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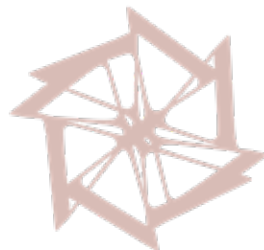
ATMOSPHERE

Surface Tension

Eric Trinh Chu | fiction | 124

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SURFACE TENSION

Eric Trinh Chu

On a night relentless waves of raindrops threw themselves onto concrete, Eli perched, naked as a jaybird, on top a closed toilet lid. Tape recorder in one hand, two-toned lilac-aquamarine ball in the other, they could stand if they wanted to, but it would be a tight fit between the antique sink cabinet and oblong toilet bowl. To their left, a flimsy plastic patio chair stood as a makeshift barricade against the toilet and door. And on their right, a bathtub filled rapidly with scalding water. The window above sat just a tiny sliver ajar, funneling the wind into a manic wail.

Ball in right hand redolent of dill, shaving cream, lavender, and the ocean; fresh and bracing, sweet and calming, evocative of some small, un-namable, pinpoint ache. “*You need to pamper yourself a little more, bb,*” Chi-anh had said. Bourgeoise nonsense, but far too expensive a gift to just throw away. The glittering orb slipped under the water, burst into bubblegum clouds, so bright a contrast against the faded cream tone of the tub and its mottling of soap scum and mold. The wind wailing so shrill and insistent that it might be worth holding the window shut even if wouldn’t stay.

Recorder at the edge of the tub. Its red button, inlaid with a smooth groove for fingertips, yielded with an audible click.

“Testing, testing,” Eli intoned. The wind’s howling became almost quizzical.

“La-la-la-lariat. Laputa. Last ditch effort.”

In lurching steps, they lowered their legs into the iridescent water. The temperature was still nearly unbearable, but they deserved it.

“Switchblade...apricot...needlepoint...absolution.”

If only forgiveness were as simple as this.

“I am become one with ze bath bomb.” Click. “*Testing, testing,*” the tinny voice repeated. “*La-la-la—*” click.

The key to courting madness is to invite just enough to keep life at bay. In the confines of that sweltering room, hermetically sealed but for the window’s gash through which the wind cried out its occasional response, Eli spoke words both real and imagined, strung fragments and chased thoughts as diffuse as the steam that rose from the bath. What heated moisture stole away out the window instantly condensed, joined millions of other droplets plummeting onto the earth. Perhaps a man in the adjacent slice of the projects could be lighting a cigarette, the flame’s flicker and the cig’s fleeting mote a momentary respite from the heavy dark. Perhaps he was due to turn in for the night; a future husband, perhaps, whittling away the minutes before sleep arrived. How many months of wages was he was supposed to blow on a set of twee little wearable rocks

that would neither feed him nor keep him warm? The diamonds wouldn't, but they might just win him a wife who would. His form in the dark would be reclining on a loveseat the shade of vomit brown. Fiction, for the aspiring bathtub poet or the imaginary working man, maintained that delicate balance, that translucent boundary between the yearnings of a human heart and the vast incomprehensibility of an uncaring universe.

A knock. Eli could almost pretend it was a trick of the wind until three more came, then another three, and then: "Elina!"—that strange sound, repulsive in its familiarity yet increasingly alien, like a name meant for a palm-sized pet transliterated into the wrong language.

"I'm coming in!" the voice declared. The door met quick resistance from the chair barred against it. At the realization that yes, their dipshit brother would really try and force his way in, Eli shouted: "fuck off, Vincent!" But before his name could stop echoing through the paper thin walls, he'd slammed his entire weight into the door—the chair, utterly hopeless against this man who had trained his body for violence, first compressed like an accordion against the toilet before its pliable legs snapped off its frame, and shards of bigger and smaller once-chair clattered around the cramped bathroom. Steam whirled inward from the intrusion, parted and then resettled around the pieces of projectile plastic.

A rush of cold air followed Vincent in. Eli curled into a fetal position, but the water only rose to a little above their shins now that they turned to face him, knees hugged against chest, toes pressed flat against the side of the tub. They shivered as their upper half met cold air and then shuffled their arms over their shoulders. "Get out," they said.

