

Summer 2023, Issue 6

CURIOSITY





EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Six years in the making, CUriosity has never stopped evolving, abiding by our longstanding belief to nourish our readers' minds with new perspectives. Gravitating from the science-oriented debut issues to increasingly philosophical compilations, we now decide to go one step further down the spectrum to explore the artistic limits of our readership. As the first issue to be produced in post-COVID times, we find it worthy to look back and honour the thoughts and ideas borne in times of change, thus leading us to explore the nuances of Normality.

The Looking Glass Self—How far does the social construct play a part in our self-perception? How much individuality can we safeguard against prevailing archetypes? With these perennial questions at the forefront of our thoughts, our writers sparked a conversation with the mind—some painted their thoughts with whimsical imaginations, while others sang the reds and blues of life.

Mind Matters—A mirror reflects but a reflection may not necessarily be true. What if we get lost in constructed images? Our writers divulged moments when they felt most vulnerable and out of their minds, and how they eventually came to terms with their worst fears. Your

nights are just as valid and valuable as your days, and “none of that makes you less whole”.

Tuning In—After learning to embrace yourself, it's time to look further into the collective society. What does it mean to be a woman? What about a minority, or even a majority? From stories by the bedside to those on the big screen, our writers draw on ordinarily lived narratives and seek to reinterpret traditional and new-found identities beyond superficial attributes. But how can we make sense of people different from us? To quench our curiosity, we interviewed Ms Jack of All Trades, or Dr Sonia Wong—poet, film critic, curator, activist, feminist, performer, artist, and lecturer at CUHK—on how she perceives identity and representation.

So what is Normality, you ask? Even after compiling this issue, a clear answer continues to elude us. What we know, however, is normality is ever-changing and we all are part of the drive. One story is one voice heard, and perhaps one conversation normalized. We hope you won't have to see yourself through the looking glass but can stare yourself straight into the eye and allow your story a chance to be heard.

Yours truly,



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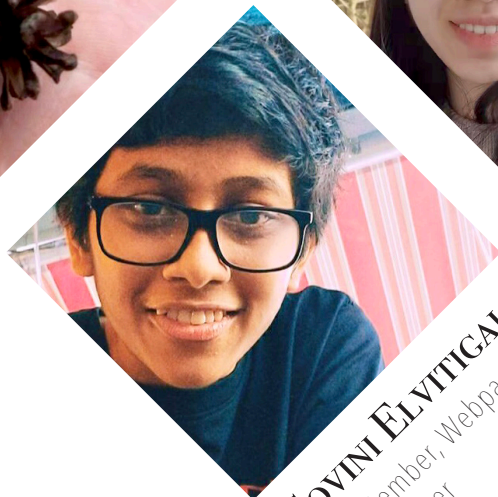
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If our mind were a tree, thoughts and memories would be its leaves – each similar but different, collectively a wondrous scene. Those we failed to cling to will fall, languish and be lost in the forgetful reds. The trees strip naked, our soul wanders, but so long as our yearn for knowledge burns, the lush green always returns.

Yet writers like us are greedy, we see all leaves their own legacy. So we fashion ourselves as gardeners, we paint them gold while the green lingers, lest they fall in nature’s course, they shall live on as mystical folklores.

About Charlotte
She/Her

An anthropology major who is driven by a curiosity about people’s lives in different cultures. Love to read, think, and write. Introverted, but not shy.

To use a kind of dessert to describe myself, it is to be a durian layered cake. Not fancy in its appearance but rich in texture. It is like my ideal of simple living and fulfilled spiritual life. The layers of the cake add to its rich flavor. Similar to this, an accumulation of experiences has enriched my ongoing process of growth.

About Iris
She/Her

The quote I like: “Don’t expect things to be easy. Expect things to be meaningful.”

Inquisitive by nature and a lover of all things creative, Mina thrives on reading up on (read: obsessing over) the newest niche topic that catches her eye. When she’s not pouring over a good book, she can be found watching musicals, writing for her blog, or taking a well-deserved nap.

She once read a quote (either by Immanuel Kant, Alexander Chalmers, or Joseph Addison, depending on whom you ask) that goes, “The three grand essentials of happiness are: Something to do, someone to love, and something to hope for.” She’s since been trying to approach life with this belief.

About Mina
She/Her

About Arianna
She/Her

A human. Being. Lost in the vortex of nothingness, found in the harmonies of nature. An introvert who enjoys birdwatching and painting in her free time. Blessed with ignorance.

“Why would you make out of words
A cage for your own bird?”

A chemistry major pondering their place in a world brimming with creativity. A novice guitarist tired of simply listening to Hozier. A sustainable inhabitant who initially assumed this was unworthy of mention being a thing everyone did.

I obsess over other people’s art and am still figuring out how to create my own.

About Govini
They/Them

MEET T

THE TEAM



JERIC CHEN
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Melancholy and moody mathematics student who is delighting in exploration and creation. He is interested in plants, animals, weather and stone, organic chemistry, quantum mechanics, PDE, literature and critique, art, history of philosophy, economic, sociological theory, social psychology, internet and computer.....all in all to have a widespread interest. You would find him a nice person to talk with if you are looking for a serious talk. And God said, Let there be light, and there was light.

About Jacky
He/Him

"Live the moment. Cherish the present. Anticipate the future. Frame the yesteryear." I love sports, photography, laughing and drinking! And always, always, always open to try new things.

About Jessica
She/Her

A QFIN student who is 80% jocular, 20% serious. Enjoy chess, badminton, and reminiscing chats from dusk to daybreak. Heart set on touring the world one day. To write is a bliss and to read is no less. The world beyond the words is for us to seek, and the words themselves are for us to speak. As I always believe in, the simplest language can convey the deepest meanings.

About Jeric
He/Him

Curious of how people perceive all things, Miranda always wants to be involved in small chit chats and serious talks. An English major, a video games lover, a cat person with severe cat allergies.

About Miranda
She/Her

When she finally goes outside and is away from her room, she enjoys watching movies in the theater alone, loneliness gives her a way to escape from the world and into her mind.

She is inspired to do many things in the future, terrified yet excited about the unanticipated. She likes the quote, "In a world where you can be anything — be kind."



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MEET THE

An architectural master's student as well as an art and design lover! I love exploring new places and new things so that I can gain fresh ideas and enhance my creativity. "Work hard, play harder!" — my motto in life!

About May
She/Her

Wishing you all the best while going through this great piece of art! I haven't yet seen it by myself as a whole piece but I am pretty sure that you and I will fall in love with it anyway. And I really wish to tell you every single detail that happened when I was participating in the creation process but I should be travelling, tasting deliciousness or messing around at the moment, so let's catch up later, shall we?

About Rosara
She/Her

IG-rosxara

Recently I was wondering, what keeps me alive.

Things come to my mind casually.

- Carbs.
- Scent.
- Warmth underneath the sun.
- Colors.
- Wisdom.
- Passion.
- Being loved.
- Dialogues.
- Memories.
- Satisfaction.

Tell me, what stops me from creating. Death?

Maybe not. Long live the creative soul.

About Amanda
She/Her

About Ryan
He/Him

A geography and resource management student who loves things about art and design. An introvert who loves traveling and exploring new places and stories. A movie lover who also loves reading books and picturing the scenes in his mind. A listener who you can talk to when feeling down. A complex individual who has so much more on the inside than he seems.

About Audrey
She/Her

On a constant search for peace and meaning, Audrey has a love for travelling, trekking, and trekking while travelling. She's trekked through the Himalayas in Nepal; and the Pyrenees from France to Spain. Along the way, she seeks to untangle the complexities in her heart and finds creative writing a necessary means to make sense of her inner world.

While we may not be responsible for the wounds inflicted upon us while growing up, we are responsible for healing ourselves and finding happiness. This truth can be both dispiriting and empowering. May we all have space in our hearts to hold the many polarities within us.

UNG

CHERIE MA
Writer



THE TEAM



HOI YU
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Writer



TOMMY YU
Writer



NINGWA SHAKTI
LIMBU
Writer



EVA CHONG
Writer

An English major who hasn't actually read a lot and has writer's block every single day but still loves writing. A firm believer that so-called "kids' stories" are the light and hope of this world whose favourite genre to write for is somehow angst.

About Cherie
She/Her

All grown-ups were once children. I haven't had the key to the mysteries that intrigued me as a child. Instead, I grew a shell infested with knowledge, wealth, and career, and the innocence once mine has now weathered away by money-making cynicism. A sand grain was embracing the vastness of a desert; contrary to what I had assumed, it didn't feel safe at all.

About Tommy
He/Him

I started to write against the clock of maturation, where I would gradually lose the ability to defend my imagination and curiosity. I am happy to leave a fragment of my imagination here.

Wave — a current of elegance that is meant to break and fade. A flow of emotion that emerges and dissipates. In a landscape where artists desire the idea of "forever", musings of this sort cannot escape their fate as writ in water.

About Eva
She/Her

The wave crashes its way to the shore, escaping from its blues. It carries the weight of memories and tales of the sea. Evanescent thoughts slip through your fingertips. All that's left is a gentle greeting to the ones who feel seen.

- the thought of me.

A year 4 student with a deep appreciation for poetry. I find joy in exploring new places from time to time, but I also appreciate the simple pleasures of everyday life. To quote William Martin, I believe we can "make the ordinary come alive" by seeing the wonder in the world around us and finding the extraordinary within normality.

About Ningwa
He/Him

Ningwa Shakti Limbu is an undergraduate student at CUHK who is reconsidering his major. He rarely plays video games, but he is another consumer of stories and hopes that he can write them as well.

He is on his 12th rewatch of *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, his 8th reread of *The Traitor Baru Cormorant* and his 5th replay of *Outer Wilds*.

If you see him at university, walking by himself, talking to himself, he is going through a podcast.

About Hoi Yu
She/Her

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Finally, our warmest gratitude to Dr Klaus Colanero (General Education Foundation), our supervisor, whose insightful and candid comments encouraged and challenged us to think, to write, and to think like a writer.



