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## Introduction

We kicked off our creative writing class three months ago, hardly aware of the potential challenges ahead of us. It is not until our *Halfway Home III* anthology finally clears its way to the press that we realize how we have seriously underestimated the challenge.

While not everyone is born with a gift in creative writing, we hope that this selected compilation of poems and short stories will set you on a wonderful journey of exploring the fascinating world of literature.

A big round of applause to our very talented authors, for their contributions and touching pieces; lots of love to our fellow classmates and copy-editors, who have given great support and turned this class into such a blast. Special thanks to our advisors, Professor Shirley Geok-Lin Lim and Mr. John Wall Barger, for their valuable insights and endless patience.

Last but not least, massive thank you, to Mr. Chris Leung and the Department of English. *Halfway Home III* would not have been possible without your help.

Kong Kin To, Ken

May 2013

## Preface

It is a pleasure and honor to return to the pages of *Halfway Home* in this third issue, and with welcome news. Building on the success of the first two issues, *Halfway Home III* has moved to showcase not only City University of Hong Kong's students' creative writing but also that of the Creative Writing faculty and teachers in its rapidly expanding curriculum. This issue does not distinguish or discriminate between young and professional writers. Its chief aim is to offer a collection exhibiting the kind of English-language writing across multiple literary genres—poetry, prose poems, short stories, and creative non-fiction—that is now covered in City University's MFA and undergraduate programs. In inviting the Canadian poet, John Barger, to serve as poetry advising editor for the poetry section, *Halfway Home III* is enlarging the talent pool it draws on, and which is so evident in Hong Kong's vibrant cosmopolitan community. I thank the Department of English, which is a stellar illustration of talented cosmopolites drawn together in a common academic mission, and particularly Associate Professor and Acting Head, Rodney Jones, and Executive Officer Chris Leung for their indispensable support of the publication; and the students who edited this issue with focused enthusiasm and consistent conscientiousness. The future of English-language creative writing in Hong Kong belongs to young writers like them, and *Halfway Home III* is dedicated to all the students who worked on it.

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

Visiting Professor, City University of Hong Kong, 2012-2013

Research Professor, University of California, Santa Barbara

May 2013



## Preface

The undergraduate portion of the poetry in this collection reports from the street level of 21st century Hong Kong: among friends and family, on the MTR, in local restaurants, at Starbucks and even Abercrombie & Fitch. The images reveal deep-seated suspicions of surface appearances: “I know what you are behind / the almost-perfect mask,” says Joyce Chan. “Her glowing smile / hides a fool,” says Kristin Tang of a passerby on the MTR, with the lucid cruelty that characterizes some of these poems. What does it feel like to be a young student in Kowloon, inundated with pixels, glass, plastic, fluorescent lights, billboards? Cheryl Ho describes a wardrobe so full that “Its door pulses like a gasping beast, / Then it bursts open ...” The voice that emerges in these poems is by turns awestruck, foreboding, and apprehensive. Perhaps Crystal Law describes it best, in “Binary Duende”: “Something is moving in the atmosphere. / Something dark. ... / “Maybe it's a lunatic”, / His soul set free in the icy flame. / Maybe it's been lurking for a while.”

John Wall Barger  
Poet teacher

May 2013



## **Prose**



## The Yellow Tent

Inspired by the documentary, “Aokigahara: Suicide Forest”  
*Phyllis Au*

“Kon’nichiwa.” The bespectacled elderly forest guard bowed slightly in front of a lemon-yellow tent which was pegged in the middle of the trail. It blended harmoniously with the browning leaves and the sun beaming between the barks on the soft dust and mud.

“Kon’nichiwa!” a voice whimpered from inside the tent. A man’s voice, shaky, pretending to be confident and calm.

“You can’t camp here,” the guard said gently. It was not a warning or an order.

“Hai! Gomen’nasai!” the man apologized.

The guard nodded a few times, smiling. “You know, I’m a guard here at Aokigahara.” He sat down on a large stone tangled with roots and branches in the sea of trees, covered with dried fallen leaves. Even the crisp of leaves echoed in this vast forest.

“Hai!” the man huddled inside the tent responded.

“I’m here to check out, you know,” he continued, hesitantly. His tone remained soft and mellow. “To prevent people from committing suicide.”

“Hai,” the man in the tent sounded cheerful.

“So take your time and think thoroughly, be peaceful. There’s nothing that can’t be resolved.” There was a moment of silence. Not even a chirp from a grasshopper or the whisper of wind. “So, do you have enough food?”

“Hai!” he replied energetically and gulping a little.

“So, I’ll leave you here. Hai, hai, hai!” The guard continued his way back on the trail, turning back to eye the tent again. “You know, you’re never alone.”

## The Truth

*Christine Chan*

“Hey!” I called out to him as I arrived outside the restaurant where he was waiting. He smiled and kissed my cheek. He held out his arm so I could put mine around his and led us into the restaurant. The server brought us to a table by the window. Accompanying us was the view of the harbor and the lights of buildings that shone like stars across from us. I watched the flame of the candle on the table flickering and looked up to meet his gaze and smiled.

He swept gently at my temple to tuck the strand of hair in my face behind my ear. “Happy birthday, my love.”

It all happened a year ago. The day I woke up next to the man who was not my husband.

I woke up in an unfamiliar bed inhaling a foreign scent and turned to see a familiar face – it was Will. I sat up in an instant. My heart raced as I realized what had happened. I closed my eyes and tried to think back to the events of the night before. I remembered the big fight I had with my husband just before I slammed the front door and left. It seemed like something big back then, but I couldn’t remember what we were arguing about. I remembered Will calling me, asking me out for a drink. I was so angry and sad because of the fight. I agreed to go even when I knew how Will felt about me. I didn’t care if I was leading him on that night. I remembered being in desperate need to forget all my troubles, and after about half a bottle Jack Daniel’s, I did, as I did with the rest of the night. *How did I get here?* My head hurt. I couldn’t think straight. It took a while, but it hit me--the shame and guilt.

I snuck out of bed, careful not to wake him up. I didn’t want to speak with him, not now. I gathered my clothes scattered over the floor, got dressed and quickly went for the door. I needed to leave. Immediately. I fumbled at the door lock in desperation, but the more I tried to unlock it, the more stubborn it became. I was close to tears. All I wanted was to go

home and hide in my bed, mine and my husband's bed. A hand suddenly clamped over mine, I looked up to see him staring at me. He saw that I was teary-eyed and he didn't say a word. He opened the door and I bolted out.

The sun was shining bright over my head. People were laughing and talking, as though nothing had happened. The birds were sitting on tree branches, chirping away, as if mocking me. Everything was the same, but I had changed. I hated myself. I'd become someone I swore I would never be. I was walking a Sunday walk of shame. After a night of escape, you still had to face the harsh reality that awaited you. I pulled my sweater together tighter with my head down, hoping no one would see my smeared eyeliner, a trace of the night before, a trace of being unfaithful.

My heart was pounding like a hummingbird's. I was shivering because of the cold, or because I was frightened, I couldn't decide which. I had my hands on the doorknob of my front door. I didn't know what to expect on the other side. An angry husband ready to strangle me? I wouldn't have minded that now if that was what it took to redeem myself. I turned the doorknob, and pushed the door open lightly.

Kyle was sitting on the sofa with his face buried in his hands. He heard me when I closed the door. He stood up right away and walked towards me. I cringed as he held up his arms and I shut my eyes. I was waiting but he did not say a word. I almost jumped when he wrapped his arms around me and guided my head to his chest. His chin fell perfectly on the top of my head. We were perfect, I thought, but I had ruined it, I ruined everything. At that thought, I started bawling, wetting the front of his t-shirt.

"It's okay now, baby. It's over. I'm sorry we fought. Everything alright now as long as you're back," he comforted me as I cried. I wanted to tell him that it wasn't okay, I messed up, but I couldn't bring myself to say anything. I was afraid he would leave me.

For the rest of the day, we curled up in bed with the TV on. I was glad to be with Kyle, but the guilt was eating me up inside.

“So where were you last night? I called you but no one picked up. I was worried sick about you,” he asked as he stroked my hair.

“I was at Jessica’s,” I looked away as I answered him.

“I called her. She said you weren’t with her.”

“I told her to tell you that,” I said in a firm voice.

Kyle nodded. He dozed off not long after, leaving me wide awake in the dark, haunted by my own thoughts, scared that this guilt would swallow me whole.

The next day, I checked my phone and found I had four missed calls from Will. I was just about to put my phone down when it started to ring again and “Will incoming” appeared across the screen. I hesitated. He was the one causing all my problems. He took advantage of me. I felt the anger stir within me, but it soon died down, as the ringtone of my phone did. I had no one but myself to blame. I was the one who put myself into the situation. I sighed. The phone rang again, and this time I picked up.

“Hello?” Will’s voice was deep and a little hoarse.

I didn’t speak for a while. I didn’t know how to say it, but I summoned up the courage. “Will, it was a mistake and it didn’t mean anything to me, alright?”

There was silence on the other end of the phone. “I know, nothing happened,” he stated calmly, finally. “I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

“I’m fine. Please don’t call me again,” I told him and hung up.

I had known Will for almost a half a year. I had met him at Jessica’s birthday dinner and found that we shared a lot of common interests. We started talking a lot after the dinner and texted each other regularly. Since then, he had always been there for me. He had told me he loved me, and when I said I couldn’t do the same, he was still there for me. I couldn’t deny it, I did have feelings for him, but I also knew it wasn’t the right thing to



do. I tried to suppress my feelings towards him, because I never wanted leave Kyle. I didn't know it was possible to love two people at the same time, but it happened. Kyle was the man I'd always loved, but Will gave me the excitement I had always longed for. I thought if I ignored it long enough, the feeling would go away. Of course it didn't help that he was always flirting with me. Or that I enjoyed it. That night, we went too far, and there was no turning back. Was he willing to pretend nothing had happened because he felt guilty for taking advantage of me? Or was he scared of jeopardizing our relationship? Actually, there was no more relationship.

I was in the kitchen, putting a pie in the oven when suddenly Kyle came in.

"Leah," he called out my name in a hesitant yet serious tone, and I turned to look at him. "I have something to ask you about." On his face was an unusual grave expression.

"Yes?" I answered, worried about what was coming next.

"I went to Jessica's that night you left," he said. "You weren't there."

In my mind I was forming a thousand excuses, but they would have been futile. He knew. He looked firmly at me as I was trying to avoid his eyes.

I nervously bit my lower lips. "I wasn't," I admitted, finally. "I'm sorry."

"Were you . . . were you with Will?"

I winced at the mention of his name. Just the sound of it made me uncomfortable. There was no point denying it now. He knew. I nodded. I apologized to him, crying. I tried explaining, but I was sobbing so hard I could hardly speak. I knew it was over. Our marriage.

After a while, Kyle started to speak, "Leah, listen, I love you and I don't want to lose you. I'm sad that all of this happened, but perhaps I'm at fault too. I shouldn't have fought with you the other day. We can work things out, Leah, if you just promise one thing. . . . Promise you will never see him again."

I looked at him in astonishment. I couldn't quite believe what I was hearing. He ... he's *not* leaving me? I thought I had messed everything up. Maybe, just maybe, we *could* work things out.

"I promise."

I suppose it was true that honesty was the best policy. After what had happened, Kyle and I became even closer than we were before. We told each other everything.

"Leah?" he said, to catch my attention. "Why are you daydreaming?"

"Just enjoying the beautiful view," I smiled. Just then my phone rang. I excused myself to take the call.

"Hello," I said.

"Hey, my beautiful birthday girl, where are you? My boss said I didn't have to overtime that long today. I'll leave now."

"I'm just finishing up my work, I'll be done soon."

"Alright, then. See you. I love you."

"I love you, too," I replied.

"Kyle," I said. We told each other *almost* everything, but there were some things I still had to keep from him. It was for the better.

"I'm sorry, Kyle's off work early," I apologized. "I have to go. I'll make it up to you next time."

Will started to protest, but I gave him a quick peck on the lips and left, to go home, back to my husband.

...

Kyle was buttoning up his shirt as her hands reached from behind and hugged his waist. She sniffed the cologne on him and decided she needed to buy it herself, to remind her of him when he wasn't there. He gently pulled her hands away and threw his suit over his shoulders.

"I need to go now, it's her birthday," he announced.

“I know,” she pouted a little, but she knew he had to go.  
“But see you tomorrow?”

“See you tomorrow, Jess,” he smiled, and closed the front door behind him.

## Yangzhou City

*Cherry Cheng*

Yangzhou was a hustle and bustle city. The sun was shining violently in the sky. Along the two sides of the street, lots of hawkers were selling all sorts of things. A muscular butcher was yelling to attract customers. Inside a grocery store stood a lady holding a hairpin, bargaining loudly with the storekeeper. In front of the vegetable store several middle-age women picked the freshest vegetables. An old woman sat on a small wooden stool, two worn wicker buckets filled with big red apples beside her.

Among the gang of workers squatting under the tree, a sturdy young man leaned against a tree and crossed his arm. He smiled cheerfully, his white teeth gleaming. His upper body was naked, showing his rugged pectoral muscles. Sun and wind had tanned his body. He hung a white towel on his muscular shoulder and tied a hammer to his waist with his sackcloth belt, patches and holes on his grey cotton trousers. He grabbed a tiny bottle of sorghum liquor in his callused hand, laughing and playing loudly with other workers. "What a sunny day!" the young man exclaimed, "let's swim in the river and have fun."

"Get away! Get away!" a shout from the end of the street pierced the noisy town abruptly. "There comes Master Lee and his guards".

"How imperious they are," the villagers grumbled. At the same time they immediately stepped aside to make way for the comers and for the team of guards dressed in black with deep blue head-coverings and long sharp spears in their hands. In the middle of the team was a grand chariot painted reddish brown, with precious embers, agates and pearls inlaid. When the sunlight shone on it, the jewels reflected the light and made the chariot sparkle like the sun, dazzling the people who stared at it. It was pulled by a white horse with a skinny man on it. He looped a horsewhip around his waist and held the reins tightly with both hands.

Inside the chariot sat the merchant. He wore a red silk gown with a black mandarin duck embroidered on his chest, a long queue at the back of his head. On his head there was a cap badge with an agate set in the middle. He peeped outside with his small black eyes. "How noisy and crowded it is," he frowned and lowered the curtain. When the crew marched past a salt fish store, the stinky odor assaulted his nostrils. He frowned and pursed his lips. He took out a silk handkerchief from his satin pocket to cover his nose. "Hurry, hurry" he commanded with a low voice and waved his thick fat palm toward the cabman and showing a ruby ring on his short forefinger and a golden bracelet around his wrist. With a sharp slash and a long whicker sound, the team moved on.

The young man gazed at the chariot team, moving further and further until they gradually disappeared. "Wow, I wish I could be that rich," he whispered. He took out several copper coins from his fabric pocket and walked to the store selling watermelon. Soon he returned to his colleagues with an embarrassed smile on his face. The workers immediately clubbed together to buy half a watermelon. Then they gathered under the tree, cut the watermelon into slices and passed them around. The young man took a large bite of his watermelon. The tasty juice inside the honeycombed flesh rushed out violently, surged inside his mouth and excited every taste bud. He gobbled the watermelon up. Fresh red juice ran down from his hand to his elbow. He spat the pear-shape seeds onto the ground, wiped his mouth with his bare hand and smiled cheerfully.

Soon the team arrived at Lee's mansion. The merchant got off the chariot with the help of his servants. When he walked to the sitting room, his belly wiggled and his legs wobbled. He staggered, swaying a little and seemed to fall with every steps. With a long sigh of relief, he sank onto the sofa. His mustache vibrated while he panted hard. He closed his eyes, his mouth half opened, and sweat dripped from his forehead to his big round cheeks. "What a sunny day. I feel like I am

melting,” he frowned and grumbled, and took out his handkerchief to wipe away the sweat. He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

The servant standing aside immediately put a goblet of red wine and a dish of grapes on the small red sandalwood table. “Here you are, master. The red wine is just imported from the United Kingdom and. . . .”

“Peel them,” the merchant interrupted. He put the goblet of ruby red wine under his nose and shook it gently. The gentle smell of the ripe dark grape assailed the nostrils, refreshed his mind and penetrated deeply into his heart. He took a small sip. The taste of fruity grape and raspberry tangled with the pleasant scent of pine cork, mixing and crossing over like a harmonious melody, making his taste buds tremble with excitement. He nodded his head and smacked his lips. Then he grabbed a grape and put into his mouth. But immediately he frowned and spat it out. His face turned red and he stared directly at the servant. He slammed the table, pointed at her with his ruby-ringed finger and shouted, “Why is there a pit in the grape? Didn’t you check carefully before giving them to me?”

He grabbed the goblet with his shaky hand and took another sip. The pungent taste of tannin made him frown. He sighed and shook his head with dissatisfaction. He put down the goblet on the table heavily and strode to his bedroom.

Outside Yangzhou City there was a lake. The workers went for a walk along the lakeside. The lake was as calm as a mirror, reflecting the objects along the lakeside. Swans swam on the lake like a team of elegant knights marching around. The water was so clear they could see the small fish and stones at its bottom. The young man sat on a rock beside the lake and looked around at the scattered jade green willows. When the soft breeze passed, the trailing branches swung and shattered, like a ballet dancer dancing with the wind. The young man picked a stone and threw it into the lake. With a slight splash the stone sank, riffling ripples that finally disappeared. He stooped,

scooped up water with both hands and took a gulp. The fresh water cooled and refreshed him. He trembled with excitement. He put his towel on the rock and with a loud splash jumped into the lake. “Come, come!” he exclaimed, splashing the water toward the other workers like a naughty boy playing tricks on his friends. The workers jumped into the lake one after another, and tried to push the young man down into the water. They splashed and splashed water at each other. The lake was full of laughter.

## How Heaven Should be

*Cheung Kwok Pui, Priscilla*

It was a gloomy afternoon. Through the windows, the buildings on the other side could barely be seen. The white shirts hanging to dry outside looked soggy and lifeless. The foggy weather made Lynn drowsy. She was spacing out, pulling and pushing back the small money drawer for no reason while waiting for Agnes to finish her Math exercise on the mahjong table.

“I’m thinking... how is heaven like?” Agnes asked the young teacher out of the blue.

“Hah? Why? What about heaven?”

“If Mami dies one day leh, will she remember me in heaven?”

“I can’t see anything about heaven in your fraction exercise. Come on. Focus!”

Agnes put her pencil down and began to whine. “Please ... please ... tell me. I want to know now!”

Seeing her pleading puppy eyes, Lynn knew it was not a good idea to continue on fraction simplifying. Agnes would keep being distracted if she did not get an answer to those random questions in her tiny brain.

Flustered, Lynn’s mind tried to compose an ideal picture of heaven from the bits and pieces she had read from the Bible. But she could not really remember the details. When was the last time she read *Our Daily Bread*? That was a difficult question. For God’s sake, she could not even remember what kind of bread she ate yesterday! She had been busy at work, and it gave her a good excuse for not doing any proper reading. Everyone was busy, busy for nothing. Her dream of being a children’s book illustrator was allowed only at midnight. During the night, she could amuse herself painting purple dinosaurs which lived on rainbow-colored cotton candies. But when the sunshine crept through the blinds of her window, she knew it was time to leave her canvas until another midnight.

Lynn tucked her hair behind her ears, preparing a story.



“Well... heaven is a wonderful place. Everyone is dressed in white robes. There won't be any worries and sorrows. Don't worry! Your Mami will definitely remember you.” She gave her best smile, one only seen by children.

“How do you know?” Judging by her tone, the little girl was not convinced.

