

A Smile to Remember

by Charles Bukowski

We had goldfish and they circled around and around
In the bowl on the table near the heavy drapes
Covering the picture window and
My mother, always smiling, wanting us all
To be happy, told me, 'be happy henry!'
And she was right: it's better to be happy if you can.

But my father continued to beat her and me several times a
week while raging inside his 6-foot-two frame because he
couldn't understand what was attacking him from within.

My mother, poor fish,
Wanting to be happy, beaten two or three times a
Week, telling me to be happy: 'henry, smile!
Why don't you ever smile?'

And then she would smile, to show me how, and it was the
Saddest smile I ever saw.

One day the goldfish died, all five of them,
They floated on the water, on their sides, their
Eyes still open,
And when my father got home he threw them to the cat
There on the kitchen floor and we watched as my mother
Smiled.

Bukowski's Wikipedia page reads the following: Henry Charles Bukowski (1920 - 1994) was a German-American poet, novelist, and short story writer. His work addresses the ordinary lives of poor Americans, the act of writing, alcohol, relationships with women, and the drudgery of work. In 1986 Time called Bukowski a "laureate of American lowlife".



Source: www.wallhere.com

About the Poem



Why Bukowski?

- Honest, Simple
- Concise, Straightforward
- Imagery and Symbolism

There are lots of things that are said and unsaid. The poet does not talk about what the characters are feeling, he only describes things objectively, the way they are. And yet you find a deep embedded subjectivity in it, emotions peering through, as you read between the lines. This quality of it was, in fact, what drew me to the poem. It seemed like a good opportunity to depict all that had been left unsaid in words with visuals.

Theme: Abuse

The Poem tells how Henry and his mother were heavily abused, and how their lives were ruined because of this. It explores how violence at home hurts the family members both physically and mentally.

Another prominent theme is Depression. His father was described to be 'raging inside of his 6-foot frame because he couldn't understand what was attacking him from within.' This suggests that his father was a victim of his inner demons.

Paradox: Smiling

In the poem, his mother is always asking Henry to smile. "Henry smile! Why don't you ever smile?" The whole idea of smiling is contradicting the abuse they suffer. The fact that his mother expects her son to be happy even though they are beaten several times a week helps portray a deeper, sense of sadness and hopelessness.

The greater theme of the poem, for me, is the mother's descent into madness. For a woman who had been forced to remain timid all her life, she is driven to a point of insanity where, at the end of it, she taps into herself to find that something has

changed. The smile at the end denotes this very sentiment. She realizes that if things continue the way they have been, she will be met with the same fate as that of the fish. Her inner turmoil is reflected in the scene where the cat violently tears up the dead fish into pieces.

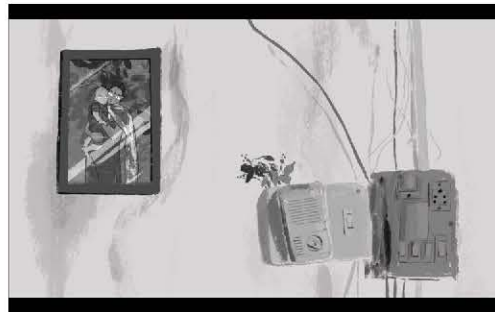
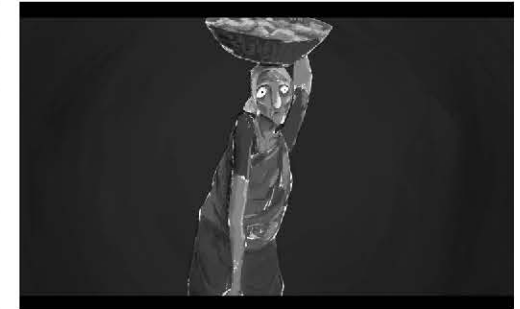
The metaphors, contrasts, imageries and paradoxes used as techniques in this poem give it a much deeper meaning and portray a greater sense of loss.

Glimpses of the Animation Film



The movie is a tale about courage. It is a tale about staying **afloat**.

Glimpses of the Animation Film



Word Image Relation



Approach:

3 kinds of approaches to explore the word image relationship had occurred to me initially as I was deciding on what type of visual treatment would I want to go with and the meaning it would make.

- Images juxtapose the words wherein two completely different narratives are explored, one communicated in audio and the other in images.
- Images complement the words wherein the visuals change core meaning of the poem. For example- Images of man destroying nature as the poem on domestic abuse plays in background.
- Images elucidate words or show a deeper, layered reality wherein visuals add meaning to the poem.

Out of the three, I chose to go with the third option. My consideration was to relate the words to images in such a way that the visuals explore the emotions and nuances of the poem in greater depth, elucidate more than what is apparent in the poem and therefore add another layer of meaning to the poem.

