

CU

Writing in English VII



2007

CU Writing in English

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Preface (Story Section)

Once upon a time, in a kingdom far, far away...

We are the generation that grew up listening to Anderson's fairy tales, watching Walt Disney's animations, reading Japanese comic books. Over the years, the characters and their worlds have become an inseparable part of our childhood.

Yet, as we are old enough to have the pocket money to buy novels ourselves, clever enough to write essays on literature works, we find that something is missing.

Those stories set in the places thousands of miles from here centuries ago cannot satisfy us anymore. We want stories of a place where our memories lie, stories of our hometown, and stories of where our own imagination can reach.

This year, forty-nine students in the English Department of the Chinese University of Hong Kong have made their first step in transforming their colorful memory and dreams into pages. Each of our young authors has his or her scope of life, personal experience and unbound imagination. Those who were born and raised in Hong Kong have told the stories of their city, shared sentiments on their identity and their perspectives of China and other places near Hong Kong. Students with other cultural backgrounds and experiences have also shared stories from their point of view with us.

Reading their stories is like experiencing the adventures from country

to country, understanding the dialogues between these aspiring writers. You will be amazed by the variety of themes, the familiarity of settings and the liveliness of characters. But most importantly, they are original, creative and written from the bottom of their hearts.

In this collection, we have only chosen fifteen most outstanding stories for publication. Despite this, we appreciate the effort of the other students who have participated in this wonderful creation and their openness in sharing their comments for each other's work in the tutorial sessions.

We would like to express our gratitude to Professor Parker. Without his encouragement and guidance in the course "Reading and Writing Short Stories", we would not have the courage to create our own stories. In addition, Tracy's patience and assistance have helped us realize our dream to have this book published. Last but not least, we would like to thank Olivia for her help.

Now, are you ready for the journey?

Once upon a time, in the city of Hong Kong...

Ginny Chan
Rachel Tou
Gary Lai

A Prefatory Sestina (Poetry Section)

Precise
Original
Everlasting
Melodious

There is a seed implanted in our mind. We give it all the nutrients it needs-sufficient water and plenty of sunlight, then it starts to sprout and grow. With time and intensive effort, it soon spreads with unshaken branches and luxuriant leaves. As its owner, we shall never take a break. To look after it, to trim it, to cut away the surplus would help it grow into a comforting canopy. May it one day bloom with ravishing flowers and luscious fruits; may it not, it shall shade us away from the earthly petties.

It all begins with a spark from nowhere and undergoes the rational process of mankind. During the process, one must be able to manipulate the abstract and construct them into a meaningful piece through congregation of words.

We are really honoured to be the editors of this collection. We must say that we find the most pleasure in reviewing and discussing our classmates' poems; selection comes second. It is amazing that each time we read the same poem, it is a unique experience, a new discovery, because we bring in our own emotions and knowledge of the world. Poems that we did not like at first might prove to be our favourite in the end. A good poem is to be read many many times.

All our classmates' works are original and true to self. After discussion, we have decided to choose the poems regarding their themes, content and use of language. The selected poems are creative and reflective. They span a wide range of subjects including everyday life, experience, personal feelings and imagination. They are so sincere that touch our hearts.

We hope to express our gratitude to Prof. Parker and Ms Tracy Liang for their generous support in publishing these works. By presenting these poems, we would like to thank Ms. Jennifer Wong for her insightful advice and guidance throughout the course. Last but not least, we thank our classmates for their continual effort and hope all of you enjoy reading these precious crystals.

Ady Chung Fong Yeung
Alfanie Yeung Yeh Pung
Patty Lau Pui Ting

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The Sea

By Philip Tsang Tai-hang

The sea wind gently blows the leaves of the palm trees, making the only sound in the silence of the night. The castle on the shore is brightly lit, standing against the darkness of the street. Sitting on the hotel balcony, I look across the calm sea. This morning I was still in Istanbul, taking a cab to the airport, stuck in the traffic congestion in the middle of the day, dizzied by the non-stop noise of car horns and the blazing sun. It took me nearly an hour to get to the airport, and I was just in time for my flight.

I arrived in Bodrum this afternoon. When the coastal city first came into sight on the plane, I saw the Castle of St. Peter solitarily overlooking the deep-blue sea. It had stood there on the shore long before I was born. My mother had brought me up to the top of the castle to see how the sea met the sky at the distant horizon before I could speak. Bodrum. The city that started my history. The city that wrote history. Two and a half millennia before my birth, a child was born in this city which was then known as Halicarnassus. His name was Herodotus.

I read from a copy of Lonely Planet which I have brought with me that “this marvellous coastal city is simply an ideal tourist resort and the sheer beauty of the sweeping coastline has attracted hundreds of thousands of tourists every year.” Taking this as one of those hyperboles that abound on every page of Lonely Planet, I was met with great surprise when I actually set foot in Bodrum. Along the street beside the beach, shops selling souvenirs, swimwear and surfboards were open one next to another. Tourists in all sorts of fashionable clothes were bargaining with the shopkeepers. Several women carrying Gucci

and LV handbags were busy trying on the latest Pradas in a shoe store. Beside a CD store which kept playing Eminem's rap music, a long queue had formed outside an Italian restaurant, in which the waiters were almost running among the tables to serve the customers. Such sights were, if not overwhelming, so much outside of my expectation. I have heard how much Turkey has changed in recent years, but I could never have imagined that even a small coastal city like Bodrum would have changed so drastically that it was barely recognizable to me. Though the way the place looked the last time I was here seems vague to me now, I can still remember that the roads were not yet covered with bitumen then, that there were not any of the rented villas which are now so closely packed together, and that the tranquillity had not yet been invaded by the clamour that reigns over the city now.

At the end of the street, I stopped before a restaurant with a big blue fascia. Seahorse. It's still there after so many years. I went into the restaurant. Only several tables were occupied. A woman in her forties wearing a crimson headband stood behind the counter.

"Selam alejkum," I greeted her. I could not remember how long it had been since I had spoken a single Turkish word, so my greeting must have sounded so strange to her that she hesitated for a while before returning my greeting:

"Alejkum selam."

I ordered a cup of Turkish tea and took the table beside the window that overlooked the sea. Outside, the sun shone gently on the beach, which was crowded with people. Two children who had chased after each other tripped over a sand castle built by three other boys, triggering a quarrel. Several men who had been enjoying a sunbath looked up at them. Back then, when I lived here, there were only a few houses squatting along the shore. Occasionally we would see a tourist

or two, but definitely not as many as today. My parents came to live here right after marriage. Not long after my birth, my father died in a shipwreck, and my mother became the only one taking care of me. She ran a grocery store beside our house. There was not much business though. Sometimes, when she went out of the city to find new supplies of goods, I had to run the shop for a few days. I would then take a chair at the entrance of the store and spend the whole day reading a book, facing the sea. Every time my mother came back home, she would bring some strange toys for me. Sometimes, I found myself looking forward to the toys even more than her return itself. Whenever she returned home, she would bring me to dine there in Seahorse. It was never a luxurious place, but it was decent enough. My mother was good friends with Mrs Parscan, the owner of Seahorse, who often joined us for dinner when we came and gave us large lobsters for free.

I looked around the restaurant. Well, everything had changed. Back then, the brick walls were covered with old movie posters. There were not any cinemas in Bodrum, and those movie posters would induce all sorts of images in my mind. I still remember a large poster of *Gone with the Wind* on the wall behind the counter. Whenever I dined here, I would always gaze at that red poster, imagining how in the movie Clark Gable would kiss Vivien Leigh when the whole city was on fire. Now all the posters had gone, and the walls were covered by light-blue wallpaper instead.

I was so deep in my thoughts that I did not realize that the woman with the headband had been standing before me. She put my tea on the table, and asked:

“You’re Turkish?”

“Well, I was born here in Bodrum, but now I live in America.”

“I see.”

When she was about to turn away, I asked:

“Sorry, but do you know Mrs Parscan?”

“Mrs Parscan?” she turned back with a look of surprise. “You mean... my grandmother?”

Only then did I realize what a stupid question I had asked. Mrs Parscan, as I recall, was thirty years older than me. If she were still alive now, she must have been over a hundred years old.

“Oh no,” I laughed, trying to conceal my mistake. “I mean Sarah Parscan.”

“Oh, my mother you mean. She’s been away for a few days, but she’s coming back tomorrow. You’re a friend of hers?”

“An old friend.”

“I see,” she replied, a bit nonchalant. “I’ll tell her that you’re here when she comes back.”

I gave her my name card and my hotel address before she returned to the counter. This was really unexpected. I had never anticipated meeting anyone I knew. After all, I had left here forty years ago. The possibility of having a reunion with Sarah almost seemed unbelievable to me. Back then, whenever I went to Seahorse, she would always be there, helping her mother. I can still remember her big eyes, her brown, thick braids, and how she would come to my house, take my hand, and run with me to the beach. We would while away a whole afternoon there. I used to lie on the beach, and Sarah would pour sand onto my body until I was wholly covered, with only my head sticking out. I always enjoyed getting buried in the sand, closing my eyes, and listening to the waves.

And there was Timothy too.

*

I had not seen Timothy since I left Bodrum. Now, when I think

about it, I do feel some sort of remorse. After all, we were good childhood friends. Back then, we lived next to each other. I first met him at a party at my house when I was six. My mother invited all our neighbours to come and Timothy was among them. He was then a skinny boy, blond, with a pair of brown eyes that spoke of melancholy. The first impression he gave me was, in fact, not very pleasant. As I recall, he looked especially gloomy that day. When my mother brought us to each other, he did not even care to shake hands with me. I was rather annoyed then. Later, when he was not looking, I poured some vodka into his juice. He kept choking after each mouthful he drank, and I could not help giggling beside him. Many years later when we talked about that occasion again, we both burst into laughter.

“You definitely shouldn’t have treated me like that,” he complained.

“How would you like me to have treated you then? Who told you to be so indifferent to me at first?” I said.

“Well, I had had a quarrel with my mum before the party. How could you expect me to give you a bright smile?”

After that rather unpleasant first encounter, however, he became a frequent visitor to my house and went to the same school as me and Sarah. As days went by, Timothy and I grew closer to each other. Every day after school, we would run straight to the beach. We would throw our schoolbags into the air. Sometimes they would fall into the water, but we did not care. And when we got back our bags, we would often find small fish and crabs in them – sometimes even jellyfish. We would pick up seashells on the beach, fling them into the sea, and see how the ripples would spread on the water. Sometimes, we would grasp a handful of sand and throw it at each other’s face; we would then get into a fight. We were not serious of course. We would fall

onto the ground, hold each other's bodies, and roll on the sand. The air would be filled with laughter. The sand would get stuck on every inch of our exposed skin. Even after so many years, I can still remember the touch of the sand. The dampness. The softness.

Sometimes we would swim too. Whenever the burning heat of the sun was trying to evaporate every drop of water in our bodies, we would strip off and jump into the water. We would not swim far though, especially after that night when I nearly drowned. I was fifteen then. We usually did not go out at night. But that night, Timothy asked me to go for a walk, saying there was something he wished to speak to me about. So we went out, and walked to the beach. It was a starry night and yet the darkness over the sea extended to infinity. I was waiting for him to speak when he asked me if I felt scared swimming at that hour. I laughed and suggested a race.

To tell the truth, I was so very scared. The water was cold, and I could see nothing before me. Timothy gave me a grin, and off he swam. He was a fast swimmer, and I had a hard time keeping up with him. I was quite a good distance from the shore when I suddenly realized he was out of sight. I looked back. The shore was nowhere. A feeling of horror rose in my heart. It was then that I felt pain in my feet.

Spasm. I struggled in the water. The cold salty water kept rushing into my mouth. I could not let out a single cry. Soon water began to fill my nostrils. I felt dizzy. I tried to kick but my feet were so stiff. My consciousness was fading out when I felt an arm grabbing my body.

I did not know how long it took for Timothy to take me back to the shore. I had lost my sense of time then, and could not say a word. His arm was supporting my body, and I kept looking up at the sky. Beside my ears were the sound of water and Timothy's gasps. As soon as we reached the shore, Timothy laid his mouth on mine. His lips were

cold and his breaths were fast. I could hear his heart galloping like a wild horse. It took quite a while for the artificial respiration to take effect. When I started to recover, he put his hands on my shoulders and shook me vigorously, calling my name. I held up my trembling hand, touching his face, and he rested his head on my chest, exhausted.

I knew he was weeping.

*

I took a stroll along the beach early this morning. The sun had just risen, and the beach was deserted. The waves crept onto the shore rhythmically. Several seagulls hovered above the sea; the flapping of their wings and the lapping of the waves formed a strange duet, which brought some peace to my mind. I walked on the wet sand, from which some water was squeezed out whenever I took a step. It was at this hour, when most people were still asleep, that I was struck by a sense of nostalgia.

I stopped in front of an old cottage, which was half hidden by trees. Much of its white paint had flaked off, exposing the damp wood, which was overgrown with lichen. This cottage had stood on the beach ever since I was born. All through the years, it had never been occupied, and there were all sorts of rumours about strange noises inside it at night. Timothy and I often went there to play cards or just chat. Inside the cottage, there was nothing, not even a bench or a table. We liked it there because we would never be disturbed. Sarah, however, would shiver at our mentioning of the cottage, which she believed was haunted. Once, Timothy and I tried to drag her inside, and she screamed with tears.

What the cottage first reminded me of when I saw it this morning was that it was where I first met my wife Katherine. It was a summer morning right after my twenty-second birthday. I remember the

previous night I had had a row with Timothy for some reason which I have now forgotten. Anyway, I was walking on the beach that morning, depressed about the row, when I saw Katherine sitting on the terrace outside the cottage, reading a book. On seeing me, she smiled and stood up. It was rare to see someone sitting in front of the cottage, let alone someone that I had never met before. I walked to her, almost instinctively. She looked like an angel before me. I can still remember the plain white dress she wore that morning and how it fluttered in the sea breeze.

That day we spent the whole morning strolling along the beach, talking like old friends. She came from a wealthy family in America and was then on holiday alone in Bodrum. Years later, when we talked about that first encounter, she told me she was then escaping from her family, from her suffocating life in America.

“And the moment I saw you,” she said, “I knew I had fallen in love with you.”

“Why?” I laughed.

“I just knew,” she said, leaning her head on my shoulder. “That moment, I looked up. I saw a man, walking on bare feet, smiling at me. It’s the way you smiled, the way you walked, or just that moment itself, that assured me that this man before my eyes was the one I should spend the rest of my life with.”

Now whenever I think about this little conversation, a sense of sweetness rises from the bottom of my heart. Katherine was always like that. She only believed in her own feelings, her intuition, and she’s so good at reading my mind. In our forty years of marriage, whenever there was something bothering me, no matter how cheerful I pretended to be, she would know. Meeting Katherine was a major turning point in my life. Even now that she has passed away, I still feel greatly

indebted to her. Without her help, I would have never been able to run my business. If I had never met her, I would still be here in Bodrum, never having had a chance to see the world outside. That year, she spent all summer in Bodrum, and our relationship grew fast. When she suggested to me that we actually get married, it did not take me long to make the decision to go to America with her.

I am perhaps going too far, but yes, that cottage I saw this morning has really evoked a lot of memories. Now as I remember more, there is another scene in the cottage that creeps into my mind, and this has to do with Timothy. It was one of those last days of summer, a few days after I had told everyone that I was leaving. Timothy seemed depressed on hearing of my departure, and perhaps it was because it was so hard for him to accept such a fact that he did not come to see me for a week. This was totally understandable. I felt sad too. After all, we had been good friends for years. We had never imagined parting one day. Anyway, he finally came to my house to ask me to go for a walk. It was a sultry day. When we arrived at the beach, my shirt was soaked through. We did not talk the entire way there, and when Timothy stopped in front of the cottage, he broke the silence by suggesting we go in.

Sunlight was sieved onto the floor through the dusty window-pane covered with cobwebs. Timothy stood facing the window, and I stood at a distance behind him, staring at his back. We fell into silence again. All I could hear were our breaths and the waves outside.

“When are you going to leave?” he suddenly turned to me. The light from the window was so strong that all I could see was the silhouette of his face.

“Next month,” I replied.

He advanced towards me. I slowly moved backwards until I

reached the wall. He stood before me. His face was so close to mine that I could smell his breath. He did not say anything, and looked into my eyes. I felt so uncomfortable that I tried to move away from him, but he didn't let me. He put his hands on my cheeks, and held my face even closer to his.

"Timothy," I said, getting his hands off my face. "I love Katherine."

"I know," his voice was weak. Tears started to roll down his cheeks. I embraced him, and he laid his head on my shoulder, sobbing. I stroked his head. His hair smelt of the sea.

"Don't be like that," I did not know what to say other than that. "I can always come back. I will come back. I promise."

I do not remember how long he cried in my arms that afternoon in the cottage. But thinking about this particular scene now, I really feel sorry for Timothy. Yes, he was sometimes too emotional, or should I say, irrational, but after all, he acted that way out of care for me, because of our strong friendship. I have never fulfilled that promise I made, and I should really blame myself for that.

*

When I was eating at the dining hall in the hotel this evening, a waiter came to tell me that there was a Mrs Irmak who wished to see me. Appearing before me after a moment was a slightly plump old woman in a brown dress with floral patterns. She gave me a bright smile:

"Alexander? My daughter told me you were here and I couldn't wait to see you!"

"Oh, Sarah. What a surprise to see you here!" I gave her a hug and ordered some spaghetti for her.

Of course, there was not a bit of Sarah that I could recognize. So

many years had passed since I last saw her as a teenage girl, and even if there was something in her that had not changed, I would not know because her voice and manner had long faded in my memory over the years. She seemed quite cheerful on seeing me, though she showed a sign of sadness when she mentioned Katherine.

“I’m sorry for Katherine’s death,” she said. “But I read that there nearly a thousand people attended her funeral last month.”

“Yes,” I said. “She made so many friends throughout her life.”

“Well,” she smiled, “that’s also because you and Katherine were so much respected in society. I read that you’ve just set up a fund to help African children in Katherine’s name. Well, one of the many things you’ve done for charity.”

“That fund, it had always been Katherine’s wish.”

“But I must say, it’s a real surprise to me that you sold your business to the Johnston Brothers a week after Katherine’s funeral.”

“Well, you see, I had run my business for forty years. I’ve devoted a very large part of my life to it. And now, after Katherine’s gone, I feel really tired. It’s time for me to have some peace.”

“I see,” she said. “But you’ve had a very satisfying life, haven’t you?”

I looked at her in silence.

“Well, are you satisfied with your life?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Ha,” she laughed. “When you left Bodrum all those years ago, who could have expected that you would be so successful in your business?”

“Yes,” I said. “Back then, when I decided to leave, I didn’t have a single idea how my life would be.”

“Yes,” she said. “I remember you had much struggle at that

time.”

“Struggle?”

She took a sip of her tea.

“Well,” she said. “I mean, you loved Katherine. But then you weren’t so sure about your marriage, and you knew what you had to give up here if you left with her. You told me so.”

“Did I?”

“Probably,” she said. “Or maybe it was just that I had that feeling. I’m always thinking too much, you know. But anyway, you made the right decision, didn’t you?”

I nodded blankly. We went on to talk about other things for almost an hour, during which I heard about the death of her husband, her daughter’s recent divorce, and how difficult it was for her to run Seahorse as competition with other more “tourist-oriented” restaurants grew increasingly ruthless. The dining hall was almost deserted when the clock struck nine. After Sarah had finished her food, she gave a laugh:

“Ha, it suddenly occurs to me how we spent our days on the beach all those years ago. Those good old days, you remember? And the games we played?”

“Of course,” I laughed. “And that haunted cottage. You were so afraid to go there.”

“Oh, that cottage. It’s still there, you know?”

“Yes, I saw it this morning.”

“Well, I always wonder why nobody would think of pulling it down. It’s simply useless.”

“You’re still afraid of it?” I asked, half-joking.

“Nah,” she said. “But I still pass by it every now and then. Those are the moments when I think of you and Timothy.”

That was the first time during our conversation that she mentioned Timothy. Silence fell upon us for a moment. Then I asked:

“Yeah, our old friend Timothy. How’s he?”

“Well,” she said. “I didn’t see him much after you left. I had my restaurant to run, and he ran a liquor store near the castle. We did come across each other in the street once in a while. We didn’t talk much though.”

“Is he married?” I asked.

“No,” she shook her head. “He never got married.”

“So he’s still running the store here in Bodrum?”

Sarah looked up at the ceiling. She did not say a word. I looked at her, waiting.

“Alexander,” she finally said, “I didn’t plan to tell you this. But, well, Timothy died a year ago.”

I smiled and said:

“Well, Sarah, you don’t have to be so sad. Yes, we lost a great friend. But everyone dies, don’t they?”

I asked for the bill.

“It’s getting late now. I should take you back home.”

So I walked her home. After I got back to the hotel, I went straight to bed. I was really tired.

*

The tide is coming in. The seawater rises onto the beach. The sun has not yet risen, and the only light source is from the castle afar. I am sitting on the beach, with my arms around my bent legs. Now, the tide has come up to my feet, and I can feel water penetrating into my shoes. Yet I have no intention to move or walk away.

I woke up at around three this morning, and no matter how I tried, I could not fall asleep again. People always say that when one gets

old, he does not need much sleep. This does not quite hold true for me, for all through the years, my regular living habits have saved me from insomnia. At the end of the day, if one is not able to get some sleep, and instead is still being bothered by his business or troubles, that is the saddest thing in life. This morning, however, I was so preoccupied that for the first time in years I found myself having great trouble laying my mind to rest. So I decided to go out and take a walk beside the sea.

After my meeting with Sarah last night, one of her questions has been hovering in my mind: “Are you satisfied with your life?” I gave her a definite answer, and found it strange that she would ask such a question. I ran one of the most successful businesses in America, and the money I donated to charities every year has made me a highly respected philanthropist. Katherine and I had a happy marriage. Sarah knew all about this. Why would she ask such a question? Why would it occur to her that there might be something unsatisfactory in my life?

But now, when I think about it again, there seem to be, well, not exactly regrets, but some imperfections in my life since I left Bodrum, and they have to do with the very fact that I never came back. Not even once. Why hadn’t I come back? Why wouldn’t I have wanted, even once, to come back? Well, I am so busy with my business. The work is killing me. I have great responsibility for my employees. So I told others. So I told Katherine. So I told myself. Yes and no. At the bottom of my heart, there was some other reason. There was Timothy.

Timothy and I grew up together. We were friends. We were close friends. At the height of our friendship, we saw each other every day. We spent much time together on the beach, in the cottage. Sarah joined us sometimes. But most of the time, it was just us. The two of us. Timothy and I. Sarah once said that we were not like friends, that

we were more like lovers than friends. I almost shivered at such an idea. I scolded her furiously for speaking nonsense, and she did not mention it again. But my mother also noticed my unusual closeness with Timothy. She asked me what we usually did together. I told her that we simply played some silly games on the beach. Which was true, of course.

But, what I didn't tell her, what I dared not tell her, was that whenever we fought on the beach, whenever we rolled our bodies on the sand, I enjoyed the feeling of having my skin in contact with Timothy's. I liked that feeling of rubbing our bodies against each other. That passion under the sun. Timothy liked that too, I could tell. And I could sense that he desired more than I did – he wanted to bring me into a realm that I could not imagine, that I did not want to imagine. My worst fear reigned over my heart. I had to grow distant from him. I had to leave him. Before everything went wrong.

But what does it matter now? When so many years have passed. When Timothy is already gone. Really, what does it matter? Why should I be dwelling on these things? But then again, what is there to hide? Why should I fear to admit to myself that I left Bodrum all those years ago, not for Katherine, not for my future, but because I couldn't accept the fact that I was so much in love with Timothy? Why should I deny that I had not come back all these the years because I feared I would lose control if I met him again? And why, now that my trip is coming to an end, should I not admit that I came back this time in the hope of seeing him? Now that I will never meet him again, shouldn't I call that a regret? A promise that I can never fulfil?

I find myself crying. In the distance, the rays of dawn fall upon the sea through the clouds. The water has risen to my chest. I think

of Katherine. Throughout my life, I loved her—or more precisely, I always tried to love her. And in a way, I succeeded in loving her. If there were someone pointing a gun at her, I would have been the first to protect her. I would have died for her. But, every now and then, when I woke up in the middle of the night, finding her sound asleep on the bed, how much I had hoped that the one beside me was Timothy instead. Whenever that thought had crossed my mind, I would feel guilty and try to suppress it. But how would she not know? Having been the closest person to me for forty years, how would Katherine, my sensitive wife, who knew my feelings so well, not know? But still, she gave me all her love, and in return, I always tried to love her but—how can I deny it now?—in vain. All through the years, I tried to convince myself that I had made the right decision leaving Bodrum with Katherine. Hadn't I? I ran a great business. I donated a great sum of money. I had a great marriage. But—Sarah's question rings in my head like a curse – beneath all those sorts of greatness that people saw in me, that people envied, am I satisfied with my life? Was the life I lived what I really wanted? If so, why do I feel my heart breaking now? Why do I feel, now at the end of my life, that I have so many regrets for Timothy, for Katherine, for myself?

But of course, nothing really matters now. Timothy is gone, and so is Katherine. I'm the only one left, and I'm too tired to bear such solitude. I close my eyes. The water has covered my mouth and begins to run into my nostrils. I remember that night all those years ago. That starry night. I nearly drowned. When Timothy took me back to the shore, I was facing the sky. That night, there were so many stars, like diamonds embedded in black flannelette. At that time, I was wondering how far the stars were. My mother used to tell me that when one leaves

the world, a new star will be born.

And now I need to have a good sleep.

A Beach Girl Poster

Midsummers in a year,
The beach is full of tourists chatting, laughing and peeping around.
The sun gently pushes the palm leaves aside
To bathe me in the freest sweat.
The sea breeze caresses me
With its unique fragrance and lullaby.

Awakened from the hammock
By her shocking orange bikini and clay breasts.
I reach out to feel the radiant face,
Only to find her flat,
As hard as facts.

Nothing can be more haunting, than this old setting.
The quarrels outside,
A fluorescent tube overhead,
A rusty, jerky fan,
A locked, stuffy room and
A red iron bunk bed I lie.

I sit up and take off my white sleeveless shirt.
Gasp and
Jump into the
Deep
 Blue
 Sea

Lily Wong

Mountain of Experience

On my long journey down,
I saw a young child stumbling upwards.
She was beauty I'd forgotten,
An angel without wings.

I wanted to warn her,
Precious child, turn back!
You'll find nothing up there
But betrayal and despair!

Down here near the bottom,
There were still berries and butterflies.
The girl's little cheeks glowed
As she laughed and she played.

