

Lost Constellations.



★ Commentary

*People We Leave Unmapped
Were We Better Then?
Tastes & Smells*

★ Lifestyle

*Sailing in Familiar Waters
The Beauty of Saying "Yes"*

★ Fiction

*Dream Fields
The First Star I See
Return*

★ Poetry

*Last Day in Astronomy Club
found haikus in a utown trashbin
Ode to a Nameless Star*



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear readers,

We follow the stars for stories. For meanings. For directions. But what if the stars we once trusted begin to fade?

In this issue, *Lost Constellations*, we explore the intermingling of the certain and the unknown, the erosion of cultures, the fragments of mythologies, and the quiet yet chaotic navigation of a world with endless possibilities.

I'd like to express my heartfelt gratitude to our incredible team of writers, designers, and marketers who poured their creativity and dedication into bringing *Lost Constellations* to life. A special thanks goes to our EXCO team: Tania, Akshita, Rachel, Zander, Xiao Yu, and Yee Ching, for your unwavering leadership and hard work over the past year. This magazine would not have been possible without you.

To our returning readers, welcome back. And to those who are here for the first time, we invite you to discover constellations of your own through words and images.

Let this issue be your telescope to the past, present, and future.

Yours truly,
Angie Truong Hai Ha
Chief Editor



CONTENTS

- ★ 02 THE FAULT IS NOT IN OUR STARS
- ★ 05 THE EVOLUTION OF OUR STARS
- ★ 08 FROM STARS TO SCREENS
- ★ 11 WHAT IS THE VALUE OF THIRD SPACES, ANYWAY?
- ★ 14 NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL NOISE
- ★ 17 AI: THE DIRECTIONLESS ALLURE OF ADVANCEMENT
- ★ 20 IN MEMORIAM
- ★ 23 WERE WE BETTER THEN?
- ★ 26 THE BLANKET VOCABULARY
- ★ 29 WHY ARE WE SO AFRAID OF THE ELDERLY?
- ★ 32 THE BEAUTY OF SAYING "YES"
- ★ 34 SAILING IN FAMILIAR WATERS
- ★ 36 FORGOTTEN BY TIME, IMMORTAL IN MEMORY
- ★ 39 THE FIRST STAR I SEE
- ★ 42 RETURN
- ★ 44 DREAM FIELDS
- ★ 46 MOONRISE
- ★ 47 TASTES & SMELLS
- ★ 50 LAST DAY IN ASTRONOMY CLUB
- ★ 51 FOUND HAIKUS IN A U-TOWN TRASHBIN
- ★ 52 PEOPLE WE LEAVE UNMAPPED
- ★ 55 REQUIEM FOR THE MISALIGNED
- ★ 56 ODE TO A NAMELESS STAR



The Fault is Not in Our Stars

BY VIVIEN KWAI & KOH
YING XI ZANDER

Early in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, the Roman senator Cassius tells Brutus, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, but in ourselves, that we are underlings." It's one of the play's most memorable lines, though I suspect more people now recognize it as the inverted inspiration for John Green's novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*. The negation in Shakespeare's original is easily forgotten—perhaps because humans have spent millennia convinced that the stars do, in fact, determine our fates.

For thousands of years, cultures across the world have studied celestial bodies, believing their positions at the time of our birth might shape our personalities and futures. We see this preoccupation manifesting in East Asian star charts tracking Jupiter and its moons, in the Mayan Caracol observatory following Venus, and in Caesar's wife begging him to stay home because of ominous comets overhead.


Today, this ancient fixation persists most visibly through zodiac signs. Based on your birth date and time, astrology claims to reveal your personality, relationship compatibility, and even your subconscious tendencies. Most of us acknowledge that astrology is pseudoscience—research has consistently failed to validate its claims. Horoscope wordings are vague at best, and supposedly zodiac-specific traits are commonplace in the populace. Peer-reviewed studies have shown astrologers to correctly match someone's personality profile to their astrological chart up to only a third of the time—a statistically poorer performance compared to pure dumb luck.¹ Yet, people continue to check whether Mercury is in retrograde. Why can't we seem to let go of this mysticism?

The answer isn't particularly profound: it is because life is uncertain. Beyond astrology, we've developed countless methods to manage this uncertainty. Economics and decision theory model risk. Companies design elaborate interview processes to predict which candidates will succeed. Young people take personality quizzes ranging from magazine fare to Myers-Briggs tests, seeking to understand themselves and others. Sometimes, being a Hufflepuff Type 1w9 INTJ Aries sun, Scorpio moon, and Virgo rising is all the information they need to assess your character and adjust the way they choose to (or not!) interact with you. After all, it's easier to ensure success in your romantic life by avoiding the red flags that are Scorpio and Sagittarius men, right?

Even with all these tools, our need for answers about the unknown remains insatiable. Our desire to make sense of the world often outweighs our ability to objectively evaluate the reliability of our meaning-making systems. The human craving for certainty helps explain why we still turn to astrology and other forms of divination, scientific evidence be damned. To find meaning in the stars is to make sense of the inexplicable. Take the 2024 U.S. presidential election, for example. Many found Trump's victory unfathomable—some blamed this unforeseen event on rightward-drifting Democratic policies. Others pointed to voter ignorance or the flawed electoral college system. Regardless of the reason they came up with, one thing was clear: finding a narrative was essential to process Election Night and the powerlessness that washed over everyone after it was over.

Throughout history, we've cherished the concept of free will—the belief that our actions stem from our own choices, that we could have done otherwise. Yet scientific advances have challenged this notion. If everything has a cause, what makes human agency different? Determinism becomes seductive: if you couldn't have done otherwise, perhaps you bear no responsibility for your actions.





In a world of immovable institutions and overwhelming problems like climate change, it's tempting to conclude that nothing we do matters. And that's when we end up with a form of nihilistic apathy; if nothing we do matters, then why should we ever care about anything? But this sense of inevitability merely shields us from the emotional weight of personal responsibility. While absolving ourselves of guilt might provide short-term comfort, it ultimately proves harmful. From a cosmic perspective, maybe indeed, nothing truly matters. We live and exist on a tiny planet in a tiny galaxy, constantly floating in an endless void where we are but tiny specks of dust among celestial bodies. But we live on that tiny planet surrounded by other tiny specks of dust—other humans who live and breathe beside us. We may not leave much of an impact on the universe, but our actions matter to each other in the temporary blip of time in which we exist in the universe. To pretend otherwise is to be callous.

This tension between stellar determinism and human agency reflects our broader struggle with uncertainty. In a chaotic, unpredictable world, we cling to narratives that provide clarity, even when those narratives lack scientific foundation. Whether it be astrology, political theories, or personal philosophies, we create frameworks to make sense of the unknown. These frameworks may not be factually correct, but they offer something more valuable: comfort, direction, and a sense of control in an overwhelming world. Like how religious folk find security and community in the religious community, believers of astrology find purpose in the skies and the blinking lights looking over us every night. At times, sharing a zodiac sign might even be sufficient reason to tie together strangers (usually women) waiting for bathroom stalls. In the end, our fascination with the stars, our search for meaning, and our desire to understand our place in the universe all stem from the same impulse to find order in chaos. Through ancient star charts or modern personality tests, we continue asking life's most profound questions: What is our purpose? Can we change our fate? And are we truly in control? That we keep asking, having tried and tested so many different methods across millennia, demonstrates the timeless human quest for meaning amid uncertainty. Maybe, sometimes, the fault *is* in our stars. But choosing to believe that doesn't absolve us of the fault which exists within ourselves.

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The Evolution of Our Stars

By Kyra

For as long as humans have existed, we've gazed up at the stars, whether for guidance or simply to wonder at their beauty. They've been a constant presence, weathering the rise and fall of countless kingdoms and reminding us that, somewhere out there, lies something bigger than ourselves. Though their glow is drowned out by the artificial lights of the city, should one dare to step away from the reaches of civilisation and venture into the wilderness, the sky will come alive. Countless constellations will scatter across the darkness, just as they always have, untouched by time or human hands. Now, however, despite their beauty, modern science has stripped them of their once-mystical aura, reducing them to mere balls of burning gas, governed by physics rather than fate.

Considering how stars have been around long before humanity even existed, it's no wonder that our understanding of them has shifted over time. Each era has given them its own meanings and interpretations—it's just that our generation was fortunate enough to have access to more advanced technology that helps us better understand what they truly are. But does this mean that previous generations were simply wrong? What did the stars truly mean to those who lived a millennia before us?

The Role of Constellations in Mythology

To the ancient Greeks and countless other civilizations, constellations weren't just pretty lights, but divine messages from the gods used to commemorate and preserve the triumphs and tragedies of both gods and mortals alike. No two constellations bear the same name and stories, with most of these tales revolving around legendary heroes like Hercules who overcame immense adversities and were rewarded by having their victories immortalised in the night sky. But of course, not all stars celebrate heroic deeds. In fact, some also serve as eternal warnings and cautionary tales to remind mortals of the consequences of arrogance, betrayal, or defiance against the gods.

One example is the constellation of Cassiopeia. Unlike the usual protagonists of most myths, Cassiopeia was no hero. She'd never killed any fearsome beasts and she'd most definitely never embarked on any legendary quests. Basically, she was just an ordinary woman—or, well, as ordinary as a queen could get. If this was a modern TV show, instead of being the main character, Cassiopeia would probably be a minor villain or side character that talked too much, made a terrible decision, and then got hit with karma before exiting stage left and leaving the hero to have his happily-ever-after.

To put the entire conflict into context, she once boasted that her beauty and that of her daughter, Andromeda, surpassed that of the Nereids, the sea nymphs renowned for their beauty, which of course, angered the god of the sea, Poseidon. He then gave her an ultimatum: either she would sacrifice her beloved daughter to a sea monster or she would watch as her kingdom Aethiopia crumbled to ashes.

To save her kingdom, Cassiopeia decided to offer Andromeda as a sacrifice and chained her to a rock at the edge of the sea to appease Poseidon's fury. In retrospect, it may seem incredibly unfair that the poor princess was paying for her mother's sins but as I'll elaborate on later, the gods weren't exactly known for their objectivity. To be honest, there was virtually no chance that Andromeda would survive if not for Perseus, a random hero who had just finished slaying Medusa, who happened to pass by, defeat the sea monster, and rescue the princess in the process. But although her daughter was saved, Cassiopeia's arrogance did not go unpunished. To ensure that her vanity would forever be remembered, the gods made sure that she would spend half of eternity hanging upside down in the heavens—certainly a cosmic lesson in humility, if ever there was one—and a clear warning to all that one should simply not anger all-powerful beings capable of smashing your kingdom to smithereens.

This theme of divine retribution is seen in many other myths, even if those involved didn't become constellations. Like Arachne, who was transformed into a spider for challenging—and defeating—Athena in a contest of weaving, which was seen as the pinnacle of blasphemy. While the ancient Greeks might have argued that her fate was well-deserved for her hubris, from a more modern perspective, some may point out that maybe sometimes the gods were just petty. After all, if there's one thing mythology teaches us, it's that omnipotence does not necessarily come with a strong moral compass.

The Relevance of Our Stars Today

As such, we can see how constellations are not only useful in telling us about stories but also how they give us a clearer idea of what values and morals people used to value back then. Those who were humble, brave and virtuous were rewarded with their noble deeds memorialised across the night sky, while those deemed arrogant and disrespectful were cursed or inflicted with divine punishment. Therein lies the most stark difference between those who lived in ancient times as compared to modern society: the belief in divine intervention as an unquestionable force that shapes the trajectory of human lives. While religion itself remains a presence today, its influence is no longer as all-encompassing as it once was, with most societal values and worldviews now being shaped by secular principles and scientific reasoning rather than divine authority. Droughts, floods, and other extreme weather events can now be explained as consequences of global warming and shifts in atmospheric pressure, rather than a form of punishment



Nevertheless, this shift in perspective definitely shows the fundamental change in how we, as humans, see the stars. In the past, every constellation carried its own story, whether it be a tale of tragedy or heroism, but now, they have merely been reduced to serial numbers and catalogue numbers like WISE 0855-0714 or HD 209458 b. The same sky that once told tales of gods, monsters and heroes is now a ledger of scientific data points, where stars are classified by their temperature and coordinates and filed neatly into databases rather than by myths and memory. Sure, science has definitely given us a better understanding of the universe, but has something been lost in the process?

It may be unfortunate but perhaps that's just the trade-off for knowledge; the more we understand something, the less mystery it holds. Once, people looked up at the night sky and saw omens and tales of legendary feats, but now, all we see is hydrogen, helium and fusion reactions. It's not that science has made the stars any less awe-inspiring, it's just that the way we engage with them has changed, which of course isn't necessarily a bad thing. Our modern understanding of the stars has allowed us to explore the cosmos in ways that our ancestors could never have fathomed. How could one ever imagine that the human race would ever be able to step foot on the Moon, which was always seen as a celestial being, or send cats into space?

Moreover, the stars continue to serve practical purposes, just as they did in the past. Early navigators relied on constellations to find their way across vast oceans, and even today, astronomers and scientists use the positions of stars to explore the universe. They not only hold significance in the scientific field but also act as a source of artistic and literary inspiration, proving that while their role may have changed, their relevance in today's world has not faded. Whether through myth or modern science, the stars still capture our imagination, linking us to the past while guiding us toward the future.

From Stars to Screens: How We Navigate Life and Roads

Vivienne Tsai

Throughout history, humans have navigated vast landscapes, oceans, and even the complexities of life using the tools naturally available to them. Fast forward to today, navigation and decision-making are increasingly guided by digital tools like Global Positioning Systems (GPSs) and smartphones. We can now find our way in seconds, but in the process, we've forsaken the fundamental parts of our humanity—our relationship with the world around us and the deeper insights that come from personal experience. As we shift from ancient methods to modern technologies, we must ask: are we losing more than just our sense of direction?

Stars, Maps, and Phones

In the past, navigation was all about using the natural world around you to find your way to a destination.¹ The stars, the Sun, the winds, and the currents were essential guides that enabled tribes to journey across the shifting landscapes of land, sea, and ice.

From around 2000 to 1000 BCE, the Polynesians,² some of the best wayfinders in history, became experts in navigating the vast Pacific Ocean. Without modern maps or instruments, these early sailors relied on a combination of star charts, ocean currents and wave refractions (to indicate the presence of islands), and the migration routes of birds to guide their voyages, crossing long distances with remarkable accuracy.

The Bedouin Arabs were equally stellar at their pathfinding craft. Starting around 500 BCE, these nomadic tribes³ living in the Arabian desert navigated the shifting desert sands with natural landmarks, such as dune shapes, wind directions, and distinctive vegetation. They used rocks and their own shadows as makeshift sun compasses, whereas they relied on the North Star, which remains almost stationary above the North Pole, to navigate at night. These all helped them mentally map challenging desert terrains where distance could be difficult to judge due to low visibility.

Fast forward to the 15th to 17th centuries, European explorers like Christopher Columbus and Ferdinand Magellan took navigation to new heights.⁴ They used magnetic compasses to determine directions, astrolabes to determine latitudes based on the angle of the sun or star above the horizon, and Portolan charts to plan their routes. These advanced navigational instruments, along with better ship designs, allowed for more precise voyages and paved the way for the golden Age of Exploration, expanding maritime trade and global exploration.

Throughout history, our ancestors' spatial awareness came from years of experience and constant attention to their surroundings. Navigating was not just about following a set route, it was about observing the natural world and adapting to it. Today, however, this kind of awareness is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain. In a world saturated with devices and instant information, we have become less patient, often relying on our smartphones and GPSs to guide us. With just a device in hand, we can figure out a route effortlessly in minutes. While this convenience is undeniable, it's a double-edged sword—leaving us less attuned to the world around us and inevitably weakening our ability to navigate surroundings with the same depth of awareness and adaptability our ancestors once had.



Life's Compass

Just as nature served as a beacon of guidance, so too did the elders of indigenous communities, whose experiences and teachings helped shape the path ahead. In many societies, elders and experienced leaders were the cornerstones of guidance, much like how the natural world acted as a compass for ancient navigators. Indigenous communities⁵ in particular, like the Navajo in North America, relied on mentorship systems and storytelling to pass down survival skills, beliefs, and wisdom across generations.

In ancient China, the concept of filial piety (孝, *xiào*) deeply emphasised respect for elders and the importance of listening to their wisdom. Children were taught from a young age to value the teachings of their parents and grandparents, who served as the primary sources of knowledge about morality, survival, and proper conduct. These values were passed down through generations, creating a sense of continuity and community within families. Filial piety, as promoted by Confucian teachings, reflected the belief that elders held accumulated wisdom that could guide younger generations in making decisions about life, work, and relationships.

But in today's world, that kind of wisdom feels increasingly distant. The wisdom of elders, although profound, doesn't always align with the rapidly changing world in which young adults find themselves. For instance, when making career choices or navigating the complexities of modern relationships, many turn to online platforms, forums, and social media rather than seeking advice from elder people around them, often due to a perception that the opinions from elders may be outdated.

Once again, this instant access to a wealth of information and diverse perspectives is a two-sided coin. The digital space, at times, floods us with constant streams of information that it becomes difficult for anyone to truly process or use effectively. As a result, this seemingly endless supply of opinions, strategies, and answers often leaves young people feeling lost or disoriented, much like a sailor on a ship with a dozen competing maps and no clear star to guide them.