DR KLAUS COLANERO
Supervisor

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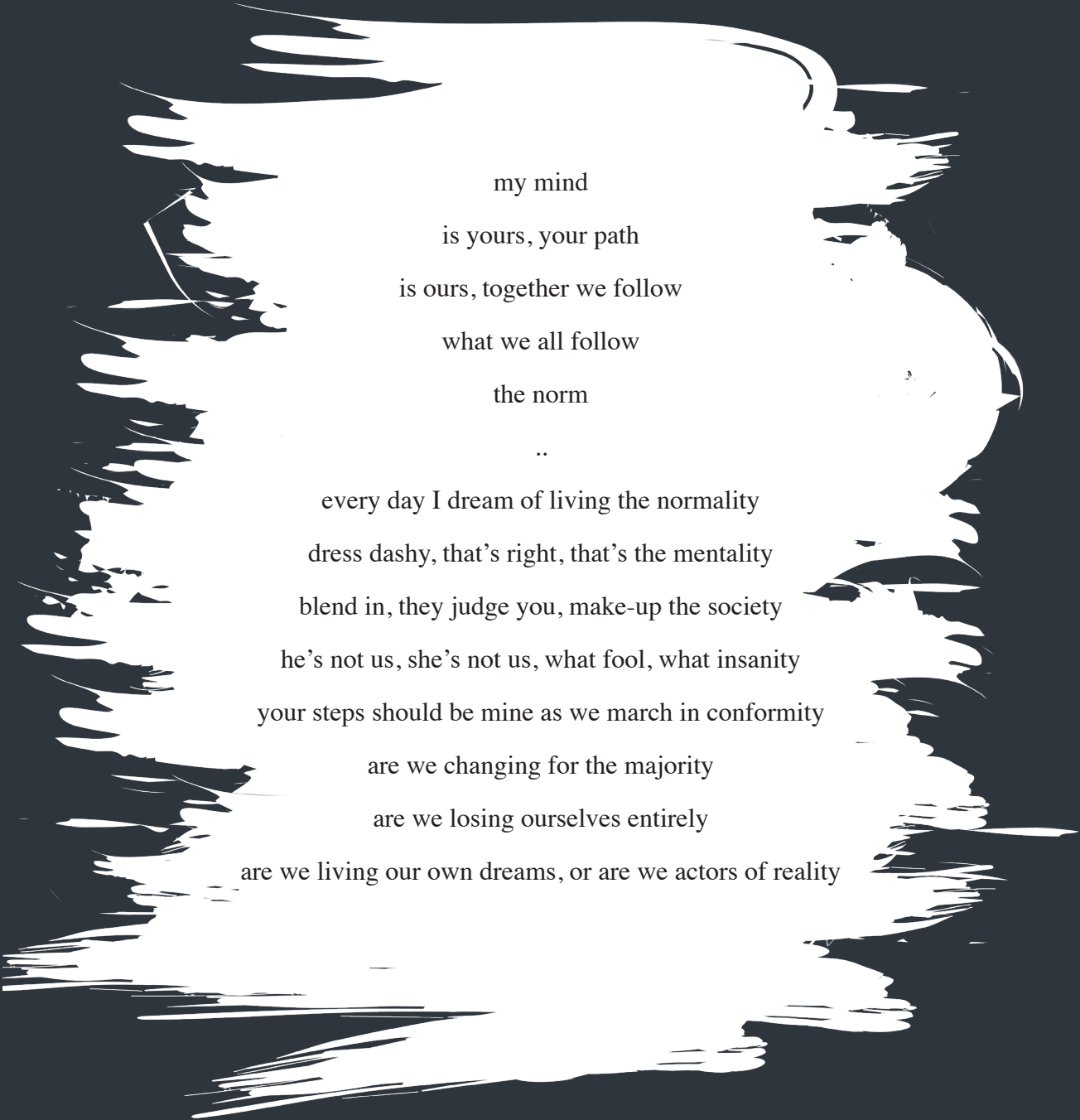
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The Normality

By Jeric Chen



my mind
is yours, your path
is ours, together we follow
what we all follow
the norm

..

every day I dream of living the normality
dress dashy, that's right, that's the mentality
blend in, they judge you, make-up the society
he's not us, she's not us, what fool, what insanity
your steps should be mine as we march in conformity
are we changing for the majority
are we losing ourselves entirely
are we living our own dreams, or are we actors of reality



Often, we are not unlike each other — different in flesh and bones, but blended in the way we think, act, and speak. We are confined by the norms of society, and act to appease ourselves and those around us. Yet we are not anyone, but our own. So, sometimes we should not be afraid to find ourselves again and be the unique entities we were born to be.

Disclaimer:

A section of the article contains depictions of body horror. Read with caution.

The doorbell rang amid a swirl of dust. Turning the doorknob, Arthur stared at his inopportune guest — Jeffrey looked breathless, soaked, and frightful. The worst fear came about and spread cancerously over his nerves and bones.

"No one's left," he said.

Arthur and Jeffrey are the last survivors of Causeway Bay Village. Their bodies have stopped evolving, still retaining six pairs of legs and a hood of shell like their ancestors. As they crawl under the sunlight, their organs burn bright blue like a lavender. But recently they saw a flurry of disappearances of the villagers. It is said that Children of the Earth, who have two arms, two legs, and two eyes, kidnapped everyone.

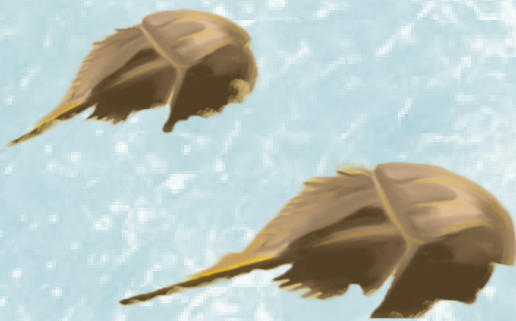
"Are you okay?" Arthur cast a concerning gaze upon Jeffrey:

"I felt something on my back." Jeffrey murmured as he turned around, bared his back, and revealed a square incision chopped out on his back.

"Oh man, did you stumble?"

"No. It happened when I was asleep. I was taken to another place. I thought it was a dream but the next morning I had a palpable thing."

Arthur studied the scarlet embroidery, what seemed like a catgut jerry-rigged to Jeffrey's back. His spine resembled a dried rivulet, and his six pair of legs were already shrivelled; his eyes, glazed with emotion, trembled on the verge of recognition. His thought was, like the sea, tossing with bottomless depth, begging for a moment to withhold the inevitable current to founder a ship, relationship, friendship, kinship, or whatever human connections he has.



14232

By Tommy Yu

“I will be remembered, right?” he said, clasping some miserable visions into his chest. The harbour where ships were sailing in and out seemed to outlast his fate.

Arthur nodded and remembered what his ancestors said — no matter how far they travel out to the sea, they must return home eventually.

“But where’re you going?”

“Home. The bell is tolling.”

Jeffrey said as he hobbled towards the sea, slowly melting into distance. He saw a lusterless lamppost on Gloucester Road, the triangular glass of Central Plaza flashing various shades of gold. A vessel accompanied his departure, and water, swaying at first, was at rest.

That evening, Arthur laid wide awake and observed a flock of birds settling on the overhead lines. Night crept into dawn, and Children of the Earth began bustling as usual. He thought it was them who caused the disappearance of his tribe, so he cowered underwater until the harbor was cleared. When moonlight sprawled upon the harbor, he rose to listen: no noise except the waves.

There was no one around, and then Arthur came out foraging for food.

On his feeding grounds, he was struck by waves, his mouth sifting through the sands as he chewed and spat his catches. Against the rippling shadow of the bright moon, his reflection splintered. The crimson spots of the moored vessels gleamed beyond the beach, and Central Plaza became a pinnacle of darkness.

Suddenly, he widened his eyes and like a balloon inflated with helium, he began to float in the air. He saw trams running beneath the wires, buildings colonized by people, and the sea painted by lampposts. Barrels of blue, red, and green passed before him, followed by a smell of iodine. In front of him were stairs moving towards a sliding gate, he did not move because he was tied by something unnameable.

A gigantic force grabbed him from under and leaned his body over a rail which shimmered like a knife. Upon its reflection he finally saw the place where Jeffrey was embroidered at the back: people unbeknownst to him were tapping to palpate his existence. He was bent at the pelvis, his spine protruding, and he started to writhe out of fear. His pairs of leg began clutching helplessly, but he was held up over something long.

He didn't feel pain, but a washing came over his eyes, and it wasn't tears either: a part of him

had already disappeared. Tubes were inserted to each pair of his legs, and soon he began to feel a widening pool of blood all over his body. He writhed again, and this time he felt the weight of an attachment to the bottom of his spine. He tried hard to disentangle the grasp, but to no avail.

Bit by bit he came to the realization that a needle was stuck inside his body, and he couldn't feel anything. It was the most horrible of it all, that the execution was absurdly painless. Every kind of struggle would seem pointless by now, except he knew that something was up. But he couldn't observe exactly what went wrong.

The process came to a graceful fruition. He saw the bottles carrying his blood. Arthurs felt himself being put inside a box, and it was all darkness again.

Roused to the sunny beams of a Friday morning, Arthur had a terrible dream last night. He sauntered along the coast and found an empty husk without innards, discarded as a deflated balloon. It was reduced to none other than a flap of forehead with two dangling eyeballs, and there was a scarlet embroidery plastered to the back. Everything below the pelvis was eaten away by something, and he saw this sheet of skin floating on water, instantly flopped as wave broke

ashore. He was terrified, yet everything around him seemed perfectly still and normal. Nothing had ever happened,

but what were the feelings that made him feel so wrong?

The next day, no one knocked on the door. Arthur counted his tidal wave at his doorstep, and it was exactly at the fiftieth tide that he discovered a wild calling to go home. He heard the bell toll, slowly at first, and then, louder and harsher. He saw his mother beckoning him home. He crawled out of his house.

He caught himself on the water — bright blue eyes, bright blue tail, and bright blue legs. He was at one with the ocean, eventually on his way home.

A body was found lying on the beach. Although the back had been scuffed white by the motion of the sea, there was a visible scarlet embroidery, with the number, **14232**, sewn on it. An old man picked it up, frowned intensely, and casted it as garbage; a young parent pointed to this lifeless body and explained to his children how much this creature had contributed to humanity. It sat there among a motley of empty cans, banana skin, and unrecyclable plastics.

An occasional fly buzzed by, stayed for a while, and then left.



DISCREPANCY

By Cherie Ma

In happiness and health, I've grown so well.
All lovely moments, fine stories to tell.
You say that's good, that's the Normality.
Yes, isn't that what they want us to be?

But whenever I fall down rabbit holes,
And let wonders dictate the paths I go.
When I come home with the magic I stole,
They would say Alice, stop dreaming.

When I so rarely dare to soar,
In wishful nights, through skies I tore,
And wake chasing the stars some more,
They would say Peter, stop flying.

When the swallow flies in my stead,
And see every sorrow I dread,
Cruel snow first dawn upon my head,
They would say Happy Prince, stop weeping.

They buried holes and say dreams don't go far,
They say not everyone gets to be stars,
Still I was sheltered by friends and family,
How come this isn't the Normality?
I had this privilege to stay so "silly".
I stayed a child in an adult's body.
This happiness and health that never grew,
From opposing what they deny you too.

You tell me I'm good, I'm normal.
They scorn I rebel, abnormal.
But whatever it is they say,
I speak, I sing, I celebrate,
The normality I see is me,
The happiness, the health, the scarce time to be free.

Once, a friend told me I am what society expects children to grow into – healthy, happy, optimistic, motivated. But if “normality” is being expected to abide by the norm, then am I really normal? When was the last time you met someone who can so readily declare they are happy? I manage to stay carefree as if I were a child because I never moved on; because I kept fairytale virtues as a personal philosophy of mine; because my beloved family and friends indulged me like this. Yet society rejects that. Our society seldom values these stories, hence why the last lines in stanzas 2-4 seem to deviate from the previous three. Our society wants us to grow up and conform and be useful as swiftly as possible. Is there not a discrepancy then? Are we expected to grow up happily as they rip happiness from our grasp? I am not here to redefine what the norm should be, but I do feel the need to ask, why must you take this discrepancy as your normality?





NORMALITY IS NOT EVER AFTER

By Cherie Ma

“Normality” is not absolute. It fluctuates with your perception of your surroundings. Most notably, the normality we perceive as a child must have been very different than the normality we perceive now. Things were simple in childhood. The world was small. The world was good. The stakes were low. It was normal to dream, to trust, to feel happiness. When we grow up, things are not so simple anymore, and inevitably the normality we perceive will change. Certain beliefs have to be exchanged for others. But we are free to choose what we sacrifice and what we keep. I have made my choice, what would yours be?

