

FALL WINTER 2019-2020

GENESIS

AN ANTHOLOGY OF WRITING
FROM THE ELTU'S CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION

ISSUE #1

EDITED BY DR CHRISTELLE DAVIS

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Table of Contents

ABOUT THE PROJECT	3
EDITOR'S LETTER	4
FOOD WRITING	6
Instant Noodle Reflections: Feeding A Pandemic Appetite	7
A Companion to My Nomadic Adult Life: Szechuan Fish Stew with Pickled Mustard Greens	11
HOTPOT; AND THE REFLECTION OF SOLITUDE AND COMPANIONSHIP	15
MEMOIR	19
Feverish Utterance	20
Reminiscence in the Garden	24
Sharpened.....	30
Because I Am.....	35
Anna Karenina Principle.....	39
POETRY.....	44
You and I.....	45
Innocence	47
The Koala.....	49
Reason VS. Feeling: A Poem on Jane Eyre	51
Mother, May I.....	53
Rising Above	55
Dear Self	57
List	58
Surgery.....	60
SHORT STORY	62
My Days on Cassiopeia.....	63
The White Wolf	66
The Silk Road	69
Washing Machine	73
Needle and Thread	78
JUDGES	82
AUTHORS	84
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	89

ABOUT THE PROJECT

[The Creative Writing Project](#) launched in the 2019-20 academic year as an extension of the [English Across the Curriculum \(EAC\) Project](#), an institution-wide language enhancement initiative implemented by the [English Language Teaching Unit \(ELTU\)](#) at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. With the aim of cultivating a dynamic creative writing environment, the program offers workshops, a campus-wide writing competition, literary events, and publication opportunities for all CUHK students.

The ELTU's Creative Writing Competition encourages students to nurture their creativity, explore a vivid means of self-expression, and demonstrate their skills in English writing. The first issue of this anthology celebrates the achievements from the **ELTU's First Annual Creative Writing Competition 2019-20**.

Editors:

Dr Christelle Davis (*Lecturer, ELTU CUHK*)

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EDITOR'S LETTER

It has been a privilege to supervise the ELTU's Creative Writing Project at the Chinese University of Hong Kong during the 2019-20 academic year. This project was born from a desire to provide a creative outlet for students who, too often, are facing demanding and rigorous academic schedules with little time for 'play'. The four Creative Writing workshops that our team hosted during the year were met with much enthusiasm and proved that students value the opportunity to step away from their assessments and coursework and experiment with different genres, writing styles, language and structures. While this has been a challenging year in more ways than one, this anthology demonstrates how students have channeled their memories, desires, fears and passions into the creative process and emerged with some excellent writing. Whether it is witnessing a dystopian nightmare, extolling the perfection of instant noodles, capturing the memory of a childhood fever, discovering the beauty of a tomato metaphor or becoming aware of a turning point while studying abroad, the pieces in this anthology are original and engaging.

I would sincerely like to thank the judges who patiently read the many submissions and offered their expert opinions. Furthermore, this project is a result of the hard work of the project team which includes Ms Jessica Acuña, Dr Antony Huen and Ms Natalie Cheung.

Finally, I hope that you are inspired and entertained by the following pages and gain an appreciation for the hard work of CUHK students.

Dr Christelle Davis

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FOOD WRITING



Instant Noodle Reflections: Feeding A Pandemic Appetite

Stephanie Studzinski

First Prize

Here I am at home: feeling caged and dreaming of being free range. Eating alone, which I hate, with nothing but my thoughts for company.

Step 1. Boil water.

Feel unwell? It was probably something you ate. It's strange how one meal can change everything. Now, we are all forced to watch the gruesome spectacle of the novel coronavirus nibbling away at the world's population.

Researchers are busy determining how it jumped the species barrier. The best guess so far? It was probably something someone ate. Someone's bat breakfast, lunch, snack or dinner may have started a global pandemic.

Well, some news is hard to digest...

Step 2. Add the noodles to 600ml of boiling water.

For most people, it is hard to imagine eating a bat. Imagine it. A small, black body covered with wiry hair and bony wings, draped in flesh and finished off with tiny hooks. Even in Asia, where bats are associated with good luck and fortune, most people do not want to look at them, let alone touch or eat them. Every day at dusk they fill the twilight skies and patrol the streets looking for their next meal. They, like most Hong Kong residents, dine around 7:00 pm when the streetlights awaken from their slumber. These days, it is only the bats who are publicly dining in large groups.

And their menu? Mainly mosquitos, dragonflies and moths. Dining at Hong Kong's bountiful subtropical insect buffet is another hard-to-stomach meal. Although I've mercilessly crushed and crunched their carapaces under my shoes, books and even my hands, I can't imagine crunching them between my teeth.

Imagine it. Those legs like small gristly twigs with a dressing of whatever filth lies in the dark places they inhabit. Papery wings. In your mouth. They probably pop like *ikura*, those large orange fish eggs with the little red center that stares back innocuously...

No. It's the bin for them. They can be food for bacteria or other insects who feast in those unimaginable trash heaps. Landfills—those must truly be the ultimate buffets. Every type of human food and things we don't even consider food, but they do.

They say we will all be eating insects sooner or later.

No other way to feed the world's population. They are the main course of the future due to our unsustainable, insatiable lifestyles. Perhaps eating insects is just the most abridged version of the circle of life: we eat them to live, they eat us when we die. I wonder then, if you are what you eat, which of us is the cannibal?

Step 3. Boil for 5 minutes.

Food is subjective and it brings everyone together. Bats, insects, people. It is

how we commemorate major life events.

It is even how we define ourselves as a species: we are hunter-gatherers. We are what we eat. I wonder if this isn't the root of the problem we face now: after all, what is hunting and gathering other than killing and taking...? And what happens when there is no more to hunt or gather? Who or what will we become then?

Step 4. Drain. Save 2-3 Tbl of liquid.

We are insatiable when it comes to resources. The world is not enough. And what are we really eating? What food you have access to is determined by income, status, class and that, in turn, will influence how long you live. Now, more so than ever in Hong Kong, we are even eating our politics. We are told by protestors to only dine in “yellow” restaurants which have the “right” political beliefs. We are eating our ideals to see if they will sustain us: body and belief.

Step 5. Add seasoning packet to noodles and remaining liquid.

Here, people leave food as offerings for the dead in belief that food can transcend the plane between life and death. The dead are generally thought to be hungry and unsatisfied. Although, I wonder how much more satisfied the living are...I guess it's only possible to be satisfied if you know what you want. This, in turn, depends on whether you know who you are. Who are we then? Homo sapiens: the wise hungry, hunter-gatherers...

Our origin story remains a powerful one that reveals how central food is to our well-being and collective identity; we have defined ourselves by the ways in which we obtain it. Only now, most of us are forced to eat that identity alone. Trapped in our homes like cages, hiding from a hungry virus. Some even live in what are known as “coffin homes.” How strange that must seem now. Locked, at home in your coffin amidst a pandemic...

Step 6. Mix well and serve.

The taste is bitter. Chewy. Something you are forced to contemplate as it resists between your teeth. The gritty texture of whole grain noodles in our instant noodle world full of empty calories and the pretense of sustenance. Full, ironically of preservatives. At times like this, it is best to chew thoughtfully and with care. Like the tongue pushing and prying out fish bones before we crunch them or risk skewering our stomachs. We must reassess our hunger before it's back to our empty calorie ways and we realize that we did just what we said: Eat our hearts out.



A Companion to My Nomadic Adult Life: Szechuan Fish Stew with Pickled Mustard Greens

Winnie Lam Wai

Second Prize

Hailing from a small town in Fujian province, I was whisked off to a boarding school in Guangzhou at the age of 17. Like Pip in Dickens' *Great Expectations*, I tried not to be disoriented by the multitude of changes that came with living in a buzzing metropolis. Among them was the change in my diet. While my hometown cuisine prides itself on its emphasis on the original flavor of food, umami (or *xian* in Mandarin), the district that my new school was located in was packed with Szechuan and Hunanese restaurants, which go heavy on spicy seasonings.

On the first day, my roommates proposed eating water boiled fish (*shui zhu yu*), a classic Szechuan dish, and I, out of ignorance, agreed. It was when I saw the mountainous heap of chillies and peppercorns that I realized what an egregious mistake it was. My roommates dived into the gargantuan sea of chilli oil and rummaged through the seething heap to unearth the fillets. I watched their zeal in wonder and eventually picked up a floating morsel, because compared to the horror of spiciness, the horror of looking different on the very first day and then being alienated by my peers was more overwhelming. I put the bloody bit in my mouth. Moments later, I felt the heat igniting like firecrackers on my tongue and thunderbolts raging in

my brain. I clutched my throat and tried not to scream: “Water! water! No, Coke! Iced, yes, iced!” One worried-looking roommate hurried to fetch the iced can. Having gulped down the liquid, I had never been more grateful for whoever invented the freezer. An oxygen tank might as well have been needed.

The mouth-tingling water boiled fish opened my taste buds, palate and stomach to a whole new world. Spiciness is an especially exotic flavor for the older Fujianese. As a matter of fact, my mom gets diarrhea whenever she eats spicy food. However, as I adapted to life in Guangzhou, I gradually learnt to embrace the diversity of cultures, languages and personalities. Interestingly, the foreign flavor kindled my adventurous spirit. Like my seafaring ancestors who overcame numerous setbacks before finally arriving at the islands in South East Asia, I was determined to give Szechuan food a second go. I was circumspect though and heeded my roommates’ advice about ordering a less fiery dish—a fish stew with pickled mustard greens (*suan cai yu*).

When it was served, I was delighted to find that the fish was not overrun by peppercorns. Instead, a collection of ginger, garlic, spring onion, coriander, celery, sesame seeds and various kinds of pepper was ladled over the pearly fish. Unlike the bubbling magma in water boiled fish, the broth was yellow and inviting. While the pungent smell from water boiled fish could almost knock me down, the aroma exuded from *suan cai yu* was a brisk wake-up. My saliva went into overproduction. I couldn’t wait to savor the fillets. The texture was equally rewarding. The fillets were so silky and custardy that they flaked apart the moment I put them into the mouth. There was a delicate balance between the flavor of the fish and those contributed by the assorted herbs. I ate more. Water boiled fish battered the tongue with heat whereas *suan cai yu* teased the palate with more flavors. It was sour, spicy, umami and salty all at once. Every bite was a rollercoaster of sensations. Akin to the philosophy of Fujianese cuisine, the essence of the ingredients shone through. The broth intensified the fillets without stealing the show. The dish was a riff on fish rather than an effort towards spicy novelty. (Yes, the latter refers to water boiled fish).

Since then, I have fallen under the spell of the fish stew. I have become increasingly unmoored from my hometown over the last few years. I left Guangzhou

for Hong Kong, and after another two years, I went to Beijing for a six-month internship. In the meantime, the popularity of *suan cai yu* has proliferated worldwide, making inroads into New York, London, Sydney and other cities big on dining. Wherever I go, I can rest assured that there will be at least one authentic Szechuan eatery. For me, *suan cai yu* is the ultimate indulgence I can pamper myself with on a weekend. The crowns of herbs vary from restaurant to restaurant. Each has their own secret recipe for the infusion of flavors. As a result, I never tire from trying new restaurants. From an eater's perspective, it is a dish pregnant with possibilities. While the succulent chunks of fish are the mainstay of the course, one can decide what to throw in the mix. For those who like veggies, they can choose from a variety of greens. For hotpot fans, they can add sweet potato noodles, meatballs and other accompaniments. The combinations can never be exhausted.

