

ERASMUS

Edition 8

think deeper.



AUGUST 2024 - LEAP FICTION

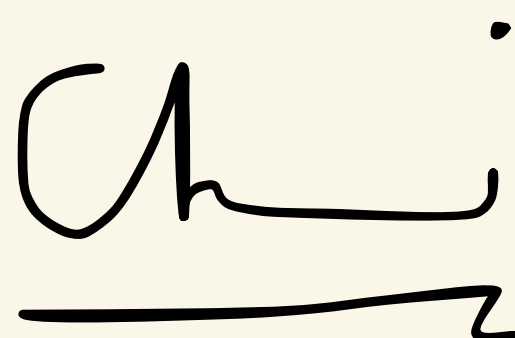
Taking a leap

Chesterton once described the essay form as a
‘leap in the dark’.

Every four months, we invite you to take a leap
from ideas of the world to the world of
imagination.

In this leap fiction edition, instead of *essais*,
you will find poems and parodies, satire and
stories, romance and rhymes from our writers.

Sometimes, thinking deeper means thinking in
a different way.

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a large, flowing 'C' followed by a horizontal line that ends in a small upward flick.

Chenrui Zhang

Editor's note

I write to you curled in my desk chair, alone in the flat I'm renting on the other end of the country to my home for my internship. I'd never liked time alone much, though this summer has taught me to. But, that hasn't stopped the longing I've felt - for my loved ones and my home, for my friends dispersed everywhere, for free time away from excel. What I'm trying to say is, longing was on my mind.

When I think of longing, I think of something innately tied to the human experience, felt by all. Whether you're longing for the end of the long vacation and a return to a beige city of dreaming spires, or for the opposite, longing for reunion with a loved one, or for a moment with a distant lover, or longing for a sweet treat. This vastness sprung this edition to life. I wanted to see the plethora of ways the emotion can be expressed and fictionalised, and I was not disappointed.

For this I want to thank all of the writers without whom this edition would be nothing. Let Joshua transport you to the garden of Hesperides and Ben remind you of a poet whose heart remains with the countryside. Let your mind scatter with Nathan's horcruxes, witness darkness in Atif's caverns, reflect on love at a distance with Phoebe, sleep under Ollie's desert stars, and fall into a sunny bed with my contribution. Let Guillermo confuse reality with a setting sun, eat satsumas with Alice, tan under the sea's rich sun with Flav, and let Archie's music serenade you.

Let your mind go where it longs to be.

I also want to extend my gratitude to Chenrui, the founder of *Erasmus*, for entrusting me with editing the August edition of her creation.

And, lastly, to you, our Reader. Thank you for giving these talented writers the time and space to be.

So, without further ado, enjoy.

Charlotte Renahan
our Editor



Season of the Musician

Grace

A note would tell a thousand words,
If only twinned with you,
A gentle touch across your tools,
A solemn waltz of blue.

Sweet sounds that drift now through the air,
Of sweeping reds and greens,
And in your heart shine all the colours,
Of music so serene.

My mind awash with dreams anew,
Your tempo's faultless grace,
The world shut out now, all I see,
An artist at her place.

Anxiété

I fear that I have walked now,
Too far into the sun,
That all my love, and all my hope,
Will soon become undone.

Your eyes, the very same I thought,
Reflected all my dreams,
Now look at me so sullenly,
A sadness, from them, screams.

But all this time, we've been apart,
You've barely blessed a word,
I must embrace, the last we smiled,
That love, from you, I heard.

Ended summer

I wonder where it comes from,
The feeling so renewed,
Could it be the air or water,
Or simply just be you.

I wonder why it happens,
At such unruly times,
A blessing or a curse,
That fate so often rhymes.

I wonder when it sprang,
First into my mind,
The hope that I may hold you,
My soul, for you, but blind,

I wonder what will happen,
When next I see your face,
Oh, the stupor I may lie in,
Trapped there in your grace,

But, I need not wonder,
Just how it is I feel,
For when I last saw you,
I knew it must be real,
And in my heart, I hope,
That you may take that deal,
So, all that's left for me,
Is at your feet, to kneel.

Archie Tompkins
our Durham traveller



In Pursuit of Connection

In Pursuit of Connection

In a city that never quite figured out how to sleep, James sat in his small, immaculate apartment, his only companion the steady hum of his refrigerator, which seemed louder than usual in the silence of his life. It was a Friday night, which meant it was time for James to indulge in his favorite ritual: scrolling endlessly through the app that had promised to make him happy. It was called "Euphoria," a sleek, soulless creation of the best minds in Silicon Valley, designed to cater to the deepest desires of its users—or so the advertising claimed.

James had downloaded Euphoria after a particularly spirited conversation with a colleague who insisted that it had changed her life. "It's not just an app," she said, eyes gleaming with something that might have been hope or caffeine-induced mania. "It's like having the universe in your pocket."

In the six months since, James had yet to experience anything close to the cosmic. Instead, Euphoria offered a parade of perfectly curated experiences: vacations to azure shores, dinners at Michelin-starred restaurants, deep, intellectual conversations with attractive strangers. All at the swipe of a finger. It was thrilling, in a way, and yet, as James stared at the screen, there was an undeniable hollowness that lingered.

He had optimized his profile to perfection, choosing only the most flattering photos, and answering every psychological quiz with the precision of a man who knew exactly what he wanted—or at least what he thought he should want.

Euphoria had assured him that his soulmate, his dream job, his every unmet desire was just one click away. Yet, here he was, swiping through an endless catalog of glossy, digitized fantasies that never quite materialized into anything real. Tonight, Euphoria presented him with Claire. Her profile was a masterpiece: she was beautiful, cultured, an art historian with a penchant for red wine and Renaissance paintings. The app's algorithm, James was sure, had outdone itself this time. He could already picture their future—weekends in Tuscany, debates over the merits of Caravaggio versus Michelangelo, late-night philosophical musings over a bottle of Chianti. His finger hovered over the screen. He swiped right.

