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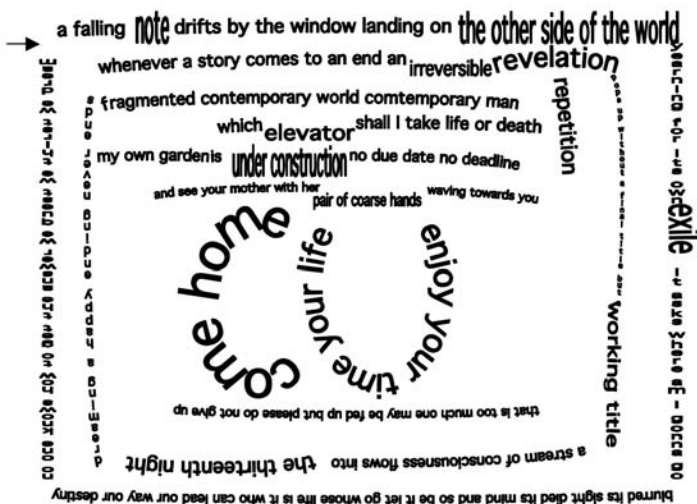
Editors' words for CU Writing in English 2005 (Story section)

Hi! Welcome again to our *CU Writing in English*. This year, our classmates have produced a great number of fabulous works. It really took us a long time to choose the special ones from the fifty pieces submitted.

This year, the stories selected have a greater variety in themes and structures.

The short stories section editors say...

"...Once you get ahold of CU Writing Vol. V, you are not going to let it go as you will be enchanted by all these intriguing stories... it's just like falling into a labyrinth and trying to seek your way out...readers...we won't let you go..."



Amazed, right? Just follow the maze and finish all the great works written by our superb classmates.

Finally, we want to thank our source of inspiration - Prof. Parker, who gave us ample time to ‘squeeze’ out our writing potential and took up lots of his energy to read our crazy ideas. We also want to thank Tracy for her time and effort in helping us with the cover design and the final production, and Olivia who gave us the last minute help; also, all the contributors and the people who gave advice to this book.

Anna Yeung Ka Ching
Christine Leung Mei Yee
Priscilla Ng Yuen Ting

A Brief Note on Poetry

Keep this secret for us: we did not edit these poems.

Or rather, these poems did not need editing. Try thinking of some naturally beautiful gems in rainbow colours; by themselves, they are already uniquely magnificent.

That's right, we are the editors. But instead of modelling the poems after any objective standard, our major task was simply to admire, to polish and to arrange such delightful jewels for display, with the hope that every facet and angle would reflect the most brilliance.

In the course of a few months of hard work, we have learnt to put ourselves in the poet's shoes. And this opens up a poignant and amplified world before us, a world of endless possibilities. The experience is like finding a way out amidst the maze of words and punctuation marks.

We might have different opinions of what the poet meant, but after striving to understand the poet's thoughts and intentions, we succeeded in putting forward our suggestions to embrace the rift between both the poets' originality and our ideas.

Despite all this, neither the poet nor the editors have the final say. It is you, the readers, who make all words on the pages come alive through your imagination.

Thank you, Professor Parker and Sara, for your continuing guidance. Thank you, Tracy, for the help that you and the office team provided, without which the success of our compilation would never have been possible. Last but not the least, we would like to thank the poets for their invaluable contribution to the volume.

Next time you feel tired of your daily routine, don't forget that you can always step momentarily into a wonderful and amazing world of poetry with this book.

Viona Au Yeung

Queenie Lau Kim Fan

Joyce Mok Mee Luen

Louisa Wong Wai Man

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The Shaved Talks Back

Louisa Wong Wai Man

Our chins rubbing against each other,
a momentary loose bond.
Between us,
the prickly tiny needles
stand in the way.

“This an unweeded garden,
that things rank and gross in nature possess it merely!”
you yell with a frown.

What’s bloody Hamlet to do with *my* chin?

In a split-second, pressed in bed,
you, the ruthless gardener,
pluck out the roots of my masculinity.
No time for farewell to my intimate friends.
Exposed! Shorn!
I feel like a naked lamb.

Dammit! You’ve sprayed the shaving cream all over the quilt.
The violence of love coils

in the core of fragrance's bud.
Turning over,
I seize your conquering hand.
My teeth shove into
your triumphant finger.
Hard,
not without a tinge of anger.

When Everything is Edible

Louisa Wong Wai Man

Grandma bit into an oak table and lost her front teeth during the Japanese Invasion. The dried salty feed for goldfish is pretty harmless. Mum wrenched my mouth open to dig it out. Go into any bookstore and sniff for your favourite; each author oozes their unique breath. The yellowish ancient pages of Shakespeare's sonnets make one think of tomato soup. A girl eats a book with knife and fork on TV. Eat one poem every day. Words, words, words? They are juicy, meaty, seasoned with laughter and tears. We all bite a pen pensively once in a while---To hell with Sigmund Freud! Think of the food chain--- with Hannibal Lecter at the end. My friend almost fainted from fasting for two weeks and dreamt of nothing but bananas. The taste of an ant is sour and leggy. They say he took rat poison due to hunger for love. I guess it is hunger which keeps us alive. Savour a light, long kiss. The strawberry lipstick on a pretty girl's soft fleshy lips is nourishing. Someone swirls her dead mother's ashes into bubbling congee with a ladle over and over. A man chews and swallows glass in the circus for a livelihood. The magician of Hunger transforms our tasteless world into an edible universe. Even hunger will be devoured by the gigantic mouth of time at last.

A View from the Other Side of the World

Erica Chan Yuk Luen

I heard about it, in our ancestral hall where Grandpa lived with many other villagers, on an April Sunday afternoon. I listened to it and I couldn't believe it. Grandpa talked about it over and over again. Looking back, it seemed to me that I was actually in it, perhaps. It was what my grandpa called his most extraordinary train-station incident. He had a lot of interesting train-station incidents when he traveled the world. He quit his government job and went for a decade long "spiritual search" when he was thirty three years old. The day he told me about it, he was sitting on a rocking chair, swinging to and fro.

A world map was in his hand, and wrinkled when he cleared his throat and said, "You'll not believe me but I swear it is not a myth that I make up. I was resting on a bench and waiting for the train to Tokyo in Nagoya station. There was an old lady in a kimono, sitting next to me. And I was enjoying the crunchy cherry rice crackers which I had bought in the station." He sniffed his pipe and continued, "While I was chewing the crunchy crackers, I heard some crispy noise outside my mouth. The Kimono *roubasan*¹ was having my crunchy cherry rice crackers!"

1 Old woman in Japanese

He turned to look at me with an awed smile. “So I looked at her, not trying to scold her, she was a *roubasan* after all, but I was hoping she would say *arigatou*² to me.” Grandpa asked me in an undertone, “Lizzy, and do you know what she said?”

“Bugger off, pervert!”

“Haha! You little devil. Wrong answer. The Kimono *roubasan* told me to have some more,” he nodded, seeing my widened eyes, “but we have not gotten to the extraordinary part.” Grandpa rocked his chair even harder and continued, “Soon after she said it, my train came, so I boarded on the train and left that bag of crackers to the Kimono *roubasan* to savor. Her gnarled face glowed under the sunshine and that moment fossilized in my head.”

“You were so nice to her.”

“No, I wasn’t,” he whispered, “when I took out my ticket to the train inspector; I found my cherry crackers in my pocket, the wrapper was still intact.”

Grandpa puffed a full ring of smoke which diffused in the sultana sunlight. I found the lines on his forehead were not as straight as the railway tracks. The clock ticked and tricked. Five years have gone by since I traveled on the Eurail with Wai Ting.

It was August 2000. I had turned 18 and was about to enter university. While thousands of people flocked to down under to

2 Thank you in Japanese

watch the Sydney Olympics, I decided to initiate a rite of passage in Europe. My traveler genes, which I probably inherited from Grandpa, were like water droplets dancing madly on the hot stove, propelling me to see the world. And my traveling partner was Wai Ting. We were not bosom friends, but close enough to experience something together. And she was my only friend whose mother did not object to the lunatic idea. Wai Ting told me how she wheedled her way to Europe: she drafted an undertaking to convince her mother that it would be safe to travel with me. Though I was amused by her over-excited and childish trick, I was proud of her trust in me. I knew I was the only one she trusted because we had been friends since primary school. I could still remember her very first question for me when we met in our school playground: “You like wearing skirts? I only wear pants because I don’t need to worry about showing my butt if the skirt hem is stuck in my underpants.” I burst into helpless laughter thinking of the hilarious scene of exposing a butt without realizing it. It was downright funny but true because we are used to seeing things from our own eyes, which aren’t available to look behind us. She asked many strange questions. Wai Ting was the kind of girl I described as “a spork,” that had the features of a spoon and a fork. Her grateful heart was broad as the basin of the spoon, but her sensitivity could be as sharp as tines that stabbed through people. My love grew for her gentle voice that seduced my ears. The way she said “Thank you so much!” was as gentle

as the way you puff up the whirly dandelion heads. And it made me feel good.

The week before we set out, we ran through travel agencies, outdoor-wear shops and embassies to gear up to our Europe trip. Each morning, I was up with something to remind Wai Ting about the trip. I would go straight to the dining room and reach the phone at seven in the morning, to call Wai Ting. We discussed how many pairs of jeans to bring, which youth hostel had a history of peeping Toms, how to ask for help in French and many more. Papa obviously could not put up with my endless burbling every morning over breakfast. “Your majesty,” he said in obvious banter, “shall I ask Grandpa to check the almanac and suggest the best time to board on a plane?” His icy eyes betrayed this seemingly humorous suggestion, so I stopped the conversation. “Now, stop talking and chew the food well.” I attributed his banter to a mixture of jealousy and apathy. Of course, I didn’t know how fussy I was back then. At that moment I thought when I was in Europe, I would be on my own and out of his surveillance.

There we were in the third stop of our Europe trip. We had been to the Netherlands and Germany. Every town or city we traveled to showed signs of vibrant life but Paris was different; it taught me to see things differently. I couldn’t help loving the way that dogs in Paris walked like cats! So light a foot idled in the

sizzling summer air. Along the Seine, we saw a romantic young couple kissing under the bridge, a dignified grandmother with her grandchildren eating ice cream, a middle aged woman with her poodle in a straw basket instead and a disheveled man drinking beer. A French girl wearing a long black dress rode a bicycle and passed by. She caught my eyes because she had a baguette in her hand, in a stylish way. My eyes followed the girl, and then I saw Wai Ting's hands massaging her thighs. An enchanted sight encrusted with kill-joy tiredness. I should not think in that way, but I did regret touring with her. She had been so useless, burdensome, and energy-sapping that she stole my joy of traveling. She was weak, insecure, suspicious and always frowning.

“Lizzy, could you walk slower. You know how heavy my bag is?” Wai Ting stuttered when we were sitting on a stoop in the Rue de Paradis.

“Sorry, didn't know it. But now I know.”

“Thanks, Lizzy.” Her grateful voice lightened the heavy August air in Paris.

Wai Ting was so dependent and such a chicken that she followed me like a shadow. I knew she could not stand walking for five hours along the Seine but she could have told me. All I wanted was more directness.

Wai Ting asked me while her hands were still massaging

her thigh, “Lizzy, have you ever worn pantyhose on a windy day?”

“Why pantyhose on a windy day?” I asked and tried to figure out the underlying message she was getting across. That was the way we communicated. She liked to use metaphors that implied a deeper level of meaning. And I was to be the riddle-solver.

“When the wind blows at your legs, the tiny holes of the pantyhose store the chill and they pass the chilly feeling into every pore of your legs. The chill works well with the pantyhose and produces an alchemical magic. You will feel your legs are not your legs anymore, they are out of your body.”

“That’s interesting. So are you saying you are not yourself now?”

“Uh huh. I’m sorry but I can’t help it. I’m always scared of the feeling of uncertainty. I’m probably tired. But thank you for helping me all the way. I know I must have caused lots of trouble. Thank you, Lizzy,” she said with a tired smile, her hands squeezing her legs.

“Well of course. That’s what friends are for to help each other out,” I lied when I actually couldn’t agree more with her. “Umm...why don’t we find a café to relax? Chill out like the Parisians!” I believed some drinks would cheer her up. We left the stoop and headed for the Latin Quarter where our hotel was

located.

I helped Wai Ting put on her backpack and checked the map for our next stop – to find a nice café. We were walking at the beginning of sunset. It must be half past eight then. The setting sun shone on my left temple and gave me an elongated shadow which totally covered hers. A whole day of walking had really worn us out. Energy of my legs leaked. My friend walked almost like a cripple. The lawless traffic system in Paris forced us to make detours. Wai Ting said she liked the detours because they let her wander the winding streets of Paris to experience the secret delights of the city in a relaxed and engaging way. By the evening, since we were so tired, we didn't take detours anymore. Wai Ting intuitively crossed the road arm in arm with me. I could tell she was scared of the cars and motors.

I remember the sun was below our chins when we arrived at the Boulevard St. Germain. It was a boulevard packed with cafés. It smelled of latte, cappuccino, bourgeois and chic. The caffeine aroma rejuvenated both of us and Wai Ting reacted to the vibrant scenario by saying, “It was already a real treat just standing in the street and watching the world go by. Lizzy, you made a good choice.” I didn't deliberately make myself out to be smart, but when Wai Ting found me smart I could take that as a compliment. We strolled along many cafés and soaked up in the authentic Paris atmosphere. It was time to find a café to hang loose.

“Oh no, Lizzy, everything is so expensive here. Look at that, seven francs for a cup of mocha. It’s a kind of rip off, isn’t it? A can of Nestle coffee is only HK\$5. We shouldn’t have come here.” Wai Ting lamented as she checked the menu of Le Rendez-Vous.

I was irritated because she had been more fickle than I thought. But I tried to keep my cool, “Well don’t worry about the price. It’s on me. When you hunt for a doughnut, don’t look for the hole. See what I mean? Here is a prime spot for people-watching. You’ll love it.”

It seemed Wai Ting didn’t hear what I said, she continued to walk and turned to a corner. That was the first time she ever walked ahead of me. I was taken aback a little. Though I could not see her face, her slouched back was grouchy enough. At that moment, I knew I could not stand the sight of her but I just had to grin and bear it. As she stopped at the door of a café called Café Chat at the backstreet to check out the price, I stood there and merely waited for her. There were several tables outside and some people were having drinks in serenity. There was an undercurrent of tension. I decided to let her take charge of it since she refused my goodwill. I was waiting to see how she would handle it on her own.

A coarse voice came to our ears, all out of the blue, “Allo, ladeas. Where tu from?” A young French guy with a cigarette in

his mouth spoke to us, showing a cheeky smile. He wore a white tank top underneath denim overalls. I was surprised that a French person initiated a talk with us, finally.

“Hi, we are from Hong Kong. Nice to meet you,” I answered in a thrill. Wai Ting raised an eyebrow.

“Ong Kong! I’ve been there when I worked in a circus. See,” he lifted a strap of his overalls to show the Cirque du Soleil logo printed on his tank top. He beamed with undisguised red cheeks.

“Oh Cirque du Soleil, wow! You like Hong Kong?” I asked. He nodded, puffing some smoke, then beamed with half-open eyes. “We like Paris, it’s a beautiful city. And we are looking for a café to hang out,” I told him while Wai Ting stood quietly next to me. Not responding in any way because she lacked essential *savoir-faire*, I supposed.

“Really? Well, what are tu waiting for? Tis is the best café and the cheapest. The one over there is no good,” he pointed at a café a few steps away. Three of his friends, two men and a woman, all showed uncaring grins upon hearing that and they went on with their reading and *vin rouge* tasting. The guy then moved two chairs and invited us to sit down.

I was truly fascinated by his rare hospitality, which I see as a strange zest in retrospect, and without a second thought I

grabbed Wai Ting's hand and went to the table. It must be a bit of a tug when Wai Ting complained in an undertone, "You nearly pull my arm off!" I didn't care. The French guy was so happy when we accepted his invitation that he did a handstand as a demonstration. His cherry red face got all my attention so that I didn't realize Wai Ting's face had turned ash-gray. He did a few more tricks before he took our order for us, which threw me a little bit. Just when I was about to tell him that we would like to go inside and get the mochas by ourselves, he fleet-footed to the counter. His female friend then explained, "He is a regular here, he knows the boss very well." Then she turned to her friends and conversed in French.

"Lizzy, I think we should leave here now!" Wai Ting whispered to me in Cantonese.

"Hey, they don't know Cantonese, speak up." I responded, indifferent to her nervousness.

"Don't you think they are suspicious? They freak me out when they speak in French, especially that circus guy. I think he is drunk," Wai Ting whispered to my ears.

"Who doesn't speak French here? Don't pull my leg, Wai Ting."

"Oh! You still don't get it. What if this whole thing is a hoax? Remember we are two girls, we can lose more than

money,” she explained with a little shiver, “now, I’m going to shoot from the hip, you’re too reckless this time.”

The word “hoax” alarmed me; it was like a whip to the bottom. The thought of robbery or something even worse froze my mind. But I didn’t want to believe her hypothesis; she was too cynical. And I couldn’t face the fact that I made a reckless mistake and needed her to be my savior. It was simply not our way. Or it was not *my* way. So I tried to say something that helped me wrap up the situation nicely, “Give a little more trust to people. What can he do to us?” Yet I wondered if I was digging my own grave by being that trusting.

“You have no ideas, he fetches our drinks, what if he makes them heady?” Wai Ting hissed.

“What do you mean? I don’t think he’s a fraud. If you’re that smart, why didn’t you stop me from walking in here well before? And please act naturally, they don’t know Cantonese!” I shouted in response to her hiss.

“You were drooling over that French guy, how could I stop you?”

“You are letting your insecure feelings out too generously, Miss Wai Ting. Did you ever trust people? Don’t be a bummer! We’ll be fine.” I really could not bear the sight of her now.

“It’s not about trusting people, it’s about *our* safety. Let’s

put our heads together and find a way out. Please, I really want to leave here.” Her voice was on the verge of crying. She put her hands on my arms to persuade me.

At this moment, the French guy swaggered back with two cups in a tray, his cigarette still in his mouth. “Here tu are, ladeas. Two mochas,” he gave us the drink in a professional manner, “bon appetit!”

We nodded and squeezed a smile, then he went to talk to an old man next to our table. Wai Ting and I stared at each other and her hand started to pick up the spoon. She was not about to drink it. I hesitated to drink it. She stirred the mocha so vigorously that a spiral appeared and spilled the drink. She was trying to fool people that she had sipped the mocha. I followed her but ended up spilling half of the drinks on my laps. “Oh mama!” I gave a loud squawk and stiffened. Wai Ting pushed her chair away from the table and grabbed my arm. The French guy was trying to find me a towel. When he went inside to look for one, Wai Ting immediately hurried me to dash off with the excuse of cleaning my mocha mess.

The French guy shouted that he got a towel but we kept on walking. “Don’t go ladeas. Don’t go.” I was tempted to look back, only to find that he did another handstand. “Wai Ting, stop.” I said but she grabbed me even harder. We soon reached back to the noisy main street. Neither of us spoke but we were a lot

calmer. He was out of sight, out of mind. It was a kind of adventure that caught us from behind. I didn't know what to say. Seeing the muddy brown mocha stain on my white trousers, I was really confused if it had embarrassed me or saved me. Yet I still let the blame slip from my tongue, "Look what you've done! We could have had a nice time in the café. Oh, my pants stink." Wai Ting remained silent. We got back to the hotel when it was nearly dark.

The mirror-coated hotel elevator was intimidating, especially at night. The mirror revealed something invisible to our earthly eyes under the bleak yellowish light. Looking into the mirror, I found Wai Ting was taller than me. All the way, I had thought that I was taller than her. This illusion probably came from my highheels, an artificial agony I liked. Or it was my ego that had magnified the way I saw myself.

She finally opened her mouth, "Have you seen a painting by Magritte? It showed a man looking in a mirror. He doesn't see his face; he sees his back. I like the idea of that picture. Though this elevator is walled with mirrors, it's still hard to see our backs. Can you, Lizzy?" My philosophical friend was getting somewhere, but I was too tired to figure out the message behind. She continued, "Thanks for spilling the coffee, if it wasn't for that, I really didn't know how to get out of that place," she finished and closed her tight lips again.

Was the whole café incident a hoax? No one knew. I didn't want to believe it. And it made me feel like I was being used to protect Wai Ting's insecurity. And what was the meaning behind her deep thought of that painting? Why had I been so stupid to let her boss me around? It would have been a nice encounter with local French. Why did I let her hyper-sensitivity destroy the possible get-together? My gentle friend had acted against me. She hurt my sense of professional control, my self-esteem. Many questions shot out like missiles that bombarded me. I didn't have answers for them. I was as lost as passing a door three or four times without realizing it is the way out.

The next day we were on the Eurail to Switzerland, leaving Paris behind. There were moments when, frankly, I wanted to tell her my genuine feelings over the course of our journey. But I found her eyes fixed in utmost concentration on the floor. Pent-up air burst hotly from my lungs. With a violent effort, I held back the impulse because she could not bear it. Four hours of journey brought us to Lausanne. The air was minty-fresh after a brief shower. We hustled out of the crowded train station. But the open space led us nowhere.

“Lizzy, there is the tourist information centre,” Wai Ting said, “go and ask for directions. I'll be here to watch out for the luggage,” she pointed to the centre where many people were lined up.

“Forget it. See how many people are waiting. We can ask

someone on the road.”

“No, it’s risky to ask strangers,” she stunned me with a firm rejection.

I tried to ease her nervousness, “You got to trust people. Don’t worry, I’m here.”

“Well I’m also here. I need to ask someone reliable. Please ask the officer from the centre. I just want to make sure we don’t make the same mistake again,” she said. Her voice was thin, scarcely a thread of sound. She was getting impatient.

“*What mistake?* We’ve been fine all the way. I think it’s you who have the problem.” I was getting impatient, too.

Now she was truly furious. She had been quiet and indirect before but now she attacked. “So you think I’m a trouble-maker? All I want is to be sure of our safety. I know you’ve been taking care of me since the day we left Hong Kong. And I appreciate that. But don’t talk to me like I’m good for nothing. The world is dangerous. Do you know? If we were not careful, we would get into trouble. Do you know? You were too reckless with the French guy. If I didn’t stop you – you may – I think you should be *thankful* for what I did,” she said and looked away.