Ever since the Shenzhen-Hong Kong borders were closed, I started scouring the local dining landscape for Szechuan restaurants. While I fall back on the simple, insipid Fujianese cuisine during weekdays, I rely on *suan cai yu* as a protein booster over the weekend. Among all the Szechuan restaurants in Hong Kong, Twelve Flavors is my firm favorite. Tucked away in a nondescript building in Mong Kok, Twelve Flavors offers authentic Szechuan food. Their menu showcases the diversity and nuances of Szechuan cuisine. It is not just about being spicy and numbing. Their *suan cai yu* is relatively lighter. The soup is drinkable and the pickled mustard greens are very crispy. I hope I am not underselling the marinated fish by admitting that I prefer the pickled mustard greens. No other restaurant where I've ever dined is as attentive to pickled mustard greens as Twelve Flavors. The dramatic sizzling sound in the kitchen always revs up my appetite's engine even before the dish is served. The waiting process is thus angst-driven. I would recommend dining at noon when you will get a starter of black ear fungus to allay the hunger. The waiters work smoothly, revolving around tables in the graceful ballet of fine service. It may sound ironic, but the steamy Szechuan restaurant has become an oasis for me.

As an itinerant, life was not always easy. In Guangzhou, not only did I have to keep up with the piling pressure of university entrance exams, but I also needed to get along with roommates with diverse living styles. I also adjusted myself to more common folks in a big city: beggars, thieves, gamblers and prostitutes. When I moved

to Hong Kong, even before the social movement in 2019, I had to bear humiliation and insults. The CU Student Union once sent an email denouncing Mandarin as “a language spoken by northern brutes.” After I temporarily relocated to Beijing, my face was warped by the terrible weather and I could not even smile without feeling the painful pull of my muscles. In the end, I needed to undergo facial surgery to restore my normal look. When I returned to CU last year, it went without saying that the discrimination against Mainland expats was even more entrenched. A black-clad student once shouted at me, “Go back to Mainland” in the supermarket at school. In a sushi store in Tsim Sha Tsui, my friend was “politely” asked to leave after the waiter heard her talking in Mandarin on the phone even though she ordered in Cantonese. “Are you Mainland Chinese or Taiwanese?” asked the waiter. My friend said “Mainland” and was denied service.

For me, *suan cai yu* is a dish that absorbs all your attention, so when you partake of it, all the unhappiness is swept aside. It is a healing dish that boosts my morale as well as...my belly fat. At the end of the day, most Szechuan restaurants are run by Szechuan natives. They will never ask me the existential question that I find so difficult to answer as a daughter of a Fujianese father and a Taiwanese mother: “Are you Mainland Chinese or Taiwanese?”



HOTPOT; AND THE REFLECTION OF SOLITUDE AND COMPANIONSHIP

Tung Ka Long

Honourable Mention

Walking back home at two in the morning, I thought of the New York Times journalist, Stephanie Rosenbloom (2018), who described how enjoyable it was to enjoy food in Paris ALONE.¹

A few hours ago, I, a late partygoer, arrived at my friend's home, said, “sorry,” and took off my mask. There was an unexplainable pleasure in seeing my good old friends. Hotpot was what we aimed for. But first, an extraordinary intelligence-engaged board game would be the starter. I mean, the board game was fine, but it was just the beginning.

After a 1.5-hour session of board-gaming, then it started—the hotpot. In the time of the coronavirus, social distancing was common sense. But when it came to friends, we could even share the same pot of food.

¹ Rosenbloom, S. (2018). *Alone time: Four Seasons, Four cities, and the pleasures of solitude*. New York: Viking Penguin.

After coming back from the U.S., I had stayed at home, self-quarantined for 14 days. According to the authorities, 14 days was long enough for the symptoms to appear if one was infected with the virus. Without a single flu symptom, I strongly believed I was fine.

During the past few months of studying abroad in the U.S, I had several chances to go to Chinese restaurants to have hotpot. I could speak Chinese to the waiters as well as order “fat cow” in those restaurants, but what I couldn’t have was the feeling of comfort from being with my beloved old friends. This is not a “being out of my comfort zone” thing; I had been out of my comfort zone, that’s why I cherished the comfort zone more than ever.

Macht, Meininger & Roth (2005) suggested that physical features of the environment and social factors amplify food-induced positive affective reactions and embed them in an individually unique setting.² An eating experience is good not just because of the food itself, but also because of the friends who accompany us. We talked about the good old days we spent together and the future of our society from both optimistic and pessimistic perspectives. Eating, in this sense, was a social activity. What made this social activity unique was the context.

People are changing constantly. The today-I is different from the yesterday-I. People learn more day by day. And I can always learn from the same people on a different day. That's the value of communication, or as someone put it—democracy. Of course, time is also relevant. Intimate relationships became much more precious in the time of the coronavirus.

The food that was consumed was no doubt an important element in the entire experience. As the study also pointed out, people who enjoy eating have the explicit intention to enjoy; they eat slowly and focus upon the salient features of food and the environment. I ate slowly, as always, throughout the meal. I tasted the meat and the fish slowly to enjoy every bite of them. The kinds of food mattered. I arrived late and

² Macht, M., Meininger, J. & Roth, J. (2005). The pleasures of eating: A qualitative analysis. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 6(2), 137–160. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-005-0287-x>

couldn't go to the open-air market to buy ingredients with my friends. I had reminded them to buy baby cabbage though. According to Lesani and colleagues' study (2016),³ the amount of vegetable consumption is associated with happiness in college students. Okay, Science 101: correlation does not equal causation. I was not sure whether eating vegetables would boost my happiness, I simply wanted to eat a variety of food every day. At least it gave relief in the time of social disorder and coronavirus.

I followed the same principle during the 14-day self-quarantine after coming back from the U.S. I ordered food sometimes and cooked for myself most of the time. My mom and sister sometimes bought me ingredients and then left. Basically, I just asked them to buy some vegetables for me because there was more than enough meat in the fridge. I had a constant daily routine for those 14 days —eating, studying, reading, and exercising. Eating accompanied cooking and they constituted quite a large portion of the time in a day. During my solitude, there was time for me to concentrate on the academic stuff and to rethink the future of myself and the society. I heard someone say, 14 days of quarantine is too long. But I appreciate that they had probably already reflected on the state of the world enough beforehand.

After the satisfying meal, we played the board game again. With the fascinating design of the plot, we participated in a night-time forest treasure hunt in a small old house. We finally detected the ghost in the house with the loss of several heroes' lives. We meant to only have dinner, but it turned out to be a night full of chatting, eating, reflecting, and playing.

I will never have enough time to gather with friends, as I am never satisfied enough just being by myself. Time is not limited, but our time is.

Calming down from the exciting night, I tasted the night's aftertaste. If we never get to experience being alone, we'll never have the chance to enjoy being together.

³ Lesani, A., Mohammadpoorasl, A., Javadi, M., Esfeh J. M., & Fakhari A. (2016). Eating breakfast, fruit and vegetable intake and their relation with happiness in college students. *Eating and Weight Disorders – Studies on Anorexia, Bulimia and Obesity*, 21(4), 645–651. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40519-016-0261-0>

A 2015 study in Thailand⁴ suggested that being unhappy was associated with frequent solo eating. It might support the notion that eating alone is something bad for our well-being. It might be true for some people, but it's not accurate for everyone though. We need time to explore how much alone time is too long for us, so we'll become lonely. Loneliness, different from being alone, is a psychological mood that makes one feel "I'm so sad that no one is with me," while being alone is the physical fact that one is by himself or herself.

Searching for our feelings and then constructing a lifestyle to stay healthy is what we can do in the time of coronavirus, and throughout our entire lives.

⁴ Yiengprugsawan, V., Banwell, C., Takeda, W., Dixon, J., Seubsman, S. A., & Sleight, A. C. (2015). Health, happiness and eating together: what can a large Thai cohort study tell us? *Global Journal of Health Science*, 7(4), 270–277. <https://doi.org/10.5539/gjhs.v7n4p270>

MEMOIR



Feverish Utterance

Emilia Wong Sze Man

First Prize

I remember the one time when my soul left my body.

An out-of-body experience—that is how people name it. My father, who was an obsessive listener of late-night radio, always liked to blast the supernatural program in the house when everyone was asleep. The two hosts chatted in strange enthusiasm about spirits, souls and conspiracy theories—and of course, how to achieve an out-of-body experience. The off-putting superstition in the show often made me uncomfortable, and I had never believed in any of their conversations until that winter.

I was nine in the winter of 2009. A particularly torturous winter, perhaps, because I was far away on a family trip in Beijing and it was snowing heavily. The pavement on every corner was covered by snow, and the world was ghastly white, like the bandage on my left middle finger. The stitches which kept my finger intact still hurt me, and the frozen air crept in through the slits of the wound and sent chills right down to my spine.

The recovery of my chopped off finger took longer than expected; it took us almost too long to reach the hospital, and so my fingertip was not stitched back on time. It became a bit crooked to the right, despite my earnest praying to God every single night afterwards. The pain lingered with me throughout that year, and it had been my faithful companion during that trip to Beijing. The persistent ache held me back in many ways; it kept me from enjoying the short journey and since then, I could no longer hold the hands of my mother.

I still cannot, if that is what you wish to know.

But it was a trip, nonetheless. A rare luxury for a nine-year-old child. So, I ran in the snow-covered streets and remained amazed by the temporariness of the delicate snowflakes, melting on my icy hand. I rolled in the snow, vibrating with odd excitement, and I pretended very hard, that the pain on my hand was from frostbite instead of the scar.

And perhaps it was that which gave me a fever on the second morning in Beijing. I caught a cold that left me bedbound on that precious trip, and I was forced into solitude in my hotel room.

Oh dear. How peculiar it was, that we had always wished for a fever when we had to go to school, but it was only granted when we finally had our overdue holiday.

I stayed in bed all day, senses swinging. Burnt by the heavy fever, I faded in and out of consciousness alone. My parents left me in the room for a tour, claiming that it would be better if I rested in silence.

I thought of the itinerary that I had missed, and the powdery snow outside. I thought of my finger that was chopped off and stitched up, yet still gave me agony, and closed my eyes.

And that was the time when, in a trance, I felt my soul leaving my body. My consciousness slowly floated up to the ceiling and stopped mid-air. I rolled back, as if I was swimming, and watched myself, my body, alone in bed.

Such a small kid I was. Being left unattended in the small hotel room, I saw my body curled into a small bump between the sheets, unanimated.

Not having to look at yourself through a mirror was such an uncanny experience. I hated when I had to do that; my mother always told me she hated how my features strongly resembled my father—how my face bore so little of her. She was gorgeous and stunning, almost comparable to a famous pop star. She often said it was unfortunate how nothing of her managed to pass onto me, that I turned out to look like my father, whose only merit in appearance was having an honest face. However, whenever I looked into my own eyes in the mirror, I often saw that scorching flame identical to my mother's, always ready to hurt and wound somebody. I did not like that.

With my eyes lifted from the ground, my body seemed vulnerable and breakable, troubled by the sudden sickness. I examined my body up close, only to find nothing of significance, although I suppose that had always been how I was, of no significance. I took a close look at my stitched finger, reminiscing how my mother chopped off its tip in feverish anger when she punished me for my disobedience.

People say your ten fingers are connected directly to your heart, which I could personally testify. My heart broke in agony when my mother shut the steel window on my fingers, the metal sliced through my fingertip and I screamed in the silent sound of something being broken. The panicking chatter that followed the blood fell heavily on my eardrums, yet I was unable to process anything. The pain and anguish brought me to the ground; I knelt as I had always done when my mother was angry, only that time, my broken finger lay between us and none of us dared to pick it back up.

