



Between the

Lines

Literary Magazine 2016

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MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORS

HEY THERE, EVERYONE THIS IS A MESSAGE FROM THE EDITORS, AS YOU CAN PROBABLY TELL. ANYWAYS, THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO SUBMITTED WORK TO THE LITERARY MAGAZINE! WE HAD SOME GREAT WORK SUBMITTED, AND THIS IS PROBABLY ONE OF THE BEST YEARS FOR SUBMISSIONS. THERE WAS A WIDE VARIETY OF WORK SUBMITTED WITH EVERYTHING FROM PAINTINGS TO PHOTOS, SCI-FI STORIES AND WONDERFULLY CRAFTED POEMS. AGAIN, THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO SUBMITTED TO BETWEEN THE LINES.

Masquerade

by Tanner Walling

I shifted on the roof, my body pressed against the moist concrete roof of a New Orleans building. In my hands was a tranquilizer gun. I peered through my binoculars, keeping an eye out for my target: Andres Antonio.

Andres was a famous Mardi Gras performer, known for his crazy stunts. What many didn't know about this seemingly cheerful, fun-loving man was that he secretly had his hands in an illegal weapons trafficking business worth an estimated three hundred and fifty million.

The sound of the Mardi Gras parade was almost deafening, with people cheering and clapping along to the music. I myself was wearing a Mardi Gras costume to blend in. A black cloak covered most of my body and on my head was a mask akin to the ones worn by plague doctors, albeit with more decoration and more vibrant colors.

As I stared down the street at the seemingly endless stream of performers, I spotted the man. Andres Antonio. He was spinning wildly around, performing his signature stunts, on a platform with a roof that curved down and out. Atop the canopy was a tall spire that stretched for a couple of meters into the air. I knew he would likely have guards to protect him, and I soon spotted four men dressed in extravagant costumes standing in the four corners of the platform.

One tranquilizer dart could leave someone passed out for an hour, so splitting it into quarters and hitting them all with one dart would ensure that they stayed passed out for 15 minutes. After all, the dart was split into four chambers. The plan was perfect.

I stood up, folding up my binoculars and putting them into a small backpack concealed beneath my costume. I watched as the parade continued along its course, with Andres coming ever closer.

I waited until he had passed me a bit before I backed up on the roof. With my sights on him, I broke into a sprint.

I dashed across the ceiling, vaulting over the railing at the edge. I flew through the air above the street, aiming the tranquilizer gun downwards. I passed over the spire, my tranquilizer gun trained on the very tip of the spire. I waited for the right moment and then fired.

The dart shot out of the gun, slamming into the spire. The four chambers ripped apart, the individual chambers flying off in their respective directions.

I flew over the spire, slinging my tranquilizer gun over my back. I watched as the darts slammed into the guards, sinking into their skin and causing them to faint.

I grabbed a small sphere off my belt and slammed down onto the canopy. I dashed towards the end and jumped again, twisting around and lobbing the sphere at the canopy.

The sphere attached to the canopy, beeped, and then exploded. A large portion of the canopy came crashing down, and the crowds went up in a panic.

I pulled back the sleeve of my cloak and aimed it at the bottom of the canopy. I flicked out a metal bar from the side of the glove and then pulled back on it.

From the top of my wrist, a modified grappling hook shot out of the glove.

It sailed through the air before attaching to the roof. Then, with a sudden lurch, the rope dragged me to the spot where it had attached itself.

I deactivated the glove and fell to the ground, looking up to see where Andres was. Standing in front of me was the man. He had slicked-back black hair and piercing blue eyes. His skin had a darker tone to it, and his presence was both inviting and ominous.

His expression was a mix of surprise, anger, and a drop of fear. I scanned his body, looking for a weapon he could use. Nothing bulged out in the slightest from underneath his clothing, making it likely he wasn't armed. He was counting on his guards to protect him. Now, they were passed out.

"So, who might you be?" Andres said, pacing slowly towards me.

"No need to tell you. But we all know who you are," I answered.

"Oh, yes! Everyone, absolutely EVERYONE knows who I am," he said, extravagantly. "I'm the one, the only, Andres Antonio! World-famous Mardi Gras performer!"

"Quit being full of yourself and realize you're wanted for illegal weapons trafficking," I said, rushing at the man. I had taken him by surprise, but he obviously had quick reactions. He kicked out with his leg, and I threw myself to the ground in reaction.

I missed his foot by inches and swung my foot around once I had passed his leg, kicking his feet out from underneath him. He lost his balance, but twisted and flipped mid-air.

He landed behind me, and I realized I was at a strategic disadvantage. I leaped backward, flipping around and slamming my feet into his shoulders. Anticipating my move, he grabbed my legs and swung me around, releasing me and letting me fly. I slammed into the metal pole in the center, and pain shot through my back.

I jumped to my feet and rushed at him, drawing my fist back and throwing it forwards. He blocked my punch, a move I knew he would do. I grabbed his arm with my other hand and flipped him to the side, slamming him into the pavement. I somehow had to get him in handcuffs, get law enforcement here, and do that all before his guards gained consciousness again.

He spun his legs, using the motion to jump back to his feet. He held his fists in a defensive position, bouncing from one foot to the other while balancing on the balls of his feet.

"I've never fought a kid before. This is new!" he said, prompting something inside of me.

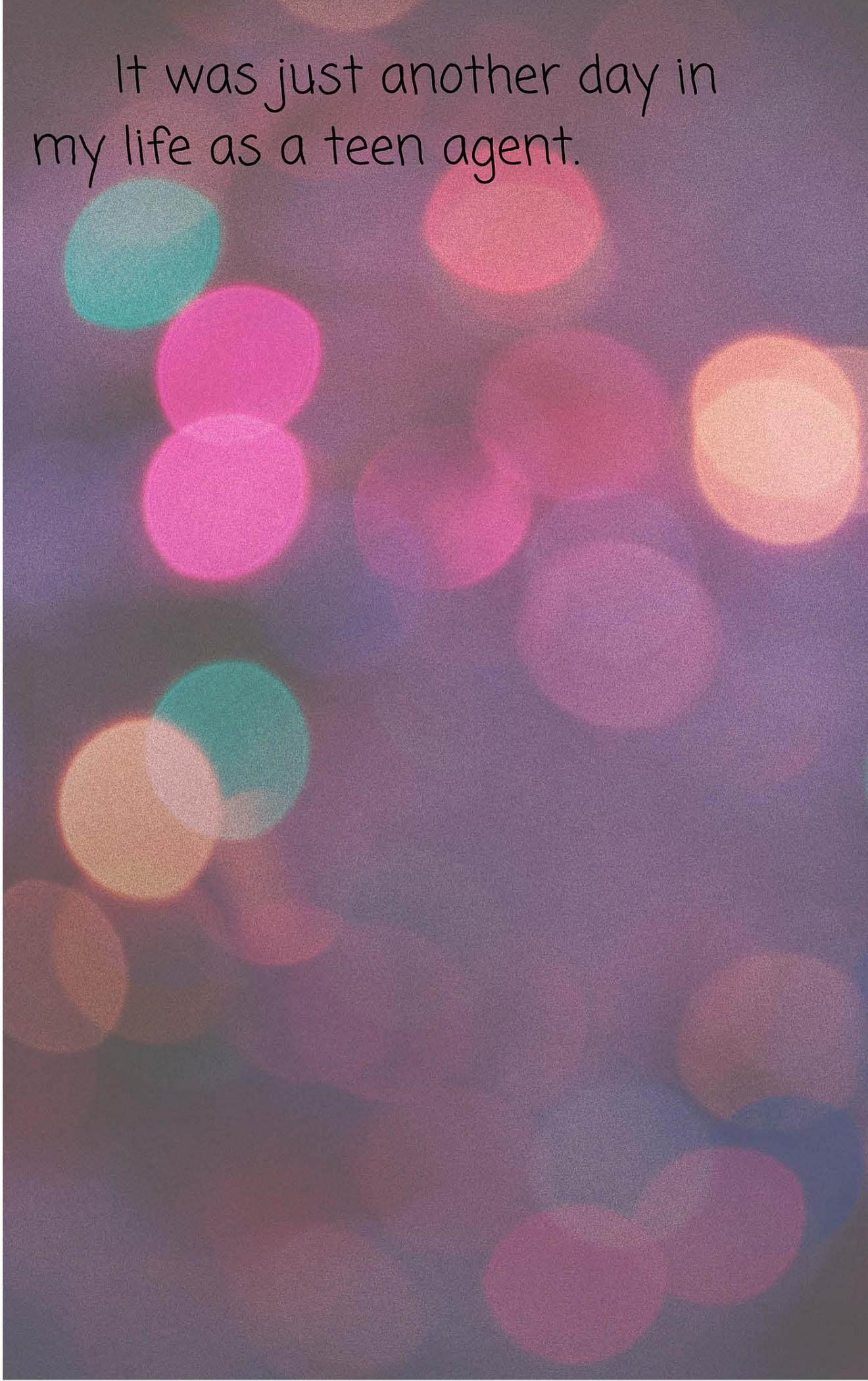
I rushed at him, and he threw a fist. I slid to the ground, sliding beneath his legs before jumping back to my feet and spinning around. I drew my knee upwards, slamming it into his back.

He fell to the ground, and I grabbed the handcuffs from my belt, locking him up. I hauled him to his feet and walked him to the end of the platform. A police cruiser had stopped next to the platform, and I handed Andres to the officer.

