

miniMAG

issue25
heavy metal high



redredred

Juliette Salom

Red is the colour of my lips when I smile. I smile so hard, so wide, so big that my molars pinch the inside of my cheeks. So big that they pinch the skin until it bleeds. My lips are wet and they're red and they're salty. The camera man, with his grey goatee and trench coat of green, asks me if I'm ok. I smile wider. *No*, he says as he pulls the camera from his face, *I mean, you're bleeding*.

In the nurses' office she tells me she hates photo day too. I lick my lips and keep them shut. Salty and red and wet with silence. She asks me, again, *didn't you notice they were bleeding*. I shrug, again, and wordlessly wish she'd let me get to class. She sighs and says I can go. I hear her roll her eyes to herself on my way out.

My locker permeates the smell of old bananas. *Ratchet*, I say, when I open the door. The girl before me forgot her recess in here over summer. For two entire months, yellow became brown and life became death. My death is finding the soft brown corpse here this morning.

Banana girl, the year twelve standing at the locker above me sneers into my scalp. *It's not mine*, I don't say. I do the math in my head and decide I like Banana Girl better than most alternatives that could be on option. My locker smells yellow and brown and now I do too. I throw my books on top of the corpse and shut the coffin door with a clang. The older girl huffs through her nose with the relief that she's nicknamed the weirdest of the year eights. Turquoise is the colour of the booger that becomes unhinged as she huffs pity in my direction. I huff the same back.

The year twelve swings her ponytail back down the hall and I watch the others watch her. The ponytail swings like it knows it is being watched. It swings like hot pink and bright blue and all the other highlighter colours she'll overuse in every textbook.

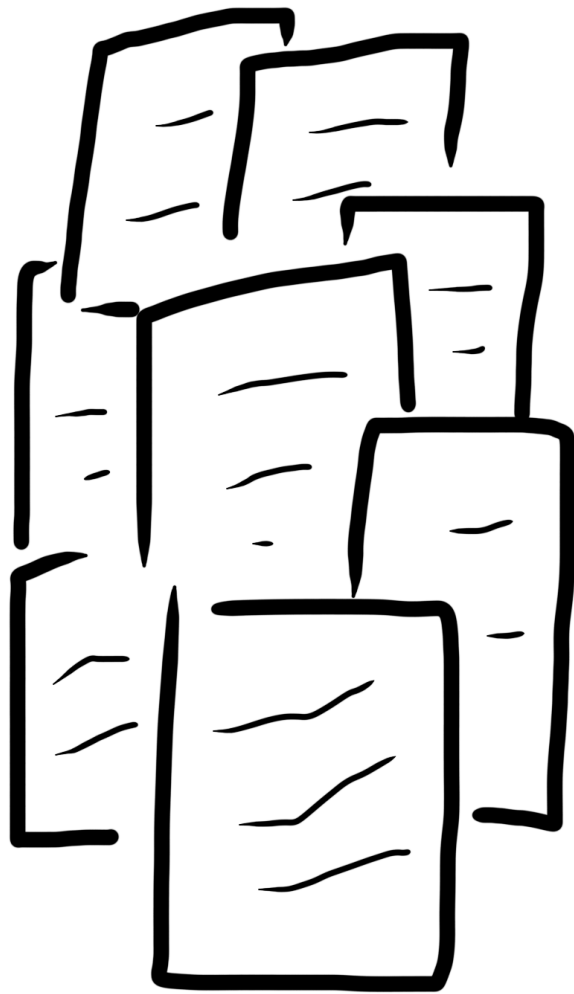
Stepping into math class late, all I can see is the blinding colour of mean girls. When they're in the room no other colour dare competes. Mean girls and emerald green girls and girls the colour of ruby red shoes. *Sit down please*, the teacher says because I've been standing by the door for too long. The only spare seat is the chair with graffiti and the table with gum, right at the back. It's grey and bare and the colour of all the lonely fourteen-year-olds that have sat there before. I take my seat.

