

PARTICLE

UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE

Time Zones

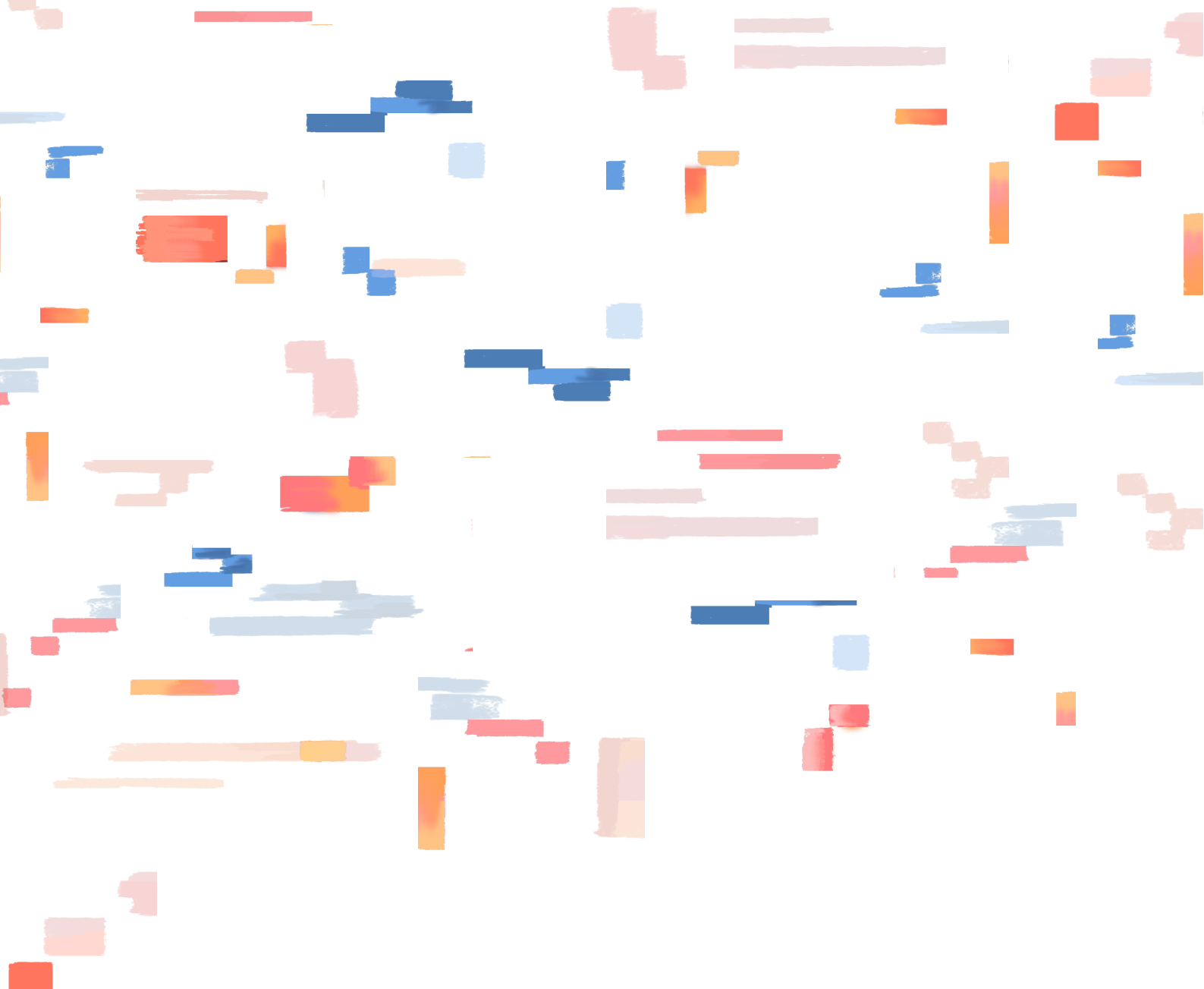
PARTICLE UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE • AUTUMN 2020



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PARTICLE

UNM'S LITERARY MAGAZINE

Particle is an online literary magazine run by the students of the University of Nottingham Malaysia.

Established in 2013, Particle publishes biannually, committed to providing a platform to amplify the voices of both emerging and established writers and artists.

The work contained in this magazine does not necessarily represent the opinions and views held by the Particle staff or any member of the University of Nottingham Malaysia.

Submission information can be found at particlelitmag.wixsite.com/site

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Poetry | Fiction | Creative Nonfiction | Artworks & Photographs
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Editor's Note

Dear reader,

It is peculiar to me that time has never worked the same as before. When the pandemic spread the world like wildfire, I felt like time has stopped working and all of us are suspended in the air, following the same routine in isolation, seeking reasons to live and hoping that everything will get back to normal again tomorrow. This universal feeling of loneliness crossed time zones to foreign places and this omnipresent longing exists in every language.

Therefore, Particle has decided on Time zones as a theme for this issue with an aim to bring you literary pieces and art works that discuss about the human experience in different place and time. We are excited to publish these eccentric and original pieces for you to dive into the world of a story that takes place outside of your room and reading a poetry that moves you.

We hope that these literary pieces and art work will help you gain a new perspective when coping during this uncertain time, these works may not have the answer that you are seeking but, they may share a longing that is common to you.

On a personal note, I have been with Particle for three years and I am proud to see the magazine growing with a solid team of intelligent and skilled editors and administrators. I would like to thank my co-editor in chief, Rasha Hamza who has been the yin to my yang when both of us took the leadership role in this magazine.

Thank you to the administrator team for organizing and helping us managing the magazine. To the editors, I would like thank you all for your hard work editing the submissions.

And to you, thank you for reading this issue. We are grateful for your support.

Sincerely,



Syaza binti Norazharuddin
Co-editor in Chief of Particle.

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a quarantine tale

Sanjana Shah | Fiction

with love and hope that you will enjoy reading this as closely as I enjoyed writing it.

When I think of you, the emptiness that has dug an insatiable void within me is all at once full and simmering with hope. We live and exist in such absurd, remarkably unpredictable times, that finding and remembering fragments of giddy, happy moments spent in carefree laughter and memories of unconstrained joy calms my racing fears. It soothes my dismayed thoughts, giving me a semblance of hope.

Time is but a fickle illusion. Days pass in a slow befuddled haze, leaves fall from the weary branches of trees and the sun doesn't stop burning; yet everything the world thought that it was sure of has completely changed. I still think of you, surrounding myself in warm nostalgia – from dancing to singing while picturing your hand entangled in mine, to the simple thrill of losing myself in a crowd of people on the sidewalk.

Patience rejects me, as exhausted and fretful as I am! However, I try to keep my belief of hope unblemished, for in the words of Rumi, the essence of patience is to look at the thorn and see the rose, to look at the night and see the dawn.

So I think of you, when I cannot comprehend how much I miss you through the language of words in a text. I'll call and pretend that you're sitting by my side, not continents away. When the solitude wins and pushes me yet again under a crippling wave of sadness, the pictures of you on my wall will pull me back up and revive me.

Joy needs Sorrow like a bird needs wings to fly. If I didn't feel this enveloping loneliness today, I wouldn't glow with gratitude. For having known you, no matter how fleeting and inconsequential our interactions may have been, every small 'hello' of yours has made its mark on me.



