

Foreword

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Halfway Home owes its vitality to the student editors who read and wrote for it, selected the poetry and prose in these pages submitted by City University of Hong Kong Creative Writing students and teachers in its programs, and then copyedited and laid out the work. This issue is the result of an enormous yet enthusiastic collective effort, accompanied by robust discussion of the merit of each piece, disagreements, frowns, giggles, guffaws, and final majority approval. The issue is thus a testimony to the critical as well as creative energies that mark the English Department's 2014 majors, demonstrating the students' pleasure in team work and their valuing of individual and expressive talent.

This is my third iteration as faculty advisor for *Halfway Home*. The original student editors whom I worked with in 2012 deserve a note of recognition for their prescient choice of the title for their literary journal, appearing this time in a historical moment when Hong Kong as home is yet again in critical and creative sight, with these young Hong Kong writers represented in this issue continuing the long journey home to the city that they love.

Editors' Note

The editorial team of *Halfway Home VI* would like to take this opportunity to thank everyone involved in the process of this lovely piece of creation. We especially thank Professor Shirley Geok-lin Lim for being such a wonderful mentor and advisor who patiently guided us every step of the way.

We thank everyone who has submitted work which added color and life to this collection. It is always a pleasure reading poems and stories that make one smile, giggle, teary-eyed and think. These creative pieces didn't fail to captivate our hearts, and we hope it will be the same for everyone else. The *Halfway Home* team is extremely grateful for this experience, and we thank you readers for taking time to appreciate these works by professional and fellow aspiring writers.

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Monkey

Pauline Burton
(Kowloon Tong, August 2014)

Dusty-brown monkey
Runs on a railing
Past office windows:
Easy and fluid
Threading the metal
Through delicate paws –
His tail's a question.

Wildness leaps up
To meet tiles and glass:
Hillside half-tamed
With drainage and fencing
Smothered in green –
Wide sky, clouds drifting
Above Lion Rock.

Inside their boxes
Humans watch monkey:
Monkey just runs.
Who will still be here
This time next summer
Us, or our cousins?
Anyone's guess.

Who Poked the Jenga to Skew?

Chan Siu Hang

All the pioneers were dazed by the haze.
That raging gaze nearly gouged their eyes out.
Frontiers were repelled by inferno sprays.
All the marchers were restless since the craze.
That fierce fight nearly tore the iron redoubt.
Enforcers were swarmed with amber sunshades.
All the dwellers were barred from expressways.
That peaceful move nearly halted their lives.
Residents were annoyed by the explosive hurrahs.

Some say we are the thickening glue.
We say we are fighting for you too.
Some say we should return to school.
We say we are learning outside classroom too.
Whether to stop is not up to me and you.
Whether to stop is not about how we are screwed,
But about who poked the Jenga to skew.

Little Buddy, I Need You!

(Inspired by Wendy Cope's "Lonely Hearts")

Chan Wing Ka, Pinky

Can someone make my childish dream come true?
Mr. Mickey Mouse is still my best friend.
Do you live in Disneyland? Is it you?

Playing dolls at the age of twenty-two,
we will become the purest Disney fans.
Can someone make my childish dream come true?

Visiting Neverland must be so cool,
we will never grow up like Peter Pan,
Do you live in Disneyland? Is it you?

Want honey? I will be Winnie the Pooh.
Sticking together, we don't need boyfriends.
Can someone make my childish dream come true?

Mad for the pretty princesses? Me too!
Want to join them? Let's write it in our plan!
Do you live in Disneyland? Is it you?

Unlike the novels that we read in school,
our story won't be paused by a bookend.
Can someone make my childish dream come true?
Do you live in Disneyland? Is it you?

Furry Wish

(Thanks to Wendy Cope)

Chan Tsz Ching, Phyllis

Can someone make my simple wish come true?
Lonely cat seeks company to talk to.
Do you live next door? Is it you?

Clean my fur, chase my tail, sleep and eat.
Those are the only simple things I do.
Can someone make my simple wish come true?

I have always longed to play hide and seek.
Cat that likes to run and jump is cool.
Do you live in the park? Is it you?

Or we can have an adventure on the streets.
Explore the neighborhood all the way through.
Can someone make my simple wish come true?

We can share my bed and cuddle when we sleep.
Sunbath together and shadows to pursue.
Do you live in the drug store? Is it you?

Spending time with you will make my life complete.
We don't have to dream big, we can be fools.
Can someone make my simple wish come true?
Do you live in the café? Is it you?

Taste of home

Chow Hay Ting, Angela

Soya sauce, corn starch, granulated sugar and chicken powder,
Mix it all up and you'll have my family flavor.
I would tell you our secret wonton recipe,
But I doubt you can follow it sensibly.

My four siblings and I whisper,
Our mother has more cooking talent than dad.
Shhhh, don't tell him, or he'll get into one of his fits.
No need for another long tough love speech; you get the gist.

Parmigiano-Reggiano, Jalapeño, Fleur de sel and Cayenne pepper,
I know all these fancy names by heart,
Staring at them. Julienne everything into matches.
I bow with respect to the masters of culinary art.

But when it comes to the ultimate comfort food,
A bowl of rice with soya sauce is all I really need.
Maybe a cup of freshly brewed chrysanthemum tea,
And I am pretty sure my family will agree.

Ghazal, Rain

Shin Han-Seob

It's raining, not from the sky but from the eyes.
The eyes of the thousands of people.

Where is it the rain from, then?
From the inside of us? From the tear gas? Or is it from the history?

Numerous skyscrapers of Central are overlooking us icily as they don't
know the answer.
A yellow ribbon, tied in my wrist, is trembling irregularly with my red
pulsation.

All the people now begin concentrating on their own thunders, silently.
'Rise. Rise and hands up for our today and for our tomorrow. . . .'

The Moment Before Death

Stephanie Han

Fleeting, but sharp.
Fatigue.
A brief rest.
No tunnel. No light.
No angels.
No voices.
No relief.
Calm. Quietude.
A moment quite ordinary.
Bizarre to feel
what will come to pass,
the moment before one agrees
to Death.
In a second
the world continues.
I have not done what I should.
Longings, desires met/discarded.
Fight over.
But before I accept
the invitation leaves.
The days tire.
I close my eyes,
doze a minute
maybe two.
My son shakes me awake.
I try to square his face, pliant,
open, lit with love and wonder.
I feel the moment
I needed to cross before I dozed.
But it is
time to disembark.
My son grabs my hand.
The ferry has arrived in Mui Wo.

Who Can Decide?

Olivia Lam

I look into a mirror:
a girl is sitting inside a large box.
She is perfect.
A robot with zero mistake,
repeating on doing the same task day by day.
I close my eyes;
take a deep breath.
She cries; she yells.
But she still keeps working on her task.
I comfort her.
I take away her battery.
I decide on her future.

This Is Just To Say

(Thanks to William Carlos Williams)

Lau Yick Chung, Daniel

I have thrown
the assignments
given by you
into the bin

and which
you were going
to be marking
for my final grade.

Forgive me
they were profound
so deep
and so useless.

Ripped Apart By Both Sides, I Shall Be Gone

Law Hau Ning, Aurora

Ripped apart by both sides, I shall be gone.

Filled dishes splashed down from the table with one swipe of her arm of foolish rage.

Then his grip pulled me to refuge behind the sealed doors of the sage.

Till now the splatter will not fade.

Still, how did it stay vivid? The sound could never be unmade.

Tied by bonds, the couple has played,

But they were the ones with choices. I had none.

Tied by blood, the family is made,

But they were the ones with choices. I had none.

I have a cage, but I have no food.

I have a bearer, but I have no mother.

Chained by bloody dead knots,

This is the reason I do not show my fist or have my dagger bleed.

Cut me loose.

Cut me loose.

Sunrise

Manishya Mandal

When darkness met light,
Colors took charge above.
Bursts of orange and streaks of pink,
Red lines raced with the golden rays.

When darkness met light,
Nature became visible.
Children's nightmares faded,
Morning grief walked the other way.

When darkness met light,
I searched, and I searched
For what haunted me last night.
But the tainted past left no trace –

When I
met you.

Food for My Soul

Melanie Nambiar

You are a lemon with a twist,
You are my cuppa, my morning bliss,
You are all things on my shopping list,
You are the eight glasses I must not miss.
You are like peppers, you're fiery, that's fine,
You are my favourite and sweet key lime pie,
You are intoxicating, just like my wine,
You nourish my soul and I'm glad you are mine!

Green

Melanie Nambiar

I'm trapped in a room addicted to you.
More it thrills me, less it kills me.

It always comes and it always goes.
Some have little, some have plenty.

We all hope for it but it is never assured.
Good, it makes me; bad, it breaks me.

My senses ignite when I'm closer to you.
The more I seek, the less I find.

If I could haunt your dreams, I would trap myself and never leave.
It makes me ugly, it shows I care.

Ferrari speaking in Causeway

Ng Wing Yan, Alice

Tut tut, tut tut, tut tut. . . .

The tiny red man turns green.
The teens crossed and rushed.
I stare at the sky
With two strong yellow eyes.

Tut tut, tut tut, tut tut. . . .

My roaring saffron eyes dashed far.
Photographers pressed the shutter,
Leaving lines of shining scars.

Aliens pacing and stuntmen playing.
Free flow of mind, free flow of limbs.
In and out, out and in.

Looking up, peeping through,
Each glossy golden grid,
In rectangular lids.

Behind the white curtain,
In black mind
With red wine,
Blasts of laughter and whisper
Rise from cuddling hipsters.

Strong scent of rosy perfume,
Red hot lips, big round hips,
Whispers of boy, hipsters with joy.

Thud thud, thud thud, thud thud. . . .

Hearts with spider web in aliens
Beat on street, blow with flow.

Hong Kong Bamboo

Kate Rogers

As the sun rises a labourer
lashes long poles together
to build new barriers for students
trying to hold the streets.
He builds the ladder as he climbs it.
They watch from the ground
and study his balance.

He left school to learn how to work
with bamboo, but does not scold them
for asking questions
and reading text books on the road.
To him the strength of bamboo is
its hollow core because it leaves space
for fresh air to flow.

He knows Sun Yat Sen was a student here,
and still casts a strong, lean shadow.

He knows bamboo can bend in high winds,
but seldom breaks,
and the sound of bamboo when it snaps -
is as loud as a gun.

The Soup On The Table Was Not Hot

Tong Lai Man

On the sofa with a shawl
Mom fell asleep
One, Two,
Three grey hairs
One, Two,
Three wrinkles
One too many nights.

Goodbye Kiss

Wan Wing Man, Wimpy

Granny kissed my chin.
“I will be back tomorrow”,
she said years ago.

Depression

Wan Wing Man Wimpy

Depression sounds like an out-of-tune violin, unpredictable and unbearable.
Depression feels like drowning while you are watching everyone breathing.
Depression looks like a virus, spreading so fast and killing you slowly.
Depression smells like gas leakage, no one knows until it's too late.
Depression tastes like garlic, so strong in your mouth and long lasting.
Depression says, “I can swallow you up!”

Labrador

Wan Wing Man Wimpy

Brother's bitten by
playful dog. I rushed to see
if my dog was fine.

Hong Kong

Chantelle Wong

A network that stretches through the city
Like blood in veins, seeping into every part of it.

Musty atmosphere,
Barely any breathing room.

Shoulders against shoulders like packed salmon,
Squeezing lungs.

Passengers stuck by the doors, human barriers,
Yet the compartment centre is always roomy.

Handrails, handles and seats,
Who knows how dirty they are?

Abandoned newspapers, suspicious liquid on the floor,
Stepped on by those who don't watch their steps or don't care.

Loud chatter clashes with drowsy brains,
Some with eyes glued to phones and some pretending to sleep.

Bodies so close to one another, hearts far apart,
Each mind drifts in its own world.

Moon

Wong Shuk Yu, Fish

I like the moon most
as it can't shine on its own.
Nothing is alone.

Wanderlust

Woo Yeuk Man, Florence

Can someone make my simple wish come true?
In search of lost souls to explore the lands.
Are you in Spain or Germany? Is it you?

Inspired by Kerouac and the Beats.
A gang of lunatics, a festive band.
Can someone make my simple wish come true?

Fauna and flora on the shores of Crete.
A yellow backpack, a notebook in hand.
Are you in Greece or Hungary? Is it you?

Experiencing life through the heat.
A fantasy parade of sea and sand.
Can someone make my simple wish come true?

Les viennoiseries of Parisian streets.
A traveling map I need to expand.
Are you in France or Italy? Is it you?

Someone from Europe, I would like to meet.
Call me from the Red Telephone Stand.
Can someone make my simple wish come true?
Are you in U.K. or Turkey? Is it you?

New Year in Hong Kong

Yu Shuchang, Maya

Calling back home
one Thursday night,
two thousand miles away:
New Year's Eve is today.
The phone circled around
the table. I had been absent
three years in a row.

Dad said,
Do you know your Federer lost to Nadal at semi-final?
Sis said,
Don't miss me too much. See you this April.
Uncle was a bit tipsy,
Who...who the hell are you having dinner with?

Granny grabbed the phone.
Come back home right after graduation.
Do you hear me?
What is so good about Hong Kong?

Then my dear grandpa,
after a long pause, said
Daffodils,
daffodils are blooming.

My great-grandpa didn't take the phone –
too deaf to hear me.
Mom was shouting to him,
Chang is calling from Hong Kong!

Then I saw him,
nodding solemnly.
As if he heard me.
As if I smelt the firecracker and daffodils.

Red

Yu Tin Lok, Natalie

Red is a glamorous gorgeous girl.
Wherever she appears, she stands out in the crowd.
Wherever she goes, she catches everyone's attention.
Nobody can ever take his eyes off her.

Red is a sensitive sophisticated symphony.
She influences emotions.
She soothes anxiety and pain.
Nobody can forget her voice.

Red is a fragile fragrant flower.
She is delicate but distinct.
She spreads her aroma to every part of the world.
Nobody can ignore her presence.

Red is a sexy seductive spice.
Once a man has tasted her, he can never forget.
Once a man has touched her, he can never turn back.
Nobody can resist her temptation.

Red is a flashing flaring flame.
You can only catch a glimpse of her.
You cannot gaze at her for a long time even if you want.
Nobody can possess her.

Red says,
"Just come and find me.
You will fall in love with me;
And you can never walk away."

Sesame Street

Chan Tsz Ching, Phyllis

Press the number three button on the remote control. A flicker on the screen. Puppets with vivid colours pop up. A foreign language pleases my ears like a stream that runs smoothly with a happy tune of dramatic ups and downs. The puppets look merry. Is it because of the language? Or is it their big enthusiastic eyes?

A moment later, a secret code is revealed on the black box. Two vertical lines converge and connect their edges and a shorter line bridges the middle. A voice pronounces /eɪ/. A mind-blown, elegant and lively symbol, it stands in the middle of the screen confidently.

The puppets keep repeating the sound of the symbol. Are they trying to convey secret messages to me? What is it about? I must learn it. Decode the mystery, unveil the secrets and sing the melody!

I'm Wong Shuk Yu

Wong Shuk Yu, Fish

I have no idea of my age, my class or my class number, but I remember I was preparing to take the very first exam in my life. As I entered the classroom, all the tables were facing walls, which formed a second quad and caught everyone in it. We were assigned to sit separately. The room was so quiet and bleak that I could hear an eagle weep. I received the exam paper and was told to write my full English name on the top left corner. I stared at the word "NAME", the colon, the underline, the whiteness of the paper and I was stuck. My brain was as empty as the big blank above that long line. My hands trembled like my heart did. I tried so hard to move the pencil, but it was holy as heaven, heavy as hell and hot like the first fire that Prometheus had stolen. That was when an angel appeared in the man's world.

"Oh, you don't know how to spell your name, do you? W-o-n-g S-h-u-k Y-u," he whispered at my back. He leaned forward and stayed until I got every word right. "So let's get started, Shuk Yu."

Since then, life has truly started, and I have always had an idea of who I am.

On My Way to Where the Air is Sweet...

Fung Hoi Yan, Sarah

Mommy said I had no school today so I had a little playtime at home. It was a sweltering summer day and I did not feel like doing anything. I was lying on the cozy sofa and watching television for the whole afternoon. 14:20 p.m. I was staring at the television, sitting still, looking forward to my all-time-favorite cartoon series 'Doraemon' to be broadcasted in ten minutes.

"Nanny, I hungry! I want eat!" I cried.

"Yes Little Ma'am. Just a sec." She pretended to be dutiful as she replied, with a beam of delight. "Sandra, no more Chinglish okay? You should say 'I WANT TO EAT.' Got it?" she continued.

"I-WANT-TO-EAT? Aiya whatever la! English is just too complicated for me. . . ." I loathed and spoke with impatience.

"Come and play/everything's A-Ok/friendly neighbors there/that's where we meet. . . ."

"Nanny! Where's Doraemon? Who are they?"

"Oh, oh," she said, staring at the television. "'Doraemon' has finished and we'll watch 'Sesame Street'! It's a good one though."

I stood in front of the television, staring at Big Bird and Elmo dancing and singing happily with a bunch of children.

"Come and play/ -thing. . . .Ok/ friendly. . . bors there. . . ." I could not recall when and how I was attracted by the theme song. I moved closer and closer to the television, and began to mimick their singing.

