



# VOICES

Fall 2016

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# A Pinch of Sweetness

Yufei Qu

For as long as I could remember, I had never seen real snow in my hometown. No matter how much I dreamed of the soft touch every winter, all I could recall was the dull sting when I was holding an icicle. Whenever I heard my parents talking about past winters with snow, I always wished what happened back then would happen again this year. Maybe because my curiosity about snow was too obvious to ignore, my parents decided to take a trip to the village closest to the northern border of China, which people called the Snow Village.

We decided to go in early February, when supposedly the coldest days have already passed but all the activities were still open. When I stepped out of the airport terminal, however, the cold wind made me suspect that we instead caught up with the coldest time of the year. We were not even close to the Snow Village, but the frozen air was already poking my face without any mercy; and by sneaking into my sleeves, the air crawled up along my arms and gave me a sharp icy touch. I shivered as I realized my jacket was not thick enough, and I felt shame as I recalled my complaining a while ago about wearing something this heavy. And my legs, although covered with two layers, still felt numb when I walked. Although I was shocked to be hit by the severe weather, my excitement about seeing whiteness along the road was feverish as we hurried to the hotel. As soon as the door was shut behind me, the warmth from the heat inside embraced me and enabled me to take control of my body parts again.

The hotel we settled in was built as similar to the traditional houses of the region as possible, which have

unique heating features. When the heater was not yet invented, people were accustomed to sleeping on a bed made of bricks called “Kang.” It was built like a stove, hollow with an opening on the side and a vent connected to a chimney. People could add wood to the opening where it was burned, but the smoke would go out through the chimney: the bed can therefore be gradually heated and kept warm. People would then put slate on top before adding a mattress, sometimes putting extra layers to make it softer.

Since I grew up in the south, I was amazed by everything I had seen so far. I saw a room with a Kang, but it was only for display because of its rarer use nowadays. But when I saw the room, I could imagine hearing the sound from the sparking wood, laying on the warm bed, and watching the snow falling outside—that was my fantasy for winter.

We loaded into the tour bus the next day in the early morning, prepared for a long drive heading north. Our tour guide was a young local man, short-haired and energy-charged, who lived in the Snow Village. As we hit the road, he started to talk about rules in the village. Some of them were standard, such as do not throw garbage on the ground. Others sounded unique, such as do not go into some special yards because the beautiful natural outdoor snow scenes were protected. “Pay attention,” he warned as he shook his finger in the air, “you might be charged quite a bit if you are not careful with your steps.” When he was about to sit down, something else must have suddenly come to his mind. “Oh, one more thing. Do not dig out food that was buried in the snow. I know it sounds funny, but,

hey, you know what, it might be a villager’s storage. We are blessed to have a huge natural refrigerator.” Someone chuckled, followed by some small talk here and there. A girl older than myself, sitting somewhere behind me, suddenly raised her voice as she spoke of a famous Chinese movie scene that had been captured in the village. I soon turned my attention to the view outside the window, as I was fascinated at how delicately the snow decorated the branches.

When we got off the bus, the air was almost frozen. Although I was slowly getting used to it, I was not getting much feedback from my senses: the icy air scratched through my nose and made me unwilling to inhale. I completely lost my sense of smell after a few minutes. The white clouds made from my breath caused little pieces of ice to congeal on my eyelashes, which made them stick together and took away some of my vision. Sometimes when my nose could not bear the roughness of the air anymore, I had to breathe through my mouth. It felt like I was drinking a full cup of refrigerated water, which evaporated as soon as it touched my tongue, though the coolness remained.

My curiosity did not allow me to forget to look for food in the snow. But the young tour guide, preventing me from searching too deeply, pointed out an outdoor market ahead of us set up by the villagers and opened to visitors. “If you want to try something special here, like the villager’s food storage I mentioned on the bus,” he smiled and showed the direction again, “that’s the place to get it. I recommend frozen fruits, one-hundred-percent natural. My favorite.”

Frozen fruits? I turned and looked at my mom who was standing beside me. She smiled, so we started walking. There were not many choices, considering the time of the year. But they had what I loved the most: persimmons. It is a type of fruit that looks similar to a tomato but has a honeyed taste. Its sweetness is similar to an over-ripe cantaloupe, but there is a tangy aftertaste. Its texture, on the other hand, is similar to dates but more melted. It’s smooth, soft and tender, and for this reason I had trouble when I ate one for the first time, because it would not stay in shape while I tried to peel off the skin. Compared to a fresh persimmon, dried persimmons are more commonly seen in the market; they are much more sweet and become denser, even a little sticky. The dried and frozen ones were what we found in the market. I was very excited but also patient while checking different tables that had them,

comparing prices and how they looked. I almost changed my mind on buying persimmons when I saw some other frozen fruit such as pears, my second favorite, because they were all tempting to me. After wandering around in the market for a while, I finally went back to one of the tables that seemed to have the best persimmons: the color looked good, not too dried, and lots of people were buying. When my mom and I walked to where we were supposed to meet as a group, I saw the movie girl I heard on the bus. She seemed a little annoyed, making small impatient movements with her feet and talking to a group of other girls. “Uh, how long do we have to stand here? Why would anyone buy weird frozen fruit anyways? Who would eat that?”

I would, I answered silently when I walked by her and exchanged a glance with my mom.

I tried my first bite after we found a good spot to stand. It was that familiar sweetness. “Do you like it?” My mom asked. “Um... It’s good, very special. Here, try a bite. I think it’s not as sweet though.” The texture was different. Instead of the creamy smoothness it had mixed with poking ice crystals, leaving the tongue to grind. The water that was absorbed while the fruit was buried blended with its natural richness, which diluted its flavor. At first, I didn’t like it as much as I thought I would, but later I started to appreciate it in another way. It was closer to the flavor of a persimmon smoothie, if such a thing exists, but made with double the amount of ice.

We needed to walk through the village in order to start our main activity of the day: climbing. The protected snow scenes in the village were gorgeous. The snow piled on the roof looked like soft white pillows, puffy and adorable. Sometimes I thought about the snow as descending clouds, not only because they are similar in color and shape, but also because snow comes from the sky. Our young tour guide led the way to the mountains, and after he took a short cut between the villagers’ houses, we kept walking for a while until we reached our destination.

We were standing near the entry of a forest—a blend of some dark ink green, some pale wooden gray, and some bright feather white. I saw multiple lines of footprints heading up along a comparably clear path between tree trunks, which had much shallower snow and vague footsteps maybe because of the tourist season. But even so, it didn’t seem easy to walk on.

The weather was cruel. We were slowly beaten up by the wind as we were climbing higher and higher. Panting



and sniffing, I tried to find a good place to step. I had to pull my legs out a couple of times as I accidentally strode into two-foot-deep snow, and I struggled, then laughed. I loved the surprising loss of balance when I sank into the cotton-looking softness, and for some reason, I thought it would be hilarious if I got stuck in the snow forever. Luckily the young tour guide stayed close by and helped me, maybe concerned that I was the youngest one in the group.

"There is something you should try," he turned to me and said with a mysterious tone while catching his breath, "Some people don't believe me, but when we approach the top, the snow on the branches is a little sweet."

"Is it really?" I raised my voice. My eyes glowed when I looked at the trees around me again, especially the ones that were further up the hill. When I saw the wooden shanty where we were supposed to rest, I was excited and focused on picking the best tree ever to try. I stood in front of one of the trees, hesitated, switched to another one. I tried to seek some advice from my parents, but the answer I got back was not very helpful: whichever should be good but I couldn't have too much. I wandered around near the shanty and looked at different types of trees. Trying to reach as high as possible to the branch, I finally decided to pinch a small amount of snow, and dropped it into my mouth.

There was a light touch on my tongue, disappearing in an instant. Then, there remained the delicate sweetness—slight, but precious. It was neither as stale as artificial sweetening nor as thick as powdered sugar. It was not the

persimmon's honeyed taste either. It was similar to the natural sweetness in the water from a pure and clear stream, but with a tiny amount of bitterness, which comes from the woods. I suddenly realized how specific and well-mixed a taste could be; I was thankful that I could concentrate on my sense of taste because of the loss of other senses.

After a blink, the sweetness was gone. My parents stopped my attempt to reach the branches again, as they knew I would probably have the snow as a meal. I told everyone that it was true, the snow was sweet.

"Nah, I don't think so." The movie girl shook her head as I talked. She folded her arms tighter and then turned to her friends, "It's deadly cold out here, can we go?"

When I told my tour guide though, he responded with a big smile. "Glad you tried it!" he patted off the snow stuck on his shoulder, "sometimes people don't want to taste it, or they just can't taste it."

On our way back, I was crazily happy about rolling down the hill with feet of real snow under me. I felt like I was rolling on a huge padded woolen blanket, except it wasn't warm. It was a challenge to avoid bumping into trees, but I didn't care. I knew that it might not be a good idea to jump out when the snow buried my leg up to my thigh, but I tried, and the result was I got stuck again. In the end, although I could still walk normally, I could not feel if I was still wearing my boots. However, I felt more than happy and satisfied. That was my very first time seeing real snow, and my very first time knowing that pinch of sweetness. ✍️

# B

## Anonymous

**B**eneath the moon, I lay on the park bench, feeling mischievous but still very certain of who we were. Just friends, thirteen years strong. Closeness intact. Succumbing to his eyes, but resisting the rest. This wasn't strictly passion. I craved his soul more than his body. As our lips met my senses exploded with years of growth and change and wonder, but I feared the shift. We were in an open space, vulnerable, alive. Both physically and otherwise. I stopped it there. He could have insisted as they always do. I could have collapsed as I always do. But our history doesn't push. It doesn't urge or force. As such, my boundaries have grown slowly but organically toward him. No further that night though. "The high school sweetheart who never was," he calls me. I can still see his face above me.

We were supposed to talk about it at the bar the next weekend. Confused and complicated, but still in one piece. As yet unadulterated. I hoped to find us there. "Us." Instead, we found fingertips. And other tips. Wandering eyes and wandering hands. A type of foreplay that neglected the original reason for being there. History dictates that we would find ourselves in a bed, gazing into each other's eyes, fingertips grazing over soft skin, inspecting and exploring with virgin lips, free of intoxication. Bodies close, hearts closer. But nothing further. History has been wrong before.

We departed from the bar, leaving behind empty glasses and thirteen years of tension, both intellectual

and sexual. Entering into a tiny room in a familiar house as unfamiliar people. I think we believed that we were picking up after our abbreviated time under the moon. But having seen each other through life and death and everything in between, we rushed into un-nurtured passion. Sloppy, drunken bodies collapsing on the bed. It felt... artificial. I morphed from lover to performer. I searched for my heart in his eyes, while unskillfully executing these acts, and unsuccessfully finding it. "I don't feel as close," he said. Oh, there it is. The heart. It was unfamiliar there, by the door. Our closeness shifting, not dying, as he explained, but shifting none the less. "Come to New York because I love you."

So I went to New York and he told me he didn't love me anymore. This was not a pain I consented to. Paid for with our years. I receive his beautiful words on a tiny screen as I exit the plane: "Can't wait to see you create your own world. I'll write you soon." I have been discarded. I check the mail daily, but I swear on his love I'm not waiting. Alone in my room now I trace over the marks of an unforeseen memory. Eyes closed, a surge through my heart, imagining things that never were. Things that I yearned for and still do. I rewrite this part with fingers on my own skin. His photograph supplementing a new narrative. I hate how the camera steals the blue from his eyes. This is how you lose your best friend: fall in love together. Fall in love with the high school sweetheart who never was. ✍️

# Untitled

Anonymous

The bittersweet stench of blood fills my nostrils as I glare with deadened eyes at the sight in front of me. The knife lies by my blood-soaked leg, blade winking wickedly in the light. And a few feet from it sits the girl. Her head hangs low and her shoulders slump forward but I can see her dark eyes peering at me through stringy hair. I see them narrow as she watches me watch her. Red droplets ooze from swollen cuts on her arms like dying worms leaving a crimson trail on her skin before seeping into the ground. I squeeze my eyes shut, remembering the way it felt. The way her smooth skin split so easily at the knife's cool touch, like cutting through butter. I hear again the whimper that escaped her lips and I taste the pain as I recall how she forced down her cries, shoving the feelings down her throat. I open my eyes to find salty tears blurring my vision.

She didn't even put up a fight. How pathetic. What a waste of space, of time, of breath. Her eyes pour freely now. 'Worthless.' Sticky eyelashes dripping. 'Stupid.' Wet, hot cheeks turning pink. 'Ugly.' A slither of snot starts to collect on her upper lip, which quivers uncontrollably. 'Annoying.' Loud sobs rack her body, each one wrenching itself from somewhere deep inside. 'Boring.' She falls forward. 'Useless.' Nails dig into the ground. 'Unlovable.' She grips her hair. 'Disappointing.' Curled into a ball. 'Freak.' Rocking back and forth. 'Worthless.' She lies there, heavy shudders shaking through her. She deserves it. She asked for this. She did it to herself. She became so broken that all she can do now is break. She makes everything worse. She adds nothing good to this world; she's better off dead. Everyone would be better off.

She sits again and stares emptily back at me, like some old, forgotten rag doll. I feel the sizzling, seething grip of hate as I look at how weak and pathetic she is. But I didn't make her like this. I didn't even used to hate her like this. It was others who broke her, others who drained the light from her eyes. And then they cut her with words sharper than a knife. I let them. I stood by and watched them laugh shrill, piercing laughs. They were hyenas, jeering at their first victim. A pack of vicious wolves snarling at a defenseless rabbit. They told her she was worthless and eventually I realized they were right. I joined in and finally I understood.

Rage floods through me while I relive it all. Hurt stabs at every part of me. The pain of every emotion courses through my veins. I cover my ears trying to block out the sound of their harsh laughs and quietly deafening voices and I try to forget how no one cared.

My fingers are gripping the handle of the knife. It seems to pulse, eagerly awaiting any destruction it can cause. I stare once again at the girl. "I hate you!" I spit. Hurling the knife at the space between us, I watch as the mirror shatters. The shards fall fast, showering the dirty carpet and ploughing into my skin. I stand up. Time to put the bandages on.

I tend to the cuts quickly, throw on fresh clothes that don't stink of sweat and grab some money. I have no idea where to buy a mirror but I get ready to leave anyway—even just to breath some clean air. I catch a glimpse of her in the hallway before I go. I turn and force down the feeling. Down my throat, which is raw from crying, down where no one can see. We smile, each playing puppet to the other's master, hiding the pain. I force it down again and I leave. ✍️

# Phage's Affair

Ana Laura Grazziotin

You're already familiar with prokaryotes, Bacteria and Archaea that live everywhere. Now pay attention and take your notes, 'cause this is the story of their virus 'affair':

Once upon a time...

In a forgotten part of the globe, unforeseen viruses make their home, take advantage of unwary microbes, and shape our planet Earth's biome.

In this microbial driven world, viruses play good and bad guys, whose mission has to be unfurled to reveal the strategies they apply.

When prokaryotes are the hosts, their viruses are named phages. Their association, first and foremost, leads to host death or a viral latent stage.

A host population dynamically changes if a lytic life cycle takes over the cell, and a cellular gene may be rearranged from virus to new host where it could dwell.

Phages integrate into the host for generations when the established life cycle is lysogenic. Expressed viral genes may bring innovation, giving the host a phenotype more pathogenic.

Given this intimate obligatory relationship, phages abound where their hosts exist. Estimated 10 phages per cell for courtship, depending on the environment in which they subsist.

Countless interactions between these mates have promoted these partners' coevolution: genetic mosaicism, adaptation – diverse fates, for every 'acquired' surprise, a new solution.

Thus, cells developed adaptive immunity. CRISPR systems interfering with invaders, but some phages found an escape opportunity. Above all, this is nature! A silent wise trader.

This is just a small piece of a fascinating story, from which hidden affairs are yet to be revealed. Exciting times for biologists in the laboratory, seeking for surprising phages in this field.



# DuPage County

Katherine Hauck

There's an old adage in Kentucky that you can always tell the wealth of the farm by the fences. They can either be three-board, four-board, or five-board, double or single. Because of this, many farms will put up double five-board fencing in the front and leave the three-board fencing for the back. Double fencing means that, in addition to weed-wacking around each fence post, someone has to weed-wack the two-foot space between the two fences, all the miles of it. Oldham has five-board double fencing throughout.

If you have never been to or driven by a farm, it may be difficult to tell you what one is like. The first thing to know about the thing is the size. In Kentucky, one farm may stretch all the way to the horizon. They seem even bigger than they are because they are largely unbroken green, exquisitely kept. In fact, the word farm itself may be misleading, if you think of a place with bare dirt and chickens. But farms are what they are called. In practice, no one calls them stables unless they are trying to be snooty.

The next thing to know about these farms is that they have that curious beauty of something high-quality made to be used for many years. For that is another thing about these farms: one does not build a farm; one inherits it. The land is old. It has been the home of horses for many years, and it knows how to do it.

To imagine Oldham, don't start with a farm. Start by imagining a beautiful old house in the country, soft white, with a huge porch that wraps around three sides and a

gazebo on one corner. The ceiling of the gazebo is painted light blue with clouds. After dinner, you can lay on your back with your ankles crossed and gaze up at the roof of the world. Your grandmother and her aunt painted it in the hot, sultry summer of 1948.

