

Cu Writing in English

-Volume XV/2016-



C **u** **W**riting
English

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Preface to the Poetry Section

“We don’t read and write poetry because it’s cute. We read and write poetry because we are members of the human race. And the human race is filled with passion. And medicine, law, business, engineering, these are noble pursuits and necessary to sustain life. But poetry, beauty, romance, love, these are what we stay alive for.”

—John Keating, ‘Dead Poets Society’

Similarly, we appreciate and attempt to write poetry not only for aesthetic pleasure or intellectual fireworks; we love poetry because it shows us the breadth and depth of humanity. Poetry awakens the most innate human qualities in us, distils our human essence, and shows us what it truly means to be human.

Of course, being merely students, we are far from being able to demonstrate the divine qualities of poetry; rather, through learning to write poems, we have gained insight into the beauty and magic of acclaimed poetry, and by engaging with those masterpieces, we have found more and better ways to express ourselves.

The Creative Writing course has been an exhilarating journey for us. Through being taught the technique of ‘reverse engineering’, we learnt to think in other poets’ shoes; while developing the skills of imitation and translation, we tried to transform ideas and perhaps even transcend boundaries. With these methods, we gradually started our own experiments with words, and embarked on the quest for our ‘second voices’.

This collection contains part of the fruits of our learning. Here you will find the languages of simplicity and relative sophistication; throbbing tales of love, loss, joy, rage, remorse, and so on; most importantly, you will hear the rhythms of thirty beating hearts. However different they sound, they are the same in the sense that they hope those outpourings of the soul might, at certain points, perhaps help prove how poetry keeps us alive.

Thank you.

Carren Wong, Gabrielle Tsui, Liz Wan
Editors

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What if a princess is not the one?

by CHAN Ka Shuen, Elise

What if a princess is not always the one
Who caters a prince's dream?
What if it is a prince
Who took a prince's heart?

But they say,

A prince is meant to be with a princess.
But they say,
There is no way
That cupid fired two arrows at two men.
But they say,
There is no way
For two suns to exist under a single sky.
So they say,
You just can't.

But he says,
For gender is a title, and
Love is a giant
Bigger than two suns and a sky.
Once upon a time,
A prince married a prince,
And they lived happily ever after.

The Mirror

by CHAN Ka Shuen, Elise

The mirror hangs on the wall.
The mirror is silver, clear and murky.
The mirror is a best friend of a narcissist.
The mirror shows the inverted and tells the truth. It never lies.
The mirror is cursed to be up to no good.
The mirror couldn't remember how many possessors it has had.
The mirror only remembers they all slayed the fairer men.
The mirror is evil, or maybe it is not.
The mirror has timeless time. Unlike humans.
The mirror never changes. Yet it cannot put a stopper on time for others.
The mirror only has one face, but shows thousand faces of the queen.

The mirror knows greed is a starving wolf.
The mirror cannot feed a starving wolf with language.
The mirror understands more on what wickedness is than any other mirror does.
The mirror swallows all the sorrows of the queen.
The mirror sometimes teases at the queen.
The mirror is wiser than the queen. For it knows that fairness is something that easily fades.
The mirror is laughing. Waiting for the next man.

On My Birthday

by CHAN Ming Yui, Minerva

Written on April 24, my 21st birthday

I prepared myself a glass of butter beer
to celebrate this day of the year.

I tried to do something queer,
like keep calm and read Shakespeare.

I could have played hide and seek with the sun
but Eliot disposed the fun.
I could have had a running race with the moon
but together with Plath I am trapped in the cocoon.

I could have harmonized with the cicadas
but unlike Kafka I sucked at melodrama.
I could have stayed with the cuckoo birds
but Lee tragically mocked one, as I remembered.

I am reading “No Fear Shakespeare”
and also “Sparknotes”, to be fair.
Today is my birthday, but I don’t care
Trust me, I am an English major.

Learning to Love Hong Kong

by CHAN Ming Yui, Minerva

At dawn I took a ferry and learned to love.
To touch her innocent heart, and vowed for
the glory of the harbour to immense at night.

At noon the ferry brought me,
To watch her past, to caress the marks
that history has desperately left on her.

In the evening I felt playful, and let
the echoes of her songs fade in the centre of the sea,
Absent-mindedly ignoring the moans between her lips.

At dusk the ferry hit the storm.
I could smell her fear, and find her shivering vulnerably
under the umbrellas in sirens of the cosmopolitan.

At night I was selfish enough to leave her alone,
To taste her sorrow, and forget the pain
that had bitterly tortured her with my guilt.

When the sun rises I took the ferry,
To anticipate in 30 years, a reply for me, as I
deliver this apology to her.

Dying in A December Storm

by CHAN Pui Yee, Isabelle

In December the Storm blasts
Howling, tearing faces off.
But people stumble on the street
Dragging drying skins and throats
They aren't blessed by the Light
So they're tormented by the Storm.
They can only blind their eyes,
Shut their ears and seal their mouths.
As they have no rights to resist.
As they are not blessed by the Light
And so is It not.

When I loved myself enough

by CHAN Wing Tung, Janice

When I learned to love myself,
I wouldn't be anyone's second choice.

And when I loved myself enough
I would hold the door open
For you if you wanted to leave.

I wouldn't wait around
I'd ask for an answer
Without hesitation
Right here, right now.

And in the end
I might tell you
"Who does he think he is"
You might think
I am just filled with anger
Or that my pride is hurt

But really,
That would be truly what I think.

My value would not be measured
By someone's inability to see it.

And when I loved myself enough

I would allow myself to leave
Before I am left with no one else.

Signifying Something

by Jonathan CHEN

Unsure how to respond,
I write; hoping to dance,
Over unyielding sincerity,
Obscure Intensity.

More comfortable,
With feelings ensconced,
Lyrically enhanced,
Hidden in songs.

You remind me of a more sincere age,
Of chain emails and 8-tracked mixtapes.
When walls were writ with unflinching honesty,
Love and hate.

And we communicated simpler feelings through status updates,
“I wanna go back to the start.” Sings my favourite artist of late.

Simpler days of rose-coloured haste,
But I'd rather go forward, my perspective changed.
The city skies, an old shawl
The mixture of blue grays, a comforting call

An argument for optimism lasts, hope yet to fade.
Unsure where this poem goes, mind puts self through pace.
Reminding mine a reaction; Befuddlement of current case.

Blue jays for blue days,
Food carts exhaling haze,
Parked in parks, out for larks,
Different sights in a new gaze.
World painted with a different glaze.
Incoherent rhyme scheme of the blazed.

Reminding me of a different age,
Where modems messaged at painful pace,
Inquiring the world of future days,
A childish determination.
Refusal to be fazed.

Hopeful Aspiration.
Unbound Inspiration.
Refusing Termination.

These are Photographs of Me.

by Jonathan CHEN

Etches in blue. Sketches.
Pictures and Pictograms, depicting,
You and I—pieces of a future thought possible,

It was a novel.
Idea that we could, catch up, make up.
Speaking of nothing,
I lost you.

In a stream of mascara, miasma of things past.
Turning into a sea of pages, poems,
Raging waves echoing through ages and acres.
A fist through drywall ended arguments.

You laughed.
Again instruction to—
Wait up because you needed to wash up,
Make up ruined now, black streams—
How can I face you?

Your faces:
“These are photographs of me.”
Nonplussed by such pleas may seem
Shipping off, board the dropship needle be,
If I was high, but fate had a different pipedream.

So I chased success.
As far as the eye could see.
Now leave me be.
For these photographs,
Hold worlds for me.

Framed for a Crime

by Jonathan CHEN

Watching,
Whimsical windows to your soul.
Hipster glasses, coffee cold.
Knit sweater, outlet old.
Trite cliché, generation joke.
Told straight, keys to lungs she holds.

Breaths cloud, slow dance bold.
Middle of the night, streets ours alone,
Glancing through windows, universes sold.

Beholden to no-one, so keep him close.
Wolves do run and cards do fold—
Paint me a picture of what the future told.

Write it in blood,
Write it in stone,
Of Love Elusive—
Frame it behind windows.

Catch them together,
Together alone,
Flash. Snap. Frozen.
No more sorrow.

Love birds

by Ruby CHEUNG

Wild rain splashes onto two hopeless souls
Too fierce as if it knows
Fate is a ruthless pit
Drawing them into the cruelest split

She swallows a drop of rain
To quench the thirst
As if it is an antidote
And make the drowning hope float

He moans about the rain
To unleash the anger
As if it is a curse
And make the dying birds disperse

Scattered vapor condenses into clouds
Too pity even if they vow
That they will get each other in the crowd
But fate will not allow

Happiness

by Ruby CHEUNG

Happiness
You have such a fickle heart
Every time I get close to you
Like ice meets fire
You bring me tears

A Floating Island

by CHEUNG Wui Tim, Samuel

Last night, I saw a Cantonese soap opera
called “Love Coming Home” on TV
and the plot was educational.

The English radio is broadcasting
more often.

Edward is exercising
in South Carolina.

He is real milk
and I
a banana.

Yet, others’ labels exhaust
me.

There is no more Cheung-Wui-Tim-or-
Zhang-Hui-Tian—
such English pronunciations
do not represent my name.

English letters, however, tell my stories
better.

I wish I could enjoy my life
and taste a cheesy pizza.

This morning,
I ate noodles,
and this evening,
I had rice.

Exotic love tastes like no other desserts
and is bitter
sometimes.

If she lies,
I will never believe her.

The best forgiveness for a lover’s lie
is saying
“never mind”.

The things I like most are:
A standing for American movies,
B standing for British literature,
and C, of course, being Cantopop.

I know I will age tomorrow
but time
cannot dye my eyes.

If it did,
it would not dye my heart
fully.

Learning to Love Hong Kong

by Jessica GALES

I am far,
Far away from my home
In a foreign place
A fish out of water to this new sea I am placed in
This new sea,
It is a new city

Busy people still crowd the streets on my commute in
They are focused on their commute, it's their routine they know
Faces a blur, lacking expression, moving quickly in their suits
They are cheetahs, racing against time to get to where they have to go

These actions are normal to me. Familiar, nothing too new.
I understand the hustle and rush that these cities can give you.

But what city am I in? I am not home. . .

I see bright lights from Bank of China and a Rainbow Building
The skyline is full of color: red, pink, green, blue
These are colors that make me happy, that I know I love
But I am not in the Times Square I know

Quick snacks of bagels and coffee have turned into sweet buns and milk tea
Yellow taxis have turned red and green
The subway I know is now the MTR, such a more efficient system and did I mention:
Clean!

I understand the rings, telling me when to cross the street
But I cannot understand the conversations of the people I pass
I say to myself, "If I knew Cantonese, my life might be so much easier here"

I am confused by the wonderful way this city works
I am lost in the alleys of Hong Kong
I am adjusting to these new lights

Because this is a hike up a mountain
Because the wind here is strong
Because this is a challenge
Because this is a new city, not mine

But I will accept this challenge,
Because it is my time to explore
Because I am determined to make Hong Kong my new home!

Tiger Kingdom

by Jessica GALES

Hello, sleepy Tiger how are you?
Are you well in this cage?

Hello, sleepy Tiger can I pet you?
How do you feel today?

Do all the tourists who come ever bother you by the way?
Do you ever want to be set free, out of this profiting prison?

I wanted to see your kind, sleepy Tiger, you must understand
I traveled all the way here, because I would have never had the chance to meet
you otherwise

Sleepy Tiger, are you sad?
Do you feel like you have no purpose?

Sleepy Tiger you are so cute and soft,
I hope you feeling okay

Sleepy Tiger, I'm going to take a picture with you
Please try to look happy & alive

Sleepy Tiger, I did not mean for them to wake you with sharp bamboo
Sleepy Tiger, I apologize, I should not have let my curiosity get the best of me

I paid a thousand baht for them to let me bother you, Sleepy Tiger
I contributed to your captivity and frown

The photos were not worth the sadness I felt from you
I'm so sorry sleepy Tiger

Shop list

by HO On Yiu, Angie

I am quite lonely lately,
I embark on a shopping journey.
As I create a shopping list for what I
currently need,
I think about what things to buy that can
represent me.

Although I am a Hong Konger,
I am no British girl.
As I am window shopping,
All I see is European brands.
Chloe from Paris,
Swatch from Switzerland,
Folli Follie from Greece.
They don't represent my history.

Wait a second,
DKNY from New York,
that fits a bit better.

But I am not an egoist,
Nor am I a materialist.
I just wish to shop for some
Music & Dream
Like when I was in Broadway!
When I saw them orange, beige and black
Up on that stage,
It was magic everywhere.

But I am old and worn out now,
My body won't chase after dream anymore.
Even after walk and shopping for two hours,
All she loves, now

Is a bowl of salad,
Some candies,
Some cherries,
Also feels like having mustard
And some brown sugar.

Perfect!
That's all I need.
Mix them all together
And some
109 Books,
and there,
Boom!
You have a shopping list for my identity.
We Hold These Truths To Be Self-Evident

Ordering Yeezy's on a chilly night

by Philipp KOERBLER

My Yeezy's are here what have I done;
I only meant to order one.
It must have been my fault,
to order shoes from Amazon.

My friends will think it was due to the malt,
To purchase two is a wound plus salt.
Between the boxes and unpayable bills,
I see no exit in this vault.

I start to question why there is such a thrill,
it is only a shoe, for which people would kill.
What if I just sell them on the street.
There would be plenty of ways to spill

The Yeezy's are stylish, fresh and neat,
But do I need them to feel complete?
I shall rather use my bare feet,
I shall rather use my bare feet.

"Love without Limits"

by LAM Yin Sing

Under a big bright telescreen
With big smart words written - "Love without Limits"
Stood a tall man who wears neat and clean
Waiting for someone special, minute by minute

There he came, with a big hug
Only a hug, really.
Well, maybe he had also secretly kissed him
On the neck gently

People stare
And people glare
People take photos by their smartphone
Of a man kissing the other man on his collar bone

On the other side of the big bright telescreen
Under the big smart words "Love without Limits"
Stood a gentleman kissing an elegant lady in peace
No one had ever paid any attention to it

Above Average

by LAU Ashley Yee-ting

This is an ode to those
Who are not the worst,
Good enough to depart from average,
But never the best.

We who can carry a tune and follow the beat,
Praised and encouraged to go farther,
But voice outshone by those with true talent;
The eternal fourth place.

We who get 80s but want more,
Because why can't we be those who get 90s?
Yet we cannot complain,
For we should be happy with our nice grade.

We who know we are not anyone's best friends,
But always the second or third to be confided into
As a good, close friend.
Is that really enough?

We who are well-rounded
With no particular talent to show,
Can only look on with green eyes
Wishing to trade.

We who know we can be better,
Despite the lack of instinct and talent,
But hard work only goes so far,
And we are left in the dust once more.

We who want an identity, a thing
To anchor to and grow roots,

So we need not float like wandering ghosts,
Searching for a place to belong.

We who fly without rest,
As birds without nests.
Can only huddle on a telephone line,
Dreaming of a home.

We who stand between the worlds of black and white,
Colored grey so we can pass through both,
Yet black nor white can we stay.
Where do we go?

We who see the world clearer than any,
Through the deep pits of black,
Through the blinding light of white,
Yet never understanding the secrets behind.

Jack of all trades,
Master of none.
Because we are good,
Just never good enough.

Of Those Who Loved and Were Loved

by LAU Ashley Yee-ting

Have I ever told you the history of my home?
How my family owned the lands when
These roads and bridges were still wet fields of rice.
Of the time when the villagers still spoke Hakka, the language
They refuse to teach me, the language
That has dwindled and become lost in time.
Back when my father and his siblings once ran along these streams and
Followed the river that still leads to the sea.
There were no trains, no cars, no buses, no trucks,
Only a pair of muddy shoes and feet.
Look over there at that leafless lychee tree,
Where once under its shade women rested and gossiped,
Looking over the acres of land and the sunset
Hovering in the horizon
Like a reminder of their counting days.
And the old men and women always seemed to know,
The date and time for their endless sleep,
As they bid those they loved and were loved by goodbye, then go off
In eternal peace.