Almost

Sara Mostafa | Poetry

I first met her at the crossroads of an overblown star,
i saw her amber curls burst into flames—her heart fracture into nothing.
the Universe looked away but kept the door to her life ajar.
her celestial body could not withstand our blistering light.

i caught your eyes under the drizzle of rain
they were hidden underneath the frail fabric of an umbrella.
a kaleidoscope of all the things i'm keen to keep for myself.
for if the Universe caught a glimpse of your shadow,
It would extinguish the blush in your eyes, failing to recall the limbs you
relinquished to breathe life into Them.

i heard her sincerity among the falsehoods of words and whispers.
it hovered around minds of sophists, creeping
under tongues that never tasted truth.
the subtle utterances she spoke roused them from their daze,
and left them to reflect upon the echo chambers they were prisoners to.
mortals never seem to abandon voices that never belonged to them.

i felt your touch—tenderly trembling on my skin,
as you pushed me into a strange cluster of constellations.
i ached to trail the course of your orbit—
but light-years will pass before we watch
the same sun and moon rise and set again.

she looked at me—starry-eyed
as if I held Osiris and Horus on my shoulders.
i yearned to preserve her gaze in the pockets of my heart,
but the mundanes called for rescue and i could not dismiss their prayers. the
world grew faint and the sun faded
before i could spend another moment in her embrace.

i waited for her on the last stop of a forsaken heaven.
my chest—brimming with the burning desire to be with her.
my feet—willing to trace the planets in the rhythm of her footsteps
so, she can believe that i—not once have forgotten her strides.
the humans said that we would eventually meet at the end of the road.
but she did not come.

we met at the edge of the Universe.
the thread of love tugged at our feet
pulling us to where we could meet.
the rivers stopped flowing, the stars
froze—caught in a frame.
the galaxy came to a halt.
almost as if we were infinite—

A Letter To You About Time

Shafiqah Alliah | Fiction

“To be human is to be aware of the passage of time”
- Dan Falk

Your Lover
The Hourglass
24th October 2020

Dear You,

The warped sense of time - I get it. They say we are in a new era, in which time zones separate us. We have returned to our roots and submitted to prostration. We are in different time zones - ahead or behind, only one knows. We are desperate to hold onto each other, every second, minute and hour. “Just a minute more, please”, we have begged. We yearn to exist, dance and sing our deepest melodies in the same sandglass. The sand showers us mercilessly, telling us we no longer have the time once promised to us. Now, we are buried in it, with its coarse grains in our mouths and eyes. We squint and stay mum. We have lost grip of each other's hands. We can only faintly discern our bodies. This is our goodbye. Forever or temporary, no one tells me.

I asked my Mum, ‘When? When? When?’

My Mum smiled and said, “When it is right.”

I asked Dad, “When do you think?”

My Dad nodded and said, “When the time comes.”

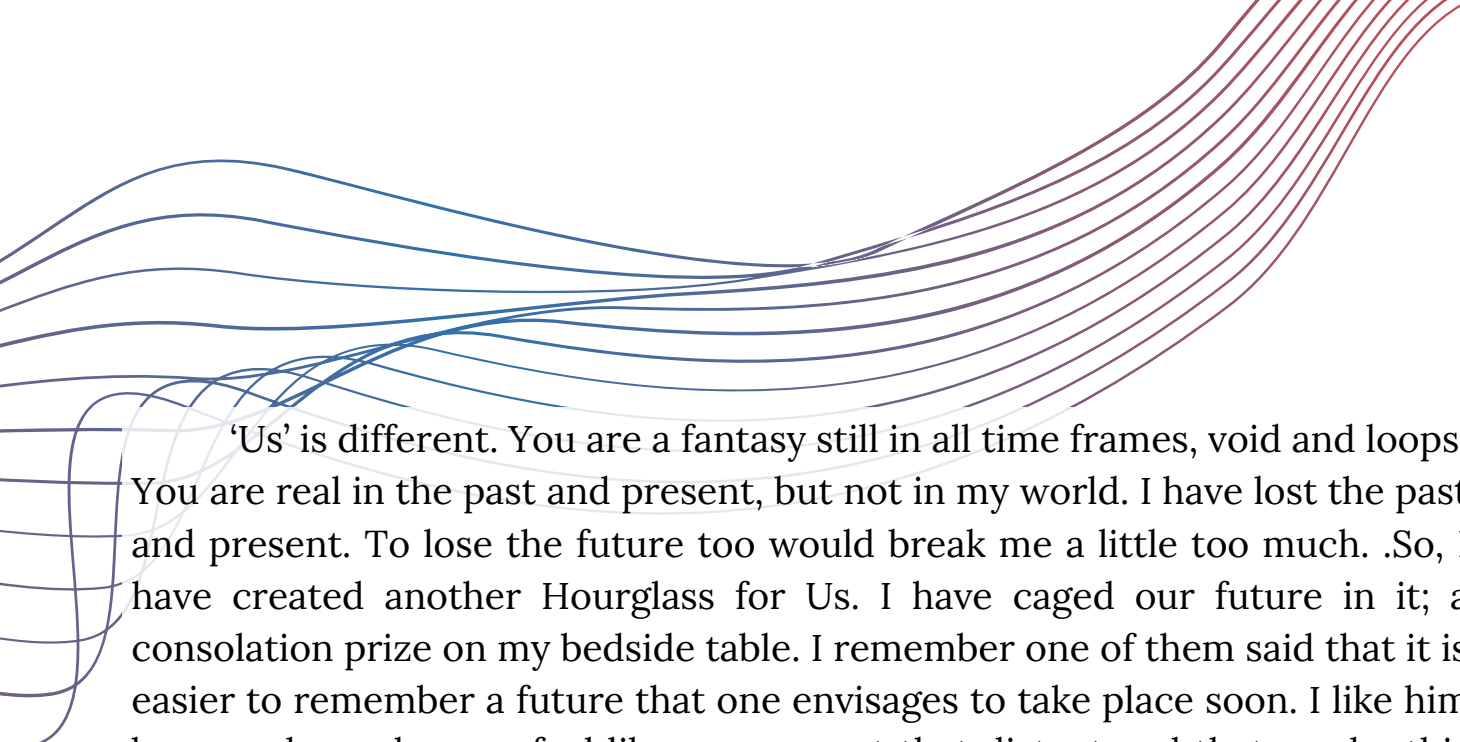
I ask Them, “When? When? When?”

They wag their heads and say, “We are not sure. We are waiting as well. Sorry.”

Please, please tell me it is soon. I have lost so much. I am desperate too. My mouth is full and my eyes sting.

Until I remember, but not for Me and You. Time is but Us. Neither Our ‘hello’ nor ‘goodbye’ is an indelible footprint on the desert. I am not sure if I am in the present, past or the future. It feels as if I exist simultaneously in all those passages. You are there too, in all of them. They said their present sense of time suffocates them. Little did they know I had long drowned in the sand and I have learned to breathe. Since You, I have cut myself off from all the roots that tie me down to the earth. I’d rather float. I have lost the ground and now I am stuck in this time loop. A cycle in which You are always ahead and I, behind; I am crawling after Your shadow on cream-colored land. But our times never collide. I am parched and exhausted in the desert; I bleed after some time. Engraved on my skin is now a blue-black luminous star tattoo - the scar from where I bled, longing. Still, this book of Ours and this travel of Mine is impervious to the malady that sweeps across the globe. It only serves to remind me constantly that I am running out of time. It whispers that I should probably crawl faster. In my world, time is not linear. Memory is not just in the past. And so, this invisible dimension has swallowed me alive.