"Ha-ha. . . . Are you singing, Sandra?" Nanny asked with amusement.

"See! The Bird's singing!" I exclaimed in glee. I felt like I had had discovered a secret island on Earth.

"Sunny Day/Sweepin' the clouds away/On my way to where the air is sweet. . . ."

The moment amazed me. The music was so pleasing to my mind and ears, as if there was a magical power cast on me. The music was like children playing and chit-chatting joyfully on the playground. The music was inviting me to play together with them. The music was like a loving boy that I could not resist. . . .

“Nanny, teach me how to sing!”

“Well...well. Easy-peasy. ‘Sunny Day/Sweepin’ the clouds away/On my way to where the air is sweet. . . .’ Ha-ha!”

Her euphonious accent was so full of sensuality, it seemed to me that her heart would speak English if it could speak.

I slipped down the sofa and recalled the lyrics of the song, and I began to sing it out loud in my own heart, with passion and with curiosity.

On the dining table I spotted the thick book I hated, yet I now began to love it. At that moment, I knew I was going to pick up something new – something I truly enjoyed.

Spelling “Genius”

Chan Wing Ka, Pinky

Tick tock, tick tock, tick tock. . . . The clock kept ticking. The sky behind the window turned from dark blue to absolute black. The 26 alphabets were lining up in order inside my little head, waiting for me to call them out.

“Astronaut,” said Mum.

“A-S-T-R-O-N-A-U-T,” I said, picking those alphabets from the queue.

“Museum.”

“M-U-S-E-U-M.”

“Good! The last word for today – ‘supermarket.’”

“S...S-P-U-E-R...M-R-A-K-T.”

“Again.”

“S-P-U-E-R...M-O-K-E-T.” Spinning my pencil, rolling my eyeballs, knitting my brows, I looked so innocent. However, the 26 alphabets in my head started blaming me for messing them up.

“Why did you interchange our position?” P and U shouted.

“Why did you call me out?” O yelled.

“You seldom mess us up!” they said.

“Sorry dears, I didn’t mean to do that,” I cried.

The annoying clock on the wall was still ticking. The furious darkness of the sky was submerging me. Can you be as kind as the white sky? The bed in my room kept scolding me madly. Even in the living room I could hear whatever it said. Can you be quiet like what you are in the daytime?

Spelling was not a hardship. Sleeping was.

The Stupid Me

Chan Siu Hang

If I've to reimagine my inability to learn English in kindergarten, it'll be like this: A for astronaut. B for barbarian. C for chimpanzee. Good grief! What are these? Are they an alien's way of saying, 'You suck, kid!?' The future Morse code saying 'SOS'? The symbols when film subtitles go wrong? What about D? D for dumbass? I for idiots? And M for morons? If the kindergartener taught me a swear word for every letter, I'm sure I could memorise them all in no time. I wish I could dig a tunnel to the core of the Earth and ask, 'May I be reborn now as an Englishman?' Ask, 'Where is Aladdin's magic lamp? I've three wishes to be fulfilled. First, I want a maid who speaks English, no matter Filipino or Indian. Second, give me a pill not to kill myself, but to master English now. Third, get me to the surface! I'm stuck in the abyss of emptiness.' Ring. Ring. Ring. Bloody hell! It's finally over. The lesson, which tortures me by teaching me whatever that is deeper than a black hole, sucking all my attention, is over. The lesson, which instils into me the visualisation of a bunch of happy, dancing little alphabets who wear a smile playing like they're humans, is over.

The Pain But No Gain

Chow Hay Ting, Angela

I could've sworn that teacher hated me. "Do you really hate Chinese that much?" she asked, staring at me with her stern eyes, her voice full of spite. I was unable to memorize Chinese characters like the other kids could. It was always pure luck that I passed the exams and dictations. Countless times, I sat on the red brick steps outside the classroom, sobbing and sniffing, wishing and wishing that these complex characters would flow through my piece of dumb meat when I needed them. Better yet, my anxiety for Chinese blessed me with a habit. A curdling pain would furiously infest my internal organs, a pulsating pain. This pain came at every single exam throughout my late primary school years. The silent atmosphere, my teacher's sharp eyes and the rustling of papers. Classmates with their glasses stuck on the brown pages, nostrils filled with the sour smell of recycled paper. While my trembling sweaty palm clutched my pencil tightly, a serial killer would lovingly lick his blade, raise his arm, and start carving a work of art. Sharp swift swipes, in and out, in and out of my abdomen. Stabbing again, and again into a labyrinth of gooey organs. The world twirls and swirls, my body in a curl, and my brain in a whirl. And my result? "Do you really hate Chinese that much?" I still hate that serial killer.

Underground English Class

Yu Shuchang, Maya

When I was in third grade, my mum got me a secret invitation to an English afterschool class from her close friend Tong. I still remember every detail from it. It was a thick yellow paper, with the size half of my textbook. There were some English words on it that I didn't understand at all. At the bottom was a flourished English signature by the teacher.

"Aunt Tong said only the one with signature was valid," my mum told me proudly.

In our first class, Teacher Jim warned us not to mention this to any of our friends, because our classroom was so full that we couldn't add any extra seats. This warning worked so well on us. Everyone felt much privileged to join the class, or rather, a secret organization. Being so well educated by Chinese civil war films, we all acted perfectly like the members of Communist Party's underground network. When I met my comrades in my school, we would pretend that we didn't know each other. I would tell my classmate every Wednesday that I couldn't play with them afterschool because I had "some business to run".

This was how I ran my business: I would hastily pack my backpack, run out of school and jump on the backseat of my mother's bicycle. My mum would ride her ass off for one hour to get there while I would be eating a cold hamburger on the backseat.

There was this one Wednesday in November when we were caught in heavy rain on our way, the kind that could only be found in summer. We had only one raincoat, so my mum put it on and I got in from the back to cover my head and upper body. My mother never offered and I never asked, to take a shelter for a while or not to go at all. It was such a tacit agreement.

I was only a few minutes late. By the time I got there my long johns were wet through, icy cold and sticking to my legs. I sat in the classroom, for two hours, trembling and constantly trying to separate my long johns from my legs. On the way back home, my mum said to me, "Your English has to be good, otherwise it just isn't worth what we went through today." I wept on the backseat without her noticing. Was it out of guilt that I didn't concentrate at all in class, or was it just because of the long johns glued tightly to my legs? I don't remember.

I can't tell if the secret club helped with my English at all. Yet every now and then, when people ask how come my English is so good, I think of that evening and my long johns glued to my legs.

Close Circuit Musical

Law Hau Ning, Aurora

Puff the magic dragon lived by the sea, and frolicked in the autumn mist in a land called Honah Lee. Yellow bird, up high in banana tree. Yellow bird, you sit all alone like me. Oh Carol, how I love you so. Darling I love you, though you treat me cruel. Only you can make the world seems right. Lemon Tree, lemon tree. Mr. Topsy Turvy and Little Miss Sunshine sat under the tree and did marvelous talks. Then the magic key shone. Biff, Chip and Kipper took their dog Floppy with them, and the key took them all to a castle. Flora is also a dog too, but she is not in the Oxford University Press book series with Floppy. Speaking of dogs, Sir David Attenborough popped up in the screen and taught me the world. How Cheetahs can sprint but overheat, how dinosaurs turn timeless in fossils, and how flowers bloom through the icy ground. Along marched the myths of Osiris and Anubis, stories of the golden Pharaohs, followed by Zeus' love life and Medusa's head chopped off. Tales, sung and read, heard and recurred. Flow, flow, the English flows its wonders in my veins.

Hitching a Read

Jenna Collett

I get around. I'm not ashamed to say it. Some other books judge me. Oh, they try to hide it, but I've heard the talk. I can hear the crisp whispers from between their still-white pages. Haughty bastards. Like they've never had a questionable hand go a little too far with them. Like nobody's ever given their spines a good cracking. Please. Those ivory tower types are the worst. I've stayed in a few of those shelves, I can tell you. I know how the game is played. I get around.

That's how I started actually. When I was printed you could still smoke inside buildings. Pipe tobacco, hand-rolled cigarettes, and short-stub cigars: my youth was marinated in the stuff. I rubbed spines with first editions, collector's items, books autographed by their authors. Not bad for a young soft-cover. My pages reeked of green leather arm chairs and a bottom-drawer sherry habit. I witnessed countless classes, saw the arrogance of argument and youth in white shirts and wool skirts, and noticed the hair get more and more ethereal on the old Prof's head. But I never really fit in. I always got the feeling that my place on the shelf wasn't quite guaranteed. The old man eventually put me in a cupboard together with the self-help books. You know the kind: books that think bullet points will shoot down sorrow and that falling in love is about how you pay the bills. I wound up with the likes of "The Seventeen Successful Habits of Highly Impressionable Idiots" and a book about sex for the elderly. I'll talk to anyone, but I know when I've been snubbed. It was time to make my own way in the world - to graduate - so to speak.

I got my chance when the old man retired; he didn't even take us Cupboard Books with him. We landed up in a library sale with all the outdated physics and geography books: long suffering texts singing their stories like the world was still flat and God was the one with the rolling pin. I shouldered my way to the top of the pile. It's hard not to look desperate with a one buck price tag on your arse, but I made it work. I saw a young lad approach the sagging table, and tried to look nonchalant. He had his shirt untucked and that air of invincibility I had come to expect from the young men in Prof's classes. His hand reached for me. It was the beginning of something electric - my next big affair - I could feel it in my seam. His knuckles grazed my cover as he leant behind me to pick up a book about the early farming methods of the Boers.

Three hours of self-loathing later, a woman in her early thirties approached. Gathering myself--and blocking out the eternal drone of cigarette and snake oil ads from the stack of old magazines next to me--I tried a different tactic. I was honest. I looked as vulnerable as I felt. I bent my cover a bit: left just enough space to appeal to her already itching thumb. That was the first time I hitched. And I was hooked.

I can't really get into how I came to be in Lagos, Nigeria (Reader-Book confidentiality, you know), but I can tell you that an African road trip is probably the most fun you can have with your cover on. I was loaned to a friend and never looked back. Lived hand to hand, bedside table to beer crate to backpack. I got sand in my crack for the first time in Mozambique. I was read against a Baobab tree in Zimbabwe. Southern Africa is a ball, and Johannesburg is the tits.

I spent some time doing the second-hand book scene in the city, but I soon realised that the bookshelves of back packers are where it's at. Back packers are a hitchers' Heathrow: our ticket to anywhere. The first time I skipped the continent was because of a back packer in Botswana. I got thumbed by a man who kept a library in the boot of his car, exchanging tales with strangers like they were common currency. He swapped me for a book of short stories and I left with a guy who was going free-diving in Indonesia. A month later I was in Bali.

I got ahead by being left behind. My story already digested, I was too big and too read to fit into the returning travellers bags. So I stayed, hitching with new readers as they moved from island to island. I was thumbed up and down the archipelago for years, and began to wonder if my greatest escape was turning into a revolving door. Not that I minded. The packers had me now. My old office mates wouldn't have been able to recognise me. I had the look and taste of a sea-book: wilted from rogue waves slushing onto the boats that carried me further and further away from the quiet rooms and correctly-levelled shelves of my former life.

I'm not a particularly classy book - and with the life I've led I'm no looker - but I've been passed on in real earnest a time or two. People have even given out the name of my latest hostel to like-souled strangers in order to get my next reader in touch with me. That's how I finally got out of the archipelago. I left with a woman who had a tattoo of four dancing penguins on her foot. She used a red plastic sack as her handbag. It was one of my first boat rides in South East Asia where I didn't get wet. She

was on her way to Shanghai to see a friend, but I was forgotten in a toilet stall in Kuala Lumpur Airport, and landed up in South Korea instead.

Korea's alright, if you like the cold. And Kimchi. The books get cared for though. I spent a winter keeping hands warm and cabin fever at bay. But when summer scorched in and I felt my pages dampen with humidity, I knew I had to move. It wasn't too hard. A man who never felt at home without his books took me to India, but a book like me can't keep with a man whose books are his family, never to be freed. So I kept on.

So I've been around, it's true. It's not for everyone. Most books like the sedentary life. But if you're me you tend to attract a wandering thumb now and then. If you're me you get urgently pressed into a semi-stranger's hand, or you are fondly lent to a friend, never to be returned. I've been scribbled in, made love on, used as a conduit for time and memory. I've become a heavily sweated-over ledger, a paperless poet's last resort, a skin for a sleeper's fast-escaping dream. I've been forgotten too. Left behind. Sold to the lowest bidder. It doesn't bother me. I collect tales by trading on my own. And it's the nature of the trade to always gain while you are losing, or lose while you are gaining.

Today I float down the Thames on a bright blue barge. With the company I've kept it's with no small irony that I find myself here. It's quieter, much quieter, than the riotous sea. I smell river water and dark red tea, sugar and steam. The smells tell me who I'm traversing with, where I am going. I smell mother of pearl buttons on a rough tweed coat, clods of earth, cement under rushing water. I smell the wind-written patterns in the river, the slow current tracing a map that will keep me following it, even as it changes.

See The Sunrise

Joelle Kidd

It had been raining steadily for a week. Water dribbled off of every ledge, every rooftop. Constant tapping on every window pane, like tiny pins dropping from the sky.

Julie ventured outside only for a moment to pull some soggy mail from the box on the door. A cheap flyer, some bills. The corners of all the envelopes were stained blue with runny ink, the paper wrinkled and mushy. Water was permeating everything.

The house was silent except for the tapping of endless rain on the kitchen window and the bubbling of the overworked kettle. Wrapping her bathrobe tightly around her, Julie placed the flyer carefully on the kitchen table. It had a picture of a sun-drenched beach on the front: electric blue sky and navy water, a fat palm tree hanging into the frame, splaying its leaves suggestively. Ghosts of barbecues and dish sets showing through the wet page.

Julie pushed the flyer away. Her kettle shrieked pitifully into the little damp kitchen. Julie took it off the electric coil, poured herself a mug of instant coffee, and turned to her laptop.

Where to Sunbathe in Hawai'i, she wrote. She opened some tabs in her browser. The Hawai'ian Islands official tourism site, lists of the best beaches. A review site. Make Your Trip to Paradise Memorable With These 9 Fantastic Beach Spots, she added.

She sipped her coffee and scratched her foot. She wanted to look up the weather report. After this. Write one paragraph first. She sighed and began to type.

She got paid fifty bucks for the Hawai'i article and did another one on beaches in Fiji. The editor emailed her back asking if she'd had any food experiences in Hawai'i that they could use in a feature on World Delicacies.

She made a grocery list. Spam Musubi seemed like a good bet. Easy, but quirky.

The Spam reminded Julie of the pâté that she'd had in Paris some ten years ago, the only time she'd ever travelled. It was her last night in Europe. Her plane flew out at 8 am, and she refused to pay for another night in the tiny hotel room, which was barely larger than the bed inside it.

She checked out early and spent her final night in the city lugging a giant hiking backpack on her back and a day pack on her front. She was too embarrassed to ride the Metro with her backpacks, so she walked all the way up to Montmartre, getting thirstier and watching the price of a Coke rise with every block. Darkness was settling in, the sun just a rosy blur on the horizon, throwing the city into black relief.

She met Alexander and his friends in a graveyard. They were having a rowdy picnic of pâté on crackers and wine. She took some because she was hungry and thirsty and sat with them because she felt obligated. They said they'd come looking for Jim Morrison's grave but they'd gotten lost. Julie pointed out that they were in the Saint-Vincent Cemetery.

"Jim Morrison's buried at Père Lachaise."

"Oops," said Alexander. They sat in front of the grave of Théophile Steinlen instead. The pâté was cold and spongy. Julie promised herself she would go to McDonalds on the way to the airport.

They traipsed around Montmartre for a while in the dark; Alexander and his friend Rolfe from Belgium, Lindsay, an American girl who said "gosh" a lot, and two French girls. Julie wasn't sure where they'd picked up the French girls, who seemed content to follow the rest of them around, jabbering bored-ly in French, pausing occasionally to gesture at Julie's backpacks and laugh.

"What now?" asked Lindsay. "Should we go find Jim Morrison?"

"Let's get drunk," suggested Rolfe. He motioned over his shoulder at a little bar, throbbing with life in its corner of the darkened street.

"I think I'm going to walk back," said Julie.

She was writing an article meant to detail her experiences hiking the West Coast trail when her phone rang. It was an editor.

"We'd like you to do a story on Machu Picchu. Something off the beaten path. We really like your work."

"Thank you. Well—"

"We're prepared to fly you out," he added hastily. "So don't worry about that. We'll cover the tickets and a nice reasonable per diem. We want a good, in-depth story."

"Oh." Julie glanced back to her laptop. The cursor was blinking at her, waiting.

"Just leave your bag by the door," said Alexander. "No one will take it."

The French girls giggled.

“It’s fine,” said Julie, “I don’t feel like going in.”

The others shrugged and went inside. Alexander stayed. “I’ll walk with you.”

She started moving away and he fell in step beside her.

“Where are you going after this?”

“The airport. I’m going home.”

“You should stay longer. Rolfe and I are going to Spain.”