The second we stepped out of the hospital, my family never mentioned the incident again. Me with twelve stitches on my left middle finger and veins filled with

anaesthetic; the air was always heavy and sticky around us since then, like cough syrup.

But in the hotel room, I continued to float on the ceiling, unable to feel my body weight. Perhaps it was simply fever hallucinations, but I was convinced that my soul did leave my body during that short morning, because the pain in my left hand was gone as well. At that moment, my body was free of any constraint, free from my strained muscles, my dried-out hair, my fragile flesh and my aching ribcage. Free from the pain, the torture, and the wounds. I was at peace, and nothing could get to me. Not the winter, not the fever, not a thing.

But then my mother returned to the hotel room, and my soul was dragged back into my heavy body again. My tired gaze turned to her, and she looked as beautiful and out of this world as always.



Reminiscence in the Garden

Johanna Chan

Second Prize

The breeze danced through the air to the tune of Frank Sinatra’s “My Way,” which had been echoing in my head all day. A large, white cross stood across the clearing, demanding respect and reverence. I stood looking at the small stones in the garden, cold and rough. Closing my eyes, I took in the scent of fresh grass in the winter chill. Grandpa William would have liked the smell. He would have looked wistfully upon the frosty cross contrasting against the grey sky. After all, William Chan was a man of adventure.

My grandfather always wore a clean cut business suit and tie and was the Hong Kong Santa Claus to my brother and me. We would get presents whenever he visited. That was quite often, as we would eat together at least once every two weeks with the whole family. Among the gifts were nonfiction books, D.I.Y. kits, and a remote-controlled robot. However, my favorite was a stuffed toy puppy, made of sheep’s wool from New Zealand.

We would sit there in the living room as he rummaged through his mail and told us captivating stories. He spoke of seeing mirages and riding on the bare backs of water buffaloes as they splashed through river banks. As I grew older, we began to

exchange stories. I described my experiences playing with snakes in Malaysia and riding on wild horses in Mongolia. We would laugh and sometimes become bewildered and surprised at each others' stories. Although he loved working, Grandpa was always there for us, even when, as students, we got busy with assignments and projects.

That busyness paid off. Soon after, on January 2018, I got an email from my university with an offer to go on exchange to Los Angeles the following year. Before I left for California, Grandpa told me about the first time he visited the deserts in America.

"I was in absolute awe. I imagined myself as Clint Eastwood, riding my way to the saloon," he gushed, eyes shining. "What a sight to see."

I leaned in asking, "You mean like scenes from Spaghetti Westerns?"

"Yes, they don't make movies like they used to," Grandpa sighed. "There's nothing like a good, exciting Mexican standoff. I've watched nearly all the Clint Eastwood movies."

"Alright, Grandpa, I'll be sure to check those places out," I reassured. "I'll send you lots of photos and tell you all about my trip."

He looked at me long and hard in scrutiny. "You're like me," he decided after a while, "but female. Adventure is out there, but so is danger. The most important thing is to come home safely. Can you promise me that?"

I gave him a hug. "I promise. I love you."

In my arms, he felt small. The tall clever gentleman in the grey suit and tie had shrunk through the years. Although his body was fading away, he was still just as clever and dignified.

Grandpa was a man with many adventures and many friends. Knowing that no one would pick me up from the airport, he called up his friend, a kind man I called Uncle Sunny, for help. Uncle Sunny's brother, Stephen, happened to live in Los Angeles, and so an arrangement was made. Uncle Stephen picked me up from the airport and took me out to lunch, while I fiddled with my fingers, nervous for the upcoming experience. Then, he gave me a bag of goodies, including a mug, some sardines, crackers, and other useful gifts, and dropped me off at the local inn, where I stayed for two nights before moving into campus housing. I don't think I ever expressed enough gratitude.

The first time I stepped on campus, it was like entering the stereotypical American university, the type I'd seen on television or in movies with varsity sports and Greek societies. There were people skateboarding to class and friends sitting on the steps outside buildings, possibly sharing a joint. I was absolutely overwhelmed with the fact that for the next five months, I would be here, a place with spaces so wide and open that I could finally breathe in fresh air. Home had been too tight and suffocating. I wondered if Grandpa ever felt this free when he left home to travel.

By February, nearing Lunar New Year, a girl I met during the involvement fair invited me to join her friends for a potluck, knowing that I couldn't celebrate the new year with my family. I made sweet and sour ribs, which my mother taught me how to cook before I left. There were dumplings, fried rice, and many plates of food scattered all over the table, just like dinners back home. The room was decorated with balloons and Chinese pop songs played in the background, but most notably, the loudness and warmth between people reminded me of my family. On my way home, I decided that I would call Grandpa and my family to wish them a happy Lunar New Year.

When I got home, I messaged my dad, wanting to tell him everything that happened that night. But he spoke first.

“I have something sad to tell you.”

I wondered why I couldn't speak first, tell him about my wonderful experience, and demand that he tell me when the family will gather, so I could call and surprise them.

“What is it? Do you need to call me?”

The dread slowly ate its way into my heart as I watched my message go from sent to seen.

Typing.

Typing.

Typing.

“Grandpa was found this morning, not breathing. Brought to the hospital. Left for heaven. He passed away peacefully.”

We arranged for flight tickets, but I still had to go to class before leaving. I sat in Introduction to Cinema Studies that week, limp and numb. The lecturer excitedly babbled on about editing and montage, but it sounded like distant underwater bubbling. Every now and then I would hear words clearly, like “dialogue” or “time” or “cut short.” But nothing registered. That was until he showed us examples, and Clint Eastwood appeared on the screen across from Lee Van Cleef and Eli Wallach in a Mexican standoff.

“They look so cool. I love Spaghetti Westerns,” Grandpa’s voice echoed in my head.

I could picture him next to me watching *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly*, and see his smile and gleaming eyes, never straying from the silver screen. Taking deep breaths, I tried to keep calm.

One. Two. Three. Breathe.

My lips quivered.

One. Two. Three. Breathe.

My eyes stung.

One. Two.

I ran back to my housing that day. It never felt so far from campus before. The street was so long, so flat, and the house, so distant. I wanted to go home, where most buildings were close and intimate.

Very few knew of my return. I stayed in Hong Kong for a week for the arrangements and the funeral. It was an open casket.

“I’m home. Like I told you I would be. I’m home. But you’re not. You’re not here to hear about everything and reminisce about your own past,” I thought as I looked into the casket.

There was so much more I wanted to hear, to share, to do, and yet, the time ran out. It slipped away like grains of sand from a palm, starting off slow then sneakily picking up speed. Before I knew it, I was left in the dark with my own thoughts and shards of regret and memory, stuck with words unsaid that would disappear years later. Death is a full stop. In the middle of a fragment, when one expects a full sentence.

Grandpa was to be cremated. As we all set down our roses on top of his coffin, the ground of the chapel swallowed it whole, no doubt transferring it to the retort of the crematorium.

Life went on as it had to. It didn't feel right, as if someone had rearranged pieces of a puzzle before it was finished, but it had to go on. I flew back to L.A. and finished my semester, living fully in every experience that I could. I travelled, I took a bite of the spiciest taco according to the internet, and I learnt to perform stand-up comedy. I knew he would be proud.

The family agreed that he was an adventurer at heart. He deserved to be wild and free. For this reason, his ashes were scattered into a garden at a Christian cemetery.

As I stood in front of the garden, I took in the view. The gravestones further below the hill were decorated with crosses and seraphims. Across from the cemetery, the sea sparkled from the reflection of sunlight, filled with endless possibility. It stretched far and wide, beyond the islands near the shore. If I could walk on water, I would rush forward across the sea, and keep walking until finally, I'd end where I started. Back home. Grandpa would like this view indeed.



Sharpened

Jing Chan

Honourable Mention

My mother held my face tenderly, wiping away a tear resting on my cheek with her fingertips. I looked up at her, feeling weak, defeated, and discouraged. This was when my mother began to change my perspective of her, by telling me about her past:

My Mother's Point of View

When I was a child, we were a poverty-stricken family that lived in a cramped, tiny wooden hut. The wooden hut did not have a toilet. I had to walk outside and find a drain to do my business in. Oh, the shame! Every time I hovered over, I reluctantly pulled my baggy pants down as my face burned with embarrassment. Squatting down with my bare bottom exposed, I listened to not only the sound of my urine hitting the bottom of the drainage, but also of people snickering, which made me want to sink into the hole and disappear. I was self-conscious and insecure; I felt worthless and foolish. It was always a nightmare. So much that I would hold it in for as long as possible just so I wouldn't have to face the horrendous terror.

I often questioned myself...how can I even consider myself a girl? I'd see girls my age walk past me wearing beautiful dresses. If not, they'd at least look tidy, clean, and sophisticated. I didn't go a day without comparing myself to them. How could I not? I was on a completely different level; I was utterly filthy!

During the winter, warm showers were non-existent. I constantly begged my mother to allow access to warm water, but due to an inadequate amount of money, my sisters and I were forced to stop complaining, or else we'd be beaten by our father with either a rattan stick, slipper, or hanger. The relentless freezing water would pour onto my naked body, giving me goosebumps all over my skin and sending shivers down my spine. I had no choice but to sometimes avoid showering for an entire week.

One day, carrying a heavy schoolbag on my way home from school, I tripped and fell on the rugged street. I lost my balance and landed on the floor, my legs taking most of the impact as I hit the ground. I yelped, howled, and moaned from the agonizing pain. My aching legs sent a strain up the rest of my body. Soon, huge purple bruises formed, and blood dripped from the wounds that were covered in dirt. Tears stained my pasty cheeks. Traumatized by what happened, I limped home to tell my mother. I was expecting comfort, maybe because I thought being the youngest in the family meant receiving more care and love from my parents.

Unfortunately, I was very wrong.

When my mother saw me, she simply demanded, "Come over here now!" Her face was serious, emotionless, and stern. I expected care, but I wasn't so sure anymore. Tentatively, I dragged myself towards her direction with a slim hope of being comforted. I followed her grim eyes till they looked down at me, condescendingly. As she towered over me, I lost all sensation in my legs, daunted by her overwhelming presence. I realized it was the uncertain worry that made my heart beat irregularly fast. I was a wimp in comparison to her. All the warmth I expected to receive vanished, simply because of her intimidating presence. Tears freed themselves from my already red and swollen eyes. I was crying from not only the pain, but the

lack of empathy I felt from my mother. I glanced up at her peering down at me with her patronizing superiority.

She looked at me indifferently and said, “Your father is sleeping. Your crying will wake him up and he will beat you up. Did you forget about how your crying would bring bad luck to his gambling? Don’t you *ever* dare cry again!”

I didn’t want to recognize my mother as “my mother” anymore. What kind of mother would treat their own daughter like this, when she is enduring such pain? How could she only show care about my father and his gambling?!

My father was unreservedly addicted to gambling. He would gamble on dog and horse racing, often going to Macau for the sole purpose of gambling. Every time he left us, he’d leave insufficient money for the family. It would be our luck if he won because we’d get to have a box of cake from Macau to eat. On the contrary, if he lost, we would have to face intolerable physical abuse.

As my father’s gambling problem increased over time, our family lost more and more money. When I turned ten, my mother finally started working so that she could help support the family. She’d frequently bring in some outside work from the garment factory she worked at and force me to finish the job. Many times, having to sew and cut loose threads, blisters would appear on my hands from working excessively long hours. I could only do schoolwork, study, and rest only after working numerous hours for her.

I considered escaping. But before I could even try, my mother prevented it from happening. In order to keep me home after she left for the factory, she locked me up by putting a bulky, heavy chain on the gate of the apartment.

