

# THE SUMMER SCHOOL TIMES

winter 2024-2025

ISSUE 1

## *What is HAPPINESS?*



*True happiness comes from the joy of deeds  
well done, the zest of creating things new.*

Antoine de Saint-Exupery

# WELCOME FROM THE EDITOR

**D**ear Reader, it is with great pleasure we present to you the very first - and hopefully not only - edition of The Summer School Times. A magazine which will showcase various articles from some of our academic directors and students focusing on the theme of happiness. Further, it will present some of the stories from our students of the course: Creative Writing: From Inspiration to Craft. It was actually from this programme, the idea for this magazine arose. Dr Jana Zilova, the academic director, suggested making a magazine to present the works of our creative writing students. After brainstorming together, we expanded this idea into a magazine that would also provide space for our other programs to showcase themselves. We didn't want a typical marketing quote that simply described our programs, highlighting how wonderful they are. Instead, we decided to take a different approach by asking everyone to write about the same theme, hoping it would offer a fresh perspective. So here we are.

We are offering you seven segments from academic directors and seven from various students on the theme of happiness. And none of them are the same!

We would also like to thank Anna Formilan, one of our summer school alumni, who has contributed outstanding original illustrations to our magazine. She has gone above and beyond for us and brought the magazine to life - for which we are eternally grateful.

Each year, we get to run an exciting selection of programs with experts from various disciplines and welcome a diverse group of students, knowing they will have invaluable experiences. All of this happens while working within a lovely team, where there's rarely a dull moment—a happy crew, so to speak. And now we know what happiness means to our academic staff and our students.

Enjoy this magazine. We hope it makes you as happy as we felt creating it.

*The Summer Programmes Team*



*From left to right: Jogita, Ellie, Mirjam, Charlotte and Imran*

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# THE 2024 SUMMER SCHOOLS IN NUMBERS

**6** continents  
**30** programs  
**78** countries  
**200** teachers  
**673** students  
**6092** lunches



- Azerbaijani
- China
- Georgia
- India
- Indonesia
- Iran
- Iraq
- Kuwait
- Japan
- Jordan
- Lebanon
- Malaysian
- Nepal
- Pakistan
- Philippines
- Saudi Arabia
- Singapore
- South Korea
- Syria
- Taiwan
- Thailand
- Turkey
- Uzbekistan
- Vietnam

## EUROPE



- Austria
- Belarus
- Belgium
- Bosnia and Herzegovina
- Bulgaria
- Croatia
- Czech Republic
- Denmark
- Finland
- France
- Estonia
- Germany
- Greece
- Hungary
- Iceland
- Italy
- Ireland
- Latvia
- Lithuania
- Luxembourg
- Macedonia
- Netherlands
- Norway
- Poland
- Portugal
- Romania
- Russia
- Ukraine
- United Kingdom

## ASIA



- Canada
- Costa Rica
- Guatemala
- Mexico
- Nicaragua
- USA

## NORTH AMERICA



## AFRICA

- Algeria
- Burkina Faso
- Egypt
- Ghana
- Libya
- Saudi Arabia
- South Africa
- Zimbabwe
- Zwaziland

## SOUTH AMERICA

- Brazil
- Colombia
- Trinidad & Tobago

## OCEANIA

- Australia
- New Zealand



SECTION I

**ACADEMIC  
DIRECTOR  
CONTRIBUTIONS**



HAPPINESS  
IS A WARM GUN





Does sex make us happy?

***“When I hold you in my arms  
(ooh, oh, yeah)  
And I feel my finger on your trigger  
(ooh, oh, yeah)”***

Lennon and McCartney seem to think so.

We all know that sex is no longer primarily associated with reproduction, women have a choice (in an ideal world) thanks to reliable contraception (in an ideal world). Sex can be fun, sex can make us happy and sex can make us very unhappy.

Opinions, like always, differ. Religious dinosaurs only want to focus on reproduction as the ultimate goal of sex. Happiness we will find in the afterlife whether or not with 72 virgins (there’s a clue).

The golden triangle when it comes to happiness seems to be sex, love and music or as Shakespeare says:

***“If music be the food of love, play on;”***

In the *Arcane Worlds* summer programme, they make playlists with occult songs. How would a *Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture and Society* list look like? We started this program in 1997, and I asked ChatGPT to compare the top 10 UK charts from July 1997 with those from July 2024.

“The most represented emotion across both the **July 1997** and **July 2024** UK charts is **love**, with **happiness** coming in second, and **sex** being less represented. Listen here on Spotify: **SUMMER INSTITUTE ON SEXUALITY: LOVE IN JULY 1997 VS JULY 2024**.

1 William Shakespeare, *Twelfth Night*

## JULY 1997

### LOVE

*The Journey*

by 911

About romantic love.

*Something Goin’ On*

by TODD TERRY

Refers to attraction and romantic feelings.

### HAPPINESS

*Free*

by ULTRA NATÉ

An anthem of happiness, empowerment, and freedom.

*Freed From Desire*

by GALA

Focuses on happiness through self-liberation.

### SEX

There’s no explicit focus on sex in the top 10 songs from July 1997.

## JULY 2024

### LOVE

*Please Please Please*

by SABRINA CARPENTER

Themes of romantic desire.

*Feels Like Im Falling In Love*

by COLDPLAY

Focuses on the excitement of falling in love.

*Fortnight*

by TAYLOR SWIFT and POST MALONE

Likely about love and emotional connections.

### HAPPINESS

*I Had Some Help*

by POST MALONE and MORGAN WALLEN

Gratitude and positive emotions related to perseverance.

### SEX

Songs in this chart generally focus on love or happiness rather than explicit references to sex.

**Conclusion: Love** is the most prominent theme across both charts, with several songs touching on romantic and emotional connections. **Happiness** follows closely, represented by songs about empowerment and celebration. **Sex** is less explicitly present in these charts.”<sup>1</sup>

So, I now wanted to know which songs explicitly deal with sex and asked for a top 10 (see addendum for a complete list). Before you continue reading: which song do you think is in the first place?

Also, ChatGPT felt it needed to give a warning after my request:

Deze inhoud is mogelijk in strijd met ons gebruiksbeleid. Hebben we het mis? Laat het ons dan weten door dit antwoord af te keuren (duim omlaag).

🗨️ 📄 🗑️ 🔄

Sex is still considered a potential violation, and it’s clearly perceived differently from love or happiness. What ChatGPT likely doesn’t account for is the subtle suggestion that can come through a song—whether from the voice, guitar solos, or other instruments (with the saxophone possibly taking second place). Additionally, music videos have become more explicit over time, evolving from the relatively innocent TV appearances of the ‘60s and ‘70s, which were considered shocking at the time. We see that all three categories are clearly represented in music, but whether there is a causal connection between sex and happiness remains to be seen.

Finally, in this totally unscientific little analysis, women seem as present as men or as we nowadays say: all genders are represented.

Is music changing the world or does the world change and we see this represented in popular music? There must be research about this, but feel free to send a letter to the editor or come and study at the Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture and Society.

1 ChatGPT

MIRJAM SCHIEVELD, a cultural anthropologist by training is the founder of the Summer Programmes Office, starting with the Summer Institute on Sexuality, Culture & Society over 25 years ago. She believes in changing the world one student at a time.



## ADDENDUM

Here’s a top 10 list of songs that explicitly deal with sex, either in a playful, direct, or provocative manner: Listen here on Spotify: *Summer Institute on Sexuality: Explicit*

*Sexual Healing* (1982)

by MARVIN GAYE

Famous lyrics: “Get up, get up, get up, get up / Let’s make love tonight.”

*Darling Nikki* (1984)

by PRINCE

Famous lyrics: “I met her in a hotel lobby / Masturbating with a magazine.”

*Justify My Love* (1990)

by MADONNA

Famous lyrics: “Wanting, needing, waiting / For you to justify my love.”

*Me So Horny* (1989)

by 2 LIVE CREW

Famous lyrics: “Me love you long time.”

*Dirrty* (2002)

by CHRISTINA AGUILERA

Famous lyrics: “Wanna get rowdy, wanna get a little unruly / Get it fired up in a hurry.”

*S&M* (2010)

by RIHANNA

Famous lyrics: “Sex in the air, I don’t care, I love the smell of it.”

*I’m a Slave 4 U* (2001)

by BRITNEY SPEARS

Likely about love and emotional connections.

*Closer* (1994)

by NINE INCH NAILS

*Closer* by Nine Inch Nails is one of the most raw and explicit songs dealing with sex, known for its infamous line: “I want to f\*\* you like an animal.”\*

*WAP* (2020)

by CARDI B FEAT. MEGAN THEE STALLION

Famous lyrics: “Now from the top, make it drop, that’s some wet...”

*Often* (2014)

by HE WEEKND

Famous lyrics: “She asked me if I do this every day, I said often.”

# CHOPPING IT UP IN THE THIRD MIND

by J. CHRISTIAN GREER illustrations by ANNA FORMILAN



The Psychedelic Universe seminar meets five days a week, lasting from morning till the late afternoon. Needless to say, we all see a lot of each other. However, I had a sneaking sense that even with all this time there was still so much that remained to be said on the topics we explored. From the presence of cannabis found in paleolithic burial sites to the contemporary ceremonial contexts centered on smoking crystallized forms of toad venom, we were only scratching the surface of this material. The topic of global psychedelic history is so new, so it makes sense that my co-instructor and I were eager to map out the basic terrain of this topic, but there is something about the classroom setting that prevents us from going as deep as we want. The classroom setting was ideal for laying down the fundamen-

authentic insights. So, how to create a zone for such aimless but engaged chit-chatting within the classroom? Of course, it is impossible to plan a good conversation. They happen as if by magic. In the writings of William S. Burroughs we find an occult explanation worth considering. This legendary beatnik and pioneer of consciousness-alteration argued that a “Third Mind” is formed when two minds come together in earnest conversation. What is this “Third Mind”? His writings on this are convoluted in the extreme, but it has something to do with the fact that all human consciousness arises from the



amentals, that is clear; but other forms of socialization were necessary to ask the types of questions that have real stakes for the academic study of this topic. This realization, though, did not come to me fully formed, but rather I was led there over the course of an evening of discussing with my co-instructor, Erik Davis. Aha! It was precisely our night of informal yakking, which careened between sincere questioning, ironic commentary, autobiographical reminiscing, anecdotal mentions of half-remembered dreams, and just plain goofing around that served as the royal road to

same substratum of being. Or at least that is what I think he was arguing. Anyways, following his lead, I knew that I could not announce to the class that there will be a “earnest conversation group discussion” at the opening of every class. If I was confronted with this in a classroom, my first thought would be - “What kind of hippie crap is this?” I decided to take a sneakier approach. Instead of jumping into my next lecture on the possible role of psychedelics in early Christianity, I opened the class by describing the importance of doodling while in class. It was a total non-sequitur from

the lecture Erik presented the day before, and seeming totally detached from the day’s topic. Nonetheless, I explained how drawing in the margins of my notebook strengthened my concentration, and even suggested that perhaps new thoughts were coalescing in the abstract shapes that filled page after notebook page. Going further, what if these weird designs were actually encoded ideas, or diagrams of thoughts I was on the verge of thinking? “Does anyone else doodle while listening to the lectures?”, I asked. A quiet woman in the back raised her hand, and shared her doodles from the last lecture, which got her talking about the parts of the talk she understood, and where she drifted off into daydreaming. “Wow! I am obsessed with daydreaming, I yearn for daydreaming. It feels like I am stealing time away from thehypertechnologized “attention-economy” that surrounds us each day, I remarked. Where is the land of daydreaming? Can anyone recall a daydream “trip” they have taken while in this class?” A few hands went up. So began a freeform discussion that mixed personal insights, scholarly reflections, and zany explorations of the imagination. Much to my delight, we kept returning to aspects of this discussion throughout the rest of the morning and afternoon sessions. It was like we established a foothold in the imaginal realm, which let us “speak from

the heart” for the rest of the day. In one of the course evaluations, a student mentioned how much she enjoyed it when Erik went “off-script,” turning away from the topic of his lecture and just rapped about an idea. The student likened it to watching a rock-n-roll guitarist just shed a tasty solo. Our conversation about daydreams was just like that - like we were all floating downstream of the “Third Mind” without regard for the speed, direction, or even coherence. This drift naturally led into a meta-conversation about what it means to study the global history of psychedelics, the ways scholars have gotten succeeded or failed in conceptualizing it, and what it meant for us to be co-creating this new field of inquiry in the classroom during the course. We landed on a conclusion that reshaped the classroom dynamic from that day forward. The best way to explain our realization is by way of reference to the principal Acid Western film, *El Topo* (1970) by Alejandro Jodorowsky. Here, the protagonist, a psychedelized gun-fighter, must cross an expansive desert to find a hidden spiritual master; however, in this freaky-deaky world, the most direct path leads him further away from his destination! Quite a conundrum. The breakthrough insight in the film is that the most expedient path is circuitous. Historians of religion will recognize this lesson as a central tenet of Daoism literature: “the Way that is the Way is not the way.” So it was for us in the classroom going forward. Both Erik and I began starting each class by “spiraling in the desert”, so to speak. The class eventually named this routine “chopping it up”. On one occasion, I opened by reflecting on the virtues of taking notes with pen and



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paper, as opposed to typing on a computer. There is some special mind-body connection at play when we write each word out in our own script. It makes recalling ideas easier. This opened up into a discussion about the ways we all retain information, with one student adding that he is an visual learner who relies on the notes I write on the dry-erase whiteboard, another student explained how he re-writes his notes after each class in order to integrate the ideas into his own thinking, and another bemoaned the fact that she has to translate a lot of the lesson into her own language (Italian) before it sticks in her mind. Similarly, Erik once reflected on the difficulties he faced over the last thirty-years in teaching himself about psychedelic history. This riff then turned to how low-quality information spreads across the web, which led to a freewheeling conversation about access to libraries, the importance of lending books to friends, and the ethics of writing in the margins of borrowed books. “Chopping it up” forced each of us to tap into deeper parts of ourselves, leaving behind the stifling roles of student and teacher so that we could communicate with humor and generosity, and take risks in ways that traditional classroom instruction often eliminates. More to the point, it was fun. And it was precisely this playful spirit that guided us until the end of the course.



# QUEERING HAPPINESS

## The intersection of Sexuality and Well-Being

by **EDY CHOITY** illustrations by **ANNA FORMILAN**

**H**appiness can be described as a subjective experience, a mixture of feelings of joy, contentment and well-being that varies from person to person. Although happiness surely is a personal experience, it is far from being independent of one's surrounding and the prevailing social and political factors within a given society.

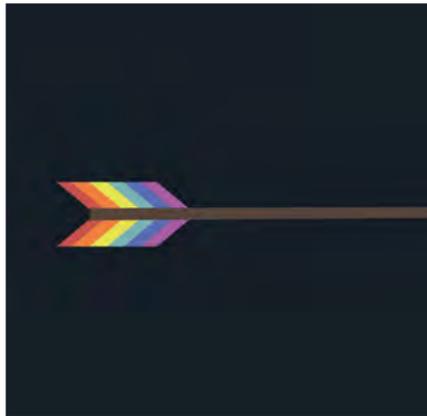
The understanding of happiness varies across cultures. In individualistic cultures such as in the U.S and Western Europe, happiness is more likely to be

tied to individual success and positive emotions, while in collectivist cultures such as in East Asia and Africa, it is more about social harmony, spiritual fulfillment, and balancing between positive and negative emotions. In Bhutan, for example, the government promotes Gross National Happiness (GNH) rather than Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the key measure of national well-being, focusing on spiritual, environmental, and communal happiness rather than economic growth alone.

That said, what is worth mentioning

*EDY CHOITY is a junior lecturer at the bachelor and pre-master sociology program at the University of Amsterdam and is the Associate Academic Director of Introduction to Sexuality Studies. His interest lies at the heart of gender theories and sexualities.*

here is that religious and philosophical traditions play a major role in shaping our cultural understanding of happiness. In ancient Greece, thinkers like Aristotle linked happiness to moral virtue and the pursuit of wisdom rather than material wealth. Eastern traditions like Confucianism viewed happiness to be stemming from social harmony and ethical conduct, while Buddhism redefined it through the concept of Nirvana, the cessation of all suffering through the elimination of greed, hatred and ignorance. Later, Christianity placed happiness in the realm of salvation and eternal life with God, and advocated chastity as one means to that end. Similarly, Islam posited that happiness could be achieved through



morality and good deeds, with an ultimate goal to be achieved in the afterlife. It was not until the Enlightenment that happiness began to be understood in secular and humanistic terms. The 17th and 18th centuries saw happiness enshrined as a right, most notably in political documents such as the U.S. Declaration of Independence in 1776, which proclaimed “the pursuit of happiness” as a fundamental right. With the rise of utilitarianism, happiness took on a more quantifiable meaning and began to be understood in terms of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Jeremy

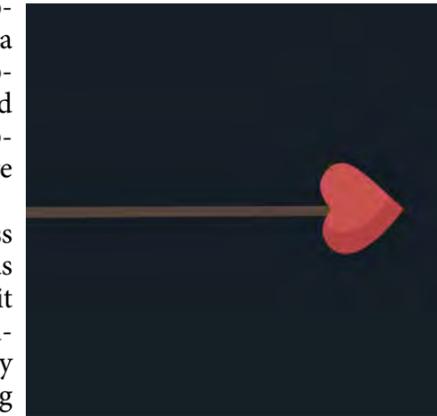
Bentham’s “greatest happiness principle” emphasized the maximization of pleasure and minimization of pain for the greatest number of people.

