

# Tofem

2012 - 2013





*Untitled | Acrylic and Colored Pencil | Irene Yang*



*Hudson River | Digital Photography | Larissa Yee*

## *The Business Boy*

*Peter Buhler*

I imagined all the people he had drowned  
With his quick-draw machete handshake  
And his backstage frat-boy power pound

I read his history like Braille in his knuckles  
And found from his catapult tongue  
An ego as subtle as a Texas belt buckle

I heard it in his Princeton-parsed euphonic  
In his smile thin as paper, warm as  
His rocky chronic gin and tonic

Through his skull I could see the boy in his brain  
Pulling the strings of his man marionette  
His playground politics settled in the rain

Even after twenty years after twenty years of school  
There was the smack of all he said, all he did  
As puerile as the adage Boys rule, Girls drool

*Cover Art: Scavengers | Digital Photography | Thevamaran Ramathasan*

# Mendel

Jonathan Schor

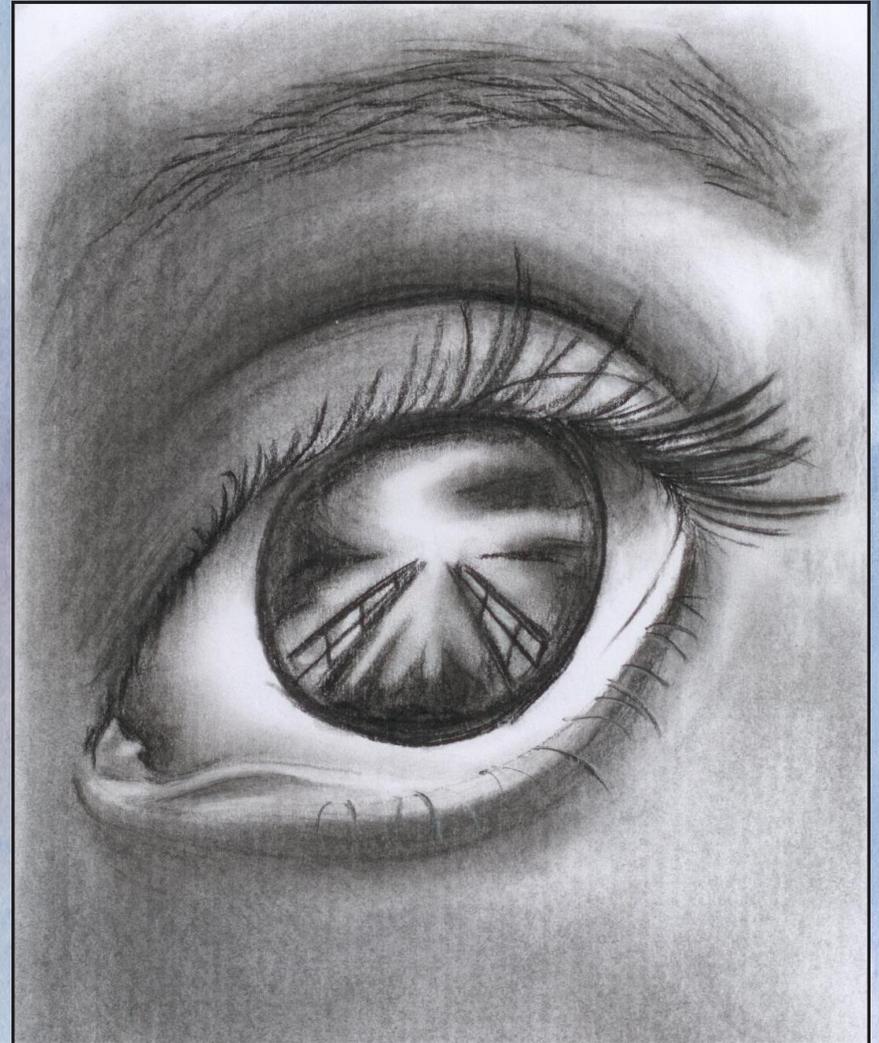
It was generally accepted that Menachem Mendel was the grumpiest man in town; and in a town as small as Hurley, Mississippi it wasn't too hard to be sure of that. A seventy-something-year-old widower, his children had long since married and moved away, leaving him alone in a dusty old house filled with the decrepit memorabilia of his formerly young self. The children of the town used to delight in antagonizing Old Mr. Mendel, at least until the baker's boy was caught putting birds down the chimney and sent home with a rough spanking. Other than those past visits, the only company Mendel received was from a cat that would come and go as it pleased, through a hole in the house that Mendel had yet to find. He chased it outside with a broom whenever he saw it snooping through his pantry.

Mendel had an accent that no one in the town could place, a lasting remnant of his Eastern European upbringing. He had a tendency to pronounce "v"s as "w"s, grumbling that he was "wery good, wery good" to the postman who was only asking out of habit. He said even less to the town preacher, who had begun paying him visits shortly after his wife died. After finding that he was rebuffed time and time again, the preacher, like all others who had tried to connect with the old man, eventually discontinued his visits.

Thus, there had emerged a general consensus that Mendel did not care about anyone or anything, and that the old man would die friendless and alone. Which is why everyone was surprised to see Mendel make an appearance at the local high school on a hot day in 1970, the same day that school integration was to be enforced throughout Mississippi. He stood just outside of the crowd, which was already growing rowdy from the scorching sun. Within a few minutes, their expectant eyes were directed at the school bus that screeched to a halt in front of the building. The doors creaked open, and three black students walked cautiously outside.

State police had been dispatched to quell the crowds at each school, but Hurley was not large enough to merit a commanding squad of officers. Instead, two young troopers nervously pushed the angry mob aside as they escorted the new arrivals to the door. The collective sound of the crowd grew, and before the students had reached the school it seemed that the enraged group might spiral out of control. The state troopers did their best to keep it at bay, but in the commotion the butcher's hotheaded son pushed through to the students. As he began to yell every manner of insult, he felt a cold hand firmly grasp his shoulder. The young man whirled around and roughly forced the hand off, toppling his assailant in the process.

A hush fell over the crowd as Old Mr. Mendel stared up from the ground. His hand was cut from catching his fall, and the sleeve of his shirt was torn. Underneath, a crudely inked tattoo was clearly visible, displaying a five-digit number that Mendel had carried with him for the past 30 years. The butcher's boy gave an embarrassed look and went to help the old man up. Mendel batted his hand away and staggered to his feet. He limped over to the three students, and walked with them the rest of the way to the high school door. The crowd remained silent.



