

FOR PAGE & SCREEN

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“You Can’t See the Future With Eyes of Cotton”
by Rachel Wojnar

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Chuyến Gió, or Crossing Realms of
Existence:
Queering the Dream of Asia-
Futurism

Screenplay by

Kyla-Yên Huỳnh Giffin

FADE IN:

INT. ASTRAL PROJECTION ROOM – DAY

HUỲNH AN LINH sits in the dark, cross-legged, eyes closed, their hands in a full lotus position on their lap. They are wearing a white iridescent men's áo dài with no shoes and have their dark brown hair styled in a feathered bob.

The only light in the room seems to emit from them. Even the freckles on their face shimmer, looking like a constellation. Their rhythmic breathing and heartbeat echo all around.

A ringing fades in and grows louder and louder until all sounds stop and their eyelids fly open, revealing deep black eyes that reflect the scene in front of them.

EXT. RURAL SCHOOLHOUSE – SUNSET

LINH has become a CHILD no more than ten years old. Their hair is clipped into a ponytail with a tortoiseshell barrette and they are carrying a small brown bookbag on their back. They are wearing a school uniform—a white collared shirt over an ankle-length, pleated red skirt, and

black stockings tucked into brown buckled loafers.

The darkness around them has changed so that Linh is illuminated in an orange glow, standing at the corner of a schoolhouse surrounded by farmland, watching other school children laugh and chat while walking, skipping, or running on the paths along the fields toward their homes.

Linh blinks, shakes their head slightly, and moves to walk forward when their foot kicks something with a thud. Linh looks down.

At Linh's foot is the peeling trunk of a chopped down tree. They inhale and smile, smelling the tree's pleasant fragrance.

LINH (V.O.)
Cinnamon.

Linh squats down and begins peeling off the bark and holding it up to their nose to smell it some more. Looking absentmindedly into the distance, they put the cinnamon bark in their mouth and chew.

LINH (V.O.)
I guess I must have liked
cinnamon in this life.

Linh sits back on their heels and watches the school children and farmers in the fields.

LINH (V.O.)
Funny. I hate cinnamon.

Linh stands up, still chewing on the bark, and walks away from the schoolhouse.

Linh enters onto the path by the fields, chewing on the cinnamon bark and shielding their eyes from the sun. Children can be heard laughing far ahead on the path, as well as the sound of farmers

working and chatting in the fields and wind blowing through the grass.

The scene begins to pixelate and Linh stops walking and chewing.

EXT. TEMPLE W/ LOTUS POND AND TREE

Linh stands in front of a Buddhist temple and lotus pond that sit beneath a giant tree, large nuts, broken and full, lying scattered across the ground.

They look around.

LINH (V.O.)

I know this temple.

Linh walks toward the temple and pond.

One particularly large nut, still unbroken, sits at the edge of the pond. Linh approaches it, their footsteps quiet on the soft ground, and picks the nut up.

Linh moves it around in their hands, tracing the grooves and edges, before loudly breaking the shell open.

They pop half of the nut into their mouth, then sit down on their knees at the edge of the pond.

Linh gazes across the water and up to the top of the temple and tree. The orange-red sun shines through gaps in the branches and gaps in the temple arches and windows. Bird song and the buzzing of bugs drift through the atmosphere.

A dragonfly lands on a lotus in the middle of the pond, sits for a few seconds, and flies off.

Linh rests their chin in one hand, and with the other, pops the other half of the nut into their

mouth, their jaw moving up and down in their hand as they chew.

LINH (V.O.)
Did I just eat anything I
found on the ground?

INCARNATION
(giggling)
Actually, we thought this was
the best way to know things.

LINH (V.O.)
Oh?

INCARNATION
Yeah, by tasting the world
around us. We learned it from
our parents, the way they
interacted with the land they
farmed.

LINH (V.O.)
I see.

Linh and the incarnation sit, watch, and chew in
silence.

INCARNATION
Are the farms still there, in
the future?

LINH (V.O.)
Yes.

INCARNATION
(excited)
Really?

LINH (V.O.)
Really. The land is
flourishing like you wouldn't
believe. We take good care of
(CONT'D)

LINH (V.O.) (CONT'D)
it. And we take good care of
the people who tend to it,
too.

INCARNATION
That makes me...
(grins wide)
really happy to hear.

The scene pixelates into darkness and Linh morphs
back into their present form.

INT. ASTRAL PROJECTION ROOM

Linh stands up from the floor and, as they walk
forward, the room pixelates once more and-

INT. BUDDHIST SHRINE - CONTINUOUS

-turns into a Buddhist shrine room, every wall,
statue, rug, and tapestry iridescent in light and
color, and seeming to be rippling.

A door slides open in the wall directly in front
of Linh. They walk through it into a large domed
glass greenhouse.

It closes behind them.

INT. GREENHOUSE

Along the greenhouse's wall is a series of
reflective sliding glass doors, including the one
Linh just walked through, and throughout the
interior of the greenhouse are hundreds of
species of plants and bugs native to Vietnam. In
the center is a wide metal column of shelf upon
shelf of binder, with a metal railing spiraling
around it.

Linh walks to the base of the column, where
instead of shelves the column is just a glass-
walled enclosure.

The glass slides open for Linh to enter, and as it closes, the glass cylinder is filled with beams of white lasers from top to bottom, scanning Linh's body.

Linh holds out their hands in front of them, and all the beams focus onto their hands, dotting the outline of a rectangular shape. The beams construct, thread by thread, a thin metal tablet with white glowing etchings, looking almost like a large computer chip.

The beams sweep over Linh again, and their white iridescent áo dài pixelates into thin air to be replaced by a sage green áo bà ba top, white pleated culottes, and black combat boots, a black leather trench coat draping over their shoulders and a messenger bag hanging across their body.

The glass slides back open and Linh steps out onto a metal platform which lifts them up steadily into the air with a soft hum, and floats along the railing around and up the outside of the column, until they reach a shelf midway up the column and the platform stops.

Linh pulls one of the binders off the shelf and opens it, revealing a stack of tablets like the one in their hand, but each with its own unique engravings. They place their tablet on top of the pile, shut the binder, and replace it on the shelf.

The platform floats them back down to the ground.

As they land, several glass doors throughout the greenhouse begin opening, and other people in the same uniform as Linh was wearing walk out and approach the column.

One of them, a tall WOMAN with a birthmark in the shape of a butterfly wing on her right cheek, and black hair that floats down to her waist in two long braids, waves at Linh and jogs over to them.

Linh waves back, smiling.

TIÊN

Linh! Did you already archive your tablet? Who were you today?

LINH

The daughter of farmers, from the 20th century. She was just a kid, too. Ate everything she found on the ground.

Linh and Tiên both laugh.

TIÊN

I was in the 17th century today.
(pridefully with palm on chest)
He was a hát tuồng opera singer.

LINH

How ironic. You can't carry a tune to save your life.

Tiên playfully punches Linh's arm.

TIÊN

Hey! And here I was going to make you bánh bò hấp tonight.

Tiên thrusts her chin up in the air in mock indignation and begins to walk away toward the column.

LINH

Tiên, I take it back, I take it back! You're such a great singer that I definitely don't want to rip out my eardrums whenever I hear you sing.

Tiên looks over her shoulder back at Linh and laughs.

TIÊN

Okay, okay. As long as you help me cook.

Linh smiles as Tiên lines up with the others at the column to wait her turn to retrieve and archive her tablet.

They walk through one of the glass sliding doors, the tallest and widest of all of them, at the opposite end of the greenhouse as the shrine room door they had come out of.

INT. ARCHIVAL LIBRARY

Linh enters into a grand domed library. The white floors and white staircases and curving white wall filled to the brim with books and white áo dài of workers walking around with books or electronic tablets in hand, all drenched in sunlight from the enormous skylight on the ceiling.

The white walls are only disturbed by the greenhouse windows that curve from the skylight down to the glass sliding doors that lead to the greenhouses.

A round desk with a few receptionists behind it, typing on projected screens, sits at the center of the room.

Linh walks toward a large opening in the floor in front of the desk that contains a stairwell leading down to the first floor.

As Linh approaches the opening, a tour group of people led by another worker in a red instead of white áo dài with a neon pink pixie cut come up the stairs.

GIANG

This is our historic archival library! These documents are ancient, fragile, and often one of a kind, so as such, require special care from our book conservators and historians.

Giang sees Linh, smiles, and gestures at them.

GIANG

And here we have one of our extraordinary historians now, Huỳnh An Linh! They just came out of one of our greenhouses, which contain our astral projection shrine rooms where historians spend their workday re-experiencing past lives. Each greenhouse, by using sunlight as well as the energy from sound waves generated by the bugs and plants inside, also powers its own core column that is responsible for burning our historians' ancestral memories onto tablets and then archiving them in our system.

The tour group "oohs" and "ahs" as Linh shyly waves at them.

GIANG

Linh, do you think you could share with the group what past life you experienced today?

LINH

Well, I found myself in 20th century rural Vietnam as a

(CONT'D)

LINH (CONT'D)
young schoolgirl whose
parents were farmers. I was
able to see what an ancient
temple and schoolhouse looked
like. One cool thing about
experiencing our past lives
is we take on the feelings of
our ancestors. Like, I hate
cinnamon, both the smell and
taste, but this version of me
loved it, so I loved it too.
I could also feel her love
for her parents, and her love
of the world around her.

(smiles to herself as they
remember the experience)
It's really a beautiful
thing.

Everyone in the group, in awed silence, including
Giang, eagerly watches and listens to Linh.

LINH
If anyone has any questions,
I can answer them.

Giang claps their hands together in delight.

GIANG
Perfect!
(turns to group)
Questions, anybody?

Several hands shoot up. Linh chuckles and rubs
the back of their head hesitantly, sharing a look
with Giang.

GIANG
(mouthing)
Please?

Linh sighs, then searches the group to see who
they should call on first. They spot a YOUNG BOY

off to the side, his arm impatiently stretched into the air.

LINH

(gesturing at the boy)
How about you, kid? What do you want to know?

The boy lowers his hand.

YOUNG BOY

How many lives have you lived? Does this mean you remember all of them? Who are you going to be tomorrow—

LINH

Whoa.

(chuckles and puts hands up in a stop motion)
Slow down, one question at a time. Um, I don't know how many lifetimes I've lived, nobody does, really. Some past lives take days, weeks, even months to explore, so most of us will never make it through all our past lives. As for remembering, you could say all the memories from each past life are downloaded into my brain when I project, although it's more like they're being awakened. But after projecting, only the memories I re-experienced stay with me. Everything else still gets recorded on the tablets though. And as for the last question, I don't know who I'll be tomorrow. No one knows until they project.

The young boy listens carefully then nods matter-of-factly, as if he already knew all the answers and was simply testing Linh.

The other tour group members grow more interested and impatient, bursting with questions.

TOUR GROUP MEMBER #1

Do you experience bodily sensations when projecting?

TOUR GROUP MEMBER #2

Is projecting like time travel? Can you change the past?

TOUR GROUP MEMBER #3

Oh, what about—

GIANG

Alright everyone, that's enough bugging Linh, they did just get off work after all! We'll let them go and we can continue our tour through the library and in the greenhouses, and there will be plenty more people, including me, to answer your questions.

Some disappointed "aw"s come from the group as Giang herds them away, giving Linh an apologetic look over their shoulder.

Linh nods in thanks to Giang, then heads down the stairs.

INT. PUBLIC LIBRARY

The first floor resembles the second floor almost exactly.

The library it contains is a public library accessible to everybody, and Linh can see people

of all ages, alone, as couples, or in groups, all browsing the shelves or talking to workers at the reception desk, kids running across platforms and up and down the spiral staircases.

Linh walks straight from the bottom of the stairs in the direction of the entrance, which is a glass revolving door under a solid white arch. As they pass the reception desk, they wave goodbye to the workers sitting there, who smile and wave back.

Walking out the entryway, they shield their eyes from the evening sun.

EXT. FRONT OF LIBRARY – HO CHI MINH CITY

The skyline of the city looks like a range of hills, every building domed and curved and covered on its entire surface with gardens, fields, and even farmland.

Rivers trace the city ground instead of roads, with concrete footbridges and walkways crossing and outlining them. Water vehicles float through the rivers and pedestrians walk along them

In the sky, people whiz around on skyboards and in sky cars, buses, and trains.

Linh sits on a bench near a skyboard rack and charging port to watch the city. At the sound of footsteps, Linh looks over their shoulder to see Tiên coming from out of the library, now in a peach-and-navy-blue-colored áo tú thân over white high-tops worn and dirty from wear, a fanny pack strapped across their back.

As Linh stands up to greet Tiên, she jumps onto them, throwing her arms around their neck, and Linh wraps their own arms around her waist.

Tiên pulls back to look down at Linh's face, kisses them, and smiles. The birthmark on her

face rises up with her cheek, as if it is an actual butterfly flapping its wing.

TIÊN

Ready to go?

LINH

Mhm.

Linh puts Tiên down and grabs their skyboard from the rack nearby, placing the tip of their thumb on a small scanner on the edge, powering it on with a loud whir.

