

Foreword

This tenth edition of *Halfway Home* contains some of the most perceptive and imaginative writing I have seen from contributors over the years. There is an intricate and subtle sense of both the meaning and the raw sound of language. Some of the poems, in particular, are worth reciting aloud to appreciate the full resonance embedded in the words. The narratives capture a sense of inner life and feeling, ensuring that imaginary characters can take on a life of their own in the mind of the reader. In this collection, we are frequently confronted with the everyday stresses and strains of living shoulder to shoulder in a densely populated city. The experience of individuals trying to carve out a personal path to happiness and fulfilment is one that most readers can identify with. Conversely, we are also transported across the sky and over the sea to places that exist only because we (and the writer) want them to exist. That effort of will magically brings forth worlds where things are different and yet recognizable, almost familiar.

This year's theme, 'gratefulness', has been interpreted in myriad fascinating ways. The power of a single word to act as a springboard for multiple creations is not only a testament to the multi-layered ripple effect of language, it is also a salutary reminder of the uniqueness that is present in all of us.

Thanks are due to the Student Publication Team who brought such a rich variety of texts home together under one roof. I hope what you read here will inspire you to put pen to paper or fingertip to keyboard, and will inspire our contributors to further literary exploration.

Dr Peter Edward Rees Jordan,

May 2020

Preface

Starting from December 2019, members of the Student Publication Team (SPT) collected written works from students at City University of Hong Kong (CityU) and in Hong Kong secondary schools to show you how creative these young writers can be in *Halfway Home X*. Among all the works, professors in the Department of English at CityU have selected the ones that best fit the theme and are meaningful to you.

In this book, you will immerse yourself in reading numerous works of different genres, including poetry, short story and fiction, with the theme “gratefulness”. The SPT came up with the theme because Hong Kong citizens were sad in 2019. The SPT wanted to convey a message of being grateful for everything you have regardless of the circumstances in the community or Hong Kong society.

The SPT also wanted to encourage those who rarely write creatively to submit works for the next edition of *Halfway Home* series. We are sure you will learn the joy of writing from your creative writing!

Student Publication Team 2019/20,

May 2020

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Halfway Home X

Hong Kong Writing

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Poetry

Blinded by Blessings

Seah Xin Ru

There was a woman on the train,
She stared at me, smiling,
I smiled back at her, resuming my reading,
Her eyes followed after me, I am sure, I saw her peeking,
She greeted me with kindness,
But I doubted her timeless.

She told me she is lost,
That she is supposed to head north,
I showed her my phone, the navigation app that is well-known,
I taught her the way and her respective zone,
I filled her head with knowledge, the ones that she didn't know,
But she took the words for symbols, the word "left" was mumbled as
"eF".

I hopped off the train, bidding her goodbye,
With the word "privilege" circling my mind,
How blind was I, to assume that education is equal to mankind?

Le Grand Bleu

Zhang Ao, Ron

There's sky and ocean in your eye,
Reflected by the tenderness in mine,
How shall I forget,
The time when we first met.

Porpoises am I to be by your side,
Listened to you cry without asking why,
For I am whom you cherish,
Even though I from your cause of bitterness am.

You belong with me when you dive,
Into the ocean and strive,
How hard it must be,
To love it when it's meant to take away your life.

Like the day when your father sank,
With your screaming as a son,
Slapping, Shouting,
Yet nothing useful could be done.

It was the island in Griechenland,
Where I inspired you of the first try,
Now we are together by the ocean,
Together into your new form of life.

Notes: *Le Grand Bleu* means “the Big Blue” in French.

The above poem is based on a film of the same title.

Brothers in the Mask

Lai Ho Lam, Kenny

I have been fighting abreast in the dark.
To each our way to shield your heart.
I have waited for the time that hit the mark.

I have deeply breathed the air of smoke
In this morally buried flame of war
Resounding the alarm until people woke

We have stumbled in the bricks and stones
When rushing and shrinking on the dead bodies
And chanting the slogan “We’re not alone”

Though our brothers in the mask were unknown
Devoted the bloods and sweats on the road,
Dedicated to protecting our best of home
But remember that all our brothers belong
To the strongest army that survived,
Sacrificing the lives to prove them wrong

Looked at the triumphant flag in the dark.
I have been waiting at the moment we unmask.

Alive

Yip Chi Hin

I'm grateful that I'm still alive
Hardly it is too late
To rebel against the state
At the age of fifty-five

Now that I've learnt,
Everything will be in archives
No such need to say goodbye
To what they've torn and burnt

A journey, where you say,
"Don't die"
I'm still grateful that I'm alive

Gratefulness

Ruiz Serrano Andres

Gratefulness emerges from within the anchored vertigo of a frenzied specter.

It overflows the blooming hands of a bright purple morning star.

It inhibits the corporeal impetus of the disillusioned enchanted lover.

Gratefulness echoes the majestic eyes of a victorious bard.

Gratefulness wanders among blind and despotic hyenas.

It eclipses the infinite blaze of human emptiness.

It extinguishes the frozen sandstorm of an abandoned caress.

It welcomes the angelical sensation of inhaling eternal dreaminess.

Gratefulness hides behind the ears of a deaf.

It uncovers the secret veil that confines the lance of a duchess.

It knits the fractured silk threads of a maple leaf.

Gratefulness revives the lush green pastures of the darkest forest.

Gratefulness is a whisper of freedom for honorable men.

It is a turquoise waterfall of forgiveness and compassion.

It is the ceaseless interlude of joy for our children.

Gratefulness is your lineage and my garden its heritage.

The price of birdseed

The winning piece for Professor Shirley G.L. Lim Poetry Writing Scholarship

Cheng Kazumi Mangacat

The vane and downy:

frail, fleecy and frill

On a shaft that's sleek, stiff,

barbs hooked still.

Achromatic and kaleidoscopic; artwork

on a harmony, from a bill.

Soaring, swimming, strolling,

sometimes it gifts a quill

When it frantically evades me

moving too close to give it a meal.

In Praise of Dreams

First runner-up for Professor Shirley G.L. Lim Poetry Writing Scholarship

Liu Tse Shan Teresa

In my dreams,
I paint like Beethoven.

I speak Italian fluently
and not just with the musical instruments.

I drive a rocket
that does what I want it to.

I am mysterious
and write mighty presto.

I hear voices
as clearly as any obsessive composer.

My brilliance as a witch
would fascinate you all.

I fly the way we ought to,
i.e., to the moon.

Playing with my voice in outer space,
I sing gently to the irascible musicians.

I've got no problem
breathing in the Milky Way.

I can't complain
I've been able to locate Pluto.

It's dramatic that I can always
wake up before my dreams vanishing.

When the dawn comes,
I roll over on my other side.

Finding Stars in the Sea

Second runner-up for Professor Shirley G.L Lim Poetry Writing Scholarship

Cheung Hey Man Nicole

I sit myself on winter sand
Inches from the deep black sea,
An empty Universe mirrored in its abyss.

Dust scattered by ocean winds
Decorate my damp hair roots.
My head housed a galaxy of imitators –
A solar system of false stars.

Amist icy sand dunes
Lie abandoned clam shells,
Torn apart like envelopes of opened letters,
Forever missing their mirror halves.
The Moon's luminous crescent,
sharp as a shark's tooth,
Threaten to tear my eyes from the ocean.

I look and I look
Fiddling with strands of stray hair
That tickle my cheekbones.
They wave like helpless anemone in torrent tides.

Winking lights at the ocean's edge
Giggle at my impatient silhouette.
With pupils nailed to the waves,
For just one fleeting twinkle I pray.

I scour restlessly the deep black sea,
The empty Universe mirrored in its abyss.

[NO TITLE]

Lee To Chun

Munsang College

Some call their talents blessings,

some may call them gifts.

Some take them for granted,

But some may still feel miffed.

“Why don’t I have his talents, of her divinely good looks? Why, oh why, is all I can do, to draw on a sketchbook?”

“Why can’t I get a promotion? I need all of my luxuries! Never mind the lonely widow that needs to feed her babies!”

Charisma, strength or intelligence, is naught but their unchosen boon.

So tell me, right here and now, Is your present garbage too?

Many can see only, what other people have.

Yet they seem to have ignored the dangers they had braved.

All that man has forgotten is what they have that’s by their side.

Maybe they should be grateful for their senses that came on the ride.

A million things have befallen millions of the populace.

To make it so that they’re not whole.

No, not in the slightest.

We have just been lucky that a plague didn’t strike us dead.

So why not just be grateful,

before your stomach turns to lead.

[NO TITLE]

Leung Long Ching, Ariel

Marymount Secondary School

Here I am

Healthy as a clam

On a stress-free vacation

Like a timeless meditation

Wandering on the beach with no intension

Gradually traversing into another dimension

Organizing thoughts, jubilant or despairing

Doesn't matter, they're all fascinating

Life's filled with excitement

Endless countries for us to explore

Yet none of these are certain

For they're tons of things to be grateful for

Short Story

No Use Fixing it Now

The winning piece for Professor Charles Bazerman Prose Writing Award

Cheung Hey Man Nicole

Ab Nui has volleyball practice again tonight. The plates of bok choy and pork chops on the dining table would have frozen by now if Hong Kong isn't perpetually 40 degrees Celsius. Okay, I exaggerate, but the weather has been unbearable these past few months. Our air conditioner broke when it was most needed, and my husband David hasn't gone around fixing it yet even though I've been telling him to since early August. He always waved it off with his nonchalant, "I'll call the guy next week".

"No use fixing it now," I said, "it's already November."

Sometimes I wonder if *Ab Nui* inherited her easy-going nature from her father. My daughter would smile and shrug the burning world off her shoulders. When she was 8, her then best friend Chloe, whom I still remember because of her hideous pigtails the girl's mom was so proud of, said she wanted to stop being friends with my daughter out of the blue. *Ab Nui* told me she remained silent, then merely said "alright". When she was 14, she accidentally broke a toilet seat and got told off by teachers for days. Even though she apologized, she seemed locked away in a content daze for the following days, no sign of sulking as normal teens would.