*The Path Ahead \ Pencil \ Carrie Wang*



*Balloons | Oil Paint | Wubing Ye*



*Untitled | Digital Photography | Jacob Shenker*

## *Love you just this once*

*Pedro Rodriguez*

You caught me at my lowest  
when I felt so much more empty than normal.  
Like a hunger that can never be sated.  
It doesn't make me proud,  
but I had to give in to  
your perfectly proportioned figure and  
the way you look, the way you smell,  
the way you feel between my fingers,  
the way you taste on my lips, in my mouth, through my entire being.

Maybe this is just how men are: behind all our  
logic, reason, composure,

we still have that primal craving.

Tomorrow I will loathe you once again,  
the aftertaste of shameful indulgence unforgotten,

but for today, I will love you, just this once,

so briefly

and so INTENSELY,

so you better make it count,  
make it last,

because

I will love you  
just this once,  
french fries.



*Untitled \ Digital Photography \ Lan Nguyen*



*Living in a village \ Digital Photography \ Thevamaran Ramathanan*



*Historic Austrian Village \ Digital Photography \ Joe Donovan*

# For Only You

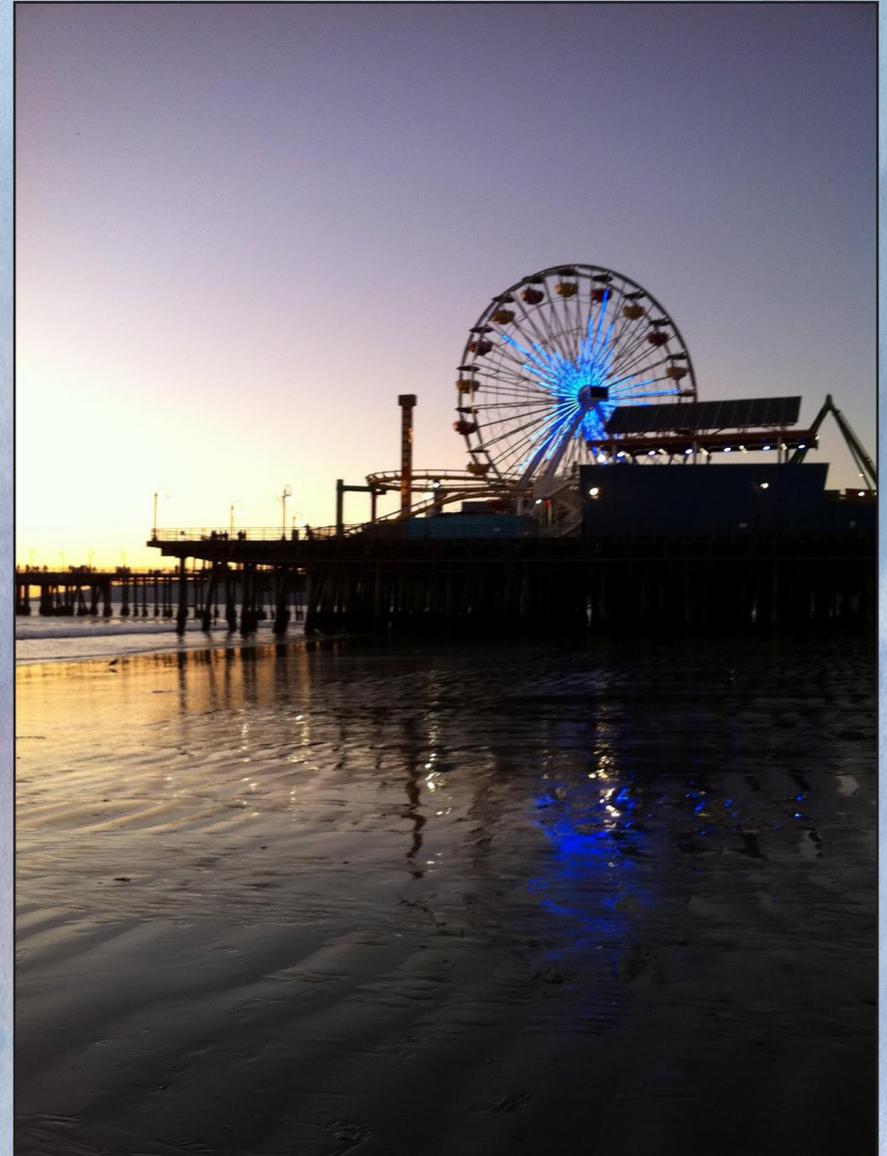
Teresa Xu

Summer has flown by like a puff off a dandelion,  
floating through whimsical currents of promises lost.  
Its glow still lingers at times between our fingers,  
reflected in your lazy smile, braided in my ruffled hair.  
In those days of summer, we got so high off youth;  
we could do anything; we'd always keep our word.  
We would bask in the liquid sands of the hourglass,  
and it was a crime, to rest your lids before dawn.

Summer once blossomed of our carefree reveries,  
its nectar sweet like your breath warm in my ear,  
its fragrance entrancing like your love-struck gaze,  
its petals soft like kisses, your cheek against mine.  
We traced circles in the air as if something's there,  
versing naïve ambitions and daydreams of tomorrow.  
We did somehow forget many a whispered regret,  
daring us again a fall before our bandages unravel.

Summer has fallen like a leaf, drifting ever so slowly,  
swinging on invisible pendulums, closer still, to earth.  
It falls like the rare raindrops, slipping off your lashes,  
falling out of my pockets like colorful candy wrappers.  
Remembering summer is like reopening another box  
full of anecdote-worthy mementos nested in confetti.  
These amber collages, though now faded and blurred,  
still smell of cozy bonfires, and ruins of sandcastles past.

The summer songbird warbles earnest goodbyes,  
"Farewell lighthearted summer; welcome gentle fall."  
I bid adieu to these idyllic days, our forgotten wishes,  
and close this memory-bloated, story-coated scrapbook.  
Summer has left in an envelope hand-addressed to you,  
lined with tender hugs, sealed with my careful heart.  
I enclosed your crown. Thank you for being my hero.  
For only you, shall summer pass as my smile outlasts.