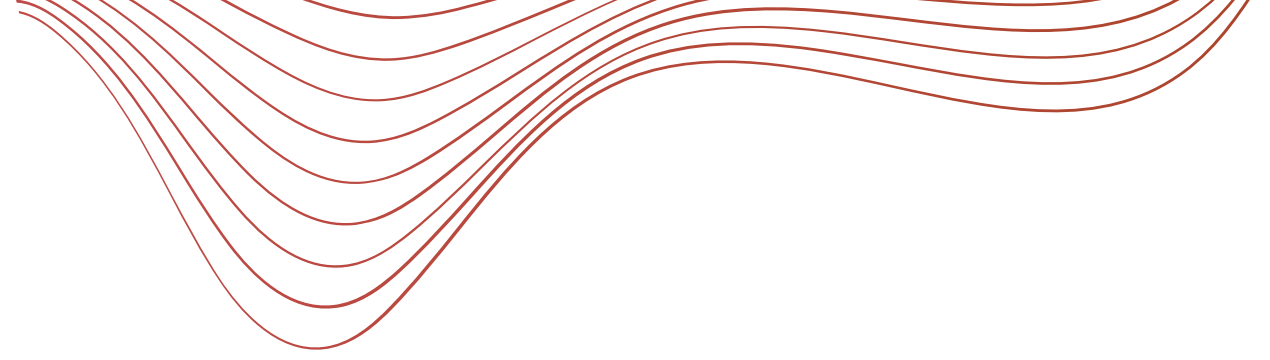
Oh, and they told me a secret too! They said people want to conquer fate by travelling across time. I heard they bid their shiniest blue diamond to board the ship. So, they told me to place a bet, my most precious bet. They think I’m gullible. They said I will get back to you that way. I told them once again, “But not for Me and You”. I’d rather not exist in the same passage of time as you. I crave the longing and the crawling. They are my mad pills, nourishing my dreams of the future. We will never be in a time zone. Time does not separate Us. That is what they don’t understand. We are more fluid, more mysterious, more twisted and more insane than time. It does not define Us. I won’t let it.



'Us' is different. You are a fantasy still in all time frames, void and loops. You are real in the past and present, but not in my world. I have lost the past and present. To lose the future too would break me a little too much. .So, I have created another Hourglass for Us. I have caged our future in it; a consolation prize on my bedside table. I remember one of them said that it is easier to remember a future that one envisages to take place soon. I like him because he makes me feel like you are not that distant and that maybe this Hourglass is not really a consolation after all. In my semantic memory, your skin and blood paint the backdrop of my room, your love in between pages of my journal. The episodic memory of my yesterdays, loving you, fills in all the gaps until it paints the wall blue, violet and clementine. I mix them both in the sand of Our Hourglass. It lets me escape the void of my moment of being. The loneliness was biting to my black bones. It gives me a sense of individuality – that I am yours.

Silence reigns. I have not reached the time in which You exist – but my heart has. My heart has been to the future. It tells me that everything will be so beautiful that words fall short. It warns me too that I will also find myself in a dark room with no window, wishing I had the map to the Sands of Time. I tell my heart that I will not mind. I still want Our future. My heart has passed all known and unknown boundaries, beyond what they regard as 'time'.

Sometimes, I sit there on the brick steps of my home, my hands cupping my face and think, "Am I rushing it? By crafting and keeping this Hourglass of the future? Then, I remember your eyes, the bright blue jewels. The image cinches my decision. The raving beauty of your silhouette is timeless. I become the Red Queen in your forlorn mansion. I remember our future instead of the past because you are always there. You are nowhere to be found in the past. We have intertwined in the memory of my future. But then, she comes.



She is an Angel and she mars every molecule in Our Hourglass with her perfection. She throws me back into the past and allures me to hold onto it. So, I hold. To the past where you were captivated by her. Where you were behind her in the reflection of her golden mirror. I hold onto that past. Through time, you have forgotten her. Or, maybe, you are on your way to find me. Our hours and minutes will collapse outside of The Hourglass. Yet, I am still in the past. I still attach her to you, probably always and forever. I mourn. I thought I shall forever miss your past. I was wrong. Loving you has made me relive history. Decaying, stagnance, disintegration, crumbling, – everything in that family I have felt. While you and she have moved on, I am still here, lamenting about your old love stories. Still holding onto Us. .

Despite the pain, my reverie is too real. My love is too much. My heart is too big. My time is too short. Your being has invaded my passages of time. Past, present and future now have intertwined. My love for You feels old now but I like it that way. Through time, You have become too familiar to not be true. I am in the present now, waiting for You. I will be in the future, in and outside of The Hourglass, still and still waiting for You. So, tell me, how do time zones separate Us? It makes no difference, for I am everywhere in the patches and passages of time. I am your past, present and future, beyond all boundaries. Let the era change, let The Hourglass break or run out of its magical golden sand. Let kismet decide and let it weave us. For, I have the courage to love you more.

Love,
Your Forever Lover



Family

Aishath Dhana Latheef | Artworks



'the intertwining of time and family creating a bittersweet moment.'





The Moon

Swetha S. | Fiction

There is no time difference between India and Kumari, but that doesn't mean we live in the same time zone.

It's been a month since she left me. But today, I wake up with a start again, as if she'd messaged me while I was asleep, and I'd missed it by a second. My phone's notification centre is still empty with only the clock staring me down, dropping the seconds bit by bit, taunting me. It starts in the morning, this constant checking my phone, counting the hours till midnight on my fingers.

She works at one of those call centres, a place for chameleons. The moment you step in, you drop your name to make it more pronounceable. You switch out your accent and count on the opaque phone's ability to conceal you—you're plastic. I was surprised she could do that every day. She told me it's the only way she could get out of her house. Her parents restrict her from using the internet, having bought her a phone with no internet capabilities to 'protect' her from its corrupting influence. So, instead, she hides a cheap smartphone under her desk to text me whenever she's at work.

Her tea break is at midnight. We usually chat for exactly fifteen minutes as she bites into a vada. Then, back to work, she goes, and I'm left to pry my eyelids open every few minutes, waiting for the moments she may manage to steal between phone calls.

Tonight, like every night, I have to stay awake because I know she needs me. She always checks if I'm okay, if I'm still here. She's been like this ever since she left Kumari. She wants to leave her building in India, and come to me. "I'll get a boat," she texts me. "I'll swim across the ocean." On other days, she's more creative. "I'll open my umbrella. It's breezy today. Maybe the wind will bring me there." "Heard Indian mangoes are shipped to Kumari. Maybe I'll sit in the carton like Chhatrapati Shivaji, and they'll ship me there for free." Six months or so ago—it's been only six months?—she had come here *legally* of her own accord.

We had met online, but we might as well have been neighbours, holding up white screens of text for each other through our window panes like in the movies. We were only confined by the glass screen in-between. And, on most days, I've contemplated taking a hammer to my screen, wondering if I'll find her behind the LCD display on the interweb dimensions, waiting to be released. But she told me to hold that thought. She'd saved up enough money through the trickles she's earned from her stint at the call centre. Of course, this was still a small amount, given that her parents would immediately notice if she were to spend that much of her salary on herself. But it was enough to get her here. I couldn't send her money in case she really was a forty-year-old male pervert like most web manuals in Kumari warned. But it seemed fair to pay for her once she got here; I was paid fairly well and had a decent job, after all. And so, she boarded the plane and travelled to our capital, Southern Madurai. From there, she took another plane to the northern city of Agni Nagar.



Today, I wash away the memories from six months ago with a splash of cold water. I get ready to go to said decent job. My mother watches me, expressionless as I apply talcum powder onto my face with a powder puff. In the mirror, I see swollen eyes, dark eyelids, and a wrinkle underneath. My mother can see it too. She quietly goes to the prayer room, sits in front of her many gods and goddesses and prays for me again. Once she's done praying, she walks over to me, smears a line of holy ash on my forehead, saying nothing.

