

Foreword

In Hong Kong, it sometimes feels like we're *always* only “halfway home.” That state is permanent, or at least, semi-permanent, if we go by the contents of this year’s journal.

Halfway Home VII is testament to the tenuous emotions underlying this halfway state. The poems speak of moments of joy or despair, but the overall message is like an unanswerable question about our very existence. The prose pieces are flights of fancy tinged with many uncertainties. There is a critical lens cast over our expressions of home.

If nothing else, this creative output is important for its reflection on being and nothingness, the state of being young, escapism and travel, an investigation of a present reality in this halfway home that is our university and city. These budding writers are to be congratulated for their courage and insights. We are privileged in having such witnesses to who we are and who we hope to be.

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Special Dedication To You – The Binocular

Sumie Chan

Morning dew, growing and glimmering on green
Bushes in between.

Bright red, romantic purple
And peaceful snow, rivals.

A tiny kid, screaming and shrieking,
Running and jumping
Hysterically, like a caged dog released.
An elderly woman, thrice her size
Stop in a corner, squat and rise

There, the pair start their fest
Without taking much rest.

Walking into the noisy restaurant,
A blessing to have air-conditioning on.
As grandma instructs
“Good morning” is a must!
Interrupting their conversation
In which grandma gets satisfaction.

The faster she grows,
The more grandma gets old.

Month after month, year after year,
Judgment day becomes near.
Now, she's gone, leaving her companion in ceaseless mourn.

The two become a unified whole.

WhatsApp

Bethany Cheng

I said: Hi

Double blue ticks.

I said: what you doing?

Double blue ticks.

I said: we need to talk.

Double blue ticks.

I said: I need to know.

Double blue ticks.

Your profile pic changed.

The selfie of you two
kissing.

You said: can't you see?

Double blue ticks.

I said: but why?

Then no
double blue ticks
anymore.

Greenwich Mean Time

Nicole Go

1

Talk about entertaining a thought without accepting it. I've been having similar dreams of the same nature in every one of them I die young and I die a different death. I cannot say for sure I'm not afraid of the endgame itself hypothetically, hypothetically I probably am not but what do I know? I am but electrical energy in the cortex signals firing back and forth. What I fear is not the unannounced caesura but the ceasefire. I fear being interrupted but then again is it not what I want sometimes? In every dream I die a different death and I wake up to find myself crying disillusioned, but relieved.

2

I sometimes think I was made for all this of course I could be something else but I wouldn't be me. Bent-backed Atlas, twenty years, adding up and up. Amid the primal things they long to touch you but they cannot stand even the slightest of your madness but is it madness really. Words – are futile. If I could find the words, things would be a lot easier, but there's nothing poetic about anything it's just a lump of notions and emotions. Sometimes you make it into poetry because there's no other way. And then the written/spoken word will no longer be yours; it's in the world. All you can do is critique your manifest self-pity, all the while questioning if

that's really what you meant to say in the first place and if there will ever be a way at all to do justice to your perception.

3

I know a better representation physical representation of spiritual wonder
you said I love it when you pull my hair smudge my lipstick bend my neck
breathe bite my skin my chin towards the lights overhead. Not a star but
non-thoughts. I am and am not human and amid the primal things I know
you. Rising rising. Look down just enough to see your mouth opening in
slow. Motion.

On the Way Home

Kwan Sin Ying Kate

The moon
used to follow me
 everywhere
I go
—illuminate my shadow.

 One day,
 she ran away
—left me
 alone
 on the dark pavement.

The Plum Tree

Kwan Sin Ying Kate

The plum tree is all barren now; its branches empty, all alone, standing under the April sun. It has been weeping since late February—when its last piece of white petal fell. People left with their cameras and satisfaction from capturing your most glorious state; those images now belong only to the past. When they see you now, they see you as you were before; what you are now, only few see it. So you weep—until the cold arrives again with the memories of you blooming in the past, present and future.

Walking

Kwan Sin Ying Kate

Sometimes you walk in the city and you feel alright. You look at the women walking past you in their summer dresses and espadrilles, the men in their linen shirts and leather loafers, the children with sunglasses larger than their faces. Then you look up at the clouds that move ever so slowly; and you shudder at the way they devour the blue sky—so cold, so merciless—a deep feeling of sadness suddenly washes over you: there are the people and the cars and the shops and the ice cream and the sunlight and the breeze; but really it's just you and your sadness, walking in a foreign place that never belongs to you and you never belong to—the noise suffocates you; the silence depresses you.

Almost lovers

Leung Chi Yan Angie

We draw two straight lines –
They extend till they meet
And never cross again.

Answer

Leung Chi Yan Angie

Dad calls at midnight

“I’m divorcing Ginny.”

Not my mother’s name.

Apr 5th

Leung Chi Yan Angie

April morning
Off to the graves
Find your lover
Lost in a maze.

Rusty hinges,
Packed rubbles.
Naked roses,
Squealing in my prayers.

Stench of incense
Chokes your senses
Vines on tears
Rip the years.

Nostalgic photo
Goes black and white.
Thoughts of you
Bury me.

Fishing for Life

MANISHYA MANDAL

THE BEST PART OF HER BODY IS HER RESERVOIR
WHERE SHE HIDES ALL HER SINS
AND DROWNS HER FEARS.

IT'S THE PLACE LEAST EXPLORED
BY HER EXHAUSTED INHABITANTS.

I FISH FOR SOMETHING THAT CAN MAKE ME FEEL
ALIVE

AND FIND THE BEAUTY AND LIFE THAT LIE
BENEATH HER.

I CATCH HER HEART ON MY HOOK
IN AWE OF ITS BEAUTY AND STRUGGLE TO LIVE.

IN SOLITARY PEACE, I FIND THE STRONGEST
CONNECTION

THERE EVER WILL BE BETWEEN US.

SO I'LL KEEP HER HEART IN MY HAND
JUST FOR A WHILE, UNTIL I HAVE TO LET GO
AND BE HER SLAVE AGAIN.

The Arsonist

Demi Poon

Antarctica lies in
Not the southernmost part
On earth but in
Me, a place where blood once
Had been pumped in
And out as if an instrument
Drummed itself in
A rhythmic beat endlessly.

It had once been set
On fire by your innocent smile
When we first met.
The sky - it was a clear blue -
I'll never forget.
Such a daring attempt it was
To have me let
Fire burn on ice, knowing it'd fail.

In Memory of Our Little Sunflower

Demi Poon

The roar of the flaming gas in the air
burned eight strands of my dark hair:
the number of brown petals still
left hanging on the dying flower on the windowsill.

The sunflower seeds I held tight in my hand
(what we desperately tried to plant)
took me one more wistful month than to be
the part-time mother of our child in me.

If one single petal fell off each month,
there would have been eight more months
to anticipate the only antidote for
both our fragmented hearts at war.

I once carried in me a fire torch as our light
to shine through our darkest path of fright,
but by mistake, we ended up setting fire
to the flower that grew on a pot of mire.

Lilies

Demi Poon

Half-drowned petals float dead,
Gushing veins paint red.
Quiet brim forgets to ripple,
No more the eyes that shed.

Above the skyline you reach,
Just as how you would beseech.
Rise to His kingdom as steam,
Cleansed by angels with leach.

White lilies diet on water,
And sleep in peace by my lover.
Foreseeable ache but let be,
I live by the fate of a mourner.

My heart dwells on May
When lilies kissed the sun-ray.
"Never pick a flower
If you love it," you'd say.

Lip Balm

Demi Poon

I hope she still hasn't forgotten
how adorable she is,
even though it's been hella a long time
since he last looked her in the eye,
held her face in his hands
and brushed his lips across hers
before breathing out his broken promises,
like the way he breathed out the
secondhand smoke in his lungs that
he had been trying to get rid of.

Between her booze-stained teeth and
peeled crimson lips is where
she often holds the ancient grudges
and puffs of smoke that always seem
as heavy as the anchor weighing her
deep down
in the ocean
of
unspoken sorrows and
forgotten
pain.

The way she always finishes a cigarette completely
says so much about how it annoys her to
handle unfinished business in her life.

But the life she has made belief for -
the one that he had crossed his heart, hoping
to give her, is one

BIG IRONY:

the adventure of two is never finished together.

She says he is toxic like cigarettes.

Each puff she inhales, she imagines
taking

him

all

in,

breath

by

breath.

She has learned:

that, is the closest they'll ever be;

that, is the safest distance for love.

Last Christmas, the cold weather

peeled off the skin of her lips

layer

by

Your Conquest in Me

Demi Poon

I stood straight
in front of my mirror,
staring at the reflection of
an uncovered figure -
bare and naked.

There wasn't much
to look at
but I saw my body
all covered in
you.

The depression of
my collarbones -
somewhere your lips
had brushed across -
held the concave shadows.

The even chest of mine
carefully pounded unevenly,
drumming a hurtful rhythm.
One skipped beat for each
moment missing your presence.

My bony rib cage
folded, unfolded,
repeatedly.
I breathed you in.
I breathed you out.

I am a land
you have conquered.
My Emperor, don't you
ever retreat, for
I am *yours*.

The Angel in Shadows

Alexandra Yu

The age spots, the creases and wrinkles are stamped,
However persistently I try to smooth out.
The messages I wish to impart,
Will be left in doubt,
Vanishing,
Gone.
But let me,
O summer's day,
Let me embrace the peace.
Welcome the forgotten pleasure,
Of eternity which never shall cease.
Only then will I receive my long-awaited treasure.

You'll Know It's Hong Kong

Alexandra Yu

When the speed of footsteps
Is like the flapping of hummingbirds' wings;
The haste of pedestrians
Is like an unwelcome Monday morning;
The experience of walking on the streets
Is like the terrifying act of tightrope walking;
The smell of the orange rubbish bins
Is like that of the burnt soup I tried to make;
The feeling of gazing up at the skyscrapers
Is like having mighty giants towering over you;
The weight of schoolchildren's backpacks
Is like balancing a mountain upon their shoulders;
The citizens' anger
Is like a steaming tea kettle;

Yes! Hong Kong is dreadful
and distressing,
But you'll always know it's Hong Kong
When it feels like home.
Warm, warm home.

Haiku

Yuen Ting Wei Kristy

Two cups of coffee.

Heart attack and ambulance.

One cup of coffee.

Comfort

Chan Wing Ka Pinky

The Chef

“I-ra-sha-i-ma-se!” Yuto welcomed the customer.

In the open kitchen, Yuto put some noodles into the hot water for a few seconds and then placed them into a sieve. He shook the sieve to remove the excess water. Drops sprinkled on his apron, waterproof boots, and the floor too. With meticulous precision, Yuto poured some of the pork bone broth he had prepared last night into the black ramen bowl before adding the noodles into it. He then took out a box of sliced pork from the refrigerator and put three thick slices onto the pan. “*A bowl of ramen cannot be good without sliced pork that melts on the tip of your tongue.*” Yuto could never forget what his father said when he passed the shop to him. He waited until the sliced pork turned golden yellow to flip them over. Having topped the noodles with the pork, Yuto moved on to prepare the eggs. He cut a soft-boiled egg in half and the creamy egg yolk gushed out at once. The last step was easy. Yuto put some fresh greens next to the egg. The ramen was ready.

“Do-zo(どうぞ!)” Yuto held the bowl of ramen carefully and passed it to a customer. Yuto looked into his eyes, his own face brimming with a smile whose warmth resembled the current that was running through his heart.

