

Halfway Home XII

Hong Kong Writing

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Foreword

The theme of this year's issue of *Halfway Home* is 'nostalgia', a word that has a relatively short history in the English language. According to the OED the term was first used in 18th century medical discourse, and was used to describe a psychological condition of acute homesickness. Back then a person could be diagnosed with 'nostalgia', something that seems ridiculous today. During the 20th century, however, the term became more broadly associated with a sentimental longing for a place or a period in the past. It is difficult to know why the idea of nostalgia evolved in this way, but it must have something to do with the historical conditions and the way people collectively think about the past. When times get tough, as they did for many years of the 20th century, we can imagine that people naturally turn to nostalgia as a way to understand and reconsider their own social situation.

In recent years, Hong Kong has experienced historical changes, social turbulence, and a deadly outbreak of Covid. As L.P. Hartley once wrote, "the past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." Very often, temporal shifts can feel like geographical ones. In the unique case of Hong Kong, this is literally true. Nostalgia, then, seems apt as a lens through which many of us explore our ideas of home, or homesickness, while also imagining times and places that seem very far away, or are no longer attainable. German philosopher, Novalis, famously said that "Philosophy is really homesickness: the urge to be at home everywhere." But by that same measure, the homesick philosopher is doomed to be nowhere at home. Why have people often been so compelled by the impulse to return to the past, to alternately view it through rose-tinted or doomsday glasses, and to thus eternally misremember our present? The writers in this year's issue approach these tensions through a range of ideas and topics – some are lighthearted while others address more serious and even painful memories or experiences. As writers approached the theme from

from various perspectives, we were impressed with the quality of work and the subtlety of emotions expressed through the submissions.

While featuring works submitted by students of the Department of English, this year's edition also contains the prize winners of the City U Department of English Secondary School Writing Competition. We believe that these submissions demonstrate the creative potential of young writers in the community. At the same time, this year's edition features the winners of the Professor Shirley Lim Poetry Writing Scholarship and the Dr. Simon Berry Fiction Writing Award. On behalf of the Department of English, we would like to thank Dr. Berry and Professor Lim, our generous donors, for their support. Lastly, we'd like to thank the Halfway Home Student Publication Team for their commitment to this project. Halfway Home would not be possible without students like you!

Dr. Jeffrey Mather
Dr. Jerrine Tan

Preface

My mother and I used to play shadow puppets. With a cheap torch, we would sit on the bed, our hands and fingers fluttering to bend in just the right shape, projecting little dogs and doves on the dusty walls of my grandmother's bedroom. I remember dearly the soft glow of the torch illuminating our bright faces. In these rough and tumble years of loss, sickness, and upheaval I, as with many others, tend to look back upon our past, to remember a time of peace and tranquillity. It is with this in mind that I asked my mother to take a photo with me, a photo of us playing shadow puppets once again, a decade later, in my grandmother's room. This is the story behind our cover photo, a story enveloped in warm nostalgia.

This shared fondness for childhood was the foreground of how we, the English Student Publication Team, have come to decide on this year's themes— nostalgia and memories. As our fellow neighbours collectively reminisce, we wanted to give them a chance to explore their relationship with their memories. Therefore, we welcomed stories, poetry, and non-fiction that were personal, that delved into each person's own relationship with memory.

This year, the English Student Publication Team is delighted to have received so many submissions from local secondary and CityU students, all brimming with authentic and unique takes on nostalgia and memories. With the support of our coordinators Dr. Mather and Dr. Tan, the five of us compiled these pieces into the booklet in your hands. We sincerely hope that Halfway Home Vol. XII is to each and every one of you a place of liberation from these isolating years, where writers and readers connect and share their individuality.

English Student Publication Team

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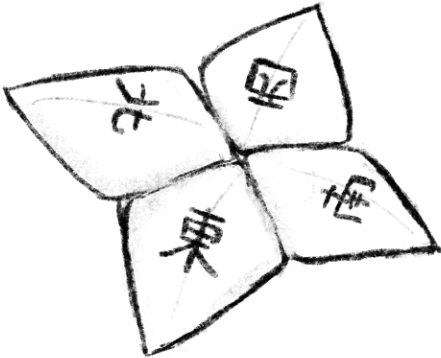
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Short Stories



Secondary School Contributors



Oblivion

Chum Anson

Champion

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section)

“Ma, here,” I handed the recoiling figure on the bed a cup of water.

“Ma.” I softened my voice and approached her, now curled into a ball in the corner of the bed. “Just drink some water, hmm? Just a sip.”

A trembling hand poked out from the blankets, like a dry branch poking out from a pile of fallen leaves. Water swirled and spilled out of the plastic cup as she put the cup to her lips and cautiously took a small sip. She handed me the cup, with the water half full. I leaned forward and tried to wipe the wetness off her chin, but the alarming glare that shot from her opaque, cloudy eyes left me frozen in the middle of my move.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to do anything,” I raised both hands above my head just in case she couldn’t hear me. I watched as her eyes softened a little -- perhaps because she was used to me as a stranger already -- and she wiped her chin with her blanket as if it was meant to be done like this.

I opened my mouth but words were drained from me.

People often wonder where memories go, especially those during the first few years of life. When they look back, they never recall their first cry, nor their first step, and their childhood tales come out as amusing stories from their parents’ mouths. Fragments of speech and precious recordings make up an incomplete puzzle called infancy, the most carefree and blissful years of life.

I do not find these memories carefree though. Perhaps the tiny troubles of an infant were washed away in the passing of time, and forgotten in the waves of bigger troubles, but mine stayed and lingered, bottled up in my head, like files well organised on shelves waiting to be taken out for reading and inspection.

I could recall, whenever I want to, the first few days of my life, from the labour room to the nursery in the hospital. I could recall the first sight I had of the world, blurry and monochrome, of items never seen before. I could recall the tingling feeling in my chest, the unexplainable urge to curl my fingers and open them up again to ease the feeling, which I later identified as fear. The cries of my neighbours going through my ears sent uneasiness over every bit of my wrinkled skin exposed in the air and brought tears to my eyes. Often, before I could react, a cry would burst through my throat, echoing in my ears and sending my limbs flailing in my crib. Every bit of stimulation outside my mother's womb disturbed me to an extreme.

I never told anyone of these memories I had. I was not sure if it was a gift or a curse, but in this situation, I would see it as more of the former.

I knew how she felt when she whimpered whenever I tried to approach her. She didn't know me. Perhaps she couldn't recognize the home setting either. It was as if she had undergone a factory reset, her experience and memories cleared into that of an infant's. Foreignness occupied the place in which affection and intimacy once stood, and she was left blank as a sheet in an unfamiliar world with unfamiliar people.

But she was not an infant. She would not accept strangers as family the way infants do. She would not grow fond of me, as I was an intruder in her world, an unwelcome guest in her home. All I could do was to take care of her, through her safety distance, and wait, even though I am unsure of what to wait for.

She was a time traveler, walking down the long hallway of her life and diving into different pictures hung in her gallery of memories. I was the supporting actor, performing in different plays, all of which starred her.

Sometimes she was a little girl, around five years old. In the middle of a meal, she would freeze and push me away, frantically trying to leave her chair to hide under the dining table. When I wrapped my arms around her and secured her on her chair, she would struggle with the might that was unusually seen in old people her age.

“Can’t you hear it?” she would yell, her voice trembling. “The sirens, the sirens are blaring, we have to get to the shelters!”

I would know then, that she was back in the past again.

“My dear,” I would pat her on the back, hugging her despite her restlessness. “You are safe. Don’t you remember? We’re in Hong Kong now. We are safe.”

It usually took her a few minutes to comprehend my words, and she would cease fighting. With her chin resting on my shoulders she would embrace me back.

“Mama,” she would cry softly in her hoarse voice. “I’m scared.”

I would caress her grey hair, whispering in her ears, “I know, I know, baby, I’m here.”

And then she would fall asleep in my arms, her porridge unfinished and cold on the table, my shirt damp on the shoulder.

Sometimes she was in her most glorious years. When we were watching the news on the old television on the sofa, a quilt covering her lap, she would suddenly sit straight and put her hand on mine, pushing the quilt to the floor and trying to stand.

“What’s it?” I would ask.

“My daughter,” she would answer urgently. “It’s time I fetch her from kindergarten.”

She would struggle to stand, her legs giving in, again and again, unable to lift her from the sofa.

“I’m sorry, could you lend me a hand?” she would turn to me after rounds of defeat, squeezing out a polite smile in spite of her frustration. “I’m really in a hurry, I can’t keep my daughter waiting.”

I would look up from the comedy show on the television, and sigh. “Her father is picking her up today, you needn’t worry about anything.”

“Oh?” she would narrow her eyes in surprise. “That’s unusual of him. He hadn’t told me the night before.”

“Yes, he did. He said he’ll be leaving work early today.” I was so familiar with these lines, that she could not find any insincerity in my eyes, nor any flaw in my explanation.

“That’s funny,” she’d settle down again on the sofa. “I don’t have any memory of it.”

I would pick up the quilt and spread it on her legs again. “It’s normal to have a slip here and there, you know. You have a lot to remember every day.”

“Ah, yes,” she would smile with pride. “Running a household is no easy task.”

We would continue the comedy as if the little interlude hadn’t happened at all, but when I was beginning to think that she had left the past and come back again, she would mutter something about having to start cooking after the show.

“Just ten more minutes, ten more minutes, and I’ll have to start preparing dinner.”

When she dove into the painting of the present moment in her gallery by chance, she would become herself again, but it never lasted long.

Once in a while, she came back as the person I knew and adored. She ran her fingers over my cheeks, looking closely as I tucked her into bed.

“You’ve grown prettier,” she said after examining me.

I clutched her hand and put her arm under the sheets.

“Were you busy?” she asked, like a child in bed. “You haven’t come in quite a while.”

“Ma, I’ve been here the whole time,” I lifted her head a little to gather her hair on the side so that it wouldn’t scratch her neck.

“Really? Well I don’t know,” she seemed taken back. “I haven’t seen you around. Have you hired a nurse?”

“No,” I replied in a coaxing voice. “It’s always been me.”

“Now, don’t lie to me, young lady,” she squinted. “There’s nothing shameful about hiring a nurse for your mother. It’s just that it would be better if you would tell me about it, and stop changing the nurses so frequently. I don’t like it when a stranger appears in my bedroom every morning.”

“It has been me, and only me,” I sat down on the edge of her bed. “Don’t worry, your daughter isn’t going to leave you alone.”

“Of... of course I’m not worried,” she said, stubbornly refusing to acknowledge her insecurity. “I’m just asking to make sure. I forget a lot of things these days.”

“I know, I know,” I assured her. “You’re just asking.”

“Will you remind me again? If I forget tomorrow?” she asked as I stood up to switch the lights off. “Remind me that my daughter has visited me today?”

“I will,” I kissed her goodnight in the dark. “And I’ll tell you again, that I’ve always been here.”

The moment I closed the door of her bedroom, I knew that the following morning, Ma would be gone, and I would be facing a stranger again.

Two sides of the same coin

Ho Lok Yan Elsie

1st Runner Up

St. Mary's Canossian College

Mari's hands were damp as she watched the instructor's silhouette pacing around in the dim room. Beside her sat Abby's family: her loving parents, John and Lucy, who had redness lining the frames of their eyes, and her young brother, who was far too young to have to face the loss of a family member.

The longer the instructor tampered with the machines, the more agitated Mari became. Lucy had her fingers clasped around Mari's wrist. She wanted nothing more than to stand up and walk away from this impending doom, but it was impossible to nudge a muscle with the old lady's firm grip around her wrist. She was being shackled to her seat, forced to watch some gruesome show against her will.

"Sorry for the delay," the film projectionist finally started. "Now, we're all here today because someone precious has left us. Someone who was a good friend, a good daughter, and a good wife," Mari must've imagined the subtle look he gave in her direction. "However, her life will not go to waste. If there's a way to honor her memories, it is to dive into them ourselves. And with that, I present to you, the most prominent memories in the life of Abby, from her perspective."

The film started with a totally unnecessary retro countdown. 3, 2, 1, then the screen came to life.

Mari recognized the setting as the lawn at Abby's childhood home. She'd lived there until she could afford not to, around the time she graduated from university. The camera-- or rather, Abby's eyesight-- was unmoving, looking off into the distance. Then, a much younger version of Lucy came into view with a bag of wet wipes. The woman in the present gasped softly.

"Clumsy you, always getting paint everywhere," she cooed, wiping the blue paint off Abby's cloth.

"You are quite the artist, aren't you?" The white canvas on the grass showed a mindless mash of colors. There was no meaning or quality to the painting if one could call it that.

As far as Mari was concerned, Abby had always been addicted to art. She just never realized that her interest dated as far back as when she could barely talk. It was probably something she should've known, but Abby must've simply forgotten to share.

The next scenes displayed moments from her childhood to her adolescence. She was getting more involved with visual arts, her hands thick with dried paint in every frame. Even now, Mari could still recall the calloused skin. It sent a shiver down her spine.

These sacred moments came to an end eventually, and at the sight of her own face on the screen, Mari's breath hitched. Catching her reaction, Lucy squeezed her hand, only to send an uncomfortable sting through her arm. She didn't want the consolation.

Mari remembered that day crystal clear. She was alone in the university canteen that served food worse than the neighborhood diner, rummaging through some notes from her accounting class when someone came stumbling and threw the whole bowl of tomato soup onto her belongings. While Lucy and John chuckled at the careless mishap, Mari could remember how abrasively she reacted. Even in retrospect, she believed that her anger was justified. It was just that she didn't want everyone in this room to see that side of her.

