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Poetry Section

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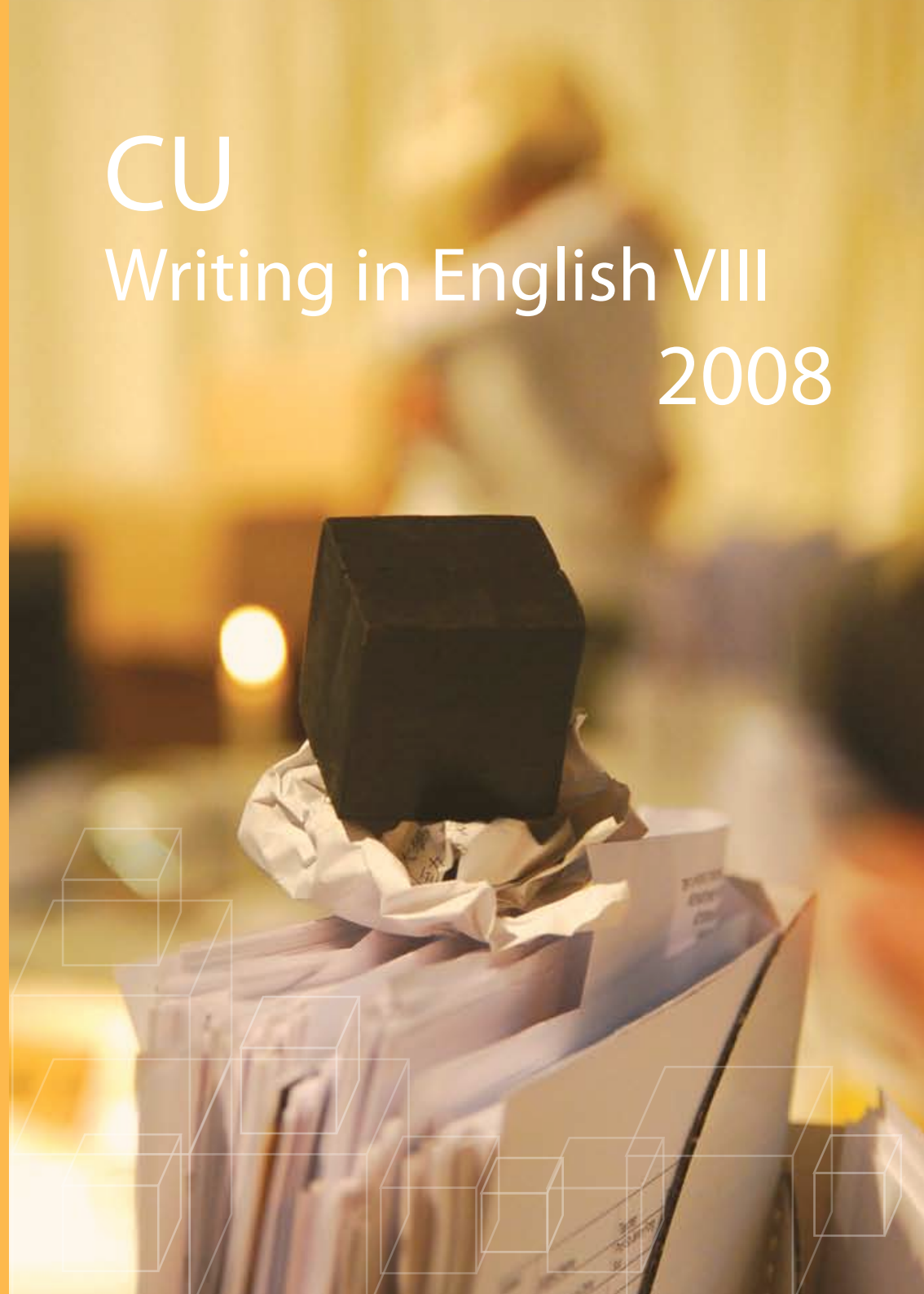
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CU Writing in English

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Preface

It is said that a good writer must also be a good reader. This wisdom may have an especial significance in the context of Chinese culture. In the Chinese literary tradition, scholarship is always treated with more respect than genius. The common attitude is that those who have read a thousand books before writing a word are more reliable than those who write without much learning. The later works of a master are often better regarded than his early works. For instance, the most beloved poet of all time in China is Du Fu, and his reputation is largely built on the works he had made after he was 50. In this tradition, Chinese students are often encouraged to read intensely rather than to write creatively; but reading does not always help writing.

As students of literature, we sometimes wonder if intense reading would not restrict our freedom of writing. The more masterpieces we read, the more challenging it is to surpass them. If all the motions and emotions of humanity have been expressed by authors such as Dante, Shakespeare or Leo Tolstoy, is it possible that we can write anything new? If literary explorations may be compared to military accomplishments, then it is like the more territories our ancestors have conquered, the longer the way is we have to travel before we reach our own battlefields. These masterpieces are guides or even forms of our expression, but they also become fences of our expression, that we have to be even stronger to get through them.

Naturally, the way to become stronger to resist the domination of our masters is to write. We should not treat Dante, Shakespeare or Tolstoy as Gods; that all we can do is to worship them and not use



the same thing they have said. Rather we should treat them as fellow writers, that we can learn from their thoughts but we do not have to follow their expressions; we can say things differently and it is not necessarily worse than theirs. This is the attitude that we create these pieces of short stories in this volume; modest, yet bold. We see them as footprints of our way following the masters, yet not simple imitations of what they have done.

We humbly present to you in this volume some short stories written by the English majors in CUHK and hope that you can appreciate the effort of our young fellow writers.

Yours Sincerely,
John Zhong
Jessica Yuen
Emmy Chow



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The Journey

Had we met we would have hummed the melody we heard
when the snow amused us, lodger from the south,
when a young sparrow departed from a frosty leaf.

We, like gentlemen and ladies,
celebrate every moment
of whitening roofs,
of rusting bicycles,
of greening leaves,
in articulation of Mandarin,
sibling of our mother-tongue.

‘How can you cheat us?’ you said
to the taxi driver, ‘We are both Chinese!
you should have the Heart!’
we paid him what he deserved at last.
The flaming taxi diminished to a gray spot
quickly into the endless road.

Had we met
we would revise our stories for
the grilled chicken wings outside the campus,
the barbeque pork, the disgusting bean soup,
long and dusty street, brick-red pavilion,
nice old rickshaw, generous widow,
in interval of mundane work
at your office, at my school.

Ashley Leyash

Hook

By John Zhong Han

In the court when asked about the murder, he said:
“I thought they were coming to rob my car.”

As the saloon started, Chen Sujun rested her head on the side window. This was dangerous, she thought. She felt a thrill of alarm when she thought about the terrible treatment that some of her professional fellows had received from the drivers of black cars.

It was not a lucky day for her. It was raining. This morning when she left her apartment, her right eyelid twitched several times, and when she tiptoed across the floor, which was like a basin between the stairway and the street, she almost broke her right ankle in the dirty water. She thought about her high heels – they were really dangerous – but it was part of her job.

Lei Qingwen did not study the face of his passenger carefully, but he knew that she was a stranger to Bridge Head. It was not cautious for him to take a stranger. When Chen appeared on the street, he had been waiting for the workers of Bridge Head to take his saloon downtown for work. But the woman was standing in the rain in her high heels, and seemed to be shrinking with cold in her blue skirt and red short-sleeved blouse, so he had to take her.

A stranger could be a hook. Two weeks ago his friend Guo was robbed of his minivan by two strangers he took. Lei himself had been hooked once before. His passenger had made him drive to a place where there were 6 policemen waiting for him. He'd paid ten thousand *yuan* to have his car back. Ten thousand *yuan*! Lei turned his head to his passenger. No, this woman could not be a hook. Neither her dress

nor her face looked like those of a hook. The long eyebrows and the small pointed nose of this woman even reminded him of his fiancée Lin.

Chen knew that the driver was looking at her, but she pretended not to have realized. As soon as she got into the saloon, she noticed that the ignition was a bit further than normal from the passenger seat. She did not say anything, not even to herself. She shut the door with great force and then pulled the door handle twice as if she wanted to make sure that it was strong.

The green cloth cover of the passenger seat was almost worn out. It must be a second-hand car, she thought. The dense atmosphere smelt of pungent oil which always made her stomach sick. At least it was warm here, she thought, looking at the people who walked rapidly in the street. Where were all these people headed?

“Where exactly are you heading, Miss?” the driver asked, looking at her.

“The crossroad near Lujia Bridge – do you know where I mean?” she asked anxiously.

“The one next to the Lujia storage?”

“Yes,” she nodded.

“Do you work there? It’s so early in the morning.” There was some doubt in his eyes.

“Yes, I work in the Lujia storage,” she answered carefully.

“A lot of people in Bridge Head work for that storage – are you from Bridge Head?” he asked.

“No, I came here last night to visit a friend,” she answered.

He paused for a while and said: “Can you put your belt on, Miss?”

There was a hint of jitteriness in her eyes but she managed not to

show it. She put on a slightly pained expression instead and answered: “My stomach is not feeling well this morning and I don’t want to press it with the belt.”

He did not reply.

“We should be there in ten minutes. I don’t think it’s necessary,” she said.

He did not insist on it. He was lost in his own thoughts.

The driver was a man of about twenty-five. She picked him out right away from the other drivers of black cars in Bridge Head. Most of them were in shabby clothes, but he was in a white shirt. He had a boyish round face and very thin arms, and he looked like an office man rather than a driver. His eyes were beady but both his eyebrows and nose were as straight as arrows, showing his high spirit and strength. On his left middle finger there was a gold ring. Only when Chen had gotten into the saloon did she notice that there were two patches of brown on his chest. Poor chap! It must be the only shirt he had!

The driver was not paying attention to her. He was thinking of the morning he’d met his fiancée Lin at Bridge Head. She and her friends had taken his saloon on the way to work. They had a good chat on the road and it turned out that they were all from the same hometown. The girls suggested that they take his saloon to work everyday and he most delightfully agreed to it. Lin and Lei soon fell into a relationship and three weeks ago, they were engaged. The wedding was to take place on the first of the coming May.

While the saloon was accelerating, Chen’s heart seemed to beat a little faster. She was sick of this job. It was so crude and cruel. Two years ago she would not have done it. Two years ago she was one of the owners of a hair salon downtown. The business was good and her son was studying in a prestigious primary school. She never thought

that her husband would desert her and her son. She had married him because she could not bear to live with her sister-in-law any longer after her mother's death, and because she had trusted in his incapacity to cheat on her. He had been in an affair with her business partner for half a year, and she had not found out until they'd run away with all her money.

She put her right hand to her chin. It was ice-cold. She looked into the side window and saw her slightly wrinkled face. Behind that face, rows of ugly houses in the town were stretching into the unknown outskirts of the city. She knew that at the end of those rows there was a small apartment in which she lived with her son. That was her apartment, her home. And to make it more of a home she would have to have the air conditioner repaired before the summer, she would have to replace the worn-out plastic sofa cover with something nicer, she would have to hire a private maths tutor for her son...

"Where're you from, Miss?" the driver asked suddenly, startling her.

"I'm *Shanghainese*," she answered politely. "Where're you from, please?" she asked, partly to shift some of his attention away from the windscreen.

"Anhui," he said.

"Anhui is a rich place, why do you come to Shanghai?" she was curious.

"The flood, the flood in 98, you know?" He looked at her.

She nodded.

"The flood destroyed everything. We lost our farms and my entire family moved to Shanghai."

Chen remembered the news on television.

"Didn't the government distribute some relief money to you all? I

thought you'd all gotten new houses built by the government after the flood," she said rather naively.

"Houses? They were all in the pockets of those government officials!" He sneered.

Chen could not believe it! The flood in 1998 had caused millions of people to go homeless, and if those people hadn't gotten relief, where could they go? Then she remembered the corruptness of Chinese officials and thought that nothing was impossible.

"Shanghai is such an expensive place, do you rent your house?" She wanted to change the subject matter.

"Yes, an entire family of seven, in an apartment as big as my palm," he said while turning the saloon into a narrow street.

Chen did not want to talk about the hardships of life. She saw his ring.

"Are you married yet? You *Waijiang Ren** marry early." She smiled to show that there was no offence meant by her comment.

"Not yet." He smiled too, adding, "only a fiancée."

"Really? And when're you going to marry?" She was as excited as any woman would be when hearing about a marriage.

"In May this year." He paused for a moment and sighed a little. "Money! Money is a big problem!"

Chen said nothing. The saloon had just passed the sign of a famous chain-store bakery. The driver's last sentence repeated itself in her head and she remembered that she had not bought birthday cakes for her son for the last two years.

The driver said nothing either. He was thinking about the incident of the previous night. He had been invited by Lin's parents for dinner, but as he was walking on the road, he saw a group of children chasing each other in front of a large house. When Lei got close, one of the

* People not native to Shanghai.

children suddenly ran towards him. He tripped in front of Lei, who was just able to catch him. The child cried like an alarm clock in his arms. Lei immediately let go of the child and walked away, unless others thought he was a kidnapper. He took a few steps before he noticed the two patches of chocolate on his shirt. That was the only nice shirt he had! He looked in the direction of the children, and realized that they were throwing pieces of cake towards each other. In the end he had to call Lin and say that he was not able to dine with them, because he had a terrible stomachache that night.

Chen saw that the driver was concentrating on the windscreen again. She was tired of finding a topic that was not about the hardship of life. Everyone had to face hardships in life, so why should she pity him?

“How much did you buy this saloon for?” She regretted it as soon as she had asked the question.

“Sixty-eight thousand,” he replied, and softly clapped the steering wheel.

“Second hand?”

“Yes, second hand.”

“Did you buy it or...?” she could not help continuing the inquiry.

“No, no. Didn’t have that much money.” He waved his left hand with the ring. “I borrowed thirty-three thousand for it.”

“Why don’t you drive a taxi? It’s much ss... easier,” she did not want to say the word.

“I want to.” He paused for a second before continuing, “but it is not allowed. Only the native *Shanghainese* drivers are allowed to drive taxis here.”

“Is there a rule of such or what?” she asked rather anxiously as she saw another sign of the same bakery.

“They say you can’t so you can’t – who cares about the rules?” He was rather amused at her naivety.

The passenger had suddenly become quiet. She was terrified to see the third sign of the same bakery – it was only about one minute away from their destination now. Her stomach ached and all she could think about was floods, farmers, large families, fiancées and loans.

“Are you feeling all right, Miss?” he asked, noticing her pale face.

“Yes... all right...”

One second, two seconds, one second, two seconds... Oh, one minute was too long! She was not afraid. She had been a hook for six months now and she had gotten rid of the anxiety, but there was one thought that troubled her: how much would he lose when he was caught? Ten thousand *yuan*, she knew, but how much would he really lose? Ten thousand *yuan*! She could have murdered somebody for ten thousand *yuan* a year ago, when she was being chased by every usurer. Would he still be able to marry in May if he had to pay the fine? Seven people in one small apartment – what a large family! He probably had two aged parents and several younger brothers or sisters – all dependent on him! Very likely he did! Oh! Why did these people come to Shanghai? Didn’t they know that Shanghai was a place where men ate men and where once you fell, your life would be forever in hell?

She checked her thoughts. She knew that in her profession the worst thing that could happen was to think too much about the consequences of the victim. She was only a hook. She earned her living by putting herself in risk of being robbed, beaten or even murdered. The police could fine the drivers of black cars ten thousand *yuan* or even a hundred thousand, but she only got two hundred. She had a child to feed and besides, she was not doing anything bad. According to the police, she

was a “helper of the legal system”.

But still, how much would this man lose because of the fine? And because of her! She would ruin his life, or even the life of his entire family. They had already been in debt for this saloon. How would they be able to pay the fine now? The usurers, ah! She knew just too well what the usurers were like!

Lei noticed the strange expression of his passenger and was surprised.

“We don’t usually take strangers,” he said suddenly. “We take the people we know to work. That’s all, but that’s not enough sometimes.”

“Why not strangers...?” Her voice trembled a little.

“Because a stranger might be a hook. We hate hooks!” He clenched his fist unconsciously as he spoke.

Chen’s face was as pale as a piece of paper dipped in oil.

“Last month one of our drivers was hooked again. He took two strangers near Bridge Head and when he reached the destination, the woman from behind suddenly pulled his neck backwards, and the woman next to him immediately took the key out. He had not recovered from the shock before finding himself surrounded by eight heavy-built robbers. He had to give them the car in order to save his life.”

Chen looked at his face anxiously as he told the story, not knowing why he told her the story.

“Wait a minute. I’m going out to have a look.” The man suddenly stopped the saloon.

She felt her heart almost come out of her chest!

He opened the door, went off to the front and bent down to examine something. She took a few deep breaths and leaned forward to see what he was doing. There was a huge rock in the middle of the

road which had probably been laid there by some naughty boys. What the driver did next surprised Chen to death. He picked up the whole rock and threw it to one side of the road – she had most mistakenly underestimated the strength of his thin arms.

A few moments later, he came back.

“I can’t believe that... you could just... pick up that huge rock... and throw it away!” she could not keep her voice from trembling anymore.

“We earn our living with our strength, Miss. In the farm sometimes we got to carry waters for miles.” He did not sound suspicious, but his eyes did not leave her face.

“We should be there soon, Miss, and...” his eyes still staring at her.

She could not possibly know what he meant by this pause.

“Tell you the truth, Miss,” he said after a while. “You should not have taken an unfamiliar black car in Bridge Head.”

She studied his face most carefully.

“There’re some bad drivers in Bridge Head. They dump you in some unknown places or even rob you,” he said with a slight embarrassment.

“Why are you telling me this? Aren’t you afraid of losing business?” She was relieved that he had not found out her secret.

“No, I am only saying that a few, a very small number of black cars are like that, but you don’t seem to know them at all so I am giving you this advice.”

She did not know that he told her this because he thought that when she was jittery she looked very much like his fiancée Lin, but she thanked his kindness of heart anyway.

“Tell me,” she asked carefully, “what would you do if you have

taken a...what do you call it? A hook?”

“I’m not afraid,” he said with his fist clenched again. “Since Guo’s robbery, everyone has been carrying a weapon on the road.”

“A weapon!” she exclaimed. “What weapon?”

Lei saw that the word “weapon” had alarmed his passenger, so he immediately answered: “Don’t worry, Miss. It’s just a fruit knife.”

Chen had not seen a fruit knife since she got into the car and now she was dead nervous. The man had been kind to her and she was going to ruin his life! Now that she knew his strength and that he had a knife, it did not seem like a good idea at all to dress in a skirt and high heels. How would she be able to run away from him once he found out her secret? She wanted to press the brakes and stop the whole thing.

She fixed her eyes on the face of the young man. The nose, the eyebrows, the forehead, the chin and the lips – everything seemed to remind her of her younger days and the hopes she’d had on her wedding day.

“Turn back now!” she shouted suddenly.

But it was too late.

The man’s face had suddenly become very solemn and he did not move his eyes from the windscreen at all. Chen was alarmed and turned her face to the windscreen. There, eight heavily built men were rushing towards them. She turned her face to him like an alarmed animal and saw his eyes staring at her like two poisonous daggers. Every muscle of his face seemed to be on the edge of explosion. Chen was frightened out of her wits for a second, but instinctively seized the key with her left hand from the ignition and tried to pull the door handle with her right. She did not reach it. Her left arm was grasped by Lei’s right hand and he pushed her whole body towards the door. Chen struggled with all her strength but she could not move an inch. In a few seconds she



saw a thirty centimeter long knife in the man's left hand.
She screamed.

Learning to Love Hong Kong

Because of the never-diminishing neon-lights.

Because of the meandering streets
Where I can find curry fish ball, egg tart and snake soup.

Because I walk as if I'm always in a hurry.

Because I am used to being less than several inches from another face,
Squaring my shoulders in the MTR
To avoid being squashed.

Because I can scarcely remember the Canadian National Anthem.

Because I participated in the July 1st demonstrations,
Holding the Blue and Yellow Umbrellas and
Demanding universal suffrage.

Because I differentiate myself from the people who
Squat and spit on the streets in Guangzhou.

Because I have stopped dreaming in English for 7 years.

Because I have many friends and relatives here.

Because this is where I call home.

Because even though I dream of returning,

I cannot risk going back by leaving
Everything.

Vivian Chik

Grin

By Wilson Ng Wai Cheong

He wonders when she will stop babbling.

“You know what, I couldn’t sleep last night... My neighbour wished me good luck and her dog licked my hands! Oh it was so cute... and then the bus passed through Central but oh no! Traffic jam! I hate traffic jams! You know what, it really got on my nerves...”

Keung glimpses her from the corner of his spectacled eyes – he could not understand why this tiny rustic lady, with a common name – Siu-ying, deserves so much attention. What makes her so special? Her face is tanned like the chocolate toast he had this morning, her hair is as “hedgehog” as everyone else finishing their 27-week hell-like training in Fanling Police College, and her body... he has no idea why it meets the “A-” standard rated by his colleagues 5 minutes after her arrival. Bluish short-sleeve shirt, black suit trousers, a set of equipment including a walkie-talkie, a handgun, a manacle and a truncheon, Keung does not think this combination could arouse any fantasy over this 1.6 metres tall girl wearing it. The only thing that Keung finds appreciable in Siu-ying is her grin. Although her teeth are not as perfectly white and neat as those blinks in the toothpaste advertisements, at least she is not stingy with her grins. However, besides her grins, Keung does not really like her. Perhaps it has nothing to do with her; perhaps he is just jealous of her fame, something that he never possessed, but she earned immediately after her arrival. How the men get crazy over Siu-ying reminds Keung of his old days in secondary school. Keung, with a normal height of 1.7 metres, thin but a little bit brawny, small eyes and a flat nose, could never compete with those 1.8-metre-tall sports team captains with their abdominal muscles in the shape of chocolate.

Siu-ying has been reciting her story since they started their patrol. Her favourite line “you know what” has occupied the auditory canals of Keung, forbidding any other sounds intruding its realm. Today they start their night beat at 10 p.m. and it is already 11 now. The sounds of the gates locking produced from the closing shops add some dull yet long-lasting “bangs” to this little prosperous city. Being the patrolman for 15 years, Keung could not count how many times has he seen these shops opening and closing. On morning beats he witnesses the shop keepers pulling the metallic gates up, turning on the lamps casting light on the shop windows, and installing the set of face and voice that they specifically used towards customers; on night beats he watches them locking down the gates, turning off the lights, uninstalling their working outfit and leaving the shop one after one. These openings and closings, like the coming and going of his colleagues, are just unavoidable repetitions in his life, and as routine and natural as the metabolism of cells in human bodies.

Passing the 300-metre-long shopping lane with fifty something shops lined up on one side, Keung and Siu-ying turn at the corner into a narrower alley. As the centre of the city, this district is complex and hybridised. Long shopping lanes dazzling with the window displays of luxury goods, museums with unique designs and themes, for example, a Space Museum in the shape of a Chinese pineapple bun, a view of the waterfront of the opposite coast across the harbour... all these features, alongside some 6-star hotels, has crowned this district with the reputation of a tourism foothold. However, like many other famous cities, this district is also full of illegal businesses. At night, the kaleidoscopic neon signs of saunas, pubs, clubs and sexual trade hang up in the air of allies one after one. Shocking pink, shining orange, sparkling yellow... different colours paint another picture

of the multidimensional city that could never be found on tourism promotions.

Keung and Siu-ying walk in the alley, under signs that eject heat over the street. Two foreign men with blond hair and pale green eyes cross the road and come to them. These two men, in the age of about 40, with the gigantic belly bulging out like a pillow hidden under their T-shirts, are holding a little palm-size book. They point their finger at the book and ask Keung and Siu-ying, “Excuse me, can you tell me how to get to here?”

“Sure!” Siu-ying reaches her hand out to the book, answers with a big grin towards the foreigners. However, 5 seconds after she pores onto the book, her grin disappears and her face flushes red. Her face becomes so red that she looks like she just performed a handstand for 5 minutes.

Recognizing that the noisy Siu-ying has suddenly become silent, Keung notices this must be a special book. Keung, who is at first standing behind Siu-ying and looking around, moves closer to take a look at it. Printed on that book with magazine papers are a photo of a half-naked woman and another picture of a signboard with the phrase “local taste” in Chinese. Underneath the pictures, there is an address with a phone number. The book name “Sex Guide” is printed on the corner of the page. Keung bites his lips with his teeth, so that he would not laugh out obviously.

Seeing Keung showing no sign of offering help, Siu-ying answers the foreigners with her face going redder and redder. She assists her words with her fingers pointing in various directions, finally receiving a “thank you” and the foreigners leave them to find their entertainment.

Knowing Siu-ying is still embarrassed, as the flush on her face is

still remaining, Keung tries to comfort her. “Disrespect is something that you will come across everyday; you still have a lot to experience. You could never imagine how people insult you, either intending or not intending to do so.” He pauses for a second, and continues before Siu-ying opens her lips. “You will be used to it soon. Remember, you are not a superwoman, you are just a policewoman, or just a woman.”

Keung stops in front of a convenience store. “Should we have a break?” he asks. Before Siu-ying can respond, “do du,” the shop entrance detector has already made the mechanic sound when Keung steps onto the white tiles on the shop.

15 years ago in this same convenience store, Keung’s partner told Keung the same thing that Keung is now telling Siu-ying. His partner had been a PC for decades, and that was his last day before he retired. It was a night that rain poured over the whole city. Keung’s partner bought a can of beer, “no one will go on the street under such messy weather,” he stood at the back of the shop and lit a cigarette, “so why don’t we just rest for a while. Night is long, and so is your remaining life. There is no use working that hard.” At that time, as a fresh graduate from the police college, Keung did not believe in what he was told. He thought if he worked with passion, and all the skills that he had learnt, he was going to become an outstanding policeman, receiving praise from everyone. Over the eave of the store, rain had formed a waterfall, covering the entrance of the convenience store. Some cars once in a while passed by the shop, their red and orange beam lights colourizing the waterfall. Keung thought it was just too beautiful.