Normality was when we dared travel
Through many labyrinths that unravelled
When each page was turned by a child’s fingers
When, in dreams, we were allowed to linger
Where the roses white could be painted red,
Where we could do anything in our heads.

Normality was when the world was small,
A hundred acres and we knew it all.
“Good morning”, you’d come bumping down the stairs,
A new adventure for honey to share!
We’d call for our neighbors around these woods,
We knew them all and we knew they were good.

Normality was when we knew better,
And chanted happily-ever-afters.
Princes, princesses weren’t just play-pretend
When you pulled me around the room to dance,
All the humming and songs and laughs and squeals,
All the truest love stayed forever real.

But normality grew when we did too.
The world now bigger than stories we knew.
Dreams are faulty, trust is risky,
And happiness is not for free.
Grown-ups must accept the grown-up story,
Of utility
Safety
Guarantee.
We were born heroes from the start,
We grow to be cowards at heart.

Normality is just the world you see,
It doesn’t dictate what the world should be.
Some tales are misplaced when we grew.
But what you lose depends on you.

CONCERTO

By Hoi Yu Cheung

we live the same life of different harmonies,
the rhythm of the major and minor chords,
with bliss truncated, blues
isolated.
we chase Fridays,
a break
in the phrase.
tempo running from the Allegro, creeping back to
the Grave.
an incomplete concerto,
what next to play?

Concerto: *a musical composition for a solo instrument accompanied by an orchestra*

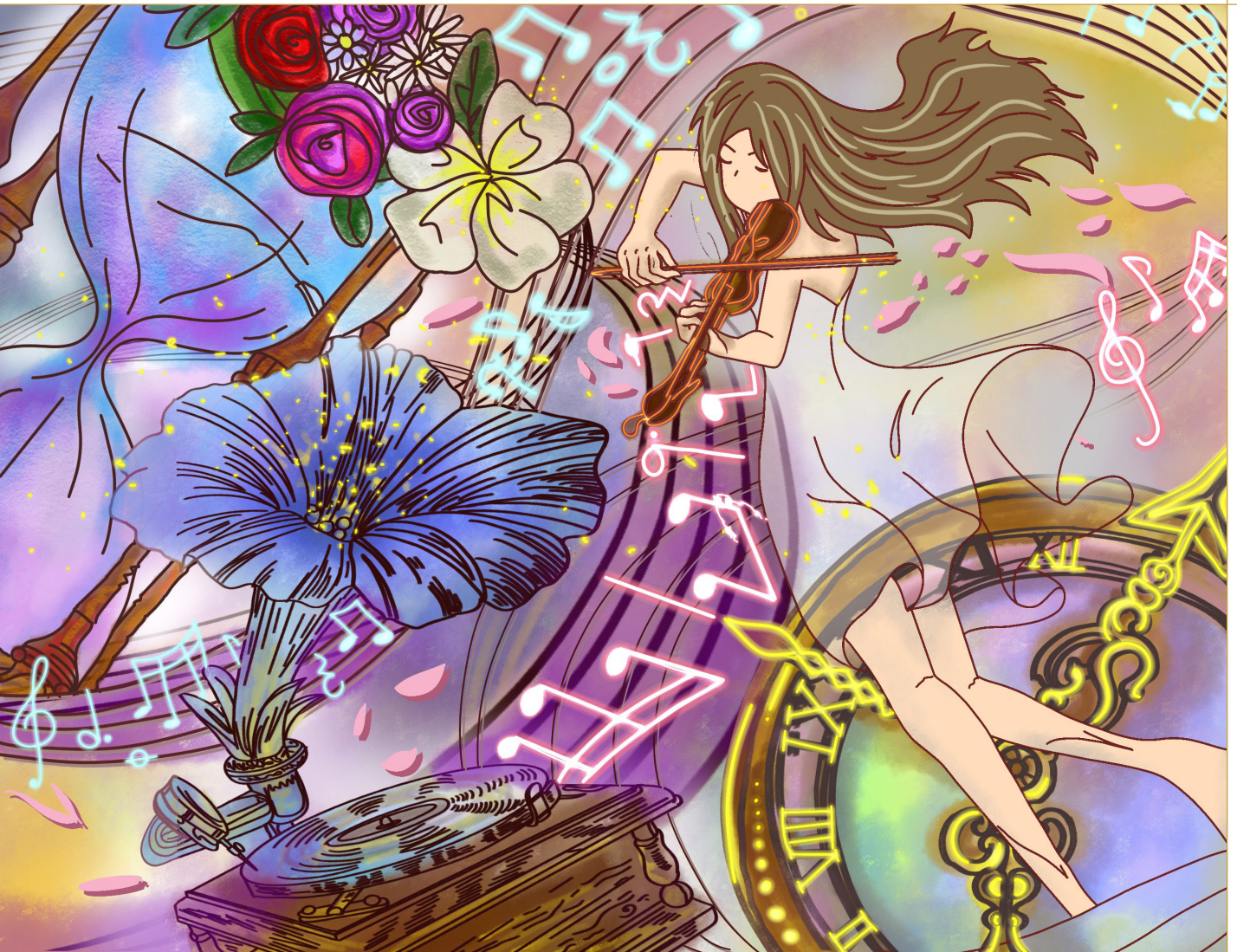
Phrase: *a unit of musical meter that has a complete musical sense of its own*

Tempo: *the speed or pace of a given piece*

Allegro: *a mark to perform a musical piece in a bright manner and fast tempo*

Grave: *a mark to perform a musical piece in a slow and solemn tempo*

This poem reflects the normality of our lives, such as how experiencing ups and downs are a universal experience for all. It also touches on how the decision for how we "play" out our lives ultimately rests with us.



The Fear of Fear

By Eva Chong

see me,
these fluttering lashes
can't shake off bewildering flashes
inhale
then exhale
gently

hear me,
I'm losing to my own heartbeat
thoughts on repeat
silent screams inside the broken record
scratches on the school chalkboard
resurrecting from memory

feel me,
wavering in the calm
ice in my blazing palm
senses cloud and dissipate
sinking until I levitate
perpetually

nothing is physically here
suspense paces but never dies
golden hour at the corner of my eyes
fabrics of time shreds through my fingers
meet me where the dusky haze lingers
all I have is the fear of fear.

For me, the fear of fear is anxiety. These were some thoughts that lingered over one early spring, before my 18th birthday. Normality is relative; just when everything is supposed to bloom with grace, it could be a season of torment for some. As absurd as it sounds, my greatest fear is fear itself. What about yours?



Fall in Blue: A Dive into First Year

By Eva Chong



Disclaimer

This article may be triggering for some as it mentions topics relating to anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts. Read with caution.

Entry #1

“...Everything’s tangled together like a knot of thorns. Untying it hurts, touching it hurts, leaving it hurts. Stay still and feel nothing on top of feeling everything.”

My vision sharpened once the tap on my shoulder dissolved the imagery in my slumber. We exchanged glances as the train behind us rode off into the darkness. It was 11 p.m. on a Sunday night. The next thing I knew we were charging towards the bus stop. I could feel my muscles tearing apart as cold air pierced through my lungs. Wet hair, 2 bags, and a suitcase. I hated myself for taking up so much space as I squeezed myself into the school bus. My friend was feverishly typing on her phone while stepping foot into the bus, finishing whatever that’s due tonight. My phone deep inside one of the bags chose to ring at this very moment, so I rummaged through everything in embarrassment.

“... Have you eaten dinner after training?”
It was my grandma’s voice.

“Well...no. We’re just getting back to dorm. Everything’s fine though, so don’t worry. I’ve got to hang up now, I can’t hold everything.”

How pathetic, I thought to myself. So, this is the truth behind the glory of holding the Hong Kong flag — student-athletes who act like they have their lives together. Once I get back, I should heat up some food, unpack groceries, eat, do dishes, empty my swimming bag, oh, and don’t forget there’s also an assignment due tomorrow and an 8:30am class. Though, how am I supposed to tell you? It’s been weeks since I pulled a thigh muscle in training and it’s not healing. I don’t think I understand anything in my majors. I can’t learn 4 new choreographies within a month. I can’t relate to anyone around here. I haven’t seen the news on TV in so long. I swear everyone looks like they’re having fun in university. I’m on the verge of breaking down but I refuse to show this sort of *absurdity*.

“Push through, aren’t you supposed to be an athlete?” I’m barely holding onto the flag post of my ship with “supposedly strong mental willpower and capability” written on that flag.



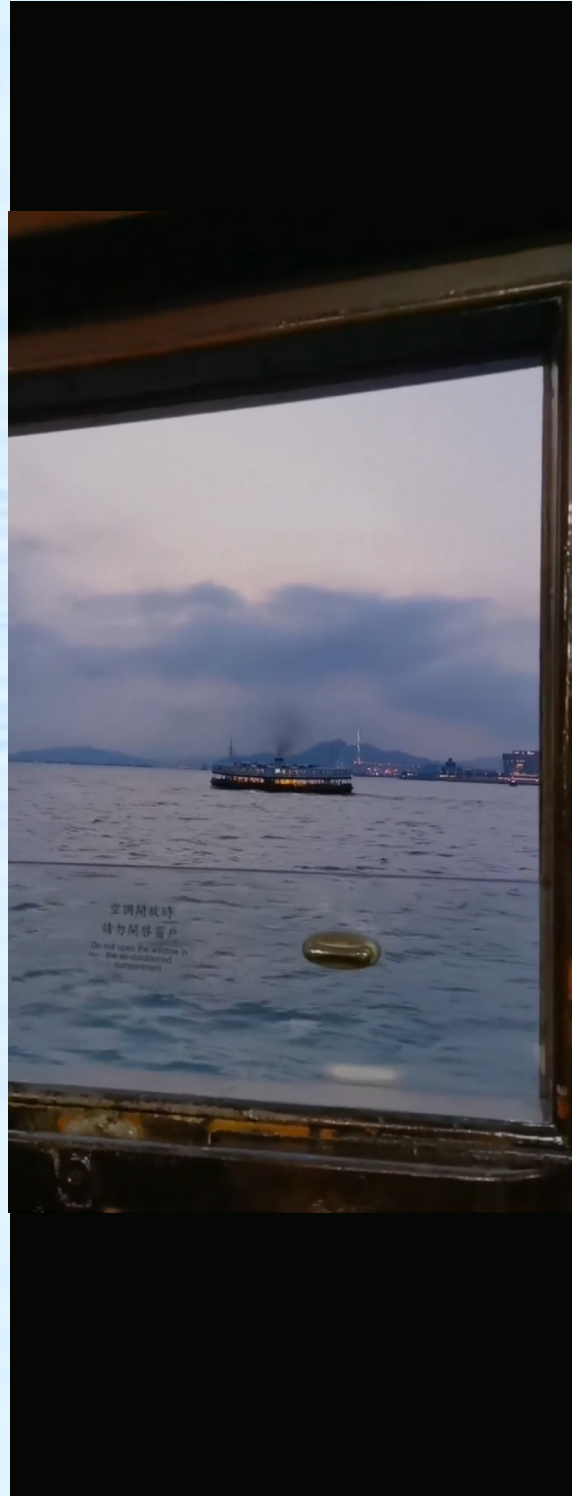
Entry #2

“Full of nothingness. I don’t know if I can write anymore, as I don’t know if I feel anymore. I can’t wake up or get up. I’m killing me.”