Wait a minute. If heaven is a place without worries, why the hell should Mami remember her little girl? Lynn believed that memories were burdensome, no matter whether good or bad. It would be better for Mami to cross the bridge of helplessness and drink the five-flavoured tea. *Ones who you miss this life, ones who you hate in this life, will meet you as strangers once you're at the other side.* She remembered this line from a melodramatic film with Leslie Cheung as hero. To be honest, the movie was nothing but a cliché. Yet she had cried for the unfortunate lovers every time she watched the movie.

Her little bratty student waved her hand in front of her eyes.

“No one knows. I made a guess. It depends on what you believe, lah. If you believe Mami will remember, then she will remember.”

“So, who can go to heaven, leh?” Agnes raised another question.

Lynn was annoyed with this whole conversation about her Mami, white robes and memories. “It would be smart children who can finish their homework quickly.” She looked at the unfinished exercise, then slowly into Agnes's eyes. She raised her eyebrows, hinting for Agnes to continue her work.

“Hah! Are you sure?”

“How about this?” Lynn picked up a piece of scrap paper on the mahjong table, scribbled a few words and passed it to Agnes. “You are God for one day. Try making your own rules to heaven with the word ‘should’.”

Agnes paused for a second and began to write, putting down each word carefully and erasing a few. Her tongue stuck out. She got so serious over that little task. It seemed like she

was about to create a groundbreaking rule that would change lives.

“Are you done yet?” Lynn lost her patience.

“I’m done! I did it! I did it! See how smart I am? You owe me some candies today! I like the soft and chewy ones you bought last week. Are you going to get me some again?”

The young teacher could not keep up her high spirits. She gave a weak smile and read Agnes’ paper.

*You should be nice to your parents.*

*You should finish every grain of rice for dinner.*

*You should sleep before 10 pm.*

*You should smile every day.*

Lynn laughed to herself. With these rules, there would not be anyone reaching heaven’s door, probably not even the doorknob of it, in Lynn’s case.

When she reached the last line, she was speechless. This bossy and bratty girl might make a mess with common multiples or ask for soft candies without any shame. Yet her mind was much more beautiful, more beautiful than Lynn’s herself. The teacher read the last line in her heart with a smile:

*Heaven should be for everyone.*

## **Writing Bill's Story**

*Victor Fung*

The TV was showing the news when Vincent had dinner at home. On the TV, people in a gay pride parade were waving rainbow flags as a singer “came out” on the stage. She held the microphone with both hands and stressed each syllable when she said “I am queer!” Vincent didn’t swallow the food until the report ended. The food felt funny when it went down his throat. He wondered how long he’d been chewing that. He had some thoughts about the news, but his father spoke first.

“That was disgusting,” he said, laying his chopsticks on his bowl, though he hadn’t finished his food yet, “don’t they think of their parents when they say such things?” The family finished the rest of their meal quietly.

After the dinner, Vincent began working on a short story for his writing class at City University, a story about a boy falling for another boy.

He did research for his story, reading gay romance comics and watching “Brokeback Mountain”. The theme song of the movie stuck in his head. He looked it up on the internet. It was called “The Wings”. Listening to the song, he wrote the first paragraph of his story, the story of Bill, a high school student.

Bill’s diary, 23<sup>rd</sup> September, 2011

In exchange for helping Victor with his English, he got me on a date with Shelly, the prettiest girl in the class. He wouldn’t say how he did it. Shelly and I went to the movies after school, had ice cream and took pictures together. I’m always shy around girls. But after meeting Shelly, I won’t thrill at other girls like before. At least the feeling was not as good as I had in class sitting next to Victor. Maybe I’d be confusingly anxious the whole time.

Bill’s diary, 25<sup>th</sup> September, 2011

It's 11:00 p.m. now. My parents are in bed. I was locking myself in my bedroom, looking at some girl-on-girl stuff. But I didn't get an erection from it. The boys always say the lesbian stuff would turn them on. A strange thought came to me, that chicks in the porn meant nothing to arouse my interest. So I tried gay porn, and that worked. Now what?

Bill's diary, 3<sup>rd</sup> October, 2011

The gay porn issue kept staying in my mind for a week. We always watch the news during dinner time. I saw on today's evening news that some celebrities "came out" in a gay pride parade. I thought it'd be a good chance to raise the topic right after the news report. But dad slammed the table halfway through the report. He took the remote control and switched the TV channel to Discovery Channel. "It made me sick," he said. Mom showed no sign of disagreement. Sick? They wouldn't even frown at reports of mass school shootings!

The next day, Vincent had a writing class in the morning. The teacher returned marked homework to the students. Vincent got his story back, read the comments, turned over the paper and left its blank side facing up. The classmate next to him was Noelle. Vincent peeked at the bottom of her paper to see what comments she got from Mr. Mountain. It read: "I like it. . . ." Vincent turned his head away, and looked out the window. He clenched his fist and took a big deep breath as he looked at buildings, construction workers, trees and pigeons.

Noelle poked Vincent's shoulder.

"Thanks, Vincent," she said, smiling, "thanks for helping me submit my homework."

He smiled back.

"No problem. Anytime." He turned back to the window and whispered, "Scheisse," German for "shit". Vincent started learning German by himself two years ago when he was

obsessed with a girl he had met in a literature class who knew German well. He learnt German for four months until he found out about the girl's ambiguous sexual orientation.

Class was over and Noelle asked Vincent if he would have lunch with her. He said he had to eat with someone else. Instead he skipped lunch and stayed at the library to study till the evening.

Bill's diary, 13<sup>th</sup> October, 2011

When I took the minibus to school this morning, I saw Victor walking uphill with a pretty boy from the other school. The boy studies at the Band Two school half-way up the hill. It was twenty-nine degrees hot, and Victor walked the rest of the way up to our school on the top of the hill.

I added Victor as my Facebook friend so I could check who that boy was. His name is Apollo. What a name. A week ago, he wrote on Victor's Facebook wall, "Long time no see. I miss you." And Victor replied, "I miss you too. How about we walk to school together?"

Bill's diary, 14<sup>th</sup> October, 2011

I asked Victor about Apollo. He said that guy was one of his primary school friends. I asked Victor if he was gay. I mean, "I miss you" is not something a boy would say to a mere friend. He said he wasn't. I doubt it.

Bill's diary, 28<sup>th</sup> October, 2011

For the first time, the month's best article prize belonged to Victor. This month's topic was "a comfort letter for a suicidal cousin". Miss Lam made copies of it for the whole class, as always. I read it. It was truly awesome. Victor picked his prize out of the box of books. He chose "1984" by George Orwell,

and gave it to me after school. “I owe you a lot for your English lessons at lunchtime,” he said.

Bill’s diary, 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2011

A few days ago, I began reading the book Victor gave me, “1984”. In the age when everyone is watched by the government and is almost completely stripped of freedom, Julia sneaks a love note to Winston, and two of them start a secret affair, running the risk of a likely arrest. I was touched. Now it’s three in the morning and I still can’t get to sleep, thinking of possible ways to confess to Victor.

He’s been so into German recently, though I don’t know when he started learning it. Perhaps I could also begin learning it by myself. A confession speech in German might work.

Bill’s diary, 8th December, 2011

In the Math lesson, I taught Victor how to fold a paper heart, step by step. I gave him one I folded myself, and an illustrated instruction sheet that listed the ten steps. Victor received them with delight. That’s a good sign.

Bill’s diary, 23<sup>rd</sup> December, 2011

I got this month’s best article prize. The topic was “A letter for a lover out of the country.” I wrote to a boyfriend. The letter begins with “Dear Victor”. My confession is done. Every classmate got a copy of the letter. I knew I could get write better than my classmates, but I chose not to, only because Victor gets envious easily. Miss Lam said my letter was really well written, but my writing style as a girl kind of crept her out.

In another week, Noelle and Vincent had lunch together after the writing class. Vincent was writing in his notebook. The food lay untouched on the plates.

“How was the story you got back last week? The one about a boy finding out his mother...” Noelle fiddled with her fork as she waited for Vincent to start eating.

“His mother’s career is in porn,” said Vincent, still writing.

“Yes, was the feedback positive?” She put her hands together.

“Well, the teacher’s comment said it was good but still had room for a lot of improvement. So, you know,” he shrugged.

“Well, don’t get frustrated. You have any ideas what you’re going to write this time?”

“Well, quite a few.”

“Tell me.”

“Well, one’s about a man being falsely convicted of rape.”

“And?” Noelle rolled her eyes.

“Another is about an abusive woman who works as a kindergarten teacher.”

“You got any childhood trauma? Or are you having too much stress?” she asked.

“No,” Vincent said, and let out a laugh. “Come on.”

“Why are your stories always so gloomy and,” she tried to find the right phrase, “sex-related?”

A young man came by and gave them two leaflets. “Hope you’ll find Jesus. Jesus loves you,” he said as he politely lowered his head. He had thin hair and was wearing glasses.

Noelle returned one of the leaflets with both hands and said, “One will be enough.” The man took it back with a smile and walked towards another table.

“Thank you. Jesus loves you, too,” Vincent said loudly. He flipped through the leaflet.

“You seem interested. Ever been to church?” said Noelle.

“I’ve been going to church every week, since six months ago.”

“You believe in God?” Noelle straightened her back.

“Well, I guess I kind of do,” Vincent looked at the floor, “I mean, I feel a sense of guilt every time I masturbate. I can’t help thinking that it hurts the relationship between God and me, though I doubt if God even exists. I used to masturbate every week. Now I’m trying to cut it out. It’s been kind of successful so far.”

“You’ve known me only for two months and we meet only once every week. And you’re telling me this. You think you can share this kind of secret with me?”

“That’s no secret. You may as well tell everyone my mother’s a woman.” Vincent laughed again.

“You’ve got a point there,” Noelle pointed her fork at Vincent, as if to locate the point. “Now let me say the prayer before we eat. Dear Lord, I’m glad we have this chance to eat together. Thank you, Lord, for this precious food. Please cleanse the food on this table so we can be healthy. Also, please help Vincent think of a new story.”

“Amen,” they prayed together, and picked up their knives and forks.

“You read the prayer so well. You go to church?”

“My parents are Catholic.”

“Oh I see. Hey, about the stories, actually, I’ve been writing something.”

Then he showed her the pages of Bill’s story in his notebook. She read through it without a change in her facial expression. Vincent asked her what she thought.

“Are you finished with the story?” asked Noelle.

Vincent shook his head.

“How does it end?” she asked.

“Well, Victor’s not even a bit homo. All the hints made sense to him once he got a copy of the letter with the greeting “Dear Victor?”. He was homophobic and didn’t know what to do, so he shunned Bill. That broke Bill’s heart.”

Noelle frowned and said, “It’s okay. Not very good, but okay.”

“You can be honest.”



“Does the story have a meaning? Are you trying to say anything through the story?”

“Well, nothing but the story itself, I guess.”

“Well, the part of the paper heart sounds really homo.”

“You think it does?”

“At least it’s very girly, if not very gay.”

They went separate ways after lunch. Vincent went to the library to study for the psychology quiz on the next day. “Very girly, if not very gay,” Vincent slowly said to himself. He reached for the pencil bag he’d been using since high school, and unzipped a compartment. He hadn’t seen the content inside for a year. He carefully took out two paper hearts, one red, one blue, and an instruction sheet on how to make one. His heartbeat was racing. Details of the scene kept flashing in his mind. He memorized making the blue one himself. Looking at the red one, he heard that Brokeback Mountain song in his head. He tore the red heart into two halves. “Bill,” Vincent sighed, as he found the words written on the inner side of the paper heart, “Ich liebe dich”.

“Lord, please forgive me. Lame excuse, perhaps, but I have to masturbate to lesbian porn once I’m alone,” Vincent whispered.

## OTTO

*Christopher Hill*

Linda sits on her bed and poses questions to the musicians posted on her walls. There is no response. Their faces and the music they conjure seem distant and faded, like a rabble of butterflies drained of color. Linda's parents told stories of how she kicked in the womb whenever they put on a CD. Linda is thirteen now and not even music can explain how cancer took her mother away.

Linda remembers her mother just a few Saturdays before, sitting at the living room table working furiously at her computer, a scarf wrapped around her bald head. She was still beautiful without her hair, except for her expression, which was bathed in intense concentration, her penciled eyebrows furrowed like dark brooding storms. Linda's dad explained that this was the way actuaries smile. Her dad loved to joke like this; while her mum worked he cooked and tried to sing along to the Bel Canto playing on his Hi-Fi. Her parents were like Yin and Yang.

"Linda, come look!" her father calls. He stands in the corner of the living room patting a piano. The instrument occupies the far end of the room near the window so that one could play while casting sideways glances over Victoria Harbor in the distance.

"You won't find many of these in Hong Kong," he says.

Linda watches as her father examines the piano. This is the first time he has smiled in weeks. He is dressed in his uniform buttoned down shirt and black pants. His agile frame maneuvers around the piano, searching for damage. Each blemish he examines closely with thick-rimmed glasses that cover long lashed eyes and a tall crooked nose he broke playing rugby at Nottingham University. She has an old photo of him running in one of those rugby matches, the only Asian guy on the team. In the picture his hair falls to his shoulders, now it has vanished. His bald head is like a large round hill surrounded at

the sides by enthusiastic waves of thick black hair and spotted with shocks of white. The white hair appeared spontaneously after her mother died. The look gives him the eccentric air of an orchestra conductor.

Her father lifts the piano's lid with anticipation; rows of ivory white keys are displayed. The words *Otto Bach* are etched in an ancient gold font at the center of the lid. He sits on the stool and presses a few keys and the sound resonates through the room. "Now you have to get serious with your music," he says with her mother's stern face.

Linda looks to her keyboard discarded on the sofa. She remembers the Saturday she first got the keyboard. Her mum took the afternoon off from her laptop and they had gone together to Tom Lee music store. The man in the shop had explained why the Nord was the best keyboard on the market. Linda didn't care so much; she just liked the red color. After they got home, her mum made congee and drank her smelly medicine, the odor engulfing the living room. She asked Linda to play a few of her favorite jazz songs and sat on the sofa the entire afternoon with her eyes closed, a peaceful smile on her face. Afterward they had all sat down to the Italian roast her dad had cooked, and he let Linda have a sip of Chianti mixed with water. He told her that that's how Italians learn to drink.

There is a knock at the door. Linda opens it to a woman as tall as her father. The woman possesses a long neck that requires her to crane her chin down so that her large friendly eyes can inspect Linda. The woman's arms are short, like that of a Tyrannosaurus, forcing Linda to step forward to meet the extended hand. In this position Linda imagines herself a bacteria sample observed through a microscope.

"Hello dear, my name is Mrs. Frampton your piano teacher." Mrs. Frampton grasps Linda's hand firmly, turning it over, palm down, to observe her fingers. "Well, you have the fingers for it. Long and supple, but there is plenty of strengthening to develop, which means lots of practice."

Linda's father introduces himself and leads them through the hallway and across the living room to the piano.

"An Otto Bach! Oh, this really is lovely Mr. Li! Where did you come across such a treasure?"

"It was left to me by a relative. I had to have it restored and shipped over from South Africa, would you believe. It arrived only yesterday."

Linda admires her father's confident English.

Mrs. Frampton turns to Linda. "You are a very lucky girl my dear. Such an instrument! You obviously have a passion for music, Mr. Li."

"Yes, I minored in musicology at university, never had much talent for playing myself, I am much better at appreciation, but Linda plays beautifully."

"Well, I look forward to that. Now, Mr. Li, you should know that the routine of the summer course is very rigorous. Linda will have to apply herself and will need your support." She pauses for a moment and pulls a few sheets of music from her bag.

"I assure you, Mrs. Frampton, Linda is very eager to learn. Her music teacher tells me she has some catching up to do with the other girls in her year and this is the perfect opportunity," Linda's father says, speaking to Mrs. Frampton, but peering at Linda with her mother's look again.

"Now don't let me distract the two of you – Mrs. Frampton would you like a glass of water?"

"That would be lovely," she replies.

Linda's father heads toward the kitchen.

"Now Linda, we discussed the *Notenbuch* on the phone and one piece of your own choosing. How about you show me what you can do?"

Linda frees the piano of the sheet music and begins. A flourish of alternating notes flaps around the piano and then launches up a scale and around the room. The music lands comfortably in the piano solo refrain of *Rhapsody in Blue*. Linda

bobs her head back and forth as her fingers perform the jazzy rhythm with practiced enthusiasm.

Mrs. Frampton thrusts her hand out indicating Linda to stop. “Interesting. Was that just one piece dear or a few mixed up?”

“Just one piece, by Gershwin,” Linda replies.

“Well, that’s a challenging tune and your playing really was lovely. If we can apply your enthusiasm and talent to the exam music then I think you have great potential. But you must understand that we need to focus on classical music, the canon, yes? That is what you are examined on and is what gets the grades,” she says with a grim smile. “Now, let’s try the *Notenbuch*, shall we?”

Linda returns the music to the stand and starts playing. She shakes her body of rhythm and plods; Mrs. Frampton nods approvingly. The keys become gritty and sticky, and Linda stumbles, correcting a bar or two. The stickiness thickens, as if the surfaces of the keys have frozen like dry ice. A small sharp sting accompanies each press. Linda’s fingers speed the tempo in response.

“Slow down, dear, there’s no need to hurry,” Mrs. Frampton tells her.

Linda slows her playing, but the pain in her fingers grows intense and spreads, quickening at her wrists and running up her arms.

She finishes the song and breathes deeply, her arms limp and body spent.

Mrs. Frampton offers tips and explanations, but the English is difficult to absorb, echoing around Linda’s brain. Mrs. Frampton gestures for Linda to try again, and she forces herself to place her hands on the piano. The stinging pulsates steadily through her body. The room spins. Between each song she rests and tries to recuperate. The songs keep coming; wave upon wave pushing her under, barely giving her time to catch her breath. A deep rumbling emerges from the piano. A laugh.

“Can you hear that noise in the piano?” she asks Mrs. Frampton.

“No my dear, it must be music in your head,” her teacher says with a smile and a wink.

When the practice is done, Mrs. Frampton is silent for a few moments. She calls Linda’s father from the kitchen to listen to the critique.

“Well, that was not bad, your technical ability is well beyond the exam grade, but you play much too fast, Linda. You also have a habit of varying and adding notes in places; crotchets are crotchets, my dear, one quarter of the bar; no more and no less. There is no room for interpretation.”

“Ivory Leung is already grade 8,” her father says.

“Mozart was just five when he composed the *Notenbach*,” her teacher adds.

Mrs. Frampton gives Linda a new piece to practice in the afternoon.

She goes to sit at the Otto but can’t bring herself to touch the keys. Instead she sets up her keyboard and begins her practice. Her father appears in the lounge.

“What are you doing?” he enquires.

“Practicing,” she replies without looking up.

“And why are you not using the piano?”

“I’m comfortable on the keyboard.”

“So I shipped, repaired and tuned Otto so that you could play on your keyboard?”

“Otto is your piano.”

“Linda, use Otto or lose the keyboard,” her father replies, and he strides off to the kitchen.

A tear escapes down Linda’s cheek. She wipes it away and takes a deep breath. She switches her keyboard from Piano mode to Rhodes and presses a key. A Gregorian bass warms her, an electric sun emerging from the clouds. She plays Herbie Hancock’s *Cantaloupe Island*, one of her mother’s favorites. Her

fingers warm as they scamper improvisations around the notes. Her body unwinds, the keys feeding her ardor.

An hour later Linda breaks for tea. Her father passes the lounge and announces he is going out for a couple of hours. She observes his face, the smile from the morning has gone, and the deep sadness has returned, weighing down his posture as he closes the front door.