The idiot me was stubborn with myself. I didn’t understand the essence of her speech. I provoked her into the verge of breaking down by saying, “Well I say it’s the other way round. Do

you know you've been depriving me of my enjoyment these two weeks? Yet I have been nice to you, taking care of you, comforting you like a nanny. I'm so sick of being used to sheltering your pitiful insecurity. I'm better off without *you!*"

"You take me for granted. Now I'll go as you wish," she rubbed her eyes soon when she made this final remark.

I didn't protest that, even in my heart. Maybe it was true.

The fume of anger totally blinded my eyes to show the essential empathy for my best friend. I stood and saw her walking towards the ticket counter. The crowd seemed to make way for her of its own accord. Despite the abrupt way things ended, I did not do anything to stop her. Perhaps I didn't believe Wai Ting had the guts to go on her own. But she did. She must have foreseen the possibility of us going against each other, so she checked the flight schedule booklet the night before. She did not come back. I could only see her back steadily drowned into the crowd.

Feeling perfectly idiotic, I left the station and headed for the youth hostel myself, obeying a confused desire to find myself alone and to get a chance to think. Vapors moved up in the hazy sky but the sunspot was still as if the sky had bruised its eye. The blurry vision given by the sun in my eyes showed me multi-visions of the objects around me. A few cars passed by, the late afternoon sun stretched a shadow at my back. Just from a glance I could see how big the shadow was there to keep me company.

Chocolates

Inspired by Gary Solo's "Oranges"

Joyce Mok Mee Luen

The cold beads of orange
pop and melt on his tongue,
sweet gingery fragrance
wafts in the December air.
his girl, with dangling pigtails
unwraps the crinkling wrapper
for the chocolate she
had carefully picked from
the old candy jar
at the neighborhood drugstore.
stiff blue fingers hold
the plain chocolate cube
gingerly
but delightedly.
bright heat overflows from
the orange fire
spreading from
those boyish hands,
rises,
to melt snow and frost
on the tall branchy treetops.

the orange treasure
glows and brightens
his heart, hers and mine.
In the heat of July
I release his damp clasp
to open Godiva's box.
six perfect truffles,
rocky, irregular,
smooth sprinkled
with coffee powder
or pebbly covered
with crunchy almond bits.
the centre
is bound to be
tender,
rich melting cream
liquefying noble taste,
that animates the olfactory
with sentimentality.

he paid for my
chocolates
with anything but
a nickel and
an orange.

dark misty eyes,
weary steps,
athletic hands
that diminished in power.
they greeted me good early morning
while my clothes still stank
of plane cabins,
plush chairs and
stale chow.
taking my bags,
he led me to a food shop for
beef noodles.
then
seeing that I was not
really hungry,
he presented to me –
chocolates.
the simmering summer
combated the whiny ventilator.
lukewarm air
bringing the smell of home,
was totally lost at that moment
to the steam of the
soup,
and the fire

burning
orange
in those familiar
masculine
hands.

Homecoming

Louisa Wong Wai Man

“The only reason people want to be masters of the future is to change the past.” Milan Kundera

Mum phones me up in the middle of my study.

“Ah Man, come home for dinner tomorrow night. It’s your father’s birthday. We’ll have a big meal to celebrate.” she says.

“Hey Mum, I have two mid-term exams coming up this week. Gotta prepare and cannot come. I’m sorry.” I reply.

Mum doesn’t seem to listen. In fact, she never listens to what I say. “The old man will be disappointed if he comes home and finds you missing. What a disgrace! Remember to bring a present tomorrow. That’s settled.” Then she hangs up before I can protest.

I gaze at the window in my hostel. It’s already night. A moth is beating its wings against the icy glass, trying to get inside but in vain. I close the book and toss it on the bed, not without annoyance. I am tired, tired of the way Mum puts up the pretense. It’s been two years since Dad left us for another woman. He simply vanished from the earth. No one knows if he is alive or dead, except himself. Mum always expects him to come back through the front door, as if he can be conjured up like magic. She never forgets Dad’s birthday, the birthday of a man who has

dumped her. I stare at the sky, which is heavy with blackness. Not a star can be seen. Darkness sprawls and stretches without bounds. Will Mum ever get over it? When will she finally see sense? That night I cannot sleep.

Every time I come home my heart sinks with fear. I don't know what I'm afraid of. Mum and I live on the sixteenth floor. Right after I step out of the elevator the noises of TV jump into my ears. Mum is a big fan of TV. Worse still, she is seriously deaf. Something happened to her when she was ten. She lost seventy percent of her hearing because of that. "Dammit!" I simply can't help cursing when I'm shuffling in the alley. Mum gobbles up all kinds of soap operas. "Chewing gum for the mind," Dad used to say when he was still with us. You can't do anything with the TV on at full blast around the clock. Why can't Mum find something better to do? I have been growing up with the noise of TV ever since I my first memory. I cannot afford to waste the rest of my life with TV noise again, not for the whole world. I feel suffocated when I enter the house, slamming the door shut. Mum calls from the kitchen, "Ah Man, is that you?" I haven't answered while sidling my way into the living room. The house is clattered with things and bags. Mum is the kind of person who loves to buy things but never throws away anything. "Six tiles left," I think, counting in my mind the only tiles that are not yet buried by Mum's possessions. Last time when I came

home there were ten. I'm afraid someday I will set this dump on fire. "Homecoming without home."

Mum enters the living room, wiping her wet hands on her oil-stained apron. Mum has short white hair, which gives the impression of a mass of snow with streaks of black.

"Dinner is ready," she says, "Why don't you help me lay the table?" Then she hands me three bowls and three pairs of chopsticks. I hesitate, not knowing where to put my hands.

"Hurry up! The programme 'Flowery Life' is going to start soon." She says in a matter-of-fact tone.

Mum doesn't wait for Dad. There's an empty seat between her and me. It is Dad's seat, and it will always be. We eat our dinner in front of the TV. Mum is totally absorbed by the soap opera, with her eyes fixed on the screen constantly.

"Mum, I've got to talk to you about something, something serious." As soon as I utter it, my voice is drowned by the overwhelming noises of TV.

"What?" Mum asks, her eyes still glued to the screen.

"I say I've got something to talk to you." I have to shout in order to let her hear.

"Just wait till commercial time. The show's getting really exciting." Mum waves her hand the way she drives away a fly.

"For God's sake, can you please please please turn off the

TV for just a while? We can't talk about anything serious with the TV on."

Mum turns her head abruptly and says, "Why do you yell at me like this? Just because you hate the show doesn't mean you can interfere with me. You can't always have your own way at the expense of others. If you have anything to say, just go ahead."

"Mum, can't you treat me seriously? I'm not at home very often and I won't be here for long. Won't you turn off the TV for just a second and listen to me? Do that for me, please!"

Mum doesn't answer, or she simply doesn't listen.

"Mum, you've got to choose between the TV and your own daughter. I think you know why Dad's gone from your life. You don't want that to happen again, do you?"

Dead silence jumps in all of a sudden. The TV is off. Mum turns around, her eyes glistening with tears.

"Don't tell me you're sorry." She says, her voice icy with anger.

"I'm not sorry." I retort. I know I am lying.

I leave without saying goodbye. Mum has the TV on again as soon as I step out of the front door. When I'm out of the house, I take a deep breath, feeling released. From that day on, I realize that we can no longer live together, me and my mother.

Mum hasn't called me for two weeks. It's very unusual. I'm worried, but just for a while. Then I become occupied with other stuff and forget about the matter.

One night, while Jack and I are having dinner in Spaghetti House, Mum calls me on my mobile.

"Ah Man, it's me." Mum waits for my response.

"Hi Mum, what's up?" I ask, glancing at Jack at the opposite of the table. He pretends to look at the menu, cigarette in his mouth. This is Jack. He had a cigarette in his mouth when we first met. I know he is listening.

"Nothing." Mum says.

"Then why do you call?" It's very noisy on the other side of the phone. TV on again! I take out my cigarette and crush the butt against the ashtray violently. Jack looks at me in surprise.

"Let me hear your voice. Can't you hang on for a while longer?" Mum is almost pleading. I've rarely heard her like that. I am moved and press the phone harder against my cheek. But the house is so noisy that it feels like talking to a bunch of strangers instead of my mother.

"Not when you have the TV on like crazy." I say.

"Why are you jumping down my throat? TV is my life, because there's no human voice in the house for days on end. You should come back more often if you still have a heart....." Then

she grumbles about other things, which I do not bother to listen to. I begin to lose my patience and drift away. I don't know the rest of her speech. Plus, Jack is now frowning and flipping through the menu over and over. I know this is a signal. He's running out of his patience too.

Finally, I cut her short and say, "Mum, I've really got to go now. I've another call coming in. Bye." I hang up without waiting for her reply. This is not the first time I lie to her.

Mum won't change. The only times she did have the TV off was when I was preparing for the HKCEE and HKAL exams. Since then, Mum has never made any exceptions.

"Hey sweetie, what happened?" Jack wakes me up from my recollection.

"Nothing." I say.

Jack and I have a wonderful time. The food is superb. Jack always makes me happy, unlike Mum. I forget about the call completely. We hang out till midnight.

It is not until I return to my hostel that I realize it's Mum's birthday. I used to sing a birthday song to her this day every year. The clock has just ticked twelve. "Too late to phone her anyway," I think. I know this is just an excuse. I am afraid of something which I can neither name nor describe. But I am afraid, that's certain. This unknown fear is like a coiling snake within me, ready to spring up any time.

Jack has dumped me for another girl. There is no sign at all. Can you believe it? He simply walks out on me. This is a hard blow. It's like part of me has been ripped away, without mercy. I drift around like a ghost, day and night. I keep on returning to the place where he left me, hoping against hope to find his stout back, his familiar shadow in the sea of strangers. I am suffocated by my yearning for him. Jack leaves nothing behind, except the tickling addiction to cigarettes. I wish I can find him back in every puff of smoke I exhale. My mouth clings to cigarettes so much that I find eating hard to stand. I toss fitfully in bed, only to wake up with a renewed anguish of my loss. This has been going on for a month until I receive a warning letter from the English Department of the University. It says if I fail to turn in the assignments before the semester ends, I won't be able to graduate. What have I been doing? I realize I must catch up. I must have my life back. But it's hard, very hard indeed. I still feel weighed down by unhappiness. I lack the strength to stand up again.

I'm in my hostel, alone. I try hard to concentrate on my study but fail. Books, books, books. Not a single human in sight. This is my final year. I know I must catch up in order to graduate. But loneliness is distracting. It eats you up, bit by bit. You can't toss it away. You can't shake it off. Imagine the horror of growing old under the spinster spell within four walls! I want someone

beside me, someone who really cares for me. I call my buddy Dana. The phone keeps on ringing. I try again and again. Finally I give up. People just disappear when you need them most. It's not until then that I think of my mother, the woman who brought me into this world, the only one who is dear to me. It's already one in the morning. I pick up the receiver and dial home. It takes me a short while to recall my home number. I cannot remember how long it's been since I called. It's always Mum who phones me. The phone rings for a moment before I hear Mum's voice, husky and sleepy, "Hi, who's that?" she asks. I can hear a Cantonese pop song of the eighties. Mum must have fallen asleep on the sofa with the TV on.

"Mum, it's me." I say finally, my voice trembling and my face in my hands.

"Ah Man, what's wrong?" Mum must have some sort of radar, even on the phone.

"Jack's dumped me. I feel so helpless. I don't know what to do." By the time I finish, the receiver is already drenched.

"Who's Jack?" Mum is puzzled. Immediately she understands and exclaims, "You've never told me! You little devil!"

I remain silent.

"Hang on for a moment," Mum says.

"Mum must be angry with me," I think. Then it's all quiet

on the other side of the phone. Mum has the TV switched off.

Mum returns and says, “Listen, Ah Man. I’ve no idea about what happens between you and whoever it may be. But you’ve got to face this: If a man leaves you in this way, he doesn’t love you any more. Nor will he ever come back. You’ve got to be tough because you can’t control what happens to you in life. Just look ahead and move on.”

“I’ve tried so hard! I’ve tried so hard! I have nothing now.” I almost scream.

“You still have me, always.” Mum says calmly.

“But I’ve lost all my strength. I can never...”

Mum interrupts me and says, “Listen, Ah Man. If a woman at my age can get over the loss of a husband, there’s no reason you can’t recover. You’re twenty-one only. You still have a future ahead of you.”

“But Mum, if you’ve really bounced back, why do you keep on waiting for Dad on his birthday?”

“On the day he walked out, I knew he would never come back. You think I’m crazy from the way I pretend he’s still with us? I tell you, this is just a trick to drag you home. Forgive me, my child. I only have you in my life. I need your company.”

“You are *really* cruel, Mum.”

“I didn’t expect to be so successful. I think I could become

an actress for that.”

“You certainly could.” We both laugh. I rub my swollen eyes with the back of my hand. “I see your point, Mum. As Charles Baudelaire says, we won’t ‘beg a tear from the world’.”

“Who’s Charles Baudelaire? You know I don’t understand English, not even a word.”

I can picture Mum frowning on the other end. Mum hates me using English in front of her. By the time Mum was exposed to English, she was seriously deaf. Plus, she was forced to quit school and go to work when she was fourteen.

“He’s French.” I say immediately.

“Well, think of it this way: If you won’t beg a tear, you can at least drown the world with your own.” I laugh in spite of myself.

“Ah Man, see what we’ll do. Go straight to bed and get some sleep. Don’t hang up. If you need anything, just speak to the phone. I’ll be right there.”

I feel safe and secure. That night I sleep soundly.

It’s sunny the next morning. I wake up with the receiver beside me. I pick it up and listen to it intently. Mum’s asleep. I can hear her snoring. I think of last night and it feels strange. It

was the first time Mum has “seen” me cry ever since that incident. I once swore Mum would never see my tears again. That was five years ago, when I was in Secondary Six, when we still had a man in our house.

Mum and I almost fought because of the TV. I told her I wished she were totally deaf. In that way she would not have tortured me with all the TV noises. Mum raised her hand, ready to strike and knock me down. Within a split-second her hand stopped stone dead in the air and she said, “If I really strike, you’ll be deaf like me. Like the way my mother slapped me and ruined the rest of my life. I was only ten then. One blow only! How easy!”

I was in the street before I realized, running and running. I didn’t know where I was going. I didn’t know when I would stop. I just wanted to escape. It was already midnight. The air was spiky with coldness. I was in my nightgown and slippers, running at full speed. The road was like an endless ribbon. I thought this would go on forever. Finally, I stopped and leaned against a lamppost, panting from exhaustion. How could that be? I was shivering from my cold sweat. Then I slid down, sat on the road and cried like a lost child. It was already daybreak when Dad found me. He coaxed me and tried to drag me home. I didn’t let him. He had to lift me up and carry me all the way back. I punched and scratched and kicked. But he didn’t budge. That was when Dad still cared.

When I returned home I had a high fever. I slept fitfully, tossing in bed all night. I kept on having nightmares, nightmares of a gigantic ear with a broken eardrum. Then torrents of blood flooded and drowned me. Dad never forgives Mum for that, like the way I would never forgive granny. From then on I swore I would never shed a tear in front of Mum.

Some noise on the phone jerks me awake. Mum is stirring on the other side of the phone.

“Good morning, Mum.” I greet her awkwardly.

“Feeling better now?” Mum asks in her yawn.

“Mum, I want to ask you something.” I don’t know why I suddenly have the courage to face it.

“Well, what’s that?”

“Mum, do you... do you remember what happened... what happened to you when... when you were ten?” I stammer, trying to find the best way to put it.

Dead silence. I can hear my heart beat.

“How can I ever forget! But I forgive.” At last Mum breaks the silence and my fear.

After that I’m not afraid any more. I’ve beaten the snake inside me.

Mum and I are packing things at home. The TV is on, as

usual. Boxes are everywhere. I'm moving into an apartment after my graduation. I've rented a truck to deliver me as well as my belongings to my new nest. The truck is waiting right outside our building. Mum insists on helping me with the packing and all the manual labour.

“Goodness! I never knew you had so many books.” Mum says when she's cramming the last book into a cardboard carton. There are ten boxes altogether, all books. She glides her finger over the book ridge and says, “It's been so long I haven't touched a single book. Don't understand one word in English. If only I had the chance.....” she fails to continue.

We are now on the driveway right in front of our building. It's a windy day. Mum's in a blue blouse and a pair of tight black jeans. She has put on a lot of weight these days. Somehow I think her body is sagging with the heavy burden of time.

“Why don't you move back home and live with me? The rent is *so* expensive. I really don't know what's going on in your mind.” Mum shakes her head slowly when the driver is lifting the boxes onto the truck.

“Listen, Mum, you and I can no longer live under the same roof. Our lifestyles are too different. I need a lot of space and quietness. Plus, I love reading a lot. It's nobody's fault. I hope you'll understand.”

“I and my own daughter can't live in the same house

together. Isn't life an ironic joke?" She forces a bitter smile.

"Mum, I want you to know that you're not losing me. I care about you as much as you about me. I'll come back to see you because this is the place where I've grown up. I still consider this my home, no matter how noisy it is."

Mum heaves a sigh of resignation, "I know all along. I knew this day would come on your first day of school, when I was carrying your tiny schoolbag on the way to the kindergarten. Only I didn't know you would go that far."

"Mum....." I bite my lips, not knowing what to say.

"Wait a minute, Ah Man! Your hair's entangled with the necklace. Turn around and let me fix it." Mum takes off my necklace and unties the knot, pulling out strands of black hair from it. I've been wearing this necklace since I was a baby. The necklace becomes a bit short as I grow up. She puts it on for me again. My long hair is ruffled by the wind. Mum insists on brushing it for me, right here on the street. As far as Mum's concerned, I'm a permanent child who can't take care of herself properly. Mum fumbles in her handbag but can't find a hairbrush. So she brushes my hair with her bare fingers over and over. Every stroke is like the strumming of a harp. I close my eyes, enjoying the moment. When Mum finishes, she smiles with satisfaction, the satisfaction from accomplishing a great task.

"Thank you." I say. The driver has finished loading the

boxes. He's waiting. "I have to go now. Goodbye, Mum."

Mum wants to hug me but I jerk back. If she comes close enough, she will definitely smell the odour of cigarettes in me. Mum has enough to stand in life already. To my surprise, Mum doesn't seem to be hurt by my strange behaviour. Instead, she pats my head gently. This reminds me of the days when I was small. In those days whenever I was bullied by my classmates, I would bury my head in Mum's belly or tuck at her sleeve, crying whilst complaining. Mum would then pat my little head and tell me not to be afraid. At last I land on the truck. Mum stands on the same spot and waves me off.

When the truck is about to go, Mum winks at me and says, "Ah Man, whenever you feel like smoking, drink some juice." Mum knows! She must have the nose of a hound.

That night, I'm exhausted from all the unpacking. My apartment is on the fifth floor, looking out on a park. It's very quiet now. Then I hear faint laughter, the pure, genuine laughter of a child. I look out of the window. A girl is playing on the swing, with her short sticky legs dangling in the air. Her parents are standing behind her and pushing the swing together. The girl must be less than five. I gaze at her for a long time, wondering what life was like when Mum was about that age, when she was healthy and happy, when there were still endless possibilities ahead of her.....

A Thought Distorted

Danielle Mei-mei Ehrnfelt

Do not expect verve from the void,
Nothing left by one eye blind.
It is all done, over and destroyed.

A reflection, unsolvable as a lipid,
Tough as the hardest rind.
Do not expect verve from the void.

A sentiment in a mentality devoid,
Never present still repeatedly confined.
It is all done, over and destroyed.

A reminiscence, relived and enjoyed,
Then strings of nerves, intertwined.
Do not expect verve from the void.

The inner self is deployed,
A strap around the arms unwinds.
It is all done, over and destroyed.

Emptiness strives, self-employed.
Now dead, all of it maligned.
Do not expect verve from the void,
It is all done, over and destroyed.

New World Part II

(in response to Derek Walcott's "New World")

Mandy Chan Sze Man

Surprises are often sour,
so who still wants one more?
O yes, the sweaty and haggard Adam
staring in the distance
at something
he could no longer see.

He shuffled around
in the New World,
too tired of hearing Eve's weeping
for the sin that was, originally, her own.

The snake? It stripped
and dressed itself in human skin.
The snake delegated to Cain
a holy task:
to bring the world the first drop of blood.
It would not let God take a role.

Under the dazzling golden sun
Adam frowned and wiped his face

full of freckles.
The sun-burn kept him tingling;
his face twisted with pain.

Thenceforth, all souls
were damned with disgrace,
to feel life at the edge of death,
joy squeezed from suffering.

The loss of Eden could never
make a profit.
So Adam had another idea:
Kill the snake and make *his* New World.
To surprise God.
Now, let's talk
business.

If

Mandy Chan Sze Man

If a pig can devour 30 miles of green grass,
please reserve a flower for me. If
the universe evolves around the earth, please
make me the centre of this evolution; If
the frosted window panes are to vanish and melt
into the River Nile, please
let it carry my crushed dreams down the stream and
cradle them in its river-bed. If
the Great Sphinx roars and stands up, like a cat, please
e-mail me a picture; If
we are only a lump of clay,
burn me and make me concrete, please.

My Own Garden

Priscilla Ng Yuen Ting

I walk along a little, muddy passage bordered by dwarf bushes. The leaves on both sides brush against my waist; their limpid dewdrops drench my clothes. It feels chilly and fresh. The air, smelling of soil and grass, is sober and calm. Rustic trees stand crooked in shadows behind me. Eventually the winding path leads me into an open area. Blends of milky light descend. Seconds later, the whole land, previously steamed up, glows to an exquisite garden. I see plants everywhere. Big, peculiar flowers in red, pink, yellow, pale blue, bright purple, and all sorts of vibrant colors, are blooming with energy. There're also twisting vines clambering up gigantic pillars of infinite height, sucking nutrients from the sky. The melted sun then sheds itself onto the vegetation, polishing the soft sheen on every leaf. Translucent shades form variegated patterns that dance on the ground and swing and swerve with a mild breeze. I decide to step inside and join this grand occasion of the celebration of life. Butterflies accompany me and soon dissolve in a sea of roses. I advance further along an alley with rings of pergolas decorated with cascades of bluebells above my head, until I reach a wooden door and get a glimpse of another walled garden. It's a huge square lawn with interesting statues on it. A crystal-clear fountain is in the middle, producing crisp sounds. Seagulls float in the evening

sky. The sea must be near. Probably ruins of some old stone castle too. This is another place, quiet and secluded. I squat on my heels on the lawn. And the wind, redolent of the eternal swirl of time and space, blows vigorously and causes arrays of billows on the grassland. I'm here all my life.