Oh, there she is at the door!

“Ah Ma, I’m home,” she says before I even unlock the metal gate.

“Tired?” I ask, replaying the same question from yesterday like a faulty radio.

“My legs are like scrambled eggs.” She pauses and looks me in the eye.
“My scrambled legs.”

I pretend not to hear that awful pun when I hear David laughing from the kitchen. *Ab Nui* removes her shoes (and put them on the floor I just wiped instead of the shoe rack, I’ll have to remind her later) and plops her equipment bag down near the door. She then buzzes off to the shower while I fish out the sweaty clothes from her equipment bag.

This is strange. Her clothes are clean without an ounce of dirt on them. My daughter is the rowdy type in volleyball games, so usually, her team uniform would get all damp and reek like raw onion. I hesitantly sniffed the shirt. A waft of artificial lavender and daises caress my nose. *This makes no sense.* She had been training all afternoon, right? Still, I toss the shirt and shorts into the laundry basket just in case.

After showering, *Ab Nui* comes out for her late dinner. She gobbles down the bok choy and pork chops as if this dinner is her last. The rice cooker is efficiently emptied once again. She is still a growing teenager, after all, she needs all the food she can get.

With a grain of rice on her left cheek, still chewing, she mumbles, "Dad, is the air con still broken?"

I shoot David an annoyed look.

"Yes," he grins guiltily, "I'm still arranging a date for the plumber to come fix it. *Si Fu* doesn't see this as a big job so he's stalling until there's a costly job that needs to be done around our district"

She swallows her last bite clumsily and says "Mom, Dad, what if...what if the air con doesn't need fixing?"

"What do you mean?" I stared in confusion at her sheepish face.

"Maybe this is a good thing. Maybe we should start using fans like the old days. Global warming, you know?" *Ab Nui* stuttered, a spark of hope flashed in her eyes.

"*Ab Nui*, you know we can't survive the summer without it. This city is an oven."

"I know, I know. But there are alternatives like high-tech electric fans now. Like those from that one company that starts with a 'D'. They produce way fewer carbon emissions and—"

“They cost a thousand dollars! I’ve told you so many times. We can’t afford spending that much on some crummy fan.”

Looking defeated, *Ab Nui* drops her chopsticks and retreats to her room. I make a gesture to wipe off the rice grain on her cheek, but she dodges my fingers and wipes it off herself. I sighed and sat down on the sofa. David, unaware of my stress, asks me to fetch him a glass of water. I drag my body to the kitchen, wash the glass, wipe it down, pour in freshly boiled water, and finally hand it to him. Only for him to say, “I meant iced water.”

After an hour or so, thunderous laughter erupts from my daughter’s room. I pass by to go to my own room but accidentally eavesdrop. *Ab Nui* is on the phone with someone, probably her current best friend Lilly. They’ve become inseparable these last two years. *Ab Nui* even went to her place for a sleepover last week.

Now that I think about it, Lilly is so different from *Ab Nui*. Even though they are both on the volleyball team, Lilly is poised and diligent, while *Ab Nui* tends to rush into everything. Lilly even helps *Ab Nui* with her math homework, which I shamefully admit is her worst subject. Lilly is just an all-around perfect girl, except that she has a boyish pixie haircut. Her appearance is the only thing that keeps me from liking her. Even so, *Ab Nui* praises her all the time; “Lilly’s so funny”, “she’s so smart and pretty”, “Mom look at this photo of her” are phrases I hear all too often. She’s not that pretty to me. I find it unlikely that such a boyish-looking girl will

attract the attention of boys, which is a shame because she has such delicate features.

Normally, I would be delighted my daughter is having fun and respectfully avoid interrupting her, but after that row at dinner I'm not feeling generous. Tonight, I'm petty. I burst in without knocking.

“Oh, Mom!”

“Oh, I didn't know you were on a call.” Sure enough, on the other end of the line is Lilly's voice.

“Anyway,” I continue, “It's 12 a.m. on a school night. Time to sleep.”

“Mom, it's fine, just ten more minutes.”

“Five.”

“Gosh. Fine.”

After the door is shut, I hear *Ab Nui* lower her voice into a whisper. She is saying it so gently, I can barely make out the words “I”, “you”, “goodnight”. *Ab Nui* comes out of her room and runs into me in the hallway.

“Before you sleep,” I shuffle her equipment bag, “remember to pack your water—” Something small, cold and metallic slipped into my palm. I pull out a gorgeous pink lipstick.

“*Ab Nui*, what’s this?”

“Oh, nothing, just a lipstick.” Her signature blush dashes across her cheeks; that's when you know she's lying.

“Did you buy this?” The lipstick case was unbelievably nice, a metallic pastel purple with white patterns decorating the cover.

“Yeah, yes, I did.”

“How much is it?” Not convinced, I probe her more.

“I don’t know, like fifty dollars.”

“You don’t know? Didn’t you pay for it?” I am now determined to wedge the truth out of her.

“I bought it with Lilly, so I don’t remember. I used my own allowance so who cares. I’m going to sleep now.” *Ab Nui* tries to slip past me to the toilet. Guilt and embarrassment are written all over her young features. I prepared for the worst.

“Tell me the truth, honey. Did you pay for this?” My stern gaze caught her frantic eyes.

“What? Yes!” She bursts out, her blush deepens.

“Mom, if you must know, we went shopping today and Lilly paid for it. I didn’t shoplift.” My daughter is gritting her teeth and glaring back into my eyes. I relax my shoulders a bit in relief. At least my daughter is not a criminal, but she did lie about going to volleyball practice and paying for the lipstick.

“Why didn’t you tell me in the beginning then? We could have avoided so much back and forth.”

“I don’t know.”

“And why did you lie? You know I hate you lying to me. I’m your mother. I deserve to know the truth.”

“I don’t know.”

“And that Lilly, what was she thinking? What made her buy you such a lavish gift? What if she thinks you’re indebted to her now? She’d better not be taking advantage of your passiveness! *Ab Nuzi*, you better return this to her, or better yet return it to the store. Don’t let Lilly think you owe her something.”

“What? Mom, no!”

Ab Nui swipes at my hand, trying to snatch the lipstick from my grip. But I stepped back and dodged her attempt.

“Hey, watch your tone. I’m just saying you should be more careful with delicate subjects like expensive gifts. You never know what the other person’s intentions are.”

“Lilly isn’t like that! Mom, please give it back. Please, I’m sorry I lied. Just give it back please.”

“I will. But only if you promise to return it. We must be humble or else what will people think of us? What will grandma say if she learns of this?”

“I won’t return it. Lilly gave it to me. I like it.”

“You don’t even wear makeup that often! This Lilly girl has been so suspicious with her endless generosity. *Ab Nui*, I don’t trust her. I think she’s trying to get something from you.”

“She’s my *f**king* girlfriend!”

My head goes completely blank. I stare at my daughter, who starts tearing up. I don’t understand any of this. My daughter cursed at me for the first time in the 17 years she has lived. My daughter, a beautiful, vibrant, good-natured girl just swore at me, her best friend for three years, is her

girlfriend. My daughter is looking at me through her tears now, at a face of utter disbelief and horror. My hand remains firmly clasping that metallic lipstick. That *f**king* lipstick.

“Lilly is your...girlfriend?” The question sounded out wrong. Like if you’ve been living in an upside-down world for the last few months and suddenly things are back to normal again. You feel disoriented and have a nagging sense that you will never be normal again.

Ab Nui wrestles the lipstick out of my grip and cups it against her chest with gentle but protective palms. She didn't answer my question, but she didn't need to.

“Are you sure?”

“About what?” Her voice is low and hoarse.

“That you’re a...a lesbian?”

“I’m gay and I love Lily.”

Fragments of my once certain future taunt me before they dissolve into nothingness. *My daughter getting attention from other boys, and me solemnly warning her but secretly being ecstatic. Me seeing her date her first boyfriend. Me comforting her first heartbreak. Me attending her wedding and shedding a proud tear at the happy*

couple. Me nagging her husband, taking care of her newborn, and watching my grandchild grow up.

“But I’m bisexual, not a lesbian.”

Suddenly, the fragmented fantasy mends itself and takes root again.

“That’s better then. You might find the right guy to change your mind someday,”

Ab Nui furrows her brows again.

“Mom, just because I’m attracted to guys too doesn’t make me less attracted to girls. It doesn’t make me less in love with Lilly. Bisexuality isn’t just a straight woman choosing to make out with a girl.”

“*Ab Nui*, I’m sure this is just a phase. This ‘bisexuality’ is just you stumbling to figure yourself out. Look, mom won’t be mad at you because you’re still young. But I can say with certainty you will find a good man one day, so you don’t have to settle for girls like Lilly.”

“That is so homophobic I don’t even know what to tell you. And I love Lilly very much. Stop insulting her and our relationship.”

“What? No, I can’t be homophobic, I loved *Brokeback Mountain*! I don’t hate gay people. I just don’t think you’re gay. You’ve never shown homosexual tendencies in the past.”

“I had a crush on Chloe.”

“The girl with the ugly pigtails? I thought she didn’t like you and stopped being friends with you.”

“She found out I liked her and told me I was a pervert.” *Ab Nui* forces her words out through gritted teeth.

“Wait, I thought you said she just suddenly stopped being friends with you. What else have you kept from me?”

“When I was in Form 2, I kissed a classmate in a bathroom stall and broke the toilet seat. It was just a light peck though.”

“Why didn’t you tell me any of this? Now you’re overwhelming me with all of this. Saying you liked girls, that you god forbid kissed a girl, and now you’re dating one? *Ai ya!*”

“Because I knew you’d react this way. I’m going to sleep, Mom.”