The skyboard floats out of their hands and hovers near the ground.

Linh steps on it, their feet suctioned onto the board with a soop sound by the skyboard's gravitational pull, then holds their hand out to Tiên to help her on. With another soop, Tiên's feet are secured to the skyboard, and it flies off into the sky.

As the two of them soar through the airway above Ho Chi Minh City, they pass by other skyboarders and sky cars, weave between the hill-like buildings, and skim the surface of the rivers.

The two of them grin widely the entire time, laughing wildly when they get splashed because they are too close to the water, or when the breeze blows them unexpectedly.

EXT. APARTMENT

They arrive in front of a large apartment complex covered from top to bottom in foliage, every apartment a colorful cubical pod, so that the complex looked as if it was made of giant linking cube toys.

The two of them fly onto the balcony of a pale green apartment, and the skyboard hovers low as

the two of them step off. Almost the entire balcony floor is covered with potted plants, and plants also hang from the balcony railing and the ceiling above the balcony.

Linh picks up the skyboard and places their thumb over the scanner again to power it off, then sets the skyboard against a charging platform on the wall.

Linh and Tiên pause at the same time, inhale deeply, then look at each other.

LINH

I guess Hải already made dinner.

TIÊN

Thank goodness, I'm so hungry.

LINH

Yeah and you need to make sure you get enough energy so we can make bánh bò hấp later.

Tiên laughs.

TIÊN

Is that all you've been thinking about?

LINH

The entire ride home.

Tiên rolls her eyes at Linh, slides open the balcony door, and walks into the apartment, followed by Linh.

INT. APARTMENT

Colorful rugs and velvety cushions all surround a short table on the floor, flowers and

succulents lining almost every inch of the cream-colored walls, vine plants and air plants hanging from the ceiling, potted trees of every shape and size squeezed into every corner and edge available.

Against the wall to the left, partially obscured by all the plants, is a small, charming kitchen, where HÃI, a young man with long hair, jet black save for his purple highlights, drawn into a ponytail, stands wearing a white apron over a maroon linen áo dài tunic and black lounge shorts. He stands over a stove, holding a frying pan that sizzles from the heat.

He looks up at Linh and Tiên.

HÃI

Oh, you're home! I'm just cooking some shredded chicken and then our bánh mì will be ready.

LINH

Yum!

TIÊN

I'll get the plates. Are the others joining us?

Hải clicks his teeth.

HÃI

Oh, I knew there was something I was forgetting.

TIÊN

You mean you didn't make enough?

HÃI

No, no, that's the thing, I did make enough. I just forgot to ask everyone.

Hải laughs and rubs the back of his neck.

LINH

No worries, I've got it.

Linh walks to the front of the apartment, taking off their leather trench coat as they do so.

When they reach the front door, they hang their coat on a hook, then slide open the door. Looking down the quiet hall of closed apartment doors, they cup their hands around their mouth.

LINH

(shouting)

Hey everyone! Hải made bánh mì!

Through the hall, feet shuffle and voices in the apartments as doors open and their neighbors step out into the hall.

NEIGHBOR #1

How did he know I was craving bánh mì?

NEIGHBOR #2

Oh good, I'm too exhausted to make dinner tonight.

NEIGHBOR #3

Hải, we'll all make you a feast next week, but I can't promise it'll be anywhere near as good as your food.

NEIGHBOR #4

Wait, let me bring over some of the bánh tét I made earlier.

NEIGHBOR #5

Oh yeah, I have some chả giò left over.

NEIGHBOR #6

I'll bring—

LINH

(shouting)

But did anyone happen to make
bánh bò hấp?

Fifteen of their neighbors file into the plant-filled apartment, dressed in their comfiest clothes for lounging around and carrying various dishes, chatting and laughing with each other.

Hải carries a tray of bánh mì over from the kitchen and places it in the center of the table, Linh helps everyone set up their dishes, and Tiên passes out plates and utensils.

Everyone settles onto the cushions, thanks each other for the food and thanks Linh, Tiên, and Hải for hosting them, then piles food onto their plates and eats, gossiping about their days and teasing one another all the while.

Linh scarfs down their food and bolts up from the floor and into the kitchen.

They open a cabinet door above their head, trying to reach one of the top shelves.

Tiên, mid-bite and listening to one of their neighbors tell a story about their daughter, sees Linh struggling out of the corner of her eye.

TIÊN

Linh, what are you doing?

LINH

(straining)

I'm...trying to reach...the
tapioca flour.

TIÊN

For bánh bò hấp?

LINH
(still straining)

Yes.

A couple of the people sitting next to Tiên watch Linh with her.

Linh's fingertips graze the side of a bag of white powder on the shelf, but can't quite grasp it.

Tiên sets her plate down and stands up.

TIÊN
You're too short, babe. Here,
let me hel-

Linh pushes the bottom of the bag too hard and it falls over on the shelf, top unrolled, spilling tapioca flour all over Linh's head and shoulders, a white cloud suspended in the air and slowly falling onto the counters and floor.

Tiên gasps and bursts out laughing as everyone else looks over to see what the commotion is all about.

Linh turns around and looks at them with a mildly shocked look on their white-coated face, and blows out to clear some of the flour off their lips.

Everyone else joins in laughing with Tiên, and Linh's shocked look turns to mild annoyance as they start to shake and brush the flour out of their hair.

Tiên walks over to them, still laughing, and tiptoeing around the flour on the floor so as not to track it throughout the apartment.

TIÊN
You should have just waited
for me to get it down for
you.

Tiên grabs a towel off the oven handle and, holding Linh's chin with one hand, wipes down their face with the other.

LINH
(muffled behind the towel)
I was eager to get started.

TIÊN
(laughs)
Well, now we don't have any
tapioca flour to make bánh bò
hấp with.

NEIGHBOR #7
Actually, I have a bag I
haven't even opened yet that
we can use!

Linh's eyes light up, and they go to run out of the kitchen when Tiên's arm catches them.

TIÊN
Wait, you're covered in
flour! You're going to track
it all over the place.

Linh gives Tiên a menacing smirk.

Tiên lets go of them and backs away, hands held out defensively in front of her.

TIÊN
Oh no, don't you dare, don't
even think about it, Linh.
Linh...

Tiên runs out of the kitchen and Linh chases after her, laughing along with everyone else.

Linh jumps onto her back, and Tiên shrieks playfully as they rub their flour-covered face on her face, shaking the flour off their hair onto Tiên's as well.

EXT. APARTMENT

The sun is low on the horizon behind the buildings that look like hills, but there is still enough of it to make the plants on the apartment balcony glow.

The rivers, reflecting gold, flow toward the sun like veins leading to a heart. The laughter from inside the apartment blends into the whirring of skyboards and sky vehicles and evening bird song.

INT. ASTRAL PROJECTION ROOM

Linh is once again sitting, cross-legged and eyes closed, in the dark astral projection shrine room, wearing their white work áo dài.

They pixelate into a YOUNG TEENAGER with sleek brown hair falling over the shoulders of their denim jacket, a bird pinned to the chest pocket.

Around them, the room pixelates into a dim sum restaurant, and they open their eyes.

INT. DIM SUM RESTAURANT

The restaurant is loud and bustling, every round table covered with a white tablecloth and surrounded by wooden chairs full of people, squished together as close as possible, only leaving enough room for servers to walk through with their carts.

Linh sits at one such table, and in the middle is a spinning wooden platform. The platform is filled to the brim with steamers and plates of various dumplings, buns, noodles, meats, and vegetables, a large bowl of cháo at the center, a stack of smaller bowls and soup spoons next to it.

Around the table sit people that, with the memories of this past life, they recognize as their AUNTIES, COUSINS, GRANDMOTHER, and MOTHER.

Their grandmother, mother, and aunties gossip a bit in Vietnamese to one another, but the cousins talk entirely in English, and the younger aunties speak a great deal in English, which Linh is surprised to find that this incarnation of themselves understands, since their present self does not.

LINH (V.O.)

Is this English? Where am I?

INCARNATION

San Jose, California.

LINH (V.O.)

America?

(groans)

Of all the places—

INCARNATION

Don't worry.

(smiles)

We're safe here. See?

Linh and the incarnation scan their surroundings.

Everyone in the restaurant is Asian, not a single white face in sight. And while some are speaking English, most are speaking Vietnamese, Chinese, Thai, Korean, and more.

All of Linh's relatives are smiling and laughing, eating to their hearts' content, speaking as loudly as they want to each other, the youngest cousins even chasing one another around the table.

The same can be said for the rest of the parties of people in the restaurant. Not only is it

obvious that they all feel safe, but it's obvious that they all feel joyous, as well.

LINH (V.O.)

(looking around)

You're right. Everyone does feel safe here. And there's no white people here. That's nice to see. I'm glad you had this.

INCARNATION

You still have this, right?

LINH (V.O.)

Oh yes. In fact, it's even greater. We're back in Vietnam. All across the "Third World," we've freed ourselves from the colonizers. We even destroyed capitalism in the West. And we brought our people home. And we've built such a wonderful, much better world. The land is happy, we are happy. We're healing. Thriving, really.

INCARNATION

It feels almost...impossible to imagine.

LINH (V.O.)

I promise you. It's not.

Linh and the restaurant pixelate again, and Linh becomes a YOUNG ADULT, their brown hair short and hidden under a beanie, barely reaching their ears where paper birds hang from their lobes. They are dressed in a mint green knit sweater over white wide-legged pants. Their long coat is a deep forest green, the same color as their beanie.

INT. ASIAN GROCERY STORE

Linh is standing in the snack aisle of an Asian grocery store, holding a red basket in one hand, where a couple packages of ramen, a bag of rice crackers, a few cups of Yan Yan, and a bag of tapioca flour are piled into.

Linh sees the flour and smiles.

LINH (V.O.)

That reminds me—I need to buy more tapioca flour.

INCARNATION

You do? Why?

LINH (V.O.)

I kind of spilled an entire bag on myself.

The incarnation laughs.

INCARNATION

Sounds like me.

LINH (V.O.)

What are you buying it for?

INCARNATION

To cook bánh bò hấp.

LINH (V.O.)

No way, that's what I was trying to cook, too. Well, that's what I was trying to help my girlfriend cook at least.

INCARNATION

I've...never made it before.

LINH (V.O.)

So why now?

INCARNATION

At this point, I'm attending
a very white college, away
from my family, and I feel
them, I feel myself, slipping
through my fingers. So I'm
teaching myself Vietnamese,
learning Vietnamese history
and folklore, and

(holds up the shopping
basket)

trying to cook foods I've
never cooked before, let
alone even eaten.

They walk down the aisle.

LINH (V.O.)

That sounds hard. How old are
you here?

INCARNATION

Nineteen.

They stop walking.

LINH (V.O.)

Do you feel alone?

INCARNATION

Yes.

They continue walking.

INCARNATION

How old are you, anyway?

LINH (V.O.)

Twenty-five.

INCARNATION

Not much older than I am
here.

LINH (V.O.)
A six-year difference sounds
like a lot to me.

INCARNATION
That's because you're still
young.

LINH (V.O.)
(laughing)
Coming from the nineteen-
year-old.

INCARNATION
It's only in this particular
instance that I'm nineteen.
My memories and my spirit are
not.

They reach the cash register at the front of the store. The incarnation empties the basket onto the black conveyor belt, the cashier scanning and bagging the items as they pass in front of her.

LINH (V.O.)
How old did you live to be?

INCARNATION
(smiling)
Maybe you'll get to see for
yourself.

The incarnation reaches into their pocket and pulls out a wallet. They open the wallet, take out a debit card inside, and insert it into the card reader of the sale terminal.

After a few seconds and a beep from the machine, they take it back out, tuck it into their wallet, and replace the wallet in their pocket.

The incarnation grabs the bag the cashier is holding out to them with a smile.

INCARNATION

Thank you, have a good one!

They exit the store through the sliding doors at the front.

EXT. BOSTON CHINATOWN

Linh and the incarnation find themselves on the sidewalk of a mostly empty, dark narrow street.

As they round the corner, they find more narrow streets, these ones full of murals, and crowded colorful shops, restaurants, and bakeries, most with signs written in Chinese.

People fill up the streets and sidewalks. At the end of this street, sits a tall paifang topped with a green roof, bright against the gray cloudy sky.

They walk toward the paifang.

LINH (V.O.)

Is this Chinatown? What city
are we in?

INCARNATION

Boston, Massachusetts. Coming
here makes me feel a little
more at home.

LINH (V.O.)

That makes sense. By the way,
I've been meaning to ask, do
you like green? I notice
you're wearing a lot of it
here.

INCARNATION

Yes. It's my favorite color.

LINH (V.O.)

It's mine, too.

INCARNATION

(smiling)

I think that is the exact
kind of thing that would have
helped me feel less alone.

As they approach the paifang, a patio comes into view under a mural where old Chinese men play xiangqi. On the other side of the paifang, two fu dogs flank the arch, protecting it.

As they walk forward, Linh and the scene pixelate again, but the location does not change.