Julie sighed. Everywhere you stopped, every hostel, every city, someone was inviting you along to the next place, hoping it would be better. “No. I’m going home early.”

“Why?”

“I’m sick of Europe.”

They followed the winding streets to the Sacré-Cœur and sat quietly on a ledge, side-by-side, while Julie rubbed her sore shoulders.

It had been the worst three weeks of her life. She had packed everything up expectantly, barely batted an eye when her parents warbled their tearful goodbyes at the airport. This is what she had been waiting for, a month alone in the cobbled quaintness of Europe, going where she pleased, tasting and seeing and smelling a world different from her own.

Instead it was expensive, and the cobblestones hurt her feet. She got heatstroke in Milan and threw up gelato. The chill went down to her bones in England, where the food seemed limp and tasteless. All of her clothes were wrinkled and damp and smelled like the inside of her backpack. In Hungary, a little old man grabbed her ass on the street. The payphones were different in every country and none of them worked, just barked at her in languages that she didn’t understand.

“I don’t know what I’m doing here,” she said.

“We really appreciate your unique voice,” the editor was telling her. “You see what others miss.”

“I really can’t take it on right now. I’m sorry.”

A sigh fuzzed through the phone speaker. “I hope you know we don’t usually make requests.”

“I know, I just ... to be honest, I think I might be done with travel.”

“Well. I’m sorry to hear that.”

She hung up the phone and moved towards the window. The rain had stopped. The clouds were spreading slowly apart and harsh white sunlight was stretching its fingers out into the sky.

“I wanted to be a travel writer,” Julie confessed. “I was going to turn this whole trip into a book and send it in somewhere and become a best-selling author.”

Alexander laughed. “Maybe it’s just not for you.”

“Maybe I’m not adventurous enough.”

“If I was adventurous I would have stayed home and made something of myself.”

“What kind of something?”

“I don’t know,” sighed Alexander. “That’s the problem.”

The skyline was glowing pink and orange, a sliver of sun peeking over the horizon.

“I guess the sunrise is the same everywhere,” said Julie. “Whole world, same sun.”

“No, it’s not. Have you ever seen it rise in the mountains? Have you ever seen it rise in an open field? It’s completely different.”

“I guess so,” said Julie, and when they kissed, the insides of her eyelids glowed pink and the sun washed warm over her.

The “Sweetest” Hug

Mak Long Ying, Christy

It was my first long distance flight, and as the plane was about to land in this giant country, I was thrilled to notice a sea of little square rooftops of houses right below the airplane, a sight which was completely different from Hong Kong’s high-rise buildings. Neither was I jet-lagged nor exhausted after an entire night packing for this fourteen day trip.

The country wasn’t as densely populated and mountainous as Hong Kong. Everything was HUGE here in Canada. Supermarkets, parking lots, restaurants, houses and even the body size of Canadians seemed large. On the third day of the trip, my mum’s best friend Aunt Connie, who had moved to Canada twenty years ago, brought my mum and me, two hopeless shopaholics, to a gigantic shopping mall, Square One in Mississauga. My prey was nothing but good fashion. Grinning and giggling with delight, I was surprised when I saw an “S” on the price tag of the dress I put on in the fitting room since what appeared on the price tags of the outfits I bought in Hong Kong were all “L”s.

My impression of Canada wasn’t merely “big” but also romantic. Aunt Connie and Uncle Raymond first met each other here and got married soon after they fell in love with each other. It was love at first sight. So naturally I dreamt of meeting him who had flown to Canada to further his studies in 2009, but I knew it wouldn’t be possible to bump into him in this mammoth country.

While I was listening patiently to Aunt Connie talking about how they were going to celebrate their 20th wedding anniversary, I suddenly noticed someone. I blinked. It was real. It was him. What astonished me wasn’t merely meeting him here all of a sudden, but also that he saw me. As he came closer, my face blushed and my heart started beating fiercely. This was the first time our eyes had met in three years.

“Hey! Christy! Long time no see! What are you doing here?” he asked. Greeted by his sunshine smile, I had had the same sparkles in my eyes as when I watched him winning the basketball championships long ago. We talked for a while and finally he offered to be my one-day tour guide on my last day in Canada. My heart danced again.

Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday. . . . Each day passed as slowly as ants walking. The “date” haunted me. I looked back at the times that we spent together when we first met at school and I no longer seemed

to care about where Aunt Connie would bring me to visit or what fashion items we could hunt for next. All I did was think, insanely, about those days when I used to admire him.

Wearing a pink floral dress, light makeup and jasmine-fragrant perfume, I arrived an hour early. He drove his car from Richmond Hill, where he was living, to pick me up in Mississauga. The first spot he brought me to was Gooderham & Worts in the Distillery District, which used to be a distillery but was now developed into a tourist attraction. Characterized by its reddish brown brick Victorian buildings, it featured a collection of art galleries, decor shops, restaurants, bakeries and bars. We snapped some wonderful pictures under the perfectly clear blue sky.

After two hours of wandering around, we stopped for refreshments at Soma Chocolatemaker, a micro chocolate factory. I ordered a cup of hot creamy chocolate. To my surprise, he didn't order but shared mine. I felt embarrassed when he had a sip of it at the beginning without asking me for a taste first. Although it might mean nothing to a guy, I could only associate it with something, especially since it was done by the guy I was secretly in love with.

Shortly after the sunset, we had dinner at Messini in the Greek town. This authentic Greek restaurant was renowned for its Gyro sandwich wrapped in a pita with tomato, lettuce, French fries, meat and their iconic tzatziki sauce, which was like the Western hamburgers. The long queue there seemed to guarantee its quality.

He talked about his friends and his basketball team, but never inquired about me. I didn't mind and endeavored to be an attentive listener until his mobile phone rang. He answered the call in a slightly different voice, whispering softly. For the next couple of hours, I kept guessing who the caller could be. I couldn't hold the twist in my heart anymore and before we paid the bill, I said something which then broke my heart into a million pieces.

"Was she your girlfriend?" I asked embarrassingly.

"Yes." He nodded and showed me the wallpaper of his mobile phone.

I sweated. At that moment, we seemed abruptly distant. It didn't just disappoint me but shattered my heart. I felt so sour inside that a stream of pain flooded my heart.

“Stay strong!” I muttered to myself. Placing my trembling hands under the table, I breathed in and exhaled, sat up straight, and tried my very best to control my emotion. All I could do was to pretend I didn’t care though it was hard.

After he drove me back, the last minute of our night finally came. My last attempt was to request for a goodbye hug, although I knew it would be just a plain hug. The hug was “sweet” in the way it ended my very first trip to North America, which was all about him. It was also “sweet,” as my fascination for him was smacked down by the painful reality that all that remained were secret memories of a secret love and a secret admiration. I had been expecting too much.

Once he left, my tears poured down. I wept for how foolish I had been. I wept for having loved a boy who had a girlfriend but she wasn’t me. But most of all, I wept because I was going to leave, which meant I wouldn’t know when we would meet again. As I wiped my tears away, the memories of this tiny secret love between the two little friends were erased in a colossal country.

Chained Freedom

Daniella Cedermark

My baby girl comes running in to my bedroom again. Her face is a bit swollen from playing outside in the cold all day when she peeks out from the messy hair. She holds her cuddly panda, called Mr. Panda, close.

“Mommy,” she says, “Mommy, I found a bottle of daddy’s special drink in Mr. Panda’s bed.”

A girl her age should not have to see her mommy cry every day. A girl her age should not find her daddy’s bottles among her toys either. I look at her, wonder if she realizes what her daddy is doing? Does she think that I made a mistake marrying her daddy? Is it time to leave him now? My daughter interrupts my thoughts by pushing me softly for an answer to what she should do with the bottle in Mr. Panda’s bed.

“I’ll help you baby girl, I will talk to daddy and tell him to keep his things away from Mr. Panda’s bed.”

I walk her to her room. There it is, a vodka bottle tucked in under Mr. Panda’s pillow. I almost admire his creativity in finding new hiding spots. I stop that thought. How could he think I would not find out about this bottle? He knows that our daughters tell me everything. I take the bottle and tell my baby girl that it is time to put on her pajama.

Walking to the kitchen, thinking about what I should do about the situation, I almost miss Lara, my older daughter, sitting in the living room. She stares blankly in front of her. After putting the bottle on the kitchen bench I walk to her.

“Is daddy coming home tonight?” she asks when I sit down.

“I think so” I lie. I hope he doesn’t. I don’t want another night of smelling his alcoholic breath and denying sex.

My baby girl, her name is Julia but I always call her my baby girl, comes to the living room, ready to go to bed. She crawls up in the lap of her big sister, yawns and claims not to be tired. A few minutes later she falls asleep, her face as innocent as only a little girl’s can be. I carry her to bed, kiss her forehead and whisper good night.

I walk back to the living room, ask Lara if she wants some tea before going to bed. She nods. The tea smells of cinnamon and we both feel the energy pouring out of us.

“Mommy, am I a bad daughter if I don’t want daddy to come home tonight?”

The question takes me by surprise. “Why don’t you want him to come home?”

“Because I don’t like it when he makes you cry, you don’t deserve to cry,” she answers quietly, stands up and gives me a soft good night kiss on my cheek and disappears to her room without finishing her tea.

I sit for a while, looking at the pictures of my girls on the wall, when they play in the grass, when Lara holds newborn Julia in her arms, looking terrified. My favorite picture is taken at my parent’s cottage in the highlands, the sun is shining and the girls are smiling and holding newly picked flowers. A flash of guilt strikes me. They were so happy. I cannot remember Lara smiling like she does in photographs for the past months. It’s not fair to make them live with their father in this condition. He is a good man, I love him. I promised to be with him in sickness and in health. He swept me of my feet back then, handsome, intelligent. A real man. Something happened when he got that promotion and we decided that I should stay at home with the children. He changed, did not come home happy as before, did not smile at me like before. I tried to talk to him but got nothing back. One day he came home with flowers and champagne and apologized for being down for the last couple of weeks. I had one glass of that champagne and then it was empty. That was when he got sick, when he started finding alcohol to be more important than family. I did not recognize that at the time but when he started coming home with wine on weeknights and going to the bar more often I started thinking about it but did not have the guts to mention it. When I did, a time later, it was too late.

The phone rings, it’s John. He was there for me when my husband was not. He listened to what I had to say when my husband did not. He saw into my feelings, he understood I needed someone to hold me up. It was not meant to happen, he was just being a friend.

“How are you?” he asks, knowing the answer already.

“I’m fine . . .” but he knows I am lying. I don’t want my girls to walk in on me talking to my lover. Lara probably understands that he exists. At times I have asked her to baby sit Julia and then she has seen me coming home with messy hair and a ridiculous smile.

“Do you want to meet up?”

“I don’t know if he will come back soon and I don’t want the girls to be alone if he does.”

“Okey. Call me if you need to, I miss you.”

We hang up. Later when I am in bed I feel lonely, and I think about what would happen if my husband knew. Would he even care? I close my eyes and fall asleep.

I see my little girl crying but I cannot do anything about it. I see my big girl walking away from me but I cannot do anything about it. I try to scream, I want my girls to be happy and to be with me. No sounds come from my mouth. It feels like a wind is holding me back, I cannot move. It all seems horrible but I am calm, I feel hopeful for some unknown reason. I know that the only thing holding me back is me. I need to accept it before I will reach my full potential as my own savior.

Suddenly the wind changes, becomes stronger, I feel that I lose the little control I had before. Panic starts crawling up my back and I feel the smell that scared me too many times before. It is sweet, sticky and heavy, comes at me in heavy warm breezes. I try to turn away from it but something is physically holding me put. I twist and turn my sweaty body and try to open my sleepy eyes. I finally get them open and I realize my husband is home and lying next to me. He stares at me with blood shot eyes, breathing heavily and hold his arm around my waist.

“So you decided to come home tonight?”

“You know you are the only one for me”

I am used to him lying to me, at this point I’m surprised if he tells the truth. I sigh loudly and try to twist to loosen his grip around me.

“Anyway, you smell of alcohol again. You know do not like that smell so could you please turn around so I can sleep?”

“Come on baby, we haven’t had some fun in a long time. I miss you.” His hand starts traveling down my body.

I take away his hand from me. “Don’t start that again, I am not in the mood tonight.”

He roughly sits up, stares at me. He almost looks sad, but the signs of drunkenness would be obvious to even the most innocent. I know what his next move is before he makes it. I raise my hand in the exact moment to block his open palm towards my face, and count down for the guilt feelings to hit him.

“Baby, my baby I so sorry, I don’t know what got in to me!”

His tears have never felt real. I am tired of this, I am fed up with worrying when he will try to hit again, fed up with having to defend myself. I sit up, stare at his pathetic face and say what I said so many times before.

“I cannot live like this anymore, it has to end.”

He lowers his head, and mumbles the words I can recite with him. “I am so sorry, I never want to hurt you. Can you please forgive me? Give me one last chance?”

If this was a normal night I would have nodded quietly and whispered that I just wanted to sleep. The evening flashes in front of my eyes. My little girl with her cuddly panda and the bottle with alcohol in the panda’s bed. My big girl, not glowing with happiness like she once did, asking me if she is a bad daughter because she did not like how her daddy treated and made her mommy feel. The almost-slap, which I dodged so many times before, and missed to dodge even more time before that. If this was a normal night I would have ignored the anger building up inside me.

Tonight I couldn’t. I wish I had been thinking about Lara and Julia before getting out of bed, opening my husband’s closet and pulling everything out. I wish I did not grab our wedding photo and threw it to the ground with a loud crack and glass spreading on the floor. My husband cries on the edge of not breathing, sees red and hits me with his fist. All I think about is Lara and Julia while he hits me until I lie on the floor with a bleeding nose.

Then Lara walks in the room. Her face turns white and her nostrils widens before she screams for help, and pushes away her daddy from me with such power that he falls. This was not a normal night.

I am sitting on a cold chair with a blanket around me. My girls are sitting next to me. We all are offered hot drinks but only Julia says yes. Now she is holding the brown paper cup of steaming hot chocolate. Lara is blankly reading a brochure she found children with unstable family conditions.

A tired policeman approaches us with heavy steps. “If you ladies have nothing more to report on this evening’s events, you are now free to go.” He walks away without waiting for an answer.

Free, the word hits me like a lightning of energy. Is this how it feels to be free? Do my girls and I have the whole world in front of us now? What will happen with the house, will any of us be able sleep there ever again? I find myself smiling for a second, there are butterflies in my belly. I am excited to be free, excited to make my girls feel safe, excited to not live in fear of my soon to be former husband. I feel the panic as well, but this time I embrace it, it is a panic for having to make decisions about a life without fear, something I have not done in a very long time.

“Mommy, do we have to go home now?” my baby girl wonders with a hopeful glance. She is still in her pajama and holds Mr. Panda close. Her big sister looks at me for the answer, I can see that she shares her little sister’s hope.

“No” I answer, “I will try to make sure you will never have to go back there.”

Once you had a taste of freedom, you never want to let it go.

First Kiss

Chan Wing Ka, Pinky

His lips touch hers. To Asha, this is all sudden. She has been fond of him since the first time they studied together. She could feel he felt the same too, but his care for her did not seem much more than his care for any other friend.

Leaning on the table, Asha is too tired to continue studying. Then he approaches, closer and closer, until he is too close, until his face is blurred. It is so intriguing, so dangerous, and yet so soft. She pulls back her lips. No! She actually wants it; she actually wants him. No one says a word, but his sincere gaze speaks more than a thousand words. Why is he so calm and sophisticated? Asha's heart is pounding, stomach shaking, and brain halting. He smiles, but still doesn't say a word.

Her lips finally touch his. To Eddie, this is his first kiss. Before that, he rehearsed in his imagination the best moment for when he gives her a kiss: Hold her in arms and kiss her while standing on the escalator like other couples in the streets? Hold her when she trips over something and kiss her accidentally like the common plot in clichéd soap operas? Confess my love in front of her in a beautiful park and then kiss her gently? Or simply kiss her suddenly in the dark theater while watching a romantic film?

All the plans are not realized. In the study room that seats only two of them, he stares at the face that he wants to see the most. He can't help looking closer and closer so as to see her clearly, until her face is blurred. It is so surrealistic. She moves back. Why? Eddie's heart is pounding, and his lips are shivering. Still looking at her with a smile, he is not going to let any words ruin the dreamy aura around them.

Redefining Human

Chan Siu Hang

A young man lay on a plain white bed in a poorly lit room. Imagine a bed in a bank vault with 6-foot thick stainless steel walls and everything silvery. The room resembled a vault in every aspect. An electrocardiograph beeping beside was the only machine in the room. He was the only thing under the spotlight.

After being in a deep coma for nearly a week, he slowly opened his eyes and noticed he was in a hospital room. *Where am I?* For 19 years of his life, he hadn't ever been in such a cold, dehumanised room. "Oh, damn! I can't move!" he murmured to himself. "Wait. My leg can!" The young man tilted his head up to look at his still movable right leg. "Bloody hell!" he yelled. "Why is it shiny? Is it prosthetic?" He couldn't sit up because he was firmly bound to the bed. Shifting his sight to the wall in front, he saw a large logo which read 'HuCS'. *What's happened to me?*

"Eden," a robotic female voice announced. "Subject zero one. Entered coma state at twenty-one zero one on twenty-fifth of June, two thousand and forty-seven. Left coma state sixty-eight point nine seconds ago after one hundred and sixty eight hours, one minute and eleven seconds."

