

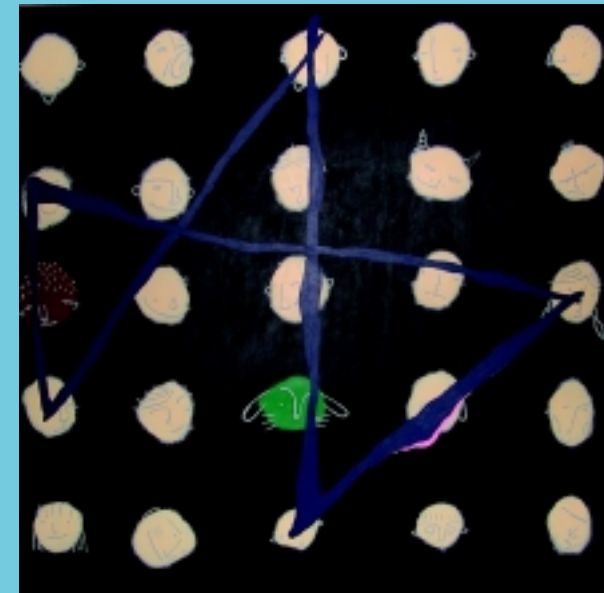
CU

Writing in English

Volume II / 2002

The Editors

Catherine, Katrine & Toby



'Star', a painting of Tang Siu Nam, Department of Fine Arts, CUHK, 2002

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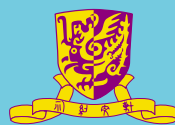
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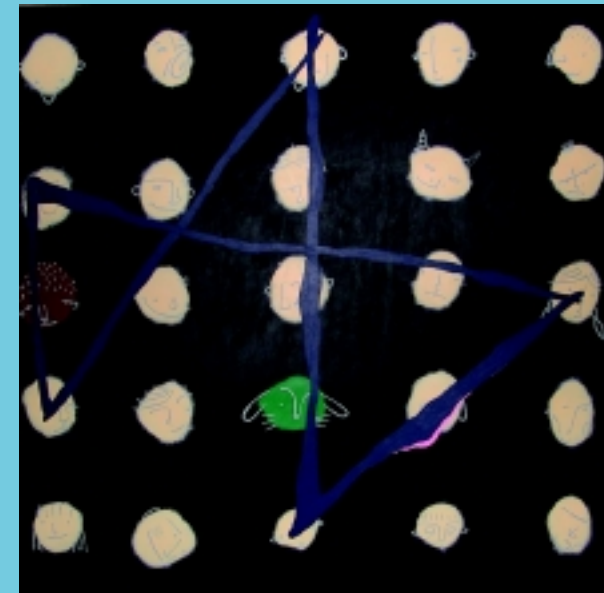
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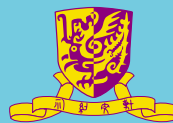
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CU Writing in English

Volume II/2002



Introduction

It gives us great pleasure to present to you the second volume of *CU Writing in English*. Different from last year's, this volume includes 24 poems alongside 10 short stories.

As we read our classmates' writings, we could not help marveling at their bold creativity as well as delicate description. In this collection of students' writings, you will find unusual observations on social reality in Hong Kong, celebrations of love and friendship, explorations of family life, as well as self-reflections on the life of young writers in Hong Kong. Every time we met, we clustered round the pile of scripts, debating over each other's ideas and decisions, masticating certain words to see if we should keep them, and bidding farewell to sentences and clauses.

We would like to thank all our classmates for their support, Miss Nicole Wong for her enthusiastic suggestions, Professors Louise Ho and David Parker for their teaching, guidance, and inspiration in the creative writing courses, and, last but not least, Ms Tracy Liang for her energy and time, without which the publication of this book would not be possible.

Onward to *CU Writing in English*!

The Editors

Poetry: Catherine, Ellen and Isaac

Fiction: Catherine, Katrine and Toby



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Foreign Invader

Zoe Chan

Mum was lost and I am lost, too. I can't recognize myself at all. Mum is right, and also the fortune-teller. Our family has been broken by the foreign invaders. The flashes of memory keep whirling while I am searching for mum on the street.

Everything began with the wedding banquet of my eldest sister; or earlier, when my younger brother came back from the United States with a Mathematics degree; or even earlier, when I got into the university to study English; or even earlier still, when my mother received a red bag in the temple.

It was the day that changed everything; it was the first time my mother asked me to lie to my father. Even though I was only five years old at that time, I had a premonition that something terrible would happen ...

The stench of burning incense was irritating in my mind. I still remembered the location of the temple, the face of the fortune-teller, the words my mother told me, and the red bag.

"Stop laughing! Close your eyes, concentrate on your wish!" shouted my mum in her usual frightening and hideous voice. My sister and I ceased gurgling and pretended to be patient on shaking the bamboo sticks.

"Career: 32, Academic: 67, Family: 28, Health: 55." Mother repeated for the fortune-teller as he flipped through a yellowish sleazy book. The baffled fortune-teller replied in a profound chiu-chou dialect. Mother frowned and listened to his words carefully. He scribbled several lines on a piece of paper and folded it into a red bag. Mother took the little red bag and put it into the inner pocket of her coat.

"What did he say? Is it good or bad?" I wondered, as I knew none of the inexplicable words they said.

"Don't tell it to your father. Never mention we have been to the temple today. Go to buy some fruits with your sister. Go! Go!" Mother pushed me towards my sister and she fled.



I lied to my father and I allowed myself to lie to everyone. Sometimes I mixed up the truth with the invented truth. Starting from that day, my mother never spoke about the red bag, but I knew that it was kept under her pillow. I saw her shake her head and sigh when she studied the notes in the red bag. She became more and more superstitious, disgustingly superstitious.

* * *

In the year I entered University, mother asked me to call to the Fungsui TV program to ask those professionals questions about the arrangement of the furniture in our flat. We moved the sofa 15 degrees, planted three ivies in the kitchen and started feeding goldfish in the sitting room. I said to father that our flat needed some decorations. Mum also asked them how to prevent the foreign invaders next door from bringing bad luck.

“The fortune-teller said we mustn’t get contact with any foreigner, or else, our family will b-r-e-a-k! Listen carefully don’t talk to the foreigners next door. Do you hear me?”

I naturally used the same method she taught me to answer her - lying. (I couldn’t see any harm at all!) This was the way we communicated; I knew her well.

Starting from that day, everyday mother knelt in front of the ancestors’ altar and murmured for half an hour, while my sister read her bible in her room and also murmured in the same way. In mother’s room, there was a poster of Kwun Yum on the wall, whereas there was a picture of Jesus Christ on sister’s desk. They both love wearing a golden necklace, but sister would prefer to have a little cross in her necklace. They were so like each other, almost the same height, the same face, the same smile.

“Like her? Not in a million year! I was never like her and never will be! She speaks chiu-chou dialect. She is so narrow-minded. She is so...” my sister got indignant when people commented on their sameness. I could understand her, as I would do the same when people asked me.

I realized the discrepancy between them at the moment I said goodbye to my sister in the airport. She went to the United States with my younger brother to further her study. She was so



excited and over-reacted a little bit. She chuckled liberally when she looked at the passport, but mother sobbed. I thought she was right. They were from different worlds.

I seldom heard of sister and brother thereafter.

Because of her leaving, the little room became my private paradise. I started to stick all my favorite idols' posters, newspaper cuttings and postcards on the walls. I could flaunt my Norton's Anthology Literature series and all the Entertainment Weekly magazines on my bookshelf. I really wished to change my double deck bed into a larger single one but mum insisted on everything remaining unchanged. Whenever I was doing my homework in the room, she would stand at the door and stare without a word. She must be happy that I kept the room so clean.

* * *

My younger brother returned to Hong Kong two months before my sister did. He claimed that he was the precursor of surprising news for us. His return had already created enough shock. He didn't tell anybody when and why he came back. We received a call from him at midnight,

"Hi! Buddy, guess where I am? Haha...I'm back, in Hong Kong! I think I've a little trouble here. The airport seems a bit different and I get lost. You've gotta pick me up somewhere?"

My younger brother had never called me "buddy" before. He had changed a lot. The way he spoke, the way he thought and the way he behaved were totally different. He seemed to me a stranger. He was a year younger than me but he had his head in the clouds - both physically and psychologically. His over-weight rickety head was attached to his scrawny body making him like a scholar, full of wisdom. He was lank and ordinary, like any one else you'd see in the Mongkok main street.

After his return, there were always conflicts between him and mum. Once mother asked him why he fixed so many "i"s on the wall of his bedroom that looked like candles bringing bad luck! I thought he was too self-centered and he only belonged to the world "I". However, he explained to us that "i" was neither a candle nor "I" but the magical vector equal to $i^2(-1)$. It was quite unbelievable as my mathematics teachers told me that only positive numbers could have a square



root. No one could understand his world. He was absolutely a mathematician, living in his own algebraic world.

Many times brother answered my questions in a way that gave rise to more questions. I was amused by his intelligence and his shrewdness. He was a total genius, I thought. He gave me much inspiration. However, my mother didn't think so. She blamed the western country that had transformed her son into an idiot. Mum hated the way he spoke with contempt and his lack of politeness, as he never greets me as sister but called me "buddy". Chinese never call relatives "buddy", especially family members. Anyway, it was just a greeting.

* * *

One day, my brother brought me a letter and a nightmare. I didn't talk to mum for a week after receiving the letter – escaping her phone calls, escaping her questions, escaping her eye contact.

This time, I shouldn't keep this secret or lie. What would mum do if she received this letter and this shocking news? Why should I handle this "thunderstorm?" Why brother chose me? Gosh! It's me! Indeed, sister was coming back with her husband!

"Oh! A husband! Oh my God! Your sister has married? To whom? How can she do this to us, to the whole family? Does she still consider us as mum and dad, just informing us through this little rubbish paper? No... no... absolutely not! I don't have such daughter! Tell me it's not true..."

What I imagined had exactly happened, but more exaggerated.

"Yes, it's true." Father put off his glasses after reading the letter.

"He is my professor. He is young and handsome. A pretty nice guy." My brother added his comment. I turned mute at this moment, completely speechless.

Sister had diminished the destruction to the lowest degree - only to herself. Mum nearly fainted when she received this news. Sister promised mum to hold a wedding banquet to notify our



relatives and to compensate for her boldness. I believed the meaning of wedding banquet to her and to mum would not be the same. It was time for me to uphold the family and consoled mum.

* * *

Brother seemed to be the happiest one thirsting for their return. He said that brother-in-law was the only one who could communicate with him. I agreed. Brother-in-law asked him something about the "Vector project". I realized it's all about the "i"s but I didn't understand.

On my uncle's cremation ceremony, mum blamed uncle's entire family for not taking good care of him. She was enraged at their handling of uncle's death ceremony, the placing of the picture in his altar, the clothing of his sons and daughters, the rundown of the program and even the seating of the visitors. We paid no attention to her comments but my younger brother responded her in a sublime voice,

"Life, abstract but real, is like an Function- $F(x)$ of Mathematics that everyone contributes something into the same matrix and receives differently."

"Hey, what do you mean?" I asked.

"You're born; you grow; you fall in love; you get old, you get sick and you die, same formula for everyone, no exception, neither you nor I, understand?"

Brother-in-law replied to him with a knowledgeable smile, "Yes it's true."

Their words were completely out of my perception. They belonged to the same world though brother-in-law was more sophisticated. He was a pure WESTERNER.

* * *

A month before the wedding banquet, mum started picking up stuff like coconut, red cotton blanket, faichun, wedding cakes, etc from everywhere. We were so busy to send invitations to our relatives and friends. She called my sister very frequently to get her husband's batchi and rushed to the temple to check whether they matched or not. It was useless; they were married. The type and



format of the wedding caused a big quarrel. I dealt with both sides and finally, we made the best choice - Chinese in the morning and at night; Western in the afternoon.

* * *

Here we came to the day before the wedding. First, mum forbade my sister and brother-in-law to talk to or to see each other that very night. However, I saw him standing at our door carrying a bunch of red roses. Mum squinted at him, but remained silent. Second, mum cooked some dumplings soup for us and combed sister's hair with a special comb.

“First comb is for a long lasting relationship. Second comb is for bringing happiness to their family. Third comb is...” Before mum finished her statement, brother-in-law kissed sister's hair and praised, “You are so beautiful, gorgeous, charming...” Mum turned pale, speechless still.

There were more Chinese customs to follow on the wedding day. Early in the morning, my mum woke everybody up and we were dressed extremely formal. Mum asked the new couple to kneel in front of the altar but they resisted doing so. Brother-in-law claimed he could only kneel in front of God, but not anything else. After my persuasion, we skipped this process. They were then asked to kneel in front of mum and dad to serve them tea, brother-in-law half knelt and nearly toppled the teapot. Mum responded with a blank face. My brother couldn't stop laughing. Though I wanted to, I couldn't. The wedding was such a funny game to me!

The afternoon program and the night banquet were so-called peaceful that everything ran smoothly, though I saw mum fall asleep in the church. I didn't see mum talk to brother-in-law in the whole day. They were sitting on the two edges of a bench, much distanced. I comforted mum that it didn't matter if she felt uncomfortable communicating with him because I was always stand-by for listening to her.

Looking at my eyes, studying me closely, she answered me coldly, “Sometimes I can't communicate with you either. Your sentences are mixed up with English words.” This time, I understood her words, thoroughly apprehended.



After returning home, when sister was still bathing, brother-in-law rushed out from his room. He kissed my mum. He expressed his happiness by telling us “good” news. Tomorrow he would bring young brother to USA to help him working on a research. I knew mum really wanted to slap him, but she didn’t. She only turned and ran.

* * *

Mum stormed off the house. She fled again. Father called every relative; brother and I went out to search for mother. There was enough news for us. Why didn’t brother-in-law keep this one? Our family will really break. I didn’t recommend brother to go, unless he persisted. The westerner couldn’t steal my sister and take my brother away as well. I kept on searching for mum in the street, thinking and running.

Mum was lost and I am lost, too. Our family had broken because of the foreign invaders. My brain was mixed with mother's words. Had I been really transformed into a foreigner in mother’s eyes? Nothing seemed certain to me anymore: I couldn’t see them clear; I couldn’t trust my interpretation. While I was puzzled by my thoughts, I found her.

She was there, at the dark corner of the garden near our home, crying. I watched her for a long while, her voice “I can’t communicate with you either” filled my mind. After some time, she invited me to sit down. I didn’t know how to comfort her, so we just sat together for ages, smelting the mist of the heavy air and sensing our deep breath.

She gazed at infinity, at last, handed me a little red bag and uttered, “It’s fate.”



Who is Bin Laden?

A Nursery Rhyme

Bin Laden is forty-four years old,
devoted his life to terrorism as a whole.
Had a rich contractor father,
he is able to do what he favours.
Encountered a Palestinian tutor,
he developed a strong religious fervor.
Thought the U.S. desecrated Muhammad's
birthplace,
he started to plan the 911 case.
Lived a life fired by extreme fury,
he did what he wanted passionately.

Wong Chi Kiu, Stephen



In Hoc Signo Vinces

In hoc signo vinces.

By this sign we are conquered.

The rage of a caged bird.

The pain of a chained slave.

We are well set up and framed.

We are rootless because we are trained to run fast.

We are educated sinners

And professionally mediocre.

Damned with an alien tongue,

Cursed with a hybrid mind,

We breathe foreign air

And inhale with bastard lungs.

Our thoughts are designed and channeled.

Being mere means to shameful ends, you should tremble.

Cheung Ching Lap, Dickson



One More Step

Kelvin Yim

He was not my best friend, and he never will be.