She asked me melodiously
If I was back from the summit,
Did I have tales to tell,
And could I teach her the way?

As she spoke, a gleam from her eye
Melted the warnings on my lips.
Instead I told her to climb onwards,
To be brave, to be strong.

I watched her climb,
And my fear for her fate

Turned to envy for her youth.
Oh, to be young again!

I told her I'd never reached the summit,
But I knew that she could.
Then she smiled and took my hand,
And led me back up the mountain.

Terrence Lee

The Highway Between

Matthew Muma

I knew better as those wheels scraped across the summer-hot asphalt—if I can know anything. I knew better than to expect that a summer Up North would settle my spirit. From the time I passed Saginaw—stopping quickly for lunch, to wave away a bum, those ruined, rusting southern cities, the twisting suburban rows—I had not illusions. I was going to work—to work and go on living. I turned off the stereo an hour or so later, the forest beginning to fold in around my car, cruising north at about eighty miles per hour. The odds were against me. I wasn't going to “find myself.” I wasn't going to meet some Mandy Moore heart-of-gold country girl who'd teach me the meaning of love and simplicity; I wouldn't take it all anyway. The locals would be nothing to me, and I nothing to them. I was going to live with my grandma and work at her old shop. So, then, I'm not sure I was really thinking of myself at all.

Her house lay almost flush with the road, and when I arrived, my grandma was sitting on the porch bench in a long beige skirt, watching the asphalt, hands folded tightly in her lap. She waved, quickly, slashes of hand in that late afternoon haze, as I pulled into her drive. From the car, she looked younger than seventy-six—leaner, grey hair pulled back, more awake, somehow, than I'd expected. But as I approached and she slowly pulled herself to her feet, the age opened up. I planted a kiss on her cheek and put my arms around her. She was too light, too small; the skin seemed ready to peel off her fragile, bird-like bones. Her eyes were sharp, but even then, the face itself was slacker than it had looked from the car. We did not hug long.

“Hello Grandma.”

“Hello Tom.” Her voice was aged, cigarette burned, maybe, but it still crackled, crackled and moved quickly. She waved her hand towards the car. “Come in, get your things.”

I did as I was told, and found her sitting at the table in a cramped, age-stained dining room just a little back from the road. Through a window to her left, I could see chickens strutting around her neighbors’ sun-hardened yard. I placed my gear at the foot of the stairs.

“You can stay in Jack’s old room—first on the right.” That was how she spoke at first: quick orders, sharp enough, but little else. When I returned, she was seated in the exact same spot. The sun had inched just a little bit further down in the sky, so that it illuminated only the wall behind her and cast Grandma, hunching slightly, into shadow. I remembered her as straight-backed. I stood before her, and neither of us spoke for about ten seconds. I watched the chickens, bored and tired looking, picking at their fence.

“I’d like to thank you for coming up.”

“It’s really no problem.” I smiled.

“The weather has been very good lately—I just wish that the Maleys hadn’t bought those stupid chickens.”

“The noise must be terrible.”

“They’re not farmers. I don’t see why they need those dirty birds. I’m... I need my sleep.” She stopped. I pulled out a chair and sat down across from her. With my feet planted firmly on the floor, I thought I could feel the rumble of a passing train, maybe a mile or more away, rushing furiously.

“So, what is it, exactly, that I have to do? Where is the shop, for a start?”

“You’ve been there before.”

I nodded but did not answer. I think she noticed that I hadn’t risen

to her bait. I searched her face for some change, some outward sign of that recognition, but I saw none. She continued after the pause.

“Well, the shop is about a mile down the road.”

“Which way?”

She pointed. I looked out the window, saw a chicken poking furiously into the dirt at the edge of its wire fence, and turned back to her. She had ceased pointing. I rested my hand against my chin. She stood up, stiffly.

“I’ll make you dinner.”

“No, wait. I’ll... help.”

“No, you’ve driven all this way.”

She pushed past me, slow as limping. I watched her. We did not say more than two more words to each other that first night.

I drove myself to the shop the next morning, the heat already rising in waves from the highway, the lake lunging suddenly into view between the trees. The shop itself, a crumbling, flat-roofed storefront was built alone and forlorn a little back from the lake and sold fishing gear, bad food, and pop. I had one co-worker: a teenager named Jack, of half-American-Indian extraction. He favored out-of-date punk t-shirts, sallow skin, and few words. I had no desire to ingratiate myself with him and lost no time not doing it. Past the first five minutes we did not speak. I drove home with the stereo playing, the sun just beginning to sink into the forest. She cooked another simple dinner, store-bought chicken with apples on the side. Eating together, we barely spoke. From the bedroom, I called my friend Will, at home in the suburbs. We talked about the chickens, their morning calls, their eventual destiny in a supermarket aisle, appetizingly lit and wrapped in plastic. Over the phone his jokes fell even more flat than usual, but I still laughed.

“Every morning, with the sun, they start screaming away—those

birds can't get sent to the grocery fast enough."

"Are they male birds?"

"What? Yeah, it's cocks that crow, I guess."

"Well, then you just have your very own alarm cock. Stop complaining."

I hoped that, from downstairs, my grandma could hear me laughing.

And repeat. Repeat. Repeat. Grandma padded about, said nothing. Sat on the porch. She had a computer, and when I returned home, sometimes I'd find her staring at it, hands in her lap, the CNN main page open in front of her. I wanted to be useful, but in the absence of order, the best I could do, I felt, was stay out of the way. But it was she, to give her full credit, who broke the silence.

"I think...I think that I might want to teach you how to cook a little."

"That'd be great, Grandma."

"I can't say thank you enough. I know you must have things to do, going to Canada, China, and all. I hear all about you."

"It really is...really is... no trouble. My other plans didn't work out for this summer, and frankly, I wanted a little rest."

"I'm sure you feel that way. But there should be young people around. I wish there were. How is the shop?"

"It's fine. There are some customers. You know the other guy who works there, Jack, right?"

"I hired him."

"OK."

It was early evening, and, with the light on, the world seemed to retreat, to disappear, leaving only us. We sipped tea, her hands shaking on the tea-cup. Each car, driving by, rattled our bones, interrupted

thinking, talking. As time wore on, she spoke more slowly. More tiredly. With greater effort, like dragging waters. I began to see signs of it in her face: a squint of the eyes, a slightly deepened furrow in her brow. Ghosts of expressions long disused.

“Your grandfather traveled, a little like you.”

“Where did he go?”

“To China, once or twice, in the navy. He’d tell me stories from then, they weren’t all good stories.”

“They never are.” A start, a light tremor, seemed to slide through her. Her eyes squinted deeper. When she spoke again, it was a crawl, but a crawl with some bite in the back of her throat.

“You’re a very good grandson. A very good grandson. I don’t think you eat enough. But I’m going to teach you how to cook a little anyway. Tomorrow night.”

Photos lined the window frames, the mantles, the ancient and dusty piano, but I did my best not to look at them. Shaving in the mirror the next morning, I caught myself squinting, making the same expression. On the phone at night, I heard my mother strain, slow and curl the words. The chickens pecked endlessly at their fence. The old woman did teach me to cook a little, but we spoke less. She complained of head-aches—a sense of pressure, of a flood barely restrained by the river’s dam. Storms threatened, flashed, and disappeared without it ever actually raining. She did not age—no, she was long beyond that. At night I began to dream of her, did not leave my room for fear of running across her, specter-like in her nightgown, haunting the house while still living. I complained a little to my parents, a little to Will, but my complaints were dried up, intangible, at once true and strangely false.

Weeks passed. Every night or two, more and more often, we

cooked together, after a fashion. She stood, bent over the stove, and ordered me to grab the right amount of this, of that. Sometimes she forgot and checked her books. The spaghetti noodles had to be cooked just so long, not so long as the book directed, she did remember that. I bought the supplies in town, striding quickly through the meat aisle and grabbing what was needed, not lingering long. She became younger, in a way, in the kitchen. Together there, often back to back—I holding a knife, cutting the cucumbers, she at the stove, mixing meat and vegetables, ingredients and oils—I could hear it in her voice, feel it in the way her footsteps followed each other. But when we sat down to eat, she said as little as ever.

One evening I cut myself while peeling carrots. I stared at my finger for a moment, the point of blood just beginning to form at its tip, a liver of white, dead skin, hanging out. She was behind me surprisingly quickly. I turned, and she took my hand in hers.

“It’s okay, I’ll finish up. There should be some band aids in the bathroom upstairs, I think.”

I thanked her. When I returned, she was nearly finished cooking. I set our places without comment. But in the late afternoon light I could see her smiling, her teeth, yellow with age, glowing slightly against the shadows crawling up the wall.

“You’re coming really has made me feel better, you know.”

Her voice crackled slightly, and curled upwards at the end as if she’d forgotten some habitual inflection, as if something else had risen, unbidden, in its place.

“You’re a little bit like your mother, you know that too. And a little bit like your grandfather. You help out, he never did, but I hear stories about you, and you sound like him.”

“About going to China and all?”

“Maybe... maybe not. Things were very different then. Sometimes I forget that. Even that. You know, I had a lot of hope when I first heard you were... coming. When Jack moved back to Northville. They won’t tell you, but they don’t trust me up here by myself.” Her voice continued at this new timbre. Cracking harder, somehow. Some kind of effort, to keep the voice tough and level, had given out, and a beautiful fragility was left in its place, higher pitched, weaker. She smiled again.

“No, they tell me.”

She nodded only slightly in answer, and hunched down into her food. As I reached for my knife, a brief shot of pain whipped down my finger and a shot of my blood pulsed into my bandage. She began speaking again.

“Right now, I wish I could have known you better. My legs have been aching lately. More than usual. I wonder if they’re right sometimes. I can’t stay up here much longer...” She trailed off and stared past me. I waited, but she did not continue. After a moment or two, I stood up and switched on the light.

After she had retired, I stepped out onto the porch. A pick-up truck sawed by through the night; the wind began blowing; the trees began to sing. A storm would arrive, I thought, by the early morning. And it did. I crossed into her room—the first time I had done this—to close the windows. She lay in bed, breathing, a miniature lump beneath her sheet, all smelling slightly of must, time, rain. In the dark, none of the revulsion or fear I’d been expecting hit me. All the same, I had trouble sleeping the rest of the night. At the shop the next morning, I amused myself by doodling endless parades of Chinese characters into a notebook. Jack came in and left. With the sunlight piercing the windows and the fan droning endlessly away, I fell asleep.

When I awoke, a family was standing out front on the dirt and gravel, their four-door sedan shining a conservative green in the afternoon sun. The father was in shorts and a polo shirt, his hair just beginning to thin, the wife in jeans and a baseball cap. A young woman, around my age, and a younger boy, probably in high school were both wearing t-shirts and jean shorts. After a moment, the young lady stepped into the shop, squinting.

“Hi, we’re trying to go to Traverse City and got lost. Do you know how we could get back to the highway?” Up close, you could see the signs of highway fatigue: beads of sweat, a messy ponytail, skin slightly burnt. She smiled tiredly.

“Turn right and go straight for about a mile, then... you know, it’s kinda complicated, I can write you out directions. Do you need a map?” I searched for my pen and tore a strip from my notebook. Behind her, I could see Jack returning, slumping, hands in pockets, across the lot. He gave me a look as he sauntered in, but it communicated nothing.

“We have a map. My dad is just sure he remembers it... and he doesn’t.”

“Happens, sometimes roads change.”

“He grew up here.”

“Oh well. Where are you guys from?”

“Cleveland.”

“Ohio... Ohio...”

I finished writing the directions. When I handed her the paper, I saw that there were two Chinese characters stranded at one edge, unintelligible. She appeared not to notice, thanked me, and walked out. Gravel crunched beneath the car’s wheels as they pulled away. Jack, back behind the counter, stuck his hands into his pockets.

“You shoulda hit that.”

The car disappeared around a turn, into the daylight forest. I turned back to doodling Chinese characters in my notebook.

I didn't find her when I went home that day. Not until a week later, in fact. But she didn't say much before. The trouble with a brain aneurism is that, whatever warning signs there are, it's hard to spot them within the usual forests of age, ache and time. It was a bright day, like most, sweat stuck, and the chickens all lay in their coop, invisible and defeated. All the windows were open, though I don't remember a breeze. I didn't realize anything was wrong when I first entered the house. Only after a minute or two, my wallet already by the mantle, my shoes already laid out by the door, did I hear it, a kind of gurgling, coming from the bathroom. A car slid by, lightly, and then all was stillness.

She was rushed to the closest hospital in a screaming ambulance. But even that was too far for hope, the first rite in the ending services. Briefly, cops and paramedics pushed around our house, full of fat words and professional glances. I sat quietly in the dining room, sipped a Coke, and said as little as possible. The questions they asked were perfunctory, and after that they left me alone. Jack stopped by briefly—to ask if he'd be able to keep his job. I told him I didn't know, and he slouched off alone, steering towards the tree-cast shadows along the opposite side of the road. From then until sunset I was left alone. I checked the dining room one last time after packing my things. The light was fading, and outside, I saw that a single chicken had escaped its coop, and had begun picking at the dirt along the fence. I stepped back onto the porch and stared at the sky for a moment, before locking the door behind me. Night fell as I drove south. My family called at regular intervals, offering condolences, telling me not to drive too fast. By the time I'd arrived at home—my mother had stripped my bed, I

slept on the couch—the arrangements were already in order; I had nothing more to do. The funeral itself was closed-casket, but for a brief moment at the wake, the family waved good-bye to her face, over-lit, alien and ashen. Will and I left the luncheon early. A soft rain began pattering at the windshield as I pulled into the driveway. I changed out of my suit in my bedroom, the bed still stripped.

When I'd finished, Will was already sitting on the porch, waiting for me. The rain fell steadily, but not so hard that it drained the world of color. The grass across the street seemed to glow an even brighter shade of green.

“Thanks.” He spoke quietly when I handed him the beer. In profile, staring out at the rain, his blond hair close, chin pointed up, loose t-shirt allowing a pinch of hair to poke out, he looked so healthy. The soft chatter of the droplets held steady against the tiled roof.

I sat beside him and fought to keep myself from hunching over. He looked in my direction, smiling, sly. My heart leapt to the roof of my mouth.

“Well, how big was the inheritance?”

From anyone else I would have been insulted, but from him, never. It was a joke in the face of cosmic fact, the entire joke. He sipped at his beer, a little jerkily, as always, but better than me. I drained the whole can in moments.

“You remember what I told you about proper nutrition.” He patted me on the head. I smirked.

“Shut up.”

“LAAA.”

“Are you speaking Canto now?”

“Wo bu zhidao shuo gwondung...”

But he stopped mid-sentence. Neither of us was laughing. The rain

was coming in harder now, at an angle, and my mother's flower baskets began to twist in the wind, dropping little spurts of wet dirt across the porch steps. It was suddenly colder. I reached for another beer can. Will slung his hand over me, from an angle, and I slumped down, so that my head rested in his chest. The air was close, and I could smell him, somewhat like myself—but not over the growing smell of wet grass, the smell of rain itself. I caught myself nearly sobbing for the first time.

“There, there, c'mon, you're acting more like me now...”

I only raised my head again to take another long drink. I saw him sitting there, rain flying down in thick sheets, and I tilted my head back and felt the alcohol rush, no longer leaving a young man's burn, rushing over my tongue. He watched, kicked his feet slightly, and put an arm back around my shoulders. Beyond us and before us, the rain fell harder and harder, greyer and greyer, until there was nothing else that I could see.

Visiting Home

Uncle Joe meets me at the arrivals gate.
I'll be staying at his place.
I'm just visiting for a few weeks
To see my family, my friends, and the place I call home.
It's my first time back in a long while
And everything is just like I remembered,
Except that I'm not used to the cars
Being on this side of the road,
My native language sounds foreign,
Everyone is older and a little more serious,
Another family is living in my house,
And to my surprise,
I still miss home.

Terrence Lee

A Visit to Yale

Kristy Chan

I must look terrible, she thought. Annie leaned closer to the driver's mirror, examining the split ends of her hair. Gosh, and with my panda eyes, what a good impression I will give! After all, sixteen hours on flight without sleep could be disastrous to the beauty of a 22-year-old. "I need to have a lot of make up on! See my swollen eyes!" she said, but no one answered. Everyone was busy passing around lotion and mascara while the driver announced through the speaker, "Be patient guys, we're five minutes away." Everyone was breathless; Annie nervously brushed out the wrinkles in her winter coat, had a final check of her make up and sat upright, waiting for the important moment. Suddenly, they heard light music from not far away, and there they were! Hand in hand, singing. Finally, she thought. And they all stepped out, standing in front of Phelps Gate of Yale University.

Oh dear, how hard it was to be indifferent! Annie tried not to peep from the corner of her eyes; she tried not to be too curious. But the noble dining hall that they were led into was filled with the classical smell of dignity and authority- the oil lamps on the reddish stone wall, the elegant arches of the doorway, the warm light coming through the stained glass window, the magnificent paintings and sculptures, red roses in tiny vases, gentlemen with pocket handkerchiefs... She would like to take a closer look at the flowery patterns on the forks, but someone hit the spoon against the wineglass, "Ting", and a girl stood up-

"Good evening. My name is Lisa. Sophomore from Saybrook College. On behalf of all the Yale students, I would like to give my warmest welcome to all our guests from Hong Kong. Welcome to

Yale!” With a burst of applause and a “cheers,” dinner began.

While Annie was still absorbed in the girl’s composed yet energetic tone, people started initiating conversations. Exactly what they talked about Annie would have found it hard to summarize. After all, she was too thrilled to be there- it was a totally different world to her. She could only recall someone saying, “I was hosting my very own study party from one to four and after that, I went immediately to bed as it was so tiring...then I realized that I completely slept through the fireside chat meeting with the dean!”

People laughed. Someone explained what the chat was. Annie listened with widened eyes. She imagined members of the British aristocracy talking politics by the fireside. Gosh, we have fires solely for barbecues she thought, suppressing her giggles. It was crucial to be very well mannered in a place like this.

Someone else said, “I’ve assembled seventy course packets from start to finish: I labeled them and put the plastic things in them, called up people for their email addresses, typed a million people’s contact information into a database, and looked up zip codes that correspond to different cities...and constantly I was counting down the days I had left to work! But still like millions of people applied for this position! It’s Microsoft Corporation!”

People laughed, but this time no one needed to explain what Microsoft Corporation was.

Someone said again, “I am so bad at languages—I can only speak a little bit of French, a little bit of Spanish, a little bit of Japanese, a little bit of Hebrew and a little bit of Russian.”

There was silence, yet Annie was growing more and more excited. How smart these people were! She felt like she couldn’t sit still any longer when the ice-breaking game finally began!

Someone started clapping a rhythm and led the game with an exaggerated tone: “BIGGGG buddy. Big buddy oh yeah. Big buddy big buddy. Big buddy no.... TEN!” Someone else continued, “Number ten, number ten, number ten, number ten, number ten, number twelve!”

People clapped and snapped, cheered and rapped with a funny tone. Annie snapped along; her eyes glistened and she could feel herself slightly shuddering with excitement. She moved vigorously, as if to push all the excessive energy out of her body. It was like a dream!

Yet it wasn't long before Annie woke up from her dream.

Dear Diary,

This is to announce that I, Chan Chek Yi, have finally finished the first part of my masterpiece, *A Visit to Yale*, after procrastinating for ONE WHOLE WEEK. I would like to give my warmest thanks to mummy for keeping me awake with a cup of hot chocolate (delicious ☺), to daddy for not urging me to go to bed as if I was four, and to Maggie for tolerating all the noise when I typed beside her bed at three in the morning. You are my saviors.

But mum said this Annie was in no way like me, and I sort of agree with her. I mean, it's supposed to be a semi-autobiography but then, I don't really see myself in this old Annie anymore...after all these happenings.

Am I becoming a better person? Yes and no, perhaps. Yet I can say for sure that if I were this old Annie, I would have used a fake name- I would not have let everyone judge me like a country girl going to her first ball! Gosh, it's embarrassing.

Maybe, after all, I should thank all those who confused and embarrassed me...

With panda eyes again (4am),

Annie

Chan Chek Yi, Annie Professor Peter Henderson ENG 1230 Final Project Part Two 15th March, 2007.

It was after the symposium when all the guests, together with the Yalies and the New Asians, moved into the dining hall at Timothy Dwight College.

This time there was no nametag on the table. Annie could see some new faces, and she moved towards those people skillfully without being noticed by the Hong Kong kids. She thought to herself, Come on Annie, you're here on an exchange, to talk, and not to fool around with friends.

She got to an empty seat opposite a lady who looked very smart and even a bit intimidating. "I'm Annie, good to meet you." They shook hands and took their seats. The lady was called Elise, had graduated some years ago and was working for Lehman Brothers in New York. They talked casually about the weather, the French toast and Annie's jacket, but the conversation became more serious when they touched on the topic of the symposium.

"What makes you feel that Hong Kong is doing better than the U.S. and other developed cities? My company is famous for treating female workers well. I am very well paid too. Women in our company go to top positions!" She was obviously challenging Annie's presentation, which was about females' rights in Hong Kong.

"Well, it was research conducted by an NGO two years ago, and it says that Hong Kong came first in gender equality among all the researched cities." Annie was wondering how long her intellectual

tone could last; she did not actually dig too deeply into the research as her presentation focused on female immigrants from the mainland.

“But what exactly is that research about? What standards do they use? What sort of legislation exists to protect females and how do you compare this legislation to that in the States? How are the rights of the less privileged protected? Is there any law setting a minimum wage? Does it apply to immigrants?”

It was a long chain of questions. The lady was becoming more aggressive, even a bit “violent,” as Annie felt her face being torn apart piece by piece. She forced a smile and tried to look composed, yet under the table she was nervously pressing and pulling her thumbs, which she always did to release stress.

“You must have thought about all these, right? I suppose you were working on women for the presentation,” she was expecting an answer then. Annie’s hands were wet with sweat, and she kept on sipping the red wine to calm herself down. She was looking into Elise’s eyes, though she didn’t want her to feel that she was intimidated.

“I don’t know the details of the research, only the results, really.”

Still the lady looked at Annie, not saying anything in response. “Well...” I am completely defeated now, Annie thought, “...let’s Google!” Annie tried to keep it light and casual, but still she could not hide her embarrassment—her lip was shuddering and she could feel the heat on her face. Annie peeped at Elise and saw her smile of victory.

At that moment Stan came by with his wine and casually said, “Hey! Nice to meet you, I’m Stan!” Stan was Annie’s pen pal from Yale. He winked at Annie and patted her lightly on the shoulder, putting down a plate of brownies, which were Annie’s favorite.

“Are you Yale or not?” Elise asked, examining Stan, the American-

born Chinese.

“Yes, I’m from the Class of ‘06, sophomore, International Politics and Asian Studies major.”

“I was also an international politics major!” Elise said, her eyes glistening with excitement. And so they talked, talked and talked on all sorts of things from job opportunities in Lehman Brothers to corporate social responsibilities to global warming...Gosh, are they giving a lecture? Annie thought. She felt perplexed. She wanted to join the conversation, since the whole table was divided into conversation groups and she was alone. Yet she was too discouraged by Elise and Stan, who did not even glance at her now. She sat alone, sipping her red wine, eating her salad piece by piece, praying that time would fly. She looked over the table and saw her Hong Kong friends chatting enthusiastically. This is so embarrassing, she thought.

After the dinner, Annie walked side by side with her friends on the way back to the campus.

“How was the interview?” they joked. They seemed to have enjoyed the dinner.

“I screwed it up. Hey Devin, what’s Lehman Brothers?” Annie asked. She dared not ask Elise earlier as it seemed to be a globally famous company.

“Hey, who cares?” Alex said. He was one of the New Asians. He never socialized with the guests. He found it unnecessary.

“No, I really wanna know.”

“Investment fund,” Devin said. Devin was one of the Yalies, but he was born in Hong Kong and he liked to stick with the Hong Kong kids. He almost always spoke in Cantonese.

“Is it famous?”

“One of the best. The kind where you can retire after working for

two years.”

Annie looked back at the lady; she was exchanging cards with Stan. She could hear that they were talking about a summer internship now.

“Stan succeeded,” Devin said.

“Of course, he is just so smart. And he’s such a gentleman.” Stan always sat upright, with his suit ironed and a handkerchief in the pocket. He might appear a bit goody-goody but Annie found him the gentlest one in the group.

Annie caught a brief, cunning smile on Devin’s face and he said, “May be.”

“Why don’t you go and interview, Devin? Why stick with us silly people?” Annie asked. She thought he wasted all the golden opportunities.

“It’s only a dinner. I don’t want to spoil the nice food and drink.”

“And don’t you find it a strange idea that people help others make more money?” Alex asked. Devin and Jess were all nodding in agreement.

“Maybe,” Annie could not even convince herself with her uncertain tone. “What’s funny was that that lady emphasized she was doing voluntary work to compensate a bit,” she added. They all laughed to death. Annie hated herself for adding that information, but she was just so confused.

So, my story is an autobiography on culture shock. According to my understanding, culture shock can roughly be divided into at least four phases: the honeymoon phase, the everything-is-awful phase, the everything-is-doubtful phase and the everything-is-okay phase. Now I have finished the honeymoon part, and I’ve got Elise here who

foreshadows my hell-like phase and...

Wait, how about Georgiana? She can best represent my everything-is-doubtful phase! Well, it was actually a trivial moment. It was at Yorkside after the ice hockey match, when I ordered the famous chicken tenders and wings plus a vanilla milkshake. I can't remember what exactly Georgiana got, but probably salad as she was on diet. And when our food came, I asked if she would like to try some wings. I mean, it is no big deal to share food! Yet she was like, "Are you sure?" with her eyes wide open. I said, "Sure!" but still she repeatedly asked if I was positive. She still looked at me doubtfully the moment she put the wing into her mouth, even though I tried real hard to put on my trademark you-are-most-welcome smile. She reminded me of the evening before when I dined out with Alex and Jess. That night I ordered Danish herring served with sour cream and potatoes and Alex had a spoonful of my sour cream without even asking; in return, he gave me half of his mushroom and oyster pie, and I shared my chocolate pudding with Jess. Yet, we all insisted upon going Dutch. This had nothing to do with generosity; it was only that we don't want to bring calculators with us all the time. It may have nothing to do with Georgiana really. They all acted the same—strange.

Now, Camilla should definitely be the highlight of my everything-is-awful phase! That bitch!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!! Okay, let's calm down a bit... this Yale girl is...bitchy!!!!!!!!!! She was that malicious girl who spread the gossip about Stan. She knew I was Stan's pen pal, and she knew Stan was being very nice, yet she kept telling me behind his back that he was... gosh, I don't even want to say that word. I mean, yes, I do admit that I was suspicious of him and his intentions after that party and the dance but...anyway, it doesn't matter any more.