"I'm not Eden."

"Subject consciousness acknowledged. Performing vital and mental scan," the female voice continued ignoring him. "Scan complete. Medical personnel entrance permitted."

A doctor and a nurse in white suits walked through the door. "How do you feel, Eden?" the doctor asked. "How do you like your new leg?"

"I'm Ryan, not Eden. I'm abso-fucking-lutely not good!" he said. "What the fuck happened to me?"

"Calm down, Eden. You should be excited about your cyborg leg," the doctor stated.

"What do you mean by cyborg? Why didn't you give me a normal leg?"

"Constable, you are our first candidate of HuCS," the doctor explained.

"Human Cyborgification Scheme," the nurse added, looking at the health monitoring machine and jotting down something.

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Ryan said, “and I’m not participating in this damn thing! Just put me to an appropriate room.”

“I’m sorry,” the doctor sniggered, “you did not enrol yourself. You were chosen.” Before Ryan could ask more questions, the doctor called out. “Prepare for second phase operations.”

“Understood.”

Ryan’s mouth stayed open. Only when he smelled a scent of fresh grass did he notice that he’d been breathing neutral, man-made air. He gradually recalled how he ended there as an experiment.

On that day, three other colleagues and I were assigned to investigate a massacre. That’s the first time I was given a serious case after I’d graduated from the police college. Everything went well as I was practising what I’d learnt and I was helped by the others. Nothing seemed strange while I was walking around the mansion looking for evidence, until I opened a room full of LPG. Why would a rich family use LPG instead of gas? I was smart to ask the question, but not smart enough to run away from the room. Before I closed my eyes, the hellfire was devouring me and I couldn’t feel my limbs. Ryan pondered this memory while wandering in a refreshing meadow.

He woke up again in the same room. Before he tilted his head to look at his legs, he caught a glimpse of something shiny on either side. “Don’t tell me it’s my fuckin—“

“Second phase modification complete three hours and twenty-three minutes ago,” the synthetic female voice announced. “Initiating body-mod integrity analysis.” Lights beaming from the ceiling dazzled Ryan.

“Damn it! Stop the whole thing,” he yelled at the voice as though he knew where it was coming from. “What do you want from me? Why was I—”

“Analysis complete,” the voice reported. “All cyborg limbs fully integrated. Congratulations, Eden. Proceeding to mental health evaluation.”

“I’m not fucking mad at all!” Ryan yelled knowing that the voice wasn’t responsive. A translucent white sheet appeared beside his bed. *What the hell?* he questioned thinking it might be a hallucination. A young woman in office lady suit click-clacked through the ‘door’.

“Hey, Ryan,” said Katherine, a clinical psychologist of HuCS.

Damn! She’s gorgeous. He’d rather not say this for fear that more parts of him would be changed. Ryan had never been so excited since waking up. He suddenly felt that staying in this room wasn’t so bad.

“Hi,” he said, “I, I’m Ryan.”

“Nice to meet you, Ryan,” she said as if she didn’t know anything about him.

“Why didn’t you call me Eden? Everything else calls me that.”

“You’re their test subject,” she explained, “but definitely not mine.”

“What test? They said it’s a scheme.”

“It is a scheme, but they didn’t say how well the scheme was developed.”

“I didn’t even—“

“I know you’ve countless questions to ask. But before this, “ she said, not wanting Ryan to ask any more questions, “how about we start the counselling first?”

“If you say so,” Ryan agreed unwillingly. His mind was filled entirely with mystery and Katherine. Katherine was not the first female he saw after waking up. Was he not attracted to the nurse who did his health check? Well, the nurse was good too but she didn’t really shine out. *Damn! Katherine is appealing. She always looked so delicate and touching that I want to hug her.*

“Can you describe how you feel?”

“I feel lost, helpless, hopeless.”

“Can you think of anything that can soothe you?”

“Umm . . . I don’t know. Maybe some answers to my questions and . . . some love.”

“Some love. Interesting. Do you mean your family?”

“That counts for sure, but I’ll better if some girl gives me love,” he replied with a smile. He’d never felt positive in this room. In fact, he didn’t think that he saw any life form since he’d arrived. The room was filled with emotionless and heartless machines, steel walls, brand new limbs and a female announcer. If no one would talk to him after the operations, he would absolutely go mad.

“What will people think about me?” he asked. “I, I mean I have all these weird-looking arms and legs. Will they see me as a fucking intelligent robot?” The counselling became serious when Ryan asked about how the world would see him.

“It depends on how people define human,” She could sense that Ryan had begun worrying about his future. “But first, you’ve to accept yourself, Ryan. I’m sure after all operations, you’ll look like a normal person,” she smiled.

“Will I?”

“Why not?” She was still smiling at Ryan as if she could decide how normal he’d look like.

“Will you treat me normally even if I look like a robot?”

“It’s the inside that defines human, not the outside,” she replied.

He didn’t bear the answer in mind knowing that she might say that to comfort him. After all, it was her job to comfort people.

“Can I have a chance to go outside? Staying here won’t be good for my mind.”

“Hmm . . . I’ll try my best to convey your request. You know, it’s not me who decides it.”

“Thanks, Katherine,” Ryan blushed. “Will we meet again?”

“Sure. Whenever you feel that you need my help, just tell her.”

“Tell who?”

“Another female in the room.”

“Ahh . . . the robotic voice that didn’t give a shit for me.”

“Mental health evaluation terminating,” the female voice announced.

Dammit! So now you give a shit? he thought. Not having time to say goodbye, Katherine was ‘removed’ from the room. Ryan always thought the real Katherine had stepped through the portal, but then he knew that she was a hologram. He still hadn’t met a real woman in the room.

“Third phase modification begins.”

“Oh, come on!” Ryan yelled, “I don’t even have time to daydream.” He smelled fragrance of blossoming flowers so strong and pleasant that he was teleported to a hill to watch a sunset between patches of blooms.

Katrine is sitting here leaning on me, enjoying the aroma of flowers and watching the sunset. Then I pick up a flower and put it onto her hair. We chase each other in the field of flowers like children. When we are tired, we lie on the field and look at the moon. We talk about everything but my robot body. It’s getting dark so we go down the hill together. I hold her hand when she’s afraid to walk down steep slopes.

Ryan woke up the third time in the room. This time he didn’t know what of him was changed. He didn’t care.

“Good morning, Eden,” the voice greeted him.

“Oh, uh . . . good morning.” Ryan never felt that the voice was alive. For a moment, he thought that she was Katherine. “Hey, what is your name?”

“No name was given to me,” she replied.

“Then what do they call you?”

“Who?”

“The doctor, nurse, Katherine—“

“They do not address me.” Her indifferent reply surprised him. “To be accurate, they have not ever entered this area since you arrived.”

Ryan suddenly understood one thing – he was isolated like the voice. A human being and a female artificial intelligent voice were mostly different. One had life and one had not. One had a mind and one had not. One had a body and one had not. One had a personality and one had not. And simply, one was a human being and one was not. But then no one seemed to treat both of them differently. Katherine did show him some care, but after all, it was her job. Ryan knew he shouldn’t take her care too seriously. Not to mention the doctor and nurse who were using him as a test subject and didn’t even call him Ryan.

“You have one new voice message, Eden. Do you want to hear it?”

“Go ahead.”

“From Katherine, the clinical psychologist. ‘Good news, Ryan. You’re allowed to leave this complex now. Remember to return here by midnight like Cinderella. See you soon.’”

“Good grief! Thank you, Katherine. I owe you one.” Ryan could’ve jumped from the bed if he had not been bound.

Cling. Cling.

“Unbinding completed. Door and elevator access granted.”

What should I do outside? Mum and dad must miss me so bad. I should go home first. Yeah, home first and friends second. Damn! I’ve to find something to cover up my arms. They’re shiny as hell! Will they be scared of them? Will— he contemplated until what the voice said shocked him.

“Six hours, fifty-seven minutes and thirty-seven seconds remaining before initiating final phase,” she reported with an abnormally soft voice as if she didn’t want him to hear it.

Ryan stepped out of the prison. Turning left, he saw an egg yolk hanging on a grey canvas descending behind skyscrapers, glaring bullets travelling swiftly overhead causing massive vortices, and a standing torch providing irregular illumination to the streets like strobe lights in the club. He sighed. Turning right, he saw the fast lane to his home. All sorts of vehicles were piercing through the air like jets, yet none of them stopped for him. *How can I get home? I don’t have money or anything.* Just as he was going to walk back home, one of the vehicles approached him.

“Get on,” a voice said.

“You’re one of them?”

“I said get on.”

“Alright, alright,” he jumped into the vehicle. “Wow. This is cool!”

“Where to?” the voice said.

“My home. It’s at nine thirty-one S—“ Ryan didn’t know where to look at as he couldn’t locate the driver seat.

“Okay. Navigating to nine thirty-one Park Street.”

“Oh, wow. How do you know it?” He thought that he’d asked a stupid question. *If HuCS could replace my limbs, why couldn’t it know my home address?*

The car door slid open, signalling that he should get off. He looked at the sign above the entrance – ‘931 Park Street’ – and entered the building. In the 19 years of his life, he occasionally would have to look carefully at the sign to see if he had arrived at the right place: every adjacent building looked exactly the same.

He arrived at the door of his home. He was not sure about what his first sentence should be. “Hey, mum and dad. I’m back.” *No. That sounds like I went out this morning.* “I miss you, mum and dad!” *Nah. Old-school. Hmm . . .*

Clink. Clink. Creak.

“Ry—Ryan?” Mum burst into tears hugging him.

“My goodness, we knew you were not dead.” Dad looked at him with tears about to roll down.

“Oh God,” Mum grabbed Ryan’s ice-cold hands. “What did they do to you?” Mum was shocked seeing his mechanic arms. They closed the door, went inside the flat and sat on the sofa.

“What happened to you, son?” Mum asked.

“It’s a long story,” he replied. “After the fire, everyone and even I thought I had died, but eventually I was sent to a” Ryan repeated what he experienced in the unusual patient room, describing the indifferent doctor, nurse and voice, the exceptionally realistic anaesthetic to the tempting clinical psychologist Katherine. Then he realised that they were still frowning.

“You two still look so upset,” asked Ryan. “Why?”

“No, nothing. We’re so happy you’ve come back. Just—just the arms and legs . . . why did they make you look not like a human?” Mum asked.

‘Just some shiny limbs. Why do you care about them being robotic or not?’ Ryan was getting a bit grumpy. ‘Do they mean so much to being a human?’

“We didn’t mean you’re not a human,” Dad said when Mum started sobbing. “To us, you’re still a human being and our son. Just that we’re worried about others not seeing you the way we do. Reality is cruel, son. When you’re outside we can’t support you. You’ll have to face what others think about you.”

“So, after all, you are still saying that in no way I’m a normal human being!”

“No. We aren’t!” Mum clarified. “But you’ve got to know that the world isn’t what you think it is.”

“The Earth isn’t spinning around you, kid,” Dad repeated mum’s last sentence.

“Alright,” Ryan said. “Fine! I’ll go face the world now!” He walked out of his home and slammed the door. The door shook.. The whole floor shook and he shook. For a moment, he was furious with his parents for caring more about his limbs than him, but he didn’t intend to slam the door that hard. He was in fact treating his new arms as if they were normal. *Oh, shit! I hate how they look, but the power feels good,* he thought.

There was no turning back now. He couldn’t just return to the flat and say, “I’m sorry. You two are right.” *Anyway, they know I’m still alive at least.* Annoyed by them and his selfish act, he left the block of flats.

Ryan thought of his friends. He thought of Greg who might accept him considering how close they were. While he was again thinking about walking to Greg’s place, HuCS’ smart cab appeared. He hopped into it without saying a word. The cab dropped him off downstairs at Greg’s block.

Knock, knock. Creak.

“Hey, bro,” Greg shouted. “Shit. I just know you wouldn’t die like that!”

“Hey, what’s up, Greg?”

“I’m all good. Don’t stand outside. C’mon in.”

“Thanks.” Ryan was nervous entering Greg’s flat. He tried to conceal his shiny metal limbs, but acting weird hiding them was just as noticeable.

“Wow, hey,” Greg wanted to hide his amazement at the prosthetics with a friendly tone. “What’s with those new limbs?”

“I think I would’ve died if I wasn’t given all these,” said Ryan, relieved, showing them to him.

“That’s kind of sick. Why did they help you like this? They aren’t cheap.”

“I, I’m part of an experiment,” Ryan hesitated. Experiments can be dangerous. No one knew when they would fail.

“Damn, bro,” Greg remained calm although he had begun worrying about his own safety. “Can you control them well?”

“Don’t worry. I can.”

“Alright, tell me your story,” Greg said.

Ryan repeated to Greg the story he told his parents. Greg frowned listening to him. *Shit, HuCS? Is it the high-risk experiment the government has been kept confidential? Fuck! I shouldn’t have let him in!* Greg was worried. He had let a government experiment in his flat. He was a risk, no matter if he was wanted by the government or not.

“That was a hard time,” Greg asked, “eh?”

“Yeah, but Katherine made it easier.” Ryan couldn’t keep her off his mind.

“Hey, uh . . . I’m glad that you’re back and alive,” Greg didn’t want to be a coward but he had no choice. “I think it’s time for you to go back.”

“Oh? How do you know I’ve to go back?”

“I guessed it.”

“Is it twelve yet?”

“Uh . . . nearly. You have to leave now.” Greg looked at his phone.

“Hmm . . . alright.” Ryan could sense something, ‘I’d better go. Thank you and see you soon.’”

Greg opened the door and said farewell.

Ryan didn’t look back at him. He was disappointed. “Is he scared by the limbs? How did he know I’ve to leave? So he’s one of them?”

He was alone standing downstairs. The parents had told a 19-year-old boy to face the cruel reality outside alone. His best friend had told him to leave because his time was up. No. The friend couldn’t take the risk to share the boy’s pain and helplessness. All Ryan’s closest persons rejected him because he was forced to accept the new him. He had no hope for anything. Being turned into a cyborg could be his only way to begin his life anew. Tears rolled down his face. He cried for the first time after he was reborn. Wiping the tears, he felt organic again: crying was a proof that the cyborg-looking him was still a human being inside.

He stood close to the road trying to look for his black cab. “It’s been on time to pick me up,” he said to himself. “Is it late?” He glimpsed an antique clock tower and cursed, “Fucking bastard!”

He couldn't forget Katherine thinking she could be the only one who cared about him. Ryan kept his promise of returning before midnight. He went to the bed and got bound again.

"Welcome back," the voice said. "Eden."

"Hello, girl. Where's Katherine?"

"Miss Leung is here."

"I need counselling. Can I see her now?"

"Contacting Miss Leung . . . Meeting denied. Reason: finish the last phase first."

"Fine, then." Ryan was annoyed. "Start it already."

"Request acknowledged," she announced at a slightly louder voice. "Confirmation needed. Do you want to proceed to the holistic cyborgification phase?" She asked as if Ryan could say no.

"Yes."

"Acknowledged."

Ryan closed his eyes to ready for some pleasant smell. He would not regret the decision. Even if he could turn back at this moment, rewinding the tape of history and time, the only result for him would be death. As the saying goes, 'To drag out an ignoble existence is worse than to die'.

"Maybe I could start again and prove that I'm still human. I wish people were not that superficial to judge a person only from his appearance. Even though I look like a robot, can't they just give me some care? Get to know me? I talk and act as a human, yet they treat me as a robot with a cold generator heart and simple mind."

Ryan was eventually fully cyborgified. He was promoted in the police because he became more powerful to carry out dangerous tasks. Before he left the patient room, he asked Katherine again whether she saw him as a human.

"Why would I not? You have the heart and soul of human being. The cyborg look shouldn't deprive you of your human identity."

On the one hand, he was grateful for her understanding and encouragement. On the other hand, he chose not to believe her. After all, it was her job to comfort him.

I'm now a full cyborg outside: shiny face, shiny skins and shiny limbs. I earn loads of money from my robotic appearance. I'm the boss of many police officers and a propaganda machine for the government to cyborgify all humans. There are ads about me on boardings, television, in magazines and discussions on me are everywhere on the internet. I don't have to worry about my future or earning a living. Girls chase after me.

To me, all these are worthless. My new body gave me a new life but took my history away. My parents don't recognise me. My friends don't accept me. Everything around me is materialistic. Materialism upsets me. I already have a lot of artificial materials on me. Why more? Sometimes I pretend that I'm a robot and ditch any emotion. But I can't. It's my unhappiness that proves me human. It's the emotion that makes me human. It's the heart and soul that define humans.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Justin Hill

Author's Note: In April 2014, I was asked if I would be interested in writing two novels (Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, and the sequel, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Green Legend) which would both come out with the film Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: Green Legend's in 2015.

This is the sample chapter I wrote, which was to be the beginning of the first novel, which, for many reasons – commercial, practical and legalistic - never ended up being written. By necessity, it differs from both the film and the original Chinese novels.