I forgot why and how we became friends. I only remember it was at the Orientation Night of the Department of Medicine when I first met him. He was my senior.

“Can you tell me why you want to study medicine?” he asked.

“Why? I don’t know,” I didn’t have to give him any formal reason. “Maybe I have no choice... maybe I want to earn more money... maybe... I don’t know”

“I think you’d better quit” He put away his smile.

“(Excuse me, but do you need to be that rude?) Hey, it is no big deal to have no reason, right?” I tried my best to smile.

“I think you’d better quit” He walked away without looking at me.

I have forgotten what swear words I used then (in my heart of course.) I wished I would never see him again. My wish was in vain - he lived next door in the dorm. I could not believe my “luck”. I wanted to kill him on the first day when we met in the corridor. He stopped me and asked with an expressionless face, “Have you quitted?”

* * *

I tried my best not to confront him, but it was unavoidable that night. I was studying after mid-night that Saturday. Despite the fact that I had been studying all day, I was several chapters behind. Mariah Carey’s voice rushed into my ears: “Do you know where you’re going to? Do you like the things that life is showing you...”

The noise came out from his room

“Excuse me sir. Do you have any idea what time it is now?”



“Oh....sorry. . .I forgot a new Medical student is living next door. You know, usually, I am the only one left in this dorm at an hour like this”

* * *

Maybe it was the apology or the guilty look on his face. Maybe it was his childish smile. I could not tell. Somehow I did not hate him so much. We started to have dinner together. Sometimes I would spend time studying with him. My first year’s results turned out disastrous. I failed two of the four subjects. I had to take a supplementary exam.

I was walking quietly back to dorm with him after reading the results posted on the board of the office. Finally he started a conversation.

“So...what are you going to do?”

“Study, I guess”

“Perhaps. . .maybe. . .you would like to think about if you want to study something else? If you want to become a doctor?”

“Why do you always want me to quit Medicine! You think I am not capable? I will prove to you that I am capable!” I left him and rushed back to the dorm.

“I just want you to know where you are going to” He shouted at my back.

“Dorm!”

“No...I mean...”

I could not hear his last words. I ran back to my room, sat down, and looked out of the window. Why was he so cruel? Why did he treat me like this?

He walked into my room a few minutes later, sat down next to me when I needed him most. My nose suddenly felt so warm. I forgot if I had cried; I forgot what I did that day. I only remember I told him my only secret in life, consciously or unconsciously. I never intended to share it with anyone. I had expected to see a big surprise on his face, but I did not.

* * *



I passed all the exams eventually. I'd begun to really try to know this "friend" of mine. We always hung out together after that. He was by no means without friends. He always had many phone calls, which annoyed me sometimes. His room was always full of people. He was not a bright student, but he studied very hard. He never got good results in tests or exams, but he could always pass. He always said that would be enough - his aim was not to get good results. He was a typical Medicine major, who studied for at least 6 hours and slept only 5 to 6 hours during weekdays, and studied for 13 hours during Sundays and holidays. He always said that he was not hardworking; he only wanted to try his best.

* * *

He'd lost 20 pounds from the first day I met him up till then. I'd lost more. That day...he walked quietly into my room and sat on my bed. It was 11th April, a Saturday afternoon. I was studying and did not know that he was in my room. I forgot how long he had been sitting there until I turned around and noticed him. He was staring at the floor.

"What's up?"

"I don't want to go back to my room"

"Why?" I turned back to my study.

"Just don't want to"

When I had finished studying three chapters, he was still sitting there, murmuring his favorite song. I didn't find that song annoying anymore; I started to follow it in my mind. I suddenly remembered he told me the night before that he was going to visit the doctor again the next day. My heart knocked on my rib cage.

I turned around abruptly and asked, "What happened to your report?"

". . .Carcinoma."

He had to be kidding. No, he must be joking. He wanted to scare me. That was only an ulcer on the tongue, not to mention it was just a small one. No, this could not be true. I mean, hey,



this only happened in those soap operas that I didn't watch even when I had nothing to do. No, I could not believe this...

“Ok, you win, I am terribly scared. Stop kidding OK?”

“...How I wish I was only fooling you”

I forgot how long I was there sitting next to him. I wanted to offer my hand or my shoulder, but I didn't think it would be appropriate. I didn't know if he would like that or not. After all, the secret...though he didn't know who that guy was...if I could turn time back. . .I might have. . .

I sat there. Our conversation was broken. I asked something like, were they sure? You want to consult some other doctors? Things like that. Both he and I knew very well that the doctor was right. I thought he had already suspected this would be the result; otherwise he would not have gone to see a doctor for an ulcer on the tongue.

We did not go to bed that night. Time seemed running so fast yet so slow. At the end, we decided to have a nice breakfast in Shatin. When he stood up, he said, “Just don't tell anyone. . .at least for the time being, OK? A secret.” He winked his eye at me. “So many secrets between us...oh, no, so many secrets we shared...Ha.” I did not give him any response. I walked slowly beside him. I was so close to him, yet so far away. During breakfast, he started joking again. His phone calls came back, again after he switched his mobile phone on. He kept on saying sorry to everyone who called him that morning, saying that he forgot to bring along his phone the day before. He told me he was going to have the operation in June, and his case had already been sent to the Dean of the faculty.

“The best doctors,” he said. “I can see the best doctors in HK, or at least in the New Territories, at one single time. I feel so much like the Chief Executive in Hong Kong”

“It would be better if he were the one to have tongue cancer”



“Wah, how can you say something like that? What if some secret spies around here hear you and take you away to kill you?” He gave me the warmest smile I had ever seen in my life. “Then I will lose someone who is so special to me”. Was he hinting at something? I didn’t know...I wouldn’t know.

Our conversation went on pointlessly that morning. He told me he only wanted his classmates to know the whole situation after the operation. I felt so useless when I think about it now - I should have acted more naturally. I should have been more talkative. I should have been the one to lessen his burden and not the other way round. I didn’t know what to do.

* * *

It was how things worked in Medicine, or anywhere in the world: when something highly confidential like this was going on, everybody would know. My classmates kept nagging me, “Do you know that one of our senior classmates has got tongue cancer? Do you know who he is? What a pity. How I wanted to know who he is. How I wanted to console him. How is he going to cope with it? Why life is so unfair...? Oh Oh Oh”

“He didn’t want any sympathy.” That was my only response to everyone who approached me.

“That means you know who he is?”

“Yeah, it was you. Gossip is one of the main causes for tongue cancer. Didn’t you study?” I did not have many friends already and after that, I did not have any friend at all.

* * *

“You shouldn’t have treated them like this you know” He said when I told him what had happened.

“They were annoying. Who needs their sympathy?”



“It is ME who got the cancer, not you” He grinned. “If sympathy could do me good, I don’t mind getting as much as I could” He laughed.

I could not understand why he could laugh, but I laughed too.

* * *

It was on 10th June that he was admitted to hospital, waiting for the operation on the 12th. Many of his friends and classmates were in his room. He was eating his last meal, mumbling, “I have to eat as much as I can now. I have to eat all my favorite food. After all I can’t eat anything for a long time after the operation. That will be a good time for me to keep fit.” He talked, laughed and ate. Everyone joked with him. Occasionally some girls went out of the room and came back with; a red nose, then others went out. His mother was there, holding his hand all the time. His father was standing next to him on the other side, without a word. The visiting time had passed long ago but we begged the nurse. She knew that we were all Medical students, so she permitted us to stay a little bit longer. We left around mid-night.

I was there when he was still asleep on the morning of 12th June. I was there when he woke up. I was there when his parents arrived. I was there when some of the classmates rushed in, worrying about the news on TV. It said typhoon signal number 8 was hoisted.

His operation was supposed to take place at three that afternoon. The doctors had not arrived in the stormy weather. We were desperate. Some of them made a circle outside the corridor and prayed. Some kept asking the nurses about the progress and Begged them to call the doctors again. I prayed silently beside him. I was not a good Christian. I seldom went to church. I asked God to have mercy on him. I told HIM if the operation would be successful, I would never speak foul language again. More and more classmate came, the circle got bigger and bigger. Some kept on praying. Some went to call the office. Some called the Dean's secretary. He stayed calm.

I never believed in miracles but all doctors came on time. Some doctors told us they had never intended to come in such weather, but the sun suddenly shone and they hurried back. The sun shone only from one to three.



I was there when he was being sent to the Operation Theatre. He grabbed my hand when he was on the bed inside the lift. He said, “thank you”, let go of my hand and closed his eyes. God knew how I wanted to burst into tears. I just didn’t.

* * *

The operation was a successful one, as the doctors claimed outside the Operation Theater at half past four. I lost track time. Eventually he was living next to me again. He insisted on not going back home. His mother held my hands, crushed my bones, with tears in her eyes and said, “Please, could you please look after my son?”

I assured her I would try my best.

It was not long before his roommate came and asked if I could switch room with him. When I walked into the room with my belongings, he was there, standing next to the door. With little hair on his head and a pale face, he said, “Hi”. He gave me a smile and went back to his study again. I noticed there was hair all over the floor; on his pillow; his notes; and pills on his desk. I unpacked my things and finally, I asked, “Why don’t you go back home to take some rest?” “Mum...daad...worvy...if... saw...me...hair, but... I...horgot...hoommate...scared... too.”

I forgot three quarters of his tongue had been cut off and it would be terribly painful for him to speak now.

“Don’t talk if it’s painful. Why don’t you get some rest now?”

“...kady (study)...eham(exam)...ear(near)...”

“I don’t understand...Don’t answer me, but I really don’t understand. Why do you still study 15 hours; sleep less than 5 hours per day; work seven days a week; go to hospital to practice? Why? You should be staying at home, get some rest, or at least do something less stressful! A patient should go where he belongs!”

He smiled and turned on his hi-fi.

“Do you know, where you’re going to...” Mariah Carey’s voice filled the room again.



He wrote something on a piece of paper and handed it to me: “I know where I am going to...Do you?”

* * *

He grew weaker and weaker day by day, because of the pills and the radiotherapy. I was usually the one who helped him walk to the hospital; do all the heavy work; bought him dinner, which is usually congee. I was the one beside him that day, when he visited the doctors again.

“What do you mean by spreading?” I jumped.

“I feel so sorry too...but...we’ve detected cancer cells in his lymph nodes”

“Hell with your reports!”

“I am sorry”

“Of course you should be sorry!”

He remained calm and wrote to the doctor: (Then what is your suggestion?)

“Maybe another operation was needed, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. I have to discuss this with the SMO (Senior Medical Officer)”

I walked him home, sobbing. We knew if the cancer cells had spread to the lymph nodes, a poor prognosis was expected. Nothing could be done.

* * *

Another year had passed. He was in his last year of study. He was too weak to walk to school and always needed someone to walk with him. He insisted on going to every lecture, even those useless and boring ones. He was too weak to speak and write, but he kept on doing so. It took him a minute or two to write one sentence. I was still living with him. He tried his best to speak in vain. I had got adapted to his speech. Those words he uttered only I could interpret.



On the night of 23rd March, we had a nice chat in our room. Everything looked like yesterday...

“Why do you still want to become a doctor? I mean...why do you still study so hard? I could not understand. You are a patient and you are supposed to be resting at home”

He wrote to me: (cos' I no where I go to)

“Where do you want to go? You always say you know where you are going to, then where is it? A patient is supposed to do what a patient should do”

(i only want to be a doc)

“WHY?”

(This is my dream. i only want to work for my dream)

This took him two minutes to write.

“What is so special about a dream?” We both knew that he could never become a doctor...in this situation.

(u live once)

“...”

(if u want to do sth. Just go for it. If not hurt others. y not? Like ur secret. y not tell him u love him?)

“Ha ha ha! Are you crazy? It would scare him away!” How could I told him the one that I loved, the one that I told him loved, was—

(u don't even try)

“He would never love me.”

(do what u like. go for it. y care what others think? y let people around confine u in ur place? Remember i asked u to quit' Cos' i know being a doc. was not ur dream. u study only because other people thought it was good)

“...”

(if one loses his dream and aim of life, what's left for him? If u let others control you, and tell u where to go, then who r u?)

“...”



He gave me the biggest smile he could make, put his hand on my shoulder. I could feel his bones and my body temperature warming his hand.

* * *

On the 20th May, he wanted to go back home after all the exams. His parents came and picked him up. On the 23rd May, he insisted to go back to hospital again. No one knew why he wanted to go back to the hospital, but everyone respected his decision.

There he was, lying in the bed again with me beside him, together with his parents and some friends. Everything was just like the day before his last operation. Except that he had now lost 50 pounds in total and was paler than any living creatures I knew. We came to visit him everyday, seeing that his lunch changed from congee to IV cannulae now. From a smiling face to a blank face. Sometimes, I would sneak into the hospital, pretended that I had to check out all the cases before the lecture in the next morning. I once asked him why he suddenly wanted to go back to the hospital. He wrote: (cos i will scare my parents.)

He was right. He coughed up blood on the next day of admission. He lost all his hair. Because of the chemotherapy, his skin was so dry that you could see cracks all over his body. All that was left for him was his bones. I felt sorry for him when he saw all his would-be-doctor classmates walking around in the hospital. I could feel his depression when he tried to squeeze a smile at them.

* * *

It was raining heavily on 30th May when I got a phone call from hospital at four in the morning saying that he wanted to see me. I took a taxi to the Prince of Wales Hospital and ran to the tenth floor. I opened the door. There he was, lying there, motionless, with blood all over the floor, on his body, everywhere. The blood was coughed out and passed out by him during his last minutes. The nurses were crying when they saw me. They told me he had suffered a lot before he



passed away, because the cancer cells had spread to the major organs. They told me it was him who asked them to call me first. After that he passed away painfully and silently. He must know he was about to leave, to go to a new place. From the moment he insisted to go to the hospital, he knew it. He didn't want his parents to see him suffer. The blood would break their hearts. The nurse told me they had already called his parents. All I could think of at that moment was to clean up that place. I took off my sweater, rushed to the toilet, brought a mop back and started to clean the floor. I knew why he wanted to call me - I knew what he wanted me to do. I quickly changed his gown, clean his face, put cotton into his nose and ears. The nurses helped me but they asked me if they should be doing this now or wait till his parents came. "We MUST" That was all I said.

By four-thirty, his parents rushed into the room, with tears in their eyes. I didn't know what to say but gave his mother my shoulder while his father walked to his son and held his hands. At last, some of his friends came. Some cried. Some punched the wall. Some just stood there.

"He died in his dreams" I lied, but I didn't feel guilty at all. The nurses looked at me, silent and sobbing.

His mother said nothing but held my hands. His father looked up at me from his son and said, "Thank you." He buried his head in his son's chest.

I forgot how long I had stayed there, when finally the nurse said he had to be moved to the proper place. "There is no 'proper place' for him." I whispered. "No proper place except where he wanted to go to."

All he needed was only one more day, and he could be called a doctor. The results came out the day after he left us. As usual, he passed all the exams with average results. His mother burnt the results sheet, saying that he would get it. I never know whether he could get that or not. The only thing I know was that he was not my best friend, and he never will be...he is a part of me.



A Sappy Love Poem For Those Who Love It

I cannot play the Queen of Hearts
For you're the one who holds the cards.
You are the King who stole my Spade.
I took your Club and dug my grave.

Sappy love songs I used to hate;
They can't sound more inappropriate.
Austen, Bronte, Sylvia Plath,
Will you guide me along the path?

Am I plain Jane or the "Bell Jar"?
I did leave my town to live afar.
Do I lack pride? Do I lack sense?
Why can't I tell the future from the present tense?