Inside the house, the ceilings are high, the windows large, and the crown molding nine inches wide. The house was originally built for ten children. Houses like this have a real library, the likes of which you rarely see in the world today, and Oldham does not disappoint: leather-bound Durants and *The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds* and Ingrid Klimpke's biography rub elbows with your mother's college chemistry textbooks and the collected works of Lewis Carroll. Cut geodes serve as bookends. There's a marble fireplace that burns real wood, and the wood floor around it has a few scorch marks. Over the fireplace hangs a painting of your mother as a young woman, dressed in a fox hunting costume. A greyhound sleeps in one of the leather chairs and drools on the arm.

Oldham is a house with a sundial. It peeks through the film of little button roses, and its face is a blue and gold engraving of a horse. There are ribbons and silver cups and engraved plates and trophies stacked idly all around the house. The farm office is just off the kitchen: both rooms are filled with farm paperwork. Clean laundry is piled all about upstairs, and a saddle pad is hanging over the back of one of the kitchen chairs. The kitchen counter is, of



course, cluttered—items on it include: the maintenance record for the big farm tractor; a cold tea in a mug with the Oldham logo (a yellow horse with its head turned to face you on a red background) on it; the lesson schedules for that week and the previous week; three pencils, one broken; a CD with the handwritten words "A. Oldham, Cully PSG Freestyle 2012"; one winter glove; spare parts for the riding lawnmower; a red Patagonia jacket; two time stubs (one bearing the name *Fausto L* with a smiley face and one reading *Janye* and no smiley face); a USDF baseball cap; a half-opened shipping box of Cosequin tubs; and the odd piece of hay. There's a bit in the state-of-the-art dishwasher. Roses from the garden sit in a vase on the kitchen table, and the vase itself is a solid silver two-handled trophy engraved with the words "1922 Jupiter Cup" in curling, tarnished script.

Outside, though, is the real magic. Even before you get to the farm itself, the gardens around the house are extensive. Oldham is home the sort of trees you can't buy, only wait for them to grow that old. Next to the house is a vegetable garden with twelve beds: six of peas, one of asparagus and spinach, two of beans, and three of tomatoes. There's a small greenish lake behind the house with a dock and a raft; a willow tree weeps over it. In the spring, thousands of tadpoles hatch in that lake, only to be eaten up by the goldfish. On the other side of the lake is the tree that holds the treehouse. Beyond that is a small orchard and a patio of sun-warmed, mossy bricks, which is surrounded by lilacs, yarrow, forsythia, tulips, goldenrod, cornflowers, and a rose trellis arbor over the entrance. In the

very back is a tiny cemetery with four crumbling gravestones, little purple flowers growing hopefully up between, pushing the headstones over: *Aisling Montgomery Oldham, 1813–1877, wife and mother, love never forgotten; Blake Oldham, 1809–1861; Tristan Oldham III, 1834–1863; Mary Oldham Peabody, 1874–1940, We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed.*

In front of the house, stone steps are set into the hills, and peonies and snowball bushes are planted around the porch. There's a rope hammock strung between two spruce trees each over a hundred feet tall. The aged branches drip nearly to the ground in

some places, creating a little cocoon around the hammock. Farther down is a circular garden with a horse fountain in the middle and wooden bench set well into the flowers: lilies, iris, echinacea, black-eyed Susans, hyacinths, and poppies—so many colors and textures overlapping that your eye can't settle. On another spruce hang wind chimes: not those short, tinkle-y ones, but the full-bodied ones that are four feet long. There's a whole field of daylilies on the path to the farm. The grass is always a bit too long, and the gardens a bit messy and never free of weeds, though never overflowing, either. They look lived in. They are lived in.

The farm itself consists of five small barns, three large arenas, and more land than you can see from any one spot. The five barns, each painted red and white with Dutch doors, house approximately eight horses each. Each has a radio in it, and each is set to play a different sort of music based on the clients that live there: classical in the Arena Barn, jazz in the Silo Barn, pop in the New Barn, and two different country stations, one for the Adult Barn and one for the Pony Barn. The chalkboards on each of the horse's stalls to indicate their feed are always out of date; the manure dump is covered by a trellis with flowers growing on it (courtesy of the employee named Fausto L); most of the stalls are different sizes; everyone is constantly stealing each other's leadropes; ribbons are tacked up on stall doors and then never bothered to be taken down, so they collect dust and get chewed on by mice; there's a rat snake named Hector (name courtesy of Fausto L, as well) that lives under Houdini's stall in the Silo Barn and eats the mice.

This is DuPage County, where the land dwarfs the people. 

# Cry of the Automaton

Andrea Caceres

The last one flew away, liberated like a child's balloon in summer's haste,  
so I decided to make a new one.  
It was easy, trimming feathers off of the past one's remains,  
gluing each moment together with a sloppy hope.

But as I paused to hear its song, it let out a staggered cry.  
Its cogs crusted with dried grease.  
Every attempt at kindness and goodwill, every gift, every bribe,  
it scrambled to farthest edge and trembled.  
I grabbed some twine in desperation and  
wrapped it tightly around its foot as its wings flapped frantically.  
I dissected its vocal cords, filed them and threaded them to  
register the perfect song I once heard.

I ignored the burning song because it warmed me like a blanket.  
I kept fixing and building the little thing.  
Precise stitches into and out of the cracked canvas that became its skin.  
Masterful, ugly, pure, dirty. I was committed.  
Tweezers plucked out the mold that started growing between its tufts of feathers,  
replaced mechanical minutia with biological scraps.  
Perhaps that would make it sing the beautiful song I once heard  
With every procedure the cry became a little less energetic, a little less willful.

It endured this pain as it changed a lyric or two, seeking the less painful note.  
How alluring the process was.  
Days blended seamlessly as the fixation devoured my being.  
Each tool replaced, every method erased as years slipped through my skin.  
I realized that my life had passed, seeing the suffering of my trembling creation.  
Its ivory bones now yellow, stuck ostentatiously through sunken, putrid skin,  
I decided to open the door and

it left me.

It teetered around clumsily, the crippled, dirty thing  
frantically searching for an exit.  
As it flew unevenly on its better wing,  
it reached the ledge and looked at me.  
Its eyes hollow little bullet holes,  
it flew off without a sound.  
I remained staring where it vanished in the sky,  
resenting what it stole from me.



# Echio

Pearl Tate



**E**chio is a city that forces knowledge onto its townspeople. Hidden in the hills of a forest no one knows exists, live the people of Echio, alone in their constant state of knowing. At the end of each day, the townspeople are taken over by an unseen force and stopped completely. Whatever they're doing, whoever they are, whatever their age, every action they're making is frozen in place, and they are shown the knowledge of the world. A mother and her child are paused in their argument about dishes in the sink, mouths open and eyes paused mid-roll. A young man on a late night jog is stopped mid-air, one leg extended and waiting to meet the pavement, the other bent at an angle, waiting for its next turn to kiss the cool asphalt. The bursts of knowledge never come at the same time each day, but they do come

every day to every citizen, as the day seems to end, and always last what seems to be an instant. Each person in the town lives within his or her own knowledge, and through their knowledge lives the knowledge of the town.

Every day, there are new things to learn, and every day as the knowledge of the world grows, so does that of the Echio people. They know everything about one another, though it hardly matters, as they know everything about every person the world has ever known. The gossips of the town rarely focus on the mundane activities of the no-one neighbors they see every day, but focus rather on the beautiful faces unknown to them from the outside world, and, more recently, the social and political movements that are shaping the world hidden from them in every way but the knowledge they receive.

The people of Echio are the most intelligent of human life forms. A child, once able to speak, can recite the most complex mathematic equations, for they've been shown them since they day they were born. This leads to a social class unlike any the world has ever seen. There is no need to study hard in order to earn a decent job—the only thing stopping a single person from achieving a certain position is their physical or social skills. While one may know mentally how to put bricks together and create a building, only those who are physically able to do so can take on the task. In the same way, every person of the town has knowledge of the same experiences, so there is no one person more qualified than another to become a politician or political leader; however, someone who is good with people and able to speak publicly without fear will be able to achieve this position much easier than someone who possesses the same knowledge and ability to mentally lead a group of people, but is unable to communicate effectively with the public.

Every day new information is added onto the old, and the information of the world is reintroduced to the townspeople's minds. Some use this information to create their own discoveries. They revile in having their ideas added to the town-wide summary each day. These same people spend every second of every day working against the clock, racing to discover something before another can first, rushing against the looming threat of not finishing their discovery by the end of the day and having it picked up by someone new on the next. The townspeople who engage in this type of knowledge competition are a major source of the townspeople's technological advances and lead to a portion of the knowledge that the townspeople are exposed to at the end of the day coming directly from their very city.

Others, however, despise the invasion of their minds every day. Of these, some even attempt to leave the forest in the hills as a way of escaping the knowledge that is forced upon them. It's been discovered however, that these people who try and leave can never make it off the hill. One could climb the tallest tree and see the outside world, but could never reach it. The forests, they say, seem to grow around them in every which way, never ending. These people, in their travels even outside of the town's walls, still experience the buckets of knowledge poured into their minds, and believe that the only way to escape is to escape through the trees, and

to find a way past the home of Echio they are trapped in.

These two groups of people—the explorers and the competitors—are in the minority. Most of the town has accepted the information as a normal way of life. They expect the knowledge. None dread what's to come, nor anxiously anticipate it at the end of each day. They simply expect its arrival. These are the older citizens who've lived with the knowledge their entire lives and expect nothing less. The younger townspeople have also come to accept the information, but they haven't yet lost the ability to marvel at the amount of knowledge the world has to give like their elders have. During this phase of wonderment in a young townspeople's life is also the time when they realize how much of the world they will never experience anywhere other than in the confines of their minds. This discovery is one every generation comes to at various times, but once a child thinks it, at the end of the day, every other child knows the same truth.

This discovery is the main factor in the town receiving its various categories of people. Explorers attempt to seek out the outside world not only in an effort to get away from the town's constant source of information, but also in an attempt to realize what they know with their own eyes. Competitors attempt to create an impact on the world by adding their own information into the void of knowledge they've been given, even if they can never experience the rest of the knowledge themselves.

There are few who know about Echio outside of the town's walls, and there is no proof such a place truly exists. But those who speculate find themselves wondering: if every person within the city knows and understands all the wonders of the world, what importance is placed on such wonders? What good is knowing the secret to world peace if every person you encounter has the same knowledge and you have no one to share this information with? What if the people of Echio are so used to this transfer of knowledge that at a certain time in every citizen's life they simply ignore the information they receive? After the unseen force releases its hold on them, they simply go back to whatever mundane action they had been in the middle of before they were taken ahold of. Echio must be a city of the utmost of technological, social, and agricultural advancements, and yet it's the one place in the world where knowledge has as little importance as sunlight does to a blind man and thus the one place every person hopes never to find. 

# Seeds

Katherine Huack

As a child, Rosemary had smashed her violin. Mrs. Wallstead had told her there was a little point, on a violin, on which Rosemary must never, ever drop it, or it would shatter into a thousand pieces, and her musical instrument would become only shards of kindling. Mrs. Wallstead had seen it happen, so she said, had watched the wood split straight up the body like ripping paper, and would never she forget it.

At this point, Rosemary had liked the violin in neither the general nor the particular sense. In fact, the violin was a truly obnoxious instrument, and Rosemary was not quite sure how no one had noticed. Rosemary could not tune its pegs to her liking, nor could she coax it to produce sounds that matched the tones that rang in her own head. Her small hand splayed on its neck, scrabbling helplessly, and her fingers ached afterward for no reward of music.

All things had seemed set at this juncture. Rosemary was small and would always be small. Rosemary stammered. Rosemary would never become as good at the violin as her older sister Jane. Rosemary would always bear the scar from where she had slipped off the steps outside and ripped open her own skin. The square hedges around her house did not grow; how proud they all were that the Roman coins in her father's collection at the Natural History

Museum had changed so little from his cleaning.

So: her relationship with the violin would not be improving. She resolved herself, therefore, to rid herself of it. Rosemary rolled back the rug and cleared a space in the library. She clambered on top of the desk with her violin and stared at the wood floor below, judging the angle carefully. She positioned her violin just how Mrs. Wallstead had showed her, and then she let it go.

It worked just as she had been taught. The violin split up the spine and the strings danced like broken spiders' legs. The only unfortunate thing about the whole experience had been that it had made a rather loud noise, and Rosemary did not much like loud noises.

Later, it was explained to her by Jane that things would change. She would grow taller. Her stammer would diminish. Her scars would heal. Her skills would improve.

As an adult, Rosemary teaches violin lessons. Her students are largely children. Rosemary likes children approximately as much as she had originally liked the violin, and she doesn't think this relationship will be improving. However, it allows her to work in her apartment's living room, which is more convenient than she can say.

Since she lives in it as well, she doesn't bother to keep the living room free of the clutter that accumulates

with her regular living: she likes to think it adds to her Eccentric Violin Teacher persona. Two of the walls have a hideous cream and black wallpaper, and two of the walls have a dark green paint, which she had painted before she exhausted herself peeling the wallpaper off the walls with her fingernails. The books on the bookcases are falling sideways and another stack of them hold up the decrepit television shoved into a corner. A set of antique teapots from Jane face each other on top of the bookshelf with an empty bowl that used to hold leftover Chinese food because Rosemary hasn't gotten around finding a better place for them than hiding the hideous painting of a waterfall that had been there when she had moved in. Several assorted sheets of music, a slipper, and a lava lamp sit on the floor. There is a good deal of dust.

Her apartment is three stories up. The view directly below to the pavement reminds Rosemary of the view from the top of the desk in the library as a child, just before she had smashed her violin.

Jane stops by on a Tuesday. She's carrying a folded up, damp umbrella because Jane is always irritatingly responsible.

Rosemary leaves the door open when she has students, so Jane simply ducks inside, smiling. The little girl currently butchering "Fond de l'Étang" stops playing in alarm or confusion at being watched. Jane has that effect on children: it's how she got to be an elementary school principal.

"That's only my sister, not my next appointment, Daisy. Keep going," Rosemary says. Daisy glances at Jane once or twice more as she raises her bow again.

"Um," she says.

"Start at the key change," Rosemary tells her. She's not facing Daisy, but staring out the window instead. "Make sure you remember the flats. Which are they?"

"B and ... just B."

"Correct." Rosemary pivots and points her violin bow like a sword at the music stand. Daisy resumes. It's clear she hasn't been practicing.

When Daisy leaves with her mother seventeen minutes later, Jane gets up from the chair she had perched on and digs around on Rosemary's shelves until she finds a beaten-up Scrabble box. It was underneath a Clue box, and the Clue box had left a square of brightness against the rest of the cardboard, stained by dust.

"Saw this when she was playing," Jane says. "Thought we could play."



"Because you enjoy losing to me?" Rosemary asks, collapsing dramatically on the couch. "Do they ever practice, do you think, or just say they do and hope for the best?" Rolling over, she opens the Scrabble box and paws at the soft bag until some of the letters spill out onto the table.

*Solo*, she spells out, and then pushes the tiles around with one finger: *Opus*. The little brown squares line up together over the blue and red and pink ones in way that is pleasing to Rosemary. She covers the letters with her hands and mixes them back together.

"You know, most people call before just coming over," she says.

"But then you'd mysteriously have an emergency and just couldn't possibly see anyone today—so sorry, just had a breakthrough on the symphony, another time—"

Rosemary cuts Jane off with laughter. "Alright, alright, let's play."

Today is Friday and Rosemary is laying on her back on the couch with her head stretching down to the floor. The pull of her hair in the opposite direction feels nice on her scalp. She flops her hand about idly on the carpet until she hits a box of crackers. She has to balance it against the side of the couch to open it in her current position.

The cracker Rosemary pulls out is square with little grid lines baked into it like the plows of a field. It's sandpapery to the touch. Rosemary stuffs it whole into her mouth so as not to increase the number of crumbs on her floor and then immediately regrets it as the little sharp corners stab at her mouth.

The cracker is very fibery, and Rosemary absent-mindedly reads over the box as she chews. On the back of the cardboard box is a cardboard square with the words *GROW ROSEMARY!* printed on it.

Rosemary rips the square off the box and drops the box back to the floor. From this square of cardboard, one could

apparently *GROW ROSEMARY!* She flips the right way up on the couch and retrieves the box to read the instructions.

The square needed to be soaked in water for two to four hours prior to planting. Rosemary glances toward the desk, on which there is a mug she hasn't bothered to take into the kitchen yet. She fills it with water from the bathroom sink (if she goes into the kitchen, she'll feel obligated to clean it, and yet she won't clean it, and right now she's excited to *GROW ROSEMARY!*) and pokes the cardboard square down into the bottom of the mug. It doesn't quite fit, and she derives some pleasure from forcing it to fit where it doesn't want to. Satisfied, she smiles down at it, and then realizes she has two to four hours before she can do anything with it.