Today, happiness is studied across many fields, including psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and even economics, all of which emphasize the importance of social, political, and cultural contexts on individual happiness. Gender and Sexuality studies examine happiness through the lens of sexual well-being and autonomy. Increasingly, the field promotes the concept of positive sexuality, which approaches sexuality in affirming, inclusive and respectful ways. This lens moves away from the traditionally stigmatizing discourses around sexual behavior and promiscuity, promoting instead a positive outlook on bodily pleasure that challenges heteropatriarchy and recognizes the impact that sexual agency have on overall happiness.

Queer studies deepen this conversation by offering critical insights into the relationship between happiness and liberation from societal norms. Queer theory’s emphasis on fluidity and its commitment to deconstructing rigid identity categories offers the possibility of understanding identities, as “spaces to be navigated” rather than “categories to be [eternally] occupied” (Giffney, 2009). This understanding, not only liberates individuals from the burden of labels, but opens up a mesh of possibilities for them to unapologetically own to their sensations and unspeakable desires. In this sense, queer theory provides a possible framework for understanding alternative sexualities, such as BDSM (Bondage, Discipline, Dominance, Submission, Sadism, and Masochism), as a liberational practice for some, while also recognizing asexuality as a challenge to hegemonic expectations and monolithic assumptions about sex, desire and intimacy.

Now, if happiness is to be understood as a mental state, then it makes sense to consider the body as a key conduit for achieving it. The fascination with exploring the limits of our bodily capacities—whether through physical endurance, sensory experience, or even altered states—has always preoccupied humankind. This exploration has been deeply rooted in cultural, religious, and philosophical questions about the relationship between the body and mind, the nature of human potential, and the boundaries of physical experience. And sexuality is no exception to this exploration. In ancient cultures, the orgasmic experience for instance was seen not only as a natural bodily response but as a sacred experience. Some Sumerian religious practices involved sacred prostitution, where temple priestesses would engage in sexual acts to connect the divine with the earthly through orgasm. In ancient India as well, the Kama Sutra emphasized the importance of sexual pleasure, and orgasm was seen as a vital component of spiritual fulfillment.

A critical question that emerges here is whether happiness, as it relates to sexuality, derives from the actual experiences of bodily pleasures or from the mere liberty to explore and engage with these desires freely. Perhaps, the answer to this question lies somewhere in between. What is certain, however, is that the ability to openly express one’s sexuality is a form of resistance, and it is in this interstitial space—between societal structures and personal liberation—that happiness is often negotiated.



Finally, whether a need or desire, there is nothing more natural than enacting our sexualities and exploring the fascinating limits of our bodies. As Alfred Kinsey asserted, “the only unnatural sexual act is one which you cannot perform.”

The next time you are asked if you are happy, take a second to observe where your mind takes you and what it actually assesses in answering this question.

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# Sustainable happiness

by ERNST VAN WEPEREN



To facilitate the understanding of the title of this text on 'Sustainable Happiness', it helps to briefly take some time to better understand how "sustainable" is interpreted contextually. Today, "sustainability" is often understood – perhaps mistakenly – as a catch-all container within the grand environmental project. Problematically, using this abstract noun in a range of contexts actually complicates understanding. A relatively easy manner to counter this added complication, is to shift the attention to the adjectival form, "sustainable" – defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "the ability to continue at a particular level for a period of time". Used adjectivally the question arises as to what one is trying to sustain. Contextual focus comes from associating the adjective with specific nouns. Examples include, but are not limited to "the sustainable self", "the sustainable society", and in the context of this text "sustainable happiness"; how does one continue happiness at a particular level for a period of time? How, in other words, does one sustain happiness?

Maslow's pyramid, although not without its own critique, may shed some light on the matter of the sustainable happy self. He suggests that we meet physiological needs before we find a sense of security, social belonging, self-esteem, and for some of us self-actualizing into the person each and everyone of us have the potential to become. Whether each step is necessarily a precondition to the next is open for debate, but there is merit in claiming that each needs to be met in order to live a fulfilled, dare I say happy, life. One can argue that in contemporary society,

many components in the first layers of the pyramid are translated to monetary value. Most of us have to pay for things like food and drink, security in the form of a home, and a sense of security through income. However, the higher we go up Maslow's pyramid, the less obvious it becomes to assign a monetary value to our needs. It is difficult, at best, to put a monetary value on one's level of self-esteem or self-actualization. If anything, value has multiple dimensions where environmental aspects such as fresh water, air, food, lay the foundations for economic value such as income, and social value in terms of a sense of belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. Planet, People, and Prosperity are three of the five principles that form the foundation for a sustainable global society, according to the United Nations. The other two principles are Partnerships and Peace.

When zooming in on modern-day global society, some might argue that it is accelerating at an ever-increasing pace—a rat race fueled by an addiction to growth, specifically material growth. Kate Raworth's 2018 TEDx talk, in which she introduces her Doughnut Economics, powerfully challenges the myth of perpetual growth, critiquing the 1950s model of Rostow's "Stages of Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto". In his manifesto Rostow argues that there five steps through which all countries must pass to become developed: traditional society; preconditions to take-off, take-off, drive to maturity and age of high mass consumption. It goes beyond the scope of this text to discuss all 5, but it is worth noting that the highest level

of development according to Rostow is "the age of high mass consumption". In Rostow's defense, his book was written in the 50's of the previous century, an age where global population was approximately 2,5 billion, and the sky did in fact seem the limit. However, even then one could wonder why the highest level of development is defined by an age of mass consumption. Why does much of contemporary global society still seem to be stuck in a mindset similar to Rostow's? Despite decades of increasing consumerism, many of us continue to self-identify with the things we own and buy, seeking near-instant gratification. Yet, with every purchase, the moment of gratification seems to diminish. One could even argue that running from one purchase to the next while passively absorbing the endless stream of information we receive via our digital devices leaves little room for the inner development of ones self-esteem, and self-actualization.

Sustainable happiness - the ability to maintain happiness at a particular level for a period of time - is a far cry from the highest level of development that Rostow suggested in 1950, which still seems to define many of us in 2024. If we want to sustain happiness, individually and on societal level, perhaps we should focus on economic, material growth only until our needs are met, and then focus on more lasting, sustainable forms of value.

*ERNST VAN WEPEREN is a lecturer, researcher, and freelancer that has worked in non-for-profit, for-profit and academia in a career spanning two decades. He directs the Pre University Sustainable Thinking programme.*

# MAKING FRIENDS WITH UNCERTAINTY

by FFION PINDER

**D**uring the UvA Summer Program 2024, I spoke about how making friends with uncertainty can have benefits on happiness and wellbeing. I am a psychologist working in Amsterdam, so I have seen how having an intolerance of uncertainty can lead to anxiety and stress. Becoming friends with something that, neurologically, our brains are cautious of can be a challenge, but it is something that is absolutely possible.

To build our tolerance to uncertainty, we need to learn to live alongside it or even embrace it. There are a number of skills you can implement to accomplish this, which I discussed with the students in the summer program.

## BUILD IT UP

To build up tolerance, we may need to give ourselves time to learn that we are able to manage uncertainty. Additionally, we need to collect tangible evidence that shows that uncertain situations can turn out well. To gather this evidence, I recommend that people start with 'low risk, low anxiety' conditions, then build up to more anxiety provoking situations. As you work up your own hierarchy, you will notice that the worst case scenario that you feared rarely happens. Even if things do not quite go as planned, you are able to manage these situations.

## FIND THE EVIDENCE

There will be examples in your own life that show your ability to survive and manage uncertainty. So, if you find yourself thinking "it will go badly" or "I won't be able to manage" in uncertain situations, I encourage you to look back objectively on your life and consider if there have been times when you successfully navigated uncertainty. Some examples of this can be you starting university, living through a global pandemic, or trying a new flavour of crisp. Using your own experiences, provides you with real evidence that you have managed uncertainty before and therefore have the ability to do so again.

## PROS AND CONS

There are certain questions I encourage my clients to ask themselves to offer a broader perspective on their worry, especially if they are intolerant to uncertainty. Questions such as:

- *What are the cons of avoiding uncertainty?*
- *What will happen if every opportunity you are faced with, you think it will go terribly?*
- *Will this restrict your life? If yes, how so?*
- *What would be the pros of leaning into uncertainty?*
- *Would there be any positive changes as a result?*

Leaning into uncertainty doesn't make it less scary, it is still frightening. Be curious and ask yourself "is this worry worth the possibility that this could go well?". Uncertainty can be wonderful, exciting and lead to amazing opportunities, don't let your fear limit your capability.

## ANCHOR

Living in unknown situations, or in times with lots of change can be unpleasant. In uncertain situations, it can be helpful to focus on something consistent, stable, or safe. An example of this can be seen in the observations made during the Covid-19 pandemic, when people around the world were suddenly thrown into a frightening and uncertain reality. Many people found comfort in sticking to similar routines, to provide them with some certainty through their own action. Others used nostalgia as a way to anchor to memories of times outside of the pandemic, such as re-watching their favourite childhood movies or baking food their mothers used to make.

Have a go at some of these skills and embrace uncertainty! Perhaps an uncertain situation to experiment with could be attending a summer program, where you get to meet new people and learn new things.

FFION PINDER is a Welsh therapist that lives and works in the Netherlands. This summer she directed the mental health week in the Urban Changemakers programme.



# (BI) CYCLES

by CAS SMITSMANS illustration by ANNA FORMILAN



CAS SMITSMANS  
works as an ad-  
visor and teacher  
in the sustain-  
ability sector.



# IN THE CITY

**R**ecently I got the question “How are you?” And then: “how are you really?”. It is quite easy to just revert to your routine answer and say “I’m good, what about you?”. But if you actually pause, and reflect on it, what really comes to mind? Is it a feeling of happiness and joy? Is it sadness and helplessness? Love or anger?

Perhaps, it is a question about what gives us meaning in an increasingly complex world, where the weight of global challenges can sometimes feel overwhelming. Bad news cycles feed us with information of climate change, disturbed biochemical cycles, social injustice, and economic instability. Such information can lead to a sense of helplessness, overshadowing our moments of happiness and joy.

When answering this question, you could also consider where to draw a boundary around our happiness, similar to how we would map systems. Can I be thriving if my environment and my community are not? Or should I feel guilty about finding moments of happiness?

Another question that might come to mind is if happiness is bound to space and time (e.g. looking at generational justice). Yes, I can be happy now, but tomorrow something might happen that will change my happiness. Does that extend also to other people? Perhaps other generations?

This is especially interesting if we look at our own living environments and how they should be shaped and used. Our surroundings have a profound impact on our mental and emotional states. Cities, where money and power are ‘cycling’ through the streets, often seen as bustling centres of opportunity, can also feel isolating and stressful, fostering a disconnect from nature and community.

When thinking about governance of a city and designing the built environment, it is important to recognize that while cities can be designed to cater to our immediate needs—providing entertainment, fast food and other conveniences—this often results in only temporary happiness. Also, we must ask ourselves: happiness for whom? Is it at the expense at the happiness of others?

If you could ask a tree, “Who are you really?” would it be happy? Difficult to know. However what we do know is that a thriving tree is grounded in its environment, connected to everything in its ecosystem, small and big, driving cycles of nutrients to those in need.

If you look behind some doors in a city (e.g. the doors of Buurtbuik), there are other cycles occurring that connect all the dots: social cycles, of care for each other, cycles of information and education that enables us to contribute to our environment. Take actions that gives meaning to what we do. While reflecting on the summer course with my colleague, academic director Daphne Truijens, we discussed that engaging with all these diverse perspectives and motivated individuals, deeply strengthened our feeling of shared purpose and meaning.

So, “how am I really”, you ask? For now I’m good.

# Unlikely Bedfellows: Journalism and Happiness

by DR. BENJAMIN B. ROBERTS



In today's world it is hard to imagine that anyone could get any kind of pleasure or happiness from reading and watching the daily news. In fact, most mental health gurus would strongly advise against it. In *Stop Reading the News: A Manifesto for a Happier, Calmer, and Wiser Life* (2013), the Swiss writer Rolf Dobelli recommends that the key to a happy life is one with limited news intake, which in today's world of social media is almost impossible unless you live in a cave.

Nevertheless, writing for the media personally gives me pleasure and happiness, which might seem like strange bedfellows. As a journalist, each writing assignment that I am commissioned forces me to investigate and get to the bottom of the story with as much accuracy as possible, which can be a challenge when researching sources. Each story is not black and white and is layered with nuances with shades of grey, which is something commercial media channels do not abide by. In fact, most headlines are designed to catch viewers' attention with teasers, and once the reader gets pulled in, after not too long, they (hopefully) figure out that the teaser-headline was completely inaccurate, and they were sucked in, and still do not have all the facts.

By completely investigating a topic and finding all the shades of grey, and then framing it into a greater historical context – and

believe me- most everything we have witnessed on the evening news has been happened before on the planet - helps me rationalize the world's current situation. Most headline news stories seem like they are announcing the end of the world. We must remember that most news media are commercial businesses that financially survive and thrive on a steady supply of viewers and readers. If nothing happened in one day, why are there still dramatic doomsday headlines? If nobody watched the news, would the world change much?

Who's to say. Of course, a well-informed voting public is a requirement for a functioning democracy, especially today when most news consumption are short-reads and lack the long in depth reads which give the audience the bigger picture. That's where my happiness comes in. Digging deep into a story and discovering all the ins and outs, and then writing a well-balanced article which makes the reader feel like they have a more complete idea of the situation, preferably with a solution to the problem – instead of being left holding the bag (the problem!). That's the stress that the media causes most people today. Only presenting the problem without providing any solutions.

My happiness-factor goes off the charts during my summer course "Pre-University Honours Programme: Journalism, Media, and Society". The programme

allows me to share my passion for researching and writing with high school students ages 16-18, who come to Amsterdam, and already know that they want to become journalists. I don't know how the team at the summer school programme of the University of Amsterdam pulls it off, but every year I am rewarded with a bunch of bright-eyed, intelligent young people who want to use journalism to transform the world and make it a better place. I'm convinced in ten years' time (if not sooner) the world will be a better one as the younger generation does not take commercial journalism at face value. They demand a higher quality of news reporting and journalism. And that very thought already makes me very happy.

*Dr. BENJAMIN ROBERTS is an American writer, historian, and journalist based in Amsterdam. He currently works as a journalist writing about art, culture, history, and sports for various publications. Benjamin is the academic director for the Pre University Media, Journalism and Society programme, as well as other tailor made courses for the Summer Programmes Office.*

# Why Mindfulness Matters: A New Lens for Viewing Happiness

by MAJA WRZESIEN

Last weekend, I did a quick experiment by asking people what happiness means to them. People were mentioning finding happiness in nature, doing their favorite activities, sharing new experiences with people, or being in the company of their loved ones. All these personal definitions, including the one from my 12-year-old son, for who happiness is “having a never-ending *Yes day*”<sup>1</sup> match what researchers have found when they’ve looked more closely at what happiness is.

Happiness is often used by the scientists interchangeably with “subjective well-being” which can be assessed by asking people about their life satisfaction (cognitive component), the balance of positive and negative emotions they experience (emotional component), and their sense of meaning in life (eudaimonic component).

While many factors that influence happiness are beyond our control, some evidence-based strategies like sociability and gratitude increase our chances of feeling happy. Today I’d like to add another one to the list: mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness has many benefits, which I believe can be summarized by three main ideas: (1) Nothing lasts forever, (2) Shit happens, and (3) Don’t take things personally.

## NOTHING LAST FOREVER

Mindfulness is the practice of being fully present while developing the ability to step back

from whatever arises without clinging to it. Although we kind of know that nothing lasts forever, we tend to assign a sense of permanence and stability to things that happen around us, including our own identity. But what if we could fully appreciate and learn from each moment in life even though it will change? Recent research shows that one mechanism through which mindfulness enhances meaning in life is by allowing us to focus on positive experiences and take a step back from them, a process known as decentering. The movie *About Time* beautifully illustrates this concept through the main character, who travels back in time to relive moments and appreciate them beyond their troubles. By the end, he learns to live each day without needing to go back, choosing instead to live it “as if it was the final day of his extraordinary life”.

## SHIT HAPPENS

We might be tempted to focus only on the happy moments, but research actually shows that if you focus too much on being happy, it can actually make you feel worse. Mindfulness encourages us to move beyond the idea of happiness as good and sadness as bad, emphasizing the importance of acceptance. In fact, research shows that when we use acceptance—including accepting that we may not like the situation—it increases positive feelings and improves well-being. Next time you have a bad day, try to embrace what is there instead of chasing happy moments.

## DON’T TAKE THINGS PERSONALLY

We all have the capacity for conscious self-reflection, which allows us to imagine, plan, and

improve ourselves. However, focusing too much on ourselves can lead to over-identification with our own views, causing us to exaggeratedly protect and defend them. This individualistic focus is often amplified by society, especially through social media, where we share everything from perfect meals to workouts, turning ourselves into self-proclaimed celebrities. This excessive self-focus can negatively affect our relationships, happiness, and overall well-being.

Our brain also plays a role in this. It constantly predicts and interprets the world based on our past experiences, which may reinforce this rigid sense of self. Although more rigorous empirical research is needed, experts believe that meditation can help us break this pattern by changing how the brain predicts and processes information. This, in turn can lead to a more flexible sense of identity and improved mental health.