“*Ab Nui*, you’re just confused. You’re not gay. You don’t look like a lesbian at all. Lilly, on the other hand, has a classic tomboy haircut, but you don’t. I just think you’re mistaking your feelings of friendship for love, and that you also see Lilly as a man. Oh, “in Love”, you’re just too young to understand the concept.

How long have you even been with her?”

“Two years, mom. Goodnight.”

“Wait, *Ab Nni!*” She closed the door in my face. Oh my, where’s David? I need a drink.

“David!” It’s 1 a.m. and the heat is digging into me. The broken air conditioner just serves as a bitter reminder of what we could have. Where is that good-for-nothing husband?

“David, the god damned heat is driving me crazy. I can’t take this anymore.” My voice trembles along with my shoulders as I start sobbing.

“Oh, don’t cry. I’ll call the guy tomorrow.”

“No use fixing it now. It’s already November.”

The Woman in Black

First runner-up for Professor Charles Bazerman Prose Writing Award

Cheung Wing Chi Gigi

The woman in black brings the night with her wherever she goes. A wave of her arm chases away the afternoon, dyeing the cornflower blue of the afternoon sky with reds and purples. She slowly pulls the sun towards the horizon and into her arms.

The ball of molten gold pulses softly until she stows it away into the folds of her cloak. Above her, the sky melts into a thick navy blue that darkens into obsidian velvet. A spray of stars materializes in the pitch-black sky, glittering like tiny diamonds.

The time has come for her to travel across the world. She begins her trek by descending from her perch at the peak of the mountain. Her black cloak trails behind her, darkening the shadows of every nook and cranny she passes by.

She watches the moon rise above the mountains from across the world. Its silvery glow settles over the Earth like a satin drape. She smiles and walks on.

Passing by a small town, she quiets the incessant rattling of machines, the buzzing chatter and the clatterings of domesticity. Her steady touch weights down weary eyelids and tucks strained shoulders under soft, warm

sheets. The swish of her cloak dims the last light and guides the town into a deep, peaceful sleep.

The ocean she crosses is as smooth as glass. Her bare feet keep the surface undisturbed as she glides across the water. The reflection of the silver moon remains clear and untouched. The fish sleep soundly under the blanket of darkness she drapes over them.

The grass does not rustle when she walks into a valley between the mountains. The animals that find sanctuary in the area are not startled. She runs a comforting hand over a dozing sheep's back. Sweet, heavy dreams of safety settle into soft woolen curls, and the woman in black moves on. The climb up the mountain is one she has done countless times. She knows each ridge and slope like the back of her hand. Her feet find footholds with ease and her strides lengthen at the thought of what awaits her at the top. The moon sinks slowly from its perch in the sky, drawn towards the horizon by the force she knows intimately.

When the woman in black finally reaches the snow-capped peak of the mountain, the woman in white is already there, waiting for her as always. She greets her with a smile before reaching up to pull the descending moon into her arms. The sky is a dusty lilac backdrop behind her, caught in between the edges of the end and the beginning.

The woman in black shakes the folds of her cloak to bring out the sun once more. A mere push is enough to guide the golden orb of light into the air. It leaves them behind, rising higher and higher into the sky as the woman in white wipes away the last of the night. The final wisps of grey dissolve with a wave of her hand, and the sun shines platinum gold through the clouds.

She waits as the woman in white tucks the moon away into the folds of her cloak. Their hands find each other's without prompting, and they turn together to watch as the world wakes beneath their feet.

[NO TITLE]

Second runner-up for Professor Charles Bazerman Prose Writing Award

Lui Cheuk Sum

Fall, Northern winds rushed through the town, cutting through trees that stood in its way. A letter found on the porch of a glamorous home is lifted, as though about to be carried away – only to be flipped over and set down gently again. On that side of the letter, in strong, structured handwriting “Found this, thought you should have it.”

To my dearest son,

I love you.

Those were the last words I said to you. December ten years ago, when you were taken away. So these three words shall be the first I write to you, if you ever see this – however far into this letter my strength can carry me. I ask myself, why am I using my last strength to write you this? You, of course, don't remember me at all, and are better off without me. I am nothing but a ghost of your past, and you mine. A selfish part of me wishes to be the one to finally reveal everything to you. It is clear I can never do so personally—just one of the many, many things I cannot personally do.

Are you well, wherever you are? Winter is coming Would it be too bold of me to ask you to remember to dress warmly?

You were only present for a few short years; the hardest, but the best years of my life.

When you came into my world, you were so fragile I could break you with my little finger. I was so afraid of you breaking from a single touch, I never held you longer than necessary in the early days. Afterwards, when you grew stronger and healthier, I held you so tight to me because I had realized I was afraid of losing you more than anything else. Fear was prominent in our years together—even so, I never imagined that one day, you would leave my world—no, that I would *cause* your departure.

I loved you like no other. Yes, you may find this hard to believe—considering what I had done—but I did love you. How could I not love those imploring blue eyes that followed my every move, revering the world we were in with wide-eyed wonder? I know you loved me too; after all, we spent almost every second together in those short years. You depended on me to live, and even though it was tiring, I gave you everything I had. The glow you had in your eyes were well worth it. Yet now, when I close my eyes, yours hold me responsible for the pain I caused. When I wake, I dream, your accusatory stare pinning me down whatever I do. *Why did you leave me?* They scream. *Did you not love me? Was I not good enough?*

Every second of the day, my guilt plagues me. Son, you must always remember one thing: you are more than enough. You always have been. It was I who was not enough, a revelation I came to right before we separated.

I am not even halfway done, yet my hands are already shaking—I must go on.

You never knew your father. He disappeared the minute he found out about your existence, never to be seen or heard from again, so when I was seventeen, I dropped out of school to take care of you. Once *you* were old enough to go to school, you understood our family was not normal—at least, your tiny little head could comprehend that the other children had a “papa”, whilst you only had a “mama”. I waited and waited for the inevitable day to come, dreading the moment where you would look at me with big, innocent puppy dog eyes and question, “Mama, where is my papa?”

That day never arrived. Maybe it was because you never reached the rebellious teenage years, at least not with me, but I liked to think it was because I was *enough*. That I was enough for you—all you needed was me, and despite the fact that some nights we both had to go without meals, you loved me enough that you didn’t even think of needing another parent, one that could perhaps provide you with warm meals everyday. You made me feel loved and *needed*. For your whole life, you were my

world, and everything I did, I did for you. I fought tooth and nail to keep us together, to keep us alive, because I lived for you.

You need to understand, dearest, that Life itself hated us. More specifically, it hated me, and by extension, you, because you were a part of me. For that, I apologize; maybe in the next life, you will be reborn into better conditions. I remember, once, for homework, you had to put down jobs of your family members. I told you to tell your teacher your mama had no job. Why? Because, as far as you had known, I had no job. I wished to protect your innocence and shield you from the horrors of this world, particularly that of my job, even as a part of me knew, and denied, that I couldn't protect you forever. As for the business I had—please don't ask, for I will not word it explicitly. Some things are better left unspoken.

Still, we made it through. We lasted a month, then, it was a year. We were doing fine, until your eighth winter, when you got horribly sick. I tried everything I could—you *have* to understand this. I spent many sleepless nights either tending to you or praying we would make it through together. But you only got worse, and as you cried, I cried too. I was desperate enough to do absolutely anything, I searched and I searched, but came up empty-handed. I was useless, and I was helpless. I cried with you until you lost the energy to, and after that, I prayed to anyone I could think of, screaming for someone to please just listen.

Nobody heard me, son. Absolutely no one. I don't know what you believe in, but there is no deity above, only below. If there ever was a merciful God in heaven, they would've kept you and me together. The only reason you are still alive, son, is because Satan himself gave me an idea.

I tried to steal from the Masons. I'm sure you know them quite well by now. The same family that took you in, I tried to steal from. Only a necklace, I thought. Surely Mrs. Mason wouldn't notice. A small necklace, in return for your full health. It was worth enough money to take you to the doctor at least ten times.

I was, of course, caught. I promise you—it was the first and the last time I ever stole from anybody. The Masons, who had been trying, and failing, for children, swore they would pay for all your medical expenses in one condition: I relinquish my parental rights to them.

I was stuck between a rock and a hard place. Anything I would have done at that time would've ended the same: you and I separated. If I just took you and ran, you would die. If I refused the Masons, I would've been arrested and—who knows what would've happened to you then? The third, and final, option was to take their offer and never see you again.

But you would live for sure. Son, everything I've done up to this point was for you to be alive and well. I knew right then, as I know now, I would never be enough for your happiness and safety. That a few years in the future, I would be the only one still hurting—and it was okay, as long as *you* were okay.

The separation wasn't easy. You screamed and cried with all your might, but it was futile. You sacrificed whatever strength you had left to plead to me, before dark slumber took you in its arms. The haunting sound of your cries keep me awake at night, and when I finally drift off, they follow me into my dreams. I don't have to close my eyes to see the angle at which your tears fell, a bead down your cheek until it broke into a million pieces hitting the ground with a barely noticeable splash. Your eyes were hopeless, confused and glassy, and as the tears shattered, so did my heart.

I am so, so sorry, son.

It has been so many years...I will not pretend to know what you must be thinking. You most likely hate me, but I understand. Just in case I don't make it through the letter, I must stress that I lo—

Life's Lesson

Cheung Tung Ching, Athena

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section)

‘Oh, Ronald. It appears your time has come. Let’s take a look at your life, shall we?’

A shining figure that radiated waves of power stood by the old man’s hospital sickbed. They extended a hand, clearly meaning for him to reach out and grasp it.

Frenzied, jumbled thoughts swept through Ronald’s mind. Was he dreaming? Or had he finally lost his mind and started to see false visions? No, something in his gut told him that this wasn’t a dream or a hallucination.

