

# ONE IMPERATIVE

babies: first steps



Alice Renez Tay  
*A dance with the clouds*  
2014

# Unbound

(a ghazel)

(For my friends in Hong Kong)

Where? What remains of my life and love left broken?  
How can the great plans of man leave so much broken?

My love carried off, to serve others' ambitions.  
Hard hearted corvee, our matrimony broken.

The dreams man dreams range large. Vanity, even more.  
Yet my dreams, with one edict, beaten down, broken.

They say to build up they have to dig deep, stakes in.  
Building narrow-mindedness, words and backs broken.

They say to touch Heaven, man's fancies must reach up.  
But Heaven sees only the stretched and the broken.

They say when done, it unites this fragmented land.  
But walls never join, they divide, break the broken.

I see in my closed eyes, your sweat for man's vision  
Of glory for one. But your bowl remains broken.

Kings and queens, warriors and heroes, are honoured,  
mourned.  
Common folks' monuments are in soil barely broken.

Each man a brick, each man a load, each step fumbled.  
These are better words. The history book's broken.

Their public words feed the chronicles, their lies cast.  
Yet the truth of love and loss are never broken.

History, they say, is the fiction of empires.  
Its human toll is redundant, records broken.

Greatness wanted the world altered, our lives improved.  
Instead, themselves are changed. Ours unhinged and  
broken.

They who built had no will but finally believed.  
We who've lost, we too must believe hope's not broken.

And hope alone must rely only on vague tales,  
Rumours, hearsay, dark whispers, stories half broken.

Insinuations in half-light, like the dusk, leaves  
Hope teetering between joy and joy broken.

My journey, my search, like the breach, are my last stand.  
Among million men, million steps, a million broken.

We alone in our loss are alone together.  
For this bricked snake, we millions of lives are broken.

It will stand, this pride and joy of generations,  
Testament to ruler and ruled, rules unbroken.

They say to move Heaven, they have to dig deeply.  
This grave keeps forgotten men who lay still, broken.

I say to move Heaven, we dig into our hearts.  
Cry tears, drown sorrows, wet the blood of the broken.

Dear love, I cry into your bones. Sleep my loved one.  
Our unity is two, your remains are broken.

Who weeps for the weepers, remember us who've lost?  
History as good as the tale of the broken

Can be preserved by a recital of the ruined.  
I will cry to Heaven to write from the broken

Tiles and bricks and mud and sand. My love could not rest.  
Now his sleep is eternal, his dreams unbroken.

I, Meng Jiang, lay next to you, muddying history.  
We who've lost, with tears and blood, can break what's  
broken.

Lim Lee Ching  
March-August 2016  
Singapore

# *New(ly) (Re)Born Again*

by Michael Kearney

"sunk in a subrational trance"<sup>i</sup>

Rise ... Wake ...Emerge ...

suck in air,

gasp and writhe,

shuck off the shell,

the shell of "predigested pap."<sup>ii</sup>

Robert Creeley,  
what did you see  
in DH Lawrence  
to write a poem  
so personal to me?

"The self is being, is in being and  
Because of it."<sup>iii</sup>

I hear -  
Heidegger,  
Derrida,  
Lacan,  
and me when I read you.

When I read you, I hear  
their voices,  
my voices;  
they rise up  
in a confusing cacophony  
drowning out your lyric.

Spiraling,  
like a twirling drunk at a crowded gala –  
I lose track of  
who is who,  
and myself.

I'm receding –  
I think of Comfortably Numb:  
"you are receding ..." <sup>iv</sup>  
How much more  
comfortable than  
my *self* receding.

I'm nervous.  
Am I growing  
or dying,  
gaining insight  
or losing my mind?

"Where is my mind?"  
Pixies – <sup>v</sup>  
going to see them  
yet again,  
the same old songs,  
from twenty-seven years ago,  
will be reassuring,  
remind me of  
who I am – was.

Body old, mind –  
hmm ... senile?  
Or still working its way to birth,  
not yet formed enough  
to be born into this being?  
Still can't distinguish itself from  
all the others –  
ah Lacan –  
fragmented,  
all gone to,  
always was and will be in,  
pieces;  
as it is, was, and shall ever be.

Fiction of finally being a complete,  
whole,  
self,  
recedes,  
comforting.

These fragments piece together,  
its all not up  
to me.  
If I let go of me,  
the I  
the self –  
ah, the comfort of being,

accepting it as is,  
chuckling at its absurdness.