Wow. It seems that my story will be LOOOOOOONG!

Chan Chek Yi, Annie Professor Peter Henderson ENG 1230 Final Project Part Three 20th March, 2007.

That night when Annie got back to the guest suite, she called home. When someone picked up the phone, she could hear a lot of noise in the background—it was the Lunar New Year soap opera.

“Hi there.” It was Annie’s dad.

“Hey Daddy, it’s me!” she tried to sound cheerful.

“Hey baby!”

“What time is it in Hong Kong?”

“1 p.m. Why don’t you go to bed earlier? It’s real late over there, isn’t it?”

“Not sleepy. What’re you doing?”

“Mummy and Maggie and I went to yum cha¹ with Grandma this morning.”

“And?”

“And Mummy is making dumplings for dinner tonight.”

“What dumplings?”

“Choi yok dumplings².”

“Yummy.” Annie could almost smell the dumplings from the other side of the phone.

“Did you go anywhere today?”

“No, I had symposium.”

“How was it?”

“... so- so,” Annie’s voice almost broke into sobs. The feeling of loneliness and confusion and self hatred was suddenly pouring into her heart.

“You all right, honey?”

1 Yum cha- going to restaurant

2 Choi yuk dumplings- dumplings with meat and vegetables

“...um...” Annie felt the heat in her throat and she couldn’t speak up. There was a second of silence.

“Annie?”

“Yes Daddy, well...how’s Maggie?” She quickly filled the silence and luckily managed to suppress her sobs.

“She’s out for a movie, with Den.”

“Good for her...Did you hang up the faicun³?”

“Of course, I mixed yu mi fen⁴ with water, making a thick dough to stick the faicun on the wall.”

“Did you help clean the house?” She was vaguely listening then. She just asked and asked as if she could go back.

“Sure! I vacuumed all the rooms, changed the bed sheets, cleaned the windows...” Annie’s dad was so proud of his contributions.

“Thanks so much.”

“You’re very welcome, wanna talk to mummy?”

“Sure!”

“Hey!” It was Mum’s enthusiastic voice, which failed to lighten her up this time.

“Mummy, making dumplings?”

“Yeah, for dinner tonight. How’s Yale? Having fun or not?”

“Yeah, lots of fun. Did you go yum cha with grandma?”

“ Yes, all the tables were reserved. We waited on long long lines.”

“Did Grandma give me red packets?”

“Yeah, one for you, one for Maggie. But Grandma wasn’t pleased with you not being here for chun jie⁵.”

“Oh, I know, I will go and see her when I get back.”

“You always say so but you never go.”

“I must go this time. Will you go to Aunt’s place this year?”

3 Faicun- spring festival couplets

4 Yu mi fen- cornmeal

5 Chun jie- Lunar New Year’s Day

“Don’t know, may not if everyone is lazy.”

“What? Aunt can really cook. You’ll regret missing all that good food.”

“Is it cold in the States?”

“No. Snowing but not cold.”

“Don’t stay up too late baby, and put on enough clothes tonight.”

“All right, you take care too.” Annie hung up, and all of a sudden Hong Kong became so far away. I should have been there, fooling around and doing all that homey stuff, she thought. To Annie, home was always an antidote to her potential emotional crisis. Those conversations might not be very constructive, yet she felt relieved every time she talked to them over the phone, and she would recall her mother saying “Of course we common people talk about trivial stuff.”

That night, Annie wrote in her diary before going to bed:

19/2/07 Heavy Snow
Complicated.

And no longer could she control the tears.

To: chan_chek_yin@yahoo.com.hk

Subject: re: ENG 1230 Creative Writing

Dear Annie,

Thanks for your suggestion. I appreciate your passion as a young writer but I’m afraid we can’t afford anything more than ten pages. I think you should learn how to write precisely and concisely.

Best of luck with your project... I can’t wait to see your work!

Best,

Peter Henderson
Department of English, CUHK

Quoting chan chek yin <chan_chek_yin@yahoo.com.hk>

Dear Professor Henderson,

I am from the Creative Writing class and I have queries concerning the final project. According to the course outline, the length of the project should be kept strictly to ten pages. I am writing to suggest the abandonment of the restriction because a writer's talent and imagination should have no boundaries.

I sincerely hope you consider my suggestion. I look forward to your reply.

Best Regards,
Annie Chan Chek Yi

It seems that I have to quickly jump to the climax... please forgive me for leaving you out, Georgiana and Camilla.

Chan Chek Yi, Annie Professor Peter Henderson ENG 1230 Final Project Part Four 30th March, 2007.

Finally the programme was coming to an end. It was the Friday before their departure, and they went partying. They were in the grand dance hall, chilling and waiting for the grand party which was said to have cost US \$8000 to begin.

Sitting in the corner of a sofa, Annie looked around at girls wearing sexy little pants in pink, cheery yellow chiffon, purple silk organza dresses, gold bracelets, high heels, and a couple with masks which

Annie found too exaggerated. She felt dizzy with the loud laughter, the heavy metal music which rocked the dance hall, the too bright colors, and the rapid movements of people coming and going.

Annie looked at her plain top, and all of a sudden she felt indifferent. Who cares? she thought. After all, everyone is different, and it wasn't necessary to hide or pretend anything. She was having one shot of whiskey after another, and randomly she exchanged a word or two with people around her. She didn't nervously hide her bra strap which fell on her arm; she didn't articulate her words; she didn't escape people's gazes; she just sat back and relaxed. The two weeks were far too exhausting.

The hosts, with cocktails in hand, moved from one group to another. Annie noticed that they could not really focus on one conversation for more than a minute. People walked by and they kept turning around and said "hi" and "welcome" and "very nice to see you come" etc.

One of the hosts approached Annie then. They shook hands and he introduced himself. "Why bother to ask when you are meeting like zillions of people today?" Annie thought. When it came to her turn to introduce, she said,

"I'm... Isabella from... India." She knew not why she lied, but all she was thinking was why be so serious about all this?

"Wow! Wonderful!" I am quite sure he did not listen, Annie thought, I bet I am in no way like an Indian.

"Welcome! Enjoy yourself!" he smiled politely and walked away.

Annie sat down again, searching for Stan in the crowd. It seemed that she had not seen him for a long time. There he was, standing next to a Eurasian. Annie could tell that they were had just met since they were introduced by a third person. They talked enthusiastically for quite a while.

The group stayed for an hour or so when Jess said she would like to leave early. What a relief, Annie thought, and they followed Devin to the cloakroom to get their gloves and winter coats. It was freezing outside. When Annie walked through the dance hall, she saw Stan and the girl dancing. Stan was pressing his body closely to the girl's, like melting cheese stuck on a burger. They slid and glided with the gentle music. She could clearly see that Stan was moving his left hand from the girl's shoulder to her waist, and then to her thigh, his other hand feeling the girl's buttocks.

Annie recalled what Camilla had said the night before: "Now there is something really aphrodisiac about Stan—watch out Annie," and she looked back. She caught the eyes of Stan, who gave her a wink and that gentleman-like smile again. She quickly pushed through the crowd and left.

It was snowing outside, and the wind was blowing. Her body ached from the heavy weight of the winter coat. Annie hid her face behind the scarf and quickened her steps. Having spent all her energy, she was too exhausted to even shed a tear.

Stan Ji (Yale) wrote on Annie Chan's (CUHK) wall

At 3:00 pm on April 1st, 2007.

Annie! How's your story going? Add oil! I can't wait to see your story!

Annie Chan (CUHK) wrote on Stan Ji's (Yale) wall

At 1: 30 pm on April 5th, 2007.

Stan!!! I wish you were here or I was there! I have finally finished my story about Yale, and about you. You're my superstar in the story, the very best pen pal in the entire world. Missing you!

This was the last message I wrote on Stan's wall on Facebook. Looking at the final part of my story, I feel like I have betrayed him.

Have I betrayed him or have I been betrayed?

It's hard to say.

Sometimes, I feel like bouncing back to the everything-is-doubtful phase again.

All I know is that he never replied, nor did he write back on my wall. It has already been six months since he left me the message. I haven't heard from him since then.

Words

I hate word but the wizardry it brings—

A bug on a lily of the day, lavishes butter of the sun
and dissolves, unifies into a nightingale
which feathers the chasm—
inside are turquoise, quartz, and amber.

A sculptor does not age, but oldens others—
He comes and carves: the lily, the sun, the nightingale;
the chasm, the turquoise and the quartz.
Once the mute blade touches the amber,
the beetle inside, the wings
flutter, and he creates.

David Law

The Urban Caterpillar

Setting off at rush-hour,
stagnancy guaranteed.
Emerged from the ground,
rises the urban caterpillar.

Composed of mechanic segments;
fuming with rage.
With the heat of the early sun,
it burns furiously from within.
Crawling on the tarred road,
Move! It brakes!
Move! It brakes!

Unbearable!
Nuisance!
The ever elongating caterpillar:
The more you propel;
the longer you become.
You clumsy crawling creature,
When would you metamorphose
into a lovely butterfly
and fly in the free sky?

Ada Au

The Way Ahead

Venom Yeung Shing Tak

Dedicated to my beloved grandfather (1929 – 2007)

It was an ordinary Sunday. All my relatives were gathered in my grandmother's little apartment except my sister, who was studying abroad far away in Australia. Dishes and dishes of artistically-constructed meat and vegetables were placed on the oval-shaped wooden table. At dinnertime, we started gathering around the eight dishes. Everything felt like a set of repeated acts, except for the absence of the smiles. My grandma, my aunts, my uncles, my father and myself were creating a fearful silence.

“Shud we lif somfing for Papa,” my youngest cousin said innocently, referring to my grandfather.

Before anyone could come out with an answer, my dad's phone rang, and broke the silence.

“Hello?” my father said. “Um, I got it.” His voice dropped a bit.

Right after dad hung up, he said to all of us, “Let's go. Now.”

With this command, we all moved without hesitation. We left the food untouched, and didn't notice that chopsticks were falling on the ground. When my aunt was still trying to find coats for my cousins, my father and I were already at the lift, waiting uneasily.

“Wong ha, wang xia, going down.” The automatic announcement of the elevator was like a prophet in a magic crystal ball, reading people's thoughts.

As the elevator door opened, we all walked so fast it could have been called running. We separated ourselves into two groups, taking two taxis. My grandmother was, of course, in the first one. Around fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the hospital.

I was the first one who rushed in. Behind the huge glass door at the entrance, people were all suffering. There were kids bleeding from fight. There were patients crying over their pain from accidents. And there were people sobbing... for their loved ones. We did not bother investigating the situation further; instead, we wandered hastily around the lobby, searching. Meanwhile, my aunt was consulting the receptionist. After a short conference, my aunt proclaimed, “in the emergency room.”

Immediately we ran to the location. About twenty feet away from the emergency room, I saw my mother alone, crying. She was standing next to the pink curtains with doctors and nurses rushing in and out. I walked slowly towards her and asked, “How’s Grandpa?” My family formed a crowd around her.

“They were trying to rescue him but I told them not to. Your grandpa has been suffering a lot,” my mum said with tears running constantly from her eyes.

“Is he dead?” my most rational uncle asked without any embellishment.

“Where is he now?” my aunt asked.

My grandmother was the only one who did not say a word. She was keeping all her sadness and questions to herself.

“He’s still inside,” my mother said, pointing to the pink curtains next to her, and the “emergency room” sign above. “He was about to have a simple body exam. He told me he couldn’t breathe well, and all of a sudden his lips turned white and they took him right into the emergency room.”

Before Mum finished, I started praying, and so did my relatives. None of us really came from any religious background. But at that moment saying prayers was the only thing we could do.

“Au Hoi Chi’s family.” One of the doctors came out from the emergency “tent.”

“Yes, that’s us,” my mother replied.

“We’ll have to move him up to ward F2,” the doctor said, without any emotion. “Do come up.”

After a minute or so, my grandfather was moved out of the “tent.” We all took a quick glance at him. He was a little bit pale and without his dentures, he looked a bit thinner. He must have been trying hard to win this battle.

My grandfather had been a warrior all his life. He had literally no parents since he was adopted by a couple in Malaysia. He did not even know whether his parents were Chinese or Malay. Although he was not wealthy when he married my grandmother, he decided to give birth to five children, including my mother. Not only that, but he also thought it his responsibility to take care of his grandchildren. As a result, my sister, my cousins and I had built up intimate relationships with him. My grandfather was also obsessed with knives when he was in the kitchen. My grandmother was an exceptional cook but she would leave all the chopping jobs for my grandfather. They were just a perfect couple.

We were told to wait outside the ward. It was a huge hallway with a few chairs placed on the two sides near the entrance. All of us sat for a while, waiting. Due to the way the chairs were put, we were facing one another. We avoided eye contact. We did not want to spread any more sadness to each other.

“Au Hoi Chi’s family,” the same voice proclaimed, “he is in bed number nineteen.”

We all rushed into the ward and found my grandfather lying deeply asleep. He had some big and complicated machines next to him showing his heart rate. And he had also lots and lots of needles running through his skin. His face was nearly unrecognizable with all the sticky tape fixing the pipe that provided my grandfather with oxygen. There were also cuffs holding his hands for fear that he should pull away the pipe and endanger himself. The only part that was allowed to rest freely was his gray shiny hair.

“You know he had heart attack before, right?” The doctor’s tone was merciless.

“Yes,” my mother replied.

“It was a heart attack again this time.” The doctor went on explaining with his superior medical knowledge. “His heart stopped for a few minutes. Honestly, even if he could be saved, there might be damage to his brain causing abnormalities. Be prepared, he may have to leave in a couple of days.”

And the doctor left. We all surrounded my grandfather, giving him our blessings, and trying to digest the indigestible truth that we had just heard. We left the hospital at two a.m.

I woke up at around ten the next day. The first moment my eyes opened to face another hard day I picked up the phone and called Mum, who had stayed overnight with Grandma and Grandpa.

“How’s Grandpa?” I asked.

“He’s awake now but he’s suffering from all these pipes and needles. Are you coming over today?” my mum replied, sounding a bit less worried.

“Sure. Should I come over now or...” It was a school day, though I did not have many lessons.

“No, it’s okay. Come over after school,” Mum said and hung up.

I had only three lessons that day. I was an English major in the Chinese University of Hong Kong. I could not pay any attention to the lesson. Images of Grandpa had taken up all the space in my brain. I did not want my grandpa to leave at all. I wanted him to see me graduate, to take lovely pictures with me at my University.

When I arrived at the hallway outside the ward for the second time, some different people were sitting on those chairs, facing one another. They must have been undergoing similar experiences. Their eyes were reddened, and they were sobbing loudly.

Next to my grandfather stood my grandmother, my mother and one of my aunts. Tears started running from my eyes the moment I saw Grandpa. He was awake but he could not really move. It was a tough task just for him to lift his arm; I could tell from his trembling. I walked closer to him. He was delighted to see me, but he could not talk. The tape on this mouth gave him trouble moving his lips. He waved slightly, telling me to get close to him.

When I was close enough to smell his body odor, he clutched my hand very tightly. I saw his lips moving but not a sound was produced. My hearted filled completely with sorrow and I started talking.

“Grandpa, it’s me,” I said with a soft tone, as if talking to a baby.

My grandpa nodded, meaning he understood.

“Everything will be over soon, you’ll recover in a few days and we can take great photos. I’ll be graduating soon,” I said cheerfully.

In between the pieces of tape, I could see my grandfather smiling. He moved his hand, denoting that he wanted to write something. My mother produced paper and a pen right away. I assisted my grandpa by holding his arm. He was shaking vigorously as he moved. Every time he wrote a tiny bit, we tried to guess the word for we did not want

him to use too much energy. Bit by bit he wrote my Chinese name in full. Then he wrote in Chinese characters, “I’m good. Study. Great Improvement.” Then he wrote again, “I can’t talk.”

I could not hold back my tears. “I will, Grandpa. I’ll be good, and I have got an award from my university for Outstanding Performance. I’ll show it to you tomorrow.” My grandpa smiled again.

On the way home that night, I was in a mixed state of joy and sorrow. It was just fantastic to see Grandpa talk again. But those pipes and needles were just too much for any human being to bear. The first thing I did back home was to find the award so that I could encourage my grandpa the next day. It was already three in the morning.

The next day when I woke up, I repeated the move of calling Mum.

“Grandpa is not as strong today. When are you coming?” Mum said on the phone.

“I’ll come at seven, after school. And I’ll bring the award,” I replied, encouragingly.

“Okay, see you then,” Mum replied and hung up.

As I was waiting for the bus to go to school, I could not help thinking of the enlightening images of my grandfather getting better. I triple checked the award I was bringing to the hospital, making sure that I had got the right one. Right before the bus arrived, my phone rang.

“Hi, Dad,” I said. Dad’s number was displayed on the screen. “You know what, I am bringing my aw...”

“Mum said Grandpa’s situation has worsened. We have to go there right now. I’ll meet you at the KCR,” Dad said without taking any breaks.

My heart stopped for a while. My brain suddenly jammed. I had to figure out which way would be the quickest, so I called Mum.

“Mum, what happened?! And what is the fastest way to...” I said on the phone.

“Take a taxi,” my mum replied without letting me continue, tremblingly. “No no no, the nurse says you’d better take the KCR, then the light rail train. Be quick.”

I took a different bus that would take me to the KCR. Dad was standing next to the KCR station with a worried look. Without talking to each other, we ran into a train. Throughout the journey, I was holding the phone in my hand. I did not want it to vibrate at all. I did not want to hear my mum’s voice saying I was too late. When we were halfway there, Mum’s number was displayed on the screen of my mobile. I pressed the button without saying anything.

“Where are you now?” my mum said.

“We’re almost there. We...” I could not think of anything to say.

“Grandpa’s heart has stopped. But he’s still breathing and can still hear. Be quick,” Mum hung up.

I was so afraid and text-messaged my sister who knew everything that was happening.

My sister replied, “Tell him I love him and I’ll always think of him. :(”

Tears burst out again as I saw the message.

Around twenty minutes after my mum’s call, I arrived at the hospital. The queue for taking the elevator was frustratingly long. I waited and waited nervously, until my mum called again.

“He has gone peacefully. Come up and take a last look,” Mum said.

“... ”

As I arrived at the same hallway, I saw my aunt crying. I did not rush into the ward, for my steps were too heavy. I could feel pain in my heart. Step by step, I walked towards my grandfather. He was surrounded by the pink curtains, for a little privacy from other patients. All my relatives were there, looking at my grandfather.

My grandfather looked very peaceful. He had finally been able to live without the pain of his disease, the pipes, the needles and the cuffs. He was sleeping like a baby.

“He left peacefully,” my mum announced, for she was the eldest sister. “He told us he wanted to sleep after we cleaned his body, and then his heart stopped.”

We did not make a noise and kept looking at Grandpa’s face. I remained silent, but I was preparing my last speech to my beloved grandfather.

“Can I have one private minute, please?” I said quietly and they left the tent.

I placed my hand on the blanket covering the body. It was all cold. Grandpa was lying very still.

“Grandpa,” I burst into tears once again, “Do know my sister and I love you so so much. Thank you for taking care of us. You mean so much and we will always think of you. I have kept my promise of bringing the award here.”

I took the award out from the bag and held it in front of him.

“I promise I’ll be a good boy. I’ll take care of Grandma and everyone else in the family.” I could not continue for my tears had stopped me.

Being unable to speak, I decided to share a moment of silence with my grandfather, and that... is the very last moment I ever spent with him.

Dear Grandpa,

I am sure you must be having a better new life elsewhere now. No more diseases, no more needles, no more pipes, no more medications. You must be feeling warm, harmonious and relaxed now. It's been nearly a month since we last talked. I miss you so much. I'll be graduating soon. I always think it's sad that we didn't take photos together with the gown. But it's okay. I know you are up there, keeping an eye on me. I will keep my promise of maintaining harmony in our family. And I will not let you down. See you in the future. I'm so proud to be your grandson.

I love you, grandpa.

Love,

Shing Tak

Feudalism

Beside the steamy river bank
All that gushing and a dazzling white,
A silvery stream bends and sparkles—

Down below, thousands of salmon push
Each other upstream
Their determined tails flap about,
Till they settle down somewhere.
They first learned swimming
To produce and to survive their family.

Up there, behind the rainbow bridge,
A bear sits and leans over
It opens its mouth wide enough
To welcome the home- goers.

— Here above the river bank,
Onlookers take pictures
For each other; and flip through
The magazine *The Emigrants*

Lily Wong

Farthest Apart

Evelyn Chan Ching Chi

09/09/01

Today is my 30th birthday. I wonder how people feel when they celebrate their 50th, 60th or 70th birthdays for I can feel I'm losing the anticipation or excitement towards birthdays which I used to have when I was young. Mom used to hold all these big birthday parties for me until I turned 16. But I bet nobody would want a big party anymore when they turn 30. Who will want to face the ageing self?

So Dad is 59 today. I sent him a text message after a prolonged struggle. As always, he called back immediately. Didn't talk much, happy birthday to each other, how is everyone at home, the weather is getting cooler, take care. More like getting a report of each other's life. Only I no longer felt like I was talking to my boss; we are on equal terms now.

9th September, 2001

Time is the cruelest thing on earth. My limbs are aching again. Could I have imagined myself suffering from this pain now back when I gave all my strength and energy on the football pitch during my golden youth? I used to spend so many birthdays there, but today I did not even want to leave home because of my aching old bones. There is no way one can compete with time. My oldest daughter is already 30 today.

I got Ann's birthday message. She said they were doing fine. I've given her a huge burden over the past years. I had no right to ask much and I know she was not willing to tell either. This was understandable. Who would want to talk to an old, useless and irresponsible father?

Still, I cannot help feeling disappointed about not hearing from Joyce on my birthday.

10/09/01

Little Alex called to tell me about his brilliant results on the exams. He's one of the smartest little things I've ever seen. And that's why everyone around him loves him so much. I must go fetch him something as a reward tomorrow. This kind of encouragement means so much to kids.

Dad never bought me any presents no matter how well I did in school. I used to think it was because I was not doing well enough, so I tried my best on every test or exam just to impress him. I only realized all my effort was doomed to be futile until I overheard him quarreling with Mom that night. I was then in F.1 and Joyce was in P.5. Dad came home with the doll that Joyce begged him to buy few days before. As usual, I got nothing. I didn't utter a word. It was then at midnight when Joyce and I were already in bed that I heard Mom and Dad's voices.

"You shouldn't have bought her that. You're spoiling her."

"I don't need you to comment on the way I love my daughter. I will always give her the best."

"But I must remind you that you do have two daughters."

"If only they were more alike! Ann is so much like you: stubborn, disobedient and too tough."

"And that's my fault again?"

I still remember every word of it. From then on, I knew I wouldn't be able to impress him regardless of how hard I tried. What I've achieved since is all for my own good, and also to prove to him that there is nothing wrong with girls being tough and stubborn. Is this what people call the impact of childhood?

10th September, 2001

Like mother, like daughter. This is why neither of the girls is like me. Luckily. Or they would only grow up to be a huge failure like I am now. Indeed, Ann is so like Bess, and has been ever since she was a kid. She had a very strong character: quiet, precocious and stubborn. One could tell immediately upon seeing her relatively brown complexion, her pair of very dark pupils which looked like they were always staring and her small mouth that never smiled. Joyce was just another extreme. She had a pair of big, watery eyes and very delicate skin with two little dimples at the corners of her mouth. I have always loved her so dearly.

I do love both girls. Ann always seemed so mature and independent that I never had to attend to her matters. It was Bess who did not trust me, and made a fuss about it. She believed in all those theories about praises and compliments. Fathers do not do that touchy stuff. Ann did well in everything even though I never gave her any rewards. The truth is she is the pride and the only success of my life.

12/09/01

The World Trade Centre in New York was hit, the most terrible terrorist attack. I couldn't believe my eyes when watching the news report.

Suddenly, it reminded me of him. If he were here, he would be talking loudly with spit flying, commentating on the whole thing. We often held very different opinions in this kind of discussion. He burnt with anger when I went onto the street in 1989, after the Tiananmen Incident. Apparently, it had to do with the education he received in China when he was young. He agreed with everything the government did, even violence. Somehow he has always believed violence could

really solve problems.

13/09/01

A mother called me this afternoon when I was having lunch at school. Her son is in my class. She cried on the phone and kept asking me what to do with her son. I was surprised when she told me how rebellious he was at home. He was one of the few quiet ones in my class, never a troublemaker. The mother said the father had become so impatient with him that he slapped him the other day and the situation had further worsened since then. I kept telling the mother to go talk to her husband and tell him that violence can only create problems. I also suggested that the father apologize to the boy or else this will impact his life. I meant it and I spoke from experience.

13th September, 2001

The ends justify the means. Sometimes violence is just inevitable when it is the only way to achieve the desired aim. People mourn over the collapse of the Twin Towers and point their accusing fingers at the terrorists, but has anyone ever noticed the deeds of the American government? It is the same with the June 4th Incident. Was there a better way to end the whole thing and restore peace more promptly than threatening them with tanks? Those kids just did not know what trouble they were making and the government was responsible for teaching them a lesson. The government is like the parent of its people, and so I couldn't understand its acts better.

It is heartbreaking to have your child speak against you. I could not hold my temper at all when Ann stood up suddenly and interfered with my negotiation with Bess five years ago. So much influenced by her mother, she could only see things from their angle, so she blamed me for the broken relationship and bargained with me over the terms

of the divorce. Of course I did not expect her to be on my side and I knew Bess needed her support, but still I could not stand my daughter talking to me like that. I slapped her; I did. That was the only way I could think of to shut her up and to tell her how disappointed I was with her. There was no other way.

14/09/01

I just spent an hour talking to this boy. I understood how he felt but still I asked him to forgive his father. Easier said than done. I lied. I said all fathers love their children. Even if he beats you, it is an act of love. What a ridiculous remark. I never felt my father's love. He never listens to his daughters. He just couldn't care less about his daughters' stuff. Or my stuff. Hitting your own 25-year-old daughter, you call that an act of love? He only minds his interests. He has his ego to protect. He is always right simply because he is my father. I have no right to utter a word because I am the daughter. All I could see was a man who only knew to complain about every little thing in the house, who would not respect my mother's effort in taking care of him and the family and who thought he was King even though he was no more than an unsuccessful businessman. I know better how to love my mother and so I must protect her from his exploitation and manipulation. I didn't give a damn to how much he would pay us after the divorce, he couldn't afford much anyway, but I just couldn't stand him still trying to blame her and scold her. As always, he never knew how to communicate with people. Violence was his only way to solve problems.