Untitled | Digital Photography | Teresa Xu

# Grace

*Nicole Tetreault*

I am white as the cool winter's breeze and a swan's fluttering wing in a daylight sky. Inhalation, and you breathe me out, I am the soft powder cloud from your mouth in 20 below. My white clouds paint sky pictures for your imagination. My snowflakes dance before you to touch, to lick, to inhale. I am your son's, or daughter's, or mother's, or father's, or bother's, or sister's milk mustache. I am the smell of a freshly painted blank dorm room. I am every New Year's Eve dream for a midnight kiss. I am unpigmented and without stain, I am your saint and your freedom. I am your white flag. I am the naturalness. I am the white light of your meditated mind. I am the chalky words you once wrote in grade school. I live on Morris Lewis' paint bush, am always in the background of any canvas. I speak and am the blankness on a white sheet of paper. I am the ivory keys for you, I am Brahms' lullaby. I am the clear rain drop as you long for your childhood days of jumping in my puddles. I am everywhere, I am in the stillness, I am in the sea and I am the peaceful dove dreaming.



*Butterfly | Digital Photography | Christina Lee*



*Untitled | Collage | Winking Ye*

# *The Dragon Eater*

*Peter Buhler*

It is the beginning of an elephant night  
A night of circus, shadow, and stampede  
With pregnant sails full of pressure  
A slowly closing fist of nervous calm  
The ship's clocks are full of promise  
Led by the steady beating of the bomb

It is the twilight of a fickle dream  
And the iron mind will steer his sloop  
For across all the ancient oceans  
He has laid a thousand lashes on his troop

With all the speed that he can muster  
With all the haste that he can make  
The captain of the Dark Moon vessel  
Leaves a burning lily wake

He follows his kleptomic map  
By his candle by the cold  
He seeks freedom from the terror  
That plagues his belly and the hold

The crust of countless salty nights  
Lays heavy on his leather head  
But now he tastes the hors d'oeuvres of a pounding heart  
When he hears of land ahead

With bated breath he watches  
Then discerns the wrinkled hills  
Matches silhouette and memory  
And their concordance thrills

The rigging all at once is manned  
As they approach the creature's den  
And their cargo shudders all the ship  
For he has the length of ten full men

"Light the flares and sound the gong  
Soon we rid us of the beast  
O curse the day he stowed aboard  
On the dark shores of the East"

So flares were lit and gong was rung  
And the dragon scorched and roared  
The sea bubbled up a maelstrom  
And the crew leapt overboard

Because there he was, the Dragon Eater!

He was not an island dwelling creature  
Resting on some stony shelf  
Waiting for the landing of a wayward craft  
He was the island all himself

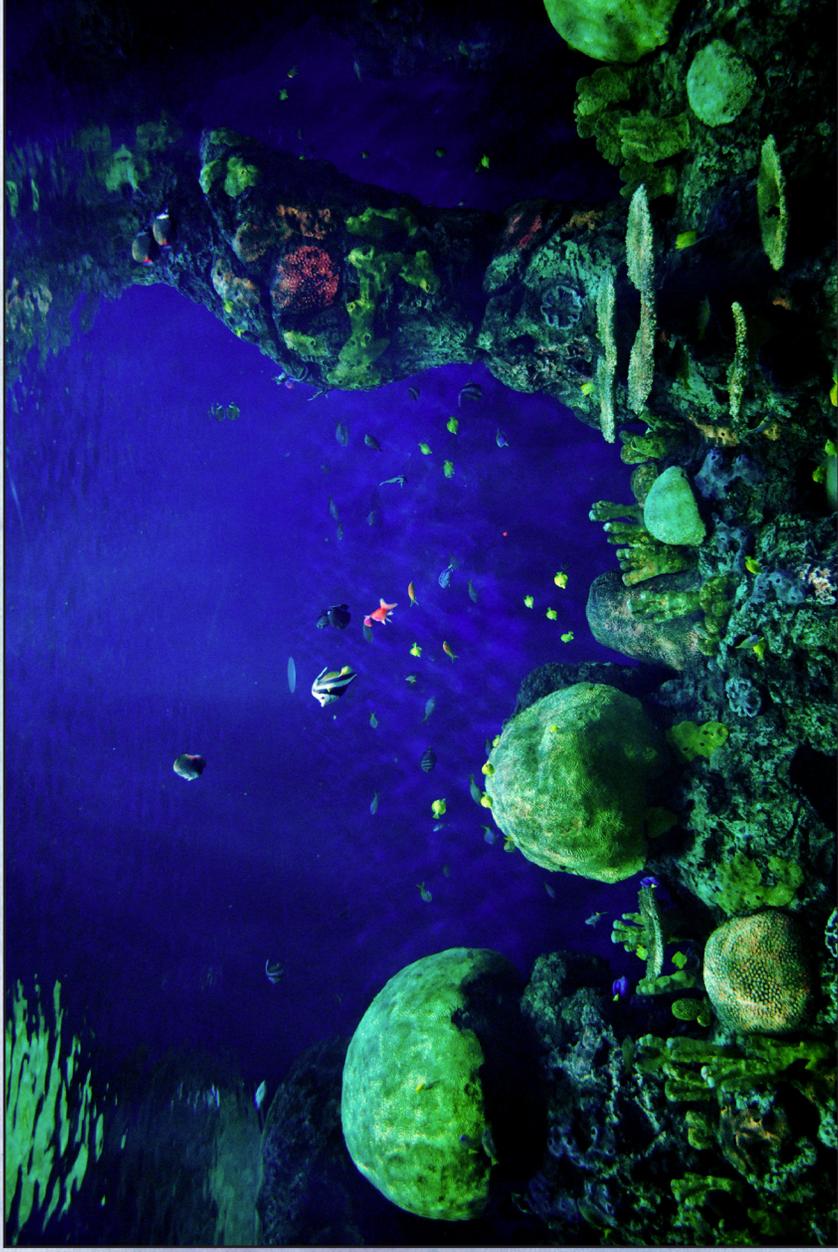
But ramming through the bulwark  
The dragon finally smote  
The hull cracking like an eggshell  
The lizard hatching from the boat

An awful flame he sent out  
To incinerate the crew  
Roared again and wheeled  
And fast away he flew

Under him a wide vortex opened  
With a horrid sucking sound  
Spreading faster than wings could carry  
And he would sure be drowned

So he shot up toward the heavens  
To escape a great and watery paw  
That aimed to cast him down  
Into the Dragon Eater's maw

And the dragon he rose fast and true  
His scales sparkled in the stars  
After decades he had freedom  
And he would suffer no more bars

