

# LEGACY GAZETTE PRESENTS

2025

## THE GOLDEN QUILL LITERARY PRIZE WINNING PIECES

01



**SPONSORED BY THE LEADERSHIP & INNOVATION LAB**

GRADES 7-12 | CREATIVE WRITING | FICTION/NONFICTION



# WINNERS

Caitlin Liao, Gold Prize, 9-12 Category

**MARCH 25, 1911**

Yixia Fan, Gold Prize, 9-12 Category

**WHEN FOREVER WAS JUST A SEASON**

Rupert Lian, Gold Prize, 9-12 Category

**FRONT DOOR**

Yuriy Rogachev, Gold Prize, 9-12 Category

**RUSSIA**

Dongjhu Huang, Gold Prize, 7-8 Category

**THE SIDE OF ME THAT I CAN SEE**

Emily Yang, Silver Prize, 9-12 Category

**SMOLENSK**

Melody Cai, Silver Prize, 7-8 Category

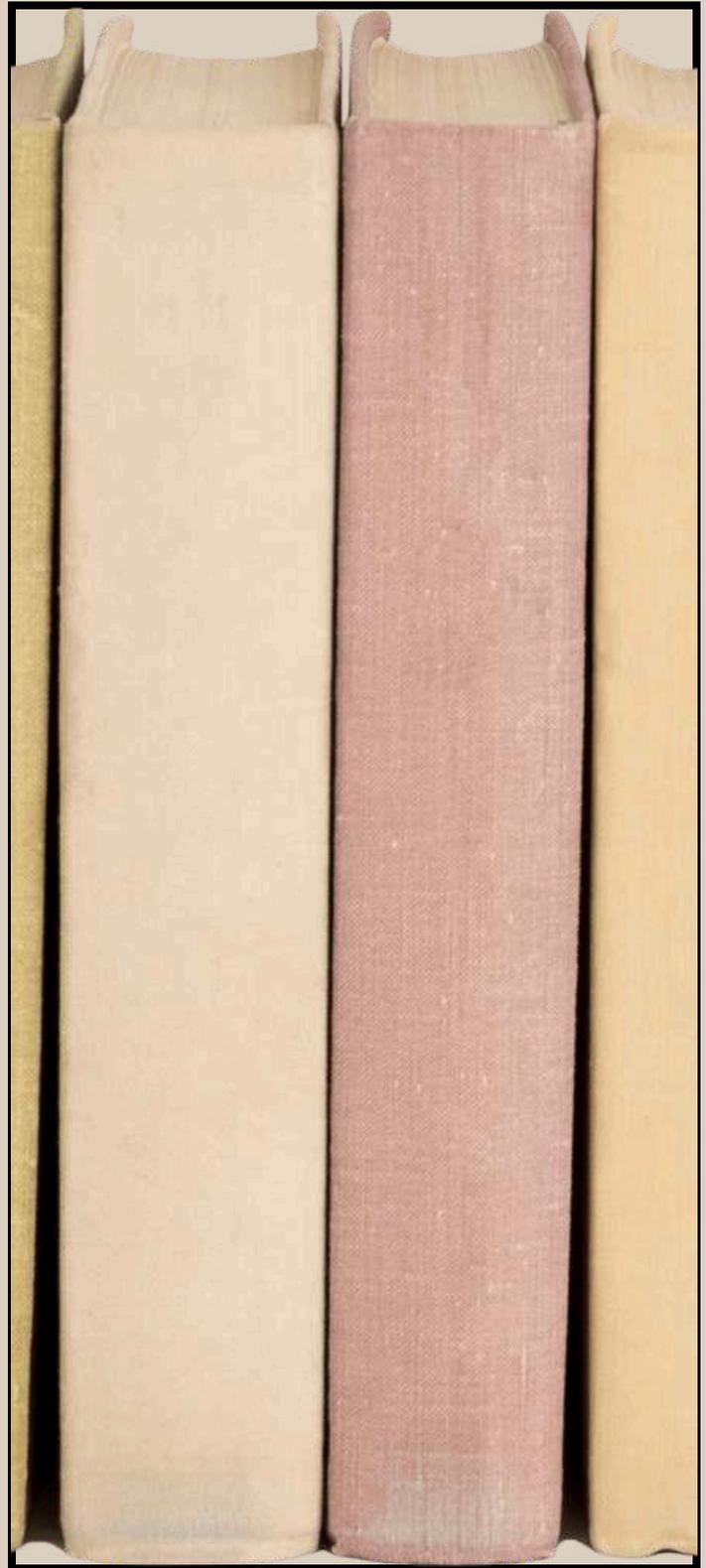
**TIANHONG**

Gracia Chen, Bronze Prize, 9-12 Category

**THE ALLURE AND SOLACE OF  
DOOMSDAY AESTHETICS**

Zerui Yan, Bronze Prize, 7-8 Category

**THE IDES OF TOMORROW**



# CONTENTS

**MARCH 25, 1911** 04

---

**WHEN FOREVER WAS JUST A SEASON** 10

---

**FRONT DOOR** 15

---

**RUSSIA** 20

---

**THE SIDE OF ME THAT I CAN SEE** 23

---

**SMOLENSK** 28

---

**TIANHONG** 34

---

**THE ALLURE AND SOLACE OF DOOMSDAY AESTHETICS** 37

---

**THE IDES OF TOMORROW** 40

---

# MARCH 25, 1911

CAITLIN LIAO

I never understood why the factories ran on Saturdays, as if they hadn't produced enough shoes, enough cotton, enough sausage by Friday evening to clothe and feed America, two, three times. The rest of us didn't work on the weekend— we sat in our apartments listening to the radio, or we walked. There were a number of us walking that Saturday afternoon. I was searching for my next story.

The girls would have been lovely indeed, if they could have afforded Woodbury and running water to clean beneath their chins. Even in last year's dresses and finger-combed hair, we always could tell they were going to the factories by the haste in their steps. We watched from the benches, the shops, the windows, as they ran the last hundred feet to make time.

“Good morning, Mister Wilson,” Martha called to me. She was smoking a cigarette on the corner.

“Morning, Martha.”

“Writing anything good?”

“It's Saturday, Martha. I don't work on the weekends.”

“In my experience, Mister Wilson, the most exciting things happen on Saturdays.”

“I'll be prepared if they do,” I said, patting my chest pocket where a fountain pen hung.

“Just waiting for inspiration to strike.”

\*\*\*

“How do I look?” Ruth asks, holding the finished blouse to her chest. She had loved the fine blue linen so much that she hand-stitched a lace trimming to its collar. It was the loveliest piece she had made in her three months at the shirtwaist factory.

“Like a doll,” Alice beams. “Fredrick would go mad if you wore that.”

“But she won’t,” Julie snaps from behind her sewing machine. She is already on her sixth shirtwaist of the day. “She couldn’t even dream of it.”

“We were just joking, Jules,” Ruth says.

“Maybe if you spent less time joking and trimming lace, you’d have gotten more done today.”

“We’re paid by the hour, love,” Alice chirps, ignoring Julie’s unusual sharpness.

“They’ll get rid of you just as easy.”

Ruth and Alice go silent, looking between each other.

“Did Mister Harvey say something to you?” Ruth frowns.