I could only escape mentally by playing Chinese chess with my best friend, Zhu. I remember sitting on the floor, her on the outside and me on the inside, playing through and in between the gaps of the gate. I was, and still am, very grateful for her and her company. Without her, I would’ve been incredibly lonely and miserable.

My mother was already stressed and disgruntled from the lack of money in the family. So, when she found out that my father had an affair with another woman, it demolished her. She became depressed and metamorphosed into someone who believed themselves to be hopeless and worthless. She isolated from us and didn't talk to anyone in the family, giving us the cold "silent treatment."

When the melancholy phase passed, the resentment phase came along. She was incandescent, always wanting to start a fight, not just mentally but also physically. Since my parents would argue relentlessly, there were multiple nights when my sisters and I could not fall asleep. We wanted to help, but we knew it would just get us into more trouble and get us beaten up by either one of our parents for being a bother.

The bickering worsened, which led to severe violence. I will never forget the moment when my mother took the sharpest and largest kitchen knife she could find to threaten my father's life.

"I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!" she hollered.

As a consequence of this chaos, the entire family had to go to the police station. I thought it would be the last straw. But sadly, I was mistaken. In fact, we were sent to the police station several times. I was unconditionally *humiliated* to be a part of this family! The amount of arguments did not reduce, and I couldn't handle the tension I regularly felt any longer.

I despised my father for not treating my family and I fairly and properly. He made me feel valueless and I lost self confidence in myself and my abilities. I was exhausted with how my mother handled things around the house and how she couldn't support me.

But after my father passed away, my mother became a very different person. All the horrors she caused us in the past went away the minute he left. Her priority

was to come see me as much as possible, especially my daughter, you. She wanted to be a part of our lives, almost as if she was trying to redeem herself. That's when I could truly feel her strong love for me.

My mother was like a *sharpener*; her daughters were like pencils. With all good intentions, she cared for us like the sharp knives in a pencil sharpener, scraping and chiseling until her daughters were sharp and in good condition. She didn't do this correctly or properly, just like how one does not stop sharpening even after it's already pointed. She went overboard with the sharpening, eventually breaking the pencils, leaving her daughters shattered and defeated. It sure hurt like hell, but the intention...it was there.

My Point of View

“Look in the mirror, I see a strong, beautiful, and confident young lady. I see myself in you. I'm your reflection,” my mother commented while she wiped the tear on my cheek with her fingertips again.

“Today, I look at you, knowing that I've raised you properly. I have endured my mother's strict parenting and tolerated my father's ruthless actions. Now, I gather my history to teach and show you your worth, abilities, and what it looks like to grow and be transformed, just like myself and my mother have.”



Because I Am

Charlotte Tiffany Fung

Honourable Mention

I need to go to the toilet so bad.

I'm sorry if that was inappropriate. I didn't realize people no longer think that the need to excrete waste from their body is something worth being vocal about. Anyway, all I need right now is for my teacher to turn away from the whiteboard and look straight at me, so that I can mouth the word "bathroom" to her, then slink away to the door. But since she's busy scribbling god-knows-what on the board, I spend the rest of the lesson staring at the back of Tyler's head, who has had the privilege of sitting in front of me and I, for one, know the number of freckles he has on his neck. Zero, to be exact.

You may think I'm just another teenager at school who pays no attention during class and comes back with a grade just as "below average" as my BMI, and you might be absolutely right. But it's not like I'm brainless. As a matter of fact, I scored 142 on my IQ test and I am known to be "highly gifted." It is just a misfortune that none of my teachers acknowledge the fact that I have an intelligent brain and can certainly be a straight A student if I ever tried, and of course they would never know that I have been dealing with the teeniest issues for years, like my social anxiety.

They say high school is one of the places where you find your lifelong soulmates, collect your most breathtaking memories and laugh until you get eye wrinkles that you will regret when you're forty. But what they never tell you, is that for the vast *minority*, high school is that one place where you get deep-rooted scars that leave you half in pieces and half surviving for the sake of school attendance.

At the very moment when I was busy flipping my mind inside out, the bell decides to ring, which causes me to jump and I instantly blush because, well, why wouldn't I? Impatiently but very necessarily, I wait for everyone to leave the classroom as school is already out, and after eight impossible minutes, I sprint to the bathroom and silently thank God for not letting me wet my pants in front of my crush.

Afterwards, I head to the train station, ready for another episode of my anxiety attacks. My experience of taking the train is so highly traumatic and mind-blowing that it could be literally written in a book.

So, like everyone else, I've got my headphones on and I'm minding my own business. But my idiotic anxiety decides to think that everyone is looking at me and judging the way I stand with both of my feet placed on the floor. My brain starts to go blank; my cheeks get extremely hot and my palms become so sweaty that I can't even hold on to those straphangers. I can't even mumble out a "sorry" when I accidentally lean on a woman when the train turned right. Or was it left? It might have flown skywards but who knows? All I know is that I couldn't open my mouth to apologize to that woman and she glared at me for a second then moved on with her life, which led to me thinking about her suing me, for the rest of the train ride.

What did I say about taking trains again? Just supercalifragilisticexpialidocious. It never ceases to amaze me the way my brother could have a different friend over at our house every day after school, just like today, while I stay in my room reading *Paper Towns* for the fourth time, a book that is, according to my classmates, as boring as Miss Leah's morning assembly speeches. But for my exceedingly occupied brain, a plain story is something that soothes me whilst everything else in this world constantly tears me down into bits.

I head to the bathroom before my parents arrive home at 8 o'clock and take out the blade I took from my cutter and before I know it, three more parallel lines appear on my left arm. Two seconds later, blood gushes out and I watch, still fascinated after two years of doing this. Nothing happened to make me cut myself, in case you were wondering. I just *had* to. I quickly put my arm under the faucet and rinse it with cool tap water. I walk back to my room feeling just as empty as I had been before and smile to myself.

Having social anxiety is bad enough when you have to go to school every day with people that gossip about everything, but it's worse when your only friend has her own group of friends and doesn't appreciate the fact that you tag along every hour of the day. Being physically invisible means that I will never be the centre of attention anyway, but what it feels like to me, is that everyone is whispering about me and staring at me, when in reality, no one actually notices my existence nor my absence. I've tried explaining this to Kara, but she told me to shrug it off and went on blabbering about her Econ test, in which she got an A.

So, since I cannot speak my thoughts out loud, I draw them over my skin like a viola's bow, so no one can hear my lullaby of the blues. My parents hit the roof when they saw my scars one beautiful Saturday. I was already so numb when my mum slapped me across the face and threatened to cut more. I guessed she was hurting inside too, but rage got the better of her and it all came out like bullets shooting directly to my heart.

I was forced to see a psychiatrist, who diagnosed me with social anxiety and depression, and she said gravely, "How did you survive these two years?" I didn't answer her, and just sat there silently as she continued, saying how strong-minded I had been to fight off the demons by myself for the past two years.

I hope I wasn't the only one who was relieved after being diagnosed with a mental illness. I mean, you can't be celebrating when you find out you have to take Zoloft and Xanax every day, which could cause numerous side effects, including

drowsiness and nausea; nor when you realize your family had to pay a large sum of money for your medicine alone, not mentioning your clinical psychologists sessions and all that good stuff.

But in fact, I was simply thrilled to know that there had been a reason to it all. My sudden need to leave a party because my heart was pounding so hard against my chest, my rapid blushing when I had to present in front my class, my feeling of drowning in living waters every night. I lost friends fast when I became distant and rejected their invitations every time they wanted to hang out. I never understood why, but now, I finally had an answer. An explanation for why my subconscious stopped me from accomplishing and doing a lot of things.

I couldn't believe that my scars were not my fault. All those nights of blaming myself for not being normal and in high spirits like everyone else suddenly made perfect sense. I was still the same individual I had always been. Just that my sharp-witted fight-or-flight response chose "flight" every time something, as unchallenging as talking to a waiter, happened in my life.

Who was I to blame then?

Five months after my diagnosis, I am still cutting myself. I guess this isn't something that some pills could easily help you walk out of, but it is myself whom I have to convince: you don't have to cut to feel alive. You can have moments when you feel like you're trapped in darkness and need not be guilty about it. You can be panic-stricken when you travel on a train or bus. You can have all kinds of dark emotions, and if the world wishes to blame that on you, let them.

You aren't the only waves others can see.

You are made of oceans.

You are, because I am.



Anna Karenina Principle

Winnie Lam Wai

Honourable Mention

“You can love someone and still choose to say goodbye to them... You can miss a person every day, and still be glad that they are no longer in your life.”

— Tara Westover, *Educated*

I couldn't remember when I first started to sense that there was something wrong with my father. On the surface, he was still the doting father. He washed all the dishes and swept the floor not just for one day, but always. He told me that I must find a boyfriend who helped shoulder the household chores like him. He even hand-washed my underwear with menstrual stains without complaint. From many perspectives, my father was the paragon of “a family man.” Yet, both of us changed and I was the one who could not bear the other's change.

When I was a primary school student, my father ran a shoe factory. There were many things on his plate, so he often arrived home at 1:00 am and left at 5:00 am. I knew this because his footsteps always awakened me. This kind of life persisted until I entered junior high school. Then, all of a sudden, my maternal grandparents started to speak ill of my father even though they used to be very kind people. My maternal grandfather even donated five million RMB into the refurbishment of a

primary school. During one visit to my maternal grandparents' house, I accidentally overheard a conversation where they asked my mom to consider a divorce.

I was so furious that I ran downstairs and shouted at the first person I saw, my uncle (my mother's brother) that, "I would always stand with my father no matter what kind of scheme you are up to."

I got a slap on the face and no explanation at all. I later garnered the fact from different relatives' gossip: my father's business went into a deficit of two million RMB and while my maternal grandparents were fully capable of plugging the financial hole, they were unwilling to do so.

Indeed, I knew my maternal grandparents were fully capable. I knew my uncle gambled away two hundred thousand within one night. I knew my maternal grandfather lent three hundred thousand to someone he met in a chess club for the first time and later felt embarrassed about urging him to return it, so he never reclaimed the money. I knew my grandfather was considering buying a lakeside villa that would cost three million RMB. I knew that for whatever reason, it was a fait accompli that my dear grandparents were reluctant to save my family.

My mother did not leave my father. She chose to confront the crisis with him. We retrenched: my mother stopped visiting beauty centres, my English lessons were axed and so on. In the meantime, my father relocated the factory to a cheaper area and reduced the size of production. He had more free time, yet to my surprise, he used the free time to watch soap operas. Don't get me wrong. I wasted time on soap operas too. But my father could watch a single episode five times in one go. I never knew why he repeated watching them and I dared not ask.

During the first two years of junior high school, he weaned off the television screen. He would start watching the soap operas the instant he hit home, which was around 7:00 pm, and he would leave the couch after 3:00 am. When I turned fifteen, my father swerved from soap operas to a mystic division of Buddhism. Initially, the distinction was not clear-cut because my hometown does embrace Buddhism to a

greater degree than other provinces in China. What distinguished my father from other relatives though, was his dedication to rituals. He bought a bamboo lotus seat on which he sat every evening reciting the Buddhist texts.

One time, I could not curb my curiosity and asked him, “Do you really understand what the text is about?”

I asked this question because the way my father recited was extraordinary for me. I knew that when Chinese Christians recite the Bible, they recite the Chinese translation of the text. As a result, they are bound to know what the text conveys. But the books that my father read did not contain meaningful sentences in Chinese, although they are Chinese characters indeed. Those Chinese characters record the phonetic transcriptions of Sanskrit texts. It puzzled me why my father would think it was beneficial to read aloud texts that he did not understand at all.