The people casually walking and hanging around morph into a large crowd gathered in front of the paifang, carrying flowers, banners and cardboard signs, and cameras.

Linh's hair is now longer, at their chin, and they are wearing overalls over a green short sleeve t-shirt. Tattoos are scattered across their arms, including the head of a chim lạc on their shoulder peeking out of their sleeve. At the corners of their eyes they have drawn on winged eyeliner.

They are still wearing the paper bird earrings.

From the center of the crowd, a voice booms.

VOICE

We are here today, together, to
not only fight against this
country's legacy of colonial
and white supremacist violence,
but also to honor the lives
lost to this violence, and
especially, to celebrate one
another.

Linh and their incarnation weave through the crowd, and find that the voice is coming from a young woman, with brown-black hair and sharp,

watery black eyes, her fingers white as they grip the microphone she is half shouting, half crying into. At her feet is a makeshift altar, fruits, flowers, candles, and incense laid out in front of picture frames of Asian women.

The crowd listens intently, and the atmosphere is thick with their anger, grief, and hope.

LINH (V.O.)

Is this...?

INCARNATION

A protest.

Throughout the crowd, some people have tears welling in their eyes, some are holding each other's hands, and some are praying.

INCARNATION

This here is our community.
This is home when home is too far away. We find it in each other, in strangers, because our spirits cry out to each other, command us to radically love one another.

Linh rubs tears from their eyes. They watch as people emerge from the crowd to kneel at the altar and light incense.

LINH (V.O.)

Can we go pray?

INCARNATION

Of course.

They walk up to the altar and kneel on the ground in front of one of the picture frames and a bowl of rice, incense, and ash.

They pick up a stick of incense and hold its tip to a candle flame until it catches on fire. They

wave the incense stick gently, and the flame goes out, leaving a stream of smoke swirling into the open air.

They clasp the stick between their palms, bow their head, and close their eyes, moving their lips in prayer.

After a minute, they bow three times, open their eyes, and place the incense in the bowl, then bow once more before standing up and dissolving back into the crowd.

INCARNATION

What did you pray for?

LINH (V.O.)

That home won't be so far
away anymore.

As they walk through the crowd, the scene pixelates once more.

INT. NGOẠI'S HOUSE

Linh is sitting on a brown linen couch in the living room of a small house. They are wearing a green silk áo dài, embellished with designs of cranes, their hair still chin-length, but their face more mature.

There is a bowl of prawn crackers and a bầu cua tôm cá game sitting on the coffee table in front of them, and a TV on the other side of the table, the Super Bowl playing on its screen.

At the right-hand side of the couch is a cherrywood altar with a statue of Quan Thế Âm, a vase of yellow flowers, a bowl of fruit, small water offering bowls on a plate, a couple candles on each side of the altar, and an incense holder.

The house is crowded with the incarnation's family.

Aunties walk around with lì xì peeking out of their pockets and purses, sneaking them into their nephews' and nieces' hands and saying not to tell their moms.

In the kitchen, their mother, some of the aunties, and some of the older cousins chat in Vietnamese at the kitchen table, where several large, still steaming dishes, as well as red decorations and snacks packaged in red, are laid out.

LINH (V.O.)

So, where are we now?

INCARNATION

Ngoại's house. For Tết.

Their grandmother, with her black permed hair and tattooed eyebrows, dressed in a floral cardigan over a pale green shirt and white silk pants, approaches them where they sit. She holds out a lì xì.

NGOẠI

Chúc mừng năm mới.

INCARNATION

Cảm ơn, Ngoại, chúc mừng năm mới!

Their grandmother leans in and, giving them a sniffing kiss on the cheek, hugs them, then walks back into the kitchen.

A tiny hand slaps Linh's shoulder from their left.

YOUNGER COUSIN #1

Tag, you're it!

Turning, Linh sees that a child, who can't be more than eight years old, with black hair tied up into a ponytail with a pink scrunchie, and

wearing a pink áo dài to match, is smiling up at them with one of her small hands on Linh's shoulder.

INCARNATION

This is one of your youngest cousins. You have fifteen total. They've been like siblings to you your whole life.

LINH

(smiling)

I know.

They jump up off the couch.

INCARNATION

I'm going to get you!

Their cousin shrieks in glee and mock terror and runs away.

Soon all of the younger cousins are stampeding away from Linh as their mothers yell at them to stop running.

Linh sees their mother gesture to them from the kitchen table. They hesitantly make their way over to her.

Their mother is dressed in a black blazer and blue jeans, her black hair, with its purplish shine, curled into gentle waves, her casual smile lipsticked, her eyes, one a slightly lighter shade of brown than the other, glimmering with the reflection of the yellow light bulbs on the ceiling.

She leans across the table and, reaching into a plastic bag with Chinese writing on it, picks up a handful of small red cardboard boxes and hands them to Linh.

MOTHER

Here, hand out some poppers
to your cousins. They can
play with them before the
firecracker goes off.

INCARNATION

Okay, sure.

(shouting to cousins)

Hey guys, I've got some
poppers for you!

Linh walks back into the living room, and their
younger cousins run over, grabbing the boxes out
of their hands.

INCARNATION

You all want to go outside
and play with them?

YOUNGER COUSINS

(in unison)

Yeah!

The younger cousins run out the back door,
ripping open their boxes and bouncing around the
patio, throwing the tiny exploding poppers on the
ground.

Next to them, the uncles prepare to light the
firecracker, hanging it from a corner of the
patio roof, before heading back inside.

Linh stands inside the back door, watching. From
behind them, two of their cousins, each a few
years their junior, come to join Linh at the door.

One of them, slightly taller than Linh, is
wearing a purple velvet áo dài, her curly brown
hair resting on her shoulders. The other, a head
shorter than Linh, has her straight black hair
tied halfway up, the front sections of it dyed
lilac, and is wearing a red silk áo dài.

INCARNATION

(to cousins)

Remember when we used to love playing with these?

COUSIN #1

Yeah, I used to throw them at your feet.

COUSIN #2

We bought them every time we went to Grand Century. It was a lot of fun.

INCARNATION

What's stopping us from enjoying the fun now?

The three of them grin at each other. Each grab a box of poppers from the bag on the kitchen table and step out onto the patio to join their younger cousins in tossing poppers at the ground and each other's feet, laughing and shrieking all the while.

One of the aunties stands up from the kitchen table and leans against the doorway.

AUNTIE #1

Okay kids, time for the firecrackers! Come on inside so your uncles can light it.

The younger cousins, still shrieking, hop inside the house, followed by Linh and the older cousins, while one of the uncles goes back onto the patio with a torch in hand.

In the kitchen, Linh, along with all of their cousins, aunties, uncles, mother, and grandmother, crowd against the glass door, watching.

The uncle flicks on the torch, holds the flame to the fuse at the bottom, then, as it sparks, jogs inside the house to watch with everyone else.

Within a few seconds, the firecrackers begin bursting, sounding and looking like gunfire with the sparks and the smoke, the red paper shells flying off in shreds.

The air also looks like the mouth of a dragon, flaming and smoking. Against the backdrop of the night sky, the little fires look like stars being born.

LINH (V.O.)

I've always thought
firecrackers are one of the
most beautiful things.

INCARNATION

I agree. And you know what's
so beautiful about it?

LINH (V.O.)

What?

INCARNATION

They're so bright, and loud,
and hot and smoky, that you
can't help but have to notice
them and experience them.
It's the way they take up
space, and show how we insist
on taking up space as well.
Look at us.

Linh looks at their family.

INCARNATION

On Tết, nothing else matters
but family and home, not even
the world we're in not
wanting us to exist. We come
together anyway, in numbers,

They stand up slowly and make their way out of the room, their footsteps echoing.

INT. GREENHOUSE

As Linh enters the greenhouse, they see Tiên, already back in her own clothes, a loose, flowy, peach-colored áo dài today, pacing back and forth in front of the core column.

Tiên, upon spotting Linh exiting the astral projection room, runs over.

TIÊN

Linh! There you are. I was a little worried, it's been half an hour since the rest of us archived our tablets and no one had seen you come out yet. How come your projection took so long?

Linh looks at Tiên somewhat absentmindedly.

Tiên tilts their head and raises an eyebrow.

TIÊN

What's wrong?

Without a word or movement, Linh starts crying, tears pooling up in their eyes and then streaming down their face as they sniffle.

Tiên's eyes go wide.

TIÊN

Oh my— what happened, babe? What's the matter? Are you okay? Linh?

Linh's tears and sniffles grow into soft sobs, their face crumpling.

TIÊN

Linh! What is it? Come here,
baby.

Tiên pulls Linh into a hug, gently rubbing their back with one hand and stroking their hair with the other as Linh cries into their shoulder, arms wrapped around her waist.

TIÊN

It's okay, we don't have to
talk about it right now, you
can just cry. Cry however
much you need. We'll just
stay here like this for as
long as you need.

Linh takes ragged breaths between their sobs.

EXT. FRONT OF LIBRARY, HO CHI MINH CITY

Tiên and Linh exit the library, TiÊN's arm around Linh's shoulders and Linh rubbing their eyes and blowing their nose into a tissue.

TIÊN

Are you still good to guide
the skyboard?

LINH

(sniffling)

Yeah, I'll be fine.

TIÊN

If you say so. Take your
time, we can just sit here
for a bit first if you'd
like.

Linh peers out onto the city, the scene just like the evening before, and looks up in the sky at the other skyboarders.

LINH

No, actually, I think being
in the air will help me feel
refreshed.

TIÊN

Okay, ready to go home then?

LINH

Yeah.

Linh walks over to the skyboard rack, picks up their skyboard, and powers it on. It hovers over the ground, and as soon as Linh and Tiên have both stepped on, their feet suctioned to the board, it takes off into the sky.

In the air, Linh closes their eyes and inhales deeply. They stretch their arms outward like wings.

Tiên gives them a questioning look before smiling softly, knowingly, and doing the same thing.

LINH

(whispering)

I hope they know...

TIÊN

Hmm? What did you say?

LINH

(louder)

I hope they know...that my
prayer for them came true.

TIÊN

Who?

LINH

My incarnation.

TIÊN

Well, of course they do.

LINH

What do you mean?

TIÊN

They are you, babe. Different body, different time, different place, sure. But it's been your same soul all this time. That's why you're feeling...whatever it is you're feeling after your projection, too. Whatever memories you experienced today, they're your memories, too.

LINH

Yeah. Yeah, you're right.

(smiles)

That makes me happy.

TIÊN

Good, I'm glad.

Tiên takes her outstretched arms and wraps them around Linh's waist, both of their eyes still closed, smiles on their faces, tears at the corners of Linh's eyes.

Linh opens their eyes to the pink, orange, and purple sky, the hill-like buildings, the shimmering rivers, and the birds that fly alongside them and sing into the evening.

Linh laughs, and whistles along with them, arms still outstretched, as they fly forward together, the birds, Tiên, and Linh.

Linh lets out a big sigh.

LINH (V.O.)
We're home.

INCARNATION (V.O.)
We're home.

FADE OUT:

A Second Chance

by Tim Goldstone

I developed a childhood phobia of the wind when I fell asleep on a sea-damp towel on the sand. Drifting in and out of the edge of dreams, I accidentally saw precisely what the wind looked like. It's body. It's face. And knew instinctively that is forbidden and I would be silenced. Instantly I was infused with cold despite the afternoon sun. Holiday noises coming off the sea became muffled and shivery against a fuzzy ragged chime of waves while I dreamt of a big white star on top of a tall white tower against a clear unending blue.

In years to come I will remember this exact moment—as while I slept, an inexplicable, lethal blockage of my airways failed to kill me by a split second only because I woke gasping at the sound of crashing waves. I will remember it while lying in a derelict outbuilding resting from dry stone walling high in isolated hills, looking up through a ragged hole in the roof at the big bright white blades of a wind turbine motionless against a perfectly still, clear summer-blue sky, reminding me of a dream I'd had as child lying on a towel, dying on a beach:

Huge shapes hold themselves perfectly still as my closed eyelids fluttered. This time the wind, determined not make the same mistake again, holds perfectly still, so as not to wake me until certain my breathing has ended and this time will not return.

A few minutes later the wind turbine's blades begin to move again, and small white clouds speed jubilantly across both summer skies.

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He stands in front of me enlightened

by Claire Leona Apps

Or so he tells me. The air is thick with irony; while his tone suggests a union of my lips and his penis. “Have you heard of a Chakra?” the enlightened one asks with a laugh.

I have.

I’m a nonbeliever. Spinning orbs by my heart, throat, and lonely sex seem too poetic to exist. Swallowing in lieu of speech, I quickly escape. Carefully, my tiptoes maneuver around the muted colored mats in search of a refuge.

The open-aired Shala is full of ladies with a bristle I associate with survivors. The windows to the men’s souls are either vacant or mischievous. One steals attention by leaping into a handstand. With a whoop, he returns to his unnecessary feet. A bro whimpers, then barks, then whimpers again. His round eyes are distracted by the curve of a beauty’s back.

“Go to your mat.”

I do.