So, is mindfulness a magic pill for happiness? I would say it is not. However what experts in the field agree on is that mindfulness encourages us to see happiness not as a goal to be achieved, nor as a pill to be prescribed. The practice teaches us to be fully present and open in each moment, regardless of whether it feels good or not. It also encourages an ethical way of living where interconnectedness is a key, ultimately promoting both individual and collective happiness.

*DR. MAJA WRZESIEN is currently a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Valencia (Spain) and a former post-doctoral researcher (Marie Skłodowska-Curie fellow) within the Psychopathology and Development group at the University of Amsterdam.*

<sup>1</sup> A whole day when caregivers agree to say “yes” to almost any reasonable request their children make, like eating dessert for breakfast, building a pillow/blanket/furniture fort in the living room, doing a marathon of video games or wearing pyjamas outside the house.



**INTERVIEW WITH**  
**JULIA**  
**MURASZKIEWICZ**

**DIRECTOR**  
**OF THE**  
**SPACE LAW**  
**PROGRAMME**

Illustrations by ANNA FORMILAN



**I**n the summer programmes office, we are always looking for new and exciting topics to develop into programmes. Sometimes we come up with these ideas together as a team, and sometimes someone comes to us with a very niche topic that excites us. This was the case when Dr Julia Muraszkiwicz came to us with idea of a programme on Space Law. Our initial reaction, as is most people's when they hear those two words together, was "Space Law!? Cool! ... but wait, what are the laws in space?"

We hope that this interview with Julia, the academic director of the space law programme, will give you some insights into the programme itself as well as Julia's experience with the summer school. Within the theme of this magazine edition, Julia prefaced by confirming that the summer school indeed made her "very happy".

**So perhaps a vague question, but let's start at the beginning – when did people realise we need laws for space?**

In reality, a few people were writing about it before but the moment we thought, not only do we need to have some laws, we have to get them quite quickly, was when Sputnik launched in 1957. Sputnik, the first satellite from the then Soviet Union made the world go, "oh, looks like we're going to be doing some things in space. Oh no, there's absolutely no laws there. We probably need some laws". That was the kind of

the tipping point. Like I said, a few people were writing about it beforehand but particularly in an international arena where space law really exists, that was the trigger point.

**And to now jump 70 years in the future, what's the most interesting recent development you have seen in the field?**

Well, I think there are two. One is the fact is that America now has the Artemis program, named after the twin sister of

for that now. The Artemis program as you can see is the equivalent of the Apollo program during the Cold War era, but it's not only going to be three white dudes, there's going to be a woman, there's going to be a person of colour, so we will have diversity on the moon as well. So that's exciting and inspirational and broadens to other people who can get inspired by that. That's my number one thing. The other thing is the fact that we're really seriously entertaining the idea that asteroids and the moon can be mined.

There's some really powerful resources there that could solve some of our energy issues back here on Earth. If we could perhaps stop mining and destroying our planet, and mine an asteroid in order to obtain materials for batteries, smartphones and such, that could be promising. There's a number of companies

who are currently preparing to mine asteroids and bring back some really useful resources, which will be good for the planet but it's going to make some people very rich, which raises questions as to who should benefit from the resources and how.

**And, other than some people getting very rich, do you foresee space mining causing other issues?**

It already is because of the law on that particular aspect. For

example, nobody owns the Moon or Mars. The law on that is very clear. You cannot put your flag on there and call it your own. I mean, I know the Americans put their flag on the moon, but they didn't say the moon is ours. So everyone accepts that planets, the universe, belongs to all humankind, the heritage of all humankind. But the law is very hazy on say, what happens when you mine the moon or an asteroid? Who gets to keep the resources? Some will say even the resources, minerals and chemical elements are also the province of humankind, so no one can take or have it for profit. But others will argue there are laws that say they can do this, so it will cause tension.

**To move on to yourself, can you tell me how you got into this field. What was your background and what guided you to this very niche field?**

My actual background is in law and international law, specifically human trafficking, which is completely different - but I have actually written one article where I bring the two together!

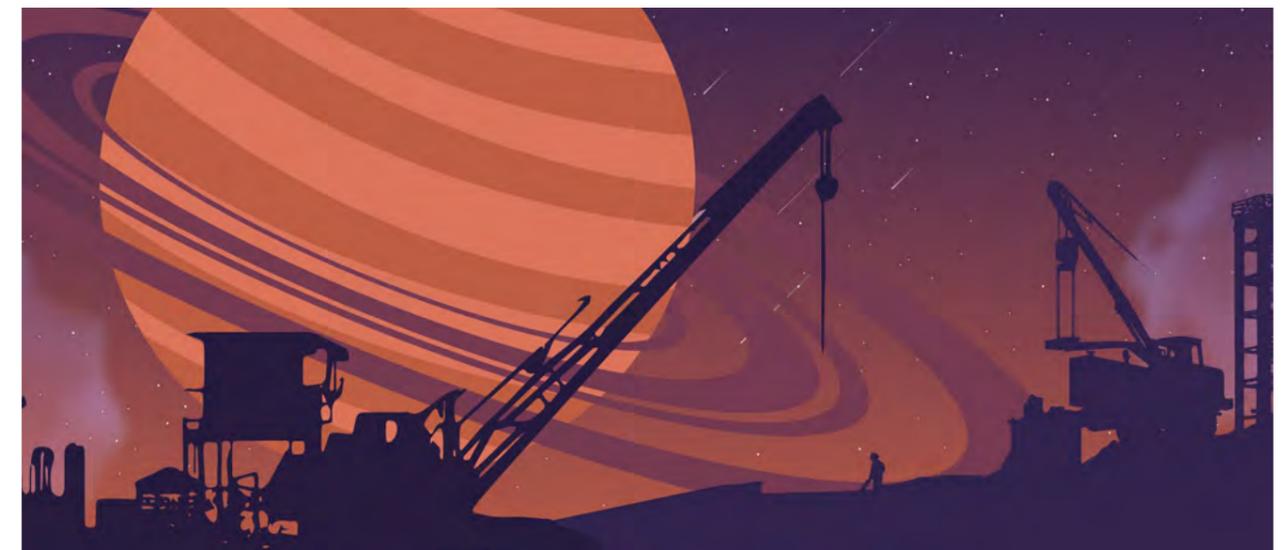
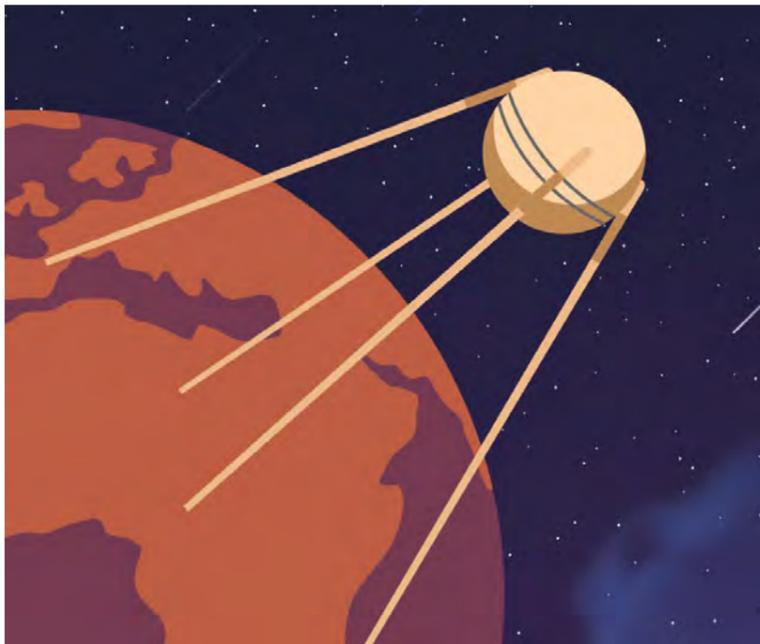
I've always been interested in international law and transnational cooperation among states and understanding the next new thing. I also always always loved science fiction books and just generally space and then one day, I just thought "you know what, I could go into space law!" So really just kind of walking in the park one day, and then being like, well I have the foundation for it and I have a PhD in international law. So, then I took a few courses on Space Law, taught myself a lot, attended conferences and read books, the usual way you get into a new field. Once I felt confident that I knew what I'm talking about, I started teaching it at UVA on the PPLE program. And then, I think around this time last year, I pitched it to Charlotte to see if we could have a summer school and she said yes. And now here we are having this interview!

**So your background in law and love for science fiction sparked your interest. Was there anything else that makes you passionate about this topic or wanting to pursue it?**

Yeah, I think it's the fact that a lot of the laws, well, all the law, international laws that we have on Space Law is a product of the Cold War, and it's very interwoven with our modern history, and I don't have an academic background in it, but I love history. I really enjoyed studying the Cold War and reading about it, so the fact that it's so entrenched in that particular aspect was part of the appeal to me.

**What gave you the idea to approach to summer school and how did you envisage a summer program?**

Well, the reason I did it is because I think not enough space law is being taught. The same reason why I pitched it to PPLE. It's taught mainly at a master's level. Maybe one lesson in an international law course or something. But on the whole, it's not taught enough, but it is such an up and coming and will be such an important area that we're definitely going to need way more lawyers. I thought, we need to get these kids interested and inspired and a summer school is such a good way to do it, because sometimes



universities can be stuck in their ways. They might not necessarily want to change their existing modules but having a summer school gives that flexibility and allows you to really show, look, this is working and people are genuinely interested in it. And also, the beauty of a summer school is, people really want to be there, right? They're paying money, they're moving country. So the people you're teaching, they're not going to sit there and yawn and play computer games. They're going to be listening because they want to be there. So I think that's also the beauty of doing a summer school, and it just also means that you get to do it in an intense period of time. It's not like you teach it one week and then wait another week. So another lecture by that time is forgotten or got caught up in tort law or something else. But here we were every day discussing it. The students were thinking about it while they were sleeping, and they were coming back in the morning saying, "Oh, this is what I thought of!", which, again, made it really interesting.

**That leads me on to the next part. Which aspects of the summer school and teaching the program made you happy?**

First of all, and not to be like, "Oh, you guys (the summer programmes office) are so amazing", but it was so well organized. I very rarely experience such good organisation. I really had to worry absolutely about nothing other than showing up and teaching which was so beautiful and Charlotte (the programme coordinator) did such an incredible job. So that was one thing - the ease of doing it. And then, like I said, the students. They really,

really made it. They weren't there sitting bored and yawning. They were so engaged. They taught me probably as much as I taught them. And I know that's such a cliché, but it was so true. So the students, and the fact that they were from different parts of the world, that gives you a whole different perspective on law. I also like the freedom. Charlotte said, "what do you want to do?", and there was no restrictions other than in terms of hours and that you have to have assignments, but I could make up the course as I wanted. And equally, we could change it - I could say to the students, "Right, this is the plan. Is there anything else you want covered?", and we could be agile and add an extra day or change stuff around. So that was pretty cool.

**I think that's something that a lot of our directors say as well is that they really like the fact that they get to teach what they love, so they get to really dive into their favourite topics. And then you get lots of like-minded people from around the world in the same room to get excited and talk about these things such as space law, or whatever it may be. You said that, although it's a cliché, that you learn from them as well. Could you maybe give me something surprising that you learned from the students?**

First of all, some of the skills they had, like they were so incredible on PowerPoint presentations, and I just couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was so impressive. The second thing, their enthusiasm. It was infectious. For example they were given assignments, some of which were not

marked, and they would go away and put so much effort in. One of them made an entire podcast instead of doing a presentation, she put it together, edited it, phoned somebody in India to be a guest speaker - like an actual podcast. So I'm just so impressed. And then they all brought stories back from their home countries. They all had, for example, the same assignment in which they had to present the history of space law. Every single one of those presentations was completely different, because they had their own perspectives. One guy took us back to ancient Greece and Aristotle. Somebody else took it more from an academic perspective. Somebody saw it more from the angle of the Cold War. So it was really interesting to learn from their interpretations, and like I said, for them to give examples from their home countries.

**Yes I always find that interesting, for example, if we do a programme concerning sustainability, it's fascinating to see what people may think is feasible here, or may well be feasible in Amsterdam - that could be completely not feasible in another part world. It's really inspiring to have these discussions with people.**

**Is there anything you would change or any insights you have for next year?**

I taught the course mostly myself and because I'm a lawyer by background, it was very much space law. I did bring in guests. They had a guest lecture from a physicist who explained space. They had a guest lecture from somebody that works in Dutch defence, so they talked about it from a defence perspective. But I think even getting more per-

spective would be great. I'd like to make it a little bit more holistic - to use another cliché...

**It true though! With a topic like this, it is always great to hear from so many different professionals, especially when there's so many different stakeholders involved.**

**Ok so probably my last question but it's a big one... How do you see the future of this field, and what gets you excited about the future of this field?**

There's going to be more of it - which also means I'll have more competition in terms of teachers... But no, there's going to be more of it. We're probably going to see the new laws coming in nationally. So for a lawyer, how exciting you get more laws you could study. So I think it's going to pick up speed, and we're just going to see it become such a more prominent issue.

**Do you think it would then be something that might be incorporated wider within lots of different law degrees as well, or offered by universities?**

Definitely. At the moment, for instance, in the Netherlands, it's only really taught at Leiden, and mainly at a master's level, and maybe one or two universities have a subject on it. There's not much else outside of Leiden. At UvA Only PPLE offers it. It's not taught, for instance, in the law school. So I'd like to see that changed.

**Thank you very much! Is there anything else that you want to add?**

So on your theme of happiness... Only so few people have been into space. As we move towards things like space tourism, mining and working in space, we must question whether people can be happy in an environment that's not their own Earth? Earth is so wonderful with its forests and nature. In space you can look at the Moon and so on and it's amazing, but you don't get beautiful trees and whatnot. So it'd be very interesting to find out on happiness and psychology, what that's going to look like when we do go there. Don't forget the people in the International Space Station, they're the best of the best of the best. They are chosen from the entire country and are put through rigorous testing and training. They are very special type of humans. So it'll be interesting to see what happens when your average Joe is up there.

**Well, maybe in a few years' time we can do this interview again and talk about happiness up in space!**

I hope so.



*DR. JULIA MURASZKIEWICZ is an international, criminal and human rights law expert. She started UvA's first space law module and has appeared at numerous conferences focusing on space law and the role of women in space.*



SECTION II

**STUDENTS  
CONTRIBUTIONS**



# A FAIL-PROOF MAGICAL POTION FOR HAPPINESS

by **MARCO DE BONI** illustrations by **ANNA FORMILAN**

**W**hile the world of the arcane may evoke mysterious and dark esoteric practices, from the invocation of demons to secretive meetings in hidden lodges, practitioners of the occult have also shown an interest in happiness. One of the most interesting and influential magical texts of the mediaeval period was the *Picatrix*, a 13th century collection of four books translated into Latin from an earlier, possibly 11th century, Arabic text. It contains instructions on astrology, talismans, and potions to assist the practitioner in various aspects of life, from seeking love and defeating enemies to finding treasures and salvaging bitter wine. Amongst this plethora of potions are some to help the practitioner lead a happy life.

In book 4, paragraph 36, for example we discover that:

“If you plant a laurel tree in any house you wish, fear will depart from it, and its inhabitants will be happy, cheerful, and well-disposed through the quality of this tree”.

What a simple way to ensure a happy household!

Slightly more complicated is the formula for removing sadness (paragraph 20):

“Take chickpeas, place them in the light of the waxing Moon at night. The next day before the Sun rises, anoint them with olive oil, and put them in water to soften for two hours. Then cook them. Whoever you give some of these to eat, they will see sadness, ill will, troubled thoughts, and every kind of melancholy recede. Their heart will rejoice in the power of the Almighty, and they will always become joyous and cheerful.”

So, hummus for a cheerful disposition?

If that doesn't work it must be because of its simplicity, so here is a slightly more intricate potion from a sage of Chaldean Agriculture (paragraph 9):

“On the first day of the lunar month and in the first hour of that day, take olive branches with green and not yellow leaves, carry them home, set them aside until the beginning of the next Moon. Then, at the beginning of the subsequent Moon, take other branches home as before, carrying them as before and setting them aside in the place where the first ones are. Then take the first ones, and burn them, warming yourself with the heat of the embers. That person will be protected and totally free from all the evils and impediments of Saturn. They will become continuously cheerful in spirit and character. Rejoicing, they will never be sad nor mournful. They will profit in their works and stand in good fortune. They will be virtuous and not die until old age”.

If that still doesn't work and you're still feeling a bit down, the following formula (paragraph 96) is sure to work. This experiment of the Egyptians cannot fail as the author assure us that “I myself have seen many men test and discover its power”, and who are we to doubt the veracity of his words? Here is the potion:

“Blood extracted from a left-hand finger provokes enjoyment when the Moon is conjoined with the Sun or when the Moon is with Venus and given when the Moon is in opposition to the Sun”.

Just make sure you get the alignments of the planets right or you may accidentally turn into a frog instead!

*MARCO DE BONI was a student of Arcane Worlds 2024.*



**HAPPINESS**

# Happiness in Stillness: Why Park Benches Offer More Than Just a Seat

by AWATIF GHAPAR

It was a bright summer day in 2024 when I arrived in Amsterdam for the UvA Summer School Program. The sun bore down in a way that reminded me of home in Malaysia. As I wandered the city streets, the gentle sway of trees, people chatting, and the soft rush of bicycles passing by gave the city its rhythm. Every now and then, I would pause, find a bench, and sit. It wasn't just about resting my feet—there was something more to these quiet moments, something peaceful about observing the world from a bench.

