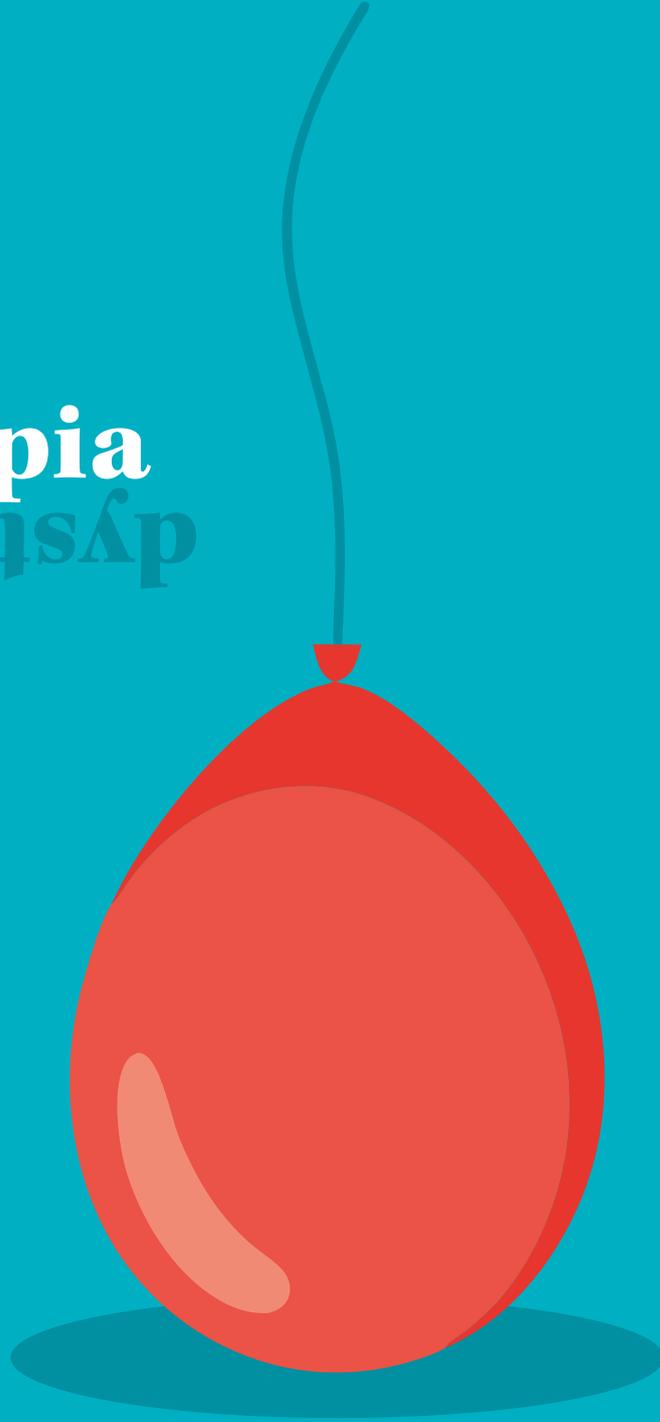


THE SUMMER SCHOOL TIMES

summer 2025

ISSUE 2

utopia
dystopia



*Utopia is a word I made up by combining
utopia and dystopia – the imagined perfect
society and its opposite – because, in my view,
each contains a latent version of the other.*

(Margaret Atwood, 2011, p. 82)

THE SUMMER SCHOOL TIMES

summer 2025

ISSUE 2

IMPRINT

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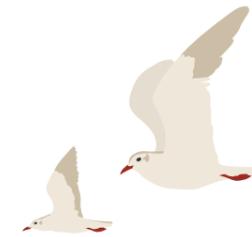
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WELCOME FROM THE EDITOR

Dear Reader, we are excited to present the second edition of The Summer School Times, a magazine that features various articles from our academic directors and students focusing on the theme of Utopia and Dystopia. Our contributors, with backgrounds ranging from mindfulness and circular cities to birds, explore a shared theme through a unique selection of articles. We also highlight some must-read stories from our programme Creative Writing: From Inspiration to Craft, offering a glimpse into the creativity and imagination of our students.

When Jana Zilová proposed Utopia and Dystopia as the theme for this year's magazine, we were eager to see which directions the contributors would take. What stands out is that no article is fully exploring or depicting what a true utopian society might look like. Instead, most are focusing on dystopia, or the tension between the two.

Is it easier to imagine a world gone wrong than one gone perfectly right? Are we more prone to imagine catastrophe, while a world where everyone truly thrives feels almost unimaginable?

This magazine invites you to ask yourself: how would you picture a future dystopian or utopian world? Can these visions spark creativity or social change? If you were to design a school, city, or community as a utopia, what principles would guide it?

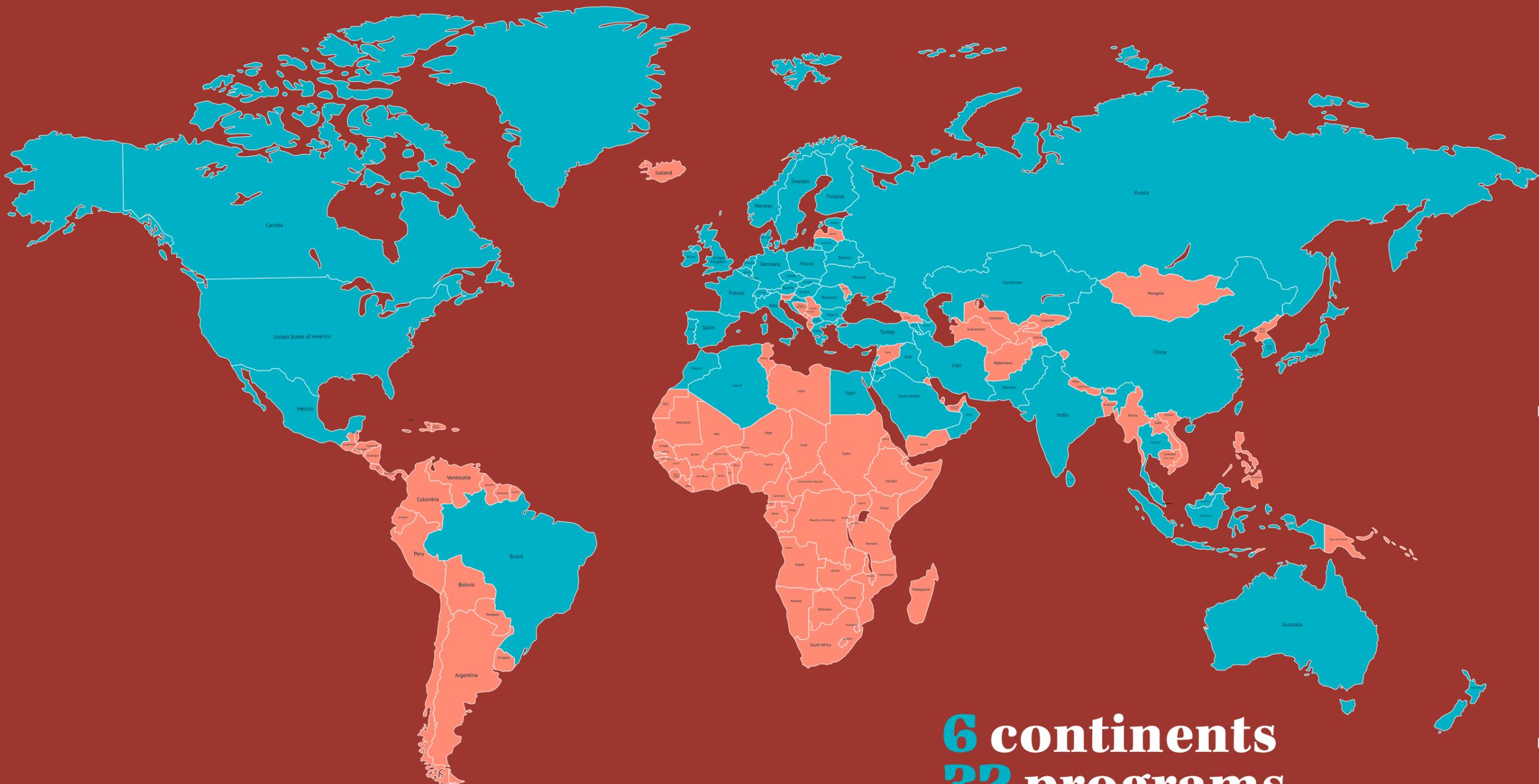
Our students and academic directors have taken up this challenge with imagination and insight, each offering a unique perspective that makes this year's edition an exploration through both dark realities and bright possibilities.

Enjoy the journey!

The Summer Programmes Team



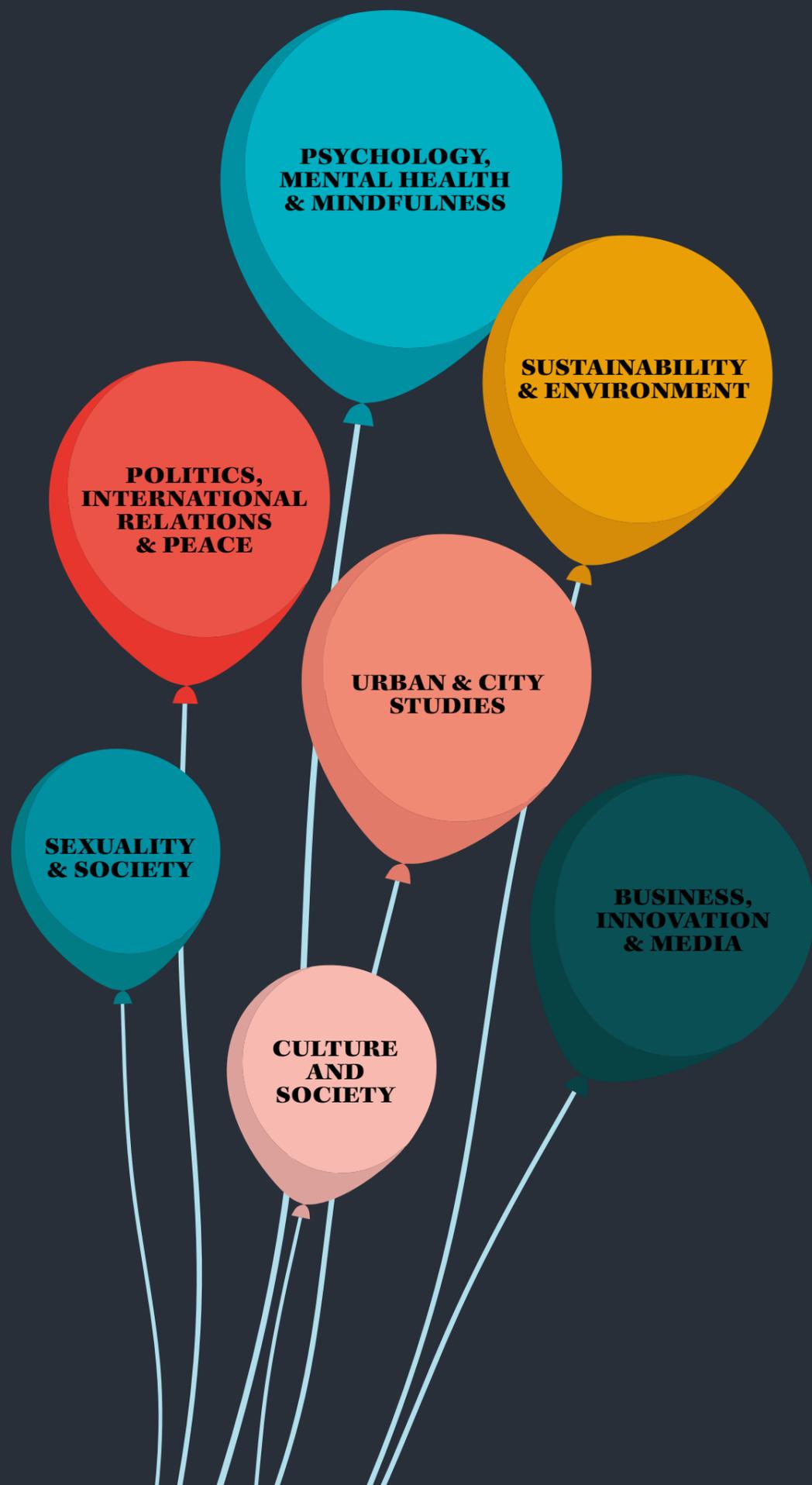
From left to right: Paulina, Mirjam, Jogita, Charlotte and Kristina



THE 2025 SUMMER SCHOOLS IN NUMBERS

6 continents
32 programs
87 countries
200 teachers
595 students
5896 lunches

- EUROPE**
 Austria
 Belarus
 Belgium
 Bulgaria
 Croatia
 Czechia
 Denmark
 Estonia
 Finland
 France
 Germany
 Greece
 Hungary
 Ireland
 Italy
 Lithuania
 Luxembourg
 Netherlands
 North Macedonia
 Norway
 Poland
 Portugal
 Romania
 Russia
 Slovakia
 Spain
 Sweden
 Switzerland
 Ukraine
 United Kingdom
- ASIA**
 Armenia
 Azerbaijan
 China
 Cyprus
 India
 Indonesia
 Iran
 Iraq
 Israel / Palestine
 Japan
 Jordan
 Kazakhstan
 Lebanon
 Malaysia
 Oman
 Pakistan
 Saudi Arabia
 Singapore
 South Korea
 Sri Lanka
 Taiwan
 Thailand
 Turkey
- AFRICA**
 Algeria
 Botswana
 Egypt
 Morocco
 Mozambique
- NORTH AMERICA**
 Canada
 Mexico
 United States
- SOUTH AMERICA**
 Brazil
 Colombia
 Ecuador
- OCEANIA**
 Australia
 New Zealand



THE PROGRAMMES

- **PSYCHOLOGY, MENTAL HEALTH & MINDFULNESS**
 - Mental Health, Youth and Society
 - Mental Health and the Workplace
 - Emotions: An Interdisciplinary Perspective
 - Mindfulness and Compassion-based Interventions

- **URBAN & CITY STUDIES**
 - Urban Studies: Planning and Living in Cities
 - Planning the Cycling City
 - Placemaking: from Practice to Impact
 - The Circular City: Towards a Sustainable Urban Ecosystem

- **POLITICS, INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS & PEACE**
 - Pre-University Honours Programme: International Relations
 - Addressing Conflict: Peacebuilding in Theory and Praxis
 - Multilateralism, Globalisation & Corporate Diplomacy
 - Pre-University Honours Programme: Politics and Identity
 - Space Law: Exploring Legan Frontiers

- **BUSINESS, INNOVATION & MEDIA**
 - Building Brands and Influencing Behaviour
 - Pre-University Honours Programme: Business Innovation & Entrepreneurship
 - New Media and the Digitalisation of Everyday Life
 - Pre-University Honours Programme: Journalism & Society

- **SUSTAINABILITY & ENVIRONMENT**
 - Birds: Our Shared History, Habitats and Future
 - Pre-University Honours Programme: Sustainable Thinking

- **SEXUALITY**
 - Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture and Society, Part 1, 2 and 3

- **CULTURE AND SOCIETY**
 - Creative Writing: From Inspiration to Craft
 - The Psychedelic Universe: Global Perspectives on Higher Consciousness

Student Experiences



YOUSSEF RHANIMI

Pre-University Honours
Programme: Business Innovation & Entrepreneurship

“When I applied, my main goal was to learn more about business and entrepreneurship and to find out how I could turn my dream projects into real startups. The programme gave me exactly that—and more. Every day of the summer programme was filled with lessons that offered a new perspective on how businesses operate. We analyzed real case studies and shared ideas freely, which helped me understand how businesses start, grow, and overcome challenges.”