Lagom

Just as we've shifted from celestial navigation to GPS technology, we've moved from mentorship based on personal experience to instant information lacking the depth of real-life context. The compass of wisdom from lived experience has been replaced by the compass of clicks and algorithms. While technology might point us in the right direction, it often lacks the meaningful connection that once guided us.

This is where the Swedish concept of *lagom*—meaning “just the right amount”—comes in. It encourages us to find harmony in all aspects of life, avoiding excess and embracing moderation. In a world flooded with digital information, *lagom* offers a refreshing reminder to slow down and seek equilibrium between the fast pace of modern technology and the deeper, more thoughtful ways of learning that require patience and reflection.

To live by *lagom* in our modern world, it's important to approach our relationship with technology and information in a way that

reflects balance and mindfulness. Practicing mindful consumption of information—where we prioritise quality over quantity—helps us navigate the overwhelming digital landscape without feeling consumed by it. But *lagom* isn't just about being selective with information; it's also about finding equilibrium between the virtual world and our real-life connections. By balancing digital tools with face-to-face conversations, we can tap into the richness of wisdom that comes from human interaction and experience.

It's equally essential to step away from our screens and reconnect with the natural world. Whether it's a walk in the park, observing the changing seasons, or simply being more present in our surroundings, these moments help us cultivate a sense of groundedness and connectedness that the digital noise often drowns out. In embracing *lagom*, we can create space for both modern technology and timeless wisdom, finding a balance that enhances our lives rather than overwhelms them.

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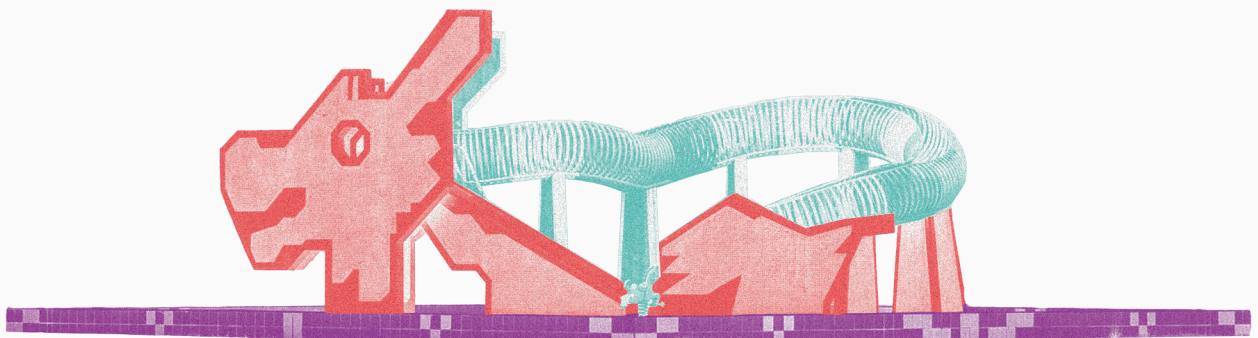
What is the Value of Third Spaces, Anyway?

Grace Leong

Whispers and murmurs flood through the hollow space filled by hundreds of people in a rectangular building, looking at window silhouettes of consumerism. A lady's child is screaming in the corner, and you can sense a stench of secondary school students walking by as you are waiting nearby for a friend to grab coffee with. Sounds familiar? When was the last time you experienced this? In a shopping mall, or even a library? Coined by sociologist Ray Oldenburg in 1989, third spaces are physical spaces that are not your home or where you work or study, yet you frequent regularly. This can include malls, places of worship, or even a café you're especially partial to. In a Singaporean context, a third space can also include the place you often volunteer at and the playground near your house that you used to play in growing up. These places are alternative spaces that encourage the natural spontaneity of organic human interactions outside your home or work. Oftentimes, these spaces are representative of some commonality that you might have with those who share your third spaces. In a café you frequent, one commonality would be your love for the café or perhaps its proximity to where you live.

Third spaces are fundamental to society as they can help to foster community, a sense of belonging, and create opportunities for social interaction, all which we require for healthy living. This does not mean we all *have* to have a third space, but we should reflect on where our third spaces are and how they have contributed to our lives. Looking back, one third space I remember growing up is the playground that I frequented near my estate. I remember learning how to make friends and share my toys, simplistic but fundamental social skills needed for life.

Third spaces are also places where community forms. A notable example would be religious sites, such as churches or temples. These hubs or social bubbles where people congregate around a certain belief or common interest, are the propellers we use to keep our boat rowing. Our first and second places, home and work places are important, but it is often these communities that empower our purpose and will to live and keep going. It is in these spaces that colour our sense of self and identity and hence, fuel our purpose to keep going. That is why community is so important in our lives, so important that we underestimate the importance of it.



Despite its known importance, third spaces have been disappearing. The advent of the Internet has often replaced the need for going to these third spaces, and its rise on the cusp of the 21st century has been dubbed the “4th revolution”, revolutionising the way we humans go about our lives with the accessibility it brings.

The internet brings a life-changing sense of connectivity; you do not have to even leave your house to experience things. Conversations, chatter, and socialisation associated with third spaces can be filled on the Internet, through forum applications like Reddit. It takes two to tango—evidently, we can be both perpetrators and victims of such a phenomenon. Generally speaking, when we engage in activities like doomscrolling, we can be considered victims trapped in vicious algorithms that keep us hooked. However, by interacting with short-form content like TikToks and Instagram shorts, we also increase the demand for such content. And thus, the cycle never stops.

The Rise of the Internet

Looking at my own life, I have been both a perpetrator and the victim of such a phenomenon. A perpetrator in a sense that I participate in these online engagements through Reddit and lurking in the comment sections of YouTube or TikTok. A victim—I have been sucked into the endless vacuum of doomscrolling to fulfil my sense of boredom. It happens far more often than I’ve been bothered to count. With that, third spaces begin to lose their appeal. People no longer frequent the malls since applications provide ease of convenience through online shopping. Why go for physical establishments for services, like watching films at the cinema, when you can enjoy the service in the comfort of your own home? Why go to the playgrounds, when jumping on your laptop to game would do the trick? All of these questions hint that the basis of third spaces is built out of necessity rather than desire. When that necessary activity can be replaced by something more convenient, humans choose convenience over everything else.





Societal

Much of our lives before the Internet was structured around communities and our collective identities that exist within our interests, such as cafes, gossiping, or skateboarding. We are creatures who live to enjoy our hobbies. Thriving in communities gives us a reason to survive. And so, when our societal life gets structured around these third spaces, and these third spaces are gradually getting replaced by the Internet, what does it say about our impulses? Amidst all the doomscrolling and the filling-of-our-existential-void conversations, have we ever stopped to appreciate the value of physical spaces? Have we asked, why do we go out? Meet friends? Hangout? Play laser tag? What is the value of all of this, most importantly, what is the value of communities?

Values

Because convenience is so highly valued in our society, it seems like so much better of an alternative that it can almost replace the physical interactions we experience in third spaces. One explanation I can draw from this observation is perhaps the impulse of human nature. We prefer internet spaces over real ones, not just because of convenience but because of impulse. Nowadays, the buzzword thrown around is, “instant gratification”, but I believe it exists beyond that. The convenience online spaces afford us is not just being instantly gratified, but the fact that we can access these spaces with a click of a button. It is more of a draw towards escaping the mundanity of a bus ride—the quiet, still slowness in comparison with the fast-paced overstimulation that makes the Internet spaces so appealing.

& Structure

The disappearance of third spaces has also been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic. With governments encouraging social distancing, our individuality has been emphasised more than our community. How do we find value in interacting with the community around us when we’ve forgotten how to even talk to each other?

There is no real answer to this essay as we all deal with our social lives in so many different ways. What I would like to leave the reader with is simply a question: Why? Why do we want to escape the mundane so badly? Are we that scared to exist in the present that we yearn for stimulation every second we are alive?

Navigating the Digital Noise

—Yang Hsin Tien

Can you recall the TikTok video from just ten scrolls ago? Do you find yourself swayed by influencers' glowing product reviews—even when they sound too good to be true? You might be experiencing “infobesity,” a blend of the words “information” and “obesity.” This describes how an overload of information can impair our ability to think critically and make informed decisions.

Today's digital information landscape is overwhelming. While the unprecedented access to knowledge makes learning easier than ever, the sheer volume of information ironically degrades our mind, whether we are aware of it or not. Yet, we keep scrolling. We keep consuming. Most Gen Z internet users scornfully dismiss this very real issue, believing it only affects the more “gullible” older generation. Though we mock the elderly who fall for AI-generated videos and absurd news articles, our age and tech-savviness do not make us immune from the effects of the world wide web. If anything, our near-constant exposure to digital media makes us just as vulnerable, if not more. The endless cycle of scrolling, liking, and sharing rewires our brains to prioritise instant gratification over deep thought. And that's a dangerous shift.

The concept of “infobesity” parallels obesity—just as excess food can harm us physically, excess information can damage us both physically and mentally. When bombarded with a constant stream of information, everything blurs into a haze of “noise” that our brains struggle to process. The overwhelming volume of articles, websites, social media posts, and AI-generated content can paralyse users, making informed decision-making nearly impossible. While unrestricted access to information should empower us, it leads to mental deterioration instead.

Information overload doesn't just clutter our minds, it numbs our emotions. A major effect of information overload is emotional disengagement. News of countless major events, accidents, catastrophes are delivered right to our phones every minute of the day, each more shocking than the last. Initially, we react with outrage, concern, sympathy. But after the hundredth crisis, the fifth car accident we've read about this week, we stop feeling. Over time, our brains become overwhelmed by this sheer volume of information and stop processing these incidents fully. Repeated and constant exposure to these shocking events gradually dulls our emotional responses—a phenomenon known as compassion fatigue. As these tragedies become normalised, we become desensitised to them and adopt an attitude of apathy. We disconnect from these crises, finding it increasingly difficult to maintain our concern, as the endless stream of devastating news numbs our compassion and humanity. What once made us cry now barely makes us pause.

On the flip side, thousands of influencers flaunt their glamorous lives and gorgeous appearances on social media, dominating people's feeds worldwide. This constant exposure to glitz and glamour warps our perception of reality, as we base our worldview on content from a tiny fraction of people with massive followings. We begin to assume that most people live similarly lavish lives, wearing the same trendy clothes and using the same trendy products. For women especially, social media fame and virality are largely reserved for those deemed conventionally beautiful, perpetuating and intensifying unrealistic beauty standards.

Constant exposure to conflicting information also brings about cognitive effects such as mental fatigue. This is especially relevant in our era of “doomscrolling”—the compulsive urge to endlessly consume negative news. This behaviour overwhelms our brains with negative stimuli, worsening stress and anxiety. It also breeds feelings of helplessness as we face an endless stream of global negativity. An April 2023 research review published in *Applied Research in Quality of Life* that analysed three separate studies involving a total of about 1,200 adults has suggested that doomscrolling is linked to worse mental well-being and life satisfaction.¹



Our attention spans face a serious threat as well. Consider the trend of TikTok videos showing movie clips alongside Subway Surfers gameplay—a format designed to hold the attention of a digital generation that struggles to focus on a single stimulus. The rise of short-form videos and endless streams of bite-sized information, crafted for quick consumption and maximum engagement, has significantly shortened our attention spans. The rapid pace of digital content discourages deep reading and reflection, diminishing focus and impairing learning. This makes it harder to engage in critical, thoughtful analysis or to concentrate on educational long-form content like documentaries and books.

As the quantity of low-quality information continues to surge, perhaps the most insidious concern is the spread of misinformation. With tools like AI and deepfakes, anyone can create convincing fabrications, and even well-meaning social media users can spread false information by posting their mistaken opinions. A prime example was the viral AI-generated image of Pope Francis wearing a designer puffer jacket and jewelled crucifix—a deception that left many, particularly young people, stunned at how easily they were fooled. While older generations may be more susceptible to misinformation due to limited digital literacy skills, younger people must not become complacent, as they too frequently struggle to differentiate between credible and misleading sources.

#FOMO



Digital platforms' content curation significantly worsens the spread of misinformation. Social media algorithms favour sensationalised headlines and viral, eye-catching content, prioritising user engagement over accurate, well-researched journalism. Instead of fostering an informed public, these systems amplify whatever draws clicks and shares, allowing misleading content to spread rapidly without intervention. Even platforms with fact-checking features, like X (formerly Twitter), are often unable to intervene until false information has already gained significant traction. Furthermore, algorithms recommend content based on users' preferences, creating echo chambers that reinforce existing beliefs. This traps users in bubbles of misleading narratives and distorted perspectives, ultimately cementing their misconceptions.

So where does that leave us? Drowning in a digital ocean with no lifeline? Not necessarily. In these disorienting times, media literacy has become a crucial survival skill. While many struggle to navigate today's digital landscape, strengthening media literacy is essential to combat both misinformation and the cognitive burden of information overload. People must practice mindful, responsible information consumption by taking the time to evaluate and think critically about their online engagement. Developing fact-checking skills to verify sources and identify bias is also vital. Through cultivating these abilities, we can learn to adapt to our evolving information landscape and reclaim our focus, our emotions, and our ability to think critically.

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THE DIRECTIONLESS ALLURE OF ADVANCEMENT

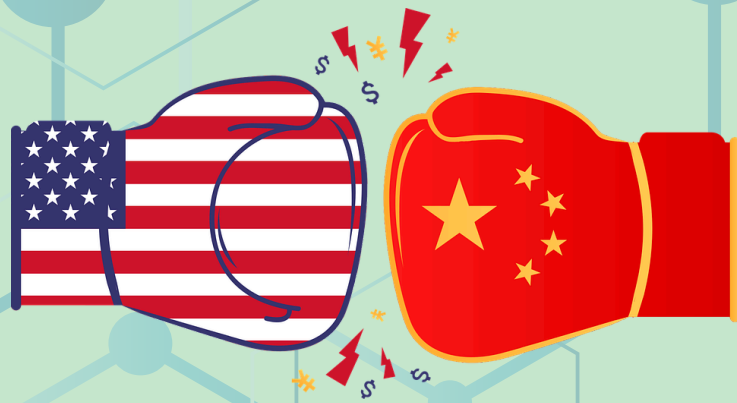
-Jazmine Lin

Introduction

Since ChatGPT was released in 2022, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged everywhere. For many, this drastic change seems to have happened overnight. Not too long ago, AI was just a distant concept I associated with sci-fi novels, but before I knew it, ChatGPT had become a commonly used tool in the classroom.

The recent release of DeepSeek has once again thrust AI into the spotlight. Before, discussions around AI revolved around tech giants racing to be the first to develop artificial general intelligence (AGI), a type of AI that matches or surpasses human cognitive capabilities across a wide range of tasks. Now that geopolitics has entered the race, there is much more at stake, with the United States (US) and China competing to be the world leader in AI. Though AGI currently remains a concept, the rapid pace of AI development makes it a very real possibility in the future.

The geopolitical and technological implications of these developments have been much debated. But at the end of the day, all these speculations are characterised by uncertainty. In the pursuit of AGI, are we prepared for the day it becomes a reality? What is the ultimate end goal of tech advancement, and will it benefit humanity as a whole? The environment surrounding AI development is largely a competitive one. However, it is worth questioning whether this is the right approach, because no matter who wins this race, everyone will feel the impact of AI advancement in some way.



AI: Blessing or curse?

Given how uncertain the future of AI is, it is concerning that society is already so polarised about its existence. It may seem like a recent development, but in reality, AI has been around for a while in both the workforce and daily life. AI was actually birthed way back in the 1950s, when the term “artificial intelligence” was coined and came into use.¹ Since then, AI has entered our lives quite seamlessly. Common household objects like the Roomba and Siri have been around since 2002 and 2010 respectively. In 2006, companies such as Twitter, Facebook, and Netflix started utilising generative AI as a part of their advertising and UX algorithms.² So why did AI only become mainstream in 2023 with the arrival of ChatGPT?



1. Tableau, “What is the history of artificial intelligence (AI)?”
2. Ibid.

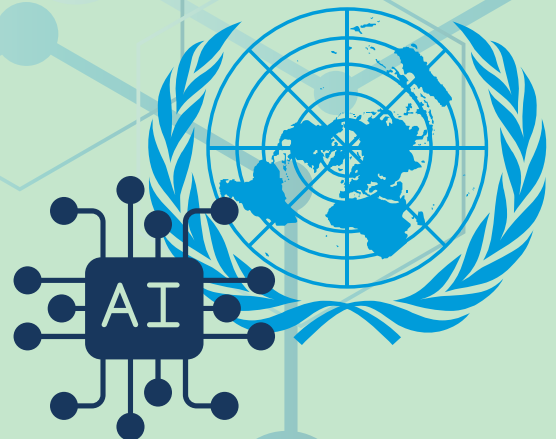
Though inventions like the Roomba had a direct impact on peoples' lives too, ChatGPT was unique due to its relatively widespread applications. It could draft emails, write articles and even generate programming code. The ability to directly interact with the AI and receive comprehensive answers was also groundbreaking³, making AI seem more like a 'living thing' rather than just a tool. Reminiscent of how quickly the Internet was adopted in the late 1990s, we are at an inflection point in the AI-adoption curve where the novelty of the technology itself has begun to be eclipsed by the utility and efficiency it delivers. AI has now become a given in any software solution that promises to increase productivity.⁴



At this stage, it is important to determine how AI could shape our future and how its potential downsides can be mitigated. However, polarised views over how generative AI should be used often makes it difficult for countries, much less international organisations, to make decisive decisions about AI use. For example, machine learning in manufacturing and financial sectors is viewed as more acceptable than generative AI in creative and social work sectors. Even among artists, there is polarisation over how acceptable using AI in art is—anti-AI artists believe AI devalues the skills of artists and are concerned about copyright legality since AI is trained on the work of other artists.⁵ On the other hand, artists that support AI art see it as complementing and enhancing human creativity rather than replacing it.⁶ Differing opinions over major world developments is nothing new, but AI is a fast growing technology that will not wait for differences to be ironed out. This becomes especially clear when comparing the pace of AI development to that of AI regulation.