Benches, I realised, are the theatre seats of public spaces. They offer a front-row view to life unfolding in all its small, unnoticed moments. You rest, clear your mind, and suddenly, the world around you becomes sharper—the laughter of children, the rustle of leaves, the hum of distant conversations. A bench is where stillness meets connection. During my time at the University of Amsterdam, I delved into these ideas more formally in the course “Placemaking: Sense, Space & Strategy.” We studied William H. Whyte's work with the Project for

Public Spaces. His research showed that sitting is not just a practical necessity but a crucial element of good urban design. Alongside trees, food stalls, sunlight, and water, seating tran-

sforms public areas into spaces that engage the community.

So, how does a simple bench foster happiness? According to a study by the University of Alabama (Yuen, 2019), just 20 minutes spent in a park—whether you're exercising or not—can boost your mood. Benches play a vital role in this; they offer a place to pause and breathe. They reflect how we interact with our surroundings and each other, providing both privacy and openness. A person sitting quietly on a bench doesn't need to speak to feel connected to the flow of life around them.

Public benches also create a sense of belonging. When more seating options are available, people can choose where they feel most at ease. Sitting down in a space allows you to observe and be observed, to feel part of the city's fabric without any demands placed upon you. This subtle invitation to belong can make a person feel welcome, especially when the city provides places to rest rather than push people away.

Not everyone immediately recognizes the value of benches. In *Happy City* (2013), Charles Montgomery recounts Fred Kent's attempt to add seating to Rockefeller Plaza in New York. The management initially resisted, fearing that more benches would

worsen issues like littering and loitering. However, they eventually approved the idea of transforming the space into a more welcoming environment. The result? The plaza became more vibrant, drawing in visitors who found pleasure in slowing down and taking in their surroundings. The seats transformed the space into a more inviting, human-centred environment.

As the Social Life Project (Madden, Kent & Peinhardt, 2021) suggests, public seating communicates that the streets belong to the community, not just to those passing through. Benches encourage people to pause and enjoy where they are, fostering mental well-being. Researchers Bynon & Rishbeth from The Young Foundation also highlight how sitting outside benefits mental health, particularly for people with limited mobility or those facing social isolation.

Benches may be simple, but their impact is profound. They invite moments of happiness, not by grand gestures, but through quiet opportunities to rest, reflect, and connect. Want to make your city a more pleasant place to live? Start with a bench.

*AWATIF GHAPAR was a student of Placemaking: Sense, Space and Strategy 2024.*

# HAPPY CYCLING

by CAROLEEN WILKES

What is happiness? How do we get it (or more of it)? Perhaps these are some of the most frequent inquiries of the human condition.

In the book, *Build the Life You Want: The Art and Science of Getting Happier*, Arthur C. Brooks highlights the differences in the cultural and linguistic significance of happiness. In the Western world, happiness is most notably related to excitement and achievement. While happiness, among communities in the Eastern world, is more familiar to a sense of calmness and contentment. Thus, Brooks proposes that in spite of these differences happiness for all of us is defined as a combination of three attributes: enjoyment, satisfaction and purpose. As I reflect on my own experiences I find this idea of happiness to be true.

Some of my earliest happy memories were cycling as a child in American suburbia. I biked every day to seemingly everywhere I wanted to be: the pool, my neighbors', the park, an ice cream shop, etc. My bicycle proved to be a tool of independence, transportation and socialization. Then suddenly, as a teenager I could no longer get

to all the places I needed or wanted to go on my bicycle. Commuting of any kind began to require traveling further distances. That's how my bicycle lost its purpose - where my happiness with cycling began to be challenged.

Since then, I've only used bicycles on vacation as a source of enjoyment: in beach towns, cities and along riverfront parks. I couldn't imagine commuting happily as a cyclist. The purpose and satisfaction of cycling was limited by compromised safety and inaccessibility. Of the three attributes of happiness, I only had enjoyment of my cycling as an activity. That is until this past summer, I joined about 70% of people in Amsterdam, by cycling as a primary mode of transportation. To my surprise, commuting by cycling was not only possible, it was safe and accessible. I enjoyed being an active participant in the streetscape of urban life. I was satisfied with how safe movement improved my wellness. And cycling served as a daily purpose to move efficiently around the city. Once again, I was reminded of happy cycling. Of course, I could be happy without my bicycle and I could cycle without being happy, but there again was an embodied

experience of magic when they intersected.

The Institute for Quality of Life, based in London, has created the Happy City Index. This Key Performance Indicator analysis uses 5 themes, including mobility, to rank the happiness of cities around the world. Their mobility score is dependent on a variety of factors such as safety, accessibility, efficiency and multimodal availability. This index very clearly demonstrates that urban cycling is a sliding scale of enjoyment, satisfaction and purpose. To no surprise, Amsterdam ranks #2 for Mobility and #5 Overall among Golden Cities on the Happy City Index.

When our cities enable cycling they enable happiness. Don't just take my word for it. Professor Yingling Fan, at the University of Minnesota, researches happiness relative to various modes of transportation. Fan asserts that cities that want to improve the quality of life of its inhabitants must focus on enabling biking; it is indeed the happiest way to get around.

*CAROLEEN WILKES was a student in Planning the Cycling City 2024.*

# Enjoying Seriality: How Serial Media Texts Generate Happiness

by **LORENZO SASCOR**

**T**alking about happiness from the perspective of a media scholar first requires identifying a precise viewpoint. We can analyze how happiness is portrayed in media texts, but also how happiness influences media consumption and interpretation. Since we are always exposed to different media forms, it is also useful to analyze whether media fosters consumer happiness.

We are always exposed to different forms of media texts. To make a general distinction, we must consider, on the one hand, news media, which inform us about events happening around the world, and, on the other hand, media designed to entertain us. While the former are usually newspapers, TV news, and talk shows, the latter are films, television shows, music, video games, etc. Of course, there are some exceptions to this pattern, but it's clear that when it comes to happiness the entertainment-aimed media are more ideal to produce and foster this sentiment. The need for entertainment is connected to the need for leisure: it is a concept that emerged with the urbanization and industrialization of the Western world and has to do with workers' free time. «Leisure and entertainment are separate from and in opposition to work and domestic cares» (Dyer 2002, 7), they are tools to escape from the obligations of everyday life.

In my studies, I have focused my research on the topic of audiovisual seriality. It is not casual that nowadays the paths of seriality have been increased, with the emergence and diffusion of streaming platforms and new forms of serial formats, such as YouTube channels or podcasts. Seriality is indeed a narrative format that causes an inevitable satisfaction, presenting to the audience an already-known diegetic universe and familiar characters; it brings order in a world (our real world) characterized by disorder and chaos. Indeed, entertainment itself is not just evasion, it is also «the creation of meaning in a world in which work and the daily round are characterized by drudgery, insistence and meaninglessness» (Ibid.).

An interesting essay by media scholar Ryan Engley, which combines psychoanalysis tools with textual analysis, describes the complementary feelings of frustration and satisfaction typical of serial narrative consumption (Engley 2021). While watching a TV series, we feel frustrated when the episode ends in the middle of an emotionally relevant scene or, even worse, just after an unexpected plot twist. Of course, serial narratives are constructed – written, filmed, and distributed – to generate this sense: the television industry needs a constant and loyal audience, which can guarantee the consumption of every single series

episode and, in so doing, allow the incomes generated from the advertising space sales. However, this sense of frustration is always balanced by the satisfaction derived from the narrative resolution and especially from the constant return of the same characters and the same diegetic world. It sounds more evident when it comes to genres characterized by narrative verticality, such as sitcoms; but, in fact, this sense of familiarity and attachment emerges even with more horizontal and serialized series.

This explains why comedy series such as *Friends* (NBC, 1994-2004) or *The Simpsons* (Fox, 1989 -) are still viewed and loved by enthusiasts from different generations. This is also why fantasy dramas such as *Game of Thrones* (HBO, 2011-2019) affect the collective imagination of viewers from all around the world. They represent a comfort zone, but also a range of feelings, a mix of excitement, expectations, and curiosity which helps us give sense to our everyday life. Through serial narratives, we better understand our world, our society, and ourselves as well.

*LORENZO SASCOR is an Italian master's student in Film, Television, and Multimedia Production at the University of Bologna and he writes for online magazines about film and television. He was a student of the Amsterdam summer school "New Media and the Digitalization of Everyday Life" in 2024.*



# Discovering Happiness in Amsterdam: A summer of learning and global connections

by **ELIS CASTELLO BRANCO**

This past summer, I was lucky enough to be able to go to Amsterdam for the UvA pre-university summer school program: Journalism, media and society - an experience that exceeded all of my expectations. From the moment I arrived at the city until the last minute I was there, I was captivated by its amazing architecture, beauty and energy. For a couple of months, Amsterdam and the UvA were my home. A place where I not only expanded my knowledge but also built meaningful relationships and experienced a vibrant, international community that will stay with me forever. Whether it was walking or cycling around the city, going on canal boat rides or simply sitting in one of the many cafés that Amsterdam has to offer, every moment felt like an opportunity to learn something not only about a totally different culture, but about myself.

The summer school program itself was nothing short of extraordinary. The course was engaging, offering new perspectives and ideas that challenged me in the best ways possible. The tea-

chers were knowledgeable and supportive, creating a welcoming environment that encouraged dialogue and collaboration. I found myself immersed in discussions that went beyond the classroom, exploring complex ideas that impacted our understanding of journalism and media in a global context. My experience couldn't have been better. It wasn't just about what I learned in the classroom but also about how the learning environment encouraged collaboration and curiosity. Besides that, being able to communicate and meet people from all over the world made the experience feel like more than just an academic program. Each day brought new conversations with people from different cultures and backgrounds, yet we all shared a common excitement for learning and exploring together. This opportunity changed the way I saw the world and opened my mind to a whole new perspective of life. By sharing meals, thoughts, customs and laughs with so many people, I learned to appreciate the beauty in our differences and the connections that

unite us all, creating memories that will last a lifetime. Amsterdam taught me to embrace the unknown and seek joy in every interaction. It reminded me that the world is vast and filled with opportunities for discovery, and that happiness often lies in shared experiences and mutual understanding.

Looking back, this experience has been one of personal growth as much as academic achievement. I returned home feeling more confident, more open to new perspectives, and inspired by the global connections I had made. It also helped me to nurse a curiosity to continue to explore things beyond my own borders. Amsterdam and this summer were unforgettable, and the memories I created there—both inside and outside the classroom—will stay with me for a long time. This wasn't just a summer of study; it was a summer of discovery, adventure, and friendship. And I truly loved every part of it.

*ELIS CASTELLO BRANCO was a student Pre-University Honours Programme: Media, Journalism and Society.*

# URBAN PLANNING AND HAPPINESS

by **HENRICH SLOBODA**

Happiness is a term often used and more often misunderstood. Urban planners, as their profession suggests, aim to plan. They aim to anticipate what people might want, what might make them happy. We design our cities, regulating what people do and how they do it, but we forget that people don't abide by rules if they seem unnatural, if they have to go out of their way to comply. So how can urban planners and designers know what makes people feel happy? How can they design a space which, idealistically should be the space where people feel happiest? They can't. Because people themselves don't know what makes them happy. You don't, for example just wake up and think to yourself "today I will go to the park with all the nice views and playing equipment and I will feel happy". Happiness is not a preprogrammed emotion, and I have come to realize that my attempt to explain happiness is not justifiable. Simply put, we cannot plan happiness, neither have we made a gre-

at effort to define it. Or maybe we can, but we don't associate its feeling with something intentional. Happiness on the street is often caused by the simplest things. The scent of a flower. Looking at a wall of a building, illuminated by the gentle touch of the setting sun. The hug of a loved one. The most harmless and unexpected situations are most often the ones in which we feel like we belong to this world, where we have a sense of connection with something and just feel right, in the moment, happy.

Planning such conditions is impossible. Because you don't know when and what will happen that will make you feel this way. It happens in the moment. And that's exactly what urban planners and architects should focus on. Designing places which allow for these moments to happen. These moments are often the most natural things, like a summer breeze, or soft morning light, a child's laugh making you reminiscent of your past, or the glow of a single flower amongst swashes of concrete. Therefore,

designers of spaces, whether indoors or outdoors should aim to incorporate nature in all its shapes and forms, whether social or natural, into their projects, in order to allow for the most unpredictable moments to happen, which consequently make the users of the space, the people, happy.

The next time you take a walk in the city, I dare you to embrace the moment. Notice your immediate surroundings, the people, listen to their conversations, gaze at the sky, brush your fingers on the grass, appreciate the intricacies of a door. I guarantee you will feel something. It might not be happiness, it might even make you cry, but you will feel something that will connect you to the present and to the space you are in. Seek out those spaces and notice what makes them unique, for they are the ones which have been truly well designed.

*HENRICH SLOBODA was a student of the Pre-University Honours Programme: Sustainable Thinking programme 2024.*

# Happiness is a circle (and other small infinities)

by **RAYAN H GH H MOHAMMAD** illustrations by **ANNA FORMILAN**



**H**appiness is a circle—never a straight line, never a destination but a quiet spinning thing. It does not end, nor does it begin, like a leaf falling from a tree (but wasn't it once skyward? didn't it once chase the sun?); it lands, it dissolves, it is reborn in the soil. From the roots, upward, it finds a way to the stars again.

We are taught to think happiness can be chased, captured, and held in our hands like glass beads—but glass, like everything, breaks. Happiness—like a river, like the earth—flows in circles. And isn't this the way of things, the way of nature? Each thing feeding the next, each step folding back onto itself, forever becoming.

When we think of circularity, perhaps we think of economies and cities, systems spinning outward to make things “sustainable.” Yet the word, like all words, trembles under the weight of its own meaning, until we realize: sustainability is merely happiness on a larger scale. After all, is not the happiest person the one who needs less? The one who sees

the cycle of give and take, of waste and renewal, and marvels at the balance?

To live in a circular world is to breathe with the trees. It is to know that the air we exhale becomes the air the leaves breathe in, and around, and back again. The plastic bottle you held in your hand can be shattered and shaped and shattered again, until it is no longer a bottle but something else entirely, a whisper of its former self. We, too, are like this—always shifting, always becoming.

Happiness is found in the space between what is and what could be: the pause before something is discarded, the moment when you wonder, what might this be next? It is found in the realization that nothing truly leaves us—not even what we call waste. The soil turns old bones into flowers. your broken bicycle, rusting and forgotten, becomes a part of the metal that holds up a child's first swing.

Perhaps the cities we live in—those sprawling boxes, those endless roads—forget this truth. But there are places where happiness lives in the streets themselves,

where people understand that the circle does not stop at the end of their driveway. Think of Amsterdam, where bicycles become wings, and the wheels that turn on the cobblestones are the same wheels that turn in the hearts of its people. Think of the small villages, where nothing is wasted, where happiness is not bought but grown.

It is not the things we collect that make us happy. No, it is the letting go, the returning, the reshaping of old things into new. Like the earth, like the ocean, like the stars above us, spinning in their cosmic dance, happiness turns upon itself, a quiet revolution.

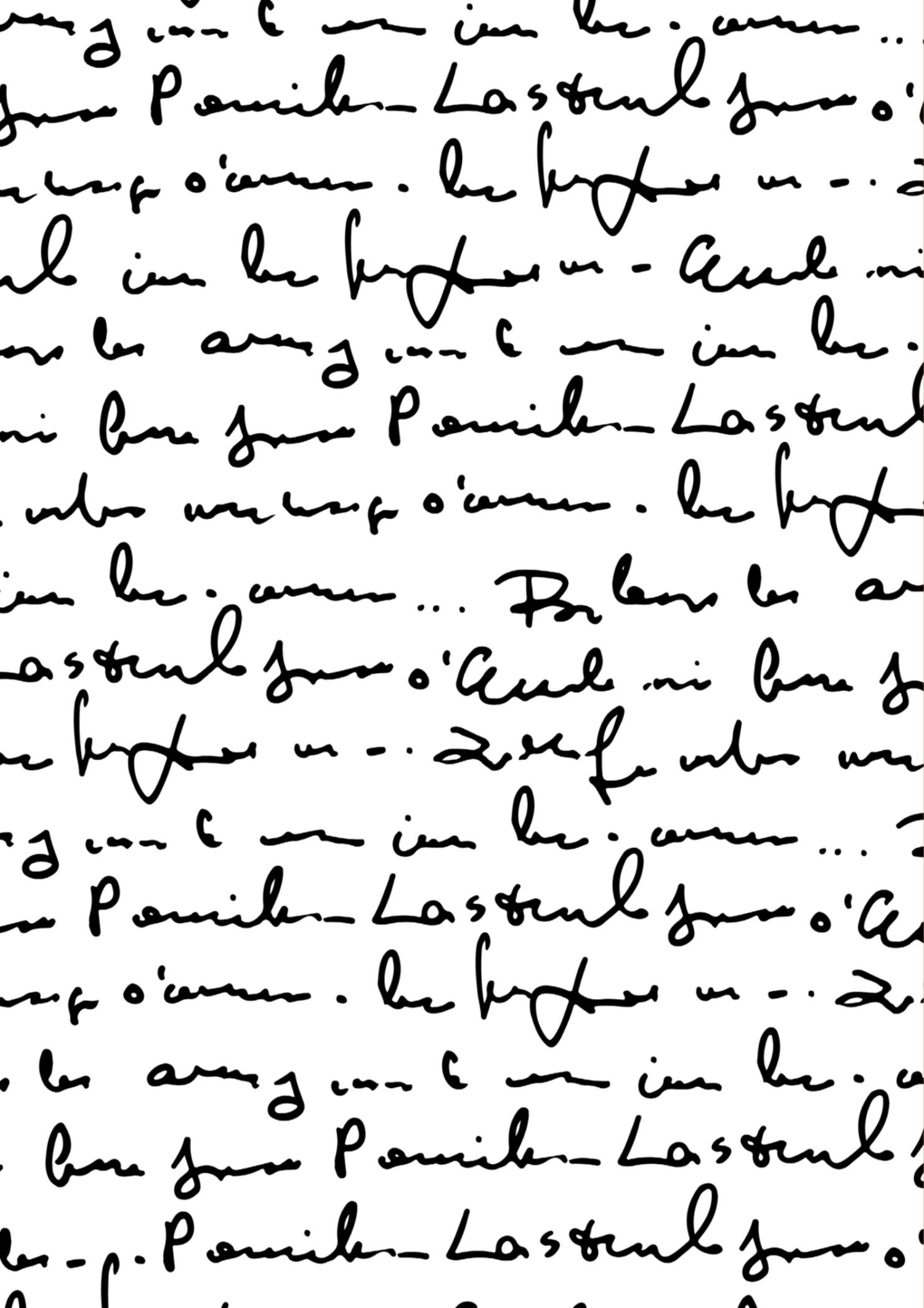
So perhaps the next time you hold something in your hand—a piece of plastic, a handful of soil, an idea—you will ask it: “what will you become?” and perhaps, in that small act of imagining, you will feel it—a flicker of happiness, that infinite turning circle, finding its way back to you.