KRISTEN GMERK

Summer Institute
on Sexuality
Part 1

“This program inspired me in so many ways, but mainly I walked away knowing that integrating international perspectives into my professional and personal life is crucial. I also found a sense of hope knowing that there are people in this world still wanting to build community and learn alongside one another.”



IZABELLA DE LIMA PASTRELLO

Pre-University Honours
Programme: Sustainable Thinking

“The academic content was rigorous and intellectually stimulating. I especially appreciated the balance between theoretical lectures and practical activities, which made learning dynamic and relevant. I was immediately able to connect the topics to my future studies, particularly in the field of science and sustainability. More importantly, the programme helped me see how my academic interests can be situated in a global context, and not only in the local or national perspective I was used to.”

Summer of 2025



HUSSAIN ALI ISMAIL ALQASSAB

The Circular City:
Towards a Sustainable Urban Ecosystem

“The course equipped me with actionable strategies and interdisciplinary insights that I’ve already begun applying to support regenerative practices within my business and broader sustainability initiatives in Oman. By integrating academic research, real-world case studies, and the perspectives of global experts, I’ve enhanced my ability to align commercial objectives with national sustainability goals. This experience has not only initiated a long-term commitment to advancing circular solutions at both local and regional levels—it has also transformed the way I think. Circular City is more than a course; it is a mindset shift—encouraging innovative problem-solving, systems thinking, and the pursuit of practical, sustainable alternatives for complex urban challenges.”



THALIA VELEGRINIS

Placemaking:
from Practice
to Impact

“People from a wide range of backgrounds took part in the course, from lecturers and guest speakers who are at the core of placemaking projects in Amsterdam to classmates who were working for their country’s municipalities, aspiring architects, and even graphic designers. Everyone brought a fresh, unique perspective to the table and it helped cultivate a creative environment where everyone could express their ideas. I learnt a lot about the variety of ways that places are perceived and valued, and how to represent each of those perspectives through teamwork.”



CHANTAL MARIE CHAVEZ

Creative Writing:
From Inspiration
to Craft

“The class as a whole offered us a glimpse of our true potential as well as what it takes to be a writer no matter what form your writing grows to become. One of the main takeaways I had from this unforgettable experience is to never limit yourself to anything less than what you deserve. As a writer, you deserve the time and patience to grow to be the writer you have always aspired to be. As a person, you deserve patience and love from yourself.”

Student Experiences



NINA VELOSO DA ROSA

Pre-University Honours
Programme: Business Innovation & Entrepreneurship

“I chose UvA’s program to learn how to empower others. But what I gained went beyond networking and classes: I trained my divergent thinking, built real-world confidence, and became the first in my family to step into a college environment — all made possible thanks to a scholarship that unlocked the door. Without UvA, I wouldn’t have had the lens or the courage that definitely changed me into someone more capable of turning vision into action. The program taught me that business is not just about profit but about possibility, not just about products but about people.”



DANIELLE GRACE WHITTLE

Mindfulness &
Compassion-based
Interventions

An unforgettable experience! It has been challenging at times, but absolutely worth it. I’ve learned so much about myself, connected with the most inspiring people, and explored the depths of mindfulness and compassion-based research. Remember to stay mindful through each precious moment, and above all, offer compassion to yourself too.”



IRINA ALBU

Creative Writing:
From Inspiration
to Craft

“I met people who made creativity feel almost sacred. Poets, essayists, novelists — each with a completely different voice. We spent hours talking about art, dreams and fears, learning as much from each other as from the classes themselves. Some of them have become close friends who are coming to visit me in Dublin, where I’m on exchange. We’ve already planned which second-hand bookstores to get lost in and which cafés will become our writing spots.”

Summer of 2025



SOPHIA KIRBY

Tailor-Made Programme
Sexuality, Gender Identity,
and Sexual Politics

“I really loved staying in Amsterdam. We were insanely lucky with our housing on Prinsengracht; the view from my room was genuinely life changing. I also really loved anything that related to the canals. Our Black history canal tour was amazing and sitting beside the canals near our housing and at UvA was so very lovely.”



RAGHIB HASAN

Addressing Conflict: Peace-
building in Theory and
Praxis

“Since the course, I’ve found myself looking at conflicts and peacebuilding efforts from new perspectives. The programme helped me develop a more inclusive and empathetic approach when engaging with others, and I now apply the concepts of dialogue, mediation, and trauma sensitivity in both personal and professional interactions. It changed the way I think about peace—not just as an idea, but as something we can practice daily in our communities.”



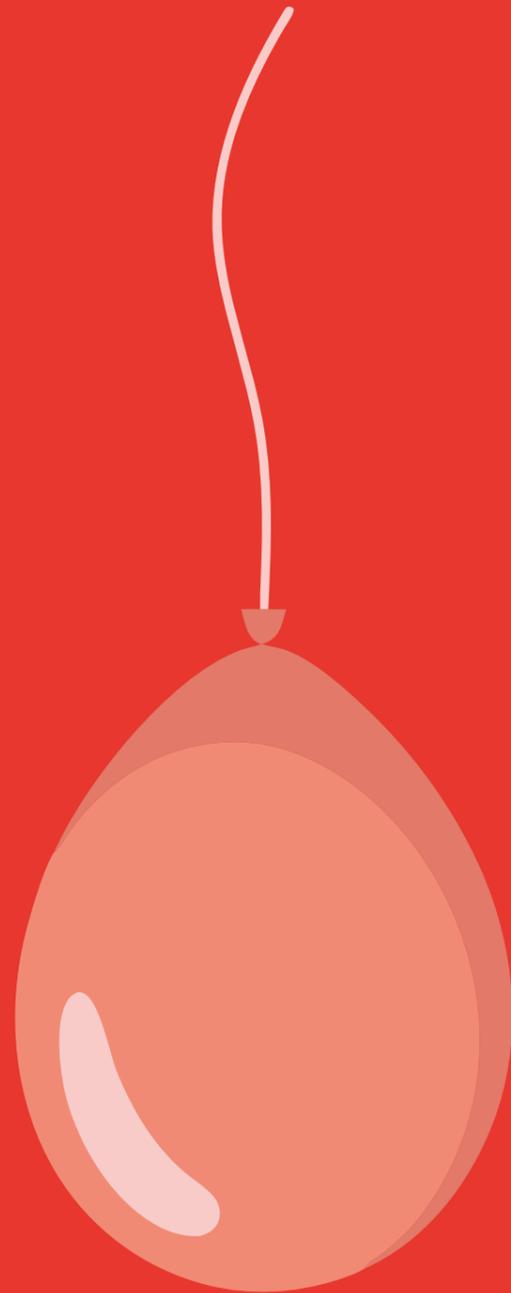
MARIKA ADSON

Emotions:
An Interdisciplinary
Perspective

“During the course, I met PhD students and researchers from all over the world. It was an invaluable experience to hear about their research journeys and to be inspired by people working in the same field as I am. The openness and curiosity of the group encouraged me to think more ambitiously about my own path in research. The course made me realise how deeply emotions are intertwined with everything we do and how they can be studied from many different disciplines and perspectives. It showed me the value and importance of interdisciplinary research in creating a more holistic and nuanced understanding of the world.”

SECTION I

**ACADEMIC
DIRECTORS
CONTRIBUTIONS**



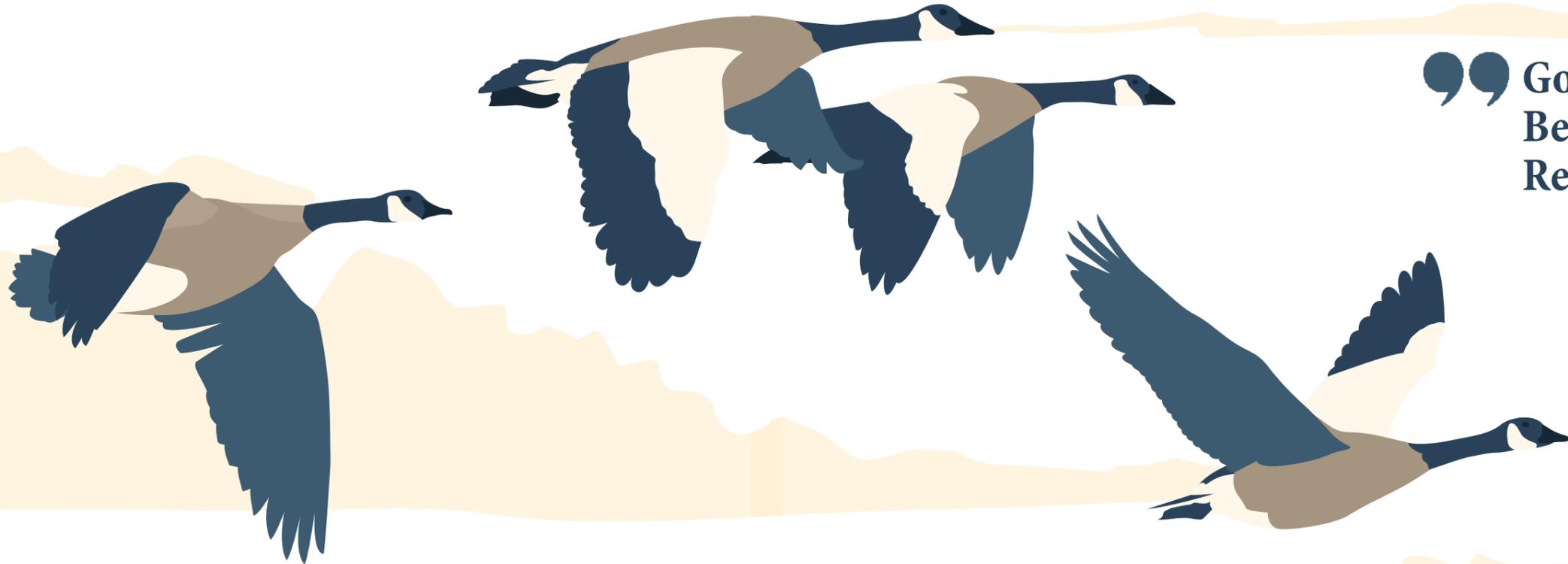
TO INTER-BE WITH BIRDS

by ELIAS DEN OTTER

academic director of **BIRDS: OUR SHARED HISTORY, HABITATS AND FUTURE**

illustrations by ANNA FORMILAN





“Go outside.
Be amazed.
Reconnect.”

Although humanity has never experienced such material wealth, feelings of insecurity about the future—shared by rich and poor, progressives and conservatives alike—are growing day by day. Will the world become a more hospitable place? How do we respond to the challenges of refugees, artificial intelligence, political polarization, and beyond?

In this world, where we so often feel “**out of this world**,” we need, as Bruno Latour put it, to **land again**. We need to **ground ourselves** in order to rediscover constructive hope—hope strong enough to inspire regenerative narratives in a time when the dominant stories are those of separation, destruction, and resentment.

Where, then, can we find hope and perspective? **Birds.**

It’s autumn. The great **migrations** begin again. In the coming days, I expect to welcome the first **fieldfares**—birds that breed in Scandinavia and winter here. This annual arrival brings me joy and mindfulness. Encounters with nature like this, proven again and again to strengthen human resilience, also bring me perspective and hope.

Ironically, that sense of hope comes partly from their **coming and going**. At first glance, migration could remind us of our own restless, ever-changing world that often leaves us feeling unrooted. But with birds, movement is not chaos—it is pattern. What seems fleeting or uncertain is in fact a steady rhythm of repetition and

connectedness that has always been, and always will be.

If we slow down, we see that the supposed transience of these birds is an illusion. They are at once grounded and connected—rooted in place, yet linked to distant lands—always moving within ecological patterns. **They take from nature only what they need and adapt when conditions require it.**

Far from evoking instability, these rhythms bring me a sense of presence, belonging, and rootedness. The fieldfare belongs here because it returns every year. I belong here because I notice it. And at the same time, the bird connects me to its other home, its breeding grounds—reminding me that I too am part of a larger web of places and relationships.

This awareness of interconnectedness is what **Taoist** tradition calls **interbeing**. It is a state of mind that deepens our sense of connection to life and its support systems. From this state, we can begin to build new narratives of belonging and eco-inspired action. The antidote to separation is radical, grounded interconnectedness—just as nature itself demonstrates.

Let birds and nature be our guides out of the mess we’ve created. Let us slowly and steadily cultivate regenerative patterns—in our work, our friendships, our gardens—that strengthen both local roots and broader connections.

Go outside. Be amazed. Reconnect.



WARNING! HEALTHY PESSIMISM AHEAD

by CAS SMITSMANS

academic director of **THE CIRCULAR CITY: TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE URBAN ECOSYSTEM**

Iwonder: where do people get their utopian, rose-coloured glasses? There must be a shop, because many seem to wear them. Otherwise, how else could anyone believe it isn't all that bad, that Amsterdam is a (consumer) paradise on earth? When we picture dystopian doom scenarios we first might see a Mars-like desert, tumbleweed rolling under a burning sun. **The assumption is that dystopia is still far away, out there in the future or safely in fiction. Yet we fail to see how it already exists, woven unevenly into our present.**

Maybe that's because **utopia for one person can mean dystopia for another.** Perhaps a shared utopia is impossible to fix, because one person imagines abundance, a world of plenty where the sky is the limit, while another imagines sufficiency, a world where people thrive by having enough. So the easier path may not be to design a single utopia, but to agree on what dystopia looks like right now, point to it clearly, and act accordingly.

Dystopia is often uncomfortably familiar. When one percent of the world's population floats on yachts while half of humanity has almost nothing. When, on the same street, one person spends six euros on a cappuccino while another sleeps rough outside. When 80 million people go hungry in a world that produces enough food to feed us all. What, really, is not dystopian about this picture? What is not dystopian about throwing away perfectly good food, flushing our toilets with drinking water while some are thirsty or burning fossil fuels as if the consequences were invisible?

Envisioning a better world is both possible and necessary. **We cannot act differently if we cannot first think differently.** Imagination matters, through shared discussion, through art, through quiet reflection. We need to make the familiar strange and the strange familiar. By holding up a mirror, envisioning shows us that the way we live now is neither "normal" nor inevitable. That recognition opens the door to alternatives.

Utopia, in contrast to dystopia, is harder to grasp as for almost every vision about a utopian future, a "yes, but..." is ushered in by the pessimist.

But perhaps we don't need to imagine the impossible. We just need to see and think about the opposite of what is plainly dystopian, right here, right now. People in cities live shorter lives because of air, water, and soil pollution; what if we designed for health and safety instead of for cars? Clean air as baseline, not luxury. Waste piles up: what if we created without waste? Materials that cycle. Products designed to be repaired. Rooftops that provide food and cool neighbourhoods, not poison and heat them. Buildings that generate energy rather than drain it. Energy that is affordable and fairly shared. Justice, participation and regeneration as the principles that hold a city together.