Because the poem refrains from talking about what the characters are feeling and only describes things and events objectively, the way they are, my intent was to have the visuals tell the story in greater depth, exploring aspects of it that are not apparent in the poem, delve into emotions faced by the character, and doing so while seeing it so that the visuals do not take away from the mystery of the poem itself.

Context



Lower middle class household in India:

Even though the poem has been based in an American context, the emotion it addresses has a reach beyond geographical borders. Hence, I decided to re-contextualize the setting of the poem to a lower middle class household in India. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, India recently underwent an economic slump that resulted in widespread unemployment in the country. This led to a rise in the rate of alcohol consumption and the number of domestic violence cases being reported saw a sharp rise as well.

Secondly, my familiarity with the Indian context meant that only some basic amount of research into the lower middle class environment would suffice. It also led me to believe that suspension of the audiences' disbelief of the original context would not be too much to ask for. Instead of focusing on the American details of the poem like the name 'Henry', the audience would focus on what has been attempted to communicate.

Media



2D Animation on Procreate:

2D Animation, also referred to as traditional animation, is the art of creating the illusion of movement in a 2 dimensional space by sequencing individual drawings together over time. I have wanted to explore 2D animation since quite a while.

'Procreate' is an App that lets one draw on the iPad with the Apple Pencil, and has recently come up with an Animation Timeline feature that supports light weight GIF format animations up to about 70 layers. Alongside, it has a multitude of brushes to choose from and sufficient customization to support flexibility in creation of an animation clip.

Duration



4 mins 30 secs, approximately:

Four and a half minutes seemed like an appropriate duration and although the poem, itself is pretty short, my pacing of the film is rather leisurely (in order to incorporate the implications of the words as well into the visuals).

I started out with an aim of creating 2 minutes of visuals that had to be restructured and extended beyond the 2 minute time-stamp midway through the project. The compilation of the storyboard gave me a sense that the film visuals seemed a bit too rushed. More about that, in the later sections.

The Process: Initial Iterations

In all, there were **4 iterations** of the storyboard up to the finished animation film. This resulted in a lot of buffer windows of indecision in these 5 months. The journey might have been a grueling one, but overcoming these challenges one at a time brought immense gratification and made it all worth it. A very brief description of the various iterations is here to follow.

Iteration 1

The storyboard was imagined in terms of a set of disjointed visuals for each section of the poem, as shown here.

Discarded because: There was no story binding all the visuals together.



The Day of Reckoning

we had goldfish and they circled around and around in the bowl on the table near the heavy drapes covering the picture window and

my mother, always smiling, wanting us all to be happy, told me, 'be happy Henry!' and she was right: it's better to be happy if you can

one day the goldfish died, all five of them, they floated on the water, on their sides, their eyes still open,

and when my father got home he threw them to the cat there on the kitchen floor and we watched as my mother

but my father continued to beat her and me several times a week while raging inside his 6-foot-two frame because he couldn't understand what was attacking him from within.

my mother, poor fish, wanting to be happy, beaten two or three times a week, telling me to be happy: 'Henry, smile! why don't you ever smile?' and then she would smile, to show me how, and it was the saddest smile I ever saw

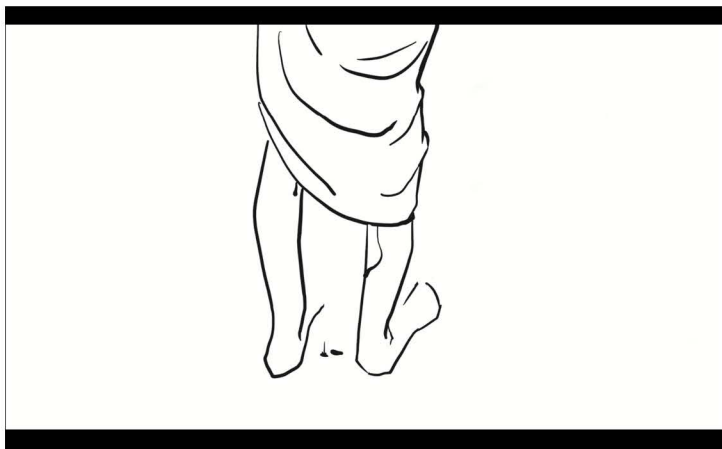
... smiled.

Iteration 2

A Day of Reckoning

The visuals of this iteration were thought of more in terms of a real-time movie shot with a camera than something that has been drawn. The movie idea was indicative of the incident of a single day when the fish die and the events before and after complement the respective parts of the poem.

Discarded because: There was no point in animating something that could be shot with a camera, much easier and faster. It also went against the dark and dystopian theme that was decided upon.