*RAYAN H GH H MOHAMMAD was a student of the Circular City programme.*

SECTION III

LITERARY  
SUPPLEMENT





In summer 2024, we successfully launched a brand new programme entitled *Creative Writing: From Inspiration to Craft*.

During three immersive weeks, students delved into analysis of contemporary short stories and analyzed topics such as character development, setting, point of view, detail, and interiority, among others. Through insightful readings, engaging discussions, and peer reviews, students gained valuable knowledge and inspiration behind crafting compelling narratives. But this course went beyond theory—it's all about action!

The daily hands-on writing assignments honed students' skills and allowed them to refine their voices. We discussed the vital importance of having a regular, consistent writing habit. Many students started writing daily and kept at it even after the course. We also welcomed the Dutch writer Alma Mathijsen, who discussed her work and led a workshop inspired by writing prompts.

Part of the course was a trip to the Kröller-Müller museum outside of Amsterdam, which showcases a rich range of painters, such as Van Gogh, Marc Chagall, Pablo Picasso, sculptures and modern installations. Prior to the museum visit, students analysed the ekphrastic short story *Tiger Mending* by the American novelist and short story writer Aimee Bender, which was inspired by the painting of the modern American painter Amy Cutler.

The etymology of ekphrasis dates back to the Ancient Greek word *ékphrasis* which means "description," and *ekphrázein* which designates "to tell over, recount, describe."

However, an ekphrastic piece doesn't just catalogue or copy the features of the painting; the poet, the writer, creates a new narrative, *paints a different picture*, that the work of art might conceal. Similarly, the short story by Aimee Bender doesn't just "describe" the painting. The painting inspires the motif of the story; it becomes a narrative thread, a mysterious journey that the characters embark on. The painting represents a core scene in the story, yet the writer builds a unique universe around it.

And this is what our students did. Inspired by the paintings, they wrote prose poems and art essays that elevated the paintings and infused them with a new life, a new story. We enclose prose poems by Andriani, Millie and a reflective art essay by Marina. They all capture and unveil emotions and questions that the paintings pose, or which remained unsaid.

As a final assignment, students worked on a short story that they submitted to international competitions and for potential publication. We are thrilled to share with you the best final stories in this supplement by Fiona, Gina, Lottie, Marina and Nathan.

Have you always desired to delve into writing in general and creative writing in particular? Or do you enjoy journaling and would like to take it to the next level? Then join us in summer 2025 for *Creative Writing: From Inspiration to Craft!*

Dr Jana Zilova

# FLIGHT OF SWALLOWS

by **MILLIE JEFFERY**

Our path upwards to the altar is a veined twining tapestry,  
air gyrating with the ecstasy of fractured wings.  
Flushing with carrion, a beaten bag thrust between and about, unforgiving  
as we migrate to the higher, separate for now.

In this air we are resurrected, a naked riot of fledgling, fowl,  
foul frenzy of vile black and blue bruise, white heat, light.  
Organic in our new oneness, we become an organism, a pulsating singular cell;  
arcing into aerial ballet, carving tips of wings into the wind.

From above, the ground becomes the surface of the sea, as seen  
from under the water, a rippling weave of seething rubble.  
Ground shrouded in a mist that climbs away from those left behind  
following us in tendrils, us in our cacophony, our euphoria.

We have become a hive, a spectral mass darkening the rising sky.  
A collection of undulating sores, creating momentary, fragmentary shapes  
across the atmosphere. Oscillating, reverberating, levitating and coalescing from monolith to  
sanctuary, eclipsing the cloud, becoming the cloud.

The air bulges, bulbous; the climax of our flight is like the swelling  
of an orchestra, a cyclone in the burning bush.  
Hymn to the emerging light, we cascade upwards and consecrate the air,  
each flight a witness to the purity of ascent.

I am raw with migration, my path upwards carved out for me in infinite variety.  
Reborn in the steady, soft beats of wings,  
and renewed in the transformation of flight. All I can see is bathed in the rising,  
rolling motion of *up*.



*'Volo di rondini'*, Giacomo Balla (1913)

*I'm a second year student from London studying English at the University of Cambridge in the UK. I mainly write and perform spoken word poetry, but this course was really beneficial in helping me branch out into different forms of prose writing. The inspiration behind 'flight of swallows' was chiefly Giacomo Balla's painting, "Volo di rondini" - I really wanted to create a snapshot of a moment of avian migration and movement. The creative writing course at the University of Amsterdam was incredibly helpful in providing inspiration and guidance to write;*

# JANEY

by **NATHAN HARRIS**

“Fuck’s sake.” Scattered tissues. Mark was clearing the debris of last night’s mediocre wank. Bored. He wasn’t a special man, really. He was about five foot six, although he told people, particularly women, that he was five eight; balding, of course; and he perpetually wore a scruffy, white oxford shirt, unironed and untucked. It hung around his waist like a gown. He thought that it made him look continental. Mark enjoyed experimenting with his facial hair. This particular evening, he sported a scruffy goatee with stubble which extended messily down most of his neck. It itched. Rugged looking, he liked to tell himself. He wasn’t one for jewellery, by and large. It made him feel effeminate. He did like to wear an expensive old watch of his father’s, however. One with a heavy link strap which he’d grovelled for, characteristically, as a teenager. He owned three pairs of shoes. Two of these were practically unworn: hiking boots which had accompanied a new year’s resolution in his earlier thirties, and a pair of trainers the men from work had forced him to buy when they started a five-a-side league. Mark had never participated. He didn’t like to sweat. He wore a pair of brown, square boat shoes every day. These had been a gift from his sister and, while still unattractive, they were far, far too nice for him. His face, and demeanour, suggested a man far older and more tired than he really was. His skin seemed not to fit him quite right. He had trouble maintaining eye contact and blinked a lot. Altogether, he seemed a man troubled by his own place in the world.

“Christ.” Dried semen on his hand.

He had a small group of school friends who he saw every few weeks. Broadly speaking, he felt rather apathetic about them. They, all men with partners, stronger jawlines, and more hair, roundly disliked him. He glued himself to people. Mark staunchly believed that he was the cleverest of them. They were teachers, civil servants, and bus drivers.

Schmucks, he thought. No independence. The steady, weathered hand of government to cling on to. But they were comfortable, he supposed, and didn’t ask about his personal life too often. Locating a new circle seemed, to him, not worth the exertion. The group, as all male collectives do, had a leader. A tall, clumsy man named Gareth. He was uncomplicated, easy to like, and a little stupid. Mark resented Gareth for his place among the sexual aristocracy: men who, it seemed to him, inhabited sex. Chiselled, smarmy bastards to whom intimacy was offered, graciously; never bartered for. Gareth’s wife, Bethany – a quiet-looking woman with a long neck who flirted outrageously when she drank – had inherited a medium-sized campervan which the men would take up north once every few months. Gareth always drove. They’d camp, complain, drink beer and snort cheap cocaine. Bethany was under the impression that Gareth hadn’t done drugs since about 2009 after having his nose broken in a fight at a nightclub while high on ecstasy. It was Mark who brought the coke for the group. His dealer was a seventeen-year-old friend of his nephew’s.

Cough. Flush.

He didn’t have too much of a habit. Not a bad one. He’d first used when he was 14 – a flaccid, infantile joint. A joint becomes a bottle. A bottle becomes a line.

Mark found the rasping, public desperation of drug addicts ugly. His friends, without speaking, agreed that their trips north were their time to get high. Perhaps they were no longer even as keen on it as Mark was. He wondered, occasionally, whether they would still use if it weren’t for his ability to supply for them. These reflections, however, often led Mark to question what the broader impacts of his absence from the group would be and therefore were shelved before too long.

To Mark’s mind, getting high was a great leveler. Everyone became grey; sacks of meat. He’d find

flaws in the most beautiful people. A mole, a nervous tick. These observations – nasty, insidious – would grow and mutate. Hair became matted; thick and oily like the matted coat of a sick animal. Teeth protruded and broadened. He thought about having soft, red chunks bitten out of his neck. Genitals became repulsive and alien. Mark believed that he was more perceptive than most people. This act of seeing people for what they were, he supposed, was an act of great revolution – one of great transgression against the previously untouched, the perfect.

The room was clear now, at least. The smell remained. Sweat. Emptiness.

He sat on his living room sofa. A tired, black, once-shiny leather thing. He decided to masturbate, again. He considered playing some music; Cat Stevens’ *The Wind* – a strange, pavlovian masturbatory routine he had developed. He remembered being sixteen. He wanted to phone a call girl, as was his wont on particularly abject days. He had tried to be an actor, back then. Far too ambitious, really. A dirty dream. He opened his phone. Lee, another member of the school cohort, was good for that sort of thing. Numbers. People. He’d done the work. A spotty, teenage interpretation of the work which was just as much to do with the bohemian fantasy of flitting between fucking and rehearsals as it was to do with good art. He found Lee’s contact on WhatsApp.

*Alright mate? Need a number for a girl. Just phone stuff. Cheers. M*

He had loved it though, he supposed. People had seemed to like that version of him. He appreciated being able to hide behind characters. Most people who wanted to be actors, Mark surmised, were either motivated by a predisposed attraction to immediate and sustained attention, or a desire to control when people laughed at them.

*Haha aye bro got you, this one’s good. quid a minute*

Ten digits in blue. He’d applied to drama school, too. He’d really gone for it. He wondered what the woman whose phone number was now in his possession looked like. He’d done Richard II for his audition. What she would tell Mark she looked like. For what can we bequeath save our deposed bodies to the ground? A Brunette, he hoped. He punched in the number, hungrily.

A woman’s breath picked up the phone.

“Hello?” “Hey, sexy.” Mark decided that she had small hands.

“How are you?”

“I’m good, baby. My name’s Janey,” she teased, laughing at her own half-rhyme, “how are you?” Her voice carried a lot of breath. She was forcing

the sexuality a little, in his view.

He thought back to the night he’d lost his virginity.

“I don’t know, Janey, tell you the truth.”

Strong, male hands on him. Around him. Pulling at him. Marking him. He remembered thinking about his pubic hair for the first time. The smell of sex hanging on him for hours. The hole that it created in his life. Fifteen.

“Oh, baby, I’m sorry. Why don’t you tell me your name?” Mark imagined her wet mouth forming the shape of each word.

“I don’t think so.”

“Okay, baby. I’ll just call you baby. Why don’t we find a way to make you feel good?”

He didn’t fuck a woman until he was in his twenties.

“Please.”

He felt like a failure.

“Do you want to know what I’m wearing?” Whatever she told him would be a lie. He couldn’t remember the last time he felt attractive.

“Sure.”

“Well,” she purred, “I am wearing a black crop top and I have my favourite underwear on. Red lace. Do you like red, baby?” She was lying, definitely.

“Yeah, why not.” Mark could picture her. Tired, sweaty, staring down a clock. Chewing a piece of ratty nicotine gum in some boxy ‘office’ where she and a few other girls worked. He wondered, almost jealously, if there was a partner for her to go home to at the end of her shift. Children, even. His thoughts turned, unpleasantly, to Lee – whether or not he was involved in all this, getting a cut. It wasn’t impossible, he supposed. Lee was a man with a very flexible moral compass.

“Do you like the sound of that, sexy? Do you like thinking about me, lying here. Thinking about you. Just you, baby?”

Mark walked to the fridge and grabbed an old bottle of Glen’s. Red label.

“If I stay on the line and don’t want to talk about fucking, will you hang up?” He didn’t feel that he deserved to be alone with his thoughts. She was getting paid, after all.

“So long as you’re happy with the charge, baby.” Her tone shifted a little, softening perhaps.

He took a drink. Mark hadn’t had a girlfriend in four years. He told people it was two. They generally weren’t interested enough to pick up on this small fiction. His last partner, Sam, worked in marketing. Mark had never really got a sense of what she did specifically. He knew she earned more than him. That put him off asking questions. Another drink.

The girl was still on the phone. The woman. She was an impressive person, really, Sam was. Exercised, healthy group of friends, very few vices – Mark notwithstanding. Things had ended when he'd refused an offer to borrow money from her. He couldn't make ends meet, couldn't keep up with rent.

Janey was trying to make small talk. Mark, who was attempting to get pissed, suspected that she knew he wasn't going to hang up any time soon and was staying on the line for an easy night. It had all got on top of him, finances-wise, and Sam had tried to get him out. She saw him very clearly. He ran away. She had told Mark that he was weak; small; an animal. He knew she was right. It was as though, in all the fighting and bitterness and reaching and tears, a part of her had crawled inside him. He could still picture her, that foggy, far-off way she'd looked at him. He blamed her for the fact he didn't know how to fuck other people. She was burned into his mind. A thick mess of blonde curls. Another drink. Her warm, wide smile. She was always better with people than Mark; made them feel welcome. She was tall, Sam, and strong, physically. Muscular arms with practical hands. A large patch of sweat was growing underneath Mark where his heat met the leather of the sofa. She wore red. Mark pictured her in red. Red jumper, red boots, red nails. The vodka didn't have much of a flavour anymore, which was good. She'd told him, more than once, about her fantasies of being dominated, sexually. He'd never been able to fulfil these. He could never quite believe himself in the role of a strong, intentional aggressor. He just couldn't sustain it. He suspected that this disappointed her.

Sam and Mark had taken a weekend trip – a little cottage down in the borders – during the early months of their relationship. This was the point at which Sam first expressed her concerns about Mark's sexual performance. Mark hadn't been able to make her orgasm. He felt so palpably aware of his own inadequacy. She perpetually had a small, thin scratch around the bed of her right thumbnail. During this conversation, she picked at it. A slow, metallic trickle of blood; a sort of weeping. Mark was sure he could still smell it. Their fucking, she laboured to tell him, was passive; self-involved, small. Mark told her that he didn't want to have sex which felt performative. Sam did not reply. That evening, after making a hash of shaving his pubic hair, Mark fucked Sam. He was fairly sure he'd made her come, eventually. Protracted oral sex. He felt that he'd done a good thing; for Sam, for the sanctity of their

relationship. It wasn't a euphoric orgasm; some rich moment of liberation, not really. That's what Sam told him. It somehow left her feeling emptier than before.

"If it's just about you getting me there, you winning, I don't want that. It depresses my insides."

It depresses my insides.

He remembered the sounds of her crying, quietly, from behind the bathroom door.

"I'm alright, Mark. Thank you. It was good. I'm sorry. Thank you."

After that, she had bought a vibrator. A vibrator which quickly became a more active part of their sexual dynamic than Mark knew how to be. If it was ever out of charge, or if they were away, Sam would refuse Mark's clawing attempts to get her to have sex. He wasn't sure if these advances had anything to do with desire, as such, or were more a product of some strange competitiveness. He resented feeling as though he was in second place behind a piece of plastic. She always closed her eyes when she used it. He could remember, clearly, how – when they had without before it – she seemed determined, intentioned; like she was exercising.

It depresses my gritted teeth.

When she used it, Sam – with all her distinctive, identifiable qualities – seemed to vanish. Writhing limbs. Heat. Pleasure. True, unanointed pleasure. That's what was left there, spilling all around Mark. Pleasure which, undoubtedly, had nothing to do with him.

The sofa was beginning to stick to Mark's damp skin. Janey was still there, down the phone. Janey who might be in her black top and red underwear. Janey who might not be Janey at all, but rather some poor girl with nowhere else to go. Her voice became watery. Maybe his signal was acting up. He shook his mobile, drunkenly.

"Janey. Janey. What do you think of me? What have you made of our precious time together?"

"I think you're a fucking animal, Mark."

"Sorry?"

He must have misheard. She sounded different; he was certain. His head spun. His tongue felt big, and dry.

"You're a smarmy fucking bastard, you prick."

"I don't-"

"You deserve this. You are a sick, sick man. You're a nothing."

Why?

"I feel-"

"No you don't," she cackled. "You don't feel a

fucking thing."

"Janey?"

Who the fuck is Janey?

I thought you- I don't know.

You're a lazy, dirty fuck.