“I hope you’re ready for this”

I am.

“You’ll have to learn to breathe.”

I know.

“And meditate”

I hope.

“And learn about yoking of mind, body, and spirit. So you too, maybe, can become enlightened like me.”

There is a fury of flying Lycra as everyone disrobes down to side boobs and happy trails. Being a practiced practitioner, I’ve accepted unveiled love handles and the occasional freed nipple. If nipples could speak, they would say: “Remove me from these antimicrobial wireless cups so that I may nourish the world!”

Baaaa. My eyes meet those of an atrophied elderly lady on the adjacent mat. She blinks; her eyes are unusually far apart. I force a smile. Finding the nakedness of socializing challenging, I press my forehead onto the mat. My reptilian heredity allows me faith that stillness equals invisibility.

My teacher back home would demand I dedicate my movements to a guru who brought me into the light. Everyone has a guru because everyone was born from a womb.

The Enlightened chose the mat configuration that ensures everyone an unobstructed view of him. Across this pulpit, I watch the bro remove his cap embroidered with an L mixing into an A. His tongue flaps out of his mouth before he energetically puts his cap right back on.

BAM! A majestic orange flicks in front of me. The Enlightened glows with his long grin.

“Stand on your mat, feet together, thighs together, stomach in.”

He punctuates, “Clench. Your. Anus,” as his icy stare drills through me, and the class begins.

I’ve repetitively returned to spaces like this throughout adulthood. Desperately attempting to ease the hammering behind my eyes, third or otherwise.

Peck: you are failing.

Peck: even at meditating.

Peck: it doesn’t matter, in a way, nothing matters.

Peck: but therefore, everything matters.

Peck: breathe in, warrior two.

Peck: breathe out, reverse warrior, keep your front leg at a ninety-degree angle.

Down to the ground, in one breath.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

I’m here for when the pecking stops.

Suddenly, a paw is on each of my shoulders. My head remains tilted down, eyes locked on his enlightened toes. A confident pressure is applied. Touch does not have to be sexual. Touch can be practical. Touch is always intimate.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

I wonder if he’ll touch me again.

I abandon my eye line, my Drishti; never a good sign. Beyond my fingertips, I watch him speak in hush tones to his favorite pet. Their familiarity quivers the room in envy. Bam, Bro's tail hits the floor. Bam, Bro's ears perk with dedication. His coat and teeth look clean. He's not too fat and not too thin. The enlightened looks after his pet.

Breathe in.

My teacher back home always reminded us that it's a dedication, not a prayer. This is not about you.

Breathe out.

Backbends are bliss. My hands press the ground as my navel drifts upward. Enlightened paws suddenly grip my torso. With a flip of his wrist, I rise and trip onto his bare chest. He steadies me. The wind from the open-air Shala does nothing to lower our temperature.

“You drop back?”

Yes.

“Control it. Press your thighs against my leg.”

Questioning why I blindly trust in particular situations, I fall backward. Three of my fingers scrape the floor, not long enough to hold my own weight. His claws don't shy away from my curves. Flip. I'm up, stumbling again. My clavicle brushes his fuzzy torso. Although my view is over his shoulder, I sense a smile. The wind from the open-air Shala gives me goosebumps.

Locking my bandhas, I squeeze my vagina shut as I exhale to find the floor. An enlightened thigh thrusts between my legs.

Breathe in. Flip. This time, I do not fall onto him. Our bodies float two inches apart. Only his claws remain; they hungrily penetrate deeper. His tail sweeps the floor collecting spices and dead bugs. This time he does not smile. Is it because I didn't fail?

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

He's somewhere else, and I'm in the most complicated variation of side plank.

Peck: you want to impress the room.

Peck: you want to impress him.

Peck: you want to feel his enlightened claws guide you back into his arms.

Touch is not always sexual.

Touch can be practical.

Touch is always intimate.

In my early teens, I wrote a story and asked my older brother for feedback. Halfway through, a couple fought. The husband slammed his fist on the table as they do in tween novellas. 'I need you' the wife pleaded. My brother had circled these words in red, advising that as a female creative, I have a responsibility to never have a woman tell a man 'she needs him.'

The Enlightened Fox has no sisters. He has a brother, a son, and an estranged baby mama who swears his name into pillows under tropical sunsets. Her followers are informed she is destined to wander in lust or wanderlust; I'm never sure of the distinction. My online stalking before signing up to this retreat revealed that everyone associated with the Enlightened Fox gathers in Venice, California, between stints in Asia. There they utilize the medium of still photography to hawk goods to strangers. The prism that I view influencers through is red. Pain creates judgment, judgment creates anger, and anger will stop me from purchasing your mushroom coffee. It looks gross.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Placing a block under my sacrum, I cross my legs.

“Make sure your back is straight to let the prana pass through your line of Sushumna.” I know what’s coming. The Sushumna Nadi—a line of energy that potentially runs up my spine—is only mentioned before mantra chanting.

The lambs, puppies, and monkeys all compete at LAMing, and VAMing and RAMing the loudest.

“New girl.”

Yes.

“I cannot hear your LAM. La La La La.” His mouth is enormous as he flicks his tongue with every La. “There’s a blockage in your anus chakra.”

My teacher back home calls in 'base.'

The wind is now my friend, helping me nest. The smell of turmeric fills my nostrils. My senses delight at being somewhere new. Off in the distance, I hear tuk-tuks charging and coconuts cracking. Suddenly, the room erupts in chatter.

My teacher back home would not allow this. “Mauna—quiet in the shala,” he would shout while winking at me.

I open my eyes to the beautiful sashaying animals. Hiding my anti-social temperament, I roll my mat with intensity. Sneaking a peek, I locate him leaning by the door. His fans patter around, trying to lick him. Look! The bro puppy has found a female puppy! She's wrapped ear to paw with straight-out-of-Bali tie-dye. They both hold their front legs at ninety degrees, keeping their pads accessible for high fives. Oh, how positive and energetic their sex is going to be.

Something taps my toe. An elderly woman in a sun-beaten saree is sweeping with coconut sticks tied into a broom. Her untouchable back has spent too long bent over.

She picks up some Venice Californian snot paper. No, this cannot be. I immediately assist.

My teacher back home would say Shaucha: purity, cleanliness, and clearness. Keep your Shala clean.

A block hits the ground behind me. Startled, I turn to see my neighborhood lamb, precariously holding five blocks between her hooves. I pick up the one she dropped. The three of us continue to tidy in silence. As the sun sets, we creep away: three untouchable females that only just belong.

* * *

I ground each toe into the teal pattern tiles. Earth is my element. My feathers fluff, enjoying the shock of cold.

The lamb stayed by my side throughout dinner. She spoke even less than I did. Feedings complete, everyone retired to hammocks to pretend they could play the ukulele. After one too many conversations about crystal healing, I'm starting to conclude that Venetian Californians are fond of neither science nor asking questions. In fact, the only one I was asked was where I was going.

To fetch a scarf from my room.

"You can borrow mine!"

No. Thanks.

"If you change your mind. It's right here."

They recommenced barking to out of tune strumming.

I now stand draped in a silk weave of sapphire blue that matches and clashes with the paisley tiles. The blackness through the window is foreign to me. City life is well lit to imply everything is necessary.

Nothing exists outside this dark: no Bay of Bengal, no Himalayas, nor the Thar Desert.

A few years ago, I met a Thai yoga massage therapist that told me to meditate on the earth. He also tried to engage me in a threesome with a six-foot-tall Australian nurse, Willow. I knew my boyfriend then would never have pardoned such exploration, so I declined. Willow responded by hitting me over the head with a didgeridoo and swimming naked in the ocean. Both acts were glorious. As I stared out to sea watching Australian Willow bob in the waves, the Thai yoga massage therapist explained how the elements are mine: the earth, the wind, the fire, the boogie, and the wonderland.

My room consists mainly of a Jacuzzi sized bathtub. The kind of bathtub only a colonial prick would demand. The brass faucets require all my strength to move. Finally, with a thundering noise, the water forces free, disturbing birds outside my window. “Dumb human,” they squawk as they fly away.

My dry throat is eyeing the yellowish water filling the tub. There’s a fountain at the bottom of the marble stairs. Just swoop down and fetch some purified water and stop being paranoid and overly sensitive.

My ex-boyfriend would repeat such things to me. His laugh hurt. With an abrupt stop, he’d ask: how could he possibly respect me.

I hop around gathering empty bottles. In my hunt, I find my holiday book. It’s a semi-erotic feminist thriller, which I can’t wait to consume after years of not reading. It’s hard for shadows to find the time. If I did, I was jealous of all these women that had agency. These strong females lived in a world of green opulence. I place it by my bath. Bare-footed, gambling silence against spider bites, I descend the stairs.

Between me and the fountain, there’s a doorway. I can hear the Enlightened’s voice. He’s quoting from the Vedas with bits of the Upanishads, and Bhagavad Gita threw in for good measure. Peeking around the corner, I see him cross-legged on a chair, higher than the rest. On his right is Bro puppy, who is drooling. The female puppy tries to listen while scooting her sacrum on the rug. Most of the lambs are wrapped in fabric screen-printed with Hindu gods. One monkey has his palms together and is successfully not masturbating. Another stunning monkey is strumming that appalling ukulele while swaying to the words

of his leader. I wish I had Jell-O to throw at them—orgy already, goddammit.

I open my scarf and soar across the threshold.

“New girl”

Yes.

“Sit with us.”

I shake my head, busying myself refilling bottles.

“It would be good for you to hear what I have to say.”

This bottle is one-third full.

“The West doesn’t focus on what’s important about the practice. What makes us content.”

Sometimes my ex-boyfriend would pin me down. While he was inside me, he’d state that I was terrible at being a woman.

Flicking his tail, he’s next to me. I want to snatch it and rub the fur on my cheek. He leans on the wall, invading my eye-line. His muscles are visible through the thin fabric of his tapered vest. The beautiful creatures from the West Coast of Los Angeles peer at us. His right claws lift. His right claws wrap. His right claws dig into my shoulder.

The flood of emotion is overwhelming: I need him.

Enough. I’ve yoked and meditated and gone through cognitive behavioral therapy. I have no evidence that I need him; I only met him a few hours ago. I have no proof that he’s a nice person; I might have some for the contrary.

I flash the fox a smile and a sapphire flutter before skipping back to my nest above. Just before I swoop inside, something wags in the shadows. It’s the puppies! They must have used my distraction to ditch the group and are now sniffing each other’s butts while circles of smoke dance around. Bro puppy raises his cap to lash at an itchy spot behind his left ear. Girl puppy studies a spider ascending the wall. Her tail enthusiastically bams on the floor. Turning his spliff around, Bro puppy offers it to me. How tempting. But the last thing I need after coming out of a long-term relationship is a pet. I don’t have the infrastructure to create a happy home. Slipping away, I decline with an appreciative nod.

The bath is now complete. There’s fluttering outside my black window. My bird friends have returned to be quiet with me. The warm water engulfs my anus chakra. I dunk my head under; water is now my element. Reemerging, I study the ornate stucco above.

Think of your guru. It's not a prayer.

I must forget everything he said. He said: I pretend to be strong. He said: no one wants a little girl. He said: I deserved nothing. How many times that second bottle of wine would create a towering presence, dismantling and crippling, as I would disappear into corners of the room, into the corners of myself.

I wipe away the salty water coating my cheeks. How long have I been crying?

Knock.

My head cocks. The light casting through the base of the door is partially blocked by a set of even placed hind legs. Please be my lamb. It's not. Females prefer an unequal division of weight. Constantly swaying from limb to limb for the enjoyment of our hipbones. He is stationary. A flicker of orange darts across the opening.

Knock. Breathe in.

My body freezes, fingertips clench. The doorknob turns. Did I not lock it? The keys are easy to find; a copy hangs on a hook above an unmanned desk. I try to disappear into the corner of the bath. The sound of wood gliding across my paisley tiles echoes through my room. Stay still—you can be invisible. I inch my head until I see the reflection in the mirror above the washbasin. His steely blues glare down at my naked body. I have only a semi-erotic feminist thriller as protection. I want to scream. He is not allowed to come and consume me just because he is an opportunistic feeder. The key to my mind, body, and spirit should be far away from his enlightened paws.

Before words learn to exit my mouth, his tail gloriously arches as he backs away. He bends out of sight and then shuts the door. He left the Bhagavad Gita for me. And I am left untouched prey.

* * *

We settle into child's pose as a secure gait enters the Shala.

“One must be willing to surrender.”

Breathe.

“Stretch your arms in front, open your palms up to the universe....”

Dedicate your practice.

“Yoginis think they know everything.”

He laughs, “we were all stupid once.”

My blood boils as I struggle to activate my Ujjayi breath and awaken my kundalini. Come to me primal energy, help me fly. Instead, I remain a sack of hollow bones.

Foxes pounce on their targeted prey. They use their hind legs to leap up, join the earth’s magnetic field, and land on top, trapping their victims with great force.