Ah, the light  
at the end of  
the birth canal –  
a peek reveals  
Camus waiting  
with an aperitif.  
Body old, mind –  
hmm ... senile?  
Or still working its way to birth,  
not yet formed enough  
to be born into this being?  
Still can't distinguish itself from  
all the others –  
ah Lacan –  
fragmented,  
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as it is, was, and shall ever be.

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i Marshal McLuhan. *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*. Gingko Press; Berkeley, California: 2001.

ii *ibid.*

iii Robert Creeley. "Poem for D.H. Lawrence," in *The Collected Poems of Robert Creeley, 1945 – 1975*. University of California Press; Berkeley & Los Angeles: 2006.

iv From Pink Floyd's album *The Wall*, 1979.

v From the Pixies album *Surfer Rosa*, 1988.





Sara Chong  
*Man hands*  
2006



# Jarred Brain Babies

by Setsuko Adachi

An old man in a washed-out white cotton garment with orange stripes lit his cigarette under the morning sun. His good wife, she always makes sure cigarettes are in the drawer for him. Tobacco shavings flicker in red and he watches their dance. The wigglers don't know it but the paper stage will burn out in seconds. When it does, some ascend, some float, some fall, some leave no trace, some die black, some go on 'till white.

... And there are those talented shavings that can make it happen in that instant; those that — at the desperate moment — manage to transform the burning footing stage to serve their creative operation. Amazing are the artistic leaps and falls when the footing is gone. Bravo! ... Orgasms of art tremble the physical-metaphysical beings. It took him years — of attentive observations, interpretations, theorizations, to appreciate and critique the culture of the ephemeral tobacco shaving dance: a pure joy that thrills him, that his intellect cannot stop pursuing.

He dropped his cigarette butt into the water-filled ashtray, yawned, and squeezed himself out of the designated smoking spot back to the bed in room Z4, leaving behind a congregation of heavy smoking, stress-filled doctors and nurses dedicated to their professions.

The old man lay on his bed. In a motivated excitement, feeling the morning sunshine through his eyelids, he gets onto his "Jarred Freedom" project. In the potent air he thrives — bringing out forms from it — some come out well some don't. It is the most productive and fulfilling experience of his life. He can't stop digging into it, he can feel his skill improving, his scopes expanding, which brings along new ideas and new discoveries. He is certain he has found it, the joy, the best of his life.

*...How is he doing? Well, he is asleep most of the day, sometimes he opens his eyes, then he goes back to sleep. Would you like me to wake him up? No, no, it's okay. Let him sleep.*

When he passed away he carried an old crumbling cigarette butt, his precious last cigarette for a long time, carefully caged in the hollow cave of his fist. "Filthy," said his wife; and a nurse with a plastic disposable gloved hand picked it up and threw it away.



Jaina Wilmer  
*Untitled*  
2016

# Crafty little things...

by Joel Gn

I am not particularly fond of babies. To be more precise, I am learning not to be fond of them.

This is a claim that needs clarification. Most of us, I believe, are socially conditioned to regard our young as lovable objects yearning for our care and concern. From a biological standpoint, it is necessary – if one is a parent, it follows that one is obliged to care for his or her own child, because the propagation of any species does not just entail the act of giving birth to another, but also the raising, and even making of an infant to an adult. With respect to such a relation, I harbour no objection; at least, not as far as the clinical process of parenting is concerned.

My discomfort lies in the domain of appearances, for it is rather inexplicable that a diminutive and helpless other should affect us so intensely. Babies, however one may perceive otherwise, are an aberration of the human form, in terms of proportion and symmetry. Small, plump, and clumsy in demeanour, babies attract us because of their deformity, and not for the lack thereof. In return, we display our unbridled affection and idealise their vulnerability, insofar as we become care-givers and emphatic lovers of their bodies. Is this appeal an intrinsic quality of our young, or is it a one-sided perception on our part? How do we read the lovable, or for that matter cuteness? Babies do not declare their intents and purposes, much less demand to be loved; yet it is in the Gestalt of their physical features and behaviour that we recognise the object of our affection, as is the case with most infant mammals and non-living objects that simulate such characteristics.