After 15 years, Keung has not become the outstanding policeman that he believed he would be. It seems like he is following the path of his old colleague. Instead of the respect that he has not received much of, most days he only receives rudeness, impoliteness and

disrespectfulness. He has been censured as “cold-blooded” by drivers who received penalty notices against parking offences; he has been greeted with foreign foul language from tourists who have lost their way and do not feel satisfied with Keung’s help; he has been mocked by Triad members for being a powerless constable; and he has been dumped by his girlfriend for not having a promising future. Maybe he was too arrogant when he was young, and he had over-estimated himself. Perhaps after another 15 years go by, on a heavily raining mid-summer night, he will still walk past here, welcomed by the same “do du,” then leave his footprint on the white tiles, with the same model of black leather shoes he is now wearing. Or maybe it will be his last day, in which he tells the same doctrine of “policeman not superman” to his new partner, while he puffs away at a cigarette, misting the shop with a billow of smoke.

After the break, they resume their beat on the street. The stuffiness of the air has soaked away the mood of talking. Swinging their legs back and forth, with their hands kept behind their back, Keung thinks this silence may be the right companion of this lifeless yet cosy repetition. Midnight has gone by, yet the streets are somehow still filled with people. Some of them stand at the bus stop, frozen in their own postures towards the direction of the coming bus, like a line of statues coloured with different faces and costumes. Some young ladies walk from one pub to another, wearing sexy dresses that present themselves barely under other’s eyesight, draping on different colours of makeup over their faces. Some couples tangle with their lovers, meandering aimlessly. Keung and Siu-ying walk among the crowd quietly, without disturbing any of them.

They walk down into a strongly illuminated tunnel. “Bump, bump, bump,” their black leather shoes thud on the cement stairway, shooting

the dull footsteps into the tunnel. The white tungsten lights along the tunnel encircle them, projecting their silhouettes onto the walls of the tunnel.

“This tunnel is where one of our colleagues was killed by another 2 years ago, right?” Siu-ying asks.

“Yes.” Keung replies. It is a memory that he does not want to recall. He hopes the conversation can stop right here, but unfortunately it does not.

Siu-ying continues to ask, “did you know them?”

The pain of recalling the history starts to twist his heart. “Yes, I did.” Keung pushes the answer out of his throat. Fearing that Siu-ying would continue to ask, Keung randomly picks the pedestrian coming to them along the tunnel to check his identity card.

How could he forget that case? Kwok-hang, the colleague who was killed, had been his best friend at that time. They graduated from the police college in the same year, then they worked together as police constables in the same team for years. Unlike Keung, Kwok-hang was an optimistic guy that loved his job even though he also had never gotten promoted after working for years. Though his career was stuck like Keung’s, he could still teach Keung to treasure his life, to look at things with a positive perspective and learn to appreciate the world. But how ironic, the one who loved life was killed; while he, a pathetically useless guy, continues to live lifelessly in the world that he does not like.

On the night that Kwok-hang was killed, Keung was patrolling with another colleague along the seafront. All of a sudden the news was announced through the walkie-talkie wearing on his crest, “Attention, all units, crossfire in the tunnel at Canton Road, nearby units please get there as soon as possible...” Keung remembered that

tonight Kwok-hang's patrol route went by that tunnel, please, no... Leaving his partner who was checking the ID card of a man, Keung shot himself like a bullet towards the tunnel. On the previous night in the changing room, Kwok-hang was still flying around talking about his plan to volunteer for Médecins Sans Frontières in Africa, and he patted Keung on the shoulder while asking him to join... please, no... Keung's sweat was dripping onto his bluish shirt...

When Keung arrived at the tunnel, it was already full of other policemen. Different types of police vehicles settled at the entrances of the tunnels, the blue and red turning lights weaving together. He pulled up the blue and white plastic band used for isolating the area and got in. He squeezed himself through the crowd, finally saw that familiar face with a familiar appearance. The lively Kwok-hang had gone lifeless, and his shirt, soaked with blood, could no longer show its original colour...

Keung and Siu-ying are now walking along the seafront. With the view of the opposite coast across the harbour, this seafront is a favourite place of tourists and lovers. At night, there are still some stalls along the seafront, offering the services of taking photos or painting portraits. There are also ladies holding rattan baskets with sticks of roses inside; they go from one couple to another, selling their flowers.

"I love flowers," Siu-ying promptly says, with her eyes fixing upon the roses, "my sister had a flower shop before."

"Don't you think flowers are unworthy?" Keung answers. "And they are short-lasting, like love."

"No," Siu-ying bursts her answer out immediately, "they are worthy. Their value comes from their own existence; no matter if they live long or short, they are beautiful. Even the ugliest flower has its own beauty."

Keung had loved flowers when he was young. But now, flowers reminded him of his ex-girlfriend, his only ex-girlfriend. Their relationship started from a flower. They were in form 3 when they started. One day in the spring, when they were walking home together after school, Keung picked a flower from the clusters next to the road. He gave it to her and asked if she wanted to become his girlfriend. She halted and gave him a kiss on the cheek. The softness of lips touched his cheek; Keung felt the warmth was as cozy as the spring sunlight embracing them. The scent of her hair stimulated his aspirations of protecting this delicate lovely girl.

After form 5, Keung chose to become a policeman, a strong man that could protect the weak. At first, his girlfriend was proud to have a policeman boyfriend. She showed Keung around to her friends during different occasions, flying around like a variegated butterfly fluttering her beautiful wings among some moths. However, they broke up a few years later, because she said he could not give her a secure future. A week after they separated, Keung met her on the street when he was on duty. She was holding a bunch of flowers larger than the size of her upper body – maybe there were 99 roses – with her right hand, her left hand circling the arm of a man aged about 30, wearing suit and holding a suitcase.

Afterwards, Keung had tried to apply for a promotion test. However, without a good educational background, and the luck of coming across big cases to show his ability, he failed to get promoted. Making several attempts but still failing, Keung became more and more dispassionate in his job. Like a fire continuously splashed by water, one day, it would go out, leaving behind ashes that could hardly burn again. Old colleagues were promoted, new colleagues came in, this generational change has been repeated in his life numerous times;

while he remains a small potato, without much attention from anyone. Keung has forgotten his reasons for being a policeman.

All of a sudden Siu-ying darts towards the road. Before Keung wakes himself from his trance and sees what exactly is happening, “Zi.... Bang” – a squeal from an abruptly stopped car dashes into his ears, followed by a thunderous crash. Siu-ying is lying in the centre of the road, a few metres from the van that has been bumped concave in its head. On the right in front of the van, there sits a shaking kid, not crying, but tears are shedding on his pale white face.

Keung springs towards Siu-ying, who is cut all over her face and her arms, with holes sliced on her shirt and trousers. Blood is rushing out from those cuts. Some has dripped onto the floor, soaking the velvet cap fallen off her head. “One colleague injured in a car crash on Canton Road, please send help as soon as possible...” Keung speaks into the walkie-talkie as fast as a shooting machine gun. Siu-ying grins towards Keung and touches his hand, murmurs brokenly, “do you... remember... the little sis... sister of your girlfriend... who... who likes... playing with... robots...”

Memory flashes back to Keung’s mind, like a rewinding video recorder. The yellowed pictures of the past appear one after one, and he suddenly understands why the grin of Siu-ying is so familiar. “I told... you... I want... to... to... become a... good police... like you... I did... it... finally...” These words strike hard on the bell in Keung’s heart, waking him up from the soulless status that he has been living in. He has left his dream, his motivation, in the cruel reality. He once promised the little girl, that he would wait until she grew up and they would be good police together. But now, he is no longer a policeman; he is just a man disguised in a police uniform.

The ambulance has arrived and the ambulance men pull Keung



away to care for Siu-ying. Tears are running down his face, but they are not the tears of sadness. They are tears of epiphany.

Baking a Poem

Preheat a pair of typing or writing hands,
whichever is available and most comfortable.

Take out from fridge the brain, then
unfreeze completely.

Meanwhile, dance or read or sing or chat or run or toss and turn,
but never steam or microwave
to speed up thawing.

Sieve grins, tears, frowns, sweats, flesh and blood
into finite concentrate.
Reserve for use.

Squeeze from the unfrozen brain
solution of diamonds, thunder and sun.
Filter out conventions and typicality.

Measure alphabets with clarity and precision
to form diction.
(Note: This process is to be done with care!)

Mix filtered solution with measured diction.
Stir in slowly sieved concentrate.
Beat mixture with rhythm and imagery
until blended and smooth.



Bake with intense revision until golden.

Serve with human voices loud and clear, yet tender and soft.

Winifred Chan

Xiao Hungmao

Xiao Hungmao,
Or Xiao Hungjin
As you may call her.

She lives in a small village in Hebei.

One day, her mother tells her to
send her Nainai the Quotations from Chairman Mao Zedong.

Encountering the tongzhi¹ on the main road,
She is advised
not to pick flowers but to help out a steel smith.

Standing in front of her Nainai's little hut,
She is not
knocking the door, but ponders whether she should say
Ni hao ma? Or Nin hao ma?
Or does it matter?

Facing the giant mouth of Dai Huilang
She is not
saved by a bullet but a hoe.

Uttering thanks to the farmer,
She is not
saying simply thank you, but Long Live Chairman Mao.

Winifred Chan

¹ The most common salutation for addressing a member of the community, under Chinese Communism, meaning "people of the same interest or vision".

My Daughter, My Mother

By Corey Tso Wing In

My Mother

We dance around the ring and suppose, but the secret sits in the middle and knows.

— Robert Frost

On the ferry heading to Tsim Sha Tsui, Mammy's cell phone rings. It must be Daddy. I can tell. He always calls us on Sunday afternoon returning from Shenzhen. Mammy hands me the phone without a word.

"Hello Ling Ling, want to have lobsters for dinner tonight?"

Sitting around the table in Kan Bao Seafood Restaurant, Mammy's arms are folded in front of her breasts. I wind the paper sheath of the chopsticks into an ashen rose while Daddy is reading the menu.

"Do you want some shrimp?"

"Whatever."

"What about perch?"

"You decide."

"What kind of vegetable do you want?"

Mammy does not answer. Daddy's face starts to turn red and the edge of the menu is crumpled in his hand. He wears the same funny expression when he wants to blow up and restricts his temper at the same time. Daddy will never be mad at me. He gives me whatever I want. I receive gifts from him nearly every week. Sometimes it is clothes, sometimes it is sweets and sometimes it is a Barbie doll. Mammy gets gifts from Daddy too. Once I saw Daddy bring her a necklace with gold and diamonds. She closed the gift box with a loud "pop" sound and threw it into a drawer. I never saw her wear it. This

week, I get a new thirty-six color pencils set with a sharpener and a greenish eraser in the diamond-shaped metal box. Mammy glares at my pencils set, she hates it. She hates everything from daddy.

We visit grandpa and grandma every Saturday morning. Grandpa's voice is as loud as a bell. You can hear him right after you walk out of the elevator. This morning, he loudly requests grandma to prepare our lunch, as usual.

“OH PLEASE, can you be smarter? You know they are coming. Why don't you prepare the lunch before Ling Ling comes? What don't you make chicken wings? You know Ling Ling loves chicken wings.”

Standing at their door, I see grandma's chunky figure shuffle into the kitchen behind the iron gate. Grandma opens her mouth as if she wants to say something, but grandpa's voice is so loud that I can hear nothing else but his continuous curses.

“Grandma!”

Grandma turns around and smiles at me. She has the most sincere smile in the world. During the lunch, grandpa keeps complaining about the cold soup, salty fish and overcooked beef. Grandpa complains about every dish at every meal. He can find something new to complain about even though we have the same dishes every week. However, his favorite subject to complain about has remained unchanged for so many years – grandma. And grandma's tactic against grandpa's complaints remains unchanged too – silence. Sometimes, I really hope that Mammy can learn from grandma.

“Ling Ling, do you want to go to the Hong Kong Disneyland? Let's go there next weekend.”

“The examination period is coming. Do you remember that you failed mathematics last semester?” Mammy stares at me.

“The exam is in next month and I can tell that she has been making an effort. She is only seven years old, you can’t push her too hard.” Daddy smiles at me gently.

“How can you tell? You never check her homework, you never do the review with her, you never sign her dictionary book, how can you tell if she is improving or not?”

“The most important point is whether she is making an effort or not, not how many extra marks she can gain. I think my lovely daughter deserves a relaxing and happy weekend.” Daddy’s palm is huge and warm.

“If you want to go, you go alone. Ling Ling is doing review for the exam this weekend.”

Mammy makes me a new timetable every month, four weeks a month, seven days a week. She will color the grids in different colors: doing homework in pink, extra mathematics class in orange, practicing piano in yellow, reading English books in cyan, watching television in purple and rest in blue. My timetable is always blooming with bright colors.

Mammy says that I am her boss and she is my personal assistant because she takes me to school, cooks me meals, does reviews with me, plays with me and sometimes even accompanies to sleep. I remember that some weeks ago, at midnight, while Daddy was not at home again, Mummy came to my bed and embraced me in her arms as if I was still a little baby.

“Ling Ling, you are my only possession. You are my life,” Mammy said beside my ear, wetting my face.

Mammy is easily irritated. I have to wake up immediately when she bursts into my room in the morning or she will tell my teacher that I am a lazy girl. I have to help clean up the table after dinner or

char siu, barbequed pork, would make a better daughter than me. I cannot decline Mammy's suggestions about my diet, my schedule, my hobbies or even my use of color in my drawings or I am ungrateful to her kindness. I cannot ask Mammy to take me to Daddy's factory or I am a brat because only evil men go to Shenzhen and evil women live there.

Yesterday in the writing class, my teacher Miss Yuen asked us to write about our family. So, I wrote: I have a father, a mother and no siblings, though I would like to have some. My father is the manger of a garment factory in Shenzhen. So, he stays in the factory from Monday to Friday and only comes home during the weekends. Though we see each other only once a week, I know that Daddy loves me a lot. My mother is a beautiful woman but she seldom wears a smile on her pretty face. Mammy is always unhappy, and she cries a lot. Last week was my sixth birthday, so Dad brought me a Hello Kitty watch with a pink leather strap. I like it a lot and Kei Kei, my best friend, likes it too. So, I lend it to her to wear for two lessons. I love my father a lot. I want to marry a boy just like my father when I grow up.

My Daughter

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep. But I have promises to keep,
and miles to go before I sleep.*

—Robert Frost

My daughter visited me nearly every week these days. When she appeared in front of my door more and more often, I was not surprised. She would spend the whole afternoon playing with the two dogs or reading in her old bedroom. There were three large bookcases up to the ceiling in her room. The books were arranged in terms of categories: old textbooks, fashion magazines, designs books, Chinese novels, English novels, and the latest division – childcare. Mei Ling had been pregnant for more than six months. The day when she brought me the news, I could see that, in her eyes, there was something other than happiness.

“Have you told Ronald yet?”

“Yes, this morning on the phone. He is more than happy. And we have agreed that we should start thinking about establishing an education fund for the child. We will both contribute to the fund every month...”

“He is a professional accountant and you two have to worry about money?”

“No, it is not what he means. He just wants to offer the baby the best quality of life and education. It is not a bad idea, we should prepare for his future.”

Her facial expression reminded me of that particular evening when Mei Ling and Ronald had their first date.

“Why you come home so late? Lots of assignments? Have you eaten your dinner yet? What about I make you some noodles?”

“I had dinner already...with my high school friend.” She gave me

a pregnant smile.

“Kei Kei has returned to Hong Kong? I thought she graduates next year.”

Later, I found out that it was not Kei Kei, it was Ronald. Mei Ling and Ronald were indeed high school classmates. Only, Ronald and Kei Kei had been in the science stream and Mei Ling in the art stream. After high school, they furthered their studies in Australia and Mei Ling enrolled in the City University of Hong Kong, in fashion design.

“How’s the date?”

“Ma, you’ve asked too much.” She smiled.

In my daughter’s eyes, Ronald was the most romantic man in the world.

“He delivered a bowl of sweet soup to my classroom just because I said I was thirsty. He drove for forty-five minutes, from Ma On Shan to CityU, just to see me for fifteen minutes, and drove another forty-five minutes to go back to his family gathering. While I was rushing to finish my term paper at 1am at school, he waited outside the university library for more than two hours and accompanied me home.”

Ronald’s love for Mei Ling was almost unconditional except for one thing: they go Dutch for everything.

“I think it is reasonable. You know, we are both students and he is not permitted to have part-time jobs as a foreign student in Australia. His parents pay for all his fees. I would have turned him into a son without filial piety if he buys me extravagant dinners, right? Ma?”

I know Mei Ling craved love and concern, especially after her father’s departure. Time and attention were what this stingy boy could offer my daughter, the exact opposite of her father.

Mei Ling’s love-story telling was suspended for a while when

Ronald returned to Australia for the new semester. Though the telephone bill rocketed to more than two thousand dollars a month, I didn't say a word. At that time, I believed it was because Mei Ling was bored and lonely.

In the summer, that half-happy, half-uncertain expression came back to my daughter's face. Ronald was returning to Hong Kong for his term break in July. One afternoon, I caught Mei Ling staring hesitantly at her passbook.

"You've got a letter."

She received the letter with her left hand and pulled a magazine to cover the passbook with the right. That night, the phone kept ringing. To my surprise, it was not Ronald.

"Hi Auntie Chan, it's Kei Kei. Would you please put Mei Ling on the phone? I need to talk to her."

Mei Ling grasped the phone and scurried back to her room. The door was closed. Her dim voice came through a crack in the door.

"I know what you are going to say...he is not that kind of person... his PARENTS are rich, not HIM...we are both students...I work as a part-time tutor, I can afford that...three thousand dollars is a lot of money, but not THAT much...he wouldn't even come back if it is not for me...last year, he didn't come back...I think it is acceptable...not the full fare, but only my share..."

I was startled, not only because of his request, but also my daughter's blind obedience. If three thousand dollars could buy my daughter three weeks of happiness, I thought it was worth it. And it was. The changes were astonishing. The introverted, sensitive and melancholy girl transformed into a happy, talkative and outgoing person.

One evening, Mei Ling came home with a large bunch of flowers

and a slender rectangular-shaped and limpid trophy. On the trophy, it read: Champion, *Best Designer, Hong Kong Youth Fashion Designer's Contest*. Later, she showed me a collection of pink calico dresses. On the tag of every dress, the name of the collection – flawless love – was printed. The crystal-like trophy was at the corner of her desk, the rest of which was occupied by countless sketches, colored pens, fragments of fabric, pictures and a laptop. She said she wanted the trophy to be placed in the middle of her room so that she could look at it when she was exhausted by the work or ran out of new ideas.

At the dinner celebrating Mei Ling's promotion as the chief designer of a fashion retail and franchise, the sparkle of the diamond on Mei Ling's finger distracted my attention from the dainties.

"Ma, we are getting married. We would like to have your blessing."

In Ronald's eyes, I could see delight, confidence, certainty and rationality. However, I could only see desire and stubbornness in Mei Ling's.

That very night, Mei Ling came to my bed.

"Ma, we have decided. We want to share our life. We want to share everything. I need him and I know he loves me too."

"If he really wants to share everything with you, why was he so stingy about who paid for tonight dinner?"

"It's only because we are both well-educated and independent. I am very proud that I can sustain my own living and contribute to our family." Mei Ling was almost shrill.

Silence.

"Say something, Ma?"

"You have a career, you have money, what can I say?"

One year after the wedding, Mei Ling was pregnant. This newly-

wedded couple brought me not only a grandchild, but also those exotic ideas about independence, fairness and equality. To me, they only meant calculation.

Mei Ling spent more time with me when her maternity leave started and Ronald was not in Hong Kong. He was promoted to director of the Hong Kong branch of his accounting firm and had to travel between Hong Kong, Shanghai and Beijing frequently. One evening after dinner, we rested on a couch and watched TV. Accompanied by occasional laughter from the television, I peeled an orange and handed Mei Ling half. She did not take it.

“Ma, do you love me? Am I precious to you?”

“Of course, my daughter. You are more precious to me than my life.”

“Then why do you give me only half, not the whole?” Mei Ling swept the orange onto the floor.

“What are you talking about? Hey, Mei Ling!” I followed her into her room.

“Mei Ling! What’s happened?”

“I am fed up with the damn fairness. I hate to calculate who contributes more and who takes less. I am not an accountant and there is no fairness in love.”

She whacked the table so heavily that a pile of design books fell and knocked against the trophy. It hit the floor before either of us were quick enough to catch it. The flawless love was shattered into pieces.

Weather Forecast

There is a hurricane in the city
and nobody seems to be on the run.
Yes, there is a hurricane
and no one is running.

She wakes up in the morning
and looks out the window.
The bamboo scaffolding she sees,
she could merely see.

Peeping through the window frame
she sees the Wongs in the opposite flat.
It is the last time they see each other,
she knows.

The ancient staircases,
The florescent signboard of Fat Kee,
which is proudly posed,
will soon be torn.

O! A plight!
The forty year-old dower from the Great Britain!
Now the hurricane comes
to grab them away.

There is a hurricane in the city
but nobody seems to be on the run.

One day the city will be overthrown
and there'll be nowhere for us to go.

Eva Lo



The Salted Corpses We Ate

The salted corpses we eat
Bit by bit,
Come from the mythical Eden,
Where the dead are prickled,
Naked and dangled
In everybody's garden.
By choosing to consume them,
Like eating His body
And drinking His blood,
We are helping to sustain
Their eternal life.

Eva Lo



Through a Looking Glass

By Wenny Chan

She felt the man finger her soft breasts and thighs, touching her body carefully as if it was a piece of delicate glass ornament. She wanted it. Her arms encircled the man's neck and her legs tightened around his hips. The man's hair smell of oil, sweat, and old cigarettes. She muffled a handful of kisses on the rough skin of his neck. His body responded to her before he could protest. The man's breath quickened. It hit her as a smooth breeze and sent her to the peaks of her happiness. Their hips were now moving in perfect harmony, and their bodies were merging into one divine wholeness like a well-instructed Beethoven symphony.

This was the one hundredth time they made love to each other in this year.

It was her favourite time of the day. Lorrie especially enjoyed these private nights she shared with him. All the world was undone. There was nothing between them. No clothes to separate them, and no other people to stand between them. Their worlds consisted of only themselves. Everything else was unnecessary. They were the others she would not give a damn about. She could only own him in these moments they shared. In the mornings, his wife was always there, between them and separating them.

Lorrie inhaled his presence again into the depths of her soul. She felt a sudden urge to cry to remember how very close their bodies were. The feelings pulling at her skin told Lorrie that bodies won't tell lies. His body rising and falling with her moans told her he loved her. She believed him.

They met in the bar called Blues in the loud streets of Lan Kwai

Fong ten years ago, when she was barely nineteen and he was thirty-nine. He spotted her because she was the only one to dance wearing a dark bra-strap top and a flaming red miniskirt. She noticed his sharp eyes piercing through her soul through the people and the loud music. He whispered in her ears that he was interested in her and asked if she wanted to go out with him. She was attracted to him, a charismatic mixture of matureness, skill, experience and the smell of money and power that differs from the men of her age. The unshaven beard, the clean-cut head, the damp hairy skin revealed along the edge of his shirt, the gold Cartier on his right wrist, the polished silver cufflinks on his sleeves, the smell of expensive cologne under his breath, the sparkling diamond ring on his fourth finger, and the pair of sharp desperate eyes full of animal desire. She could not resist. She said yes, kissing the stranger a dangerous kiss, unaware what it would bring to her future and his.

This had been the first time they had made love.

It was the music.

The loud beat of the music, mixed with the chattering scattered voices from here and there, combined into a compelling force larger than life that spoke to her. It was Lorrie's third cup of champagne this night. She looked down at the glass she was holding in her hand. She had always liked the glasses of wine, elegantly standing and displaying the yellow liquor through the glass. She was beginning to lose balance on her feet, on the shaky ground on which she was merely standing by. She lost the sense of her limbs, her thinking, her body, and her mind. She was not herself anymore. She could be anyone she imagined. She was happy. She gave all of herself to the music, the voices. She couldn't stop to care how others looked at her, the distanced looks of

her friends, her parents' disapproving smile, how her mum scolded her, swearing Lorrie was not her daughter anymore, and the last word she heard from her family. It all faded away with the music beating lively and loudly in her pulse. She was happy for what she was not.

She sensed hundreds of men's lusting eyes upon her and she felt proud of herself and the body her mother had given her. She was a beautiful doll. She was the object of desire. She was the queen of this night. It was the hallucinatory music, the hallucinatory wine, the hallucinatory dim lights of the pub that made it all look wonderful.

She saw a man approaching her with a cup of champagne as the lure in his hand. This was another night, same as the countless thousands of nights in the never-ending number of nights that followed. Tomorrow would be another day. When it came, the night would end. And she had to return to her own world, the world where she belonged and which she hated. And yet tomorrow would be another night for her. There would always be another night, another man, another hotel room. This was how she passed her nights when he did not come to her.

Lorrie winked back at the man.

The sunlight penetrating through the blinds of her large house in Causeway Bay marked the start of a day. Lorrie disliked every morning. She did not count the number of mornings. It did not matter to her. She did not remember the days. The days were all the same. It all blurred into the same month, the same year, the same life. When morning came, his name always became a forbidden whisper on her lips. Yet she could not stop thinking about him. To pass the days more easily, she began a habit of carefree shopping, buying anything that caught her eyes with the huge sums of money he gave her in a cheque every month.

Of all the things Lorrie bought, the thing Lorrie bought most were diamonds. All kinds of diamonds. Lorrie was obsessed with diamonds. But her obsession in diamonds started from her fondness for glass. During the endless afternoons, she would polish all the glass cups, glass dishes, glass tables, glass shelves, glass windowpanes and kitchen utensils, glass vases, and glass ornaments in her deserted house. She loved the shiny surface of the glass that caught the different dim reflections of herself under the sunlight. Since she was young, she had been fascinated by glass. The transparency of the glass, seemingly there but not there at the same moment, a duality of contradicting existences.

One day, her primary school teacher had taken their class to a nearby glassmaking factory. Under several hundred degrees of boiling temperature, the liquid glass was like water. The artist had to blow it into different shapes while it was hot, adding different oxides to colour to the final product. The glass would then be frozen forever in that state when it was cooled. It was a miracle to her that so many different kinds of glass existed in this world. The difference in the shapes of glasses was the beautiful capturing of the momentary motions of the liquid glass.

