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### Wanderlust

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# Wanderlust

Thao Pham  
December 10, 2020



To my mother  
who has unconditionally supported me,  
endeavored through thick and thin,  
you continue to inspire me every living day.

## To Live and Conquer

Time continues to pass in midsummer sweltering heat,  
While the accursed contraption draws ever so closer,  
Soon I reach a point of no return.

Wafting aromas of cotton candy, popcorn, and ICEE slush,  
A distinct fizzle of funnel cake drowned in a pool of grease and oil  
Mingle with pungent waves of chlorinated water.

As animated, eager children line up to booths  
a resounding *ding* echoes.

The sleek, freshly painted railroad track  
How it twists and turns and loops in unconforming shapes,  
with a sharp 90 degree drop straight to hell as the opening scene.

*Thump thump thump*, my heart races.  
I trudge forward with a faint lightheadedness,  
To see blurring outlines of shapes and colors,  
The gates to oblivion remain ever so welcoming.

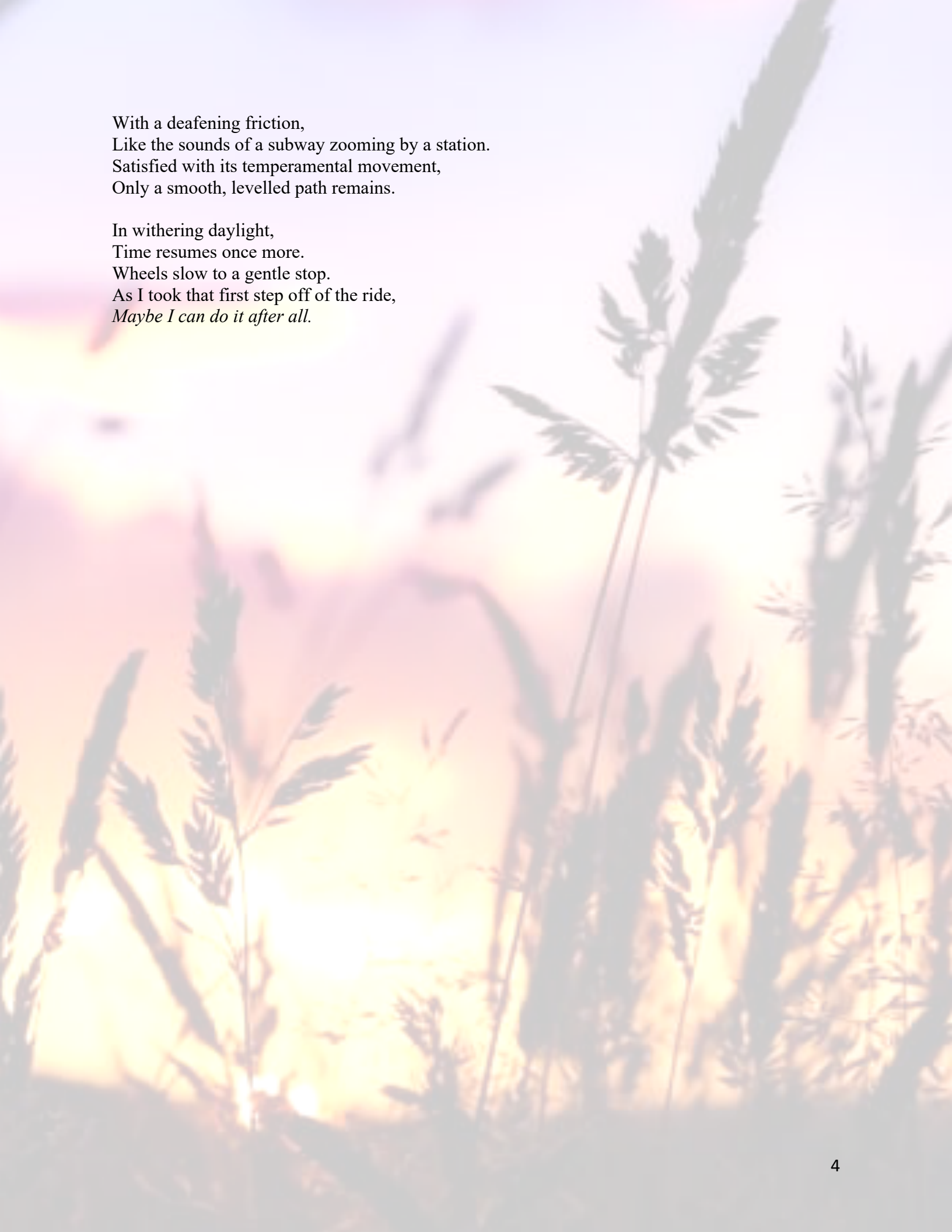
I hear the unrelenting screams of its previous victims,  
*Don't go on this ride, you won't make it out alive.*  
*You can't do this.*