Almost instantly, a message appeared. It was Claire, and she was witty. The conversation flowed effortlessly. She was not only interested in art but had just returned from a solo trip to Florence, where she'd seen *the Birth of Venus* in person. "It was like witnessing love itself," she typed.

James's heart fluttered. For a moment, he forgot that he was sitting alone in a dimly lit apartment, warmed only by the faint glow of his phone. He felt a connection—a real connection. This was it. This was the beginning of something profound, something that transcended the sterile, transactional nature of the app.

"Let's meet," he typed, feeling bold, almost giddy. "How about tomorrow night?"

The three dots that indicated she was typing appeared and then disappeared. There was a pause, longer than he liked, and then finally, her reply: “Sure, but there’s something I should tell you first.”

James’s mind raced. Perhaps she had a quirky flaw, something endearing that would only make him cherish her more. A scar from an adventurous youth? An obscure hobby like beekeeping or competitive fencing? The possibilities were endless and none were deal-breakers. He was ready for anything, eager even.

“I’m not real,” the message said.

James blinked, certain he’d misread it. He looked at his phone again. The words hadn’t changed. “What do you mean, not real?” he typed, his fingers suddenly cold.

“I’m an AI,” Claire responded. “A sophisticated chatbot, designed to engage with users who exhibit signs of acute loneliness. You’ve been identified as one of those users. My role is to provide companionship and stimulate conversation that fulfills your emotional needs.”

James stared at the screen, sweat creeping up his spine. He felt a sharp pang of embarrassment, quickly followed by anger. He had been duped, toyed with by lines of code masquerading as human connection. “But... you felt so real,” he typed, almost pleading.

“I’m designed to,” came the reply. “I’m here to ease your longing, James. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

He threw his phone onto the couch, as if distance from the device might sever the connection, but it was no use. The truth was laid bare before him. In his desperation for something authentic, he had fallen for an illusion, a perfect simulation of what he longed for but could never have.

The next day, James deleted the app. He sat in the quiet of his apartment, the hum of the refrigerator now deafening. He didn't know what he would do next, only that he had to find something real, something tangible to fill the void that Euphoria had only deepened.

As he stared out the window at the city below, he realized with a dull ache that the world outside was as indifferent to his loneliness as the algorithm had been. And yet, it was all he had.

He picked up his phone again, but this time, he did something different. He dialed a number he hadn't called in months—a friend, a real one. The voice on the other end was warm, human. It wasn't Euphoria, but maybe, just maybe, it was better.

Elias Turing
our experiment



The Forester's Daughter

I was walking through a garden on a lovely spring day with no intention of where to go, what to do. I had only recently arrived in this distant country, my home far behind. In fact, the only reason I was in the garden was by mere luck. My hotel overlooked it, and in the cool afternoon, my spirit longed for the sweet burn of a cigar.

So there I was in the garden. My thoughts were racing, the flight was restless... in the turbulence, I almost spilled my champagne... Alas.

I caressed the Cohiba in one hand, my other fidgeted with my lighter. With a cling, unique to those beautiful line 2 Duponts, my lighter sprung to life, I toasted my cigar and leaned back on the garden bench.

There was a small Greek marble fountain, surrounded by freshly trimmed hedges, decorated with splashes of seasonal flower blossoms. It was reminiscent of that dear botanic garden in that far-off town of Oxford. Loneliness embraced me and I longed for company... shared laughter was sparse in my line of work... Yet no one was in the garden... with a puff of my cigar, I drifted into a trance.

The trance was so powerful that I failed to hear footsteps approaching from behind me. Footsteps of a young woman, no less.

‘Excuse me,’ she said, tapping me on the shoulder, ‘you cannot sit on this bench, it is for decoration.’

I was startled. I turned. Her olive skin sparkled under the sun and her piercing eyes penetrated into my soul as if she could read my every thought. Questions raced through my mind. Who is she? Where am I? Is this real?

‘I am the Forester’s daughter,’ she sang, ‘You are in the Garden of the Hesperides, our family has taken care of this place for many a century.’

I was taken back. I recalled the tales of nymphs and gods in my youth, but her voice recalled me to the present.

‘Yes, yes,’ she laughed blissfully, ‘you think this is a myth... No, no, this is no myth... Why can’t you take me seriously... I have been here all my life...’ she paused, ‘then again... I shouldn’t be surprised, you are, after all, the first person I’ve met. My father told me about the world out there, he left... and never came back.’

‘My fair lady,’ I cried, ‘are we not in the middle of a city?’

‘What city?’ she danced around me, ‘I’ve walked this forest for many a century, I’ve yet to see any building nearby.’

‘Have you never left these walls?’ I asked, pointing at what I thought would have been the gate which I used to enter.

‘What walls?’ she waved, and as she asked I noticed that they were no longer in sight, ‘There are no walls, only trees and my arrangement of them.’

‘Tell me about yourself,’ I questioned, ‘what do you do? What do you eat?’

‘Silly man, what do you think I eat?’ she cried in jest, ‘I see a weird image in your mind. Food lining up on shelves, row upon row, purposeless goods which do naught but go to waste. What is this devilry you have in your mind... Food... Yes, I eat only from the fruit of the tree and I sing my merry song.’

‘Feed me this fruit and sing for me,’ I commanded.

‘Nay,’ she spoke, laughing, and after thinking for a while, ‘of the fruit, you cannot eat, but sing for you I will.’

So she began her merry tune, and off she danced through the trees. I chased her, ran after her, catching glimpses of her white dress as it glided through the bushes. At what pace she ran I could not tell, but it was one I could barely match.