I would have enjoyed a lot more in that fairyland if the busy trolleys in the corridor had not produced so much interruptive noise. I touched the cozy grass, and I tried hard to feel the breeze and sniff the sweet air. I managed to force some continuation of my stay there until I sensed two nurses were coming. I turned my back to the door side. But as soon as they started spreading and folding my blankets abruptly, I had to wake up.

I was fiercely reluctant to leave my garden, which hardly exists now. After thirty years or so, every flower inside must have wilted, and everything been destroyed. But I mean I did own a garden. My garden kept flourishing even though I lived in this cramped Hong Kong city. It was a garden in Scotland. I owned a Scottish garden once. I did.

The nurse is filling in my medical record. Her eyelids lower to two indifferent lines. She won't listen.

My parents said I should relax and have fun. They chose to send me abroad just a week after I left hospital, because they never had the time to look after me. And more because they hated my indolence and didn't want to see me lying in bed all day. After

all those disgusting pep talks, they insisted that nature in Scotland would do me good. And they were pretty sure I would be assigned to a good host family.

“All Westerners are nice,” my mother told me in the airport, “just a month away, don’t miss me.” I dragged my luggage with both hands into the departure zone, without looking back.

In the Perth Airport, the first words I exchanged with my newly-met host parents were that I wouldn’t get homesick.

“Good good good! We’re your parents now, and you’ll like Scotland, lassie,” James replied and held out his hand. He was a happy man, in his late forties but possessed a childish face. He smiled almost like a mischievous little devil.

“How would you like us to call you?” His wife Jenny asked me. She was nearly ten years older than James, but she kept a terribly good figure. She looked great with make-up and in sexy dress. Her reserved talking manner bestowed a noble air upon her.

“Ah Lin,” I said.

“Ah... L...lin... Okay!” A crispy smile spreads across James’ face.

“Wong Shui Lin... Wong Shui Lin...” My name is called. It’s the fat nurse distributing medicine from ward to ward.

The first morning I lingered in the town myself, he caught

sight of me and greeted me in a most unusual way. I was getting idle when suddenly I heard a man's voice shout my name. I looked around and was caught by the shrill noise made by a double-decker bus across the road. James was driving the bus. I found him inside – one of his hands blowing the horn violently, the other waving vigorously towards me. His impish grin warmed up the cool air.

James liked to use baby talk to me, and he loved teaching me Scottish. Sometimes I became their laughing stock. Sometimes I couldn't help laughing at myself too. It was lots of fun when I firmly replied "aye!", or when I told Jenny that I was "foo as a coo" round the dining table.

Every night in the conservatory, the three of us lay back in our rocking chairs and chatted. Jenny enjoyed her after-dinner cigar and brandy, and James served me hot chocolate. Their eyes liked to rest upon me. Then one of those nights I felt the need to talk about something more profound. I gathered all my courage and started narrating my past. Until James reminded that we should all sleep, as he always did when the clock struck twelve: "I think it's baw-baw time, my dear".

Ounces of sunlight squeeze through the window screening into my room. I'm sure it's a good day outside.

"Good morning lassie! Jenny and I are taking you to Loch Lomond today, how does that sound?"

“We can’t wait another day, Ah Lin. See the lovely sky today.” Jenny handed me a huge knapsack with bottles of water, sandwiches, crisps and fruits in it.

We were standing in front of Loch Lomond. Facing the tranquil water, James told me things about his land and his people, stories of William Wallace and Robert the Bruce. He seldom turned solemn like that. For some time we stayed very quiet. Jenny crossed her arms and retreated to the shades under a sturdy tree, alone, pondering. The grande dame looked more sophisticated than ever with purplish sunglasses worn on her expressionless face. I came to see how the couple were connected with this pathetically beautiful history of blood and tears.

I hoped my reason for sadness was a mightier one rather than merely personal. But as I looked at the loch that was peppered with trickles of silver, those aching scenes just appeared out of the blinding glitter.

Kit had never told me why he didn’t even come to see me in the hospital he simply fled my friends said my love was suffocating him how why I was doing it for myself and he let me no one could believe it eight bottles of liquor drunk with two packs of painkillers and he let me one tablet at a time and he just sat watching me saying nothing I thought I had miscalculated

something he made me continue by doing nothing doing nothing except throwing my emptied bottles away with false anger repulsive bottles I emptied with pain but he didn't understand he waited for a finished bottle to dash it to pieces wasn't that a joke mind the passers-by I should have told him

There was a private garden in their house, just outside the conservatory. I seldom went there. I dared not to. In fact I never saw the couple in their garden, and mysteriously, the white curtains of the conservatory were always drawn, permitting no view of it. Once I got inside when James and Jenny were out shopping. I took the keys on the table and tried each in the lock until the conservatory's door creaked open. It was a deserted land, with wiry grass unevenly spread on the barren land. The few pink roses along the fences were fading. Rusted pergolas ran over my head. A sallow urn erected at the centre; it held tangles of dark, dry ivy. Below it an old grass-trimmer was half-soaked in the earth. I wasn't aware that my very shoes were daubed with mud too. When I got back into the house, I left dirty footprints on the carpet. I thought I couldn't conceal them from James and Jenny, though I feared I had made myself an unwelcome guest by stealing into the forbidden land.

“Oh don't be silly, Ah Lin. It's alright, we'll clean it up,”

Jenny responded when I apologized.

“Aye! It’s no difficult,” James sang, “easy peasy lemon squesy!”

“I entered your garden that...” I uttered.

“Ah the garden, that’s a bad bad place. I’ve been planning to prettify it,” James said.

“But you never get the time,” Jenny smirked at him.

“No, because I have to take care of my friend,” he made a grimace to me.

“I mean I’m sorry to get into the garden without your permission.”

“Now Ah Lin, you are part of our family. And this is your house,” James sounded serious this time, his eyes boring into me, “you can share everything here with us. Just be free, okay?”

In a late afternoon when Jenny was taking a rest, James sneaked out of her bedroom, came to me and whispered in my ear, “Get changed and we’re going to Edinburgh – to Arthur’s Seat.”

A miniature of the highlands in a busy city. A marvel so distant from me.

“Ah Lin, hurry up! We’re to climb the eight-hundred-foot-high volcanic plug. And we’re seeing the sunset there.”

An hour later we were at the highest point of Edinburgh. Just the two of us. Bathing in thin pillars of tender light, just below a changing and moving cloudscape, we appreciated an overview of the city. Under my feet everything glowed so bright, so lively, so unique in distinctive shapes and colors and patterns. I gasped; my eyes widened. Suddenly I was filled with the desire to survive. I felt I should want nothing else. Beside me, James' face was coated in sunset yellow; he seemed too big, too great, and too fine a man. A Scot. Brought up in nature. Happy. Unstained. I wondered how he would understand the world, and life.

“Hey I'm just twenty.” I murmured.

“Let's go.” James said, “It's getting cloudy.”

It rains. The weather is always fickle. But I forget how the rain feels. Somehow I just want to taste it, to have it to quench my thirst and moisturize my lips, my body.

It drizzled that morning. I had finished packing for hours. I sat on my bed, covered my whole self with the soft blanket. I shivered underneath. My mind was blank.

I listened to the rhythmic ticks when arrows of rain hit the zinc roof of the house. It was a song of departure. Awful, too awful for me. My heart sank. I couldn't breathe. I found it impossible to confront James and Jenny. It was 9 a.m.; I knew the time had to come anyway. I forced a smile and gathered some

false spirit in front of the mirror. But there was something within me I couldn't get rid of. I saw it in my eyes. I looked so weird.

But I hid no more. I came out of my room. Yet the couple were not in the lounge, nor in the dining room, nor in the kitchen. An unusual silence filled the house. I thought they had not woken up. Later when I came to the conservatory and spread open the curtains, I found them.

Across the hard glass wall, just beneath me, they were sitting on a stile leading to the garden, their backs facing me. I was shocked. They feared not the rain. Jenny was smoking a cigar. James was playing with his hands. Suddenly he drew her close to him, embraced her and kissed her. Her face softened in his bosom, and she let his stout fingers massage her blonde hair. I couldn't believe my eyes, though this had been too familiar to me. In a second, the entire world's bitterness came back to me. I dropped the curtains. I didn't move for a while. Nothing mattered... got used to it, to be forlorn, to be cheated –

You silly boy why don't you just let me press the little cutter on my wrist with a little more determination that would have been a nice finish my hands were grasped so hard it hurt a fraud all a fraud he said he went to buy me something that would be a surprise Kit you deceiver liar brought along the men in white who pressed me

down stabbed me with needles dragged me into ambulance away unconscious laid and spread and tied to the table rubber tube inserted through my mouth wails amidst chokes and vomits Kit help no he appeared no more my blood and plasma got nearly all sucked as I waited to no avail day after day Kit come see me please no he never appeared –

I left without the couple's notice. I looked around the house. Everything seemed so estranged; so fake to the point of melting, disappearing. The wooden clock, the framed pictures of the couple on the wall, the fireplace, the wine glasses in the cupboard. I touched the sofa; traces of happy moments, of togetherness with James struck my fingertips. I thought I must retreat into my bedroom to cry.

Gentle knocks startled me. "Ah Lin, have you woken up?" It was Jenny. She called a few more times and the door opened.

"Ah Lin..." Jenny sat on my bed, her hands reached for my shoulders.

"Is my friend ready for breakfast?" James peeped through the door. He then lowered his voice. "Oh, you've packed everything already."

I couldn't help throwing myself into his open pair of arms

as he came up to me. I held him tightly, my breasts pressed against his chest. Time was frozen for us. And I wouldn't let it go. Then his wife leaned forward, kissed my face softly and wiped my tears away.

“We can always write to each other,” she said.

“But I miss you all, and I miss this house, I can't see it or feel it anymore...never be here...” My teardrops wet James' light yellow shirt. “Don't you forget me!”

“Listen, Ah Lin, Jenny and I were just talking about replanting our garden. You like it?”

“Yep.”

“That's right. We can grow plants for you too. We will take pictures and send them to you. You'll see how the garden develops, how seedlings flower. We are not that far apart.”

I can still recall James' enigmatic smile at our departure.

I spent half a day in a shopping mall, searching for the nicest greeting card I could find, examining its every replica available, and choosing the one with no blemish or fold. Back home, I drafted again and again what to write. After double-checking my grammar and spelling, I crafted my message for them in my prettiest handwriting. I hid no emotions. I told them how precious and dear they were to me, and how they had healed me and renewed me.

Three weeks later, I received the first picture of my remote garden, which was accompanied by some brief notes from Jenny. I knew it would come eventually, though time had been terribly harsh to pass. So they didn't break their promise. They brought me the garden.

Dead vines got cleared away from the brick wall, beyond which those haggard trees now stood slim and graceful. Wild purplish heathers and petty thorny gorses first came along by wind to fill the crevices of the stile, and crowd about outside the conservatory. At the centre the mossy urn got polished and was surrounded by a circular bed of ploughed-through soil. New fences were built to separate the verdant lawn from the planting area. My garden was neat and clean, like a newborn baby nakedly alive.

Kit didn't seem to be that important to me. He seldom came into my mind when every month I got their letter. A picture in every single month. A contact with Scotland. I could sense how my own garden was growing each day, each second, as if I was growing with it too.

More crocuses each time. And more snowdrops and roses, and rhododendrons, and lilies, and so on.

But fewer words Jenny wrote me.

The pictures – the only evidence of my garden, they must

have turned yellow. Where are the six of them now? I forget. Locked in this bottom drawer beside me? Or are they at my forsaken home?

Why things never went as well as I expected I no longer heard from James and Jenny after just half a year nothing arrived so many sleepless nights I squeezed my pillow and quilt and scratched my hands but can you imagine how I was haunted by dreams that were too sweet and tender but far away from me I felt I was dying wilting there was something inside me desperate for nutrients for help for rainwater or sunshine or whatever it was I didn't understand an acute fever a piercing cold maybe there was this thing inside I just couldn't get rid of couldn't weed out couldn't pull off

Yes I know. I left them on my writing desk before I opened the window of my bedroom and made this leap in the dark.

“Did you have a good sleep?” A young nurse interrupts. Her older companion comes to check my blood pressure.

Across the monitor the empty vase is there as always. “I feel dry.”

“I get you some water.”

“No. Can you wheel me out?”

*“Are you feeling okay?” She leans forward and watches me.
“You’ve got too excited.”*

*“Not today. See how worn-out she looks,” the old one
speaks to her colleague.*

*“Why? I’ve been here all my life! I want some fresh air...
just go for a round in the park and...”*

*“Be patient, my dear. The doctor will see you first. Oh I
nearly forget – you get something very very special today.”*

“What can be so special? Just wheel me out.”

“A letter.”

O Sweetheart! My Sweetheart!
**(Imitating Walt Whitman, “O
Captain! My Captain!”), in the voice
of my roommate’s girlfriend)**

Leon Wong Man Chun

O Sweetheart! my sweetheart! Your dirty clothes are cleaned;
The messy bed is rearranged - tidied, the rubbish on your desk is
removed;
The floor is white, it shines with light, the room returns to
tranquility,
While after the heavy chores, my legs lie tired and sink;
But O lover! lover! lover!
O comfortably you stay in your office,
Where under cool air-conditioning you watch the computer,
Leaving me to sweat and gasp.

Lover, I Let You Go

Leon Wong Man Chun

May I be a stone, as black granite
but I wouldn't be one, I'm only flesh.
Tears from my eyes.

Long have I waited for you to turn your face and
say my long-expected words,
but no, you turn your back and go.
This morning, the sky is clouded.

May I erase your name from the stone,
brush your name into smoke,
but your name still flashes inside me,
your image I'm trapped inside.

Without any goodbye, you walk away,
never getting any closer with me.
One more second, can you, please, stay?
Now you go, and I must let you go.
I wish that I'm a stone, upon it
I erase your name forever.

But now - tears from my eyes.

The Irreversible

Angel Li Ka-Yan

She wearily pressed the doorbell. She waited for 30 seconds until the door bell stopped ringing. It was a Thursday night and he should have been home. She was so exhausted she could not bring herself to press the doorbell one more time. She put her take-away on the floor and got her keys out. She had to drag herself into the apartment. She called his name under her breath and said that she was home, but nobody answered. The lights of the commercial buildings shone through the floor-to-ceiling windows, so she could see vaguely in the dark. She quickly downed the take-away. She left the container, the plastic bag and the spoon scattered on the table and proceeded to her bedroom to get her bathrobe which lay alone on their bed.

She lay in the bathtub, her body covered in the lavender bubble bath. She deserved a nice bubble bath. It had been a really long day. More than 12 hours. From 9am to 10pm. Non-stop work and dinner with clients who kept blowing cigarette smoke in her direction. It was irritating, but she had to take it all in, hoping to get the contract. She did not take a bite during dinner. She wanted to go home and watch TV with him, but she needed the contract too. Thank God they chose her company after a 3-hour struggle and it was worth the ordeal of smoke. Was it? She dipped her head into the bath.

She needed to indulge herself in a glass of pink rose tea. She sat by the floor-to-ceiling window, bending her knees. Her right hand sluggishly brought it closer to her face. She sniffed the aroma and breathed it out. She really loved the smell of the pink rose tea. So subtle. After a sip, she continued to hold the glass in her right hand, sort of placing it on her knees. She gazed at the view through the plume of vapour emitted by the hot tea, truly amazed. That was it. The reason why she rented that apartment. When she was shown that apartment, she was immediately drawn to the window and it provoked her urge to draw. Regaining the long-lost urge was a bizarre feeling - she was both thrilled and nervous. Thrilled for knowing her heart was not completely dead. Nervous about being reminded of her unforgivable betrayal.

That night, she decided to confront her fear. She put down the glass and walked to the study to get her kit out. The leather case containing her drawing tools was not very big, just the size of A3 paper. It was covered with a thin layer of dust. She wiped the dust off with her right hand. It felt so strange, yet familiar. She never let other people touch it. Not even him. Once, she was out with her leather case and it started raining out of the blue. She felt deeply responsible for the case. She wrapped it with her long jacket for fear it might get soaked. The case was a gateway for her to escape reality.

She went back to the window, the case on her left and the

glass on her right. The sky seemed different that night. The sky was reddish with several red streaks. He had said the red streaks signified a nice sunny day. He said that was what the British believed. She felt that she had to capture them on the drawing paper. She gazed at them for some time and started to visualise it in her head. She looked down and was about to make the first stroke. Her hand holding the crayon halted when it was 5mm from the paper. That did not feel right. The image was in her head, but she could not put it on the paper. She looked up again at the buildings and tried one more time. She failed. She took a deep breath, her eyes fixed on the view, her mind wondered where her instinct had gone. Maybe she was too tired to focus. She looked through the window so intensely that she began to see her faint reflection on the window. Through the blurry reflection, she saw the truth - she was not half as good as what other people saw in her. Her features were not that outstanding and there was not even an air of confidence. She looked away.

She took the glass with her and stood up, her back leaning against the window. The tea had cooled down. She knew it had a bitter taste; she took a sip anyhow. Something shiny invited her to look at its direction. She complied and approached it.

The shiny thing was her most-valued possession. She had won that trophy in an arts competition. It was different with that particular piece. She had painted a large piece of grassland in the

middle, with very tall trees on both sides. Nothing special at first glance. While she was working on it, she could imagine herself strolling on the grass, breathing the fresh air. She painted for five hours straight. Upon seeing the final product, she was delighted, yet a greater part of her felt sad. The grassland was beyond her reach, she thought. She reached out her left hand to touch the trophy, but she withdrew it very quickly. Her mother's voice appeared in her head. "I don't like this piece. Just some grass and trees. No liveliness at all. You should have drawn some people on the grass, like they're having a picnic or something." Since then, every picture of hers somehow included people.

Next to the trophy was another trophy. This one she won in a piano competition. She stared at it very hard, her eyes somewhat filled with disgust and scorn. For herself. Sweetie, it's time for piano practice, her mum would shout from the living room. She hated to be interrupted while she was painting in her room. Her private moment in her own little world. She hated playing the piano. She hated the long hours of practice. She felt trapped while playing the piano. She could not express her feelings in full swing, playing music from the scores. Her mother said it would be good for her. She kept playing.

The picture of her wearing the graduation gown and hat caught her eyes. Her heart cringed. She was wearing a subtle smile in the photo. There was something lacking in her eyes. She

never wanted a business degree. You need a business degree to have better prospects, said her mother. She did not want better prospects. She did not care about money. Her three years of college were, most of the time, a nightmare. She never opened the leather case that she had brought with her to the UK. She stashed it under her bed. She could not stand the sight of it as it reminded her of betrayal. Betrayal of her passion and her heart. Even a glance at it would be fatal.

On the left of the picture stood a mini painting in a tiny frame. She had almost forgotten it. He gave it to her on their first date. When she opened the gift, she was shocked and asked him why he chose that gift. He just shrugged his shoulders, saying he just got the feeling she was the artist-type. They had been friends for three months and she had never told him she loved drawing. She knew immediately that guy was different. In him, she could actually see herself. To be more exact, she could actually see her forgotten self. He studied animation, so, like her, he was an artist-type. All the books on his bookshelf were about animation. He had watched “Chicken Run”, one of his favourite movies, 154 times and it was still ongoing. When he was introduced to her through a mutual friend at a party, she was surprised at his shyness. He was very tall and slender, standing at least 185cm. His height and appearance seemed intimidating. She kept asking him all the questions. He had to gulp down his glass of Coke every time before answering her questions. She looked at him

attentively and he evaded her eyes. What she remembered most about him was the determination and devotion in his eyes when he was talking about his animation. He told her he would spend hours on a project. It could be tiring, or even exhausting, but he enjoyed the process. He said it was more like a liberation that took him to different places. Places where he could forget reality and where he could be himself more than elsewhere. It set him free and he could stretch his imagination, or rather, his wishes, beyond any boundaries. After telling her all that, he resumed his shy and quiet self and she deliberately diverted to another subject. Never had anyone expressed to her the beauty of art in such a familiar way. It pained her to know she could understand and relate to those words. It troubled her to realise somebody felt the same. It hurt her to recognise that somebody had the courage to live his passion.

She saw a picture of them taken on the shore in Brighton. It was on that day and on that shore that she told him she chose business over arts to make her mum happy. Her eyes were fixed at the horizon which was glistened with sunshine. In the corner of her eyes, she saw him looking at her. His gaze never left her. Who was there to make her happy? He asked. The question pierced her heart. So much and so bad that her eyes began to be filled with tears. The urge to cry suffocated her, but she was unable to cry. There was a sense of numbness and death in her heart. The question reverberated in her head. Who was there to make her

happy? She told him he made her happy. But he said it was different. He had foreseen it - her laughter and smiles were just an act to deceive others and herself. Deep down, there was a fragment of her heart that needed to be filled. He could not fill that hole, even though he wished he could. She finally looked in his direction. Once her eyes met his, she could not hold her tears any longer. The last time she cried was when she was informed that she got admitted to the business department. Her mum cried too. For her mum, those were happy tears. For her, those were tears of agony and doom. She was mad at herself. How could she desert her passion just like that? How could she be so cold-hearted? She could recall every single detail. She sat in front of the desk. Before her was the application form for Warwick University. She stared at the heading so hard that the words became blurry and she was lost in her meditation. She did not want to fail her mother as she had been working very hard to bring her up. Being a single mother was no easy task...

Her wandering thoughts were interrupted by the opening of the door. She turned her head from the photo to the door. He was back. His appearance had not changed much. He was not much different from the guy she had met at the party five years ago. Work had not destroyed him at all. Instead, it matured him. Every day after work, he would fill her up with his work. He would tell her that he had come up with a new story. In no time, he would be transformed into a child in front of her eyes, getting very excited

over his animation. She would listen to him, wearing a genuine but weak smile. She was truly happy for him; still, she envied him. She envied his passion for animation, work and life. She never told him about her work. Never. Not that there was not much to talk about. Certainly, the irritating clients and her demanding boss. Just that telling him would make her feel small.

She was still standing in front of the cupboard, facing him. He did not say a word. He sat on the sofa and took off his shoes, as if he needed to channel all his concentration on untying his shoelaces. Not a glance at her. She knew exactly why.

She worked up the nerve to greet him, “Sweetie, why did you get off work so late today?”