Well, what do I have to lose? he thought. I’ve known that my health has been worsening for a while; if I die now, at least I will die knowing that I have atoned for my past behaviour.

Ronald mustered up all the strength that remained in his weary body and brushed his fingertips against the outstretched hand that was waiting for him. Then, almost instantly he felt a surge of energy enveloping them both.

There was no time for him to panic, for in the blink of an eye, they were gone.

When Ronald opened his eyes again, he felt strangely free and unburdened. It was odd—he could barely feel his body at all! He glanced down and recoiled in horror and shock when he saw only empty space where his flesh and bones had once been.

Wait! What is this? Have I been punished to live as a ghost forever?

A faint chuckle sounded in his mind.

Do not fear, Ronald. You are not a ghost. Right now you are witnessing your own memories.

Somehow, Ronald just knew that this voice in his mind was the same mysterious entity that had asked him to take his hand. And for some reason, he trusted them.

He took a deep breath and turned around to find himself standing before his childhood home.

Emerald green hills of grass sloped one for as far as the eye could see. The exotic palm trees that dotted the wide pathway to the main entrance swayed softly with the calm breeze.

It was funny how the senses seemed to sharpen when in a memory, a lost period of time, Ronald noted. Even though he wasn't physically there again, the smells, sights and feelings were as vivid as ever.

He found himself drifting towards the pair of impressively large solid oak doors. Ronald smiled a bittersweet smile. *Even the front doors screamed of luxury, of wealth, of riches. One of the many things I was too blind to be grateful for.*

Through the doors and into the grand foyer he went.

Right on cue, a young boy who was none other than Ronald himself stumbled into the foyer, too busy fiddling with his newest extravagant toy to see the old maid who was polishing the marble floors.

They collided and both landed roughly on their backs. Present Ronald watched as the maid hurried to help Past Ronald up and check him for any injuries.

What a kind woman, he thought now with a smile on his invisible face. *She didn't even check to see if she herself was hurt. How come I've never noticed her before?*

Yet the warmth in his chest quickly morphed into disgust as he watched Past Ronald shake off her caring hand in a fit of rage, and yell at her. "I don't need your help! You clumsy good-for-nothing! Watch where you're going, or you're fired!"

Present Ronald sighed, regrets filling his mind. *I was such a spoiled brat back then. Why couldn't I just thank her for trying to help me? Why was I never grateful for all the good things that happened to me? Oh, past me...you really were terrible.*

The scene melted away before his very eyes and he found himself in another memory.

Ob. Dread filled Ronald's heart as he realised which part of his past this was. *This... this was just before the...*

An older Past Ronald was sitting in his giant bedroom, tossing his expensive toys and models over his shoulder in his single-minded search. Most fell and broke when they hit the floor. Present Ronald cringed at the waste. *How much food could just one of those toys buy for a starving family? I really had all the best, but never knew to appreciate any of it.*

Past Ronald had just found the gold locket he had been searching for underneath a giant pile of items when suddenly, loud crashing noises came from downstairs.

“Who’s disturbing me this time?!” exclaimed the boy. He jumped up and raced downstairs furiously, shoving the locket in his pocket. Once he got down to the living room, however, his eyes widened when he realised what all the ruckus was about.

“Fire! Fire! Everyone out!”

“Evacuate! The sprinkler systems aren’t working!”

For the first time in a long, long while, fear and panic flared up inside Past Ronald. They were just two of the many negative emotions he would get to know rather well in the next few years.

He turned tail and fled immediately, feeling the heat of the fierce flames coming from the left. Sweat dripped down his face and neck as he barely dodged a piece of falling debris that smashed into the sleek marble floor with a resounding ‘BOOM’.

With adrenaline pulsing through his veins, he forgot all about his burning muscles as he spurred himself on, faster and faster, until he finally managed to reach the back entrance.

He gasped and panted for breath, and when he could speak again, he shouted out, “Hello? Is anyone here? Mother! Father?”

There was no response. Uneasiness growing in the pit of his stomach, he rounded the corner and came to the front of the house.

A few quivering staff were collapsed on the grass outside the gates. Past Ronald sped over, and yelled at them. “Hey! You lot over there! Where are my parents?”

The maids only shook their heads and pointed to the fiery mansion, expressions of sorrow, grief, and even pity on their faces. “They... they didn’t make it out...”

Past Ronald’s eyes widened in utter shock, and in a bout of denial, he screamed. “NO! They cannot be gone!”

Rage burning in his eyes, he stomped over to the remaining staff. “Why are you the ones who get to live?! What have you ever done for me, or for my parents, to be more worthy of survival? And why didn’t you save them?! You’re all USELESS!”

A wave of exhaustion hit him. The sudden shock and anger caused him to pass out. The last thing he heard before he lost consciousness was sirens blaring in the distance.

Present Ronald hovered over the scene, tears welling up in his eyes as well as he relived every second of the painful memory. As the scene faded away, one thought remained in his mind.

I know I was angry, but what I said was still wrong. Those maids worked hard for us and cared for our entire family tirelessly, ever since before I was born. I never even said thank you to them, not even once... how ungrateful I was!

This time, the memories flashed by more quickly. There was a funeral, with elaborate caskets being lowered into the ground as people dressed in all black swept away tears.

A close friend was holding the hand of Past Ronald and reassuring him. The kind gesture was, once again met with harsh, unnecessary words and fits of rage. As he watched from amidst the crowd, Present Ronald sighed. *Even after their deaths, I still didn't learn. Not yet, anyways.*

Another flash, and he found himself in a stuffy room with a man in a tuxedo and Past Ronald staring at the man open-mouthed. “It can’t be! You’re saying that... everything is gone? I’m... left with NOTHING? I’m BANKRUPT?!”

The man nodded silently. “I am sorry for your loss, sir. Perhaps—” But Past Ronald had already stormed out, slamming the door behind him, no doubt off to yell at a few others who had helped him before to diffuse his disbelief and anger.

Present Ronald nodded, musing to himself. *This was the part when everything went downhill, and I became worse and worse...*

In the blink of an eye, he found himself in another memory.

This one was scattered and fractured, as if his mind couldn't recall much of it. But when he saw flashes of his former best friend before him, he instantly recognised the scene.

This was when I cut ties with him... a foolish move. I blamed him for things that weren't even his fault, and told him...

Sadness washed over his features as he remembered exactly what he had told his friend that night. Right on cue, Past Ronald's voice could be heard, piercing through the chaos.

“No, *you* are the one who doesn't understand! What have you ever done for me, really? You come and sit with me sometimes, and you bring me food occasionally, but you're doing it out of pity, aren't you? Don't deny it! If you really wanted to help you'd give me your money! YOU'RE the selfish one! I don't need your help! You're not helping me, and you never will be!”

The memory sharpened as Past Ronald roared and shoved his friend out the door, slamming and locking it behind him. Present Ronald shook his head at his former self.

Who was I to say such hurtful and meaningless things to someone who had always been there for me ever since childhood? No matter what, he had always stood by my side until that day. I was never grateful to him, either...

The scene dissolved and a new one appeared. This one contrasted starkly with any of the previous ones. Ronald recalled this to be about fifteen or so years earlier from now.

Past Ronald had finally realised his mistakes and tried to make up for them, doing anything good he could think of. He started sending up prayers to ask for forgiveness, did charity work, and began changing his attitude towards life and people in an effort to redeem himself. He recognized the good deeds people had done, regardless of who or what they were done for. And finally, a seed of gratefulness was planted in his heart.

However, as he neared his sixty-seventh birthday, his health took a turn for the worse. He realized that he probably did not have much time left, so he decided to start doing any good deeds he could, and practiced gratefulness more and more often, even keeping a journal to record down one thing he felt thankful for every day, no matter how small it was.

A smile tugged at the corners of Ronald's lips. He may have been blind to the good others had done for most of his life, but he was glad that he changed.

And so, we return to the present, the entity rumbled. Ronald jumped a little at the voice in his mind, having forgotten that they were there.

“Of course,” he replied. Then, a swirl of lights blinded him.

When he was able to open his eyes again, he found himself back in his body, lying on the hospital bed. The glowing entity spoke again. “Before you leave this world, could you answer one last question for me?”

“Alright.”

“What is the most important lesson your life has taught you?”

In a heartbeat, Ronald answered with a bittersweet smile. “To always have gratitude in your heart, and to count your blessings. To be thankful for acts of kindness and to appreciate all that others do.” Ronald couldn’t see the entity’s face, but it was as if he could feel them smiling, too.

“That is a wonderful answer.” Just like before, a glowing hand reached out to him.

“Now, it’s time for us to leave.” A flurry of golden sparks surrounded the two.

Ronald reached out and took the outstretched hand, and a glorious, shimmering light flashed.

When the dust settled, they were gone.

[NO TITLE]

Ma Wing Gi, Beatrix

Marymount Secondary School

“... Last but not least, we will always be grateful for the privileges we have,” Mom said.

“Amen,” we all chorused and start[ed] digging into our food. I found myself pondering yet again.

Gratitude. It appears important and vital, but lately, I find myself wondering about what really [it is]. Sure, I know it by definition. It is, essentially, to be thankful and appreciative. What I didn't quite understand is how I should be grateful. Is it a feeling? Does it come naturally, or am I supposed to force myself to feel it?

Everybody says “be grateful”. My parents tell[s] us to be grateful for what we have during our prayers before meals, my teachers tell us always to have a grateful mindset, the pastor from the church reminds us every week to be grateful for our privileges. However many times I hear it, I just don't feel it. It feels as if it's an empty shell, like the meaning of it is only contextual, and not as spiritual as people make it out to be.

This interpretation of gratitude persisted until the day I almost died.