The Salaryman

It was 9pm. Hayato pressed “Save” for the document he was working on and turned off the computer. He looked around the office – tables, chairs, computers, paperwork, but no one. *Time to leave.* Hayato stood up and found his legs paralyzed. He stretched himself with a loud long yawn, and left the office.

“Pork bone broth ramen, please,” Hayato said as soon as sat down in the ramen shop just next to his office building.

“Yes, sir. It’s you again! How are you?” Yuto said.

“Good, thanks,” Hayato forced a smile.

While waiting for his dinner, Hayato thought of his boss’s announcement about the upcoming layoff plan of their company. He then thought of his girlfriend Aiko, who had been dropping hints that it was time to get married. Hayato scowled with a sigh and rubbed his sweaty palms against his trousers. He poured himself a cup of iced matcha and gulped it down as if it was a pint of beer. The iciness ran from his throat to all the other parts of his body, temporarily discharging all the pressure in his taut nerves and muscles.

“Do-zo!” Yuto said with a wide smile, passing Hayato a big bowl of ramen.

"I-ta-da-ki-ma-su!" Hayato said, his stomach rumbled louder than his voice.

The ramen ran smoothly between his lips; the softness of the egg yolk caressed his taste buds; the slices of pork melted instantly in his mouth.

"Go-chi-so-sa-ma-de-shi-ta!" Hayato finished his ramen very quickly.

He then poured himself another cup of iced matcha. This time, he took a long, slow sip of it, casually emptying the cup. At this moment, he was thinking of nothing but the lingering aftertaste of the pork bone broth. He tripped down the way back to his home.

A few days later, Hayato was summoned to his boss's office. He was extremely nervous but at the same time, prepared for the worst. On the way to the boss's office, his heart beat hastened and his legs trembled.

Shall I just pack my things quietly and disappear? There's no way I can walk down the aisle with all eyes on me and my paper boxes, like those dejected actors do in so many cliché dramas.

Finally, Hayato stopped in front of the office door. He summoned all his guts to give two knocks.

"Come in," said his boss with the intimidating voice that had recently appeared in Hayato's dream every single night.

With a pace that's part hesitation and part reluctance, Hayato made his way into the room and stood next to the rectangular wooden table in the center.

"Take a seat please," the boss said, pointing to the chair just next to Hayato.

Hayato pulled out the chair. He sat down quietly with a hunchback.

"Hayato, thank you very much for your devotion to our company over the last 5 years. You really have contributed a lot," the boss said, sincerely.

Deep inside Hayato's heart, he burst out crying. He knew that the thankful words from the boss were just the prelude of the thunderstorm. *Aiko will be very disappointed in me. Will our wedding be postponed? Or will she just leave me because I have lost my job?* Hayato tightened his sweaty fists.

"Moving forward, I have discussed with other colleagues and we have come up with an idea," the boss said, looking down at the papers before him, "which is to promote you to the role of Marketing Manager."

"Ma..manager?" Hayato raised his head and stared at his boss.

"Yes, Marketing Manager. We all agreed with this decision considering your top performance and working attitude all these years. What do you think? Would you accept this offer?" the boss smiled.

"Oh, thank you! Yes, sure I will and I will continue to do my best as well!" Hayato stood up and made a deep bow. His eyes were brimming with tears.

Everyone in the office was staring at him when he left the office but he did not even notice the gazes. He went back to his seat, planning a surprise for Aiko.

The Rich Man

"A pork bone broth ramen with extra slices, please," Masato visited this ramen shop almost every Sunday.

"Yes, sir! How's your day going?" Yuto asked kindly.

"Days are better with your ramen," Masato said with a jokey tone. He treated Yuto as his friend, the one and only one.

When the ramen was being cooked, Masato noticed the young couple sitting next to him. The boy kept talking on the phone about meetings, his clients, etc., leaving his girlfriend aside throughout the conversation. Masato thought of himself when he was young and fresh out of college. At that time, he was so involved in his career that he spent almost all of his time on working, making money. That even led to the failure of a long-term relationship. He broke up with Kiyoko, whom he had dated since they met in high school. Young Masato thought he was justified to put his career above his relationship. *How's Kiyoko now? What if I hadn't given up on her? What would our lives be if we did not break up? How would I be, if I had someone by my side?*

"Do-zo!" Yuto passed Masato the ramen with his signature smile.

Masato could still recall the feeling of holding Kiyoko's hand on the way to school, her laughter when he could finally afford her first bottle of perfume after saving up for almost a month, the warmth of sharing a cup of ice-cream together... These memories melted in his heart just the same way as the pieces of meat melted in his mouth. *How did I screw up? Masato hadn't seen Kiyoko since they broke up. How is she now? She's probably got*

married. Maybe she has already become a mother. Oh! Maybe I can try to find her on Facebook! Masato took out his iPhone 6 and typed "Yoshida Kiyoko" in the search box. A list of accounts was shown. He looked very carefully at each of the profile pictures. *What would the 40-year-old Kiyoko look like? Has she changed a lot throughout these years? Looks like she's not on the list... Maybe she does not use her full name as the account name? It's possible that she simply does not have a Facebook account.* Masato sighed but did not want to give up, again. He clicked into an account with cherry blossoms, Kiyoko's favorite flower, as the profile picture. Skimming through the "About" section, Masato found that the owner of the account had studied at the same high school as he. What made him even more excited and relieved was that the relationship status shown was "single". He decided to send her a message.

"Hi, Yoshida San. I am Yamada Masato. I know this is a bit awkward and it's a long shot to try to reconnect after all this time. Anyway. You hate pineapple but are okay with pineapple juice, right?" Masato, with a heavy and fast breathe, murmured while he was typing. His hands shuddered when he pressed "Enter".

Masato had been watching his Facebook inbox ever since he had sent that message. When he was at work the next day, he finally got a reply: *Hi, Yamada San. I guess I am the one you're looking for. It has been such a long time and I am so surprised that you still remember those things about me. How are you?*

"Oh, Yes!" Masato could not help but shout out loud in his office.

The Ramen Shop

One year had gone by since Hayato was promoted to Marketing Manager. He managed to do his job well and was acclaimed by both his superior and subordinates. It was a Sunday, but Hayato went back to the office to retrieve his phone, which he left on his desk the previous day. He was very hungry so he dropped by at the ramen shop on his way home.

"Pork bone broth ramen please!" Hayato sat at the place where he could get a clear look of Yuto cooking. It had always been his favorite seat.

"Hey, Hayato!" A familiar voice was approaching Hayato.

"Oh! Hi, Masato San," Hayato was so surprised to meet his boss there.

"May I take a seat?"

"Yes, sure! You're here for the first time?" Hayato smiled. Since Hayato had got promoted, he had got lots of chances to work with Masato. They became good working partners.

"No way, the pork bone broth ramen is a must for every Sunday. And you are in my usual seat!"

"Pork bone broth ramen! That's my favorite as well!"

They both laughed, amused by the coincidence.

"So how is it going for your wedding next month?" Masato remembered having received an invitation to Hayato's wedding a few days before.

"Aiko and I are still busy preparing the decorations, seating arrangements and stuff. We are getting a bit nervous now," Hayato touched his head, looking a bit shy.

"Congratulations! You are making me jealous, Hayato," Masato chuckled.

At this moment, the phone in Masato's pocket vibrated. He fished it out from his pocket; it was a message from Kiyoko: "*Let's meet next Sunday!*" Masato smiled.

"Do-zo!" Yuto showed a wide-grin and passed a bowl of pork bone broth ramen with extra pork slices to Masato.

"You know me so well," only then did Masato realize that he had forgotten to order.

The meat melted on the their tongues.

"O-i-shi-i!" Masato and Hayato whooped for the delicious ramen. They thought it was the best moment in their lives.

Color in the Grey City

Singh Gagandeep

Heading to work in Grey City is simple enough for me. My office is straight down the road. All the grey buildings are neatly stacked in line with no gap between them. But I have no difficulties finding my office. It's exactly 213 steps from my apartment.

In my grey shirt, grey pants and grey tie, I blend in seamlessly. Everyone is dressed in grey. Even if they notice someone, they won't acknowledge one another. After all, there is no purpose to being acquainted to someone we meet on the street.

33 steps into my walk back to work, I notice someone walking towards me. It's the girl who works at the ration store across my apartment. I do not know her name, but she walks by me every day, from Monday to Friday, in her grey blouse, grey skirt, and grey heels.

38 steps into my walk back to work, she is within arms' reach. I notice her lips. Red lips which thin out and turn into a smile.

"Your lips are red," I said, pointing my finger at her lips. I must be hallucinating.

"I know," the girl said.

"Why?"

Seeing my reaction, she smiles. "Why not?" she said with a laugh.

She pats my shoulder and walks past. I don't understand why she looks so fascinating. I must be hallucinating. I'd better visit the health camp after work.

I resume my walk towards work. I am in awe at myself. I have never stopped in the middle of the street on my way to work. Never in 15 years. Nor have I talked to anyone on the street. I must have looked peculiar to anyone who would have noticed me. I speed up a little to make up for the lost time.

"Why not?" she asked me. It should be clear to anyone without any explanation. Because it's color and color is – well, I don't know. If everyone starts wearing color on them, the city won't be grey anymore. We won't be able to call it Grey City. It would be troublesome to change the name of a city.

79 steps into my walk back to work, I return to my regular pace. I have made up for the lost time. My breathing has hardly quickened. The visit to the health camp might not be necessary after all. "Why not?" she asked. Her lips looked really sharp. They were full, glossy and just begging for attention. They were – attractive.

105 steps into my walk back to work. I am standing dead in my track once again. The neatly stacked rows of grey buildings which begin from my apartment and end at my workplace are not all grey anymore. The building on my left is yellow! Its walls, its window frames, its door. They are all

yellow. There are 3 other men standing in front of me staring up at the building.

I have never seen something so bright. “Why not,” I remember her asking. I have a warm feeling rising inside me. It’s as if the yellow is heating up my cold fingers and face. I like this feeling – this color. “Why not,” I said aloud instinctively.

One of the men standing there turns around and looks at me with bugling eyes. That is when I realize what has just escaped from my mouth. A chill shoots up my spine and the horror dawns upon me. I quickly turn away from the building ablaze with color and rush past the three men. This is trouble. I need to get away from here as quickly as I can.

105 steps – or is it 100? I have lost count of the number of steps I have taken so far. Never in 15 years. But it doesn’t matter now. I just need to get away from here! I must have lost my mind to say such a thing on the street. I do not dare look back at the scene behind me.

There is a grey postbox 67 steps away from my office en route. I can start counting once I reach the postbox. I shouldn’t panic. My steps are quick and my breathing is heavy. I reach the grey postbox without any further incidents. Now I just need to get to work. And why not?

Before lunch break is about to begin, the city’s emergency broadcast radio announces a 4-hour curfew in the city. These curfews take place once every 3 or 4 days. But they don’t bother us. No one leaves the office during the lunch break anyways. We all eat in the canteen.

On my way home from work, I walk faster than usual. I want to see the yellow building once more. But it is nowhere to be seen. All the neatly stacked buildings are grey again, as they always have been. No one has red lips or smiles at anyone on the street too. I wonder where all the color went. Perhaps that's what the curfew was for.

I don't see the girl who works at the ration store across my apartment again on my way to work. Nor do I see her at the ration store anymore. Instead, a new girl walks by me every day now, from Monday to Friday, in her grey blouse, grey skirt, and grey heels. We don't acknowledge each other. After all, there is no use to being acquainted to someone we meet on the street. My life is running smoothly as it is. And that's all that matters.

