



Words NINA ST. PIERRE Art RAM HAN

The curious case of the udumbara.



In the introduction to French pilot and author Antoine de Saint-Exupery's whimsical classic The Little Prince, a Turkish astronomer discovers a new planet, but the scientific community doesn't believe him because he's dressed poorly. Adults are like that, explains Saint-Exupery. "When you tell them about a new friend, they never ask: 'What does his voice sound like?' 'What games does he like best?' 'Does he collect butterflies?' They ask: 'How old is he?' 'How much does he weigh?' Only then do they think they know him." Adults want numbers. Facts. A polished persona to trust. They've forgotten how much truth lies in what is invisible. When I first began mulling over the curious case of the udumbara, I was thinking much too much like an A mythical flower prophesied in Buddhist scripadult. ture, the udumbara is a tangled story-thing. After sightings of the miniscule white blooms swept across Korea in the late '90s, then again in China and Chinese diasporic communities, and even leaked into the U.S. in the late '00s, the udumbara flowers were debunked by entomologists as insect eggs. Believers claimed the scientists were part of a cover-up and that the King was coming. As a California kid weaned on conspiracy theories, I was captivated by the duality of it all. Are they real or fake? I wondered. Who's right? The entomologists? The Buddhists?

Of course, I was asking all the wrong questions.

Near the truce line that divides North and South Korea, in the Gyeonggi province surrounding Seoul, sits a nondescript Buddhist temple. Lesser known among the region's dramatic temples, Uri Temple was a quiet place until one mid-summer morning in 1997, when Tonbong, the temple abbot, spotted a row of spindly white flowers sprouting from the chest of a Shakyamuni Buddha statue in the main hall. Unattached to any tree or root, the flowers, with stems thin as filament, seemed to bloom from nothing. When their petals opened, the air around them filled with the spicy scent of sandalwood.

Ten years later, almost to the day, 22 of the same flowers were spotted in a rooftop garden west of Seoul, South Korea. Then 12 more on a university window in Seoul. Weeks later, two clusters sprung from a car door in Qingdao, China. During the summer of 2007, reports of white flowers, no more than a millimeter in diameter, emerged throughout China. Not confined to sacred spaces, they bloomed on doors, railings, tables, and pipes. Reports rolled in from Taiwan, Northern California, New York, and Texas, almost always from Buddhists. Then, for a while, nothing, until 2010, when a nun living in the mountains of China reported a batch of the blossoms under her washing machine. In the decade since, reported sight-

> According to the Lotus Sutra, a Buddhist scripture, the udumbara blooms once every 3,000 years and signals the arrival of the King of the Golden Wheel. This golden-wheeled chakravartin, or universal monarch, is a godlike figure whose mythology is rooted in But in the scripture, he arrives as a secular Bodhisattva to turn the golden wheel of dharma and ready the globe for the next incarnation of Buddha. The wheel reads as both real and metaphoric. As it turns, justice

Like all stories that have evolved over thousands of years, it's complex, but I read the golden-wheeled king as less moralistic than a Christian messiah. This king is less concerned with binaries of heaven and hell, "good" and "bad," than on restoring the homeostasis of society through destruction or renewal to whatever degree necessary. He is not a king who wields power through force but through the turning of a wheel—a benevolent, mythical sailor cranking the helm of karma. Eventually, everything will be as it should.