I was in a car, alongside my family. My father was driving, my brother was sitting beside me, singing obnoxiously to some heavy metal music blasting through his headphones. My mother was in the passenger seat, trying desperately to tell my brother to keep the noise down, forgetting that he had his headphones on. It was just like any other day, and everything was just the way it was.

That was, until I heard a deafening screech, and I was jolted forward by a powerful force. I could feel the seatbelt straining and tightening against my collarbone and my body. Before I could even register anything or feel scared, there was an ear-shattering sound of metal being crushed. My face slammed into the headrest in front of me, and searing hot pain blossomed in my nose, slowly spreading across my face. The pain fades away a little just as my mind filled with shock and adrenaline.

I tried to sit up straight again and look around. The car, having crashed into another vehicle, was a total wreck, but my family members were conscious. My parents were talking over each other, asking us if we were okay. My brother looked like he was in a daze, but did not seem to be hurt badly save for some cuts. I let out the breath I did not notice I was holding. The shock melted away, and the pain in my nose came back with a vengeance. I hugged my brother tightly as we both burst into tears. We nearly died.

Gratitude. The word had seemed empty to me. However, after this fairly traumatic event, along with a broken nose, it gave me a new conception of it.

My life has been nothing short of joy and happiness. I have doting parents, a family, access to food and education... There are uncountable things I could possibly appreciate in my life. I have lived happily and comfortably.

The car crash made me realize my life could be taken away in a blink of an eye. As easy as that, I could lose everything I have at any given moment. I have most definitely taken a lot of things for granted, things as simple as water I drink in the morning, shoes I wear to school, or even functioning limbs. I have taken for granted all the resources I am able to have access to. I have taken for granted the fact that I am alive and well in this world. For the first time, I felt what it meant to be grateful authentically.

If someone asks me if I would want to experience the crash again, I would say no without a doubt. But what I can say for sure is that I feel glad it happened, for it made me learn that I should live my life to the fullest every single day, and with gratitude that I've been given the opportunity to life.

The Blind Boy

Li Tse Ching, Christy

Munsang College

Eddie was blind since he was born. His hard-hearted parents abandoned him when he was ten and he had to beg his living on the street every day. From morning till night he wandered along the city streets and country lanes with the help of his white cane.

One day, Eddie sat on the street with a hat by his feet. There were some coins in the hat and he held up a cardboard which said “You can see this beautiful world but I can’t.”

A man was wandering along the street and he saw Eddie. He took few coins from his pocket and dropped them into the hat. When he was about to go, he saw the cardboard.

The man wondered why Eddie wrote like this. He asked, “Why you write this, instead of “I am blind.” Eddie answered, “I want to told people that they are so lucky that they are not blind. I want the others to learn to be grateful to what they have, instead of complaining what they don’t.” The man was touched by Eddie.

Be thankful for what you have. Be innovative. Think differently and positively. Enjoy the world with a heart of gratitude.

Feeling Fulfilled for the Things you Have

Chang Wai Kiu

Munsang College

We have desired for everything in our life like luxurious products, brand-named cars, and I was not an exception. I lived in a poor family, with desperation. My dad was a baker and my mum was a housewife. Our money was never enough for our living. We couldn't even have a full meal. I was not satisfied and fulfilled. I felt unwilling, insatiable.

I believed that being educated would really change your life. It could bring you wealth, happiness. I really wanted to go to school but unfortunately our family's treasury wasn't enough for a proper meal, how could I go to school?

Every day, I kept mentioning schools and education. Trying to persuade my parents to send me to school although I know that was absolutely impossible. Out of my expectations, one day, my parents told me that they finally had enough money for me to go to the school. I felt pleased, excited.

After that, my school life had finally started. I discovered and learnt a lot. On a school day, when I was on my way to school, I coincidentally saw a familiar faces sweeping the floor. It was mum. She cleared up the roads, trash. She looked so different from the mum that I always used to know. She was much slimmer and her hair was not dark anymore. I could feel

that she was very tired. I was puzzled and confused. Why mum needed to sweep the floor?

Just then, I finally realized all my books, stationeries and school life was came from sweat. My parents need to work harder, to earn my school fee. I felt ashamed and regret. How could I be that willful.

Nothing was not enough, 'He who knows that enough is enough will always have enough.' Felt grateful for the thing you had and for the one who loved you. Be grateful for everything, because they could surely fulfill your desire once you believed and felt thankful.

The Poor Billionaire

Cheung Chu Kwan

Munsang College

“His net worth has increased!” David’s assistant told him. David became a billionaire nine months ago and he just became the world’s richest man alive. David was in high spirits because of this and he rushed to tell his wife and daughter. They were not surprised but they still congratulated him.

David’s owned a large chain of supermarkets. His supermarkets were everywhere, no matter how big your city was. No other supermarkets could compete against his supermarket! His markets were crushing other markets. His company was unstoppable.

He was splendid that he got the title of “richest man ever”. He went out and spent billions of dollars to celebrate. He bought fine wine, some houses and twenty brand new sports cars. He had a grand dinner with his family, tasting mouth-watering appetizing seafood and luxurious desserts.

However, David was an enormous spender. He spent millions, near billions, per week. He bought super cars, property, cosmetics and food. Days and weeks passed, he looked up the Wikipedia page “Richest Person” and choked on the biscuit he was eating. His ranking dropped and became the 2nd richest person. He decided to operate his supermarkets better and making them more profitable, but David was too

much of a spender, rather than saving up some money, he spent the money even much worse. He spent billions to buy houses, although he already had around two hundred houses and villas. David was also facing legal challenges. About ten companies complained that David's supermarkets did not have the right to sell their items.

Weeks and months flew past David. A year passed. David became bankrupt. The companies, that did not allow David's supermarkets to sell their items, asked for price compensation under the protection of the law. David, helplessly, gave all the companies a total of 100 million dollars, including lawyer fees. David also kept spending money uncontrollably. He was addicted to gambling as well. He went to casinos and horse racing arenas thrice a week, and every time he made a bet, he used a billion dollars, which was an insane amount! He started to lose all his money, so he sold all his properties and vehicles that he owned.

After David became bankrupt, he could not own his house, so he moved into his original small flat in an ordinary building. He did not have enough money left to maintain his social needs. His wife quickly divorced with him, saying that he was too cheap to be her husband. Despite that David had no money left, his daughter stayed with him surprisingly. He asked her why she chose to stay with him. His daughter told him, "Although you're not as rich as before, but you're always my father."

David was touched by her. He realized that although there were downfalls, wonders, which you did not perceive that they were already there, would appear in front of your eyes.

[NO TITLE]

Leung Angus

Munsang College

It was a rainy day. Overwhelmed with work, I headed straight home right after school. On the way, it came bucketing down. The street was almost empty — except for one old man, who was sitting under a tree all by himself. Approaching him, I could clearly see that he was homeless. His hair was messy and his clothes were unkempt. ‘Miserable.’ I could not help blurting out the word. Noticing me, he exhorted, ‘Please give me some money! I can’t even afford to eat!’ His hands were trembling, his eyes glimmered with hope, as if I was the only one who could save him. Suddenly, a realization hit me hard. I had a home to return to. I had clothes to wear. I could eat and drink whenever I want. Yet, I complained about everything: Not having enough pocket money; Not getting the expensive items I want; Not having enough sleep. I always thought my life was miserable. In the face of him, I should have counted my blessings. I should be grateful for everything I have.

Mother

Li Sze Hoi

Munsang College

Mary was a positive girl, before her mum passed away.

Last winter, Mary's mum died of lung cancer. Mary was very upset and cried every night. Her father didn't know how to comfort her because he himself was very depressed too. Her class teacher chatted with her every day. Mary's father wanted to find a new mother for Mary. However, she was angry that she thought dad didn't love mum anymore.

Sometimes later, Mary's father did bring a woman called Helen back home. Mary was very disappointed with her father, she missed her mum very much. Her mum cannot be replaced by anyone.

Helen is about 30 years old. She is a gentle person. She treats Mary as her real daughter. But Mary does not like her. Mary does not say anything with her dad and her step-mother at home. Helen feels worry with with Mary, so she always chat with her, sometimes talks about her hobbies, sometimes talks about her favourite things. But Mary does not want to listen to her. Helen does not want to give up, she cooks delicious breakfasts and dinner for Mary. Although Mary thinks the food tastes like her mother cooked before, she still tried to hate it.

One day at midnight, Mary got a high fever. Helen and her dad were very nervous. They carried her to the hospital. Mary was very touching. Now, Mary and her step-mother has broken the wall between each other. They always chat and cook together. Mary becomes positive again. She knows she has her father and step-mother love her very much, she feels grateful that she can have a new mother that loves her like her real mother.

[NO TITLE]

Mack Long Chai

Munsang College

I used to be bad at English. At [In] Primary 6, I only got a simple pass or even failed in English grammar quizzes. I didn't even know what every piece of English homework was about. So I hated English lessons at that time.

When I went to the secondary school, my English started improving because I had to study many subjects with English such as Science, Geography etc. But the problem was: I didn't understand the meaning of the words, so I was so confused at what the teachers were saying.

Fortunately, I met Mr. Chow at the beginning of this school year. He is kind and he never give difficult homework. He will explain every new vocabulary items to us clearly and in detail. So we can understand how to use the words. He will also sponsor us with SCMP every English lesson! He makes me love English.

So I would like to thank Mr. Chow for teaching me so zealously and kindly. I will never forget his kindness and encouragement to me when I face difficulties.

The Boy Who Wanted To See The Stars

Su Man Lok, Adrian

Munsang College

Once upon a star, there lived a desirous little boy in the small town of Ventsville.

The boy had developed an abiding passion for stars since young, when he saw them for the first time. Luckily for him, his town had a clear sky, perfect for stargazing. Every night after supper, the boy would go out and lie down on the grass, looking at the starry sky, feasting his eyes on the twinkling bright angels, like a thousand rhinestones glittering from heaven. He would imagine himself flying among the stars without worries, befriending the stars and traveling around the galaxy in his pyjamas.