The Last Cigarette

Singh Gagandeep

I wonder how long I have been holding this Marlboro Black Menthol cigarette between my fingers. It looks as if I have just lit it up. Three inches long with a soft green glow at its tip. I take a lazy puff and watch the smoke rise with a hint of green in it. The sweet minty flavor lingers on my tongue. I take a sip of the black coffee sitting on the table. Bitter and cold. Elaine used to always throw in lots of milk and sugar. "Wouldn't want you to become a bitter old man dad," she said walking back to the kitchen when I complained. How long ago was that?

Elaine once shouted out from the kitchen. "Do you need me to send you an invitation to come in here?" she said with a hint of annoyance in her voice. She saw me smoking in the house again. I put out the cigarette and went in the kitchen. The smell of fresh toast, hot coffee and cinnamon hit me.

"Glad you can still smell something over that cigarette odor," she said while washing the pan.

"By the way, I'll be staying over at Kate's place tonight," she said, coming to the table. She spent the night at her girlfriend's place whenever she was upset these days.

"Why don't you come home?" I said. "I'll be home early today. I can cook."

"That sounds nice," she said looking up at me, "but I'm sick of having my home smelling like a bar. I'm sick of you spending more time smoking rather than talking with your daughter. I'm sick of it all!"

Things were fine when her mother was around. I should have stepped up and filled in the void her mother left. But all I thought of was my work.

"I'll quit," I said. She continued looking at me, her expression blank. She seemed to be unsure if I really said those words or she just heard me wrong.

"I'll quit smoking," I said, holding up my Marlboro Black Menthol pack. "No more cigarettes. No more odor."

"I don't believe you," she said. It felt like she was almost daring me to prove her wrong.

I opened the pack. There was only one cigarette inside. "Last pack. Last cigarette," I said. She opened her mouth to say something but I interrupted before she could do so.

"I promise."

People say things never work out as planned. But the two words were said with the confidence of a man whose spontaneous actions work out more often than not. The Marlboro Black Menthol. I wanted to finish it off before my daughter returned home. One last smoke with a cup of black coffee.

The little crimson coffee machine on the kitchen counter spat out my Americano brew. Sitting on the bar stool, I took out the cigarette. It seemed to be whiter and smoother than the usual ones. I held it between my lips softly and lit it with my silver lighter.

The strong minty flavor hit me immediately on my first puff. Rather than the usual artificial flavor, the taste was unusually natural. The smoke I inhaled into my lungs seemed to linger and left a fresh minty aftertaste.

I remember coming home from work and opening the door. Elaine would be right there in her mother's arms, giving me the brightest smile, her tiny little hands stretching out as she called for me. "Papa." I haven't heard that word for years now.

I looked at the smoke rising from the cigarette between my fingers. There was a slight minty green hue to it. I picked up the cup of coffee to take a sip. But all that was left in the cup was coffee stains. I stared at it for a few seconds before looking at my cigarette and back at the cup. The cigarette was still at its full length. I was sure I took a few puffs while drinking my coffee. The cigarette should be burned out too.

"Downed it too quick," I said, looking at my watch. It was 6 p.m.

I got the gas running with the cigarette still between my lips. Spaghetti with duck breast and pumpkin sauce. Elaine's favorite. She was coming home for dinner after all. The aroma of Italian herbs and the pumpkin sauce was swirling around the kitchen. But so was the minty burning smell.

I took the cigarette bud from my mouth to dump it. But what I saw between my fingers was not a cigarette bud. I stood as if frozen in time. My eyes fixated on what should have been only a bud. A three-inch long cigarette burning with a soft green glow at its tip. A flicker on my wrist told me it was 7p.m.

My mind had to be playing games. She was going to be back soon. I needed to put it out before it was too late. I stubbed it out on the kitchen counter. But the harder I pushed the tip against the counter, the brighter it glowed. It was burning stronger but wasn't getting any shorter.

I dropped it on the floor and pressed the sole of my foot against the tip with every intention to take the life out of it. There was no way it could still be lit after that. A chill shot through my foot and up my spine. Cold as death itself. The cigarette I tried to crush under my feet was burning brighter than ever. It wasn't crumpled, bent or discolored.

Elaine opened the door up front. I couldn't let her see this. I quietly slipped into my room and put the cigarette at my bedside table. The bright green tip glared at me as it hung off the edge. It had to be out by the time I came back in to sleep.

Sitting across Elaine at the dinner table, I smiled at her whenever our eyes met. But my mind kept dragging me back towards what was behind my closed bedroom door. I saw Elaine's lips move, but the sound didn't register.

"Don't worry dad. You will get used to it," Elaine said, catching my eye with a smile. She thought it was the side effects of quitting so suddenly.

The dinner ended a little too quickly. Elaine was back in her room. And I was standing in front of my bedroom, holding the door knob. My hand trembled slightly against the cold metal. I turned the knob and pushed open the door.

There was no way I could have explained it to Elaine. She saw it as a mere excuse for breaking my promise, for breaking her trust. She rarely comes home anymore. My colleagues at the work thought I was delusional. I was given a long holiday and got referred to psychological counseling.

But I know I'm not delusional. Because here I am 2 years later, with the Marlboro Black Menthol between my fingers. Three inches long with a soft green glow sitting silently at its tip, sneering at me.

Cat

Nicole Go

December 2, 2014

Amsterdam

‘It’s not sex I want,’ he said as the girl stood up, red lips slightly parted. ‘I’ll give you 30 euros for an hour anyhow. I just want somebody to talk to.’

Outside, spectrums of pink, velvet, gold and blue toward sunset had just begun to take the place of the city’s grey scale. Dam Square still looked somewhat the same, except that the Royal Palace was now lit up with a golden austerity. Beyond the National Monument, De Wallen awoke in puffs of smoke as men crept around its peep shows, sex shops and coffee shops, whilst women in lingerie beckoned by the crimson windows. Daytime was particularly fugitive, but the night, notorious and reeking of nausea, went on in the midst of hazy exchanges; mind-altering for some, thirst quenching for others.

The girl stared into his eyes for a short while but betrayed no emotion whilst pondering his request. She then made her way to lock the door, sealing off the maroon dimension. Each light step sent her Christian Louboutin stilettos clicking against the surface, creating a rhythmic

staccato. With a practiced movement, she proceeded to draw the curtains, effectively isolating the glances outside.

‘Okay. Sit down,’ she said at last.

Half expecting a trace of perplexity on her face, suddenly he no longer knew what to say. He did as he was told, took off his coat and scarf and tossed them aside.

‘What’s your name?’ he asked.

‘Luna.’

He finally took the time to observe the girl: not beautiful, not very pretty, but nice. Since he first laid eyes on her through the glass door, he had barely noticed how the slinky French lace wrapped around her body and accentuated her curves underneath its florals. Now, looking at the plunging wire between the cups that held her breasts, he imagined briefly their texture but was quick to stash the thought away. This was not what he had come for. In a flock of torsos, it was neither easy nor meaningful to distinguish one from another.

‘Luna, why are you doing this?’

‘Doing... *what?*’ her eyes twinkled.

‘*This,*’ he repeated, gesturing as though to remind her of the reason for the room they were in.

‘Who are you? A journalist? Writing a feature?’ she giggled.

‘I just wanted to know. I never knew how any man could stand the idea of sleeping with a woman who wouldn’t sleep with him if it wasn’t for the money.’

‘Well,’ she said, easing herself into the chair opposite him and crossing her bare legs. ‘I’m no prostitute. I mean I am, in a way, obviously, but not as a profession.’

‘What do you mean?’

She did not answer immediately, but instead looked away as if weighing the worth of answering.

‘Forget it,’ he said, almost too eager to steer the conversation away from where it was going (or not going) as he glanced down at his own hands, they were so rugged and big he could hardly believe someone once found them lovable. ‘Forget I ever asked. I was just being an idiot, I’m sorry.’

She took a pack of Camels from her purse, put a cigarette between her lips and lit it. The man watched the smoke rise from the tip burning bright like coal and drift away in the air as she took a drag.

‘I’m working on my sociology thesis and this is... an *experiment*, you could say. First-hand research for a month,’ she said at last.

He looked up. He might have suspected this was a bluff, but it didn’t matter. Given a different set of circumstances, he would have laughed his usual laugh, but there he was, he had just paid to talk to a prostitute in what seemed to be a desperate move – not that it would bother him whether she was truly a non-professional, or a harmless, compulsive liar.

‘You mean you’re a student?’

‘That’s right,’ she said matter-of-factly. ‘I guess I wanted to know the same.’

‘How’s it going for you, then?’

‘Pretty well don't you think?’ she exhaled a puff. ‘I’ve never had anyone coming here announcing ‘let's not fuck, just talk’, or giving me 30 euros to know why I’ve decided to put myself up for sale. You’ve certainly given me something to write about.’

He said nothing.

‘Talk about human behavior,’ she smiled. He tried to guess her age, she couldn’t be more than twenty-five, but something about the way she carried herself negated all hints of insecure youthfulness. It was hard to say.

Her cigarette was only one-third smoked when she crushed it in the tray with skillful fingers. At this point the room fell silent once again. A quarter must have passed; all the while the man seemed to have zoned out, as though gazing at some imaginary yet intriguing presence behind the girl.

‘Look, I’m not in a hurry, but I just don’t want you to waste your money. Isn’t there something else you want to know?’ The girl asked as she shifted her legs in the chair.

He let out a sigh.

‘Tell me, Luna,’ he spoke after another delay, ‘have you ever observed a cat?’

March 14, 2014

Hong Kong

‘What did I say in the emails?’ he asked.

Cheek in palm, elbow on the pillow, she rolled her eyes, lips pursed into a thin line in an attempt to hide the mischievous smile that had always enveloped him in a warm glow.

‘I’m thinking. *You* don’t remember?’

‘I honestly don’t.’

Her gaze lingered on, challenging him with a questioning look, but she herself gave no answer to his original question.

‘Well?’ He asked again, right hand creeping along her left upper arm. She gasped a little, as though recalling something. All the while he never took his eyes off her.

‘Still thinking... Nope. I don’t remember either.’

There, the smile. Of course that was a lie, she even remembered the white shirt, mustard jumper and blue jeans on the first day, how could she forget what followed? He knew that. It was just one of her tricks. He pulled the blanket off and caught her off guard. She squealed in breathless laughter as he pinned her shoulders and tickled her, clinging on to the cover with all her might, writhing and kicking like a small child. Her giggles, too, made him laugh.

‘Come on!’

‘Noooooooooooo. Stop!’

Still chortling, his hand slowed down to a gentle caress, tracing invisible lines.

‘Your skin makes me so jealous.’

‘Hmm, perfect skin,’ she said under her breath. ‘Nice genes.’

‘Indeed.’

‘The baby’s to inherit them.’

‘Absolutely,’ he said, now drawing circles on her back.

‘With your eyes,’ she smiled sleepily.

‘No. *Your* eyes.’

‘No. It’ll have *my* skin and *your* eyes.’

‘Brown eyes are beautiful.’

‘They’re not. Green’s better.’

‘No. Yours have to be the dominant gene.’

She rose from the sheets and melted into him.

December 2, 2014

Amsterdam

Sometimes, life leaves you wondering what on earth you’re doing with a brunette of some twenty years sat on the edge of a bed opposite you in a sheer black Basque. The bed’s not yours; you don’t even know the girl’s name.

This is a mistake. I’m out of my mind. But it’s too late for anything now, if anything, in fact, could’ve been done. It’s always too little, too late.