I stared back at the scene. The street was mostly deserted, and Andres' platform was smoldering with a section of its canopy collapsed.

Mardi Gras might have been interrupted, but a dangerous criminal had been apprehended.

It was just another day in
my life as a teen agent.



JUNGFRAU, TOP OF EUROPE

BY ATHENA WU

"Athena! Get up!" my mom whispered as she snatched my blanket from me and threw it aside. Ugh, I was not a morning type of person. Groaning, I rolled onto my side, stretched, and sat up, rubbing my eyes.

"Chop chop!" my mom urged from across the room. "We have to make the train heading to Jungfrau at 9:40!" What time was it now? My eyes scanned the hotel room and came to a stop at the clock hanging above the T.V. 9:25, yikes! Frantically, I grabbed my backpack and started to shove in necessities needed for the trip: food, money, and the camera.

"Don't forget the bag containing the jackets and sweaters needed for the trip!" I barked towards my brother as I made my way towards the door. "It'll be freezing up on the mountain!" With only minutes to spare, my family and I sprinted out of the elevator, then out the hotel's lobby and towards the train station.

Running as fast as my legs could carry me, I squeezed past people, in the process, accidentally hitting them with my backpack. To those people, they may have thought I was a robber who was trying to dodge the police. Right when the doors were about to close, my family and I slid in, breathless. We had made the train! Our excitement didn't last very long when we suddenly realized we only had three bags.

"Mom, where's the fourth bag?" I questioned thinking the worst of worse. Seconds later, we learned that we had forgotten a bag. Which bag though? Minutes of searching confirmed that we had forgotten the most important bag, the one that contained the jacket and sweaters. Before we had taken the plane to Switzerland, I had made a discovery. The temperature in Switzerland constantly changes and is quite unpredictable, meaning that it could be 80 degrees outside and two minutes later, it'd be pouring rain. So every day, we carried heavy bundles of jackets and sweaters with us, only to have sore shoulders from the weight of the excess material. Right on the day when we would go to a snowy mountain over 11,000 feet above sea level, there was none.

Every reluctant minute that ticked closer to the end of the train ride made me want to turn back and run. It was already hard to breathe because of the increasing elevation, but there was nothing I could do other than to cross my arms across my chest and pray for the best. My heart thumped a million beats per minute and I felt my adrenaline starting to come out of its hibernation. My mom told me that it would be okay because we would all endure the cold together. I didn't believe her. Three hours later, the train came to a stop at the front of the visitor's center which would lead us to the mountain. Trudging as slowly as possible, I ambled my way through several twisting and turning corridors, with the heavy, steel, doors leading to the mountain eventually coming into view. Putting on a brave face, I gathered all the fortitude left in me and pushed through.

Icy winds welcomed me and at first, I gaped in awe at the endless, azure sky which stretched above. White, puffy cotton balls dotted the sky and a nebulous ring of sunlight encircled the tip of neighboring mountains. Could I touch it? Was I high enough?

My family and I looked at each other. I was wearing a pair of shorts that was probably only five inches below my waist and a tank top. The rest of my family's clothing resembled mine.

"What should we do?" my mom inquired, a worried expression spreading across her face. "Do you want to turn back and get them? Or else, we will be freezing."

"No!" my brother practically screamed while standing there, arms akimbo. "It'll waste so much time. Let's just give it a shot. We don't even have to be on the mountain for too long."

"You were the one who forgot the jackets, William, or else we wouldn't be in this horrible situation!" I accused, pointing my finger towards him.

"Now now children, this is not the right time to fight. Why don't we take a vote?" Dad offered. We took a vote, results being that everyone but me wanted to not go back for the clothes.

"Okay then. Just don't blame me when you're shivering!" I pouted, glaring at my family, "Don't blame me."

Standing on my tiptoes, I extended my hand upwards, only to feel discouraged when I felt nothing. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew ferociously from behind me and I toppled face first into the freezing snow. Wind swirled around me as the wind seemingly screamed "Take that!" Mother Nature was stronger than I thought for when I tried to get up, the wind would effortlessly knock me right over. By the time I managed to stand up, I was drenched in snow. My teeth chattered as the snow seeped through my clothes and onto my skin. I rubbed my hands on my skin thinking it might help me feel warmer. Within minutes, a puddle of water had settled into my shoes, freezing my toes. Luckily, my dad found a scarf at the bottom of a backpack, and he swiftly wrapped the scarf around my head while my mom helped me to wring out my clothes, in hopes of making me feel a little warmer.

People stared at me, some trying to ignore my presence while others pointed and laughed. I was about to burst into tears when my mom bellowed, "photos everyone!"

Let me give you a quick fact about my mom. When my mom says "photos everyone," it basically meant that we would be there for half an hour posing for photos. How could I prevent from freezing to death? By jumping! While my parents snapped photos, I jumped up and down, laughing, screaming, and having fun. Using my scarf, I would wave it around in one photo and then hand it to my brother for another photo. In each picture, we would wave it around so it would appear as though it was a flag. I pretended to be Neil Armstrong landing on the moon while the whole world watched his actions.

After striking numerous Superman poses and waving my scarf several times, my family and I stumbled into the visitor's center and waited in line to buy a cup of hot chocolate each so we could warm ourselves up. While I was drinking it, I suddenly felt warmth. Not from the hot chocolate, but from my family. Here we were, in a foreign country, with none of us knowing how to speak the language. We traveled together like a flock of migrating geese and ended up landing at Jungfrau.

There is always one "goose" in our family, flapping its wings at the very front of the "v" formation, in the process, creating uplift for the "birds" behind them. Once the leading "goose" becomes tired, another one helps out, just like how I fell and got wet, my family all rushed over to help. Even though my family was also cold and shivering on the mountain, they still ended up giving the only article of clothing to me, the one who needed it the most.

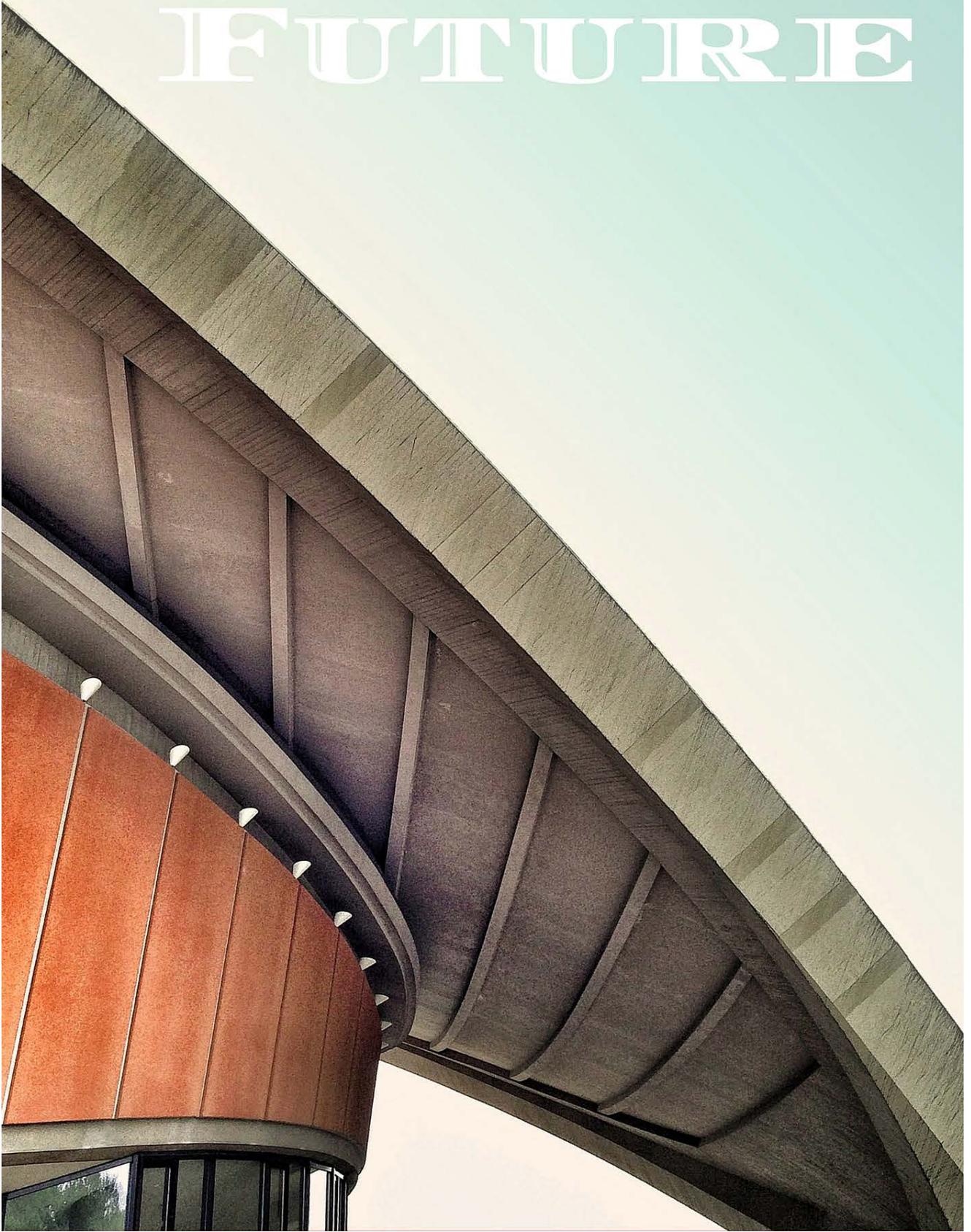
No family is perfect. We fight, yell, and sometimes even stop talking to one another, but from this and numerous other experiences, I've come to realize that in the end, a family is the group of people who love you no matter what and that you can rely on them the most.