Cheong Pui Mei, Anna



A Reaction to Shakespeare's Sonnet 3

Look into the mirror and tell what you see,
A familiar face with five sense organs,
Look at your twin brother and tell what you see,
A face familiar and yet unfamiliar.

Look into the mirror 50 years later,
You see a face bewildered,
You see a face all withered.
Wanting plastic surgery thereafter.

Technology of cloning is now considered,
With all the tubes standing up in holders,
Clones grow up in pride and prestige
You see a thousand equal faces from one single mother.

So if thou want to live remembered,
Die single, thine image WON'T die with thee.

Yik Ping Chui



Relieved

Selina Lam

A candle burns till it is dies. Here is where it burns, struggles, and quenches. Everything changes except my memory - a memory of a candlewick, sometimes bright and sometimes dim. I am here again.

The house is desolate today. I wonder why ma'am can tolerate this mess! See? Newspapers placed on the floor, fragments of antique scattered everywhere, a still-plugged-in iron, a pair of burnt candles.... There are also some withered oranges and apples with ashes beside. Maybe ma'am was again worshipping Gods during "the First Day" or "the Fifteenth Day"¹ weeks ago. She should tidy up this mess! How come she relies on me so often?

Ma'am - No, nothing frightens me anymore. I am stronger than her. Yet, whenever I enter the house and see those eyes, I quiver. Maybe mine are not as sharp as hers, which glow in the dark. They are a pair of electric candle-lights, only that they are not placed on the God-shelf. I'd better glide somewhere else. I'll go to the corner of the house - where I used to eat, sleep and think

Thank God! My possessions remain unmoved. They are my memory...my dear Diary, my make-up stuff and my little mirror. I blow the piles of dust and sweep them with my sleeves. They shine as bright as a waxed floor. I always think that I'm the most talented and professional maid in Hong Kong, if not in this world. Every year, when I watch the program 'Miss Hong Kong Pageant', I grow furious seeing those ghastly and dreadful women on the stage. I pick up the mirror. It has been one week since I have looked at my face. I can't see myself! Is it due to the dim light? Yet I shouldn't have changed much. Anganda ko². Here is my dear Diary.

* * *

My dear Diary,

Today is a disgusting day!



I was woken at six sharp as usual. Ma'am shouted at me for this and that. I hate hearing her voice, especially early in the morning:. It drives me mad. She talks like a babbling parrot. "Wass de de dety cofs now! Also the four, swip it, quick!" She said in flat tone. Siraulo³! She always thinks that I can wave my wand and finish the work at once!

"Yes ma'am." This is what I could say. Do I have any choice? I need my salary as I need my son. My poor little boy is waiting for me alone in Iloilo⁴. He must be missing me all the time. I dreamt of him yesterday. I saw him sitting at the window and staring at the sea till the ebb. I, as his mother, could do nothing at all. I tried to soothe him, but he couldn't hear me; I wanted to wipe his tears away, yet he couldn't see me. My dearest son, I promise - I'll come back soon.

My son can live without a mother, why can't I tolerate my ma'am? Carrying a bucket of grimy clothes, I thought of my boy. For my son, I must work even harder. Yuck! What a stinky bucket! It smelled like preserved fish that is ma'am's favorite dish. My stomach acted up. I calmed down when the figure 3500 lashed across my mind.

I rinsed the clothes once, twice, and thrice. Never could he odor be eliminated. Anyway she can't smell it, as she is the origin of the smell.

I must sleep now. Goodnight, Diary.

She needs me! She is such a fool that she doesn't even know how wash clothes and sweep the floor. She must be regretting now hat she has lost me.

Let me turn to another page.

* * *

Dear Diary,

I've never met such a cruel woman in my life! That loathsome woman!

She always treats me worse than an animal. Is it because I'm a maid, so I have to be treated inhumanely? She never looks at me straight, only out of the corner of her eyes; she never smiles at me, not even a cold one. It's okay because I'm a maid. But isn't a maid human? I have been thinking about this. When I look at my scar, I believe I'm not.



“Aiya! You stubed full really wan die!” she said and slapped my face. I lost my balance and fell onto the ground. She is a giant to me. Her face is painted with layers of oil. The most significant thing is the creases all over her body. How can such a woman get a kind handsome man? It’s unfair to him!

I said sorry to her and kept on nodding. It didn’t calm her at all. She neither spoke nor listened to me. The only thing she did was grabbing my hair and beating me. I became a sandbag. I begged “No, no please...” until I have no energy. She picked up the iron and branded me a scar.

I murmured, “Anak! Napakaingaay ng mundo⁵.”

I fainted.

I look at my scars. They have disappeared already. As I said, nothing frightens me now. I’m stronger than she is. Ah, here’s a letter in the diary.

* * *

To my dearest Sir,

Please don’t feel awkward about this letter. I’ve been writing it for many nights before giving it to you. All the words are from my sincere heart. I dare not lie in front of you.

I’m sorry to make Ma’am so angry last time. It’s really my fault to have burnt her pajamas so carelessly. I know I should make everything perfect because you pay me three thousand five hundred dollars. Honestly, I feel excited rather than sorrowful. It’s because I heard you blame Ma’am for mistreating me. You think she is too cruel to me, right?

I know you love me. You are attracted by my charm. Yes! I’m really attractive, everyone says. Your expression changes when you see me; you become less cool and serious. I’m fond of you too since you restore me.

I know it’s a great torment to have such a wife. So love me please...

Your beloved maid

* * *



B T y D
e o M e
l * a
o r
v e
e s
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S R
i

* * *

Oh, lover - I have had one. Why am I so stupid to keep it here in the diary? What's the point of hiding it? Chance flies away if one doesn't grasp it. This is the problem of ma'am. She doesn't know the importance of clutching a man's heart. A man needs someone gentle to take care of him. She is an irritable and grumpy woman. How can a husband tolerate a lion-like wife? I don't know exactly why Mister ignored her. They rarely spoke to each other, not even a 'Hi'. One might imagine how quiet this use was. Sometimes it was just bad. They would quarrel openly, ignoring the existence of other residents. If they insisted their own views and no resolution could be made, I myself had prepare to tidy up the mess. Mistress would use her extra-high-pitched voice when she argued with Mister. Sometimes, she acted a mad cow and swept all things in front of her down onto the or. She would also kick the tables and sofas. Neighbors juttet out their heads and I shrank mine. This happened usually at nine when people had finished their dinner.



After several complaints from the neighborhood, they determined to express themselves by a ‘Cold War’. That was a prolonged war. I was the only one who served and talked to Mister. Once, he asked me about my homeland, and I told him that it was really the loveliest and the most fantastic place in this world.

“It is full of trees, coconut trees! You can taste a fresh coconut. You love it, right?” I asked.

“Yes, coconuts are really great.” He replied.

“I used to swim and sunbath on the beach. The sand there is white as flour and milk. I love sunshine! Although it is always 35 degrees, we need not turn on the air-conditioner. It’s cool...” I sank into my memory and couldn’t stop. Sometimes, Mister replied me “Yes”, and sometimes, he simply nodded. Since then, whenever ma’am went to play mahjong, we would spend the night chatting. Ma’am never realized this.

* * *

The pair of candlelight flickers on the God-shelf. I draw back at once.

“Hey, is anyone there? Come out please. . .I’m not afraid of anything... you know, I’m so powerful now...” I whisper. There’s no reply. I glide bit by bit until I reach the God-shelf. I see nothing except the candlelight and the statue of Guan Yin⁶, which ma’am always worshipped; and talked to during the ‘Cold War’.

I see a photo under the statue. I’m in it! I’m embraced by Mister; we look very happy. He is really a gentleman. How’s he? Does he remember our good times? That was a most unforgettable day in my life. Was it put under the feet of I fall onto the ground suddenly. I can’t control myself now and I feel myself being distorted. No, no please! Help. . .I can’t utter a single word. My screech goes on and I faint. In my 6 Guan Yin is the Chinese god of mercy unconsciousness, fragments of scenes come into my mind. I see ma’am - her brutality and frenzy. I can’t hear her words though her mouth never stops roaring. Who’s she shouting at? That poor creature...

Here is a lady. She is lying on the floor struggling for survival. Her arms, her legs, her neck. She has wounds and scars all over - red, blue, black, or a mixture of them. Run, run away at once!



Some of her wounds are so deep that blood spurts from the cuts. Why does this lady choose to be inert? She can't live any longer now since her blood has dried up. Maybe it's her will to end her life here and starts a new beginning in the heaven. Will it be better there? God knows.

I regain my consciousness.

* * *

Battered Maid Found Dead

News reported by

Angel Li

Yesterday, a maid was found lying unconsciously at home in Glory Mansion, Yau Ma Tei, with serious wounds on her body. Police found her death suspicious and her mistress was arrested for further investigation.

At about nine in the evening, neighbors found that odors spread from the Wong's family. They called for the police. "Nasty smell, really nasty! It smells like preserved fish! It makes me sick!" the old man living next door claimed. "I used to hear the family quarreling after the dinner. They always start at nine and stop at about nine forty-five. They talk about a wide range of issues, ranging from financial problems to love affairs. They've suddenly become quiet these days. I really want to know what has happened to the couple." Mrs. Wong who lives below the family said.

The maid is believed to have died for nearly a week. Her great loss of blood is the cause of her death. The police are still trying to contact her family in the Philippines.

* * *

I sit motionless on the floor and I see the page of the calendar⁷. It was last torn on 28th April⁸.



My body begins to vanish, from my legs to my arms, and finally to my whole body. Formless. Transparent. Non-existent. I fear no harm from anyone anymore. I'm solitary ghost. I'm a free soul. Maybe I can really start a new life in Heaven now?

¹ The Chinese worship God during the 'First Day' and the 'Fifteenth Day' of a month according to the Chinese calendar.

² Anganda ko: I'm pretty.

³ Siraulo: crazy.

⁴ Iloilo: a small village not affected by pollution in the Philippines.

⁵ Child, the world is too noisy.

⁶ Guan Yin is the Chinese god of mercy.

⁷ A traditional calendar is thick, in which every page indicates a day only.

⁸ A spirit is said to return to its home seven days after its death.



We're too Extreme

YOU and ME ---

Living under the same roof

Sharing the same parents

Are

t w o

EX

TREMES

Sis ---

You cling to the

Left

Whenever i prefer the

Right

i'm funny enough

To act as a

m u t e

Since my birth

Because of your dominating role

As the

QUEEN

Due to our different identities

We never speak, share,

Or love each other

Sis ---



What sets us apart?

I doubt

A gap of 365 days?

Or

Miscommunication

Misunderstanding

Jealousy

Hatred?

SISTER!

We're old enough

To realize, to think and to understand

All these enemies

Only break our hearts thoroughly

WE ---

Living under the same roof

Sharing the same parents

Should not be

t w o

EX

TREMES



I See

- *After XiXi*

In the year 2001, from Hong Kong I see.....

a flock of pupils

as yellow ducks

coming out of a primary school

in a flood;

a bucket of clothes

so cheaply sold

recalled the time

that's really old;

a swarm of unemployed workers

outside the door queuing

and the Labour Department officers

inside the room sitting;

a band of teachers

and parents again protesting:

prices of books all rising

and policies keep changing;

a choir of advice

so beautifully performed

by the government officials



to the public informed;

a tribe of Hong Kongers

working in Mainland China

keeping their BNOs,

in the airport they say sayonara.

Wong Yuen Kwan, Irene



Lim

Irene Wong

She raced up the stairs to the bedroom once she got home from school, with her academic report and a certificate. She quickly put them into a red plastic bag and hid them into a drawer. Before shutting the drawer, she took a last look at them - *No. 2 Government Primary School of Shanwei ...No. 1 in Primary Two... certificate of the honorable "Three Virtues Student Prize" ...Lim Ng*. She couldn't help smiling to herself. Having shut the drawer, she looked beyond the window. Some kids were playing with each other on their way home. Some carried long and short sticks of firework. Next week will be the Lunar New Year...a wonderful New Year...*and I can see.....again*, Lim thought.

"I'm hungry, ma, ma....." shouted a boy in Chao Chou dialect with a strong local accent, running into the house. It was Lim's nine-year-old brother. He should have been promoted to Primary Three. But his performance at school was so poor that he stayed in the same class with Lim. The footsteps of their mother followed.

"Ming, why are you shouting so loudly? Today is the last school day. Where is your report? What number have you got in class? Have you passed all the subjects?" asked the young woman. She poured the fish congee she had just bought from a plastic bag into four bowls. he boy ate his lunch at once, and dared not look at his mother. Lim went downstairs from the bedroom and took her bowl of congee to the kitchen in careful step. As Lim had expected, her mother scolded the boy. She knew her mother would be angrier if she had lingered for just a moment.

"Can't you work a little bit harder like Lim? Don't you want a small motorbike from your grandpa? You can easily have it if you get full marks in one dictation. But you can hardly get a pass..." The shouting continued for fifteen minutes until his mother was tired. Lim had finished her lunch and walked out from the kitchen. Her Primary Six sister, who had two long ponytails with red ribbons, entered the house.



“Lim, you go upstairs and tidy up the room as the New Year is at hand. Then come down and do the washing up. Yan, take a rest and I’ll reheat the congee for you,” said their mother, walking into the kitchen. Yan threw her school bag on the floor and lay on the sofa.

When Lim was cleaning the bedroom upstairs, the boy dashed in, glaring at Lim.

“You should never touch my pens as I don’t want to use anything touched by other people.”

Ming sputtered and rushed to the door. In a few seconds, Lim heard a series of quick and heavy running steps.

“You cannot borrow my books without asking me. Mother has bought them for ME,” he declared in a loud voice. “THEY ARE MINE,” he said, pointing at his nose. After walking for a few steps, he turned around and said,

“I’ll kill you if you dare touch my new watch. It’s my father’s present for me from Hong Kong. I’ll go to Hong Kong one day and I’ll have to wear it.” The boy finally walked out of the room. Lim resumed her work. He is always like that, she thought. She laughed it off and put all the dirty clothes of the three children together.

Before washing the clothes downstairs, she couldn’t help looking at her report again. Her eyes sparkled at every single dot and little mark on the card. She fell on the bed and smiled to herself. Her form teacher’s remarks: A diligent, intelligent and promising student. Lim wished that someone could have read them too.

Lim was always number one in class.

She usually hid her report cards. Until the last night of the holiday, she would leave it on the table for her mother. The report card would then be signed by the next morning and she could take it to school.

On the first day of the Year of Horse, Lim’s family visit a family who came from Hong Kong. The man of the household was an old classmate of Lim’s grandpa. Grandpa told the children that his friend was nostalgic for his hometown, so he had recently built a house and he would live there with his family in the holidays.

“Wow. . .a big white house. . .” Ming exclaimed in Cantonese, running to the gate.

“Oh! This is the European design...”Yan added, following her brother. Lim ran after them.



“So new and clean...what a big house...and a beautiful bench in front of it,” their mother said. They all went into the house.

“It’s Doraemon!” said Ming. He rushed to the 29” television.

“Do you understand the cartoon?” asked an elder girl in perfect Cantonese. She wore a pair of glasses. She walked down the stairs.

“Yes! Of course!” boasted Ming. You nodded her head and smiled proudly.

“Tai-hung was naughty last time...he didn’t do his homework but he borrowed Doraemon’s time machine...”Yan said in excitement.

“Yeah...he didn’t return it to Doraemon...” Ming added. Ming and Yan chattered on and on about the cartoon they saw the day before. They were so eager to talk in the “television language,” especially with the girl from Hong Kong. All the children in Shanwei understood more or less some Cantonese by watching the TVB channel. Ming and Yan were the best Lim among all.

