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Foreword

Once we thought that what made humans distinctive from other animals was our ability with tools and with language. It has since been proved that other animals – from the chimp to the gorilla to the octopus to the crow – fashion and use tools; and whales and dolphins speak – or sing – to one another. But knowledge is a mountain pool that refills as fast as it empties. One thing that does indeed make *homo sapiens sapiens* distinctive from the rest of Creation is not tools or walking or even speech – but our predilection for art.

Some have called it an ‘Art Instinct’. Whatever you call it there is no human culture which does not indulge in a set of universal art forms: from painting (the body or a canvas or a cave wall); music (sung or played or beaten on a drum); and storytelling (whether oral, or written – as a story or a poem). It is the last of these which this volume is concerned with: a selection of the best writing to come out of the various courses offered by City University’s English Department.

Poems, creative non-fiction, fiction. These are stories that speak to our time and of our time. They tell tales of Hong Kong and beyond; speak of unnoraml lives and loves and loss; turn what many think of as ‘normal’ lives into something distinctive. These pieces have come out of a single semester’s work. They have

been written by students from all disciplinary backgrounds, ethnicities and nationalities. But all of them are what good stories should be: brave, honest, illuminating, compelling.

I would like to thank and congratulate everyone – teachers, editors and writers – who contributed to this collection. The poems and stories now can speak for themselves....

Justin Hill

Assistant Professor

City University of Hong Kong

January, 2014

Preface

Working closely with a great group of student editors, I learned how alive a passion for the arts is at City University. I was impressed with their seriousness and dedication to the spirit of the journal: exploration, contemplation, and discovery. You could not ask for a fairer-minded or creatively engaged team, and I think it shows brilliantly in this collection.

I would like to thank Mr Justin Hill for giving me the chance to lead this team, and for his great support. I'd also like to thank Professor Rodney Jones and Professor Kingsley Bolton for the many signs of support and many excellent programs that have made such a good home for creative writing and writers at City University.

Lastly, I would like to give my thanks to all the students who submitted and volunteered. Your passion and commitment are what keeps *Halfway Home* alive.

Sebastian Bitticks

Graduate Teaching Assistant and MFA Candidate

City University of Hong Kong

February 2014

Editors' Introduction

The young and the restless. For *Halfway Home VT* we bring you the unfiltered and uncensored voices of City University. A truly collaborative project, the editorial team took full control of the collection; from concept to proofing, what you see is a student production. This year, our editors worked with each writer to develop their submissions and bring you this excellent offering of poetry, prose, and nonfiction.

In this issue, we bring you a journey in three parts. In the first section, we have young writers taking some of their first steps into the world of possibilities...and disappointments. Ever-present is the pull home, while around the next corner are messages both cryptic and personal.

Often when we leave, we tarry too long. For our second section, we have writers who have passed that point of no return - and stopped. What are we going to do, now that we're finally here? Our writers find answers both smart and sarcastic, and get a step closer to that newest of marvels: the independent self.

In this city of contrast, no story seems complete without a homecoming. In our third section, our writers tackle the questions raised by return. They have come back changed. Some have found fresh appreciations, but others cast a more crooked eye on what it means to make a home and be a family.

Once again the students of City U have shown they will not be satisfied with the expected route. There are dark stories here. There are poems with both raw emotion and pointed criticism. But there are unexpected tendernesses, too.

The editorial team of *Halfway Home IV* would like to thank every writer for their excellent submissions. We've had a great response, and the collection in your hands now is a testament to the creativity in this growing community. We were thrilled and challenged by absolutely every submission.

We would also like to thank Mr Justin Hill and the English Department for their ongoing support and unflagging encouragement. It's a rare pleasure and opportunity to be given the reins of a project such as this.

Editors:

Gloria Fan, Sidera Tahir

Assistant Editors:

Chun King Hang, Russell Chan, Gigi Yan, Jeramy Lee, Matthew Leung

Advisors:

Sebastian Bitticks and Alicia Beale

I

*Gone,
for myself,
in solitude.*

A Good French Year

Chun King Hang

During my first year of college I was sharing a room with a Frenchman and he would either ask me out for a drink with other Frenchmen and Englishmen or tell me how badly I had missed the night when he was back. Life during the time wasn't bad but other than that I barely knew him. I barely knew other new people I met. I barely knew my family as well, anyway.

'King, what are you reading?'

'One Hundred Years of Solitude.'

'Still? We're going out tonight. Come join us.'

'I've to work. You'll have as much fun, Antoine.'

'Mathilde is going tonight.'

'Which Mathilde?'

'The girl from Nice that you talked to at the party down on the porch. She asked if you're going. Not for the first time, King.'

'I thought you're the only one asking me out. Why didn't you tell me?'

'You didn't ask. And I'm always drunk.'

'At nine? Where?'

'Nine at the Blue Bar.'

'I'll be there.'

'Damn it where's my shoes? King, have you seen my brown

suede shoes?’

‘At the end of your bed under the sheet. Clean your football jersey. It stinks.’

‘Till when I can find it. I’m getting some breakfast now. See you tonight.’

I’d heard the Spanish have dinner through midnight but I had never heard of the French having breakfast in late afternoon.

‘Bye, King!’ Antoine closed the door quietly and I smiled at him.

Then I tried to go back to the page I stopped. It was when Aureliano declared himself Colonel. Then I tried to go back a few pages and reread but they didn’t make sense and I realized I wasn’t actually reading the story. I was instead writing a story of an orphan in the 70’s. Then I started thinking about my grandma whom I hadn’t seen for a month. I hadn’t seen my parents for a long time, either. My mother called me on every Friday to see if I was going home that night and when I was going to the UK for the internship. I told her I was not going home and I was leaving in June. She asked when I will go back home and the exact time and date of departure. I said I was not going home and I was leaving and was annoyed as I was in control of nothing. And she would ask if I was dating a girl and tell me not to do anything wrong with girls. I hung up and felt bad and tried to get rid of the guilt by reading. But I kept thinking about how bad I was to my mother and father and my old grandma and turned the pages

without reading any of the lines. Never mind. I shaved and went to Central. It was Friday night and we all should have a fun place to go.

Streets in central flow like lava down a volcano. Most of the good places there are on slopes. So are the bars. Walking up D'Aguilar Street the slope deepens and the small crowds condensed into a big crowd moving around a square on which bars and clubs are aligned in a good fashion. They are so closely packed that a drunk man can walk into a bar within two steps and start a fight again after losing or winning one in another. The bars and clubs only occupy the ground to the first floor of the old buildings. The upper floors are residential and the exterior concrete started falling off but nobody notices. They look at faces when they are still sober and the ground when drunk. The floor is a drunkard's final destination.

It was six and people were having the first round of beer. In the second round they would have shots of tequila or gin but there was not a third round, as they would mix up all the liquors and drink. By then some of them would throw up on the street and leave a bad smell. I was worried as I didn't have any food after the muesli with milk for breakfast at noon. I would throw up if I drink with nothing in my stomach and I would have nothing to throw up if I hadn't eaten. But I wasn't hungry. I thought I could walk around in Soho to build an appetite as there are nice restaurants. But I only knew a Greek one there.

I walked out of the square and along the flat Wellington Street to the west and reached Soho. The Greek restaurant was at the corner and had a big window through which the whole Staunton Street was under surveillance. There was a woman in a black dress with curly brown short hair sitting alone by the window. It was Mathilde.

‘Bonsoir.’

‘Bonsoir, King! Why are you here?’

‘I’m just walking randomly before meeting Antoine.’

‘You finally join us!’ Mathilde sipped the last mouthful of coffee and looked contented. ‘You’re good? I should order something for you.’

‘I’m good,’ I said.

I called the waitress. ‘Check, please.’

Mathilde paid and we left.

It was eight and people were hungry after the first round of beer. The restaurants and people were packed on both sides of Staunton Street and cars could barely move. The walk was so narrow that I had to walk down on the drive and Mathilde was as tall as me then.

‘You’ve got cigarette?’ she asked.

‘You know I don’t smoke.’

‘I thought I changed you on the porch.’

‘Not for that.’

Mathilde looked around and asked for a cigarette from a

stranger. He gave her one and lit it on her lips. ‘Merci,’ Mathilde said.

‘It’s bad for your body.’

‘But it’s good for my mind.’ Mathilde gently blew a puff on my face. ‘We’re all born to rot slowly. We age. Teeth and hair fall off. And our mind vanishes like a puff.’ She tipped the cigarette and the ash fell.

‘But cigarettes make the deterioration faster.’

‘The faster, the better. Let our mind take the pleasure and our body the pain.’

‘We should run together and I’ll show you a different kind of joy.’

‘You should smoke first.’

‘Alright. Our minds just work differently.’

I understood Mathilde but I was not like her. My mind feels bad when my body is in pain. But I liked her. Maybe I would smoke with Mathilde. Maybe Mathilde would join running with me. Maybe we would run and smoke.

We walked down Shelley Street. Mathilde was wearing a plain black dress that revealed the good curves of her body. Her small breasts were accentuated by an almond-size crucifix on a thin silver necklace. It was not for any man, not even Jesus Christ. It was for Mathilde as engraved. She was wearing a pair of red moccasin and her feet were white.

‘It’s almost nine. We should go back to the square.’

‘King, was what you told me on the porch true?’

‘What’s true? I told you a lot.’

‘That I’m different from all the people you know.’

‘You are. So am I different from those you know?’

‘You see what others can’t. Nobody notices my name on the crucifix. And what you said is true. I’ve broken up with him.’

‘Good.’ I felt happy not only because Mathilde had broken up, but what I’d said was true. ‘You know, in men’s stories the girls are different but the rest is just the same.’

‘Are you just the same as them, leaving a girl for another?’

‘I’m even worse. I would leave for myself.’

We walked through the way back to the square and by then it was so crowded that we could not see the road. Outside the Blue Bar Antoine was chatting with people I didn’t know and some I knew but had forgotten their names.

‘They’re over there. Amélie is also from Nice! Let’s join them.’ Mathilde crossed my arm and I followed. In the bar it was loud and I could not hear other people or my mind talking.

‘King, don’t drink like the Germans. They drink everything in big cups.’ Antoine drank shots of whisky swiftly. ‘Drink like us.’

‘Antoine, I’m not French,’ I yelled.

‘You’re with us, so you are. And I know the Chinese drink tea in even smaller cups. We’re the same!’

I was watching and they were all drinking and it was dark. Mathilde was having a third glass of Whisky. Amélie was good

drinking with others and Antoine was in the crowd. By then I was the only one who was sober. I never drank but no one knew since there were always empty cups on the table. Mathilde was drunk and wanted to leave and I told Antoine. Antoine talked to Mathilde in French and Mathilde mumbled.

'King, you go back with Mathilde,' Antoine said. Then Amélie argued with Antoine. I didn't understand a word. Antoine was serious then Amélie became very serious then Mathilde whispered to Amélie and Amélie gave up. Mathilde was feeling bad and she became heavier on my shoulder.

'King, take a taxi and go back with Mathilde first,' Antoine said.

'Mathilde is rarely drunk like this,' Amélie said.

'Don't worry.'

We took a taxi and were back to Mathilde's room but I couldn't find her key. 'Mathilde, where's the key?' Mathilde muttered in French. I knocked on the door but her roommate was likely not home.

I carried her back to my room two floors down. I put Mathilde in my arms and placed her on my bed and cleaned her face with a hot towel while she kept saying things that only made sense to those in her dream.

'Mathilde, what's your roommate's phone number?' She mumbled and stopped and thought she had made herself clear.

I took off her shoes as Mathilde's ankles were tender and

pink and I didn't want the shoes to scratch them, and my sheet was white and clean. Mathilde turned and cuddled my pillow as if it were hers. I slightly adjusted the pillow and pulled my blanket over her legs. Here she was on my bed.

I was sober and I felt sad. I tried to read again but I couldn't keep my eyes off Mathilde. I should have been drunk. My father always told me not to drink as he says when you're drunk you couldn't control yourself and would do things that you don't want to. But alcohol indeed can't change our mind. When you're drunk you'll do what you've wanted to. I never drink because I always want to do many things and when I'm drunk I'll be monstrous.