Linda walks over to the piano and places her hands on the keys. She feels the sting in her arms and jumps from the seat and stares at the piano listening for the laugh. The piano is silent. She sits down again with her hands in her lap and her eyes closed just listening. She hears the living room clock counting 1, 2, 3... . Sparrows chirp through the open window. A hammer echoes off a roof in the distance and traffic hums in concert with the bees hovering over the balcony. A few small gusts of wind make their way into the living room and she smells the lavender her father potted. Inside the house, there is silence, save for the steady churn of the washing machine in the laundry... 271, 272, 273. Linda's eyes open, her hands touch the piano. The first key falls, as if in slow motion, like a crumbling cliff toward the ocean. The felt of the hammer launches toward the piano string and fires. Another and another follow as Linda's fingers play the notes.

She plays slowly at first, a casual modal with a catchy melody, then a few variations of its rhythm emerge. As Linda plays, the sounds warm her. The music works her fingers until she no longer needs to think. She catches her reflection smiling in the gloss of the piano's rack.

Later, Linda sits in the kitchen eating a bowl of congee. She hears her dad walk through the front door, put down his suitcase and come into the kitchen. He takes a seat opposite her.

"Congee? It's been a while," he says.

"There is plenty, would you like some?" she asks.

"Thank you," her father replies as he takes a bowl from the cupboard and studiously ladles congee inside. He tries a

spoonful and nods his head. “ I do miss congee.” He pauses again for a moment and looks up at Linda.

“Linda, I just...” he starts, but she cuts in before he can finish.

“Dad, would you like to hear my new piece? It’s the first to be written on Otto.”



## From Oklahoma

*David Hill*

He was four years old at the time, riding across the dust-swarmed emptiness of the American Southwest in the back seat of a car he no longer remembers, save for the sweat-stickiness of his skin on vinyl and the paltry relief from the midday heat he found by leaning half his body out the window, the hot, dry wind beating against his face, as they sailed down the highway toward California. Sometimes, he remembers it as though he were in the front seat, looking back at himself, as though he were his mother, or his father, leaning back with an open hand raised, yelling at him to sit down, for god's sake, sit down. He imagines that by the time they were halfway across New Mexico, his parents would have given up, would have settled the matter with a final warning—*If you fall out, we won't come back for you*—and left him to his own daring, too exhausted to care any longer. Maybe something like that happened.

That desert, outside the car, an endless, light brown nothingness. For hundreds of miles, it looked no different from the landscape they'd left behind in Oklahoma, as if that dreadful earth had chosen to follow them halfway across the country. It would pursue them all the way into California, giving up its chase only after they were well past Bakersfield, past Livermore and Oakland, where the desert gave way to trees and small hills covered in pale green.

Throughout the journey there were stops for gasoline, and brief respites during which his grizzle-faced father slept, sprawled across the back seat, while he rode up front with his mother. And she must have slept, too, sometimes. Probably in the front seat, sitting upright.

He remembers one time when they'd stopped to eat, in the middle of the night, at a diner alongside the highway. Just he and his mother. His father, probably more tired than hungry, had stayed in the car.

His head barely reached above the table where he sat in a booth, across from his mother, who ordered for him, eggs bacon toast, just coffee for herself.

*Eat slow*, she said to him, as if issuing a warning, when his food arrived. Then she turned to the darkened window, gazing momentarily past their reflections in the glass, and said nothing more.

They sat near the door. Her eyes scanned the room, marking every move their waitress made. His mother smoked, as did everyone in the place, a haze hanging over all of them, forming foggy halos around the bare light bulbs above their heads. The entire place smelled of stale smoke, and salt, and grease. There was a low mumble of conversation from other tables, where large men with gray, tired faces devoured sausages and pancakes and drank coffee. There was a hum of fryer vents in the kitchen, and the intermittent clinking of plates and cups.

He broke a fried egg with his fork and let the silky yolk dribble across his plate, then smeared a piece of toast in it. He held the sopping bread in his mouth for several seconds before swallowing.

His mother. Painfully thin, except for the protrusion of his sister's fetus in her belly. Her skin tanned a leathery brown, and wrinkles beneath her eyes already, despite her youth. She would have been about twenty-three then, but already the world had hardened her, had drained the marrow from her bones and replaced it with cement. Her shoulders sagged toward the earth. He remembers a look of resolve in her eyes, those bloodshot marbles, a look of longing and desperation, but maybe he's adding that detail now. She wore a light blue blouse, the same one for the entire trip. It was sleeveless, with sweat stains beneath her arms and around the top buttons beneath her throat. Her fingernails, grimy and yellow, were chewed so far down they sometimes bled.

This image of his mother would soon become a distant memory, even in his childhood, like a creased and faded

photograph he might carry around in his pocket. She would grow to be a large woman in the years that followed, the California years. And stern, always quick to swipe him with a switch, as she called it, which he would select from the weeping willow in the yard. Her determined gaze fading to one of hollow vacancy as the years wore on, always seen through the smoke of a cigarette throughout what would prove to be a life too short, as if California were not enough, as though maybe they should have kept on driving, onto Oregon and Washington, into Canada, all the way to Alaska, where some uncle, Uncle Mathis, he thinks, was rumored to be living off the fortune he'd made panning for gold. And someone else, perhaps another uncle, one without a name, saw no end to high wages on the fishing boats. But no. To California they would make it, and there only. As she said time and again to her son while she still lived, before her arteries clamped shut forever, *Only the foolish and lazy waste time on might-have-beens.*

But before all that, on that long ago night in a smoky, sad diner, still full of vigor and determination, she leaned suddenly across the table, and whispered to him, urgently, *Now. Go to the car now.*

With slow but determined movements, she ushered him through the door, clutching the remaining toast from his plate in one hand, and into the front seat of the car. And then she was driving, and he was in the front seat, beside her. She kept the headlights off until they were on the highway, accelerating, a cloud of dust rising in their wake. A few moments later his father sat up in the back seat, blinking and rubbing his hand across his stark, unshaven face. He looked as though he'd forgotten, just briefly, where they were, where they were going, and why.

## Fragments of Hong Kong

*Justin Hill*

*A selection taken from six years of taking notes on Hong Kong.*

I.

It was their first date.

He was American: all tattoos and tight t-shirt, biceps bigger than his brain.

She was young and local and skinny: squeezed like toothpaste into a black dress. She had to stand on high-heel tip toes to shimmy between the tables. The person at the table next to her held their glass of wine as she squeezed past. She sat with her back against the wall. He sat opposite her. The waitress gave them laminated menus. Two for him, one for her.

There were at La Souk, on Staunton Street: a place with an Egyptian owner, Nepalese staff and Middle Eastern food. The owner was Orthodox Christian. He was called Ali or Gabriel. It didn't matter, what mattered was that he strode up and down between the tightly packed tables, clapping in time to the Arab-pop. He gave out a lot of energy. Your heart began to beat in time to his clapping.

'How do you say your name again?' the man said.

She told him and he tried to repeat it, but he couldn't get his mouth all about the Cantonese.

'If you don't mind, I'll call you Cindy,' he said.

She didn't seem to mind. He called her Cindy.

Cindy's heart was racing as she looked at her menu.

'So, Cindy,' the man said. 'What do you like to eat?'

'Anything.' Cindy didn't sound confident. 'As long as it's not spicy.'

Gabriel or Ali kept clapping out the atmosphere.

'So,' the man said.

Cindy didn't speak.

'So,' he said again. His biceps strained his sleeves. 'Do you smoke?'

'No,' she said.

'Good.'

'Do you?'

'No,' he said. 'I quit. I used to smoke a ton.'

Their food came. It was not spicy. Cindy picked and muscles shoveled food in with his fork. He watched her and she kept her head down and moved her food about into little patterns. He still had food in his mouth when she spoke. 'I like you. But how do I put this politely? I think you're a little skittish. You gotta relax.'

Cindy left her food in a swirl on the plate. She looked up through her lashes. They were long and black. There was a long silence. Her heart was still beating. 'I don't think you're nice,' she said.

'What do you mean?' His biceps flexed as he lifted his fork to his mouth. 'I'm really nice,' he chewed. 'I'm a really nice guy.'

'When I called you, you said 'I'll call you back.'"

'I was packing!' he said. He opened his arms wide like a wet-market trussed chicken. 'I was packing. You know, putting things from here to here.'

'How should I know?' Cindy said.

II.

The number calling me was 210\*\*\*\*.

I picked it up.

'Hello?'

There was a long silence, then a click.

'Wei?' a curious voice said.

### III.

I wanna buy your ‘Ra Ring’, she said. I gotta buy that ring! You got a layaway plan? It’s gotta be the Ra Ring because when I think of Bertie I think of the sun. And when I think of the sun I think of Ra – the Sun God – and Ra is right there on that ring.

Bertie? He just went into jail on Monday, and that’s OK because God has gotta take a little time just to work with him. Give him a little perspective.

I was single a long time. I’m only thirty three! I’m quarter Mexican, half Black and I’ve got a *cold* personality. There are plenty of guys want get with me. But I’m waiting for my Bertie! I wanna get him that ring. No I don’t need a sizer – Bertie he know his ring size, if you know what I mean!

That’s very kind of you. When Bertie gets out of jail I’m gonna give you a call.

Tell me. You seen the Ra Ring. Is it nice? It’s a lot of money.

### IV.

In a third floor window of the Hopewell Centre: a blue poster with two words: McCain. Palin.

### V.

After the movers had emptied the 14<sup>th</sup> floor home, I had a last look round each empty and echoing room. I flashed back to the day, three years earlier when we’d just moved here, and the real estate agent had shown us round and we’d paid the deposit and signed the contract, and I stopped.

Stunned. Unable to remember or understand what had I had liked about this place.

## VI.

### The Wanch Pub, Wanchai

- i. Two Indian men talking: one fat and dark, other pale and suited with grey hair dyed orange with henna. The fat man had very hairy hands, and held them together as if in prayer, touching his fingers to his chin.
- ii. Short fussy woman, like Ms Tiggywinkle, sits uncomfortably on a seat, and puts her leather bag on the seat next to her, and then pulls it close as if it was a child about to run off. Someone looking for a seat goes over and asks if there's anyone sitting there. 'No,' she says, reluctantly gathers the bag to her lap, and looks anywhere but at the person sitting next to her. Unhappy. Waiting.
- iii. Thai hooker with heavy make-up, blonde hair, smart woolen coat and high heels comes in. She's short and young and skinny, and has to climb up onto the high stool at the bar. She orders a drink. Vodka and orange. The waiter sets it down. This is not a hooker bar, she isn't here for business. She doesn't touch the drink, but sits on her stool, black-stockings legs crossed before. It's open-mike night. There's a string of singers. She digs her hands into her pockets, wraps it about her like a rainy-day duvet, and waits for the love songs and silently mouths along.
- iv. A Rasta sings Bob Marley with his Filipino back-up band, at a volume so loud that no conversation is possible. Everyone sits with buckets of beer on the table. There's a stunned stillness through the room, as if they've all just been electrocuted.
- v. A Japanese thrash metal band play as a middle aged Chinese lady sitting at the bar takes out a pen and uses it to fix the frayed ends of her white leather lattice hand bag. She is wearing a Little Miss Naughty T-shirt. It rides up as she bends over, and reveals a man's name tattooed across the small of her back. The name is *Bertie*.

## VII.

### Typhoon 8

- i. The typhoon 8 signal is raised. 'X's are taped across window; in the harbor the water is matt and choppy and directionless, like a panicked crowd, wondering which way to run. Rain strikes as suddenly as a missile. The wind blows dresses tight against women's contours. Everyone is leaning into to the gale. A light goes out on the covered walkway from the IFC and people give it a panicked look, as if the end of the earth is coming. Everyone walks the same direction. It makes me think of your story, when you told me how, after Sept 11<sup>th</sup>, everyone trekked up down, and you took your high heels off, and walked barefoot, like a medieval penitent, as the smoke rose behind you.
- ii. On skirts of wind and rain, the storm slowly approaches, drawing us deeper into her. The world is slamming rain against the window, and the faint shudder of the building. Then there is calm.
- iii. The storm has past. In the morning there is an inch of water in the corridor of our flat, and we wake to the sound of children splashing and laughing.
- iv. Outside there is an eerie quiet, the ground is scattered with leaves and stray pieces of paper, and clothing, that has blown off balconies. They are all exhausted after a wild night of storm and swirl and slamming.
- v. Green plastic rubbish bins are tied to trees and lampposts with white plastic twine. They remind me of patient dogs, waiting to be untied.
- vi. In the plaza three trees have been brought down. The sun comes out and in the days that follow I miss the shade that the trees used to cast. The eternal sweat of Hong Kong begins.
- vii. In the road there are skinny broken branches and palm fronds. Within a few hours these are gathered together



fenced off. A man with a hand saw works dissecting a branch. The leaves quiver with each stroke right to the end of each shiny green leaf. If you listen hard, you can hear it scream.

## Stranger

*Ho Chun Man, Clement*

On a Sunday afternoon, Hei was walking along a hustle and bustle street where different shops and boutiques could be found, selling electrical appliances, fashionable clothes, multi-language books, to name but a few. Through his thick glasses Hei could see some billboards hanging over the two sides, like a skeleton hand trying to grab you into the shop and to kill your time. Many street artists were performing. Some were playing magic tricks, some drawing pictures on twenty T-shirts at the same time, and some standing still for the whole afternoon. In front of the cinema, Hei stopped and listened to a guy singing. Gradually the passers-by formed a crowd surrounding him to listen to his beautiful voice.

*“Stranger, you seem to me like a stranger. . . .”*

All of a sudden, somebody patted Hei’s shoulder. As he turned his head around, a man hugged him tightly.

“Hey, we haven’t met each other for long. It is such a blessing to meet you again.”

“Oh, yes . . . yes,” replied Hei. Since he could not see the man’s face, he tried to recognize the man by his voice but it was like searching for a book from a sea of bookshelves.

The man released Hei from his bear hug. Hei could finally see a common but unfamiliar face.

“Don’t tell me that you have forgotten who I am?” teased the man. “I am Paul. We used to do lots of things together. We chit chatted during class, went to the toilet together, and played tricks on the girls. Haha! Do you remember me?”

*“How could you forget what we’ve gone through?”* sang the singer.

“Oh . . . yeah, Paul!” answered Hei with an exaggerated happy voice. *Did we?*

“How are you doing? I haven’t heard from you since the final school day.”

“Quite good. Where are you working now?”

“I’m working in an insurance company. Take it easy. I’m not going to sell you anything today. Haha! How about you? I remember that you dreamt to be a writer. Are you a famous writer now?”

“Nope. I’m now a clerk working in Central.” *Did I? Writer?*

“It’s ok! Life isn’t easy nowadays. I totally understand. At least you are still writing, right?”

“Sort of.”

“How about your parents? I remember Uncle always gave me treats every time I went to your place and I had lots of fun. He is a good father, isn’t he?”

“Yes, I think so. He always treats everyone good.” *Did he? He is a scrooge.*

“When talking about treats, I always think of Miss Chan.”

“Miss Chan?”

“Yes, Miss Chan. The one who taught us English.”

“Why? Why would you think of her?” *Miss Chan? English?*

“Why? Of course, because of her treats. She always gave candies to those who had good grades in tests. She treated us like her kids. She was just my favorite teacher.”

“Yes. But I never got any candies from her.” *Really?*

“Haha! It was alright. Let me tell you, her candies didn’t taste good at all. By the way, you owed me some money because of candies. Don’t forget about that, huh!”

“I didn’t, did I? I couldn’t remember this.” *I didn’t owe anyone money at all!*

“Hey, don’t pretend that you can remember nothing. You borrowed money from me because you wanted to chase a girl. I remember she was from another class. Her name was . . . Mary.”

“I didn’t. . . .” *I didn’t borrow any money to chase a girl! Not even a single dollar.*

“Whatever, I forgot her name. So, what are you doing here?”

“Just waiting for my friends. How about you?”

“I’m waiting for my girlfriend. She is a bit late today, as always. Oh, there she is,” Paul pointed to the girl. “We are going to the cinema, but we are a bit late already. See you later.”

“See you.”

“Hey, let’s grab some time for tea later.”

“Sure! Bye!” Hei continued his walk along the street.

Paul’s girlfriend gave him a hug, followed by a French kiss.

“Who were you talking to?” she asked.

“You mean the man with a pair of thick glasses? He is Chris Wong. The friend I met in secondary school. We used to be good friends. But we haven’t kept in touch for long. Oh my goodness. I should have asked for his Facebook name. Well . . . it is easy to find someone nowadays.”

*“You were my everything but now it’s all over, all over. . . .”* The singer finished his song, the crowd gave him a big hand, and they scattered.

## **Mr. Clumsy**

*Hon Hei Yu, Hayley*

The school bell was harsh to the ear. It was nine o'clock in the morning. I could hardly strain my puffy eyes, which seemed like there was steel on them. The boisterous and loud class hit my ears. Alex was playing "Candy Crush" with his iPhone and roared with anger when he failed that round ten times. Susie and Betty were gossiping about the school affairs. I glanced at Susie's new bag. Another Prada this month, I thought. The boys said the girls were pretty, but I thought they were bratty. I reached my hand into the school bag for that disgusting book, with a feeling that the nasty, spotted, pop-eyed frog on the cover was staring at me.

"Hey, Olivia," Matthew turned around to ask, "has Mr. Clumsy come to school yet? The lesson should be starting."

"I guess he lost his way again," Johnny chimed in and burst into giggles.

I smiled wryly. Though I had gotten used to it, I still felt awkward and uncomfortable. I saw the frog sneering at me with its sticky tongue.

"Stupid, stupid, stupid . . ." I heard. I gave the ugly frog a heavy knock and crumpled my notes into creases. I hated Biology!

Five minutes later, I heard a scurry of footsteps and the door banged open against the wall. Mr. Clumsy came in with a puff. He wore a pink striped shirt with one of the buttons missing.

"It's very hot today," he said, rolling up his sleeves. Some water drops fell from his wet hair onto his face and back. His moustache was not trimmed. There was dirt on his trousers and the shoelaces of his shabby leather shoes were untied as usual.

"Maybe you should buy a new pair of shoes for Mr. Clumsy," said Matthew. "And he really needs a school map. I can draw one for him."

“Thanks, Matt. But I think it won’t work,” I sighed and kept my head down. On the new distributed note sheet, I wrote down my name carefully, Olivia Klum.

“K-l-u-m,” I whispered to make sure nobody heard me. I disliked my surname because it made me look stupid. I had already forgotten who started to tease me for my Dad’s name. I was vexed at this joke for some days, but now I was numbed. All the students called him Mr. Clumsy. Even his colleagues did. They thought it was the best joke in the history of the school.

“Class,” Mr. Clumsy cleared his throat, “today we are going to do something interesting and thrilling. Let’s guess?”

“Is it something bloody?” Julia’s voice trembled with fear.

“Good guess, but you will learn animal dissection next week,” Mr. Clumsy said and picked up the chalk. *Guinea pigs*, he wrote these crooked words on the blackboard and took out a cage. Inside the cage two shaking guinea pigs cringed in fear, weak and helpless. Though they would not be killed today, they would be the meat on the chopping board when the animal dissection lesson began.

“We are going to observe the body and living habits of these little things,” Mr. Clumsy told us. “Now, please come out and take a look... . Oops!” a sudden exclamation startled us. Our faces went white as paper when we saw the guinea pigs escaping from the unclosed cage.

“Ahhh!” the girls yelled with dread and ran away.

The guinea pigs scurried under the tables and chairs. Then they toppled down the chinks and jumped on the tables, leaving white steps on them.

“Please stay calm,” said Mr. Clumsy. “I will catch them. . . . Oops!” he cried for the second time.

“I caught them!” exclaimed Johnny. He caught the two prisoners and put them back into the cage.

“Good job, Johnny,” Mr. Clumsy thumbed up. He was lying on the ground and one of his shoes was missing. His hair was messed up and there were smudges on his face. He tried to get up but “Oops!” he howled for the third time and tumbled over

and hit his head on the rubbish bin. A clown-Dad, I would name him.

Everyone burst into laughter. My face was as red as a tomato, and my heart was beating as fast as a shocked deer. That's why I hated Biology.