I stare at the man behind Luna (that’s the name she gave me) next to the clinically white bed, he stares right back. A living, breathing vacuum wrapped neatly in the skin of an animal. But if you know where to look

and look hard enough, you can always spot the rough seams. Is he aware he's alive? *The nineteenth century dislike of realism is the rage of Caliban seeing his own face in a glass.* Right. *The nineteenth century dislike of romanticism is the rage of Caliban not seeing his own face in a glass.* Are those tears brimming in his eyes? Or mine? They can't be mine – can they?

Some Japanese woman in one of Murakami's books – never mind which woman in which book – says, 'To know one's own state is not a simple matter. One has no choice but to look at one's reflection in the mirror.' The image is, through experience, believed to be correct, but that is all.

If that's the case, if that's what the girl is seeing, then this is truly fucked up.

There are two ways to look at it: *she* might still be alive or she might be not. Either way makes me sick to the depths of my core – because alive or not, she no longer has anything to do with me.

She willed it to be so.

August 17, 2014

Hong Kong

Lately I've been thinking about dying, a lot.

You must have noticed; it must have nearly killed you to watch me disintegrate. But I don't want to die just yet, nor do I have the guts. I starve myself for hours on end, drinking only coffee (because you cannot walk into a coffee shop, claim a seat and delve into your own work without ordering anything, and the coffee shop is the only place where I don't feel so claustrophobic). Eventually my stomach would rumble – brain signals telling the digestive muscles to restart peristalsis, vibrations instructing me to put something in the system for god's sake – and I can only follow even though I have no desire to eat, because I'm nothing but electrical energy in the cortex, signals firing back and forth.

I could've drowned myself somewhere, but I'd struggle and fight before the thick waters could smother my windpipe. Slitting my veins open won't do either; I'd grow nauseous at the smell of my own blood, drag this rugged doll that is myself to A&E just so they can stitch me up and make the stench stop. I've thought about jumping off the roof, too, but the increasing momentum will give me nothing but regrets.

So it is according to a primal instinct's overpowering of all nerve impulses that, at the end of the day, I still want to live.

I'd like to make myself believe such is the truth. My womb has rejected its purpose, my brain chemistry sends me into a downward spiral, my primal instinct tells me to grit my teeth – it's all biology and it's got nothing to do with me. So why am I afraid of killing this thing that's not me? Because I don't want to take responsibility. I'd rather a fast car run me down. It'd break your heart I know. You'd track the reckless bastard down, take him by the neck and choke him to his own death; even then it still won't have anything to do with me.

All I've got to keep myself sane, then, is sleeping around. I can never apologize to you enough, but something inside me is dead and I can't feel anything anymore, though I know I ought to apologize. It's nothing to do with love. You have every right to call me out on the affairs, but it's all biology: the only emotion left in me is something carnal. The first time I thought of the thing I'd been keeping in my womb, I locked myself in the bathroom and cried. Then I thought of it again at work, and rushed to the staff toilet and cried. Now when I think of you, I think of the thing, but I don't feel anything anymore even though I remember it more vividly than I remember us.

Self-pity is cheap. I don't know why I'm writing you this. When I was small I couldn't keep a diary because there were so few things worth documenting. If I waited for something interesting enough to define each day, I would have to abandon the whole labor altogether. How can I write without censoring myself, as in how can I be completely honest with myself about all this self-questioning? To put it down in print is to materialize it, make it more real than it already is in its intangible form. And then the written word will no longer be mine; it's in the world, all I can do is critique my own sentimental foolishness, laugh and ask 'now what on earth has gotten into your head

again?' But why should I be honest? I've been honest with myself this whole time; it's hardly resolved anything. For all I know I'll probably tear this sheet up and rid myself of it, and you'll never know.

Sometimes I hate being a woman.

She was one metaphor away from being poetry; instead she became a whore.

August 18, 2014

Hong Kong

He knew her body the way he knew home: the mole just slightly above her left pelvis, the faint birthmark on her right arm – a physical representation of spiritual wonder. He knew as well its quiver at the lightest caress, her slow, deep, heavy breathing, the dark of her lashes, the angle of her spine arching whilst half in pleasure, half in pain.

Standing in the shower, he knew, too, that those were tears and not merely droplets on her face. Her trembling body in his arms felt smaller than he had ever known, more fragile. He could have easily crushed her skull if he wanted; her protruding ribs, like a child's, were barely holding the shipwreck between them.

What he wanted to do, though, was make love to her just to snap her back to the present. He had to tell her it didn't matter the first one couldn't make it; there'd be another as long as they had each other.

But he just held her like he wanted to crush her. Five months had gone by and her stomach was flat again.

'I can't,' her voice was barely audible, 'I can't. I can't.'

She could no longer hold back the tears, so she turned away.

'Please,' he said, pressing her arm, 'look at me.'

'I can't.'

'Why?'

'I just can't,' her voice broke as though the throat had forgotten itself. And forgotten itself it had, for it was so dry she couldn't even swallow the piece of bread in her mouth.

He took his glasses off and set them on the coffee table, unable to believe that he himself, too, was crying. That was the first time she tried to break things off.

He buried his face in her shoulder; still she wouldn't look at him.

'At least finish your plate, please, you've barely eaten,' he whispered, tucking a strand of her soft curls behind her ear.

I can't eat. My throat.'

He brought her cup of coffee to her lips, waited for her to take a sip, then shoved another piece of bread into her mouth. She tried to pull her face away but he had her clasped in his arms, and he was practically rubbing the food on her stubborn lips.

She broke into a smile, and took a bite.

Memory is a funny thing. Why, of all its manifestations, this particular fragment chose to come back to him *now* he did not know. Sometimes in retrospect, trying to reconstruct the narrative – but you cannot reason with the moment; you can only make sense of the remains of it.

That night after the shower, they skipped dinner and went to bed (she wouldn't eat and he didn't want to either). She fell asleep almost immediately with her back facing him. He watched the contour of her torso rising and falling and thought of his own toes in the sand, the waves kissing the shore and withdrawing, just to come back and do it all over again. It's just a thought, or maybe it was a dream, though he couldn't remember having dreamt that night. The next morning he found her white slip lying on the pillow. All that was left was the white slip, her head's indentation, and a faint scent of gardenia and orange blossoms, like the imprint of a cat that's been sleeping on a cushion – warm and delicate.

Slade Memorial Park

Peter Jordan

They were both panting now as the hill steepened. He, with a stick, and she, with her hand on the railings.

‘Did you hear what that woman called her child?’

‘No.’

‘Arthur. Parents are calling their children Arthur again.’

‘Lucky you,’ she said. ‘I don’t suppose Lavinia is going to come round any time soon.’

Arthur stopped suddenly, catching his breath. ‘Wait a minute,’ he said.

‘You haven’t forgotten to take your medication again, have you?’

‘I recognise this.’ He nodded to an expanse of grass that sloped sharply down to a flat play area at the bottom of the hill.

‘Slade. Slade Memorial Park.’ Arthur smiled and gingerly hammered a power chord on his air guitar. ‘Cum On Feel The Noize. Girlz Rock the Boyz.’

‘Too old to rock and roll. Too young to die,’ chanted Lavinia, nodding her white hair-bunned head back and forth.

‘Careful dear, you’ll get whiplash.’

Lavinia laughed her tinny, tinkling laugh and slapped Arthur gently on the back.

‘Never too old to rock and roll. Never too young to die,’ she said.

‘Now, look there. See? That’s the Memorial.’

‘Looks more like a rubbish bin, if you ask me.’

‘No, no. It’s the Slade Memorial. Do you remember those old cine films? There’s one of me and the others racing down this very slope. We raced each other to the Memorial. And I won.’

His breathing slowed as he gazed down at a welter of jostling memories.

It had been cold and icy, just like today. He was wearing a brown and red knitted Balaclava and brand new shiny Wellingtons. He remembered being scolded for scuffing them on the grass as he ran and tumbled his way to that famous victory. The first, but not the last. At least, not quite. He had also once won at conkers against some cocky kid called Kevin Duffy.

Adulthood, on the other hand, had been a rather relentless series of defeats. A career as a rock star had failed to materialise. In retrospect, he had not so much lived the dream, as lived in a dream. Often a narcotically induced dream, although he would only ever admit this to himself on special occasions when a depressive nadir temporarily removed the clutter of delusional aspirations, like the brief foray into painting. That was something of a long shot. In an amphetamine-fuelled frenzy, he had cobbled together a series of ‘action paintings’, one of which he gamely entered for the Royal

Academy Summer Exhibition. He would have entered them all, but at ten quid a throw it would have eaten unacceptably into his substance budget.

If he had merely thrown paint at the canvas it might have turned out more happily, but he had insisted on smearing the colours together with a sponge. The result was an indeterminate brown smudge, which, in a brief flash of inspiration, he dubbed, 'Dirty Protest'. When it was unceremoniously rejected, he sensed an Establishment conspiracy. He brooded for a while, but eventually went to the pub with a couple of mates from his band days.

And so his life had passed in a flurry of dead-ends. Like most people, he had been completely caught out by the tendency of passing years to accelerate towards the long-awaited day when everything simply rolls to an abrupt stop.

But now, standing there in the steaming cold February air, he looked back to a time when he was still brimming with untapped potential. A time when his green stick limbs could bend and bounce and his joints never ached. A time when he felt invincible. His eyes glittered in the silver rays of the low-lying sun. He teetered for a moment. Then with one joyful bound, he began cantering down the slope.

‘Arthur! What the hell do you think you’re doing?’

By way of response, Arthur began whooping loudly as he gathered momentum. Then all of a sudden his legs went from under him and he was bumping and rolling and sliding out of control. There was a sharp crack. Arthur did not hear it. But Lavinia did. In fact, she could actually 'feel the noise' shudder through her, just as Noddy Holder had exhorted them to do all those years ago. She gasped and then screamed as she saw Arthur's body lose all tension, flapping and flailing like a rag doll, and finally coming to rest just shy of a concrete drum near where the Slade Memorial might once have stood.

He lay there for a long while before he realised that he was not dead. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Lavinia pick up one broken half of his stick. He slowly rolled over and lay doggo, looking up at the vast blue sky as Lavinia's laughter came tinkling towards him across the frozen earth.

Midnight Conversation

Kwan Sin Ying Kate

“Honey, are you asleep?”

I say no. I haven’t slept for two days in a row. I hope I can get some sleep tonight.

“I can’t sleep.”

I roll over and find Vera staring at me. I take a strand of her dyed brown hair and start playing with it with my fingers.

“Let’s talk,” she says.

“Sure,” I say. I pull out a white hair among the strand. I look at it closely and realise it is a lighter shade of brown. I pluck it out in one swift motion.

“What should we talk about?” she asks in her dreamy voice.

“I don’t know.”

“I don’t know either.”

She is still looking at me. I am looking out of the window. There is a red dot moving slowly in the sky. I watch it flying further and further away until it gets out of my sight.

For a minute or two, we just lie there without talking. I am looking at the sky. She is staring at the ceiling.

“Remember that time when we stumbled upon this antique shop in Central? That time when we couldn’t find that Thai restaurant where we were meeting your sister and we were late and she got real angry about it? I wanted to go in so badly but then the lady in there looked so intimidating and we were late. Let’s go back there some time.”

“Sure.” I try to think of the shop she’s talking about, but I can’t remember anything about it.

“But it’s been over a year now. Do you think it’s still there?”

“I don’t know. Probably not.”