It was already 3 a.m. and a bird twitted then another answered and all of them sang. Mathilde was sleeping sweetly. I was tired of thinking but couldn't sleep and was sitting by the desk. There were only Mathilde and I but I felt someone were sitting on Antoine's bed watching. Maybe I could wait until Antoine was back so I wouldn't feel as sad with only two of us.

Antoine didn't come back that night and when I woke up in the morning Mathilde was gone and I was covered in my blanket. I went home that morning. My father told me not to drink. My mother told me not to do anything wrong with girls. My old grandma told me not to take drugs. Then I went to the UK for my internship and when I was back Antoine and Mathilde were long gone. I felt neither home nor with friends nor elsewhere that year.

But I think somehow I had put good grapes and yeast into an oak barrel and I just need to wait for good wine. Antoine told me I could stay with him in Paris. And since that night I have never seen nor even heard of Mathilde and in my memory Mathilde was black and white, like her dress and her feet.

An unknown call

An unknown call
Never received before,
Though the line is dead
That's you
I know for sure.
Woman's instinct is never wrong.
Nothing could make you stay
Neither wife nor children.
You left without a word,
without a second thought,
without a shelter for us.
House moved, numbers changed,
You left nothing
but misery
And now
someone like you
has something left unspoken
Any words once important,
become trivial.
Remorse, retrieval or return,

Whatever it is,
let it be unspoken.

Fan Ho Nga, Gloria

Bleeding

Icicles in veins

Sharpening my nerve endings

Menstruation pain.

Cabo da Roca

Yan Tang

The bus driver took another deadly turn at full speed towards the destination. It was a pity that the scenic view along the cranky mountain had passed so quickly, making it difficult for even the earnest of all eyes to capture such a rich summer sight. I inhaled deeply for the distinctive whiff of summer, but my lungs were instead filled with the pungent smell of a fellow passenger's vomit, which, to my dismay, resided painfully in my nostrils throughout the already unpleasant journey ride towards the westernmost point of Europe. It was difficult not to wonder if the poets romanticized the place a bit too much after all.

Yet, when the doors of the bus opened at Cabo da Roca, my mind was blown away with awe. The sky spread across my visual field like a palette full of colors – strokes of sky blue which slowly gradated towards a light orange-pink color, with flocks of white cloud moving in between like herds of sheep. Slowly I trod towards the cape, breathing in the aroma of the crisp grass and the damp saltiness of the ocean. When I reached the textured wooden fences, I closed my eyes and allowed the harmonious symphony of nature to take over me. Even with my eyes closed, the mesmerizing beauty of Cabo da Roca whispered in my ears and penetrated me. Such serenity!

Gazing beyond the cape, my eyes squinted at the picturesque view of the shimmering sea, which reflected alternating colours of blue and green. Following the movement of the waves as they danced towards the shore, I couldn't help but marvel at the resemblance of such a scene with children playing peek-a-boo: when the waves rushed toward the shore, white running suds appeared quickly and temporarily covered the rocks; but as quickly as they came, the waves rushed back to the waters, and the giant boulder took again centre stage, showing off their peculiar shapes under the sun. It was as though an invisible hand had moulded them into distinctive artworks of wonder.

I heard Mother's voice calling out to me in the distance. Tearing my eyes off the Cape, I took one last look at what the 16th century Portuguese poet, Luis de Camoes, had described to be "where the land ends and the seas begins". Inhaling my last breath of ocean air, I zipped up my coat and kept my hands cosy in the oversized coat pockets before walking back towards the shadow of the bus stop. And as the cold wind brushed against my face, I felt strange warmth glowing in my heart.

Encounter at the other end: Chinese New Year

Chow Angson

‘Happy Chinese New Year, Son. Wish you a safe trip.’

The Whatsapp message popped up on my phone as soon as I woke up. London shines in the blue mist at 8 a.m.

Right, today is the Chinese New Year.

Usually, today my family would dress up in new clothes to celebrate the New Year. In China we have a tradition that suggests that old clothes bring you bad luck on Chinese New Year. ‘Old clothes are dirty, don’t wear them on New Year’s Day,’ Mum would say. New clothes symbolize a new beginning.

Mum would dress in a bright yellow shirt with polka dots. I will never understand her sense of fashion. ‘Yellow is good and it means good luck. It looks golden too, money, money, bling, bling.’ She would strike a pose to show off her outfit.

Okay, Madonna, enough with the vogueing.

She would go on without letting me speak. ‘Don’t I look pretty?’

‘Ah. Yes, you look fabulous.’ I didn’t have the guts to tell her that she looked like an orange. The only thing I could do was to watch as the new joke took on the old one.

Today is the 6th day of my backpacking in London. For 20 pounds a night, I get a room in a hostel with seven strangers.

There is a crippled professional poker player in the room; he got the extra-large bed. My bunkmate above has changed 3 times while I was here. At first there was a Japanese boy who didn't speak a single word of English, then he left unnoticed. I wonder how he survived without knowing a single word of English. Then came this guy who I never even met. I heard he was a Spanish guy who was here for a brief visit. So brief that he remained a mystery to me. A Lebanese backpacker took over the bed few hours after his exit.

Nobody asked me about how they were dressed.

I put on 4 layers of clothes to veil my shivering body. All these clothes were bought years ago, for a snow-skiing trip I took in Australia. Even Australia wasn't this cold. I had borrowed a bright yellow coat from my brother. You can tell from the choice of colour, that my mother had been behind this purchase. As soon as I walk out on the street, the street cleaner and I align with our matching coats. Now the joke is on me.

We would go to grandmother's house for a family dinner. We would walk along Tai Po Road and make a turn after we passed though Ming Sing restaurant. The street would be noiseless, unobstructed. All shops would be closed, with a red sign stuck on the front, saying they would rest until the end of the festival. The only shops that would be opened were the restaurants, selling food at particularly rip-off prices.

When we arrived at Grandma's house, she would scream at

the top of her lungs, ‘Ah B, come sit down!’ That nickname of mine stuck with me throughout my teenage years, the burden of being the youngest in the family. Apparently B means baby, so they call me Ah B.

‘Ah B, don’t drink coke la, we have soup.’

No ma’am, I am not giving up my coke. Though I would play it cool.

‘OK la. I will drink both.’

‘Ah B, eat chicken la,’ she would yell.

Mum would join the party. ‘Also the Fish, Ah B, big fish for big boy.’

‘OK. OK.’ Oh, women.

Grandma would drop chicken to my bowl while I was already chewing, mum aggressively filled up my bowl with a giant scoop of fish.

My bowl was never empty.

The poker player mixed me up with the Japanese boy. Once he said, “You guys look the same.” I wondered how good he is at his job, considering he is a professional poker player living in a cheap hostel; clearly he must have poor eyesight.

“Just like how the streets of London look the same.” I replied.

The streets of London were a puzzle to start with. I made a turn to New Cavendish Street after I got out of the hostel, and then every street went in its own direction. I twirled and I twirled,

as if a spell was cast and I would twirl forever. The shops looked freakishly the same, and after 10 minutes, I found myself walking in a loop, lost in the jungle before I wandered into Tesco.

I went straight to the frozen section. I grab the 3-pound meal deal pack on the chiller, random frozen frosted salad with random frozen defrosting topping, a yogurt and a soft drink. Cold food for the frozen day. I have no complaint. It cost 3 pounds so what do you expect? I finish my meal within ten steps of leaving Tesco.

I continued my journey onto Oxford Street, passing through shop after shop. I got lost in the city again. All shops looked the same. I crossed a stairway at Somewhere-look-alike-Oxford-Street, made a turn to the right and found myself in Somewhere-look-alike-Soho. Once again becoming lost until I saw the big signs of China Town, right; then I found myself again in Somewhere-look-alike-Soho. Once again becoming lost until I again saw the big signs of Chinatown.

The best ritual of the whole festival is getting red pockets. A polite nod to the elderly gets you 50 dollars; an ass-kissing compliment gets you even more. The further you go the more you get. After the festival, I have money to eat more than just instant noodles for the entire month. Screw instant noodles, I could eat KFC every day for a month.

My friend, Maybelle, and I would sit at her home and compare the money we got in the festival.

‘Look, my uncle is the worst. He only gave me 20 dollars!’

‘The creepy one?’ I said.

She has an uncle who always stares at her chest every time he gets a chance.

‘I know which one you are talking about, I am talking about the other one.’

‘Is he just as rowdy?’

‘Worse.’

‘Oh, well. If you dress like that of course you got only 20 dollars.’ We joked about that while we were flipping through all of our money.

‘I got 2000. How much did you get?’ I asked.

‘What the hell, Angson?!? What the hell! You are buying drinks this time. I only have 1200,’ she added.

We would just sit and count our money while laughing at how pathetic each other’s lives had been. The one who earns the most buys drinks. For three years, I was the one who ended up buying Vita lemon teas.

In this trip, I walked around with all my money wrapped around my neck as my mum warned me before the trip that robbery happened everywhere in Europe, she suggested that I put all my money in a pocket that should directly be placed under my neck. I wore the pocket in my whole trip, as if I got an inflated stomach, I even wore the pocket while sleeping.

I didn’t know anyone in London; I assumed I would receive

no red pockets this year. But much to my surprise, I received one, from a stranger.

The guy dressed as Cai Shen in Chinatown. Cai Shen is a Chinese god of prosperity. The guy dressed all in a red traditional gown, a red large hat and long fake mustache. He stood on Lisle Street giving out red pockets. He handed me one and said in Cantonese ‘恭喜發財, brother,’ a Chinese saying to bless people and bring them a prosperous new year.

The festival continues on the street. I remembered it was raining in London that day, but it didn’t water down the festival. The festival included pop-up shops selling Chinese-imported goods. There was one shop only selling Vita lemon tea, at four pounds a bottle.

I Whatsapped Maybelle when I saw the shop. I wondered if she was counting through all her money and buying herself a red pocket drink or spending it with her new boyfriend.

‘You are buying me drinks this round for sure, I only got 1 pound in my red pocket.’

‘How did you even get a red pocket? You just pick up some money on the street?’ she typed.

‘I’ve got a guy giving out money on the street.’

‘Escort service?’

‘A dollar makes me holla,’ I added.

‘LOL.’

‘So, lemon tea?’

‘Only if you buy me souvenir.’

‘Cheap bitch,’ I mocked.

While I was walking on the street, white dots splattered on my phone screen. I got lost again. Where am I? Who am I with? Looking up to the street Chinatown, I knew no one. Actually, nobody knew anybody. A woman traipsed on the street, aimlessly searching for someone. An old man sat on the bench with a plastic-wrapped beverage watching cars passing by.

Even though these oriental faces were seemingly familiar, we all walked in our own deranged directions. We were all strangers. This time of year we should be gathering, though we are trapped in the far west for whatever reasons. Lost in the continent we could only call shelter, we are all far, far away home.

Freedom

Let go,
You said.
I am the gatekeeper of memories
confronting the invaders
who try to erase the early years.

Let go,
You said.
I am a lock with no keys
holding back my sentiments
towards you and she who left.

Let go,
You said.
I am the Black Hole in the Milky Way
swallowing everything and
only a heart devoid of emotion remains.

Let go,
You said.
But I am hijacked in a maze

arms and legs in shackles and fetters
way lost in the boundless space.

Let go,
I tell myself.
My love who was once mine.

Chow Pui Sze, Cyndi

Haiku

Fury fiery sun

Funny freakish windless month

Crestfallen flavour

Independence is when-

You have become your own mother:
preparing meals for famished creatures,
bleaching stains on crumpled fabrics,
understanding that time eats away your skin.

You have become your own father:
maintaining a proud facade of virtue,
earning more than those slipped away,
enduring the pressure for the future of the immature.

You have become your own sister:
hiding break-up tears from your family,
deserting loneliness with selfies and emojis,
finding happiness and comfort in the material world.