Showing up to class is the least I can do, I thought. But why is lifting my body so demanding? I can’t take my mind off the screaming pain from every inch of my legs. Loitering along the aisles of the supermarket became the only distraction that could get me out of my room. Maybe sugar could numb the pain. Packet after packet of chocolate crackers, a whole bar of chocolate, a box of cream puffs, an entire moon-cake right after a full course meal. I was still eating right before I fell asleep; if I hadn’t fallen asleep, I guarantee I would’ve still been eating. When I gathered the wrappers in the morning, the shame and guilt engulfed me. The utter mess in the room made me feel monstrous. How could I do this as an athlete? I couldn’t tell if it’s my ego or my body that got hurt.

Truth is, I didn’t remember feeling particularly hungry or full. It was simply numbness. At times, junk food would replace my meals because I was too tired to prepare anything, and the pendulum swung from one extreme to another dead end for the same reason. What’s the point of eating when I don’t feel hungry or full, but simply exhaustion? There were days I laid motionless no matter how hard I tried. The food was right there in the fridge, all I had to do was heat it up, but not even a finger budged. Grabbing food was too laborious of a task, and I was too numb to feel hunger anyway. Next thing I realized tears started rolling down my cheeks incessantly because I felt so out of control.

Steer away! Are you sinking your own ship? I’m no student or athlete, I’m just a flooding shipwreck joking about my greatest nemesis, showing up in class as if I didn’t just trade in my pearls for saltwater.



Entry #3

“I’m so tired — of myself. What if I just leave without notice? I need someone else to be me. I can’t uphold [my name]. Everything is in slow motion, yet time keeps moving.”

The musty ceiling was all I saw in doctor’s office lighting. Cold gel spread across my bare skin as the transducer came into contact. The silence turned into echoes in my ears, and the wait only brought fear. The monitor lit up the doctor’s face with a blue halo as he stared into the black waves. An iceberg came under inspection as he moved over to the

the lump in my body. It’s not cancerous, is it? **“Wait seriously, you haven’t told anyone?”** My friend turned to me in disbelief. **Is it a whirlpool or an iceberg? I don’t know. I just know I’m sinking.** That is the most uncharacteristic thing I’ve heard about an athlete who spent their whole life in water.



Entry #4

“Can you imagine trying to fight everything while fighting yourself at the same time? I’m scared I won’t try anymore. I’m talking as if I have no autonomy over myself. What if I just ‘decide’ not to fight anymore and let it take me...”

One cursed night, I couldn’t take my eyes off my craft knife. I was terrified of what I could do to myself because my body didn’t feel like mine. Screams in my head, light of the blade and blood in my eyes. Visuals of past traumas came in flashes as I hugged my knees so tight to stop trembling. I was so scared of losing control, wandering off, and killing myself.

The more I try to breathe, the less air there is. Nothing was physically happening, yet I couldn’t even do the simplest task of all. The chattering outside my room pulled me back to reality. I felt like a freak gasping for air — no one should see me in this horrific state. I didn’t even know what I was going to do next: walk towards the door to lock it or towards the table to grab the knife. Instead, I was frozen in time.

“Sea monster!” The pirates yelled out. I pulled out a sword for the great war, just to see myself there. I don’t recall how that night passed. It slipped into the thin air as my eyelashes fluttered.

For a brief moment in time, I really thought that was the end of the story. Why does this feel like a dream, precisely a nightmare, except everything’s real?

*What if I want to sit in the pain for a while?
Why is the only way leading towards exile?*

By dawn, the waves gently pushed me back to the shore.



Slowly, I opened my eyes as the city’s sunrise greeted me with a warm embrace. I felt a bit hazy, but the sheets felt crisp and clean. Lying motionless in bed, I heard my grandma’s call. She asked me if there’s anything I wanted to eat specifically, and I shook my head. All I know is, I simply had no reason to resist the freshly cooked dishes she prepared on the table, and the least I could do was get up for her. I never really told her what happened, but she never seemed to look at me differently anyway. She became my anchor, and I was finally at home.

Looking back, every step I took that autumn was filled with fear and guilt. The line between persevering and overworking is so vague. How do you draw the line between

letting go and escaping? Am I holding my breath or am I suffocating? Lost in the middle of the sea, I was sailing full speed. I was so focused on the creaks under my step that my legs were frozen. I was screaming into the night sky, but I thought no one could hear me.

This was extremely difficult to write about for different reasons. The topics mentioned above are often regarded as “taboo” and “dark”, things we should stay as far away as possible from. As if these experiences are only minor outliers. As if people struggling to this extent are abnormal and all they need is a diagnosis to prove that these emotions and behaviors are valid. Otherwise, it’s not socially acceptable to speak about these thoughts, to break down in public, to be a mess of a human. Weirdly enough, these things happen around us ALL THE TIME. I know many of my friends who struggle through similar things in their own ways. In a sense, no one was really, properly taught how to deal with these mental tremors until you have to teach yourself, or how to help someone who’s going through it. The way we were told to look away as if they aren’t right around us makes it even more alienating of an experience. I’m in no way encouraging coping mechanisms that are detrimental to health. What I described was just the plain, blatant truth of how my struggles looked like. We’re only human, and it’s normal to struggle. So, check up on your friends if you can, and reach out for help if you need. Understanding your emotions through journaling and counselling may be a good start.

Writing this article also meant exposing my fears and wounds, something my ego fought against tirelessly. Some days, I wish I could

say it was all smooth sailing, and that I have had a blast of a journey. Or at least, I wish I could tell you I’m already on the other side of the sea, and that I would never fall back again. The truth is, it comes and goes in waves.



it comes and goes in waves...

I can’t possibly be everyone’s anchor and clearly point out the constellations on your map, because I’m also in the middle of it. I just figured there’s not much point in painting an illusion of a world free of misery, because that might just put more people suffering in silence into misery. At least, I could show you my blue world:



I’ve always wanted to paint my bedroom wall and the thought of it kept me alive. The days I painted made me forget about everything else in the world. The sun seemed to set too soon. This is my biggest piece yet — it’s nowhere near any artist-worthy level, but I’ve given my best and I like it. So this is my true colour, this is my blue world.

**This is my *normality*,
and none of it makes me less whole.**

ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT SCIENCING

By Ningwa Shakti Limbu

The thing that truly solidified my desire to pursue Physics is this video game called *Outer Wilds*. In it, you play a blue, four-eyed alien who is the newest astronaut of his species on this tiny planet within a tiny solar system. But on the first day of your space launch, the sun at the center of the solar system explodes. As you die watching the gorgeous supernova engulf you and flashes of your life pass by, you wake up, back again, at the start of the day.

Outer Wilds is essentially a space exploration game with a time loop mechanic. Every time you die, you wake up at the beginning, and have to continue your investigation of the universe. Along with the mystery of the supernova, and your time loop, you also have to crack the secrets behind an ancient alien civilization that mysteriously went extinct. Thus, being an astronaut trapped in a time loop doesn't just mean learning to pilot your ship, but also becoming an explorer, a historian, an archeologist, an astronomer, a mechanic, an ambassador, an interpreter and so on. Unlike other role-playing games, there isn't a leveling or class system—you literally only use things you learn along the way — the histories, systems and secrets of the universe — to help you with every step of your exploration. All of this you have to complete within 22 minutes, before your time loop steals you back to the start of the day.

I feel, in many ways, the study of Physics is sim-

ilar to the game play. You sometimes have to bumble around the same problems again and again and fail tediously before you hit upon your answer that seems so obvious in retrospect. You're often racing the supernova to fly as far as possible, to read as much as you can before the loop ends and you're brought back to the start of a new day. We humans, with our short lifespans, are also racing to uncover as many things about the universe as possible, albeit on a much larger and complex scale. Even after we die, the subsequent generations carry on the knowledge and repeat their efforts again, and again, and again. I was set on exploring as much as I could. But my own experience with time loops began around a year ago, when several months after I started my degree, I was diagnosed with an anxious-depressive mood disorder.

There are many kinds of time loops that humans experience, and they are only compounded by poor mental health. There's the cycle of not doing anything because you feel unmotivated and depressed, and in turn feeling depressed because you're not doing anything. Then not doing anything again. And so on.



There's waking up and begging yourself to go to classes while every cell of your being screams at you to go back to sleep until you get tired of fighting yourself and pass out at midnight and you have done nothing at all, everyday.

There are slight improvements in the routine, like managing to finish your assignments and cleaning up, then being destroyed by a low grade and an insult from a peer, despite your best efforts.

Rinse and repeat the vicious cycle of anxiety and depression.

I have always had a speck of discomfort within my mind, long before I came to Hong Kong; a sort of unhappiness that would swell in size and shape according to the day. But it swelled and bulged to illness when I had to live by myself, with a bunch of strangers I didn't get along with, and was challenged cerebrally in ways I had never been.

The thing about time loops is that it's too easy to fall into despair, at least for me. After all, regardless of how much effort I put into an assignment, how much sleep I lose, how much I feel like puking and how many classes I attend, if I still get subpar grades, if I am still blind to all my calculus, theorems and diagrams, what's the point of even trying? If no matter how far you grow, how much you learn, how many people you talk to, you wake up back at the start, aren't you just stuck on square one?

These days, I don't understand why I'm still trying to get a Physics degree. This isn't a dig at

people who study in STEM. I think those people are smart and noble, and I respect them deeply for that. I just mean that I'm so horribly, terribly, absurdly bad at it, which is strange because I used to be good at those subjects in high school. Over the past year, my self-esteem has grown smaller and smaller as my grades became lower and lower, and these feelings exploded like a supernova until it burned up everything else in my life.

Alex Beechum, the creator of Outer Wilds writes, **“Real world space exploration tends to be an incredibly humbling affair that constantly reminds us how small and insignificant our planet truly is on the cosmic stage.”**

Trying to study physics has deeply humbled me. Now I truly understand where the phrase “It's not rocket science,” comes from, because nothing I have attempted in my life could have been as hard as this rocket science.

Over the last year, my therapist (that the university has provided, for which I'm grateful for) has been telling me that I may have been ruined by my perfectionistic tendencies, which, I realize now, is true (he's a really good therapist). You see, there's another thing about time loops that lure you in. If you end your day badly, make a mistake, or get swallowed by your anxiety, or crash and burn, you can always wake up back at the start to repeat your day again, all your mistakes erased. This is how my mind tends to work. If I make a mistake or feel so utterly out of my mind, I just shut down and give up until I wake up tomorrow, with a chance to start a perfect day again.

¹ <https://digitallibrary.usc.edu/C.aspx?VP3=pdfviewer&rid=2A3BF163YX5A>



I started my degree with the sole intention of going into academia. I wanted to be a smart physicist. I wanted to get a PhD and churn out research papers. And gosh, I knew that it would be difficult and I knew that it would be tough, yet I wanted to suffer for it. I was so deeply fixated on a perfect day that even an “okay” grade was a massive failure that would implode in a chain reaction and I would escape into the safety of a new day. If I wanted to achieve my goal, there was no room for error. So when I didn’t live up to my own fictional perfection, it bothered me to no end. It itched and itched, until I started to dislike the actual act of studying, and just started to crave grades, which in retrospect, is stupid.

Here’s a major spoiler about Outer Wilds (which is actually really obvious): You can finish the game within your first 22 minutes playing. You can just break your time loop and go straight to the end, and there’s little difference in the ending, whether you explored the solar system or not. But that is a horrible way to play the game.