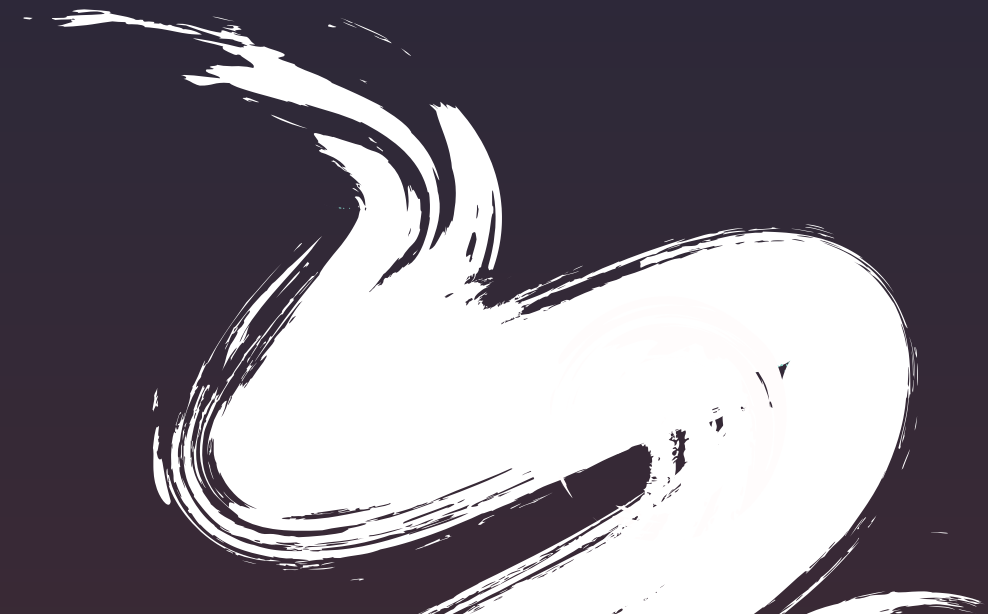
At work, I am an Accatan plant technician. Kumari has Accatan plants posted all around the country—they capture imprints of those in their immediate vicinity. With the imprint and the location of the plant, the Kumari government can determine people's locations. It's our version of security cameras. My job is to look through a batch of plants and make a record of who was in which location at what time. I often have a goal for the day and, as long as I finish the goal, I am free to work on my own flexible schedule. Because of this, I was able to go pick her up from the airport.

I still remember how I'd felt when I saw her walk out of the arrival hall. She wore a white kurti, her long, straight hair was a little frizzy after the travel. We walked to each other in a trance-like state, not knowing how to smile or greet each other. It was like we were meeting for the first time but had somehow known each other for years. The time I had spent with her—going to the market to fill our bottles with spices, buying climbers and succulents with her and arguing over their placements, and lying next to her, scrolling through my phone in perfect silence—was the only time I felt normal. Happy, even. It was like looking at the moon. Like I was dancing in Kodaikanal, in a 90s Tamil song, with my hands stretched out like the heroes who were in love.

The day after she left, I was forced to come back to work even though all I'd wanted to do was stay in bed and cry into a pillow. The co-workers saw my red eyes but didn't ask questions. They'd seemed heartless to me. Later, I asked for the Accatan plants from the airport and they yielded the entire batch to me without batting an eye. It was an unseemly amount of plants to go through in a day. Usually, multiple people took care of each location. But that day, I was determined to go through them all myself. I undid the folded imprints of the plants and soaked in the essences of the airport's thousand visitors. I didn't keep count. I kept on going for half the day until I got to her.

It was like she was with me for a moment. The strong, flowery Sakura perfume she'd bought from a convenience store. The clink of the imitation gold earrings she'd painstakingly paired with her day's outfit. The many twinkling mirror pieces stitched to her kurtis. The scents and bright colours of her liquid bindis that always matched her clothes. The glassy shawls she'd often lassoed me with. It was all there.

In reality, I was sitting in a steel chair in my office, staring at a tall plant gently nodding in the breeze. I stayed there till they closed the office that night as though she'd leave me forever if I left the room. The guard had to drag me out of my chair as I sobbed uncontrollably. I couldn't stop turning back to look at the plant as I left. The next day, however, the plant was gone and my co-workers showed no remembrance of the previous night's events. I slowly settled into my regular pace again.



Today, the supervisor in the Accatan plant facility calls me into her room.

"You don't look well," she tells me.

"Is there a problem?" "You need to move on," she says. "Find a good boy. Have a family. That's what we do. That's what's practical."

"Are there any issues with my work?" I ask.

"How long did you know her? Six months? Are you going to waste your life over six months?"

I stare into the wall behind her, into the Kumari government emblem—the Dravidian temple gopuram embossed in gold, looking down upon us in cold majesty. I want to lecture her with the poetry of love, about the fierceness of what I feel. But perhaps I have been staring at the moon for far too long. The moon is a brilliant creature. It holds in its grace the imaginations of all of mankind. Visible to all, it is a great egalitarian. It is what youth aspires to be. But it eventually falls into the horizon, letting the burning sun rise in place. With daybreak, everyone has to get back to their sobering realities.

The night before she left, my mother had one of those bhajans in our house. When she found out about my thing, she'd cried and cried and went to the gods for help. As an answer to her troubles, the gods sent her the neighbour aunty with her many religious connections. One person led to another and she finally arrived at a priest-monk person who told her that my girlfriend was my husband from a previous life, reborn as a woman. We were meant to be together and separating us would anger the gods. Strange, I know, but it was certainly better than what Freud had to say. Besides, it helped my mother deal with this. Only, she had to sell her soul to the gods in return for this information.

As a part of the deal with the gods, she held a pooja and bhajan every Tuesday. It's always too much commotion and I didn't want my girlfriend to be sucked into the vortex of their choruses. So, we went out for an evening walk, watching the Kumari skyline, holding hands. When we returned home, however, there was a lot of chaos—even more than what the poojas wreaked. A Kumari immigration officer and two Indian police officers had collaborated on an international project to kick my girlfriend back to her country.

"The girl's parents say she was kidnapped," the policewoman told my mother. My mother nearly fainted in response.

"She wasn't kidnapped," I said, "She came here of her own accord."

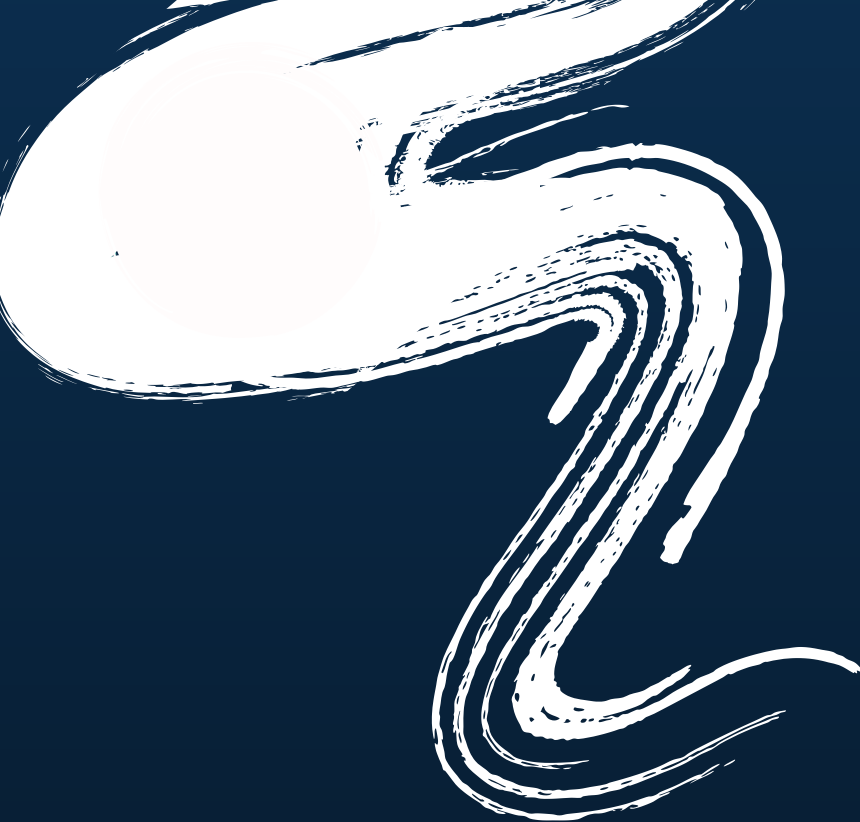
My partner nodded in agreement. "I booked the ticket and came here myself."