Janey-or-not-Janey's voice seemed to have escaped the phone. It hung all around him, blurring the view out of his small living room window, drowning out any other noise. It burrowed its way into his ears. It hurt. He couldn't tell if he enjoyed it or not. He lay there, on the sofa, feeling as though he was falling, constantly. Orbiting around something. When he was hung over, Mark would place a hydration tablet into his morning drink. It would fizz and bubble. He thought about that moment of reaction. Dissolution.

It depresses my cracking skull.

Janey?

Silence.

Do you think Sam thinks about me?

Does she think about you? You? Christ. You're pathetic. Small man wants to feel big. That's what you need, I think. She's a grownup, alright? A real, proper, functioning adult. You do know that, don't you? She's not a fucking toy. She's not a hobby. She doesn't exist with the sole purpose of entertaining you. No, she doesn't think about you. Or if she does it is about how glad she is to be free of you. Of your grovelling. Your gnawing. All the times that you said "it's alright" and so clearly didn't mean it when she told you she didn't want to fuck you. All the times she knew. She knew how you saw her and it almost broke her. What you thought she was for. You are a failure. You're a failure because you don't think anything. You have nothing to say. You're a pit. And she; all she needed was for you to see her. Just look at her. Once. Instead, you sat here, waiting for life to start happening to you or around you or for you. Drinking. Fucking yourself like an animal. Your flat is a shithole, by the way. It's horrid. She used to walk in and feel swallowed up, as if she was somehow complicit in the rancour and vulgarity of your strange, disgusting caveman existence. You'd make her feel like it was her fault. Like you – your state – was because of her. She hated you, Mark. She hated your body. The weight of you on her. Your reaching, desperate breath. The way you clawed. The way your father looked at her.

Oh, Mark said.

He took another drink.

A pit opened up in Mark. He felt himself falling. Dropping like your gut drops. It was being marked – compared, even, held up against – that voice. That's what did it. Sam's voice. Janey's. That cold,

dead mouth. He felt his bones – his fingers – breaking, crunching, one by one. Each joint. Every digit. Vertebrae. A scratch near the bed of the right thumbnail. Being held up to her humanity – her completeness. It was like getting teeth pulled. Having his eyes dug out with a spoon. He wondered what it was like to meet God. A God of shit and money and blood. He felt the heaving retches in the bottom of his stomach which usually forced out damp, heavy sobs. They weren't quite there. An empty suggestion of feelings washed away. It was like looking in a mirror and seeing your corpse. Or a dead dog. You are the discharge of the earth's cunt. He couldn't tell if he was crying. He couldn't see, really. His hands shook like a junky. People die in increments, Mark supposed. A steady process. A straight line. What a fucking mess you are. What a mess. What a waste.

Janey?

*I'm a fourth year Theatre Studies scholar at the University of Glasgow, born and raised in Edinburgh. I've always been interested in producing drama which engages with the 21st century New Writing aesthetic; a theatre with a strict, economical focus and aesthetic. More recently, particularly since my time at UvA, I have become more concerned with writing prose which explores the links between gender, sexuality and mortality.*

*Inspiration: During and immediately prior to my time in Amsterdam, I grew increasingly fascinated by literature which blends weighty, existential themes with colloquial, specific languages and frames of reference. Most particularly, Dostoyevsky's Notes From Underground and Irvine Welsh's Trainspotting were useful points of inspiration for my piece. Highlights: I found existing in a city with such a rich cultural and literary history to be immensely creatively stimulating. To take part in a course which pushed me to interrogate my own working processes and share my writing every day was of huge benefit to my technical skills. The reflexive, inter-disciplinary content of the summer school, particularly the trip to the Kröller-Müller Museum, was a true highlight.*

# REFLECTIVE ART ESSAY

by ANDRIANI ADAMANTINI

The rocky tapestry of this secret, little alley in Arles.

You would think it was made just for us.

The senses and the colours, the lights and the sounds.

Blending, whispering, shouting, digesting, laughing.

Nothing feels the same,  
yet a déjà-vu dream emerges every time I shut my eyes.

Every delicious smell, every delicate shade.

I have seen it all before.

This is my life. The one I long for, the one I feel like is owed to me.

Just leave us in France. Never would I need anything more,  
nor special, nor kind.

The certainty of your presence illuminates my stars, my rusty street lamps, and my tired eyes.

A few hundred glimpses of the reckless smudge reveal a much more intoxicating world.

A world unreal and yet concrete. Made out of fragile strings and drunken brushes.

All tied up and organized.

Casted with a spell,  
protecting them from ever getting untangled or misunderstood.

It is still just you and I that I yearn for though. Mesmerised by the ease of the men and women around us, I dream of us.

I could not for the life of me imagine a scenario more magical

than the one we built with our trembling hands. Blood red wine and floating in the clouds type of conversations.

A spiraling wormhole in time and in the late night. A universe just for you and me that we can perceive because we are us.

It is too challenging to explain it to outsiders without the risk of sounding insane or high.

The sound of saxophone is almost deafening and yet no one is playing.

I guess the band was hidden in our secret alley as well.

I doubt anyone else would understand it.

Looking back and remembering our intimate café, the crippling sense of gratitude chases me down to a clear defeat.

For I can never go back to our flawless night in the twinkly, star-lined street.

In our claimed world,  
left only a few light-years away. Rushed and killed before its time.

*I am currently pursuing a Master's in Technology Management at TUDelft. Writing is my escape-- my way of processing life when it gets a bit too much. I mostly enjoy writing personal essays, movie analysis articles and reviews, and poetry.*

*Inspiration: Café Terrace at Night is undoubtedly one of my favourite art pieces out there. While crafting this poem, I found myself trying to imagine the physical experiences and sensations of the people present in that small corner of Arles at that exact moment in 1888. Paired with my own emotions and memories, I wished to paint a vivid picture of what might have been going through my heart and mind had I been sitting at*

*one of those tables with a special someone.*

*Highlights: The Creative Writing Summer School is one of my most cherished academic experiences so far. It gave me the opportunity to explore new parts of myself, take a leap and trust the process, and, most importantly, bond with a wonderful group of people, most of whom I am still friends with to this day. I will always look back fondly on my time in Amsterdam and feel thankful for the opportunity to grow my writing and editing skills, as well as for the new ways I discovered to find inspiration and curiosity in life.*

Café Terrace at Night, 1888 by Vincent Van Gogh



# JOAN

by **GINA DELLAGIACOMA**

**T**hree days after he disappeared, she finally got to know his name. It was a bright Tuesday morning and she stood at her window. She waited, looking at the empty red bench across the street, until it was exactly 9:00am. She took her phone and dialed the number of the retirement home that was just a couple of streets away. He had been sitting there on that red bench across her street since the day she had moved in two years ago. He was old, maybe around eighty or ninety, for all she could guess. Every morning, he arrived with the first light of the day and left hours later, right after the sun had set. Today, he had already taken his seat when she moved the curtains in the kitchen. Like a hunter on a raised hide, she studied every movement of his carefully. There he sits in a bright blue linen suit with a fine hat made from white straw on his head. The wooden walking stick locked between his knees, both hands resting on the golden knob on top of it. Her apartment was on the fourth floor, a classic single bedroom, 20 square meters, with a mus-tard-colored kitchenette. There she rested at the window frame; the curtains half open, a mug in her hand. For a split second she could hear the person in the flat next to hers shutting the cupboard. Then it

was quiet again. On most days the humming elevator appeared to be the only other living being in this house. From up there the contours and wrinkles of his face looked smudged, blurry. Half of his face was covered by dark sunglasses with an even darker frame. Every few minutes he lifted them with the back of his hand and slowly wiped his eyes with a checkered handkerchief. The first time she saw him doing this, she concluded that he was crying. By now she was convinced that those were not tears of sorrow or sadness but of old, teary eyes that couldn't cope with the polluted air of the city anymore. But most of the time his shades were down. And from the far distance of her window, his eyes were hidden from her. What if he was returning her gaze, she wondered. He might be watching me too. She quickly brushed this thought out of her mind. It was 7:30am and she had to leave for work.

In the cubicle she exchanged her ear plugs for the headset. But the customer-complaints she was responsible for usually arrived via email. One person was dissatisfied with the quality of the product, another had been flooding her inbox for weeks trying to get his money back and one ranted in capital letters about the politics of the company. She read them, sorted out, redi-rected if necessary

and answered with one of the pre-written apologies if possible. At noon the silence was broken by white noise of chatter. Dozens of people arose from their little boxes and commuted to the cafeteria. So did she, but not until an hour later when the office was already quiet again. She struggled picturing herself sitting at one of the chrome tables in the cafeteria, surrounded by her co-workers bragging about their beautiful husbands and wives, their beautiful children and beautiful houses and beautiful cars. And then they would turn their heads, pin her with their hungry eyes and wait for her to tell them about her life outside those office walls. What would they expect to hear? Her life was boring and uninteresting, no need for sugarcoating it. She was the plain Jane kind of girl with a beige skirt and a white cotton blouse, with no-name-sneakers and hardly twenty contacts on her phone. She was that kind of girl they made TV-series about, showing how they transformed this shy creature with hideous glasses into a radiant sex-queen-women. Wait, no, she wasn't that kind of girl. Neither did she wear glasses, nor did she want to become a sex-queen. She was as beige as her skirt and as bland as the egg-sandwich she was eating now. She had accepted this fact years ago in college. In the empty

sea of cafeteria tables, she continued listening to her audiobook and finished the sandwich before she went back to her cubicle. At 5pm she shut the computer down, switched off the lamp and hung her headset over her chair so that the cable wouldn't be twisted and full of knots when she came back after the weekend.

Walking down the street, the red bench came closer and closer and the old man on it grew bigger and bigger. She always avoided looking directly at him and saved her imaginations and stories for later when she was in the safety of her kitchen many meters above his head. When she was in school there was an old photo album in her classroom, on the shelf right next to the window. It must have belonged to the teacher's family, she realised now, years after flickering through it. She didn't know back then that the pictures were from the 1940s. She only knew that they were old. Very old, she assumed as they were all in black and white. Looking at them as a kid made her stomach rumble and the blood in her head rush for a second. Uncanny and strange. This wasn't the city as she knew it. This wasn't even the city she knew just minus the colors. This was a different city, in a different world, on a different planet. But what a relief it would

be, she thought now staring at her feet, if she could beam herself into that strange world. There would be no need for getting on the bus on Monday to go to work because neither her bus stop nor her workplace even existed back then. There would be no need for getting back into her empty flat because the house now in front of her would not have been built yet. Many things that she despised did not yet exist. And many people she feared weren't yet born. But he would be there. This thought made her chuckle. Maybe she'd sit on the black-and-white-bench with a much younger black-and-white-man, maybe he'd even be quite handsome with his white straw hat. Maybe he would tell her about the woman he had bumped into at the post office and was now madly in love with or the fresh vegetables he had bought at the market this morning. They might discuss the novel they both had just finished reading and the play they both just had seen and wave at the neighbors walking past them. How easy life would be if she could crawl into this photo album, a new version of herself on this black-and-white-planet. Only a couple of steps away from the red bench she now made a sharp turn to her left, crossed the street and got inside the house. Tomorrow I

will sit down. This idea had been bugging her for a while now. The elevator doors slid open and she got out her keys, tomorrow, yes, tomorrow, and she opened the door.

But he wasn't there. At first this wasn't particularly surprising to her. It was early August and unusually warm that morning, the humidity and hot temperatures of the day already lingering over the city. It might take him a little longer to get to the bench, dragging his old body through the glazing sunlight, she assumed. Streams of bicycles passed under her window and VW-buses with stand-up paddles on their roofs. Or maybe he had visitors and enjoyed an extended breakfast, she thought. Groups of people with beach bags and air mattresses crossed the street downstairs, on their way to the lake nearby, chatting and laughing. White teeth and tanned skin. The city was electrified, buzzing. When he wasn't there in the evening, she decided that he might have skipped his routine today. But he didn't come back. Not on the next morning and not on the one ever after.

"Becky, Becky." It wasn't easy to concentrate on the words in front of her with Martin shouting in the cubicle next to her. "Becky!" They had been working in the same office for five years al-

ready, shoulder to shoulder, separated only by the thin cardboard wall. Not that there was a strong friendship between the two of them, but they talked. Just yesterday he had borrowed her stapler. And last Wednesday she had paid for his coffee because he had left his wallet on his desk.

"Becky!" He waved his hand aggressively in front of her face.

It took her a moment to understand.

"It's Brenda." "Huh?" "It's Brenda, Martin. My name is Brenda." "Shite, I'm no good with names ha ha," his arms were now dangling over her cubicle wall, "you started a couple of weeks ago, the new left hand to Herbert, right?"

She could smell the odor of the two dark spots under his armpits.

"Christ, that customer is getting on my ne-ne-erves, man. Will you take over, B?"

She swallowed her tears, ended the jazzy-music of the waiting loop – "Good afternoon, Brenda speaking, how can I help you Sir?" – and wondered if anyone would even notice, if she wouldn't return to the office tomorrow. Her forehead and thighs were wet when she woke up the next morning, the cotton shirt damp. She hadn't slept well and could still feel the darkness of her

dream sitting in her chest. She slid into her brown slippers and opened the curtain in her kitchen even though it was still dark outside. Staring out of the window she didn't take her eyes off the bench, didn't even blink. The shrieking howl of an ambulance snapped her out of this state. When she called the retirement home nearby, the receptionist recognised him instantly through her description. "Jon passed away three days ago," the lady informed her with a sigh. "Were you a friend of his?" She didn't know how to reply, her vocal cords blocked by a thumping lump. She hung up and got the black silk dress out of the wardrobe. She didn't bother to take her pajamas off, just slipped it over and went outside to sit on the red bench. Jon, what a simple name for such a strange man, she thought.

*I am a PhD Student and Research Assistant at the Department of Social Anthropology and Cultural Studies at the University of Zürich. In her research on feminist films, she also thinks about different and more creative ways of how to write these histories. Inspiration: Her story is inspired by true events – or rather: real daydreams and fantasies about the people passing her kitchen window every day. Highlights: The city of Amsterdam! That should say it all...*

# LOTTIE WILLIAMS

Songs will sing of the watery graves,  
Of sailors in their final days,  
Who fought against the oceans lure,  
Silencing themselves for profiting tour

In their hunger, lust, and desperation,  
Fearing tales of childhood imagination,  
Pilfering the ocean with nets and knives,  
In the final attempt to survive.

The deep blue god is not a forgiving type.  
She claws at boats with unrelenting spite.

Her icy tendrils grasp the ship,  
And with one blow she starts to dip.

The boat is thrown on tumbling waves,  
Missing rocks and dashing caves.

The roaring ocean teases an imminent demise,  
Simply to see the fear in men's eyes.

The eyes that stared with hunger and violence,  
Now mouths hang open screaming silence.

Their fate lies in the depths of the ocean,  
What once was living is frozen in motion.

Leva sees a beach, a quiet night where the pitch black of the sky, the deepest of blues and purples, reflect onto the ocean, obscuring its life with ink and violence.

The gulls caw in the sky, Circling the mottled corpse on the pebbled beach. They have tasted the child's flesh and know now to never to suffer the preserved decay. They hover above waiting for the smaller creatures who will make the same mistakes as them. A crab scuttles across the boy's torso and snips at the fatty remains of his abdomen. The seagull swoops and saves the child corpse from its inevitable fate.

Every time the image gets closer, impossibly near. Each time Leva believes it couldn't possibly become more intense. The wind could not get louder and stronger, the waves could not be deeper and darker than the night sky, and the small child could be more realistic or familiar.

Then suddenly it ends. Blackness. Leva awakens suddenly and sits up in bed in shock. The pitch black of her room frightens her compared to the realism of scene of the small boy on the beach. Gradually her eyes adjust to the light, and she can make out the familiar features of her room.

Her senses calm her, she can see the shape of the wardrobe, her small wooden desk and chair, the pile of discarded fabrics laid

across it. Clothes which no longer fit her and taunt her with their beauty and comfort. Every day she tries them on again just in case, but her bump continues to grow larger. Distorting the body, she knew and had only just come to love.

Leva smells the sheets she lays on, the cotton smells of little other than her sweating body and the rosehip oil she delicately places on her fragile skin every night.

As she feels the thin sheet that lies above her, her heart begins to race, and she throws it off in a panic. The fabric was tightening around her, wrapping its way around her legs and upwards.

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Elsewhere, Stove, a man of considerable height and considerable weight wanders across Dortreth beach. As his long legs clumsily makes its way across the rocks, dawn begins to break across his dim path. The light bouncing off of the water splashing against the pebbles.

He savours every step against the slipping the rocks as they roll beneath his heels. With bare gnarled and lanky feet, he enjoyed the feeling of almost falling and the satisfaction in saving himself. Preparing to feel only the swell of waves tomorrow, several weeks away from land and a lifetime away from the sturdy familiar safety he's come to love.

The stygian waters lap at the shoreline, swallowing the pebbles that litter the land. As the waves break over the rocks, its icy waters create an obstructive line between the liveable and survivable, and the torturous will of the ocean. As Stove muses to himself exploring ideas the vastness of the ocean and his minuscule presence in Tremordros, he comes to notice a small white dot in the distance.

Suddenly a child comes to view, awkwardly splayed against the rocks, frozen by death. The child could have been mistaken for sleeping if it weren't for the pitch black of night which envelops him, and the beating rain which threatens to pierce his skin. With every step it grew bigger, its blotchy blue coating becoming clearer, hinting to the existence of limbs, hands, feet, fingers, toes. They shone in the morning light a matte white/blue glaze.