“Oh no, I'm so sorry,” Abby fished for a pack of tissue from her pocket and started wiping the mess she'd made on the table. A sheet of paper broke apart with a single brush. Recalling how she'd broken into a fit of foul language and outraged cusses, Mari squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself.

“It's fine. Here, I'll just do it myself.”

Clouded with confusion, she opened her eyes again. Those were definitely not the words that'd come out of her mouth. It must've been her mind playing tricks on her, but she looked more amiable and forgiving on the screen, nothing like her supposed cold, hard shell of a young adult.

“After Abby first met you, she gushed about how you were the prettiest girl she'd ever met for weeks,” John whispered from two seats away. Mari forced out a laugh. Much to her displeasure, only half an hour had passed, and she had no idea how long these memory screening services were supposed to be.

Abby's university life was filled with art and inspirations, nothing surprising. She treated each and every piece she came across with consideration and appreciation, and there were occasional shots of paintings that had seared themselves onto her mind. Mari never understood the appeal of art. She herself leaned more towards the real sector of the population. It was hard to understand Abby, even harder to bring her down whenever she had her heads up in the clouds.

The next clip was yet another significant moment in her life. After graduation and two years of dating, Mari and Abby were planning to rent a shared apartment. Mari had got herself a position in the trainee programme hosted by an accounting firm. It was exactly the direction in life she'd planned for. Abby, on the other hand, was having problems deciding which field she wanted to get into.

"There're vacancies open at the art museum downtown," Abby said from her position on the sofa. Mari had her back turned to her as she typed away on the computer. She didn't catch her the first time, so Abby repeated the sentence.

"And you want to go?"

"Sure."

Mari grimaced. It was one of the first fights they'd had, and while it ended with peace, it wasn't pretty.

"How...how much is the pay?"

"Enough to get by," came Abby's vague answer. "Around half of yours."

"That's *not* enough to get us by." There is a sharp edge to Mari's voice. She wanted so badly to crawl inside a burrow now.

“I know, but there’s nothing else that interests me.”

“But--” the old Mari paused. “It’s—never mind. You really want to take the job?”

Abby nodded. Mari let out a huff. “I have no objection if it’s what you want to do.”

Hung open was Mari’s jaw as she watched the two unfamiliar characters move into a hug. The real fight had lasted for a fortnight and ended with Abby getting the job secretly. It certainly hadn’t gone so smoothly. It was like watching a completely different person with your loved one.

Mari unclenched her fist, confusion taking over the anxiety of her rage being shown to the audience. There was no screaming or smashing of porcelain dishes, nor was there angry slamming of the door. Abby’s memory was calm and almost flawless, filled with peaceful negotiations and understanding touches. It was as if she’d been a different scene altogether.

Or could it have been her own memories that had been warped and altered unknowingly? Whose recollection was in the right? Could it mean that in Abby’s last moments, she would show Mari as her supportive and loving wife instead of an impulsive murderer?

Lucy’s fingernail grazed the back of Mari’s hand, and she flinched away. Finally taking the hint, Lucy withdrew her hand and gave her a sympathetic smile. It felt more like a punishment, as if she was saying, *I know what you’ve done. There’s nowhere left for you to hide.* The guilt was getting to Mari’s head.

As Abby’s memories progressed, the coat of sweat on Mari’s forehead thickened. Her heartbeat had accelerated to the point where she was certain she would pass out.

There was the wedding that took quite a toll on Mari's work-life balance. While the whole idea of settling down was a crucial part of her life plan, the actual preparation was draining the soul out of her body. Of course, it was all romantic and sweet in Abby's eyes. What Mari saw as burdens, she saw as testaments of love.

There was Abby's job at the art museum, which she refused to give up on despite the fact that it was wearing down their joint bank account. She loved every piece of work she got to touch there, whereas Mari had no memories of any of them. Lucy let out another series of sobs and sneezes when she saw their old dog's death. The day it died, Mari was giving a presentation that could determine whether or not she would get a raise. Even to this day, she still had no regrets about her choice of ignoring Abby's messages and calls.

"You gave Abby so much happiness," Lucy murmured. "I don't know what she'd have done without you."

She wasn't even certain whether she'd been married to the same person Lucy was referring to.

When Mari lost her job after getting into a petty conflict with a colleague, her days were filled with gloominess and depression. She knew for sure that Abby couldn't support the both of them for more than half a year, so she had to search for a new job as soon as possible. Abby's indifference to the matter only added fuel to the fire. As expected, the memory was blissful to Abby. She enjoyed the additional time they got, and it looked as though the apartment was brought alive with joy. For one, Mari definitely didn't recall those flowers being all around the house.

"We're nearing the end of her memories." The instructor announced. Mari shifted in her seat. She was dying to get out of there now.

The familiar neighborhood diner came into view, and Mari felt her heart jump a good mile up in the sky. She remembered the argument they had about how Abby resigned recklessly just so they could have ‘more time for each other’.

“There won’t be any time left for us if we’re broke” was what Mari had said at that time. Abby blurted out something insulting, and Mari rushed out of the diner. It was hard to wrap her head around how someone could be so unrealistic and blind in chasing their dreams. She used the rage boiling in her body as fuel to walk quicker and quicker despite the calls for her trailing from behind until there was a sharp screech and the heavy *thump* of a collision.

That was Mari’s memory. It was very different from Abby’s.

“There won’t be any time left for us if we’re broke.” There was a tight scowl on Mari’s face as she sat across the booth, hands clasped tightly together as she stared-- no, *glared* at Abby. The fury in her eyes burnt through the screen.

“Maybe if you weren’t so hung up on money, you’ll see my point.” Abby snapped. This was the only time Abby’s memory aligned with hers. However, it was Abby who promptly got out of her seat. Seeing red, Abby dashed out of the diner.

“Wait, Abbs!”

“I don’t want to talk--”

Mari’s pleading voice morphed into a scream before the world went rotating with a loud crash. The last thing Abby saw was Mari’s tear-stricken face as she tripped over apologies and cries for help.

“Abby? Please look at me, don’t leave me...”

A sentence in standard font said ‘End of the movie’. The room brightened once again.

Even in Abby’s last moments, she was shielding Mari from taking responsibilities, even going as far as to warping the very truth of the reality to take the blame for her.

Lucy and John gathered their bags and talked to each other in a low, hushed voice. The young boy wiped his eyes quietly. The instructor handed out pamphlets. It felt like a satisfactory conclusion to everyone, except for Mari, who was trembling with newly dampened cheeks.

“Well, darling?” Lucy extended her hand with a loving smile. “Let’s go now.”

“Right.” Mari took her hand with her own shaky one and followed the family out. The world would never know that she was connected, albeit indirectly, to Abby’s death. The guilt might eat her alive, but at least she would be able to walk away from this.

A Flowery Scent

Ho Jo Wei

2nd Runner Up

Carmel Pak U Secondary School

A memory is like the flowery scent of a beautiful woman. You grab on to it or you let it slip out of your hand. Right now, she had let it slip out of her hands, into thin air. Her mind was as white as the bedsheets that lay beneath her, as white as the walls that surrounded her, and as white as the clothes the nurses dressed her in. The whiteness was driving her mad, she needed to remember. She willed her mind to stretch out, scratch at any corner if only to find even a hint of something.

There, that's something.

She was Adrienne Elise, 77 years old, lying on a hospital bed in the year 2000. She moved a bit and felt tubes in her nostrils, extending and entangling themselves around her hand. They seemed to twirl around the bed. Lying here was boring, so she tried to smell more of that flowery scent. She closed her eyes and began to embrace the whiteness. Flashes of scenes came and went so quickly she could've sworn they did not exist.

Then, she was plunged into a brick room, with a beautiful face right in front of her. There was only silence save for the occasional cracking of firewood and heavy breathing. The warm orange light reflected off Eric's face. Beautiful and precious. His long lashes cast shadows upon his rosy cheeks, touching just the edge of his pink lips. His eyes shone with sincerity as they observed her face.

She turned her head to look at the fire, blazing and dancing side to side, despite the lack of air in this underground chamber. She couldn't help but wonder what kind of artist fire is. An artist of anger, in the way those orange lines fought each other, pouncing front and back? Or perhaps an artist of sorrow, in the way those sparks of hope desperately tried to burst through but eventually faltered and died?

She felt like being one as well, with the sound of bombing and fire guns encouraging her, chanting a call of death, urging her to plunge herself into the flame. What more could she lose?

“Adrienne.”

There, that's the thing that she would lose if she had become an artist of sorrow. Eric's voice reminded her that there still was hope, that despite what the Nazis say, there can still be a reality where the allies would emerge victoriously. Suddenly she heard a sob.

“Eric? Are you alright?”

“I...” Her memory told her he had never cried like that before, “I'm just scared, I suppose. I mean...even if we won the war, even if we can go home, I...we...can't be.” She found herself wondering just *why* they couldn't be together, that suffocating whiteness, however, took control once again.

“Could you imagine if we got together? If we even dared to live together? We would be ripped apart.” Tears were streaming down his face right now. “All of our memories...I...I don't think I'm ready to let you go. To let us go.”

His soft voice sent chills down her spine as flashes of memories re-emerged. Black was the piano he played for her while she leaned on his shoulder. Green was the grass they lay on together while she painted his handsome face. Indigo was the night they gazed together upon their balcony.

“Hey, hey, look at me. We’re gonna make it out of here, okay? We’re gonna hide in a little town. What about Sedona? We could buy ourselves a little flat, I could paint the natural views around, and you could play piano in clubs. We won’t earn much, but I know I will be happy— with you. Happiness will be ours, and so will forever.” He simply looked at her, and before she heard a reply, she felt soft lips on hers. Adrienne allowed herself to sink into the memory of his lips against hers.

The feeling didn’t change, but she felt her surroundings swirl and found herself in a well-decorated emerald-colored room.

“See you, love.” He smiled and she waved, leaving his warm embrace and walking out of their little flat. She arrived at a bar and sat next to a gruffly old man.

“Do you have the portrait done, Miss Smith?”

“Oh yes, Mr. Davis. Here, the portrait commission for Miss Jones, just as you said.”

“Good.”

“Um, Mr. Davis, if I may— I’m in a bit of a hurry so it would be nice if you could give me my payment now—”

“Oh don’t pretend, Miss *Elise*. You hardly need the money.”

“What? What do you mean? I’m Alice Smith, you’ve been working with me for 2 years now—”

“And apparently, you’ve been lying to me for 2 years, Miss *Adrienne Elise*.”

“Oh, Mr. Davis, please stop joking—”

“I know,” He looked her straight in the eye, and she could feel her heart drop, “and *he knows*—” She never heard him finish the sentence as she sprinted back to their little apartment. The apartment where he would come home to her new paintings and she would sleep to his comforting piano playing.

She heard screaming. It pulled her out of the warm nostalgia, and into a cold realization. Eric was pressed against the walls with a gun shoved against his head.

The gunman turned. She recognized him to be her father.

The gun seemed to slowly melt itself into Eric’s head as he winced. His breath came in hurried little chokes and slight sobs that made Adrienne’s heart ache.

“A— Adrienne...you got here...”

“Yes, my love, I’m here, I—”

“Miss Elise, just why do you think you could continue this? This is simply unnatural, unacceptable! I would’ve shot you in the head if you weren’t my only female offspring—”

“THEN DO IT! STOP BEING A COWARD AND POINT THE GUN AT ME!”

“Oh, I know your little trick, you want to save your lover, don’t you? Unfortunately, that’s not going to work.”

She grabbed a cutting knife and held it straight in front of her throat.

“Father. Let Eric go, or I will and I mean it, I will cut myself right now!”

He faltered, but his gun remained pointed firmly at Eric.

She put the knife closer to her bare skin and she could feel blood slowly dripping out.

“Stop. Don’t, Adrienne.” The plea for her survival did not come from her own father, but rather her love.

“Hey, hey, look at me. We made it out of the war, didn’t we? I was happy. Very much so. I watched you paint while I played our piano. I would happily play for you forever.” Tears streamed down Adrienne’s cheeks, and her legs began to shake.

“We... we didn’t earn much, but we were happy. We are happy. Happiness was and will be ours, my love—” Words couldn’t be strangled out of Adrienne’s throat if she tried.

“It will never be...”

BANG.

...

Was she real?

Was the blood on the emerald wall real?

Was the “thump” as his lifeless body hit the floor real?

Judging by the deafening silence in her ears, the darkening of sight before her eyes, and the softening of her legs, this was simply just a very bad nightmare. And of course, it wasn't real, why else would her love not be responding to her hands clawing everywhere in the air, as she tried to squeeze energy into her legs to climb towards him? Why else would his eyes lose its usual spark, the kind to pierce into her cold soul and send warmth? Why else would she only taste blood when she kissed him?

Was it really blood that she tasted?

Her eyes showed her bloody lips, but her memories told her that those were cold, dry, lifeless lips. Her eyes showed her a bullet wound on the abdomen, but her memories told her that the hole was between his eyebrows. As she cradled his body, eyes closed, all she could hear was her own desperate calls of "My love...my love...my love..."

My love.

My love.

"My love...my love...my love..."

"Miss Elise?"

She opened her eyes, and saw grey, all around her. A strange man stood in front of her. He had white hair and was dressed in an undoubtedly expensive suit. The man signed and signaled for someone to be brought forward. That someone...was Eric.

"Miss Elise, I am your father. I'm afraid you have lost your memories."

"No, I remember. And I want my love."