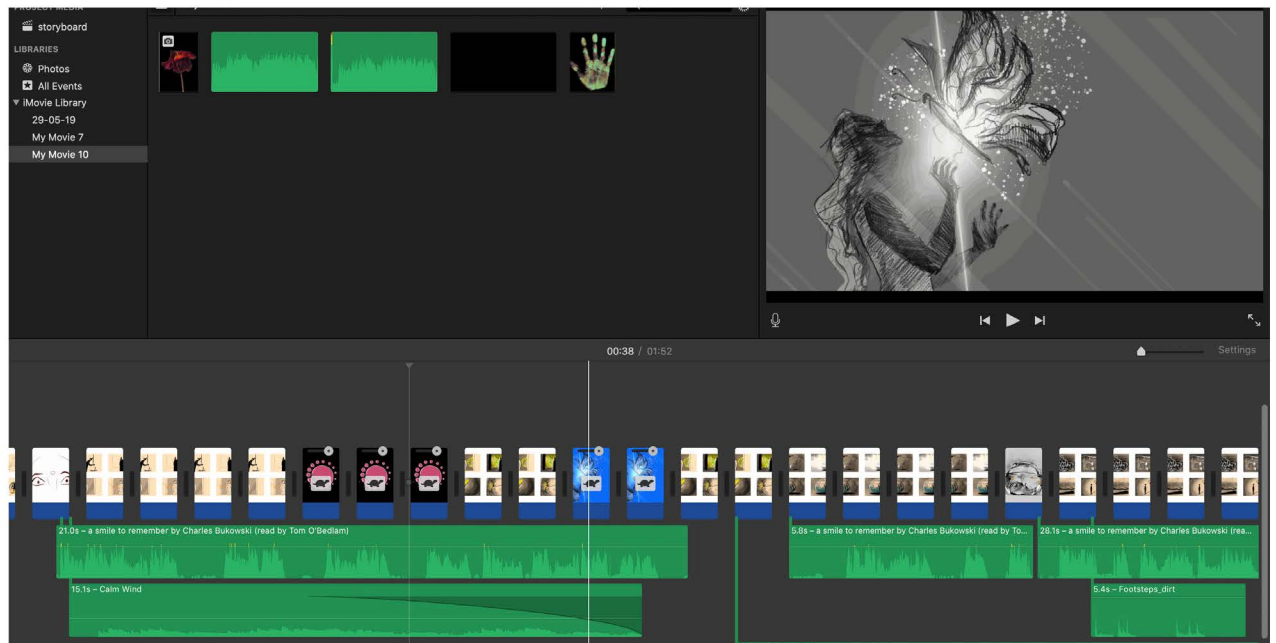
Iteration 3

A Weird Blip - Abortion?

I had been reading about the pro-choice movement in the U.S. and the effect it has on women suffering from domestic abuse, especially those seeking to abort the child without the knowledge of the abuser. So, for the third iteration I decided to make the mother pregnant and the poem ending with her having and abortion as she decided to not bring another kid into a home

plagued with domestic abuse. Confident of having finally found a story I was convinced about, I went on to make a video storyboard to explain this idea to my guide.

Discarded because: On watching it, my guide said "you're a dark, dark girl" and advised me to steer clear of getting into the complex intersections of two social issues and instead stick to and do justice to just the one. Albeit a little disappointed, I came to realise the significance of the advice and ran with it.



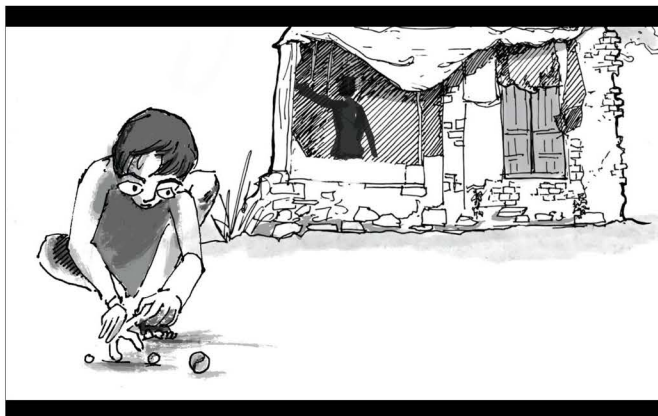
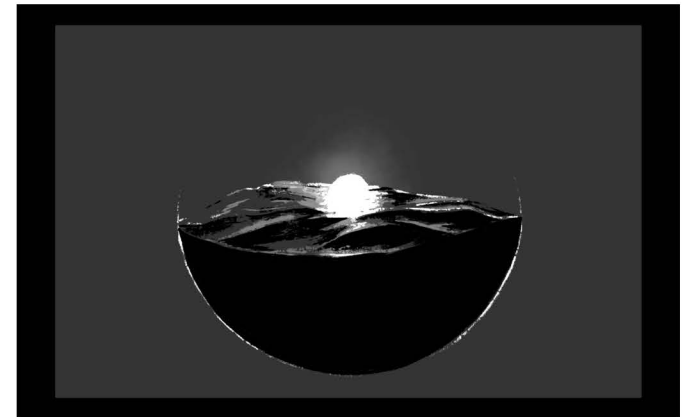
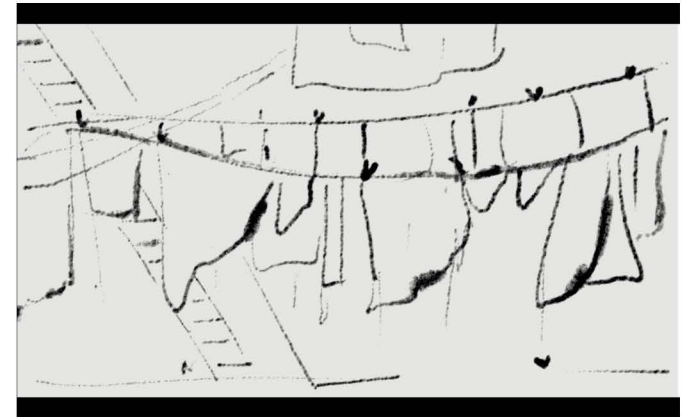
Iteration 4