You have become your own brother:
putting up fights for stubborn reasons,
indulging in air, drinks and senses previously unexplored,
embracing a thousand confrontations in heart's no-man's-field.

Konzentrationslager

He breathed life into them,
And left them drowning in the white air.

They banged on the door, like if they tried
Hard enough, the gates of heaven would open;
They ran around the chamber, like if they ran
Hard enough, their bodies would not turn cold;
They prayed with tears, like if they prayed
Hard enough, they could evaporate from the suffocating hell.

Why did He not save them,
If He created man in His own image?
Why did He create men who then
Slaughtered hundreds and millions of them?
Why did He flood the earth to cleanse the impurity
Corrupting the world He had created?

They were drowning in the white air.
Silently, ceased banging on the door, footsteps crumbled.
Sinking into the bottom, a stifled sculpture deprived of hope
He had once gave and took away.

Given up, eternally lost in faith.

Why did He breathe life into them,
And left them drowning in the white air?

My Moment in the “Hometown of Japan”

Chan Hiu Ying, Winky

I have always considered Japan’s railways to be the most developed but the most complicated transportation in the world. I spent a total of thirty minutes reading the railway map and learning how to buy a ticket in front of a ticket machine. In three hours’ time, the Tōkaidō Shinkansen (East Sea Road Railway) brought me from the modern city, Tokyo, to the “Hometown of Japan”, Kyoto.

I took a Tatami Capsule in Capsule Ryokan Kyoto (Capsule Hotel Kyoto). The capsule was similar to a typical capsule hotel, but smaller, with a small television, yellowish-brown light, an alarm clock, and a roller curtain in Kyoto style as the door.

After lunch, I asked the capsule hotel’s owner, Mikiko, for the right transportations to some scenic spots in Kyoto. She was a thirty year-old woman raised in Kyoto. She knew simple English and suggested renting a bicycle for travelling around Kyoto as it is a simple little city. I took her advice and continued my journey.

I stopped at Hanamikoji Street. It was a silent street of geishas. There were red lanterns hanging up on the doors of each restaurant, indicating that there would be geisha performance inside. The name of the geisha of that restaurant was written on each lantern.

When I shuttled through the street, I saw three elegant

geishas walking slowly. I wanted to take a photo with them so I approached them. However, once they noticed my left hand was holding a camera and I said, 'Hello, can I...' they had already covered their faces with small paper fans, speeded up their steps and walked away from me. I was a bit shocked and embarrassed at that moment.

Did my action scare the geisha girls?

This question floated in my mind as I went back to my tatami capsule. That night, Mikiko told me that asking for a photo with geishas might be considered as an impolite action in Japan.

'Kyoto was the ancient capital of Japan where the emperors lived in the past. Many Japanese cultures, arts, spirits, etc. originated here. People in Kyoto are responsible for keeping the traditions. Amongst them, politeness is one of the most important traditions in Kyoto,' Mikiko explained in English with heavy Japanese accent.

I always thought being a tourist means enjoying good treats from the locals. I felt abashed and sorry as I reflected on my action to the geishas.

The sun shone brightly for my second day. I visited the biggest and the most famous temple, Kiyomizu-dera (Clear Water Temple), in Kyoto. It is a historic temple that was established in 778, even before Kyoto became the capital of Japan. The great Deva gate (red door) at the entrance of the temple welcomed me to this millennium site.

I saw numerous wind chimes hung up on the hallway of the Hondo (Main Hall) of the temple when I walked to the Kiyomizu Stage (Clear Water Stage). The stage is a nice and comfortable place where I could appreciate the beautiful scenery of Kyoto. I indulged in the stunning view and took as many photos as I could.

Inside Kiyomizu-dera, here was another little temple, Jishu Shrine, which let people pray for their loved ones. In front of the Jishu shrine, there were two stones in about 18 meters separation for the lovers to have a love divination. I did want to try it, but there were many tourists and pairs of lovers having the divination and I was not travelling with my boyfriend. So I chose to buy a charm for love blessing there instead.

Before I left the Kiyomizu-dera I went to the Otowa Waterfall and drank the sacred Otowa Water from a ladle for the blessing of my health and happiness. It is a must-do thing once you visited the temple.

I admit that I had arrived Kyoto with only a few Japanese expressions such as “Konichiwa” (Good afternoon), “Arigatou gozaimasu” (Thank you) and the language barrier was a challenge.

One day before I left, I went to a traditional kimono shop in Kiyomizu-dera to rent a set of kimono to wear. It was a small shop in Machiya (Townhouse) building style. The three big wakasas on the roof were the symbol of the shop.

“Ko-ni-chi-wa,” I looked around the shop and tried to say the phrase carefully. Many beautiful and colourful kimonos entered

my sight.

“Konichiwa...,” an old couple came out saying a few more Japanese words in a soft voice. Although I could not tell from what they were saying, their warm smiles were welcoming me.

“Er...I...,” I pointed to one set of kimono and tried to use my body language to show them I would like to try it on. However, the old husband waved his hand and said something to his wife. It seemed that they did not understand what I was doing and I could only look at them in confusion. Then I took out my travel guide and showed them the photo of a tourist in kimono. They nodded and the wife brought another set of kimono to me.

I looked at the kimono. It was mainly pale blue with white cherry blossom pattern on it, matched with a pale pink butterfly shaped belt and a little cloth handbag.

It's out of my expectation that it takes around an hour's time to put on the kimono. The wife also helped putting some make-up on my face. I was satisfied with my new look.

“Ichiban-nei!” the husband did a thumbs up and said.

“A-ri-ga-tou-go-za-i-masu.” I bowed to thank them and left the shop.

Throughout the day, I was like a traditional girl in the past Kyoto. I breathed the clean air, enjoyed tasting the local Japanese green tea cake and bought souvenirs for my relatives and friends. The comfortable and silent environment refreshed my mind and relaxed my body.

It was finally time to leave the capsule hotel. I placed a thank you card on the reception desk for Mikiko and set off to the railway station. But leaving did not mean it was the end of my journey; I was going to continue the journey in Nara, with my photos and memories from Kyoto.

My world

My green childhood garden,
Diminishes by the day.
One by one I lose friends,
To the world of greed.

Orea Eleni

Born molten
of Thera and Mycenae –
my father lava,
mother the sea
which boiled at his touch –
some call me natural disaster.
The wave that swamped
the world.

Others call me Princess
and under their breath, whore.
Men worship and blame me
put me on plinths,
or never let me
through the door again.
Nowhere in the ancient world
is there a picture of my face.
No grave has been found,
only shrines and pot shards.

Eidolon I shape shift

under the gaze of their longing –
a dark brunette, a blonde
with a golden complexion.
Boticelli called me Venus,
painted me pale as dawn
before the sun is born,
then set my hair on fire.
He stood me on a half shell
like a scallop hors d’oeuvres.
At least Shakespeare had the wit
to cast my beauty in the shadows.

Homer told my story first –
I’ve been Helen the home wrecker
who could not sleep alone
longer than I was ever
any man’s wife.

It should come as no surprise
that I was kidnapped young
and came to love my captor.
I am Yeats’ doomed
daughter of rape,
but some say
my mother was not Leda

but Nemesis.

That would certainly
explain a lot.

Many call me goddess
since my father was immortal.

We never met.

I search the face
of every man who wants
to take me to bed
for his likeness.

Wong Him Kwan, Kasie

The Street Lady

Tonight

What you want is

To fall asleep

In the street that's

Full of strangers

Sit on your stair, murmuring

'No drunks kick my cans

Overturn my rusted cart

No

Recycle bins put here

To lock away my livelihood.'

So tonight

What I want is

People take me as a silent background

Trivial

left alone

In the street
Full of strangers

The Last Viking

Justin Hill

The Uppland hills that fathered me were carved from the bones of Ymir by giants in the days before anyone remembers. Hard in spring, they cling like maids to their covering of snow; in the summer they swell, green and bright against the heavens, and it is glorious to stride out and smell the four winds crossing the skies. But winter is the truest test. The nights are long, the snow thick, and once the morning chores are done, all there is left is sit close to the fire and listen to each man's tale, to hear how they have won fame.

Our grand-sires were full kings. They raised the hogsback hall; settled the valleys with men they could trust and led them to battle when battle was called for. They were descended from Odin, All Father, who raises warriors above other men, dispenses victory, brings heroes home to Valhalla at the height of their prime.

My father, Sigurd Sow, was a vassal king. He cared more for pigs than spears, and put hack silver away against hard times as most men do with barley or malt. He married my mother, Asta Gudbrandsdaughter, when she was only eighteen years old, already a widow with a babe at the breast. They both took the cross when they were young and had two sons together before I was born. My full-brothers were like my father. They cared more for corn-rigs and meadowlands, and the smith-work and cattle. I swore

a holy oath, too strong to break, that one day I would lead enough warriors to devour their stores of grain and cheese.

I was the one who floated woodchips on the water and imagined them longships; who saw the hillside pines wreathed with mist, and thought of a forest of spear-blades, and the grim warrior faces beneath. I felt closer to my absent half-brother than any of my full-blood brothers. Like the autumn hogs I was ever hungry for word about him. His name was Olaf.

Olaf the Holy men call him now. He went a-viking when he was twelve, sailed with Thorkel the Tall, and took coin from Ethelred of England. The year that I was born he came back to Norway and declared himself king of all the Norsemen.

I am the full king's brother, I told myself. I never thought about myself the same way then. I expected more from the world – if he had done it then I could too. These were childish thoughts. I was a bairn still, but I was a bairn who saw a mountain before him, and determined to reach the peak.

War is a jealous mistress and Olaf had many battles to fight in the north against the Earls of Lathe, but when I was six word came that his ships were at anchor in Ford. His favourite ship was named Bison, it had a bull's head, leafed with gold. At sunrise it shone pale yellow, at sunset it was a deep baleful red, like a dragon's eye.

When you are a boy the world overshadows you, and Olaf seemed like a giant as he rode up the slopes to our hall, his

retainers behind him, laughing and confident, gold rings on their arms, and silver on their sword-hilts. The paths were worn knee-deep into the turf, they kept each man in marching order. I held my half-brother up against the man I had constructed from the stories, and he was shorter than I thought, and stouter, with sandy hair and broad cheeks, scrubbed red by the sea-salt winds. But it was his eyes that struck me: the palest blue with dark rims. They were keen as a hawk, and they struck me dumb as he pulled his horse to a halt, swung one leg over, landed as heavily as a wheat sack.

‘So, these are my brothers!’ he said, glaring down. ‘Will you make warriors?’

He slapped my eldest brother, Guttorm, on the shoulder so hard it made his lip curl and he bit it to stop himself crying. Halfdan, my other brother stepped close to my mother. I was the only one not afraid. He bent down and scowled at me. His pale blue eyes were as piercing as a bow-shot arrow; his glance cold and clear as Spring fjord shallows.

He pulled what he thought was an ugly scowl.

I returned it with one of my own.

He tugged my forelocks. I tugged his beard. He laughed then and ruffled my hair. ‘Good lad!’ he said. ‘Repay gift for gift; misdeed with vengeance!’

Olaf the Holy only occasionally came to our hall: he was a

boy here, helped out in the smithy, herded goats and birthed cattle – and it is hard for a man who had risen so high to go back to the place where men remember him as a child. I understood that. But still, each time he left, I sat alone and bit back the tears, and felt that I had been abandoned to the life that he had left behind, rooting in the ground like fattening swine.

My brothers were like plough-oxen, plodding the muddy track my father had worn. As they grew into men they fattened like sheep, but I grew tall and lean like the farmyard beans that clamber up the side of the hall till they reach the roof, and have nowhere left to climb.

Ambition was my goad. My path was the path of a warrior. Each day I swam in the fjord; practised with bow and spear and sword, sat with the longbeards when the night closed in and learned how to set down words in poetry: so that men might always remember what deeds I had done.

I was thirteen when my mother followed my father into the grave, and my brother Guttorm took over the family estates. He was a good man, though at the time I despised him – but it was more my life that I hated. My brother Olaf had imposed strict laws on the rich men of the country, and they buckled under his authority. It did not take long for King Knut, of Denmark, to send his men to stir up trouble.

