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Preface

What does it mean to be ‘halfway home’? Is it a geographical position on a map, or a state of mind? Are we standing still, or are we moving forward? Will we ever reach our destination, or is it better always to be in transit? Do we travel alone or in company? What do we leave behind along the way, and what do we accumulate? Whom do we become?

There is no better place to be exploring these questions than here in Hong Kong, city of greetings and goodbyes, city of eternal motion. Something of its restless spirit infuses the prose and poetry of this fifth issue of *Halfway Home*, the anthology of writing by City University of Hong Kong’s creative writing students and faculty. The stories, novel extracts and poems populate the borderland halfway between writer and reader, between the initiation of the creative act and its completion. It is here, in the interstices, that rites of passage are enacted, relationships formed and broken, and encounters with ‘the other’ take place. It is here that ideas of home and belonging are re-examined and renewed.

Whether they are interpreted as acts of reminiscence or anticipation, implicit in these pieces of writing is the understanding that, as we journey through time ‘we carry with us [the] footprints of vanished places.’¹ We are the human archives of our pasts; we are all made from fragments of memory, of places in which family dramas unfolded, or simple childhood

¹ Klinkenborg, Verlyn. 2007. ‘Remembered Spaces.’ *The New York Times*. July 17.

routines played out. We are the interpreters of a contemporary world, filtering the overload of an ever more urgent present. We are the architects of imagined spaces where the seeds of future narratives take root. In between the shift and slippage of landscape, time, language and identity, we are the homes in which stories take hold.

Halfway Home V has gathered some of these ‘stories.’ A talented and hardworking team of students took on the challenge of compiling and editing this publication, and it was a pleasure to share the process with them. I congratulate them on their dedication and commitment. Congratulations also to the English Department of City University, which initiated the *Halfway Home* series, and which also does so much to champion creative writing in English through its MFA and undergraduate programs. In particular, sincere thanks go to the Acting Head of the Department, Associate Professor Dr Rodney Jones, and to the *Halfway Home* series publisher, Assistant Professor Justin Hill.

Last, but by no means least, well done to all the successful contributors to this publication. As writers, you offer us so many interpretations of home. As readers, we meet you halfway.

Mags Webster

Editorial Advisor, *Halfway Home V*

Hong Kong, June 2014

Editors' Introduction

The editorial team of *Halfway Home V* would like to thank every writer for their excellent submissions. The response this year was truly enthusiastic, and seeing the work of our classmates was both humbling and inspiring. To everyone involved in Halfway Home, our sincere thanks.

We would also like to thank Dr. Rodney Jones and Mr. Justin Hill specifically for the chance to put this anthology together. It was an amazing experience.

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To Mom: I almost forgot those nights

Zhu Youran

Ignoring its long tail of wire

We move TV to balcony

Our whispers grow louder

Eclipse cry in drama

You towel-dry my hair

In sleepy summer wind

Laugh at my curls

Taking after dad

Instant noodles, not fully boiled

I Followed You Foolishly

Lo Yuen Ying, Siu Sun

This is not how Alexa had imagined she would lose her virginity. Not so suddenly, not in winter, not when she is in such a messy relationship, not in this lousy motel where they don't put roses on your pillows, not in this small cold room where the yellowish walls have so many stains, reeking of dust, and definitely, not with this man.

Alexa's father was killed in a car accident when she was seven, leaving her, her mother and her little brother all alone. The death of her father was certainly too much to handle for a seven-year-old girl like Alexa. She lost the man who loved her the most and she loved the most, the man who remembered everything that she liked and cared about her. Her mother worked two jobs to support the family but it was still a difficult time. Alexa had started taking part-time jobs after school ever since she was 15, to help her family financially. She had no time for boys, even though she always had this silly girl's dream of dating a young and energetic guy, but she would rather work to get more money.

The naïve dream of a romantically simple relationship was no longer possible at that very moment when Alexa met this man named Brad. It was not a love at first sight. She loathed everything about Brad: his beard, his rugged clothes, his lorry cap and his dirty boots and how he came in just fifteen minutes before they were going to close the diner. There was clearly a story behind the gloomy face of Brad which Alexa had zero interest to

know about. She only wanted to get this over with and end the day by the lying on the sofa at home drinking a bottle of Stella Artois.

‘Hi, what would you like to have for tonight?’

‘Budweiser, please,’ he smiled politely at Alexa.

What a terrible choice for beer. She loathed this man even more now.

‘Sure. Be right up.’

‘And whatever you wanna have.’

‘I’m sorry, what?’

‘I had a huge fight with my wife.’

‘So?’

‘I need someone to talk to. Please?’ he forced a fake smile at Alexa.

Unlike his redneck appearance, Brad was surprisingly a polite person. And the sorrowful eyes of Brad made it impossible for Alexa to reject him. ‘Well, what the hell,’ she thought to herself. They both needed a break that night. She got a Budweiser and a Stella Artois from the bar, and returned to Brad’s table. It was the night when they trapped themselves in a tangled relationship without knowing how to escape.

She sat down the booth, but Brad didn’t look at her, he was staring at his Budweiser blankly and playing with the sticker on the bottle. The silence was making Alexa uneasy. She looked out of the window, watching people walking past under the dim streetlights, and hummed along to *Today Is The Day* by Yo La Tengo on the radio to make this moment less awkward.

‘This was the song of my wedding’

‘I’m so sorry, I had no idea...’

‘No, no, no... I’m just sayin’. I like this song.’

‘OH MY GOD, really?!’

‘Haha, yeah, it’s my favourite.’

As much as Alexa didn’t want to admit it, she was always attracted to people who liked the same music as she did. She could keep talking on and on about the musicians and their songs. Music was the one thing that can break through her stone cold defense.

Beer after beer, they both seemed to be enjoying this night. They talked about everything except for their problems. She didn’t think she could talk so freely and happily with a man in his late 30s. He reminded her of her father, the man whom she missed so dearly and wished he was here. A silly thought of how she didn’t want this night to end flashed through her mind. Brad didn’t mention anything about the fight with his wife, as if he didn’t want to ruin the moment. Alexa didn’t bother to ask anyway, she couldn’t care less about a customer’s marriage problem.

Since then, Brad would come to the diner night after night and park his truck outside. He came here so often that the cook, Phil, recognized him and gave him a nickname ‘The Chevy Truck Guy’.

‘Why do you come every night?’ Alexa asked playfully.

‘Gotta get away from her. Haha.’

Maybe it was a made-up excuse, maybe he had a perfectly fine marriage, maybe he only wanted a casual fuck. Alexa would rather believe that he was telling the truth. Every night, she would wait for him to show up, looking out the window to see if the familiar truck was coming. She would get a little bit sad and start imagining things if he didn't. 'Is he with his wife? Is he bored of me?' She knew this had to stop, even the cook told her that this is not good for her. But she didn't know how. She couldn't, she wouldn't.

It was very cold outside tonight, the raging snow made it hard for Alexa to catch a view of the street outside the diner. People would rather go home and stay warm with their families tonight than go out, she got it. But he showed up. The headlights of Brad's truck sliced through the snow, and she knew, she knew it was him, she knew this truck all too well. Seeing him entering the diner made Alexa feel warmer in this freezing night.

'Hey, I've got somethin' for ya.'

'What? What is it?'

'Get the beers and sit down first, ok?'

Alexa took out two cans of Budweiser from the fridge. One for Brad, one for herself. She didn't know exactly when and why she has picked up the habit of drinking Budweiser like Brad. She didn't even realise it at all.

'Open it.'

It was Yo La Tengo's *Today Is The Day* EP, in mint condition.

'OH MY GOSH I've been looking for this for SO long!'

'So you like it?'

'I LOVE it! Thank you!'

He smiled. She had a sudden urge to kiss Brad on his cheek, but she held herself back. They looked at each other in the eyes without saying a word. They knew there was something between them, but they would rather not talk about it. Neither of them wanted to disturb the perfect harmony in this chaotic mess.

And they talked all night again. Empty beer cans were scattered all over the table. Alexa's face was getting the flush from all the beer. But she was not drunk. She knew clearly that she was still sane despite she was giggling at everything Brad said.

'C'mon, you're drunk, let me drive you home.'

'But I don't want to go home.'

'What do you mean you don't wanna go home? Come on, let's move.'

'I want to be with you.'

Brad didn't say anything, neither did Alexa. He stood up and got Alexa up. He held her hand as they walked to his truck. They still didn't say a word.

Alexa could barely see the road because of the snow, she didn't know where they were going but she was not afraid. She wished he could keep driving so that she could keep looking at him while he drove.

He didn't let go of Alexa's hand from the moment they left the truck, and he led her into a dusty motel room. They sat down on the edge of the bed, staring aimlessly at the TV, without saying anything.

She knew what would happen. She was young but she wasn't born yesterday. She knew Brad would drive her home immediately if she said she didn't want to do this. She also knew that Brad was struggling about what was going to happen, and he might decide to leave any minute. So she kissed him, pressing her lips hard against Brad's. She wanted him to take her; she wanted to take this man. She just wanted to be together with this man at this moment. So she kissed, and they kissed, harder and harder.

Brad was snoring with his arm laying on her. She didn't know what this was, she didn't know if this could be called a relationship. She couldn't shake away the feeling of emptiness and loss but at least the warmth of his body made her feel safe, like a consolation prize. She was staring at the ceiling and the image was getting blurry. She couldn't tell if the moisture on her face were the sweats from Brad during sex or her tears. She didn't even know why she was crying. In the prime of her youth, Alexa knew she deserved something and someone better, but she was stuck in this mess. She chose to blame this motel room.

All she could think of was Brad's wife. She thought of how his wife was waiting anxiously at home for Brad and how she will react if she found out about this. The sense of guilt crawled through every inch on Alexa's body like vines climbing up a tree and suffocating it. And her mind jumped back to the night when she met Brad. She thought of the song she hummed, the line 'I followed you, foolishly...' played in her head.

She closed her eyes and moves her head closer to Brad's body, hoping to latch onto the warmth of his body before he goes back to his wife and leaves her in this cold room all alone.

The City

Sam Lee

The city is alive

Jewelled and majestic

A nocturnal organism

I feel her breathe and move

I am her blood cell

Travelling through her intertwined

Underground veins

I'm so lost

The Last Viking

Justin Hill

...Earls Edwin and Morcar gathered from their earldoms as great a force as they could get, and fought with the enemy. They made a great slaughter too; but there was a good number of the English people slain, and drowned, and put to flight: and the Northmen had possession of the field of battle.

And this fight was on the eve of St. Matthew the apostle, which was Wednesday, 20th September.

Anglo Saxon Chronicle, 1066

Here, man give me your hand. I will not kill you.

You are probably wondering how I beat you in battle. You had the might of two earls, lined up behind a flooded brook, with the river on one side and a bog on the other, and I, King Harald of the Norsemen, have broken and routed your army.

And still the rout is still not done.

See, your lord, Earl Edwin, has hitched up his skirts and is running for the gate. I do not think he will make it. The one leading the pursuit is Rolf the Bald. Great gangly legs. He never stops, that man. His father was the same. Not a patch of hair once they turned thirty.

Do you want to stay down there in that ditch? Someone will mistake you for a corpse and use your head as stepping stone. That's it, take my hand. Come, it's only blood, and it's neither of ours. There are worse things. My brother knew that.

Push old red-cloak off your legs. He's dead. An honoured fellow from that gold arm band. Last night he probably sat on Earl Edwin's benches. Do you know him? No doubt he sat in York this morning and broke his fast. He marched out this morning, along the Holderness road, stopped at this narrow point, and thought to prevent our passing. He was breathing an hour ago as our armies waited on either side of the ford for the river-tide to ebb. He clenched his shield grip, crossed himself and prayed to see the next moon rise in the east.

'How will you beat them?' Tostig Godwinson asked me when we saw the Northumbrian army drawn up with the walls of York behind them. All those fierce warriors with their ancestral swords drawn, a hedge of spears, a wall of painted shields; banners and priests with relics of the saints brought to do battle.

'Watch,' I said, 'and see. God loves my brother more than their Northumbrian saints.'

He should have stayed abed. All these corpses should. They could have grown old and tiresome and bored their grandchildren with tales of their youth. Even now red-cloak's wife stands a few leagues away. She stands at the door of her longhouse. The green acres of Northumbria stretch out before her. There is a chill in the wind. The wheat is in, but something

troubles her. She does not know if the battle has happened or not. She sniffs, shuffles her worries: has the earl made peace, why are the pigs restless under the beech trees, where is that boy! Her husband's seed has quickened in her womb, and she thinks of the last two children that they buried during Lent. This new child will be born at Easter. Behind her his daughter is sitting in the light of the smoke hole, learning to spindle wool. She cannot concentrate because of the two kittens that are pouncing from under her stool. The white spotted one climbs up her skirts.

In the yard the slave girl picks a blade of dry summer grass from the milk bucket. It fell from her sleeve as she walked, the bucket slopping against her left leg. Watching her from down the field is this man's son. He is sitting with his back to a beech tree. He is angry because he thinks himself old enough to fight, and he resents his father for leaving him behind.

'Look after your mother,' was the last thing his father told him, and that son fumbles with those words, twists them in his mind, like the ends of a straw-rope. He picks long grass stems to chew. The outer sheaths are dry, but the inside is still wet and green. The sap is bitter. He chews the ends flat. He tosses the grass like a javelin into the stabbing forest light about him. The first beech leaf falls. It drops at his foot, bright as a new-struck coin. But if that boy was here, he would be dead as well. Trodden three bodies deep into the mud. Here his father lies, mouth open to take his last breath. But Death came too quick for him. He didn't even have time to shut his eyes.

Have you ever fished? Cod come up from the water looking like this. The net has them fast, and they are hauled out shocked and gasping for air.

That is how your earl is feeling. How all these corpses look. They cannot believe what has happened to them. See the carrion crows are already descending.

Shut your eyes, old man, before they are pecked out.

You're a monk from the tonsure. But no ordinary monk. You think I cannot tell silk from wool? And that silk is purple. Have done. Tell me. I will find out eventually. Stop stammering man! Speak clear. I said, I will not kill you.

Tofi! Look here. See what I pearl I fished from the ditch. This man says he is the bishop of York. My brother had an English bishop too. Grimketel. He was a great convertor of the pagans: used to turn the stubborn ones over to my brother. 'It's always the ox-heads that you have to deal with,' my brother told me. 'They're so thick you have to hit them with the back of an axe before they understand!'

I like the look of you. Intelligence is in the eyes. You seem like a bright man. We could do much together. When I am king of the English you will be my bishop.

Look. Your earl's huscarls still want to die for him. Three of them have drawn up a shieldwall to block the pursuit. They are young men. Two of them have steel helmets. The other lets his locks fall free. The wind catches it. They do not stand a chance of course. See the giant advancing on them?

The one with the Russian shield. That is Grimketel. He was with me in Micklegard². He's a miserable bastard. I have seen him kill three and look for a fourth. Men think because he is so big he will rage at them, but see he is as cunning as a fox. Just watch.

There. It is done. I told you.

Kings are often right.

I hope they made peace with god.

It seems your earl has lived to see the sunset. Even Rolf has come to a halt. Much closer to the ramparts and the archers will feather him. He turns and sees behind him the others are stooping to pull off the gold arm bands and pick silver-hilted swords from the hands of men who should have used them better.

His face turns from anger to greed. I have been in his place many times. The battle is won and the fury abates and you find yourself standing in a field of treasure and lesser men who lagged behind are bent over like women at harvest time. They are already at work cutting off rings, unwinding belts, strapping on dead men's swords. It is messy business. Your hands get much bloodier than this. Here, give me your cloak. It's wet enough.

² [+Queen Ingegerd, as I am sure you will know, Micklegard, literally 'The Great City' is the name that your people often give to the Latin's city of Constantinople+]

There. Now my hands are clean.

Tell me your name again, bishop. I have a poor memory for English names. I am old. Trees die from the crown up, do they not. Look at the white in my beard. It was all gold once. But my folk call me Harald hárfagri, fair haired, still. I have crossed Christendom. I have fought battles at sea, in winter snow, in the heat of an African summer. I have fought battles against men as black as boot straps, heathens, Saracens, Armenians, and Bulgars. I have loved too few men, and too many women. I have fought a hundred battles, and won almost all of them. Just like I did today. And I have been to Jerusalem, and cleansed my sins. Do your sins weigh on you?

Mine do not weigh on me. But this mail coat does. Christ's Balls! I used to wear it all day without thinking, I used to sleep in it. But fifty winters take their toll. Now the mail hangs heavy on old shoulders. It is a fine coat, is it not. She is called Emma.

It's a long story. I'll tell it to you.

A haiku for all seasons

Diana Frederiksen

#1

Hot wine burns my tongue

Winter is already here

Snow will heal my wounds

#2

My orange orchards

Stand ready with sweet blossoms

This spring cannot fail

#3

The sun has not yet risen

I still see evening's laughter

Written in the sky

#4

Sometimes the sun shines

Through the trees or into them

Autumn decides how

Beijing Revisited

Du Yan, Zoe

O, memory, thou fond deceiver,
Still importunate and vain
To former joys recurring ever,
And turning all the past to pain.

---Oliver Goldsmith, *The Captivity*

On my 17th birthday, I decided to make a wish after singing the joyful birthday songs. I closed my eyes and was suddenly struck by a powerful image: I saw myself standing amongst the moving crowds in Beijing Railway Station, my hands were cold and there were tears in my eyes. They were happy tears. The next moment, I opened my eyes and saw my family looking at me with mild surprise.

‘Have you made a wish already?’ said mom.

‘Yes,’ I replied. In fact, the wish came to me so naturally that I need not have made it. It just came.

Beijing has always occupied my memory, especially in my teenage years. Back then, I would rummage up and down the shelves and drawers for old,

yellowing pictures of my first visit to the Capital. When I found them among used papers, the collection of my fallen teeth and a batch of blunt pencils, I would gaze at the pictures for long hours and let my mind wander until I finally fell asleep.

I first visited Beijing when I was 12 years old. That was the first time for me to visit the capital, all the way from my hometown Fuzhou. It was the first time for me to take a plane as well. As the plane touched the brown asphalt runway of Beijing International Airport, I looked up and saw the terminal buildings perching tall and firm against a scarlet sunset, and at that moment my heart leapt—So this is Beijing! I thought.

It was 2006, before the Olympics and when everyone still preferred to ride bicycles in and out of *butongs*. The sky was bluer than any painter could possibly depict, and with only the slightest wisps of clouds floating carelessly. Tiananmen Square was not so crowded back then, and once in a while I could see middle-aged ladies holding red dancing shoes in one hand and a huge 1960s radio in the other, as they settle down in one corner of the square and posed for their morning dances. Old men loved to play tai chi along the ladies, and would sometimes engage in friendly conversations with them. Some kids would fly hand-made swallow kites loosely attached to cotton strings, their loud cries and jingling laughter rose and fell like the kites in the wind. There were quite a number of foreign visitors too, and I was surprised to see them riding bikes with a map perched precariously on the head of their bikes and a mountain-like backpack sprawling on their broad backs.

I gazed at all these people and was amazed, as the elegance and diversity

of the city burned into my memory, along with the vivid snapshots of Beijing civic life. However, my memory of Beijing was more often associated with some personal settings of Beijing. The first such place is a large studio in the Daxing Area, somewhere around the 6th and 7th rings of Beijing, a quiet suburban escape. I went there in 2006 as a contestant of the 7th CCTV Star of Outlook English Talented Competition. I clearly remembered myself wearing my best —the pink, T-shirt with a sunflower on it, and tight overalls with an innocent looking Twitty Bird peeking out from the chest pockets. I wore them the entire day I competed, in the huge studio where the lights shone directly into my eyes and where the people always ran around or hid behind their cameras (Not just ordinary cameras, but those gigantic ones with long arms like those of a chimpanzee).

I later realized that I'd be on TV, facing audiences all over the country. The cameras flashed, the tapes rolled, and the rusty dusty smell of a seldom ventilated studio filled my nostrils as I walked up the stage. I saw those famous judges looking at me and the audience was cloaked in half-darkness, their expressions were hard to make out. The moment I stood on the stage my youthful imagination ran wild, words and images flashed across my mind, the English language itself was working through me like never before.

My days in Beijing passed quickly and just as I was getting used to the fragrant, sunny sweet air of Beijing, I had to return home. I clutched the trophy cup I got from attending this nationwide contest, and as I held it close to my chest I could feel the cool crystal against my beating heart. That moment I thought I was attached to Beijing in a way—in a way that it allowed me to see so many things I would otherwise be unable to see in my

small town down south. More importantly, I have left here one of my best girlhood memories—and freshly budding dreams.

Last fall, I revisited Beijing, now 20 years old. I told myself I'd go back to the places I have lingered when I was a girl, so that I can pick up bit and pieces of childhood memories. I took a bus to Daxing District and slowly the studio emerged before me, clear and cleans despite the smoggy weather. I peeked in and was greeted by the same rusty smell 8 years ago. I spotted a transparent glass podium standing, in the corner of the narrow backstage. It was the podium I used to stand on during the contest, where upon I had rested my sweating hands, folding them and unfolding them as I spoke. The plastic flowers still perched on the center of it and blossomed like it did 8 years ago. Little has changed, but the girl standing here observing this studio has. She has stopped speaking English like it were her mother language. She quit public speaking soon after her 14th birthday because she was afraid she could not make it to a good senior high school. She has retreated into the backstage, with only the sounds of silence and solitude to entertain her.

The filming started in the afternoon. The director came and asked the audience to clap louder. The familiar clapping sound rose and fell, so real and so dear. There was something about the much-altered, yet still familiar studio that made me want to laugh and cry all at the same time. Time flies and memories desert us, but the fact is-- they have never really left us. They simply reside deep within our bosom, always seeping bitter-sweet juice into our senses.

The smog began to float downwards along the streets. I left the studio and strolled on until I found myself standing in front of Beijing Foreign

Studies University—I did not realize that I had walked as far as to Hai Dian District. This is another place I was particularly attached to. In 2008, I came to Beijing to attend another English speaking contest. I stood outside the red brick buildings of The Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. It was autumn too, and the chilly winds had begun to blow. I walked across a leaves-strewn path towards the north, and found myself in Beijing Foreign Studies University, a quiet, green campus. For those who love English, this place is a dream—a paradise where the beauty of language is cherished. My mother took me to the front gates of BFSU and she took a picture for me. Two days later I came there again, carrying my trophy cup—I got the national champion for that English speaking contest. Looking up at the red brick walls of BFSU, I could feel the desire to be there burning in me like flames.

In 2012 I took the College Entrance exams. I missed BFSU by 30 points. The score came out and I cried stormily in a lone booth in the McDonald's. But that did not change anything. I quickly calmed down and chose a school in Wuhan, a university I had never heard of before.

I looked up and was greeted by the red brick front gate. It was the very same place, and the arching gateway looked like a man-made rainbow in the misty haze. I was attacked by a sudden melancholy and regret, and the childhood photo appeared clearly in my mind: I was standing in front of the gates and smiling broadly; the sun was shining and I was squinting; my hair was short and looked messy because of the autumn wind. Somehow the image of my younger self struck me: I could have been standing here now, a proud sophomore holding a stack of English Literature books in one hand

and the Oxford English Dictionary in the other. I could have been walking past a hundred languages every day, allowing them to ring in my ears like nursery rhymes. What if I did not fail my exam? What if I got 6 more multiple choice questions right? What if...? But I knew the 'what ifs' cannot change anything. They, along with the childhood photo and my teenage regrets, have become a part of my memory.

My short trip of revisiting Beijing ended with a conversation with my high school friend, who studied at Beijing Normal University.

'Promise you'd come to see me some other time, it is awfully smoggy here you hardly see anybody,' she said. 'And oh, promise me you'd never come here for further studies.'

'Why not?' said I. 'I like this place, it is far away from me but those memories always stays with me....'

'Come on,' she interrupted, a bit impatient. 'You know, Beijing is not for everybody. You are a traveler, always a traveler. But I guess it is good to be a traveler here. There is simply so much to see.'

She picked up my bags and handed them to me. I bid her farewell and walked out into the now crowded Tiananmen Square. I did not see the people dancing, or flying kites, or riding bikes. I tried to look at people's faces like I did 8 years ago. I couldn't, though. I just couldn't see them clearly, or maybe I did not really care anymore.

So I had always been a traveler. I was a traveler in 2006, when I thought my dreams for public speaking would come true in Beijing but finally grew up to be a different person; I was a traveler in 2008, when I thought I could

get into my dream university but turned out getting further and further away from it; I am a traveler now, walking past the memories -- memories so sweet I did not want to lose them, so painful I'd rather wish they had never existed.