Julie’s machine roars louder in response. She cuts the thread and holds up her seventh piece— a horrid green. She finally looks up. “He took me into his office. I had to push him away.”

Her throat bobs. “I can’t afford to lose this job.”

Ruth brings her hand to her mouth.

“Oh, love,” Alice murmurs, closing her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

The needle slips through Lou’s sweaty fingers into the pile of fabric by her chair. She wipes her hand on her forehead— also damp. The woman three machines down coughs again; they put all the sick workers on the ninth floor. “How much longer must we do this, Paul?”

He looks up across the table. “Less than an hour, darling.”

“I didn’t mean today.”

“Lou,” he stops me. “We’ve talked about this. We don’t have enough to leave yet. I don’t have enough for you.”

“I don’t need anything,” Lou pleads.

“Louise.” His eyes beg her to stop. “What about your parents?”

“I’m nineteen now,” Lou protests. “I’m hardly a child anymore.”

Paul frowns at his machine. “Tomorrow is Sunday. How about we go to the beach?”

“Okay,” she whispers. The imperfectly-sewn fabric in her lap seems to laugh at her.

“Lou. Paul. Do you see that?” Tillie asks from the machine to Lou’s right. She points to the window, where a cloud of black smoke is rising. Around the room, workers have begun to rise from their seats, joining each other at the windows to watch the smoke rise from the floorbelow.

“What is that?” Lou asks Paul. His face has gone white.

“We need to get to the stairs.”

“What?”

“Now, Louise.” He jumps up from his seat and begins to run towards the stairwell. Lou rushes to follow him, tripping over the piles of fabric on the floor. Paul makes it to the door before her and tugs at the handle. His head whips backwards as she reaches his side. “It’s locked.”

The fire alarm begins to cry.

\*\*\*

Dozens of men and women came to watch the smoke pouring from the windows of the 8th floor. Hundreds of workers burst out of the front door, tripping over themselves and each other.

“Call the police!” a voice yelled.

“They’re stuck up there!” a woman cried, pointing at the floors above the fire, where a group of young girls was trying to open the large window.

“I think you have your story, Mister Wilson.” Martha said from my side.

I couldn’t speak. I could only watch the first body hit the ground.

\*\*\*

““Oh my God. That was Anne,” Alice screams, craned over the window ledge. Julie pulls her back with shaking hands.

“We need to get out,” Ruth shouts over the alarm. The heat of the flames licks her neck as she drags Alice and Julie away from the fire, which had started in the opposite corner of the room and was fast approaching. The other workers on the eighth floor, all young girls, pound at the wooden doors, begging to be let out.

“I’m not dying in this factory,” Julie exclaims, her eyes watering in the smoke.

“That was Anne,” Alice mumbles, dragging her hands down her face.

Ruth watches the desperate girls push each other against the barred exit. “You’re crushing me!” the girl closest to the door cries again and again, but her words are drowned out by the alarm. Soon her voice disappears entirely.

“The doors are locked,” Ruth says. “It’s the window or nothing.”

“I’m not jumping,” Alice whispers.

“Alice—”

“I’m not jumping!” she screams. Tears draw trails through the soot on her cheeks.

“There’s a fire escape,” Julie says. “We have to get to the fire escape.”

“I’m not going anywhere near that window.”

“And you, Ruth?” Julie asks, her eyes ablaze.

Ruth looks from Julie to Alice to the fire. “I’m staying with Alice.”

“Fine. Suit yourselves.” She pauses before she turns, her eyes softening. “I’ll see you both soon.”

“Bye, Julie,” Alice whispers from Ruth’s arms.

“We have to get to the corner. As far away from the fire as possible,” Ruth says to Alice.

She pulls her up and they stumble past fallen machines and chairs, towards the exit, Alice wheezing as they run. They reach the farthest wall, sinking to the ground and clutching each other tightly. The fire consumed most of the room already, creeping up the walls and ceiling. Amongst the sirens, sobbing, and prayers in all sorts of languages, Ruth’s heart begins to still. That familiar heat licks her cheek again, and she shuts her eyes.

“I love you, Alice,” Ruth whispers into Alice’s ear.

“I love you too.”

\*\*\*

Shrill screams fill the air, accompanied by the deafening sound of breaking metal.

Seconds later, cries of agony reach the ninth floor.

“The fire escape just broke,” a man says to Paul.

“But the firemen are here,” Lou says hopefully.

Paul shakes his head. “Their ladders can’t reach us.”

“I’m gonna jump,” the man says. “They’ve got nets up now. It’s as good of a shot as any.”

He shakes Paul’s hand and tips his head to me. He climbs up onto the window ledge and faces backwards. He pulls a cross from inside his shirt, murmurs a few words, and kisses it.

“Don’t look, Lou,” Paul says, turning Lou away.

After a few seconds, Lou opens her eyes. Paul is bent over the ledge and the man is gone. Paul looks back at her, his face hopeless. “We have to jump.”

She can only nod. The fire has begun to tear through the floorboards, fueled by the endless piles of fabric. The adrenaline in her veins is long gone.

“Here,” Paul says, grabbing a pile of fabric from the floor. “Wrap this around your body. It might soften the impact.” Her hand is too numb to accept the fabric from him, so he ties it around her neck. He takes Lou’s hand and leads her to the window ledge. “Don’t look down,” he says.

She nods weakly. Her heels teeter on the edge.

Fredrick guides her chin towards his face and kisses her gently. Then he kisses her knuckles. “On the count of three.”

“One.”

“Two.”

“Three.”

\*\*\*

I was one useless man in a crowd of useless people, all watching the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory blaze. My legs went liquid as I watched a couple jump from the ninth story window holding hands. I would have crumbled if I hadn't been at the front of the mass, gripping the wooden police barricade. The falling bodies broke straight through the nets they had strung. The ladders could only reach the seventh floor. Embers of burning fabric fell from the sky like it was pouring.

It rained across all of New York City that Saturday. Four hundred thousand people attended the funeral. It rained then too.



# WHEN FOREVER WAS JUST A SEASON

## YIXIA FAN

### The Fading Echo of a Childhood Friendship

- “Hey, let’s be BFFs.”
- “Sure.” (Smile)
- “Are we BFFs?” (Tilts head)
- “Yeah!”

That was how it started—a simple exchange between two kids who didn’t yet understand the weight of promises or the way life could pull people apart. Back then, friendship was as easy as saying yes. We didn’t think about distance, time, or change. We just knew we wanted to be best friends, and that was enough.

### The Beginning: A Friendship Forged in Laughter and Math

Her name was Emily, and she was the kind of person who made everything brighter. We met on my first day of school in New York City, sitting across from each other at the lunch table, swapping stories about our summers and giggling over nothing in particular. She had a way of turning even the most mundane moments into adventures. Playdates at each other’s houses became our routine, building pillow forts, darting down sidewalks in our after-school speed trials, and pretending we were Rachel and Kirsty from *Rainbow Magic*, our favorite book series. The two of us mirrored them perfectly: While I shared Kirsty’s Asian heritage, Emily’s golden locks and emerald-green eyes embodied Rachel’s distinctive charm. We would doodle the goblins and fairies onto scraps of paper, carefully cut them out, and scatter them across the place. We also bought cheap beach-shell necklaces, filled them with glitter, and waved them through the air like enchanted talismans, pretending to cast spells as shimmering dust sparkled around us.