He did not respond and brushed past her to the kitchen to get a Coke. Her eyes followed him and she remained still on the spot. She could not move an inch. His coldness shocked her. They seldom quarreled. He was always the one who said “sorry”, even though she was the one throwing the tantrum. She never threw a tantrum with her mum. She really wanted to throw a tantrum when her mum told her to practise playing the piano. She never did though. She did not care to let him see her ugly side. He brought out the “childish” side out of her which she had tried very hard to suppress as a child. It was the first time he had ignored her. She thought he was still mad at her. She wanted to play dumb and ask him why he was still mad, but those words

could not come out from her mouth. People always admired her confidence in the conference room. She was articulate and never got tongue-tied, even before the “big shots”. People thought it was confidence; she deemed it indifference. She could not care less and thus she was capable of standing in the middle of the conference room calmly. It was different - she cared a great deal about him, about them. She felt guilty too. She knew why he was still mad. His last question resonated.

He asked her that question twice over dinner the day before. It was her 30th birthday and they celebrated it in the restaurant where they first dated. Technically, their FIRST DATE in Hong Kong since they came back from the UK. He was acting pretty weird. He looked different. He was dressed in a suit. His usual clothing was a plain sweatshirt, a pair of jeans with several small holes and a pair of sneakers. She could not help but feel out of place. She was still dressed in her business attire. She could not make it back to their apartment to change as her boss wanted her to finish a proposal. She wanted to tell him she was having dinner with her boyfriend, but refrained. She ended up being 30 minutes late. He was so deep in his own thoughts he could not see her entering the restaurant, with his hand clutching something in his right pocket. Upon seeing her, he was caught off guard and stood up very nervously, wearing a subtle yet exclusive smile. It was just like the first time they met. He planted a kiss on her cheek. Though a light one, it was filled with appreciation, tenderness

and even pampering. For the first time that day, she was able to relax, letting her guard down.

That did not last long. Their rare private moment was disrupted by the ringing of her cell phone. He looked at her, with a gaze seeming to urge her to resist answering it. His intense gaze also appeared to urge her to treasure their moment. She did not comply. She answered the phone and it was her boss. He needed her right back in the office to amend the proposal. She told him she really wanted to stay, but she had to go. She said she was sorry. It was not the first time. He had been bailed out on many times before. He had been tolerant because he loved her so much he could not bring himself to get angry. That day was different. Why could she not have the courage to refuse her boss's request? How could she tolerate indifference towards life? He expected a lot more from her. When he first met her at the party, he sensed something different about her. She was very chatty, but he felt she was just concealing her hollowness with the heavy amount of words. While she was talking, an inexplicable sort of energy radiated from her body. She obviously had a passion. He could tell from her look when he was talking about his animation. Part of him wanted to help her unveil her courageous side. He could not hold it any more and asked her where her courage was. She was struck speechless.

She was wrong. All along, she naively thought he took her

to a haven where she did not have to worry about expectations. To be more precise, others' expectations of her. She forgot he had expectations of her too. It was another kind of expectation...Her mum's expectations confined her to a cubicle where she could not do what she wanted. They made her feel trapped and drained as her passion was sucked out of her against her will. His expectations demanded the opposite. He expected her to break free from the cubicle imposed by her mum and her boss. His sole expectation was that she would wake up to the reality and that she would have the courage to fly.

Standing in the middle of the living room, she still could not get his question out of her head. His voice interrupted her thoughts. He burst into sobs and whispered faintly he was sorry. She kneeled down in front of him, maintaining an eye-to-eye level with him. She apologised. She was sorry her vulnerability had hurt him. She was sorry she was not courageous enough to take the leap. She was sorry it had taken so long for her to realise that.

He did not respond. He continued to sob, saying he should not have pushed her. He had intended to ask her to marry him. He got the ring out from his pocket. It was just too late.

She replied that it was not too late and that she would do anything to make him happy. No response again. Amid his sobs, he said he should not have let her leave for the office by herself.

He should have driven her back to the office. None of this would have happened...

All of this puzzled her. What was he talking about? What happened, she asked. He would do anything to have her back. Those were his words. He stood up and strode to the floor-to-ceiling window. Her feet were still glued to the spot. She looked around the living room and it looked different. Where was her leather case? It was not there in front of the window. Where was the glass of pink rose tea? It was gone too. Where were they? Her mind was thrown into a whirlwind and the images of the past kept flashing in her head. Playing in the park...Painting in her room...Her mum listening to her play the piano...Dozing off in the lecture theatre during a business class...Meeting him at the party... Strolling along the shore in Brighton...Moving in the new apartment with him... Their last fight in the restaurant...A car speeding in her direction...He shouting her name and clutching her right hand... His tears streaming down his face...

Everything became clear to her. He was not mad at her. He could not see her. Not at all. She wished she had had the courage to take the leap for her passion. She wished she had cared more about herself than her mum. She wished she had quit her job. She wished she had realised sooner.

None of these really mattered...

Hear the Air

Kathy Kong Ho Yan

You' re dancing in the world of timbre,
Soft as soap bubbles crowded in the bathtub,
Ringing like marbles shaking in a glass bottle,
Your hands're sliding along the black and white river,
Hovering at some tones:

Waving notes jerk up to the sky
Hastening like a scared horse in fog
But some are lying on a cloud like a drowsing girl.
Suddenly, they are loud as a furious thunderstorm
howling in a summer night,
Losing energy to the boiling land.
They become quiet as the breeze humming for the autumn day.

Till the last note loses its last breathe, it has melted in the air.
The keys are dropped into the embrace of the moon,
Frozen for thousands of years.
I can hear the air.

My Prince

Chris So Man Wai

In the daytime
I am ordinary under the sunshine.
Bees hover over us.
We all know their preference.
Amid the pink, maroon and azure,
I stand without nectar,
white, invisible.
Even bees do not like me.

You are the only one
who spares a few seconds
to take a closer look at me.
Every day.

Your blood stains my body,
saddening the night.
I hate my thorns which
hurt you.

The falling sharp razors from the sky
cut me terribly.
I lie fatigued
with crimson stains and tears in mud.

In Leaves No Step

Dedicated to Stella, who did not live to read my words.

I had to let you go.

Lee Lemort

Stockholm, March 16th 2005

Danielle Mei-Mei Ehrnfelt

The silence in her head is broken by the sound of breaths. She realizes that it is hers as her eyes are fixed at the water below. Small ripples disturbing the placidity of the liquid.

do you remember we stood by pitch dark water against my cold skin to wash away insignificant words fragments of them sinking to the bottom when some lingered on the surface panic I tried to seize them in my hands paralyzed and plastic wrapped around my fingers texture of ink on my bare skin I lost you laughed as my skin hit water and I did not have the choice they were all insignificant

She continues home in measured steps. Outside the door she halts. Small streaks of condensed water seep between her lips. In the park behind her, murky trees arise, twigs suspended from thick branches dressed in frost like pearls.

When she walks into her apartment she is met with a nearly empty room enclosed in dense shadows. Her presence tears molecules of immense quietness apart. Tears bearing his name burn rimy cheeks, keys fall to the floor. Hunched on the floor she

is motionless for some time, then lights a cigarette.

She sinks down on the couch with a glass of wine and crispy white pages in her hands. With a pen she starts crossing out black letters, writing notes in margins. Blank spaces filled with faded ink. She wakes up at five. The wine glass is empty, the pages are on the floor. Treading into her bedroom with effort, she lies down on sheets turned yellow. Moonlight knocks on the window. She closes her eyes and remains in fetus position.

*

Empty office, grayish walls protecting against the blackness outside. Stella opens the last drawer, taking out a manuscript. It leaves no step in compact letters. Intense weight on her fingertips. She slowly turns it over, looking at the name. The second manuscript. His words are printed on each leaf. A door slams and she looks up.

“I forgot my papers.” Peter strides through the room. “Staying long?” he says, leaning over his desk.

“Not for long.” Stella puts the manuscript back in the drawer. “See you at the art opening?”

Half empty glasses with red lipstick marks. A light mist of cigarette smoke cloaks the gallery. At the other side of the room, Peter is talking to a man in a striped scarf. The man leans against the windowsill, looking downwards, nodding. Stella swallows the

last wine; head feeling faint as she staggers towards them.

“I’m leaving.” She lights another cigarette. The smoke hangs in the air as she smiles at the man in the scarf.

“Carl, this is Stella, we work together at the publishing house.”

Carl looks at her with tilted head, reaching out to touch her hair. Stella withdraws.

“You have ash in your hair.” He lets a strand of her hair glide between his fingertips. “It’s gone.”

Stella smiles warily. “Thanks.”

A luster of traffic lights in intersections penetrates the glass of the cab. The sound of braking wheels in wet snow. The seatbelt is tense over her chest, rubbing against her ribs.

will I survive inside you

The resonance of her unlocking door saturates the air, echoing from wall to wall. In the kitchen her body folds. Guts are sucked towards her spine and she falls. Shortness of breath. Rain lashing against asphalt.

fragment of words on my skin

A dim telephone signal in the background. Crouching on the floor she stretches out her thin arm, grasping the cell phone.

“I just wanted to make sure you got home.” Peter’s

composed voice.

“Yeah, I’m ok.” Fluid welling up to the rims of her eyes.

“Are you crying, Stella?” Her name persists in midair.

As the voice on the other end dies, she walks to the window. The clear complexion of the glass reflects a vision of her. In the park on the opposite side she sees an older man seeking invisible flowers. He slowly bends down and picks them in soaked snow and holds them protectively in his hand. He lives across the street. Stella has seen him putting them in a fragile vase, filling it up with water.

“You’re picking beautiful flowers today.”

Her skin is moist as she crawls into her bed. Moonlight piercing her eyes. She unfolds the blinds and a pattern of light envelops whitened walls and ceiling. She slants them; the room is embraced in a gray film. Lying on her stomach by the edge of the bed. Stella spots a fly. It is dry and frail, shriveled legs pointing upwards. As she blows on it, it sails over floorboards.

“You’ll find your way out one day.”

*

The murmur turns quieter as people leave the bar. Stella leans on the bar, manuscript in front of her. Inside her head cyclical sounds.

repetition of

“Stella.” Carl’s hand on her shoulder. “Nice seeing you again. Can I sit down?”

“Sure.” Mouth to glass, red wine slithering in the creases of her lips.

“A whiskey please.” He smiles at the bartender. “I just got a location for

my mouth an isolator as you spoke your words that

“and I used an amazing fabric for the

I cannot hear in the silence when you ruined my way of forming

“the fashion show will be in a week and

your words and manuscript fragments of me wrote me into words that now form

“and it would be nice if you came.” Carl sips his whiskey. On the inside of the glass the thick fluid mounts. He scrapes ashes from his cigarette on the edge of ashtray.

“Your scarf’s on the floor.” She picks it up and as she hands it to him her fingertip brushes against his wrist. Warmth.

Carl’s apartment is cold. Dense drapes cover the windows, floating on the floor. Exterior winter rain and a distant tinkling of glasses from the kitchen. Walls expand like barriers around them.

Arm around waist, forcing bodies together. Another room. Skin to sheets, skin to skin.

my body is silent as yours

Lips to neck and collarbones. A hard whisper audible. Skin against tissues. Silence.

I lost you when

*

A dry rain sweeps the windows of the office. A car accident. Someone forgot a turn signal. Red is mixed with water on the cracked windscreen. Stella sits by her desk, staring into the mist covering her eyes. Peter walks in with reluctant steps.

“He’s here. To talk about his script.” Hands in pocket. “He wants to see you. If it’s ok?”

“Tell him. I’m not here.”

“I thought you...” he says, sitting down on her desk.

“I just don’t want to see him.” An enforced smile. Peter leaves.

She hears his voice in the corridor. A door shuts. Silence. Putting on her scarf and coat, she leaves the office, running past the scene of the accident. Every molecule in her body burns. A visualization of him passes her retina.

your words are the ones I cannot speak or form in

*

“Stay the night.” Carl stroke her arm. Goosebumps. “I want to wake up with you.” Her skin wears his fingerprints.

“I have to go.”

*

“I read Lee’s *In leaves no step*.” Peter takes a cigarette from Stella’s pack. “Stop itching your hands.” Her hands are dry and red. “Did you read it?”

“Where’s my coffee?” She turns around, searching for the waitress.

“I sense you’re one of the characters.” He inhales the smoke.

could not be with anyone because of your black letter written on my skin and

“Hmm,” Stella says, picking her nails.

“What’s going on, Stella? You seem...distant.”

“I have a lot of work. We’re still waiting for a novel from the printer.”

“Is it true he never told you he loved you?”

momentous words

“He never loved me.” Black coffee on the table. Glossy

surface reflecting her hand as she seizes the cup. “I was quiet.”
and our babies remained forgotten neglected in glistening silence
at least as mine in water trying to

A puddle on concrete floor as snow melts from her shoes.
Her hands are under the table, a nail beating on plastic surface.
She looks out of the window. Dark intrudes early, rubber soles
packing new fallen snow. A strand of hair falling in her face and
she looks at Peter and smiles.

Soft flakes of immense snow fall from a darkened sky, icicles
descend from edges of rooftops. Outside the door, a key gets
stuck in the lock.

“Did the lock jam?” Stella turns around, seeing Carl
wrapped in his stripped scarf.

“It happens.” She pulls out the key forcefully, opening the
door. “It’s cold outside. Want to come upstairs?”

They sit on the window ledge, looking out over the park. A
leaking tap in the kitchen. Across the street an empty vase in the
window.

“I like being around you.” He slightly touches her neck.
remembering the lies and words and

“The flowers in the case in that window are really
beautiful.” She points and silently smiles. Chin to knee.

“The vase is empty.” He looks at her resting eyes on the floor. “Can I stay here tonight?”

The dim atmosphere in the bedroom slips through the door, an immense mist covering the floor as a casing. Stella dips her hand in it. Cold.

will I survive beside you

He sleeps beside her. She slightly touches his shoulder.

“You have to leave.”

Stella lies alone in her bed as moonlight bends around her vast silhouette. She falls asleep with a black hole in her skin.

*

She is sitting beside him in a black cab, plastic seats. He looks at her, his fingers intertwined with hers. She senses his breath by her ear. Soundless breath. Droplets of moisture stick to her skin, forming letters, words. Droplets grow heavy, sliding down her neck. Water. His words become hers. Cars passing by outside. A traffic light vanishes; a streetlight replaces the emptiness.

She is sitting beside Carl in a black cab, plastic seats. He looks at her. She looks outside the window. There is nothing between them but spoken words. Outside only darkness. A streetlight vanishes, then emptiness.

She is sitting alone in a black cab, plastic seats. She is thinking of him while leaning her head towards the window, seeing through her reflection. Steel, concrete and darkness pass by outside, each part existing just one second. A traffic light disappears. Wheels braking in wet snow. Stella begins dissolving in the shadows. Naked existence pushed against glass, plastic, aluminum. Her fingers press against the front seat. Melting plastic, black color on fingertips. Swelling iris. Intense light drowning her. Dampness thrusts through her pores. Silence expands inside her, exploding every vein in her.

and the silence within me and pain is no longer

The silence is broken by the sound of tiny waves pulsating. Droplets of moisture on her skin. She tries to breathe but fluid sticks in her throat. Looking up, ice floes enclose the surface. In the water around her she glimpses words. Reaching out for them she holds them protectively in her hand and closes her eye.

*

A blizzard wraps empty streets. Red liquid on a cracked windscreen is covered by snow.

Washing Spree

Erica Chan Yuk Luen

Savor the flavor of each mouthful,
and chew the food well.
When thirty minutes as a gourmet has gone,
a sacred job follows: the washing up.

A squeeze of Swipe, a twist of the tap
swell up a gallon of foaming fluid.
Bowls, plates, spoons and chopsticks
clank and tango in the silver sink.

My ginger gloves massage the salsa plate,
And they are tickled pink when dirt's away.
Bits and pieces of time leaks to the pipe
The washing is still on the way

Next comes the tanned wok
stitched with lines of scrambled eggs.
A dozen scrubs with a scouring pad,
And a panoramic view shines in the wok again.

Final sprinkles of tap water wash away

the greasy galaxy of food scraps.
Dry the dripping-wet kitchenware
And I can call it a day.

Repeat the action five hours later
and three times a day.
Savor the flavor of each mouthful,
and chew the food well.

Merrily They Roll Along

Erica Chan Yuk Luen

Creamy sunlight flavors night mist
Pristine dew magnifies the network of veins
Of its spongy Pansy leaf
Butterflies fly by with ecstatic wings
In the rhythm of a waltz
The dew slips
In tune with spring
And breaks the silk-smooth pond.

The Elevator of Life

Mary Fung Wing Chi

As soon as the door of the elevator opened, I saw the dynamic, fat-filled shadow stamping into the elevator. It was her again – Mrs. Chung, a rich woman in her forties, with her son studying in the same class as mine, a forever quiet student. Wearing a reddish floral pattern shirt, with her cheeks painted like two preserved egg yolks that day, she squeezed into the elevator forcibly with her Filipino maid though she should have known how much space she needed to occupy.

Mrs. Chung roared, “You lazy Filipinos, why did you travel by minibus to the market yesterday? It cost me five dollars while the bus only costs four dollars and eighty cents! Buy two chickens today. Timothy has got five A’s in his examination! We have to celebrate for him.” The maid nodded her head repeatedly like a fishing hook, and the elevator giggled.

I knew she had noticed me. I hated the way she looked. The tiger was staring at her prey, waiting for a serious attack. She stretched out her dynamic arm, her bracelet and rings shining in the dim elevator, and pushed my chin up and asked, “How many A’s have you got in your examination, my dear son’s classmate?”

I did not answer. I knew she loved to compare me with her

“dear son”. I would not provide her with such an entertainment at the expense of my dignity.

“Oh! How come you don’t have any A’s?” The fat woman raised her tone.

Her reply was just like “Why don’t you have some cakes?” when even rice was not available. Her arrogance shook the elevator. She had successfully embarrassed me, this ugly adult.

I stared at her walking out of the elevator, until the shadow of the big fat tiger diminished into an ant, which I longed to catch and squeeze between my fingers. I felt terribly sorry for poor Johnny who had such a ball-like mother. My mother was nothing like her - she had a slender figure like bamboo, so much like bamboo that I would bitterly ask how she could give birth to such a piggy daughter. She was endowed with the greatest talent in cooking, a creator of the world’s wonderful dishes. Living in a complex estate, I seldom saw people like my mother, whose tenderness and decency flourished like a goddess. How much I wished I could be her when I grew up.

At about five o’ clock I heard the unlocking sound of the door, and a familiar figure appeared at the doorway, gentle and quiet, with a...What? A live chicken! Its ugly red head danced in an alien way, eyes staring like the way Mrs. Chung stared at me.

“Tomorrow will be the first day of the Chinese New Year!

Let's cook the chicken with rice in Hai-Nan style." To escape from the alien eyes staring, I turned away, and accidentally discovered the grey and red spots on mother's leg.

"Ma, why are there a few spots on your leg, what is it about?"

She squeezed some smile on her face - I was sure she squeezed, she never smiled in this bitter way, "This chicken was so naughty; it escaped from its cage in the store and bit my legs when the shopkeeper tried to catch it, that...that's why I bought it and decided to take revenge!"

See? "We do chicken right." But it gave my mother a bite. I pulled my face in strange ways and sang "Kentucky Fried Chicken" until the door opened again - my father came home. Immediately I noticed a thunderstorm sweeping from the door to the sitting room, roaring in a low voice, "That fucking boss didn't give us double pay this year! Damn it!" He hit the sofa with his tie, with a sound so frightening that I felt the pain for the sofa.

Silence.

Even the chicken shut up.

It was no joke that day. Yet father was the strongest but kindest man in the world at usual times. Though he did not earn much from being a bus driver, he saved every cent in order to take me to Ocean Park last week. It was the first time I ate in a

restaurant with glass walls. The warmth of the delicious meal, the comforting soft breeze and my parents' love transformed my mind. These memories penetrated my whole body whenever I needed them.

Our New Year's Eve dinner was consumed in silence. I tried hard to break the ice, "If I were you, Daddy, I would put some chickens in your boss's office so they would make some grey and red spots on his legs like mother's!" The joke only put me into a more awful situation. No one had produced a single word on this day for reunion.

Crying chairs and shouting tables pulled me out of bed. It must be the damn Hai-nan chicken! I tiptoed to the entrance of my room, hoping to give a surprise to the chicken - but I was surprised. Torn shirts and a broken cupboard and a bleeding forehead, smell of tears and blood saturated the stuffy air, everything choked and froze my eyes in a second.

"I have told you that we would probably have no double pay this year. But you still bought expensive chicken, brought her to the pay-for-nothing Ocean Park and spent hundreds for meals like rubbish! Just pay twenty dollars and you could satisfy your child! It can be simple and easy!"

"You couldn't lie to your child. She's grown up!"

My face was buttered with redness and tears. Tears ran

down from my eyes like steaming rivers. It was my father – the chicken that bit my mother badly. I could not stop myself from appearing in this no man’s land, where the two hostile countries were about to fight. My eyes looked up in exhausted hope, saw hollowly the two furious thunderstorms above my head, but my shivering lips were sealed by fear.

My stretched arms were like toothpicks, could not help separating them. My voice creaked. It was the tiny voice of an insect when the lions were actually roaring. I looked out of the window. I saw a wet kite shrinking helplessly in the swirl, when the deafening thunderstorm smashed the sky in a flashing second.

The New Year arrived palely. The sitting room was overwhelmed with excessive peace and silence, so quiet that it seemed to be the prelude of another deadly explosion. I was ordered by my father to buy an Apple Daily at Seven Eleven. “Ordered”, with his stressed, exaggerated pronunciation of the word “Seven Eleven”. There was a magazine store at the block next to ours, but Seven Eleven was obviously located in an unreachable distance. I got my master’s secret message: Don’t come back too soon.

I looked out of the window when I was waiting for the elevator in the corridor. I saw black clouds, more than black ones accumulating at the very corner of the sky, growing bigger and bigger. As soon as I stepped into the elevator, I felt the immediate

dimness, abnormal coolness infiltrating into my every cell. The silver door worked like a semi-mirror, reflecting my red eyes after a whole night's crying and whipping. But there was something else – I saw the “he” standing in the corner...His face was unseen. His silver hair was like iron bars blocking his whole face, but I knew his lifeless eyes were observing me through the little space between bars. He must be an old ghost – his aged crackly neck was barely fit to support his head on it, and his face so yellow and fleshless that it could no longer be covered by the iron hair. The elevator descended slowly, giving me a sense of diminishment like traveling in a metal coffin to a haunted hell. I felt sorry for this shrinking old ghost. Maybe he had been living in the hell for thirty years. Maybe his family did not know that he was in hell. Maybe he was like me, whose family never understood my feeling. The elevator arrived at the ground floor. The old ghost disappeared in a second, leaving a little card on the floor - but my mind was too occupied to notice it.