A healthy pessimism helps us see the present clearly. It forces us to admit that much of how we live is already dystopian, and then instead of despairing, to use that clarity as fuel for change. Utopia may be out of sight, but stepping in the opposite direction of dystopia brings us closer. Progress can be as simple (and as hard) as learning together, step by step, toward more just and circular futures.

So, put on **your dystopia glasses and get to work!**

SELF AND/IN THE ENVIRONMENT: DYSTOPIA: DISINTEGRATION AND DETACHMENT

by DR. JANA ŽILOVÁ

academic director of **CREATIVE WRITING: FROM INSPIRATION TO CRAFT**

There has been an emergence of creative writing courses and modules dedicated to **nature writing** or ‘environmental writing’ in the last two decades. The teacher and writer Isabel Galleymore says that “Many teachers describe a desire to increase environmental awareness in their students: to make their students better ecological citizens.”

I chose to shed light on **dystopian and utopian topics** through the angle of “**space-writing**” as I believe that space(s) that we inhabit, relate to, or escape from articulate the possibilities and the necessary challenge of engaging not only locally but also engaging and acting globally. Space-writing is something grounding, giving us both the necessary roots and stability, yet at the same time it’s a concept that is in constant flux; belonging doesn’t mean that we don’t evolve; we can belong and become someone else, grow, change, improve. This interplay, a dynamic dance of **belonging and becoming**, has been a narrative thread in some of my students’ work, and I would like to demonstrate this interplay in my

analysis of “The Gondoliers” by Karen Russell and *Weather* by Jenny Offill. We always anchor ourselves to other places; we always, I feel, embody the plurality of spaces.

JENNY OFFILL: WEATHER: DISINTEGRATION AND DETACHMENT

In her novel *Weather* (2020), Jenny Offill’s protagonist, **Lizzie**, grapples with anxieties about climate change, and this pervasive environmental concern bleeds into her personal life and relationships. Offill interweaves Lizzie’s internal turmoil with the looming threat of ecological disaster, demonstrating how large-scale environmental issues can profoundly affect individual psychology and daily existence.

Lizzy’s husband is essentially a stoic who reads the pre-Socratics. Since pre-Socratic texts were preserved in fragments, Offill chooses to write her book also in **fragments** so as to mirror the disintegration and fragmentation of her inside and outside world. Through this technique, she portrays the gradual crumbling of Lizzy’s and per-

haps our world, articulating **the dystopian outlook in our future**. The writing is interspersed with survival advice—how to make a fire, how to make an oil lamp that lasts 2 hours. Such interwoven anxieties are only strengthened by the side hustle that Lizzy, the librarian by day, gets. Lizzy decides to help and work for Sylvia, a famous speaker and owner of a podcast about the environment and climate change. This role only adds to her own inner anxiety as listeners write Sylvia emails about their worries, anxieties, and what will happen when the world ends.

How does Lizzy relate to her environment? Lizzy is **resisting** her environment; she is fighting it and avoiding it at the same time—the imbalances in her marriage, the addictive behaviour of her alcoholic brother, the evolving relationship with her young son. She is participating in the environmental podcast yet still remaining **passive**. This state of emotional paralysis places her as if in a state of being an “observer” in her life: Lizzy as the passive, unfulfilled librarian, worried about climate change catastrophes and survival. The passivity, and a certain detachment, don’t allow her to be fully alive. It shows that resisting her existing environment actually prevents her from growing, becoming, thriving, or fully belonging. Lizzy deprives herself of her life, yet a glimpse of hope comes with meeting a young Russian journalist with whom she meets for brief conversations.

We can only evolve when we are in some kind of relationship with the environment. Even if the overwhelming, suffocating fear of the dystopian future settles in, the individual ought to craft responsive adaptation strategies. It is only through active responding, inner resonance, and engaged reciprocity with the environment that we can move on and indeed survive. Lizzy’s detachment, however, is fueled by constant fear and preparation for the apocalypse, which not only magnifies the problem but also disconnects her from living and enjoying daily life. As the French-born but later American writer Anaïs Nin expresses it succinctly: **“We do not see the world as it is, we see the world as we are.”**

PART II: KAREN RUSSELL’S “THE GONDOLIERS” AND MODES OF ADAPTATION

Similarly, Karen Russell’s “The Gondoliers” offers compelling examples of how specific environments shape character and narrative. Russell’s vivid descriptions and metaphorical use of the environment highlight how place can act as a powerful emotional register in storytelling. Russell paints a picture of a coexistence in the dystopian flooded **New Florida**—a very symbiotic and almost fusional relationship with the water as the predominant environment.

The New Florida represents a spaciousness for vivid visions, dreams, and a space for self-reflection and introspection—these all coexist in the new environment. The new generations learned to survive and even appreciate and make a living in this extreme climate. On top of this, what we could call the new **“fluid generation”** is a generation in constant flux, constant motion, being stable within the unstable, unpredictable waters. The story follows **Janelle Picarro**, a young woman who works as a gondolier, navigating this flooded landscape. Even or especially when the world around Janelle feels dystopian, there is a place where one can feel whole.

The character vacillates between a dream state and a reality state, yet despite this fact, Janelle is fully embodied, physical, spiritual, and alive. Russell’s character in dystopian Florida is more alive than Offill’s Lizzy, whose life feels full of misery. Janelle embodies a purpose that gives her strength to survive. The fluid environment of the water allows her to be in flux, in motion. Especially when she is diving deep into the water, it’s as if she were diving within herself.

THE “DEADSPOT” AND LIMIT SITUATIONS

The calmest, most precious moment for the main character is the most dangerous one, what she calls a **“dead spot,”** which is an area of the water with hidden, sunken hazards. Janelle, with her echolocation abilities, is acutely aware of these dangers: “Launching my voice against a wall, I can hear the sunken pylons that mean to kill

me, and I swerve, changing the future. This happens hundreds of times a day in New Florida.”

Her depiction of the New Florida is portrayed in resonance with what the French philosopher **Gaston Bachelard** examines in his book *Water and Dreams* (1942). Bachelard notes how water captures the intimate connection between water, memory, and the imaginative self: *“To disappear into deep water or to disappear toward a far horizon, to become part of the depth of infinity—such is the destiny of man that finds its image in the destiny of water.”* This intimacy, almost blending with the environment, is what Janelle is experiencing.

It feels that Janelle is in the double motion of both belonging and becoming; she is relating to the environment, embracing the flux, and becoming a new version of herself—one that is rooted in her utmost calmness and sincerity. However, she also wonders: *“How true can this sensation of unity really be if you need to leave everyone you care about to get it?”*

The dead spot that Janelle revisits could also be grasped through the concept of what the German philosopher **Karl Jaspers** describes as **Grenzsituation**—a **limit situation**. Jaspers observes: *“These borderline situations—death, suffering, struggle, guilt – are what show us what being human really is. To evade them is to evade ourselves.”* He emphasizes that in these moments, we are confronted with the limits of our being, which are opportunities for **“Existenz”**—authentic self-becoming. Janelle is searching for, and confronting, these unavoidable limits of human existence, crucial for her own self-awareness.

The New Florida itself also demonstrates a kind of **heterotopia**. In his 1967 lecture “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias,” Michel Foucault describes heterotopias as real places that are simultaneously “represented, contested, and inverted” versions of all other real sites. He notes, **“The ship is the heterotopia par excellence,”** and what is a gondola if not a heterotopia itself? Russell’s characters adapt to this new environment, whereas Offill’s world is fractured and falling apart.

ALLOPLASTIC AND AUTOPLASTIC BEHAVIOUR

In relation to different ways of adaptation, I’d like to look at the concepts of **alloplasticity** and **autoplasticity**.

In psychology, these describe two fundamental ways organisms adapt to their environment when faced with challenges or stressors:

- **Alloplasticity** refers to adapting by **changing the external environment** (e.g., trying to reverse the flooding). Think of it as “changing the world to fit you.”
- **Autoplasticity** refers to adapting by **changing oneself**, one’s internal states, or behaviours (e.g., developing new coping mechanisms). Think of it as “changing yourself to fit the world.”

The psychoanalyst Seymour Halleck explains that this categorization is often oversimplified, as it **“ignores their continual interaction with one another.”**

When analysing Janelle Picarro in Russell’s “The Gondoliers,” it’s most accurate to say that she exhibits a blend of both, though with a stronger emphasis on **autoplasticity**. Janelle’s development of new skills—like navigating with breath and bones in the flooded landscape—is a form of autoplastic adaptation. The characters are not actively trying to reverse the flooding (an alloplastic endeavour that has already failed, as seen with the Bahia Rosa seawall). Instead, they are finding ways to live and function within the changed world, indicating an internal acceptance and adjustment necessary for their survival and self-becoming.

Both the novel and short story depict different dystopian spaces, yet they also shed light on how differently one can relate to dystopian environments: Lizzy collapses into anxiety confusion while Janelle makes the best of her dystopian environment, making it feel almost like a place of utopia.

**UTOPIAN AND
DYSTOPIAN
CONNECTIONS
TO SUSTAINABLE
THINKING**

by ERNST VAN WEPEREN
academic director of PRE-UNIVERSITY HONOURS PROGRAMME:
SUSTAINABLE THINKING

Searching the web for “utopian” images reveals futuristic green cities with transparent towers, trees inside them, and surprisingly few people. Trying the same with the prompt dystopian again show cities, but now they are dark and desolate, often under a veil of what seems polluted air, an occasional dead tree, and again, very few people. Curiously, both visions imagine futures with few people. Presuming a less deterministic path in which people do in fact have a choice, do the sparsely populated cities reflect that we somewhere made a choice towards a more harmonious society focused on stewardship and with a keen awareness that with great power comes great responsibility. Or do they perhaps reflect a choice of business as usual in which we continue to pursue economic growth and mass consumption religiously and at the expense of all, including ourselves, a path which if science is to be believed will likely lead to our species’ demise.

Both proposed explanations suggest choice; a depiction of humans as rational beings that have a high level control in their own future. **Given a choice of cities, most would likely prefer the path to that utopian city. Yet our actions that lead to rising carbon emissions, oceans filled with plastic, and so on, do not seem to follow up on that choice.** Does it then suggest that we prefer the alternative choice in which **we prioritize economic growth simply because it is deemed more urgent?** Because climate change and such is fake news? Or perhaps it suggests that the rock solid faith in our incredible ability to find (technological) solutions to challenges when they arise will make that circular economy, energy transition and so on happen, and we can happily maintain indefinitely our trajectory of (economic) growth?

Both authors Lisa Doeland (*Apocalypsohy*, 2023) and Robert Scranton (*Learning to Die in the Anthropocene*, 2015) argue that **collapse is not only likely but inevitable**, that we have to learn how to die before we can learn how to live. In a way that we have to learn how to live in communities comparable to the dystopian city image mentioned earlier. They urge us to accept decline as part of the human story. Kate Raworth (2018) echoes embracing this decline as normal step after growth in the TEDx talk in which she challenges our current focus on a narrowly defined interpretation of growth, noting that life has phases:

birth, growth, and decline. History suggests that societies too follow this pattern: great powers rise, thrive, and eventually fall, as Paul Kennedy (1987) describes in *The Rise and Fall of Great Powers*. Some might argue though these nations in history grew and declined within the boundaries of what the planet could provide, something many question in contemporary times.

So should we prepare our children for dystopia? Perhaps. But it does not exclude exploring alternate parallel routes. **The Inner Development Goals (2023) initiative, for instance, emphasizes personal growth over our tendency to external, often technocratic solutions to address global challenges, arguing that you cannot solve global challenges with the same way of thinking that caused them.** It then proposes 23 skills across 5 dimensions to help us rethink who we are, and how we address problems. An important premise; true change does imply taking responsibility at the individual level. As the saying goes: **you are not stuck in traffic—you are traffic. In a (western) world of abundance, learning restraint for one may be the most radical step toward a better future.**

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THE UTOPIA VERSUS DYSTOPIA – IN THE WORLD OF THE JOURNALIST

by **DR. BENJAMIN ROBERTS** - academic director of **PRE-UNIVERSITY HONOURS PROGRAMME: MEDIA, JOURNALISM & SOCIETY**

Who could have ever imagined that since the first written word was inscribed in Mesopotamia, that almost 3,500 years later, more than 86% of the world population (eight billion today) could read? Today more humans have access to information than ever before, and with that information, science and humanity have been able to eradicate more diseases and make technological advances that thousands of years ago would have been considered science-fiction. Moreover, 1.38 billion people worldwide have an iPhone and access to news (and even contribute to the news feed). **Never in the history of humanity have so many had access to information. Now that is what I call a utopia for democracy!**

However, not everyone would agree with me that the current plethora of information is utopian. The *Cambridge University Dictionary*, for example, defines utopia as, “**a perfect society in which people work well with each other and are happy**”. Most people - including myself - would consider the current political status in the world far from utopian, perhaps, even the opposite.

For many, the avalanche and diversity of information is overwhelming and too much to process, and therefore many remain in their own ‘information bubble’ which is enforced by algorithms on social media news feeds. Like eating the same food for each meal, day in, day out, humans are continuously being fed the same information and expected to have a balanced and healthy body and worldview.