I

'I have chosen your husband,' Master Yu pronounced from his ironwood drinking chair. His cheeks were red with wine and a single paper lantern threw a dull red light against the night's pressing dark. He hesitated as if he thought she might argue but Shulien pretended not to hear him. Her back was turned, she leant a shoulder against the doorpost and looked out at the world within their four walls.

Spring rain filled the courtyard with fat splashing drops. The air was cold on her face, the smell of yellow earth was strong.

'I promised your mother,' he said as if that was the end of the matter. He always brought out her mother's ghost to scare her, but Shulien was nearly a woman now, and her mother's ghost was no more frightening than a dark room and an unlit paper lantern.

'Yes, father,' she said. Her voice was distant. 'I know.'

In the yard the cherry tree stood alone. It had been full of blossom that morning. Now the numberless rain drops had almost stripped it almost bare. It looked bedraggled and forlorn. The white cherry blossoms lay on the floor, swirled in the muddy pools, left them scattered in the yellow mud, seething storm water bubbling in the stone gutters.

It was the third day of the third month. It was not an auspicious day.

'We should not talk of weddings,' she said.

There was a long silence filled with the sound of dripping water. It was always the same these days. Each night he set two cups, two chairs, and he sat deep into the night, drinking alone.

*Waiting for you, a poet had once written,
I am filled with longing -*

*the blinds of my doorway flutter open
but it is only the autumn wind.*

‘Will you join me?’ her father said, as he always said.

They drank three cups together, but three cups was not enough for him, and too much for her. That was how tragedy was made, she thought, and when he went to fill her cup a fourth time she put her hand over it.

‘It is late,’ she said at last. ‘We have a long ride tomorrow.’

He nodded. She was right. He let her go, refilled his own cup to the brim, and held it up with two hands, in a gesture of gratitude. With a cup of wine all troubles diminish, the saying went, but wine only deepened his melancholy.

It was sad seeing her father like this: diminished by age.

She could not be son and wife and daughter.

Shulien bowed good night, crossed the room: as light as a tiger, as graceful as a crane, as sad as evening. She stopped at the door and turned back, and saw her father and the lantern and the gathering rain. It was hard on anyone, always watching the doorway, waiting for one who will not come.

She felt for a moment that she was looking back on the past, and lingered for a moment, then turned and stepped forward into her room, shut the door behind, heard the soft click as the latch fell into place.

The next morning night storms had passed, and the waning moon still hung in the western sky, a gauze of clouds wrapped about the West Mountains, the sun had not yet risen when Shulien sat to meditate in the yard.

Her fears had gathered in the night like a mob of voices. They had woken her early, insistent and loud: clamouring at her door. She took them out, one by one, and dismissed them as a *wushu* master takes on a crowd of fighters and leaves each in the dust. Her breathing was slow, and deep and regular as the night faded about her, the world faded from black and white moon shades, to the rich colours of day: the green roof tiles, the blue of sky, the yellow earth, sprinkled with the drowned cherry blossom.

Old Maid had laid out her clothes, but Shulien put them aside, opened her chest and picked out thin black trousers, leather boots, and a short black jacket lined with blue silk.

‘Aya!’ Old Maid said, when she came in, still chewing her breakfast of cold steamed bread. ‘It is too cold!’

Old Maid was always like this. Nothing was ever right. The world was too cold, too hot, too wet, too dry! Shulien was a girl, Shulien was too boyish, her feet were unbound, she was too beautiful to stay unmarried, Old Maid was too old.

Old Maid took another bite of her white steamed bread, touched the embroidered silk clothes she had laid out and looked disapprovingly at Shulien’s boots. ‘You look like a Manchu,’ she said.

Shulien took no notice. She tied the black sash about her waist, and thrust the scabbard on, with her two broadswords, each handle trailing a long green silk streamer. Shulien could see what Old Maid was thinking. Old Maid said it anyway. She pointed with the end of steamed bun she had in her hand.

‘Those swords make you look like a robber.’

Or worse, Shulien could see it in Old Maid’s eyes, like a boy.

Shulien took the long way round to the front courtyard. Her father, Master Yu, had closed his security firm six years earlier. ‘No one’s paying,’ he said once. ‘The business is not good,’ he said another time. ‘The good fighters are all gone,’ he once sighed.

The truth was he was a perfectionist, and he was no longer as fast or agile as he had once been. ‘I was never beaten!’ he liked to say.

The eastern courtyards had once been full of young men pitting their skills against each other, or training their muscles to leap harder, faster, more explosively. But now the paper windows were brown with dust, holes flapped in the wind, and there was a carpet of moss on the doorsteps.

Shulien paused. She could remember the day she had knelt to beg not to have her feet bound like the other girls. She was six years old, and her mother said it was already beyond time if they were make her little lady’s feet, not the fat working feet of a peasant, but her father had resisted.

‘She has talent,’ he had said.

‘She has beauty,’ her mother had answered.

It was Bald Wu who had saved her. He had taught her Flying Crane Fist, and she had knelt at the statue of Buddha Guanyin, ‘If you leave my feet unbound I will be a fighter against injustice and evil!’

Before her father she said, ‘I will protect you when you are old!’

And her father had laughed then because he was young still, and fearless, and undefeated by any man. She had taken her chance. ‘Let me show you! Bald Wu has taught me.’

Bald Wu stepped forward to apologise and she remembered how her mother had cursed.

But then the courtyard went silent, because the spirit of the crane had entered her. She was long legged, long necked, her beak a blade to strike the snake. She remembered the moment as if she was one of those watching. A slender girl, hair plaited to the sides of her head, in black trousers and top, suddenly assuming the stance of a striking crane. She was grace and elegance and then she struck and she was speed and power and penetration, then soft and flowing and graceful again, as the dancing bird.

At the end Bald Wu fell to his knees and touched his forehead to the dirt.

‘Forgive me!’ he said. ‘She taught herself at first. Following the men in the yard. I never saw such a fighter! Talent should not go untrained.’

There were many days after that when Shulien had waited to hear what her parents had decided. Bald Wu refused to teach her now, so she practiced alone, and harder, till the sweat soaked her clothes and she slept like a stone by the side of the road.

Her father summoned Shulien to the family shrine, where the ancestors hung on scrolls that covered the eastern walls. Generations of the Yu Clan, sombre, serious faces, staring down from Dynasties past.

‘I have brought you here, so that the ancestors might witness and take note. I was not given a son to carry on my line, but a daughter only. But it seems you have the heart of a boy, and the talent of a warrior. I have told your mother that you shall remain unbound.’

The words were spoken solemnly. Seriously.

‘Do you understand what that means?’ he had asked.

Shulien had nodded. ‘Yes, father,’ she said.

It was not true. She was six years old and had no idea how men and women alike would look at her unbound feet and shake their heads, and tut, and say 'Poor girl. Who will marry her now?'

'Yes father,' she had said, when he asked her if she wanted to become a warrior.

'Under Heaven the Emperor is Highest,' he said. 'Then the Officials. Then the peasants, upon whose work all the land depends. Next come Merchants, and last, at the bottom come your family: soldiers and warriors. Is this the life you choose?'

She nodded.

He had smiled sadly. 'Then welcome, daughter.'

She had knelt before the ancestors and kowtowed, left a stick of sandalwood incense burning thoughtfully before each. When she stood at last her father put a hand on her shoulder. 'Shulien. As a son you shall be to me.' And he had kept to his word. He had taught her all he knew, had expected the best from her, and more, and she had trained harder than any boy.

Pain is a good teacher, her father had always said, when she wanted to stop, or give in, or rest for a break. She only had to hear the cries of the girls next door who were having their feet bound to remember her vows.

A week before the invite had arrived.

Her father was sitting on the wall, a bowl of noodles and pickled cucumber. He pointed to the scroll that lay on the stone next to him.

'What does it say?'

'Read it,' he said and slurped.

She picked it up. The paper was light in her hand. 'It is from Magistrate Du,' she said. 'He wants you to come to his yamen on the fourth day of the third month.'

Her father shovelled in another load of noodles.

'What could he want?' he said.

'He does not say.'

Her father was waiting in the front courtyard with his men. They rode slowly, paused at the East Gate, where a dead man's head was stuck on a bamboo pole. Shulien glanced through them, saw the crow-pecked eyes stared blindly out, the dead mouth hanging open and silent. A long banner proclaimed his crimes: rape, murder, unfilial behaviour.

Her father looked up and said nothing.

Magistrate Du's banner bearer waited for them with a drummer. They cleared a way through the busy morning crowds. When they reached the yamen, Magistrate Du came out to greet them. 'I am honoured to have you here, Master Yu!' he said, his hands clasped together. He led them into his inner courtyard where a table had been set in the sunshine and they shared a cup of wine, and a few light dishes of melon seeds and lotus root.

The Magistrate poured the wine. They touched their cups to each other and drank. 'It is hard these days,' he said. There was silence, and the Magistrate sipped his wine alone. 'It was better in the days your father was a fighter,' he said.

Shulien said nothing. Her father appeared uneasy.

'It is Three Mountain Bandit,' the magistrate said. 'Have you heard of him?'

Her father shook his head as the wine was poured again.

'He has defeated all the men I have sent to arrest him.'

'Who did you send?' her father said.

'Mighty Wang,' the Magistrate ran through the list. Halberd Dai. Korean Yun.

Her father laughed. These were not real fighters. They were mere loud-mouths who sat around bars talking of their abilities. No wonder they had all failed to bring the Bandit to justice.

Magistrate Du poured a sixth cup of wine. He listed the crimes of the Three Mountain Bandits, kept pouring the wine as the food piled up. After the eighth cup her father did not need any more. He put down his chopsticks and cleared his throat.

'I will bring them in!' he declared. 'This Three Mountain Bandit!' He lifted up his cup and they toasted together and Shulien forced herself to smile.

On the ride back Shulien was quiet.

'What is it daughter?'

'Nothing,' she said.

Her father's cheeks were red, and he hummed a spring song about cherry blossoms and young girls' cheeks and she wondered what he was thinking of.

‘I thought you had stopped working,’ she said when his song was done.

‘I have,’ he said.

There was a long silence.

He seemed oblivious, and started humming again. At last she could stop herself no more. ‘You know nothing of this bandit,’ she said.

‘I know I can beat him.’

Shulien looked out and saw a lone figure balancing on a narrow path between the rice paddies. Behind them the mountains reared up like a wall, each peak higher than the next. A gust of wind made her shiver.

‘Father,’ she said. ‘Promise me.’

‘What?’

‘When you go to capture this Three Mountain Bandit, let me come with you.’

He laughed. ‘You think I am too old.’

‘No,’ she said.

There was a hollow note as he thumped his chest. ‘I am *not* too old.’

Shulien nodded. ‘Of course not,’ she said.

Brickfields

Sreedhevi Iyer

“Oh my god, have you seen Brickfields lately?” asked Vijay Ramanjulu. Like a true Malaysian addressing someone who had left and lived overseas, he was lamenting the state of the nation five minutes after hello. A massive flat screen mounted up near the escalators blared advertisements to visit the Angkor Wat in Cambodia and the Taj Mahal in India. Skinny brown models in sarees too long for them grinned at me, and I found it difficult to concentrate on my friend’s words. Each visit, things seemed different, with louder, shinier layers, obscuring what probably only remains in memory. One reason for my trip this time was to force myself to question my loyalties. Was my allegiance still with my Malaysian passport, or was it time to get on with Australian citizenship? Malaysian law didn’t recognise dual citizenship with Australia. So it meant that at least on paper, I had to reject one identity to take on another. Some would say one’s identity could not be reduced to words on paper, but when you deal with words most of your waking hours, on some level you understand their insidious influence on your thought processes.

“What’s happened to Brickfields?” I was used to Vijay’s dramatic diatribes – it was something he carried with him like a badge, ever since we were student housemates in Australian law school. Since graduation, he’d returned to Malaysia, and I’d stayed on in Brisbane. Like an unspoken pact, we updated each other on the continuity of our lives whenever we met, using tales to strengthen our bridges. This time it was clearly his turn. We were at KL Sentral, the main inner-city train station. It had been his idea to meet in this teeming, throbbing hub. Despite my annual pilgrimages, Kuala Lumpur’s new developments always left me with a sensation akin to teetering over an edge. I’d thought living away from my home culture for twelve years would’ve sharpened my memories of the place, but my actual visits only mocked them.

“They’ve named it ‘Little India’. Also – they’ve done things to it.” Vijay was obviously far more partial to the area than I was. Brickfields to me was the place my parents went to when they visited Kuala Lumpur, for good South Indian food on banana leaves, rare Tamil films, and Madras coffee. My own sense of cultural navigation usually took me to Jalan Masjid India, the other Indian enclave, the one with the loud Bollywood

music and gold jewellery shops and Indian Muslim supermarkets. My parents hated the place.

I was confused. “Isn’t there already a Little India in Lebu Ampang?” I asked.

Vijay first nodded, then shook his head, then frowned, as if cross with himself that he had no right answer. “Yes, but now they’re calling this place that. All new stuff they’ve brought in.”

Seeing I was far from illumination – the screen now showed trailers of horror shows coming to national television – Vijay took me by the elbow. “It’s just here,” he said, leading me away from the station. “I’ll show you.”

I attempted to make sense of the attraction of Brickfields or Masjid India or Lebu Ampang, only after I left for Australia. These mini areas plonked randomly on the KL map sans interconnecting logical links had always been part of the landscape. My memory of Brickfields was no more than a few streets and shops stuck together around older colonial buildings, temples, churches and railway quarters, but with a particular quality that did not exist in the rest of the crazy developing maw of Kuala Lumpur. Entering Brickfields or Jalan Masjid India was like stepping through a portal into another dimension, into a street in Chennai that possibly no longer existed in Chennai itself. Tamil writing on shop signs, scents of marigolds and jasmine from garland stalls, Tamil and Hindi film music blaring from speakers placed outside saree shops. The silent private culture my parents practised and imposed as we lived invisible minority lives in tiny faraway Alor Setar exploded here, onto the public, urban sky of the capital city, unabashedly shouting the audacity of its existence.

I was too young to understand this then, but I found myself visiting these areas often while living in Kuala Lumpur. I would come up with excuses that were progressively flimsier. My friends pronounced me an obsessive and left me alone when I had the urge for yet another pilgrimage so that most times I went to these places by myself. It didn’t bother me. However temporary and artificial, being in a place surrounded by all that represented me was like a salve for a wound I didn’t know existed.

Vijay and I walked out of KL Sentral, and the humidity hit me like a living thing, one of the few things I wish I could forget about the place. We walked under temporary awnings set up above the ‘five foot way’ pavement, our transliteration of the Malay term *kaki lima* – and tried to

ignore the din of perpetual construction, now the official sound of Kuala Lumpur. “You know, now there are two ways to come here,” says Vijay, playing guide. “One, the KL Sentral one there, and another one, the Tun Sambanthan station. But its on the other side of Brickfields, very far one.” I could already see some differences – less cars parked illegally, and more new paint, giving the old buildings a more polished look. I had yet to see what the fuss was about.

I knew from my random readings that Brickfields wasn’t unique. The formations of geographical loci outside India, where the Indian diasporic subject can find himself mirrored in his surroundings, was as much a given for the Indian as the idea of migration itself. Brickfields had siblings and cousins – those that were closer in kind, and those with greater differences but still within the shade of the family tree. Paco in Manila, Mogul Street in Rangoon, Pasar Baru in Jakarta, Phahurat in Bangkok and Serangoon Road in Singapore are the rival siblings, with South Indian enclaves thriving among a dominant Southeast-Asian culture. But it was the distant cousins - Southall in London, Jackson Heights in New York, Gerard Bazaar in Toronto, Tsim Sha Tsui in Hong Kong and Dandenong in Melbourne – in other words, pockets of pretend India within the most non-Indian spots around the globe - that had greater global exposure.

These mini cultural enclaves came into being, it seemed, because of the human need for familiarity and references in a foreign place, for sanity amidst strangeness. Like Chinatown, the sister phenomenon, these Little Indias recreate the Indian motherland within its small vicinity. Perhaps it was too ambitious an endeavour, considering it theoretically meant cramming the equivalent of 22 languages, 28 states, at least 33 separate cuisines, and 12 known ways to wear the sari, into the length and breadth of a single street or suburb. The result was usually a mish-mash of food and clothes and shops and temples that originate nowhere. These may seem faintly recognizable to a visitor from India, but if locals who’ve only known Little India all their lives were to pay India itself a visit, like I did for the first time when I was eleven, they would quickly figure out that what had been ‘Indian’ to them were actually semi-shadows of the real thing. And that’s what these enclaves were, really, at the end of the day. Shadows of another culture that remain like a mirage, despite all the painstaking efforts to plant them.

Vijay and I turned a corner, and suddenly we were on Scott Road, one of the few street names unchanged since independence. We turned

into Jalan Tun Sambanthan before heading into Jalan Rosario. Vijay gestured wildly towards what he found objectionable - ornate arches and Indian-style street lights along the street, and a kitschy fountain of elephant motifs, apparently the tallest fountain in the country. "This obsession with creating records!" he cried.