I wanted to go and fight, but he forbid it until chance, that fleeting hooded visitor, had taken his staff and passed out of sight.

When I came into hall that evening, Guttorm nodded towards a strange man cloaked with a dark sea cloak who was sitting at the benches where the goats were snuffling among the floor rushes. I had seen his ship that morning as it stitched the flat fjord water: the sail furled on the long yard, her dripping oars pushing her slowly along, like the slow beat of a bird's wing, a prow of carven wood that did not glow.

'Tell us your tidings,' Guttorm called out. 'So that my brother might hear them for himself.'

He was a thin-faced man with ginger-straw hair, a beard that only grew on his side-burns and chins, which gave him a goatish look. He was a Lathe man, from his accent, and rubbed his hands together and cleared his throat. 'Your brother, the king, has gone into exile,' he said and told the whole tale. The people had turned their face away from my brother, and he had gone east to look for help.

The man seemed strangely glad to be bringing bad news.

I sat silent and furious and defiant, but his words beat down on me like a smith's hammer. My brother had failed. He had not even fought for the throne. He had let me down. The world, I understood, was as fickle as a lamp-flame.

I could barely speak at the end. It was all I could do not to let my voice quiver. I mastered it the way a man will master a nervous horse. 'Why did he not come here?' I asked, but my heart wanted to know 'Why did he not take me?'

They looked at me as if I was a fool; or perhaps they thought I would rage and were waiting for the anger to come. But I mastered myself, and sat down for our night meal, held out my horn for some ale, and sat and listened to them discussing the news as the hearth flames curled and lapped around each other.

Powerless men look for signs in the flight of a bird or the guts of a dead hen. I felt powerless then, as if hope was a leaf that the wind had blown out the door. I was as trapped as the tethered stars, circling about the sky. My days were the same. I often found myself by the banks of Honefossen, where the cold mountain waters tumbled down the steps of rough black rock and looked for patterns in the crash of the melt water. Cold spray mist was on my face. The roar of the water filled my ears. My horse was nervous at the tempest. I did not comfort him. I had no comfort to give.

In the harvest weeks that followed I kept away from the hall cheer. Their talk was free of all but bushels and pints, and how many acres were left to harvest. I hated them all. I hated myself and I hated my half-brother for fleeing his foes and going off into exile without his half-brother.

Those two years were the longest.

King Knut appointed a man to rule over us in his stead, and I withdrew from the world where men ploughed and sowed and scattered. Olaf had gone a-viking when he was twelve. I had turned fourteen already and felt like an old maid, whose chance of marriage has passed.

My mother was dead, and however much I scowled and pouted, my brothers would not spare the coin to provide a ship for me. So I climbed the mountains and the shepherds laughed at me for wasting my energy. But I felt closer to God there, and stood on the rocky pinnacles and looked out over the world – the great mountains in the north, the high windswept heaths to east and west and to the south the waters of the Upplands all drained away to the Fold Fjord, where the narrow waters opened out to the world.

All water finds the sea at last, old men liked to say, and something within me knew that soon I would follow them south, to make my name, and see the wide world.

In that time I turned from a boy into a man, and a man does not wait for his brother to say yea or nay. He does as he pleases. So when in the early weeks of the new year a lone horseman came from Vestfold and hammered on our hall doors, I knew my moment had come.

The man was a Dane. Not a man any of us knew, but he brought tokens with him to show that he was to be trusted. Guttorm had been churning the slave girl he had taken to his bed, and he came out still buttoning his trousers.

I felt shame at that. My brother was the first born, but he was no better than a hog. No king's son he.

Guttorm bade the man be fed and given water to wash himself, but the water was half frozen and the man was shivering

enough already. I took a hot stone from the side of the hearth and dropped it into the jug of beer. ‘Here!’ I said, giving him my own silver-lipped drinking horn. I had turned fifteen now and had fluff on my lip, and I fretted at it as if willing it to grow thicker and darker. ‘What news?’ I asked him.

It took a while before the warmth did its work, and he had stopped shivering enough to speak clearly.

‘Earl Hakon set off from England with three boats, but they were hit by a storm, and two of the boats were sunk. The third waited for him, but the waves were too rough, and he has been lost.’

Earl Hakon was Knut’s man, appointed to rule over us. God had spoken when he drowned his ship. The stranger spoke for many when he said, ‘Your half-brother Olaf should return. Send word to him. Is he still at the court of Onund?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘Last we heard he was with Jaroslav in Rus.’

The men all about came together at the thing, and we were all agreed. A message would be sent.

I watched that ship skim the narrow fjord water and wished I could be on it.

I drank heavily that night. But I held my ale and my tongue, for that was the mark of a man. But when all other men were lying down to sleep, I took down my father’s helmet and shield from the hall wall. I had cleaned and polished them, and kept them free of dust all this time. I had put extra holes in his belt as well, so that it

would fit me. I was a beanpole then, and strapped on his sword and strode outside.

The hogsback of the hall was dark against the sky, but overhead the skies were cold and clear and the stars burned with a fierce white light. I put on the helm, and felt the edge of my vision darken, my hearing muffle.

I imagined I could hear the crash of steel and the roar of fighting voices and drew my sword, for it was my sword now, and raised it to the northern sky and shouted for joy because I knew that battle was coming.

There was no answer, except for the treetop screech of an owl, but I took it as an omen that at last my life had begun.

II

*Stranded,
experiencing,
with others.*

Almost Death

Two hours
Sweat, cries,
Bloody gloves and knives

Navel string
Strangled the fragile neck,
Struggling for one last breath

Baby's heartbeat
Through the skin
Doctor and nurses panicking

From an unbearable pain
To tears of joy

First bitter then
Sweet,
The birth
of me

Distance

My sun rises, yours goes down;
Your moon comes up, mine sinks behind the sun;
I get in my bed, you finish lunch;
I flip over the pillow, you're driving home from work;
I dream of you with another girl, you work out under the sun;
I tell you I can't sleep, you wait for me on Skype;
I get out of my bed, you dine while I breakfast;
I rush to school, you get in your bed;
The clock strikes twelve,
tears on my lunchbox.

'Happy Anniversary,'
I scoff.

Gagandeep Singh

Globalized

Working in a Korean restaurant

Fascinated by Japanese etiquette

Room filled with Swedish furniture

French speaking

Loving Italian food

Born and raised in Hong Kong

A British citizen

An Ethnic Indian

Gagandeep Singh

Haiku

I lit the candles
To keep you out of darkness
Now shadows haunt me

Holiday

Christensen Frode Kjaer

Last night is today.

I have been sleeping most of the day when a knock on my front door wakes me. I open my eyes, but stay in bed, hoping that whoever is knocking will soon leave. I have an ambiguous feeling when it comes to unannounced visitors. On one hand I love to have guests, on the other I get anxious when I don't know who it is. Is it the police waiting on the other side of the door?

The knocker is persistent though, which finally prompts me to get out of bed. Did I say bed? I mean mattress on the floor. Still in my underwear I move past empty bottles of beer and dirty clothes.

At the front door I take a deep breath and prepare for the worst.

'Hey what's up man!' Andy greets me, as he comes in the door and gives me a hug. The ever persistent smell of one package of cigarettes a day lingers about him.

'Hey I just woke up, but it's good to see you,' I half greet and half apologize to him.

‘No problem, I just thought I would come by before work.’

Andy works close to where I live. He used to have a shining career ahead of him as a chef, but he gave it up a year ago in order to study food science. Now he works part time at some semi-decent restaurant.

He throws his shoes in the tiny hallway and takes the only chair in the room, while I jump into a pair of jeans from the floor. He stretches his long legs and lights up a cigarette, Red LM, and takes a drag with his big lips.

At that time I shared a small apartment with a friend. Two bedrooms, a kitchen, a tiny toilet that’s broken and a shower inside the kitchen and a consistent chill no matter the weather outside.

‘I’ll make coffee,’ I announce.

I always try to be a good host by offering guests something to drink. Most tend to decline, not wanting to impose. The trick is not to ask them if they want anything, but to declare that you are serving something. Not that he would ever decline an offer of coffee.

I go to my little kitchen and start grounding the beans and boiling water. When the water is boiling I pour it into the mocha pot, fill it with ground coffee and put the stove on low.

‘Party last night?’ he asks me.

‘Nah nothing special, Jones and I had a couple of beers.’

‘More than a couple clearly.’

‘You know how it is with Jones, once it starts it’s hard to

stop.’

I hear a bubbling noise from the kitchen. ‘Just a minute I got to take the coffee off.’

I take a chair from the other room, sit down next to Andy and hand him his coffee.

Andy lights another cigarette and takes a sip.

He offers me a cigarette; I decline, but change my mind after he has put the package down and help myself.

‘Where is Jones anyway?’

‘Probably at school. I just got up how would I know?’ Jones is my roommate and his aunt owns the apartment we live in.

‘What did you do last night?’

‘We got drunk here and Jones convinced me that we should go out. The last I saw of him was with some pretty blonde girl outside the men's room at some bar.’

‘Best when he's drunk?’ he jokes.

Andy looks at his watch. ‘Well it has been nice, but I got to head to work.’ He drains his cup and heads for the hall. ‘I'll give you a call when I'm done tonight.’ He slams the door behind him and my apartment is quiet again.

I don't really worry about Jones and as when I begin to tidy up the place I forget about him. While cleaning I find a leftover beer. I open it and take a swig. It's warm, but not completely stale. I sit down, enjoying the beer and the slightly better looking room. There is something magical about warm beer after you wake up.

Outside the sun is high and casting a warm glow across the city, which makes me want to be outside. I finish my beer and leave the apartment.

On the steps at the front door one of my neighbours is smoking a cigarette. I always find her here, no matter the weather.

I stop to say hello and she offers me some fruit from her garden. I accept, which makes her smile and talk on while I listen and nod. She talks about politics, the neighbourhood, her problems with sleep and how some guy was shouting on the street last night. *Could that have been Jones?* I wonder.

Our neighbourhood is a noisy place at night. Not only from the many bars around the area, there is also a mental asylum across the street. Some nights I can hear the inmates shout into the darkness. 'Where is my mom? I don't like it!' I wonder how it must be to wake up not knowing where you are. In such a situation I would probably ask for my mom, too.

I say goodbye to my neighbour and she promises to hang the fruit on our doorknob. The warm beer has given me a thirst for more so I stroll down the street towards the nearest bar. Maybe I'll ask around about Jones.

People on my way are smiling and enjoying the weather. The long dark winter makes them all miserable, but when the summer comes they forget the winter and replace snivelling noses with shorts.

The bar I'm heading to is ancient, more than a hundred years

old. To most people this might be seen as a signifier of class and dignity, but that couldn't be further away from the truth.

It's a seedy place with dark windows, brown tables, brown chairs, a brown bar and a few slot machines. The place stinks of cigarettes and on a busy night you won't be able to stand the smog for more than an hour or so. Miserable souls gather around places like this, staring into their beer with empty eyes. You can see that they have given up and are just trying to pass the time before it's all over.

Today the place is empty though, sleeping all day screws up my sense of time; the reason why nobody is here is because the place has just opened.

'Isn't it a bit early for drinks?' the bar owner japes at me from behind the counter. He is usually a sour man, but the weather seems to be affecting him too.

'You are open, are you not?' I reply a bit more brisk than intended. For some reason I don't find myself in the mood for his jokes. 'Can I have a beer please?' I try to be a bit more polite.

I take my beer and head for a table and realize that the place is not as empty as I originally assessed. One of the tables has already been occupied by an old man staring into his beer. He doesn't seem to notice me, only sitting there in silence as I choose the table next to his.

For some time we just sit there and mind our own business until the man turn towards me. 'Wourd yi gouda rh we,' he

mumbles. I smile to him and nod. He smells unwashed. He goes on: 'shef fok gwen.' Here in his sad lonely existence he almost remembers what it is like to be human again. Maybe this was his attempt to engage in what he remembered as being communication. He goes on with incomprehensible mumbling and I sit there with my beer.

