



WRITTEN BY JORDAN NISHKIAN
PHOTOGRAPHED BY IAN MCGINNIS

*You once heard that you could
figure out which way was up
by following the bubbles.*



You weren't sure when it had started, but the tinnitus that haunted your right ear had now wrapped around your head and entered your left. At first, it was something you only heard in silence—now there were days when the ringing was nearly debilitating.

You pushed through work until the new guy with the compass tattoo relieved your shift in the parking lot attendant booth. Summer was over; even at four, the sky left you wanting for daylight.

The thirty-minute walk home was littered with crescendos of ringing in your ears—aggravated by squealing tires and blasts of bass-heavy music—but it quieted down by the time your heavy feet trudged up the stairs to your studio apartment.

Though it had been two months since Mara moved out, you were half expecting to hear the chatter from one of her shows when you opened your door. You didn't miss her need for noise, but you did miss the bread she learned to bake by watching British people compete for a cake stand, the superstitious habits she developed when she watched something too scary, the lack of space she left on your walls. You missed how she could sing along to any song.

You never noticed the ringing until she left—maybe there was something to her strategy.

Eight hours in the attendant booth left you with a film of stale exhaust settling into your skin. The patter of water in the shower was usually the only type of ambient distraction that could appease the ringing, but perhaps it was the steam.

You reached your arm behind the clear plastic shower curtain and turned the water-spotted knob. A rattle in the pipes released a sluggish trickle from the showerhead. After weeks of warning, the shower arm had finally given out on you.

You tried your luck with the tub faucet, smacking down the calcified peg that directed water to your now-useless showerhead. Tepid water flowed out of the teal-tinged tap, and once it warmed up a bit, you pressed down on the drain stopper until you felt it click into place.

The water crashing into the acrylic tub became a part of the city soundtrack as you walked across the apartment to the kitchen. You dried your hand on a rumpled up towel on the counter and glanced over your uninspired pantry, opting to pour yourself half a mug of the black spiced rum Mara left behind.

The ringing swelled, but before your hand could reach your ear, it quieted. It was still there, but not as sharp, like the reverberation after striking a bell. You swallowed the contents of your novelty mug without setting it down, flooding your throat with a slow-draining burn that was quick to seep into your lungs and your stomach.

The rum did nothing for the humming, but it helped your memory.

You set the empty mug on the counter and made your way back to the tub, stepping out of your scuffed sneakers and taking off your navy-polo-and-black-pants uniform. You left your clothes in a pile by your bed, noticing that the hum was getting louder by the time your bare feet felt the linoleum.

You pulled the curtain aside and turned off the tap, testing the temperature with your hand before stepping into the overfilled tub. Easing your body into the water caused it to slosh over the edge and onto the floor, instantly soaking the dollar-store bath mat beside it.

The warmth of the water was forgiving and lent you a feeling of lightness that you hadn't felt in years. Small waves rocked you, and you began finding rhythms in the hum. Eyes closed, you tilted your head back until your ears filled with bathwater. You expected the sound to be muffled and cloudy, but it only became clearer and more familiar.

Your fingers curled around the edge of the tub as you pulled yourself up from under the surface. Your eyes darted around the bathroom—you were alone and her humming had softened. Easing your spine against the wall of the tub, you let your eyes close again, trying to block out the sound with the gentle lapping of warm water against the walls of the tub. The steam rose and collected around your nose and across your brow. Despite your best efforts, her melody lingered in your mind and beckoned you to listen.



Lungs filled, you prepared to submerge yourself. You lowered your face into the water, greeted by the sound of her voice. Your body sunk into the weightlessness as you opened your eyes, looking for the source of the song. Soft yellow light poured in from your ceiling, and there was nothing to see besides your own blurred limbs.

Your lids lowered closed as you began moving your arms to the tune of her voice. The places where your vertebrae anchored you to the floor of the tub detached until each part of you was swaddled in water.

Legs outstretched, you started to kick, feeling self-initiated currents pummel between your toes. The darkness behind your eyelids embedded you in the rise and fall of her otherworldly pitch and the push and pull of the water, which had grown colder.

You arched your back and paddled your limbs in circles. Small whirlpools churned behind your knees and shoulders. You felt a freedom in expanding, in feeling your muscles stretch out in a glorious yawn after being confined to the limitations of concurrent compartmentalization.

Her song became louder, and you felt a neighboring current swirl around you. You swore her fingers were interlacing yours, that her hair was painting waves over your shoulders and chest.

You opened your eyes, and in the split second you could bare the burn of salt, you saw you were swallowed in openness—still alone, feeling your lungs pinch and contract with deprivation. You clawed for the walls of the tub, but all you could sense was a cold and briny expanse. Forcing your eyes open, you found yourself lost in indigo—a directionless space with no division of light and dark.

You once heard that you could figure out which way was up by following the bubbles.

Ready to kick, you unsealed your lungs, hoping your last small ration of air could lead you to the surface.