Worcester by Kalley Hou



TO THE FUTURE



Excerpt from Danny and the Wrath of the Dinosaurs by David Lee

The cavalry entered the scene right before Danny, Jack, and Lieserl were herded into a cell. A loud BANG resonated throughout the HQ. Danny, Jack, Lieserl, and Plutoninex immediately put on their spacesuits. Jack attempted a karate cross-chop on Plutoninex, but the sudden loss of pressure and gravity made him propel himself into the ceiling. Meanwhile, the guard aliens, who could stand the vacuum of space, fired.



Danny fired twice, bringing down one alien and launching another into the wall. A series of silent explosions rattled everything and random pipes bursted. Plutoninex fired at Lieserl, who dodged the blast and fired the lightning stick. Being that lightning travels different with no gravitational pull to direct it, it electrocuted the nearest guards instead, turning them into a smokescreen of metal bits, ash, and wires.

A Spacebattler then crashed through the corridor, sucking everything in the prison bay out into the main control center. It was as big as three Grand Central Stations, Danny reasoned with his mathematical skill. A tangled mess of Spacebattlers and Centurion spacecraft were blasting everything to bits, and much of the debris was flying towards the exact hall where Danny, Jack, and Lieserl had entered, only that the airlock doors were replaced by gaping holes.

Danny and Jack opened fire and Lieserl aimed the lightning stick. John Havocker flew by at top speed, discombobulating a bunch of Spacebattlers. Lieserl's lightning blast imploded their engines, sending the machines careening throughout the battle like enormous missiles. A group of human soldiers managed to fight through a tangle of aliens and closed the airlock. A large announcer yelled, "Pressure restored!" through the speakers. A well aimed blast, however, irreparably smashed it open.

"Dad!" Jack yelled.

"What?" Danny yelled.

"Most of the Spacebattlers are stationed near that corridor. Maybe that's where Plutoninex is."

"Let's see. Lieserl, try firing towards corridor 4B."



BZZRTKABLOOIE! The lightning bolt cleared a path through the unsuspecting guards. Immediately Centurion fighters were zooming inside the now unprotected hall. Danny and Jack floated as fast as they could to 4B.

The duo was enveloped by a veil of darkness. "Jack, is there a light switch?" said Danny. "OOF!" Jack shrieked. He had happened to stub his foot on what seemed to be a charred, gruesome ... er ... thingamabob. At that moment, Danny also happened to knock the light switch open. The 50-foot floodlights turned on, revealing a mess of floating debris. At the far side of the corridor lay two entrances. One door read COCKPIT. The other read ENGINE ROOM. By the way, there were also heavy turbolasers that immediately used the sudden release of light to aim and fire at Danny and Jack.

The green blasts missed and hit the debris, sending metal debris flying out of the corridor. Danny said to Jack, "It doesn't appear we can destroy these cannons, so we have to get around them." They started to pull themselves through the thick viscosity of anti-gravity towards the cockpit. A crowd of human soldiers charged into Corridor 4B, giving Danny and Jack the perfect distraction.

They finally got to the door. Jack shot out the lock and Danny kicked it open; "Too easy," Jack commented. They went down an intertwining maze of vacant halls, guns at the ready. A steadily increasing group of people also started to follow Danny and Jack. Lieserl brandished her lightning stick. They finally walked inside the engine room.

Danny realized he had been duped: the labels on the doors had been switched. Now he had led a cavalry of soldiers into a trap. Cocked blasters were shoved into his suit.



"My, even a genius like you can be tricked that easily," Plutoninex said with a large smirk on his face.

What if Oculus Rift Took Over the World

By Alex Stepanov

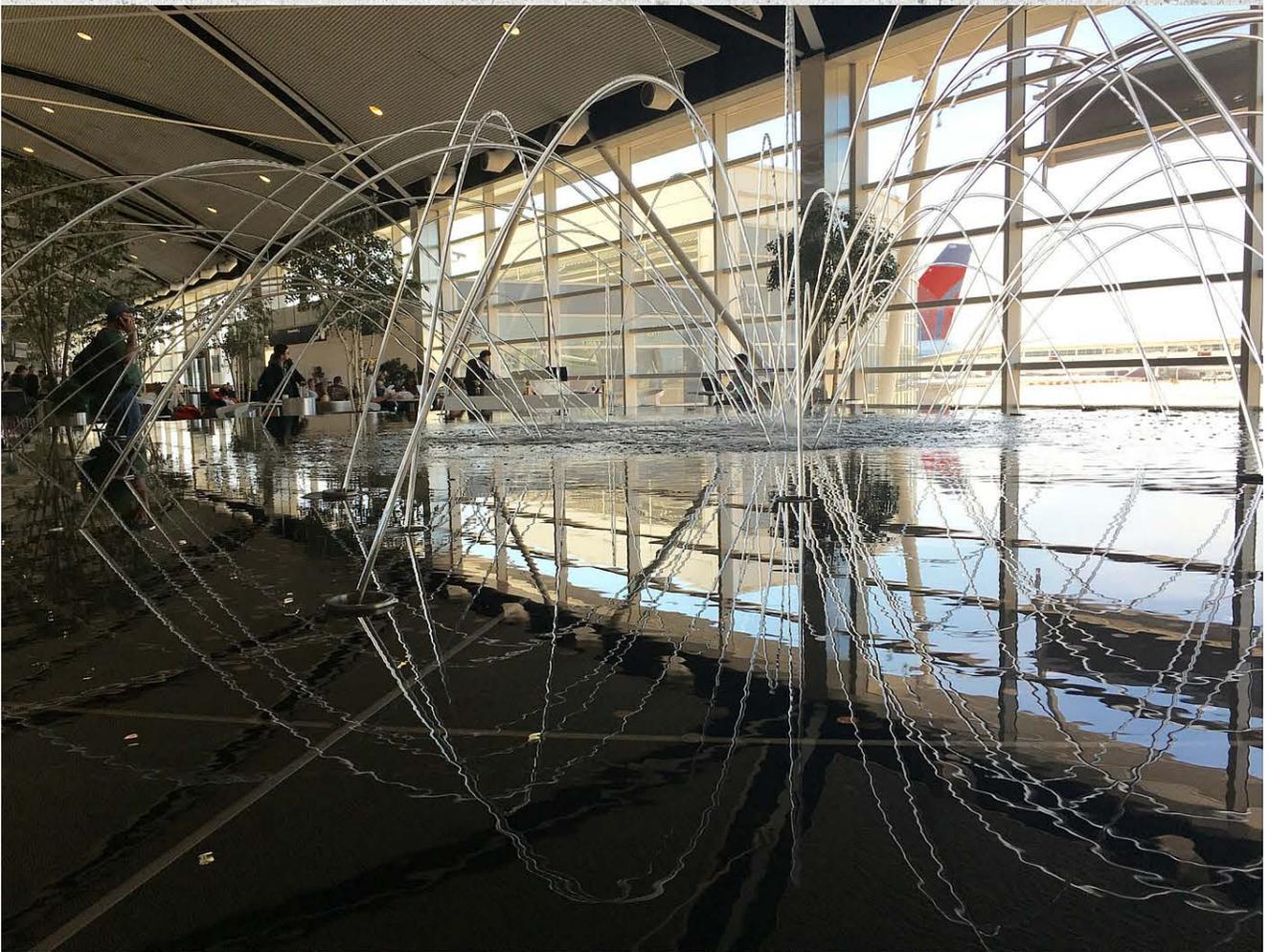


PHOTO BY TANNER WALLING

The world is dreaming because of him. Norbert Mosley, formerly my best friend, now estranged by me. Ages ago, he had the brilliant idea to make the perfect virtual reality program, dubbing it the "Mosley Machine". Creative, I know, but tests showed that the thing was effective during the first prototype's tests. When that happened, Norbert knew that he was on to something that would shake the world forever. And shake the world he did, with his Mosley Machine making billions in revenue over years of use. Norbert was happy, and he lived an extravagant lifestyle, with people using his machine to connect to each other's own virtual worlds, with their own rules, and sub-worlds with other rules, and sub-worlds of those worlds, and the inception could go on. However, Norbert had put in one universal port, one universal world that all could connect to: Earth-1.

Basically, it is a virtual version of our world, same laws, same equations, same constants, same everything, but with a key difference. That key difference was that it was an infinite, flat plane, as it wouldn't hamper our finite amount of resources and land on this planet. That decision was met with skepticism at first, as infinite everything means that platinum would turn from a commodity into a common household possession, but Norbert proved that the time it would mine all the virtual platinum in Earth-1 would be infinite. It was obvious, and I have no idea why the people arguing against Earth-1's infinity would even think to say what they said back then. Other also argued that the moon and tides couldn't be replicated 1:1 with reality, but they overlooked the fact that Norbert was a genius, and one by one, the skeptics turned into fanboys and fangirls of the machine. However, everything is a double-edged sword: there are good and bad things with everything that exists. At the time the device's lifespan was in, the good edge was done slicing through the wood, but the bad edge was just beginning to slice through it.