15th September, 2001

Forgive and forget. This is easier said than done. I have long

forgiven Ann about that night, but it is not as easy for us to forget it. No father would like to slap his child. I could see the impact on our relationship and I know it could last a lifetime. Only I would never have known that the whole thing would also impact Joyce this much too. I remember her crying all along that night even before I slapped Ann. She is my precious and I never spoke to her loudly, let alone hit her. But now it is she who refuses to talk to me.

15/09/01

Aunt Betty is back from Singapore and visited us today. She speaks louder and complains even more than before. Wonder how her sons put up with her. It was okay to listen to her complain about Uncle David, but I couldn't help feeling disgusted when she talked about Dad. I know Dad has done a lot of harm to Mom and us and I will never forget it. But still, I hate hearing people telling me how bad my father is. I bet I know my father well enough — I don't need someone else to judge him. Nonetheless, her visit did somehow enlighten me. She's pathetic, for she only remembers what people have done wrong to her. She lives with hatred and will never find happiness.

16th September, 2001

I called home tonight and again they said Joyce was in the bathroom when I asked about her. I was not that stupid — I knew she was avoiding me.

16/09/01

Dad called tonight. Only I talked to him, as usual. Seldom does he call so often. He said he was enjoying life as he has a very regular life now. He cooks three meals a day, does some revision for his Chinese

medicine course in the afternoon, takes a walk after dinner and goes to bed after watching TV for a short while. Felt a bit sad for no reason when he was talking. He used to be such an ambitious and restless man. My instinct told me he wouldn't be happy with such a life. The few times I saw him recently, I no longer felt the hatred I once had but only noticed his whitening hair. I never hated him so much that I wouldn't want him to be happy. At the age of 59, Mom has us but he has nobody. We have found our way without him and we are certainly having a better life than he does now.

Joyce made a face to show her disgust when she heard it was Dad calling. She still hasn't forgiven Dad for ruining her happy family. She used to be so proud of having the most loving father. I bet I can understand her disappointment when she witnessed Dad quarreling with Mom about money and slapping me. Sometimes I even feel that she loathes him more than I do. It's not that I am more forgiving than Joyce is. I cannot forgive him, nor can I understand him. But 5 years have gone by. Do we really want to live with this hatred for the rest of our lives?

01/10/01

Home sweet home. Never been so homesick. Couldn't sleep at all in the hospital, with all that moaning and that very stiff bed. Should go to the insurance company tomorrow to claim compensation for the accident.

I'm so blessed to be able to sit here and write in my diary right now. I could have lost my life were I not that lucky, though my car was certified to be total loss. Everything was spinning around when I stepped out of the car. Then my mind turned blank when another car hit the fence next to me. Didn't realize how close to death I was until I

sat down on the bench in the hospital. It was then that I suddenly burst into tears. What if my life just ended there? I couldn't imagine it.

Perhaps I was too much in a fright. I knew I shouldn't call Mom or she would be more frightened that I was already, so I dialed Dad's number. He was in China and was so shocked when I told him I was in a car crash. He then asked me about all the details and my injury. He apologized for not being able to be there with me. Yes, he actually said sorry, he did.

Certainly there are things that can't be mended between us. But what if I was to die just then, did I want to die with hatred? I didn't. He was still my father, the closest person to me after Mom and Joyce, and this was perhaps why I chose to call him at that moment.

1st October, 2001

Life is a blessing. You never notice how much you want it until the moment you are about to lose it. This is not only true with life, but perhaps everything. It was not until she told me she was wounded in a car accident that I realized my daughter did really matter a lot to me. I was not a good father. I did not provide her with a comfortable environment, I left her responsible for the family after the divorce and I never loved her enough. My heart ached so badly when I knew she was alone in the hospital and called to seek comfort from me. It ached worse than the night when I slapped her. All these thoughts came to mind but I could only say sorry and nothing else. I was a complete failure, not only as an individual but also as a father.

Luckily, she is fine now. She is as strong and capable as always. My only achievement in life is to have a successful daughter like her.

I am going back tomorrow to see how she is doing.

Autumn at Victoria Park

Light flashes past
As the last ancient couple
Lantern on each long-lived water crane sail and yearn -
Now that they are close at hand:
The waiting years to glide over universe
And what remaining have eventually run out of sand.
To escort the descent rite,
Waft lotuses light and flowers of crap apples sail along,
And the Chinese ducklings mate.
There the bond of these two fond lies,
Encircled by the earthly crowd, stir
Their forever marital ties...
 To imagine this picturesque tale
 Of their time-honoured virtue for tonight,
 How a full moon can mean so subtle!

Ady Chung

The Sea of Men

Tong Ho Wai

When I was just a little boy, I asked my mother what I would become. “When you grow up, you’ll become a man, just like your father.” At that age I did not know to judge, but I was satisfied with her response.

One night when my mother was covering me with the quilt and stroking me to sleep, I asked her, “Why does Father sleep naked at night?”

“He feels comfortable doing so, perhaps,” Mum answered. “You can ask him tomorrow.”

But I was so eager to know. “Can I do the same tonight—sleep without my clothes on?”

“Oh, of course not, my silly boy.” Though soft, her answer was swift, “You will catch a cold doing that.”

I was confused. Father never caught a cold; yet I would if I slept naked. This must be the right of a man, I perceived. And I would be a man one day.

In my observation, a man should be inscrutable. He should speak little, and never show emotion. Every night when my father came home from work, he would seat himself before the computer, his eyes glued to the screen, his back facing us. In work or in games, he was always engaged. Occasionally he would smoke a mouthful of cigarette, and take a sip from the cup with whatever brand of tea bag inside. I saw him only in profile; his thick, square brown-rimmed glasses invariably slid off the bridge of his nose, on top of which was a ditch from frowning.

When dinner was served, my father would turn around on his

rotating armchair, take a step forward and roll the wheels over to the dining table, with his buttocks clinging to the chair the whole time. He rarely talked, not even at meals. But when he did have something to say, it was either about my school life or about how Mum had said something wrong or inaccurate that invited correction or improvement.

Half-burying his face behind the bowl for several minutes, he would finish his eating task, leaving us only a shining empty bowl. His terrific speed of consuming rice remained a mystery to me in my early years. Perhaps a man should eat like that, I supposed. He would then turn back to his original position, frowning.

I was further confused. Is he frowning as an entertainment, or is he addicted to torture? Neither one made sense to me. Is he bound to suffer? Can't he simply quit that torture? All these were beyond the level of understanding of a little boy.

But this only made the little boy even more curious. One day when I was left home alone, I climbed up and explored the box over Father's high shelf. And I was stunned. Inside the dusty box was an orderly collection of porn CDs. How disgusting! All of a sudden my father struck me as lewd, indecent and mentally unbalanced. For the first time, I hesitated to grow up as a man. But this thought was soon dismissed. I promised myself I would be an exceptional man.

The first lesson I learnt in how to be a man was bitter, though unforgettable. That afternoon when Mum went to the market, she told me to take care of my sister, and that she would meet us at the toy shop afterwards. We first looked at stationery. I was so proud of myself that I kept my sister close beside me all the time. But soon my sister was bored, and yelled that she wanted to go to her favourite section. Feeling awkward standing with her in front of the dolls' shelves, I told her to look for me at the models' section in five minutes. I even took

off my watch and put it on her wrist to remind her of the time.

I had a random walk around the models' section. The model cars were simply cool! But I didn't forget my task. I stood at the outermost position of the section, so that my sister could easily recognize me. Some moments later, she hadn't yet come over to me. I sensed something was wrong. I hurried to the dolls' shelves but she was not there! I quickly ran through the whole toy shop but still could find her nowhere. Anxious and frightened, I couldn't move but stood still, waiting for Mum's return.

It seemed to take a hundred years before Mum was back, and she was in a panic upon hearing the news. She could only call Father's office for help and he arrived in a flash. We split into two groups to search, and I was with Mum. I caught sight of several little girls in pink but none of them was my sister. After a total fuss, Father found my sister watching TV in an electronic appliance shop and took her home safely.

I burst into tears when I saw my sister again. But the excitement was overwhelmed by my extreme fear—and there it thundered! An ominous voice penetrated into my ears, and stabbed my mind, "Come here!" And I was brought unconsciously by my steps to the place where Father was standing. He shouted in rage, "Why did you leave your sister alone?"

I murmured, "She said she wanted to have a look at the dolls"

Father interrupted sternly, "You should have kept a close eye on her."

"But it was she who yelled about leaving the stationery section" I explained.

Father said furiously, "This is no excuse. You are her elder brother. You cannot leave her alone!"

“But this is unfair! This is not my fault! I lent her my watch and told her to return in five minutes!” I argued. And at that very moment, I heard a resounding slap and felt a burning pain on my cheek. My face was thrown to the right. Before I regained my consciousness and rushed back to my room, that horrible sound uttered forcefully, “You – should – protect – her!”

I locked myself in my room, burying my face in the pillow, sobbing. Out there the horrible voice was still audible.

“How could you possibly leave two little kids at the toy shop alone?”

Mum explained, in vain.

“They are kids, but you are not. How could you make this poor judgment?” That air of authority ceased to be heard after the slam of a door. I very much wanted to sneak to Mum’s room and comfort her, but I dared not step out of my room lest Father would spot me. I could only stay there, helpless.

I hate men! I hate men from the deepest part of my heart.

The next morning when my father was out at work, I went to Mum. Despite her pretentious calmness, her eyes were swollen.

“Are you okay, Mum?”

She said, “I’m fine.”

And I continued, “Daddy is bad....”

But mum’s response surprised me. “Hmm.... Your father is not bad. As a son, he takes persistent care of your grandma, and he is doing perfectly well as a father. He never drinks, he never goes to prostitutes nor has he married a second woman, and he never gambles. Though he is boring, he is calm and responsible. As a matter of fact, he is a good man.”

She paused a little bit. Her eyes reddened. And she resumed, with

her stiffened voice, “But he is not an excellent husband. He is not caring and considerate. He never understands my feelings.”

Seeing Mum restraining her tears in her eyes and keeping them from falling down her cheeks evoked my tears. I so much wanted to protect her that I uttered unconsciously, “Mum, you are so great, you deserve better treatment.”

“I am used to this. What else can I do? Divorce him? Then who is going to take care of you and your sister?” I was speechless in response to her questions.

Before I could come up with a reply, Mum dissolved into the conclusion, “So don’t imitate your father in this way. When you have a girlfriend in the future, you should always love her and care about her feelings. Don’t treat her like your father treats me.” I nodded vigorously without a milli-second of consideration. I promised I would be a caring man.

Mum added, “You should be gentle to her.” I always bore that in mind.

Years later, when the “her” changed from a common noun to a proper noun, I found that that sacred sentence didn’t work all the time.

It was the first Christmas Eve I spent with Amanda in Tsimshatsui. I intended to treat her to a good meal in a Japanese restaurant. But I didn’t know to make a reservation in advance for I couldn’t have expected that every place would be so crowded. We could only abandon the original idea, and wander around looking for another nice restaurant. We finally settled down at an Italian restaurant after some tiresome squeezing through the crowd. That meal cost me dear, but I regarded that as the fee of this unpleasant lesson.

After the meal I took Amanda out for a ramble. She talked very

little that night. I guessed I knew the reason. But that only made me even more nervous. Occasionally she went into boutiques and I waited outside.

Outside one boutique there stood a young man who looked impatient. I looked at him and wanted to exchange a sympathetic smile with him. But he returned my smile with a scornful gaze, and sized me up from head to toe. I was immediately enraged and my eyes sparkled with disdain, cursing him in my mind. I couldn't see how a sense of superiority was gained by wearing a Polo shirt and a pair of CK jeans with an additional unfitting Gucci handbag. Why didn't he just stick the banknotes from his neck to his waist and from his hip to his feet? He could have equally retained his arrogance that way. A stupid slave not knowing how to spell the word "capitalism"!

Amanda and I walked around randomly some more until she lost her temper. This time her eyes were not lovely, but frightening.

"Where are you leading me to? I can't stand loitering around aimlessly!" The other day she told me softly in my ears that she just wanted to hang out with me, never mind the destination. Suddenly, I realized that was a lie.

"You hadn't thought to make a reservation at the restaurant, you hadn't planned out where we'd go, and you didn't even care to shave and dress yourself nicely. Don't you know to prepare things beforehand? I feel like an idiot walking by your side. I am very disappointed with you." This was the first time I came to understand that dating, just like examinations, was practical and required some preparation work, especially for boys.

That night we departed without even exchanging farewells. I watched the whole night. The following days I was moody and I shut myself in my room. Mum seemed to have sensed a difference, but I

had no intention of telling her. Even had I done so, that motherly care would have helped nothing. It would only have suffocated me with questions and superficial judgments and that fuss thus aroused would only have added to my frustration. In short, it would have been even more troublesome if I had revealed the cause of my change of mood. So I kept it only to myself.

And this was the first cold war between Amanda and me. It lasted for a day and a half. I didn't feel like calling her, for I believed neither innocence nor inexperience were things to apologize for. But she called, asking me, "So what do you want?" Puzzled by her absurdity, I didn't know what to say but just burst out saying sorry. I couldn't figure out why, perhaps I just wanted to make peace. And then we reconciled. The days since then had regained their sweetness.

Our second quarrel happened yesterday. It appeared to be my problem again. But I really didn't mean to hurt Amanda. As a matter of fact, it was she who asked me to answer her honestly as to how I would comment on Ah Lai. I just said she struck me as beautiful. Then Amanda asked calmly if I was fond of Ah Lai, and I slightly nodded my head. That's all. All of a sudden her face blushed with fury and she gave me innumerable smacks on my chest with her palms. I was totally confused as well as hard-hit and I kept stepping back, cluelessly. Before I could utter a word, Amanda roared, "You immoral devil! I hate you! I don't wanna see you again!"

Wasn't it she who asked me to answer her honestly? I was just trying to be loyal to her and I intended to hide nothing. And again, it was she who told me the other day that I was so lovely and caring that she just wanted to stay with me forever and that she didn't even mind if I loved another girl so long as she was the first and formal wife. But I was fooled. She minded. Again I was too late in discovering that.

Nonetheless, perhaps I should at least be glad that I had not had the chance to mention that Ah Lai and I had a mutual affection.

After the quarrel, we did not break up. She needed me so much and I could not possibly leave her alone. But this left us a permanent scar on our relationship; I hoped that time could heal the wound.

I wanted to find some friends to talk to but I could find none, for I am sure everybody would have found me absurd for acting that way. I did not care, for I believed sympathy was not to be bargained for. I considered them equally absurd for suppressing and distorting their real emotions, and for covering up affairs that they deemed “immoral” with beautiful lies and promises. What’s the problem with sincerity? If natural and sincere feeling is immoral, then morality is equally unnatural and insincere in itself.

Last night before my early sleep, feeling numb, I locked myself in my room, and watched some of those CDs from over on the high shelf.

I woke up early this morning to prepare for the interview workshop. I had no school today and only this workshop in the afternoon. Actually I never valued this type of mock interview. I participated only to accompany my friends, and thought it might be better than doing nothing. But I didn’t know why I would prepare for it. Perhaps I just wanted to occupy my mind.

My interview ran smoothly and I was given some quite positive comments. On the way home on the train, I produced from my bag the feedback sheet, on which was written: “Marvin, you’ve done a nice job. You’re neatly dressed, clean-shaven and show your competitiveness. Impressive performance!”

Sickened by the ideology of competition, stifled by the idea of love, perplexed by every single thing, I didn’t feel like heading home.

I just wanted some fresh air. So upon coming out of the station, I turned in the opposite direction of the usual path I took to walk home. During my directionless loitering, I saw housewives hurrying home from markets, young lovers in school uniform hugging and kissing each other in the middle of the street, and little schoolboys out of school holding PSPs in their hands, probably not thinking of what they would be in the future.

I stopped at a traffic light, waiting to cross the road. In a quick glance around at the passing vehicles I seemed to have caught sight of a familiar back—the familiar back of that familiar man—on the opposite side of the road. When the light turned green, that back was nowhere to be found and was dissolved amid a sea of men, right in front of the Hong Kong Jockey Club¹ betting branch.

¹ Hong Kong Jockey Club: the only legal bookmaker in Hong Kong. The betting items include horseracing, football betting and mark six.

Shenzhen

Getting out of the Lo Wu Customs,
I saw men with beard, half shaven
sitting on a line of trolley
cuddled under a pillar.
Behind them a cardboard stand
on the tilted plane declare
'take luggage for five yuan'.
Girls waved to me one after another,
'Manicure, pedicure, beauty!'
'Acrylic nail, gel nail, won't you try?',
flipping pieces of paper high and low.
At the top of the escalator stood
a tall woman in a glimmering qipao.
She had a buzzing walkie-talkie at her left
and a padded menu at her right.
Shops selling bags in every corner and isle,
you walk into it, you can hardly get away
without a little pulling-dragging exercise
we still have more, not displayed!
and throw piles of brand new catalogue at my face
Well,
chances are that next time
I will take a detour
just for a minute of rest!

Patty Lau

Confessions of a Busaholic

Ginny Chan Chip Yue

Rosaline Wong sat at the window seat in the third row of the upper deck of the bus. Rain was splashing on the windows. She gazed sullenly out onto the rainy streets. The bus rolled past Morse Park¹. The park where...

A silent tear glided down Rosaline's cheek, like the tears of rain dripping endlessly against the window. On her lap lay a journal. She could still smell the peach-scented fragrance, Amber's favourite, lingering on the pages of the journal like an imperishable spirit. She grasped the cloth bound notebook with her frail fingers and seemed to feel the warmth emanating from it.

Three-year-old Amber sat by the window on the upper deck of the bus, clinging onto her Dad's arm. Amber's Dad, Mr. Wong, was lanky and pale. His cropped hair and his huge, plastic-framed glasses² contrasted with his face, making it seem even smaller. His eyes were tiny, but they would twinkle whenever he smiled. Amber had never known her Dad to smile a fake smile. Amber pointed out of the window, babbling endlessly, and her Dad would laugh at her contently, repeating her simple words after her.

The bus was nearing their stop, the park where Amber's Dad was taking her for the usual Sunday treat. Since Amber was still wobbly on her feet, Mr. Wong lifted her up in his right arm and descended the stairs holding onto the handrail with his left. His arms were thin, but when it came to holding his daughter, he never lacked the strength.

When he was only halfway down the stairs to the lower deck, the bus suddenly jerked violently sideways. He instinctively held

1 A famous park in Kowloon.

2 A frame style of glasses popular in the 1980s.

on to Amber tightly with both arms, letting go of the handrail. The bus threw him against the wall, grazing a whole foot of skin off his left elbow before it finally came to a stop. He was still hugging little Amber protectively in his arms when she saw her Dad's bloody arm and started wailing in fear.

“Daddy! Are you okay? Blood! Are you going to die? Don't die, Daddy!”

Her Dad, though his arm was prickling with pain, managed a warm smile for Amber.

“Daddy won't die. It's just a small scratch.”

A helpful passenger hailed them a taxi for the hospital. Amber followed her Dad into the taxi, mumbling all along,

“Bad bus driver...hurt Daddy.” He couldn't help laughing and cuddled Amber as the taxi sped towards the hospital.

This was in the summer of 1988.

“How we like to try, how I try to try, this is my simple mind...”³ Amber hummed cheerfully as she took out her notebook. It was a lovely day. She was sitting in her favourite seat by the window on the bus's upper deck on her way home from class, and she was excited about the new assignment given by the professor today. For the Final Year Project, they were going to write a semi-biographical mini-novel. She had bought a notebook of her favourite purple especially for the task.

The warm summer sun filtered through the large window and lit up Amber's tanned, friendly face. The rays played on her long, straight black hair and her amber pendant glimmered in the afternoon sunlight. Just the mood for writing. As a young girl of 20, Amber already had great plans to be a writer. She had endless ideas. Riding on the bus

3 The theme song of a very popular Kowloon Motor Bus commercial advertisement a few years ago.

always gave her inspiration.

Amber flipped to the first page of her notebook and started to write.

This has to be my favourite assignment for the whole of my University studies. After three whole years of writing essays that I don't even understand myself, I finally get to do something I really enjoy.

Ideas were already jumping out at me when Professor Barrel gave us the topic of the Final Year Project. I mean, I've been wanting to do this for years! This is what makes my uni life complete. I've got loads of ideas. I'm going to write about buses. Myself and buses. Myself and my memories and buses.

It's kind of an obsession really. I choose to travel by bus whenever possible. And when there's no destination, I take random routes and go joy-riding. I could spend the whole weekend like this. Huh, so probably I could name my story *Confessions of a Busaholic*. Neat. I picked up my purple-ink Hi-Tec-C and starting writing on my lovely, new, purple cloth-bound notebook.

If the bus comes, can memories be far behind?

Hmm... sounds weird. I scratched out the written sentence.

Some people say there is a princess in every girl. If I were Cinderella, the bus would be my pumpkin coach, taking me to the place where my dreams come true.

Sunny January 18, 2000

Dear Diary,



Could someone stop me smiling to myself? My cheeks are aching from smiling all day long. Oh, but I'm so so so happy. Steve finally

asked me to be his girlfriend today. As usual we were sitting side by side in the third row on the upper deck on the bus trip home from school. I was telling him about my bus-mania again for the n-th⁴ time when he suddenly held my hand, and told me his feelings... He said if the bus were my pumpkin coach, he hoped he could be the one rescuing me in case the pumpkin fell apart, and leading me back on the way towards my dreams. What a silly metaphor! I laughed even harder when I saw his serious face when saying it. He is SO CUTE. I'm so happy happy happy happy!! Lalalala....

Chapter 2

Human relationships must be built on a foundation. This foundation might be a place, an event or an activity. Ang Lee proposed dining together as the basis of relationship-building in his movie Eat Drink Man Woman. This Chinese belief certainly has some truth in it.

For me,

I paused with my pen above the paper, thinking about how to put into words how important the bus is to me. The bus journey has been used so many times as a metaphor for a relationship: in songs, movies, dramas, and so on. Would it become a cliché if I used it again in my mini-novel? But this is so true for me. In fact, those pop-song lyrics are just too shallow. The bus is not as simple as a single love story, but has many deeper levels of meaning for me. Indeed, so many of the critical events of my life have happened on the bus that it would be possible to base my whole autobiographical novel on them.

Denise Ho's MTV of her song, a tribute to her parents, was being broadcast on the bus TV. A television on the bus. Who would have thought of that twenty years ago? Anyway. As I watched the MTV featuring a stage with a single spotlight, sparks of inspiration urged

4 N-th times means for so many times the person has lost count. Similar to "the millionth time" in English.

me to continue writing.

For me, The bus is a stage on which the story of my life is played, and where relationships are built, and ended.

The lower deck of the hot-dog⁵ was hot and stuffy. Air-conditioned buses were an extravagance in the 80s and early 90s. Six-year-old Amber usually liked to sit on the upper deck because it was breezier up there. The view was also better. It was also more exciting somehow.

But little Amber didn't mind. She was a big sister now, and she had to help protect her baby sister April. It would be dangerous for both Mummy and April to go up those steep stairs on the jolting bus. She looked at her Mummy and sister with a happy smile.

Her mother, Mrs Wong, Mrs *Rosaline* Wong, was wearing a flowery lemon yellow sundress. She had soft wavy hair, and even the huge, plastic-framed glasses could not hide the glow in her big beautiful eyes. She held April tenderly in her arms with a contented look on her face. Amber leaned against her and touched April's tiny fingers and played peek-a-boo with her. April giggled in the most adorable way that only babies can. Amber and Rosaline smiled at each other.

"Ammy, you're a big sister now, you have to help me protect your sister whenever you can, okay?" Mrs Wong told Amber in a gentle voice.

"Of course, Mummy!" Though Amber was only six, she was sensible enough to understand that her baby sister needed more care from their Mummy right now. She would not be jealous of her own sister like other children were. Besides, she loved April too, and she knew her Mummy always tried her best to make Amber feel involved.

Amber lifted her head towards the cool breeze that had just blown in through the small window. She was happy because her Mummy


5 The slang term for buses without air-conditioning.

was taking them to Morse Park, her favourite park with the most fun playground in the world. Suddenly the bus screeched to a stop at the red light and they jerked forwards. Mrs Wong hugged April in her arms protectively, but Amber, not braced for the sudden halt, hit her nose bridge against the seat in front. Her nose started to bleed. Mrs Wong, flustered over Amber's injury and feeling guilty for being unable to protect both of her daughters at once, rummaged in her purse for a tissue.

"Ammy, Ammy, don't be afraid. Hold this tissue and pinch your nose bridge here." She held April with one arm while trying to stop Amber's nosebleed with the other hand.

"It's alright Mummy, I can do it myself. See, April's crying! You look after her. I'll be okay. I'm a big girl now!"

This was in June 1991. Amber's sister was two months old.

September 14, 2001


Dear Diary,

Grandpa passed away today.

I was on the way to school when Dad called with the news.

The air-conditioning on the bus was freezing, but my body was burning with anguish.

The upper deck was buzzing with passengers' chatter but I could only hear Grandpa's voice.

People were sitting all around me, but I didn't care, all I could do was cry.

The sun outside was scorchingly hot but there was a blizzard in my heart.

Grandpa, may you rest in peace.

Chapter 9

*You may say, there are so many other forms of transportation,
what is it about buses that fascinates me so?*

It may not be as convenient as the KCR.

It may not be as fast as the MTR.

It may not be as cheap as the tram.

It may not be as comfortable as the taxi.

But it is unique.

Unique as a carrier of my memories.

Unique as a place for my daydreams to regenerate.

To put it simply, I can answer your question in one word.

Obsession.

The month-long battle of the HKALE had finally come to an end. Amber slumped against the bus seat, exhausted, but incredibly glad that the exams had finally ended. Steve, who happened to be assigned to the same examination centre as Amber, sat beside her silently. Finally, Amber thought, she could enjoy her time with Steve. She didn't have much time to accompany him during the past year. She had been too busy studying.

"Steve, aren't you glad the torture is finally over?" Amber asked with closed eyes.

"Hm."

"Goodbye high school! Hello uni! I'm looking forward to the brand new start already!" Amber sighed happily. There was no response from beside her.

"Steve? Are you okay?" Amber looked at him with concern.

Steve lowered his head, willing himself to say the words.

"Amber, you're right. A brand new start is worth looking forward

to. Let's... let's just be friends again..." Steve murmured softly, but firmly. Silence.

"Wha... what?!" Amber stammered after she recovered from the shock. "Why? We were still getting along great the last time we met three weeks ago!"