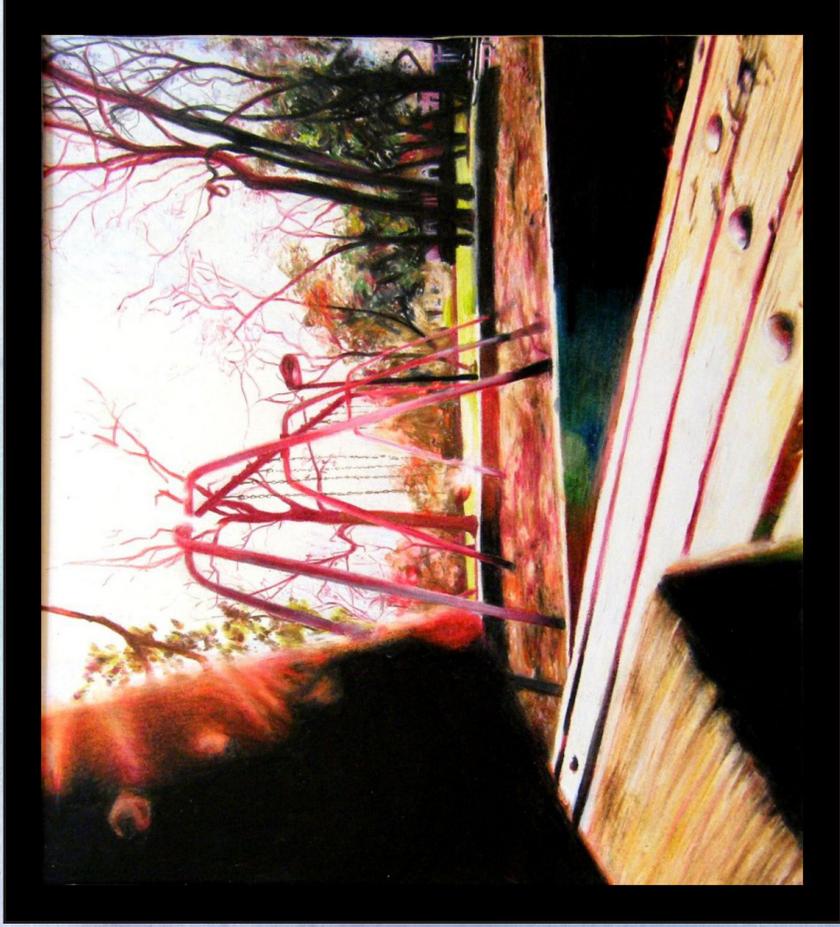


*Aquarium | Digital Photography | Kiara Simpaio*

s m t w r f s

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11 Independence Day	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26 Ramadan	27	28
29	30	31				

July



Swing Set at Dusk | Colored Pencil | Irene Yang

s m t w r f s

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August



*Kiyomizudera Temple Above the Maple Clouds | Watercolor | Sandra Fang*

S M T W T F S

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2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10 Labor Day	11	12	13	14	15 ●
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	Rosh Hashanah (sundown)		International Students Pre-Orientatton Begins	26	27	28
29	24	25	26	27	28	29 ○
30	New Student Orientation Begins	Yom Kippur (sundown)				
	New Student Orientation Ends					

# September

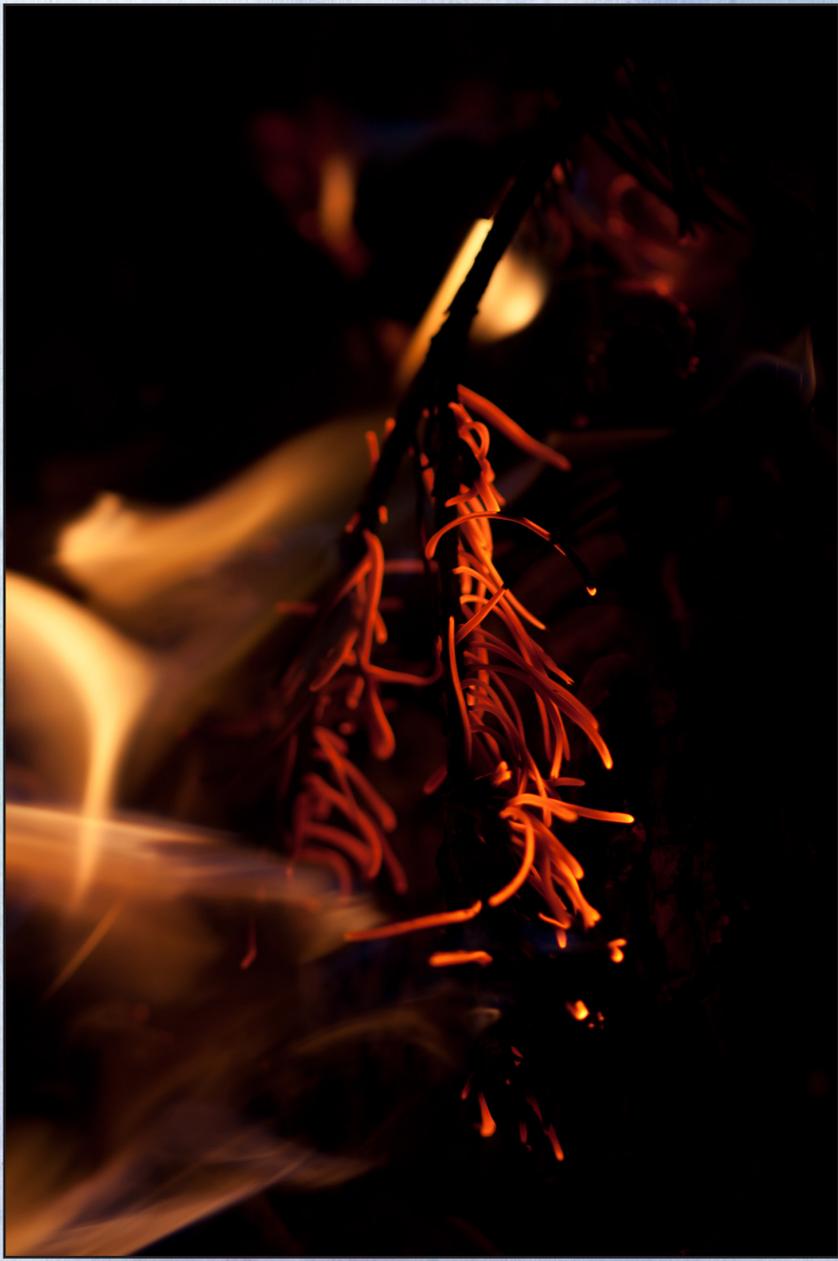


*Lurking in the Dark | Digital Photography | Tomasz Tyranowski*

s s m t w r f s

	1	2	3	4	5	6
7	8 <small>Fall Term Begins</small>	9	10	11	12	13
14	15 <small>Columbus Day</small>	16 ●	17	18	19	20
21	22	23	24	25	26 <small>Add Day</small>	27
28	29 ○	30	31 <small>Midterm Exams Begin Halloween</small>			