Have I ever told you my childhood memories of home?
Days when chicken and children still ran around
Weaving through houses and fields,
Without fear of H5N1.
The years when wild dandelions and daisies and periwinkles grew
All over the hillside, and along the fields were
Three-leafed 'not lucky' clovers and dormilonas that
Quivered and closed at a single touch.
The children could spend their weekends playing
Hide and seek amongst the twining labyrinth of paths and houses,
Each turn finding, discovering more and more
Hiding spots and shortcuts and secret bases hidden

By the overgrowth of neglected weeds.
A time when carefree laughter rang throughout the village
And lovely smiles adorned the sun-kissed faces of those who loved and were
loved
Dearly and sincerely.
I remember when all year round there would be sweets and cakes and dishes
that Cannot be found anywhere outside the village,
Made by the wrinkled hands who brought the recipes to their graves.

Have I ever told you about my home?
How amidst the modern town of Shatin there is a patch of rural village life
still preserved,
Where fields of vegetables and abandoned rice fields lay next to the busy
roads and under the rumbling rail bridge of the MTR.
That my village has now been separated by a staircase that leads from where
I used to live
To where I now reside.
Overlooking the village on the hill once overflowing with assortments of
dainty, resilient flowers
I stand, with my camera in hand to capture:
The empty chicken hutches;
The stump of the lychee tree;
The crumbling ancestral halls;
The renovated house I lived in;
The park that was once a rice field;
The broken table where the grannies once played cards.
All things I remember yet not; things that now represent my home,
The people who I love and love me, and who I loved and loved me.

On the Authority of Names

by LAU Ashley Yee-ting

Which name are you?
Why is your name English?
Are you trying to be Canadian?
What about that weird Chinese name your parents gave you?
Why don't you use it?
Are you ashamed?
Why are you turning back on your own culture and ethnicity?
How are you not when you use an English name?
You mean China. Hong Kong is part of China.
That still doesn't explain why you have an English name.
But you're not even White.
You don't see Yaqoob changing his name to Wilson.
You're turning your back on your blood; will you be painting your face white next?
Will you be dying your hair blonde?
Will you wear blue contacts?
Will you do plastic surgery to get double eyelids?
A taller nose? Bigger eyes?
What right do you have to use an English name?
What authority do you have over English?
Why are you crying?
I'm only speaking the truth.

Dinner for One

by Louis Ray LEARY

I know you are cooking dinner,
checking your phone, for blue arrows alone,
telling you your message has been read
I know you are cooking dinner,
the water is boiling, you are looking for salt
I left some in the drawer besides the fridge
I know you are cooking dinner,
looking out of the window, wondering about rain
but the forecast tells you: the sun came to stay
I know you are cooking dinner,
my recipe book beside you, opened by the bookmarks
order, the page decorated with stains
I know you are cooking dinner,
standing beside you are three empty boxes,
one for the cat, one for tomatoes, one for wine
I know you are cooking dinner,
and I am sorry, but for the first time, in 436 days
you will be eating alone

This is a Draft

by Louis Ray LEARY

This is a draft
nothing more.
It's roughness
expected
thus not a problem
its lake of rhyme scheme
can still be fixed.
Thoughtless clichés make
uninspired metaphors
just like ugly ducklings
waiting to grow up into beautiful
swans.

I start stanzas starry eyed,
allow all alluding alliterations,
and slowly build up
towards
the climax,
then take a break,
for creativity's sake.

Still this is a draft,
and tomorrow,
I will fell disgusted,
and delete
word.
for.
word.
every stanza.
cursing myself
for ever believing
I could write.
So this is a draft,
and due to impatience,
and romantic notions about instant
writing success
it will never be more than
a draft.

Falling in Love with the Moon

by LEE Sin Ying, Sandra

There was a poet on the river
who died most ludicrously ever:
Enchanted by the moon,
He drowned himself so soon
to embrace his newfound lover.

Dance

by LEE Sin Ying, Sandra

I raise my hands and set my feet to prance,
Then slowly sway my body to the sounds.
The spotlight triggers my desire to dance,
Emotions flows and sheer joy abounds.
Enchanted I become as music goes,
A feather waving to and fro so bright.
The beats are trimmed by graceful moves and pose
That I present to you wordless delight.
They say I am the tender heir of tears,
But my eternal passion shall not fade.
Despite the pain in true form all the years,
To float and twist I ought not be afraid
So long as art reflects the cruel and kind,
To dance is to enrich my heart and mind.

David and Goliath

by LEUNG Tsun Yin, Ethan

At this very moment in Hong Kong
Stepping out the door, you represent not only
Yourself.
Take an umbrella and follow me
Brace yourself and stand vigorously
In front of the merciless giant,
Together we fear none.

Under the sunlight
Gold lining reflected from the yellow umbrellas and
Our passionate hearts
Striving for the autonomy and dignity of
Our Hong Kong;
Under the rain
Waterdrops fall from the sorrowful sky and
Our swelling eyes
Lamenting the gone comrades and the gloomy future of
Our motherland.

We use plastic goggles as our helmet;
We use sanitary masks as our respirator;
We use rusty umbrellas as our spear;
We use hopes and rationales as our reinforcement;
Withstanding the savage whack and torturous pepper spray from Goliath
We do not flinch.

Standing in the midst of the misty gas
Upholding broken umbrellas with both of our bleeding hands
We do not surrender.

Together we are David.
Together we stand.

Country Girl, Big City

by Shelagh LI

A city filled with a myriad of warm-toned apartment lights,
Never is there to be a moment of silence; of calm.
If the cars are not breathing out of their exhaust pipes, then it is the chattering of
A couple hundred people, all contained in 700 squared-foot spaces.
The clinking of chopsticks on china plates, being put down and picked up again to scoop up
the last bit of fried rice left in the bowls.

So different to the enchanting breaths the wind whispers though
The long stalks of shedding willows in at dusk, the gentle
Caress of the burnt sienna dust that wraps itself onto my shoes, unrelentingly clinging.
The fiery red, then orange, then purple, then deep, dark blue
Painting that flashes across the weapons opposite the two storied house of my childhood.

The city is not governed by one, nor does it will to be governed by any. It is a place
Of voices, of freedom, of democracy.
It has no inkling of even a tiny wish to belong to any other ruling power; it is its own.
Sampan boats and the yellow umbrella; both of which are its symbols;
Accounting for the history of this insignificantly tiny city, of which its inhabitants have
ultimate pride.

So different to the wide streets and green trees of childhood;
So different to the plenitude of
Spicy food that burns down the throat – but in the good way.
So unfamiliar and cold in the very fact that not one human residing here has any
Personal space; but not one person will have any social contact with anyone face to face –
They would rather look at the phones that are making them socially dumb.

But in its own way, this city is beautiful.
Never have I seen a place so modern yet filled with so much history.
A place when at night, every yellow-lighted window on the skyscraper housings hints at
a bigger history,
A place so paradoxical in every aspect, yet makes so much sense in itself to everyone
inside it.
Perhaps the mystery and the realisation that I will never know everything about this place
Is what compels me to stay; to discover the secrets hidden amidst the constantly
throbbing heartbeat
Of beauty.
Of this city.

Itself

by LO Tze Chun, Felix

So, I remember, oh
when you glimpsed at your watch and realised –
it had been such a time
since we were talking
talking and talking until talks swirl, coil, come round into
itself
like how I have been chasing you
again and again and into your shadow
and into my own
your tilted face half slit by the befuddling light
your warm breath blown into my face

Suddenly, the night is drunk with heat
damp, oozing, full of shivers
as I gingerly flip over your words
and find lies I have always been telling myself
with our gazes woven into the silent symphony
of treacherous beat
no chill can calm the beats and beatings

I know we will not see each other again
not as much as we will writhe out of our cocoon of
sad empty words – this bravado of subdued stirrings
but I am still drawn to it
like a moth craving the flames
and gravity
pulls me again and again today
back to that long, cold bench,
where I found on you
something that implodes upon itself

we both become it
and it becomes itself

The Closet

by LO Tze Chun, Felix

When I was young, curious, and naïve,
I wandered in the house and found a closet,
Imagining it to be the portal to another world,
I stepped in, and since then have never come out of it.

In this space that is dark, cramped, and unfit,
I sit, intrigued by the patterns of the wood.
The mothballs tickle my nose like dust on its tip
I find company in jackets, socks, and shirts without sleeves.

A windbreaker hugs me and I bite its zip,
At first I think I am just going to play with it,
But soon I have grown addicted to the smell of mould.
In the dark corners and shadows I make a gesture bold.

The fabric and the linen mummify me bits by bits.
I begin to strip off, as the smooth cloth sends my body kisses,
Until I realise all that I pine for has been no human,
But a pile of clothes mistaken for lips, tits, and ribs.

I fidget.
I struggle.
I move my arms around,
The wooden panes crush my elbows,
The closet implodes quickly until I no longer fit,
In a pang of claustrophobia, my muscles have become flaccid.

I want to shake the door open, charging out naked.
But the closet has been locked from the inside,
Bolted by a bar of shameful weight that I cannot lift
So I just wait there, aging through my puberty.

Even now as I have come of age,
I have not come to grow with courage,
To push the gate and step into light,
To stride with pride out of the closet.

Ode To Bee

by LO Tze Chun, Felix

The dust, the sand, the roaming seeds,
Thou lie on the ground with wings at ease,
Crystalled by breeze and scorched by heat,
Thy light death shall from this earth delete.
The hive which nourished thy special breed,
Must know not of thy nameless decease,
But thy birth hath been a rare feat,
A gourd of nectar with swelled mystique.

Has not thy life come to this end,
A beauty so still will not relent,
Only in clutch of life's dark hands,
Thou shall undress thy cold pretense.
To thy shelf my eyes do attend,
Zealous and lost while my thoughts still pend,
What every groove may represent,
Lest thy machine any cog unscanned.

But doth thou float or drown in air?
Which honey soft and what flowers flare?
I cannot see the wind thou dared,
But fancy here of the thrill unbarred.
Once thou had buzzed, thy sting in glare,
Sizzling with blood, flying ploughshare,
If thou in stillness no one beware,
I would thee unseen but in silence fare.

By Night

by LUI Chung Man Pinky

Forget the treads the old shepherds have walked
Before the dawning dew damps wild Rye tall
This night shall be our keys to all doors locked
Their mystic tunes at midnight to us call
Dream of that sun-kissed field another day
The lilies pure as driven snow can wait
But night ends soon when dawn is on her way
The winged chariot is never late
Come fast as maidens' years would never last
Those ample lips of rubies soon will dry
Take my hand and we shall chase the past
Until the sun brings light and all songs die
Let down your window breathe the thrilling air
Impetuous are those with red hair fair

A Siren's Song

by LUI Chung Man Pinky

Among all she alone could sing
Sweet tunes do I adore
My heart her curls have fast ensnared
I beg the Gods for more

“Come ye, my sweet courageous men,
Come ye, soon will be dawn
If you could hear my songs of woe
You know your time has gone.”

If only we can cease the wind
And hear only her voice
I see her there, her fiery hair
My heart leaves me no choice

Were I surprised to find no wings
A gift from heaven sent
We sail towards the rocky shore
Oh, do our hearts lament!

“The hour is nigh, come here anon
And save me from the dark
My love will be yours to conquer
Kiss me and leave your mark.”

If only Gods would hear my prayer
The light is seeping through
No fairer jewels would ever match
Her eyes the ocean blue

All men refuse to look below
Their beauty's straight ahead
And when my Venus sings again
Her voice is full of dread

“I yield my love, my life, my soul
To have you in return
Our song has merely just begun
Do hearts of lovers burn.”

My bride awaits, the storm arrives
The ship is sinking fast
“Fret not, my love,” and as I drown
I hear her hearty laugh

Reminiscence of an Immortal

by LUI Chung Man Pinky

He told me

everything changed on that ungodly day
when the dawn brought only darkness
and the trumpets in heaven thundered
as every winged servant of God
was stained crimson with traitors' drops

the blades glistened
in the violet gazes of the once
heavenly brothers
as the arms swung up and down
and agonizing roars deafened all
Heaven had never been so silent before

one of many but one nonetheless
Gabriel stood still
waiting
for the band of brothers to cease
no more should be this lunacy
no more, no more

this terribly great war torn apart
the most sacred bond
He who thought himself impaired
has sworn to uphold the banner
of no more reign of terror
for equal seats for all

not even the deep roots of mountains
could withstand the newly born Sin
with his sword
buried under wings
Gabriel kneeled and sang to the Throne
the most desperate prayer

As the world continued to shake
and the sky deemed eternal dark
and the trumpets never ceased
and the blood kept tainting the ethereal
and Gabriel felt the glory
and he cried

The glory manifested
and all stayed still
the humming silence grew stronger
with a ray of light so intense
buzzing in the pungent air
none could see but only feel

no words were needed
He saw all that was lost
all begun
with a wicked thought
of disobedience vile
of desolation wide

the first rebellion
the first of many sins
it all ended
with a start
in that terrible void
of oblivion

falling
was the last thing an angel felt
Gabriel turned his head away
but could not help
to stare askance
imagine that hollow drop

down they plunged for nine
days and nights of nothing
the great loss of heaven
grace turned to dust
paved ways for absolute
eternal victory

Eons passed
but not one day would Gabriel forget
the gore and glory
and how the world was a world no more
A world of wars
A war of worlds

The Black Butterfly

by MA Ming Sum, Kitty

Never catch a black butterfly, she says,
For it is the messenger of the Grim Reaper.
But I cannot help
Being swallowed by the swirling of its wings
That glows in the darkest corner of hearts
And fades in the brightest noon light.
I lie in its shadow
To dream a butterfly's dream,
And to die a beautiful death

Ten Minutes

by SROCHVIXSIT Amornrut

This is a ten-minute video: ten-minute
loop of silence compiles
the remnants of porcelain scattered
over the tiled ground of
the abandoned cafe, where a strand of nutty aroma still
attracts the same flock of birds hovering around
the lithograph of footprints
of tables and chairs, dusted with
the vaguest sense of experience.

(N.B.: "Ten Minutes" is composed of words randomly selected from prints.)

Reincarnation

by SROCHVIKSIT Amornrut

When the trunk decided to cast off its shackles,
It quaked remorselessly with its last breath,
Straining every nerve to fling its trembling limbs,
Transmitting forces down the laminas,
In wrathful hunger, devoured chills from the spine
And bacterium in its melting marrows.

Once electrified with sufficient energy, they jumped
To death without vision or revision, leaving the place
Where they had been numbly carrying out synthesis
With light that penetrated into their bodies, aspiring
Bondage with their intrinsic chemicals.

Until they fell.
Nestling against the soil of their land, they
Ultimately get warmed up, and meditate
Into evaporation as to be readily grinded
Into a Mandala,

So that their relics could be infiltrated
Back into eternal nature and—

Revitalized.

The Snake

by SROCHVIKSIT Amornrut

You wiggle here and there, like Salome's dancing;
You chant your own memoirs, like a song of incantation;
You sneaked into my dream one night, curling me up, and up,

Until my body temperature descended to yours;
Until the colour of my skin was dyed like yours,
The warmest.

And now I inherited the senses you have,
Perceiving our closest counterparts as you do,
Despite the intrinsic discordance among the like.

I whistled in the dark, embracing what is warped;
I stand up against the gravity upon me,
Watching you wiggle, hearing you chant,

Until you shed your skin, fading to—
The coldest.

Two | Lovers

by SUM Acca Penelope Kwai Ching

I have

Pushed it down, kept trying
New things met new friends and
drained bottles
To fill in the gaps and consume the
hollow soul.
I shut my eyes and gushed forth
unnoticed cravings;
It took deep cuts to realize I have
Never wanted anything so badly.

Swallowed my pride to plead for love,
Overlooked your selfish nature to
worship you
And I unparted forever, us exchanging
vows.
Hanging by a thread but I clung onto it;
Cried myself to sleep for countless
nights and
Had enough.

I remember

Promising together wherever, paired
charms as tokens.
Youthful years dwelled in ordinary
happiness,
Improvised trivial gestures,
unpredictable
Pecks on the neck make decisive
events –I found
You, safe haven loving arms to escape
to, from a world
Somber and tattered by armies of
salarymen. I am left With Us.

Those pinky-promises too.
Acts of innocence that can't be taken
seriously,
Childhood aspirations of meeting
Prince Charming
Confronted with indifference,
Could not be bothered
Caught up in
Pain, but even then

I regret

Rejecting your calls, and everything
But nothing.

Your sudden exit just took me by
surprise.

Nothing.
Memories locked up in hidden shelves,
Need not always be brought to light,
But whenever I recall, although
seldom,
It's always Heartwarming.

I See

Us,
As nothing short of lovely.
Life is transcendental but love follows
us to the graves.