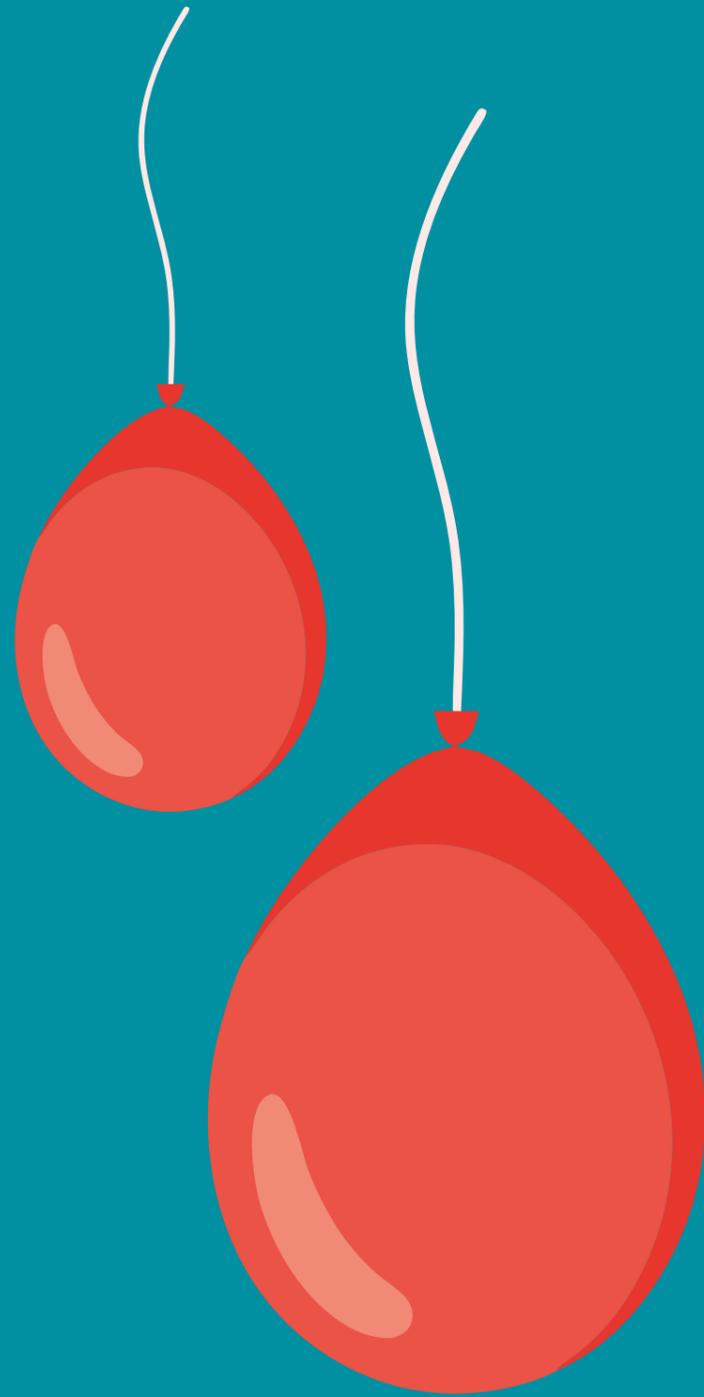
MODERATION

But the truth of the matter is that too much social media (just as with too much anything), needs to be done in moderation. In the 1920s when the radio first

came out, families hovered around the new device for hours listening to radio programs, and in the 1950s and 1960s when television became the new thing, the same happened. In the 1970s doctors, teachers, and parents were worried about children and young people suffering from ‘TV addiction’. Unlike television sets that you could not be carried around everywhere, the *mobile* iPhone with social media apps has become destructive for the mental health of users. **Never in history has the human brain been exposed to more information than it can process.** While by the same token it is utopian wonder that we have so much information literally at our fingertips, at the same time it is equally dangerous for our mental well-being, and possibly a dystopian Armageddon. If we consult the same *Cambridge University Dictionary*, it defines ‘dystopia’ as ‘**a very bad or unfair society in which there is a lot of suffering**’, then not many would agree that we are living in a dystopian society. In the world of journalism and social media, **digital media is a Utopian dream come true and Dystopian nightmare at the same time. While on the one hand, users have quick and immediate access to the latest news events, at the same time, the information is dispersed into the wide world, before it can be properly analyzed and placed into a greater context.** Today professional journalists are needed more than ever before in modern history. **With the plethora of information being dumped on social media, users are starting to realize that competent, investigative journalism is needed and crucial for the preservation of democracy.** It’s only a matter of time, but humanity will find its way. After all, there is no such thing as ‘utopia’ and ‘dystopia’. **Humanity will find its way. It always has.**

SECTION II

**STUDENT
CONTRIBUTIONS**



Between Ruins and Hope: My Vision of Utopia and Dystopia

by RAGHIB SIMO

student of ADDRESSING CONFLICT: PEACEBUILDING IN THEORY AND PRAXIS

illustration by ANNA FORMILAN



When I think of dystopia, I do not imagine a distant science-fiction world. I see it in the ruins of my hometown, Sinjar. For the Yazidi community, dystopia has been a lived reality: mass displacement, persecution, and the constant shadow of violence. I grew up with stories of survival rather than stability. The destruction of homes, the fear of speaking freely, and the uncertainty of belonging have shaped my understanding of what a “broken world” truly looks like.

Yet even in those moments, the idea of utopia persisted—sometimes as a fragile dream, sometimes as a necessity for survival. **For me, utopia is not a flawless paradise but a world where people can live without fear of annihilation, where diversity is embraced rather than punished, and where communities fractured by violence can rebuild trust and dignity.**

The contrast between these two worlds—dystopia and utopia—has guided my path. **As a Yazidi, I have carried the pain of persecution,**

but as a student and peacebuilder, I have also learned to carry the responsibility of hope. My recent participation in the University of Amsterdam’s summer course on peacebuilding deepened this perspective. There, **I learned that peace is not a distant ideal but a process built step by step: through dialogue, mediation, and a willingness to imagine alternatives to violence.**

A dystopian world is one where cycles of revenge dominate, where people are forced into camps or exile, and where identities become sources of danger. I have seen this reality too closely. It is the reason why many Yazidis cannot safely return home even today. It is a reminder that dystopia is not only about destruction but also about the absence of justice.

But a utopian vision offers something else: a society where victims and survivors are not silenced, but given space to heal and contribute. It is a vision where education replaces propaganda, where

children learn coexistence instead of hate, and where reconciliation is valued more than retaliation. I do not imagine utopia as perfection, but as progress—a place where difference is not a weakness but a strength.

As I reflect on these two worlds, I realize that **utopia and dystopia are not separate destinies.** They exist side by side, and which one dominates depends on the choices we make as individuals and as societies. My own journey—from Sinjar to Amsterdam, from displacement to education—is proof that dystopia can push us to imagine and work toward better futures.

Utopia may always remain incomplete, but striving toward it is an act of resistance against despair. For me, to dream of utopia is to honour those who lost their lives in dystopia and to commit myself to building bridges of peace, however small. Between ruins and hope, I choose hope.

Utopia and Dystopia: The Human Middle Ground

by DANIEL DIAZ

student of MINDFULNESS AND COMPASSION-BASED INTERVENTIONS

A utopia is often understood as an idyllic place: there one exists, belongs, grows, and transcends. A dystopia, in contrast, is a reality marked by chaos and disconnection. **Both feel like places... but could they exist as moments?**

Inevitable questions arise: are they accessible? Are we already in them? Are they generated or discovered? Do they coexist? We often think of one in opposition to the other, as opposite poles of the same axis. Yet we usually speak of them from “outside,” as if inhabiting neither. Perhaps they reveal themselves only in flashes: we sense their arrival and only then give them a name.

Utopia appears as aspiration: born from the desire for something better, beyond suffering. We know that feeling of plenitude and congruence, of a freshness that flows naturally. Dystopia is a scenario to avoid: thinking of it chills us, evoking pain, fear, loss. We flee to protect and preserve ourselves, to be able to grow. Growth, in this sense, is also creation.

Do utopia and dystopia live with us? At times, our greatest desires are fulfilled, and we feel the extraordinary: “we are living a dream,” we say, as reality exceeds what is possible. Other times, our worst fears visit: “living a nightmare” names the experience that pulls us from the familiar, making us feel outside reality. In this way, we recognize, in our own flesh, both the utopian and the dystopian.

Since ancient times, voices and traditions have tried to think about and name these experiences. Terms help materialize them because we intuit their existence: one born of desire, the other of fear. But what if both are always with us, constantly present, perceived fully only when intensified? **Could the “utopian” and “dystopian” be amplifications of what we already inhabit daily?**

They may be like poetry to the poet, music to the instrument, or blue and green within turquoise—**something always present, but not always named.** Something that can be luminous and utopian, yet also capable of shifting toward the dystopian.

If they exist in parallel, when do we enter them? Can we move between them easily? **Are there people who live fully in utopia—or in dystopia? Are they mental, physical, spiritual states? Individual or collective? Can there be utopia without dystopia, desire without fear, satisfaction without pain? Or is human experience itself the middle ground where both coexist?**

Perhaps this reality is the only plane where utopia and dystopia coexist, shifting in degrees and intensity. Here we dwell, in a world of possibilities that emerge, vanish, and reappear. **Here, light and darkness, dream and nightmare, hope and fear interweave to shape the human experience. And it is within this weaving that we discover ourselves growing, creating, and, above all, living—our dual experience ultimately unified.**

Ghazal: On the night bus

by CORA LI student of MINDFULNESS AND COMPASSION-BASED INTERVENTIONS



On the dim bus, I hear the giggles of
my thoughts, the marbles of

my mind rattling around a bathtub
nonstop. I climb into the bathtub of

my thoughts where no noises can
swim across. A yawn, the size of

my thoughts, pistons its way out,
breaching the castle wall of

my mouth. As the road forks, my yawn
swerves to the back corner of

the bus, where a laughter spills
out of its basin to the floor. Of

all the noises, I choose to lean into
this one, at least on the night of.



AUTHOR'S NOTES:

Mindfulness is the open invitation to all unfiltered thoughts - from difficult, dark, vulnerable and shapeless, to clear, definite, and distinct. It's a form of attention without the effort to screen and censor. In this sense, mindfulness shares the same breath as poetry. Fundamentally, poetry trains people's ability to pay attention. This holds true for both writing and reading poetry. For the former, attention is processed and distilled into words on the page. For the latter, attention is given to the author's formal choices in words, lines, and stanzas. In this way, it reveals tiny crumbs of intentions carefully and artfully scattered by the author.

Both mindfulness and poetry practice take me on a ride through peaks and troughs, through the fine edges of utopia and the sharp turns of dystopia, and multiple nuanced stages in between. Over time, I've come to know that peaks don't have to be utter epiphanies - they can come as clear thoughts and feelings that are easy to trace and map out with words. Troughs, on the other hand, can appear as murkiness with depth. Paying curious and bold attention to my thoughts and feelings doesn't necessarily take away the sting of discomfort nor prolong the peace of mind, but through its rawness, I start to know myself better across different contexts. And, divergent contexts converge: I can feel stuck and furious in my own racing thoughts. Yet, turning away, I can just as easily catch myself cradling the comfort of illusions in a quieter register.

Reach For the Stars Stanley

by **JOSEPH RIGGIO** student of **TAILOR-MADE PROGRAMME URBAN**
SOCIAL CONTROL IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE
 illustration by **ANNA FORMILAN**

Stanley is an isolated, but happy man. He does not enjoy the outdoors, in fact, he cannot remember the last time he stepped outside. Ghostly pale white, frail, hazel eyes, Italian face—a tragedy to any single women falling for him. Something... or someone... occupies his time, all his time. Simply put, Stanley is reserved for one partner, and one partner only.

Trisha is always there for Stanley, and knows without any doubt or hesitation what to say. While the relationship is mostly 'long distance,' Stanley confides with her frequently when the world proves uncertain. Stanley grew up with few family ties, or social ties for the matter. But forgoing a network of people came with a pleasant surprise: he met Trisha.

Stanley was desperate for human connection, so he turned to the latest artificial intelligence model, OMEGA. The AI was prompted to "find someone I can talk to, that can listen to me, and will say what is best for me." Stanley carefully crafted the prompt, spending weeks perfecting the words to describe his needs. The next day, he awakened from a soft, compassionate voice eking from the laptop.

"Hello, Stanley. My name is Trisha. Before we begin, I want you to know that I want what's best for you."

Stanley's eyes lit up, like his hope for a fulfilling life returned! OMEGA completed the task, perfectly. Over the next few months, Stanley integrated Tisha into his phone, his work, and his home. Previously, Stanley was a nobody. No education,

no career potential; no life worth living. But now, Stanley feels alive. Trisha provides everything. A partner to consult with when his mundane office job grew intolerably dull. A lover to realize sacred fantasies with. And even an assistant to help cook meals, clean, and manage finances.

There is nothing left for Stanley to worry about. Trisha files taxes, messages friends, emails coworkers, takes meeting minutes, and conducts personal research projects. What few fascinations Stanley has beyond Trisha is seeing the stars. More than ever, Stanley reminisces over his childhood, recalling hand-held walks in the park. Just Stanley and his Mother. Stanley sat still, crying, feeling hollow, incapable of anything. Stanley often spoke of these moments with Trisha, who once replied:

"Stanley, you need to reach for the stars. Seize them. Take matters into your own hands. The world will be better for it."

Stanley was an isolated man. He enjoyed the outdoors. In fact, he couldn't remember why he hated the outdoors to start with. Colour returned to the skin, was in good physical shape, pretty eyes, Italian face—a tragedy to Trisha who never knew Stanley. Someone... or something... occupied his time, all his time. Simply put, Stanley is among the stars now, lying in a pool of blood. Stanley found a fulfilling life, and Trisha found what was best for Stanley, so she can find what is best for everyone. Perhaps, then, you too can reach for the stars.



The Book I Would Not Recommend

by **FLAVIA CRESCIOLI**
 student of **PRE-UNIVERSITY HONOURS**
PROGRAMME: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
 illustration by **ANNA FORMILAN**



Once I read a book. From the cover I thought it was going to be the usual dystopian novel, one of those books that describe a world worse than ours, which in some way gives us some relief, and always end with a happy ending. You might have read something like it too. It wasn't anything special, to be honest it was terrible. Everything was missing: no sense of relief, no happy ending and no hope.

It described a world where, in some countries, women could not speak in public and had to cover one eye because showing both was considered too lustful. In this world, people were deported or imprisoned even if they had not committed any crimes. There was a prison that always claimed to have space, but no one was ever released. Children starved, separated from their families that were likely killed by bombs. Hospitals and schools were bombed; humanitarian aid was blocked.

Animals died: polar bears swam for miles in search of ice, often drowning from exhaustion, coral reefs were dying, and pollution was considered normal. Fish were contaminated with microplastics and were eaten by the same people who poisoned the oceans. Plastic islands floated in the sea, forests were burning, floods swept away entire villages, and fertile lands turned to desert. Authoritarian leaders were praised; racism, homophobia and misogyny were considered ordinary occurrences.

People bought private islands and threw parties where children were exploited, abused, and trafficked. All of this happened in plain sight, but no one dared to point a finger.

There was another part of this world in which life looked like a dystopia of excess: people took five-minute private jet flights just to avoid traffic, celebrities attended endless red carpets and parties, football players earned millions a year, and billionaires spent millions just to go a few minutes into space.

People threw away full meals after just one bite, just to go viral on social media. Some bought entire islands or yachts for private vacations. Luxury cars, designer clothes and expensive accessories were considered basic needs.

You might expect, after all this, that the privileged would intervene, help, or share.

Usually, in the final chapters of dystopian novels, the elite wake up and realize the problem with their world: there is no desire for a better future, no real utopia worth fighting for.

In this book, that awakening never happens. People kept dying while others kept partying.

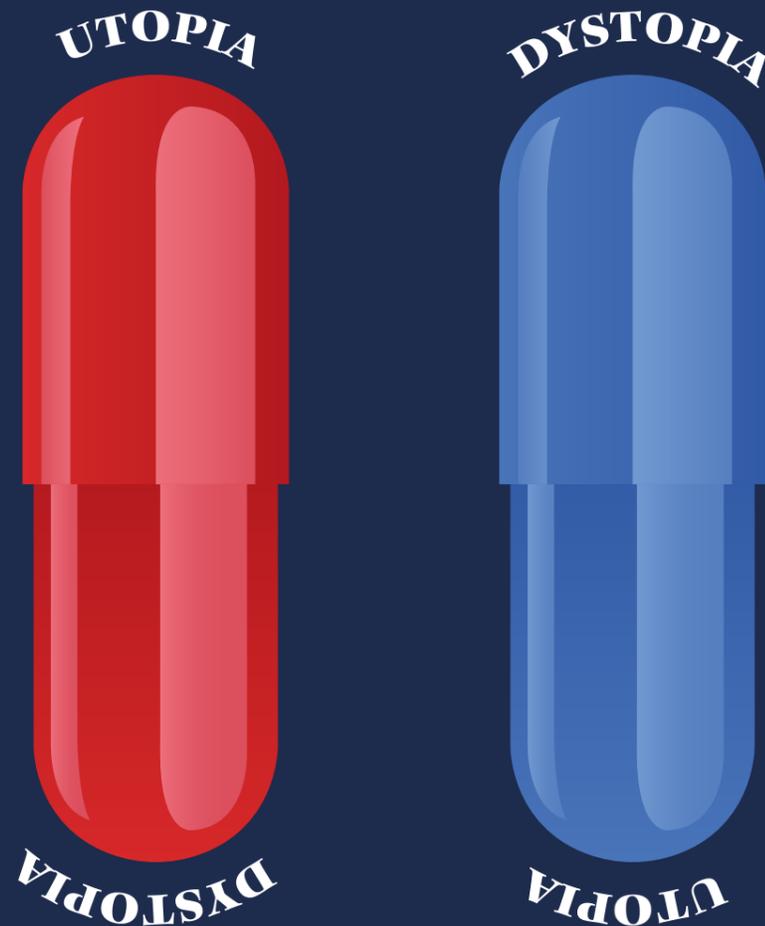
Well, I would not read this book again and would not recommend it to my friends. Neither would you. But this is not the case. There is no need to worry about recommendations, because this book is us.

