



elt 英語教學單位
English Language Teaching Unit



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GENESIS

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



ISSUE #2

EDITED BY DR CHRISTELLE DAVIS

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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 second issue of this anthology celebrates the achievements from the **ELTU's Second Annual Creative Writing Competition 2020-21**.

Editors:

Dr Christelle Davis (*Lecturer, ELTU CUHK*)

Ms Natalie Cheung (*Teaching Assistant, ELTU CUHK*)

EDITOR'S LETTER

It has been my great privilege to once again supervise the ELTU's Creative Writing Project at the Chinese University of Hong Kong during the 2020-21 academic year. This project was born from a desire to provide a creative outlet for CUHK students regardless of major, year level or background. This year, we expanded our offerings and hosted eight Creative Writing workshops focusing on a range of genres, styles and literary techniques. The students thoroughly enjoyed these workshops and I would like to praise the teachers who provided such engaging and valuable instruction during a year of challenges and of course the students, who threw themselves into writing with such enthusiasm.

This anthology is the result of many students' hard work, passion, courage, experimentation and above all, creativity. Whether it is a story about favourite childhood meals, coping with a long term illness, facing a woman's greatest fear or finding a way through grief, the pieces in this anthology offer a fascinating glimpse into Hong Kong life and CUHK life.

I would sincerely like to thank the judges who patiently read the many submissions and offered their expert opinions. Furthermore, this project would not be possible without the hard work of the project team which includes Ms Jessica Acuña, Ms Natalie Cheung, Dr Jose Lai and Mr Abdulwahab Tahhan.

Finally, I hope that this anthology leaves you feeling inspired and moved by the hard work of CUHK students.

Dr Christelle Davis

Lecturer

English Language Teaching Unit

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

FOOD WRITING

How to Survive a Fast-Paced Life 101: Food Edition

Coco Yu

Honourable Mention

There is something you should know before reading this, and that is I am lazy and slapdash when it comes to food. Please remember that. Thank you for your attention. It's hard to not be like this when living in such a fast-paced place like Hong Kong. When parents aren't home and children are too young to know about cooking, microwaved food shows up like a knight in shining armour. Pre-made food might sound like something carcinogenic, but it tastes like something epic. My childhood experiences made me the expert I am today. Now, allow me to introduce you to some of my personal favourites.



Image credit: Coco Yu

KIMCHI SPICY NOODLES

First, we have kimchi spicy noodles. I can't eat spicy food, but I keep coming back for this. Three to four minutes is all it takes. Tear off the plastic bag, put the noodles in a bowl, add water, and microwave it for three to four minutes. "Ding!" Add the seasoning after the instant noodles have softened. This is the meal I usually have for lunch when there is nothing to eat in my kitchen, when Dad isn't cooking, when I am too lazy to make my kitchen a complete mess, or when I have my next Zoom class in 15 minutes. It is always sitting in my cupboard. I try to add a little bit less of the spicy seasoning whenever I don't want to end up getting a runny nose and having to chug a carton of milk. Apparently, I keep failing. It is savoury, salty, and hot. I would

finish the noodles in five minutes, but the chewy texture of the ramen was just not enough for me. I would take a sip of the bright red spicy soup after eating up the noodles, which made me keep sniffing my nose. I regret that decision every single time.

But I like kimchi spicy noodles, so I guess I like putting myself in hell.



Image credit: Coco Yu

QUICK SERVE MACARONI

Quick serve macaroni is the taste of my childhood, but also the smell of nightmares.

Again, it just needs three to four minutes to be cooked. I remember stepping on a stool and putting a bowl of quick serve macaroni into the microwave when I was in primary school. I will always remember that salty chicken soup flavour. It was my everyday lunch in the summer because Mum and Dad were not home to make lunch for us. Literally, every day. I liked it when I was a kid because it was savoury and easy to make. If it was too salty, I added more water. Very simple.

But I stopped having it after a stupid accident. Yellow smoke flew around the kitchen, and I realized I had burnt the macaroni in the microwave because my small brain forgot to add water before heating it. The yellow macaroni turned black, the white microwave turned brown. It traumatized me as a kid.

I felt nostalgic while tasting it again after almost ten years. It is still my lazy lunch and I still kind of like it.

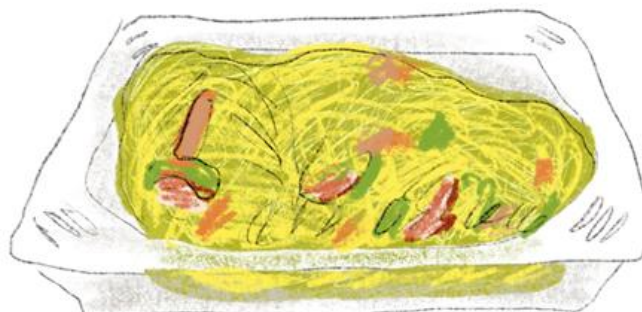


Image credit: Coco Yu

SINGAPORE FRIED RICE VERMICELLI

Moving on to the food of my teenage years—the microwave version of Singapore fried rice vermicelli. There should be shrimp, *charsiu*, eggs, and greens in this Singaporean dish. However, there are only a few small slices of *charsiu* and greens in this microwave version of Singapore fried rice vermicelli. Personally, it is enough for me; I mean it is a cheap and quick meal, so what do you expect? The brand is even named “*Ho E Sik*”, which means “very easy to eat” in Cantonese. It doesn’t look that appetising at first, but after heating it up for five to six minutes in the microwave, the pungent smell of the peppery curry would linger around the kitchen and make my mouth water. The rice vermicelli is a bit more moist than the ones made in restaurants, which I prefer, as it is easier to take in the heavy taste of curry.



Image credit: Coco Yu

SALT BAKED CHICKEN BY DAD

So, my parents actually take good care of us; they feed us, I promise. I usually have better meals at dinner because Dad makes it. Every time he makes salt baked chicken for dinner, I would eagerly wait for the “*ding*” sound. I would stare at the oven, hoping to see through the golden yellow chicken and potatoes inside the tin foil. I like to use a spoon to poke the tin foil, making a hole big enough to peek at the chicken inside. It is usually well cooked after 30 minutes. The chicken oil would be boiling, making the chicken look juicy and tender. The dish has a rich taste, and every bite of the chicken is buttery and creamy. The potatoes are soft and savoury, full of pepper and salt. What a perfect dish to go along with a bowl of rice.



Image credit: Coco Yu

NEW YEAR'S EVE FEAST

Steamed scallops with minced garlic and vermicelli, lobsters, steamed fish, Chinese cabbage, and white rice. What a feast for New Year's Eve. I told you my parents treat us well. We don't usually have this much food for dinner, but Dad always makes a divine meal on special occasions. The big scallops are succulent, the lobsters are savoury, and the fish is tender. The rice and greens are a perfect accompaniment for all the intense tastes. I am usually beyond full after devouring the

“*tuen neen fan*”, or New Year’s Eve dinner in Cantonese. This meal not only warms my stomach but also my heart. When it comes to the special days, it is always about the memories. Placing four bowls of rice on the dining table is all that matters.

I am definitely a person who eats to live as I don’t have high expectations for food. I keep telling myself I should spend more time preparing a proper meal and not to always have microwaved food. I want to eat healthy. But I’m just too lazy. That even rhymes, like a slogan constantly repeating in my head. I’m just too lazy to care after all.

In this fast-paced city, I believe many people in Hong Kong eat as much quick-served food as I do because it’s just so convenient and easy. It is a part of Hong Kong’s food culture. Waiters always rush in restaurants, taking orders and orders. In a *cha chaan teng*, they don’t even give you time to think about what you want. This is one of the reasons why I don’t like eating out. The waiters scare me, and my palms would start sweating when I tell them my order. But this is Hong Kong, and that’s why we need those microwaved meals. Everything needs to be fast, and no time should be wasted, not even lunch, the only time for relaxation. This works fine for me as I always bolted down my food. I prefer big bites anyway.

I don’t particularly love or hate microwaved food. I feel nostalgic every time I have a taste since I grew up with them. I can’t imagine what my meals would be like when I live alone, with everything waiting to be microwaved.

My sister and I started forcing ourselves to cook a proper meal for lunch during quarantine. We experimented a lot, but the results were not that ideal. We called the food that we made “dark food.” You don’t want to know what we put together as a “meal.” As long as it was something edible, we were up for it.