Us as nothing more than
Dead flowers that bloomed in the past,
But couldn't be given life again.
Love expires.

I

Am still waiting.

Am peeling the pain off the memories,
Like it was almost therapeutic to revisit
The image of you and I under the
wedding bells One last time
No longer dreamt, but a naïve past held
close to heart.

I turn around

And it's still here
If I miss you enough
Please don't shut me out.

And it's gone.

Singlish Level: Beginner

by SUM Acca Penelope Kwai Ching

I am learning the language of Singapore—
LAH,
what foreigners identify right away as uniquely Singaporean,
but Singapore is so much more than I Not Stupid (小孩不笨),
or chicken rice, *Zi Char*¹, and *Bakkwa*² (must buy for mum before go
home),
or MBS³, Sentosa, and Orchard Road.
I am picking up the Hokkien, Canto, Malay vocabularies—
the *Liao*, *Meh*, *Sia*, *Siao*, *Already* (in Singlish intonation)—
and the ten ways to order tea at *Kopitiam*⁴ but I only remember Teh-peng,
whilst adjusting to the haze from Indonesian tree burning, and Uni hostel
without AC⁵.
(It's not that difficult what!)

I am learning the language of Singapore—
The CIM⁶, and Other⁷.
In Theatre lecture, there were very few exchange students. I asked the *ang
mo*⁸ beside me, *Where are you from?*
He is Singaporean, ethnically Eurasian. *Which part of Europe?*
Netherlands, and America.
He was naturalized after NS⁹ to become Singaporean, nonetheless, an
Other;
his sister has taken courses on Singapore's history, and is waiting to be
arranged for saying the National Pledge for naturalization.

¹ Chinese cuisine with many dishes, commonly supper for Singaporeans

² Meat jerky, Chinese snack

³ Marina Bay Sands, a luxurious resort complex with shopping mall and casino

⁴ Traditional coffee shop

⁵ Air-conditioning

⁶ Chinese, Indian, Malaysian categories in the racial categorization model

⁷ The category for any individual who is not Chinese, Indian, or Malaysian

⁸ Hokkien for a white foreigner

⁹ National Service

I am learning the language of Singapore—
Singaporeans love to Relac¹⁰ One Corner,
but if you say it to a Malay, it might be offensive.

Chinese are the most hardworking, fortunately drenched in
Chinese privilege, and the successors of PAP¹¹;
Indians are tech-savvy, engineers of IT companies;
Malays lazily Relac in One Corner, they also cannot be trusted
with guns and military intelligence at SAF¹².
But honestly if they so lazy then how to betray Singapore?

I am learning the language of Singapore—
if one day he asks, Shall we apply for *BTO*¹³—
it's understood as a marriage proposal.
Do you actually want to marry me, or are we marrying for the
HDB¹⁴?
PAP put up large billboards with vaginas in the MRT, to remind
Singaporean women of their duty to reproduce, and that they are
not making enough pure-blood Singaporeans.
To offset the aging population and boost the labour force, influx of
PRC arrive, but Singaporean aunty uncle dislike them.
I am not PRC¹⁵, I am from Hong Kong.
Anyhow, I am not a PR¹⁶ so we would only be eligible for EC¹⁷.

¹⁰ Relax

¹¹ People's Action Party, ruling party of Singapore

¹² Singapore Armed Forces

¹³ Built-to-order flats

¹⁴ Properties built by the Housing and Development Board

¹⁵ People's Republic of China

¹⁶ Permanent resident

¹⁷ Executive condominiums with amenities including swimming pool and
clubhouse, can be sold as private property to non-citizens after the 10th year mark.

How The Moon Rises

by TANG Lok Yin Clara

I.

She waits for the orange watercolour sky to dull and fall apart
before wrapping the planet with a navy blanket of stars.

II.

She scatters constellations in the dark
to watch over the creatures as clockwork begins its calculations,
waiting for when the moon's time is up.

III.

Some nights,
she turns the other cheek
and is only willing to reveal less than half of herself to the world.
Her head remains in the clouds and she tells the stars she's going through
a crescent phase.
But still, her moonlight reaches the irises of the creatures she set ablaze
and she hums a soft lullaby of crashing waves.

IV.

She pulls the oceans towards her and pushes them back to shore,
not being able to make up her mind because she's
not sure if she's thirsty for a saltwater war
against the sun.
Perhaps another time.

V.

Sometimes, she still lingers around daybreak and paints herself pale
to blend in with the bright cerulean wake
that the risen sun brings.

VI.

She will never give up and stop rising even if the sunstone outshines her
Because in a dark sky, we welcome the moon's light with our irises.
But in an already-light sky, we can never look at the scorching bright sun in the eye.

A Mermaid's Scream

by TANG Lok Yin Clara

I have a mermaid's scream
because I am submerged in poisonwater.

my cry,
a screech,
that bubbles and fights against
a curdling spinning sea.
I try to shake away the salt
that grips to my hair with a
d
r
o w
n
ing

saltwater
scream.
olive green choking seaweed catches it
before it reaches the surface of this sea.

crashing waves bury
and break it up
to tumble thousands of feet deep.
this muffled earsplitting sound of mine
caves shards of sorrow
for the screams of mermaids that could not scream.

because no one believes that a beautiful porcelain creature
is capable of a wail and has imperfect tears to weep.

The Girl Who Lived

by TANG Lok Yin Clara

The girl who lived spun spells
of silver webs that collected light before
darkness latched on.

A lightning shard of a heart
unknowingly struck scars
to scatter the one scar of hers.

The girl who lived dipped a painted toe in the lake
only to find liquid poison extinguishing the fire she once had. Still,

She treads

on .

The girl who lived
lived whilst listening to the howling screeches of
a thousand mermaids
pouring salt on her freshwater face.

The girl who lived
loved every bird that tried to flee
from her sandpaper touch

The girl who lived counted
The many times she wanted to live

Only to find there was

none.

Nyctophilia

by TSUI Kai Wing, Kevin

Living the same life as bats
Shadows, vampires and stray cats
In the absence of light is when I feel alive
Freed from the spiritual cages, my spiritual freedom they deny
Because we are all Nyctophilia, liking the moon more than the sun
When necessary the darkness aids in hiding weapons like a gun
The level of light and our mood are indirectly proportional
When the sun goes down our mood goes up, the moon is our idol
The night is beautiful, and it soothes my mind
I cannot understand how people can dislike darkness of any kind
We can disappear into the dark, not leaving even a trace of a shadow
Or cry over the loss of a lover, so can the widows
Darkness is our friend, hugging us closely
Oh beautiful night please engulf me entirely
At night we can look up towards the stars and the sky
Wondering and wandering with our minds flying high
About all the beautiful mysteries above us
In space where night time will never leave us
At night I can walk in silence
Alone, and hearing shadows move in and out of the darkness
I feel at peace when the streets are empty
And appreciate the only time of the day when no light can disturb me
My friend, why can't you see the beauty of the night
If you could only learn to appreciate it, you'd discover a whole new life

We Hold These Truths To Be Self-Evident

by TSUI Toh, Gabrielle

1. I do not wish to listen to your standards of what my body should be.
2. I saw girls of the same looks same small sizes toted out on shows only as eye-candy and pretty faces.
3. Janice, Jeannie, Joanne, Victoria, Vivian, Valerie, they all have names yet hardly acknowledged in New York City.
4. I am a rockstar, and she is a glowing ember of flame.
5. She sheds her skin only for his eyes to see and Romeo, smooth words slippery heart, screams and stutters and scatters off in fright.
6. I will hear your standards of what my body should be; hear you spout your numbers and criterion, dictating that of someone who you cannot even empathize be it through your heart or your genitals.
7. I want to paint the walls in bright scarlet of the blood my sisters and I have shed, the bright rouge of the lipstick that God forbid makes us stand out a little bolder.
8. Asshole.
9. We are chained by our feet, from our bosoms, because the world has told us we have no place in defying gravity.
10. A stands for apex predators of society that we must be submissive under, B stands for being called Bitches when we take a stand, and C, of course, is chocolate cake and the cacophony of criticisms and corrections to our thighs.
11. You will tell me to stop, shut up, stop fighting: deal with it.
12. Your words, have become a meaningless stream of nonsensical nothings to my ears.
13. The tree is fruitful, it bears sweet golden apples; round and tempting and supple in my palm.
14. If she is a woman (there is no 'if'), then I will raise her up as my sister (I will always raise her up as my sister).
15. This morning, I swallowed down your disrespect with the butter on my toast, and this evening I vomit out the bile of your beady roaming eyes.
16. I've shoved the scale under my sink; it sits in the bathroom, just looking, waiting for me to crack.
17. I saw girls with different looks different sizes standing tall in their individuality on shows of their own creative voice, as human beings and more than just a pretty face.

The Road Taken—Or Not

(After Robert Frost's 'The Road Not Taken')

by WAN Yuen Yuk, Liz

A single path stretched out in a deep dark wood,
And disappointed there was not another road
And being two travellers, long I stood
And gazed ahead as far as I could
To where it disappeared into twisted branches black and cold;

Then looked within me, to see the Other,
Which has perhaps the better deal,
Because it was greener and brighter everywhere;
Though as for the pathway real
My mind could shape them however I dared.

And 'both' that afternoon simultaneously lay
In webs no foot had stepped on and intruded.
Oh, I took the road with my mind on another way!
Yet not knowing how imagination leads to falsehood,
I believed that self-deception would be a protective hood.

I shall be recounting this with a sigh
Still after years and years have passed me by:
Only one road was available, and I—
I took it with a wandering mind,
And to the true beauty around me I was blind.

Plucked Chicken

by WAN Yuen Yuk, Liz

The moment when
After all the years of perceiving our folks as unbreakable walls
You first notice the cracks and scratch marks
Engraved on the battered bricks
And as the sun spins on
Bits of debris begin to tumble
And you start paying parts of the patching fees
Is like seeing each bubble you blow
Burst
In mid-air

The moment when you start to realise
How their side of the hourglass
Is quickly running out—
And yes it is time to flip the whole thing over
But still there is a
Gap
Between the space where the mouths of the cones kiss
Or sometimes even a sieve plate
That partially blocks the tranquil trickle—
Is like shouting to the other side of the mountain
Yet your voice is sucked into the void
And they cannot hear

It is like seeing them shed a layer of feathers
With each passing decade
And then turn from a peacock
Into a skinny, wrinkled
Plucked chicken

But before you turn away
Take a look at their bills
They are the same beaks that put each grain of sand
Into your end of the hourglass
The same beaks that bled
Against yours during the unending feeds
And the same beaks that removed their own plume
To clothe you
When you yourself were a plucked chicken
Still a plucked chicken
Long ago.

War paint

by Carren WONG

Take her swimming on the first day he said
Because wash away-beauty
Is a lie.
Learn to love your canvas they said
Because it is yours to keep
With the scars and the pimples and the pores.
But I walk out to your judging eyes
And squirming bodies
My skin kissing the air
I brush on the battle cries of eyeliner
To narrow my steel gaze on your conventions
I smear a shade of Crimson on my lips
Because you forgot the blood that runs
Under your skin
Boils under mine.
I come out with rosy cheeky and feline features
Exact like a bullet
To scream at your ignorance
Your eyes
Your daring disrespect at the art
Of knowing one's face.
Now tell me,
you look in the mirror and like what you see
Then I'll rest my weapons
And let this be.

Homage

by Carren WONG

So I stand
Saluting Homer, watching nostos
Work its magic on Athene's champion
A hero with a tragedy
Unfolded by Fitzgerald.
A beautiful fool Plath was not
Because the meta beauty of writing genitalia is brave
And naked.
I see Lady Lazarus in Martha Singer
The sorceress in Fight Club but wait
We do not talk about fight club.
Tyler would not be happy.
I am Joe's throbbing Consciousness when the light poured into Mrs
Ramsay's eyes
But no one ever makes it To The Lighthouse.
'It is enough!' So she screams
But Woolf can never find enough stones to put in her pockets.
Every cobble sings a pain a joy a love
She touched in her mistress.
So Jung and Sabina was never meant to be
But who knew such affection is borne out of pain?
Another slap another bite
And Ariel is alive again.
We are all the right hand of God
A lioness with golden eyes
Screaming with Hector's blood.
So I stand
Holding the golden apple
Chaos in my eye
Shining in my hand.
My salute can go on
But who then, will speak for the unborn words in the end?

Wing Is Depressed

by WONG Sze Ki, CK

Wing is listening to the blues,
He stands on the balcony
Wing is listening to the blues,
He stands on the balcony
Worrying about the tsunami
His soul hanging on the twinkling canopy

He calls our insurance agent
Asking how much can leave for me
Again he calls our agent
Asking how much can he leave for me
All of a sudden he worries his daughter
Unbearable but sweet

He calls his daughter
'Girl, you are our strength'
He calls his daughter
'Girl, you are our strength'
Thank you for being tough
You won't get along

Wing is listening to the blues
He stands on the balcony
Wing is listening to the blues
He stands on the balcony
I wish I can stand with him
Sharing his agony.

Teenage Beastly Beauties/ Beauty Beasts

by WU Lok Ying, Judy

It is what it was, an open cage with lawns and
Flowers blossoming here and there like
Eden, semi fallen, with
No Adam but a bunch of Eves
At their bitchiest age
Eyeing the apple thinking
Whether to bite or throw it away or
Stuff it into each other's mouths or perhaps
Kiss that poisoned throat afterwards just to
Experience that passively active sense of delight

Nobody knew how to deal with herself as
The beauty is breeding along with
The self-awareness, the desire, all that
Jealousy and tearing apart we now remember as
Growing pain (and so called youth)
I know all the arrows and the stabbing
Did not aim to harm; we were nothing but
Curious teenage beasts eager to know what
Blood looked like and it was almost necessary to
Lick our hands, just to have a taste

It took us six years (or more) to realize
That the cage was open and that it is indeed
Flowery with green lawns like heaven; we were
Trapped by the charms in the cage and not
By the cage itself and we are
Tied with a string as a package, never able to
Split or escape we are
Sisters and we are
Beauties we are beasts we are
Prisoners for life

Boyfriends

by WU Lok Ying, Judy

Tall and cheeky, clean and sleek
First day of form five, through the phone
He became my boyfriend one point O

A beacon is what he wanted to become
And he did, by over-loving, by conversing, by
Being a friend closest to the heart and by

Leaving
A mark, by
Leaving

We then ran, ran, ran in different directions with
The wolves, hearing the remote howling to
Locate each other's soul

The flesh failed us as the wolves
Got us and they turn out to be
Sheep under the stinky fur

Tall and awkward, clean and sleek
Some night some chat, through the phone
Boyfriend one point O two point O

A boat is what he wants to become
I don't know if he would but it does not
Seem to matter anymore because of that

Flooding patience
Like the sea
All consuming

They say they would still have chosen me
A million times over, not for
The kisses but for
The words, the embrace, the chosen
Overlap like family without the
Forcefulness

Who Are You?

by Bibi ZANIB

Where are you from?
From Hong Kong.
But you don't look Chinese.
I look at them for a while,
Thinking, where am I from?
Where are you originally from?
Do they mean before I was born?
Do they know where they were before they were born?
My mother's uterus perhaps and before than...
I'm from Pakistan I tell them,
Even though I've only been there for a summer vacation.
I told the immigration officer I was Pakistani,
He laughed at me and said,
Kid you don't even have a Pakistani passport.
They called me Hong Kongi there,
Ah Cha,
Gwei mui,
So many labels,
Why couldn't I just be me?
What would I have to do to belong?
To call a place home.

Promises

by Bibi ZANIB

I have always known I assume,
The place of my refuge once,
Though I wish he would and
He would see how insanity has me consumed.

I take pilgrimages of these woods,
This was where we met for the first time
Where I had seen him, it was dark
And little did I know it would only get darker.

The bell brings me back from the past
Maybe the horse felt it too,
Brush of the wind against my face,
Almost like his hand caressing my cheek.

The dark woods desperately call to me,
I will not break promises like him,
I still have oceans to swim,
I still have oceans to swim.

Dark

by Bibi ZANIB

He was sunshine,
She was dark.
So bright he would light up places he went to
And darkness followed her like a shadow.
But the universe had conspired them to meet.
They did meet, like raging comets
Crashing into each other.
He wanted to save her
But some people don't want to be saved.
She sucked his sunshine right through him
And he happily disappeared into her darkness.

Just following instructions

by ZENA Mason

Follow instructions? Oh, what a bother.
I would rather watch a blank television screen
All day than blindly follow yet another
Denison of the land of TV who reigns supreme.