Regulating an uncertain future

Can we keep up with these rapid technological changes? AI regulation is always one step behind development. The European Union AI Act is the world's first comprehensive AI law, and is still gradually coming into operation. Though this is a major step in regulating AI, there is skepticism over the practical implementation of the act, and the resources needed to ensure compliance. There is also debate over the regulation of general-purpose AI systems like ChatGPT. These systems are rapidly evolving and can create new threats in the future, such as malware generation and more sophisticated prompt injection attacks. Hence, the current AI Act may quickly become outdated as technology advances.⁷



3. Bernard Marr, "A Short History of ChatGPT: How We Got To Where We Are Today."

4. Brian Peccarelli, "How AI And Machine Learning Quietly Went Mainstream."

5. Sarah Shaffi, "It's the opposite of art': why illustrators are furious about AI."

6. Worklife, "These Artists Are Using AI as a Creative Partner. See How!"

7. Symbio6, "Critics Raise Concerns About the EU AI Act."

AI regulation becomes even more uncertain and inconsistent at an international level as each country or region develops their own unique regulations. Unlike the EU's centralised AI Act, the US pursues a decentralised and sector-specific regulatory framework primarily driven by voluntary commitments from private companies and guided by federal agencies.⁸

Even within regions, there are disparities between countries. For example, China adopts a more prescriptive approach to AI regulation compared to Singapore, which is more voluntary. Singapore has launched a series of frameworks which provide general guidance but has no legally binding effect. On the other hand, China has introduced mandatory technology-specific regulations and measures. Unlike in Singapore, these regulations are legally binding.⁹

International organisations face even more difficulties in developing an AI framework due to the diversity of member states. The United Nations' (UN) 2024 draft resolution on AI signalled the importance of regulation, but is not legally binding and is vague in its methods of implementation.¹⁰ Such an approach makes it acceptable to most member states, but it makes the geopolitics of AI particularly unpredictable as there is no concrete approach to AI regulation that all agree on.

In this uncertain landscape, tech firms aren't waiting to see what regulation looks like before experimenting with AI. Many companies have already established their own internal frameworks in anticipation of governmental regulations.¹¹ As countries design specific AI regulations, firms will face even greater uncertainty as they navigate different operating environments. Due to rapid changes, regulation attempts are often forced to react to developments as they come, making it inevitable that regulation will always be a step behind.

Conclusion

AI's potential makes it revolutionary, but I hesitate to say that it'll be a definite win for humanity. Today, AI is still in the relatively early stages of development, yet its impacts are already so widespread. Additionally, we still haven't figured out how deep learning systems make their decisions, which makes it much harder to predict AI's growth and how it will shape lives. This makes it difficult to trust AI for more high-stakes decisions, especially if it produces biased or hallucinated results.¹² It's because of this that I doubt fantastical scenarios like AI taking over governments will become reality. Instead, issues like cybersecurity threats or AI-induced unemployment will be much more immediate problems.

Though there are other unpredictable phenomena besides AI, AI is one of the few that is progressing at a rate too rapid for proper safeguards to be implemented in time. This is largely due to AI's novelty and how it's become incorporated into US-China competition. In a competitive environment, I expect AI development will only progress faster, compounding uncertainties over its effects on everything from daily life to international relations.



8. Davtyan, "The U.S. Approach to AI Regulation: Federal Laws, Policies, and Strategies Explained."

9. RPC International Law Firm, "Part 4 - AI Regulations in Asia."

10. Jeffrey Shin, "AI Watch: Global regulatory tracker - United Nations."

11. Isabelle Bousquette, "AI Is Moving Faster Than Attempts to Regulate It. Here's How Companies Are Coping."

12. Lou Blouin, "AI's mysterious 'black box' problem, explained."

IN MEMORIAM

An Article by
PRITHVI BHARDWAJ

PG. 1 / 3

THE RIDGE MAGAZINE

COMMENTARY

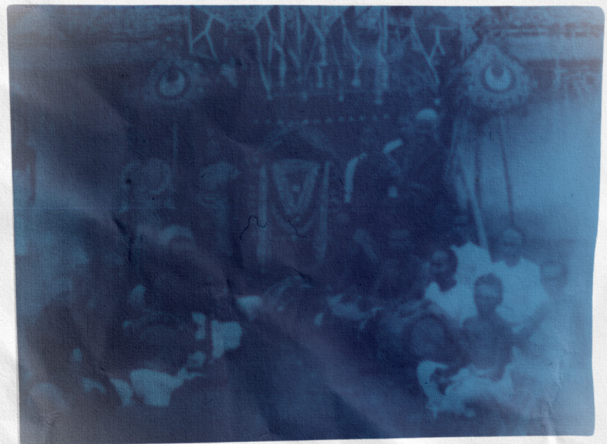
South India, with its deep-rooted traditions, diverse linguistic heritage, and rich artistic expressions, has long been a cultural powerhouse of the Indian subcontinent. However, many of its traditional practices have faded over time due to the twin forces of colonialism and modernisation. It's been a common observation that this relentless tide of change has led to cultural erosion, shown in the declining visibility of unique dance forms, puppeteering techniques, sports, and so on. Luckily, in recent years, there has been a concerted effort to rediscover and reintegrate these traditions into contemporary South Indian life, rekindling a connection with a past that was nearly lost.



A Sadir dancer.

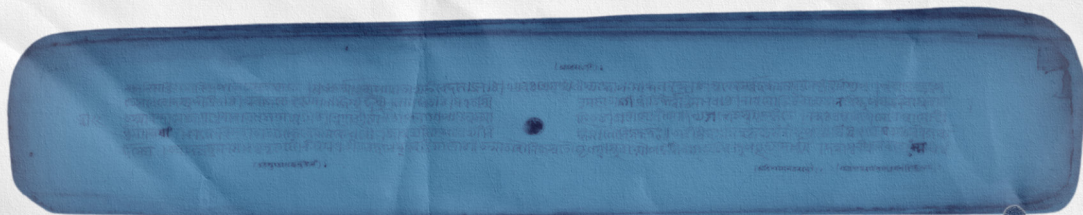
Beyond colonialism, the passage of time and the relentless push of modernisation further altered the cultural landscape of South India. The urban migration of the 20th and 21st centuries led to a disconnect between generations as younger South Indians moved away from villages where traditional practices were deeply embedded. With nuclear families replacing joint families, the transmission of oral traditions, folk music, and regional dialects weakened. Festivals that were once grand community affairs, involving processions, storytelling, and local crafts, became smaller, commercialised, and often secularised.

To understand why many of South India's cultural traditions faded out, it's important to understand India's history. Colonial rule in India, particularly under the British, profoundly disrupted South Indian cultural traditions. The imposition of Western education, legal systems, and economic structures marginalised indigenous knowledge, crafts, and local governance models. One of the most striking examples of this was the suppression of traditional temple arts (artistic affairs associated with religious temples), such as Sadir, the precursor to modern Bharatanatyam. Originally performed by Devadasis—women dedicated to temple service—Sadir was stigmatised under colonial moralistic reforms and was nearly erased. Sadir is possibly one of the most pre-eminent examples of cultural misappropriation—because British colonisers incorrectly perceived Devadasis to be prostitutes, they labelled Sadir as morally corrupt. Over time, this became the prevalent perspective and resulted in communities shunning Sadir dancers. That severely reduced the art's patronage and performance opportunities, and with reduced funds, the art form was on its way out.



A Sadir troupe.

The changing linguistic landscape also homogenised South Indian society, threatening the cultural diversity in the region. English and Hindi became dominant in education and media, while several South Indian dialects and regional storytelling forms, such as Villupattu in Tamil Nadu and Burra Katha in Andhra Pradesh, declined in popularity. Similarly, the once-thriving tradition of palm-leaf manuscript writing, a medium for recording historical, medical, and literary knowledge, nearly disappeared. As South India embraced technological advancements, many traditional occupations—from Kolam artists who created intricate rice flour designs similar to the more popular Rangoli to handloom silk weavers—found their skills undervalued in a rapidly modernising economy.



A palm-leaf manuscript of the *Bhagavata Purana*.

Yet, even with the widespread decline of these traditions, there has been a remarkable cultural resurgence in recent years driven by a growing awareness of cultural heritage and a desire to reconnect with ancestral wisdom. Organizations such as SPIC MACAY (Society for the Promotion of Indian Classical Music and Culture Amongst Youth) and the Kalakshetra Movement aim to revive classical Indian dance and music. This is being done through direct integration into school curriculums, allowing the youth to access old traditions with a low barrier of entry. Traditional performing arts like Bharatanatyam, which was once dismissed as an outdated ritual, has been reinterpreted and globalised as a prestigious classical dance form. With these programmes, there has also been renewed interest in Yakshagana (a traditional theatrical dance-drama from Karnataka) and Koothu (a Tamil folk theater form). Yet, these art forms have adapted and been transformed by young artists into more modern performances which appeal to the tastes of contemporary audiences.

Lastly, temple and village festivals—which had lost their vibrancy due to urbanisation—have been revived through cultural preservation initiatives. The resurgence of Kambala (buffalo racing in Karnataka) showcases a broader effort to reclaim Indian heritage practices that were once deemed archaic or controversial. The landmark legal battle to protect Jallikattu, with the Supreme Court ruling in its favour, reflects a deeper cultural assertion among South Indians. And it was digital platforms and social media which played a pivotal role in amplifying youth awareness about these forgotten traditions, making them accessible to younger generations in ways never before possible. YouTube channels dedicated to folk storytelling, Instagram pages celebrating handloom traditions, and TikTok videos featuring traditional South Indian recipes have all played a role in this huge movement to revitalise traditional cultural practices.



A Bharatanatyam dancer.



Kambalas across India.

Cultural traditions are never static—they evolve, decline, and often resurface in new forms. South India, with its deeply ingrained respect for heritage, is witnessing an era of rediscovery, where forgotten traditions are being reinterpreted and reintegrated into modern life. Colonialism and the passage of time undoubtedly led to significant cultural losses, but the resilience of South Indian communities has ensured that these traditions are not entirely lost. Whether through artistic revival or digital preservation, South India is embracing its past while moving forward into the future. This is proof that cultural impermanence does not necessarily mean cultural extinction.

In the end, the rediscovery of forgotten traditions is not just about nostalgia—it is about reclaiming identity, strengthening community bonds, and ensuring that the wisdom of the past continues to guide the present and the future.



**WERE
WE**

Maybe it's the '90s grunge look that is making a comeback, or the idea that people used to dress better (spoiler: they probably did not). As uncertainty looms, societies have a fascinating habit of turning to the past—not for clarity, but for comfort.

BETTER THEN?

When the future feels fuzzy and the present seems chaotic, we tend to romanticise what has already been. Yet, we do not just remember the past, we remix it. We search for and create it through rose-tinted lenses, even if the reality was a little messier than we would like to admit. And why not? After all, it would be nice to believe that life used to be cooler—or perhaps more relevant to today's local discourse—smelt better too.

By. Glendas Ng

NOSTALGIA OR RECREATION?

This longing is reflected in cultural cycles. Fashion revives past trends, scents trigger decades-old memories, and music from bygone eras resurfaces as remastered or remade versions, as if offering a portal to a time that feels, retrospectively, simpler or more authentic. For example, fashion cycles back to certain phases and eras, from the resurgence of Y2K aesthetics to the revival of bell bottoms—people often feel a connection to the fashion of their youth or a period they associate with positive memories. In times of uncertainty, people may look to the past for comfort and familiarity. Fashion in this form can be an escapism, allowing people to transport themselves to a different time. This can be especially appealing in a rapidly changing and increasingly confusing world. Granted, as sustainability becomes more important, interest in vintage and second-hand clothing might be another contributing factor to the revival of past trends too.

The notion of nostalgia is not just a personal motivation; it has been leveraged on for the creation of products for more capitalistic purposes. Be it in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, where the faint smell of flowers at Gatsby's parties adds to the opulent yet superficial ambiance, or in Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, where the aroma of Christmas dishes highlights the festive spirit and contrasts starkly with Scrooge's cold environment, olfactory imagery has become a seminal passage in literature. So famous in fact, that it has its own name: the Proustian moment—a sensory experience that triggers a rush of memories often long past, or even seemingly. Olfactory imagery goes beyond books these days. Look no further than Maison Margiela's *Replica* line of perfumes which crafts scents that are designed and intended to transport wearers to specific moments and moods from the past—whether it's the feeling of a Jazz Club in the 2010s, or the nostalgia of a traditional Barber Shop in 1990's Madrid. Or perhaps sportswear giant Nike, whose signature scent was inspired by the smell of a basketball, the mixture of rubber and sweat, and shoe soles as they scrape across the court and many, many other elements that would trigger the memory of partaking in sports as a youth.

In times of uncertainty, when the future is unclear and when chaos reigns, people seek clarity in the past—even if that past is a mirage. We do not simply remember; we reconstruct, reinterpret, and romanticise. The notion of a “prime” or “golden” age is one of the most persistent historical illusions. Almost every society, at some point, has longed for an era of supposed purity, stability, or greatness—one that, upon closer examination, is often a convenient fiction. The past is filtered through selective memory, its rough edges smoothed out to create a sense of nostalgia that is more comforting than accurate. Hindsight is 20/20, right?

More than that, when clarity is absent, people not only reconstruct the past but also fill in the blanks with fiction: that is, like those of conspiracy theories. Conspiracy theories flourish in moments of crisis, providing narratives that impose order on randomness. If the present is chaotic or simply missing a couple of truths, a convenient alternative can be created—one that simplifies complexities and assigns clear plots, heroes and villains. The less people understand, the more they feel the need to explain, even if that explanation is flawed or deceptive. A quick search on Google will land you on what I can only assume to be a non-exhaustive list of conspiracy theories on Wikipedia. Another scroll and you will land yourself on a Reddit community for the sharing (and ridiculing) of any conspiracy theories one could possibly think of. Because let us face it, sometimes it is easier to believe in a shadowy cabal pulling strings behind the scenes than to confront the reality that many problems have no single cause and no simple solution. History is full of these narratives, from the medieval paranoia of witches and heretics to today’s digital echo chambers where misinformation spreads faster than ever. In a time where truth can feel slippery and subjective, these alternative histories and explanations provide a kind of mental comfort—because at least in a conspiracy, there *is* a villain we can point to, even if that villain is a fiction of our own making.

Nostalgia, then, is not about the past. It is about the present. It is an emotional response to uncertainty, a way of grounding ourselves when the road ahead seems obscured. The challenge is recognising when reimagining history serves as an enriching exercise and when it becomes a form of escapism that distorts reality. And just maybe, one day, when you catch a whiff of marinated sweat on the train some years down the road, it will serve as a reminder of the ridiculous Mandi-lah Singapura debate, of your younger *golden* days.



The Blanket Vocabulary

Natanya

“Sticks and stones may break my bones, but chains and whips excite me” - Rihanna.

Oh, sorry—I got the second half of the quote wrong. The *actual* saying is “sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me”. This playground adage has been altered countless times over the years; it’s almost impossible to pinpoint where this idiom originated from. One of the earliest appearances can be traced to a publication called *The Christian Recorder* by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. Now, I don’t mean to insult the lovely AME Church and what I’m sure is a fantastic publication, but I do have a bone to pick with them vis-à-vis their rhyming adages. Words DO hurt. I have been hurt many times by words. Specifically, words that are used over and over again until they lose their original meanings, corpses and shells of words spread across the linguistic cemetery: it hurts to look back at the purpose and meaning they once held.

Hey, does the word word still mean word or does it mean the other kind of word and how do you know which word i mean when i say word?

When I was a kid my mother and I used to stop by the McDonald’s Drive-Thru once every two weeks, after my piano lessons. I would hold the hot bag of fries and inhale the fresh smell of oily deep-fried potatoes all the way home, on account of not being allowed to eat in the car. My mother would playfully comment that I was smelling all the flavour out of the fries, and that by the time we got home they would be tasteless. While I’m not sure whether that’s true for fries, the principle definitely applies for language. When words get used over and over again by millions of people it’s easy for their original meanings to get warped and, in some cases, replaced by something else entirely.

One phenomenon that illustrates this is the “euphemism treadmill”, coined by psycholinguist Steven Pinker. Essentially, the euphemism treadmill refers to the process by which terms intended to replace offensive or outdated words become pejorative themselves over time, and have to be replaced—thus continuing the cycle. For example, ‘handicapped’ was replaced by ‘disabled’, then ‘differently-abled’, each term eventually acquiring the same negative connotations. This cycle demonstrates how language is always changing, often losing its original intent as words become overused or socially charged.