People became addicted to the Mosley Machine, with them being absorbed into their worlds they created, with their "friends and family" and their superpowers or other things they gave themselves. Before long, Norbert became corrupt with that realization, and with his popularity and scientific genius, told everyone that they would need a Mosley Machine to survive the oncoming dark ages that were coming into fruition. The people of Earth already had a decentralized, corrupt and fragmenting government, and most obeyed. But how could I blame them? They saw the virtual worlds the Mosley Machine gave them as salvation, a new reality to welcome with open arms. However, me and some of my friends didn't, preferring the real reality: the only reality we could make a difference in. That's when I realized what Norbert was trying to do: world domination. He could manually edit Earth-1 with his computer, becoming the de facto ruler of everyone, and even use his custom Mosley Machine to give himself god-like powers. With one simple manipulation of politics, he went from being a famous inventor to dictator of all the people of Earth. But what about the electricity to maintain that status? No worries, robots were already there, maintaining the nuclear power plants and all the other sources of electricity for the machines to work. And of the offspring that everyone would make? Norbert programmed that in, making sure the virtual human beings that were born mimicked reality, and wouldn't have deformed faces unless the conditions were ripe for the deformed to take over. It was the year 2055 that the Mosley Machine was made, and I was 23 back then. Now it's 10 years later, and life's a struggle. Looting and scavenging what could remain of humanity's last real legacy, to finding and creating a sizable community of people to share the knowledge, print copies of *The Prince*; it would be the greatest struggle humanity could have ever faced.

Now it's 10 years later, and life's a struggle. Looting and scavenging what could remain of humanity's last real legacy, to finding and creating a sizable community of people to share the knowledge, print copies of *The Prince*, it would be the greatest struggle humanity could have ever faced. However, the machine could disconnect people from Earth-1 if they were unlocked or a person had a hammer on hand. It would be simple, open or smash the lock, press the red button, and free the person from their false reality. But the overwhelming majority of the machines had hard connections: the person would die if they were disconnected from the machine. I estimate that only 25 million people could be freed from their machines, and that's out of a population of almost 10 billion people. Fortunately, people from revolutionary scientists to teachers have been saved from Norbert's corruption, and I and several other people have built a sizable commune of 10,000 and rising near what was once Shrewsbury, Massachusetts. As for Norbert? I think he and his closest partners-in-crime go outside and enjoy the now tranquil peace of 2065, and go into their Mosley Machines to create another universe where they have their god-like powers and morph into their original characters. However, one thing's for sure: it is sad to think that only two thousandths of Earth's population knows or could know what is happening in reality, and I hope things change for the better in the next century or so.



Above: Untitled Painting by Lanna Wang
Below: Late Night Sail by Kalley Hou





Above: *Untitled Painting 2* by Lanna Wang
Below: *Train Station* by Kalley Hou



unwanted, unseen, forgotten.

By Kalley Hou

I was waiting for the pity in your eye.

The sad, sorry face.

The want for forgiveness.

Yet I stared at the back of your head,

You, never turning around.

How could you do this to me?

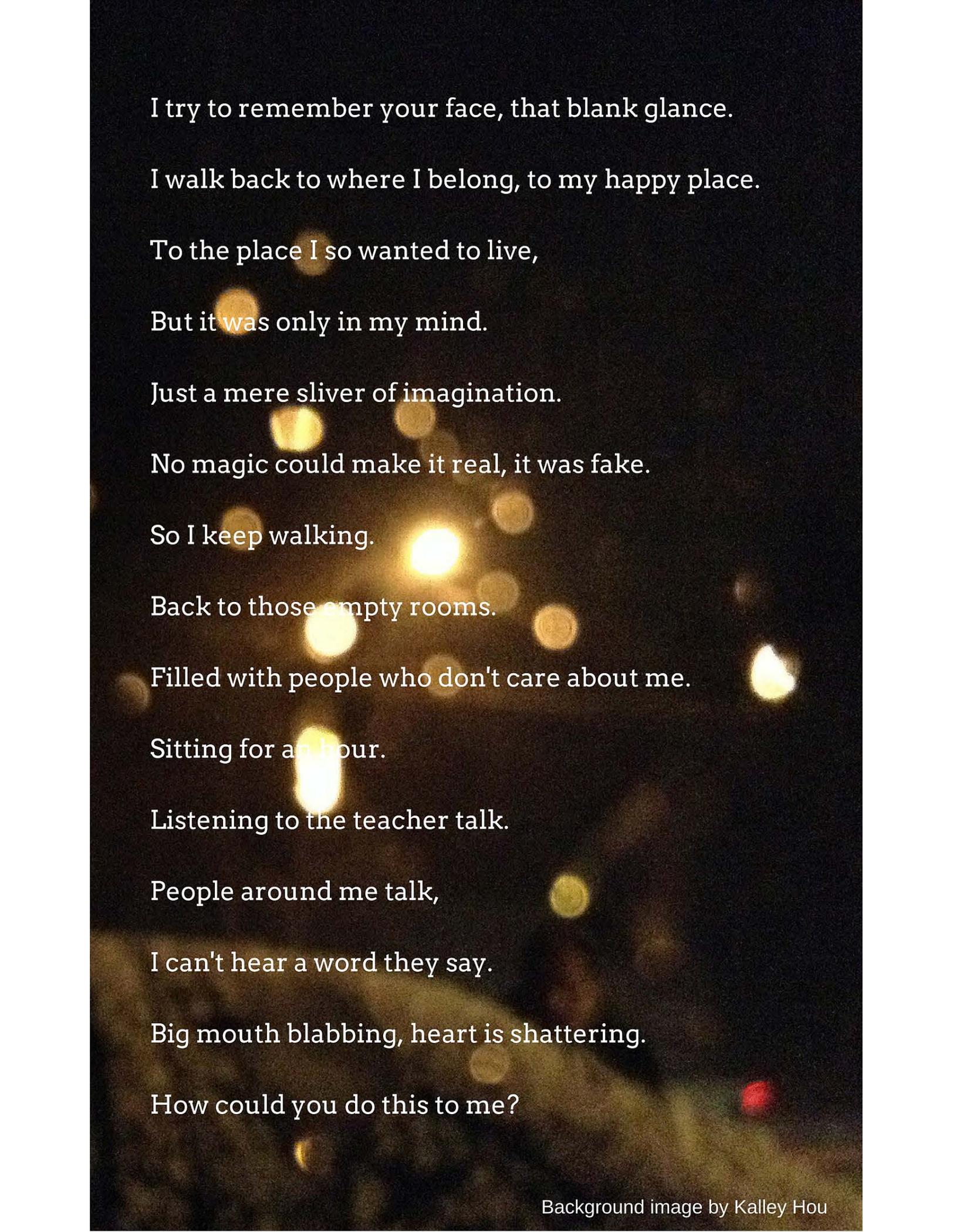
At least tell me for crying out loud!

At least then I would understand.

Why you decided to betray me,

And leave me in the dirt.

I walk away afterwards, feet dragging on the floor.



I try to remember your face, that blank glance.

I walk back to where I belong, to my happy place.

To the place I so wanted to live,

But it was only in my mind.

Just a mere sliver of imagination.

No magic could make it real, it was fake.

So I keep walking.

Back to those empty rooms.

Filled with people who don't care about me.

Sitting for an hour.

Listening to the teacher talk.

People around me talk,

I can't hear a word they say.

Big mouth blabbing, heart is shattering.

How could you do this to me?

Untitled

Camelia Gouda

Sobbing,

Tears running down my face,

Laughing, smiling,

Those days are long gone,

The rain taps against the shutters,

Thunder lets out its rage fiercely,

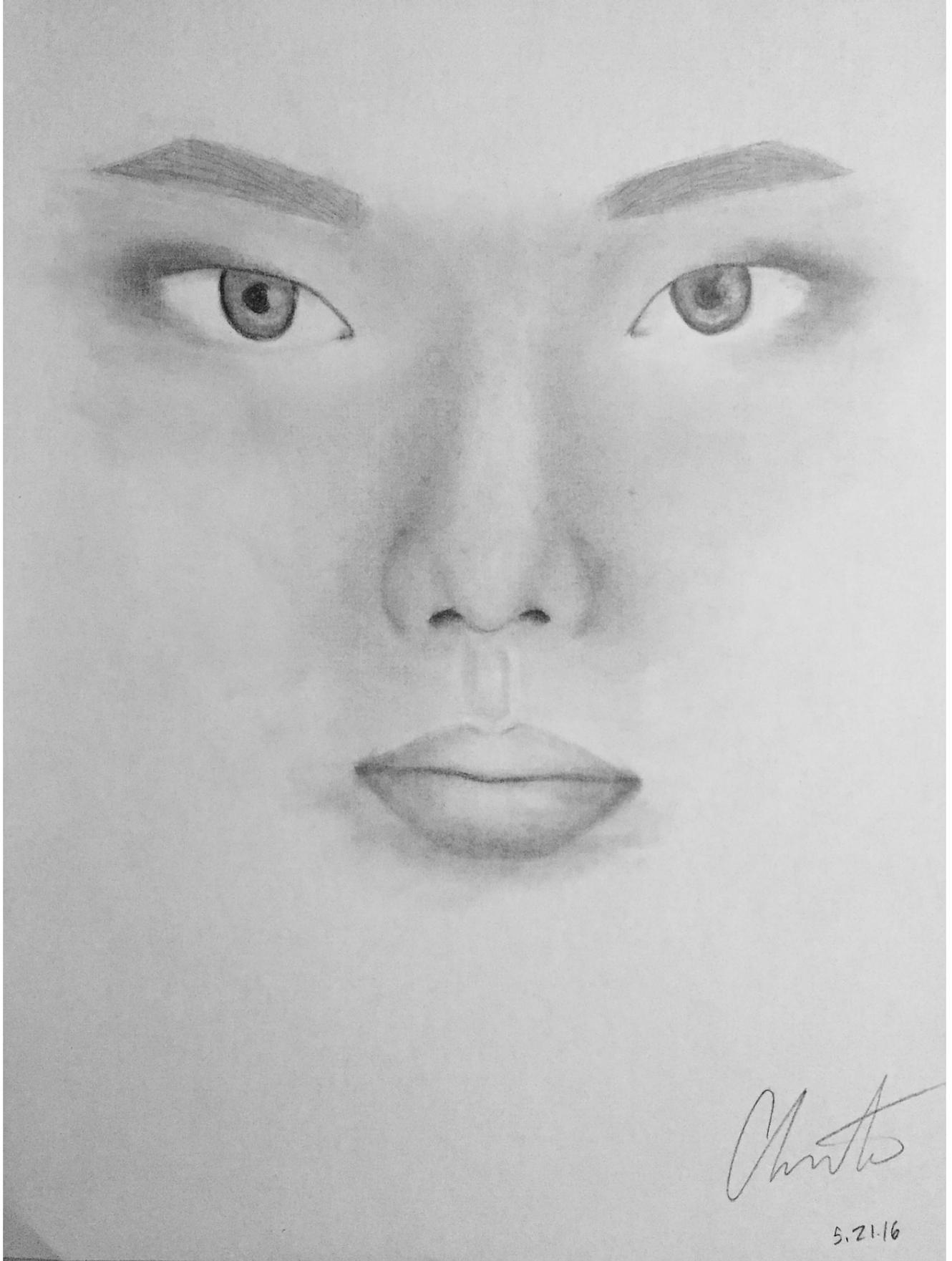
Much like my heart clashing with my
brain,