In head-to-knee pose, Parsvottanasana, my hamstring, attempts to stretch. At sunrise, my muscles are as cold as my mind. I feel his paws touch my back. He pushes one inch. It feels different. He pushes two inches. I feel unsafe. My muscles seize, attempting to create a barrier against his intentions. He pushes three inches. Please don’t pin me down. Please be non-violent, Ahimsic. He slams my torso until the creases in my neck reach my knee. My shoulder blades buckle, trying to explain to his biceps they must stop.

My pain is audible. One. Two. Three explosions echo through the open-air Shala. Buckling, the ground finds me before my mind catches up. He darts off and lets me fail. My talons scrape the earth for support as pain shoots up the back of my leg. Everyone else is vinyasaing around, churning dust of spices and dead bugs. Through my tears, I see the puppy, standing on his puddled mat, ears perked, eyes large and tilted as if he was drawn by Disney himself, looking at me. Nervously rotating his cap between his paws, the L and the A beneath his calloused thumbs. He’s a good boy.

Two monkeys raise into handstands. What a slap in the face. But monkeys can be little buggers. Enlightened Fox takes the opportunity to whisper sweet nothings to his pet. Bro puppy nods and becomes a warrior. As he moves, I catch a glimpse of sad slanted Disney eyes under his cap. It’s not your fault, puppy; even Hitler had a dog.

“Remember, you need to keep your chakras in line, or you’ll injure yourself,” he says. “If you don’t have enough breath to stay up with the class, go to child’s pose.” His golden tail hits me in the face as I move my useless limb under my body and lower my head in defeat. I smell the country, the turmeric and sweat, the incense and mangos, the social system, and tropical flowers. Now, I compose a new mantra. Pressing into this ancient earth, I whisper: I will not remain still.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

Paws scratched at my door all day, wondering where I was. While I sat and listened to the birds outside my window cooing for revenge. Finally, everyone heads to their pens, evening spliffs stubbed out, and tight bras yanked over ears. And the Enlightened Fox lays naked above his sheets.

I reach through my sapphire blue and turn the doorknob. It opens. Did he forget to lock his door? He chose the room with no air-conditioning. The moist fur on his chest forms a line running from Adam's apple to cock. He doesn't notice my uneven gait limping towards him.

The moonlight casts over his naked body, the Vedas and the Upanishads. He doesn't have the Bhagavad Gita because he gave it to me. Almost by his side, something is below my foot: a set of Mala beads. With a deep breath, my fingers undulate over their roundness. Wrapping it twice around my neck. This will be my trophy, my lucky fox foot.

From beneath my silk span, I pull out a blade. My lips form into a beak and coo: Himsic, Himsa, Harm.

After morning practice, I struggled to the nearest shop. My request was met with calm.

I want that one, the one with the wooden handle.

I waited as they scraped it against a piece of leather hide. The irony had not escaped me: I will use a blade sharpened on the back of a dead animal against a vegan. As I waited, a delightful child appeared. She twirled once before asking if I was a friend of Beyoncé's.

No.

"You should be. She's a great woman."

The child serenaded me with the sweetest version of 'Single Ladies' as her bright pavadai daavani bounced around. When the blade was sharp, she pressed a bindi between my eyes.

Thank you!

Her father disapproved, nodding from left to right. Unprepared to lose my third eye, I grabbed my knife and faded away.

* * *

Placing the blade atilt upon his tail, the knife pulls against the grain. The hair surrenders, clumping upon the metal. I rub it on my limp thigh, watching the orange fur fall to the earth.

*You stay still. You keep the Shala clean. You are untouchable.
Breathe out.*

I return the blade to the tip of his tail. As his hair rolls into balls, years of emotional abuse evaporate.

You don't know my yoga, my meditation.

The blade reaches his anus.

My teacher back home called it base.

His tip quivers. His appendage is more awake than his mind.

You are not Ahimsic. You hurt me.

My teacher back home told me to practice for a guru.

Dedicate my movements: to him. He would undress, his steely eyes upon me. My teacher back home held his cock in front of my face, expecting a union with my lips. My teacher back home pinned me down, while inside of me, he snarled, "you're horrible at being a woman."

The blade's at the base of his enlightened tail. I press it into his flesh. But he is not my teacher back home.

I look around at the discarded underwear from the companies who sponsor him to just be. He's a messy little fox. All he wants is some attention in a world oversaturated with yoga teachers. He wants smiley faces with heart-shaped eyes and fifty-two thousand people to scroll past his thoughts on sequence formations. He is destined to wander in lust or wanderlust. How fast I judged him from my non-enlightened pedestal.

I stroke the blade a final time against my limp leg. Did he enter my room because he heard my tears? Did he think I needed him? Too bad he didn't have a little sister. Even the pain he inflicted could have been an accident. Touch can be a mistake. I decide to leave a gift: a semi-erotic feminist thriller. Have a read of my spiritual text.

The birds start chirping as the sun reminds us of its power. My sapphire blue, third eye, and beaded neck descend the marble staircase. By the entrance is my lamb with her hooves on either side of the threshold. As my bare feet hit the grass, I whisper to her: "The only one you need is you."

The wind is now my element. Lifting my arms into the world outside of the Shala, I twirl my sapphire wings. I lift one, two, three feet off the ground. Soaring upwards in a tornado of breath, I spot the puppies playing on the lawn. Bro puppy notices my ascension, and his tail jumps alive, wagging with the kindness of a conscious male.

Tucking my legs beneath me, I rise to the tree canopy. I explore my wings' width they both match and clash with the teal of the morning sky. With every flap, this bird understands flight. With every spin, this bird abandons anger. As I soar upwards, I decide to reach a height where I need me. I will dedicate this movement to me.

It's my prayer.

Breathe in.



CLAIRE LEONA APPS: Raised in Hong Kong and educated at the London Film School, British-Canadian award-winning writer/director Claire Leona Apps's debut feature *And Then I Was French*, released in 2018, is a psychological thriller compared by critics to Andrea Arnold and David Lynch. Apps is known for her cross-cultural perspective and for using dark comedy to challenge ideas about society as we know it.

Previous writing and directing credits include *Gweipo*, *Girl Blue Running Shoe*, *Ruminant* and *Ages of Man*. Her work has been screened on the BBC, shown at The Great North Museum and premiered at prestigious festivals such as St. Louis International Film Festival, Cork Film Festival, East End Film Festival, Florida Film Festival and North East International Film Festival. Her most recent script *Her Country Too* was a Film Fatales Fellowship Finalist and rewarded a scholarship for Stowe Story Labs 2023. She is a BAFTA LA newcomer and has worked with outstanding actors such as Francesca Annis, Olivia Poulet, Joanna Vanderham and Rebecca Hall.

Claire is currently working on her original fiction Audible podcast, *Aqua Tofana*, a family crime drama with fairy tale charm to be released in 2024. In her spare time, Claire runs the Soho House Women Writers' Salon at Holloway House.

Paradigm Shift

Screenplay by

Anna Gordon

FADE IN:

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, FLOOR 59 - DAYTIME

A bleak open-plan office with rows of nondescript cubicle desks. Every desk is occupied by someone in a white shirt and blue tie.

SUPER: Monday morning, 9AM EST

EMPLOYEE 198 (25) sits at his desk cubicle. He wears the same white shirt and blue tie, and small glasses. He is sharpening a yellow pencil with a mechanical sharpener, the rough scratching accompanying the clicks of keyboards surrounding him.

He pulls the pencil out and inspects the sharp tip.

His desk phone rings.

EMPLOYEE 198

Hello?

AUTOMATED VOICE (V.O.)

Employee 198 to the Manager's office, please.

EMPLOYEE 198

Shit.

AUTOMATED VOICE (V.O.)
Employee 198 to the Manager's
office, please.

Employee 198 looks over his desk's cubicle. He
adjusts his glasses.

AUTOMATED VOICE (V.O.)
Employee 198 to the-

He puts down the phone and stands up.

INT. MANAGER'S OFFICE, FLOOR 59

Employee 198 stands in front of a large wooden
desk. There is a frame with no photo inside and
a plastic potted plant. A golden plaque reads
"MANAGER OF MARKETING". The MANAGER OF MARKETING
(55) is behind the desk, balding, his tie a
cerise pink. He has a thick bandage on the bridge
of his nose that extends to his forehead.

MANAGER OF MARKETING
Thank you for joining me
today.

EMPLOYEE 198
No problem, sir. May I
inquire what this meeting is-

MANAGER OF MARKETING
Take a seat.

Employee 198 sits in a black armchair opposite
the desk.

MANAGER OF MARKETING
We've been impressed with
your work, 198. You've been
diligent and loyal. Always
thinking outside of the box.
A busy little bee, one could
say.

The Manager of Marketing leans over the desk, smiling. Employee 198's fingers sink into his own thighs.

MANAGER OF MARKETING (CONT'D)
After careful consideration
and discussion of where your
strengths lie and how we
could better utilise them,
we've made the decision to
promote you.

Employee 198 swallows and nods fervently.

EMPLOYEE 198
Thank you, Sir, really, thank
you, I won't let you-

MANAGER OF MARKETING
You'll need to move up a
floor, to Sixty. The
promotion is immediate. Take
the elevator. You know our
protocol.

EMPLOYEE 198
Yes, sir.

MANAGER OF MARKETING
Wonderful. Do you have any
questions?

Manager of Marketing's nose twitches.

EMPLOYEE 198
What are my, um, additional
responsibilities? Will I get
a new title or- or something?

MANAGER OF MARKETING
Well, that's the cushy part,
I'd say. You'll be working
within the [BLEEP] division.
(CONT'D)

MANAGER OF MARKETING (CONT'D)
Overseeing project [BLEEP].
No new title, I'm afraid.
There's no need for that
until you're floor Seventy at
least.

EMPLOYEE 198
I'm overseeing project
[BLEEP]? But I've never been
told-

MANAGER OF MARKETING
You'll be briefed by the
Manager of [BLEEP] when you
make the transition.

There is a brief silence. The Manager of
Marketing smiles obscenely. A clock on a wall
behind the desk is ticking.

MANAGER OF MARKETING (CONT'D)
Well. Goodbye, marketing! Eh?

Blood dribbles from the Manager of Marketing's
nose, seeping through the bandage.

EMPLOYEE 198
Goodbye, marketing...

MANAGER OF MARKETING
You've been a real team
player. Brilliant synergy
with your colleagues. And we
really feel we can trust you.
Do you feel you can trust us?

The blood pools onto his white shirt, staining a
deep maroon.

Employee 198 nods. His hand subconsciously comes
to his own nose.

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, FLOOR 59 - DAYTIME

Employee 198 is at his desk, a small cardboard box in front of him.

He places his desk objects into the box. His pot of yellow pencils, all freshly sharpened. A plastic potted plant. A white Rubix cube. Some plain printing paper. A photo frame with a yellowing picture inside, of Employee 198 and a family. He is holding a dog. The family members have had their faces carved from the photo.

He slides his ID card into his palm and looks over it. The information is blurred. His ID picture's eyes have a censor bar over them.

His desk phone rings.

AUTOMATED VOICE (V.O.)
Employee 198 to floor Sixty,
please. Employee 198 to floor
Sixty, pl-

INT. BRINKBRIGHT ELEVATOR - DAYTIME

Employee 198 stands in a dark metal elevator, his box of desk objects in his arms. There is a pad of over one hundred floor number buttons, and he struggles to press Sixty with his thumb. The button lights up red. The elevator doors close.

His fingers tap the box anxiously and he looks around him. There are four CCTV cameras blinking red in each corner of the elevator. This is the only light.

On the elevator door, there is a poster that reads: "WARNING! TO KNOW IS TO BE IMPLICATED. DISCRETION IS LAW." An illustration of a man's terrified eyes accompanies the message.

Above it, a digital clock reads 09:01.

Employee 198 steps forward, his hand reaching for the poster when the elevator doors ding open. He stumbles out...

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, FLOOR 60

...And into the open-plan office space of floor Sixty. A HANDLER (30) stands outside of the elevator, waiting for him. He wears a black utility vest, and a censor bar covers his eyes.

HANDLER

Mr. 198?

EMPLOYEE 198

That's me!

HANDLER

I'll help you with that.

The Handler takes Employee 198's cardboard box and sets it aside. Employee 198 points at it.

EMPLOYEE 198

I need that. That's my stuff.

HANDLER

We'll take it from here, Mr. 198.

EMPLOYEE 198

But those are my things! For my new desk? I can carry it over, it's fine. Let me just-

Employee 198 goes to lift the box, but the Handler grabs his forearms firmly and pulls him back.

HANDLER

This is for us to handle, Mr. 198. Please allow us to follow protocol.

EMPLOYEE 198

I just don't understand why I
can't-

HANDLER

If you resist protocol any
more than you already have,
Mr. 198, I'll have to take
this further.

Employee 198 swallows.

HANDLER (CONT'D)

Are we clear?

EMPLOYEE 198

Yeah. Clear. All clear.

HANDLER

Follow me, please.

Employee 198 follows the Handler to a new desk
cubicle, identical to his last one. The Handler
pulls out the black office chair for Employee 198
to sit down.