Rosemary will need dirt. Wayne Park has dirt. The box recommends an eight-inch pot, which Rosemary obviously doesn't have, so she braves the kitchen to get a bowl. It's white ceramic with two blue stripes around the rim.

Rosemary will also need a trowel. That is something else she doesn't have, so she grabs the metal serving spoon she uses for pasta out of the drawer of extraneous cutlery. Rosemary is not dressed to go out. She is wearing a pair of sweatpants with several small burns in on the seat from sitting too close to the fire, and no bra. Adhering to society would require her to actually go into her room to get dressed, which she has no intention of doing, so she simply slips her bare feet into the dress shoes by the door and leaves, with her bowl and her monstrous spoon, deciding as she does so to simply pretend she isn't crazy. It's not difficult.

The next day is Saturday, which means that Rosemary has students all day. Some of them are adults, who are actually worse than children now that she thinks about it. They aren't scared of her, and so talk more. Also, contrary to popular belief, they labor more strongly under the misapprehension that Rosemary cares even a little bit about their lives.

Currently, though, it's noon, so Rosemary is three-quarters of the way through a forty- five-minute lesson with Daisy. Daisy shifts around when Rosemary ask her to play a piece of music she hasn't practiced, the ribs on her corduroy skirt squishing together and then rebounding. Her elbow brushes the cheap metal of the music stand.

"This piece requires your fingers to speed up in the second half, just when you want to slow down," Rosemary tells her. Leaning forward, Rosemary takes her pencil to place little dots above each of the notes. The notes are

shaped like tadpoles, she notices.

"What's this?" asks Daisy. She's peering into to the bowl of dirt on the windowsill with his violin bow trailing behind him. She is obviously talking about the bowl of dirt, which is obviously a bowl of dirt, so Rosemary doesn't respond. Instead, she plucks one very sharp note on her violin.

"Let's work on your sight-reading," she says.

Every day, after her shower and before bed, Rosemary waters her bowl of dirt. Sometimes she just splashes it with water from an extra mug (grey with the Chicago Natural History Museum logo on it), and sometimes she likes to see how slow and fine she can make the trickle of water from the mug to the bowl. Jane and Nabisco both lied to her, apparently, because it's been a week and nothing is growing.

She goes to bed, and when she turns out the light, she plummets into unconsciousness like falling off a cliff into a pool of deep water.

If Rosemary weren't so lazy, she would make herself some food. That really seems excessive, though. She considers. Is she more hungry or more lazy? There's nothing in the whole house she wants to eat, anyway, and she's definitely more lazy than hungry if not being hungry involves going to the grocery.

Time is a luxury she has too much of, these days. Day after day is the same, whether the outside is butter-yellow sunshine or the flannel-grey skies that accompany rain. Time bleeds into itself.

Deciding against her better judgment to check the contents of her refrigerator, Rosemary heaves herself to her elbows and begins the long, arduous crawl across the living room rug to the kitchen. When she reaches the box of crackers, she gets sidetracked and curls like a comma around the end of the couch. *GROW ROSEMARY!* the box shouts, even though the accompanying pictures show carrots, tomatoes, and basil. Rosemary wonders if the other varieties of the cracker have the other seeds. It seems unlikely.

The pictures of green remind her of the never-changing hedges around her childhood home. Rosemary stares at them fixedly while she eats one cracker. Rosemary is nudging cracker crumbs into a mathematically perfect spiral with her fingernail when there's pounding on the door.

"You've got a key!" she shouts, flopping flat on her back like a starfish, one hand under the couch.

"Yes, but I thought it might do you good to actually

move from one spot before you mold to it," Jane announces, dropping a stack of paperwork onto the desk and draping her coat over the back of the couch.

"No such luck," Rosemary groans, rolling her head back and forth on the carpet. "Let's play Scrabble again. I want to beat you twice in two weeks."

Jane steps over her to pick the Scrabble game from where it had been left behind one of the chairs. "Just because I open up the board and am too moral to use pointless words like *Q-J* and *K-A*—what even is that? I don't think you can play it if you can't define it."

"I think it's a sort of bird," Rosemary says, sitting up cross-legged and pulling tiles out of the bag. "Maybe from Australia?"

"That's a kiwi."

"A different sort of bird, then. *Wok* for thirty-two."

Sighing, Jane marks in down. "Do you have any food?" she asks. "I could make dinner, but knowing your pantry, that may not actually be possible."

"There's probably something. Pasta? I don't know." Rosemary flops her hand in the direction of the kitchen. "Food is exhausting."

Jane rolls her eyes. "So is starving to death."

"Good, then I could finally start suffering and write that symphony."

Jane snorts and pulls herself to her feet. Rosemary follows her to the kitchen, picking up a stack of sheet music off one of the kitchen chairs and seating herself in it. She tries to balance the sheet music on top of the stack already on the table, but it wobbles dangerously, so she pulls it into her lap instead and curls around it as Jane rummages through the cabinets.

"What're you making?"

"Spaghetti."

"Wait, you're actually making dinner?"

"I did say so," Jane tells her.

Rosemary gives her an extremely skeptical look: Jane has a husband and three children at home. Jane sighs and puts her hands on her hips. Her blonde hair falls limply in her face.

"It's not a big- Nathan and I are just having a little trouble at the moment. Just thought I'd spend a little time here, tonight; it's nothing."

Rosemary raises her eyebrows even farther. She doesn't bother to restrain her little smirk very well, waiting for Jane to continue. But Jane just pushes her hand through her hair and turns back to the stove. With Jane's back to her,

Rosemary twists her mouth and kicks at the rungs of the chair uncomfortably.

When the spaghetti is done, Rosemary cleans off the table by setting the stacks of sheet music in the corner as an apology. Jane told her to find some plates, but Rosemary hadn't wanted to wash any, so they eat off saucers instead. Jane rolls her eyes but doesn't comment.

"I've been thinking," Jane says. She catches Rosemary's eye, sees the comment there waiting to happen, and adds "Oh, be quiet," before continuing. "*I've been thinking*: I know you're not going to like this, but you know that our music teacher is retiring—"

"No," Rosemary tells her. She's tensed on her chair.

"I mean, it's just not ... healthy to be ... to be alone like this. Rose."

Ah, yes, the inevitable betrayal. Rosemary should've seen this one coming, what with the spaghetti and all. You need *help*, Rosemary; there's something wrong with you.

"I'm not actually one of your students, you know, *Principal*, and I hardly think a forty-six year old woman hiding out at her sister's apartment because she doesn't want to see her husband has any room to talk about *healthy* and *normal*," Rosemary snaps.

Jane looks down at the table. She nudges her fork a little on her plate. "I don't want you to be normal," she says quietly. "I'm sorry. Forget I said anything."

They finish the cooling spaghetti in silence, and then Jane gets her coat and her responsible paperwork and leaves the apartment.

The next day, in between students, Rosemary cuts a long isosceles triangle from the cracker box and draws in a dark black comma. *GROW, ROSEMARY!* the sign now reads. Rosemary sticks it like a flag in her bowl of dirt.

Daisy is back for another lesson, which means it's Tuesday again.

"Again," Rosemary demands, pointing at the music. "Staccato means quick."

Daisy picks up her violin again mutinously. Before she gets three measures, Rosemary snaps out, "B-flat, B-flat!"

Without looking at Rosemary, Daisy starts over, and misses the flat again. "Have you been practicing?" Rosemary demands.

"I have!" Daisy bursts out. Her small fingers curl white around her violin bow. "But I never get any better!"

Daisy's mother looks up from her book, gauging whether or not she needs to intervene, but Rosemary ignores her. She feels herself shattering on the inside,

fissures spreading across her heart like a climbing vine up a pane of glass.

*GROW, ROSEMARY!* the little flag on the plant shouts, mocking her.

“Daisy,” Rosemary says slowly, “have I ever told you about the certain, particular spot on the violin? You must never drop it on that spot or it will shatter. I would know; I’ve seen it done.”

At the window, Rosemary alternates between scratching staccatos across a lined sheet of fresh parchment and flicking the violin bow against her leg. She stares out the window and watches the Chicago slide by. There are stars, she knows, but they are snuffed out by light and pollution. The sky is just a great maw of emptiness, of nothing, filled with tiny points of meaningless light.

“Hey, looks like you’ve got a little shoot coming up!” Jane tells her. She’s bent over the bowl of dirt on the windowsill. “You are trying to grow plants, right?” She grins at Rosemary, who waits until Jane wanders away to inspect the bowl of dirt.

Jane is right: there is a little stalk of green protruding from the brown. The sight of it sends an inexplicable giddy thrill though Rosemary. It’s stupid, she knows. It’s just a plant. Plants grow on their own. She didn’t even do anything.

“Got any plans for it?” Jane asks, and Rosemary tenses. Jane isn’t supposed to see her looking at the plant. She isn’t sure why, but she is sure that it’s a stupid reason. That only makes her more irritable.

Turning around, she stretches her face out into a smile. “You’re going to cook me something with it.”

“Oh, am I?” Jane raises an eyebrow, but she’s smiling.

Rosemary heaves a sigh and flops bodily down onto the couch. “Yes, Jane, you are,” she says. She tips her head into the pillow so Jane can’t see her smile transform into something sincere.

It’s Saturday again, and Rosemary sits on the couch reading as the clock ticks passed eleven thirty, and then eleven thirty-five. At twelve fifteen, she smiles and closes her book. She picks up her own violin and plays out a perfect rendition of “Fond de l’Étang.” She hits every B-flat, and her toes curl into the carpet the way they do when she plays a piece she particularly enjoys.

The doorbell never rings. Daisy never shows.

A week later, Jane sticks her head around the doorframe and says, “Get up and help me with this, will you?”

Torn between annoyed and interested, Rosemary

follows her to down the steps of her apartment building to her perky little SUV parked out front. Rosemary hadn’t bothered to put on a coat, and she wraps her arms around herself as she stands on the pavement.

“You could’ve worn shoes,” Jane says dryly.

Rosemary doesn’t dignify that with an answer. Instead, she picks up three of the plastic sacks from the back of Rosemary’s car without looking at them and marches back inside. Dropping them on the stairs, she turns back to get another load, and runs into Jane.

“That’s all of it,” Jane says. Her face is pink from the wind. “The rest is stuff for Jessica’s soccer game.”

“What is all this, anyway?” Rosemary demands once they get the bags into her apartment. She pokes into the bags, crinkling the plastic.

She’s met by the sight of two dozen brightly colored packages of seeds: carrots, marigolds, turnips, pansies, lettuce. She freezes.

“I saw how much you liked that little plant you have, so-”

Jane stops there, perhaps recognizing the complete stillness of Rosemary’s body. Jerkily, she turns away from the pile of plastic bags on the couch and picks up her violin, clenching her knuckles so tightly around the neck that the pain can ground her.

When Jane breathes in again to speak, Rosemary starts to violently scratch at her violin. She plays a very spirited rendition of “Ragtime Annie” as loudly as she possibly can, so that she doesn’t have to hear or think about Jane’s words as she continues. When she hits the B-flat, she does not have the control she wants, and there is a second—just a second—where her anger breaks across her face and she lifts the instrument like she might throw it across the room.

Jane—irritating, interfering Jane—endures eleven bars before she leaves the apartment. Rosemary continues to play until the SUV pulls away from the curb, concluding the performance with an earsplitting shriek that more or less sums up her feelings on the matter. Then she locks her violin carefully away and dumps the little pot of *GROW, ROSEMARY*—the white ceramic bowl with the two blue stripes and the dirt from Wayne Park and all—into the overflowing trashcan. She pushes it all the way down into the used-up paper towels and sharp and empty tuna cans up to her elbow and holds it there until it yields. 

# Grad School

## Samuel Jambrović

Grad school is shopping for macaroni and cheese and picking the box with SpongeBob™ on it because if you’re going to ingest enriched wheat flour, you might as well enjoy yourself.

Grad school is not making your mac and cheese until two weeks later because you don’t have butter and you don’t have time to go to the grocery store to buy butter since CVS doesn’t sell it and the gas stations need the space for beer. Walmart sells it, Walmart sells everything, even pillows that smell like bacon, but it’s far (1.4 mi), you only have a bike (no basket), and the return trip is all uphill (131 ft).

Grad school is refusing to buy a car because you truly care about the planet, so much so that you somehow always forget the reusable bags you brought from Brooklyn, and you end up wasting more oil packing everything into twenty plastic bags hanging from the handlebars than you would have if you’d just gone in a car.

While you wait for the water to boil, you contemplate the tiny shapes of enriched wheat flour and realize they only include the male characters. You turn off the burner, dump the water down the drain, and throw the box with SexistBob™ on it in the trash. In grad school, there’s a fine line between morality and hypocrisy.

Grad school es comprar macarrones con queso y optar por la caja con Bob Esponja™ porque si vas a ingerir harina de trigo enriquecida, es mejor divertirse en el acto.

Grad school es no preparar esos macarrones con queso hasta dos semanas después porque no tienes mantequilla y no tienes tiempo para ir al supermercado en busca de mantequilla puesto que CVS no la vende y las estaciones de servicio necesitan el espacio para cerveza. Walmart la vende, Walmart lo vende todo, hasta almohadas impregnadas con olor a tocino, pero está lejos (2.3 km), solo tienes bici (sin cesta) y el viaje de regreso es todo cuesta arriba (40 m).

Grad school es negarte a comprar un carro porque te importa de verdad el planeta, tanto que siempre se te olvidan las bolsas reutilizables que trajiste de Brooklyn y terminas usando más petróleo empacándolo todo en veinte bolsas de plástico que cuelgas del manillar del que habrías gastado si fueras en carro.

Mientras esperas a que hierva el agua, contemplas las formas diminutas de harina de trigo enriquecida y te das cuenta de que solo incluyen a los personajes masculinos. Apagas el quemador, botas el agua en el fregadero y tiras la caja con Bob Machista™ a la basura. En grad school, hay una delgada línea entre la moralidad y la hipocresía.

# How to Grow a Tomato

Megan Henry

Congratulations! You have taken the leap and committed to growing yourself one tasty tomato. This process is laborious and long, but we are certain that with our detailed guide and a pinch of patience, you shall reap the rewards you most certainly deserve. Good luck, and may your tomato soup be prosperous!

## Step 1. Location

As we're certain you know, location is everything for the fruit of paradise. You will want plenty of sunlight, not too much water, and friendly neighbors to check up on your workings while you are away. For these reasons, we recommend the Midwestern United States. With its hot summers, seasonal spring rainfall, and history of thick glacial till, it will be the perfect pad for your fruity future.

The next step will be locating your crops' ideal soil. Tomatoes are best in a soil that is just a tinge acidic, not too wet - but moist, well aerated, and containing

rich and vital nutrients like Phosphorus (P), Potassium (K), and Nitrogen (N). We know that you wouldn't want to purchase processed chemicals from dirty factories to sully your innocent tomatoes. Don't worry, we have you covered. Your plants will do best in land native to the tall grass prairies of the Midwestern US. Unfortunately, most of the remaining .1% of tall grass prairie exists as small patches along highways. We wouldn't want you putting yourself in danger from fast driving cars, nor worse: putting your plants in danger of endemic "trucker grazing." So we recommend that you purchase a small area of old corn-and/or-soybean-field - it will be easy to find as it now covers 99.9% of what was once the tall grass prairie. This is where your work begins!

## Step 2. Soil Preparation

Unfortunately, what with mono-cropping that has occurred since the John Deere tractor, the biodiversity of your newly purchased land is less than ideal. The deep

black soil that your tomato so yearns for is only about a quarter in depth of what it was two centuries ago. For this reason, you will need to do some preparations. Your tomato needs vitamins! It needs a soil that is full of nutrients, so your first step of soil preparation will be creating that perfect soil with some other plants. We have some good news! Because of the extreme temperature variation and the extensive range in water levels that created the prairie, the herbaceous perennials you will need to cultivate grow and reproduce at lightning speed. They will grow those deep below ground root systems perfect for a thick luscious soil. With some light pruning, access to the right nitrogens, and that fast decomposition of this vegetation, your soil will be ready for spring planting in no time.

## Step 3. Pruning, Nutrients, and Aeration

One of the most vital steps for creating your perfect tomato home is a heavy dose of TLC. It can be expensive and time sucking to go out with the shears every day, purchase fertilizer, and impact tons of meter-deep aeration. For these reasons, we recommend you follow more native practices and acquire a bison. We should note here, that you'll want to make sure you have a significant area - around twenty hectares - of land for its feeding and roaming needs. Once arranged, however the hassle is over! Your bison will roam your small patch of paradise munching on shoots to encourage vegetative regrowth as well as the deepening and extensive branching of root systems. He will release his nitrogenous waste over wild alfalfa where it will fixate in for nutrients, and his intermittent stomping - perhaps accompanied by a dozen prairie dogs if you are feeling motivated - will aerate better than any pull-behind or spike sandals could dream. As a keystone species of the prairie, your bison is the easy fix to an otherwise exhausting problem.

## Step 4. Organic Deposit, Pest Prevention, and Other Spring Preparations

Speaking of lightning (see step 2), another central concept to ensuring your tomatoes success will be flash fires. As the harsh cold of your first winter desiccates the foliage where your tomato plant will soon thrive, the dead dry shoots will need to be burned hot and fast in order to encourage seed deposit for the spring. We recommend lightning. If none can be found, light a match and drop it. This simple action will ensure not only that you avoid invasive trees from polluting your tomato space, but also that the regrowth of

this biodiverse landscape is tasty and appealing for your bison next spring.