So here we sit, neither of us knowing what to do with the other as the door to the place opens.

Blond curls on top of a pretty face steps in the door. What is she doing here?

She has a quiet word with the owner, who serves her a beer, walks towards my table and before I can say anything, sits down.

'You are one of Jones' friends, right?'

'Yeah. I live with him.' She is beautiful and the way her hair curls in a sort of messy way makes her look like she has just had sex. I want her. Why did she leave with Jones last night? How was he able to enthrall her in his state of drunkenness?

'Do you know where he is?'

'I thought he might be with you.'

'He had to go, but he is actually going meet me here soon.'

'Really?' I try to keep the jealousy out of my voice and change the subject. 'Isn't it a bit early to be drinking?'

'I could ask you the same,' she retorts.

We sit around in silence and not wanting to watch the two of them together I make up some excuse and leave. She just gives me

a wicked smile as I leave. She is probably glad to be rid of me before Jones shows up.

On the way home I decide to buy more beer, get drunk, pass out early out of nothing better to do and maybe some bitterness.

The sun is touching the rooftops and casting long shadows across the city. Before heading up to my apartment I take a walk around the park surrounding the asylum. Had I come by earlier the place would have been teeming with people enjoying the weather. By now the only people left are two girls, some drunk sleeping in the grass next to a building with empty bottles around him and a man with a young child. The girls look like they are about to leave and the man and the child are feeding some goats in a fenced area. There is a tranquil sense of the whole scene and I just stand there sucking the whole thing in.

As the girls are about to leave, the drunk wakes up and shouts something at them, but they ignore him.

The man and the child heads for the exit leaving me alone with another drunk. His face is red, but he does not look as worn out as the average drunk. I think we recognize each other at the same time.

Jones smiles at me with his red face and I walk towards him.

He is in a sorry state, but he wears it like a badge of honour.

‘Hey there,’ he says with a hoarse voice. He smells like alcohol and cigarettes. ‘Got some water?’

We share a beer and try to puzzle last night together after the blond girl.

‘She was a total monster!’ he exclaims. ‘Whenever I had done her and wanted to sleep, she would ask for more, in the end I thought to myself: get out of here now before this girls eats you. I made up some excuse and told her I would meet her today, her bedroom floor was covered with empty condoms when I left.’

I can’t help but laugh and Jones looks somehow proud of himself.

‘When I got home I realized that I had forgotten my keys at the girl’s place, but I didn’t dare to go back so instead I tried to wake you up by yelling at you from the street. Well in the end I decided to buy some beer and drink them in the park, must have fallen asleep.’ He finishes his tale and takes another sip. ‘What have you been up to today?’ he asks me.

‘Nothing much,’ I reply. I do not feel like recounting my meeting with Blondie.

We start to head for the apartment, but on the way I get a call from Andy. He has been stealing bottles from the restaurant and is coming over.

‘Let me at least have shower first,’ Jones complains as I inform him.

‘Sure we’ll take it easy tonight just a drink or two and then we’ll call it a day.’ I lie even though I know where this is going.

Kong Girl

I am a girl living in Hong Kong,
but please don't call me Kong girl.

Kong girl, wearing make-up,
making up her face.

A geisha, a clown, always covering her original face.

Kong girl, she passes by.
Her voice in piccolo pitch,
and the awful smell of perfume. I sneeze.
Yes, noise and air pollution are serious in Hong Kong.

Kong girl, in the restaurant.
Complains that her beef, 1mm thinner
than the beef on the nearby table.
Complains that her wine, 0.05ml less
than the wine on the nearby table.

Kong girl, updating her Facebook status.
In the photos, kissing her boyfriend. The focus,
a diamond necklace shinning on her neck.

Kong girl, a queen.

Pointing to her slaves, counting their mistakes.

Claiming that they were not faithful.

I am a girl living in Hong Kong,

but please.

Please don't call me Kong girl.

Chow Pui Sze, Cyndi

Haiku

Glitter powders float
Santa Claus feels stiff and cold
Isolated globe

Chan Long Ching, Samantha

Piano

Year after year
My fingers dance over the keys
Even with sweat and tears
I am cheered

Stage and spotlight
is where I belong
Surrounded by applause
I am consoled
For there's someone,
I have been waiting for long,
willing to enter my world
willing to understand me

For the first time
my hands are taken off the piano and
held tightly in your hands

My Love,
I dread of the thought
that you are not coming near

For I devote my music, my heart to you
The one, who simply listens and feels
And the only one,
that makes my world sparkle

How I Wish I Stopped Procrastinating

How I wish humans never get tired,
So I do not have to go to sleep at night.
How I wish humans do not sleep,
So I can accomplish a million to-dos.
How I wish to accomplish a million goals,
So I can feel a sense of achievement.
How I wish to feel a sense of achievement,
So I can stand proud of myself.
How I wish to stand proud of myself,
So I could forgive myself for surfing online without realizing a few
 hours have past,
How I wish to resist the temptation of social media,
So I would not feel so frustrated when things do not get done as I
 had planned.
How I wish to feel less frustrated,
So I could live life easier.
How I wish to live life easier,
So I could stop worrying about the things I may forget.
How I wish to live life without worrying my assignment due date,
 my appointment and my grocery's expired date,
So I do not have to plan everything ahead.

How I wish to stop being so obsessive while indecisive with the list
of activities-to-do for tomorrow,
So I could stop having wars with myself before I sleep.
How I wish to feel peace at 1.30am,
So I could have a good night sleep.
How I wish to have a good night sleep,
So I could wake up in the morning with courage to face failure.
How I wish to have courage to face failure,
So I could be someone I admire.
Okay,
Stop grumbling and go to sleep!

Such is the Time

such is the time,
when i sit here alone by the window
on this dark cold night
looking at the rain as it pours down
hearing every drop ticking down on the hard ground,
the loud thunder that comes within it and gets into my nerves
yea, its nothing new...
it's the same story every summer
but this time, its strange...
i feel an uncanny emptiness within me
wishing you would be near me, hugging me tight
and allowing me to burn in the heat of your breath
but dreams rarely get realized
i wish this rain would stop pouring
and give the sky a chance to rest after all that crying
and i find some solace after all the sleepless nights
oh, please stop crying now!

The Wedding

Lena Fadel

‘God has opened all his doors for me,’ he sang while dancing around the house with a piece of paper in his hand. I sat on the couch and observed his jerky movements when he pulled up my other cousin and gave her a big kiss on the cheek. ‘Thanks for all the help cuz! Would never have gone without you!’ After many interviews and applications to various embassies, he finally received a visa to the United States, where he was more or less guaranteed a job as a jeweller. Charbel had struggled for years to get his career on track. He had a jewellery store in Libya that went well, but had to leave it behind when the war broke out. The lost son came back home to Syria, relieved that he managed to get out of Libya intact. Since then, he had tried to establish himself, but without any success, especially considering the war that broke out one year later. But that doesn’t matter anymore because he finally got a visa to the United States where he would have the opportunity to realize his dreams and collect money to afford to get married and provide for his future family.

‘God has opened all his doors for me,’ he continued singing. His face was lightened, his worry lines gone. All that stood between him and his departure was a visit to the U.S. Embassy in

Jordan. To get there, he insisted on taking the car instead of the airplane because of the cost, and planned to go early in the morning to avoid the traffic, and above all, avoid the conflicts between the army and the rebels, which usually took place in the afternoon. He invited his family and relatives over to celebrate that evening. We sang, played the drum, danced and ate until it was time for his departure.

When the driver arrived the darkness was still filling the streets in Damascus, it was too early for sunrise when he got dressed in his dark blue jeans, black shirt, a sea blue sweater and a black leather jacket: 'They'll think I'm the ambassador,' he said as his voice gave way to laughter.

His father had not said a word during the entire time until he finally burst out in anxiety: 'Please let me go with you!' Charbel stopped, dropped the bag in which he had the sandwich his mother had made him, and grabbed his father: 'Do not worry, the driver take this route every day and nothing has happened. I will be home for dinner.' He kissed him slowly on the forehead and rushed into the taxi while he hummed the melody from 'Change is gonna come'. He waved goodbye with a big smile that never left his face even when the car started to move: 'I'll call you when I am on the border,' he promised.

The car turned around the corner and left our sight. If my calculation was correct he should arrive at the border in less than two hours. Two hours...two and fifteen...two and a half hours

passed by and still no call. I felt a lump in my stomach when I reached for the phone to dial his number, only to be met by an autoreply that the number could not be reached. The lump began to expand and settle upon my heart and lungs and reduced my breathing. I opened the window to get some fresh air but was ambushed by the strong wind and the smell of fuel; I looked as far as I could from the window to see if Charbel was somewhere nearby, but the street was empty. I tried to keep myself from bad thoughts. Perhaps his battery ran out. That was what I had to believe, what we all had to believe.

But he never came home for dinner that day, neither the next day. Friday, Saturday, Sunday, Monday, Tuesday passed. I wondered what he was doing, where he was, why we had not heard anything from him. Five days without a clue where Charbel was. I had my suspicions, but pushed them away as soon as they came to the surface. They just couldn't be true.

He had left the house with only a sandwich and no change of clothes, as he would be home the same day. We called the police, but there was not much they could do. The country was in the middle of a war. All they could say was that Charbel Francis never left Syria. The car was missing without a trace and the border police had not registered the car number in Jordan. I imagined that he was fine, he was hidden somewhere because of gunfire and he had no access to a telephone. I had to believe it. There was no other acceptable alternative. Every hour that passed I felt myself

fading away, my body present in the meaning of flesh and blood, but my soul afloat in another sphere, far away from this earth in hope of reunite with my body.

I was sitting beside the phone, eagerly waiting for good news about his return. As soon as it rang I picked up the line, only to be met by a screaming voice: 'He is dead!'

My whole existence stopped, what I had feared became reality.

'How do you know!?' I screamed back in desperation.

But I did not receive any useful answer from my crying cousin; all she sent me was a link. A link that would turn my whole world upside down. It was true, the rebels had downloaded a YouTube clip where they proudly showed how Charbel had been tortured and was lying dead on the ground with the driver on his right side. His face was smashed and it was clear that he had been shot in the face. He had probably also tried to flee, for his entire leg was cut open. His sea-blue shirt was full of blood, but his leather jacket and watch was missing, probably stolen by one of them. My precious cousin with a heart of gold laid there on the ground somewhere - dead. I checked it again and again, could not believe it, looking for any sign that it was not him, but everything was in vain. It was self-torture. The clip was published the 25th of January 2013, the day after his disappearance.

The clip spread like aggressive cancer and the family collapsed all together. There was screaming and crying nonstop.

People from the village came over to express their condolences, but his family were still in denial and refused: 'As long as we have not seen the body, there is still a chance that he might be alive!' but of course we did not allow his parents to watch the clip. They would not be able to see their child in such a condition. Charbel's family would never experience peace if they did not get the body back to where it belonged.

'How the hell are we supposed to get the body back?' I asked my relative, Bassel, 'they have probably just thrown him in a mass grave somewhere.' He looked at me with tired eyes and sighed: 'Yes, probably, but I will do the best as I can.' Bassel had always been a fearless man who puts everything into God's hands. 'God has given us a certain period of time to live, and Charbel's time was over,' he told to me. He was the calmest person during the whole situation, not because he wasn't devastated, but because he had accepted it. Charbel would die no matter what because that was God's plan for him, and he had no doubt about it.

To get the body back Bassel created a false identity to be able to track down the man who published the YouTube clip. As he searched for useful information he was put in a situation no one dreams about being put into: he entered a world where thousands of people had the same destiny as Charbel. The rebels threatened to kill him as well if he would come close to the area where they had thrown Charbel as a dirt bag, but even so, he was willing to take the risk: 'If I still have time in this world then I will be fine,'

he said. Bassel contacted the army for help to enter the area which were at the moment occupied by the rebels. '30 minutes, that's all we can help you with, then we have to get out of there quickly,' he was told. That was the best offer he had gotten, since the Red Cross did not want to enter at all. 'Suicidal' was all they could say.