My mind was repeatedly disturbed by the same imagination: mother glancing at her shiny knife which she used to cook me wonderful dishes, and father picking up the hammer with an evil smile. Being a helpless child, the only silly idea I could come up with was to hide all the utensils and tools in my bed, so that my parents could not access any possible weapon. I ran back home like a motor after buying the newspaper and entered the same elevator in which I met the ghost. Choked by

every terrible image, I sobbed breathlessly – but it was another world at the opposite corner of the elevator: alluring eyes and burning lips, Mr. Wong and his wife were embracing each other tightly, faces glued together with Mr. Wong’s hand drawing circles, triangles, squares, rhombuses...all over Mrs. Wong’s back.

An unknown woman standing next to me launched her attack, “Is that all for you, grown-ups? Don’t you feel ashamed performing such a show in a public place like the elevator? I will be happy to sponsor you the rent of a room in Kowloon Tong Motel so you two can put on private shows all night!”

The Wongs were embarrassed. They were embarrassed because they had embarrassed others in the first place. Their behavior embarrassed the woman in the elevator, and their behavior embarrassed me too, who was not lucky enough to have a father so lovely, a father who would draw circles and triangles on my mother’s back.

When the elevator ascended a floor, going nearer and nearer to my flat, it was like my heart was being pierced, bit by bit, and the Wongs’ over-intimate behavior was like sea-salt being poured onto my wound... The Wongs and the woman left, leaving me in the elevator, dying. My tearful eyes suddenly noticed the card that was left by the old ghost and I picked it up. It looked familiar. It was the name card of Miss Li Oi Mui, a counselor who lived on the first floor of my building.

“Ah Mo! You’ve got a letter from Ah Mui! She’s in London?” My father simply dropped the letter on my desk, muttering some meaningless words. It was the Easter holiday, three months after I first met Ah Mui. During the three months I enjoyed my leisure time in Ah Mui’s home nearly every day. It was a paradise for children, with curtains in rainbow colours, wooden furniture painted in colours of ripe fruits and more importantly, countless candies and chocolate that would cure every child’s soul, making children show their blooming smiles like magic. Ah Mui’s home was also a fantastic hospital, where my pierced ears could take a good rest, where the harmful memories were cleansed from my mind and where strength and energy were injected. One stuffy afternoon Ah Mui even told me a secret at her home: she said she was a great writer. But she had never shown me any of her work.

Ah Mui’s news of leaving Hong Kong had shocked me a lot in March. She was appointed to carry out a research in London for half a year. My mouth was sealed by the shock. I could not imagine how my life would be if Ah Mui left me. I would be like a cancer patient without doctors, a turtle losing its shell or a fish without water! I was going to be the shrinking kite again, wandering helplessly between the two thunderstorms without a place for landing. To cheer me up, Ah Mui promised to send me her first story in her letter from England, the one I had just got from my father.

The story was written on a few blank sheets, more like a report than a story. The main character of the story was a boy who lived on the fourth floor of an old public estate - the same floor where I lived. The boy's life was crowded with unhappiness because his parents argued very often. He thought that he was the unhappiest person in the world and he committed suicide by jumping from the floor where he lived. As he was falling in the air, he looked into the windows of his neighbors of the lower floors and saw the different things his neighbors were doing.

As the boy reached the third floor's window, Mr. Chan was scolding her fat-filled wife authoritatively in the room, "who is the master of the house? My decision is the final one. Go out and prepare the dinner!" Overhearing this, the boy finally understood. Perhaps Mrs. Chan treated her Filipino maid and her son strictly because she wanted to exercise her limited authority when her husband was not at home. She needed to show her power to somebody in order to let others know that she was also "something".

The boy was then at the second floor's height and he looked into the window. Mrs. Wong broke down. When she embraced her husband in the elevator, she discovered a lip print on Mr. Wong's collar which was of course, not hers. The lurid red lip print shattered her soul. Mr. Wong stood still.

The boy finally came to the first floor, or more accurately,

the last floor before he reached the ground. Surprisingly his favourite artist was in the flat, sitting next to a ghost-like old man. The boy immediately realized the resemblance between the artist and the old man. Now he understood why the old man covered his face with the hair all the time. The old man did not want anyone to recognize him as the artist's father, especially the mass media, who would report negatively on his heartless son's abandonment of his father in an old public estate. He did not want to ruin his son's career. That's why the old man gave up the idea of finding any counselor for help, and he threw away the counselor's name card in the elevator.

Things he saw in his neighbor's flats froze his mind. He discovered that he was not the only victim of life; there were many, so many other victims. If all of them committed suicide, nobody would be left on earth - but the realization came too late:

Ground floor.

Astonishment stuffed my mouth and congested my breath. My naivety allowed me to see myself as the only victim, but it blinded me from the road to understand the real world, real life. My mind was crowded with joy - it must be the ripest fruit among Ah Mui's writing, and the sweetest chocolate to a desperate crying human!

"Mother, give me a *Cha Siu Bao* please!" Having my monster breakfast in the restaurant, I tried to read thoroughly the

local news on the newspaper.

“Don’t read this bloody news! I don’t want you to wake me up in the middle of the night, jumping on my bed and saying you are haunted by nightmares!”

“Mother, if you don’t let me explore the real world, my mind will forever be stuffed with fancy cartoons, Kentucky Fried Chicken or Uncle McDonald!”

I grasped the newspaper back victoriously and glanced at the biggest title, which even the blind could read:

“EIGHT DIE IN ENGLAND CAR CRASH”

“Li Oi Mui”.

Perhaps, only Jesus resurrected today.

Reality.

From Birth to Death

Agnes Lee Hiu Yan

With breath dying and reviving,
the dog quivered, from the belly to the bony legs.
It drew tears from her, not from us.
We witnessed,
waited,
with sweat boiling, blood flooding the minds,
and then a sigh –
The puppy was born,
crouching on our dining table.
Forks were up,
Knives were whetted,
We were ready –

But the dog yelled tearfully.
Mum walked away, whispering
“mercy”.

So the knives were put down.
Their silver surfaces reflected
our impatient faces like wolves, wrinkled and dry

while the puppy

quivered from the belly to the bony legs,
licking the hands sharpening the knives on the table.

This Age and What is Romantic (based on Li-Young Lee's "This Hour and What is Dead")

Yvonne Lee Wing Chi

Last night, my 16-year-old sister was strutting
in the sitting room,
humming "My love is like a red, red rose".
Did she know not every rose can bloom?
Some have thorns that could stab right through
her Mickey Mouse t-shirt, then her heart.
Did she know men could be phantoms, the most appealing
façade?
Their words for girls are like sweet chocolates.
Flavor savored as they slide down the throat.

At this age, what is romantic is oblique
and what is realistic, redundant.

I advised her to beware of tooth decay.

My 26-year-old brother was slouching on the couch
and watching "The Bachelor".

Normally, he likes avant-garde stuff
that I can never understand.

This third-rate choice was equal to a breakdown:
her solid promises dissolved,
corroding his nerves.

His eyes, drifting somewhere beyond the TV,
see his girlfriend kiss another man.

At this age, what is romantic is unbearable
and what is realistic, inescapable.

I advised him to go back to his room to sleep.

Exile

Xu Ting

On the way to the university, she didn't look out of the bus window. She didn't need to. No longer did she ask the conductor to remind her of her arrival, or search consistently and anxiously for the signposts through the window. Nor did she want to. Those familiar, dull and monotonous buildings hurt her eyes. She couldn't believe she lived among them.

When the bus stopped beside the stone lion, behind which the Chinese characters "Peking University" were reflecting the radiance of the sun, she got off, with a big suitcase in her hand, like a sojourner.

The narrow open space in front of the university gate was getting crowded and bustling when streams of boys and girls flocked in from all directions, accompanied by their sweating parents carrying luggage, big and small. Their faces, still retaining a childish innocence, glowed with joy, excitement and pride. They were the nation's elite. Each had a glorious history.

Her eyes swept through the admission notice in her hand. Name: Song Jiayin; Arrival place: Beijing; ...she sighed.

Everybody said Jiayin was extremely lucky. Her name, which meant "good news" in Chinese and connoted her parents'

expectations, did make her fortune's favorite. Now she was becoming a student in a top university in China. But this was not the first time that luck favored her.

“She is so lucky. Moving to Beijing.”

“Yeah. Now she can enter Tsinghua or Beida¹ even with her eyes closed in the exam.”

Her classmates' words resonated in Jiayin's ears. She looked out of the window.

The train was cutting through expanses of terrain at a fast speed, past those waltzing lampposts and houses and fences and trees.

“News does get wings,” she thought. Within one week, those simple words of her emigration had spread from one student to the whole class, and then the whole grade, making her the focus of others' attention. Whenever she overheard their gossip or was addressed directly with “how I envy you,” she just squeezed a smile, trying to be indifferent.

But how could she be?

Ever since she got the news, she had been constantly caught in a dream, in which she floated and flew, all the way to the painting-like Summer Palace, to the grand Great Wall, to the august Tsinghua and Beida.

1 Peking University

She had to admit that her classmates were telling the truth: for a girl who was born and raised in Jinzhou, a small city in Liaoning province, moving to a big and treasured city like Beijing meant so much - a higher possibility to enter good universities, a broader horizon and a brighter future.

The brisk rhythm of the wheels slowed down. “Dear passengers, our train is going to arrive at the destination: Beijing station. As the capital, Beijing is the economic, political and cultural center of China. We wish you a good time.”

Jiayin got off the train and walked out of the station. She could see beautiful neon brightening the city in this mild and serene night, like a lighthouse showing the direction for sailing ships. Twinkling stars were blinking at her, like a mysterious fairy at the entrance to a maze beckoning and inviting her.

“Will this be my new home?” she murmured to herself. Beijing, this alluring word, was like a stone that had started a ripple in the pool of her heart.

A ripple could be stirred and extended, but it wouldn’t last long.

She had to start her new school life the next morning. She kept wondering how her father could have told her that the school was not far away, just in the same district as their residence. After being sandwiched in the bus for an hour and a half – a period

within which she could cover half of her hometown on a bike – she finally arrived. The teacher had started his lesson, and her introduction was postponed to the afternoon.

“I’ll give you back the homework today,” continued the teacher. Something was passed from one hand to another – milky and lovely slices, with delicate and exquisite letters embedded. Jiayin’s fingers shook as she touched it. Rather than the rough pages which had been filled with spidery handwriting of her former classmates, this homework was typed! By computers!

The bell rang. Jiayin turned to her new neighbor. “Excuse me, could you tell me when we shall arrive in the morning?”

“Before 7:20,” the girl didn’t raise her head, busy savoring her reflection in her mirror.

“So early. Then I have to get up at six in the morning.”

“What’s surprising about that? I used to get up at four,” the girl finally turned her head to Jiayin. Her curly and uprising eyelashes looked artificial. “Now I don’t need to because I live near Xi San Huan² now.”

“Where...?” Jiayin regretted uttering this at once.

“My god! You don’t know where Xi San Huan is?” Her eyes widened, examining Jiayin up and down, as if looking at an alien. “How weird! I wonder how you came to school today.”

2 One of the main roads in Beijing, near the protagonist’s school.

Jiayin bit her lips tightly.

She soon forgot about her neighbor when several friendly girls huddled up, introducing themselves and saying hello to her. Jiayin greeted them with her sweetest smile. She spurred her memory to trace those names and strained her eyes to identify those faces. However, the dazzling light reflected from the window made her almost blind.

“Where is Jinzhou?” Suddenly uttered a girl, whose eyes rested upon her exercise book, on which printed “Jinzhou Middle School”.

Jiayin’s heart quivered. Ever since primary school, the history and geography teachers had been telling stories about the famous Liao Shen Campaign³. She had been so proud when she found the word “Jinzhou” in her history and geography textbooks.

“It’s in Liaoning province,” her voice as weak as a mosquito.

That night she was lost in a dream, in which everything around swelled and pressed towards her.

But life had to go on, no matter what a routine it was for her: getting up at six o’clock in the morning, rushing to the station under the darkness-veiled sky, swallowing bread and milk on the bumpy bus; then after a day of lessons, exercises and

3 A campaign centered in Jinzhou during the Chinese civil war (1947-1949).

examinations, being packed among crowds on another bus; last but not least, staying up till 12.

“You need a rest,” sometimes a voice would echo in her mind, especially when her classmates were talking about tempting TV series, calling people to join in the weekend karaoke, or flinging themselves into those exotic McDonald or KFC after class. “Look at your dusty face and panda eyes.”

“No,” retorted another voice. “Think about how your classmates mimicked your ‘countrymen’s accent’; think about what that teacher said: ‘Beijing students are more clever and knowledgeable than non-local students though they work less hard’; think of those officials at the exam session, who insisted that your previous test scores in Jinzhou couldn’t be transferred because they were not standardized.” The intensified voice yelled out with excitement and strength. “Prove, prove, prove to them!” It seemed to have magic: speeding up her heartbeat, warming up her coursing blood and injecting more energy into her body.

Her effort didn’t prove in vain. It paid her off with an admission notice to Peking University. She inhaled the air with all her force, as if trying to draw in everything: the people, the memory, and the days.

The horns of automobiles were roaring, urging people to walk in. She followed the signposts to the check-in center, where crowds of people were asking for daily necessities.

“Is this quilt thick enough for winter?” a middle-aged woman asked a helper nearby, “Beijing is cold. It snows.”

Somehow Jiayin felt her word laughable. How could that be called snow? Something pathetically thin like grains of salt, vanishing before landing on the earth, leaving nothing except a stretch of wetness. She should come to Jinzhou and witness the real snow. Her mind wandered wildly to the mornings when she walked outside to find that the whole world had turned silvery white. Thick and fat goose feathers composed of numerous crystal hexagons were swimming in the air. Her feet stepped on the tender velvet mat. Children were running, chasing and throwing snowballs. A big smile flashed on her face.

Twenty minutes later, when she took all her luggage and daily necessities into her dorm, there was already a girl there.

“Hi, I’m Jiayin, from Liaoning,” her voice sounded firm.

“Hello! I’m Liu Jin. Nice to meet you,” the girl responded. “I’m from Beijing.”

Yes, I can tell that.

She had been drowned by this kind of voice for almost a year. There were numerous days when she hung her head wordlessly under the flood of her classmates’ voice. Their words slid together, confusing as if they were holding a mouthful of water, confounding the listeners’ understanding. Boys’ pitches

got higher and higher, reaching a falsetto note toward the end. Girls' teeth clenched tightly, uttering those j's, q's and x's, which aroused her gooseflesh. Yet what was most painful was the geometry class. "Say one, say two and say three are..." the teacher's finger pointed at three points C1, C2 and C3 on the blackboard, "so the answer should be say." She didn't know whether to laugh or to cry when the teacher showed his two protruding front teeth, between which that terrible pronunciation came out. Thank god that she could still listen to her parents everyday. Their silky tones, contralto pitches, calm and steady ascending at the end of each sentence relaxed every inch of her body.

She didn't talk too much with that Beijing girl. Even she herself couldn't figure out why she would like to miss the opportunity to get acquainted with her new roommate and spend her time in these chores: unpacking her luggage, wiping the table, making the bed... After all were done, she put a postcard in a most prominent place on her shelf. It was her favorite. And it went well with the snow-white wall. Her fingers rested on its top and her sleeves kissed its bright, smooth and glistening surface: The sky was so blue and clear, the Bohai⁴ seawater so clean and ultramarine, the tree so green and overflowing with vigor.

She closed her eyes. Again, the silky and soothing words from *xiao pin*⁵ resonated in her ears; the whirling images in the

4 The arm of the Yellow Sea, indenting the coast of North China; bordered by Shandong, Hebei, and Liaoning provinces.

5 Skit, a popular art form in northeastern China.

mirthful and warm *er ren zhuan*⁶ played in front of her eyes; the fragrance of the creamy and delicious *guo bao* meat⁷ permeated in her nostrils.

She turned it over, and there oozed a gentle and delightful aroma of ink. She didn't know how many times she had read it, especially when she was in despair.

To my dearest Mouse

An original sonnet by a poet illiterate

*The last New Year in our high school time is approaching,
And I couldn't help missing you and sending my best greeting.
Wish you a happy new year free from reading, calculating, and
memorizing,
And remember not to steal dates in your new residence in
Beijing. :)*

That cheeky Cat! She cursed. But she smiled like a bride. Every time when she came to this line, she couldn't help bursting into laughter. How could she forget their awkward escape after she was persuaded to knock off dates from their neighbor's tree?

*In the days I often recall our childhood playing,
And the classroom reminds me of our heated discussing.
At night I dream we were sitting next to each other, note-taking.
When I wake up, I'm disappointed because of the different places
we are staying.
But no matter where you are living,
You'll always be my best buddy, with whom my friendship will*

6 Song-and-dance duet popular in northeastern China.

7 A special dish in northeastern China.

continue growing.

So don't forget your reading, calculating, and memorizing,

To make Tsinghua or Beida our next place of meeting.

P.S. Bear, Colt, Calf and Duckling, who hope we can gather some day, eating,

Have set up an online Alumni Space so that we can keep communicating.

Yours always Cat

The wish about their reunion in that Chinese calligraphy did come true! Her heart had almost jumped out when she got the news that Cat had also been admitted by Beida. The clock struck ten. Yes! Cat must have arrived since she was also an early bird.

“Da, da, da...” A second later, brisk footsteps floated from the hostel stairs. A smile had remained on Jiayin’s face stiffly ever since she rushed out of her dorm to the campus.

Patches of pure blueness stretched out through the clouds that had met and piled one above the other. The blades of grass quivered in the delicious breeze; the petals of flowers seeped a new burst of freshness after the rain; the magpies hiding in the treetops were twittering notes of a distant and melodic song.

Her eyes brightened each time when a girl with a ponytail appeared in her eyeshot and then dimmed, until they finally spotted a girl standing by a signpost, with one hand fumbling her pocket in a familiar way. “Cat!” She fastened her steps.

Incredible! She didn't recognize her. She smiled. The girl frowned. But after a second her face lit up as though she had struck a match in the darkness. "Jiayin!" She exclaimed. "I didn't expect you to be here. Someone told me you chose Renmin University."

"I changed my mind when filling the registration form. It's so good that we are in the same school again." Jiayin smiled, grasping Cat's hand, when she suddenly found straight and shiny hair sliding down Cat's shoulder.

"You come here alone?" Cat's asked curiously.

"Yeah. Mom and Dad have to work today. Besides, it won't take too long for me to get here. I can move in more stuff tomorrow."

"It really makes a difference living in Beijing," her voice sounded bizarre. "That luggage almost made my fingers break."

Is she envying me? Or is it my imagination? She was not sure. But she soon denied the first question. No, impossible.

A car stopped nearby. A man got off and walked towards them.

"Oh, this is my father's colleague. He sent my family here," introduced Cat. "And this is my friend, Song Jiayin."

"Your classmate?"

“Ye-”

“Used to be.” Before Jiayin completely opened her mouth, Cat had blurted out, “She took the exam in Beijing. And now her home is in Beijing too.”

Jiayin frowned. She wanted to correct her words. But what was wrong?

She was somehow glad when she saw the man leave. And they kept on talking about their majors, about their hostels.

Cat’s eyes suddenly flashed, “Hey, you’ve got a Beijing accent now! Haha.”

Do I? How could I? The skin on her arms rose into little lumps.

“How is your life in Beijing?” She felt relieved when Cat changed the topic.

“Worked hard day and night, like a machine,” she drew a long and soft breath, like an athlete who had just finished a competitive race, “just for that difficult national exam.”

“You must be kidding. How can it be difficult since you are in Beijing?”

Jiayin shook her head slightly. Their conversation stopped in a long silence.

“When did you arrive in Beijing?” She felt an impulse to

start again as she couldn't tolerate the silence anymore.

“A few days ago, I did some sightseeing. It was wonderful! Also, Bear, Colt, and Duckling...” her eyebrows sprang rhythmically with her uttering of those familiar names, “They all came to Beijing. We went to a restaurant to celebrate our survival of the black July⁸. The meal nearly made our stomachs explode. You can't imagine, Bear got so drunk that... Hahahaha.”

Each thrilling word trampled on Jiayin's heart. Why didn't they give me a call? Why didn't they respond to my message online? I have posted all of my ways of contact on the Alumni Space. Why?! Why? Why. A billow of question marks smashed on her brain cells. Dazed, her mind suddenly went blank.

Something was wavering in front of her. It was a hand. “What's wrong with you? You didn't blink just now. You scared me.” The girl was looking at her watch. “I have to go now. Bye.” Her words were fast and determined.

She left, without turning back her head.

Jiayin remained there, riveted, watching her back away: first a mass, then a stick, then a dot, finally nothing. Slowly, she dragged her feet toward her hostel, like a zombie. Her shadow formed a moving “1” on the ground.

Nobody was inside the dorm. The curtain was tightly drawn, keeping out all the light from outside. The room was like a

⁸ The national exam takes place in July.

dark and bleak trap waiting to suck in its quarry, preventing it from escaping home. It was in dead silence except her breath. She threw a look at the shelf. Something was there, like a giant and undeveloped negative. She drew nearer. It was her postcard. She put her shivering fingers on its top. And soon the surface was covered by her palm and sleeve.

Someone knocked at the door. “Hello,” a girl pulled in two suitcases. “I’m Wang Dongdong, from Hainan.”

“I’m Song Jiayin, from...” her throat was choked.

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A Crazy CV

Queenie Lau Kim Fan

Dear Professor Hung,

Instead of giving you my long long history,

I write a one-paged story.

My Chinese name is Lau Kim Fun; English Queenie

and Jasmine. To get the job hunting stuff done,

I have to find referees prestigious.

Now, I get into my 22-aged story

which will still grow constantly.

I was a shy little girl dared not to take up big posts

but minor junk ones like secretary and general services.

My Cantonese and English are fluent and I can type 30 words per

second, GREAT!

My family is big with seven, each has their own favorites

And Mum always cooks with a grilled face.

My dad loves horse racing and mahjong games

and Mum loves talking with a loudspeaker.

My sister works next to me in a building starting with Lee

and we would have lunch when her boy is not free.

My younger sister is studying crazy in the field of contemp. Arts

and always pesters me to share Muses but I refuse

for inspiration belongs to all, not me only!

My brother and youngest sister are racing in the exam hall
running for a long-distance course.

I'm a graduate of CUHK, a lovely place I will ever love
but not after finding my other half.

Sometimes I go crazy but crazy with reason
and I love poems and writing poems.

