

Foreword

Writing serves different purposes for different people at different times. We write to communicate, to express ourselves, to tell a story, to evoke feelings or prompt thoughts or instigate reflection. Sometimes we are motivated to write less for the intended effect on our readers and more for ourselves: by setting words on a thought or a feeling or an experience, we may understand it better.

The texts in this volume were produced at a time when the writers, along with everyone else on the planet, were encountering new experiences, and ones which were difficult to fathom, on a daily basis. Some of the contributions address the adversity head-on. Others reference it obliquely, or not at all. It is hard to imagine, though, that the pandemic did not leave its mark on each of them, regardless of whether the authors used the process of writing to work through, or to escape from, the global crisis.

Every volume of Halfway Home showcases the power of writing as an expressive tool. This volume, produced against the backdrop of the events of 2020 and 2021, demonstrates the power of writing to provide some order in a chaotic world.

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Introductory note

The theme of this year's edition of *Halfway Home* is 'resilience', a concept that could not be more relevant, given that the world has been transformed in the context of a widening global pandemic. As they address the theme of resilience in various ways, the contributing writers reveal how obstacles, limitations, and difficulties can also lead to unforeseen opportunities.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the student team who worked on this edition of *Halfway Home*. Over the past months, the team managed a secondary school writing competition, designed promotional materials, balanced a budget, made a number of important editorial decisions, and maintained an attention to details. It is only through their active efforts that we are able to enjoy these wonderful stories and poems.

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Editor's Preface

The American poet T.S. Elliot once said, “Home is where one starts from. As we grow older, the world becomes stranger, the patterns more complicated.” The idea of home is elusive due to its ever-changing nature and thus, the reason we will always merely be halfway there. For the past ten years, the *Halfway Home* publication has provided its readers a pathway to explore their ideas of “home”. However, for the year 2020, one could argue we are not even halfway there.

Despite 2020 being the year of self-quarantine, fear, and strife, many are constantly grappling with personal issues like sexuality, loneliness, and mental health, just as they had in the previous years. However, many issues in our life share one commonality with the virus - their tenacity. And I for one believe that it is only by being more tenacious than our obstacles, can we outlast them and emerge victorious.

In light of the situation in 2020, the Student Publication Team proposed the central theme of this year's submission - resilience, and its corresponding symbol for Hong Kongers - Lion Rock. The theme resilience denotes the ability to persevere and overcome hardships, which is without a doubt an element that Hong Kongers courageously displayed in the face of insurmountability.

By taking a step back and recalling how the older generation pulled through adversities, we can then look inward to evoke our inner resilience and recover our strength moving forward. Therefore, this year's edition encourages students to articulate their experiences through various literary forms, namely poetry, short story, and non-fiction writing.

Though some can be heavy-hearted at times but found to be cathartic, some might be able to set off a chuckle or two and serve as an escape from your problems. Each and every piece contained in this volume presents a novel approach to the idea of resilience, each inspiring in different ways.

On behalf of the Student Publication Team, I hope this year's edition can be a resting stop for you and let you call forth your resilience during this time of uncertainty. So, sit back and take a breather, because we are not even halfway there yet.

Leong Kwan Wai Leo

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Readers' Notes

Since this year's central theme is resilience, our editorial team has devised four sub-themes that relate to one another sequentially.

“Suffering”: a condition that virtually everyone is familiar with and is currently going through. Entries about entrapment, hardships are included in this section. More often than not, we face our difficulties head-on by ourselves.

This brings us to the next theme- isolation: the issues of solitary, helplessness. After our hardships, no matter how insignificant they appear to be, we often find ourselves tougher and therefore, develop a stronger mental fortitude to overcome the next obstacle.

As a result, transformation and perseverance are opted as the last two sub-themes. Entries that to the biggest extent, capture a certain theme are put into that section.

In order to enrich your reading experience, extracts of entries are placed in the middle of the cover pages. In this way, you can catch a glimpse of how writers interpret the sub-themes and acquire more perspectives from them.



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Halfway Home XI

Made in Hong Kong

Suffering



Photo by Dan Gold

“A man of 35 sits in the living room.
He thinks of 12 different ways to die.

He fears that the resolution in his veins might one day start
eating at his heart.

Sweat beads across his forehead, stale, as it runs down his neck
again and again.

Thirty-five is too young an age to die but a long, long time if all
one does is survive.”

(From the poem - A family in a house)

A family in a house

Antara Verma

The scent of misery and struggle lingers in the sweltering heat of the kitchen in this house.

House. Not home.

The mother always ends up spilling more sugar in the tea than required.

The roaring fire of the stove and the crackling spices of a too watery curry hide sighs of discontentment and disappointment.

The scent of ginger and garlic washes over the bitter stench of relationships gone sour.

Grandmother claims knitting as a hobby, but she visibly hates it.

Her sagging skin betrays her frail bones and fails to hide the tell-tales of a life that was never lived.

A faded blue yarn of wool lies strewn across the tiny room she shares with her grandchildren.

She knits and knits and knits.

In the 9 and 5 years of her grandchildren's lives, they have never worn a woollen sweater.

A man of 35 sits in the living room.

He thinks of 12 different ways to die.

He fears that the resolve in his veins might one day start eating at his heart.

Sweat beads across his forehead, stale, as it runs down his neck again and again.

Thirty-five is too young an age to die but a long, long time if all one did was survive.

Over the periodic din of utensils being scrubbed, the children squeal occasionally.

They sit on a dusty rug and as they eat a too watery curry, make faces of distaste.

A few years more, and they will know this is what hopelessness tastes like.

Until then, the children continue to laugh aimlessly,

The grandmother knits but fails to hold the fabric together,

The man of 35 silently awaits a tragedy he doesn't know has already fallen over his shoulder,

And the mother burns her blood to keep the stove burning,

burning,

and burning.

My Cranial Sanctuary

Leong Wai Ki Ricky

On a gloomy day

I wander under a thickened veil of grey

Heart grappling with that guttural gutting fear

On a street full of digital eyes and ears

The pavement busily populated by suits
which is made of dimly colored cloth.

They roamed and they rambled about
on errands of life in their guarded lofts.

For they are the hollow men

For they speak in dried voices

Like the trees ceaselessly singing

To the wind's relentless calling

For they think in wheat-filled brains

Just as fading stars on a bright-lit sky

They screamed and they shouted

but to no avail.

For they are the hollow men

I pray you, my fine fellas
Keep up only the appearances
Think not, act not, feel not
For the air is contaminated by
Big Brother's digital eyes
Stay hidden in your skull-sized prison
Let not the crime of treason
Catch you singing to
Wordsworth's daffodils of imagination

Despair not,
for it is in our skull-sized lofts
That we can truly be free
It is in our inward eyes
That we can truly see
It is in our deep meditations
That our mind can be set free

So rise, rationalize, and reason
In that mental plane of yours
Set yourself o'er vales and hills
Shall your hearts be pleasure-filled
By accompanying with seas of daffodils

And while your minds are lying still
I heed you to find your strength
Find the traveler from that antique land
Read from the pedestal on the sand
Remember those sculptor's hands
Which mocked the mighty Ozzie's demands

And I beseech you
persist,
as we will find illuminating lights again
For the precious, precious lesson
Taught by that colossal wreck
Nothing last forever
Not even Ozymandias' tracks

Damned Comedy: Zeroth Circle

Professor Shirley G.L. Lim Poetry Writing Scholarship Runner Up

Kazumi Mangacat Cheng

Have you heard of the zeroth circle?

A prequel to Dante's Divine Comedy,

Where every sin run universal, in chaotic harmony.

It is where priests devote themselves to God,

As they thrust their being into a child.

The spirit is a convenient mascot;

We only pray when we need Christ.

Eyes prey on breasts and vagina,

Of girl and woman.

Giving praise for scoring as an Alpha,

We ignore the pain of a devoured man.

Famine rules the poor;

As the rich rots in food waste.

The obese mouth's a fool,

Gobbling with haste

Either way, deaths on their plate.

Packed politicians' pockets and their phoney philanthropy

Capitalism: conspicuous consumption

We all love money,

It protects our material obsession.

Thou shalt hate neighbor as thyself,

Belittle and humiliate those who anger you

For this world must only know of yourself

And to everyone else, "fuck you"

God competes with Gods,

Like Buddha, Allah and Brahma.

He is not the only orthodox,

Funny to get kicked out of Eden for such petty drama.

Hurting and bleeding is a fetish

Against thy neighbor, you, God and nature

For wrath feels good on the flesh,

Together let's take on this torture.

Lies and manipulation in every heart

The media is perverted and falsified

We only know how to outsmart

The idiots that naively confide

Judas would be put to shame,
With the treachery we can commit
Feelings and bloodstain played like a game
We've learned since we were a kid.

Welcome to the zeroth circle,
Where sins run universal.

Cube

Professor Shirley G.L. Lim Poetry Writing Scholarship Winner

Leung Yi Yan Kelly

howdareyoutrapmeinthis
freakincubewithnodoors
orwindowshauntingpitch
darkallaroundmeallalone

Breathless.

no exit
no hope
but walls

let me out
set me free

I need nothing but to get

out of the box.