Perhaps (and this remains a conjecture), that if our one-sided love for babies is a response to what has affected us, then it is likely that the object, be it a baby or otherwise, simultaneously compels us to be intimate and injurious with it. That is, in order for us to relish in the artificiality of their innocence, we have to revoke their agency; for when babies are objectified as our 'cute little things', they are reduced to whatever we want them to be.

But this one-sided affair is an example of a lack that we seek to circumvent, not resolve. It is easy for adults to shower infants – or by extension, anything cute – with affection, but our perception of the object is also a projection of our expectations, because we read, and thus humanise, its behaviour according to our own terms. Such a response on our part circumvents the other's absence, but we can never be certain if our projection even adequately represents the thoughts and feelings of the object in question. As any parent would attest, figuring out a baby's intention is often the result of persistent guesswork, and all methods on paper have to be modified and adapted to the arbitrary needs of the child. An encounter with difference always entails some fumbling in the dark, and tumbling tots are no exception.

Given this limitation in our understanding, it would, I think, be worthwhile to return to the question of what parents make with their children. Assuming this notion of making is compelled by a projection that is partial at best, then there will be moments when this projection falls short, thus showing that circumvention does not gratify the lack, as much as defers from it. There is, quite clearly, a prosthetic nuance to our experience of the lovable, for it no doubt supplements our questionable need for love, and conditions a different experience of 'love' at the same time. On this note, it is hardly surprising that such experiences can be easily fabricated en masse and re-administered in the form of dolls, plush toys, cartoons, and teenage celebrities. Cuteness, in this context, is an infantilism isolated from otherness.

Oddly enough, our idealisations of innocence do not relieve us of the asperity of aging, when our bodies are yet again, confronted with and covered in deformity. A utilitarian would conveniently account for this on the basis of life expectancy, and claim that the young, though equally helpless, may be raised into functioning adults; whereas the elderly have, for the most part, exhausted that potential. Yet, this says nothing about the perception of appearances, or even why many of us will reel in disgust at the sight of an elderly stranger. The irony, though stark, tends to slip away when the occasion calls for it. Age may dispel many illusions, but it tells us nothing about why we were charmed in the first place.

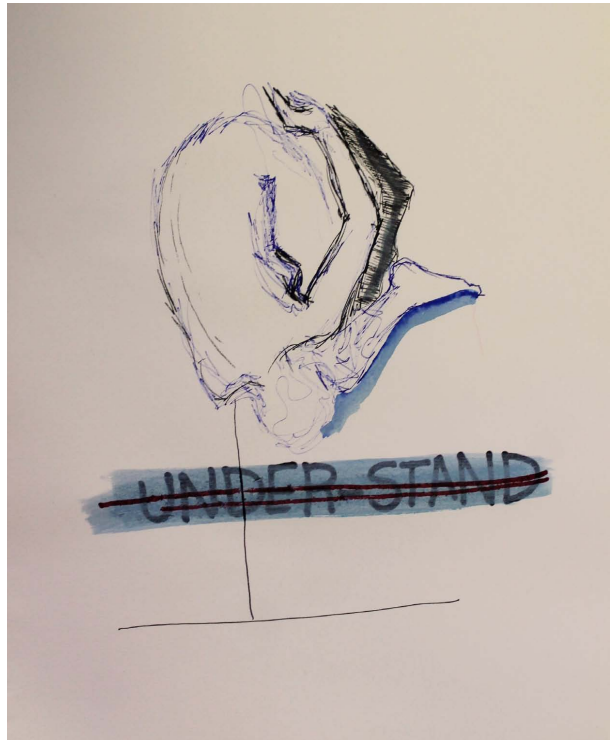
So I find myself turning back to the cuteness of babies, and to re-acknowledge the fact that I too, unknowingly, had charmed my parents, along with those who hold on to the memory of my childhood. And like a certain cherub who is known to strike down humanity serendipitously, I along with everyone else, am both the outcome, as well as the beginning of the craft in an encounter, where love is not simply a thing made by two, but is more profoundly, a making in itself. Let the cynic declare that we are blind, foolish and vulnerable to artifice, but we must always begin, as these crafty little things...<sup>1</sup>