Good examples of how nuance tends to get lost in certain words that are overused are terms that have been popularised through social media, such as ‘gaslight’ and ‘normalise’. These two terms fall under the semantic group of medical language; specifically, they’re terminology used in psychology. Over time, however, their overuse in and oversimplification due to online discourse have diluted their original meanings, stripping them of the nuance necessary for accurate communication. “Gaslighting”, for example, originally referred to a “deliberate and systematic form of psychological manipulation”. It is an incredibly serious and painful form of manipulation, where a person is made to doubt their experiences and can often become so disoriented that they lose their sense of reality. This very serious phenomenon often seen in victims of abusive relationships has lost its weight. Now it is casually thrown around to describe any disagreement or differing perspective even when no intentional manipulation is at play. Even if this is not the intention of people who use gaslight without understanding the true meaning, it still takes away from the real experiences of victims.

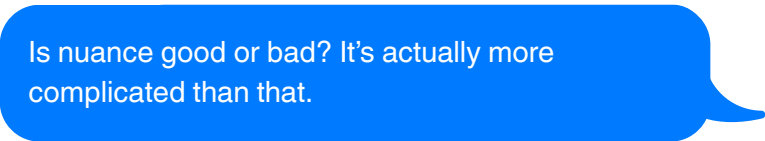
Similarly, “normalise” was once used in clinical and sociological contexts to describe social processes to integrate marginalised groups or behaviors that were not seen as “natural” into mainstream society. Now, it is frequently applied to any trend, behavior, or opinion people want to promote, no matter how insignificant. (*No, Nara Smith, you are not “normalising” the trad-wife lifestyle. Sorry to break it to you.*)

A more light-hearted example of this is the phrase “hidden gem”, which has been used so loosely in local social media spaces to describe any and every eatery that you’d think Singapore must be the world’s most prosperous mine.

The loss of nuance impacts how we understand and engage with the world. When complex psychological concepts are watered down into buzzwords, genuine mental health struggles risk being trivialised and misunderstood. The concepts lose their weight, and the victims lose validation of their experiences. If telling someone you’ll “be there in five” when you haven’t even left the house yet counts as “gaslighting”, then true cases of manipulation become harder to identify and address.

Beyond the immediate impact on communication, this loss of nuance also causes cultural erosion. Language is inextricably linked to culture. Cultural knowledge, practices, values and history are all carried in the words we use precisely because communication is how we as humans create culture in the first place. When words lose their original meaning, they take with them the cultural specificity that once defined them. Words from indigenous languages and dialects are often repurposed and trivialised in online spaces, detaching them from their cultural roots. For example, the most popular meanings of words like “aloha” (originally a term deeply linked to Hawaiian culture, meaning much more than just a simple hello) or “aesthetic” (which once had a rich philosophical meaning) have been reduced, now bearing little connection to their original significance.

Ultimately, when language loses its depth, so does our ability to express diverse perspectives, historical narratives, and the richness of human experience. This shift reflects a broader issue: in an age of rapid digital communication, words are the fallen soldiers, the collateral damage in our trade of depth for convenience or humour. Through this trade, we lose not just the deeper meanings of words, but their cultural legacies.



Is nuance good or bad? It’s actually more complicated than that.

One argument that can be made against nuanced language is simply that the modern world is too complex to accommodate for every variation, caveat and anomaly.

However, I would argue that nuance in language is essential in our modern lives *because* of its complicated nature. For example, the political divide between the Democrats and Republicans has long lost the nuance necessary for many socio-political issues. The polarising language of divide that is used in political discussions only bolsters the feeling of having to choose between one or the other, which often ignores the much-needed middle ground and encourages extreme views and actions. Are you red or blue? A MAGA republican or a woke liberal? This kind of black-and-white framing strips complex issues of their depth and forces individuals into rigid ideological squares.

Moreover, when language lacks nuance, it hinders critical thinking and meaningful debate. Instead of engaging with the complexities of social issues (such as the socio-economic factors influencing abortion rates or the intersection between free speech and hate speech) conversations devolve into slogans and buzzwords that do little more than antagonise. This reductionist approach detracts from productive conversations about issues that greatly affect millions. It also radicalizes discourse, which only exacerbates this one-size-fits-all labelling.

In the long run, this erosion of nuance in language poses threats to our culture and even discourse surrounding the very fabrics of our society.

So words have to stay the same forever?

Not necessarily. The word “nice” used to mean foolish, and the word “awful” used to mean in awe of. (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). If someone called you awfully nice in the 1300s, it would probably mean you had some issues to work through.

It would be egregious of me to suggest that language should stay stagnant—that’s not what I believe at all. Language is, above all else, a reflection of the human experience. Language change should be embraced and welcomed; it acts as a mirror to our current realities, social systems and relationships with each other.

We can actually use language change as a marker of how societal norms have changed over the years. For instance, discussions of diversity now focus on the term “acceptance” rather than “tolerance”, which reflects a deeper understanding for others and higher expectations of genuine inclusion rather than mere coexistence.

Furthermore, language change is natural and inevitable. What might seem to be simplification or erosion is often just adaptation—language evolving to suit the needs and rhythms of its speakers. For example, the popularity of internet slang is merely a reflection of how important digital communication has become, especially for modern day youths. Gen Alpha “brainrot” terms are not signs of our language systems crumbling around us, but rather are products of a youth culture that has been born and bred on the internet. They are no less innovative than the slangs of our predecessors (see: cool, awesome, cop, movie, nerd, etcetera), and who knows? Maybe one day in the distant future, “rizz” will be a commonplace word, used by half-people-half-robots on Mars. Globalisation has also played a factor in how language, specifically English, has become more accessible. As English becomes the language of global communication, more and more non-native speakers have to become fluent in it. A simpler vocabulary can tremendously improve comprehension, and if you don’t think learning English is hard, maybe try empathy for a change. I’m kidding. You should try learning a completely new language to proficiency at your big adult age and telling me how it goes instead!

Language change should also be celebrated because it is a celebration of culture. In Singapore, we can see our multicultural diversity through how Singlish has merged English with our local languages—Tamil, Mandarin, and Malay— borrowing from these dialects to create a unique variety of English. Expressions like “is it?” or “I also want to go” mirror Chinese syntax. In Indian English, words like “prepone” or “time-pass” convey ideas with precision that standard English lacks. Even the use of the humble “can”, such as in “can or not?”, mirrors Malay syntax with the word “boleh”.

To sum it up, not all language changes are good, especially when they stem from a misunderstanding—or worse, a lack of care about the original meanings and weight of language. But we shouldn’t be afraid of change just because some of it is less desirable than we’d like it to be. What we should be doing is being mindful of the terms and phrases we use: don’t just pick up a popular term you see on the internet because everyone else seems to be using it. Being more intentional and conscious of the words we use, and the implied or overt consequences of using them, will benefit not just my soul (so that I may never see someone use the terms “unreliable narrator” or “gaslighting” incorrectly again) but also lead to a more empathetic and informed people.



Why Are We So Afraid Of The Elderly?

by Jonathan Joramsa

Old people scare us, apparently. With no shortage of horror movies depicting the elderly as the monsters out to get our young protagonists, it seems profitable to push forward the narrative that old people should be feared. In horror, gone are the wise, kind seniors we've learnt to revere; their feebleness and wisdom that typically make us go *aww* elicit screams in the darkened cinema instead. The only roles the elderly can play are of the grotesque, the envious and the nefarious—and we eat it up.

Contrary to what many horror movie *avoiders* might say, horror movies are more than just cheap jumpscars. They're cultural products, and often reflect very real social anxieties—trust me, I took a horror film class last semester. Though these social fears are obviously exaggerated for shock value, the power of horror is in its ability to force us to confront the harsh truths. Think about how the movie-watching experience means that we must brave our fears—or at least peek through the fingers over our eyes—to see whatever's on-screen. If representations of the elderly in horror are so effective in generating fear, what does that say about the way we view the elderly and ageing?

GROSS! Get That Away From Me!

It's no secret that ageing is part of being human. While this means we'll experience the joy of retirement, becoming a senior is also negatively associated with deterioration as we lose the robust physical and mental faculties of our youth. Becoming "ugly" (as society perceives) or losing control over our own bodies as we age are difficult pills to swallow. These fears of deterioration manifest in the monstrous aged figures of the horror movie, where it's clear that elderly characteristics are marked as grotesque.

In *The Substance*, the young and old are in perpetual conflict. In an attempt to reclaim her former glory, middle-aged Hollywood star Elisabeth turns to a black-market drug which claims to create a younger, prettier version of herself. Though Sue's unnatural origin might make her a candidate for repudiation, it's more so Elisabeth who's alienated for her accelerated ageing. Compared to Sue's unblemished skin, Elisabeth is meant to be viewed as monstrous for her ugly and dysfunctional body parts. The film satirically plays into the trope of hagsploitation—the portrayal of menopause as a state of disease. What's even more horrifying is Elisabeth internalising the grotesqueness about her decrepit body, and discarding her sense of self-preservation in favour of the youthful, gorgeous Sue. Released amidst America's obsession over anti-ageing treatments, the fiction of *The Substance* articulates the current reality where ageing is a disease to be avoided at all costs.

Even horror antagonists who aren't technically old are depicted with aged characteristics. Freddy Krueger's face is fleshy and porous, ornamented with a hooked nose commonly used in portrayals of old witches. The Brundlefly is horrific because of its dramatic combination of wrinkly skin, thinning hair and saggy bulbous eyes. The slow-moving zombies in *Dawn of the Dead* are in a constant state of decay, leaving them physically impaired. Old age is frequently viewed as a transitory state between life and death, and the visible deterioration aged characters undergo reminds us of our mortality. More than that, they remind us of the likely possibility that suffering awaits us when we stumble into the elderly age range. Ageing has become synonymous with sickness and social ostracisation, and no doubt it's scary to have to reevaluate the way you see yourself and adapt to a new life with restrictions beyond your control.

Always WANTING What They CAN'T HAVE

As discussed earlier, horror movies fundamentally operate on the notion of difference. We identify ourselves with the "good guys" since they appear most like us—whether physically, mentally, or through the values they uphold—and learn to abhor the "bad guys" who represent the exact opposite. Without realising, we're forming relationships within the diegesis, as we learn very quickly who to root for and be against. Part of setting up this us-versus-them dichotomy in narratives about the elderly is presenting them as figures who are lacking, having lost much in their temporally-tied decline. The young are conversely presented as figures who are whole, placing them in a vulnerable position against the envious.

This brings to mind Moira O'Hara from *American Horror Story: Murder House* or the Old Lady in the Bathtub in *The Shining*. In both cases, these women are initially presented as attractive youthful females warranted in their displays of sexuality, before being maliciously transformed into perverted old women. Ageing and the loss of sexual appeal go hand-in-hand, so when elderly characters in horror transgress the border of sexuality meant only for the youth, it feels *wrong*. They're threatening the social order by engaging in youthful activities and by extension, trying to become young again. This technique of implanting elderly characters in scenes of scandalised sexual desire is common—just look at the success Ti West's *X* had in parading the perversions of an elderly woman trying to imitate the younger characters' sexual ventures. She eventually kills them off when she fails, reinforcing the horrific image of the jealous aged who only wants to exploit the young.

The insidious motivations of the Armitages in *Get Out* echo this same notion of the envious elderly. While the film deals with racial politics, at its core it's about the privileged elderly masquerading as young black people to compensate for the frailty of old age. There's a sense of the alien as the senile consciousness invades the young characters' minds, sequestering the real consciousness in the Sunken Place. The young can only watch as their bodies act as vessels for these parasites. Horror movies portray the elderly as monsters for wanting what they used to have, but is it monstrous to yearn for the past? It's important to question the unspoken rules we've enforced onto the elderly—why can't they have sex, or be content with their health? Why are some things only for the young and not for the old? Time stops for nobody, and if we don't do anything about the way we conceptualise the elderly, we'll soon be subject to this same set of social constraints.

Grandma's Gone **INSANE**

And now we turn to the final form the elderly can take in the horror movie: the nefarious, or otherwise, the pure embodiment of evil. While we might sympathise with the grotesque or the envious, with the nefarious any semblance of sympathy gets chucked out the window Olympia-style. Their motivations are incomprehensible to the rational person. They only exist to seek, kill and destroy.

Perhaps underlying all these one-dimensional depictions of the elderly are our fears about their intrinsic power. Much of the laws and cultural norms in our societies were decided by these same people we now consider our elders. With the younger generation espousing more liberal sentiments, there's frustration with the overly conservative or rigid systems we're forced to live under (the patriarchy or the denial of queer rights, for example). Even after these old men have left office, we still feel the effects of their political careers reverberate through our lives. And when we hate or fear something so terribly, we turn them into monsters.

The Castevets in *Rosemary's Baby* are the perfect image of the modern archaic. On the surface, they're the eccentric old neighbours-next-door, always finding an excuse to pop by for an unannounced visit to gossip over tea. They're harmless—or so we think. Beneath their ever-so-obliging smiles, a devious desire burgeons: they wish to use Rosemary to birth the spawn of Satan. From the very beginning, they've secretly orchestrated all the events that will bring about their plan, slowly cutting her off from her friends and instilling paranoia within her so she's a compliant vessel. The final harrowing scene is of Rosemary confronting the Satanic cult (notably, consisting of old people) in horror as she grapples with the fact she gave birth to the Antichrist. If Satanism is viewed as an ancient evil, who better to be its disciples than old people set in their ways?

Heretic then interestingly challenges the old-conservative, young-liberal model by having the two young female protagonists be staunch Mormons seeking to evangelise. The film's villain is the senior Hugh Grant, who plays a cunning proponent of the secular. Though he's unexpectedly liberal for a man in his 60s—renouncing religion in a move that might resonate with youth today—ultimately the same story plays out: he tortures the girls into submitting to his own beliefs. These nefarious elderly are always in positions of power, and inadvertently abuse the power they hold to perpetuate their values.

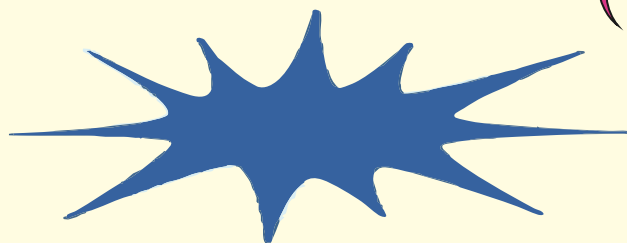
But **ONE** Day...

We fear the elderly in horror because, deep down, we fear becoming them. It's easy to project our anxieties onto these elderly caricatures; we gawk at the grotesque, sneer at the envious, cower before the nefarious—never once considering that one day, we'll become them. And when that day comes, will we still see them as monsters? Or will we finally realise that the real terror was never in the wrinkles, but in the way we chose to look at them?

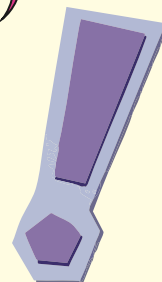




The *Beauty* of Saying by. Zander



"YES"



Many freshmen enter NUS with grand expectations of the globe's top eighth university, keen to experience its world-class education and vibrant student life. It's not long before this excitement fades into routine and the once-thrilling promise of university becomes another list of KPIs to hit. Disillusioned, it's easy to wonder if it's all just a game of numbers. For a moment, you wonder what you're doing this for. But NUS is more than just its namesake! If you're feeling lost, maybe the countless academic and extracurricular programmes available can be your compass.

Working Hard or Hardly Working?

University is an intermediary between schooling and work, and for some, there's no better way to fill the gap between university theory and real-life work than jumping into an internship. Xing Hui, an Accounting student, joined a well-regarded MNC for her first internship. Her company's strong coaching culture exposed her to operational procedures from the get-go. Coupled with the 9-month long programme, it showed how her job scope might transform throughout a financial year. With the MNC's guiding systems, she won't need to expend extra energy on optimising accounting workflows from scratch, making a seamless transition from academic theory to technical application.

Likewise, I joined a start-up because it was difficult to see how what I learnt from my major could transform into career prospects. All I knew was I wanted to do something in the private sector, so I joined a start-up! Though I'd

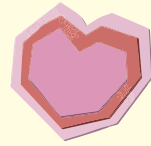
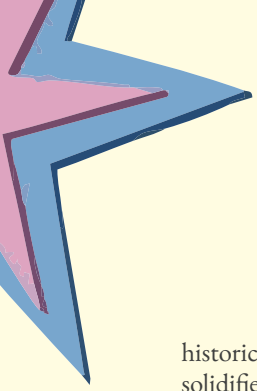
wanted to take a stab at agritech, my role ended up being a blend of e-commerce and sustainability education. But the journey's been fruitful—I found that even common curriculum courses I'd once discounted, like DTK1234, could help me in the workshop curation process. And even as annoying as children can be, environmental education is growing on me as a potential career path forward.

Regardless of what you do, keep your priorities close to heart and stay open to unexpected opportunities. Both Xing Hui and I agree that to know what it's like "out there", you *need* to talk to people, be it at career fairs or through cold emails and LinkedIn. Who knows, you could even secure a role from this!