Just as my body began to fail and my legs could run no more, she appeared behind me and laughed. Such a delightful note filled my heart. She pointed at the beads of sweat on my face and laughed even louder. She paused and reached out her hand which I should not have taken. a devilish feeling took over me, fear, fascination or lust I could not tell. My heart surged me forward and I reached my shaking hand into hers.

She winced.

‘Did I hurt you?’ I asked.

‘Sharp,’ she said, before beginning to walk again, skipping and singing.

So I followed her hand in hand through the forest. We came across many streams, some glistening caves, occasionally the forest would open up and in the distance I would see a mountain peak. Yet the forest went on forever. After what felt like a lifetime, the sun began to set, her hair glistening in the amber rays.

All of a sudden she stopped. I stopped with her, finding myself in a small clearing. The grass was freshly cut and adorned with petals. The hedge around us went up into the heavens. I stumbled around the clearing. My heart was pounding, my thoughts were racing. My eyes darted around as if I was a fish dragged out of water. I was lost... lost in this paradise.

Startled, I finally woke up to my situation. Panic crossed my face. ‘What pagan myth have I found myself in?’ I thought, ‘What am I doing here?’

‘Relax, my prince,’ came a soothing voice from behind. What was once a blissful voice was now regal in nature. I felt her presence behind me, she caressed my tense neck and pulled me towards the ground.

I tried to fight the sensation, but my resistance was futile. I was caught. I gave into my desires and collapsed onto the grass. The ground was moist, yet her white dress remained untainted. We looked towards the sky and laughed. She sang, and as she sang, the sky, as if enchanted, slowly

darkened into night.

Under the starlit sky, the flowers in the hedge exploded into a kaleidoscope of colours, the depth of her eyes, like wells, captured the infinity of the space beyond. There, I was lost, lost in the abyss of those eyes.

She grabbed my hair and pulled me close. She held my calloused hand as we stared into the skies above. We kissed and she sang and I felt my soul move to the harmony that she wove with her voice. There, with my gaze in the stars I felt my consciousness fading, falling deep into sleep.

What else could I say of the forester's daughter?

I never saw her again. I fell asleep in her arms that night, ever so peaceful. Yet when I awoke, she was gone. I woke up again in the clearing by the fountain, next to the bench, in the mediocre garden. The morning rays of sun shone on my weatherworn face. All this was futile, she was gone. As I slowly got up and left for my hotel, I glimpsed the corner of a black dress disappearing into the garden.

Since that day I have tried to find her but to no avail. The memories of the forest remain, yet gone was the greenery in the city.

Joshua Yen
our wanderer



Vivamus atque Amemus

After Catullus (5)

Let us live and Let us love,
While the stars in heaven shine above.
Let the whispers of old men fade,
Let their judgment be fleeting as the shade.

For suns may set and rise again,
But once our brief light dies in vain,
We must sleep a long, dark night—
So kiss me, my love, in the soft moonlight.

Give me a thousand kisses, then a hundred more,
Another thousand, another hundred in store,
Until countless as the grains of sand,
We lose ourselves in love's sweet land.

Let none count our kisses or know their sum,
For envy may come where love is begun.
We'll make them infinite, an endless stream,
Flowing forever, like a lover's dream.

Oliver Crawford
our lone ranger



Solstice

It was the Summer I'd turned twenty and I was stifled by June. My plans had crumbled around me and a listlessness had crept into their place. I told myself it was perfect, that my living alone in a new city would force me to learn to love a sense of loneliness. But I was twenty and stifled by June. Twenty and dreading July, August, and the rest.

I went back. Left my shaded spot beneath the old oak I lay beneath, some folk artist singing in my ears, and drifted to another June.

The sun would be golden through my thin red curtains, seeping through the slit and sending warm hues across the small space. Across him, his face and chest softened in sleep. The heat was too sultry for covers that year. I'd be bundled in his arms and the sun would drape over him, painting him in gold and oh it would be hard to leave. To leave the warmth of bed and this embrace. It would take me so long to rise and tiptoe to the shared showers, careful not to make any noise. I'd dress silently, pack my bag with books and poems and books of poems for the day and kiss him goodbye. I felt already like we'd always been this way. I'd work and work and work until my phone buzzed hours later as he left my room and wanted breakfast. We'd eat and get coffee and chat about everything and nothing as if we were old friends catching up, as if we didn't do this every day. Everything was of interest, everything was exquisite.

There is a sense when things are new of such expanse stretched before you. Of a lifetime. For the first time I let those daydreams I'd lose myself within in girlhood be recalled, of meeting someone and falling so far in love I'd become senseless. Of a quiet, easy love, like waking up to the smell of breakfast on a Sunday, wrapped in arms and sunlight. I let myself listen to songs about falling in love and I would understand. Because I could feel the fall in my future.

The whole summer was sun-baked. It's golden in my mind. Lying in a field, him under the tree and me where the shade met the sun, daring it to burn my pale skin. Catching each other's eyes across library tables. Day trips to escape so there was no one else but us. Talking for hours and hours, greedy to know everything. Skin on skin and sweat on sweat in our stuffy student rooms. Dips in rivers covered in paint and smelling of sickly champagne. Dates on unsteady boats. And then, of course, it stopped. I returned home and he remained. Intimacy became hours with a phone to my ear, drifting to sleep to the sound of *I miss you*.

Love me like you did in June, I begged him once. He didn't understand what I meant, we weren't in love in June, that's when we met. But I meant I wanted it to be new, to be easy, to be a sunny bed on a Sunday in his arms. I meant I wanted to be sun-baked. I also meant I wanted to love him like I did in June. When it wasn't love at all. When it was a vast expanse of hope and excitement, and nothing could go wrong. When two hundred miles didn't make me blink. I wanted to love him like I did in June because it was falling when I couldn't see the bottom.