Exposed to blazing hot sunlight,  
A voice calls out to me with defiant authority,  
Bounded by chains,  
I am forcibly subject to imprisonment.

The demonic machine begins to emit a booming roar.  
Time halts in place as it approaches the endless blue sky,  
Silence, fear, but also anticipation permeated,  
At a complete standstill, savage talons await to strike.

*Whoosh.* A climatic drop to the death.  
Moments soon become a mere blur,  
Sense of motion completely disrupted,  
Pure instinct controlling and taking over rational thought.

It continues to twist and turn and loop in unconforming ways,  
Momentum and speed coming and going with unpredictability,  
Deceleration, pause, then another steep descent,  
Continuing in an unending cycle.  
Harsh collision of wheels to wooden track,



With a deafening friction,  
Like the sounds of a subway zooming by a station.  
Satisfied with its temperamental movement,  
Only a smooth, levelled path remains.

In withering daylight,  
Time resumes once more.  
Wheels slow to a gentle stop.  
As I took that first step off of the ride,  
*Maybe I can do it after all.*

## Vietnam

Vĩnh Long was a continuous battleground.  
Steel-toe boots, reverberating gunshots,  
billowing clouds of black and white  
camouflaged a clear azure sky.

An interminable monotony,  
time merely an illusion,  
when the sweet taste of life and death  
were indistinguishable

Agony and anguish,  
over the spirits of the damned.  
permeating silence,  
of an unknown future.

Slumbering weald of lost souls  
wandering aimlessly in the haze,  
blurry remnants of those who once lived  
fading into nothingness.

Broken, estranged, disoriented.  
Trapped inside an impenetrable forcefield,  
The outside world directly facing her,  
Only fingertips away.

“What makes the sky blue?”  
The young maiden wondered.

She looks up and sees the sea of horizon  
governed by an empyreal being.  
Was it akin to endless opportunity,  
Of undiscovered territory?

Closing her eyes,  
she imagined bright forest greens,  
and a cloudless, wild blue yonder.

She wanted a reason to open her eyes,  
and gaze longingly  
over the celestial blue sphere  
she yearned to call home.

*Invisible Departures\**

A gentle voice resonates  
like a guardian angel's tender embrace.  
Until frigid cold arms dissipate any sign of warmth.

Sleep entrusted its snowdrop wreath too soon  
akin to a wisp of a tiny candle flame  
that flickers for just a split second  
then disintegrates into ashes

Quivering embers entranced in a fiery dance.  
Kindred spirits spin and whirl in a frantic frenzy.  
And voices howl in agonizing pain.

A lost soul mourns,  
displaced in limbo under the darkest sky.  
Awaiting for the merciful rise of begotten dawn,  
Shrouded by a veil of rose-colored petals.

Where are you, I wonder?  
Sometimes I sense your solitary spirit  
watching over me as a guardian angel  
as the world remains blissfully unaware.

Ripped from the early pages of your storybook,  
you are the missing puzzle piece.  
But its shape is distorted,  
never fits no matter how I construct it

*Wait for me, then.*

\*Title taken from Dzvinia Orlovsky's poem "Invisible Departures" from her book *Bad Harvest*.