Tulip Season

Rajani Limbu

As Laila moved along the crowded, busy lanes of the market, she had a feeling that she was being watched. Amidst the sea of unfamiliar faces, she spotted a face looking at her. He looked away quickly, as if he had been caught. Laila smiled to herself as she pretended to inspect some floral arrangements.

“Tulips are in season, ma’am. How about these ones? Almost as beautiful as you, I must say,” the old man behind the counter held up a bouquet of tulips.

“I’m afraid I can’t take them. I’m on a tight budget today,” Laila smiled apologetically.

The man produced a single tulip from under the counter. “Take this then, ma’am. For making my day.”

“Why just one when she deserves the whole garden?” A voice from behind them said. Laila turned around to see the man from earlier. He had a rugged look to him and his eyes were even browner up close.

“She’ll have that one,” he pointed to the biggest arrangement of colorful tulips.

“And what do I owe this favour to?” Laila smiled politely.

“Why don’t you come with me and find out,” he smiled.

“Why don’t you tell me more about yourself?” the stranger asked as they walked down the dusty cobblestone path.

“What do you want to know?” Laila asked, innocently.

“Let’s start with your name.”

“Laila... and yours?”

A group of children ran up to the man and tugged on his sleeves. The oldest one, a boy with messy, matted hair, pointed at his mouth with one hand and rubbed his belly with the other. The man rummaged in his pockets and handed the boy a few crumpled notes. The children took it and ran away.

“Even the children could tell that you’re not from here,” Laila laughed.

“That is true, I’m not from here. Laila, that is a beautiful name. I’m Noah.”

The sun was setting and night was drawing near. The young couple knew their time together was almost up.

“Laila, will I see you again?” Noah asked, earnestly.

“I can’t. I’m... betrothed to someone else,” Laila fidgeted with her dress.

Noah’s face fell and after a moment of silence he said, “Then come, run away with me. I will provide for you.”

Laila considered for a moment. Finally, she spoke. “Life is not a fairytale. You can’t just whisk me away like some damsel in distress. I have my own life here.”

“I didn’t mean any offense. I just can’t bear the thought of never seeing you again. If this is the last I’m going to see of you, at least let me drop you home,” Noah insisted.

Laila led the way with Noah in tow. In the darkness of the night, Noah tripped and Laila caught him just in time. They laughed as Noah pulled Laila in closer.

She didn't protest when Noah leaned in, nor when he placed his lips on hers. In fact, she kissed him back, hard.

Noah woke up to the cawing of birds and his eyes squinted against the glare of the sun. His shirt was unbuttoned and his boots were covered in thick, dried mud. The tulips laid not far from him, under a tree. Laila was nowhere to be found.

Dazed, Noah headed back to the town's market, which was a good one hour away. He did not remember walking this much last night.

"Do you remember the girl from yesterday?" he asked the florist.

"What girl, sir?" The old man asked as he trimmed the ends of flowers.

"The one with the long brown hair and the blue dress," Noah said, unable to hide the frustration in his voice.

"It was a slow day yesterday, sir. I would remember her had I seen her."

"Excuse me, how much for these tulips?" a lady appeared next to Noah. She had a brown straw hat on. "I should get these for Laila. She always loved tulips," she said to the older woman next to her.

"Sorry to interrupt, but do you know Laila?" Noah asked the two women.

"Yes, my sister. Did you know her?" The lady in the hat said. Now that she had said it, the resemblance was striking and Noah wondered how he hadn't noticed earlier.

"Yes, it's a funny story, actually. We only met last night, but I think I'm in love with your sister," Noah blushed.

“Is this some sick joke?” She cried and ran away. Noah, confused, looked to the other woman for an explanation. The older woman spoke, “Laila was the older one of my two daughters. She passed away a year ago today. It’s my fault really, for making her marry someone she didn’t want to. I should’ve listened...I should’ve listened...”

Noah’s heart skipped a beat. He paid for the woman’s tulips and expressed his condolences.

It was Noah’s last night in town, but he could not sleep. He laid wide awake, thinking about what had happened. Suddenly, he heard knocking at the door.

“Who’s there?” Noah called out.

The knocking stopped. Minutes later, there was knocking again.

“Noah, it’s me, Laila,” a voice on the other side of the door called.

Noah felt a chill down his spine as beads of cold sweat formed on his forehead.

“Noah, you promised. You promised to take me away from this,” she cried.

The knocks were no longer knocks, but hammering.

“Did you know the man?” the police officer asked the innkeeper. “No sir, all I know is that his name was Noah and that he was a traveling businessman. He stayed for 5 nights. Other than that, I know nothing about him” the innkeeper replied.

As the officer got up to leave, the innkeeper stopped him. “Please sir, do help me solve this matter. A death, regardless of its cause, is never good for business,” the innkeeper pleaded.

“We’ll see what we can do about it”, the officer replied grimly and bid the innkeeper farewell.

Old Boy

Khan Ibrahim Kevin Barba

It's 1:03 am and I can't sleep. Racing thoughts flood my mind, although I'm tucked in bed. Despite doing all the methods to help me drift off, I still can't do it; so, I just pass it off as one of those insomniac nights—it's a Saturday anyways. In retrospect, the past 7 days have been nothing but a duplication of the weeks that passed and an imitation of months prior. I go out to the dimmed living room to think of ways to kill time 'til sunrise—maybe, this could help my sleeping. The creaking of my door must have chased the dark clouds away, as a gleaming full moon slowly unveils. I accept the invitation of this nocturnal summoning; stepping out of my house to feel the midnight air and to have a cigarette at the same time, sucking in the embers of a charred Oriental Pearl. I slowly tiptoe my way out of the house, to avoid disturbing my dreaming laboured parents. I sit by the stairway behind my “Tong Lau” apartment Queen's Road East, where the dreams of my immigrant folks cohabit. The stairway leads you to Star Street, a place of dulling historical significance, a dimming Victorian fantasy. My awakened peers and I see nothing new here; obsolete as the future is: we want to get out of this place.

I walk further and am greeted with the fragrant night breeze; cold and fresh. As I light up my first stick, I cannot help but get a renewed sense of comfort to a seemingly mundane ambience. Chirping birds, surrounding trees and encompassing tall skyscrapers, also accompanied in an area with a great mix of

Western and Eastern architecture painted in red and green—Wan Chai. Enjoying my Marlboro light, within the distance, I see an old man hunched down, pushing a cart filled with stacks of unfolded boxes. He is wearing a grey hat and a loose white T-shirt accompanied by a khaki-coloured vest and pants—he is heading in my direction. I am quite bewildered as to what his intention might be. As he approaches, I begin to recognize him, he turns out to be the building attendant. I sigh in relief. He parks his cart, stations it adjacent to me, and then pulls out a pack of Double Happiness. He tries to light his cigarette, but fails; it is out of fluid. He sighs in aging frustration. After failed attempts, he gazes in my direction and our eyes meet. I smirk. He approaches and asks me for a lighter, so I help him out. After lighting, he asks me: “why are you up this early?” With an awkward pause, I respond with my accented Cantonese, though I fully understand, I strategically reflect the topic back to him asking him: “why are you still working?” It also intrigues me why he is still awake and energized, since I also see him working even during daytime; patrolling the building, cleaning occasionally and so on. He responds with a raspy laugh: “[cusses] because I like to do so.” He asks for my age, “I’m 19”. “Crazy kid, smoking outside at this time” he mumbles and coughs from the tar build-up.

We converse smoothly, despite frequent mistakes of my enunciating the tones, he seems unbothered and keeps talking. The surrounding is filled with laughter and smoke in the air. “I’ve been working in this building for 30 years, non-stop”. He further exclaims by saying “before coming to Hong Kong, I was also like your age”. In his early life, during the 1950s, he worked as a “coolie”

across the Victoria Harbour coastline serving local market vendors. Until he hustled into owning a hardware store in Sai Ying Pun into the 70s.

Unfortunately, in a twist of fate, his shop was burned down accidentally when a kerosene stove burst. Despite him building his business from scratch, he was met with disappointment, as there was no means to compensate for all his losses in the ravaging fire. All his investment had gone into ashes. However, he was fortunate enough to have found this job as a building attendant. In the 80s, when the building was first built, he was the original worker to be employed. He currently resides in the building with his wife. He occasionally collects boxes and plastics to earn some money and also as a habit. Out of curiosity, I ask him, “do you enjoy what you're doing?” “This work has grown on me, just like the building. It feels as if it's a part of me. The daily routine has become part of me, this is my life and I am content. Then, if I stopped, where will I get money to support myself and my wife? I don't have kids to help fund me. No matter what, I will work till I die, I will be here forever.”. His last words brand themselves into my soul and his burning dedication lights up a new spark within me: a lineage of Lion Rock resilience from an immigrant man to an immigrant's boy.