Lim stood alone in silence. She could understand Cantonese too. She did watch Doraemon yesterday. But she couldn’t join in their conversation because she never spoke Cantonese. They are fluent in their spoken Cantonese as mother has taught them since they are small. Father is working in Hong Kong. They always talk about going to live in Hong Kong. *Why don’t they practice with me then? Will they not go along with me? Have I done anything wrong?* Lim thought. She looked at the changing scenes on the television and the children laughing back and forth, teasing one another.

Lim’s favourite character suddenly showed up on the screen.

“Cheng-yee,” Lim murmured unconsciously. Yan turned her head to Lim and asked, “What did you say? hehe. . . She’s Ching-Yee, not Cheng yee...haha...” Yan chuckled.

“What? Why are you laughing? I want to know...tell me, sis...” urged Ming. They whispered and burst into laughter. Lim blushed.

“Why are you laughing so loudly?” asked their mother, “Come and sit besides Aunt Wong.” Ming and Yan came to their mother while Lim stood still.



“Look! How beautiful they are. You see their big eyes and milky skin...I love their dimples very much, see? Alice...” said Aunt Wong in perfect Cantonese, holding the hands of Ming and Yan who were sitting in a sofa. Their mother smiled proudly when Alice gave similar comments.

“A-lice,” said Ming and Yan, reading after Aunt Wong.

“That’s right! You’ve got it...so cute and smart...” praised Aunt Wong. She went on talking about how they looked like their mother.

“A-li-ce,” Lim repeated in her mind, enjoying the fascinating sound of English. English was amazing, she thought. She wished she had an English name too. But she didn’t even know the alphabets. She longed for her first English lesson in Primary Four. Aunt Wong said Alice was the only child of the family. It’s rare to Lim as she seldom heard of any family in her neighborhood having only one girl. All Chinese people wanted to have as many boys as they could, especially the Chao Chou people who had a strong male-dominant tradition.

Lim stood alone in silence. She wanted to sit on the long sofa but Ming pushed her away and made room for his elder sister. She walked out to play with the dog.

Am I really an ugly duckling? Every neighbour calls me so. Why does everybody pet them?

Lim wondered. She knew she was short and dark. She didn’t have the sweet smile with the lovely dimples either. Her hair was as short as the boys’. She knew her mother was fond of her brother and sister and thus taught them more Cantonese. Lim could never join the private conversation among them. She only heard their giggling in the midst of their gossiping in the melody-like Cantonese.

Lim stroked the dog lovingly. It was a big female dog. Lim wondered why the family kept such a common Chinese yellow dog. People of rich households should keep small dogs with long curls instead. But she would not ask. She was always quiet. She was not used to expressing herself since she was little.

Lim couldn’t get rid of the scenes of Ming and Yan laughing, gossiping and mother teaching them Cantonese in her bedroom. Those pictures kept moving in her head. *We’re of the same breed, the same family, aren’t we? Why do they treat me so differently?* The faces of her brother, sister and mother blurred and vanished into the distant past - the birthday present of Ming, the new dress of



Yan, their photos with their mother on the wall... She just couldn't understand. *Was it my fault? Why? So close. So distant.* Then she heard someone saying—

“...Lam...”

Lim heard of her name mentioned in Cantonese when she was at the back of the house near the kitchen, playing with the dog.

“...that woman has already got a girl and a boy...Lam was actually her niece. . .that's why they are so different. . .the One-child Policy...”

“Birth control is the first step to liberate women.” Lim remembered the red words on the white street wall. She knew the One-child Policy might be somewhat related to her, but she could not figure out what “birth control” was.

“...the policy...too strict in the city...so they left her in village under the name of her aunt. . . still have to pay fine and dare not recognize her...just hope for a boy...”

“Did they have one after Lam? . . .” A younger voice interrupted.

“No...still a girl...recognize Lam? ...never, never...disobedience to the government policy...definitely affect her father's career...”

Someone entered the kitchen. Lim quickly ran away to make sure that no one had seen her overhearing the conversation.

The face of a woman came up in Lim's mind. It was her “aunt.” Her “aunt” and “uncle” seldom visited Lim's family except the Lunar New Year. Her grandpa would tell her to sit beside them when they came to their house. Every time she sat next to her, she breathed deeply in order to smell her body. She didn't use perfume. . .maybe she did on other days of the year. . . Lim was not sure. The last Lunar New Year was chilly. Her “aunt” didn't wear gloves. When the adults were talking, Lim stole a glance at her. Lim saw the wrinkles on her dark and thin hands. Lim dared not look further or she would notice. Lim had a lot to tell her. Her school days, her teachers and classmates...She was too excited and nervous when sitting beside her. She couldn't utter a sound. Her “aunt” had little to say either. The atmosphere of the house felt really strange. Maybe this was the reason why her “aunt” seldom visited Lim. Lim enjoyed sitting with her in silence.



Gradually a voice grew in Lim's mind. "Mother," she called. Lim knew she was her mother. She resembled her dark skin and small eyes. Lim wanted to meet her, but she dared not say a word of it. She cried "mother" in her heart whenever she thought of her. Once she wanted to call her but she swallowed the word at the very moment. *Don't I deserve a mother? Everybody has a mother...why not me?* Lim always asked. As a child, she was not supposed to know anything about her own story. Her real father often seemed displeased with her. Last year when Lim greeted him "uncle", he didn't even look at her. *If he knows I've known everything already, he will not let mother come...* Lim thought in fear.

Now, she would no longer cry in the washroom, like three years ago. It was painful to swallow a sob when it welled up in the throat. She could still feel the pain. She had been waiting for her mother for a whole year since their last meeting. The dog and the wonderful white house made her forget the long waiting at that moment.

Alice went out from the house, looking for her dog. Alice saw Lim and beamed at her.

"Do you like Mi-mi? It's very lovely, right?" asked Alice. Lim gave a shy smile. Then Lim's eyes fixed on the ground again.

"It was motherless and homeless when my father and I first met it on the street," said Alice while petting Mi-mi.

Lim raised her small head when she heard of the word "motherless." Her eyes met those of Alice. Her face blushed and she lowered her head again.

"Your hair is; shiny and black. Why don't you keep long hair like your sister?" asked Alice, stroking Lim's hair. Lim slowly shook her head. She wanted to look like boys. She thought her parents would be pleased to see her as a boy. She knew if she were a boy, everything would have been different: she would be living with her mother and sleeping in her arms everyday. Now her mother did not even hold her hands. Once her mother raised her hand a little bit as if she was going to hold Lim. When she met the leer from her husband, she sat still and her hand dropped. Her eyes fell on the icy floor again.



Lim enjoyed Alice's stroking her hair. She always wished her mother would comb her hair, like what Yan's mother did every morning. The dog sat in front of Alice and Lim. It wiggled its tail and licked Alice's hand as well as Lim's. Lim's palm was wet. She smiled.

"Mi-mi is a good dog, really. It is faithful and very obedient," said Alice.

I am obedient too, Lim said in her mind. Another voice shivered in her heart... "Be obedient to your mother. . .don't argue with your brother and sister. . .and be a good girl, remember?" exhorted her aunt once, before she left. Each word her mother said was precious to Lim. How could she forget? Once Ming's mother chided Lim for breaking a glass that she was washing, Lim held back her tears and hid her wounded thumb in her small fist. Every time Ming bullied her, her mother's gentle face came up in her mind. *I've been working very hard, at home and school... Mother; I've got the prize again. I have been good... Please come, mother, please come!!*

"Your smile is quite beautiful," said Alice. Lim showed her shy smile again. Lim's mother always wore a gentle smile when she came. So Lim sometimes took a stool to the mirror in the washroom to mimic her smile. This was the most interesting activity she did in her leisure. She hoped her mother would notice her smile when she came.

"Mi-mi barks at strangers but never my relatives or friends. Do you know? One of my father's friends wants to give us a puppy with long hair but we have refused. Most of my friends at the Chinese University of Hong Kong keep that kind of dogs..." Alice went on talking about her friends at university and their dogs. Lim was interested in the word "university". *People go to university around twenty... twenty years old... that is so far away... I'll be a grown-up*. She remembered that one of her neighbors always boasted about his son studying at a university in Guang Zhou. Lim thought it would be even more honorable to go to a university in Hong Kong. *If I'm obedient, Maybe they'd let me go to Hong Kong with Yan and Ming later? I'll work very hard for that. I'll be obedient. I'll be very good. Maybe... Maybe... One day they'd let me? I'll study hard...and go to— university. It will be a great honor to mother: "Uncle" would be pleased too. Then... they may come and bring me... home*, Lim's mind raced.



“Oh, see what I’ve got in my pocket...I forget to eat it on my journey to come here. I bought it at Okashi Land near my university,” said Alice. She took out a cotton candy with a cartoon picture on it. “This is Hello Kitty,” Alice said.

“He-llo...K...it-ty,” Lim followed and grinned. Alice told Lim more about this cartoon character. Alice kept talking about her favourite snack that she usually bought in Hong Kong. Lim just looked at the cotton candy on her palm.

English...I know English... Lim was so excited. *Wow...from Japan...* she exclaimed in her heart. She longed for something precious to give her mother as a gift. This sweet was packed in a transparent plastic bag with a purple trim. Last time her mother wore a white blouse in purple floral pattern. *She must love purple,* Lim thought in high spirits. *I have something to give her now! It’s so soft... I can tell her: this sweet is made in Japan. I can tell her...I can tell he - my English name is Hello Kitty.*

“Let’s go home. There are food and drinks...Mi-mi must be hungry now,” said Alice, running with the dog back to the house.

All the people had great fun inside the house in the afternoon. Lim’s brother and sister were watching television. Their mother was talking with Aunt Wong. Grandpa was smoking and playing chess with his old friend. Alice was feeding the dog.

Lim stayed outside. She looked far away, beyond the beach, the sea and the skyline. She pictured her next meeting with her mother. Lim put her right hand in her pocket in the whole afternoon, holding the purple cotton candy. *Maybe...Maybe... One day I would make it, wouldn’t I?*



The New Handkerchief

In the 'Breadwinner-of-the-year' cup my daddy comes first annually.
On the plane, in the train, on Wall street he eats,
In the conference room, in the gents, he sleeps,
For his dear daughter he sweats out days and nights.

Every small detail of my everyday life is taken care of,
He employs not only a 'giligulu' maid to look after me,
But an old chauffeur to drive me anywhere,
A private tutor to teach me how to write.

Never is a man so committed to his girl,
Not to say Gucci and Prada, he buys me Volkswagen and Mazda,
For ATM service, I press the eight-digit mobile phone number,
Just because, he says no one is more precious than I.

One day I went straight to his office to give my daddy a surprise,
From his piles of files he looked up puzzled and asked who was I,
I broke down and cried, then, from his front pocket not a handkerchief,
He draws out a thousand-dollar note to wipe away the tears of mine.

Cheng Charmaine Lyan



I Don't Know You

Gung Gung
You are
a stone buried
among grass.

I visit you,
once a year
on an April Festival.

cleaning you,
filling the vase with water,
leaving you

with Carnation flowers,
And I bow
to you three times to honor you.

I met you through
an old photograph.
A long tanned face

your eyes framed in creases
with a smile held in the lips.
"This is Gung Gung," ma says.

Were you a kind man?
A man that loved his wife
and all his nine children.



Was ma your favorite?
That made Uncle Robert,
Uncle Raymond, and Aunt Pat jealous

And disliked her so much.
If you had loved your wife,
Why didn't you return

to see Por Por?
Had no intention to or
not allowed to?

Was she no longer a beauty?
She was mad and under stress
Didn't you know that?

You are just a name,
a date
carved on a stone.

Yet I feel so close
such warmth, standing
in front of you.

This simple name
that makes us more
closely intimate.
Gung Gung.



Root

Stephaine To

The ancestral hall was filled with choking smoke. Three boys were bowing to the ancestral tablets with glowing incenses. I could hardly see them through the smoke. Yet I could still recognize my brother because he was the tallest. In my blurred, irritated eyes, the lights of the candles and lanterns were mixed with the color of the red paper scrolls, oranges, apples, millet wine and the “dolls” on the table. My main focus was on the roast suckling pig placed on the red cellophane paper.

“When will this ceremony end?” I murmured and took out a piece of tissue paper to wipe my tears.

Nobody answered me. I peeped at my second uncle who sat beside my grandmother. He yawned. Mother said that he had just come back from the United Kingdom and I would not recognize him, as I had not met him for seventeen years. Since my father died seventeen years ago, I had not had any contact with my father’s relatives, except during Chinese New Year. Last time I was in this ancestral hall only for my red pockets. Some days ago, my mother received a phone call from the village headman and was informed that my brother, who had already reached eighteen years old, could inherit land and house under our ancestor’s surname. Mother called this “Great-grandfather distributes lands”. I did not know my great-grandfather. I was quite sure that he was one of the people in the photos on the wall of the ancestral hall, and that he had been a very generous person. My mother also said that my ancestor was a famous poet in Jin Dynasty. I really doubted her words, because none of the people in the hall looked like a poet, not even educated.

Anyway, that was why we were here. That was why three aliens from the urban planet started to communicate with the rural world. At first I was amazed that I had become the sister of a landowner. When I knew that my brother only inherited one of the stories of my grandfather’s house where my grandmother was living, I sneered

I wished my brother had never inherited such a stale, dusty house.



* * *

“Ah Ling, what are you doing upstairs? I asked you to sweep the floor half an hour ago and you are still working on that?” My mother thundered from the ground floor.

“Yeah, I am still sweeping,” I shouted loudly, sitting on the bed, concentrating on reading my old composition.

“Hey! What are you doing here?”

My nerves jumped at this unexpected storm from the bedroom’s door. My inspector mom was standing there with her crossed arms and burning eyes.

“You’ve scared me to death!” My heart drummed.

“I tell you, I’m leaving now. You have to clean the three bedrooms today, and polish all the windows. Hang up the curtains I bought yesterday. Ah Ma said that you may have dinner with her before you leave.”

Only dinner? You’d better offer me a bed to sleep on! You have given me tons of work!

Finally, I spent two hours on my assigned work. My bones rang like bells. I stretched my knuckles and they cracked. I looked around my mother’s dream summerhouse, and perfect...storeroom. I packed my belongings, snailed down the stairs, and decided to go.

“Ling-ling! Leave so quickly? Deenner!”

My goodness! Ah Ma saw me! She was chopping meat in the kitchen.

“I...I have many things to do. I have to go now!” I tiptoed to the front door.

“Stay I...*fei gei*! How can I...?”

“Ha?”

“I, I have steamed a *fei gei*!”

“What?”

“I said, I, I, I have steamed a *fei gei*!”

Fei gai. I thought she said fei gei.

“Oh, chicken! Eat it yourself... I have to go now”

“How can I... I... I eat a whole chicken? Stay! Go after deenner!”



Ah Ma raised her voice to 90 decibels. I was really afraid of her loud voice with the piercing Wai Tau accent. I could not imagine how a little 80-year-old lady could produce such a storming noise.

“Stay!”

Alright, alright, I stayed. I had no choice. I had to stay, or Ah Ma might block all the exits and imprison me. Instead of Ah Ma’s powerful noise. I was shocked, half an hour later, when I saw the pig lung soup, a plain fat chicken, steamed fish, fried cabbage, and bean curd stuffed with minced pork on the wooden dining table. A dinner for two only! I stared at the splendid banquet, with my mouth and eyes wide open.

“Eeeat!”