# October



*Dancing Flame | Digital Photography | Joe Donovan*

S M T W T F S

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# November

				All Saints Day		
Daylight Saving Time Ends		Midterm Exams End Election Day				
Veterans Day				Al-Hijra (Islamic New Year)		
	Registration for Winter Term Begins		Drop Day	Thanksgiving Day		



*Snowflakes on the Window of a Transatlantic Flight | Digital Photography | Mengshuen Chua*

s m t w r f s

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30	31						

# December



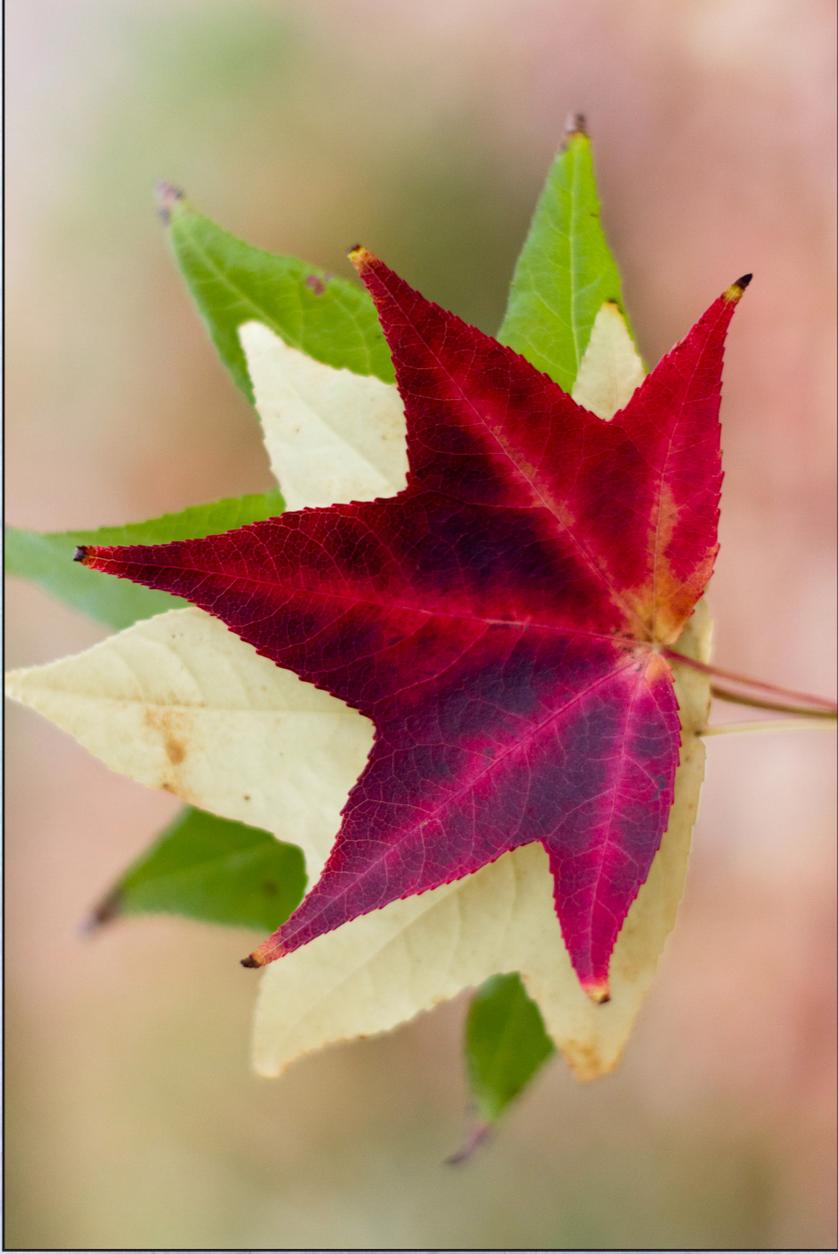
Central Park Digital Photography | Larissa Yee

s m t w r f s

6		1	2	3	4	5
		New Year's Day Kwanzaa Ends				
13	7	8	9	10	11	12
		Winter Term Begins				
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		Martin Luther King Jr. Day			Add Day	○
	28	29	30	31		

January





Leaves | Digital Photography | James Li

S M T W T F S

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Daylight Saving Time Begins	18	19	20	21	22	23
St. Patrick's Day	25	26	27	28	29	30
24			○			
31						

# March

Easter



Untitled Digital Photography | Caroline Yu

s s m t w t r f s

	1	2	3	4	5	6
	Spring Term Begins April Fool's Day					
7	8	9	10 ●	11	12	13
14	15	16	17	18	19	20
21	22 Tax Day	23	24	25 ○	26 Add Day	27
28	29 Earth Day	30		Passover (Sundown)		
	Good Friday					

# April



# Polaris

Eric Liu

i'm sinking  
floating on a cloud  
submerged in memories of  
you and solitude

release me  
from this beautiful spell  
the twisting knife in my  
heart makes me high

i'm sinking  
dreaming on a wave  
lost with no yellow subma-  
rines in my skies

freefalling  
one hell of a ride  
by Polaris where the sky and  
sea have no boundary

you've caught me  
disarmed by your captivating  
smile  
entranced by silver peals and  
sparkling eyes

i'm floating  
buried by your deep embrace  
lost with paper planes in my  
seas

i'm floating  
drowning in a beautiful  
reverie  
flying high with memories of  
you and me