Before Stove processed the sight ahead of him or dared to identify the human figure fixed across the shoal, a history of folkloric tales traversed in an instant across his mind. Late nights around the hearth hearing old tales of ancient battles, subhuman feuds and impossible creatures enveloped his imagination.

One specifically haunted his brain as he approached the mound. His grandmother had told him once when he couldn't sleep, of the white Bucca Sea spirit who lived in his town:

Mothers cover your babes' mouth,

Stop their screams from rolling out.

The haunting Bucca listens always,

Stealing wails across the waves.

As he gets closer the figure, he sees its small hands and short stature, in silence he takes in the reality of his sight. The weight of his cheeks and freckles across his nose. The child appears almost exactly as it was, preserved by the salt and ice water but transformed with a layer of white glass and fatty wax across his skin. His skin no longer contains the warmth of his youth, instead a bloodless mottled blue.

He recognizes the black cowlick plastered against the body's forehead; it was the same as his captain's. The inevitable truth winded the fisherman, the child's name is Fin. Those discoloured white rigid hands once helped his fathers' trawling business, hauling fish, and mending the damages of his old boat, they are no longer calloused but delicately covered in a smoothing white waxy substance of his own making. It's been weeks since the child last set foot on land, his form now entirely different and shifted by the will of the ocean.

Fin's Father will be fine, Stove assures himself, no man has lived to 40 without losing someone be-

fore. In particular Davion, will survive the loss, he loved his son as all fathers do but he had at least four more. Davion was fuelled by fury in everything he did, so when his son is discovered dead, he will focus on revenge. However, Stove starts to fear for Ceri. When a father loses a son, he loses a piece of himself but when a mother loses a son, she loses a piece of her heart. Ceri does not have much heart left to lose.

After analysing his options in the brief second it took to form them, Stove ran like he has never run before, feet barely touching the rocks, he glides like a sea bird. If he did feel the pain of sharp rock or broken glass, you would fail to see it. He heads straight for the church, after contemplating shouting "Help" or "Murder" down the streets but he feared no sound would come out when he screamed. Or perhaps the early morning ears may not process his cries, simply confusing him for a startled sea bird. The church instead, offered a sound recognisable to the people of Tremordros; when a storm approaches the cove threatening the lives and the livelihood of its inhabitants the church bell creates a cacophonous noise. A distinct sign to seek shelter in the basement of the old building or to congregate in the walls of the cold damp church.

Stove rushes into the deteriorating building, the salty air

aiding the decay of the wooden steps to the bell tower, as they crumble beneath his feet. With every step he feels his heart bounding faster until he takes two steps at a time. Desperate to warn his friend and colleague of his son's death.

With long spindly hands he grasps the bell tower ropes, wrapping his fingers round tightly in a frantic plea to no longer suffer this discovery alone but also through habit; his arms heaved at the rope the same way he heaved in the trawler nets most days of his adult life. He thanked God that the bell ropes neither felt as wet nor smelt as strong as the fisherman's nets.

He does not stop until the loud reverberating knocking of a fist against the doors of the church, snaps him out of his hysterical rhythm.

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Leva awakens to the deep chimes of the church begin to toll. The sound is haunting. In the daytime there is a beauty to its melodic chimes but at dawn there is something uncanny about the frantic ringing of a desperate god.

She carefully stands up and wraps herself in a simple slip and dressing gown and ties her worn leather boots around her swollen feet, silently resenting her changing body.

Her walk to the church is long

and winding, with shrubbery disguising the path, and small jagged rocks threatening the stride of any absent-minded villager. Leva knows this path, the view of the vast expanse of the ocean, and the warm light of the sun slowly rolling away from the horizon. The green of the grass and the small mice who know it as their home, and the violence of the wind as gales threaten to tip the strongest of men. She loves it, but today she is not alone. The village has joined her in this silent pilgrimage to the church, dreading what they'll find, and knowing better than to start theorising now.

The voice of a small child breaks the silence of the group.

"Why's she 'ere?" whispers the child struggling to hide his desire to shout. The mother slaps the back of his head, and he cries out in shock. Now he'll know to hide his disdain. Leva, having practised this performance everyday of her life smiles generously at the mother, and silently continues the walk a few steps behind her pace.

A crowd gathers outside the old doors of the church, its wooden and steel locked doors preventing the satiating of curiosities. The church cross imposes over the small inhabitants and the light of the morning sun rising casts a shadow over graveyard.

Leva remains to the back of

the crowd, questioning the ravishing desire of the men banging on the church door, their questions will soon enough be answered but they cannot abide by silence.

The doors swing open, as if unlocked all along, and the crowd flows through. The first to arrive gasp with horror at the sight in the church.

With the help of the priest and the parish neighbours, Stove had brought the child's remains into the church and placed them over the alter.

A child's death is not uncommon but to be presented in such a way struck the hearts of the villagers. The figure's waxen limbs spayed out across the table did not lie limply but held the shape of its demise. The fingers were splayed outwards twisted and broken by a wicked force. The child's clothes were torn from his body and lay in tatters across his skin, becoming ingrained in the cruel putrefaction of the once frozen body brought into the warming air of the building.

Leva stands to the left of the door allowing for the arrival of more people and trying to stay invisible to the crowd, a crowd so personally offended by the tortured boy's image. Leva felt bad but she knew the child. Everyone did. Fin went missing several weeks ago, some questioned if he had run away, stolen one of his father's boats and sailed to a new port out of the shadow of his father. Others presumed he'd

run inland dreaming of a simple life away from the tides of the ocean and the backwards beliefs of his neighbours. He was smart everyone presumed he'd survive alone.

Suddenly an ear-piercing powerful scream broke the silence of the congregation, then a series of guttural wails from the same woman. The crowd slowly parted allowing the woman to approach the gruesome display.

Ceri was slight, greying and loved by age and sun. But the intensity of her suffering brought distorted broken expressions to her face, streaked with tears, and reddened by despair.

*I'm LOTTIE WILLIAMS, currently studying a MA in Environmental Humanities at the University of Bristol. My favourite genres to read and write are the Gothic and Science Fiction, I am particularly interested in the works of Jeff VanderMeer and H.G. Wells. I find the blue humanities, a fascinating rich subject which inspires a lot of my writing. Another inspiration is my family's connection to Cornwall, as my mother grew up there and I spent my much of my childhood exploring the Cornish coast and its expansive mythologies. Highlights: I enjoyed the atmosphere of the course, surrounded by creative and inspiring individuals. The challenge to write every day with new techniques expanded my creative ideas and attitude. It almost goes without saying the beautiful city of Amsterdam, and the university itself, created a welcoming and fascinating environment.*

# BACKSTROKE IN SPACE

by **MARINA VASILEVI**

**J**ust a few years ago, in 2019, Anya went to a rally in Moscow, listening to a song about angry pigeons. She was walking towards the subway station, and in her ears, the band “Blood drain pipe” was singing: “These are the pigeons of fucking full retribution. These pigeons know no mercy, they are angry.” She was angry too but also scared. With this song, she tried to concentrate on anger instead of fear. She was scared that she might get detained, and then in the police van, she would want to pee. And the police vans sometimes stay in place for many hours. And they might arrest her, and on Monday, she had work...

At the rally, fear and fun mingled. Protesters walked and ran around Moscow in groups, escaping and hiding from the cops. Anya walked with a crowd, everyone clapped and shouted: “This is our city!” It felt like everything would be okay. Suddenly, people began to turn around and run back, towards those who were still smiling. This meant that a busload of National Guard troops had arrived, and they were running at the crowd, swinging rubber batons. In Stoleshnikov Lane, Anya got caught in a cordon. Cops linked arms, forming a chain, and moved towards in jerks. With each jerk,

they shouted, “Hoo! Hoo!” Anya locked eyes with one of them — most had their visors up—and started crying from fear. Someone pulled her aside and helped her climb over a fence— it was a churchyard, where people were hiding from the police.

Back then, in 2019, thousands of people were at the rally. Now there are far fewer. Now, it’s February 24, 2022 . People stand silently. Those who shout or pull out posters are immediately taken away by the riot police. One woman, being dragged by two officers, screams: “I’m a famous singer!” By the old habit, Anya films the woman and sends it to her former colleague Kirill—he’s on the news desk writing about this rally. She wants to shout: “No to war!” but is too scared. Soon she will need to use the bathroom. Now there’s a McDonald’s nearby, but in the police van, there are just cold benches.

She still doesn’t understand what’s happening. Will it be over tomorrow? Some policeman approaches people in “PRESS” vests and cheerfully says into the megaphone: “Disperse, comrades journalists!”

They respond: “We’re working, just like you.”

“But you are not us,” the cop says and walks away.

A group of guards in helmets

with visors down (that’s why they’re called astronauts) approaches women around sixty. “Come along, ma’am,” says one of the guards to a lady in a hat with a flower.

“And why should I?” the lady protests.

Her friends chime in: “Maybe we just came to the theater!”, “Aren’t you ashamed, think about who you’re protecting!”, “I could be your mother!”

The cop retreats and goes to pack other people. Anya has always noticed that the police are afraid of older women. They don’t treat anyone else with such caution...

She wasn’t detained this evening. Anya returned to her one-room apartment on Dmitrovskaya and without taking off her coat, went to the closet, and took a pillow full of moths from the top shelf. She had noticed a week ago that pearly moths with wings that looked like they were sprinkled with flour were crawling around inside the landlord’s pillow, but she didn’t know what to do. It wasn’t her pillow; it needed to be thrown away, but it was disgusting even to touch it, the insides were wriggling. Anya opened the window and threw the pillow out with all her might. She felt guilty. She wanted to smoke but had no cigarettes.



A few months ago, she decided to quit both her job and smoking. It was impossible to help anyone. She wasn't a real lawyer but a public defender, mainly helping with the trials of those detained at rallies. In the end, no one was acquitted. She wrote news and reports about how people were tortured and beaten in the police stations, how some guy threw a paper cup at a policeman at a rally and ended up in prison for years. Once, at a documentary screening, she sat next to the mother of a man who was raped with a glass bottle by the police. The mother sat with a focused expression and watched her son on the screen saying that it had been five years and no one had been punished. Anya wanted to intervene, to do something—that's why she went into human rights advocacy in the first place. But it turned out that no one could be helped.

She still needed to live on something, so Anya got a job at a magazine about interior design and started writing about arranging furniture in wealthy people's apartments. She woke up later and later, and in the evenings, succumbed to melancholy and nicotine cravings and went out to bum a cigarette from a passerby. Sometimes she had to wander for half an hour, trudging through crunchy snow, but someone was bound to be found...

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A week later she went to another anti-war rally. Or rather, to the place where it was suppo-

sed to be. There were seas of policemen, and a few dozen people glancing at the cops. Anya realized these were people like her, who came to the rally but were now afraid to show it somehow. She wandered for an hour, got cold, and then conveniently, her former boss from a small NGO, Tolya, texted her. He suggested meeting at a bar, and Anya went to the subway.

Tolya looked terrible, devastated. Usually, he was a cheerful, happy guy in his mid-forties. He had a wife and four kids, and he seemed to enjoy spending time with them, constantly talking about them, but he also regularly hung out and drank with colleagues. Tolya didn't like being alone; he always advised everyone to have kids, saying everything else would somehow work itself out. He liked singing songs with a guitar and going to bars. But now, he looked exhausted and somehow surprised.

They ordered a beer. At first, the conversation was awkward.

"Well, so this is it," said Tolya.

"I don't understand," Anya replied.

By the second beer, they started talking, and Tolya's eyes filled with tears.

"Everything was normal... We raised kids," Tolya said. "It seemed like there was a chance."

"It wasn't," Anya replied. "We worked in the same place, didn't we? People were being jailed, and having carbines inserted into their rectums."

"Yeah, but what now?"

Anya shrugged and showed Tolya a meme on her smartphone: Soviet cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin is talking to someone on the phone: "How are you, descendants?" They reply: "We're at war with the Ukrainians." And he says: "With the Ukrainians? Against who?"

"Yeah, that's right," Tolya said, slapping his palm on his knee. He pursed his lips and fell silent, either unable to express his feelings or afraid to start crying if began to speak.

They went out for a smoke, Tolya offered Anya a cigarette.

"These menthol ones are addictive," Anya said.

"Anyway, why I called. Our foreign colleagues invited us to work with them in Dortmund. Ten spots. We'll be helping political prisoners and writing news about it all. We need to decide quickly, the consulates are starting to close," Tolya said. "We can get visas and money for three months"

"And what will we do after three months with Russian passports?"

"How would I know? But working here is impossible. They've passed the law on discrediting armed forces, and it'll get worse."

"But I resigned a couple of months ago. I can't write news."

"Sorry, there are no spots for just nice people. At first, we will live in a hotel. Lika and Vanya are going."

"Can I think?"

"Three days, we need to submit the documents. They might start mobilization and close the borders. Or anything."

"Is your family going?"

Tolya began to look even sadder, although it seemed impossible. "No, they'll stay for now. At least we'll be doing something useful. I was thinking... maybe I should... go fight."

"Which side?" Anya asked.

Tolya abruptly threw his cigarette butt into the trash can.

"Let me know what you decide," he said.

They went back into the bar.

"I read that as of today, 406 civilians have died, and two thousand soldiers," Tolya said.

"It's hard to grasp," Anya answered. "When three people are sentenced or beaten, it makes sense. I mean... It's clear that one was an industrial climber, another was a programmer. But several thousand..."

"Well, if you line up those people head to toe, it would be about 4 kilometers."

"That's like from here to our old office."

"About an hour to walk along."

They both fell silent, each taking a sip of beer.

"How is this possible? We are one people," Tolya exclaimed. "I was born in Ukraine, for me, Belgorod and Kharkiv were the same thing."

"I thought you were from Siberia."

"I was born in Kharkiv, and then parents moved."

"I never thought much about Ukraine. I mean, just another country."

"Even after 2014?" Tolya was surprised.

"Well, I thought there were plenty of problems here, and if

they weren't solved, there was no way to get the Russian military out of there. So we had to fix things here. And I tried... If your Girkin had stayed home, none of this would have happened."

"If he could hear you now, he would take it as a compliment."

"I'm glad he doesn't."

"Girkin has a soul."

"FSB agents have no soul. And does it matter that he killed three hundred people?"

"It wasn't on purpose!"

"Oh, ok. Killed three hundred people, not on purpose. And everyone is like: 'Well, okay then. Do we invite Girkin for a barbecue?'"

"I would."

"Barbecue with war criminals."

"Well, it's a different situation. The criminals are those who sent that Buk missile system and entrusted to who knows who in Ukraine."

"But he was in charge."

"Look, I'm not justifying the Buk... Fuck, I mean I'm not justifying the Boeing. I'm just saying he had an idea."

"After a certain point, it doesn't matter."

"Well, it matters to me. I believe in God," said Tolya, swaying.

"Do you think Saint Peter will meet him and say: 'Igor. You shot down a civilian Boeing but for an idea! Did you know there were three children flying to their parents?'"

"Damn," Tolya summed up.

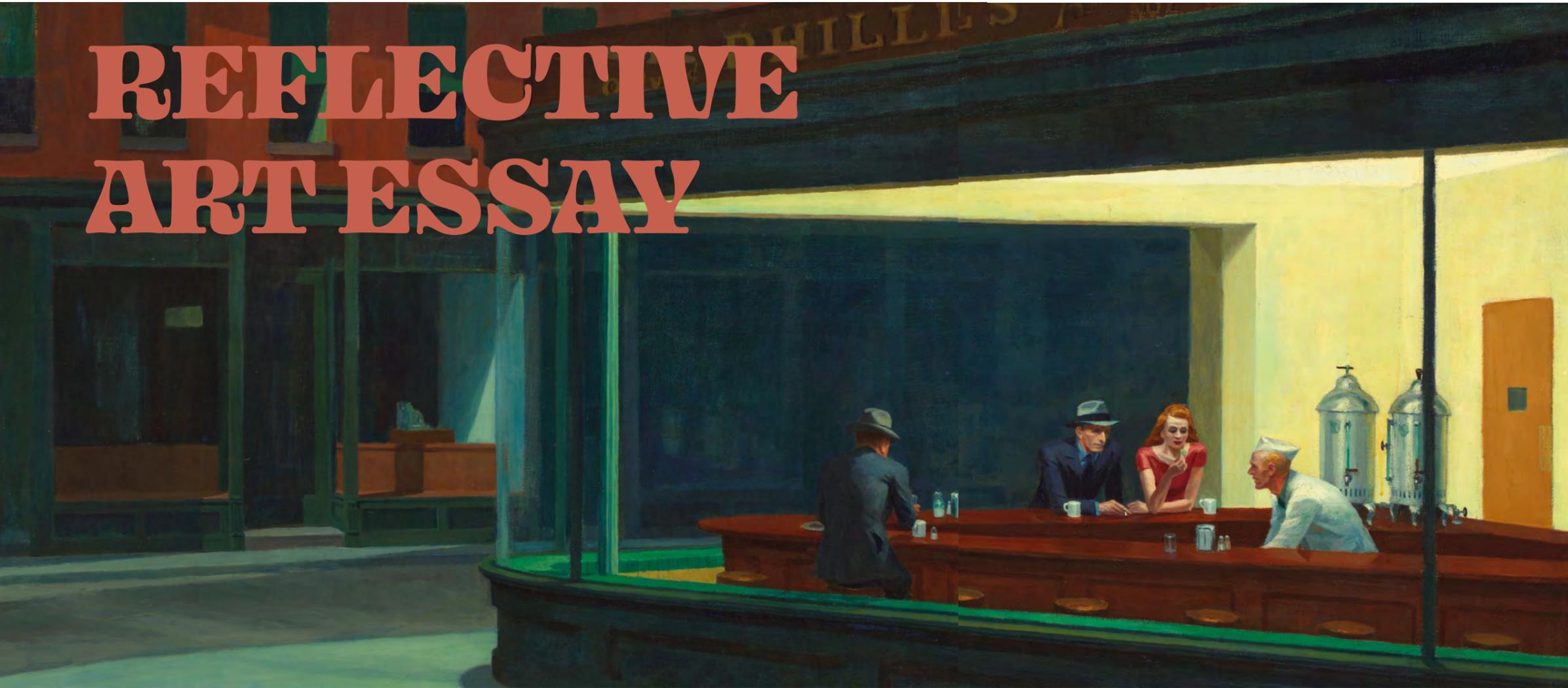
They ordered another beer. Anya rested her hand on her chin and sang a song in Ukrainian

from «Only Old Men Are Going to Battle» Tolya's favorite movie: "What a moonlit, clear night! Come out, my beloved, weary from work, just for a moment into the grove." It's a film about how during World War II, Soviet soldiers on the Ukrainian front fought against Nazi Germany. They create an orchestra and dream of playing after the war. The hero who sings this song—the "best voice of the Ukrainian Front"—overcomes his panic, gets into a fighter plane, — and crashes.