But it wasn't just the fun stuff that bonded us. We also spent afternoons hunched over math problems, groaning about fractions and decimals, half-joking that if we could survive homework together, we could survive anything. In one particularly brutal math session, we decided that "studying" meant turning equations into spells. We scribbled numbers onto sticky notes, declared them 'algebraic incantations,' and flung them at each other like wizard scrolls. When one landed in Emily's hair, we laughed so hard we got shushed by the librarian—but it worked. Somehow, through the chaos, we actually memorized the formulas. Magic or not, it felt like a win. One time, we even made a silly pact, swearing we'd be best friends forever, sealing it with a pinky promise like it was an unbreakable contract. Back then, I believed it. At the time, it seemed as unshakable as Rachel and Kirsty's friendship—distance or not, we'd always be best friends.

### **The Last Goodbye: That Photo I Didn't Know Would Be the Last**

The last day of school, before I moved back to China, was a blur of excitement and chaos. The sun beat down relentlessly, and all I could think about was getting home to try the new popsicles waiting in the freezer. My grandpa, though, wasn't having it. "Pictures first!" he insisted. I remember rolling my eyes, dragging my feet as I posed next to Emily.

"Just one more!" he said, holding up his phone.

I groaned, wiping sweat off my forehead. "Hurry up, it's too hot! And my popsicles are waiting for me in the fridge!"

Emily laughed, throwing an arm around my shoulder. "Come on, one last pic for the memories!"

"Yeah, yeah." Just get it over with.

I didn't know then that it would be the last. Not just the last photo, but the last time I'd see her as my best friend. If I had known, maybe I would've hugged her tighter. Maybe I would've said something more meaningful than, "See you later!" as I rushed off. But I didn't. And just like that, the chapter closed without me realizing it.

### **The Slow Drift: When “Best Friends Forever” Becomes “Best Friends... For a While”**

At first, we tried. Really, we did. The first few months after I moved, we still texted—sending silly memes, complaining about homework, and updating each other on our lives. But then, the replies started coming slower. What was once daily chatter became once or twice a week, then twice a month, then... nothing.

By late November, I noticed the silence stretching between us. I'd send a message: 'Hey, how's school?' 'Miss you!' and wait. And wait. Sometimes, she'd reply weeks later with a short, "Sorry, been busy!" Other times, nothing at all.

I told myself it was fine. Maybe she was swamped with school. Maybe I was, too. But deep down, I knew something was slipping away. The problem was, I didn't know how to fix it. How do you mend a friendship when the other person isn't there to hold up their end? I hadn't yet learned that even the strongest bonds need nurturing—that time and distance could erode what seemed unbreakable.

### **The Final Disappearance: A Friendship Erased Without Explanation**

Months turned into years, and the silence between us hardened like old glue—brittle, but still clinging. Last year, on a whim, I tried texting her again. But when I searched for her name, her account was gone. I checked every social platform, even old ones we hadn't used in years, but everywhere—no profile picture, no last seen timestamp. No trace of our years of inside jokes and shared memories. Just... empty space where her messages once lived.

Did she delete her account? Forgot to tell me? Or block me? Or maybe she just... moved on, while I was still clinging to the ghost of us.

I still don't know. And maybe I never will.

### **The Ghost of a Friendship: Memories That Won't Fade**

Sometimes, when I hear our songs, the ones we used to scream-sing in her bedroom, I can almost feel her next to me, doing her ridiculous dance moves. I flip through old class photos, and suddenly, it's like I'm back there: laughing at her terrible jokes, passing notes under the desk, believing we'd always be inseparable.

Once, I dreamed about her. We were back in school, sitting at our usual lunch table. "Remember when we promised we'd be BFFs?" she asked, her voice so vivid I could almost feel the cafeteria bench beneath me. Tears welled up as we walked hand-in-hand through Central Park, just like we used to—the autumn leaves crunching underfoot, her laughter ringing clear in the crisp air.

Then, abruptly, the colors bled away.

No—I knew then, with the cruel clarity of half-sleep, that I was being dragged awake.

Let me just see her one more time, I begged. But the world was already fraying at the edges. I strained for a few more glimpses of our past, but everything scattered out of my grasp.

Gone.

Just like her.

For weeks, I replayed that dream like a damaged movie reel—her laughter spliced with static, our footsteps in the park dissolving into pixelated fog. My brain, desperate to reconcile the girl in the photos with her silent absence, kept editing the memories. Was she really that radiant, or had I gilded her to soften the ache of losing her?

And then it struck me, cold and irrevocable: the most fragile friendships are often the ones we assume will last forever. We forget to cherish them—until they haunt us.

We were like two lines that intersected for a brief, beautiful moment before veering off in opposite directions.

### **The Bittersweet Beauty of Letting Go**

For years, I clung to the quiet hope that Emily and I would find our way back to each other.

In my mind, we'd reunite as if no time had passed at all—laughing at inside jokes only we understood, picking up conversations mid-sentence like we'd never stopped talking.

Sometimes, I imagined her showing up unexpectedly at my school in China, her familiar grin waiting for me at the gates. We'd run through the hallways like we used to, turning mundane school days into adventures again.

But as the years went by, that dream began to feel more like a fading photograph—once vivid, now softened at the edges by reality. I realized that some friendships aren't meant to be revived—they're meant to be remembered. I realized too late that promises alone can't sustain friendship—it requires presence, effort, and sometimes accepting that people are only meant for a season.

And that's okay.

Not every friendship is built to withstand the test of time. Some exist to teach us something—about ourselves, about love, about loss. They exist to leave footprints on your heart, teaching you how to love, how to let go, and how to hold memories gently when the person is no longer there to share them with you. Emily taught me how to be a better friend, how to laugh freely, and how to cherish the little moments. But the deepest lesson was this: cherish those who remain. Speak your heart before ‘later’ becomes ‘never.’ Even if she’s no longer in my life, the impact she had on me remains. I learned to guard my own heart. I no longer dwell on what is lost. Instead, I turn my attention to what I still have: now I show up for friends who stand behind me.

### **Are We BFFs?**

So, Emily, wherever you are—are we still BFFs?

Maybe not in the way we once were. Maybe not in the way either of us once pictured it. But in some small corner of my heart, you’re still the girl who giggled with me over failed algebra attempts, who danced in the rain like no one was watching, and who taught me that even the brightest friendships can fade.

And for that, I’ll always be grateful.

Because even though we drifted oceans apart, for a little while, we sailed together.

And that was enough.

# FRONT DOOR

RUPERT LIAN

The front door revealed cold distant winds that slid across my skin while delivering a warning. The evening conversations that normally filled my boarding house were completely absent. The phone in my pocket produced a single buzz before it stopped ringing. The light grew dimmer while a sense of impending doom settled over me. The usual footsteps of people outside transformed into the heavy beat of a funereal march.

Something was wrong.

I couldn't say what, but every part of me felt it. I tensed as my hand reached for the door. Stepping inside, I hesitated before reaching for my phone.

Answering felt mechanical—my actions came before any thought. My dad's voice echoed through my room, the news lingering like fog. His words were clear, calm. But I was still confused. My breath caught, and my surroundings became a blur.

The silence deepened.