I was drawn to a rather post-modern, larger than life metallic street sculpture of Nataraja, Shiva as the lord of dance, rendered in solid cubist style, gleaming away among dreary traffic. I could not place my own feelings on witnessing this, and turned away to what I already knew would greet me. I was relieved to see the air-conditioned restaurants that served meals on torn banana leaves, and smelled of roasted cardamom ---although it looked like the places had been refurbished and renamed. The row of textile shops were still there, with chiffon and georgette sarees hung-up fanlike from the ceiling. At the entrances, speakers larger than salespeople blared Tamil film songs. The signs were bigger and shinier, and I had to shade my eyes from the sun's reflection on them. The little makeshift stalls that I remembered, selling garlands of jasmine and rose and marigold around Hindu temples, were no longer there. Instead a row of cement edifices, each fashioned in the style of South Indian temple architecture, housed the garland and incense sellers. The temple style was a diluted version of real temple architecture, uniform and streamlined.

Despite the stubbornness of Brickfields' faux Indian identity, the history of the place contained overlapping cultural elements, like everything else in the cultural hodge-podge that is Kuala Lumpur. Brickfields was developed by Yap Kwan Seng, the 5th and last Kapitan of Kuala Lumpur, around 1890. The Kapitans were Chinese representatives of their own enclaves who had to report to the British on what was going on in the streets. Yap Kwan Seng came to Malaya from Chak Kai district in China and quickly realised Kuala Lumpur was expanding, and people were looking to settle there. A fire in 1881 that razed wooden houses with attap roofs to the ground had prompted a British by-law, requiring all houses to be built only with bricks. So Yap Kwan Seng constructed a kiln, baking bricks from the clay all around this place. Good clay that made good bricks, making the place famous. So it was possible some smart young British officer decided to name the spot Brickfields, and the name stuck. A hundred and fifty years later, the official name of the street was Jalan Tun Sambanthan, named after an Indian politician who helped negotiate independence in the 1950s. But still, as Vijay confirmed, any

self-respecting taxi driver was more likely to take you on as a customer if you say “Brickfields”.

As they had done in India, the British developed a railway system for Malaya, and decided to place the main depot of Malayan Railways in Brickfields. Shades of present Brickfields began. It was easier to import workers from another colony, who already knew how to work the railway systems there, rather than having to train the local natives from scratch. Droves of Indians were brought into Malaya. They came from Madras State, the closest to the Malayan colony and having the shortest turnaround time by ship. The Tamil-speaking Indians settled into prepared quarters around the Brickfields depot. They opened schools, worked in administration, and prayed in temples they built for themselves.

Vijay and I stopped at Saravana Bhavan’s, a South Indian restaurant chain that served vegetarian food, with branches in places like New York and Bahrain. I looked out from our lunch of rice and sambhar and rasam and yoghurt. I saw, not the clean contrast between colourful ghetto and organized, polished urbanity, like Brisbane’s Chinatown, but just more hodge-podge chaos. I could see the incredibly tall Petronas Twin Towers, evacuated right after 9/11 as a safety measure because some high official overreacted to its global importance. I could see KL Sentral, the railway station that had replaced the Malayan Railway depot, and was now the focal point of all five inner-city railway lines. But I also knew this stuff was just on the surface, obscuring other things that still breathed and survived in this polluted air. Underneath this sheen was the chaotic tumble of the real Kuala Lumpur, the one that had always defined its growth, pre or post-independence. Brickfields not being starkly distinguishable from its surroundings, possessing chaos that was also the chaos of Kuala Lumpur, and a fragmented existence that was also an aspect of the Malaysian way of life, was something that perhaps harkened from a history earlier than even Vijay contemplated. Much of the Malay’s mode of interfacing with the world, in terms of language, culture and food, came from pre-Islamic Indian influences, from the Hindu-Buddhist empire of Srivijaya and Majapahit, when Sanskrit was the lingua franca and temples to Vishnu and Shiva were prominent. The residue of that history was visible not just in Malay words that have come from Sanskrit, like manusia and dewa and raja, or in the shadow puppetry that re-tell the Hindu epics of the Ramayana and Mahabharatha, but also in the way both the Malays and Indians today practiced everyday courtesy. It was in the little things, like

asking permission before crossing in front of seated elders, in bringing fruit when visiting the sick, and in the bersanding wedding ritual, where the bride and groom sat beside each other as the rest of the family blessed them in turn.

I brought this up with Vijay, that Brickfields was still merely an extension of Kuala Lumpur's inherent characteristics. Though Brickfields was cousin to the Southalls and Jackson Heights of the world, in some ways it was more a bastardized relative nobody wanted to acknowledge. Unlike the former suburbs that established themselves through voluntary migration, most Little Indias around Southeast Asia were the result of colonial policy. As such, there was never any insistence or debate that the Indians assimilate themselves into the local society. The British preferred it if they kept to themselves - in fact they even encouraged it, in keeping with the 'divide and rule' policy they swore by everywhere. Time passed, more Indians came in, and the next generation of Indians born in Malaya began to grow and marry and have children themselves. Thrust far away from home and not being told what the new place was like, the Tamils erected a fortress of familiarity all around them, never needing to leave. Brickfields grew in terms of infrastructure and administration. More shops opened, and the 100 railway quarters of Rozario Street were filled to the brim. Houses of all religions were built - there was the Buddhist Maha Vihara, built by Theravada Buddhist Sri Lankans but frequented today by the Chinese, the Zion Lutheran Church, the Church of Our Lady of Fatima, a Karpaga Vinayagar Temple, and a mosque called Madrasatul Gouthiyah. I knew all still stood today, ancient architecture intact, because its moniker as 'The Divine Location' had been made official through mention in the Lonely Planet guide. Vijay said the moniker was really only used by the tourists, who stood around these temples trying to emulate rituals and looking a little lost. As time passed, though, Brickfields had become more an inherent characteristic of Kuala Lumpur than a divergent feature, connected to India in spirit and to Malaysia in commerce.

Over our vegetarian meal, Vijay and I tried to define the Kuala Lumpur that survived in our memories. The illegal bookseller, for example, who printed his own editions of the current bestsellers and sold them from a wooden cart with iron wheels as high as his waist. We never knew his name, nor where he was going to appear next, and we knew enough not to ask. We just hoped to get lucky one day and find him around our

street corner. Or the Coliseum Theatre, built in Art-Deco style in 1920 by the Chua family, which showed Tamil movies to this day. We had made friends with a woman who worked under its awning, selling homemade fried snacks stuffed into little plastic packets. She wore a batik sarong everyday because it helped with the heat, and she'd sent her son to study medicine in Oxford with her profits. And then there were the ubiquitous Eun Yan Sang shops scattered around the place, selling traditional Chinese medicine, famous enough to warrant Indian and Malay regulars. Taxi drivers agreed or disagreed on taking passengers depending on the requested destination and the possible state of traffic. Most times, if they did agree, it was on a set price that had nothing to do with the meter. Haggling was useless. And if by chance they were caught for speeding, one could always gently query "Lima puluh?" to the police officer, and be let off for fifty ringgit. Traffic slowed down for everything, but especially so if there had been an accident on the other side of the road, because everyone noted down the vehicle's registration numbers to use them for the next lottery ticket. Traffic also slowed down every time it rained, which was usually on a daily basis, and usually between 3:30 and 4pm, like clockwork.

"So maybe this is not that bad a thing, lah," I said to Vijay. "We always grew along and next to each other right. Maybe this also will be like that – it will get absorbed in with everything else." It was when I used 'lah', that particular Malaysian suffix, that I know I've become comfortable in my return. It also increased my intimacy with others. It worked wonders with street peddlars when they attempted to overcharge me. On Vijay it had the effect of a gentle smile of recognition.

We had finished lunch, and washed our hands at the specially provided sink and tap at the back of the restaurant. But instead of paying up, Vijay settled back into his seat at the table as the waiter cleared our banana leaves. He ordered coffee. "You know, I was thinking of this, everything we had just talked about, when I heard the government announce this project for this place," he said, adjusting himself in his seat. "And I thought, what are they trying to do? We already have these spots what. Won't this new development cause unnecessary confusion? They say it is about Indian identity, but is this enhancing the identity, or erasing it?"

Vijay was grappling with policies of Malaysia's post-independence era, after 1957. The first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, had declared all Indians and Chinese in Malaya as citizens of the new

independent nation, no questions asked. The ideal outcome of this, as Vijay and I were taught in our school history lessons, was that the average Indian was as much a local as his Malay neighbour. That just as Indians were spread around the Malay land, mixing in with the current milieu, so too would their collective identities merge and mesh with the local environment. These were the ideals of our fathers. These had been their dreams.

But Indians today found themselves forgotten in the tussle between Malay political dominance and Chinese economic dominance. Politics and elections were racialized. The ruling party Barisan Nasional contained three divisions that ran along ethnic lines – United Malayan National Organization (UMNO) for Malays, Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) for Chinese, and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) for Indians. With policies such as quotas for Malays in universities and band subsidies, what looked like affirmative action in practice was more akin to Malay supremacy. In such a scenario, where the population, following the example of its politicians, also started thinking along racial lines, enclaves like Brickfields became emblematic of their collective identity. The area was spoken about as the home of Ananda Krishnan, one of the richest men in Asia. He owned Maxis, the mobile network, as well as Astro, the satellite television company. Tony Fernandez, the owner and founder of Air Asia, lived in neighbouring KL Sentral, a real estate hot spot. They were spoken about in hushed tones by the majority of Indians - the toilet cleaners, bus drivers, mechanics, waiters, factory workers, office clerks, and checkout girls of the nation - as they were the exceptions. Their names were uttered with reverence, because they made it against government-sanctioned odds. They lived the life the rest of the Malaysian Indians didn't dare dream of. Especially not when fifty years on, Malays still told Indians to go back where they came from.

“For years, I’ve heard nonsense about the government helping Indians,” said Vijay. “Because they still vote for them. The middle-class, you and I – when have we voted? When have we cared enough? You voted last time or not?” He poked a toothpick at me. I shook my head, trying to keep the guilt hidden from my face. He nodded, as if he’d expected it. “You know, there’s this guy in my office, he told me this happened in the 80s. The MIC had gone to the rubber estates, in all the rural areas, raising money for a scheme that would bring electricity and business for them. The buggers pocketed the money. Nothing happened.

The stupid estate people had even pawned their jewellery – and then they still vote for these idiots!”

The coffee arrived. Vijay took several sips, blowing on the brown foam on top. He held the hot aluminium tumbler with the tips of his fingers. The beverage seemed to calm him down. “But now, you see, after so many years, it’s different. We know what’s happening, and the government is running scared. All this is because they are scared.”

“Do you mean Hindraf?” I asked, before I could stop myself.

Vijay nodded. “It still hangs around, like a spectre.”

HINDRAF, or the Hindu Rights Action Force, was a coalition of 30 Hindu NGOs that in 2007 decided to protest demolitions of Hindu temples by KL’s City Hall authorities. Thousands of Indians took to the streets with demands that included 4 trillion US dollars from the Queen of England as compensation for the colonial practice of forced migration. The sensational demand was a stunt, but one that called international attention to the country’s practices - and a rebuke from the White House. The ruling party suffered its greatest losses in the next elections. So perhaps Vijay was right to say the government, now no longer of the overwhelming majority it had taken for granted for the last fifty years, would be cautious.

“You know how it all started? The Indian Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, planned to pay a visit in November 2010. Things went into overdrive from August itself. It was all over the papers. Refurbishment for Brickfields. Little India, new name. 35 million ringgit project. Planned so well, had three phases to go through.” Vijay shook his head. “They made Jalan Tun Sambanthan a one-way street. They posted policemen there to write summons for illegally parked vehicles, day and night. No alternative parking spaces, even though such parking goes on all over Kuala Lumpur. They widened the roads.” Vijay had finished his coffee. I quickly ordered another for him. “When the opening day came, I thought, okay, lets go see what all that mess was worth. Manmohan Singh came, stood on a raised platform and gave a nice quiet speech. Other dignitaries also. At that time it wasn’t that crowded – the crowds came later, for the late night concerts. Yogi B lah, Ramli Ibrahim lah, Alleycats lah. Vaanavil channel had all their journalists there, interviewing random Indians. And what were they all saying? Brickfields now new, now developed, how it was so different now compared to “the olden days”, so much better.”

We finally decided to leave the restaurant. I forced Vijay's arm aside as he made to pay the attendant at the main counter, and proffered a fistful of bills. It was something I always insisted on, something Vijay never approved of. But it was difficult to convince him that what he provided me was of far greater value than the cost of a meal. This time, he sniffed in annoyance as we made our way to the exhausting heat outside. "Dinner in my house. Tomorrow night. You can't pay when it's home cooked."

Despite the pinpricks of the afternoon sun's rays, I agreed to follow Vijay for a walk around the area. He pointed out random things as we passed along the street shops, with a common refrain of "Don't you remember?" I dearly wished I didn't have to disappoint him so often on that.

Something else drew my attention, though. I saw a smattering of tourists among the local population, with sunglasses, cameras, and cargo shorts. They were probably coming through Kuala Lumpur for only a few days, laying over before jetting off to Singapore or Thailand or Indonesia, in a planned trip to 'do' Southeast Asia. I saw some of them buying brass figurines from a handicraft shop, and others eating street food by holding it gingerly in their hands. A lady in a Hawaiian print bandana stood outside a DVD shop, holding her iPhone out near the speakers, presumably taping the tinny Tamil music, as workers inside gawked. Perhaps, I put to Vijay, they were the real reason for the sudden decision on decoration. They injected money into Malaysian veins. As Vijay considered this, I spotted a tourist couple trying to cross the road without the benefit of traffic lights or zebra crossings. The woman wore a straw hat, her face obscured by oversized sunglasses, while the man's angular jaw jutted out as if in self-protection. They resembled friends of mine in North Queensland, who hosted me every Easter holidays. Pedlars called out to them, quiet women smiled up as they passed, taxi drivers slowed down. I noted that the Japanese tourists didn't receive similar treatment.

"Business throughout Brickfields suffered for eight whole months," said Vijay, and I was back in his world of critique. Was he attempting an answer to my query, or was he picking up from our previous conversation? I couldn't be sure. Like my family and a lot of my Malaysian friends, Vijay spoke laterally – making associations as he went on, as the listener arrived at the point of the speech somewhere in the middle. I used to do it too. "While construction happened. This street, you notice how it is one-way

now? You remember how it was before?” I had to shake my head. “The construction drastically reduced the lunchtime customers, and so the restaurants had too much curry, to the point of cutting down demand for coconut milk. People went to other saree stores, other grocery shops, other temples.”

We came to a gaudy arch on the far end of Jalan Tun Sambanthan, with welcome greetings in Malay and Tamil, announcing the name of where we were. The roads, now paved over, had floral patterns in coloured cement. The demarcation seemed to brand the area, drawing clear boundaries of inside and outside. I looked up at the Tamil words. I could still make them out, could still read enough for them to make sense. I read it out to Vijay, trying to show off.

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know how it helps the temple owner or the garland seller.” I was disappointed at his lack of reaction to my attempt at Tamil, but then he turned, facing me. His eyes didn’t blink as he said “I don’t know how it helps the little boy living in the temple, looking after the tourists’ shoes as they enter to take pictures of gods.”

We turned around, walking back on the other side of the road. Effectively we were re-entering the new Little India, with all its new embellishments visible in a single glance. Somehow I found the effect slightly stifling. “It’s beautiful, isn’t it,” said Vijay, and he was right.

“There’s a gilded cage feeling to the whole atmosphere,” I said. Vijay reacted the way I wished he’d reacted to my Tamil. “Absolutely!” he said. “It’s so clear now, where we belong, now that we’ve been put in our place. We cannot leak out, others cannot leak in. ‘See, we’ve done this for you, now be grateful and shut the hell up about your rights’. It’s like the British never left, lah.”

I laughed, then nodded. “Like a label slapped across a mouth,” I said, more to myself.

Vijay looked struck by my words. Before he could respond, I bumped into someone, and in turning to apologize I realized it was the couple I had seen earlier, my Easter host doppelgangers. The lady arched her eyebrow slightly at my apology – perhaps it was my Australian accent – and both of them smiled, nodded, and went on. I wondered if they were aware of the new enforced identity on Brickfields. How much would they be aware of Brickfields’ distinctive features from the rest of Kuala Lumpur without such spelled out segmentation? How much would a temple tower conflate with a mosque dome in their minds when they return to their

country and mention Malaysia at dinner parties? I had an irrational impulse of wanting to stop them, to make friends of these outsiders, give them tips on where to eat, and mention that temples like the ones they might visit were being bulldozed, that it might be the reason why everything around them was so beautiful.

“You okay ah?”

I turned back to Vijay, standing on my other side, his face still in a frown. The nation’s discontents, never apparent to the tourist, were etched along the lines of his face. His eyes flitted up and down my length, in brief reappraisal. In that instant, that nanosecond of my affiliation with foreigners, I had become one myself in his vision.

Each time I questioned my idea of myself, I also sensed a frightening floating feeling, or worse, something akin to splintering. In that sense I possess kinship with Saleem Sinai, Salman Rushdie’s protagonist in *Midnight’s Children*. His sense of self, tied to the land that gained freedom precisely at the moment of his birth, begins to crack and fragment like the nation itself as a result of Partition, the slicing of land into India and Pakistan. Occasionally I sought out external reassurances, like researching the history of events and places and ideas that formed my childhood memories, the building blocks of my agency. But what am I when the things which link me to my origins, my memory of a place, are no longer true? The more I visit Malaysia and update myself, the less embedded I become in its matrix. It has no place for a me-shaped hole that I can repeatedly return and neatly fit myself into each time, snug and smug, pretending no time had passed.