When she was older, she learned from science lessons how to look for the rainbow reflected in the prism. She was amazed, although she never caught the rainbow she wanted.

In a spring carnival in Tai Lam, she won a goldfish with him in a game of shooting. She named the gold fish Little Lorrie. She put it into a wide goldfish bowl, feeding it every day, buying lots of beautiful decorations for it. During many lonely afternoons, she would look at it. Its large eyes would stare right back at her, seeming to understand her. It was her only friend, trapped in the same fancy glass house. But

it was inside this glass house that he had bought for her, that she felt safe and protected.

During the gloomy rainy days, Lorrie's mood was the happiest. She would sit by the window when she was at home to watch the raindrops gliding slowly down the glass. It was that beautiful picture that touched her. She loved the rich moisture in the air that nourished her. She loved the calmness and stillness it brought to the days, like a pause between the weeks and months. And she especially loved the pale grey colour of the sky, a blending of day and night.

Sometimes, Lorrie would go out to walk in the rain with her dark-coloured umbrella, feeling raindrops falling down to her head under the shield of her umbrella. In this parachute-shaped umbrella blocking the views of her and others, Lorrie felt safe. No one would come to disturb her. She was in a little world of her own.

On these rainy days, she did not have to worry about distinguishing between morning and night. In the sunlight, he belonged to a woman she was not allowed to talk about in front of him. She was the woman of daylight. And Lorrie was the woman of the night.

It was night again. His hand slipped through the clutch of her fingers and reached for a glass of water in the small coffee table near the sofa he was sitting. She could smell an undertone of alluring woman's perfume under his strong and refreshing smell of cologne, like a trail of sweet flowery scent that obtrusively lingered in the air of this living room. She knew at once. But she said nothing and looked away from him. She hated him and she felt a sudden urge to kill herself, for he was already a part of her. If he died, she died. He was the flesh of her soul, and the reason for her living.

And yet, he made her suffer. He did not look at her in the eye. She was a tiny ant that was trapped in an enormous bell jar. She felt like a doll again. A beautiful toy that was inanimate and expressionless.

It was difficult not to care, for she had cared far too much and more than she could and far too long to come to a stop now. She loathed him with a shade of love, and she loved him with a tinge of loathing. Her two contrasting emotions twisted with each other so intensely that they had become inseparable grapevines, all clinging to him. To her, he was the god and the demon, her savior and her abuser. He was the cause of her suffering and the cause of her joy. He was everything to her. She loved him with all of herself and more than herself. She hated him the way she would have hated herself, with forgiveness and lies.

Her anxiety grew most during the night. She began to have nightmares. In her endless nights, she dreamed that she was a piece of glass to be broken by the man she loved. He was going to destroy her. She could have easily left him, but she did not move a single finger. Because, this was also the creator who had made her into this beautiful piece of glass, shining and reflecting different shades of colours. He had made her into what she was now.

As days went by, she drifted in and out of these nightmares of her life.

“She came yesterday,” was the first thing Lorrie said when he came in on Sunday morning.

Looking up from his newspaper, the man asked: “What did she say?”

“To leave you. And she called me a fox in front of everyone. A fox!” Lorrie said in a trembling voice.

“Of course you aren’t. Oh my,” the man said calmly, putting

his hand over his forehead, revealing a troubled expression. “Don’t worry. I will settle this.”

Lorrie turned to look him in the eye.

“Settle this. Settle that. I am tired of these things. Do you really plan to stay like this with me forever?”

“I don’t know, Lorrie. You know I can’t divorce her. I have kids. I love you too, Lorrie. Isn’t that enough?”

“It has been ten years like this. I’m getting tired and old.”

“Time knows nothing.”

“Yeah, time knows nothing. So do you.”

“Lorrie?”

The man touched Lorrie’s hand and Lorrie pulled her hands back.

In the night, the man embraced her and they made love again. Lorrie tried not to think. She wanted to let everything that was not crucial now fall away. But Lorrie found that she woke up making love to a man that could not hear her voice. She was making love to a wall.

For months, it went by without changing. They quarreled. They made up. They made love. They quarreled again. Every time it was the same topic. The same decision. The same cycle. It was a vicious cycle running endlessly, in complete tiresome circles. Lorrie was tired of this relationship, tired of them. She felt for the first time that nothing would save them. It was all going to end. It was the last thing she wanted. But the pain and suffering would all end. She would start a new life, with a new man.

“Why can’t you just leave her and end everything? You said you love me! Please don’t go! Don’t, don’t leave me alone,” Lorrie begged him at the door.

“I need to go back because she is my fucking wife! And who are you? You are nothing!” The man’s hand furiously pushed everything on the glass table onto the floor with a loud crash.

She watched the fishbowl crumble into nothingness in front of her. She kneeled and picked up the broken pieces of the glass fishbowl. Her fingers were shaking. She looked at the golden fish lying in front of her, its body rising and falling with each dying breath. She lifted the fish with tears rolling down her face and suddenly let go of the dead body.

She turned to him. She plunged towards him with sudden force. She stabbed the man in his left chest with the sharp piece of broken glass she was clutching with her right hand, feeling the bumping of his little heart, bumping lively against her large and deadly weapon. She looked straight into the man’s shocked eyes. The man she had spent her most beautiful and precious youthful years with. She looked at her love, the love that had haunted her.

She stabbed the man again and again, repeating the action with sharp precision, with all the force she had, with all the life within her, with all the love she had, like an artist carving her final masterpiece to a godlike perfection. Until the cuts of his skin blurred into one deep hole and could not be distinguished from each other, she stopped.

She steadied herself before the bloody scene in front of her eyes. She gathered her weapons in slow motion. She got up and reached for the door and walked out into the chilly weather. Cold wind brushed against her face and body. Drops of rain fell down hard onto her dull face. She walked on.

This is the last story that happened in the middle of the night before winter ended.

South China Morning Post

23 March 2008, Tuesday

By reporter Debby Leung

A forty-year old man, Lawrence Cheng Pak-Chek, has been found dead in a flat in Causeway Bay today. Cheng is married, has two children, a ten-year-old and a five-year-old. Neighbours said Cheng is a good husband and that he and his wife seldom argue. According to the police investigation, Cheng had been seeing a woman for several years. She is currently under arrest, waiting to be on trial in court on Monday.

The deputy Police officer, Lau Hiu-Wai, said it was a typical case of love murder. It was the fifth love murder case this year.

The Hong Kong Story

She slips on her high heels,
He waits for the yellow double decker bus;
She sweats on her way to work,
He takes a glimpse at the magazine covers;
She passes by a beggar,
He stops by for milk tea take-away at the corner;
She pauses to straighten out her skirt,
He shrugs at the rain...

Summer time –
She hates the stuffiness,
He loves the sunshine;
She hates the typhoons,
He loves the wind;
They live together but
They never commune.

People willingly trade away
Family and relationships
For better eating, drinking, and
High-class living.

She quits her job – her hubby doesn't love her,
He stares at the screen: the stocks are falling;
She buys a plane ticket – Canada might be better,
He forgot where he put his tie; he needs it for work
– Where is his wife?

She flies away,
He stays, for his boss is easily maddened.

Will this be the story
of countless Hong Kong lives?
When divorce rates are rising,
the population aging;
As babies refuse to be born,
Dumped into hospital waste bins
instead of being loved and pampered
In million dollar homes on the Peak.

Instead of loving and pampering their infants
They love and pamper themselves.

I sit sighing
hoping this will not be
The ultimate Hong Kong story.

Johanna Ma

Me, Alone

Where do the people go at night?
Time Square is empty, but full of lights.

Why does the city feel so cold in the summer?
Even the old pigeons start to flutter.

How do people survive in such a place?
It is difficult to stay in this conscious state.

Where is the music that was once played?
Where are the crafts and monuments once made?

There used to be this and that there,
The city no longer looks fair.

The skies are no longer blue,
Every couple of years there comes some kind of weird flu.

Life was once very simple,
Just like spotting a child with a dimple.

Happiness was easy to achieve,
but now every one wants to leave.

It is no longer what it is,
Maybe it is just me, but reality is this.

Joseph Kwan

Found and Lost

By Stan Chu Shing Tak

My father has always told me to stay out of trouble. The reasons were, as he said, first, that this was traditional Chinese wisdom; second, troubles were simply troublesome. To do this – it was easy -- I just did not care about others' business. Just leave it be. Because either helping or harming someone would put you in someone else's way.

And, I had always stayed out of any kind of trouble.

This motto was particularly vital to a person like me who had been put in a “near-anarchical” and chaotic band three school where the fist was often the first and last resort to solving a problem. If you ever put your trust in teachers and annoyed them by reporting an incident, you were merely looking for more trouble for everyone, including yourself.

Now, it was June. People were complaining about the hot weather which forced them out of the mood for class, as though they had been in it for some time. All of us, students and teachers, were looking forward to the summer holidays. To me, this would be good because the big guys would not bully me as frequently.

However, strange things always happened in June.

Today, the teacher brought in a new guy after lunch. No one would expect a late enrollment like that. And that was the first time I saw Sam. I was very impressed by him, like everyone was – because he was just so different from us. He wore those kinds of old-fashioned glasses with huge yellowish-brown plastic frames which I thought people abandoned in the 90's. his bright white shirt and pants were properly ironed to a nice straight crease – although the pants were a bit too short for him, making the white socks and black glossy shoes so

noticeable. His appearance was a total mismatch of old and new.

“Class, this is Sam Chen. Now get to your seats,” the teacher said powerlessly, and then turned to the computer without giving the class a single glance. “This is a self-study lesson. Do whatever you like. No fighting or you’ll be in trouble, understand?”

Without being assigned a seat, the boy went to the seat in the far corner of the classroom, taking out a textbook, readying himself for the class. Perhaps much to his disappointment, unfortunately, this was not a place to learn. It looked like he was from some kind of educated and well-off family. Why didn’t his mum know about this school?

He just sat there doing nothing but repeatedly copying a piece of news for the whole lesson. Then the day was done and he went home alone.

My school had a stupid scheme to force students to use reusable utensils for lunch. This made the toilets very crowded because everyone would need to wash theirs after using them. Sam was aware of this also. I saw him eating with an aluminum spoon. But he suddenly dropped the spoon and rushed to the toilet. Maybe he had an upset stomach or something. Anyway, I would not care about others’ business as long as I was fine.

I went to the toilet to wash my fork. Only half-way, I already saw people congregating outside the open door of a toilet. Distant sounds of laughter and cheering, loud like thunder, struck my ears. I hurried and fought my way through the crowd. Before I could see anything, I felt little drops of water splashing on my face, and then I saw the big guys pouring water on the new guy, Sam. He was sitting there on the floor with his head down, weeping. His glasses almost slipped down from the tip of his nose.

“Dirty little shit! Let us clean you up! You do not have to thank

us...haha!” yelled Leo, one of the biggest guys in the class. Sam was completely silent. He did not try to evade them, he didn't even move a bit. The crowd chattered in a low voice.

“Our new friend is much cleaner. Hahaha! Let's go!” Leo led the big guys away, and the crowd also slowly vanished in disappointment. Only Sam and I were left in the toilet.

It became so quiet. There was only Sam's quiet weeping and the sound of the ventilation fan. I took his arm and helped him stand. He was all wet. His uniform was swelling in water and tears, maybe urine too.

“You okay?” I asked.

“Yes.” He tried to dry himself with a piece of paper tissue which had also been wetted. It started to fall to pieces as he rubbed.

“Here, take this. Use some dry ones. Ermmm...you can actually go to the general office. They can help you dry your uniform with the iron. Real fast. They are experienced in handling situations like this.”

“Hmm. Thanks.” He took my tissue and left.

As soon as he left, I realized I might have done something wrong – why should I care about others' business anyway? Maybe Leo would turn on me later. Fortunately he was not there when I had talked to Sam. Did I look like a hero of some kind? I looked into the mirror – No.

Sigh.

When I returned to the classroom, Sam's seat was already empty. And I went home alone.

The images of Sam and the incident still coiled in my mind long after I got home. Although these things were not rare in our school, they were unusually bothersome to me this time. Sam lying and weeping on the floor was still so vivid in my mind. I was beginning to go crazy –

but I did not even know this guy.

So unthinkable.

This was the first time in my life that I was trying to get away from my father's motto.

There had been rumours about Sam – they said Sam was a mad guy. He was stupid and could not control himself. I didn't know anything about those rumours. All I knew was that Sam always sat in the corner of the classroom repeatedly copying passages. He was now copying one from the newspaper. Diligent and quiet, that's exactly how teachers wanted their students to be. But such students, and such teachers, had never existed here. Look at Leo...oh, he was not here; look at Matt over there. Only came to school to talk to girls. Unlike Sam...but he was not here either.

The absence of both Sam and Leo did not make me feel quite right. The images of the incident in the toilet a few days ago started to occur in my mind again.

I rushed to the toilet. Oh God! Please don't let that have happened again. My heart was beating harder than it ever had. Could Leo be pouring something else on Sam this time? He might pour gasoline and set fire to Sam and then put it out himself and laugh at Sam. Oh, Sam! But what if Leo and Sam were there? Who was I to actually do anything.

I kicked open the door. It was quiet. That, however, was the first time I saw it with my own eyes – Sam was there washing his hands so anxiously and hysterically. I stood there, watching him wash his hands for a minute or so. He was not stopping or slowing down. I slowly walked towards him.

“Sam?”

He kept washing without saying a word or even giving me a glance.

In fact, I did not think he heard me or even noticed me.

He finally stopped. He was staring at the washbasin.

“Erm...don’t worry. Things will be better when you grow up,” I tried to comfort him.

Sam looked at me, with his hands down. But he did not say anything.

“Really, I used to wet my bed when I was small. Now it’s gone.”

“I am normal. I don’t wet my bed. I promised before that I’d be normal.”

“I didn’t mean that you wet your bed...”

“Sorry, but I have no idea what you’re talking about. I am leaving now. Excuse me.”

For the second time, I was left alone in the toilet. So the rumours were true. Sam was up to something.

There was a shortcut behind our school which lead to the bus stop. We called that the “secret path” – a secret path that was known to everyone. But very few of us would use that path, because first, it was very muddy, particularly in the summer, anyone who walked past it would get a thick layer of yellow mud which looked very unpleasant on their shoes; second, it was the home of many unfriendly and hungry mosquitoes.

I was on the path today. Sometimes it was good to be alone when you went home.

“Damn! It is Leo and his friends,” I thought to myself.” Why must you stand in my way all the time?” When I was about to turn around, I suddenly thought it was just weird for them all to be standing there. I looked into the crowd and discovered Sam was lying there again.

“It’s Sam! I must do something...but wait, Toby Wang, it is not your business anyway. And who are you...damn! Forget about the

motto! Your friend is in need.” I mustered all the courage I had and approached them. Leo and his gang turned around and looked at me, right in my eyes.

“Go away, Leo!” I wanted to say, but I did not hear myself saying that. “Hello Leo,” I heard instead. I felt my legs shivering, the muscles on my face losing control and beginning to squeeze into a smile.

“Little Toby! What are you doing here? You know him? He’s a loser. Don’t ever approach him. You a friend of his?” Leo put a burning cigarette right in Sam’s face.

“No...” I faked another smile. I felt my back was already sweating. “How would I know him? Ha...” I looked the other way. My face was hot, as if it were burning.

Leo laughed out loud and stroked my arse as he led his guys away. Sam stood up and picked up the broken pieces of his glasses along with some flowers he must have picked earlier. A few drops of blood from his bleeding nose hit the ground. His shirt was full of dirt. He carefully put the flowers into a jar and slowly stood up.

What could I do this time? Tell him things would be better later? No, I had already told him that; tell him I would help him when he was in trouble? But what had I been doing just now? My feet felt like they were glued to the ground. I could only see him walking away.

I wished there was a way to shake that ill feeling inside me.

It was Sunday morning. I was wandering in the street alone. It had been a few days since Sam had last come to school. What could he be thinking? Why hadn’t he come to school these last few days before the summer holidays began? Was he so afraid of Leo now? I swore I wouldn’t let that happen again. I wanted to tell him I would really stand up for him. Even though I was no match for Leo, I had a cell phone and could call the police. How I wished I could meet him by

chance in the street now.

The sky was getting dark. It might rain very soon. I quickly fetched myself a newspaper and went home. I did not normally read the newspaper. I only glanced quickly at the headline. The headline today was “OCD sufferer committed suicide.” I could not believe what I saw – the picture of Sam. I read on and the newspaper said: “Sam Chen, 15, a patient of OCD (obsessive compulsive disorder) committed suicide in his home yesterday...” It went on to report that Sam had been forced to study in a conventional school due to his mother’s expectations of him. His parents had divorced many years ago. What followed were some stupid interviews with some so-called experts who only knew to tell people to seek help when they needed it.

Now the whole picture of the story suddenly became clear to me. Heated tears quickly flooded my eyes. I was kneeling in the living room, crying for someone I could barely call a friend. The “15” on the paper became blurry. Now that Sam would never grow old, his problem would remain untreated, and the memory of my cowardice would remain with me for the rest of my life.

Wait

I know you are waiting
in the early hours of day, under the twilight of dawn breaking through
the curtains,

in front of your computer screen, before your eyes fail you.

I know you are waiting

lying down, facing the grey white ceiling of your bedroom, seeing
with closed eyes,

while the world slowly wakes and passes you by.

I know you are waiting

with the mid-day sun urging you into action, telling you with a tired
voice

that it is time.

I know you are waiting

leaning against the bus stop sign in the middle of nowhere
across the enormous yellow field that stares at you in the eye.

I know you are waiting

as you pace inside your office, where you move like a robot while
you fulfil the endless tasks

that keep you alive.

I know you are waiting

while the dusk falls, covering the sky with a pitch black curtain
as you look up and wish
to bid the stars goodnight.

I know,

I know you are waiting,

waiting even when you close your eyes and hope
for someone to tell you



that everything is fine.
I know you are waiting
by the dying light of candles, wishing the game will be over
as the wheels keep turning
and send you reeling towards another ride.

Louisa Leung

A Beautiful Mind

By Vivian Yu Wai Chik

The national anthem sounded as the prelude to the evening news at six-thirty. Ah Jun was mindlessly flipping through pages of *A History of Architecture* that he had borrowed from the Architecture Library at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He was a tall, angular young man in his twenties and his fair complexion was a contrast to the dark circles under his small eyes. He was sitting on the tattered mattress in the living room of their 400 ft public housing estate in Tin Shui Wai. Apart from the old mattress, the only furniture was a 15-inch second-hand television on a wall cabinet and some folded wooden tables and chairs which would only be opened for dinner and studies. There were also many folded cardboard boxes placed against the walls which Ah Jun and Ah Mei picked up and sold during the weekends. His 14-year old sister, Ah Mei was cooking dinner in the kitchen. She had inherited the slightly-curved hair and protuberant eyes of her father. Her cheeks gave a slight blush without the help of any make-up. Her height and the size of her breasts had grown over the months as a sign of her reaching puberty. The waft of scrambled eggs with cha siu reached Ah Jun's nose.

“Ah...my favourite dish! Ah Mei, let me help you!” said Ah Jun, as he put aside his book and stepped into the kitchen.

Crouching down to reach the rice-cooker on the floor, he ladled rice into the chipped porcelain bowls. His head turned at the sound of the metal gates screeching as his father entered. Chiang was swaying a little, carrying in one hand a plastic bag with half a dozen cans of Qing Dao Beer and in the other hand an open can. Ah Jun lowered his head as he carried the bowls and the plate of cha siu fried eggs to the

table. His father was seldom home as he was usually either gambling in Macau or too drunk to find his way home. His unexpected return had frightened his wife — Xiao Hung. Xiao Hung's pale and wrinkled skin betrayed her fifty years of age. Her eyes were usually glazed as they stared at nothing. Ah Jun saw his mother's eyes turn from emptiness to fear as she saw her husband return home. She fearfully retreated into their only bedroom and shut the door.

“Dinner's still not ready! Don't you know your old dad's hungry! What a waste of my money to bring you two up, both of you are as useless as these bits of cha siu!” Chiang's moustache quivered as he bellowed and stuck his plump bottom onto the round wooden stool.

He then stuck his chopsticks into the scrambled eggs and gorged himself. He took several large slurps of beer and his puffy eyes followed Ah Mei into the kitchen.

“Mei Mei's becoming so much prettier, a big girl now,” he said, his words blurred as his previous drinking took effect.

Ah Mei quickly hid herself in the kitchen and busied herself boiling the choi sum, pretending that she had not heard her father.

Ah Jun took the wooden stool opposite his father as the evening news broadcast began. The television showed representatives from the International Committee of Red Cross reporting on the numbers of rescues they had made today in the aftermath of the devastating South Asian Tsunami. Ah Jun looked at the toppled buildings in the background and wondered how many years it would take to rebuild not only the houses, but also the community that had taken many years to establish. He felt the weakness of man against nature, just as he felt weak against his father and against the community he lived in.

“A Hong Kong couple rescued yesterday in Phuket was found to have cheated social security allowances for 10 years. The couple

had divorced ten years ago but records reveal that they had gone to Thailand together several times in the past 5 years. It is believed that they divorced so as to receive the greater sum of allowances for single-parent families,” the news reporter said as she stood amongst the rubble with the destroyed buildings behind her.

A surge of hatred clenched his heart as Ah Jun swore silently through gritted teeth. These were the people who caused his mother and sister so much suffering. In his fury, he remembered the words he had heard through their iron gate several months before.

“I don’t know how the family can feel no shame.”

“Yes! To consider that the father and mother are not crippled! They can work, can’t they? What a shame to live on other people’s hard work! We both have 2 jobs to support our own family, why can’t they be like us?”

“Ai...and think about what values they’re teaching their children! They’ll learn from them to become future parasites in society...”

Their voices trailed off as they walked toward the elevators.

Ah Jun thought hard to remember what his mother had taught him. As he ate his rice silently, he took a glance at the closed bedroom door behind which his mother was hiding, perhaps pretending to be asleep.

His mother was knitting as he put his head on her lap. He was 9-years old and they were still living in Shenzhen.

“Mama...why do you have to knit so many sweaters?” Little Ah Jun asked as he pointed to the pile of sweaters stacked on the chair.

“For selling, of course! But this pretty one here is for little Jun’s 10th birthday!” Xiao Hung said as she brought the half-finished blue

cardigan against Ah Jun's shoulders.

"Remember ah...Ah Jun...We may be poor but we must never steal, never take other people's goods or money. Our hands feed our mouths. We are poor, but we have dignity. Human beings cannot live without dignity," said his mother as she gently ruffled his hair.

Dignity.

He wondered if that was what had killed his mother's voice as he picked up a piece of choi sum with his chopsticks. The loss of her *dignity*.

Ah Jun still remembered the first day they had arrived at their new home in Tin Shui Wai. He was 10 years old and Ah Mei was 4 years old. It had taken Chiang eight years to successfully apply for all three of them to come to Shenzhen because there had been too many applications after the 1997 handover and application procedures had become stricter. As Ah Jun tried to budge their two large red-white-blue plastic bags, his father walked over and gave him a pat on the shoulder. Together, they carried the plastic bags into the room. As he walked back to the living room, he heaved Ah Mei onto his shoulders and put his arms around Xiao Hung's waist.

"Very soon, the two of you can go to your new school. We are such a blessed family!" Chiang said as he looked from his children to his wife.

The good times didn't last long for their family. In that same year, Chiang was laid off from his job at the construction site. He took on a job as a truck driver transporting goods back and forth from Shenzhen. To make more money, he worked hard even on weekends and holidays and seldom came home. Eventually, when he did come home, he was

drunk and searched through the drawers for money. Once, Ah Jun tried to stop him.

“No, Papa. This is Mama’s money!” said Ah Jun, his voice quivering as he confronted his father. His hand was trembling as he pulled his father’s hand away from the drawer.

“You son of a bitch! Who do you think you’re talking to! Getrrroff!” Chiang shouted as he flung his son’s hand from his own, picked up the dusting feather from the nearby table and began beating Ah Jun furiously.

That night, Ah Jun’s was sobbing silently as Xiao Hung applied medicine onto the red swollen slashes on his arms and legs.

“Big boys don’t cry ga Ah Jun,” said Xiao Hung into his ears, “you’re a big boy now. You have to be tough so that you can take care of the family.

“Remember ah, Ah Jun, no matter what happens, we are always a family. No matter what your father does, he is still your father. We are bound by blood.” Xiao Hung whispered as tears trickled down her face.

Ah Jun did not understand his mother’s words at that time. He was only eleven. For nights afterwards, whenever Chiang came back to get money, Ah Jun did what children did when they were afraid and did not know what to do. He hid.

On the night he turned fifteen, he was hiding in the kitchen after his father had returned. He heard his father and mother quarrelling loudly and peeped through the slit in the half-closed door.

“How come there is \$3000 deducted from our account every month? You haven’t come home to sleep for 2 months, are you keeping a mistress?” Xiao Hung demanded, holding the bank book in Chiang’s face. Ah Jun had never heard his mother speak so loudly before.

“It’s none of your business!” Chiang shouted right in his wife’s face, his spit flying onto her face.

“How could you do that to us? How could you?” She sobbed as she flung herself onto his arm and refused to let him leave the house.

“Gettrotf me, you bitch!” Chiang said as he pried her hands off him.

“Getrrrrroff!” Chiang bellowed and slapped her on the face.

From that day, Chiang never brought home any money. Xiao Hung went to find help from a social worker in their district and they applied for social security allowances. After the approval from the authorities, they received \$4000 each month. Ah Jun never heard her mother speak again. Her dignity had been wounded.

Ah Jun buried his face in his pillows. For twenty years, he had lived like a shadow when his father was in the house. Instead of hiding in the kitchen, he would remain silent when Chiang was in the house. Most importantly, he had failed to protect his mother. That night, on his mattress situated in the living room, he woke to hear his mother sobbing quietly as she sat on the stool. He felt that he was in hell and twisting his head away from his mother, he dug his nails into the flesh of his palm to ease the ache in his heart.

As he rode on the Kowloon Canton Railway (KCR) from the university holding the handrails and watching the LCD screen, he saw the words displayed on the government propaganda video:

‘Don’t cheat social security allowance. It adds burden to the working force in the society.’