"Yes, the last time we met was three weeks ago. Another lesson I learnt from this exam period is that our priorities are really different. I've been wanting to say this for a long time, but I didn't want to affect your mood during this critical period. Let's just... let's just say it's over. I wish you a bright future in university."

"No... Steve... please don't." Amber sobbed as Steve disappeared down the stairs and out of her life.

This was in 2004, the last summer before they entered university.

Amber rested her head against the window. It was raining heavily today. Though she was more of a sunshine girl, rain suited her just as well. She loved summer and the unpredictable weather it brought.

If...

How should she end her story? She didn't want to end it just yet, but she had written 98 pages, which was more than enough. She chewed on her pen. The heavy rain was splashing against the window.

Just as she was about to put her last word on paper, she lurched forwards. What was that? The bus skidded and the last thing Amber remembered was her lovely, purple journal, now filled with her handwriting, being thrown into the air towards the back of the bus.

The sky was dark and cast with heavy clouds, and it suited Rosaline's mood. But the rain was refreshing. Everything was washed and freshened up by the shower and new life seemed to spring forth.

With a slightly trembling hand, she fingered the title on the journal's delicate purple cover, *Confessions of a Busaholic*, written in decorative silver letters.

On the last written page, Amber wrote,

If there were 24 hours left in your life, what would you do? If there was only one day left in my life, I would spend it recalling my memories of my loved ones. There is only one place that would make this possible, my second life, the...

The purple ink was splotted on the last word. Rosaline put her rose-coloured ink pen to the paper and wrote the last word for her daughter:

... bus.

The White Man

He staggers in the unstained corridor
With white shirt, white pants and white wristband.
Recognized by all,
The disorganized smile and bizarre thought.

A collective of his kind,
Known not for their names but minds.
Caged with fear, handcuffed with fright,
Separated by lines and quarantined in time.

In the indestructible white fortress they stay,
Immuned from the virus infecting the colored race.
And when the outsiders grunt and gaze with disdain,
Through the abyssal eyes he sees
Normality an abnormality.

Geoffrey Chan

La Femme Noire

Joseph Kwan Gi Yue

As the escalator slowly moved up over the hills of Central, Li Kin Ho remembered the stories his father had told him about his childhood experiences in Hong Kong. His father had always raged about the benefits of being Chui Chow Chinese during the late 50s and 60s. He talked about how people used to look out for each other and were really sincere. The fact that maybe everyone and not only Chui Chow Chinese were sincere back in the day never really occurred to him. Li Kin Ho simply liked and remembered these stories because they made him remember his father. The Chui Chow Chinese nowadays were no longer a concentrated group. In fact, no group really was. The changes that Hong Kong overcame during the past fifty years gave almost everyone a unique identity, just as if they all had a different story to tell. The buildings that the escalators crossed by no longer looked the same as they once did forty, fifty years ago. Mid-Central and Sheung Wan now mainly consisted of modern buildings, art galleries, bars and eateries. Li Kin Ho remembered his father's story of swimming up the shore of Sheung Wan Pier and how he had had a confrontation with the coolies working there. The Sheung Wan Pier has changed a lot since then. It used to be used for shipping and logistics, but now the only use of the pier was to transport anxious gamblers to the closest casino.

Li Kin Ho's grandfather was a principal at a school back in China. Whether or not this had anything to do with Li Kin Ho becoming a writer was never for certain, but it definitely had something to do with Ho's strong interest in reading. This interest created a habit of reading the newspaper on a day-to-day basis. As Lin Kin Ho reached the newspaper stand at the corner of Hollywood Road, he picked up

his paper and fetched the vendor a shiny five-dollar coin. The paper no longer cost a nickel, like it did back in the day of his father. In fact it now cost \$6, but since Li Kin Ho had been living in this area since his birth 36 years before, and since the newspaper vendor's father was great friends with Ho's father, loose tabs were kept. As he made a turn at Peel Street, like always he had already opened up the front pages, curious about the daily headlines. Unaware of the dangers of reading the paper and walking at the same time, he bumped into a lady wearing a black trench coat. At that moment they both had a perfectly good glance at each other. Although trench coats were in fashion once again, there was something different about how this trench coat looked on her. Although it was black in color, it was still easy to spot that it was of high quality. For many people, a trench coat shapes the body, and can sometimes hide unwanted waistlines. However, in this case it was the lady that gave the trench coat its character. She quickly turned away and had just headed downhill when he noticed her wallet was on the ground.

Right when the lady in the black trench coat reached the Central MTR station she realized her wallet was missing. She quickly ran back up the hills of Central to the corner of Hollywood Road where she had bumped into that man. However, by the time she had made it up the partially steep sidewalk, there was nobody there but the newspaper vendor.

As Ho checked and read his e-mail over a cup of green tea, he noticed that he had voice messages. The answering machine was nowhere near his work desk, but then again his home was so small, it didn't really matter. The first message was from his friend Yun Cha, calling once again to borrow what was left of Ho's salary. He had

acquired that name through his notorious reputation for his bad debts, and as well for his mighty “Ham Ju Sau.” The second message came from his work. He had somehow managed to escape dinner with his colleagues, and now they were calling to scold him. Finally, as he came to the last message, there was nothing but the sound of “nothing.”

Later that evening he decided to go to the restaurant to meet Yun Cha. As Li Kin Ho dressed up to leave for the Dai Pai Dong, he could not help but remember Yuen Han. As he walked down the slopes of Central memories of him doing the same with Yuen Han popped up in his mind. The memories popped up so frequently that it felt as if she were right there.

As Li Kin Ho walked through the slit of the plastic drapes that surrounded Fat Kee, he heard some people in the far corner arguing.

“Hey, you have aborted the baby already. How do I know if it was mine? You weren’t only sleeping with me at the time were you?”

“How could you say such a thing? Before all this I was thinking about getting married to you.”

“See it’s clear that we don’t understand each other. Good thing we no longer see each other then.”

“Jerk!”

As Li Kin Ho walked further back in the Dai Pai Dong, he noticed the girl from the dispute leaving in rage. However, most embarrassingly of all, the guy she was fighting with was Yun Cha. As he approached the table, he did not even want to bother asking him what was going on. In fact, Kin Ho was kind of sick of his fuck and dump stories. Once again Kin Ho noticed that Yun Cha had already begun eating before his arrival.

“Where are your manners? Would it hurt to wait?”

“I’m hungry! What’s the matter with you?”

“You call me to tell me you need money, but here you are eating only the most expensive items.”

“I haven’t eaten since last night. Oh yeah do you mind grabbing the check later on?”

“What?”

“What? I told you over the phone I needed money. How do you expect me to pay for the meal?”

“What happened? You weren’t gambling again were you?”

“No, I dropped my wallet last night. It must have been while I was picking up that waitress at that bar on Elgin Street. Actually I am still speculating whether or not I have been pick-pocketed.”

Li Kin Ho was aware of the fact that Yun Cha was most likely making up some story to scam what that was left of his salary. He slowly drifted off thinking about the lady in the trench coat.

“So I went to the bank this morning to get a new bank card right? You know how I have so much money in the account that I couldn’t risk having someone try to withdraw from it, so...”

“Hey you know I picked up a wallet just a few hours ago.”

“Hey maybe it was mine. Did it have any money in it?”

“It was a ladies’ wallet. Plus I saw the lady that dropped it. She bumped into me.”

Yun Cha’s expression quickly changed to disappointment.

“So?”

“She looked just like her.”

“Who?”

“Yuen Han”

“Maybe it was her, who knows? Maybe she didn’t want to talk to you? In that case let’s split what’s in that wallet.”

“It wasn’t her. She looked very similar, but there was something different about her.”

“Will you stop thinking about Yuen Han. Shit, she has left you already. What’s so attractive about this woman? I admit she is kinda hot, but you live in Central - there are dozens of hot women around. Just look out your window on a Saturday night. Who knows, you may even see down their blouses. Hehe!”

“You’re a fucking pervert. Yuen Han was never only about sex. Sigh! You won’t understand.”

“Hey you gonna order? If not let’s grab the bill and jet. I gotta pick up that waitress I met last night.”

“You’re still going to meet her?”

“Oh yeah that reminds me. Did you bring my money?”

“Well I had to chip in for tonight’s dinner at work today. So I don’t have much left. All I can give you are two bills.”

“That’s alright. I’ll pay you back later.”

As Kin Ho walked back home, he once again passed by the very corner where he bumped into the lady in the black trench coat. He purposely took smaller steps and slowed down his pace, as if he was trying to wait for her to appear again.

“Hi, I am calling to see if anyone has reported a wallet missing around the intersection of Hollywood Road and Peel Street?”

“No there have been no similar reports. Sir did you find a wallet?”

Kin Ho quickly hung up the phone.

Kin Ho hesitated for a long time. Sitting by his work desk at home, he wondered if it would be improper to go through the wallet. However

his desire very soon defeated his conscience. The fact that withholding this wallet with no intention of reporting it to the police made him culpable didn't really seem to bother him that much. He was now more concerned about whether or not he would gain the information he sought after. As he carefully pulled out everything from the wallet, he noticed a picture. It was an old pocket-sized family photo. Although it was evident that the photo was taken a while ago, it was in very good shape. There was not even a single crease or a dented corner. The faded colors were the only thing that gave it away. Kin Ho then sat back in disappointment and carefully put everything back into the wallet.

“Hey you sure you don't want to sell your apartment? You know your place is getting old and it's not easy to get another offer like this.”

“Yeah I know, but I really have no intention to sell.”

“Why are you staying there anyways? I mean there are so many new apartments around the Central area, which are much closer to the scene.”

“When was the last time you went out and partied with me? You know I am all over that. It's not me, and it won't be again.”

“It's not about her is it?”

“What?”

“Don't tell me it's about her. Shit, you're still not over her are you?”

The morning traffic was no different than it had been any other day. The stop where Kin Ho waited for the bus was never congested with people, but the buses that came by and especially those that picked up Kin Ho always were. There was not one time when he was able to get

on that 104 bus without having to push and shove. He often wondered where these people came from and where these people were going. It was like they actually lived on the bus and never got off. When Kin Ho got ready for work that morning, he had never considered that it would rain. He was dressed in a black suit with a smooth black silk tie. It wasn't something he would ordinarily wear to work, and there was a reason for that. The office had called Kin Ho earlier and reminded him to dress formally for the meeting with the executives that morning. Apparently there was some important announcement to be made. Speculations of restructuring had aired across the office for several months. A media company from Singapore was interested in buying out the newspaper that Kin Ho wrote for. The economy was now pretty much recovered and most of the staff along with Kin Ho was not too worried about the lay-off. After all, almost half the people Kin Ho worked with were ready for retirement. The bus stopped right across the street from the office. Usually Kin Ho would stop by and pick up his usual black coffee and breakfast sandwich, but he did not dare to be late. Although he was never really a bureaucratic kind of man, he deeply respected his bosses. His philosophy was that anyone that could spend so much money printing what would soon become tablecloths for more than half the Hong Kong population must have a respect for journalism as deep as his own. As he approached his work desk, the chief quickly came over.

“Hey hurry up, everyone's in the conference room. On a day like this, you don't want to be high profile.”

The chief was always looking out for Kin Ho. After all, Kin Ho's father once looked after him when he worked there as well. As he followed the chief into the conference room he noticed that there were many unfamiliar faces sitting at the far end. It was not really a

conference room. It used to be a resting area back Kin Ho's father's day when a quick afternoon nap was still common practice. Years had gone by since then and the freshly coated paint that used to give the room vibrant colors and light now only wrinkled and waited to peel in its dull earthy appearance.

The announcement was not surprising to Kin Ho, as he had expected the worst. His days working for a newspaper made him realize that there is no such thing as bad news. After the announcement, everyone was sent back to pack up their things. All except Kin Ho.

"Ah Ho, hold on for a second. We need to speak with you."

As the two men and the chief walked up to Kin Ho, there was a stunned expression from Kin Ho. It was not intimidation, but rather a curiosity as to why they needed to talk.

"You interested in working in Macao? We have a spot open there."

Kin Ho paused as if he didn't know what to say. He then smiled politely at the man.

"Macao? I had never really thought about that before."

"Well we have an office there, and I think you'll fill the spot perfectly."

The quiet pause in that moment created an atmosphere among the four individuals. Kin Ho slowly turned his eyes over to the chief as if to ask, "Do you know anything about this?" He then politely rejected the two gentlemen and slowly turned away.

That afternoon as Kin Ho returned from work, he stopped by the corner of Hollywood Road and picked up his newspaper, just like any other day. As he stood in the corner of the intersection, he realized that night had fallen earlier than expected that evening. But as the streets

gradually changed to pitch darkness, he continued to wait patiently for the lady in the black trench coat. There was no way to tell when he would stop waiting. It was as if he was seeking the moment in which light would once again be shed upon him.

Homestay

Ten hours of drive brings me back
To my homeland,
The Island of Egret,
 An entire new land
 Since I went away.

The roads are wider with flyovers,
Vehicles travel quicker on the super highway.
Greenbelts surround the city with grace.
And people's dress follows the trend unfamiliar.
 My homeland changes as the blossoming of a young lady.

The taxi drivers know no Amoy
Only Putonghua.
 A language I know
 But not mine.

Here
I'm back again
To the home I used to live,
 Now to stay just for a week.

Grandma is so happy to see me
That I can only see her two teeth.
I hug her
 And wonder if I have grown taller
 Or she is getting shorter.

I'm no longer the youngest in my family.
As a cousin and auntie of many kids.
I smile and laugh,
Code-switching
Between Amoy and Cantonese.

Here
I'm back again.
I'm still part of the big tree.
 The only difference is
 I am a Hong Kong guest, too.

Alfanie Yeung

These Eyes: Thirteen Ways of Seeing

Mandy Chan Sze Man

To be is to be perceived.

-- George Berkeley

*** (February 3: It is a date to remember. Feb 3, 1783: America's War of Independence. Spain acknowledges America's independence. Feb 3, 1918: The New York Times begins to be published all over America. Feb 3, 1930: The Communist Party of Vietnam is born. Feb 3, 1959: This date is named "The Day the Music Died" as Buddy Holly, Ritchie Valens, and The Big Bopper are killed in a plane crash. Feb 3, 1966: The unmanned Soviet Luna 9 spacecraft makes the first landing on the moon.

Feb 3, 1984: Sophie comes into the world at St. Margaret's Hospital, Hong Kong.

Sophie thought she was going to be somebody great given her birthday of excellences, or at least that she would be able to attain the rank of Jeanne de Bourbon, wife of Charles V of France, or Felix Mendelssohn, the German composer, who both shared her birthday, or Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of the Western movable-type printing press, who died on the same day. Sophie knew her birthday made her destined for great things. But she did not know she had only a life of thirteen stanzas.) ***

I

The room is dimly lit. Sophie has been putting books into paper boxes for the whole morning. It is like she is performing a ritual or something—she hates the word "funeral"—as if she were putting the

corpses of these books into their paper coffins. She marks down the name of each book onto her notepad, and she laughs to herself that it is the monument of Wisdom. *À la recherche du temps perdu*, she whispers under her breath, flicks through some pages, and puts it into a box. Suddenly she feels a slight regret that she has not managed to finish the books.

The smell of decadence from the books pricks her nose. It has been a lot wetter these days since spring is coming. The humid weather often intensifies the smell of everything: her hair, the bed sheets, the greens outside the window, and the books in particular.

Sophie has been reading a lot these days. She has a tremendous fear, a sense of absolute fear of hollowness. She wants to grasp time and learn whatever she can before it is too late. She has been practicing the use of Braille, for example, the word Sophie. Her name. (A name she thought was a product of her own free will.) She touches the raised dots on the cover of the notepad, but she feels nothing. The touch of clusters of little beans is strange. The dots mean nothing to her. The thought of this gives her heart a heavy slap. She cannot imagine how Knowledge could come to her through these alien dots. She supposes it will take ten lifetimes to master the skills. Such stupid things. The camera to record the visual knowledge of the world is now malfunctioning. One day this camera of learning will cease to operate and nobody will be able to repair this incurable default. She fears she would die of starvation without foodstuffs for her brain. Her brain would dry, eat itself, and one day diminish to nothingness.

“So I see you’ve become scholarly these days,” Gloria laughed the other day when Sophie told her she was reading some philosophy.

Sophie has not told her what is happening to her eyes. Gloria is a best friend of Sophie’s, this is true, but somehow Sophie thinks Gloria

is just too lucky to be able to understand what it really means to lose one's eyesight. Sophie does not believe in the word Empathy. Who says there is a human capacity for really feeling pain that one does not have? Big lies.

Sophie comes to realize that her feelings towards Gloria have grown strange, too. There is some unknown anguish between them.

It was near dinnertime another day when the telephone rang.

"Hello?"

"It's me."

Of course it was Gloria.

Nobody else would call Sophie's home when her mobile phone is off.

"What are you doing right now? Wanna come out and have a drink?"

"Sorry I can't," Sophie refused, "I've got things to do."

"What things?"

"*Many* things."

There was silence on the phone. Between them.

"Alright," Gloria said, "Call you later."

Then she hung up.

In fact, Sophie went to bed straight after dinner that night. She did not have a thing to do. She lied.

*** (Do not mistake me. I am not saying that Sophie does not need Gloria. It is just like playing the Trust Your Friend Game where you were asked to close your eyes, relax, and fall straight back into your friend's arms. They say your friend right at your back is ready to grab you. They say you will be fine. You should know you will be fine too. But why do you still hesitate?)

Oh, right. I forget to tell you I am not a third-person omniscient

kind of narrator. Let's take a break here then as we still have some stanzas to go. I am *Alberto*.¹ I am a male narrator; please note that. Forgive me if you have mistaken my voice for a girl's so far for I know how many times the reader may identify the omniscient narrator's voice with the writer's gender—Mandy's in this case. Anyway, I am sure you will only need half a minute or so to adjust my voice back to a male's. Maybe I already sound like a male to you by now. Ha ha ha. Well, I think I am a wiser sort of character because I know I am fake, unlike poor Sophie. It is too bad that our plots do not have a meeting point. Anyway, I will try my best to tell the story from her point of view, not mine. This story is about her thirteen stanzas. She has spent the very first stanza of her burning life by now. I may find some time to talk to you later, and I promise to make good annotations to this work. Ciao!) ***

II

As Sophie proceeds with packing the books, a photograph slips off from Ishiguro's *Remains of the Day*. It is a photograph of her and her mother at the beach. Sophie remembers it was summertime too when they took this picture, some years ago. She realizes that her mother had less grey hair then. Sophie looks at the photograph for a long while, trying to carve the image into her memory, as if she is meditating over it and paying some silent tribute to her forgone past.

Sophie closes her eyes and tries to recall her mother's face and generate an image of her mother with her Mind's Eye, as people call it. But then she is confused. She feels defeated and ashamed when she comes to realize that she fails to do this exercise of recalling the faces of those beloved and familiar persons in her life. She cannot tell whether the mole on Mother's face is on her left or right cheek. She cannot tell whether she has earlobes. She cannot even tell how tall or

1 He is the character in Jostein Gaarder's novel *Sophie's World* who helps Sophie realize in the end that she is but a fictional character in a book—a birthday gift the writer's writing for his daughter Hilde. Hilde, in turn, is the mysterious target Sophie has been finding throughout the story until near the end she realizes what is really happening.

how heavy she is. These are simple facts, she thinks, if only she had tried to pay some attention and to care.

Sophie thinks it is just so horrible to live in complete darkness with unrecognizable faces of her loved ones. One day these faces will blur and fade out into shards of ghostly shapes. One day they will become only names. And eventually one day, she is afraid, she will find herself having cleanly forgotten people who once meant a lot to her, and that, at worst, she will find they do not matter anymore.

III

People often say “seeing is believing.” Sophie suddenly comes to think, the fact that her reason can tell her that what cannot be seen does not disappear is a learned idea, just as a child can only tell that his favourite toy car is still behind a cardboard box when he is fairly grown-up.

She then wonders what will happen when she cannot see. She thinks, ‘Does it mean that I can no longer trust anything around me? Or, can I even trust myself when the world around me disappears from my very own eyes?’ Say, she thinks, it would be so scary to know that you were unreal. Say, she thinks, what a nightmare it would be if she were just a character on a page, merely words of ink.

‘Perhaps I can imagine myself to be some characters of any kind,’ Sophie thinks, ‘Say, I can participate in the story of *The Wizard of Oz*.’

She wishes she had friends like the Lion without nerve, the Scarecrow without a brain, and the Tin Man without a heart, and then she would make a perfect Dorothy without her eyes. They would go on an adventure in search of various invaluable things in the world. Courage. Wisdom. Love. And the Ability to See the World.

She can let Gloria be Toto. They will fight against the Witch of

the West and take over her magical powers. She will transform Gloria back into her human body—which is a nice body—and they will be good friends ever after.

“You’re crazy.” Gloria darted Sophie a slightly angry look when she told her this crazy dream she had one day. Sophie thought perhaps Gloria enjoyed the story except the bit where she had to play Toto. Gloria often says dreams are nonsense and one should not take them too seriously.

“I do not take dreams *too* seriously,” Sophie said.

“You do,” Gloria said. Sophie kept silent. Sophie knew Gloria always had to win the argument.

Sophie was glad she did not tell Gloria that the other night she had another dream, a more bizarre one. She dreamt that she performed darts in the circus, with her eyes blind-folded.

I thrust out the fatal dart towards you. But there are things beyond my control. I hope you will be fine.

IV

Gloria was asleep on the bus and Sophie was looking out of the window. Things went past them like they were on a carousel. The only difference was Sophie could not see them again the next moment. They were left far, far behind.

“If only you could see what I see,” Sophie whispered to her.²

V

One of the advantages of going blind, Sophie thinks, is that she will not betray herself. People will no longer be able to tell whether she is lying from the contraction of the iris. The window to her soul will then be closed. She will be safe with her feelings *inside*.

*** (I am ashamed when I see Sophie thinks of this. She does not know narrators are like paparazzi, trying every second to expose

2 This is another allusion to the ending phrase of Ridley Scott’s film *Blade Runner*, where the engineered humanoid Roy Batty concludes his miserable life with these words.

the characters—from their everyday lives to their most secret mental activities. Or worse, I feel like narrators are parasitic on the characters they narrate, squeezing and sucking every last bit of their characters' thoughts and emotions for the indulgence of the reader's appetite. Sophie does not know that she is being betrayed.)***

VI

A moth flies through the window and lands on Sophie's ceiling lamp. She stops fetching the second stack of books. Instead she watches the moth for a while.

Moths are one of the weirdest creatures in the world, she thinks. They are willing to spend their life in the glorious pursuit of the precious light. It is more than merely a biological drive. It is the inherited wisdom ever since the Big Bang: Light is Life.

Her imagination starts to wander wildly and she wonders what kind of worlds she would see if she had the eyes of a microscope.

"Then I would see through the desks—the fibres, the atoms—and my hands—the tissues, the blood vessels, the cells—and you," Sophie said to Gloria once when they were in Form Three. They were in a biology lesson and they had just dissected the eye of an ox and examined it under the microscope.

"Concentrate!" The teacher warned them to shut up when he walked past.

Sophie saw that Gloria was about to say something before this. Gloria did not say it then. But Sophie knew what Gloria wanted to say.

You say you will escape my gaze. You say you do not want to let me see through you. You say you are scared that I may discover, if I do so, that you are indeed empty inside.

VII

As Sophie moves a stack of books to reveal a line of ants, she sees an ant which has accidentally left its crowd creeping anxiously along the floor. Their worldview is only two-dimensional.

Gloria is always proud that she has the perfect 20/20 eyesight of a pilot.

Sophie says then she will have the superhuman eyesight of an astronaut—seeing from outer space. I have seen a satellite picture of Earth. The areas with a high density of bright dots of light are those countries which are perceived to be developed and free. The image is made funniest when it comes to the distinction between North Korea and South Korea. Light is Freedom.

“Let me extricate North Korea,” Sophie will say.

Let me extricate you from the darkness of despair.

But Sophie is afraid she should not stay long in outer space. She will be sucked into the immense darkness of the black holes. She does not want to be another Lamplighter.³ All lights of life will be absorbed, assimilated, and eventually vanish.

VIII

It shocked Sophie for days when she and Gloria went to see *The Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Chapel ceiling three years ago, as she remembers it. Vatican City, a place so close to heaven and to God.

“Adam looks handsome,” said Gloria, “and look at his muscles.”

“And the touch,” Sophie nodded. “Isn’t it as moving as the touch in *E.T.*?”

“Did God really create Adam by breathing into him Life?”

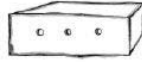
“He is God. He can do anything.”

“But somehow he does not look like my god,” smiled Gloria. “I mean, *our* god. Don’t you think?”

³ From Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s novel *Le Petit Prince*. In the novel the Lamplighter, alone on an asteroid, is dutiful to his job of lighting the only lamp there every minute—rather meaningless indeed.

“Maybe there’s someone else who is above us, watching us.”

IX



4

X

“You do not just have ten pages to live.”

Yesterday when Sophie was going home with her new clothes, she nearly knocked down a blind old woman onto the street. Sophie apologized and bent to give the stick back to the old woman.

“Why hurry?” said the old woman, “You do not just have ten pages to live.”

Sophie thought for a second. What a strange metaphor that was. She concluded that the old woman was a weird person.

XI

“You look as if you are dying,” said Gloria, nudging Sophie’s arm at the cinema. “Open your eyes. It’s the best bit.” This was followed by a shrill scream from the screen.

How many times had Sophie shut her eyes tight at horror movies? She always thought that when she opened her eyes again, the images of nightmares would be gone. But every time she just saw the worst.

Now, the question is: Does Sophie dare to open her eyes and see what she does not want to see?

Perhaps one day Sophie will realize the complete nonexistence of her mother and Gloria, and begin an adventure in search of them. There would be no Lion, Tin Man, Scarecrow, or even Toto to keep her company.

Remember what the Fox says to the Little Prince?

On ne voit bien qu’avec le cœur, l’essentiel est invisible pour les

4 From Antoine de Saint-Exupéry’s novel *Le Petit Prince*. In the novel the Little Prince asks the pilot narrator to draw him a sheep. Several pictures fail to satisfy the Little Prince and at last this box, where the Little Prince imagines a little lamb is living, becomes a most significant message of the novel: the paradox of Seeing/ Not Seeing, and the power of Imagination.

yeux.⁵

XII

By late afternoon Sophie has finished the list of books and started to make a voice record on a cassette recorder. *Gone with the Wind*. *The Art of Travel*. *Hamlet*. *Romeo and Juliet*. *Henry IV* (she has three books of Shakespeare's left, two others have been lent out). *Remains of the Day*. *The Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*.⁶

Then her voice gets a little shaky as she starts to sob. She cannot help her tears and her voice. She switches off the recorder and has a cry. A very, very good cry. Her heart has been like a rain cloud these days, grey, heavy, absorbing and accumulating the negative energy of the world, floating alone over the sky in search of a place to stop, discharge her tears, and disintegrate.