Yet I feel too much to shrug my shoulders at the nation’s trajectory. Looser bonds do not dilute empathy. And really, while I had been sympathetic at Vijay’s diatribe, it had not been the vacuous absorption of the uninformed, but the visceral comprehension that my connection to Brickfields now possessed parallel lines, of alternative realities. I recognize it as the local insider, and in greater depths because of my understanding of its history, its peculiar ability to mutate, absorb and still remain distinct. But I also appreciate its beauty the way foreigners do---it does not trigger pangs of resentment in me the way it does with Vijay, because I am no longer mired in this city’s everyday realities.

To wonder at the beauty of the unfathomable, and to voice the palpable underground dissent. Both were equal and opposite reactions to the same place. I had a sense then I was both Vijay and the tourists,

looking in the same direction but with a kind of double vision. Brickfields symbolized the artificiality of my own identity, of something ensconced within its opposite, turning in over itself, different actualities visible to those of differing degrees of familiarity.

I caught Vijay's arm, and squeezed it. The touch seemed to calm us both.

"I'm fine," I said. "Take me back."

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Mr. Chan and His Own Flat

Lau Yick Chung, Daniel

In the office at 6:00 p.m. Mr. Chan is preparing a new proposal. Mr. Cheung calls to invite him to his home to watch a football game and enjoy beer with other buddies.

“Sorry, guys,” Mr. Chan replies, “I have to prepare a new proposal tonight. Maybe next time?” he hangs up.

In the office at 8:00 p.m. Mr. Chan is preparing a new proposal. Ms. Lam calls, asking if Mr. Chan could have dinner with her.

“Sorry, babe,” Mr. Chan replies, “I have to prepare a new proposal tonight. Maybe next time?” he hangs up.

In the office at 10:00 p.m. Mr. Chan is preparing a new proposal. Mr. and Mrs. Chan call, asking if Mr. Chan could come home and drink the Chinese soup they had prepared.

“Sorry, dad,” Mr. Chan replies, “tell mom I have to prepare a new proposal tonight. Maybe next time?” he hangs up.

In the office at 12:00 a.m. Mr. Chan finally finishes the new proposal. Stretching out in his chair, he imagines his perfect life after he has saved enough money to buy his own flat: he would hire a maid to take care of his parents, he would marry Ms. Lam and have children, and he would invite Mr. Cheung and other friends to come over to watch football games and enjoy beer.

In the office at 6:00 p.m. Mr. Chan is having a meeting with new clients. Mr. Cheung calls to invite him to his home to watch World Cup and enjoy beer with other buddies.

“Sorry, guys,” Mr. Chan replies, “I have a meeting tonight. Maybe next time?”

“But it’s World Cup!” Mr. Cheung hangs up.

In the office at 8:00 p.m. Mr. Chan is having a meeting with new clients. Ms. Lam calls, asking if Mr. Chan could watch a film with her.

“Sorry, babe,” Mr. Chan replies, “I have a meeting tonight. Maybe next time?” he hangs up.

In the office at 10:00 p.m. Mr. Chan is having a meeting with new clients. Mr. and Mrs. Chan call, asking if Mr. Chan could come home and have dinner with them.

“Sorry, mom,” Mr. Chan replies, “tell dad I have a meeting tonight. Maybe next time?” he hangs up.

In the office at 1:00 a.m. Mr. Chan finally finishes the meeting. Stretching out in his chair, he imagines his great life after he has saved enough money to buy his own flat: he would hire a maid to take care of his parents and he would marry Ms. Lam and have children.

In the office at 8:00 p.m. Mr. Chan is dealing with new suppliers. Ms. Lam calls to invite him to watch “The Wedding” and have dinner with her at Mon Amour, a French restaurant.

“Sorry, babe,” Mr. Chan replies, “I have to deal with new partners tonight. Maybe next time?”

“But it’s Valentine’s Day!” Ms. Lam hangs up.

In the office at 10:00 p.m. Mr. Chan is dealing with new suppliers. Mrs. Chan calls, asking if Mr. Chan could come to the hospital to visit his father.

“Sorry, mom,” Mr. Chan replies, “tell dad I have to deal with new partners tonight and I love him.” he hangs up.

In the office at 2:00 a.m. Mr. Chan finally makes a deal. Stretching out in his chair, he imagines his good life after he has saved enough money to buy his own flat: he would hire a maid to take care of his parents.

In the office at 10:00 p.m. Mr. Chan is preparing for the presentation on a new project. Mrs. Chan calls to ask him to come home and have dinner with her and other relatives.

“Sorry, mom,” Mr. Chan replies, “I have to prepare for the presentation on a new project tonight. Maybe next time?”

“But it’s Chinese New Year’s Eve!” Mrs. Chan hangs up.

In the office at 3:00 a.m. Mr. Chan finally finishes preparing for the presentation. Stretching out in his chair, he imagines that he has saved enough money to buy his own flat.

“My colleague has suddenly fainted!” In the office at 4:00 a.m., Mr. Lau calls for an ambulance.

Now, Mr. Chan has his flat, more precisely, his public housing. A maid is hired at the expense of his disability allowance. Installed in his

wheelchair, Mr. Chan looks outside through the window and imagines that he has become a bird.

Remember

Law Hau Ning, Aurora

Let's take a walk. There is still time before your lesson. See that there? That's a crane. Know how it works? I tell you. Are you cold? Here, wear my jacket. Give me your hand, I fold the sleeves for you. You can't sleep? Come here. Oh this? This is a famous movie, Terminator. Wanna watch? Come, sit here. Sleepy? Come here, I hold you until you sleep. *Okay*. Any books you wanna buy? OK, I buy some too. Oh this is a good one, and how about this, book about horses. Hey, documentary about elephants is on TV, want to watch? Practise piano. Do Math exercises. Here, I teach you. Don't sleep too late. You do not lie to me, understand? If anything happens, call Papa. *Yes*. Do you have enough money in your wallet? I have taught you values and I show you prices so I know you will be OK, but if you need more just tell me. Do you need a new computer? OK as you like. Want some noodles to bring home? So you were talking about the galaxy? *Yes*. I have doubts about black holes. The sun does turn, you know this right? Phone me later when you get home. *Noted*. Come to Yum Cha with Maa Maa* tomorrow morning. You push Maa Maa's wheelchair. This is how you push a wheelchair over a hump on the road. This is how you lock it. Do you have anything to do after this? Come with me and accompany Maa Maa back to the elderly home, okay? Give Maa Maa a hug and say goodbye. *Right*. Do you have anything urgent tomorrow? Come to the hospital with me and help Maa Maa to leave hospital. Meet me in MTR station at 10 in the morning, then we go get Maa Maa and have lunch together, maybe Yum Cha. And then we send Maa Maa back to elderly home. *I'll come*. Come to the hospital this afternoon after school, doctor say Maa Maa is in stable state but is not going to recover. Come and hold Maa Maa's hand. Give Maa Maa some water. Talk to Maa Maa. Ma, don't go. Ma. Come give Maa Maa a last hug. *Maa Maa, don't worry, I will take care of Papa and me*. Want to come for dinner in the upstairs of wet market? Hello, Lo Ban,**, same for me, but make two. This is my Thousand Gold.*** OK now, I have to go to work, you go home right? Just remember Papa love you dearly. If anything upset you, talk to me. Phone me later. *I will*. How's your assignment? You see, I am not of help as soon as you receive higher education, right? You now know more than me. You know what is most important to me now? Have been you and Maa Maa. But it has been a year after she passed away. Time flies. Oh, but daughter,

you know what you must not do? You must not die earlier than me. You know why? Because you are the only thing I have. You know what happen if you do that? Papa will be heartbroken. *I know. I know.*

Notes

- * Maa Maa - An intimate way of calling father's mother in Cantonese
- ** Lo Ban – Shop Master in Cantonese
- *** Thousand Gold – A traditional way of say “daughter” in Chinese

Rejection

Law Sau Man, Sherry

A big old banyan tree grew in the yard of my school. Its many aerial roots hung in the air calmly and quietly. When the school bell rang, recess time came, and everybody would run to it. It was the best spot to play under. Only a little beam of light could luckily sneak through the boughs and shine on our little heads. Red rubber bands, green rubber bands and yellow rubber bands joined together and hair was flipping up and down. Laughter was bouncing around. I was aside looking.

“I got chosen! I am in the school choir now!” the girl with shoulder-length hair said happily.

“Me too! I am a choir now!” the girl with chest-length hair added excitedly.

“I am going to represent the school to sing!” the girl with waist-length hair said proudly.

A summer breeze passed by. My ear-length hair stayed as calm as the aerial roots.

Yingjiang, a small place where I was born, in southern part of China, surrounded by ubiquitous green and endless skyline, is so small that you can almost bump into your friends or relatives or neighbors smiling and chitchatting at every corner. People who live in a small town like Yingjiang supposed to be simple, kind and without worries. As expected, they are, but in a different way that I would never understand.

When I was a child, I went back to Yingjiang every summer to visit my family. The year I began to realize the world wasn't what I expected, I was 12 and it was a sunny day in Yingjiang. My auntie was driving to park by the side of the road when I saw two beggars, a father and a son. Their bodies were barely covered by a few pieces of worn-out cloth and I couldn't tell the cloth was full of dirt or just black in colour. The boy looked gaunt and haggard. They were rummaging through the trash at a weirdly slow speed and in discordant motion. When I looked into the father's eyes, they were deathly still as if he had no soul. I had never in my life seen any beggar like them in Hong Kong. I just couldn't take my eyes off them. Something, some feelings that I couldn't describe spurted and I turned around quickly to ask my auntie to help them. I will forget what she said.

"There were three of them. Father, mother and the son. The parents were addicted to drugs and spent every penny on drugs. The mother suffered and died because of AIDS. Drug addiction and AIDS are the last gifts the mother gave to her son. Everyone here knows about them and there is nothing we can do."

"Why?" I asked. We can give them some money to buy food or we can report to the government so that they can help the kid,"

"They are drug addicts. They will always be drug addicts. Once you give them money, they will only use it on drug. This is life," she said calmly.

"But they will die if we don't help. They will die..." I repeated again and again.

"This is life," She said calmly again and looked aside.

I looked into her eyes, I saw the reflection of the crystal blue sky and few clouds drifting by, peaceful, but I saw no soul. I looked out at the

street, the cars passing by, the peddlers were selling stuff, children playing games together and dogs wandering around, but no one stopped to care.

The thousands of questions I had were the same question, “Is this really life?”

The Art Curator

Shirley Geok-lin Lim

A mole rested on her right upper lip; at least it looked like a rest as it might take flight any second. Small dark moth wings folded in a characteristic hieroglyphic V, a triumphal metamorphic moment between the woman and a night flying creature too tiny to be dangerous, unthreatening even as it suggested something of her nature, so much a creature of nature as perhaps to be considered unnatural?

But sometimes it looked like an undistinguished mark, a period left for no particular reason, a bit of dark chocolate forgotten in a delicious oversight.

Other times it glowed like a talisman, an Egyptian scarab fastened amulet-like on her bright alert features, or so he thought, thinking of his art studies that had taken him so far but never to Egypt where he had first discovered the beauty of things made long ago to be buried with the dead. The treasures of Tutakaman, the large black outlines of liquid eyes still staring open from sacrophagi, the elaborate radiance of golden armlets and neck fastings: he was about ten when his uncle had given him the heavy book on the history of Egypt that he had carried back with him from his haj to Mecca after which he had stopped in Cairo. One could not boast of seeing Mecca, but Egypt! Why, a photograph of his long lean uncle in front of a decaying Sphinx stood on top of their television for years, reminding the family of his eminence.

Uncle Rashid remained a bachelor all his life despite many women—later mostly widows—approaching the sister, his mother, to intercede for them. And of course he, his mother's son, had followed in Uncle Rashid's footsteps, a bachelor despite his almost forty years, his mother's—now no longer heard from the grave—loud lamentations, his three sisters' implorations that their children needed cousins, and so on and so forth.

Surrounded by beauty in his work in the art museum, no one, man or woman, girl or boy, could glow in his eyes. Their human aura dimmed in the light of paint. Canvas offered a stillness of perspective that showed infinity on its planes. In comparison, no untidy, noisy, restless body smelling of soap or sweat or worse of perfume could hold his gaze for long.

Until she was recruited for his department, which had the important job of authenticating all the art work the museum was considering on adding to its already extensive collection. First, he saw only the mole. When she talked, it moved a mobile blackness above white even teeth. He had wondered then what it would feel like to kiss her. Would he feel the mole pressed against his mouth? Would it remain visible in the night or fade as he was sure her face would fade once the bedside lamp, the overhead reading light, was switched off?

The Chinese called moles beauty marks and as a young student reading French drama he'd learnt that seventeenth century French courtesans painted moles on strategic parts of their bodies to excite their lovers. Moles adorned Maria Antoinette whose head probably rolled off the guillotine with a full set of beauty marks. But he was neither Chinese nor French. A Muslim Tamil, a rarity like certain anthropological artifacts from places ignorant Europeans called explored and dark although they had been inhabited for longer than their Western cities.

Wasn't every Tamil girl one large beauty mark, he mused, their dark skins gleaming with the tropical humidity of Madrasan skies? He could not recall even one female relative—not mother, aunts, sisters, cousins, nieces—bearing a mole on her face. Instead they carried the vermilion dot of the *pottu* on their forehead, even the Muslim women, a third eye denoting virginity and modest marriage. The married women wore their *pottu* every day, and the marriageable girls used their large coy eyes below that red authenticating signature to tell him, “Yes, I'll marry you.”

However, as a curator with a specialization in authentication, his eyes ignored all deliberate signatures, and studies only what lay beneath the paint on the canvas, the strokes from hands long dead still commanding space and time, the voices that spoke intimately to him, that it is I who have created this singular image.

He found her mole singular, its author unknown but the canvas on which it appeared shining each morning with the aura of a genuine work. What would she say if he were to proposition, no, propose, to own her as it were? In these days, who would question him for crossing color and generation, given how few marriageable Tamils were to be discovered in Los Angeles?

Besides, art protected him, irreproducible strokes he had the power to read accurately; that is, each series of strokes, he corrected himself irritably, remembering the Warhol paintings and the controversies over

authenticating his canvases, with their identical images identically produced in mass-factory-fashion studios, like monster baby-clones in a stainless steel womb incubator, one spermatozoa and one egg split into quintuplets, sextuplets, even duodecimiuplets. He shuddered at the vision of canvases rolling off an assembly line, identical and outside of the power of authentication.

“The file you requested,” she said, knocking on the open glass door.

He watched in fascination as the chocolate bit wavered, eat me, eat me.

“A collage,” he mused, “an edible collage.” He’d suggest it to Etsy on the next opera date. Etsy listened to his ideas for her art and did exactly as she pleased, but an artist was permitted her insolence that she could not expect to be forgiven as a woman, even one in her fifties.

“Do you like opera, Miss Tsui?” he asked, taking the folder from her hand, a pale hand, he noticed, adorned only with the tips of emerging moons on clear unpolished cuticles. A hand of small bones that would have been perfectly preserved for eternity in the natron that embalmed the Egyptian pharaohs.

Her smile was confused, the mole wobbling on the unpainted lip.

“Well, I have a double major in music.”

“I have two tickets for the Barber of Seville, you know, Rossini’s masterpiece,” he added, thinking, “Of course she’d know it, her mind’s just escaped from the university.”

“Gosh,” she said, proving herself a recent immigrant from Singapore, as reported in her Human Resources files, Chinese born in America never saying “Gosh” nor most Americans of her generation, “two tickets? I’ll check with my boyfriend if he can make the date.”

And there and then he saw the moth fly into the open sarcophagus, to which he shut the lid firmly, as for eternity.

Eternity

Manishya Mandal

She sat in front of the wooden dressing table in her bedroom. But instead of looking at the mirror, she stared at the candle next to her hairbrush and perfume sets. The candle was small and round. It gave out a gentle rose scent that tingled her nostrils.

The door opened and the mumbled voices outside became more audible. Stan stood at the doorway and saw Freya in her dreamy state, a state that has been visiting her too often these days.

“Dear, the little ones are looking for you. They want their Grammy’s jokes. Not Gramp’s apparently,” Stan said.

“I’ll be out soon,” Freya said as she smiled weakly at Stan’s reflection in the mirror.

“Well, what’s keeping you here?” Stan said as he walked across the room and slowly sat on the bed.

“Nothing,” she sighed. “This candle though. Isn’t it a beaut?”

“That? We have them around the house every Diwali, Frey.”

“I know,” Freya gently turned the little plate that the candle was placed on, “But just look at it. It’s dancing!”

“Dancing?”

“The flame is its body and the smoke is its soul. The best part about candles is when the flame dies – The soul does a last dance and leaves its scent as a final memory.”

“You never fail me, you know that?” Stan smiled. “Now, would you mind getting your poetic tushy down and fulfill your grandkids’ wishes?”