Getting there

And thus, at the end of 2 months of thinking and conceptualizing, I was back to square one. Only this time around, I had developed a keen sense of what would not work, and that was, well, something to start with.

It took me another whole month to figure out the next storyboard. There were obviously parts of it that were hazy and parts that I wasn't fully convinced about but I still decided to go ahead with whatever I had at that moment and start with the execution process, hoping that those parts would come to me eventually.

All the images of the fourth iteration was simultaneously compiled into a video storyboard. This storyboard acted as a starting point for me to look at the film as a whole from a necessary distance; a distance between the creator and creation that is often convoluted in the process of creating.



After going through it, I got a clearer picture of the hits and the misses and thereby, made few revisions to the story.

The Nodes of Conflict:

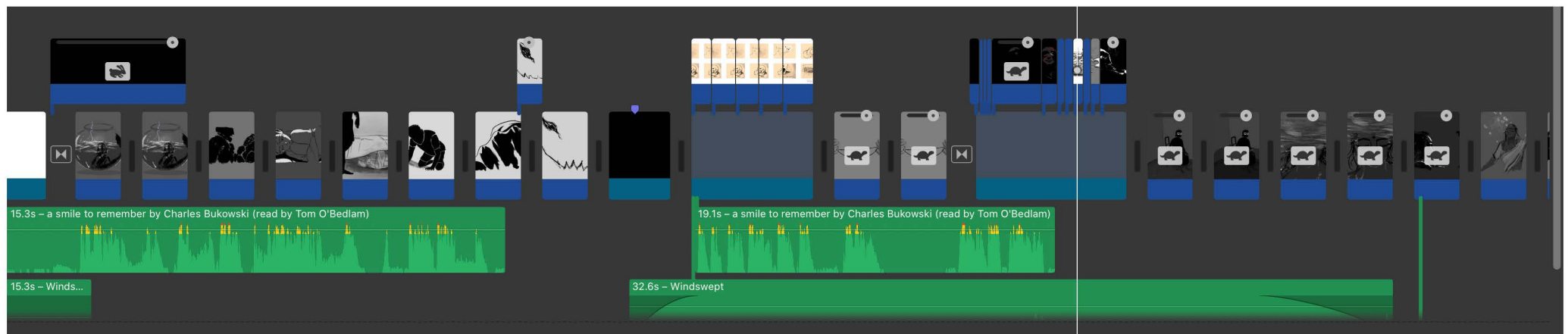
The ending of the original poem is pretty vague and results in multiple interpretations that one could possibly have. But broadly, it can be classified as either a dismal one or a hopeful one. The takeaway of the dismal one would, therefore, be that the torture has been going on and will continue to happen until the light of life stops burning in the mother. After much thought, I decided to go with a hopeful ending, where seeing the fish die moved something within the mother and her smile representing a newfound sense of urgency and strength.

The general sense that I got from the video storyboard was a need to include nuances to heighten the drama in order to imply things that aren't mentioned in the poem.

For example, there is a montage series where corners of the house are shown. There is one image wherein a tea cup is kept on the table. Instead of that, if the tea cup is shown to be broken or fallen on the ground scattered all over the place, it would take the drama up a notch and imply domestic abuse.