I reach for my phone and check the time, it's 4:50 am. At this point, I start to feel heavy eyes. He also notices, “I guess, it is time for you to go to bed kid, you seem sleepy”. I agree. We exchange our goodbyes, and he disappears into the dark. I walk back to my house and head to the washroom to wash away the

cigarette stench, so my parents will not discover it. I brush my teeth again and prepare to sleep. As I tuck myself to a familiar bed: I know I am home. My thoughts drift to a gradually perceivable future: dawn arrives. Then, I pull up my phone one last time, it is 5:03 am. What happens next: I stay, drift and dream.

Hanging On...

Writing competition winning piece

Li Coffey Yu Fei, St. Mary's Canossian College

Maybe it was one day, an hour or two... I have no idea. Here I am, hanging on a branch in the middle of nowhere. I know it is easy to fall to my death. Oh how very easy... I look down at the space below me. I wonder what death would feel like. Is it quick and painless or quick but excruciating? It would be easy letting go, saving myself from all these hardships. My hands blistered and my arms sore. I feel sweat dripping down my face, making one of the many trails. It's ironic how the current situation is like the part from "Divergent" where Christina has to stay on the rail for a few minutes and when Al decides to end his life. I am here at a crossroads, to either fall to my death or continue hanging here for what feels like an eternity. I swear I can hear Janus whispering in my ear 'choose, choose, choose...' Great, I am now officially a senile person. It might be due to the fact that I am dying of a few things. I am utterly dehydrated and my broken knee doesn't really help. I tried washing all those thoughts away with the mantra I used to chant, "It'll take only a bit more time." Now, it is useless. I asked myself how much longer before someone notices where I am. By that time, I might have been dead. It's funny how the world loves to contradict me. First "Divergent", then Janus and now this. Can't it see how humiliated and battered up I am? I am again consumed by my thoughts. I am reconsidering falling and ending my misery.

My mind returns to the time when I loved reading Percy Jackson. I wonder how he found the strength to come out of the River Styx. Maybe because his family was still alive. Well, you know what? That is totally not helping at all. My family lays dead at the bottom of this very cliff because I requested to come over. What does that make me? That makes me a murderer. I killed them. Should I go where they went? After all, I deserve to go to hell. I try thinking about other things, but my thoughts are waging war. My family is dead because of me, but my thoughts finally focused on the fact that my friends might be waiting for me on the other side. If I could just hold on a bit more, they might notice that I am gone. I again think about the cons. Even if I were to survive after this, would it be considered as living? Being alive under the constant crushing guilt, I am pretty sure I may resort to suicide at the end, so if I will in the future, why wait?

I am about to let go when I end up in the realm of The Fault in Our Stars. I recall how Augustus mentioned that he'd rather die leaving a mark. Gus also said to live a full exciting life. At the time I was foolish, really. I always hoped that I would die a swift death rather than a slow excruciating one. I finally feel Gus and Hazel. I really do. They have cancer when I..., well I am lamenting over how accursed I am hanging by a thread. I'll do what it takes to stay alive. I need to show Earth my worth. I shall live to the fullest. I shall leave my mark. Who knows? I may spend the rest of my life hanging on this branch or I may die of dehydration, but I am sure as hell never giving up.

Isolation



Photo by Meriç Dağlı

*“Without kins
home in three cities
haunted by the notion
of my lack of devotion*

*How would I learn
to withstand burns
if you were not here
at every turn?”*

(From the poem - 20 Years)

20 Years

Ip Nam Nicole

When ghosts were floating bed sheets
without a soul, I believed
you were the comfort I devoured for sleep,
the nightlight I masked for bravery

Wounded cheeks, calluses on my knees
plagued by invisible forces
unmoving and timid,
you built me swing sets on a tree

In your water
warm and well-weathered
you carried me in your blood
hoping to grow flowers out of me

Without kins
home in three cities
haunted by the notion
of my lack of devotion

How would I learn
to withstand burns
if you were not here
at every turn?

20 years, my longest companions
ghosts on missions
in my one-bed apartment
frightened in your absence

Phantoms, I no longer run
nightlights as my guardian
Bruised, but unshaken
I found strength in being one

Ascent

Siu Leong Huen Justin

“... cure your mother... look for the indigo flowers in the fields high in the mountain ...” The doctor’s words echoed faintly in my mind. I glanced at the daunting spire ahead of me. It perched high atop the land, returning my gaze as it silently observed the plains beneath. Its white, scantily clad summit touched the golden skies effortlessly. A stone trail lay before me, covered in a thick layer of snow.

I inspected my knapsack to check that I had enough supplies to last the trip. “Preparation is the key to success, my child.” My father’s teachings resurfaced in my mind. He was a hunter, the best in the village and never backed down from a good challenge. Mother tended to the fields while he was away and I helped out as much as I could, but she always managed to finish things more efficiently. I enjoyed watching the sunrise with both of them back then. The skies coated in a golden paint, as the sun rose from its slumber, it was a sight to behold. Life took a turn for the worst however; father never returned from a hunt one day, and soon mother fell ill. She would claim that everything is fine, but her illness was painfully obvious.

I ventured slowly into the mountain. The foothills were littered with frozen husks of trees, as winter mercilessly forced them to shed their leaves and sucked them dry of life. The monotonous snowy landscape seemed endless, everything appeared froggier and the air became harder to breathe.

#

As winter was in full force, the winds howled stronger, unleashing their fury upon the land. The snow rained harder, usurping the stars in the sunless sea. The moon vanished along with its companions. Without the stars for navigation, I stopped and set up camp for the night. I searched my knapsack, and a peculiar flower fell out. It emitted a pleasant scent, tempting me to sniff it.

A whiff of indigo smoke reached for me. Suddenly, the winds stopped howling and the snow ceased raining. Startled, I studied my surroundings. The silver moon had been restored to the night sky, as did its starry brethren. Under the moonlight, a figure approached my camp. It was my father.

“Father? ... Where have you been all this time?” I stood up cautiously. “I promised I’d return ... I’m sorry it took this long ... How have you been?” he looked not a day older than when he left. “I’m ... I’m fine. Mother’s sick and I’m looking for her cure.” I stammered. “You should rest. You look tired.” His voice was as gentle as I remembered. Heeding my father’s advice, I turned in for the night.

#

Mother would be glad to see him alive and well. Since she fell ill, she had not had a single comfortable night’s rest. It pained me to see her suffer. However, I was not certain if father was here last night. When I woke up, he was nowhere to be seen. I searched for him, but he left no footprints in this heavy snow.

#

The skies darkened as the clouds gathered, blocking out the sun and prevented the beams from descending upon the land. The blizzard grew stronger and the snow on the ground grew thicker. The stone trail faded as I ascended further up the mountain.

Soon, I reached an escarpment, dotted with small rocks on its surface. There seemed to be no other way around but climbing it. In a hurry, I scaled quickly and was close to the top. I raised my hand for the final rock, but then it cracked, and I was sent tumbling down. The snow broke my fall, but my back was wounded. The number of climbable rocks also shrunk; another climb seemed impossible.

I curled up in defeat and held the odd flower unconsciously, its scent emanated in the air. Moments started to feel like an eternity. It was then my father reappeared. He left no footsteps in the snow as he approached. "Stand tall, my child..." He pointed at a tree nearby the cliff, motioning me to climb it. Father was always excellent at casing his surroundings. With his guidance, I attempted the second climb. As I looked back, he vanished again.

#

After more long windy paths, with the occasional tree trunks and boulders serving as an impediment, at long last, I reached the fields, but I was horrified immediately. The wilted corpses of the indigo flowers laid silently on the barren fields, unwavering in the blizzard. "NO, NO, NO!" I shouted as I hurried over to where the flowers were. My last hope for my mother was snuffed out. My tears poured like waterfalls, melting away the cold snow.

It was then I recalled the strange flower in my knapsack and rummaged for it. The flower looked as if it was just plucked, somehow managing to stay intact throughout the journey. I clutched it by my chest, its intoxicating scent enveloped me. Suddenly, an ethereal hand touched my fists. It was my mother's.

“Mother...? How are you here...?” the words barely escaped my mouth as I sobbed uncontrollably. She looked full of life, as if she had never been ill.

“Let go, child...”

“If I do... then you, you will die!”

“Everything will be fine...”

Before I could even respond, she pointed towards the edge. Her figure nodded gently, nudging me to go over. It was sunrise. The golden skies had returned, and the dark clouds had dispersed. A gentle breeze blew as the snowfall ended, restoring the land to its lush green colour. Spring had dawned.

I sat down, in awe of the beauty before me. Remembering my mother, I glanced behind as father had joined her and stood by silently. “Will you watch this sunrise with me? One more time?” my tears flowed again. They nodded and sat down. The sun shone brighter than ever.

By noon father and mother had disappeared. As the indigo flower in my hand withered away, I descended the mountain without looking back.

The Remains of a Waning Crescent Moon

RTHK Hong Kong's Top Story 2020 First Runner Up

Wendy Law

A flurry of light. Expanding. It seeped through the line of narrow windows installed below the supermarket's roof. The rarely clear sky, always drab and dull, was suddenly coloured by a brilliant azure.

Thin clouds were hovering serenely, contrasting the air of tension arising from the 2-metre social distances between each person. Waiting among the long queue in front of the self-checkout machines, I was the only person wearing a mask and gloves, which were sent to me by friends in Hong Kong.