HANDLER

You'll be called to the
Manager's office in a second.
Do you have any concerns I
can assist you with?

EMPLOYEE 198

No. No, I don't think...
Well. Would I be able to-

HANDLER

I'm afraid that will be all,
Mr. 198.

The Handler leaves. Employee 198 stares at his
blank desktop, fingers sinking into his thighs
again. His desk phone rings.

AUTOMATED VOICE (V.O.)
Employee 198 to the Manager's
office, please. Employee 198
to-

Employee 198 opening the Manager's office door...

INT. MANAGER'S OFFICE, FLOOR 60

A BALDING MAN with a censor bar over his eyes

Chair scraping.

Blood soaking into a white shirt.

Skin peeling from a cheek, muscle and blood
visible underneath.

Fingers digging into thighs.

INSERT - TEXT OVER BLACK

THIS FOOTAGE HAS BEEN CUT DUE TO THE SENSITIVITY
OF THE INFORMATION DISCUSSED.

DISCRETION IS LAW.

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, FLOOR 60

Employee 198 stands outside of the Manager's
office, visible sweat on his forehead. His
breathing is laboured.

INT. BREAKROOM, FLOOR 60

A sparse breakroom. Employees stand in a static
queue and are dressed the same: white shirts,
black slacks, and blue ties. They pour coffee
from a coffee machine successively.

A digital clock on the wall reads 09:20.

Employee 198 is second in the queue. He appears sunken and tired. When it is his turn to use the coffee machine, the machine whirs and beeps.

EMPLOYEE 198

Oh.

He thwacks the machine with his palm. It beeps again. He turns to the employee behind him.

EMPLOYEE 234 (mid-20s) is a scrawny man with sallow skin. He looks terrified.

EMPLOYEE 198

I think it's broken.

EMPLOYEE 234

(quietly)

It's fine.

Employee 198 blinks a few times. He thwacks the machine again.

EMPLOYEE 198

No, it's definitely not working. I should go and find a-

He makes to leave the breakroom, but Employee 234 catches him by the arm. Employee 198 startles.

EMPLOYEE 234

It's fine.

Employee 234 hits a palm against the machine and it rumbles and begins to pour black coffee. The machine screeches. From the spout, several bloody clots plop into the paper cup.

Employee 198 breathes heavily.

EMPLOYEE 234

See? It's fine.

He takes the cup from under the machine, a large blood clot floating at the top of the coffee. He hands it to Employee 198.

The digital clock on the wall now reads 09:04.

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, FLOOR 60

Employee 198 sits at his desk, working on a spreadsheet that is censored by pixels. A digital clock on his desk reads 09:01. A calendar stuck to his cubicle has half of its boxes crossed off in red ink, but there are no discernable dates and the month at the top is also censored by pixels.

Employee 198's eyes are bloodshot. He sips at a coffee beside him, and his lips come away smeared red. He chews on the coffee as if he's swallowed a lump of something.

From the back of his desktop monitor, large bulbous maggots crawl onto his screen.

Employee 198's hands pause on his keyboard and retract slowly. He shivers violently.

The maggots keep appearing, falling from his monitor and onto his desk, plopping onto his lap.

He flails, gagging loudly. He picks up his desk phone, shaking maggots from it.

EMPLOYEE 198

Can I be connected to-

AUTOMATED VOICE (V.O.)

Welcome to Brinkbright. Here at Brinkbright, we strive for excellence and transparency between the business and our consumers. To be forwarded to a customer helpline, say

(CONT'D)

AUTOMATED VOICE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
"HELP." To be forwarded to
IT, say "IT." To be-

EMPLOYEE 198
IT!

AUTOMATED VOICE (V.O.)
You have now been connected
to IT. Please wait.

EMPLOYEE 198
Come on. Come on.

Static noise on the other end of the phone as it
connects.

IT INTERN (V.O.)
Hello, 198. What seems to be
the issue?

EMPLOYEE 198
Uh, maggots? Maggots.
Everywhere. Like, crawling
around my computer - I think
they came from the router?
They just started-

IT INTERN (V.O.)
Well, that just won't do,
now, will it? Is your desktop
switched on?

EMPLOYEE 198
Uh- what? Yeah, it's on! But
there are maggots coming out
of it, man.

IT INTERN (V.O.)
Good, good. Maybe try
switching it on and off
again?

EMPLOYEE 198

Excuse me?

IT INTERN (V.O.)

I feel like it could be your cache. Maybe try clearing your cache, yeah. I'll talk you through it. Open 'Settings'-

EMPLOYEE 198

No, yeah, I know how to clear my cache. This isn't that. These are maggots.

IT INTERN (V.O.)

Have you deleted your recent cookies? They can really stack up without us realising! Bogs down sometimes, so-

He slams the phone onto the telephone base, which a maggot has crawled into. It squishes under the handset, white goo oozing.

INT. BREAKROOM, FLOOR 60

Employee 198 sits in the busy breakroom, a few maggots clinging to his white shirt while he sips a lumpy coffee and eats a croissant. His croissant's jam is liquidated. Blood.

He turns to the employee beside him, flicking a maggot off his shoulder.

EMPLOYEE 198

Can you see these? These fucking maggots?

His colleague, EMPLOYEE 316 (30s), has her hair neatly pinned back and is eating a similar croissant. She doesn't turn to look at him.

EMPLOYEE 316

What? What am I supposed to
be seeing?

EMPLOYEE 198

These!

Employee 198 lifts a maggot from his chest and
holds it up between his fingers. He gags.

EMPLOYEE 316

(with humour)

We've all had a Monday
morning like that.

Employee 198 stares at her.

EMPLOYEE 316 (CONT'D)

Have to take the hardships in
your stride.

EMPLOYEE 198

We need to get a pest
terminator in here. Actually,
we should kind of report this
place for, like, gross
misconduct?

EMPLOYEE 316

Did you clear your cache?

EMPLOYEE 198

Did I... what would that have
done? How would that have
helped?

Employee 316 shrugs.

EMPLOYEE 198 (CONT'D)

(whispering)

I'm not crazy, right? We're
all just acting like this
to...to stop mass hysteria,
right? Like, I'm not insane?

EMPLOYEE 316

I don't know what you mean.

EMPLOYEE 198

Yes, you do. Come on. Give me something. Tell me I'm not the only one freaked out by all...this.

He gestures to a Handler that stands by the door. As they've been talking, the breakroom has been cleared out. They are the only two in the room.

Employee 316 reaches one of her hands over and places it atop Employee 198's hand. She turns toward him, revealing she has a bulging tumour emerging from the side of her head.

Employee 198 reels back, knocking his cup onto the floor and standing to his feet.

EMPLOYEE 316

Get out. Get out. Get out.
GET OUT! GET OUT!

She continues screaming as the Handler approaches her and grabs her by the biceps, pulling her off of her chair and onto the floor. She is restrained, and the Handler produces a large knife-like rod from his utility vest.

HANDLER

Please return to your desk,
198. Your break is over.

Employee 198 stumbles backwards, running for the door...

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, FLOOR 60

And onto the office floor. The door shuts behind him, muffling Employee 316's screams.

He flaps his hands and starts walking toward his cubicle, panicking. He doubles back and starts to jog to the elevator.

INT. BRINKBRIGHT ELEVATOR

Employee 198 is panting in the elevator, his hands braced on the wall.

The digital clock on the wall reads 09:04.

EMPLOYEE 198

Christ.

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, FLOOR 60

The elevator dings and Employee 198 walks out. He starts to breathe heavily when he realises he's still on the same floor. He spins around and gets back in the elevator.

The elevator doors close for a beat. The elevator dings again, and Employee 198 bursts out. He looks around himself frantically, before his sight lands on black double doors, painted with a hazard symbol. On the doors, a poster reads:

HANDLERS ONLY. NO EMPLOYEES BEYOND THIS POINT.

He pushes through the doors...

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, STAIRWELL

...And into a white stairwell. There are keypads on the walls and digital clocks showing the real time: 02:46. Employee 198 pauses briefly to stare at a clock.

He begins to scramble down the stairs, hands slapping the handrail. Once at the bottom, he bolts for a black door that is half open at the end of a corridor.

He reaches the door...

INT. BRINKBRIGHT ELEVATOR

Employee 198 stands in the elevator, staring at the poster on the doors. He is sweating. The digital clock on the wall reads 09:02.

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, FLOOR 60

Employee 198 sits at his desk cubicle. He reaches for the calendar pinned to his cubicle wall in front of him and flips through it. Only the current month has days crossed off in red ink.

He searches on his desktop: 'WHAT DAY IS IT?' His desktop brings up a '404: ERROR' page.

Frantically, he grabs a sharpened pencil from a pencil pot on his desk and begins to shade in the days on the calendar from previous months. In his haste, the pencil lead snaps, and he throws the pencil down.

Employee 198's hands are shaking. He picks up the broken pencil and a sharpener on the desk and begins to quickly sharpen the pencil, rough scratching coinciding with his heavy breaths.

He takes another sharpened pencil from the pencil pot and holds them both up to his eye level, inspecting the sharp lead.

Employee 198 nestles a pencil in each nostril, lead tip first. He shimmies them about in his nose, sniffing, and then breathes deeply. He closes his eyes and braces his hands on the table.

He brings his head down fast and hard toward the desk. Just before impact...

CUT TO BLACK:

INT. BRINKBRIGHT OFFICES, FLOOR 60 - DAYTIME

Employee 198 sits at his desk cubicle. There is no calendar. He has a thick nose bandage on that extends up to his forehead and his eyes are bloodshot.

His desk phone rings.

EMPLOYEE 198
(muffled)

Hello?

AUTOMATED VOICE (V.O.)
Employee 198 to Conference
Room 5, please. Employee 198
to Conference Room 5, please.
Employee-

Employee 198 slams the phone down.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM, FLOOR 60

There are around fourteen employees around a grey conference table and the MANAGER OF [BLEEP] (mid-60s) sits at the head, a censor bar over his eyes.

Handlers are stood behind every employee. Employee 198 is squeezing his own thigh, white-knuckled.

MANAGER OF [BLEEP]
And I'm sure you're all aware
of-

INSERT - TEXT OVER BLACK (GLITCHING)

THIS FOOTAGE HAS BEEN CUT DUE TO THE SENSITIVITY
OF THE INFORMATION DISCUSSED.

DISCRETION IS LAW.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM, FLOOR 60 - DAYTIME

The Manager of [BLEEP] stands at the head of the conference table. The censor bar is gone and his eye sockets are empty and red. On the table, his eyes are soaking into the paperwork, their tendrils curling around the pages.

MANAGER OF [BLEEP]
It's about devotion.

He gestures to his eyes.

MANAGER OF [BLEEP]
It's all about devotion. All of it. We cannot operate without your complete devotion to our company's manifesto.

The handlers encroach on the employees, their gloved hands clamping onto the employees' shoulders.

MANAGER OF [BLEEP]
Give yourself to us.

ALL EMPLOYEES
Yes, sir.

The Handler behind Employee 198 spreads open his right eye wide with his fingers and produces metal prongs from his utility vest. He brings the metal prongs in front of his eye.

EMPLOYEE 198
Yes, sir.

CUT TO BLACK:

A cacophony of loud screams begin.

Terra Incognita

by Tim Goldstone

Flaming torches turned the root and vine-filled scene explicit—febrile with obscenely gyrating shadows pulsating and wavering; the scurrying humans spectral, quivering against strained and crumbling stockade walls, outside which dreams of fabulous plunder morphed to enticing maps: wishful thinking engraved on copper and gauze—exotic unknown lands hammered flat, where empire makers (conquerors, colonizers, soldiers, explorers, swaggering adventurers, engineers, priests, cartographers) rotted and died yearning with accelerating frenzy for cities of gold—smashing down jungle that sprang back up behind them in swirling, shaman-induced miasmas that sucked at their rapidly rusting cannon, their armour, their crosses, their bones, their frantic prayers—dissolving them all to froth, bubble, algae.

Today, what's left of the jungle beckons paying tourists with shiny brochures, corrals them seductively into luxury compounds for their own safety, liquefies every one of them in all-inclusive succour.

.....

TIM GOLDSTONE has roamed widely and currently lives in Wales between the mountains and the sea. Fiction published internationally in numerous print journals and anthologies, both online and in print. Prose sequence read on stage at The Hay Festival. Scriptwriting credits for TV, radio, theatre. His writing has also appeared on websites including The Royal Court Theatre, Sherman Cymru Theatre, BBC, and Waterstones. Twitter [@muddygold](https://twitter.com/muddygold)

Heaven's Chosen

Screenplay by

Ramona Gore

FADE IN:

EXT. TEMPLE COURTYARD - DAY

Four MEN carry a litter through the entrance of the temple as MASA walks next to the transport with a sword at his side.

The temple is shaped like a U, with structures surrounding the courtyard on all sides except the entrance. It largely resembles Chinese architecture.

They are met by a group of people who are arranged in rows, with CHIEF PRIEST at the front. The bearers place the litter on the ground and Masa pulls back the curtain.