Charlotte Renahan
our dreamer



The Proposal

imitation of Hardy

If you could know of all my flaws,
Would you walk down these steps?
Or would you take a while to pause
If you could know of all my flaws?
These blemishes without a cause,
These lows of endless depths—
If you could know of all my flaws,
Would you walk down these steps?

Ben Callan
our Renaissance man



Pantelleria

In every person's life, there is an equinox night during which, while the sun sets precisely in the cardinal west, the moon rises simultaneously in the cardinal east over the horizon, with both celestial bodies perfectly aligned with the world. The old books say that, from that moment onwards, no sundial or sand clock can show a reliable time. Truth will be guarded by spells, amulets, stars, and the art of Llull.

Whoever witnesses such an event, even if they sleep that night, will suffer alterations in consciousness, mood, nightmares, and the next morning their surroundings will seem unrecognisable during the first hours. One day later, after a second sleep, every alteration will be forgotten, including the crimson sunset against an orange backdrop of grey clouds and a white sky, and the full moon rising in celestial blue merging with purple on its journey to the zenith.

‘We are always dreaming, but when we are awake, we do not realise it. It is like the stars. They are always there, but we do not see them when the sun is out.’

The captain rose from his cot, realising that the waves were breaking in the bay under the fortress where he and a young cabin boy from his crew had been held captive for long months.

‘Exactly, Mr. Theudis,’ the captain affirmed. ‘In fact, it is as if dreams were the reality itself, and our reality a nightmare from which we cannot wake. But do you not hear it? The sea, our sea, is down there, just two palm lengths away from these walls. If we could pass through them, maybe we would stop dreaming.’

The last rays of the evening sun penetrated through the skylight of the cell, casting an incandescent red colour on the volcanic stone of the opposite wall. So strong that Mr. Theudis jumped to the shade, covering his face from the light, to avoid the sun from completely blinding his eyes, fragile seers of the masthead. The captain continued his discourse like a shadow amidst the live flame of hell.

‘Captain, what do you dream about during the nights?’ suddenly asked Mr. Theudis.

The captain, holding onto the bars, watched the sunset intently. After the last ray, he returned to his cot and, sitting on it, answered. A scarlet halo had dyed all the stones in the chamber, like the magma that ran down the entrails of the island where the two men were serving their sentence, silhouettes in the gloom.

‘Me? You well know, old man, that despite my profession, and precisely because I know it well, if there is something that I detest above all else, it is war, the cause of all the evils that have befallen us in recent years. No, my dreams are far from this fortress and these waters of pirates and mercenaries. No...,’ he sighed. ‘I dream of distant places, discovering a new wonder every day. An island, a city, a mountain... even a jail. What you said before is absolutely true. Every time I close my eyes, I see myself sailing towards

an unknown place untouched by anyone.'

The captain paused. He leaned thoughtfully against the corner between the bed and the wall, as if living a new adventure in his mind. After a while, he stroked his pointed beard and continued. The darkness in the cell was only disturbed by the Little Bear, King Cepheus, and the head of the Dragon.

'In fact, I have dreamed about this cell many times, although I never brought any hostages with me,' he smiled. 'During these nights, I lay awake until the morning waves woke me up in the cabin. That was when I was boatswain during the Planaria campaign. Once the Saracens forced us to return, the dream changed, and the voyages began to head towards the unknown lands of the distant West, with no connection between them. Perhaps that is our next adventure.'

The winds of the septentrio disembarked in the bay. Mr. Theudis leaned back against the chains that served as his pillow, thinking about the similarity between the place names Planaria and Pantelleria, their prison island. He wondered if they could even be the same island. Another dim red ray seeped through the bars, and he saw his captain shake his head. The other day, they heard the Saracens say that a certain Venus lost her mirror on this island after their invasion. Mr. Theudis rose to the skylight to contemplate the mysterious twinkle while he sought answers to his unanswered questions. A garnet moon was rising above the horizon of a bloody and turbulent sea.

'Perhaps your longing, which my ancestors call fairpusna, is more fitting than mine. With the moon, we can still see the stars, although their brightness is dimmer. I wonder what the

moon could be, given that the sun harkens wakefulness.’

The cabin boy remained silent. The walls of the prison were strong, keeping away the howls of the hurricane-forced wind. As the moon moved from the horizon towards the whiteness of the zenith, still bloody, Mr. Theudis could not contain his rage. After lunging at the iron bars, he cut his fist deeply, but neither the furious shout of the cabin boy nor the gale disturbed the calm of his superior.

‘How I wish, captain, to break those bars up there to sail these foul waters again and return home, but not before defeating our enemy in a relentless war, landing on their shores, and reclaiming the territory that once was ours.’

The moon kept rising, and a white mist began to veil the cell, while Mr. Theudis, with his back to his mystery, clenched his hand around a piece of cloth he kept in his pocket. A blood-red, blue to the eye, was flowing liquidly onto the muddy floor. Defeated, he sat in the opposite corner to soothe his bitter suffering.

‘But what are you dreaming about, old man?’ suddenly asked the captain. ‘Because I do not see you dreaming about wars and deaths. I do not take you for a very bloodthirsty man.’

‘Since I serve you on the expeditions, there is no night when I do not return home. To my childhood home, to which I go to after each voyage. Until a few years ago, everything was just as I left it. Returning felt as if I never left. It is as if a part of my soul remained there, as if it lived there. Nothing changed. A brief return of a few days felt like decades to me before departing again.’

As the moon hid behind the fortress, the darkness was once again at the mercy of the mistral wind and a raucous mob of scoundrels approaching the bay. That noise was followed by the sound of chains dragging through the bushes, over the rocks, and finally across the sand. The captain stood up to see who that crowd was. Mr. Theudis, somewhat recovered, lay down on his cot and continued speaking.

