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Welcome to the Middle. The Middle is underrated. No one talks about the Middle. People forget the Middle. Apparently people only remember the first and last bites of the food they eat. The bites in the Middle? Totally forgotten.

As two Michiganders and former denizens of Middle America, we’d like to make a case for the Middle. We’re living in it, so we might as well. Sure, it isn’t the butterflies-in-your-stomach Beginning, when everything is novel and the possibilities laid out before you seem limitless. But, hey, at least it isn’t the End, when you will inevitably make a lot of people’s shoulders wet with your tears. Plus, remember how in the beginning, you didn’t know what you were doing?

For some, approaching or passing the halfway point of this year may have thrown you into a mid-post crisis. For others, it might mean you’ve finally built up enough of a rapport with your favorite street food seller to get yourself a discount. For first-year fellows like ourselves, it might mean you have decided whether or not you want to fill up your plate for a hearty serving of PiA seconds.

For this issue of PiARTS we asked you to reflect on the theme, “crescendo”, because of its connection to the word growth and expansion. As we suspected, you proved to us through your diverse submissions that, while the beginning and the end of the year-abroad bell curve might get all of the credit, it is the middle of this experience that teaches us the most about ourselves, our host countries, and the world. It is the daily act of living in foreign communities that challenges our beliefs and identities, that pushes us to examine our privilege, and to reflect upon both our roots and our blossoming.

Thank you for meeting us here, in the Middle. We hope you enjoy the beautiful and vulnerable work of your fellow fellows as much as we do.

With Love,
Eliza Mott, Sam Corey, & the PiARTS Editing Team
Siyu Lei
Yangon, Myanmar

Every two weeks I buy one stem of lily for 700 Myanmar kyat (around 60 cents) from the "ako*" who sells vegetables and flowers just outside of my apartment compound.

Like every other dealership based on longevity and familiarity, this one between me and my flower ako began with a price markup. At 1,000 per stem (still less than a dollar), I was paying 40 percent up this flower’s market value.

After a couple visits, my dealer realized that the Chinese girl who speaks no Burmese not only lives in the neighborhood, but that this transaction could also be ongoing. Since then, he has felt too bad to rip me off, so much so that he would occasionally compliment my broken Burmese.

Every two weeks, I go home with a single stem of flower, clean the leaves and put it on my night stand, watch it bloom, spread its scent, wither and die. Two weeks later, I go back to the same ako and buy another one.

Feeling drained of energy and creativity lately, I took some sick days to stay in bed. Sound asleep near my unbloomed lily one late morning, I heard this minuscule, but distinctive, squeaky noise from above my head.

It was unmistakably coming from my lily, the sound it made trying to crack open.

The plush petals pressed against each other, brushing back and forth, struggling to break free from the pressure and boundaries. The friction produced the puny sound, barely detectable, but still a triumphant announcement of the phenomenon that’s about to come.

And just like that, after sitting on my nightstand as a fresh bud for almost a week, in 15 minutes, the lily blossomed in front of my eyes. The petals smooth out and spread, like that’s how they’ve always been.

* "Ako" means "older brother," which in Myanmar what one uses to address just about every older male, from restaurant waiter to older colleague, and in this case, my lily dealer.
Dynamic Voices
Dallas Nan
Bangsak, Thailand

Throughout our life we hear inner voices, shaped by our experiences and our processing of those experiences, which we carry with us as we move forward into the unknown. I expect that Princeton in Asia has been some form of unknown for all of us, and I wanted to take this opportunity to share how the crescendos and decrescendos of some of those voices have been for me. On June 25th, I arrived in Bangsak, Thailand, and after embarking on a 38-day trip to Myanmar, China, and Laos on September 23rd, I returned to Bangsak on October 30th a renewed person.