During dinner, Ah Ma kept putting food into my bowl. I could not stop chewing and swallowing. She kept on speaking her language and I kept on mumbling “Yes, yes...” or “yes?” with a mouth full of food. I ate as fast as I could, so as to leave as soon possible.

The dinner seemed never-ending.

* * *

The HKAL exam was coming. I had to visit my storeroom again to get my past papers for my brother. Although I did not have the key, I could still get into the house because the front door of the house was always open. I stepped over the threshold and looked into the house to see whether Ah Ma was there.

Ah Ma was in the mini-ancestral hall. She was putting three glowing incenses into the censer. I picked up Ah Ma’s palmleaf fan from the dining table, stood under the hanging electronic fan, and fanned myself.

“Ling-ling! Hot? Haha...”

Her Wai Tau laughter sounded funny.

“Yes, very hot! Don’t you feel uncomfortable in this hot weather without an air-conditioner?” I asked softly, as I had put my greatest effort on fanning away the hot air.



“Haha...hot? Haha...”

Ah Ma kept on laughing. She went to the kitchen, opened the refrigerator and took out a bottle of Coca-cola. No, it should be a bottle of “something” in the two-liter Cola plastic bottle.

“What’s this?” I frowned at the yellowish-green liquid Ah Ma was pouring into a glass. There were some dark green dregs on the surface and they looked like green worms. Yuck!

“Aa...aa... you don’t know...? Cool tea!!”

“What? Cool tea ? Are you joking? Don’t lie! What’s this thing floating on the surface?”

“That’s ... snake!”

“Snake?” my eyeballs protruded.

“Snake- tongue!”

“Snake- tongue? Oh dear!” I nearly vomited.

“Yes! Good... no hot!” Ah Ma, holding the glass of green thing, came to me.

“Take it away! I won’t drink this ugly thing! No way! I won’t drink it!”

“Drink! ! Good! Ah, fresh!”

“How can I drink snake- tongue water? That’s not for humans! I’d rather drink the mice- wine...No...You’d better kill me!”

“Ah...Haahaai.... No, no snakes! *This is ‘white flower snake-tongue grass’, and ‘half-lotus’!*”

“Grass? You mean grass?”

“Yes! Good...no thirst!”

I was half in doubt, and used the tip of my tongue to touch the liquid. Sweet! I took a sip of it. It tasted really good. Very good indeed! The tea was pure and cool, with a mist of fragrance in it but without artificial sweetening. I gulped down the whole glass and some little grass stuck onto my lips.

“Huh huh... tastes good, eh? Slower, slower, not too fast! I have a lot!!”



“Ah Ma, that’s too much!”

“I have a lot!!” Ah Ma gave me a Park’n Shop plastic bag of half- lotus. She had taught me how to make the cool-tea after she saw my shining eyes when I was drinking the greenish- yellow liquid for the first time. I could not believe that I would fall in love with that ugly thing.

“Ah... I, forgot the white- flower snake-tongue grass!”

Ah Ma immediately put on her black gauze hat, took a sieve and a small scythe. “You... you wait here.” With nothing to do, I followed Ah Ma. She stepped into the small field next to the village house, and crouched in front of the “weed”. She reaped the “weed” with her scythe and her bare hands.

That was my Ah Ma.

Her back was like a knoll under the sun. I had not seen her hunched back before. Mother once told me that Ah Ma was a brave lady who raised ten children at one time in this village of men; she did not bend under the authority of communists nor with the acute pains in her rheumatic joints.

Her back was filled with winds and waves of life.

That was my Ah Ma.

Some months ago, I nearly forgot that I had a grandmother. The village house was so far away from my modern home, and even after my brother had inherited part of the house, I just made it a storeroom and put all the old dusty things there so as to enjoy a larger room in my modern house.

And now...

“Ah Ma! Let me help you!” I rolled up my trousers.

“Hey, no... why are you here? It’s hot... back into the house! Here, dirty soil...”

“Let me help you! Is this the snake-tongue grass?”

* * *

I paid more visits to the stale house. Whenever I felt tired busy life, I went to the house. I would take a chair outside, sit under the roof, and fan myself. Or I would climb onto the fence wall,



pick the wampees on the tree and eat them. Sometimes they were sour. Before school started, I visited Ah Ma again. But this time, Ah Ma was not in the house.

“Ah Ma!” Nobody answered me. I looked around the living room: except the “Big-head Buddha” in the wooden cupboard and the dolls of “fortune, fame and longevity”, I could see nobody. Ah Ma’s rattan fan was on the cane chair. I entered Ah Ma’s chamber that was linked to the parlor. She did not have the larger chamber upstairs because of her weak legs. Ah Ma’s room was dark. Over her mahogany bed, there hung a mosquito net. A heap of cookie boxes and plastic bags accumulated behind the paper screen. A red umbrella was hung on the screen. I liked the mahogany dressing table most, especially the oval mirror inlaid vertically. It was made of the rust of antiquity. What’s that on the table? White jasmines? Ah Ma always liked to pick jasmines from the little garden outside the house and put them near her nostrils. There was a special smell in the room. Not the smell of jasmines, or the smell of wooden furniture, or of incenses... it was the smell of Ah Ma. I looked around and found a piece of red silk embroidery hanging on the wall. There was a phoenix on it, and beside the phoenix there were many signatures: Chan Tai Mui, Lau Sai Kit... Wong Lok Fook. Wong Lok Fook? That was my mother’s father. At the corner of the cloth I saw a list of Ah Ma’s sons’ names: Tao Chi Fai, Chi Kuen, Chi Kit, Chi Chung... I stared at the name “Chi Chung”. Tao Chi Chung... that was my father.

I walked out of the chamber. Having passed the kitchen, I entered the mini- ancestral hall. “Ah Ma!” Still, no one heard me. I thought Ah Ma had just left the hall because I saw that three freshly lighted incenses were in the censer on the wooden “estrate” - the worshipping table. A box of matches, a pair of candles, three cups of millet, some fruits, and a dish of rice cake were also neatly arranged on the table. In the middle there was the ancestral tablet. Actually I did not know what exactly the ancestral tablet represented. Sometimes Ah Ma gave me the incenses and said, “Ling-ling, pai-pai your ancestor”; but sometimes she would say, “bow to your father”. I listened to Ah Ma every time and bowed with my eyes half-closed to look more whole-hearted, more filial. There was a pair of symmetric poetic lines written on red paper on each side of the tablet. I knew all the words but I did not really understand the meaning.

Maybe my ancestor was really a poet.



I turned to look for Ah Ma outside. Three steps forward, I noticed a big bag of “snake-tongue grass” lying at the corner of hall. I thought of Ah Ma’s wrinkled, shriveled hands - a pair of hands that had been uniting a home for over fifty years. I took a deep breath. The air was filled with incense smoke. It smelt so intimate.

I turned around again, stood up straight in front of the ancestral tablet, and looked at the tablet and the two symmetric lines of words.

I bowed.

¹ fei gei - aeroplane in Cantonese



My Grandma

Walking is torture as
Your legs can barely support your body,
You pant even when you merely stand.
Your arms are dried ancient branches;
The tip of my thumb meets my middle finger
When I hold your arm.
Your hands are always cold,
And how I wish to warm them up!

Mai Ka Ying, Brenda



A Meal of Life

Starters stimulate your appetite.

Taking in the right amount
of knowledge equips you
with essential tools for living.

Main courses make you satisfied.

By trying different kinds of dishes
can make yourself experience and
discover as much as you can.

Desserts make your meal rich.

Only a tiny amount is required,
Such as love that can embellish your life
Captivate you in illusion when taken a lot.

Taking a meal in a right proportion
is important to the essence of life.

Li Wing Lun, Warren



First Love

It happened so fast

And I forget too fast.

You remember so much, but I can't recall much.

It will last a lifetime

But let us forget for now.

Wong Ying Man, June



Ballade

Katrine Wong

Donna sat next to her mother in the airport, waiting to board the plane to Shanghai. They were going there for no particular reason, not even for shopping. Her mother asked her the week before where she wanted to go as relaxation since she'd finished her HKCEE, and she blurted out Shanghai. She wanted to see him again. She wanted to listen to his playing Chopin Ballades again. He's such a virtuosic Chopin player. She met him in the Asian Piano Open Competition two years before that. She still remembered his artistic eloquence, gestures, and chivalry.

"Congratulations, Mr. Champion," Donna shook hands with him after the presentation ceremony was over.

"Thank you, Miss First Runner-up," he bowed.

They both laughed.

"Your fourth Ballade was amazing, and you had perfect accuracy. How did you manage all that?"

"When you play," he moved closer to Donna, looked into her eyes, and articulated as if he were reciting a poem, "feel the passion of the music, play with a soaring soul, think about your power and beauty, and charm your audience. Er, mademoiselle - ?"

"Call me Donna."

"May I invite Mademoiselle Donna to the Winner's Concert tomorrow?"

"Would passengers of rows 21 to 30 of Flight KA 801, please board the plane."

"Let's go," Donna's mother nudged her.

"Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. This is Captain Huang. It is my great pleasure to serve you today. From my crew and myself, we wish you all a safe and enjoyable flight to Shanghai."



Ciak! The cabinet resumed to silence, with only the faint, piercing roar of the engine audible. Her mother was dozing, so Donna took out her diary in which she kept all the letters, pictures, and postcards that he had sent her. He always wrote to her in beautiful Chinese calligraphy, and in black ink. Every time she opened his letter, there oozed a gentle and delightful aroma of the ink. Every time she read his words, she could not help the rich, creamy air around them. She pulled out his first letter, the one that she liked the most, and read it silently to herself. She could almost recite it.

Dec. 21st, 1997

Dear Donna,

How are you? Remember me? I'm Fei Xiang. Time flies. It seems that we only met yesterday, but it's already 2 weeks since we talked in the backstage of the Auditorium of the Hong Kong Cultural Center. And by the time you receive this letter, I guess it's already 3 weeks, or even a month.

I'm very happy to have made your acquaintance, and you've been so very generous to exchange addresses with me. However, I still don't know much about you, and I'm sure you barely know anything about me. Yet it doesn't matter, Donna, we can get to know more about each other step by step, right?

Why didn't you come meet me after the concert? I was waiting for you backstage. I wanted to continue the conversation we'd had earlier on. And I wanted to make some music with you. I meant so much to ask you to read with me some Liszt chansons. I didn't have the chance to tell you that I'm a tenor. But there's always time for us to do that someday, maybe next time when I go to Hong Kong again, or when you visit Shanghai, or perhaps we will meet again in some other competitions, or music camps - who knows?

You asked me what I would do with my prize – the Steinberg piano. I still haven't made up my mind. If I sell it, I can use the money to go to the Tchaikovsky Competition next year. The Hong Kong pianist Liu Shi-qun became famous because he came second in the event.

So there, my dear friend. If you happen to have questions concerning your piano repertoire, do write to me any time. I sincerely wish that I could hear from you soon!



Yours,

Xiang

(Enclosed is the picture we took together that day. Hope you like it.)

Then she took out his sixth and last letter.

Aug. 29th, 1998

My dear Donna,

I've just come back from the Gina Bauchauer event in Salt Lake City. I got a second - I'm already very happy. I played Chopin's Sonata No. 2 and Ravel's "Miroirs". (...)

Thank you very much for your last letter in which you had answered my request and said you would forgive me for not writing for so long. June was a busy month for me, with all those exams and recitals. I could be relieved only when I read your last letter, Donna. And I really am because you've pardoned me.

I know you're a science student. You're very smart indeed as you can handle both science and music. But I think you can be trained to become a professional pianist. From what I've observed in your playing in the competition (I have good memory - ha!), I'm sure you really love music. You played every single note as if it were a highly polished gemstone and you strung all the sparkling gems finely and firmly into a most enticing piece of jewel, so perfectly pure and beautiful that no one would dare wear it, or even lay hands on it, lest it would be tarnished. Really, why don't you give it a try? Let your talent be known!

I know nothing about poetry. I never read poems. But for you I try to write a petit poem you may laugh at me as much as you wish) -

I write silently

I call softly

I let my words carry my thought

Hoping that the star

The distant star will feel it

Such is my little wish



For my little star afar

Yours,

Xiang

Donna did not know how many times she had read this weird poem of lame rhymes. She could more or less figure out what he was trying to say, but what if her thinking was too I. convoluted... ah no, wasn't it he who wrote in his other letter: "I'll need to stay in the Conservatory till July 1999 for the graduation exam. I know you'll finish your big public exam in early May 1999, correct? If you happen to go on a trip, come to Shanghai, and we can make some music together." Donna smiled. Yes, she was going on a trip to Shanghai, and it's late May, so Xiang would definitely be in the Conservatory. She glanced at her mother's watch. Forty minutes more before landing. She closed her eyes and took a nap. They say that a sweet nap makes your eyes pretty.

"Mama, I think I want to go for a walk across the harbor," Donna said, her almond-shaped eyes searching her mother's face inquisitively.

"All right, and I want to have a siesta now," her mother yawned. "Come back for dinner, okay?" So Donna left the Pudong Shangri-La Hotel and took a ferry across the Huang Pu Harbor.

Twenty minutes later, she was walking along the Huai Hai Road, heading toward the Conservatory. There were not too many people on the street. She saw a little old woman, whose back was nearly bent at a right angle, selling peaches and figs. Almost all her teeth were gone, yet Donna could hear her speaking very clearly to her customers. Swallows glided in the air, magpies called overhead, and cicadas sang their summer chorus. A sparrow chirped twice, and another answered with one chirp and flew to the caller's side, and their beaks touched. The caller had a big patch of black on its chest. Lucky it. Donna knew that the larger the black patch, the higher status the sparrow enjoyed in its group or community. Toddlers in open-seat pants squatted round the feet of an older boy who was weaving rattan baskets of various shapes and sizes. Summer breezes blew, bringing with them the welcoming smell of pot-stewed beef, Donna's favorite dish. Her stomach rumbled with hunger, but she did not mind for she was going to meet him soon. To suffer a little for



something big coming is all too worthwhile, isn't it? Argh... she stretched her arms upward, and whistled at those two sparrows that were still snuggling together on the branch. It would be so very wonderful if she could live in Shanghai.

There it was - Shanghai Conservatory, inscribed in Chinese on the school gate by the late Chairman Mao. Her heart beat fast. She took a deep breath, and stepped into the campus. Flowers of different colors and shades grew everywhere, and there were also many well-pruned bushes. Donna greeted an old gardener who was watering the central lawn.

"How are you, big uncle? Your flowers are very lovely!"

"Thank you, young lady," the old man beamed and nodded, and the sagging mole under his left eye quivered like a blossom shaking in the wind. "I guess you're not a student here, are you?"

"No. I've come to visit a friend of mine. Could you please tell me where the Keyboard Department is?"

"It's over there on your right."

"Thanks. Good day, big uncle."

She felt in her bag for the box, the little box containing a Swarovski crystal piano decoration. She took it out and held it in her hands so that she could give her friend this token and surprise him once she saw him. She chuckled at this idea.

The ground floor corridor of the Keyboard Department was dingy. One of the fluorescent lamps gave off a few irregular flashes, and it died out; the ceiling paint had begun to peel; with each of Donna's steps, the wooden floor moaned "crack, crack" feebly. Her eyes were caught by some big characters on a notice board. It read: Student of the Year - Fei Xiang. Donna felt very proud of her friend. She turned and saw a woman in the office, and asked, "Excuse me, do you know where Fei Xiang is?"

"Fei Xiang? You're - ?" the woman squeaked, scowling.

"I'm his friend. I've come from Hong Kong to pay him a visit." Donna answered with a most modest and courteous smile.