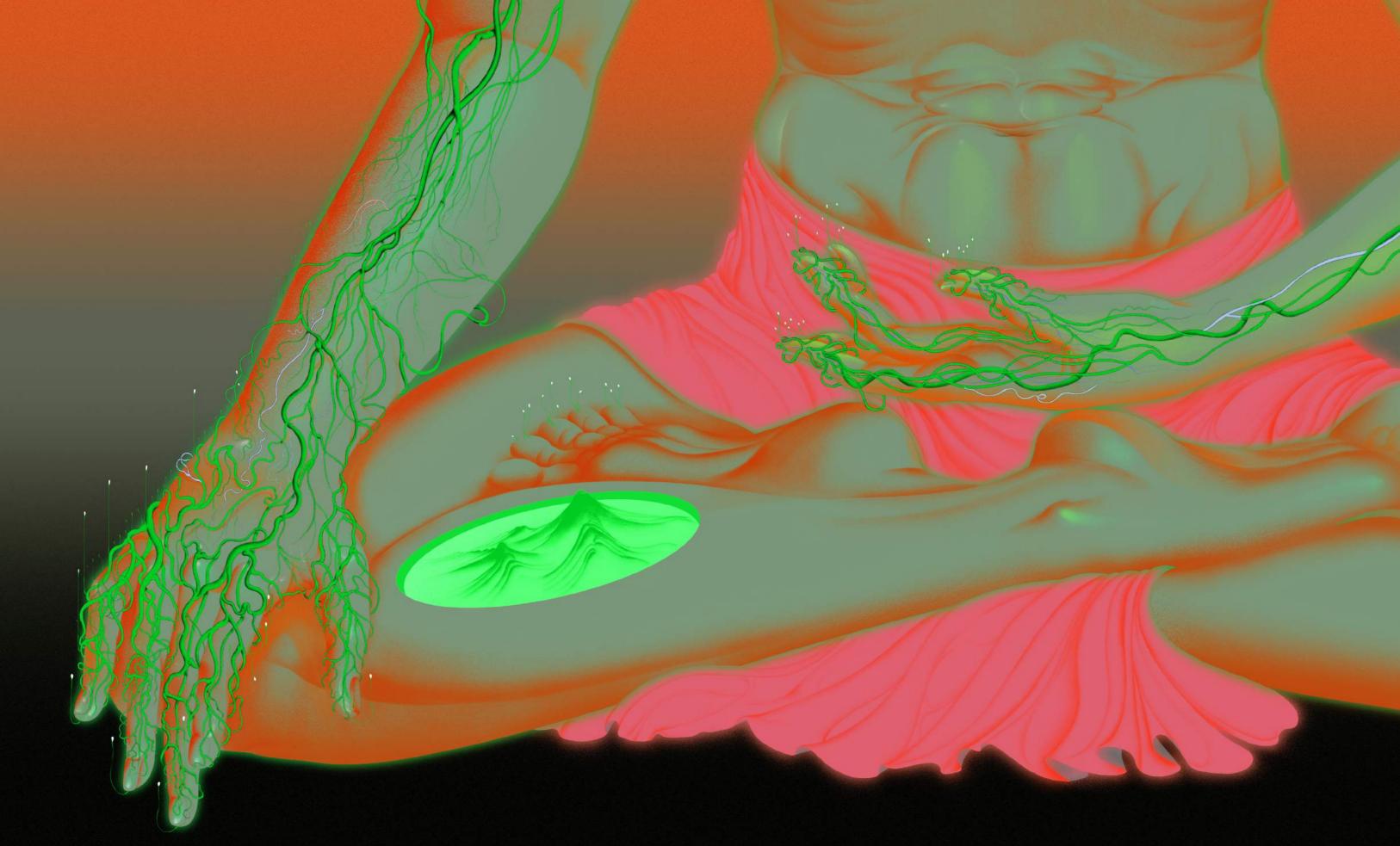
This is also how nature repairs itself.

When I was a little California kid, my mother talked a lot about our state falling into the sea. She quoted Nostrada mus and rattled on about the New World Order. She told me Bill Clinton was a clone. (Which, well ...) She wasn't a religious zealot, not really, nor even a doomsday prepper, exactly. She was almost objective about THE END, an oracle of global and interdimensional prophecy. Yes, she did believe Y2K would end us. But no, she did not prepare us well. All I remember is a pallet of bottled water stacked under piles of dirty clothes in the laundry room. I sensed that she was looking for a solution to the slop of humanity and that one of these prophecies-doomsday or redemptive, secular or religious-would be our ticket out. By spreading her chips on the table, when the great wheeled king stepped in and spun, just maybe she'd hit some form of ascension, some sweet liftoff from the pain of watching humans tear each other apart.

> It's a shame we don't get to cherry-pick what we inherit. She's been dead 15 years now, but lately, I find myself in silent conversation with her about the state of the planet. So many things she said about politics, the environment, the economy, have come to fruition in the last few years. What would she say now? Would

> There is something soothing, if patriarchal, about prophecy. Imagining that something, someone, will eventually save us, that it's already been written, that our suffering and degradation of the earth is part of a larger cosmic plan. Sometimes, especially in a time as chaotic and uncertain as ours, the state of the climate nearing apocalypse, I, too,

Before Haemin Sunim became one of South Korea's most famous and beloved monks—a holy man-turned-inspirational leader via pithy Twitter and The Things You Can See Only When You Slow Downhe was an academic who published under Rvan Bongseok Joo. Harvard- and Princeton-educated, Joo taught Asian Studies for close to a decade at Hampshire College. It was there, as Joo, that he wrote the most nuanced and de-



Most figs we eat contain the body of at least one female wasp whose corpse has been broken down into proteins and absorbed back into the fig.