Arriving in Bangsak, my roots clenched tightly
The ones I had nurtured for twenty-one years
The ones that defined who I had been
Who I should be

An apprehensive inner voice made me question my ability to
Live in a small village without the ideological comforts of my native culture
Unfinished business beckoned me, reminding me of work to be done and
A self to still discover

Perhaps this call to action was a product of my
Mismanagement of my relationships
Perhaps it was the rain that kept me in
Introverted to buffer uncertainty

Perhaps, no, definitely, it was my motorbike accident
Broken bones, broken newly initiated
Dreams of weight loss
Dreams of language gain

My dormant recovering body exacerbated the marination
Of doubt and the forces calling for my return
But bones know no borders
My humerus cared little about what country or bed it lay in to rebuild

Before I knew it, my life was hurling forward
Thousands of miles above the earth towards Myanmar
And then China, and then Laos
I was greeted with incredible, intricate cultures and humans
Many of them Princeton in Asia fellows

My life was moving too fast for the initial voice espousing hesitation to reach me
Instead the immediacy of new countries, cities, friends, flavors, sights, sounds
Demanded my active participation
Demanded that I look for and not take for granted the
Beauty in the difference around me

I returned to Bangsak guided by the crescendoing euphony
Of an inner voice that shook doubt and savored adventure
That rejected unfounded anchors and permitted the growth of
New roots

It is a voice that disbelieves the idea that this year is a pause on our lives
That we won’t carry the children we have taught and the
Friends we have made with us as we move forward no matter where we
Find ourselves

This voice is optimistic
It has fueled belief in myself to lose seventy pounds so far
It asks the self to be understanding of the students who sleep through class
And the boss that projects the instability of her life onto mine

This voice bellows my best self, and I hope that I can find ways to have it
Speak to me for the rest of my life.
Ode to Venus, My Bike
Christina Djossa
Kathmandu, Nepal

The last time I rode a bike was four years ago when I was living in Tokyo, Japan. My homestay mother wanted me to join her to complete some chores, and told me I could use her spare bike. At that point, I had not ridden a bike in five years. Everyone tells you riding a bike is muscle memory, but I struggled with balance and never learned how to use gears. Ultimately, I face planted at an intersection and all these Japanese people stared at me, the careless gaijin (foreigner). I was pretty embarrassed and completely swore off bikes.

Fast forward four years later, I am in a bike shop in Nepal looking for a used bike and breaking my promise. My commute is an hour long by bus, but by bike, just twenty-five minutes, less crowded and cheaper. Even though I knew the deadly risks riding in Kathmandu traffic, and did not have much riding experience, I decided to buy a used bike. Since then, it has been an incredibly rewarding and challenging journey re-learning a skill that I never fully understood. Mind you, the person who taught me how to ride a bike, my mother, does not know how to ride a bike herself.

So, in summary, biking is wonderful experience that has taught me about the outdoors. I wanted to appreciate my growing relationship with riding and my bike for being the queen that it is.

When I first saw your skinny frame, your sandy wheels and your silver paint, I was afraid.

Memories of when I had ridden the likes of you swirled into my consciousness.

I remembered:

the wobble,
the sweat,
the uneven grip,
the trepidation,
the brake,
the ditch,
the blood,
the onlookers,
the judgment,
and –me– the gaijin,
who looked liked a fool.

But, I needed you.

So after claiming you, we took off into Kathmandu rush–hour.
As I screamed down the road, you held steady.
As the trucks whizzed by, you swerved to create space.
As we approached potholes, you took the impact with grace.

After that day, I knew you were something.

Over the months, we began to trust each other.
I became your eyes for speeding motorbikes, and you became an extension of my legs, guiding me to destinations unknown.

With you, I have traversed places I never thought I’d go.
We’ve climbed steep hills and once we’d reach a summit, while panting, we’d congratulate each other.

We’ve raced down highways under the full moon, excited to reclaim the empty roads.

We’ve fled from foaming dogs, and narrowly escaped spit bullets that passed us by.

You’ve taught me how to be patient even when traffic is unbearable.

You’ve showed me that foresight is more than looking both ways, but anticipating chess moves.

Most importantly, I have learned from you that brown girls can conquer the outdoors, no matter how others look at us.

Even as you grow older, and the dents on your frame become profound, I am happy you are my night star, my friend, my bike, ready to ride through unruly chaos.
Abhi Veerina
Penang, Malaysia

Preface

This is my self-expression. A video-spoken-journal-podcast-music-thing of sorts. In its first imagining, it was an uncensored view of my sometimes toxic, often petty, but ultimately honest thoughts and reflections. It shared my perspectives throughout the tumult of the past couple months through video clips I have collected and images I find meaning in. It shared music which makes me feel safe. It shared my words, and the words of others, by the medium of my voice – my voice describing the ebbs and flows, the crests and crashes, the roars of laughter and the whimpers of helplessness, the echo-chamber of my rumination, the growing tension and the exasperation of trying to keep it together to the climactic shattering of the glass and the silence which ensues.