Vincent glared pointedly to one side. His eyes darted left and right from the pieces of the fractured patio chair, to the brightly colored water, to the tape recorder that had fallen on the floor. Its reel was still spinning. He directed his response towards the sink:

"What...are you doing." An accusation, not a question. "It's called self-care. You should try it after you get the fuck out," Eli replied. A spasm of something that could have been laughter started at his chest before it squeezed its way between his tightly clenched jaws: "You?! Self-care? That's rich. That's really rich, Elina—" A flash of anger: "I told you to stop calling me that," they said. "Well it's the name on your goddamn license, it's the name mom gave you, and if you think you know better, then go get it changed!," Vincent roared at the window above Eli.

"Or what?" Eli said. They studied his posture, the set of his hands. "Are you going to arrest me," they asked, "you fucking pig?" There: his overgrown hands clenched into fists, unfurled, clenched again, unfurled. "What—" he started. Now that Vincent finally looked into the eyes of the sibling he thought he had known his entire life, he saw a caged animal staring back. He bit his tongue, averted his gaze again. "Look," he said, "I was just worried about you, ok?" His hands found their way back into his pockets. "You mean what I'd do *this* time?" Eli said. Above the sink, the hinges where a mirror's frame should have pivoted were visibly warped where the frame had been ripped off the wall. "Mo lei," he muttered under his breath as he reviewed the old damage. He continued his scan around the room: the shelves of the medicine cabinet, still emptied; the plastic pieces of chair strewn about—no sharp edges; nothing on the ground or the edge of the tub or on the windowsill but the toppled tape recorder; the feral adolescent in the candy-colored water clearly on guard, but intact.

"You can't just waste water like this," he said, "unless you're the one paying for it."

"If I had the money, I'd buy actual locks," Eli said.

"Ha, ha. I'm sure mom would be so down with that. Why don't you ask for a tattoo while you're at it? Or break a few more things that you can't pay for?," he said. "I *do* work," they said. "Well find work that actually pays," he said. "I'd rather s-starve than do what y-you do," they said. The bathwater had lost most of its warmth. "All c-cops means *all* c-cops, p-pig," they hissed. "FYI," he said, "hating on people who risk their lives to keep you safe isn't a valid personality. You're lucky we still care

about you. Even mom still loves you, even though you're a—" *oof*. An abrupt pause, his jaws clenched tight again, his eyes back to the window.

"Even though I'm a *what*, Vincent?" Eli hated how their voice climbed two octaves then, how *this* was always what it came down to. Their arms returned to a tight wrap around their knees, a score of fine criss-crossing lines paling into sight on their skin pulled taut.

"An asshole. Now get out before you catch a cold. Chop chop!" He shut the door, not ungently.

Behind the door, a garish soup of lukewarm, not-quite-purple and not-quite-blue water swirled down the drain. A not-quite-child, not-quite-adult Eli squatted, swathed in towel, gazed out the window at the stormy sky. The endless keening of the wind was both a song of yearning and a manifesto composed by the broken seal between inside and outside. Eli wondered what it would feel like to finally escape their narrow existence, to join millions of other rain droplets as they became something more than themselves.

Her. Chi-anh, who smelled of apricots and coyote brush. Chi-anh in the sun, a smile to match the floppy cloth sunflower on her hat, aficionado of gifts both gag and sincere, Mercedes-whisperer, star-child, smart as a whip and oh so terribly soft. Chi-anh whose first words in the hazy space between their waking dreams and memories were "*you need to get out more, b*" and whose last words to them were "*I really don't think so, Eli*." Chi-anh whose perfect smile was immediately recognizable from rows and rows of animated faces, some eating, some surreptitiously adjusting their hair, and others, like Eli, resigned to allow a darkened square with their name printed across to hold their place in digital space.