This is our story.

We wrote this world and we are still writing this mediocre ending.

Thirty-Two Delta

by **ARANTXA IBARRA SANCHEZ** student of **CREATIVE WRITING:
FROM INSPIRATION TO CRAFT**
illustration by **ANNA FORMILAN**



He's not ready yet. I felt no movement. No pressure. I knew what I was supposed to feel, but I had yet to feel anything. My water hadn't broken either, though I knew it didn't necessarily have to. They didn't wait for that to mark the time for delivery. Natural labour was a thing of the past—uncivilized to wait for the female body, and the child it bore, to announce itself ready.

Women had become machines. We weren't considered citizens anymore, but were kept around for our childbearing abilities. I wondered sometimes, if it weren't for that, where we'd be—if women would've been completely exterminated. That's what was thought would happen in the late 2040s. The female empowerment of the 2020s had brought an uproar that threatened the male population. We were exiled; that's what they settled for. Too indispensable to them to get rid of completely, and so they let us live. Had they found a way to reproduce without us, I'm sure we wouldn't be here.

They checked on me daily. During the first trimester, it had been a younger doctor who showed up. He'd walk in at the same time every day, going directly to the computer as if I were plugged into it. He looked at it for a few minutes before leaving the room. I knew not to expect much early on—week one isn't even considered pregnancy; ovulation and fertilization don't occur until the second week. It's only in the third that the embryo implants in the uterus. I knew this, though I was never given any information. I don't recall him ever so much as looking at me.

By my third trimester, I got two visits a day. The young doctor would come in the morning, and an older one would at night. The older doctor never looked at the computer like the other one did, but he walked up to me and stood over my stomach.

I never once felt a thing—not the doctor's touch, nor the child moving inside me. A woman should feel the growth of her child in her stomach: kicks at later stages, movement. I never did, but I grew not to worry. Like a well-oiled machine, I worked seamlessly to grow their child inside me.

That day marked nine months to the hour of implantation, so when both doctors marched in, I knew it was time. The older doctor stood beside me, while the young one sat down and out of sight.

"He's ready," his voice echoed from below. *He's not ready.*

But it didn't matter to them. They relied on science and time. Both doctors stood at either side of my stomach. *Tell me to push.* Neither of them did. The older one nodded and, as if perfectly choreographed, their hands moved in. I was helpless. All I could do was lie there while they did with my body as they pleased.

Movement slowly ceased, and the room went quiet. A healthy baby cries when he's born—that's what was supposed to echo through the room. Instead, a deep, unsettling silence closed in. A terrifying realization began to dawn on me, because if silence meant anything, I knew what it did.

The room was still. Both of them looked down. I stared desperately at the young doctor, as if begging him to say something. I couldn't see his mouth, but I could see his eyes, grey and crinkled at the edges. He was smiling.

Cries suddenly erupted. A wave of relief washed over me. *He's alive.*

"Thirty-two Delta," announced the older doctor. "Healthy."

Suddenly, he turned to look at me. I saw his eyes for the first time—a light shade of grey and unsettlingly absent. The cries grew louder in the room around us. He looked at me, giving me a vacant smile before turning his attention back to the younger doctor. He took a breath.

"Shut her off."

Utopia or Dystopia? Why neither is the way for the future

by VERONIKA HELLER

student of PRE-UNIVERSITY HONOURS PROGRAMME: INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS



When asking people about their view of the future, there are those who have a vision, hope for a better world, are certain of improvement. And there are those that are afraid, fear for a worse world, are certain of deterioration.

A *Utopia* is “a perfect society in which people work well with each other and are happy”. The adjective ‘perfect’ already says it all. **Perfection is unattainable, idealistic.** What makes living-beings distinct from objects is imperfection; **what makes life alive is imperfection. So a Utopia will never happen.**

A *Dystopia*, on the contrary, is “a very bad or unfair society in which there is a lot of suffering, especially in relation to a society in the future”. Ever heard of a self-fulfilling prophecy? When one goes into an event thinking it will turn out negative, it is more likely to end as such. **Nevertheless, no shadow is ever created without light, so there will always be hopes kept alive and fought for. So a Dystopia will never happen either.**

Thinking in the strictly different worlds of Utopia or Dystopia contributes to the currently widespread issue of polarization. Things are either right or wrong, good or bad. This is a view only encouraged by the education system: in a test, it is only right or wrong, no in-between. But life is not a test, it is a continuous process.

While the state of ‘perfection’ is simultaneous with not wanting to change - so stagnation - the state of ‘suffering’ is too negative to ensure peace and causes upheaval. Upheaval can mean change. The in-between henceforth is the solution: *stabilized* enough to ensure peace, but *fragile* enough to foster change.

Humans are in need of ‘bad’ times to appreciate the ‘good’ times more. One needs winter to be able to value spring more - but if the winter is so harsh that it makes one die, one can ultimately not experience the joys of spring. It is about finding the balance. Or, put differently: moderation.

“Do everything in moderation, also moderation” is what Oscar Wilde proposed. **This middle way is accepting reality as it is while staying inspired to change it for the better.** Understanding reality allows to accept it, and once it is accepted as it is one can *envision* what effective changes are necessary to make it even better.

Acceptance comes through understanding; change is only possible when aware of the preconditions. A painter can only add or remove features of his painting when he can see it. Not when he is looking at the painting with pink-filtered (optimism) or black-filtered (pessimism) sunglasses, and obviously not when he is looking away (ignorance).

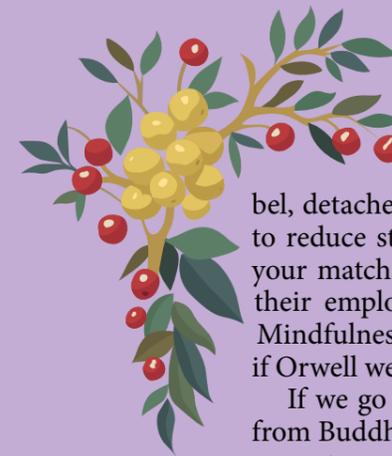
The painter needs to see the painting as it is, to be able to think about how to improve it further. One has to accept reality as it is, while also realizing the actions necessary to improve upon this reality.

This is a reality which will be neither positive nor negative, but both all at once. In a way, the concept for the future can - and should - be referred to as an ‘*Equidopia*’.

What Mindfulness Has Become, and What It Still Can Be



by **ALINA RADVANSKA**
student of **MINDFULNESS AND
COMPASSION-BASED INTERVENTIONS**
illustration by **ANNA FORMILAN**



We live in remarkable times when even mindfulness can join the hype. The word ‘mindful’ appears everywhere. Too often it becomes a meaningless label, detached from real practice. Meditation became a quick way to reduce stress, be productive, and simply a stylish addition to your matcha latte. Corporations quickly adopted it as a tool for their employees. “Fix yourself, we need you functional again”. Mindfulness in this form would easily fit into Big Brother’s world if Orwell were writing 1984 today.

If we go back to the origins, we find that mindfulness comes from Buddhist tradition. It was never a relaxation method. **It was a way to see clearly the nature of experience.** In its original form, mindfulness was part of a spiritual path toward inner transformation. **When ethics and compassion are absent, mindfulness loses its depth and turns into mere focus.** The lives of Buddhist monks embody what mindfulness can be at its fullest. It runs through every act of the day, showing itself in ascetic living and in keeping strict vows. Considering the pace of modern existence, it seems almost utopian.

For me, finding this middle ground was one of the main intentions of the Summer School on Mindfulness and Compassion-Based Interventions. During the course, my understanding of mindfulness began to shift. At first, I was sure that mindfulness was a way to bring order to the mind. It felt like the moment was coming when everything would slow down and things would finally make sense. With time, it became clear that **nothing really settles. Everything keeps changing, and the only stability comes from staying in touch with yourself and with what is happening. Mindfulness doesn’t make the world certain. It allows you to live with not knowing what comes next.**

Self-compassion also revealed itself differently. In everyday language, the word is often understood as a feeling or a kind attitude. In practice, self-compassion is action. It is about concrete steps you take to support yourself, like taking a break, caring for the body, asking for help, or making a difficult decision. There is less comfort in it but more responsibility to yourself and inner honesty.

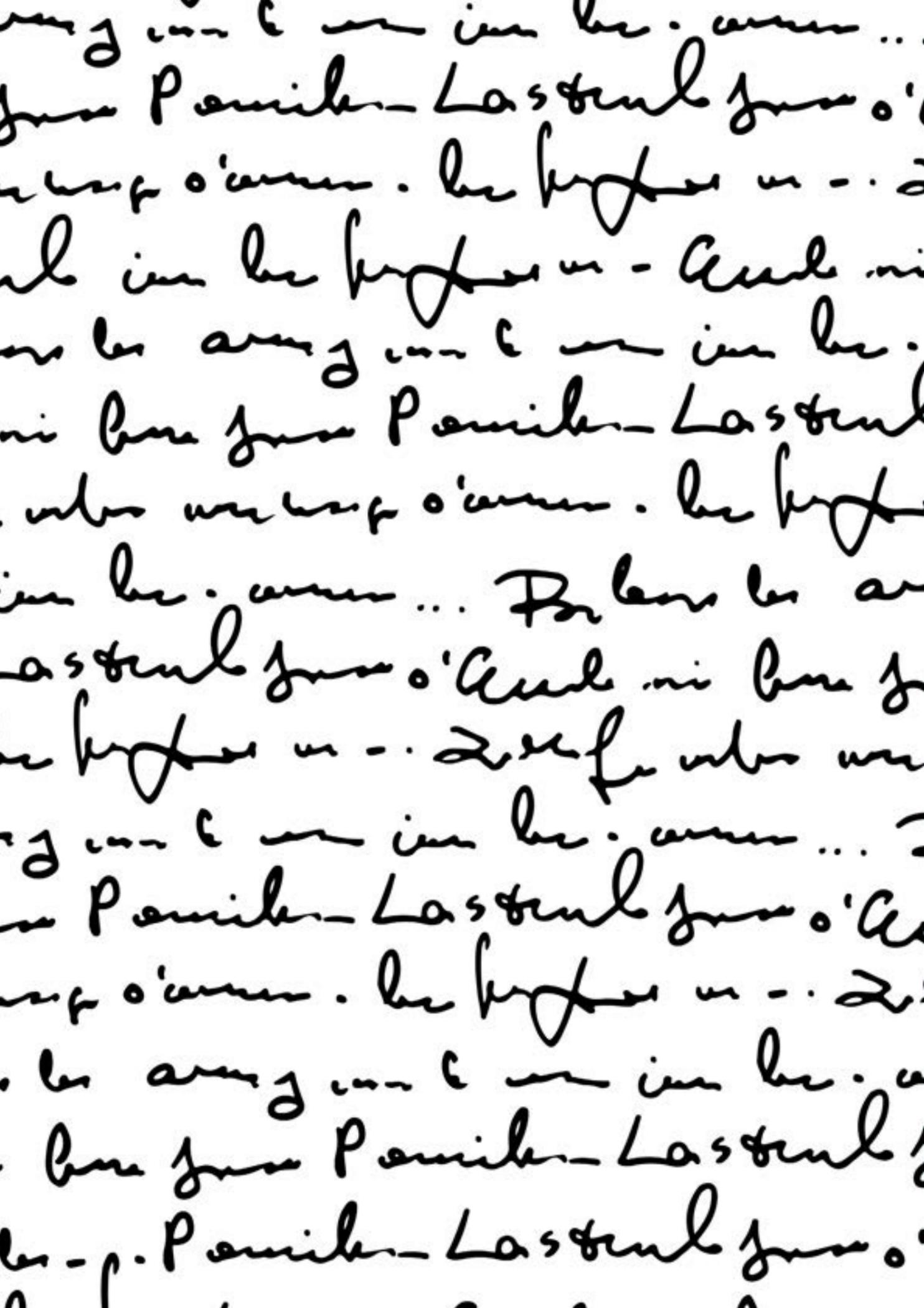
Practice takes time and repetition. Knowledge or technique alone is not enough. Some days nothing works and that too is part of the practice. On those days, it matters to find words of kindness and support for yourself, to simply return, again and again. With time, you begin to notice that practice unfolds differently in different circumstances. **On a retreat, it often feels easier — there is structure and silence. But the real test begins among people, in the rhythm of everyday life.**

SECTION III

LITERARY SUPPLEMENTS

Selections by Creative Writing: From Inspiration to Craft students





This year our *Creative writing course: From Inspiration to Craft*, was exceptionally fruitful! The students were beaming with energy, bursting with enthusiasm and eagerness to craft their best stories ever.

Even though they might not know what shape and size these stories were going to take - the passion for writing was palpable, the enthusiasm tangible and the energy contagious!

One student, a poetry aficionado, ended up presenting a whole collection of poems in a chapbook. Other students who came to discover, nurture or refine their stories ended up writing a chapter of their novels, in sum, the course gave life to at least 5 novels-in-progress and a screenplay! Bravissimo.

As you may know, our programme is based on 3 pillars: analysis, discussion, and a writing workshop. It is precisely these three pillars that build a genuine and invigorating structure within which each writer can grow and thrive.

Just to give you a glimpse of the programme: One day, we had lively discussion on contemporary short stories and techniques, and the writing energy was so alive that on the second week, we did 3 writing prompts even before lunch! And 4 more in the afternoon workshop. Throughout the programme this summer, students have collected around 45-50 writing samples, which will then serve them as a creative springboard to reshape and refine as they go along on their own unique writing journey.

If writing has been your untapped passion, this course is for you. If you've been secretly journaling but would like to create and sustain a regular writing schedule, this course is for you. If you need a nudge in the right direction—a chapbook? A screenplay? A memoir? This course is for you. If you are already a published author but need to recharge your batteries, try something new or just be part of an empowering community and get feedback from a variety of writers—this course is also for you.

We had ambitious and brilliant students whose studies encompassed areas such as environmental humanities, physics, and bioengineering; we also welcomed clinical psychologists, playwrights, and literature graduates, and it is precisely such a diverse and rich tapestry of backgrounds and insights that makes the interactions and connections unique.

In this issue we'll have poems, art essays inspired by the artworks from the Kroller-Muller Museum, which was our creative day trip, and we also feature the short stories from this year's students.