Though your prairie dogs will be safe under the moist soil, make sure to round up your bison during this stage to avoid potential medical costs.

## Step 5. Patience

You are just one step from where the real fun begins. Get those tomato seeds ready! The only thing left to do is grab a stool, twiddle your thumbs, and sit down for some good old fashioned waiting. You want your new soil to be able to handle the tomato plants responsibly and with stability. Like a toddler, your prairie needs some roosting time before it earns adult responsibilities. We recommend about a decade for intermediate results - the findings are controversial, but perhaps only five decades for top results! In no time your prairie soil will become that rich beautiful black you are dreaming of, and you can start the planting process!

**Next time:** I Have My Soil, What Now? Acquiring clean, pesticide-free water for your tomato patch in the unregulated streams of the Midwest. 🐾



# Beyond the Surface: Rethinking Masterpieces

Andrea Caceres

An individual's affinity to a work of art is instinctual, yet this bond is excruciatingly difficult to dissect. There is the undeniable question of bias that surrounds an individual's judgment on what is a masterpiece. Even if unintentional, the bias can challenge the legitimacy of the claim. Others may rely too much on how iconic or well known a certain piece is. This claim can be applied to *American Gothic*, and even remarkable pieces like DaVinci's *Mona Lisa*, which may be considered lackluster and unfinished compared to his *Lady with an Ermine* or *The Last Supper*. The background of a piece may elevate it, but a true masterpiece should transcend its own history. A masterpiece has a story and a legacy, but regardless of nameplate, it should captivate the viewer. For a work of art to be recognized as a masterpiece, not only must the artist show mastery of artistic techniques, but the art must effortlessly express the artist's intellectual and emotional intentions. A true masterpiece does this so effectively that it transcends time to capture the attention of the audience throughout human history. Although not as iconic as other works of art, *Nike of Samothrace*, *Las Meninas* and *Q. And babies? A. And babies* exemplify all the qualities of a masterpiece in their distinct depictions.

Standing at nine feet tall, the Parian marble sculpture

*Nike* effortlessly dominates the grand staircase at the Louvre (Kekicheff et al.). Found in Samothrace, Greece in 1863, *Nike of Samothrace* (a.k.a. The *Winged Victory of Samothrace*) dates back to the late Hellenistic period roughly 2,200 years ago (Bradley). Although the name of the artist is unknown, his vision is obvious. Nike, the winged goddess of victory, was highly praised in ancient Greek and early Roman culture, appearing on anything from coins to trophies (Cartwright). Her cultural significance is fitting for an empire famed for its competitions and military strength.

*Nike's* powerful stance immediately demands the viewer's attention. Her outstretched wings and dimensions assert her dominance. Positioned on a marble pedestal, the tallest human in the world would fail to come close to the height of her missing feet. The description from the Louvre states that, "The right foot was just alighting on the ship's deck, while the left was still in the air. The Victory was not striding forward, but rather alighting on the ship, barely skimming the base" (Kekicheff et al.). This emphasizes her unearthliness as an entity superior to humans. *Nike's* confidence and decisiveness are further complimented by a dynamic forward stance. When "affixed to the bow of a battleship," *Nike* would have been the first thing enemy ships would have seen, almost appearing like the ship is

an extension of *Nike* (Kekicheff et al.). The mastery taken to portray Nike as the embodiment of victory surely lies in both the design of the form and the precision of the cut marble.

The marble's texture evokes an elegance that juxtaposes the strength given by the pose. The delicate layers of draping cloth across *Nike's* body indicate the artist's skill in carving marble. The loose tunic tugs at *Nike's* skin allowing the viewer to imagine a strong wind thrusting it away. The taunt fabric, loose folds, and delicate drapes show the control the artist possesses over the material. The smooth reflection of light at the front and shadows made by the folds in the back add contrast, stressing the lightness in "barely skimming" the ship's deck. The frailty of the tunic being swept by the wind emphasizes *Nike's* strength and beauty. Texture adds realism by showing *Nike's* relation to her surrounding. The artist creates a distinct force pushing her back, while the presence of sky and ground are shown by her wings extending in flight and her delicate feet grazing the ground (if they are present). There is a diminution of details as the viewer moves to the back of the statue, emphasizing the forward thrust of *Nike*.

One characteristic of a masterpiece is surpassing the scope of others. As mentioned above, *Nike of Samothrace* is able to concurrently be a fearless warrior, and a graceful deity. Other versions follow prescriptive representations giving her bent knees, with either face or body positioned sideways or emphasizing her womanly qualities in a stiff pose. One exception to this norm is *Nike of Paionios*, which succeeds in balancing these two aspects, yet fails to evoke the dynamic emotion and detail found in *Nike of Samothrace*. *Nike of Samothrace* immediately offered a new version of the Nike figure. Statuettes imitating her pose were found in Europe and dated to shortly after while modern copies of Nike of Samothrace stand in various public buildings and private collections. Modern art like *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* by Umberto Boccioni, an abstract depiction of a man moving through space is heavily influenced by *Nike of Samothrace*. In all cases, it is apparent that *Nike* has made a distinct and lasting impression throughout time. *Nike of Samothrace* possesses all elements that compose a masterpiece, enabling it to outshine other works despite its age and missing appendages. Whereas Rome has fallen, the memory of its victory and the allure of its triumphs, remain tenable in the form of *Nike of Samothrace*, destroyed and reconstructed through time, yet accepting reality with pride and

dignity. She stands damaged yet strong, speaking to the generations of admirers yet to come.

*Las Meninas* by Diego Velazquez is another piece that immediately captivates its audience. It does not take long to appreciate Velazquez's irrefutable skill in "capturing the form." Beyond the surface, *Las Meninas* is a painting to be read, thought about, and experienced. The painting was made in 1656 for the private collection of King Philip IV (Jones). The deep admiration King Philip the fourth had for Velazquez's work "almost monopolized his production for the rest of his life" but enabled him to take more liberties in his paintings (Honour and Fleming 588). Now residing in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, the 10 ¾ x 9 ¾ inch oil painting depicts Philip's daughter and her maid servants attending her (Finaldi). The background creates complexity of story with reflections, doorways, and darkened corners full of additional figures.

Amidst the choreographed clutter, this is a painting of subtlety. Whereas *Nike* draws its energy outwards, *Las Meninas* draws spectators into the piece. Every human and object is placed with precision to cater to the theme of attendance. Velazquez's theme has depth and ingenuity, expressed through his details and complex play on perspective. The piece is bustling with activity, yet feels suspended in time. Velazquez's "expressionistic handling of paint, his exploitation of its materiality, and his tendencies toward abstraction [surpassing] the boundaries of Baroque" enable the movement to look more like vibrations: energetic, yet frozen under light (Konstantinidis 10). The echoes of movement trapped by stillness reflect the conflict between the thoughts of the people in the piece and their roles in society. Each character has their eyes transfixed on the object they are serving, with the majority gazing at King Philip IV and Queen Mariana. The use of white clothes on Margaret and the maidservants against a dark background grabs attention. Margaret shows the friction between societal roles and inner thoughts. Her face is turned towards the window while her eyes and body face her parents, hinting at her repressed longing for the outside. The maid servants have the job of catering to Margaret, but ultimately serve the king. This is reflected by having one maid focused on giving Margaret water and the other only positioning her body to Margaret, as her eyes gaze at the king and queen. Her subtle curtsy almost looks like she has just accepted a task to do. One maid's body language conveys anxiousness while the other poses cautiously, almost as if they feel judged by the implied king

and queen shown in the mirror.

The king and queen are placed at the center of the painting via a mirror. One theory says the mirror reflects two individual portraits of the king and queen as one, a "double portrait" (Sayre 174). Yet, the multiple stares from the subjects acknowledge the existence of an actual king and queen in the room. Since the couple is missing, is this a depiction of what they are seeing in the room? This would explain the excess illumination on their child. Sayre notes that at the time of painting the Spanish Empire was flourishing, and the royalty was well received (Sayre 174). The gaze of their subjects could have reflected the weight of leading a kingdom.

Is the painting actually in the perspective of the viewers gazing at the painting itself? The negative space composed of the ceiling and walls invites the spectator into the room, yet are repelled by the portrait indicative of the couple's position there. The fact that the canvas in the image seems to be of the spot either the king and queen are or the viewer are, gives a new meaning to the painting. Is this portrait of the monarchy hidden to show the difference between the royal couple's presentation and perception their subjects view them as? Is the spectator a person, or a god-like entity that sees all? Velazquez is the only one who faces the front completely. One eye is actually on the viewer while another is on the painting, implying a duality or even hinting to several perspectives volleying between each other. Much like the subjects rely on a king, a king relies on his subjects.

*Las Meninas* has not only left an impressive trail, but was possibly built with the intention of Velazquez assuring he would be remembered. The insertion of Velazquez, dressed in the attire of nobility, is painted in a favorable light. *Las Meninas* has influenced a variety of professionals working in different mediums from Picasso's *Las Meninas* series, to texts describing the piece. It is through an ingenious concept, technique, and legacy, that *Las Meninas* becomes a masterpiece despite changing times.

The introduction of the medium of photography challenged accepted conventions of art in the twentieth century. Due to photography's debatable status in art, the discussion of this piece might seem unusual. However, in 1969, a group of artists, Irving Petling, Jon Hendricks and Fraser Dougherty published a photo by Ronald Haerberle in Life Magazine (Wells). From the moment of its publication, *Q. And babies? A. And babies* was a masterpiece. The image depicts a cluster of dead Vietnamese villagers

lying between the road and fields with the phrase "Q. And babies? A. And babies" in red typeface. The photo is of the My Lai Massacre of March 1969, where hundreds of unarmed villagers were killed by U.S. soldiers (Sayre 281). The lithograph exposes the atrocities of war through its use of medium and innovative fusion or art forms.

The emotional root of this image lies in the fact that the content could only be captured by a camera and the composition only created by a true artist. Thus, while art circles claim that photography is lazy and lacking in creativity because the camera is the artist, there is no question this mixed media image is a masterpiece. The shocking, graphing content is difficult to accept as truth. The background of the image depicts a quaint road in the countryside with a rustic fence. However, the sense of calm and quiet is distorted by the inclusion of the victims set against the background. These are obstructions on the road to American ideals because the bodies taunt viewers by asking the impalpable question of who is to blame for their death. The image forces its audience (at the time the American public) to admit that the perpetrators of this atrocity are U.S. soldiers. The shame and anger the image magnifies ultimately calls for the violence to end.

The addition of text calls for a second look at the image. Due to the lithograph being an anti-war propaganda image in a magazine, combined with the fast paced culture of the twentieth century, viewers likely happened upon the piece rather than seeking it out. The text slows the reader down and forces a contemplation of the content that eventually leads to the realization that these are victims of a monstrosity. Without the text, the picture shows a mass of disembodied appendages. The word "babies" pushes people to search for this content, and when looking for it, find the remains of innocent humans. This forces the viewer to acknowledge the wrongs committed by the perpetrators. The contrast of color between the font and grass calls attention to the words. There is a disturbing synchrony between the red words and red clothes, which points out the bloodshed. The unity this creates also brings a deeply unsettling stillness because these people are dead. This peaceful permanence brings to mind a surreal unfairness like when the dust settles after the toppling of a building.

*Q. And babies? A. And babies* received immediate attention with the controversy surrounding it, spreading like wildfire. Volunteers, the Art Workers Coalition printed 50,000 posters of the image which were sent worldwide



including a 25 x 38 inch donation to the Museum of Modern Art in New York (Sholette 47). Out of all Vietnam graphics, this was one of the most important, distinct, and well made. Unlike *Las Meninas* and *Nike of Samothrace*, *Q. And babies? A. And babies* resulted in severe consequences taken by the government such as evidence in the murder trial of Lt. Calley and his team. Half a century later, this image still holds a timeless power. Whereas *Nike of Samothrace* radiantly celebrates a triumph of survival, *Q. And babies? A. And babies* dissolves pride into mourning over those fallen under the flag of victory.

Beyond the technique, expression, and influence of *Nike of Samothrace*, *Las Meninas*, and *Q. And babies? A. And babies* there is a distinct allure that is able to hold the attention of so many. An object of art is a means for an artist to speak to the audience, but a masterpiece imprints a message an individual's mind, making the individual share a personal emotional bond with the work of art. A masterpiece has a timelessness and universality that enable it to be appreciated in various cultures regardless of its origin. Most masterpieces are of Western origin, likely due to widely accepted conventions of art. Is this omitting worthy works of art? Beautiful manmade masks are categorized as religious artifacts, while minimalist, ink paintings such as *Six Persimmons* by Muqi Fachang get widely overlooked due to their divergence from the norm, yet these are able to move an audience. The names of many artists have been lost in time, and the existence of many works of art extinguished, but the masterpieces

that remain still demand a pause to at least taste the thick narrative unraveling beyond the surface. 

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# Vertical Rise

Devin VanDyke

Donald. Shouted. “You cannot play golf on a plastic surface!”

Bart, dressed in blue coveralls with thin black vertical stripes replied, “The Super Bowl is played on artificial turf!”

Donald was wearing a suit and tie. He’d come to the bar after work to wind down and found himself staunchly defending the GOP position in the coming national election. He got sucked into the argument because the damn liberals, intent on being mindful of fresh water, had been singing about finally having a swimming pool if the referendum requiring golf courses to use artificial turf passed. The liberals believed the golf courses and cemeteries used too much water. The GOP had nimbly argued with the Liberals to keep the cemeteries out of mind and off of the referendum. Donald slammed his nearly empty beer mug onto the table opposite his antagonist, Bart, and yelled, “American Football, my naïve drinking acquaintance, is a game of destruction derby played by large animals pumped up on steroids. Golf, on the other hand, is a sport played with finesse, like in cards—football is war and golf is bridge.”

Bart replied with equal fervor, “Look mister clean-hands suit and tie you won’t even notice that your precious recreational activity has changed at all. You’ll get used to it after the first three holes and six pack.”

“I don’t get used to nothing you enviro-hugger. You and your liberal wife should cease bathing if you want to save water.”

“An enviro-hugger? That’s all you got?”

He slammed his beer mug onto the table a second time

but with a professional ping pong player’s wrist-snapping serve. It shattered. He said with its jagged remains still held by the handle and shaking it at Bart, “I don’t need a better insult—do I?”

“Ha ha ha. I got another one anyway, astro-phobe!”

The bartender walked up to their table with a 40-inch widescreen held across his body and a headset. It was really just a large phone with a blinking light to tell users a 360 degree camera was in use. On the other end of the phone the caller could see everything. The bartender spoke into his mike while standing near Bart, “Let me see if Bart Morningstar is here.”

Bart waved at him and said, “I’m here.”

The bartender set the screen down on the table and Bart activated the 360 camera. He said to Gina, his wife of ten years, on the screen, “Welcome to my new drinking place.”

“Hi babe. You didn’t tell me your bar had air hockey.”

Bart replied with a rising tone, “They do? I hadn’t noticed.”

Gina replied, “Yeah, it’s in the corner next to the waist-high climbing wall. And am I seeing your favorite verbal sparring partner, Mr. Donald?”

He grinned widely, showing too many perfectly straight teeth, and said, “Liberal?”

Bart pushed the button on the top—turning off the camera and light—and leaned closer to the screen and said, “His bark is worse than his bite—uh at least I think it is. Anyway will you be home soon?”

Gina said, “An hour or so. And hey you remember we have a virtual reality dinner date with Tom and Mary

tonight right?”

“Yeah I just remembered it—and I’ll be sure to get the kitchen ship-shape.”

While Bart talked to Gina the Bartender he stepped up to Donald, pointed at his mug, smiled and said, “Ten bucks for the mug and five is the handling fee, Donald.”

He reached for his wallet and handed over a twenty and said, “Keep the change. I know you need it.”

“No problem Donald—your green is always welcome.” On the screen Gina blew Bart a kiss and he returned it. The Bartender picked up the screen and walked back to the bar.

Donald stood in front of the table with both hands in his pockets fiddling with some coins in his right hand. He turned to his drinking buddy and said, “Is an astro-phobe, as you say I am, a subcategory of nature-phobe? I mean in the science of liberidgid?”

Bart replied, “Hey if you promise to be civil maybe you could come over and hang out for a bit tonight with the wife and Tom and Mary? We’re their standby’s.”

“Hold on. In liberidgid they’re *parent* standbys, but they’re really Godparents. Yeah I guess I’ll come, but I do not want to leave Joanna out—keep the peace and all.”

“It’s settled then. We’ll all get together about seven tonight. And I’ll buy us another beer to celebrate this hard won truce—in a paper cup.”

They sat quietly at the high concrete table on the wheeled barstools and listened to a story on NPR about wasps enslaving spiders. When his beer was gone Donald said, “Thanks, I’ll be civil” and left. Bart put his beer cup in Donald’s and flagged the bartender for another.