I could find. In Materializing a Buddhist Symbol of Rarity, published in the journal Material Religion, he recounts visiting Uri Temple, where the white blooms first appeared on a Shakvamuni Buddha statue in 1997.

Puzzled by the strange flowers that grew with no soil or water, the temple abbot Tongbong called in the counsel of a respected elder monk from a nearby temple. Recalling the prophecy, the elder monk proclaimed the white blooms as udumbara. His trusted word led an entire religious community to embrace the "flowers" as a sign that the golden-wheeled king would soon be here.

"Abstracted from its location," wrote Joo in his 20page investigation, "the object would not have become the stead of in a random crack in the sidewalk, the monk deemed the "flowers" of divine origin. Unlike the astronomer from The *Little Prince*, the respected elder's word was enough: the organism became udumbara because he said it was.

By 2007, during the second wave of "udumbara" sightings, Chinese media began to publish articles debunking the divine origin of the flowers. Entomologistsinsect experts-claimed that the bloom-like organisms being called udumbara were not flowers at all, but the whose larvae are nicknamed aphid lions. Lacewings lay their eggs individually at the end of filament-like stalks to keep siblings from cannibalizing one another. And they look almost identical to the pictures of the sacred

Herein begins the riddle.

There is another udumbara—one recognized by botanists—but it's a tree and not a flower. Ficus racemose: a cluster fig. Native to Australia, Malaysia, Indo-China, and the Indian subcontinent, the cluster fig is less known to trunks of these massive, verdant trees are tightly wound with

> reds as they ripen. Cluster figs provided vital roadfood for scholars during long journeys to Takshashila, a major hub for Vedic and Buddhist learning from 5th century BCE to the 2nd century CE, located in what is now Pakistan. To avoid the wasps that pollinated and lived inside the figs, they pulled them open and dried them in the sun for an hour before eating.

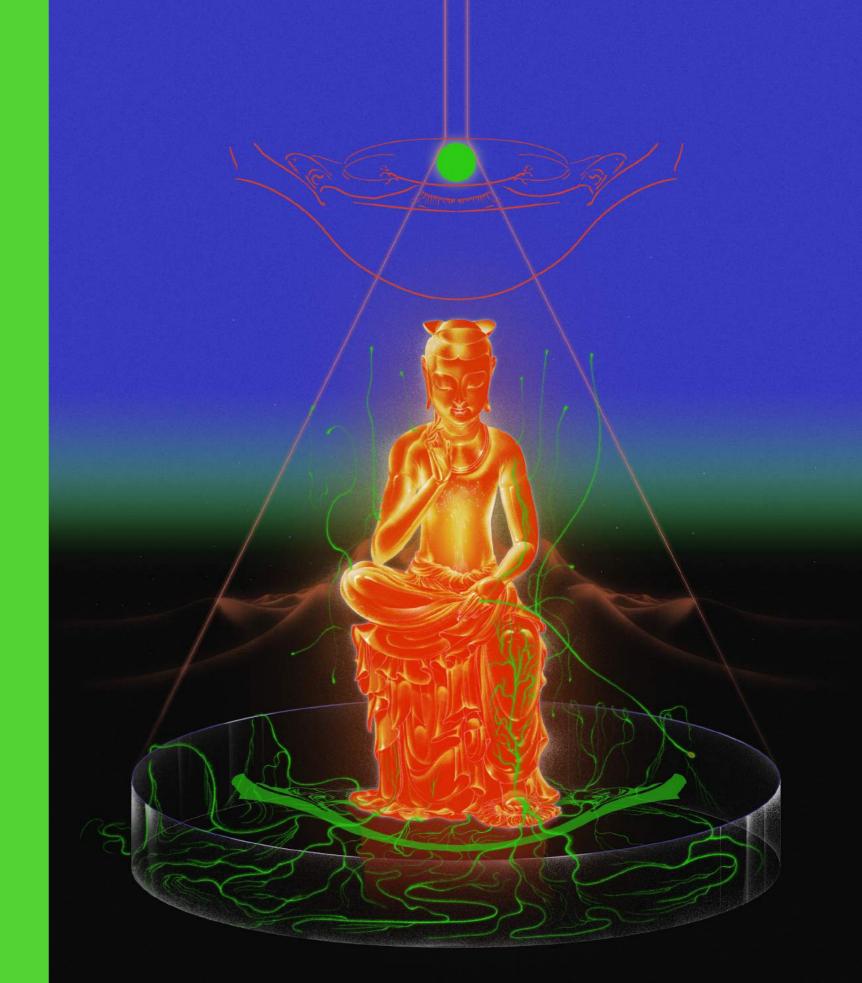
Udumbara is both tree and god. More specifically, a tree born from the god Indra after he drinks a cup of soma, a ritualistic plant juice. While the exact makeup of soma is disputed, scholfor drinking soma that wasn't his, Indra's body was disintetwo trees. Dr. Ratna Raman, a professor at Delhi University and expert in the Upanishads, an ancient Hindu religious text, tells me that the udumbara tree-not a flower-represented virility, fertility, sexuality. In other words: the profane. The other tree, a ficus religiosa, symbolized the sacred.