They went with the army to the location after collecting a couple of men and shovels. Charbel was buried alone under an olive tree far away from the other victims of that day because he was a Christian, a *kaffir*, a cheater according to them, someone who did not deserve to be buried in the masses of the Muslim people. Even though the thought disgusted me, I was thankful for it because now it made it much easier to dig up the body, without any other corpses in the way. Everything happened very fast, there was no time to think or to feel. They found the location, dug and laid the body in the truck and got the hell out of there, all in 30 minutes.

It was then time to confirm his body at the morgue, the moment of truth. When they exposed him under the white sheet a breeze of chills ran through my body, my toes curled together and my eyes started to fill up with tears. He looked very different, but it was definitely him. His face had turned black and the clothing had melted onto his skin. We were told that the olive tree he was buried under during three months had kept the corpse in good shape with water and minerals. The brightness and smile on his face were all gone, killed down by someone full with hatred and with nothing

other than a heart of charcoal. I have seen these images a lot on television, but never in my life though I would see a beloved one in this condition. A man whose only motive was to create a better future for himself, without owning a single weapon or engaging in political issues.

All the essential commands I have been taught as a child were all long gone. Do not kill and treat your neighbour right, I was told. But that was only an illusion of a fantasy world, far away from reality. Animals kill to survive, humans kill for fun, a significant proof that our kind are damaged creatures.

All I can feel is my empty heart and the depression that a crime like this had actually had taken place. I find myself humming *Father...father...father...help us, send some guidance from above, cause people got me, got me questioning: Where is the love?* I want to be mad at God, but perhaps Bassel was right. His time was over and God had bigger plans for him beyond this world. '[God] makes the sun rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust' (Matt.5:45), and even though I do not understand how God is working, I have to believe that He is in control and this is only a part of a bigger plan.

I can smell the scents of red and white roses being waived by everyone in the mass. People screaming, crying, dancing and singing the traditional songs of my village. I am aware of what is happening but do not give it too much notice. The white coffin is

shaking from all the people jumping up and down with it, they had to jump and spin it at every crossroad we pass on our way to the church. That was the tradition when burying an unmarried person. If that were me, I would not have appreciated it. But at least, after three months of waiting, my cousin Charbel Francis finally got the funeral he deserved, the wedding he never had.

-Based on a true story

Texts

How is life?

I miss you much. :(

Not a single day pass by
that I don't regret leaving you behind.

Better than ever. :)

Have you been enjoying the coconuts
Under the sunshine
In that lovers' paradise Maldives?

Is everything back home fine?

Wait up for me

Return my calls

You are my sunshine. <3

Such a sugarcoated lie

She took a picture of you naked

And sent it to me online. :-/

Goodbye.

III

*Returning,
home.*

Wong Hin Kwan, Kasie

Hands of the Chef and Father

I thank
for what I have got
what I haven't got
from you
Dear, your hardship –
burn marks
knife cuts
all clothed in odours of ointments
grease stains in nails
swollen right palm
new burn marks and
your ragged fingers which have been making
pinky promises
from my threes 'til now: I'm twenty-one!
were the prizes at my 19th Christmas
when I lost in the competition named love with a young man
the private gloves where my cold hands rooted and grew
and shields of mine
at any time, sound, strong and sweet
has raised me up

For my Angel

Sidera Tahir

He lay there in a motionless state covered in a white blanket with a hospital logo on it, intravenous needles running through his hands administering medication and necessary nutrition. Dr. White observed this with her hands tied to the metal handles that ran along his bed. He had been given medications to calm him down physically after an emotional outburst earlier that had the doctor screaming for help.

It was Dr. White's first encounter with this tall, muscular man who had been in the hospital for about two weeks now. He was classified as a criminal and considered mentally unwell for which a psychologist was sent to conduct an investigation. He didn't have anyone looking after him and after initial police verifications it was found that his wife had died due to complications in the delivery of their second child and his daughter a few months later. He had no one of his own prior to his nuptials as he lost his parents quite early in his life in a car accident.

Dr. White stepped out of the room and walked back to her office dumb struck at what she had heard from the young man. He was probably sleep-talking and didn't mean anything he said, or worse, possibly, it could be that he was dreaming a scenario that

had actually occurred. She helped herself to the couch near the door and sighed heavily. The record-sheet file folder fell off her hands and onto the floor opening up to a blank page that had needed some scribbling. She picked it up and walked over to her desk to do what she was required to. With great effort she placed her hand onto the white paper but couldn't bring herself to write anything. After a few seconds of trying, she put the pen down and buried her face in her hands.

She recalled the old man's conversation with an unknown being in his sleep when she entered his room. 'Calm down both of you. There's no need to worry. Give me what I want and you can leave.' He was trying to get them to understand his needs in a rather soft voice with a slight smile pulling his lips upward to the left side enough for his premolars to be seen. 'Please, quickly give it to me,' he had said and was starting to lose patience, 'I am running out of time. My little girl has been waiting for four years now.' And when the ghosts of his dream didn't seem to grasp his intensity, he had shouted, 'I just need that bloody little heart from your body. Quickly! Hand it over!' But they still didn't seem to fulfil his commands making him furious; he then starts kicking and trying to set his hands free. 'All I need is that little heart of yours. Give it to me!' he roared before the nurses injected him.

Dr. Whites knew then this man wouldn't be an easy case but what intrigued her, according to a conversation later with her boyfriend, was his need for the heart.

The next day she went to see him again. ‘How was he last night?’ she asked the nurses at the counter. Once she was satisfied with the response, she proceeded to his room, this time without any files or papers. She turned the doorknob slowly so as not to disturb his sleep if he were sleeping. To her surprise, he was awake. He could do nothing but stare at the ceiling in the confinements of the bed and that was exactly what he was doing. He implored deeply for something on the white sky of the room above him without batting an eye. It was as if he had gone blind and had no option but to look ahead.

‘Hi.’ smiled Dr. Whites. No response. No movement. ‘How are you today?’ she attempted to inquire but failed to get a reply. She sat on the chair beside him noticing a wet patch on the pillow resulting from his tears. Patiently, she tried again. ‘How are you feeling today?’ She waited for a reply observing the man who must be in his early thirties with sea-green big almond-shaped eyes that were beautifully outlined with thick eyelashes as if a curtain had been drawn. A pointed nose and sharp lips were placed neatly on his oblong face that was housing stubble. She got up to leave when she heard him whisper, ‘I miss my Angel.’ She slowly sat back down expecting more but nothing else came out of his mouth.

‘Was your daughter called Angel?’ asked Dr. Whites in a low voice.

He answered in the affirmative and then paused. ‘She was going to turn five years old in a few days when she passed away.

She had asked me to get her a white dress to wear on her birthday. She wanted to be the angel that day...with big white feathery wings...but I couldn't afford the big ones so I got her the small ones.' Dr. Whites listened on while he talked. 'Every day, before bed, she would put on the wings and hold her magic wand out asking which wish of mine would I like to fulfil...she was very sweet.' A smile had formed on his face again, this time in fondness and genuine love for his daughter, broad and angelic imparting a seraphic presence but that didn't last beyond a couple of seconds for he was soon fogged with prickling tears. And then they tore up as if they were Niagara Falls.

Dr. Whites gave him some bedside tissues to clean his face and patted on his hands, 'I'll come back later. Take care,' leaving him alone to let it all out. Outside on the other side of the door, she too was fighting with her glimmering eyes.

The following day, as she was about to enter his room, the nurse briefed her on his condition the night before. He had been hallucinating again trying to break free from the bed. She proceeded in. His head was turned to the right hand side and so she instinctively walked to that side of the bed. He was fast asleep. She waited there a few seconds before turning to leave noticing his right hand. She was aghast to see the skin of his wrists peeling off creating small dents that were surrounded by bloody marks. In a matter of minutes, she had the nurses in for dressing making sure she oversaw that they did it well. Feeling the sting of the alcohol,

the man woke up too flinching his arm but said nothing.

‘Good morning,’ greeted Dr. Whites. She had waited for the nurse to leave once she was done with the bandage. ‘How are you today?’

‘Very well,’ he responded in a rather weary tone almost inaudible. He wanted to say more, perhaps ask her the same but couldn’t muster the courage to do so. Dr. Whites realized this too but did not try to further question him on that.

‘Since you’re doing great, I’ll come and talk to you after I’ve visited other patients.’ She held onto the door handle when he said something.

‘But what if I want to talk now?’

It was not a question. It was perhaps a request but she didn’t want to hear him at this time. It was too early to spoil her mood, she thought, yet she spun around, smiled and took her position on the chair the nurse had sat on earlier. ‘Yes?’ she hinted him to speak politely. He sighed heavily and clenched his fists ready to take off the veil of something important.

‘I want your heart, doctor,’ he said firmly but rushing through each word to blurt it out.

‘What?’ asked the jolted doctor almost shrieking.

‘I WANT your heart,’ he repeated with the same readiness and sharpness.

‘Why?’ her tone raising alarmingly in order to protect herself.

‘Cause I...No! I need your heart!’ he bawled. ‘My daughter

needs it or she'll die. Please save her,' he begged. 'Save her! She needs a heart. A good heart!" The words raced out.

It took Dr. Whites a while to get out of the shock before she advised him to 'Calm down,' motioning with her quivering hands in an upward-downward movement slowly. The staff at the counter had barged in by then. 'He's fine,' directing them to leave as quickly as they came in a tremulous voice.

'I will get you what you want but you need to tell me what exactly you need and why,' regaining her composure to talk sense into him.

'My Angel is suffering from cardiomyopathy and so I need a healthy heart for her transplant if I want to save her and I can't allow myself to sit and watch no one help her. I can't repeat what I did with my wife,' he yowled. 'I will get your heart. Give *it* to me now!' he demanded kicking the bed sheets away with his swollen wrists pointing in her direction. 'Now!' The *it* had had so much power to it that Dr. Whites felt the hunger, pain and hopelessness in his voice. For a second, she could have even given him what he wanted had it been possible.

'I can't just give it to you but I can...' she tried to explain but was interrupted by the man's raging voice.

'You can't? You said 'can't'?' and he was shouting again. Kicking his legs and trying to flip sides, he kept raising his head, struggling with all his might. 'You girl-of-a-blue-bottle-maggot! How dare you say that! You slag, I'll get it from you.' Once again

the nurses rushed in and gave him the magical injection to put him to sleep after learning of his behaviour while Dr. Whites darted out to the staircase, flew down five floors and dashed out the lobby pushing passersby on her way out to the garden area where she dived into the green grass. She oozed tears as if an arrow had hit her in the eye and blood seeped out. Nothing else could be more upsetting than this. When she was too tired to continue, she turned around to lay on her back and looked at the vast blue sky above. There was no sun to be seen just like the day she had lost her only son, a fine good-looking boy of 7 years of age, but she was not thinking about him. She was thinking about a voice she had heard at the mortuary. An unknown voice pleading for something. The only words she could recall in that daunting, husky voice were, 'for my little girl.' Maybe it was the same man she contemplated. Or maybe not. No, it was the same voice, he concluded after a little battle in her mind. She felt his pain of losing a child and wanted to ease it but how?

After a few days, she went to see him again. He was very quiet and peaceful then. She asked him if he wanted to sit and he said yes. She had sought permission to get his hands released if he was in a good-state of mind during her visit so she opened his handcuffs and helped him up. 'This feels good. Thank you,' he smiled in gratitude. 'It's important to be set free from the rocks that tie us down.'

'That's right. I share the same opinion,' he said and then

paused. ‘Why did you release me?’

She had expected that question yet was not ready to face it. ‘I think you’re a pretty nice guy that’s why.’

‘Are you sure?’ he cross-examined.

‘Yes,’ she answered confidently, ‘I want to talk to you about your problems and help you solve them.’ She looked at him to check if he was listening. ‘You told me your daughter needed a heart transplant a few days ago but you didn’t get one for her yet. Did you...?’