"Doesn't it feel strange, to hold a celebration like this?," said Tam Pau Lee. The accordions yellow bar underneath her static portrait was the only indication she was speaking. Her portrait depicted, in black-and-white, a young woman in her twenties, fist raised in solidarity at some march. This march probably took place a long, long time ago; if you stared long enough at the photo you could almost hear Tam cry *ain't no power like the power of the youth cus' the power of the youth don't stop—say what!* Oh, Tam was still a force of nature, only now she led rallies in a wheelchair. Her raspy and genial voice rang out from Eli's tinny speakers: "I am sure some of you are quite sick of this by now—the ten, fourteen, fifteen hours you spend every day on the inter-web!," Tam continued. Eli shook their head, even though nobody could see them. "I, for one, sure feel like my butt has atrophied! Or maybe that is normal for my age," Tam cackled, causing a ripple of motion as each person in the video mosaic of participants laughed in response. "Let's start off with a performance from one of our own, very special, musically gifted fellows!" said Tam. A small kernel of something cold and painfully heavy seemed to condense in the pit of Eli's stomach.

Chi-anh, whose voice was worth drowning in. Chi-anh, who held her ukelele like a small child. The microphone icon with a red slash vanished from beneath her video tile. For the first time in twelve revolutions of moon chasing sun, her voice shot again into Eli's ears, a timbre so beloved and familiar, sparking warm recollection, a constellation of pinpoint pricks of light behind their eyes. "This one's for all you movement babes," she began. A dull ache pulsed in their lungs. "A reminder that we are joined not only by a shared analysis of our material conditions, but by our mutual struggle for liberation. We cannot be liberated until we *feel* liberated," Chi-anh said. Utter bullshit, meaningless and hollow, craven, shameless, so sincere, so sweet. There was no such thing as liberation. Liberation was somewhere locked deep, and dark, and far underground, bound and pressed against Chi-anh. Chi-anh who began to sing:

“Three little birds, sat on my window / And they told me I don’t need to worry.”

Eli pointed their mouse cursor over Chi-anh’s tile. The prompt over the chat box changed from Everyone to Private Message:
BanAnhAnh97

“Summer came like cinnamon, so sweet.”

A flood of text erupted, Eli’s fingers flying over keys: *Please tell me what I did wrong. I’m sorry. I miss you.* Absolute certainty that this was a terrible idea.

“Little girls double-dutch on the concrete.”

Click. Immediate regret.

“Maybe sometimes...”

Chi-anh, whose eyes were an ocean of brown,

“...we got it wrong...”

glanced at the flicker of text,

“...but it’s alright....”

and plucked the wrong chord, harsh and discordant. Unease rippled through the faces on the video mosaic. Some emoted concern or sympathy, while others waved jazz hands as a sign of support. None of them mattered. None of them would take her away again.

“Sorry, let me try again,” she said.

Two years ago, Chi-anh threw a party. Friends of friends arrived at this inter-org exchange. *Party Worker* thumped in the background. “You sure you should be giving me this?,” Eli said, holding up their glass. Chi-anh rolled her eyes, shot a conspiratorial smile. “You need to get out more, b,” she replied, raising up hers in response. A clink, barely audible, as they toasted to that summer’s successful wage theft campaign. Eli’s first taste of liquid fire, or molten stars. Before long, the two of them were taking turns trying to spin a plastic step stool like a top. The movement elders watched with benign disapproval until Tam approached. “Sweetie,” Tam began, “wouldn’t I get in trouble with your mom if she found out I let you break all her furniture?” she asked. “Tam-uhhhh,” Chi-anh whined, “it’s from the dollar store!” “Right,” Eli snorted, “why do you even have one of these?” Tam gave Eli a conspiratorial look. “I’m pretty sure your mom has a few, Lina. I’m pretty sure everyone here’s mom does,” Tam said.

That was probably true, “but...,” Eli said, gesturing loosely at the furniture around—the expansive refrigerator with its built-in icemaker, the wall-to-wall glass windows, the giant television on the wall, the diplomas framed around it. “And...” they said, pointing at the plastic orange bath stool wobbling haphazardly on its edge.

“Bud,” Chi-anh said. “Buddy. Budderino. Let me tell you something.” She threw an arm around Eli, pulled them close. She swept her other arm in a wide arc, as if to unveil some fundamental truth about the universe:

“You’re never too rich for the dollar store.”

How long after until they lay in bed in each other’s clothes? Flouting shelter-in-place felt so deliciously taboo, and time seemed to have loosened its grip. Chi-anh’s bedroom was almost as big as the entire room of Eli’s SRO in the Tenderloin. Quiet, sealed off, no puddles of shit or dirty needles on the sidewalk outside. Her thumb slowly traced a circle over the back of Eli’s hand, a circle matched in time to the recorder’s spinning reel held up close to their ears.