Bart got home before his wife. They had a lot at stake in the election because they both wanted the municipal pool to have enough water to reopen. They didn’t mind quickie showers. There were unspoken things they hoped for as the national referendum process rolled forward. He heard the bells attached to the front door from the kitchen and he said, “I’m knockin’ out the dishes.”

Gina shucked her coat and strolled to the refrigerator and reached for a bottle of beer.

Bart turned and with his hands dripping wet grabbed her hand and said, “Now, now, we don’t wanna drink for that little one that might be in you right? How about a nice cold cranberry juice. I got your favorite—Dom Perignon.”

She took the bottle from his hand and stared at the pile of suds sliding off. “I’ll drink this, but if I am carrying and we win then you don’t get to go to the bar and drink anymore either right?”

“You got it.”

“By the way, you’re never going to change Donald’s mind. Why do you think you will?”

“I don’t wanna’ change it—I like the passion of our debate—by the way he said he might stop by.”

“Tonight? How could you?”

“Hey now. Tom knows him and agrees with some of his opinions—not all—some. Plus I ran into Mary on the way home and she said it would be fine with her—he did promise to be more civil than when he and I drink.”

“So you two won’t devolve into medieval knights jousting.”

“Naw—we’ll be chivalrous knights hacking at each other with swords.”

“Just remember maybe-father—your adversary becomes so passionate he breaks mugs on concrete tables for emphasis.”

“Yeah, it’s kinda’ hard to forget when I have to pick glass out of my beard—but he’s such a good actor—I love the theatrics.”

Gina walked over to the oven and felt the door. “You forgot again!”

Bart dried his hands off and started waving his phone in the air and said, “Tom called and they’re going to have Chinese delivered!”

Gina smiled and glanced into the dining room where the dinner party virtual reality system was setting itself up. Bart came up alongside and squeezed up against her and said, “Not if we win, but when we win, we can have great playdates without leaving home.” Then Bart reached into a cabinet for a set of plates and set them on the table in front of where Gina sat down in the dining room.

At ten before seven the virtual chimed and Tom and Mary’s images coalesced. Jarod, now two and saying, “No,” incessantly squirmed in Mary’s arms while she looked at the camera and said to Jarod, “Say Hi to your standby’s”

Jarod looked into the screen and said, “Hi.”

Gina and Bart said in unison with enthusiasm, “Hello Jarod buddy!”

The four of them had finished with their hellos when the door chime in the reality set sounded again. Donald and Joanna came into view as two more screens popped up out of the dining room table. Donald, pointing to Joanna, said, “I have my civil regulator with me.”

Joanna glanced at each of the group and said “Hi, I’m so glad to meet you rather than hearing about you vicariously!”

Everyone laughed, Donald too. 🐾

# First Year in X Town

Qian Jianan



It was a horrid mid-summer day when I got off the train. The white designer shirt I was wearing was soaked through sweat. My father had given it to me the day before departure as a farewell present, saying he wore this very shirt in his youth whenever he needed to dress formally. My father was confident that this shirt would help me make a favorable first impression as polite and reliable. Yet he had it put on only twice in his life, once for his wedding, the second time for my grandpa's funeral.

"Keep in mind, Zhao. When in Rome, do as the Romans do," my father said as he waved to me in a Shanghai railway station. I nodded at him.

That was in 1972. I was sent from my hometown Shanghai to a remote rural town X. According to the central government policy, I needed to be reformed by the poor peasants because I was born to an intellectual family (both my parents were high school teachers). My class status was not right.

I arrived at the X Town Bus Station. Holding a piece of paper with my new home address, I still did not know where to go. The land was barren, except for a wooden shed with a sign saying *X Town Bus Station*. I didn't dare ask the driver. He seemed to be a man with a violent temper. His two wolf-like eyes glared fiercely as he came to take my money for the bus ticket. I looked around and saw a group of ten dark locals. I walked to them to ask the way, but they showed their teeth and pushed me away. I had no other choice but to continue walking until I suddenly saw piles of low shanties packed closely together.

In front of the low shanties sat a dozen middle-aged women, naked to the waist. I was stunned and startled. Their bulging breasts dangled like bags of rice, and

their toddler babies climbed on their back just like baby monkeys did in the zoo. When these babies cried for food, the women simply flapped their huge breasts over the shoulders so the kids could hold and suck.

I was still a virgin, and froze like a bronze statue.

"Never seen a woman, right?" a stout young man came up to me and asked. I did not answer, blushed. "You must be Savage Zhao from Shanghai?" he said, looking me up and down. At last he stared at my white designer shirt. "Why am I a savage?" I asked him. He did not answer me, but ran up to one of the sitting women, pinched her right breast and ran away.

"Chen you bastard, your thing itches, right?" shouted the woman. The baby on her back did not cry, gaping at Chen.

"You bitch in heat. You must have had your husband's *diao yangzi*<sup>1</sup> yesterday!" Chen shouted to the woman from a stone's throw.

"What does *diao yangzi* mean?" I asked.

All the women and Chen burst into laughter.

"*Diao yangzi*, the savage asked what *diao yangzi* is!"

"*Diao yangzi*. Dogs *diao yangzi*."

I did not know what was so funny. I just echoed them. "*Diao yangzi*. Dogs *diao yangzi*."

It turned out Chen was the guy selected by the local authority to help me reform, although he was only four years older than me. I stayed in a thatched shack just behind his one-room slum. Chen was a man shaped like a brown bear. He had a long nose and a barrel chest. Sometimes when he did not say anything at all, I could still hear heavy grunts from deep inside him like rumbles echoed in a

cavern. But all the local people said he was a very kind and funny man, except for his wicked ideas.

"Still, you'll find his wicked ideas fairly useful," they told me, half smiling.

The first night, I could barely sleep. My shack burnt like fire. Chen came in at midnight, smiled at me and said, "I knew you wouldn't be able to fall asleep. Sleep on the floor, Savage Zhao. No one can sleep on a bed in summer." I took his advice and lay down on the cement floor. I immediately cooled down.

"Sleep tight. Tomorrow we have to work," Chen said as he went out, leaving the door open.

The next day I was assigned a job in the local factory, which produced magnets, working along with Chen. The factory was a two-storied gray house located beside the largest septic tank in X town. I could not help but cover my nose and mouth with both hands.

"Savage Zhao, you make me sick. Put down your hands. You can't work that way," said Chen.

I put down both my hands, and began to cough heavily. The people there soon clustered around me like a shoal of fish, laughing.

"What the hell's with this guy?" one of them asked.

"Oh, he's a savage. He arrived here yesterday."

They fixed their eyes on my white designer shirt, which I had washed the night before, and I could see flares burning in their eyes. Among them, there was a man shorter than others wearing a scar on his left eyebrow. He took a step forward, raised his fist, ready for a fight.

"Savage Zhao, didn't I tell you yesterday? You should take off this disgusting shirt." Chen fumbled to take off my shirt for me. Only then did I realize that all the men in the factory were shirtless.

"Take this off, or they will beat you," Chen whispered in my ear.

They did not walk away until Chen rolled my white shirt into a ball and threw it into the cesspool nearby. They murmured, "Watch out, Savage Zhao."

"Savage," echoed the short man with a scar. He pointed two dirty fingers towards me.

At least the job was easy enough. I was to pour chemical liquid into a metal mold. I strived to work hard, running to fetch another metal bucket right after finishing the one at hand. Chen laughed at me and called me savage.

"No need to work so hard, Savage Zhao. It's useless. The

1. Literally means "hanging straws"

magnets, I mean. They just stack them in the warehouse.”

I did not reply. He continued babbling, saying we were here only for the sake of lunch. He told me that I was lucky because it was mid-summer—so much to eat in summer.

At noon with a ringing sound of a bell, Chen and I went to the canteen to have our lunch. “Whatever you see, remember—don’t say anything,” whispered Chen. I nodded.

Soon I realized what Chen was referring to. The stinky tank nearby attracted swarms of flies to the factory, especially in the canteen. They weaved a thick black carpet on the table, sucking on the grease. I tried not to frown or pucker my lips. Chen asked me to take his lunch pail for a second. He didn’t sit down. Instead of fanning away the flies, he banged the table with both hands. A cluster of black bodies crushed under his huge palms, while the survivors flew away, forming a black funnel to the ceiling.

Chen took his seat, put down our lunch pails. He dunked the dead flies into the green vegetable soup. Then he bit the flies with a snap.

I heard the bangs and snaps now and then, and witnessed black funnels here and there. Chen scooped the rest of the flies into my spoon and encouraged me to have a taste.

“You really think we can live on the food provided by the canteen?” he frowned at his lunch: a bowl of vegetable soup, and another bowl of rice.

“Take these. They’re nutritious,” he said. “You’re lucky to have these supplies in summer.”

I was reluctant. Several young men banged and sat beside us. They stared at me with a smirk.

“Savages cannot appreciate the wonderful side dish,” one of them said.

“Then stay hungry, savage,” it was the short man with the scar. When he said this, he did not bother to look up. He buried his head into his vegetable soup. He had poured dozens of flies into the soup.

I poured a full spoon of flies into my mouth, and bit them with a snap.

“How do these taste, Savage Zhao?” asked Chen.

“Great!” I murmured and tried not to spit anything. I didn’t.

When in the countryside, do as the locals do. Assimilating to the local culture, I soon learned their dress codes, pet phrases, their way of living. I walked around shirtless and swallowed flies as special treats for

lunch and supper. When a woman worker bent to retrieve something from the floor, I was among the men staring at her breasts and laughing aloud. After work, I pinched the sitting women’s breasts before going inside my shack. There was no toilet inside the slums, so I learned to shit outside at night, whistling for a dog to come to my side and eat my stool, just like the locals often did.

“Human shit is nutritious for dogs, just like flies are nutritious for us.” Chen once said to me. “Why do the dogs here grow so strong? Dogs were born to eat shit.”

I had a white dog eat my shit almost every night, and I called him Little White. He was a male dog covered with snow white, which was rare to see in X town. Sometimes when he was enjoying the fresh food I provided, I talked with him in Shanghainese. I was so afraid that I would one day forget my dialect, forget that I was once a Shanghai boy. But to remember these things did me no good. Maybe I would never get back to my parents, never get back to Shanghai in this life. Still, talking in Shanghainese with Little White was comforting. He remained meek and silent when eating. After having his midnight snack, he would lay beside me for another five minutes, listening to me talk.

I sang Shanghainese nursery rhymes to him.

*Yao A Yao/ Yao Dao Wai-Po Qiao*

*Wai-Po Jiao Wo Hao Bao-Bao*

*(Row a boat/ Row a boat to Grandma’s*

*Grandma calls me her dear babe.)*

Little White blinked at me. Sometimes he would even snuggle up to me and sleep with me outside under the starry sky till morning broke.

But I dared not talk in Shanghainese with any local people. They might mock me and complain that the reforming work was not carefully done. They might even write a report to the local government, and send me to an even more unimaginably horrible place. I faithfully copied the ways they spoke, despite the fact that I did not always understand their words. I copied their dialect and accent. When we got up early and went to work, Chen said to the first female neighbor he saw as a greeting, “You had your husband *diao yangzi* yesterday?”

Sometimes the woman would laugh in a flirting way and pretend to kick Chen’s crotch. At this very moment, I would feel the urge to stand up for Chen and say, “Woman, surely you had your husband *diao yangzi*, you are just like a bitch in heat.”

Then we would laugh wildly and run away.

I did not ask again what ‘*diao yangzi*’ meant, fearing

that they would laugh at me again. I guessed it had a sexual connotation, and I was content with this thought.

After October, it was okay to sleep on the wooden plank bed. But I still had a problem with sleep, not because of the weather, but because of hunger. Flies died in groups. Sometimes we were lucky to scarp a pile of black bodies when having meals. Other times we could only watch the black carpet drown in the cesspool nearby, helpless. In late October, when we scraped the flies’ bodies from the switch rope of the electric lamp, we were sad to see they were already dead. They clustered around the switch rope for warmth, yet that was not warm enough to save their lives. They stuck there only because of the static electricity. Since flies were nowhere to be found, we starved.

“Autumn is the cruelest and most unbearable season in X town.” said Chen. He sounded as if he felt sorry for me.

I felt sorry for Little White. He came to me every night, but I could hardly shit anymore. He waited quietly as my face wrinkled and I groaned. I was also aware that the cesspool did not stink as much as it did in summer.

Little White showed no disappointment. He lay down beside me, let me tickle his belly and listened to my Shanghai nursery rhymes.

*Yao A Yao/ Yao Dao Wai-Po Qiao*

*Wai-Po Jiao Wo Hao Bao-Bao*

He was hungry too. I could see a harp-like skeleton under his skin.

Autumn was a strange season. Despite the hunger, everyone in X town seemed to be somehow ecstatic. At first I believed that there would be a large harvest awaiting us, but it turned out that we had little to be harvested. Then on a Sunday in early November, I learned why.

The local boys and girls were chasing one another in the streets, calling out in excitement, “Dogs *diao yangzi!* Dogs *diao yangzi!*”

Chen saw the look on my face and said, “You wanna know what ‘*diao yangzi*’ is, go find out yourself.”

I ran after the kids. They were happy following two dogs. A male dog was pulling a female one along the street.

The kids skipped along and clapped their hands, shouting “*diao yangzi, diao yangzi.*” They were all five or six years old.

I still could not figure out the exact meaning of this phrase. Only then did I discover something unusual with the dogs. The male dog was not pulling the female one with his mouth, but with his penis.

The kids ran after the dogs. Dogs were pulling and being pulled all the way around, groaning and grunting. In the end the male dog seemed exhausted. It collapsed eventually in a street corner and pulled out its huge sausage-like penis, now soft.

Autumn in X town was a dog carnival. Almost every day I heard cries and shouts from the children. I saw energetic male dogs running and pulling female dogs all the way along the streets like racing cars. I saw Old Wang’s Little Brown, Old Li’s Little Yellow, Young Sun’s Young Black. Strangely, I did not see my dear Little White. Indeed, I had not seen Little White since November. He didn’t even come at night when I whistled for him to take my shit.

I sang the rhyme all alone.

“Have you seen Little White recently?” I asked Chen.

“You mean the white dog raised by Old Zhang? Oh, that is a strange dog,” said Chen.

I patiently waited for him to continue, but he said he was too tired that he was going to take a nap.

In autumn, the workload broke our backs. We hoisted all the magnets on our shoulders from one warehouse to another, because the authorities said they needed one more empty warehouse to stack ripe grain from the farm. We moved magnets every day until the warehouse was cleared. But they told us that crops were short this year.

All the workers were angry and agitated. They showed their fists and teeth, but they had no strength for a fight—their fists shook from hunger and fatigue.

“They’re fucking with us.” I said to Chen in a whisper.

“Sure they are. But we have no choice. They’re the leaders—great, glorious and correct. They play the same trick every year,” Chen said with a half-smile. “Grin and bear it, Savage Zhao. Soon I’ll show you something truly spectacular.”

“What’s so strange about Little White?” I asked Chen again. Another two weeks had passed and I still hadn’t seen the dog. I couldn’t reveal to Chen how much I missed Little White.

“He hides himself in mating season. Strange dog, isn’t he?” Chen giggled.

“But why?” I asked.

“He never goes after female dogs randomly in the streets like other dogs. He grows a weird temper. About two years ago, Old Zhang took him to mate. It took three weeks for him to grow intimate with his partner. Then he

mounted the female and mated with her successfully. Afterwards, Little White was forced to leave the female dog. You know what, he was like a lovelorn boy, and he refused to eat or go out. Maybe that was his first time. You know what they say—the first time is unforgettable. But he’s only a dog, right? Even humans can fuck women we don’t love. It’s sex. Having sex is like having a meal.” Chen drew a figure with a sharp rock in front of our shack.

I shrugged. Luckily he didn’t see.

“He began to eat after a whole month of heartbreaking. And for two years, he refused to mate with any other bitch. He would imprison himself in spring and autumn. An infatuated dog, isn’t he? Hey, come and see what I’ve done.”

Now I could see he had drawn a naked woman, chubby and full-breasted, without a face.

“That’s great... Um... But why don’t they let the female dog stay with him?” I asked.

“Like a marriage? Don’t be silly. Marriage is not for dogs. Besides, you know which female dog he was doing? The White Beauty. We need the White Beauty. You don’t know how important the White Beauty is, do you?”

I shook my head.

Chen smirked. “You’ll see. This time we’re going to use the white beauty strategically. She is one of a kind. We used Little Flower to replace her in the last two years, but it didn’t work well,” he said. “Wait and see, I’ll show you something truly spectacular,” he said again, while adding two extra huge breasts between the doodled naked woman’s crotch.

“Does that make your thing itch?” Chen turned back and smiled.

I nodded at him.

**B**y late November it was freezing. Chen said winter in X town came earlier than in other parts of China. We were all hungrier than ever. The trees were leafless. Two weeks ago, Chen fried leaves for me to eat. They were nasty, hard to swallow and hard to digest. Now we had run out of leaves.

Strangely, the dogs were no longer emaciated. Male and female, they grew stronger and stronger. Every day, more dogs could be seen having sex.

“They’re catching the last bus,” Chen said. “Their heat will be over as soon as December comes.”