‘I got her not one...but many...and yet I couldn’t save her. The doctors couldn’t match any so I went looking for one myself. I went to the old Muslim cemetery at St. Patricks...it’s easier to dig those out...and got one from there,’ he revealed and stopped. ‘It was also a little girl who had died a few weeks before...I brought it home and cleaned it up then took it to Angel’s room. I had given three sleeping pills to her when she went to bed so I knew she wouldn’t easily wake up and I could get the job done in the meanwhile.’ Dr. Whites stared in astonishment with her eyes wide open and heart pacing faster and faster. ‘I unbuttoned her pajamas shirt and marked an outline of where the heart will fit in and then cut her open with a butcher’s knife. I located the heart with my torch light... it was a tiny little balloon inflating and deflating,’ he stopped again to think about what he had done. ‘I quickly cut off every tube joining it to the body as I held her little heart kicking in my hand and then replaced it with the one I’d brought,’ he narrated

as if he were a thorough professional who did this on a regular basis. 'I ensured my little girl didn't wake up in the whole process so I sewed the veins back with the heart quickly but the heart never rose like hers did. I waited until next morning for her to get up but she didn't. I realized I had gotten the wrong heart. Like the doctors had told me: it needs to match.'

'I then remembered my wife telling me once that a new born baby's heart beats louder than his cries when she carried Angel. It hit me then that I needed a new-born baby's heart and so I went a few blocks down to a couple's residence that had just had a baby a week ago,' hinting at the immoral and unforgiveable deed that he was about to commit. 'I quietly crept through the backyard and into the house, took the baby away covering his mouth with white tape and brought it home but he was too noisy so I gave him cough syrup and put him to sleep in the basement.' There was no remorse or guilt in his voice. 'I then took out his beating heart and replaced it with my daughter's like the previous one and sewed her skin back together. The heart was thumping. Thud. Thud. Thud...' he smiled sanguinely. 'I slept beside her that night peacefully knowing she would wake up the next morning.'

'Did she wake up in the morning then?' queried Dr. Whites, who had been listening attentively with her eyes wide open and a red face after she realized he had finished speaking, knowing the answer well.

'No, before she could get up a knock on the door had woken

me up. I went to see who it was to find the police outside,' he avowed. "That heart didn't work too...they told me...I need another one," immediately rising from his bed and pushing Dr. Whites to the floor. 'I need yours,' he shrieked trying to tear her shirt from the gap in between the button holes.

'Help! Help!' cried Dr. Whites and in pounded the staff and security. They quickly got hold of him and pulled him off Dr. Whites. His face was like a red apple about to explode. Dr. Whites was quickly escorted out of the room while the man kept trying to break free of the three that held on to him tightly until he could. He sprinted to the toilet and locked himself in.

The staff tried to convince him to open the door while others ran frantically to get the keys and immediate help. After a good ten minutes, when they finally managed to open it they saw a small rectangular window at the right side of the wall had been opened. The chaos that poured in from the window told the tale of his life.

Leung Chun Lok, Ryan

Heaven for Rent

You fade away as you turn into ash.
No grief at the grave, but only a chance to gain.
Rest in peace (let us take the dead man's cash).

Our eyes were only on what you have left
Paying for dead man's death with sorrow we feign.
You fade away as you turned into ash.

Priests play with flames, patter as half-hearted words clash,
Answer ludicrous rings from their hand-held brains.
Rest in peace (let us take the dead man's cash).

We build your resting place with what you have left,
A heaven which whereabouts will always change.
You fade away as you turn into ash.

But I did not see you as rice wine wasted,
But I could do nothing, nothing but my anger in vain.
Rest in peace (let us take the dead man's cash).

My dearest grandfather, please don't be mad;

Someday we will handle your rent and pain.
You fade away as you turned into ash.
Rest in peace (let us take the dead man's cash).

Hong Kong? No more myths...

When you are a baby,
no places for your birth.
When you are a kid,
no stock of milk powder.
When you are a teenager,
no entries for universities.
When you finally
become an adult,
and you want to
have a taste of freedom...
Very likely,
you can't afford a flat.
Not only private housings,
even the public estates.
Maybe you can live...
under a Mong Kok bridge,
but the Air Pollution Index there
is always over 100.
Hong Kong people say,
'We are returned,
to the motherland.'

Lan Kwai Fong

Chow Angson

When I was 16, my friend Dino, a twenty-five year old hotel manager, decided to take me out to Lan Kwai Fong. ‘It’s about time you see what’s out there, little boy,’ he said, as he took a young boy to witness the limelight of adulthood.

He took me to a place called Zinc. A name I had only heard in chemistry lessons. Zinc is one of the few transition metals on the periodic table. It is silvery and poisonous, but the bar resembled nothing like it. It was pitch black with a pole installed onto one of the bar tables. I imagined it possessed the same intoxicating properties as the metal.

The waiter came out with the menu.

The menu displayed a plethora of extravagantly named cocktails and martinis, advertised in an elegant mock-handwritten font. My eyeballs became lost and shuffled from drink to drink, baffled by all these attention-seeking alcoholic terms.

‘Want anything?’ Dino cut me off in the middle of wandering.

I panned across the menu again, panicked. These over-dramatic cocktail names left me in awe. Grasshopper? Buttery nipple? I felt like I am reading contestant names in RuPaul’s drag show.

‘Um.... I’ll have what you have.’

There I was, pretending to be calm at an eighteen-only bar with my sixteen years old ID card. Here I am, pretending I knew what I was ordering.

Drinks served. Two cups of translucent yellow drinks placed in front of us, with a crystal white edging, making the cup blink with a line of silver reflection.

‘Alright, copycat. Here’s your margarita, choke on it,’ Dino said.

‘Erh, you go first.’ All these new experiences left me pondering.

‘Don’t act like such a pussy, just put it in your mouth. You’ll get me in trouble for bringing you here if you act like that,’ Dino said.

‘Fine!’ Irritated me put that unknown glowing liquid into my mouth.

The first thing I tasted was not alcohol, but the salt. ‘EW!’ I said. Dino laughed.

Cherry-popping experiences were always embarrassing.

Zinc was not what I had expected. There was no one jumping in the air while putting their hands up, not a single Lindsay Lohan moment caught my eye, no unexpected babies were fathered in the alley behind the bar. It was nothing like what the movies had described, the music was fairly loud and I could hardly

hear a single thing Dino said to me. Stripping the loud music aside, I thought this street is just a street.

I was wrong. It is a street unlike any other street. I revisited LKF quite a few times when I was 17, stopped for a while during my public exams, then went back and became quite an indulgent drinker for quite sometimes after I turned 18. These visits have taught me that my first impression was superficial.

It turned out that people do jump and put their hands up, and Lindsay moments do happen, quite often actually. I just have to wait until the right time and the right place, a wild party awaited for me. As for the baby making, well, I guess they know how to use a condom by now. There is even more to Lan Kwan Fong, skinny guys would wear shirts one size too small just to make their arms look like Rocky. Trannies would pick up some hallucinating, drunken mess at 4 a.m. Tsui Wah, an infamous diner open 24-7, serves as a habitation centre for drunkards and occasionally, me. If you are poor, there is always one club 7-11 down by your side to save your wallets from overpriced liquor.

I could read LKF like a map. After dawn and on the weekends, people catch the mid-night trains to Central, put on their gear, and march into the clean, empty streets. In a flash, the road is fraught with temptations of vodka, bulky bouncers waiting for your entry with open arms (sometimes with their fists if you are naughty). Within five hours, the road is filled: with broken bottles, puke stains and some unconscious guy with their

supposed-to-be-tucked-in shirt tucked-out, lying on the grey side of LKF next to a bin overflowing with empty bottles, or sometimes collapsed by the front door of COACH, awaiting the hospitality of the girls with penises. Yet the street is still awake full of laughter.

Clichéd fact: Life's too short, enjoy it while you can. For one moment in the entire day I could be away from the mundane annoyance of family riots, a remedy for the mess in my life. All the things I didn't get to encounter at school or home were out there waiting for me. The best thing was that I encountered many people. They were the secret ingredients of making the place lively as they filled up the nights with the trials of their existence. I met many party monsters. Every Friday night, I can always find Charlz at PLAY, a guy who quit his day job to become a full-time club promoter. Josie is now working in Privé, because her boyfriend works there. White Tim and Chinese Tim are always in the corner of LINQ, separately humping some new guys. If you get no life and decided to go out on a weekday, find Will. Will is a schoolboy from island school who bragged about cracking cocaine with Kate Moss (though I don't think that is the case), drinks as if he turned alcohol into plain water.

I remember I went out one night, saw Charlz going out with his mum. It was the most bizarre and awkward meeting I've ever had there. I ran out and sat on the side of Initial, with my half-filled beer bottle. I stared at the street, watching people

hopscotch though the rhythm of Lady Gaga latest single. As if Lan Kwai Fong is the playground of innocents.

I thought of my mum. We used to play hopscotch down at the weary playground. I would get lost in the playground for the whole day. My parents were soon divorced, forcing mum to juggle with work and raising three kids. We then never played hopscotch anymore.

I spun the quarter-full bottle; the liquor spilled and spiralled downhill, drifted rapidly into the centre of the slope. It attracted the roaring cockroaches, crawling on the path. A girl in high heels stepped on a cockroach. Few of its legs got stuck onto the girl's heel, girl screamed hysterically, adding a voice of tragic onto the street, but nobody cared. I stared blank, people after people; they danced and drank, watching the voice of tragedy overshadowed by the filthiness.

Mum worked every day to raise all of us. The day she found a man, I was ecstatic, but that means she would leave us behind for an entire new life.

I went out on the day of the announcement of their marriage, only to remember that I got into a fight with some drunken guy. No punches were thrown but it hit me hard in the head: Lan Kwai Fong is a suspension of reality. You realize the people you called friends in the phone book, would only drop by "how are you" messages on the weekend. You realize you would never find love in a place where people keep on being superficial

and shallow. You realize the people revolving around you, are actually a bunch of pretentious assholes. I asked myself, 'What am I doing here?'

When mum left for her man in Australia, I was basically on my own. The moment dawned on me: It is about time to get a life. I stepped away from the excessive drinking and endless crumping in nightclubs. I would go out occasionally though I would remind myself to get a life, get a real life.

Lan Kwai Fong has its magic, a glamorous indulgence, but it is only a dream. I have learnt that it is just a place of hallucination sheltering hallucinated people. Nothing goes beyond such suspension. I woke up from all these nights, it was all a dream. Shall let it be a chapter in my teenage wasteland.

Lee Wing Sze, Tiffany

MTR

Platform.

Carriages! Luggage!

On your marks! Get set! Go!

Please mind the gap! No one attend.

Sardines.

Fan Ho Nga, Gloria

My Kin

Behind the daughter, a mother;
Behind the mother, a husband;
Behind the husband, a family;
Behind the family, a story;
Behind the story, a lie;
Behind the lie, a broken heart;
Behind the broken heart, a single mom;
Behind the single mom, a hard life;
Behind the hard life, a strong bond;
Behind the strong bond, my mother and I.

Liu Suet Ying, Yukiko

Sleeping Souls

Train doors open.

City people
worm their way through
the crowd in and out
of the train.

Train doors close.

The well-pressed suit and
the expensive heels look
so grim, so weary, so disconsolate,
echoing with the
hollow,
smothering train

And look around.

Look at the tired eyes
fixed at no distance,

standing mindlessly
like an envelope without an address.

Train doors open again.

The lost souls wriggle
slowly,
reluctantly,
to work
in the city never sleeps.

The Bee that Got Away

Chan Sze Wan, Natasha

‘Dreaming of a bee flying away can symbolize death as the bee is the soul, but if the bee flies into the mouth of the dead person, that person will come back to life,’ *greatdreams.com* told me. This morning I was woken by the buzzing sound of a bee, a rumble bumblebee, flying right above my head. I had the feeling that a bomber fighter jet was tracking me, ready for the kill, closing in with its sting. I let out a cry for help and dashed out of my bed at lightning speed.

‘What’s wrong?’ my mum asked.

‘Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!!’ I screamed.

‘It’s just a bee,’ mum sighed.