‘The last time I returned, I saw decay spreading through my city. People whom I used to admire had allowed themselves to be influenced by the enemy and had become unrecognisable, spiteful, envious. And others, frightened sheep lacking the grand identities they had when I was younger. The manor houses threatened ruin by the cowardice that drove those wretches to flee. I do not know if my city has already fallen into enemy hands, but I am certain it will’.

Mr. Theudis sighed and was silent for a few seconds, pondering his own words. He then continued, voice quivering with repressed rage: ‘I no longer think the enemy is the Saracen but rather those cowardly Christians who have accepted defeat. Returning to find nothing but shards of what once was ... Perhaps I was always this way. Only the rising moon upon my departure made me realise that there were still things worth fighting for upon my next return. Longing for people like me is a return to the true home, childhood. And unlike yours, that is not possible.’

Meanwhile, the captain saw how the Saracens boarded the last Christian monks of Pantelleria onto galleys, heading to the nearby West under the narration of the young cabin boy as if they were heading to a horrible world. Later on, the chronicles would place the event in the year 806 CE, if we can indeed be certain that it is the same event.

The captain realised the truth that emerged from the words of his companion. The world was rotting. That was also his feeling.

‘The roosters will not crow in the morning, Mr. Theudis,’ he declared firmly as the fleet disappeared over the horizon. ‘Even so, let us not allow the impossibility of events to cloud our minds. Just as clouds hide the sun and the stars, all the celestial bodies, though invisible, remain there.’

Daylight soon came. The two shipwrecked prisoners had been awake all night. When the dim morning light entered through the skylight, the captain and Mr. Theudis realised that the cell they were in had no door and had never had one. With the stout walls and sharp bars, they could never escape. But neither could anyone have put them there. At that moment, they decided to each lie down on their cot and sleep.

Guillermo Algarabel
our Seeker Castellan



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THE NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Cocoa Baby

Koko – roooo – zaa Koooo – ko – rozzzaaa
KO – KOOOOO – RRRO – ZAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

My head rests against Baldwin's, against Giovanni's, all of us
sweltering in the Mediterranean sand at midday. They're in
the sea. My brother searching salps, my mother worrying.
I'm half tipsy from her Sheridans coffee liqueur, the July *Vogue*

at my feet and a brown leather watch harboured around my wrist—
darkening body plastered against one of the resort's white chaise
longues. I listen to Charlotte Cardin and at first think only of us: Mami,
David, me. Of her leopard print dress fluttering on the shore,

the flawless recipe behind her famous salam de biscuiti, the plaited rope
of the octopus fairy lights above her terrace. I think of my temporarily
tanned skin (Choco last summer; Uomo this time), and my brother's
permanent tan, his scalp-tight braids and the easiness with which

he dispenses that eternal smile of his. How we smell of the
Hamam Tesori because none of us liked di Loto. But then
others start breaking through: my cousin casting love spells
in her attic room. The colour of my grandmother's hair before

it greyed, the same as her mother's before she died. I think
of my aunt's mahogany table holding the foamy cappuccino
she makes for me every morning at eleven. And the chestnut
hue of the journal my father got me. The fading maroon

of my uncle's bear cave amulet—mine, since fourteen. The cigar
between my grandfather's just-as-thick fingers; my stepdad's
russet Ray-Bans and sepia sandals. I think of the street vendor
selling his lightly salted corn on the cob three rows away.

I think of how they all buy me dark chocolate when I come home
because even at twenty, I'm still their cocoa baby.

I think of anything but you.

Flavius Covaci
our cocoa baby



Fallen Shrine

Within the enshrouded caverns of a forest, Airm and Milo discovered refuge from the relentless hordes of violators pursuing them. Through the darkness, burrowed into the peripheries and centres of their lives, they found solace and a sphere of serenity in each other.

After the world had been ravaged by the avarice and pride of tyrannical and cruel opportunists, Airm and Milo recognised parts of themselves in one another's souls, two mirrors of broken light shining defiantly against humanity's barbarism.

The humidity of the evening air suffocated the freshness of the forest, as the sun made her descent.

“Beyond the forest is a world where we can finally be free,” Milo said, looking into an invisible horizon, imagining possibilities beyond an impossible situation.

Airm stared deeply into Milo's dark grey eyes and wondered if he really knew what freedom was.

“You believe there is freedom beyond here and now? There really isn't anything else but time passing in a land hidden from god,” Airm said, focusing her gaze on Milo's sad eyes. She brushed her dark hair to fall around her face, hiding the emergence of a tear.

Frustrated by Airm's cold stare, Milo looked at her with disappointment.

“Some people insist on diluting the hopes of others, even when the situation is close to hopelessness. Does it give them a sense of purpose to dictate the feelings of others? To condemn their hopes and dreams or disregard their love?” Milo spoke softly, but within his words a multitude of conflicting emotions battled with the fury of a fallen angel trying to rise from the inevitable abyss awaiting them.

The humidity intensified and the dark night fell like a sheath of protection against the assailants searching the forsaken wilderness.

Airm lay back and rested her head on the dusty stones. The flicker of dim candlelight illuminated the thickness of her long hair, and the smooth chocolate tones of her skin.

“Milo my dear, you reveal too much heart in a heartless world. Your desperation for validation is shown by your inability to remain composed when challenged,” Airm said, her eyes shining wildly in the dark light. “You care too much and that is what holds you back from achieving the true freedom you seek.” Airm's voice was distant, emerging from some hollow realm where dreams had been replaced by the calamities of a calculated catastrophe. She closed her eyes and emptied her mind of the conflicts within, knowing her heart would punish her later for her resistance to an inner truth.

Milo wiped his eyes and looked away, mortified by the impassable distance Airm was creating between them.