“And that’s me.”

“Yes, I am here to tell you that I decided to give you a chance...to be with Eric.”

“Isn’t that great, my love?”

She looked into Eric’s eyes, but that sense of familiarity was lost. This whole scene did not feel like something that should be in her memories.

The whiteness took control again, but her mind was grey. The two colors raged into a swirling madness. Blocks of grey scattered across her but her memory focused on solely one in front of her. A freshly clean tombstone with the name ‘Eliza Moening’.

Eliza?

Not...Eric?

Then the whiteness exploded again, but this time flashes of scenes emerged. Her sitting across a beautiful blonde, crystal blue-eyed woman in the orange glow of the fire. Her lips kissing soft lips that belonged to a woman. Two women embracing each other in a small emerald-colored room. Eliza...slumped against the wall, lifeless, cold lips no longer able to respond to her.

“Eliza? Are you alright?”

“I know, and he knows that you are a disgusting lesbian, That you are sleeping with a woman.”

Finally, her memories decided to come to an agreement.

“Nurse, is Miss Elise going to recover?”

“Well, she’ll live, but I think she must’ve gone through quite a shock. The poor girl kept calling everyone ‘my love’, and doesn’t seem to remember anything.”

Her father sank into his own thoughts before nodding to the nurse and signaling for Eric to follow.

“Miss...Elise?”

“My love? Are you my love? I want my love, my love, my love...”

“She really has gone mad, Mr. Elise, you sure want to do this? She doesn’t remember anything.”

“Which is exactly why this is the perfect opportunity,” Mr. Elise turned towards Adrienne and pushed Eric forward, “here, here’s your love.”

“My love?”

Eric cast a hesitant look towards her before looking away.

“...Yes, I am your love, Adrienne. Eric, your love.”

No. He was not her love. Now her memories have finally revealed themselves to her, escaped manipulation, free of lies. Lying on here, she finally remembered. It was Eliza that she would die for. A memory is like the flowery scent of a beautiful woman, not a man, but of a woman she loved— Eliza.

She remembered now.

The Mind of an Artist

Yam Cheuk Hei Canus

St. Mary's Canossian College

Silence filled the room. Noises trickled steadily into her ears. The famed artist's hands twisted and turned the malleable metal pieces into their place. A sculpture was being created, one that is made in her likeness but presented differently than a simple replica of herself. Nannerl Mayermann is known for her incredible cognition and creative work. In secrecy and never revealed, Nannerl's outstanding ability to dissect, comprehend and manipulate pieces has its credit due to another self. A younger self that only she could see, who stood in front of her, quietly giving approval. They would lock eyes, and that simple action itself reassured Nannerl. They shared consciousness, and no words were ever needed to be exchanged between Nannerl and her imaginary friend.

The sound of crafting stopped, as Nannerl held her right hand in her left. Her shoulders curled in, and her brows furrowed. She scanned around, weary and disappointed. Fear consumed her. Art was her safe place, but it haunted her now. Her younger self has disappeared—a panic rose again. Without the personification of her talent, Nannerl is lost. Her mind could no longer process her artwork from two perspectives simultaneously. Nannerl's brain was mush and her hands clammy. A week of nauseating trepidation went by with every nerve in her body numb. Nannerl dreaded the last resort—therapy. She disliked talking about the reserved life she had led, or any bit of looking back with depth. The lingering sense of pride and arrogance in her head demanded her to devote herself to art and into the future.

“Good morning, *Frau* Mayermann. Have a seat,” Dr. Lange said, her gesture welcoming and relaxed.

“You can call me Maria.” Words came dropping out of Nannerl's mouth, like tiny pebbles falling into shallow puddles.

“Sure, Maria. We are here for a hypnotherapy session today and we can start whenever you’re ready.” Dr. Lange continued smoothly. Her office smelled like apples and cinnamon.

Nannerl stiffly placed herself into a spot. She came with a dedication to getting her younger self back and she will do whatever she can to achieve such a goal. The nerves that were so delicately packed in her head were ready to break due to immeasurable anxiety. Nannerl closed her eyes and leaned back. Dr. Lange’s instructions became a faint murmur and faded into background noise. But suddenly, it was amplified. It echoed. Bounced. Refracted.

“Picture yourself in the world of your mind. A cord that binds you in your head and the real world,” Nannerl nodded, finding herself walking on dry soil barefoot, a rope tied to her wrist and the other end seemingly linked to an unending void.

“Now remember, whenever you want to stop, we can always put the session to a pause. Do not force yourself.”

She stared at her imagined wrist, skeletal with moist dirt stuck between spaces and withered plant roots dangling in between. Yet, to be honest, Nannerl was more comfortable with her current corpse-like form in her imagination than she ever was with her real body. If she could, Nannerl would rather present herself as this corpse-like spectral self instead of the crusty, physical body that she is.

Walking along the imagined lane, the crumbling feeling of the scorched ground under her feet reverberated throughout her torso—as it was in direct contact with the inner layers of her rotting flesh. Nannerl’s volition declined, residing into a foggy wander. Dr. Lange instructed her to look into her mind, to search for what might have caused her sudden loss of talent. She walked amongst trees, her nonexistent heart racing, her rib cage rattled as she veered. Eventually, she came to a stop. Nannerl did not retain a lot of memories from her childhood, nor into her adulthood. It was always hard for her to bring up her past. To her, it is as faint as a tea bag after its tenth cup of water. Nannerl winced at the thought of being unable to realize the reason why her old self, her *friend*, is gone. But, more so, Nannerl needed her.

Looking up to the misty sky, a quick spark glowed and dimmed, until it came shooting down, right through parched tree branches, into her powerless embrace. A surprised gasp escaped Nannerl’s lips, as the person tightened their grip on her waist.

“Maria Anna!” The little one shouted, excitedly. In an almost frantic state of excitement, Nannerl stepped back, her hands clasped onto the person’s shoulders—they locked eyes. Nannerl was about to cry from joy.

“Please—” Nannerl uttered, her tongue almost falling out, language broken into pieces scattered across an imaginary floor. Her younger self’s arrival brought her out of darkness, into a dancing light.

“Maria Anna. No, Nannerl. I am sure together, we can recollect our memories.” She chirped like a hummingbird. She marched into the unknown. Nannerl followed her younger soul.

The haze dissipated, and the two walked themselves into another realm. A young Maria Anna stood on the stage, above her competitors. She did not express her happiness in winning the competition, nor display any pride in her craft. There was only a constricted smile. Nannerl looked at the old artwork— she was actually very proud of this piece. The colours were bizarre, inverted from what it was supposed to be. It took many days to make. However, *old Herr Mayermann* would mock her if she seemed too pleased, so Nannerl didn't bother to show any emotions.

Out of nowhere, a screwdriver shot across the hall and the canvas was struck through. Fury licked her heart. She remembered crying while trying to copy her own work, failing to fix the original piece. She never succeeded. Nannerl could not make a piece twice. Even more infuriating was the fact that the man who snuck into the hall and threw the screwdriver was never caught. Nannerl regretted not punching that bastard right then and there.

“We could definitely punch him right now, though?” Her younger self tilted her head. “I mean, we're in our memories after all.”

Nannerl shriveled up. If they could change their memories like this and, technically, overwrite events in her head, wouldn't that bring her younger self back to reality because the trauma wouldn't exist? Losing these memories wasn't exactly bad for her. Now she remembers, she will only have herself to rely on to cross over her own mental obstacles. Even if she only has a half-decaying body and a childish self, she will fix herself back together. Nannerl kept herself optimistic against her cynical nature. She thought her younger self could be a key, manifested so she would be able to bring the personification of her talent back to the real world. The world Nannerl barely liked. It was a very tempting idea, and Nannerl did just that. Nannerl's half-carcass was briefly fleshed. She felt alive, she felt free.

The hummingbird's fingers noiselessly wrapped around Nannerl's upper arm, trying to loosen the rope. In wordless disagreement, Nannerl backed away.

Her younger self's brows knitted together, saying, "We don't need this. We can do this on our own!"

With an undertone of concern, Nannerl refused again, this time with an apology adorned. There wasn't exactly a valid or steady reason why she did not oblige, but this little dispute proved to be bigger than what it needed to be. They tumbled, in their fight, and they fell into another bubble of memory.

A vase came crashing against the wall. Pieces flew. It was dark, regardless of the time outside. No song of a nightingale or lark to tell the hour. A woman's dominating figure blocked the only source of light. Nannerl's ghostly silhouette trembled, forced to stand as an audience, forced to remember what started her path of becoming a famed artist. A path against her family's wishes. Little Nannerl. Little Maria Anna Mayermann stopped paying attention to logical subjects and turned her gaze to art in an attempt to escape from her parents' will. She participated in a competition without her parents' acknowledgment and, as it turned out, Maria Anna was incredibly gifted in art. But upon discovering her talents, the *older Herr and Frau Mayermann* would not rest until they made her a famous prodigy, even if it means locking young Maria Anna into the attic until she bends to their wishes.

The young hummingbird shivered, regarding the whole scene with even more anger than Nannerl does. She craved to tear her own ears out to stop hearing the woman's cruel scolding. Staying quiet, submissive, committed to her art is all that her younger self did. That's the best she could be, for her, for everyone.

A strange sensation climbed up Nannerl's spine. Her young hummingbird self immediately, with vigorous strength, took hold of Nannerl's wrist. The young girl wanted to undo the rope again.

"Everything can stay the way it is now. I am a part of you and will forever be bonded to your emotions," she hummed softly with a slint of aggression— territorial behavior, for the lack of a better term.

"We can remain in the past, have fun in our memories! We don't even have to be sad!"

And never return to the real world? Nannerl silently asked, but young Maria Anna was unable to hear or understand her. Nannerl's racing thoughts calmed down to a sad realization. This younger self was not the perfect presentation of herself, nor the silent projection of her imagination and talent. They shared the same ideas but they no longer shared the same consciousness. Nannerl pulled back, struggling to keep herself away from her younger self's fixation on dwelling in memories as a solution for overwhelming sorrow, and her obsession with freedom. Fragments of her past bothered her, but the sentiment that every memory holds has a value, a price, a toll. Her past had made her develop her current decaying corpse of a self-image. But without her trauma, she would have never succeeded. A sudden swell of determination consumed Nannerl— she alone could walk out of the pit of memories, no help was warranted.

Nannerl's eyes popped open, blinking intensely. A sense of peace washes over her. Her heart burst with a burning desire to release her ideas, words poured from her usually pursed lips.

“Thank you very much, Dr. Lange. This has been very helpful but I have to leave.” She picked up her bag, nodded at Dr. Lange, and dashed to her workplace as quickly as possible. A fountain of inspiration has lifted her spirit into the clouds. The return of confidence was so sudden, but not unexpected. Every artist is sort of like that, a sudden boom of spiritual understanding. Nannerl trusts herself, even if her younger self does not return to serve her. She doesn’t need a quiet, submissive, art-committed younger self. Her talent isn’t embedded in a suppressed, perfect mental representation of herself. Her imagination is great enough that she could imagine a piece from every angle without needing to see it in actuality. That is her talent.

The sculpture lay in the middle of the office, unmoved and pathetic. Nannerl, in a split second, grabbed the nearest hammer and swung it at the humanoid hindrance. It crumbled into its original valueless state. She smiled at the result and placed herself onto the chair. In her head, a spotlight shone onto the yet-to-form artwork, Nannerl channeled into a different mind state, pulling away strings of thoughts. In complete tranquility, she looked across the room. There stands a quiet, half skeletal self. They locked eyes, and Maria Anna Mayermann is reassured that she is half dead, half living. Dying to survive, and living to perish.

What Could Have Been

So Tsz Kiu Audrey

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section)

I was an introvert, socially awkward, and quite a loner when I was a child. I wouldn't talk to others often, and not many people would talk to me either. It was better in my early primary days, but nearing my later primary school life, I realised there was something wrong about me, as though I was a repellent towards my schoolmates. I knew I'd never fit in with them with my current self, so I did what I knew best and put on a façade, trading my true self for a cool, unbothered yet friendly persona.

Ever since growing up, I've repressed my true self in order to paint my new reputation, that I was not an emotionally fragile outcast of society and instead am a great individual to get along with. This façade worked in my favour, since I made a few friends from hiding behind it. I thought I would be happy then, for I had friends like everyone else does, yet the void within me laid empty, drained of all emotions.

They said having friends will make you satisfied, yet the hole where my soul laid echoed back at me, reminding me of the price I'd paid for this so-called happiness. *I'd never feel much again for having friends*, I thought, but when you came into my life, all my previous thoughts dissipated into thin air.

I do not recall the day we met, nor the first words you said to me. All I remember is that we were classmates and that we had met through a common friend. It was nice of her to introduce us, for it wasn't often that I'd get to know someone new out of my volition, and having just one new person to talk to in this new class was enough for me.

For the most part, we were just your average pair of classmates, you saw me as a friend you could talk to, and I suppose I had felt the same way towards you. Yet on that fateful afternoon self-study session, when you moved your seat across the classroom to assist me with my homework, gently touching my right shoulder as you pointed at the papers upon my desk to explain a concept I didn't understand, time and space seemed to shift in my eyes.

At that moment, my inner world flipped, pink butterflies emerging.

My eyes trailed after you as you made your way back to your seat. How is it that you explaining a question to me, only led to a million more unwanted questions? I gently touched my right shoulder, where your hand had been not so long ago, letting the reality of my situation settle in.