It's Just Fluff, Isn't It?

But sometimes, knowledge *is* the ultimate goal which pushes students to extend beyond their mandated curriculums. Ashleigh* has always been interested in social theory, but didn't study much of it until she joined NUS Anthropology. She took CS1010E last year thinking it would be a low-stakes UE (spoiler alert: it wasn't), and quickly realised that she wasn't suited to coding—a common realisation shared by many during their struggles with the CS1010 course variations.

Now, she selects her UEs based on "cool course assessments and topics" which analyse taken-for-granted aspects of daily living. Through these courses, she can stretch her academic aptitude and learn more about the famous



historical theorists she reads about in her free time. Not only does that extend on what she's learning in her major, it's also solidified her decision to pursue further studies.

But UEs don't *have* to be dense. Zayden*, left with only six UEs after his compulsory Pharmacy courses, ventured into the unfamiliar territories of programming and Japanese. While his foray into CS1010S left him battle-scarred, not all was lost; the “computational thinking” and basic algorithm skills he obtained from the course were surprisingly useful for decision-making. He fared better in Japanese, driven by a passion for the language and its nuances. After five long semesters of studying the art of Japanese, he'll be graduating with a minor in the language.

Rather than maximise their GPA with “easy A's”, they believe UEs are worth fighting for. Remember, we're paying thousands per semester. As Ashleigh says, “I'm not adding depression from courses I hate onto that price.” Instead of stressing over a 3-digit number, both Ashleigh and Zayden suggest taking courses you enjoy, or those that bolster your knowledge in topics you might not otherwise have time for. Even if you S/U the course, you could still learn something new about yourself, or even see the world in a new light!

Flying Above and Beyond

Our time in NUS doesn't have to be spent all in Singapore either—NUS offers a variety of overseas exchange programmes, internships, and volunteering projects. These aren't cheap, but they draw students in search of adventure all the same.

Our own editor, Akshita, thought her Winter exchange at Hanyang University was a taster of what was to come in SEP. As she'd never been to Korea, nor gone skiing (included in the programme), she figured she'd “kill a bunch of birds with one stone”. Having grown up on the move, she wanted to seize this opportunity to determine how well she'd fare in navigating somewhere unfamiliar independently. And yes, she did get homesick halfway through the programme. But the experience taught her what her limit for being away from home was. In her words, “there isn't any better stepping stone” to a semester-long SEP, an international internship, or even migrating for work.

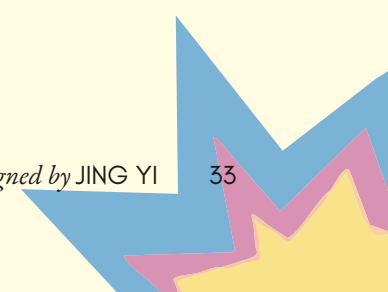
As for Yu Wei, he's leading a volunteering project in Vietnam with the NUS Engineers Without Borders team. Part of it stems from a desire to “do good for communities” lacking support, but part of it also stems from a personal desire to explore possibilities outside of Singapore. And what better time to do so than in university, while he has the time and energy for such a project? Besides, it's a good opportunity for him to get involved in social entrepreneurship—a very real career path for him considering his second major in Innovation and Design. For him, going overseas isn't just a fun escape, but a way to better understand regional cultures and global trends.

Purpose in a Piece of Paper

Everyone I interviewed for this article swore that GPA wasn't the be-all-end-all, but most of them still view a high GPA (and the Dean's List!) favourably. It's a nice pat on the back: proof you've put in the effort to grasp your coursework. That said, chasing a high GPA isn't the goal here. We've all tried doing that, and it *sucked*.

Academic success doesn't *really* matter as much in university, not when compared to career preparation and personal growth. With fewer responsibilities and plenty of time, university is a prime time for exploring interests, learning new skills, and gathering socio-cultural capital. Striving to do the bare minimum just for a degree certification would be to do ourselves a disservice. It's fine not to know who we are or what we want right now. But we can't “find ourselves” when we shut every door offered to us. Here's some food for thought—exploring NUS' research gigs, mentorships, extracurriculars, and even TA roles might just be what you need to find the beacon in the fog.

**Names have been changed to protect the privacy of respondents.*



Sailing IN FAMILIAR WATERS

WRITTEN BY SHRABASTI

FEATURING LEAH GO JOHN TAN ALICE WONG BEN LAU

DISCLAIMER: THE NAMES AND COURSE OF STUDY OF THE INDIVIDUALS IN THIS ARTICLE HAVE BEEN ALTERED TO PRESERVE THEIR ANONYMITY AS WELL AS OTHER RELEVANT DETAILS.

University life is known for its fast pace and high expectations. While students are eager to excel academically, many also recognise the importance of taking breaks to nurture their well-being. For some, the key to this balance lies in revisiting old hobbies that they had set aside years ago.



Leah Go, a second-year engineering student, shares her story: “I used to paint a lot when I was in secondary school. Art class was my escape, but I stopped painting when I entered Junior College because my focus was solely on my studies. It was only in my second semester when I was feeling overwhelmed, that I picked up a brush again. At first, it felt strange, but gradually, the old passion came back, and now, painting is my way of decompressing after long hours of studying.”

Leah’s experience is not unique. For many students, the rediscovery of a hobby offers a much-needed reprieve from academic stress. As Leah explains, “I now set aside time each week to paint, and it has helped me a lot with managing my stress. It reminds me that there’s more to life than just grades.”

For some students, rediscovering an old hobby is a deeply nostalgic experience, offering a reconnection with their younger selves. In doing so, they find comfort in familiar activities that provide emotional healing, particularly when university life becomes overwhelming.

John Tan, a final-year business student, rediscovered his love for playing the piano. “I started learning the piano when I was eight, but when I reached my teenage years, I stopped practicing regularly. My studies took precedence, and I didn’t touch the keys for years,” John recalls. “One evening, after a particularly tough day at school, I sat down at the piano in the common area of my hall. I just started playing, and I couldn’t stop. The more I played, the more memories of my childhood came flooding back, and it felt so therapeutic.”

John has since made it a routine to play the piano for at least half an hour every day, using it as a way to relax and clear his mind. “It’s amazing how something I hadn’t done in years could bring me so much peace,” he says. “I think it’s important for students to have something outside of academics to ground them, and for me, it’s music.”



HOBBIES OFTEN BRING PEOPLE

Together

ALLOWING FOR THE FORMATION OF NEW FRIENDSHIPS AND A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Another reason why students are rediscovering old hobbies is the opportunity to connect with others who share similar interests. Hobbies often bring people together, allowing for the formation of new friendships and a sense of community. This is especially valuable for students who may feel isolated due to the intensity of university life.



Alice Wong, a first-year Life Sciences student, rekindled her interest in photography and found an unexpected community on campus. “I used to take photos all the time in secondary school. My friends and I would go on little ‘photo-walks’ around our neighbourhood. But as my academic responsibilities increased, I stopped,” she says. “When I came to university, I didn’t know many people, and I felt a bit lost. Then one day, I saw an announcement for a photography club event, and I decided to go. I met so many great people there, and it reminded me of why I loved photography in the first place.”

For Alice, photography has not only become a hobby again but also a way to socialise and build connections. “Now, I go on photo walks with my friends every weekend. It’s something we all look forward to after a long week of lectures and tutorials.”



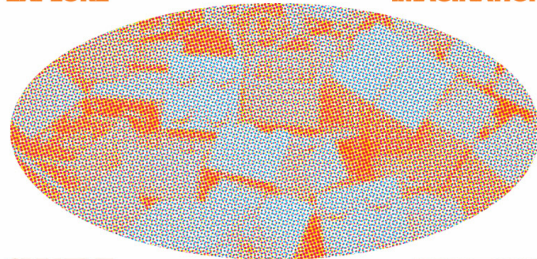
Beyond emotional fulfilment and social bonding, rediscovering old hobbies can also enhance students’ creativity and problem-solving skills. Many hobbies, such as drawing, writing, or even gaming, encourage students to think outside the box, explore different perspectives, and develop new ways of approaching challenges. In a competitive academic environment, where innovation is highly valued, hobbies can serve as a source of inspiration.



Ben Lau, a computer science major, found that revisiting his childhood love of LEGO helped him approach his coursework with fresh eyes. “I used to build LEGO sets all the time as a kid. It was a way for me to explore my imagination and come up with creative solutions,” he explains. “I hadn’t touched a set in years, but during the school holidays, I decided to buy one for fun. As I was building it, I realised how much I missed that feeling of creating something from scratch. That creative mindset has actually helped me a lot in my coding projects—it reminds me that there’s always a way to solve a problem, even if it’s not immediately obvious.”

EXPLORE

IMAGINATION



CREATIVE

SOLUTIONS

The stories of students like Leah, John, Alice, and Ben demonstrate that rediscovering old hobbies is more than just a nostalgic pastime—it’s a way to find balance, foster creativity, and connect with others. In the fast-paced and competitive world of university life, these hobbies provide a much-needed outlet for self-expression and relaxation. As students continue to navigate the demands of their academic journey, embracing old hobbies may just be the key to leading a more fulfilled and balanced life.

Forgotten by Time,

Immortal in Memory

By: Isabel



Over 110 billion people have died throughout history. Of that staggering number, how many can you name? A few historical figures, perhaps, some cultural icons, and maybe an ancestor or two. But the vast majority—those who lived, loved, suffered, and died—have been forgotten, their names lost to time.

Yet, the desire to leave a legacy—to be remembered—drives much of human ambition. People build monuments, write books, start families, and contribute to society in hopes that something of them will endure. But why do we care so much? And should we? This article explores the fear of being forgotten, the philosophical and religious perspectives on legacy, and why impermanence might not be something to fear at all.

THE FEAR OF BEING FORGOTTEN

For many, the idea of being forgotten after death is terrifying. If no memory of us remains, it can feel as though we never existed at all. This fear is closely tied to our awareness of mortality. Legacy becomes a way to cope—a symbolic form of immortality.

TERROR MANAGEMENT THEORY: LEGACY AS A SHIELD AGAINST DEATH

Terror Management Theory (TMT) explains how humans manage the fear of death. It suggests that we construct cultural worldviews, pursue achievements, and build relationships to feel part of something greater and more enduring than our finite lives.

Studies supporting TMT show that when people are reminded of their mortality—a phenomenon called “mortality salience”—they become more motivated to leave a mark on the world. This can manifest in working harder, seeking recognition, or engaging in charitable acts. Legacy provides psychological comfort, reassuring us that some part of us will persist beyond death.

CONFUCIANISM: LEGACY THROUGH FAMILY & FILIAL PIETY

Have your parents ever called you their legacy? In Confucian philosophy, legacy is not just personal—it is communal. Confucianism emphasises the continuity of family, tradition, and societal order. To be forgotten is not just an individual loss but a failure to uphold one’s duty to ancestors and descendants.

Confucius taught that a meaningful life is one that contributes to family honor and societal well-being. By raising virtuous children, maintaining traditions, and ensuring the prosperity of future generations, individuals secure their legacy within the collective memory. In this view, fulfillment comes not from personal remembrance but from the impact left on one’s lineage and community.



THE PHILOSOPHICAL DEBATE: DOES LEGACY MATTER?

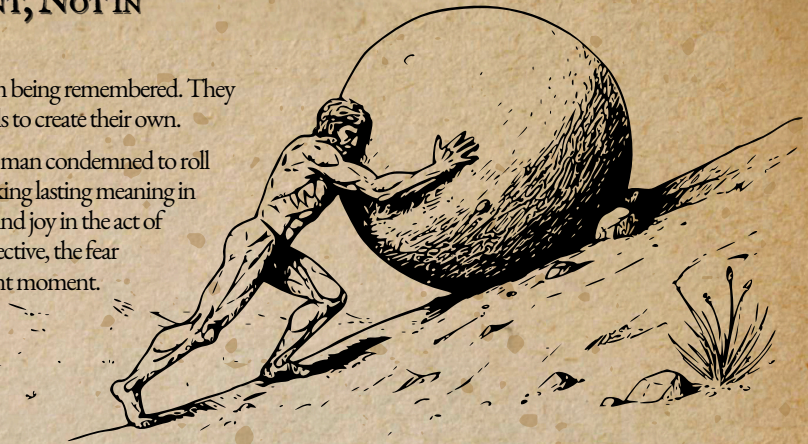
While some argue that legacy gives life meaning, others question whether it should be a concern at all. Several philosophical perspectives challenge the necessity of being remembered, suggesting alternative sources of fulfillment.



EXISTENTIALISM: MEANING IN THE PRESENT, NOT IN LEGACY

Existentialist thinkers reject the idea that meaning is derived from being remembered. They argue that life has no inherent meaning, and it is up to individuals to create their own.

Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, uses the image of Sisyphus—a man condemned to roll a boulder up a hill for eternity—to illustrate the absurdity of seeking lasting meaning in an indifferent universe. His solution? Embrace the absurd and find joy in the act of living rather than in the hope of a lasting legacy. From this perspective, the fear of being forgotten is misplaced; fulfillment is found in the present moment.

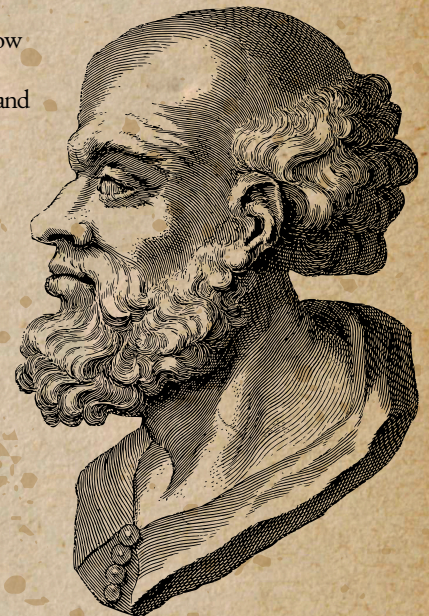


STOICISM: INDIFFERENCE TO LEGACY

Similarly, Stoic philosophers emphasise that external factors — such as how we are remembered—are beyond our control.

In *Meditations*, Marcus Aurelius reflects on how even the greatest emperors are eventually forgotten. His advice? Accept impermanence and focus on living virtuously rather than seeking posthumous recognition.

For the Stoics, true peace comes from aligning one's actions with reason and virtue, not from worrying about how one will be remembered.



EPICUREANISM: DEATH IS NOTHING TO FEAR

Epicurus offers a radically different approach: if death is the end of consciousness, then the fear of being forgotten is irrational. In his *Letter to Menoeceus*, he writes, “Death is nothing to us, for when we exist, death is not, and when death exists, we are not.”

Rather than striving for recognition, Epicurus advocates for a life of simple pleasures, friendship, and freedom from anxiety. If we cease to be aware after death, then whether or not we are remembered becomes irrelevant.

WHY BEING FORGOTTEN MIGHT NOT BE SO BAD

If history shows us anything, it's that even the most influential figures are eventually forgotten or reduced to footnotes. But does that diminish the meaning of their lives?

Rather than fearing oblivion, we can choose to embrace the present. The act of living well, forming relationships, and contributing positively to the world holds value regardless of whether we are remembered. As Camus, Epicurus, and the Stoics suggest, fulfillment is not found in chasing immortality but in experiencing life fully.

I know some who might believe that these ways of thinking are just for the masses to cope with the idea of mediocrity. That a lack of will to leave a legacy is a result of a lack of ambition, and that appreciating what you have and enjoying the day-to-day is “settling”.

But living life fully isn't a privilege afforded by everyone. And I certainly don't believe that a lifetime of hardship is better than an eternity of fame—especially since you're not there to enjoy it.



A LIFE OF SUFFERING, AN AFTERLIFE OF FAME

Vincent van Gogh lived a life of poverty, rejection, and mental anguish. Despite creating over 2,000 works, he sold only one painting in his lifetime, mocked by critics and dismissed as a madman. He relied on his brother's financial support, struggled with mental illness, and ultimately died by suicide at 37.

Yet, in death, his work became immortal. His expressive brushstrokes, once seen as erratic, were later hailed as genius. Today, his name is synonymous with artistic brilliance. But was it worth it?

If legacy is meant to bring fulfillment, what comfort is there in recognition that arrives too late? Van Gogh never knew his impact—only suffering. His story forces us to ask whether legacy is a reward if the one who earns it never gets to see it.

FAME AGAINST HIS WILL

Franz Kafka, in contrast, actively rejected the idea of posthumous fame. Before his death, he instructed his friend Max Brod to burn his unpublished works. He did not seek legacy, nor did he believe his

writings should outlive him. Yet Brod ignored his wishes, publishing *The Trial*, *The Castle*, and *The Metamorphosis*, turning Kafka into one of the most influential writers of the 20th century. If Kafka had his way, he would have been forgotten — but would that have made his life any less meaningful? His works shaped literature, but against his will. His story challenges the idea that legacy is always a gift. If we are remembered for something we never wanted, is it truly an achievement—or a betrayal?

THE REALITY FOR MOST

Most people will neither be Van Gogh nor Kafka. They will not suffer only to be celebrated posthumously, nor will their rejected legacy be resurrected against their wishes. Instead, they will experience both suffering and obscurity. Their struggles will not be immortalised in museums or literature, and their names will fade within a generation or two. This is the reality for nearly everyone who has ever lived.