In order to stop my story to run and run,
I've got to cease here but continue to write there.

Hold on! Say one more thing about me and
You only, Professor Hung Hin Wai.

That is...

You are my teacher; I am your student.

Best,

Queenie in the past, Jasmine at present

P.S. The actual CV is attached behind it but I won't let you read it!

“The Thirteenth Night”

Janice Chan Yeung Chau

* * * * *

~ *After The Fifth Night* ~

Moonlight illuminated the room, peaceful and calm. But the man on the bed felt somewhat uneasy. He glanced at his wife who was lying sweetly beside him. Once. Twice. Three times. Bitter. It was the first time the man had done something so covertly behind his wife. Employing a private detective. Following his wife. But getting no information about the likelihood of an external affair. He felt stupid.

“Sir, Mrs. Lee spends more than twelve hours on sleeping every day. I don’t have any medical knowledge, but I guess Mrs. Lee may have narcolepsy...”

“Does she visit any places or meet someone?”

“No, not likely. She would go to Park’N Shop and the bank... other time she simply stays at home... sleeping.”

“How about the postman? Anything between...”

“No, Sir. I’ve reported all I observed. No case is simpler than this one...”

“Well... you just follow her for four more days. And write me a brief report. We’ll discuss it at that time.”

The detective left. The man should be glad indeed. Yet he felt stupid and bitter. Though the truth seemed to be disclosed; the suspicious feeling didn't fade but grew deeper underneath his skin. People said dreams reveal one's subconscious state and inner desire. The man could not get rid of the idea that his wife had the secret desire for an affair as revealed by his dreams. Night wind blew tenderly across his face. The man shivered a little. His heart palpitated stronger as a window of the bedroom slightly opened. He wondered if someone or more accurately, something had touched the window. He was not afraid and suddenly an idea popped up in his mind and eased his guilty feeling. Should be a nice solution. Ah huh...

The next day the man found the retired expert in supernatural knowledge who had also furthered his studies in areas such as astrology, physiognomy technique and dream analysis. It was not difficult for a reporter to find such a person. The man had once considered hypnosis, but that could not fulfill his curiosity and relieve his doubts. He wanted to see... well, if there was any chance to penetrate into someone else's dreams - his wife's!

“In dreams our bodies run at a subconscious level, and our thoughts are basically set to be automatic. There are some people who possess inborn dream abilities such as flying, wall penetrating, time-stopping, deadly-stare, telekinesis,

teleportation, world-manipulation, etc. However, dream abilities can be developed through dream practices. Your mind can control your dreams, manipulating anything if you have a strong mind and keep it concentrated enough.”

“Frankly, I don’t quite catch the meaning of those specific terms regarding dream abilities and I’m not interested in knowing... I just wonder if it’s possible to enter someone else’s dreams...”

“Um... I’ve heard of such cases, but I can’t tell you how or why... Maybe it’s a kind of natural born ability or... I’m not sure if concentration can work either... You have to be patient if you want to try... it may take more than an hour for a trial.”

Feeling satisfied with the expert’s explanation and advice, the man left with a smile. A plan was half-forming in his mind.

* * * * *

~ *The Third Night* ~

(The husband’s dream)

The same scene. The same building. The same faces. It was the third time I wandered around in this place. Though a bit shocked. I finally recognized that the woman was my wife. And the man hugging her and kissing her was not me. I followed her to the apartment where she settled and discovered something more. A child of hers! God, we did not have a child at all. And

she claimed that she didn't want one. Now she had a perfect family here! I had to see what happened exactly. It was nice that they seemed not to notice my existence. I hid quite well. My wife was planning to go out with her family. As usual, she ordered her husband and child to go first and she just stayed by the main gate chatting with the handsome watchman. I saw many women approaching this handsome watchman and I could not stand the fact that my wife was one of those fools. How could she betray me in reality and betray her husband again in the dream world? This woman must have a hidden desire for an affair and excitement. How I loved her and how wrong I was...

(The wife's dream)

Everything seemed so perfect here except I began to notice that I was being followed. It annoyed me as I never wanted my dream world to be exploited or disturbed. I must complain to the leader of the dream world, the person who offered me the chance to create what I wanted in this world – the things I lacked in reality. Sadly, I never understood my real husband. We were a sweet couple in our neighbors' eyes. But we were too busy to even have a conversation. He was a reporter and I was a writer. He needed to be 24 hours on call for accidents and important happenings; I needed to meet my deadlines for my stories all the time. I worked daytime and he worked nighttime. When I began to work nighttime to fit his life, he changed to work daytime or

was sent to travel on official business. For a long time, I felt depressed and it was by coincidence that I met Mr. Watchman, the owner of the Dream World Building. Since then I gave up writing and devoted all of my time to the enjoyment of my desired life. My husband did not say a word and I spent more and more time sleeping. Oh, I had to preserve what I owned and must complain to Mr. Watchman about an outsider entering my dream world.

* * * * *

~ *The Eighth Night* ~
(The husband's dream)

“... Madam?”

“Pardon?”

I pushed my wife to the main gate before she went on asking. She didn't hear the words. I didn't let her. The watchman being left behind swallowed his words back to his stomach, digested them and finally turned them into junk. He stood beside the rubbish bin where he was probably born. His tall body lost balance, slightly shook, and his gorgeous face distorted, shocked by the fact that he ended up speechless. No one would ever hear him again. No women.

It was my dream. He couldn't speak. I didn't let him.

My wife held my hands more tightly. Helpless. And her

appealing eyes shimmered. She heard no one's speech except mine. I heard everyone's speech except that of the watchman. He was silent now. Totally. A few women passed by and approached him, probably seeking a chance of play and fun rather than ordinary security or domestic enquiries. He first stared at them as if he wanted to see through them but actually he didn't notice their existence at all. When he noticed them, the women began to seem a bit annoyed. Their voices, their complaints and their noises got fainter and fainter. My wife and I were on the way. I could imagine how the watchman looked and was doing. Getting some paper and a pen? Did he know where the right place and the right things were? I smiled. He should begin to learn how to be a silent and honest watchman. He should know what to do and what to say. But after all, he should quit the job that did not fit him. This job was for old men only.

My wife had lost her memories about her husband and child as I wished. They had disappeared but the watchman was still a small trouble. She asked me why the watchman behaved differently. She forgot to praise him today. So would the other women in the building. I could imagine how the watchman's soft voice turned furious and his face became colorless. I wanted to stay and see the watchman reveal his real face, scaring the others away.

But maybe next time. It was my dream anyway.

* * * * *

~ Before The Eighth Night ~

Trifles. Mr. Watchman murmured to himself. Though women's wants were unlimited, they were all easy to satisfy. They want an ear, you offer them an ear. They want a bear, you give them a bear. A formula of sweet flowers plus sweet guys. An essence called conversation. Pretty enough. Why so hard to get in reality? He didn't understand. He could see reality but could never enter the real world to experience it. What the hell did it matter then? He sat down and took out a cigarette, lighting it with just a flick between his slim fingers. Anyway he was glad that there were more and more visitors or even dwellers in the Dream World Building. It also meant that he would be busier than before. A crowd of women had just left. All with cheerful smiles.

Except one. The freelance writer. The young lady who was new here.

Mr. Watchman collected the smoke and turned it into a gray board, at the same time the half-finished cigarette became a chalk by a quick flick. He soon noted down the name of the young lady on the gray board and listed her problems as well. This was a special case. She had brought the first intruder to this private wonderland. Someone who came not for wants or personal desires but with an aggressive intention to intervene in others' dreams.

Manipulation was the right possessed by Mr. Watchman only. And disturbance to his area of influence was certainly intolerable. He stared at the gray board. A bit annoyed. Yet more puzzled. He began to recall the time when he first caught the sight of the intruder. He was more shocked than annoyed because he could not figure out any reasons for the young lady's intention for an affair behind her gorgeous husband's back. They were such a perfect prince-princess match.

Some strange feelings grew in Mr. Watchman's mind. He walked around. Thinking. For a moment he found himself not matching with the pleasant atmosphere inside the Dream World Building. People around were all happy and satisfied. He was not. He was thinking of the young lady and her husband and was surprised by the fact that his wish to see the two being together outweighed his responsibility to drive out an intruder. For a whole life time Mr. Watchman had been governing the Dream World Building and was pleased with his success in creating and maintaining beauty and harmony. And for the first time he had witnessed such a vivid perfect match from the reality world. On the one hand he sincerely thought that they did not belong to this place. But on the other hand, he should keep them here for the sake of his own role and responsibility. Split minded. He walked around in a hastening speed. He was trying to offer himself some better excuses to help the young couple.

Mr. Watchman finally decided to test them by separating them into two sub-buildings of the Dream World Building. To fulfill the husband's desire to manipulate everything in his dream and to make him believe he had already penetrated into his wife's dream and gained control of everything. Likewise, he would make the wife believe that the intruder had already been kicked out and she could continue enjoying her peaceful dream life as before. Of course Mr. Watchman could not help the young couple directly or give them any hints that this was a test. The solution was always in their hand. He could just do something that was related to his responsibility. He could only wait, observe and hope.

* * * * *

~ *The Ninth Night* ~

Several days had passed. The detective was bored with the job of observing a sleeping beauty and was worried about his report. Obviously the husband looked for something that did not exist at all. Maybe he would only be at ease with some evidences to prove his hypothesis. Maybe it would be easier for the detective to create the fact rather than to puzzle and struggle over a few pages of blank sheets.

The detective waited till sunset and began to pack his personal belongings. He was ready to leave the nearby apartment that he had rented for the convenience of observing the daily

activities of the wife. He found the whole job nonsensical and unbelievable. First it was a reporter, who could probably do the investigation best, who came for help. He thought it must be a hard task and did not expect something so simple and routine. Second, he did think the husband was over-suspicious and the wife must be sick. What an unhealthy relationship. Third, the matter had gotten stranger and stranger since the sixth night. The husband's sleeping time increased gradually. And now he had been lying on the bed with his wife for over twenty hours. The detective was actually a bit scared. He wondered if they had died. But the husband woke up for a few minutes to go to toilet and took some water before he slipped into bed again. And the wife did move her body. So they were not dead.

The detective just wanted to leave this awful and haunted place as soon as possible. A well-paid job always meant low security. Money was not easy to earn anyway. He realized it as he locked the door sharply.

* * * * *

~ *The Thirteenth Night* ~

It was twelve fifty at night. The detective was in his one-man office. He had already finished his report but failed to find his employer. He was afraid that he could not get his money back. Yet he was more afraid of paying a visit to the apartment where the young couple lived. He did not want to discover that they

were still lying on the bed.

He was scared and felt it was too silent in the office, so he turned on the radio and listened to some music, followed by the Nightly News at twelve o'clock .

“This afternoon a middle-aged woman who lived on the 14th floor of XX Building in Sham Shui Pui reported that a disgusting smell had been troubling the neighborhood for a couple of days. The smell got stronger and she complained to the security guard. Two dead bodies were finally found in Room XXX.....”

The same night the detective had a nightmare. He dreamt of the young couple screaming to him, and asking for help to unlock them from the Dream World Building.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Photograph

Bobo Lee Bo

I

“One, two, three. Smile!”

S-N-A-P!

The camera is pregnant
with the film in its womb
fertilizing into a photo.

II

Which photo should I use for my Xanga and Friendster?

Oh no!

This one... Messy hair!

That one... Swollen pimple!

Yeah! This one is perfect!

Sharp eyes and smooth skin.

I'm sure cool dudes

will be leaving me messages.

III

The flow of time

washes away the tincture,

weathers away the gloss,
yet the story behind remains,
as vivid as ever.

A grandmother grips the yellowish photo,
Her hands wrinkled like rivers and valleys.
“Your grandfather didn’t even get a chance to see you, see how
handsome he was!”
She says softly to her granddaughter,
blushing like a bashful little girl.

IV

In the rubbish bin
lies half of a father’s smiling face
in rent edges and contorted lines.
The poor little daughter picks it up,
puzzled by the raining eyes of her mother.

V

On a gravestone,
a pair of deadly eyes
are shouting
his unfulfilled wish
buried under mud and stones.

VI

Ashes of broken memories.
An intact photo
unites the entire story.

VII

Fans, a lengthening snake
Sweating and starving
Outside the TV station
With piles of photos in hands
Just to wait for Tom Cruise
and get his autographs.

VIII

How joyful these children must be!
When they're fanning the instant photos
taken with Santa Claus,
their dim faces turn alive
as their hands dance with the wind.

IX

Stiff as a statue,
the tripod stands.

The iris shutter

is longing to blink
at the sinking sun.

X

Like a students doing a matching exercise,
an immigration officer
is switching his eyeballs
between the traveler and his passport photo,
anxious about
any discordant contours.

XI

A photo squeezed at the corner of a dusty drawer
contains the tears and anguish
of a woman
losing her marriage
to a prostitute.

XII

Thanks to the invention of Photoshop.
A magazine editor
is cutting a naked body,
and pasting it
below Britney Spears's head.

XIII

The printing machine
is sweeping across
a piece of white paper.

A newborn child.
A new member of
the mounting collection of memories.

Under Construction

Anna Yeung Ka Ching

Nora said she would deal with the problem herself¹.

“Where is my skylark? Songbird?”² cried Torvald after he sent away all the guests.

“I’m here, dear,” Nora sat alone in the drawing room. Torvald came and embraced her.

“Oh, my beloved wife - I feel as though I could never hold you close enough. Do you know, Nora, often I wish some terrible danger might threaten you, so that I could offer my life and my blood, everything, for your sake.”

Nora looked at her husband, decided to disclose the long secret that haunted her for years. She tore herself loose, got up and slowly walked to the drawer³ and took out a letter. “Torvald, read the letter now,” she said in a clear voice to her husband.

“Good! My little squirrel gave me a love letter in this romantic Christmas time. Yes, I know your love for me,”⁴ Torvald went to her wife and kissed her tenderly.

“Torvald, stop, I want you to read the letter now.”

Torvald sat back and read the letter. He always enjoyed the little suspense given by his wife, but this time his smile faded, his

1 Imitation of the first sentence in Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*: “Mrs. Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself.”

2 Dialogues are taken from Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House* Act 3. Some changes have been made to suit this story.

3 In *A Doll’s House*, it is a mailbox outside the house.

4 This line is not in *A Doll’s House*.

face darkened. He stared at his wife furiously. Nora stood at the window, waiting.

“Is it true?” Torvald lowered his voice, staring at her.

“It is true. I’ve loved you more than anything else in the world so I did this.”

“Don’t make any silly excuses,” barked Torvald.

“Torvald...” Nora took a step toward him. How much she wanted Torvald would do something to save her.

“Wretched woman! What have you done? Answer me! Oh, what a dreadful waking! For eight whole years - she who was my joy and pride - a hypocrite, a liar - worse, worse - a criminal! Oh, the hideousness of it! Shame on you, shame!”

Nora was silenced and stared unblinkingly at him.

Zi...zizzizi.....the picture was rolling fast, the characters on the screen moving backward and forward. It stopped.

“...Nora! We’re saved! It must have been terrible - seeing no way out except - no, we’ll forget the whole sordid business. We’ll just be happy. It’s over! Listen to me Nora, I have forgiven you. I have forgiven you everything. Why are you looking so pale? I know that what you did you did for your love of me.”

“That is true.”

“You have loved me as a wife should love her husband. It

was simply that in your inexperience you chose the wrong means. But do you think I love you any the less because you don't know how to act on your own initiative? No, no. Just lean on me. I shall counsel you. I shall guide you..."

Zi...zizi...zi.....

(A loud voice from the podium) "Notice the famous discussion here as given by the renowned critic and writer Bernard Shaw. This is Ibsen's contribution to the new form of drama. See how Ibsen replaces the traditional resolution with a long discussion between the couple. Remember what is Aristotle's definition on drama - Drama is an imitation of man in action. The discussion shows the realistic element in this play." Prof. Kim spoke through his microphone to his students as the movie went on.

Nora took off her fancy dress, and changed into her everyday clothes. She took out her suitcase and approached the door.

"Where are you going, Nora? It's so late already. Please try to calm yourself and get your balance again, my frightened little songbird." Torvald walked around near the door.

"Yes, Torvald. I've changed," Nora looked at her watch, "It isn't that late. Sit down here, Torvald. You and I have a lot to talk about."

“Nora, what does this mean? You look quite drawn...”

“Sit down. It’s going to take a long time. I’ve a lot to say to you...”

Noises of packing pencil cases and schoolbags came at the back. Anita looked at her watch knowing that it’s nearly time to go, two more minutes.

“In eight whole years - no, longer - ever since we first met - we have never exchanged a serious word on a serious subject. We’ve been married for eight years. Does it occur to you that this is the first time we two, you and I, man and wife, have ever had a serious talk together?” Nora looked at Torvald.

“Did you expect me to drag you into all my worries?”

“I’m not talking about worries. I’m simply saying that we have never sat down seriously to try to get to the bottom of anything.”

Two students from the back walked out of the classroom hurriedly.

“But, my dear Nora, what on earth has that got to do with you?”

“That’s just the point. You have never understood me. A great wrong has been done to me, Torvald. I can’t always be your songbird or skylark.”

“I do love you!”

“You have never loved me, Torvald. You just thought it was fun to be in love with me,” Nora shook her head.

Noises became louder, the students prepared to leave.

Zi...zizizzi.....

“Could you explain why I have lost your love, Nora?”

Zizi...zizz...ziz.....

“I’m leaving you now, at once. It’s no use to stop me now. I shall take with me nothing but what is mine. I don’t want anything from you, now or ever...”

The film was stopped. The light was switched on. Professor Kim smiled and had his usual finishing words, “Ok, here shows that Nora doesn’t want to be Torvald’s plaything anymore. Her leaving of the house marks her gaining of individualism. Do you have any questions on this final scene?” he waited, “Then we will continue our discussion in the tutorial. Remember your paper will be due next week by 5:00pm.”

Anita packed her bag, gave a long sigh, “It’s killing me! Hai...two papers, six journals, one story writing all due in these two weeks!” she looked at her friend Karen, “Have you finished Ibsen’s play?”

Karen gave a similar sad smile, “Me too la, just quickly slip

through it on the bus jar. I have one more quiz on Putonghua next Monday tim! I am now struggling with Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* paper. Horror! Horror!⁵" Anita knew very well that no one's lives were easy these days.

Very late at night, Anita woke up when her family members all went to sleep. Under the yellow light, she took up the pen and started to compose a story. She told herself she must finish the draft first. She had had a dream. There were so many noises...she saw Torvald scolding Nora...a single woman with her luggage at the door preparing to go...a boy and a girl next to her. Some blurring images. Anita didn't like writing a romantic story or any story about superstition, or anything surreal. She had enough absurdity and ambiguity from the modernist works. A simple and happy story was enough. Why be philosophical? Life was like an orange as her grandma told her. Her story should have some meaning behind it, she remembered her professor said. That was difficult. Could she make it? She wondered. Bearing in mind what Alex Miller said one day in the story-writing class: "BE PREPARED TO WRITE CRAP FIRST!" "BLANK PAPER IS KILLING!" quickly she drafted what was in her mind...

Mrs. Chan, thirty years old, had just come down from China to find her husband in Hong Kong. She missed her two kids so much. It took her so long to get an admission from the

5 Kurtz's last two words to Marlow before he dies in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "The horror! The horror!"

Hong Kong Immigration Department. She was glad that she was finally a Hong Kong citizen. She was a nurse in China and was upper middle class. Her life was peaceful and happy until one day she met him, Chan Kai Shan, a businessman from Hong Kong, her husband now. Hong Kong was always a good dream for her. She knew her children would be happy there. She longed to see them.

Everything had gone smoothly since she got to Hong Kong. Her husband loved her, her children were glad to have their mother with them finally.

A trip with the children. Yes, a happy one...

Her son blamed Mrs. Chan for always not being with him. Looking at his disappointed eyes, she knew she had broken a number of promises... She did not want to. Life was like that, who could help it? Her son did behave quite well today. She was happy with that...

Anita yawned and stretched her arms. She knew she could not work anymore. Inspiration usually came and went. She had sat there long enough. It was already five. She had to go to South Horizons to give a private tutorial to her student next morning, actually just four hours later. She thought she'd better have a little sleep before another day's struggle.

It usually took me an hour and a half to travel from Tin Shui Wai to Ap Lei Chau⁶. I often used this time to finish my readings from school. Reading a book helped me pass much of the time. I really enjoyed my private moment. There were few people traveling to Hong Kong around this hour. I could occupy a whole row of seats. Just the last part of Ibsen's *A Doll's House* left, fifteen minutes were enough. Then I could think about the outline for the paper. God! Prof. Kim's paper was due next Tuesday, and the story writing next Thursday. Be quick! Concentrate! I really wanted to know what happened to Nora and Torvald.

This is her last Tarantella⁷. Nora danced beautifully in front of her husband and the guests. After tonight, she would leave this house, end her life, so Torvald, her husband, would be safe from the secret. She would not be afraid of Krogstad anymore. He had no rights to control her life. Her husband's name would be saved, and so were her children. But Torvald had broken her heart. She realized he was a coward that couldn't shoulder any responsibility. She decided to leave him. Torvald begged her to stay and hoped to seal the broken relationship...

Torvald: Can you also explain why I have lost your love, Nora?

Nora: Yes, I can. It happened this

6 Change of the narration: Imitation of the structure in Margaret Atwood's *The Edible Woman*.

7 Here I change part of *Ibsen's* story into a narrative form.

evening...⁸

“Hold the handrails!” shouted a woman to a little boy and a little girl. “You sit here. Wait till Mama ‘doo’ the Octopus cards.”

Nora: Yes, I can. It happened this evening, when the miracle failed to happen... (It was page 101.)

A smell of spaghetti came from the opposite side of me. The mum was opening a box of Maxim. Some steam was coming out from the box. The woman, two children and a big bag took the whole row of seats opposite me.

Nora: ...Yes, I can...when the miracle failed to happen. It was then that I realized...” (Page 101).

“Ar.”

“Open your mouth, please!” cried the mum.

The little girl wearing pink dress, sitting still next to her mum, opened her little mouth. Carefully the woman put a fork of spaghetti into the mouth. The girl’s mouth was tissue.

“Sit still, brother! Ar...” the fork was pointing to another little mouth.

“Ar,” the little boy wearing a white shirt leaned forward to the fork, imitating the sound of his mother, opened his mouth.

The woman quickly mixed the tomato paste with the

⁸ Ibsen, Henrik. Plays Two: A Doll’s House. London: Methuen Drama, 1997.

noodles, and blew some air onto it.