I felt like I suffered from melancholia today. I could not stand the tension waiting until the bell rang and I could get out of the class. Ten . . . nine . . . five . . . two . . . one! I counted to myself. It was the happiest moment when I could grab my school bag and dash away. Along the corridor I heard people talking about me.

"See, she is Mr. Clumsy's daughter!" a boy with blonde hair and a dragon tattoo on his right arm shouted.

"Shhh. . . Daniel, don't speak too loud, she'll hear you," the girl next to him reminded him.

"What are you afraid of? Mr. Clumsy putting guinea pigs in your bag?" the boy sneered at me and hugged the girl. They giggled like two repulsive frogs.

I struggled to control my tears as their words bruised my heart. At this moment, I heard some hasty intimate footsteps. I wished I could vanish. Mr. Clumsy patted my shoulder lightly and looked at my face with his fathomless eyes. I swung at his arms with force and ran out of school.

On the street, pedestrians walked in haste. The sun was covered with dark clouds. It poured water mercilessly after a bolt of lightning lit up the sky and thunder roared like hungry lions. My eyes were clouded with tears that fell down in chains with the sad rain.

I could not remember how much time had passed since I hid myself crinkly under the blanket. My eyes were stabbed with glowing sunshine and I could hear some melodious notes outside the window. It was the sparrows, I thought. They had nothing on their minds, but I was different. The alarm clock had been ringing, and Dad came in to stop it.

"Olivia, it's time for school," Dad pulled away my blanket.

I recaptured it. “You have no right to order me around! Go back to the circus and be the students’ clown.”

Dad left without saying a word. I could see that his face had turned white and pale. The door was shut after a few minutes. I did not mean to be so mad and hurt him, but I could not control myself. He used to be a teacher who stole hearts from girls and he would receive at least ten love letters each day. Then he fell in love with the principal’s daughter and married her. A baby was born on a chilly and rainy night with blessings. That was me. When I was five, Dad told me that Mum had gone to a peaceful place, and I wouldn’t be able to see her forever. I nodded naively and he hugged me with falling tears.

He was hoary-headed and his stride became jerky and halting as time flew. We always bought plastic dishes and glasses since the glass ones broke all the time. These days with him were simple and routine. We cheered for Madrid, swallowed a jumbo salami pizza and played chess together. Though I may have felt embarrassed sometimes, we had had happy times. He was a good Dad, I knew.

I put on my school uniform and left my room. I decided to apologize and bought him a new pair of trousers and shoes that afternoon. When I returned to the living room, I saw a huge hot pink box on the table. “To the child who was born in winter” a card announced. I unfastened the ribbon and saw a white chocolate cake with snowmen, snowflakes and a snowy house with “Happy Birthday, my dear, I love you as always,” on it.

I was totally gobsmacked. At this moment, there was only one thing in my mind. I forgot how I had carried my school bag with me and left home. I just realized I was wearing slippers and that my hair was untied when I reached the school entrance. However, Dad was not in his office, the Biology lab or any classroom. The school said he had not come yet. I panicked.

My pocket vibrated suddenly when I was wandering along the corridor. I was a little bit nervous to answer it as it was a private number. “Hello?” I answered.



The caller murmured a few words to me, and I dropped my cell phone before the call had finished. My heart was beating fast and erratically. I could not believe what I had heard. My forehead and hands were sweating and my legs were shuddering. I felt like I had lost my strength.

I loathed this place because it took my Mum away from Dad and me and destroyed my family. I crossed my fingers that the unlucky things would not happen on me again. While I was finding the ward, I saw a young pregnant lady weeping alone outside the surgery room. I wished I could soothe her.

“Room 301... Room 301... that’s it!” I finally found the right ward and pushed the door open. I saw Dad. He was lying on the bed unconscious.

“Dad, can you hear me? Wake up!” I called out. Hearing no response, I began to cry.

I did not want to be alone. We would not be able to cheer for Madrid, swallow a jumbo salami pizza and play chess together anymore. I knelt hopelessly near the bed.

“Surprise!”

I was floored by this shocking and unbelievable voice. Dad was back! I could not hold back my happiness and we embraced each other. The doctor and nurses came in, they smiled and I knew that I had been tricked. But this time, I was over the moon.

Dad returned to school after a week. In the morning, he drove me to school and we decided to watch a football match at night.

“It will be exciting, Dad,” I smiled.

“Of course it will!” he smiled back.

Although Mr. Clumsy was still clumsy during the lessons, I began to love Biology.

## Gu Cheng Lake in My Hometown

*Lily Jim*

With all the excitement about being in Hong Kong fading, I begin to dream about the Gu Cheng Lake in my hometown Gao Chun, a little town in Nan Jing, Jiang Su Province. This lake is a beautiful pearl set in my lovely hometown, and you will have different experiences if you visit at different times.

At dawn the lake is surrounded by thin, milky fog, like in a hazy dream or a fairytale world. The waves are gently kissing the shore, and the long willow branches are swinging slightly in the cool breeze. When you bend down, you can sniff the faint sweet smell of flowers; when you look up, you can find scattered stars winking in the sky. Soon after, the lovely sun shyly shows her round bright face and drives away the darkness. Then a cute and lively morning comes in. Birds begin to chat happily with each other. Drops of dew on the green leaves are shining with colorful light in the sunlight. Some people are jogging along the shore while others are wandering leisurely and watching one or two little fishing boats bound for the heart of the lake.

At noon silence settles over the lake again as the townspeople have lunch and take afternoon naps. But a few of white herons still lazily pace by the still water or among the thick reeds.

As dusk falls, the lake looks like a gilt disk in the splendid orange sunset. When the ornamental street lamps are lit, people will gather in the park next to the lake. Groups of young women in beautiful dresses and shining high-heeled shoes dance to the music like fluttering butterflies. Children rollerskate in the open field, laughing and chasing each other. Some practice the saxophone by the lake. Though not very skilled, these players can always bring us wonderful tunes. Music and happiness can be found in every corner of the park at night.

But the rainy nights are quite different. You seldom see any one and the world is silent. Wandering by the lake in the misty drizzle with a transparent umbrella in dim light, you can feel a

picturesque poetry, as if you are appreciating a Chinese painting. Listening to the rhythm of the falling rain and the slap of waves, you can choose to walk alone in the quiet park. The air there is fresh, wet and grassy and you feel totally free and relaxed. You will feel as if you have become a part of nature, and your tired and lonely soul can finally find its home.

Now, in Hong Kong, cold raindrops are falling down quietly outside the window, slowly wetting my memories.

## Lung Fung Café

*Kong Kin To, Ken*

Walking down Queen's Road, Ah Luk was going to breakfast as was his morning routine. Lung Fung Café was once their must-go-to place every day before work, but it had been a year since his ex-wife left him, after his business bombed out with a heavy debt.

A long queue of nearly a hundred people stood outside the restaurant.

"What's happening?" he asked.

"The interview about my shop was printed in the newspapers yesterday," Boss Chan explained.

Ah Luk was surprised to learn that that week was the café's final days of business. The landlord recently decided to lease the property to a fashion label at a monthly rent of about HK\$1 million. Everyone was coming for a last meal and to bid farewell to the café.

The eatery's history extended far beyond the restaurant walls and deep into the core of the town's people and culture. Occupying its seats were poets, businessmen and gamblers alike, all finding comfort in an honest meal.

"It's sad. . . . We've been working so hard, and it's been more than thirty years," Boss Chan lamented. "But we have to accept it. . . . We cannot lay all the blame on the developers; it's the demand and supply of the market."

Mrs Li, Ah Luk's old neighbour, had just been discharged from the hospital the previous day, so Mr Li accompanied her to try her favourite macaroni and French toast in the café.

Mrs Li was longing for the taste of the whole family's reunion. She felt fortunate to have found a suitable bone marrow donor. "You know what, Ah Luk, the odds of finding one who's not a family member is about 1 in 20,000!" she emphasized.

"How about you, Ah Luk? How's your life?" Mrs Li asked.

"Everything's fine," Ah Luk replied.

“So, have you let go of your ex-wife?”

Ah Luk thought to himself, "At that time, I couldn't believe it would happen to me. We raised a family, we fought, then made up, and made plans for our future --together. We didn't have much money, nor did we go on exotic vacations, but I thought our company and our love would carry us through any hard times.”

Mrs. Li saw that Ah Luk had no response, so she encouraged him, “Come on, Ah Luk, leave the past in the past. Perhaps that divorce saves your life. It is the beginning of building a foundation for a new life.”

Ah Luk replied, “We had spent over five years together, and it took a courtroom about five minutes to say it's over. People thought I could just walk away from a marriage overnight and start a new life. But the pain was real. The emptiness was huge.”

Mrs Li's son yelled, “Let's sit near the window, I wanna see the buses,” as Li's family settled in the booth by the main entrance.

All the other seats were occupied, so Ah Luk had no choice but to sit on the same row with the son. The 4-year-old kid made a grimace, and Ah Luk smiled, thinking of his own child and his runaway ex-wife.

“Your set A with scrambled eggs and milk tea,” Boss Chan said.

His voice was followed by a sudden clang of the great alarm bell, then gunshots and shattering glass.

Ah Luk instinctively held the boy firmly by the arm, but he felt a searing pain in his back.

Some stray bullets had entered Lung Fung Café, and Mr Li was seriously injured.

The café was filled with screams while the culprits fled the jewellery store across the street.

Ah Lu was slightly injured, but he got quite a considerable sum of insurance compensation, and he used the money to pay off his debt.

Mr Li was not that lucky, he suffered complications and died about two weeks later. Nevertheless, Mrs Li still felt blessed after surviving these two major traumas. In her bereavement, she raised Little Li by herself.

Every morning, Ah Luk would wake up alone, wondering who was sleeping in the bed with his ex-wife. He tossed and turned every night, hugging a pillow while he visualized how someone was comforting her. Ah Luk still had his ex-wife's picture on his bedroom writing desk. Finally he called her to meet him for a meal in Central.

That night Ah Luk put down his glass and reached out to softly touch her hand. He let his fingers trailed lightly down the back of her hand and smiled, "Why so nervous?"

"I'm not," Ah Luk ex-wife replied.

"Honey, I was thinking of Ming Chai all night. Kiss the kid for me and tell him I'll see him on a bright and early Saturday," Ah Luk said.

"I met this guy. He is Michael," she said pointing at a photo she took out from her purse. "We will be moving to the US next month, and our kid is now friends with his kids," she added.

"Fiancé?" Ah Luk sputtered. "You have got to be kidding!"

"You should find a soul-mate whose love for you would be equal to your love for me. She may need you. We all deserve that. To be loved and wanted," Ah Luk's ex-wife said.

"Can I see Ming Chai at some point?" Ah Luk asked.

Without saying anything, his ex-wife left the restaurant.

A lonely year passed with no news from his ex-wife. On a usual Saturday, Ah Luk was going to breakfast in a newly built shopping mall when his mobile rang.

"Daddy, I'm heading to your home!" a high-pitched voice came through the phone.

"Where are you, Ming Chai?" Ah Luk asked in surprise.

"I will arrive at the newspaper stand soon," his son replied.

“See you in a minute!” Ah Luk rushed to the stand where he could see three figures standing in the distance. He knew it was Ming Chai’s new family.

“Hi, I’m Mic,” the red haired man said in an apologetic tone. “Thank you for taking Ming Chai for the day. We’ll meet you here at 4 p.m. Sorry we have to rush.”

Ah Luk wondered why his ex-wife could love such a Gweilo. He thought, “Are blue eyes the only thing that make you so attractive to her?”

“We came back to Hong Kong for his business, and Ming Chai said he missed you much, so. . .” Ah Luk’s ex-wife explained.

Ah Luk held his son’s little hand as they walked along Queen’s Road East near Lee Tung Street. In the past months, Ah Luk had watched as tenants were being evicted one by one. People started putting “X” marks on windowpanes, and soon the street was deserted entirely.

Ah Luk brought Ming Chai to McDonald’s, the only low budget restaurant in the district. After the meal, they went to the Wanchai Livelihood Place to look at an exhibition of videos of doors, surfaces, and walls that made a statement about the neighbourhood that once stood there.

In the museum, Ah Luk encountered Siu Mei, an old waitress who had worked in Lung Fung Café. Ah Luk asked, “How’s Boss Chan?”

“He passed away last month,” Siu Mei answered. “He departed his life in his sleep,” she added.

Siu Mei acted as a guide to introduce Ming Chai to the history of Wanchai and the Wedding Card Street.

An hour later, Michael came to pick up Ming Chai. Before he left, Ah Luk told Ming Chai how proud he was to have a fine son and would love him still no matter what changed.

“Bye, I love you too, Daddy,” Ming Chai said, as a kind of farewell.

A giant corkboard had been set up in the final section of the exhibition where visitors could leave their messages of their memories.

Ah Luk took a memo page and wrote, “Perhaps not only the human life is fragile but also our history.”



## Mami

*Stephanie Lam*

This night is not like the other summer nights. It is extraordinarily hot. There is barely any wind. It is dark outside and the darkness pierces through the window of the bedroom. Only a few lights beam from the building across. It is so quiet the air conditioner sounds like a lion roaring. Everyone is asleep, but she is tossing and turning in bed, trying so hard to sleep. She can feel her heart beating like a drum. She can feel the sweat on her back, her armpits and forehead. She sweats so much that her hair is wet.

Finally she pulls herself up and gets off the bed. She opens her bedroom door, leaning on it because her knees are so weak. She can barely stand straight. Hunching her back, she crawls to her mother's bedroom.

"Mami. . .," the girl whispers in her mother's ears.

"Hmm. . .," her mother is in deep sleep.

"Mami, mami. . .," this time the girl raises her voice, giving a little shake to her mother's shoulders.

The mother wakes up and squints her eyes to see what is going on. "Jo Meh Si Ah?"

"I am not feeling well."

Mother gets up and switches on the light, "Let me see... . You are shivering." She slips her hand to the back of the girl's neck. Knowingly placing her hand on the girl's forehead, she says, "You are having a fever."

She looks into the girl's eyes, not saying a word for seconds. "Let's get you to the hospital," she breaks the silence.

"But I don't want to go to the doctor. . . ." the girl murmurs unwillingly. She lies down on the bed next to her mother and closing her eyes pretends to sleep.

"Just get changed. I'll call a cab." Her mother gets up, ignoring her. Slowly she walks to the closet, opens the door, grabs a black woolen cardigan and puts it on. She turns around to check on her daughter.

“Why are you still lying on the bed?” she asks.

“Mami, I can’t get up.”

Her mother takes a grey jacket from the closet, and moves closer to the bed. She gently slides her hand under her back, giving a little push to help her daughter sit up straight. “Give me your right arm.” She glides the sleeves of the jacket smoothly into one arm and then another. “Such a grown-up now, but still need me to get you dressed. What if I am not here one day. . . ,” she mumbles.

The girl doesn't know what to say. She stares down quietly. At this moment of silence, she has a closer look at her mother's feet. She realizes Mami's feet have become smaller. She can still remember in the old days, she would place her feet next to her mother's and laugh at how big her mother's feet were. “You have monster feet, Mami!” Both of them would laugh to tears, and Mami would take her feet and tickle her till she screamed. Those were the days.

And now, have her Mami's feet become smaller these days?

Suddenly a melody buzzing from the mother's handbag breaks the awkward silence. “Must be the cab driver,” Mami reaches to her handbag, takes out her phone and answers. “Okay. Okay. Ng Goi,” she says, and turns to her daughter abruptly. “Let's get you to the cab.”

The girl gradually gets up from the bed.

“Hold on to me!” Her mother tells her to firmly grasp her right arm and lean on her.

Very slowly she takes one step after another. The way from the bedroom to the front door seems so long. Like a worm, she drags herself to the door. Then, one step, two steps, three steps, she sluggishly crawls to the lift at the end of the corridor. Every time she moves, she can feel her head pounding, like someone inside her head is drilling and hammering nails. The way from the door to the lift takes forever. She thinks, “It's like an expedition to the Great Wall.”

While waiting for the lift, she holds her mother's arm tighter. She can feel the warm current passing through her mother's

hand. Though her Mami's hands are covered with green veins and wrinkles, they feel soft and cozy.

It has been a long time since she has held her mother's arms like this. So long she can't remember when was the last time. Was it on the first day she went to the kindergarten? She was so scared of the new environment and the teacher with blonde hair speaking a language she didn't understand. She was so scared of letting go of Mami's hands.

Was it that time when she won the storytelling competition in primary school? She held Mami's hand and dragged her to MacDonald's for an ice-cream sundae as a prize. She could still remember how she begged Mami for a whole month because Mami said ice-cream would make her cough and at last she could only eat half of it.

Or was it the time she went shopping with Mami in Sogo for dresses and shoes for Chinese New Year? She would hold Mami's arms and beg her to buy two red dresses for New Year. They would choose the shoes that matched the dress and holding hands leave the department store with their bags of treasures.

Now, they rarely go shopping together. Even if they went together, they would go separate ways, to different stores. The only time she asks her mother to come along is to get Mami to pay by her credit card. Walking hand in hand to shop?

Those were the days.

Finally, they reach the ground floor and see a taxi waiting for them. One step at a time, they walk towards the taxi and get in.

In the cab, Mami gently places the girl's arm on hers, "Hold on to me . . . hold on to me."

## The Wristwatch

*Felix Larsson*

Michael had never been very close with his brother, but he had gone too far when he decided to throw his life away. He was looking for something he was not likely to find, instead of getting a good education, a job and a future for himself. So, Michael kept his distance and by now, they hadn't spoken for years. It was all because of that wristwatch.

He was wakened from his sleep by the sound of his telephone ringing. He threw a quick glance at the watch on the nightstand; it was a quarter past three in the morning. He let out a loud sigh of frustration as he reached for the phone next to the watch and picked it up.

"Yes?" he said, trying to sound agitated, but his voice was full of sleepiness.

"I have located it!" a voice said triumphantly on the other end. "I have found it!" the voice repeated, barely containing its excitement.

"What?" Michael said, confused by the voice that seemed to know him and took for granted that Michael would, too. "Who's this?" he said as he rose from the bed and moved slowly to the only window in his small hotel room.

"It's David, your brother," the voice grunted in displeasure. He had a sarcastic tone to the last remark and also a hint of impatience. He said: "I found the watch, Robert's watch."

Michael understood David had been dying to tell someone about this for some time by the way he blurted out the words at a fast pace.

"Like we suspected...like I suspected, it was in the possession of a German guy whose father had stolen it from Robert's dead body in France. If that was the same man who killed him I don't know, but I guess it's probable," he said.

Michael thought his younger brother sounded quite arrogant, but let him continue. He had never been as invested in the quest to recover their dead brother's old wristwatch as

David, so naturally he had a certain right to boast about finding it finally. In fact, Michael never really made an effort to find it at all, not even when their father, on his deathbed, asked them to find the watch for him. The watch had been in the family for three generations, and it had become a tradition that father would hand it down to son when the eldest son came of age. It had always bothered their father how the watch had been lost. Sometimes, Michael wondered which loss their father mourned the most; the watch or Robert. So when their father gave them this task, David was eager to go search for it. Michael, on the other hand, had no time for such nonsense, as he was working hard to become a doctor and had to devote all his time to his studies. Truth be told, he had no desire to do it either; pleasing his father had never been his strong side, and he wasn't intending to start now. After all, it was only a watch. David had inherited their father's fondness for traditions, and as such he had made it his personal crusade to find that watch.

"That's great," Michael said absently while peeking through the dusty, torn green curtains that only barely covered his window to take a look at the deserted alley outside.

"Aren't you listening?" David asked sharply, picking up on the absent-minded tone in Michael's voice. "I found it, our search is over, and both father and Robert can rest in peace," he said.