"I don't know all that, ma. The court demands your presence. You can tell the judge whatever you have to say," the policewoman insisted.

"I am a twenty-four year-old adult woman who legally acquired her own documents and used her own money to travel to a different country. I owe no one any explanations," my girlfriend said.

I would narrate the rest of the conversation. But that was pretty much all that was exchanged for the rest of the night. Only it turned from angry protests to scared begging. Eventually, she agreed to go to the court in India, announce that she came here out of her free will, and return to Kumari. She was a tearful mess by the time she left. She had no more money to buy tickets for her return to Kumari. But I grabbed her hand and told her I'd send her money. "I'll also start looking up job openings for when you return. Maybe we could work in the same building," I told her. "That way, we could have our lunches together." That prospect gave her the illusion of a future together. She nodded and left.

Only later on did she find out that her father was waiting for her at the airport. She told me this two weeks later, when her parents let her get back to work after she promised to never see me again.



Today, I'm home again. It's a Tuesday, and the bhajans continue even though my girlfriend is gone. My neighbourhood aunties arrive in shining sarees with jasmine flowers in their hair. They fill the home with their noisy cheer. I think one of the aunties mentions to my mother that someone somewhere is in search of a suitable wife for their son. My mother asks for more details, then continues to pray. I'm not sure what she's praying for. I know she's trying hard to love me, but it shouldn't be hard in the first place.

I run into my room and close the door. I could've taken a walk outside. But every building is laden with painful memories. Even the chillness of the breeze stings my hanging hands. When I look at the empty bed, I'm somehow even sadder. I lament how I can't share my bed with my girlfriend. I'd bought new bedsheets before she came here. Softer, thicker ones. I miss how we slept shirtless every night in the northern Kumari heat.

Outside, the women pray and sing and I think of what the monk-priest person said. Mine is a holy love. A pious love. Its disruption angers gods. To this world, my love is loveless. It is piety for a girl, a relationship I forged out of an abnormality. Something fated, not dynamic; a stupid folktale story, like that of a woman who married a snake.

I don't know if that's true. I don't know if I'm pious. But when I hear the aunties' songs, my ears heat-up, and I plug them with my fingers. Maybe I should give up this whole charade and stop living this shitty half-life between two time zones—I can't look at the moon forever. The sun will rise, and I will have to squint. The world can't be that happy a place.

I contemplate falling asleep and not messaging her. She'll understand. Her family is likely looking for a boy for her.

No, I can't do that. I have to at least tell her my decision. Then, I can sleep. It won't take long. Just a short text.

When it's twelve AM, she texts me first.

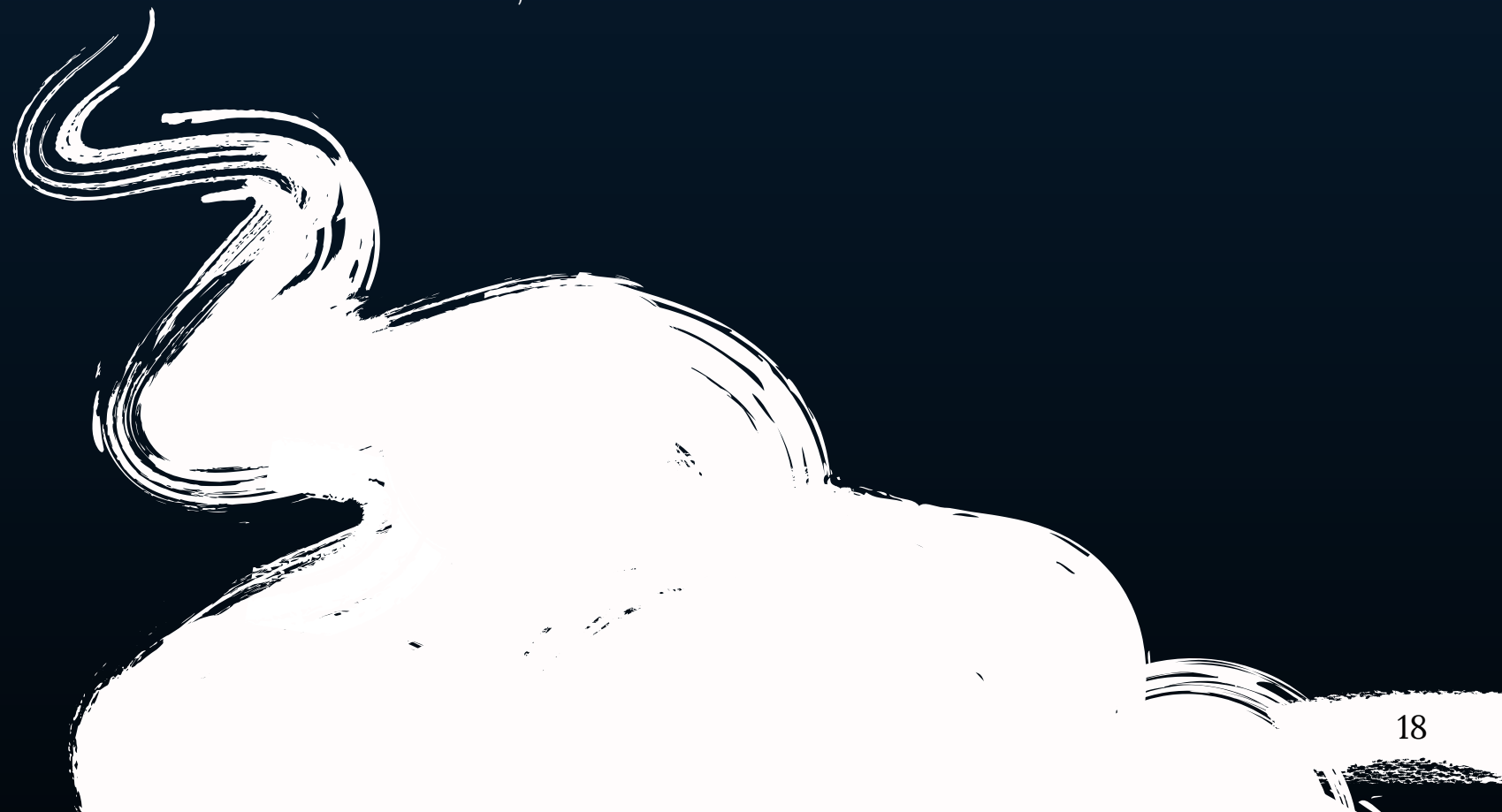
"Hi boo! I was looking out the window, and the moon looked so big and pretty. I think I found another way to get there. I could just grab onto the moon. You know how it spins? When it comes back tomorrow night, I can jump off, and I'll be with you."