The first draft was designed as a sort of explanation to you, my dear fellows and directors. An explanation which six months ago I would not have even dared to share. Because who likes hearing the sound of their own voice? But, more because of how vulnerable this would make me feel. But, I guess I have changed since then.

The final draft contains remnants of this. As I watched the first draft, the negativity of my own words felt foreign to me. The melancholy remains, but with a positive spin. I decided that rather than an explanation, my work would instead be a dedication – a tribute of my gratitude and a practice of storytelling. I call it Book of Dreams after my journal with the same words printed on front. I got it in my first month of college and completed my final entry on the very last page at the end of 2016. It seemed appropriate.

I will admit it’s a little out there, even for me, but it was fun to put together and experiment with a different style of editing and telling my story. Thank you for being a part of it.
Book of Dreams

WHAT IS THIS COMPULSION?
TO CREATE SOMETHING.
AND NOW TO SHARE IT.
WHAT I SEE.
WHAT I HEAR.
WHAT I TASTE.
WHAT I SAY.
WHAT I THINK?

MAYBE IT ALWAYS EXISTED.
BUT I WAS JUST TOO SCARED.

I’ve romanticized this year abroad for sure — I’ve painted a picture in my mind of this escape I’ve been waiting for, for so so long, but life happens: passports need renewing, visas are delayed, you lose motivation and direction, people are racist, your grandfather passes away, Trump gets terrifyingly close to the White House. It is really easy to complain — but, you know, there is also so much to be optimistic and grateful about: I am physically healthy, recently a man without a single word gave me a ride on his motorcycle to the BTS, my colleagues at USM are a delightful, silly, selfie-taking cohort, I am reminded how smiles go such a long way each day, I am humbled by the hospitality of all the friends I’ve made, old and new.

On Friends

KHAO YAI NATIONAL PARK, THAILAND

I am overwhelmed. There are such beautiful people in this world and such beautiful experiences to be shared. I felt a new feeling here. A feeling that happened when a room of individuals open their hearts so widely that you can feel pulses of love, intimacy, and connection; that the goose-bumps keep rolling throughout your body; that you can’t stop smiling and tearing up; that you feel the roots of kindred spirits anchoring themselves.

Thank you.
On Family
SAN FRANCISCO INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

Oct. 30th, 2016

Wow. Big night. No more secrets.

Nov. 1st, 2016

Ugh. I am so privileged. I have never seen love displayed like that. It brings tears to my eyes. I wish I was able to show them the same kind of love.

Jan. 13th, 2017

Dear Dad & Momer,

This year on my birthday, I am thinking about how lucky I am to have parents like you. I have learned a lot about myself over the past couple of years – but perhaps, the most important being the power of being vulnerable with those who are close to you.

The past year and a half was the most difficult period of my life. But, it was also the period I have felt most loved. Because I shared my struggle with you, I feel closer to you both than I ever have. From the way you demonstrated your love to me back home and coming all the way to Malaysia for me, to your continued support for my crazy, unconventional path, to your unwavering belief that I will be successful, influence the world and rise from my struggle – all of this gives me pure vitality. It has proven to me that asking for help is not weakness, that receiving love and support is a sign of a full life, and that a full life is exactly what I have.

Although we are far apart today, I am thinking of you and full of gratitude and deep love. Thank you.

Love,
Abhi
On the Election

PENANG, MALAYSIA

I am sitting in my office.
8:15am. November 10th.

I keep thinking to myself,
“the sun rose today.
the sun rose today.
the sun rose today.
and it was beautiful”,

but, the tears fall anyway.

my father told me this morning,
“you are a good person.
that’s what matters”,

they can’t take that away from me.

I will love more deeply.
I will listen more carefully.
I will fight more passionately.

the sun will rise again tomorrow,
and it will be beautiful.

On Cendol

PENANG, MALAYSIA

Sweet,
milky.
coconut heaven.
slides down my throat.
Shards of ice soothe my flushed face.
Textures keep changing, my thirst never quenching.
Part confection.
Part refreshment.
Satisfaction.
Dec. 1st, 2016 – Penang, Malaysia

“There’s a sunset and sunrise every day. You can choose to be there for it. You can put yourself in the way of beauty.”