The boy leaned over his mum and got a blue bottle from the big bag next to her. The boy clicked out the straw and sipped the water.

“Ar...” the woman signaled.

The girl shook her head.

“What do you want ar? Eat!” the little mouth opened.

A bottle dropped. The little boy looked at the woman with a smile.

“Hold your bottle firmly!” The woman bent and picked the bottle up with her right hand, while holding the box of food with her left hand.

“Drink some water, ar mui⁹.” the woman handed her a pink bottle from the bag.

The pink bottle slipped off the little hand of the girl.

“Wai! You want me to *fit*¹⁰ you on the bus ma? Sit still!”

“Mummy, I want to alight from the bus. Where is Ocean Park? I want to see the *aminals!*” exclaimed the little boy. His mouth was circled with tomato paste.

“Not till you finish the food. There is nothing to eat in the Park.”

9 ar mui: sister.

10 ‘fit’: hit. A Cantonese onomatopoeia.

“Ar...”

“I have brought the camera. We can have photos with dolphins, pandas and sea lions, ok?” the mum smiled to her son and her daughter while putting another forkful of spaghetti into the little mouths.

“I want to see *aminals* too! I like rabbits and duck ducks!” the little girl told her mother.

The boy leaned over to his mum and wanted to put back his bottle into the bag.

“Sit better! I can help you.”

“da..da la la la...” the little girl was humming and playing with her bottle.

The little boy stood on the seat and looked out of the window also humming.

At last, the whole box of spaghetti was finished by the three. The woman drank the water from her children’s bottle and put it back, feeling contented.

Nora: Yes, I can. It happened this evening, when the miracle failed to happen. It was then that I realized you weren’t the man I’d thought you would be...

Nora: Torvald, yes, I borrowed money from another man, Krogstad, your subordinate, to save

your life when you were very sick four years ago. I didn't get your permission. I hurt your honor...

Nora: Every day, I hoped the miracle would take place! When Krogstad's letter was lying there, threatening me that he would expose this scandal to the public, you would step forward and take all the blame on yourself, and say: 'I am the one who is guilty!' 'Publish the facts to the world! Bastard!' But you didn't. You chided on me, and said that you dared not entrust my children to me. I'd had enough, Torvald. I am no wife to you anymore... ¹¹

The street door is slammed shut downstairs¹².

Anita finally finished *A Doll's House*. She closed the book and felt relieved. She was quite frustrated by the noise and regretted not bringing her mp3. Looking at the watch, forty-five minutes! She needed forty-five minutes to finish five pages of the play! Impossible! She had not yet thought about the outline for her paper either! She frowned and wanted to throw an accusing stare at the people opposite her, but found that the two little kids were sleeping peacefully and happily in their mother's lap. The woman opposite her was drowsing. Suddenly a strong inspiration came across Anita's mind, yes, Mrs. Chan¹³ could keep her promise. She took their children not to Ocean Park, but Hong Kong Park or HK Zoological & Botanical Gardens. Those were free of charge. That would be the ending of her story.

¹¹ The original dialogues are shortened and changed.

¹² The exact ending of *A Doll's House*.

¹³ The main character in the story she was composing.

The beginning and the ending were formed, but there was no conflict in the story. Mrs. Chan's life was a bit too smooth. No climax would definitely fail the story. It needed an action, like dramas. Anita looked unblinkingly in front of her, busy searching for any further inspiration that would come to her. Everything was quiet. The scenes outside the bus window ran by quickly and smoothly. The bus was at high speed...the screen was rolling fast...there was Nora talking to her husband...a letter...miracles...arguments...Nora leaving the house, taking with her the children...

Yes, that was it! The middle part! Immediately, Anita scrambled in her large schoolbag and took out an ugly piece of paper, and scrawled:

Everything went unusually smoothly after she got to Hong Kong. Her husband loved her, her children were glad to have their mother with them finally...

But all was an illusion. For the longer she lived in that house, the more she found not everything as she dreamt before. Her children were not always happy with their pa. They were always left alone with the maid at home. Now the Filipino maid had gone because she was not needed anymore when Mrs. Chan was here. Mrs. Chan was always a good house manager.

Mrs. Chan was a clean person. She normally cleaned

her house twice a day. Wiping windows, washing clothes, mopping floors, tidying up the mess of her children's toys, all the house chores occupied every minute of hers, but she felt satisfied with her hard work. Sometimes she laughed to herself and wondered if it was her occupational disease from being a nurse before, being so sensitive to germs?

But one day, she laughed no more. She accidentally found a letter from a drawer that her husband used to put his shirts and ties. She discovered a horrible secret that her husband had long concealed from her. Mrs. Chan was not Chan Kai Shan's first wife, she was the second. Chan Kai Shan had a forty-year-old wife in Beijing. Mrs. Chan never knew that. That was a nightmare for her.

“Wretched man! What have you done?” She burst out when she saw Mr. Chan that night.

“Do you understand what you've done? Answer me! Oh, what a dreadful awakening! For years - you were always my joy and pride - a hypocrite, a liar - worse, worse - a criminal! Monster! Shame on you, shame!”

Chan Kai Shan was silenced and stared unblinkingly at her. He knew his secret was disclosed.

“You don't deserve my love, Chan Kai Shan. You never took the responsibility of a good father when I was in China. I

am leaving you. You are ruining my children. You are a liar!”

“Could you forgive me? My little bird.”

“There’s no use. It’s all over! Don’t ever call me your little bird anymore. I am sick of it. After reading the letter, I realized you weren’t the man I’d thought you would be. I don’t want to be dragged into your fantasy anymore. Now, I need no more from you. I am going to take my children with me. You go back to your old wife and your children in Beijing! They need you more than my children and I”...

Back home that night, Anita finished the other half under the same yellow light.

Mrs. Chan worked as a nurse in a small private clinic in Wan Chai after the divorce. She was happy with her new life. Her children were with their grandma when she was at work. The old woman took them to the playground and brought them oranges as a treat after the kindergarten. She started teaching them “life was like an orange” like her mother. Whenever Mrs. Chan thought about this, she smiled and murmured to herself, yes, very true, sometimes sweet, sometimes sour, just like life. But in her life, she had picked a bad orange.

Her mother had come to Hong Kong to take care of the children several months ago. For a long time, she had not had

fun with the children. This coming Easter, Mrs. Chan was given a four-day holiday to celebrate with her children. Mrs. Chan was glad about that and thanked her employer. She knew her sixty-five-year-old mother also needed a rest, so one day she took their children to have a Hong Kong trip.

Yes, a happy one...

A city bus slowly approached a bus stop. Mrs. Chan and her children luckily caught the bus without waiting in the sun. Having two big bags containing water, food and napkins on her left shoulder, she had difficulties in holding her baby daughter in her right arm, and taking her son with her left hand. The bus driver had a look at them behind his sunglasses and started the bus slowly...

Looking at her son and her daughter, she was aware she had owed them too much. She did not want to. Life was like that, tragic in nature, but she could make a miracle from it.

“Hey, Chun Zai¹⁴, let mama take you and Ar Mui to Hong Kong Park ok? There are lots of monkeys!”

“I want to see gorillas and crocodile Bui Bui!”

“OK!” smiled Mrs. Chan.

“I wan see fish, dogs, cats, *tortors*¹⁵ ...”babbled the three-year-old girl. She nearly recited all the animals’ names she learnt from her kindergarten.

¹⁴ “Chun Zai”: 俊仔 Hong Kong parents like adding “Zai” at the end when calling their sons’ names.

¹⁵ Tortor: tortoise. Imitation of baby’s babble.

“Ok! No problem! After that, let’s have ice-cream in McDonald’s!”

The children screamed with joy!

Everyone on the bus was looking at them, astonished by the happy noise.

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Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. Penguin Book, 1996.

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Structures/ techniques adopted in “Under Construction”

Literary Works	Structures/ Techniques Used	My story
Virginia Woolf’s <i>Mrs. Dalloway</i>	Two individual plots joined at the point when the protagonists meet at the park	The book, the student, the characters meet on the bus.
Margaret Atwood’s <i>The Edible Woman</i>	Its three-part story uses both 1 st person narration and 2 nd person narration for one focalizer.	The focalizer will exist as “Anita” and “I” in the story.
Ibsen’s <i>A Doll’s House</i> (Drama & Movie)	New form of drama. Aristotelian notion: “Drama is an imitation of man in action”.	Story: an imitation of real life.
Pirandello’s <i>Six Characters in Search of an Author</i> (Drama) Bertolt Brecht’s <i>The Caucasian Chalk Circle</i> (Drama)	A story within a story.	That a student needs to finish her homework is a story. The work she composed is another story. What she reads around her is also a story.

Smoky Names

Janice Chan Yeung Chau

In the mirror,
 Her black eyes shimmer.
 The image of a white light flows.
 When she walks away, smoke fades;
 Her pale face stays on the wall,
 Through the window she sees no sky.
 A white bird turns red--flesh.
 Eyes of black granite;
 They are stones, no tears.
 She stares at her clouded reflection,
 Half expecting it to fade.
 She touches the name of a woman
 On her right arm. Closer.
 Letters of cutting light.
 She said she wouldn't look at the sky. Again.
 Wings of a plane slant this way--that way.
 Brush across her lost eyes.
 The image of the plane is erased
 by flashing light. She
 smokes again; smoke on the window.
 58022 NAMES
 Of the woman hiding inside the mirror.

On the Train

Mary Fung Wing Chi

On the train, stories of life are happening,
before the sun wakes up, and after we bid him goodnight,
while the wheels underneath dance and sing.

A's head moves like a fishing hook, snoring,
B's head is the hand of a clock, it strikes from left to right,
On the train, stories of life are happening.

An unzipped bag as Mr. Chan sleeps, in ten seconds the thief
possesses the wallet and the ring.
The scent of bacon dances in the air, but it suddenly bounces in
John's mouth in a bite,
while the wheels underneath dance and sing.

Warm lips and tight arms, loving couples and shining rings,
Romantic rhythms bloom in the dim tunnel light.
On the train, stories of life are happening.

Like a thunderstorm, Mrs. Cheung is roaring,
She forbids her son to run but he says she deprives his right,
while the wheels underneath dance and sing.

Notice the thousands stories grow daily in the train.
Let their glowing light shine into your blinded sight.
On the train, stories of life are happening,
while the wheels underneath dance and sing.

Plague of the Year

Mary Fung Wing Chi

Wishes are made every January, because they are never fulfilled.
St. Valentine dies in February, with my complaining letters in his coffin.

March is flooded with Easter eggs, but Jesus lies still.
I am born every year in April, 'Forgotten' is my friends' yearly present.

Professors perform end-of-term massive killings in May.
Father's Day in June: he wishes I will be less stupid next year.
In melting July, ice-cream covers my eyes each time I measure my weight.
Mark Six with August special prize: the only month prayers swell in God's ears.

School is hell in September, when students meet their long-winded instructors.
In October, the Halloween Satan grows throughout the city – but real life Satan grows throughout the year.
In November steam of hot pots dances with the richer, but chilling wind plays with the poor.
Only Santa Claus is welcomed in December – that is what Jesus

has discovered.

Throughout the year, we are like a wet kite shrinking in the swirl of problems.

Yet, may the Holy light dry our pressure out, and may our hopes blow us to the height of Heaven.

A Pair of Coarse Hands

Christine LEUNG Mei-yee

A striking black shadow wavered and lingered along the hospital corridor. It seemed that it was waiting for something.

“Where...where...am...I...I...now?” A pale faced middle-aged woman spoke with a gasp. She slightly opened her fatigued eyes. The shimmering signboard sneakily answered her: PRINCE OF WALES HOSPITAL-ICU¹.

After several feeble coughs, a stream of reddish liquid splashed from her mouth and stained the pillow besides her. An invisible pressure pressed on her chest which made her nearly suffocate. She once yearned to struggle, but in vain. Lying on her bed, she listened attentively. The ward was filled with an excruciating symphony. Her panting rhythm piping through the slender oxygen transmission tube echoed the beats of the cardiogram.

She ruminated. Right, PRINCE OF WALES HOSPITAL plus ICU equalled death. Yes. She knew that she would not stay long. She was fed up with her soreness and weariness. Somehow, she really wanted to give up...yet, she couldn't.

“Wait...shall I wait for...for my daughter? Just...just a few

1 ICU refers to the intensive care unit of a hospital.

moments...” She pleaded. She wheezed.

Fate...

“Who are you talking to, Mrs. Chow?” A nurse came into the ward to record this dying patient’s situation. No one knew who she had talked to. At this moment, she just thirsted for air.

Countless short and rapid treads approached. Someone flung open the door.

“Mum, why did you suddenly faint at the birthday banquet?” A young woman asked.

“How come you don’t know, huh? Your mother has suffered from serious pulmonary emphysema² for more than three years already.” The nurse reported.

Cough...cough...cough...Panting...Yau tremulously raised her right hand, “...Mei-lai?”

“Yes, Mum. I’m here.” Mei-lai sat next to the bed combing her mother’s messy and loose grey hair.

“My girl...Don’t cry. Let Mama tell you a story... secretly...just for you...”

“No...Mum. ... Please don’t...you should take more rest...”

Yau removed the respirator and said, “No... Don’t stop me...come...come near me...see...there...a tiny, colourful butterfly...”

2 A lung disease.

Mei-lai leaned forward. Little by little, bit by bit, Yau tried very hard to utter every word. All her memories flooded as if they swelled along a mountain stream. Somehow, Mei-lai realized that her mother had gradually lost her way. Yau's wrinkled hands were getting cold.

The nippy shadow came back. Yet, Yau didn't seem ready to leave.

Where did she have to go?

B-E-E-P-

“NO-” Frenzied. Mei-lai didn't know what to do, except scream –

“Help! Doctor...! Doctor...!”

Untying those wearisome pipes, closing my eyes, stretching my body, I yawn. A deep yawn.

“Yau, what are you doing? Squat!” A familiar male voice quietly uttered. A big hand gives a tug on my hand.

Who is he? Ken?

He is! This strong young man has Ken's deep voice, short beard, and his unique messy hair.

A beaming light is scanning through the paddy field and the wavy underbush. See. There...I recognise that tiny colourful

butterfly. Why does it reappear here? Mother once told me that the butterfly represented one's life. Though it dies, it will be reborn. I never understand such philosophical myths. It endeavours to fly until the last minute of its life. Finally, it lands on my hands. Burning its life. Dying. Hang on...Gazing at my hands, most of those tiny crinkles and calluses vanish. So miraculous.

Where am I now?

It seems that I have met all these scenes before.

“You three, go that way! And you two search this area! Check! Thoroughly!” A callous voice commands. Two public security guards are approaching nearer.

Several other fellow countrymen shiver. Now, I know where we are and who we are. We are not playing children's hide-and-seek or sand-and-mud. It is a fatal game. No. A battle-fighting for our dream.

The report of a series of gun shots makes me shudder.

“Yau, pay attention. Bear in mind that after the Snakehead³ commands, we must run as fast as we could, got it?” Ken murmurs. His eyes intensely fix on the Snakehead's subtle movement. Meanwhile, my husband holds my shoulders so tight that I sense his nerves.

On my left hand side, the artificial bushy grass stirs.

3 “Snakehead” is the title for the leader of Chinese illegal immigrants.

*Kirk...kulak...*⁴ A piece of bough cracks. The Snakehead can no longer stand to restrain himself and starts to act.

“Run! Hurry up! Don’t look back!” Our central commander orders his fellows to escape. A group of stray men run about in all directions.

“Catch those I-Is⁵!” The police rush towards those men.

Under the hail of bullets and shells, Ken firmly grasps my hand. We keep on running endlessly.

“Oh...”

“What’s up?” Ken turns back.

I stumble over a tree root and fall into a muddy puddle. My feet are blocked. My hands scrape seriously. I can’t help myself get rid of the sticky mud. Though I’m lumpish, I’m not Ken’s stumbling stone. I’m not!

“Ken. Run! Leave me alone! I don’t want you to be caught!”

He doesn’t listen to me. He never does. Ken endeavours to pull me out of the puddle. He once again saves me. I hug him. He tears off a piece of cloth from his “Red Guard⁶” uniform and bandages my wounds tenderly. I grit my teeth to endure the pain.

“Okay, now. Let’s go again!” He smiles.

After crossing another narrow path, we arrive at the edge of

4 An onomatopoeic phrase to describe the sound of cracking a bough.

5 “I-Is” stands for illegal immigrants.

6 “Red Guard” was a term used to refer to the group of young guards during Chinese Cultural Revolution.

a river. Snakehead dives into it.

“S-W-I-M-!” Snakehead waves his hand and shrieks. Everybody follows.

“Yau, we are very near Lo Wu now. See. There. Passing across this Shenzhen River, then we can reach our destination-Hong Kong. And if we can successfully arrive at Kowloon Immigration Centre, everything will be fine.”

“Yes. We will have our new hope.” I nod.

Ken and I make our utmost effort to swim. This is our fourth trial already. Every time when we were caught, we were sent to a concentration prison for a few weeks until our relatives gave some ransom money to the guards. Inside the prison, neither sufficient food nor clean clothes would be provided. For the first two times, my own brother came to pay the ransom. It was really unexpected. Originally, I expected my husband’s family to come. But they didn’t. Until the last time, when granny came but with grumbles. After giving the ransom, she criticized me. She said that I was a stumbling stone or even the bane of my husband. From then on, my life in Guangdong became a nightmare. This is my final chance. I can’t lose anymore or else I will be caught under granny’s ferocious claws forever. No matter how much salty water we drink, we yearn to settle our home in Hong Kong.

Hong Kong, please wait for me, I’m coming...

Yes. Yau, you can get your ultimate prize – the Hong Kong identity card.

All of a sudden, a turbulent force coming from the bottom of the river sucks me into a whirlpool. My whole body sinks. My vision blurs. My spirit flows into a bottomless chasm.

“Follow me...zzzziiiiii...follow me...ziiiziiiiizizizi...”

A chilly voice and an engine sound echo in my ears and in my heart.

Where am I heading to...?

The noisy engine sound wakes me up. Knocking on my dizzy head, I discover that I have arrived at another familiar place. Hundreds and hundreds of sewing machines are neatly arranged. You can sniff the smell of lubricant. A little card falls onto the dirty floor. It says, “Chow Wan Yau”. My name. It has my picture on it as well. Oh, I can finally seize my little prize. When I try to pick it up, I can’t stoop down.

Look. Look at my round-round belly. Can’t you believe it? It’s not my fat but my own blood and flesh. Will it be a boy? If so, Ken and granny must be very glad to hear that. But...my mother once told me about the traditional saying. She said that if an expectant mother’s belly was pointed in shape, it must be a boy; but if it is round, the baby should be a girl. Anyhow, no matter

what, it is my own child.

I have a good stretch and yawn. The rising sun dyes a group of clouds into different colours. It's so beautiful.

“If it's really a girl, let me name my child Mei-lai⁷.” I mumble.

24th April, 1980.

A new day has come already. But the tedious job never ends. While stepping on the sewing machine pedal, seaming the zips and pieces of denims, I feel my baby vigorously kick me. I can't endure. Little drops of cool sweats quiver along my cheeks and back.

“Yau, are you okay? You've been working overtime for more than two days and nights already. You look so sallow and greenish. Do you need to take a rest first, huh?” Siu Hung, my fellow colleague who also came from my hometown, drapes a coat over my shoulders.

“No...I can't stop...” I insist. “It's just a transient pain.”

I persuade myself to continue. “Zizizizziii.....” These damn rusty zips knot together! Even the zips want to bully me!

I really can't control my moodiness.

7 “Mei-lai” is the Cantonese for “beautiful”.

Why do I have to be here? I have had enough!

Calm down, Yau. You should not transfer your pain to the innocent zips.

I know...but...No...I can't endure anymore...

“Oh! Da Lu Mei⁸! What are you doing!? You want to die ah ha?” A woman violently gets hold of my braid. Later on, she tweaks my ear without any benevolence. “How dare you ! Who let you tear my valuable denim clothes ga ha?”

I can't utter a word. I have no courage to challenge her.

“You've nothing to say la, right?” Manager Ho crosses her arms in front of her chest.

I stand still, keep my mouth shut, and swallow the insult.

“Say something, Yau!” Siu Hung urges me to protest. Siu Hung doesn't understand my burden. I need to earn money to bring up my baby. The reality doesn't allow me to protect my dignity.

“If you are clever enough, continue to work. I don't want to delay my client's shipping date.” Manager Ho said.

I obey her command.

Who likes to be called “Da Lu Mei”? Who wants to be humiliated? No one understands how deep it hurts me both inside and outside.

8 “Da Lu Mei” means mainland girl.

“Yau, if you don’t say it, never mind, I’ll say it for you. You see her lofty manner! I really can’t stand her any longer!” Siu Hung turns her furious face towards Manager Ho and screeches out loud with her local accent, “You! Ugly bitch! I know you Hong Kong people are richer than us. But it doesn’t mean that you have the right to despise us, insult us or even abuse us!”

“What-did-you-call-me?” Manager Ho is irritated.

“Bitch!”

“Can you stop that, Siu Hung? I beg you. Please don’t cause any trouble for me...” I mutter without any energy.

“I cause you troubles?”

“I don’t want others to give relief to me. I want no one’s sympathy. This is my own fate. Nothing can be done about it.”

“YAU! Your conscience must be eaten by a wolf!”

“...”

We stare at each other. Stifled. I notice that something is fading away. Our valuable friendship. She may treat me as a turncoat now. Indeed, I have somehow betrayed her. But human beings are selfish. We have to face this realistic world. Just like the philosophy of drinking water that Mother told me. Human relationships are like drinking water. You’ll never know whether the water is freezing, cold, warm or hot until you drink. Some

people may treat you well, but some may not. I know that Siu Hung wants to help me, but I can't accept. I would rather put it in my heart. Perhaps Siu Hung may understand this some day.

“Wei! You two, enough la! I hire you here to work, but not to argue ga!” Manager Ho stands with arms akimbo. “Humph...I am merciful therefore I employ you here... If you don't like here, leave here lor...And you, no money then don't have baby la, shameless...Wei...hey...what's up with ar Yau?”

“Who knows how to deliver a child?” It's Siu Hung's voice. “Hold on, Yau!”

I gradually lose my energy...but I still sense that she holds my hands tightly.

“Can you forgive me...?” Two different voices reverberate inside my heart.

“Can you forgive me? I should have...” Mei-lai held her mother's hands tightly. A tear rolled down her cheek. She didn't know her mother had been insulted for the sake of protecting her. When Mei-lai touched her mother's cold rugged hands, she realized that something had lost that she could never cure. What could she do now? Nothing.