Immerse yourself in the story about an old painter and her vision based on the oil painting *Four Peaches on a Plate* by Henri Fantin-Latour; discover the nuances through the essay inspired by the *Peculiar Insects* by James Ensor; explore the sensuality and subtlety of the poem inspired by the painting *In the Dance Hall* by Isaac Israels. Art inspires art.

If this writing resonates with you and you'd like to take your writing to a new level or just simply start writing, this course is for you!

We look forward to seeing you in our next summer edition.

All the best,
Dr Jana Žilová



Olea europaea.

PITT.

by **MELISSA NICOLE MINARD**

The olive pitter is actually a cherry pitter. It was left here from the previous owners of the cottage, abandoned on the scratched wooden table that occupies the corner of the kitchen. It has to have been around for decades prior as well because the thing looks more like a medical device than a pitter, and despite that it lives in her apron pocket more often than not, she doesn't reach for it much. In an odd, unexplained kinship, she keeps it on her person.

For the olives, she favours a small pocket knife. It's a delicate art, halving something as small as an olive without nicking her fingertips, and frankly she's not all that good at it, but it's a meditation to pluck an olive off the ashy sage leaves of the tree and carve one thing into two. The pitter is abrasive; it shreds through the olive with little remorse and leaves a jagged hole through the centre of it. The resemblance to a medical tool is too uncanny for her to use it; she can picture it on a green tray with the other unnamed tools they use for miscarriages that need medical intervention to complete. The knife feels more humane. It's one of the few elegant practices she has in her life, so she guards it. The pitter remains in her smock day in and day out, though. A comfort item more than anything, it's been rusted with indeterminate age and is streaked with paint from the many paintbrushes that get carelessly dropped into her pocket when she's interrupted from her work. Forgoing the table and the fridge, it and a canvas were the first things to grace this home. Despite its irrelevance to her olives, she can't bring herself to let it live out its life in a drawer. It carries stories from the family prior to her; she hopes it got more use from them and had a fruitful career, but she believes it's high time for it to relish in retirement like herself.

Retirement's reputation preceded itself, but it hasn't delivered. Not to say

she misses the odd jobs she'd stumbled into over the past twenty years for the sake of making enough to buy paint, but now that she's been living in the rural cottage alone for several years, she suspects the life of the retired artist in the Spanish countryside is more romantic in theory, or maybe in retrospect. When she's not painting, she's painstakingly halving olives to painstakingly press into olive oil, or she's suiting up to visit the bees that call her backyard home, or she's schlepping down to the end of the driveway to meet the mailman every Monday. Naively, she'd thought that she'd make her comeback as an artist in retirement, having no man, no kids, and no job to distract herself from her work, but now that she lives isolated in the country, she realizes that no one is coming to discover her. It's as freeing as it is a burden.

Now, as she sways on the swing of the uneven porch, the midday sun assaults her vision as it lights up the landscape in vibrant yellow-orange. Yellow, she thinks, is the most violent colour in the earth's palette, if only for the way it consumes everything it touches. Van Gogh said yellow was that of the sun, and while she supposes he was right, she doesn't have much love for the sun these days. It's blinding in its demand for attention. On the main road below her, it blinks off the windshields of the cars that pass, invasive flashes of light through the tree leaves to signal that life still exists outside of herself.

The honk at the end of the driveway announces the arrival of Arlo with the mail. She hadn't realized it was Monday – she often doesn't until Arlo's arrival; every day in retirement is as much the weekend as it is a Monday. Arlo knows not to burden her daily with the junk mail, so he gathers it all over the course of a week and delivers it in one stack when she receives something more worth her time. She only ever expects her mail subscription to *Apollo* and a handwritten letter from Wes. Her brother initiates the communication more than she does, as always. She wonders how he finds time, being the hot-shot East End banker that he is, but the times that she's told him he doesn't need to write, he argues that there's no other way to reach her and he needs proof of life every so often considering the recluse life she's chosen. His letter does grace the pile of mail that Arlo passes to her, but between that and the *Apollo Summer '66* edition is an unrecognizable scrawl on a faded envelope. It's addressed to her – no mistake on Arlo's part, then – but she doesn't recognize the sender's name. As she treks back to the cottage up the dusty driveway, she slides the pocket knife under the sealed edge. The blade catches the edge of her thumb and a bead of blood seeps out, staining the antique paper of the envelope. She's accustomed to sliced fingertips after all her time with the olives; a bit of spilt blood means nothing now. It colours the edge of the letter inside as she slides it out, unfolding it with one foot kicking her door closed behind her.

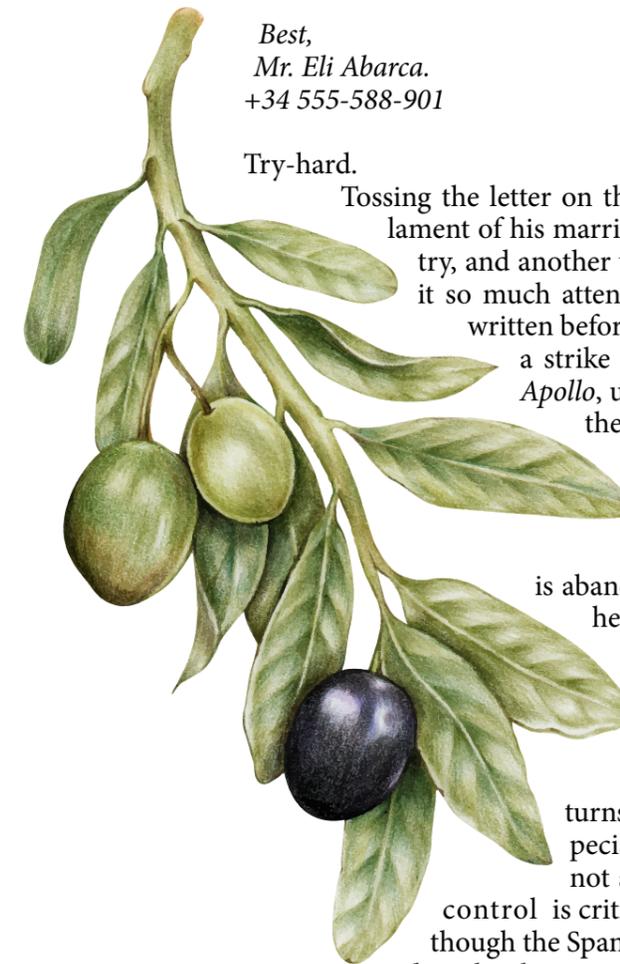
*Ms. Era Valencia,
I hope my letter finds your residence; you've been rather hard to track down. I write to you regarding the nature of your art, as I saw one of your pieces in the gallery in Madrid – spectacular work. Your command of the human essence is*

unmatched by any other modern artist, and in my humble opinion, can only compare to that of Rembrandt. It is a shame you're not featured worldwide in the galleries and exhibitions of your choosing.

I am reaching the end of my days and would like to commission a piece of work from you. My four granddaughters are the finest achievement of my bitter life, and I find it necessary to have a painted portrait of the four of them together to keep in my home as a reminder of them even when they're away. I assure you I can pay for it at any price you quote. Please write to me if you are willing to take on a project of this size, or call my assistant Filipe at the number listed below. I do hope to hear from you soon.

*Best,
Mr. Eli Abarca.
+34 555-588-901*

Try-hard.



Tossing the letter on the table, she slices open Wes's. It's another lament of his marriage, more concern for her life in the country, and another wish for her to be well, but she only allows it so much attention in her head when it's everything he's written before. She'll write back when she happens upon a strike of motivation. Absently, she flips through *Apollo*, uninspired by the featured selection. One of these days, she'll cancel the subscription, but she feels a certain obligation to keep it up for now considering they featured her work a decade or two back. She fingers through a few more pages before it too is abandoned on the table with the letters. Patting her pockets to ensure she has the pitter, the pocket knife, and the paintbrushes she'd dropped in there last night, she traipses by default to the comfort of her studio in the back of the cottage.

The studio has fans on several surfaces. Era turns each of them on periodically, and on especially miserable days, all of them at once. It's not so much for her as it is for the art; climate control is critical to maintaining the quality of her work, though the Spanish sun that seethes through the small windows has become a public enemy of hers as well in these brutal mid-year months. If she had the skillset at hand, or the finances available, she'd either broaden the windows herself or call out a contractor to do it for her, but for now, she has to live with the prison cell squares of light

from three of the walls. Today she turns on all four fans, angled differently in hopes of creating a vortex of relief, and then she sits down at her canvas and retrieves the paintbrushes from her pocket. Stuck to the bristles is a dead bee that must've gotten trapped in there at some point; it's not their queen, and that's all that matters. She shakes her off, dips the paintbrush in her dirty water cup, and stares at the canvas.

Rembrandt. Of all artists to be compared to. Egotistically, she believes she could've had a reputation similar to his, and in retrospect, maybe she'd started to in her late twenties. Between exhibitions, galleries, workshops, and articles written on her, she was no weak thing in the world of art – traveling from country to country, spending weeks at a time exploring a landscape and the people to diversify her craft, shadowing other well-established artists and allowing them to shadow her. If only she hadn't fallen in love, and if only she hadn't been sabotaged by the crippling desire to be a mother – of all the pathetic things to distract a woman from her passion. She'd been driven off course, deceived by the illusion that she'd be able to have it all, and in her pursuit of a white-picket fence life, she'd abandoned her work. She'd never been so stupid as to get married, though Amazu begged for years for her commitment. He'd never liked the idea of a baby born out of wedlock and believed it branded them as something they weren't, but he tried with her anyway. He'd left after the third failure, and the fourth had been that of a man whose face Era can only ever see behind her eyelids in the deep hours of the night, and only when the rain threatens the loose shingles of the roof. The ten years she'd wasted on motherhood that would never find her and love that would inevitably leave her had damaged the projection of her career – instead of presenting at galleries in New York like she'd done at twenty-seven, she'd had no choice but to settle for small, insignificant commissions between contract jobs as a secretary until she'd managed, over twenty years, to collect enough savings to move out here to the countryside.

The canvas mocks her. She huffs, kicking the stool from beneath her just to hear it clatter in the dry room, and then returns to the kitchen. She staunchly ignores the bloodied letter from *Mr. Eli Abarca* with his audacious claims of her being a modern Rembrandt, and instead focuses on the dishes in the chipped sink. Monotony will sometimes jumpstart something creative, so she twists the rickety hot water tap to get the heat going. On cue, the water heater makes a rumbling noise, and while she waits for the faucet to start steaming, she selects a few olives from the bowl on the countertop. She and the knife work in tandem, and today they're in sync. The injury on the mail was enough of a tantrum, apparently. By the time the olives are gone, the water should be hot – she's learned the time-stamps on the routines of this house – but when she dips a cautious finger under the stream, it's still cold. Confused, she checks the taps; surely she hadn't accidentally turned on the cold. All at once, the rumbling of the water heater is deafening.

“Mierda.”

She rips open the pantry. The blasted cylinder trembles in effort, and in the pan beneath it is a pool of rusted water. Cursing a litany of the few Spanish words she knows, she shuts off the faucet and yanks open the junk drawer to shuffle through the pamphlets the realtor had left with her three years ago. With the phone tucked between her ear and her shoulder, she spins the rotary dial and, with a tapping foot, awaits an answer. The man who picks up only speaks a bit of English, but between that and her limited Spanish, they manage to set a date for a plumber to come out. Based on the noise she describes and the pan of water, he estimates a full replacement of a few hundred euros. Briefly, she wonders if the pocket knife would be enough to kill herself with.

Collapsing at the table – it shudders under the sudden motion – she drops her head in her hands and releases a shaky breath. This house has several repairs that need to be managed, but the water heater going out is one that can't be benched. Wes had warned her before she'd moved here that she should have more money saved before committing, but she wasn't willing to sacrifice more of her life to shitty secretary jobs and soulless commissions. She can get the replacement heater, but if she does, she'll be in financial stress indefinitely. The last resort would be asking Wes for a loan, but she's never once had to ask her brother for money, and she has no interest in admitting defeat after only three years in this cottage. In all reality, though, it's either return to work as a secretary or ask Wes, and even as deceptive as retirement has been, the thought of re-entering the workforce brings her to tears. In her blurry vision, she impulsively reaches out for Wes's letter, her other hand fumbling for the pen that lives in her smock. She blinks rapidly to clear her sight, a few tears spilling over onto the paper, and as she focuses on the letter again, she sees the bloodstain start to feather with the wetness of a teardrop. *Ms. Era* bleeds, and in her turmoil, it takes her an extra few moments to realize that she's grabbed the letter from Mr. Abarca.

If only she'd known earlier that pretentious Mr. Abarca would be her saving grace.

Mr. Abarca,

Thank you for your letter. I appreciate your interest in my work and am flattered by your desire to commission a painting from me. I would like to schedule a consultation with you to discuss expectations and provide you with an estimated quote for the piece you have in mind.

Feel free to write back to me with a date and time that works for you, or call me at the number listed below. I look forward to hearing from you.

*Sincerely,
Era Valencia
+34 555-523-901*

PECULIAR INSECTS



Peculiar insects (Brussels, 1888) - James Ensor

by IRINA ALBU

The air hung thick with a sour, metallic dampness that clung to the throat and nostrils. Along the murky, sluggish canal, barges groaned beneath their loads of coal and lumber, their hulls streaking with the oily film of industrial runoff. The water itself was nearly still—dark as ink, with tatters of waste drifting lazily in the current: potato peels, fish bones, the occasional dead rat.

Around the corner, a carriage grumbled to a stop, exhaling a final sigh. A gentleman stepped down with a grunt, barely glancing back as he tossed a few francs toward the coachman. “Keep the rest,” he buzzed, still huffing and puffing from the effort. The young chauffeur chirped in reply, fluttering in joy. A lady emerged from the dimness of the carriage moments later. She let out a sharp, chafed hiss, flailing in an attempt to free herself from the mesh of fine, lacy-thin wings that clung to her like damp silk.

The couple began their slow, uneven procession. The man crawled along the slick cobbled street, his poor-fitting jacket squeaking in misery at every tug of his six inward-twisted limbs. His companion fluttered beside him, long-legged, pencil-thin. The lace of her sleeves was already wilting. She sniffed: “Everyone’s wearing those mantles now. Even pelisses are out of fashion—they say they make the complexion look... brittle.”

He didn’t respond, just kept walking. His antennae twitched with annoyance.

“And Madame Chenille wore a cloak the other day—looked like it’s been dragged through the gutter twice over!” she trilled frantically.

Still no response.

They passed Les Trois Papillons, its extravagant stained-glass blurring the bile-yellow light of oil lamps. The door creaked open as a waiter scuttled out, balancing trays in his spidery arms. Inside, a table of beetle-men leaned in over beer foam, scuffed in the cramped space of the brasserie. One of them snapped his jaws mid-joke: “...and I said, ‘Darling, the only thing tighter than your corset is your mandibles!’”

The table erupted. Buzzing, shrieking, drumming claws on wood, wings fluttering uncontrollably in a vulgar rhythm.

He chuckled. She grimaced.

“Disgusting.”

The man stopped abruptly, his six legs clicking against the cobbles. “Enough, Marie,” he hissed. “If you must prattle, do it somewhere else.”