My heart, feeling so complete, tingles running throughout my senses, there is no doubt that thanks to you, a distracting, bothersome and unnecessary emotion had been drawn out from behind my fragile façade.

Love.

I became excited about school, if it meant I could see you again. We didn't take the same school bus, but occasionally our buses would meet at the overseas tunnel, and when they did, I'd look for you. Sometimes you'd wave back at me, sometimes you were asleep, but it didn't matter what you were doing. As long as you'd seemed at peace, I felt satisfied.

I've had social anxiety all my life, so it was hard dealing with my feelings for you. It became difficult to strike up a simple conversation with you, for everything had seemed awkward when accompanied by my unnecessary feelings. I turned to texting you instead, where you could not read my emotions from my face nor tone, for I would be mortified to expose just a tiny bit of my true feelings. *I could not let you see my true self*, I believed, *it would drive you away*.

I had thought texting would be easier, since I had a huge screen to hide behind, yet my fingers trembled in fear as I slowly typed out a 'hi' on my phone, my right thumb hovering shakily on top of the 'send' button. *Is it weird to send a 'hi' for no reason?* I would debate with myself for hours before finally sending the message.

I remember swiftly turning off my phone and tossing it to the side after sending the message, yet not too far away so I could still check if you had replied. It was stupid, that I, a calm and collected person, would freak out so much on sending a message to someone, but deep within, I knew it was my genuine emotions taking over me again. My entire body would tense up at this terrifying thought that one day I'd lose my only mask to hide behind. I couldn't lose my reputation for you, so instead, I opted to stay away.

It's for the better, I told myself repeatedly, but my heart couldn't help but ache as I watched us fall further away from each other. I couldn't let my feelings towards you ruin my reputation. I couldn't let others see my true colours, and if it meant staying away from you until I've settled my emotions, I was willing to pay the price.

For the many months afterward, we were just plain classmates, we were still friendly towards each other, but any build-up to a deeper relationship had vanished out the window. You hung out with your other friends more, since I was too emotionally unavailable to be around you. I had hoped that you'd miss me just a bit and perhaps would come back to talk to me for a while. I had fantasised that scene many times before, but who am I kidding? It was only natural for you to slip out of my grasp after so long of not hanging out with each other. It filled me with a sense of dread when I'd see you run off with your many other friends during recess while I leaned against the courtyard gates alone to read a book. I had tried very hard to focus on the words presented to me, yet in your presence, all words had seemed incomprehensible, and all I could do was watch you play happily under the sun with your other friends. I blamed your friends for taking you away from me, I hated them for that, but I knew that I was the true one to blame. After all, I had reaped what I had sown.

Winter went, and spring came; the silver snow melted in the warmth of the new season. I thought my feelings would melt away as the snow did, yet it only came back harder, as though it was a blaze of fire pulsing throughout me, burning every inch of me with desire.

Staying away from you only brought about deeper, more vivid feelings within me, all directed at you. I wanted to run back to you, to share the plethora of colours bursting in my heart with you. Still, with our burnt bridges and my inescapable façade tightening its grip on me, I could only continue to bottle my feelings within, relentlessly shoving it in its already bursting capacity.

Those feelings were like wine. The longer I left them unbothered, the stronger it came back at me. Whenever I'd see you, I'd want to wrap you tightly in my arms and never let go. I'd like to stare at your gorgeous face for hours each day, cherish your perfect imperfections, and take those sweet lips in for a chaste kiss. Yet those were fantasies I could only indulge in, for how could I possibly commit to them in real life? I shut down those ridiculous thoughts immediately, but it had become clear what my true desire was.

I want to be with you, always.

Soon came graduation, a time in which friends say goodbye to each other. Yet I did not worry about us, for I knew you'd be going to our school's secondary section, and I too would be. I would have six more years with you, and perhaps in that time, I could take off my mask and be myself again. Maybe you'd like me for the real me, and we could be even more than what we were then.

This sweet fantasy I held on to, as I took my blue slip of paper, on which my secondary school was written. As I cheerfully made my way back to my seat, I suddenly stopped in my tracks, confused at the words written on the paper.

It wasn't my school's secondary section that I was going to, it was a school my parents had decided for me.

All in a moment, my internal world came crashing down, every supporting pillar collapsing into dust. All alone, I will be in this new environment. Away from the ones I know and love, I will be entirely alone in this place I never asked to go to. It felt like the floor beneath me had been brutally stripped away from me.

For the first time in 5 years, I cried in public.

The mask had shattered, leaving behind an utterly broken, lost child. Tears streaming endlessly from my eyes, I stared down at the monstrous blue slip in my trembling hands. Some people hurriedly gathered around to comfort me, my father telling me “it will be alright” gently as my class teacher patted my right shoulder reassuringly. My best friend cracked a few jokes to cheer me up, but what came out of my mouth was a forceful cough-like chuckle, salty tears dripping down into it.

The adults kept telling me that my new school was an elite school, and that there was nothing to cry about. They told me that going to a new school wasn't the end of my life, that I could always make new friends and get used to the new environment. They reassured me that my friends would still be here supporting me, even if we weren't in the same school.

I knew then, those words were of good intentions, but hearing them was like adding oil to the fire burning my soul, choking me under layers of suffocating pain. They would never understand me; they could never understand me. Screaming internally, crying my heart out, I could do nothing but bury my unsaid feelings even deeper within my soul, until it choked the breath out of me.

They would never know that I had cared not for the eliteness of my new school, not for its environment nor people. They would never know that I had cared not for leaving my original school, nor separating from my classmates and friends. And they would never, ever know that my tears were not for myself, but for you, who were swiftly slipping out of my sight, out of my grasp, and out of my life.

All I wanted was to be around you.

I wanted to be with you always.

It hurt a lot when I would go to my new school, only to be greeted with unfamiliar faces. It tightened the wound in my heart, adding salt to injury, when my new classmates would converse with each other so casually, like how I did with my friends back then. It tore my spirit, to know that you weren't beside me, like I had always envisioned. It crushed me the most, when I realised that the façade I thought I could grow out of had melded with my true self, turning me into an empty husk with a hollow soul.

Staring out the corridor, I'd see schoolmates roaming around freely, cheerily chatting with their friends. My vision would become blurred, remembering the agony of that dreadful day.

Now, you're just a memory of what could've been, what we had become, and what I had lost. This memory still remains deep within my mind, though its colours have faded with time. I think less about us now, but occasionally, my heart still aches for the poor child that day, who was too young for all they had lost.

The Man and His Smile

Wong Tsz Yu Iris

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section)

Memory is a funny thing. That is coming from Memory himself. He is immortal, a god, some people would say. No matter how fickle or small the thing is, he still remembers.

He never understood why people would forget, why even the other gods would forget. Is memory not as important as their most treasured belongings? It certainly is for him. Without his memory, he is nothing.

Memory sees himself as a just man. He punishes those who lie, who fib about their memory. A man lied about his debt, claiming he had forgotten. The debt returned ten times the amount. In a way, the memory god has the ability to change fate.

And memory does change fate. It shapes the person you are now. What you remember could be completely different from another person in the same situation. That's what the memory god finds amusing.

He is also curious. Can one simply forget about everything? Have no memory or recollection of the things they have done? So he sets off to find answers. Travelling through different realms, he finally finds his home in the human realm.

Memory meets a man. He is kind, offering his house as the god's home. He is optimistic, generous, witty. His smile could light up a thousand suns. But he has one fault—his memory.

He has severe amnesia. Never remembering where he places things, never remembering people's faces and names, and sometimes even forgetting his own. But oddly enough, he never forgets Memory's. Even when he left and came back under the guise to travel, the man still greets him with the smile he longs to see and a friendly wave, never the blank and confused look when he meets someone else.

Memory thinks he found his answer, so he stays with him.

One day, the man says to the god, "I wish there were someone out there. Someone who can cure my sickness."

Something ignites in Memory's heart. He becomes determined to help this man he calls a friend. But even through endless trials and tests, he still could not cure the man's amnesia with medicine on Earth. He knew he could cure him in an instant with his powers, lending him a piece of his own. But he does not dare, for it is strictly forbidden for gods to reveal themselves to mortals. He is afraid of the gods' punishment, so he stays silent.

Years passed, and the god stayed with the man, only returning to his own home occasionally. Their friendship grew and grew, and they became close; they became more than just friends. And every day, the memory god thinks about the man's wish. The man himself had forgotten about it, of course, having no recollection of saying such. But the memory god remembers. He always does.

He remembers the wish whenever the man smiles at him. The smile brings an aching pain to his chest. He remembers the wish whenever the man does not come home, lost in a different town. He remembers the wish whenever the man asks him again and again what his name was. And every time that happens, his heart breaks into smaller and smaller pieces.

He remembers. So he finally gives in, finally gives him a piece of his power.

The man notices. Of course he does. He notices that he no longer needed to write in his journal to remember the most basic things. He could continue a conversation without needing to be reminded of the topic. He gives Memory the brightest smile he has seen. And for a moment, he was no longer afraid of the gods' wrath.

But the gods above notice as well. And they got angry. They took away the most important thing they knew to him—his memory. And cast him down to the human realm.

Unbeknownst to them, that is no longer the most precious thing to him. His most important 'thing' is in town, getting along with the villagers as his memory improves day by day, no longer needing to rely on his journal, yet longing for the god's return.

Memory might no longer have his memory, but he still remembers. He remembers the man he has grown fond of. So he sets out to find him.

And he does.

He starts his life anew with the man, who welcomes him home with open arms. He still, of course, does not remember the reason he was in this world, but even when his memory deteriorated with age, even on his deathbed, on his last breath, he still remembers the man and his smile.

Remember to Forget

Melanie Advani

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section)

Felix walked out of prison feeling a little disoriented. His neck was throbbing from where they'd injected him earlier, and he reached up a hand tentatively as if he could stop the invisible needle from probing into his skin. Sunlight was beating down on him in harsh rays, and beads of perspiration dripped from his chin.

Squinting at the desolate landscape, Felix stopped. Was the sun always that bright? Maybe he was imagining things. He shook his head, trying to cool himself despite the sweltering heat. He shuffled a few steps forward in uncertainty and stopped, feeling a fresh sense of hopelessness threatening to overwhelm him.

Or maybe... he was already starting to lose his memory.

"You have one week," they told him. "One week to settle your affairs before your memory resets."

Felix laughed bitterly. One week? That was hardly enough. He didn't even know where to start, or how he was supposed to find his family, given that the officials had shut down all his contacts. On second thought, he didn't even know if he had any family left.

How was he supposed to forget everything as if they'd never happened? Frankly, Felix thought he was more likely to have all his memories carved under his eyelids than forget a single one of them. These were the same memories that tormented him relentlessly in his dreams every night, and Felix would tear himself from his nightmares only to discover there was no relief in waking.

Other people never forgave him for what he'd done. And they made sure Felix would never forget it.

He was barely twenty back then, freshly graduated from college, and enlisted in duty patrol. He passed by the dingy little house every day, yet he never paid much attention to it until the incident happened. It was a pathetic little structure, on the verge of collapse and tangled with overgrown thorns.

There he was, stretching his limbs out of boredom as usual when there was a scream. By the time he figured out the source of the noise, there was another yell and the loud scuffling sounds of two people fighting.

“Everyone freeze!”

After barging inside, Felix could only make out the bruised and bloody figure of a girl on the ground before he was thrown across the room like a broken rag doll. He could never forget the overwhelming stench of alcohol nor the fury that raged in the man’s eyes as he gave the girl another kick with a bottle in his hands.

Rigid with horror and choking on tears and blood, Felix reached for the gun in his belt with trembling hands and nearly fainted at the sight of his bleeding knuckles.

Don’t, the girl mouthed at him, eyes wide and shaking her head frantically.

Felix ignored her. *He’s going to kill us both.*

His finger twitched, air swallowed metal, and lead took its first taste of iron, calcium and dirt. Felix remembered it all as if it were yesterday. The color of deep crimson soaked through the man’s shirt and splattered across Felix’s face as he dropped dead to the ground.

Years later, Felix would still see the girl's face in his dreams and wake up in his cell screaming about monsters and broken bones and blood. Remembering what he'd done was the only way he could seek some form of redemption for killing a man, and now that was going to be taken from him as well.

Maybe I should go and take a walk around the neighborhood. Felix swiveled his head around in confusion, scratching his neck.

But which way should I go? Throwing up his hands in exasperation, Felix was about to choose a road at random when he heard a large splash, followed by a horrible gurgling sound.

Years spent in solitary confinement didn't dull his senses in the slightest. Detecting a salty tang in the air, Felix ran around blindly in search of the water source as the choking sounds intensified and he fell headfirst into a lake.

A girl was thrashing around in the water, waving her arms wildly while coughing and spluttering. Felix gasped as he swallowed lungfuls of water, trying his best to stay afloat and propel himself forward. *Wait a second. Do I even know how to swim?*

By the time he'd reached the girl, his muscles were on fire. Lungs burning, Felix managed to haul her onshore by her armpits. Then both of them collapsed in a heap, breathing heavily and gasping for air. Felix's heart was still thudding madly beneath his ribcage, and when he finally got to take a proper look at the girl, it almost stopped beating entirely.

"Hold up, you're the girl!"

Never in a million years did Felix imagine that he'd be able to see her again. The girl had grown a lot, judging by her height and facial features, but Felix recognized her nevertheless. You never forget the face of someone who was the source of your nightmares.

The girl acted as if she hadn't heard him, but there was a flicker of recognition in her eyes.

"You didn't have to do that."

"What?" Felix's voice was incredulous, and so was the expression on his face. This definitely wasn't the sort of warm welcome he expected.