My favorite thing about Outer Wilds was never its ending—which I admit, is pretty spectacular—but all the stories you could explore within the universe. There’s a collapsing planet with a black hole in its center and a volcanic moon, a double planet system that exchanges sand and a gas giant with different layers of green typhoons and currents. There’s ruins and writings where ancient aliens argued over experiments, fell in love over poetry, and raised children in our precarious solar system. There’s even other astronauts like you scattered across the game, each so different from one other, with their own personalities and reasons for joining the space program.

The game is full of history, systems and secrets.²

Yes, you are in deep space, and it is absolutely terrifying sometimes. Yes, it is so absurdly difficult when you’re stuck, or a clue leads to a dead end, or you spend an entire day trying to land your ship on a tiny moving satellite. And yes, it feels like the universe is weighing on your shoulders. But what’s the point of doing all those things if you forget to appreciate everything you’re doing?

The solar system of Outer Wilds is “governed by forces that do not know or care about the player.”³ All you can do is try to understand, appreciate, and live with the universe that is ultimately out of your control. My therapist has been trying to make me accept that fact. You see, the scariest thing about the solar system is that perhaps it’s not even possible to save the solar system at all. Perhaps, it’s not even possible for me to do well in my studies. Perhaps, it’s not even possible for me to go into academia in Physics (I hope it is). Yet, I want to, so badly that it is almost unbearable. I had been trying so hard to reach that goal that I began to burn myself. I was in denial of my own flaws, which is just unscientific. Of course, persistence is a virtue in learning, and you can’t take the pressure off yourself just because something is difficult.

² <https://digitallibrary.usc.edu/C.aspx?VP3=pdfviewer&rid=2A3BF163YX5A>

³ <https://digitallibrary.usc.edu/C.aspx?VP3=pdfviewer&rid=2A3BF163YX5A>



But it's so much more important to love what you're doing, and despite the imperfections, to keep going at it. You can't just retreat from the day because you failed once and retry for a better tomorrow again and again. What you can do is account for all your limitations, accept them, and learn to live with them as you keep trying to save the solar system.

I replayed *Outer Wilds* again quite recently, and I hope I do well this year.



I relate to dumplings: Spoken word poetry

By Audrey Chung

We all have parts of ourselves we feel the need to hide. Perhaps we deem them unloveable. Too chaotic. Not beautiful. Perhaps even shameful. I think of them as innards of a meticulously wrapped dumpling, with the wrapper being the acceptable and conventionally beautiful exterior we present to others. But we all deserve to experience love no matter how broken we feel. I hope you find somebody whose warmth gives you the courage to “unwrap” yourself and be unapologetically you; who finds it all the more precious and exceptionally beautiful. I hope you believe it too.



I relate to dumplings.

Dunked-too-long in boiling water,
skins

peel open —

divulge

undecipherable contents.

A tornado

of minced vegetables

flinging themselves

upon each other in

chaotic dance.

Bubbling waters unrelenting,

White-limbed wrappers

shiver,

weep

round the ring

of its devastation.

A long cabbage strand catches

between the lips

of a still-sealed dumpling,

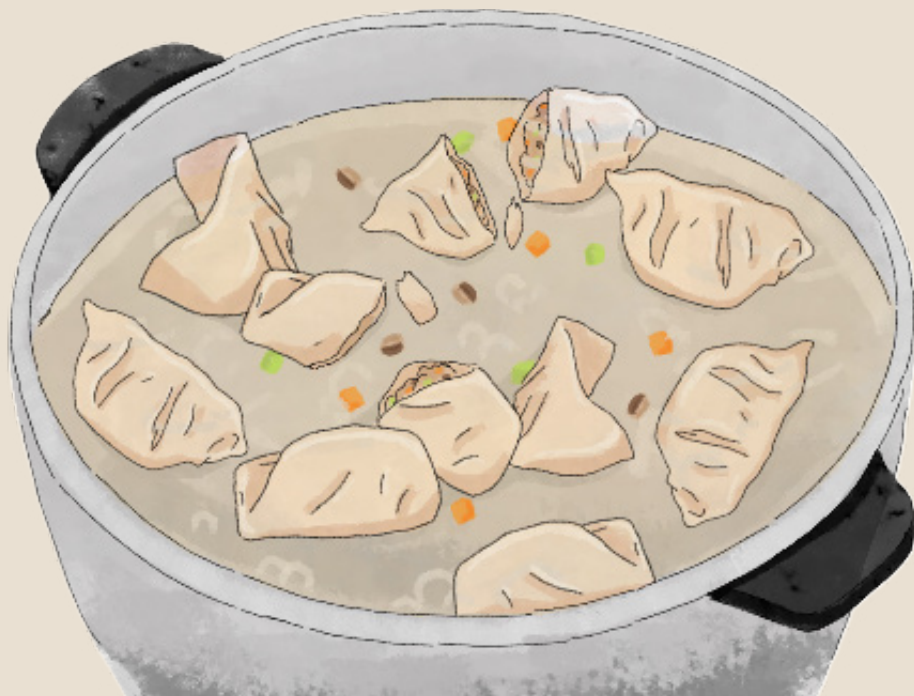
tossed in the current, it

refuses

to

let

go.



36 MIND MATTERS

What I mean to say is:

I'm afraid

of your warmth.

It softens

the skin that cages

my messy insides;

threatens

to peel it a p a r t,

like petals

of the daisy

you ask

impossible questions of:

“He loves me,

he loves me not”.

When you

tear

its

last

petal, you

are repelled

by what is no longer

intact.

So I

keep myself together:

You can't stuff

the insides

back

into

a boiled-too-long dumpling.



What I mean is:

I like myself better

packaged

like a present.

Folded

meticulously in

conventional

designs —

I have the skilled

hands of a Chinese grandmother

ritualistically

folding dumplings for her family

every new years':

“Make sure to dip

the sides of the wrapper in water.

That way when it folds it

seals

itself

shut.”

What I mean is:
I'm not proud
of my blemished
meat mixture interior —

Pork

slain from a butcher's rude knife;

Rehydrated shiitake

that's tainted the water it was soaked
too long in;

Four carrots

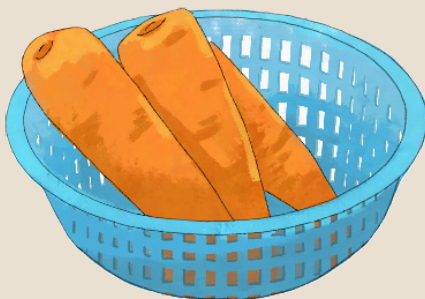
from perforated
wet market baskets
off the corner of Pei Ho Street*

Cabbage

tossed carelessly
into plastic
by an impatient hand
fishing for change
in a red bucket under a broken roof.

Sometimes I can't
remember
where all my parts come from.

Does it matter?



What I mean to say is:

My parts are
chaotic,
not easily understood.

My dumpling is
beautiful
whole.

But when it breaks —
for it is sure to break —

I
need
you

to tell me that
fragmented dumplings
still make for some
hella
good
broth!

* *Pei Ho Street* (北河街): Located in Sham Shui Po. Known to be one of the cheapest wet markets in Hong Kong.



WHAT IS A “NORMAL” BODY IN SPORTS?

By Iris Wu

Picture competitors in a track race starting at different lanes as they wait for the sound of a gun. Each competitor varies in a multitude of ways, including height, proportion, and less obvious attributes such as endurance, flexibility, and strength. It seems this variation is accepted as the normality in sport events. That is not the case when it comes to hormone levels. In 2019, VOX produced a video that features the controversy surrounding South African runner Caster Semenya whose body naturally produces a high level of testosterone which was three times that of a “normal” female.¹

Testosterone is a sex hormone that men and women as well as gender-diverse people all have. It plays an important role in the development of male sex characteristics and increases muscle mass as well as the body’s ability to use oxygen. There has been conjecture that an elevated level of testosterone confers an unfair benefit in Caster’s running events. The debate went on about whether this naturally occurring advantage should disqualify her from competing as a

woman. The question at the core is what levels of testosterone are too much for a female athlete.

If there is a definite answer to this question, we should be able to clearly define “normal” testosterone levels for most females and males. To put it simply, experts in biochemistry suggest that it is difficult to know what the right level of testosterone is for an individual. Not only does the way that testosterone works differ from person to person, but testosterone levels can also vary depending on where one lives and how wealthy one is. Put simply, there is no universal “normal range” that may apply to all groups of people.

However, there is a range deemed as “normal” for female athletes to qualify as contestants in the female classification. From 2012 to 2015, some of the world’s biggest sports associations, including the IAAF (the International Association of Athletics Federations) and the IOC (International Olympic Committee), had banned athletes with testosterone levels above 10 nmol/L from competing in women’s events. In 2015,

1 2 3 4 5

¹ <https://www.reuters.com/lifestyle/sports/semenya-offered-show-her-body-officials-prove-she-was-female-2022-05-24/>

the regulation was challenged by an athlete in a court case which determined that existing scientific evidence is not enough to justify the IAAF's regulation.

Later on, the IAAF and the IOC had changed some of their rules. The IAAF's new regulation only applies to athletes with conditions referred to as DSD (differences of sexual development), in which atypical development of chromosomal sex (XY rather than XX) leads to circulating levels of testosterone similar to those in typical male range. To compete in the 400m, 800m, and one-mile women's races at an International Competition, these athletes with XY DSD and functional androgen receptor are required to reduce their testosterone levels to below 5 nmol/L for a continuous period of at least six months, according to IAAF's Female Eligibility Regulations.²

It is believed that if a 46 XY DSD athlete's body can make use of the testosterone that it produces, then she holds the same advantages as a 46 XY man has over a 46 XX woman.³ The sport's international governing body draws this conclusion from observations

of athletes' performances with elevated and suppressed testosterone levels and testing of all female athletes at the Daegu 2011 and Moscow 2013 World Championships. Caster Semenya becomes one of the affected of the IAAF's new Female Eligibility Regulations. To defend her right to compete in the women's competition, Semenya appealed the regulation to The Court of Arbitration for Sport (CAS) but the case was dismissed. CAS agreed that the IAAF's Female Eligibility Regulation was "discriminatory" in nature but deemed it as "a necessary, reasonable and proportionate means of achieving the legitimate objective of ensuring fair competition in female athletics".⁴

The IAAF rules and CAS's decision sparked controversy over the issue of fairness facing women's sports right now. Julian Savulescu, a scholar on biomedical ethics, takes the level of 5 nmol/L testosterone as "meaningless" and "chosen for convenience".⁵ He reasons that the comparisons of testosterone levels between Semenya and other XX chromosome women speak little of fairness as they are different in physiology and how testos-

terone receptors function.

Adding to the complexity, judging how much benefit testosterone gives female athletes is difficult. Bioethicist Katrina Karkazis suggested that apart from testosterone, other factors contribute to athletic performance as well, including other physiological factors like VO_2 max (the maximum rate of oxygen your body is able to use during exercise) and heart size, and external factors like coaching, training, nutrition, and equipment.⁶ Whether testosterone can be singled out as the defining factor is under question.

On top of that, high testosterone isn't a universal performance booster. Figure indicates that many male powerlifters had testosterone levels below what the IAAF considers as the lower limit for men.⁷ Sports that include the most men below the limit include rowing, track and field, ice hockey, and rowing as well. It is equally possible that some aspects of training in these sports lead to lower testosterone levels or that lower testosterone levels constitute an advantage for male athletes in these sports.