Telling me what is wrong is right,

And what is right is wrong.

Oh, what to do,

What to do.



차학연,

Cha Hakyeon

BY CHRISTINA TRAN

SENTIMENTAL

by 空白

It's a tale as old as time. You don't have to believe it,
if you don't want to. But it happened. It really did.

prologue.

The world just went to hell, that day. The seas caught fire and the stars went black. We'd all pretended like it was incredibly funny, incredibly ironic that we'd all die in a blazing fury of zombies or aliens or robots, or something. Hell, some people even thought that someone messed up with a ouija board and unleashed a storm of demons and ghosts onto the world.

But the tempest calmed all too quickly.

To this day, no one really knows what caused the world to go haywire. It's been a while since the stars had stopped shining and the seas had stopped rolling. Scientists are all still frantically seeking for an explanation, maybe even looking for a way to rectify the problem and all its possible returns, even though it's a thing of the past. Conspiracy theorists have thrived ever since, with ideas void of remotely anything coherent or plausible, but it's believed nevertheless, driven by fear.

But the weirdest part was that even though at night, lost wanderers had been rendered unable to navigate their way by light, even though the shipwrecked sailors were forever lost in stagnant seas, the world had still functioned as it had during the normal part of our lifetimes. Our environment hadn't changed, nature never had forsaken us. It's only our manmade panic that's had any major effect over the duration of the catastrophes.

It only took a few hours for everyone to realize the newborn fallacies of this new world.

Again, we'd all acted like it was hilarious, that someone was playing a cruel practical joke on us. I guess we tried to pretend that it was, because we wished it was true, maybe we thought that if we lied to ourselves enough, it would actually come true.

But it was probably out of fear, we were too afraid to bring up the unspoken thoughts. We all knew that the world had truly gone to hell, and that there was nothing we could do about it.

It doesn't really matter though, we'd all learn that we couldn't play pretend for much longer.

I.

"It doesn't really make sense," I had whispered, mere weeks after that day. My voice was quiet and timid, I was afraid to mention it, I knew very well that I was breaking our fragile peace, the unspoken ideas haunting our relationships.

I'd wanted to put my trust in Leo, so I did.

"It's not like this world made any sense before it all decided to mess with us." His voice had been bitter beyond all reason, as if he had some sort of vendetta against the universe. But I guess we all did. Who else could we blame for changing the rules so suddenly? The game changed without our knowledge, and we were paralyzed within the board and its infinitely metamorphosing rules.

His response surprised me, I guess I was fully expecting him to ignore me, or to change the subject, not to openly express his frustrations as well. It never occurred to me that I was the only one who was dying of the posterity. I was cracking up, the pressure too tight and overwhelming and I needed somehow to suppress the tension.

"Maybe the fires of the stars and the waters of the seas got bored, and switched places, forsaking our miserable world, in retaliation of their cruel fate to perpetually keep the world at peace."

"Maybe they did," he agreed. I think he was in thought, because he didn't seem bored or uninterested, like he wanted to change the subject, but he was awfully quiet.

"So, what do you think's the cause for all this?" I asked, trying to fill the painful silence that would've perpetuated on until the world would end.

"Maybe the universe is dying," he suggested. I never thought it would be this soon.

"Well, at least we'll be the first generation to witness the death of the world," I said, looking for false optimism I didn't have faith in, ignoring that previous and instinctual thought.

And then he said something that still manages to make me think every once in a while, something that still manages to make me quake with fear every now and then, "We'll also be the last."

"Yeah, we will."

II.

If anything, the possibility of impending doom instilled nothing more than reckless behavior in our friendships, fueled by the heat of the seas.

Though the stars stopped shining and the seas burn away, they act as if they don't. So we did too.

A week before summer would end, Leo and I had decided we wanted to see more of the world, before it would seemingly end. There wasn't any guarantee that the world would indeed end soon, but we all kinda took it as a sign to live greater, and to live bigger. We went over to the coast, inviting Drew and Elle. She'd been a little wary and Drew honestly couldn't care less, but Leo and I eventually convinced them.

It was a great weekend after all. It was worth the trouble.

I think it was the weekend where we'd finally been able to accept everything, and ourselves.

We'd wanted to see the seas burning while gazing under the dark and cold skies. I still remember the looks of awe on everyone's faces, when we'd seen the seas on fire.

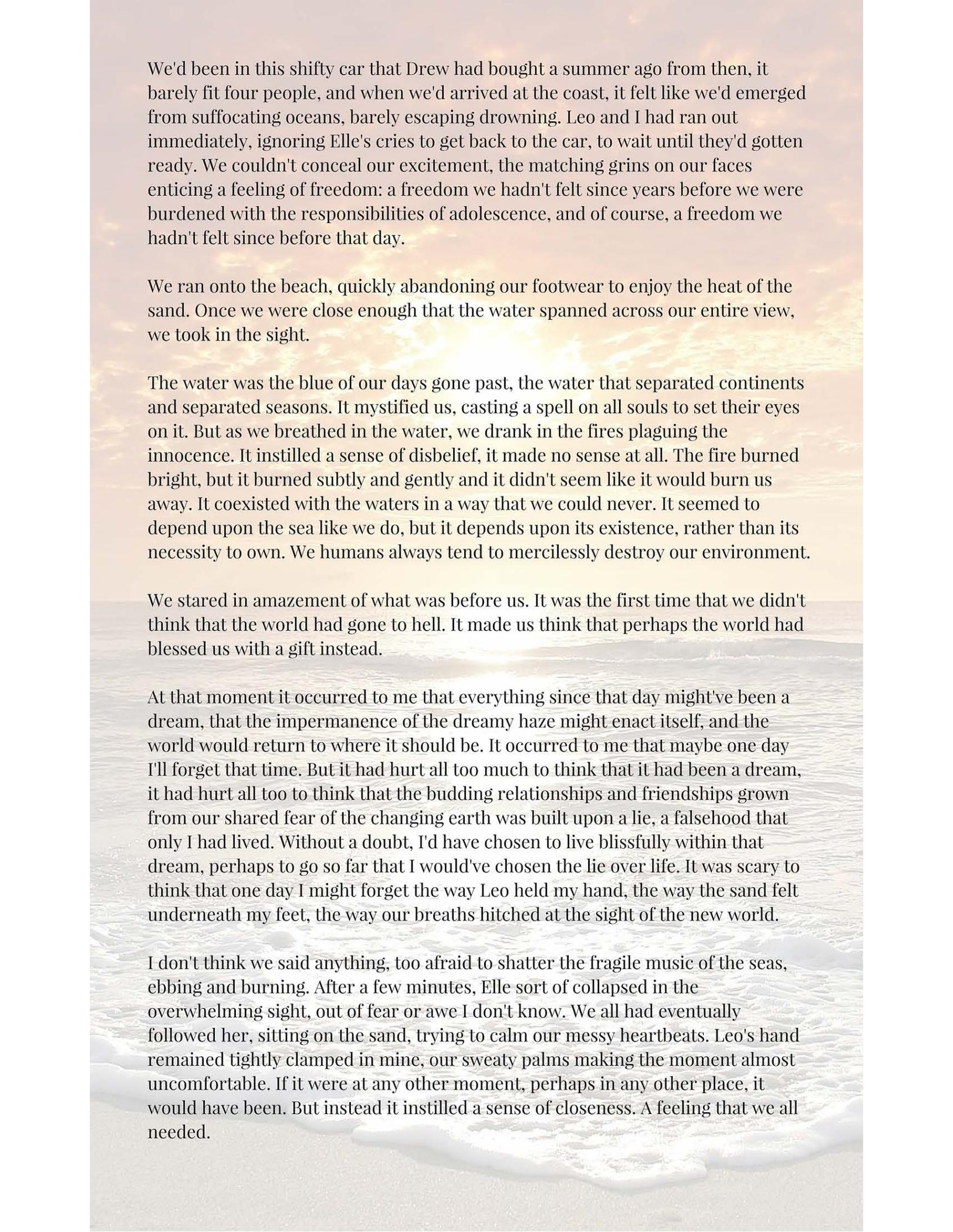
It was amazing, the way the seas were burning, yet they continued to act as if they weren't.