The summer of 2020 seemed eternal, especially in a foreign land. It had been two years since I first set foot in Edinburgh, where I was welcomed by an overcast sky that stayed the same thereafter. One year, seven months and twenty-three days, to be precise. It was the amount of days beneath a foreign sky, and now approaching the second month of a nation-wide lockdown.

I had this illusion of time being almost stagnant, like the slowly proceeding queue I was at. Perhaps the illusion was exacerbated by living in the times of pandemic, while being far away from home. But ever since last year's summer, days dragged on and on. I thought about my homeland. I thought about a city on fire. I thought about my family, my parents and my beloved Grandpa. I thought about my friends and classmates there. Looking forward into the future was like gazing into the dark night, an abyss that would eventually absorb and devour me.

Shaken by this unaccustomed feeling, I had attempted to escape it by looking backward, dodging the abyss' returning gaze, and searching for the vanishing trails of vapours, the residues of tranquillity, left by the drifting clouds of bygone days—

The metal handles of shopping baskets snapped and clang – and I spied instead, a stampede of days that had ripped themselves out of the neat grids of an old calendar, like tumbling supermarket shelves, products gushed out of the rows of racks; as if the glassware and wine bottles smashed, losing all sense of calmness and reason, the liquid splashed and spilled, charged with fury and questions, echoed with a broken howling. They landed on my paralyzed body that was stuck in an alien spacetime.

I scanned the basketful of food and seasonings one by one, a pack of minced pork, two aubergines, several garlic bulbs, red chilies and various groceries. The red beam blinked and beeped. The shelves and racks behind me were stable, the products intact, sitting silently on the place they belonged.

Exiting the supermarket, my spectacles fogged up as I breathed against my mask. Passers-by avoided me. I happened to be the sole mask wearer walking down the street. The day was stretching again. Here, the daytime could last well until midnight. International students often joked about this was the real reason Great Britain once called itself "the empire on which the sun never sets."

Even the sky looked different on this land. Broader and taller. In my home city, the sky was covered by suffocating high-rises and infrastructures - a

monstrosity named money – growing up and up, leaving its dwellers a restrictive view of concrete, concrete and concrete.

I hurried past the empty Edinburgh Waverley train station, where the once crowded dessert and pastry stores had shut down. But the sweet aroma of candy floss before the lockdown lingered in my mind. The puffs of fleeting sugary fantasy within the glass and steel structure, reminded me of Kowloon Tong MTR station. The same scent of sweetness. There were bakeries near the gates and an old hawker selling a traditional Chiu Chow snack called Tong Chung Peng, a fragrant candy and coconut wrap.

Every day after school, at the corner of the footbridge, I watched as the old man sprinkled shreds of desiccated coconut onto small pipes of white candy wafers. He folded the wrap together and placed the snack carefully inside a brown paper bag. Eight dollars each, he would say with a smile when handing me the little bag.

Until one day, the stall disappeared.

Weeks had gone by, and I found out from a classmate that the hawker passed away. It shook me – what was tangible a week ago became intangible memories. Time became unreal. I resorted to Grandpa’s saying that we all die three times. The first time is the “death” as we know it – a biological phenomenon: the heart stops beating, the lungs stop breathing; certified by a doctor, followed by a list of protocols, including funerals that are like official closing ceremonies. It is an idea strangely preconceived, which could indeed happen to any person at any moment, yet normal people wouldn’t bother to think about it.

The concept of “dying after death” is more abstract. You die a second time when everyone who has memories related to you is gone, when the intangible parts of you also cease to exist. The Waverley station in front of me was morphing into a blurry image – a flickering Kowloon Tong and pieces of Hong Kong – as I wiped away the tears that were streaming down my face. When the tears dried a bit, seeing the huge public advertisements of COVID-19 measures, I struggled to stop myself from thinking about the third and complete death ...

I was back in my quiet student flat. Most international students went back home already. I headed to the kitchen, ready with ingredients to prepare a dish for this important day.

“Do I put in the garlic first, or the onions first? Mom—?” I realized rather late that minced pork should not be added to the dish today, so I used onions instead.

“Aiyah, — first—” She was answering from another continent, nine thousand and five hundred kilometres away, her voice was obstructed by poor wi-fi connection.

“The what first?”

“The — fir—st—” her frown froze as the connection finally failed. I noticed new wrinkles around her eyes.

After several unsuccessful attempts of reconnecting, I turned off the screen.

Little pale white crescents were lying on the chopping board.

I pressed the flat knife blade against those garlic cloves, but was unable to replicate how Mom could squash them with a slap – and manoeuvre the blade edge to slice in a seamless motion.

I tossed the chopped garlic into the pan. By the time the onion strips were sautéed into a golden-brown colour, the garlic pieces turned black. Yet I moved on to add the sliced aubergines braised in soy sauce.

When the dish was almost done, I pondered whether to call Mom again, but it was already late at night in Hong Kong. Since last year, I had been bugged by an irrational fear: each phone call I made home could be the last one. I was exasperated by the uncertainty, the unexpected and the worst – Murphy’s Law – “Anything that can go wrong will go wrong”. Just like when I left Hong Kong, it had never crossed my mind that there was a possibility of never returning – everyone from home warned if I chose to go back, I ought to be extra cautious with everything I say, write, and do. But sometimes, being very very carefully is not enough. You are just a nobody, like the sand and pebbles in a river, you should not go against the flow, it is dangerous.

I looked out the kitchen window and saw a waning crescent moon emerged, hanging on the purple foreign sky. It was already 10 p.m. when the solemn night descended fully. The sky seemed emotionless and expanding. Before turning on the lights, I recalled the same day last year, receiving that dreadful phone call, whilst the TV was playing news footage of black smoke rising from a city of howling protestors. That was a night when a similar crescent moon was hung in the dark sky...

I took a bite of my dinner – “braised aubergine with minced pork” was my Grandpa’s favourite dish. The minced pork was replaced by onions. I had to be a vegetarian today, because it was his death anniversary. The dish tasted vastly different from the one he used to cook. For a moment, I felt lost. The feeling was gradually replaced by sorrow. I retrieved, from the fridge, the pack of panna cotta that was reduced to clear in the supermarket. With restaurants and stores all closed amid the lockdown, a panna cotta was the closest I could get which resembled the look of a silky tofu pudding. It was his favourite dessert.

When Grandpa was gone, time ceased to flow. Just like witnessing the demise of a city – my homeland engulfed by flames, I know that something in my life was irrevocably altered. The home that was one year, seven months and twenty-three days ago, and nine thousand and five hundred kilometres away, was never the same again.

Time is relative. I never did understand Einstein’s Theory of Relativity, but in my own explanation of the relativity of time, which is devoid of complicated formulae and equations, I could testify that in the sometimes seemingly slow passage of time, there are numerous moments when minutes and seconds fell short.

There is never enough time for me to spend with the people I love. Time is too short for those who cared. Time is compressed in a capitalist city. Time stops ticking for the youths who are serving behind bars for the ideals and justice they believed in. And when time ends, people are startled. They wake up from their dreams to catch the remains of the waning crescent moon – the past and the golden age that was only found in reminiscence – the fragments of

dilating time.

I turned off the local radio playing Lady Gaga and Ariana Grande and tapped open a playlist of songs by Anita Mui, Danny Chan, and Leslie Cheung – singers from the so-called “golden era of Cantopop”. One’s love and appreciation for Leslie grew with age. His gentle murmuring of lyrics was composed of the softest sighs –

“The wind keeps blowing, reluctant to leave, the tears keep falling not on my face, but in my heart... when I look at you...” I had the surreal feeling of being at home in Hong Kong, back in my childhood.

My friends here liked to complain about the lockdown and quarantines, the unbearable distance that was created between people. I told them I was used to the distance. I was used to being far away from homeland and the people I love. But distance did not stop me from reaching out. We are going to live on, we are not going to die for “a third time” – in which the world ends, obliterating everything we’ve ever known and would ever have known, including the concept of “death” and “dying after death”. Even if it happens, it doesn’t matter – at least that was what Grandpa said – when the universe ends, it doesn’t matter anymore.

As I continued dinner, I gazed into the night sky. I knew that I wasn’t alone. I enjoyed this moment, knowing that I was accompanied by the shimmering remains of the moon.

The Year of the Rat

Chhetri Aishwarya Thapa

Saturday night in January, a rat entered our home through the window's ledge,
And made itself comfortable under my bed.

I got a long stick and banged around,

Hoping it leaves due to the sound.

A few hours went by and no movements were heard.

Surely the banging scared it off.

Gleefully, I shut the windows and said goodnight,

Thanking god that the rat left without a fight.

Two am, I was fast asleep,

but suddenly woke up when I heard my bed creak.

Followed by a crack, then a cloth tear.

What I saw next gave me the biggest scare.

Red eyes, matted hair,

It was on my headboard,

Pacing back and forth,

Like a worried father whose child is not home.

Out of fright I screamed.
It quickly looked down at me.
Then sprinted off down the wall,
And disappeared.
With the knowledge of it being here,
I opened the window to let it leave.
Then I locked myself and my family in the living room,
While praying and hoping it does not enter this room.