I dreamt of Beijing several times afterwards, but none of them was as clear as the picture I saw in my mind when I made a wish on my 17th birthday. Memories may be invisible. They can be resilient too.

Mexican American

Anna D'Souza

In sunny California

We are hated like rats

'Go home you goddamn Mexican,

You're no good for shit.'

Same mindless rants,

Same pointless chants,

We've been labeled immigrants

Each and every one.

Hatred is so easy

But we've not affected you.

Hatred is so easy

When you don't know what to do.

I'm sorry you're naïve.

One day I'll make it big

I'll remind you

I'm Mexican.

Blue

Law Kwok Tung, Barry

This wet towel is blue,
it is hanging on the pole
dropping tears
silently.

These clothes are blue,
they are shrinking
their sleeves

The pencil lead is blue,
it is writing
blue words
on blue paper.

I go out.

The sky is so blue,

and I am attracted by the sky.

the grass is blue,

leaves flowers are blue.

Everything blue.

I find a blue bench

lay back my head

Only blue sky

is in my view.

So plain

So beautiful.

and it is getting more intense.

Huh?

I am not blue anymore,

the sky absorbs the blue.

I look around,
grass is green,
leaves are brown,
flowers are red.

Everything coloured
My life is restarted
My life burst with colour.

My Love and Soul

Ma Ka Ki, Cedar

With a sample print in his hands, Karl Wordsworth turned over the book cover and saw a message on the front page:

‘To my dearest Karl, my hope and future’

His fingers went over this message and his face blushed. This is the first time Ching addressed him publicly. As her husband and responsible editor, Karl was filled with happiness. He flipped over the pages and memories flowed in his mind. They sat shoulder-to-shoulder when discussing the content. He handed Ching a cup of tea when she struggled on her writing at midnight. Ching messaged him to say goodnight when he worked at the office overnight. After two years of hard work, they finally had a book by the two of them.

Karl woke himself up from the memories and started tidying up the mess on his desk. He piled papers into files and his blue eyes stopped at a book spine, *Chinese Customs in Weddings and Funerals by Law Wai Ching*. He hesitated for a moment but pulled out Ching’s previous publication six years ago. He turned over the book cover and looked Ching’s message to Yan, her husband who passed away years ago:

‘To my dearest Yan, my love and soul’

In the two-shot under the message, Ching held Yan’s arm. Her smile shone with a blessed happiness. Wrinkles ran around Yan’s eyes and mouth

with maturity and kindness. Both of them had similar black hair, dark eyes and sunburnt skin, which made Karl feel that he did not belong to their world.

‘No. I swore I will accept everything of Ching, including her past,’ Karl closed the book and put it in his bag. ‘Now I am her husband and we love each other. I should not think about it again.’

10th September Sunny

Today during lunch break, I met Jason, my younger brother who has just come to Hong Kong for a cross-border project of his biotechnology firm. He’s going to stay here for one year and I was very happy to hear that. We talked about our work and also Ching. Jason said he is still not very ready that a bestseller writer has become his sister-in-law. Strange him. How come he could be ‘not ready’? I could see he appreciates Ching and he said he likes her writing.

I guess Jason said he’s ‘not ready’ not because Ching is a bestseller writer, but that Ching writes book about ancient myths and customs. Jason has shown enthusiasm towards animals, doing experiments and observing the nature since he was small. He likes looking at things by reasons and results. That was why he chose to work on biotechnology. So maybe deep in his heart, he thinks Ching and him are opposite in values and nature. Maybe he is worried that he and Ching cannot get along well...

Also, one strange thing. Jason asked whether I have gone sunbathing and kept saying my skin has become much darker than before. Come on. I

work in the office all day and night. How could I have time to go sunbathing and get sunburnt?

‘.....after burning the dead body, people would keep the bone ash in a container, usually a white one, and keep it for memorial and offer sacrifices at special days such as the date of death and the afterlife birthday. Chinese people believe that the soul of the dead would stay with the bone ash. Therefore, the bone ash is equal to the dead people themselves.....’

Karl sat on the bed after shower, with his caramel-brown hair still wet. He was revising the chapter about human bone ash which Jason mentioned when they talked about Ching’s *Chinese Customs in Weddings and Funerals* yesterday. He remembered this chapter very well as it reminded him of Ching’s collection of Chinese vintage. Blue-and-white china dishes, Four Treasures made in the Ming Dynasty, horse furnishing with coloured paints. These vintages were new to Karl and he liked them a lot. The elegance of them echoed with Ching’s character. Among the collection, there was a particularly one vase that Ching treasured the most. In an custom-made wooden shelf with glass doors, there it was, a plain white vase with a black silk cover on it. It was slightly larger than a hand and did not look special. Karl was once suspicious about it as it matched with the description of bone ash container so much. He once thought of asking Ching about it but at last he did not. He felt that Ching might not want to talk about it and he chose to trust her.

‘Karl, come. Dinner is ready.’ Ching went into the bedroom and dragged Karl to the dining table with lots of dishes on it.

‘Come and try. I’ve looked up some new recipes and these dishes should taste good,’ Ching said anxiously when putting some stir-fry chicken into Karl’s bowl.

‘Oh, i-it tastes good. I like it,’ Karl tried some and replied with a forced smile.

‘Really? But you don’t seem happy. It doesn’t taste good? Or did I cook it too much?’ Ching frowned when she leaned towards me.

‘No, no, dear. I’m just a bit tired.’ Karl replied. Indeed, if Karl had to say one single thing that he did not really like about Ching, that would be her cooking. She always cooked very salty or spicy dishes but he did not want to upset her by saying it.

‘You know, Karl. I want you to be happy. I-if I’m doing things that upset you, just tell me will you?’ Ching sobbed.

‘Ching, I’m not upset. You always put me at the first place and I can’t be happier. Your cooking...could be better but give yourself some time. I don’t want you to push yourself too much. I want you to be happy too.’ Karl held Ching’s hand and comforted her.

‘I understand,’ Ching smiled, ‘but I will try my best with my cooking. Try it for me, will you?’

Karl nodded his head though he knew he was going to eat very salty and spicy dishes day after day. Ching tried so hard to make him happy and

he would do the same.

25th September Cloudy

Ching's latest publication, *Blessed or Cursed: Ten Ancient Chinese Controversial Customs*, has been published finally. Today at night, I had a drink with Jason at Lion Bar in Prince Edward. I brought a copy of Ching's new book for Jason. Expectably, he has bought his own copy already. Silly him. Why not wait for me and get a free premium version with Ching's autograph in it?

We had a good chat and enjoyed our drink, until something happened and I can't help feeling blue. Jason said he liked a song played in the bar and I told him that it a sad song about a couple have to part although they both love each other. I felt normal but then Jason asked me if I have done research on the song to understand it. I thought he was making a joke on me and said I understood by the lyrics, of course. I can still recall his surprised and puzzled face when he said the song was in Cantonese. Why? I don't know Cantonese at all but at that moment I understood the lyrics naturally. Why was that? Why?

After the publication of Ching's new book, she took a break and stopped writing for the moment. Karl took up the job as responsible editor of other writers and worked days and nights again. Being an editor was Karl's pride and he spared no efforts in his work. The time Karl and Ching could meet become much less. This was the first time when Karl felt

struggled in job. He wanted to do his best in his job but he also wished to have more time with Ching. He tried hard to be a good editor and also a good husband, and he sometimes felt sick and tired.

7th October Cloudy

Today I made a mistake at work. I forgot to submit the proposal for the next meeting. Very tiring day. Can't make such mistake anymore.

13th October Sunny

Boss suggested me to stop all my work and go on a holiday. I was shocked and I tried to refuse. But boss said I looked very tired every day and I had been unable to catch up my work. He said I should have a rest. I accepted it but I was very very upset. I love my job. Why I'm so sick? Why? Now, Ching has become my only comfort. Without my job, I still have her with me....

Most of the time, Karl and Ching stayed at home together. Karl was always too sick to get off from bed and Ching took care of him. She stayed with him all the time as if she did not want him to be out of her sight. Except going to the toilet, Karl stayed in bed all the time. He ate on the bed and for most of the time, he slept. Every time before he fell asleep and after he woke up, Ching had a bowl of dark liquid in her hands.

'Dear, this is a Chinese medicine that I read from a book. It's made of

herbs. Have it. You will feel better,' said Ching when handing the bowl towards Karl's mouth.

'What's this? It smells like rotten eggs,' thought Karl but he was too tired to speak. Every time after he took this medicine, he felt very sleepy and he would have a good sleep. Though he thought the medicine smelled and tasted bad, he believed that Ching would always do the best for him.

One night, Karl woke up and felt quite well after a good sleep. He got off the bed and looked outside the window when Ching was in the kitchen. He stretched his body a bit as he has been lying on the bed for so long. His bones were aching. It was 10 pm and it was completely dark outside. Feeling disappointed with seeing nothing, Karl stepped back and decided to go back to bed. At the corner of his eyes, he saw himself in the reflection of the window. He thought he should have mistaken but he still walked back to the window to have a closer look.

Black hair.

He froze. He could not believe what he saw but he knew it was not a dream or any illusion.

With the light of the desk lamp behind him, he got his face close to the window and looked into the reflection. Not just black hair. His face was cracked by wrinkles. He touched his face with fingertips and found that his skin was not as smooth as before...

'Why are you out of bed, dear?'

Karl's heart bounced. He saw Ching through the reflection on the window. She smiled with lips like the crescent and looked at him steadily as if having thin pieces of ice over her eyes.

'Oh..... My body is stiff. I want to move around a little bit,' Calming down his heartbeat, Karl replied when he turned his body to her.

'Poor you, dear. Now come and stop worrying,' Ching held his hands and comforted him back into the bed. 'What you need is rest. Take this and sleep.' She handed him a bowl of medicine.

Looking into Ching's eyes, Karl forgot the shock about his hair colour and he drank the medicine with his eyes and nose closed but he could still feel Ching's eyes nailed on him. He finished the medicine and he felt his conscious flying away from him. He shored up his eyelids and had one more glance of Ching's smiling face. Before he completely fell asleep, I heard Ching whispered in the fondest voice he had ever heard.

'Sleep...Sleep...When you wake up, we will meet again, at last...My love and my soul...'

In his armchair, Jason had a cup of tea on one hand and the *Blessed or Cursed: Ten Ancient Chinese Controversial Customs* in another.

'.....as mentioned in my previous publication, Chinese Customs in Weddings and Funerals, the Chinese believe that the soul stays with the body after people died. A thousand years ago, the Law family pioneered a custom to bring the dead back to life. With intake of a spoon of bone ash of the

dead body every week, another human could be turned into that dead person bit by bit, from appearance to mind. This custom is one of the most controversial customs in Chinese history. It brings someone dead back to life but at the same, it kills another person.....?’

‘Another great work, Ching...I can’t help believing in you as all you say is just so real...’ said Jason to himself. He closed the book and went back to his work.

Path I have seen

Law Kwok Tung, Barry

I can smell the rose perfume
leaking out from the coffin.

I can feel worms
wriggling inside my skin.

I can hear the horn
performing under the soil.

I can see the path
to the way below.

A flash reflected
by a crescent reaping hook
wakes me up.

All these
draw a path
in this living world
for me to travel.

A path drawn
by my heart.

In the Neighbourhood

Alicia Beale

On Sundays too, Gregory Morgan woke at six am to walk Poochie. Poochie's name came from the children, not him. She was their dog and their promised responsibility, but every morning it was Gregory who found the pleasure of a moist little nose nudging him awake. Sliding out from the warm cocoon of covers and onto the crisp coolness of linoleum, he held no resentment. Walking Poochie was a joy. Already the curly brown ball bounced with life. Rain tapped outside and the breath of winter lay thick as a carpet along the floor where the warmth from the heater never quite seemed to reach, but there was Poochie happily dancing around the front door, eager to enter the drab outside world. Gregory snapped on the leash and together they went out.

Unlike his children's pet, he could not so easily fill with mirth. The weather affected him. With one hand he held an umbrella and with the other he juggled control of the leash just as in one heart he was grateful to make such a sacrifice for his children and in another heart, one that had beat long before his kids were born, he was envious of anyone who had a father that loved them so much. These grass lined sidewalks were very different from the glass strewn pavements of his childhood where his father had forbid pets. Pets were foolishness. They were expensive. They were dirty. When he stooped down to gather the dog's droppings into a plastic bag, he thought

maybe his father had a point, though that concurring feeling evaporated by the time he'd poured water to rinse away the stain. No one should deny their offspring the chance to exchange the limitless affection that happens between child and animal, even if Joseph Morgan would.

At 4pm that afternoon, Gregory would also walk his father. He took the bus to the old neighbourhood. To the left behind classmates still hovering around the corners and stoops, he said taking the car was more trouble than it was worth with finding parking and paying meters. They'd nod in understanding to a problem they'd never experienced, while knowing as Gregory did that he didn't take his car because he was scared of it being stolen. The neighbourhood only stretched a ten block radius and within the twenty years that Gregory had been away, a bicycle repair shop, a ceramics studio, two cafes and a weekend farmer's market had taken space amongst the halal kebab restaurants, dollar stores and pawn shops. When Joseph first had lost his way, he blamed those new businesses for changing the face of his community so much that he ended up riding a cross-town bus for an hour with a bag of soiled clothes meant for the Laundromat only two blocks away from his home. With Gregory's mother gone to Bermuda where she was divorced and happy, his sisters both living in the capital too many miles away for them to take turns checking in on old Joe, it was left to Gregory to knock every Sunday to see if his father was dead or alive.

No one answered his knock. No one answered the dozen other knocks before he took out his spare key and cracked opened the door. The television whirred in the background but no one was in the living room. The kitchen smelled of burnt rubber and Gregory found a plastic spatula

charred into tar under a stove grill. There weren't any other signs of cooking. Down the hall, he could peer straight into the empty bathroom. On the left side, the master bedroom door was ajar. Gregory called out, 'Pop, you in there? It's Greg. C'mon out for our walk.'

He paused. Waited. Listened to the stillness and called out again in hope that he wouldn't have to walk in to find his father lying dead.

'Pop, stop playing. You're never funny nohow. C'mon I've got things to do,' he shouted as he allowed his feet to step closer. He slowly slid the door open and was immediately overwhelmed by the searing stench. Ready to back away, he saw a large liquid stain pooled underneath the bedroom closet. A hand over his mouth, breath held and suffocation growing in his chest, Gregory found his father naked and fallen squat into his own faeces. Joseph wasn't sleep or hysterically crying as he had been when Gregory found him last in the sink cabinet. He was simply sitting, staring now up at his son and before presumably at the back of the closet door. Gregory looked down at the man whose words used to tremble through walls.

'You got to wait. This toilet's taken,' explained Joseph.

'You ain't on the toilet. You're sitting on your bedroom floor. So let's get you up and outa here,' replied Gregory who wasn't completely ready to reach into the mess so he added, 'Where's Tituba?'

'Who that?'

'She come cleans, cooks, and takes you in a car to your doctor.'

'She wear pink pants?'

‘Yah, that’s her. Now where is she?’

Joseph’s placid manner converted into a bitter snarl and he spat out, ‘I threw her ass out. She’d been stealing. I knew it’s why I can never find the things I’m looking for. Cause that woman taking them home.’

‘You can’t find what you’re looking for because you have dementia which is also why you got to have a home health aide. So I don’t come around finding you sitting in your own shit and now got to get you in the shower too.’

He didn’t want to sound hostile. He hoped he sounded only miffed on the outside but slightly partial on the inside. He wanted to hold a playful anger like how one spoke to a dog that bit a hole in the couch. He wanted to display the infinite patience of a sensitive son who was a vegetarian, read books, and recycled. Yet disgust and a vague sensation he didn’t want to understand stirred inside him as he surveyed the bones, the flabby skin, the knobby joints, all sitting atop a muddy mound of poo. It was underneath the nails and caked on the palm of the hand that stretched out to Gregory. He yanked the old man by the elbow with such force that Joseph slid out of the closet and whirled on the floor like a break dancer, which is where his son left him as he went to run bath water.

Gregory had bathed both his wife and children in different types of love. For his wife, he let the water stream between his fingers until it was steamy. He poured in rose oil and lighted candles around the rim of the tub. She had soaked and unwound. She spoke to him about work, troubles, the kids, her mother’s online dating while he rubbed her glowing skin. For the

children, he stuck a forearm into the water to test its temperature and depth. Safety first. Safely, he made them step inside. Rubber duckies, blue sponges shaped like farm animals, and foamy bars of soap bobbed up and down while the kids giggled and squirmed. Sometimes his wife would take pictures to embarrass them later as teenagers. He would laughingly squeeze water out the sponges on top of their soft small heads. For his father, he sat him in tepid water and scrubbed.

He refused to look at the body. He kept his attention on the up/down motion of the rag as though he were wiping down a filthy wall until a dark green tint caught his eye and he looked closer at his father's chest. The rag dropped into the teak coloured water. Stretched between his index finger and his thumb, Gregory could see the piece of skin wasn't gangrene or bruising; it was a fading tattoo. In green ink, right above the left buttocks, there was a ribbon that read, 'For Tim' and nothing else.

Gregory slunk down on the side of the tub. On his back, there also was a tattoo. This tattoo started at the base of his spine, spread from rib to rib, and rose up right below his shoulder blades. On Gregory's tattoo, a busty woman swayed with her nipples turned out and her head tilted in a lascivious manner and the ribbon read 'For a man'. When Gregory saw that mark upon his father, he wanted to hold the old man's head under the bath water and watch the bubbles stop coming up. Throughout the summers on beaches and in pools, he wore rash guards and he had never given in when his past girlfriends and current wife pleaded with him to get it removed, because this scar gave his hatred legitimacy. When people viewed his back, they witnessed the physical remains of his childhood.

‘Are you gay?’

The question floated into Greg’s ears. Family dinners were often silent affairs. In the background, there was usually only the ambient sound of the television. Greg, his sisters, and mother would share their days’ news before the meal, before Joe came home from work. They knew how best to give him this space to chew, to feel full, and to be left in his own mind. So Greg, deep in the dream of his novel, barely lifted his head to respond.

‘Don’t know whatcha talking about,’ he said.

‘You don’t bring no girls home,’ Joe pointed out with a flourish of gestures. His knife and fork were players in every motion. He leaned over his half-eaten plate of mash potatoes and roasted beef cubes. Eyeing his son as though he, the father, had laboured over hot stove for this meal and his son sat there unappreciative and not hungry.

‘Girls don’t like me.’

‘You don’t play no ball. You don’t sit out on the stoop with the others. How the girls even supposed to see you? Instead, you sitting in here reading over your food.’

Greg’s mother and sisters ate on, sometimes stopping to watch the television program. Nothing exciting was happening between father and son. They knew he would beat him. All they needed was to stay alert for the moment when they had to hide for themselves.

‘If I was a girl, I’d think you were a faggot.’

‘Leave off,’ said Greg, finally lifting his eyes from the book and ready

for the result.

‘Why don’t Khalil and Raul come round here anymore?’

‘No reason. They’re just different.’

‘How they different? They Black. You Black. They got nuts and a sac. You got nuts and a sac. But I see them talking to a couple girls outside Jordan’s grocery. Pretty girls. All the old heads getting their numbers just staring at that young ass dancing round them boys. You know what Jordan say to me? He say, ‘Not going to see Greg with something like that.’

Greg let out a laugh, ‘Shakira and Terri, nah no you sure ain’t. Those girls silly.’

‘That’s what I’m talking about,’ slammed Joe. With his knife aimed at the boy’s heart, he went on, ‘All those boys you grew up with. They looking like men now on the streets but you sitting in here with books saying girls silly.’

‘That’s me,’ said Greg sadly. It wasn’t just his father. It was the whole neighbourhood he knew.

‘How that you?’ Joe shook in tremors. ‘How’s that you? If you ain’t gay?’

With that said, Joe slapped the book from the table and then backhanded his son.

Greg took the blow and spat out, ‘You’re the faggot!’

The women took that as their cue to leave the table, though it was

unnecessary since the men were out the door in minutes. When the men returned, Greg had a tattoo.

‘I like this song,’ said Joseph smiling and singing along. Now clean and clothed, he sat gazing at music videos flashing across the television just like how Gregory’s sisters used sit transfixed with giggly smiles on their faces when they still lived at home.

‘It’s a stupid song so shut up. I’m on the phone,’ snapped Gregory

‘Who you calling?’

‘Tituba,’ said Gregory as the line clicked into voicemail. ‘Hey it’s Gregory Morgan. I don’t know what happened between you and my father but you should have called me. I can offer you double rates, at least, until I find someone to replace you but I need you here with my father overnight tonight. Please call me back as soon as you can. My number is 973-4598-8009. As soon as you can please.’

‘Are we going out?’ chirped Joseph.

Gregory closed his phone and looked around. He hated this apartment. He hated the very air inside.

‘Yes, we are,’ he said and then asked, ‘Who’s Tim?’

Joseph shrugged, ‘Don’t know.’

‘Why is his name on your back?’

‘Don’t know,’ Joseph said turning around again to the music videos. ‘I’m watching the movie.’

‘Ah fuck,’ Gregory mumbled though he knew even before the disease, his father never would have told him.

Sometimes he wondered if it was all a sham. Five years ago, Joe still bought his own malt liquor and lottery tickets. Two years ago, he could still hold a cigarette even if his hands shook as he lit it. Within the last two years, the belligerence stopped. You could help him into his shirt, pants, and underwear without the struggle through a man’s pride. Here was a time, Gregory thought he would never see; Joseph didn’t drink, didn’t smoke, and was happy. Maybe this was his father. How he was when he hadn’t worked hours pushing and pulling vats of chemicals in the fumes of the glue factory. Maybe this was his father when he didn’t have the pressure of feeding a family of five and piles of bills stacking up on the countertop. Maybe this was all a show so his father could once in his life do nothing. Gregory gazed at Joseph whose eyes glittered at the screen and then he went off to find his own answers.

He started in the bedroom. Envelopes and papers flew in flurries as he flung open drawers and shook out old boxes. No Christmas cards, no postcards, no personal letters, nothing that gave a sense of Joe’s life except for saved pay stubs, tax bills, and other notes of business. What could he discover in those numbers? No photo albums or frames were left in the house after his mother moved to the Caribbean, but Gregory tossed out every jacket, coat, and pants he could find so he could rifle through pockets, searching the linings for secrets. He stormed his sister's' old room, his old room, and next took on the living room. There the cabinets were locked so he kicked them in and the splintered crack energized him so he went off to

destroy more.

‘Tim sells candy,’ said Joseph. He stood next to Gregory who held the family Bible upside down, fanning the air. ‘Can we go walk now?’

The afternoon sun had taken some of the crispness out of the air. The rain had ceased and Joseph shuffled along in an uneven gait next to his son. For the first time, Gregory was happy with the slow pace. He could think. The path they followed was the same one that he had walked a thousand times to school as a child, so he walked it almost blindly as his mind stayed focused on his thoughts. Tim sells candy. A small congregation of church women in their pastels and broad hats flocked out the gates of Mount Liberty Chapel. Their chattering paused to smile a hello towards Gregory who habitually nodded a greeting and strode on. Tim sells candy. Joe Morgan had never been on a plane nor abided by boats or trains. Nothing could move my father outside of this neighbourhood, Gregory thought and suddenly collided into a trash can. Riotous laughter broke out amongst the kids eating long red strings of sugary candy outside Jordan’s Grocery. One threw a sticky string at Gregory before running off in high pitched shrieks. Gregory dusted away the sugar from his jacket and picked up the candy.

‘You want some fruit?’ asked Joseph who held up a cantaloupe from the grocery’s produce basket.

‘No, put that back,’ replied Gregory, already crossing the street. Jordan’s Grocery didn’t sell that kind of candy. It only sold the usual chocolate bars. For the rainbow coloured goey taffy that stuck on your teeth and dyed your mouth, you would go to Mr. Monty’s where out of his back

screen door you could buy ice pops made in an ice cube tray and candy cigarettes that puffed out sugar clouds. Mr. Monty sold candy. Mr. Tim Monty? Gregory turned to place the question to Joseph who was not next to or beside him nor ambling ahead or straggling behind him. Gregory was alone. Quickly he traced his steps to just across the grocery where his father still stood staring at the spot where Gregory had been. Gregory crossed over.

‘I can’t cross the street by myself,’ whispered Joseph to his son. His eyes betrayed his fear. ‘I’m supposed to wait and go with you.’

‘Sorry, I forgot to guide you,’ said Gregory somewhat shamefully. It was his rule that his father was repeating. ‘Grab my arm. We’ll go to together.’