“What a shame,” she says. There’s not a hint of disappointment in her voice.

My left foot finds Vera’s feet under the cover. I stroke her toes slightly with mine. She strokes back. We continue like that for a while and then she goes on talking about getting a new sofa from IKEA.

“What colour do you think we should get?”

“I don’t know. White?”

“I like white. But it gets dirty very easily. I was thinking about grey. What do you think?”

“Grey sounds good.”

I hear a man and a woman arguing downstairs. The man shouts “what do you want me to do?” and the woman is crying. I cannot make out what she says because she is crying. Then none of them says anything. I wait for them to speak again, but nothing comes.

“Joe,” she says. “Are you listening?”

“Yes.”

“I was saying, should we get a fabric or leather one? I saw this brown leather sofa the other day when hanging out with mother. It’s perfect for the house. And she was like, ‘If you like it so much then buy it.’ I really wanted to. But it costs quite a lot. Something around seven thousand and five hundred. I said I’d ask you about it first. What do you think?”

“Whatever you like,” I say. I turn my head to look at her. She is lying on her back with her eyes closed. For one second I thought she has fallen asleep. That reminds me of how I used to wait for her to sleep first so that I could watch her sleep. I loved the way her eyelids would flicker every once in a while. I still do, but I don’t watch her sleep anymore.

“Maybe forget about it,” she says. “The one we have now is still in good condition.”

“Sure,” I say. I continue staring at her face. A few times she opens her mouth and then closes it again. I can hear the sound of her breathing, her chest rising and falling in a slow rhythm. Then she opens her eyes.

“Joe,” she says calmly.

“Yes?”

“Do you remember the first night we spent in this house? It was so empty. There was no furniture. No sofa. Nothing. Just a bed.”

“Yes. Just a bed,” I say. I remember ordering pizza and spilling the whole cup of coke on the three hundred dollar rug that night. That rug is gone now. And I remember waking up late the next day. It was a Sunday. We were happy.

“This bed,” she says.

“Yes.”

“Maybe it’s time for a new bed.”

“Maybe.”

Then both of us remain silent. I try to think of something to say, but I can’t think of any. She is probably trying, and probably failing, too. I look at her and she looks back at me. Both of us are waiting for the other one to say something. Things that we need to talk about. Things that we never talk about. But none of us says anything. We just lie there and look at each other. A while later we decide that it’s best for us to stop talking, so we say goodnight to each other. She says it first.

Somewhere along our conversation the sparrows have started chirping. The room is less dark than before. I turn to the other side and look at the sky. The clouds are visible now. I feel Vera shifting behind me. We both did.

Kasa and Yu

Jeremy Lee

It was a cool day in November. Young man Yu woke up early, just when dawn broke and the morning birds started chirping. He ran up the mountain path with glee and excitement on his face and reached the highest point of the village where a big but lonely house stood.

“Good morning, Kasa!” Yu called out when he reached his destination, the village head’s house, enclosed by a tall and bushy garden. He arrived at the entrance and unlocked the gates with familiarity as if he had been living there for the past 25 years. By the time he took off his shoes and set foot in the living room, old man Kasa was already sitting there, savouring freshly brewed rice tea.

“See what company has come, out of nowhere in a sudden, just like the first rain.” Kasa filled another cup with tea and handed it to Yu. “Of course, the old man knows the agenda for the day.”

Together they gulped down till the last sip the tea pot had to offer and packed for a day trip. Yu had brought rice puddings, one of the specialties of the village and Kasa brought bottles filled with the rice tea they had been drinking, an even rarer specialty that quenched the most lingering thirst.

Carrying all their supplies in a rucksack, young man Yu and old man Kasa (with a walking stick at his disposal) left the village and traversed along the long and winding path that lead to the other side of the valley. On weekdays the path would be bustling and crammed with merchants, but on weekends, the path was a living example of tranquility. After going down steep slopes and slowly trotting on uneven pebbles for several hours, the duo arrived at a quiet hill; far from population and close to oblivion.

“We both have great expectations in stall for each other today, and this is mine - welcome to my secret place.” Yu stretched out both of his arms and guided Kasa’s eyes to what lied beyond: a flat piece of unmoving lake, crystal- clear and sky- high, unfolding and expanding as far as Kasa’s eyes roamed. Yu felt the comfortable silence and knew his friend was in awe.

“We walked upon the lake, saw the reflection of the sky and dived in deep. Some drowned and some found grains at the bottom. We planted and harvested the rice, and in times they multiplied,” quoted Yu word by word as his parents had told him years ago when they were still alive.

“To think I could see this before my life ends, life is really a box of surprises,” followed Kasa.

They made their second meal of the day, descended the hill and walked upon the water that remained still. It definitely felt weird to wet your feet yet float and drift like a feather in the water. Yu joked that they glided like professions of stealth from a faraway eastern land he once heard from the merchants.

Though Yu was proud of revealing his secret place to his friend, Kasa did not show the joy and thrill Yu was anticipating. In fact, his gaze was aimless, his mood seemed to dampen second by second, inch by inch as they stepped further into the lake. Kasa's invisible fear gave away when Yu saw the ripples aroused by the trembling walking stick.

"I guess the wise old man is not yet accustomed to the nature of water?" Yu asked cautiously with care.

"I don't think we should tread any longer in this water. Let's..." Kasa almost tripped over his own feet if Yu had not held his arm the whole time and saved him from losing balance.

Kasa's situation did not improve even hours after they made it back to land. A shadow of grief and guilt cast over Kasa's face while he kept whispering invisible sounds. Yu thought Kasa might have caught a cold

and lent him his coat, but Kasa's shivering halted only when the duo realized it was getting dark and decided to make way back to the village.

By the time they arrived the curtains of the night had fallen over the sky. Yu escorted Kasa back home and unloaded whatever remained of their trip. The liveliness on Kasa's face did not recover until the pot of rice tea Yu had been preparing was ready. Kasa quickly downed a few more cups. Yu was a bit astonished since the tea was still hot. They remained sitting in the living room for the following hour.

Kasa finally spoke but was interrupted by Yu.

“Did you see something in the lake?”

“Yu,” immediately Kasa responded, “I must thank you for showing the secret place of yours to me. It makes me feel trusted as a friend. We can talk to our hearts' content about the place we saw today another day, but today's agenda must be finished within today. I should have told you this earlier.” Kasa looked directly into Yu's eyes. Yu sitting right opposite Kasa, straightened his back with a light smile.

“When the first light of dawn shines upon this village,” Kasa continued, “the great plot of land, previously a part of the forest to the southeast of this village but burnt to ashes in an autumn fire, will become your property. The village has seen you turning the remains of the fallen trunks and branches into a new path for trade, naturally they decide if the ownership of the land will be all yours.”

Yu’s smile grew a little wider, but waited patiently until Kasa finished his speech.

“However,” Kasa lowered his voice, “you must abide by one rule: the village will determine what will be produced, and how it will be used.”

“Kasa,” said Yu, whose smile vanished in an instant, “correct me if I’ve misunderstood you, but this wasn’t what you told me a month ago. How is the land fully mine if I don’t have the right to decide what to do with it?”

“The other villagers heard of your plans and dreams of expanding business with cities faraway and they think it’s too radical. We have come to a consensus that for the time being, the traditional way...”

Yu sharply cut in Kasa’s thread of speech. “The others didn’t want to change because they are afraid of it, and mostly because they want to keep

the wealth flowing into their pockets. You know all of this. Most of them don't like me because I see through their evil."

Kasa let out a sigh. "Of course, it is a problem we need to tackle, but the opposing numbers are too great. And they don't fear you without reason. Merchants who wandered in the valley and ventured upon the lake we just visited today saw horrible things in it. The whole village knows it – only you are not afraid of those cursed creatures drifting beneath the thin surface."

So he did see something in the lake, Yu thought.

Kasa poured himself another cup of tea and started toying with it. "You don't have to put on a face like you have just been betrayed. I understand very clearly your feelings even without having to look you in the eye. You did the same thing to me, didn't you? You knew I would see monsters and beasts, manifestations of my sins lurking across the horizon, ready to devour my life once I gave in. That's why you took me there."

Yu opened his mouth and tried to defend himself but was rendered speechless. He collected himself and began, "...It was something I really wanted to share with you, because I tried to believe that you were still the same wise old man I used to know years before. I thought you would see

the same view as I saw, a clear blue sky with white hazes, clouds moving slowly. I thought you were different from the others and I wanted to prove it.” Guilt and sadness started to spread in his heart. All of a sudden, Kasa seemed miles away from him despite their friendship all through these years.

Kasa chuckled, “The things we see are very different. The young are oblivious to their mistakes and the aged are too old to even remember each and every wrong they have done. The inexperienced wants to grow through change, but the experienced thinks yesterday was better.”

When they realized it was already in the dead of the night, Kasa offered Yu to sleep over for the night, but Yu politely refused. As the gates of Kasa’s garden closed, Yu thought he heard something lock tightly, and when he turned back, the wall of trees stood taller and mightier than Yu had ever seen. It was like Kasa’s house was rejecting an unwanted stranger it never saw before.

That night, Yu travelled alone the same path he and Kasa walked in the morning and returned to the lake. He thought if he and Kasa had fewer secrets between each other, and were willing to step into each other’s shoes, things might have turned out differently. He felt a sense of grief swelling up deep inside him, wondering if he had really tricked his friend, if his desire to change had brought the downfall of their relationship, if

something had been forever lost. November had always been his favourite month, but now the sky was starting to rain. Upon the hill where he was standing, the grass got so soaked that it seemed his emotions were flooding.

Yu wondered if earlier this day, Kasa saw in the lake his father and mother, who had perished in the fire. Maybe he did, maybe he did not. Yu walked over to the edge of the lake and tried to see what was reflected in the waters. He looked down, and deep.

Lighthouse

Jeramy Lee

The last train's whistle blew for the final time, urging me to board before it was too late. Quickly I made my last sprint and managed to get into the carriage before the doors closed shut. I sat down, catching my breath, realizing I was the only passenger as I looked around. As soon as the clock struck twelve, the train started moving out of the station and dashed into the night.

I never saw the ticket man pass by. Two hours into my journey I had already fallen asleep twice and woken up to ever changing sceneries and the same moonlight, pale and distant. The carriage was dead quiet besides the creaking of wooden seats, which contributed to my constantly aching back. I reached to my backpack beside me and started rummaging through it, trying to find something that would feed my boredom. I held my breath. My papers and money were nowhere to be found. Only things from yesterday were brought over - an unfinished book and an old photograph of me and my grandparents. I looked out the window again, not sure if leaving home was the right decision for a boy who had just turned eighteen. But there was no way back and the train kept moving on the trail. The night was still long and I thought, maybe there was nothing more I could lose.

I opened the book and started reading from where I had left off. “The traveler bears a sad face when he sleeps. He who has witnessed too much suffering has trouble finding happiness even in his sweetest dreams. In order to take back what he has lost, he decides to embark on a journey. He keeps travelling to the east, further into the east...” I tried to keep myself awake but my eyelids gave way. Not soon had all the words blurred than my vision was invaded by absolute darkness.

“Hi.”

My shallow sleep was disturbed by a clear and distinct voice, the exact opposite of the subtleness of the night. In front of me was a young girl sat opposite me, her eyes filled with curiosity and innocence. So I wasn't the only person aboard after all.

“Hello,” I tried to sound friendly.

“Hi,” she said again, “I walked from carriage to carriage and found you sitting here. You're heading for the Lighthouse too?”

