under layers of cosmetic chemicals.

But its worst atrocity is in convincing us that this outward display of “individuality” amends our scars from the judgmental stares and the ever-damning fact that they shut the door on us. We strive so hard to portray a visual rebellion of unexpectedness. Yet, in the end, all we have done is unwittingly succumb to their curated trap: eagerly jumping into their expectation and screaming, “Hey! I'm different.”

In the end, we are not unique. We are alone.

A chain of giggles pierces into my ears. A couple of teenagers' eyes crease into mocking crescents as Yellow Mohawk performs the circus trick of walking in his 10-inch platform boots. The mucky lines of black tears trail down my face and disappear without a trace into the darkness that engulfs me.

Nobody cares to spare a glance at my outlandish turmoil.



by Nathan Watts

It was our first dinner together and you asked: “What would it be like if we didn’t have a body and communicated as spirits do?”. The evening was cool and we were both midway through our artichokes, your haddock and my medium-rare steak. A man throws a red ball to his dalmatians outside the restaurant. A blur of black and white and red. Two couples can be overheard arguing about dry cleaning two tables down. Funny how you can meet someone and you can’t wait to take their clothes off. A year later and you’re fighting in public about the dry-cleaning. Imperfections are built into the design. Being all spirits none of this would be noticeable. Not even your smile, the contours of you, how I can make out constellations from your freckles, the hair that falls across your eyes that shimmer like fireflies in this candlelight, the way you’ve hooked your legs under the chair, that you are petite but your legs are like a long sentence I can’t finish, and I love the way you speak English in that accent, and never before has anyone said “addock” the way you say it, it’s no longer a smoked fish but a word that sounds like – the word that comes to mind is dismissed and is love. Beauty isn’t beauty because it’s perfect. I share your gaze. Disconcerting, the way you look at me, what were we talking about? “That’s a weird question” was my reply, “I’ll think about an answer after dessert”. “Which is?” she raises the question as a test, my answer was apple crumble. There’s that wry smile. Tomorrow marks three years from that dinner, you’re gone and that is what I remember of our first dinner as I am walking in the rain, my collar against the wind, the stars absent in this darkness, the gleam of puddles under battery-light and farther away, the sound of car travelling the main road, but here and now the lone sound of my footsteps and my breathing.

She’s alone: a scene of weariness

by Ninotchka Hood

Two faces with a brimful smile invade her screen. She answered the call but knows she will not be able to speak... was it an ultimate attempt to slide out of this apathy?

Her mouth is sealed. No willpower — even of one that would frighten death away — could disjoin her lips, as if it had been an unknown movement to her body, one she would have needed to learn all over again.

Her face barely risen - her body immobile, stretched out across the length of the bed.

In response to their salutations, they await an agreed-upon utterance, officializing the beginning of their conversation. She emits a growl to which one recognizes the sound of « yes », and, her function fulfilled, releases the effort which until then maintained her neck straight; her face now lost in the thickness of the covers.

Embarrassed and slightly annoyed laughs escape the computer against this scene, once more repeated. So, they circumvent the emptiness; discuss their holidays: a verbal flow without interruption, without weakening of the voice, without uncertainties. Their words evaporate, stagnate against the bedroom ceiling, to finally form a cloud weighing on her head. Sinking her a little more into the depth of a dreamless sleep: an inertia without awakening.

Three souls; solitudes.

Her eyes closed, she does not need to maintain a reality in front of herself anymore: she abandons herself, all disappears.

The voices merge, then fade away completely. Her body, her mind dissolve between the wrinkles of the sheet. Rid of its consciousness, an invisible and unreal existence begins.

The constant demand of the effort to be has ceased.





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