Only one dog looked scrawnier and scrawnier in X town—Little White. He came to accompany me in the last week of November, though I could hardly offer any shit for him to eat. He was so thin that his bones poked



my legs when he snuggled up to me. He seemed deep in meditation when I sang the rhyme Yao A Yao. With him beside me, I had the feeling that my hometown Shanghai was not so far away.

On the last day of November, Chen said to us that it was about time. I did not know what he was referring to, but I had learned it was better not to ask.

“Today, we’ll lead those horny dogs into a beauty trap,” Chen said. He told me this practice was faithfully conducted every November. Before the long and bitter winter swept X town, they needed something to warm their stomach.

“Savage Zhao, you are a lucky dog. This time we use the white beauty. You’ll see with your own eyes how glamorous she is,” said Chen.

There were four of us, Chen, I, Zhou and Liu. Both Zhou and Liu worked in our factory. Zhou and Liu were also the ones who had threatened to rip off my white shirt on my first day of work. Liu was the short man with the scar on his eyebrow.

“You were a savage then,” Zhou said.

“Still a savage,” said Liu.

“Don’t mess it up, Savage Zhao. If you don’t want to stay hungry and cold for the whole winter season, then do what we tell you to do,” Chen ordered.

“I will,” I replied.

“Watch out, Savage Zhao,” murmured Liu.

We stole the White Beauty from Old Wang’s shack to the local ancestral temple which was windowless and dark as night. It was the perfect place both for worship and for a trap. Liu had given the White Beauty a bowl of fresh shit to keep her busy, satisfied and silent. When we chained her neck on the wall, she started to grunt. Chen urged us to climb the walls and squat on the beams, holding clubs in hand, and wait for the male dogs to come.

The White Beauty grunted in the most sexy and alluring way. Although we were not dogs, we got hard listening to it. Chen was happy with her sound, saying the White Beauty was a real bitch. Chen had told us already that even if the White Beauty were locked in a remote ancestral temple, located at the far end of X town, all male dogs would smell her female odor from miles away. He had told us nothing could stop the male dogs from tracing the odor all the way here—the heaven as well as the hell. Then all we needed to do was to wait for the right moment to get the fattest dog in X town. He was right. Soon we heard a fiery mix of steps. We smelled the male odor of these dogs. I could imagine their drool dripping, their tails wagging, and their things itching. There must have been scores of them. In a moment we saw their heads gathering at the doorstep. We held our breath.

The dogs seemed to know that we humans were playing a trick on them. They waited there, keeping a safe distance, and watched the White Beauty swaying her hips on the floor. No dog dared to sidle in. Chen gestured to us to have patience.

**W**e waited and waited, listening to male dogs groaning at the White Beauty and the White Beauty grunting back at them. We waited and waited, until our legs were numb, our private parts wet.

Eventually a dog was brave enough to step in. We were so disappointed that he was not fat at all. My heart was nearly pounding out of my chest, because I saw he was all snow white.

“Damn it. Little White, you fool, you’ve screwed things up,” Chen said in a whisper.

“Should we do it again? That dog is so scrawny,” I wanted to say. But I did not.

Zhao and Liu were disappointed too. They flared their nostrils and were about to jump down.

“Hold on. We’ll catch him, the foolish dog,” Chen said. My heart was thumping with sadness.

We remained where we were and held our breath.

Little White raised his head and looked up. I knew he had seen us. He must have known what would happen to him but he was not afraid. He strode directly to the White Beauty. His snout nudged heavily on the White Beauty’s neck, then moved slowly to her back, her belly and her hip. She rubbed against him too, kissed him and even bit him. Eventually he smelled her vulva and took deep breaths within, like a man kissing a woman.

I almost shouted “run” to Little White. But I dared not. They three were absorbed in this view, yet they were sober. Chen had told us that we needed to wait for the moment of when the dog would “diao yangzi.”

We waited and waited. The White Beauty seemed to hesitate. She refused several times when Little White was about to mount. I knew she refused because she could not stand to see him die.

At last, though Little White was thin, he was still a male, and he was strong enough to climb on her and insert his penis into her vulva. Chen, Zhou and Liu’s faces glistened ecstatically. Liu and Zhou wanted to jump down but Chen gestured to us to wait still, wait for the moment when both glands of Little White’s penis swelled like balloons. At that moment, he would be unable to pull it out, which was what we called “diao yangzi” in the dialect of X town.

**B**oth the dogs grunted. Even the scores of male dogs grunted in a chorus outside. It was almost time. Chen gingerly fingered the door closed in a very skilled maneuver. On hearing the door closing, the four of us jumped down simultaneously from the wall. We started to beat Little White with our clubs.

“Stupid dog, you bastard, you have messed things up,” Chen shouted when beating.

“Now you have taken the bitterness of love,” Liu said with a smirk.

I watched for a long time with my club in my hand. I saw Little White’s expression. He didn’t look surprised, and he wasn’t going to bite us either. He was ecstatic, enjoying making love with the White Beauty up until the very end of his life.

**C**hen carried a knife with him. After Little White was dead, he peeled off the dog’s skin right away in front of the White Beauty.

“I’ll go get a cloth to cover her eyes,” Zhou said. “Otherwise we won’t be able to use her the next two years, like before.”

"No need to do that," said Chen, still cutting. "She'll be too old next year anyways. We'll find another White Beauty."

The White Beauty shuddered like an autumn leaf. She saw us flay Little White, take out his bowel, stomach, liver, heart and cut him into pieces.

Zhou took several logs of firewood and a wok out from under the sacrificial altar and began to make a fire.

"You should have a taste, Savage Zhao, this was really good. Dog meat, supreme," said Chen.

Liu went out to fetch some water from the well. I was supposed to do this, but they told me to stay here, because my hands were shaking with terror.

"First time you killed a dog, right?" said Chen. "You'll get used to this. We'll catch some old female dogs a month later, after they gave birth to pups. Not so delicious though. Their meat is tough and sour."

"Savage Zhao, sing a song for us. Chen likes listening to songs when cooking dogs," suggested Zhou. "Liu used to sing Cantonese songs for us. He came from Guangzhou two years ago."

I shook my head, astonished.

Liu was back in a moment. Zhou laughed at him, saying Liu was not a Cantonese any more. "Savage Zhao can't see you're from Guangzhou. A-ha, Savage Liu. You've done a wonderful job of reforming yourself," Zhou said.

"Sing us a Cantonese song, Liu," Zhou implored. "Beautiful songs you used to sing."

"I can't. I can't speak Cantonese anymore," Liu said, pouring the water into the wok.

"Savage Zhao, you sing a song for us. That song you sang every night is a pleasant song. What is it like, eh, "Yu A

Yu? Right?" Chen said, mimicking my Shanghai dialect.

I should have been surprised and frightened to discover that I had been under surveillance. Oddly I did not feel anything. I opened my mouth to sing a song for Chen, but I could not utter a word.

The aroma of dog meat wafted from the wok. I smelled and started to feel the hunger.

"Sing, Savage Zhao. We'll let you eat one more piece if you sing a pleasant song," Zhou said.

"Sing, please. It is a wonderful song," Chen said.

The tantalizing aroma filled the air. Drool trickled down from my mouth.

*"Yao A Yao/ Yao Dao Wai-Po Qiao*

*Wai-Po Jiao Wo Hao Bao-Bao."*

When I was singing, I could feel the Shanghainese running out of me one word after another. Shanghai seemed like a distant dream in a previous life.

*Yu A Yu/ Yu Dao Wu-Pu Ju*

*Wu-Pu Qu Wu Hu BeBe<sup>2</sup>*

"Come and eat, Zhao. Save this song for the next time," Chen offered me a chunk of Little White's steaming leg. It did not make me sick this time. I was able to disconnect this heavenly flavored food with Little White. It was chunky, thick and firm. And I craved another bite.

"Zhao, am I right? This is really spectacular, isn't it?" Chen said, granting me permission with a firm nod while I tentatively put my chopsticks into the wok.

I swallowed, and murmured in the local dialect, "Spectacular! '*Diao yangzi*.' Dogs '*diao yangzi*.'" 

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2. This is nonsense. But literally, it might sound like: Swim/ Swim to the Witch

# That the Science of Deduction is Limited

Katherine Huack

Not long after Katie and Michael bid them goodnight, Sam leaves Blake and Mrs. Norton in the living room to slip into his bedroom. When he returns, he hands Blake a package wrapped in Mrs. Norton's wrapping paper: candy-apple red with jolly green and white snowmen on it.

"Got you something else," he says, quiet.

"Oh, Blake, go on," Mrs. Norton calls to him from the kitchen. When Blake looks over at her, she adds, "Deduce it!"

With a glance at Sam, Blake fires off: "Didn't 'bring it out earlier' means you're not sure about it? Likely an impulse buy. Size of the box suggests a shirt or a sweater; however, clothing is typically given as gifts by people in committed romantic relationships, which we are not. Additionally, the thickness of the cardboard suggests a puzzle or board game. The number of moving pieces inside is too few to be a puzzle. Therefore: game."

"Incredible," Sam says, a breath. Blake stares at him a moment too long, stretching into an uncomfortable position, and then clumsily repositions himself with a rather sickly smile.

"Judging by the size of the box, the board is twenty inches square. The most popular games using that size board are Trivial Pursuit, Monopoly, Scrabble, chess,

checkers, Clue, and Pictionary. We already have a chess set; therefore chess is unlikely, checkers also. Your artistic talents are second only to your literary ones, so neither Scrabble nor Pictionary." Blake slips a finger under the tape. "Your knowledge of pop culture and useless trivia would give you an advantage in Trivial Pursuit; however: Christmas, sentiment; on balance ... Clue is ... more likely."

Blake's voice trails off as he stares at the Clue game still half-hidden under the paper. Sam shifts awkwardly.

"Thought we could play."

"Oh, that's nice!" exclaims Mrs. Norton. "I haven't seen the other one since some young man knifed it to the wall before ... well, *before*."

The last time Sam had played Clue with Blake—the last time he had played any sort of game—he had still been dating Jeanette, before he'd given up the pretense of dating altogether. It seems interminably long ago now, that there had ever been a time when he had tried to convince himself there was anything else for him but to be Blake's. They've come around again, gone back to the start.

Blake is still staring at the game in his hands, a little furrow between his eyebrows. Sam clears his throat.

"You know, I just ... thought it'd be—"

"No, let's play," Blake announces. "Stop fussing about in

our kitchen, Mrs. Norton; come and play Clue.”

“Well,” huffs Mrs. Norton, not bothering to sound particularly affronted.

The little table next to Sam’s chair is pulled between his chair and Blake’s, and Blake sets a wooden chair at it with a flourish. There’s a lit candle on the table he puts unceremoniously on the floor. Half the candles they’d put out for Christmas are freshly store-bought; the other half makeshift amalgamations of candles past, wads of wax melting slowly inside old jars, flames poking out of multiple burned-down wicks. The light inside the house makes the outside appear even darker, muted.

“Mrs. Norton!” Blake snaps, but his hand is gentle when he absentmindedly settles it on her back to guide her to her chair, and Sam has to turn away to cover the painful tenderness he knows is visible on his face.

When they’ve got the game set up—Mrs. Norton protesting that she’s forgotten the rules, Blake curling up in his chair, chin on his knees, with his bare feet tapping on the leather as he frowns in concentration at the little figurine of Professor Plum, and Sam not even bothering to hide his fond smile in his Scotch glass—Sam settles back in his chair. Christmases had never been much of an event in his childhood, and he knows without a doubt that this is the best one he’s ever had. He doesn’t know how to tell Blake how much it means to him to live in this apartment again, not without telling him too much. He’s happier than he’d ever thought he would be. There was a time when he never expected to be anything but bitter.

After Blake had set his violin away, Mrs. Norton had put a CD into their decrepit CD player, and now Frank Sinatra swirls through the apartment, echoing the swirl of the snow outside the dark window.

*... I’d trade that whole Manhattan skyline, shimmering steel and chrome For one old fashioned Christmas back home ...*

“Your turn, Sam,” Mrs. Norton tells him. Guiltily jerking back, Sam realizes he’d been unabashedly watching Blake: the way his long toes curl against the dark leather. Judging from the amusement on Mrs. Norton’s face, she, at least, had noticed the direction of his attention.

“I’ve got it, though,” Blake whines, brandishing his pencil.

“You have to wait for your turn—oh, go on, then,” says Sam, attempting to be irritated and falling spectacularly short. “What’ve you got?” Grinning, he kicks his socked feet at Blake’s bare ones, and to his surprise, Blake scoots

forward and playfully captures Sam’s foot underneath both of his own, pulling the sock half off. Sam’s breath catches and he glances up at

Blake looks at Sam from under his lashes, face at once vulnerable and heart-wrenchingly hopeful. Sam’s stomach drops.

“What’ve you—got?” he asks, and his voice comes out hoarse and cracking.

Blake blinks, tucking his head into his cards. “Colonel Mustard, in the Library, with the dagger.”

Mrs. Norton pulls the answer cards out their envelope in the center of the board and flicks through them.

“Colonel Mustard ... with the dagger ... oh, Blake, it’s the Kitchen.”

“What?” demands Blake, snatching the cards from her hands. “That can’t be right. “Colonel Mustard wouldn’t pick the Kitchen—give me your cards.”

“Well,” Mrs. Norton sighs, smiling conspiratorially at Sam, who gets up and follows her back into their own kitchen. His cards are on the table for Blake to sort through. “We’ll just leave Himself to it,” adds Mrs. Norton as she starts to wipe down the counters. Sam leans his hip against the table and watches her tidy.

“I’ll just do a little. I’m not your housekeeper,” she reminds him. “Do you want some more of this cake? Well, if you change your mind...”

Sam catches sight of Blake’s reflection in the window opposite. The black pane captures and multiplies him in ghostly doubled lines: his profile, the curve of his cheek, the line of his jaw, the red shadow of his mouth. The image imprints itself vividly in Sam’s mind, startling.

“He’s so happy to have you living here again, Sam,” Mrs. Norton tell him in a stage-whisper, dragging Sam’s attention back to her. “I can’t tell you how much he missed you.”

Sam smiles rather weakly. “Well, I’m sure he got on just fine without me,” he says, shifting.

“Oh, you,” chides Mrs. Norton. She stops cleaning their kitchen to put her hands on her hips, one hand still holding a sponge. “Blake has lines around his eyes from time spent smiling more than he expected.” She fixes Sam with a very pointed look. “I wonder just who’s responsible for that.”

Involuntarily, Sam makes a stuttering half-noise from his throat. He looks away from her, unseeing to the windows over Blake’s head. The ice patterns in the window corners fan out like spider webs, a thin spiral of snow twists in the brilliantly weak candlelight, whirling like an upside-



down chandelier, catching snarling rainbows in its frosted talons. All the lines have blurred, smudged to nothing. Sam has been differentiating for years between the challenging, dynamic Blake who has mocked sentiment at every turn, and the Blake curled around Sam’s bleeding body, with that look on his face like he has nowhere to run. But there’s no difference, really, is there?

“Mrs. Norton, stop that.”

Blake appears at Sam’s elbow, removing the sponge from Mrs. Norton’s hands and snatching a biscuit from the platter still on the counter.

“I was just telling Sam how nice it is to have him back here again,” Mrs. Norton remarks.

“Yes,” says Blake rather stiffly, and nothing else. Mrs. Norton gives an exasperated huff. Arm settling around her on the counter, Blake stuffs another biscuit unceremoniously into his mouth.

“It’s so nice to have the place decorated again, not like last year...” Mrs. Norton is back to cleaning their kitchen again. “This is so much more festive: the lights, and the wreath above the mantle ... I think we ought to get a tree next year, but I put up some mistletoe this morning--”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Norton,” Blake says pointedly, using the arm around her to guide her forcibly toward the door.

“Well!” huffs Mrs. Norton, not sounding put out in the slightest. “Sam, make sure to wrap up that cake before you go to bed. You know he won’t.”

“Yes, thank you,” Blake says as he attempts to push her out the door.

“Merry Christmas. Be good,” Mrs. Norton tells him gently. Sam can’t hold back his soft, doting smile as Blake stoops a little so she can kiss his cheek even as he continues to shut the door on her.

“Goodnight!” Sam laughs as Blake finally gets it closed. All he can think of is how easy it would be walk over to Blake and wrap his arms around Blake’s waist, press his open lips to the side of Blake’s silky throat--

But of course, it wouldn’t be easy at all.

“Well, I--” Sam starts, but Blake holds up a hand to silence him.

“Actually go downstairs, Mrs. Norton,” he calls through the door, exasperated, and Sam chuckles as he hears Mrs. Norton’s huff and then the sound of her kitten heels on the steps. Blake turns to him, grinning, and, for a second, Sam’s sure it’s still on his face: his affection, his devotion. Blake falters; it’s a strange, slippery moment before Sam coughs and turns away, cursing his own cowardice.

He wants achingly to stay with Blake for a while longer, but he suddenly feels like he needs a reason to, like he can’t just sit in his chair and soak up Blake’s presence. The mention of mistletoe—and even more, Blake’s reaction to it—has put him on edge.