Thirdly, every animation clip seemed too rushed in the storyboard. It were as if I was trying to fit the visuals into the film as per the speed of the narration. In order to rectify this, I extended the pacing of

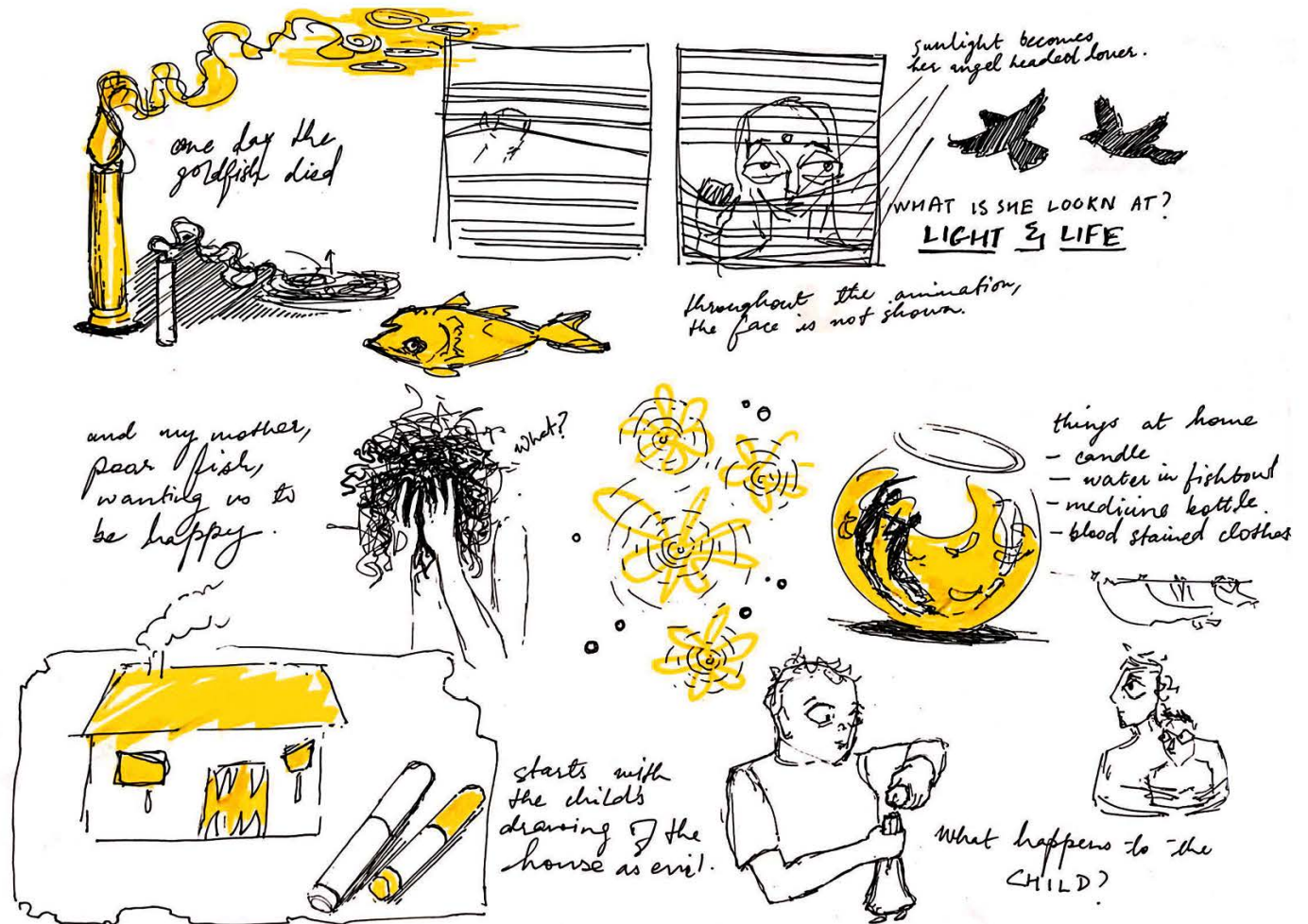
the shots, which took the total time from 2 minutes to around 4 minutes. But this rectification was a necessary one as the film demanded to breathe and for me to calm down.



Visuals and Characters

Another sense that I got from the storyboard was that the characters seemed a bit shallow and generic. So I went back to thinking about the details of the characters, this time addressing questions like what are their habits and motivations? How do they keep themselves engaged? What are their character nuances? For example- Maybe whenever the kid feels threatened, he holds onto the cloth of his shirt very tightly.