The phone stayed pressed against my ear long after his voice had faded. My body trembled. The rain outside pattered softly against the window, a melancholy rhythm that matched the dull ache in my chest in a way I couldn't quite explain. I sank into my chair, trying to make sense of the moment, trying to stop my thoughts from spinning in a hundred directions.

Memories rushed in like a flood—soft smiles, familiar laughter, the way she always seemed to know when I needed her most. She wasn't supposed to be gone. There had still been plans. There had to be more. The numbness was first then the ache followed—a raw, hollow ache that pulsed just beneath my ribs. My tears felt like the tide: relentless and inevitable. They rushed through me like melting ice, covering every inch of my skin and replacing my complexion with the glistening of grief.

I sat still for a long time, phone resting loosely in my lap. The clock in the corner remained suspended in a forgotten hour. Loss had arrived in the form of a few words over a phone call—and nothing would ever be the same again.

A day or two passed, but I was still stuck in a state of shock. Everyone kept saying “are you ok”, “my condolences” but all that was just words, forgotten—meaningless.

The chaplain came in, also heavy with emotion. The room was dull, pressing out any remnants of happiness. I sat with my hands clasped tightly, unsure of what I was even doing. Talking hadn't helped before. But something about his presence was different—calmer, patient.

He didn't rush me. He waited.

After a long silence, I finally spoke. The maze on his lightly wrinkled face lifted; he looked relieved that I had begun to open up. “Everyone keeps saying sorry. Telling me it's okay to cry. But I don't know if I want to just be sad. It feels... empty.” He nodded slowly. “Grief is deep. But it doesn't have to be empty. Mourning isn't meant to erase joy—it's meant to hold space for both pain and beauty.”

I looked at him, confused.

He continued. “The reason you’re so hurt is because the pain is real—but so is the joy, the laughs, and the memories you built together. Those things are just as real as the sadness you’re feeling now. Don’t let the tears blind you from what truly made her special.”

Something shifted in me, subtly.

“Her memory shouldn’t just bring me pain, should it?” I said. “It shouldn’t,” he replied gently. “We mourn not just because they died, but because they lived. And we honour them by remembering the life and love you shared—not just the loss.”

His words sank in slowly. They felt different—unconventional. At that moment, I realised he genuinely knew how to help, unlike the generic school support I’d been expecting. He helped me carry her memory in a different light.

“Tell her stories,” he added. “Speak her name with admiration and joy. Share the memories that make you smile. That’s mourning, too – try it – it’s better.” Suddenly, something in me eased. The lumps in my heart no longer choked my feelings with sadness and tears. It wasn’t about letting go or forgetting—it was about holding on and remembering differently.

The entire conversation he had shared with me about mourning as a celebration instead of a tearful event played in my mind during my journey home. I had never experienced this perspective before. The new understanding allowed me to stop feeling guilty about smiling when I thought of her and laughing at our old times and not crying all the time.

That small shift brought an unexpected peace.

The day of the funeral felt surreal. The outside world remained unchanged – the sky was still grey, and the pollution hung loosely beneath as a gentle breeze blew through the trees, yet my inner world had undergone a complete transformation. Years had passed since I last saw several of these familiar but strange faces. As the mourners expressed their feelings about her death, regardless of their connection to her, I held my personal memories as sacred tributes.

The ceremony maintained its simplicity but carried intense emotional weight. During the spoken words I drifted toward a deeper understanding of the present moment instead of moving away from it. Her laughter and her voice and her ability to transform holidays into magic appeared in my thoughts.

Flowers and photos filled the venue as gentle reminders of how deeply loved she was. They softened the sorrow: a quiet tribute to her spirit.

When it was over, a strange calm settled in my chest. Saying goodbye hurt. But somehow, I also felt full—full of love, of memory, of quiet gratitude.

I felt at peace.

The funeral served as a conclusion, but it demonstrated that our cherished memories remain forever. The death of someone we love produces an empty silence which words struggle to bridge. At first, grief overwhelms you. You cry. You ache. You wish for just one more moment. The sadness gradually disappears to make room for a peaceful feeling of gratitude.

I refuse to remember her existence only through sorrow. I wish to keep her memory alive through happy thoughts. I treasure all the laughter we exchanged and the peaceful exchanges of words and the unspoken wisdom she conveyed to me. Her existence brought me a precious gift which allowed me to share in her life journey. Mourning should function as a celebration of one's life instead of a collapse into uncontrolled grief.

My grandmother would have preferred us to appreciate our time together instead of spending our time grieving about what we lost. We pay tribute to our deceased loved ones through actions that mirror their personality. Through laughter and kindness and true love. Her physical absence does not diminish the loving and warm memories she left behind. The time we spent together should not be diminished by grief. Every instant we spent together formed a new page in an exciting story. Tears will certainly appear, but we should prioritize celebration of her life and gratitude above all else.



# RUSSIA

YURIY ROGACHEV

The first thing that hit me when I stepped off the plane in Russia was the December cold. It was not the kind of biting, blistering cold that I usually felt back home. No, this was something more subtle, more profound. It was a crisp, sharp chill that did not just brush against your skin, but seemed to seep straight through your coat, your layers, and into your bones. It was the sort of cold that made everything feel denser, heavier, but in an oddly comforting way. The air itself seemed to wrap around me, filled with the scent of fresh snow mixed with the earthy aroma of wet pine needles. It was as if the entire land had just taken a deep breath after a long, deep slumber, exhaling something ancient and real. There was a silence, too, a kind of stillness that hung in the air. A stillness that made every sound, footstep, and even gust of wind, feel more significant.

As I stood there, letting that first breath of Russian winter settle into my lungs, I felt small, but in a good way. It was the kind of smallness that reminded me of standing beneath a star-filled sky or at the edge of the ocean. It was this smallness that had reminded me that I had stepped into a country steeped in centuries of history, older and deeper than anything I had known. There was something both humbling and invigorating about it, something that hinted at stories long buried beneath the snow and whispered in the trees.

I had come to stay with my relatives in a small town just outside of Moscow, far removed from the glittering lights and constant motion of the city. The drive from the airport was a blur of snow-covered fields; pine forests; and quiet, half-frozen lakes which reflected the gray, cloudy sky. As we approached the town, the buildings grew closer together. Rows of Soviet-era apartment blocks surrounded courtyards where kids met up to play. Life here moved differently, at a pace I was not used to. It did not rush or demand attention, it simply flowed like a river beneath a layer of ice, ready and assured.

One evening, just a few days into my stay, I found myself sitting at my grandmother's kitchen table. It was a modest room, with pretty wallpaper decorating each wall. A stove by the window, a refrigerator, and a shelf lined with a large variety of dishes. The air was warm, filled with the scent of soup simmering on the stove, an aromatic blend of beets, dill, cabbage, and a hint of garlic. A lamp, which hung from the ceiling, illuminated the room with a warm, yellowish glare, creating a sense of happiness and security within the walls of the room. The walls looked brand new, but felt old, as if they had absorbed the years of cooking and conversation, absorbed the warmth, making the room feel like a sanctuary from the cold outside.

My grandmother, with her gray hair tied back into a bun and her eyes still sharp despite the lines of age, ladled the soup into thick ceramic bowls, placing a slice of fresh rye bread beside each one on the table. The bread, whose crust was still warm, was a little rough to the touch. I dunked my slice into the soup and took a bite, letting the tangy, earthy flavors settle on my tongue. The sour cream melted into the broth, softening it, adding richness to the overall flavor. I did not say much, and neither did anyone at the table. We ate in near silence, the only sounds being the clink of spoons against bowls and the distant hum of a car passing down the icy street.