An obese white Jewish man, Mr. Monty, would have normally stuck out in such a neighbourhood, but since he opened his backdoor to the tap of any tiny knuckles seeking saccharin, he had a role as the candyman and so his presence made sense. When Gregory tapped on the door frame, the screen was shut but the door behind was wide open. Through the screen he could glimpse inside the house and view it very differently as an adult. The glorious hall of candy that he had drooled over was a narrow back pantry. The shelves rusted and dust lined. On each shelf were glass jelly jars of assorted colours. Size and prices ranging from the top of brand name chocolates that the kids eyed like Willy Wonka golden tickets to the bottom where five-cent squares of bubble gum sat as cheap fodder for quick-handed thieves. Past the shelves, the hall winded into the shadows of the house’s interior. A malted musty air crept through the screen.

Gregory rapped again on the door frame.

'I want some,' chirped Joseph with his forehead leaning into the criss-crossed metal.

'We're not here for that,' Gregory rapped again and grabbed him backward, 'We're here to meet Tim. This is Tim right?'

'Don't know.'

A shade fell over them. In the doorway, a man as old and brittle as the candy he sold filled the entire space of the frame. He said, 'Why did you bring him here?'

Within that question were Gregory's answers, but his fire was gone. The intensity kindled when he was alone with Joseph had never been seen by anyone outside of their sphere. The existence of an outsider quelled his previous passion. In his hands, he still grasped, tight and hard, the bone of an old invalid man. In the expression of the outsider, he could see the reflection of himself in the image of his father, how his father used to be, but he couldn't let go even with his father as he was now.

The screen opened. An arm half protective, half restrained, came in-between the men. It hung in the air touching neither but broke them apart.

Tim spoke, 'He's worse than I'd heard.'

'Do you know my father?'

'Yes, I do,' sighed Tim. His arm suspended in the air appeared wanting to lift itself to stroke Joseph's shoulder or his cheek or his hair as it hung in

a limbo of longing. 'People told me things but just in passing. No one thought I'd be interested and I'd never asked for more so they wouldn't. If I had known, I wouldn't have let it be so long. I feel like I lost him already.'

'You know my father?' repeated Gregory who couldn't believe that the cosmos were expanding, stars drifting further and further out of the satellites' range, never to be explored.

Fiesta

Du Yan, Zoe

I placed you upon the front
leather seat of our Fiesta,
huge brown schoolbag
sprawled over your back,
a crumb of bread dangling
on the corner of your mouth.

We drove the familiar
road to school. Round
the meadows I took you,
we sang along to radio music,
splashing the colours of spring.
One day you decided

not to take my Fiesta to school.
You looked sad as you closed

the car door and wobbled away
in your oversized schoolbag,
I waited for you to return
to snuggle against my shoulder
in the front seat, like you always did.

I tried to turn on the engine,
yet my fingers were glued
and I could only follow you
with my eyes.

You grow fainter and fainter,
melting—
into the orange and purple rays
of the autumn sunset.

Your hair flying behind you
like a handkerchief waving
Goodbye.

Into the Dust

Kong Yui Man, Melody

Jamie didn't say a word about my cat's death. He didn't offer to hold a funeral for her. He just nodded, said: 'We can always get another cat.' The only flaw in Jamie was that he never learned to sympathize, ever, and it was always the main issue in our marriage.

I shook my head. 'We're not having this conversation now.'

I had locked myself in the bedroom since then. Jamie was panicked in the first week. He kept knocking. I asked him to go away every time and he pleaded. I said I needed time and eventually he conceded. But there was once he sneaked in because I forgot to lock.

'Go away,' I said.

'Kris, I need you to look at me,' I didn't. And he continued, 'It's just a cat—'

'Don't speak *just* to me on this,' I said, refusing to look at him.

'Please, don't do this to me.'

'I hate you—' I didn't expect this.

I peeked at him at the corner of my eyes. Jamie froze. His eyelids were flickering like butterflies.

'Please leave,' I climbed to my bed.

I heard the door closed after a minute.

Jamie rarely knocked since. I figured he got the hint: I hated being pushed. I tried my best to avoid direct confrontation by leaving my room only in his absence. A clink on the table was usually the signal—Jamie usually drank a cup of tea before he headed to work. And that clink was loud. I had nagged him about it numerous times.

I swirled my chair. I thought of Lily again—I missed her sleeping face. I also missed her eyes. Her eyes were gray with a bit green pigment. She used to gaze at me with those translucent eyes when I talked to her, as if she truly understood me. She used to stare at Jamie like that too, and she would meow rhythmically as Jamie stroke her fur.

Jamie.

I got up and walked near the door. I heard Jamie's walking. He was probably walking in his pair of worn-out leather shoes. I had asked him to get a new pair but he never did.

Then I heard the sound of glass splintering. I grabbed for the doorknob. But I stopped myself. What was I going to do? Fetch a broom? Ask if he was hurt? I didn't know. I realized I hadn't spoken to him for a long while. Pretty long while.

I braced myself and went out. But Jamie had already left.

I strolled in my own apartment like a wanderer. I didn't know where to start looking. I wondered what he had been doing without me. Pacing past his study room, I recalled spending most of my mornings here.

I entered the room. Jamie's study room was neat. At least there was no stench of food. A book was opened on the desk and a few pages were stained with yellowish splashes. I had told him to drink less coffee, I thought. There was also a few candy wrappers tucked at the gap between the desk and the shelves. I squeezed my thumb and index fingers into the gap and took it out. Okay, so maybe his study room wasn't that neat.

I slipped into his armchair in front of the desk. It felt quite peculiar albeit familiar. I felt weird sitting on it, whose texture was so much different from mine in bedroom. I slumped into the seat for a few minutes until I spotted Jamie's notebook.

The cover was turquoise. The pages were torn, and as always the pages were spilled with coffee. It was the one he used to record random ideas, like if I told him a really hilarious joke, he'd probably have it jotted down there. I flicked to the last page and anticipated something new. Something he had written without me. But there was nothing other than words being crossed out.

I tried to make out what was written beneath the lines but couldn't. I noticed a number of pages were torn out from the notebook as well. It was not normal.

What did I miss?

I was still in Jamie's study room when he got back. He entered, and jumped. I smiled at him. He was wearing a black baseball cap, his navy scarf swathing tightly around his neck.

'Hey,' I said.

‘Kris,’ he didn’t step forward.

‘—How’re you?’ I asked.

He twitched his eyebrows. ‘Uh, great,’ he mumbled.

A long pause.

‘I want to tell you that I’ve read your notebook,’ I said.

He gazed at me for a while and he didn’t blink. ‘What for?’

I braced up. ‘Have you not been writing?’

‘Is it really that important?’

‘Of course it is.’

‘God—’ He removed his baseball cap and scratched his head. His dyed-brown hair was tousled and his black roots were getting out.

I bit my lower lip. ‘I know it’s me—’

He cut me off. ‘It doesn’t have anything to do with you.’ He let out a sigh, and continued. ‘It’s more about me.’

‘What is it?’

‘I couldn’t understand you,’ Jamie laid his palm on the forehead. ‘It’s been bothering me. But I—’

‘I’m sorry,’ I said.

Jamie shook his head. ‘Kris, it’s not your fault. It’s not mine, either. It’s simply because we’re different. All we need is reconciliation. But I still need you to be strong.’

I realized I had been holding my breath.

‘Okay,’ I said.

Jamie smiled.

Then we lived like we used to live again. Completely back on track. I could see him sauntering around biting a pen lid again—I could hear his mumbling when he wrote again.

We were both trying to be considerate. At least we didn’t argue over ways to live. I almost started to feel that life was eventually getting easy on me.

It had been easy until this one night. One Saturday night around eight. Jamie went hiking with his old bud from university. He said he would be home at six or seven. I wasn’t suspecting too much until the time was already one thirty. I was about to call Jamie when my cellphone rang. It was a call from his friend.

I was about to wrap up my paintings with the brush in my right hand.

‘Hello.’ The brush was dripping paint on my pants. I tried to wipe the paint with my hand but it didn’t go away. ‘Aw, hold on a second.’ I rushed to the toilet and washed it with water. After a second, I retrieved my cellphone. ‘Hello?’

There was a complete silence.

‘Hello?’ I said.

‘Kri—Kristy?’ I figured he was a guy. He was panting.

‘Yea? Who’s this?’

‘I’m Peter—Jamie’s friend—’ I heard gasping in his voice, and I laid down my brush.

‘Yea?’

Long pause. ‘I—I don’t know how to put this right, but—’

‘What?’

‘—Please don’t panic.’ He said.

‘Hey—what—’ my left thigh began to quake.

Peter sounded as though he was about to suffocate. He didn’t reply for a couple of seconds but I could hear his sharp breath.

‘We were just by a small stream—’ Peter stopped abruptly, and then he started to pant again. He took a huge intake of air before speaking.

I remembered my stomach was twitching as if a swarm of worms rammed their way along my organs. It was more than mere pain; it was closer to all the air inside of your organs being entirely sucked out without a puff.

I couldn’t speak.

‘And Jamie was ahead of me—I tried to call him ‘cause I needed to rinse my face. It was pretty misty up there and my face was all sticky with sweat—’

I gripped the brim of my chair with my left hand.

Peter's voice evolved into a moan. 'Oh my god. He was just there—and now—'

'—Where is Jamie?' I snarled.

'—I don't know.'

I couldn't move.

I looked at the canvas before me.

What the hell was I doing here? I asked myself. I didn't know. I didn't know what I was doing. I felt my throat tighten.

Peter began to speak again. 'Jamie is missing—he's been missing for three hours.'

I just sat there.

I couldn't bring myself to snap out of that looming thought—Jamie was *missing*. The idea of it magnified in my head.

What was *missing* supposed to mean?

I didn't know how to deal with it.

I hung up the phone then curled up my knees. I wrapped myself tight. My shoulders were shaking. *Why did it have to be Jamie?*

I began to get used to the throbbing pain in the head days after days. The one you would feel after you stayed up all night. And yet, the difference was that I never could whisk that *pain* off.

Sometimes I would just sit on the bed and lose in thought by staring at

one corner in the room. I saw Jamie snuggling up there and wearing headphones. He sang along with the music and his voice wasn't easy on the ears. Or sometimes I fell deep in debating a question—how I did I *get* here? Jamie and I couldn't be less akin to every other couple on Earth: we made mistakes and often we were reluctant to acknowledge them; we had too much pizza before we slept and we argued over whose turn it was to turn off the light before we slept.

And so did the rest of the couples.

So why did it have to be Jamie?

Perhaps because it wasn't true—Jamie wasn't missing. This explained all the hardship I went through when I strived to acknowledge it—this explained the bitterness swelling in my stomach every single time when Peter's words crossed my mind: '*Jamie was missing.*'

No, he wasn't.

Jamie just *bid* himself—it must be. I had this faith in me that Jamie hid out of *boredom*. There were times that I shivered out from my dreams when I heard someone laughed so hard; I pictured Jamie standing at our bedroom with that mischievous smirk of his, that smug face of his, flaunting his flawless scheme of playing missing.

He was going to come back.

During the years, I had been waiting for calls from the police or Peter. I

knew someday they were going to inform me the truth that they had been wrong about Jamie. The truth was that Jamie intended to be unfound all along, and he wasn't missing. I had been sleeping with my cellphones enveloped in my arms. I checked my mailbox because Jamie was going to mail me clues. Clues like an anonymous postcard that led to the places he had been, or anything that I could trail him by; just like the characters in cartoons leaving breadcrumbs on their ways.

The police or Peter was going to realize someday that they were all fooled.

I had been having this belief imprinted in my mind for years—Jamie will eventually show and come back. So had Peter, he had been collaborated with the police during the year on the search of Jamie. I would say they were playing hide-and-seek, to be precise.

Their investigation had lasted for a year or so until they closed the case.

Closed.

And here I was. 'Closed.' I hummed.

My heart was supposed to ache. My head was supposed to spin.

Jamie, Jamie, Jamie—when was everything going to stop?

Everything was going to be all right if you came back here.

Then why were you not here, Jamie?

You did know they were out there searching out forces and detectives to search for you, right? *Then why were you not here, Jamie?*

Now they closed the case.

As I was holding my cellphone, listening to Peter delivering the news, I realized that I had been expecting this—this nature of human:

People move on with their lives.

People do not cling on lost ones forever, or otherwise they might just die for good without other drives in life. Yes, Peter might have felt guilty for Jamie's disappearance for a year by devoting his time to search for Jamie, but not *forever*.

'I'm sorry, Kristy. But the police wasn't able to make any further progress on Jamie's case—' Peter paused for a bit, and continued, 'nothing ever came up.'

Peter sounded tired. His voice was deep and husky. As I was listening to him, I was thinking he could really use a good sleep. 'I'm sorry,' he repeated.

For giving up on Jamie.

I couldn't blame him.

It had been one year, more than one year. He had a wife and a son. He had a job. He was leading a life that neither Jamie nor me should intervene. Granted, he was there when Jamie disappeared, how was he the one to be blamed?

What more could I ask from him?

I knew I couldn't.

The police had given up and so had he. He stopped believing, I figured,

after years of absorbing himself into the hope of finding Jamie. It had been exhausting for him—for bringing up his hope and it ended up shattered.

‘I think,’ I replied Peter after a long pause, ‘no matter it’s for your sake, or my sake, we both deserve an ordinary life. At least not like this, not like how we’re living now.’ I hung up and I sat like a statue. *Not like dreaming everyday he was going to be here.*

Deep in my heart, I knew that I stopped believing too. I had never been the kind of person who could survive till the end; I wasn’t the kind of person who was capable of clinging on to one *last* hope. I gave up; I guessed it was the closest word to what I was doing. I didn’t want to dwell on the illusion of having him back; I didn’t want to dwell on the serenity I felt at almost every time when Jamie and I just laid on the bed and said nothing.

I guessed I had already given up before I realized.

Silent Love

Ma Ka Ki, Cedar

My surname walks the same path as you,
but in no single part we alike.

For years I've done all you've said,
swallowed my words though I cannot help dislike.

Hands up I tried my best to reach your arms,
embrace the warmth though we differed in height.
And now I can reach you raising my arms,
but you back away before my sight.

Strong as the banyan trunk you used to be,
I loved your arms, which kept dangers away.
You're no longer stand like a ceiba in front of me,
I'll stand by your side so don't be afraid.

Though never have we said I love you,
our love is a pine and always true.

Go Home

Yu Shuchang, Maya

Yi was sitting next to Asher on his bed, looking at him. He looks Jewish, Yi thought. Black hair, black eyes and aquiline nose.

But what did she know? Years ago when she watched *The Diary of Anne Frank*, she asked her mother why the Jews were all so honest and wore that Star of David wherever they went.

‘If they don’t, the Nazis will put them into prison,’ said her mom.

‘But how could they know? They can’t check the passport of everyone on the street, can they?’ Yi insisted.

‘Well, they could tell at a glance,’ her mom said.

‘I couldn’t,’ Yi murmured.

Yi wished she could tell from his accent. Asher had a European accent, which was weird, if he was Jewish. But it didn’t matter much because all those European accents sounded the same to Yi.

‘What are you thinking?’ Asher said, reached out his hand, grabbed a lock of Yi’s hair and played with it.

I am wondering where you are from, Yi said to herself. Of course she didn’t ask him that. She should have known, just as he knew she was from China. They must have had talked about that at some point. But it is so unfair, she thought, China is so distinguished, while those from European or

whatever small countries, they are all the same.

‘Nothing. Just...how can your room be so messy?’ Yi glanced at the floor full of clothes. They were on his bed when they entered the room, then Asher threw them all to the ground. Yi guessed he was trying to copy those banal movie scenes: the guy wipes everything from his desk to the ground and then holds the girl up on the desk so they can kiss, but in a lousier way. It bothered her a little since she wasn’t able to tell if the clothes were dirty.

‘I would have cleaned if I knew you were coming,’ Asher looked at Yi and smiled. He leaned to Yi, gently kissed her upper lip. Asher was a good kisser. His lips are born for kissing, not talking, Yi thought. She definitely enjoyed the kisses a lot. They were much better than her boyfriend's kisses. He always kissed her with all his strength. It felt like he was trying hard to prove something. Maybe he was, Yi thought. He was always a bit intense about everything. He wasn’t supportive when Yi decided to study in the U.S., saying that long-distance relationships were ridiculous. Yi wondered how much longer their relationship could still hold on through Skype.

‘But seriously, doesn’t such a mess bother you at all?’ Yi just wanted to say something to drive away the thought of her boyfriend. Not a good timing, she said to herself.

Asher didn’t answer, just shrugged. After a moment’s silence, he gave with a presenting gesture and said ‘Welcome to a sad bachelor’s room.’

Yi looked around again. Although the mess made the room seem smaller than it actually was, it was not bad considering the location. He was

obviously sharing the apartment with someone else, but it looked like his roommate was not here tonight.

Or maybe he had already gone to bed? Yi tried to find a clock in the room but there was none. The walls were all empty as if someone had just moved in or was ready to move out. It was quite late anyway. By the time they left the bar it was already half past two. Anyone who leads a normal life should be asleep by now, Yi thought. The idea that someone was sleeping next door made Yi a bit uncomfortable. She recalled the giggles and moans from the dorm next to hers every midnight. She constantly had the impulse to knock at their door and shout: 'Mind if I join you?' She never did.

'Close the door, will you?' Yi said with a smile.

Asher looked at her for a second.

'Sure,' he said. He stood up, closed the door, came back to her. He started kissing her gently, her forehead, her eyes, her cheeks, her ears, and her neck, her collarbone.

This is *not* what I mean, Yi cried out in her mind while feeling the probably dirty sheet rubbing her back. She never made the first move, even being misunderstood that way made her upset. She considered such eagerness would make her a slut even though she had just gone home with someone she barely knew.

But what the hell. She laughed at herself while her tongue was in Asher's mouth.

The phone rang. They both wanted to ignore it, just wait for whoever that was to hang up. But Mr. Whoever was quite determined. It seemed the ringing had lasted long enough for any call to be finished.

Yi let go first, took her arms from around Asher's neck. Even though they were still clinging to each other, neither of them knew what they were doing after the phone started to ring.

'Just take it', Yi said, acting as cool as possible.

Asher rolled off the mattress and grabbed the phone on his desk. Yi noticed that his face twisted for half a second before he picked up. He said something in a strange language, with that spitting sound in every word. It is surely not French, Yi thought. It was like pirates talking, too harsh to be French. Even though Yi knew neither French nor pirate language, it was an educated guess.

He quickly finished the call.

'Who was it?' Yi regretted the second she asked.

'My mum,' Asher regretted the second he answered.

There was a long silence between Yi, lying on the mattress with her blouse opened to her belly button, and Asher, standing at his desk, two steps away from the mattress. It was the longest pause since they first met.

It was not as embarrassing as it might sound. They just needed to start over again.

'You know, she always forgets the time difference,' Asher finally found something to say.

‘Yeah, my mum does that too,’ answered Yi with an absent mind. She was doing her little math, trying to locate Asher’s country based on the unknown time difference.

Then she suddenly heard herself.

‘Sorry about that,’ Asher said in a low voice, trying to hold back laughter. He was back lying next to Yi, ready to go on kissing.

‘Oh no, don’t worry,’ Yi made herself sound as cheerful as possible. Then she sat up and started buttoning her blouse. ‘Sorry Asher, but I have to go now.’

‘Hey, what happened?’ Asher sat up. ‘Is it because of the call? Look, I am not one of those creepy guys who need to call mummy every day, all right? If that is what you are thinking.’

‘No. It’s not. It’s just me. I can’t do it. I’m sorry,’ Yi said, with her voice dwindling into silence.

‘What do you mean it’s just you? What about you?’ Asher raised his voice. It must have something to do with that call, he thought.

‘You know, we... Chinese can’t do this,’ Yi didn’t know where that came from.

‘You Chinese...’ Asher puffed his cheeks out with a long sigh. ‘Bullshit, that’s bullshit.’

Yi said nothing, just sitting there, looking down.

‘I don’t understand,’ Asher said slowly, ‘then why you came with me so

naturally, as if you *are* that kind of girl?’ He smiled, lowered his head to look at Yi with tenderness as if she was a naughty little girl who just stole his shoes.

‘I don’t know. I guess I was too drunk,’ Yi said, sitting there staring at nothing.

She was not drunk and she knew it. It remained a mystery why she could take so much alcohol with such a tiny body. Thanks to that though, she got to meet all these people in this dull city including Asher, who was a friend of one of her drinking buddies. Apparently people here didn’t do much except drink themselves to death. They are good people indeed, just bored. In some way, she was proud of herself on that. It was better to drink with a bunch of lushers than to cook and watch Korean dramas every night, she always thought.

Only sometimes the void was stronger than any kind of alcohol. It ate up everything people had, left them in thirst and starvation.

‘You know you can stay till morning, if you want,’ Asher said while watching Yi put on her coat.

‘No, no, I’ll be fine. I can walk, it’s not far at all.’ Yi said.

‘Do you want me to walk you out, maybe?’ Asher offered.

‘Nah, I’ll be fine. You take care.’ Yi turned back and smiled while putting on her boots at the door.

It must have been raining on their way to Asher’s apartment. The road

was still wet, though it wasn't raining at the moment. Yi couldn't have noticed that. She was busy talking to Asher and her mind was occupied by thousands of thoughts, including whether he was Jewish.

On the way back she noticed everything. The street was totally empty. The wet ground reflected the pale yellow light from the street lamps. Cigarette butts and broken bottles were everywhere. It somehow reminded her home, although instead it was dog shit everywhere. Nobody walked with their heads held high – you had to watch your steps. Still the streets here were scarier for Yi. All the horror movie scenes came towards her like zombies, and they were about to eat her brain at any second. She now regretted saying no to Asher.

But I wasn't lying, Yi talked to herself while walking, somehow trying to defend herself. It was true, she wasn't lying. She just couldn't do it, not when she was Chinese.

In a city so remote from China yet so full of Chinese, nobody saw her as one of them, or they simply never thought about that. They never had those long night talks, about family, life and the universe, that kind of shit. Yi couldn't recall one thing they had talked about from their loud, endless conversations. Again, not because of the alcohol. She spoke perfect English, drank tequila with salt and lemon and occasionally went home with random guys. How on earth should anybody see her as Chinese?

But she was Chinese, at least when it hit her that she hadn't talked to her mother for quite some time. It was always her mother calling her, seldom the other way around, except that time she lost her credit cards and needed

her mom to suspend the account for her. She was robbed on the street, but she told her it was just stolen. Her mom was neurotic enough even when nothing happened. It would be the case for anyone, if your little girl was in a country where those campus shooting cases took place almost once a month.

She was always happy when her mother called, at least for the first few minutes. Then she would start to worry about the insanely expensive phone bill while her mother could not stop talking about the trivial things that happened in her family. Her distraction or impatience would soon be sensed, and her mother would abruptly wrap up those stories she carefully selected and wrote down to tell. Yi felt bad every time she hung up the phone, but it would be exactly the same for the next call.

Right now, walking on this creepy street, Yi wanted to call her mother so badly. Just to talk to her, to listen to her voice. But unfortunately, she was not drunk enough, never drunk enough. Her mother would ask why she called at four in the morning, then she would probably start to cry, and that would do no good to nobody. Or she could call her boyfriend, the one that always kissed too hard. But then she had to make up a story about why she was calling. That 'because I miss you' shit wouldn't work this time.

Sunflower Seeds

Diana Frederiksen

A fortune-teller once told me
I am confident
But I hesitate sometimes
I once stole sunflower seeds
Porcelain crafted, village painted
From an installation at the Tate
By Ai Weiwei
My curator friend told me it'd be fine
I took some and ran
Felt guilty, yet proud
Scared I'd get caught
Happy I took the risk
I carry them with me, proving
The benefits of not hesitating too much

The Sunk Good Store

Dumalagan Wong, Winsome

Chan Sum-yuet pushed the heavy door of the McDonald's, and then started to scan through this rare old-style interior. Everything was so dark under her sun glasses. She lowered them a bit and started searching from the right hand side. Um...Old woman...That woman eating a sundae with her fake teeth? Naaa...How about that one sitting with a kid? Seems not...That one picking her teeth with a tooth pick? Ahhh Nope...Oh should be that woman reading the book at the corner by the window. She mentioned the author to me, a female author? What's the name? Chang Ah-ling? Or Chan Ai-ling? She walked towards where the old woman was sitting, and stopped to see the book. Oh ya...Chang Ai-ling's Love in a Fallen City. This name seems so familiar, is she that writer always mentioned by my Chinese teacher before? Whatsoever, just a has-been that's loved by the older generations anyway. She slightly lifted her sun glasses and sat opposite the old woman.