"Yeah, and that's great, it really is, but it's three in the morning and I'd really like to get back to sleep. I have an early meeting, a job interview in fact, that I'd rather not miss and I don't see why this couldn't have waited until morning," Michael said, and now it was his turn to sound agitated. The sleepiness in his voice was gone. The meeting was important to him and it was an opportunity he didn't want to miss.

"You're an ass," David muttered and hung up.

Michael felt like he was being crushed alive by the silence that followed those last words. This had been his brother's great quest in life for many years now, but he reacted rudely when his brother finally succeeded. He should have been happy for his

brother's success, for the success was for his entire family. He sighed and walked back to the bed, where he sat down next to the nightstand. He put his phone back and leaned backwards until his back hit the hard mattress, where he had spent the last four nights. He had come to New York from Ohio for a job interview, but had been stood up for four days in a row now. There had always been something more important for the hospital to take care of than him. Michael supposed that was what life in New York was like. This thought gave him some sudden clarity. That was exactly how he had treated his brother for years now. He decided he wanted none of what New York had to offer and rose again. All his weariness was gone in an instant; determination had a way of doing that to him. He grabbed his still unpacked backpack and left the shabby room behind. He never looked back.

Six hours later, he stood outside his brother's farm in rural Ohio. He was quite a sight, where he stood under the morning sun. He was still wearing the rugged green nightshirt he always wore for bed and his favorite pair of jeans, the ones he bought 17 years ago at the age of 18. It had seen all his life's greatest moments and had become quite worn down. His hair was tousled from his sudden awakening and the following six-hour car drive. He had not showered or shaved for two days by now. Michael did not resemble the skilled and successful doctor he actually was at all. Maybe that was what caught his brother off-guard when he answered the door as he did not seem to recognize Michael until he uttered his first word. It had been nine years since their last meeting, but David somehow looked the same. He sported a short military style haircut and a shaved face. He wore a gray t-shirt that revealed a tattoo of a wristwatch on his right forearm and a pair of black shorts. Michael supposed he was just about to go for a run as he also wore a pair of running shoes.

"David," Michael said in a humble tone.

David's eyes widened in surprise and he opened his mouth as if to gasp, but no sound was made.

“I’m sorry about earlier. You’ve accomplished what you set out to do nine years ago, and I’m proud of you for it,” he tried giving his brother an encouraging smile.

“I thought you had a meeting,” David said. He was masking his surprise to see his brother in person again with a tone of disapproval and a stern face that showed no affection.

“I decided some things are more important than a job, just like you did once,” Michael said, looking at his brother’s face, a face he had almost forgotten during their falling out. David’s left eyelid twitched a little, a thing it had always done when he didn’t quite know what to say. “So I came out here. I believe you had something to show me.”

“I did,” David’s voice sounded hoarse. He swallowed as he tried to find the right thing to say. When he realized he didn’t know what to say and wasn’t likely to figure it out, he simply took a few steps backwards as to tell his brother it was okay to come in.

Michael took the hint and walked into the tiny hallway, where he had not set foot since his father lay on his deathbed in this very building. He thought to himself how the years had made him forget what this house looked like, but he now saw that his brother had left it just the way it had been when they grew up. The wooden walls of the hallway had gotten a little bit darker than he remembered, probably from the persistent rains that troubled the country for years and caused the walls to absorb moisture. But he saw the black burn mark to the right of the cracked mirror on the wall, from that one time he arrived home drunk, smoking a cigarette. Noticing his parents still up waiting for him, he panicked and put out the cigarette on the wall. This small piece of nostalgia was enough to almost bring a tear to his eye, but he could not afford that as he still was not sure what talking to David would be like, and he knew he might have to be tough.

David led him through the hallway into what had been the living room when Michael last saw the place. Now it seemed to serve the same purpose, but it had been updated with modern

furniture such as a big, bulky TV and what looked like a new and comfortable sofa facing it. The TV was standing at the far corner beside the wooden bookshelf that still covered the entire wall on his left. By now, a large collection of books had been assembled there that the bookshelf looked as if it might fall apart at any moment. Michael supposed that was what David had done with his time as he never did get an education or a job but simply tended the farm. While Michael had stopped to look at the room, David had continued towards the corner opposite of the TV where a big wooden cabinet stood. Michael remembered that was where the family photos had stood, protected by a pair of well-polished glass doors, and they still did. But time had faded the photographs; the older ones of his grandparents were in quite a bad shape and it was difficult to see everyone's faces clearly. But something else had been added there. Given the place of honor in the middle of the cabinet, their dead brother's wristwatch was resting among the rest of David's most prized possessions. Michael could see a metal toy truck from his childhood, a golden necklace that had once belonged to their mother, and there right beside the watch, the last letter Robert sent home before his death.

The watch was a plain one, with a brown leather band which was weathered and hardened with time, but it had been kept in good shape and had been taken care of fondly. It showed black roman numbers on a white background and the pointers were equally black.

"There it is," Michael said. "Just the way I remember it," he spoke in a solemn voice. "May I hold it?" he asked his brother and looked him straight in the eyes, the same eyes he had, and the same eyes Robert had had.

David didn't say a word, but slowly opened the glass doors, carefully removed the watch from its place of honor and handed it to him.

As he received the watch, Michael felt the unbearable sadness and melancholy as he thought about what this tiny object stood for. But he could not help but felt hopeful at the



same time. Maybe he could now get to know his brother for the first time.

## A Good Way to Earn Money

*Leung Ho Ying, Celia*

Luke stares at Jose. Without a deeper gaze, Jose nods his head – he knows exactly what Luke is thinking. They have lived together for so long that they don't need words to communicate with each other. They call each other 'brother', although they are not real brothers. Jose grabs the black backpack, goes to the mirror and covers his blonde hair with black highlights – his daily procedure. Like a perfect schoolboy, he thinks. By now, Luke has completed all the "daily procedure" and is standing next to the door. "Let's go," he says.

They walk out from the dark room. It is a beautiful night, a perfect night for everything. They pass through the dark alleys and corners, and finally come to one of the most crowded places in their city. They see the dazzling lights and loads of people dressed in the most trendy clothes. They have arrived. This place. A paradise for beauties and food lovers. Flooded with thousands of naive foreign tourists. The root of crime and all evils.

The main road. Luke points at the hectic street. He chooses it for a reason: it is always easy for them to flee or to find the next victim.

"Finding the prey?" Jose says as they walk on the road.

"Found the prey," Luke grins as he sees two girls approaching. They are both wearing black spectacles that make them appear pure and compassionate young ladies. To put it more directly, they look like they can be fooled easily. He turns around, walks near the girls and gives them the brightest smile "Hi."

"Hi. . . ."

"Tourists?" Luke asks.

"Yes."

"Hongkongers?" Jose asks this time.

"Yes," the girls are surprised. 'How do you know?'"

Because people shopping at this place are mostly Hong Kong tourists, Jose answers in his mind. He exchanges a glance with Luke. “Good sight, bro,” Jose says.

“Sure,” Luke replies.

Ignoring their question, Jose turns his eyes to them, “Eighteen?”

The girls nod. Great, the naïve period, Jose thinks. He takes out a small plastic bag from his backpack and hands it to one of the girls. ‘We are from Hualian University and are eighteen years old too! This is a pen we have produced. We really need your help to earn enough education credits.’ He continues, ‘A pen only costs TWD250! Please help us by buying some pens.’ He makes his voice sound as pathetic as possible.

At the same time Luke moves to stand right in front of the girls, using his body to block the essential route for escaping, unintentionally, of course.

‘What to do?’ Jose hears the girls whisper. He understands what the girls are saying even though they are using Cantonese instead of Mandarin. He has heard these three words many times when he was soliciting other tourists. ‘What to do?’ they whisper, ‘what to do?’ And obviously, the two girls are no exceptions – they are mumbling for a consensus. After a while, still standing on the main road, one of them is reaching in her handbag, ready to pick up her girly pinky wallet. The girly pinky color is of course in Jose’s imagination. “Just about to succeed!” His heartbeat is drumming clear and loud. ‘I just need to make more effort. I have to gain the girls’ trust.’ It is not he wants to – he has to. He remembers a trick from his childhood his father taught him. Jose flips through his memory and finally, his mind stops at page 102 of his diary. In childish writing it says: Step 1: if people are hesitating, be more genuine.

How? Oh, yes, smiling is the best way to show sincerity. He comes closer and gives a bigger smile. “Please. . .,” he repeats. “It is not so expensive. You can help us by just paying a little!” Jose bends his body to a 90 degree angle and put his hands by his thighs. One. Two. Three. He waits, and waits. Yes, he knows

very well that this kind of schoolgirl is super vulnerable to sincerity. So he bows to play with the girls' minds.

Unsurprisingly, the girls give in. Jose and Luke look at the girl who is now holding the shining, shimmering piece of paper. "Come and take me home," the TWD500 paper says. They can already feel the roughness of the golden paper, although they haven't even touched it.

Jose stretches his arms to the girls. But Luke interrupts. "Don't accept yet. More is always better," he cautions.

"We really thank for your support," he turns to the girls, "but can you buy two pens so that we can earn more money to support the tuition fee?" He makes an innocent face, "if you can pay us TWD1000. . . ."

The girls become silent. She, the girl who first gave Jose the money, opens her bag and takes out the purse. She is putting the money back. Jose knows that the girls are not going to pull the TWD1000 paper out. They are about to turn around, saying no and leave the place. His hands are all wet. What is the next step? He knows he can't just let his prey leave without slashing their flesh. He panics as the time flies. He tries to turn to the next page of his diary. "Keep thinking," Jose forces himself. If people... If people's mind is wavering... What is the next step? Gosh, I can't remember...

His head is hurting and aching. Like the ants tearing the giant food particles, his overused mind is crashing. Calm down, calm down. He shuts his eyes, pictures the diary in his mind, turns page over page until he sees the number 103 at the bottom right corner. Page 103. It says, "Step 2: if people's mind is wavering, be more persuasive."

Be more persuasive. Jose talks to the girls, "We've already asked an auntie from Hong Kong and after knowing our situation, she bought a whole bag of pens from us. She's so kind. I believe Hong Kong people are warm-hearted too," he adds. "Just two pens. It won't cost you too much."

The girls look directly into Jose's eyes, hoping to find a trace of lying. But no. They fail to find any in his perfect acting. "Just

TWD500,” they pause to think. If we pay TWD500, according to the newest currency exchange rate, we actually pay around HKD120 only. It is nothing compared to how much we have paid to go on this trip. To buy or not to buy? That’s the question.

A minute passes. At last they agree to the deal and hand over a thin layer of notes to Jose and Luke. Finally! 1000 cash! Jose hoorays. For the first few tricks, Jose did not understand why so many people fell for this simple trick. But now he knows. It is the mystery of travel. Tourists are always willing to pay more, although the things they buy are rubbish. Jose grasps the cash in hand and puts it into his wallet with the greatest care. He then takes out TWD500. “Here you are,” he gives the money to the girls, “the change.” Jose sees the girl’s hand approaching. Two centimeters more, she can touch the money.

“There! There! They are the bad guys who lied to me and gave me fake money!” someone shouts. Jose’s eyes move to where the shouting comes from. It is the woman who had bought their pen yesterday. She yells, “You liars! I gave you real money but you returned me fake notes! Give me back my money!”

Jose doesn’t listen to what she is saying. What he cares about are the people behind her – their deadly enemy. The sapphire blue uniform. The white badge on the left arm. The black belt. The intercom hanging on the waist. Damn it. Jose realizes he and Luke are stranded. The police are coming near.

We can’t be caught here, Jose roars with fear. He hides the money and steps backward. “Run!” Jose grabs Luke and dashes off the scene– tonight, he and Luke will either live or die. They don’t remember how many crossroads they have passed, but they know the police are still chasing them. They run until the light from the main road dims and the air becomes stuffy. They have run back to the dark alleys. “It is not safe yet,” Luke whispers. He gives signs to Jose – shut your mouth and hold your breath.

They hide in the dark, waiting patiently for the police to stop searching. After a very long period of time, the footsteps die out. They are safe for the moment. Jose stares at the ground where the dark is overshadowing the light. He sighs. In the past, light had never shone on him. His parents left him early. His life is always a maze where turns are dangerous and traps are fatal.

Jose looks at Luke. He remembers the evening when the man who'd raised him brought him and Luke together in a small room. "You are brothers now," the man said. "Learn to protect each other."

They called each other "bro" from that time. For the next five years, they learned tricks, practicing how to be more genuine, how to be more persuasive. At that time, Jose didn't understand why they were cheating to make a living.

The man, who was old and dignified, told him, "No, don't call it cheating. We don't lie to anyone. The customers pay willingly and they receive something for real. They are just paying much more than the market price."

Jose was confused.

"Just remember," the man looked deep into Jose's eyes, "this will be your life."

He and Luke have been executing the man's words perfectly--doing the same thing over and over to different people. He and Luke convince the others to fall into a trap. He and Luke earn the money. If the people who care about Jose are still alive, they might ask, "After all these years, why are you still doing this?" But he only knows this way of obtaining income since childhood.

If the people who cared about Jose are still alive, he would answer, "It is a good way to earn money. It has to be a good way."

## Grandma's Plan

*Cynthia Li*

*Ding.* “Where’re you now? It’s an emergency. Please save my sister!”

You know it is a real emergency when your cousin sends you a message with correct grammar and punctuation from a different time zone.

There is a lot to do before you die. Finish university. Get a fulfilling job. Make friends. Marry someone. Have kids. Spend time with your parents while you can. The list goes on. But clearly, people have priorities. After witnessing the fierce battles that damage without a single bullet, I have started to think another item on the list is nagging your grandchildren into marriage. The dinner table can be a cruel battlefield.

When I was younger, family dinners meant fun. I got to play with my cousins. Mom would not order me to help set the table. Grandma always saved me a chicken leg because my younger cousin would eat them all if he could. Grandma would cook our favorite dishes and the best soup in the entire universe. We loved her. When she was in the hospital, we ran to visit every day to read the newspapers to her, to talk to her and to take her walking. The nurse told us none of the other patients had as many visitors. She said my grandma was very blessed.

“*Popo*, I’m here! Good evening, *kon-fu*. Good evening, *bul-jei*.” I was taught how essential it is to greet everyone older than you the moment you step into the apartment.

“Finally, finally both of my granddaughters are home for dinner!” Everyone home for dinner is somehow considered an accomplishment. Something grandparents can show off to friends and neighbors: *I am still important*. Another is to still be able to make soup, the most subtle way to show the love of a mom or a grandmother. A bowl of soup appeared almost instantly in front of me right after I sat down by the table.

Grandma asked my cousin Zoe, or See Yu as grandma prefers to call her, what dishes she wanted to have on the dinner

for her birthday next week. As the oldest grandchild, Zoe gets the most attention but also bears the heaviest expectation. She was the most obedient and therefore most loved one when we were children. But it is unrealistic to expect the same as she was now a 25-year-old young lady.

“You’re getting old!” I laughed and stopped when I sensed the intense glance from Grandma.

Grandma started, “Can you believe it’s been so long? See Yu, you were so small at birth. Now she has become a young lady. I still remember when I picked her up from school and took her for tea. Oh! Those were the days.”

Zoe suggested that all of us return to that favorite restaurant for tea some day.

“Good. Maybe we can go with Patrick? Why isn’t he here today?” Grandma asked.

And I could tell the battle between a grandma and a granddaughter was about to begin.

Zoe told us he had to work.

“A diligent young man,” Grandma commented. Just like our grandfather, whom she married 60 years ago at the age of 17. They were in love. But the other part of the story was they were not supposed to be; it was a scandal: the daughter from a well-off family marrying the young teacher at a local school earning only very humble income and running away to Hong Kong to be together.

“Shing?” Grandma called on Uncle Raymond. She asked him to arrange dinner with Zoe’s boyfriend’s family. Uncle Raymond promised to try.

It was the usual routine of getting to the issue of marriage that started three years ago when Zoe came back from the United Kingdom with her bachelor’s degree in Environmental Science, which all of us agreed to be worth studying. She was the only one to seek advice from the family when deciding on her major. Her brother and I did all the applications by ourselves and informed the family of our decisions and the results. I once thought she would simply do whatever she was



asked to. Her returning with a boyfriend from a respectable family kicked off Grandma's campaign. And from then on family dinners were no more fun. We pretended to be busy. We avoided going. We made excuses. We would not show up unless we had to.

"They're busy, Grandma."

I almost choked when I heard Zoe's voice.

I was not the only one shocked. "Can't even squeeze time to talk about their son's wedding arrangement?" Grandma asked, startled.

"We're not getting married anytime soon. There's nothing to discuss yet!" Zoe continued.

I then understood what "Save my sister" meant. My cousins had planned their scheme across the Pacific Ocean. That was why my uncle insisted I must come to the dinner. Instead of uttering meaningless sounds to show she was listening, Zoe had decided to speak her mind, for the first time in the twenty years we have spent together. Maybe this evening would not end up with Grandma's lecture on how essential family was to a woman, after all.

"Mom, Zoe is just 25..." Uncle Raymond tried but was defeated in a flash.

"See Yu IS already 25. If you were lucky enough, you would've been a grandfather by now."

I wondered why to Grandma's generation, number of offspring is a measure of success, like you would be a million times more valuable to mankind with grandchildren than without.

"Grandma, people don't get married so early now. They usually work and save until they can afford their own apartment," I said, hoping I could be of some help so that when Grandma would choose to target me, someone would help me.

"Sweetheart, do you think I haven't thought about that? We can always help her out." Grandma was prepared. "They can live in the apartment we have in Hung Hom."

"We're just not ready," Zoe said.

The table went silent so suddenly even the maid stopped her work in the kitchen fearing something serious had happened.

“NOT READY?” Grandma choked.

We freaked out. All of us rose from our chairs.

“MIDA! Get Grandma some water please!!!!” I shouted.

Uncle Raymond was massaging grandma’s chest, trying to push out the pork stuck in her esophagus.

Zoe cleared the bowl and chopsticks after getting the medicine prescribed for circumstances like this.

Grandma stopped coughing, swallowed the pills and drank the water. “You’re not ready? What do you mean by that?! You’re living together already!” There was shame in her eyes, as if merely saying these words was immoral.

“Zoe’s just living with Patrick. It’s not illegal.” Uncle Raymond once again provoked Grandma even more.

“Your daughter has become this because of you.”

Grandma let out the statement through her teeth. “You don’t even care! They’re living together before they’re married. How scandalous! What would your father think? What would the rest of the family think?”

Scandalous. It must be the word tagged on Grandma. She was the scandal when she ran away and never returned.

“Grandma, it’s just not a good time. We have just finished school and started working. Maybe we can wait for a while.”

Zoe stayed calm.

“How long?” Grandma asked disbelievingly.

“When things are more stable and. . .” Zoe was searching for phrases that could buy her more time.

I said before she could come up with anything, “When Ho Kei’s back.”

Ho Kei is the cousin who had texted me earlier--he was the only boy in our generation, so naturally there was always a special place for him in the family. At this moment he was our last resort because Grandma was obsessed with the idea of unity. She was never happy with us studying aboard. Family was meant to be together and family was all she had now.

I succeeded. Grandma's face started relaxing.

"Yes. I want everyone to be here. Especially my younger brother. It's an important family event after all." Zoe took the opportunity. "I'll talk to Patrick as soon as Ho Kei's back."

Grandma agreed reluctantly, thinking her only grandson would be back in the summer and her oldest granddaughter would start planning a wedding by then. She thought she'd won: finally, See Yu had promised her a time for the wedding.

*Gonna stay here for summer. No back till grad. Send grandma my love.*

That was the message Ho Kei, who had just started university, sent us the day before the dinner.

## Waiting

*Lai Sin Man, Joanne*

“This will take so long,” an old woman turned and looked at me, perhaps seeking my agreement.

I smiled, feeling uneasy to talk to a stranger, especially in a place like this.