"He's not in Shanghai. He's just left for New York two days ago for an audition at Juilliard."



Juilliard. Dazed, her mind went blank. Had she not supported herself against the office counter, she would have collapsed on the spot. She knew she did not blink, yet she was blind for a few seconds. She could hardly move a limb. Take a deep breath and move, she told herself. She managed to turn round. But she did not know how to move, where to look, where to go. Like a zombie, she let her feet drag her body along. Bonk! her head hit something. She collected herself and looked. It was a door. There was a nameplate that said “Fei Xiang” on the door. So this had been his room. Donna turned the knob and entered. She was still holding the little box, so she put it carefully on the rickety three-legged wooden table, the only furnishing in the room. She sat down in front of the piano, opened the lid, and touched the keys that his hands and fingers had touched. He used to learn, practice, and sweat right here. Ah, one, two, three, he’s sweating even now. Three warm, delicate drops fell onto the keyboard. Donna wiped them away. Ding-ding-ding. Her right hand tolled Chopin’s Fourth Ballade awake in octaves, and her left hand joined in, echoing, bringing out the elegiacally beautiful a line of this unique Ballade. The lilt in the accompaniment wrung her heart. She savored the twitches; she loved the sweet twinges. The keyboard became foggy. Donna closed her eyes.

What are you doing here? - Playing for him - But clearly he’s not here. - Yes, he’s here; his name, his touch, his soul, everything of him is here. I can feel the passion of the music. I’m playing with a soaring soul. I’ve gotta show him that I can do what he told me. - But he’s left.

Barcarolle transition, octaves for left hand.

Yes, I see, he’s left, I’ve come. I’ve come with a crystal piano for you. I’m now in your room, playing your Chopin repertoire, and you can’t hear me. But you can feel it, can’t you? - C’mon, Donna, he doesn’t even know you’re here.

Donna opened her eyes. She sat up straight and inhaled deeply, preparing for the “pang-in-the-heart” chord, that heart-gripping tenuto suspension that her teacher had yelled over her head and demanded for God-knows-how-many times.

Suspend, resolve, tension released' a plateau.

Is there a plateau waiting ahead for me where he is -? - Hello, you’re still in the suspension phase. The resolution is still out in the air. A plateau will be a miracle.



Donna's right little finger slipped on a warm drop. She had just ruined a tinkling cadenza of arpeggios and chromatics, and here came the counterpoint lot. The canonic entries grew into intertwining lines. The interwoven contrapuntal lines climbed higher and higher on the keyboard.

You've been giving me more and more hope. You've written me letters, sent me mini busts of composers. You've even composed a poem for me. But now... You won't know how I feel, Xiang. I simply don't know how to let go. - See, you're building up another tension again. Really, stop brooding. How can you ever reach a plateau?

Donna broke down. She paused at the fermata before the coda, and instantly she resumed her poise and composure, and discharged all her energy in the tempestuous coda that she knew she would finish in victory.

I can finish the coda in brilliance, so can I finish this. I know what I'll do. I see a plateau now. When I get back to Shangri-La Hotel, I'll make a call to Juilliard, and ask the people there to dig him out and fetch him to the phone. - That's just ridiculous, and he'll probably be annoyed. - I'll talk to him myself, and ask him when he's coming back, or if he's coming back at all. - So? - So, if he's not coming back, I'll fly to New York. But first thing first, I want to talk to him. I need to talk to him. I must talk to him...



A Puppet

I, a puppet,
Am tied by numerous strings,
And you make me laugh, make my cry,
Make me dance like a clown by manipulating the strings.

I, a puppet,
Am held up into the air;
Whereas my feet can never touch the ground
What I rely on are your controlling hands.

I, a puppet,
Shall I accept this as my fate?
Or to wait until you have pity on me, my Lord of Love;
So as to cut off your controlling strings on me?

Wong Ka Wai, Michelle



Scars

Extravagant experience is love
The hurt of the mangled wound
Cupid's belligerence
You're lost in his maze
Several times you taste the mighty thrill
Words he says are fringed with gorgeous frill
You give him what he wants
Then "Farewell" as his love fades
Eternally you love with the scars he made

Chan Ka Ling, Zoe



Hedgehog

Who am I
mere flesh
twisting about
alone
in a dusty corner
so painful
my wounds
are inflamed

I exert
all my strength
to wriggle
against
gravity.

Salt tears
they bite
my wounds
Yet
they are
my comfort
my release.

I too,
like you,
am out of God's creation.
I too
know
what is pain.

I look at myself
this is not me
I used to be
spiky
spikes were
my strength
my pride
my weapons
my uniqueness
my security.
Now, they are all gone -
you said you didn't like them,
I pulled them out
ONE
BY
ONE
with blood & flesh
coming out
I've pulled them all out.
This is not me
not a hedgehog
not even like
a sea cucumber
but a
pound of
rotting flesh.



Inveteracy

Catherine Wong

I kneel on the sofa, looking out through the windows. On the fifteenth floor, I see several students playing basketball in the ball-court. They run. They bound. They yell. They enjoy their leisure time after school

The chirp of the birds lulls me to sleep.

I take off my glasses and lie on the sofa. The breeze I caresses my face and tranquilizes my blood.

The thinking sound of the keys disrupts the serenity.

Blast it! Her again.

She bangs the door and lays the bags of grocery on the floor.

‘Hey, no need to go to school?’ she bellows as if our flat is thousands of square feet big. ‘Have you dusted the side-table and the modular cabinet?’

‘Not yet’

‘You always have time to sleep but no time to do the chores,’ she points to the bags on the floor. ‘Arrange them’

I get up from the sofa and hasten to the bags. Why me? Why should I be ordered to do this and that? How about her own daughter? This flat is not mine but I have to do all these chores. All these disgusting chores!

After a moment’s helter-skelter, I settle down on the sofa with a drink, which moistens my dry throat.

She drags herself out of her bedroom and back and forth the kitchen. I sit gazing at her lackadaisical movements. As a pious Buddhist, she prays to Buddha every morning. Today is the first day of the month on the Chinese Calendar. She has to tidy up the altar and arrange some flowers and fruits for the Buddha and ancestors.



Under the altar of the affable Gwanyin are the altars of my mum and my ancestors. There is mum. She smiles blissfully in the photograph. Whenever I look at the picture, my blood scuttles and warms my heart,. She is my own mum. The episodes of my childhood gush from my brain. Sundays were our family days. We drank tea, went cycling and shopping. I yearn for the days when we were together. Can time fly back to fourteen years ago when I had an intact family? It can only happen in my dreams or in my memory. My life was perfect before I was ten. Mum, Dad, brother and I. I long for it. I want to live it again. Where are my father and brother? Why did they leave me? Yes. They couldn't bear the bitch. Her clatter. No one can stand it.

'Wing, I'm going to move your ancestors and mothers' altars back to the ancestral hall next week,' she declares, 'your father and brother aren't coming back. No need for me to consecrate your ancestors, right? If you want to enshrine them, you can visit the temple'

'Um'

Leaves rustle from outside as a gale jerks.

'Your mother hasn't blessed us, has she?' she mutters, 'your father gambled and that dead boy ran away Right?'

'Are you a*aid that the windows won't break?' she growls, 'you always wanna break my things'

I jump up from the sofa and scurry to my bedroom.

She has haunted me for eleven years. The whore. She seduced Dad. I was too young to discover the truth. Mum did not die of cancer. Mum must have been devastated by this fraud and broke down that day. I still remember this whore's snicker when she told me that she was lucky to marry my father. Bullshit! What the hell was she saying? I am fed up with this hypocrite. How can she keep profaning her god everyday? Such a shameful Buddhist!

'Wing, why are you burying your head in the quilt? Get out and help me for the dinner.' She commands.

Stop asking me to do this and that! You are nothing, bitch! I shuffle to the dining room and turn on the television. The weather forecast says a typhoon is approaching Hong Kong.

The howl of the tempest intensifies.



I look out the windows. The students are still playing basketball in the shower. Their giggle resounds through the court.

‘Wing, fetch me the plastic plate,’ she yells, ‘hurry up’

The crack of the plate infuriates her.

‘Wing, are you mad at me? Huh? Get out of here and I can save my money. You useless dead girl always break my things!’

I hate you, slut! I hate everything here! Look at yourself, dowdy bitch!

‘What’s up now? Why are you staring at me like this?’ she queries.

She looks like thirty something at forty. Perhaps it is her rather fair complexion or the regular use of ‘whitening essence’. She has long black hair and a slim figure. Her pink T-shirt and demin skirt show her dream, to become youthful and ageless. Such a pitiable matron. She has nothing. She has no mate. She has a daughter who’s indifferent to her. The girl prefers living with her grandma to living here with her mother. Perhaps the girl can’t tolerate her clatter either. Perhaps the girl hates her mother expelling her father. Yes. It must be hatred. Nothing else can cause a daughter to leave her mother. Poor matron. You could be a great mother only if you could restrain your mania. What a pity! You are not sensitive enough to perceive your own flaws.

A shaft of lightning whacks the earth. A clap of thunder follows.

‘Crazy!’ she starts, ‘Wing, close the window’

‘Um’

‘Why do you keep answering me like that? You don’t wanna share things with me, do you? Other people’s children are not like this. You don’t talk. You don’t care about me. Here are only you and I. We live together. No. It’s more than that. We’re mother and daughter, right?’

Mother and daughter? We can never be. Do you think that I can’t see your plan? You’re not a fool. You never make fruitless investments. So do I. I see you through. Why are you supporting my living and my study? It’s not out of motherliness. It’s greed. You want my economic support in the future. I’m your sole hope, right? A Bachelor daughter with a promising future. Sorry. I’m going to let you down just like what dad and brother did.



Rain pound in pillars, which intensify. It blends perfectly with the chop-chop sound from the cleaver.

‘Wing, I’m talking to you. Why do you look like you’re in a trance? Okay, just forget what I’ve said. You won’t say anything anyway’

I walk out of the kitchen and go back to my bedroom. I am glad that I have a room of my own, a shelter of my own. I am used to being alone. I enjoy looking at the sullen sky. I am fond of somberness, especially the dismal atmosphere tonight. How long will the torrential rain last? When will it stop? What a gigantic nimbus! It is like a mammoth serpent encompassing the whole district. It shows the longevity of the gloom.

The trees and plants down the street shake as if they will never be exhausted. Sudden flare bursts across the space.

The ringing of the telephone intervenes the vision.

‘Wing, answer the phone!’ she calls. I scurry to the phone in the dining room.

‘Wai’

‘Ah Yee, please,’ the voice says.

‘Aunt, it’s your call,’ I yell towards the kitchen.

She rushes to the phone in her bedroom. She is beaming with elation. Her voice is softened. Her volume is lowered. She chuckles and prattles, prattles and chuckles. She has had this thing with the man on the phone these years since dad left. I am never wrong. What a slut. She cannot be anything else. I am used to her misdeed. Years already. I should not bother about her. She is nobody to me. Well, she is a ‘sze lai’ already. She has been abandoned by two husbands. She must be extremely disappointed by marriage. Why shouldn’t her choose a married man as her playmate at this hopeless stage in her life?

‘I don’t want a husband. I enjoy my freedom now. Someone who cares about me is all I want at this moment. I want no more than that. I don’t need a man to sleep with me’ Her excuses or damned love theories. She has explained to me a thousand times whenever she wants to rationalize her deceit. What an antinomian! Her wicked moral value.



I can't leave now. What I can do is to wait. Wait for the right time. All the endurance is worthwhile then. I know that I can make it at last. I can have my own home, my own future and have her freedom too.

She can have her freedom too. She can possess the whole flat alone or maybe with her playmate. But nobody can bear her and will live alone. She will become older and lonelier, lonelier and older.

I can't leave her. I don't want to be accused. An ungrateful, culpable step- daughter.

The violent storm begins to retreat and the downpour gradually turns to drizzle. The gigantic serpent vanishes. A beam of faint light glimmers behind the clouds.

'Aunt!'

'What?' she shouts back from her room.

'You won't get what you want at last!' I yell and open the windows wide.



The Tides

The rocky headland is leveled out in breeze,
Tides dissolve the rocks in turbulent seas.
In which, debris rests as sediment and
Resurrects in platonic movement to form land.

The tide swallows someone standing on shore
The lost souls must be shaken to the core
To my surprise, they are surfing the wave
"That's the greatest moment in our lives", they rave.

East, west, old, new all dissipate in tides,
Yet the grave can be a cradle under the skies.

Pang So Kin



Four season's haikus

New Spring Fashion

When the first breeze comes
it brings a gift to grasses ---
a new green hairstyle.

The Corner of Summer

Heat makes our skin shine,
ripples lace the sea when tanned
tourists dance with waves.

The Messenger

Cool wind is coming
to sweep away the dry leaves
and brings longer nights.

The Christmas Wish

There the nude old tree
hungers for spring to adorn
it with fresh make-up.



The Biggest Ocean

On earth, there must be six major oceans
Rather than the five we come up with
The sixth and biggest is really quite special
It surrounds you to get your attention.
It is Advertisement Ocean
In which we swim all days
The commercial wave we are engulfed by
Push in all directions with temptations.
There's shore where human beings could rest
Giant ocean intrudes into everywhere where we live
Aiming to capture us in its conquest.
Continuous waves choke and tire us mortals,
But one could stop struggling,
By raising your head
And look at the gentle sky.

Ng Lau Ting, Lulu



My Diary

Brenda Ma

15th Nov 2000 (Wed)

Even the sun pushed away the clouds and shone happily with me today! Surely I won't forget today as long as I live! After all, it's hard to refuse someone like HIM as my boy friend.

* * *

7th Nov 2000 (Mon)

Dad and Mum had a big fight and dad said they were going to get divorced. Feeling extremely irritated and upset. Wanting to find a place to quiet down, I went back to my dorm. Didn't they marry out of love? How could they say such insulting things? Where has their love gone?

He called while I was thinking about my parents' fight. He put his studies aside and came to console me till 4 a.m. in the lawn outside my hostel. 'You are lucky', he said, 'at least you've got both parents living under the same roof and they neither smoke nor gamble.' Well, perhaps he's right.

* * *

26th Dec 2000 (Tue)

Stayed with him for the whole day in his dormitory, which is nearly smothered by books, for he has to sit for his exam in two weeks. Cherry bet I couldn't concentrate on studying in his dorm while we were dining with some other secondary school friends the night before. I finished reading the unbearably boring novella *Heart of Darkness*, including its study guide there. Of course, the reading was interrupted by occasional gazing at him. It's a wonder to me that he could remember all



the stuff he studied and knew all the meanings of those extraordinarily long medical terms that I couldn't even pronounce properly.

He kissed me on my cheek when he was waiting for a taxi with me. It's sudden, but sweet.

* * *

11th Jan 2001 (Thur)

Extremely down because he didn't call during his lunch hour. He used to call between 1230 p.m. and 1 p.m. for the past two months. I kept picturing what could have happened to him in my afternoon lecture, and today is the first time I forgot to switch my mobile to vibrate mode before attending the class. It sang 'Lovin' You' noisily in the middle of the lecture. It wasn't his call. It turned out that he was so busy that he had only 15 minutes to eat. Couldn't he have spared a minute or two?

* * *

13th Jan 2001(Sat)

His exam has finished! Finally I saw him! When he was cutting his underdone steak during dinner, I couldn't help imagining what he would look like when he uses a surgical knife in the operating room - cuts and takes out whatever it is inside in the patient's body. Of course, that will only happen twenty years later if he chooses to be a surgeon. No matter what, I guess I can neither eat steak nor cow's organ noodle with him anymore.