“Meanings do not matter. What matters is that you truly believe in the Buddhist,” replied my father.

As time went on, my father struck me as more and more weird. What’s worse, even my mother was influenced by him. My mom suddenly joined my father in watching a series of lectures delivered by a monk at night. They even demanded that I let go of my homework and join them, even though I was in the thick of preparing for high school entrance exams.

“This is really important,” said my mom.

I did join them for one night and was mesmerized by a scientific study that the monk cited in his lecture. The study was done by a Japanese scientist named Masaru Emoto. Later that night, I searched for the scientist online and found that his studies were criticised as pseudo-science.

The next day, I almost pressed my phone screen to my parents' eyelids, "Did you see this? It was pseudo-science. Lies, all lies." My parents snorted and they continued to watch the lectures again and again.

I guess I am starting to bore my readers, but you see, over the years, I led a precarious life. I was worried about the next turn my parents, especially my father, would decide to take. For some time, my father spent half an hour a day attending to his divine statues. Every morning, he examined their positions.

"If a statue faces a different direction, the function will change as well," he said. At another point, he devoted himself to nailing the middle split. He bought fitness equipment to help him practice. "The ability to do the middle split is a sign of fullness."

Sometime later, he began to entertain the hope of becoming rich within two years after a fortune teller told him so.

In another scenario, he complained to someone who was having a fever, "You always have this or that illness. I never went to see the doctor. It was unnecessary. When you practice [Buddhism] as I do, you do not need to see the doctor. You just feel, feel which part of the blood is congealed and use your willpower to clear it away."

My father's words gave me a mini heart attack. I stared at his back with my mouth agape.

The most painful awakening of the yawning divide between my parents and I; however, happened after I had gone to college. I gradually learnt about the backgrounds of my classmates. Many of them come from a family of intellectuals. Their parents are teachers, engineers, chief editors, doctors and senior civil servants. Their parents supported them to pursue further studies abroad and often gave them help in establishing professional and personal networks. Two days after I told my parents my idea of going abroad for a Master's, my mom texted me. The content was apparently a prophecy given by some fortune teller.

Her next message said, “I paid two hundred RMB for this consultation. Read through the prophecy when you have time. The master mentioned that the West is an ominous direction for you. I think you’d better not go abroad.”

Tears trickled down my face. I felt a Berlin wall between my parents and me.

POETRY



You and I

Gladys Lam Lok Ching

First Prize

How would you feel if you knew that this was your last MRT ride?
Relieved for finally going home,
or would you feel a hint of reluctance sizzling in your bones?

Stir-fry, durian and the hustle of the city blend
to form a weird aroma.
Captivated by the scent,
you bring me to a hawker centre in Chinatown
while I'm heading to China tomorrow.

Under the bright red lanterns,
You and I reminisce
my timidity and your tenacity
when we first met
in the hue of a dated polaroid,
longing to meet each other
sooner or later

at an intersection of our lives
again.

I look you in the eye.
Your pupils reflect nothing, but a limpid image of me,
keenly staring at your face
in hopes of capturing the moment
where there's only you and me
and your split-second grief.

Unlike a nimble photographer
who can freeze time with a magical click,
I cannot but witness the ebb and flow,
the dawn and dusk, and
the arrival and departure.
When you smile and bid farewell to me on the MRT,
I realise that you have endless MRT rides to take
whilst I'm bound to commute by MTR for life.



Innocence

Emily H. Olsson

First Prize

It is more adhesive
than glue, stickier and
heavier than overripe tomatoes
before the fall, and so you stare,
troubled as a lighthouse,
knowing as a sailor clings to
his mast, he is lost to the storm.

And yet, at night,
when the tomatoes sleep,
you creep on your toes and
reach to smear cement
along their fruit-bearing stems
to ensure each branch
will harden like freshly paved
sidewalks before someone

could step in and mar their symmetry.

And so, when the fattened tomatoes
awaken, eyelashes sticky with
paste, they wobble unsure, with
morning confusion at their
heavier weight. They look to you
for guidance and stare sullenly
at your grey, muddied face,
“I’m sorry for eating so much candy,”
they whisper, mistaking your hidden
concrete hands as judgement
instead of shame.

You prod them out
like cattle, or overfed lamb,
and guide them to ships with masts
and wooden planks, you crank the water
gates and let flood
the stormy seas;
you tap their hands when they cling
to the masts and chide them when
they scream they’re too heavy
even for land; you shush them
and push them off the wooden planks,
and pray as they sink,
you didn’t send your tomato sailors
to their graves.



The Koala

Kassandra Lai

Honourable Mention

The ruthless fire
Is ripping through the woods
Like a hungry beast
Devouring our home

Palls of black smoke
Are billowing from the scene
Things are ablaze
Reduced to ashes

I can hear nothing
But the crackling sound of fire
And my little heart
Pounding abnormally fast

You left me crying
Screaming loud in agony
As my friends perished

Into the blazing sea

Everything is blurred
By the bitter tears in my eyes
I'm drowning deep
In the taste of despair

My time has come
As bright red flames encircle me
With my last breath
I murmur

"How could you?"
This is not meant for the megafire
But for you
Human beings.



Reason VS. Feeling: A Poem on Jane Eyre

Hysan Lam

Honourable Mention

Tossed on a buoyant unquiet sea,
I'm eager to set my heart and feelings free.
Yet unconsciousness pulls me back to reality,
Telling me to stay right where I should be.
Conceal it, repress it, don't ever let it out
For I'll never reach the shore without a single doubt.
Suppress my inner feelings and bottle them up,
Keep them down under the surface so they shall never show up.

Reason, come over and take the wheel
'Cause I can't decide depending on how I feel.
The man of passion tries to lock me up in his cage,
Pushing me to sacrifice reason and start a new page.
Torn, I rip myself apart from him for good.
Reject him coldly and be as harsh as I could.
Sorry for placing morals and self-respect first
'Cause there's no way I would give in to my feelings though it hurts.

A wrong step could mean destruction for us both, you know?
Ruining the pure, sacred love which binds our two souls.

Again, I find myself at a crossroad in life
As the man of reason tries to force me to be his wife.
What he wants is a religious wife in name,
Thinking his desire and God's will are the same.
A loveless marriage life would kill me inside
For I foresee I must always push my feelings aside.
Abandoning feeling for the sake of principle,
No, I can't live like that, that is unacceptable.

Reunited with the man of passion
I come to realize,
Now that he needs me so,
I will never let go.
Reason used to be my compass,
Guiding me through darkness.
But now I can trust my feeling
Without the fear of losing.
Following my feelings which I repressed in the past,
I have finally achieved that perfect balance at last.



Mother, May I

Emily H. Olsson

Honourable Mention

Mother, may I sleep
in the puddles of spoiled milk?
In the milky lime gurgles of spit?
Mother, may I please lie in it?

Mother, may I frolic
in the unearthed soil?
In the gorged mud of my mangled seeds?
Mother, may I dance on them
in the lilac petal dress
you sewed for me?

Mother, may I mop
the fresh milk you wept
along the dry riverbank?
Mother, may I lose
the seeds you chiseled from obsidian

in the field of volcanic ash?
Mother, may I paint
the bronze land indigo
besides the milk I left to fester
like a dead cow under the searing sun?
Mother, may I show
you the soil rake that ran
away from my hands and ripped
up the land?

Mother, may I swaddle
myself in the spoiled milk and
mangled seeds?

Mother, may I reap
in the lilac petal dress
you sewed for me?



Rising Above

Anju Otsuka

Honourable Mention

Rise up for those who are without shelter
Who are more vulnerable than the rest
Share with them what you can provide
Be their life saving vest

Rise up for the parents who have much to juggle
Who feel overwhelmed and distressed
Care for them as they work from home
Give them love and give them rest

Rise up for the children who are restless to play
Whose hands do not even reach the ceiling
Tell them the earth has merely fallen ill
Tell them she is slowly healing

Rise up for those who endure sleepless nights
Rise up for those who work in fear
To save the lives of all our beloved

To fight for those whom we hold dear

Rise up for those who are losing hope
Rise up for those who are lost in sight
Tell them what is theirs will be theirs
And what lies ahead remains bright

Rise up for we are stewards of the earth
Rise up for it is our duty
To protect the earth and all its people
To protect it in all its beauty
Rise up for those who yearn for the day
The day when all has been restored
The day when families can be reunited
The day when all is in accord
The day when we are free once again
To wander the lands as we please
To travel to the ends of the earth
From the high mountains to the seas

Dear Self

Charmaine Wong

Honourable Mention

Dear Self,

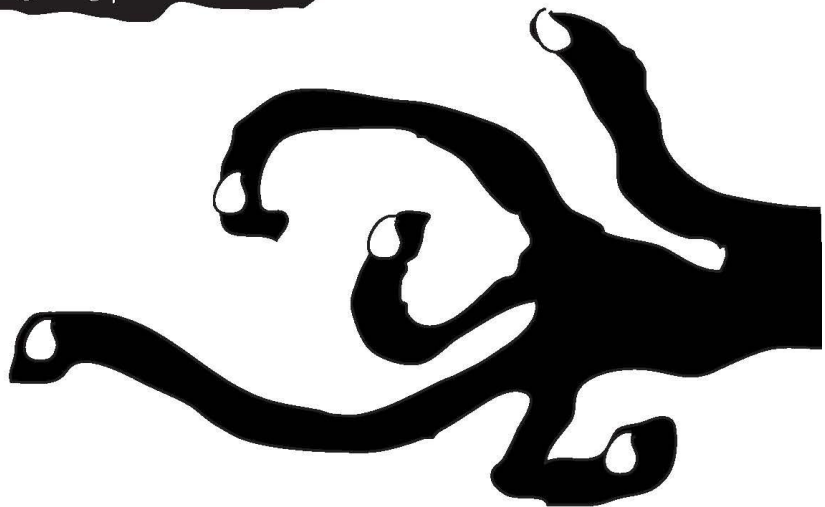
When I look into his eyes I saw myself,
a colored world to him but a stranger to my Self.
Crooked arms and twisted legs,
a queer creepy smile.

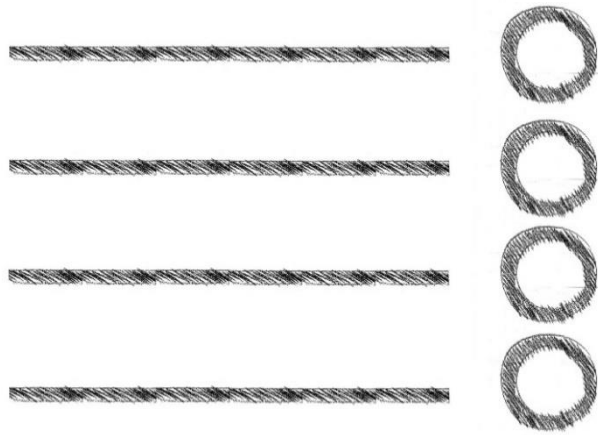
Until its limbs are overly curled, and distorted,
the joints start to swell a bit too much.
While walking becomes a fear,
And simply a look into the mirror would be an abuse.

And now the fingers start to grow, faulty craws
Tearing and scratching
him and also me.
Too selfless as a beast, too gentle as a demon.

The face I've never seen myself,
the heart I've never heard,
the hate I've never felt,
the disgust I've never smelled.
Now I do.

Every day I look, there is a new stranger in his eyes
trembling in fear as if living in my past is a lie.