However, when it comes to the food that my dad cooks, I’ve started learning to appreciate the food. I savour every mouthful because I think he makes the best food in the world. This is one more reason for me to not like eating out. Everyone needs

something bright in their lives. I can't eat pre-made fast food all my life. In fact, I have already gotten tired of some of it.

There is only one thing I don't particularly enjoy about my dad's cooked meals, which is that the rice is too dry. He thinks drier rice is the perfect rice, and he loves it. But again, as I said, I don't ask much for my meals, so I can bear with it.

It is a bit hard for me to talk about food, let alone write about it. I hate people who moan after tasting their food, blabbing about how good or bad the food is. I just think that's too much. However, this food journal made me realise that I kind of need to slow down and really taste my food. I think I need to stop gulping down my meals. I want to eat healthy, no more but's.

MEMOIR



Cane You or Can't You: Perception and Visible and Invisible Disabilities

Stephanie Studzinski

First Prize

In the second year of my PhD, I was studying abroad when my husband had a massive heart attack and stroke. We were both shocked. We had been hiking, running, eating healthy foods and feeling like we were on the top of the world just the day before. Yet, there he was, suddenly confined to a bed at death's door.

The beginning was the hardest; we were both in shock. It was hard to reconcile our belief that we were at our happiest and healthiest with the reality that, in fact, death had secretly crept in and lodged its icy talons into my husband's heart. Suddenly, the world turned upside down. For a long time, it looked like death was not going to let go any time soon, but then, neither would I.

My husband had to learn to do everything again—even just sitting up or moving his toes seemed impossible at the beginning. Months confined to a bed began wreaking havoc on our mental health. Finally, after two months of slow recovery, was the moment we had both been waiting for: he started using a wheelchair. A small taste of freedom came at last. However, even this small improvement to his mobility was a challenge. We both struggled to get him into the chair, and even then, there was

nowhere we could go. I was not allowed to take him off the hospital grounds. I remember telling the nurse I was taking him “around the block” and she protested until I explained that I just meant “Block A,” which was where his room was located, and that we would not leave the floor.

It was strange having to check out one’s husband like a book or a rental car. They want to know when you will return such and such article and you must sign to take responsibility for its care and safe return. My husband sat passively while I signed for him; perhaps he had learned to acquiesce to this imposed state of *thingness*. In hospitals, one realizes how few choices there are sometimes.

I found a garden in the hospital where we could sit, and I wheeled him into the sun every day. Even when he did not feel like it, I insisted because the sun has often healed my heart, and I was determined to do everything to make every day better. When there was no sun in the garden, I would wheel him to the parking lot, and we would watch people come and go. It was funny that this activity became something to look forward to. Previously, whenever I had glimpsed other typically elderly people confined to wheelchairs and confined to simply observing life—even parking lots—I had thought about how sad this was and how depressed they must be to live in such a sad state of being sentenced to the mere observation of life and not living it themselves. Yet there we were in the same exact position, only we were very happy to be in it. And it dawned on me, sitting there in the sun, how happy those people had probably been too at this basic freedom—to sit outside in the sun and be a part of existence.

Slowly, as the seasons changed, he went from wheelchair to walker, until he could finally get around with a cane. This was what we had been looking forward to because this meant that he could leave the hospital. It was exciting for us both as we had spent the last three months in hospitals following strict rules—checking in and out and following strict schedules. Suddenly, we were almost normal people again. He was released, and we were out in the world together, doing and eating what we wanted, when we wanted.

The only problem was that he did not want to use a cane. I suspected that the cane made him feel older and more fragile than he wanted to be. Or maybe, he saw it as the last visual representation of all that he had been through. Or the last remnant of trauma holding him back. Except, of course, he needed the cane. He needed it for getting in and out of the car and for going up and down stairs and hills. This meant that I carried the cane around since I wanted to make sure he had it when it's needed. However, I quickly discovered that it is impossible to carry a cane without using it. So, I found myself using the cane as we walked together. And I noticed people seemed not only more aware of me, but more sympathetic. As if some great tragedy had physically marred me for life. It made me think not of the ways in which we judge others by their appearance, but the ways in which we often narrativize elements of people's appearance and story their identities and needs in arbitrary ways. Or, as I had done, the way we misjudge even ourselves based on how we story ourselves.

The clearest example of this is crossing the road. When my husband crosses a four-lane road, we barely make it before the light changes. If he has the cane, people are patient. They are happy to wait for this poor disabled man to get across the road. However, without the cane, people would begin to honk, yell hostilities and insults, and even speed by us in a threatening manner, as if to punish us for choosing to take so long. As if we get pleasure from delaying the movements of others. It is interesting that the cane for most people seems to symbolize some tragic story made visual. He is a veteran. A police officer injured saving an old lady. A long-term sufferer of some crippling illness. *Who knows?* But upon seeing the cane, people would see a person deserving of extra care. Without the cane, he is a person taking up too much of their time. An obstacle. A time waster. Someone to be shoved aside. But most people are not what they appear to be. I've learned that everyone needs something. Sometimes more and sometimes less. Maybe we shouldn't be so busy narrativizing others, but listening to them in order to find out. We need to seek new ways to "see" others.

Author's Note:

I have left my husband's name out not for privacy reasons, but to draw attention to the fact that I am narrativizing him. This is a fact of life: we continually story each other.

It is part of what makes us human, but it is also something we need to be aware of because stories change, and stories have the power to change.



Image credit: Michelle Yau Ming Suet

It is not as bad as you see

Michelle Yau Ming Suet

Second Prize

11 May. 35.3 degrees.

The temperature reached the twelfth highest on record for a summer evening. Plain and dull voices from the television kept repeating that the “Very Hot Weather Warning” was now in force, urging the public to be aware of the health and wellbeing of the elderly and persons with chronic medical conditions staying alone. The enormous bright yellow light bulb fixed in the middle of the living room ceiling flooded the house with annoying heat. The deafening buzzing outside intruded the room, whinnying like a herd of war horses ready to run on a battlefield.

I stood up from the sofa and walked toward the window, wishing to catch a thread of wind. The clock behind me went *tick tock, tick tock*.

Nobody knows how bad a tragedy will seem when all the lights are off.

03:42 am.

A sleepless night, again. Though the sultriness from daytime already waned, the air was still hot enough to make one roll and turn restlessly in bed, as if one was sleeping on a frying pan. Of course, I could feel the warmth, but I couldn't help but wrap myself tightly with a thick fluffy blanket, like an ancient Egyptian mummy. The tighter it was, the safer I felt. I loved the feeling when I breathed and the blanket breathed together with me. My rough, uneven breath under the blanket made me feel more alive than ever.

04:01 am.

My pyjamas and blanket were already soaked with water. My cold sweat steadily ran across my back, drawing a dark blue abyss on the blanket, drop by drop. Drenched in moisture, I did not want to leave this embrace, not even for 0.1 second. The building surrounding me was silent and dark, staying motionless while heavily breathing on my bed, with eyes sparkling and my brain shouting.

The voices inside my head became louder and louder. Countless embarrassing, shameful and painful flashbacks soared high in my mind. No matter how hard I tried to repress these thoughts, they appeared in no time whenever I shut my eyes. They grew like tangled vines crawling all over a forest, twining up tree trunks, clinging to barks, and ultimately penetrating the centre of the wood.

I remembered how others reacted when I shared with them those sleepless nights. The words from their mouths, the expression on their faces, the suspicion in their eyes, and even the up and down of their brows brought me to a deeper and darker abyss.

“It is not as bad as it seems. You see, you are now normally sitting in front of me. I can't see what's wrong with you. It is totally not a problem. Okay?” A counsellor said to me.

On another day, I met a friend, sharing with her how terrible it was counting seconds till the breaking of dawn. This was how she reacted:

“No way! I mean, you are not that kind of a person. Look at you, you are the cheerful, optimistic girl I’ve known for years. And you actually do not look as bad as I thought. You don’t even have dark circles!”

Out of nowhere, I felt a chilly breeze blow from the bottom of my heart, like I had swallowed a cube of ice that crystalized a thousand years ago in the Ice Age. I pulled myself closer to the blanket. But it didn’t help one bit. Frosty air continued to overflow out of my boiling organs, and a glacier went through my whole body. Trembling and struggling, I held the thick blanket in a firm grip with my teeth.

I couldn’t stand it anymore. I just couldn’t.