SHIMA hesitantly steps out and faces the crowd.

CHIEF PRIEST

Welcome Heaven's Chosen. We humble ourselves within your presence.

Everyone bows to Shima which flusters her.

SHIMA

Please, there's no need for that.

Chief priest straightens and everyone else follows his lead.

CHIEF PRIEST

I see you still do not fully understand your position. We will need to rectify that but for now, Ashura!

From among the rows of people, ASHURA approaches the front.

CHIEF PRIEST (CONT'D)

Ashura will take care of all your needs and if you ever want for anything she will get it for you.

(to Ashura)

Take her to her room.

Ashura nods respectfully to him.

ASHURA

If you would follow me,
Heaven's Chosen.

Ashura walks away and it takes a moment for Shima to follow.

INT. SHIMA'S ROOM - DAY

Ashura slides the door open to the bedroom.

The windows in the bedroom are the only source of lighting, and other than the necessary furniture, it is largely bare.

ASHURA

This is where you will be staying. If you need anything else, simply pull the rope to summon me.

Ashura bows.

ASHURA (CONT'D)
I will be taking my leave
now, Heaven's Chosen.

Ashura turns to leave.

SHIMA
(Stuttering)
My name is Shima.

Ashura freezes, refusing to turn around and look
at her.

SHIMA (CONT'D)
I wasn't sure if you knew
that since everyone calls me
the Heaven's Chosen.

ASHURA
It would not be appropriate
for me to use it.

SHIMA
(quietly)
A lot of things haven't been
since I received this mark.

Shima rubs her wrist where the mark of the god
resides. It looks like two small red stars.

ASHURA
Excuse me.

Ashura exits, closing the door behind her, and
walks past Masa who stands guard next to the
doorway. Shima is left alone.

INT. TEMPLE CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

Ashura walks down the temple corridor lined with
pillars.

CHIEF PRIEST (O.S.)
Ashura.

Ashura turns toward the voice as chief priest glides over.

CHIEF PRIEST (CONT'D)
I was hoping I would catch
you. Walk with me.

Ashura trails behind chief priest.

CHIEF PRIEST (CONT'D)
How is the Heaven's Chosen
settling in?

ASHURA
Fine, chief priest.

CHIEF PRIEST
Good, good. We do not want
her running off. That would
complicate matters.

Chief priest stops, making Ashura come to a halt.
He looks at her over his shoulder.

CHIEF PRIEST (CONT'D)
Do you understand what I am
saying?

Ashura lowers her head.

ASHURA
Yes, chief priest.

CHIEF PRIEST
Excellent.

Chief priest looks ahead and walks away, leaving
Ashura behind.

INT. TEMPLE CHAMBER - DAY

Shima sits seiza in front of chief priest. Ashura
is next to a fountain behind chief priest.

CHIEF PRIEST

You may have been chosen but
we still must prepare your
body. It needs to be capable
of withstanding the strain of
having a god dwelling within
it.

Chief priest nods to Ashura who brings over a
large bucket of water.

CHIEF PRIEST (CONT'D)

First, we will cleanse your
body.

Ashura pours it over Shima who shrieks and
shivers.

CHIEF PRIEST (CONT'D)

Only 99 more to go.

Shima stares at him in despair. In the
background, Ashura collects more water before
dumping it on Shima making her yell out.

INT. SHIMA'S ROOM - NIGHT

The lit candles attached to the walls generate
flickering shadows and cast a warm glow over the
room.

Shima shivers violently underneath her covers in
bed.

SHIMA

(teeth chattering)

May I have another blanket,
Ashura?

Ashura places another blanket over Shima who
snuggles into it.

SHIMA (CONT'D)

Thank you.

Shima adopts a troubled look.

SHIMA (CONT'D)

I don't know if I can do
this. Maybe someone else
would be better as the
Heaven's Chosen.

Ashura pauses in her cleaning and looks at Shima from the corner of her eye.

ASHURA

There can be no one else.
Only one future vessel can
exist at a time. You are all
we have.

SHIMA

Oh.

Shima's brow furrows and Ashura is tense.

INT. TEMPLE KITCHEN - MORNING

Ashura enters the kitchen with a tray filled with dirty dishes. The room is bustling with activity.

A wooden table sits in the center of the kitchen, with stone structures used for fire-based cooking against the back wall. The walls are lined with wooden standing cabinets.

Ashura places the tray on a counter and notices a TEMPLE COOK waving her over. Temple cook starts to load Ashura's arms with food. Ashura's knees bend at the unexpected weight.

TEMPLE COOK

Yol is sick. I only recently
found out, so now our god's
food is late.

Temple cook sweeps a thumb over the eyelids of her closed eyes.

TEMPLE COOK (CONT'D)
May the heavens forgive me.

ASHURA
(protesting)
I have never been allowed in
that section of the temple
before.

Temple cook begins to push Ashura out of the
kitchen.

TEMPLE COOK
You serve the Heaven's
Chosen, it should be fine.
Hurry!

With one last shove, Asura finds herself in the
corridor alone. Ashura glances at the kitchen
before walking away from the doorway.

INT. RESTRICTED TEMPLE CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

Ashura knocks on grand double doors that have
carvings etched into them.

ASHURA
I have brought your food, our
god.

INT. GOD'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Ashura steps cautiously into the god's room.

A large mural has been painted on the back wall,
and the room has high ceilings. The GOD, who is
lying on their side with their hand supporting
their head, is bracketed by pillars.

GOD
You are not the one who
usually brings me food.

Ashura approaches the god with tray in hands.

ASHURA

Yol is sick. I am her
replacement for today.

Ashura crouches down and places the tray before
the god.

ASHURA (CONT'D)

I hope you enjoy your meal,
our god.

Ashura begins to rise.

GOD

Tell me, how is my future
vessel doing?

Ashura freezes.

ASHURA

(nervous)

She is doing well.

GOD

For all your sakes she best
be. I will be needed more
than ever in the coming days.

Ashura has a look of panic on her face, but the
god pays no mind as they dig into the food.

EXT. TEMPLE GARDEN - DAY

Shima stands in a circle of trampled grass.
Ashura and chief priest are off to the side.

CHIEF PRIEST

Now that we have cleansed the
body we must purify your
insides. To do so, you will
need to perform a ceremonial
dance.

Chief priest hands Shima a gilded scroll. Shima unrolls the scroll to discover it depicts the choreography for the ceremonial dance.

CHIEF PRIEST (CONT'D)
Let us begin.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

Shima slowly sweeps her arms from right to left, but it's the wrong direction.

CHIEF PRIEST (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Again.

Shima goes to crouch down and almost tips over.

CHIEF PRIEST (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Again.

Shima moves her arms in a jerky fashion, almost doing the robot if such a thing existed.

CHIEF PRIEST (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Again.

Shima walks backwards and stumbles.

CHIEF PRIEST (O.S.) (CONT'D)
Again.

Shima tries to spin but trips over her own feet, falling to the ground.

END MONTAGE.

CHIEF PRIEST (O.S.) (CONT'D)
I think that is enough for
today. We will pick this back
up again tomorrow.

Chief priest leaves. Ashura steps in front of Shima and Shima looks up at her. Ashura has a blank expression.

ASHURA

What future do we have with
you at the helm?

EXT. TEMPLE WALKWAY - DAY

Ashura walks through the temple walkway with a load of laundry in her arms. She pauses when she hears the sound of flesh being hit. Ashura follows the noise and looks around a corner to find Masa being beaten by a TEMPLE GUARD.

TEMPLE GUARD

(growls)

Take back your words.

MASA

(pained)

No, senior. You think I want
to protect a girl like her?

Temple guard hits Masa with the flat part of the scabbard. Masa falls to the ground from his hunched over pose.

TEMPLE GUARD

Take it back.

MASA

(panting)

She will fail. She has no
chance of becoming the next
vessel.

Temple guard slams the scabbard on Masa's head. He waits for Masa to get up again but Masa doesn't move this time. Temple guard leaves Masa lying on the ground and exits.

Once the coast is clear Ashura abandons the laundry basket to check on Masa. She crouches next to Masa and runs her hand through his hair searching for bumps. Masa's eyelids slowly flicker open.

MASA (CONT'D)

What are you doing?

Ashura freezes.

ASHURA

You are awake.

Masa slowly sits up and hisses as the movement agitates his body. Ashura backs away.

MASA

I thought if I feigned
unconsciousness he would
finally leave.

ASHURA

Do you need help getting to a
healer?

MASA

It's not as bad as it looks.
He was pretty weak.

Ashura looks at Masa doubtfully but doesn't
press.

ASHURA

Why was he punishing you?

MASA

Didn't you hear? I don't have
faith in the Heaven's
Chosen's ability to succeed.

Ashura's eyes widen.

MASA (CONT'D)

Oh, come on. You've seen her.
You must be thinking it too.

Ashura looks off to her left.

ASHURA

Our god must have seen something worthy in her. She is only... not living up to it.

MASA

And we all shall pay for it.

Ashura grips the grass.

ASHURA

There is nothing that can be done for it unless...

Masa looks at her curiously.

MASA

Unless?

Ashura hesitates for a second.

ASHURA

Unless she died.

MASA

That would be blasphemy.

Ashura gives Masa a withering stare.

ASHURA

As if you have not already committed it.

MASA

(short)

I know what my actions are.

Masa looks at Ashura consideringly.

MASA (CONT'D)

How would you do it?

ASHURA

Do what?

MASA

Kill her.

ASHURA

Was your head hit too hard?
Maybe I should take you to a
healer after all.

MASA

You wouldn't have said
anything if you hadn't
thought about it before.

ASHURA

Thoughts and actions are two
very different things.

MASA

So you admit it.

Ashura begins to stand.

MASA (CONT'D)

Wait, wait. Don't leave. If
you wish the Heaven's Chosen
dead then I am your best
chance for gaining an ally.
Think about it.

Ashura pauses and looks at him consideringly. She
sits seiza on the ground.

ASHURA

Alright. Here is my idea.

INT. TEMPLE CORRIDOR - NIGHT

Ashura trails behind Shima as they walk down a
hallway. Masa walks past them and his hand
brushes Ashura's hand. Masa slips something into
it. She grips the item tight.

Chief priest approaches Ashura and Shima, making them stop.

CHIEF PRIEST
Heaven's Chosen, there is something I would like to discuss with you.

SHIMA
Of course, chief priest.

Shima and chief priest start to walk away. Ashura goes to follow but chief priest turns, putting a hand out stopping her.

CHIEF PRIEST
Alone.

Ashura nods, respectfully.

ASHURA
Understood, chief priest.

Ashura watches them walk away before opening her hand and seeing what's been put there. It is a note telling her where to meet Masa. She gives Shima and chief priest one more look before taking off.

INT. TEMPLE RECESS - MOMENTS LATER

Ashura ducks into a recess where Masa is already waiting.

MASA
Are you sure you want to do this? I'm fine with doing it.

ASHURA
No, it was my idea, so I should be the one to kill her. I will accept responsibility and suffer the consequences.

Masa looks skeptical but hands Ashura a dagger anyway.

MASA

Remember, you need to stab her cleanly or else she'll start screaming and everyone will come running. I can only keep so many people away.

Ashura narrows her eyes at him.

ASHURA

Yes, I know.

Masa raises his hands defensively before walking away.

MASA (O.S.)

It's all on you.

Ashura unsheathes the dagger partially and stares at her reflection in the blade.

ASHURA

(softly)

I only hope people will understand why.

INT. SHIMA'S ROOM - NIGHT

Ashura slides open the door to Shima's room and creeps in, dagger clasped in hand. Shima is already sleeping in corpse position.

Asura carefully makes her way over to the bed.

She stands next to it and raises the dagger over Shima.

Ashura breathes heavily, dagger raised, but hesitates.

She tightens her grip and goes to slam the dagger into Shima's chest.

The dagger stops and a choking sound can be heard.

Ashura looks down at the hand in her chest in shock as blood streams out around it.

Ashura weakly drops the dagger and the hand leaves her chest. She collapses to the ground in a heap, dead.

"Shima" examines her blood-coated hand but her eyes look different. They are the eyes of the god.

"Shima" gets up and steps over Ashura's body. "Shima" slides open the door and exits, leaving a bloody handprint behind.

FADE OUT:

.....

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Where Your Children Walk

by quinn fati

*This story was originally published in *Moss Puppy Magazine* Issue 3.

Boundaries of where the heart cannot cross, the body cannot pass through correctly lest it be marred and changed and transformed and cursed, the soul seeks an exit by any means necessary. You are bound to the room, you are in the process of being made again, remade, transformed, marred, into an image of their design even if that image is a corpse. Again you stand and again they beat you swiftly and coldly at the knees so that you will kneel once again before their god. They tell you this god is loving and is correct and you see how they treat one another, how they raise their young, how they care for their most vulnerable and you know this god is not one of love nor compassion nor curiosity nor grace. The language for their god is also the language of war. It is poison, it is vitriol and hierarchy and violence. Their baptism is drowning. It is to experience near death by the hands of those meant to be your countrymen. What was once your lands are now marked with the bloody footprints of your mother and her mother limping into the woods to perish, your compatriots poisoning themselves, eating poison, learning to cook with poison.