“At least my tushy is poetic and funny.”

As Stan and Freya walked down the stairs, Freya’s warm, floral scent twirled in front of Stan.

“Ah, you’re wearing it,” Stan gave a teasing smile.

Freya knew what he meant. “It’ll always be a favorite,” Freya kissed Stan on the cheeks.

“Hence, its name . . . Eternity! I swear, every time I smell it, I see you in your white gown. I see you walking down the aisle. I see us dancing at the reception. . . . That autumn day. I remember whe-”

“GRAMMY!” their five grandkids shouted in unison as they reached the bottom of the stairs.

“Did you know that Gramps said he’s funnier than you,” five-year-old LiAnne said ushering their Grammy to sit on the sofa.

“Yes, he said he is dry!” four-year-old Kay said.

“Kay, you dingus. He said he has a dry sense of humor,” said eight-year-old Dylan.

“Same thing!” Kay said as she played with her Grammy’s hair.

“Alright now, what do you want to hear from the funnier grandparent now?” Freya chuckled as she carried Kay on her lap. “I can already sense your Gramp’s eyes rolling.”

Stan woke up with his right arm placed gently around Freya’s waist.

It’s Diwali, he thought. We better get things started early.

As Stan moved to get out of bed, he caught a whiff of Freya. Strange. I don’t remember her wearing her perfume last night. He smiled as he found himself reminiscing.

Something seemed off though. After noticing the absence of another breathing in the room, he knew. She left him with the best of memories. Eternity did a dance around the room, along with her soul.

The Wind Chime & the Wind

Manishya Mandal

She sings her spontaneous tunes when he is with her. She swings around, improvising dance moves. She spins in directions as he elegantly leads her. She is only alive in his presence.

He is blind, mute and deaf. He can only make her feel him. He embraces her with his breath. He was a blank piece of paper until she colored him with her voice and movement.

They are connected and intertwined. They have a magical and melancholic love because they know what they have is ephemeral. One means nothing without the other. Their love lingers in the air every single time they meet.

How we never met? How we ever met? 相逢何必曾相識

Ng Wing Yan, Alice

How come we never met? How come we ever met?

Beep beep beep beep beep!

The white bullet MTR train closed its doors and shut the glass insulation windows. The stupid sardines failed to squeeze into the fishnet and stayed in the sea with sorrow. As one of the sardines, I did not lose my faith. Wait, wait and wait. I waited for another chance to get into the fishnet and travel to another beautiful blue sea.

Beep beep beep beep beep!

The sailor, the predator, whistled persistently.

Swimming, squeezing, scrunching, I got into the fishnet! Gasping and halting, my fin and tail were stuck with other fishes. Some annoying fishes kept splashing, chatting and flaunting their scales. I wanted to keep bubbling to cover, delete and destroy all the buzzes.

“The next station is Tin Hau, 下一站天后, xia yi zhan tian hou.”

I glanced around in the fishnet. Then, I noticed a pair of shimmering pearls staring at me with a flushed cheek and simper. He was so gorgeous! His eyes, his cheeks, his lips, his hips, his fins, his scales and his tail hypnotized me. He looked like Daniel Wu, the Hong Kong male celebrity! Our gaze met. For a long while, I did not hear any buzz, I did not see any fuzz, but only felt the little brittle bubble I made with Daniel.

My mouth was half-opened and my head was tilted to examine this captivating creature. The sardines kept rushing back and forth, back and forth. But our pupils did not move; they stayed very still faithfully on each other.

Daniel did not move. He was very still, very still. I bit my lower lips and swam towards him. His cheek was coral and his eyes were pearls. I drooped my head and kissed his cheek.

Daniel's gill was so cold. He did not bubble a word. How could a man be that passive if he liked me? I danced with my flattering shining

body and he did not even bubble a word! I rolled up my eyes and pressed my lips down.

Suddenly, someone splashed me with a tail and broke the brittle bubble we made! I turned around, and a man whispered, “He has been dead for a while, leave him alone.”

Prosopagnosia

Chantelle Wong

I can feel his pulse weakening under my fingers, his heat against my palms. I squeeze harder and assert more pressure by supporting more body weight with my arms. His futile effort of scratching my arms is slowing down, his mouth wide open, as if that can help him get air to his lungs. I mustn't let go of my grip until I'm certain. I mustn't.

Soon I realize his hands have gone completely limp. His eyes look like they're popped out, like that goldfish I had when I was a kid. I can finally let go and get up. After all these years, I've finally done it.

I drag his body into the store room, thinking no one would go in so I can get rid of it in the morning. I take the time to stuff him into a suitcase. I shut the door and lock it with a "click".

Just when I plan to grab a cup of water before heading to bed to my wife, I see him. My fingers slip and I drop the water jar. He is smiling. I hear glass shattering and cold water splashes on my feet. He is smiling. I glance at the store room right away. The door is half-open. But it can't be! My hands are trembling as I fix my gaze back on him. He looks as if he has just woken up. Yawning. His hair all messed up. Is his hair longer than before?

"Hey, why are you still awake, hon--"

There is no time for doubt. I leap toward him and press him against the wall. Fear and confusion cover his eyes like mist. Yes, he should be afraid. Of me.

I place my hands back on his throat, right thumb over the left. His neck feels more slender this time, probably because of what I did to him just then. He seems like he wants to say something desperately. No, I will no longer let his words affect me. My nails dig deeper into his flesh. All the choking and spluttering is starting to feel like *déjà vu*.

Shit, this time his nails actually manage to scratch an opening in my wrist. Did his nails get longer or what? His legs are kicking but the kicks don't even hurt.

Even when there is no more resistance, I hold onto his neck until he is turning cold, until my fingers are numb and my grip loosen. He slips down and drops to the ground. I stretch my hands for a little and my bones crackle. I grab his ankles and drag him to the store room. I don't

even bother stuffing him back into the suitcase. It's not like my wife would come remotely close to this room. I lock the door again and double-check it this time.

The birds begin chirping and the sky is gradually lighting up. Screw work, I'm just gonna go to bed. The wind blows the curtain up. I glance over and there he is. He is out there strolling on the street, like nothing has happened. I can't control my body from shaking as I back away slowly into the kitchen. How can he still be alive? Is he. . . . Is he even humming a song? My knees feel weak as if I can fall over any moment. I try to balance myself by leaning on the counter.

My quivering fingers cease trembling as I can feel the kitchen knife block set.

Let's finish this once and for all.

Heart of Gold

Wong Shuk Yu, Fish

It was a hot summer evening when the rain struck the city suddenly and heavily. Winds blew quicker and quicker, as if to complete the dandelion's dream of flying. Kay was 15. She was eleven-floor from the ground, safe from the rain. Like a cat; windows served as her ultimate TV. Her eyes scrolled from the left to right; from the packed pavilion to the pink brick path and then landed on a yellow Poincinana. Between the swinging leaves, she saw a small shadow lurk in the dark. It was a cart full of waste cardboard, most of which was turning from beige to brown. As the shadow moved forward, Kay saw that an old lady was staggering behind. The cart was too heavy for her to push forward.

“I’m going out!” Kay screamed and began tying her shoelaces.

“Where’re you going?” her mum shouted from the kitchen. “Take an umbrella with you!”

The shadow then appeared closer and faster.

Not long before dinner, the rain stopped. Kay was back and needed a new umbrella and to wash her shoes.

C'est La Vie

Woo Yeuk Man, Florence

Gertrude Stein wrote that the purpose of fiction is to combat loneliness, to provide a solution in this expanding web of solitude and pervasiveness, to touch lives as a whole, to spread words like fire as they flare through your inner soul like candles in a dark cave . . . and he does not agree with any of that. He regards these big, condescending “words of wisdom” as pathetic and meaningless. Utter bullshit.

C'est la vie, he thinks. It is a more than ordinary day for a more than ordinary person. But he wonders at the possibility of it; he ponders upon its meaning, its incalculable probability of leaving behind a different direction which will impact him for the rest of his life. He has this sudden urge to begin again from where he started, to change every decision he has ever made, to leave everything behind as if they were nothing but rocks and sand against the brawling wind.

But he is, after all, a man. So he gets up from bed with his disorderly curled hair pushed to one side, like branches of vines intertwining with the fabric of his sheets - a parasite struggling for space to survive and air to breathe. He leaves the house feeling empty, and is yet filled with a peculiar anticipation for what is to come.

The idea is soon dissipated with the sensations of absolute bizarreness and ambiguity. Idiot! Why would today be any different? Why would your life be any different from the other seven billions who walk on the same land and drink the same water as you do? As he heads towards the bistro at the end of Rue de la Bûcherie, he realizes abruptly that he is alive, and he should just be thankful and glad. He has not slept well for days, and he can certainly foresee it is not likely to get any better as seconds transform into minutes, and minutes into hours. For the entire night the dark thoughts had run through his head like a slimy snake sliding in the back of an alley, where uninvited images and music from a concert were being projected like a film.

The sun has long been risen, the street is calm; and yet why is the city so desolate and cold? He cannot make anything out of it. He thinks of a scene in *On the Road* where the hippies are drinking and smoking by the river bank, as they dance eccentrically and make terrible jokes about love and life; and without knowing how or why the conversation soon

surrounds them with an immense sadness. For numerous times in life he had experienced this drastic change of emotions, and they often left him feeling uneasy and anxious.

As he joins the queues of other Parisians lining up to get a croissant, he cannot help but be fascinated by their stories. Who are they? Where do they come from? What are they struggling with in life? Where will they be in tomorrow? In fact, where will any of us be in tomorrow? How do we know? Marion once said that he is the most sentimental man she has ever known, and she loved him for it. So where is she now? When everything ended all that remained were tears of silence, words of apologies and bubbles of broken promises which eventually became a wave of blankness in the passing air as it weaved into the distance and disappeared.

That was the moment when he hated La Tour Eiffel – the great iron tower that witnessed countless unions and separations of lovers, as they shared their first kisses and whispered their last goodbyes. As the eternal icon of Paris stays young and static with the monstrous crawls of Time, all we can do is to participate in that sick, sadist game called Life and pretend we have one hell of a ride in it. But aren't we all afraid of growing old? Perhaps the only way is to accept our eventual fate gracefully, he thinks – that we all began as miracles of genetics and end as memorial stones in lonesome gardens.

After grabbing his croissant and espresso, he goes outside and finds a table in the middle where he can observe everyone. On this particularly bright day in one of the oldest cities on Earth whose glamorous mobility parallels the romantic lives of its citizens- he does not feel so bright, glamorous or romantic. He is baffled by its purpose, confused by its immensity and astounded to find how everyone is filled with an effervescent joy. He feels painfully jealous of them. These lucky bastards who know exactly what they want in life and how to get it.

Beside him is a family of four. The couple appear to be lost with their newborn baby crying, and their young son complaining about the food. Yet, they are perfectly happy as the father kisses the forehead of his daughter with a smile the size of moon, and the mother mumbling sweet nothings into the soft pink ears of her son as she strokes his blonde, salty hair in the blinding sunlight.

“Pardon, monsieur!” A voice yelling behind him, and it is not until then he realizes that he has been half dreaming and half dead. He looks down to see the tip of his shoes dripping in brown sticky pastes of coffee,

with whipped cream sliding down the bottom of his jeans. Merde! Can this day get any worse? As the man keeps apologizing and offers to clean the mess for him, he gets more irritated and annoyed.

“Ça ne fait rien.” He shakes his head disapprovingly and hurries up to leave the café. A flow of nonsensical panic creeps through him as he knocks down some chairs, which attracts the attention of several curious hawk-eyed Parisians as they point fingers and drop comments.

Why is it our nature to find others’ mistakes hilarious and laughable? He never understands. He feels deeply saddened and affected by this side of humanity as the waves of memories flush through the inner vacuum of his head, threatening to create a tsunami which shakes him to his core. His childhood had not been an easy one: growing up in a big family with rich connections, he has long felt out of place and regarded their monetary values despicable and shameful. A social wallflower, he buried himself in the immortal lines of Victor Hugo and preferred to be left alone in dinner parties held at Chatou when he was young.

The more he reads, the more he discovers the true meaning of loneliness. He does not believe that books are the antidotes to solitude as it is an intrinsic property. We are born alone and we are for God-damn sure to die alone anyway. At the end, we are nothing but dirt and soil in this barren ground against the cruel physical laws of the cosmos.

Without knowing when or how, he has arrived at Shakespeare and Company. The vast volumes, with their ancient aromas of culture and history, bring him back to the forlorn lands of nostalgia that he knows so well. Not far away, a flock of pigeons compete for crumbs of buttered bread as they collide and separate in a synchronized pattern. He thinks of how blessed they must be with their simple, undisturbed lives, and cannot help but compare theirs with his.

“Clack!” He looks up and sees that a girl with red curly hair in a blue coat taking a picture of the pigeons, standing not more than ten footsteps away. He is puzzled by her choice of subject, as he fails to see their uniqueness or beauty when they are as numerous as the citizens of Paris. So why does she even bother. . . .

“Would you like me to take a picture of you?”

Just when he is drowning yet again in the sea of self-mediated poetry and consciousness, she has asked him the question of the day. It startles him for a moment; but he is soon excited by this seemingly ordinary point in Time as a sign from the universe that a change may be coming.

So he looks up and asks the clouds, the sky for a hint; and with a crack of a smile as his lips contort to the two sides of his cheeks--- a first one in a very long time, he gives his answer.

Martin

Woo Yeuk Man, Florence

Martin leaves his university library on a Saturday midnight, with an empty stomach and emptier wallet. He fades into the silence which resembles an ancient dragon threatening to tear him down, swallowing him into pieces—he scratches his brown curls absent-mindedly; and searches for any remote signs of human life in this blank night of nothingness. How long has it been? He tries to remember. But does it really matter? Lately loneliness has been his sole companion, since Florence had decided to take a break from their crumbling relationship, which had turned into a dysfunctional compass in the Dead Sea.

What is she thinking about this moment? Could it be about me? Martin knows that at times like this it is better not to think, but to act. It is better not to wonder, but to ask. He has always been regarded as the most mature among his peers; having it all figured out when his friends still struggle on how to impress mediocre girls in cheap fishnet leggings and green high-heels they picked up in bars. Yet why is he not himself now? Isn't she just another girl? Even at this moment he is still confident with a shower and change of clothes, girls would all drool over him, as they always have, if he visits a nearby club. But they are not her; and tonight - especially tonight, she is the only one on his mind.

Should I just text her? Apologize? Shower her with gifts? Surprise her with a cup of Starbucks coffee and bouquets of roses? It worked before; perhaps it might bring her back again. He drops his books on the grass, which had turned wet from the rain not long ago as they reflect the paleness of the Parisian moonlight.

"The number you dialed is not working at the moment. Please try again later." He immediately regrets his decision to call her and tortures himself with a game between heart and ego. Why isn't she answering her phone? What is she doing? He swallows the lump in his throat as memories, like water hitting the inner tissues of his Adam's apple, flow through his psyche and bring him back to their last days as lovers.

He blames himself for the harshness of his voice when they were arguing over trivial matters, and how he remained superficially aloof as her face became an ocean flood of tears, sweats and anguish. He laments his pride which made him stick to his rules, and how these rules stayed firm even though she begged him to speak to her. He despises his

self-importance, as he made changes after changes to their plans; and how his cold words revealed his dominance over her.

At which point have we become strangers? He still vividly remembers the last dinner they had in one of the fanciest restaurants in the neighborhood. It paralyzed him, the moment he could see every other soul in the room is leading a thoroughly joyous life as the bohemian-looking French-horn musician killed him slowly with a song that reminded him of their encounter. He looked at her, and how she was momentarily distracted by some other men in one of the tables not far away as they giggled loudly. Where are you? Please look at me; I want to see your almond eyes, your celestial nose, the curling of your pink lips as you smile, your brilliant white teeth, the red sea knitted by the rows of your hair as they are pressed together. . . .

He seldom smokes, but tonight is where a cigarette may help. Florence has frequently joked that it is not very French of him, and he agrees.

When they were merely good friends, this remark often amused him as they examined the degree of his patriotism, and flirted through endless laughter, subtly touching each other's hands and faces. Nevertheless, he found this opinion of hers to be more and more irritating at the last stage of their relationship. It astonishes him to realize that sometimes the little things that make people fall in love in the first place are the very reasons they fall out of it at the end.

So where is she now? He has absolutely nowhere to go. His flat is not far from where he has been standing for at least the past hour, but having barely eaten today he is fatigued and weak like a bubble lost in the sea. It hits him that he is truly heartbroken, and he does not have a clue of what he had done in the library. Maybe he goes there because of how much she loves books; as she once said they are the carriers of civilization and memoirs of the human experience. It was that moment where he felt something truly different for this petite girl with eyes the color of dark chocolates standing before him, and he remembers how much he wanted to be with her.

But does she want to be with him now? He is not sure. He is aware that standing here for the whole night will not help. A choice has to be made. It is a moment for honest confessions and teary confrontations and trying to make her fall in love with him again; and that requires courage,

patience, sincerity and love. Oh fuck it, why not! With a heavy sigh, Martin takes out his phone and pressed the numbers he has imprinted in his heart, whose combination reminds him again and again of home.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it’s Martin. . . . Can we please start over?”

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