“What if I forgive myself? What if I was sorry? But if I go back in time, I wouldn’t do a single thing differently.” –Cheryl Strayed

Dec. 12th, 2016 – Penang, Malaysia

“But dreams adjust in new realities.” –Trever Hagen

Dec. 14th, 2016 – Penang, Malaysia

“In cultivating compassion we draw from the wholeness of our experience – our suffering, our empathy, as well as our cruelty and terror. It has to be this way. Compassion is not a relationship between the healer and the wounded. It’s a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of others. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity.” –Pema Chödrön, The Places That Scare You

I’m doing my best.

Dec. 25th, 2016 – Narita International Airport

Just like the good feelings came to me here, I can feel them leaving. Alone on Christmas.
And a little drunk.
PiA ends on my birthday.
I don’t know what to ask for.
Dec. 27th, 2016 – Penang, Malaysia

I will be going home.

The last fellow to start and the first to finish.

Annamaria and I often laughed about how this will be a funny memory soon enough. I didn’t expect soon enough to be so soon. But, I didn’t expect a lot of things.

But, this was a great experience whether or not it was the one I was expecting to have. I have not made such quick, reverberating, profound friendships to date. I am so proud of my students – for their antics, their openness, their enthusiasm, and their hard work. I am in awe of the temples I have explored, the beaches I dug my feet into, the forests I’ve trekked through.

I am no longer (quite as) alarmed by cockroaches. I drool at the thought some spicy Laab with sticky rice and a cold Chang. I have never sweat so much in my entire life – Chicago winters ain’t so bad. I am lucky to have been part of this cohort – to associate myself with you, a group of role-models, leaders, and strong individuals. I have learned about the power of gratitude even when my mind obscured me from it. I have learned about being vulnerable and how important it is. But, perhaps most importantly, I learned that I can’t distract myself from myself anymore. Things are going to be okay. I’m just still learning to forgive myself.

“Barn’s burnt down/now/I can see the moon.” –Mizuta Masahide
Mt. Agassiz
Maddy Dahm
Vientiane, Laos

Artist: Nipslip

A not-so-subtle way of breaking the news to important people that you’re staying for a second year
Michael Augustine
Can Tho, Vietnam

Energy and people alike labor
To acquire, build, solidify, and
grow both finite and
intangible resources, that
much seems undeniable. But
that begs the question: For
what? I am, as are many young
people too, sorting out that
question bit-by-bit as it comes,
but this narrative poem does
not address the result(s) of
such growth, but rather the
conditions that foster it.
If you ask me, the good times were meant to roar
Ask me about those good times—and I'll think long and hard
I'll tell you they don't look like those distractions on your news feed, nor do they read like the words in
my blog
There isn't a formula for 'em
There isn't a filter
Ask me about the things I did out here, and instead I'll tell you about how they made me feel
Yet, I wonder why the sounds of such times aren't ingrained in memory, like the notes produced by a
grand piano are re-traced, reconsidered, and reborn by its player as she plays
Where are those sounds? You know the ones that:
    — linger like a long, hard laugh long after a joke falls out of memory;
    — or sync, surge, and eventually spike with a tantalizing drop
    — or cry, cry for more! not always selfishly, often out of outright appreciation
In what realm do those sounds of past lie?
For what should I listen now?

[Tick tick tick] Now listen closely as the hour is about to strike 6
Six symbols struck sequentially
Shh, you can almost hear the silence
But time never stops as long as we keep counting it:
Tick tick tick, again, do you hear that?
It's the almost silence I swear I never knew I needed, which I enjoy now
Like clockwork, a year's worth of expectations (mis--pectations) spontaneously debunked the only thing
worth guaranteeing:
    — this year will surely expand (and even test) the substantive threads of our
    — youthful hopes and dreams and beliefs further than our imaginations have ever
    — yet roamed