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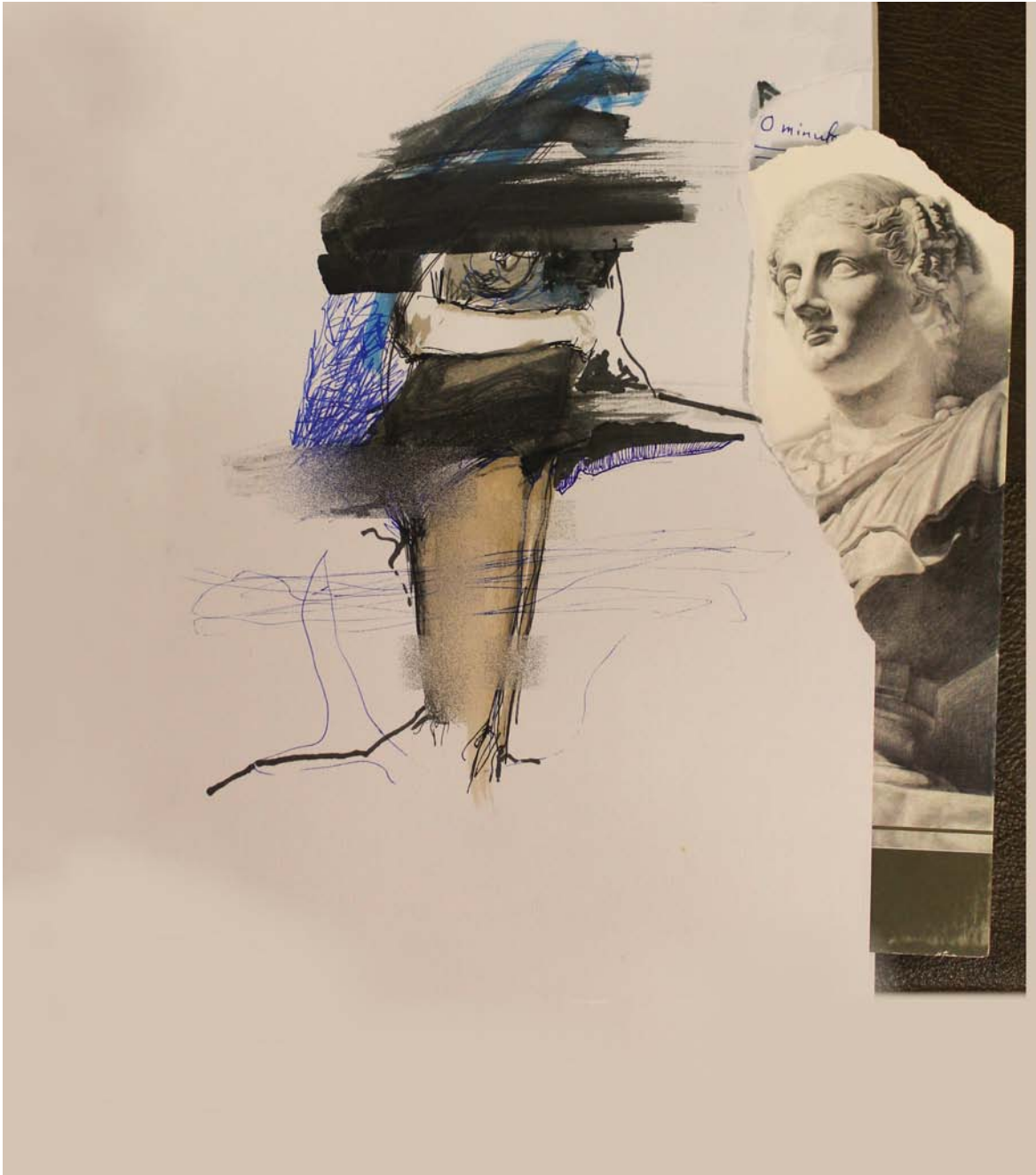
<sup>1</sup> The use of 'crafty' is also in reference to an earlier definition of 'cute', to describe one who is shrewd and clever.