² <https://www.worldathletics.org/news/press-release/eligibility-regulations-for-female-classification>

³ <https://worldathletics.org/news/press-release/questions-answers-iaaf-female-eligibility-reg>

⁴ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/world/article-caster-semenya-loses-her-challenge-of-new-testosterone-rules-for/>

⁵ <https://theconversation.com/ten-ethical-flaws-in-the-caster-semenya-decision-on-intersex-in-sport-116448>

⁶ <https://www.vox.com/identities/2019/5/3/18526723/caster-semenya-800-gender-race-intersex-athletes>

⁷ <https://www.biointeractive.org/sites/default/files/TestosteroneAthletes-Educator-DP.pdf>

Dutee Chand was prevented from competing against women in 2014 because her natural level of testosterone stays within the typical male range. Born to a below-poverty-line family in India, the daughter of weavers has gone through a hard journey from a girl who used to run barefoot around a lake to becoming a two-time Olympian and 100m national record holder. The female sprinter expressed disbelief at being asked to fix her natural body to be eligible to compete with other women who are taller or from more privileged backgrounds when these factors certainly confer advantages for them.⁸

This has raised a further question: If artificial factors such as financial backgrounds are not likely to be subject to equalization, what kinds of regulations on naturally occurring advantages are fair? Swimmer Michael Phelps, the most successful and most decorated Olympian with a total of 28 medals, for instance, is known to have the advantages of having a wide wingspan, long upper torso, and producing low amounts of lactic acid. These attributes are more celebrated than questioned. Finnish skier Eero Mäntyranta who has enhanced oxygen-carrying capacity because of a genetic mutation that increases his red blood cell mass by 25-50% is not required to reduce his biological levels as what is required for Caster Semenya.

This suggests that not all naturally occurring advantages are deemed unfair. What makes the difference? Well, most sports competitions don't classify athletes by the size of their hands and their foot, but by sex, namely men and women, even though there is no indisputable way to draw a line between females and males.

Like many millennials, I grew up subscrib-

ing to the misunderstanding about biological sex, taking for granted that sex fits in a binary that is determined by genitals. But scientific evidence maintains that sex is a spectrum, not a binary, whether it be determined by genitals, chromosomes, hormones, or other factors. For instance, this is what



we learned in traditional sex education: XX chromosomes = female, XY chromosomes

⁸ <https://theconversation.com/caster-semenya-how-much-testosterone-is-too-much-for-a-female-athlete-116391>

= male. In fact, people with female physical traits are likely to carry “male” chromosomes XY, and vice versa. In this sense, it is impossible to use chromosomes as a single cross qualifier to determine an athlete’s sex.

Despite the existence of a variety of inter-



sex conditions, the classification of sex in sports events has been established over dec-

ades while the criteria of defining sex has changed over time. In the mid-1940s, female Olympic athletes had their genitals inspected to verify their “femininity”.⁹ This process was replaced by chromosomal testing in the late 1960s, and a testosterone limit in 2012.

Among the many different factors that contribute to sport performance — including training, coaching, nutrition and medical support, as well as many genetic variations, testosterone levels in a typical male range is regarded as the only factor that is beyond reach for most women and a primary driver of the sex difference in sports performance between males and females.¹⁰ While it is widely accepted that competitions of men against women are unfair, it is hard for people to agree on what should be the upper testosterone limit in women.

The range of testosterone levels vary broadly in male athletes. While individuals with a wide range of testosterone levels have access to men’s sports events, individuals with high testosterone levels are banned from competing in women’s events. A high level of testosterone is accepted as a competitive advantage in men’s events while rejected as an unfair attribute in women’s events.

Some have argued that sports relying on abilities are essentially unfair, such as gymnasts being short do better than taller ones. It goes on to suggest that sports events should allow women with naturally high testosterone levels to compete with other fellow women, regardless of their testosterone level.¹¹ However, there are concerns about transgender athletes who were assigned male at birth competing in women’s events, who are believed to have advantages associated with cisgender men.

⁹ <https://slate.com/technology/2018/11/sex-binary-gender-neither-exist.html>

¹⁰ https://www.tas-cas.org/fileadmin/user_upload/CAS_Executive_Summary_5794_.pdf

¹¹ <https://www.runnersworld.com/news/a20817647/caster-semenya-starts-her-bid-for-gold>

How do we make women's sports meaningful and, at the same time, protect the rights of transgender athletes who wish to compete as what they identify as? Some have raised the idea of dividing athletes into three groups, namely women, men, and the other one that is open to other individuals exclusive from the former classifications. However, it remains a hard decision regarding what to be used as a criterion and where the threshold is, not to mention the discriminatory connotations of not qualifying as a man/woman. To be eligible to compete in the open category, transgender athletes may risk coming out as transgender while their safety is not guaranteed.

In November 2021, the IOC officials released a new guideline that discourages sports federations from using the levels of natural testosterone as the determining factor for the eligibility of transgender and intersex athletes. In this new guideline, these athletes are not required to lower their testosterone levels to be eligible to compete alongside other women. Admitting that there is “no scientific consensus on how testosterone affects performance across all sports,” and that the “role of testosterone” in “unfair

advantage” is “unclear,” the IOC has adopted a new approach that takes competitive advantages associated with biology as different from sport to sport.¹² To quote IOC President Thomas Bach, “there is no one-size-fits-all solution.” The responsibility for creating solutions of fair rules associated with gender eligibility is left to the global governing bodies of individual sports as the new guidelines will not be absolute rules.

In July 2022, Caster Semenya competed in the women's 5,000 meters at the world athletics championships in Eugene. She finished 13th out of 16 runners and failed to qualify for the 5,000m final. This is not an unexpected result as she is barred from her best event and other international running events from 400m to a mile, under the rules that demand her to take hormone-reducing drugs to enter these races.

Semenya has refused to take a hormone suppressant drug and insisted on competing as who she is. But it is not completely up to her to decide who she is. IAAF secretary general Pierre Weiss once commented on Semenya, “She is a woman, but maybe not 100 percent.”¹³ Here, it seems that “women” as a category is composed of some attributes to be compared within a continuous range. In other words, some women are more “womanly” than others.

It seems that there is a “normal” way of being a woman. Features that are deviant from the typical standard become “abnormalities” that are required to be modified through medical procedures. But this doesn’t apply to Michael Phelps’ case where his “abnormalities” are widely accepted. This difference has highlighted a long-existing ideology that deems ambiguities of intersex bodies as problematic in some respect. Atypical sex traits were treated as a medical problem and something to be cured. Many people with external sexual ambiguity received surgery to “normalize” their genital appearance. Now, we know a lot more about sex variation, yet we still find them enough to draw a conclusion on what is a “normal” body.

There are certainly no easy answers when it comes to who is “normal” enough to be permitted to compete alongside other athletes. The major takeaway is that it is nearly impossible to fit human diversity in bodies into two categories, male and female, both within and beyond sports.

¹² <https://sports.yahoo.com/olympics-transgender-athlete-rules-ioc-policy-framework-194620455.html>

¹³ <https://www.ocregister.com/2022/07/20/caster-semenya-unnoticed-at-world-championships/>

Womanhood

By Audrey Chung

*Stories from the hospital, as told
by a medical student*

It was a rainy Saturday morning and Lily (pseudonym), irritated and betrayed by every sensation in her body, flung the blankets off her writhing torso. She took yet another drag of the gas that was supposed to take her pain away – but it never worked. When later she goes into labour she would have cursed this faulty gas. But all throughout she would keep the gas mask plastered to her face. Her hair was damp in this cool, dim-lit room, and her face puffed, from drifting in and out of consciousness on this birthing bed since 5 a.m. this morning. She was transferred to the labor ward a few hours ago because her membrane ruptured, which was to say this 9-month infant

inside her womb was finally ready to be ejected. Lily had given birth before. She expected things to go smoothly.

When I first spoke to Lily she had her eyes glued shut and couldn't properly speak to me. I could not tell if it was because of the pain, or the analgesics mask she had cemented to her face, from which she was strenuously inhaling. I gave her a bit of time and went up to her again as I had to take her consent to allow me to assist the midwives with her birthing process.



This involved taking her and her baby's vitals every 30 minutes, performing vaginal examinations every few hours to check if her cervix was dilated enough for the baby to pass through, and finally, the moment I am most excited to be a part of – the birthing process. All the times I have witnessed vaginal deliveries I have been a mere observer, standing in a corner with my jaw dropped, as the midwives catch the newborns coming out of the frazzled and always sweaty mothers. This time, I thought to myself, I'd finally have the opportunity to hold the baby, be the person helping it manoeuvre its way into this world, and hold it as it adjusts to this new environment, catching its first breath, making its first cry.

Neither Lily nor I had our expectations met.

Around mid-afternoon I knew something was not right. Her cervical dilatation had remained static, which was to say that the baby's head is too big to descend. Because it was trapped by the pelvic bone, the cervix was not pushed open by the descending head, and so it remained dilated at 8cm for more than 5 hours. In a frenzy, 3 doctors came into the room, hovered at the corner of the room over her charts, and tried to get her to give birth nonetheless. When she couldn't, they told her she needed to do an emergency Caesarean section, a surgery to take the baby out from the uterus.

Lily couldn't take it any longer. In anguish she screamed "I don't want surgery!", while stomping her feet on the bed, kicking and grabbing wildly at the air.

When the doctors left the room she clutched my arm, knuckles paled. "I don't want surgery. I ate as much as I could during my pregnancy, I thought it'd be nutritious for the baby, I did not know this would happen", she proclaimed in one breath. I couldn't tell sweat from tears as beads ran down her forehead, eyes, and cheeks. I felt my own vision blurring as I whispered, "**This isn't your fault.**"



Childbirth is a process that has existed for millions of years, yet has evolved tremendously since. Humans, having evolved to walk on two legs and have bigger brains, developed a much larger head-to-pelvis ratio than any of our ape-cousins. In order for babies to wiggle their way through their mother's pelvis, they have to twist, rotate, and sometimes even require doctors to use instruments like forceps and vacuums to assist in their journey through the tiny space of their mother's pelvic bone. If you were to tell Lily this when she was in labor, she might just say she would much rather be born an ape than to go through this laborious process!

Nevertheless, Lily was one of the lucky ones. She consented to surgery and in no time, was rolled into the operating theater, where we cut open her uterus (by we I mean the obstetricians. I was standing to the side holding the bladder down with a retractor, snipping stitches, eagerly helping where possible). Soon after she held her baby boy in her arms, fatigued but still beaming at his tiny face. I stood there, struck with awe and admiration for the surgeons' efficiency, the midwives' professionalism, and of the abundance of support she had access to throughout her gruelling journey. In many countries, maternal and infant mortality remain very high. There are still grave magnitudes of inequalities across the globe. I can only imagine how the story would have unfolded if Lily went through labor in a less well-endowed facility.

There is so much that I've witnessed as a medical student

– intimate moments playing out in front of my eyes that I feel privileged and humbled to have been a part of. There were dramatic incidents, like when I had amniotic fluid squirted all over my gloved hand as the amniotic sac decided to rupture right when my extended fingers were about to examine the vagina and cervical dilatation. There were also moments where mothers like Lily exhibit such heartbreakingly vulnerable emotions that I feel as if my presence was intrusive. What I've come to understand though, is that having a child – the whole process, from trying to conceive, to birthing, to rearing and parenting – is so much more difficult than I ever could have imagined.