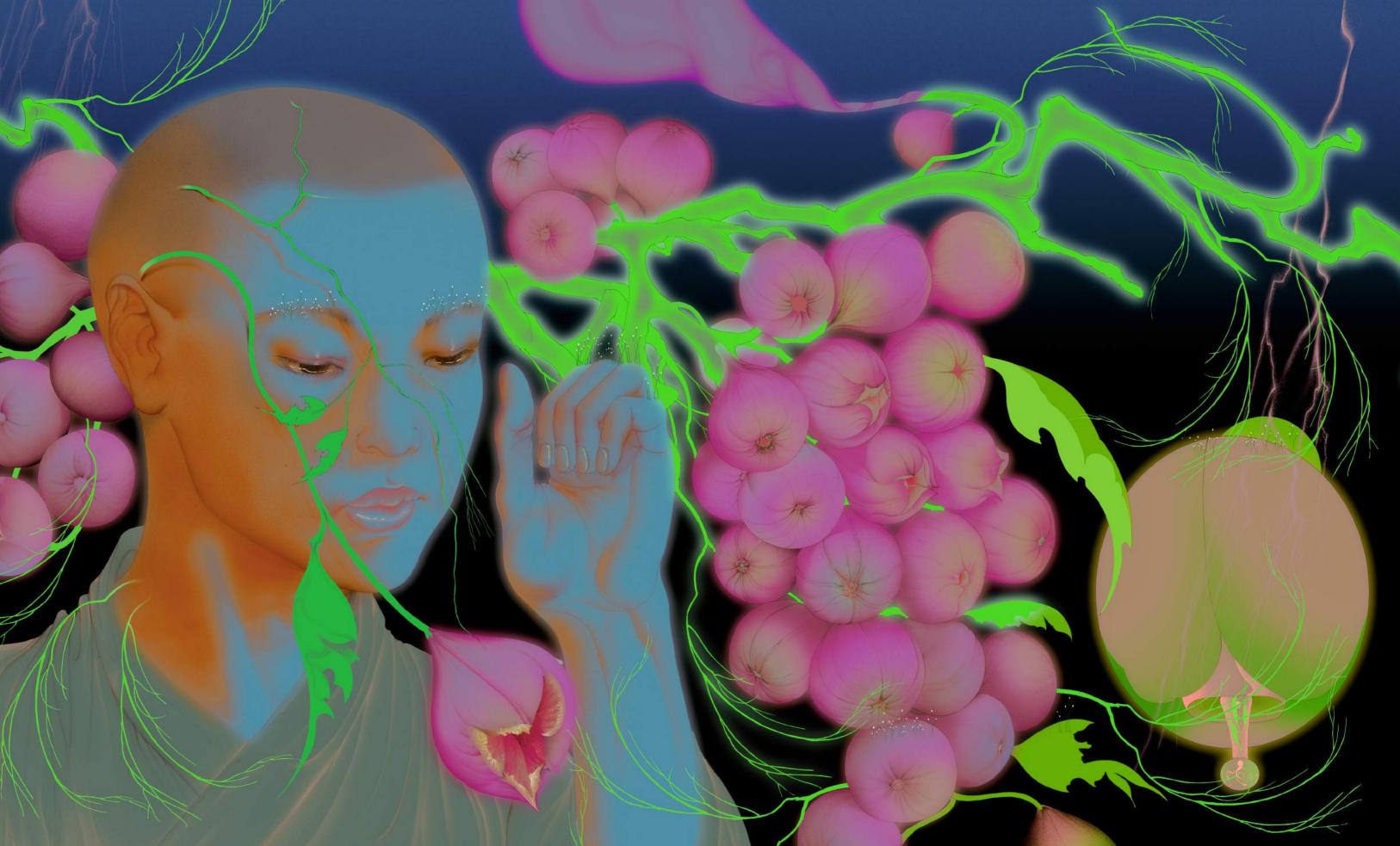
In Gods, Wasps, and Stranglers: The Secret History udumbara flower." Because it appeared on a sacred statue in- and Redemptive Future of Fig Trees, British biologist Mike Shanahan says that the paradox of the udumbara lies in its designation. The flower of the actual udumbara, or cluster fig, tree blooms every year, but like all fig trees, its blooms are hidden from view. We may feast on them for breakfast, fan them onto cheese platters, eat them raw or wrap them in bacon and broil, but figs are not actually fruit. They are an inflorescence, a collection of inverted flowers that bloom in the private theater of their own belly. The actual "udumbara flower" is visible only to one creature: a wasp driven by biol-