'Ms Lee, right? Have a look.' She put the big paper bag onto the table. What an interesting old woman, light-blue dress with her silver linings softly laying on her shoulder. Deep double eye-lids behind the frameless eyeglasses, tall nose and a familiar red birthmark on her neck.

'Nice to meet you, Ms Chan,' Ms Lee placed a book mark, closed the book and smiled, showing her dimples on her wrinkled face and squinted her eyes. This young lady sitting opposite her isn't ordinary or at least pretending not to be. At least she seems not one of those whining girls you

would see everywhere, taking selfies, wearing cosmetic contact lenses, seeing nothing but themselves. A pink wig, round sunglasses, black punk sleeveless jacket and skirt and a black leather backpack. A lady around her early 20s with pointy chin and slim body, can't see her eyes but single-eye-lid almond eyes suit her, not so tall not so short, just like me when I was young. She gave an approving nod in her mind.

Ms Lee took out a yellow flair skirt, grey fitted jacket of Sincere Department and a pair of cat eyeglasses inside a brown leather box from the bag.

'I'm not afraid to tell you that I'm already 70 years old now. These were the popular fashion for office ladies in the 60s. I was still a young girl like you at that time,' Ms Lee folded the clothes and put them back into the bag.

'But to be frank, Ms Chan, I don't think these clothes deserve \$500. They're like phony products, not from the 60s either,' Ms Lee stared straight into Sum-yuet's eyes.

'Huh? Pardon?' Sum-yuet frowned.

'I don't think they deserve \$500. I'll pay it for \$300.'

'Ms Lee, I think you misunderstood something. It's not a market here. I'm not gonna cut the price. I've mentioned that in the advertisement. No bargaining,' Sum-yuet tried to calm her voice down. Suddenly this old woman in front of her became so ordinary like a random old woman you would encounter in the market filled with smell of fish, pork, vegetables and fruit.

'Young lady, in the advertisement you mentioned that you'll bring back

the best objects from memory, but I don't think these are real ones. They are just cheap clothes from Sham Shui Po imitating the nice high-class clothes from the past, am I right?' Ms Lee's voice was still as calm as a candle flame in a church.

'Hey Ah Po! You know what? You are too old to remember the right thing! These clothes were popular in the 50s not 60s. They would probably become old-fashioned like you by the 60s. Ha, fashionable office ladies would probably wear A-shaped clothes in the 60s,' Sum-yuet grabbed her fist hard under the table. What an old bitch! She thought. Who are you to doubt me?

'Leave, I'm not buying! Who are you to doubt my memory? You're not even in the world at that time. What an ignorant infant.' Ms Lee snapped, glaring at Sum-yuet.

Sum-yuet grabbed the bag and left, only leaving the *kok kok* sounds of her high heel boots.

'Sum-yuet, you are early to...' Not waiting her mother to finish, Sum-yuet had closed the door of her room already. By this time, she was no longer wearing her pink wig and punk clothes but in plain white T-shirt and short blue jeans. She would never let anyone discover she was making this business, especially her parents. 'Why are you wasting your time doing useless stuff? Better study harder, you are going to be a lawyer in four years' time.' She could already imagine what they would say if they knew.

'That old bitch...Wasting my time...Bad luck today...' Sum-yuet shook her head while she put her backpack onto the desk. Then she pulled out a

big wooden box from under her bed. She took the things from the paper bag and put them into a plastic bag labeled 'Ms Lee, 1960s, clothes' inside the box, together with around twenty other plastic bags of other cases in the past 6 months. She normally keeps the cases for 6 months in case her customers would have any additional or follow-up requirements. These files would be cleared very soon though.

'The Urban Renewal Authority has announced to cover a few more areas for redevelopment... ' The sound of TV News from the living room wouldn't leave Sum-yuet alone.

Gosh... Why do adults like destroying memories? Don't they feel how they are losing a part of themselves? It's just like staying in a place that doesn't belong to you. Like an astronaut observing another planet. What else could last in this world? Sum-yuet thought about her the pictures she drew when she was young. Those crappy trees, geometric animals and objects with hands and legs in unreasonable colors. The way she perceived and dreamed as a child. They were all gone, just because her mother wanted to clean up so called 'rubbish'. After losing these 'rubbish', she felt a part of her was being drawn into a vortex. Something was lost. Like a deserted forest, the leafy memories of her would be buried by only one slight blow of wind. She couldn't safeguard the forest anymore. It was the 4th of April, three years ago. Losing your childhood memory on Children's Day. Ironic huh? She'd imagine finding her drawings still being kept by the garbage collectors who'd keep unwanted papers for sale. She'd imagine her mother wrongly remember that they were thrown only. They were still somewhere at her home. Yea, she knew these would never happen. But maybe these could

happen to others. Those who are suffering the same as her, the fear of losing memory. The fear that nothing could prove a memory. Is something a memory or hallucination? You'd gradually get confused. Or the fear that one day you'll simply forget a memory and it will never be dug up. That's when she started the Sunk Good Store.

She posted posters on random streets, just to let people with luck to see it. After receiving suitable orders, she'll google-up the wanted objects according to the descriptions given by her customers. Usually those sunk goods ordered are inexpensive old goods like eyeglasses, notebooks, clocks, watches... To find cheap unwanted goods, you can visit Sham Shui Po, Mong Kok or morning markets where old people would sell unwanted old goods in a low price on the street from mid-night to early morning. You'll be surprised by the variety of goods there, like bracelets, old CDs, books, stationery, cups of different decades and styles. The possibility to get the target was around 40%. But now, thanks to the 'lovely tourism', more and more small stalls are selling those bored-to-death 'I Love HK' T-shirts or souvenirs. The possibility has lowered to 30% now. She has to wake up early to the morning market more often and had to leave home without being noticed by her parents. If she couldn't find the longed-for item second hand, she could only think of methods to imitate those goods. However, she couldn't do the same to herself, as she knew it was already gone and never could be found. The only thing she could do is not to own, then you'll never lose. Look at the neat tidy white room surrounding her, nothing extra, nothing to lose. That's right.

'Lee Fung-kiu! Have you collected the garbage of twenty-third floor?' a

woman shouted.

Sum-yuet followed the voice as she walked by the corridor, heading home from university. It was already a few days later since Sum-yuet met Ms Lee. But she never thought she would see Ms Lee again, especially in this way. Maybe that's why the birthmark on her neck looked so familiar. Unlike that old woman pretending to be elegant, Ms Lee tied her hair up with a bun and was wearing a blue polo-shirt with a company logo. She was bending to collect the garbage at the gate a few flats away from Sum-yuet's home, without any arrogance. Sum-yuet opened the door and went into her flat, it was none of her business anyway.

'Good evening, Mr Wong!' Sum-yuet heard Ms Lee greeting from a distance, she could imagine the bright beam she never had in front of Sum-yuet and the mildness she never showed.

Behind Ms Lee's smile was her tiredness. Although she only had to work at night that day and she spent the day reading Chang Ai-ling's book, she couldn't help herself from staying in a world outside the book. What that ignorant girl said a few days ago had stirred up fragments of Ah-Wei looking at her through the opposite gate as a kid, with the corridor between them, him waiting her after school, his nearly bald head every time he cut his hair, gradually his more masculine body, soft mustache, unstable voice, then the tattoo he had on his tan skin, putting his arm around her shoulder, saying he would protect her...Oh...That's enough...That arrogant kid, dare to challenge my memory...Lee Fung-kiu, I'm telling you, only the dresses and the cat eyeglasses are missing, it'll be completed soon. Very soon.

Before going to her bed, Sum-yuet received a phone call from Ms Lee, asking her to meet the next day at the same location.

‘Six hundred,’ Sum-yuet said as she sat opposite Ms Lee, in her pink wig and sunglasses.

‘Hey, isn’t it \$500?’ Ms Lee frowned and raised her voice.

‘You wasted my time, it’s service charge.’

‘It’s the problem of your products, not mine! Do you think I really want your products? They are just rubbish to me, I just pity you for no one buying from you.’

‘How about making a deal? Tell me why you want these objects. If I’m satisfied, I’ll sell it at \$400. Fair enough, huh?’ Sum-yuet crossed her arms and leaned backwards, showing a victorious sneer.

‘I have no time to play with you, Sai Lo.’

‘Ah Po, you think I have the time to bargain with you? Bye for now.’ Sum-yuet stood up and grabbed the bag. Yes I am playing, I am making a bet. She walked towards the door, not turning back. She could feel Ms Lee staring at her back, no response, no response, still no response...

‘Wait.’ Ms Lee mumbled.

‘What is it now?’ Sum-yuet slowly turned back. She snapped her finger in her heart.

‘I’ll tell you. Take your promise.’

Sum-yuet sat.

‘My reason is simple, I was an office lady in the 60s and I miss those old days.’

‘You are hiding something aren’t you? Were you married?’

‘NO.’

‘Lying.’

‘I said NO!’

‘Then who’s this boy.’ Sum-yuet took out a yellowish old picture. A young woman with red birthmark on her neck was standing with three kids. Long hair, long nose and deep double-eye lids. It was taken in front of a fish pond. Clearly it was a shiny day, they were frowning with grins. Sum-yuet found it the night before, when she was throwing away files of cleared cases.

‘Where on earth did you get this picture!’ Ms Lee shouted as she tried to take it.

‘Lee Fung-kiu, who is he?’ Sum-yuet sat back to escape from Ms Lee’s grab.

‘Give it to me!’ Ms Lee leaned in again.

‘He’s your son, right? I don’t think you could be a mother and an office lady at the same time in the sixtyish. How pathetic, you were an office lady but now you are a garbage collector?’ Sum-yuet herself felt weird with her harsh tone, but she couldn’t think of any way to force out the truth. She wanted to know if her help was deserved. This wasn’t the kind of order she hated and would reject, those orders from kids who broke up with their lovers and cried for certain rings, necklaces or watches their lovers used to

wear. But then they'll forget about it a few weeks later and they are very willing to forget about it. In the first few cases she accepted, half of them cancelled the order very soon. Something's important in Ms Lee's memory. Sum-yuet might be able to help both her former customer and Ms Lee with their memories. That will be great. But this old woman seems denying it. It should stay, why reject it? Maybe I should be harsher? Like breaking the dusted and scratched glass to see what's in it.

'How the hell do you know? Ah! That girl staring at me yesterday night! It's you right? What an impolite child! I said I was an office lady!'

'No you never were! You don't even know their costumes in the 60s!'

'I was! I said I was! I went to office every morning at 8 o'clock, then I would type and type for the whole morning. After that I would have lunch with my colleague in a nearby *cha lou*. In the afternoon we'll work for a few more hours until...' Ms Lee explained.

'Oh gosh, stop making up stories. You gotta be well-educated at that time then. A woman like you could become office lady at that time? Nooooooo.' Sum-yuet forced out a laughter but stopped when she saw Ms Lee's face.

Ms Lee's eyes widen but were staring nowhere. Her lips trembled but saying nothing.

'Eh...I just hate people manipulating and disrespecting memories. Your son was my client 6 months ago. He requested the dress you wore in that picture. Hey...you alright?' Sum-yuet softened her voice and waved her

hand in front of Ms Lee.

She looked pale, her eyes were red and watery. Ms Lee was trying to find the right words to say, but it was like catching fish with her bare hands. The words kept slipping away.

Sum-yuet sighed and slowly gave the yellowish picture to Ms Lee.

Ms Lee slowly turned her sight on the picture. She looked at it for a while and gradually took it with her wrinkled hand. She remembered this picture. That was her second son's 7th birthday. They went to Kowloon Park which that time was very new and popular. The kids were jumping everywhere, exclaiming at every single species they saw, cranes, ducks, parrots, turtles...Nowadays, she didn't think young people would still want to go there. And that green dress she was wearing, was a gift from her Ah-Wei, her former husband.

'How does he look now?' Ms Lee finally broke the silence,

'Um...I remember meeting him at the MTR station. He was tall with broad shoulder, wore eyeglasses and suit. Hanging the jacket on his arm. He's got dark skin, that kind of healthy skin color, with his hair gelled all back. His impression to me is quite deep cause he looked so smart and seems so tender with his order, a dress from his memory...'

'He's my son. For 30 years, I haven't seen him. I left them when the youngest was 15, oldest was 22...'

A few months before she left, the oldest son was killed by heroin. That morning, his room was filled with pungent and rotten smell. She hadn't seen

him for a few days and thought he was out, but now she saw him lying still on his bed, a rat on his chest, his pupils enlarged, white powders around his nostrils, dried white liquid from his widen mouth. A silent and cold farewell. That was 1984, the signing year of Sino-British Joint Declaration. Like Hong Kong returning to China, she thought she would be returning to a more normal life very soon.

‘Ya, that’s what I call, a normal life,’ Ms Lee said.

‘Normal life,’ Sum-yuet repeated.

Ms Lee’s husband Ah-Fu was a triad society member. They were neighbours since they were young, from living in wooden houses to public housings in Tsz Wan Shan. He said that being a triad society member could protect them. They got married when she was eighteen. By that time, she was a factory worker for 4 years already. ‘Ha, and you’re right, how could I be an office lady?’ Ms Lee smiled bitterly, ‘Sometimes, we had to attend those triad functions like birthday celebrations. Sometimes, I’d see my husband get hurt, he’d take drugs sometimes too. So you know where my son learned to take drugs. Though life was quite nice with him. He was responsible and nice to me.’ She recalled the times when he would buy, steal or pick her books, knowing that she loved reading. He would even teach her with a dictionary. While they were reading, they would watch their children sleep, watch their heaving chests and touch their wet and oily hair.

‘But you left them.’

When her sons became older, she went to work as a shopkeeper in a bookstore, there she met a white-collar who worked nearby. He was a shy

man and was a few years younger than her. At that time there were more and more young office lady, they looked so confident, like they were living under sunshine. 'But I'm just like living in the shadow. How could I tell others about my family and my future? Tell them about my husband and my children who were going to join the triad society?' Ms Lee continued, 'Then this man courted me and I left with him. I was vulnerable after my son's death. But after one year of living together, he immigrated to Canada with another young woman, and now I don't even remember his face. Pathetic right? I was finally being left.' Ms Lee forced out a trembling smile again and looked down.

'And that's why you want to act as nothing had ever happened? That you were already an office lady from the very beginning, having a bright normal life?' Though Ms Lee was looking down, Sum-yuet could see her watery eyes. No tears falling as if they were already dried up.

Ms Lee nodded, 'I didn't bring anything with me when I left home...not even pictures of my children, just for a whole new life. And when that man left, I was all by myself. In order to marry my first husband, I argued with my family and lost contact since then. I had nothing left. Nothing at all. But that's good isn't it? I can construct a totally new memory. Memory that I would like to have. Being an educated office lady sounds great right?'

'But you would be lying to yourself. You know you weren't.' Sum-yuet thought of her former customer Mr Yim. He ordered a notebook where he used to draw his stories many years ago. He threw it away when he decided to give up his dream as a comics artist and live a so called normal

life. Just to earn a living and live on. He did different jobs later on. Yet after all these years he still couldn't convince himself to forget about it, to forget about the failure he thought he faced. He gave her the picture of the notebook, the leather cover of it has an Italic 'Y'. Sum-yuet had to ask her only close friend who studies design to follow that pattern and laser print on the piece of leather Sum-yuet found. Sum-yuet paid her a little but didn't mention about the deal. Then, she wet some papers and dried them under the sun to make them yellowish and sewed them with the leather cover. However, she could never recover what was inside the notebook. He accepted it. 'Little girl, I don't expect myself to be this calm when I see this notebook again. Maybe the memory never faded away. Maybe something would stay no matter what. Thanks anyway.' He said. 'Something would stay.' Sum-yuet wasn't convinced by this at that time, now it seems to be right though.

'But what can I do? I have nothing left...' Ms Lee said at length. For an uneducated middle-age woman like her who only studied until primary three, what could she do? Even those books she was reading, she still had to check the dictionary or guess all the time, just in order to be more literate to pass time. 'I wouldn't have a blissful life at all, no money, no strength, no knowledge, I've been a waitress, then when I get older, I could only be a garbage collector. Can't I have a little bit blissful time even in my imagination? Can't I?'

Sum-yuet wanted to answer her but when she thought of her tired face collecting garbage, she couldn't say anything.

'Anyway, these objects that I collected from the garbage or from buying,

could help me construct it. Especially when I got older, I wouldn't have clear mind. I would always believe in these objects. I would say, oh ya, I was an office lady when I was young, I like reading books, Chang-Ai-ling's... Isn't that a great memory to bring with you into the coffin?'

'But if you have a chance to go back, to stay with your children, will you take it? I mean, I have your son's contact number. You can call him...'

Sum-yuet suggested.

'Young lady, will that help? It'll just remind me of the past.'

'Lee Fung-kiu, do you really hate staying with them? No blissful moments at all? Seeing how your son tried to remember you, I feel bad for him. Or tell me, what you hate about your past is the decision of leaving them? Following another man because of so called 'normal' life? And now, I don't think you are gaining it either. Living in your own drama.' Sum-yuet questioned. She was in fact surprised by Ms Lee's answer. She thought she would be very pleased to call, feel touched and beam while reaching out her hands for the contact.

Regretted the decision of leaving them? This struck Ms Lee. She thought of the nights when she was in those tattooed arms, times when he would carry the plastics holding vegetables, pork, fruits and fish for her, times when the kids would hold her hands, times when the kids would help massage her, times when they would appreciate her cooking, times when they would have a night walk at the central football court, times...when her youngest son knelt to beg her stay when she leaving, only the youngest son was there when she left, she couldn't imagine how Ah-Wei would react when

he got back home that night...Maybe trying so badly to find her? Calling up her friends? Or just remaining silent and locked himself up in the room? How did they live on these years?...

Seeing Ms Lee tapping her fingers on the table, seeing the loss of directions in her eyes, Sum-yuet couldn't think of any advice. She herself wasn't much better. They both knew how vulnerable memory could be, it could slip away silently, it could be twisted unconsciously, or it may stay, only to dig a greater hole in oneself. Lee Fung-kiu was living in her own drama, and Sum-yuet was avoiding a drama. In these few years, Sum-yuet tried not to buy extra products, especially souvenirs. She tried not to treasure a particular moment, just treat them as normal times. Then it would hurt less when you feel you've forgotten something, because nothing is important or special. She didn't make a lot of friends since then either, as when relationship changes, memories may kill. Anyway, she's not those talkative outgoing popular kid from the very beginning already. Sometimes she'll imagine what it is like to have loads of memories with friends. Seeing some old or middle-age people smiling while they see the sunk goods related to their friends, doesn't it hurt? Aren't you afraid these years to see those memories getting further and further away from you? Sum-yuet would ask in her heart. Now she recalled them, they've given her the most obvious answer already.

'The contact and the clothes,' Ms Lee paused and breathed in, 'I'm not going to take them.'

Sum-yuet was going to give her the bag. She stopped and looked up.

‘Sorry for wasting your time, I can still pay for the clothes. But I’m not turning back, nor pretending that I had a normal life. It’s my only way to be responsible to them and my past, to carry this old memory with me.’ Ms Lee said.

Sum-yuet was still holding the paper bag and looking at her, not knowing how to react.

‘Young lady, how do you look like behind those sunglasses?’ Ms Lee asked.

‘I’m like planting daffodils in a desert. To create people’s garden. But now seems like it’s just a comfort. What people want is not the daffodils, but the feeling of daffodils in their memories. The smell, the image, the texture... If they treasure them enough, they will always be there. They actually don’t need me planting daffodils, right?’ Sum-yuet said as she took off her wig and eye glasses, showing her almond eyes and black short hair.

They left, passing through the huge McDonald and Friends painting, the peach square tiles and the brown Jukebox hung on the wall. Some kids were enjoying their toys and meals beside their grandparents. Sum-yuet looked at them. Will they remember their times with their grandparents when they grow up? Or do the grandparents still remember the times being a kid?

‘This shop will undergo renovation soon. We apologise for the inconvenience caused. New McDonald’s is coming.’ A notice was stuck on the glass door.

‘Where are you going now?’ Ms Lee asked.

‘Maybe close down Sunk Good Store?’ Sum-yuet thought as she looked at the advertisement on the street lamp they just passed by: *The Sunk Good Store. Bringing You Back the BEST Objects From Memory.*

Seraph

Gershom Tse

It's been just over a month since I last saw him.

He had arrived early. He was coming to discuss his final essay. I was just wrapping up a dead-end conversation with Cathy from the same writing class when I saw behind her, through the frosted glass his silhouette gathering like a cloud and I was flustered by it. Yes I was expecting him, but the timing was unexpected. It threw me off.

Small, minute stuff like that can often startle me. I guess I'm just naturally nervous. I am and have always been, like an elephant easily unnerved by mice, or a disturbed child troubled by his sixth sense.

This is not totally a metaphor, because I actually think about ghosts quite often. I used to be worse, and I'd like to think as I age I'd also grow out of those hallucinations, but the truth is, they still visit me. I pretend they don't bother me, but, truth be told, they still make me anxious sometimes. Although, over the years I have learned to deal with them, to keep them under control.

My eyes were drawn to the blur that was him. His name was Jonathan, but I'd always thought he could've done better with 'Casper' or 'Freddie'. His build was too slight for the name 'Jonathan'. He was like a spirit imprisoned in a mortal coil. His soul was a seraph though—I could tell—if it could be set free.

His wraith-like shadow hovered back and forth a couple times,

supposedly considering whether to interrupt or not. He actually had interrupted me already even if he didn't want to, and I hope he didn't know that I was slightly smitten by him, that he had that sort of effect on me. If he knew, I'd have to kill myself, out of shame.

My glance at him obviously wasn't discreet enough. Cathy noticed, because she turned her head to trace my distraction. I didn't want her to see what it was, so without much thinking I hastily said 'eh...eh...d'you not see it? Euthanasia is not a *choice*. No...no...I don't mean *choice*. I mean *right*. It's not a *right*...'

With that I managed to draw her attention back on me. 'Why is it not?' she turned and asked, having been pulled back into our battle to outwit each other. She was far from being a worthy opponent though.

Cathy had always thought she was all that, and that everybody would agree with *whatever* she said. She had thought her stance on euthanasia would speak for itself, but I was having none of it. To me, she had only bad assumptions, plus she barely had a name. It should be *Catherine*, like my mother, but I'm glad she hadn't chosen Catherine, because she was nothing like my mother.

'You didn't even get to choose when you were *born*, so *choosing life* isn't even a basic human right. Why would you then suppose *choosing death* is a right?' I retorted.

'But...but...' Cathy was back on the verge of tears. She'd been so sure what she wrote would work on everyone that she didn't have a plan B. My mother had always taught me about having a plan B.

‘But what? You can't just *state* 'euthanasia is a right', as if everyone agrees with you on that already. You can make that claim but you'll have to *prove* it, and some people will disagree with you on that, I for one. Look, ultimately there's no right or wrong to this. That's why it's another one of those on-going debates. It's not your job to make that final call. Your job is to state your stance on it and try to convince others to agree with you. Does that make sense?’

She sobbed, but she didn't answer.

‘Think about it. And do me a favour: don't write *the government should* this and *the government should* that. Don't get the government involved. I'm not interested in who you want to burden with responsibility. If you wanna write about euthanasia, write about euthanasia, but I'm only interested in your opinion and not your politics on the subject,’ I said while I rose from my seat to hint that she should be going.

‘Thanks...’ Her reluctance spoke louder than gratitude.

As the opaque door opened, Jonathan glanced at Cathy and her teary eyes but Cathy paid no attention to him as she hurried out of the way. Jonathan turned towards me with lowered chin, raised eye brows and a quizzical look. I looked at his eyes, the right one slightly smaller than the left, and thought either he was questioning what I had done to Cathy, or he knew what and wondered whether he was about to face the same.

I'll admit I hadn't been in the best of moods. Yes, I could've let it go and not call Cathy out for false logic, but I couldn't restrain myself. On a

sunnier day I probably could, but Cathy had always been a snob in class and I enjoyed punishing her a little bit for that. I know in some small ways I'd have to pay for it eventually.

Jonathan was different. He mostly kept to himself and avoided controversies. He wasn't the type you'd want to crush because he lacked that ego altogether. He was the underdog you'd want to root for. His smile was most endearing. It was always sheepish, as if he constantly had something to apologize for. I quickly switched back to a cheerful tone. 'How are you, Jonathan?' I asked with a smile.

'Fine,' he answered, coyly, flashing half a smile.

He was wearing khaki trousers and blue checked shirt with sleeves folded almost up to his elbows, like he had just stepped out of a GAP commercial. He had the kind of youthful elegance to remind me why to be male is to be more beautiful—the same reason why stags wear antlers like a crown and does don't, or why peacocks are cloaked in extravagant covert feathers but peahens aren't.