A wave of hopelessness attacked me and pushed me to burst into tears. My right hand was shivering, searching for my mouth, and I tried to cover it, lest it accidentally made any sound. God knows what would happen if I was found sobbing or crying at midnight. Forcing myself to pant silently, I had to suppress the loads of magma inside, waiting to explode through the gaps of my fingers. Unwarily, tears kept coming out from my eyes. On the one hand, I knew clearly that I should stop crying and sleep, but on the other hand, I wilfully wanted to cry until the last drop of water in me drained out.

I already forgot how I fell asleep at last. But no matter what, it worked. I finally found an effective way to cure my insomnia. Cry until sleepy and exhausted. And when I wake up the next day, it will be another day of sun. All things will resume. And life is not as bad as it seems.

POETRY



Image credit: Maleah Do Cao

No.

Maleah Do Cao

First Prize

yes and no.

the first two words you learn,
the second word so often used.

it's a pity and a shame

how though i say it,

“no” doesn't seem like the answer

when you unbutton my blouse

or rip off my shirt

or touch my bare shoulders.

“no” seems like the beginning

of a false promise when

you whisper to me

how i was dressed like

i wanted it.

beware of the big bad wolf,

we're told.

do not talk to strangers

nor accept candy from the white van,

seem such easy commands
to obey, to comprehend,
just like it is unlawful to murder,
or to force yourself onto me.
“no”, now an empty word,
matters not how forcefully, audibly,
desperately exclaimed,
is useless,
powerless.

a walk in the park,
the sky winking down at me,
murmuring be careful.
i can't see my hands,
i can't see my shadow,
but i see your silhouette
in front of me
and your unwanted gaze
groping me.
i pull the red hood over my head
like a cloak of invisibility,
as if it had locked
and hidden away my possessions
away from your curious, predatory eyes.

like staring down the barrel of a gun
or walking into a house on fire,
fear courses through my veins
and the key between my knuckles,
as i bite down a shudder.
when you brush against me,
a reminder of invisible hands,
like coarse sandpaper

rubbing into my skin,
robbing me of my dignity,
my humanity.

once is enough to scar me forever,
yet the realisation
of the impact you've left
never hits you,
because we're just over-exaggerating.
because society values your words,
over ours.
our battle is lost
before it even begins.

our words, to you, are nothing more than jokes.
and your jokes, of us, are humourless daggers
piercing through centuries worth
of demanding to be treated
as nothing more than
equals.

some of you who call yourselves allies,
say "not all men",
yet cover my exposed shoulders
when other men walk by.
you say, "maybe if you didn't dress this way",
but how is it my fault that
it is you
who cannot control yourself?

when will you understand that
my short skirt
is not an invitation?

when will you understand that
my bare shoulders
aren't yours to touch?
when will you understand that
“no”
means “no”?



Because I could not stop for Death

(After Emily Dickinson)

Corrine Cheung

Second Prize

Because I could not stop for Death
He stopped for me instead
Took my arm – to the tunnel
Left my limped body – on a boxed bed

Clustered marches dampening away
With feathered steps – I tiptoed
Cries – turned to muffled mutters
Sequenced pictures – I now behold

Mangling infant – pigtailed and bows
Growing – spaghettied thoughts and grey noise
Alone in a heavy room – a route to freedom
Roped in – now unstrung toy

He led the way – near the entrance
Or exit – it shone a light –
Silky carpeted – shimmering

Towards the pull – welcoming its Might

But then it stopped – a paused sight

He stood with blank sockets – wasn't it well

I thought – my soles felt empty

A plunge – a stare – a warmth – I fell into –



EMPTY BOX

Charlotte Chan Sze Lok

Honourable Mention

Open the fridge door and fetch yourself the peanut butter jar. Grab a slice of bread and dip it into the peanut butter. Don't you dare have more than two slices, for your body shape is in crisis. You still need to reduce two more inches to fit into that Asian-fit summer dress. The greater the restriction, the louder the craving voice. Now go pour boxes of cheerios into your mouth as you have no choice. Steal some chocolate pralines from your roommates. Devour the whole box until it is too late. Remember, it's a Guinness World Record that no boxes of cookies can survive in your dorm room for more than a day. Sugar is your best friend in times of churning out essays. Just eat them, engulf them, and slowly you will be numbed. Sweetness retreating; guilt ebbing. Don't I have better things to do other than eating? Why am I still hungry, after consuming thousands of calories? Food is the new god I worship; kneel and eat ceaselessly to prove my kinship. My bloated tummy squeezes out senses and rationality. Look at my distorted reflection in the toilet bowl. Nothing more than a roaring lion prowling around looking for food to devour. Pleasure and suffering come in a duo. I, as a sinner of gluttony, only want to drown my head into the toilet and flush out every maniac thought that traumatises me. Pick up that toothbrush and vomit! Vomit! Vomit! And the satanic litany repeats.



The Gray Constellation

Cyrus Chan

Honourable Mention

I see countless constellations
Roaming the vast cosmos.
They veil their stars in a shroud of gray,
Muffling their stories and their voice.

Castor only sees his frailty,
Pollux, his failure to protect.
The Gemini would much rather be
The great hero that is Orion.

Yet Orion despises his fate,
Being chased by Scorpio all day.
Stuck hunting down the same bull,
Who escapes his grasp every time.

He envies the sign of Hercules,
Who is remembered for his bravery,
As Hydra and Cancer remind the man

Of the violent crime he had committed.

The stars are all immortal,
But none of them want to be.
They loathe how dimly they shine,
When the whole universe is bright.

I see countless constellations
Casting grayness over their stars.
They can, no doubt, see through the haze,
The night sky, though, is no mirror.
And everyone rushes to become
The gray constellation that they hate.



Wanderer

Cyrus Chan

Honourable Mention

Amidst the woods was where I woke,
Surrounded by the winter's snow.
I thought I had somewhere to be
And so I feebly stood and went.

Through hazy eyes I spy a man,
Who slowly shifted in the cold.
I swiftly rushed to him for aid,
But before I spoke, I heard him say,

“Look how the trees, they idly stand,
For years, they looked across the land.
But nothing comes of what they find,
No hell and neither paradise.”

The tale he told made little sense,
While odd and gripping nonetheless.
I pressed and asked him how he knew,

He said all trees were once a soul.

A sadness in me quickly grew,
To know they spent their lives in vain.
I would express my sorrow then,
Had I not heeded what he said,

“Without a vigil, we explore
And wander through the boundless earth.
The ones who lived their lives in haste,
Cared not to know the sights displayed.”

We stood at where the crossroads met,
That housed no more than blotchy leaves,
Yet one of which had caught my eye,
For life appeared to pulse within.

My eyes were focused on the veins,
Whose journey ended all too soon,
And only when I lifted my gaze,
Could I observe the map that they traced.

When I recovered from my trance,
I found myself alone again.
There was no man nor any ice,
Just the woods in its new light.



Image credit: Élise Chan

Brewing of Spring

Élise Chan

Honourable Mention

Have you not picked up the faint scent of sweetness beside the thawing lake?

The bud of a lily,
the chirp of a robin,
the flowy chiffon of a lady.

They must have snuggled in the hollow of an oak
conspiring against the shivering frost.

Have you not caught the vague trace of ruby below the barren bush?

Under the first beam of warmth,
fairies stretched their drowsy wings and
vanished into the morning haze.

They carried little pouches of paint to sprinkle along the way.

Are you not caressed by the genial sun, cradled by the mellow breeze?

I meandered afloat by the stream,
Zephyr fondled my hair and
left kisses all over my blushed cheek.

In the velvety chant he hymned,
his touch seeped through my skin,
thus and thus,
I dispersed in the vernal breath of spring.



Another diary of a madman

Marta Gramatyka

Honourable Mention

As long as there shall be stones, the seeds of fire will not die. – Lu Xun

Bite off my skin, chew my body, and eat me whole,
I am no longer scared of your sharp teeth.
Call me a madman with an abstract role,
But I am not willing to live in a heath.

Tease me with your cruel tongues,
And throw all the stones at me,
You may shackle all my bones,
Losing sight of what I see—!

What I see, what I see?! What do I not see?
Each one of you staring with deep dead eyes.
The old world is shaking, awed by uncertainty,
But it can't explode, soothed by your lies.

Faster and faster, towards blinding lights,

Do I simply run, or can I manage to flee?

Losing humanity with no men in sight,

Am I one of you, or is it truly me?

If I started to scream, would anyone care?

I hold a torch high, and flames mirror my heart,

The thunder cleaves through the thick atmosphere.

Am I heralding the future or tearing it apart?