> Female figs—the ones we eat—are pollinated by female wasps who carry pollen from the male flowers. Her wings are torn off by the narrow entrance on her way in, so that once she enters, she's trapped and eventually dies inside. Most figs we eat contain the body of at least one female wasp whose corpse has been broken down into proteins and absorbed back into the fig.

> the editor of Harvard's Arnold Arboretum magazine, nected to these out-of-sight flowers: when the syconium is a flower. So the fruits seemingly appear from nowhere."

As a white American raised by parents invested in Vedic and Buddhist mythologies for their own spiritual purposes, I have an inkling of how difficult the scale of the stories can be for the pragmatic American psyche to grasp. The scales of time-meditating for thousands of years-and the flex and





The social significance of prophecy is not about what the prophecy itself predicts, but how it affects the way we live in the present and thereby how we create the future.

When I ask Taoist sage, scholar, polyglot, and translator of Revolutionary Gandhi K.V. Subrahmonyan, also known as KVS, about the impossibility of the udumbara mythology, he is clear that I'll find no finite reconciliation of its contradictory truths.

"As we have lost some of the ancients' sensory and mental faculties," he says, "some of the meaning of their myths related to the flora and fauna are inevitably lost on us." Then, he quotes William Wordsworth's *The Tables Turned*:

> "One impulse from the vernal wood More of moral good Than all the sages can."

By setting out to answer a simple question—is the udumbara real?-I was chasing a binary that offered me nothing more than the accumulation of fascinating facts and anecdotes. Winding forested roads to wander down, plucking fat figs along the way for sustenance.

emphasizes Dr. Raman, the Delhi University scholar who told me the story of Indra and the stolen soma. "With myth," he says, "we only weave symbols deeper into our consciousness

In 2006, Chongju, a nun living in a Buddhist temple near Pusan, South Korea, logged the most incredible of all udumbara reports. The blooms were growing out of her hands, she claimed, and when believers showed up in droves, they saw it was true. She tended the tiny blooms, some smaller than an alfalfa sprout, keeping them covered like winter toma-Her hands became a living shrine, as pilgrims from around tanical eucharist.

the country traveled to have an audience with the miraculous bloom. A microbiologist examined Chongju and confirmed that it was indeed a plant and not a fungus or the eggs of a lacewing. When Joo interviewed the nun three years later, the organisms were still alive and she tended them like a deity.