“Let’s go, Po Po,” a girl in school uniform who stood in front of me said.

The old woman shook her head; her silver hair flew in the air.

“No, I have to wait here.”

“Why?”

“I said no, I have to wait here.”

Groaning, the old woman put her head against the wall on which thousands of bacteria clung, as the disabled toilet was just next to it.

I could tell they were not locals from their faces and old-fashioned clothing although they spoke Cantonese. The granny was wearing black blazer and trousers with a cross shoulder bag plus white socks in sandals.

I kept my eyes focused on my phone, minimizing any possibility for conversation as I was the only person lined up behind them. However I was alert to every sound and movement. Who knows what would happen next? People could pee on the MTR and poo in malls. Or perhaps they were just acting and I was their next prey.

Time passed; people flowed in and out of this narrow corridor. A female voice from a loud speaker caught my attention, “We apologize for the delay from Hung Hom to Lo Wu...,” then the school girl cut in. “Come on Po Po. Don’t wait here.”

“Next one will be me.”

“Look! People who first stood outside the door all went in already!” the girl raised her voice. She pointed at the long queue at the female toilet.

“No, I’m not going to move. I feel so dizzy and I’m desperately in need.”

“Po Po, I can help you to line up here. Will you just go to that line?”

The granny ignored her granddaughter. The girl walked angrily to the long queue at the female toilet. I could hardly breathe because of the tension and the urine particles in air. Granny turned her head to look at me, maybe talking to me to distract her sick feeling. “She intended to do so. She wanted to make me mad,” Granny stared at the door.

“Huh?”

“I don’t understand why people are so rude. Oh, my tummy... .”

If a sigh could blow one leaf onto the ground, her sigh could turn a tree in spring into a winter one.

“Let me help you to ask people in the female toilet for help?” I suggested.

She nodded.

When I walked to the long queue, I was nervous. Unfriendly gazes fell on my back. I opened the door, and surprised by my own tiny and shaky voice, I asked people in the front whether they would like to give priority for people in need. I doubted that they would ignore me as they all saw the old woman’s condition while waiting outside.

At last, granny went in the female toilet without giving me a “thanks”. I stood at the end of the long queue. Looking at the disabled toilet, I wondered if the woman inside it had fainted.

In this narrow corridor, the human is sometimes more stinky than shit.

## **Resident Alien**

*Gordon Luke*

He felt it, that feeling akin to a dull ache, out of sight - deep inside the very marrow of his bones. The poisoned city, feverishly throbbing in its death throes, lay just outside. Its muffled tumult battered against the barriers of his home, casually indifferent to his weary distress. His home town, once unparalleled, a beacon of human ingenuity and industry to the world, all beauty and vitality now devoured by the cancer eating away at its core.

Frail hands began to shake and bend crooked by time. Veins and wiry sinew visibly straining underneath skin worn thin as paper, fidgeting incessantly. A man could only delay the inevitable - the day had come. As the clock had tick-tocked away the seconds slowly and unerringly, so too had the door grown swollen and corpulent with foreboding. By all appearances a benign wooden construct, it now possessed a palpable sinister quality. A feeling, both hot and cold, scurried up his spine causing the hairs on the back of his neck to prickle - hastily, he averted his gaze. With methodical and deliberate movements, he tingled to prepare himself. A reluctant glance passing the heavy curtains showed a dry winter's day. He wrapped his tired body in a woollen coat - too long in storage, musty and reeking of mothballs. As he sat down, his joints popped indignantly. After a gargantuan effort, his swollen feet finally squeezed into tattered boots that were once comfortable. His preparation was over, yet he remained seated and statuesque; his milky eyes glazed over. From outside, came a squeal of ecstasy or pain - he couldn't tell - brutally snapping him out of his reverie. His clenched jaw and sharp exhalation were the only testament to the effort it took to steel himself. Worn parquet floorboards creaked as he shuffled to the door while the world around him faded. At this moment, there was only the door. It loomed over him in cruel amusement, clearly stating its challenge to him. Up close, the knots and cracks in the wooden planks slithered and

swam in dizzying patterns, becoming representation of his deepest fears, cruel mimicry of nightmares that woke him in a cold sweat when night was at its darkest. His hands, fighting against his authority, faltered . . . then stubbornly grasped at cold steel. Hinges squeaked with rust as the door opened with a final, outraged creak of defeat. Harsh, bright light invaded his home, reflecting blindingly off clouds of disturbed dust motes. He quietly shut the door, its power had now departed - he did not look back as he shambled away, each step taking him further from home.

His eyes darted back and forth as he slowly walked out onto the street. Offensive sights and sounds assailed his senses. The sounds of traffic and people, to his ears, were transformed into the shrieks of a dying beast. He erupted into a fit of uncontrollable sneezing, bent double, his whole body trying its best to expel the noxious fumes. Every acrid breath seared the back of his throat. He could taste the accumulation of years of human waste and excess and behind it, almost hidden - the putrid smell of sickness and rot. Steam billowed up from the unknown depths onto the street, he dared not think of what was lying beneath - the steaming pits of Tartarus. Leering youths, absurdly outfitted in clothes several sizes too large and clearly looking for mischief, rudely bumped into him as they passed. The tarmac of the road bit into the palms of his hands. Where there was once unbroken skin, now beautiful pearls of blood formed, dripped and were quickly absorbed by the thirsty tarmac. His weak protests were met only with scornful glances and filthy insults. His beseeching gaze swept bored onlookers, spying upon a gentleman much like himself. It was almost like seeing an old acquaintance, both of them were travellers from a foreign land linked by their mutual experiences, now stranded in a strange time. He would not be able to say why he felt so. His recognition was intangible - and yet despite this, he knew it was true. The stranger's carriage, his clothing - the look in his eyes, all told him that this man was just like him. There were deep pools of pain in the man's eyes; he too saw - and deplored - the

decomposed husk, the scant remains of what was once this great city. The momentary glint in his eyes faded upon seeing the man hurriedly look away. The man owed him nothing and yet against all logic it still felt keenly of a good friend's betrayal. He wished he had not lived to see this sick and depraved age. An age when a man turned his back on his fellow.

Always the first to arrive and the last to leave, that was what everyone used to say of him. How prophetic, he thought to himself with a smile full of bitter humour. People claimed this to be the greatest city in the world. Was he the only person who perceived differently? Something ethereal and unobservable had left this damned place. Yes, he decided, it was almost as if the world had lost all colour. It was the eyes. So dead, ice-cold, jaded before their time, they stared out at him from children and adults alike. When did people become so mean and ornery? For the first time, he realised that perhaps it was he who was not welcome. It was he who was the intruder. The world had changed and he was left behind. A relic from a forgotten age, unwanted and irrelevant. His American dream was dead. Upon this realisation, the final and pitiful dregs of his strength dissipated. He felt his body crumpled to the ground, his mind detached and uncaring.

Gentle hands brimming with the surety of youth cupped his elbows in support and carefully lifted him to his feet. A young woman, her brow creased with concern, fastidiously brushed off his clothes and cleaned the blood off his hands. He thanked her wordlessly, eyes misted over, the ravine-like wrinkles in the parchment of his face shifting into the best approximation of a smile. The two of them stood together on an island surrounded by a swirling vortex of humanity.



## Laughing by myself

*Jos Ma*

I waited for another train to arrive. I was just an inch from the yellow line, with my arms folded across my chest and ready for the crush of the passengers who would come aboard. As the passengers filed behind me, my leg was bumped by a round object. I looked down at an orange in a ParknShop plastic bag held by a middle-aged woman standing next to me. She acted normally, as if creating a fifth row in the section was normal. Everyone was eager to hunt for a seat. I laughed.

“The next station, Admiralty,” an unnatural female voice announced. As soon as I took my first step out of the packed train, it was like the Sino-Japanese war in World War II. The passengers around me had suddenly become frontline warriors, carrying suitcases and handbags as their shields and running to the other side for a huge battle. All of a sudden, I felt a gust of wind sweep across my face. I laughed.

Walking to the other side of the platform, I saw a Mandarin-speaking lady mutter to herself as she bent down to clean something on the floor with Tango tissues. A little kid next to her was pulling his pants up. I laughed.

In the train again, I stood in front of a couple sitting on the silver seats. The fiftyish-year-old man was reading the *Oriental Daily* while his wife was whispering by his ear, telling him about how CY was a poor chief executive. Then the newspaper was slowly raised, and the woman became mute and closed her eyes as if she had just taken an effective sleeping pill. I turned my head and noticed an old man whose tired eyes were scanning for a seat. I laughed.

As I walked out of the station, I saw a young couple walking with their hands intertwined, swinging them back and forth slightly. They suddenly untied themselves and walked off when I heard a deep voice in English say, “Do you know how I can get to. . . .” I saw the helpless face on the tall foreigner with his family. I laughed.

I headed to the entrance of CityU, with the banners on the side: “No matter at which place, we all need to follow a rule: to keep quiet and maintain a good environment for study.” Once I entered school and reached the elevator to get to the next level, my ears were attacked by a group of students. No, two. Two groups wearing strange costumes and shouting at each other *or* me. I was sandwiched in between two loud bands. I laughed.

I got to the classroom door where a notice said, “Class cancelled”. I laughed and laughed.

## Here and There

*Peter Phillips*

### Stunned Mullet

When I moved back to Hong Kong after business school, I lived with my grandparents on Blue Pool Road. Each morning I'd eat half a breakfast bar walking down the hill, then take the 117A to Kowloon. One day I realised I was in love with a woman who always sat in the sideways seats near the front. She was around my age, maybe older, and had enormous, cartoony eyes that made her seem caught in a permanent state of surprise. I secretly christened her Stunned Mullet, an expression I picked up from my history teacher in Melbourne.

When she'd get off the bus, a few stops before mine, the Stunned Mullet would look left and right with those big, break-your-heart eyes and appear totally disoriented. It was like she never knew what came next. I watched her through the glass, floundering in the morning half-light, and thought her the most precious little stunned mullet I'd seen. I decided she needed rescuing and sometimes imagined myself leaping from the bus and reeling her madly into my arms. I wanted to provide the bearings she lacked, but I was just making it to work on time as it was.

The next year, I moved into Causeway Bay with my Korean girlfriend. There was no part of that sentence my grandparents liked, and they stopped talking to me. I started taking the 117B, full of Catholic school girls dressed neck-to-thigh in ice cream white. Some of my pervert friends were into that, not me. I missed Stunned Mullet.

One week when Grace was back in Seoul, I was drinking in a dive bar when I lobs Stunned Mullet, her eyes bigger and more bulbous than ever. Buoyed by the thrill of finding something I thought lost, I made my move near the jukebox and soon found myself swimming naked in her bed. She said she was getting married soon, so we couldn't have proper sex. We

could do most other things though. That was okay, since I didn't want to cheat on Grace either. The Stunned Mullet's breasts were smaller than I'd hoped and her breath smelt too much like sushi. But it didn't bother me, not one bit. I'd caught my darling little mullet, and she was smiling in her sleep.

A year later, I was married too. The ceremony was at St. Margaret's in Happy Valley, the necessary Catholic penance for my grandparents to start speaking to me again. Grace and I worked hard and got promotions and moved into a nicer flat. Sometimes when we fight or I get down on living in Hong Kong, I take a ride on the 117B and trawl through my phone contacts for the surnames beginning with M. I smile when I see her name and cradle the phone like it's a delicate nestling. The world outside the bus seems sharper, clearer.

## Dynamic Busan

When Tom arrived in Korea, he started spelling his name Thom, and quickly tripled the number of women he'd slept with at Arizona State. He was 22.

After three years teaching in language schools, Thom started a blog; he called it "Raw Busan". At first, he blogged mainly about American burger joints, rating the juiciness of the patties on a scale of 1 (Dry as a nun's nasty) to 7 (Juicy-licious). The more students he seduced, the more confident a blogger he became, and soon he was writing about topics as diverse as "How to pick up Korean girls at baseball games" to "How to pick up Korean girls on buses". He stopped wearing his Go Sun Devils! sweatshirt, preferring instead to match rive gauche jackets with skinny, hipster jeans. He wore black-rimmed glasses and cultivated what he liked to call an "international" accent.

Thom's big breakthrough came in 2008, when George W. visited Seoul en route to the Beijing Olympics. With thousands of Koreans protesting against American beef imports, Thom posted a rant called "Why I renounce America". By week's end, his blog was attracting 10,000 unique visitors a day. He was

interviewed on the City of Busan's tourism website, soon after it launched its "Dynamic Busan" slogan. He claimed mastery of the Korean alphabet, as well as saying he ate kimchi daily. He spoke passionately about his love for Korean bathhouses, admonishing western attitudes toward public nudity. He said after nearly a decade living on the peninsula, he felt more Korean than American.

Not long after he topped 20,000 hits, Thom received a phone call from home. "Mum's got cancer," his sister said. Thom went to his favourite burger joint in Haeundae, ordered the Hawaiian, and weighed his options. He could go back, like he was supposed to – play the prodigal son. But what about the blog? he thought. "Write it over there," his teacher buddy Matt told him. "Nobody'll know the difference." Thom rejected this solution. You don't become one of Korea's top 10 expat bloggers by peddling bullshit.

He eventually offered his sister a compromise. "What say I come back at lunar new year," he said, as if lunar new year had always been part of his rhythms. "She could be dead by then," his sister said, as if she also knew the orbit of the moon. "Tom, we need you now."

They weren't the only ones. Thom's loyal readers, upward of 21,000, needed him more.

He had always known a day like this would come, when bad news would arrive from home. When there would upset the plans of here. He was prepared, like a missionary, to stay the course. He started blogging more dutifully than ever. He spent whole afternoons soaking in the bathhouse.

He called weekly to see how Mum was holding up.

## Near Life Experience

*Jason R. Sinarwi*

It rained at midnight. Lightning streaked across the sky and thunder echoed through the empty streets. The sky opened and water gushed down flights of stairs and flooded the pavements. The usual bustling city suddenly became a ghost town, but Andrew was still trying to make his way home.

It had been a busy day at work, and all Andrew could think of was getting under the sheets after a long hot shower. He thought about his wife who was away on a business trip until the weekend. He lifted his sleeve to reveal the old Swiss watch his father had given him. It was 2:30 a.m. For a moment, he thought about his father, and pictured his graying beard, and the peaceful expression he had on his face moments before he passed. He quickly brushed the image out of his mind.

He had a long way to walk, since his usual shortcut of stairs had become a gushing river of rain. Instead, he needed to walk an extra twenty minutes on a secluded path, taking him through a winding walkway that led him through a small park full of shrubs.

He walked grudgingly, tired from all that he had experienced during the day. Why did it have to rain? Why now? The day couldn't have gotten any worse. He didn't have a choice. Home was all he could think about. He held his umbrella close his chest and pushed against the heavy rain like a warrior shielding himself from falling arrows. He kept his eyes directly on the pavement in front of him, keeping a rhythm as he walked.

Lightning flashed, and he braced himself for the terrifying roar that followed. The thunder was deafening. He crossed the road, and quickened his pace. Home was much closer now, and Andrew began to feel a slight excitement in his gut. He crossed another road, and another. Rain poured heavily, lightning flashed and thunder roared. Andrew began to jog, and it seemed as though the rain and thunder grew louder and louder. He spotted his apartment building in the distance. All of a sudden, a

blinding white light flashed before him, and what seemed like the burning fury of a million fire ants consumed his entire body. The sound of rain turned into a high pitched satellite signal that rang loudly in his ears. He felt light. He was flung into the air, and everything went black.

“Be still”, a voice whispered.

Andrew opened his eyes. He couldn't move. His ears still ringing, he could not feel a thing. He lay on the ground, soaked in the rain. Slowly, he began to notice himself breathing. With his mouth wide open he sucked in as much oxygen as he could with each breath. Squinting up at the sky, he could see the rain falling. He lay there, completely exposed to the one thing that he had been trying to fight off with his umbrella. The moment consumed him. And for the first time in his life, he felt completely bare. It felt beautiful.

The voice came back, “Be still.” Andrew was confused. He could not see anybody beside him. The voice seemed to come from around him as well as within. He kept still. What does this mean? Who was speaking to him? What had just happened?

He tried to move but he couldn't. He felt paralyzed, as though an invisible force were pinning him to the ground. The rain continued to fall. The voice spoke again.

“You have spent your entire life trying to make a living yet you haven't truly lived,” said the voice.

Immediately, Andrew saw images in his mind. He saw his friends, his family, and his father who had just passed away. He saw his boss, his colleagues and his work place. He saw his wife, and for the first time in his life, he saw himself. All this time he had been trying his best to become something else, rather than to let go and be. He had spent a life time trying so hard to fulfill expectations that he had missed out on precious moments with his family - with his father.

He felt as though his world had been shifted into order, like the planets in his solar system had miraculously aligned and he had just put on a clean pair of freshly ironed pants. Like all of a sudden he didn't make that business trip and instead spent the

last few weeks with his dying father. Like he hadn't spent so many late office hours while he neglected his wife, and that he was there to provide her with comfort instead of that man that she was secretly seeing.

"I'm sorry" Andrew whispered. He didn't know who he was talking to, or whether anyone heard him. He didn't care. He just felt that it was something he had to do.

The rain stopped. Andrew could hear himself breathe, and he could finally move. The invisible force which pinned him to the ground had been lifted off of him. He felt peace. He continued to lie there, staring up at the now clear night sky. The cool, damp breeze brushed gently across his cheek.

He sighed, and then took a deep breath.

Slowly, he picked himself up. His bones felt creaky, and his muscles ached as though he had just been in a boxing match, fighting for his life. His body felt weak, like an old man, but deep inside he knew something had changed. He felt rejuvenated, and for the first time in a long time, he felt joy. He hobbled home with a smile on his face. He took a long hot shower, got under the sheets, and slept like a baby.



## Portrait of Anonymity

*Gersham Tse*

He walks towards the end of the boat—or should I say *front?*—passing rows of benches that are deeply stained and varnished. He sits down on the last bench, puts his left foot up and rests his elbow on his kneecap, much the same as Adam painted by Michelangelo. His colleague, also wearing the indigo Star Ferry sailor suit with white highlights lining a broad collar and a big star on the left chest, comes over with slouched shoulders, dragging his shoes as if they are a pair of slippers and as if he is a panda attempting to walk upright. The colleague says in a hoarse voice, “passengers are not supposed to put their feet up.”

“Either here or I’ll stick my foot up yours” he responds.

The boat berths. For passengers, they have reached their destination; for the boat, it has come to just another stop in its endless journey of periodicity. For him, he has come to the start of another iteration of a ritual. He gets up. He throws that old rope—permanently wound into a loop—over to a mirror image of him on the pier side. On the boat side he starts in the middle of the rope and winds it around a metal cylinder that looks like a giant bullet stuck on the deck with its tail towards the sky. He takes care to avoid getting his arms, or hands, or any of his fingers caught in between rope and metal. He dramatizes it to make this all look more laborious than necessary.

Disembarkation and embarkation later, he releases the cylinder from the stranglehold of the rope, but it has been choked too long and has now completely lost its voice, and will, to scream. He saunters back to the last bench and sits down, putting his left foot up—this time no colleague comes to intervene—kneecap is clutched between his palms, and he continues his journey down periodicity, never managing to escape.

## **Korsöstigen [09:45]**

*Emilia Wärlinge*

You can take bus 444 or 471 from Stockholm Central, but the best is the 444, it changes to the highway after Henriksdal and you will earn almost eight minutes. The buses are always crowded on weekends; even early mornings almost every window seat is occupied by a person leaning against the misty glass with eyes peacefully closed. Girls with what's left of last night's lipstick smeared in the corners of their mouths, tired after a late party, or men in suits on their way to work. Try to find a seat in the front of the bus, then you can watch the city transforming to suburb out the big front window or look at the bus driver in the rear-view mirror. The scent of alcohol and black coffee from people's opened mouths might not be very pleasant in the morning if you just had breakfast before you left. Fifteen minutes after the bus enters the highway there will be a sharp left turn that will shake you out of your observation of the driver's way of grimacing at every red light and you will glance out the window. You are not supposed to get out just yet; you are close and could walk from here, but please stay on the bus for three more stations before you press the stop button. Don't forget your bag with its important content that you carelessly have put down at your feet and get off at Korsöstigen, this is where I will meet you. I will wear a dress, trousers make me feel trapped. Try to look into my eyes when we speak and please let me know if my flirting is making you uncomfortable.