The next thing I did was google:
“When will you know the rat left”.
Encountered outrageous stories,
and did not sleep.
Sunday Morning sleep-deprived
I slowly and tiredly entered my room.
Or the remnants of it, as it was turned upside down,
In our quest to find the rodent lying around.

No rat was found but it left its mark
The next few days I had no spark
Constantly looking under the bed.
And jumping every time I see my socks.
Ah! Again!

I had gone insane!

A week went by

I kept the windows shut

And slept in the living room, never entering my room

My parents accepted, it had gone

But I was always on edge.

A month went by

I think, for sure, it is gone.

It is gone, right?

I have not heard any creaking and scratching.

At the dinner table my mom said,

A little rat can do no harm dear.

It has gone,

And the window net will make sure that it can never appear.

Adaptability

Rai Anusaran

Corona started right off the bat.

We all started to stay in our flat.

Isolate ourselves in quarantine.

For a total days of fourteen.

Social distancing became real.

The mask was our shield and seal.

Face off with our mask on.

Hoping the devil's work would be gone.

Tried to distance ourselves 6 feet.

Before we end up 6 feet deep.

Transformation



Photo by Sam Ho

*“What struck me the most was her face; it was the face of resilience.
Her body was frail and bony, but her face was like a glowing phoenix,
renewed with resilience.”*

(From the short story - Rise to Resilience)

The Rise to Resilience

Rehman Redha

Slowly, I ascended the infamous mountain, Mount Everest. Every slippery surface and jagged rocks threatened to slow me down. Regardless of the mountain's hunger to swallow me, I let my endurance carry my feet to the highest point on earth.

I have been training for this day, and just like these jagged rocks, I had trials that tried to stop me. The icy wind felt like cold fingers brushing my bare cheeks and suddenly this irresistible fear overtook me, I felt an impending doom, much like the time I almost lost my own life.

"No need to be afraid," I told myself. After a deep breath, my fear slowly ebbed away.

"Gem, are you alright back there?" Steven hollered from behind. Steven was our mountain guide, and he was experienced with the route.

"Yes. I was just a little shaken," I said with a shiver.

"It's dropping to -40 Celsius and oxygen level is almost dropping by 60%. We should be at camp 3 soon." Steven informed us.

After an hour of trekking through snow, we settled onto the camp and after an hour of trekking through snow, we settled onto the camp and pitched our tents.

"Here, this should warm you up." Steven gave me a mug of warm tea. "So what brings you to this notorious part of the world?" He asked me, a curious look in his gaze.

“I want to conquer this mountain, it’s my second battle.” I sipped my tea and felt my throat warm up with the pleasurable heat.

“What was your first battle?” Before I was able to answer him, he was called for help. One of our teammates decided to continue the path alone.

“Matt! Get back here, you CAN’T go by yourself!” Steven yelled. But Matt kept his back turned and trudged on, we knew it was hopeless for him.

I recalled what the villagers said, the Sherpas’ words of wisdom. *“When you climb the mountain, you need to strip away your pride. Approach it with humility, or else the mountain will swallow you.”*

Many have died from frostbite or lack of oxygen because of their prideful ambition. In a way, we were standing over a graveyard.

The Sherpas’ words rang in my head as I watched Matt slowly disappear into the blizzard.

“Shoot!” Matt shook his head, “I hope he lives for the sake of his family.”

“Gem! You must live for us, for the sake of your family. Fight this battle.”

Mum’s voice was laced with worry. I know I had no hope but maybe there still was a tiny bit of hope that something could change. Every day I would wake up to this cruel monster tearing me apart, exploring in me and spreading fast out of control. You can fight it, that was what everyone told me. Instead, it was fighting me. It took over my world and left me hopeless.

I woke up with a start, rubbing away the sleep from my eyes. I heard the shuffling of feet from my tent and knew it was time to move on.

As we climbed, I glanced up involuntarily and hoped to see Matt's silhouette, but he wasn't there.

We reached a cliff, and there was a makeshift bridge connecting the other end of the cliff. I looked down and squeezed my hiking poles. "You got this!!" Tentatively, we crossed the bridge one by one. I trained my gaze ahead and approached the bridge. With my heart hammering, I took a step and as I was in the mid-way point, the bridge wobbled at the strain and I lost my footing. I cried out and clung to the cold metal.

My eyes traitorously darted to the bottom and there, laying lifelessly, was Matt. His unmoving eyes stared right through me.

I gasped.

My mom gasped when I woke from unconsciousness. It was hard to adjust my eyes to the white fluorescent lights first thing. The pungent smell of the hospital made me want to puke but I didn't have the strength to do so.

"Gem! You're awake? SHE'S AWAKE! DOCTOR, MY DAUGHTER IS AWAKE!" My mom cried out in relief.

I was alive and the machine next to me was beeping rhythmically, confirming my mom's words. I wondered how long I was out. I tried to remember and then it struck me. I remembered my mom saying, 'fight this battle'. Pain started to circulate my head and my memories flooded back. I touched my scalp, and my bony fingers met bare skin.

"Gem, look at me!" My mom smiled with tears of joy.

“Gem, look at me!” Steven shouted. I tore my gaze from Matt’s body.

“Now, I want you to listen carefully, Gem. Move slowly to us.” I nodded at Steven’s instructions.

There was a deafening silence, as I moved my body slowly. The whole way I kept my eyes focused on my destination and as I pulled myself one last time, the tension was gone. Pats on my shoulders were given and I smiled.

I made it.

We took the time to say our silent prayers for Matt and moved on.

With our oxygen tanks on, we finally made it to the top. Everyone shouted with triumph, and we stood staring at the majestic view that stretched around us for miles. We put up flags and pictures to show our victory. I took out a photo and I placed it among the other photos of climbers.

Steven

Like everyone else, Gem placed something of hers to show her victory. I still haven’t found out what her first battle was in life but as I looked at the picture, I got my answer.

In the photo, there was Gem, bony and bald with tubes connected to her wrists. Cancer? She was battling cancer.

What struck me the most was her face; it was the face of resilience. Her body was frail and bony, but her face was like a glowing phoenix, renewed with resilience.

Beef Wellington (Your Homey Uni Life from Scratch)

Lo Wing Yan

Cooking Time: 4 years

For this recipe you will need:

a naive freshman

2 cups of friends fungus, include some wild ones if you like

some social lubricant oil

an exchange semester

joys and tears to taste

shatters of a broken heart

1 extravagant musical

a little eloquence for dusting

3 tbsp. sexual awakening sauce

500g of inventive teachers, thawed if frozen

1. First, you need to season the freshman with joys and tears. Make sure to cover every aspect of its life. Sear it quickly on a hot pan with some social lubricant oil. We will bake it later so you need not let it be well done. We just want it to still maintain its juice and original insight after it got roasted by the outer environment.

2. Even if flambé is totally optional, it can bring some extravagant and deep taste to the dish. By partially burning off the volatile alcohol, flambéing reduces the alcoholic content of the dish while keeping the flavours of the liquor. I use one musical to help enhance the sweet and smoky flavour but you can just use any other alcohol.

3. Brush the sexual awakening sauce on the meat and let it rest. Make sure to brush it while the meat is still hot so it absorbs all the flavour. Then, let the meat rest. This allows time to collect its thoughts and compose its emotions. This can help to spice up the dish while softening the meat from the inside.

4. Next, blend the friends fungus into a paste. This is a very free recipe and you can choose any form of friends here. Fry the mixture on a heated pan with a little social lubricant oil to release more moisture. Season with joy and tears as well. There is no recommended time for how long you should spend time with your friends, as the key here is quality, not quantity. They should be able to hold their shapes without much of your help. Remove the duxelle from the pan and leave to cool.

5. Place shatters of a broken heart on the work surface. It should be large enough to wrap around the sophomore and the duxelle. Hearts are made to be broken so don't be afraid when handling them. However, do treat them with care as they are very thin and fragile.

6. Spread the duxelle onto the shatters, followed by the sophomore. Wrap them tightly together as you want your dish to be fulfilling but not hollow. Put it in the refrigerator to set firm.

7. Preheat the oven to your desired temperature. If you want the situation to heat up, you may want to set a higher degree. Or if you would like to let it slow to warm up, you can set a lower degree with a longer time.

8. Dust the working surface with a little eloquence to avoid any sticky situations. Put the inventive teachers on the board and wrap it around the chilled meat. Score the roll slightly to create a better impression with a sharp knife. Glaze the top of the roll with an exchange semester if applicable to give it a nice golden colour. This step is not necessary but will definitely touch up the appearance of the resume and make it more appealing to others.

9. Bake the dish according to personal preference, but at least until the pastry is golden brown and cooked. Meanwhile please do not open the oven door as it will let the heat out and affect the rise of the senior. Rest for 10 minutes before carving.

Eden's Garden

Pun Tulsi Kumari

Decades ago, in search of the door to the garden of Eden,
Courage came to him like an explosion, he
hopped through forests, mountains and oceans, he
erred nowhere, then he reached the paradise with ardor.