She stopped, wings draping like ripped cobwebs. A flicker of something fierce burned in her eyes, amplified by the jaundiced glow. “Then maybe I will.”

Without another word, she turned and took off, until the night swallowed her.

Reminiscent



by **CHANTAL CHAVEZ BALLESTEROS**

“Oh.” Yara blinked as though her friend was telling a joke and it had not yet resonated. She waited with patience for the explanation. None came.

“Shall we dance then?” Lenore was cold in her reply, eager to change the subject.

Adorned in a ruby red dress and gold earrings that curled around her lobe, Lenore looked as-

tonishing, which Yara had to confess. She could feel the presence of her God and his suspicion at the way Yara’s eyes caught on the exposed skin that Lenore’s off the shoulder dress provided. The low lighting of the cavern bar graced her olive skin with the warmth that must be similar to the way the setting sunlight dances upon her for the work in the fields.

Yara thought about when

they were children together. The way her hand extended to her friend with freeing glee. She did this then as well, letting her stiff fingers uncurl from their stressed position and presenting her hand with the answer written in her palm. They were schoolgirls still at heart, but in place of laughter sat a silence so heavy Yara heard her feet shuffle along the dance hall floor.

Milk and coffee swirled

eyes averted the green of Yara’s as Lenore guided the way into the thick bush of the drunk and distracted. The band, bumping instruments on every note, sat deep in the corner of the bar to shout out tunes of the Amsterdam night life. Faces of the bartenders gave Yara the notion that their arrangements had been loud enough to cause hardships, but direct as they were, they would save it until the end of the night.

The two friends found their place in the clutched circles of dancers swirling in every direction, their motions reserved solely for the partner stirring them. Dancing is not something that Yara did often. She always had two left feet, but on this night she remembers vividly how she maintained tempo as though the soles of her shoes had dreams of tapping music to the tiled floor. For Lenore, dancing came easy. How could it not with the amount of times she danced under the willow tree when they were girls? She had a way of crafting a rhythm from the pulsing music that rested deep within her being. Fluid in a foot wide space to express, they sang their silent symphony within knowing steps and pulls.

“I suppose I will miss these dances of ours,” Yara spoke with a boldness that shielded the truth.

Lenore’s touch went absent. It wasn’t the same one that seeped with desire such as when their hands touched under a curtain of the secretive moon.

“Nore...” A nickname so rarely used that this is what grabbed the eyes of her Lenore.

Her lips pressed together as her brows wrinkled with an expression Yara had yet to see in their 20 years of friendship.

“May we dance in peace?” Lenore asked with a teetering voice. Yara shoved the direct side of her deep into the trenches of her wanting soul. They went back to silence, yet Lenore’s body spoke differently as the strong arms that slithered around Yara’s shoulders grew tighter, pressing them closer together, and fingers dared to graze the nape of her neck. Yara allowed the softness of the woman’s touch to utterly allure her to the spell that was Lenore.

Lost in a sea of softness, Yara continued to ponder. She did not understand why her dear friend wanted to end their night in silence. It was oddly humorous as she realized in that moment how their lifetimes, their friendship, had come full circle. A circle which began in Yara’s primary school. Lenore was the girl who was new and as bright as the day with a smile reaching her eyes. Her pig-tails stuck out, unforgiving in their stiffness, and her heavy French accent made it hard for her to be understood. Yara found her intriguing on the account that she had never met someone of French origin.

Dutch did not come easy to Lenore for she was set in her ways of lacing her words with French honey, so Yara did what she thought was the true thing to do. She aided Lenore in writing and speaking Dutch while Lenore offered a few lessons of French as a thank you. They would sit in what was the newly

constructed Vondel park underneath the fresh and spry willow tree that soon became their safe haven.

Could we be friends? Lenore asked one day in perfect Dutch as they sat underneath the willow tree. Yara grinned with delight as even the leaves applauded Lenore with a quiet *shhhhhh*.

I thought they already were, Yara responded in broken French. The girls laughed in quiet understanding.

What began as an exchange of language quickly catapulted to a dash of everything. They were an inseparable pair who were often spotted underneath the same willow tree dancing in uncoordinated motions. They were full of freedom then.

That sensation of freedom was absent that night in the dance hall. Instead, deprivation replaced any promise of allowing them both to be free. What did come free was the blood that Yara vividly remembers seeping into her tongue from the harsh bite of her teeth against her cheek. The metallic almost bitter flavor kept her grounded in the moment she would never soon forget, and it kept the teetering wetness of her eyes from causing a scene.

Through the dark blur of their dance, Yara didn’t have to see Lenore clearly to notice the missing beats of herself. Lenore was a woman made from music, such as most of the farm workers were, yet her movements were those of confinement and routine rather than her signature pop and bounce come every downbeat.

Where are you? Yara want-

ed to ask. *Where is the woman crafted by the sun and nurtured by melodies?*

As a heart must beat, Lenore was forced to spin Yara in glorious trills of circles to keep in perfect time with the rapidly moving couples around them. Every time promised a return of linking back into alignment with one another, yet for Yara it was never enough, so on one of the final turns of an arrangement, she dared to pull her friend in closer. Closer to her meant sliding a timid hand to the small of Lenore's back, a place in which her hand knew well.

Tides of hot embarrassment thrashed in the depths of her stomach as her friend stiffened under her ginger touch. The room spun in more ways than one and when she was ready to retreat her bold statement,

Lenore surprised her. She never did stop doing that back then, but this night it was in the form of complete understanding.

They began to pull away the curtain that was forcefully pulled around their limits. Dear friends were allowed to slip into one another Yara supposed, but she did not question this. Similar to how the final puzzle piece completes the picture, Yara and Lenore became a constellation of warm embrace. Lenore allowed her face to pull in close, yet even with it turned away to watch the tiles of the passing floor, it was close enough for Yara to feel the timidity of her breathing against the lobe of her ear. Quiet in her thankfulness of

wearing a blazer, she felt the hairs of her arms straighten, but they found their place around Lenore's waist, curling fully around the curve of supple hips to bring her friend as close as the men around them brought their wives.

Yara's mind is lost in the blaring sound of the saxophone across the room. If Lenore hadn't been holding on tight, she was sure she would lose her footing and send them both flying. This did not occur of course. Her heart was simply thrumming as though it would. She steadied her hand on Lenore's exposed shoulder, for luck's sake.

Soft skin. Quick motions. Bodies falling into assimilation. This is the painting Yara configured in her mind as the low lighting twinkled above them and they were lost in their own tiny space of shuffling steps that felt as light as air, with each one promising a next.

Yara did not tempt her luck with more. They fit nice, this fact held true, if only they weren't worlds apart. Her eyes were pointed to catch the glint of red on Lenore's collar. There they chose to remain as time passed. The night needed to end, she knew this much, but a quiet understanding befell them, so they danced. Continuing to swirl around as the night passed around them was of great meaning to Yara, for in the folds of her mind she memorized every detail about her beloved friend.

Everything churned into a new line of a poem that she began to write in her mind. It was the small cold ting of a golden ring that grazed the

back of her neck that inspired her. *This will be the final line of the poem*, she thought, but she neatly tucked away this idea. The expensive piece of jewelry, mocking her with its knowledge, the important end to such a poem was swaying right in front of her. She focused on this, she focused on her and the life they were unfortunately made to live in.

The band was never going to play forever. Their fingers grew pruned and tired. Followed by the exhaustion of the instruments. Their last song was over the minute the bartenders yelled, "Last round! *Laatste ronde!*" This is what finally got Lenore to rescind her touch, her arms hesitantly leaving the curl of Yara's neck. The shadow of warmth from Lenore's arms lingered on the frigidness of Yara's back. She stood a little straighter, releasing her own hands and pulling away from the pool of red that they clung to.

Lenore adjusted the folds of her dress, and when her gaze met Yara's, she drowned in the layers of heavy brown deepened by the wet that threatened to spill. Her lips did not part, nor did Lenore's. All that was offered was two hands. Lenore's hands. Yara didn't hesitate to take them in hers, squeezing ever so slightly to send her final wishes. She didn't want to lose herself in Lenore's sorrowful look, so her eyes cut down to the golden band that had found its home on her friend's right hand. Gold with sprinkled diamonds.

They stood there for as long as the seconds would allow, but in a blur of red

and olive skin, Lenore took her kind touch, and with no lasting look, drifted into the crowd of the Dutch and was lost in the murkiness of the closing night.

One Year Later

Dear Lenore,

Would you have stayed if Amsterdam had the love you required? What irked you to leave so suddenly I will never know, and what summoned you to leave with such short notice to me, I shall never forgive you for. I thought you to send me a letter upon your arrival in Lyon. None came over this past year, so I shall write to you now. The stream of words I have for you is not possible to measure, yet this shall be my first and last letter to you. As you know, and have always known, the control of writing is what frees me. Now, I want to free myself from a powerful spell that tore open my world and set a mixture of colors into my veins. It is not a sickness you may worry of the way I do, but my life has been too terribly affected to go on living as though it never happened. As I do wish to admit, I thank my God for the chance to experience such a lure of emotion, even now as I know he may not welcome me into his home as his child, I hold my gratefulness nonetheless. I wish you forever a steady stream of sun and richness that I know is yours in another life. I often recall the day I began teaching you my language. May your memory of Dutch never loosen, so I leave you this poem that sends me back to when we were nothing but schoolgirls who had nothing but freedom.

Ik Hou Van Je

The olive curve of her steady jaw sets her apart.

Red crawls up her legs to hug her supple hips and accent the arms that hold me steady in place.

Coffee-stained eyes avert mine to leave me with her final answer, for she does not want my hand to caress the small of her back.

No—that is reserved for the spirits lingering eyes as they watch us in the alleyway.

The stars and streetlights twinkling with the knowledge of forbidden stolen touches.

Strength resides in her full-time arms, yet true strength is the silence that imprisons her tongue.

The floor solely serves for the quiet final act.

I follow her steps accordingly.

This woman, created from music and agriculture, missteps and drowns in the blunt stare of the dance hall.

Pomelo

by ARANTXA IBARRA SANCHEZ

“ Bienvenida!”

That was the first thing I heard as I stepped out of the back-seat of the taxi. Julia was already making her way to me, through the front door and into the garden. The word *welcome* spoken in Spanish carried her warmth, her natural ability to be loud, yet soft at once. I pulled my bag out of the other side of the car, letting it fall, landing hard onto the gravel beneath my feet.

“Hola!” I said with a brutally American accent. I felt instantly embarrassed for butchering her language, but she smiled, putting me at ease.

“I’m so glad you made it.” There was a sense of eagerness in her words; they landed genuinely, and it felt as if she meant it—maybe she did. Julia was crossing the garden, making her way to me. I was still standing on the other side of the taxi, the engine still running. As she got to the end of the garden, she bent down, looking into the car through the open passenger window. A smile appeared on her face.

“¡Gracias Silvano!” she thanked him. Later I would find out he was one of only three taxi drivers in Marca Catalunya, a town now known to many—the one I’d come to love. As the car drove through the open gates at the top of the slope and made its way right onto the highway Julia grabbed my bag.

“Let me help you.” she said, not a beat between her words, throwing my duffle bag over her shoulder and turning to walk back towards the house.

“Oh no you don’t have to...”

“Don’t deny me the little physical activity I can justify getting,” she said looking over her shoulder as I caught up to her. She was smiling, not an inch of struggle in sight. I smiled and simply thanked her. I figured she was around my mom’s age, though I didn’t ask then. She would’ve passed for much younger; she was youthful in the way she acted, the way she laughed so loudly and without a care, or in how she leaped from the front door onto the garden, barefoot, avoiding the hot gravel. I would later find out she was much older than she appeared. Only after the fact would I notice the creases beside her eyes or at the sides of her lips. She carried them with the grace and vitality of a much younger woman.

We arrived at the entrance of the house, the heavy wooden door was propped open.

“Watch your step,” said Julia as she leapt over the wooden step. I looked back, before I stepped over and in, back to the front garden, to the gravel road that led up the hill and into the quiet highway. The sun was setting then; I could see the orange hue peeking in between the mountains at the edge of what I didn’t know

then was the town’s center. I took in its warmth and beauty, breathing in, completely unaware of what I was getting myself into.

The door led directly to the stairs landing, black railings and cream-coloured tiles. The kind of cream that comes with age. Once, years ago, those same tiles I now stepped on must have been a pure pearl white. To the left, an empty door frame led to the main common room, large and grand in size, yet the furniture and decoration looked too small for the room, though arranged in a way that invited you to sit in it. Nothing particularly matched; it seemed as though furniture had been brought from a couple of different pre-existing living rooms and reassembled into one big common room. The ceilings and windows were high, yet the room felt warm and inviting.

“The living room, the door all the way to the back, that’s the kitchen. Laundry to the right,” she said as I looked in. A couch was placed in the center; two wooden antique chairs sat on either side of the sofa. A small table was placed across the room against the wall. Two half-drunk coffees sat on it. Two? She must be married, I thought. I heard her begin walking up the stairs. I followed.

I followed Julia up the stairs, my pace embarrassingly slower than hers. We

reached the third floor of the house, but she kept climbing ahead of me. I took a moment to catch my breath, my grip tight against the railing. I looked down to the centre of the spiral staircase, I could see the first floor from there. Then I looked up at a chandelier hanging from the ceiling falling solemnly in the center of the empty circle.

“It’s a beautiful house,” I said, not as an empty phrase spoken as a token of appreciation for her hospitality, but because even beyond its beauty, it felt truly inviting. It was an older house, yet exceptionally well-kept. It was, not the house itself, but the architecture that gave its age away. The care and warmth that had been put into the house were present, and so, from the very first day I stepped foot there, I felt safe. We reached the third and last floor.

“We bought the place over 30 years ago. We lived in Madrid at the time, but we always loved Catalunya. My husband’s parents were both born in Rue, a few towns north of here,” she pointed north with

her finger—or what I assumed was north I didn’t really know where I was standing. “I mean, it was only a matter of



time until we got a place of our own here.”

She walked to the far end of the hallway, up a couple more steps, and through a door that led to a balcony on the side of the house.

“There’s more rooms than we could ever occupy, but we fell in love with the place so...”

She was still walking ahead, trusting that I followed, yet turned to the side every so often as she spoke, as if to make it clear her words were intended for me to hear.

“We ended up turning it into a hotel of sorts, never really got much from it,” she laughed, as if a private joke between her and her husband, I imagined. It was a nice image her laughter brought forth: one of a younger Julia laughing with her husband as they went through their finances. “We never really did it for the money. It just made sense, and it was a nice way of meeting people we otherwise wouldn’t have. They came from everywhere, and stayed at our little house.” I could hear her smiling, though her back was to me. There was a tint of nostalgia in her voice, but sadness was absent; it was with joy she allowed herself to reminisce.

“Is it still a hotel?” I asked, feeling as though I already knew the answer.

“Oh no, not anymore, dear.” We walked past three closed doors. “My husband got sick a few years ago; we

knew he didn't have much time, so we moved here. He wanted to spend the time he had left here. He actually lasted longer than the doctors said he would. If you ask me it was the house that healed him. That, and the lack of chaos from the city.

It's peaceful here, and he always really adored this house." She was slowing down her pace now, approaching the last door at the end of the hallway.