## True Love's Kiss...?

Settle down, impatient children, as we delve into a young maiden's unworthy misfortune, hopelessly subjected to the male-dominated Messiah complex (and one that is not so far off from contemporary society, mind you all). The archaic fairy tale begins with a bitter and forgotten fairy's hapless tragedy. With a flaming fervor, she curses the missing thirteenth golden plate - the demonic, imperious apple of temptation, *oh the horror* - thirsty for revenge, setting aside all semblance of rationality and reason to subdue her crippling fear of inferiority. She sets her target on the royal family's christening feast for the newborn princess - a grandiose celebration fitting for new life, furnished with an open fireplace, English-inspired tapestry and curtains, cushioned thrones and a table the length of the room itself, embellished with golden plates (a *must* for the nobility) that glisten under the hanging chandelier's florescence - a dining hall distinctly high-class. *I tell you, when the princess turns seventeen years old, your daughter will prick herself with a spindle and fall over dead*, the thirteenth fairy commands, resentment bleeding through her unnerving smile (here, a classic case of the unknowing daughter who suffers the consequences of her neglectful parents). Even though she was exercising the utmost care, the princess pricks her finger with a spindle, and slumbers for a hundred years within the highest tower of the palace, adorned by a sky of fire that caresses the vast horizon. Dreaming, she awaits her true love's kiss (or whoever happens to stumble across her comatose body first; as an esteemed princess fated to survive the royal family, she really can't afford to be picky).

A hundred years later, as the prophecy foretold, an aspiring (but timid) prince traverses up the tower until he reaches an rusty and untouched bedroom. There, her sleeping body lies, golden locks illuminating delicate skin, hands neatly folded onto one another, warm plump lips awaiting in eager anticipation for her male savior. He walks up to her stone cold corpse (for the sake of undoing the sleeping beauty's hundred year curse, he most certainly does not possess any ulterior motivation), and stares in awe. His heart is about to burst out of his chest, the surface of his skin frigid, pupils dilated (never having touched a girl in his entire adolescence), and he leans in. He is only a few centimeters away when he hears a soft mumble from the sleeping body. Her eyes gingerly open, taking in a comforting light that she hasn't experienced in so long. The prince stumbles back. She yawns, stretches her stiff arms and legs, mutters to herself about not having had a proper meal in a hundred years, and without sparing even a passing glance to the dumbfounded prince, takes her first step outside the tower.



## A Fervent Rivalry

On a clear but breezy autumn day where vibrant hues of gold, scarlet, and apricot delicately garnish miles of gravel road and dense forest, Mia positions herself at the starting line with the other runners, waiting for the signal. She briefly glances over to the other end of the starting line to monitor her archnemesis Iris, her former childhood friend from one of the rival schools with whom she was always butting heads. Confident as usual, focused and calm, a formidable opponent, Mia mentally makes a note to herself as to the status of her adversary. She steadies her breath, slightly bends her knees to get into position, and averts her watchful gaze away towards miles of rough track, steep hills, and curving paths ahead. The distinct blare of a horn pierces through hushed silence and bated anticipation, and she strides forward.

*Half a mile.* She starts with a more frantic pace, struggling to jostle with the other runners so she doesn't get lost in the initial crowd. A falling leaf propelled by an unusually strong headwind brushes the side of her face, leaving a tiny scratch on her right cheek. No sight of Iris – perhaps she wasn't able to push through the sea of runners - but no matter. As the approaching headwind dwindles in intensity, the young athlete charges onwards with a newfound determination.

*One mile.* The first steep hill, the most intimidating challenge for any cross-country athlete. Mia doesn't falter, she's trained almost obsessively running up and down hills near her neighborhood in preparation; at this point hills are second nature, so she knows exactly when to push forward, how to get ahead of the competition. Soles of shoes crackling on uneven gravel roads gradually dissipate until she can only hear the sound of her own heartbeat and footsteps.