Ashamed. “What have I done for Mum? What have I done...?”

She wanted to go home. She had no face to face anyone.

However, when Mei-lai imagined her home, immediately, she could only visualize an empty flat. There was no place to go, no place to go to dry her eyes. Broken inside. She had been abandoned, and now she couldn't find what she left behind. She feared to face her mother, even herself. Last time, when her father died, especially for the time, when her mother needed her support, Mei-lai had gone to Newfoundland for one whole year to indulge in her sorrow and escape from the reality. Not being a dutiful daughter, it turned out that her mother did everything for her father's funeral. Others criticized her for being irresponsible, selfish and unfilial. Did these people understand how miserable she felt? Actually, it was not a convincing excuse at all. Did she consider her mother? Never ever.

She was afraid to recommit the same mistake again.

“My Father, my Lord. May You keep me under Your gracious love? I fear. Please, my Lord, please forgive me for my debts. I confess my selfishness. For I now lack my courage. Lord, I pray. Please give me strength, and faith...Amen.”

Opened her eyes and looked outside the ward window. Mei-lai rubbed her eyes. A shadow little by little slipped away. She tried to seek the trace of the shadow. But it had vanished already. The sight of the shadow made her blood freeze. It resembled the sight of her mother's back.

“Maybe it was just an illusion...or is it really Mum?” She whispered.

Looking at her mother’s peaceful countenance, she wondered if it was God who had received her mother to heaven.

The candle of hope rekindled.

Epilogue

“The Lord Bless You And Keep You

The Lord bless you and keep you

The Lord make it face to shine upon you

and be gracious unto you...

The Lord lift up the light of his countenance upon you,

and give you peace.

Amen.

Birth date: 24th April 1960

Death date: 24th April 2004

to mourn

a loving Mother

Chow Wan Yau

Progeny Mei-lai establishes”

Mother has left me for a week already. I come here again. I have buried mother next to father’s tomb. Hyacinth matches Rose. What a perfect match. Two colourful butterflies are flying freely as if mother reunites with father. Mother has left me a riddle before her death. She asked me what on earth would never decay.

“Mum, the answer is Love.”

Before she went away, she had also asked me to help her do one thing-to take good care of myself.

Leaving the story “A Pair of Coarse Hands” on my mother’s tomb, I know that Mother would be glad to read it.

Don’t be jealous, father. Yours is coming.

Right. I should move on. The upcoming story would be dedicated to my father. Let me think. It is entitled as *A Portrait of A Father’s Face*.

The Ice-cream Seller

Dorothy Lau Sze Man

Hearing the sweet music
marks the entrance to the fantasy world
with just a lap
I can dive into the dreamy world
that reality prohibited

my body grows lighter and lighter
flowing in the air
toward the ice-cream truck
as if I
were under a spell
I hear my blurred voice
asking the guy to make me
a fresh tasty one

but I suddenly wake up
spotting the traces
on his forehead
and
the frown...
everything swirls

as the ice-cream
goes
round-and-round
the cone

The lick is not sweet at all
through the eyes of the seller
I see sweat coming down his cheek
when the tears of my ice-cream
drop
along my fingers.

Six BIG Reasons for Love

Wayne Chung Nim Hei

Inside, our hands need a corpse to hold
so that a single coffin would not feel too cold

In life we simply need fun
an organic doll is better than none

Hiding behind a fleshy wall
offers a shelter from others' wordy squall

To do a little biological research in bed
tasting different lipsticks which are alluring red

Everybody racing to do the same
is the eternal rule of the game

Or this just lies within our genes
like a fly must bathe in the brown hilly scenes

Don't argue to argue, but please love to love
This reason would be enough

Revelation

Karen Wong Kin Hung

“Ting-ling...ting-ling...ting-ling...ting-ling...”

The deadly silence of a September early morning was pierced by the rattling sound of keys, accompanied by heavy tramps. A primary school girl with very short black hair stalked towards my mum and me at the lift lobby, with her hand grasping a whole bunch of keys.

“Jou Sahn! Going to school?” My mum greeted her in the way she did to every neighbour. To my surprise, a deep sigh, instead of “yes”, was heard.

“Ar... you are going to school wor, right?” My mum strove to ease the situation by using a more relaxing tone.

“If not, why am I in school uniform? Can’t you see it ga!?” The girl replied, pointing at her uniform dress. Her widely opened eyes and thundering voice were so overwhelming that I grasped my mum’s arm at once.

Then I started squinting at the girl bit by bit, dazzled by her eye-catching neon pink G-Shock watch and striking orange Nike schoolbag, which were both the latest fashions that I longed for. Probably she was staring at the cheap cartoon watch on my left

1 “Jou Sahn” means “Good morning” in Cantonese.

hand held by my mum. I felt relieved as the lift reached the eighth floor.

The lift opened. The girl dashed to the centre of the lift and crossed her arms, making herself a central figure surrounded by waves of children and mothers. Just as usual, my mum talked to other housewives in the lift.

“Going to wet market?” Mrs. Wong living on the eleventh floor asked my mum.

“Yes! I have to buy some beef and vegetables for tonight’s dinner. My daughter loves them very much, and... ar... she also likes shrimps, eggs, fish balls and --”

“Oh, ‘Incinerator’²! No wonder she is so FAT!” The girl interrupted my mum by a rising tone. Looking at the girl’s slim body, I tried to hide my flushing face behind my mum. “She is so rude!” I mumbled and cried. All the housewives frowned, scanning the girl from bottom to top till the lift reached the ground floor.

“So skinny! She is like a skeleton!” My mum said furiously. “You know, when she and her grandmother first moved into the next door, she was also that disgusting! I remember she ...” My mum shared her every bit of information about the girl with other housewives once she saw the girl walking far away from them. I murmured to put an evil spell on the girl.

2 Incinerator: In Cantonese, “incinerator” is a humiliating term describing a person who accepts and eats everything available.

That was the first time Ah Yee spoke to her neighbours, and also the very first day she was designated to be the hot gossip topic of my mum- just after she had stepped out of the lift.

Ah Yee and her grandmother appeared at the eighth floor lift lobby one month before the school started. It was a stuffy August Sunday afternoon seven years ago, when the lift lobby was, as usual, a multifunctional playground for parents and children. The lobby was always an ideal place for social activities in an H-shaped public housing building like ours, as it was spacious. I still remembered when the lift opened, the suk-suk and yi-yi³ were playing mahjong, while the children were playing chess and riding bicycles. Nevertheless, we were then all distracted from our entertainments by the two strangers stepping out of the lift.

The girl and the old woman were short, and significantly small when compared with tons of furniture and luggage in the lift. The girl, who looked like a shorthaired Form 1 boy, was in a blue T-shirt and jeans. Though small and short, she stared at us with unspeakable intensity. The old woman, apparently in her late fifties, was in a silk white shirt and long black trousers. Her overly decent dressing, in the context of public housing estate, gave a sense of inapproachability. Seeing the two unfamiliar faces, my mum and Old Chan showed their receptivity at once.

“Oh, new neighbours?” My mum talked to the girl, who

³ Suk-suk and Yi-yi mean uncles and aunties respectively. They are commonly used to address senior people in neighborhood, though without any blood relationship.

gave no response.

“Let’s help you to carry the luggage and furniture to your room!” Old Chan gesticulated to the other uncles to take action and walk towards the stuff, but was stopped by the girl’s obstruction in front of the lift. Even worse, Old Chan’s stretching hand towards the luggage was hit by her thump. The laughter-filled lobby became silent.

Without any apology and explanation, the girl pushed the furniture one by one. The old woman, in her fifties, rolled the luggage to their room and said “excuse me” many times. I was not interested in their brand new expensive furniture, that could hardly be seen in any tenant’s room in our public housing estate; instead, I was very curious about the whole bunch of keys in the girl’s hand. There were about ten to twelve keys, but what were they for? Before I started to think about it, my attention was drawn by my mum.

“So rude! How can that girl be like that!? Is she dumb? But even the dumb know politeness.” My mum talked with anger to Old Chan.

“Maybe she thinks we are bad neighbours lei. Ai! Being kind-hearted is rewarded with a thunderstorm!” Old Chan shook his head.

“Huh! Bad? All know that we are unobtrusive and modest

4 Being kind-hearted is rewarded with thunderstorm: A Chinese proverb meaning a kind person is responded badly, despite the benevolence he or she shows. It is often considered an ironic saying to address people’s lack of thankfulness.

neighbours! Who can deny this?” My mum said proudly and everyone nodded at once, except the children, including me.

“Anyway, you’d better keep an eye on them, especially the girl. She is strange.” Old Wong added.

“Of course! And see! The two people are moving into the room next to ours! I think they must bring about bad luck to us. I must worship the ancestors to give us much more blessings after this game, and --”

“Hey! It’s your turn! Quick! I am going to win this game...” Old Wong urged my mum to continue the game. My mum kept grumbling till the mahjong game ended at 6 p.m., when she had to prepare dinner for the family.

There seemed to be no trace of human existence in my neighbour’s home. While all other tenants opened the doors widely for better ventilation at that hot and stuffy night, my neighbour closed the door. There was no sound, neither human sound, TV sound or radio sound, from that room. It was only until midnight could my mother and I hear some strange noise: the little girl was crying and arguing with the old woman. The speech became clearer when we pressed our ears to the wall, though we could only get part of it.

“She won’t come and take you back! Keep crying, if you dare to! There is nothing worth crying about, and there is no use

crying. Do you hear me?”

“You...you are lying! She loves me! She bought me so many things: the watch, the schoolbag and -”

“Listen. She doesn’t want any of us. She is no longer the one you’d been familiar with. Wake up and face the truth: only I, a useless skeleton, am going to look after you from now on. If I were not your grandmother, I would just leave you alone.”

“She must come and take me back with her. Don’t say bad things about her!”

“Ai! Silly girl, wipe the tears and go to sleep now. You don’t understand the complicated adult world.”

The conversation between the granddaughter and the grandmother interested both my mother and me. “Oh! The old woman is the little girl’s Ah Ma⁵!” My mother talked to herself. But then who was the “she” they referred to? The girl’s mother? From that night onwards, my mum tried to listen in to next door, but, to her disappointment, she heard nothing.

My mum’s information could not be updated until several weeks later, when Mid-Autumn Festival came in late September. My mum encountered Ah Ma at the lift lobby, both burning paper money to pray for the Chinese Moon God. My mum initiated the talk, as if she thirsted for new information to discover who “she” was.

5 Ah Ma means grandmother in Cantonese.

“Oh! You also stick to this kind of tradition? Nowadays fewer and fewer people go on with this kind of traditional practice, especially the younger generation.” My mum talked while putting the paper gold and money one by one into the burning tin.

“The younger generation? What do they know? They know SHIT! They know respect to tradition? NEVER! They just want to get rid of old things, like their aging parents.” Ah Ma said slowly yet fiercely, her silvery grey hair showing me a kind of perseverance.

“Maybe it’s just because they are not mature enough! See? My daughter also treats this kind of tradition as a game rather than a ritual. She is already Form 1, but she still likes playing with fire. So naughty. It’s hard for them to understand the meanings behind it.” My mother pointed at me, holding a box of matches and colourful paper bank notes.

“Children... children are to be forgiven, because they are still innocent... and they will listen to your words, if you scold at them! But the older ones, I mean the adults...they will not listen to others. Too arrogant.” The grandmother shook her head continuously.

“Ar, do you have any children?” My mother eventually asked the question lingering in her mind for so long. It seemed that I saw a wolf’s shadow behind my mum.

“Children? My only daughter’s dead.” Her answer silenced my mum for a while.

“O... “ My mum uttered only this sound probably because she was disappointed by the answer. She might not know what the euphemism should be, too.

“It’s ok. No need to feel uncomfortable because of that. I always tell Ah Yee to stay optimistic. She is the one and only hope of my life. Though she is only Primary 6, she’s filial and obedient.” The grandmother smiled, yet her eyes were filled with tears. Though in my mind the two adjectives “filial” and “obedient” were hardly related to Ah Yee, I was convinced by Ah Ma’s sincere and serious tone.

After that intimate talk, my mum shared all she knew about the two neighbours with other eighth floor neighbours, in the nearby park under the bright full moon. Everyone was so concentrated when hearing about it. I found that night a gossip forum rather than a moon-watching gathering.

“So,” my mum said, her tone showing a sense of complacency, “‘she’ is not Ah Ma’s daughter.”

“Then, is ‘she’ just one of the girl’s aunts? Maybe they sought help from her but were refused.” Old Wong said.

“But ...where’s the father? Not with them?” My mum questioned.

“99% certainly he has found another woman and has left the young and the old! Many men are that disloyal!” Mrs. Yeung seemed to blame all men in this world, and the majority of housewives nodded.

“But then where does the two’s money come from? They have brand new furniture! And Ah Ma has no need to work!” My mum asked.

“Illegal... money?” Uncle Lee suggested with hesitation.

“Shh...” Old Chan whispered, touching his index finger with the mouth, “Don’t say it too loudly! Others may hear that!” He looked around to see if there were any eavesdroppers.

“Oh my God! It can be! Ah Yee acts exactly the way a child from some kind of triad society does! She always stares at others and hurts others by words!” My mum said with affirmation, wolfing half of the moon cake in her hand.

“Wa! We must be more aware of that family la! Also, we should never fight back, as they may take revenge.” Mrs. Yu said, showing her scared face.

I sat beside all the uncles and aunties, lighting the colourful candles with other children, as if lamenting something. The family was really that terrible? The father might need to work overseas! The money could be Ah Ma’s savings! How could my mum know what a child from triad society acted like? I sneaked

stealthily from the crowd and enjoyed the peaceful moonlight. The moon was extraordinarily bright, and nothing could escape from its powerful illumination.

After the gossip forum, my mum dared not to gossip about the family in public, but at home with my father or on the phone with the neighbours. Though my mum did not have any new information regarding the family, she kept convincing others that she knew more than anybody did. I gradually became tired of my mum's continual gossiping. In the following few months, I did not spend time and energy listening to any rumours related to Ah Yee and Ah Ma, for I found them unbearable.

The Lunar New Year Day arrived on the coldest day of that year. It was just 7 Degrees Celsius with chilling rain. Our whole family stayed at home watching TV, trying to make the small dining room warmer. The New Year songs were heard repeatedly from TV. The tempo of drums was heard from the lion dance teams. The occasional sound of firecrackers was also heard from somewhere in the building. These noises were so familiar that they got none of our interest and attention.

“Tik-tak...tik-tak...tik-tak...tik-tak...”

A series of uniform sounds, which was resulted from hits of high-heeled shoes on the ground, suddenly reached our ears. Who was going to visit relatives so early in the morning? I peeped through the security eye on the door, seeing a lady approaching

towards our side. I opened the door a little bit, as if I had assumed she was our guest. She stopped outside the next door for a while, standing still and ignoring our strange glances.

She was a very fashionable woman probably in her late thirties. Her heavy makeup, as well as her fancy mini-skirt, induced many negative associations. “She must be an indecent woman,” my mum whispered, “as she wears clothes like a prostitute.” Indeed, it was rare that women were dressed in that way in public housing estate. “See,” my mum continued, “her handbag...it’s LV! It must be expensive. No common housewives can afford that.” I could feel how incompatible this woman was with our world. However, what interested me most was that she had no wrapped New Year gifts with her, the very first things I looked for from my relatives every Chinese New Year. Then, what was she there for? When I was thinking about her relationship with Ah Yee and Ah Ma, a series of rat-tat arrived at my ears.

“Koko...koko...”

Ah Yee opened the door, showing an enormously big smile that we had never seen before. She took the woman’s hand at once and pulled her into the home. She was so excited that she forgot to close the door properly. The unclosed door made every word in the room audible to us, as long as they spoke loudly and we remained silent enough. My mum wondered who the woman was, and suggested she might be the source of illegal money that the

two neighbours needed to support their livelihood. Money from a prostitute? It sounded a bit weird. If a prostitute had to contribute her money to Ah Ma, then Ah Ma was the agent of some kind of illegal organization? It was impossible! I did not think she was that kind of person.

The room appeared absolutely silent, but then it was filled with deafening wrangle between Ah Ma and the woman. It was already the midway of the wrangle by the time we could perceive the fight.

“Sin Fung, how can you be so selfish? You may abandon me but... please, take Ah Yee back! I beg you.”

“You don’t want Ah Yee to be with you?”

“What’s the good for her to be with me? I’m getting old and I may die soon. I can’t help you look after Ah Yee for the whole life-she’s YOUR daughter!”

“I know but...”

“But what? That bastard businessman again?”

“Please respect him. I am going to marry him next month. He has divorced.”

“Sin Fung, how many times have I told you not to get involved with that businessman’s family? How come you were so cruel to destroy both his and your family?”

“We love each other. You don’t understand.”

“But do you remember how badly he treated Ah Yee at your home? If he’d not been like that, I wouldn’t have taken Ah Yee with me and got away from that hell-like place.”

“He doesn’t like children-”

“But then how about Ah Yee?”

“He doesn’t want... any step-daughter.”

“What do you mean?”

“I have asked him to buy you and Ah Yee a big house. You don’t need to live in this cramped flat anymore. I want you to look after Ah Yee, as he doesn’t-”

“You leave me YOUR daughter and MY daughter leaves me. What sin have I committed in my previous life! Sin Fung, wake up! I don’t want to see you making more and more mistakes! You remember? Ah Yee’s father went away just because of your love affairs, and-”

“Stop recalling the past! There’s no use looking back.”

Suddenly, a tremendous sound of keys hitting the ground was heard. It should be Ah Yee who hurled the keys heavily onto the ground.

“I give you house and money. So much money that you can’t repay even if you two work for a whole life! How can you

treat me with such a temper?”

“Take back these keys to your big house.”

Ah Yee’s words catalysed the wrangle and prompted Sin Fung to leave the flat. I was shocked to know the hidden side of the family, and started to understand why Ah Ma mourned for her “dead daughter.” A great sense of guilt struck my heart, making me sleepless all night.

The next morning, as usual, I did not hear any human sounds from my next door. Instead, the sizzle of a plastic bag rubbing was heard for the whole morning. As my parents and I went out for lunch, tons of rubbish was found at the rubbish collection site at the lift lobby, which were disposed of by Ah Ma. From the semi-transparent rubbish bags, I could see the familiar neon pink G-shock watch and some photos showing a young woman and a baby. To my greatest surprise, the bunch of keys that Ah Yee always held in her hand was also left at the site.

“They are going to move away?” My mum wondered.

“Probably. If not, they will not throw away so many things.” My father replied.

“Ar,” my mum made that sound as though she had some great inspirations, “do you think they know we listened to their wrangle last night?”

“Who knows? Maybe they don’t even mind that.” My father

said indifferently.

I looked at the rubbish, feeling that Ah Ma and Ah Yee's longing had vanished so suddenly. An unspoken sense of regret silenced me when I waited for the lift. My parents' non-stop gossip made my heart sink to a greater extent. The lift eventually reached the eighth floor, and my mum held my hand and went into the lift.

“Kung Hey Fat Choi!” We greeted the neighbours, and so did they.

“Haven't seen you these busy housework days! How are you?” Mrs. Wong living on the eleventh floor asked my mum with an old friend's tone.

“Oh! Let me tell you something first. Remember that skinny dying girl we met in the lift several months ago? She has a very complicated family! She...” My mum spoke like a professional storyteller again, manipulating her tone to give emphatic effect.

I let go of my mum's hand as soon as the lift opened on the ground floor. Without a second thought, I walked as fast as I could to escape from my mum and Mrs. Wong. I got a strong sense of how Ah Yee felt when she was walking away from the housewives on that school day morning.

The Best Comfort

Viona Au Yeung

She climbs down the stairs
with the help of
metal handles.

Ring and sounds of a tram
sliding through its paths,
clearly heard in a Sunday afternoon.

As she sits in her favourite dessert store,
a drop from the old air-conditioner
on her slightly curved back
absorbed into her clothes before
slipping downward.

Sitting on a stool,
she sips her red bean soup.
Sweet and bitter it tastes
familiar from the old days
when the two
ran for life
hand in hand
hiding from the raining bullets
of the Japanese army.

Alone in bed,
looking at a black and white photo,
what comes to mind is still colourful.
The sound of a turning key she hears,
the door is slid open with care.
At the door's edge, light enlarges
from a line to a long rectangle.
'I thought you were asleep',
says a rough voice,
so low,
as if not to pause
her train of thoughts.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Poem

Viona Au Yeung

I

‘Does a poem have to rhyme?’

‘This is more prose than a poem.’

II

Shakespeare sucks!

His indulgence in love and beauty
generates endless assignments and papers.

Shall I compare thee to a summer’s day?

Oh, no! Surely not.

III

Dear politicians,

Next time before you pick fragments
from me randomly

to mask your sophisticated plot,
please get a copyright from my lord.

Yours,

Poem

IV

I'll not pay \$39.5 for a Hallmark card
if there isn't a poem in it.
The poem 'Says it Best'.

V

A poem is a paper boat
drifting on a pond
carrying bearable lightness
until it reaches
a sincere listener.

VI

Light shines through the windows
in a winter afternoon.
Some stand by the windows, hands folded.
Some lounge into a sofa, legs spread.
Syllables from a poem jump
in staccato, walk
in legato.
Images in listeners' head,
rotating shadows in a lantern.

VII

Everybody reads the same poem
in a solo-verse speaking contest.

Sets of gestures remind people
of dumb shows' characters.
Emotions in the eyes
of those good actresses
flood the hall, drowning
the audience.

VIII

a lamp.
a rainy evening.
a poem
on a desk.

IX

A poem painted with a bamboo brush,
the ink on it
diluted by salty tear drops,
tells the story of a daughter,
a pearl in her father's hand,
in the forbidden house.

X

My heart is a cave.
At night when no one dares to enter,
thoughts sweeping through

like winds in a hollow,
I write a poem.

XI

A poem is not meant to be
interpreted, analysed, memorized,
and - like those sentimental words, which
roll back to the sea with sand and water -
forgotten.

It is written to be remembered,
as the first rainbow in a child's memory.

XII

What a difference it would make
if e.e.cummings' falling leaf
landed
in the soft hands
of a country girl who
clipped it into her Robert Burns book.

XIII

A line in a poem is a pit on a rock.
Each time it is read - a raindrop
drips in the pit, collecting
into a pool.

The sun shines,
and the water reflects
images into our eyes.



'After Lunch Before Lesson'
a painting of ELAINE Tang Yee Wing
Department of Fine Arts, CUHK, 2005