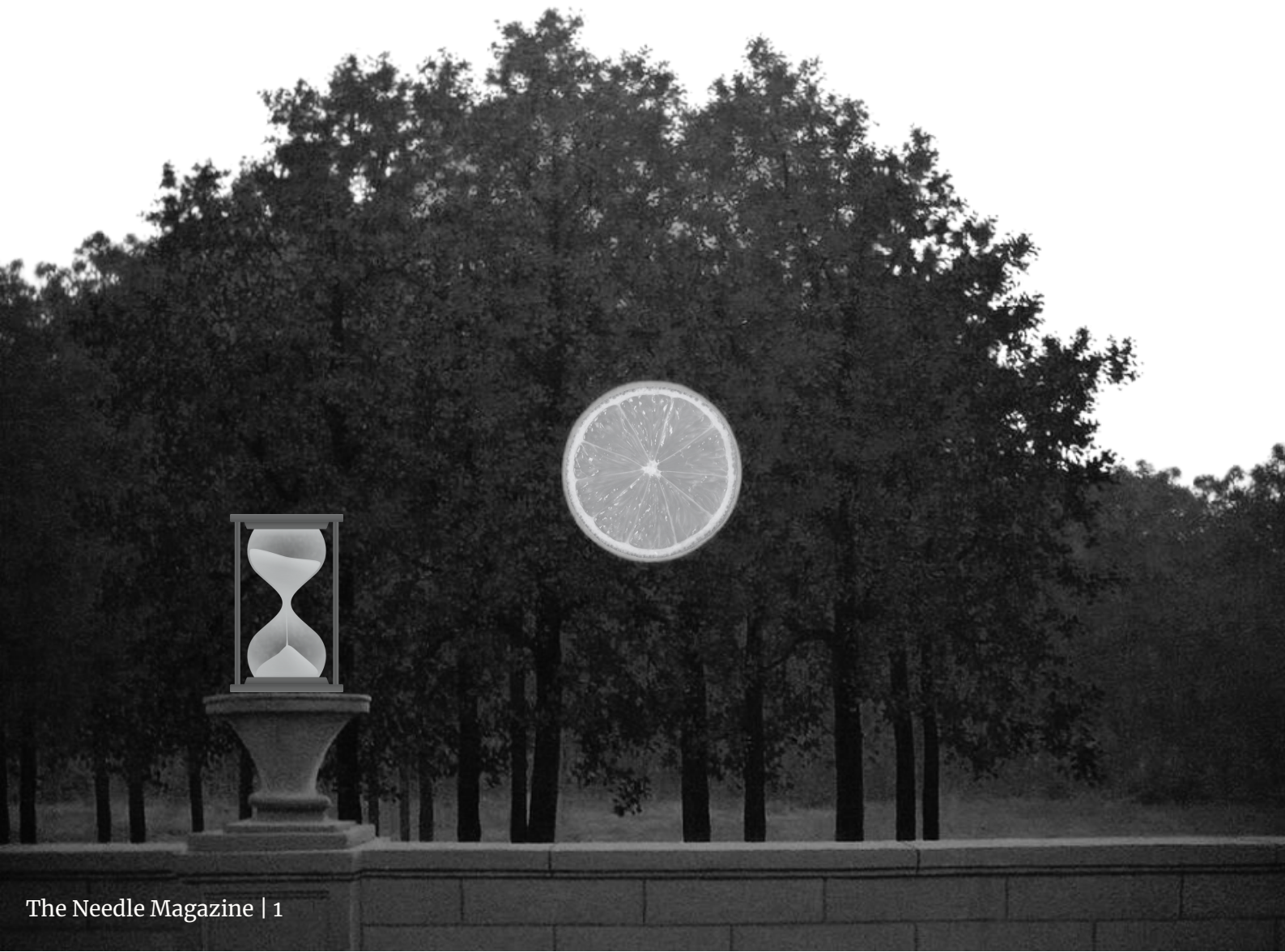


GOING PLACES

OSHI AGARWAL



I woke up in a grassland today. I could smell and feel before I could see. The air carried rain's spirit but the hair on my skin felt the blazing sun, one that chose its favourite while setting. The leaves tingled my feet, their waves filling me with the green scent I so love. Pressing my mouth together, I drank the air and it bloomed down my throat, opening my ears. I could hear now, the silence and the rain and the sun.

I wanted to become one with the grass. Though knitted together under the earth, I stood too high up, my mouth too far to press light kisses on the succulent needles. My roots, (too big, too hairy, too selfish) brushed next to those of the gentle leaves unkindly. I, hesitant in retrieving them from the moist soil, wept quietly and the salt settled like raindrops on my rough skin.

It got dark then. No, not the clouds in the sky. The moon never rose and the stars never twinkled. The grassland became a flipped page of a new book, remembered but unreachable.

Nothing changed but there was a smell. A sour smell, slightly sweet like a piece of cake left to the mercy of time after sundown.

I found myself looking over a swamp, the water bubbling with minerals and beings unknown. Something glimmered in the water, perhaps the sun which kept setting in the North in the wrong colours. I wondered if I was closer to the Lights but it was humid and my upper lip was salty, with no trace of ice on my tongue.

The glimmers liquidated to reveal whites and hollows. Not one was ever freed of curiosity but I was told to beware of nature's vility. So, I kept my distance. The whites became clearer, so did the hollows somehow. There were eyes, human eyes, more than what I could count in any language, emerging from the murky greens of the swamp. Of different shapes, sizes and colours, they looked into me. A few had whitened with age or disease or poverty. My mouth went dry and I craved to be in the grassland again, tasting the green chemical.

I made to move away from the shore but as if my toes were sewn to the loose ground, I remained stationary. I stood there to see the eyes grow vacant, the hollows filling with something red and swollen like flesh. Stood there to realise the glimmers in the water came from me, who was laden with gold, sickeningly yellow and sacrilegious. The fear was irrational as the eyes just looked and looked and looked as the gold grew heavier and heavier.

Then there was the smell. Lemons. Cake. Sunset. And time.

It was a room this time. Not big, not small. Not that I could tell the area it cover-

-ed as it was filled to the ceiling with what appeared to be bubbles. Different from the ones you can make from soap, bringing your fist together and blowing through it as your mother's fingers caressed the foam on your scalp. Ah, the wonders of childhood! I digress, but the room felt like it was made of digressions; the air was thick with half-spoken sentences and half-thought thoughts.

A small window pooled in the only light and the greens and yellows told me the sun was still setting. The bubbles refracted the light, revealing themselves to be made of glass. Crystal balls, which were slowly filling with white smoke. The smoke shaped itself into figures and images. I could recognise some resembling my past, some filled with laughter, others with tears from first falls. The balls farthest from the window had my recent years capsuled in them. Was it the low light which made them so grey? I could tell they were identical, like the film of a movie, moving from one frame to another, a difference of much less than seconds.

Cake. Eyes. Roots.

Book. Time.

Moon.

The room transformed into a building. It looked old and important and had a huge number of steps to a door. What was I to do but enter the building. It appeared to be a temple, it felt like one. But there was no idol, no shrine, no object that was shiny and appeared lovely but an empty space for one on the opposite side of the hall. There were no pews or carpets, no prayers, candles, or tears.

There was no ceiling and the sky was not yellow or green or blue or black. It was a pink moving into purples and there it was. The moon. The sun was nowhere to be found and I felt something heavy sitting at the bottom of my throat.

Grass. cAKE. lEmON. roots.

Moon