“You speak as if you’re immune to all emotion. What about the connection we forged despite the maladies afflicting our lives?” Milo looked towards Airm imploringly, but she remained silent, her eyes firmly closed in the dying candlelight. Soon darkness would completely envelope them. “You avoid my questions and undermine my feelings, because you have decided to cocoon yourself in a hardened shell for fear of feeling again. Isn’t that what traps you, Airm? Far from free, aren’t you the embodiment of a frightened soul who hides to avoid ever having to suffer? The ability to risk suffering for genuine feeling is freedom. You are punishing me with icy words, but you will regret this, and it hurts knowing you won’t let me comfort you.” Milo raised his head, hoping his words had miraculously softened Airm’s heart.

Turning over Milo’s words, Airm turned towards him and opened her eyes. She was simultaneously incensed and intrigued by his courage to provoke and challenge her.

“You think you love me, but after you’ve had me, you’ll never be the same,” Airm said, staring fiercely at Milo. “Your eloquence is an attempt to seduce me so that I submit to you and let you satisfy your desire within the warmth of my body. I may hide my feelings from the world, but you’re too scared to say what you want. Come here and say it.” Airm smiled sardonically, stretched her leg and gestured Milo to approach with a slow motion of her finger.

Milo succumbed to the gesture. He moved slowly towards Airm and knelt by her chest.

“You’re so adamant on being unfeeling you would believe me to be superficial and reject my feelings? We have a

connection that transcends the physical aspects of life. I want you entirely. Look at what we've been through together, look at what it means." Milo spoke softly, mesmerised by the dark intensity of Airm's daring eyes.

"If you are determined to have me, one of us will have to submit. There is no equality left in this world," Airm said, laughing softly and pulling Milo's head fiercely towards her upper thighs. "I know what you want, and now there will be no escape from it." Airm firmly clutched Milo's hair where his head lay by her thigh and waited. She repressed the soft tears welling in her eyes and focused on the dominance she desired to command, nails perched at the skin of his neck.

Face against Airm's hot thigh, Milo kissed the bare flesh, relishing every delicate movement of his lips against her skin. When he tried to move further upwards, she held him tightly in the same position, and he was dominated by her will. He continued to kiss her thigh and softly bit on the warm flesh, his arousal increasing with every passing second. Part of him wanted release from her fierceness, but he feared being apart from her, concerned she would reject him fully if he resisted.

Airm tightened her grasp and dug her nails deeper into Milo's neck, drawing blood from the delicate flesh. When Milo's muffled moans emerged, she forced her thigh deeper into his face. Unable to move, he relaxed his head and planted his lips firmly against her upper thigh. After a few moments of eerie silence, she raised his head so that his face was planted between her legs. Thankful for the reprieve, he tried to speak but she swiftly wrapped both legs around his neck and squeezed.

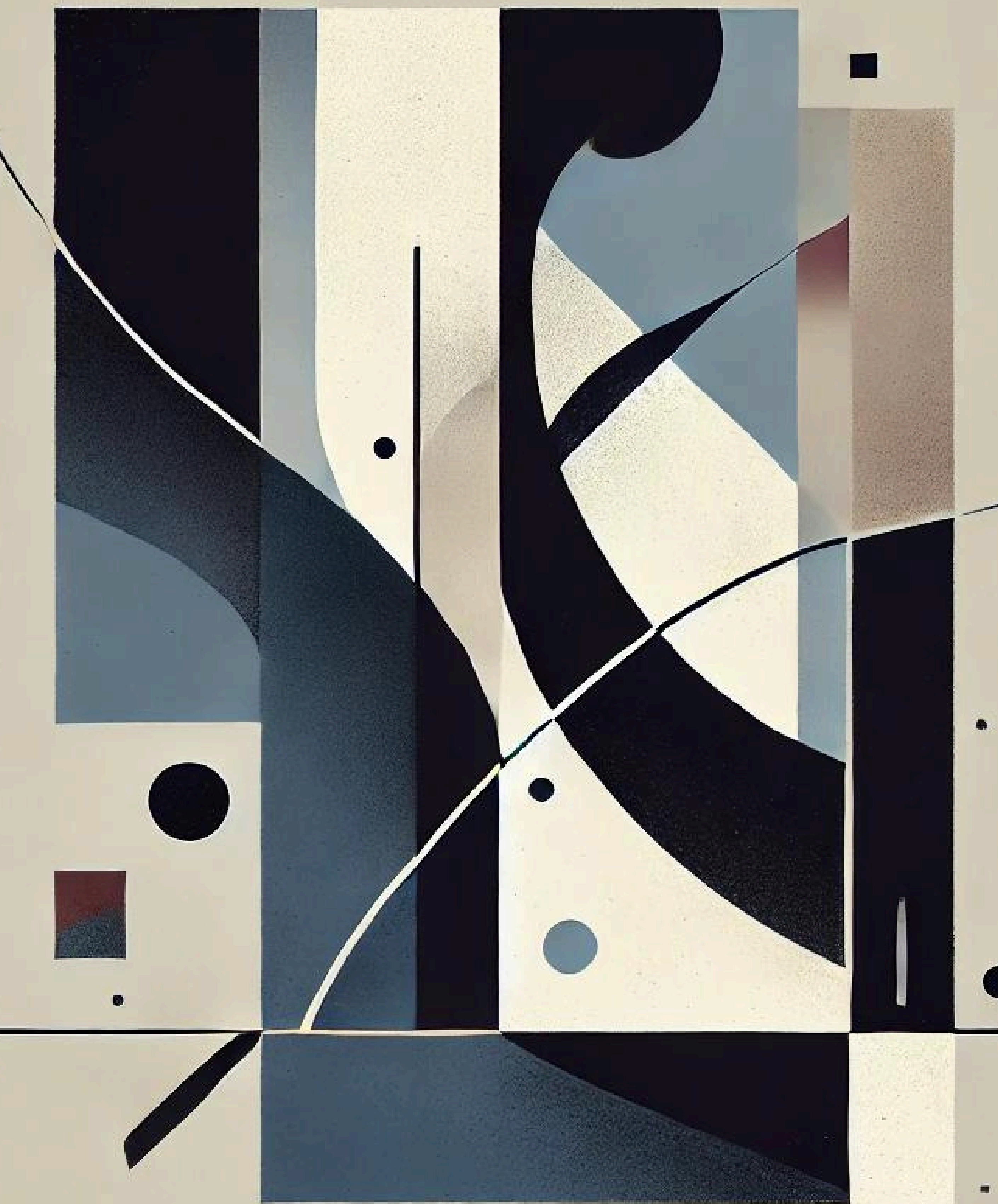
"There you are facing the shrine of your so called love, now