And to her surprise, Sophie's cry echoes in the room and becomes the sound of hollowness, of absolute loneliness, as if she were the only person in the world, and her world were nothing but this room, these books, and herself. She has finally come to *the* realization. *Her* realization, in both senses: Sophie has realized—understood something is wrong with her sense of existence; Sophie has realized—completed herself in the course of twelve stanzas. She has strived to make herself real.

XIII

If Gloria were here and they found a page of a poetry collection by chance, a piece like this, then this would be the very last conversation between Gloria and Sophie:

If a pig can devour thirty miles of green grass,
 please reserve a flower for me. If
 the universe revolves around the earth, please
 make me the centre of this revolution; If

5 "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly; what is essential is invisible to the eye." From Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novel *Le Petit Prince*. Later the Little Prince vanishes on Earth (dies), although he is said to have returned to his B-612 asteroid.

6 *The Hard-boiled Wonderland and the End of the World* is a novel written by Haruki Murakami, which is about the clash of the fictional dystopian world and reality.

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.⁷

“Who wrote this? This is a silly poem,” said Gloria, “A pig can never devour thirty miles of *anything*.”

“It is called Metaphor,” Sophie said.

“Then Metaphors are all fakeries for real things, aren’t they?” Gloria giggled at her own joke. “Well, and that’s why they can only happen in fiction. Like they can’t happen to *us*.”

“Maybe you and I are metaphors, too.”

“Yeah right. Metaphors. Of what then?”

“Of anything, if only you will it to,” smiled Sophie, closing the very last book, *Sophie’s World*.

I bet she knew it.

P. S. How much I want to let you know that I exist because you are reading me. *I speak, therefore I am*.⁸ I am but a voice in your head. I am so glad you have the patience to hear me speak; I hope I have been a good narrator.

So long—Our author-god has forsaken us. It is finished.⁹

7 This is a piece of a poem Mandy wrote for Creative Writing class in her first year.

8 Descartes’s most famous statement: “I think, therefore I am.” In his philosophy he thinks that the world we live in can be a set of tricks by an evil demon and that the world and everything may indeed be deception and nothing. We only really exist when we doubt.

9 An allusion to what Jesus says when he dies on the Cross: “My God! My God! Why hath thou forsaken me?”, and “It is finished.” Jesus is made human and returns to the heavens when his mission is finished. The concept of “author-god” is from the famous French literary critic Roland Barthes.

London Eye

A Ferris Wheel stands next to the Thames,
An eye with the 21st century design.
Countless glass-made capsules are rolling in the sky.
Man-made air bubbles form, and rise to the sky.

Panoramic view enters my vision.
Enlarging and then reducing, conquering my mind,
Big Ben becomes Small Ben.
River Thames is now like a noodle in my eye.
I hear no more the quarrel from the Parliament.
The toy like Westminster Pier brings me only the excitement.
Toy ships are sailing under my feet,
I am now too big to sit on those seats.

I rise and rise like floating in the sky.
Ancient and modern, natural and man-made,
Architectures and landscapes weave contrast under the sky
Time is so limited to read through this three-dimensional map.
Transparent, my air bubble;
Standing at the center, I am now the London eye,
Inspecting the city from the sky.

Take a snap shot before the end of the ride.
Smile at it and a setting sun will be added to your eye.
Thirteen pounds is the price,
But nothing can resist the enchantment of the ride.

Michael Lau

The Moon's Tears

Pamela Cheung

A lot of Chinese love the full moon. They think that it symbolizes perfection and fullness. However, they have never realized its surface is full of holes and boils. It has witnessed billions of tragedies. It cries for millions of children. Its salty tears corrode its face, but it cannot stop crying. It is the only one able to feel their heartbeat; it is the only one able to know their true stories. It cried for Ah Bo, but it could not save her from tragedy...

Ah Bo stood in the circle, surrounded by five teachers. Their smiles caressed her. She grinned. She suddenly felt that she was loved.

“Ah Bo, you can choose your own mentor! You can only choose one,” the headmaster said.

Ah Bo scratched her head with her little fingers. She had an itch to hug them all. She walked around and around the circle. She had no idea what ‘mentor’ meant, but she was attracted to the pink cotton trousers and so she stopped in front of the pink legs.

A lot of kindergartens worked in that way in the housing estates. Once the headmaster was familiar with the neighbors, he would give them this kind of benefit—their children could choose their own mentor. However, how could a three-year-old child make a good choice through sheer intuition?

Ah Bo tried her best to lift up her head and see what her mentor looked like. Her mentor, Miss Shek, was very tall in Ah Bo’s eyes. Although Miss Shek lowered her head, Ah Bo could not see her face clearly. Miss Shek turned her collar up so when she bent her head, her chin and mouth hid behind it. Ah Bo could only see two cashews looking at her. She loved the two genial eyes and the pink legs. She used

her little face to feel the softness of the trousers. They were pink! Her favourite colour! This scene suddenly reminded her of something...

“Thank you, Mummy! I hadn’t even considered getting such a nice bag as this! It must be very expensive,” Ah Yin said.

Ah Bo was enthralled by the happy voice coming from the bedroom. She ran over there quickly and stood at the doorway. She saw her mother giving the lovely bag to her sister. It was pink! She wondered if her mother had mixed them up: it was she who liked pink, not her sister!

“Mummy, I—” said Ah Bo.

“Shh!!! I will talk to you later. Don’t disturb your sister,” said Mrs. Chin and bent her brows.

Ah Bo saw her mother stroking her sister’s back, and said, “It’s nothing to get excited about. Take care!” They were so happy that their eyes curved into four cashews, or crescents. The dimples on their cheeks were clearly visible now. They were almost the same.

Mrs. Chin took out the ointment and gently smoothed some onto Ah Yin’s skin as usual. Her tender hands rubbed Ah Yin’s neck, the nape of her neck and her shoulders. Ah Yin skillfully turned her neck around and let Mrs. Chin give her a relaxing massage.

Ah Bo stood there and saw how her mother took care of her sister, how her tender hands swam on her sister’s skin. Ah Bo used her little fingers to feel the dimples on her own cheeks. It seemed that she was afraid her dimples had disappeared, as she had not smiled happily for a long time. She suddenly felt a pain in her heart, as if it was being clawed by sharp crescents, and she screamed, “NO! STOP! PLEASE STOPPPPP!”

“NO! STOP! PLEASE STOPPPPP!” Ah Bo screamed and gripped Miss Shek’s kneecap. Miss Shek seemed hurt by these little fingers.

She winked at the other teachers to show that she needed help. Ten fingernails grasped Ah Bo firmly and pulled her away from Miss Shek. She was brought back from the awful experience. She was frozen and stood gaping at Miss Shek.

“Are you OK? I am Miss Shek. From now on, I will take care of you. Don’t worry, baby,” said Miss Shek. She squatted down and stroked Ah Bo’s back. Ah Bo noticed that her image appeared in Miss Shek’s eyes. She smiled. It seemed that she could find someone to love her, completely, and only she could appear in Miss Shek’s eyes. Her sister was not there!

Ah Yin was born with a serious illness. She had asthma. Mrs. Chin felt sorry about this; she thought her bad genes had brought about this illness. She wanted to give her all she had to compensate for the loss of Ah Yin’s health. Ah Bo was too young to understand the truth. She continuously wondered if she was naughty and if that was why her mother ignored her.

In the following year, Ah Bo was happy with her school life. She was tidy, smart and obedient. She got a lot of attention from Miss Shek and was chosen to be the class monitress. When this happened, she knew that she was not naughty. Although Mrs. Chin still seemed partial to Ah Yin, Ah Bo felt better. The full moon did not cry for Ah Bo for a year, but it was afraid that the tears might only be reluctant to part with the holes and boils and would come back one day.

Perhaps Ah Bo loved Miss Shek very much; once the class made Miss Shek angry, Ah Bo would try to reassure her. However, a five-year-old girl was still too young to know a grown-up’s feelings. Her innocence could only stir up trouble for her. After Ah Bo’s fifth birthday, she did something which she regretted for many years...

“Why couldn’t you tell the headmaster which song we were

singing just now? I told you to remember the name of the song! OK... NOBODY CAN LEAVE THE SCHOOL TODAY! This is a punishment!” said Miss Shek sternly.

Miss Shek felt angry that her students could not answer the headmaster’s question. She was also afraid that she might give the headmaster a bad impression. She wanted to be a good teacher! Ah Bo saw Miss Shek’s face trembling, and she wanted to comfort her. She took a deep breath, got out of her seat and moved slowly towards Miss Shek. Her neighbors gave her the thumbs up to encourage her.

“Miss Shek, we will remember it next time. Please forgive us! Please forgive us!” said Ah Bo. She repeated this line again and again. She wondered why Miss Shek gave no response, so she tried to hold her hands and swung them lightly.

“GET OUT!” said Miss Shek.

Ah Bo had not thought that Miss Shek would speak to her in such a ruthless way. She was frightened. She looked back at her classmates to see if her friends could give her some direction or and advice. Some of them still gave her the thumbs up; some of them used their forefingers to point at Miss Shek stealthily. She knew that she could try once more.

“Miss Shek, we—”

“SHUT UP! Haven’t you heard what I said? GET OUT!” said Miss Shek. It seemed that a good idea had suddenly come into her mind, for she looked at Ah Bo and said, “OK... you want to leave after school, right?”

Ah Bo nodded her head. Although Miss Shek still looked angry, Ah Bo suddenly thought that she had some hope. She looked at Miss Shek with her watery eyes and waited for her merciful response. She believed her innocence could move Miss Shek’s heart.

“Now listen! Only if you take off all your clothes are you able to leave after school. Otherwise, go back to your own seat and keep quiet!” said Miss Shek. She crossed her arms in front of her chest and sat on the teacher’s desk. She seemed satisfied with her offer and smiled queerly. She believed that she could intimidate Ah Bo and drive her away. However, she did not realize how simple and obedient a child could be.

Ah Bo’s face turned pale; her limbs went cold. She unbuttoned her school uniform with her little shaky fingers. Unbuttoning the school uniform was a difficult task for her. As the buttons were at the back, her hands were not long enough to touch them. She remembered that her mother helped her to unbutton her uniform every day. This had been the sweetest moment at home...

“Your back is all wet! Eeee.....your uniform is sticky! Dirty pig!” said Mrs. Chin. She gave Ah Bo a pat on her head. Ah Bo gave her mother a light smile. Ah Bo enjoyed that pat every day. She wanted to feel her mother’s touch. However, she had never thought that she would unbutton the school uniform with the help of another person. The classmate sitting next to Ah Bo helped her to unbutton the school uniform. She did not know why she would not want to be as naked as the day she was born. She took off all her clothes except her little pants.

Miss Shek opened her eyes widely. Her face was frozen. She was shocked. She was as frightened as Ah Bo. She jumped up from the teacher’s desk and walked toward Ah Bo. She regretted that she had asked Ah Bo to do such thing. She wanted to save the poor situation. However, it was too late. The clouds in the sky moved away; the full moon was still clearly visible under sunlight. The moon’s tears were ready to splash out.

Ah Bo saw Miss Shek approaching her. She was scared. She ran out of the classroom immediately. She wanted to seek help. The terrified Miss Shek could do nothing except chase after her. “Keep calm! Don’t get flustered!” shouted Miss Shek.

Ah Bo ran along the corridor. She had not realized before that her legs were so strong. Each footstep was firm, steady and heavy. The sound, “BUM, BUM, BUM” was heard. She could no longer distinguish this sound from her own heartbeat. Both of them were loud and deep and could shake the universe.

All the other teachers came out from their classrooms. The headmaster ran out from the staff room too. They were shocked. Ah Bo knew that the only thing she could do was to escape! She would dig a hole and hide herself in it if she could. She ran into a washroom. The floor was slippery. She finally slipped and fell down on the floor.

About five teachers rushed into the washroom. They all stood at the doorway, so Ah Bo could not escape. The washroom was so quiet that she could hear every word the teachers said. Once she heard Miss Shek’s conversation, her heart was broken.

“She is a very naughty girl in my class. She easily gets into a temper. I don’t know why, but she suddenly went out of control and took off all her clothes and ran out of the classroom,” Miss Shek told the headmaster. Ah Bo could not defend herself. It seemed that a lump suddenly rose in her throat. She could say nothing. The only noise she could make was wailing. She started to cry loudly.

“She is out of control! Does she have any mental problems? We’d better lock her up until school ends,” said the headmaster. Ah Bo was locked in the washroom. She heard the footsteps move further and further away from her but she still could not stop crying. She found that her naked body was dirty. The filthy water on the floor stained her

skin. She wanted to rub it all away. She used her little hands to rub her skin. This suddenly made her remember how her mother gave her sister a relaxing massage. She hoped that her mother was there.

The school ended as usual, and no classmate in Ah Bo's class was punished. All of them could go home happily. Ah Bo was finally released by the school janitor. She then went into the classroom, put on her clothes and waited for her mother. No classmate dared to talk to her. Ah Bo received only pitying looks from her classmates.

When Mrs. Chin entered the classroom, Ah Bo quickly ran out of her seat and reached out toward her mother. Ah Bo seemed very frightened and her cheeks were wet with tears. Miss Shek was an extremely smart teacher! She told Mrs. Chin what had happened before she even asked. Surely, she would not tell her the truth. She told her what she had told the headmaster.

Mrs. Chin felt very angry. Although Ah Bo shook her head fiercely, Mrs. Chin did not give her any chance to explain. She forced Ah Bo to say sorry to Miss Shek. A child is helpless—if nobody supports her, she can only surrender.

Ah Bo finally spoke three words in tears.

“Sorry, Miss Shek.”

After Ah Bo got home, she was seriously beaten by her mother. The feather duster hurt her so much that her skin was all red and hot. She looked at the wound which her mother gave her; she did not understand why she was so different from her sister. Ah Bo knew that only her own hands could give herself a tender massage. She should not depend on anyone.

After dinner, Mrs. Chin took out a new set of colored pencils and gave it to Ah Bo. She told Ah Bo that she had bought it for her after she went to school that morning. Ah Bo looked at her mother with

tearful eyes.

“Ah Bo, don’t be naughty next time. Take this set of colored pencils and draw an ‘I’m sorry’ card for Miss Shek,” said Mrs. Chin.

Ah Bo had not thought that she needed to pay for the color pencils. She picked up the pencil obediently and followed her mother’s instructions. She outlined the naked body of a girl on the cover of the card with her trembling hands, and her eyes burnt with anguish and despair.

The full moon knew the truth, but it did not know when it could stop crying for Ah Bo. It hoped that Ah Bo would grow up as soon as possible.

Star Ferry Pier: It's Never Gone

Yan Fung Ka Yan

“Hello.”

“I miss you dearly. You haven't called for a week. Busy?”

“Yea... I miss you too. But I'm quite occupied by exams. You know, the end of the term is coming and I want to... (yawning)”

“You must be very tired...”

“Kind of. The thesis will take a couple more nights, I think. Oh what time is it now?”

“Around twelve-thirty in the afternoon here so it's midnight over your side. Don't overdo it. I am really worried...”

“So I've got eight more hours to work on it before class starts again. But... (yawning) I think I have to grab some time to sleep... do you have anything special to talk to me about?”

“Nothing but ju...”

“Hmm, then goodnight my dear.”

“...st wanted to ask...”

“*doo-doo, doo-doo, doo-doo...*”

“...if you have read the news about Hong Kong recently.” Though Claudia was expecting a familiar human voice to soothe and enliven her, the earphone just responded with a series of monotonous tones. The sounds, plain and repetitious, just resembled that which was emitted from an electrocardiograph connected to the dead. The telephone had stuck her left hand and left ear together. She just could not hang it up. At last she finished her utterance, “Goodbye and I love you.”

Claudia turned to her photo albums, which occupied two entire

shelves in the dining room. She picked out the one placed at the top left corner. It was decorated with a fine shot of one-year-old Claudia blowing candles on the front cover. Underneath she had written “My First Birthday Celebration with Dad and Mum” in artistic fonts. The forty-three photo albums were all well-tailored with paper accessories, drawings and writings done by her magic hands. They were like uniquely dressed models parading in a neat order exhibiting Claudia’s beauty in different stages of her life.

“...welcome to the TVB Afternoon News. The government has announced a plan to demolish the Star Ferry Pier in favour of better urban development projects. The whole Central Reclamation Project will be undertaken in a timely fashion according to the Secretary for Housing, Planning and Lands, Michael Suen Ming-yeung. Heritage concern groups have been protesting against...”

This time, Claudia was more peaceful than before. She kept on reminiscing about the happy memories collected in her photo albums. When she had first heard about it, she just could not help burying her face in the pillow while a sob welled up in her throat.

“I think people are just being too emotional about the pier. Don’t you think so?” Lying prone on the couch with her slender legs waving in the air, Beryl displayed a leisurely grace that was seldom seen. Instead of poring over heaps of legal documents as usual, she was just enjoying Jessica Magazine, whose readership enjoyed a comparable popularity to her own among the gentlemen who hung around her. She drew a handful of cookies from a bag and began to chew them, piece by piece, with her cherry lips. The cookies were desperately sliding into her mouth, just as other professional men were always craving for her love. Rational as she was, she resisted all the honeybees and lived her own life.

“No. The Star Ferry Pier is one of our landmarks. It is also a symbol of the collective memories of Hong Kong people.” Claudia gently wiped off the thin layer of dust covering her latest photo album with a cloth.

“But the government is just improving the city’s infrastructure to facilitate transport in Hong Kong. Sometimes we have to be a bit more reasonable. The pier has to be pulled down if it hinders social development, right?”

“It’s unfair for our heritage to be sacrificed for urbanization. Our old Kowloon Station and Victoria Prison have already been victims. We should preserve the pier before we lose even more precious memories. We all have emotional ties to this historical building. We shouldn’t let go of the past anymore...”

The photo album slipped off her hands and fell open. A collection of photos dated “13 07 2004” floated in her eyes. These the last collection of photos Claudia had taken in Tsim Sha Tsui and ever since then, her digital camera had been left idle.

The two overjoyed faces appearing in every photo caught her gaze. In one of the shots, their heads were leaning against each other and their necks were wrapped up with the same scarf, which Claudia had spent day and night knitting. They were holding two cups whose rising steam misted his glasses. Sniffing the photo, Claudia seemed to smell the creamy fragrance of the two hot chocolates and she was brought back to that special day again.

“Do you know why you would only rank second if there were a list of The World’s Happiest?” He seized one end of the knitted scarf and looked into Claudia’s croissant-like eyes. She was still chuckling over his funny responses when she had surrounded him secretly from his

back with the blue-and-white-striped scarf she had knitted for him.

Claudia shook her head.

“Because you make me feel that I am the most blessed one. I do wish that you could celebrate the rest of my birthdays with me...are you willing to do so?”

“So are you proposing to me on this ferry? With no flowers and no diamond ring?” Claudia looked at him with a mischievous smile. She was not going to reject him anyway.

He extended his arms and grabbed Claudia into his embrace.

“You know what, the Star Ferry Pier is an important symbol for my grandparents. They got married in 1958 when the pier was established. It was like a guardian angel blessing their happy marriage for so many years.”

The affable faces of his grandparents floated in Claudia’s mind. Their welcoming smiles always made her felt at home. Time had silvered their hair and wrinkles had lined their faces. Yet, they would still go to the wet market hand in hand to chat with the vendors and to o their grocery shopping every day. Next year they would be celebrating their 49th wedding anniversary. His Grandmum had already requested that the banquet entrance be decorated with silver balloons. They were really a sweet pair.

“It blesses not only your grandparents, but also your Dad and Mum.” Claudia was so envious of his parents who could organize a warm family and raise this charismatic and ambitious son. They also loved her generously as if she was also their kid. Claudia was always thankful to have these people who filled her wounded heart with the parental love that she had been deprived of. The few photos taken with her parents were her only spiritual food to feed her esteem. She knew she had also had her own blessed family—before her parents had gone

forever in a car crash when she was three.

“The Star Ferry Pier will soon carry special meaning for me too because it will be the witness of our engagement one day. Believe me, we will continue their blissful legends.” He gently kissed her cheek and seeded a sweet promise.

Claudia became a tender blossom enveloped in the warmth of his body. She could smell his cologne, a faint one which was being blown away by the wind from sea, yet it was so comforting. She closed her eyes and wished that she could sleep in his hug forever in this way. She whispered, “Yes, we will.”

“Hey do you want some?”

Passing her the half-emptied bag of cookies, Beryl awoke her to reality. When she was going to place the photo album back onto the shelf, she felt as if she was using every muscle to close the album. The irresistible power of memory was acting against her; she was defeated as a loser in the present.

Claudia looked at the silver ring on her index finger. Perhaps she should have removed it two years ago but she still had faith in their relationship. It symbolized the firmness of their six-year love.

“He is still in love with me. We are going to get this through because God is just testing our patience and forgiveness in love. One day, he’ll actualize our dream beside the Star Ferry Pier... yes, he will.”

She retreated back to the bedroom. The teddy bear dressed in a gown was sitting on her bed to remind her how he had celebrated graduation with her. When she tidied up the mess on her desk, she discovered the photo frame they picked together at Christmas and the mp3 player he bought her as her twenty-first birthday present. Claudia felt mentally exhausted. She lay down on bed and grabbed a cushion.

Some words were knitted on its surface with colorful threads: Claudia, our bond is everlasting.

Claudia retreated to her desk and began typing in her private diary:

8th Nov, 2006 - Cloudy

I am frosted

If our happy memories have already penetrated into every bit of my life, how can I ever evade them?

It has been two years since you received the offer of the master degree from the University of Chicago, since you said that we should be parted for some time so that we can fight for the future.

You booked a flight.

You packed two pieces of luggage.

You flew to Chicago.

Where was I ranked in your heart?

If I were you, I would not just bury my head into my studies and neglect the one I love; if I were you, I would give a call to my dear, at least once a week, to share with her the details of my life staying with the Americans, to describe to her the beauty of the dusk in Chicago, to please her by telling her that the Chinese dishes she cooks are the best of all and to say “I love you” before hanging up; if I were you, I would make her feel at ease about our temporary separation and plan ahead for our future. But I could never be you and you could never understand how I feel in this chilling period.

The Star Ferry Pier will be demolished in a week. My heart aches when I try to convince myself that it should be the ever-standing witness for the thousands of young couples who have exchanged rings and kisses in front of Cultural Square, including you, who showed up with a bunch of tulips and knelt down asking, “Will you marry me?”

Claudia clicked the “Save Now” button and this inner voice was jailed forever in a cold computer. She clicked another gmail icon and started:

Dear,

Do you remember the photos we took on the Star Ferry on your birthday? They are pieces of evidence to remind me how happy we were. You once said I have a photogenic face, but I haven't got any shots since you left. I'm waiting for you to be my photographer again. The pier is fading away, but I still remember it as the birthplace of a promise that holds between us.

Still, best of luck on your thesis paper.

Claudia

The screen appeared with “your message has been sent”. To her, it meant more than an ordinary email; she had sent her only hope.

“I know he will come.” Intuition is women's best tool.

Following the tide of news reports and public opinions, 12th November, 2007 eventually came. Walking towards the Star Ferry Pier, which was flooded with people, Claudia became a piece of tiny sand in the crowd. That day, most passers-by had three eyes with them—they were using the extra one to snap, snap and snap. The whole area became a landmine, detonated by the flashes emitted from the eyes. No farther apart, some painters peeped their heads out from behind wooden painting stands, took a look at the pier and buried themselves in the world of art again. Innocent children did not realize that a lamentable moment was about to arrive. They darted across the Avenue of Stars, bouncing and laughing. Some were matching their hands with the imprints of Jackie Chan and Andy Lau, grinning widely to expose a gap from two missing teeth.

Everybody seemed to be enjoying companionship except Claudia.

She managed to find a partner in this unfamiliar world. Leaning against its stiff and shiny black body, Claudia raised her head to see its dimly-lit face. That lamp-post was not going to be lonely. It had Claudia and the dancing dust to stay with, perhaps for some time.

“Defend the Star Ferry Pier! Defend the Star Ferry Pier!”

Suddenly vigorous shouts raised the tension in the atmosphere and the children were frightened and hid behind their parents. A flock of people who had yellow ribbons tied on their foreheads were storming the construction site around the Star Ferry Pier. Some were confronting the policemen who blocked them from putting up protest banners.

“Get out of here! You numb guys! You know what preservation means? Were you born when the pier was serving us in the 60s? What future development! Can’t the stupid government build the flyover somewhere else? We are here and you can’t pull it down!”

The man who spoke was probably the head of the protest group. Sweat was running down his face and his glasses had slipped to the tip of his nose. The people behind him cheered when he shouted at the policemen.

The noises were piercing. The arguments, the shouts, the live broadcast, the bawls and the collapse of the metallic railings were all exploding in the area. Would someone help settle the mess? A tranquil and consoling voice suddenly emerged. It swayed in the air to cool the boiling temperature at the scene. Standing apart from the mess, Claudia heard it. It was the Star Ferry Pier.

“Don’t shed a tear for me, my Hong Kong friends. After forty eight years of dedication, I’m just so old that I have to retire. Don’t ever think that I am leaving you because we will never be parted. Remember me as your everyday traveling companion who protected you from the storm and the sun and honour me as another of your parents who

witnessed your growth. I am happy that I have been walking every step with your grandparents in their lifetime and sharing a season with your newborns. Thanks for coming to show me your love and respect to our memories, indeed. My friends, if I am a red rose in late bloom, come and celebrate my beauty and then bid me goodbye with your smiling faces. There is no need to cry because a better future is awaiting you. Promise me that you will thrive with Hong Kong and let me wipe off your tears before I go...”

“*Ding...*”

The last ring sounded and the Star Ferry Pier was engulfed by complete darkness.

The Gold Goddess Statue sighed.

The Clock Tower mourned.

The Victoria Harbor wailed.

It started to rain and the crowd gradually dispersed. Claudia's partner's head drooped in despair. The truthful dedication had only been an exchange for a broken heart, and she wished she had never learnt how to love.

The rain poured down heartlessly. Claudia walked away aimlessly.

Just then she realized that a man was standing in the shadow of the Clock Tower. Looking at Claudia, he grabbed the handle of his piece of luggage and stepped out from the dark. A pair of Nike sneakers first appeared in her eyes. She remembered she had once bought a similar pair for her dear on St. Valentine's Day.