Of all the rules about what I must do
Why must one turn on the television screen
Just because it's there? Because Marilyn Monroe?
Now that is one damsel who was a screen Queen.

She debuted on Hollywood Boulevard
She lifted her skirts in order to show her
Modesty in front of the superstars
Who watched the screens in eras that were
Rife with bunk shelters and the shadow of war.

I am an absent minded dreamer
Whose world is a myopic wonderland
Of Monet landscapes viewed clearer
Through rose coloured Raybands
That are stained with the blood of
Transfixed and detached eyeballs.

Follow instructions? Oh what a bother.
Now the rhetoric is to work endlessly on ourselves
Using all kinds of words to fill our digital bookshelves.
The bombardment on our time is endless,
So much so that we retreat and are friendless.

Stranded In Shatin

by ZENA Mason

I searched long and hard for that leather handbag.
Shopping is such a hassle.

If I were a smoker, right now I'd dig inside for a fag.

Oh, is there tension in the sky?
Must I dash for cover from sudden raindrops
The weather always changes, I know not why.

And start eating my fishheads
With the tips of my fingers
And start thinking about beds.

This is ridiculous, my skin is feeling ticklish
It's 4 o'clock in Shatin,
I imagine that black tar is liquorice.

For a minute is but a 60th of an hour
And the hours slip through cracks that I cannot.
Only when I can no longer stand this long detour
Will I homewards trot.

I know my brain won't sleep
or notice the comments that bystanders mention
or notice that taxi fares aren't so cheap
for someone on a student's pension.

Preface to the Short Stories

If the mind is its own place, then words are their own worlds. All the stories you will read are reflections of the world as the writers see it, in all its beauty and destitution. One is about a world of urban alienation, and how a helpless life lies in the cold hands of the public; another tells the same story of alienation from the perspective of two lost souls, wandering in the city. One is about the ways in which indifference can affect our modern lives, and the bonds that hold us to other people; another shares a vision of a different world, and yet the people there are trapped in the same struggles. The last one, a cautionary tale, revolves around how the numbness of the individual towards the world rebounds on oneself, culminating in the ultimate loss.

Through each line in each story, the writers reveal pieces of themselves, their sorrows, and how they integrate into the world and continually mold our human experience. But even as they write of the ugliness of the world they find themselves in, they still write hope into their stories. Hope, our lifeline throughout history, carries us through all five stories. We have felt these stories deeply, and we hope that it will be the same experience for you as you journey through the following pages.

James Chong, Natalie Liu, Pinky Lui
Editors

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The Dog

by Ken Kam

At 9:30 am in the morning, the Sheung Shui MTR station is packed with crowds waiting to travel to different destinations. The silvery double-track railway, covered with tiny, crushed gravel, sparkles in the bright sunlight. The large swarm of passengers makes the weather even more stuffy.

Some passengers look down on the floor with their eyes hardly opened while most of them lower their heads to stare at their smartphones. On the platform for the Hung Hom-bound train, Lucy, an 18-year-old girl with a healthy tan and long, naturally curly hair, keeps scrolling up and down on her smartphone screen. She suddenly bursts into laughter and then nudges her brother, Luke. Despite being two years younger than Lucy, he towers over her.

“Look at this cute little dog on The Ellen Show!” Luke says nothing, but keeps on swiftly slashing the fruits that crop up on his phone with his fingers.

“It does tricks like playing with a skateboard or something,” Lucy adds. No response from Luke.

“I’ve always wanted to have another pet dog like this,” she continues.

The screens hanging from the ceiling display information about the incoming trains. An announcement is made to remind passengers that the next train is a non-stop train and all passengers should stand behind the yellow line. With his ears plugged by earphones, Luke almost crosses the line, but his sister drags him back. The train blows past the station.

On the other side of the station, some people surround a man with big, black-framed glasses, who is being shouted at by two people dragging suitcases. They are Mei and Shing, who come from Dongguan, and the little girl in a pink princess dress with two pigtails, is Xia Ling, their 7-year-old daughter. The man frowns and shakes his head.

“What do you mean that our luggage blocks your way?” Shing yells.

“There are so many others with large luggage. Why are you picking on us?” Mei adds while advancing on the man.

“Just because others are also doing the same thing doesn’t mean it’s right,” says the man.

The people on the two platforms seem to be entertained by the arguing trio instead of finding them irritating. A few of them even take out their phones and videotape their entire performance.

“Mama, mama. Look, doggy! Doggy is waiting for trains too!” says Xia Ling while clutching and shaking her mother’s sleeves.

Mei says to Xia Ling, “Ling, not now. I’ll play with you later,” while glaring at the man unblinkingly. Shing continues to argue with the man in rising tones, until somebody from the crowd says loudly, “There really is a dog down on the track.”

Everybody’s attention shifts onto the dog immediately, and the quarrel is silenced by the shock.

No one really sees where it came out from, or perhaps no one really cares. This dog seems to have popped up from nowhere.

It is a medium-sized mongrel, with pointed ears and a yellowish-brown coat. Trotting along the track, the dog sniffs at the ground and suddenly starts to dig with both of its front paws as if there is some kind of treasure buried under the stones on the track. One man takes his mobile phone out and starts recording. More and more people at the station begin to spot the dog and the station is filled with a babble of noise concerning this unusual passenger:

“What is that little fellow doing there?”

“Is it a stray?”

“Look at its round face and short legs. It looks hilarious when it digs holes on the railway track.”

People on the platforms take pictures and videos of it. Many of them also share about this dog on the Internet right away. The dog seems to notice that it is under the limelight, as it quits digging and walks towards the Hung Hom-bound platform. It glances at the faces among the crowd and then looks at the way where the trains come. The dog attempts to hop to safety.

“I think it needs some help. It is putting his front legs on the platform,” says Lucy. She taps Luke on his shoulder and then points at the dog. He pauses his game and takes off his earphones to pay more attention to his surroundings. The dog seems familiar to him.

The wrinkles around the dog's exceptionally large eyes make it look like it is almost frowning. With its ears pointing downwards, it keeps panting while wagging its tail in front of the passengers. Lucy looks straight at its watery eyes, feeling inexplicably desperate for the dog. She instinctively gives the dog a hand. As her hand almost reaches the dog, two MTR staff members appear and stop her. "Miss, please don't touch the dog. It might bite and get you sick. Please be patient. Let us handle this," says one of the staff members. Lucy slowly draws back despite her worries, especially when she looks at the ingratiating smile of the staff member and then the innocent eyes of the dog again.

An announcement is made to tell everyone on the platforms, "Due to an emergency on the tracks, there will be a delay of the arriving trains. All passengers, please be patient. Sorry for the inconvenience caused." Soon after, one staff member jumps off the platform and stumbles on the landing. The other remains on the platform to keep people away from the dog. A circle of curious passengers immediately gathers before them. The staff member walks closer to the dog, opening his arms. The dog turns around to face him in the blink of an eye and glares at the staff. As he approaches, the dog starts barking and growling.

Lucy whispers in Luke's ear, "They don't know how to get along with dogs. See? You have to let him know you're not going to hurt him before pushing towards him." By the time the staff member gets close enough to stroke the dog, it bites his finger and then backs four meters away.

The injured staff member attempts to climb back on the platform but trips. Another staff member promptly accompanies him to the control room and before he leaves, he tells the passengers to stay on the platform. The passengers exchange glances but nobody steps forward. People discuss among the throng:

"Hurry! We need to get the dog off the track before the next train comes in!"

"But the dog is too aggressive. That staff member was bitten when he tried to help it."

"No, that's because he had frightened the dog," Lucy joins the

discussion.

"Yeah, I'm a dog trainer and I can do it but I'll need some help," says a middle-aged woman. She adds, "I only need two more people to hold it down and get it on the platform as soon as I draw its attention. Can anyone please help?"

There is silence among the crowd. After a while, Lucy steps forward and breaks the silence.

Lucy tries to talk her out of it. "Wait...Lucy! The two guys said that we should stay on the platform!"

Lucy replies, "Yes, I know. I know they did," and then she gets closer to listen to the dog trainer's instructions.

In the meantime, on the opposite platform, passengers become impatient and begin to complain. Mei says to Shing, "Honey, it's getting late. How come the train still hasn't arrived? We have to get to Shenzhen at before 10:15; otherwise, we're going to miss the train."

Shing replies, "That troublesome dog! Hurry up! This is a waste of my time." Xia Ling lifts her head to look at her mother and asks, "Is that dog a stray dog? Can we keep it?"

"Of course not! It's dangerous. The train may come any time. You should never go down to the tracks, you understand?"

By the time the dog trainer, Lucy, and another volunteer are ready to get down on the track, there are more than ten officials in yellow-and-orange-striped uniforms coming out to the platform.

One staff member shouts, "Hey! Hey you! Stop! Don't go any further!"

They try to stop Lucy and the others, but Lucy has already jumped down onto the track.

"Hey miss, stay where you are. We're coming down to get you," the staff member adds. Six of them jump down onto the railway and put a chair under the ledge, waving at the dog to come, in the hope of helping it jump onto the platform.

However, seeing so many people approaching, the dog turns around and runs off along the track.

Lucy angrily says to the staff, “You have frightened him. See? He’s running away now. This kind of dog is rather timid and you should have lowered his guard and gain his trust first.”

The staff member looks perplexed and says, “Him? I thought it’s a female mongrel...Anyways, look, miss. That’s all we can do for it...him, or whatever you call it. Another train will come in soon as there cannot be any more delay. We are concerned for your safety, so please go back to the platform now. We appreciate your help and cooperation.”

A faint bark is still coming from a far distance.

“What? He’s still on the railway. Aren’t you going to do something for...him?” Lucy stutters as a once-blurry memory resurfaces and clears up.

“Sis, you should get back here now,” says Luke while giving Lucy a hand, who simply follows what she has been told. Some other passengers further question the staff while some are relieved. But the response they received is that the station officer has decided to restore the service very soon and promises that they will search for the dog.

A few minutes later, the trains bound for both directions come in. Although the faces of passengers vary one by one—some are in a rush to get back to their hectic lives, while some look puzzled and upset—everyone gradually leaves and moves on.

As the train speeds on to the Lo Wu terminal, Xia Ling falls asleep in the arms of her mother.

Mei says to Shing, “This must be a tiring morning for our little princess. Look how quickly she falls asleep again.”

“Let her sleep. She woke up too early this morning. By the time she wakes up again, we’ll have almost arrived,” Shing replies.

“Honey, it’s starting to rain outside. Hand me Ling’s jacket in her bag. I wonder why the weather changes so quickly.”

Shing unzips the bag and gives Mei the jacket, “Don’t worry. The rain probably won’t last long. Things always come and go.”

On the train heading to the Hung Hom terminal, Lucy is standing right beside the closed door, leaning on the thick layer of glass of the door.

Her face is pale and she stares at the view through the rain-lashed window.

“Are you okay? I think the dog will be just fine. It does look smart and...it surely knows how to stay safe,” Luke says to Lucy.

“Yeah...I’m cool. I’m just a bit tired,” says Lucy. She keeps looking at the track passing through outside the window. Luke does not mention the dog for the rest of the trip, even though he wonders if his sister also finds that dog similar to the one they had when they were young, the one that died in a car accident. He only knows that this is not the time to speak of it.

Fishbowl

by Natalie Liu

The workers were unloading their bounty for the day. They shoved bundles of newspaper off giant trucks one after the other, stacking them on pushcarts, on the pavement, stacking them chest-high one moment, removing them to a pushcart the next, until it seemed like they were walking to and fro in an ever-evolving paper miniature of the city. They worked silently under the yellow of the streetlights, waist-deep in newspapers, industriously building and unbuilding their city.

He watched them from the curb, tired and drunk. The pavement around him was littered with cigarette butts, and was probably ruining the seat of his pants. The bus he was waiting for was still at the terminal, and was always frustratingly on time down to the minute. The club had kicked him out because it was closing, and because he had gotten too drunk on their overpriced shots. He was sitting on the ground, still drunk, and his wallet was empty except for his Octopus card. His ears were still ringing, and his phone would be too, had it been charged.

All of it didn't matter.

He leant back against the pole of the bus stop and watched the workers. He liked this city at this hour, stagnant but for those silent workers in the streetlight, toiling until the sharp light of the sunrise poked through the night and sent them scurrying back into the various crevices of the city they had emerged from. This quietness, he decided, was its sole redeeming feature.

*

She was looking for something, but she didn't know what. Pebbles—or was it gravel?—slid and shifted under her feet as she ran, looking, searching, she didn't know what, but she had to find it, she had to...

She was running slower and slower. The light that reached her

was filtered, a milky light; fragments of conversation *highriskpregnancy* drifted *twentyfivepercent* to her *nothingwecando*, muted, almost as if she were underwater. And with a shock, she realized she was underwater, and swimming, propelling herself through the water with a shimmy of her fanning orange tail.

A boat sunk down slowly next to her, trailing air bubbles. Its passengers waved to her cheerfully. She waved back, and swimming backwards while she waved, bumped into a solid wall of glass. A hollow thump, echoing strangely in the watery depths. Then came another echoing thump, and another, increasing in frequency, shaking the glass wall. And then she realized, it sounded like a herd of galloping horses coming in through the heartbeat monitor... her baby's heartbeat, at 11 weeks.

The sea fell silent.

In her bed, she frowned and curled up, a comma on the bed hugging emptiness, taking most of the blankets with her. Her husband instinctively curled around her. A few minutes later, she sighed, and turned over onto her stomach.

*

He got onto the bus, tired and sobering up. The door snapped shut behind him. Grumpy bus driver. The bus tore off into the grey dawn. He staggered up to the upper deck of the bus, fighting against the rolling of the bus, and finally folded himself into a seat. He rested his head against the cold glass and closed his eyes. Fought the urge to vomit.

His head hit the glass with a nasty crack as the bus bounced over a speed-bump.

*

Her husband always woke up at six, which invariably meant that she woke up at six, too. She shifted sleepily onto her side as he stumbled out of bed, silencing the alarm with a touch. After a while she heard the shower, and the sound of it lulled her back to sleep again. She didn't hear him dress in the dark, fumbling with his tie and shoes. She didn't hear him leave the apartment, gently coaxing the door shut. She didn't even feel the kiss he laid gently, reverently, on her shoulder, right before he left.

*

He ignored the look the guard gave him as he stumbled into the lobby of the building. The elevator doors opened, expelling the entire white-collar population of the apartment complex. They pushed past him, somber and self-important, eyes fixed firmly on their phones, shoes clicking on the scuffed linoleum. He sidled into the elevator, and when the doors closed he was forced to face his own reflection in their polished steel. Week-old scruff, bloodshot eyes, overstaying acne. *Disappointment*. The elevator stopped, finally, and expelled him too with a sigh of machinery and gears.

He had to try three times before he could unlock the gate. He shoved it aside, letting it accordion into itself with a loud clatter, then struggled with the door. The months-old fai chun still emblazoned on the door infuriated him. Finally unlocking the door, he stumbled over the threshold and cursed. The gate, then the door, slammed shut behind him.

His parents were already out for the day; his father was probably halfway to the border by now in his belching van, and his mother was already taking the first orders of the day in a cha chaan teng in Kowloon City. He kicked his shoes off, dragged himself into his room, and drew the curtains. His skin and hair stank of the smoke and sweat from the nightclub. He fell back onto his bed and laid there, his eyes blindly surveying the ceiling.

After a while, his eyes closed. His breath slowed. He dreamt.

*

She snapped back into consciousness as the neighbouring gate and door slammed hard in successive explosions. The neighbour was obviously finding it hard to deal with Monday mornings. She had seen him around sometimes, bumped into him entering just as she exited the elevator a couple of times, walked into him once at the 7-11 just outside the building. They had never returned to their apartments at the same time, something she was thankful for, because she could imagine how awkward the silence in the elevator would be. He never greeted her, not even deigning to give her a nod of the head, and always seemed morose and floppy-haired. Like an ill-fed puppy, she decided, or one of those whatdoyoucallthems, wooden dolls with their strings cut.

*

In his dreams, he was on a stage in a glass dome. It was like a Christmas dome, except instead of the nativity scene, the glass bubble featured his first Speech Festival. He saw himself and he was himself. He was eight again, and 28 as well—a 28 year old stuffed into a tight button-up shirt, buttoned up all the way, the way he hated, embarrassingly short dress shorts pulled taut across his thighs, his hair slicked down by his mother's saliva. The spotlight was on him like the afternoon sun and it was hot on his eyelids.