Image credit: Demi Huang Qian

Our 18, our gone days

Demi Huang Qian

Honourable Mention

The hot afternoon reminds me of our 18
When we were bold to love
and ready to fight

Now, it is April again
Under the beautiful begonias
there is another group of graduates

But I slipped into our old classroom
to seek for those gone days
I know the classroom witnessed them

I heard the voice of the eighteens
loudness when reading aloud
whispers when memorizing the chemical equations
and the final cheering “Fight for *GaoKao!*”

I saw the view of the eighteens
no more naughtiness
but full of determination
especially the sight when we said “Fight for *GaoKao!*”

If we have the chance to meet
let’s meet under the begonias
I will be waiting
for that overdue graduation photo
I will be seeking
for the figures of us
who are always 18 years old in my heart.



A Ballad for Her

Pinky Lui

Honourable Mention

No princess knows the way to find
this dreamland faraway
where virgin brides are not confined
in towers where they lay

Until a faithful day arrives
A knight, a man in heat
goes on to hunt for young fair wives
whose lips are honey sweet

He barges in the chamber locked
a silver sword in hand
As the princess stares in shock
the dainty wedding band

“My fairest maid, I’ve rescued thee
from this virginal cell
this ring shall be the faithful key

that frees you from this hell

God on high, witness our love
that fills your chalice gold
We toast to Father up above
to bless our new household.”

Our maiden still as sitting duck
a stranger she does fear
He says it’s heaven-granted luck
that they do unite here

“But I don’t want a husband yet
no wedding bells should toll
Your rescue now becomes a debt
dear knight, is that your goal?

I’m grateful that I’m now released
so I may roam the world
I want to go from here to East
my map no longer furled.”

These all are but a fantasy
no princess can say “no”
nor disrespect the Calvary
Their love is naught but woe

But fairytales do not say this
They always weep with joy
They pray, they smile, they give a kiss
through veils that deem them coy

I want to find this dreamland soon

before a knight appears
And claim me as he claims the moon
and waste away my years

I have no need for Lancelot
I am not in distress
This is my ballad, my own plot
no “go” till I say “yes”

I see the towers everywhere
we must be mild and meek
They groom us, tell us what to wear
lest bad men take a peek

How dare they tell us what to do
waste not our youth, our prime
Just call me witch or call me shrew
I will reclaim my time

The dreamland we seek does exist
I’ve seen it shining through
All my sisters who resist
who say “me too”, me too.



ourselves, alone

Stephanie Studzinski

Honourable Mention

I am conscious that there are two of us:
me and you.

You
full of distasteful things
—things, one cannot say
—things—
one does not say—
yet
you burn to know others.
You hunger so fiercely
to meet them
with an intensity
that singes you
and seals their doors.

They know
you want to consume them.

Truly
you want to meet them
more thoroughly
than they would like
—than is comfortable
—than is normal.

You
so desperately wanting
to see what *makes* them...

You
with a smile and a machete
clearing their jungles
searching for temples to raid
but finding nothing.

For they are unwilling
or unable
to meet you.

Forever closed
you feel
recoiling
and shaking with rage
(*yet you shiver in fear*)
knowing
you will never get through
never truly know anyone
as you yourself will never be known
(*will never have lived*)
except
perhaps, in this bell jar
you pretend to call home.

Will that be the end for me too?

Me

the public “us”

who behaves, but never quite lives

who laughs, but never quite feels

who smiles blindly

wondering if this really is life.

(is it?)

Who pretends not to know,

that you are more alive

than I will ever be.

I envy your sincerity

your abandon

your freedom

(so precious).

Maybe

they are right.

You should be kept in isolation

(safe)

from the whims of others

from all those unyielding things

so absently said.

You

make me real

give my bones weight

turn my blood to tides

remind me

of what *we* are.

We
will always be together
for we know what it means to live
to eat life
to burn with it
(but we will keep that to us)
because even if it is only loneliness
it is real
and it belongs to us
ourselves, alone.



Image credit: Chloe Wong

The Corpse Underground

Chloe Wong

Honourable Mention

The corpse underground does not move,
Nor does it speak nor breathe nor weep.
But silently, it does see and hear and smell and feel,
With much more clarity than any breathing human.

Buried in the darkness under the mud,
Suffocating
And being driven to the edge of madness,
It listens to the songs of the living and the rhythm of life,
A life that it can never be a part of no matter how much it yearns.
Nobody knows about its existence, its agony.
They only stamp over its fragile body,
Unaware and uncaring.

But it is not angry.
How can the noisy living understand the speechless dead?
They speak two different languages,
The languages of hope and of despair.

But at night,
When the sun has crept away,
When the living has drifted to sleep,
The corpse will rise from its grave,
Clawing at the mud,
Clawing for life and freedom,
No matter how futile it knows it is.

A ringing is filling its skull,
A tension is building from the inside,
Threatening to explode and implode.
It waits and waits,
But when its body remains whole and perfect,
It cracks its bony knuckles on its gravestone,
And dry tears run from its empty eye sockets.

It wishes to die,
But it does not know how to die once more.
It does not even remember dying,
Only death,
The eternal loneliness that stretches on and on,
Without the reassuring confirmation of a comforting end.

Every day, every night,
The corpse rots a little more,
Hurts a little more.
And before dawn,
It will crawl back into its grave,
And await a brand new day of torment.

SHORT STORY



Image credit: Maheen Haider

AND WHEN THE RAIN COMES, I FEEL IT IN MY BONES

Maheen Haider

First Prize

I find out while eating cereal.

Mom calls me, voice scraping through smoke and tears. Afterwards, I finish my cereal, unable to leave that full bowl on the table. The sweet artifice sticks to my tongue as I wash the bowl in the sink.

I come back to myself in the bathroom. I hadn't known a thing, had crashed into bed yesterday after gaming. I hadn't felt anything, none of that hand-wavy stuff about the special connection, the instinctual know-how of the other.

Nothing that warned me of this existence of absence.

And this is the moment—now, where upon finding out that my twin brother was killed in a motorcycle accident the night before, my body chooses to expel the entirety of its guts into the toilet bowl.

Grief has a diverse palette. Mom's spills out, infecting everything. Dad goes catatonic, the neat opposite of Mom even in this. I am—

Something different.

I come home, and my mom goes white at the sight of me. For a flicker, joy sings across her face, a bizarre drunken relief that fades as abrupt as a bursting cyst when she clocks that I'm not him.

I stare at my reflection later.

We are—*were*—identical twins. Neighbours avoided our names in greeting, friends took weeks to learn the trick, teachers fumbled over our names till graduation.

Square-faced, freckled skin, black hair that grew shaggy. Muscled build that widened at the shoulders in puberty, skinny knees that jutted awkwardly. Our freckles were slightly different, his concentrated on the left, mine on the right. A difference only a mom could remember, and even then, only when sober.

No, the real thing that separated us, that everyone recognised even when they couldn't name it, was, very simply: he was bright, and I was his echo.

Doctors were unsure I would survive, sapped as I was by my bunkmate in the womb. It was a miracle when I slipped out afterwards, only able to bear fourteen minutes without him.

He was strong, kind, smart: a natural leader. I was all those things, just slightly lesser.

Now, there is only me, staring in the mirror. I can look in the mirror and see him. I can never look into a mirror and not see him. But he isn't here. No more light for me to trudge behind.

Just as in the womb, he leaves first.

The term finishes, and we still don't have a date for the funeral.

His body is starting to rot, somewhere. Mom starts therapy. Dad starts talking. He tries speaking with me, but his eyes swerve from my face as a fly flinches from a swooping hand.

He apologises to me later, and I almost tell him that I can't make eye contact with myself either.

On a Wednesday evening, after my parents had their first fight since his death, I go to where it happened. The crime scene is scrubbed clean, no tracks, nothing that would tell you—a twenty-one-year-old died here, coming home, in the rain.

I lay myself on the ground, try and imagine the impact. I press my head into the gravel, my hands rub themselves pink on the ground. I don't stop until I break skin. When a slow line of red peeks out from the dusty blush of my palms, I stop.

I'm not a crazy person, after all.

In a moment of weakness, I think of the future. I get as far as our birthday in the fall, and then promptly get drunk.

All those years spread out before me. Alone.

I have lost something. I don't smell the same.

I lick mint chocolate chip ice cream, though I hate it. I try and grin like him, cheeks bunched up high. I wear a freaking baseball cap.

I poke at the exit wound.

I, I, I.

I sit and stare at his side of the room. His computer hasn't been charged for days. I know his password, but I can't bring myself to turn it on.