I looked at his slenderness and hoped that it was because his body wouldn't soak up all he'd eaten and not because he was living in insufficiency. No, neither of those were the reason. He was slender because he wouldn't consume more than his share, that's why; I could tell.

'How's your essay?' I asked. That's what he was here for.

'I'm...not sure.'

‘Not sure about what?’

‘Not sure if I’m doing it right,’ he said while his left arm reached all the way across to scratch the patch of hair above his right ear.

‘Well, let’s start with your topic. What are you writing about?’

‘Teenage addiction on smartphones.’

‘OK, that’s a start. Have you found some data on it?’

‘Yea...I’ve done some research.’

‘OK, what specifically about the addiction do you want to write about?’

‘I don’t know. Maybe how teenagers should use their smartphone less?’

‘Oh that won’t work, will it? That’s like saying the solution to an addiction is *abstinence*. It’s hard to make that case.’

‘Yea...’ He caved too easily.

There was a moment of eerie silence as each of us pondered how to salvage the essay. Then he broke the silence.

‘Actually, I did think about writing about something else,’ he said, slowly, almost with reluctance.

‘Yea? What was it?’

‘Masturbation.’

I wanted to tell Jonathan if he wanted to write about masturbation he should. If he wanted to talk about sex he could. It was natural and it was

healthy and we should not be squeamish about it. This was a university, a place where people could research sex and sexuality. There was Alfred Kinsey. There was Freud.

‘Sex is what makes us who we are. It is fascinating to study why we think the way we do about sex, and why we behave the way we do sexually...’ I said as I was interrupted by a knock on my door and a looming shadow behind the glass that seemed to have gathered out of nowhere. Across my desk, Jonathan was no longer there.

‘Come in,’ I called. It was Professor James Davis, head of the department.

‘Were you talking to yourself?’ he asked.

‘Oh...no...no. I was on the phone.’

Jonathan has stopped visiting since; now I only remember how he used to haunt me, how he was someone you could talk to about life and death, and about how to live and how to die, and I wonder why he deserved to die. I also think about how he took his own life. I had known about his chronic depression, so I was always careful not to startle him, lest he thought he couldn't visit me again.

It makes me sad to think, though, how could he, a beautiful spirit with eternal youth and so careful with every bite he took from the world, be made to return everything he had taken so soon. Meanwhile, out there, so many of us continue to consume without thinking about other people. Why

should we be allowed to carry on. That's so unfair.

Professor Davis knocks again. Holding in his hand the final grades of my writing class that I turned in a day ago, he asks, 'Who's Jonathan Lin? You gave him an *A*, but he's not on the list.'

Creating a Sweet

Celia Leung

You first need a guy to help
buy some maple sugar.

He hands you a cup of water
with passion.

Mixture of maple sugar,
you touch, sticks
your two fingers together.

Sweet, sticky, sweet,
which you share
putting your fingers
into his mouth, tasting
the sweetness.

Boil the maple sugar,

steam rises and warms.

He stirs, the sugar dissolves.

Your man holds your hand,

together you spoon

into the heart-shaped mold.

To harden the sweet with time, to consolidate

you and him.

Blocked

Tsang Chiu Wai, Henry

Paul searched for ‘Ingrid Chung’ on Facebook. A long list of Ingrid Chung appeared on screen yet none of them appeared to be the girl he was looking for.

Shit! She blocked me, he thought.

A month ago, Paul added Ingrid on Facebook and they started chatting online every day during the public exam period. Both were form six students and taking the exam, HKDSE, for university entry. The day Paul finished DSE, he expressed his love to her and asked her to hang out together. Ingrid had not finished hers, though. Paul insisted on asking her out until he could no longer find her on Facebook.

You have finished your exam, I haven’t... you just care about yourself... you could have said it later... I have been a bit sick... your message... made me feel worse... I can’t really focus on revision now...

Ingrid’s earlier message was like a sharp knife stabbing Paul’s innermost. Paul was trying to recall the whole message even though he felt ashamed about it. He could not find the message anymore after she blocked him. He could barely find any trace of her after she blocked him. What did she mean by ‘You could have said it later?’ Was she implying she liked me as well? But she’s already blocked me.

He sighed, and leaned back in his black high-back chair. He looked up at

the ceiling of his room and sighed again. He kept his eyes open, staring at the sprinkler on the ceiling. He stared at it as if waiting for the sprinkler to tell him what to do next.

He closed his eyes; Ingrid's profile picture on Facebook popped up in his mind. She had an oval face and she wore her hair in a fringe. Her teeth were exceptionally bright and in good order when she smiled, as if there were transparent braces supporting her teeth. The dimple crept into her cheek as she smiled. Paul always imagined how she looked if she took off the black glasses. She was wearing the uniform of Diocesan Girls' School, red tie, blue shirt and grey pullover. Her picture was clear in his mind because he tried to draw her face but gave up; he had never learnt drawing before.

Logging in Facebook again, he went into 'settings' and changed the password to: 20120428

Ingrid blocked him on 28 April 2012.

Paul looked out the window and saw the blue sky with white clouds moving above. The sun was shining bright, but Paul's world seemed to be the exact opposite. He didn't understand why she blocked him. If she really hates him, why did she talk to him through email every day during the exam period? He didn't figure out why she was reluctant to meet him. He just needed someone to tell him why.

Paul's Facebook update at 12:12, 29 April 2012:

Why am I so obsessed with you and only you?
when there are so many nice girls out there
I wish I had a function in my brain
that could delete you entirely from my memory
I will not look back, not the past one month
I will not desire that you unblock me
If it's meant to happen, it will be
If it's not meant to be, you will not possess it whatsoever

At night, Paul's mother came back from work. Paul was sitting in front of the computer without realizing his mother had knocked on the door for more than two minutes already. He couldn't focus on anything; all he thought about was her. His mother's footstep drew closer and closer and finally reached him. She wanted to use the computer for a while. Paul had to leave the seat and do something else.

If he could make a wish, he would wish to have another computer at home for his parents. The only thing he feared was that his mother would open that file. There was a file in Paul's desktop called Classmates. The file had photos of his last day as a form six student at Ma On Shan St Joseph Secondary School. Inside the file, there is another file called Untitled. There were only four photos in the file Untitled. The photos were all of a girl. And

all the photos were copied from Facebook, from Ingrid's album, before Ingrid blocked him. Paul would turn on the computer and just gaze at Ingrid's photo for minutes, imagining her talking to him. He didn't have to do it anymore; he could picture her face in detail whenever he wanted now. Her dimples, her bright teeth, her fringe...

Paul walked into his room from time to time pretending to find something to check whether his mother opened his secret file.

Paul's Facebook update at 10:25, 3 May 2012:

Forgive me for my frivolous demand

Forgive me for my love

Please don't disappear from my life

Your refusal incurred the eternal death of my soul

Your refusal incurred the misery inside me

I am falling into the abyss of despair and misery

Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris

(Misery loves company*)

All I can hear are the echoes of loneliness and depression

My heart is torn apart and you will never know

Do you even care?

It was noon, 1 June.

Paul telephoned his best friend – Lam – to ask him out to chat at two at Lung Hung Estate Community Centre.

The Community Centre opened at two on weekdays. It was playing the song *Rascal* by Ronald Cheng. Paul chose the red sofa as usual and sat down. Lam arrived just a minute after Paul.

‘What the hell! You look so depressed, *kai zhi*,’ said Lam. Paul had black rim around his eyes. He had more pimples on his cheek than ever. It rested against his face with dispirited sogginess.

‘So, who is she?’ said Lam.

Paul told him everything from the very beginning where he added Ingrid on Facebook until she blocked him at the end of April.

‘You are crazy. You are totally insane now...’ said Lam, shaking his head.

‘I never told you I am normal,’ said Paul and sighed.

‘I really don’t understand you. What do you like about her? You haven’t even met her. How do you know what she’s like in reality? When have you become so blind, huh?’ said Lam.

‘Look, she’s been supporting me throughout DSE. Come on. It is DSE. It’s the exam that determines your future. And she gave up her revision time to talk to me; she could just ignore me but she didn’t. She was really helpful and kind. I talked to her every single day during DSE. She was my emotional

support. Don't forget she's from DGS. She probably aims at HKU or CUHK so she needs time to study. And I kept annoying her all the time. She's just too nice.'

'Oh, but she might be different in reality. And she talked to you maybe just because she wanted to find something fun to do apart from studying for the exam. Don't take it too seriously, man. By the way, do you have her photo?' said Lam.

'I have some in my computer. But I can't show you now; she's already blocked me on Facebook,' said Paul

'WHAT? Do you mean you copied her photo and save it in your desktop?' said Lam.

Paul nodded.

'Oh my God. You are really acting like a crazy man,' said Lam. 'What do you plan to do next?'

'I want to meet her. I really want to meet her. Even though she hates me, I still want to meet her. At least I should say thank you to her, don't you think? She kept supporting me when I was most in need. She gave up her time on revision and helped me with Physics, Mathematics and English. She didn't have to, but she just did. I feel I really should thank her,' said Paul.

'But she blocked you already. How can you contact her? And by the way, she blocked you. Do you think she will come out and meet you when she blocks you on Facebook?' said Lam.

Paul told Lam his plan. He would sneak into Ingrid's graduation dinner.

‘But that’s insane,’ said Lam. Lam shouted over his laughter.

Paul’s Facebook update at 16:53, 27 June 2012:

I’d rather look back on my life and say ‘I can’t believe I did that.’ rather than ‘I wish I’d done that.’ This is probably the last chance I’ll have to meet you. I will go and find you no matter what, or I will regret it forever.

The Graduation Dinner for Diocesan Girls’ School was held at InterContinental Grand Stanford Hong Kong on 27 June 2012. Paul was there.

Paul also added Ingrid’s classmates on Facebook to obtain the information about the Graduation dinner. The event should start at 6:30pm. Paul was wearing a suit and a pair of black Salvatore Ferragamo shoes which he spent most of his pocket money that year on. Standing alone in the lobby since 5:30pm, his eyes were rolling and searching for the shadow of Ingrid. He had never seen her in person; he had only seen the pictures of her on Facebook. He found a brown sofa and sat down. The sofa was facing the entrance of the hotel. *Perfect, I don’t have to stand there and look for her.* His heart was pounding whenever a bunch of teenage girls came in. Time passed slower than usual as he waited.

What if I couldn’t recognize her? What if she isn’t even a student at DGS? What if she has been lying to me all along? What if...

His pulse quickened at the thought of it.

No, she can’t be lying. It was so real on her Facebook. How can you

fake it? It's impossible. Easy, Paul, relax. It's okay.

Half an hour passed, still no sign of her.

A lady sitting next to him on the sofa was tapping on her iPhone. She was in a black long dress like Audrey Hepburn in the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, only that she was middle-aged. She suddenly turned her head and looked at Paul.

'You seem nervous, young man,' the middle-aged lady said, her voice was like Maggie Smith in the Harry Potter movie series.

'Yeah, a bit. I am waiting for someone,' he said.

'Oh, me too. I am waiting for my daughter,' she smiled. 'Are you waiting for a girl you like? Young boys always look like this when they wait for girls they fancy. Haha...' her cheerful laughter made other people sitting on the sofa smile, including Paul.

The clicking sound of high-heel shoes filled the lobby. A bunch of young girls stepped in the lobby. The middle-aged lady rose to her feet and walked towards the girls.

'Ingrid,' she said.

'Mama,' a young girl said with a clear and melodious voice.

Paul stared at them.

It's her. Wait, Ingrid called that middle-aged woman 'mama'? That woman is her mother? Oh my god, it couldn't be!

Paul felt his hair stand on end. A stiff smile froze across his face.

Ingrid wore a black slip nightgown. She looked exactly like in her profile picture on Facebook. She seemed more beautiful than in the pictures, and she was.

Paul's head was spinning.

Ingrid and her mother were talking and Ingrid stretched her neck and looked at him. Their eyes met. Ingrid stared at him for a moment, and then her mouth fell open in awe.

Oh no, she must have recognized me.

Paul was standing still and Ingrid moved her eyes away and continued to talk to her mother. Her mother gave her a bag and then left. Ingrid watched her mother leaving until she totally disappeared from her sight. She turned around and stared at Paul. She walked towards him.

'Paul Lam?' Ingrid wanted to make sure of it.

Paul nodded. 'Ingrid?' he said.

'Don't say anything. Just follow me,' she looked around, trying to find a place without her classmates. Ingrid led him to the corner of the lobby.

'I thought I made it clear two months ago. I thought you knew I didn't want to talk to you anymore and meet you in reality,' she folded her arms.

'You said I could have told you that later? What did you mean? Did you mean you had feelings for me as well but the only thing is that I did say it at the right time?' he said.

'You are thinking too much. I had no feelings for you from the very

beginning. I just thought it was interesting to talk to a stranger. It was just for fun,' she said.

'Just for fun?' he frowned.

'Yah, just for fun. I don't know what you are doing here and what you want. If you want to be friends with me in reality, sorry, no,' she shook her head.

'You hate me,' he said.

'No, I don't hate you. I just think we shouldn't meet in reality. If you don't start the conversation on Facebook, I wouldn't know you in reality. If we know each other on internet, we should just stay inside the boundary of internet. You and I are not supposed to meet in real world,' she said.

Paul wanted to tell her how he felt for the two months after she blocked him on Facebook. He wanted to tell her that she was the emotional support for him and he wanted to thank her for that. But all the words couldn't come out of his mouth after Ingrid said she didn't want to meet him in reality. Paul wanted to say something, but no words came out.

'If you have nothing to say, I'd better go and join the Graduation Dinner which is about to start,' she turned around and ready to leave.

'Ingrid, I am in love with you,' he grabbed her hand. 'It may seem unrealistic but that's how I feel, literally...'

'I already have a boyfriend,' she said. 'Please let go of me.'

Shocked, he stood still. His hands loosed.

She walked towards the stairs in the middle of the lobby and disappeared in Paul's sight.

Paul sat down at the corner, silent. He feared to be seen by classmates of Ingrid. He feared they will tease him. He feared girls that moment. He wished to disappear immediately. Tears rolled off his cheek. He couldn't help it. The tears in his eyes made his vision blurred.

Paul walked past the moonlit promenade and headed home. He stared at the Tolo Harbour as he walked; it was tranquil. Paul, for a split second, wanted to jump in the sea. The hotness of late June made him sweat. His sweat rolled off his cheek and neck. His shirt was half-wet. He turned on the computer and logged into Facebook when he arrived home; his parents were not back yet. He unfriended all the people he didn't know in reality. The number of friends reduced from 372 to 281.

'Pop'

One notification – Vickie Wong has accepted your friend request.

Who is Vickie Wong?

He clicked into the notification. Vickie Wong, from Diocesan Girls' School...

Oh my God! I don't even know who I added on Facebook. She must be those I randomly added before.

He went to Vickie Wong's Facebook wall and unfriended her. He didn't want to develop another friendship totally based on Facebook inbox, not

anymore. It was surreal and he started to hate those kinds of relationships. He didn't want to be blocked again.

Paul's Facebook update at 23:26, 27 June 2012:

We learn by doing things we have never done before. If we didn't do anything, we wouldn't be anybody. There's no need to regret what we did in the past; the past shaped our present. Tomorrow is gonna be a brand new start.

Mangosteen

Sebastian Bitticks

Zhenzhen taught me this,
how to loosen one gossamer heart
from its nest in the rind
and hold it out between thumb
and forefinger for another to take.
She passed the first through my lips,
but soon we filled whole tables
with flesh-tender shells, drawing up
the next fruit with a finger still in our mouths
as though the supply in the sack at our feet

was endless. At the grocery this week,
I see them in graceless purple heaps,
dumped as though they'd been
shucked already. I take one, pinch it,
feel the firm give of its porous hide.

They have come back into season.
At home with a bushel I cup the first
and begin to work her method:

Hold it with the tips of your fingers.
Press together and upwards
until the hidden seam opens.
Inside nest its sweet halves
like silk worms dreaming,
fattened on a greenhouse diet
and valued only for their fleece.

A Breakfast

Wai Mei Lui, Pinky

I was having my breakfast in the cozy but nearly abandoned coffee shop when she came to sit on the chair opposite me. Without introducing herself she asked if I ate tomatoes. I said yes, and she said because she did not like tomatoes, could I please eat all the slices on her plate for her. So I clamped her tomatoes in a chunk with my fork and knife and moved them to my plate. She then grasped the pepper bottle on the table and sprinkled it all over her British full breakfast until it was half-covered with the seasoning, and started eating.

The woman had an angular face with high cheekbones that could easily make people look older than they were. But with a head of furious bright red hair and the smooth skin that no amount of cream and special products could grant, it would be unfair to say she was over twenty-five. She was slitting her pepper-flaked scrambled egg with an increasing force that she could have been trying to cut open the white porcelain. I watched and replaced the coffee in front of her with my hot lemon tea.

The slitting halted. But instead of looking up, her eyes fell shut under her uncombed bangs. It took me a few seconds to realise she had started weeping though. She cried like she was holding back a dam – trying hard not to let the wall break, but her whole body was fracturing. From time to time some soft whimpers would escape despite her reluctant effort in sniffling them back, but she kept her eyes closed all the same. Apart from complying

with my non-existence, I could not think of a better way to console her, just to let that reservoir of reserve she had wanted so much control over to flood.

By the time she took a deep breath and opened her eyes, the cup of tea I'd been holding had turned lukewarm. Her eyes looked pale with the sunlight entering in from the glass window. Flashing under her still wet eyelashes, they were looking at me. She had a pair of almond-shaped eyes.

'Better now?' I placed a napkin beside her hand and nodded towards the black coffee at her right.

'Why did you swap our drinks?' she asked without answering my question, nor showed any attempt in drying her face.

'I like tea,' I said, and I did like the one she'd brought with her, extra lemon, no sugar.

'I don't drink coffee,' she brushed aside the notion in annoyance as if talking to herself, seemed to have forgotten that was what she ordered.

'What's your name?'

'My friends sometimes call me Onion.'

This cracked her up. 'Well, we're friends then,' she chuckled, 'and I know you pretty well. You're part of what I study.'

'What do you study?'

'Nutrition.'

I threw a look at her plate that was filled with half a bottle of black

pepper. 'I didn't know pepper was that good to our body.'

'And I've given you the only thing on my plate that merits the name healthy,' she tapped on the tomato slices in my dish using the back of her fork, obviously amused.

'Good. Now we're gonna become really old friends that live long,' I said.

Her lips widened into a big grin, pushing aside the two tracks of dried tears on her cheeks. She dragged the lemon tea towards her and started pressing the lemon in the cup with the teaspoon. I ordered a new coffee.

'But we don't live to stay healthy, do we?' she suddenly became melancholy in the making of my new drink. 'We live to have fun.'

'Without a healthy body we can't have fun,' I said, moving away the empty cup to one side of the table.

She looked away and casted her gaze outside the window. I thanked the arrival of my second coffee.

'My dog died yesterday. And he left,' she began in a low voice after a long silence.

I pictured a dog lying on the floor, its eyes closed. Then a man or perhaps the dog going out from the door. The images did not quite work together. 'Some point in life we all leave, and we all die,' I said.

'And does that have anything to do with what we do?' she asked. 'That girl I met at the park was 26 when she had cancer and she died. She didn't even smoke. My dog was a good dog, she had never eaten chocolate and she died. *He* cheated on his wife and all the time she knows nothing, but he lives.'

Why doesn't he just get hit by a car and fucking die?' she talked as fast as her mind could run, although she followed no path. With that final remark, she was heaving and staring at me as if asking why I was still alive.

I told her I would look for a car when one day I cheated on my wife.

Her lips twitched, but did not at once curl. She hummed a laugh, popped up her arms on the table with her fingertips arching against her forehead. More hummed laughs. I could see her smiling with her head down.

'Are you married?' she flicked up a look after a while and asked.

I showed her my left hand with that barely visible mark of lighter skin around the root of my fourth finger. 'Once was,' I said.

'Do you love your ex-wife?'

'I did.'

'Did you leave her for another woman?'

'Hard to say.'

'*Hard to say,*' she cut in. 'What's so hard to say? The fact that all men are the same? They get married, they get bored, they go look for another woman and they get bored again. There's nothing hard to say, it's just in men's nature that they never get satisfied with one woman,' she stormed, blinking hard and breathing fast. She looked for something on the table, then lifted her lemon tea just to slam it down again on the saucepan, splashing out half of it onto the marble table. 'And why do men do that anyway? Marrying women they don't like that much,' seeming to take my silence as taciturnity, she had turned to talk to the air between us.

‘Do we always marry who we like most?’ I asked quietly.

She rolled her eyes back at me and frowned at the question. ‘Well, marriage is a choice I suppose,’ she did not see there was a point to argue.

‘Then marrying who they prefer is their choice,’ I put down my coffee.

She drew herself from the table and the fold between her eyebrows deepened. She tried to speak but did not seem to know what to say. ‘I was saying their choice doesn’t make sense in the first place then,’ she managed to say.

‘It doesn’t,’ I shrugged, ‘we don’t make sensible choices all the time. You don’t eat tomato when it’s healthy. I don’t drink coffee because it works well with my body. That old lady sitting at the corner has diabetes but she ordered hot chocolate, sometimes with marshmallows on it, every time when her daughter isn’t around,’ I tipped my head towards the mother and daughter sitting two tables away from us. She turned to look at the only other occupied table in the shop, then turned to face me again.

‘And you stalk the mother instead of the daughter,’ she added with a nod. ‘That’s your choice though,’ she held her hands up.

I laughed this time, and wondered how someone like her could get bothered for long. ‘We make choices we like better sometimes,’ I made my point.

That drifted her into another sailing in thoughts. ‘My friends never see why I had to date a married man,’ her voice came back distant. ‘Sometimes I don’t see why either. But I’d rather have him sleeping with another woman

and coming back to me than not. I'd rather fill the short free time he had even if it meant spending the rest of mine haunted by pain. I had no intention to hurt his family, but I'd rather he was married if it took that to be him. It serves me right, yet I like it still. Do you think I'm morbid?' she ended the abrupt question with a laugh.

I had no idea whether that was something everybody could see pleasure in, but at that point, what she asked for seemed minimal to me. 'No,' I answered, 'I think you're very honest,' but before I could carry on, she started off again.

'Do you believe in fidelity?' she glimpsed my hands on the table.

'I believe in commitment.'

'Are the two different?' she gave it a moment of thought.

'Fidelity is asking a person to be loyal, but I can't promise emotional loyalty. Yet what I can do is, knowing that this possibility exists, give it away for the one I'm staying with,' I said. 'And that to me, is commitment.'

'But you failed to commit to your ex-wife,' she speculated.

'She failed.'

Her mouth dropped slightly open, but did not for long. 'Does it still hurt?' she tiptoed as lightly as her voice could.

'Sometimes a cut too deep just leaves lump,' I said. 'You can still feel the hollowness and a distant pain when you press it; but that's all there is.'

'Are you angry with her?'

‘Not anymore. Maybe I was only angry with the fact that I wasn’t the one whom she could give greater commitment to.’

‘It must be the saddest thing,’ she lamented in a low voice, ‘to know the fact is to blame,’ she fell silent and I waited. ‘Sometimes when I think of his wife, I can’t help but think fidelity is simply a lie we’re all living in. It exists only in our minds but not in reality, because the partial truth we know will always be our complete knowledge. Gloomy, right?’ she said wryly. ‘But if that’s the price to be happy, I’d rather be a gloomy person than a happy fool.’

‘Not even when he left the gloomy person for the happy fool?’ I asked.

‘That’s my bottom line,’ she quivered, catching a tear in time from her right eye but lost the left. I shuffled in my backpack for my camera, but on second thought opted for the Polaroid.

‘Can I take a photo for you?’ I finally carried on with what I wanted to say.

‘What are you, a photographer?’ once again, she chuckled despite the dampness on her eyelashes at the sight of my profession, a little surprised.

‘A stalker,’ I snapped the moment and handed her the fresh film. ‘You deserve someone better.’

Poppies

Pauline Burton

Are now:

blooming on summer's
crisp white cotton, crinkled
silk petal skirts, carried high
on impossibly slender stems.

Are they real girls?

Lips, nails, blaze scarlet:

Chiffon foams, jersey slinks past in a lean
mean line.

Poppy till you drop dead
gorgeous.

Were then:

Stiffly spread petals
wired onto dull green leaves...

Summer's long gone –

All of the young men, gone –
Leaving memorial fields
Rituals of history
Lest we forget
Childless old ladies walking to church arm-in-arm
One in a suit and one in a flowery dress.
Are now:
Blazing in new killing grounds.
Burn one, and hundreds more
spring up in its place -
Dark seeds of conflict
guns and despair
small change of struggling lives.
Mules cross borders
fragile bodies laden with death –
worlds away, rows of clean zeros appear.
Is this our righteous war?