The girl huffed and crossed her arms.

"You heard me. You could've just left me alone."

Felix was sputtering by now, and not because of the lake water. *Did she even know what she was saying?*

"Excuse me? I just saved your life!"

"Don't you understand? I don't want to be saved! I just want to be left alone!"

"Look." Felix's voice was so unnaturally calm it frightened him. "I don't know what I did wrong, and I'm sorry, okay? I... I just wanted to help."

He blinked, suddenly feeling a fresh wave of stinging tears.

"At least you can have the chance to live your life, do whatever you want. In a week, everything that I've ever had will be gone. I won't even remember who I am."

"They've injected you, haven't they?" The girl's voice was remote and vague, as if she was talking to a distant memory that only she could see.

“I’ve always hated injections. They wiped my Ma’s memory too—got sent to jail for stealing a piece of bread. My Pa had to inject her himself. He’s an official, you see. It broke him to do it. He was never quite the same since.”

“You’re being ridiculous! Your dad was abusing you. You could’ve died! Why are you still defending him?”

Quietly, the girl rolled up her sleeve.

“Because sometimes, remembering can be more painful than forgetting.”

What Felix saw made him inhale sharply. Her arm was flecked with a million tiny scars, some nearly healed, some fresh and swelling with blood.

“He was agonized by what happened to my mother, and my face reminded him of her— he couldn’t help it. I guess the both of us would’ve been happier if we didn’t remember anything.”

Felix laughed despite his tears, looking at his reflection in the lake. Pretty ironic, wasn’t it? How he struggled to hold on to his memories while this girl was so desperate to forget.

“I’m grateful that you saved me. I really am.” The girl hid her arm, ducking her head beneath her hair. “It’s just that... What’s the point? I don’t have a purpose anymore.”

“It’s the least I could do.”

Felix looked at her lonely silhouette, feeling a fresh wave of sympathy for this girl he barely knew.

“Everyone has a purpose. We just have to look for it. For starters, maybe you can show me around,” he said, gesturing vaguely. “I’d like to make more memories while I still can. Besides, it’d be nice to have someone who’ll remember me.”

The girl didn’t respond, but Felix could detect a faint trace of a smile at the corner of her lips.

“What’s your name, by the way?”

“That,” she said with a mischievous glint in her eyes, “is an answer you’ll have to find out for yourself.”

Her name wasn’t the only thing Felix found out about Leah. Over the next few days, Felix spent every possible moment recounting his memories with her and checking off his to-do list, which Leah scribbled on the back of his arm, as well as revisiting different places that held a special place in his heart before he could forget any of them.

The truth was, Felix didn’t do all these things for himself, but for Leah as well. The girl was initially quiet when they set out on their journey but soon warmed up to him as time passed. At least he had to make sure she wouldn’t do anything stupid to hurt herself after he forgot everything, including her.

Felix could feel his memory getting worse. He forgot little things at first, like the reason why he walked into a room, but soon it escalated. Now he could barely remember anything that happened to him before he got imprisoned. Felix had made up his mind to leave on the sixth day before he could become a burden to anyone else, only that day arrived sooner than expected.

Sighing heavily, he got up and made his way out of their tent. The air around him seemed thick and jelly-like, and he found it increasingly difficult to breathe. Ignoring the pounding of blood in his ears, he stumbled outside, trying to block out his severe headache.

Leah was kneeling on the grass, stroking a dandelion bud. She sprang to her feet as soon as she saw Felix emerge outside, clutching his head, an expression of concern on her face.

“Felix?”

“I guess this is goodbye then.” His words were becoming slurred, and Felix groaned.

“What are you talking about?”

Felix once thought that time would make the pain go away— only it never did. The injections were supposed to give criminals like him a second chance; a chance to reintegrate into society without being judged by anyone. But, they never told him that forgetting would be the most painful part.

“Listen to me,” Felix said in a rush before he could forget anything further. “In a few hours, the injection will take full effect, and I’ll forget everything. I won’t even remember you anymore, and I —”

He blinked, rubbing away his tears angrily with his fist.

“I don’t want to forget you.”

Leah’s smile was sad.

“How can you forget me when I’ve never really been there?”

It was then Felix finally understood. His pain would be short-lived. It would be Leah who had to bear the burden of carrying the memories of someone who wouldn't even have a clue who she was. All along, was he being selfish for forcing her to remember?

“Promise you'll try to forget me.” Stars were beginning to form in his vision, and he struggled to remain conscious. Ignoring Leah's protests, Felix continued.

“You deserve a life, Leah. I don't want to tie you with our memories when all along you've struggled to be free. So go and live your life, okay?”

“I'll come and find you.” Leah's voice was wobbling.

“Don't bother. I won't remember you anyway. Try something new, go find a hobby, a boy that you like. You said you wanted to find your purpose, remember?”

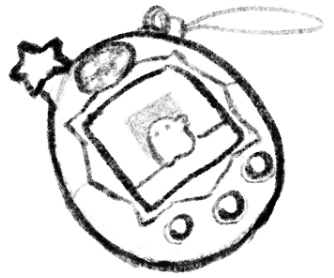
“But I already found —”

“Just go, Leah. Please.”

Leah was crying, but Felix's legs felt too heavy to chase after her. He watched the girl go with a thousand unspeakable emotions in his eyes. Maybe his time was nearly up, and maybe he couldn't help but forget her eventually, but this was one thing that he could still do for her.

His knees finally gave way beneath him. Felix collapsed onto the ground, never taking his eyes off Leah until the darkness swallowed her silhouette, and his world became blank.

It's the least I could do.



CityU Contributors

The Reunion

Rajani Limbu

City University of Hong Kong

As Elijah approached Alina, weaving through the crowd, he resembled less and less the version of him in her head. He stood in front of Alina, his hands stuffed in his front pockets, and gave her an awkward smile. She smiled back.

“Hi,” she said, trying to keep her voice from trembling. She tried to appear like the confident woman she had always hoped to be, her hair flat-ironed pin-straight and her lips a deep shade of red.

“Oh come here,” Elijah said and pulled her in for a hug.

Alina fell forward and into his arms. His scent, a familiar mixture of sandalwood, aftershave, and mothballs, enveloped her. After a beat or two, they pulled away awkwardly.

As they walked side by side, Alina stole glances at him like a shy schoolgirl. Although it had been 7 years or more, it felt as if it was just yesterday they had roamed around the city hand in hand. He was just as handsome as he had been 7 years ago, but he had definitely aged. The tired circles underneath his eyes and the grey hairs cropping upon his temples were proof.

“Do you still love Sichuan food as much as you did before?” he asked. Alina was surprised that he still remembered.

“I like it, but I’m not as fond of it as I used to be.”

“Oh”, he said, with a hint of disappointment in his voice.

“Do you remember the time I insisted on coming here?” Alina asked.

They were at a *cha chaan teng*, a Hong Kong-style cafe, one that had always piqued Alina's interest but Elijah insisted wasn't good. Now that they were finally seated, Alina felt strangely self-conscious under his gaze. While he had definitely aged, so had she. She wondered if he noticed her roots showing. She had been meaning to go to the hairdresser and have them touched up, but a busy week had kept her from doing so.

"Was it that day we went to David's birthday party?"

"Yes, when you almost got into a fight with some guy because 'he was looking at you weird'."

"I was always getting into fights those days, I didn't even really need a reason." He said and they both burst out laughing. That much was true.

Alina searched Elijah's face to see if he still had that scar over his right eyebrow that had resulted from the drunken brawl. Even back then it had been barely noticeable, and the only time she could take a good close look at it was when he was sound asleep.

Feeling Alina's gaze, Elijah's hand shot up, and felt his right eyebrow self-consciously.

"You're looking at this, aren't you?", he said, a hint of embarrassment in his voice.

Alina half-smiled and took a sip of her drink. Elijah had been quite drunk that night, more so than usual, actually. She could remember the ringing in her ears as he had towered over her, screaming.

"God Alina, it's not my bloody fault I've got a life and you haven't!" he screamed. She still remembered the heat spreading over her face like a fever, as she realized that passersby were looking.

“I’m not against you drinking, I just don’t understand why you have to drink so much...” she said quietly. She hated how pathetic she sounded. The bright city lights blurred as tears pricked her eyes.

“And you’re crying now, fantastic!” Elijah said, throwing his hands up in exasperation.

“I’m sorry...”

Elijah walked off towards the far end of the street, leaving her standing alone. Alina looked down at her hands, unsure of what to do with herself. After a minute or so, Elijah came back and roughly pulled her in for a hug.

“I’m sorry,” he said over and over, his face pressed into her hair. She could smell the stench of the alcohol on his breath.

“French toast.” The waitress unceremoniously put the plate on the table.

Alina poured syrup onto the toast. She then took a knife and a fork from where it was soaking in a hot cup of water and cut the toast into bite-sized pieces.

“How is your father?” Elijah asked, his eyes fixed on the toast.

“He left rehab five months ago. He’s making steady progress, as far as I can tell.”

“That’s good news,” Elijah said with a nod. After five minutes of eating silently, he suddenly looked up at her.

“It must’ve been traumatic. To find him passed out on the floor like that, I mean.”

Alina nodded, unsure of what to say. She didn't like thinking of that night, how she had been so excited to share the news of her promotion with her father, and instead of finding him on the floor, frothing at the mouth. Her first thought had been to call Elijah, and despite herself, that's what she had done. He hadn't picked up, and she had later seen him through a mutual friend's Instagram story with his arm around another girl's waist.

After their meal, the pair decided to walk along the Tsim Sha Tsui waterfront. The sun was setting, casting a warm glow on the city. There were plenty of people about; families, couples, and joggers.

"How's London treating you?" Alina asked.

"It's alright. I've realized the place doesn't matter. Wherever you go, you bring yourself along", he said, lighting up a cigarette.

"Have you thought about me in the last 7 years?", asked Elijah after a while. They were both leaning against the metal railing, facing the sea.

"Well, yes...but also not really."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Elijah looked at her.

"I thought more about the hurt you had caused me than you yourself", Alina said, surprising herself.

"We both hurt each other in our own ways, I guess."

They stood there silently for what felt like ages, looking out into the sea.

"I quit drinking the night I moved out of our apartment", Elijah suddenly said.

Alina said nothing.

“There’s no point in talking about these things now”, she said finally.

“I suppose not.”

“When will you be visiting Hong Kong next?”, Alina asked. They were standing on the platform of the train station, waiting for their trains to arrive.

“I’m not sure. There doesn’t seem to be a reason for me to come back.”

They looked at each other and smiled.

The pair hugged one last time and Alina inhaled deeply, taking in Elijah’s scent for what she knew would be the last time. They waved goodbye and got onto their respective trains.

Theobromine and Caffeine

Ng Kai Yeung

City University of Hong Kong

Let me tell you how this works: First, you ask the mistress, then the wife, and finally the kid. Unless it's a woman, then you'll never find your target.

Midnight, but the sky of neon colours never falls silent. I looked inside the apartment, a rusty old room filled with nothing but relics of ancient times. The window shattered. I stepped foot inside the dirty house. My fingers wrapped around the trigger tightly, ready to fire upon my prey. My age was showing, being careless with my moves, I stepped onto something, a crinkle. The room stayed silent; my anxiety faded away as I realised the room was empty. I looked at my shoe sole, a piece of wrapping stuck on it, clinging onto the intruder. I carefully peeled it off my shoe, only to be greeted with an average brown. Synth-Cocoa bar... he was spending stolen cash on expensive treats?

Flipping through the dusty desk, there was nothing but a photo collage, some random kid. The only interesting thing was the background. I hadn't seen green like that before. It was livelier than the grass here. No use staying here, better call back and see what the company wants.

“He's not here.”

“Well, you're only getting paid after you catch the target.”

Another day of expense wasted, guess it's another dollar meal for me.

Nu City, the freest, most degenerate place on Earth, and I'm in the centre of the cesspool as a hunter for the company. You must be wondering what kind of bastard is responsible for making me chow down on a dollar meal. I'll tell you who – the name's Valentine, some idiot who borrowed half a million from the company and disappeared. Everyone thought he was just another gangbanger, looking for some quick cash to cover their ass from their boss, but I didn't buy that for a second. Word on the street was that the Kings are about to wage war on the South Side gang, and they need money for guns, which would've been a big pain for a hunter like me. With my less than successful break-in, the only thing I gathered was more questions. Why would someone spend a small fortune on high-end treats but live in the slums? The stained plastic desk is as cloudy as the case, and my hunger for the truth lingers.

As I drove through the highway, I heard joyous news that could bring an end to the case. A live report of a B'n'E at the chocolate factory, the cameras captured someone with distinct short purple hair and a scrappy old trench coat. Valentine's unpredictable enough to rob a factory, so this may be him. I slowly wiped the long barrel, making sure its experienced past wouldn't show. Jericho may be an old man, but he can still dish out damage. Besides, bullets are much cheaper than plasma. My father passed it down to me as did his before him; the sick son of a bitch handed his 10-year-old son a fatal weapon, not that I'm complaining. He was tough, but it was necessary, or I couldn't have protected my mother. If my gut was correct, he was bound to hire a fixer to hide him. I knew exactly where to find him, *C'est la vie*, the sleaziest bar in town,

“Hey cuz, can a brother help you get your fix?”