Let the race begin—we all had something in mind the moment we said 'I do' to PiA's match made in
heaven (read: a clammy Princeton office over left-over pizza and day--old coffee)
Like race horses, thoughts and feelings of the past tugged tugged tugged begging us stallionettes to run
free from life's suspect comforts of home
I muddle upon the memories of PiA interviews of past when my body thrashed about the race gate, and
my mind skipped 10 meters down its track
Feel these memories around for yourself—feel yourself taking first steps in yesterday's shoes, the only
shoes you knew at the time: benevolently bullshtting with all the impassioned drive in the world to fill
the shoes of some soul you read about in a blurb and a clunky fellow report
Bathe in your anxieties of these distant days, we all had them! bathe like you've fallen into a massive pit of
mud that you never meant to move out of!
Flash your pearly white teeth under the sea of uncertainty that clung to you and seemed to own life of its
own accord
Now inhale yesteryear's excitement: where were you when you heard the news that your dream was
coming true?
What did you think the moment such dreams, like 'omg--are--you-f'ing--serious,' actualized?
    — Thank god: I won't suffer empty handed through graduation small--talk, I thought
Naaa of course I joke: I felt awestruck by such admission into a sea of opportunity, with its interpersonal
treasures and trials underneath picturesque, arduous waters
This is possibility's immaculate weightlessness yet vow of responsibility I couldn't believe I was trusted to
own
Snap back now; step back to the year's memories thus far...memories and moments dear and near or
distant, darling or daring, defined or still due in due time
As we turn the second corner of the track, rejoice in the thrills seen in the rear--view
Refill—not just oxygen but the heart that needs it, as we turn the corner
Center yourself, perhaps with sound, stepping back to all that greets the ear as you enter, embrace, and
embark from your home—as temporary or trusted as it is—that place perhaps in a city you'd never even
heard until a year ago
Listen to sounds you’ve found familiar
Have you forgotten yet that they’re different than the sounds we left back home?
Will you ever forget them as other sounds start calling?
The sounds of our everyday, what are they? Aren’t they worth a listen:
So I listen:
Clink clink clink—the beer glasses beg cheers and another gulp.
An iPhone forgets how to [Buzz] without that gotta-have-it crutch known as WiFi
A choir of backpackers echo each other with talks of:
obnoxiously detailed itineraries devoid of character and introspection
that spread through host countries like a contagion, commodifying cities to
checked boxes and reducing socio-ecosystems to a TripAdvisor review about the
best place to overpay for beer, but what’s new?
Vroom vroom vroom—every motorbike in SE Asia seems to rev at once
Teacher, teacher, teacher—my students’ passionate cries remind me of my main purpose out here and
that I should probably be lesson planning (for once)
But, my favorite sounds—I have to say—come in the margins
After we hear over the airplane’s loudspeaker: ‘Please store your electronic devices until the captain has
turned off...’ya ya ya...’ as we send that last text anyways

My favorite sounds enmesh me in my surroundings, they ring when I’m blissfully free from others, a
strand of solitude that’s the chicken noodle soup for the soul
I have come to embrace certain sounds echoing free from the hype, hoopla, and have-your-cake-and-eat-it-too heyday of an undergraduate fling
Now, I’ve come to embrace Silence as not only a noun, but a verb too
A verb guiding a life in which I can live unperturbed in these times of exploration
For when sounds shut off and Silence begins, a funny little thing happens:
Nothing, nothing at all
When I walk the block I’ve lived for months, I see my neighbors, their homes, their children on shiny
bikes, all with fresh eyes;
When we unbother ourselves with red pop-ups on touch screens that only seem to compel touch, then we
sit and stare at the path light takes to travel through the open spaces of our homes
Sipping caffeine we don’t really need at yet another coffee shop, we bask under sun or even hold out for
the rains to quit—momentarily beyond the world’s grip—enjoying the silence that falls between jokes,
stories, and questions with company that means the world when you’re halfway around it

The clock ticks and we forget our need to talk, and, if we’re lucky, even to think
The clock hits adult and we forge a path away, a path afar
The clock spits the shit and we shoot it right back, because when this world doesn’t owe us a damn thing
we gotta enjoy the life in these years, not these years of our life.
But really the clock doesn’t mean much at all, and sometimes I imagine the same is true about me and
you: the three of us ticking away, anyway, as long as life will have us
So for now just let me tick tick tick and pick my way along a bit further, breaking for peace when I can
afford it—or rather, when it affords me—bustling when those baroque hands up on the wall tell me so, but
meanwhile remembering, out here while I’m afar from all I’ve known, the value of this noiselessness, as
marginal as it may seem, because these moments aren’t absent of anything at all
All that fulfillment, jest, purpose, and GROWTH, for which I’ve search for such a time, it’s here, and it’s
there!
It’s in me and in you, it’s in us (and in them), it’s in the loss and in the found, it’s in tomorrow, but it also
IS today; it’s in the cheers, and, of course, it’s in the silence too.
Chris Patacsil
Colombo, Sri Lanka