There was no rush, no urgency to fill the silence. And that, in itself, felt remarkable. Back home, every meal was punctuated by screens, by noise, by multitasking and checking the time. But here, in this kitchen, dinner was more of an act of being present. It was not just about nourishment; it was about stillness and connection. The world outside seemed to fade with the dusk, replaced by something quieter, slower, and more intimate. But it was not just the food, or even the scenery, that made this place feel different. It was the rhythm of life itself. Unhurried, deliberate, and profoundly human. My relatives, including my parents, had seemed to settle into a way of moving through life that felt almost ceremonial. They took time for everything: for breakfast in the morning, for long conversations by the window, for a walk through the snow-covered park where the trees stood tall and silent like old guardians. Even their speech had a kind of patience to it, like every word had been weighed and chosen with care.

At first, I found it disorienting. I kept checking my phone out of habit, looking for signals of what's next, what I should be doing. But gradually, something in me began to shift. I stopped trying to anticipate the next moment and began simply living in the one I was in. I walked slower, looked longer. I listened, not just to people, but to everything: the creak of the large metal doors, the whistle of wind through the window frame, the distant sound of church bells marking the hour.

I noticed how I felt different here. More grounded, more whole. There was a tranquility in this small Russian town that seemed to soak into my skin, a kind of mental stillness I rarely experienced back home. It was not just about the pace of life; it was about the values it shaped. Here, people made space for rest, for reflection, for one another. I could feel that space growing within myself too, like a room being aired out after years of clutter and noise. In those quiet moments, sitting by the window with a cup of tea or walking through a snow-dusted courtyard, I began to meet a version of myself I had rarely encountered before. This version of me did not rush. It did not fill in silences with idle distractions. It observed. It felt. It remembered.

I do not know if it was the place, people, or simply the way Russian winter settles into your bones and teaches you to be still – but something shifted. I found myself wondering if that version of me, the one who could find joy in the crackle of fire or the hum of a radiator, could follow me home. I wondered if the stillness I found here could become part of my life beyond this visit. Perhaps decreasing the amount of time, I spend staring at the vibrant, addicting colors of digital screens could help. But that is still something for me to figure out.

What I do know is that I left that kitchen, that snowy town outside of Moscow, not quite the same as when I arrived. I carried with me the memory of warmth in cold places, of presence in a world that rarely allows for it, and a self I did not know I was missing. One that felt, at last, fully awake.



# THE SIDE OF ME THAT I CAN SEE

DONGJHU HUANG

The bright yellow light poured through the plane window, shining on my face. My cheap headphones pinched my ears until I ripped them off. Watching movies for three hours might sound fun, but it wasn't.

“Mom, when will we get there?” I asked, not really expecting an answer—just bored.

When the plane landed, the afternoon sun blazed in our faces. Vietnam had been hot; Taiwan was no different. My mom scanned the crowd for our taxi while my brother and dad stayed glued to their phones. My face scrunched up. How come they got to use theirs? Not fair.

At last, Mom spotted the car. My brother and dad stacked suitcases in the trunk like they were playing Tetris.

The whole ride was silent for me. I slept through it, dreamless as time travel. When we finally got home, I dropped onto the thick mattress and passed out.

Sixth grade had flown by, and my time management was a disaster. I wanted to improve. I promised myself this year would be different. Instead of sighing, “finally it’s done” when grades came out, I wanted to say, “not bad.” Something to be proud of.

My mom never sugarcoated things: “If you want to get into Harvard, those grades aren’t going to work.” Harsh but true. Another favourite: “No pain, no gain.”

This summer camp was my chance, a sort of practice school where I could learn how to study and how to be around people. A philosopher once said everyone has three sides: the face you show the world, the one for friends and family, and the secret side only you can see. The important thing was whether I liked that hidden side. I wanted to change mine, not lose myself, but become better.

On the first day, we lined up by age. I shuffled to the 12–13 line, anxious. I hated first impressions. One by one, the room emptied until my name echoed: “Huang Dong Jhu?”

I grabbed my bag and followed the teacher. Soon, I was staring at a test packet. Rows of paragraphs blurred before me. Shoot—I couldn't read or write Chinese well. I scratched through a few pages and handed it in. Yep, I definitely failed

The teacher asked me questions. I panicked but tried to impress her with the hardest Chinese words I knew, emptying my tiny vocabulary. She moved me to another room, which was empty, except for one kid secretly scrolling his phone under the desk. I felt exposed. Taiwanese, yet unable to use my own language. Embarrassing.

The rest of the day was filled with awkward icebreakers.

Camp felt like a mini school between grades six and seven. For once, I had the chance to start fresh. Usually, I kept to myself, shy and quiet. I like to think I'm a bit quiet and shy at first, but once I trust you, I bombard you with my personality (loud)

One morning, the teacher said, "Form groups of two or three."

I froze. No friends here.

"Hey, want to work together?" A girl with black hair, brown eyes, and glasses asked. She looked sporty—the opposite of me.

"Sure." I smiled nervously.

She tried breaking the silence. “Do you like Hamilton?”

“Uh... not really.” I had no idea what Hamilton was.

“Oh. I like it.” The silence grew heavier.

She tried again. “Do you like art? I saw you doodling on your name card.”

“Yeah, kind of. I was just drawing butterflies and skeleton hands.” I fumbled the card out with sweaty fingers.

She studied it for a moment, then smirked. “Not bad.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Ella.”

“I’ve got a friend named Ella back home. Guess I’ve got a thing with Ellas.”

This time, the silence wasn’t so awkward. I realised making friends wasn’t as impossible as I thought.

On the last day, every class performed. Class 7 was incredible, but as prizes were announced, their name never came up.

“This is unfair,” I muttered. My classmates nodded. We decided that if Class 7 didn’t win, we’d share our snacks with them.

Then the announcement came: “Class 7 wins first place!”

Relief washed over me. They deserved it. I clapped harder than anyone.

As we left, one of their students smiled at me. “Hey, thanks for offering us your snacks.” She held the prize proudly.

“No problem, bye.” I smiled. My mom tilted my head as she disappeared into the crowd.

“Who is she? Your friend?”

“No,” she looked even more confused.

For once, I wasn’t jealous. I was happy for her and happy with myself.

My grandma always said I was sweet. That day, I felt it. I wasn’t perfect, but I was proud of the side of me I could finally see.



# SMOLENSK

EMILY YANG

Somewhere east of Smolensk, December 1812

Snow gnawed at bone like wolves at flesh. White no longer fell as grace but as punishment, stinging eyes and blinding the way home. The Grand Armée, what remained of it, stumbled west in broken columns. Men once adorned in lace and brass now looked like corpses, faces hollow, uniforms in tatters, fingers blackened by frost.

He had no name then. Perhaps it had frozen off at Polotsk, or been buried in a ditch with the rest of his battery. He'd been a gunner of the *Canonnières Gardes-côtes*, absurdly reassigned inland to march on Moscow. He had manned artillery with pride — until the horses died, the wheels shattered, and the cannons rusted in fields of white silence. Now he was a straggler, muttering Breton curses, clutching a rusted bayonet.