There were flowers, there were molds,
There was gold, in its shining surface, there were moles.
Amidst them, he built a house with blood, sweat and tears,
Then, he built a circle of closely knitted family, who nourished his fears.

With darkness ebbed away, he lived a life of endless rainbows and sunshine,
He felt as cosy as a turtle feels in its shell, but
Somewhere over the horizon, a blazing tempest erupted,
The ground creaked, cracked and crashed.

The inhabitants had touched the untouchable,
The house, built piece by piece from portion of his soul had awakened, it
reached its hand, plucked the thorns and hurled it away,
And he looked on, as the house slashed the circle he built.

He looked on to the road he had travelled, and
found the road waned away like a vapour,
he looked on at his leg and found himself stationed on a thin layer of ice,
He decided to follow his circle to the land of unknown.

Now, with a head the colour of gloomy night,
With a back heavy as the turtles, he has to move.
Courage did not flare this time; fears did,
He dragged, lurked and thought of the paradise that had been.

I came to you, you gave me the world,
I laugh I cried,
Yet I never despised,
you will forever be, idolized.

Journal

Fung Sin Man Connor

Journal Entry: 26 January 2021

I don't write as much as I used to?

I have this obsession with being immersed in the moment. Fully. I later learnt that such intensity might be a symptom of mania or hyperfixation.

I hold onto memories dearly. "This lives in my brain rent-free." As memes would say. Random acquaintances anchor certain stages of your life into your head, leaves you with wonders propelling more than you can bear: *How are they doing? Can they survive without parts of their candid self forever immortalized in someone's head, their demeanor, their youth, their taglines and lack of maturity? Can you survive without knowing whose obsession you live in? How can they survive without it? Can you survive without it?* I later found out these people are who I project fragments of self onto, that they are versions of myself who I could not be, and wasted opportunities. If only we had become friends, if only I had kissed who; if only I was outspoken back then.

And to live with that intensity is a difficult lifestyle, I can hear my mom say; and frankly I did not have a choice. The same could be said about being queer, and being mentally ill; nothing I can provide physical evidence to prove. I have been watching Queen's Gambit lately, during dinnertime with mother. I always have problems watching shows with emotionally responsive characters,

especially those where children cry "Mommy and daddy, please don't get a divorce." I considered those screenwriters to have very poor observations of how children's psychology work, or simply to lack basic observation skills, because no one talks like that. Beth Harmon is someone I can relate to, but not in a healthy way. I do not understand why pedestrians do not dodge when a car hits, nor has the tragic romantic trope worked on me when an excited lover reunites with their love interests, just to be killed by an accident because their lingering glance made them situationally ignorant.

There have been discussions on "comfort characters" lately.

"Bitches be like 'this is my comfort character' and it's the overtly confident, wise-cracking and flirty character who uses sarcasm to hide how much they're hurting inside bc they don't want to be a burden on the people they care about."

Pshh, I dismissed, *that's not me*; and the follow-up twitter said,

"Bitches be like 'this is my comfort character' and it's a character who hasn't had a day of real happiness in years."

Well, okay then I guess.

I understood tonight during dinner that, our brains are resilient machines. As for I, I relate to characters whose coping mechanisms give them quirks, or disconnects them from the world emotionally, entirely. Lost all serotonin so early in childhood, as they say. Maybe not entirely, just with the exception of their one true love interest, who saw through it all with their inquisitive stares, intensely, and beams their walls of mental barriers down. Oh, and how that influenced me. I had unknowingly waited on somebody like that, my Pixie

Maniac Dream Boy, Girl, Enby, to emotionally dump on. I later learnt that it is toxic if not done healthily. Your love partner is not supposed to be your therapist and save your life.

I have had a journal before. I write down what I once owned so they would never truly be gone. I wonder if this intense nostalgia and longing is temporary, or it is something I would outgrow in my thirties. I used to dream that my future would read all of them: I have been waiting on you, I wrote down everything, and so you would not miss out on my life. Now I am happily in love and noticed that each page of my old journal was downright depressing. Do I write less than before because I had no one to listen to me in the past? Can a happy person be an artist? My loneliness had brought my writing career here, and what do I do now that I am mentally better? There really aren't answers, and those answers aren't necessary. Either way, I am just laying here some o'clock in the morning, thinking about Everywhere In The End of The World, hallucinations and cockroaches.

Fredrick the Pilot

Writing Competition - Second Runner Up

Fung Chun Hei Hazel, Pope Paul VI College

“Over! Over! Can you hear me? Aircraft HK276 is experiencing major turbulence...Ohh no! Ah!” Cried Fred, followed by a loud, almost ground-shaking crash...

It was an afternoon in the midst of summer 2020. In an apartment, filled with nothing but messiness, lived Fredrick Harper, or Fred for short. Beer cans, cigarettes, crumpled newspapers were all scattered on the floor of his, cobwebs and dust covered every corner of his apartment. You see, Fred was once a high-ranking pilot. However, the tables turned when the virus crashed in. He was recently discharged from work, and it was like falling out of heaven to him. “Who would pay for the bills?” “Who would make the money?” “Who would support the family?” All these thoughts lingered around his mind like haunting ghosts.

Previous colleagues of Fred mostly tried to lead new, fresh lives. Some planned for the future, some switched jobs, some even started businesses. On the other hand, Fred liked to lay on a couch, frustratedly complaining about being jobless to his daughter, Peggy. “What even is the point of working hard in this grey, dull and cruel world anyways?” He would aggressively ask his daughter.

Through her loving words, Peggy would remind her father to stay hopeful

during these tough times, but Fred still felt like society had given up on him completely, when the person who truly gave up on him, was no other than himself. Sometimes, Peggy would even get screamed at by her father, and she gained more fear of him each day.

In the midst of Fred's sorrow and disappointment, he heard loud noises coming from the window, noises that never appeared and should never appear in an apartment. The escalating levels of noise increased as it drew closer and it was almost ear-splitting. Fred got himself up, opened his eyes as wide as possible, and placed his head out of the window frame. Fred could not believe what he was encountering. He rubbed his eyes to double-check. And yes, that's what he saw- a plane rushing towards him at the speed of light! He didn't even have time to react, and, crash!

"Hey, sorry about this whole thing, are you alright?" Fred heard. He fluttered his eyes and looked around the room: it was a complete war zone- the walls were covered in deep cracks, the floor was covered in shattered glass shards, the furniture broken in half. He looked up, and strangely, he saw someone quite familiar, almost like a spitting image of himself. Fred with millions of question marks floating around his head asked, "Wait what? Who even are you? And what even happened?"

The person replied "Well...Long story short, I'm you in 2040! I'm the pilot of this spaceship from the future." pointing at the aircraft from outside the

window. Fred said in a joking tone, “Sure you did. And what’s your name? Fredrick Harper?” “Yes, actually” the man replied, then added “And you, or should I say I, got fired a month ago, and all you did was lay around like a total couch potato, huh?” Fred opened his mouth, raised his finger, and was about to defend himself, but words could not come out of his mouth, the man was entirely correct, Fred was speechless.

Fred nodded his head with embarrassment in the slightest way possible. Future Fred panned around the room, spotted about a dozen empty beer cans at a corner; he held one up and close to Fred and asked furiously, “What’s the point of wasting your precious time? Do you really want to live like this? Just follow me...” Future Fred led present Fred to his futuristic though half-destroyed spaceship. Out of curiosity, present Fred asked “Where are you taking me in this torn-up aircraft?” “You’ll see eventually.” Future him replied. With a click of a button, the shattered ship reformed back to its original shape, almost like a video rewinding. And with that, the ship took off into the sky, up into the clouds, and down into the lowest valleys.

Finally, they arrived at the same place they started at, but with something slightly different. The weather was shivering cold. Instead of being inside, all cozy and warm, surrounded by family, Fred was on the streets, in rags, all alone, begging for money. “You see, this is what your life would look like if you continued on like this,” said Future Fred, present Fred asked desperately “Without Peggy by my side, whatsoever?”

“Well...yes, this is reality. Remember, it’s never too late to change! Now live your life to the fullest Fred! The pandemic might be a long and dark time to go through, but you’ll see the light at the end of the tunnel!” Although the words of Fred’s future self were harsh and straightforward, they stuck in his mind permanently. He put the encouraging reminder near and dear to his heart...

“Dad! Dad! Wake up!” Fred was brought back to reality by loud yells and hard shakes from Peggy. She added “You’ve been asleep for so long! Are you alright?” “I’m fine Peggy.” Holding onto Peggy tightly, he then whispered to himself “That was a weird one...”

Fred’s surreal dream definitely changed him for the better, as it reminded him to stay positive in tough situations. He no longer laid on his bed all day long, but instead searched through each website and flipped through each newspaper to look for job applications. Although the process was long and dreadful, he found support in Peggy. Their father-daughter relationship grew stronger each day, and their home was filled with nothing but happiness and laughter.

Lord, I'm begging you for one more miracle, please! **To Yu Shi, Pope Paul VI College**

By the time Nora went home, it was already midnight. Her soul was devoid of energy and her head was spinning terribly. She lay down on her large and pink bed without a second thought. Her eyes stared at the ceiling blankly for a few moments. Then she closed them. Her mind suddenly recalled a child's voice screaming, "Lord, I'm begging you for one more miracle, please!"