“Yeah, that's the only place where this train goes,” I answered.

“I’m happy that I found you!” Her face glowed with delight. “Now we are not alone.”

As the night grew deeper so did our conversation. Same as me, the girl had left home just to witness dawn breaking at the eastern shores of the city. She was astonished to see that I was underprepared for the journey when she looked into my backpack. She let out a sigh, and shared some of her water and biscuits with me. Her food reminded me of the pastries my grandparents used to make: not particularly good in taste, but very satisfying to a hungry stomach. She kept fishing out food from her bag, offering me some from time to time when our conversation came to a halt, until the point she realized that her supply was running out, too.

“I didn’t want to admit it, but my summer vacation is nearly over,” she started.

“Does school start that early? It’s still half way through July,” I said.

“When morning comes I will have surgery,” she placed her hand on her chest as she looked out the window. The moon was still as pale as ever, same as it was when the train was leaving the station. “I want this night to stay a little bit longer.” In her eyes, something was flickering. “How about you? Why did you get on the train?”

I passed her the photo I had kept in my backpack. “Their dream was to see the sun rise from the Lighthouse. I thought I should see it for them.”

“Did they know that the Lighthouse no longer exists?” She asked.

“Some say it was demolished earlier in the last decade, some say it never existed at all. I figured I just had to see it myself.” I took back the photo she handed me, and looked again at the faded image, how my grandparents were smiling as if it was their happiest day in life. “Once I’ve seen it, I might be able to move on.”

The girl kept staring at the back of my photograph. I flipped it over and read the words again. “Keep writing for ten years, then you’ll keep writing for the rest of your life.” Their handwriting echoed inside my head, just like how it first struck me as I received my first birthday present from them, a pencil and a notebook. I wondered for how long I had stopped writing since they had left.

We knew the journey was coming to an end when we saw the coastline emerging slowly through the windows. Upon the wavering waters reflected the moon, which seemed even further away. Within an hour the train entered the station and we got off. On the wall the clock pointed to 5am.

Dawn would break soon. Quickly we headed for the shore which was within walking distance, and sat at the most eastern point. The sky was still dark but layers of blue light had begun to settle on the horizon. There was still some time before the sun would show up.

“Do you like writing?” She asked suddenly.

“Yes. I stopped recently but yes, I do.”

“I liked to swim a lot too,” she said, “but I had to give up. My heart couldn’t handle it.”

A few minutes of silence dwelled on until she asked again, “Say, you have dedication, something you’re really good at and you devote your whole life to it. One day something bad happens and you lose your motivation and talent for it. Wouldn’t that be sad?”

I looked at her to find that she had been looking at me the whole time.

“What happens if one day you can’t write?” She asked.

“...You keep on writing.” I didn’t know what else to say.

The answer was so obvious, yet it was a painful truth. She repeated it in invisible words, but I could hear it. It was clear and distinct, just like the

sound of dawn breaking, lingering in the air like the church bell ringing for morning to come. I held her hand and she grasped it in return. I wanted to let go and she wanted to hold on, and here we were, in the middle of nowhere, at the start of time.

“Look!” She said.

I followed the direction where her fingers pointed. The sun’s figure, blended with the color of the sky, was barely visible, but it was there, shrouded by the fog and mist of the early hours. Soon it would rise even higher and regain its brilliance, but I couldn’t help thinking that this was the perfect moment.

Just then I thought I saw something else. Not far from the sun stood a tall and slender shadow that seemed abandoned, faraway and lonely. It swayed and disappeared, and appeared again like rays of light shining through clouds. I felt strength increasing in my hand. The girl noticed my signal and looked where my gaze led.

I strained my eyes, burning it into my vision.

Behind the Mountains

Demi Poon

The night falls through. She has the dormers opened, hoping to greet the ghosts of youth with long cries to the sky. Darkness has filled her eyes. No glitter, no starlight; but once in a while, the sky cracks a pitiful smile, seemingly to remind her of something she has long forgotten.

Fear is what her eager eyes have defeated; the world she desires to see is just behind the colossal mountains that lie at a distance. Beyond the barricade is a world in uncertainty, but be it a valley that lives unicorns, or a land of nowhere in obscurity, she has developed an indulgence in finding it out.

On the edge of the dormer she sits, her little feet dangle as if dancing in the wind. She has on her most-adored, red shiny shoes. Her legs long to take long walks, just like the endless ones on adventures - only, farther and longer than endless.

The ghosts of youth used to haunt her, yet they are unusually inviting tonight. They float and wander around as if they were angels from hell. She lifts her head up once again, watching the sky smiles. The pale moonlight shines a valedictory; are the clouds waving goodbye?

Behind her is a bedroom reeking of sweat, failure and dread under false pretense. It is a smell she despises. The world that lies beyond the mountains, she thinks, must have an aromatic scent. She imagines walking into a field of narcissi, sniffing the essence of the flowers.

Leaning forward, she craves to go. As she loses balance for a split second, her grip on the windowsill tightens. The wind honks and blows her hair. It pushes her backwards with its strong breeze, little by little - back into the odorous bedroom she loathes. She can almost hear the wind singing her name.

"Sky,"

It whispers.

"Don't jump."

Antlers

Chantelle Wong

It started when he was 29. At first it was just like a headache, little needles stinging his frontal lobe. He tried to ignore it and focus on his dull accounting work in his tiny cubicle. And then the needles turned into drills, slowly revolving and stimulating the cerebral cortex. He could no longer stand it when it felt like continuous blows from a sledgehammer.

He sought help from a doctor. After a brief examination, the doctor wrote it up to occupational stress, gave him some pills and advised some time off, so he took a week off from work.

He mostly stayed in bed and flicked through meaningless TV programmes. He did feel better for the first few days, but the temporary peace ended, the headaches came back, worse than ever, no matter how many painkillers he took.

On the fifth day, agony woke him from his restless sleep. He sprang up like a frightened cat, sweat soaked all over his bed. He clutched his hair and clawed at his forehead, knocking the empty pill vial over from his side cabinet. Following an excruciating pain, his right eyesight began to blur and soon faded to pitch black. He could feel liquid leaking behind his eye. He rushed to the bathroom to look into the mirror. His sclera was tainted

with red, like scarlet paint seeping onto a white canvas, until it was completely covered. Just as he tried to hold his eyelid for a clearer look, he heard a faint tearing sound and something ivory-coloured emerged from within his pupil. It grew bigger and shredded his sky blue iris. A mixture of blood and clear gel oozed out of the opening.

His hand roamed frantically over the countertop, searching for his phone. Through the flapping of magazines, his trembling hand reached his mobile and pressed 9-1-1. He didn't get the number right until his third try. And then he realized he couldn't shut his right eye completely, the creamy white substance was blocking the eyelid. He moved his fingers toward the eyeball, turned out the ivory patch that was sticking out of his eye. After a while of lightheadedness out of this horrid realization, his remaining eyesight started to grow dim. He was too frightened to do anything other than to curl up at the corner of his bathroom, awaiting help.

When the paramedics got there, he had already passed out. No training had prepared them for this situation: some unknown matter stuck half an inch out of an eye but with no entry wound, leaving trails of blood on his face, his shirt, and the floor. They loaded him onto the ambulance carefully and drove him to the hospital. After a full body scan, it was revealed that bone extensions grew out of the skull from the back of his forehead, with the shape of a hook, piercing his eyeball. His brain was pushed back slightly like the internal organs of a pregnant woman. Bone growth on the right side was faster than that of the left. Therefore the left

eyeball was still intact, but the optic nerve had already been severed. The doctors were baffled; they had never seen a patient like this. In fact, no one had ever seen anything like this before.

The surgeons successfully removed the left eye before the bone reached it, and they cleared out what was left of the right eye. They discovered that the speed of bone growth varied, sometimes it could lengthen up to centimeters in an hour, but at most times it would grow extremely slowly with unobservable speed.

When he woke up again he could no longer see. He could not tell whether he was asleep or awake. He first thought it was a dream when the doctors informed him of his current situation. In the indifferent statement, he could sense sparkles of excitement in the doctors' voices.

Always being the centre of discussion among people around him, he could not get a moment of serenity. It could be doctors discussing his condition, or nurses gossiping about him when they thought he couldn't hear them, or random visitors trying to get into his room to witness this singularity.

He, of course, wanted the abominations out of his head. The original plan of the doctors was to saw off the ever-growing "horns". But after heated debates, they decided that it would be too risky to do so, since the vibrations of the sawing would cause incalculable damage to the brain.

“It was already a miracle that the bones didn’t jab into the brain and cause hemorrhage or even death in the first place,” they said.

“Be grateful that you’re still alive,” they said. God doesn’t give out miracles easily.

They had hoped that the horns would cease growing at a point, but they were wrong. After growing out of the eye sockets, the growth of bones took another turn upwards and started developing branches. The thinner branches stuck out of the main bone structure, sometimes with a sharper tip, sometimes a rounder one. Both sides were not identical but roughly symmetrical. After 3 years, they looked like antlers of a full-grown elk. Some might even argue that they looked graceful.

They called him “Deerman”.

He was on the news everywhere. Even foreign newspaper agencies fought to get an exclusive about him. Some TV station made a documentary. There were several blogs recording his antler growth. Family members whom he hadn’t talked to in years resurfaced for an interview; Co-workers whom he didn’t know well showed up to tell the others how close they used to be as friends.

No one remembered his name but everyone knew about Deerman.

They gave him a room designed especially for his abnormality. The top part of his bed was narrow, just enough for him to rest his head on it, such that the bed would not get in the way of the antler growth. There were straps to support the weight of bones when he lay down. Similar structures were built into the shower. No visitors were allowed but from time to time someone would manage to sneak in and take photos of the antlers.

The bones did not stop growing. They twisted and turned in all kinds of directions, like an entangled web covering his head. He had hoped that one day the bone would penetrate his skull and puncture his brain, ending his life once and for all, but that never happened.

After another 2 years, his antlers became so heavy that he could no longer move his head. He was unable to do anything other than lie in bed. The media circus gradually died down. To him, there was no more day or night. Only the routine schedule could signal the passing of time: Morning – breakfast, afternoon – lunch, night – dinner, followed by a body scrub. Once a month, someone would cut his hair and shave his beard. He just slept a lot all the time. There was nothing else he could do. Even the intake of food had to be done by the hands of a nurse. He felt useless. He *was* useless.

He thought of committing suicide; if it was really as easy to damage the brain as the doctors said, he should be able to do at least this. If he could just gather one last bit of courage, if he could just jerk his head hard enough once. But he couldn't. What if he couldn't ram the bones into the brain forceful enough? What if things got worse than now? Was it even possible for things to get worse? He remained immobilized as anxiety drowned out everything else in his mind.

He tried to apply for euthanasia, but the court denied him of his death wish, which provoked another media outburst. For a second, the spotlight was focused on him again, that was until the world forgot about him, completely this time.

He died at the age of 47. There wasn't even a funeral.

A rich man bought his remains, dissolved his flesh and processed his bones. The eye sockets were completely stuffed by the bones. The antlers were so long they could reach the floor when the skeleton was set upright. It was amazing how the skeleton could almost be supported by the antlers alone. The man then stored this precious piece in his large hall, along with his other uncanny collections, each one unique in its own way. He browsed through his trophy chamber one last time before heading out. With a satisfied smile, he turned around and closed the door behind him. The fluorescent lamps that lit up the room were automatically switched off

sector by sector, until the whole room returned to the state of complete darkness.