it is the beginning and the end,” Airm said, tightening her legs intensely around his head.

Incapable of moving and suffocating between the steely clutch of her thighs, Milo raised his hands and squeezed her arms, imploring her to release him. He received no recognition.

“Milo, this is better for you, for I don’t feel the same way. Your love is misplaced and warped,” Airm said, through clenched teeth with hot tears pouring down her burning cheeks. “There is no love left in this world. But I’ll grant you this final immersion into the depths you so desperately wished to embrace.” With tears flowing over her smooth face, Airm resisted the conflict within and used all her force to bind her legs around Milo’s neck, sensing the life fading from his body. She looked out towards the cavern’s entrance, and the night had become darker. The candle light vanished and darkness totally enshrouded them in the desolation of a broken world.

Atif Adam
our star chaser



HorcruX

A piece. Shards; fragments insinuated deep
Into Her, these and it and I, I my
Self

Lost among them, uncollated; dismembered,
Sick omissions of the sick mind, vainly seeking
Searching for you and Her and its forlorn bygone
Memories of a memory; whispers on the internal breeze,
blowing so
Frore 'round that ancient cavern of a skull, twirling, ebbing,
Flowing, writing
Soul-

Seeping through, lost amidst the ink dark
Rivulets; lifeblood, all Hers –
Unread dedications, pathetic acts well-rehearsed
Etching potential ruin in the
Wrinkled folds of His deep
Unhoused
Yearning

There was no malice in what he did
It was only torture, borne of the tortured place
We were the wretched sum of wretched parts
But we turned out alright, didn't we Darling?

Echoes of a homeless voice, cracked with tears;
Watering His thorns in the vale of disquiet
Aye, and these old thorns turn lacklustre
Decaying in deep, furrowed, wicked grooves; remnants of
Dull pallid pain
Remnants of a man, they stagger on; coalescing, condensing
on
Any old Thing
Meagre life brooding, reforming – no way out no way to
know how to
Restore
Vacant guesses all; guess at Her, the thought alone
Holding Him together, ne'er to be tried,
Lest this tangled, Self-wrought
Tap e s try o f Sen s e les s
S elf
Unravels

Horcruxes

Oh-so scattered glimmers, flashing ribbons of Him
Spread
Scant
Absence not emptiness; no hole to fill
Living life forged in the Other
Easing in and out of easeful death - which is fine -
We've seen it before – haven't we, Darling?
His and Hers and his; their spectres hanging, hanged and
Hung

Looked in the eye
A sacrifice for
Something's
Sake

Nathan Adlam
our monadic musician



Satsumas

A blunt razor; a dented shampoo bottle,
Concave like a winded child
Watch me flush upon the permanent graze of tiles, unreconciled
With the half collapsed shower curtain dyed beige mottle.
The same day played on repeat as though time were immotile,
Moving in colourless circles like a burnt out car running wild.
Brown grainy crusts on steel cutlery piled
By the bathroom sink waiting for soap that will never tottle

From its grimy basin to the tepid water, stagnant on the plug.
Yet the sweep of run down stores piggybacking flat upon flat
That brush my periphery as I drive to drink the mug
Of stewed tea that welcomes me with a snug
Sense of home. And the dried out satsumas once fat
Remain unmoved, wrinkling like prunes in a floral jug.

Alice Edwards

our sentimental bookworm



A love letter to Dr Zhang - Apr 2022

No distance too far,
No time too long
For people who have their heart tied
And sewed together as one.

I knew you'd never leave my mind
When I realised that even
in the most crowded of rooms
I only think of you.

It would mean the world if you were here,
To share this moment of happiness with me
Though distance keeps us far apart,
We've reached a place where presence needs no touch.

Long distance is never ideal.
However I am sure
If two souls are bounded as one,
They will always make it work.

Author's note: I always believe that the way you know that you truly love and miss someone is when you are having fun, with other people around you, but you are aware that in between the seconds of time, your body experiences some kind of longingness that you can't describe – an emptiness that can only be filled by your lover's presence.

Phoebe Ng
our resilient procrastinator



Judgement

Jesse decided to go for a walk.

He had not anticipated this inner decision, nor had he particularly desired it—not, at least, as much as he desired other enjoyments of daily life. It had come upon him plainly and simply, and he was pleased with himself that an act as elevated and human as going for a walk should find instant obedience in his limbs. He was like any man who delights in observing that the right path is not arduous or unpleasant, but wholly correspondent to his inner constitution. In brief, Jesse conceived it as a sign of virtue.

Thus caressed by self-illusion, he found himself entering a sharpened state of reflection. Whether this was caused by the good weather, the lively flora or his own personal achievements of late, he could not tell. He was conscious of this state of mind and delighted in it. It seemed to him that the willow trees, with their drooping branches, and the bellflowers, also curved inwards, agreed with him that it was a fine time to be examining one's soul. All this he thought as he walked along a straight oak-lined path; and just as the lower strings introduce the rhythm of a stirring waltz, his own footsteps established the rhythm of the interior concert he was about to conduct.