I run to the window and look up at the full moon. It somehow seemed to glow brighter, grow bigger. It's been here for all of mankind's history.

"You're really going to leave me on read?" she texts.

I pull out a chair so I can sit by the window. "Sorry, just wanted to look at the moon. It looks beautiful." And suddenly, the supervisor, the aunties, my mother, Kumari and India shrink into the background. They are all young. They are all new.

But the moon, it's been here forever.



To Neighbour

Farah Nadhirah binti Chairil Anwar | Poetry

In the three weeks your door was open, I had made myself at home in your adjoining hotel room—fluffed your self-esteem-pillows for no lumps, lit up your hope-lamp when it dimmed, made your thought-bed night after sleepless night, and you seemed to like my place too—you enjoyed the cushion of my compassion-carpet, relished in the old reruns of my memories-TV, and took out the doubt-trash without being asked; but one day as I knocked at the chime of nine, you didn't answer, so day after day I came back, banging till my knuckles ran raw, I nursed them in the dead of night when I heard your door creak, so I shot out of bed, peeked in, and Neighbour, I cried at the sight of shards of light bulb splintered across razor-thin pillows so as I left my sagging mattress behind I asked, *Can I come in*, but, startled, you rushed to shut me out again.

Some time later, a blood-curdling howl broke from your room so I threw myself against your door, bruising my body blue until you cracked it open, choking me with the acrid smell before slamming it shut—but still, I felt grateful that you opened at all.

Next time, I'll do better.

The Perfect Android Anchor

Christina Yin | Fiction

She realized her mistake the second she clicked the mouse. The image had shot out into cyberspace, even as far as the furthest moon colony. Peter had reached out to grab the mouse from her hand, but it was too late. There was no way to take it back.

Peter raised his hand and she flinched, waiting for him to strike her, but he didn't. He packed up his things and left the room quietly. Jia-Wen wished he had just slammed the door, instead.

Alone, Jia-Wen stared at her computer screen. She didn't dare to check the social media platforms and news channels. Somewhere in space, on Earth, on the many moons as well as her own planet, different programmes and Editors would be collecting data, filing away the news and assessing the damage.

Did it matter that people believed you were an android? After all, didn't everyone say that the androids lived better lives than the humans nowadays? Frequently, both ordinary and famous people admitted that they would rather be an android than a human. The most highly rated talk shows were hosted by Android Anchors that were vastly more popular than their human counterparts. Ratings for reality TV shows spiked when androids joined the cast. In fact, every day, another star was found comatose or dead from suicide due to their popularity plunging and the ratings of Android stars soaring.

After all, Jia-Wen had done it for Peter's sake. If everyone believed he was an android, his future would be secure. Casting calls would explode and he would be the most desirable singer, actor, reality TV star since Oprah

Winfrey back in the 20th century. Why was he so mad? All right, she admitted that Peter had always wanted a family. But they could pretend that she'd gotten a sperm donor. He could still be a father and an Android.

And no one would ever be able to prove them wrong. Peter's parents had died in a bomb explosion on their spacecraft set off by a deranged anti-space colonisation terrorist while he, their only child, had been in boarding school on Mars. As for her own family, she had never known her biological parents. She had been left in a baby donation hatch back on Earth. From this, she knew that her parents had been extremely civilised, understanding that it was their civic duty to offer their child to join one of the colonies being set up to bring civilisation to the new worlds. It had been for the best, she had been told. And that she should be proud and grateful to her biological parents for sacrificing themselves for the greater good. For such an effort, Jia-Wen was rewarded by being sent to the most modern and well-equipped space colony on Mars. It was meant to be, for it was there that she and Peter had met.

So, there was no one to counter her claim. And why should anyone care enough to check? Humans were notoriously adept at seeing only what they were told to see. Throughout history and across time zones, in diverse nations and planets in every cyber-zone and corner of the solar system, leaders got away with incredible lies and robbery in the name of nation-building and patriotic investment planning. It was also well known that humans were better at segregating their own species into categories according to race, religion, gender and various shades of colour than computers were at dividing numbers! So, if someone were to be revealed as an Android Anchor, everyone would rejoice.

Best of all, Android Anchors were perfect; they aged like humans, and had lifespans like humans, so that they were more believable and could be replaced by other Android Anchors along with the times. They were more real than real life itself!

And Peter was perfect, too. He was smart and knowledgeable, had a photographic memory, and he was witty and beautiful. His voice was better

than any one of the members of that ancient band *Il Divo* in concert. He was perfection and more than a divine performer. It's just that no one believed it because he was human. Now they would once they realised he really was an Android Anchor. His career would skyrocket and even the colonists on the third moon from the planet would stop feeling miserable and lonely when they watched his shows.

Peter would be back, Jia-Wen was sure. He hadn't taken any of his clothes, breathing apparatus or space suits, anyway. He would come back and they would be happy - even happier than before. He would be grateful to have so many job opportunities and so much popularity. And they would have a baby. The baby would call him Dad and he really would be its dad. It would be all right.

Hearing his familiar footsteps approaching their apartment, Jia-Wen smiled. The door opened. Peter was back just as she had known he would be. He looked at her but didn't say anything. Loving and gentle as he always was, he picked up her hand - the hand that had clicked the mouse - and kissed it lightly. Jia-Wen clutched his hand and kissed it back.

Peter reached for the mouse, clicking open the various social media tabs and news outlets. But no one was reporting anything about him. There were no casting agents sending requests on his accounts, no invitations for auditions; Jia-Wen couldn't believe it. Peter was an Android Anchor. He really was! Could it be that no one cared? Could it be that no one had noticed?

But she wasn't bluffing! Jia-Wen squeezed Peter's hand tightly in her own. This couldn't be happening, it really couldn't. Why didn't anyone believe her? He really was an Android Anchor.

Quarantine Bubbles

Ooi Shi Yi | Artworks



Her

Nethmi Dimbulana | Fiction

She sits behind her laptop, chuckling and smiling wide as the darkness in her room engulfs her - but she doesn't mind the outrageously late hours as this is the only time she gets to talk to her friend and she takes every chance she can get.

It's past midnight; the books remain untouched and the plates once filled with food are empty. And yet, she stays unmoving as her eyes float over the words on the page.

"You should sleep. It's getting late isn't it?"

"Yeah but I don't mind!!" She replies, typing at rapid speed.

Indeed, she doesn't.

The girl wakes up the next morning right on time for her lecture. She feels disoriented and a little confused, but she pulls herself together. So, she checks her phone out of habit, scrolling mindlessly through an endless stream of messages and notifications until one message in particular catches her eyes.

"I know you're asleep but you gotta see this!" and another "sleep well!"

She smiles and sinks back into the soft pillow.

Another day draws to a close, and the girl cracks her knuckles as she manages to finish her work early this time. A message pops up on the blue screen in front of her.

"Hi! You'll never guess what happened today!" That's all it takes for the girl's lips to curve upwards into an excited grin. They talk back and forth, the messages swapping between them like the rap verse of a song.

After a while, the familiar message slides in, "You should sleep." There it is again. Her eyes shift to check the time as the harsh light glares back at her. It reads: 2 am.

Two days pass, and things are quiet. The girl focuses on her classes, trying her best to excel and remains diligent. When the sun sinks into the horizon and the sky dims, she wraps up her work and she waits.