However as time went by, the boy grew ambitious and set his reach higher. He started to wonder, “Could there be more?” when he looked up to the night. He started to grow weary of the stars, displeased with what he saw. The boy wanted more, he desired for a more dazzling view other than what he had. So when he’s old enough, he decided enough is enough. “I must leave this dull night, depart this dreary town and seek for the brightest stars.” He told his parents as he packed his bags. He thought he deserved more. He was going to leave his town and travel around, searching for the most charming starry night of them all.

He first arrived at the mountain top, with nothing but goats and boulders to accompany him. “Perfect,” the boy exclaimed, “perfect scene at the top of the world.” But at night when he looked out, he was disappointed to see only a few bright lonely nips. “Just that?” So he took a picture of the sky and left.

Then he reached a city, the most glamorous one he had ever seen. Neon lights everywhere, cars zooming along the highways, luxurious boutiques all around the corners with unique and fascinating skyscrapers looking down on him. “Such glamor! So much excitement!” Nevertheless, at night when he looked out, he saw nothing but the wintry moon hanging up in the picture he had taken.

Afterwards, he turned up at the scorching desert. With a camel as his ride, he roamed across the desert plain, in search of the most shimmering skies of them all. Still, at night when he peeked his head out under the intriguing line of Milky Way. He complained, “I want raindrops on the sky!” He took a picture and left frustrated.

Days, months and years had passed since he began his journey and left his footsteps on every corners of the Earth. The boy travelled to the frigid and glacial arctic, visited the muggy and exotic rainforest, appeared in the chilly and gusty tundra. He took thousands of pictures of the night skies all around the world, but not one was able to satisfy his star-craving desire.

The boy, now a feeble old man, hopped on a bus after leaving the airport so familiar. His looked worn down with bags under his eyes, using the same old mountaineer backpack while trying not to fall asleep during his aimless bus trip. The old man compared all those pictures he had taken, but with a heavy sigh, he placed them away. The old man, feeling empty and thought to himself, “Let the bus decide my fate, I have no destination...” He then slowly drifted away...

He arrived at the last station, all tired and weary. The old man just wanted to lie down and take a rest. As he lied down on the soft and grassy ground. His eyes suddenly brightened.

Looking up, the old man was mesmerized by the perfect midnight velvet above him. He was under the glimmering angels of stars that looked like a brilliant pin-prick of white and yellow orbs. The Milky Way stretched infinitely, with white raindrops all over it. They shone like crown diamonds under the full moon, spreading hopes and dreams to all those who saw it. The twinkling stars filling the velvet were positioned so perfectly, it was like Vincent van Gogh himself painted them. The old man was bewildered, he was astonished, he was blown away by what appeared in front. It was nothing like the pictures he had taken! He... felt fulfilling at last...

The old man, after a long moment of gazing in silence, stood up and checked what place he was in. Finding a sign, the old man squinted his eyes and saw the words, “Welcome to Ventsville”.

He was lost, for he had spent his whole life chasing for the impeccable, his journey ended where it had started, but only without his family, his friends and his time. Childhood memories of barefoot strolling down dusty lanes in the loving hands of his parents, chit-chattering with his friends about their great ambitions and lying under the shining stars with his puppy... suddenly flashed back in his mind.

Closing his eyes in tears, the light of the stars grew fainter and fainter... he left knowing that... the brightest star... the one thing he sought... was always right beside him, but what he lacked... was the heart to treasure.

[NO TITLE]

Tang Chung Yan

Munsang College

Tom is the only son of the city's richest man. He is fifteen, and has everything the others envied: loving parents who spoiled him, a huge house, and everything he wanted. He is a ladies' man and is very popular at school.

One night, he played on his switch till midnight and started to feel sleepy. He rubbed his eyes and yawned. When he opened his eyes again, he saw a weird sight: he was in a tiny room, sitting on a red stool. A boy who was about the same age as him walked in. The boy looks like Tom, and stirred a strangely close feeling towards him in Tom. Tom tapped the boy's shoulder, hoping to ask where he was, but as he lifted his arm, he saw that he was transparent.

'Oh no,' Tom panicked, 'I've become a ghost, what am I supposed to do?' He looked at the boy, who was starting to do his homework on the lower bunk of a bunk bed, and sighed, hugging his head.

When the light in the room dimmed, a plump, middle-aged woman came in. 'Ah Sing, we're about to eat.' 'Okay mum,' the boy called Ah Sing replied. He tidied up his homework and set up a folded table beside the bed. Then, he walked out of the room and came back in moments later, holding two bowls of rice with yellowish vegetables.

Ah Sing's mum turned to a photo hanging on the wall and said, 'I hope your father, who is in heaven, can bless you to get good grades, and become a great man one day.' 'Mum, let's eat.' Tom was still sitting on the stool, staring at them. After dinner, the mother asked Ah Sing to sleep because of the exam he would have the next day. He agreed and said goodnight. Tom rubbed his eyes and yawned.

When he opened his eyes, he realised he was back in his room, his switch on his lap and sunlight streaming through his windows. He walked out to the dining area and saw breakfast on the table. Seeing his mum, he greeted her and thanked her for preparing the breakfast. His mum seemed surprised at her son's sudden gratitude. His father then came in, holding an old, crumpled photo.

In the photo, there was a boy who looked just like the boy in Tom's dream. 'Son, I found a photo of myself taken in my childhood. Let me tell you about it...' After the dream, Tom learnt to be thankful for everything he had, since he had seen the life of a poor, single-parent family. People around him were amazed at the big change he had.

Fiction

The World is Your Oyster

The winning piece for Dr Simon Berry Fiction Writing Award

Cheung Hei Man Nicole

The lonely figure—

“No, that’s not right.”

A hunching shadow—

“No. No. No. Delete that.”

“I am never finishing this,” groaned Scott. His back arched like a twisted tree trunk. His spine rooted itself into the chair. His palms branched out to catch his pale face, and his overworked fingers intertwined to pinch his nose bridge. Creaking elbows rested themselves on a small mahogany desk, where a laptop was propped up. He had been in this state for a few days: typing and deleting, creating and destroying. Take-out boxes bloomed everywhere from the desk to the floor as a monument to his efforts. One would have thought the endless typing meant progress, but there is not a single word on the screen.

“I can’t do this.”

Scott snapped his laptop shut. He sighed and rested his head on the table. It was like a brick wall had mounted itself between him and the laptop. This scene unfolds weekly in his apartment. Scott submits a horror story of approximately four pages bi-weekly for the weekly magazine, “Entity”. The format was limited and he couldn’t choose topics freely. But nonetheless, he devoted his body and soul into writing it. His mind used to be an overflowing kettle of ideas, its contents desperate to spill out onto the chirping keyboard like boiling water; and the ideas splashing around in his head manifested into sweat that drenched his palms. Every night he would craft and build on his stories. He used to write so much that he was always weeks ahead of schedule, with stories to spare for at least another month. He took pleasure in his work and his friends envy him for that.

But there was a limit to how much water the kettle could hold. Deadline after deadline, month after month of pouring his soul into words on paper, then having to delete a chunk of it according to strict guidelines, Scott became unmotivated. He was tired of being confined to write according to all the shackling guidelines, tired of doing meaningless tasks in every waking moment, tired of reliving the same nightmare of writing and deleting every week.

“I’m reliving the same day over and over again,” rang in Scott’s head. He believed that writing was all there is to life. Once he achieved his dream of becoming an author, he thought he would be content. But now when he thinks about his future, he sees nothing. Sure, he might get promoted or

switch jobs, he might even settle and start a family, but he is still destined to be stuck in the cycle of “wake up, go to work, come home, go to sleep” until he dies. Thoughts like these come to haunt him during moments of solitude. Usually, someone or something distracts him or he falls asleep. But he knows they will always be there, in the back of his mind. Watching. Waiting.

Now look at him, a husk of his former self. He struggled to meet deadlines. His stories got increasingly dull and predictable. His friends convinced him he is going to paradoxically loathe his job but choose to keep said job. But no, he retorted, that’s not entirely it. He whispers “in the end, nothing will matter. I’ll die regretting everything” every time he tries to put effort into something. He knows that there is no meaning in life, and it does him no good to sulk about it, but he was nonetheless shaken by the mere thought of it. If he was going to die anyway, then why bother writing? Why bother living in the first place?

Scott sat up. He jolted his arms, ready to attack the keyboard again, but froze halfway. What is the point of all this? No, really, what is the point? Years after his death, no one will remember him. No traces of his short existence would be left no matter what he does. Decimated an entire culture for some petty land? Conquered planet Earth? The universe does not care and never will. The cosmos goes on without him. So what is the point of all this when nothing matters in the end?

Scott fidgeted his pen and sat there deep in thought for a good half an hour. Then, as if a stroke of lightning had struck his static body, his eyes bulged open, his right hand whizzed to open a new tab on his laptop, smothering the short story that was assigned the topic “Ghosts” underneath. The impending deadline, the dreadful meetings, they don’t matter because nothing matters. He might as well do as he likes.

So he starts typing.

‘There is this girl who lives in a sleepy seaside town, where cottages line up against a seaside cliff. Where Poseidon would gently caress the sandy edge of the land, and tumble delightful pebbles along the way.’

“A seaside town, how romantic. I should give her a name”, Scott thought. He fumbled through his head. *Mallory*.

‘Mallory grew up here, and so knows every nook and cranny of the harbour. This was her home.