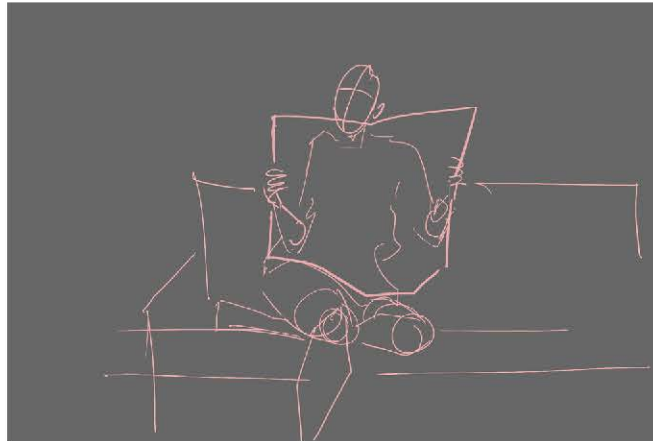
Strangely enough, the best advice I got on this subject came from a completely unrelated psychology video. It said, and I paraphrase, **"no one is completely good or bad. You have to tease the humanity out of them"**. This random piece of advice stuck with me and applying it in my project helped me a great deal with the character development process.



A Peek into the Animation Process



Initially, as I was getting into the groove of animating, it would take me about 4-5 days to complete one scene of approximately 10 seconds. Later, as I started to understand movement and pacing better, and with practice, it reduced to 2-3 days to do the same. The overall pace of the film is rather slow and the FPS rate alters between 7 to 10. **The film has a total of ~1800 illustrations.** Here is a breakdown of the process.



Step 1: Drawing a rough composition



Step 2: Adding flesh to the basic skeleton



Step 3: Colour correction and adjusting details of light and shadow



Step 4: Adding background



Step 5: Adding foreground (if necessary)

A Peek into the Animation Process

Step 6: Paying attention to details of each frame. Here is an example of a newspaper folding (as thus the position of the contents on it's page changing) over each of the 7 frames, as shown here.



The Struggle of Articulating the Animation Process

The process of animation, as I have come to realise in the course of this semester, is rather intuitive, and more subconscious decisions are involved than any other design projects that I have done until now. Usually in an interaction design or communication design project, I get to a point of conflict and make conscious decisions to solve the problem, by applying problem solving tools and methodologies. This enables me to map out my thoughts and design decisions.

For this project, on the other hand, I have taken design decisions that I can only concretely rationalize by saying that, "it just felt right". Now, I can talk about the tone, the intent, and the feel of the poem and thereby justify my vision. But to be very honest, the design decisions have resulted from a tacit sense of what fits and what doesn't, that have been developed and cultivated by an obsession with an animation-fueled-childhood.

So the design decisions, per se, have come from a place of an innate understanding coupled with a love for storytelling, honed by IDC and my stage play script writing experience, to an extent.

Having said that, let me state a few of my major design decisions.





Colour Scheme

Monochrome with Red.

The scheme is all tints, tones and shades of gray. Better known as the classic 'Black and White'. There was no need felt to introduce any other colour as black and white did the job well enough. This colour scheme is accompanied by a tinge of tint wherever it is required for emphasis or dramatic effect. The tint of choice over here, is red. This sort of discordant use of color in films can help a detail to stand out from the rest of the film.

Another reason for the monochromatic colour scheme is that exploring light and shadows in colour (and doing it well) is beyond my abilities at the moment.

Also, the background colour of the movie changes from light gray to dark gray, with the lighter and softer quality of the foreground changing into a sharper and starker quality, as the movie progresses and gets into darker zone, story-wise.

Brush-strokes



Drawing (Foreground)
Blackburn Brush



Inking (Details & Outlines)
Dry Ink Brush



Painting (Background)
Turpentine Brush

Visual Approach

The art style is what I can best describe as raw and rough. The brushstrokes, created with the blackburn brush of 'Procreate' App, is a part of the artistic set of brushes and it lends each stroke a rather grainy and aesthetic quality. Another point for choosing this brush along with the dry ink brush was that it works perfectly well for outlines as well as colour fills. Also, the turpentine effect brush has been used for the backgrounds. The end result is an animation that screams shabby and intense. This art style seemed to go well with the theme of the poem.

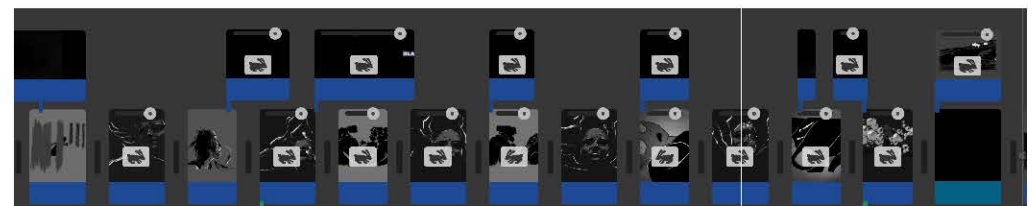
Structure

Coming to the structure and editing of the film, the first 2 paragraphs have longer scenes and fluid transitions. As the events in the poem proceed, the scenes become shorter and the cuts become sharper so as to reflect the suffocation of the mother. The drowning scene, especially, has quicker cuts as we follow the mother into her nightmare sequence.