* * *

1st Feb 2001 (Thur)

Feel bad as he said he's too busy with his studies and is unable to spend the weekend with me. I thought he were relatively freer as his new module started only two weeks ago. I felt very sour this



evening when I saw my roommate humming a song while she was dressing up to meet her sweetheart.

* * *

4th Feb 2001 (Sun)

I had dinner with him in the hospital canteen... again. It was the first time in my life that I realized that I am less attractive than a book, which contains all sorts of deformed babies and children.

* * *

10th Feb 2001 (Sat)

He didn't call me the whole day and I couldn't reach him by phone so I found someone to chat to in ICQ. I met a girl there. Her name is Joe. Coincidentally, the secondary schools we attended were founded by the same religious organization and the school customs are very similar. Even our school songs are very much the same. I was astounded when I discovered that my favorite teacher, Miss Chiu, taught her as well. She left Joe's school and started teaching in mine when Joe was in F.6 and I was in F.1. What's more, Joe loves music and reading and is a great fan of Haruki Murakami! Both of us glued our eyes on the monitor for nearly 16 hours... It was already 5 a.m. when I typed 'gdnite' to her with my aching fingers.

* * *

12th Feb 2001 (Mon)

Stayed in the dorm for the whole day, alone, daydreaming. I recalled what we did when we first came together. The way he touched my hand is unforgettable. He used to hold my hand in a way that made me feel beloved. His long fingers would draw circles on my nails to feel their shapes,



and then run on to feel the length of my fingers. I long to experience this again, but now he has to spend most of his time studying. Even when he is free, he usually practices boxing and hikes with his friends. He dines with me after these activities most of the time and gives me little presents, but I still wish he could spend more of his leisure time with me. Talking to him on the phone, even every night, is not enough. No wonder Cherry advised me not to accept him so soon, because once I accepted him, he'd feel 'I've got her!' and won't spend as much time to see me or to make me happy as he did. Now I know she is right!

* * *

14th Feb 2001 (Wed)

Went to sing K with some secondary school friends who have no valentine to celebrate Cherry's birthday. I was moved by the song The Dark Dark Sky, especially when it came to 'love always makes me cry, makes me feel unsatisfied. The sky is wide but I can't see it clearly, how lonely...' It's painfully accurate in describing my mind.

* * *

15th Feb 2001 (Thur)

I could tolerate it no longer. I called him, to tell him I missed him really badly. I had thought I could control myself when I told him my feeling of being neglected. Yet tears burst out. He soothed me by staying with me even though his exam is 10 days to go. Realizing that I mustn't distract his study and shouldn't have been so capricious, I told him I was fine. I listened to the snoring of my roommate the whole night.

* * *



16th Feb 2001 (Fri),

I looked at myself in the mirror with utmost horror yesterday morning. My eyes were red and were about half the size as usual. Knowing I could do nothing meaningful for the rest of the day, I left the dorm and took a minibus to Sham Shui Po. I wandered in the street till I was too tired to continue to walk. I jumped on a bus. When the bus reached the terminus I didn't know where I was, I got on a tram. Shortly, the tram-driver shouted at me that the tram has already reached the terminus, I got off the tram and got into another bus.

The bus stopped next to a marketplace in Wan Chai and I noticed an old lady pushing a cart of oranges and apples towards the market. Her spine was horribly distorted; her chin nearly touched her chest. She stopped and panted after every several steps. Finally when she reached the market, she took a small grey plastic bottle from her coat pocket and drank from it. I saw a contented smile on her lips. Why did this old woman still have to work to support her living? What made her appear in such a way? If she had had the opportunity to receive education, what would her life have been?

I went back to my dorm that evening, had my bath and went to bed immediately, feeling entirely relieved and refreshed when I opened my eyes again.

* * *

23rd Feb 2001 (Fri)

My net-friend Joe had learnt flute for 8 years and was a member of the school orchestra for 3 years. I still remember vividly how delighted and excited I was when I used my summer job salary to buy a clarinet last August. It has become my dream to learn it ever since I listened to Mozart's Clarinet Concerto K.622, 9 years ago. However, my mum forbade me to learn that time. She said, 'playing clarinet makes you ugly as the way of blowing it loosens the muscle of your chin and neck.' Now I know it can't be true.

I also know that the song I love is included in the syllabus of Diploma Examination of clarinet, which I have to learn for at least ten years in order to take that exam. At this stage, the



horrible squeaking noises I make when practicing suggests that this day may never come true. Joe and I both agree that although playing flute/clarinet is hard to master and makes the muscles around our mouth ache every time after practicing, the learning process is a lot of fun. She sent me a website containing much interesting information and jokes about musical instruments, including clarinet. I found that clarinet is a popular instrument of being made fun at, such as ‘clarinet: an instrument of torture operated by a person with cotton in his ears’, ‘there are two instruments worse than a clarinet - two clarinets’, ‘what’s the difference between a clarinet’s and a saxophone’s hospital use? The saxophone is used to lull crying babies to sleep and the clarinet to wake coma patients.’

After talking to Joe I always feel bitter and happier even though I was upset before.

* * *

6th March 2001 (Tue)

Today I met my net-friend for the first time. The evening was unexpectedly enjoyable. I was quite nervous waiting for her because I was worried that I couldn’t hide my shyness. Besides, I wondered how my ICQ friend, whom I spent at least two hours every night in the past month to chat on all the topics we are interested in, looked like. I suspected people who like playing ICQ were monstrous-looking creatures as they didn’t have any dates in their spare time. Joe turned out to be charming even without make-up. She has bright and beautiful eyes. Joe is an assistant engineer, who works mainly in the office but sometimes has to inspect slopes and construction sites. We seemed to be old friends who hadn’t met for a long time and talked until the coffee shop closed. She is quite the same person as I had imagined, warm, concerning and friendly. Her way of seeing things was often different from mine, and gave me a whole new perspective of seeing things. She gave a copy of *Tuesdays with Morrie* to me as a gift.

* * *



8th March 2001 (Thur)

Read *Tuesdays with Morrie* given by Joe. It has been a long time since I'm touched by a book. Morrie the professor loves his life even though he can only stay in bed all the time because of his illness and can no longer eat the food he likes. His optimism affects everyone around him. He teaches us to care about and cherish those who love us, that we should not hide our feelings from those we care about because we live only once. We don't know what will happen tomorrow. I remember how selfish and nasty I have been: I deliberately let myself cry in order to make him come at once and comfort me. I had once remained sullen all the evening because he brought a book with him and read during the meal instead of paying full attention to me. He's busy and will be busy - that's certain. I never consider the heavy workload of his studies and seldom treasure the time we when we are together. How miserable I must have made him!

* * *

14th March 2001 (Wed)

He asked me out tonight. I felt very different when seeing him tonight. Loving a person doesn't mean seeing him often, and it's better that he spends more time studying than being with me. After all, examinations are really important for him and I never want him to neglect his studies because of me. I don't want to make him look like a fool in front of the patients because he can't answer their enquiries. I told him jokes about clarinet and other musical instruments and he enjoyed listening to them. Seeing him laugh is much better than seeing him look worried and anxious because of my silliness.

* * *

24th March 2001 (Sat)

I spent a very enjoyable weekend with Joe. We went to Siu Sai Wan as both of us did not want to spend our Saturday afternoon in shopping centers. The day was so fine. We planned to walk around in Stanley at first but the whole place was crowded with tourists and families. We changed



the destination to Sui Sai Wan instead, with no idea where the place was except that it is located in Hong Kong Island. We left the terminus and found a promenade behind a shopping mall. Right opposite the prom. is Lei Yue Mun. Cargo ships and fish boats of all sizes were sailing in and out. We walked along the prom. and stayed there all the afternoon chatting, watching people fishing, children playing with their parents, and enjoying the breeze and the sunshine. I cannot imagine I can work in an office like Joe from 8:30 a.m. to 5:15 p.m. (and often needs to work OT) because it's horribly routine and boring. Yet she told me this isn't as boring as I had thought. Also the relationship between colleagues is not as dark as that depicted in popular novels and films. Her colleagues would share snacks while working and organize activities after work such as finding good places for dinner. One of her colleagues has gained 30 pounds since working there a few years ago! Wow, being pregnant won't gain that much weight I'm sure... but it's likely that working in an office can be interesting.

It's the first time I told others my dream, which I'm sure would be laughed at. I wish to carry a backpack and bring my clarinet to Europe. Whenever I'll need money, I'll play clarinet on the street and the passers-by would stop and listen to me. As they'll be impressed by my skills, they will generously put coins and notes in my clarinet case. I can earn myself enough money to wander around Europe, and can stay there as long as I like.

While Joe and I were having dinner, I met a friend of mine dining with her mum. Later my friend told me her mum asked if Joe and I are twins. I was very surprised - I'm 6 years younger than Joe! I wondered if someone thought I was at the same age as someone six years younger, what my feeling would be. Well, I should feel happy if others thought I was still 15. Haha.

* * *

6th April 2001 (Fri)

I wondered how I'd feel if my life consisted only of studying, sleeping, taking showers and having meals. This is exactly the life he is leading because his final exam is a month to go, and the syllabus covers what he's learned in the previous year. I would go insane someday if my life is that



full of ennui (a new word I learnt today!) and so mechanical. Yet he does not appear upset at all because being a doctor is his dream since childhood. Every time we meet or talk on phone, he tells me what he has learnt from the senior doctors and seen in the patient's ward, in a way similar to an exciting kid telling his mum what he has learnt from school. He is gifted in describing things. I could almost see how an injured man looks like and how painful it is to bear a baby. Grandmother often talks about how much she suffered when giving birth to my mum and uncles, but I could really feel the pain of my grandmother only after hearing his vivid descriptions.

* * *

16th April 2001 (Mon)

Went to dine with Joe again in Tai Mei Tuk, a place in Tai Po district I went cycling and barbecuing with a large group of friends when I was still a teenager. I suggested going there for I wanted to know how it looks in a weekday evening. It's very convenient to go there by her car; I used to spend about 45 minutes in the bus from Tai Wo Station to there. The dam of Plover Cove Reservoir, where I had my first attempt on riding a bicycle ten years ago, appeared incredibly magnificent at night. Together with the silhouette of the ranging mountains and the quietness of the surroundings, it seemed that we were in the countryside of some foreign countries. There were only us on the dam the whole evening. The night was memorable; especially when a flying cockroach hit me suddenly.

* * *

9th May 2001 (Wed)

I spent the evening with him in Siu Sai Wan and I'm very happy. He said, stroking my hair at the same time that he felt I've changed in the past few months. I'm no longer the empty little girl who used tears or sullenness to force him stay; instead I'm much more pleasant and independent. I show more concern and care towards him, and I don't only think about myself. He feels that I



genuinely want to understand him by showing more interest in listening to what has happened to him and, he appreciates that I brought him the delicious soup and refilled his refrigerator during his examination period. In fact, it's Joe who suggested that I do these and mum was the one who made the soup!



My First Time

"Oh - ah - oh- no-ah-
No! It's painful!
He does not stop,
just continues.

"Is - is - it going to be pain -- ful?" I asked.
He laughed grimly, "Relax. Lie down comfortably."
His low deep magnetic voice,
Calmed me down.

Yes, the couch was comfortable.
The sheet was as white as new.
The cushion was soft,
I closed my eyes,
Just let go:

"Now, open your mouth, as wide as you can."
I opened my mouth, and my eyes too,
But the sharp white light
above my head, kept my eyes shut.

"Oh - ah - oh -no - ah -
No! It's painful!
Please - I beg you - please - stop!"
He does not stop,
just continues.

"Shush, calm down. It may be a little painful --
for the first time. But, just calm down."
"No, it's not a little, but very ---- very painful!
Stop! Stop! Please ----"

'A-a-a-a-a-' I screamed, deep from my throat,
until I was exhausted.
I couldn't stop my tears.

"It's finished."
I opened my eyes --
Oh! He was so good-looking. I shouldn't have been afraid
Even for the first time.



"Thank you." I felt relieved.
My bad tooth has finally been extracted.

Leung Wing Kwan, Mandy



On the KCR

Every day after midnight,
I wait on a bitingly cold platform,
Sitting in the last train,
I always lean my face against the window.
Close my eyes and feel the shaking motion,
As if I were in a cradle.

The world is exhausted,
Tremendously exhausted.
Going into a tunnel,
All dark outside, like a black sheet of paper,
Can that be my mind too?
There will be no more worry, no more pain.

Listen to the booming noise of the railway track,
Life goes on without waiting for you.

Lam Lok Yan, Joyce



A Mug

Allen Ho

“Mom, happy birthday!” Alex kisses me and hands me a present, which is nicely wrapped.

“Thank you so much, Alex. What is it?”

“It’s something warm, trust me.” He smiles in a tricky way.

I do not want to tear the wrapping paper, so I unwrap the present with care. At last I can see what the “warm” thing is. It is a photo frame with a photo in it.

“It’s wonderful! Do you make the frame by yourself?”

“Bingo! You cannot find another frame like this in the world!”

I laugh, mainly because of his childlike behaviour. I really feel happy.

“Mom, do you remember when the photo was taken?”

“Of course I do. Last month when we three went to Ocean Park.”

“Jacky said you looked really young and pretty in this photo, so we decided to put it in a frame and give it to you as a present.”

“Thank you very much, Jacky.”

“You are welcome. By the way, auntie, do you have a birthday wish?” Jacky suddenly asks.

I remain silent for a short while, and say hesitantly, “Of course. But it’s a secret. People say that if a birthday wish is uttered, it’ll not come true.” Even if someone threatens me, I won’t expose my birthday wish again.

“Write it down and show us, mom. I think it’ll be OK.” Alex grins.

We all laugh, eat the birthday cake, and enjoy the afternoon.

This pleasant and harmonious moment reminds me of what happened on the same day last year, at the same time, in the same place.

“Mom, happy birthday.” Alex kissed me and gave me a present, which was nicely wrapped.

“Thank you so much, Alex. What is it?”

“It’s something that you’ll use every day.”



I unwrapped the present with care, and finally I saw a mug. At first I did not feel particularly happy, as it was something ordinary. However, when I took it out of the box and looked at it more closely, I was overjoyed. It was not an ordinary mug. It was one with a photo of the two of us printed on it!

“Fantastic! How can it be done?” I was very surprised, with my eyes sparkling and staring at the mug. “It must be expensive!” I added.

“It’s not important. The key point is you like it.”

“Son, you may be right, but it’s really unbelievable!”

“Mom, do you have a birthday wish?”

“What?”

“A birthday wish.”

“Oh! Of course.”

“What is it?”

“I wish & I wish I can drink a cup of *sam po cha*¹ with this marvellous mug.” I said very quickly, in a barely audible voice.

Alex’s smiling face went blank. He stood up, walked away from me, and headed to the kitchen, very, very slowly. I tried to follow him, but there was such a great pressure at his back that made me feel uneasy to approach him. There was a dead silence. All I could hear was the thunder-like “ping-pang,” “ping-pang” from my heart. I wanted to find out what was going on but I didn’t have the courage to do so, as I couldn’t afford to spoil any wonderful memories I had had with my only love left in this world.

After making a long journey with my heavy steps, I finally went into the kitchen. I acted calm and poured some water into my old mug.

“Son, you know I was joking. You don’t have to hurry to get me a *sam po*².” I said, with my lips shivering.

“Mom & There’s something I want to tell you.”



I was nervous because Alex had never been so hesitant to tears bursting to me. I knew something had gone wrong. I tried to figure out what he was going to say but I couldn't, as my mind had gone blank from the moment I stepped in the kitchen.

"Go ahead." I stumbled.