Us abandoned creatures sit together, and wait.

My mom sees the body. I go with her.

It's an educational experience; two items on the syllabus checked.

1. My mom's grief can get deeper.
2. We are no longer identical.

My friends and his friends come over. They talk, keep me company, cry a little. I appreciate it and I tell them.

When they leave, I am utterly and wholly relieved.

I wonder what people think when they see me. Not those who knew him, but those who didn't.

Do they see his head carved in the cavern of my collarbones? Do they see his thumbprints in the smudges under my eyes? Do they see his loss molded into me? That night when God took my body, and like a toddler at the pottery wheel, pulled me apart, and caved my head in.

Or was it *him* that God did that to?

It's getting harder to tell.

I dream of him, the night my mom tells me I will give a speech at his funeral. I am euphoric at the familiar sight of him. I reach out, push him. Curse him out.

What were you thinking? Why did you leave me? What do I do?

And then, the lid off the boiling pot:

I love you I hate you I love you I hate you I love you I hate you

His eyes glow and I think of the dead fish look of his eyeballs in the morgue. He grins at me, cheeks bunched up. His mouth opens.

(The grin he adopted meant that I was resigned to close-mouthed smiles, just so people would see two instead of one.)

In the morning, I can't remember what he said.

The day of his funeral is a long, drawn-out affair. It rains, and my dad makes a poor joke that my mom spits at him for.

He would have laughed.

Our extended family drifts around. Moms flock together and cry, dads shake their solemn heads. Friends cry, drink, and cry a little more.

They talk about him like a memory. That's what he is now. A before: a moment, forever dependent on others' recall. It's a good performance, this well-worked routine of grief.

When I give my speech, I ignore the open casket. It is the last time we will be on a stage together. No university graduation, no more pictures together—him throwing his arm around me and my putting rabbit ears up behind his head.

Every action he took. Every reaction I gave.

Everybody watches when I take out the cards. They look hungry, curiosity making them lean forward, their bodies like a sea of question marks, drawn to the pain of a twin losing the other, mouths practically drooling for the taste of it.

I disappoint them. Generic comments from Google.

I love him. He was my life partner. I will feel this loss forever. Thank you for coming today.

They clap disjointedly at the end, and it surprises me. I didn't realise people clapped at funerals. When they finish, they look bored suddenly, like party-goers realising the cake's not coming.

Nobody wants to hear the story anymore, and I don't want to tell it to them either.

I'm at his grave. It's starting to feel like a normal fixture in the yard, no longer the shiny new toy in the box.

It is our birthday. I am turning twenty-two.

I sing the song, slowing as I get closer to his name.

I have to restart four times, eventually forcing his name out syllable by syllable because the song gets obnoxious to repeat.

It's the first time I've said his name since he died. Since he *died*, and suddenly it's a fact, and I *know* it when, until then, I've only felt it.

The cry that colours the air is a wounded, animal noise. I think it comes from me, but I'm not sure, so I imitate it, hear it spread out in the air. The cries keep coming, like I've been reduced to raw instinct. I begin to hear it, his name, in the cries.

The shape of his name surrounded by a rough film, as if it needs to remain hidden to be ushered wholly from me. It thins out after a while, until it's just his name, over and over again.

I think he hears me, somewhere, grinning and shaking his head the way he'd do when I'd freak out over the things he'd whip through.

I close my eyes, waiting for him to come. Draw me out of my hiding spot, bring me back into the game, and hold my hand into the cafeteria. There's a brush of air, and I feel it, feel him, and my eyes split open, searching.

And my brother—always ahead—stops, and gazes back at me.

I look up, legs moving to follow him out of instinct, when I feel it.

It's raining.



The Extraordinary Ordinary: Finding Felicity in Four Rooms

(A homage to Jane Austen's shortest novel, *The Beautiful Cassandra*)

Stephanie Studzinski

Second Prize

Chapter the first

I never realized before how our rooms define us—reflect us or even conceal us. Not, that is, until I was locked in.

Chapter the second

Suddenly, I had plenty of time to reflect. Everyone needs to be someone, but I have never seen myself *that way*. Never lived as ONE who deserves and IS. I've never seen a reflection that was all my own in any mirror: no pure Felicity. Now, amidst a pandemic, it seemed only prudent to search. And since I was home, I would do it in my pyjamas.

Chapter the third

First, I found myself in the kitchen. As a woman, of course, I was uncomfortable. It is *my place*, and I've tried hard over the years not to know my place.

Chapter the fourth

But here, I can make things. Make them appear and disappear. Make others happy or make others ill. After all, a sense of self must include a sense of power, but it is not mine.

Chapter the fifth

The bedroom, in my closet, there were only trappings. I checked, but it is merely where I store myself—where I hide the most and wear the least.

Chapter the sixth

The dining room is where life seems to thrive, but only fleeting projections of me there amongst the leftover crumbs and bits of conversations that never quite fulfil their promise.

Chapter the seventh

The chairs crowd around expectantly. I can hear them mumbling. They always think there will be more people, and there never are. I feel bad for them—such unfulfilled longing, and yet, *so hopeful*.

Chapter the eighth

Then there is the bathroom. An ugly place, but it is the one place where a person is universally expected to be alone—unlike the rest of the places one finds oneself in the world.

Chapter the ninth

They say the whole world laughs at toilet humour. Maybe we laugh because we are uncomfortable. For it is here, we all sit, at least from time to time. And here, we hear our deepest thoughts and cry our most private tears. Here, we stand alarmed at our own nakedness.

Chapter the tenth

I think it keeps me sane. Letting me privately wash off the unpalatable bits of my personality and paint on a thick coral smile while quietly fusing the kinks in my armour.

Chapter the eleventh

Only there is no armour in a pandemic. I have stopped buying clothes and lost all awareness of my appearance.

Chapter the twelfth

Maybe it is unsurprising that this is where most of our reflective surfaces lie, waiting to show us something we don't want to see. Waiting for us to *really* look. For there I was, unkempt. Here all along, waiting to be left unpainted and uncovered. Waiting to stop caring about what others perceive, and instead, just being me. This is a day well spent.

Finis



Two Sisters

Jing Chan

Honourable Mention

The edges of the tiles on the floor began to blur in Ling's vision from the tears that filled her eyes. Her now drenched pants felt heavy as they weighed her body down. She pressed the old torn clothing to the floor to soak up the rainwater that had barged its way into the suffocating pocket-sized space she had to call “home.” Sweat dripped down the side of her face as she twisted the murky water out of the dirty fabric and into the red bucket next to her. She dropped her head to see the skin on her hands beginning to peel off around the blisters that suddenly bloomed all over her palms.

Through sobs, she glared at her 14-year-old elder sister, Fong, on the side-lines, and muttered under her breath repeatedly, “Why me? Why not her?”

Ling took a quick glimpse of her surroundings: the coarsely painted pale green walls covered with long spidery cracks and mould that camouflaged with the colour of the walls. The paint peeled, revealing the white plaster underneath.

As she resumed to wipe the floor dry, from above and behind her, she heard her mother holler, “Hurry up! The least you could do is clean up this mess quicker!”

“You’re expecting too much from her,” her father chimed in.

He had his back leaning against a plastic chair. His right hand played with his lit cigarette, and his eyes were focused on the blasting radio that announced the gamble results of the recent horse race.

“Ugh...lost this round again...” he said in a monotone voice, in response to the radio. “Anyway, she’s always so useless. You know she can’t do anything for the family,” he continued, replying to her mother.

Ling whimpered, but did not raise her head as she tried to hide her tear stained cheeks. She was sure her dad would complain, saying her tears were a sign of bad luck to the family, and a reason for losing the gamble.

Her mother took a second to look him up and down, analysing his relaxed posture in midst of the chaos. Her eyes narrowed, and it looked like she was about to speak, but she then bit her lip, stopping herself.

Another bucket of rain poured in again by a sudden strong gust of wind.

“Crap! Hurry the hell up!” her mother yelled again, snapping her focus back to Ling on the ground.

Suddenly, she heard a sharp but faint cackle. Following the sound, she found Fong leaning against the wall, arms crossed, peering down at her.

“Hurry up, or be beaten up. I’ve been there,” she teased with a devious smirk.

Her eyes shifted up to meet Fong’s condescending simper. Their eye contact broke apart once they heard their mother’s sudden change of tone.

“Fong, sleep early. Don’t be late for the factory tomorrow or else your salary will be deducted,” her mother cooed with a soft but urgent tone.