“So you just...like, what, free-associate when you’re in the bath?” she asked.

“I guess you could call it that,” they said.

“Well what would *you* call it then?” she said.

“Free-associate, *dis*associate, what’s the difference,” they said.

“Nooo-uh,” she said. Her playful grin turned serious. “Don’t joke about that.” There was nothing to say to such naive sincerity. Chi-anh’s hand gripped tightly around their wrist, as if to hold them fast to this shared bed. This shared breath, inches apart. These satiny sheets, this cavernous room. This slice of suburbia, this momentary still in a world that would surely storm again. Perhaps she would hold them this tightly if they leaned over the balcony outside, if they teetered over its edge.

Of course not. No one would. She would get tired of holding on, like everyone else did. It would be for the best. Maybe no one would notice. They could be here, but not here—here just enough to skim across the rooftops like Karl the fog, *not* here just enough to be possible to love.

“Well, whoever you are, whatever you’re called, you are welcome to stay,” she said. Chi-anh in the dark, her index finger tracing circles over Eli’s navel. Chi-anh, her lips over their ear: “Lina; Eli. My best kept secret.”

She was still holding on that afternoon she drove them to the clinic, Eli in the back, a black cloth bandana tied over their face. Chi-anh and her mother bickered over the roar of wind whipping in through the open windows and the muffling of their airtight N95’s. But for a few English words like “racecar” and “dangerous,” Eli could not understand the finer points of their argument, but they could at least guess the topic of Mrs. Tran’s lecture.

Chi-anh, completely unable to drop an argument. She pulled the family Benz into the incoming plaza without missing a beat in their dispute. Mrs. Tran now seemed to shift topic, waved in Eli's general direction, let off a volley of rapid-fire points. What was it *now*? The glare of the late afternoon sun off the pavement was blinding. A mischievous idea emerged. With a flourish, Eli tore off their facial covering. Mrs. Tran stopped mid-sentence. She regarded the ruddy face of her daughter's friend with surprise, then suspicion. *Now let's see if I can get this right*, Eli thought.

Honored matron, I would request your daughter's hand in marriage," Eli said in their best impression of a scene they had watched with Chi-anh. The car screeched to a sudden halt, drawing a salvo of irate honks from the line of cars behind Chi-anh's. The shock on her mother's face turned to frustration again as she barked a series of commands and directions. Now, finally parked, her mother stomped a foot outside the door. "I see you are enjoying history dramas of Vietnam," Mrs. Tran said into the rearview mirror. "That is good thing for you," she said, before taking off towards the plaza storefronts at a determined pace. The silver ichthus fish brooch on her purse caught the sun's glare, glinting like a small alarm.

"What the fuck, Eli!" Chi-anh seethed. Chi-anh, who sulked and pouted when she didn't get her way. "Are you *drunk* right now?," she asked. "When am I not, baby?," they said in their best impression of Elvis, which even on a good day was not very good at all, just all-around garbage like the rest of them. "You could buy us a fifth, get your mom back in here and do some xe đũa," they said. "Eli, that's not funny. I hate it when you get like this. You're not like this—" Chi-anh, whose lips tasted like sugarcane and pandan that afternoon.

"If you knew me at all, you wouldn't force me to stay in the closet for you," Eli said, their hands at the buttons of Chi-anh's blouse. "No, Eli," she said, her voice gentle now. Chi-anh, whose eyes always promised more than she could give. "You know that's not how this works," she said.

The last messages between them:

So you'll still be around, right? So will I. What's the point in being strangers? Let's be friends.

I really don't think so, Eli.

Why not?

Message Not Sent: You cannot reply to this conversation.

The group chat began to flood with support for Chi-anh, and some of the fellows from their partner orgs unmuted their mics for a moment: "You can do it, girl!"; "You sound great!"; "Run it back!"; "Let's gooo, Chi-anh!"

Chi-anh, who had returned a smile to her face. Her fingers moved over her ukelele again, and her voice blossomed over airwaves to a hundred listeners who did not deserve her:

"Summer came like cinnamon, so sweet / Little girls double-dutch on the concrete," she sang.