These same words were written on a poster at the Social Welfare Department when Ah Jun had accompanied his mother to apply for social security allowances. Ah Jun felt a cold that penetrated into his

bones as if a pail of cold water had been poured over his head and his whole body was shivering and shaking.

The voices of his neighbours and the news from the previous night resounded in his ears. He could feel all the eyes staring at him on the KCR as he quickly got off at the next station. Why couldn't they understand? He was not a cheater! His father did not bring home any money and his mother was sick! They needed the money...

He took several deep breaths and opened the door of their apartment. The room was dark as the curtains had been drawn and his eyes were not accustomed to the darkness. He wondered why the room was so dark when his mother and Ah Mei should be home. Feeling for the switch on the right-hand side of the door and finding it, he switched the fluorescent lights in the living room on.

Chiang was crouching down on the mattress over Ah Mei, who had fallen asleep. His hand was reaching under Ah Mei's skirt while the other hand hovered over her round breasts. The bright light shone onto his pale, surprised face as Chiang turned his head sideways to see who the intruder was. His eyebrows fluttered upwards and his eyes widened as he saw Ah Jun glaring at him and stomping over to him.

Ah Jun flung himself at his father and knocked him onto the floor. He ran over to where his father had fallen and began beating him with his fists. His father's hands were heavy and weak from alcohol and he could only manage to push Ah Jun away from him and make for the door. Ah Mei had woken up from the noise and huddled in a corner, afraid to move or speak a word. Xiao Hung opened her bedroom door and screamed at the sight of her husband and son in a fight. Ah Jun grabbed his father's arm and pushed him against the television cabinet. His other hand had secured a place under his father's head and was strangling him. The sudden force of Chiang's body caused

the television cabinet to sway. The cardboard box placed at the top came down upon Chiang's head. The cardboard box fell to the ground, displaying Xiao Hung's most treasured possessions— several silver frames of their family photos and some large photo albums. Chiang slumped to the ground, unconscious, as blood trickled down his forehead.

Ah Jun remained silent all the way to the police station. He could merely nod, shake his head or utter short answers in response to the inquisition of the police officers. Another police officer came over to him and told him some points which his disturbed mind failed to make sense of. He told him that his father had not been severely injured but was still recovering in the hospital. They would wait until he woke up to decide whether Ah Jun would be charged for inflicting harm on another person. Meanwhile, they could arrange for a social worker to help them with their problems if they needed one.

The police officer led Ah Jun into a small room with bare walls and four chairs and closed the door behind him. Sitting down on a chair, he buried his head in his hands.

After a few minutes, his mother and sister entered the room and closed the door behind them. Ah Jun looked up at them and his eyes brimmed with tears. Xiao Hung's eyes were no longer empty and staring into nothingness, but were watery and looking directly at her son. She strode over to Ah Jun and embraced him tightly. He could hear the thumping of her heart. Ah Mei walked over and placed her hand on his.

“Ah Jun...”said Xiao Hung in a cracked voice that hadn't been used for years.

Ah Jun raised his head and looked up at his mother. It had been 5 years since he had last heard his mother's voice. His heart flooded him

with happiness and guilt and fresh tears flooded down his cheeks. If only he had been able to protect his mother...

“You did...right thing...Mama...proud...you...protect family...protect Mei Mei...” whispered Xiao Hung as tears trickled down her face onto Ah Jun’s hands. Her eyes glistened as she looked from Ah Jun to Ah Mei.

“Mama...but I should have protected you from that devil...” muttered Ah Jun. He gritted his teeth at the image of his father crouching over his sister.

“No...Ah Jun...you were still...a child then...what could you do? And...no matter what he does...he is your father...we are bound by blood...Remember? He no harm Mei Mei anymore...the police officer say...social worker help us find house...move away...Your father learnt great lesson from his brave son,” said Xiao Hung. “Forgive your father...forgive others...of their fears, weaknesses and evils...so that...in the end...you may forgive yourself...”

Ah Jun could not believe his ears. Finally, they could live the life that they had been hoping and dreaming of. For he first time in 10 years, he felt peace inside him. Slowly, he closed his eyes to enjoy this minute of peace with his mother and sister. His eyes opened from surprise as another feeling overtook him—happiness. He stood up and pulled his sister and mother into an embrace.

Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Stranger

I

About the Name and D.O.B.,
The stranger's
Driver License and I.D. card agree.

II

"Excuse me,"
A voice says and sits
Next to a stranger in a window seat.
Noise of a paperback being flipped
is the conversation for the long bus trip.

III

A smile is a 'Thank You'
'You're welcome' is a nod.
An old stranger smiles
and a door holder nods.

IV

The empty seat
in the corner of the hall
is filled with the gossip
about the missing stranger's sudden call.
But no mind present can recall,
the moment
the stranger left the door.

V

“Game Over” the video game mocks,
as his sister comes in the door.
Hi and Goodbyes’ later,
his friends,
her strangers,
go out from the door.

VI

How does one calculate the
exact moment
when a Stranger becomes a Friend?
and how does one determine the
exact moment
when the Stranger and the Friend become one?

VII

The silhouette of a stranger
breaks
the tranquility of the raindrops race.
The heart
curses the indelible scars
that the footsteps craft.

VIII

I sleep under a dark grey sky,
alone
with strangers
sleeping under the dark grey sky.

IX

I wonder how
the weight of a loved one's tear
compares with
that of a stranger's tear.

X

The peephole distorts
the strangeness
of strangers on the other side of the door.

XI

Absconding the beaten harbor,
the ship blows a
mournful whistle,
and she waves goodbye to the crowd below.
The strangers wish her bon voyage.

XII

I look into the mirror
and see
a stranger
glaring
behind me.

XIII

Evaporated bones
vanished body
I.D. reads: Stranger



R.I.P.

Reincarnation Place: Round the Corner

Reincarnation Time: Couple Seconds Away

Louisa Leung

Coming and Going at H&M

Mounds upon mounds of people
Running in the same direction,
Gritting their teeth, squaring their shoulders.

Salespeople stand like soldiers, far from home.
Looking at watches, sighing,
Blackberries showing the faces of their children.

They want to go home.
One person flies towards him and knocks him over.
He changes to intelligent distribution mode and
Answers questions professionally.

‘Hong Kong World Class City’ resonates in his mind.
The cause of war is the sign outside and around him -
‘Up to 50% off’.

Mounds of clothes are tossed back and forth from one to another,
Clothes torn, hairs tugged, they sweat and swear.
A woman gets her hands on the pile, she tosses it
High.

The swarm of heads sway the same direction,
3...2...1...it lands...they run.
Victims lie on couches, motionless,
Blood appears where nails have dug.

Losers are the ones who walk slowly, talk softly, and choose carefully.

Vivian Chik

Luck

By Jessica Yuen

I leaned against the train door and rested my head on it. Keeping my arms folded across my chest, I wanted so much to suppress the chaos in my mind.

‘That’s life...’ I thought to myself.

As the train was passing through the tunnel between Tai Po Market Station and University Station, I took a glance at my own reflection on the train door and wondered, ‘Where will life take me?’

Mum had always said that I was her everything.

Mum was a chic and modern woman. She got her M.A. degree at a university in Canada. Before she married my Dad, she had worked as a translator in a multi-national business firm. But upon my arrival, Mum decided to sacrifice her career and devoted herself completely to raising me.

‘You’ll never understand the pain of labor, Terry. It’s like risking your life,’ mum said.

‘But that’s also the pain that makes you so precious to me and your Dad,’ mum smiled. ‘It’s worth it, especially seeing you grow up to be such a perfect man.’

Dad was open-minded and never pushy. One time, I told Dad that I had decided not to go to university, and I would spend a few years abroad learning to sing. At first, I dared not tell Dad or Mum about my plan, because both of them were people who thought that tertiary education was essential to one’s success; yet, they were not disappointed at all. Dad even assured me that as long as I was into singing, he would give me the freedom and support to do it.

I knew from the very start I was a lucky only child.

But if I was born elsewhere, like Africa, the USA, Korea, or just to another family in Hong Kong, what would I have become?

I alighted from the train and headed straight home.

I had lived in the same apartment since the day I was born. It was not too proud to say that even with my eyes blindfolded, I could still recognize the way back home. But tonight, all the roads seemed different.

I walked along the damp and meandering road, alone and lost. My eyes wandered through the street as I found my way home. This was the very first time I had looked at the street so carefully. Everything seemed quite familiar, but in the next second, it became something a little bit strange and exotic. The shops were all closed except one – Leung-Kee Fishball. I recognized its gigantic lightbox. It was in a perfect rectangular shape, with large red print that read:

‘Curry fishballs \$10 for 4; the best in town’

I remembered the old days.

Mum always bought me some fishballs before collecting me from the school bus, but I’d never known their price.

I suddenly felt like an orphan with no name and no friends. Ah, an orphan. I would be better off being an orphan from the beginning, than someone called Terry who was about to lose his parents and his everything. It reminded me of a piece of news which I had read a few days before, about a man who was devastated by the collapse of his marriage, decided to sell everything of his on eBay, including his house, his job, his friends, his pet, except his passport and identity card, just for the sake of starting a new life, with a new identity.

Was life as easy as he thought?

And the most important question was --
could identity be constructed?

‘No, it can’t be me,’ I said to myself.

‘It may just be a medical mistake. The doctors are just playing safe and asking me to take the test for them,’ I continued. ‘I should wait until the test results are out.’

When I finally got home that night, Mum and Dad were already asleep. I opened their door and peeked in through the gap. Though they were there in bed, it still gave me a sense of familiarity. It was at home that I could be my real self and relax. The past few days had been so stressful and ridiculous. I knew very well that life was just challenging me, wanting me to grow stronger and stronger, as I had been such a lucky boy for so many years.

But these few days, I wondered whether the air was lacking oxygen.

If life could be so ridiculous, I wish someone like a witch could pop up and turn me into a girl. Girls could use some powder to mask their imperfect face, or to conceal the unwanted scars, spots or whatever on the face.

Now, I wished so much that I could use lip-liner to draw my smile.

Watching Mum and Dad from a distance made me feel better. I did not want to leave. The thought of being nobody to Mum and Dad pained me in the heart. I could not, even now, believe that such kind of thing would happen to me.

That night, I said a little prayer to God, hoping that I would be granted a chance to do it all over again, the other way round.

My life had turned upside down since the second I made up my mind and went for the blood test. A man in his fifties had announced through the hospital to the media that he was looking for his biological son after his son's death from acute kidney failure. It was common that even two people from the same family would still have mutual transplant rejection. However, the doctors later found that the father not only had a negative-cross match, but also had no direct blood relationship with the son.

The news had aroused the public's awareness of the need for organs. I was upset by the news and I really took pity on the boy. He was of the same age as me; I just could not imagine living on this planet for only 18 years and then leaving my parents behind to suffer, and to mourn for the rest of their lives. Of course, some acute diseases just came and took your life without any symptoms. But for a world with great advances in medical technology, saving lives was no difficult task. It was, after all, only a matter of finding a donor whose stem cells were a genetic match of the recipient.

After the news had spread out in the local community, some sympathetic people flocked to the hospital and did the blood test, hoping to give a ray of hope to those listed on the endless organ transplant waiting list.

And I was one of them.

I had never doubted that my own parents were really mine.

We looked so much alike and we shared a lot in common. Wouldn't it be a complete joke telling people that I might be a wrong child to my parents?

'It's ridiculous! I'm not in any sort of soap!' the more I thought

of the test, the angrier I felt with the whole thing.

I just wanted to give the test a try, and get my genetic data stored in the hospital. I might possibly be of some help in saving a life in the future. I just wanted to contribute something to society, not to discover some dark truth or top ten secrets of the world. Why me?

As a rule, I was a lucky person. The initial test result was positive. What test? Surprisingly, it was the father and son test. And I was advised to take an advanced DNA test.

‘This is entirely your own choice, Mr Wong,’ the doctor said.

‘The chances of positive and related blood test are quite high, actually. But since you were also born in Baptist Hospital, we’d advise you to go for the DNA test,’ he continued.

‘But again, this is your own choice,’ he emphasized.

‘Baptist Hospital! Did I tell you that?’ my eyes were open wide.

‘Oh, yes, you just said that,’ he gave a light smile.

‘Damn...’

‘Baptist...June 14, 1989...’ I murmured to myself while lying in bed.

Having wandered the streets for two hours at night, my body was exhausted. But my soul was still actively functioning; suddenly there seemed a recorder set in my head, and it kept on repeating the murmur—

‘Baptist...June 14, 1990...’,

‘Baptist...June 14, 1989...’

‘Baptist...June 14, 1989...’...

‘Relax... it was just an ordinary day for an ordinary boy to come to this world. Nothing special, nothing too extraordinary would have happened.’

I tried not to think of anything but concentrate fully on my sleep, but the silence was too loud and scary. For the first time in my life, I was afraid; afraid of the dark and the days ahead.

‘But where will life take me?’ I still wondered.

Every second to me seemed like a minute and a minute seemed like an hour. I did not know what to do but sit back and wait for the day to come.

‘One more day to go...just one more day,’ I put a big black cross on April 16 on the calendar.

Looking at the black crosses on the calendar sent an indescribable fear all over my body. I did not notice how quickly the time had passed me by. I even could not recall how I had survived for the previous few weeks. I was like a blank sheet of paper, waiting for others to color, to pollute and to make me something completely different.

I could not tell why. The nearer I got to the big day, the less confidence I had in myself. I felt so helpless, like a little white rat in the hand of a lab technician. I could do nothing but scream, scream out really loudly before I was slaughtered.

But now my fate had become something unavoidable, a fate worse than death. I guess a white rat would not be given another identity once it was dead. And the story would end in such a splendid way.

Wouldn’t it be the best ending to every story?

It was only one day before the test result was out.

I opened my wardrobe and picked a white polo shirt.

‘White... a white rat. Good, good!’ I said to myself as I put the shirt on.

The big day had finally come. But I was not afraid at all.

‘Being a white rat doesn’t mean anything. I’m still a rat and no one will have the power to change me into a cat!’ I said to myself in front of the mirror.

Indeed, after all these days of anxiety, anger and fear, I was too tired to make any more wild guesses. What I really wanted was the test result and that was all. I just needed an answer – whether it was ‘Oh poor boy, you’re a wrong child!’ or ‘Congratulations you are still who you thought you were!’ I would still be satisfied.

It took me an hour to drive to the hospital.

On the way to the hospital, I played the latest album of an English singer, Leona Lewis. The first song which was played was ‘Yesterday’.

The music kept flooding in my mind and the melody lingered there for so long.

All the broken dreams take everything...

Just take it away, but they can never have yesterday.

I thought our days would last forever...

But it wasn't our destiny...

Cause in my mind we had so much time, but I was so wrong.

No I can't believe me

I can still find the strength in the moments we made.

I'm looking back on yesterday...

‘I’m looking back on yesterday...’ I sang along with the song and my eyes were all red.

“Yesterday...” I thought.

Yesterday would become a day to remember, a day which everything of mine still remained in order.

I sat quietly on a bench outside the consultation room.

I felt happy; because I could end the whole ridiculous drama in a minute. But my hands kept shaking, uncontrollably.

When the nurse opened the door and called my name, I gave a hard swallow. But I knew when the second I stepped out of the room, everything would have gotten sorted out.

I should be thankful to be invited into the room so soon.

Then, I walked in.

The doctor did a lot of talking before he actually showed me the test results.

I took it in hand and ran my eye over the page. The test results did not only come with a simple answer ‘Yes’ or ‘No’; but with so many numbers and scientific terms which I found almost impossible to comprehend without his explanation.

Judging from what I had in hand, I knew this time there would be no medical mistake.

‘Okay, Mr Wong, to cut a long story short, please take a look at the top right hand corner of the paper. If it reads ‘+’, it means that you’re actually the biological son of Mr Yeung; by the same token, if it reads.....’

I could not wait but move my eyes quickly up to the top right corner.

I allowed myself three seconds to take in the test result.

1

2

3

And then I looked at Dr Chan.

‘I’ve always told you that I’m such a lucky boy... thank you Dr Chan,’

Before We Fell into the Centre of the Earth

Before we fell
into the centre of the earth,
we looked at our emergency list.

We took a television,
because Papa liked to watch
Chelsea games
(although there is no Chelsea).

We took a dishwasher,
because Mama hated to wash
dishes for five people
(although we didn't bring the dishes).

We took a computer,
because Sister had to wander
around MSN, Facebook and MySpace
(although we don't have Internet).

We took a mini stereo too,
because Brother had to attend
lectures by Ozzy Osbourne
(although no one likes him).

I took Harvey.
He is tiny, easy to carry,
and he never barks at us.

As we jumped in,
following Papa, Mama, Sister and Brother,
Harvey and I smiled at each other.

Melody Yue

The Joy of Pain

By Minna Cheung Yin Man

It was brown, a disappointingly boring color. Sprinkled on the cover were three blossoms of roses, with an elegant set of calligraphy weaving in between. A rusty stern lock stood guard on the side. I fed it with the bent golden key dangling out of the other corner of the book. With a probing flip of the lavender scented paper, I unfurled the unknown world of an ordinary girl.

It was the last gift I expected to receive, the last gift I expected to receive the day before the big day and the last gift I expected to come from her.

15th January, 85

Like any other day, I rode the MTR to work today. At 8:40am, it was packed with flocks of strangers as usual. I was standing beside a faceless man, my nose right next to his armpit which smelled like burnt plastic. We rubbed shoulder to shoulder for half an hour, our bodies swaying in the same frequency as the veering train. I was itching to congratulate him when I got off that he is no longer a stranger to me, but I lost sight of his blue coat in the sea of people.

On the same day, I went to the canteen for lunch. At 12:15pm, the line to the lunch lady was threading for miles outside the hall. I was closing in on the lunch counter like an ignited string eating its way towards a bomb. Her face emerged from behind the chicken flavored vapor steaming from the food display cart. I could not resist it today.

“Chicken or beef?” She fired at me.

“May I know your name please?”

“You crazy or what? Quick quick! I don’t have all day!” She

barked.

All I wanted to tell her was that the chicken would taste ten times better if she could season it a little bit with her smile.

Is it just me or is the sky hovering like a dangerous grey old twirling fan over our heads?

She was the most ordinary girl you could ever imagine. Brushing past her around the corner of the street would not make your day memorable. She was never the girl that turned heads. Yet there was something thriving in her, like a pearl swimming in an oyster. In fact I had no idea that all through those years she had been trying so hard to kill that thirst in her, the thirst for purpose.

16th January, 85

The first thing this morning, as usual, I took a sip of the cold tea left over from last night resting beside my bed. I took it in one gulp, tracking the big wave of tingling chilly liquid dashing towards my stomach while savoring in my mouth the peculiar flavor mixed from the bitter aftertaste of the tea with my morning breath. I looked down into the tea cup. The tea stain together with drops of leftover tea summoned up an image of a hammer, a rare sign prophesying change.

I silenced the tea cup by refilling it with searing hot water which dismissed the forecasted image instantly. Gazing at the reflection dancing on the surface of the brownish tainted water, I heard it calling for my chapped lips. A hypnotizing force took over me and I clasped my lips at the edge of the cup. Hot tea oozed into my mouth like sizzling lava. My reflex action kicked in, but only seconds after the damage was done.

I waved my burnt tongue around in my mouth. Every stretch initiated a prickling pain that lingered long enough to make me feel slightly annoyed, to remind me of the presence of this lovely fleshy friend of mine.

For the first time in a long time, I finally felt the tongue. We talked for a long while.

She carried this subtlety like a swan in the lake. Some might even call her timid. Her tiny bone structure and frail voice did not do her justice. She hated it when people called her a porcelain doll.

“You don’t need big hands to do big things” she would always say with a stiff tone and a squint in the left eye that made it sound so plausible coming out of her delicate mouth.

17th January, 85

This morning I woke up and felt my calves swollen with energy. They have been in coma for too long, being parked still at the factory almost every day. I agreed to take them for a hike on the hill by my apartment.

I sped up the hill like I had something waiting for me on the top. I did not know what it was yet but I told myself it must be something splendid and one of a kind.

I apologized to it when I reached the top. I knew I was late but better late than never.

For some reason, I felt confrontational today. As my panting began to die down, I mustered all the strength in me and looked at that thing in the eye. My eyelids twitched frantically when its jabbing light ray sifted through my pupils, paralyzing my iris until they let out a straining fatigue. An army of tears marched out of the corner

of my eyes in response to this silly war I declared against the mighty authority.

I flinched only moments before it hurt too much. I closed my eyes and relished the residual silhouette of the sun. For the first time, it shone so comfortably.

She had never come across as destructive, not that I knew of at least, not before I read this anyway. Or maybe she had never been. Actually, she couldn't be. She is the kind of person that winces when she accidentally drops and breaks a glass, sighs when she finds out that the roses in the garden start to wilt. Reading this side of her is surprising for me both in an uneasy and pleasant way, like how I once caught Professor Maxine picking his nose at the corner of the cafeteria. It completely shattered and rebuilt my impression of him but yet it made him so much more of a human being that I almost wanted to give him a high five.

26th January, 85

I stayed up in bed last night watching the shadow of the street cars speeding past the ceiling. My left foot was swung back under my hips. My right arm was sleeping under my back. I folded myself up at the end of the bed. If anyone barged in the room at that moment, they would have thought that I was a victim of a monstrous murder case.

I think it's hard to tell between the feelings of sleeping and being dead sometimes, especially on a night like that, when the air was thick and stagnant like jelly, when the thumping of your heart synchronized so well with the ticking of the clock that it almost seemed like the clock had stolen your heartbeat.

I got up and fetched the nail clipper from the bottom drawer. I

placed my left hand closely under the bedside lamp, my surgery lamp. With the cold steel tool gripped in my hand, I began to operate on the lifeless. To achieve a smooth curve was not my only goal that time. I decided to dig deep. I cut through the pink territories, revealing the raw tender skin behind those fortifying shields until a piercing screech was sent off from underneath. Then I dipped my fingers into a bowl of vinegar, my last approach to awaken them from a coma.

I rolled back onto the bed with the sheets wrapped around me tightly like a cocoon. I heard my stinging wet nails complaining of overstimulation. Just moments before I fell into a deep trance, I was sure that I was just going to sleep because I could sense that the most lifeless part of my body was growing at the speed of light.

I complained about her sometimes but I guess it was normal. You would complain about her too if you were me. Most people would when they were in my position. Most people got demanding when they were in that position. We yearn for something that is so trivial and irrelevant that we overlook what major things we already have or originally had been looking for. It reminds me of how I would buy two cartons of milk instead of one and walk out of the supermarket admiring the free gift coupon from the purchase, thinking how smart a consumer I was, but forget what I was buying in the first place.

She has always been there for me, like how I had always been holding on to those milk cartons. I was just too busy marveling at the 10% off coupon that I never got a chance to use.

4th February, 85

I went to Wing Keung Dai Pai Dong again this afternoon. That new young boy was working again. He was squatting around the corner of

the street reading his comic book. I raised my hand and hollered at him to service my table.

“A bowl of fish ball noodle, add beef stock, gone with the green please,” I ordered without even glancing at the menu. That has always been my usual.

Moments later, he came back holding my bowl of noodle, with green confetti all over on top. I spent 15 minutes picking the spring onions out.

“You know, it is the 4th time you missed the no green part of my order.” I shot him a helpless smile.

He shrugged and said that he was sorry. Did people listen anymore?

I went home and turned on my radio. Metallica was playing. I thought to myself that it could not be more perfect. I buried my head next to the amplifiers and cranked up the volume to its maximum. Waves and waves of dispersed drumbeats punctured my ears, entangled with the passionate screaming and roaring of the singer. Halfway through the song, I could feel the music punching through the eardrums from both sides of my ears, rattling and resonating in my cerebrum.

A surge of headache exploded in my brain as they rocked the last chorus. Then I turned off the radio and there came the most serene monotonous buzzing note ringing in my head.

I decided to make sure that I listen to people first, before asking them to listen to me. Now with this humming noise in my head, I feel like my left ear is shaking hands with my right ear.

The diary went on and on. It seemed like she could not stop experimenting.

She has tried every sensation possible. Any way that is capable

of sending a tickle on her body, a ripple in her heart. I still could not register that this was her. She always had that glint in her eyes, the glint of a hardcore wrestler in the ring, as if nothing in the world could bring her down. Who would have known all these stories on how she once used to long for and how she earned her way to grab this sense of contentment?

I came to a halt when I flipped to the last page of the diary. Carved on the top left hand corner was a date that was so familiar...

22nd September, 87

It's funny how people get embarrassed by their past selves. I just read back what I have written two years ago and I couldn't help chuckling.

Today I have experienced the most intense pain in my life. Boy it felt so good!

Early in the morning of my wedding day, everyone was already busy. The bridesmaids were stumbling around fidgeting with the flowers and decorations. The servers were squirming through rows and rows of tables carrying trays of delicate treats and cocktails. My sisters were ordering helpers here and there trying to perfect every detail.

I sat in the dressing room by myself wearing the bridal gown, with yards of lacy white fabric splashing down from my waist. I picked up the diary again and turned to the last page.

A warm bony hand landed on my bare left shoulder. I was startled by a slender gray-haired woman.

"It's my birthday, right?" I gestured to the last page of the diary. She nodded with the hint of a smile.

"Giving birth to you was the most painful experience I've ever



had, but it was you that finally showed me the meaning of life.”
She took my hands as a proud teardrop rolled down her cheek.

You Can Dream

You can dream to be a wizard,
hold the broom and curse.
All the dust on floor
is waiting for you to transform.

You can dream to be a prince,
ready to save the peasants.
Baby Jane at school
is waiting for rescue.

You can dream to be a knight,
grab a knife and fight.
The lying tomatoes and cabbages
are waiting to be killed.

You can dream to be Robin Hood.
or Hercules.
But never dream against your mother,
if you still want your dinner.

Veronica Lam

Her Secret Wish

She likes fairy tales.
Snow White, Cinderella,
or Sleeping Beauty,
she fancies all.

She likes fairy tales.
Living happily ever after,
adored by charming princes -
how could she resist?

How wonderful
when women as pretty as flowers
perfume the air
and lead love towards them.

How wonderful
if she could become one of them
with snow white skin, tiny feet.
or a face that won't age after a hundred years.

She closes her eyes, and prays to be
an ugly duckling.
If only she is an ugly duckling,
she could become a swan, one day.