He would have died there, half-frozen, had it not been for the column of line infantry marching under a green pompon, *1er Régiment d'Infanterie de Ligne*.

“Fusilier! Why’s that man dragging his death behind us?”

Its owner dismounted from a frost-bitten mare, boots crunching down into the crusted snow. A *sous-officier* by the stripes and the sword: Jean, as he would later be known to the gunner.

“He’s no threat,” replied the young fusilier, glancing back.

“Then he’s a burden,” Jean replied, stepping toward the collapsed gunner. After a pause, he knelt. “Unless he can walk. Can you stand, soldier?”

At first, the gunner only stared, lips cracked, eyes glassy. But at the question, he forced himself upright.

“Good,” Jean said, almost pleased. “Then you’ll march with us. No room for statues in the snow.”

They did not speak on the first day.

Jean gave him no duties, only a place at the rear behind the fusiliers and the drummer boy, who had no drum anymore, only frostbitten hands. The gunner limped in silence, bayonet useless but still carried.

Boots slogged through snow that reached their calves, then their thighs, depending on the whim of the wind and the uneven, frozen earth beneath. Each step gave something new, siding stones, broken muskets, even the curled shapes of men who had simply sat down and never risen again. Breath hung in the air like smoke, each soldier a fumbling chimney emitting faint signs of life. Their greatcoats were soaked through, then frozen stiff. Snow clung to their lashes, their mustaches, their epaulettes. The sky above them was a dull sheet of pewter, heavy and low, as if pressing down on the column, urging them into the snow-covered ground.

Jean’s mare collapsed near Smolensk; he slit her throat himself. Now he marched on foot, saber at his side though unused. Behind him, the fusiliers trudged in silence, muskets mostly useless in the cold.

The gunner listened to crunching snow, the rustle of canvas, the soft thud when someone fell behind, and no one stopped. The boy without a drum stumbled often. Once, when the boy dropped a stick he still carried, the gunner picked it up and handed it back. The boy only nodded. Gratitude took more strength than anyone had.

Evening came not with sunset but with deepening gray and bitter cold. Jean called a halt in a shallow dip of earth. Soldiers collapsed in clusters around meager fires, coaxed to life with scraps of uniform and wagon splinters.

Jean moved among them like a shepherd, checking frostbitten limbs, tugging scarves higher, kicking those who lingered without tending their feet. He passed the gunner once, then doubled back as if tugged by instinct.

“You’ve lasted longer than I thought,” Jean said, kneeling beside him.

The gunner didn't look up. His hands were wrapped around the bayonet, tip planted in the snow like a marker stone. He gave a faint shrug.

“I didn't pick you up to watch you rot on your knees.”

The gunner turned slightly, his cracked lips parting just enough to speak. “Then why?”

Jean didn't answer immediately. He pulled a scrap of paper from his coat, a page torn from a ledger, smudged with ash. On it, a list of names. Some crossed out. Others faded beyond reading.

“To bring you home,” Jean said. “To bring their names home.”

The gunner stared. He hadn't heard a name spoken aloud in weeks. Maybe longer.

“You Breton?” Jean asked, casually.

The gunner nodded.

“My mother was from Saint-Malo,” Jean added. “I understood your cursing.”

The gunner laughed, hoarse and dry: “That was for the wind.”

Jean chuckled softly and briefly. Then stood up.

“Keep walking, keep cursing. That's an order.” He tossed a thin wool blanket down beside him. “I don't have another, but I won't need it tonight. Take it.”

The gunner blinked.

“I said take it, not thank me,” Jean said, already turning.

That night, beneath the blanket, the gunner sat awake, staring at his bayonet. It would never be a soldier's weapon again. But he kept it clean, because Jean had told him to. Because hands must remember they are still hands. For the first time in weeks, he dreamed not of snow, but of a voice calling his name.

The blanket did little. Cold still curled through his bones like smoke through cracked stone. But it was something. And so, when dawn bled pale into the sky, just a lighter shade of gray, barely enough to count, he stood.

Jean noticed.

When dawn bled pale into the sky, he stood. Jean noticed.

“You walk better,” Jean remarked one morning, tightening a frozen bandage.

The gunner nodded.

“You eat like a rat and sleep like the dead. That’s a compliment.”

“Not much,” the gunner rasped.

Jean smiled.

Another day continued, and when a man in the column collapsed mid-step and did not rise, Jean didn’t say anything. Just turned and walked on.

The gunner bent, took the man’s scarf, then jogged a few steps to catch up.

He handed it over without a word.

Jean stared, then took it.

They walked together more after that. Not side by side, never that close, but near enough that silence began to hold shape between them. Jean would speak, sometimes, and the gunner would answer if the words deserved answering. Other times, they would just march, step after step, in rhythm with the dying continent around them.

Once, Jean handed him a crust of black bread and asked, “You ever fire on your own countrymen?”

The gunner chewed slowly. His teeth hurt. Everything hurt. But he nodded.

Jean said nothing for a long while. The only sound was snow crushed under boots and the wet cough of the man three places behind them.

Then, finally, “Same.”

That night, huddled beneath a collapsed wagon for shelter, Jean spoke again.

“There was a squad. Corsicans. Boys who spoke half-French, half-Latin. They’d gone missing from the line. Took food from civilians. Looted a church. Said they were hunting partisans.”

His hand touched the hilt of his saber, but it stayed sheathed.

“They were hungry. We were all hungry.”

The wind howled through broken timber, rattled canvas. A snowflake landed on Jean’s cheek and melted instantly.

“My captain ordered us to punish them. I called two out myself. Watched them dig their own trench. Shot the third when he ran. They didn’t cry. Just looked confused. Like they’d forgotten which side we were on.”

“And you?” he asked.

The gunner shifted. His voice scraped like gravel.

“Quiberon. Before the Emperor. Chouans rushed our battery in the morning fog. I think... one was my uncle. Might’ve been. Hard to tell with the smoke. We fired. Powder blew. They burned. One screamed in Breton. I knew the voice. I didn’t stop. I just kept loading.”

His breath shook. “After, I found a ring in the ash. Looked like my father’s. I never asked.”

Jean tore a corner from his ledger page and handed it to him.

“For the ones we don’t name. You don’t have to write it. Just hold it.”

The gunner did. He kept it between frostbitten fingers until dawn.

When they crossed the Niemen, when France was a week’s march away and death finally stopped chasing quite so close, Jean passed him a flask, what little brandy remained.

He took a swig, hissed, and passed it back.

“You’re a hard bastard,” Jean said.

The gunner wiped his mouth. “Still here.”

Jean nodded.

“That’s all that counts.”

The night was quiet. Even the wolves had gone silent. Stars shone sharp and cold. The fire cracked, throwing orange across frostbitten faces. Snow drifted softly now, as if the land had wept itself empty.

Jean pulled the scarf tighter around his neck, the one the gunner had handed him, from the man who’d collapsed and not gotten up. He exhaled through his nose, slow, like the thought had been building for hours.

They didn’t speak that night, but the flask was passed between them once more, and when the fire guttered low, Jean made sure to heap more wood on before turning in.

It burned well into the morning.