Drew and Elle took turns driving us, for I was all too young, and Leo promised to drive on the ride back. From the back seats, Leo and I would be speaking of our daydreams of the sea. Wondering out loud on the discourse we would take once we arrived.

It took a couple hours, us being all too far from the coast. When we'd got there, it'd been nearing dusk, and the sky started to fade like a washed out canvas, its paint unblemished due to absence of the light of the stars.

Scientists still detected the stars, it's not like they disappeared or anything, but they just had dissimilated into empty space, fading from the naked eye. The same went for the seas, I guess. Something about them had just glimmered in a pale fire. Of course, when we ran into the false waves, into the fake tides, into the illusory fire, nothing had happened. It hadn't been as warm as we'd expected.

Honestly, it felt like some sort of magical entrancement, floating on the fiery waters.



We'd been in this shifty car that Drew had bought a summer ago from then, it barely fit four people, and when we'd arrived at the coast, it felt like we'd emerged from suffocating oceans, barely escaping drowning. Leo and I had ran out immediately, ignoring Elle's cries to get back to the car, to wait until they'd gotten ready. We couldn't conceal our excitement, the matching grins on our faces enticing a feeling of freedom: a freedom we hadn't felt since years before we were burdened with the responsibilities of adolescence, and of course, a freedom we hadn't felt since before that day.

We ran onto the beach, quickly abandoning our footwear to enjoy the heat of the sand. Once we were close enough that the water spanned across our entire view, we took in the sight.

The water was the blue of our days gone past, the water that separated continents and separated seasons. It mystified us, casting a spell on all souls to set their eyes on it. But as we breathed in the water, we drank in the fires plaguing the innocence. It instilled a sense of disbelief, it made no sense at all. The fire burned bright, but it burned subtly and gently and it didn't seem like it would burn us away. It coexisted with the waters in a way that we could never. It seemed to depend upon the sea like we do, but it depends upon its existence, rather than its necessity to own. We humans always tend to mercilessly destroy our environment.

We stared in amazement of what was before us. It was the first time that we didn't think that the world had gone to hell. It made us think that perhaps the world had blessed us with a gift instead.

At that moment it occurred to me that everything since that day might've been a dream, that the impermanence of the dreamy haze might enact itself, and the world would return to where it should be. It occurred to me that maybe one day I'll forget that time. But it had hurt all too much to think that it had been a dream, it had hurt all too to think that the budding relationships and friendships grown from our shared fear of the changing earth was built upon a lie, a falsehood that only I had lived. Without a doubt, I'd have chosen to live blissfully within that dream, perhaps to go so far that I would've chosen the lie over life. It was scary to think that one day I might forget the way Leo held my hand, the way the sand felt underneath my feet, the way our breaths hitched at the sight of the new world.

I don't think we said anything, too afraid to shatter the fragile music of the seas, ebbing and burning. After a few minutes, Elle sort of collapsed in the overwhelming sight, out of fear or awe I don't know. We all had eventually followed her, sitting on the sand, trying to calm our messy heartbeats. Leo's hand remained tightly clamped in mine, our sweaty palms making the moment almost uncomfortable. If it were at any other moment, perhaps in any other place, it would have been. But instead it instilled a sense of closeness. A feeling that we all needed.

The summer heat was intoxicatingly sweet, so addicting that we would bathe in the ambiance created by the worldly powers.

Drew spoke the first words since we had gotten on the beach, "I never thought I'd say this, but I'm glad the universe started to malfunction the way it did."

"I never thought the death of the universe would be this lovely," said Leo.

"There's always beauty in death." Nonsense had been vomiting out my mouth through words, emotions expressing themselves in ideas which contradict my thoughts. I just let it flow out, at that point, with no filter on whatever I was saying. I had supposed that the feelings had to have some truth tied to it.

"Do you think this signifies the end of the world, or something?" Elle whispered, the fear evident in the slight quiver of her tone.

We didn't answer her question, as confused as she was. Instead Leo said, "It's kinda funny how before, the skies would sleep with the stars as their guardians, but now it seems like the skies just die each night and are born again and given life by the sun and the moon. Giving life in retaliation for their cruel fate."

"Why'd you think it happened?" Drew asked.

"Maybe the makers of the world messed up, accidentally forgot to turn on the stars, maybe they dropped an eternal fire onto the seas. Maybe they accidentally messed with our sight, and we see these shadows in the place of the former truth." Leo had said it as a joke, but something about the way he said it struck me as odd.

"Maybe our makers had messed up, maybe the game we had been living in had an unfixable error, maybe there was a glitch in the game and they can't fix it. Maybe something malfunctioned with our programming, and we're all just functioning weirdly now," Drew retorted.

"If it were that, then wouldn't this world just have had no meaning in the first place? Wouldn't have just been a lie?" Elle asked.

"It's really up to us to create our meaning. There really isn't any reason that we find to keep on living, we just make our own reasons, built upon the events and people which shape us." It was a spur of the moment thought, a thought I couldn't resist to speak out loud. I never thought it'd have the repercussions that it did.

"Well what do we do, now that the world has changed the game?" Leo asked, seemingly interested.

“We just,” I paused, trying to think of some way to articulate my feelings, “we just have to create a meaning from something in this world, something that's worth living for, the responsibility is ours, the choice is up to us.”

“So how do you say we create meaning?”

“If anything, we can create meaning through the lost light of the stars, through the fire of the seas.” I knew that my words were disorganized and messy with no focused goal, and they might've even contradicted themselves, but I'm sure that everyone there understood what I was saying. They all shared the same feelings, as they were created by our surroundings. So they must've understood my words driven by emotions. It was a feeling shared and a feeling lost in the moment. There was a sort of agreement in the silence that followed. Unlike many times before, the silence wasn't empty, there was something lingering behind. Unsaid words, unspoken thoughts, unshared feelings. But we could all see them, we could all hear them, we could all feel them. The notion that the bonds between us would break far from that night would've been incomprehensible to hear then. The things we would feel later contradicted the unity we'd felt that night. We wouldn't forget this night, I don't think we'll ever. But something magical about this night was lost in the summer heat, entrapped in the toxic air.

We'd go home far into the night, after Elle was on the verge of collapsing of exhaustion, after there was a tint of light from the sun drifting upon the horizon, after the sky seemed to revive itself. Drew and Leo then drove us back, exhilarated by the sights seen that day. The trip was ill-planned, but I think that's where some of the magic lies.

As we left, we had managed to forsake a little of the things we had felt that night. But that's okay, because some things are meant to remain forever lost in the moment, some things aren't meant to leave the place, the time, they had been born.

It was also okay because we had managed to gain some things, some insights, that we'd never have gotten without losing some things along the way. And it was okay that one of the things we'd have to lose were the bonds which intertwined our souls. We're all better for it, I swear.

III.

The summer heat was starting to fade, and so were our relationships. They began to deteriorate, slowly, one by one and all at once. They were fragile friendships as well, all of us so dependent upon the others that a single one of us self-destructing would cause the ruin of all of us. So it did.

In all honesty, it was me who collapsed first and onto all the others.

It wasn't dramatic or anything, there was no one moment where our relationships imploded. Instead, it was a gradual deterioration of what made us friends. We became a little more open with each other after the day we had escaped to the coast, but we were still a little wary with each other, perhaps even more than before. Maybe it was because we were more open and more vulnerable that we felt the need to be on guard at all times. We had opened our souls to each other that day, and it was more than terrifying.

The world hasn't ended, and ever since that day nothing weird has happened in nature, other than the world reverting back to the way it was. But I still can't deny that the world might be ending soon. Back then I had thought it was best to ignore the looming fear, because ignorance begets the most wonderfully reckless abandon. The kind of abandon that creates the best stories. That's all I cared about back then, the stories, the experiences. I hadn't consciously cared all too much about my friends, or myself. I'd valued a great story rather than the heart of the characters.

I guess the breaking of our friendships changed everything, and it changed me for the better. It changed all of us for the better.

epilogue.