Veronica Lam

* The poem is on gender issues. Expressing a girl's desperate hope to become beautiful, as an only way to happiness.

Helen

By Iris Hui Yu Ting

Wearing a paper-thin short-sleeved gown, I am waiting in a cold windy room. The room is windy yet suffocating. I am trembling and can feel goosebumps all over my skin. Father said that today was going to change my life. I have always wondered why people are so fond of change. When I recall my memory of this morning, I wonder why Father was so excited when he mentioned “the change”.

I was bathing in sunshine. Half-awake, I knew that I was at home lying on my bed. When I listened, I could hear birds singing and cars sounding their horns. They always sounded so energetic to me. When my dear father called me, “Hoi Lun, your breakfast is ready! I made you your favourite, fried eggs sunny-side up,” his voice went to my brain through my ears and I understood his words. When I spread my nostrils and breathed, I could smell the fried eggs and also the familiar, unique smell of my house. It was a mixture of salted fish, dust, and our old clothes. When I swallowed my saliva, the filthy sour taste burnt my throat a bit. I heard myself whispering “good morning,” from my dry and chapped lips. When I stretched my limbs, I felt sunbeams dancing on my body. I knew that today was a warm sunny day.

Gently, Father placed a dish on my right palm. The dish was warm, but this was different from the warmth of sunshine. Sometimes you felt that as if you were burnt by the sun, but the temperature of dishes handed to me from my father were never too hot, they were just right to warm my palms and fingers.

I especially miss Father’s eggs when I am in this little room alone.

Fried eggs sunny-side up was always my favourite. I like it not because of its crispy edge of egg white nor because of its melting egg yolk. This food delights me simply because Father told me that the sunny eggs he made always look like a real sun on a sunny day. He said that the egg yolk was yellow and it was as bright as sunlight. I have never seen the sun on a sunny day. I guess I may have seen it, but I don't remember much of that anymore.

I went blind when I was six months old. I had a high fever for almost a week, and after the fever went down, I couldn't see anymore. It doesn't matter. Even though I cannot see the sun, I believe my father. People say the sun is our source of light and warmth. It is. Every time my father prepares sunny eggs for me, the smell of it seduces me into taking a quick bite. When the semi-liquid egg yolk slips through my throat, I feel like I am swallowing a ray of light, and all of a sudden, I can glow in the dark and become the brightest thing in the world. It doesn't matter that I can't see. As long as my father can cook me sunny eggs, I will always be the happiest person on Earth, even on rainy days.

What I see on a sunny day is pretty much the same as what I see on a rainy day – complete darkness, no matter if the sun exists or not. People think that blind people like me can't see any colour, but father always tells me that it is not true. He tells me that the complete darkness in front of my eyes is like a thick black curtain hanging over the stage. He tells me that I can see one colour, which is black, and when the curtain rises, I will be able to see all the colourful performances of the world.

Sometimes I wonder, is the colourful world really such a wonderful thing? Does that make everybody happy?

Father can see but he is not happy. I often hear him sob at night.

Still waiting alone and lonely in the tiny freezing room, I wonder how different I will be after my sight recovery operation. I somehow feel lucky at being deprived of the chance of having this operation earlier as Father had very little money.

After breakfast, we set off on our journey. Father smelled different today. Usually he smelled like engine oil and gas. Today when he took my hand, I recognized the scent of his after-shave. It was the tiny glass flask standing on the left-most corner in the mirror cupboard in the toilet. He only smelled like that when we visited our relatives during Chinese New Year or when we were going to a wedding dinner. It made him smell as if he had just been swimming in a pool of herbal medicine.

When we were ten steps away from our flat, our neighbour Uncle Lam yelled at Father as if he could not hear.

“Old Chan! So today is the big day finally, huh?”

I heard my father reply with sparkling joy yet slight embarrassment, “yes, yes.”

Uncle Lam has been our neighbour for more than thirty years. He always sounds proud in front of father and I. The whole estate knows that Uncle Lam and his wife have been happily married for more than thirty years. I have known Auntie Lam since I was born. Sometimes when she goes to the market, I hear a voice of another woman with Uncle Lam next door. The voice is always sharp and like a kitten screaming. I dare not imagine what kind of obscure picture that is, luckily I cannot see.

My mother left sixteen years ago, when I was one.

We went to the hospital by taxi. The trip cost us more than eighty

dollars. I heard Father slowly count the money for the driver. There must be a lot of coins, as I heard them clinging non-stop. This was almost equal to the cost of our meals for a week. In my memory, it was the third time we have travelled by taxi. We travelled by taxi the first time when I was six years old. I had a high fever that time and father took me to the hospital by taxi in the middle of the night. The second time was when I was ten years old. That was a rainy day and I was almost late for school. Father took me to school in a taxi. I have never been late for school.

The name of my doctor is James Ng. He is known as the best. I saw him once before today. He examined me on the twentieth day of last month. Father took me there and when I went into the doctor's office for examination, father waited outside. His doctor's office smelled like the disinfectant liquid we used in the SARS period. The room was chilling cold but I kept sweating. The voice of the doctor was like the voice of knights in the animation. When the doctor put his gloved hands on my eyes, I felt like an icy iron bar was placed over my eyes. I sweated even more. Then, I heard the electronic version of *Fur Elise*. I did not have a cell-phone, so it must be the doctor's. I heard him murmur out four-digit numbers and how much he wanted to buy. I guessed he was talking to his stock-broker. It made me think of the afternoon financial programme I always listened to after lunch.

The consultation ended in ten minutes. The amount father had to pay for that was equal to one tenth of his salary. But Father said that it was alright. He told me the doctor was very handsome and this was probably the reason why he should pay more. Though I felt an urge to tell Father about the doctor's conversation with his stock broker, I didn't. I didn't want to disappoint him. Nobody would like to pay a lot

to let a doctor talk to his stock-broker when he was practicing.

Today was the second time I had come here. When I got out of the taxi, I repeated in my mind what I tried very hard to remember the last time I came. Turn left, thirty-two steps, I would reach a light pole, then at my ten o'clock, twenty-six steps, turn right, ten steps...I did not know whether my memory was correct. Father took my hand and guided me.

I knew that the way he led me was always right.

There is no sun in the sky. I wake up and can only see a mist of dull grey outside the windows. This is the 100th day after my sight was recovered. I take a deep breath then walk down from my bunk bed and notice that my father has already left. It is time for my daily routine of making my way to the bathroom through mountains of rubbish like old electric appliances, piles of plastic bags, cardboard boxes and moldy newspapers. On my way to the bathroom, I see a dish of sunny eggs lying deadly on top of a pile of magazines. I take the plate in my hands. It is cold and oily. I take a closer look at the eggs, and then I put it down.

I continue on my way to the bathroom, and my right leg hits an old metal can. It hurts so much that I almost scream out. I sigh and bend down to give the spot a soothing massage. I stare at the murderous metal can, and then I gaze at the rubbish mountains. I remember people always said that I look like my father, I now know that it is somewhat true. I fix my sight on them for so long that I do not even notice that I am frowning, really hard, until my eyes meet a fragment of broken mirror hiding near the bottom of one of the mountains.

I learned from school that mirrors reflect images only because

there is light. I wonder why I can see myself in the mirror as this flat is just so grey and dark. It seems that sunlight has never reached this flat since it was built. Everything here has a colour. A colour of dust and smoke and ages and sorrow. The grey of this flat just washes away the brightness of things and people. I can only see shadow after shadow stretching their body and souls over the tiled floor.

I look around the flat and I am still astonished, just as the way I was when I first saw the place in which I have been living for seventeen years. I am well aware of the poor financial condition of my family, but only by seeing it with my own eyes was I convinced of how bad it is to be in poverty.

I am going to Dr. Ng's clinic for medical check-up this afternoon.

This is the fourth time I take a taxi. This time I sit in the taxi alone. I do not want to walk in such dull and damp and hot weather. I will sweat and look ugly. I don't want to look ugly in front of Dr. Ng. The cab fee is expensive, so I do not take a taxi from home. I take it from the nearest MTR station. The money father gave me for lunch is enough to cover that.

I planned to wear a white dress for today's check-up. White is a beautiful colour. But I discovered it yesterday that I do not have a piece of white garment. I believed that some clothes I found were once shiny white. But, they look grey and dull now. I guess it's because they stayed in my flat for too long, so long that the grey mist of the flat stained its colour on them.

Sitting in the taxi, with its windows open, the summer breeze blows my fair black hair behind me. Looking at the white t-shirt I bought yesterday, I feel a sense of satisfaction. I feel that the t-shirt and my body have become one. The buildings of the streets are moving

backwards quickly. I feel that I am escaping. It reminds me of the princesses portrayed in movies or novels. They are always locked up in a high tower waiting for their prince to rescue them. I too have been locked up in the tower of darkness for seventeen years. I want to leave desperately.

I remember my father said that Dr. Ng was handsome. I do not know what handsome is; the only thing I know is that when I first saw him after the operation, I did not want to remove my eyes from him. I wished I could see this face forever. Before I could see, when I knew people invested so much of their time and money and effort in making themselves look good, I would think that it was a stupid waste. I never understood why they bothered to make themselves look better. It was just looks anyway. It was like a piece of superficial garment that you wear. It was not even a part of you.

But then I knew that I was wrong. I remember the moment when the gauze covering my eyes was removed after the operation; I saw Dr. Ng and my father. I distinguished them clearly as I heard them speak. I saw at Dr. Ng's face and I felt that I was not able to look away. I had never really known the definition of "beauty" but I guessed what was in front of me was no doubt an explicit example. I knew that appearance was superficial, but it still delighted me. Then the older man beside him abruptly made a lame joke.

"Hoi Lun, don't stare at the doctor. Dr. Ng, please forgive my daughter. She has never seen such a pretty face before..."

Then they both burst into laughter. I was extremely embarrassed. I had a sudden urge to throw up. I did not understand why the old man, who was my father, thought that it was fun to humiliate his daughter in front of such a handsome man. Then I quickly retreated my gaze

and glanced at the both of them casually. They were so different. Dr. Ng made me think of the sunlight outside my bedroom and my father made me remember the moldy smell of our flat. It was such an unfit match. The old man's existence in the room made me feel disgust: the colour and lines of his skin, the tiny shining object in his mouth blinking at me when he laughed, the way he kept squeezing his shirt... I could not believe that he was the person who I had been living with for so many years.

I started wondering why I could not have the operation earlier. I even thought that my father had delayed the recovery of my sight deliberately so that I could not see all the wonderful things in the world. I knew clearly that it was not right. I did not know why I thought so. I just did not want to be a part of that ugly old world.

This is the first time I enter Dr. Ng's clinic alone. Even though I traveled here by taxi, I could not help sweating. When I tell the lady at the reception counter that I came in for a check-up, I feel that I am sweating even more strongly. I look down at my white t-shirt and take a covert sniff of my body. I do not want my sweat to make Dr. Ng think that I have the smell of salted fish like my father. Luckily, I smell only the light fragrance of the powder for prickly heat.

Suddenly I realize that the lady at reception may be watching. I lift my head quickly and notice that she keeps on smiling at me. When I lean forward to take back my medical record card, I peep at her watch and see the word "Chanel" shining on the dial plate. Then my eyes linger on her nails which are pink and glossy, like rose petals newly freshened by dew droplets. Then I look at mine. They are short and chapped like my father's.

I go to sit at the corner back in the clinic and wait. I squeeze my

fingers really tightly. I know that no matter how hard I squeeze them, they will still look the same. But at least I can cover them so that nobody else can see how ugly they are. I keep telling myself not to be nervous, because I will sweat when I feel nervous. And it will make me smell nasty in front of Dr. Ng.

I remember the last time I came here for check-up, Dr. Ng told me a joke about my name. He said that I should get an English name, and I should name myself “Helen”. He said that it was because Helen Keller was a famous blind woman, and as my Chinese name “Hoi Lun” had a similar pronunciation with hers, I should have an English name “Helen”. I read about Helen Keller at school. She was blind since she was very young until she died.

I guess I will tell Dr. Ng that I have decided to name myself “Helen” later. I don’t really like this name but it will be fine, as long as such beautiful person thinks that it is a good name. Yes! Only such an English name would make me a match with him, for he has an elegant name: James.

The door opens. Dr. Ng comes out with a lady with long curly hair. They are laughing casually and the lady puts her fine fingers on Dr. Ng’s shoulder. She speaks to him with her eyes glued to his.

“So, James, what is your next case? Another boring patient?”

“Of course! The next patient is a new Helen Keller, you should see her someday. I think that she is totally obsessed with me. So stupid, how could I be interested in such a dumb girl? You are always my favourite patient! ”

They go on laughing and flirting. And when the lady is about to leave, she leans towards Dr. Ng and their lips touch each other’s faces.

They make a loud sound for that. I bend down to tie my shoelaces, though they are not loose. I wish that they did not see me. I wish that I did not see them.

The sky is still grey and dull outside the clinic. There is no wind in the air. Everything is so still. I run and run. Yes, I am escaping. I know that upstairs in Dr. Ng's clinic the reception lady must be calling my name right now. I know that if I rush back to the clinic now, I can still have Dr. Ng welcoming me warmly. But I keep running. It starts to rain. My hair and eyes and face become wet. My white t-shirt sticks to my body and becomes translucent and I can see the colour of my skin through it. It looks not so white now. Rain and sweat and tears keep flowing on my face. I can barely open my eyes. I can see nothing but darkness, again.

Trip to Cuba 2003

Bumping along the road to Varadero,
Passing different types of resorts.
Tourists haul their luggage off the bus
And walk eagerly into their six-star hotels.

Stepping into our hotel,
We slap on various mosquito bites
Swollen to the size of ping-pong balls.
Very soon you'll get used to it, they reassure us

Black-skinned Cubans serve us cocktails and hot dogs with
Broad, good-natured smiles,
Ordinary Cubans are not allowed to step into any resort, they tell us,
Only the richest ones.

The sun shines on the clear sea water
We take a ride on a fast boat across the vast, endless sea.
Thinking about the few who sailed across these seas and survived,
Hoping to arrive in America, a land of opportunities.

We take a van to Havana
Driven by an ordinary Cuban.
The face of their national hero, Castro,
Can be seen on T-shirts, buildings and statues.

They take us to a nearby bank to exchange currency
Needn't worry about theft, they say,

Anyone who gets caught stealing from tourists is
Shot. Immediately.

We buy expensive cigars and rum,
People sitting on the sidewalk smoke cheap cigars.
Old cars from the 70s drive along buses with people
Clinging onto the doors to keep from flying off.

What has been promised to these Cubans,
Who receive the same income, own no private property,
Who can never leave their land?
Unlike their rich counterparts, they receive no privileges.

As the bus drives along the bumpy road,
Back to the wonderful land of resorts and tourists, rum and cigars.
A Cuban greets us again with a broad grin.
The blessing of not knowing what could have been.

Vivian Chik

The Pact—A Remembrance

By Johanna Ma

I caress her hands softly and give her a little scratch on her palms. No response. So I just hold her graceful hands the way I've held them each night for the past twenty-five years. Apart from the sound of her loud breathing from the respiratory tube, nothing disturbed our silence other than the occasional horns of cars speeding along the nearby highway and the sound of their running tires screeching against the cement road. People always seem to be in a great hurry in our city; tonight was no exception. Only in this soundless room, together with my other half now, is time frozen and the restlessness gone. We linger close to eternity.

But as always, the complexities of life try their hardest to remind us that we are only *close* but not yet *in* eternity. I am undoubtedly reminded of this as I hear Charis's disproportionately loud breathing as the heart pulse indicator by her bedside radiates short and steady green waves - my wife's heartbeat and her life. Somehow, the single green line projecting her heartbeat seems disturbingly fragile, as if the rhythm might collapse all of a sudden and she would be gone, just like that.

As the shadows of dusk dance like Indian warriors on these lonesome walls, I think about time. Today is... the twenty-third of January, 2005. The time is... nearly a quarter to six in the evening - the sun should be setting. Twenty-two days ago at this exact time, we were sitting in the Mexican restaurant on Orchard Road, celebrating the New Year with some tacos, rice and beans, and rich red wine. The wine was obviously a bit too pungent for my wife. I knew, for I've always been well-acquainted with her taste for liquor. But she insisted

that it was okay. She drank it all.

Oh, I remember the older days. Twenty-two years ago, my wife was probably at home with Josh, who was then just a baby. She might have been preparing supper for me too, with her rose-colored apron and soft dark brown hair tied up into a bun. Now, Josh's very own baby girl will be a year old in two months.

I remember, also, the day we visited the Irish Cliffside when she was recovered enough to travel again. It had been just... one year, three months and eighteen days. We thought there was still a lifetime to spend without realizing that our hair had been turning grey, our backs bending lower, our skin more crumbled, and our youth and vigor had long been dispersing slowly, bit by bit, into a treasure chest of memories we could call the past. My own memories, which happen to roam way back, are just one of a million to prove the power of remembrance and recollection, which is also reliving – only with a slight sting in your heart that comes from knowing it *is*, undeniably, the past you remember so very clearly. It is only the past.

Returning, I looked at my wife. Though there was a tube protruding from her throat at an awkward angle and an oxygen mask over her mouth, continually dampened by the moisture of her breath, I could almost see a vague smile underneath. She was lying asleep in a white gown on a bedspread with white bedsheets and a white blanket. Everything was white – including the lilies on the small stool nearby, and the wallpaper. I knew the reason for this colour being used in most hospital wards - the whiteness had given me some sort of divine serenity for these past few days since I was 'delivered' here along with Charis. The only difference between us on that unsettling midnight was that she was unconscious while I was left devastatingly clear of whatever was happening to the both of our lives. Of course, I knew

exactly what everything meant. I had known the moment she woke me up at 2am and grasped my arm with her fist. She had subsided into an uncontrollable seizure which always started slowly from her arms, then spread to her shoulders, and then to her whole body. This was something I recognized all too well – it was the formidable sign of cancer cells returning to haunt her brain, once again.

From that point onwards, I knew it was the beginning of the change of our delicately spun-out plans of retirement. Or at least the beginning of postponement. And then, it had been three quiet days of coma.

“*Click...*” I was startled by the sound of the door knob turning, which broke through the quiet room and my disquieting thoughts. Doctor Liao walked calmly into the terminal ward, followed by his assistant Doctor Xia.

“Good evening, Mr. Chua. How is Mrs. Chua today?” Doctor Liao’s deep discerning voice rang through the room, awakening both my chilly thoughts and the stale entrapping atmosphere.

“Oh, as usual I suppose, as usual. Nothing has changed yet, she hasn’t even given a slight twitch.”

The two doctors took a quick glance at each other. Sensing their hesitation to speak and their less than eager attitudes when approaching the bed, I braced myself to greet the hostility of what was about to take place. There was a loud thumping banging through my head, and I immediately glanced at the little green waves in panic only to be glad that the disruption of my own heartbeat wasn’t affecting Charis’ steady deep sleep. Had I wanted a response from her? I’m not sure. Some claimed that soul mates felt each other’s physical pain as their own and reacted to everything that the other was going through in the same way. I wasn’t too sure.

“Mr. Chua, I know that you can probably guess what Doctor Xia

and I are here for. The medical report has come out for your wife. Would you like to hear it now, or... ” His voice trailed off into silence.

I took a deep breath and mustered up the fullest of my strength, but could only afford to utter a feeble, barely audible: “Yes, I would like to hear it now.”

Doctor Liao nodded at Doctor Xia as he handed a single sheet of paper over to me. I looked down at the numbers, equations and sums, and had no idea what they meant. They were indecipherable codes. What I knew was that in them contained the chances for my wife’s recovery, carefully researched, calculated, tested, recorded. Now, the results were in my hands.

“Very unfortunately, we have made a correct guess: your wife’s brain cancer has revived after her one-year remission. In the short time span of the past five weeks, a tumor the size of a ping pong ball has grown and occupied the upper cortexes of her brain. Due to the presiding dangers, we are unable to have an open operation, nor would chemotherapy be of any help this time. Do you see the two percentages at the bottom of the page? They are the left cortex and right cortex’s individual running capacities. And the percentage in bold red letters is the...”

My mind raced and my body shuddered. I was losing his words. He raced on at a fast pace. Didn’t he know that I was entirely unfamiliar with all these medical scenarios and considerations? I wanted to scream. I wanted to yell out at him to stop and...

...and then, I heard him.

“Mr. Chua, simply speaking, your wife’s breathing is sustained now only because of the tube that goes through her trachea straight to her lungs, which is in turn connected to an artificial breathing apparatus. Even more simply speaking, without medical aid, your wife will stop

breathing immediately.”

Joshua rushed toward me along the long white corridor in quick hurried steps, his leather black shoes making clinks of echoes, reverberating like the ticking of a clock through the hallway. It was deep into the evening and though I couldn't see his face clearly; he reminded me of myself when I was young – only he had a tint of aggressiveness both in his stride and character which I didn't have. Nonetheless, Charis and I had adored him much as he grew, and it was especially between mother and son that, unlike most families with aging parents and maturing children, a very special bond had continued and strengthened between the two with the passing of time.

Wide-eyed, ruffled and very alert, Joshua attempted a whisper, which was still a bit too loud for a hospital hallway – but I guess no one would blame us now.

“How is mother! What did the doctors say, Papa?”

I embraced my son and gestured towards Charis' room with a slight nod of my head. I showed him the sheet of medical report the doctors had given me, with the percentage “0.3%” inscribed in red at the very bottom – the tiny crimson numbers which had since stirred up a fierce storm within my heart. I waited for my son's eyes to scan the page alarmingly, then decided to let the cold hard facts dissipate out of me, with a faint groan.

“The ratio in bold red letters at the end of the page... it is mother's chance of waking up, Joshua. The doctors say that unless there's a miracle...” I tried desperately to compress the shaking in my once composed voice as my face tied up into an unsolvable knot, “And even if she wakes, the cancer would still be beating down upon her brain. She cannot survive another round of chemotherapy. The longer

she breathes, the higher the chance of the cancer cells spreading to her other organs. Josh...”

My son’s face turned up from the page to look at me. His expression was dull, but I saw that tears had welled up in his eyes. The moment I placed a hand on his shoulder, I started crying too – I let my fears and immense grief pour over me. We were like two little babies having a fit. We held each other.

We held each other for a long time.

I first met her in the inter-university Garden Party in her freshmen year, on the front lawn of Victoria Town Hall. Everyone was extremely well-dressed. I was twenty-two, and she was no more than twenty years old – a graceful, soft-spoken, and slender young woman in a white dress draped with little blue flowers, looking so fragile and timid it seemed a gust of wind could have swept her away. Since we were most definitely the only Singaporean-Canadians around, I walked over in my straight-cut tuxedo and polished black shoes and introduced myself warily. I remembered thinking it would be a complete miracle if I could date and marry someone like her. Miraculously, she recalled later that seeing me in the tuxedo was the moment she fell for me – secretly, of course. It would take another uninteresting and tedious school year until we became frequent acquaintances. We started dating officially a month later.

She graduated from the University of Victoria with a Literature degree and found a job as an English teacher at a local primary school in far away Singapore. She asked me if I was willing to go with her, after I had finished my final year of postgraduate studies in Education. I took out the ring I was audaciously hiding in my pocket for a week and proposed to her, telling her I was just waiting for the perfect moment

to hit us by surprise. The ring had a tiny diamond etched in a heart shape, with our initials engraved on a sterling silver surface. I told her I would go to the depths of the sea with her, if that was what it would take for us to grow old and ugly together. She looked at me with a smile and moon-shaped eyes. I knew she would say yes.

Charis and I got married in a small church in the Butchart Gardens, a simple ceremony full of lilies. We moved back to Singapore two months later, along with sixteen overflowing bags of luggage. On that last day when we were to leave, her best friends came to the airport to send us off. I watched as she gave each of them a hug. “See you soon,” she sighed, “It’s not like I’ll be gone forever.” I felt quietly fortunate in those tearful moments of farewell that I would be the one left to escort her onboard the plane and the one to hold her hand as we landed in a whole new part of the world. Tonight, I had my own turn to bid farewell as well. Her going away was no doubt equivalent to the instant dying of half of me. I stared at her face and held it in my gaze for a long time, hoping. Silently hoping – for a sign, for a miracle – to tell me her heart was at peace to leave her children, to leave me, and to leave the world.

“Dear Father, sometimes life is cruel and unexplainable; sometimes we would like to ask you for answers to everything we have to go through now. We were least expecting this, Father... we now commit mother into Your hands. Please grant her and all of us a prevailing peace. Even though we walk through the valley of the shadow of death, You are with us. We hope to see mother someday, in Heaven with You ...”

We gathered around the bed, Joshua, Emma with baby Grace, Chelsie, and the two grandmothers. Chelsie was holding my hand

while I held Charis' right hand and Joshua her left. We stood in a semi-circle around the bed. The doctors were standing by nearby. "Tell me when you are ready, Mr. Chua. And take your time," Doctor Liao said solemnly. I didn't know what that meant - for me, no amount of time would be enough.

For another two hours, we lingered there, singing a couple of hymns and praying some more. We told baby Grace that this woman in the bed was her daddy's mommy, and that she was now getting ready to sleep for a long time. Grace gurgled and gave a little clap of her hands. The two old grandmothers found chairs and sat down; they seemed to have lost the power to mourn openly and were weeping silent tears. Perhaps they were thinking about their own coming deaths as well, not too long from now. I couldn't utter a sound, let alone make attempts to say goodbye to her. The room was weighed down by an unspoken but prevalent heaviness I cringed to describe. Was I sad or relieved that she would be free from seizures, hospital visits, chemotherapy and operations? It seemed that a searing numbness had overpowered all my senses. I wondered if my own soul was getting ready to leave my body as well.

"Papa..." my son murmured in a low voice, "perhaps it's time..."

My daughter hid her face in my chest and sobbed loudly. The sound of midnight tires seemed especially loud on the highway outside. Somewhere, a dog was barking ferociously. I glanced up at the clock; it read 12:46am. We had all each taken turns to be with Charis, prayed together as a family, and the Chaplin had said final blessings over her. Yes, perhaps it was time.