He wanted to cry.

He was aware that all the other children were laughing at him from the first row, their faces hellishly distorted by the glass, laughing at this strange grown-up stuffed into an Eton suit, trying to recite poetry. He knew poetry, he could recite all the poems by Li Bai, his mother had made him memorize them every night...

But when he opened his mouth all that came out was:

“Bed front bright moon light, look like snow on ground—”

The children’s identical faces creased up with Minjunian laughter. Their voices echoed strangely through the glass: “This hack! And he calls himself a writer!”

And right before he ran offstage, crying hot tears of shame, he saw his mother’s face at the very back of the auditorium, devastation and betrayal in its every line.

*

She enjoyed slow mornings, because they gave her enough time to go down to the congee and noodle shop just down the street to get her favourite breakfast, zhaliang and hot soy milk. The same shop, the same order, all those years since she moved here. Each time she hoped for preferential treatment, and each time she was disappointed—the only concession the cashier made in that regard was a warmer smile when she paid for her meal, or a greeting if it was a good day. But she kept going back and hoping for a soy milk on the house, and also because she was firmly convinced that that shop had the best *ja léung* and soymilk in Lok Fu, if not the whole of Hong Kong. It had been a while since she had gone to the congee and noodle shop though.

She slid into an empty booth, smiling at the woman who immediately walked over, pen and pad at the ready. “*Ja léung* and hot soy milk, please,” she said, and was gratified to see that the waitress didn’t note it down. The waitress turned and yelled the order out at the kitchen: one *ja léung*! Returning a few moments later, she set a plastic cup of steaming soy milk in front of her, heavily, so the soy milk sloshed and threatened to spill. “Thank you,” she said to the waitress, but she had already turned away to another customer.

A mother walked in, pushing a stroller in front of her. Ensconced inside the black stroller, swathed in blankets and toys, was a baby. It was a girl—the little bow on her head said as much—and her fat *mantou* cheeks made even the frigid cashier smile. *So cute*, she cooed at the baby over the counter, *how old?* The waitress returned and placed a steaming plate of *ja léung* in front of her, then gravitated to the stroller as well. She wrenched her attention away from the baby to her brunch. The translucent rice noodle sheet was flecked with nubs of spring onions and mottled with soy sauce, and the *yau ja gwei* wrapped inside was flaky and just a little sodden around the edges, the perfect picture of the breakfast staple. Her mouth watered, the way it hadn’t in weeks.

The mother started elucidating on every detail of her daughter loudly (she’s 8 months old, likes to suck on pieces of *yau ja gwei*, but of course she doesn’t let her eat them, of course not), dragging her attention away from her food. Unwillingly, she stared at the baby girl. Their eyes met. She made a face at the baby, all scrunched up nose and stuck out tongue, and the fat *mantou* cheeks bloomed into a delighted laugh, showing off two little pearls of teeth. The mother noticed and laughed too, moving the stroller to another table. She waved at the baby as it disappeared from view.

She would have liked to hold the baby, but new mothers were so jealous. The claim of the umbilical cord and blood. Understandable—a vessel never stopped being one just because it was emptied. She turned back to her brunch, but it had started to cool. The rice wrapper clung to her chopsticks, and when she bit into it, the *ja léung* tasted like oil.

*

He woke with a start. In the curtained darkness of his room, his mobile was the sole source of light and the sole reason for his consciousness. The buzzing died down. He rolled over and checked the mobile blearily — 17 missed calls and 52 unread messages. He must have missed something

again. He was too hungover to care.

The mobile lit up and buzzed. He answered the call. His girlfriend's voice in his ear was like the squawk of an angry seagull.

"Where are you?"

"Home."

"You were supposed to meet me for lunch! Do you know how long I have been waiting? I looked like an idiot sitting at the restaurant by myself, not ordering anything—"

"I'm not feeling well."

"Fine."

The line abruptly cut off. He rolled back over, delved beneath the blankets again, and slept the deep sleep of sunken ships.

*

With nothing to do for the day, or the foreseeable future really, she decided to take up knitting. They didn't really need knitted scarves and things like that, not with the kind of winters they got in Hong Kong, but it was something to keep her fingers and mind busy. She had seen the videos on YouTube on how to knit before, instructions for hats and the like. It seemed relatively easy. And when she had mastered that, she could take up gardening, and fill the empty room with plants. Turn it into a nursery of a different kind.

The yarn store was in Mong Kok, right over Ladies' Market. She had never really been there, but with an empty day in front of her, she decided to explore the areas of Hong Kong that she was less acquainted with. The MTR was relatively empty at this hour, the rest of Hong Kong being at work or in school, so her only companions on the train were the very old and the very young. There was an old man playing with his granddaughter

in the MTR, playing peek-a-boo, rubbing his whiskers against her belly until she shrieked.

Her father-in-law didn't visit anymore. The last she had seen him was on that awful day when her husband and her mother-in-law had that row across the hospital bed, when she had been caught in the crossfire and he had watched from the back of the room. He had walked out in the middle of the argument, shutting the door so quietly behind him that even his wife didn't notice he had gone, until she paused for breath and looked around.

*

A dark room. A mobile lit up like an anglerfish. A prolonged buzz, interrupted. A clearing of the throat.

"Hello?"

"Hello. Mr. Chan?"

"Speaking."

"This is Mr. Wong's secretary. We agreed on a meeting at 3:30 pm today."

"Y-yes. Yes. Yes. In Mong Kok, right?"

"Yes. I'm just calling to tell you that something has come up on Mr. Wong's end. Is 4:30 pm alright?"

"Oh, yes. Definitely. Definitely. No problem at all."

"Good. See you then."

The dial tone, then—

"*Diu.*"

*

Crossing Sai Yeung Choi Street, she noticed the ashy circle seared into the crossing, its outline stark even against the grimy yellow and

granite road. Like a cigarette burn, she thought. It made her heart ache. She didn't and could never understand that rage. It's all because of all those young people, perhaps—the jobless, purposeless ones. It's all the pent-up testosterone until it all releases in a chimp-like screech and long sinewy arms stretched to destroy.

What a city to bring up a child, she thought absentmindedly, and had to quickly pull up Google Maps on her phone to check the directions before she went down the wrong lane.

*

Ladies' Market was a plethora of stalls, practically bursting with cheaply made imitations and fakes sourced from the Mainland. Tourists thronged along the stalls, wide-eyed with wonder at the colourful vomit of things in front of them, getting cheerfully and obliviously ripped off. Sellers stood barricaded behind their cheap wares and rehearsed their marketing, sometimes to an audience, sometimes not, but always at the highest volume possible. Middle-aged women bartered with storeowners, inspecting wholesale underwear with an experienced eye, tossing unsatisfactory bras aside like day-old fish. Middle-aged men, all pot-bellied, patrolled the stalls in twos or threes, and copulated with everyone's aged mother with every sentence.

He pushed through this crowd in a foul mood. Mong Kok held a particular place in his heart, a place reserved for things like soggy cardboard and used wads of tissue. Couldn't they have done something with this mess of a market? Turned it into something delightfully kitsch like the flea markets overseas? He had seen photos of them on Google image search, when travelling to Europe still seemed within reach. They had handmade crafts and fairy lights and well-kept antiques, and the sellers were all jolly old people. They looked nice and inviting. They had class. But no, people had to be satisfied with the sordidness of Mong Kok, celebrating the fishball

stalls with their thousand-year-old vats of curry as if food poisoning was something particularly charming.

He was baffled at this tendency for nostalgia at first, then annoyed, and then, with the passing of years, that annoyance morphed into deep-seated resentment. He longed for a Project Mayhem-esque ending for Mong Kok. The only way to cure this pimple on the city's façade, he thought, was to engulf it in flames.

*

Ladies' Market had an old-world, 1980s charm. Turning into Tung Choi Street was like walking straight into the crowded markets of her childhood, her hand clutching the lifeline of her mother's as she pressed through the sea of stockinged legs, aggressive shoulder pads warring high above her. Those were the days when the Asian tiger roared and the world heard it, when even the streets thrummed with the dizzying energy of closing cash registers, when her mother smiled all the time because wonton noodles cost \$8 a bowl and she didn't have to worry about the price.

She walked along the street, dust and exhaust fumes in her nose, taking in the myriad masses of clothing spilling out of the shadowy stalls into the sunshine-heated streets—the velvets, the tulle, the meshy glittering crinkled masses of organzas; the women ducking, birdlike, into the shops to poke and prod and pull at the patterned pajamas; the old men or women with their dusty glasses, playing chess with their displays of jade and stone statuettes; the heavy-stomached tourists thronging the stalls, clutching their expensive cameras and sweating in the heat. Different styles, different faces, but in all of it she heard the echo of the roar. *Stay with me*, she wanted to shout back to the stalls, *stay with me always. Don't go the way of Sneaker Street. Just stay.*

But she didn't. Instead, she walked slowly down the street, savouring

the sepia-toned sweetness of the fruit that would soon spoil, listening to the echoes of the roar that had given birth to her, and left her behind.

*

The meeting went well, until Mr. Wong said, *they're a large firm based in the Mainland, so you'll work with them in Putonghua*. And he had had to tell the truth: *Uh, well, you see, um, actually—*

And that was that. People used to not hire you because you weren't fluent in English; now they don't hire you because you aren't fluent in Putonghua. The wheel of fortune turned for the world, and Hong Kong kept getting trodden into the mud until it made a rut. *It's not fair*, he thought, under the fluorescent lights of Maxim's.

And this was how it had always been, all his life. He had been told, practically promised, that he would get a job with a university degree, and he had sludged through three years of studiously copied answers and early-morning frustration, and what had come out of all that? What, exactly? An insignificant GPA, two dead-end jobs, and parents who still don't understand that a university degree simply doesn't carry the same currency anymore. His father had always jeered at him: idiot *fai tsing*, can't even get a job, should have invested all of your tuition money. *Fai tsing*. "Useless youth". He had worn that epithet with pride once, until the irony wore off and he was left with the reality that after the storm, he still had nothing but a handful of seawater. Can't even rent a fucking room of his own. 79 days had boiled down to this. He had gotten tear gas in his eyes for this. And this turned out to be negatives over and over again: *No, we don't feel comfortable hiring you for this project. No, sir, your application for a personal loan was denied. No, we can't offer you this position.*

"What you want, boy?" the cashier snapped, "Can't you see the line of people behind you?" He stared back at her. The cashier had a nasal accent

and her teeth were bared at him like the teeth of a baboon. He suddenly had the urge to hurdle over the counter, grab her by her fading maroon hair, and punch her hard in the face. He imagined the scattering menus, the horrified screaming, and the way her paper cap would fly off her head as she fell to the ground under his weight. He imagined the disgustingly satisfying crunch of her nasal bone under his knuckles, the flying spittle and blood arching high under the fluorescent lights in cinematic slow motion. He wanted to punch her until she apologized for everything that had happened to him since his birth. His fist clenched unconsciously.

"Wei!" she snapped again, and rapped the counter in front of him imperiously.

"Baked pork chop rice, cold milk tea no ice, to go," he said.

He was number 380.

Well, to home again, then, to an empty apartment until past ten. Home to eat his Maxim's takeaway alone. Home to ignore the messages on his phone. Home to watch terrible soap operas, and home to stare at the TV, trying to figure out what went wrong.

*

The woman who sold the yarns was a comfortably bulky woman, who sat like a mystic behind hanging vines of scarves. For *yourself?* the woman had asked, and when she shook her head the woman said, *thicker yarn if you're never knitted before*. And so she bought thick wool the colour of grapefruit, six soft balls of them. She stayed quite a while in the store, chatting with the woman about the different types of yarn:

What's the softest yarn you have?
Merino, good for baby things.

I don't have a baby.

Good for lady's scarves too. Good for men if they have allergies. Buy only if you get used to knitting. Too expensive to mess up. Merino is bad for baby things now that I think about it. Too much puke and poop. Better cotton. Washable.

What's a good yarn for mittens and hats?

Any yarn. Wool is good. Bamboo blend is good too. But not acrylic. Will smell.

Do you knit for your children?

Tried! Ungrateful kids don't wear what you make them. Always want store-bought. Until they're 30. But then they can make their own scarves.

What should I make?

Why did you buy yarn if you don't know what you will make?

When she left the store with her bounty, it was beginning to grow dark. She hurried along the street back towards the MTR—her husband would be home for dinner soon, and she didn't want him to worry. She walked quickly, past all the sellers and buyers, past a huddled mass of grey-tinged blankets on salvaged cardboard under an overpass, graced only by flies and spare change. She absent-mindedly dropped some change onto the sodden cardboard, and hurried on. Behind her, the stalls slowly lit up one by one: fluorescent white, tungsten yellow, neon red and blue, defiantly blazing against the twilight brilliance of the sky.

*

The minibus jolted and rolled down the various intersections of the city, throwing him intermittently against the safety rail. He rested his aching temples against the cold metal railing, the Maxim take-away warm and pungent on his lap. Some time ago, minibus companies had decided to

spice up their customer's communes, so every single public transport now blared Roadshow incessantly. He hated the noise, hated the stupid shows, but had to admit that it did provide better entertainment than staring blankly out the window.

To drown out Roadshow, he had Pink Floyd on at full blast. He liked Pink Floyd. It spoke to him somehow, dredging up visions of smoky graffitied basement rooms filled with pierced and mohawked people who all had British accents. He had never been in such a basement, having progressed through puberty without a hint of rebellion, but he liked to think he had it in him if he had just applied himself.

From the TV, an anchorwoman mouthed words to him sternly. *Did they get you to trade your heroes for ghosts?* The screen cuts to black shapes running in the darkness, sirens flashing red then blue then red then blue, a bloodied and crying man wrapped in a blanket, shrouded shapes on stretchers next to shrouded shapes on stretchers next to shrouded shapes. *Cold comfort for change?* A woman, white with dust but for the dark tracks down her cheeks, mouth open, collapsed on the floor, and could not be made to stand straight despite all the hands holding her up. *How I wish how I wish you were here...*

He looked away. Out the window. *We're just two lost souls swimming in a fishbowl...* The street lights blurred past *year after year*; the passers-by, the lonely drivers staring straight ahead, the rows and blocks of buildings with their cookie-cutter windows into individual lives—these all blurred past, ran down, *running over the same old ground*, Rembrandt-esque flames of colour vanishing into the darkening night.

After a while, he looked back at the TV. *What have we found?* It was playing that asinine ad for the Tourism Bureau, the one in which the government cheerfully branded itself as 'Asia's world city'. He knew the jingle by heart. *The same old fears.* The screen flashed image after image of

Hong Kong—light shows, sped-up traffic, shop after restaurant after shop, fireworks over Victoria Harbour. *Wish you were here*. He watched, strangely comforted, as the screen showed various tourists grinning identical grins, posing identical poses, laughing soundlessly in front of various tourist traps. Pink Floyd trailed off, and Juno Mak started crooning about lost love in his ears. The screen faded to a shot of the skyline at night, with a superimposed slogan: ‘*We make the difference*’. The Bank of China shone like a diamond in the darkness; the IFC, crowned with light, towered over the harbour. Beneath them, around them, a river of golden light ran ceaselessly, fertile with purring engines and dreams.

He had never seen the harbour that clearly before. Each time he had gone to Tsim Sha Tsui, the buildings had been wreathed in fog, or smog, or there had been so many bodies and cameras obstructing the view that he had to turn away.

*

Cing mat kau gan ce mun. Qing buyao kaojin chemen. Please stand back from the train doors. Beepbeepbe—

A flurry of clothes, a battering ram of a suitcase, and the doors sprang open again. A family entered, hysterical with relief that they had caught the train, elbowing themselves into the sardine-can compartment. She felt a wave of resentment ripple over the crowd. Tongues tsked under breaths, glares were loaded and levelled, and then people oozed back into their positions like mud settling around a dropped stone.

Cing mat kau gan ce mun. Qing buyao kaojin chemen. Please stand back from the train doors, the announcer repeated, affronted. Beepbeepbeepbeepbeepbeep.

She swayed along to the press of bodies all around her. She liked the

closeness of it, the one solid body of people, united in their common wish to get off the train. The girl next to her looked like she was impersonating a sarcophagus. All girls under the age of 40 look like sarcophagi during rush hour on the MTR; all women above the age of 40 keep their chests out and the legs planted apart, daring indecency. She was just musing on this difference in posture when she realized that wailing was coming from the TV installed in the compartment. A couple of other passengers were looking up too, reluctantly drawn away from their phones to telecasted grief.