The teacher talks of *recurring decimals* and *irrational numbers* and all I can see is the recurring irrationality of how I feel. I see ash grey and stone grey and every other shade of grey. Charcoal and taupe and the colour of my face.

Are you ok, the teacher probably asks. I'm unsure because my face is as knotted as my stomach and looks the colour my intestines feel. Grey becomes green and the world becomes colour. Colour of the worst kind. The kind that smells like vomit.

Back again, are we? The nurse is the colour of annoyed. I hold a plastic sick bag under my chin and hold the sobs under the lump in my throat. The lump grows and moves and then my whole body is lumps. I am a lump. A lump that sees the world the colour of terrified. A lump that smiles so wide, so hard, that red is the colour in the sick bag now. *Oh honey*, the nurse says, but she won't dare come near me. Red is the colour of this lump when it smiles.





Youth

Alex Prestia

There's a wall that my students beg to tear down, claiming a secret passageway must be behind it. That sense of wonder is lost on the journey from their chairs, into their notebooks, and onto my desk. Mentions of hidden chambers do not disturb their somnambulant essays. Fairly predictably, the creativity is stamped out. I know there is no trapdoor behind the "false wall" in the back of the classroom. I won't shatter their hope.

Please Speak Mandarin

Tim Gao

I jostled past the onlookers and saw Lao Chang on the edge of the mountain. Two young guards in rent-a-cop uniforms were dissuading him from jumping. The nonchalance in their pleas disconcerted me as I yelled out to Lao Chang. He looked at me with trepid eyes, fearful not of death but from being seen. Below the mountain the Min River sparkled with late summer radiance.

There are people you meet in life who stay with you. Outliers. Those who deviate so distinctly from the banal baseline of the human experience.

Last summer I went to China by myself. My parents were originally from Sichuan and they migrated to Canada in the 90s, which was where I was born.

As a real estate intermediary, I needed to polish up my Mandarin to better serve the Chinese community in Toronto. After conferring with my family, I enrolled in the summer program at Leshan Normal University in Sichuan, the province of lush culture, adorable pandas, and world-class cuisine.

Since I hadn't been back to China since I was a kid, I ruminated on the flight about this propitious chance to reconnect with my roots.

Leshan Normal U is a small cozy school on a hill surrounded by dense trees. The campus consists of only one big building and a sports field. That first week was fun and convivial, got to meet cool students from the States, Sierra Leone, Holland, Italy. Some chuckled after meeting me, for I wasn't the instructor they were expecting but a

thoroughly westernized Asian with subpar Chinese.

One day I stayed after class by myself to practice the written characters, which is always a humbling endeavor. Eating my favorite snack of hui bing, I drilled stroke order on the blackboard, one slash of the wrist after another, like a painter on canvass.

I heard a voice in English with a thick Sichuan accent: “How do you write 茴香的茴?” Standing by the door with his arms behind him, an old man was smiling at me. He was at least seventy-five with a cadet’s buzz cut, his belly protruding under his austere blue jacket.

English was spoken by the young crowd; I had never heard it from an old local. Quizzical, I began conversing with him in English. He told me to call him “Lao Chang,” a more intimate address than “Mr. Chang.” He used to be a janitor at this school where, during his twenty-seven years, he picked up English by chatting with the foreigners. I told him about the frigid winters in Canada and he told me of his love for literature.

“What I asked you earlier was a Lu Xun reference,” he said with the sententiousness of a patriarch. He went on to list all the classics he had read, ancient and modern, popular and obscure.

“I have *War and Peace* on my shelf, a gift from an American journalist who studied here. Probably near the time when you were born,” he boasted while nodding. His sense of self importance jarred me.

His stories ran long, and good manners forbade me from interrupting. Perhaps he was lonely and just enjoyed having someone to talk to, but after ten minutes I’d had enough. I hit the fake call button on my phone and pretended to talk. Even my little nephew, for all the time he spends on the i-pad, would’ve seen past such an artifice, but Lao Chang just walked out the classroom, slowly and with the grace of a relegated emperor.