I looked at my son knowingly, then saw him make for the door to notify Doctor Liao. He came into the room, glanced at us for a

long time before finally going over to the breathing apparatuses. He carefully pressed a single button to shut it off. At that moment, we held our breath and squeezed each others' hands as tightly as we could, and tears unwittingly pouring forth. Gradually, the loud inhaling and exhaling that were issuing through the tube stopped. The oxygen mask was taken gently from her mouth, and we could look upon her face more clearly now. She was indeed, as I had imagined, carrying a faint smile, the corners of her mouth slightly upturned. She looked serene and surprisingly radiant, still wearing a slight blush on her cheeks and not bulging a bit. The doctors said that she would keep breathing for a few more minutes before her lungs failed to function and she was gone, so we waited. We waited and stood there, heart-torn, but wordless, sending her off.

I held her hand and touched the wedding ring she was still wearing on her middle finger. Switching it around a bit, I tried to adjust the diamond back to the center position while my heart was screaming within me. *Don't go, Charis! Don't go! What am I to do without you; how am I to live without you here with me? Don't go! Stay with me, Charis! Stay with me...*

Then it happened. Her hand twitched in my hand. The heart pulse indicator beeped and immediately started making irritatingly loud noises.

Although I was dazed and baffled, and although my children and Charis' mother were yelling for the doctors and to each other all at once, although the doctors were bewildered and started pacing around the machines hastily, I thought quickly. Then I knew. With almost ninety-nine percent certainty I knew that the little twitch she just gave in my hand was an attempt to scratch the center of my palm.

Blood rose up to my head as it became heavy. I could feel the

adrenaline pumping towards my heart. A surge of rampant energy and elation, previously all sucked out of my body during the past few days, returned like an ejected bundle of warmth. I focused on my wife's face, all the while recollecting what we had said, almost a year ago, on the Irish Cliffside...

“I was thinking, Gerald, that if I had really died some while ago, I would be going to Heaven. It would be a wonderful thing, dear. The only doubt I have about it was that according to the Bible, when we're in Heaven, I wouldn't be able to recognize you ever again. But I want to recognize you, Gerald! I want you to see my body free of cancer cells; I want to see you without your nose allergy! We could still do our little dance there, you know!” She chuckled.

Tucking the dark hair away from her face and letting it be lifted by the gusty ocean breeze, I murmured, “Ah, well, Charis, by then we would have Jesus and not each other anymore. Though I would agree that one lifetime is not enough for us, apparently it's how God ordained things to be.” I chuckled. “And no more foolishness about you almost dying, my dear. The Lord has kept you here with me so we could make a trip to Paris on our Golden Anniversary some thirty long years later, with our cranes, our bent backs and our aching legs! I promised you that, do you remember?”

She replied after a long moment of silence. We stood there, gazing down at the playful white waves accompanied by the yelps of soaring and swooping seagulls.

“Gerald, if for some reason one of us dies before the other, or if something bad happens to one of us – when we see each other in Heaven and we don't know if it's us – here. Take my hand now.”

I glanced at her, curious, and reached over to hold her hand. Slowly

but firmly, she gave a little scratch on my palm with her middle finger. Then she smiled.

“If we don’t know each other when we’re up in Heaven, we’ll do this to find out. It’s our little secret sign language of *love*. Don’t you ever forget, Ger. This is our pact now. Just in case something bad suddenly happens to one of us, someday.”

I had looked down at her face and given her an intimate squeeze on the shoulders, all smiles. Yes, on that day briefly after her remission by the Irish Sea, I had agreed not to forget this little pact – our little pact – just in case something would happen to one of us.

Remembering, I continued to fix my eyes on her face with undivided focus. The children were asking me what was happening, and the doctors were doing something strange to Charis’ chest while putting the oxygen mask back on again. But I didn’t care. I held on tight to her hand... Then, in the midst of the commotion and talk, it came again.

Another scratch –

This time, firmly and undoubtedly real, she scratched the center of my palm with her middle finger.

As I became swiftly overjoyed and started wondering whether she was coming back after all, the machines beside the bed let out a loud, long and unending groan abruptly, catching all of us by surprise. *Beeeeeeep...* The doctors were fixated, Chelsie looked struck and confused, Joshua turned to Emma and clung onto his family like a strengthless man, while the two grandmothers still sat in their chairs, weeping.

She was gone.

All at once, everyone started talking, crying, or moving about.

More nurses rushed in to help check on the equipment, making sure everything was accurately measured. Baby Grace let out a loud whimper and started wailing— just at the right moment. Chelsie kept asking one of the nurses nearby, “*Is she dead? Is my mother dead?*”

Bracing myself, I released her hand gently. In these last few seconds of my wife’s life, I had felt a supernatural contentment surging into my soul, rising up from the very depths and overflowing to the top of me. Astoundingly and shocking even myself, a fuzzy and joyous smile found its way on to my face. Charis had come back to tell me that she was okay – she was at peace with leaving. She had come back to tell me that she would remember the pact that we had made, the pact that we had decided would be the sign of recognition when we were sent to Heaven someday – the pact of love and of loyalty to one another even in the face of death and glorious eternity. She was going to Heaven, and she had come back briefly just to tell me not to worry, to give me this supernatural strength for the remainder of my journey, and to make an assurance that we would see each other soon, in Heaven. I did not care if it was just a common minor reflex action, a mistake her body had innocently made when she was gasping for more air, or just my plain silly imagination. Somehow, I knew it was her. I knew it was the sign I had been praying for all this while, a sign to assure me all was well despite the turmoil, the grief, and the huge sense of unrelenting loss. Though I was wetting my shirt with my tears without knowing it, I was at peace. I was at peace in my heart, and I was at peace in my spirit. I let her go. She had flown to Heaven.

As we stood watching while they stripped her of her tubes and needles, wrapped her cold body in white cloth and carried her to the morgue, I was well...

As I stood beside her body, adorned with white lilies, and said

thank you to friends and family at her funeral, I was well. As Chelsie phoned me a year later on a random midnight, bawling through the phone about how much she missed her mother, I was well. As Joshua's second baby turned a year old and we took him to Charis' gravesite to introduce him to his grandmother, I was well. I was well, through all these times. I was well when my heart ached and burned as I thought of Charis at our daughter's wedding, five years later.

Now, as I am old and aging, still alive and going about on my own, I am well. I do miss her occasionally, on late nights when it was just me and the sound of my breathing. But over the years, it has been easier to think of her and not break into tears at the memory of how she had brought sweet refreshing fragrance into my life like a pure, white lily. Through her death, which was almost twenty years ago – by Jove, how fleetingly time has passed! – she had promised a powerful and timeless joy to me in the last moments of her life, so that I had strength to endure my walk... until one day, I would too go Home. Tomorrow was our forty-fourth anniversary. I would be flying to Paris, along with my two children and their families, for a celebration. I knew we would have a joyous time together. I knew she would too, watching us in Heaven, waiting for me to come at some divine moment, when we would see each other in eternity and fulfill the pact that we had made when the both of us were still on earth – the pact of love.

Cousins

We travelled on a bus
to Grandpa's home town
four hours across the border,
where bulls stared at dump trucks.

Father talked to two boys
in a language we didn't understand
and told us 'these are your cousins'.
They asked questions with their eyes.

But we failed to answer -
they didn't speak Cantonese or English.
And with frequent sips of water,
we legitimised our silence.

My ears were burning
while my brother's head hung low.
It was the closest we could be.
Cousins bound only by blood.

On the bus homewards,
I wondered if they would also
write a poem about me
in another language.

Melody Yue

A Wide, Open Smile

By Anita Lam Hiu Yan

Kate is sitting in front of the mortuary with her eyes wide open but looking nowhere. There may be tears inside them but she tries hard to sniff them back. No tears are allowed she says, shivering. Her hands are on her lap, sometimes firmly fisted, sometimes trembling over her mouth. It isn't true, it isn't true, she tries to convince her brain, however, the horrible smell coming from the opposite side of the door conquers her mind, not leaving her a bit of sympathy. She stands up and starts walking back to the ward; she needs to smell the sense of life, to cheer her up from her exhaustion.

The wedding, the breakup, the phone call, the coldness... all suffocate her in her freshly up-side-down life.

Everything seemed to be more than perfect at Kate and Wesley's wedding. The cool winter breeze kissed her a number of times, blessing her. The sweet scent of her favorite winter flower, diamond smile, gushed into her nostrils from all over the hall; they were everywhere, giving fragrance to every inch of air. Wesley gently held her hands in his to warm them up. Everything was perfect. The maid of honor in the lemonade-colored gown was Kate's best friend, Zoie. They had been friends forever. They had made a deal when they were younger, that they had to be each other's maid of honor, and neither side could break the promise.

In front of the altar stood Kate and Wesley, hand in hand, embraced by the snowy-white flower decorations and the music that came from the grand piano that saluted in the front of the hall. It was a huge church which Wesley had to beg the priest to rent to them for their

wedding. Kate was wearing a soft dragging jasmine-white deep-v wedding gown with lace trimming the edges. The light silky veil drooped, covering her anxiety and only allowing Wesley to view her vaguely. Wesley in his ivory-colored, straightly-ironed tuxedo looked into Kate's eyes with satisfaction, then helped Kate put on the slender silver diamond ring they had picked together in an antique store. "I promise I'll try my best, to make you happy for the rest of your life," he swore affectionately.

They all stood in front of the church waiting for the cameraman to count to three. Kate tenaciously gripped the bridal bouquet, trying to seize every moment of happiness. "You don't have to be nervous, sweetie, you'll be happy forever, I promise," said Zoie standing next to her, with a persuasive smile. Everything seemed perfect.

"1, 2, 3," shouted Kate. The round bridal bouquet made with red-wine purple and white roses somersaulted a few circles, and then landed neat and tidy in Zoie's hands. Kate hushed forward and gave Zoie a warm hug, joking with her, "Congratulations Zoie, next time will be your big day, huh." Politely, Zoie smiled back in a trance with her hands grasping the flowers tightly.

This morning, when Kate was busy feasting herself on the pleasant moments pictured with Wesley and Zoie, a phone call intruded. The three of them had been friends forever since her parents divorced. They had always been supportive, backing her up anytime, anywhere. Kate was wondering how Zoie was doing in Canada after departing three years ago; she didn't hate her anymore, in fact, she was grateful for her departure, allowing Kate to continue her fantasies.

"Mrs. Fong, this is Hong Kong hospital. Your husband, Wesley Fong, was seriously hurt in a car accident half an hour ago. You'd better

come over immediately...” the lady on the other side said calmly while Kate’s heartbeat thumped faster than the engine sound of a bullet train. There was no time for her to be emotional but to hurry to the hospital. However, she was still too late. All that was left was an empty bed with a familiar fragrance remaining in the air. All swears and promises were gone. Kate collapsed onto the floor bursting with emotion. Tears ran down her face, ruining the make-up she had put on deliberately before she had looked at her wedding pictures this morning. “Mrs. Fong, would you like to visit the other patient?” interrupted the nurse in white uniform, who was supposed to be an angel.

Absorbed in the white bedspread was Zoie, yes Zoie! Kate looked down at her unbelievably, her face stained with tear-traces all over and lips trembling, murmuring, “why...how come...I thought everything was finished...you promised...to leave us...”

Zoie’s eyes were deep and sunken. She tried to look easy but every blink took her more than a few seconds. “I’m so sorry Katie, I tried...I really tried to run away... I thought everything could end... I really.... wanted... to see you happy...but...”

Not a word escaped Kate. They hung in the air, waiting for anyone to pick them up, piece by piece.

“Katie.... I’m sorry, but I promise...you’ll never have...to see me again...but please...can you help me to take care of..... Emma....”

That was all Kate could hear, already too much, but, who the hell was Emma?

B.....E.....E.....P.....

Kate was left alone with Zoie’s cold hands in hers.

They were the same pair of hands. The hands that had accompanied Kate for years, the hands that had pointed her to the answers for the

quizzes at school, and the hands that had helped her put on her first make-up even though she still thought she looked funny with it. It was the same pair of hands that she had held onto tightly when she was having her ears pierced and, at the same time, these were the hands that had torn her life to pieces.

Kate and Wesley's one month wedding anniversary had landed on a nice cool autumn night three years ago. Kate had deliberately left work earlier, planning to give Wesley a passionate surprise. She elfishly bought a new set of sexy underwear from a department store and hunted down Wesley's favorite Canada steak and expensive fresh organic vegetables. The whole scene that had been set for a sweet, romantic and passionate night with her dear husband played over and over in her little head.

That night did turn out to be unforgettable. On the floor were pieces of broken crystal glass that she had newly bought, an untidy bedspread which she remembered she had tidied that morning, and a pair of used guest slippers she had intended to reserve for her mother-in-law's visit that weekend. It seemed that intimate promises and heavy exquisite diamond rings were not as attractive as a beautiful maid of honor.

After the shock, Zoie swore in tears that she would never see Wesley again while Wesley put a knife to his neck, beseeching Kate's forgiveness. The whole mess finally seemed to be settled by Zoie's abrupt announcement that she was be going to take a five-year course on wedding planning in Canada.

Walking back through the aisles, Kate couldn't help thinking of Zoie and her request. On the bed coldly lay the friend she had loved and treasured, but also the bitch that she hated...What could she do?

What should she do? She knew more clearly than anyone how she would feel if she said yes – a totally different life. Wesley was gone, now Zoie, too. The people she loved had left her twice-over; nothing could be more painful than that.

Back in the ward Kate spotted Emma who was around three years old by now. She slept with her legs curled on the bench and her head buried into her knees. The dim sunlight sneaking the tiny hospital windows embraced her. Is that the only love she would get for the rest of her life? Looking at Emma sleeping, a strange sympathy rushed to her eyes, and turned into salty lukewarm water oozing from their lids. Emma has Wesley's bright blond hair that sparkled under the sun like a whale diving in the sea. Her sun-kissed skin color and cute tiny, chubby toes are definitely from Zoie. It is the first time that Kate has seen Emma, but she can tell immediately that Emma is their daughter.

Settling her eyes on Emma's tiny curled up body, Kate felt her heart aching. The pieces of broken glass pinched her mercilessly and all those memories she tried to lock up exploded altogether. They are drowning her, not allowing her to make any clear-cut decisions.

She remembers how passive and helpless she was when her parents divorced. To many people, certainly the judge, living with her mother seemed to be the best arrangement. No one was there to see the empty beer cans, to smell the Chinese medicine she had to put on the bruises on her hips or feel her thinner and thinner arms. Everyday after school, she hung around shopping malls, libraries, book stores... everywhere she could think of, just to avoid going back home. Life in school wasn't that happy either. Divorced parents were like murderers

or prisoners to primary school children. Nobody was willing to play with her; just sitting next to her was like sitting in an electric chair, waiting for someone to switch it on. Those were the worst days in her life, not knowing where to go, what to do. It was Zoie and Wesley who had changed her life. They were new to Kate's class when she was in Primary six, and since then, they were the only people who were willing to listen and talk to her. They helped her survive and later, Zoie's parents even invited Kate to live with them. Her mother said yes, of course, perhaps because of the alcohol.

She also remembers the surprise Wesley gave her on their first wedding anniversary. After all the storms, she thought that she and Wesley would be able to sit before the sunset and watch the gentle waves push themselves onto the beach. That night Wesley came back from work in his wedding suit, idle since their wedding. He handed Kate a long rectangular carton he had been hiding behind his back before and urged Kate to open it. Inside was a purple wine-colored silk tube dress that Kate had pointed in the magazine one day, joking to Wesley about how beautiful she would look in it. Now in front of her was the same dress, plus that handsome, attractive man she had fallen in love with at first sight. She knew that Wesley had been trying really hard that year to regain her trust and she thought that it was time he deserved to be forgiven.

“Hurry up, emergency!!!” interrupts her thoughts. Doctors are storming and yelling to the nurses while the nurses behind are hurrying forward, also checking the equipment they will need soon.

“Hurry up, hurry up, won't you?” an old doctor shouts nastily to a poor young nurse, “there's a life waiting for you!!”

“Come on, Emma, let’s go home,” Kate finally says the words aloud, swallowing her saliva.

Stepping back into her home, Kate melts exhaustedly into her bean cushion. How could things have changed so much? How could this have happened to her? The photo album remains open; untouched on the delicate glass tea table she bought recently. She loves enjoying the sunlight penetrating through the thin transparent glass, toning down the fierce heat into a soft and cozy warmth. However, today the glass seems to be covered by a thick layer of mist. She drags her body towards the tea table, pulling herself forward by her arms.

“Are you hungry, Emma? What would you like for dinner tonight?” Knowing Emma won’t be able to answer her, she reminds herself of the change. Looking at Emma is like looking into a mirror. Before, all she could see were wrinkles or freckles but today, she sees her past and perhaps, her future as well.

Today is a bright and breezy Sunday afternoon, and Kate and Emma are on a school outing together. It is a tough decision for Kate. She cannot forget the afternoon when Emma laughed so happily when she picked her up from kindergarten. “We have a school outing, parents can join, too,” Emma couldn’t help giggling when telling Kate. That laughter was so wide that she couldn’t say no to it, even though the word staring with a P sounded too heavy to her.

“Look at you, you’re so dirty!” Kate laughs at Emma, tickling her. The chain of laughter coming from Emma’s small but widely opened mouth touches Kate.

“Come on, let’s wash your face,” says Kate while trying to wipe away the dirt with her hands. “Ar...hahaha...now your hands are

dirty, too,” little Emma replies giggling.

“Emma, do you miss your Mummy?” Kate asks trying to be casual, in the washroom.

“Yes, I do. But I like auntie Kate, too!!” she replies. At that moment, Kate knows that she didn’t make the wrong decision. Between them, there are no secrets or lies, exactly the best relationship every couple wants.

Standing in front of the wall, Kate fixes her eyes on the two black and white pictures stuck on the two small drawers. The people hiding inside had once made her laugh and made her cry, they had been her everything. Now, looking at the pictures, her mind had never been so peaceful, so clear and calm. It had been her idea to put them together; after all, they already had a daughter. Now, Kate wets her lips with her tongue, trying to recall the bitterness she had tasted in the hospital, or the sweetness she had tasted on her wedding. But, she can’t. There are nothing but memories. For the first time, she feels completely happy and knows that she will continue to be.

Back at home sitting on her favorite bean bag with Emma on her lap, Kate flips through the same photo album. “This is you, dear.” She kisses Emma on her forehead, pointing to a photo taken last week, at Emma’s birthday party. The sun peeping through the window highlights their same, wide-open smile.

I Know You are Looking

I know you are looking for the letter she gave you before your plane took off, it was too short to be read during a flight.

I know you are looking for the drops of rain you collected in a jam jar for primary science class, you got soaked but you saw a rainbow afterwards.

I know you are looking for the scent of Grandma's sweater, you told her you were too sick to walk so she carried you.

I know you are looking for the longitude and latitude on the map where you used to lie on the damp grass.

I know you are looking for the poster of your favourite punk rock band, it was torn apart by Dad.

I know you are looking for the tiny mushrooms that grew in the garden, you thought they could be eaten.

I know you are looking for the lyrics of the song you sang with your brothers in church, which you tried to recite and scrutinize.



I know you are looking for the laughter that brought you
up in space when you leaped over the mountains
covered in snow.

I know you are looking for that place in the long abandoned woods,
and you might find it some day.

Melody Yue

Rose in Blue

A stands for Apple, B stands for Boy, and C of course, is the worst grade you could afford.

Rockets and bombs in the news again.

I don't want to wake up.

I am a girl and he is a man.

This morning, I laugh and the same evening I'll cry

The tree's shadow is following me, wherever I go.

Dream a little dream of me, my friend.

I am in a dream. Am I in a dream?

Peter Pan is doing his homework.

I know I need to wake up.

Chewy, soft and sweet.

I am a rose because I am in blue.

Will my world end with a diamond bomb?

I want to pick and sniff my little blue rose

My blue rose would talk and sing and dance

If he is here, then I will go.

There far away, he would be working, perhaps.

Oh you, How are you?

Veronica Lam

Women

By Betty Huen

“La-lalala... It’s Alex Lee with you this morning, the current temperature is...”

“Could you just turn it off? Will you die without the radio? Why don’t you just marry a radio?” These words were fired from Mrs. Lee’s mouth.

“So that we can have some noise ma...” Mr. Lee defended himself smiling.

“How can we talk when the radio is so loud?” Her voice was amplified this time with the wider opening of her mouth.

The radio was executed promptly by Mrs. Lee. And the TV screen in the sitting room burst into colours with an awkward ‘*bo-ook*’.

“Ha-haha-hah. So let’s go on a picnic tomorrow!” said animal characters in the show.

“I go buy a newspaper,” said Mr. Lee, his worn voice reflecting his old age.

Mrs. Lee’s face was of a honey colour, golden and not exactly clear. Lines were carved on her forehead and chin, on which the skin was like a loose layer of soft rubber, but her eyes were those you could trust your children’s education with. She had been a teacher and he had been a teacher. There were on the walls pictures of the couple traveling in the Philippines, even the curls of her hair seemed to be smiling under the glass.

There was the regular soap drama on TV. Mrs. Lee always occupied the middle seat of the sofa at that time in the evening. The female characters always had long curly hair, exaggerated eyelashes

and white skin.

“These women must have starved themselves, and then put on loads of make-up. Do you agree with me, Ah Leung?”

The husband nodded without hesitation. The dinner went on; there were two dishes, fried mixed vegetables and steamed pork with duck’s egg-yolk. They ate slowly and there were only the conversations coming from the TV.

“You-u cheated on me! Did I make any mistakes that you have to find another woman? Ahh! ”

The husband tried to chase the wife but his girlfriend stopped him. Then, the couple went to a pub and got drunk.

“These men are so heartless!” commented Mrs. Lee forcefully.

She finished her bowl of rice and reached for more. The dishes suited her taste buds. They were all Mr. Lee’s cooking. Mrs. Lee insisted on working and Mr. Lee had become a house-husband. He had been in charge of household matters for almost a decade. They had two children who were both working now. Sometimes the boredom of life could lead to tedious arguments and it was uncertain whether they enjoyed it or not. Sometimes getting no response from a quarreler could be worse than having a huge fight.

It was nearly nine forty and Mr. Lee needed to pay for the metered parking space a five-minute walk from the flat. It was almost eleven when he returned to the flat again. His wife was like a stone on the sofa in front of the TV, but the shows were getting more meaningless as time passed. There was the nonsense of the advertisements and the occasional annoyance of mosquitoes, encouraging inhabitants to break away from the house, at least spiritually. It was as if a ritual had to be performed before things could move forward, before the sun could rise again to illuminate and energize the people.

“What took you so long downstairs?” Mrs. Lee interrogated her husband. Her eyes moved from the TV to him.

“Just a walk, it’s so hot you know,” Mr. Lee said patiently.

“It’s ten something and what do you can you do downstairs? Did you find those hookers?”

“I said I just went for a walk. You think too much.” he smirked and tried to act funny so as to make his wife comfortable.

Bang! she hit the table with her fist and-

“YOU THINK I ’M DUMB, don’t you, HUH??”

“Ai, I just went for a walk and you just don’t listen.”

“SO I AM WRONG TO ACCUSE YOU! ...”

Veins and tendons in her neck appeared as Mrs. Lee continued her scolding. Her eyes and face reddened with anger. She sobbed and he was silenced. He retreated to the bedroom and she let herself topple onto the sofa. The TV was like her guard; it would not and could not cheat on her, and it had no damn legs to leave her.

She wanted to scream but had no reason to. She kept switching channels for several minutes. Finally she resorted to stories of Agatha Christie, on which she had spent some of her nights already. The TV was only switched off at about four, and so was the light.

The next day was peaceful, as if nothing had really happened. Or at least Mrs. Lee thought so. She left for school at around seven in a blouse and pants. There were less people on the street than she expected, but the morning breeze was a bit too cool. Leaves were parachuting from branches, and she wondered if they knew where they were going. The few pieces of rubbish looked lonely on the deserted street. She found herself near the zebra crossing and felt an urge to shoot out in front of the coming cars. She instantly felt pissed off that

she was so naive. Still she tried to imagine herself being rushed to the hospital with her husband beside her.

She boarded the train and fixed her eyes on the screen. “Saturday 4/10 ...” flashed before her in red little dots on the display screen. It was a holiday. She closed her eyes and felt protected in darkness when she could not see anything, allowing the train to take her wherever it felt like. She squeezed her eyes, working hard to locate memories of last night. All she could remember were the contents of the soap drama.

On Saturday, Mr. Lee woke up at four something, turned off the TV and the light. What a waste it was to leave them on the whole night! He looked around the house. He had always hated the TV; the stories were so fake and deceiving. It was showing ‘Tele-fish-ion’ before he put all that nonsense to a halt. He scanned the sleeping woman on the sofa mindlessly. Her body was once soft and slender, and her hair thick with rich black curls. Both of them had grown old, and with age came a lot of problems that he fully understood. He was not angry with her; on the contrary, the quarrel the day before reminded him of some surprising possibilities. Other women. He felt the coming of spring and he dreaded the naughty inspirations. He was almost sixty. All his life, he had played the role of a perfect husband and father, and he thought no one really cared whether he could remain as spotless as he had been for the past decades.

The shorter hand of the clock had swept over a quarter of the clock surface. The sky was orange when he left to do the shopping. He was breathing the air of dust, people and food from stalls and restaurants and he seemed to gain some freshness. Park’n’Shop was packed with

women, mostly Philipino maids. They were so young, he thought. He was at the meat section; he picked up a pack of fresh pork chops. He gave it a glance and placed it back onto the shelf. Either the colour of the chops or the figures on the labels chased him away. He left for the market. The moment he stepped out of the shop his pores were covered with warmth and slight stickiness. When he entered the market there was immediately strong coolness, accompanied by dirty grass-like smell of chicken crowds and here and there non-stop 'cok...cokcok'. He felt that the all humans shared similar fates with the chicken for slaughter. Since he would only live once, he ought to do whatever he wanted to, especially when he did not have many years left. The market was like a friend to him. He treasured the moments when his children were small enough to follow him to shop there like going on an adventure. But with age, things disappeared. Perhaps something was meant to be lost anyway.