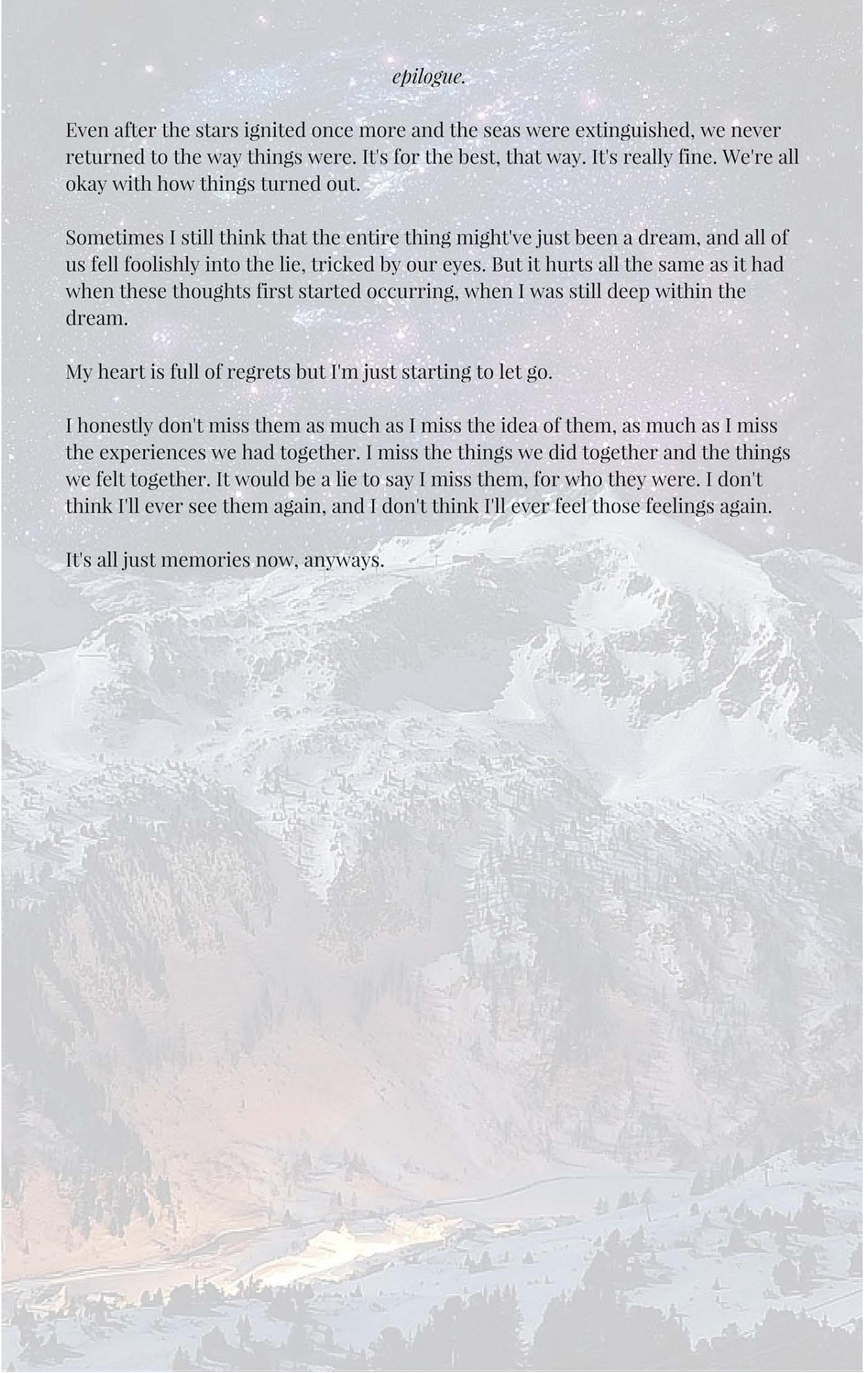
Even after the stars ignited once more and the seas were extinguished, we never returned to the way things were. It's for the best, that way. It's really fine. We're all okay with how things turned out.

Sometimes I still think that the entire thing might've just been a dream, and all of us fell foolishly into the lie, tricked by our eyes. But it hurts all the same as it had when these thoughts first started occurring, when I was still deep within the dream.

My heart is full of regrets but I'm just starting to let go.

I honestly don't miss them as much as I miss the idea of them, as much as I miss the experiences we had together. I miss the things we did together and the things we felt together. It would be a lie to say I miss them, for who they were. I don't think I'll ever see them again, and I don't think I'll ever feel those feelings again.

It's all just memories now, anyways.



Poem

By Andrew Messick

Oak Middle school is very amazing

All other schools are standing there dazing

People will smash their work when they try

It's almost just like that our people can fly

In power of course cause we are so bold

So awesome, so beautiful cause we are so gold

Oak Middle school, the fun sure lasts long

People all over are coming through strong

We are a team and we are the best

Let's put our school to the big test

Whether we are good, whether we are bad

We will accomplish anything we won't get mad

We are a great school we hit the top

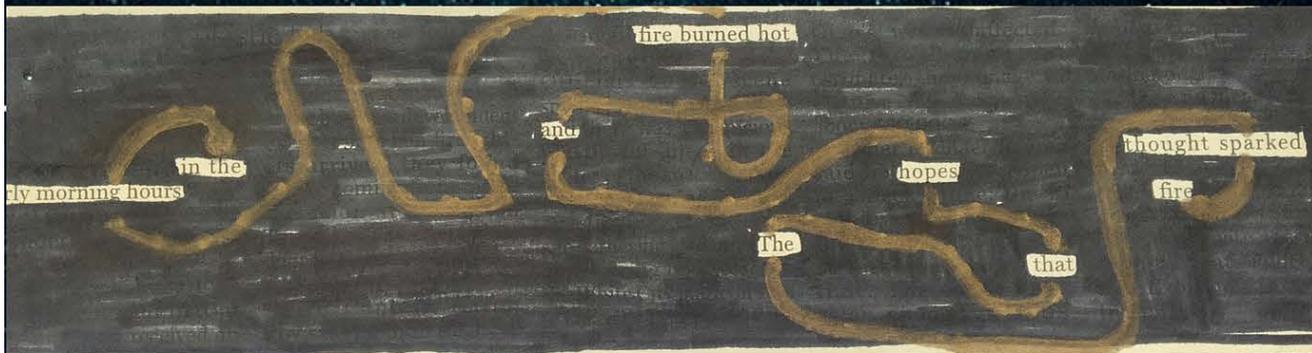
It's up to you to look and stop

How amazing we are and savage too

Oak Middle school has won in life

Through through and through

BLACKOUT POEM



Keegan Scesny

LION OF THE REALM

SREYA NIMMAGADDA

We are captured in a cage,
Where we can see the world but not engage.
We are glued to their expectations, the sticky
slime,
But we shall escape and let loose before we lose
our time.
We will muster all of our rage
And throw it into the war we must wage,
Gaining our freedom, we will turn the page
Where we are forever in our prime,
Lion of the realm.
Every one of us is a sage
Never once will we succumb to their image.
We will persevere through the long, difficult
climb,
And stay determined to never commit the
crime
Of joining their attention-seeking show on the
scrutinizing stage.
We are no longer in their grasp and have come
of age—
Lion of the realm!

Next Door

By Tanvi Saini

The little girl retouches her makeup

to hide the freckles that cover her face

Next door, a young boy takes his cellphone out of other people's view

to look at his dad's last text "I love you"