She tsked under her breath. Crazy Muslims. Horrible business. All those poor people. Good thing that doesn’t matter here, she thought. Not enough of those turbaned people in Hong Kong, probably. Or was it veils? Definitely beards, though. Even the women, sometimes: she had seen her in Chung Hing Mansion, a girl with a wispy moustache like a pubescent boy’s, and she had stared until the girl turned bashfully to her mother. The mother had herded her out of sight. Mother bear, brown doughy arms shielding her cub.

...the next stop is Kowloon Tong. Interchange station for the East Rail Line.

The doors slid open and expelled a rush of passengers. She was left standing in the middle of the compartment, clinging to the pole for dear life.

*

He managed to squeeze into the elevator by worming himself into a space between two suited men determinedly looking down into their phones. In the gap between the doors, right before they closed, he saw his neighbour running up to the elevator with a huge bag swinging by her side. Then the doors closed, and he faced himself once more: just another face in a mass of people.

*

The doors closed just before she could get to them. Winded, she turned to the next elevator, tapping her foot impatiently as it began its slow descent from the 33rd floor. The security guard started talking to her. Yes, she went out today. It's yarn. Knitting a scarf for her husband, yes. Oh, wouldn't say he's that lucky. Chinese herbs will do wonders for his cough. It's terrible that he can't afford to see the doctor. Yes, it's a useless government we have. She can bring him some though, she happened to have an unused bag, but he'll need to remind her. Oh, it's no bother at all.

And then the elevator came, and she waved goodbye to the nice security guard, holding a bag of wool that she didn't know what to do with, reminding herself to give him that bag of herbs stuffed into the corner of the cupboard—that dusty gift from her parents-in-law.

*

He was halfway through 'The Empress of China' and his dinner when he noticed the text:

'we r over'

He'll remember this moment differently later. He'll add outrage to this moment when he retells it to his friends, and loss, too, when he ruminates on it, but at that time, all he thought was:

Finally.

Then he turned back to the Empress of China, beautiful and cruel, bejewelled and heavy-breasted, and finished his pork chop rice.

*

Her husband had bought dinner: roast duck, fried rice, vegetables with oyster sauce—too much food for two people, too much food for such

a small table. She set the table as well as she could, switched on the TV for background noise, and watched as her husband bustled around the kitchen making tea.

"I bought yarn today," she informed him crouching back. He paused in his search for the tin of tea leaves in the cupboard under the stove.

"What are you going to make?"

"I don't know. Do you want a scarf?"

"I can wear one if you make one for me."

"Okay. It's pink though."

She caught the look on his face just before he straightened.

"I'm fine," she said, and turned her attention to the drama playing on the TV. The Empress of China had just sentenced the rival mistress to death for bearing the emperor a son.

Her husband set a steaming cup of tea in front of her. "Drink," he said, and she drank.

*

His parents both returned at 10 pm, each dragging dusty soles and back pain in their wake, and collided in front of the TV. He decided to go out.

*

She fell asleep in the middle of the remake of Godzilla, her hands

suspended over her stomach, cradling air. Her husband stayed still, afraid to put his arm around her, afraid to wake her. Godzilla roared on the screen and blazed electric blue. She startled awake, and he brought her to bed, holding her hand lightly like a child.

*

The rays caught the people's faces intermittently; their fluid, drink-fuelled movements turned stilted, momentarily frozen by the sweep of light. The strobe lights turned everything into a stop-motion movie, the successive alternation of darkness and strong neon lights wiping away all semblance of coherent thought.

He was cornered against the bar by this throng of sinuous bodies. Errant elbows jostled him and dug into his sides, but it didn't matter to him—he was on a mission. Fighting his way to the bar, he signaled for two tequila shots, handing one to a girl whose haunches he had been eyeing for the past ten minutes. She giggled, said something he couldn't hear above the throbbing music, and downed the shot. In a couple of minutes, fifteen maybe, they would be kissing each other in a facsimile of passion. In two hours they would each head home, separately, in a drunken stupor on the bus. But for now they kiss, practiced and bored, negotiating companionship in their tangles of tongue and teeth.

There were just so many lonely people all around him, all hankering for crumbs of affection in their pushed-up breasts and gelled bravado.

*

In her dreams, Godzilla had woken again. Mountains cracked, fire sparked, all the hills were ablaze, and in the midst of the fire Godzilla sat up from his slumber like a weary vampire. He had come, he said, not to bring destruction, but to bring affordable housing and a higher minimum wage for all. He touched the IFC with a fiery finger and it began to burn, all the

glass and steel collapsing on themselves like a deflated bouncy castle. The molten glass and metal cascaded down onto Connaught Road, solidified, and turned into identical little stalls, rows and rows of them, springing up all over the multilane road until they conquered and swallowed it whole. The din of the stranded car horns was enormous, but there was nothing they could do about the conflagration and the spontaneous springing of the stalls...

She smiled in her sleep, turned over, and wriggled deeper into the blankets. The flames danced higher and higher in her mind's eye, splintering steel skeletons and turning glass into red-hot sprays that bloomed into delicate lightbulbs, burning red and blue and yellow and a brilliant white. Outside, a steady rain began to fall.

Pitter...Patter

by Venus Lui

In memory of my friend, Jessica.

Pitter...Patter...Pitter...Patter...

Of all days, why does it have to rain today? It's just my luck that the day I choose to hike is the day that it rains. It is raining softly now. The grey clouds are slightly thinning as the sky has no more torrents of rain to unleash. Taking shelter under a nearby tree, I see the raindrops dripping from the leaves. *Pitter...Patter...* At my feet, a small, clear puddle has formed. I look at the puddle. It is at moments like this that I come to realize the beauty of nature. I have never gotten over how entrancing ripples can be. Absolutely mesmerized by the raindrops— *Pitter...Patter...Pitter...Patter...*— *my mind drifts ... (Pitter...Patter...) "Goodbye." (Pitter...Patter...) Why did you leave?* I close my eyes, and tears well up. I shake my head, shaking away this memory— but at the same time, I am shaken up once again by this sudden intrusion. I get up and walk a little closer to the puddle. I bend down to look into the puddle. I see myself— my mirage-like reflection, my shifting reflection. I see the fragile me, the uncertain me, the unknown me. My tears begin to fall. *Pitter...Patter...* Into the puddle they go. My ears start to ring: *What a pity Pat. What a pity Pat. (Pitter...Patter...)* No. No. Go away. *(Pitter...Patter...)* "Where are you going, Pat?" cried a startled Jaelyn. "Stop! Wait for us! Be careful!" Jax's worried voice echoes around the field. But I cannot hear them. It is too much, walking into this place full of memories of her. My brain is filled with this soft sound *Patter... Pat..* It's the same soft way she used to call me. *"Pat! Pat! Pat!" Stop calling me! (Patter....Patter) Pat!*

"Pat!" Jessica turned around just to taunt me about my grades with that soft voice of hers. I wonder if it is because she didn't want anyone to know that she is taunting me.

"I know. There's nothing I could've done anyway. I seriously tried my best."

I couldn't help but roll my eyes at her. Jessica, the prudent role model, a shy and sweet presence in the class, an obvious academic freak. And there was me, Pat, the rule-breaker, loud and always appearing to not care about anything.

We weren't exactly friends. In fact, we were merely classmates. We had been classmates for two years. Two. I couldn't exactly ignore her. But I couldn't have cared less even if it was Godzilla talking to me— it simply made no difference to me. I didn't care. That's right, I was Pat, the I-don't-give-a-damn girl. People somehow always wanted to talk to me, and I was always up for it. Sure, talk to me. Why not? I would just listen. It's not so hard. I was anyone's friend. But don't expect me to reciprocate. Don't expect me to be all sentimental and sappy. I listen, I leave, end of story. There wasn't much use in opening up too much when I didn't care. Right? Jessica looked at me with sparkling eyes. She looked like she had something to say. "Spit it out. What is it? I'm all ears." I absently asked, eyes wandering off to a commotion in the corridor. It sounded like someone was wailing for help. "Nothing. You should really go and have a look. Your bum is itching to get out of the chair." Jessica laughed. The laughter seemed telling but I shrugged it off. If there was something wrong, she would have told me. Why wouldn't she? She knew I would listen to her. Shrugging off the idea, I took off without looking back.

Plat...Plat....Plat... The sounds of me stepping into the wet mud resonates around the green plain. I slow down and stop, turning around to look at the trail of footsteps I left behind me. The rain stops. I bend down to catch my breath, and as I did so I notice someone, or something, scurrying away into the bushes. Unable to resist my curiosity, I follow the path. Parting the bushes, I see a small resting pavilion. I walk up to take a closer look. There is something special about this pavilion. It was really white, and unlike the other ones that I walked past today, there is a block of cement in the middle. I climb up the steps (*thump thump thump*), and, to my surprise, I find a hollow inside the strong slab of cement instead of the cement table

I was expecting. It had an eerie beauty to it. I sit on the ledge and peer into the middle. There is a small pool of water in the middle, and I wonder how the water got there. As though answering my question, a ripple appears in the middle of the pool. I gaze up and find my answer. In the conical roof, a small hole allows rainwater to seep in and drip, drop by drop, into the pool. I wait and I catch it again, the ripple that the water droplet creates. *Plop*. Into the pool it goes. I smile. What is so special about ripples today? I don't remember myself focusing on something for so long. Too impatient to wait for another water droplet to drop down, I ease my left leg over the edge and hover it above the water. I dip my foot into the puddle and withdraw it, gently paddling the water. I look at the effects closely. When I lift my shoe from the puddle, a few drops of water get caught on my shoe and rolls off again. The re-joining of the droplet with the pool of water creates the ripple that I am so obsessed with. As the water drops back into the water, it creates a wave in the pool which rolls out to the outer edges. It looks very much like a transparent blooming water lily. *Plat...Plat...Plat...* My heart begins to unfold like the water lily, and I travel back to that day. *Plat...Plat...Plat...*

Plat...Plat...Plat... On the way from the MTR station to the white building, the drizzling rain enveloped us. The dreary grey sky had done nothing to ease the heavy mood that hung over our group. The mood of dread dogged our footsteps and our heartbeats. Thump. Thump. Thump. With our envelopes ready, we ventured down the white corridors, our steps echoing against the cold walls. 101...102...103. We stopped, heaved a sigh, and entered the hall of 103. We handed over our buffalo envelopes and received a white one in return. We signed our names on the white table cloth. We shifted uneasily in the waiting area as we waited to be announced. It was my first time in this environment, and I took in my surroundings. The drip of water from the air conditioner was too loud. In the already cavernous room, the bright lights obliterated all shadows, seemingly stretching the room to twice its actual size. The room was too bright, and it took some time for my eyes to adjust to the brightness. My eyes travelled to the end of the room, and became transfixed by the image at the end. My

surroundings began to fade away. My scope of vision gradually narrowed to a familiar but strangely unfamiliar smile. "Enter, secondary schoolmates and friends of Jessica!" the speaker announced our arrival. *Friends*. As we entered, we got closer and closer to the smile. We bowed and endured a moment of silence. "Thank you for coming," someone said, and I dragged my sight away from the smile and looked for the speaker. "It's nothing. It's the least I can do." I heard myself saying. Amongst the rank of chairs, I heard whispers: "Poor Jessica's brother. Handling the funeral affairs on behalf of his mother. Poor Jessica's mother. How unwell she looks. She must take care of her health." I looked at the two people in question. The funeral had left her mother overwhelmed by grief and her brother in agony. Jessica's funeral.

Why did she die? They said it was because of the overwhelming pressure from university. I couldn't help but laugh at this reason. Jessica is—no, *was*— a prudent, hardworking student from the first day I met her. She was not one to suffer from distress merely from homework. I found myself looking at her face in the white frame, thinking. That couldn't have been the reason. Or could it? I looked at my friends faces. They all had the same look of disbelief. All of us hadn't seen her in a long time— after we graduated, we didn't really keep in touch. Did I really know her? Perhaps I didn't, but I couldn't bring myself to say I don't care as I did. Because I do care. But my tears were nowhere to be found. Do I really care? I did know her, didn't I? I don't care, do I?

After giving my condolences to Jessica's mum, I found a seat in a corner, unwilling to mingle with others. I opened the booklet that held the rundown of today's ceremony. *Hymn. Bible Reading. Words from Family. Words of Support from the Priest.* Hymn. I read the family's last words to Jessica. "...my sister would devote her free time to singing hymns for church..." Singing hymns. Singing hymns. Singing hymns? Jessica didn't appear to like to sing. In the past, when we sang in music lessons or morning assemblies, her voice was even softer than a mosquito. How could she have

sung for church? I looked at my phone for the time, and accidentally swiped the play button. It was ‘Sing’ by Gary Barlow, a song that I fell in love with during secondary school. ‘Sing’. A familiar song name. Hold on, she does—did—sing. An angelic voice she had too. I frowned at this sudden intrusion of memory. Why hadn’t I remembered?

“Jessica, you should sing louder, dear. You have a lovely voice. ‘Sing it louder, sing it clearer, knowing everyone will hear you’, ok?” Mrs Ng, our strict music teacher, shouted through her microphone, quoting from the song of the day— ‘Sing’ by Gary Barlow. I saw Jessica cower from the request.

“Yes Mrs Ng.” She squeaked. I nudged her and she looked at me. I winked at her and stood closer to her.

“Don’t worry. I’ll cover for you.” I whispered.

She gave me a small smile. We started to sing the song again: “*Make some noise, find your voice tonight.*” I glanced at Jessica, then smiled and faced the front again, not wanting to risk Mrs Ng’s wrath. Out of the blue, an angelic voice came drifting out from amongst our ranks, “*You brought hope, you brought life, conquer fear, no it wasn’t always easy. Stood your ground, kept your faith, don’t you see right now the world is listening to what we say?*” I followed the voice and looked the person next to me. I saw Jessica’s eyes glistening and I could see that she was singing loudly for the first time. Our gaze met for a split second, and I knew instantaneously then that the angelic voice had belonged to her. “*Sing it stronger, sing together, make this moment last forever.*” Last forever...and where are you now?

I looked at her photo that was slightly glistening with the condensation from the cold air conditioning in the room. How long had it been since I last saw her? Three years? Maybe four. Did she always have rosy cheeks or was it just Photoshop? I honestly didn’t have a clue. I continued to gaze at the

picture, trying to think, trying to remember.

“Jessica! Are you feeling alright? You’re really red in the face!” I asked, genuinely concerned that our model student was sick. She couldn’t be sick because our class needed her to answer the questions that our Geography teacher threw at us mercilessly in the upcoming double period.

“Pat, are you seriously asking me this question now? I’ve been sitting in front of you for two months and you’re telling me that you didn’t realize I was born with rosy cheeks? Tell me you’re kidding.” She rolled her eyes, hurt evidently sketched on her face.

“Oh. Just double checking. We can’t have you ill now, can we? I was worried. Sorry.” I answered apologetically.

No reply.

“Ok. I’ll remember from now on, ok? Promise. Cross my heart, hope to die.” I said, nudging her.

“Promise?” Looking me straight in the eyes, her gaze pierced through me. For some unknown reason, this seemed important to her.

I didn’t have the heart to joke, so I said sheepishly, “Promise.”

Her smile widened and a genuine smile formed.

Just like the one in the photo.

The ceremony started. The procedures marched on without delay. The sobbing of the mother accompanied the bearers as the coffin was brought out. The coffin. Jessica. It was a hazel brown coffin. It had a nice sheen to it. I admired the wood of the coffin, the patterns, and the tint of brown to

it, which was exactly the colour she had once shown me in our art class. At least they got her coffin right. The priest came and began the prayer. Everything went smoothly, unimpeded by the little hiccups from the crying. I looked into the envelope that they gave us in return for our condolences and found a tissue, a lolly, and one dollar. Such small things. The dollar I knew what to do with. But the lolly and the tissue? I had no idea why they would give us such things. It was as though they thought a lolly would lighten our mood. What a joke.

The ceremony was ending and it was time to say our last goodbyes to Jessica before they transported her to the incinerator. We got up in rows and began filing out to pay our last respects. Then I saw her. The blank look. The closed eyelids. The pale cheeks. The mouth clamped shut. The pale face behind the glass lid. There was an obvious and thick layer of makeup on her face. I looked at her eyes that were now closed. Closed. Dead. Gone. The realization came at me with the force of a car crash. I would never again see the glimmer in her eyes. I would never see the shine in them when she had something more to tell me. I would never know what she wanted to say to me years back. I would never see the pride she once had when we sang together in music class. I would never see the rosy cheeks that I promised I would remember her by. My stomach clenched. The memories of my promises to her, my observations of her, my time spent with her resurfaced one by one. I remembered.