"Miracle?" Nora was not a stranger to this word. In fact, she heard this word from her patients most of the time when she was working as a doctor. To her that this word was meaningless. Only fools would believe that. It would take much more effort for a little girl who lost her father twenty years ago to still believe in miracles...

"Daddy, wake up! It's time for breakfast! Can you hear me...?" Little Nora was grabbing the cold hand of her father and kissed it. Although she knew that her father was no longer alive, she found it much easier to believe her sentimental thoughts than dealing with the cruelty of reality. So, she convinced herself that her father was only sleeping, and would wake up soon. But he never did.

"Mommy, why doesn't daddy wake up?"

"My sweetheart, daddy went to heaven. He is never coming back." Nora's

mom, Elizabeth, was doing her best to tell the truth in a better way.

“Mom...But I want daddy back...”

“Nora, let mommy repeat again, daddy will never come back.”

“But mommy...please...can you bring daddy back?”

“No, Nora, can’t you hear me saying that your daddy is NEVER COMING BACK?” Elizabeth’s patience began to wear thin and she lost it eventually. A moment of silence followed. “Nora, I’m so sorry...” Elizabeth made the first move to break the silence. She tried to beg for forgiveness with a little hug, but Nora shrugged it off.

“Mom, I’m gonna be out!” Nora walked out the door alone. Her tears were dancing in her eyes. Nora kept running until she found a church nearby. Her tiny hands pulled the door open and walked in. Her eyes fixated on the cross in the center of the Church. She knelt down on the icy marbled floor. She let the tears fall and cried out loud, “Lord, I’m begging you for one more miracle please...”

Nora opened her eyes and her memories were frozen in her head. She was breathing hard as if being strangled by a pair of invisible hands. Her heart was beating fast like she just finished running a mile. Her vision was blurry and her head ached. Ding-Dong. Someone rang the doorbell. Nora used her remaining strength to reach the door. When she opened it, she saw a tall man. His hair was dark brown in color, his eyes were blue as the ocean and he has got a short-boxed beard like her father. Nora did not bother to figure out who the man was. She simply wrapped her arms around him.

“Dad, is that you? I missed you so much...Dad, you know what, there was a family that died today and I couldn't save them all...” Nora bursted into tears but she continued, "I wish you were there to protect me. I feel like my life was incomplete without your presence...” Nora realized that her arms and legs were weak and shaking. Then she saw her world fall apart in front of her and her eyes closed, again...

“Nora, are you okay? You fainted,” asked the man.

“Yes. I'm alright.” Nora squinted her eyes at the man. She knew exactly who he was. He was one of her colleagues working at the hospital.

“Ben...am I dying?”

“I'm afraid so. You'll need surgery soon.”

Nora's heart sank. She took a deep breath and said, “You will do me a miracle, won't you?”

Ben burst into laughter, “I was joking. Don't take it seriously. You are perfectly fine! But did you call me your father?” Ben was putting on a funny voice and both of them laughed. Their eyes were staring into each other.

“I heard you saying miracle. Do you believe in one?”

“I used to.”

“Then why not?”

“Because my dad died.”

“Oh, I'm sorry.”

“No, it's okay.” There was an awkward silence between the two. Both of them were too shy to start a conversation. Nora searched in her mind for the books she had read about socialization, then she came up with this: “Thank you,

Ben.” Her face reddened.

Ben’s heart skipped a beat. He was appreciative. Never had he anticipated to receive thanks from Nora’s mouth. Though he did deserve it. He was always the first person to notice it when Nora was having a bad day. He would set everything aside to help her. Nora never expressed a word of thanks verbally, she kept it in her heart, instead.

“Oh, don’t mention it! I can be your miracle, if you don’t mind.” Ben sounded oddly serious. He hesitated for a second, then he said, “I like you, Nora.”

“So do I.” Their cheeks blushed. Ben laid his head down on Nora’s chest and Nora was pleased. Little did she know, she was already deeply in love with this man, who broke the walls to her heart and walked her through the sorrow.

Nora closed her eyes peacefully this time. She pictured her dad walking beside her and they held hands together.

“You did this, Nora. I’m so proud of you.” Her dad smiled and released his daughter’s hand. “Goodbye.”

Nora watched his father disappear and she whispered softly, “Goodbye, daddy.”

Perseverance



Photo by Sam Ho

*“You know you are a diamond,
Who always perseveres and persists under adversities, defeats and
pressure;
Who always ignites your sparkles inside as a fighter.
Ever try, ever failed. No matter, try again. Fail again, fail better.”*

(From the poem - Fail Better)

Fail Better

So Hiu Lam Timothy

- To the demented and the disturbed.

You had complained about how the world you are living in is dire,

Starvation, pollution, discrimination;

You had whined about how life has choked you to the point you cannot respire,

Stressed, depressed, distressed.

Then, as age and wisdom thrives,

You have slowly, but surely realised,

How your moans and groans have ceased,

As if the troubles have trivialised.

You finally understood,

It is your toil, sweat and tears that count;

Which make you tougher and better than ever,

And equip you to the many future obstacles to surmount.

A diamond,

So unique and exquisite,

Can only glitter as brightly as it now is,

After withstanding enormous stress and repeated polish as a prerequisite.

You know you are a diamond,

Who always perseveres and persists under adversities, defeats and pressure;

Who always ignites your sparkles inside as a fighter.

Ever try, ever failed. No matter, try again. Fail again, fail better.

A bloom in Zoom

Leong Kwan Wai Leo

Collapsed at the humming screen
Weary with bloodshot eyes, five lessons has it been
Desperate, betting on my vocal cord and lungs
To win your attention, appreciation
Even putting their stamina on credit

Still,
I went on with my lively commentary
Siphoned straight from a straining soul
Even when I knew, you were not digging the lesson
But on your Minecraft, digging diamonds

Till,
I was counting countless confused, uncaring countenance
But how could I catch your attention
When it's like catching a teasing fly
that only feeds on Apple in palm size?

Until,

You greeted me with a smile :)

As you hopped into the chatbox

Nodding every once in a while

Religiously as the pendulum in antique clocks

Until,

I quizzed you with a riddle

“What kind of room has no door or window?”

In unison, your eyes rolled and mouth mumbled

Your brows desperate to hug each other

Like an eight in Chinese character

Until,

I said “it’s mushroom”

Dumbfounded with voided eyes

You thought and finally realized

As you bloomed
with a smile just as wide,
as the cat Cheshire
But nonetheless,
pure, like the morning dew
Your face cringed with a pink hue,
Your cute little head slightly askew
Meanwhile unaware,
The muscles on my face took cue
And bloomed into a smile,
As silly as yours

Collapsed at the humming screen
Weary with bloodshot eyes, six lessons had it been
Cord cracked, breath depleted
But watch me,
As I put their longevity on credit
And do it all over again next week

EPI .demic. C

Tsang Ka Ying Rachel

Day by day like rolling dice,
little did they know it's the pain of life,
Weary hands with morsel air,
little did they know the weight they bear.

Stand up to the vile,
tolerate its hostile,
be elastic like soldiers,
to the reckless state of bile.

Arm up, our warriors,
reveal our strength,
of resilience, of stout, that endures thy pain.
Torrent of rage coming each day,
soaring our limits until the passé.

Embattling awe with fearless souls
Neither did they know their saint protects the whole.
Page by page like thrilling stories
Neither do they know it marks a history.

- Rachel
a poem to appreciate the resilience of frontline medical workers under the epidemic
:).

Dramatic Contingency

Professor Shirley G.L. Lim Poetry Writing Scholarship Runner Up

Chhetri Aishwarya Thapa

Drum roll please, let the curtains rise.

Let us sit back with wide open eyes,

And enjoy the spectacle commence.

Containing, characters developing, conflicting,

Contrasting both antagonist and protagonist in agony.

There might be heroic episode with fatal fragments.

Or emotional manipulation, compilation, separation.

However, or whatever it is we will be enchanted, enlightened and frightened

As the actors appear from backstage one after the other

Into their spotlight then dance, flutter and sing.

Sometimes completely silent.

The other times loud and proud.

Their performance is something that most of us will like.

However, some we may dislike,

Maybe it is the setting, or the actors, plots and plays does not look right.

No matter what we sit, watch, read, critique and process.

We laugh, we comment, we digest, and we entertain.

Some we may perish but most we will cherish.

Then as the story unwinds, I go up the stage,

Turn on the mic and hopefully with grace like the actors previously here

Be able to reiterate the mystical word with much courage, care, and accuracy.

And then be applauded with the same extent.

Now we are nearing the stories end.

We are content with this fictional world.

We have understood it, talked about it, re-enacted it with compassion, care, and
delight.

Now it is the end.

The characters are bowing, we are standing, applauding, cheering.

Some may even throw some flowers to the stage.

The others may just leave.

And I will too but with composer, smile, and ease.