Moving around him, Blake goes to sit by the fire again, perching in his chair like a folded-up baby bird of prey. It

suddenly strikes Sam that Blake had pulled off his shoes and socks and jacket after Katie and Michael left: armor removed for Mrs. Norton and for him. The thought makes him smile, secretive. He hesitates a moment, hovering and awkward, and then sits down across from Blake. Picking up his Scotch, Blake kicks at the feet of the table until Sam shifts it back to the side.

They sit in companionable silence, though Sam restlessly moves his feet around until they end up nearly in Blake's lap. All he wants is for Blake to rest his hand to rest on Sam's ankle, just that little sign, but Blake slumps down nearly horizontal instead, regarding his Scotch as though it's a chemical experiment. Blake drinks, the long line of his throat holding Sam's attention, and then pokes at the fireplace screen with his toes, staring at the flames with an unreadable expression. Sam wonders if he's thinking of James: small babies and big brothers long since laid reverently under the earth. Mrs. Norton hadn't taken her CD with her earlier, and Frank Sinatra still croons through the apartment:

*... Whatever happened to Christmas? The bells in the streets are ringing ...*

Blake drags his hand through his hair and frowns. "Ah," he says, pulling off the antlers a rather tipsy Mrs. Norton had placed on his head while he had been playing the violin and unable to defend himself. She had convinced him to play—not that he had taken much convincing, really, but he'd put up some token resistance that had made Sam grin into his lap. Now, Sam's fingers prick hot

thinking about petting through the thick, soft strands of Blake's hair. The fire stains individual curls copper, the ends glowing embers, giving everything both a sharper contrast and a dusker flavor.

"I told Michael he ought to propose," Blake mutters airily. Sam turns his head to look at him as he continues, "She thinks he's not serious—it'll be his second wife, after all—he thinks he'll scare her off moving too fast. *Tedious.*" He sighs dramatically, but his voice holds no heat.

Sam clears his throat. He knows he's staring in wonder. "That was— nice. Of you to do. For them."

"Could've deduced it himself if he wasn't so incompetent. He'll do it tonight; ring's in his sock drawer. Typical."

The alcohol slides through Sam, lazy and honeyed and sweet. The Scotch is open on the floor in front of them, but Blake's glass has been long since abandoned. The majority of the mostly empty bottle has gone to Sam, which might explain why his head is lolling back on his chair, tipped toward Blake with an infinitely tender half-smile on this face. He can't hold back the warm looks, the pure vulnerability. He just worships and loves, and it seeps out of every pore.

Eventually Blake rises, and Sam starts a little, but Blake merely disappears into the kitchen to snatch up the ginger biscuits he'd been eating earlier and secret them away in his lap.

As he passes back by Sam's chair, his long fingers fiddle absently with the ribbing on Sam's sweater and then fall away. Blake plucks Oscar up off the floor and curls him into his lap, where the puppy stretches to snap up the leftover Chinese off Blake's abandoned plate. Unconsciously, Sam's eyes grow even fonder.

Every single thing about this moment, thinks Sam, is absolutely perfect.

He has to try.

"Linda ... came out the Christmas I

was sixteen," Sam starts. He doesn't look at Blake, but he can tell Blake has turned to look at him. "She was fourteen. Don't know why she thought our parents would be okay with it. But Linda ... doesn't really give a shit about ... much, really. I thought," he huffs. "I thought maybe she just did it to piss him off. Our dad," Sam clarifies.

He chances a glance at Blake. His face is impassive. Looking away again, Sam continues. "Not my finest moment, maybe." He clears his throat. "My dad..." He doesn't even try to finish the sentence.

Blake shifts subtly and says, "Career military, Major. Unimpeachable record. No college. Married your mother quite young. Conservative."

Sam clears his throat. "Yeah." It comes out a little hoarse.

Blake glances at him out the corner of his eye and then looks back into the fire. "Disciplinarian," he says carefully.

Sam's eyes prick. It's the very best thing about Blake, the thing that drew him in immediately, that Blake *knows* what he's like: Sam doesn't have to try to hide how utterly screwed up he is. He can't. Blake knows.

Sam has seen Blake a hundred times announce his deductions of people's personal lives and bring them to their knees: his boss, his brother, several of Sam's ex-girlfriends, even Mrs. Norton or Michael or Katie on occasion. Never once has Blake humiliated him like that. Sam's never considered it before: have there been things about him Blake has refrained from deducing, Blake's own small version of tact?

Because Blake knows. He clearly knows.

"It's just ... my whole life, I've lived my whole life the way you're supposed to. But it didn't really work. With Mary, but ... ever." Sam has shrunk back into his chair a bit, making him look smaller. "I've never really felt all that much. You love murders and experiments and Clue." His eyes are focused on some point on the floor next to his right foot. "New York, even."

"I'm not like that. My daughter. I didn't, ah," he swallows, "love her."

Sam can feel Blake's gaze on him, but he doesn't look up to meet it. Still looking at the floor, Sam confesses, very low: "It's not like that, when I'm around you."

There's a pregnant pause.

*Please, Sam begs. Please, Blake.*

"Well, I do try to offer some utility," Blake says lightly. Sam's head snaps up in time to see Blake gesturing airily as he gets to his feet.

*You knew, Sam thinks, you knew; you knew—he doesn't feel things like that—*

This is not a conversation Blake is willing to have. All Sam's carefully spun castles come crashing down; no matter how warm and intimate and perfect this moment had felt to him, Blake doesn't feel things like that. He doesn't want the same things Sam does. They are what they always have been: Sam loves Blake, and Blake can't feel, and anything else is an illusion. Sam had known that going in. His eyes prick.

*He doesn't love you. ↗*



# 'Tis the Season for Holiday Spirit

Marci Clark

An example of ideology in which an "imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence" occurs during Christmastime. There are common sights, sounds and feelings associated with Christmastime that are given direct correlation to the holiday. People are also generally happier and friendlier around Christmas because of the common signs of Christmastime; a behavior that is driven by the belief that Christmas is a "happy holiday" because of "holiday spirit."

The "real conditions of existence" in the context of Christmastime are the common and cliché things you are likely to observe in December. Red and green everywhere, gingerbread cookies, presents, a manger scene, and pine trees decorated with ornaments are all "real conditions of existence" during Christmastime. You also

hear and smell things that are not tangible, but still are a reminder of Christmas. The scent of Balsam, peppermint, and fresh snow are common encounters. The sound of upbeat carols softly playing in the background and bells ringing for the Salvation Army are examples of the "real conditions of existence" you would expect to hear around this time of the year. The frigid cold of the wind along with the warmness of the burning fireplace are "real conditions" of this time of year that you can feel. When you experience these types of sights, smells, sounds and feelings, you receive the sense of Christmastime.

These aspects of Christmas are represented through an "imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence" because "Christmastime" is not tangible; it is only a feeling or sense. Of course, the correlation between the

typical aspects of Christmas and the imaginary relationship that is "Christmastime" cannot be explained purely in the "real conditions of existence." This is because no one informs you that these things represent Christmastime; instead you learn it through experience and observation.

Furthermore, Christmastime creates a specific sense of happiness tailored to the holiday. People present themselves as more "merry" and "jolly;" two words that do not necessarily have the connotation of Christmas in their name, but by the imaginary relationship that we give them. The imaginary relationship of "Christmastime" and the overall happiness and excitement of people tailored to the holiday are represented through the hype of Christmas by tangible and materialistic objects. Christmas Day is widely known as "The most wonderful time of the year" and "The happiest season of all," an ideology that it has probably always carried with it. This ideology may exist for many reasons. For religious people, Christmas is a time of celebration of Jesus being born. For kids, Christmas is a time of anticipation before opening a present. For college students, Christmas is a time of relaxation and the comfort of home. Whereas for adults, Christmas is a "happy holiday" because families interact more with friends and family. The sense of "Christmastime" therefore, can carry many meanings, each unique to one another.

The feelings of happiness and friendliness associated with Christmastime serves the interest of all who celebrate Christmas whether they celebrate for religious reasons or not. This ideology may exist because so many people celebrate and observe the day in one way or another whether it's with a traditional huge dinner or by attending church. Since so many people celebrate, it is an event we can all be joyful about. Christmas might even cause some people to act against their own interest when they "become" happy purely because it is Christmastime and they feel being unhappy is not part of the "imaginary relationship" of the weeks leading up to December 25th. This once again reinforces the belief that Christmastime is perceived as a "happy holiday" when individuals engage in "holiday cheer," an imaginary relationship we assign to the time frame.

The "real conditions of existence" during this time of the year create the "imaginary relationship" of happiness and cheerfulness specific to the holiday that stem from the exciting once a year event. It would be hard to argue that Christmastime is not an exciting and joyful time of year considering all the "real conditions of existence" pointing us to all the reasons to be happy. Red and green lights, songs about Jesus, and a big man dressed in red with a white beard may create a "holiday spirit" within you, but that feeling is purely imaginary. 🎅



# Two Truths Make a Lie

Andrea Caceres

## Rule 1: Admit and Commit

There are two universal truths about lying: everyone hates being lied to, and everyone lies. Sit back and eavesdrop on a conversation for a few minutes and you'll probably hear each person say two to three lies, with half being easy to catch.<sup>1</sup> Why would someone lie if they A. dislike lying, and B. are probably going to be caught? We often ask this of others yet fall helplessly into the habit ourselves. Regardless of purpose, lying effectively can significantly impact your quality of life. You do this on a daily basis, so why not embrace your imperfections and exploit them?

Lying starts young. At age two it first emerges, and floats out like a bubble very soon to be popped. It's a reaction and an experiment. A child only thinks of one thing at they reach out to the cookie platter: the delectable constellation of crumbly cookie goodness marking their face like a warrior. Depending on the child's imagination and intelligence, the realization that their thoughts differ from everyone else's could come earlier or been postponed another year.<sup>2,3</sup> As the child tests these barriers, they start noticing clues indicating what a person is thinking about and begin to realize they don't know the child's thoughts. As the child tests how many cookies they can fit into their mouth, the cookie fatality count doubles, devoured mercilessly by the child. A meaty hand reaches for the last cookie when all of a sudden the door opens. "I didn't do it", the child slurs, eyes wide, lips frozen stiff, mouth half full, face and kitchen smothered in a crumbly, chocolaty warzone, "A cat came in and gobbled them all." This spontaneous, yet deliberate excuse ultimately proves the child, as well as you are members of one of the few species evolved to be capable of cognition and cooperation.<sup>4</sup> Much like the child, you also let out a lie at least once in a while to hopefully ease tension. Amazingly, for someone with so many years of experience deliberately "bending" the truth, who has lying ingrained into their genes, you are still a human disaster when it comes to lying. How embarrassing.

It's honestly not just you; most people can't be bothered to commit to a lie, and their doubt is contagious.

In order to lie well you need to both remove and immerse yourself in the world of your lie. If you're going to deceive, you should at least do it well, so you might as well follow these rules and practice.

## Rule 2: A Person Will Assume You are Lying or Telling the Truth Before You Say a Word

Person 1, "Penny": She is the media's darling, singing accusations and calling it heartbreak. Once in a while she posts a picture of a publicity event and stage it as a fun, casual time with a few of her celebrity friends. Everything from her childlike, symmetrical face, to her common, girl-next-door look screams "trust me."<sup>5</sup> She's just an average small town girl *fearless* as she takes on the world in *style*. A decade of fame passes, and she is well aware of her clean cut image, and make no mistake, she would do anything to protect it.

Person 2, "Paul": On the other side of the ring, consider her opponent, a self-proclaimed "genius." His slogan: no one loves him like he loves himself. Comparing himself to anything from Gandhi, Shakespeare, Nike, Jesus, and even Google, this celebrity builds his image on the extravagant and controversial. It isn't that he's *heartless*, it's just such a burden to carry so much *power* and *fame*. He recently said of himself, "I'm like a vessel, and God has chosen me to be the voice of the connector."<sup>6</sup>

The situation hasn't been stated and already each of these "completely anonymous non-celebrities" has a background that probably allowed you to make up your mind about who is the liar in this situation. You most likely would suspect "Paul" to be the liar, even without hearing the statement in question. On the other hand, you may proudly declare "Penny" the liar because you can see this twist coming, and that is an example of lying to yourself dear. Are you confident you would think that in real life circumstances? The fact of the matter is that even among the self-proclaimed "unbiased", everyone has preconceived notions about who can be trusted and who cannot.

For example, let's assume an acquaintance believes you aren't lying. It may be because there is virtually no reason to lie (is this a hobby for you?). It may be because of circumstance, or perceptions for one or both of you. Either way, congratulations. You have the privilege of making small mistakes, having fun with your story, and potentially add an ally. Even if you are caught, your inherent likeability and positive background will allow you to suffer fewer consequences than others less lucky. If "Penny" was exposed for using lies to cover up her mistakes (while subtly insulting her enemies), she can simply misdirect, distract, cry, and lay low until the drama dies down. Had she been someone that didn't have such a charitable image (such as "Paul"), her career could have potentially ended in a situation like this. Quotes such as "I didn't mean to say this, I meant to say..." or "It was a mistake but it *definitely* won't ever happen again," are often claimed by many guilty people.

On the other hand, if your acquaintance has a lurking suspicion of you, prepare by looking more trustworthy before speaking a word. A light smile is ideal (unless of course you find yourself in a realistically terrifying situation, smiling next to a dead body may give off a different impression). Make yourself presentable—just like in an interview, you want to make sure you are putting your best, most innocent face forward. You might not be gifted with the features of our dear "Penny", but you can always try covering up any scars and blemishes, possibly removing facial hair, and of course, wearing that "natural", interested smile.<sup>7</sup> This might invoke a sense of detachment to yourself—as if by putting on a face, you are giving up your own. Over time a thought will lightly tap at the corners of your mind: do people not trust you because you aren't trustworthy? Many times, being told you aren't trustworthy will push you to fulfill these words, sometimes even immediately.<sup>8,9</sup> It's been proven countless times: people change in response to the expectations and beliefs of others onto them. Self-fulfillment prophecy goes for anything else too: give a child a fish and they will eat for a day, tell a child they are a fish every day and they will dive into the ocean, free, into the sunset with a school of tuna. Either way: don't prove them right! Perhaps you'll feel like it's unfair, having so many things stacked against you and now having to play an honest part without necessarily being all that truthful. Put on your best face and you tell yourself you don't care. Isn't a pep talk sometimes a lie in order to encourage success? After all the saying fake it to

you make it basically means lie your way towards a sense of accomplishment. Eventually you'll become what you are after.

## Rule 3: Tell Them What They Want to Hear

Famous ad man Don Draper once declared, "I don't sell products, I sell dreams."<sup>10</sup> People buy ideas, not products. You need to create an emotional connection with the person you are lying to. In lying, you cooperate with your audience to create an event existing exclusively in your minds. Be it a minor tweak to an actual event or a lifetime, you need to make sure to know what your audience is willing to take. Here is where you have to really think about what you want to get out of this deception. Who gains what if your lie is successful? How severe is your lie? Are you trying to escape punishment, or simply get out of a pinch? In-the-moment-lies are where a lot of the "little white lies" come from. Those "have other plans tonight" concealments of your pizza and chip loaded binge fest til' 2 am, those "I love you—" excuses for staring mindlessly at that gaudy accessory—lies that probably won't make a difference in the world. Unfortunately, if you can't keep a straight face, or if you say something wrong, your "good intentions" won't really matter. You would potentially be losing someone's trust for saying something intended to be nice.

Just like the ad man, lawyer, or politician, your words need to slip through cracks and win people over. When it comes to phrasing, there are several expressions a seasoned liar knows to avoid, and emotions they can exploit in order to sell a story. When telling a lie, use contractions liberally. Don't say "I did not do...", opt for the "can'ts" and "wouldn'ts." The Clintons, Lance Armstrong, Jerry Sandusky, President Nixon, and many more have exhibited this trait when lying.<sup>11</sup> It's an easy tell. Hiding the truth by inserting "not" in the middle isn't as effective as it is soothing. Do not repeat the question in the first person, say you are "honestly" or "truthfully" telling 100% of the "verifiable" truth, or change your tone too much.<sup>12</sup> Every time you say "honestly" think—are you saying this to convince them, or to convince yourself?

Remember that it's easier to get away with tiny incorrect details than a full blown lie. Most importantly, know your story as well as you know your name (unless you're lying about that). Become an expert over the ins and outs of that "fated night", or that "romantic vacation" in case you get follow up questions or need to repeat something. If you

say you went to see the dolphins, then you better know what a dolphin looks like! Small details have the power to make mulch out of your story, which is why it's much more effective to concentrate your lie(s) around adding miniscule details in an otherwise marginally true event. Embody your lie. Imagine yourself living this made up moment, not as a distant dream, but as a reality you simply haven't experienced yet. Adapt. If think you might get caught, bargain with the other person. "Yes you ate those cookies, but it was only two, not all of them." "Yes I never swam with the dolphins, but I definitely dipped my feet in the pool." Remember what you say. Getting caught in a contradiction is not only disheartening, but embarrassing. Give yourself a free lie on the house and make up an excuse to get out of there.