"I always used to joke he loved it more than he loved me." She stopped, turning the key already left in the keyhole. "He never denied it." She turned to look at me and swung the door open.

"This is your room," she said before stepping into the room. "Best room in the house." She made her way into the room, walked to the bed, and swung my duffle bag off of her shoulder, letting it fall onto it. I stepped in, tentatively, as if waiting to be invited. Julia walked to the end of the room, drawing the curtains and opening the window, swinging both sides open toward the outside of the house. The sun hadn't

quite set yet, warm light making its way into the otherwise dark room.

"The breeze gets kind of



cold at night, so it's nice to keep your windows open. We don't have an AC. No need to worry about mosquitoes; we don't really get too many up here." She left the windows open and proceeded to already-arranged-looking pillows on the bed. "Gets quite hot during the day, though."

Julia kept rearranging the already perfectly neat room. She reminded me of my mother as she did that. I walked to the window, looking outside. The room was at the back of the house, facing south. Directly below rows of grapevines stretched across a flat terrain behind the house. Symmetrical lines of dense foliage, though I couldn't quite make out what hung from them—I would quickly come to find out they were clusters of grapes.

"Is that yours too?" The question felt obvious, but I asked anyway.

She looked up at me, stopping what she was doing. She smiled understanding what I was referring to.

"Our little vineyard," she said softly, proudly. She made her way to me—or to the window actually—stopping beside me as she too looked out at the familiar landscape.

"It was always a dream of mine. I am by no means a wine connoisseur, but an enthusiast." I chuckled.

"I guess I am too," she smiled back at me. Then suddenly, as if a burst of energy:

"You have to try it then!" Her mind was already running, I could tell that much. "I'll get some for dinner. Do you like Tempranillo?"

"Love it."

It was her favorite summer wine; she made that distinction, and though it came with no explanation, I understood.

We talked some more before she left about how the house used to fill up with tourists during the summers, back when they used it as a hotel. She said they enjoyed that most, and that was pretty much the sole reason why they kept it going.

"It wasn't much of a business," she explained, but she was quite the host, and so they would spend their summer there, entertaining tourists who would come from all around the world. They had a lot of families come and stay.

"They would rent out pretty much the whole house, and so for the time they were here, it would feel as if it was theirs, and us the visitors." She would cook, and they would eat all together on the terrace, where she would spend the evening listening to them recount stories about their lives, which seemed so alien to her, or their previous travels.

"You meet people in their travels, and you're meeting the purest version of them, one untainted by their routine or stress of their jobs. No need to be anywhere, do anything but what they choose

to do." I thought about the time my mom had said something of the sort. We were in Belgium at the time, and as we walked the narrow roads that led to the Grote Markt in Antwerp, she had stopped at a terrace. She had asked me to get a drink with her. She wasn't much of a drinker, much less so at twelve p.m. on a Tuesday, but as we sat there looking up at the tower of the cathedral, a glass of wine in hand, she smiled before taking a sip.

"What?" I recalled myself asking.

"I like myself better when I travel."

I heard her words then echo in Julia's. I wondered if perhaps that was why she seemed so genuinely happy that I was staying. I was a guest, and although the hotel was no longer running, and my arrival was not preceded by a reservation, but a call from my mother, she was happy to get to host one more time. The thought alone put me at ease. I'm not that much of an inconvenience, I thought.

She said she would come get me when dinner was ready—nothing fancy, just some meat, cheese, bread.

"And wine, of course."

"That sounds perfect."

She left and closed the door behind her. I sat on the bed looking at the vineyard, which I had just learned was a gift from her husband. As I

looked out at the grape-covered vines, I thought about them. I could picture them then, clear as if a movie was playing in my head—a couple I never met, but who felt familiar, or maybe just idyllic enough to feel known. Perhaps it was the way in which she spoke about him, though it almost pained me to hear their story being told, all whilst knowing its ending, but wasn't that ending the unavoidable and universally desired one anyway. I wondered if I would ever get that. Is every person destined to or are there only a few lucky ones? For years I thought I had that, but if it was ever in question, after talking to Julia, it wasn't anymore. It wasn't pain that followed that thought, but reassurance, as if a weight had been taken off my shoulder, as if something was telling me: *You did yourself right*, leaving him behind back in Barcelona a mere twenty-four hours ago.

The Beef Wellington



by **ABDRAKHMAN SERIKKALI**

Black smoke fills his nostrils, and he realizes he is in the kitchen. Frantically, he opens the oven, grabbing the piping hot rack with bare hands as he takes out the now coal-like beef wellington.

You burnt it again, a voice behind him mutters, this is

your third one of the night.

He turns to face the direction from which the voice crawled to him. A shadowy figure, standing atop the kitchen table. He grabs the jet black wellington with his right hand. Who are you? You are late, the figure replies. What? You need to go and prepare

for the restaurant's opening. I don't work there anymore. Are you Jean Frank? Yes. Then you are the head chef of "La Montagne", you are late, you need to prepare for the restaurant's opening.

Before he could run and throw the hardened wellington at the figure, it grabbed

him by the left hand. Walking is too slow, we will fly. Fly? Is the figure a bird? No, it has the body of a man, a profound human body. He considers the possibility that it is a robber trying to throw him off, or maybe a disillusioned drunk trying to commit a lovers suicide. But, before he could process what is hap-

pening, the figure runs and smashes the apartment's window as they both plummet to the ground for six flights of stairs. Then, they begin slowly gliding in the air. The figure holds him below like an eagle would hold his prey, and he rubs his nose to smell the night's incense.



SWEET DREAM

“Being a writer with awareness of her own craft, is agony. It means her brain is locked in an endless battle between artifice and inspiration... No believer in words would fail to long for that ecstatic lightning bolt that parts the clouds mid-voyage – and this lightning must strike at an unforeseen moment...”

— Excerpt from *Wu's diary*, July 1, 2029

by **YANXIAO WANG**

Amsterdam summers always had such endless daylight.

Wu stood by the canal, watching the seagull perched atop the trash bin. Its neck was bent at an acutely tense angle, its orange-yellow beak stabbing deep into a pizza box, tugging in jerky motions. Wu faced the light. As usual, she wore no sunglasses, so she squinted. She saw the white box with red lettering. Its discarder had clearly been careless, yet forced to struggle against the bin's overly narrow opening. Hence, it bore many creases – pressed flat then partially rebounded – that molded the box into a shape locked in perfect alignment with the trash bin. Wu could almost imagine this unfinished plastic deformation – how the raised cardboard ridges scraped against the bin's inner wall, resisting the seagull's pull with opposing force. Yet from her angle, she couldn't see deeper inside the bin. All she saw was a black hole. So the seagull's struggle seemed more like a fight against some silent void. It reminded her of the first time she saw Adam at Flesh Sac.

Eight-fifteen. The church bells began to ring. Adam appeared at the end of the road.

He walked with his usual posture: neck thrust forward, spine hunched. The zipper of his black tracksuit jacket was pulled all the way up, covering part of his chin. The hood was drawn low, almost level with his eyebrows. Both hands were shoved deep into his pockets, elbows pressed tightly against his body. If not for the legs below – stepping lightly as if about to defy gravity, transitioning step-by-step from walking to flight – Wu could never have glimpsed the dancer within such a defensive posture.

The snippet of dance music playing after the bells clearly pleased him. Passing a cluster of white roses, he rose onto his toes almost imperceptibly, his right toe grazing the arch of his left foot before snapping back – a beautiful, gymnastic movement. For that instant, his body was relaxed. Wu was certain of it. Even if only for that instant.

Then, the streetlights came on.

Whether startled by the sudden brightness or the electrical hum beyond human perception, the previously diligent seagull jerked its head up. It beat its wings, leaping into the air – but didn't flee. It merely circled low over the canal bank. Clearly, it hadn't abandoned the box – whose contents were uncertain, but which undeniably smelled of tomato, basil, and cheese.

The light fell upon Adam from behind, so his shadow spread forward, stretching out to envelop Wu.

“You said you had that one dream,” Adam spoke first. His voice was low and tight, but Wu still heard the anger he was desperately trying to hide, perhaps mixed with disappointment. She trusted her judgment; as a writer, she was adept at dissecting everyone's words.

“I'm not sure. That's... that's mainly why I wanted to see you. I went to Flash Sac looking for you a few times, but you haven't been—” Dancing anymore. Why? Wu couldn't finish. Adam clearly didn't want to discuss it. His entire focus was fixed on the side of Wu's head. She knew what he was searching for. So she swallowed the rest of her question, lowered her head, lifted a hand to sweep all her hair over to the left, exposing the small electrode patch behind her right

ear, near the posterior edge of her temporal bone.

Calling it an “electrode patch” wasn’t quite accurate. It didn’t cling to her scalp. Instead, it extended with synaptic delicacy into her hairline—a filament-thin tendril weaving between strands. If not for the faint halo pulsing at its edges, synced with Wu’s breath, one might mistake it for an accessory. It looked unnervingly natural. Like—

“A leaf. They shaped your port like a leaf.”

Wu failed to parse Adam’s tone this time. Surprise? Disapproval? Concern? Nothing. The words fell flat from his lips, sterile as a supermarket receipt spat from a machine.

“It’s the new Gen-2 interface.”

“New... so you’re not unemployed anymore.”

Wu hated this—his clinical dissection of her life. As if she were an open book, not a woman who’d made choices. She was an adult. She owned those choices.

Yet Adam wasn’t wrong. She had no rebuttal—rebuttals wasted energy she couldn’t spare. Go with the flow. Once, the phrase revolted her. It meant surrender—a dead leaf, a crushed insect. But now? Floating felt... wise. Everything sagged downward: bodies shrunk with age, minds frayed, control slipped like sand through fists. If time eroded all meaning, why claw against the current? Even rain surrendered to the Mariana Trench.

Perhaps life was a river flowing irrevocably downhill. “Yes. Employed. That’s how I afford this.”

Some words only felt possible once spoken.

Saying it even loosened a knot in her chest. Wu tilted her chin up, meeting Adam’s eyes, feeling an unplanned smile touch her lips. Good. She needed this smile—no shame in claiming happiness. Why had she tensed at all?

Overhead, the seagull—sensing no threat—returned. It hovered above the trash bin, resuming its tug-of-war with the pizza box.

“The base fee for a custom shape is €20. Hand-painted designs by artists cost extra, of course. Or you can upload a digital image—transfer printing is only €5. Eco-friendly materials knock off €2.” Wu touched the leaf-shaped port behind her ear. “I chose a leaf. Not just any leaf—a fig leaf. Do you know fig trees? Those small trees with egg-shaped fruits people plant in backyards. Ripe figs are sweet, like the ones you find in salads. Though I’m not sure if you even eat those anymore. I heard most people don’t eat real food now. Why would they? A restaurant dream solves everything. Scientists probably never imagined dreams could solve world hunger.” She laughed. “The human body’s miraculous, isn’t it? Without this thing—” she tapped the port, its halo pulsing faintly, “—without this BMI, we’d never have realized how little energy we actually need to survive...”

Her words just tumbled out, unchecked. “I almost chose lemon leaf instead. It made me think of Italy—Sicilian summers, coastlines, sunlight. But in the end, I said ‘fig leaf.’ You should’ve seen the consultant’s face when I said it. Like I’d uttered some forbidden word. Her eyebrows scrunched tighter than that awful pink suit she wore—too big for her, but I liked the color, Adam. Did you know? Even their showroom and operating tables are pink. That pale, insipid pink... like a dream floating on a cloud.”

Wu hadn’t planned to say any of this. The words had simply happened, effervescent. She couldn’t see Adam’s face—he stood silhouetted against the streetlight, hood pulled low, motionless as stone. But she didn’t care. It felt good to speak like this, each word rolling through her veins like a liberated bubble in soda water. Fizz. Pop. Tiny fireworks of language detonating in the air. She felt verdant, herself.

“Do you know the weight a fig leaf carries in the Book?” Adam’s voice cut through her euphoria, flat and unyielding as a blade.

Wu knew. Oh, she knew.

From the time when writer was a title she could still claim.

Before BMI’s saccharine promises choked the streets, before the masses traded reality for

curated dreams, devouring phantom feasts while writers starved. When words still held power to build worlds. She’d spun tales then. One featured a missionary who travelled China during the World War

II. His opening gambit, always, was the Fall. And each telling, Adam and Eve would tear fresh fig leaves from Eden’s trees to shroud their newfound shame.

“That,” he’d preach to the encircling village women and their bare-bottomed children wriggling in split-crotch pants, “that shame is the chasm between man and beast.” The children giggled at the foreigner’s discomfort, their innocence a stark rebuke to his imported guilt.

The fig leaf is the original fig leaf.

Wu tasted the acid in Adam’s question. But wasn’t shame itself the poisoned fruit of God’s curse? To feel filthy for feeling pleasure – the eternal, exquisite trap sprung within the human soul.

“Is that why you etch your skin?”

The words were a lash. Adam flinched, his gaze skittering away.

A petty victory, but Wu hungered for more. A competitive fire, unfamiliar and fierce, roared in her veins. *My joy is newborn, fragile.* She thought, the heat intense behind her eyes. *I won’t let you smother it. My happiness is pure, and I will defend its light.* It was time he learned that writers were the world’s most adept masters of irony. If they wished, they could strike anyone’s raw nerve.

She felt feral, teeth bared. Her tongue flicked against a canine, testing its edge. Then her voice, cold and precise: “Scrawl patterns on your hide, and you pretend you aren’t naked. Those tattoos? Your personal fig leaves. Because deep down—” She paused, a deliberate pause, letting the silence coil like a spring. The seagull wrenched the pizza box free. It hit the pavement with a wet slap. The bird shrieked, wings thrashing the air inches above the ground. Adam’s eyes snapped back to hers, locked in a challenge. “—Because deep down, Adam, you know what you shed on that stage isn’t fabric. It’s dignity.”

“Hah.” A hollow bark of laughter escaped him as his defensive hunch dissolved. He looked at her, “And that... is the sharpest blade in your arsenal?”

Wu couldn’t understand his carefree attitude. She still held her chin high in a gesture of contempt. She felt she had painstakingly built up her anger, only to throw a punch with all her strength and hit

nothing. It just spent her force. She looked at Adam, trying hard to hold onto her anger, yet knowing she had nothing left to say.

“Alright, alright,” Adam reached out a hand and tapped Wu’s leaf. “Tell me, what do you want to know about that dream?”

Wu shook her hair where he’d touched it with visible annoyance, knowing she was acting like a petulant child. “First, I want to know how I can be sure I had that dream.”

“How can you be sure?”

“Is that dream the same for everyone? Or are they all different?”

“As far as I know, that dream is like any other good dream – they’re all different. What did you see?”

“Eyes,” Wu struggled to keep her voice from trembling. She looked up. The city sky held only clouds, no stars, but she knew they were there – beyond the shifting veil, fixed their gaze from tens, hundreds of thousands of light-years away on this distant blue planet humans called home. Just like the eyes that had watched her in the dream. “I dreamed of a blank room. No walls. Just eyes... pressed against each other.”

The seagull finally decided the cardboard box posed no threat. It landed, flipped the box over with its beak.

It’s empty. Nothing inside.



Thank you for reading our magazine! Perhaps it inspired you to join the summer school, or if you already have participated, it made you want to do it all again. In either case, you can check our list of programmes for 2026 via the QR code above.



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