I hurriedly walked away and returned to my seat. Once everyone returned to their seat, the priest announced that everything was done and asked the staff to bring out the lid for closure. I watched the staff remove the glass casing and lift the lid over to seal Jessica inside. Forever. Something broke inside of me. Tears started welling out and began dripping onto the booklet. *Pat...Pat...Pat...* I realized the enormity of putting the lid on the coffin was too much for everyone in the room. Everyone, regardless of their age, gender, or their relationship with Jessica, started to tear up. Some wailed while some had tears silently rolling down their cheeks.

Boom. The lid closed with finality. I couldn't hold it in anymore. I took out the tissue and sobbed silently into it, crying for a friend that I had never known. A friend that I had not realized that I befriended until the day I lost her forever.

I turned and left, unable to bear it any longer. The others left with me. We stood in silence outside the gloomy white building. No one was able to say anything. I looked at their faces and saw my reflection looking back at me. We all knew and felt the same guilt. *Patter...Patter...Patter...* The sky was pouring with rain, but none of us bothered to take out an umbrella, nor did we move to a shelter. Each of us stood in the rain, each caught in their own thoughts, silently hoping that the rain would wash away our guilt, wash away our pain. *Pat...Pat...Pat...*

“Pat! There you are! Why are you here? Don't ever scare us like that again!” Jaclyn and Jax come crashing through the bushes. I look away from the pool of water, resurfacing from my memories, my eyes full of tears. They see my tears and come running to my aid, Jaclyn giving me her warmth, Jax bringing out the tissues.

“What's wrong? You still thinking about Jessica?” Jaclyn carefully asks. Jax kneels and adds, “There's nothing you could have done. She made her decision. Maybe the world was just too much for her.”

“How could I not be responsible, if not partially, for her death? I was her friend but I knew nothing of her problems. If only I knew a bit earlier and called her. If only I cared for her more. If only...if only...if only...I had told her I cared about her, things wouldn't have turned out like this.” I break down completely, tears streaming uncontrollably down my cheeks.

“Pat,” Jaclyn says softly, stroking my back, attempting to calm my emotional upheaval, “Let's not play the game of 'if only'. It's not healthy

for you.” I open my mouth to explain, but Jax beat me to it. “No, Pat. Listen,” she says firmly, and I close my mouth in defeat. “I know it is not easy to let go, but you have to learn how to do it. Pick up where you have stumbled. If pretending to not care gnaws at your conscience, then start caring. Start caring for your other friends that are still here. Jessica wouldn’t have wanted you to waste your time blaming yourself. Live in the present, not the past. Live for the future.” I let the truth sink in. *Live in the present, not the past, live for a future.* I hold onto these words like they are a lifeline.

“I don’t know if I can.” I’ve just admitted that I am weak. Can I pull myself through this admission of vulnerability? “That’s what we are here for. To pull you through the dark times, silly.” Jaelyn smiles at me, “What else are friends for?” Jaelyn and Jax each extend an arm, inviting me to hold onto them. I look at their determined faces. I hear birds chirping away happily as the rain slows, then stops. A breeze passes through the pavilion, encircling us with a gust of fresh air. I take a deep breath and take both of their hands. Entwining our arms, we set course to leave the pavilion and continue to explore the nature around us.

I turn around for one last look at the pavilion before leaving, and suddenly it all comes rushing back to me. “Hold on. Jessica would have loved this place. No. She loved this place.” I say to Jaelyn and Jax. “Before I met the two of you, she once told me that she wanted to come here with me. Like the two of you, she was a nature-lover.” I smile at this memory.

“Pat. Pat. Earth to Pat.” Jessica snapped her fingers at me. “What?” I looked at her, irritated at her intrusion into my daydream. “Let’s go to a park with a small pavilion. We could picnic there and leave the city behind. Please? I really, really, really want to go.”

With her rosy cheeks and glimmering eyes, there was no way I could reject her request. “Fine. Only if you bring lollies for me. Deal?” I said resignedly.

“Deal,” she laughed.

“Wait a second.” I let go of their arms and walk towards the slab of cement again. Unbuckling my bag, I search for and find the white envelope that has followed me around this past week, in memory of Jessica. In it is the lolly they gave me. I take out a pen and write on the cover:

*Pavilion I have found for you
A lolly you have brought for me.
Together we shall rest in peace
Till in future, when we’ll meet.*

I fold the envelope until it becomes a little packet. I set it onto the pool of water and watch it as it soaks in the water and sink. *Goodbye Jessica.* I know Jessica will like this resting place better than any other.

As Pat leaves the pavilion with her friends, the white envelope slowly settles onto the bottom of the pool. The water begins to dissolve the ink on the cover. The glue that binds the water-sodden envelope slowly erodes away, until finally it falls apart, releasing the breath that has been cooped up in the envelope. The lolly drops to rest at the bottom. As of this day, it still remains there, resting peacefully on the bottom, sleeping to the lullaby of the occasional fall of water droplets from the conical roof, waiting for that day.

Pitter...Patter...Pitter...Patter...

A Silence Loud as Water

by Wendy Ma

My brother Brilar sells charms.

Or at least, he used to sell them 'em. back when he was still living with us in Glaer Sorenef, the tiny island we grew up in.

I was just three-and-ten of age when he left. Truth be told, I am uncertain as to whether or not I miss him still.

Every Sunday morning, when the needles of the tower clock pointed eight in the distance and I imagined the air to ring with its chimes, he would wrap his carefully spelled jewellery in my mother's blue kerchief, tuck them in his schoolboy's satchel, and ride his bicycle towards the farmer's market by the harbour.

The charms were nothing elaborate — a good-luck spell woven into an earring, a gemstone necklace with a charm for health bound into it, perhaps something for wit in a lady's hairpin. He'd occasionally spell other objects as well, such a snaring charm on a fish-hook for the fishermen, or on his favourite pen so he'd never lose it. These were the spells he did mostly for practice, for the sheer fun of it if nothing else.

He shared ownership of a tiny stall in the market with his closest friend, an artist called Kelhán, who hailed from Votdr across the sea. The stall was nothing more than two large desks pushed together, but Brilar and Kelhán made it work by draping a large picnic blanket over both desks to hide the shabbiness, so that the colours seemed bright and jolly. On one table were the trinkets, laid out in neat rows, glinting eye-catchingly under the sun, and the other table Kelhán's paintings, propped up on display with wooden easels, each of them a kaleidoscope of bright oil colours depicting subjects that range from the spiral towers and turrets of glass that made up the city skyline, to the burst of neon that was the beating heart of our city's nightlife. All of Kelhán's paintings were of the city, never anywhere else — not even Votdr.

I usually joined them at the market after chores were done for the morning, sitting at the back struggling with the week's load of homework, occasionally manning the stalls by myself whenever the two of them went off on their own.

I was watching after the stall again, the day I turned three-and-ten.

Brilar and Kelhán had wandered away for a lunch break, and left me with the wares and some painfully difficult sums for mathematics homework that took all of my concentration.

Something soft struck the back of my head, and I flinched as it bounced onto the dirt. A screwed-up ball of torn notepaper. I picked it up, flattening it in my hand.

The words *Morning, pipsqueak!* were scrawled on it in a hasty, messy hand, recognizable at once.

Kelhán was grinning down at me, the blade-like points of their ears perking up brightly, sticking out from the azar mane of curls they wore in a bun.

Despite the fact that ours is a bustling port city where you cannot walk down a street without seeing an outsider, the Votdri were a rare sight in Glaer Sorenef back then, for the land of Votdr was on the far side of the world. Try as I might, I could not get used to Kelhán's presence. It wasn't just things like the Votdri's naturally blue hair or pointed ears. It was more than that. Telling a Votdri's gender was absolutely *impossible*, made even more by the long shapeless robes that they wore as custom. Kelhán wasn't a young man, nor were they a young woman. They were just — just a *person*, I suppose is the right word for it. A being without a gender. This is why I refer to them as *them*, the singular, neutral *them* as opposed to the markers of *he* or *she* we place on our children from birth. As Brilar told it, the Votdri people were people “of the water”, because of how their gender was ever-changing, ever fluid, ever undefinable and unidentifiable. Every Votdri I've ever met were tall, fine-boned, their features sexless — and Kelhán was no different. I could never decide whether I was uneasy around Kelhán because they were so close to my brother, or if it was because I couldn't *understand* the Votdri artist.

I scowled up at the whiff of ashiness that still surrounded my brother and Kelhán.

Brilar set off a flurry of movements with his hands and arms, signing words at me as I watched. *HAPPY - BIRTHDAY - PIP*. He was bad at it, slow to pick up the fluid actions of the language even though he had

been learning for my sake. Kelhán, however, who'd picked up the written and spoken language of our people ever since coming here, preferred to communicate with me through scribbles and scrawls. It helps them learn our language faster, Kelhán said, so I indulged them by reading the various notes they wrote to me.

Most of the time, though, I read lips. Much easier for me – as long as the person I was talking to took care to talk to me face-to-face every time. Now that Brilar and Kelhán were both within my line sight, that was what they chose to do.

Hullo, what's this? Kelhán signed. *I don't remember seeing this thing here last week.* Kelhán picked up one of the trinkets from Brilar's side of the stall – an armlet of gold, beaten to an almost paper-like thinness, etched with faint, elaborate patterns that swirled their way around the band of the armlet. The gold shone when it caught the light.

“One of the fisherwomen fished it out of the water,” I let the words out. “She didn't want it, and told me it wasn't going to fetch a good price on its own or even if she sold it to a blacksmith, so she gave it to me.”

Huh. What a bargain, Kelhán said.

They were far too bony for the armlet to fit their arm, so they grabbed at Brilar's wrist, slipping the armlet up past his hand and up his arm until it rested on Brilar's bicep. *What do you think?* they asked him.

Brilar grew bright red and looked away.

He huffed a laugh. *Stop messing about, Kell,* I saw him say, and he worked the armlet loose again.

The two of them turned back to me.

So. Thirteen years old. How does it feel? Brilar signed.

Kelhán clapped my back in an affectionate, brotherly way that thoroughly annoyed me, and Brilar tugged on one of my pigtails. I stuck my tongue out at him.

Anyway, Kelhán formed the words, *What say we celebrate tonight, just you and Brilar and me? I've been meaning to explore the old warehouses in the city.*

Brilar, having just regained his composure, smiled broadly next to

him. He seemed as though he was looking forward more than I was to the prospect of spending the night in creepy old warehouses. I didn't have the heart to say no. “Sounds good to me.”

Kelhán's eyes skittered off into the crowd of tourists at the market, and they suddenly turned back to us.

Gotta go, they mouthed the words. And before either of us had a chance to speak, they'd vanished back into the throng of market-goers in a trail of turquoise hair.

I stared at Brilar, dumb-founded. He shrugged.

Brilar and I were just finishing up with the packing when a greasy-haired bear of a man in a waistcoat that strained at the stomach pushed his way through to crowd towards us.

My dear Miss Aerling! I saw the words form in his mouth. At first I thought he was speaking to me, and Brilar must have thought so too, for he did not look up at him, but the man came to halt in front of Brilar and his enormous shadow loomed over the entire stall; it was only when the man coughed dramatically into a fist to catch Brilar's attention did my brother raised his head.

Oh. I winced in sympathy for Brilar, but did not say anything. Glowered at the man instead with every ounce of hatred I could muster within me, for even though Brilar annoyed me constantly, it still wasn't right that he be called a title that he was not, and being called *Miss* must have stung him to no end.

I alone knew the truth of it.

When Brilar was born, the doctors told our mother that she had given birth to a baby girl. They were mistaken, of course, all of them were, but a girl was what the doctors saw, and thus girl was what the doctors and our parents took to be true. Time soon proved them wrong. Brilar took to trousers instead of skirts, tinkering with merchant magic instead of sewing, father's old workshop instead of the kitchens. I suppose that was why they gave birth to me, eight years after Brilar – mother wanted someone who could keep house and tend to her health when it became clear that Brilar wasn't suited to the task.

What do you want, Lord Livriotto? I could see the sharp annoyance in the way Brilar snapped the words out, the way his brow furrowed. I glanced warily at my brother then to the man, silent, trying to guess what he wanted.

Spittle spewed out of Livriotto as he spoke. *Should'a guessed your friend spooked off at the sight o' me. Tell 'em – her – it, whatever, you can never tell with those fucking Votdr creatures, it gotta pay up for this month, yanno, elsewise it gonna find it kicked out. I ain't letting some dirt-poor morphauleis squat in my lodging-house for free.*

Morphauleis. Formless. That was what we called the Votdri in these parts, for to those of us who'd spent our entire lives immersed in our own (admittedly huge) human community. Despite my mistrust of Kelhán, I still recognized the clear insult of the word.

"Who is he?" I asked.

Kell's landlord, was Brilar's answer, signed with his hands. *No one important.*

*

Glaer Sorenef was well-known throughout the land as not just a trading port for spice merchants and fishermen, but for our glass industry of long ago. The famous glass workshops and warehouses were all abandoned now, however, when turning Glaer Sorenef into a home away from home for travellers became our main priority instead.

The three of us broke into one of the abandoned warehouses with hardly any trouble that night, crawling in through a broken window.

I shone the flashlight all around the empty space. Pillars. Stacks of empty crates. Ash-filled furnaces that had long since gone cold.

"It looks so sad," I said, shuddering. There wasn't any way to judge if I had whispered, or if my voice was loud enough for it to reverberate within the warehouse.

Kelhán turned his flashlight onto his own face so I could see his lips moving. *This place could do with a bit of colour.*

The shadow at my side that was Brilar nodded in agreement.

The rest of the night was spent with stories, card games, feasting on crisps and chocolate and the leftover pieces of cake mother had baked earlier that afternoon.

It was nearing midnight when I started yawning, and we busied ourselves setting out sleeping bags in a circle in the middle of the room. Our flashlights went into the middle of the circle. The last thing I saw, before I curled up happily asleep with a bellyful of food, were Brilar and Kelhán, their features lit in eerie flashlight.

I didn't know how long I'd been dozing off when my eyelids fluttered open, but a glance at the window told me it was still deep into the night. I shifted in my sleeping-bag to see if the others were still awake.

And of course, they were.

Brilar was lying on top of his own sleeping-bag but not in it, one hand folded behind his head, other hand clutching the neck of a bottle of cheap beer as he gazed up at the roof as though it was a starry sky. He'd taken off his shirt in the summer heat, wearing only the short vest he wore most days to bind his chest. Kelhán sat cross-legged next to him, still in that long Votdri robe, turning over something over idly in their hands.

I kept my eyelids half-closed so as to make them think I was still asleep, and watched them as they talked. It was difficult, and I could only catch snatches of their conversation.

...leaving day after tomorrow, early on the next ship, before Livriotto gets to me. Kelhán turned, and spoke words I could not see.

Brilar propped himself up on his elbows, a sharp, jerky motion. *I want to leave with you, see Votdr, get away from this sodding hell-hole of a place.*

What does longing, does hope and desperation, sound like? I didn't know, but the emotions were scrawled nakedly all over his face in such a clear way that I didn't need them spoken aloud.

You have your own responsibilities, do you not? Providing for Pip, and your mother. Who will look after them? said Kelhán. *And your magic. It*

might be just trickery and rustic charmwork here in your part of the world, but outside, they will view you with mistrust, the same way y,our people do not trust us.

In between the moment I blinked slowly and the next, Brilar must have said something in reply. I couldn't tell. All I caught were the words *don't care about that. Pip's old enough to take care of herself anyway.*

There was a sinking feeling in my chest. Tears threaten to sting my eyes.

Brilar and Kelhán had lapsed into silent contemplation again.

The quiet in the warehouse was almost unbearable until it finally broke again, when I saw Brilar speak.

Lord Livirotto called you it this morning when he spoke to me. I almost couldn't make out the words, he was starting to mumble so much. Nearly punched that dick in his pox-rotten face. Guess he couldn't make sense of you. None of the others can, not even Pip. They see only what they want to see. They can't make sense of me as well. It's enough to make me fucking scream. S'pose that's why I feel like you're the only one I can talk to in the whole city. I'm morphauleis too.