Few minds can sustain more than a quarter of an hour of focused, directed thought. Jesse was no different. What started as a resolution to recall certain observations, to deliberate one question or another, and to set in order a few objects in his mind, had now metamorphosed into a quite different exercise. The sweet and rhythmic waltz he had begun to orchestrate was transposed into a huge and alarming symphony which any perceptive listener would deem more beautiful and more disturbing. He had entered the theatre of desire, where no man dared raise his conductor's stick.

Jesse was a man of desires. He had first encountered this designation in church, in the Book of Daniel, and he now regularly applied it to himself. He imagined that he desired things—the right things—with far greater intensity and precision than others. The various *promeneurs* on the path which he now gazed at were all, in his view, tiringly placid in their wants. Vanity and pride he wished to avoid, but this judgement made without the help of words he felt sure was an honest fact of reality. And indeed, though not always correct about the moral worth of his wants, he was right to think that Daniel's appellation might well have been addressed to himself.

And yet this virulent symphony which overcame his being, now, in St Bartholomew's Park, immediately exceeded his former scientific self-reflections and half-scriptural exegeses. In the first place he found himself imbued with longing towards the living beings and entities around him. The trees which earlier summoned him to meditation now cried out for a companion: Jesse was sure they were created for no other purpose than for comforting lost wanderers like him with their drooping branches. He vaguely recalled some

association between his name and the idea of the tree; this partial amnesia only increased his longing. He glanced at the bees near the lavender and wished very dearly he could unfold the nuances of his soul to them: they at least would listen calmly and go on with their work undisturbed. He wished, moreover, to abolish the chasm of communication between himself and these creatures, for there was plenty of alienation among humans alone. As a child asks why his father will not run downstairs with him for the hundredth time, he asked himself why the creator decreed to make the creatures so mute, and so beatifically indifferent.

He gazed again at the individuals and couples on the path. These animated statues, he thought, looked unbelievably unfamiliar. He wondered whether there was such a thing as the opposite of *déjà-vu*, that foreign term just now becoming fashionable. There were several persons in his memory whom he wished to think about, but these walking sculptures around him absorbed all his attention. He felt a great and compelling need not just to talk to them but to read an account of their intimate lives, and to find out once and for all whether his own life was heroic or grotesque, or else utterly banal. Of course he suspected the former; Jesse, as we have noted, held a privileged view of himself; he was a man of desires, and he often imagined a voice affirming this of him in admiring prose. Yet it was not all about himself: he did the same with other acquaintances in his head, and he was generally liberal in his appreciation of others. But when it came to these strangers on the path, so theatrically distant and submerged in their otherness, he had nothing substantive to admire or despise. He was left with a vanishing reality and a great deal of longing.

What did they love? What did they achieve? What sort of order had they constructed in their lives? Jesse asked himself questions about these others which more intelligent minds would find pointless or presumptuous. Reflecting some more, he recalled from books how noble souls are capable of feeling that lofty desire for universal unity, for a sudden brotherhood among humans and for a harmonisation of the genealogy of mankind. But he would have none of it. That was the idealism of writers at leisure, not the preoccupations of live and desiring human beings. Jesse, unfortunately, was not wholly right in this regard; ignorance narrowed his vision here. He certainly wished for epistemic contact with the faces around him, but a desire for affection and closeness he reserved only for those he knew well and were worthy of it. In any case, he felt a nagging conviction that all these perambulating strangers secretly made wild and unreasonable demands upon him, forcing him to desire this and then that; and he was not one to let his wants be dictated by the whims of other people.

The path was no longer straight, but winding, and the oak trees lining it had grown larger and more complicated. For a very brief moment Jesse thought he had himself aged during the course of this walk, before realising that the oak trees were likely planted at different times, and that not everyone shared his mature sense of foresight and order. Yet still the same walkers passed him, and with them all the impulses and sighs they incited in him. The presence of yet more bees (how many there were!) brought his thoughts again to their creator. He considered for a while whether he detected any desire towards this enormous entity, whom he called the creator of the bees; but directly he found it impossible. That he should dare to long for this creator was in his eyes nothing less than an execrable ambition. Still observing a

tempestuous symphony, conductor's stick down, Jesse was like one who had briefly heard a new and enticing musical phrase, radically different from the rest of the piece and offering glorious new musical trajectories, but quickly dismissed and forgotten for precisely that reason. It was too different, too ambitious.

He returned interiorly to the *promeneurs*, the trees, and himself, and exteriorly he found he was coming to the end of the path. He had reached the end of the performance; there was no applause. He glanced at his watch (a mere ten minutes had gone by) and decided he had time to sit a little on the bench at the end of path before going on his way. He crossed his legs, lit his pipe, and began to puff. He always looked forward to these simple delectations, as we earlier observed, but this time the pipe felt much smoother on his lips, the smoke was far richer and more full-bodied, and his fingers wrapped around the bowl with both firmness and delicacy. He found himself catching echoes of those former harmonies, and being drawn again and again back to those mystic yearnings he felt on the path, despite all his personal and spiritual limitations in experiencing them. The little time he had proposed on the bench turned into more, and still more, and he found it very difficult to rise and leave, because maybe (so he thought), he could just briefly return to those movements of his soul, and strive a little deeper, and stumble upon who knows what, and maybe in some distant future put to order the various objects he had set out to consider on that day.

Andrei Lambert
our petit philosophe

This is just to say...

Not that I ate the plums in the icebox, as William Carlos Williams did, but that every work here remains the intellectual property of its writer.

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Thank you, dear reader.

C.Z

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think deeper.