Every morning, Mallory follows her grandmother to the market at the docks. For the next nine hours, she would sit on a stool and crack oyster shells. Mallory and her grandmother sustain themselves by wedging the armour off of oysters from six in the morning to three in the afternoon. To alleviate boredom, Mallory gazes at the sea while she tears the oysters apart. She stares deeply into it, with awe and longing swimming in her eyes. Whales waltzing in the deep, anemones sweeping along with the

currents, marine turtles soaring near the ocean surface; she wants to see it all. It is quite ironic, her desire to swim with marine animals while ripping said animals apart. Life is unfair, she thinks, and cracks open another shell. After her shift she wanders around the harbour, looking for something to play with.

“There you are!” Mallory sprints past rafts drifting idly on the water, until she stops in front of a humble sailboat. A ginger cat pokes out of one of the bollards. Mallory picks it up and pets it. Coral the cat is a familiar presence in the docks. She can be seen strutting around the area as if she owns the place. Whenever Mallory feels troubled, petting Coral always helps. She follows Coral around, exploring the docks, until she reaches the beach. The beach is actually just a small patch of sand-infested land nobody bothers to deal with. It is so insignificant that no living soul goes there. Mallory frolics there a bit and goes home.

“Grandma, what if I trained to become a diver?” Mallory knew the answer, but still, she asks time and time again. Her grandma would say it's too risky, too far from home, too deadly. But what if she would rather die than sit at the market everyday? But what if she would rather die exploring underwater caverns than crack and wedge her life away here? She looks at her grandmother sometimes and sees her future. Is this what she will become in a couple of decades? Wasting away in this tiny, suffocating town?

Scott stopped there and went to rest. But Mallory began to invade Scott's thoughts like a parasite to its host. His mind hardly took a break from her. In the next few days, he thought of nothing but her story. He threw his work aside and put everything into developing Mallory's character. It even occupied the time he usually spent on nihilistically contemplating his sealed fate. It was a distraction for him.

'Mallory is transfixed by the tides again. How she longs it would wash her away into the abyss. A place where she would not be forced to do the same things everyday. She is hypnotized. "Come to me," she almost hears it say.

"Mal? You haven't touched your batch." Her grandmother broke Mallory's trance. She has been staring for so long that she has forgotten her work, her hands cupping a lone shell. A strange movement caught her attention. A translucent needle feebly wriggles out of the shell. A crushed oyster crab. Mallory hears its desperate scratches against the oyster shell, the crab's own armour bent inward, its beady little eyes searching in Mallory's own pupils.

A wave of nausea and a cold numbness spreads through her. The pathetic struggle of the crab was an all too familiar scene. She feels like she is the crab, pounding against the uncaring universe that is the oyster shell, asking questions that are answered with silence. Mallory sprinted away from the stools, towards where the sailboats are. Where Coral is. She needs a distraction.

But where is Coral? Perhaps it's pure coincidence, or fate's cruel joke, for the neighbourhood cat is nowhere to be seen. Mallory's head is roaring. Vicious waves of anguish clash upon her rational mind, corroding bits and pieces away. She dashes through the wooden planks of the harbour, passing the rafts and Coral's sailboat. Finally, her feet stop at the edge of the beach. The endless body of blue is waiting for her there.

"Come to me." No. She must be hallucinating. The sea cannot speak. Her ears must deceive her.

"Come to me, Mallory." This time it echoes through her skull, loud and clear. She hesitates, then surrenders her feet to the sand. The soothing waters look promising and sane compared to the dry land. She leaves behind her past of dull oyster shells, and finds peace in the alluring waves. "Come." Foam wash against her ankles, and bubbles tickle her tired soles. She strides forward until the blue devours first her thighs, then her waist, her shoulders, and finally her head.'

A sense of accomplishment washed over Scott. It had been ages since he was this inspired. Now his motivation has rekindled through Mallory. He found his piece liberating, therapeutic even. He didn't have to adhere to any rules this time; the freedom pleased him.

"So? What do you think?" Scott raised his head a bit, trying to decipher his friend's facial expression.

“Mallory drowns in the end? That’s so depressing,” his friend finally says, setting down the story on the table.

“The ending is up for interpretation. She might have found salvation.” Scott gave a nervous laugh.

“In death?” Scott’s companion arched his brows in disbelief. “Can’t she choose to be happy in spite of her situation?”

“Well, one cannot simply choose to be happy. Besides, her joy was temporary. It was derived from distraction.”

“It’s better than death at least!” His friend scoffed.

“Is it though? She would just live on in her meaningless, repetitive life. What’s stopping her from ending it all? Nothing. You would think there is some order in this universe and that everything should make sense or will someday but that is not the case. Life is not fiction.”

His friend paused for a moment, and replied, “Are you alright, Scott? I don’t want to assume anything but are you projecting your own problems onto Mallory? This existentialist crisis has been eating you away, hasn’t it? Is that why you have been so melancholic lately? So you created Mallory as a venting vessel, and judging by the ending, also as wish fulfillment.”

“I...” Scott looked for an answer in himself but all he found was denial.

Dying of Embarrassment

First runner-up for Dr Simon Berry Fiction Writing Award

Chau Wing Ni

The last scene she saw right before the double-decker bus crashed into her at full speed was a bald middle-aged man in a worn-out suit, mouthing the word “s**t” at her. “Shame that the last man I saw in my life is not attractive,” Melissa thought.

Then, it was a loud bang.

Her blood-stained white shopping bags and the shattered phone were scattered on the way to her kid’s kindergarten. Ambulances rushing to the scene and a few nosey people surrounding her with a frown and a concerned glimpse. After a few attempts of the first-aid, they announced the time of her death. And here came the period of Melissa Kwan’s short 40-year dull, tedious life. Oh, sorry! I made a mistake. It was merely a period to her life in the *world of humans*.

If you ask those who knew Melissa personally to describe her, I can guarantee everyone would say the same thing – “As a mother, she was very loving and dear; and as a person, she always had the tenderest heart in the world. Yet, she is *BORING*.” Indeed, the shy petite woman never had a life of her own. At least, that was those who do not know her little secret would have thought. When she was young, she always obeyed her parents. She had no hobbies, just studied hard, got good grades and entered the

best university in the city. And when she got married and had kids of her own, she quit her job (and also her personal life as if she had one), and devoted her whole self to the domestic, routine and a *very, very* typical life. Melissa basically did nothing significant when she was alive, and of course it means she never committed any bad deeds too. So naturally, when she died. She went straight up to heaven.

Heaven was quite different from her imagination. One time when Melissa read her children bedtime story like they did every day, one of them suddenly asked her where does their little turtle Shelly went after she died. The mother was startled for a second and replied, “It will be all white and very solemn like the church we go every Sunday. There are angels that are sweet like you and sing hymns all the time too.” When she woke up from a coma with a headache, she glanced around. What she saw were people of all kinds wearing anything but not white. Everyone was dancing their heart out with the really loud Taylor Swift’s music. The ceiling of the Heaven was made of marble with some Renaissance painting on it. Surrounding the frantic dancing pool were a lot of statues of the same style, which made a funny contrast. She had no doubt that she would end up in Heaven, still she experienced a tremendous difficulty to believe this place – a Renaissance-theme-nightclub-like place was the holy resting place everyone were literally dying to get to until a strong black man, who were wearing a reflective pink tank top tapped her shoulder politely and announced, “Yo! Angel Lil Wave here at your service. Very welcome to Heaven, Melissa. Funny how you were dropped at the noisiest spot of the whole holy place. Let me show you the God.”

It was an intense flash of white light. The next voice she heard was a very thick soothing deep man voice who Lil Wave referred to as God. Different from Heaven itself, God actually looked pretty similar to how people usually described. He was of middle-size, brown curly hair and beard that looked nicely trimmed and was in an ivory robe. Crudely elegant. “Hello, Melissa. Quite careless, aren’t you. According to our schedule, your date of arrival is supposed to be 50 years later. But that’s ok.” God declared. She paced in front of God while trying to take in the environment. After a while, she finally started to collect herself and realised she was supposed to be the next one to speak in this conversation. “Oh, so what is going to happen to me now?” She sat on the tiles and mostly muttered to her confused self. But of course, God would not miss it. “Chill, Melissa. You don’t have to be scared, for you have now in the embrace of mine.” He laughed and announced, clearly wanting to comfort her. It gave Melissa a mixture of bewilderment and delightment. “Ok, since you have been an awesome human being in your overly short life, you are allowed to go down for one last time and change one thing you want. It could be anything. Up to you really. You will have one whole day for it.” He replied. “Wait, will that make me miserable like that Emily in the play called In Our Town? I have read enough to know changing the past is always bad.” Melissa was obviously hesitant about this. “Oh, no worries about that. The real question here is do you, or do you not have any unfulfilled wish down there in that dull world of humans?” He smirked. She was silent for a few seconds and then something seemed to have popped up in her mind. “Oh damn yes. I did have something I would like to do,” the tiny woman exclaimed with an energy that had not

been seen after she arrived in Heaven. “Cool cool cool cool. Here you go then,” God snapped his fingers. It was another intense flash of white light.

And here she was at her apartment again. She could not comprehend what had just happened but it felt as real as the headache she was having. No one was around her now, which made sense as the short hand of the clock pointed at the figure 1, meaning her kids were still at the school while her husband was still at work. She glanced at the family photo hanging on the wall in a nostalgic manner, knowing that she would not see them again for a good while now. Looking at the flat, Melissa was lost in all her thoughts before she suddenly remembered the reason she came down. Slowly and quietly, she sat on the black desk chair, and turned on the computer. *Click, click click*. It took her awhile since she never really used her kids’ computer but finally she found it – a file named *Detoxification*. Everyone who knew her thought she was boring. Little did they know she actually were a very talented writer. Unfortunately, she gave up writing up and choose to study a business degree instead because to quote her mother, “Arts are pretty useless.” And so, she never showed anyone her work since the ideas that art and writing were something not interesting in the eyes of others. Writing became her own safe haven. When she did not have to take care of her home, such as when all of them were asleep, she would write. She wrote about all kinds of genre and stuff, fantasy, comedy, romance and you name it. As for the file she found, it was a long fiction that she poured her heart and soul into. Melissa always crave for it to be published. Yet, she never had the courage to do so because she did not have the heart for all the cruel criticism and the comments of others. A lot of time, she

would write an email to the publisher, then attached her script but not the button 'send'. So when God gave her a chance, she immediately thought about that. All her life, she wanted to be recognised, to unleash her creative mind, to splash colours on the canvas but life. *Oh life*, it just did not give you what you want, is it not? She decided this was now or never. If she was still alive, her heart must have been pumping like crazy but she was not. So it was only her hands that are sweating excessively on the mouse, her fingers flew frantically over the keyboard, and then the anchor moved to the file, and then the keyboard again, and then a 'swoop' that indicated the departure of the long-due email. "That's it! I finally did it." she babbled with a huge relief while swinging on the chair.