While the night slipped away for Fong, Ling carried on, filling up countless buckets of rainwater until the rain eventually came to a stop at 3am. In the remaining time, before she dozed off to sleep, she consoled and told herself that all the hurt she was feeling will be all worth it someday.

On another night, Fong arrived home from work with a brown envelope in her hand. Hearing the door slam shut, their mother immediately called out to Fong.

“Fong! You’re back! I can only count on you...Where’s the money?” she asked, clapping her hands with enthusiasm.

Fong strolled over to the mini refrigerator while dropping the envelope in her mother’s hands. Fong’s fingers were already wrapped around the handle, preparing to open the fridge that Ling, on the other hand, was forbidden to touch.

Tearing the envelope open, their mother pulled out the few hundred dollar notes and carefully counted, making sure none of them were missing.

“It’s all there,” Fong reassured in a huff.

Once their mother finished counting, she smiled at Fong, signifying her satisfaction.

“The pear is in there, bought just for you. Go ahead.”

Ling desired to be like her sister, in which she could work and contribute financially to the family. But she was only 8. She would have to wait until 1975 before she could reach the age of 14, the legal age to work. Hopelessness overcame

her again. Simply looking at the luscious green pear made Ling's eyes widen, mouth water, and stomach growl. She could only envisage the sweet juices that would burst into her sister's mouth.

“Ling, what the hell are you doing just standing there like an idiot? If I can't have a son, and need to settle with you, make yourself at least somewhat useful. Get the table and food ready for dinner!”

Ling proceeded to climb up onto the kitchen countertop so that she could reach the old wooden cupboard that held their tableware. She caught a glimpse of a cockroach slipping to the back of the cupboard to hide. Ling collected the bowls in her tiny hands and noticed black dots in them.

“Must be cockroach droppings again,” she casually muttered.

As she began to scoop a cup of plain rice into the bowl, she paused. From the corner of her eyes, she saw the black pepper shaker sitting on the counter.

Her eyes grew wide, and a grin emerged on her face. She thought to herself, “*It's my chance to fight back.*”

When she carried the four bowls in her weary arms, her heart started to race. She distributed them onto the table one by one, strategically. Her right leg shook impatiently as she waited for dinner to begin, and her eyes were fixed on the bowl across from her to ensure it would not budge.

Soon, the few dishes were ready, and everyone began to eat. She traced her sister's every move, watching Fong spoon deep into the bowl, place the rice into her mouth, and swallow in one gulp. Ling tried to conceal her smile by pursing her lips.

The dish of fish became the star for the night. Ling swiftly picked up her chopsticks, and leaned forward to pluck some of the inviting, glistening flesh. Before

the tip of the chopsticks could touch the meat, her mother slapped her hand away from it.

“What are you doing?! You know that only your father and Fong can eat this!”

Fong chuckled, throwing her head back. “I earn the money, I earn the fish.”

Ling fumed as she studied the way Fong put the large piece of meat in her mouth and chewed delightfully. At that moment, she wished for her sister to choke on a fish bone. Her imagination was interrupted by a choking sound. Her eyes flew open to check if her wish had become a reality.

“What the heck is this?! Is this cockroach poop?!” Fong shrieked, holding her bowl out towards the others, revealing black dots in it.

Ling’s tight and curled lips gradually formed into a sly smirk. She covered her mouth trying to hide it. But it was too late.

“Why are you smiling Ling? You were supposed to clean the bowls. Did you do this on purpose?” her mother challenged.

Ling stayed silent for a second. All eyes were now on her. Seeing Fong’s daggering eyes staring straight into hers sent shivers down her spine, but somehow, seeing her sister’s anger also gave her satisfaction and excitement.

All at once, Ling burst into laughter. The living room had never been filled with such gleeful sounds before.

“LING! Apologise to your sister now!” Her mother and Fong had now stood up from the dining table, as if they were ready to attack Ling.

She squeezed her fists tightly, unwilling to back down.

“It’s not cockroach poop! It’s black pepper! Look!” Ling defended.

She signalled to her own bowl of rice, with an equal amount of black dots scattered in hers. Taking her spoon, she put a big scoop of rice with the pepper into her mouth and chewed, in an attempt to prove that she had done no harm.

Their mother sighed in annoyance. “Ok, just hurry up and finish your dinner. We don’t have all day,” she instructed Fong.

“But...” Fong protested but was cut off by her mother. “Quiet. Your father is listening to the radio. You want him to win money, don’t you?!”

Fong squinted at Ling, her face full of doubt. But she had to listen to her mother.

It would be her own little secret, but the black dots in her sister's rice were in fact cockroach droppings. Perhaps Fong would eventually find out, but what mattered was that her mother did not punish her. At that moment, she won. A smile remained on Ling’s face. For the first time, she felt powerful and a strong sense of achievement that she had never experienced before. She had not only found hope, but her own way to fight back.

Tomorrow, a Rose

Serag Heiba

Honourable Mention

The average number of days it takes for a seed to grow into a flower is 80. I bought Kira a rose in March and now it's almost June. Assuming she planted it the night I gave it to her, and that she watered it only once every three days and not more, and that she placed the clay pot in that little corner by the window where the sun always shines, the rose should be flowering any day now.

The average number of days it takes for a seed to grow into a flower is 80. That's the one sentence I've been telling myself over and over again since March. Last night I even dreamt about it. Well not so much *about* it, but rather—*it*. I dreamt it. I was the sun and the soil, the clay pot, the rain and the spring air. I was also the leather glove, the wooden rake. My dream lasted till sunrise, and by the time I woke up—startled and in a sweat—the seed had grown into a flower, already dead and wilting, and screaming.

It was the screaming that woke me up.

The first two screams made their way into my dream unannounced, but otherwise unnoticed, the way an early alarm clock melts into the exhausted subconscious. The third was hard to ignore. From behind my curtain, I could tell it was the same group of people outside making noise. I'd left my window open before I went to bed, just enough to hear their conversations. It wasn't their drunken ramblings I was interested in, but rather the careless laughter that followed their every other sentence. Over the course of the night, laughter lost its novelty and chairs were abandoned altogether, with the group deciding instead to chase one another around the courtyard. Against the backdrop of an orange-blue sky and the distant growling of car engines still cold, their laborious steps and the occasional scream transported me to today. And today, I'm meeting Kira.

Kira was exactly how I remembered her. Tall and brown, with eyes that stared back at you if you glanced near them. Her hair reached almost to her waist, and her waist rested squarely above her hips. To anyone who dared ask, she was a self-described free spirit. To anyone who looked closely, evidence was abundant. When I first met her, Kira explained to me that I was too rigid, too narrow-minded to ever fully understand her. It wasn't my fault of course; I was a guy, and that's just how guys were. As Kira liked to say, with a small, manufactured smile and a playful tap on the wrist, "You have to dismantle the patriarchy within you."

Try as I might, I could never fully dismantle it. Either that, or it wasn't my patriarchy that whispered in my ear whenever she leaned in for a kiss to point out how her chest was hairier than mine. But I'm not a particularly hairy guy, nor am I a particularly picky person, so I figured it shouldn't matter to me anyway.

When the sun was firmly in the morning sky, we met up and went to the café to sit in our usual spot.

After only a short silence, she asked, "Why didn't you tell me you were leaving next week?"

"I'm pretty sure I did. Either way, I figured you'd realize once my term ended."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean you have to leave. Nobody else is leaving."

That wasn't true, but the people she knew hardly overlapped with the people I knew. Our lives were worlds apart, though encounters like these often left my world in orbit around hers.

"It sounds like you don't want me to leave," I offered the bait, but she didn't take it.

She was wearing a green sundress and a denim jacket, the sleeves of which folded over the table like little waves. I wonder if I should ask about the rose I gave her—

“You remember that film I told you about? We can finally watch it tonight. They’re showing it at the institute.”

“The ethnographic film?”

“No, the other one. Where the director is the only character. It’s a film about himself filming himself, being filmed by himself. He calls it a ‘post-modern exposition of the self.’”

I have no idea what that meant.

“Yeah sure, we can go tonight.”

As we sat, morning faded into noon at the café and our conversation blended into the background noise.

I’ve been seeing Kira on and off for the past few months, and almost every time we go out, we come here. She knows all the servers, and at night when the band starts playing the same few songs, she knows all the musicians. We met at the most unlikely spot: the reception of the counselling centre downtown. I was paying at the counter when she came in, wearing the same green sundress and denim jacket, humming to the tune of a waltz. She stopped right next to me and grabbed the transparent plastic bag I had placed on the counter, shaking it around a bit, tilting her head and finally asking, “What’s this?”