List

Stephanie Wu Sin Yan

Honourable Mention

She receives a to-do-list:

Sweeping the floor,
Cooking dinner for her Masters,
Changing bed sheets, and
ironing shiny dresses for her step-sisters.

I also receive one:

Hunting for a part-time job (with an hourly pay of at least \$37.5),
Looking for a dating partner (ONS no thanks, thanks),
Reaching the top of the mountain called GPA (Hi Dean's list),
Sneaking into XX Hall for (at least) a semester, while
Skipping lectures in exchange for leisure (a.k.a sleeping).

Let's reach for the unreachable end,
which seemingly has an end.

Oh wait.

You are already drafting the *career-marriage-and-children list*?

and the *investment-in-retirement list*?

and

the *health-insurance-and-elderly-home list*?

Okay. Fine.

But how about the *death list*?

“Sorry my dear.

For this you will never know.”



Surgery

Stephanie Wu Sin Yan

Honourable Mention

My seemingly moist, hazy eyes.

You, apparently, with
a black-and-white suit, a stethoscope clinging on your neck,
plus a white coat.

As successful you are to be,
a winner of the system – a shiny identity
the fancy dream of many girls.

A scalpel, first you held,
Dissecting my beliefs
A forcep, then you raised,
picking up the bad tissues, from my bleeding, alive wounds.

I was a tumor in your sharp eyes,
a stubborn, terminal one.
You had cut me into half,

dearly, clearly.

You left me on the icy metal table, behind the double-swing doors,
of the stony Operation Theatre.

Suturing my other half became far more risky,
with hands quivering, knots tangling;
with mind blanking, blood bursting, tears flooding.

Without looking back at 30-32 Ngan Shing Street,
I survive,
yes, I *have* survived:
with the non-prescribed tranquilizer,
called Courage.

SHORT STORY



My Days on Cassiopeia

Emms Chan

First Prize

Date: 24 September 2145

Day 1 on *Cassiopeia*

I guess it is finally time for me to leave this mess of a planet behind and start a new adventure on the ship. I have never been to space before. I bet it is going to be mind- blowing!

The Captain gave me a short tour before all the passengers got on. He introduced me to the crew. I only remember some of them. There's Charlie, the engineer, a woman with a marvelous fashion sense. She used to be the lead singer of a punk band. One can only imagine what made her change her career so radically. I am sure it will make an incredible story if she decides to tell me one day.

Then there is Eisner, the scientist. He wears glasses and has long, greasy, black hair that he keeps in a ponytail. Whenever he talks, there is always this teasing tone in his voice, like he is playing a joke on all of us that only he is aware

of. When I first met his eyes, he didn't look away. He just stared and stared until I shied away. His gaze was penetrating and unbearably cold. It was as if he was regarding you as an object to be analyzed rather than flesh and blood. He gives me the creeps.

—

Date: 21 October 2145

Day 28 on *Cassiopeia*

Life aboard is pretty hectic. The Captain doesn't allow anyone to be a freeloader, so he made me work for Dr. Schmitt in the med bay. Most of the time I just help her draw blood from her patients. The blood samples are for Eisner and his experiments. When I pointed out that it was unethical to conduct experiments on people's blood without their consent, she shrugged as if it was none of her business. She explained that Eisner is the Director of the science division in ATLAS. He is on the ship by the direct order of the President. If we defy him and he reports us to the company, we will be in big trouble.

I get her point. Getting into trouble and being kicked off the ship is the last thing I want. What Eisner does is his own business. As long as he doesn't bother me, I am going to stay out of his hair.

—

Date: 24 October 2145

Day 31 on *Cassiopeia*

The passengers started falling ill due to some mysterious sickness. Still no progress in diagnosing the patients. Doc said it could be some alien virus that people picked up during the pitstop on Riordan. A cold shiver ran down my spine as she told me this. No one in their right mind would want to work in a room full of infected people. We don't even know whether it is contagious or not. We should stop the spread of the disease before the whole ship gets infected. So, I said to Doc: Wouldn't it be better if we just quarantine these people and leave them to their own devices? Better them than the whole ship! She told me to get out.

—

Date: 26 October 2145

Day 33 on *Cassiopeia*

The patients exhibited aggressiveness along with fever. When I tried to give a man an injection with a syringe yesterday, he thrashed in his bed wildly. Then he proceeded to jump on me, pinning me to the floor and started to strangle me with his unnatural strength.

They say your life flashes before your eyes when you are dying. All I felt in that moment was regret and fear. I couldn't fathom the thought of getting killed for no reason and by the hands of a demented mind no less. The unfairness of the whole situation ignited a fire within me. I struggled against his strong grip, my lungs burning due to the lack of oxygen. As I gazed into the black void of his eyes, I saw it gazing back at me. There was nothing behind the eyes. No emotions. No sense. Just an empty shell acting on pure instincts; its only purpose was to kill.

Realizing that I still held a syringe in my hand, I used the last of my strength to stab the man through the eye. I stabbed him again and again until someone grabbed me by the waist, asking me to stop. They said I had a wild look, with tears streaming down and blood splattered all across my face. *His* blood. My neck hurts even now. I don't think the bruises will go away.

I am glad he died instead of me.

—



The White Wolf

Emily H. Olsson

Second Prize

I remember looking down when the snow stopped and the rain came and how my mother wept, shaking in my father's arms, as our graves washed away.

-

It was a winter like any other. Somber and quiet as the land was blanketed with thick layers of ice and snow. The trees grew white branches, and the forest went silent as the animals hushed and hid in their holes. All except the white wolf who roamed.

Every night of every winter, my mother gathered Sister and I in her arms after our father chopped up the wood for the fireplace. Clustered like flocks, we bundled up in blankets, as Mother told us the tale of the white wolf who roamed the woods. While the world hid, the wolf was always waiting, stalking, and hunting those who dared brave the winter cold. With white eyes and glistening teeth, the white wolf was always hungry. And he lies waiting every night in the snow.

Don't go into the snowy woods.

Don't go where the white wolf roams.

Don't go away from home.

Don't, don't, and don'ts littered our bedtime stories. And when Mother and Father grew tired and satisfied with their *don'ts*, they tucked us into bed and fell asleep in their own. But my sister and I could never fall asleep until we were satisfied. And so, as we lie in our beds, listening to the snores of our parents, we whispered about the white wolf—his gleaming teeth, his wandering eye, and his fattening stomach. We plotted his adventures and wondered how he felt digging his sharp claws into the soft snow. We talked until we could feel how his feet feel crouching on the crisp and stinging cold. We imagined what it would be like to be the white wolf, alone, where no one dared to go.

Don't go where the white wolf roams.

But, why not go and see what only stories dare to speak?

As don'ts littered our parent's minds, *why nots* littered ours'. Trapped in our holes, our feet yearned for the snow. *Why must we hide when the white wolf can roam? How does the white wolf brave the bitter cold?*

And one night, when Mother's sister needed to push out a baby, Sister and I were left alone for the first time. We kept our eyes closed until we were sure our parents had left to our aunt's and then we ventured where no one dared to go.

The snow was as crunchy and crisp as we had imagined and the cold stung our cheeks, noses, and mouths. All down to the tingling tips of our toes.

We crept past the wooden fence Father built and entered the solemn woods.

Stillness settled into our ears with a biting hold.

A muted lullaby hummed in the lull of silence, pulling us deeper and deeper. We watched as the trees passed, straining to hear beyond the crunch of our tingling toes and the humming quiet of the forest toll. We tried to hear another crunching sound. The crunching sound of the white wolf who roamed.

But there was nothing under the blackened sky with muddied clouds.

Nothing but a silent cold settling deep into our bones.

I turned to clutch my sister's hand, but I couldn't feel my own. I looked up and saw that my sister's nose was blue, and her hands were too.

Turning back, we ran until our feet turned blue.

But we knew not where our father's fence stood under the ebony sky and wordless cold. There was nothing to guide us home.

And so, we lie on the crisp, stinging cold. With frozen breaths, we stared up into the muted trees and waited for the white wolf to take us home.



The Silk Road

Cindy Chung Jing Wo

Honourable Mention

I still remember Patrick sulking along the Silk Road...

It was busy and teeming in Tashkent Station, early Monday morning. People hustled and bustled about like a shoal of fish. Their mood swirled in invisible currents underneath the dark surface of their faces. Caught in the seething moving mass, the cacophony of noises and commotions of feet on the concrete floor, a child throwing tantrum, a metal can hitting the open compartment at the bottom of the vending machine, rolling suitcases, the crunching of breakfast burgers, a generic station announcement of the next arriving and delayed trains and the rhythmic beeping of the railway doors thumped me like Muhammad Ali in a boxing match.

Yet, in the course of this orchestral experience, as I was slurping my freshly brewed coffee in the waiting hall, a voice stood out from the boisterously screaming melody that caught my full attention. It was a low soft male voice speaking on the phone.

“Please listen to me, I did try to... I really did try to return as soon as possible... Trust me, I was out of town on important business at that time... I am a trader you know... I am in no desire to argue with you... Please... No... No... Please! Hello?”

I saw a familiar face, a young gentleman looking uptight. He endeavored to restrain his emotions, but they were written all over his face. I watched him as he blinked in and out between the other people dancing until he completely disappeared along with the weakened sound. An ominous feeling struck me head on.

Not long after, the train stomped in. The crowd swam into the train compartments just as how the River Thames meets its bank. I thrust my way through the throng in the compacted cattle truck, put my luggage on the rack and sank into a seat near the window. Having settled down, the peaceful and placid atmosphere took a load off my mind as I enjoyed the view outside the window. Soon the semaphore signal turned green, the train horn sounded, the engine whistled and the train departed the deserted station. I was having an aesthetic appreciation of the architecture suffused with historical and cultural flavor, an easing to the discomposure within, when the same voice interrupted.

“Yes, trust me. I am having a meeting with my boss and clients... Yes... Sure. I will be back soon, okay?”

I grunted and turned my head towards the source of the voice. It was the same gentleman as before. After hanging up, his frustrated look seemed to alleviate. He was the kind of guy inevitably adored by the fairer sex with sharp features of almond shaped mariner-blue eyes, a hawkish nose and defined cheekbones carved down towards a flinty jaw, and with a well-built physique, a ritzy sense of clothing and the vigor of youth. But there was something about the depth of his eyes and the expression of his deep voice that left traces of the facade he put up for others from the get-go.

I followed him. He stepped off at Samarkand after a tedious train journey, hailed a taxi and stopped at the Furkat Hotel. He made a visit to the restaurant, screening the surroundings through a window before entering.

When I walked in, the receptionist approached and asked,

“Room number, please, sir.”

“I am not a guest.”

“Then have you any reservation, sir?”

“No.”

“Sorry we only accept reservations.”

I checked into the hotel and sat in the lobby where everyone entering and exiting the hotel could be observed.

The clock struck five. I took heed of every single person passing by as if I were a screening machine to ensure that I did not miss him.

The clock struck six. I grabbed a drink from the bar to make myself less suspicious.

The clock struck seven. I clicked my fingernails against the table, stood up and paced up and down the hallway.

The clock struck eight. I felt the heaviness of my eyelids.

The clock struck nine. He finally reappeared, accompanied by someone this time. They talked and chuckled, and as they stood to leave, they gave each other a weird look as if both were anticipating something to happen. He walked off to a house two blocks away, took out a key, pressed the passcode and went in. I hid in the bushes and took out my monocular telescope and single-lens reflex camera from my tool bag. No one else was in the house. My instincts told me the apartment was so excessively furnished and comfortable that it did not seem like corporate housing.