This time, it's a video call. The girl beams as she sees her friend. Texting is one thing, but seeing her through the screen truly is something else. It's invigorating. Thrilling. Her heart stammers and beats a little too fast as she stares into the brown eyes on the other side of the screen.

Talking comes easy when it's with *her*. The conversations flow, and there are no awkward moments or uncomfortable silences. It's easy. It's natural. It works. And that's why she loves it.

The girl wakes up the next day, completely exhausted, but it's okay. It's the weekend. When she checks the time, her phone reads "11:00 am", and she groans. But then she sees the message. The one right on top. Her fingers fumble to open it, and a soft smile spreads across her face in record time.

"Good morning! Eat and rest well today. We'll talk later."

The message is so simple. Still, her heart flutters. She wakes up and does some work. Just because it's the weekend doesn't mean she can just lay around, it's her final year after all. Final year hits differently.

But the stress and pressures of her work doesn't crush her. Because she has something, *someone*, carrying the weight with her every night.

That night, the two talk about their lives, their favourite tv shows and their work. They laugh, and it's so effortless. She feels elated, everything seems right, and the time passes by fast. It's 3 am and they're still talking. Eventually, she gently drifts off to the sound of her friend's velvety voice as the call continues. The brown eyes gently smile, watching her sleep, "Goodnight, love."

The girl wakes up the next day with her head still heavy with sleep. As her eyes slowly adjust to the light in the room, the panic settles in. She remembers passing out whilst on the call without having said goodbye. Her hands scramble to grab her phone to text back an apology but before she hits sent, another message catches her attention.

"Yeah, so, you crashed last night on the call, it's okay. Hope you slept well!! Talk later. I've got so much work to do."

The girl smiles, shaking her head as her fingers type a reply, and turns off her phone.

They go back and forth like this with morning texts and late-night calls, just enjoying each other's company. Work is tough and the pressure is high, but the time spent with her gives her something to word towards.

It's a warm day when she steps back into the world post-COVID, with her mask tightly wrapped around her mouth and nose. She waits at the airport, keeping a safe distance from everyone just to be extra careful. Her eyes scan the large crowds of people carrying trolleys and bags and sags her shoulders disappointedly. The little kids run to their grandparents, reuniting after a long year of separation, and she watches, her heart yearning for *something*. *Anything*.

It's not long until she hears her name. She turns around, eyes widening, as she sees her warm brown eyes. She hustles forward, almost tripping over in excitement. Their eyes meet momentarily as she sprints towards the small figure, bridging the agonizing gap between them. She falls into the other's arms, burying her face in the smell of lavender and morning dew. The gentle pair of arms wrap around her, enclosing the space between them, and she feels safe, once again. Her friend laughs gently, which sounds like music to her ears.

She pulls away slowly, to gaze back into the familiar brown eyes that she had seen over the screen.

"I guess I don't have to stay up anymore for you."

"Well, now we can stay up together."

She laughs, eyes crinkling, as a smile spreads across her face. She grabs the extra bag, offering to help. Then, she interlocks her free hand with the girl - the hand fits perfectly in hers.

Author & Artist Bios

Author of *a quarantine tale*

Sanjana's favourite authors are Khaled Hosseini and Elif Shafak. If she wasn't doing FAM, she would probably spend her days sipping wine and writing.

Author of *A Letter To You About Time*

Shafiqah Alliah (Shaf) is a passionate undergraduate reading English Language and Literature at University of Nottingham Malaysia. She is also an editor of the school's literary magazine, *Particle*. A tsundoku who lives in a fantasized reality, she does everything best in the presence of endless caramel latte. As a shy person, she finds refuge in the art of writing and plans to be in a very very long-term relationship with English.

Author of *Almost*

Currently studying Creative Writing at the University of Nottingham Malaysia, Sara Mostafa is an aspiring poet and writer. As an expat living in the UAE, she aims to find her Egyptian identity that has been rewritten too many times. Her poetry usually revolves around the experiences and life around her.

Artist behind *Family*

Aishath Dhana Latheef is an engineering student who had taken up art as a hobby since a very young age. She does not have a distinctive style when it comes to art but rather seeks to find inspiration from her hometown, Male' City, Maldives. Some of the art mediums that she has used in the past include watercolor, oil, pencil and digital. The five panel comic titled "Family" illustrated the intertwining of time and family creating a bittersweet moment.

Author & Artist Bios

Author of Her

Nethmi Dimbulana is a 3rd year Biomedical Science student. Although she is a long-suffering science student, she has always had a passion for writing. She draws inspiration from her life experiences as well as the never-ending list of movies and shows that she loves. Nethmi has always found great joy in the creative arts such as writing, music, drawing and you begin to wonder how she ended up in the science stream... She also deeply enjoys music of all genres, photography, videography and video editing; it's her way of escapism and bliss as she ventures forward.

Author of To Neighbour

Farah Nadhirah binti Chairil Anwar (Nadhirah) is a third year Creative Writing student at the University of Nottingham Malaysia. She was born in KL and raised in the US and Nigeria as well as Malaysia, which she considers home. Her works explore mental health and relationships of all kinds. She spends her free time editing for Meraki Press and baking cookies.

Artist behind Quarantine Bubbles

Ooi Shi Yi (nickname: Joey) is an artist who likes to experiment with different styles and colors in her art. She enjoys drinking mocha, singing, and reading comics in her free time. She also has plans to make a webcomic in the future. The artwork depicts how chaotic and relatable video-calling can be in different time zones. Sometimes you will be sleeping, playing music in the background, or getting disconnected several times due to horrible wi-fi connection. The hope is that this artwork will put a smile on someone's face and make their day a little better.

Author of The Perfect Android Anchor

Christina Yin is a PhD student at the School of English. Her research is on creative nonfiction; true stories of people working on orang-utan conservation in Sarawak.

Author of The Moon

Swetha S. (Pronouns She / Her) was born and raised in Coimbatore, India. She is currently a student of English with Creative Writing at the University of Nottingham, Malaysia. Her short fiction had previously appeared in Out of Print Magazine. She writes speculative fiction based on contemporary India, and is currently working on her first book.

Editor Bios

Rasha Hamza (she/her and they/them)

Co-Editor in Chief

Rasha is a curious writer and editor. Soon to graduate as a Creative Writing major from UNM, she's dabbled in freelance content writing but is more interested in curating the creative experience for others. You'll likely see her digging into queer literature, poetry, and contemporary visual culture. Unrooted and a relentless traveller, don't be surprised when you find her in a different country next time you hear about her.

Syaza Binti Norazharuddin (she/her)

Co-Editor in Chief

Syaza is soon to be graduating from UNM with English with Creative Writing degree. If she is not in her room reading Virginia Woolf's "A Room Of One's Own" for the nth time, you will likely find her writing at a park among the trees. Besides writing, she is very fond of painting and playing the guitar. Although an introvert, she has ventured in spoken word poetry and has participated in spoken poetry events on campus. She has also worked as a social media copywriter and content creator in CGS-CIMB for her summer internship.

Farah Nadhirah Binti Chairil Anwar (she/her)

Head Editor of Poetry

Nadhirah is an editor and Outreach Manager for Meraki Press, a small Malaysian publishing company. She has also previously worked as a content writer for an online travel publication and a digital marketing firm. As a poet, her work has been featured in Particle and will soon be published in a collection of poetry by Malaysian youths. She once judged a pun competition and used to coach Malaysia's national quidditch team.

Sara Mostafa (she/her)

Junior Editor of Poetry

Sara Mostafa is an aspiring poet and writer. She has participated in a few local poetry slam nights and fell in love with spoken word poetry and words ever since. She aims to gain more experience in the literary field and publish her work one day.