Chi-anh, who would not, perhaps could not, follow them into the storm.

“Maybe sometimes we got it wrong, but it’s all right.”

Chi-anh, who held little desire to dash what inside her had no name against the closest things Eli knew to oblivion: a warm body, or fermented grapes, or a three-word lie told over and over again until it became truth.

“The more things seem to change, the more they stay the same.”

Perhaps, once, she was willing or able to tell that lie, but if she was no longer willing, then Eli did not want to spend the rest of their miserable, short life wondering what had changed.

“Ooh, don’t you hesitate.”

Chi-anh, whose growing silence would only make her more and more impossibly beautiful with each passing day—more tragically, insufferably, unreachably soft, and warm, and worth hurting for.

Eli hovered their mouse over the chat. The recipient indicator reverted to Everyone.

“Girl, put your records on, tell me your favorite song.”

Chi-anh Tran, if you don’t answer my messages right now I am going to go away, forever, they typed. The message was quickly washed away by the tide of other fellows who, similarly without webcams, had only the chat box to communicate.

“You go ahead, let your hair down.”

I have a plan, I will leave where no one will ever find me again and it will be entirely your fault, Eli continued. Messages of confusion began to appear, but Eli was focused only on Chi-anh’s video tile. Chi-anh, however, had begun to hit her stride, and her eyes were screwed shut as she hit the high notes:

“Sapphire and faded jeans / I hope you get your dreams / Just go ahead let your hair down.”

I’ll be waiting on my phone. Call me or else, Eli concluded.

“Eli!” Tam shouted, her voice garbled as scores of other participants also unmuted themselves to try and intervene, “*do not—*”

The screen went black. Eli took their finger off the power button of their dusty desktop tower, tapped their phone against the desk. They lost count over how many thundering heartbeats passed before Chi-anh called:

“Eli.” Just business. The voice she used when canvassing for-profits for donation.

“You know what I want,” Eli said. “Answer me. What the hell is going on?”

“Eli, I don’t owe you an explanation for why things didn’t work out.” Like hell she didn’t.

“Okay, but what can I do? What do you want me to do? You know we still have to work together, right?” This wasn’t quite true. She could go wherever she wanted. She didn’t need the money. Their fellowship would end, she would remain on staff or whatever, they would likely go their separate ways. If they didn’t do something now she might flit away forever.

“I don’t want you to do anything, Eli.” Her voice, though weary, seemed to soften a touch: *“I want you to go college and forget me, forget this happened. It was a mistake, I should have known better, I shouldn’t have led—”*

“I’m an adult! I wanted this too!” they hated the sensation of warm tears rolling down their face. Wanted and still wanted, forever—maybe not the painful parts, but even those were better than silence unbroken.

“Eli, you exhaust me. You just do things sometimes, and it’s like you completely ignore how others can feel, or what you might do to yourself. It’s scary.” Sinking. They should sink into the ground. They didn’t deserve to live.

“You need to understand how hard it is for me to even tell you this. I-I’m gonna go, but know that if we’re ever going to see each other again, you need to give me, give us, some space.” Death would certainly hurt less than this, wouldn’t it?

“I don’t know how I could go on without you. You *promised me—*” Eli started.

“To care for you, Eli. And right now, the only way I can do that is to ask you what hospital you would prefer—”

“Fuck you.” Eli hung up. An electric agitation began to course through their veins. An ache that urged them to jump down the stairs, a whole flight, maybe several, at a time. Vincent was ready for them in the landing. “Move, pig, I’m not in the mood,” Eli said, before spotting the cuffs in his hand. “What...?” they said.

It wasn’t the first time the two had fought, tooth and nail, loudly enough to disturb the other tenants of the building. But this time, only Eli screamed, and this time Vincent had grown much larger since they were children.

This feral youth, not quite Eli, not quite Lina. Eli under a darkening sky that warned of imminent rain. Eli, wrangled into the backseat of a two-tone cruiser, told “we’re getting you help.” Eli, screaming and thrashing, their head turned upward toward heaven. The door forcefully thrown shut; a pocket of air burst in their ear; the first drops began to crash onto earth.

ERIC TRINH CHU is an MFA in creative writing at the University of Washington, though he is on leave this pandemic. He also writes under the pen name Ira Jun.

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