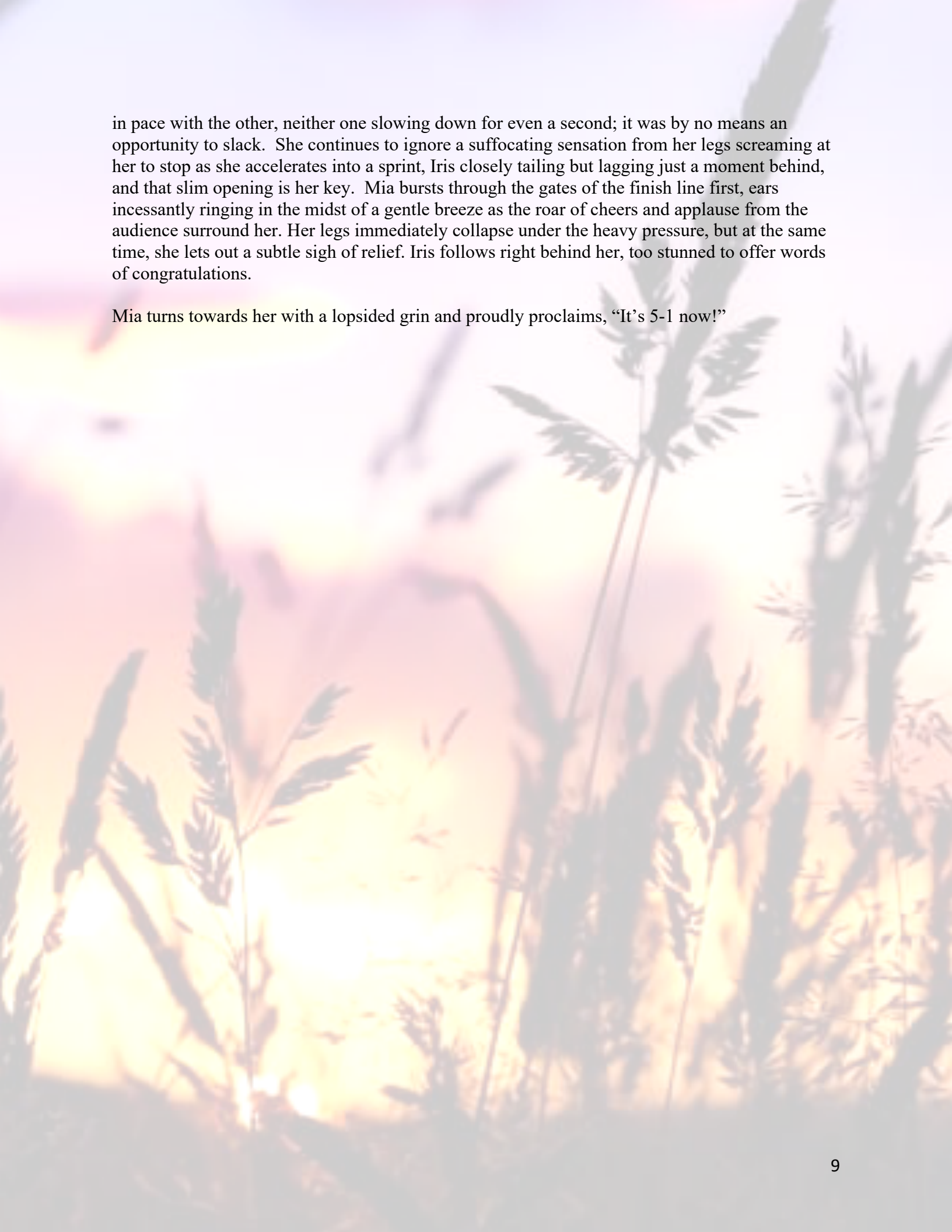
*Two miles.* She catches a glimpse of Iris as she easily matches her own pace without even breaking a sweat. Mia, her breaths becoming staggered and her head pounding, almost stumbles as fatigue begins to catch up to her, and Iris lets out a haughty cackle.

“Careful, we still have another mile left to go,” Iris snickers in between bouts of short breaths. “Tried to push too hard in the beginning, huh?”

Mia indignantly huffs in response, but she couldn't quite ignore the burning pain in her stomach or the increasing weight of her legs no matter how hard she tried to yell at herself to speed up.

Iris didn't have the energy to come up with another snarky remark, so she lets out a noncommittal sigh in response. She too becomes hyper fixated on her own growing restlessness, the stinging pain in her limbs, thinking to herself, Hmph, but I can't talk; I couldn't even get through the initial swarm without pushing just then. She's too far ahead. I need to step up my game, I am not giving her any false hope that she has the upper hand. Her pace starts to become more inconsistent, but her emerging pride dictates otherwise. At this point, it wasn't just a competition of physical endurance, but a raging battle between two headstrong adversaries. Despite her growing fatigue, Mia doesn't falter in pace, but neither does Iris, and the two continue on in a tense silence with the unending road in front of them as their sole guide.