Kelhán ducked their head in what I could only imagine was a small fit of laughter, and turned back at him. And oh, that thing in his hands was the armlet from earlier at the stalls.

Your people see Pip as broken too, as formless, because of what they call a defect in her, but we both know that isn't true. I still cannot understand you humans and your strange obsession with making everything make sense.

In the torch light, Kelhán's long, blue hair rippled like water as it fell over their face.

And then –

Brilar craned his neck up to look at Kel, and the way he looked at Kel was half-scrutinizing, the same way I look at people's expressions and the shape of their mouths when I want to know what they are saying.

I'd seen enough. I rolled over in my sleeping bag, wishing I could

silence the ache that almost felt like guilt within me.

We all woke early the next day, and I packed my things in bitter silence that was no different from the silence that surrounded me every second of my life. Brilar didn't ask me what was wrong or why I was suddenly being sullen. None of the three of us brought up the conversation I oversaw — and I didn't want to bring up the fact that I *did oversee* them.

When I opened my bag, after I was in my room back home, I found the armlet nestled inside. I drew it out. The gold of it seemed to *sing*, and I could feel Brilar's magic all over it, a charm of strength worked into the near-fragile plate.

I decided to go into the warehouse again by my own, one Thursday afternoon directly after class, not bothering to change out of my school uniform. I didn't know why I wanted to go, I just knew that there was *something* that might be waiting for me, back there.

I stopped in my tracks the moment I leapt down through the window.

The walls looked different. Where it was the colour of cold slate and ash, it was now a blaze of bright colours, depicting the instantly recognizable marketplace and harbour of the city.

A mural. They had painted a mural on one of the walls, on the pillars. It wasn't meant for me most likely, but the familiarity of the artwork was comforting, nevertheless. I ran a hand on the rough surface of the walls and could feel the ridges of paint on my fingertips, already dry but still smelling faintly of acrylic. And then –

The paint moved. No. That's not the right word to describe it. The colours swirled and changed and shifted before my eyes, a symphony of vivid gold, ruby, the rich deep blue of a night sky and the silver of sea foam. The waters of the painted harbour washed up and retreated.

The paint was only paint, that I was certain. But the colours came alive by my touch. Just as the trinkets Brilar collected came alive for him. I had magic. I had my brother's magic — inconsequential, perhaps, in the grand scheme of the universe, but at that very moment, I felt invincible, untouchable, the entire world for the taking at my fingertips. A small bubble

of incredulous laughter welled up within me, but in the pressing silence, I couldn't hear it from my own lips.

A look down on the ground and I found a set of paints and brushes, the only objects in the warehouse. They were wrapped up in a scrap of paper.

I crouched to open the makeshift package even as the sky made of paint shifted from dawn, to full daylight, to dusk and night and back again. There were words written on the paper.

We'll miss you, pipsqueak. In the meanwhile, this is for you to remember me by.

The Imprisonment

by Judy Wu

Some are desperate to know that I exist, some are not. She belongs to the latter; she is desperate, but she is not desperate for what is out of touch. Young as she is, she craves only for things available right here right now. So here she goes again. A few shots of tequila, whiskey, bailey's, and a few takes of molly. Illusions, blushed cheeks, dances, and men; or shall I say boys, for they are not a lot older than she is.

They don't know what they are doing, but I do. Oh they are but children, MY children. I know her – it is the sensation that she is after – the immediate, false sense of salvation. Some children are just not taken back by signs and words. Some children need more. Gently, I placed a little salvation in her. Real salvation, real blood.

With a touch, particles swim right in place. Nothing too grand, just what you children call incarnation.

*

Though half awake, I find myself conscious.

All this moisture, hollowness, darkness, and sense of coziness are so dominating that it is strange – I seem to be utterly alone in this massive place, but I don't feel lonely at all. There is nothing I am sure of, though I can feel all the thoughts positioned themselves in me. Weird as it sounds, I witness the formulation of my soul.

I can't stop hugging myself because I can feel the droplet of warmth in me. Though this mysterious room is nothing close to being cold, the urge of guarding the warmth has control over me — as if I am that droplet of warmth itself.

*

She does not feel anything in particular. Molly does cause absence of menstruation sometimes. And some other times it causes so much menstruation she would go “oh damn”. Bodies are little universes on their own, don't you know?

And oh by the way you – my little thing, oh you – yes you are. You are a droplet of warmth, of salt, and of light. Stop questioning that. You will get to know what is happening; you will get to know life. Take it slow, it is not going to happen all at once.

*

I guess I am here to wait, for some unknown cause. No light, no companion, no sign of anything but peacefulness. I can't really think of what sin I have committed, or what good deeds I have done, to be put here. I can't recall whether this is bliss or punishment; there is nothing but emptiness and harmony in my mind. Maybe there is no reason. Maybe.

It is a struggle to face the breakable and useless self — I cannot see, cannot smell, and not feeling capable of any kind of exercise. Not knowing what else I could do, I sit very still, cuddling. Silence cries out the weirdness of the whole situation. I don't know nothing about this place, and I know nothing about myself. I am happy, and that is the only thing I know. Handicapped and comfortable, that is what I am; maybe I should be scared, but I am not.

*

As I have expected, she begins to worry. She is not going to tell her friends, and there is no way she is telling her dad— she'll be thrown out for sure. Well it is not actually the case, but she does not know. And of course she does not know for sure. She has not done anything to try to make

anything certain. The wild possibilities are so scary that does not want to know anything for sure.

Sometimes she vomits right after she gets up.

“It must be the hangover,” she thinks to herself, tidies it up, heads for another cigarette.

*

I feel fragile. But I gradually get to move. It is funny how you feel your body formulating once your soul is done; the muscles, or I should say tissues, are soft and flexible. My bones go along with them. It is not like I can make whatever movement I want, but I have a feeling that I am actually existing. Why, the moisture, the atmosphere, the feeling, and the taste of the room are becoming familiar. Does the getting-used-to-being-here thing have anything to do with ability of movement?

But the accumulating strength is not all exciting; it comes with side effects. The silence is fading, and terrible noises get through as waves. The vibration is so strong that it shakes me from the core. The turbulence that comes with the waves is the worst thing ever. I search for a posture to avoid it, but there is none.

*

Her routine is not regular at all times, but there is a pattern; of course there is a pattern, every child has a pattern. But recently, she has a feeling that something is different, if not wrong.

She is not feeling well, but there is nothing that could stop her from doing what she is used to doing. Getting up at around one or two p.m., ignoring several phone calls from the school, putting on foundation and

powder and mascara and bold eyeliner and blood-red lipstick, smoking marijuana in the park with a big mac, some fries, a coke, and some girls. Night falls, hit the bar, then the club. More casual kisses, more free wine. More dances, blushed cheeks, more boys, more illusions. Temporary salvation leading to hell.

Tonight it is a boy with fists and a leather belt who has an obsession with little alleys and broken glass bottles. Recently she is very into guys with the eyes of eagles, the anger of lions, and the temper of her father.

They do their thing. I have one hand on her belly, the other on her forehead.

The sun rises, from the east as usual, a beam of light falling exactly on her purple bruises.

*

I suspect there are creatures living out there. Apparently, they are only capable of making simple sounds. The shouts, the roars, the high-pitched screams, they come more frequently as ever. I am growing stronger, but I am increasingly vulnerable to the shakes and the waves, especially when the shouts rush in when they are least expected. In order to protect myself, I duck my head in between my knees as tight as I could, until they fall into silence. Yes, those creatures out there do shut up once in a while, so I suppose they are capable of sleep.

I don't know why they are constantly screaming through the walls. It's not my intention to learn to distinguish their different sounds, but soon I become capable. There are angry ones, sad ones, excited ones, and painful ones; the species out there should be of a large population, each of them has a different wavelength, a distinct intonation. And frankly, I don't like it. It

annoys me. Never has anyone hummed a song to me — they are all angry and loud, almost hateful. I am almost certain it is not communication that they are after.

There is one more thing I noticed. The room seems to be contracting bit by bit – I can't tell how long it takes exactly, time hides its existence here. But I guess it's happening at a slow pace.

*

“Hi the mo'er fudgger up there, wat the hell?”

For the first time in her life, she talks to me, confronts me and the possibility of me. Even when it is all expected and planned, it brings tears to my eyes; this is going to be the beginning of something, and the end of the other something.

She finally does it. Three times. That red line looks redder than her red lipstick. Of course all this does not start from the pregnancy test kit, but to her, it is the start of all this — shit, as she phrases it. And now, my child, how are you going to deal with your darling little shit?

She looks into the mirror; takes a deep breath, hits the bar again with extra joints in the pocket.

*

You should understand how hard it is to live in a constantly shrinking room. The walls are almost oppressive. And the room is not even static. It shakes. With noisy violent creatures as neighbours. Screamy wavelengths buzzing through from next doors. It is awful. The bigger I grow, the weaker I feel, isn't it paradoxical?

I am reluctant to say it this way, but regarding the situation I am in, here is the most sensible guess I can come up with — these creatures with awful screams are capable of controlling this room. Did they put me here on purpose? As the space becomes smaller continuously, their cries become more distinct. Shakes are more frequent. I am sometimes beaten. It is crazy how strong and violent these aliens are. They slash the wall and the vibration is powerful enough to strike me, no matter how hard I hold myself away from the wall. I have bruises everywhere now.

I guess they tried beating me up a long time ago, but I was small and the room was big, so I was too far away from the walls. Why all this violence? It's not my decision to grow.

*

She is not the kind of girl with a visible belly in pregnancy, but still, it is getting visible.

“You pregnant?”

“Nah, shuuut up ya beeeeeee'ch.”

“You sure? You never have that funky meat swinging.”

“SHUT DA FUCK UP. I jus ate 'lot dat's all okay?”

Streams of thought are running through her head, and I read them all. Abortion. Give birth. Give birth then raise it. Give birth then give it away. Give birth then strangle it. Give birth then put it in the washing machine. Give birth then freeze it in the fridge. Give birth then pretend it is a brother or a sister. No. Abortion. No.

Of course it is all her choice, yet of course I know what she would choose. She is a child with an adorable, funny head. Out of all the possibilities, she picks the most interesting, out-of-place one; not that I am particularly pleased with such a decision, but this is just who she is.

She goes to him. Ray, the famous drug dealer in class, the professional since twelve years old. He is bright, and I will make him marvelous; just not yet. Heroin is his recommendation.

*

The beating is not actually the worst part. There is something the walls completely fail to protect me from – a flavour injected through a soft pipe at the top of the room. It takes the violence of the creatures out there to a whole new level. The substance is irritating, heavy, and it doesn't stay in one corner of the room — it spreads. The most dominating thing I have ever experienced, it occupies the whole room and numbs all the senses. Whenever it is injected, everything else is swallowed: the moisture, the darkness, the long-lost peacefulness, and myself.

It has to be a weapon against me, as I am the only being here. It turns me blue, destroys every single oxygen particle, depriving my ability of breathing or thinking — I involuntarily shiver, move, roll, cuddle extremely hard. Pure insanity, absolute torture. If I could reach the people out there, I would have begged. But there is not a way to do it. And therefore, due to circumstances, I traded my comfort for my dignity.

Luckily, the flavour usually comes with occasional pauses. Yet unluckily, it always comes back.

*

It is not addiction that is on her mind. It is poisoning that she is thinking about. No surgery, no letting people know, little money involved. Ray gave her a discount, because of her situation, and because she gave him a blow job that night.

One dose. Two doses. It still moves. Three. Four. Five six seven. Eight nine ten.

Many people may not realize it, but it is true that if a fetus is not killed by heroin, it could get addicted to it. But of course, it is the mother who gets addicted first.

It hurts for her to get money out of the purse, but it is necessary. It hurts for me to watch, but it is necessary.

*

I would rather trade my physical growth and my strengthening senses, for the large room I once had, for that peaceful bliss I once owned, and for my unawareness of my ill-fate.

The walls are more and more closely packed and I start to realize that they are more rubber-like than solid, no wonder they are not that punch-proof. The room just keeps contracting, and the place is ever so small now. A bit of that flavour is enough to take control of the room.

You know what's the most devastating part?
Now I cannot live without the flavour.

It is still very true that I can't breathe or think with the substance, and that I turn blue and I shiver at its presence, but I am masochistic enough to crave that excitement, and they are sadistic enough to keep giving me the torture. It is truly pathetic how the intermission of the flavour has turned from heaven to hell for me.

I laugh at myself for once ignorantly thinking that my existence in this room is bliss. I must be either a prisoner or an experiment. I am in despair. There is no reason not to be.

*

It is her favourite spot in the city, a pier where tides hit the concrete together with soda cans and plastic bags. She takes a seat, and stare aimlessly at the foggy, smoky sky. One hand in pocket searching for the lighter and a cigarette, the other hand on her tummy. Spark of fire, inhale, the only moment that feels like living. It trembles. It is there.

“Wat was I thinkin’? It’s naut gonna work at’ll.”

In a cigarette’s time, she starts to crave and shiver.

The cigarette hand reaches for the heroin.

She gets a kick. From the heroin, on the belly, and onto her life.

For the first time in her life, she feels ever so needed.

She reviews her life. Not her favourite activity, but it sounds necessary at this point. All the guys, all the shots, all the drugs, all the missed calls from school. Dad and the dishes he smashed during all these years. Mum and her haunting, swollen body flowing on the sea.

And for the second time in her life, I crossed her mind.

“Hey you mo’er fudgger up there. Wat em I supposed t’do? Wat do ya want from me?”

A mixture of tears and mascara slides from her eyes to her face to her neck to her left chest. The anger and the deliberate blindness in there. Softened. Almost melted. Almost.

I gave her a little rain and a little rainbow.

It is almost the moment. Of choice. And of arrangement.

Your choice, daughter.

*

You know what, recently I have been thinking about a major discovery that I made. I was stretching, and my feet touched a cave-like thing. Never have thought of an exit, and suddenly the possibility lit up my mind like a firebug in the dark. That striking moment was so shocking that I immediately resumed my cuddling position to regain calmness.

When the excitement fades, another thought pops up in my head. No, it is not that simple. They created this room, they control this room, and it is impossible that they don’t know about an exit. It’s a design. It’s a trap.

With the punches, the screams, the vibration, and the flavours, they, want, to, smoke, me, out. But what for? I try to think about it during the flavour breaks, for I am only capable of thought at those brief moments, and thinking distracts me from my desire for the flavour.

If they want to get me out, does it mean they intend to torture me further? That is one sensible guess. Without the walls I would be completely under their control. Or, they want to get me out of here because they want to recruit me? Do they want me to become one of them?

*

Some are desperate to know that I exist, some are not. She belongs to the in-between; she is desperate, but she does not know how to desire, and what to desire exactly. Young as she is, she craves only for things that could pull her out of this quicksand right here right now.

She took all the illusions of salvation for granted for so long, and now they are all failing her. Tequila brings hangovers. Cigarettes run out fast. Heroin pumps all her money to Ray’s pocket and all his sperm to her body. Guys with the temper of her father all hurt her like her father.

One question circles through her mind: What is the most immediate way out of this?

So here she goes. To the clinic.

*

Is the flavour stronger out there? Would I be able to scream? Maybe I will have fists as strong as theirs, and will I be punching around like they do?

If all they wanted is to recruit me, as I step out, will I be punching another wall, attempting to smoke out another intelligent soul, attempting to turn him into savages that shout all day long? Will I be living in the flavour all day long? And maybe I will never get to think in peace. I shiver upon such thought. I don't want to become one of them. I would rather stay here forever. True, I am living with occasional flavours, screams, and punches here, but for the rest of the time I can think in peace.

The tendency of room-shrinking shows no sign of pause. Very soon I will outgrow this room, and I will have to get out of here. The room becomes too unbearably oppressive. Their plan is going well. I think of those young wild monsters, their hatred, their punches and shakes, the savagery, the violence. I am escaping this fate.

Your choice, son.

I kick, roll, go upside down, throw my fists everywhere, twist. I am angry and desperate — I roll around the soft injection pipe, let it go around my neck, and let it do the trick.

In my hands you placed your spirit.

The imprisonment is over, forever. I would say things are a lot better up here. At least they look and think just like me.

You look just like me.

The angels tell me only very few unborn make it, but I don't care, I'm home. Hello, Father.

Son, come, come to my right. It is done.

Does Fortune Exist

Yeung Wun Yan

Department of Fine Arts, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 2016





Poetry Editors

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webpage: <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/eng/>

english@CUHK

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