The remaining daylight faded, and darkness fell over like a velvet blanket. The low street lighting at the front of the house beamed across the pebble pathway on the side. Nothing unusual occurred until a female figure peered from behind the house. Noticeably she took the path to avoid the lamppost. She paced back and forth along the dimly lit pathway then stealthily darted towards the house and rang the doorbell repeatedly. The door was answered. I was about to take a snapshot until she gazed around before entering. Her appearance came clearly into sight. Her features were so recognizable under the house light that I was taken aback. When I appeared right before them, all that was left was a startled glance.

My apologies for not introducing myself. My name is Luke. I work at The Smith Investigation Agency and was promoted three months ago at the closing of the Silk Road case, just when I started living alone. Again.



Washing Machine

Kelly Lam Man Hei

Honourable Mention

It was an ordinary summer afternoon. The bright orange sun hung high in the sky, scorching over the peacefully quiet neighborhood.

Gordon, who had recently resumed school after the pandemic seemed to have rescinded, came home dripping in sweat. His lanky arms and legs awkwardly protruded out of his too-small, sweat-stained school uniform, and his backpack sagged all the way to his bottom. Withering his shoulders and arching his back as if he had an electric shock, his backpack slipped off his shoulders and landed onto the wooden floor with a thud. After hastily shoving his shoes into a cabinet, he too joined his battered backpack on the floor.

“Ow!” he yelped, as he tried to lay his sweaty head on the floor, just realizing the wooden floorboard had been burnt golden brown by the sun. Jolting his entire body, Gordon shifted over to a shadier side of the living room, leaving a trail of glistening sweat across the wooden tiles.

A few minutes passed. A familiar whirring noise suddenly erupted from the kitchen, catching his attention. He looked over in the direction of the sound and noticed that the sweat patch had begun to dry. He lay there for a few minutes. The noise stopped. He laid there for what seemed like an eternity.

Boredom engulfed him.

Restless and itchy palmed, he desperately wanted to annoy somebody.

Gordon jumped to his feet and crept over to the kitchen. He yanked open the door and found his sister squatting on the kitchen floor pulling fresh laundry out of the washing machine. His sister, Hayley, was his spitting image, except shorter, covered in pimples, and had shoulder-length hair tied into a loose ponytail. She looked up upon his abrupt entrance, but showed no sign of interest, bearing the same lifeless look on her face.

Sensing mischief in the sudden twinkle in her brother's eyes, Hayley held up a hand to defend herself, but it was too late. He did it. In the split second, Gordon had flicked her ponytail. Her biggest pet peeve.

No words were exchanged, but Hayley's deathly glare alone sent shivers down Gordon's spine, which was enough to tell him to start running for his life.

"Yeet!" He let out delightedly, before turning on his heels. But this time, he was too late. His sister had leaped into the air and grabbed him by the back collar of his sweaty uniform, dragging him back into the kitchen.

"How many times have I told you not to do that?" she hollered. She was at least half a head shorter than him, but her fiery presence seemed to tower over the skimpy boy. Gordon clenched his throat, rubbing it furiously.

"You didn't have to pull that hard, it hurts!" he complained.

“About time you learn a lesson,” she shot back, returning to pull clothes out of the washing machine. But this lesson didn’t last long.

Not even a second after she said that, Gordon flicked her ponytail again, and dashed off. But before he could get too far, he tripped on Hayley’s slippers, tumbled backward, and fell headfirst into the washing machine.

“Ha! You kind of deserve that,” she sneered.

There was no reply.

The rest of Gordon’s body sprawled out of the machine at an odd angle and Hayley wondered if he might’ve passed out. She kicked his legs for a response, but they turned soft, springy, and jello-like at her touch.

“What the hell?” she thought. She kicked his hands, but like his legs, they felt like thin rubber and flopped over. Gordon showed no sign he was unscathed. He barely looked alive, let alone human.

Wanting to make sure her brother wasn’t dead, Hayley decided to pull him out to check for breathing. However, when she began to tug at his jello legs, the washing machine shuddered and started to slowly spin clockwise. Gordon’s limbs wildly flopped in all directions as the spinning accelerated, loudly clanging against the metal of the machine. She grabbed hold of his floundering ankles, but the spinning continued, and his body now looked like a twisted wet towel. Pinning down his feet with one hand, Hayley used her free hand to stop the machine, but it made no difference. It wasn’t even turned on.

With horror, she watched as her brother increasingly resembled a twisted licorice candy. It looked as if he was edging closer to bursting apart with every spin. Hayley yelled for help, but to no avail. There was no one else in the apartment. Trying to stay calm, she thought that if she let go of his legs, he would most likely unravel and that would decrease the damage. But she was wrong. Very wrong.

The moment she let go of her brother's soggy ankles, the backing of the washing machine disappeared into thin air, and Gordon's entire body was sucked into a dark hole. As quickly as it had disappeared, the backing reappeared as if it had never left, and the spinning came to an abrupt halt. Silence echoed throughout the kitchen, and Gordon was never seen, ever again.

What Hayley didn't know, was that Gordon had been conscious the entire time. He struggled as his body refused to comply with his demands, and felt somewhat touched when his sister tried to save him. He was sure she would've left him there to die.

As soon as Gordon was engulfed by the washing machine, he entered a dark abyss, still spinning vigorously. His life flashed before his eyes, revealing too many instances of furious shouting and keyboard slandering at heated computer games. "This is it," he thought. "I'm really dying."

At once, everything stopped. An agonizing pain struck him like lightning, piercing every inch of his muscles from head to toe. Gordon felt his soul return to his body, which began to straighten out, and the sensation returned to his fingers. He inhaled deeply and fluttered his eyes open. Immediately, a small gasp of surprise escaped his mouth.

In the darkness, bright white circles whisked by him one at a time. They came from every direction, coming and going so fast it was nothing but a blur. "So this is what people who have near-death experiences mean when they see a white light?" Gordon wondered. "But why are there so many? Why are they circular? Are these moons? Am I in space?" After some careful observation, he noticed each circle was slightly different from each other, differing in size and color. Most of the circles were tinted yellow and Gordon could see some indistinguishable objects spiralling along the inside edges of the circular lights.

"What in the..." he gawked, as the realization of what he was seeing hit him. "These circles... these objects going round and round are... clothes! And these circles... are washing machines?"

Just as Gordon was about to ask why he was haunted by tiny flying washing machines, one particular circle began to approach him, growing larger into view. Gathering speed, the circle raced toward him. Before he had any time to object, he crashed into a circular glass door, slumping into a wet pile of laundry.

Pressing his face against the glass, he surveyed the outside surroundings and realized he was back in the kitchen. But it didn't feel the same. Unsettling oddness lingered in the atmosphere and Gordon noticed that the walls were tinted murky yellow as if they had been rotting in the sun.

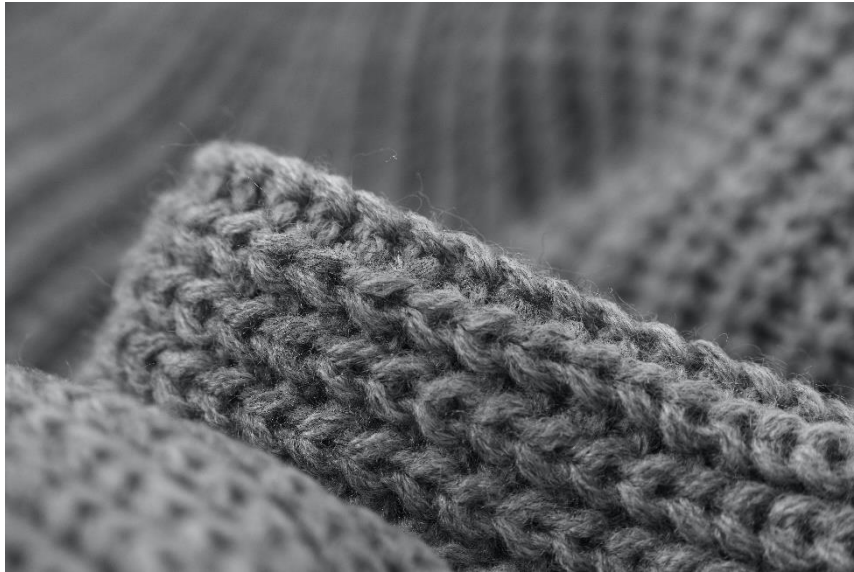
Shuffling footsteps approached the kitchen and he peered anxiously toward the kitchen door, wondering who it might be. A pair of wrinkled feet belonging to a plump middle-aged woman came into view, who then grasped both her knees while slowly lowering into a pained squat. Grey roots sprouted from her scalp and the rest of her poorly dyed black hair was gathered hastily in a short ponytail. Gordon thought this woman looked vaguely familiar but had no recollection of ever meeting her.

The woman looked up, and lodging between layers of wrinkles, Gordon could see aged dents and acne scars on her face. She leaned in closer, and their eyes met. Expressionless, she held his gaze for a long time. Discomfort began to creep in and Gordon tried to look away, but her stare was so strong it had the power to captivate. Slowly but surely, an eerie tingle slithered down his spine, making the hair on the back of his neck stand up. Unmistakable, Gordon knew who she was at once.

Not daring to break eye contact, the woman opened the washing machine door with trembling hands.

“Hayley?” Gordon whispered, brows furrowed and head tilted.

Eyes widening, the middle-aged Hayley stumbled. Her eyes rolled into the back of her head, leaving two white bulges loosely hanging in her creased eye sockets. Hayley's skin went as pale as her eyes and she fell backward in a heap on the floor.



Needle and Thread

Nicholas Yu Pak Hei

Honourable Mention

“Mum, it is alright, let’s meet tonight.”

I hang up the phone and continue to walk to my workplace. Now it is winter, all pedestrians are wearing thick clothing in order to resist the cold. Looking at the scarf around my neck, I suddenly remember that winter night several years ago. In my memory, the wind was also chilly and fierce on that day...

The freezing wind was blowing vigorously. Even though I was walking in the corridor of a building, I could not stop myself from shivering. I paused in front of a flat and knocked on the door lightly. Soon it was opened, and Mum welcomed me with a big smile on her face.

“The weather is cold, come in now!” She was the same as before, always worried about me.

“It has been a month since your last visit, boy. You should come back more to have home-cooked meals.” Mum spoke to me while we were having dinner.

I nodded my head perfunctorily, not willing to respond. After graduating from university, I had become a secondary school teacher. Since my workplace was very remote, I moved away a few months ago and rented a shabby apartment in Kowloon. When I first arrived, the floor was covered in a layer of dust. Junk was scattered everywhere, causing a huge sense of discomfort. Poor accommodation had tightened up my nerves, and my recent job performance was also unsatisfactory. As a novice teacher, I was still confused about my situation and could not handle my tasks properly. In order to make up for that, I worked very hard and strived for improvement. Gradually, I spent less time visiting Mum. Whenever she called me, I would end our conversation quickly and return to work. Yet, Mum never got angry about my cold attitude. She was the same as before, always calm and uncomplaining.

“The government will give out money again? Life is really getting better,” Mum mumbled to herself and continued to move the needle in her hand.

After having dinner, I would always spend some time with Mum. Even now, her greatest interest was to watch television while knitting clothes. This might be related to her childhood experiences. As Mum was born into a poor family, she had to knit clothes for others in order to earn a living. Over time, knitting had become her favorite leisure activity. When Mum was free, she would knit some clothing for both of us. However, I did not like to wear them because they were normally too bulky and old-fashioned. Despite my complaints, Mum did not seem to care about my comments.

While I was sitting on the sofa, I recalled a conversation with Mum about knitting from many years ago. I could not remember the details, but she had said something that really impressed me.