Your memory can no longer recall the old ways, the old gods, how your soul would remain the same but the body would transform and the soul would remain within the body. Once you transgressed the boundaries of where the heart cannot cross, they cut your hair, they covered your warrior marks, they put you and prostrated you in front of their god and demanded blood for worship. A broken arm became a symbol of love. They ingrained in you these falsehoods, these violent reminders framed as acts of love. You had never conceptualized a map before. These lands were a part of your heart, your mind, your soul, the familiarity never transferred beyond your love. But now when you see the maps of how far you had walked with your mother and her mother

into the woods to die, all you can see are rivulets of blood dripping down your face. What becomes love and what becomes hate and when does violence cease to define love in this room that you have become bound to.

The soul will leave the body by any means necessary. This transformation is profane. It is to desecrate, it is to violate you against recognition, the remaking into the devil.

No longer is it the spider and the coyote and an omnipotent being, no longer shall your progeny carry the sun in their hands but instead you are transformed into a being of a binaric god system, to be male and to be female and for all your power to be in masculinity and you suddenly are a woman bound to a room where, when you refuse to kneel, they whip your knees so hard they buckle and crash. Their god is not a god of unpredictability, of chaos magic and of one for whom you would ask for help when all else failed. Their god became that which all dependence and life was sought, for whom kept a watchful eye, you are unfamiliar with a panopticon god. You know not of how this is the undoing of your mother and her mother and how your descendants no longer sing to Wakonda but speak to God but it is also everything at the forefront of your mind. Your knees ache and still you stand and still you are hit. Language is transformed, clothing is transformed, you and your sister and those who will descend from you are transformed and the soul will leave the body by any means necessary.

And how could you know, you made of earth and sky, born to carry the sun in your hands, how could you foresee your mother and her mother stepping into the woods to perish, how could you foresee the mobile homes, the violence, the permanence of the violence of a god machinated for war, for death, for ambivalence. How could you understand the violence of the nature of those who hurt your knees to kneel, how could you know that those rivers of blood coursing down your face would become what predetermined where your people would go to die. What could possibly happen when your descendants learned how to acclimate to poison, what could happen when your descendants unwittingly placed their footprints in your footprints in the pursuit of betterment, when your footprints became the pathway to your body. These were concerns beyond you, what your focus was to survive, you, a child, now categorized as “girl,” categorized as “gendered,” categorized as “less-than by whiteness” learning the facets of the

transformation of soul-no-longer-encompassed-by-body and body-no-longer-occupied-by-soul.

The fear settles in, the violence, the fear that your unborn progeny shall face this transformation and so of your culture, of the spider, of the coyote, of Wakonda you shall not speak. No longer is it the sky, no longer the earth, but your god becomes “man,” your god is “gendered,” your god shall seek the rivulets of blood demarcating maps and shall determine that your mother and her mother and your sister and your children shall walk into the woods covered in that same blood should they dare to disobey. Your god now speaks to you in the language of war, of violence, of what shall be to pass and what shall not pass is the soul. The fear, the blood, the violence, but what makes you, what once encompassed the being has been beaten at the knees until the knees are torn asunder. Your humanity survives but the fear survives longer. This language of fear was not faced during wartime but this is the prolonged violence, the violence of the mind, the body, the soul. You shall exist in memory, you shall serve reminder, you of your heart, of your soul, of your blood, of the vengeance that you once sought and was beaten out of you through your knees, you shall become and you shall transform, once in life, eternally in death.

You shall hold the hands of your progeny and you shall lead them from the woods and you will show them the rivulets of blood streaming down your face and forewarn them that where they seek your footsteps in betterment serves nothing but to leave them covered in your blood. Maps cannot begin to comprehend your understanding of the land, the land you knew in your heart, the land that birthed you and your mother and her mother.

Your moment is the tipping point and the moment of your progeny is the revolution.



QUINN FATI is a multidisciplinary artist—a sculptor and writer primarily. They specialize in interviews, think-pieces, and mad god prophecy. They have written works for Meow Wolf and Birdy Magazine. They live in Albuquerque, NM, and are of Osage descent. They have been, are currently doing, and will continue to always do their best.

The Watchmaker

by Arsch Sharma

It was July, and the last of the warm Gulmohur shards scythed the sultry Delhi air with their bleeding blooms. The Watchmaker lazed in the grey sun with his head bent. His neck, thick and furrowed as a bull's, sheafed upon his droopy terry cot shoulders while slim, marbled plastic buttons pleaded helplessly across his pot-belly. As the street-side horological masters of the old, he sat barefoot beside his watch repair cart guarded by a curtain of wristwatches suspended in diverse stages of animation, with his toes searing in the sun like red mountain potatoes.

Hauz Khas market was alive with flies that Monsoon day, as it is all through Summer. Some walked about and primed their wings with their hind legs, and the others stuck to each other, fought for mates, and fucked.

Humans weren't much different in their spirits either—most were busy discussing politics to liven up their drab workplaces, hunched over their tins of home-packed rice and dal. Others, who were fancier, planned their weekends in denial while chewing on salubrious reams of kale and iceberg lettuce, secretly wishing for a drink that would knock them out hard enough for the week.

But here by the watchmaker's cart, time passed free from the sanctions of organised labour, and so he dozed with his arms crossed over his belly. And his siesta would have gone uninterrupted were it not for a little child with her gaze fixed at her feet, clutching her mother's defunct HMT in her pocket. She approached the cart with some apprehension, holding on to a watch that refused to tick forth: its seconds hand tracing the same old furrow—now a moment ahead, then a moment backwards, never budging hope. She strained her brow, employing her juvenile wisdom to figure whether the jangling coins she'd brought would be enough to get it out of this rut.

For some time, she stood marvelling at the curtain of wristwatches: dials in all conceivable colours—golden, pearl, deep blue

and even amethyst. She brought her tiny palm to the display window, the illusion of touching these fantastic time-bracelets was engaging enough. She followed the letters painted on the cart: the deep crimson outlined with yellow in the curve of a 'W' followed by an 'A' and then a 'T.' Thus she spelt the bright advert, now slightly dulled under the clear, clandestine lacquer of time.

After it had been long enough, and she had grown tired of her fascination, the girl tugged at the sleeping watchmaker's bush-shirt.

He sneezed out of his sleep and caught a glimpse of the small, curious figure with a short single pigtail of an anchor on her date-shaped head. "What do you want," he yawned.

She produced the watch out of her pale, bloodless fist. "It won't move," she said. "It moves, but goes back to where it started."

"Hmm," meditated the watchmaker. "Yes, they do that sometimes," he smiled, "but I can fix this."

He twisted open the back case using some Feviquick and a pair of tweezers—the acid had eaten up some of the metal, but nothing unsalvageable. "It needs new batteries," he said.

"Will a hundred be enough?" She produced a floral kerchief out of her pocket, tied into a knot that she'd been clutching all this while.

"Eighty would be enough," said the watchmaker, "you can go buy some chips from across the road while I fix it, if you want to."

He prepped his tiny eyepiece and wiped it against his shirt's hem after blowing onto it, and brought his knee to his chest, which made him look like some wise, ancient octopod. The timepiece lay paralysed in the palm of his hand, and he let out a smile in an equal measure of pride and condescension.

Not much was to be done here, just some routine cleaning and a standard battery replacement, but time was at his mercy—the determining metronome of life, helpless before him. And he smiled at this robber, this slick dupester outdone by a lead acid disk smaller than a ten-paisa coin.

The child had clutched the watch in her pocket on her way so hard that her grip had bruised the leather strap, even cracked the cheap, flat crystal a little. She had to hold on to her in whatever measure she could. Nothing testifies loss better than a watch tine refusing to move on.

She waited nonetheless, hunched over a concrete municipality bench, for the impossible. Beside her, the roadside vendor continued

frying crisps as she waited. She wondered what it would be like when the waiting would end, would the Watchmaker freeze in that very frame, would the world stop if only for a while, if not for as long as she'd been since her world had turned upside down? Or would someone see past her grief, and pat her shoulder after all these years of anonymity?

"It's done," he finally declared, and the child came over to the cart with a certain measure of disbelief on her face. She held the watch in her palm and looked at it—it wasn't stuck at quarter past six anymore. She looked around, scrambling for the catharsis she had anticipated: a faint whiff of orange marmalade perhaps? She looked at the market, at the flies swarming at her feet, or the traffic, or the fancy façades of organic grocery shops—nothing had changed, except that now, the faded petunia kerchief felt a lot lighter in her pocket. And so, she went away, not clutching her mother's HMT as tightly as she had on her way to the market.

* * *

The night comes, and the windows light up. Phone rings get lonelier, faces don powder, rouge, and fancy garbs hung across shoulders, thighs and hips parade the markets, the pubs, the diners—any place but home. The Watchmaker sees it all: for a city so alive with ghosts, its streets are too g-ddamned bright.

A young boy, barely fifteen, had set shop beside his cart. And all sorts of light: yellow, green, red, and white had lit up their unremarkable corner on the pavement. The boy, with calves thinner than the watchmaker's wrists looked plainly at his curious eyes.

"What do you know about Christmas?"

"What Christmas?" He asked, but a pair of LED reindeer horns flashed red and green on his head in response. The Watchmaker wrung out a little laugh.

But it got busy: a few college girls were asking after his fairy-light crammed wine bottles. Their voices wrapped fashionably around apathetic syllables while the boy kept following them for numbers. They bought some devil horns, even a reindeer headband after much negotiation, since it was off-season for those, and then walked off to a more Instagrammable corner.

* * *

The Watchmaker pushed his cart through the streets, almost got hit twice: both times by jolly groups with thick, salty tongues and empty eyes. But our friend endured their curses, and other than a violent sway of the watch curtain and a slight exchange of pleasantries, it did not amount to much. It was this city's late-night music—men in beat down cars half-drunk and sad, cursing at anyone who crossed their way, or sometimes even at someone on the other end of a phone call miles away, with an almost religious conviction to defile their mothers and sisters and daughters, without a clue of what was eating them from within.

He went past the glimmering markets and shops, past the merry enclosures of desperation adorned with a thousand yarns of light, all robbed from shanties and corners of paling anaemic eyes.

And in the shadow of this garbage pile of the rich where the bones of this city lay, having long given up on miracles, he came to a yellow brick outhouse that he called home.

Tahmina was standing by the door leaning over the sink, hearing her husband barrow the cart through the untamed, wild yard. She went outside with a smile upon her lips like each evening. "The kids are asleep," she said almost in a whisper.

"Aren't they always asleep?" The Watchmaker's voice was devoid of any remarkable emotion. He heaved his paunch and set it down on the staircase, "Do you mind if we sit here for a while? Here, by the cart."

"I'll bring you tea."

* * *

A faint wind glided across the dew leaves of the frangipanis across the road, and the stars hung bright that night across the sugary, ginger-scented sky.

The Watchmaker looked at Tahmina, their eyes had softened as they did each time they sat together under an open summer sky. They were two refugees in this country called life who'd come to set roots in this vacant yard.

"What's it going to be today?" She asked him with bright eyes desperate with promise.

He chuckled, “You’ve warmed up to my stories.”

“It’s only time I warmed up to them, there’s not much else that you bring back home,” she fashioned her lips, the colour of freshly ploughed monsoon earth, into a playful taunt. The shadows under her eyes darkened.

“You know how it ends Mina”, he said, evading her hopes. “There aren’t any more stories left to tell.”

And he looked at his hands, at his fingertips stained green from the lead acid.



ARSCHE SHARMA, 29, has been writing professionally for three years now. He has penned works of creative fiction and non-fiction, including opinion pieces, essays, short stories, poetry and novellas.

This issue of *For Page & Screen Magazine* feels, to us, unlike any other. These stories are bold. They are graphic and violent and tragic and beautiful. We are privileged to work with authors who understand that—while life needs both pain and joy—unmitigated violence and blind faith in the systems we participate in can only end in ruin.

As such, we present these stories: stories that play with genre and perception, stories that question what it means to heal and what it means to have hope, stories that challenge the reader to consider what role, unwitting or otherwise, we have played in these cycles of violence.

We at *For Page & Screen* strongly believe that horror, as with all genres, can be as deeply cathartic as it is critical. While this is not, by theme, a “horror” issue, we hope that you’ll open yourselves up to the more graphic nature of these works so that we may understand and appreciate the criticisms, the joy, and the pain these wonderful authors have come to share with us.

—For Page & Screen Editorial Team

Featured stories include:

“Chuyển Giới, or Crossing Realms of Existence: Queering the Dream of Asia-Futurism” by Kyla-Yên Huỳnh Giffin

“A Second Chance” by Tim Goldstone

“He stands in front of me enlightened” by Claire Leona Apps

“Paradigm Shift” by Anna Gordon

“Terra Incognita” by Tim Goldstone

“Heaven’s Chosen” by Ramona Gore

“Where Your Children Walk” by quinn fati

“The Watchmaker” by Arsch Sharma