Muhammad Aqil Najhan bin Faris Najhan (he/him and she/her)

Junior Editor of Poetry

Aqil Najhan thinks his legal name is a little too long. Currently second-year English Language and Literature student at UNM, he once held the position of head editor for the literary department of his high school's magazine. His interests include theatre, queer literature, and, of course, poetry. Oh, and his own poetic work is set to appear in an anthology entitled Malaysian Millennial Voices - isn't that exciting?

Nur Hanisa Razalee (she/her)

Junior Editor of Poetry

When she is not busy listening to music or planning shots for her next YouTube video, Nisa can usually be found writing or editing poetry. Her poetic works have been compiled into a zine titled Dreams, Delusions, and Made Decisions. Published under Terbitan Langit, the zine has been sold in places such as Kedai Buku Fixi and events such as The Georgetown Literary Festival. Nisa is also the producer at Paper Plane Boy Studio, a Malaysian video production start-up company.

Evelyn Patricia Ramli (she/her)

Intern Editor of Poetry

Evelyn is a first year English Language and Literature student at UNM. Although not as experienced in writing poetry, she has been an editor of her high school's literary magazine for the past two years. Evelyn's interest and passion for poetry, especially editing poetry, has been snowballing. Constantly inspired by her peers, she is determined to do and learn as much as she can, and she is excited for her future in the literary world, wherever it may take her.

Arvina Gill (she/her)

Head Editor of Fiction

Arvina is a published writer and editor and is currently pursuing an MA in English with Creative Writing. She was the former Features Writer at Harper's BAZAAR and has experience in the PR industry. When she is not writing, she is playing with her cat, Leo, or drinking oat milk.

Wong Li Wen, Rachel (Rei) (they/them)

Junior Editor of Fiction

Rei is a UNM final year student in Creative Writing. They have been writing for years and publishing fanfiction under a pseudonym on many different platforms. They're particularly interested in writing LGBT stories and wishes to one day publish an issue that highlights the LGBT community in Malaysia. Rei was also the PR manager of UNM GSOC, and is currently part of their events team. Apart from being an avid writer, they're also a passionate gamer and a cosplayer in the local ACG community.

Farah Nadia Zulkiflee (she/her)

Junior Editor of Fiction

Farah is a writer, editor, and currently, a final year Creative Writing student at UNM. She is particularly invested in exploring personal and social issues through contemporary fiction. Her other interests include watching cat videos and enjoying some nice lattes now and then.

Tan Jie Ying (she/her)
Junior Editor of Fiction

Jie Ying is a Creative Writing student at UNM and has published several short stories in various Malaysian zines including Nutmag, an annual zine dedicated to stories by Penang-born and Penang-based writers. Her previous work experience includes interning at Areca Books (a small nonfiction publishing company in Penang), and freelancing as a translator at CENT Translation.

Niamh Flannery (she/her)
Intern Editor of Fiction

Niamh is an enthusiastic writer and aspiring editor. Despite being an Electrical and Electronic Engineering major, she finds great joy in writing, editing and all forms of art. Prior to this, she has had experience in shadow writing, and has edited earlier editions of her high school's magazine.

Chin Sze Wei (she/her)
Junior Editor of Fiction

Sze Wei (Kaitlyn) is a first year student at UNM and an aspiring editor. In her free time, she enjoys books, movies, journaling and writing poetry. Her editing journey began a few years ago when she started doing editing and proofreading for authors online and fell in love with the process. She hopes that her passions and experiences will continue for a long time.

Iyath Adam Shareef (she/her)
Head Editor of Creative Nonfiction

Iyath is currently completing her final year of undergraduate studies in UNM, majoring in International Communications & English. She currently writes for an online travel website as well as for Ignite: UNM's Student Media. When not daydreaming about travelling, she can usually be found browsing through online recipes, and sometimes actually attempting them.

Loh Ji Yen (she/her)
Junior Editor of Creative Nonfiction

Loh Ji Yen (Angeline) is an undergraduate student at the University of Nottingham Malaysia studying Politics, History and International Relations. She helped in editing her school newsletter in secondary school which made her interested in the editing process. She is a minor history buff and cat lover.

Shafiqah Alliah Razman (she/her)
Junior Editor of Creative Nonfiction

Shaf is a passionate English major at the University of Nottingham Malaysia and an editor for the school's literary magazine, Particle. Previously, she has worked as a content writer for a local news site, WORLD OF BUZZ. Her poetries and fiction have been featured in Particle and UNM Writer's Society zine, while her creative essay, "Fear Let Me Be Free", won a competition organized by Empower Malaysia. A shy novice in the field, she aspires to learn and find refuge in the art of writing and editing. She's also a tsundoku who constantly needs her caramel latte fix.

Rasha Hamza (she/her and they/them)

Head Editor of Artworks & Photography

Rasha is a curious artist who likes to dabble in multiple mediums yet gravitates towards ceramics, monoprint and linoprint, as well as fabric art. Her works have been exhibited and sold in The Future Is In Their Hands at the Etihad Modern Art Gallery. She explores a multitude of themes but loves to play with lines and patterns. Unrooted and a relentless traveller, don't be surprised when you find her in a different country next time you hear about her.

Sanjana Shah (she/her)

Secretary

Sanjana Shah is a second year finance, accounting and management student who has previously worked for a logistics and services company in Zambia as well as a printing and packaging family company in Dar-es-Salaam. She enjoys the quest of learning things outside her field of study and finds great joy in dogs and designer shopping. In her spare time, she enjoys Belaire Rosé and a good book or podcast. You can find and connect with her on Linked-In.

Akmallina Athirah Binti Mohamed Zaharin (she/her)

Marketing Director

Growing up, Akmallina A. is surrounded with books, thanks to her bookworm family, and has spent her childhood writing fairy tales. Now, she is a final year Creative Writing undergraduate at Nottingham Malaysia, still spending her time writing, reading and listening to music. She's open to any genre and is willing to explore things that are unknown to her. Akmallina also loves learning new things and will go around sharing them. One day, she hopes that she'll be able to contribute to the global art scene.

Caroline Oon Kai Yuan (she/her)

Treasurer

Caroline is currently a second year Finance, Accounting and Management student. Caroline had several roles as a Treasurer in the past. She also loves money. In other words, people call her the loan shark! On the side, she loves to express herself through writing, dancing and also playing the piano.

Fathimath Laisha Fahud (she/her)

Graphic Designer

Currently a final year English Language and Literature undergraduate at UNM, Laisha aspires to work in publishing and eventually publish her own work. As a child, she was recognised as the girl reading books that weighed more than herself. Laisha discovered her passion for designing magazines at age sixteen when she embarked on her two-year journey as co-editor and designer of her high school's magazine. She has also headed design and marketing teams for various student body committees in UNM. A perfectionist to the core, Laisha may have to be forced away from her work station!

Evelyn Patricia Ramli (she/her)

Graphic Designer

Evelyn has been the head (and only) graphic designer for her high school's literary magazine for two years, which has given her the opportunity to enhance her abilities with InDesign and Adobe as well as her confidence with designing. She also teaches English online and works as an online freelance editor for essays, manuscripts, research papers, and more. When not studiously studying (haha) or watching k-dramas, Evelyn can be found in the dance room or badminton courts!

Damia Binti Norazharuddin (she/her)

Web Designer

Damia is a computer science student whose course makes her well experienced in HTML and web design. She also does digital art and illustrations as a hobby and has years of experience using Photoshop. Her love of digital art translates to her interest in watching animated films and her ideal day off is watching a good Satoshi Kon film and posting movie reviews on Letterboxd.