In Catholicism, the god-house in which my mother was formed, the Eucharist is a way for everyday people to gain corporeal access to Christ: the stigmata its more rare and painful cousin. The miraculous bloom gave Chongju and the pilgrims—everyday people—access to a divine body. Her hands blood from stigmata wounds has been described as having a perfumed smell. Around the udumbara blooms, the faint

Audumbara (औदुम्बर), a Sanskrit spelling of udumbara, translates to "a class of seers," and I wonder if that isn't the most apt way to think about it. It's hard to explain how a metaphor might be true when the truth of it is built on metaphor. It may be a matter of naming and semantics, of the fluid ways that one word splinters into many, but udumbara is where collide. The mystical flower looks nothing like the scientifically verified udumbara tree or its flower-fruits, but life and death are encapsulated in both. Inside the fig lives not only serve as a study for what it means to ripen within. To keep our flowering tucked up into our bellies. To absorb what has pollinated us and break down its body into nutrients. A boIn their collection *Prophecy in the New Millennium*, scholars Suzanne Newcombe and Sarah Harvey explain that the social predicts, but how it affects the way we live in the present and thereby how we create the future. Political scientist Michael Barkun, in an essay in the same collection, writes that our appetite for prophecy-whether sacred or secular-remains strong even in a skeptical time, maybe especially so. "Given the desire for messages that bear the stamp of transcendent tinue to bring them."

After 2010, the buzz of the udumbara dropped to a smolder, its embers occasionally and quietly stoked by the Falun Gong, a persecuted sect of Chinese Buddhists, outlawed in the late '90s after being branded a cult with intentions of overthrowing the government. In 1998, Falun Gong leader Li Hongzhi left China for good, and in 2000, began to build a private compound for his followers in upstate New York. Dragon Springs which serves as an incubator school for the dancers of Shen Yun, a psychedelic, propaganda-filled epic show that includes a dance number honoring the udumbara. Shen Yun draws on a Buddhist text called Hui*lin Phonetics and Interpretations*, to frame their story: "Udumbara is the product of ominous and supernatural phenomena; it is a celestial flower and does not exist in the mundane world." For the Falun Gong, Joo wrote, the blooming of the udumbara and arrival of the goldenwheeled king will bring justice and an end to their persecution by the Chinese government. It is a beacon for a "new era in political leadership and the imminent collapse of the Chinese communist regime." In other words, it serves them for the flower to remain upheld as prophecy and unexamined

by legitimate South Korean and Chinese news sources, much of that has been scrubbed. The digital trail of what Shanahan calls "the riddle of the udumbara" is flimsy. The most substantial records are cataloged in the *Epoch Times*, a paper associated with the Falun Gong. But the rest of the searches lead to dead-end websites and niche forums rife with the wildly incharacteristic of New Age propaganda. A digital echo cham ber regurgitating the same sourceless information, just like the rhetoric I grew up with. The rhetoric that led me here-a cynic exploring the power of belief, hoping to believe.

As the singular resident of a surreal asteroid with an epidemic of invasive baobab trees and waist-high volcanoes, the namesake character in *The Little Prince* is a strange young boy whose only friend is a single rose with four thorns. One day, system, landing eventually on Earth, where he wanders into a glorious rose garden. There must have been 5,000 roses. But instead of awe, the Little Prince feels ambivalence. "You're lovely," he says. "But you're empty. No one has tamed you and you haven't tamed anyone ... One couldn't die for you." Suddenly, he's overcome with love and grief for the rarity of his rose, no longer a simple flower, but a relationship of special meaning born of their mutual claim on each other.

> Maybe that's why the udumbara is such a powerful emblem. An ephemeral, delicate flower, its blooming is not only a symbol of new life and renewal but the most tender part of the earth. A calling from the great feminine-Mother Earth, the female fig, the wingless wasp-for delicacy and tenderness. A teeny, tiny flower that trumpets the arrival of an all-powerful global king and his cosmic wheel. A reminder that the masculine and feminine are not binary but

> "People are more likely to turn to prophecy in bad times than good," Newcombe tells me. Even climate change, she explains, is a type of negative prophecy and can provide renewed purpose and meaning for those who believe. It's something wortity to both those who believe and those who deny.

"Living 'for' a prophecy can give a directionality or purpose to living," says Newcombe. "That purpose and come more important than the apparent truth or falsity of the prophecy itself." The question then is not whether the udumbara is real, but whether believing in all its formsproven and debunked, scientific and sacred-has the power to change us, to show us something prismatic, a meaning that cannot be contained to one reality or religion. The flower as shape-shifter. The bloom as meaning-maker.