He returned to the damp apartment, where the air smelled of dizziness and moisture. He opened the tightly shut windows, both for himself and the potted plants in the room. His wife would say it was to let in dust and thieves at night if she was there. The broad leaves of the African violet were covered with dust trapped within the tiny hairs on the surface. There were no flowers. He carefully blew away the dust, and gave them some water. He was never into living things that could not take care of themselves, but this morning he felt that he could befriend the violets. He was happy with this slight change. Hours passed while he dived into the world of Mingpao and ordinary household chores.

Creeping, night fell. People were unprepared. That night was even hotter than before. Cooking in the tiny kitchen, Mr. Lee's T-shirt was

drenched like the pattern of flame, an inextinguishable flame. The urge for change grew furiously in Mr. Lee's mind. He felt an irresistible discontent within himself; he wanted some change to his mechanistic, plain-to-death life. Balloons of anxiety exploded in his mind, and at that moment he started to pity those who broke the rules. He began to plot his escape from the apartment. But what about dinner? He then resolved to finish the meal first. He was pleased about it because usually whores operated later at night.

Clashes and clings were heard from the iron gates. Mr. Lee nearly lost all his nerve about his secret plans. His glasses were falling from the ridge of his nose. He looked into the fridge for the pork he had bought from the market, only to remember it was already being steamed inside the cooker. He felt stupid. He had a family, what could disgusting hookers bring him?

“Ah Leung, are you cooking?”

“Ye...yes... will you watch the fire for me for a moment? I'll be back soon.”

“Why?”

“I just want to buy some dessert.”

“How come you suddenly became gluttonous?”

“It's not the case.”

Mrs. Lee frowned. She thought about the small fight yesterday. But then, it was not yet eight so she felt safe letting him go. And anyway he was such a nice man; he would never do such a stupid thing.

“Will you buy me a sweet-potato soup when you go out?”

“No problem.”

Mr. Lee hurried out. The door closed softly behind him and he was on his own. He heard the TV of his neighbours. It was one of the

few times, if not the first, that he had lied to his wife. He was clueless about his next step. Was he really going to visit those dirty women? He questioned himself on his way to the dessert shop. He sat down and ordered. The icy soup cleared his mind, but eventually the coolness turned into freezing forces inactivating nerves in his gums. He wanted to go home for the warm supper. A couple was sitting a few tables away. The man had a broad oily face, his teeth heavily stained. He was wearing a stripped shirt and sandals. Next to him the woman was in pink vest, shorts and golden high-heels. Her hair was dyed brown and her powdered cheek was smeared with rouge. Her eyebrows were hand-drawn; her lips artificially red and thick. Her Cantonese was broken and polluted with dialects. The man had placed his palm on the woman's thigh. Mr. Lee noticed that his spying had been discovered so he quickly paid the bills and left with the take-away for his wife.

He passed the street where women were standing in front of closed shops and displaying themselves. Despite the dim yellow street light, one could tell the women were not locals. They wore high-heeled sandals and tight-fitting clothes. A few men were smoking across the street. Some pedestrians speeded up to leave the street hurriedly. Mrs. Lee had told their children many times not to take this route at night. He also shot through the street, but accidentally bumped into a woman with her hair tied up. The foam bowl fell and hit the ground with a 'boo-ok' sound, and some soup slowly crawled out from the plastic bag. There was no way they could be put back into the bowl again.

The woman paid no attention to the take-away on the ground but simply lifted up two and then five fingers to Mr. Lee, giving him a smile of thick red lipstick. The overly smoky eyes almost immobilized Mr. Lee. It seemed that the time was frozen by the heavy cosmetics on the woman's face. Before Mr. Lee gave up on the takeaway and left,

a bony hand with orange fingernails adhered to his shoulder, and slid downwards, smoothing his back. To his surprise, a stream of tenderness spread through his body starting from his back, transfixing him.

Heavy steps carried Mr. Lee onto poorly lit stairs; each floor was marked by wooden doors on which glasses glowed with faint pink neon light. The space smelled of sweat and perfume. There were occasional low moans coming from behind the closed doors. He thought he was on a journey to excitement. He just followed the ‘*clock, clock, clock*’ from the stranger’s footsteps in shadow.

They came to a door which opened to a double bed. The woman asked if he wanted the lights on and he said no. He didn’t know what to do; it was his first time. He went to the bathroom to wash his face. Outside the woman began undressing silently. He peeked at the naked woman from the slit of the door. He saw she let down her curly hair at the end.

“I am charging you hourly, so be quick.” said the woman.

It was a nightmare, the body of an unfamiliar woman.

The moment he reached her, he felt weird. He tried kissing her body but it did not help. It was not that her skin was not smooth or her body was not in good shape. He had no intention of sleeping with her. He just did not want to. He told the woman frankly about his feelings.

“Hey! Then don’t you waste my time! I will find another customer. But I will still charge you.” She dressed promptly.

Mr. Lee nodded, paid and left. He felt good about himself.

On the same street stood Mrs. Lee; it was well past nine and she was alone. She walked pass a plastic bag containing a bowl on the ground and she carefully avoided the liquids. She arrived at a dessert

shop and entered.

“Mrs. Lee! Your husband just left some time ago! You still want more sweet potato soup?”

“...Y-yes! Can I have a bowl? Hot please.”

She knew that Mr. Lee just went for a walk since he still remembered her dessert. She would just meet him on her way home later. She enjoyed her sweet soup with the TV in the shop. She saw a nasty couple so she paid and left.

She regretted that she took the road which she always warned her kids not to take.

She recognized the back of a man, she hesitated to call him. He was with a mainland girl, Mrs. Lee could tell instantly from the way she dressed, and her guess was confirmed when the girl spoke. She lowered her face and deliberately slowed down. She finally had to walk pass them. It couldn't be him. It couldn't be him. She muttered under her breath. It was not him. She found her situation similar to TV housewives suspecting their husbands, she laughed to herself at her own folly.

Mrs. Lee blew some air from her mouth and took a deep breath. She did not like to be watched by others so late on that street doing nothing so she took out her cell phone and dialed.

“Do-do-duu-duoo-doo-du-dude-due...bo-ook...linnnng...linnnng...”

She walked holding her phone at her face. A familiar ring-tone was heard.

“Wei?”

A man's voice was heard from not too far away - in fact from a nearby staircase. Mr. Lee emerged from the dark hole and turned towards Mrs. Lee.

“Hello?” repeated Mr. Lee holding the cell phone at his face.

The two people were facing each other. Mr. Lee was immobilized on the spot again. Mrs. Lee covered her mouth with her hand and rushed home, not giving him time to do anything.

The Utterances

Had I a choice, I would not pronounce any vowel.

(At 5 am I saw Charlie Chaplin in black and white, while Socrates bargains at a market between Iran and Iraq. I am the hero and he must then be the heroine. Goodbye Shakespeare. Go and shake your spear! I do not have a choice not to pronounce any vowel. I want to cover myself with a grey silken blanket, inside a coffin-like bed. Talky is my roommate. We chatted every night until we slept.

Nur ein Wort, bitte².

“‘A’ stands for ambiguity. ‘B’ stands for bigotry and ‘C’ of course is crayon.” The professor emphasized. The world will be a bookmark in a book. It marks a Logos. I am a radio because people need something to listen to. The birches are dissecting the sky with precision. If he had been released, I would put him back. This morning, I designed a consonant; this evening, I made him a friend. They commanded: Do not write. Long live Socrates’ wife.)

Ashley Leyash

² “Only one word, please” in German

Chinese

There I was, in the Sistine Chapel
Listening to
announcements in all major languages
Italiano
English
Française
Español
Português
Deutsch
even Nihongo

Waiting
Waiting
Waiting
for my own language
Mother tongue of 1.3 billion people

Eva Leung

From the Lecturer's Desk

I know you are cursing me
6 in the morning, kicking off your blanket,
splashing cold water on your face.

I know you are cursing me,
fiddling your pen,
thinking I speak like Prufrock,
and my Powerpoint like Krapp's Last Tape.

I know you are cursing me in the canteen
with those who sit next to you
who are also cursing me.

I know you are cursing me
reading supplementary texts
when words dance in the air
sounding like Scandinavian.

I know you are cursing me in your room
tapping hard on your computer
coffee by the side, the dark sky whitening.

I know you are cursing me when I walk past you,
when you sit scribbling for two hours
hoping I would put a tick.

I know you are cursing me
when I give you an alphabet,
so you can have a paper,
which you can take to someone else
whom you would curse
more than cursing me.

Eva Leung

Literature—Mirror of Life

By Michelle Ng Cho Ling

Today Terry wakes up at eight in the morning, as usual. He habitually takes a shower after he gets up. After thirty minutes, he starts shaving with his brand-new electric shaver. He has to tilt his head backwards a little bit so that he gets the whole image of his chin in the mirror while he shaves. He runs the shaver slowly, cautiously, to and fro around his chin, so that he does not miss any of the hairs that stick out. He now lowers his head a little bit so that he can do the same thing to the hairs just below his nose. Every time he lowers his head, peering through the lenses of his Burberry glasses, he reluctantly meets the bald spot in the middle of his head—a sign of wisdom and hard work, he comforts himself. “Ji...ji...” the operating noise of the shaver goes on for another two minutes; then it dies away, mechanically. The house is back to utter silence again, because Samantha is still sound asleep. She is a piano teacher and has a flexible work schedule; her day usually kicks off in the afternoon when the kids go home after school. Terry throws a glance at Samantha who is snoring slightly, and squeezes a smile at his own image in the mirror, just to make sure he will be presentable in front of the four clients, his manager and the colleagues he will be meeting later today.

When he gets home, it is already eleven at night. He throws himself onto the couch. He does not say anything; he simply enjoys the tranquility that surrounds him. It seems to be the only second he truly enjoys for its own sake. They live in a house in the New Territories; so they can always hear the bugs’ “zizi-zizi-zizi” and the toads’ “cra-cra-cra.” Allowing his ears to follow the rhythms of nature, Terry gradually lets his eyelids fall, half-open first, then finally slightly

closed, and his body also slides down along the arm of the Italian couch he bought on his last trip to Europe with Sam, about four years ago. Now his snoring gets louder and louder with his eyelids vibrating along with his snoring; but it stops abruptly—when the phone rings. It’s Samantha.

“I’ll be home late. I’m gonna have a late supper with Mandy...the one you met before, at one of our gatherings, remember?”

Terry’s face remains still and rigid, the whites of his eyes now dirty from the nap. He said something he does not really remember himself, like, “Sure, Hon, why not?” and hung up. He falls into sleep again, still on the couch. This is the end of Terry’s day, a typical day. The date is March 20, 2008.

The date is March 20, 2008. Terry gets up and gets ready for work. His life has always been occupied with his job, and it is getting busier and busier. In spite of the fact that he manages to earn his living with his job, Terry, deep in his heart, does not really like it. As an English major at CUHK, he had always aspired to become a teacher, an English teacher, one who could inspire the younger generation. However, his parents and teachers kept telling him he would make more money in the business sector, and so he ended up working for an insurance company. One of the reasons he dislikes his current occupation is because he feels he is not educating, but deceiving. On many occasions, with his ample experience in persuasion, he has had to bamboozle his clients into consulting their company and hence buying insurance. He had a client who was once diagnosed as having breast cancer.

“Can I still buy this package...you know, I had breast cancer eight years ago?”

“That is ab-so-lute-ly all right. Just trust me. I’ve got more or less

twenty years of experience in claiming reimbursements. Just count on me. Sign right here, as this discounted package will end really soon. And may I remind you...” he went on blathering in his low, one-tone voice, his hands busy shuffling the documents and at the point the client affixed her signature, Terry’s grin was one that exposed all his canines.

However, the client was unable to claim her reimbursement when her cancer resumed after three years, due to her unrevealed previous history of cancer.

There were lots of other occasions when Terry cheated university students into buying travel insurance with his clever use of language and exaggerated humour.

However, Terry was not totally cold-blooded. He felt bad every time he knew that he was being dishonest with his clients, and even himself. He was now walking, alone, along a boulevard, to see his first client of the day. How much he wished he were a piece of a cloud, wandering lonely high up in the clear sky, looking down at earthly things, like his old days back at CUHK. The days at CUHK were happy and simple enough; he was always sitting somewhere in the corner of the UC canteen to discuss schoolwork and aspirations with his classmates. All the others looked into his wide, energy-filled eyes, behind his golden-rimmed spectacles—which apparently made him seem intellectual. While he spoke, some of his hair, which was pretty long, would dangle in front of his forehead and he would sweep it away with his right index finger, swiftly—and it was such a move that had made him a charismatic leader at that time. When he reached the topic of the attributes he thought would make a good educator, he became so agitated that his eyes would widen so that you would be unable to see his eyelids.

“I believe a great educator has to possess the knowledge himself, and also patience...” he addressed his classmates in this passionate and energetic voice.

He has not become a teacher or a professor. His dream has long been shattered. And yet these beautiful old days were still visible when he let his eyelids drop heavily and he opens his inward eye; like Wordsworth, these pleasant old days still fill his heart with pleasure and he dances with the eternal past. Right there, he sees with his inward eye, his old friends sitting around a small white table, elbows pressed to the table and palms supporting their heads, their eyes fixed on Terry’s lips. He, back in the boulevard in reality, gives himself a smile, probably one of solace and remorse.

After working for a couple of hours, Terry has a break, during which he thinks of Sam. Terry and Sam have been together for nearly five years and they moved in together soon after they came to know each other. Sam is in her early twenties, and is more than ten years younger than Terry. In Terry’s eyes, Sam is just terrific; she is in her bloom and she is amazingly musically talented. More strikingly, Sam is a piano teacher! That is just like Terry’s dream career! He cannot afford to lose her.

There was a night, about two years ago, when Terry got home at about eleven, as usual. He got a call from Sam at midnight.

“Err...I will...be...a little late...um...um...you go to bed early... gotta work...tomorrow...” Sam threw up her words in broken pieces, as if the telephone cable were about to fall to pieces as well.

At first, Terry was just worried. Then, he got curious, when he heard the noise from a car engine at three in the morning. He knew Sam did not drive. So, he tiptoed out of the bedroom, stuck his head through the window so that he had the whole view of the parking lot.

There in the dark, he saw two headlights, which were turned off when he peered out. Could that have been Sam and someone else? His hair dangled in front of his eyes but he still managed to spot the logo of the Jaguar. A Jaguar. Well, that must have been someone as energetic and powerful as a jaguar in the wild. He swept aside the hair, and he felt with his hand his wet forehead and pot-hot cheeks. He heard some purposely-light footsteps approaching the house. The worst dream was yet to come. It was the first time he did not want the one coming home to be Samantha. Now he felt he was too feeble to walk; he was simply stuck to the spot, with drops of sweat streaming down his forehead, wetting his dangling hair so that the whole thing was like a section of marshy field. Yet he, upon hearing the clink of the bunch of keys out there, knew he must be back to bed before she knew that he knew.

He does not really remember how he passed that night. He covered himself tightly with the blanket and did not even steal a look at Sam. All he still remembers is Sam's overdose of perfume, rose-flavoured, smelling like an exclusive brand; also the odour from her hair, smelling like some styling gel. She must have been dressed up and made up so beautifully that night. Could she be sexy with the guy? Could he be flirting with Sam? Could they be going too far? Terry fell asleep, finally, in the midst of these doubts.

This did not happen just once. Now Terry is pretty sure what has been going on. And they are talking less and less. Terry, to a certain extent, gives Sam up and he ploddingly gets used to the reality. Now he, during a break at work, tries to reach Sam on the phone but fails to. He knows immediately whom she would most probably be with—the Jaguar. He stares at his own face in the glass he is holding in his hand. He sees that his own image is staring back at his sparse hair, some already sparkling silver, due to the work that has overwhelmed him

over the years. He frowns—oh, don't frown, or the crinkles on his forehead would form three railways. He relaxes his muscles a little bit, but he can still see three thick scratches as if they were scorched onto the skull. His spectacles have now fallen to rest on the tip of his nose, which makes him look even more comic with his already distorted and sunken cheeks in his reflection. His grayish lips just blend into his face tone. He sees the image of himself and he knows that is what Sam would see with her eyes as well. He lets his eyelids slide down slowly; then he keeps them tightly pressed for a good period of time.

While he allows his mind to travel freely, it meets J. Alfred Prufrock—they seem to have encountered the same problem in life.

“Have I grown old, Prufrock?”

“You grow old...you grow old. You shall wear the bottoms of your trousers rolled...” Prufrock's voice, as sharp as a knife stabbed into the ventricles of his heart, keeps lingering in his mind.

“Shall I part my sparse hair behind? Do I dare eat a peach?” Terry still remembers all these lines pretty vividly.

He is by now experiencing a change that he has never known in person but only in books; now he gives a sigh of epiphany: this is life, he thinks to himself, nodding. He finally feels a tunnel dug between himself and Prufrock, with every act hammering and drilling down on his arteries, veins and capillaries. He feels that his blood is pumping out from his heart, with every breath he takes; on the other side, Prufrock, in uncontrollably forceful pulses, and they become one entity now, past and present, literature and reality. At a certain point, Terry seems to have dried up and he finally has no acute feelings about his inevitable aging, and the turbulence in his love life. His eyes are fixed on the glass of water in front of him, and yet he is seeing much beyond that: all he wants is to drown in the centre of the glass of water

right in front, like Prufrock does at the end of the poem.

After the break, Terry goes back to his office only to have a piercing shriek greet his ears.

“Terry Cheung, come down here! Come, come, come. We all look at sales! I said good sales! However you can get them sales!”

That is his manager. He is someone more “insured” than any other insurance agent.

“Mr. X, but the economy these days is not very good...so it’s not very likely...”

“Damn it! It’s not our concern! We want the best sales! Top salespersons! That’s the difference between you and me...lack of vision, lack of planning, lack of confidence...”

Terry remembers how he climbed his career ladder, right after his graduation. Thanks to his well-presented image, outstanding educational background and spectacular language proficiency, he was assigned to the office at Central and most of his clients were professionals and business leaders. He made a pretty good living through all these years. His all-time high sales record earned him a certain status within the office. Whenever they have a meeting, it would be his show time. He could still hear those compliments in the air now.

“Top sales person! Again, again, and again: Terry Cheung! Everyone, join me and give our young hero a big round of applause!” What followed here would be rhythmic claps and whistles.

But those were the beautiful old days. Now everything was slipping downhill. And descending from the peak simply meant you would be waving at both tangible and intangible things in the past: Terry gave up his Mercedes and could now barely afford a Toyota; he is no one in the office either now, though he still carries the title of assistant regional manager. Now, he swiveled his head from one end to the other, like a

mechanical fan in the 50's. He felt now like he was being suffocated to death, as if all the air were being sucked away from him while everyone in the office was staring at him with eagle-like eyes. He pants, and he pants. He could now hear nothing except for his own struggling breaths, for the last gulp of air. How much he wished he were a bug, under the pen of Kafka, so that he would not have to meet the humans line to line. He would rather go unnoticed, and un-attacked. His manager and his colleagues used to wear a grinning mask with respect when they saw Terry, back in the days when he used to make lots of money and earned face for everyone, when confronted with the other branches of the company. He'd felt gigantic at the time, because everyone would look at him from down there, their lips curving upwards. Yet now, everyone was looking down upon him, their lips all drooping and some even stretching the upper left corner of their mouths so much that their yellowish pointed canines would stick out like roaring dogs—they just wanted to show their disdain. Nonetheless, he was getting accustomed to these beast-like faces as the days went on because he has always known, since his days at CUHK, that once a human turns into a bug and does not function as well as a human any longer, he would be dehumanized for good. And today, Terry, at last, sees for himself what metamorphoses meant, in life.

It was now finally, the end of another day. Terry lay on his exclusive Italian couch, earnestly enjoying the celestial tranquility of nature. Soon, he drifted into sleep and dreamed of turning into one of the bugs in the garden, leaping around freely—merely in his world of literature.

Old Tree

In all seasons, spring, summer, autumn and winter
You stand at the same place, more than hundred years.
Sometimes I wonder about your age, health and I fear--
Are you dying? Are you catching a cold or fever?
With strong wind blows, and thunderstorms hitting hard
Or the boiling sun, shining upon you, until it gets dark.
And bitter snow too; attacking you, as your skin gets wrinkles
And start to fall apart, I worry about you-- how long will you last?
Your identity remains a mystery to me, but no one cares
about your existence, until you go, become papers,
books, even trash bags. Tell me who you are...
I will keep it a secret, never tell anyone, not even my father.
But would you understand me, the language I speak,
The points I make, the thoughts of my mind, the
restless uncertainties inside my heart?
Perhaps I have worried too much about you
As I rest here
Underneath your feet, feeling the bark
I hope you will never fall apart.

Hollis Ngai

The Yellow Flower

By Geoffrey Chan Kin Yu

The weather was so hot.

For more than three months, not even a single drop of water had pitied this forsaken village—if one could still call it a village. There were virtually no buildings left intact in this territory, after the war started. The remaining structures were left devastated in this land and tainted a sand-yellow, making the village seem more like an Egyptian ruin than a village where people were struggling to stay alive.

People in this village found sleep precious, as sleeping gave them the momentary hope that the world would be better the day next when they opened their tired eyes, hoping to see crystal after crystal of raindrops tending the scalded landscape, humming a beautiful piece of percussion music. But when the worn tents that surrounded them slowly came into focus, and all they could see outside were the disgusting shit-holes and the pathetic land that had been bleached by the sun to an eyesore white, they knew Allah wasn't here to save them today.

Once in a while, though, it rained.

“Run. RUN! They are coming!!!”

A warning scream by someone in the village sent everyone else into a panic. In the distant sky, a flock of armor-plated bombers roamed through the sky, their wings spanning across the universe like a huge hand masking everything but a few rays of sunshine that slipped through its fingers.

And then, it rained.

First the sky, then the people's eyes.

The village was in chaos. Villagers – fathers and sons, mothers

and daughters, everyone, ran hastily for shelter. It was strange to see that a boy, approximately fourteen years of age, stood unmoved by the rampaging rain of dynamite. His dirty clothes were at least two sizes too large, the baggy sleeves plagued with holes which were swaying slightly in the hot breeze, spreading a rotten-food kind of smell that would keep every sane person at least ten feet away from him.

But what did he care?

The symphony of explosions encompassed the half-deserted village. To some, the bombs were like fireworks that were used to celebrate the dawn of a new age, and with a miraculous bonus effect – to obliterate those who were opposed to their ideas. To an unfortunate population, they were the seeds of suffering. To the boy...he didn't even bother to waste time figuring out what their meaning was. The earth-shattering explosion seemed like feathers tickling at his ears. And if time stopped flowing, he just squatted on the debris and stared at tiny yellow flower some fifty centimeters away from him. He stared with such concentration that if his eyes were swords, they would have cut and dismembered the flower into a million pieces.

“Boom!” and he fell.

His parents had died in a raid.

Soldiers, it hadn't mattered which faction, carrying machine guns, explosives and rocket-propelled grenades had stormed this little village in the morning. They claimed that renegades from an opposing faction had been hiding there. Whether or not their claims were true and could be substantiated was not at all important. In either case, his parents had been out that particular morning queuing up for some water at a well. As a result, they had become target-shooting practice.

The boy remembered moving his head a bit outside the window so

that he could search for his mother with one eye. He remembered how his body had shivered in fear when an RPG just narrowly missed him, setting part of his home on fire. But the picture he remembered most vividly was his mother's eyes, when a couple of ruthless metal bullets had pierced through the burning heat and impaled her fragile body. Everything happened so fast his head had gone completely blank. There were a million words inside, he was sure, and a numberless amount of emotions left untold. He wished dearly he could listen and feel what she had felt, but before he knew it, his parents lay motionless on the hard earth.

Covered in dirt, they held each other's hands on the ground, their still-warm blood pouring out fiercely, absorbed by the ravaged and thirsty soil at once, turning the ground a crimson red. He knew their lives were evaporating under the burning sun, minute by minute, second by second. What could he do? What could he possibly have done to prevent this? A sudden surge of rage hit his heart and for a few seconds he really wanted to take out the knife he hid under his bed and stab those responsible. But who were they?

Then the picture of his mother's eyes reemerged in his mind, ever so gentle and tender.

“Live on, my child”—maybe she would have said.

His neighbor Essam saved him a second time from certain death. The rain of explosives could have incinerated him in no time, but as if Allah was making jokes with him, he lived, with only a few scratches on his legs. People gossiped about his recent behavior. Some said he had lost his mind, some said he could never recover from his parents' death. Others pitied what he went through but were too busy worrying about themselves. It didn't matter. He hated them. He hated them all.

He hated them for no apparent reason.

But what kept the boy wondering was how the little yellow flower managed to survive the crazy bombing. The hyperthermal explosion had apparently failed to burn it down to its roots. Weird, he thought. But the flower's existence in this place was by itself a weird incident. What was it doing here, on the very spot that his parents had left forever for heaven? He wondered.

He had been staring at the ground for many weeks. First, the bloodstain was still remotely visible. Then, yellow earth was all that he could see. Weeks later, a seedling emerged into this world and soon it blossomed. Despite the immense heat and occasional sandstorm, the flower stretched out its petals and smiled to the world with radiating beauty.

The sun shone ever more violently. Its sterilizing rays cut through the cloud-free sky, and bombarded the lone village, showing no mercy. The boy could feel his skin burning with pain, but not once had he thought of leaving this place. Of course, he was not leaving. Why should he leave? The yellow flower was not submitting to the raging heat, nor was he...not until he had found an answer, anyway. There was no food, no water for the flower, yet it flourished, nonetheless. Sometimes he thought that maybe his mother was living inside it, but more often, he thought of the flower sucking her blood from the soil in order to grow. Whenever he thought of this, blood pumped faster in his veins, and he could feel that his chest was on the verge of exploding, ready to unleash whatever madness was growing within him.

“And what are you smiling at?”

The urge to tear the flower into a million pieces was so great that he nearly lost control of himself. But no, his mother could still be living inside. Realizing that, he loosened his fist a bit.

It was then that he saw a little hand holding a small piece of cloth in front of him. Turning his head slightly to the right, he saw a little girl, who, like him, was squatting on the ground, staring at him with a pair of questioning eyes. He had never seen her before, yet when their eyes met, he was shocked to see some sort of familiarity in them. He almost let the word “mother” slip from his mouth. But, she looked so much younger than him!

“Aren’t you hot?” the girl asked, still holding the cloth by his hand.