People Like Me

Pun Tulsi Kumari

With thoughts I roam,
Roam the same road,
Rushing, touching, pushing, pulling,
Yet I see nothing,
I feel a void lurking,
until,
I see, see the faces of,
People like me.

I will be lost in the realm of thoughts,
Rushing back and forth,
In a brutal battle of memory and imagination,
I dive deep into the realm, until,
I hear,
The voices of people like me.
I move my head and become,
Aware.

Aware of the life that is going on around me,
The voices act as an alarm,
I see them, they see me.
I feel censored, they do too,
And I don't mind it.
Because in that new realm that just opened,
I feel golden rays spreading.

Yet I have to move, to walk,
My eyes follow them,
My ears leap towards them,
But my legs walk away from them.
And I don't see them anymore.
I don't hear them anymore.
The same void that lingered around,
Takes power and conquers me.
I fall back into the realm of my thoughts.
Blinded, deafened, numbed,
I walk on.

These are the perks, of people like me.
If you climb a little higher,
You will find it hard to see people like me.
If you climb a lot higher,
Seeing people like me,
Is like spotting a lost person in the jungle,
A vanished plane in the ocean,
And it just makes me wonder,
Why the Atlantic and Pacific don't mix,
Why they are not taught to mix.

In times when I feel like I am losing the battle,
I go places where I find,
People like me.
Yet, I want to reach the top of the hill,
So, I submit,
Because I will be there when,
people like me are seeking,
people like us.

Drawing to resilience

Chan Ka Man

Wherever my eyes lingered,
It was beckoning me over with its finger.
An inner monster,
Fed on loneliness and took away my palpitation.
News about rising virus infection,
I could feel butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

Till that day my phone was broken,
Feeling whatever surrounded me was all in silence.
A place where everything was in tranquility,
Without media-constructed anxiety.
Now I'm able to clear my head in serenity,
And bring that beautiful butterflies back to nature.

When the butterflies and stress fly away,
I draw the entire scenario onto a painting.
Although my artwork is Picasso free,
I find it satisfying to depict my feeling.
After my phone is repaired,
I post my drawings and encouraging quotes on social media.

Now there is no monster inside,
Through indulging in art can I put it aside.
It is starving to death,
I feel no loneliness even though I'm alone.
Hope I can even draw to share the power of resilience,
And to portray the color of pleasure.

Resilience - An Essay

Writing Competition - First Runner Up

Liu Ka Wai Judy, Maryknoll Convent School
(Secondary Section)

rɪ'zɪljəns/

noun

noun: resilience; noun: resiliency; plural noun: resiliencies

1. the capacity to recover quickly from difficulties; toughness.

Each individual has to inevitably face a time of weakness at some point in his, her, or their life. Perhaps it is the passing of a loved one; maybe it is a crossroads at which the choice you make will affect your life vastly, such as the decision of a life-long partner or multiple tempting job offers, and you are split between them. Maybe it is a fatal illness or disability or it is any such traumatic event.

Resilience is the psychological strength needed to battle through hardship and recover swiftly afterward. It is the inner reservoir of strength that you can depend on for support and encouragement. Evidence suggests that resilient individuals, or people who have experienced failure or weakness beforehand, demonstrate the ability to handle such adversity with an unyielding attitude.

However, this does not mean that these people feel any less grief or distress than others. Instead, they handle their problems in a way that helps them foster strength and self-care, allowing them to emerge as stronger and better people.

Those who lack such traits may find themselves dwelling on minor issues and make use of various unhealthy coping mechanisms to deal with their problems.

Resilience does not eliminate stress or erase all of your problems. Resilient individuals don't see the world through a rose-coloured lens; they understand that pain and discord always find a way into their lives. Disruption, loss and bitterness will inevitably be involved with them, but their mental outlook and strong-willed exterior helped them recover and move on.

Even in the event that something utterly unimaginable takes place, resilience allows people to harness their interior strengths and combat negativity.

Throughout this process, in many cases people not only learn to survive, but to also prosper.

Social support is a crucial variable in the development and process of resilience. According to many experts in the field of psychology, solace and reassurance from family and peers help in bolstering the person up during a time of need. Other factors of resilience also include:

- Possessing the capability to plan out a realistic and viable schedule and stick to it;

- Viewing oneself as a fighter, not a victim, while executing ideas to counterattack despondency;
- Bearing a positive outlook in life and seeing difficulties as a further opportunity to improve;
- Having control over emotions and knowing how to think with reason

Resilience is an important ability and it is a trait you can use to your advantage through practice over time. Start by setting practical tasks for yourself; for example, you can build up some potentially useful daily skills. Having a positive demeanor, a trusted support system, and taking active steps into improving yourself can go a long way in the face of challenges you might meet in the future, allowing you to truly understand and make use of your inherent resilience.

Good Resilience, Bad Resilience

Yan Sze Nga Maisie, Pope Paul VI College

Imagine getting a bacterial infection... as long as we treat it with the right dose of antibiotics, plenty of sleep and a strong mindset, we can tackle it in no time. What about being kidnapped? At the other end of the spectrum lies an array of trauma that one or two nights of sleep and medication can't fix. They can be coped with in counseling, or hours upon hours of therapy. How a setback is overcome all boils down to whether resilience is in effect. Resilience, from *Cambridge Dictionary*, means “the ability to be happy, successful etc, after something difficult or bad has happened”. One will take it, literally, being able to “bounce back” after being knocked down by adversity. This psychological quality can potentially prevent an individual from further harm.

Adversity can be physical, psychological, or both, yet resilience is more effective on the physical side. Resilience can help find potential benefits from the circumstance in addition to improving one's emotional and behavioural feedback to the problem. This extra lift of enthusiasm is scientifically shown to have health benefits and boost recovery. That being said, resilience can cause counter effects to a person suffering mental problems if it is not used sparingly or correctly.

The “resilience paradox”, is a concept that suggests the flaws of resilience in a mentally weak person. Similar to “toxic positivity”, the wrong interpretation or

overuse of resilience can cause a negative response due to an overemphasis on positivity. The only difference is in the former, someone affects the victim, whereas, in the latter, the victim affects themselves. Victims suffering from trauma are desperate to be normal again because of resilience, thus they either feel worse if they fail to do so, or seek extreme measures just to obtain happiness. This daunting situation is not only excruciating to the victims, it can harm others as well because victims' strive to be happy, and can cause them to either hurt others unknowingly from irrational actions like insulting others verbally, or having delusions and memory loss from the brain's attempt at protecting itself. When a crime is involved, it is extremely dangerous since victims' inaccurate testimonies could lead to an unfair conviction.

This happens simply because victims get the meaning wrong. Resilience comes only when the victim is actually in touch with the negative feelings, rather than negating them. Returning back to the concept of "toxic positivity", it can be observed that phrases like "look for a silver lining" or "it could be worse" are red flags when we try to comfort someone. Then why is "I should be much happier" acceptable? Resilience is no different from others' genuine support. At the end of the day, we just want our feelings understood and validated. That is exactly what resilience is supposed to be. But since the wrong interpretation is used indiscriminately over the years, people may easily have the wrong mindset when dealing with emotions, inducing mental illness or even suicidal thoughts.

Resilience is a self-protecting mechanism and it should do more good than harm as long as it is the correct resilience. In this COVID-19 pandemic, there are mainly two types of people: one type that follows the rules and another that does not. It is both encouraging and disappointing to see the good resilience and the bad resilience come into play. This pandemic has thrown us many curveballs, like not being able to see friends and family, and needing to obey new laws and regulations... and most despairingly, the constant fear of catching the virus and dying. People with good resilience know not to strive for happiness and not to cover up negative feelings. Instead, they validate their urges and fears and are inclined to think carefully. In the end, they follow the rules by composing themselves. Not only are they reducing their chances of catching the virus, they are also reducing their chances of spreading the virus to other people. Even though they may feel unhappy being stuck at home or having to wear a mask, they feel proud because they are fulfilling civic responsibility. This is the right thing to do.

On the other hand, when people have bad resilience, they only focus on their own happiness, but not actually considering the costs of their actions. In the end, they underestimate the power of this virus. They risk their lives and even others' lives just so they can be happy for the moment. Not only are some of them paying the cost of catching the virus, they are throwing their family, people who are compelled to be outside or people providing service under the bus. This is certainly not the right thing to do.

We started 2020 with a novel virus; we are ending 2020 with the fourth wave of a pandemic. I am fortunate enough to have persevered because I have a family that has good resilience. But many are not with us anymore, so let us admit that we could have controlled it better. We have prime examples like Macau or New Zealand, yet we seem to have learnt nothing. The Government plays a leading role in these situations, and we can all agree that they could have done better, but before we start pointing our accusing fingers, can we just ask ourselves: “Have we done our part?”

Although it is the end of 2020, as much as we want to celebrate this momentous time joyously, we really should not let down our guard. With another possible cluster of infections after the holidays, we know it is not worth it. We have got to stop the people with bad resilience. With the technological advancements today, we can have the same fun as usual. So why don't we try to persuade and influence them with good resilience? We can support and send them positivity while maintaining social distancing. If we can all unite and cooperate, I have high hopes that this catastrophe will end sooner than we think.

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