Our city orphans

consumed
with longing
stretch out their pitiful
needle-stitched hands,
beg for the last, best gift:
Come, gentle poppy
come, tender nurse
give us the milk of oblivion
tell us a bedtime story
sing us to sleep.

The Tiniest House of Time

Sreedhevi Iyer

10 October 1998, Kuala Lumpur

Sandhya initially had not wanted to attend the protests, since she didn't see the point in supporting a perceived ideal that had spouted more from self-preservation than anything else.

They were weekly events, organised at the last minute between allies, broadcast on surreptitious websites on hidden, changing servers, drawing millions of views per day. NGOs, students, opposition party supporters, random lay—all converged with single-minded devotion to the new phenomenon of demonstrations, despite, or maybe because of, the spectre of 1969 that ministers kept trotting out on the evening news.

'Let's not have a repeat of that,' one or the other would say, to a generation that no longer remembered. All that registered with them, the would-be protestors of this generation, was that it really had been that long ago that any public outcry of any kind had occurred. That on the semblance of external peace, too much had been gotten away with.

The venue somehow made it more significant. It was to be on the commercial crossroads streets of Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman and Jalan Dang Wangi, to be witnessed by kilometres of malls and shopping complexes, and by the tallest flagpole in the world, constructed intentionally to be so. The playthings of modernity thrown into the population's lap to distract from the lack of its pillars. The websites coded the event as 'The Shopping Spree'.

The enthusiasm had been infectious. Plans, talks, tales. A selling of the protest, complete with pamphlets, a full-fledged marketing strategy. The sense of involvement, the intoxication all its own—Sandhya couldn't expunge herself of it. Especially when Faisal, in the days after their rooftop makeup session, had held her close and begged her to come.

Sandhya shouted with the rest of the student cohort, '*Mahathir letak jawatan*,' Mahathir resign. The exhortation thrilled - the more they uttered it, the more convinced they were of its possibility.

Faisal wasn't with them. He and Jamal and Khairul had left the college earlier, joining some DAP supporters as Keadilan members. Sandhya only half pretended to be miffed he wasn't joining them - but to participate as a party member took the protest to a different level altogether. The entire nation knew of the new Keadilan party, dedicated to Anwar's *reformasi*. The ceremony had seen nearly 100,000 in registrations, more in attendance, and not a single newsbyte, not a single newspaper article.

The sight would've been unthinkable two months ago, but to Sandhya it seemed they had been doing nothing else.

The triangle of shopping malls witnessed a throng of shiny dark heads milling about, getting denser by the minute. They held out posters of Anwar, and banners made out of bedsheets and tablecloths. A particularly eye-catching one read '*Mahathir zalim*,' Mahathir The Cruel, in blood red. Sandhya screamed with the rest, with Ida, Au Yeong, Noor and the others from the college. She couldn't see an inch of the ground as the crowds crushed and rushed at will. Rumours flew that Dr Azizah, Anwar's wife,

might pass by to thank them, perhaps even make a speech asking for support. The crowd surged again, the excitement went viral, and caught the imagination of thousands like Sandhya to whom ‘questioning’ used to mean haggling for a good bargain at the local bazaar. The crowd now contained families too, fathers, mothers, teens, kids. As if they’d stepped off the discount sales platform onto another, more exciting one.

‘Reformasi! Reformasi! Reformasi! Reformasi!’

Someone ahead of Sandhya and her friends droned into the microphone on a slightly raised platform on a road divider. People squeezed forward and strained to listen. Sandhya had no idea who the man was. Different protests had different people giving speeches, some old opposition stalwarts, others new recruits who’d brought in another thousand into the *reformasi* fold.

Sandhya was drenched with sweat, hair damp, droplets falling off edges. Her shoes squelched and she licked salt off her lips. She was impervious to her discomfort—the shouting gave her a high. The collective chant, like the congregational prayers her mother took her to gained power and momentum from the sheer numbers, increasing the impact of each syllable in similar measure. Nothing existed except for its repetition, a unified rhythm that was a comfort, that was finite and inclusive.

In this trance-like state, Sandhya at first didn’t hear the sirens—she doubted later that anybody did. Perhaps in assumption that Dr Azizah had arrived, the crowd pushed into the direction of the sirens, Sandhya and her friends tumbling along in the wave. She held tight onto Ida, and scanned to

check the rest were still within eyesight.

Without warning, the crowd pushed back, in the opposite direction. It clashed and gurgled and foamed like a river changing course mid-stream. An elbow from somewhere slammed into Sandhya's breasts. Sandhya inhaled in shock, doubled over, and lost her grip on Ida.

The sirens were from the Federal Reserve Unit. The FRU. Specialised officers, brought out only for unique national situations. Before the National Mosque rally, Sandhya, like millions of others, hadn't known of their existence. She could now recognise them on sight.

Forming a straight line, they marched in time towards the crowd. Dark navy khakis, rough brown boots, the darkest glasses that obscured facial and racial features. Bulbous blood orange helmets screamed their presence, as they rhythmically tapped their plastic shields with batons, in time with their march. They chugged toward the chaos as guardians of order. The sirens came from behind them, from a mammoth tank, also comically orange. Its top swivelled, and suddenly Sandhya was drenched differently—they were water cannons.

Sandhya ran behind a street light, hugging the pillar of concrete for protection. She scanned around for Ida, Au Yeong, Noor, anyone.

The cannons had their impact. The crowd ran the other way, scattering into all directions. Usually that would be enough—it meant the protest was at an end.

Yet Sandhya felt her instincts sing. She ran from the light pole into the awning of some shops by the footpath, like dozens around her. There was

nobody in the shops themselves—everyone was either a protester or a spectator. Even the coconut palms around the area swung with the weight of boys climbing to get a good view.

A jet of water hit one of the palms, and three figures fell, arms flying. Sandhya looked away.

The FRU were now squarely within the throng—there were too many demonstrators for a hasty retreat. The batons swung arbitrarily, targeted randomly. One officer per thirty protestors. Some roared back, in anger and pain and revenge. They were hit again. Entire groups of witnesses fell back, ants scurrying individually and together.

Sandhya shivered, not knowing if it was because of her wet clothes or the sight before her. She scanned again with chattering teeth for Ida.

Instead she saw Faisal.

Amid chases and curses and cries, Faisal stood on a rainbow coloured shop awning with Jamal, steadily taking photos with a camera. He was on the other side of the street.

The sight of him calmed Sandhya. It also unnerved her to see him coldly recording the brutality.

‘Faisal!’ she screamed. He didn’t hear her. ‘Faisal!’ she screamed again. It drowned in the prevailing cacophony. She then saw both the boys jump down from the awning onto the street.

Sandhya timed it before she ran into the street, into the thick of the

retreat. Keeping Faisal in sight, she buoyed with the numbers, getting carried past him, towards a phone booth on the same side of the street as Faisal. She reached out and clung to the side of the booth, her knuckles whitening as she resisted the powerful human tide. By the time she reached the boys, she realised she'd lost a shoe, torn her blouse, and was limping slightly.

‘*Sandy!*’ Faisal and Jamal jumped off the roof when they spotted her. Faisal’s hug was strong but not tender, not the protective kind. It was the hug of a comrade.

‘I lost Ida and Noor, I can’t find them,’ said Sandhya, trying not to sob.

They considered searching for them together, realised it was futile in the current situation. ‘Look,’ Faisal said finally. ‘The protest is going to continue at the Kampung Baru mosque. Maybe Ida will end up there as well. I’m sure that’s all it is.’ They looked around—a man had fallen on his knees, covering his head to protect his skull from an FRU baton. The FRU officer didn’t pause in his punishment.

‘That’s all it is.’

Sandhya ran with Faisal and Jamal, drinking in the sight. She had never been to Kampung Baru before—it was Malay heartland, the setting of many other episodes from Sandhya’s secondary school history textbooks. The memory most forefront now was the 1969 riots, but only in half-formed snatches, including the words Kampung Baru mosque.

The mosque was the central organism of the inner suburb. The entire

area retained a time-frozen flavour from the 1800s, making one expect a British Resident General to walk around the corner any moment and chastise them all for their native stupidity. All the houses were wooden and on stilts, just metres away from the city's skyscrapers. Once they reached the mosque, Sandhya noticed the Twin Towers—it loomed up in all its gloomy monstrousness. Its proximity made it more personable - a sympathetic but silent observer of proceedings, doomed to be no more than another record-breaking statistic in Mahathir's list of Second World achievements.

The sudden invasion of population into the tiny streets alarmed the sleepy suburb. Other than the regular culprits, there were bystanders and women and men who had only been out shopping. They ran to the mosque for refuge, reminded of its historicity.

Faisal dragged Sandhya up the steps into the mosque. He had rightly guessed her restraint against entering a Muslim place of worship, a result of a lifetime of being told that she couldn't. Sandhya was borne up in the press of the crowds. The cheers and chanting started, as more poured in, pockets of people coming up with their own.

'La-ilahi-illallah!'

'Undur Mahathir!'

The mosque looked ready to burst, and the three of them had to content themselves within its compound, swaying with the throng. Sandhya was aware of still more filing in, stopping all gaps with humanity. Houses, roofs of cars, benches, trees—anything that one could sit on, hold on to.

'Re-for-ma-si! Re-for-ma-si!'

Damp, hoarse and slightly feverish, Sandhya attempted a shout. It came out a sputter, and she coughed. Faisal yelled in full force next to her, at one point letting go of her hand to punch his fist in the air. She hung on to his shirt.

This time the response was quicker. There were no sirens—just a sudden parting of the crowd, a rough push from the middle that rippled all the way to Sandhya at the mosque compound. Faisal and Jamal nudged Sandhya to hang on to one of the steps leading into the mosque, so she could get a better view.

Orange helmets. Batons. Water cannon tanks. Sandhya sighed.

Rifles.

‘I think they’re armed,’ said Sandhya to Faisal, who looked up at her quickly. Sandhya realised she’d spoken too loud—those around them had heard her words. They exclaimed and pushed each other in mild panic and agitation.

‘It’s a mosque, I’m sure they won’t do anything,’ Faisal amplified his voice on purpose.

‘Dengar sini.’ An FRU officer bellowed into a megaphone. ‘Listen here. We don’t want to do this, but we can if we want to. You know this is illegal. No assembly of more than three. Disperse, all of you. Disperse. Now.’

Not a soul stirred. The Petronas Twin Towers twinkled, merry in the oncoming twilight.

The assault started on the other side of the crowds. From those right on the street. Stones, bottles. Picked up from somewhere, maybe even the ground, a kind of belated revenge for the beatings at Jalan Tunku Abdul Rahman.

The stunned FRU personnel actually seemed to retreat for a few minutes. Sandhya craned her neck—the protestors made a massive move forward, toward the FRU, as if to ensure victory. Sandhya felt a sudden relief below her knees, and realised they had been pressed on by five men, men who had now thrust themselves forward, following a crowd about to turn manic from fear, adrenalin, rage, and sheer exhaustion.

The gushing sound was now familiar—the water cannons were unleashed on the oncoming crowds. Some still advanced, undeterred. If the force of the cannon pushed them back, they merely picked themselves up and continued forth.

Then they screamed.

They ran haphazardly, without a clue to their destination. They bumped into other protestors, other FRU officers, unable to distinguish between them. Into perpetrator and victim alike, sometimes right into the foray of swinging batons, welcoming the pain as a distraction.

‘Fucking bastards,’ said Jamal. ‘They’ve mixed acid in the water.’

The press of humanity was now back on them. In the brief rush forward, Faisal had hoisted Sandhya up on the mosque steps, asked her to step inside. She now watched from the main window, oblivious to the stares from other Malay women, wondering at her uncovered head.

It was like watching a movie. One of those Hollywood disaster flicks that was all the rage.

Balls of smoke had been fired into the air. Nameless faces that poked out of houses and cars withdrew and shut their glass windows. The mosque's windows were gaping holes, the glass having been shattered from countless incidents in the past weeks. Sandhya coughed and sputtered with the rest, wishing she did have a *tudung* at that point to help cover her nose, as the other women were doing.

'See, that's why, if you had a head scarf, you won't be in this problem,' one of the ladies said to Sandhya in Malay. It would take more than a catastrophe to diminish religious strictures and codes for her. Sandhya paused, regarding the woman for a second, then burst into a laugh. She heard no mirth in it, and it made her stop.

The air became thicker with the tear gas, new arcs of smoke materialising all the time. Nobody got near the water cannons, although the FRU batons worked overtime, finding sinew and bone anywhere and everywhere, uncaring of guilt or fault.

'Ida!'

Sandhya thought she heard wrong. The boys were just under the window, Faisal looking up occasionally to check she was okay. But yes, she could make her friend out, barely, as she looked to where Jamal pointed.

Ida and Noor, Sandhya could see both of them on the street trying to flee, a little by the left of the mosque. Watery eyed, unsteady gait, their noses semi-covered by handkerchiefs and headscarves. They seemed in shock.

They probably mirrored her, Sandhya thought.

'I'll go get them,' said Faisal.

'What?' Sandhya said.

'They'll be safer in the mosque.'

'You're crazy!'

'I'll be fine. I'll just have to catch their eye.'

'Catch their eye? Have you any idea how many there are on the streets?'

Too late, Faisal was gone. He hadn't even waited for Jamal.

Jamal fidgeted, wiping his eyes, breathing into his hand. He threw an apologetic look up at Sandhya and plunged into the crowd after Faisal.

'Jamal! Where are you going? Oh they've all gone mad. Jamal!'

He paid no heed.

Sandhya turned around to the sea of faces looking back at her, waiting to see what her next move would be. Nobody moved an inch. They were too safe. There wasn't space to put a foot forward.

Sandhya turned back to the crowds outside. Cursing and praying at the same time, she jumped. Once in the melee herself, everything blurred for Sandhya. The cannons were much further off, but not being used anymore—the protest was now routed.

People ran, shops closed in fear, black smoke came out at two random spots. Sandhya kept tripping over things—shoes, umbrellas, bicycles, even a

walking stick. She choked and coughed and was reminded of walking through morning mist.

Loud, loud sirens, different this time. Sandhya tried to place the source. Buses and vans, unmarked and unpainted, pulled up around corners. Regular policemen stepped out, with sky blue uniforms and four-foot rifles.

Sandhya's vision by now was a constant blur, and her eyes burned as she unblinkingly looked out for Faisal. She was certain she had spotted him—he was now talking to Ida, and Jamal was on his way towards him, bending and jogging to escape the smoke.

The memory of it came much later to Sandhya—the sudden turn to her right, at the sound of shouts. The lone Chinese man looking on, bewildered, a little shattered even. A non-Malay on Malay territory. He couldn't pass off as something else, something other than he was. A Chinaman was a Chinaman, no matter where you found him. In a second three policemen surrounded him. Two of them pulled his arms back and handcuffed him—another slapped him across the face. They pushed him into a police jeep, and hit him again.

Arrested.

The word jangled in Sandhya's foggy mind, and she turned to find Faisal with renewed purpose. She kept moving forward though she felt she was still at the same spot. She didn't seem to be getting any nearer—all four of them were still running, but Faisal seemed to turn back, looking at the mosque.

Sandhya saw a woman being dragged away by her hair.

‘Faisal!’ The cry was of its own volition, seeking protection.

Faisal turned, trying to place the voice. Jamal and Ida and Noor hadn’t noticed.

‘Faisal!’

‘Ah! Sandy!’ He’d seen her. He stepped away from the others, his shoulders slumped, limping a little. There were still people on the streets, but all fight had gone out of them. It was time for shelter, for recuperation.

It was over.

Sandhya tried to force a smile.

The whole thing took less than two minutes. The guards swooped in, caught hold of Faisal. Someone said something, Faisal replied. Ida and Noor had withdrawn, wide-eyed. Jamal became a statue.

Another question. Faisal spat on them in response.

‘NO!’ Sandhya’s voice sounded guttural. It was too late. The guard had struck back, waited two seconds, then struck again. Handcuffs, pushing, head down, straight into the FRU truck.

‘Faisal!’

Ida and Noor were now beside Sandhya. The truck growled away, snaking through obstacles. Jamal ran after it for a while until a guard struck his forehead with his rifle butt.

‘Faisal! FAISAL!’

As a last cry of triumph, the FRU emptied a round of shots into the air.

(Excerpt)

Society

Chan Chit Wing, Zoe

Inside the limousine, a billionaire.

Inside the billionaire, a crowded heart.

Inside the crowded heart, a mansion.

Inside the mansion, a pool.

Inside the pool, tears of the homeless.

Inside the tears of the homeless, sweat.

Inside the sweat, a dream of cash.

Inside the dream of cash, a portrait's eyes on a banknote.

Inside the portrait's eyes, history.

Inside history, desolation.

Inside desolation, infrastructure.

Inside the infrastructure, a limousine.

Sister Exile

(at Festival Walk, Hong Kong)

Geok-lin Lim, Shirley

She sits on the first step of the stairs on the ground level leading to the newly opened HSBC counters and ATM machines, not looking at anything, as if she has just woken up and does not know where, and in that brief second before her restless spirit returns to the stooped flesh, there is no caring. I walk on my way down past that head of wiry black hair, years younger than my close-shorn grey, careful not to stare, as if admitting her blankness into my glance would assault her delicate shell of isolation; and on my return circle she is still there, face in hands, as she weeps at the mouth of the emporium, having woken to its hard clarity in which tears are the currency of the exiled, who are permitted to pass through but not stop. I see and do not see myself in her. I'd sat on the step of stairs in another mighty city, sick and afraid, but I had never wept--no, those salty fluids wrenched from the gut and chest would not rise for me; I'd clenched them till they evaporated, condensed into grains of words, word trails to show the way to a home where the table is set, the bed made, and I wait to welcome the lost wanderer who's walked away from the seat by the foot of stairs through which strange millions are passing.

Treasure hunter

Huynh On Ki, Chloe

A skinny brown bear

Leans on the heavy wooden cart.

Digs gold in the mud,

The burning gold leaks out a gloomy smoke,

Melts into his face,

Black dots appear on his cheek.

The flickering gold which shines

On his perfect white tooth.

He stands up with his curled back

And looks at shish kebab lying side by side on the wire netting.

Seconds that roast the raw meats into pale white.

The sizzle draws the hungry people nearby.

Chan Ka Ho

Fung Wing Shan, Toy

‘Hong Kong Baptist Hospital, please,’ I informed the taxi driver as I closed the door and sat in.

‘No problem!’ he replied with a glance at the nearest rearview mirror. His voice was husky but energetic, a perfectly fit for his humming of ‘The Bund’, one of my dad’s favorite TVB songs about loyalty.

I was just off from my tutor job in a kindergarten in Kowloon Bay, and bought plenty of polystyrene boxes of almost all kind of Chinese dim sum for dinner. The waiter, who worked for that Chinese restaurant where I usually went for a meal after work, helped me separate the boxes into two big plastic bags for easier carrying. They were of normal lunchboxes size, luckily, so I could encircle them with my right arms as I sat on the sofa seat. They were still hot.

The radio was announcing the brief evening news. ‘There was a car accident in Lung Cheung Road, in the direction towards Kwai Tsing. Drivers please pay attention or take another route. This is the end for the evening special news.’ Within seconds, the mature voice from a lady was replaced by a cheerful young guy, promoting Joey Yung’s latest album.

It was nightfall. Scattered yellowish rays from the sun penetrated through the window, scanning my face over and over again. That was

annoying, but warm. I looked up. Pieces of clouds were dyed in gray, blocking the sun. There was no sense of lightening up, and the gloomy region was surrounded by multi-layers of red and purple.

After some minutes of riding, my sight stopped at the densely packed bafflers on the road side, gray and stained, and our car did not move again. I turned around to the front. There was a long queue of vehicles ahead. Tail-lights dispersed randomly. I could hear the buzzing noise of the police car. There must be an accident nearby, maybe the one that the radio was talking about.

‘Is your relative sick, girl?’ the taxi driver asked after a few minutes of waiting. I thought he was bored so he wanted to talk. Taxi drivers are always bored.

‘Yes, it’s my mum.’ I answered.

‘Oh, I am sorry for that. Is her case serious?’ he seemed to have lost his brisk tone.

‘Not really, but it takes time to recover.’ I was still staring at the road to check if there had been any movement of the cars. We moved ahead for a few inches, and stopped again.

As I entered the car, there was no nasty smell of cigarette or perfume from essential oil, or my nose would be so sensitive to have sneezed. While the decent fragrance of beef and sausages seemed to fill the air, distributing around little by little, gradually saturating this tiny chamber.

‘I am afraid your meals are going to cool down very soon. Um...’ The

taxi driver took a deep breath, and added. ‘They smell so good,’ he finally turned around, with his left arm lying on his sofa seat.

His cheek and chin were covered with sparse beard, his eyelids were shrunken and his eyes were hardly opened. He should be aged around forty or so, but the dim lightings made him look much older.

He shocked me. I had never seen the face of taxi drivers in detail before, nor would they show their faces to me. Mostly, I would have accidentally met their eyes in the mirror over their heads, and I would never look forward again. When I paid, I usually lower my head, counting my change then take my belongings away. I used to think taxi drivers would never turn around for a chat.

‘Um...yes. The food’s probably cooled.’ I tried to check for a sense of warmth by putting my hands around the boxes instead of the plastic bags.

‘What have you bought?’ he smiled and asked. His eyebrows and his eyes opened wide.

‘Some congee and dim sums, like beef rolls, *shao mai* and prawn dumplings. Actually my mum ordered these,’ I replied, shrugging.

‘Oh you are such a good girl! But take good care of yourself these days too, so to be able to take care of your mum,’ he was looking at me so firmly that I felt like I could not look away.

‘Yes sir. I will,’ I promised.

‘You should drink more lemonade to absorb more Vitamin C. You must be tired these days.’ He did not wait for my response but continued.

‘Look at your face, poor girl. You are still studying, aren’t you?’ He frowned, making a face when people are talking to little kids.

‘Yes, I am a student,’ I said.

‘Having enough sleep is also important. My daughter never listens to me and she often sleeps late, rushing for her college assignments. Ai...you are still too young, when you are as old as me your body will reflect your health condition.’ More wrinkles appeared gradually between his eyebrows as he said every word.

I could not recall what else he had said afterwards. Maybe some tips for me to stay awake at midnight doing homework, like what he told his daughter, and some recipes of the best soups for patients after having surgeries. There was too much to remember. For more than ten minutes of waiting, he filled his unending topics. And for all questions or moments requiring an answer, I just replied a ‘yes’ or ‘understood’ and that was all. I was too tired to talk, especially with a total stranger. But he seemed satisfied and would continue without any attempt to stop.

And when I realized, he was already leaning comfortably on his sofa seat. His head was resting on his arms, and his emotions changed with every topic, like what my dad did when sharing his favorite stories. I was wondering: did he do the same to every passenger in this taxi?

‘Carrots are rich in Vitamin A. Their nutrients would absorb better after being boiled or fried, instead of eaten directly without cooking, understand?’

Fortunately, the preceding queue moved with accelerating pace after his

remarks about the nutrition of carrots, and his hands was repositioned on the steering wheel. It was a huge relief after this conversation marathon. Finally, the Nike logo on the back of his T-shirt faced me again, and I was able to enjoy the view outside again.

As we were going between the old streets in Wong Tai Sin, I could see dispirited buildings with pieces of cement peeling off. I wished I could find something more encouraging from outside the windows.

As we stopped in front of a traffic lamp, waiting for the passengers to cross the street, the taxi driver started his food lesson again.

‘Can you see the big red sign hanging outside that building?’ he pointed with his right arms outside the window.

I turned around from the dark street to the brightened building lazily. ‘Yes,’ I replied.

‘That is one of the oldest restaurants in this aging district. They serve really delicious Sichuan’s meals. The owner is a friend of mine. If you want to go there you may tell him you know me,’ he turned to me with a cordial grin, tapping his name stand which was stuck firmly over the rate meter.

I smiled to him and leaned forward as he ordered. He was called Chan Ka Ho, a common and easily remembered Chinese name that could be found in many schools in Hong Kong.

‘I will,’ I grinned and resumed my original position. I looked outside again. It seemed that the other old restaurants looked more attractive to me now.

He kept recommending places along different alleys, so I could buy some good food for my mum next time. We were stopped by another traffic light beside a car park, near the famous Hsin Kwong Restaurant. I knew this place because I sometimes went for a morning tea with my grandma here.

‘Hsin Kwong?’ I asked him.