Nearby, a lady looks at her reflection

wanting a thinner nose, wanting her height to grow

Society makes us fit this role

makes us change in all ways

You have to play by his rules

and never let you be you

Society throws everyones true beauty

self confidence and love down

leaves them with nothing

but a frown

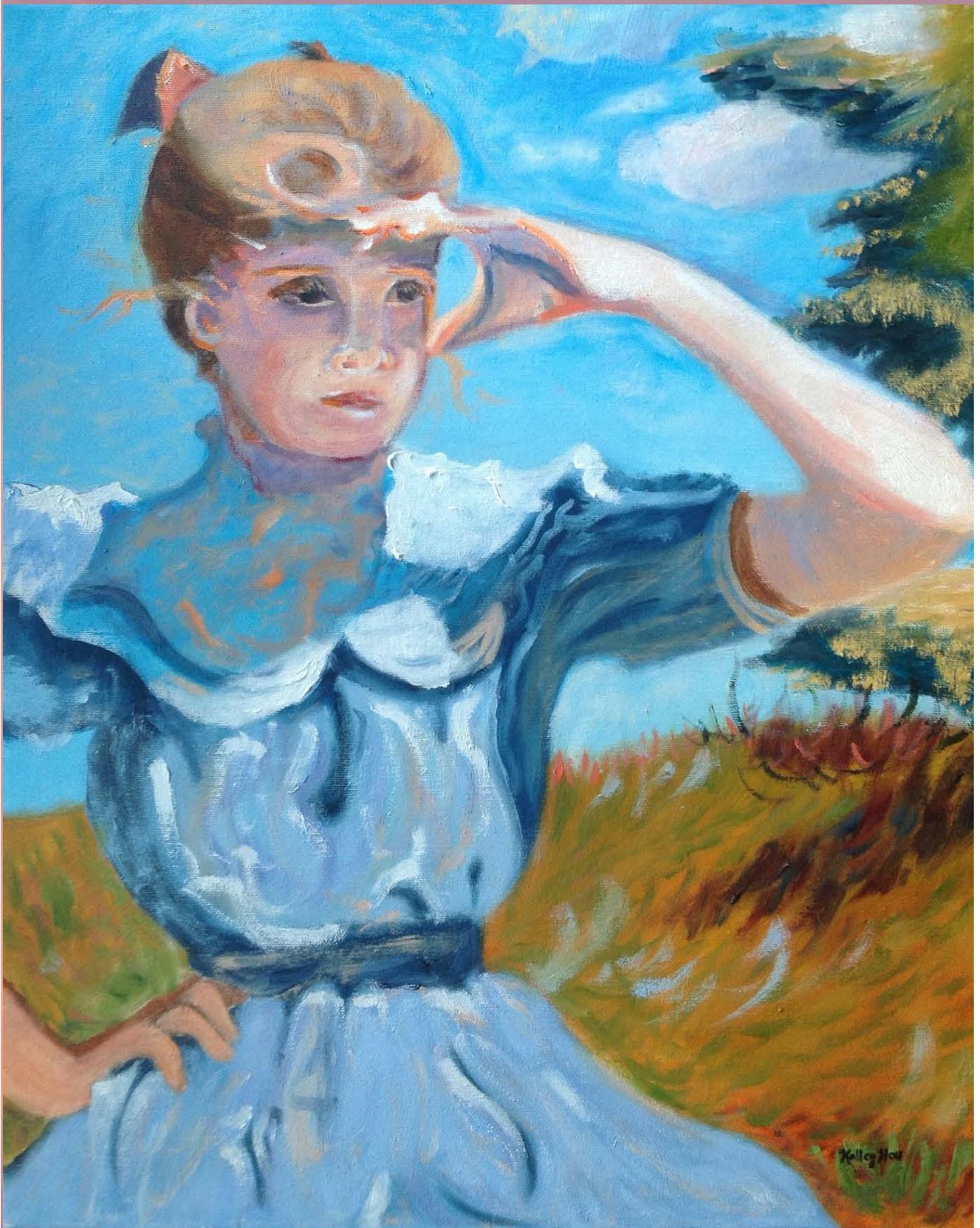
Next door, next time

don't be so cruel

because all he does is

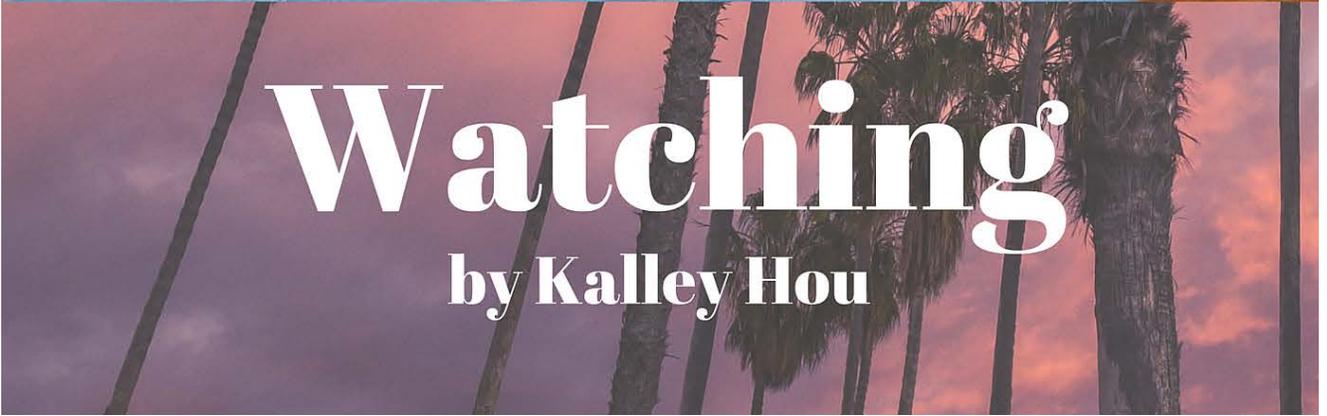
amplifies the little details that make us

Who we are.



Watching

by Kalley Hou



Setting goals is an important part of life to all of us. The hard part, however, is actually reaching those goals that we set for ourselves. I believe that no matter who you are and no matter what situation you are in, you should never give up on your dreams, no matter what gets in your way. It wasn't until I tested for my first degree of black belt in martial arts that I realized this. Life was easy going, a pleasant sail on a smooth sea, until a storm began to form over the sunny horizon, and my ship nearly tipped over. Life becomes a violent tempest that nearly knocks you off your feet sometimes, but the important part is to face the storm head-on and push your way through until you reach your goal. Giving up is never an option for those of us that are strong and disciplined. I urge everyone to realize their strengths and understand that you won't have but a chance of achieving what you want in life if you're not willing to work hard, and you are willing to give up when life punches you in the face. So work hard, stay focused, and never give up no matter what tries to get in your way

Before the idea of perseverance became so important to me, I had it locked in my head that as long as you do your best, life is always easy and everything you do will always work. Of course, I was completely incorrect because almost nothing works the first time, and life is almost never completely easy. The day I learned the value of not giving up on your dreams was a balmy, seventy-five degree day in June 2013. The sun had just barely risen. My heart was already beating rapidly, beads of sweat began to form on my forehead, and I completely lost my appetite. The day of any martial artist's first black belt test is completely overwhelming and nerve-racking. I tied the stiffly ironed black strings of my uniformed tightly together, and adjusted the tightness of my belt for what seemed like the hundredth time. Water clinked into my bottle as I pushed the faucet on, my hands still shaking. I grabbed my bag and headed to the car where my stomach would be fluttering for the next hour, as my dad drove me to the gym where the test would take place. I stepped out of the car, my legs quivering with fear that cut deeper than a knife, and opened the front entrance to see seas of other students practically vomiting with the fear that they might fail today, and this might be the end of their journey as a karate student. Suddenly, with a thunderous voice that created streaks of lightning in the dark sky, Master Gruposso barked out an order to us, to line up and quit yapping. My heart began to race, and it was this moment that I began to realize that this test would be no walk in the park. I would sweat, my muscles would ache, and I would want so, so badly to give up and stop working myself so hard and just go home. I knew I wouldn't give up though, because my desire for the rank of black belt was a beam that shone through me like a ray of sunlight. I told myself I would persevere, and I would achieve what I wanted.

The moment of realization that perseverance is a very important factor to being successful in reaching your life goals has changed me as a person in a positive way. I now am aware that any goal can be reached with the right amount of determination and discipline. The test for my black belt certainly wasn't easy. It took me five years to even be eligible to test, and when I became eligible, I worked for months and months in preparation and nervousness, desperate to achieve my desired rank and terrified of failure. Although my fears formed an ominous cloud of fear that sat over my head for several months on end, I pushed through the cloud and reached my hand up high to touch the sun. This experience left a mark on me that forces me to persevere in everything I do, and never underestimate my own abilities. I am now a strong, disciplined young woman who understands that life may appear to be a lovely package tied up with lacy ribbons, but is much more of a rocky road than it appears to be. The only way to get through life and achieve success is to fail first. No individual can accomplish greatness without first being a complete failure. But the important thing is to recognize your mistakes and don't be discouraged by them. Let them form a new light of hope inside you that rises up and guides you to do your best until you accomplish your dreams. Never give up, no matter what comes your way. This I believe.



Forgiveness

By Athena Wu

I blinked once, then again. Unbelievable! All the math tests' scores were posted in the hallway. Towards the end of the list was my name, printed in large bold letters. How? I had been the top student in the USA, only to be placed close to last in China?

Suddenly, a girl, Joyce, stepped in front of me. "Miss Failure from the USA," she snickered, pointing at me. Then, she threw her head back and laughed: "Hahaha!" Next period, I noticed a note taped on my desk. Five simple words were printed: Miss Failure from the USA. On the bottom was a cartoon of a face with its tongue sticking out. I stared straight at Joyce. Boy, my insides were on fire! I wanted to argue and shout, but I stopped myself. I didn't want to make a bad impression on my classmates.

From then on, I began to watch Joyce. I thought that she would sit with other mean kids, but I was wrong. During break, besides playing with a table tennis ball, she either sat by herself in the corner of the room while drawing cartoons or stared at pictures on her cell phone. Had Joyce been mean only because she wanted attention and a friend? Slowly, my feelings towards Joyce started to change, and I became curious to know what exactly she was like.

One day, I looked over to where Joyce was sitting. Hesitantly, I walked towards her. Thoughts flooded my mind. What if she started to tease me again? Cautiously, I sat down next to her.

Joyce looked up from her cartoon, looking a little surprised. "Nice cartoon," I commented, looking over her shoulder.

Then, I casually glanced towards Joyce's phone. It displayed a photo of a woman. "Is that your mom?"

Quickly, Joyce snatched the phone up and cradled it in her arms as if it were a baby. "Yes, but my parents are divorced," Joyce whispered, her face filled with sorrow.

"I'm...I'm so sorry." I managed to stammer.

We were silent for a moment.

“Could you teach me how to draw cartoons?” I asked after a minute. “I could teach you table tennis in return,” I suggested, shrugging my shoulders.

Without further ado, Joyce immediately pulled out a new sketchbook and started to teach me. Afterwards, Joyce and I became close friends.

Two years later, I moved back to the USA. While saying our goodbyes, Joyce held my hand, staring at the ground. “Athena, I’m really sorry for teasing you and -”

I interrupted her. “Don’t worry. I forgave you a long time ago.”

Slowly, Joyce looked up, her eyes glassy with tears. “I will miss you,” she said, enveloping me into a bear hug. “Thank you for forgiving me.”

Hugging her back, I smiled. Then, I softly spoke my last words I would ever say to Joyce before I left. “No, thank you. Now I know that when you forgive someone, you can make a friend for life.

Untitled Poem

By Lance Wong

Two railroads fading in distant light,
And both with futures, which seemed so bright.

And be one tourist, long I stared
And remembered, nobody cared
Carefully, I pondered in my silence.

Then took the right, as just as easy,
And having the better decision,
Because it was colorful and leafy ;
Though as for the walk, it was fairly crazy
Had them really differ from my beginning vision.

And both that day equally lay
In leaves and bamboo ferns,
Oh, I kept that way!
Yet knowing the result would cause us to back away,
I doubted if I could ever return.

I shall be telling this with a cry
Somewhere an eon in the distance:
Two railroads diverged in a light, and I...
I took the one with the blue sky,
And that has made suffer ever since.

Clear Day by Kalley Hou