To the Man I Love and the Men I Could Have Loved

Nicole Go

On my 20th birthday I was alone in my apartment in Amsterdam, and home was on the other side of the earth. I thought I'd be alone, but Ed came to my place with a bottle of whiskey. I had met him just once, a month before we left Hong Kong.

We sat in bed reading satires, discussing *Being and Nothingness* and our atheism (as a follow-up to countless text messages) and drinking. The room was filled with my giggles and his chortles – not that anything was particularly amusing, but the warmth in my blood was beginning to boil, and I felt giddy. Playing with my hair, he tucked a loose strand behind my ear and asked if I had dyed my hair before because it looked like some kind of reddish brown. I said I did a long while ago but the color had faded into a mixture of washed-out dye and my natural brown. He touched my face and said I was blushing and looked lovely. I smiled, said I felt fine. He didn't want to sleep on the couch so I let him sleep in my bed. He'd been talking about coming over to calm the panic attacks I'd been having since the attempted burglary, and I, too, had believed it was what I needed. But all night, I was slipping in and out of sleep on the edge with my back facing him, withdrawn from the space that'd been invaded. At six I decided to get up and do my sociology readings.

‘What are you reading?’ He came to the table two hours later, easing himself into the chair across me.

‘Foucault,’ I said as I handed him a plate of honey-and-caramel ontbijtkoek. ‘Good morning.’

‘The guy you told me about,’ He tapped my nose and was beaming, as ever when he’s with me, as though I had just told him a brilliant master plan to get us through the rest of the day, or he was thinking of a birthday. I wondered if I could ever enrage him so much he’d have no choice but to clutch my throat. I wondered how our life would be, were we living together in another fictional reality. Would we be happy?

‘Mmmmm. But this time he’s fleshing out the genealogy of sexuality. Here, check this bit out.’

I’ve been back in town for a week, feeding six months’ worth of nostalgia for Chinese food. Dad has just found out our favorite Dim Sum eatery has been relocated to Sai Wan after its unexplained disappearance from North Point one summer day (and by our favorite he really meant *his* favorite). We can go by car or tram, what do I think? Tram. I’ve always loved rides on tram, besides it’s been a while. But tram’s probably going to take an hour to get us there, am I sure? Yes. (In fact, the longer the better. Every

time I took the train from SciencePark to Amsterdam Centraal I felt bliss, I felt the ten-minute ride could go on forever and take me away and away, but it didn't. It couldn't. Rides let me down as soon as they end; more than anything I hope I never get to where I'm going.)

So on a westbound tram to Sai Wan, heading for lunch with my family, I am thinking of Ed. Thoughts of him never occurred over the past several months since I saw him off at the train station on the day after my birthday. But right now, sat by the window on this tram at this moment, I'm thinking of him. Not because I've fallen in love with him. I haven't. It's because I had promised to see him in Utrecht, but I never did. If actions were reciprocal, if thinking of someone could somehow signal them to think of us after varying intervals of delay, he'd either understand and despise me, or feel hurt and confused.

It is so hard to believe that anything is ever real. The more familiar home feels to me, the farther away Amsterdam, along with my short-lived life in it, seems. Intimacy is a peculiar thing; you'd think it's directly proportional to your temporal investment, a metonymy of the root you have or have not chosen, but it isn't. It's coming across a stray cat somewhere (anywhere) and realizing the cat is yours, even though, as far as you know, you've never owned one. But here you are with your cat; you pick him up and you bathe in each other's warmth, the warmth you've both missed. You *know* his contented purr, the bend of the tip of his tail. And you whisper, *here you are, here you are, at last.*

But what traces to testify my existence have I left behind? Sometimes, walking, I feel so vulnerable like a water bag made of a membrane thin as hell: an unintended nudge or brush of skin against skin and I'll be undone. The fear is a beast internalized and so immense it separates body and soul, leaving me unsure as to who's doing the walking – the body or the soul? Don't get close. Don't touch me. But at the same time I so desperately want, and need, a stranger to understand. I'd say to them if I could swallow the lump in my throat, *there's this man I love, there's this place I love, do you understand? But the road is long and I'm tired, but I'm here only briefly and I want a self-perpetuating track, tautological and unilinear, riding into endlessness. Do you understand?*

When the fear happens like a fit, I swallow the lump, hold back the hot tears welled up in my eyes, but I don't walk up to anyone. So here I am in my best shape, collecting my thoughts on a westbound tram. I *know* it's real, because Nadja has just messaged me: *Hello dear, how are you? We finally went to drink at Stavros's place last night. You know it's been hard trying to get everyone, but imagine – all of us together again. Only we wish you were here with us. We miss you.* So it's real, it's always true. Lost somewhere around Amstel with Andrey trying to find our way back to Centraal was real:

'What have you been reading?' He asked as we walked along, shoulder to shoulder.

'Sartre,' I said.

Let me guess. Being and Nothingness?’

Ha! Yes.’

I read it in high school, it’s so hard.’

It is, but already slightly more manageable than Ulysses. I was trying to read Ulysses during my last week in Hong Kong, but I couldn’t possibly bring all my books with me here, so I left a heavy one behind.’

‘Being and Nothingness, and Ulysses,’ He looked at me as if I had just said something in fluent Russian. ‘Jesus, be easy on yourself!’ We both laughed.

It was real, so was sitting at the back of Dom’s bike with an injured leg, telling him to not go so fast in the rain:

‘Are you okay at the back?’

‘Yes... Yes I’m ok. Just a little scared.’ I held on to him.

I know, I'm going slowly but we're actually doing pretty well. Usually it takes five minutes to get to Albert Heijn, but we're almost there now, you see.'

'Are you saying I'm quite light?' I was trying to look at the trees and forget how much my leg hurt and tell myself to not fall off again, but it was dark and we were riding fast.

'Indeed you are.'

I laughed.

'There's no need to be scared,' He said. I couldn't see his face but I knew he was smiling, so I smiled.

Where are they now? What could they be doing? I love men's company; provided that they don't look at me with the possibility of love, don't play with my hair or touch my face, don't ask if they could sleep in my bed, and that I know once parted I'll never see them again, not until some point in the future if and when we want our paths to converge, to laugh like children and say to each other,

'Do you remember...?'

Your Favorite Girl

Nicole Go

She does not have a face so technically she can't see, but this does not mean she can't tell I'm crying. I know this because *she* knows my ways. Or maybe she isn't faceless, after all. Maybe it's just the dark of the room and the clouds in my eyes. From where I'm lying in bed, facing her, all I see is her silhouette – black against her ivory slip identical to mine. She doesn't come here for me often; when she climbs into my bed, it's always well past midnight.

'Is everyone else asleep?' I hear my small voice whisper; so small and full of self-pity it's close to non-existent.

She nods.

Relieved, or utterly lonely (which one is it?), I resume my crying. She's telling me to keep quiet (but how, when she can't speak without a mouth? I know her lines). When you shed tears like this in such an extravagant manner like this, you feel as though you're wilting, willingly giving yourself away. You can feel it happening: first the insides contract, then the frame begins to dissolve and life itself drips through your fingers and toes – wax, wax, wax. You clutch your chest when, really, you're just trying in vain to

rip your tight lungs out (or are you trying to breathe?). If you go on you'll pass out from dehydration, or burn your feet in the pool of hot wax.

'Well then, stop now.'

Funny, I'm the one with a mouth and yet I can't respond. She holds my head in her arms like a lover. Trembling, I take refuge in the velvety touch of gardenia and orange blossoms emanating from her chest (that is my chest). She caresses my hair (that is her hair). Our legs entwine, incognitos posing as lovers, filling space in the sheets.

'Nothing will tear us apart.'

When I was small my family used to keep a Pomeranian in the house. I'd crouch down, call him gently, massage his head and when he least expected it – slap him because I knew he loved me and would therefore forgive my misdeeds. To him it must have been like an unannounced electric current; he'd back away in wild shock and hurt and, no doubt also a little resentment. I would apologize, for at that moment I was genuinely sorry. Then he'd tilt his head and succumb to my love and betrayal all over again, because he loved me. Because I knew he loved me, I was justified.

In the same way, I let her beat my mind black and blue. How I wish I could see her face. To see her face in flesh, as everyone else sees it, should be different from seeing it in a glass. I know her features: the shape and color of her eyes and their proximity to each other. But what about the depth of her gaze? Would I recognize her if I walked past her on the street? What would it be, the thing I'd see in her pitch black eyes?

It's late. It's daybreak. It's early. I lie very quiet and still, the way you did when you were four and crying after being denied what you wanted, then after an hour of wailing to no avail you realized you'd better stop, so you decided to stop existing altogether for a while; you laid very quiet and still.

She sits up and moves closer to kiss my salted lips open – her hair hovers over my face like a curtain descending. I feel the warmth of her moist breath; taste her slick tongue in my mouth. I'm not dying, just falling asleep, much like slipping into another room. When I get to the other room she will take it from here. She will study me like I'm a butterfly pinned down for display –

my face

my jaw and neck,

my breasts,

my ribs and all –

down to every detail. She will steal a lock of my hair and imitate. I will open my eyes and be myself again.

I will be perfect.

Circularity

K.R. Morgan

Everything loses beauty with overexposure. Even the sunrise becomes devalued when you see it constantly with tired eyes from the seat of a 747. Cycles repeat: flowers die and new ones rise, as the earth spins eternally around a globe of gas and flame. When an event happens more than once, it is no longer an event, but rather another addition to the succession of things that one is forced to experience before they die.

My life has been filled with many such rotations of experience: when one set ends, another begins. Always there remains the illusion of newness, as if somehow this job will be different, or the place that I'm in will alter the way the system of life works around me. And yet, it all blurs into each other.

I remove my passport and boarding pass from the inside of my jacket, and roll up my newspaper. *Now boarding flight number AC846 to Munich*, murmurs a woman over the P.A. I work my way through the throngs of people toward my gate. Every airport has the same exhausted, vacationing families, bickering lovers, and men and women in suits holding their newspapers and coffee in preparation for their business trips.

I make my way to my first-class seat, ducking under the curtain which protects me from the people who paid for their own places on the same machine. My place is clearly better, because taxpayers covered the cost. All is sweeter when it comes free.

At times, novel experiences seem imminent. The illusion of progress seeps into every action, every word. In my line of work, it is important to follow a routine; newness is dangerous. Our flights leave at the same times, the destinations are secured upon arrival. My job deals with maintenance – of order, of peace, of reputation. There are teams of people who make sure that everything I do follows the plan and nothing can disrupt the order that we have created. The plan, the plan, the plan. Everything has been orchestrated. All is safe.

Upon arrival in Munich, the first-class passengers disembark before everyone else. I join the group of appointed security officers (both the ones who accompanied me on the plane and the ones I met at the airport) and am led to my transportation. We arrive at the hotel: eat, sleep, wake up, eat again. I go to a full day of meetings with various people, and we talk

about the same things we always do. The most important people flew in from their respective cities at the same time I did, and we all will leave around the same time. We pretend that we will change policies and the general order of things, and that we'll come up with solutions for the various problems that we have gathered to discuss. Ten brains are better than one. We fulfill our expected roles, then disband and return to our allotted hotel rooms across the city.

When I began this position, “business trips” (as we have vaguely labeled them) were a source of excitement for me. I would make sure that I had time scheduled to admire the sights of each city. I wanted to experience the world, and representing my country in international meetings was the perfect way to visit the most influential places on earth. It didn't take long for the trips to become tedious. The destinations began to lose their distinctiveness. Oceans and beaches look the same on every continent, and man-made structures are no longer impressive when they're compared to every other man-made structure. Once you're required to keep the company of intimidating security personnel, even tourist traps lose their appeal as you draw more attention to yourself.