“Rose seeds,” I answered with an unsure laugh. We were the only two in there that were of remotely the same age, so I figured that’s why she started talking to me.

“Rose seeds?”

“Yeah,” I nodded. “My counsellor told me to keep them with me until I find someone to give them to. She thinks I get attached to people too easily and that it’s unhealthy. These seeds are supposed to help.”

“How so?”

“Well, it’s a bit like a test. If I give someone the seeds and they keep them and care for them until a rose grows, then I’ll know I’ve found someone who’s equally attached.”

“Equally attached to you, or to the roses?”

I don’t remember what I said after that, but I remember walking away holding that little plastic bag full of seeds, wondering if my therapist was somehow messing with me.

That evening, we happened to bump into each other again at the café. The band was playing when she sneaked up from behind me, grabbed my wrist and asked, “You’re the flower guy, right?”

She was smiling contagiously, and I couldn’t help but smile back. “That’s me. You’re the girl from therapy, right?”

“Excuse you, I don’t go to therapy. My *friend* does.”

“Oh I see, and what does your *friend* go to therapy for?”

“Nothing in particular.” The band started playing again and she leaned in a bit closer. “Well actually, today my friend mentioned you and your little rose seeds to her therapist.”

“And what did that friend say about me?”

Kira's eyes, then as now, had this way of luring you into them and then tossing you back out. I always fell for it.

She shrugged, "Nothing in particular."

We stayed a little longer at the café that night, trading smiles and meaningless chatter before heading back to her place. The next morning, I went home with the emptied plastic bag stuffed in my coat pocket.

I haven't been to her place since then. Sometimes she comes over, but mostly we just meet during the day and have a few cups of tea and coffee. Sometimes we go see a film or explore a gallery before she goes off and disappears, leaving me to wonder when I'll next see her again. I guess today is different though, because after the film was over, I found myself walking her back home.

Her boots have a funny habit of smacking the pavement twice with each step, so that whenever we walked side by side it sounded like we were more than just two. Inside her apartment building, the sound was even more amplified, rising progressively with each step until we reached the second floor. Her floor.

"Will you come in?"

I guess we both already knew the answer. Her flat hadn't changed one bit; the white reflections from the streetlights below still aligned perfectly with the mirrors she had laying everywhere, giving visitors the impression that they had just entered a studio. Or maybe a laboratory.

When I came out of the bathroom, Kira was already undressed. She led me into her bedroom slowly, her square hips swaying gently, purposefully, as though directing my focus. Ultimately, it was a red shape resting in the corner of her bedroom that caught my eye and betrayed us both. It sat there by the window, just as I hoped it would.

A rose?

Origami—folded in the shape of a butterfly and thrown lazily into the clay pot that was now dry and fractured, with soil spilling out of its sides. One seed, barely noticeable, poked out of the spot where I had planted it nearly 80 days ago.

“Do you like that red butterfly?” Kira asked, leaning over my shoulder.
“Tomorrow I’m thinking of making a rose.”



Parallel

Katrina Lee Yuen Yi

Honourable Mention

Do you think they know? The person who would have meant everything to another—only their body is ripped away from the linear timeline of life: halfway a fleshed-person, stuck at mere souls. Do they know they missed their chance at being someone’s love?

A parent, a teacher, a sibling, a best friend, a soulmate. The only person who could comprehend your speech in a sea of dialects, decipher the slightest lift of the brow, decode the slightest rotation of the eyes. They know what you are made of; sometimes they’re wrong, but every time they try to love you.

They are your person in life, and there will be no explanation why that is.

But sometimes your person is torn away before they get to meet you, and there is no explaining why. Sometimes your person dies before they feel the gentle pressure of five nitrile-gloved fingers, or the snip-snap of scissors, severing the umbilical cord, and before they taste oxygen on their tongue. But if they had been—for a split-second—a person, they would have loved to sense your breath tickle their veined skin.

Do the people left here on this plane of life know?

As they walk, sit, talk, spit—do they sustain a skipped beat of their heart? Do they know their person has just died? Would they run to somewhere, uncertain of the origination of the impulse?

Or, would they alight the train to school or work or meeting the wrong person, feeling nothing at all for the rest of their lives?

Maybe that is why he sits motionless, the movie in front of him running 24 frames per second. He doesn't know why his finger, hovering above the remote control's off button, doesn't come down.

The bodies fall like dominoes.

Lives like easy money, come and go. He sits there watching people die. One after another, on the path of no return. It is not even a slasher, or a horror, or a war movie. It is sci-fi. He doesn't even like sci-fi.

The camera pans to the extraterrestrial mastermind; it looks out onto its destruction. The cosmos collapse in silence.

The vacant air of the apartment contains dust, hairs, and whatever an alive human body sheds. He does not interrupt the hyperbolic speed of death. A neon advertisement plate outside fights fluorescent lights spilling from the ceiling.

His breathing marches a tempo, until it disrupts itself for a "Hello," because his mother is calling. His finger comes down. The TV snaps black.

“Mom.” He listens to her breathing, if it hiccups like burnt wiring or levels like a patient’s. He can’t decide. “Are you feeling okay?”

“James...James. I really like saying your name, kid. And I’m fine, I just want to call to... I don’t know.”

“I’m sorry I didn’t call enough.” James pictures his mother’s wrinkles around her mouth. “Mom, what is it? Is it happening again?”

“What are you asking, James?”

“Do you see or hear him?”

Kade. That was his name, his little brother’s name.

A stillborn, Kade hadn’t glimpsed the ferocious light of the operating theater, nor heard the doctor’s barked orders to the nurses, nor sensed the graze of his mother’s arms—no, he died in the womb, minutes before he was to be born.

“No, I’m not calling for that. I guess I wanted to know how you are.”

A gulp of what would be rosewater, moistening her chapped lips. The petals taste like counterfeit fruit; she spits them out.

“And James, don’t ask me that. It happened, so it is always happening. I always see him, James. I always hear him.” Her voice holds steady, at once vigorous and pleading.

Her silhouette would be inked on the koi-and-white-hibiscus wallpaper of James’s childhood home.

“Do you want me to be there? I can be there right now.”

“No, James, don’t come. I just miss him. It was a difficult birth. It was a difficult birth. And you are the only other person who knows how this feels. I don’t blame you for not being there.”

That day she told him to stay at work, saying she’s a big girl; besides, Kade wouldn’t be here for at least a full day. James remembers how she sang that name.

“And I know we talked about this, but James, I want you to talk to me. Kid, you can allow yourself to feel, whatever you feel.”

“I know.”

James reels back Kade.

What would Kade’s first drawing be? Their non-nuclear family inside a house with a fabricated chimney? He as Spiderman holding James’s and Mom’s hands? Would he like the same stuff James does? Music, sports, art? What kind? Would they get along or be at each other’s throats? Would James be the only person who knew how to decipher Kade’s utterance from infancy in ways of an older sibling—yearning to immortalize his smiles, like a parent but also a friend?

His name was Kade.

A month ago, that name held joy and promise and possibilities.

“James. Come over when you have time.”

A month ago today, James burst from the doors of the tutorial center he worked at. Moments before, his heart was supplying blood to his limbs. Moments before, he was dreaming. Moments before, he was sprawled on the desk, waiting for his

students. Moments before, he was stepping off the MTR, tired even if he had slept normal.

He dreamt a universe was about to fold in on itself and that earthlings had 17 minutes to evacuate to another plane of existence. He didn't know why sci-fi tropes populated his dreamscape, but as James was dreaming, he was not aware.

A ring. Not in the real world where anything could happen—but in this one, where anything could happen, but nothing would matter. Or so James thought.

He picked up the phone with no wires or antennae or batteries. The silence was sandpapered, and static brittle through.

Yet, air sifted through the tiny holes of the microphone.

A life born—a breath taken.

The phone vaporized.

Eyeballs oscillated, left to right, right to left. James in the real world would think: a dream, this is all this is. He didn't know, nor would he believe, that this was the universe calling, for Kade to say hello, and goodbye.

James surveyed the darkness of space.

Then the phone in the real world rang. Then he woke. Then the hospital told him to come.

Then the nurses averted their eyes as they saw a faint figure approaching fast. Then the doctor lessened the boom of his voice, adopting a gentle inflection that made him sound like an old man. Then the walls seemed to drip cold sweat, like they apprehended too much, too.