If suffering is inevitable and remembrance uncertain, what is the point of anything at all?

CARVING MEANING IN YOUR LIFE

These thoughts began to plague me a few years ago, when I was faced with the fickleness of life. I sat at my grandma's funeral, with my father, grandad, and her sister—the only people in attendance who knew her personally.

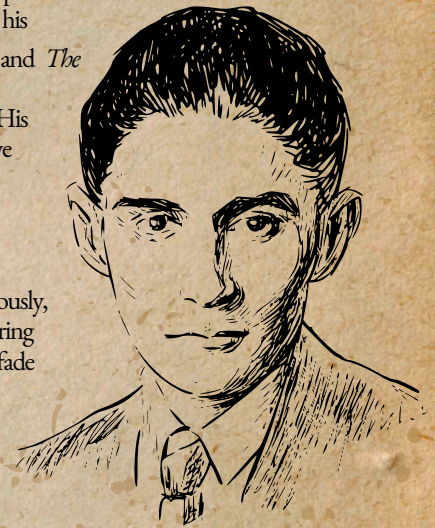
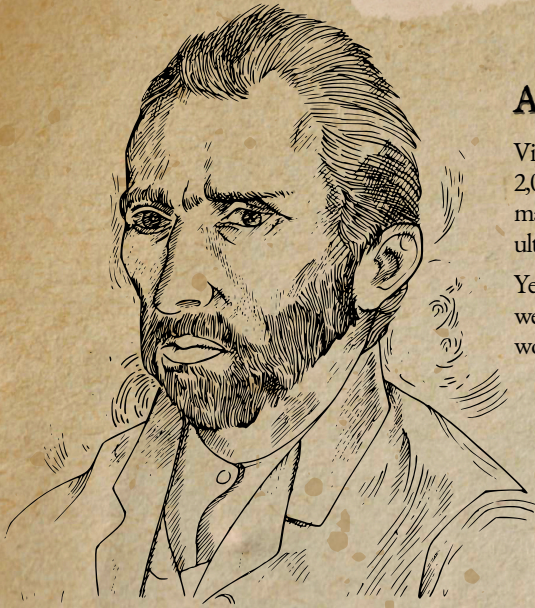
I realised then, that when I died, it would be like she never existed. That after this funeral, her name would hardly be mentioned ever again. That someone who raised me, who shaped the person that I am, and who was such a rock in my world for my entire life up to that point, will never matter to anyone else the way she mattered to me. And despite all that, the world keeps spinning.

Her life wasn't glamorous, either. Born poor and left widowed with a baby, she slaved away at two manual jobs for a majority of her life. It felt as if she lived and died for nothing. That thought left me grappling with the question of what life is truly about.

I know I'm not alone. Everyone who has grieved has felt this in some way. And I think grief, ironically, signifies a life well lived. It means you mattered deeply to someone. Even if you didn't leave much behind, you took something with you when you left.

In the end, perhaps the real question isn't whether we will be remembered but whether we lived in a way that mattered to us. Even though my grandma didn't have the easiest life, she still enjoyed herself. She went for classes, loved karaoke, and kept close to her sister who lived a country away. She lives forever in my memories, and now a little bit of her lives here.

Legacy is uncertain, but meaning—if we choose to create it—is always within reach.





BY GERIN LIM WEN TING

“Ugh, this is so...” My teenage daughter gags as she leans away from a bowl of murky black liquid.

“So... what?” I prompt, raising an eyebrow at her obvious dislike.

“So *bitter*,” she finishes, pushing the blue and white porcelain bowl away slightly, “and not the right kind of bitter. The one *Abma* made didn’t taste this bad.”

“That’s only because *Abma* always *jia tang* so you would drink it.” I sigh and take the bowl, tentatively sipping my latest failure in attempting to replicate my mother’s renowned medicinal soup, before immediately deciding to throw the rest away.

“What? No way. *Abma* would never add sugar to her soup.” My daughter walks over, stands next to me, and starts soaping the other two sets of dishes already stacked in the sink.

The first star

Sell

"Of course not," I say, rinsing the tableware she hands me, one after another in the new rhythm we've perfected over the last month. "*Abma* always added natural ingredients to make it sweeter: wolfberries, dried longans, red dates—"

"Wait, is that what those red mushy things were?" Done soaping, she reaches over to dry her hands on a nearby kitchen towel.

She's just started growing, and she's already almost the same height as... I stop before my thoughts start drifting away again.

"Yes. What did you think they were?" I finish rinsing off the dishes and stack them in the rack, then reach for the precious Ming-dynasty porcelain bowl my late mother had treasured.

My daughter shrugs and opens the fridge. "I dunno, some other weird Chinese medicine?" I eye the unopened bottle of Coca-cola she pulls out, the fizzing sugary water an even darker colour than the soup I made earlier. She sees my expression and rolls her eyes. "Yeah, yeah, I know. I didn't drink any last week. Really."

As she leaves the kitchen, I bite back my nagging, focusing instead on wiping down the porcelain bowl. The pattern of blue dragons dancing over lotus flowers is calming, more familiar to me than the back of my own hands. Whenever I was sick—no, even when I wasn't sick, my mother would make her soup, stubbornly insisting on its medicinal properties.

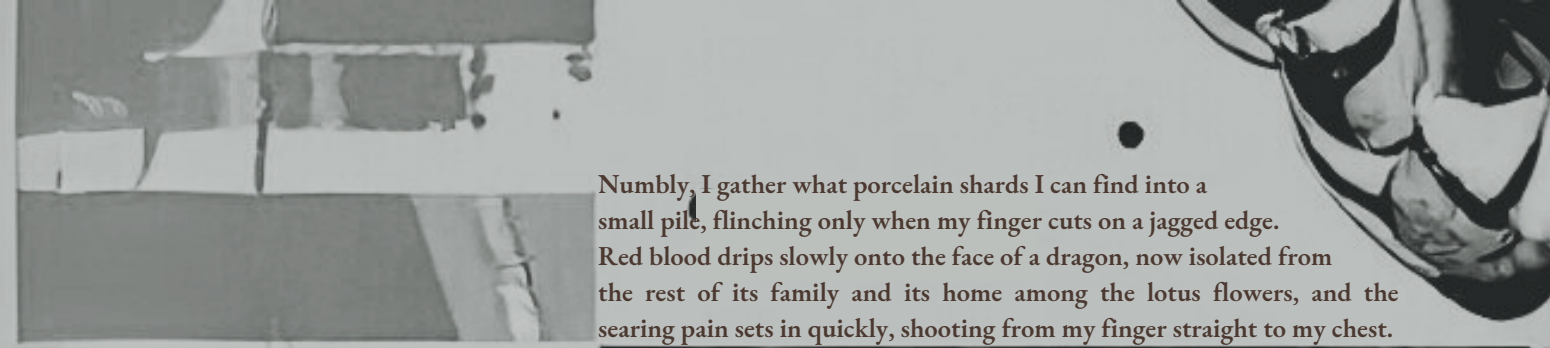
"This soup is famous, passed down only in our family," she would say in a Chinese dialect I could only understand but never speak, her voice a low rumble. "It's good for the body, that's why I'm so healthy. So you must drink it too." I always protested strongly when smelling the pungent mixture of medicinal herbs. But my mother was born a Dragon, a fierce and commanding emperor of the skies, and I was only a Tiger, a humble, lowly king of the jungle. In the end, my fingers would always end up gripping the bumpy dragon scales lining the outer edges of the bowl, my head tipped back and the same dark bitterness sliding down my throat. And tipping the other end, her weathered hands would wait quietly for me to finish drinking, the spots, moles and tiny scars littered across them like nameless constellations.

Over the years, that same bitterness eventually crept into my heart, poisoning my feelings towards her. Yet I knew that no matter how fiercely I bared my fangs, I could never overturn the pecking order between us. So instead, I leapt at the chance to stage every silent rebellion I could: half-heartedly following her orders, closing off my ears and heart to her endless nagging, denying every teaching she tried to force onto me... until it was too late, and she couldn't have taught me even if I had wanted to learn.

She said it was a cure-all, but even this soup couldn't cure her Alzheimer's, I thought to myself, carefully placing the bowl onto the rack. A memory of her empty, unseeing eyes from our last meeting in the nursing home surfaces against my will. I force the image away, hiding it behind the image of soaring blue dragons emblazoned on white porcelain, and turn off the kitchen lights.

"Nothing lasts forever," my mother loved to say. "Especially things you didn't work hard for," she would add curtly, to discourage my younger self's obsession with wishing on shooting stars, stray eyelashes, birthday candles...

Indeed, nothing lasts forever. The older I got, the more I felt that truth slowly come alive like a prophecy: my marriage didn't work out; my career didn't take off; my mother didn't—couldn't—remember who I was, even on her deathbed. And now, the last thing I had left of her has broken, shattered on the kitchen floor where one side of the dish rack has collapsed.



Numbly, I gather what porcelain shards I can find into a small pile, flinching only when my finger cuts on a jagged edge. Red blood drips slowly onto the face of a dragon, now isolated from the rest of its family and its home among the lotus flowers, and the searing pain sets in quickly, shooting from my finger straight to my chest.

Holding my hand high to slow the bleeding, I step away and almost trip. Blankly, I realise my vision is blurred by the tears falling from my eyes, and suddenly all the guilt I've been holding back crashes over me in a tidal wave of exhaustion. Helpless, I sink down onto the floor and close my eyes, let the glass box storing the memories of my mother crack under the pressure, and surrender myself to the memories bubbling up to the surface while I sit there in the now-silent kitchen.

I stay there until my daughter comes home.

“Surprise,” she announces when I walk through the door. I blink at her distractedly, not understanding what she means. This has been a common reaction whenever I talk to anyone lately, ever since my daughter found me crying with bleeding fingers in the kitchen some time ago.

Impatient as ever, she gestures exaggeratedly at the living room table, and I follow her gaze to see—

Blue dragons. Lotus flowers. It's a familiar pattern I could never forget, even its smallest imperfections ingrained in my memory—only now, it's streaked with delicate golden rays of light, as if tracing the paths of shooting stars.

“How... did you...” I move closer, wanting to get a better look but not daring to touch it for fear of it breaking again.

“It's this cool Japanese method they taught us for fixing broken stuff, called *kintsugi*,” my daughter informs me proudly, pleased with my speechless reaction. “I thought about just using superglue, but this makes even the cracks look way better, right?”

I stroke the bowl's glinting surface hesitantly. It doesn't shatter instantly at my touch, and the surface is smooth as if it had never cracked to begin with, the new golden parts blending in perfectly with the old. It's... “Beautiful.” I thank my daughter with a hug, and she returns it almost awkwardly, before asking if this means she can drink an extra bottle of Coca-cola every month for the next year.

I smile and tell her, only if she drinks an extra bowl of medicinal soup for every bottle. She scrunches up her face and escapes before I can make a worse suggestion, and I move to the kitchen, gently carrying the porcelain bowl with me and cocooning it in a soft cloth. Turning slowly and pondering over where to place it so that it will be safe even if misfortune strikes again, a tiny spark of light on the low horizon catches my eye through the open window, glinting as brightly in the twilight sky as the gold-filled cracks of the old, yet new, creation I hold in my hands.

I know, nothing lasts forever. I know, wishing on things like stars is meaningless, an empty hope we cling to because we all know, deep down, that the things and people we love will break and disappear with time, and that we can't promise forever even to ourselves. Maybe one day we won't even remember the names of the stars we live under and wish on anymore. But tonight, I have been given a miracle, and something I thought was lost forever has returned to me in a new, yet not unfamiliar, form.

So I make an exception, close my eyes, and wish on the first star I see.



Return

TD Nguyen

“This your stop?”

“Not really... It’s lane three further down.”

“You sure boy? There’s no lane three here.”

“Huh?... Oh, right. I meant lane 85...”

The grey sky waits with drifting gusts and a murmuring drizzle. Trudging inwards, he traces the cracked cement for half-familiar indents, crevices laden with old summer rain. Cold dew falls faintly, nibbling the pale skin betrayed by his T-shirt sleeves. He sneezes. The chill, piercing as he always remembers, reminds him of the distant days of his mischievous childhood and, with it, Mum’s tired, over-the-top scoldings. He chuckles, red flushing onto his cheeks. As he continues walking, the color gradually fades, no longer noticeable when he approaches a yellowed, slightly ajar door. He pushes it slightly.

“Mum, Dad?”

In the kitchen Mum is roaming around a tray of dishes. Distracted by her skillful arrangement of food, she takes a moment to notice the half-familiar voice. When, at last, she notices the lanky, underclothed silhouette at the door, the year since their last reunion flashed by her eyes, as if spanning the length of their cluttered hallway.

“Put. On. More. Clothes!” Mum’s shout pierces through the air. “This isn’t cold enough for you? Your nose is always clogged and still...”

“It’s not that bad, Mum.” He cuts her off with a wide grin. “I’m fine, I’m fine.”

Unfazed by the commotion, Dad stops the TV and glances over his shoulder. “Already home?” He sees in Dad’s eyes a hint of a smile.

He scans around for the still-image of his childhood haven across the now-silent TV and the unlit hallway. On the floor, he notices some foreign toys, next to them scattered various picture books of English, Vietnamese, Mathematics, and sciences.

“Where’s Sis and Bo?”

Dad replies, unpauseing the TV: “She’s back in Hanoi for a few days. Has some stuff to atte—”

“Save the chit chat for later! Go dry yourself!” Mum quickly cuts in. “And eat promptly so you can head to the shower!”

Still grinning, he promptly strides to the kitchen where dishes upon dishes of delicacy laid in a harmonious composition. He gobbles up the food, too tired to savor the flavors, then heads straight for the shower.

His fatigue carries him into a restful sleep.

—
The fish sauce’s pungency jolts him from the edge of slumber. It’s already 11.30 am.

“Get up and help me cook,” Mum calls from the kitchen.

“Can I do it later? I need to take a breather first.”

Non-stop travelling for a whole day gives him a migraine. He paces to the living room and rests his head on the sofa cushion. In front of the TV, columns of incense smoke interweave, curling into themselves like little moons that soon wane and dissipate into clear air. A full-moon day. A “ngày rằm”, he corrects himself. *The Moon still shines as brightly in Singapore as in Vietnam, yet the word “rằm” only comes up now, once a year.* He thinks. *Perhaps they are not the same.* The now-strange word rolls around in his mouth, leaving a heavy taste of tobacco. *Dad used to be a chainsmoker.* He’s free from that harrowing smell now, at least, for the most part.

To escape the enveloping smoke, he turns to the kitchen. Lunch is served when the high noon scatters its lights across the windows, and the living room glows lukewarm with chatters.

“What jobs are you looking for?” Dad asks.

“I’m not sure, I just apply and see how.”

“So much for your humanities degree. Told you to stick to science.”

“I know, Dad.” He sighs, eyes fixed to his bowl.

“Try what you can, but best to look for those with a good pay.”

It was one year ago when he forwent the science degree his family had expected. As a child, his life was running on a straight line, an earthen path beaten by countless footsteps. The first time he stepped outside, the ground was still dense from use. He thought he could run away forever. Now, stuck in quicksand, he turns back for one last look at the olden road. But the road is no longer there.

—
“Why are there so many vegetables?” Dad’s remark grounds him back. “So wasteful.”

“It’s fine,” he scoffs. “Vegetables can be kept for the next meal.”

“And how many times have I told you? Don’t put minced meat in the soup. It’s greasy.”

“If you have so many complaints, why don’t you cook for yourself?”

A crash comes almost immediately, the distinct sound of ceramic against aluminium. His father's bowl rolls askew around the tray, spilling its content everywhere on the tabletop. His son's lips flash a faint smile. A staredown ensues between them, and in his father's eyes the young man sees himself drowning, a glint drifting in a sea of black mass.

—

The air is soft these days, unperturbed by the sharp edges of a glance or a sneer. As per usual, his father is the first to stand up from the dining table.

"You'd better apologize to him." The tension has caught up to Mum. "Why can't I have a moment of peace in this house?"

"All right..." He looks past her shoulders. "I'll head out for a while."

A year has passed since he last rode the motorbike, yet his grip on the handles is just as firm against the winter gusts. He heads towards the lake, now greying in his memory. Passing through the streets of his youth, he fights back the mind's effort to rewrite his memories with the bustling city he now sees.

He first saw the lake in a summer afternoon. The road was treacherous, charting an unknown district of the city. Under the harsh sunlight, the entire lake glowed off-green, where his reflection, minute against the scene, floated quietly upon the water. The rustling breeze, the burning heat; they all mellowed out into the background as he gazes across the surface of the lake and how it opens towards the sky. Carefree he was in those summer days, when his youthful spirit bloomed like bougainvilleas, spreading their fuchsia hue in the wind—the days when everything was still.

Unbeknownst to him, the entrance to the lake had long been leveled for an array of apartment complexes. As he circles the newly-built roads, lost and confused, the palpable threat of the lake's oblivion weighs heavier in his chest. The city he once knew and loved has now become a stranger to him. The lake, in reality, is just a few minutes away.

When he returns home from disappointment, Dad is watching TV and Mum is cooking dinner.