As for emotions, just like any well written character, every person wants something. You want to be well liked, the other person likes compliments. It makes sense. Everyone wants to be liked; even empathy-devoid people can recognize how beneficial it is. Other universal wants include feeling important, amusement, understanding, nostalgia, and curiosity. Tell them about that meaningless (possibly made up) secret and see their eyes light up in trust. Although this act has as much integrity as a click bait title with a purposely wrong celebrity (so annoying), you have both reached a mutual agreement benefitting both of you. See things from their perspective, empathize, and know where they are coming from. That crazy friend that overreacts or can't keep a secret? You bet you'll tone down your story. That person you know can't handle more bad news today? It would be cruel to tell them their cat died (and that you ran over it). The truth is that sometimes you need to lie in order to keep peace, or elevate someone. Other times you're just covering your own back, or maybe you're bored. Either way, a lie involves more than one person, and this interaction can make or break you.

#### **Rule 4: Don't Get Nervous**

Imagine a psychopath is ten minutes from getting his victim to comply. This is one of the most amusing parts of the game: the chase. It's laughable really, how easily his victim has fallen for his story. He caught himself making two contradictory statements within seconds of each other and they just flew past the victim's head. Despite his words quickly skipping out, his body is loose and relaxed. Lying for him is fun, and he is an expert. After all, if he gets caught it's simply another game to play, and he can charm his way

out of that too. It is exactly because he does not fear that he need not fear. For if he has the charisma, the confidence, and the charm, he can (and will) get away with murder.<sup>13</sup>

You, an average liar on the other hand, fall victim to your body with every lie. Even before a lie is born, your body is racing. It's instinctual, unavoidable, but not untamable. Within 350 milliseconds, your body has already gone into survival mode.<sup>14</sup> Epinephrine, along with roughly thirty other hormones, has flooded your bloodstream and you are trying not to drown in their symptoms.<sup>15</sup> Your heart rate, your breathing, drum quickly despite your efforts. If you are really unfortunate, sweat and rigidity will mark your face with the word "liar" more glaringly than a gold sharpie. You open your mouth. It's been a second—maybe more. Your tongue is a foreigner, your voice a squeaky toy. A stutter, a stumble, or a strange, stifling sound sloppily sifts through your vocabulary. Your face stiffens and twitches. It's the irregularity of it all, the unnatural movements and the painfully obvious doubts that give you away. You unfortunately have been caught in a lie.

Do you want to hear an honest confession? Sometimes I don't call people out on lies because they seem so horrified or embarrassed I think that they will self-combust if they hear they've been caught. Poor things. It wasn't a lie; it was only ineptitude with insufficient cover. I see them as they stumble through each detail. Our eyes make contact briefly which incites them to go on digging deeper into a deeper hole. So much effort wasted.

Lying, much like acting, is a performance that takes practice. Take up acting or stress relief classes if it helps. You may feel the tension taking root at your throat and vining downwards into knots inside your stomach. Try your best to ignore it and live in the moment. You may not possess the charm and ruthlessness of a psychopath, but your morals enable you to genuinely care about others. Maybe keep this in mind to motivate you—how discovery can lead to pain on both ends. Perhaps do the opposite and try tucking your feeling away. Invest and believe in yourself. You can do this. How are other people going to trust you if you don't trust yourself?

Once the basics are covered, you need to focus on the details. Microexpressions, (true feelings) throat/face grabbing (because of the stress response), closed off gestures (blocking yourself), fidgeting (nerves again), and contradicting body language are small things that may lead a person to doubt you.<sup>16</sup> Use open or "power" poses to make yourself look big, and maybe show them

your hands—you have nothing to hide. Look the person in the eye. Not like a vulture staring down its meal, but as a close friend. There's been indications that looking in the opposite direction to your dominant side is a tell, but there has also been contradictory evidence towards this eye shift. What would a cross-eyed, ambidextrous person do in that scenario anyways? This is a very tiny, very crucial detail, but DO NOT SMILE immediately after telling a lie. You can smile before, during, or a second after, but that unmistakable "I got away with it" microsmile will give you away to an experienced lie detector. I'm sorry to say that this "I got away with it" rejoicing is a luxury. Did you really get away with it? What if this comes up again? You might find yourself contemplating your actions. A little hollow echo may disperse inside of you instead of the expected euphoria. That is normal. Know that you cannot reverse time and change your lie. The lie will exist as long as someone knows about it. And when all documents are lost about it, when everyone has forgotten, there will still be so many other lies living among us.

#### **Rule 5: Evidence can Make or Break You**

So you're getting a hang of this routine. You've stepped into the shoes of another person, seen what they want, serenaded them with your pretty little lie, and they bought it. There is of course one more thing that will determine if you are caught. Evidence. If someone gets a hold of it you will be ruined, or maybe that was the plan all along (max level liar right there buddy). Are you ready to have fun with this?

This is where the magic happens. With enough planning or boredom you have the power to bring fiction to life be it a magnum opus or Frankenstein's monster. That's the beauty of it! It's a choose-your-own-adventure that delicately balances between comedy and tragedy. Have undeniable evidence that points to something? Tamper with it. Cover your tracks with another person's big shoes. Want to make bank? Turn your next art project into a "rare missing link species." Like monkeys? Is *Finding Nemo* or *The Little Mermaid* your favorite Disney film? Are you maybe a little disturbed? Mix them together and add your own special flair. Bam: bonefied Fiji mermaid! <sup>17</sup> Put up fliers and start charging for admission, this little cutie is your ticket to fame and fortune. You don't even have to make it! Just borrow it from a friend and make \$107,758.82 (adjusted for inflation) like P.T. Barnum and his little abomination—hey, why not open your own show and see those numbers add up. By the way, this is the guy who coined the phrase

"there's a sucker born every minute."

If that sounds too quaint, adopt a persona. Promise everyone vague, sweeping statements in a quest for their support. Use your humor, and boastfulness to speak to the lowest denominator. Wax nostalgia and dreams and when you get the position you wanted, change the facts to always be in your favor. Oh there's proof against you? Lies! The funny thing is that accusations lower people's trust, but if you counter accuse them of lies, well then who is the liar huh? Maybe they were the ones planting evidence, while you innocently and coincidentally at a food drive to the poor starving children of Uzbekistan. That video with proof of you literally looking into the camera gloating that you are lying while holding the evidence: why that could be anyone, and why on earth does your accuser have access to tapes? They are the criminals and they'll do anything to make you look bad. It has to be a conspiracy.

Still not enough? Well then let's kick it up to full throttle. If your words resonate with your audience, you will find belief is stronger than fact. People can be staring at the most logical, undoubtable proof and still deny that it exists. Take various conspiracy theories, such as that global warming is fake (thirty percent of Americans),<sup>18</sup> or that the world is flat, or that the US won its independence from a country other than Britain (twenty-five percent of Americans).<sup>19</sup> Wow people are dumb. Or are they? Since birth children are raised thinking if they believe anything is possible. If they are raised in a community that believes the earth only existed 1000 years ago, only to find that they were being lied to their entire life, it's as if their entire being is being jeopardized. Of course, some people are going to take jabs to what they believe in personally, because belief is a big part of who we are. People are insecure, and need guidance. People need resources they can trust to give them facts because that's the only way they can be make conscious decisions. So take it away old friend. Change all history books to be in your favor. Say that you invented the hamburger, never poop, and that when you were born, the seasons changed, creating a double rainbow and a new star.<sup>20</sup> I'm not expecting or encouraging you to go the full Big Brother (or Kim Jung-Un for that matter), but evidence is only dependent on the source it's obtained from. Have information-manipulating dictators ever ended well? Rarely. Just because a few nutters can back up your claim doesn't mean you're good to go. Be warned. If you fail to acknowledge the importance of evidence, it can appear unexpectedly and be your downfall.

# Sic Semper Dingus

Nicholas Lecnar

## Rule 6: Rewind and Repeat

And as you trot victoriously through the finish line you become aware of a small chasm in the back of your mind. You reflect on how your voice resonated through the thin veil of air, feeling like it was true. Almost. It may zap out of existence in that instant. You would proudly carry on without this nothingness nibbling at your insides. Reward yourself with a juicy burger (vegans--treat yourself to an apple—mmm health) filled with almost as much substance as that lie, or maybe opt for that decadent desert that rolls as sweetly off your tongue as that lie. You are on fire, because hey, you got away with it! This exhilaration, liberation, and relief gives you a second wind, and maybe it's the adrenaline finally spiking, but you feel like you can conquer the world.

For many others though, worry starts to consume us—ever so slightly. Someone asks a simple question and you let out a lie. A simple one word lie over and over and over again. Just like your thoughts, this question ebbs up into and out of existence. You resent the little lies, but acknowledge they are necessary. It is not the time to reveal your story or your being. They dig a little deeper every time. More lies will come, and you'll answer the same way. You hide pieces of it through small similarities in other mediums, to lessen the alienation and doubt. The truth runs parallel to details you disclose, barely touching it always reaching for it. It sometimes ends up dripping into other mediums as it tries to escape. Reflecting is moreso a reaction, and rewinding is an inevitable part of this play. As you go put on your costume, walk across the carefully crafted stage, and sing the closing song confidently and calmly, the audience fails to comfort your efforts. You are a changeling, impersonating a being that shares your name. You are a human masquerading as normal, just like everyone else. Together we facilitate this beautiful mirage, but it is never sustainable. We'll ask each other a question, without caring for the right answer, and we'll respond to each other almost honestly, but never truthfully. How are you? Fine.

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Ty: Hey.  
Cortney: Hey. Ty is that short for something?  
Ty: Tyrus.  
Cortney: You like to be called?  
Ty: Nah. Ty, is fine. It's nice and short.  
Cortney: Ty, you can hang out? Yeah.  
Ty: I'm a writer. . . Cortney. (beat)  
Cortney: Nice. I have a rehearsal on Thursday. Great! I'm sure they'll be back any sec.  
Ty: You ever have a rehearsal with someone you just didn't think couldn't act?  
Cortney: So do you act?  
Ty: Sure. Totally. There's small actors, I mean . . . I worked with this one actor, I won't say his name.  
Cortney: He wouldn't give me what I needed until right before the scene. I like you. I don't know . . .  
Ty: I could if I wanted to.  
Cortney: What do I . . .  
Ty: Play. . .  
Cortney: Play. You mean like my guitar?  
Ty: I know.  
Cortney: I know.  
Ty: Yes, Ty.  
Cortney: Yes, I?  
Ty: I? (pause) Say anything you want.  
Cortney: I don't want to say what I feel.  
Ty: I don't want to say what I feel.  
Cortney: How do we do this?  
Ty: How do we do this?  
Cortney: And I?  
Ty: And I.  
Cortney: I don't know . . . I feel I don't know what I feel . . . I don't know why I'm saying that just now, maybe it's because she told me to? It's nice?  
Ty: (laughs) It's nice.  
Cortney: It's nice. You have to want something . . .  
Ty: Sure, but you have to want something?  
Cortney: You have to want something. . .  
Ty: You could if you wanted to . . .  
Cortney: It's nice. I could if I wanted to . . .  
Ty: It's nice.

# Shah Jahani Perfectionism

Oliva von Gries

Given a name meaning “King of the World” in Persian, the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan was not only a skillful ruler in Indian history, but also a strong supporter of the arts.<sup>1</sup> Although the emperor seemed to be most interested in architecture, as evident by his patronage of the Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan did continue to support the rich Mughal painting tradition his father Jahangir and grandfather Akbar fostered. In addition to generating a practice of creating stunning court paintings, these Mughal rulers also used these pieces as propaganda to win the respect of their subjects and rival leaders. This use of artwork as propaganda by Mughal emperors is exemplified by the watercolor painting, *A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year*, created in the Mughal Empire by the artist Bichitr in 1630 CE.<sup>2</sup> Technically well done, the piece depicts Shah Jahan in a light that goes beyond flattering to extremely idealistic. This portrait of Shah Jahan helps convey the idea that, in Mughal court art, there is a strong tradition of paintings doubling as propaganda by depicting emperors as flawless and god-like.

Used to celebrate the greatness of the current Mughal ruler, *A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year* shows an idealized Shah Jahan with his face and feet in full profile and his body in three-quarters profile. This careful positioning

is characteristic of Mughal portraiture, but how delicately the emperor’s features are conveyed is representative of the European influences on Mughal painting at that time. While the back of the portrait has an inscription stating, “A good likeness of me in my fortieth year; the work of Bichitr,” by being shown without any wrinkles or other signs of aging, the actual figure of Shah Jahan contradicts that statement.<sup>3</sup> The unblemished features and rigid posture of Shah Jahan are flawlessly painted, but this perfection is too extreme, and he looks distant and lifeless.<sup>4</sup> This coldness is emphasized by the fact that, by not facing the viewer, the figure of Shah Jahan puts a visual distance between himself and the audience and accentuates how far from the common man he is.<sup>5</sup> Looking at how Shah Jahan is portrayed in *A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year*, it becomes apparent to the viewer that Mughal rulers manipulated art forms to illustrate themselves as flawless.

Wearing an orange, patterned tunic with blue striped pants and red shoes, the affluent Emperor Shah Jahan is dressed opulently in his Fortieth Year propaganda portrait. He is adorned with many jewels, seen in his turban and on his fingers of his clasped hands. Besides the fact that Shah Jahan owns lavish clothing in his real life, the painting of such items is also quite expensive due to the sheer amount



*A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year*, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

and type of pigment needed to depict these garments. Combined with his idealized features, Shah Jahan's dress is another component to this piece that makes it propaganda; the Mughal people see this portrait and are shown a prosperous and faultless ruler. In addition to the wealth conveyed by Shah Jahan's clothing, the golden sun nimbus around the emperor's head expresses his apparent holiness; Emperor Shah Jahan is akin to a god. An Iranian concept, this use of a halo in portraiture spread from the Mughal court after the sixteenth century, and one can find the motif in numerous Jahangiri paintings.<sup>6</sup> Shah Jahan's ornate clothing and golden nimbus are two more elements of *A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year* that lend to the idea that Mughal emperors had a strong tradition of using court paintings as propaganda.

In addition to filling empty space, the background and illumination of the Fortieth Year portrait also support the idea that Mughal court art was used as propaganda. Placed in front of a dark green background, the colorful figure of Shah Jahan seems out of place with his monochromatic surroundings. Only a few flowering plants break up the expanse of dark green surrounding the emperor, which is flat and focuses the viewer's attention on Shah Jahan. Having a monochromatic background was common in Mughal court paintings, and the scattering of a few plants hints at a setting for the emperor without defining it, another Mughal portraiture motif.<sup>7</sup> Surrounding the portrait of the emperor is a patterned frame, which is encompassed by illumination filling the rest of the page. The opulent illumination depicts various types of colorful flowers, and the space in between each plant is filled with golden pigment, another indication of the vastness of Shah Jahan's wealth. The inclusion of illumination around this portrait of Shah Jahan and many other Mughal portraits



*Akbar Tames the Savage Elephant*, © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

is evidence of the great deal of money that Shah Jahan and his relatives dedicated towards book art to be used as propaganda.<sup>8</sup>

Known as the leader of the "Empire of the 'Great Moghul,'" Shah Jahan led a relatively prosperous phase of the Mughal Empire and commissioned art to emphasize such achievement.<sup>9</sup> To appeal to his subjects' loyalty, the emperor leaned strongly on his personal charm, which

was supported by the myth created around his kingship.<sup>10</sup> This creation of a sense of awe around an emperor is not a new idea within the Mughal Empire; Emperor Akbar also utilized this propaganda technique. For example, in the piece, *Akbar Tames the Savage Elephant*, Akbar is shown riding a ferocious elephant, and the painting serves to illuminate his brave nature.<sup>11</sup> Akbar passed down this tradition of using court paintings as propaganda to his son Jahangir, who commissioned many allegorical paintings that showed himself as a military genius although he was not in possession of any great military prowess.<sup>12</sup> However, with wealth unparalleled in Mughal history, Shah Jahan tried more extensively than his relatives to live up to his self-made image, and he dictated all art forms in his court were to manifest the "imperial ideal." The art of Shah Jahan's court was so strictly regulated that it became to be known as "Shah-Jahani perfectionism" and was used to gain the recognition of his subjects and his rival rulers.<sup>13</sup> Because of this "Shah-Jahani perfectionism," all portraits of the emperor that came from Shah Jahan's court were standardized, idealized, and showed Shah Jahan was beyond human; he was not imperfect or subject to change.<sup>14</sup> As time passed in the Mughal Empire, the tradition of using artwork as propaganda grew and became more elaborate as it was passed on from generation to generation, which is culminated in the painting, *A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year*.

An expertly executed piece of artwork, *A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year* is a great example of how traditions are passed down within empires. In the portrait, the opulent clothing of the emperor and the bordering illumination, combined with the materials needed to convey such aspects, helps tell the viewer the Mughal Empire can dedicate a large amount of money to art. Yet, by calling the portrait just "good," Shah Jahan hints that he might be dissatisfied with the work and feel as if he is even more affluent and perfect than the artist was capable of depicting. This practice of using court paintings to

convey an emperor's ideals was started early in the Mughal Empire, and, as generation after generation sustained the custom, the tradition within the empire of using artwork as propaganda strengthened.

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