-2
7/2
Time is relative
The wind carries leaves aloft
The rain will end soon

20
23/7
Distance is too hard
I really fucking miss her
We lasted three weeks

117
28/10
Plus-que-parfait nuit
She tasted like cigarettes
Safety came second

177
27/12
Self-delusions hurt
I really need to get her out of my life but I don’t want to lose her
No Brokeback Mountains

439
9/15
Robbing apple trees,
Will they survive the winter?
HaHA! Fonder? Please
Splice
Annamaria Watson
Penang, Malaysia

In “A Walk to Remember” Mandy Moore wishes that before she dies she could be in two places at once, and I relate to that desire to be somewhere else and here desire to be divided or shared but clearly you should only wish for what might never be, because what do you do with a wish that always comes true? and who are you if you are always becoming? and splitting in two?

Not quite slew, but more like an amoeba, or a cell, a body, a phone, a room. If you can’t see it and you can’t feel it, are you really there? If you aren’t here you aren’t there, and is your wish happening to you?
Homebase
November 2016 to January 2017
after Shawn Wong

Sophia Leung Rosenfeld
Patan, Nepal

NOTES

This poem is not directly about my experience in Nepal. However, I don’t think I would have written it had I not been living so far from the United States during this election, and consequently thinking a lot about the politics of calling a place home.

The title of this poem is from Homebase, a novel by Shawn Wong about a young Chinese American man in coming of age in California in the 1950s and 60s. The novel asks: How can you find your home base in a country that has tried for decades to keep your family from putting down roots there? (Look up the Chinese Exclusion Act if you’re not sure what that means).

My mother told me this story about her Chinese American family’s cross country road trip in the early seventies, and I thought about how vast the United States is, how little of it I know, and how the concept of ‘belonging’ becomes even more fraught when you consider that most Americans (except Native Americans, of course) are living on occupied land.
It’s 1971. My mother rides in a camper from New York to San Francisco parents at the wheel, brothers and sisters in the back watches her country roll by the traffic of Long Island the bridges over the East River, the Hudson into New Jersey, Pennsylvania, across the cornfields of Ohio and Kentucky’s lush green into the flat endless highways of the Midwest then the low-tide swells of hills and Colorado and Mexico’s deserts and mountains all around clear cold American air

My mother began a love affair with the vast oceans of valley out west far from the criss-crossed suburbs of the east Last year, after we drove across Wyoming I finally understood what she meant found myself also falling for that never ending and unforgiving land

That land is my country, or at least it was land within my own country, mine within the borders of the home that is my home it felt like alien land and yet there it was, an unbroken expanse which my mother and I love despite its strangeness to our Northeastern eyes its pain and all its stories we don’t know

In 1971, my grandparents pulled into a rest stop on a Navajo reservation in Arizona all six kids piled out of the camper, drank cold sodas My mother, the youngest, wore braids and the shopkeeper gasped when he saw her asked her to wait a moment ran to the back and returned with his granddaughter.

don’t they look alike he said. Everyone agreed that it was uncanny the resemblance between these two girls: their black braided hair, t-shirts, shorts, sandals

standing on land in a country whose men stole that land from one girl’s ancestors and tried to keep the other one’s out

And yet here is the land. Here stand the girls.
The World Is Exploding
And I Am Changing But
Everything Is Going Fine

Maddy Dahm
Vientiane, Laos
Princeton-in-Asia (PiA) is an independent, not-for-profit organization that aims to foster mutual appreciation and cultural understanding between the U.S. and Asia by connecting service-minded graduates and partner organizations in Asia through immersive work experiences that transform perspectives, cultivate long-lasting relationships and benefit local and global communities.

OUR PiARTS TEAM

Core Team | Lena Sun, Annamaria Watson, Christina Djossa
Issue 2 Editors | Eliza Mott, Sam Corey, Annamaria Watson
Issue 2 Designers | Lena Sun, Jan Kwan, Annie Wang

PHOTOGRAPHY & ILLUSTRATIONS

Kara Weinstein Nan, Thailand | Cover, Page 18
Jordan Hyunh Macau, China | Pages 2-3, 13, 19-20
Siyu Lei Yangon, Myanmar | Page 4
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