—

A soft, almost unintentional slap rouses him awake. Before he can eye the perpetrator the tiny silhouette has already wobbled his way into the kitchen.

"Bo! Don't wake Uncle up. He's sleeping."

"It's okay, Sis." He yawns. "I'm awake already."

His sister smiles brightly at him, her youthful disposition appearing unblemished by time. The child, who just last year couldn't stand up on his own, is now nudging at her pants, hiding himself from the unfamiliar man before him.

"Don't recognize your uncle?" He grins at the child. "All my efforts carrying you went to waste, huh?"

"Breakfast's outside." She laughs. "Help me bring Bo out, I'll follow when I'm done with his meal."

No one is there when they reach the living room.

"Where're Mum and Dad?"

"They went to the market together." Her voice comes closer. "I heard you upset him again?"

"We were talking about my degree."

"I see." She hesitates. "Passion is good but money's an important part of life too, you know. Especially when you have more responsibilities."

He looks at the child being spoon-fed his breakfast. She continues. "As much as Dad annoys me at times, I have learned to just let him be. Dad can't just change how his upbringing influenced him." She looks back at him. "But you can still change yours."

He remains silent.

"You are still young, don't let the past nor the unforeseeable future obstruct your way."

—

When he was six, he was diagnosed with myopia. Dad took him to this hilltop to watch the city from afar, hoping to improve his eyesight. His eyes didn't heal. It leaves a bitter taste in his mouth now as he sits at the same place 18 years later, memories like the winds brushing against his cheeks. The city below has grown past him, breaking through the hanging grey clouds. Traffic weaves itself in relentless cycles. He looks at the sky and remembers the summers of his youth, how the vast blue unfurls towards the edge of sight, overflowing like the dreams he had. Like his youth, he knows he will move on. Has to. Time doesn't move between roundabouts, but on an endless highway stretching to nowhere. Those iron clouds will catch up, rain will fall, but he can still learn to embrace the shower's fickleness, even as it erases the footprints on the ground. The winter sky is close; its proximity grounds him down. The summer sky is far, allowing him to soar above. His sky, somewhere in between, is waiting for him.

Everyone is already at the dining table when he's back.

"Come have lunch." It was Dad who first spoke to him.

"It's been long since our family cooked a meal together, right Mum?" His sister chimed in.

"Not everyone." Mum looks at him, smiling.

"Alright, I'll take care of the dishes." He smiles back.

Then he suddenly remembers something.

"Right, I should tell everyone my plan for the future. I'll..."

As everyone continues with lunch, he looks around, catching the rare glows brightening from their faces. Though the path ahead of him remains dimly lit, he is glad to tread it with them.

Dream Fields

by Tay Kai Li

They say if you sit outside at midnight, stare at the sky and wait, you might just catch a shooting star. Or rather, a shooting star might just catch you. You have to stand out, but not *too* much; ask humbly, but not expect to receive.

Of course, this is just the fable they tell children. Not your father, who believed not in idle tales—you had to learn it from the other children. And you never told your father this, but some nights, when you were sure he was asleep, you'd slip out of bed and peer out the window, hoping for a glimpse.

It never happened. Not for you or the others. One by one, they stopped believing. You suppose it's a good thing your father never bothered with fables. You can't lose faith you don't have.

You wondered, though. You did wonder...

Everyone dreams. Day or night, when the time is right, they venture into the starfields to harvest dreams from the galaxy's branches. That's how it's *supposed* to go.

But Fate, as often happens, intervenes. The lucky ones don't need to work because the fruits fall straight into their waiting palms—the fables didn't really lie, they grew from a seed of truth planted eons ago. That's why it's humanity's natural state, to kneel before the heavens with arms outstretched, prostrated in prayer or submission, but always in wait.

Some tire of the waiting game. Out into the pastures they go to work the soil, but there's never any guarantee that the seeds sown would sprout.

Often, they never do.

It's a waiting game, too, for saplings to blossom into reality. Easier, in the end, to count on luck. To let Fate do the work. After all, isn't it ultimately out of our hands? The seed chooses when it wants to grow. The earth decides if it even takes root.

Sit on it. Take matters into your own hands. It doesn't matter. In the end, all dreamers are slaves to the land.

And yet...

Each day before sunrise, your father sets out to tend the fields. By nightfall, he returns, but never with a dream.

Some nights, you find him slumped over the kitchen counter, nursing a glass of whisky. You think you hear him muttering your mother's name to himself though she died long ago. You're never sure because the moment he notices you, he plasters on a smile, spreading his arms open and inviting you for a warm hug. You always go.

When you turn 15, you join your father in the fields. Your father never complained, so you don't either. But your mind can't help drifting to idle thoughts of a different life. *One day*, he always tells you, *just wait and see*.

One day, you tire. You don't tell your father, but he knows. He knows you're done.

Halfway down the porch, you turn to wave. Leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, your father smiles. His hair is silvering like wolf coats in winter, his eyebags deeper than the night.

You turn, so he doesn't see you cry. You leave. You do whatever it takes.

You take after your father. Whatever it takes is not enough.

Five years takes you back home. Your father's smile is bittersweet as he lets you inside.

Over dinner, he tells you he still works the field every day. You stare at him. This is the moment you realise with absolute certainty that he still talks to your mother—you can see him in your mind, hunched over the kitchen counter, drinking whisky and talking to the ghost of his wife.

It's been over three decades. You can't get him to stop. *Tomorrow could be the day*, he always says. *Tomorrow will be the day*.

One day, you see his cracked and calloused fingers curled around the neck of the whisky bottle, and you snap. You snatch the bottle—*tomorrow isn't coming, it will never be the day*. Your father snaps too, yelling words that don't matter beyond the yelling itself.

You can't recall having ever argued. It's the first and last time you ever will.

Three days, you don't speak to each other. On the third evening, you take a shot of your father's whisky, liquid courage searing your throat. Your voice is hoarse, your eyes wet when you beg him to set aside the work. The silence is long and cold. Your father agrees to let you take over for one day. You almost leap to embrace him. Almost. In the end, you don't, and you're not sure why.

Maybe you should have. Or maybe if you'd never asked him to stop, if you'd let him keep on... would things have been different?

You'll never know.

The dream is warm and soft in your trembling fingers. You stare transfixed, afraid to even blink for fear it would vanish.

In the end, it was luck. Weary from the fields, you sought rest by the stream you used to play in as a child, collecting rocks and whatever else washed up. The dream didn't come from the river, but it might as well have. You'd bent down to splash your face when a loud creak pierced the air.

Startled, you'd opened your eyes to a tree bough leaning down before you, its branches quaking, the delicate petals of its single pale flower unfolding one by one to reveal its blinding core. You'd waded forward, arms outstretched, head raised to receive the glorious miracle, its divine light washing over you.

Now, you cradle it in your palms, bathing in the moment's afterglow. Your heart rabbits in your chest. Slowly, you emerge from the river, glancing at your surroundings.

They'll come for you. They'll come for your dream.

The moment the thought crystallises in your mind, you hear footsteps approaching.

Fingers slipping around the dream, you turn and shove it behind your back, but it's no use. Nothing can conceal the pulsating glow, a beacon in the dead of night.

Blinking rapidly, you scour your mind for anything that would afford you plausible deniability, but then your eyes recognise him—your father has come for you. Just your father. A

shadow blending into the darkness, barely illuminated by the sallow moon or the traces of dreamlight spilling around your body towards him. Still, you'd know his looming figure anywhere—once, he appeared in your bedroom doorway every night, backlit by the warm kitchen lights, whispering sweet dreams as he tucked you into bed.

You breathe easy. Slowly, you draw the dream out from behind you, presenting it to your father the way you'd done as a child when you'd found a cool-looking rock by this very same stream. Utterly insignificant, those rocks. But your eyes had lit up whenever you held them out with pride, and so had your father's. He'd kept every one, laid in a row atop the mantel. You can't remember—are they still there? Gathering dust on the mantelpiece?

"How?"

Your hands falter. You can't quite make out his expression, but his eyes, like an owl's, are wide and intense. His voice, too, appears distorted by the night, grave and unfamiliar.

"Answer me."

Now you're five years old again. You can't for the life of you remember what you'd done wrong, only that you'd done it and couldn't take it back. You could only stare at a crack in the kitchen tiles, thinking about how you never meant to break anything.

"I.. I got lucky."

Your father steps closer. Reflexively, you step away, hands shifting behind your back, dreamlight slitting through the darkness surrounding you. You don't know why. It's just your father, you remind yourself. Just your father.

"...lucky..."

He spits the word like acid. You flinch,

unable to recognise him. You thought he would be happy for you. Desperately, you tell him so.

"Happy?"

A terrible silence. You can't breathe. His gaze pins you like a butterfly to a board. His lips twist into a dreadful smile.

"Yes... of course I'm happy....."

He spreads one arm open, fingers beckoning.

"Come..."

You don't. Your heart pounds in your ears, your knuckles bone-white over the dream gripped in your palm.

"Come here, child..."

You can't. Your feet are rooted to the ground, soft soil-sliding beneath your heels. Your father advances, smiling still, his arm held open, and his other hand...

Above you, the moon weeps, tears dripping over your body. Around you, the trees shudder, cold wind slithering through the branches with a whispered warning you can't quite discern. In the distance, a wolf howls, the cicadas shriek, an owl sinks its talons into an unsuspecting mouse.

A dream is difficult to hide. It shines like starlight, pulsing like a heartbeat.

On the other hand, a dull grey shovel, cloaked by the night...

It's your father who's come for you. Just your father.

By the time you catch the glint, it's too late.

They say when you die, the universe reads you one final dream—the one you lived.

Selene, do you dress in orange often?
I've never seen you in a gown this shade,
blazing like the sun cusping the horizon, curving
into the distance, clouds a soft sheen beneath your feet—
so different from the glass of moonshine cupped often
in your palm, or the silver wheels of your midnight chariot.

Selene, is your evening dress the same as morning?
I've never thought to watch moonrise or moonset.
Your sister captivates the world at dawn and dusk,
scattering gold across the sky like every morning is
a wedding aisle and every evening, a honeymoon retreat.
You don't. Your cup never spills, you fill it with liquid light
drawn from the waters of the night, gathered like a promise.

Selene, don't you have a moment to spare?
Helios takes all the limelight, don't you want a share?
Or is it by your own design that your siblings distract us,
that Eos dazzles us with her displays
while you hurry home bearing gold?
Where is home, Selene? Pray tell, who is home?
When goddesses lay down to rest, do they dream too?

Dear Selene, no need to answer, for I already know—
mortals understand the most the lengths that love would go.
So may your chariot be swift and the journey smooth
and your harvest bountiful each day.
May the offerings warm your lover's dreams
and yours in gentle glow. Don't cry, Selene,
though it's true that he will never wake—
he will slumber for all eternity,
no amount of light can change that.

But Selene, when you settle in by his bedside and
kiss the crown of his temple, tip wine down his lips
and wash his feet with light, more than the gifts you bring,
it is your presence by his side that grants him the greatest peace,
and he knows, I'm sure he knows, how you hold him close.
You must know too, the way you fill his dreams. Visions of the sun
diving beneath the surface, the moon rising to meet him.....

In that other world, Endymion drapes himself in pale white.
He catches lunar light between his fingers and knows it is time,
the air aloft with gossamer mist. And so, turning his head
towards the heavens, opens his eyes and lifts his palms to the sky
to receive the rain returning to earth, a sweet silver shower.
In that moment, the moon fits in his cupped hands
like the tender face of his beloved, like a promise. He smiles.

MOON BY TAY KAI LI REFERS

Tastes & Smells

Gary A.M.

The French Dispatch is something of an oddity amongst Wes Anderson's filmography. It is, after all, one of his more divisive pieces of work out there.

The subject matter might be the first thing you notice. Journalism—or journalists to be more exact—might not be the fondest or most heart-warming subject out there. Wes Anderson's decision to make his characters socially withdrawn loners doesn't help either. In fact, their presence in the film is almost actively repulsive, acting as social enigmas at best and moral tumours at worst.

The structure is another: Anderson splits his supposed love-letter of a film into three distinct chapters, all almost entirely unrelated to one another. One's about the misadventures of an incarcerated modern-art painter, while another is on the melodramatic love triangle of a 20th-century manifesto writer. To say that they contrast would serve as an understatement: they're deliberately made to have no similarities, no parallels, no connecting thread between any of them.

But inside each story, there's always a hidden core.

The painter, after finding love in a strange place, decides to abandon the pursuit of fame and glory. The writer, after finding love too in a strange place, decides to abandon the revolution of his own making.

However, the third is perhaps the most interesting. Inside, you find no grand love story between two loners in a strange, hostile world. You find no pretty little bows, no grand revelation about the power of love. Instead, you find Roebuck Wright, Nescaffier, and a comically-animated chase sequence.

The Private Dining Room of the Police Commissioner is a story about the kidnapped son of a Police Commissaire, done by a gang of thieving bandits during a special dinner which the narrator had been invited to. Played by a stellar Jeffrey of the same surname, Roebuck Wright is thus caught up in the silly yet wholly entertaining back-and-forth that ensues between Ennui's police force and the gang of bandit kidnappers.

That surface-level reading may be an understandable point of concern for some viewers out there. As the final chapter of the film, a detour towards an action-filled comedy doesn't make much sense for an Anderson film, moreso this one about moody, pretentious writers on their last issue. But the final few minutes of the chapter reveals far more than meets the eye: it's truly a story about foreigners, about purpose, and about our everlasting will to find it in a land so dry of it.

The scene opens with Nescaffier: a famous chef who's just awoken on a humble clinic bed. He was originally meant to be the subject of Wright's story, the inventor of a unique and

unseen gourmet style called Police Cooking—one that has been in use by Ennui's police force for some time now in their various escapades. Yet he eventually ends up being the hero of the story, sacrificing himself by eating a poisoned radish meant for the gang of kidnappers. He almost dies for it, only having survived the ordeal by, quote, "the extreme fortitude (bolstered and braced, season upon season, by the richest, most potent plates, pans, and sauce pots) of his almost superhuman stomach".

Yet he remains sidelined, only mentioned in passing in Wright's story. We only get to hear this section after magazine editor Arthur Howitzer Jr. tells Wright about how unfitting the action was for the *Tastes & Smells* section. In response, he gives Howitzer a section he previously cut from the bin. In it, Nescaffier jolts up from his slumber, saying:

NESCAFFIER

They had a flavour.

ROEBUCK WRIGHT

(hesitates)

I beg your pardon?

NESCAFFIER

The toxic salts. In the radishes. They had a flavor. Totally unfamiliar to me. Like a bitter, moldy, peppery, spicy, oily kind of -- earth. I never tasted that taste in my life. Not very pleasant, extremely poisonous, but still: a new flavor. That's a rare thing, at my age.

I had a similar experience to Nescaffier not too long ago.

It was the summer of 2022, and I had returned home from what seemed to be the longest and most exhausting year of my life. School had not treated me well, and neither had I. Yet what awaited me wasn't the place I used to call home. No, for the first time it felt alien: the same buildings, same places, same people somehow felt different—unfamiliar, even.

The only thing that felt the same was a dish, one I had enjoyed since my childhood, that I ordered the very night I arrived back 'home'. It was my beloved IBC Gurami Pesmol: a truly flawless combination of sweet, sour, and creamy delights that I thought I could never get tired of. But this time, no, it wasn't just perfect, it was something more. After suffering through a dried palate for a year or so, tortured by the unbearable blandness of Singapore's cuisine, the dish struck my tongue like lightning. It was wonder, nostalgia and umami packed into one.

At the time, I probably thought to myself: maybe this is still home. Maybe, after all this time, there was something to go back to, something to struggle for after all the time I spent up there.

I was wrong: the very same year, I would lose my sense of smell from a stupidly-preventable Omicron outbreak. The next year, the pickled fish didn't taste so grand anymore.

ROEBUCK WRIGHT
(pause) I admire your bravery, Lieutenant.

NESCAFFIER
I'm not brave. I just wasn't in the mood to be a disappointment to everybody.

(pause) I'm a foreigner, you know.

ROEBUCK WRIGHT
(long pause) This city is full of us, isn't it? I'm one, myself.

That's when it hit me—that's where the real heart of Anderson's story lay. The chapter wasn't about a silly kidnapping or a quirky animated chase sequence, it was really about Nescaffier, Roebuck Wright and those who felt foreign in that strange and alien town.

And naturally, I felt a certain kinship to their story too.

Just like Nescaffier, I had arrived here looking to embark on a journey towards greatness. Ambition was what drove me here: to go abroad and make my glory, to make my family proud and loud. All those usual phrases you would hear from an immigrant family became my go-to reasons for anyone asking why I came here. Whether they were true or not I can't ever truly answer, but it certainly wasn't even a question back then. Sureness was a given, and I can't help but wonder where it went.

It didn't go away in a day. Nor did it go in a week, a month, or a year. By the time I'd realised it was gone, it was far too late. I had no idea what I was doing, but more importantly, no idea what I was doing it for. Purpose hadn't gone in an instant, but realising it sure felt like being hit by a truck. At the same time, home felt further and further away, despite my best attempts to ensure the opposite. There were fewer and fewer things waiting for me back home—less purpose to find back home. There was no purpose to find other than one waiting here, yet somehow I'd lost it, never for it to be recovered again.