‘No. I wanted to show you the old noodle booth downstairs,’ he drove a few inches forward until we could see the minibus stop.

‘Oh, I know where you are talking about. You mean the noodle booth just next to the minibus that heads to the temple on the hillside?’ I touched the window glass on his left, trying to show him the right direction. A few middle aged men were sitting around two wooden folding tables, lowering their heads and eating the big Chinese bowl of noodles. The green rotten canvas cover flipped in the breeze and some water poured down. All men stood and dispersed carrying their bowls and chopsticks.

‘Yes! You know that booth?’ he turned to me, surprised.

‘Yes! I always go to the temple with my family. My uncle would eat there every time before we go up to the hill,’ I started to laugh as I had thought of my uncle’s intoxicated reactions when he saw his bowl of noodles.

‘Oh really? I always have my lunch here if I drive nearby. You can find me there next time when you are in Wong Tai Sin too,’ He almost jumped off his seat. This was his most excited moment along our ride.

I did not make a promise but had laughed for quite a long time with

him. Why would he make this suggestion as if meeting an old friend? We had just met for less than half an hour, while he had already told me a lot about himself, as well as his family and places he liked to go. I thought he would have told his love stories if we went for a longer ride. But I did doubt if he took his words seriously or not for the remaining taxi ride.

The street had become totally dark. I could not see clearly what buildings or people we had passed, only the glaring lights from the streetlamps along Lung Cheung Road. I usually hated riding along this road, as most views were blocked by the bafflers. Yet this time, as we passed a few palaces, I leaned my left arm on the edge of the door with my head in my palm. When he said he told his daughter to work hard to earn more money for a bigger house, I giggled and kept my eyes on the now funnier places outside, recalling other strange stories he told me. My ride started to become delightful.

As our car stopped by the Baptist University, we were getting closer to my destination. I had a look at the digital clock next to the rate meter. It took us only fifteen minutes from the long queue in Kowloon Bay.

‘We are almost there. Pack up your belongings first, girl,’ he reminded me like what mum did when I left home.

‘It’s okay, I only have these two plastic bags and my bag to take,’ I hit softly on the plastic bags by my right hand. I looked at him in the mirror over his head; he was also looking at me. I did not look away this time but smiled. I could see the half-moon shape of his eyes and little wrinkles on his forehead as he smiled too.

‘Good. Don’t forget your food or I will have them for dinner,’ he threatened, and we all laughed loudly.

Climbing over the tiny slope, we stopped at the entrance of the Baptist Hospital.

‘Fifty-three dollars in total, girl,’ the taxi driver turned to me again, and this would be our last meet.

‘Here you are, thank you so much,’ I smiled.

‘You look good in a smile. Don’t worry too much, take good care of your mum, understand?’ he raised his thumb and remained with his pose.

I thought for a while, but did not raise my thumb as my hands were busy taking the two plastic bags from the seat, ‘Yes sir,’ I smiled back. I got off the taxi and slammed the door with a loud bang.

He departed. I was left standing along the path of the taxi stand outside the main entrance of the hospital. Staring at the vacuous glass door sliding to its sides as welcome, I had to start my journey again on my own. At that moment, I realized that I was never alone. So why not smile?

I took a deep breath and entered the lobby of the hospital, heading to my mum.

Fear

Chan Chit Wing, Zoe

Of flying cockroaches.

On rainy days, they lurk
outside your window.

Of crushing a nail.

A wry face with sweat and hiss
follows the blood.

Of public speaking.

Echoes break
your rhythm of reciting.

Of hearing 'We need to talk.'

For ages, with her, you built
the same thought.

Infinity

Chu Lok Yin, Elizabeth

‘Imagine your head reaching as high as the ceiling, your feet extending to the floor below,’ Ms. Chau placed her fingers on the back of my neck and pulled upwards with all her strength. It hurt, like my head was going to detach from my body. But I could not make a sound, or move, so I clenched my teeth and waited for it to end.

‘Everyone to the bars,’ Ms. Chau instructed. She released her grip on me finally. We paced towards the bars installed on the three walls of the room. My place was one of the nicest spots of all, just in front of the full-height windows. I could always look out the window when doing bar movements. One side of the view was the hustling city life of Wan Chai - the cars, skyscrapers and shining lights. The other end of the picture, the cyan waters of the Victoria Harbour.

For four days a week I would come to the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts for ballet lessons. It has always been like that for me, for the past four years, and I loved every moment of it.

Every time I pushed open the double doors and stepped on the soft thick purple and green carpet, I would find myself in a different world, breathing different air. Music students would practice instruments everywhere in the building - the echoing sounds of trumpet, cello, double bass filled the school like a soothing symphony. For each floor there was a designated field of arts. As soon as the lift opened on the first floor, a chaos

of singing voices emerged. Then on the second floor, drama students were rushing to classes in their colourful costumes. In this little space, there was no weirdo who danced in the bus queue with their headphones on, or some women mad enough to practice Chinese opera in the MTR. There was no impulse to be suppressed, not here, I would dance and sing just because I wanted to, and no one cared. This had always been the one place I was free.

‘*Plié*, one and two and three and four...’ Ms. Chau counted the beats as the pianist started playing slow classical music, Bach maybe.

I held on to the wooden bar with my left hand, standing sideways, the other arm held in a half oval shape, my legs forming a perfectly symmetrical diamond as I slowly bent my knees outward. I looked around the room by only moving my eyes - we were all so focused and silent that we could even hear the faint noises of our ballet shoes sliding across the dance floor in the mixture of the teacher’s counting and melodies from the piano.

‘Gabby! I said change sides!’ I heard Ms. Chau’s roar over the peaceful harmony. I snuck a peek at Gabby on my right, who did not realize we had switched to the right side. We both made a face when we saw each other. Erin on my left was laughing on the inside, a giggle escaped her mouth and she quickly silenced before the teacher could hear it.

The three of us—Gabby, Erin and I—were like a pack. We were the tallest in class, a bit awkwardly tall at times, and so naturally we were placed in the last row. I guess we were something of a nuisance to the teacher, because we were hopelessly clumsy and needed more flexibility. When all the others had no problem doing a split, the three of us (and one or two others)

would be struggling without success to close the inches between our legs and the floor. We also liked to sneak in a few conversations between boring warm-ups. And we definitely got scolded for it.

After we have finished a series of stretching, bending and lifting, Ms. Chau directed us to the centre. Gabby the daydreamer was again doing what she always did, so I nudged her in the arm so that she could follow the line. ‘First position,’ we stood straight with our feet forming a slightly wider V, and our arms carving an oval shape we held at our navels.

‘Imagine your arms are waterfalls, a drop of water will slide smoothly from your shoulders to your fingertips,’ the teacher said as she checked each of our positions. I couldn’t quite figure out why all of my ballet teachers have a thing for weird metaphors, which were either about animals or plants. Things like: ‘You’re a bird’ or ‘Ballerinas don’t stick their tongue out like a dog when they are breathless. ‘They keep their mouth closed like a lady.’ We three loved imitating teachers. ‘Imagine your head reaching the ceiling...’ We mimicked the way Ms. Chau pulled at an invisible thread attached to the top of our heads.

The pianist played an upbeat piece, we were panting because of all the jumps, our faces red and legs slightly quivery. ‘Okay, take a quick hydration break.’ We relaxed in our positions and found our bags on the shelf at the entrance of the room.

As the familiar notes of the dance routine filled my ears, I closed my eyes and let my body flow with the rhythm of the music, performing the moves out of memory and instinct. One by one, we leapt from one corner

of the room to the other, hands moving from side to side. I watched as the person before me started her steps, her pink ribbons floating in the air and moving vigorously. Then it was my turn. I waited for the cues in the notes and put my right leg forward to get ready for the moment. ‘One, two, three, four...’ I felt the strands of hair that didn’t endure the rapid jumps earlier brushing my face as I moved, and the air gushing towards me as I leapt faster and faster.

It made me think of the runs I would do with the girls before class. When we were waiting for class to start, we have invented this ritual.

‘I’ll race you,’ said Erin.

‘No, I am faster,’ I replied.

Gabby counted. ‘1, 2,...Hey!’

But Erin and I had already started to run before she reached 3. We circled the entire third floor until we went back to the starting point, and then start again, and again until we felt exhausted.

‘When are you going to UK for studies?’ Gabby asked Erin.

‘Next year,’ Erin said.

‘Well, we are not going to be here next year anyways, Gabs,’ I said ‘we are fourteen now and we have to pass tests and interviews to be promoted to the higher classes.’

‘Yeah, no one ever makes it,’ said Gabby, who really wanted to stay. We all wanted to stay.

'We could still dance in Ms. Chau's small studio,' Gabby proposed.

'Sure,' I said.

I reached the end of the other corner, hands crossed in front of my chest. I listened to the music and swung both of my hands in a horizontal 8 - the infinity move, as I call it. As much as I wanted this to last forever: the lessons, the passion, the friends, the feeling of sweat down my back, the runs. I know it would come to an end. But at heart, I am a ballerina, and these moments would be eternal, immortal in my memories. As the melody developed into its climax, I looked up to the ceiling and stepped a few steps forward. Then I spread my hands upward and apart, elegantly, as if I were a bird.

Staggering Genius

Colin Cavendish-Jones

‘I say,’ said Aloysius Snagglepuss (and so far, at least, he spoke the truth), ‘look at that chap over there.’

‘What chap?’ asked Xavier Snagglepuss, the first Mr. Snagglepuss’s younger brother and co-proprietor in Snagglepusses’ Sensational Circus. He peered around the dingy interior of *The Slurping Toad*, where both Snagglepusses were consuming pink gins and pistachio nuts.

‘You can’t see him now but I expect he’ll come back in a moment. I think he went to take a leak.’

‘And what,’ asked the second Mr. Snagglepuss ‘should I be looking at when he returns?’

‘He was staggering.’

‘What was so staggering about him?’

‘No, no,’ responded the senior Snagglepuss, a touch tetchily. ‘Verb, not adjective. He was staggering about.’

‘Well what was so special about that?’ asked his brother, then wished he’d said *staggering* instead of *special*, as it would have sounded wittier.

‘It was the way he staggered.’ A dreamy expression crept over the elder Snagglepuss countenance. ‘Ever so much better than any of our clowns. Do you remember Tottering Toto?’

‘Do I ever!’

‘Well, this chap was better.’

‘Better?’

‘Much better.’

A look of awe and reverence overspread the features of the younger Snagglepuss, complementing the dreamy expression still going strong beside him. It was at this moment that Mr. Magnus Hellibore, Fellow of the Institute of Actuaries, having completed his ablutions, reappeared and made a determined attempt to return to his seat.

‘Brother,’ whispered Mr. Xavier Snagglepuss, the awe and reverence motif undiminished, ‘You have not lost your touch. This guy’s a doozy.’

It was the rolling, almost rollicking gait of the thing, like an out-of-kilter hornpipe danced on deck when the sea was turning nasty, that affected the observer so profoundly. Of course, Mr. Hellibore’s version was much slower than a hornpipe and the way he occasionally clutched at bar stools and handrails to stabilize himself broke up the choreography a bit, but there was an indefinable lightness and elegance in the way he rolled his hips and flailed his limbs to maintain something approaching a centre of gravity. Meanwhile, the solemn, almost tragic, expression on his face added a touch of pathos to leaven the comedy.

As soon as Mr. Hellibore had made it safely to his seat, the two Snagglepusses approached in tandem.

‘My dear sir,’ began the elder Snagglepuss solemnly, ‘Permit me to

introduce myself. Aloysius Snagglepuss, sir, proprietor of Snagglepusses' Sensational Circus, of which you may have heard.' Mr. Snagglepuss paused impressively, hoping for an eager affirmative, but Mr. Hellibore was engaged in mopping up a double Scotch and soda and appeared not to have heard him.

'You, sir,' continued Mr. Snagglepuss impressively, 'are the greatest comedic artist it has ever been my privilege to witness. In my youth, I shared a circus ring with Tottering Toto from Topeka, generally esteemed the most adroit staggerer in the business but his technique was nothing to yours. You, sir, are a staggering genius! Wherever did you learn to stagger like that?'

Mr. Hellibore, who had lifted his visage from the environs of the bar, raised his eyes to Mr. Snagglepuss's face and laughed bitterly. In all fairness, it must be said that Mr. Snagglepuss's face was not of the kind to make a man laugh lightly. If he laughed at all, bitterness would be the predominant note.

'You would stagger,' he snorted, 'and possibly do more than stagger if you had suffered as I have.'

Mr. Snagglepuss, in spite of his alarming face, was a kindly man. He expressed appropriate concern and asked what was the matter.

'Today,' answered Mr. Hellibore, 'I have lost, in the order named, my job and the girl I love.'

Mr. Snagglepuss beamed like a Cheeryble. 'I am in a position to rectify at least the first of these grievous injustices.' He exclaimed. 'With a stagger like that, you must, I presume, have been a circus artiste?'

‘No, I was an actuary.’

‘Well,’ said the younger Mr. Snagglepuss, entering the conversation for the first time, ‘at least that means you can act.’

His elder brother waved an impatient hand. ‘You’re thinking of an actor.’ He said. ‘An actuary’s something different. They work out when people are going to die.’

Mr. Hellibore nodded. ‘And jolly good at it I was too.’ He said hotly. ‘When I predicted someone was going to die, the fellow was doomed. He keeled over and shuffled off this mortal coil bang on cue. I was, if you’ll pardon the witticism, deadly accurate.’

Both the Mr. Snagglepusses laughed politely.

‘Precisely!’ Exclaimed Mr. Hellibore, mysteriously stirred to the depths by this polite laughter. ‘Ha ha. Just so; the reaction of the reasonable man to hearing a joke or witticism. But not the reaction of B.K. Botiboll. Oh no, far from it. I conclude, therefore, that B.K. Botiboll is not a reasonable man.’

‘Look here,’ suggested the younger Snagglepuss, ‘you clearly have a tale to tell. Why not begin at the beginning?’

Mr. Hellibore surveyed the Snagglepusses anxiously for a moment.

‘Are there two of you?’ He asked.

‘Permit me to present my brother, Mr. Xavier Snagglepuss.’

Mr. Hellibore looked relieved. ‘I thought it was this Scotch.’ He said. ‘It seems to affect the vision after a few glasses. In that case, prick up your ears

and listen to my tale of woe.

‘Among the actuaries at *Botiboll & Pittenweem*’ Mr. Hellibore continued, ‘I am well known for my ready wit and fondness for jokes. B.K. Botiboll, the Senior Partner, once went so far as to call me the most amusing actuary he had ever met and it is thanks to P.P. Pittenweem, the Junior Partner, that I am frequently known by the flattering soubriquet: the Comedian. Five years ago, on Christmas Eve, I stuck a picture of a rhinoceros on the door of my office. When Mr. Pittenweem enquired what it was doing there, I replied:

‘You see, sir, an actuary is rather like a rhinoceros. They both *charge* a lot!’

‘Well, as you can imagine, that kept the firm in stitches for several months. And that was merely one of the choicest jokes in my repertoire, you understand. Scarcely a year went by without me thinking of some witticism to set my colleagues chuckling. Well today, a new client came to us, and Mr. Pittenweem, assigning him to me, said:

‘Hellibore here is certain to keep you amused.’

‘Good Heavens, an amusing actuary!’ said the client with a surprise I found somewhat insulting, though not entirely unexpected.

‘Oh yes,’ continued Mr. Pittenweem gravely. ‘Hellibore is quite an extrovert, you know.’

‘An extrovert actuary,’ I told the client, seizing on the opportunity to make one of my famous jokes ‘is someone who, in company, looks down at *other people’s* shoes.’

‘My goodness how we roared at that, but, an hour after the client had gone, Mr. Botiboll called me into his office and remarked as soon as the door was closed:

‘I’m sorry to say it, Hellibore, but we have to let you go.’

‘Naturally I was stunned. I reeled back into a chair, clutching at a green glass bankers’ lamp as I did so.

‘It is all the jokes.’ Mr. Botiboll continued. ‘Personally, I feel sure that a fine career as a stand-up comedian, or possibly an after-dinner speaker, awaits you. An actuary, however, must approach life with a certain seriousness and, not to put too fine a point on it, gravitas. It instils confidence in the clients. I myself have risen to my present eminence as an actuary by having no sense of humour whatsoever. Our profession holds no future for you, Hellibore. You must clear your desk and leave.’

‘I rose from my chair, a broken man. My sole thought was to go and seek solace from my fiancée, the lovely Miss Euthanasia Brandishknife, and assuage my aching spirit with the balm of her womanly sympathy. I poured out my tale of woe as she there-thered and tut-tutted, and then pointed out that the acme of wretchedness in this wretched business was that we should have to postpone our forthcoming nuptials. It was then that she broke it to me that, since I was no longer an actuary, there could be no wedding.

‘When I was little more than a girl,’ said Miss Brandishknife ‘my heart was broken by a fighter pilot who eloped with a Belgian burlesque dancer while recuperating from a dogfight in Baden-Baden. I had barely recovered from the shock when I plunged into another affair of the heart, this time

with a big game hunter, who was kicked to death by an impala in South Sudan two weeks before we were to be wed. It was then that I vowed I would only marry a man with a certain steadiness and stability in his life, an income tax advisor, perhaps, or a chartered accountant. While you were an actuary, you were to me a demi-god of blessed certitude, but bereft of your slide-rule and balance sheets, Magnus, I can never be yours.’

‘And that is how you find me here,’ concluded Mr. Hellibore with a deep sigh, ‘a broken man with no career, no sweetheart and very little, it seems, for which to live.’ With which words he drained his fourteenth double Scotch and soda, which a prescient bartender had placed at his elbow.

‘Not so, sir!’ cried Mr. Snagglepuss Senior, stirred to his very depths by this harrowing tale. ‘Like all great artists, you shall live for your art, for the exquisite satisfaction of bringing joy to the masses. You have given staid respectability a try and staid respectability has thumbed its nose at you. Now is the time to run away and join the circus.’

And thus it was that, after a space of some thirty minutes and three more double Scotches and sodas, Mr. Magnus Hellibore was engaged as the star attraction at Snagglepusses’ Sensational Circus.

It was a bad moment for Mr. Hellibore when he awoke the next morning and staggered to his bathroom mirror. A temperate man under normal circumstances, he was unfamiliar with the effect that twenty-two double Scotches and sodas, consumed consecutively in rapid succession, are

bound to have on the unfortunate consumer. His first thought was that some unsympathetic individual had, during the course of the evening, inserted a small burrowing animal inside his skull and that this ferret or, possibly, stoat, was in the process of trying to gnaw its way out through his eye sockets. A few cups of strong black coffee reduced this alarming sensation to a dull, throbbing ache but it was then that he became aware of another problem. He had remembered sometime around the middle of the second cup of coffee that he was now a circus clown and not an actuary and had made a mental note to order new business cards reflecting the adjustment but it was only as he circumperambulated the sitting room that his attention was suddenly drawn to the comparative evenness of his gait. He had stopped staggering.

Mr. Hellibore's customary walk was prim and precise, one foot following the other in a thin line like a man traversing a gangplank. Last night, he had staggered magnificently and earlier this morning, when the small burrowing animal had been doing its stuff, he had rolled from side to side like a ketch in choppy water. Now, however, he was reverting to his normal style of walking. As his head cleared, his steps became more controlled, until a ballet dancer could scarcely have found fault with the precision of his movements. He attempted to stagger but only succeeded in kicking over a coffee table and hurting his foot. He tried again, but merely bumped into the sofa and fell over. He felt instinctively that his attempts to stagger were stilted and amateurish. He sighed a deep, defeated sigh, limped over to his drinks cabinet and poured himself a stiff Scotch and soda.

At five minutes to eight that evening, Mr. Xavier Snagglepuss was becoming impatient. ‘He didn’t come to rehearsal,’ he reminded his brother, ‘and the show starts in five minutes.’

‘He doesn’t need to come to rehearsals. He’s perfect doing exactly what he did last night.’ His brother, as senior partner, endeavoured to sound unconcerned.

At this moment, Mr. Hellibore entered the big top, doing, to the delight and relief of both Snagglepusses, exactly what he had done last night.

‘Hurrah,’ shouted the younger Snagglepuss. ‘Come and slap on some make-up.’

‘No make-up.’ Decried his brother. ‘No make-up, no costumes. Just as he comes.’ Mr. Hellibore was, in fact, clad in a decorous pinstriped suit, which he had donned, through force of habit, between his sixth and seventh double Scotch.

‘Not even a red nose?’ Enquired Snagglepuss Junior, who was a traditionalist.

‘Haven’t you noticed that his nose is already redder than a ruby? He’s perfect.’

The gentlemen of the press evidently concurred. The Snagglepusses had put out press releases to all the daily newspapers and the next morning the Arts pages contained little but praise for the staggering genius of Magnus Hellibore. *The Planet* and the *Daily Beast* applauded the return to ‘good

old-fashioned fun for the whole family' while the smart young men at *The Grauniad* and *The Chronograph* wrote long articles about 'the theatre of the absurd enjoying an unparalleled renaissance within the inclusive superstructure of the postmodern circus'. The one point on which they all agreed was this: Magnus Hellibore was a staggering genius.

Mr. Hellibore himself was, unfortunately, in a poor condition to ingest these plaudits at his breakfast table. The ferret, stoat or, conceivably, marmot that had invaded his cranium the previous morning was back with renewed vigour and his attention was exclusively occupied with methods of expelling it. When he had done so, by means of a gallon or so of black coffee and some liver salts, he discovered once more that his walk had returned to normal and resignedly reached once again for the whisky bottle and soda siphon.

Weeks passed and Mr. Hellibore's fame increased as rapidly as his liver degenerated. Something, he thought, as he steeled himself one Thursday morning for the first drink of the day, would have to give. It was at this point that the doorbell rang and he hurried gratefully to the door (for he had, by this time, begun to loathe the taste of Scotch and soda). Upon opening the door he looked even more gratefully at the girl who met his eyes. He had been expecting one or possibly both of the Snagglepusses and a man who opens a door prepared to find a Snagglepuss phizog on the other side and encounters instead a torrent of golden curls and a pair of big, blue eyes, both attached to a girl who might be described with perfect justice as a pippin, a peach or, to borrow the vocabulary of the younger Mr.

Snagglepuss, a doozy, is apt to think cheerful thoughts.

‘Good morning, Mr. Hellibore,’ said the apparition.

She knew who he was. Better and better.

‘Hullo, Miss.....’

‘Glockenspiel’ she supplied swiftly. ‘Griselda Glockenspiel. I walk the tightrope at Snagglepusses Sensational Circus.’

Now that she mentioned it, her face did seem familiar but, only ever having seen it in a state of advanced intoxication, he had not hitherto noticed its subtle, winsome beauty. She looked, he thought, like a tender goddess, or possibly a ministering angel.

‘I have come to talk to you,’ continued Miss Glockenspiel ‘about the evils of the demon drink.’

Positively amazing, mused Mr. Hellibore, that a single girl could be so thoroughly endowed with all the virtues. Not only was she physically a sort of cross between the young Catherine Deneuve and the goddess Aphrodite but she appeared to be possessed of remarkable intelligence to boot.

‘You are preaching,’ said Mr. Hellibore, leading the way to the drawing room, ‘to the converted. Alcohol, let me tell you, is a curse. Nothing would make me happier than to live out the rest of my days on orange juice with, perhaps, the occasional lemonade to add variety. I wish I never had to see another *Glenlivet* in my life.’

‘Then why,’ asked Miss Glockenspiel, ‘do you drink so much of it?’

‘Because I have to stagger.’

Miss Glockenspiel grasped the connection immediately. She had seen drunken men stagger before and realized that the sort of staggering that had made the name of Hellibore a household word could scarcely be achieved without a lengthy course of sousing.

‘You do not need to stagger.’ She responded firmly. ‘What did you do before you staggered?’

‘I was an actuary.’

‘That’s perfect. A pal of mine’s putting on *Othello* and he needs a Cassio.’ Miss Glockenspiel was an intelligent girl but her vocabulary was not all it might have been.

‘Not actor. Actuary. I worked out when people were going to die, but I was fired for telling too many jokes.’

Miss Glockenspiel placed her head on one side and drummed her fingers on the arm of her chair, indicating to the incisive observer that she was lost in thought. Then, at last, she jumped up and snapped her fingers.

‘I have noticed,’ said Miss Glockenspiel, ‘that your gait when sober is unusually precise. The way you walk is enough to make any tightrope-walker’s heart miss a beat. What I say is this: leave off the staggering and take up tightrope-walking instead.’

Mr. Hellibore brightened. ‘You’re a tightrope-walker.’

‘I am.’

‘And you’d teach me how to tightrope-walk?’

‘I would.’

‘Will you marry me?’