A month later I was more than settled in: I knew everyone in my dorm, had bought a swift secondhand Ebike, and I even had myself a Chongqing hottie with whom I had a weekly language exchange. A pretext to study at the library would always end up back on my sofa

with her slender ivory legs draped across my lap.

Those Friday nights were the best--chilling at the night market, sitting outdoors with friends, drinking Qingdao beer and sampling the unbelievably tender qiaojiao beef.

One Sunday I was shooting hoops on campus with my classmate Richard, a trade entrepreneur from Ghana. That was the second time I saw Lao Chang.

“Young gentlemen, how do you write 籃球的籃?” he said, whipping his tuoluo, which is a Chinese gyroscope.

Seeing a man his age playing with a toy delighted us so we walked over. Right away he began boasting of his past experiences: a story about how his father used to play basketball with American soldiers who were stationed here during World War Two. After stumbling to tell the story in English, he switched over to Sichuan dialect, which is similar to Mandarin in usage so we could, for the most part, understand him.

A school administrator came up and told Lao Chang to please speak Mandarin, for there were students around. I guess she wanted to maintain an “establishment air.”

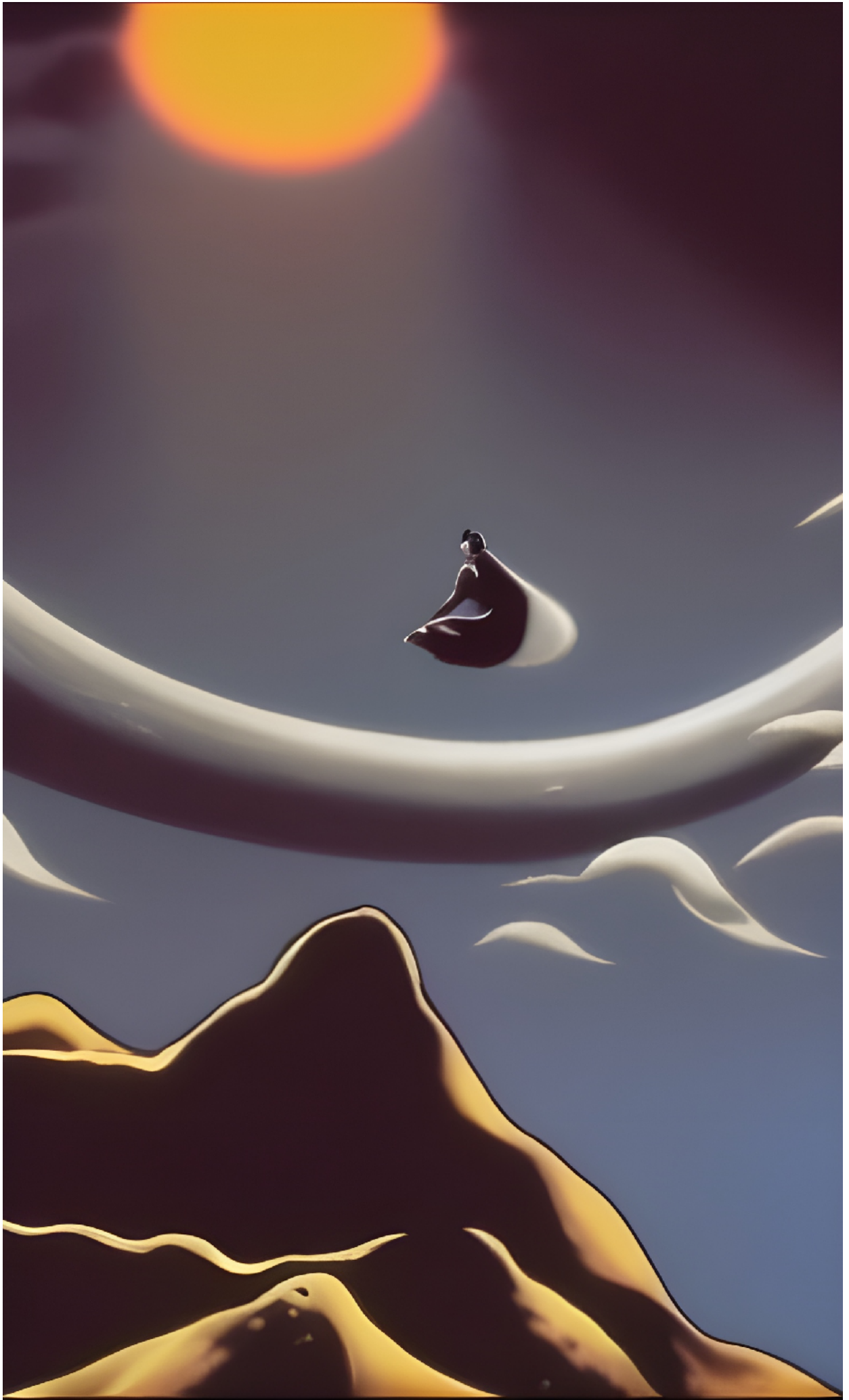
To our surprise, Lao Chang flipped out, started yelling at her. “Don't tell me how to speak! My family has been here for generations. Dialect is our heritage!”