Voices of a Distant Star | Acrylic and Colored Pencil | Irene Yang

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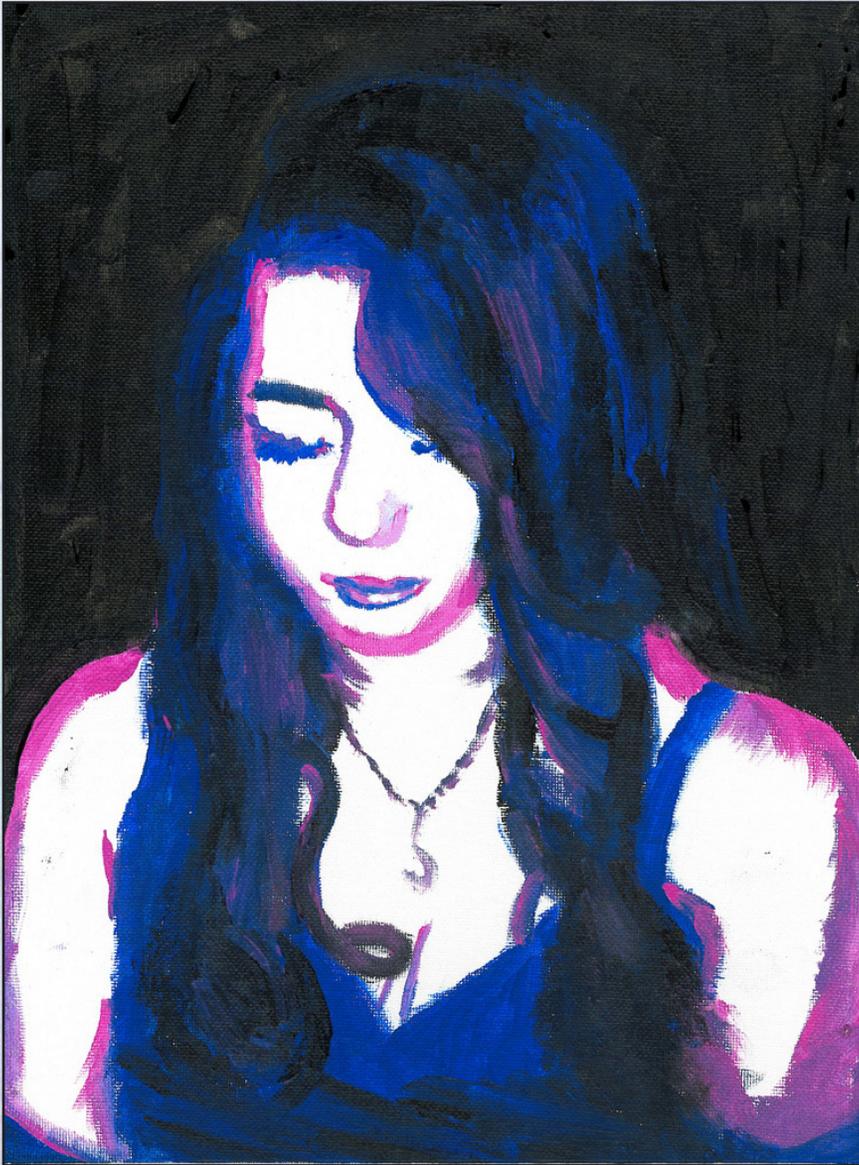
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# June

*The Goddess | Acrylic | Mathilda Li*

So I'm just daydreaming in front of my laptop like any normal night, when I see an instant message from Jen. I've been sort of expecting it, since this was the one time every year, the week between Christmas and the New Year, when we both happened to be home, and we had even agreed a month earlier that it would be nice to see each other, hang out, catch up, or whatever. That time, she had said that she really wanted to see me, especially since she didn't get a chance to the previous winter break.

Except I had clearly remembered that she did see me that break, several times in fact, and we not only hung out and caught up but we did more. I was pretty incredulous that she could have forgotten, and when I pointed this out to her, she seemed genuinely surprised. "Oh sorry, I guess we did. It just seems so long ago," she had replied. Well that was last month anyway, and since her forgetfulness had upset me, I told myself that I didn't really care if we met up or not. I've been home for several days now and we're already halfway through this one week when we happen to be close in time and space. I don't want to be the one to initiate contact, plus I half-believe that I really would be better off not seeing her, so I'm prepared to fly back to school without meeting her. I even think of it as some sort of personal victory. But then she finally messages me, and everything comes down like cards; we exchange pleasantries, then I tell her I will to pick her up from her house right now even though it's late and she has been out all day and nothing is open at this time anyway.

In less than ten minutes, I'm parked outside her house, waiting for her. As soon as she steps into my car, I notice an overbearing, flowery scent. It's not Jen's scent, because I grew up with her and I know what she should smell like: something clean and innocent, and if it does bring to mind flowers, they aren't these immodest roses with their hidden thorns, but pretty wildflowers loving the sun. When I ask, she tells me she's wearing her usual perfume, you know, the fragrance I gave her for Valentine's Day a few years ago, the kind that's advertised by naked models in seductive poses. I remember getting her the gift, but I don't know how it has somehow become her everyday scent; someone else must have bought it for her again, because mine had been a very small bottle.

Anyway, she tells me I look exactly the same as before, and I reply that consistency is a good thing, ignoring the shadow of disappointment in her voice. We drive to the park; it's supposed to be closed by this time of night, but who can stop us now? We no longer need to abide by the rules of our childhood; if a patrolling officer happens to run into us, we can just shrug and leave. After

we arrive and get out of the car, I straighten up and joke, "Don't you think I look taller? Everyone says I've grown a bit in college."  
"Nope, not a chance." She refuses to play along. "You're exactly the same." Well, I might be the same height, but she definitely does seem taller than I remember. I glance at her shoes; instead of the flip-flops she used to be so fond of wearing, she has on two-inch heels.

We walk over to the pavilion at the center of the park. When we were kids, we used to bike to the McDonald's, order the food to go, and then have a fast food picnic under the pavilion. We would spread out an assortment of dollar menu sandwiches on the picnic table, sharing an extra large drink and extra large fries. It was following one of these lunches that we had our first kiss, giggling afterwards because it tasted so salty.

"Hey, isn't this the table where we first kissed?" I ask.

Jen thinks for a moment then says, "Well it might have been this spot, but the table is different. Back then they had wooden picnic tables."

She's right, of course. Her memory has always been better than mine. The table we now sit at is made of plastic. I briefly wonder why they changed it. Perhaps these new tables are harder to damage. But the difference bothers me and I no longer want to simply sit and reminisce.

"Let's walk a bit," I say, grabbing her hand. There's a pond by the park, and we make our way towards it. We walk alongside the pond, sort of talking. To me there's something magical about returning to this place so central to my childhood, with the girl who ended it. I feel as if by some stroke of fortune, I'm inside a fairy ring, where time runs a different course and there are endless possibilities for happiness. We walk some more hand-in-hand, then go to the swing set and Jen swings.