The end comes back to one very long shot of the mother floating in the water with her eyes open for the audience to focus on the spoken poem. The visuals end before the audio does, leaving the image of the mother smiling to the imagination of the audience.



The long floating scene at the end .



The editing of the drowning shots are short and quick.

Challenges



Getting started:

At the start of the semester, I had not a single clue about animation. I have always avoided it because, as much as I was sure of my ability of laying things out in space (having worked on various publication design projects), laying things out in time seemed nowhere close to my forte. That, coupled with the fact that I have always been uncomfortable treading into a territory where there is a possibility of failure, have kept me from exploring animation. So I wanted to face this fear of mine as a personal challenge and so the next thing I did was close my eyes and commit to it by taking it up as a project (and telling people about it so that I don't back off). I did all this with zero idea as to how I was going to go about it.

The Skill of Animating :

Also since this is my last semester, if I were to ever make a film, it had to be now. I don't deny still finding myself

greatly overwhelmed while I'm at it. However, discerning the dynamics of movement, thinking about how light is falling on a surface and bouncing off it, taking it one frame at a time and focusing on the littlest of details is how I have been moving ahead.

The challenge of developing the required skill set to execute the animation was another major roadblock. To overcome it, I have been referencing videos of myself and online videos to understand how certain materials act or move and how characters interact. Although some scenes take more time than the others, yet it is fun and immensely gratifying once it gets done the way in which I had imagined it to be.

Another problem was getting the pacing right. All along I trusted my amateur judgement on it. The method opted was drawing the key frames out one after the other and then adding or subtracting frames where it was deemed necessary.

Zooming in and out:

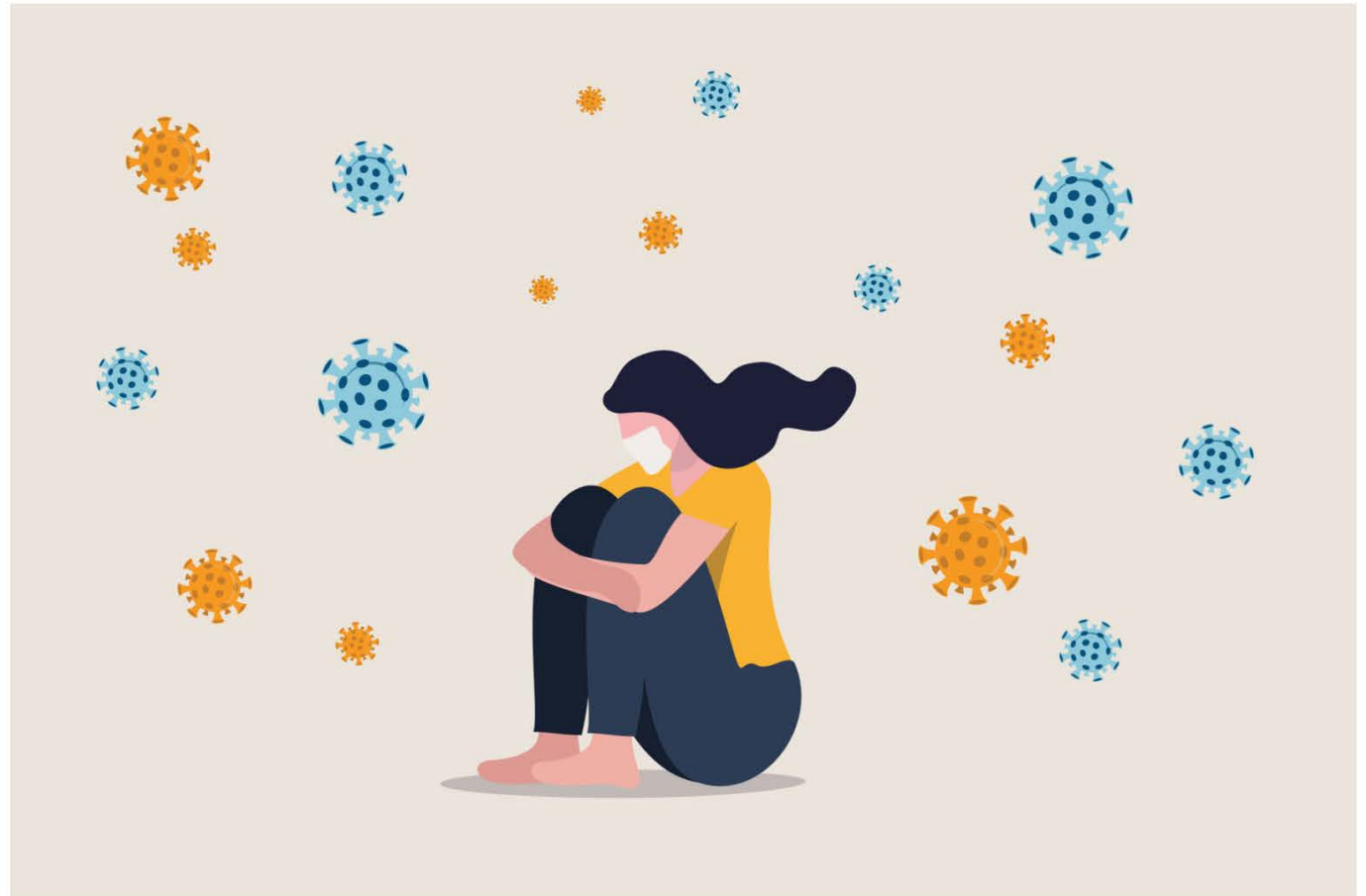
Another challenge that I faced was the problem of zooming in and zooming out. Zooming in refers to the detail oriented animation process, it's techniques and skills, and zooming out is basically, looking at the bigger picture, thinking about the narrative and the story. Overcoming it requires an ability of dissociating with one while focusing on the other. I tried to not let my skill level and thoughts about 'what is possible and what isn't' come in the way of my ambition and imagination while thinking about the story, as a whole.