I spend four days in Munich, before exchanging formal farewells and professional pleasantries with my companions. I return to the airport (which happens to look just as generic as every other one) and await my chance to embark on my flight home. We take off, and I stare blankly at the sun, which arises to bid me adieu. My eyes hurt. I slide the window panel closed. Home will be the same as any other place.

Morning in Mannheim

Michelle Mok

4 o'clock in the morning. Mannheim. She's again on her own. She's used to being alone.

Lingering around with her shabby looking weekender, shops are still closed. There is nowhere to go. She glimpses through all these people in front of her, all brought together by one train or another. Strangers, as always, come to fascinate her, as if these are their once-in-a-lifetime encounters before their lives are again drifted miles apart. Believing she might one day run into someone who thinks exactly like her, she has always been good at observing people in silence, imagining everything, anything that could happen.

*'At each encounter, they imagine a thousand things about one another.'**

A girl comes along on the platform and draws her attention by how similar the two of them together look under the Hauptbahnhof clock tower – weary but still watchful, with a hint unfamiliarity with the place written across their faces. *'Something runs among them, an exchange of glances like lines that connect one figure with another and draw arrows, stars, triangles, until all*

* Calvino, Italo. *Invisible Cities*.

*combinations are used up in a moment...'** Is she the person she's been searching for, like a long-lost twin? Where is she from? And where is she going? Does she also feel the same? The closer she's coming towards her, the more abundant the imagination can become. But then when it starts to become a little bit awkward, like in every case, her eyes naturally dart away, as if the girl in front of her is just one of the many passers-by she comes across every day but in whom she is never genuinely interested.

6 o'clock in the morning. Trains begin to arrive. She boards on the one to Paris, grabs her allocated window-seat like she's ready to succumb to sleep. But before she loses her consciousness, someone comes and takes the seat next to her. It's her.

The Imperfectly Perfect

Demi Poon

My Summer-break is coming to an end and I wish I could believe that things had finally fallen into place, right where they belong but at the same time, I wish they would never fall into place. This is the funny thing about me, I crave perfection but, simultaneously, I cannot afford to live without imperfections.

Growing up has played the biggest part in just these few months of you and me. It is fear, excitement, anticipation and desperation all at once because you have led me into your own world and showed me what I have never seen before. I fear everything brand new but it is all good, I was born a creature that can cope well in just a short period of time and overcoming fear has been so much easier when I can hold your hand.

I have never believed in charms until you open my eyes to all the magical things and now that I have seen magic, I am a believer and this is my eighteen-year-old self writing it all down in my journal, in hopes of creating wonder in the future when all dreams are dead. In forty years' time - I will be old then - I might be sitting my retired ass knitting next to you at home, or I might end up alone, but when I look back to this day of my life, I will still feel the twinkling feelings in my stomach like I do every time when I see your smile and I will remember how my heart is tied in knots searching for you in the crowd when I have lost sight of you. When

I become old and look back to this moment, be it a mistake, I will never regret taking your hand to ride on this magic carpet with you. Because when I lift up my head, it is an unbelievable sight and when I look into your eyes, my pulses race, my gaze tenses and they are such indescribable feelings.

Perfection is not your word because you are so and very flawed in every way. You wolf down your lunch when you are hungry and that makes a mess around your plate, sometimes there are even stains on your collar because I always know you are generous enough to share the food with your shirt. I know how cranky you can get after you have downed only a few shooters and sometimes I hate it but I never flip out on you because I love you. The scars on your arm bother me, though not always, for they remind me of the person you once were and sometimes your past hurts me because I know it used to hurt you too. And honey, you should know how midnight calls annoy me but it's okay because it's you and I love hearing you over the phone, feeling like we are just a kiss away even if we are miles apart.

There is this theory about each and everybody's significant other where people believe that every person has been paired with *the one*. Well truth be told, I don't believe what they say about *the one* because I've always believed that destiny does not create us, but rather, we shape our own destinies. So if you were to ask me whether I considered you to be what they call, *the one*, I'd frankly tell you that I'm really not sure about it. One

thing I am sure about, though, is that, I will no longer fear, for I will hold your hand until the end - and *you*, darling, are whom I want to be destined for because you are imperfectly perfect and there is nothing that can ever compare to that.

Remedy

Demi Poon

In one of my favorite books, *Looking For Alaska*, John Green says that we, humans, “*can never be irreparably broken*”. I wouldn't doubt that.

You see, not only does our body create, it recreates, too. I accidentally cut my finger the other day and it bled a hell of a lot. As the blood gushed out from the tiny veins, I took a close look at the spot where the wound was - like an explorer who had just made a huge discovery. It was bleeding, for sure, but as well as the running crimson dripped from my injury, it was regenerating matters to block the wound. I'd had biology lessons all right; those are what scientists call “blood platelets”, yet it always startles me to watch how my own body recreates bits and pieces to keep the *whole* functioning. Be it a micro-mini part, the body never forgets to save itself.

I used to be a broken thing. I prefer calling the broken self a “thing” because it's torn and ripped apart, crumbled into dust and blown into the cold breeze of early winter; then out of nowhere, the sprinkles of the broken thing somehow just merge with different objects they collide into along the way. I'm not quite sure what will become of them after that, so I've decided to call them ‘a thing’.

So this broken thing that I had been, it would have made me the wealthiest thing on the face of this planet if I were to be broadcasted on the Guinness World Record. Have you ever been hit by a trauma? Well, intensify it by a million times, then multiply it again by ten – those were the unit and times of trauma my body and my mind had taken. The broken thing became a walking corpse: a living dead with a rotten soul; with eyes that could not see, ears that could not hear, a nose that could not smell, hands that could not touch and a heart that could not feel.

Remember what I've told you about our body recreating itself to regenerate power and to function again? You've probably missed that part but don't worry child, you are about to be captivated by a magic that truly exists, in fact, right inside of us.

Just when I was about to be drained by the breathless days and restless nights, my antidote arrived. The thing we named Hope, it had been living in me all this time. I felt my entire body regenerating itself by the power of hope; it was magical, but real. He promised me “forever” and it was a slight hope that rescued my sorry ass. Screw the future, so what if “forever” was a lie? As long as there is a reason, I can be saved, no matter true or false. So my instinct told me to cling on to it.

It was of no pretense, even though I knew forever would hardly ever be true, there was a tiny space in me that had been created to store the spark

of hope. We, humans, have the instinct to look up to hope - let alone false hope - our mind makes us believe in it until we have been restored again from the brokenness that almost killed us. Like blocking the blood from the cut on my finger, the blood platelets are for temporary regeneration, still, they managed to stop the bleeding until new tissues could be formed.

So child, if you think you're invincible then you're damn right. You ought not to fear bending and breaking - you will always be okay. You will never be irreparably broken because you yourselves are your remedy, your cure, your antidote. You are your own savior.

Smog

Yu Shuchang Maya

“What do you want?” Ian looked at me, as direct as his question.

I didn’t know him at all.

I came with Justus, someone I met from the class “USA Today and Tomorrow.” I took it as a substitute for the core course “American Literature and Culture” back in my home university; Justus took it as an optional module—he was a social science student.

We came for a drink, and thought we’d talk about our presentation on legalizing marijuana. This was, after all, an ideal place for such a thing.

I noticed Ian once I entered the bar. He was Latino.

Berlin was very international, but behind a rusting iron gate hidden in an abandoned building, this bar was not. He stood out the same way I did.

I ignored his constant glances, but eventually he came over.

“I want to have choices,” I said.

“I assume you are not a big fan of the Communist Party,” Ian smirked.

“Not a big fan, but not a hater either.”

“You just said you want choices,” he was provocative.

“Look, what I’m saying is, it would be nice to have some options to choose from. I might still choose the Communist Party, but that would be an active decision,” I sounded like an activist, literally.

I took a glance at Justus—he was concentrating on rolling a cigarette.

“You know what I really, really don’t understand?” he asked.

“That one-child-policy thing,” he didn’t wait for my response.

He was probably expecting my amazement at his knowledge of China. But I just nodded. Not that I didn’t want to satisfy his pride, I simply didn’t know how to answer.

“Are you the only child?” he continued.

“Yes, unfortunately,” I gave a bitter smile.

It was funny though. Whenever I told people in Berlin I was the only child, I spontaneously put on this miserable look, as if I was a victim of the policy. In fact, I was a big supporter. I never felt lonely in my childhood, as many would have presumed. I enjoyed being the focus of my parents and I didn’t want to share their love with anybody. But somehow, I felt obliged to put on this pitiful look to meet a social expectation.

“Having no say on how many children you want? That’s crazy,” Ian was getting excited.

I actually never thought about it that way.

“You’re probably right, my mum always wants more children,” I said. And that was a true story. My mother loved kids.

“See, that’s what I am talking about,” he said triumphantly.

After taking a long drag, Justus handed me the cigarette. He tilted his chin slightly, gesturing that I should take a drag.

I told him the other day how I had never smoked in my life. It was very considerate of him to offer this, especially when a stranger was sitting with us.

“It is cigarette, right?”

“Yes, it is,” Justus chuckled.

In hope to cover up my clumsiness, I imitated him and took a long drag. Then I started coughing like an idiot.

“You inhaled too much,” Justus said to me earnestly.

He then turned to Ian and explained, “She has never smoked before”. It was so very considerate of him.

“This is so embarrassing,” I could barely utter a sentence.

“No, no, this is normal,” both of them were eager to express their understanding.

“This is exactly why we travel, to try out different things,” Ian comforted me.

“How does it feel?” Justus asked.

“Like torture,” I said. It was actually not that bad.

“Only at first,” Justus said.

They both laughed.

Okay, enough on me smoking.

“I get the point of implementing the policy though,” I turned to Ian and said. “There are too many people in China, and that causes severe problems.”

“But in sacrifice of human rights?” Ian stared at me.

“I think you are too used to labelling China. Everything China does violates human rights, right?” I was suddenly very upset.

Then nobody said anything for a while.

“I think what Maya wants to say is, sometimes individual freedom cannot be the sole principle. It is difficult to talk about freedom when there are starving babies and poverty,” Justus tried to ease the tension.

Ian shook his head.

“I don’t get it,” he looked at me, “first you said you want changes, but it seems to me there’s nothing to be changed.”

I was tongue-tied. The conversation made me exhausted. I found my eyes fixing on Ian’s super long sideburns. I wondered how far we were from monkeys.

Justus got up to get another beer.

“There are things to be changed, lots of things,” I finally said, “but I don’t know what, and I don’t know how.”

I ended up making a confession to a person I had known for 20 minutes.

When Justus came back, Ian had already left. He proposed to exchange numbers, but I said I was leaving Berlin in a week. Of course, I didn’t tell Justus this part.

“I was hoping he would leave us at some point,” Justus said.

“Is it normal here,” I asked, “for people to invite themselves over?”

“It happens sometimes,” Justus chuckled. “I am sorry that you have to talk about China all night, it must have bored you to death.”

I felt many things that night, but boredom was not one of them.

“Not really. I seldom talk about things like this.”

“You don’t?”

“No. I guess it’s part of Chinese philosophy. We are taught to be satisfied with what we have.”

“That’s interesting,” Justus said thoughtfully.

“I find it very hard to express what I think.”

“Those are difficult questions,” Justus said. “Wanna try again?”

“Sure, why not?” I took another long drag.

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