There's a crackle in the air, then a spark of light. Some kids in the surrounding neighborhoods are shooting fireworks. We both look up to watch the amateur light show. Soon, we hear the tell-tale screech of roman candles, and Jen swings higher, kicking off her shoes. As the last star bursts into the sky, she throws herself off the seat of the swing, and the magic of the fairy ring propels her through the air, higher than I've ever seen her jump before. For an instant, I imagine she must have grown wings, because she floats there for much too long, her face sparkling from the lights in the sky. After a while, we end up in her bedroom, but only after she made it painfully clear that nothing was going to happen. Apparently she's changed, and we can't play like we used to do, unless she's "tipsy or 'in the mood'" or so she teases. Sitting on her bed, we talk about plans for the future, relationships, whatever. She has a boyfriend right now, but it doesn't sound like anything serious. She explains how she's grown up and she's looking for something

different, something that just a boy won't be able to give. With every sentence, I lose a bit of that feeling of possibility, of being able to withstand the external flow of time. I realize I'm no longer hearing her specific words, but rather the undertones of a hundred past arguments, all jumbled together in a cacophonous mess. I'm sort of panicking now; I reach for her, trying to turn back the clock. But she pulls out of my reach. I try again, but again she pulls away. I give her a hurt look, and try once more. "Oh, you're still like a kid," she says laughing then pauses thoughtfully. "I guess it's nice you still have that side to you."

She sounds so condescending, and I can't take it anymore, so I ask, almost shouting:

"Well what's wrong with being a kid? Why are you grown up? I feel like I barely know you anymore; if that's what growing up means, then why would you want to? Why are you so damn proud that you've thrown away everything you used to care about in order to live by a bunch of stupid ideas thought up by other people? Those promises we made, is it so easy to just forget about them?"

But Jen only laughs at me. She laughs as she transforms into a fairy, and pulls me close to her, under the covers, until I turn completely into a child.



*Millenium Park | Digital Photography | Monica He*

# Candid

Eric Liu



*Christmas Morning | Digital Photography | Natalie Shih*

They glisten like tears, the dew drops in the morning sun  
Do you want it, hon'?'  
Captured in pictures  
Still framed those innocent eyes  
Frozen in fear and surprise  
They never did anything wrong.

They glisten like tears, the stars up in the midnight sky  
You want me to try?  
Demeaned in photos  
They cannot twinkle or shine  
Restrained in the form and the line  
Forever they rest but never in peace.

They glisten like tears, the waves upon the sparkling sea  
But I understand.  
I'll try for you,  
Eyes glisten with tears, so you won't forget all of those times  
Captured and framed for another soul  
So we can remember when we grow cold

I'll steal the brilliance of the sun and the stars  
So they can stay with you in pictures, faded like the best of our memories.



*Rushing Hillside | Digital Photography | Joe Donovan*



*One Night I dreamed of a Maple Tree... | Watercolor | Sandra Fang*



*Untitled | Digital Photography | Caroline Yu*

Write me down, she said  
So I did, then she gave birth  
Like soft paw-prints inside my head  
Write down my children too

And out poured her twins  
A boy and a girl jotted down  
And they matured and had a brood  
Of pure and handsome incest ideas

Sly and innocent children-schemes  
Traipsing through my pate  
Happy times with jealous parents  
In the recesses of my mind, watching on with hate

And there the twins plotted  
That the girl would disguise herself  
As a thought worth pursuing  
And so she tugged my mind

She tantalized me with the power  
With the money, with the fame  
And took hold of my pencil and my lips  
Spreading herself across ears and ears and pages and pages

She did this so that I would not notice her brother  
Who ate their children one by one  
Through his teeth and into my forgetfulness

But finally the trickster girl was stretched too thin  
Too many ears and too many pages; and she died from exhaustion  
And in her death I saw she was not such a good idea after all

I lamented in this revelation, and it was in my lamentation  
That I noticed what her brother had done  
From the smell of stale blood in my brain

I saw him just as he bit into the torso of his last child  
The limp limbs dangling between his sick smile  
And in my rage I threw him into darkness

How I tried desperately to save that child's life  
But it was too late, he was disfigured beyond recognition  
And I forgot the last good idea I would ever have  
But his father was cunning, lurking in the shadows  
Slowly he began licking at the corners of my mind with avarice  
Until finally his ambition consumed all my thoughts

And his mother, my first beautiful idea,  
Despaired at her son and threw herself down the tall tower of my spine  
And shattered in pieces on my tailbone

So I was stuck alone with him inside my head  
I set about to rid myself of him; I tried to drink him away  
But I was too slow

For, you see, he escaped from me and took hold of my hands  
He, of all the wonderful ideas that could have lived through me  
He was the one to get out

And now, because of him, I have all the time in the world to myself  
Incarcerated as I am, left alone with that thought  
He laughs at me  
And I fear he will gain more power if I think too much

So I do not think. I only remember  
His mother and his children and what could have been

But will never now be  
Because I am locked away with him,  
Regret, and Memory



## *And All the Boards Did Shrink*

*Jonathan Schor*



*Dreams | Acrylic | Stephany Lai*

A drop of water is nothing  
In my eyes which themselves  
Could produce at least 3 or 4 drops, perhaps more  
With the right amount of insisting

And yet, I've heard of places where water is currency,  
And currently, the currents of rivers are guarded like  
Cerberus guards the Styx  
(In fact, sticks are the weapons of choice

Filled with nails for impaling  
The heads of those whose hands  
Reach longingly towards the foot  
Of a pond of lake of a river, that empties into a vast ocean).

It sounds quite savage,  
This ravaging and rape of a land that can only provide so much  
To so few, and I find it quite simple  
To lay the blame on corruption, failure to modernize, and anything else in  
view

Perhaps, though, the problem truly lies  
Within my eyes that remain dry despite  
What I hear, what I see, that I know I can make the fine droplets  
At the drop of hat, should I choose.

But I don't choose, and it makes me feel callous  
That the malice of others has no effect on me  
Or on you either, for that matter,  
Who is feeling the liquid surge down your parched throat from a plastic  
bottle

A plastic bottle. Is it strange that we  
Tame our majestic rapids in this way?  
Cast away the wonder and power that they hold  
And only value some useless metric or weight  
That we assign to each product that leaves from a factory  
On its way to be processed and labeled and sent far and wide  
And here?