Having been stung by a bee once, the bee has always been my worst fear, but at the same time it is an insect that has my respect. ‘Bees are spirited beings, carrying souls,’ someone had told me before. However, old memories remain in bits and pieces only. I tried to gather them all together, figuring out their interconnection with Mr. Bee.

It was June. I was ten. My sister was six—the tender age when we still enjoyed holding birthday parties at McDonald’s, and having a Happy Meal was the happiest thing in our life. Ronald McDonald’s with his tomato red fluffy hair was the uncle we all

wanted. So when my little sister's primary school friend, Wing, invited us to her big birthday party held at McDonalds that summer, we were more than happy to go.

When we were young, we were always happy with the tiniest things in life: a small Lego or word of praise and our spirits would be lifted. On the contrary, mum was always worried, unsatisfied with the tiniest details of life, for example, a B for Chinese on our report cards. So, while me and my little sister wandered around Toys "R" Us happily choosing toys to buy for her, my mum had an unhappy, thoughtful look on her face that pulled her mouth into a downwards concave curve, with three straight lines on her forehead. I wondered what was she worrying about this time (to my young self, worry was a distant thought, no more than a word that spelt W-O-R-R-Y; the only being whether I spell the word right. Only when I got older did worry get closer). I bet it was grandma's condition.

The past year, my grandma had been staying in the Prince of Wales Hospital most of the time. She had a third stroke (who said third time's a charm, it should be third time's a harm) after she slipped at the bathroom and bumped her head on the cold hard floor. So Humpty Dumpty had a great fall! The left side of her body was paralyzed, as if that side of hers was cursed to freeze. She could only move her right eye, right hand, right leg, but nothing was al-RIGHT for her. After the surgery, grandma's brain pressure dropped, so did the pressure of her seven daughters and

sons. The pinkish colour found its way back to grandma's white skin, appetite and spirit were back as well. We were expecting her to get back home soon. However, days passed by, day-to-day observation went on, weekly visit to the hospital became a weekend activity.

The hospital was an upsetting place, I didn't like the plain white walls that echoed the pale faces of patients; I didn't like the sterilized smell from bleach or alcohol; I didn't like the lifeless, suffocating atmosphere. The hospital was in a way is a miniature of our society. There are convenience stores, supermarkets, canteens, Starbucks coffee (caffeine is not good for patients, no?) all packed in it. The beds were so densely packed it resembled a bee hive. Doctors and nurses, in fact, are just as busy and hard-working as bees. Every bed is a small apartment just like cubicles with little privacy. Patients are just a curtain away from each other. You can always hear the snoring and yelling from "next door". Patients are being patient, but as an impulsive little kid, I wasn't being patient or paying attention to grandma. All I thought of when I was inside the hospital was probably 'When are we going out?'

'We are going out in few minutes! Hurry up! Get dressed!' mum said.

We put on our brightest, colourful clothes. The present for the birthday girl—a Winnie the Pooh doll was already sitting on

the table.

‘What’s the hurry? Isn’t Wings’ birthday party at three?’ I asked.

‘We are going to visit Grandma, first thing today,’ mum answered.

‘But...’ I hesitated.

‘Don’t give me that look! You only care about playing. Your Grandma is in the hospital! Ma On Shan McDonald’s is close by. There is no reason we aren’t dropping by to visit her!’ mum said.

Just when we reached the bus station, we realized Winnie the Pooh had been left behind.

‘I had told you to take the present!’ mum scolded.

‘I thought you had taken the present,’ I tried to fight back.

We ran back home, arguing all the way. By the time we finally got onto the bus to the hospital, twenty minutes had passed.

‘Time is lost, time is lost...’ mum murmured.

The bus ride took us an hour and a half to reach the hospital. It was a sunny day with bright blue sky. I had the feeling of going on a picnic but awaiting in front of us was not a park nor some green grass, it was the parking lot and the grand glass door of the hospital. I was feeling grey. We waded our way through the crowd of people that gathered at the emergency counter, got into a lift after people flooded out, and bumped into Uncle But (“But” is my mother’s surname) who is bald. His eyes looked weary, his back was wet. Our surprised, overjoyed reaction made a huge contrast

with his blank, unhappy expression; our reddened face made a huge contrast with his pale yellow saddened face. I could sense something bad had happened.

‘Bad news?’ mum asked.

‘I just got a call...she...she left,’ said Uncle But with his shaky voice.

The light of the button that marked fourth floor went off, so did the delight that always lit my sister’s face and mine. The lift doors opened to something we had never experienced. We walked in silence through an endless corridor and finally arrived to the ward to greet a teary crowd of relatives. They were exchanging words of comfort, giving hugs as well as tissues to each other.

We opened the door to the ward to say goodbye to grandma; grandma had opened the door to Heaven. Mum burst into tears when she came face-to-face with her mommy. We were meant to say our farewells though nothing was well, there were no words I could choke out, my mind was blank. I couldn’t remember what I was thinking when I had my last glance of grandma. I only remember I saw mum begging grandma to come back. Dad who came later was biting his lower lip the whole time. My cousin was weeping at the bench. Yet, I didn’t drop a tear. Was I cold-blooded? I didn’t know how to react, nor did my little sister with her innocent face. We stayed put in a corner, playing with our fingers, living in a world of our own when the adults collected grandma’s body, her things, memories and last words or perhaps

recollecting themselves. There were grey clouds above my parents' heads, the room was in a mist after the shower, and everybody was in grief, except us.

Grief wasn't something I could understand at that time just like worry. What was it like to lose a beloved one? I didn't really know until I look back now. I don't have many memories of grandma with a distance in dwelling though there were little intersecting points in our lives. I was too young to realize she was someone important, a person I should treasure. I was too young to have engraved the date she passed away on in my mind.

It was June 4 my mum told me, the day my grandma left for afar. We got back home from the hospital in another round of silence (*The Sounds of Silence*, my mum's favourite song, occupied my head). My sister was still carrying Winnie the Pooh present in her arms.

June 4 is a special day, not only due to the memory of grandma and Wing's birthday party that we didn't attend. It is also a memorial day for the June Fourth Incident that happened in 1989. One year, I joined the candlelight vigil held on that night. The white candles that lit up the darkness, black and white photos and slogans reminiscing the innocent students killed in that incident. All of those reminded me of the vigil and funeral we had for grandma. Her funeral was held close to my birthday (the exact date is yet another thing I couldn't remember). A birthday is not something worth celebrating, I guess, after all. It was a traditional

Chinese Taoist funeral. We were in white from head to toe. The black and white photo of grandma was put at the centre facing the entrance. Grandma looked like a doll in make-up I thought. There were grave ceremonies with Taoist priest speaking alien language, burning of paper dolls and prayer money, something people find scary in a haunted house...that was all I can remember. After the funeral, grandma was cremated the next day, leaving behind embers to remember. Sometimes I wonder whether grandma's spirit is with us.

Some days later, one early July day that year, a big bumblebee came in from the window pane at night, flying around the lamp like merry-go-round. I screamed and ran into my bedroom banging the bedroom door closed. My mum switched off the light in the dining room. To my astonishment, the bee squeezed through the tiny gap between the door and the floor and entered my bedroom. Apparently it had hurt its wings when it was trying hard to flatten its body to pass through, so it lay there on our green floor tile that resembled the forest floor.

'Mum! The bee is on the floor, kill it!' I yelled.

'No. Bees carry souls. It is grandma's spirit coming to visit us,' mum replied.

So mum then picked up this unexpected guest and released it to the night sky. That night I dreamt of a bee trying to fly into my ears, did it have something to tell me? I wondered, but then it flew away.

Every now and then, there will be a moth, a butterfly or a bee that finds its way to our flat. I try to live with them, like the Winnie the Pooh doll on the shelf. I now know, bees are important spirited beings that are worth my respect.

The Pig on the Round Table

Sometimes when I see a pig on the round table,
its burned skin, the light-bulbed eyes,
lying flat in zero defence,
I wonder: are you a boy or a girl?
Did your family get killed too?
Did it hurt when they burnt you?
I am so sorry
that you were born into this unfair world,
raised and fed,
killed and burnt, like a sinner,
but what sin have you committed?
I cannot answer,
as my teeth go up and down on your crispy skin,
chewing hungrily on your flesh.

Finding Mum

Sidera Tabir

As I walked out the Chattrapati Shivaji International Airport, a herd of porters jumped over me to carry my baggage until one of them got hold of it and walked me to his yellow cab arguing with his fellow porters. An uneasy wave of anxiety rushed through my head and into my eyes. This was the place where my mother went missing. A bunch of people, especially men, stared at me with protruding eyes as I walked past, so I put my sunglasses on and lowered my gaze. Not only was I in an unknown land but one for which I was only filled with antagonism and anger.

The porter put my luggage in the trunk and opened the door. I got in and asked him to take me to Hotel Bandra Residency, which was 12 km away. A few kilometres down we were stuck in a bad traffic. 'What a start to my supposedly optimistic journey,' I thought and sighed heavily. The driver looked at me from the rear-view mirror and gave me a crooked smile. He murmured, '*idher aisa hi hota hai*,' and looked out, being unaware that I could understand him. My mother was a Parsi from Mumbai and occasionally she talked to me in Hindi or made me watch some of her favourite Bollywood movies. My mother left me a few months back for her brother, despite my discontent about her decision, because he was going through a rough time. He later

died, leaving behind his enormous wealth to my mother. The last time I spoke to my mum I was told she'd be back in a week after all the legal formalities were completed regarding his will. Then I've never heard of her again. As I was still contemplating about the whole thing, the driver in a strong Indian accent announced our arrival at the hotel, 'Madam, you are hotel.'

I checked-in at the counter, went to my room, got changed and immediately left for my uncle's place in a cab. My mum had sent me the copy of his will before she disappeared. It wasn't hard to locate his Sunny bungalow near the Juhu Beach. I was denied entry by the guard on duty and after persistent pleading he agreed to seek permission from the lady of the house, my aunt. She had asked me to wait in the garden area and I waited for nearly three hours until she came out in the evening for a stroll and spotted me. 'So, you're still here?' she asked, 'I thought you'd have left by now.'

I turned to where the voice was coming from and saw a petite snobby figure. Her eyebrows were a mere drawing of lines and lips were as thin as sheets of paper with bright red lipstick propped onto them. 'I needed to meet you, Aunt Irani,' I said.

'What for? And how am I your aunt?' she retorted.

She knew exactly why I was here, I believed. I tried to remain calm and answered her as politely as I could. After all, I was the one who needed her assistance. 'I have come here to look for my mum,' I replied and explained the whole situation.

She listened carefully to every detail and then said, 'I know

nothing about your mum. She did meet me on the day of your uncle's funeral and that's it. I do not know where she went afterwards.' After a brief moment of silence came her suggestion, 'Perhaps you should return to New York. She will go back when she wants to. Don't worry about her.' I knew by then this white witch of a woman was lying.

Having nobody to help, I went to seek help from the police who pretended to be extremely busy with other cases and asked me to wait for a few days before registering an FIR in case my mum might contact me. I found this ridiculous. 'You either write down the bloody missing person complaint or I am gonna get the international media after you!' I exclaimed to P. Akshay, the senior officer, barging into his room. I emphasized my threat to bring the case to light if I didn't get a response within a week. They then took my statement and asked for her picture.

Three days later, I got a call from the police who summoned me to Sunny bungalow. I rushed to the venue not knowing what to expect when I heard my mum had been found. Seeing a bunch of officers on the premises, my legs trembled as I stepped onto the moist garden soil. Akshay approached me and took me to a sordid basement. There I saw a figure of familiarity. My mum. She was wearing the dress I bought her for her last birthday. But I didn't run into her. I walked slowly. As I walked closer I realized that, as pale as an ugly ghost and with the messiest I had ever seen of her, she appeared to have been starving for months. When she lifted

her head, I saw that her left eye and part of her jaw had turned purple and there were some blood stains on her clothes. Upon seeing me, she gave a tired smile and then looked away but I drew her close and enveloped her tight. 'You needn't be sorry,' I whispered in her ear.

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