Then she saw them, the pair of rectangular glasses. Claudia paused and gazed at the face in front of her. Tears began to well up in her eyes. Everything was recognizable except the mustache. It mellowed him. He was the one, Vincent, her dream and her love.

“Claudia,” He uttered her name in such a serene tone that touched her heart. Surprise had choked her words. Claudia was motionless except for the tears running down her face.

“I just wanted to tell you on the phone that I managed to finish my semester earlier because I have to fight for something that is more important in life... and that’s you.” Vincent took a step forward and touched her face.

“But... the Star Ferry Pier...” Claudia embraced him in no time. She wept until her tears washed away his cologne. The blend of cedar, tangy citrus, cranberry and his sweat remained the same. It was his Tommy Hilfiger cologne spray, his masculine scent.

Vincent leaned his face down to hers and drew something out from his pocket. It was an exquisite silvery box wrapped with a shiny white ribbon.

He opened it and a sparkling diamond ring shone in the dark.

“Believe me. It’s never gone.”

1997

When the clock on the Victorian style pier
Struck twelve,
The sirens' blasted
Silence at last.

Here and there, darkness were engulfed
By the flash of cameras.
And many believed it was day time.

So everyone from four seas gathered to witness,
The ship returned and anchored
To where it departed.

Phoebe Mok

Chinese Checkers

Sharon Lee

Let's play!

A child in a yellow skirt was sitting at the dining table with a tiny piece of tissue in her hand. Her fingers were playing with some glittering marbles on a hexagonal-shaped paper board.

Some minutes ago, she was wandering in the apartment. Her head pointed down as if looking for something on the floor. There was nothing on the floor except those pieces of torn tissue. They were scattered all over the square yellow bricks.

BANG!

The sound must have come from the gate on the second floor, she thought. She lived on the fifth. It was about time. One.....two.... three.....she counted in her heart.

“Welcome back!” she rushed to the front door and pulled the door-handle.

There was nobody outside.

She walked slowly to her seat.

Ding-dong. Ding-dong. Ding-dong. The door bell rang.

The girl opened the door and a shadow blocked her sight.

“Oh, silly, how come you're so wet?” a sweet and soft voice uttered in a familiar Chinese dialect. “Where's your handkerchief? It's not in the bathroom.”

“I...I...I was just...” the girl said, “wa-i-t-ing for you to come back and.....I...was thinking...you...might break your promise,” her voice was shivering.

“Oh....my little girl,” the old lady said and at the same time, she used her handkerchief to wipe the tears on the girl's small face.

“Shall we?” The girl put her hand over the old lady’s one.

“Sure, just...give me a few more seconds. Let Granny handle all this stuff first. Okay?” The voice moved closer to the kitchen.

The girl smiled.

“Let’s play!” the grandmother said and trudged back from the kitchen. Then, they sat at the dining table.

That was granny and me in Xiamen almost fifteen years ago.

My grandmother was seventy years old when she came to visit us. Or, she told me it was to visit but I knew she had another mission. The round face, bushy and shiny hair, slender figure and the pair of big, watery eyes could no longer be found among granny’s features. I could see the streaks on her face. It was like they formed a map. On her nose, there was a pair of golden glasses. Granny was always my guardian angel.

Hugging was our usual practice. I seldom hugged Papa, Mama or my sisters. Yet, I loved to embrace Granny, especially when she walked out from the kitchen. Every time I hugged her, I felt her spongy body and smelt her sweat. I was always in the *full* arms of Granny. Whenever I was in her arms, she would repeat her speech:

“Little, you are too thin. Try to eat more. Try.....” This was not unfamiliar to me. Mama and Papa always complained about me and forced me to eat more. Whenever they started giving me a lecture, I would just run away. Granny released me from her arms. “You know? Food can give you energy and the nutrients in food help you grow,” Granny continued and I did not walk away. “Little, you know? Granny...” Granny sounded worried.

“Granny, Papa and Mama are so worried,” I interrupted and imitated Granny’s voice. I laughed and made an interesting face in which I tried to squeeze my nose, my eyes and my mouth to the middle.

“NO! It’s not funny. It’s no joke!” Granny frowned and attempted to raise her tone a bit as if this would make her speech more authoritative.

Yet, a moment later, Granny and I burst into laughter.

Laughter usually filled our room. Granny was one of the traditional Chinese women in my family. She spoke in a soft voice. When Granny moved, she would not make any noise. During the war, Granny did not have the chance to receive an education. Yet, she had something I was unable to learn from school.

Granny was an illiterate but she could read sutras. Once I asked Mama about this and she said she did not know how Granny learnt to read the Chinese characters. Sometimes I really thought Granny was an almighty Granny. And it was still an unsolved puzzle.

I spent my summers with granny in Xiamen until I was six. The age of six was a milestone for every child in my home, Hong Kong. I was about to enter primary school. Papa and Mama had to work. They asked Granny to come to Hong Kong to look after me. But Granny’s passport expired within a few months and then she had to renew it. Sometimes she was not allowed to renew and things would then turn topsy-turvy.

Granny did not know Cantonese. Hokkien was the language people commonly used in Xiamen. Granny knew Mandarin but Mandarin seldom played a role in our conversation. We spoke in Hokkien. Losing this language would mean a loss in our communication. Granny could not go to the wet market alone as she did not know how to communicate with the shop retailers. We were each other’s good helpers. Granny did not know Cantonese but she knew how to become a “super mama” in the wet market. And I would be the personal assistant when she went to the wet market and any other places.

Yet, I did once fail in my job and put the whole family in a panic.

Every day after going to the wet market, Granny would spend some time with me playing Chinese Checkers. I would choose the yellow marbles while granny would choose the black ones. When my sisters and mother joined us, we all left the black marbles for Granny. Black marbles were Granny's privilege. Granny had a cataract and could not recognize those light-coloured marbles. Sometimes I wondered how Granny knitted the sweaters for us. Playing Chinese Checkers was so much fun. There were two ways to play. One was to arrange the marbles in an inverted triangle and players had to get to the opposite competitor's home as quickly as possible. Another was to arrange all marbles in a hexagonal shape in the middle of the board. We called this one "eating ghost," to translate literally. I liked to play the former one. Granny was very good at playing Chinese Checkers. I always lost. Granny said it was just a game but it was also a game that we should play whole-heartedly. Granny also said something about life but I forgot or probably I just could not grasp her idea.

It was a usual sunny day. Granny and I sat on the floor and we played Chinese Checkers again.

"Granny, oh...too bad! I can't find any way out. What can I do? Will you show me?" I widened my eyes as large as I could. "Em...Let me think about it." I returned my sight to the board and used my right hand to hold my chin.

"Sometimes there are some ways other than just moving forward," Granny said to give me a hint. I knew she did not want to tell me everything. She wanted to help me but also wanted me to solve it on my own.

I leaned back and forth and then changed the hand that I held my

chin with. I stared at the board as if the marbles would tell me how to make my move. It took almost half an hour. Granny sat beside me and put her hand on my head.

“I see it! I can see it! Finally, I really see the move. Yeah! Ha ha...” I jumped from the chair and jumped around the apartment.

“See, you can finally make it. Little, let’s play one more game and then I’ve got to prepare dinner.” Granny looked at her watch.

I did not let Granny go. Granny looked at her watch again. When she could spare some time with me, she would not let me down. But things just could not always happen like this.

Finally, I really had to let her go.

Nothing was new to us but we enjoyed every moment we spent together. Every day Granny took me to school and we would go to the nearby wet market after school.

One day, Ah Leong, my classmate, told me that there was a new cake shop. I begged Granny to take me there. Granny did not want to disappoint me and promised to take me there on Friday after school. This was literally an unforgettable day for us.

Friday. My anticipated Sunny Friday. I did not follow the “back-home team,” in which we had to line up in two rows and follow the team leader to return home, because Granny promised to pick me up so we could go to the cake shop together. I asked Ah Leong how to get there and to draw me a map so that I still had something to refer to even if I forgot. After school, we took along the map and waited for the route number 12 bus at the bus stop. The weather forecast had said that there would be storms and heavy rain that Friday. Though I didn’t really believe in the Hong Kong Observatory, I had brought my umbrella because Mummy had asked me to.

The school bell rang.

I ran out the front gate of my school and saw Granny standing there. We followed the map and it took half an hour to get to the shop. I ordered a mango cheesecake and Granny had a cup of chrysanthemum tea. I forgot that Granny did not eat egg. Granny was a vegetarian. Anyway, we had a “delightful” afternoon. I finished the cake in ten minutes but we didn’t leave immediately after that. I kept on telling Granny every bit of the happenings at school. Granny looked at her watch and looked outside the window. The sky was veiled with a grey cloth.

“Little, a storm might come soon. Let’s go!” Granny finished the last mouthful of her tea.

“Sure,” my voice lowered a bit. “This time the Hong Kong Observatory didn’t lie.”

Granny smiled and paid the bill. Taking our belongings, we got ready to return home. Outside, the sky was covered by many black clouds. We hurried up.

Thump! Thump! Thump!

When we left the shop, we heard the sound of thunder. Walking faster and faster to the bus stop, I held Granny’s arm in mine. When we arrived at the bus stop, I saw that Granny’s shoulders were wet.

One minute. Five minutes. Ten minutes. Half an hour.

“Granny, do you think we’ve waited too long?” I had almost reached the limit of my patience.

“Little, don’t walk away, okay? Granny will go and see how frequently each bus comes. OK?” Granny spoke to me and then walked to the nearby notice board.

Granny used her fingers to push her glasses back to their original position. As she read through the lines on the board, Granny used her index finger to follow the words. Then, her eyes became two lines.

When she came back, she told me that according to the board, the bus should come every ten minutes. Yet we had been waiting three times that long.

“Granny, should we wait? Or just go? Em....but....? We...” I was nervous and hasty. I had no idea if there was any other bus we could take.

“Little, don’t worry,” Granny squeezed a smile. I knew she wanted to make me feel better or at least calmer. “Now, you stay here, OK? Granny will walk to the notice board again and see if we can take any other buses. Don’t worry.” Granny walked away.

I kept silent but I guessed my face replied.

“Remember what I taught you in the Chinese Checkers game? Sometimes things do not really go as planned. Try to be calm. Staying calm is the key to success. Granny needs....no....maybe it’s our show time. Let’s try to find an alternative route.” Granny put her hand on my shoulder and continued to give me comfort.

I accompanied Granny over to the notice board. There was no other alternative route. Oh....we lost the way! No...no...no...not really.

“Hey, Little...” Granny said as she turned her head.

I followed the direction to which Granny’s head was turned. Granny and I made eye contact and we couldn’t help laughing.

“See, there are always many possible ways to solve a problem,” Granny said.

“Yea, Granny. But, do you have a one-dollar coin?” I asked hastily.

Silence.

Granny didn’t reply. Some time later, Granny took a one-dollar coin from her pocket.

“Let me do it! Let me do it!” I took the one-dollar coin and ran to

the telephone booth.

“Ei...” Granny stretched out her hand but I was already making the phone call to Ah Leong. I made a gesture telling Granny to stay at the bus stop.

After hanging up the phone, I ran to Granny and told her that we could walk to the next bus stop and wait for a mini-bus there.

“Aiyo....Little, you got all wet. Oh....” Granny wanted to give her jacket to me but I didn’t let her do so.

“It’s okay, Granny. I just had a PE lesson this morning. Every time I exercise, I think I become a bit stronger. Ha ha....” I coughed.

We followed Ah Leong’s instructions. It took us almost an hour to walk to the next bus stop. Finally, we found the mini-bus.

This time, it took us almost an hour to get back home. That was double the original travel time.

When we opened the gate of our apartment, we saw that the front door was already open. Mummy had opened the door when she heard the sound of the gate. I looked at the clock opposite the door.

It was a quarter to eleven.

“What happened? Where did you go? Didn’t you just go to the cake shop? What happened? What Happened? What happened? You...” Mummy put her face in her hands.

“Mummy, I’m.....” I didn’t know what to say.

“Little, it’s okay. Let me explain. Take a bath first,” Granny smiled at me. I went to the bathroom and couldn’t hear what Granny told Mum.

That was how our adventure ended. That night we learned from the news report that there was a landslide which had blocked the way of route number 12.

That summer Granny had to return to Xiamen. Every summer after

that, I would visit Granny. Yet, there was one summer when I stayed in Hong Kong. I was in secondary two at that time. Mummy wanted to change my secondary school and we were busy preparing for the interviews. But the preparations did not help.

The twenty-first of July, 1997 is the day that I can not wipe from my memory. That day mummy accompanied me to the school. On the way, she received an urgent call. Granny had slipped on the floor. That afternoon, we bought the plane tickets. When we arrived, we went straight to the hospital.

A few days later, Granny was sent back to the apartment she lived and slept there peacefully. A very long sleep.

Granny's funeral and cremation were held a week later. After the funeral, my sisters and I helped pack Granny's belongings. In the wooden drawer next to Granny's bed, there were two mooncake boxes placed next to each other. I opened the left one, and it was filled with some sutras, Granny's bedtime reading. Then, I opened the right one. Inside, there were many white envelopes. I chose one among those stacks of envelopes and they didn't feel at all unfamiliar. The words looked childish. I read...and read....and read....

Dear my dearest and loveliest Granny,

How're you? Did you knit any clothes?

It's been quite a long time since we last met. I am longing for my summer holiday to come. Hahahaha.....I miss you so much, so so much.

Will you come to visit me in November? Remember? It's my birthday. Hahaha....^_____^We can play Chinese Checkers. Haha...You know? My sisters don't play with me. I'm really.....

I looked at those blue characters. Somehow they got larger and larger and everything blurred.

I left the room with my occupied hands and I went back to Hong Kong with my emptiness.

Since then, the Chinese Checkers board has become dusty.

Tattoo

The craving knife
Chisels a Jesus, book of genesis,
Creation of man and woman.

A mighty brush – finite fleece
Blossomed into flawless wings;
To brew a sacred hue in a manly world,
In pigments from nectar fountain unceasing.
Of the dome in Vatican city, shreds represent the entirety.
A tattoo in the wheel of time,
Delusion of trace, not even grinded sand,
Can rival the trellis of the Eden,
Or Eden itself.

David Law

Shadow

Ada Lam

“Yee¹, steamed pork and boiled veggies again?” Lyn complained.

Her mother fetched two bowls of rice from the kitchen. Around the little table sat Lyn, facing the television and her mother, Ying, beside her. Her mother frowned, “You know I hate the smell of kitchen smoke and grease! Add some oyster sauce to the veggies... if you want.”

Lyn could not remember how many times her mother had boiled the veggies until they turned yellowish. Her mother went to hang clothes every time while she cooked. She should not be blamed because she had so much work to do. The same scene occurred in Lyn’s family almost every week.

That night, Lyn’s mother had something special to tell her in order to break the silence at the dinner table. “Mei called me today and said that she would come to Hong Kong on Wednesday. Remember to be a good girl when you meet her!”

“Okay.” Lyn just hated her mother’s nagging.

“What’s so good about Australia that makes a daughter reluctant to come back until her father has died? It was 1975 when she left Hong Kong. We haven’t seen her for twenty two years!”

Lyn did not speak a word, for she knew that she should not comment on “adults’ affairs.” She glued her eyes to the television, swallowing down a big piece of tough steamed pork. In the following three days, she could not stop imagining what Aunt Mei looked like. The idea of an 18-year-old girl who ran away with a man ten years older than her was beyond imagination when Lyn first heard about her aunt’s story from her mother.

1 A sound Lyn made to show her dissatisfaction.

Lyn was surprised that her mother did not go to the airport to pick up Aunt Mei. Perhaps the reunion of the two sisters who had not met each other for so many years at the airport would be something old-fashioned and embarrassing. One Wednesday, Lyn followed her mother to a hotel. Her mother rang the doorbell. Lyn dared not look inside the room so she just kept lowering her head. She was not sure if Aunt Mei would speak English or Chinese to her.

The door was flung open. It was the first time Lyn met Aunt Mei. She was shocked — Aunt Mei was so different from her mother. The freckles looked good on her protruding cheekbone. Her eyes were a bit bloodshot because of jet-lag. Lyn was fascinated by the movement of Mei's long, black eyelashes each time she blinked her eyes. Though her mother said that Mei was four years older than she was, she seemed to have fewer wrinkles around her eyes. She was tall and slim — an attractive woman in her forties.

Aunt Mei gave her sister a bottle of Christian Dior Poison² perfume and Lyn a soft toy kangaroo. Lyn was too busy playing with the toy kangaroo and its little baby in the pouch that she had forgotten to look at her mother's reaction when she received the bottle of perfume. She knew that her mother never wore perfume. In fact, Ying seemed quite satisfied with the present she got from her sister. But she suppressed her smile. Lyn kept on pulling the baby kangaroo in and out of its mother's pouch. Her mother was not happy with the daughter's childish act. After all, she was already 13 years old and so she expected her to be more mature. Therefore, Ying said to her sister, "Don't spoil her, Mei!"

In the following twenty minutes, the sisters talked to each other enthusiastically about fashion, gossip and their children. Twenty two years of separation did not prevent them from having a non-stop

2 A famous perfume created by Jean Guichard which was very popular in the 1990s

conversation. Lyn sat on the sofa, observing the two adults carefully. She was especially happy when her mother told Aunt Mei about her excellent academic results.

The next morning, Lyn was told by her mother that Aunt Mei wanted them to take her around. Her mother appeared to be a bit reluctant but still thought that she had the obligation to do that. “Duty” — that was the word in her mind. They went shopping together in the mall next to the hotel. Mei was wearing an elegant navy blue satin dress and a pair of Chanel sunglasses. She said that she needed some business suits. She walked into a shop like a queen. Lyn and her mother followed her.

The salesgirls were happy to see Mei. Mei took her sunglasses off. She casually picked out three or four suits. “I want to try on this one... and that one,” she ordered the salesgirl.

“I don’t look good in it; the fabric is not good enough.” Mei shook her head. The salesgirl looked scared when her eyes came in contact with Mei’s.

Ying stood next to Mei and held her things for her. The salesgirl was busy walking to and fro carrying shirts of different colours and designs. Every time Mei walked out of the fitting room, she would turn around in front of the dressing mirror. Lyn stood at the back and fixed her eyes upon the mirror. She did not understand why Aunt Mei was so different from her mother. Her mother never wore a suit. That was why Lyn found it fascinating to look at Mei.

Although Lyn wanted to stay with Aunt Mei longer, her mother said that she was tired and asked Lyn to go home with her. Mei was quick-witted enough to say that she had a friend in Hong Kong and that they would meet later in the evening. Ying did not know who her

friend was. Did she have any friends in Hong Kong?

That evening, Lyn had to eat at a fast food restaurant. Her mother did not want to cook. Lyn was the one who first started the conversation: “Mom, what did Aunt Mei look like when she was young?”

“Umm... everyone called her ‘mountain woman³,’” her mother replied, “because she is even taller than Father.”

“But how come you are so short?” Lyn giggled. “It would be good to have a mountain woman in the family so she could do all the housework and kick away naughty kids who bully her brothers and sisters.”

“No, it was me who did the cooking at home back then.”

Lyn said, “Sharon, my classmate... her sister is very good. She always helps Sharon to do her homework! If I had a baby sister, I could take care of her too... Mom, will you give birth to a baby boy or girl?”

“No!” Her mother put down her fork and continued, “Don’t say such a childish thing again. You have grown up already. I must tell you that I can’t... I can’t become pregnant again. Do you understand?”

“No.” Lyn did not know how to respond.

“I had an abortion before marrying your father. At that time, my mother had just passed away and... and my father didn’t like your father. So I...I didn’t know what to do...”

“But...Dad didn’t stop you? He agreed to that?”

“Him? He didn’t say anything!”

“Do you mean... I should have had an elder brother or sister?”

“I ... I don’t know. The doctor says it would be difficult for me to become pregnant again after having given birth to you.”

Lyn’s heart sank. A sudden air of indescribable loneliness struck her. She held back her tears. She hated her mother’s fragility and

3 A demeaning way of referring to a woman who is tall, strong and lacks femininity.

quietness, and her poor cooking. In the following hour, neither mother nor daughter said a word. They both kept silent. The mother obviously had no wish to go on with the conversation. The daughter was afraid that her mother would be angry with her.

Lyn knew that her mother was someone who could easily forget about unhappy things. Every time she did something naughty, her mother would only scold her for one whole day. This time was different, as her mother was not a bit angry. She would not scold Lyn. It was her silence that scared Lyn. It was because of her silence that Lyn found it hard to start the conversation the following morning.

“Dad cannot come to Granddad’s funeral tonight...” Lyn opened the conversation.

“Yes, I know,” her mother replied coldly, “what can I expect from him?”

“But he says he is coming back next...”

“Oh, did he tell you about that? Do you think I can depend on him? Last year he came back twice, and this year only once! I’m not a bit unhappy. I can manage everything well without his help!”

Lyn was discouraged by her mother’s response but still managed to pretend to be cheerful: “What about Uncle Fat? He can help!”

“That Ah Fat? When he was young he only knew how to make Father and Mother worry. When he gets older, he wants Father’s money!”

“Uncle Fat is a bad guy? But we just went to ‘yum cha’ together last week!”

“You are still small. You don’t know what’s in people’s mind. I am his sister; I know him well!”

“What about Aunt Mei? She can help!”

“Don’t ask too much! It’s time to go to school or else you’ll be late!”

“I’ll get there by myself after school...”

“Well, didn’t you tell me that you have something to do after class today?”

“Yes, but I can leave earlier.”

“Well, just go ahead and do your work. You don’t have to come tonight.”

“Why?” Lyn was shocked.

“You can’t come. Women with their periods cannot go to funerals because they are dirty,” she told Lyn in an authoritative tone.

“What do you mean ‘dirty’? That doesn’t make sense! Miss Kwong said that I can still play sports. Who will know if I don’t tell?”

“I said NO. Ghosts know all.” Obviously her mother did not appreciate Lyn’s quick wit.

Lyn did not say a word and left. She hated the word ‘dirty.’ She didn’t do anything wrong. She was not dirty.

Lyn could not concentrate during class. She thought of every way to leave school and sneak into Universal Funeral Parlour⁴. She could pretend that she had serious period cramps and the teacher would allow her to leave school. The teacher would not be able to contact her parents — her father was working in China and her mother was busy at the funeral parlour — so Lyn would be allowed to take a taxi home. Or she could write on the school diary that she had to go to her Granddad’s funeral in the afternoon, sign her mother’s name and show it to the teacher. Lyn was never absent from school. Her mother always told her that going to school every day and studying hard were the responsibilities of a student. She did not disappoint her mother as

4 A place where funerals are held.

she always came first in her class and was the class prefect every year. She did not like any flaws on her attendance record. But this time was different. It was her grandfather's funeral. For once, she had every reason to be absent from school. When she had just about found the courage to put her plan into action, she suddenly remembered that her mother did not tell her how to get to Universal Funeral Parlour or which hall⁵ they would be in.

She had to give up her plan.

She pretended to be sick and skipped drama practice, and went home immediately after school.

Lyn was angry with her mother. She knew that her mother deliberately forbade her to go to the funeral. But why? Whatever the reason was, Lyn couldn't figure it out.

At 7:00 p.m., she opened the fridge. Seeing the dish of steamed egg with dried shrimp and a bowl of rice made her sick. She reluctantly put them into the microwave oven. She knew that she was waiting for her mother's call. There was nothing she could do except wait.

That day she had her dinner alone. She thought she could enjoy being home alone. She could watch TV anytime she wanted. Every day Lyn had tons of assignments and exercises to do, including those extra ones her mother gave her. If she refused to do them, her mother would say, "Yes, you can choose not to do it, but if you don't do it, you won't be able to come first in your class."

"I don't care," Lyn would say.

"You want Sharon to have better results than you? You know what, you are just lazy. I'm sure you will regret it if you lose to somebody who is not as smart as you are!"

Lyn was a clever girl; she had a photographic memory and could

5 There are different halls in Universal Funeral Parlour for people of different religious backgrounds.

remember the passages she had read well. Whenever she didn't know the answer in an exam, she could always guess it correctly. In fact, she didn't need much practice in order to do well in exams. She was almost a perfect student in the eyes of every teacher, except that she never smiled. But she could not be blamed. Her mother never smiled in front of her daughter. Obviously Lyn did not look like those girls who had a whole set of Hello Kitty stationery in their pink pencil boxes and put all their soft toys on their sweet little beds. She was just too mature.

“Ling...ling...” the phone finally rang.

Lyn rushed to pick up the phone.

It was Michelle, one of the most polite girls in her class. “Hi Lyn, this is Michelle... do you know how to do... maths homework... question five?”

“Umm...let me get the exercise book first,” Lyn replied hesitantly. “The answer should be... 50%...”

“But why?”

“The shirt is half-priced so that means it's 50% off.”

“But... but I don't know the marked price of the shirt.”

“You don't have to know it in order to get the answer!” Lyn was getting impatient.

“Then how can I list the steps out if I don't know the marked price?”

“I don't know! Don't ask me! If you don't know, just guess it. The teacher will give you the answer when she marks your exercise book.”

“... I... I'll ask Sharon then... thank you... bye bye” Michelle said in her poor weak voice.

“Bye,” Lyn hung up the phone. “Brainless!”

At 10 p.m. the phone rang again. It was her mother Ying.

“Lyn, you wanna eat something?”

“Eat... what?”

“Chicken wings? Umm... the shops around are closed... except 7-11.”

“Umm... I’m not hungry. But... okay.”

“Alright, I’ll get you some chicken wings. Bye.”

“Bye.”

Lyn waited and waited after she had hung up the phone. The 7-11 store was only 2 minutes’ walking distance from her home. But 30 minutes after she had called, her mother was still now back. What happened? It was late at night. Lyn was worried about her mother. She decided to go down to see if she was around.

She ran towards the 7-11 store. On the street corner, Lyn saw a dark shadow next to the lamppost — it was Ying, frenetically kissing a man.

Cheung Sha Wan

All the pieces had come back to me
When a collected voice mentioned your presence
Starting off with the recent news -
Officials said it was old
It was then to be rebuilt
And so much was to serve the new.

Once and ever
For I still wondered
If you were a last but one antique
Invaluable, low-storey overall,
Massive complex ensemble, to coagulate the unique
And dangle a barbed spear outside the peeled-off wall;
Remember the patterned apertures on each floor
Round the corner of our climb on the staircase,
Overhearing footsteps near, from every fully opened door,
And the natural venting space through barred iron gates?
One moment of residence
Would presumably make the difference.
Six in the morning I heard the planes soaring aloft
To awake you and me, so low, so close,
To and from the old airport...
All collections of these, and those.