Challenges

The summer of 2020 saw the world crumbling on being faced with the global Covid-19 pandemic. Despite the governments efforts, the trend of 'exponential growth in the number of cases' refused to subside in the country. This caused widespread panic and I kept animating through it all like a madman.

In the following section, I talk about a few problems that cropped up in the project due to the onset of the pandemic.

Source: istock



COVID-19 PANDEMIC



Equipment and Software:

I had left the IIT hostel for home 3 days before the evacuation notice of IIT Bombay was circulated. Hence, some of my equipments were in the hostel- like my Wacom tablet. I had been animating on my iPad back then for practice. The Procreate App on iPad supports light animation and I had expected to get my hands on my Wacom tablet for execution of the heavier files. That didn't happen due to the lockdown and I had to stitch smaller animation gifs from Procreate, shot by shot, in a different compilation software which took time and created continuity issues.

I had also expected to use the Adobe Premier Pro for compilation of the shots but that wasn't an option anymore, since I have a pirated version of the Adobe Suite which has been malfunctioning. Hence,

I had to use iMovies to compile the animation. iMovies is a basic film making software and has no advanced options. For example- it does not allow one to overlap layers of animation on top of one another. Nonetheless it was a good exercise in problem solving (working around these shortcomings).

Music and Narration:

I had thought of making the music myself and recording it on my synthesizer but then I had to leave the instrument in my hostel room and saw that possibility go right out of the window. I was also hoping to get the narration voiced over by a man to keep it as authentic as possible. It later seemed like a very cumbersome process with the whole lockdown situation, and so I had to use a prerecorded recitation that I found online by Tom O'Bedlam.

Reflections



Much is said in the gaps and silences of the poem. These silences leave the audience with more to reflect upon than the words. They make up for the experience of the poem, as a whole. It took me, after months of reading it, just one evening of listening to the poem as it was blasted from my home speaker to understand this. This evening came, albeit, a little late. This made me wonder, how does one truly capture the essence of the poem, at all?

With every reading of the poem, I'd try to conjure up a visual in my mind, and this bid never let me venture too far from the realm of what was written. Only after I was almost done with it, I could see the words as something more than a project to be visualized. I was able to vibe to the silences for a few fleeting seconds, only when I had stopped trying hard to do so. The feeling I could at best phrase as an ominous quiver of the heart.

I've really attempted to do the best I could at interpreting and executing the project, in the given circumstances. But then again, my curiosity remains as a generic open question- can one even capture the obscure sorrows of the human condition into concrete visuals, and strike a fine balance between specificity and vagueness, while at it?

There has also been this nagging feeling- if there was, at all, a need to touch the sanctity of a poem in the first place. I even have an answer to it along the lines of the entire argument for re-mediation and how this is an inevitable backlash that crops up every time a book is made into a movie; and that my primary objective was skill development and personal learning (like, the importance of knowing how to perfect a *kulhad* in pottery before one can head out to make a 'terracotta army'). Believe me, I know all of that, and yet the feeling nags away.

Every medium, be it images, words or tunes, has its own strengths and weaknesses. I had this notion that the medium does not define the evoked emotion and yet the visual medium, somehow, has always seemed more intuitive and subliminal to me than the rest. (Makes me wonder if there were poets before language). Well, well. Turns out, arranging images in TIME takes the medium one notch higher and is a completely different ball game altogether.

I'd just like to put this out here, in closing: Nothing but mad respect for the animators out there, for real. As for me, this might have been my first attempt at animating, but it definitely isn't my last. I shall continue learning about animation and storytelling, for the joy it offers to me is downright unparalleled.

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