1

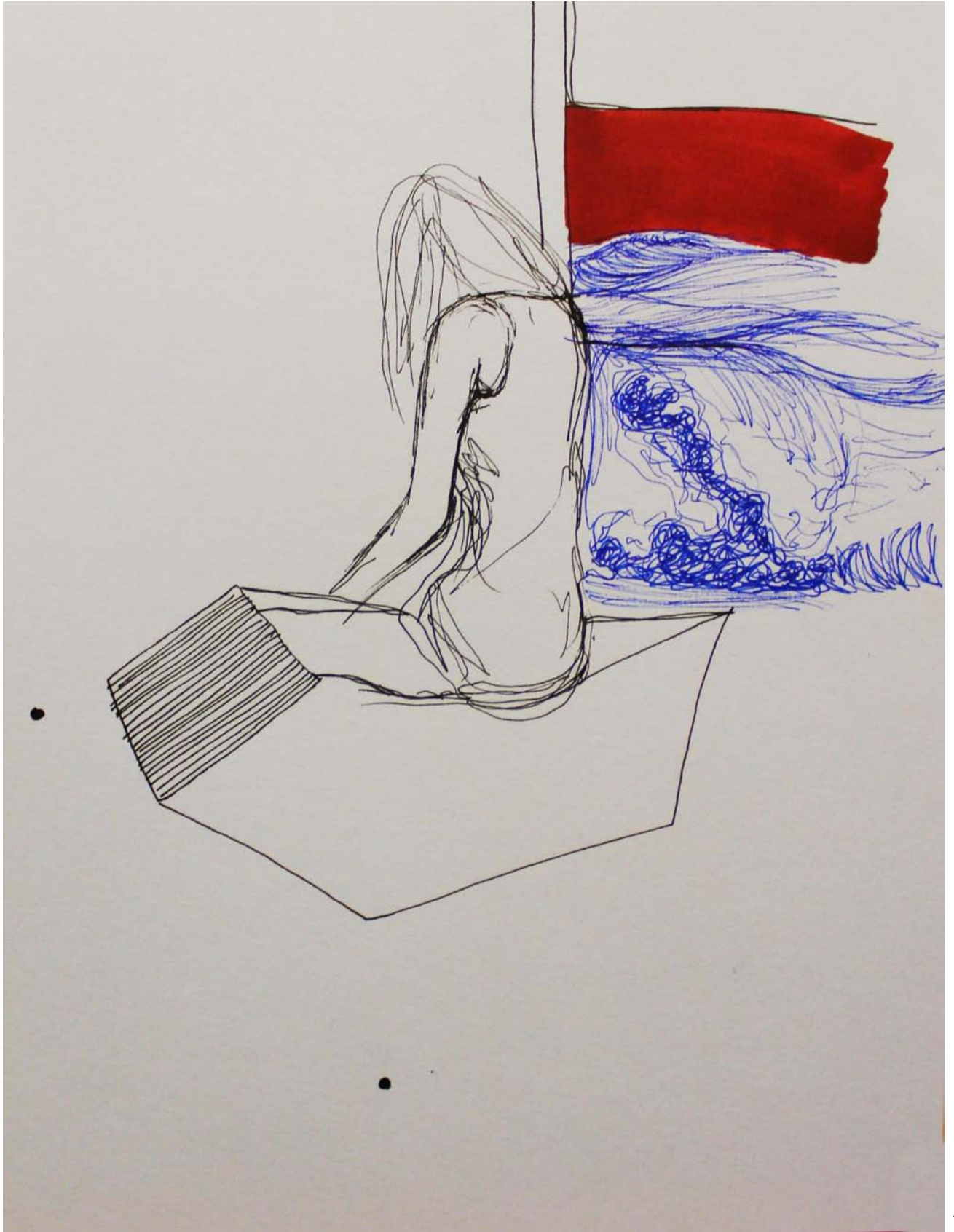


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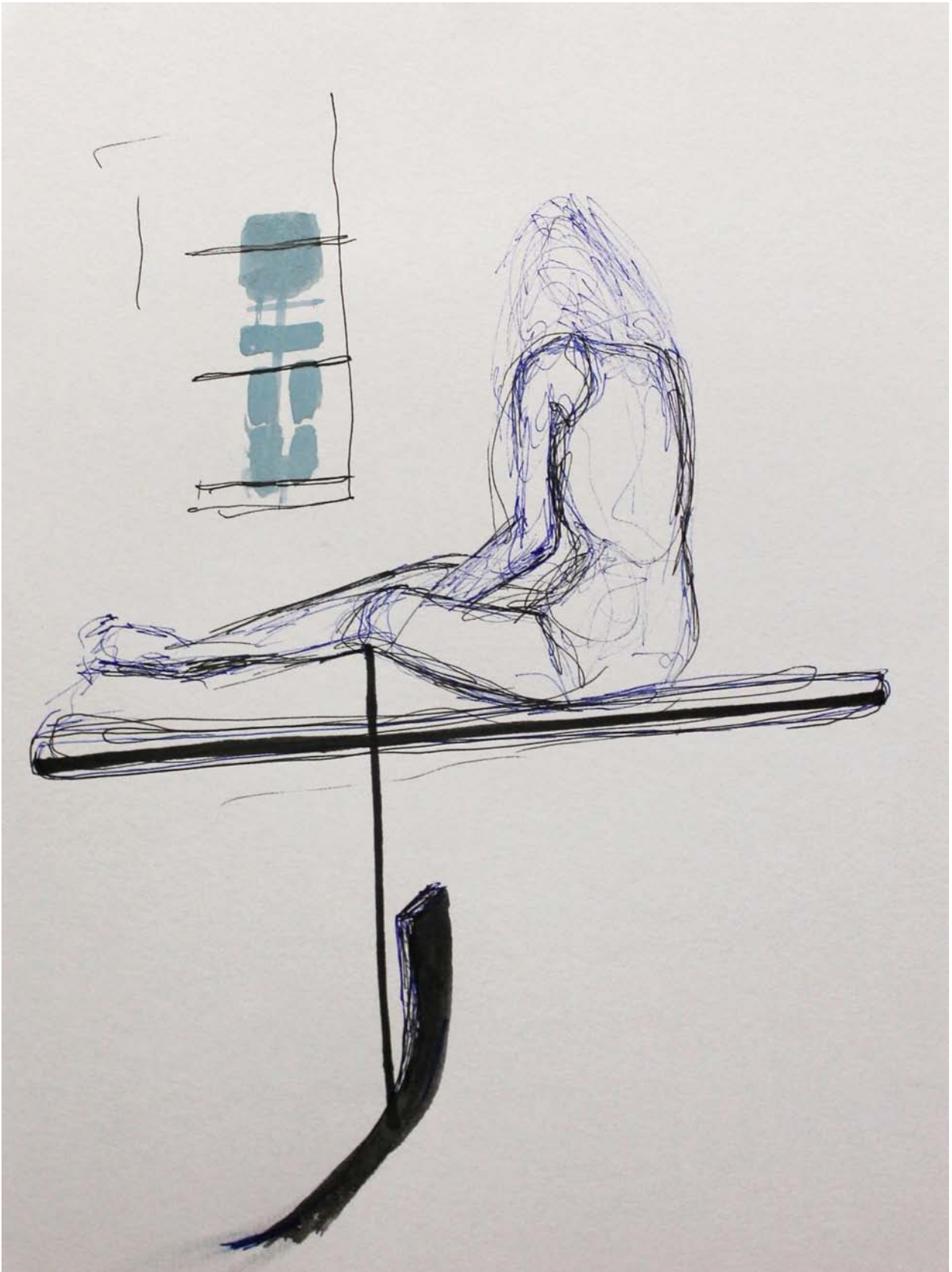


3









1-5:  
Dana Dawud  
*Janus*  
2016





# *Cream puffs*

by Jeremy Fernando

## *Mille-feuille.*

A thousand leaves. Though in that sun — even as one is, we were, standing out of it, perhaps even outside of it, not as if anyone can ever quite leave it — it felt a little more like a hundred. Perhaps then, only a sense of a cent.

One might even say — a roll of steel breeze.

Brought together, quite perfectly even, by a cloud. One could have called it cream, but that might well have been letting facts gets in the way of truth. Then again, it might be quite apt considering the possibilities of being anointed at the altar of the blue ribbon.

*And no one sings me lullabies  
And no one makes me close my eyes  
So I throw the windows wide  
And call to you across the sky.  
(Pink Floyd, Echoes)*

Does anyone ever actually sleep in summer?

Is there even a season when one sleeps? It would be too easy, to say that winter is Demeter's homage to snoozing; that autumn is its yawn; that spring is a stretching, a reaching out, a first time. But who's to say that convenience makes it wrong — at least, necessarily so.

Maybe they could have had no other name than the Été Café ...

If one stays awake long enough, might one find a tiger under the table, one might find a tiger under the table.

*Strangers passing in the street  
By chance two separate glances meet*

Perhaps only there if — when — you see it:

when it  
re-sounds;  
but perhaps only  
with you

A crinkle.

When you bite — thus, also at the very moment where it falls apart. Comes together.

Where the thousands come together into one.

As one.

Quand un mille-feuille devient une feuille.

Becomes her.



Jeremy Fernando  
I.H.O.O.Q  
2010