Do you see the brown building between the crowns of those pines? Yes, I know it is not much to look at, but it was where I went to kindergarten and drew rats and gave the drawings to my teacher, how she hated rats! Where we are now, I learned to ride a bicycle and tried my first cigarette, with a few years in between of course. Look, there is my house. It is the light green one between the lavender colored and the red one with white corners. Kind of small you might think, but it was a lovely house to grow up in, the backyard has a plum tree and the

lawn is perfect for a game of football. Do you want to come inside? Maybe look at my father's collection of LP records or pick a chord on one of his guitars. We could have a cup of coffee in the kitchen with cream yellow cabinet doors that conceal all of the porcelain in different black and white patterns. If we're lucky there are some cinnamon buns in the freezer. If you want to, we can go and have a look at my room in the garage. You might find it a bit messy, but that's the way I like it. I have put up my favorite vintage dresses on the walls, the shelves are stuffed with my collection of hat boxes and leather suitcases, a small globe and a lamp in thick glass formed as a turtle. I keep my brushes and pencils in old cans on the windowsill and a golden maneki-neko cat waves his paw to welcome strangers next to his friend, the rubber shark. The chest on the floor is over a hundred years old and was used for bread storage, before I filled it with handbags, shoes, second hand porcelain, pots and my dreams of my own home.

You could walk for hours in those woods, I see you staring at the horizon of dark pine crowns. It is very quiet there except for the picking noise from a hungry woodpecker echoing through the trees. If you get up to the highest mountain you can see all the way to Stockholm. So what say you, should we go inside?

Oh, so you prefer going to my room first? I think that sounds like a good idea, we might want some privacy. No, the door is not locked, you have to pull it harder. That's more like it! This damp September weather makes wooden doors swell slightly. Don't mind taking off your shoes, this rug hasn't known the caress of bare feet in a long time! I warned you about the mess, didn't I? Not so bad? Oh, you're too sweet. You prefer that seat? I bought that floral armchair on a boot sale for less money than what I paid for this bottle of Thai whiskey. Well, as long as you sit comfortably. You seem a bit nervous. I know you find me attractive, I can tell by the way you look at me and then lower your gaze and that particular smile just before you raise it again to meet my eyes. Here, let me pour you some of that

whiskey, no I insist. I've been in this business long enough to know how to take care of nervous customers, and I've been a woman long enough to know men.

You're asking me about my background? That whiskey built up some confidence, eh? Well, the answer to that requires a story. I warn you, it is not as tearful as you want it to be; like everyone else I did my best to survive. I painted my eyelashes with mascara every morning. I forwarded rumors. I drank alcohol, smoked and kissed boys at Petra Svensson's house parties when her parents were away, which was often. I didn't tell who burned down the school. I had a good childhood. I lied and laughed with my mouth and forgot to do the same with my eyes. I got an education. I got a job. After a while I got more responsibility working successfully a big drug tangle in the harbor, and I found my identity and a way of living. A female Tony Montana you say? Ha! I'm not sure if that's an insult or not!

You're a good listener though, I like that about you. It is not often people want to hear my story. Well, should we get down to business? The package is under the pad on the floral armchair, I knew you would choose that seat. Yes, you can put the money on the table, oh how cinematic to put it in a brown paper bag! Let's shake hands on that, what a firm grip you have! I see you hesitating, anything else I can help you with? Don't give me that look. You know, everything you've heard about me isn't true. It is impolite to jump to conclusions after simple rumors. Although some things are true, for instance that I have a film camera hidden in one of the hat boxes and that I'll do a lot of things for money. I can't give you what you desire, and I am sorry about those rumors or if I have given you false expectations. But I did not lie, you are a good listener and I was blushing when those black eyes of yours rested on my right collarbone, only for a hundredth of a second.

Do you hear that? Purposeful men in army boots and heavy belts, coming this way. Don't you worry, they will knock before entering, but they will not ask before taking you away.

## His Last Day

*Wong Hiu Tong, Flora*

“Tap, tap, tap. . . .” Footsteps echo in the empty corridor.

A man walks slowly but steadily. His gray short hair shows the man has already passed his golden age. He is wearing a tight grayish blue T-shirt with “Sunny: Home of Elderly” printed in dark blue. A big black backpack is hanging on one of his shoulders. The corridor he is walking is long and with a lot of grey doors and pale white walls. Grey handles are installed between doors. The gray tile floor absorbs faint white light from the low ceiling. The man stops at a door and goes in.

“Good morning,” he says.

“Good morning, Mr. Lau,” a middle-aged woman responds. “How does it feel? I mean, your last day of work? Started missing us?”

“Nothing’s special. Wake up and work,” he answers.

“Is that all?” the woman asks again, a little disappointed.

“Back to your work, Linder,” the man commands.

The man puts down his backpack and sits on a gray chair. He takes up a name tag from his office table and looks at it. “Mark Lau” is printed in black on this tiny yellow paper.

“Good grief! It’s been so long,” he thinks.

The name tag is old. The transparent plastic cover has turned yellowish. He tries to scratch the dirt away with his nails to make it look better. The corners of the name tag are slightly rolled up. The tiny metal clip is not moving as smoothly as it should. His fingers linger on the words “Head Manager”. He carefully runs his fingers on this tiny name tag before he puts the name tag on his uniform for the last time.

“No! I didn’t have my breakfast!” yells an old man.

It is quite surprising such a crooked old man has such a loud voice. It is even more surprising for the man, who still has rice clinging to the corner of his mouth, to make such a statement. The others pay no attention to the old man. Most of them remain silent with blank faces. Some continue to eat. Some

struggle to pick up some vegetables with the spoon. Some just look ahead without focus.

“I DIDN’T have my breakfast! I haven’t eaten ANYTHING since I woke up!” the old man yells again, and looks angrily at the staff who is trying to take away his empty dishes.

Mark lets out a sigh. George forgets he has eaten his breakfast again.

Mark takes his usual patrol at eleven. It is his habit to start with the common room. He passes by a few elderly who are struggling to walk with the help of their sticks. Assisting them would hurt their pride. It was the first thing he learnt on his first day of work. He opens the door of the common room. The Gossip Group is occupying the sofas at the corner as usual. They are the healthier ones. Some may suffer from arthritis. But they still have a clear mind. They spot Mark the moment he steps into the common room.

“Hey, Mark. How’s your last day?” asks one of them. They have a relatively good relationship with the staff.

“Nothing special so far,” he smiles, “Why does everyone expect it to be different?”

“Because it is your last day!” says one of them, leading the rest to giggle.

Mark leaves the Gossip Group and continues his patrol. He spots George in his old place. George sits on a chair looking into the busy street outside the window. His crooked hands hold his walking stick tightly, as if he is fearful someone will take it away at any moment. He looks lonely, but Mark can do nothing to help. George cannot remember things properly. Even worse, he is a grumpy man who uses his stick to hit. Mark was hit a few times before, leaving ugly bruises on his face for weeks. Few would sit around old George. There is now about half a mile of empty space around him. George’s lonely shape always makes Mark sad. He knows what George was like before.

Normally, Mark would have left George alone to continue his work. It is useless trying to communicate with George right

now. However, for the sake of the past, he decides to talk to old George for a while.. It is his last day anyway. He pulls a chair and sits beside George. George stares at him defensively.

“Relax. I just want to take a look at the street outside,” Mark says.

George grips his stick harder than before. His thin lips are pressed together so tightly that they become a line. He casts a suspicious look at Mark.

“What are you looking at?” Mark asks, trying to sound casual.

“My son! I know he will visit me today,” old George answers unwillingly. “Leave me alone!”

George looks outside the window again. It is not a nice day. The sky is filled with heavy dark clouds, giving an impression of suffocation. It is gray like this elderly home has always been.

Mark’s mind wanders away. It was a cloudy day as well. He sat on the same spot chatting with George. He was not the head manager then and that was why he had more time to socialize with the elderly. Those were his precious moments, a time when he could chat with anyone freely. George was not a grumpy old man then. He was old but incredibly cheerful and sociable. He used to be the centre of attention. He would tell jokes, share stories and help organise activities. He was full of different ideas. He would sometimes suggest having a dancing party in the common room or a riddle competition or ghost stories telling. It was quite a scene: seeing the deadly gray common room turning into a ball room or a group of old men sitting in a circle holding hands, bursting into laughter and screaming occasionally. That was before George’s memory loss and his temper change. The air of merriment seems to have left with George’s memory.

“He forgets again,” thinks Mark.

George’s only son died in a car accident three years ago. At that time, George had already grown weak. Mark thought he was ready to be buried, so he was shocked at George’s response. George gave out the loudest cry he had ever heard. It was as if he had suddenly come alive, bursting into some kind of

unknown power. The room was silenced. Nobody dared to breathe. His grief hovered over the whole elderly home.

George sat in his usual seat the next day, waiting for his son. Since then, George sits on the same spot every day. Later, his temper deteriorated, and he became increasingly grumpy and withdrawn. No one dares to sit around him. It is agonizing to watch an old friend end up like this. Mark knows perfectly well that it is not George's fault. He studies the stubborn old man's face and lets out a sigh. He walks away, leaving George alone.

Mark picks up a pen and starts the paper work soon after breakfast time. The first thing he works on is new applications for this home of the elderly. The first one is from an 80-year-old woman with eye-sight problem, high blood pressure, Parkinson's disease and other medical ills.

"Well, normal aging problems," he thinks as his eyebrows rise unconsciously. "But there aren't enough rooms! Should I cut down the number of single rooms?" He immediately puts that idea out of his mind. It is not practical. He knows too well how small those rooms are. It is quite impossible to put another bed into them.

"Hello?" Mark picks up his mobile phone and says.

"Dad, I have arrived. Come down when you finished packing. Let's have a feast for celebration!" Rick says.

Mark suddenly realizes it is seven o'clock already. His last day finally ends. He hangs up and starts putting all his stuff into his black backpack. Looking at his seat for the last time, he turns around and walks away. Walking down the familiar corridor, Marks slows down unconsciously. He stops before the common room. He has said farewell to everyone today except George. He knows George would probably forget about it the next day. But Mark still wants to say goodbye to his old friend. George is still in the same chair, looking terribly lonely.

Mark remembers the day George sat by the window and invited him to have a chat.

"Don't you think it is ironic to name this elderly home Sunny?" George joked.



“I didn’t realise that, now I do think so,” Mark hesitated. The building was painted gray and not very well-lit. The fact that all the elderly were sent here to wait for their death made the whole thing even more ironic. His face must have betrayed him.

George looked at him as if he knew that. “Tomorrow will be a sunny day,” he said calmly.

“Huh?”

George changed the topic so fast that Mark could not follow. He looked at the cloudy sky and doubted.

“There’s no need to worry about us, kid,” George smiled, “Got to have faith. What should come, will come.”

“He didn’t come today,” George says before Mark said anything.

He looks disappointed. It may be strange, but somehow old George looks like a child. A child that does not get the candies he desires. Mark puts down his backpack and sits beside George. He knows very well that George will not meet the person he wants to.

“I have to tell you something, George,” Mark starts.

“That he’s gone?” George replies with deep frustration.

“Yes, he is. I’m leaving too,” Mark continues. “Today is my last day.”

George stares at Mark blankly. Mark is not sure if he understands what he has said.

“He’s gone?” George asks after a long pause.

“Yes,” Mark answers.

“You are gone?” George asks unsurely.

“I will be,” Mark corrects him.

“I will be,” George repeats this sentence.

“No, I will be. Not you,” Mark corrects him.

George stares at Mark. Mark felt like he is being seen through by the old man. Mark tries to say something but cannot find the right words.

“Bye, George,” he says before turning away from his old friend.

“Hello?” Mark picks up his mobile phone as he tries to sit up straight in bed. It is his first day of retirement. He did not plan to get up early.

“Mark? It’s Linder.”

“Huh? What’s wrong?” he tries not to sound sleepy. He goes through all the possibilities, trying to guess the reason for her call.

“Well, it’s nothing actually. Just wanna inform you about something,” Linder said hesitantly. “George died last night”

He puts down the phone, thinking of their last conversation. George had been right.

## Imagine That

*Tina Villareal*

Imagine that: someone who would actually wake up in the morning and think, “I love you,” when he turns over and sees you drooling on your shared pillow. Can you imagine that? I can’t.

Imagine this: having had a horrible day at work and coming home to the smell of your favourite dish, prepared just for you, by him. Can you imagine that? I honestly can’t.

Imagine further: when you can’t sleep at night and take out your Moleskin diary to write in, as you trace every scratch and dent and bump on the cover, you’ll remember how he got it for you on your 21<sup>st</sup> birthday because he knew you wanted a *real* writer’s diary to scribble in. Can you imagine that? I certainly can’t.

Because all those things had been done for me and taken away when he decided that he could imagine himself doing all those things, for someone else.

## Unwanted

*Tina Villareal*

He is sitting in the waiting room. There is an expensive Japanese air-conditioner just above his head, blowing cool air every fifteen seconds in his direction. He pulls his thumb out of his mouth; he had not realised he had been sucking on it. He straightens up on the chair, legs dangling off the edge because he is not yet tall enough for this big office chair.

Then, the door he had been staring at so intently for the past thirty minutes finally moves. He can see a shadow moving behind the clouded glass and sure enough, the Interviewer opens his office door while talking to someone behind him.

“Don’t you worry,” says the Interviewer in a low, gruff voice like that of an aged smoker trying to quit. His suit is a dark, charcoal grey with silver monogrammed cufflinks. His shoes are leather, the colour of dirt brown, and he has a bald spot that shines under the fluorescent light.

“We’ll be sure to find someone for you – with your qualifications they might even take you to America!”

With that, the Interviewer steps aside and reveals whom he is talking to. It turns out to be a toddler – not much older than two years of age, with pristine porcelain skin and dull-looking hazel eyes. He nods to the Interviewer as if to give silent thanks for his reassurance and walks past, shivering slightly as the perfectly-timed fifteen-second blast hits him right in the face.

The secretary is waiting for him by the door, holding it open for him as he waddles away with his file tucked underneath his chubby arms.

“You may go in now,” she says in her warm, sing-song voice, before sitting behind her desk, clicking away on her computer.

She looks like she has come out of a 1950s movie: her blonde hair with soft caramel waves bouncing down to her shoulders are clipped on one side with a delicate turquoise butterfly pin. It matches her beautifully mournful eyes.

Gripping the edge of the office chair with stubby fingers, he plops onto the floor with a soft thud. Gathering his file, he shuffles to the Interviewer's door, and politely knocks three times. He stands a little further back as he hears the heavy footfalls and soon is facing the man himself.

"Come in, come in!" the Interviewer says a little too brightly.

A large polished desk dominates the room with a matching high-backed chair behind it. Stacks of paper and files and loose memos litter the otherwise untarnished desk. There is a bookshelf behind filled with photo frames instead of books. Row upon row of seemingly happy families and their children are captured in different yet similar looking domestic situations: there is a family of four in a garden; another of a father, a mother, a daughter and their pet cat.

The Interviewer silently motions for his client's file and it is nervously handed to him. He clears his throat a few times flipping through the pages, pursing his lips every once in a while as his callused index finger runs along with his eyes. He mutters under his breath a few times but it is almost inaudible and only a murmur can be heard.

Sitting on the other side of the desk, his client is trying to sit straight. Again his legs cannot reach the floor, and if he sits against the back of the wooden seat his feet won't even dangle off the edge. He plays with the frayed edges of his simple white t-shirt and readjusts his blue bib so that it rests neatly on his chest.

"So," the Interviewer says without looking up from his file, "tell me about yourself."

The client fumbles with the straps of his diapers and answers, in a small timid voice, "I was born in a women's shelter. My mother was..." his voice trails off.

The Interviewer puts his file down, nodding gravely, "I understand she was very young when she had you, wasn't she?" he says not unkindly.

The baby's bottom lip quivers and a single drop of tear rolls down his chubby cheek. He gulps and continues shakily,

“Yes...she was only sixteen and he...he was a married man.” He spits out the last two words as if he rejects the very idea that he has anything to do with such a man.

“Why don’t you tell me what you can do? Skill-wise I mean?” the Interviewer asks, as he heaves a binder onto his desk from one of the drawers of his desk. He flips it open as he patiently waits for the baby to respond.

“Well,” the baby says, sitting up straighter in his chair, looking simultaneously miniscule in comparison to the oversized furniture of the office and determined at proving himself worthy. “I don’t cry in the middle of the night anymore. Usually I’m a deep sleeper so any noises at night won’t faze me. At the shelter, our formula was rationed and I guess I got used to the small portions at regular intervals so I won’t go looking for extra feedings.”

He pauses and peeks at the Interviewer, who was peering at the pages of the binder and only looks up when he realises his client has stopped talking. Composing himself, the Interviewer clears his throat, “You must understand though, uh....”

“Winchester. I prefer my last name.”

“Right, Mr Winchester. You must understand that you are up against our other clients who come from far worse circumstances. Why, the gentleman before you came from a poverty-stricken family, third-generation victims of the Chernobyl disaster, and an orphan to top that all off!”

Winchester hung his head and began sucking on his thumb as the Interviewer continues his rant. “But even with cases like his, you would still have had a chance – had it not been for the fact that you are neither diseased, nor dying, nor are you in fact even an orphan! Why, your parents were simply irresponsible fools and left you to the care of the system.”

Winchester nodded. He can feel the familiar burn in his eyes and was willing his tears not to spill. He has heard this all before, at all the other agencies he had tried previously, trying unsuccessfully each and every time to convince them to take

him on as a client to put up for adoption. He vaguely hears the man behind the desk still yammering on.

“...what with the supposed illegal trading of children from Africa and the Middle East and all those tragic, war-torn, hopeless and unfit places for children, there really is very little our agency can do to convince a trying couple to adopt a child as mundane and un-needy as you. What’s even worse is that now those damn scientists have somehow come up with a way to design babies. Can you imagine that? *Designing* babies? Just the business of adopting one is already outdated!”

Keeping his head down, Winchester can do nothing but nod some more. *What else can I do anyway*, he thinks to himself, *no one is going to want a baby as boring and unremarkable as me. Maybe if I had been born with cancer or at least some sort of allergy, I’d have had an advantage....*

“Listen here, Winchester,” says the Interviewer, “my agency and I will put you on our roster and we’ll add you to our pretty binder here, see?” He holds up the giant folder he was looking at moments before. “But I can’t guarantee you anything – we have thousands, literally thousands, of clients and I’ll be frank with you, you aren’t our priority. Simply put, none of you are very desirable to advocate for adoption – you aren’t a minority, yet you aren’t white enough for the rich white couples; you don’t need special care, and from what I’ve seen from your file you are an exceptionally well-behaved baby. There is just nothing to sell about you.”

Again, Winchester nods. *Maybe that’s why all babies ever do is nod*, he thinks, *because the adult world is so full of bullshit and the truth of the matter is that babies are the ones who see the world clearly and because they are smaller and defenceless, all they can do is nod.*

“Well, that’s that then. Thank you for coming in – we’ll call you at the orphanage as soon as possible if anything comes up!”

Winchester hops off the chair and collects his file from the desk.

The Interviewer walks ahead of him and opens his office door. “You never know,” he says jokingly, “maybe a perfect

candidate will suddenly be cured of his limp and you can take his parents!”