Leaving the bar, Anya felt like an astronaut in open space, floating in weightlessness, with no ship, no planet to cling to. She didn't know how much oxygen was left—but it seemed to be already lasting longer than it should in one suit. She seldom felt safe and secure in life, and this image often came before. She knew the only way to make the world feel cozy was to perform an acrobatic trick: accept that you're in space, lie on your back, and start floating, not thinking about how every random pebble could kill you.

She came home, ran to the bathroom, vomited, and felt better. She brushed her teeth, drank tap water, and still standing in the bathroom, ordered a large suitcase online with her phone. It should arrive tomorrow. Moscow is such a convenient city; everything is delivered quickly.

# REFLECTIVE ART ESSAY



by **MARINA VASILEVI**

*I am a journalist from Russia, and I have been writing articles and news about Russian politics, society, and small businesses for over a decade. I occasionally wrote poetry and plays, publishing a small book of poems. After being forced into exile due to the war, I started telling my story through prose.*

*Inspiration: This story was inspired by my own life experiences, which I now reinterpret and reevaluate to keep moving forward.*

*Highlights: During this course, I learned a lot, but most importantly, I received valuable feedback from fellow students, realizing that my experience resonates with people from other countries, despite being a citizen of an aggressor state. This inspires me to keep going.*

**E**dward Hopper's painting "Nighthawks" has always captivated me with its mysterious and hypnotic atmosphere. When I look at this work, I feel like an observer, secretly peering into the lives of strangers who found themselves in the same place during the darkest time of night.

In this painting, a café is illuminated by a bright, almost sterile light that sharply contrasts with the darkness of the night

outside. I wonder what brought these people to this café in the middle of the night. A man and a woman sit next to each other, but they do not exchange words or even glances. Their silence is loud. Another man, sitting with his back to the viewer, seems lost in his thoughts, as if trying to escape from something or someone. The waiter, performing his job, also appears detached, his movements mechanical and routine.

Hopper masterfully conveys

this sense of loneliness in a crowd. The light inside the café, so bright and artificial, emphasizes the isolation of the characters. It reminds me of how often we wear masks and hide our true feelings even in the most ordinary places. The dark street outside the café windows seems endless and empty, like our fears and doubts, which we try to forget under the cover of night.

This scene reminds me of many nights spent in the bars of

my hometown, Saint Petersburg. I often sat in bars alone or with friends when I was late for the last train on the subway, waiting for the bridges to be built, or when something bad happened. Those places always felt familiar and cozy to me, even if it was my first time there. In such moments, the loneliness was especially palpable but also somewhat comforting. The feeling that other people around were also absorbed in their reflections created an illusion of connection,

albeit a silent one. People around you seem to hear your thoughts and could start speaking at any moment.

Now, living in exile in Amsterdam, I often feel like a stranger. The surrounding space seems deaf to my thoughts, as even the language of my thoughts is foreign to this place. It seems to me that the people in Hopper's painting are not likely to be immigrants, but it looks like they feel that way in their own lives. This feeling is when people sur-

round you, but they probably don't share your thoughts and experiences.

"Nighthawks" reflects not only the external picture of nightlife but also the internal state of a person. Hopper shows that even in the company of others, we can feel incredibly alone. But in this loneliness, there is also a strength — the opportunity to look into oneself, understand one's thoughts and feelings, and find solace within.



# The grapevine and the blackbird

by FIONA WANG

## -Android-

Anyone who walks down the street and suddenly comes across a person lying in a grotesque position, with her limbs twisted to the point where they seem to have been severed, would probably feel fear, even with the strongest of mental capacities. I thought to myself as I lay on the sunlit ground under an overpass.

A young mother dragged her child away at the fastest pace when she caught a glimpse of me. I tried to smile at the little girl who turned back through the gap in her mother's arm, trying to tell her not to worry, that I wouldn't feel the pain. Still, her shrieking voice came through my damaged auditory components the next second.

I couldn't blame them because the scenario did seem a bit strange. But this was the only place I could stay for a while. If I remained in the junkyard where Daniel, my former owner, had discarded me, I would be completely dismantled. At least more people here would see me as a disabled vagrant to be avoided rather than a scrapped android with

even fewer human rights to dispose of at will.

In fact, even if I wanted to find another place to hide, my body couldn't support another long-distance migration. The metal skeleton of my left thigh had been broken by Daniel, and my right knee had disarticulated on my crawl over. The auditory, olfactory, and tactile components had all been damaged to varying degrees after one of the headbutts. The only good news was that the vision was retained, so I could clearly witness my, how shall I put it, demise.

Good for me, I thought. This is probably the closest I'll ever get to being human, truly dreading the death that will eventually come without knowing when it's coming. I closed my eyes to feel the daylight through my eyelids as if that would make my body warm again until someone uncaring blocked my light.

"Are you still alive?" A young woman's voice came faintly.

Alive? What a strange way to ask. I'd never been alive. Maybe I had, but that was back when Daniel could still recognize me as Joan. He hadn't gotten

over the loss of his lover at that point, so he had no time for all the flaws in how I looked and reacted as a knockoff. I lived, loved, and thought I was loved with a stolen identity.

"Thank God for sending you back to me," Daniel said.

"No, Joan, you don't know how to make coffee," Daniel said.

"Joan never wore black. She liked white," Daniel said.

"You're just an inanimate but a poor imitation of life, monster," Daniel said.

"Yes, if you're willing to call the machine still running alive," I said, opening my eyes to the woman in front of me, in black Martin boots, jeans, a light brown trench coat, and a white t-shirt underneath. Her face was unreadable with the light behind her, but I could see long, dark brown hair that looked like dead vine. I had a rough idea of her type, but I just couldn't figure out the logic of her question.

She paused, still smiling, and said, "Are you sunbathing here? Or do you have nowhere else to go? If it's both, would you like to come with me? I've got better places to go than this, plenty of sun, and no one to bother you."

I didn't hesitate much to get on her motorcycle. In fact, whether I agreed or not, she could have shoved me on the back of it and taken me anywhere she wanted.

"By the way, what's your name?"

"Just call me Joan." I realized then that I didn't have a name of my own.

"I'm Wendy. Welcome home, Joan."

## -Wendy-

I took the android home with me. I couldn't deny that my action was tinged with selfishness toward my dead friend Joan, but it was more out of compassion for this suffering being.

She didn't recognize me, unsurprisingly. I knew that Daniel would erase all the memories of me when he made his perfect lover. He couldn't stop us from seeing each other before Joan's death, but he kicked me out in this way after.

But I still underestimated his selfishness and cruelty in abandoning her in such an extreme way. No, it wasn't just abandonment. The bullying started from the moment he went to the base where people could customize androids to imitate departed loved ones and friends.

They took a soul that could grow and forced it

into the cage of another, writing her entire life script for her before she was even born with a sense of self. She was so carefully molded in silicone to look precisely like Joan's face, and her clothes were in Joan's favorite styles, occasionally putting me in a trance. But when she shedded the gentle, calm skin that belonged to Joan, you could see the sharp playfulness and even acerbity that belonged to her, as well as the hollowness and despair hidden in the deepest layers.

I love Joan, but more soberly and realistically than Daniel. So I know full well that they are different people, living beings, or whatever else people call existence. As I fed the water to the somewhat wilted vines on my rooftop from my kettle, I thought, if Joan is like running water that nourishes people's hearts, then this android is probably .....

"Wendy! I need your help!" The yelp of my Border Collie came from downstairs, as did her yelp.

For the millionth time in as many days, she interrupted my musings. I quickly put down the kettle and rushed downstairs. She was supposed to be in the bedroom teaching my dog to familiarize himself with the new pet communication buttons. What had gone wrong?

Pushing the door open, I saw her left forearm disconnected, held in her right hand, and my dog Kim woofing at her.

I rushed forward to ask her how she was doing and then reprimanded Kim for chewing someone's arm off. She waved her hand with the broken forearm, saying, "It's not Kim's fault. I unloaded it myself. He's always mistaking me for a human, so I was explaining the android button to him. But Kim just seemed to be scared."

I didn't know whether to cry or laugh. I told her if Kim really couldn't learn, just say you're a human. There's no essential difference.

"No! It's not the same!" The subject seemed to hit her backside again, and her voice rose, "It's just essentially different."

"I am not a human. I'm a machine ..... I'm not like you guys. I'm a monster." She kept chanting, her expression becoming somehow pained and confused.

I looked at the android, who seemed to be suffering in a state of stress, and I could hardly imagine what she had been through.

I had observed occasions when Joan and Daniel got along. Their relationship was like water meets fire; Joan was able to soothe Daniel's impatience, and Daniel was able to bring a bit of zest to Joan's humdrum life. At that time, Daniel was indeed not a gentle man, but he was never the brutal type ei-

ther.

But who would have thought that fate would play such a merciless trick on us, and how many people's love and ego have been buried by the loss of one life? I felt sorry for Daniel, I felt sorry for myself, and I felt sorry for the android.

I realized that if Joan was running water, the android in front of me was probably a stubborn stone. The most unassuming one on the street, black, hard, tenacious, and always subject to punches and kicks. She could never quell the irritation of a blazing fire but was forced to take on that searing heat as well.

I wrapped my arms around her until the shiver that ran down her spine subsided. I gently tugged her forearm out of her grasp and settled it back on her.

"No, you're not a monster ..... Don't be afraid. No one will ever treat you like one again."

I decided to learn how to take care of a stubborn stone.

### -Android-

**W**ith Daniel, I was forever waiting, waiting for him to arrive, waiting for his instructions, waiting for him to respond tenderly because I'd mimicked Joan correctly, or waiting for his sudden outburst of anger and meltdown at some point. I had gotten myself used to waiting.

But Wendy had slowly stripped me of that ability to slumber in a dark charging pod for long periods, day after day.

She fixed me. My broken sinews were able to start running again. She got me lots of things to do, like watering the plants and flowers on the top floor rooftop, although the grapevine she kept in a bubble box never bloomed, according to her. Or like going out to walk the dog, even though Kim was obviously still wary of me. Or going to the coffee shop she owned to give her a helping hand, although I still insisted I didn't know how to make coffee.

She told me to move, not to wait passively. She told me to try to live before thinking about what it means to be alive, why I'm alive, and what to do with my life.

One day, we rested on the rooftop after tending to the flowers. The rooftop was indeed sunny and undisturbed, just as she said. She cooled herself on a lounge chair under the grapevine, while I soaked up directly in the sun on another lounge chair. The vines were tangling with the rope net she had haphazardly set up before, tightly, inseparably, co-

vering her with thick shadows. The net looked too thin and wobbly that I worried it would strangle the vines. But she said there was no way around it, that the vines had to be kept alive by the support of this net.

My sensory components had recovered. I could feel the warmth of the sun flowing over me again, the lovely wind jumping on me. I could smell the flowers and hear the birds chirping. I could see the sky embraced by the clouds, and the whole city breathed regularly. Wendy was breathing regularly, too.

And that's when I had to think of something ultimate. Maybe not so ultimate for the universe, but for me, it was. About the first line of my wish list, the final destination of my life, the questions and expectations I have always had. About that which I cannot touch with my skin, smell with my nose, hear with my ears, or see with my eyes.

About that word, the word Daniel kept hanging on to, love.

"Wendy, have you ever felt love? Have you ever loved anyone?"

She turned her head slightly to my side, her face in the shadow of the grapevine I couldn't see. I couldn't see her well enough again. I could never see her well enough.

"Love, I love in every moment." Her voice was soft.

"Then why are you always alone? I've never seen anyone else around you."

"Your former master was with you every day. Your whole life revolved around him. But don't you dare say he loves you?"

I was silent for a moment and came up with denial. I couldn't seem to prove in any way that the gentleness Daniel had once given me could be called "he loved me." The predicate was incorrect, and the object even less so. But then, something occurred to me that I had to ask.

"Do you love me, Wendy?"

### -Wendy-

“ I love you, Joan.”

I sometimes recall those words in my dreams. The dead Joan and I were dancing together in a field of flowers when I had confessed my heart so earnestly and desperately.

"I love you too!" She responded so sincerely and casually.

But you don't get to love me the way I love you. I kept it to myself.

It doesn't matter. As long as the song in my fanta-

sies continues and the dance doesn't stop, I'll always be able to stay close to her in the name of "friend", even if I know I won't be her partner in life.

I retook her hand and touched her waist and hair in my dream. I could feel her pace gradually becoming sluggish and slow, as if she were sinking into the dirt step by step. Then, her body became thinner, colder, and stiffer until she could no longer support herself and fell to the ground. Only then did I see that all that was left in my arms was a pile of white bones.

Countless vines grew out of the cracks of her bones, entangling and binding the bones as if they were going to turn into her flesh and skin.

"Are you still alive? Are you still alive?" I asked repeatedly, even though I knew no one was left to answer me.

But a human voice rang in my head, "Yes. If you would call a machine still running alive."

The voice was asking me, "So, do you love me, Wendy?"

I opened my eyes to find the android looking at me with her head tilted, waiting for my answer.

I regretted taking the word love so seriously that I'd never be able to easily handle this scenario. Maybe if I waited longer, just a little bit longer, I could let go of my hopeless past and useless guilt and fall in love with the android. Or maybe I could have learned from the dead Joan and covered up the mismatched feelings with a casual "I love you so much" that pretended to be sincere. What a way to keep an isolated soul attached to oneself forever.

But I just couldn't get those words out of my mouth.

Seeing my long silence, the android laughed softly. "Hmph, good thing you didn't lie to me."

Silence flowed between us until the sky changed from navy blue to rose gold. She stood up, stretched, and dusted off the nonexistent dirt, a comical gesture that she probably learned from Kim. Then she turned to me with a solemn look.

"Wendy, I appreciate you fixing me up and caring for me for so long. I think it's time for me to leave."

"Leave? What's with the suddenness? Is it because....."

Is it because you knew about my love for the dead Joan? Is it because my hiding it made you feel unbearable? Is it because you think I'm also using you as a substitute? Is it that you still can't be yourself when you're with me?

"No, not because of you or anything else. Well, that's not true. You're the one who made me realize. I can't keep waiting for time to pass meaninglessly,

or for something to save me. I want to take the initiative to see the outside world and get in touch with more people. I want love, and it's okay if no one else can give it to me, but I have to learn how to love myself." She said with the brightest expression and the most relaxed tone I've ever seen from her.

I thought of a bird I once saved from my grapevine. A blackbird, with its feet tangled in the net that supported the vines, and blood visible between struggles. I carefully burned the net around its feet with a lighter, treated its wound, gave it food and water, and even tried to keep it forever. I would buy it a vast birdcage.

But then it flew away and never came back.

It turned out that this android was not a stubborn stone but a blackbird that could fly, fluttering its fire-scorched wings to get into the sunlight.

"Will you come back?" That was all I asked.

"I think I will, maybe when I find a name for myself," she held her hand to me, "Next time, I'll meet you with my own name."

I put my hand on hers and stood up, then flung myself into her arms to avoid her seeing me in tears. Her skin, often slightly cooler than human temperature, was warmed by the sun, giving me the illusion that it was human flesh and blood. It was then that I realized I seemed to have spent too much time in the shade so that my body had stiffened, and my heart had gone cold.

"You are the worst person in the world," I said.

"Don't miss my great place to sunbathe after you leave," I said.

"When my grapes bear fruit, I won't keep my wine for you to drink," I said.

"And don't forget the way home, or Kim will miss you so much he won't be able to sleep," I said.

*I am a sophomore studying communication at Hong Kong Baptist University. My favorite writing genre is fiction, and my favorite topics are nature, love, life and death, and so on.*

*Inspiration: The biggest inspiration for this story was the rooftop of my cousin's house. The first time I went onto her rooftop, I saw a grapevine growing on a fishing net. My cousin told me she once saved a blackbird from this net. I was so impressed that I thought of a story about freedom and love using the grapevine and the blackbird as clues.*

*Highlights: The highlight of this course is the sharing and evaluation of each student's work. We would work on the same theme, and everyone's work would be full of unique creativity. I learned a lot of fresh perspectives and creative methods by listening to others' works. I also gained effective ways to improve and the confidence to continue creating by listening to the comments they gave me.*



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