I will never forget Desiree (pseudonym) and her dead twins. She walked into the clinic, 14 weeks pregnant with twins, for a routine pregnancy appointment. She climbed agilely onto the bed, eyes wide and eager to see her babies on the monitor. The lights dimmed. Doctor Leung marched over and with a shrill rattle of eyelet hooks against cold railings, the curtains closed behind him. With a vigorous shake and a loud squirt the ultrasound gel was seated comfortably on the probe, then squished onto Desiree's belly. The black-and-white screen connected to the device flashed to life, and from it I could make out two tiny humans, curled and resting with a strange calmness next to each other. The image was zoomed in. Desiree lay still on the bed. Her babies even stiller inside her tummy. I froze as well, straining to search for the flickering heartbeats that were missing on the screen. Surely I must be wrong – I'm just a student. The hum of the air conditioner stretched eternally as I held my breath.

“There’s no heartbeat.” My chest tightened as the doctor confirmed my dreaded suspicions. “I’m so sorry, I’ve searched for quite a while. I would not say this lightly,” Doctor Leung added as he turned the screen towards Desiree, revealing the silent, lifeless figures. She clenched her fists, and without uttering a word, turned her head towards the grey screen that would steal away her hopes of mothering these new lives.

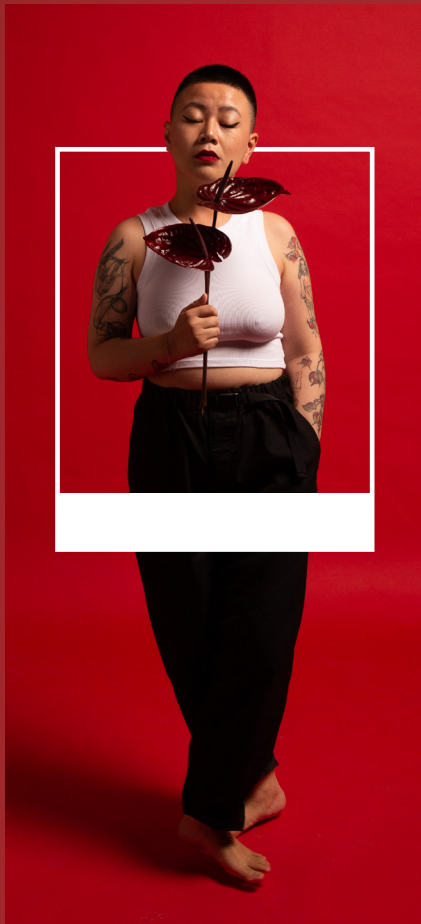
Desiree stepped out of the bed and back into her chair as the doctor returned to his seat. The flick of the light switch did little to expunge the somberness of the room. I hardly knew how to act. I wanted to hold her clenched fists and tell her I’m sorry, that it was going to be okay. Just a minute ago I was palpating her abdomen, feeling for her enlarged womb. Before that we were scheduling follow-up consultations for her twins and chatting about vitamins and supplements. At present, I caught a glimpse of the bright computer screen at the corner of my eye, and watched as the doctor cancelled all her pregnancy appointments. All I managed to whisper to her was, **“Are you okay?”**

Motherhood is a difficult task, and though it is not what defines a woman, it is indeed what many women will experience. What I did not know was that the path towards motherhood can be incredibly painful as well. Grief and motherhood never seemed so entwined. Grief for getting a permanent scar on your body for a caesarean section you did not want, grief for the sudden loss of children you were hopeful for, even grief for the woman you were before you were a mother. As a woman witnessing these events, I feel pain for the experiences they had to go through. I feel guilt as well, for not being aware and present for the many women in my life who have experienced similar traumatic events. My own mother had a miscarriage, but I was too young to understand what that must have been like. There are so many strong women around us: women who have gone through arduous experiences because we have a wom-

an's body; women who do not have a woman's body; women who choose to go through the pain of childbirth; women who choose the pain of abortion, of not becoming a mother, of giving their children up for adoption; women who adopt; women who cannot conceive; women who go through agonizing procedures to become pregnant; women not eligible for healthcare in our city and give birth “illegally”. Women whose stories deserve to be heard.

I’ve seen and discovered so much about other women’s experiences of womanhood throughout my rotation, and have had such profound experiences. But I’ve also felt awfully out of place at times. I look forward to the day where I will not only be learning medicine, but practicing medicine. For now, it brings me great joy to detail what I’ve experienced and share them with you. **I hope we can keep the conversation going about the many varied and untold experiences of womanhood.**

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LABELS AND LIMITS: AN INTERVIEW WITH DR SONIA WONG

By Govini Elvitigala

Dr Sonia Wong is a figure you are more likely to see than not at events hosted by and for minority and women's groups in Hong Kong. Be it the Gay Games, the Women's Festival, or organizations for migrant rights like Migrant's Pride, Bethune House, and One Billion Rising Hong Kong, Dr Wong is a visible presence. Talking about normality, we need to talk about those "normal" society excludes. So, we sought out this seeming symbol of such groups with questions and opinions.

"I was hoping you'd say you chose me for this interview because I don't look normal."

Dr Wong laughed. "Normal is boring, no one wants to be normal!" Well, yes, normally, who wants to be boring? But for the format of this interview, we ask her how Dr Sonia Wong — published poet, film critic, curator, activist, feminist, performer, artist, and lecturer at CUHK — came to be.

"I started out with a concern for gender. One way to understand the world and society we are living in is by defining people along the gender line. Women's access to resources and the possibilities of what they can and cannot do might be very different from other identities. Growing up, my experience with being female was very different from what was conventional at the time. My household was very blessed in that there were biases yes, but not differentiated treatment." She went on to describe the unconventionally strong and independent women of her family. "My family inspired me to be a person who is just out there to get whatever I want. My parents never demanded I studied a traditionally prestigious subject — if I liked it, worked hard, and excelled in it, they were okay. I only experienced gender roles in a significant way after entering university."

“I was puzzled because every action was coded. Why are we waiting for someone else to move the chairs for me when I am perfectly capable of doing all that on my own? I didn’t know why people were acting like that or looking at me like that. I didn’t even come out as a lesbian until I had a girlfriend because if I look and act like a woman, people assume I am a cisgender heterosexual woman. So, I waited and waited and waited, and then finally I could go around and tell people that I am a lesbian! But then, going into the lesbian community, I got the sad comment, ‘I wasn’t expecting that of you. You look very straight to us.’ I then became very interested in what constitutes a lesbian identity. Why did I think about same-sex attraction in a particular way — why did others in the community think about it in other ways? One thing led to another, and I got involved in everything!”

One of the very many things Dr Wong is involved in was the Mythmakers Spectrosynthesis III exhibition at Tai Kwun Contemporary. Spanning over 3 months, this exhibition showcased LGBTQ art of all kinds. There was a painting of a gay penguin couple.¹ A rainbow statue with

¹ *Khairullah Rahim - One Sweet Day (2015)*

names of transgender rights activists.² A video travel log of a same-sex couple in a homophobic country— ‘we mess up the other bed in the morning just in case.’³ This was an exhibition of emotions. A bittersweet nostalgia for me. Mild disgust for some people. Some of the exhibits were rather explicit, but the notion that queer people are ‘just like that’ permeates society. Queer people being called ‘inappropriate for children.’ Society that ‘accepts’ queer people as long as we do not ‘rub it in their face.’ It is a short tumble from this to booking a two-bed room for my partner and myself – having to mess up the other bed in the morning, just in case. Dr Wong gave the opening performance at and was the curator of this exhibition. So, we asked her how to best represent an identity we stand for. Was there a way for queer people to make ourselves more palatable to wider society?

“What identity do you think I stand for?” Dr Wong asked. The LGBTQ community and women’s groups we said. She was so involved with these identities, did that not make her a symbol of them?

² *Anne Samat - Conundrum Ka Sorga / To Heaven (2019)*

³ *Mondial (2010) (short film)*

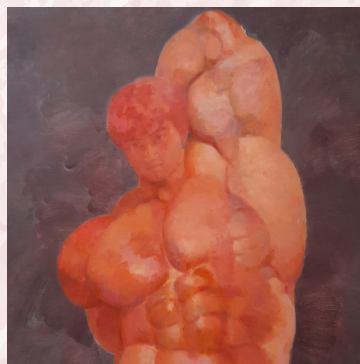
MYTH MAKERS—SPECTROSYNTHESIS III, TAI KWUN CONTEMPORARY, HONG KONG

(24 December 2022–10 April 2023)



/ Anne Samat

Conundrum Ka Sorga / To Heaven
(2019)



/ Shang Liang

The Good Hunter
(2019)



/ Xiyadie

Crying Fish
(2022)

“With a lot of the work that I do, I leverage my own, more privileged position to help the group break through certain things. But I don’t feel like I have any right of claiming that identity,” Dr Wong said, sharing her struggle with condensing her multidimensional self into the singular dimensions of her many pursuits. To academia, she was an activist. To writers, she was academia. To artists, she was a writer. A one-dimensional label often had little space for those who are both that and other things. You are required to look a certain way, be a certain way, and adhere strictly to set definitions – within the LGBTQ community and beyond.

Labels can be liberating. “If you are only one of a kind, it is very easy to feel like a monster,” Dr Sonia Wong said, encapsulating my own experiences. “But if you have two monsters, then to each other they stop being monsters.” I could not agree more — after going so long without any, mining for more and more specific labels to pinpoint who I am was exhilarating. “But if we are picking people up into smaller and smaller identities, it is easy to see labels as something essential and static. If you are a lesbian and I am a lesbian, our experiences are very different. I am not saying that vocabulary is not important, but we are very wrapped up in what differentiates us and not in what connects us.”

At one point it was **‘ace discourse’** – a discussion within the LGBTQ community if asexual people were oppressed enough to qualify as queer. At another, it was gatekeeping the label ‘lesbian’ to exclude women who were attracted to men. And at yet another, it was a discussion about transgender people being a threat to same-sex relationships. One subgroup targeted at a time. “It is not only among LGBTQ people but also between feminist groups and LGBTQ groups,” Dr Wong said. **“Crossing a lot of boundaries between fields, I see how oppression connects.”**

“Look deeper and there are always more similarities than differences,” she continued. “A lot of the time we are so wrapped up in our marginality that we do not see that other people, because of other reasons, are suffering from similar things. That we are also actively oppressing sometimes without knowing.” To me, her words screamed how transgender people were being targeted by some feminist groups even though both were fighting for the common goal of bodily autonomy. And even among those who do support transgender people’s right to life, some say there should be limits to our demands. She/her. He/him. These are the norm. They/them is pushing it – it really taxes their grammar to use these pronouns apparently. Ze/hir, fae/faer, and other neopronouns are completely ridiculed. Wider society is willing to ‘accept’ but within limits —bringing us back to the question, how could the LGBTQ community best represent itself?

“Why is something universal and why is something belonging only to a certain identity? Is LGBTQ art still good art? Are they human art? Do you call something hanging in the Louvre white male art? Why do we read it through that lens? On one hand, it highlights how visibility is important and that you know what informs their creation because artistic practices do not come from a vacuum.”

“But on the other hand, I think that good art and good work speak to people in different ways. It is not only your experience being LGBTQ but also the feeling of being uncomfortable in your own body – that is something everyone can relate to.”