Now that the airport has moved
So have you, for a commercial field.

Ady Chung

Fallacy

Kitty Fu Ka Ting

*“I know it has been tough but we’ve survived it.
There’ll only be sweetness ahead for us. I love you.”*

Craig

The last time I saw Craig, we kissed. It was three years ago. I have always wanted to write down in my diary some thoughts and feelings about our relationship—all the romantic nights, funny jokes, touching moments we have gone through—but my hand was too fragile to write my mind. Readers, the days we spent together seemed so perfect. I had him when it was least expected. But have you ever experienced that things just happen when they are least expected? I learnt not to expect, hiding my desire and longings.



“So where are you going now?” asked Mandy, my hostel roommate. We were in the same department as well. Although we had contrasting personalities, she was my very good friend.

When I was leaving the lecture theatre at six-thirty, the sky was already as dark as if it was nine. The night was exceptionally cold. As the chilling wind blew by, I pulled the jacket tighter and shivered.

“I am going to the train station to pick up my friend and have dinner with him tonight.”

“Handsome?”

“Sure. Are you interested in joining?”

Knowing that Mandy would not join us, my question was posed as a shield to block further questioning.

“Of course not! See you tomorrow then. By the way, don’t get too

excited and return late tonight. You have eight-thirty class tomorrow morning,” said Mandy, with her wicked smile.

I smiled contently at my expected answer. I lifted my hand to fix my messy hair that blew in the heartless wind when I walked towards the school bus stop. It was nearly six-forty. A bus going to the train station should have been coming. I queued while thinking about which canteen would not be too disruptive for dinner with him. The bus arrived. A sudden nervousness rushed up to my head. I was going to meet Craig in a minute. It had seemed so far away when I was thinking about what to wear a couple of days before.

I had not seen Craig for two years. This year he returned to Hong Kong earlier for Christmas holiday. Quite often I would take a look at his Xanga¹ and check his photos. It was the fifth year of his study in the U.S. He was still the charismatic lad, carrying the sunshine-like smile. As he grew up, his childishness lessened with an addition of maturity, making him even more appealing to young ladies. He changed his hairstyle quite often. From skinhead to messy style, none posed any difficulty for him. Casual outfits were his favorite: a sporty person would not like clothing which was too fussy. But it was never too plain for him. His carried the clothes well since he had a fine physique.

The bus engine stopped. People were getting off the bus. I deliberately stayed in my seat to let the people go first. It was better to be the last one to get off. I did not want to say hello to Craig with interruption from a crowd of people rushing towards us. Or at least I had more time to compose myself and tidy my clothes and hair. I walked towards the convenience store at the train station, where we were meeting. Looking around the area, there were people talking loudly on phones; some were standing in front of the magazine stand, reading the cover page; some were finishing their bread before getting

1 An online diary

into the station. Where was he? I turned my head. Someone caught my attention.

“Natalie Cheung!” It was Craig, sitting on the red fire hydrant outside the convenience store. It was always his smile, so familiar and comfortable, that made me feel special.

He walked up and I was about to say something. He hugged me.

“How are you Natalie?” he asked softly beside my left ear.

It was not what I expected in our re-encounter. His hug stunned me. Would people think that I was his girlfriend? The hug was rather tight. I did not know how to answer his question. I was just too surprised by the unexpected. I giggled to replace answering.

“You haven’t changed much. You are still the one I saw two years ago,” he said with a quick look over me.

“You are much taller. How come? You must be five foot nine?”

“Yes. I play basketball every week. I am on the university team now.”

We walked around the campus after dinner. Whenever there were people walking past, I could feel the stares at us. I was proud, and though I can not remember exactly, I should have shamelessly imagined that I was Craig’s girlfriend.

“Do you know how Clare is? I have not really had a chance to talk to her since she went to Australia,” I asked.

We paused for a few seconds.

“Yeah, she’s not coming back this winter. She will travel with her family.”

“What a pity.”

Clare was our high school friend. She had been studying in Australia since the previous year. She was attractive: both her appearance and her family background. She was the only daughter of the famous

singer Philip Chen in the seventies. There was one time when I found her picture in an entertainment magazine, saying that the daughter of Philip Chen won the championship in an ice skating contest. Clare was tall and slender, dainty and gorgeous. She had a white complexion and long, chestnut-color curly hair.

We stopped and sat on a bench, facing the Tolo Harbour. The night view was marvelous. The lights from the traffic formed a shimmering line along the highway. The moving traffic lights resembled the candle flame's flickering and seemed to give out warmth in the cold winter. I felt like I was being embraced by the air.

"How about you? Where are all your admirers? You should have a long queue waiting for your approval."

"It means nothing if there isn't anyone suitable in the queue," I said, wondering what I meant by 'suitable.'

Craig turned to me and said, with a suddenly serious tone, "You should bring your boyfriend to me for approval in the future. I know which type is suitable for you. If I don't think the guy is okay, I won't let him get you."

His seriousness touched me. I had a kind of victory in me.

"Yes Sir!"

We smiled at each other. Despite the fact that I was sitting next to Craig, with my shoulder touching his from time to time, the promise seemed to draw us even closer spiritually.

"But which type do you think best suits me?" I asked.

He paused.

"A guy like me," he answered, "who should know you well."

I smiled and nodded. I did not know how to answer.

We paused. There was an air of uneasiness.

"I enjoy the night view so much. I know I will miss it after

graduating.” I thought someone should say something.

He smiled faintly.

“Well, in fact I found you different this time. No, em... I should say it’s I who’s changed,” Craig said.

I turned to him and waited for his elaboration. But as he looked at me, my heart beat faster. I squeezed a blank smile and looked at the harbor.

“I should say I feel different towards you ... feel more...” continued Craig.

His fingers moved tenderly on the back of my hand. The sensation stung my nerves and blood vessels. I became very sensitive to any external touch. The moving vehicles, the flickering lights, the quivering trees and shrubs all of a sudden turned black. I could see nothing except Craig’s face. He kissed my lips. The campus became so quiet. I could only hear my quickened heartbeat and his subtle breathing. I did not expect this. Soothed by the softness and warmth of Craig’s lips, I caught his rhythm and put my arms around his neck. I kissed him.

The following morning I woke to with Craig’s call. He often came to dine with me in university. One night after dinner, Craig and I walked to my hostel. We met Mandy. I did not tell her that I was dating. I knew she would over-react if she knew my boyfriend was handsome.

“Natalie Cheung!” Mandy shouted when she saw us walking towards her. “Oh no, it’s really you.”

Mandy’s eyes had already stopped on Craig. She used to examine guys with me in our room. She would cut the pictures of movie stars from magazines and explain how his nose made him handsome or why he did not look good because of his ears. She sounded like a fortune teller studying others’ faces. But she had never dated any boy.

“Hi Mandy, nice meeting you. I heard your name from Natty,” Craig said. I was proud of his generosity and politeness.

“Hi Craig, Natalie never told me she had a handsome boyfriend. Where are you from? I suppose you are not studying here, right?”

“I study in the U.S. majoring in Architecture. I will go back in two weeks.”

“Oh no, the girls in the U.S. wear mini skirts and deep Vs.” Mandy looked at me as she said this.

“Come on, don’t you have a presentation to do in tomorrow’s tutorial? You won’t have enough time to prepare if you keep talking here.” I pushed Mandy into the hostel.

“Last word: Craig, you have to be aware. There are a lot of wolves preying on Natalie. If you don’t...”

“Mandy!” I pulled her to the hostel entrance, “Stop talking nonsense.”

“Bye Mandy. Let’s have lunch together next time,” Craig said.

“Alright, see you next time Craig. I enjoy preying on handsome guys,” Mandy said with satisfaction.

Craig stood next to the entrance. That look of his impressed me. Even though I was his girlfriend, I was still attracted to his smile and charisma like a little girl meeting her prince. I walked to him and stared at him closely, giving him almost no space to breathe.

“Are you thinking about how to beat the mini skirt, deep V girls?” Craig asked.

“No. I don’t have to. They can take you away if they want. I don’t care,” I said confidently.

Craig left after we chatted for some more time in the lobby. My warden Evelyn returned from a walk around college after dinner.

“Natalie, your boyfriend walked you back? He is handsome.

You two looked so perfect.”

“Thanks Evelyn. But he is not sweet enough,” I complained with a smile.

“Nor is my husband.”

We laughed like gossiping women.

That night, I showered with a smile and slept with a smile.

With one week left before Craig returned to the U.S., we decided to take a day trip around Hong Kong. We went to yum cha in the morning, then watched a movie and went to the Peak and Stanley at night.

Stanley at night was so different from the way it was in daytime. There was no bustling market or bicycles. There were few people at night, only those who walked their dogs along the beach after dinner. The starless sky made the sea even darker. I did not like the sea at night. It was threatening, like a black hole that would swallow you without any trace. I could not see anything when looking at the sea.

We sat on the beach. He sat like a chair back, with his chest as the back and his thighs as the arms. I leaned against his chest. He caressed my body with his strong arms. I smelled his fragrance and fell in love with it. The scent embraced me like air, dancing in my body like blood. It was the unique scent that made me think of him.

“You look good in pink.”

Craig smiled confidently. He sipped a mouth of lemon tea and said, “Remember the photo I showed you last time? I was the only one who wore a white tuxedo to the graduation ball. I am always the one who stands out in the crowd.”

“And you are the first boy I have known to dare to be a skinhead.”

“Proud to have such a trendy boyfriend, huh?”

“Well well, someone is getting arrogant.”

“Am I?” Craig scratched my belly and I could not stop laughing so I surrendered.

It was late so Craig asked me to stay at his place for the night. No one would know I was there since his parents were in Germany on vacation and his sister was already asleep. After a day’s trip I was terribly tired. I lay like a dead fish on the bed after my shower. My hair was still dripping wet.

... Lonely, I am so lonely. I have nobody for my own...

Craig sang his favorite song as he walked in after showering, rubbing his wet hair with a towel.

“Are you lonely? Are you not satisfied with such an adorable girlfriend?” I asked in a complaining tone, without opening my eyes.

“I feel like I don’t have enough...”

Craig hugged me from the back. He took off my vest. I noticed that Craig had already taken off his shirt. He started to kiss my hair, my ear, my neck and my shoulder. We made love.

Before he left, we made a D.I.Y. schedule for each other, so that we could spend every day together. We exchanged schedules at the airport on the day he left. I was amazed as I flipped through the schedule. It was fully decorated with colors and paper work. There were some photos we took, with his feelings written next to them. The thing I liked most was that he sprayed his fragrance on the schedule. The scent reminded me of all the days and nights we spent together.

“Almost time,” said his mother, “give us a call when you arrive.” She hugged Craig.

“Mum, don’t eat too many sweet things. I will watch over you. I have a spy here,” Craig said while his sister smiled wickedly like her

brother.

Craig turned to me. I did not want to say take care like acquaintances did. We looked at each other, smiling like the previous nights when he told stupid jokes. Suddenly something cracked inside my heart. My nose grieved and I sobbed. Craig stopped smiling; he hugged me, closer and tighter. His tear fell onto my shoulder.

“I will miss you.” He kissed me.

This was the last time I kissed him- January 4, 2004.



But can human beings not always expect more? We are greedy; selfish. Readers, I cheated you. I did not love Craig. He was right: boys like him suit me. I would love any boy of his type—handsome, tall, tan, fashionable, romantic, and popular—but not him. I was being very vain by staying with him, thinking that people would exclaim how perfect a pair we were: handsome guy with pretty girl. I grew up with fairy tales. Didn’t those romantic stories only happen when there was a prince? Cinderella marries her prince with the glass shoes; Snow White wakes up with a kiss from the prince on a horse; Beauty lives happily ever after with her beast-turned-prince. Who does not love beautiful things? One of my male friends Mike is taller and more handsome than Craig. Craig did not like me getting too close with him but why? I exchanged SMSs with him, dined with him a few times and took photo stickers with him like we were a pair. Craig knew nothing about his.

Readers, you may think that I am a shallow girl who twisted the meaning of love, contaminated fairy tales. But this is reality. No one would reject beautiful things. Like Craig: he only wants beautiful girls. Appearance is the first priority. We discussed the importance of appearance in choosing lovers one night after dinner on campus.

“I just don’t understand how the boys can hug and kiss a girl like that,” Craig’s eyes focused on the pair of lovers walking towards us, “flat nose, small eyes like red beans, chubby face like bread, big mouth like a crocodile. Well, it’s just... um, unbelievable.”

“That’s how things are grouped together in the world. Birds of the same feather flock together.”

“Maybe. That’s why a boy like me should be paired with beauties and hotties.”

I remembered he broke up with a beautiful girl in high school because she ate too many snacks and grew fat during the exam period. He had another girlfriend before that who he dated for only two weeks or so just because his friends thought the girl ate like a tortoise, opening her mouth and pausing for three seconds before ingesting the food.

Craig is never a good boyfriend. His personality is much worse than his appearance. Our relationship seemed perfect because I did not tell you everything. On the D.I.Y. schedule he made, he wrote I was his “Current Favorite Person.” He marked my birthday on the calendar and wrote “My Sweetie’s 20th Birthday!” I was twenty-one that year. Once, I noticed that he had checked my mobile SMS inbox, and after that he asked me if I had contact with my male friends. Remember the night we met Mandy outside hostel? After Mandy went into the lift, Craig made an irritated face and said, “OMG, I’d rather die painfully than be preyed upon by a girl like her!”

Craig always pretends he is a good guy. I do not think he would think he is not perfect. I am really fed up by his hollow honey words. They are only the beautiful excuses for him to disguise his mistakes. He wrote me an email the night before he left:

Dearest Wife,

It’s now 3.40 in the morning. You should be working very hard

on the D.I.Y. schedule book. It's just so sweet of us. Well, in fact I already feel so much like I am married to u, the way we talk, ur smile...I won't forget that night in ur Uni. With that kiss, we became sort of a couple. I have never been so hapi in my previous relationships.

Natty, we should bear in mind that long distance relationships are not easy. I cannot promise we will be staying together forever, especially since there are intruders everywhere in Uni; girls in my place and those boys around u. We shouldn't expect too much, since expectation brings bigger disappointment. Instead, treasure what we have had together.

Take care. Don't miss me too much, especially the way that I mess up ur studies. ☺ I will send u my contact info once I arrive.

Love,
Your Hubby

What's the point of sending me his contact information? We had not chatted on the phone once, nor had we posted a single word. I should have thanked the person who invented MSN—the tool for communication without any effort—without which we would not have typed a single word. For the first week after he left, we did make an effort to keep each other posted on our lives through MSN. But after I disappeared from MSN for some time—I forget when it started—we talked again like acquaintances:

“How are u?”

“Not bad. Always busy with school work, and u?”

“Fine. Got to finish a paper before Fri.”

“Good luck then!”

The next time we talked again was around a week later, about

more or less the same thing. Our relationship, without discussion, without knowing when, ended with the shorter and more meaningless conversations on MSN.

I did not care about his so-called inability to make promises; if he did make promises, I would not give them credit because he used to cheat. Readers, I cheated you. Clare had been Craig's girlfriend since high school. We three were good friends in high school. I helped Craig to beat the other admirers and win Clare's heart. But I was not contented. Why Clare? Some people said I was more beautiful than her. My personality was definitely more pleasant. She was temperamental. Craig can stand her temper just because of her splendid family background. I had been waiting for a chance to prove that I was the better choice.

"Can you not mention our relationship to Clare, or any of our friends?"

This was the only time Craig touched upon this triangle and his preference was clearly shown on his Xanga:

*"Clare, I know it has been tough but we've survived it.
There'll only be sweetness ahead for us. I love you."*

Craig

Readers, we humans are greedy. Although I resented Craig's selfishness, I understood his choice. I did the same thing too:

Message Inbox

Mike

27-12-2004

Natty, it's so sweet to receive
ur baked muffins. U sweetened
my heart. Call me tomorrow.
Love u too! Goodnight ☺

You're dead

You're dead.
I heard that you were dead.

A single cell split,
The athletes on the runway.
Squeezed through the gloomy tunnel,
We sweated the crimson moist.
Out of the cave, uneasy, came into beings.
You breathed the fresh air,
Two minutes faster.

Life was a race for
Milk, Barbie, cakes, stationeries and clothes...
It turned into a battle upon
The rose sprung in zealous summer days.

I rush into the room,
Slam the door hard,
Enough to wake up the soul at rest.
The words echo in a symphony,
Hollowness, the tune peels off.
The room gyrates, turns bright.
My heart is pounding fast.

Peering at the mirror,
A face unique on earth ever from now on,
For the pass you lose.
Seize with a sudden impulse,
Burst into snicker.

You're dead.
You were
Dead at last.

Alfanie Yeung

Steam

Phoebe Mok

When the plane jerked and landed in Hong Kong International Airport, Cindy opened her fishy eyes and yawned. She dared not look out of the window. But then, gathering all her courage, she took a deep breath and peeped out. Clothed under an azure sky, Hong Kong had not changed a lot, Cindy thought, and was a little bit stunned by this fact. Taking off her glasses, she rubbed her eyes and looked again, as if she wanted to confirm that Hong Kong had not changed.

It had been seven years since Cindy had made up her mind to leave Hong Kong for Australia.

Seven years.

For seven years, she had never thought of going back to Hong Kong, her hometown. But this time was different. When passengers began to stand up and take their carry-on bags from the luggage rack, Cindy could feel the hustle and bustle of Hong Kong pressing against her face. It was so suffocating that she started fanning her face with the leaflet, using all her strength till the air whistled hilariously. But she was still sweating all over.

When Cindy left Hong Kong in 2000, she only brought a backpack with her. Now she had to line up and wait for two checked bags, each weighing 20 kg. But what have I brought back from Australia? What is in my baggage? Cindy really did not know when she was lining up.

The arrival lobby was teeming with people, smiling people with hopeful eyes. Cindy could see that the exit of the arrival lobby was cast with warm and promising sun beams. Then she realized it was April, it was spring again.

Spring meant rebirth to many but never to Cindy. Spring was the preface to summer, a season of storm and thunder. Seven years ago, in spring, she met Bob, a handsome and caring Aussie. That was the beginning of the storm in her family in which her father, Uncle Lam, threatened to disown her if she insisted on staying with Bob.

“Gweilos are no good. Gweilos are all colonizers! Why do you love someone who takes away all the treasure from our motherland?” The toothpick hopped rhythmically between Uncle Lam’s yellow teeth while he roared. “This is an act of betrayal!”

“Father, stop being silly and ignorant! Let me make it clear: first of all, Australia did not conquer China, second, love should not...”

Before Cindy had a chance to fight back, a slap ended the conversation and chased her out of her home. The storm began here, in spring.

Cindy dragged her luggage towards the arrival lobby; she wondered whether she needed to stop. No! It would be too silly to think that someone would wait for me at the arrival gate, she thought. So Cindy strode towards the Air Bus station and got on the A43—she had never forgotten how to get back home.

She hopped on the bus and chose a window seat; she always did that when she rode a bus, no matter whether she was in Hong Kong or in Australia. She used to read the Times on her way home but today she decided to look at the scenery outside the window. She wanted to know whether Hong Kong had changed. Hoping that she could get a clearer view, Cindy wiped her glasses with a cloth. When the bus traveled along Tsing Ma Bridge, Cindy could see the many highways

extending out of the far end. They were like a powerful octopus, stretching its legs into the heart of the city, as if it wanted to gulp the city into its stomach. They are just like my father, who controlled everything from my field of study to my marriage! Cindy shivered and was gripped by fear and anger when she thought of this. She let her eyelids fall and when she opened her eyes she found that her glasses were streaked with tears. She then remembered that her father once said:

“Showing your emotion in public is nothing but a shame!” She glanced around and rubbed her eyes in secret.

After seven years, she was still haunted by every single word her father had said.

Cindy was a strong and decisive girl in front of her classmates, friends and colleagues. For one thing, no one ever saw her crying, not on graduation day, nor at her mother’s funeral. Everyone called her “Sunny,” not Cindy, as she was always smiling, even in adversity. But that was just a face for nine to five, Monday to Friday. As soon as Cindy revved the engine of her Benz 160E, numerous brooks of tears started to run down her face. In the first place, she knew that it was because she still loved her father, but she could never regain his love. Her throat was choked with the fusion of tears and feelings that she had long suppressed in daytime. This had made her heart ache and she had to sink back into the driver’s seat before she could calm down and drive again.

When Cindy saw the octopus, she wanted to vomit. It was not the result of carsickness, but the result of a weary heart. Cindy just wanted to throw up every single word of love to her father, she just wanted

to tear her heart open and let her father see how she loved him. But what should she do first when they meet in twenty minutes? Give him a big hug? Say I love you? Or I miss you? How should she open the conversation that had ended seven years ago? Seven years, she thought, must be a lot. Her heart was heavily loaded with different feelings just like her luggage. Two bags and a weary heart. Cindy shivered again.

When the bus stopped at Mong Kok, Cindy was the last passenger to get off the bus, as if she was not sure of her destination. But Cindy knew that she had arrived home again. Again indeed. Looking across the street, she could see a greenish prewar building standing amidst the high-rise shopping malls. The greenish wall was always cast with red, yellow and purple neon lights, and it was just the same as when she left. Nothing had changed; the world was so constant here and maybe so were the people living here. Even when Cindy was able to afford a private housing apartment in the same district, Uncle Lam refused to leave.

“An apartment is better, at least it has got security guards and a lift,” Cindy told her father in that evening when Uncle Lam was revisited by rheumatic fever.

“And you don’t have to walk up eight flights of stairs with your aching joints till you reach home,” she continued while rubbing his reddened knee.

“Ah! There is something you don’t understand—this prewar building reminds me of my old heroic days when we Chinese defeated the Gweilos with our flesh and blood! Heroic, heroic indeed,” he declared with eyes burning with valor and excitement. So they did not move out and everything just kept its original face. A breakthrough, a change, was a revolutionary thing in this prewar building.

Cindy may have kept life constant in this prewar building, but she could not keep her mindset unchanged when she entered university. She started to change her attitude towards Gweilos. She thought Gweilos were not all bad: they were colonizers but they also propelled Hong Kong's thriving economy. She began to think that there were too many generalizations and biases hidden in her father's speech. They argued more, fought more and kept silent more.

But it was seven years ago. Had my father changed his attitude towards my boyfriend? Cindy asked herself when she saw that the bauhinia trees had grown taller and the paint on the outer wall had started peeling off.

Cindy took out a chain of keys and examined it under the flickering 25-watt light bulb hanging outside her home. Which key was for unlocking the world of invariability? When the door was opened, Cindy was not surprised to see that Uncle Lam was reading his paper on the red leather sofa; he had been doing that everyday at 9 a.m. for as long as Cindy could remember. He did not show any hint of motion when Cindy opened the door, nor when Cindy dragged her luggage in front of him. Was he happy? Was he surprised? Was he still feeling angry? Cindy wondered as she went back to her room. Except for the new set of bed sheets that had been put on the mattress, everything was arranged as it was when she left. Uncle Lam had never ceased changing the bed sheets for her once a week. She touched the pillow and felt its softness, as soft as a father's heart.

For the first time in these seven years, Cindy slept without that

prelude—crying like a baby.

When Cindy woke up, her room was surrounded by darkness and the aroma of fried choi sum, her favorite dish. She yawned and walked out of her room, only to see that the dining room was all dark. When she turned on the light, she saw that her father was lying on the sofa, with a hand clenching the newspaper. Cindy sighed and was a little bit vexed, how could he be so inconsiderate? Didn't he know that I traveled eight hours on plane?

When entering the kitchen, the aroma of fried choi sum again greeted Cindy's nostril. Stronger this time. She pushed the kitchen window open and saw that an old woman was preparing her dinner as well. Cindy's fingers were stained by the oily yellowish smudge when she pushed the window open. She wiped it with a sponge and found that the stain was so strong that it stuck on her finger and even penetrated into her fingerprint.

"Dirty old man, why didn't you clean the kitchen after each time you used it?" she cursed while cleaning the window with the nearly-empty bottle of detergent. When she looked at the bottle more carefully, she saw that the expiry date was 12-04-2000.

"O my god! This is the bottle I bought seven years ago." Cindy had bought this bottle because the twelfth of April was her and Bob's anniversary.

"What happened to this old foolish man!" Cindy's anger was like an erupting volcano, burning with nothing but babbling wrath.

She marched from the kitchen to the dining room; her anger reached its highest when she saw the dangling saliva hanging on Uncle

Lam's lower lip. Cindy really wanted to give him a slap and wake him up. But when Cindy examined his face more closely, she could see that time had sewn a net across her father's face. He was so old and so feeble now. He was once a brave and boastful young man, but who could boast in the face of time? Cindy stroked her father's hair and noticed that beneath the oily black hair was a layer of shining silver hair.

What had made him so exhausted? Cindy wondered on her way back to the filthy kitchen. He had just read the paper and then was sleeping as sound as a pig. Was reading a paper exhausting for an old man? Cindy decided to cook for her dad for the first time in her life. But I must wash every utensil first. She took the wok and realized that it was heavy. She opened it and saw a bowlful of fried choi sum. Her glasses steamed up but she did not even know whether the steam came from the warm choi sum or her tears.

Aunt Carrie

Aunt Carries was a janitor.
When off from work,
She was always the first one home.
Soaked with sweat,
she unloaded the red and white
plastic bags from the market.

She put on an apron
with stains of oil and sauces.
In the kitchen roared the exhaust fan,
blared the mini-radio.
She missed the calls
from Tom and Tammy.

Gathering after rugby;
Karaoke with Debbie.
Crabs, fish and prawns
entertained no one.
Exhausted body and soul,
Aunt Carrie left sitting on the couch.

Ada Au

Let us Duel

From five to twelve,
And a night to duel,
We comfort ourselves in that game console.

Where I sit and fight,
Where you sit all night,
I Stare at the flashing screen now brightened by mere electrons.

And I bang the stage,
And you swear with rage,
Thunderous sound of defeat numb our senses.

Madly we insert the coins,
Desperate to earn more points,
Because life is a desert and game a fountain of joy.

Hopelessly bind from within,
Looking for a sweet dream,
When tomorrow comes the sun looks no different.

So we chase after the wind,
Reemerge into the dream,
Till the day grows dark, the stars show up, opponents retreat,
And the screen reads:

Game Over.

Geoffrey Chan



“Her”
a painting of Chan Hiu Kwan
Department of Fine Arts, CUHK, 2007

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tel: (852) 2609-7005/7 fax: (852) 2603-5270

email: English@cuhk.edu.hk

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

English@CUHK

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