# TIANHONG

MELODY CAI

TianHong is like a second home for me in China. It was like a lifesaver for my family. It had so many different restaurants and different shops, and even a petting zoo. I knew all of the restaurants and which ones I liked to eat at, all of the little shops that I could go to, and where to get boba. I knew where everything was on each floor, it was like stepping into heaven. Upon entering, I always felt like I'm back to my happy place. I could hear all the screaming and laughing coming from the little kids running around. I could smell the freshly brewed coffee wafting from Starbucks. I could feel the air conditioning blast onto my face. Heaven.

The journey to TianHong was something special. The walk was only a couple blocks, but it was the people, and the scenes I saw that made it special. On the way there, there is a basketball court that always has adults and kids playing at it. There is also a very busy intersection that I have to cross. Crossing the intersection feels very lively. There are always so many cars and motorcycles driving around, as well as millions of people crossing the intersection. Every time I walk to TianHong, the same feeling of joy and excitement washes over me. It makes the journey to TianHong so much more fun.

My family and I would come to TianHong for many things. If we didn't know where to eat a couple times a week, we had our regular spot. After eating, we would wander around in the mall to look through the shops, and stop by the petting zoo. Teeming with cats, dogs, hamsters, and even capybaras on one occasion- TianHong always held a place for us. TianHong represents comfort, reliability, and a dependable constant marking my visit home every year.

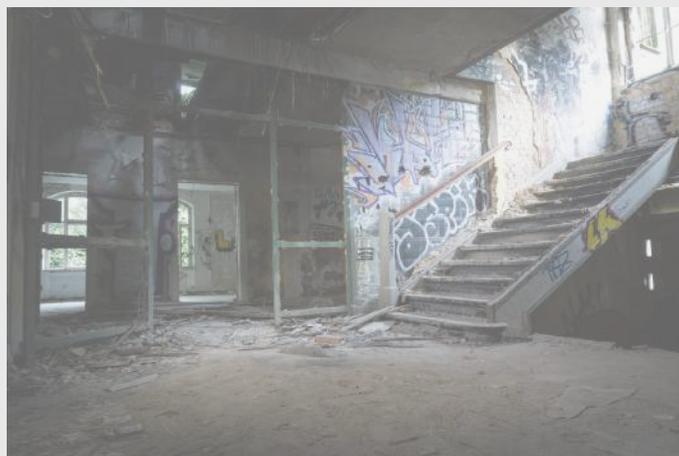
This year, I visited China again for the summer. I was so excited to go back to TianHong- to experience everything just as always. The first thing I did upon entering my grandma's house was to ask if I could go to TianHong. Within minutes, all that I heard was, "TianHong closed down," ringing back and forth in my grandma's voice. I was so confused. Why would it just close down?

I wanted to take a look to see what happened. I quickly put on my shoes and sprinted through the door. My feet led the way, knowing the route like the back of my hand. I've walked this path so many times that my footprints are probably etched into the ground. This time however, it feels different. It was only about a block, and usually it breezes by, but somehow this time... it felt much longer. The short walk turned long and dreadful. I don't know why it felt this long, but maybe it was since a part of me didn't believe what my grandma had said. The busy crosswalk on the way there normally had a lot of motorcyclists zooming around, but now it was so quiet. There are still motorcyclists here and there, but not as many as before. Everyone just disappeared. As I turned the corner, I immediately noticed the lights outside were gone. The building looks completely different. It had turned from a colorful happy building to an old, worn out one.

I felt odd inside. How could a shopping mall make me feel so emotional, so empty? There was something inside me that I just didn't understand. I never really thought about how much TianHong played a part in my life until now. I always have just thought of it like a mall that we go to all the time to eat or to hang out. Reality hit me. TianHong was no longer there anymore. It was like a part of me was gone. In my foolishness, I had thought it would always be there. I never thought that a place of comfort could be taken away so suddenly.

It was a privilege to have a shopping mall so close to my house, but I didn't realize how lucky I was to have TianHong. Now that it's gone, I finally understand how lucky I am. TianHong may feel like a regular shopping mall to others, but to me, it is a special place in my heart. That short journey to its AC-filled heavenly gates held with it years of family visit, meals together, and lazy childhood afternoons.

Now, since TianHong is gone, the nearest mall or shopping center is at least 10 minutes away. It is less convenient for me, and by the time I'm back from buying a boba, I'm drenched in sweat. This being his first trip to China, my brother doesn't even get to experience TianHong. Perhaps that is a small blessing- that he cannot remember a journey around the corner. A part of me feels empty, unsatisfied. I have made so many lasting memories that will always stay in my heart. These memories will forever be cherished, that journey etched in concrete. I hope TianHong will come back someday to let me relive all of these wonderful memories. I hope that others will not take for granted their own "TianHong."



# THE ALLURE AND SOLACE OF DOOMSDAY AESTHETICS: WHY ARE WE OBSESSED WITH APOCALYPTIC FANTASIES

CRACIA CHEN

The apocalyptic theme has never been more popular. From the natural disaster in 2012 to the supernatural horror in the *The Conjuring* series, from the man-made plague of insects in *The Mist* to the extraterrestrial intelligence's invasion in *Alien* series, we are offered various versions of how the way the world ends. The popularity of these themes is by no mean accidental, though few people have noticed. Fans announces watching horrors help them escape and confront the terror of reality. (Sampson, 2023) Living in an atmosphere that contains countless anxiety and uncertainty, we, all of us, crave structured catastrophes on the screen with supreme desire – ones with clear causes, visible enemies, and heroic resolutions. A beautiful crisis.

The "apocalypse" we enjoyed today has already become an artistic experience, meticulously crafted by countless artists. This romanticized vision of disaster has deep historical roots. Renaissance painters reveled in depicting Biblical doomsday scenes, and 18th-century Gothic novels found beauty in ruins and terror. Every era's apocalyptic imagination reflects its deepest fears. Today, while *Beholder* transforms an apartment block into a transparent cage of authoritarianism, when *Black Mirror* gives out warning of humanity's alienation through tech parables, we are not just seeing the entertainment – we are witnessing a society's collective subconscious. We are sure that there is a direct correlation between apocalyptic media spikes and real-world crises. After the 2008 financial crash, *The Walking Dead*'s ratings soared; during the 2020 pandemic, *The Last of Us Part II* became a cultural phenomenon. (Sampson, 2023) These works act as barometers of social anxiety, transforming intangible dread into consumable, controllable narratives.

Ultimately, apocalyptic fantasy is a psychological buffer. Aside from the fact that they're beautified – no longer showing the real and disgusting appearance of patients or the tragic situation of cities destroyed by war – and now so beautiful and ideal that people may even dream of them, in reality crises are also nebulous and complex: climate change has no clear villain, economic collapse offers no easy fixes, and during the pandemic of COVID-19, the only thing that most of us can do is just waiting passively. But in apocalyptic fictional fiction, crisis is simplified, beautified, and dramatized. Climate change becomes Frostpunk's frozen survival game, social inequality morphs into Disco Elysium's fractured city, and AI threats materialize as SOMA's existential horror. This simplification offers cognitive comfort: in the darkened theater, at least we know where the disaster came from, who the enemy is, and that redemption might be possible. By contrast, real crises remain shapeless, their solutions distant. Structured catastrophe provides a mental refuge. Neuroscience reveals that when humans experience danger in a safe environment, the brain activates both fear and reward centers, creating a peculiar thrill. (Mello-Klein, 2023) This explains why we relish on-screen annihilation – because we know the real world will still be there when the credits roll.