As such, distraction became the solution. Drowning myself in it, in work, became better than facing the current—that is, to even question what I was doing here. Burning out not only became frequent, but natural: almost as if it was genetic, something innate inside me.

But it shouldn't have been. Only in the past year did I confront that voice, the one so eager to ignore what I have been doing over the last few years of my life. It wasn't the sudden, life-changing realisation that I wanted it to be. Yet reconsidering, even for a second, what I wanted to achieve in a place still foreign to me had me do better things, make better choices. Though the answer will probably never be clear to me, knowing that and accepting it has been core to me and my identity.

Nevertheless, there's one thing that's clear: I'll never get that same purpose back. No matter how long I ponder, how much I overwork or 'self-therapise' through pretentious essays, I'll never get that same drive that I had oh-so-many years ago. I can search for a new one, sure, but that old part of myself had died, perhaps many years before I even realised it. Even Nescaffier realises this where Wright doesn't:

Nescaffier then says, slightly delirious:

NESCAFFIER

Seeking something missing. Missing something left behind.

Roebuck Wright nods in appreciation. He says quietly:

ROEBUCK WRIGHT

Maybe, with good luck, we'll find what eluded us in the places we once called home.

Nescaffier smiles sadly and shakes his head: no.

The chapter closes with a lingering shot on Howitzer. After a few seconds, he tells Wright, "That's the best part of the whole thing. That's the reason for it to be written." Wright replies, "I couldn't agree less."

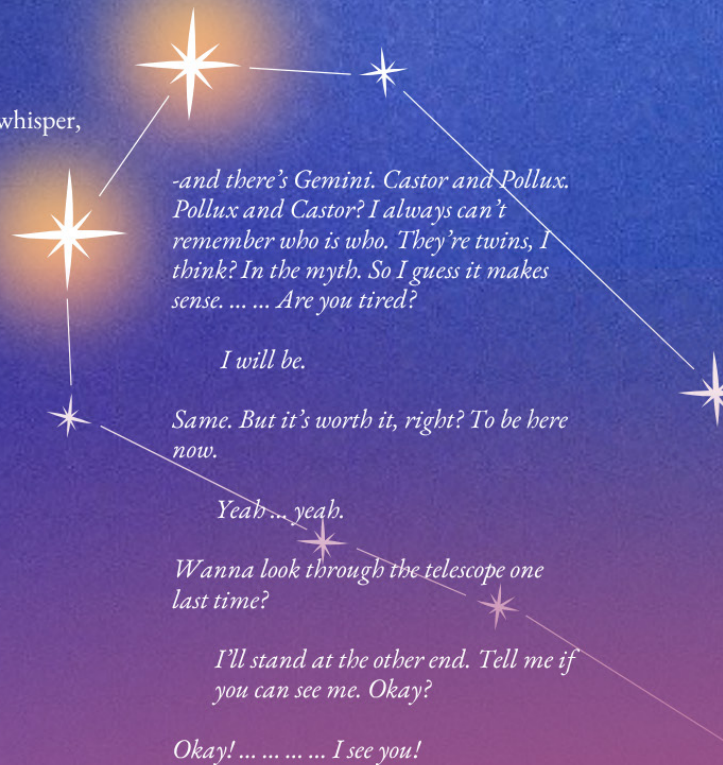
It didn't make the cut.



Last Day in Astronomy Club

Tay Kai Li

The earth, sinking
beneath us like memory foam.
We lay with our backs to the world,
and all else drops away—
the dim outline of our school,
idle chatter,
passing footsteps,
grass softer than a whisper,



-and there's Gemini. Castor and Pollux.
Pollux and Castor? I always can't
remember who is who. They're twins, I
think? In the myth. So I guess it makes
sense. ... Are you tired?

I will be.

Same. But it's worth it, right? To be here
now.

Yeab... yeab.

Wanna look through the telescope one
last time?

I'll stand at the other end. Tell me if
you can see me. Okay?

Okay! ... I see you!

whispers softer than grass,
footsteps passing,
chatter gone idle,
the school dim and distant...
Hey, do you still remember?
The earth has risen, like memory foam,
but the skies, the unchanging night, Gemini's twin eyes, all remain the same, everything stays. I still see you.
Do you see me too?



found haikus in a utown trashbin

by Dinh Cao Tue

erc to food clique,
third time they walk by already
those green glasses, no?

... i could tap for the door
after him, or he presses so i
don't—guess that works also.

under roofed walkways, eye
grazed what's-your-name walking through;
next tut still can talk bah¹.

curly headed kylie,
in last sem's g.e. mod, bobbing
from behind on the bus.

...you! haha yea.
this elevator ride a bit long,
ah.

why do i need to
join them at clementi mall for lunch?
i have doomscrolling to do.

regardless if i tap
or he taps the door i've just closed
he'll still look glassy grey.

wait, you also know jess?
let's group next sem's mod—oh cannot ah?
neh² mind, we go eat sometime!

hop on d2 by
mistake. it and d1 both
(un)packed with unsaid names.

won't see daniel again.
lucky he just knows i had one
ingrown nail. but not *toe*-nails :)

girl with green glasses
from the other tut... always
sits at that corner?

spluttering barbeque
and a silent i, but at least i
get to see people, no?

i'd never trade any
sec of this plaza sing³ hang out
with that 2-3:-5—!

hop on one bus, sit at
one table, cross one door, turn one
chair, make one different step.

jess's fanclub! oredi⁴
year four! all the best! not eaten
out still. next time lah⁵!

¹ bah: one of the many emphatic end-particles in Singlish, here conveys a sense of consolation.

² neh: shortened Singlish word for 'never'.

³ plaza sing: short for Plaza Singapura, a mall in Singapore.

⁴ oredi: Singlish spelling for 'already'.

⁵ lah: Singlish end-particle, here conveys a sense of self-assurance.



Daniella Bonite Rulin

people we leave unmapped

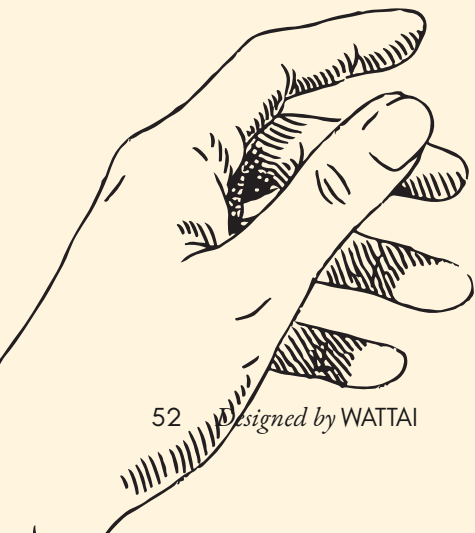
Some names slip from our tongues as easily as they once clung to us. Others were never spoken aloud, only known by a fleeting glance, a half-formed memory, a username that disappeared from a chatroom. We carry the weight of encounters never fully mapped, of connections that left an imprint despite their brevity. A stranger on the bus, a fleeting crush at an airport, a kind voice on the phone from customer service, or an online acquaintance who felt like home for a while: these are the people we leave behind, yet never quite forget.



There's something oddly magnetic about the people we meet in passing. They are the stars we leave uncharted in galaxies of our lifetimes; stray comets in the intricate constellations in which we chart our course. Oftentimes, simple acts of kindness have a lasting impact on us. The man who shared his umbrella with you when it was raining buckets certainly deserves an acknowledgement of gratitude. So does the woman who paid your outfit a compliment on a night out. But our interactions with others exist way beyond well-intentioned acts. In fact, they are part and parcel of our everyday lives. Do you remember fondly the barista who remembers your coffee order every morning without ever having to exchange a single word? How about that lady you chatted with while waiting in line for something neither of you knew what for? These people exist on the periphery of our lives, yet they can make us feel seen, even if only briefly.

Online interactions, too, carry this ephemeral weight. The fandom friend we stayed up messaging about fictional characters who consumed the entirety of our waking hours, the magnanimous Reddit stranger who gave us life-changing advice, or the person in a multiplayer game lobby who, for one night, felt like a long-lost sibling. These connections, however transient, shape our worldly perspectives and linger in our subconscious long after they are gone.

“We carry the weight of encounters never fully mapped, of connections that left an imprint despite their brevity.”



sonder

There's a term for this quiet awe we feel for the people we will never truly know—*sonder*. It's the profound awareness that every person we pass has a life as complex as our own, peppered with dreams, relationships, and moments of joy or mournful sorrow. We see a woman laughing at a text and wonder if she is in love. We watch an elderly couple walk hand in hand, sharing quiet smiles, and imagine the decades they have spent together. We all possess an endless sense of wonder, the sobering realisation that we will never know everything there is to know about the world, because every single person is a world on their own.



Sonder does not just reside in the face-to-face moments we encounter. It is the fragmented pieces of strangers' lives that we briefly interact with and then leave behind, sometimes without even realising how deeply they've touched us. Social media, particularly platforms like TikTok and Instagram, has transformed this solitary observation into a shared experience. Accounts like @booksonthesubway, which document the books strangers read on New York's subway, invite us into tiny glimpses of others' inner worlds. In a city of millions, it is through something as simple as the choice of a book that we can begin to imagine the thoughts and feelings of a stranger. Sometimes, it is not the eyes, but the media we consume which are a window to the soul.

“These people exist on the periphery of our lives, yet they can make us feel seen, even if only briefly.”

from fascination to limerence

While sonder is a benign curiosity, there exists a fine line where it can transform into *limerence*: an intense, involuntary fixation on another person. Limerence is a distinctly different love; it is an obsessive preoccupation with someone, often based on little actual interaction. It starts with curiosity but can spiral into fantasies of deep connection, creating an illusion of closeness where none truly exists.

In its harmless form, limerence can be the spark that ignites the early stages of romance. But when unchecked, this feeling can grow uncontrollably, distorting reality and leading to a dangerously unhealthy infatuation. It can manifest in idealising someone to such an extent that their true self gets lost in the haze of our own desires. Think back to stereotypical depictions of lovesick teenage girls obsessively scrolling through social media for any hint of interaction and imagining future connections that may never come to fruition. These behaviors can cross boundaries, often veering into unsettling territory, even bordering on stalking.



In this state, the person we briefly encounter can begin to haunt our thoughts, taking on a distorted version of who they truly are. They become a projection of our fantasies, not the actual individual. This distortion is often fueled by the unrealistic portrayals of love and romance in cinema and media, where perfect, dramatic connections are the norm. In reality, however, the deep bond we imagine rarely aligns with the complexities and nuances of real human connection. Limerence can leave us chasing after something that only exists in our minds, while the real person remains out of reach, unrecognisable in the fantasy we've woven around them.



fate
perhaps?

When I was in Rome, I decided to pay a visit to the Vatican City. That had been our very first stop on a three-week-long traverse across Europe, and I hadn't given the visit much thought beyond the awe and wonder I experienced from gazing at Michelangelo's magnum opus. At the end of our three weeks, we returned to Italy once more, and I felt something deep inside me tug towards the Vatican once more. It was amongst the walkway of visitors that I came face to face with my *doppelgänger*. Our faces mirrored the other in more ways than one. First came confusion, then shock, swiftly followed by curiosity tinged with alarm. Neither of us said a word to the other, before I promptly turned my heel in the opposite direction. That was the only time we have met (as far as I'm aware of, at least), and I constantly ponder upon the mysterious forces that brought us together. Fate, perhaps?



It is possible that part of our fixation on fleeting encounters comes from the cultural obsession with the idea of a soulmate. The theory is undeniably ancient. Greek mythology weaves stories of humans originally having four arms and four legs, split in half by the gods, forever seeking their other half. In East Asian traditions, the red string of fate connects destined lovers across time and space.

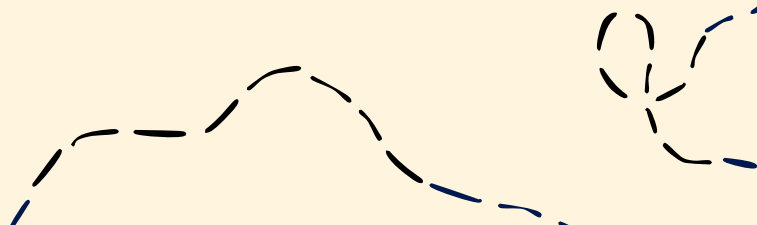
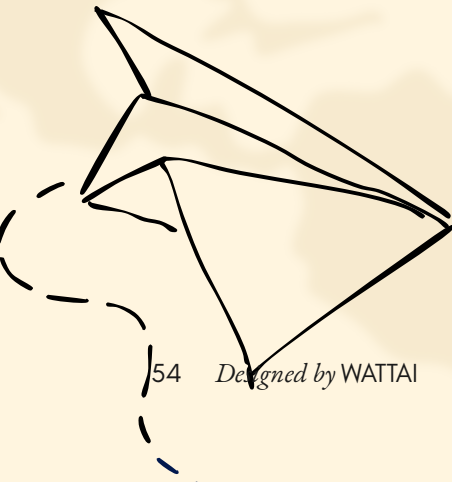
However, modern interpretations have turned soulmates into something more cinematic and absolute. The movie *Notting Hill* prefaces the main romantic relationship to be catalysed by a meet-cute in a bookstore, whereas *La La Land* narrates a serendipitous reunion years later. These stories prime us to believe that every brief connection has the potential for something greater. In reality, not every stranger who leaves an impression is meant to stay. Some are simply meant to pass through, leaving us with a momentary lesson, a fading memory, or nothing more than a name we no longer answer to.

“Limerence can leave us chasing after something that only exists in our minds, while the real person remains out of reach, unrecognisable in the fantasy we've woven around them.”

intentionally
unmapped

Not every connection is meant to last, but that does not make it any less meaningful. The people we encounter momentarily shape us in subtle, imperceptible ways. A fleeting conversation could introduce us to a perspective we had never considered. Even the ones we never speak to, those whose glances we catch across a train car or whose laughter lingers in a café, remind us that the world is vast, filled with lives as intricate as our own. Some may remain in our thoughts as wistful what-ifs, while others dissolve into the fabric of our everyday existence, their presence felt even in absence.

Perhaps that is the beauty of it all. These moments matter because being seen, even briefly, affirms our existence. In a world that can often feel isolating, the recognition of our presence grounds us in the reality that we are not alone. It reminds us that connection does not always require permanence; sometimes, it is simply about acknowledging and being acknowledged, if only for a moment, before we both move on.



we are gathered here today to mourn
the loss of our yesterdays.
they were plain yet perfect
because back then we bore everything
in our oversized backpacks:
our dreams were weightless, like our laughter,
propelling us upward with a wind that never waned.

we had our own secret language,
consisting of code words and
obscure references. but remember?
lexicon wasn't what welded us as one,
it was love and loathing
linking together like two halves of a BFF necklace
that made us keepers of each other's souls.

even when they broke us up into
separate corners of the classroom,
conversation coursed through all the same:
a frank flick of the wrist,
an arched eyebrow,
a finger gun to the head.
you taught me that.

so tell me why there's a gulf between us now
that i can't seem to find a way across?

jonathan
joram sa

What I'm really trying to say is: what became of these unspoken contracts?
I'm having trouble keeping track. Some were rescinded, but the ones that
remained are always altering and never the way they were when they were
first brought to me. It's getting exhausting to have to read the fine print
every time just for it to be flouted down the line. What's the point of having
temporary contracts?

The past will always have a piece of me, and the present the rest.

(I still feel your shoulders brush up against mine
whenever I take the nostalgic way down Haig Road.)

And maybe that's enough.

requiem
for the
misaligned

i miss your arm linked in mine,
when we promised to be friends for a lifetime.
we made plans to grow old together,
open a poetry-cafe, travel the world...
but was it all written in invisible ink?

look what you've done: the karaoke store we always visited
closed when our harmonies were wiped clean from your mouth.
you took our songs with you,
and now my singing has turned into screaming.
and it's not fun to scream alone.

i envision all the inside jokes you made with your new friends—
these are things i surely won't get so why bother saying it,
your new memories and references coloured by
cultural nuances i've never encountered as someone tethered to the
singaporean ground, for as long as the foreseeable future.

but this is a tale for the ages. i can't fault you for that.
planes keep landing where i don't want them to,
parasites still need to be pruned away,
passions will shift with the seasons...
even those right next to me aren't always present.

ODE TO A NAMELESS STAR

BY GERIN LIM WEN TING

In the beginning, there was you. God
had to beckon forth light; outer space
had to beckon forth heat; your presence
itself sketched my whole universe: ice cold

And so iridescent. A Milky Way
immolating my nebulae and suns,
you were blinding. And I, dust just drifting
sinking in the discordant soundlessness,

I see the wind in the distance. Empty
colours from tiny butterfly wings chase
clouds across the sky, but this is space:
No tornado, no meteorite would ever
reach far enough for me to perceive, beneath
your watchful glow, every breath, every thought
is weightless. I know: No matter how far I go,
Even if I forget my name, leave this planet,
travel light years away to another galaxy—

I will still be tethered to your gravity;
my body a microcosm of your life
my life an asterism of your constellation
my constellation just a small cluster
of fireworks under your night sky.

Author's note:

This poem is a reminder that though we struggle to become our own person, we may never be fully free from the influence of those important to us - and that's just how it is.

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