Winchester attempts a smile as he walks away. *How messed up must the world be, he thinks as the pretty secretary holds open the door for him, in order for it to be all right for a child to not only lose his parents but have to compete to get new ones?*

He hitches his diaper up higher over his hips and throws his head back. Something about the way he toddles says, *I'll prove you wrong. I will get adopted. I deserve parents who want me. We all do.*



## Poetry



## Cousins Met at the Chinese Restaurant

*Phyllis Au*

I thought I saw a zombie  
Walking towards me.

I am armed and tense.  
You climb over the fence.

I barely suppress my gasp,  
Safely out of your grasp.

You, a half-dead skeleton,  
Bloodless, bony, rotten,

With your decaying skin.  
The rivalry begins.

The dim sum piles up on the table,  
The fat of pork prevails.

I stop the lazy Susan,  
Making the table and people tremble.

Three *Siu Mai*'s catch hold of my reaching chopsticks:  
One for me, one for a babbling older cousin,

One for my father who is yet to come.  
I look you in the eyes in triumph,

Saving the poor *Siu Mai*'s from you,  
As you will definitely sweep the scraps,

Just like your balding father, your beady-eyed  
Mother, your blemished brother.

You heard me,  
I will have revenge.

## **The Heart is a Metronome Love Uses to Ad-Lib the Unburdened Moments**

*John Wall Barger*

Yes, you have been cruel often, yet still  
a butterfly stumbles on the air like confetti,  
dislodged from the realms of density, still  
you sit in the shade of hemorrhaging poppies,  
lesions of beauty in the dry grass, still  
a fat cat eyes a goldfish in a concrete bowl,  
still the hill tribe women, whose villages  
you have read about, the poverty & violence  
of the villages, the women now cleaning  
your hotel room, still they hand fresh folded  
sheets back & forth, back & forth, wading  
into sunlight as if weightless, in striped  
aprons & ball caps, as if they owned nothing.

## **Amber Warning**

*Pauline Burton*

(i)

Just before dawn, darkness unclenched a storm  
on to the silent park. Rain  
hissed in the trees, mercury fell, sleep ended.

Leaning out on the balcony rail  
I breathe the green night in. Blown raindrops  
prickle my arms, leaves  
stroke the bruised sky. Explosions of lightning  
fade against sour orange lights.

Behind me, years of missed chances  
cast shadows, unwatered twigs  
in a dry row of pots. New plants at my feet  
promise: we will be tended and thrive.  
Two new chairs invite: sit here with a friend,  
make this time an oasis.

An hour to go before daybreak. Escape  
to a paperback world, where icons  
weep blood, brothers  
tempt heaven, the size of estates  
is counted in human souls,  
where the priest lifts his frail hand  
to bless peasant women, and in God's name  
unpacks their burdens. When there's so much  
forgiveness, can't you believe  
some could be spared for you?

(ii)

The morning sky is higher  
than yesterday's, an upturned  
pale china bowl, dripping into a hundred  
streams. They too reflect light.

Three uniformed cleaners move brooms  
in unison, setting a slow ballet  
to the drumming of tyres on the road.

I pass the big shopping mall, riding at anchor  
with its ridiculous cargo of dreams—  
some of them mine. The sign  
at the glass entrance says:

*Amber Warning.*

A horn blares at my back.  
A truck: the driver  
with his small son beside him  
up in the cab, both waving: Goodbye?  
They point and shout, as the last wisp of cloud  
vanishes: Look out, your bag—  
Your bag is open!

## Dear Father

*Joyce Chan*

Your words are warm,  
but they are not a hug.  
They are a blaze of hatred,  
ferocious and untamed.  
All my dreams, my hope,  
my freedom are burnt away  
and the fumes blind me  
to another sunny day.  
Your face is graceful  
on the outside, but  
I know what you are behind  
the almost-perfect mask.  
An extremely ugly devil  
good at disguise.  
When I said, "You're lost  
to your own future,"  
you laughed. Tonight  
I'll carry my dead heart around my neck  
and drag my bruised feet across  
the muddy blue of infinite space  
until I see rainbows and  
more rainbows.  
I'm leaving to return as a woman  
with my teeth clenched  
and fists tightened  
to defeat you.



## **Does It Exist?**

*San Chan*

Don't tell me it does not exist.  
I like the way you look into my eyes.  
You know, this is just too hard to resist.

Morning hidden texts, midnight secret sex.  
I hide in a closet trying not to cry.  
Don't tell me it does not exist.

Is it you who has charmed me with a hex?  
I want to eat you like warm pie.  
You know, this is just too hard to resist.

Sorry, I am not a nice, handsome, muscular complex.  
When you meet one, you might say goodbye.  
Don't tell me it does not exist.

Please do not desert me between decks.  
I hear the ocean everywhere, yet I'm bone dry.  
You know, this is just too hard to resist.  
Don't tell me it does not exist.

## **Recovering**

*Aaron De Silva*

I was trapped by the weeds.  
They would not let me go.  
Thinking of that cold still makes me shiver.  
I heard whispering in my ears.  
I felt lighter, rising to the surface,  
until the weeds trapped me tighter.  
I used every inch of my skin and all my muscles  
to struggle away from them.  
Haunted in my head. Obsessed in my body.  
Leave me alone. The pain stabs at my heart.  
I sang a song to myself, a key of salvation.  
The tenderness melted into my bones and soul,  
where loneliness meets compassion.  
I floated upon the water, slowly,  
breathing the air I longed to breathe.

**John Berryman's Dream Song #4 Inspired This  
Haiku**

*David Gruber*

She bites eyes at me  
—twice        licks lips        I smile YES.  
Her husband returns.

## Luk Tei Tong Temple

*Stephanie Han*

Unborn rays imbibe drinks before the altar,  
feast on coils of sharp scents,  
flames that nip slow fingertips.

A believer, my son worships in awe.  
The bold monkey.  
The red-faced general.  
The man on the throne.  
The porcelain goddess who commands the sea.

He quietly taps the gourd, summons ghosts,  
dares to finger the pomelo.  
A recorded warble, a boiling kettle,  
a golden plastic pineapple,  
the curl of rice paper offerings.  
Wooden carvings of birds and flowers,  
the din of tin and china.  
This gives him strength  
to applaud with faith  
I do not know.

He trumpets their arrival:  
“Yum Yum has come to play.”  
Closer to birth than to death  
he’s curious, fearless,  
though his journey, too, will end in dust.

The dead quicken in dreams,  
but this does not console.  
Hold fast to dried orange peels and candles,  
red light bulbs and mirrors,  
script that runs across walls and paper.  
Fall to your knees, inhale the food of the gods.

Such light tears the heart.  
Intimate puzzles of flesh  
split by blood and age,  
by hope that cleaves death.  
The grieving of ghosts abandoned  
to the adulthood of memory.

## **Ever Since August, 2010**

*Cheryl Ho*

He has stuffed everything into the wardrobe  
Ever since August, 2010.  
Good, bad, new, old:  
He keeps everything inside.

Day by day,  
The wardrobe becomes fuller  
As he becomes emptier.  
Exhausting every square inch,  
He presses to make room  
For one more, and then one more.

Till one day, the wardrobe can hold no more.  
Its door pulses like a gasping beast,  
Then it bursts open,  
Spilling everything onto him,  
Burying him as he signals for help.

## **MTR**

*Ho Chun Man, Clement*

Pile up, pile up,  
Lest I should be the last to get on.  
Amid the suitcases and backpacks,  
I have to protect my position

From line-jumpers. Heads up, heads up,  
I am the first to sit down.  
Among the vacant seats,  
I occupy the corner with my bottom.

Look down, look down,  
I watch the flashing gadget in my hand.  
With every second,  
I cannot take my eyes off it.

A little girl with a shiny bracelet sits down  
Next to where I am cramped.  
Suddenly she stands,  
Gives her seat to an old lady.

Look down, look down,  
She sees the flashing gadget in my hand.  
I cannot take my eyes off  
The flashing.

## **Binary Duende**

### *Crystal Law*

#### I.

Something is moving in me.  
Monster? Perhaps a queen bee.  
Maybe it's travelling along my nerve pathway.  
I feel the heat sprawling.  
Maybe it's hiding inside my blood vessels.  
I want to scratch the inner surface of my vein.

A weird condition.  
The dark flame makes you die a bit,  
Just a bit.  
Something: magma, horse or spark  
Is jumping inside your chest,  
Wanting to flee and burst.

My body is out of control.  
My hands are directing a symphony.  
My feet are dancing flamenco.

#### II.

Something is moving in the atmosphere.  
Something dark. Perhaps a monster?  
Maybe it's a lunatic,  
His soul set free in the icy flame.  
Maybe it's been lurking for a while.  
His dance releases the spirit of the ground.



A creepy situation.  
People gather around watching  
His performance, addicted.  
They don't know: a black dog  
Is squeezing through their legs,  
Sniffing and touching their skin  
With a cold, wet nose.

Duende assaults their nostrils.  
Now their blood is blue.  
They laugh, they cry.  
They are chilled, and shake, too.

## **An Anchor**

*Lee Tsz Kei*

A rusty iron covered with a million wounds  
An arrowhead bloom  
With the smell of oxidized blood  
Stands still and firm even in the wild sea storm

## **Lonely Pie**

*Nora Leung*

My friends and I ate a lonely pie before  
going to the matchmaking party. It was  
a starry night so I made a wish that someone  
would rescue me when I fell into the  
swimming pool. Everyone wore an eye mask  
until they found the one they loved. All  
that romance made it stuffy in the house.  
We went outside and shivered beside  
the pool. We took a shot and jumped into  
the water. Mary was fished out by a fisherman.  
Cecilia swam to the other side on her own.  
I closed my eyes and stopped my own  
heartbeat. I drowned, heartbroken,  
beside a treasure. Perhaps I will be Ariel  
in another life.

## How to Be a Cool HK Teen

*Cynthia Li*

When you have to study,  
Go to Starbucks or any café chain.  
Never to a public library!

When you want to watch a movie,  
Choose a foreign film!  
Hollywood preferred.  
Never a local production.  
They are just *lame*.

When you photograph,  
Use your iPhone or Samsung!  
Edit it with Instagram!  
Never use a DSLR.  
Those are for *nerds*.

When you pick what to wear,  
Go for Hollister or A&F!  
Anything Korean is okay.  
Local brands?  
Nope. They are just too MK.

When you decide your college major,  
Business is the only choice!  
Science is too boring,  
And Arts won't make money, honey.

Why?  
Don't ask.  
Why not? Because  
The cool teens just don't.

**Walking with Maria Callas in the Mall  
(Festival Walk, Hong Kong)**

*Shirley Geok-lin Lim*

Long dead, you are a divine voice lamenting  
over death too soon and slow-coming.  
The arias, falling and rising, rise and fall  
and end, as they must, until I call  
you back, black-clad mistress in a century  
of white arts in which you are only history.  
Your *canto spianato* and *coloratura*  
pour like ether always pure and ever true,  
unlike my own voice strangled even  
as it utters and weeps in life. You remain  
that line which sweeps the air for its busy  
sweetness, sky for lightning shrieks, and sea's  
darkling depths for murmurous stillness.  
Callas, your ghostly voice invades and oppresses,  
mortality uplifting with soft timbre,  
to transcend, as we walk together  
among newly arrived goods, in the festival  
where neither art nor beauty can prevail.

## When I Speak of Requests

*Pinky Lui*

Dangling on the tip of an unworthy wish  
that dries up my mouth. I can't spit it out.  
Oh, it's turning my tongue feverish!

When I ask for something small (or lavish),  
the guilt of desire freaks me out.  
Dangling on the tip of an unworthy wish.

It's hard when your father is unselfish.  
I'd rather give up what I can do without.  
Oh, it's turning my tongue feverish!

Friends laugh and ask me not to be foolish.  
They don't know I always have self-doubt.  
Dangling on the tip of an unworthy wish.

It's true that wants don't simply vanish.  
They cling to your mind till your mind wears out.  
Oh, it's turning my tongue feverish!

But, to hold close what I cherish  
is, I realize, the true way out.  
Dangling on the tip of an unworthy wish  
that's turning my tongue feverish!

## **Poor Red Pen**

*Titus Nit*

Whenever the pencil case opens  
The gate of hell opens.

Oh poor red pen,  
You are forced to dance an endless ballet.  
Blood slashes out from your little feet.  
Words on the paper  
Are your blood and meat,  
Until all your blood flies out  
Like spraying pepper,  
And you disappear forever.

You want to find out why  
The pretty girl that likes you  
Must sacrifice your life.  
You weep and lament your fate.  
You want to be alive.

I wish you would finally realize,  
Your blood has become pictures, poems, letters.  
Your life is fully utilized.  
Maybe you would feel better.

## Ren Shan, Ren Hi<sup>1</sup>, or Tripping in TST

Kate Rogers

On the raised tile by the people mover in Tsim Sha Tsui station  
I lost my footing. Maybe I was too automatic beside that moving  
walkway, numb in that surging wave of bodies from Hung Hom.  
Maybe I was holding my breath, as one does underwater.  
No—the floor was not wet, but my shoe encountered a slick surface  
and I became as quicksilver as a fish, flying through the air.  
I was gaping too—in this new element—not knowing if I'd ever  
breathe again. And then I was flopping on my back, surrounded  
by staring strangers with shopping bags. Three voices coalesced  
in a speech bubble over my head, “*Lao Wai!*”<sup>2</sup>

I could have been in Beijing or Shanghai. I could have been the toddler  
riding the tractor through that teeming Mainland intersection,  
narrowly missed by buses and schools of speeding cars.  
I could have been that girl in Xian who stepped on a sewer grate  
and vanished down the hole—a new Alice for Asia.  
But someone retrieved my shoe and asked, “Are you okay-la?”  
Yes—I was still in Hong Kong after all. Not simply an object  
of curiosity, skirt hiked above my knees. I was bruised dignity  
and tender flesh—a real pulse of pain in this crowded ocean.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ren Shan, Ren Hi* means “People Mountain, people sea” in Mandarin

<sup>2</sup> *Lao Wai* means “outsider” or “foreigner” in Mandarin



## Little Lion

*Jason R. Sinarvi*

Did you have a good day at school? *No. Why not? I got in trouble.*  
How? *He pushed me again.* Was it hard? *Yeab.* Did you fall? *Yeab.*  
Did you get up? *Yeab.* Did you push him back? *Yes! But the*  
*teach—.* Good. That's my boy. It takes a brave heart to push  
back. Did you know that there is a little lion inside your heart?  
*Really?* Yeah! Let me hear it roar. *Roar!* Louder! *ROAR!!!* That's  
my boy! I want you to know that one day Daddy won't be  
around to remind you anymore. Bad things might happen to  
you—people will try to push you again. All you have to do is  
remember your little lion and let him roar! Got it? *Yes!* That's my  
boy. Remember, Daddy loves you. Now run along to bed, I just  
heard your little lion yawn. *Okay!* Alright now, who loves you?  
*You!* That's my boy.

## Sea Capriccio

*Joanna Sun*

White seagulls kiss the blue waves;  
blue waves kiss the golden beach.  
The sea breeze fresh as a mint in your mouth.  
Cool water pushes foam  
towards my bare feet  
as if a huge dark-blue hand  
presented a bouquet of lilies to me.

In the morning,  
mist floats on the surface of the sea,  
like a childhood dream  
in which everything seems sweet  
but also obscure.  
When the sun shows her shy face,  
the mist disappears, quietly.  
Water sprays the sun  
like a big orange, wet and fresh.  
Its juice flows into the sea,  
shining with bright, golden light.

At night,  
when the reflection of stars  
revolve in the water,  
the sea is like a big cradle:  
water its mattress, fog its quilt,  
shells on the beach shining in moonlight  
its jewels. The tide beats  
rhythmic and soft, a lullaby.  
Maybe the Spirit of the Sea is lying there,  
sleeping soundly in silence.

But when the storm comes,  
the sea cannot stay calm.  
She removes her luxurious voluminous dress,  
puts on a gipsy skirt, and dances  
flamenco. Spinning, jumping,  
she dances like burning fire  
to music played by wind, rain, waves.  
Music like the growling of beasts,  
heard all over the world.

## What Grows in a Girl

*Kristin Tang*

This 16-going-on-17 girl  
smugly, oh so smugly  
hugs and kisses her little boyfriend,  
turning heads in the MTR car,  
snorting at her easy victory.

Her glowing smile  
hides a fool that  
makes the seated man contemplate:  
after 10 or 20 years  
this fool will  
grow in her  
as

it does in his colleagues and friends,  
the women on streets and in supermarkets,  
the fools within  
that cannot be shaken off.

Maybe  
her little boyfriend will grow up  
turn into a man and marry her  
with or without intention:  
she will have his children,  
unveil and grow the fool  
in fights and whines.

Now  
look at her—  
shoulders back, chin up, chest out,  
posture as if saying  
“Future? Who cares about the future?”  
Seems like she has figured out

the seated man:  
a boring person,  
a single middle-aged man.  
A fool.

## **Different Skin**

*Mags Webster*

i.

here, at the rim  
of a city, poached in smog,  
rice paper screen of sky

coastlines are bespoke,  
land rephrased,  
post scriptum

the tides sculpt runes  
of abandoned shoes,  
rope ampersands  
and plastic cups

spider-jointed  
trawlers drag  
the bays, scrape  
absence from  
their depths

ii.

here, where the cloud  
emulsifies the sun

my lungs hoist  
slackened flags,  
make languid fans  
for my heart's  
dull coal, its shiver  
of ash in rib-grate

iii.

here, I wear a different  
skin, a humid lucence  
sweats from pores

I'm steamed *bar gau*,  
an oyster tipped  
from the slipper  
of its shell,

glazed with the moist  
vener of heat  
I understand what  
mouthfeel means

as the famished air  
digests me

iv.

here, in the shadow  
of Lo Fu Tau  
I try to open  
the hand of thought

to winnow  
the good grain  
from the salt  
I am the tree  
where birds don't rest,  
my roots unsure  
how to grip this soil

v.

two kites coast white  
space overhead, make  
*xíngshì* with their wings

I have built a hide  
of lotus leaf, wrapped  
myself in hay

here, I must learn to erase  
old scripts, sift new  
words from the shoreline



## **The Passenger**

*Matthew Wong*

The man who sits across from me has a stack of paper balanced on a crossed leg and a pencil in his right hand. For three stops it looks as though he is trying to write something, but every time the pencil comes close to meeting the paper it doesn't quite connect, despite his immense concentration. At one point he notices that I've been watching him do this and then turns his complete attention away from the pencil and paper and towards me. I pretend to be looking past him, at my reflection in the window, but this only makes me recognize the ridiculousness of my own appearance. A voice overhead announces that the train will be stalled for several minutes due to an accident up ahead, and sorry for the inconvenience. I shrink in my seat and fill my thoughts with foreign music. The air is thick as the whole car goes silent save for the instruments I force my head to play, and I start to hold my breath. I turn red, then purple, and then even my mental orchestra becomes jangled into blips of noise. I feel the floor dissipate and what must be a holy light penetrates my vision. A warm tingle runs through my body. Someone's hand touches my shoulder, and I know I am ready for salvation.

## **If There's a Twist to Life's List**

*Gigi Yan*

If Love were a song  
How long would you let it play?  
If hate were paint  
Who would you spray?  
If power were on sale  
How much would you pay?  
If humility were sunshine  
How long would you soak in its rays?

If sorrow were a candle  
How long would you keep it lit?  
If happiness were a ball of wool  
For whom would you knit?  
If jealousy were a punching bag  
How hard would you hit?  
If gratitude were a shirt  
How well would it fit?

If silence were apple pie  
How many slices would you eat?  
If secrets were a closet  
Would it be kept neat?  
If courage were a drum set  
Could you tap out a beat?  
If creativity were a stranger  
How would you meet?

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