“No one is truly comfortable in their own body — even you who think you are normal and inhabit a body that does not give you dysphoria. No one is comfortable in their own body because we have been taught to be ashamed. There is so much guilt and fear and shame inside all of us. We are trained not to let it come out, trained not

to pay attention to it. Trained not to talk about it." People being shamed for their bodies, we see this all around us, don't we? Impressionable young minds being told that they do not act feminine enough, do not look attractive enough, and that maybe losing some weight would help. Children being caged by the label of "girl" and "boy." People constrained by socially accepted labels – masculine man, feminine woman, heterosexual, working mom, stay-at-home dad. Men who need to cry but cannot. Dr Wong gave as an example. "If you have seen that vulnerability, you realize that it is not that different from someone else. For cis people to understand trans people, think about how uncomfortable you are in your own body." Could such understanding truly be the way to circumvent, if not surmount, bigotry against trans people and the larger queer community?

"People think they are the normal majority. And they are so used to thinking about themselves as normal that they never have room to think about themselves as not being that, so diversity and inclusion are seen as things that they have to do especially for those who are the minority, with the minority being understood as a set identity. There is no motivation for people to try to make life easier for minorities. Actually, it is not only for them, but it is also for you."

"Being a minority is not a centralized identity. It is a situation that you are in very much dependent on the context. All of us could be in that position at some time. Some more frequently than others, more persistently than others, but if you know that you could be in that sometimes as well, then you should probably start acting in ways that it is nicer to other human beings. Because you do not want to be in that position and suffer from it when other people are being completely unsympathetic." I could understand this. Finding out that I was queer made this shifting minority identity a reality for me. But most of society would never be exposed to such a situation. Right?

"I am a very short person. I rarely find a chair I can sit on and have my feet touch the ground," Dr Wong revealed to my shock – I had never considered that. "That gives me perspective of what being a minority feels like. There is an environment or a situation where you do not feel welcome. And that happens to me with every other chair that I sit on. Buses. Classrooms. Auditoriums. Airplanes. Cinemas. Concert halls. Every other chair. Are there moments like these for you? Even for those of you who think that you are the normal majority, and live your life like you are, do you run into these situations where you feel like you are out of place and not welcome? Remember that feeling." Could empathy really be stronger than bigotry? It was hard to believe.

"The moment I realized I was human, that we are all in this humanness together, was in 2014 when I was just beginning to be a tutor. I saw my students at the protest site in Admiralty. I did not know what to do. In the face of that we are connected in our vulnerability and humanness, and I am not a teacher, and you are not a student. We are all in this broken, confusing chaos together. I remember that feeling. We are all just human and that is okay."

"Be yourself, not for the sake of changing the world, but because it just feels good. Then whatever identity they think you represent stops being an idea and it becomes human. My mom showed up at the queer graduation I organized and was the stand-in parent for all my queer students. And they stopped being LGBTQ people and became people with names who called her on Chinese New Year. People are not born to be discriminatory. It's just that they don't know. All the people we think are normal are not normal in so many ways. Normality is more like a collective illusion that no one actually is. If they know, if we give them an opportunity to know, they can choose to treat both those they see as normal and not normal as fellow humans. It would be a much better world though if people looked at someone without judging them as normal or not normal."

STAIRCASE: THE DESCENT FROM THE EVERYDAY TO THE UNTHINKABLE

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POWER OF PEOPLE
மக்கள் சக்தி



A reflection made starker by transition from being part of the majority to being part of a minority.

By Govini Elvitigala

*Agam hame beda kala
Jathiwada janitha kala
Dahas gannan thala pela
Api hamoma dekada kala*

*Sinhala Tamil Muslim api
Aka ammage daruwo thamai
Jathiwade walapallata
Yawana akkath wadak thamai*

*Divided all the religions
Spread racism
Crushing thousands
Split us all apart*

*We Sinhalese, Tamils, and Muslims
We are one mother's children
Destroying racism
Is a feat in itself*

One of the mantras used at the 2022 protests in Sri Lanka.

Note to the reader: They/them is a gender-neutral pronoun. I will refer to people I do not know the gender of by these pronouns as a small gesture of inclusivity.

1. Artwork of 7 ordinary looking people (farmers, office workers etc.) using a red rope to pull down giant pillars with faces of powerful politicians attached. The red rope is reminiscent of the red "satake" — a piece of cloth said politicians use to display power. "Power of the people" is written above the 7 ordinary figures in Sinhala, English and Tamil.

I had spent the night shivering on an airport bench — a 20-hour layover. Fifteen hours in, two security officers demanded my ID. Some twenty people were doing the same thing I was. But somehow, I was the only person the officers approached. I had brushed the incident off until recently when a speaker at a workshop shared how a similar ID check happened here in Hong Kong. The officers asked for her ID, not her friend's, just hers.

The only identifiable difference between everyone else and me, between her friend and her?

Skin colour:

One of the other students at the workshop said it was typical for the police to check IDs. They said she ought to have had her ID on her. The glaringly obvious point that only the dark-skinned person had her ID checked had not occurred to them — not to them, not to anyone else in the group. No harm done after all. The officers left the speaker alone once she said she was a student; the same happened to me. No harm done. Right?

I come from an island in the Indian Ocean. International media had a field day when our peaceful protests were made violent, so maybe you have heard of us. I come from Sri Lanka. Being Sinhalese by ethnicity, I am a minority in Hong Kong but part of the majority back home. Tamil people are a minority there, the language being the main difference between the groups. Interestingly, when you are privileged, you do not know that you are.

I used to go into Tamil shops and rattle off in Sinhala without thinking about why I expected them to understand Sinhala when I did not understand Tamil. *Why should minorities make such allowances for the majority?* I once plopped down next to a fellow protester, wrongly assumed they were Sinhalese, and then proceeded to be shocked when they talked about the discrimination they faced daily in our religious hometown. How many times have people correctly assumed who and what you are — are you normal in your society? And I only learnt of the 2009 genocide of Tamil people at the end of the civil war thirteen years after it happened when nationwide protests finally pulled me out of the mass media propaganda machine.



*Plastic bottle sculpture: Sculpture at main protest site (Gal-
le Face). Constructed of plastic bottles collected off the nearby
beach, it depicts a middle finger.*

The 2022 protests unearthed skeletons. After the thieving government pushed the country into the pit of debt and poverty years in the making, peaceful protests sprang up across the country. Through them, within them, blossomed inclusion. For people wronged by the government. For those with a voice too soft to be heard. For minorities. For the past 12 years, the Tamil community memorialized the 2009 Genocide at the site of the genocide while the majority of the country celebrated the end of the war and the victorious army. In 2022, for the very first time, they held an annual memorial service in the protest sites at the heart of our most populous cities.



A young woman with a tray of flowers is seen placing flowers on a shrine. This depicts the first time the 2009 genocide was memorialized in Sri Lanka's second largest city. The photographer was not able to witness the memorialization in the largest city.

I mentioned this memorial in the article.



Torn and repaired: Artwork of a young girl clutching Sri Lanka and looking off to a side with a fearful look. There are tears visible on the artwork, crudely stitched over. This art was displayed at the protest site and slashed by thugs who attacked the site. It was stitched back by the first people to get there after the attack.

People listened when the mothers of the Disappeared talked about their pain. Those families had been protesting too and counting the length of the 2022 protests (“50 days, 100 days, goal accomplished! — we overthrew the corrupt president!”), finally brought attention to their 2000-day-long quest for jus-

The descent from language to genocide. Did my blindness to the seemingly minor language issue make me equally blind to war crimes? Does brushing off racial profiling by authority figures allow discrimination to proliferate?

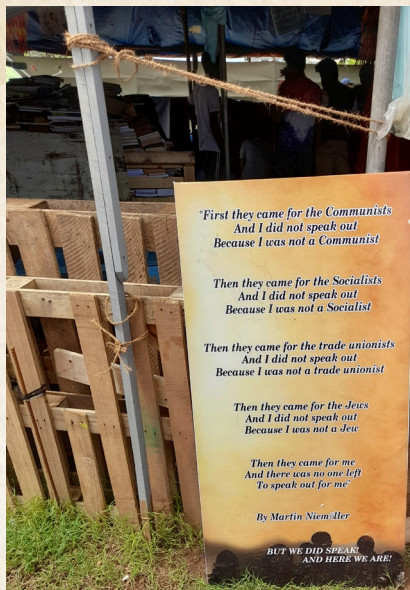
I see it as a staircase. Small, everyday things are easy to brush off. The minority is just one step below the majority — all part of

the minority experience, nothing worthy of complaint. We do not speak the same language, but that is not a problem because they ought to learn mine — it is more valuable than their own when living here!

Then something else happens — now it is a two-step difference. Now, they are not allowed to have shops in this area.

But a two-step difference is

just one step lower than before. They already experience similar things — this slightly worse thing does not matter. It is just a natural progression from the previous step. Do you see where I am going with this? Step by step. Then a tumble down the stairs. Discrimination. A country split in two. A war. Then a hidden genocide.



Library entrance: A printed sign with a poem in front of the main protest site library (the books were all donations). "Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out for me."



Slipper crushing gas canister: The commoner's ratty slipper crushes the politician's tear gas canister underfoot. The sculpture appears to be made of old metal. It appeared at Galle Face (the main protest site) after tear gas was used on ordinary people countless times in an attempt to stop the protests.

It is easy to let things that do not affect you go unnoticed. Propaganda brainwashed most of my country, hiding the reality of the war behind nationalistic pride. And despite sensing the stench of rot, I did not bother investigating. I guess it is easier to let the decay stay under the rug.



Black cross: A wooden cross with a black flag tied on is lifted up against a stormy sky. A Sri Lankan flag is seen being waved to a side. An image from the 2021 memorial for the Easter Sunday church/ hotel bomb attacks 21-04-2019.

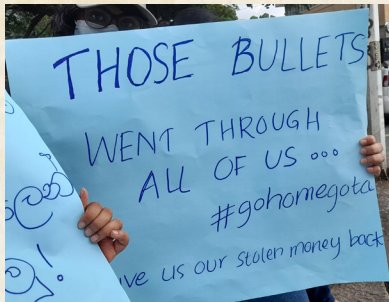


We will remember: A placard reading “We will remember” in all caps with the date of Easter Sunday church/ hotel bomb attacks 21-04-2019 written above it.

Christians are also a minority community so I wanted to explicitly mention them in the article.

On every post on racism and violence against Tamil communities by @history_lka, an Instagram account posting about Sri Lankan history, comments are about not raising racial tensions and letting bygones be bygones. But these are not crimes of the past — the criminals are still at large. There has been no justice. But since the majority is visibly unaffected, it is brushed off and swept under a rug even as it decays away the very ground we stand on.

Sri Lanka still has a long way to go. *My own redemption begins with: Step-by-Step Tamil: Second Language (Beginner).*



Those bullets went through all of us: A light blue placard with "those bullets went through all of us" written in dark blue. This was at a protest following the shooting and killing of a fellow protester.



Play What justice could be: One of the actors from a play put up at the protests — the actor depicts someone from the "ruling" family as shown through the red "satake" around his neck. There is a wound on his head and his clothes are torn in line with the play about corrupt politicians facing justice in hell. The ending of this play depicted justice simply as a return of the stolen money, no physical punishment involved — plot twist.



We don't fear bullets: Artwork of a woman with her palm out facing us. A crowd is seen behind her, also with their palms up and facing us. These palms had been drawn using actual handprints. At the bottom of the artwork, guns are depicted, apparently firing at the people. In the middle is a large text in sinhala reading "we don't fear bullets."