Knowing Lao Chang as the bothersome old man who habitually loitered, she said the university would no longer allow him to be on campus, despite his years of former employment. He got in her face, pointed at her and cursed, his voice quivering with rage. I stepped in to break up the argument, leading him away.

We walked to the track benches and he cooled off. Richard felt uneasy so he said a polite goodbye. Lao Chang sat with his elbows on his knees, looking at his hands, deciphering the creases on his palms, his nails stained from decades of smoking.

He grumbled on about MacDonaldis, Starbucks, Mandarin, and homogeneity effacing local culture. However, I sensed what was really hurting him: being alone and childless, stalked by death, feeling his generation fading out of this fast-changing world.

I should've stayed with him that day. Maybe invited him to a local spot for spicy noodles, but I had a date and I wasn't going to waste my weekend with a miserable old dude.



Today, as I write this, it's been a year since I've been back in Toronto. I'm doing pretty well: been getting new clients with my functional Chinese. I stay in touch with my classmates from that memorable summer program. Nana, my beautiful Chongqing fling, still sends me pics of her on WeChat with her coffee-fur poodle. Sometimes though, as I stroll the streets of Chinatown, the exquisite calligraphy reminds me of Lao Chang.

A week after Lao Chang had the row with the university administrator, Richard ran up to me as I was walking out the school building. "You know that old guy who hangs around here? He's at the Buddha Mountain, trying to jump." He showed me the live video that a fellow student was filming. I ran to my Ebike and hurried to the famous site.

As soon as I saw him I entreated, "Mr. Chang, what are you doing?"

His eyes scoured many tourists before finding mine. "My friend, you embarrass me. Don't look."

"Why are you doing this?"

A swarm of cell phones were filming him.

I pleaded again: "Please, let's just leave. We'll go... we can talk books."

"Then what?" he said, stepping closer to the edge. "I go home and be invisible."

The callow guards were relieved that responsibility had been diffused to me.

"Please, sir. We've made friends. We talked Tolstoy. You ... you taught me how to write characters." I had nothing to comfort him but platitudes. Half concerned, half in disbelief, I stood there, uncertain of how to handle the situation.

Lao Chang looked at me, and though my solicitude couldn't cut through his fossilized bitterness, he seemed content to have known me, if only for a summer. For a moment he let go of his anguish.

"My friend," he shouted. "Better to depart with glory than to exist in hollowness...How do you write 荣誉的菜?"

The onlookers screamed. I shut my eyes. A summer breeze came in from the river.

Breakfast

anon

These days I always feel so sick and hurt
And never feel like I could move to save
Not just what all of what I made inert,
My time as money, it's so cheap to crave,

But more than that my memory of sorts
Of caring for a culinary hell
Where no one ever cleans the fryer first
And cheap food with coffee is all we sell.

They hate the golden hat that crowns this house
Not 'cause they think that one day I'll be well
But rather since like our kitchen mouse
To all the same this grime can ring a bell.

There's healthiness in every waffle burnt
When each one shows us what our betters weren't.





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