Coming back from his thoughts, he turned his gaze back to the flower again. However, the girl’s face was like a stone tossed into a lake, creating ripple after ripple that distracted him from whatever he tried to do.

“You must be very hot,” she persisted.

Of course he was hot. He had never been hotter. His face was as red as a brick and his sweat ran furiously. He was burnt inside out. Her remarks annoyed the beast inside him. He simply could not stand the naiveté in her questions. They didn’t belong here, she didn’t belong here. And what did she know about the things that had happened around them? How could a young girl like her understand what the heat really meant? What did she know about the war and suffering?

Hearing no reply from the boy, the girl withdrew her arm and let her head rest on her palm.

“What’s your name?”

He didn’t even glance at her when she spoke.

“I am Amala. Mama said she chose this name because it means ‘hope’.” She paused. “We’re traveling to the North, but mama said we’re staying here a while.”

The boy squatted like a statue. His legs unmoving, his eyes fixed

on the yellow flower, not responding to anything she said or did.

Amala let out a little sigh, then she too, switched her attention to the flower.

“It’s beautiful,” she exclaimed, then went closer and touched its petals.

“GET YOUR HANDS OFF IT!” the enraged young boy turned to Amala and shouted a powerful cry, so powerful he hadn’t thought he could produce a sound like that. But much to his surprise, it didn’t even faze her. Amala only moved a few inches away from the flower, staring at him in bewilderment, or sympathy, he wasn’t sure.

The boy didn’t understand why but he was scared to look her in the eyes. One second he felt like a hungry tiger wanting to eat her alive, the next her gaze seemed to have dissolved all his rage and hatred. Though unwilling to admit it, at that instant he felt really ashamed of himself.

Thankfully, the girl slowly got up, left him and saved him from the total agony that threatened to consume him.

He was all alone.

The next day he went to the flower again, half wondering if Amala would come. On the one hand, her presence seemed to draw out his raw emotions, but on the other, he had felt a kind of serenity he had not experienced since his mother had died. The boy shook his head in despair, trying to shake away the vexation like shaking the perspiration from his skin. But the more he tried, the more he felt the two sides of tension almost tearing his body in two.

“Hello,” Amala said, suddenly appearing in front of him.

Caught by surprise, he looked at her and felt an electrical pulse running through him. Soon, however, he retained his coolness, turning

his head and pretending that Amala was but a phantom sitting on the ground. Amala said nothing. Like the boy, she sat by the yellow flower admiring the beauty and inhaling the sweet odor it was spreading.

Now that he was able to look at the flower in relative calmness, he suddenly had a strange feeling that Amala and the flower were not so different. While both of them were concealed in foulness – the flower growing in dirt and Amala wearing filthy clothes, on the inside, they were the same – clean, white, pure...like an angel. Perhaps it was the heat or maybe the lack of water, but the boy felt his head swelling and his eyes losing focus. The yellow terrain slowly dissolved and formed a beautiful beach of white. Amala and the flower were still there, smiling at him a glamorous and angelic smile. For the first time, the boy smiled as well...

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” Amala’s words pulled the boy from his fantasy to the real world once again.

Realizing that he was smiling at her, the boy felt an exasperating anger that not even he himself could comprehend. Perhaps the act of smiling was to accept that there was still hope in this place, that which he could no longer believe in. Perhaps smiling was an acceptance the death of his parents. Perhaps smiling was believing that there was still Allah in this world.

No, NO! There was no Allah, no hope, just pain and despair. That was it. The world had taken away his hope and it wasn’t going to give it back. Not again! The boy stared at the smiling flower as sharply as he could, the rage inside his chest having reached its boiling point and he could no longer contain it.

“GET AWAY, GET—AWAY!” the boy screamed insanely. “AND TAKE THIS DISGUSTING FLOWER OF YOURS!”

The boy bent his back to pull the yellow flower out from the earth

with tremendous force. He held it in his grip so tightly that some petals were detached and lay dead on the ground. Then, howling, he threw the stem as hard as he could at Amala, who picked it up, sobbing.

He didn't sleep that night. He couldn't. He waited until dawn came the next day and saw the sun rise from the horizon. Yet another day had come. And he felt so tired.

"You look terrible, sonny," Essam said, when he brought some food for the boy in the morning.

"I don't want to see her again."

"See who?"

"That girl, Amala."

"Amala? Never heard of her before."

The boy gave Essam a look of disbelief.

"Look sonny, this is a small village and I think I know everyone living here, and believe me, there's no Amala."

Essam's words were like echoes lingering in the boy's head. They were real, and they were so unreal. He had seen her with his own eyes. Without speaking a word, the boy dashed outside in a desperate attempt to find her.

But the flower was gone, not even the roots remained. Amala was gone, gone without a trace.

"Amalaaaa!" he cried.

"Amalaaaaaaaa!" he cried again, more desperately.

Soon a crowd congregated around him. They pointed at him and giggled, but kept some distance away as if he might somehow infect them with his insanity. He had no time to deal with them, he had to find Amala.

Knowing that she wasn't in the village, the boy ran hastily to the north, holding on to a slim chance that he might see her somewhere in that direction.

He ran until every particle of energy stored in his tiny body was consumed. He ran until he could no longer feel his legs. Still, Amala was nowhere to be found.

He fell unconscious on the ground, exhausted. When he woke up, the sky was covered with layers and layers of dark clouds that blocked out the sunlight.

Finally, for the first time in months, it was actually raining.

The rain fell on the scalded land. It landed on the boy's skin, as tender as a mother patting her infant child. He stretched out his arms and danced wildly on the deserted land, letting the falling raindrops drown him completely.

Suddenly, on the far side of a hill, the boy noticed a bright yellow dot distinguishing itself from everything else. When he moved closer, he saw a tiny yellow flower growing on the soil that resembled the flower he had so brutally killed.

No, he thought. This was the flower he had killed.

He knelt on the ground, caressing the petals with his bare hands, with love that he had never thought he could feel again. Water ran down his face, dropping onto the fragile yet beautiful yellow flower. Was it the rainwater? Or was it his tears? He knew the answer.

Then, he smiled.

The Change

I know you are waiting quietly
For the branches to bud forth
Yellow-green shoots
After a frightening barrenness.

I know you are waiting quietly
To hear the songs arise
Like mighty choruses from spring birds,
Hugging you from every side,
Making you feel most alive.

I know you are waiting quietly
For the colors to change in a wink of the wand
Until a splash of mosaic
Of green from every shade
Causes your lips to turn upwards
In a smile.

I know you are waiting quietly
For the sweet smell of bauhinias
To wake you up in the morning
And tuck you to bed at night,
When you will dream of bauhinias
And their fluttering pink dresses.

I know you are waiting quietly
For the hummingbirds to visit your garden,

Their beaks dripping with honey
From the nectar they collected
Miles away from home.

I know you are waiting quietly
For your favourite cousin Sherry to arrive
And go camping with you,
The two of you laughing hysterically
Like an exploding balloon in the mountains.

I know you are waiting quietly
To dive into the azure pool,
Flipping your fins in the cool waters
And resurfacing into the chuckling sunbeams;
The meeting of conflicting temperatures
Opening wide your acute eyes.

I know you are waiting quietly
And it will come.

Johanna Ma

Butterfly

By Emmy Chow Yi Tin

The automatic doors at Kong On hospital were thrust open when the night started its invasion. Seizing the air, Mrs. Chan commanded her legs to dash to the counter. Her loud panting interrupted the fat nurse over the wall intercom. She raised her hand to stop Mrs. Chan from speaking.

“Which room is Chan Siu Yan?” pressed Mrs. Chan. The nurse gave her a disdainful look.

“I’m her mother!” shouted Mrs. Chan; the identity card in her hand was shaking with sweat.

“...Ward D4 bed 3...3rd floor,” the nurse typed with her index finger, the other hand still holding the phone.

Mrs. Chan hastened to the elevator on the left and urged it on by tapping the button.

This is not true.

“Ding!” the sound of the elevator arriving suddenly exhausted her. As she dragged her high heels out of the elevator; they produced occasional squeaks like a baby’s squall.

Pale light.

Empty corridor.

Starched white squares over the ceiling.

Love of mother. Stark pink poster. 1057 0000.

She languished against the wall and could no longer distinguish whether the surroundings or the news dazzled her.

This is not true.

The door of D4 avulsed her last strength. She staggered to bed 3. Yan's eyes were closed. Her familiar face and neck seemed coated with slight powder. Her body reposed unusually straight on the unfamiliar bed. Mrs. Chan felt a clenching in her chest. She caressed the stagnant face with her twitching fingers. The image soon twinkled and blurred. She put her fingers between her teeth to stop herself from waking her up.

Does she know about her...? And her...?

Her mind was stuffed with compressed cotton. Yan was not a person whom Mrs. Chan could relate what had happened to. She tried to rearrange a thread of images leading to her lying in bed but dismissed it as though a baby dismantled a puzzle into pieces.

This could happen to others, but not to Yan.

The conversation with the doctor was another bombardment to Mrs. Chan's capacity. He posed many questions, which only faded into a series of mumblings and pushed her into a chasm of remorse. She pounded her heart to ease the pain and was unable to stop crying. When the visiting hour was over, the doctor directed her to the psychiatrist upstairs.

The next moment Mrs. Chan found herself conscious was on Yan's bed next morning after a factitious sleep in a soaked pillow. She then quickly hid the bottle of sleeping pills and called her school for a leave.

For the whole morning, she had been pondering on what to say. Therefore, when she found Yan was again asleep, she let out a brief sigh. As she arranged a vase of pink roses on the crippled commode, she saw the corner of a paper sticking out from the gap at the bottom. It was in Yan's handwriting.

My dear,

Last night was the darkest night I've ever had. It didn't make much of a difference when I closed my eyes. There were only some red little dots in regular distance. I tried to raise myself with two elbows, but they were too weak. A sudden cramp tore my body like a starving dog ground its meat. Just when I thought it was calming down, my mouth was forced open, gushing terror. Someone of bright colour arrived by the bed; I sniffed the acid from my lips, and whispered,

Did I faint?

Yes.

And you were no longer there...I am not going to apologize to gain any self-pity, nor crying my eyes out of remorse. Please, I just want to tell you more about everything...

21st March, 2008

I first greeted you in tears and fear. Too much for me. Too much for a 21 year-old me. Whenever I thought of it, ice water trickled down my veins and my heart pumped it all over the body. I put myself on the running machine every day and immersed myself in tipsiness every night. Otherwise, I stared at the mobile, waiting for the name Ken to appear.

I first met Ken at my friend, Polly's birthday party. He was a

glowing star interweaving across files of people, clinking glasses with a charming smile. As he passed by, his perfume flew along the line of his torso-curve at his shoulder and was reluctant to leave the air. When girls chatted with him, he gently tucked his flap behind his ear and inclined to their faces, as if asking for a kiss. Meanwhile, he played with his half -buttoned shirt under which his tanned chest lay bare. When he first held my hand rather than his glass of wine, my brain was flooded with a vain honour.

22nd March, 2008

I broke the news to him on the mobile. He hung up in silence. Then he asked if I had made a mistake an hour later. The call was cut once again and forever since. That night, I started searching for ways on the internet to get rid of you. That night, I hit you for the first time.

24th March, 2008

“Mrs. Chan, was Yan born naturally, or was it a Caesarean birth?”

Mum pulled me to visit Mrs. Lee next door, a good friend of hers. I couldn't move my eyes away from the swelling lump under the tightened maternity dress. She tried to bend her knees to serve us tea but mum jumped to grab her arm and took our warm glasses. “I hope my baby will be as good as Yan,” a radiant motherly smile spread on her face as she supported her back with an arm before gliding onto the sofa. I swerved away from her regard. I kept my head down and my mouth shut while Mum talked about the difference between the two methods and about the pain only understandable to women. They talked about breast-feeding, and about belly scars on bikinis. Mum showed no sign of giving up this subject. She went on at length. I

felt myself gradually detached from the conversation. My so-called femininity was challenged then dissipated into fear, as though the wind was pounding sand against it. I stared down the protruding ball-like feature, a parasite to a woman. For the first time in my life, I wished to forever be a girl. The chill came to me again, as if I walked bare-foot on ice blocks.

“Shall we go?” I stood and asked.

From then on, I showered with water one day hotter than the other. I stood in front of the steamed mirror and rubbed against it only to see my belly. I saw it swell up like an inflated balloon, the skin grew tighter and tighter, the navel lower and lower, causing a distorted and disproportional human figure. I felt an unexplained hatred eating away my body. As I closed my eyes to avoid bursting into tears, my hands couldn't help squeezing my belly, stamping it pink and red. Just before explosion, I imagined exerting all my strength to the mirror and heard a noise like broken china. A pang woke me and I reopened my eyes. Instead of hitting the mirror, I hit you.

I don't remember how many times I've hit you since then. It became a habit, whenever I was alone, with you. It was our only communication. I ran more on the running machine and I drank more. Yet the harder I tried to keep myself warm, the colder my blood seemed.

31st March, 2008

The mat started to roll; red digits began to jump on the screen. Sensing the bulkiness in my breast which disgusted me stronger due to motion; my rage naturally roared and split my body. I mounted the digits, the mat rolled faster. The back of my neck started to burn. The

current of steam poured down along my spine, but my freezing distress still rankled inside.

I raised my face and concentrated on the goldfish swaying in the vast in-wall aquarium. They were about the size of my palm, some with a bulky lump plumping down which swayed clumsily.

“These are the goldfish mama,” Mum told me when I was 8. It was the first time she had brought me to Fish Street in Shum Shui Po. She still spoke in a soft and womanly voice before the divorce. “Her belly grew and grew,” she pointed at one of them, “look at them, you can see their eggs!”

“So are the goldfishes babies coming out soon?” I pulled her hand, stopped her from walking away.

“Goldfish, baby, no plural for <fish>, remember...” she gave me a dangerous stroke on my hair. I quickly nodded as I sensed that I reminded her of my 45 marks-dictation. “They come out as eggs, then the eggs will sink to the bottom of the tank and they will become fish themselves. Fish are cold-blooded, unlike mammals....” She started to repeat her biology class to me. Throughout these years, she remained a glutton for work. Yet on the weekends, we usually stayed together.

“Will the mama eat her babies?” I brought up the question again when I was 15.

“Yes...they will...oh my god! Who is this...she should have learnt this long time ago!...Um...ya, cold-blooded fish...ya,” she continued marking the exam papers through her reading glasses. Her eyes rolled from left to right like a windscreen wiper.

Struck, didn’t know why this picture popped in. I was at the same

time shocked to realize that the goldfish was sucking up my energy.

What was I doing?

I stopped the running machine and wilted like a confessed murderer upon his knees. My face glowed with heat. A geyser hotter than ever ran through my vessels and finally flew out of my eye corners.

You are my baby.

For the first time, I caressed you. A hand which femininity just started to pour in. At first it was quite stiff, then more smoothly, moving gently in circles, generating warmth by friction. A shaking hand holding your first bottle of milk, would you accept? I was sorry, sorry for the past and sorry for the life that was coming to you, did you hear? I prayed and I promised...

3 hours later, you left.

yet,

Thank you.

Mrs. Chan's vision became so blurred that her eye lids blinked instinctively to let all her emotions go. They dropped at the end of the letter, where Yan signed "Your mother". Her nose and her chest twitched rhythmically and her throat produced the sound of a torn paper. A current of warmth generated from her legs which reminded Mrs. Chan of the feeling when Yan was still on her lap, she traced from



the fingers to the shoulder to the eyes, and found there was a pair of woman's eye lids, blinking gently at her, like a beautiful butterfly.

The Slippers

The Slippers are bored beside the bed, waiting for morning to summon their master from sleep.

The Slippers sometimes wish they were sneakers shielding famous footballers' feet.

The Slippers are twins joined against their wills.

The Slippers do not wish to be separated – separation is doom.

The Slippers know the floor is dirty and imagine air outside windows is unclean.

The Slippers look on as Worn Out Sneakers, Glamorous Heels, and Shiny Leather Shoes leave the door in a hurry.

The Slippers dream of carpets, mittens, and Christmas Eve.

The Slippers have nightmares about density in basements and storage rooms.

The Slippers count the exact number of steps their master makes around the house.

The Slippers cannot know the length of the marathon race on TV.

The Slippers are the protectors against the cold floor on a winter's night.

The Slippers sweat at the bottom of the closet, the summer heat torturing them.

The Slippers would love to be the feet they bear.
The Slippers might not want to touch the muddy ground in the rain.

The Slippers keep track of each other's whereabouts.
The Slippers fight for the first place to be slipped on.

The Slippers hate the smell of other shoes trapped in the closet.
The Slippers wonder what happened to the old slippers when they were taken outside.

The Slippers swear at the dog for throwing them around as toys.
The Slippers have a dream, waiting while their master sleeps.

Louisa Leung

Only After All Light Is Out

Only after all light is out,
Except the table lamp,
I realize in layers of Windows
Desire for scenery.

Let there not be birches and beeches
But buildings and bulldozers,
Ready to dissect
The thick cloudy sky
With clock-like precision.

Let there not be gardenias and jasmines
But gaudy women with slender limbs,
Crossing the streets with scent
Amidst the belch of old engines.

Let there not be pigs and sheep
But pork and mutton,
Hanging fresh in the store
Where housewives bargain.

Let there not be farms and weeds
But cities and lampposts,
Sprouting along my window frame,
From where my life spouts.

Ashley Leyash



Becoming

By Lily Liu

Sky had always had a knack, people said, for getting into trouble and not realizing it. Sky had made it a policy early in life not to concern himself with things that had no immediate relevance to his current time or place, what he was doing or thinking of doing at that exact moment, and so, situations where there might have been awkwardness or some kind of loudly hysterical and possibly dramatic confrontation were neatly circumvented by the simple fact that Sky never realized there were larger issues at stake. This was the only reason Sky got on so well with everyone, people said, he never realized what they were saying about him behind his back.

There were seventy-three steps up the spiral staircase, another forty-nine precarious rungs to climb after that, and Evan, though he was terrified of heights the way cats were terrified of water, scratching and screaming at the proposition they get in and get it done, had business up on the clock tower that outweighed his extreme distaste for putting his body in places where he was liable to slip a hundred feet into total oblivion, cracking his head open on hard pavement. Evan flung himself up onto the dusty creaking floor of the small room, panting and alive and blocking out the thought that he'd eventually have to climb back down. Worse, he'd have to watch his step and look down into the empty spaces and wonder why no one had ever installed some kind of elevator or at least a pulley-system of weights in which he could close his eyes and pretend he was merely involved in an experiment of particle-exchange, being transported from the ground-floor of the administration building to the apex of its highest tower,

overlooking the entirety of the campus.

It was a dizzying sight, and Evan had to step back and take a few deep breaths, telling himself over and over that there was nothing to be afraid, he was absolutely safe, before his heart stopped trying to burst out of his chest and make its way down without him.

“I’m here,” Evan typed into his cell phone, and, “what now?”

“Come back down,” the message came back to him, and Evan felt like beating his head on the floor until he was concussed and there was no choice but for them to carry him out on a stretcher, or there were enough endorphins rushing through his system in response to the blunt force trauma that it didn’t matter anymore.

Evan hadn’t meant to be a psychology major. Up until the final moment of reckoning, when he’d gotten his results back on the entrance exams, Evan had thought he’d go into physics, an elegant science, one in which he could achieve perfect results. A perfect failure, it seems instead, Evan had been assigned to the best university in the country, except with a major he’d never considered a real science.

“Still,” Reese had said, plucking the traitorous sheet of paper out of Evan’s hands. “It’s something.”

Evan shrugged.

Something wasn’t good enough, Reese knew as well as he did.

Evan heard of Sky before he met him, which was strange, considering they were the same year, the same class, and in a place with a freshman class of only two hundred students, the best of the best. It was both unnatural and peculiar that anyone in particular could capture the collective attention of such a selected group. Sky, though, as Evan soon realized and would have demonstrated to him time and

time again, was as unorthodox as anyone could possibly be in such a situation without being booted out. Instead, it seemed that Sky had somehow managed to con the system into holding him above itself.

Their first exchange had been, as all of Evan's first impressions on people tended to be, awkward and embarrassing.

"Um," Sky said with a strange expression, as if he was trying to be polite and pushy at the same time. "I think you're in the wrong room."

Evan rushed out the door.

It happened to him often, that he'd suddenly find himself in odd places, odd situations, none of which he could explain comfortably to himself. Evan was just awkward, nervous and tense, around people.

"No, you're roomed with Sky Winters, there's no mistake."

Evan wandered back down the hall, pulling his suitcase behind him, wondering what Reese was doing now. They weren't related by blood, but Reese's father had married Evan's mother, not the one who'd borne him, but the one who'd picked him out of an orphanage full of abandoned children, and brought him home.

Evan sighed heavily. "Hey, look--" he said, pushing open the door, to an empty room.

Evan set his suitcase down at the foot of the bed in the far corner of the room, the one closer to the window, and, Evan assumed, was undesirable because in the cold winter, the air would seep in through the glass, or an invisible crack in the wood frame, and Evan would wake up chilled to the bone and imagining he were somewhere else.

Sky didn't get back until midnight, though where he'd gone, Evan

couldn't begin to guess.

"Sorry about earlier," Sky said, cheeks flushed, "I was just--"

"Whatever," Evan said abruptly, having had enough of Sky for the day.

Sky stood up, unsteady, and stared Evan down.

"No, I--"

Evan caught him instinctively, Sky's body light and unfamiliar, Evan wasn't exactly sure where to grab on, where he could put his hands or how to hold him, to carry him back to his own bed. It figured that Sky was a lightweight, Evan couldn't even smell the alcohol on his breath, not like Reese drinking down hard liquor by the bottle, shot by shot.

Sky had nightmares, in the middle of the night Evan was startled awake by a warm body slipping into bed beside him.

"Sorry," Evan said, pushing back. "I can't."

Sky pretended not to hear, or actually didn't, either way, he clung so tightly to Evan Evan couldn't even get him back into his own bed, in the end finally managing to wrestle Sky into clinging onto Evan's pillow instead, sitting up all night watching Sky sleep, wondering if this was going to become a routine.

Evan has never been able to sleep next to anyone. In the orphanage he'd crawled into a corner of the room and slept like that, so he wouldn't have to sleep touching a warm body.

Sky didn't mention it the next morning, any of it, so Evan didn't either. For all that people talked of Sky, Evan had noticed that Sky didn't really say anything of himself, personal, academic or otherwise. Sky had a famous twin brother, famous parents, famous friends, and

so whenever Sky did something that would have gotten him expelled had it been anyone else, it was excused, because it was Sky. It was as if, Evan thought one day, that Sky had become so used to this kind of leniency, it had become sort of a habit, acting unexpectedly, because people had come to expect it of him.

“So, Park Evan.”

Instead of studying, Sky would just hand in his test completely blank, filling in only his name. As far as Evan knew, Sky had yet to fail an exam in this manner.

“M’busy,” Evan answered, copying notes off his textbook, and Sky sighed, but managed silence for the next five minutes.

“What do you think you’ll do, after this?”

Evan put down his pencil. When Sky got like this, it was pointless to ignore him. “This test? This class? This life? You’re going to have to be--”

“This,” Sky said, waving his hands in an all-encompassing motion, and before Evan could make his next derisive comment about how Sky didn’t have to worry about any of that, Sky had sat himself in Evan’s lap, and kissed him, open-mouthed and hungry.

Evan didn’t mean to kiss back. It wasn’t that he didn’t find Sky attractive, or that he had any obligations to anyone back home, or that he knew it was a bad idea, it was just. Evan could never tell if anything Sky did was motivated by his own inclinations, or by a blatant disregard for someone else’s. Sky had never gotten into bed with Evan after that first night, after all, which had to say something for Sky’s acting abilities, his instant understanding of what someone would find most unacceptable and abhorrent, so anything Sky did afterwards, would

seem insignificant in comparison.

Sky kissed with a heat that Evan hadn't expected from him, a tangling possessiveness, that when Sky pulled back Evan felt obliged to chase after him, to claim what Sky had dangled teasing and coy before him, his legs wrapped around Evan's waist and the table digging into Evan's back as Sky rocked his hips against him, Sky's hands braced on the shelf where all of Evan's books threatened to come crashing down.

Evan pulled Sky's shirt over his head, yanked the belt from his jeans, peeled Sky out of those too.

"Hey," Sky said, planting a foot in Evan's ribs, "you too."

Evan knew it was a bad idea. Evan knew he would regret it later. Evan knew that people talked, but the door was closed, and if Evan had learned anything in his year here, it was that Sky never said a thing.

Sky shivered when Evan kissed him, gasping when Evan cautiously fit himself over Sky, mewling soft sounds and begging Evan to stop being so fucking careful. "It's okay," Sky kept saying, making soothing noises, as if Evan was the one who needed to be reassured. Sky hissed, grabbing Evan around the neck and kissing him, biting down on Evan's tongue and Evan was lost in a haze of pleasure and pain and it seemed that everything relating to Sky had always come with this undercurrent of undecidability, that even on his best days, Sky could be giving and kind and beautiful to be around, but there were always the dark moments, the throwaway lines that Sky would say in the stillest silence, things people always read the wrong way, the easy way, and Evan wondered if there had ever been anyone before him, who had understood what Sky actually meant.

Evan breathed deeply, Sky having climbed on top of him

somewhere in all the momentum, the yawning chasm of not being able to look back opening up before him. Evan had to ask.

“Have you--” ever done this before, though he couldn’t tell himself which part of it he meant, if he meant anything at all.

“Of course,” Sky said, eyes flashing, “what do you take me for?”

“Besides sharing a bed,” Sky said, tangled haphazardly with Evan afterwards, “what are you afraid of?”

Evan thought.

“Heights,” he’d said, and Sky’s eyes had lit up, excited, as if someone had all of a sudden given him a priceless gift, for no discernible reason.

“Phobias are debilitating, but treatable, with the right mitigating factors and situations where the subject becomes slowly accustomed to their surroundings, it’s completely possible to cure even the most serious of cases,” Sky said, quoting from a textbook he’d never read. “Should we start with your fear of high places, or your fear of people?”



“Look Through Box”
an artwork of Yip Chi Fung Benson
Department of Fine Arts, 2008