Another Kings in South Side territory, things were getting messy around here. Getting in the bar was no easy feat but staying alive was harder than getting in; rivals, criminals and psychos all converged here, some looking for work, others for trouble. I knew a dozen freelance hunters willing to kill for even the smallest bounty, let alone this juicy piece of steak. Among the rowdy fighting and chaos, I spotted a familiar face, Ed. The fiercest bartender in all of Nu City, she once took out a small gang wrecking the bar just by herself – that’s why no one dared to touch this place.

“Hey, Ed.” She sighed audibly, wiping down the space in front of me. “Watered-down whiskey again?”

“Watered-down, **watered-down** whiskey. New target is a pain in the ass, purple-haired nobody obsessed with candies.”

She leaned in close and whispers in my ear. I could feel her heavy breath on my neck, exciting me in more ways than one as I waited for the information. Good girl, now give me the treat.

“Saw someone who secretly ate a chocolate bar in the alleyway yesterday, looks way too poor for it too. Has a key to Mount Hotel, don’t know which room though?”

Aha! I know where you are now Valentine. Tonight, I’m having real meat for a change.

‘The Mount hotel seeks to provide quality services at cheap prices’ my ass, this place looked worse than the NENT landfill, and that place was a literal dump. The nauseating smell of trash, sweat and semen was not the worst of it –flickering neon lights that momentarily showed roaches alarmed me, overloading my senses. I knocked down every door, and either a scared man with a prostitute or his mistress greeted me ... or a dead body hanging from the lights. This pattern continued until I knocked on room 26.

“What?”

The naked woman stood proudly – I sighed and bid her good day, but she stopped me right when I turned away. She held on to my hand, gently pulling me into her room, my instincts dulled for a moment. Her soft lips tried to go in for a kiss, and ready to accept, I leaned in, just to see her purple hair illuminated by the faint white light. *A bob-cut, this can't be a coincidence.* I moved back a step, to see a mouldy old trench coat sticking out of the closet – he is a her!

“What?”

She asked again. This time I did not hesitate, and I turned her around and put her in cuffs. *I am eating real meat tonight.* The target struggled for a bit but soon complied.

“Didn’t take you for the hardcore type.”

“Rey Valentine, you are under citizen’s arrest, your unpaid fines of half a million credits will now be collected.”

She realized I was with the company. The target started to struggle again, she wiggled her tied hands and kicked me in the back. Seeing I was unfazed by her attacks, she turned around and looked me in the eye. Her green eyes were just like a pair of sparkling jade earrings, shining in the dark, the same as my mother's. I could sense the betrayal and hurt, same as when I shot my old man. The target took advantage of my split-second waver, pulling a shank from the seams of her bed, stabbing me in my gut.

“I’m sorry, I just need some more time.”

The scarlet red spilled onto the vinyl floor, latching onto crevices and dents. Darkness surrounded my vision, slowly closing in on my iris. What was left is the buzzing of neon pink, the unending annoyance, starting to fade. I couldn't feel, just like my father. Not a bad way to go.

Smooth jazz awakened me from my slumber, so I guess there was still more for me to do here. I questioned whether she was real or not, yet it was clear I had been stabbed. She bandaged me before leaving. Why? I'd lost the only lead. Limping across the room, I stepped onto another wrapper. Smarties. What kind of name was that? I had never seen anything like this, maybe an intelligence-enhancing drug? I worried that it may be poisonous, but I had no choice left, pulling my nose near the wrapper, I took a sniff of it. Chocolate, again. The target was buying older chocolate, but why?

At least now I could leave this god-forsaken building. I sometimes wondered if this city was a personalized hellhole made for me because someone jacked my car while I was away. Thankfully, I was paranoid enough to install 5 trackers onto it.

“Hey Siri, find my car,”

“Your car is...2 kilometres away.”

After a short walk, I could see that my cherry red baby had crashed right into a pole. The impact must have injured her. There was a bloody trail that led into the heart of South Side territory. Company policy dictated that I should let her go, but the policy also said no perp, no pay, so I didn't have a choice here. Following the scarlet direction, I felt myself getting closer to the target. I heard faint voices coming from the corner, it must be the target.

“You got the cash?”

“Yeah, now hand it to me.”

A King's gangster handed her something, presumably another chocolate bar. She looked terrible, a piece of glass must have punctured her liver, blood flowed like the Futaleufú River. At this point, she was going to bleed out before I retrieved her. To add a cherry on top of this crap sundae, I heard South Side gangsters driving by. These redshirts were not going to react well to a foreigner on their turf. I reached for Jericho in my pocket, still doubting if these scumbags were worth the bullets.

“THIS IS OUR TURF!”

A hail of bullets raced across the narrow alley, with credits stained red floating in the air, like a cherry blossom tree you'd see in history books. The mobster was dead, but Rey was still alive, I could still extract her. The Kings hiding near the area must have heard the gunfire, streets nearby soon turned into a battlefield, with an incestuous mix of red and yellow on the floor.

“Over here!” I shouted at the top of my lungs.

She saw my head poking out of the corner, and slowly crawled toward my direction. Seeing a rusty old door near us, I kicked it down and carried Rey inside, placing her down on the cold floor.

“You- **cough**- you wanna know why I borrowed half a million dollars?”

I had no time for little stories, taking off my shirt and pressing it onto her wound, I looked for a first aid kit.

“I was put in cryostasis, don’t know when, don’t- **cough**- know why. The procedure fried my brain, and I can’t remember anything. The only thing I know is that I liked KitKat.”

Her insanity baffled me, a nostalgia-filled frenzy that cost her half a million and the whole town searching up and down for this purple-haired psycho. We were surrounded by gang members, dirt, and filth with no way out. Her hands slipped, I suspected she had less than an hour.

“Hey! Do you want to die? Press tightly.”

“I’m a dead woman walking.”

I couldn’t let those green eyes fade, not again. I had to think of something.

“Don’t you want to eat this chocolate?”

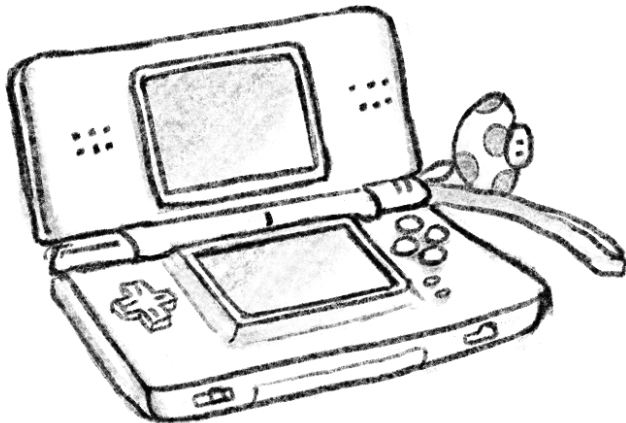
“The only thing I taste is blood. Just eat it for me, it’ll be the be.”

She didn’t finish, I didn’t think she can. No more looking back, Rey Valentine.

I was left with the chocolate. The red package taunted me, it looked just like her. How could anyone die for something as minuscule as this? ‘Tear here’, the two words tempted me, maybe its taste was something worth dying for? I tore through the packaging, revealing its silver innards to this unknown world. The bar smelt different, there was more depth than the sweetness, I smelled blood. I took a bite, the flavour of real cocoa, the texture of the waffle, it was nothing like synthetic food.

“Mm, tastes like shit.”

**Dr. Simon Berry Fiction Writing Award
Winner**



Cheung Chau

Rajani Limbu

Champion

City University of Hong Kong

I had been thinking about it for months now. It was the first thing I thought of in the morning and the last thing I thought of as I drifted off to sleep at night. I thought of it on my train ride to work, while I ate my lunch, and while I sat in endless meetings and nodded politely every now and then. One day, I decided it was time I did what I had been thinking about doing for the longest time. That day, I got out of bed as usual and made myself a cup of coffee. As I sipped on my coffee, I rang up my boss on the phone and called in sick.

“A fever. Yes, it’s terrible. Yes, I’ll make sure to take care of myself, thank you”, I croaked on the phone.

Afterwards, I pulled out the dusty old suitcase from underneath my bed. The sight of the dents on the suitcase reminded me of when Beth would nag me to buy a new one.

“It’s an investment, you know”, she had said.

“Think of all the places we’ve been planning to visit”, she added with a grin. Those moments felt like a lifetime ago.

I packed only the bare necessities. I threw in my undies, a few random t-shirts, jeans, and my laptop half heartedly into the suitcase before snapping it shut. I didn’t think too much about what I packed; I wasn’t planning on staying long anyway. I took a good last look around the flat and despite everything, I felt a twinge of sadness in my heart. The flat wasn’t much but it was home. Where was home anyway? Home is wherever the heart is, or so they say, and my heart was nowhere. That word meant very little to me now.

On the ferry to Cheung Chau, I looked out at the open blue sea as I tried to ignore the nausea rising in my stomach. Few rows in front of me was a family of four: a mother, a father, and their two sons. The father and mother looked on as their children tapped away at their phones. At one point, the mother reached out to brush a stray lock of hair away from the son's face and the son, without looking up from his phone, pushed her hand away. I wondered whether the mother and father loved each other. Maybe they did, once upon a time. Maybe that love had faded away and they were still together simply for the sake of their children. If this was true, did they resent their children for it? After all, the children hadn't asked this of them; the parents had done so out of their own volition. Come to think of it, they hadn't even asked to be born.

I thought about what Beth or my mother would have said about my spontaneous trip to Cheung Chau.

“Writing is something you do in private and when you have the time”, my mother would have said. “Jeopardising your career because you think you might be the next Stephen King is a privilege; one that my generation didn't have.”

While they didn't always see eye to eye, Beth would've definitely agreed with my mother on this one. I almost had the urge to call up my mother and tell her my plan: go to Cheung Chau, finish my novel, then kill myself. A beautiful ending to an inconsequential life. Maybe she would read about my death in the news. Casually tuning in to check the weather forecast, she would soon turn hysterical. Would she read my novel then? Probably not, she would want nothing to do with me by then.

As the ferry came to a stop, passengers got up and started leaving in waves. The father beckoned to his two sons to put their phones away, while the mother tried to get them to put their jackets on. I walked through the crowd to the nearest stall to book myself a room. I made sure to ask for a room with a balcony.

“BBQ?”, the middle-aged lady behind the counter asked.

“Yes”, I replied.

The lady took out a sheet of paper that showed the directions to the resort. Go straight down this road, turn right, then go straight down until you see a sign that says “Miami Resort”. I didn’t need instructions; I had been here a dozen times before. Regardless, I politely waited for her to finish, took the keys, and thanked her.

The room was not bad but it wasn’t great either. There was a black, worn-out sofa in the main room, and the bedroom was to the left. The sliding door next to the sofa led to the balcony.

After putting my suitcase in the bedroom, I headed out to get a few groceries. I made my way through the busy streets filled with couples, friends, and families. Beth and I were once one of these couples. We would hold hands and walk about aimlessly, entering and exiting shops, commenting on the different items for sale.

One time, Beth had spotted a beautiful seashell; pure white with its edges tinged pink.

“It’s beautiful”, she said as she held it up for me to see.

I had offered to buy it for her but she had refused.

“What’s the use? It’s dead anyway. It’s like buying a human femur.”

As I entered the supermarket, I made a mental checklist of items to get: cup noodles, red wine, chips, and most importantly, charcoal. I paid for my things and headed back to the hotel. Back in the hotel, I sat down and opened the laptop in front of me. With a mug of red wine next to me, I began to type. Taking periodic sips of the wine, I typed, not stopping even to correct the many spelling mistakes. Squiggly red lines filled the word document as I typed away. After some time, my laptop flashed a low battery warning. I blinked, as if woken out of a trance. I was quite tipsy by now, so I decided to leave my laptop charging and head out.

The sun had set when I stepped out. With nowhere to go in particular, I went to the nearest place that served alcohol. I ordered a gin and soda and sat by myself in a corner. After some time, a girl approached me and asked if she could sit next to me. I said yes. She had on a knee-length black dress, a plaid blazer, and her dark hair was halfway down the length of her back. Eventually, we started making small talk. Her name was Heather and she was a university student in her final year of study. She was here to celebrate a friend's birthday. She jerked her thumb back at the loud group of young people huddled together in the corner.

“Won’t they mind that you’re here instead of with them?”

“They’re pretty drunk by now, I don’t even think they’ve noticed I’m gone”, she replied.

She asked me what I did for a living.

“I’m a writer and I’m currently working on my first and final novel”, I replied before taking a swig of my drink.

“Why final?” Heather asked, her head cocked to one side.

“Because I’m planning to kill myself tonight”, I said in a matter-of-fact tone.

Heather threw her head back and laughed.

“You’re funny.”

“I’m glad you find my situation funny. At least one of us does.”

“You’re not serious are you?”, she asked, suddenly concerned.

“I wish I were kidding. I don’t even know why I’m telling you this. Maybe it’s because I have nothing to lose anymore. But yes, after I’ve finished my novel, I’m going to email it to different publishers, close the windows, burn charcoal, then experience what I hope is eternal peace.”

Heather looked at me with a pained expression and said nothing for a while.

Eventually, she asked, “Why burn charcoal? Why not drown? The waters in Cheung Chau are especially beautiful.”

“It’s too cold for that.”

She looked back at her group of friends and asked if I wanted to go out for a walk. I paid the bill and we left the bar together.

“I’m gonna buy some more drinks, if you don’t mind. It’s my last day on earth and I intend to enjoy every second of it”, I said before heading into a 7/11.

We walked along the streets of Cheung Chau, openly drinking out of soju bottles and chatting.

“I don’t really know what I’m doing in life, you know?”, she said, slurring her words.

“You’re coming to the wrong person for advice”, I replied dryly.