*Three miles. The final stretch.* Approaching the finish line, the crowd of spectators rush over to watch in fervent anticipation as the two front runners duke it out on the battlefield. Each keeping



in pace with the other, neither one slowing down for even a second; it was by no means an opportunity to slack. She continues to ignore a suffocating sensation from her legs screaming at her to stop as she accelerates into a sprint, Iris closely tailing but lagging just a moment behind, and that slim opening is her key. Mia bursts through the gates of the finish line first, ears incessantly ringing in the midst of a gentle breeze as the roar of cheers and applause from the audience surround her. Her legs immediately collapse under the heavy pressure, but at the same time, she lets out a subtle sigh of relief. Iris follows right behind her, too stunned to offer words of congratulations.

Mia turns towards her with a lopsided grin and proudly proclaims, “It’s 5-1 now!”

## Second Thoughts

Sunday morning, four hours before departure. Tiny slivers of sunlight peek over the horizon. Blue jays gleefully chirp within the comfortable ambiance of early dawn in New England. Delicate metal chimes of an angel with a harp sings its usual cathartic melody right outside the front door. It was a rhythm that she hadn't yet been fully accustomed to; Molly decided that the earlier she departs, the easier it would be to break ties. But her suitcases were still vacant, the plane ticket left untampered.

She never actually expected to receive a response from the California Institute of Technology, let alone be granted an offer for her dream job. Molly: Senior clinical research manager - the title pleasantly rolled off the tongue, sophisticated yet succinct enough so that introductions wouldn't be too arduous. In haste, she merely glossed over the words in fine print, starting date: March 1st, 2021 – a few months was a long time coming - and paid it no mind as she hung the printed letter on her fridge, slightly off-center from the array of family photographs, one of them she looked upon fondly: Mom, Dad, her younger brothers, and herself all holding back from laughter after a ball from the other side of the fence suddenly lands on Auntie's head while she was still trying to figure out how to use a camera. She decided to take that one with her, replacing the empty space with an older family photograph slightly frayed at the edges – she recalls it being from her First Communion – as she gently slides the other picture into a compact photobook.

Her suitcases are only half-empty now as she places the photobook into one of the front pockets of the large suitcase – she owns plenty of faux fur jackets and thick scarves but minimal short sleeves that she has to make a mental note to herself to go clothes shopping once she gets settled into her new residence, but also thinks about how she's going to make friends with her new housemates or if she'd even be capable of doing so. Is this the right choice? She feels a slight chill, a tingly sensation in the pits of her stomach. She's long since decided that she was going to take the job, she's already went through this routine so many times the past few months while scribbling and crossing out things on her comprehensive pros and cons list that at this point is almost illegible to the average person. Yet again, her mind begins to wander.

The crack of dawn turns into rays of sunlight as the bustling streets of the neighborhood become inhabited with vehicles that signal the influx of morning commuters. Molly quickly snaps back to reality with only short of two hours left before her flight – the Uber was coming any time now – and she trudges into the living room to grab her suitcases. Just for a moment, she looks at herself in the mirror, donning a bedhead only partially brushed back, slightly bruised eyelids, and a hint of acne emerging on her forehead. She lets out a dignified huff, her lips curling into a lopsided grin, as she struts with newfound confidence towards the front door.

Molly clutches the plane ticket, almost crumpling it as she slowly rests her hand on the doorknob. She's already made the preparations all the way across the country, her work schedule begins in a couple of weeks, and at this point in time there was no turning back; yet for once she felt oddly at ease with herself. She opens the door to greet the Uber driver: suitcase, ID, and plane ticket in hand.



Thao Pham was born in a small suburban city in Rhode Island as the youngest daughter of four. She is a senior at Providence College with a major in biology and a minor in English. She wishes to become involved in clinical healthcare past her undergraduate career. Thao enjoys playing the violin and piano and is learning how to sew from her mother who is a seamstress. She also enjoys writing, but has never delved too deep into the realm of creative writing until late into her college career. However, she has developed a newfound passion for poetry and creative fiction that she hopes will continue to flourish in her future endeavors.

*"Thao's beautifully crafted imagery in her writing brings her work to life. Her eloquent way of writing makes her work intriguing and powerful—like no other. Thao's creativity and her way of articulating stories in her poetry are impressive and leaves the reader wanting more. She creates masterpieces, and her work is praiseworthy— a beautiful writer!" -Isabel Arnout*

*"Thao's pieces are brilliantly structured and she manages to give immense value to every word. She does a brilliant job in dragging the reader's attention and holding it until the very end. With magnificent word choices and strong imagery Thao distinguishes herself from other poets."*  
-Sara Hendrike Rose Vijfhuizen