Looking at the clock, it was still 3pm. She did not actually know how was showing up once again as a dead person was like, so she reckoned perhaps she could still drop by the supermarket before picking up her children from school for the very last time. Melissa was worried that she would be like those ghosts that were portrayed in movies in which she would be invisible to others. But luckily, it did not happen. She paid her grocery and then proceed to the kindergarten where there was a huge crossroad in between. The crossroad was known for its monstrosity of slowness of changing the traffic light. Knowing that she would still have a few minutes before the greenlight, she took out her phone, looked at the mailbox, clicked into the attachment she just sent and try to admire her own work. Then, she skimmed through the story and found out something really strange. "Holy crap!" She uttered loudly with a mouth on her opened mouth. "Holy freaking crap! Oh my god! What have I done?" People

nearby gave her a curious stare. Turned out the file she attached was no way the story she intended to send, but the really explicit fanfiction erotica she wrote for fun back she was young. “Crap! Is being dead make me more stupid?” she screamed with her completely reddened face. “What should I do now?” She stormed by the road with pure embarrassment and perplexion. Without her noticing, she was on the crossroad, and a deafening honk of the double-decker bus. And yes, as you can guess, that was what happened.

Melissa saw the now familiar intense flash of white light and here she was in Heaven again, “God, I was so embarrassed,” she sighed with her face covered while God was laughing at her so hard that His whole body curled up on his modern gold chair. “You are literally dying of embarrassment. Ha ha ha!” He muttered barely during His guffaw. “Stop it!” The woman screamed in vain. “Hey, at least everyone loves your book even up here. You see, your book is the first on the chart on the Heaven’s Bookstore.” “Wait what?” Melissa gushed with a slight hint of surprise. She looked around and realised indeed everyone in Heaven is reading her erotic fanfiction on their smartphone. For the first time in her 40-year – life, she is fulfilled and happy for the person she was. She decided to start her writing career up here.

It felt like heaven for her.

Take-off

Second runner-up for Dr Simon Berry Fiction Writing Award

Cheung Wing Chi Gigi

The waves splash against the fine sand of the beach. The Albatross steps away from its nest to make its way to the shore, weaving around the squabbling younger ones nearby.

Something about the open sky calls the Albatross like it does its parents, its fellow fledgelings.

The Albatross hurries to the edge of the water, running across the powdery dry beach until its feet slap against the wet sand at the edge of the water. The wind is blowing from the inland, carrying the scent of grass and fruit trees.

The Albatross has been at it for days.

The call of the open sky is irresistible. It is as if the rest of the flock is also urging the Albatross to reach for the clouds, their calls loud and excited. Eagerly spreading its wings, the Albatross flaps them experimentally as it has done for the past few days. It rises upwards hopefully – feet leaving their imprints in the wet sand. Flapping harder, the Albatross gains height, until it abruptly becomes a struggle to stay airborne, balance tipping dangerously to the left. The Albatross flops down into the shallow water, startling an indignant squawk from a fellow fledgeling.

The Albatross impatiently scrambles back onto the beach and shakes itself, sending little water droplets flying. It watches as a fellow bird takes a running start before launching itself into the air, managing to stay midair for a considerable amount of time before landing roughly into the shallows.

Deciding to try the same strategy, the Albatross patters down the damp sand as quickly as it can, spreading and flapping its wings to take off with all its might. The nearby birds' calls seemed to grow louder, urging it to try harder, to reach for the sky. The Albatross pushes firmly against the wind, and suddenly it is hovering an encouraging distance from the surface of the sea. The sky seems so close; just a little more and the Albatross would soon be soaring so freely like the others, far away from the rolling waves that look so tall now.

The harder the Albatross flaps its wings, the quicker strength drains from them. It loses balance when its left wing gives suddenly, almost careening into a nearby rock. The Albatross barely twists out of the way in time, desperately pumping its wings up and down. It becomes a fight against the current to stay in the air. The Albatross fumbles chaotically before crashing back into the cold water with a huge splash. An incoming wave almost swallows the Albatross up, and it takes a good amount of flailing before the Albatross manages to awkwardly waddle back to shore, to the chattering and rustling of the flock.

The Albatross sits to stare out into the cerulean sea for a moment. It watches as the white-crested waves crash against the cliffs. The scent of salt hangs heavily in the air, promising the fish the Albatross's parents used to bring. The desire to take to the skies burns like the midday sun, but the Albatross allows the cool wind to wash over it.

Calm settles. The rhythm of the waves becomes a soothing comfort, drowning out the sounds of the other birds. The spray of waves against the cliffs turns the current into little harmless droplets that glisten in the light. White, wispy clouds drift lazily across the vivid blue sky.

Rising to its feet, the Albatross slowly finds its way to the edge of the water once more. Sand grains shift under its feet with each step. The water runs cool over the webs between its toes.

The Albatross spreads its wings. The breeze slips under them. It feels natural to flap them, letting itself rise steadily over the shoreline. Its wings waver as the wind grows unexpectedly stronger, but it feels right to keep them extended the farthest they can go, shaping the air beneath them. Tilting its body upwards slightly, the Albatross allows the wind to lift it higher into the air.

Rising higher and higher in between the sky and the sea, the Albatross gives one more flap and floats forward steadily. The golden sunlight filters through the layers of clouds, warming the tips of the Albatross's feathers as it swoops across the cliffs and over the blue sea.

Turning its head to look back at the beach, the Albatross realises it is no more than a strip of pale gold far behind, already too small to make out the shapes of the other birds on the island.

Closing its eyes, the Albatross lets itself glide weightlessly into the clouds. It already knows, far below, the waves are small and calm.

The Gratitude Tree

Wong Tsz Yau

Jockey Club Ti-I College

Centuries ago, in a land far far away, beyond the glittering mountains and the infinite sea, was a little village unlike any other. Why? Because at the heart of the village was a very important tree. The Gratitude Tree.

The Gratitude tree was a wonder of all sorts. It was gigantic, with a sturdy, gleaming trunk as deeply coloured as the night sky and long, thick twigs. In contrast, its bushy canopy was bright and cheerful, with an array of multicoloured leaves and even a few buds. This magnificent tree[,] was the village's symbol of love and gratitude.

Children would play and climb on the tree's trunk, passing sweet notecards and small gifts to each other. Meanwhile, lovers would share intimate moments and make promises to each other at the foot of the tree. The elderly could also be found relaxing near the roots of the tree, revisiting sweet memories of their past. As the tree was responsible for connecting every generation in the village, from the children to the elders, it was loved by the village.

Day by day, the children's laughter, the lovers bond and the elderly's wisdom were the water and sunlight of the tree. At that era of love and gratefulness, the tree was a beloved and treasured token of the village.

As decades and centuries flew by, the people of the village began to change their outlook on life as merchants from other villages introduced them to extravagant luxuries. The villagers started to feel unsatisfied and became envious of each other[,] and saw no point in being grateful any longer. The streets were filled with greed and lust instead of devotion and affection, and the village became a shadow of its former self.

Eventually, the people of the village decided on cutting down the tree. They agreed that it was a waste of space and building luxuries in the spot it grew in would gain them a lot more money than the tree ever would. “We should build a golf court and pool there!” An athlete exclaimed. “No! A classy jewellery store or a fancy inn would be worth a lot more!” A merchant argued. No one could decide on what they wanted.

People of the village began to gather around the tree to watch its removal. As they saw the remnants of the tree, they sniffed with disdain. The Gratitude tree was no longer as sturdy and brightly coloured as it was before. Instead, all that was left of it was a skinny, withered shrub with leaves of a faded colour. A few others who were against the idea had tried to put a stop to it but were tied up and gagged, helpless. There was nothing they could do to stop the scene from unfolding.

The lumberjacks did not hesitate to swing. Chop! As the villagers opened their mouths to scream and cheer, something very unexpected happened. Their eyes widened in horror as they found themselves falling with the ground below them, plunging in an endless abyss below. On the other

hand, the tree stump did not fall but levitated into the sky like a hot air balloon. The remaining villagers who were bound with ropes quickly freed themselves and grabbed onto the twigs of the tree. The tree floated higher and higher, farther and farther, until it could be seen no more.

Afterall, what goes up must come down and vice versa.

An ancient nursery rhyme that has been told for many generations about this story goes:

In a land no one's heard of, far as can be,
Beyond mountains of gold and the endless sea,
Grows the magic of the mystical gratitude tree.

The mystical tree is black and duller,
While its leaves shine in a rainbow of true colours.

As you can see,
Our stories of gratitude and gratefulness are the fruits of its seed.

So without our acts of kindness, this beautiful tree would be,
Shrivelled up from human's blindness and greed.

The magic of the gratitude tree spreads as it grows,
Inspiring all to show their gratitude and to let everyone know.

Being content with what you have and to go with the flow,
Is the true way to find happiness, you know?

The magic of the mystical gratitude tree is powerful in many ways,
Showing your thanks is a great way to display.
At least, that's what they say,
Or else the mystical magical tree and its tales of gratitude will fade.

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