“Oh right. Because you’re planning to-” Heather closed her eyes and stuck out her tongue from the corner of her mouth. She then threw her head back and laughed, almost falling in the process. I caught her before she fell and helped her stand upright.

“You’re so funny”, she said for the fifth time.

After some walking, Heather suddenly stopped.

“By the way, I know a place”, she whispered dramatically into my ear.

It was around 20 minutes from here but the view from up there was stunning and absolutely worth it, she said. Naturally, she took the lead and I followed as we stumbled our way through the dark of the night; the moonlight our only source of light. We were quiet throughout the journey; too drunk and out of breath to make conversation. The stillness of the night only magnified the sound of our movements and our irregular breathing.

After some time, we walked off the main path and down a narrow dirt path. The dense trees overhead gave way to an open night sky. The sound of crashing waves grew louder. I spotted a large rock jutting out of the ground; it was a tombstone. Behind it, I could see another tombstone and several more down the line.

“This is a cemetery”, I said.

“Yes, I hope that doesn’t bother you. Let’s go down near the seashore and sit”, said Heather as she grabbed my hand.

We walked past the cemetery and downwards towards the beach.

“Won’t you try to change my mind?”, I asked, looking down at Heather. She was lying on my lap with her long dark hair fanned out on the sand.

“No. I’m sure you know yourself better than I do. Besides, as a stranger, I have no right to tell you what to do.”

“Fair enough”, I responded and took another swig from my bottle.

We sat there in silence for what felt like hours, just looking out at the horizon, which seemed both close and far away. I felt as if my life were that horizon. Every time I reached out to it, it slipped farther away, leaving my arm hanging helplessly in mid-air.

“So what’s the deal? Bad breakup?” Heather said, snapping me out of my trance. I had almost forgotten she was there.

“Well yes, but that’s not the reason why I’m doing this.”

“What’s the reason then? There’s gotta be one.”

I tore my eyes away from the horizon and looked at her.

“You don’t always need a reason to die, but you need one to be alive. And I just never found mine.”

After some time, I realised I still had to go back and finish my novel before I could proceed to the final step of my plan.

“Heather, I have to go back”, I whispered to the sleeping figure on my lap.

She made some incomprehensible sound and shifted groggily. I pulled her up and got her to wrap her arms around my neck from the back. We made our way back the same path we had come from, her head lolling against my shoulder as I carried her piggy-back.

With Heather tucked into bed, I worked away at my novel. After some time, I took a break from writing and smoked a cigarette. How ironic, I thought. The novel and my life would both finish together.

Heather woke up and asked for a cigarette.

“Would you like to read my novel?”, I asked. “You’d be the first one.”

“No”, she replied, observing the smoke curling up towards the ceiling. “If I read your novel I might fall in love with you.”

“Fair enough”, I said, the edges of my lips curling up into a smile.

Lying in bed, Heather watched me as I made final touches to the novel. I pulled up the notebook where I had listed different publishers and their contact information. I typed up a quick email, attached the word document, and hit “send”.

“My friends are probably looking for me, so I’ll get going”, Heather said as she put on her blazer.

“If you ever decide to change your mind, you can always call me”, she said as she scribbled her number on my notebook. After she had put on her shoes, she stopped and looked at me.

“I would have said ‘I hope you heal from whatever it is that’s hurting you on the inside, but I guess it’s too late for that.’”

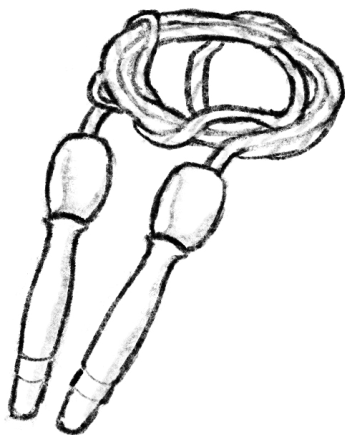
I smiled weakly and said nothing.

After she had left, I went out onto the balcony and looked out at the ocean. I smoked another cigarette as I thought about anything and everything. I thought about the universe and how it was constantly expanding. I thought about global warming, and about the last time I had seen my friends, my mother, my father, my brother. I thought about the last book I had read and really enjoyed, and the last time I had gone out for a run. I thought about how mother birds pushed their baby out of the nest; certain that it would learn to fly on its way down. I wonder if they knew that some never did.

Poetry



Secondary School Contributors



A Forgotten Time

Wong Hiu Ying Amanda

Champion

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section)

The sun-soaked field and distant shore:
An exquisite artwork lost in history.
The polished stars and nothing more,
But a touch of peculiar mystery.

A forgotten melody emerges from the past,
matching the celestial clock's chime.
The bittersweet dread has come at last,
as I lose sight of the ripples of time.

Nostalgia whispers all that eternal,
While the numbing chill nips at my arm.
The gleaming crescent stays sempiternal,
as does the silent night's charm.

I yearn to rewrite my lost memories;
yearn to reminisce what I've seen -
The iridescent glow of fleeting stories
of what never was and what could've been.

The temporary bliss of short-lived glory,
with pleasure and elation and full of delight;
Turns into days which are dull and hoary,
with undistinguished mumbling and fright.

The impalpable remorse of what is lost
intertwines with intangible sorrow.
I would live again at any cost,
waiting for the dawn of tomorrow.

I blankly stare at the rising sun

as the bronze and honey and ginger beam;
as the robin cries until there is none;
as if waking from a dream.

Memories are all we got

Lok Yiu Lam

1st Runner Up

St. Mary's Canossian College

remember?

how it started

with a bang, a starburst of love

how the first gods were invented

remember how you bought us an orange to share

and running after the last bus

remember how we stayed up until midnight

and how summer ruined us

remember the time we went swimming

even though

neither of us

could

remember how we sank to the bottom

and how

drowning

never felt

so

good

remember how

this?

of course

and how

that?

surely

remember.

how it ends

with a hush, a cacophony of ghosts
how we fade into each other
another piece of me
six
foot
under

Remember?

Yeung Cho Yiu

2nd Runner Up

The ELCHK Yuen Long Lutheran Secondary School

Remember,

The cup of tea we shared

When Noon was drizzly?

The sweet mistletoe kiss

That you gave me

On Christmas day?

The stars that glittered

In the night,

Bright as your eyes?

The time we cuddled

For Warmth, for love,

For comfort in our misery?

Remember,

When you used to

Remember?

Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow

Fu Wai Hin Jaime

St. Mary's Canossian College

Remember building sandcastles
In the shining sun and sparkly sand?
Be a princess
Build a fortress
My dreams were limitless.

Remember playing tag
In the long luscious grass with young lads?
Fly free
Filled with glee
Unbound, unrestrained, unchained, I was free.

Remember play pretend?
Superheroes strong, daring, and just
Be fearless
Value fairness
I once did anything in the name of justice.

Today they do not exist
My pure passion gone
Confined to societal norms
To power I conform.

But am I really at the mercy
Of the hands of fate?

Me and myself alone hold the high power
To manipulate the memories of tomorrow
To conserve the good
To strive to be better
To become the best
And enjoy the sweet soft blanket of honey

Coating each struggle in life.

What will be the memories of tomorrow?

It's all on me to create

Today.

I Remember A Summer

Cheng Wing Choi

Maryknoll Convent School (Secondary Section)

Beside the shimmering sea, along with that summer breeze,
Our clock kept ticking as if it was the final warning.

The fresh breath of youth tasted like sugar.
And our never-ending curiosity felt like hunger.

Then the swirling storm arrived, right at our very best supper.
On the beach we once hugged, in the ocean we once loved,
There it came...

We ain't got a chance, we ain't got a choice.
We lost the summer.

Now we're stuck in isolation rooms,
Where our classrooms turned into blue light radiators,
whilst our games became digital tricks.

Now hold on to our polaroid memories, my friend.
For we will meet one day when it ends.

CityU Contributors



Nostalgia is a Dirty Liar

Rajani Limbu

City University of Hong Kong

Nostalgia is a dirty liar,
so they say.
You wouldn't suspect a thing,
how could you?
In a soft voice
she tells stories and
lulls you to sleep
before getting to work.
With wide brush strokes, she paints
breathtaking sunsets
upon the canvas of the mundane.
In the derelict house of memories,
she tidies up the mess,
ties up loose ends,
sweeps the dust
under the rug.
She straightens crooked
photo frames and
replaces wilted flowers
with freshly picked ones.
Nostalgia is a dirty liar,
that may be true.
But ask yourself this:
could you bear to live without her in
the filthy rawness of your memories?

Glass Butterflies

Rūta Cinīte

City University of Hong Kong

Golden like honey yet ice cold
Memories will always be there,
Till you are struggling to remember
Things you thought would be yours forever.

Emptiness might swallow you like a clear night,
Looking at the stars to find an answer in their light.
The night sky we see is not the same for us all,
The more I think, the less I know.

Getting lost on your way home,
Longing for surreal places to roam.
Sharing moments so delicate and fragile
Like glass butterflies stuck in time.

But there is beauty in the non-existent eternity
No need for a life hidden in the attic, the top shelf.
In today's world, if no one sees you, are you really living?
These innermost sentiments, a maze unforgiving.

Looking to escape, where is the key?
The illusion of self, ever-changing.
Seeking comfort in things unknown,
A farewell wish in nostalgic bliss.

The Legend of Ai Glatson-La Leyenda de Ai Glatsón

Andrea Musumeci

City University of Hong Kong

*The worst of it is having to restart, again,
Re-dig has forgotten traces of my name,
chagrin,
Re-tailor old stories, reframe my theories,
Finding myself re-weaving finiteness.*

*The worst of it is having to re-pace, amid
Our dreams of Summers at your mother's lands.
Knowing to be your passion and your fear, speaking,
To you with nothing but my own two hands.*

*The worst of it is having to re-pose, in nude,
With dry coats from our last artistic mesh.
Re-living preoccupations overcome, salute,
Reverting time, falling in love afresh.*

*The worst of it is having to consent, approve,
Discovering new messages of care.
Stepping from royalty to middle-class, dilute,
Believe another smile is really there.*

*All I can feel and think... Is tedious.
Even if it's for everyone's well-being...
All that comes after you... Is tedious.*

Lo peor es empezar de cero.

*Tener que explicar mi nombre,
chagrin,*

Contar mis pasos dados,

Explicar mis letras y mis teorías de infinito.

Lo peor es pasar de nuestros sueños,

Del verano en casa de tu madre,

De saberme tus manías y temores,

De hablarte con mis manos,

A tener que desnudarme otra vez,

Con capas secas de tu última pintura...

A pasar por los mismos miedos superados,

A tener que responder 'sí quiero'.

Lo peor es descubrir mensajes de atención más oportunos,

Invertir el tiempo enamorandome de nuevo,

Pasar de reyes a plebeyos,

Creer que verdaderamente existes en una nueva sonrisa.

Lo peor es sentir que todo lo que llega después de ti,

Me de tanto...

Tanto tedio.

Aunque sea para el bienestar de todos.

**Professor Shirley Lim Poetry Writing
Scholarship Winners**



River

Rajani Limbu

Champion

City University of Hong Kong

I read somewhere that you could never jump
in the same river twice
the second time around
the river wouldn't be the same
the fish might've moved downstream
or the mud settled differently
the water would be a little too warm
or too cold the point is
the river wouldn't be the same
perhaps you would be different
you'd have grown taller a few inches or two
or have a scar from when you fall from a tree
your favourite colour might now be
yellow instead of green
Wouldn't it be nice
to jump in the same river twice
or thrice or more times
and each and every single time
the same fish would swim past you startled
long river weeds would tangle around your feet
the soft mud would rise then settle
in the familiar crevices between your toes
above the water, time marches on ruthlessly
but beneath the surface things stay the same
wouldn't it be nice to jump in the same river twice

Our Old House

Cheung Hey Man Nicole
1st Runner Up
City University of Hong Kong

There is a huge wet indent on the wall
At the corner of the living room,
Where the untuned piano stood strategically,
Dust covered.

On the walls of my little brother's room
Rubber pellets nested in little holes
His toy guns on the windowsill, cold and oily.
The cement walls tattooed in drawings of Glocks and Airsofts
And pencil-written lists of "Who would win in a fight?
Goku or Superman?"

Adjacent were pink bed sheets
Plastered by faded hearts and roses,
Red ones white ones pink ones
My room
Mine softly
Wooden desk splattered by eraser bits, paint drops, pencil marks;
Softly mine
My origami lilies on the bookshelf,
My glued puzzles framed on the wall,
My hair freshly plucked and tossed.

On the hallway walls, swarms of
Scratch marks etched.
Unconscious habits from stressed children.
Loved children,
Dearly.

There is a big bed in my parents' room, big enough to sail in.
Makeup, coins, and ballpens lined up in the musty cupboards,

Longed to be tidied one day.
They became remnants of a life far away,
In the drawers of our new house.

Hopeless Letter That Lasts Forever

Chiu Sin Lee Lily

2nd Runner Up

City University of Hong Kong

Dear Sophia, we all like you.

In fact, we all adore you.

Every day I wonder, what can I do to make you part of me?

Cause you make me glee.

I didn't know you before,

I even think we weren't related at all,

But thanks to what they care for,

Now I believe you are my friend, living across the hall.

So thank all of you,

Who introduce Sophia to me.

And thus telling me her stories that I never knew,

I feel like Rapunzel when she was set free.

I can't tell you how grateful I am,

For introducing Sophia to me, my fellow,

Without her, I'm like Gatsby without Daisy,

Spending my life in gloomy sorrow.