Yet apocalyptic aesthetics carry risks still, regarding our different attitudes towards them. When Fukushima's exclusion zone photos are filtered and set to music on social media, or when Syrian war footage is edited into "post-apocalyptic aesthetic" montages, real suffering risks becoming mere artistic spectacle. Research found that overconsumption of apocalyptic media correlates with reduced engagement in real-world issues. (Myers, 2017) Here lies the paradox: we use fictional disasters to process real fears, yet this very act may weaken our ability to confront actual crises. Like someone clinging to a nightmare, we've grown too comfortable watching destruction from a safe distance, forgetting that reality has no rewind button.

Perhaps the value of apocalyptic fiction lies not in its spectacle of ruin, but in its potential to rekindle gratitude for what remains. These stories could be starting points for reflection, but too often become endpoints for escapism. *Mad Max: Fury Road* was meant to warn of resource wars, yet many reduced it to adrenaline-fueled action; *Don't Look Up* satirized climate denial, only for audiences to pat themselves on the back – “At least I’m not as dumb as those characters” – missing the point entirely. This dissonance exposes entertainment’s central tension: the struggle to deliver meaning while satisfying our hunger for spectacle. In *Interstellar*’s climax, what moves us isn’t the fifth-dimensional wizardry, but the raw humanity of a father reconnecting with his daughter. As director Christopher Nolan put it: “I made this film to make people hold onto the present more tightly.”

We need them; whether or not through beauty or simplified situations, these apocalyptic fantasies serve as a measure of temporary assurance and, way more crucially, mirrors. In *The Last of Us*’ iconic giraffe scene, Ellie and Joel encounter a giraffe herd wandering through ruins. Sunlight filters through their spotted hides, carving a golden fissure in the gloom. This moment resonates because it whispers: even in the darkest fantasies, life persists. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus wrote, “Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux (One must imagine Sisyphus is happy).” Likewise, we need these apocalyptic visions – not to obsess over endings, but to return to reality more awake, more attuned to fragile, ordinary wonders. When theater lights light up the environment and you found your feet on the ground again, having no spacecraft or mutated dragons on the sky upon our heads, perhaps we’ll notice what disaster stories temporarily obscured: grocery stores with full shelves, video calls with distant loved ones, a wildflower growing unnoticed by the road. These unremarkable threads are the true bulwark against oblivion.

Next time a city crumbles on screen, after immerse yourself in the spectacular scene, you might as well ask yourself: am I here to escape, or to better return? The answer might help us find balance between imagined catastrophe and lived life.

Myers, J. (2017, August 23). Understanding Gen-Z: The post-apocalyptic generation. Medium. URL: <https://medium.com/@jackmyers/understanding-gen-z-the-post-apocalyptic-generation-6954ea41e243>

Mello-Klein, C. (2023, January 6). Post-apocalyptic ‘The Last of Us’ could be HBO’s next hit show. But why do we love stories about the end of the world?\* Northeastern Global News. URL: <https://news.northeastern.edu/2023/01/06/the-last-of-us-post-apocalyptic-shows/>

Sampson, A. (2023, October 31). Why some fans say watching horror helps them escape — and confront — the terror of real life. CBC News. URL: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/why-some-fans-say-watching-horror-helps-them-escape-and-confront-the-terror-of-real-life-1.7009274>

# THE IDES OF TOMORROW

ZERUI YAN

On the 15th of March, 44 BC, Julius Caesar woke up in his house on Palatine Hill. His wife, Calpurnia, tells him about a nightmare, a statue of Caesar pouring blood, with the Romans bathing in it. Caesar remembers that today he has a meeting with the senate, and he also considers the warning the priests gave him about the middle of March. After recalling these events, Caesar decided not to attend the meeting and instead stayed home, pretending to be sick. However, soon Decimus Brutus, a conspirator and Caesar's friend, convinced him to go to the meeting. He said that if Caesar did not go to the Senate, they would think of him as weak, and he would lose respect. Upon hearing this, Caesar decided to go to the meeting despite the warnings.

As he walked through the bustling, narrow, and dirty streets filled with merchants, public bathhouses, toilets, and water fountains, he noticed all the citizens. Back then, in the city of Rome, men wore tunics, and women wore a stola and palla; these different types of clothing showed their different statuses. Suddenly, a soothsayer approaches Caesar, warning him about the Ides of March. A teacher named Artemidorus hands him a letter about a plot to assassinate Caesar, which he ignores and continues to walk. Not long after that, Caesar arrives at the Curia of Pompey. Upon arrival, Tillius Cimber grabs Caesar's toga, distracting him. At the same time, another Conspirator named Casca pulls out a dagger and stabs Caesar, followed by 60–70 other Conspirators also pulling out their daggers and starting to stab him.

“ARGHHHH,” Caesar cried in pain and disbelief. Then he shockingly sees Brutus, once a trusted friend, also holding a knife in his hand. Caesar says, “Et tu Brutus?” (You too, Brutus?). Caesar's heart starts to slow. Brutus is about to stab Caesar. Then time stops. Completely. A warm white light appears in front of Caesar, as if it's trying to say, “You have a second chance.” Caesar, covered in blood, decides to take this chance. Bright light fills the room, but it seems like other conspirators are frozen in place and do not notice this light.

Caesar wakes up on a hard stone pavement. He looks around. There are bright flashing lights, and he stares around in awe and disbelief. As he wanders around, people are using flat iron things with black circles on them, aiming them at Caesar. He mistakes modern-day phones as weapons that were attacking him, and runs away in fear, almost getting hit by a car. Caesar looks around. There are large grey streets with fast-moving vehicles on them. Compared to the old dusty street back at Caesar's home, this grey "street" was extremely clean, and the carts moving at lightning speed. As he continued to wander around the city, there were markets with bright lights on them that Caesar had never seen before. Some toilets felt warm, even though the temperature outside was much colder. As he walked into a market, the door opened by itself, and Caesar got frightened, thinking to himself in disbelief, "Is there a ghost here? How does it open by itself?". Caesar walks away anxiously, and his legs bring him to what seems like the Roman Forum. The place where he used to give grand speeches, but now all of it was destroyed, old and ugly. There was no grandeur left, and visitors casually walked by, paying no respect to the building. Realising this, Caesar's stomach clenches; his empire in the future is nothing but a bunch of abandoned stone shadows.

The sun is setting, and Julius Caesar, once a great leader in the morning, is now a nobody in the afternoon of the future. Feeling depressed, he hopelessly walks to the Curia of Pompey, looking at the spot where he was when he was about to die. He feels guilt and regret for his decision to come here. Caesar looks at the sunset again. And then back to the future of Rome. A beam of sunlight hits the spot where he was sitting, and the warm light appears again, asking him, “Do you want to go back and face death ?” There is a long silence. Caesar thinks about the betrayal of Brutus, but he also feels betrayed by the world of the future. He thinks it’s better to die than live in a world with no fame and power. I am forgotten, and so is my reign; it’s better to die with pride and respect than live shameless and forgotten. Caesar says “fiat ut fiat (let it be done)“. Bright light blinds Caesar, and when he wakes up, he gets stabbed a total of 23 times. Julius Caesar dies in fame, and so does Caesar, securing his place in history.