"Um &"

"What is it, son?" I eagerly awaited his reply.

"Um & It's & It's about &"

I yelled, "What's the matter with you?"

"Mom, I'm sorry."

"Why you've to say sorry to me?"

He took a deep breath and said, "I'm in love with someone."

"That's great! Why didn't you tell me earlier?" I took a deep breath as well. "Son, you're so innocent! To fall in love with a girl is nothing embarrassing." I added, with a smile on my face and also in my heart.

"It isn't a girl." He whispered, and walked to the corner of the kitchen, turning his back at me.

At that moment I was confused with pronouns. Was it "he" or a "she?"

"Say it again!" I ordered. Maybe I had heard his words wrong just now.

"He's called Jacky." He sobbed and crouched.

There was nothing wrong with my hearing. I laughed with tears bursting from my eyes.

"Why're you so cruel to me? Why did you give me that mug?" I yelled in my heart. I was lifted at first, and then dropped painfully and helplessly on the ground. I did not want to face him. I did not know how. I was a blind person. My vision blurred. The path between the kitchen and the front door grew very long and undulating, my legs staggering.

I left home, with my slippers but not my purse. When I got into the lift, my legs were too weak to support my body. All I could do was to crouch.

Everything was colourless and unfamiliar. Where was I? I had no idea. My face was all wet but I did not have any tissue paper. I wiped it with my sleeves. I did not know where I was going. I



kept on walking, faster and faster. I wanted to be as far away from him as possible. After walking nonstop for more than five minutes, I found myself in a park.

The park was very different from what it was twenty years ago. The swings and the seesaw had all disappeared. The only thing that remained was the fountain. When Alex was a kid, I always brought him to that park, with his damned father. Alex liked running around the fountain and looking at his reflection in the water. What a cute and innocent child! After that bastard left us for another woman twenty years ago, I never went there.

I sat on a wooden bench. I kept on staring at the fountain. My face was wet again. Why you two are so cruel to me? I yelled with my only strength. They were the ones whom I loved the most, but also the ones who hurt me the most!

I did not know how long I had been sitting there, but I could feel the night breeze blowing. It was getting cold. Where should I go? Should I stay there for the night or should I just stay there forever? I had never imagined a woman would spend her birthday in a park alone, sitting, weeping, weeping, and weeping.

“Am I going to lose Alex forever?”

I really did not know where to go, but I eventually left the park, as it was too windy and cold. I wandered about the streets, with an empty stomach and a weak body. After a while, I stopped and leaned on a lamppost. Behind me was the small newsstand where I always bought newspapers from. It was owned by an old, fat man. When I turned around and faced him, he stared at me for a few seconds before he could recognize me.

“Hi, Mrs. Chan. You’re seldom here at this time. Where’s your lovable son?”

“At home,” I said coldly and gave him an odd smile.

“Your son’s really nice! He always accompanies you! My son’s much worse, he never wants to stay with me!”

“So what? I’m going to lose him.” I murmured.

That fat man kept talking about how bad and rude his son was, but I did not pay any attention to his words, until he suddenly said, “Recently, your son always walks around here with a boy. Do you know him?”



“What?”

“The boy.”

“How does he look like?”

“Quite young and smart, I think more or less the same age as your son.”

“What were they doing when you saw them?”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean um & Did they act & intimately?”

“It’s hard to say. What do you mean by ‘intimately’?”

“Well, did they & did they walk very closely?”

“Um & I’m not very sure.”

“Then did they & did they & hold hands?”

“Well, I couldn’t see very clearly.”

“Can’t you observe things a little better?”

He was completely stunned, probably thinking why a woman would ask him such silly questions about her own son. Even I did not know why. I had been living with Alex for twenty-five years and I needed to ask about him from an old, fat man in the newsstand! Wasn’t it ridiculous?

“I’m so sorry. I just can’t control myself.”

He kept on looking at me.

I was about to leave. After I had taken a few steps, he suddenly broke his silence and yelled from behind, “Trust me. Don’t worry too much! Your son’s a good man. Let him do whatever he likes.”

I did not turn back and continued walking. I tried to forget his words but I could not. They were magical that in a minute or so, I already found myself just a few steps away from home! A worried face was walking back and forth outside the entrance. He was holding a sweater. It was mine.

I did not need the sweater anymore. My heart had become much warmer. I walked towards him as slowly as I could, as I wanted to look at his worried face for a bit longer. When he saw me, his face brightened up. He ran towards me.



“Mom, it’s so happy to see you again! I’m afraid you’ll leave me forever.” He smiled in tears.

“It’s my place. Why do I have to leave?”

“Mom, I’m terribly sorry. I’ll talk to him &”

“We’ll talk about it later.” I interrupted very calmly.

“But &”

“Shhh & I’m so hungry right now. I still haven’t had my birthday meal.”

“Oh, my poor mom! Don’t worry, go home and change your clothes, then I’ll bring you to Peking Garden, your favourite restaurant.”

"Mom, go and change your clothes, then we'll bring you to &"

“Peking Garden!” Jacky interrupts.

I give them a smile, then walk slowly to my room, with the photo frame in my hands. While I am walking, I can hear the two young men joking from the back. I cannot share their happiness. I close my door and sit on my bed. I look at the photo frame very closely. In the photo, I am standing in the middle and the two young men are making funny faces on my sides. To many, it maybe a perfect photo, but it is not good enough for me. I cannot control my hands. I use my shivering left hand to cover Jacky’s face. Soon even my son and me are missing. The photo turns misty.

“Let him do whatever he likes.” The old man’s voice. I remove my hand.

I walk towards my dressing table and take out a little box from the drawer. I open the box very slowly and take out the mug, the one that Alex gave me last year with care. I always like to take it out and stare at it for an hour or even longer. It has never been used. It will never be.

“Mom, are you ready?” Alex knocks on my door.

“Yes, I’m coming!”

I quickly put the photo frame on my dressing table, and put the mug back into the drawer.

¹ A Chinese ritual in which a newly married woman has to kneel in front of her mother-in-law and father-in-law and serve them with tea.

² Daughter-in-law



A Certain Paradox

a poem
without image
is a poem
of all images:

buzzing buzzers
chasing after tiny drizzles
nuzzled against a dog's muzzle:

a frazzled explorer
in search of a missing piece
in a finished puzzle:

Ho Swan, Christina



My Journey

Under the blue

Sky on the dumb running beige train

next to the transparent creamy window on top

Of the solid wooden seat with

closed eyes I am

floating in the wintry air flying

without wings

rinsed by the grey memories

Leung Tak Chi, Toby



A Stronger Nation

Toby Leung

“Can’t you see something’s missing here?” The master cast his wife the first riddle.

Mrs. Chang clasped her lips, with her eyes focused on her laps.

Mr. Chang roared, “Go get some food! We come to eat, don’t we? Can’t you see I am starving? Huh? Go! Go! Go! You stupid bitch!”

The stupid bitch rose to her feet timidly, turned around to face all the inquisitive eyes, and trudged off to complete her mission.

Under my feet was a mat with brownish thorn pattern and a vermilion background. Over my head drooped the usual crystal lamps, too big, too glittery, too golden, too Chinese. The endless tinkling between the bowl and saucer, babies’ babbling, children’s squealing and the adults’ gibberish, entirely encircled the family. There sat the master, Mr. Chang, with his wife and daughters, making up a table of five.

I could feel the suspension of violence in the air; the guilt and shame inside their hearts.

The eldest daughter stared at her father with belligerent eyes. I knew what was going on in her mind: a revenge, or a riot to overthrow the master. She was a witch casting a spell. Stupid bitch! He said my mother was a stupid bitch! He is a pig. He is nothing more than a pig! No one could read her lips as well as I did. I could see the blood vessels expanding their coverage in her eyes. She was coming close to the point of explosion.

Even the three-year-old sister in her baby-chair sensed the tension. She pouted and winced.

The girls sat there still, as if in a prayer. They did not lift their heads. Their fingers and lips quivered. The stupid bitch came back with a tray of food. In a Chinese way, she sheepishly unloaded the food and cringed at the sight of the master.

Everyone was silent and tough. We were a strong nation. This was my mother and that, my father.

* * *



“London Bridge is falling down, falling down, falling down. London Bridge is falling...”

I heard this song every day at nine. I never had the chance to linger in my bed because of those kindergarten kids. When I peeked at the living room, I saw mother serving congee to my father.

“Can you make it even slower?” He grunted while searching for his cigarette.

My mother continued to pour the congee into the bowls. When she had finished, she retreated to the 30 square-foot kitchen - her only refuge from the cold world. After a minute, she plodded towards my direction.

I dashed back to my bed. I didn't want to have breakfast with that beast outside. It was two in the afternoon when I opened my eyes again. The emptiness of life filled me - the grey dusty wall, noisy chattering from the neighbours at the mahjong table, the muggy damp air.

What am I going to do today? The unanswered question I had had since the previous year. I was seventeen and I dropped out from school. From then on, time ran much slower than ever.

I got up and sneaked out to the kitchen to look for food. No one was there. I felt at ease with the absence of my father in this less than 500 square-foot house. I wish he were dead. It always happened in my dreams. I would laugh out so heartily that I would be awakened by my own laughter sometimes.

The doorbell thundered bringing me back to reality. I opened the door and saw a sleekly, almost bald head encircled with a doughnut-shaped oily hair. I opened the door and avoided his eyes in disgust. He did not say anything. He looked much older than the last time I laid eyes on him. There were wrinkles around his eyes and his eyelids were sagging under the eyebrows. I felt glad about this symbol of aging - a step closer to death. He avoided my eyes the same way I did to him, but I could see an almost imperceptible smirk on his vicious face. He still remembered his good deeds.

I had already forgotten what one should say when she saw the man who her life. Did he ever know that she wished she had never been born because of him? Why couldn't I choose my own father? Why was everything so out of control?

He was just a beast!



* * *

“What do yqju think you are doing? Bitch!” He roared and thrust my elder sister onto the floor.

My sister got up and continued to pack her bag as if she had not seen him at all.

“Leave if you dare! Don’t ever come back again! Go! Creep! You conscienceless pig! Get Lost!” He pointed at the door and kicked my sister with his bare feet.

I held my little sister tight with her face buried into my breasts. She should not be seeing this. This wouldn’t be a part of her history. He wouldn’t ruin her life the same way he did to me! My pajamas were wet with my sister’s tears. She was wailing and fumbling with my bra.

Mother did nothing but sobbed and tried to stand as an obstacle between him and sister. Her eyes glistened with tears. She looked so small and flimsy. She did not even say a word to stop sister from leaving.

My elder sister tottered toward us with a heavy bag on her right shoulder. She kneeled down and wept the tears away from my face with her hand. “Be a good girl. Look after mother.” She didn’t look at me. All I could see was her neatly-combed gleaming hair. What an advice! Or was it an order? My sight was blurred. I felt an intensive heat expanding in my lungs. I wanted to push her hand away but she stood up as soon as she had finished her words. She was crying, but her tears had no compassion or meaning. I wanted to shriek. I wanted to prove my existence; to release my anguish and rage. A lump in the throat choked me instead.

She had not come back since then. This was the last piece of memory I had about her, her leaving with dignity. I still thought of her all the time. Not because I missed her. I wondered how she could be so cruel and conscienceless. Where did she go? Was she thinking of us while I was dreaming of her? What left about her in me was not love, but curiosity. The riot did not happen as I had hoped and expected. She betrayed us and abandoned our nation for good. We were weaker, much weaker than ever.

* * *



“Come... Let me feel my beloved daughter’s skin. Come and sit on papa’s laps. Let papa kiss your lovely cheeks”

I felt my torso being squeezed and mouth covered by a coarse putrid hand. I struggled to push him away in vain. I could hardly breathe. He was killing me.

Help! Help me!

I sprang from my bed, terrified by this familiar nightmare. I covered my mouth with my shaking hands. I was sweating all over. My eyes were opened so widely that they ached. Calm down! It was just a dream. I looked at the mirror on my right and combed my hair with my fingers. I knew I could never put this incident behind. It was a permanent scar, which bleeds from time me. Something was taken away. It was gone forever, leaving the bed with dirty blood and shabby tears. The time was gone. The time when I hugged my father happily clinging around his neck. He would no longer kiss my cheek lovingly. I would no long curl his beard with my little finger. My once beloved father was lost.

I saw mother sitting stiffly on the sofa outside, like a student facing a stern teacher. My little sister was lying asleep beside her. Her long eyes slanted sideward toward the telephone. Why didn’t you stop her if you knew you would be missing her forever? Hearing the phone rang, mother seized the receiver. I picked up the connected phone in my room.

“Ling, where are you? Why didn’t you call us? Do you know I worry about you?”

Mother could barely hold her tears.

“It’s me.”

It was a man's voice.

“O.. sorry... I thought it is ...”

“Are you okay? Don’t think too much about it”

They talked in a way that disclosed their intimacy. Mother didn’t even know I was there listening their tattling. I held the receiver, anticipating another betrayal. I was always the abandoned, the unconcerned, the unimportant.

“Have you decided on that? I want to know the answer”

“I can’t. How can I leave them alone?”



“But they will leave you someday! Like your eldest daughter. Don’t you ever realize that? Look at your heart. You want them to go! You don’t want these burdens anymore. Free your mind and admit this! Don’t be stubborn, my dear”

Mother sobbed. I could hear her sniveling. She was so close to me, and yet so far away.

“Why don’t you understand this?” Mother blurted, “I want her to go! Why should she stay in this hell? Do you think I don’t love them? How can a mother not love her own flesh and blood! They are mine. Who cares what I am going to be? Listen! I don’t care! I don’t care at all!”

Silence.

I was so damned stupid! I tried to pull myself together. Guilt weighted me down. I plodded up to my mother and sat on her other side. She put down the phone and wiped my face with her hands. I could feel the cracks of her skin. I was overwhelmed by her gaunt cheeks. How old and exhausted she had grown! I lowered my head. There were so many bruises and wounds on her skinny legs. I collapsed into tears and lay myself into my mother’s arms. I took a deep breath to keep myself from crying again. Little sister had woken up and looked at us in bewilderment. Mother and I held each hand of my sister. How we hoped that she had grown up.

We would make it. We belonged to the same strong nation. Someday, we would stride away from this nightmare, live with happiness and dignity.

Little sister’s eyes glittered, despite the sudden doorbell ring.



Your Lips and My Lips

Between my lips I have a cigarette;
When to your lips a bottle you put, then
Drink deeply, making your lips so wet...
And, "Less of your lips!" You may say, my friend.

To kiss you on the lips do I desire;
The lip, well, of your cup is still so cool...
You bite your lips -- your feelings do you hide;
I button my lips, acting like a fool.

There's many a slip 'twixt cup and lip that --
Should all men "keep a stiff (boo!) upper lip".
When curling your lip, you meant what you said (?) ...
But still I lick my lips -- and wish a kiss.

Your lips are sealed -- and it is not your fault...
Though, never pay lip service to my thought!

Cheung Kee Nang, Kenny



How Difficult It Is To Write A Sonnet

My ball pen floats in the deadly air
And ink gets stuck while classwork can't be done.
This heart of mine is like an empty lair
With demon left but can't be reached by the sun.

My sickened marrow functions not so well
So blood cannot give food to sleepy brain.
The limbs are locked in my shabby cell
And soul can only stay in here and sing.

Good abracadabra can make a line
And so-called inspiration can form prose!
I shall not fear coz' there is not a fine
Imposed on poets who are overdosed!

With sickened mind I cannot be a bard,
And writing poetry, for me is too hard!

Wong Shun Chi, Issac