But, Sophia why did you close the door? I really thought we are
soulmates—

Thought we were friends after all? Seems like our relationship has
an expiry date.

Back in the days I really connected with you, now I'd like to know,
is it

all a fluke? Or is it all my dream, my imagination a long time
ago? Talk to me Sophia, tell me what did I do, and what
should I do,

Cause I don't have a clue, of how to, again, be friends with you.

Thoughts of you leaving make me grieve,

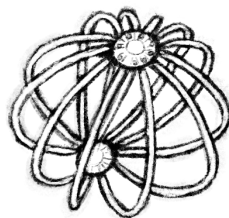
If I could, I wanted to stick with you for a lifetime,

Because you are the best friend one can retrieve,

And a friend who help me reach my prime.

Love forever,
Lily

Creative Non-Fiction



Secondary School Contributors



An Island Near And Dear To My Heart

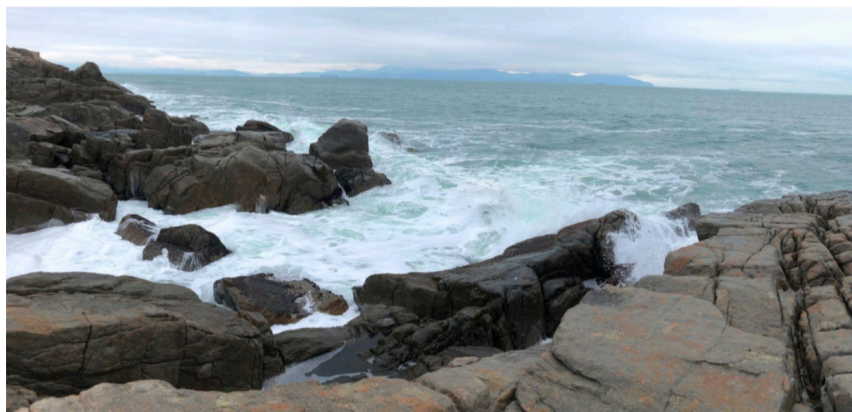
Lee Yan Ching, Yannes

Champion

Carmel Pak U Secondary School

Distant mountains over the horizon, a vast expanse of sea without end and rolling billows lapping at rocky shores — this was my view from my grandparents' kitchen windows. It may not have been much, but this humble abode has sheltered my mother's side of the family through countless typhoon seasons. An impressive feat, considering its vulnerable location — right next to the pier on a remote island.

The scenery of this island is certainly a sight to behold. I would often find myself wandering along the trail that snakes through the island whenever I visit, the picturesque views were well worth the gruelling trek. It is without question that the rocky beaches and lush grasslands are remarkable, but the Balanced Rock holds a special place in my heart. Veering off the trail is a hidden path unnoticed by many, the downhill climb is steep and dangerous, with slippery mud requiring hikers to cautiously hang onto the nearby bushes, so as to avoid tumbling down the slope. I've scraped myself many times on this path; I even sprained my ankle once, but never once have I hesitated to go down, because it is my safe haven. I liked to lay down on the rocks and hear the rushing waves. I liked to watch the soapy sea foam seep through the cracks, then retreat back to sea only to be washed up again. I liked to feel the chilly sea breeze tickle my cheeks and the flicks of seawater splash up on my face as the waves crashed just under me. The Balanced Rock is my hidden gem, where my worries are swept away by the waves and set adrift by the currents.

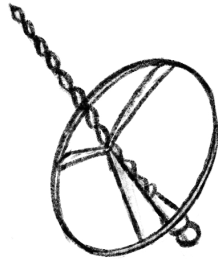


The people of this island are undoubtedly close-knit. Doors are kept open day and night without a care in the world. Neighbors come in and out as they please and are treated like family. Everyone knows everyone in this small village. Whenever I visited, we ate dinner together at each other's houses, and we dug for clams together during low tide. One time, we even helped move the massage chair our next door neighbor ordered from the pier to their house. There is a tradition where the whole village would come together and host an annual party at a Chinese restaurant in the city with amazing food, drinks flowing and a live band to dance to. As the granddaughter of the village chief, I attended every annual party diligently and thoroughly enjoyed them. It was entertaining to watch them drunkenly sing and dance to the music. Things would get pretty wild. One time my grandpa got enough liquid courage to perform Chinese opera on the dance floor. It is still fresh in my mind, and it gives me a chuckle every now and then.

Sadly, since many of the villagers are elders, the number of attendants of these parties has been dwindling due to their increasingly poor health. Some have become bedridden, some have passed on— their buried headstones visible from the trail. Once a home to two thousand residents at its peak, it has become a shadow of its former self, with less than a hundred left. The young blood of this island have ventured into the city for greater prospects, case in point: my mother. So it would be wrong to call myself a local, seeing as I didn't grow up there, but I love this place and its people dearly. Inevitably, these people will be gone, these houses will go to ruin, and this island will become all but a distant memory.

I do not want this island to fade into oblivion, becoming lost to the annals of time. Though I know it is futile, I hope to keep it alive, if only in my heart. Its name is committed to my memory.





CityU Contributors

A Conflict of Nostalgia

Rajani Limbu

City University of Hong Kong

“Nostalgia. 1: the state of being homesick: homesickness. 2: a wistful or excessively sentimental yearning for return to or of some past period or irrecoverable condition also: something that evokes nostalgia.” This is how Merriam-Webster defines nostalgia. For a person who doesn’t have a clear idea of where home is, what does it mean to be nostalgic?

“When we first arrived in Hong Kong, we would see 13-to-14-year-old boys smoking openly out on the streets”, my mother said. I laughed out loud upon hearing this. The thought of children puffing away on cigarettes on the streets like adults, for some reason, struck me as odd, although in hindsight it should’ve been more concerning than funny.

My parents immigrated from their home country Nepal to Hong Kong in late 1994. On some nights after dinner, they recounted to me their experiences of when they first arrived in Hong Kong.

“Your mother couldn’t speak proper English, let alone Cantonese. She would call me at work, lost and asking for directions”, my father said. We all laughed at this, but I now think how scary it must have felt to be lost in this maze of a city, helpless and alone.

“You wouldn’t believe it”, my mother said another time. “6-7 of us crammed into one tiny apartment.”

“What was the toilet situation like?”, I asked. Living in a family of just four and having to share a toilet already seemed difficult enough; I couldn’t imagine how 6-7 people could have managed.

“In desperate situations, the men resorted to using water bottles. The women, however, didn’t have that privilege.”

My sister and I, both born and raised in Hong Kong, have it much better than my parents. We speak English with a rapid pace of native-like fluency. Once, I caught our mother standing in front of our bedroom door, watching us.

“What?”, I asked. Had we done something wrong? Did she need help with chores?

“Nothing”, she said with a small smile as she shook her head. “I never learned to speak English properly, but it makes my heart swell with pride to hear my daughters speak a foreign language so fluently.” My sister and I didn’t think much of this and shooed her away, eager to get back to our conversation.

While this bilingualism brought my mother joy, it only served as fuel for my already conflicted sense of identity. It also came at a cost. I could manage at home, but it was only in front of other adults where I realised how much my Nepali was lacking. I felt a pang of embarrassment every time I had to substitute a Nepali word with an English one mid-conversation.

At the many Nepali functions I was forced to attend, I tried to make conversation with the children, who were less intimidating than the adults.

“What’s that game you’re playing on your phone?”, I asked a kid in Nepali. He was dressed in a smart *daura-suruwal* suit, a common attire for Nepali men.

“Huh?”, he replied, without looking up from his mobile phone. I tried again in English. This time, he animatedly started explaining how the game worked to me.

At the same time, like many other Nepali people in Hong Kong, my Cantonese wasn't great either. Although appearance-wise I could pass for a local, my intonation and wavering voice quickly gave me away. Noticing this, shopkeepers, out of kindness or perhaps pity, quickly switched to English.

“If you were born in Hong Kong, why can't you speak Cantonese?” I am often asked. Which one should I go with today? *The education system in Hong Kong doesn't cater to the needs of the diverse ethnic minority communities in Hong Kong or I don't have many local Hong Konger friends.* Both sounded as if I were playing the victim, absolving myself of all accountability. I usually laughed it off with a self-deprecating joke or changed the topic.

“We are all Hong Kongers. Share this if you love Hong Kong” said an Instagram post. In the picture was a cute animation of people of different shades of skin tone holding hands. It was during the height of the protest, not too long after two million people had taken to the streets. My friend, who is Indian, scoffed as he showed me the Instagram post over lunch.

“One day, you're Hong Konger. Next day, you're *cha chai**”.

“I miss Nepal so much. I used to go every year but I couldn't this year due to Covid”, a coworker *didi* (older sister in Nepali) said to me over lunch. We were finally on a break after a busy breakfast period at the restaurant we worked in.

“Me too. I wanna visit so bad”, I replied, feeling like a fraud as soon as the words had left my lips. While I had been to Nepal a handful of times, my stays had only ranged from a month to two years at most. Did I really miss Nepal? Did I have the right to?

When I think of Nepal, I think of the last time we went back. The four-hour flight came to a stop and passengers started standing up, eager to get off the plane.

“There’s no place like home”, the stout Nepali uncle sitting in the row in front of us turned around and said to my father. My father laughed in agreement and they made small talk while the flight crew prepared for disembarkment. As we got off the plane, I took what was my first step after ages on Nepali ground. I looked up at the open night sky and felt both peace and a sense of yearning. The night sky looked strangely empty; was it possible to miss skyscrapers?

As we made our way through the crowd to find our luggage, I nudged my mother.

“Mom, look at that funny-looking man-”

“Hush, he can understand you”, my mother scolded me, reminding me that I needed to watch what I said. I was finally in my country and among my people, whatever that meant.

We went to visit relatives and as usual, I put my hands together and said “*Namaste*”. Faces I didn’t recognize surrounded me, cooing “Ooh, look how big you’ve grown. When I last saw you, you were this tiny”. My cousins were welcoming and asked me kindly about life in Hong Kong. I answered their questions politely and to the best of my ability. After all, I am the privileged cousin; the one receiving education abroad; born with a silver spoon in her mouth. If they saw the tiny apartment we called home, perhaps they’d feel differently.

After two weeks or so of being in Nepal, the novelty of being somewhere new fades and the urge to go back to the tiny cramped apartment called home returns like a hunger pang in my stomach. Amidst my parents' bellowing laughter and relatives happy to see us after ages, I am a traitor, a fraud, an imposter. Months later, my wish comes true and before we know it, we're on a plane back to Hong Kong. Unsurprisingly, I soon start to yearn for Nepal and the open skies with its neverending stars and the bumpy rides on half-finished roads. However, something is different this time. I've started to come to terms with an in-between existence; never fully here, but never really there either.

I have started practising writing the Nepali alphabet, coaxing them out of my memory from my time spent in Nepal. This effort starts out strong but fades away towards the latter half of the alphabet. It is as if every year that passes erases a letter from my memory, but one day I hope I make it to ञ. **

**Cha Chai* or *Ah Cha* is a derogatory term used to refer to South Asians in Hong Kong.

** The last letter in the Nepali consonant chart.

Take Me Back!

Adedipe Demilade Tunrayo
City University of Hong Kong

Fifteen years ago, I visited my grandfather's village Akoko—a small endearing place laced with blue-roofed houses amidst a well-known town. As my fingers hit the keyboard, I think about my grandfather who died a few months after my visit, after those warm and unforgettable moments we had together. I am sure he is now unwinding somewhere with some music of the soul.

During the two exhaustive weeks of my visit, every moment had a natural touch. Every morning at 6 AM, a small, pink bird would land at the front of our home and chirp out sweet hymns. The sound woke me from my sleep. This made me recall the loud horn of my grandfather's hefty bicycle—it would sound sharply until it eventually dwindled and stopped. Grannie, as I affectionately called my grandfather, had a radio to listen to non-local news and a mat for us to sit on.

In the evenings, Grannie and I drank water with Taro (*Yejiang/Yutou Chang*) leaves and used jumbo stones to blend our potato tubers. We also made pots from clay. While he and I chit-chatted, the squirrels raced on the papaya trees. The squirrels looked at us furtively through the middle of the leaves as they plucked off the papaya fruits. My grandfather's village has a thousand fruits and two "clapping trees" that rattled in our sleep, shaking the two wall ends of the village. On mildly sunny days, middle-aged women would carry trays of farm produce on their heads, walking miles across the village, and cracking jokes along the way. Grannie and I would knit beautiful farm hats from the semi-dried *zōng lǚ shū*. At night, I occasionally sat with the village children to listen to grannie's midnight tales.

Two days before I left the village, Grannie took me and some other young villagers on a tour. We played with the “talking drums” and climbed on a palm tree to tap palm wine. I remember Aunty Zendaya, a young gorgeous lady who came to sell shea butter to my grandfather. She brought us bowls of native soups, which I savoured. We were surrounded by fresh air and nature.

During the tour, we dove into the beautiful river that paved its way behind our home to retrieve hidden “diamond stones”. I would never forget how it crackled whenever water overflowed from the stream, its own way of declaring “I am full!”. There is a legend about a pretty little girl who lives in the stream, and that she cleans the stream every other day. Interestingly, the stream water did appear sparkling clean every other morning. As much as I try to remind myself of science-based processes, I always gravitated towards the girl’s story. It made me chuckle. I reached into the river and fished out a fine stone. It stays with me to this day as a memento of my holiday and my dearest grandfather.

Thank you, Akoko village. The memories never left me. Take me back!



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