‘We’ll see,’ said Miss Glockenspiel, who was a sensible girl, not given to hasty decisions ‘how you shape up on the high wire.’

The Snagglepusses, at first, were heartbroken. Tightrope walkers, they complained, were a dime a dozen, but there was only one Staggering Hellibore. It was Miss Glockenspiel who talked them round.

‘The media frenzy is almost over anyway.’ She told them. ‘Do you know what happened to Tottering Toto?’

Neither of the Snagglepusses did.

‘He’s back in Topeka, doing local radio.’

‘You can’t stagger on the radio.’ Objected Mr. Xavier Snagglepuss. ‘It wouldn’t work at all.’

‘Precisely. Staggering is strictly a short-term career, a flash in the pan. Tottering Toto had to diversify and so must Magnus Hellibore.’

Eventually, the Snagglepusses issued a statement saying that, in order to escape an early death by delirium tremens, Staggering Hellibore would be staggering no more. The Elder Mr. Snagglepuss gave a deep sigh and signed up Mr. Magnus Hellibore as a trainee tightrope walker.

In an age when the popular press is all too frequently reviled, it is heartening to be able to make some amends by allocating the last word in my story to an article by Mr. Theophrastus Shrub, which appeared in the Arts pages of the *Daily Beast* some twelve years after the conversation most recently described:

Snagglepuss Sensation

Seldom does it occur that the circus lives up to its traditional boast of being the greatest show on earth so triumphantly as the new show from Snagglepuss Brothers. Undoubtedly the highlight of the evening was the Flying Hellibores, an extraordinary family of acrobats who take the high wire to new heights. Magnus and Griselda Hellibore, together with their children Anselm, Belinda, Cuthbert and Drusilla performed amazing feats of daring, suspended at dizzying heights above the ring. The Flying Hellibores are expecting a further addition to their family in a few months (though Mrs. Hellibore showed little evidence of her condition on the high wire) and, if there is anything in heredity, we confidently predict that newest Hellibore's tiny feet will soon cease to patter and begin to pirouette, taking their rightful place in what can only be described as a familial circus performance of staggering genius.

Television and the Astronaut

Dumalagan Wong, Winsome

When I turned on the TV, I found
wars becoming soap operas.

I switched the channel,
found gunshots becoming

the tik-tok of clocks.

Switched the channel,

found the poor men's flesh
becoming the cement

of the rich men's castle.

Switched again, found

Flappy Bird's peck

becoming a dagger. Switched.

Found people's right

becoming the chairs

where officials sit to enjoy

their feasts. Switch.

I find myself floating in the city

like an astronaut, the world another planet

Outside the helmet is a movie

No temperature, no touch, no sense.

Werebull

Victor Fung

Sitting in an abortion clinic
alone with just enough cash -
Werebull's visited.

Scarring the streets
with red tank trails -
Werebull's visited.

Camping on the sidewalk
in green plastic tent -
Werebull's visited.

That's not me alone in the abortion clinic; I'm male. The tanks never came to my neighborhood. Those green tents, I've only seen pictures of them. I am Teddy, now 22. Everyone gets visits from the Werebull. The

presence of the Werebull was strong the night I visited Rex's apartment.

Rex hasn't always been Rex. He changed his name from Thomas on his eighteenth birthday. The same day Selena and I let him rename us Dora and Teddy - both referring to gifts from gods - and we liked it. The only thing I thank my secondary school for, is putting Rex, Dora and I in the same class for the last 3 senior years.

We did special things on Dora's 18th birthday as well. We went to a lesbian bar for as long as Rex and me didn't get kicked out. We had to settle for a bisexual bar in the end. Dora was the kind of student who was good at everything. She was known as a lesbian at school so she was quite unpopular; Rex and I pretty much were her only friends. Dora gave me a typewriter on my 18th birthday.

On the 23 of December, 2010, the day I turned eighteen, the three of us took the minibus to Shek O beach while our classmates were sitting for the final year Maths exam. 'Who would have exams on the day before Christmas Eve?' we thought. The results wouldn't affect university entrance anyways. That was the most rebellious thing we've ever done. When we got our final report cards with F for Maths (or whatever it was), the teachers said we were hopeless, and Dora's parents worried we were bad influence for their daughter. We made it to university nonetheless, but we each went to a different one.

When I was less than a month from turning twenty, I phoned Rex to ask

him if I could stay over at his apartment for the final week of the semester. He said, 'Yes, absolutely.' He once told me he owned a place himself, where Dora paid occasional visits. I had not been to that apartment. That evening, I stood at the Sham Shui Po MTR Station and waited for Rex, carrying a week's worth of clothes, a laptop, a typewriter, and the great hope of what Rex refers to as 'Repeating the Past'.

'I wonder why nobody except me has one of these,' said Rex, showing me the digital lock on his front door. 'This way you don't have to worry about carrying keys.'

'Wouldn't somebody crack in?'

'The code is 6-digit. Any breach and the guard down stairs is alarmed, plus mug shots from a hidden camera.'

'Guard. You mean that white haired guy in uniform sleeping with yesterday's newspapers spread out.'

Rex came near my ear and whispered the code to the combination lock. 'That's the code. Remember, drop by anytime you like, old sport.'

'Oh boy.'

I punched in the code as Rex had invited me to. Then he made me a cup of coffee - coffee in a weird mug with three metallic rings as a handle. The mug handle bore an amusing resemblance to a brass knuckle. When I toured around his apartment with the coffee in my hand, I couldn't help being impressed by the private living-space he had. Rex's apartment had jade green floor tiles, a shelf-full of books, a guitar, and a cupboard-full of coffee mugs.

The flat really was all his. To a university student, his two room apartment was the equivalent of Gatsby's mansion.

‘How did you get hold of this flat?’ I said.

‘I inherited it from an old man who would rather stay on the streets than live here.’

‘You’re kidding.’

When I said I needed to use the bathroom, he said ‘Sure, old sport,’ and followed me to the bathroom door. When I was taking my leak, the bathroom lights flickered as if one of those daemons from the Exorcist series had just passed by. I shuddered.

‘Sorry,’ I said, ‘I’ll dry the toilet seat.’

‘Nothing’s going to climb out of the toilet,’ said Rex.

‘Haha,’ I said, wiping it down.

‘And I’ll get the light bulb fixed sometime.’

‘Can you hand me some more paper towel?’

‘If you ever find the need to jerk off,’ said Rex, giving me paper towel, ‘just lock yourself in the bathroom and pretend you’re taking a crap or something.’

‘You know what? I shit every day.’

‘You sure will, because Dora will come up and cook.’

Then Dora was at the front door.

Dora wasn't a popular girl back in secondary school. She came from an affluent family. One day, our English teacher printed 38 copies of a book report on *The Great Gatsby* - one for each classmate except Dora. That was before Dora and I became friends, before the three of us were even aware of each other. I knew I must get to know Dora, when I saw her picking her lips on the front row, her face half-covered with untied hair, while the teacher praised her book report. Dora asked to sit at the back row the next day - near Rex and I. She's been studying German for as long as I've known her. She aimed for that German Studies major at BU and she got it in the end, which was just predictable.

'Am I interrupting some *Brokeback Mountain*?' said Dora, soaked in sweat, taking off her sport shoes. *Brokeback Mountain* - a movie Dora made Rex and I watch twice.

'You know I ain't queer,' said Rex trying his best to imitate a Western accent, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

'And you, Teddy?' said Dora.

Dora always enjoyed watching us play gay. Maybe it satisfied the fantasies she got from those Japanese gay comics - the only thing she reads that is not hard to understand. I tried reading those comics once and it nearly bored me to brain-death. Every episode was boys with chisel-like-chins French-kissing each other, all the while saying variants of 'No! Please don't! Oh! This is inappropriate!'

I happened to be still wiping the toilet. Dora laughed and wheezed,

laughed and wheezed, as if she got asthma, only she doesn't. She was fit as a bull. Her thighs, clothed under sport leggings, were as powerfully thick as I saw them the time before. She always had a huge appetite because she trained very hard. I remember whenever we ate together, she would finish anything Rex and I left on our plates, as long as the food didn't involve killed animals, because she was vegetarian. Sweat trickled down her tomboyish bangs. Her sweat smelt as it used to - like the liquid soap in the Central Library's washrooms, which I have been using a lot lately.

‘How have you been doing?’ said Dora. ‘All this long we haven't been seeing you!’

‘Running from home. Assignment overdue for two weeks,’ I said. Then I told her about the wedding tape, as well as the unfinished story I was supposed to have turned in long ago. She listened attentively, until I was about to get into my writing.

‘Oh, don't forget to let me see it when it's finished,’ said Dora. ‘But I have to take a shower for now. Save it for dinner.’

So Dora went into the shower. She kept the bathroom door ajar and I could clearly hear, from the living room, the music of water hitting against the bathtub. I went to the bookshelf and tried to differentiate Dora's books from Rex's. I could see an atheist trying to shake off a Catholic background, a literature nerd, a feminist, and an LGBT rights advocate. Whether those were he or she, I couldn't figure out, though the Collins German dictionary definitely belonged to Dora.

‘I'm quitting porn,’ said Rex from behind.

‘How come?’ I turned around.

‘Because of that feminist book I read. Those porn actresses aren't really enjoying the sex on set. Wanking to porn is pathetic.’

‘Really? What is the book called?’

‘Pornland,’ said Rex, taking the book from the shelf.

‘Good,’ I said, checking the book’s front and back cover, ‘I’ll make sure I never read it.’

Rex chuckled. ‘You can’t hide from it forever. It’s not that bad opening your eyes. I still have material to jerk off to - been adapting my taste to home-made intercourse footage lately.’

In *The Great Gatsby*, that Gatsby guy builds a criminal empire just so he could get rich and win the heart of his dream girl - Daisy. Like Daisy, Dora also had some kind of transformative power. A month after we became friends, I started finding video games stupid. The money it saved me, I spent them on books. That year, my exam grades skyrocketed - the same for Rex. She didn’t give us afterschool lessons or notes or anything. The three of us did go to study rooms together sometimes. But we didn’t work like crazy. I remember our pool games at the Youth Outreach Centre after school, and our visits to the cinema, always 9am on the weekend.

Like Gatsby with Daisy, Rex and I were obsessed with Dora. The attraction remained unmentioned among us and we surely did not want to third-wheel anyone. We found outlets for our repressed feelings. Rex got

obsessed with Gatsby - he probably still knows every significant quote from the novel. I started self-learning German, with the fantasy that someday, I would get into a crowded elevator with her, where I'd tell her in impeccable German what she meant to me, while people would wonder 'What the fuck is that kid saying?'

I never let anyone know I was learning German, but our minds were too readable. Dora wouldn't need superpowers to know what Rex and I were up to. She used to have long girlish hair the first year we got to know each other. Then her hair got shorter each time she got a haircut. If she thought her tomboyish hair would make her less attractive, she was very wrong. I'm not sure if it was the same for Rex but her shortened hair made me crazier than ever. Since then she even began to visit my wet dreams, bathing me in the scent of the Central Library.

She started getting concerned about LGBT rights and she would mark down the dates of gay pride parades on her schedule book. When she came out as a lesbian, it was just predictable. Rex and I were already prepared to support her all the way, and she still hanged out with us. Nothing changed - not the pool games, not the cinema, except we started to hear rumors about her kissing some junior girls at our school. Dora never talked to us about having any girlfriend, so Rex and I just ignored those rumors. One time, we went to the karaoke after school and she picked that song called *I Kissed A Girl*. Then she always had that song on her lips.

Dora was singing *I Kissed A Girl* in the shower. I knew the song so well I

could tell she had forgotten some of the lyrics. Rex and I talked about where I would sleep.

‘So we have two bedrooms,’ said Rex, ‘you can take mine. I’ll sleep on the sofa.’

‘The super tidy one must be Dora’s,’ I said.

‘Don’t get too proud. Even a three year old could have told.’

Then we figured out Rex’s bed was big enough for the two of us to share. Rex wanted my advice on six-pack building - he wanted to know how to do a thousand stomach crunches like Christian Bale in American Psycho. A thousand, I couldn’t even do it myself. Nonetheless, I took him to his room and left him doing beginner-friendly repetitions on his bed, while I set up my typewriter on the dining table in the living room.

‘Rex, can you get me the slippers from my backpack?’ called Dora from the shower, the showerhead still running.

‘I’ll get them for you! Rex can’t hear you,’ I answered Dora, and went around looking for her bag. It would be the same, whether Rex or I did her the favor, wouldn’t it? I have to admit I was excited by the thought of entering the bathroom when she was naked, but I knew it wouldn’t be too awkward, for there was a shower curtain.

I found her backpack, and inside there were slippers too small for Rex, and a box of birth control pills. It was unmistakable- the brand was YAZ, which I later googled. I studied the box carefully, to be certain it read birth control. I put the slippers back into the bag. What would I say to Dora? You

must be a very helpful friend to have. I see you're helping some friend who happens to need birth control. What use does birth control have for a lesbian anyway? Rex, come here! Guess what I found in Dora's bag? I turned around to check Rex's bedroom. I caught a glimpse of him retreating into his room, and then his stomach crunches.

I returned to my typewriter.

Dora cooked mushroom spaghetti for us. Rex said we needed a good long talk around the dinner table so they could catch up with me. Only I was thinking it was me who desperately needed to catch up instead. I still remember what Dora wore at the dinner table - that camouflage green zipper jacket with a hoodie, a back tank top underneath, her hair wet. Rex asked if I had been seeing any girls at the university.

'It's quite hard to make friends at the university,' I said, 'I eat alone in the canteen most of the time. If I've seen any attractive girls so far, I met a girl that was quite hot when I was outside the MTR station, in the afternoon, waiting for Rex.'

'You mean that fundraising girl?' said Rex.

'Yea, she approached me, and asked me if I would spare a minute to learn about the plight of AIDS suffering children. I signed up as a donor. She was wearing no more than a tank top and a short skirt - both in red and white stripes.'

'Like a race-girl,' said Rex.

‘Yea, I guess it was a race-girl costume,’ I said.

‘What did you hear about AIDS?’ said Dora, apparently interested.

‘I don’t remember,’ I said. I wasn’t listening when the race-girl made that recited speech, because I was too occupied with another struggle - resisting the urge to look at the race-girl’s cleavage, which I only dared to steal a glance of while she was checking my donation form. Wearing a tank top, the woman’s shoulders, waist, and half of her breasts were exposed in the air, when it was late November and I was wearing a cotton sweatshirt; some passersby were wearing scarves. I think I signed the form because I was impressed by the length the woman would go for those kids with AIDS, and because of the thought that those kids would die having never known what sexual-intercourse feels like - something I hadn’t even found out for myself. What did the woman look like? On the dining table, I tried hard to conjure her face, but all that came up was Dora’s. I pictured Dora handing me those red-ribbon condoms as souvenir.

Rex snapped his fingers at me. ‘Geez, if it takes you forever to find the right words,’ said Rex, ‘just forget it.’ Then my sight came back to Dora. She had zipped her jacket a few inches upward - her breasts buried under fabric of green. Maybe that was just coincidence, but it saddened me, as if it was my fault.

‘Joined any orientation programs? It helps making friends’ asked Dora, after a sip from her brass knuckle coffee mug - another thing that saddened me.

‘Those freshmen orientation camps?’ said Rex, ‘I’ve heard that they’re

ridiculous. They make you chant tasteless slogans, do funny dances, and make sure nobody gets enough sleep!

‘And then expect you to be their best-friend-forever,’ I added.

‘It’s not that bad,’ said Dora, ‘though it’s true you don’t find honest friends just around the corner.’ There was silence and Dora spoke again. ‘Want to tell us about that story you’ve been writing?’

‘Sure,’ I said, ‘it’s called Honestville. A college student,’ I paused to think, ‘His name is Jimmy. He goes to some countryside for his internship, and it so happens that the locals there never lie.’

‘Why is it so?’ asked Rex.

‘Centuries ago,’ I said, ‘a plague wiped out all the liars in the place that would become Honestville. Doctors never knew what caused those sudden deaths. Because the greater the lie the faster it kills, and the people would rather die guarding their lies than warn others about the fatal secret of the virus. So by natural selection, people evolved quickly and are born with the inability to lie - they can’t even conceive of the very idea of deception.’

I hadn’t written such a story at all, but that just happened to be the most natural thing to say. When I think back, I recognize it was the Werebull speaking.

Dora was eating her spaghetti with her knife and fork while I spoke - Rex and I ate with forks only. From time to time, she was licking her knife for those pieces of tomato. The knife was blunt but it made me worry seeing that.

‘You could cut yourself, Dora, don’t,’ I said, which turned out to have entirely no effect on her recently acquired knife licking habit. She asked me to read some part of the story, and I totally gave in to the Werebull.

I got my notebook, flipped to a blank page, and improvised, ‘Blood is dripping from my nostril into my’ I almost said spaghetti, but Dora had cooked spaghetti, so I said instead, ‘bowl of macaroni. It’s literally killing me each time my host family asks if I like the cooking. The cooking is terrible, but when I first came here,’ I paused and continued, ‘and I praised the cooking, I raised them so high up into the air I can never be cruel enough to break their heart by telling the truth,’ I put down my fork, ‘that their food sucks.’

‘You could cut yourself, Dora,’ I said.

‘You have an unrealistic story here,’ said Dora.

‘Which part?’ I asked, ‘The macaroni? It could have been another thing.’

‘A place with no lies - could it exist?’ said Dora, ‘and that macaroni thing, that’s not even a lie cause it’s well intended.’

‘No, I haven’t seen one so far,’ I said. ‘A place with no lies, I mean. But it must be somewhere, somewhere out there.’

Damn you, Werebull!

Dora grazed from her plate quietly until it was empty, her head down, her gaze away from Rex and I.

‘Don’t lick the knife, okay?’ I said, ‘It makes me uncomfortable.’

‘And you are getting me irritated,’ she answered.

Rex gave me a smile I translated into ‘It’s alright, old sport.’

I wiped my mouth when I thought I had had enough spaghetti. Dora said, ‘Finish it or it’s going to the trash,’ so I picked up the fork again.

Dora said she had a German test coming up, so she got Rex to do the dishes. I wondered if Rex always gets the dishes, regardless of my presence, because at least one of them was a feminist anyway. It was raining outside.

Dora went inside her room, which I doubt she used often, door closed. I seated myself on an arm chair, and used my laptop in the living room, working on another of my overdue assignment - one about the landfill problem in Hong Kong. There was a certain period when the only audible sound in the apartment was the sound of rain hitting the windows.

Then Dora made her voice heard throughout the apartment, from behind her bedroom door. She was reading a German passage aloud, probably reciting it for the test. I had been learning German even ‘til that day, secretly of course, so I knew German well enough to tell that she was reading a two-speaker dialogue on environmentally-friendly methods for handling waste. Somewhere in the text, Dora would slip in *‘Tut mir leid, ich bin nicht schwul’*. Then she would continue with the waste problem, and say again, *‘Ich bin nicht schwul’*, then back to the waste problem, over and over. I couldn’t concentrate on anything, my hands lying still on the keyboard. I wanted to knock on the wooden door and answer *‘Ich weiss schon! Ich weiss schon!’*, but I managed to hold it to myself. I would not let the Werebull get its way. I learnt German to say something better than I know you’re

heterosexual.

When Dora was finished with her German, she came out of the room and said she had to visit the supermarket. Dora put on her Nike running shoes and left Rex and me at the apartment. She had also left her wallet. A minute later, Rex dialed Dora's number and her phone rang from the bedroom. Rex took two umbrellas and left the apartment, leaving an unclean pot in the kitchen sink. All that, I watched from the arm chair I was sitting in.

Rex had been quite quiet since dinner. That night he didn't make much noise at all. But when he left, the apartment sank into silence. Even the rain had stopped by the time Rex went out. It was like you stay in a shopping mall long enough you get to be there when the closing hours falls - I had tried it myself. The mall seems unfamiliar because you are used to seeing it swarmed with people. Then someone pulls the switch that shuts down all the air-cons. And you realize you haven't been aware of the air-con the whole time. The presence of the air-con feels the strongest the moment the humming stops. And you wonder how long the mall will keep the temperature. That is how I was feeling.

I got off the armchair, my legs surprisingly wobbly. My legs had only been wobbly this way for once before - when I got drunk for the first time, on Rex's eighteenth birthday. I went to the kitchen to finish the cleaning.

The stains on the pot were hard to remove. The scrubber dishcloth

made a squeaking sound that didn't help float the kitchen out of silence. I looked into the streets through the kitchen window. I wished there were some teens down on the streets flirting and swearing - only there weren't any. A barking dog would do, but the streets were empty. It must have been Rex who did the dishes every night - the nights I hadn't been here - because I could trace those tough stains to night after night of Rex's careless dish washing, as well as night after night of cooking - meatless cooking. The stains couldn't have got so tough - so hard to remove - in just a day, or a week, maybe not even a month. What I couldn't see from the kitchen window, was Rex chasing Dora.

I dried the dishes and they still weren't back. I went onto the Internet and played a song called *Together*, which had a rather interesting opening. For the first half-minute of the song, nobody sings and you just hear that dripping sound, a repetition that resembles a leaking faucet. I turned the speakers up and soaked the living room in the sound of a dripping faucet. The table did get wet.

That's when I chased away the quietness by the keystrokes of my typewriter. I wrote a dialogue about the Werebull.

On the Werebull

'You know the fighting bull? You wave the red flag in its face - it doesn't even matter whether it's red or not, because they are colorblind - and it can't

resist the instinct to charge against it. What awaits it behind the flag, be it a defenseless human being or swords and lances, the bull thrusts into it. Every Spanish bullfight is a tragedy - the hero destined to succumb to its fatal flaw.'

'Poor bulls.'

'The Werebull is similar, but they don't get sympathy from animal rights activists. Nobody has pity for it.'

'Does it cry to the full moon?'

'No, it sleeps in every one of us, particularly insomniac in our juvenile ages. It resides in a dark cave - a wet, dark cave with a faucet somewhere. The faucet leaks and the dripping wakes the Werebull from sleep. The Werebull doesn't want to be awake itself, but it can't find the damn faucet knot to stop the annoying sound.'

'Why?'

'Because the cave is so damn dark, and the echo makes it impossible to tell where the sound comes.'

'You said the Werebull is in you?'

'Yes.'

'In me as well?'

'Probably.'

'What can we do about it?'

'We kill it a bit at a time.'

‘How?’

‘By staring into its eyes from a safe distance, or by talking about it.’

‘Can I help you kill the Werebull?’

Then my hands stopped galloping and landed onto my forehead. I didn’t know which key to strike. Silence descended again.

I began to go on Facebook and said Hi to random people on my friends list. I looked at the time - 2:22 am. Many people must be in bed rather than on the internet, so I didn’t have a long list of available conversation partners to begin with. I sent ‘Hi’ to a few people and got no response. Then I sent ‘I hope I’m not bothering you. It’s quiet here.’ Then I sent ‘Do you happen to know what’s the instrument making that dripping sound? Thanks in advance!’ together with the link to the dripping song. No reply. I put on my shoes.

The streets were wet and quiet. I walked pass the MTR station where I met the race-girl. The station entrance was sealed by a metal garage door sprayed with the word FUCK. I wanted to see her face so I could remember what she looked like. She wasn’t there, of course. I walked pass the sports ground, the gates closed and the lights out. I circled the sports ground with the slight hope that I would find Dora and Rex. Nope.

I walked aimlessly for I don’t know how long, and passed by a cemetery. I would find the cemetery spooky another day. But that night, I looked at

the mountain of headstones with the feeling that I was greater than all of them together because I was alive, and because I had the Werebull in me. The Werebull knows no fear, for it is the most dangerous of all dark beings. If that evil spirit from The Ring called me on my mobile to say ‘You will die in seven days,’ I wouldn’t let her have her way. I’d pick up the call and say ‘Hello?’ in the Werebull’s voice, and she’d be like ‘Sorry, wrong number.’

I found my way back to Rex’s apartment. I thought I’d better sneak in, if Rex and Dora had returned, rather than ring the bell. I entered the code to the front door, but the lock bolt didn’t click. I put my ear against the door. I could hear the dripping song looping from my speakers. But that didn’t mean Rex and Dora weren’t there. I pictured them cuddling in ‘Rex’s bedroom’ holding their breath till Teddy would go away. I could feel a tide rising within me. Do you know what I’m saying? I remembered the hidden camera Rex had warned me about, so I struggled between handsomely ruffled hair and the mature well-groomed look. I chose the mature look for my mug shot, and took a deep breath before I used my other chance on the combination lock. It clicked open this time. I breathed out. The tide receded. Dora and Rex hadn’t returned yet.

(work in progress)

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