“I think knitting is like creating bonds, which can connect things together.”

Mum did not have a high education level as she only completed secondary school. Therefore, it was surprising to hear such profound words from her. Although I had tried to ponder that a few times, I still could not understand her meaning. At the thought of this, I turned my head to look at Mum who was still knitting and enjoying

the pleasant moment. She was the same as before, always content with what she possessed.

A few hours had passed, and the sky was getting darker. The feeble light of the moon and stars was absorbed by the night sky. The world gradually became quiet, and only the sound of the roaring wind and the ticking of the clock could be heard. It was already half past ten and I still had a plethora of work to do. I stood up and put on my backpack, ready to head back to my apartment.

“You are already leaving now? When will you come back again?” Mum asked in a caring manner, but I could not give her a definite answer since I was busy with my work.

“Sorry Mum, I don’t know.” I looked away deliberately when I answered, afraid of seeing her disappointment.

Mum told me to wait for a while, then walked into the bedroom and came out with a scarf in her hands.

“Boy, it’s for you, wear it!”

I received the scarf in surprise and took a closer look at it. The scarf was black and decorated with multiple stripes of different colors, which made it look very beautiful and fashionable. It was very light and made of cotton, so when I was wearing it, I felt warm and comfortable. This was probably the best scarf I had received from Mum and she must have spent a lot of effort knitting it.

“How long did it take to knit this?” I asked Mum out of curiosity.

She smiled awkwardly and replied, “My eyesight has deteriorated recently, so it took me some time. I think I spent about two months.”

I was shocked by Mum’s words and started to gaze steadily at her. In that instant, I realized that I had been wrong all the time. Indeed, Mum was not the same as before.

There were more wrinkles on her face, which were the signs of ageing. Her hair was like a shimmering black curtain in the past, but now she had plenty of grey hair. All of a sudden, guiltiness overwhelmed me as I finally understood the meaning of knitting. As Mum knew that life was transient, she knitted ceaselessly to express her love for me. In her mind, knitting possessed the power of connecting people's hearts together. Yet, I only prioritized my career and completely overlooked her feelings.

“Mum, I am so sorry...”

Defeated by the sense of guilt, I started crying helplessly and confessed my true feelings. The clock had been turned back, and I had become the fragile crybaby once again.

Years have passed, and I have become a more mature person. Although life is full of obstructions, the love from my mother is like the balmy sunshine in spring, encouraging me to overcome all these barriers. The wind is still blowing vigorously, but it is not freezing anymore. With Mum's scarf, our bond will remain strong and unbreakable.

“Spring will eventually come,” I smile and whisper to myself, striding forwards.

JUDGES

Food Writing

Prof David Huddart

David Huddart works at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, where he is Professor of English Literary Studies, Head of the Division of English, and currently Acting Chair of the Department of English. He writes about the environmental humanities, English as a global language, and different kinds of life writing.

Memoir

Mr Pete Spurrier

London-born Pete Spurrier arrived in Hong Kong in 1993 after a two-year journey along the Silk Road from Europe. In the years since then, he has written three bestselling guidebooks, edited a monthly magazine and contributed stories to anthologies, regional newspapers and other publications. He now runs the locally focused publishing house [Blacksmith Books](#), which specialises in memoir.

Poetry

Dr Tammy Lai-Ming Ho

Tammy Lai-Ming Ho is a founding co-editor of [Cha: An Asian Literary Journal](#), an editor of the academic journal Hong Kong Studies, and the English Editor of [Voice & Verse Poetry Magazine](#). She is also the President of PEN Hong Kong, an Associate Director of One City One Book Hong Kong, a Junior Fellow of the Hong Kong Academy of Humanities, and an Advisor to the Leeds Centre for Chinese Writing. Her first poetry collection is *Hula Hooping*, for which she won the Young Artist Award in Literary Arts, presented by the Hong Kong Arts Development Council. She has edited or co-edited a number of literary volumes focusing on Hong Kong. She is currently an Associate Professor at Hong Kong Baptist University, where she teaches poetics, modern drama, and contemporary fiction.

Short Story

Mr Albert Wan

Albert is a co-founder of [Bleak House Books](#), an independent English-language bookshop in Hong Kong. Before becoming a bookseller, Albert had a solo law practice in Atlanta, Georgia, where he specialized in criminal and civil rights matters. Born and educated in the United States, Albert now calls Hong Kong home, along with his wife and two children. He likes scotch, baseball and old movies. His favorite writer is George Orwell. On most days you can find Albert at the bookshop (on the 27th floor in the working class San Po Kong area) cataloging books and writing Instagram posts about books, politics, and #hkpeoplereading.

AUTHORS

Emms Chan

Why do people love to read? They read to immerse themselves in the worlds and characters authors created, so that they can escape from reality and all its horribleness, albeit temporarily. For a student majoring in Earth System Science, the opportunities to enter any writing contests are very few and far between. So, when the chance presented itself, the chance to make something that allows people to forget their problems during these turbulent times, it is only fair to seize it. Sometimes, all it took to make someone's day is a silly story.

Jing Chan

Jing Chan is a soon to be year 3 student majoring in Architecture and minoring in English. She has a passion for using creativity and design to help people and the world become a better place. Some of her hobbies include creating art, music, and writing.

Johanna Chan

Johanna is a journalism fresh graduate, who enjoys listening to and telling stories. She was Editor-in-chief of Varsity magazine at CUHK and has also worked as a radio reporter and camera operator for Annenberg's Media Center at the University of Southern California. Her interests include art, music, and travel. When she isn't writing, she is probably breaking out in show tunes or getting lost in a new neighborhood.

Cindy Chung Jing Wo

Cindy Chung is an English graduate and prospective Master in Comparative Literature. She is a mystery and thriller enthusiast and has a passion for psychological thrillers. Spending the last decade perusing and writing crime thrillers, her works utilize the device of unreliability to exploit the uncertainty over the characters' motives and perceptions of the world, and build the stories up to a crescendo.

Charlotte Tiffany Fung

Charlotte Tiffany Fung is a student completing her Postgraduate Certificate in Laws (PCLL).

Kassandra Lai

Kassandra is a Journalism student, she loves and cares for the environment and animals. She would like to raise people's awareness towards environmental issues and animals right through writing. This was her first time writing a poetry and she decided to write about Koalas because of the Australian bushfire in early 2020. She noticed that wildfires are occurring more frequently around the world and scientists associate the blazes with climate change. It is time for humans to reflect on what they have done to our Mother Nature.

Hysan Lam

Hysan Lam is an English major and a huge Big Bang Theory fan. When it comes to writing poetry, she considers herself somewhat of a perfectionist (just like Sheldon Cooper). She has always been obsessed with using the AABB rhyme scheme in her poems and often struggles to come up with rhyming words that make sense. In her free time, she enjoys drawing, binge-watching YouTube, hanging out with friends, and playing mahjong with her family.

Gladys Lam Lok Ching

[Gladys Lam Lok Ching](#) is a third-year English Language Education major. Her works include poems, short stories and blog entries. Beyond language arts, Gladys enjoys creating mixed media artworks and learning new things.

Kelly Lam Man Hei

Kelly is a third-year Psychology student looking forward to minoring in Korean. She enjoys writing short stories occasionally, but she can usually be found drawing, crocheting, reading, and watching movies. Her life-long goal is to travel and experience the world.

Winnie Lam Wai

Winnie Lam Wai is a junior majoring in English Literature. Her academic interests span from contemporary non-fiction writing to the Classics. She spent a year in Beijing working as an intern reporter at Reuters while indulging herself in the riches of Chinese cuisine provided by the bustling capital. Hailing from Fujian, a coastal province, she betrays her root by admitting red pepper into the meals. Like seafood, dance has been a part of her life since childhood. She aspires to become a TV presenter and to document life with honesty and humour.

Emily H. Olsson

Emily H. Olsson loves writing, but her self-doubt often grinds her brain to a halt. So you're more likely to find her hyperventilating under her desk than actually working at her desk. In the rare exceptions when you do bump into her working, she's probably stress reading for her English major because she (most definitely) procrastinated the day away drowning in her feelings.

Anju Otsuka

Anju Otsuka is a fresh graduate of The Chinese University of Hong Kong with a degree in Computer Science. Born in Hong Kong and raised in Tokyo, she draws much of her inspiration for writing from her Catholic faith, and multicultural upbringing. An advocate for female empowerment, she currently works as an engineer in the financial services industry.

Stephanie Studzinski

Stephanie Studzinski is a postgraduate student at the Chinese University of Hong Kong researching the ecological speculative fiction of Sheri S. Tepper. Stephanie completed a MSc at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland and a BA at Youngstown State University in Ohio, USA where she hails from. Dovetailing with her interest in speculative fiction is her dedication to popsurrealist painting. Stephanie has been painting for over twenty years and most recently painted a mural on the Sheng Kung Hui Tang Shiu Kin Secondary School in Wan Chai. Stephanie also pursues her interest in art and environment through her ecocarpentree. Stephanie collects driftwood from Hong Kong's beaches to renew and repurpose in order to combat

single-use culture and create aesthetically pleasing, practical (re)grown furniture. Stephanie uses this to educate and inspire others as she transplants her (re)grown furniture into living rooms across HK. You can find her work on elucious.com and Instagram at [#eluciousdesign](https://www.instagram.com/eluciousdesign).



Tung Ka Long

Tung Ka Long is an education-major student. He believes everyone is equal, so we don't need a dictator in our society. He also believes reading is a good way to improve oneself, but he doesn't read a lot.

Charmaine Wong

She remembers the night sitting in front of the desk at a night in Brighton, as the wind swirling and floating between the free winter air. Inside this room of her own, having a space all to herself, she felt weirdly calm, so calm that her brain freed up room for thoughts, and the very thing that sparked her mind was love. How powerful love is, she thought, that love could turn a person into a beauty and equally into a beast. What a beast, what a demon, as she recollected the moments the first time being in a relationship, learning how to love and forgive through hate. Being an English major who has a predilection for the beauty of language, she felt the need to articulate her thoughts immediately by scribbling down phrases and sentences that resonates with her emotions. And here it is, the poem titled “Dear Self.”

Emilia Wong Sze Man

Emilia's favourite fantasy is to sit by the Venice canals in a 60s dress, sing quiet odes for birds and paint in a million shades of sunlight. Unfortunately, it is yet to come true and she honestly daydreams too much for it to be healthy. Emilia is an English major in CUHK who loves fantasy novels and mythologies. She writes sparsely, mostly poems and short stories, and she also paints in her free time. Misogyny and parental abuse are topics which she explores in her writing rapidly, in relation to her childhood trauma. In her more recent works, it is easy to locate the apparent influence of magical realism and excessive symbolism there. If you are interested in sinister, stark

writing and illustrations, you might want to check out her Instagram page @paper_caged_birds for her creations.

Stephanie Wu Sin Yan

Proudly an introvert, Steph likes spending time in her shell baking, Netflix-ing and reading, while occasionally poking her head out to spend some quality time with her companions. As an English teacher to-be, Steph believes the language should not be bound by exams. For her, English is a shimmery key allowing her to open the door of a world that she has never imagined. Once Steph has stepped into her little world, she knows there is no way back – and she has been thankful for every daunting and joyful adventure in it.

Nicholas Yu Pak Hei

Nicholas Yu is a year 3 student studying Chinese Language and Literature. He is a very typical art student. When he is not busy with his studies, he spends his free time reading novels and creating different things. For example, stories, song lyrics and tutorial notes. Nicholas believes that words possess great power that can express thoughts and deliver feelings. Therefore, he is extremely enthusiastic in writing and participated in this competition.

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