But there, the bottles stop, for whatever reason  
And idealistic me (yesterday's me) wants to act  
But I (today's me) have tried and failed and despite all attempts at wailing  
I cannot cry a river.

# Misunderstood

Anne Laraia



*Past and Future | Pencil | Wubing Ye*



*Ruins of Sigiriya | Digital Photography | Thevamaran Ramathanan*

Walk into a room  
You're automatically judged  
Automatically loved  
Automatically hated  
Automatically fated  
To be judged by every one  
Ignored by some  
Understood by none  
Already blamed by a ton.

Someone may smile  
Others may frown  
One may look up to you  
While another looks down

And there's nothing you can do  
No one will understand you  
Or help you to get through  
They'll only understand what they see of you  
And even then it's true  
We are all alone.

No one to understand anyone else's tone  
No one to realize we are more than skin and bones  
We are more than any judgement.  
But it's human nature to see the cover before the book  
And to be blind only because we refuse to look  
Hypnotized by our very own lies  
Hallucinating with our very own eyes  
Deafened by our very own cries

And we don't find it strange that no one tries  
To get to know someone before we judge them  
Be honest with ourselves before we love them  
Look for the good before we hate  
Understand we are our fates  
At least take a glance before we choose to ignore  
Attempt to understand before we get bored  
Befriend each other like it isn't a chore  
Maybe then it will be different when I walk through that door  
Into that room.

Judged by all like the day of doom.  
We humans need to change for the good  
For we are all misunderstood.

## Undo

Jonathan Liu



*Hiszpania | Digital Photography | Lan Nguyen*

She's wearing white today. A plain white T-shirt, blue jeans. White for hope - I hope. Ready to walk in, order her coffee, and leave. I watch from my usual spot in the corner of the cafe. Right next to the polished window, I stare outside unobtrusively, just another insignificant soul in a hub of humanity.

I'm slowly sipping a water. Caffeine's too much for me, plus I don't like the taste of coffee. The door chimes open just as I raise the glass to my lips. She walks in, hair awhirl, striding confidence. Now's the time. Heart pounding, I discreetly get up and sidle towards the front. The line's not too long, not too short, a modest length. I reach the line just after her - perfect, just as I planned. Our sudden proximity absorbs the tension and condenses it into a heavy awkward silence. Our eyes meet - we're the same height. Green irises flecked with gold; so bright this close. They're curious. What's hiding behind those colors?

I give her a fleeting smile and stare at the ceiling, quickly. Think, dammit. Say something. Make your move. Ahead of us, the cashier's doing arithmetic. She's struggling - can't figure out the change. The customer's starting to get impatient. "18 cents. A dime, a nickel, and three pennies. Or two dimes and ask for two pennies back. No one likes pennies," I say, absentmindedly. They all turn to stare at me.

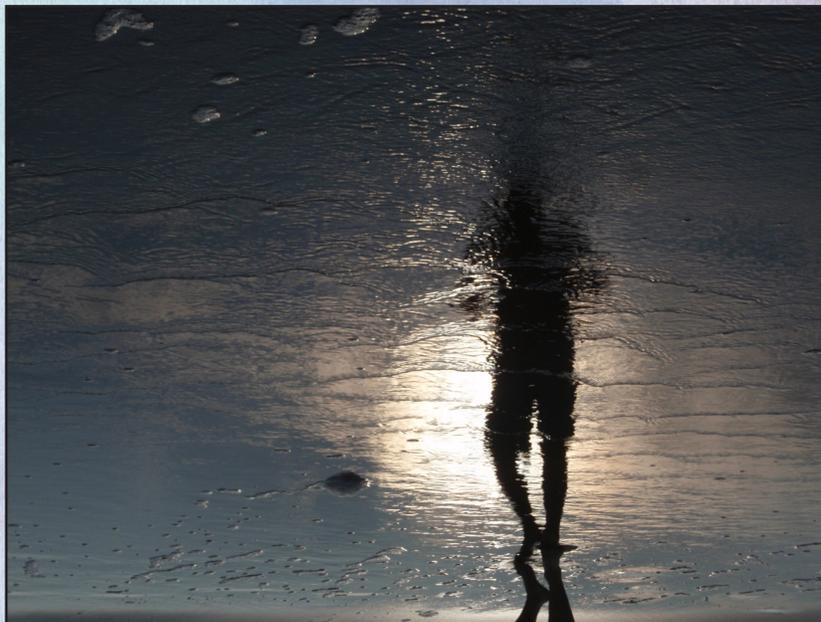
"The change," I stammer. Didn't mean to say that out loud. "Give him two dimes and get two pennies back." The man in front of me reaches into his pocket and pulls out two pennies, hands them to the cashier. Gets two dimes in return. Nice and neat. Clean. She's looking at me more attentively now. "That was fast," she says. "You do a lot of math?"

A lot of math? I almost say. You're talking to one of the world's foremost leading researchers in artificial intelligence. Of course I do a lot of math. I do a lot more than math. I simulate reality, thoughts, minds. A lot of math - you could say.

"Mmmhm," I mumble, staring at the ceiling again. Too afraid to look back.

The silence passes in thundering, crashing waves. She's ordering her coffee, she's paying, she's getting her coffee, she's turning, she's about to leave, dammit, say something, do something!

"Hey," I blurt out. She pauses, turns around.  
"You, uh, dropped a quarter." I hold out a quarter in supplication, an offering.  
"Oh, wow, thanks! I didn't even notice," she exclaims. Reaches out and takes it. For a brief moment, our hands touch. Soft, very soft. Does she feel the sweat moistening on my palms?  
"Thank you," she repeats, and turns and leaves, with me behind her, staring after her. The bell above the door chimes before the door crashes back. Around me, the world unfreezes.  
As life bustles around me, I stay frozen where I am, looking out the window, wallet lighter by a quarter. I say nothing, do nothing. The program exits abruptly, and I wake up, gasping and sweating. The cool darkness of my laboratory is comforting. Fans blow away the heat on my brow.  
"Failed again," I mumble to no one in particular. All around me, the supercomputer hums in silent agreement.  
I sit by myself for a few minutes. Then I boot up the program again. RUN SIMULATION? it asks. I press Enter, and sink back into the cradle of electronics. The countdown timer begins: 10....9....8....  
One day, I say to myself. One day it'll work, in this world and the other.  
She's wearing gray today. A plain gray T-shirt, faded blue jeans. Gray for melancholy, emptiness - I know. Ready to walk in, order her coffee. And leave.



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*Exit | Digital Photography | Anonymous*

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