Then James was told his brother was gone from this world.

Kade sits on a white fold-out chair, which contends with gravity. The chair does not exist, not really. White is not white, black is not black. Falsity and realness do not matter.

Kade does not think about his existence, let alone question it.

As he sits and thinks, Kade is real. He has never been more real.

Sound is vacuumed because he has never heard a sound. A muffled utter, maybe, which travelled from far above as his mother chit-chatted with other women before check-ups, asked James what he wanted for dinner, or whispered to Kade she anticipated his arrival. Also: heartbeat thrumming through the mileage of vessel walls. But he has never heard sounds—soundwaves reaching his eardrums, the vibrations of James's voice, wanting Kade to breathe.

James is the name on Kade's wrist. Shadowed there not like a tattoo, but a birthmark. Choice and choiceless. Skin-deep and part of the skin.

The world upends like a toy box. Kade observes spaceships, astronauts flung into zero-gravity, no lifeline, no return from their voyages. He makes out a bobbling glimmer. The glare overwhelms the whiteness of this space, the dark matter of the cosmos.

Stars arrange themselves, coalesce into a sci-fi film over which Kade would have obsessed. He would have forced James to watch it with him. Two boys weighing down a mattress because Kade would have been small enough to still want to be physically close to his brother. And he would have made James mimic the alien mastermind, and they would have sneaked cheese balls from the kitchen cabinet—James throwing the packets into Kade's open arms, odd-ball thieves of jet-black

nights. The sun would have risen—James’s palm near Kade’s nose, from efforts to keep him from snoring—to usher them to tomorrow.

Tomorrow doesn’t exist anymore.

The film glitches. The alien mastermind won. The universe is ending.

Kade thinks—with electrical impulses that do not get fired—that James is a strange word, beautiful and ethereal. He does not know why it is there.

He tries to say it with his lips.



Image credit: Jess Luyan

To Believe or Not to Believe that is the Question

Jess Luyan

Honourable Mention

We do all these things that we think are supposed to guarantee us a bright future, where we will get a high paying job and be able to travel anywhere around the world without worrying of ever running out of money. No matter what our goals are, the point is that we make sacrifices throughout our lives to achieve those goals. Deep down we know that nothing can guarantee us these things, but we still choose to believe. We still talk to ourselves, saying that this is what we were meant to do, this happened because it should.

As I'm someone who was, and still am, very close to my family, it is very hard to say goodbye to them whenever I need to leave home for another country to study. Yes, it is one of those sacrifices I convince myself I need to make because I thought studying abroad can somehow increase my chances of having a better future. Is it worth it though? We will never know, because whatever happens later in the future, we can never really pinpoint what the cause is. If things go well, everyone will praise the education you get from home and school. If things go south, everyone will blame it all on you for not being bright or brilliant enough.

By forcing ourselves to believe, we automatically add pressure to ourselves, forcing ourselves to be a certain someone once we reach a certain age, but that is not realistic. There are not supposed to be guidelines built by society for everyone to follow. Everyone has their own path and their own pace. All these idealistic ideas made by society are more imaginative than realistic, though you may disagree and say that it is optimism, and that I should not be pessimistic. This is not pessimism; it is just looking at things realistically and not by hoping for something to happen.

These few thoughts have been running around in my head non-stop as I got closer to graduating and in no way knowing fully what I want to do in life. How am I supposed to know that my goal and what I really like doing don't go hand in hand? Not to mention, there is also my self-judgement and comparison to my peers who look like they are going to do really well once they graduate. If I reach out to a counsellor or something of the sort, they will ask what my passion is, but I don't have one. All I know is that I need to earn a lot of money and I like helping people. For me, to be able to make a change in this world is if I can have an important position. For me to be in that position, I need to have a lot of money, because let's face it, when we have money, we have power that can let us do whatever we want. How am I supposed to get that?

Some people reading the previous paragraph would say, "What would you get out of all that money? The most important thing is to be happy." It is ok for you to think that, but let me ask you, what makes you happy? Do those things require you to spend some money? I know throughout my childhood about the idea that happiness trumps money. It has been ingrained into our minds, but is it really like that? Don't you think that you need money to achieve your ultimate happiness? After all, you can do anything with your money so what have you got to lose?

In our mere human lifetime, will we ever earn a high-paying job because we received excellent education or reach ultimate happiness when we do everything that we believe will make us achieve it? As your author, I am still as confused as you are. I have not figured out my life yet, and I feel guilty for leaving my parents when I should have been by their side. All this guilt and confusion will do me no good and I

will not be able to crack this enigma, at least not now. But for you, my dear readers, I hope that by reading this, you will get to think twice about everything you question in life.

JUDGES

Food Writing

Ms Janice Leung Hayes

For over a decade, Janice Leung has written, spoken, advised and produced films and videos on the subjects of food, luxury travel, social media, and sustainability.

Although based in Hong Kong, her writing can be found across the globe, in such publications as *The New York Times*, *Monocle*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Condé Nast Traveler*, *Hong Kong Tatler*, *South China Morning Post*, *Eater*, and more. She started her career in food writing first at a community magazine in Melbourne, and in Hong Kong at LUXE City Guides. In 2016, she co-founded multimedia creative agency Capsule48.

Memoir

Ms Dannie Higginbotham

Dannie Higginbotham is the Web Editor for *Young Post*. She has previously lived and worked in South Korea, Ecuador and the United States, and has a Master's degree in International and Public Affairs from the University of Hong Kong. She specialises in topics related to health and wellness, relationships, international relations and US politics and history.

Poetry

Professor Eddie Tay

Born in Singapore, Eddie Tay teaches courses on creative writing and poetry at the Department of English, Chinese University of Hong Kong.

He is also involved in the department's Masterclasses initiative, whereby he engages creative writers to conduct creative writing workshops for secondary school students. He is the author of four volumes of poetry. His first, *remnants*, consists of renditions of mythic and colonial history of Malaya as well as an homage to the Tang Dynasty poets Li Bai, Du Fu and Li He. His second volume, *A Lover's Soliloquy*, extends his interests in Tang Dynasty poetry through renditions of the erotic poetry of Li Shang-yin. It also explores the language of eroticism in modern city life. His third, *The*

Mental Life of Cities, is a winner of the 2012 Singapore Literature Prize. In it, he experiments with bilingual (English-Chinese) poetry. His fourth collection is [*Dreaming Cities*](#).

Short Story

Professor Jessica R. Valdez

Jessica R. Valdez is an Associate Professor of English at the University of Hong Kong. Her areas of research include the history of the novel, media studies, and nineteenth-century literature and culture. Her first monograph, *Plotting the News in the Victorian Novel*, was published by Edinburgh University Press in 2020.

AUTHORS

Charlotte Chan Sze Lok

Charlotte is currently pursuing an MPhil in English Literary Studies. She is 40% of the time serious, 40% depressed, 10% insane, and 10% lost. Her writings muse on love, life, and liberty.

Cyrus Chan

Cyrus is a third-year English major in CUHK. As an aspiring writer and poet, he would like to set up an Instagram page someday and share his work with a larger audience.

Élise Chan

Fascinated by the beauty and complexity of words, yet highly aware of its incapability in rendering what lies beyond the realm of language, Élise endeavours to capture the tiny wonders in life that tend to be overlooked, and slowly guide readers to the edge between the tangible and the intangible.

Jing Chan

Jing is a soon-to-be final year 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. She enjoys using various mediums to express herself and share experiences with others. Some of her hobbies include creating art, music, writing, and traveling.

Corrine Cheung

Corrine is a third-year undergraduate student majoring in English at the Chinese University of Hong Kong. As a Hong Konger, she is a pianist and a huge fan of classical music, and she enjoys writing poetry related to Hong Kong, Chinese culture, other poets, and classical music.

Maleah Do Cao

Maleah is a Linguistics major with a passion for languages.

Marta Gramatyka

Marta is a year three student majoring in Chinese studies. She's passionate about languages and societies, and she treats writing as a medium to connect with others and share her own perspective of the world.

Maheen Haider

Maheen was born in Hong Kong and is currently studying in the social sciences at an undergraduate level. When not attending a lecture, she can be found either on the cricket pitch or in the library stacks. You can reach out to her at maheen.e.haider@gmail.com.

Serag Heiba

Serag is a third-year undergraduate student from Egypt, studying energy and environmental engineering. Besides creative writing, he has been writing articles about environmental issues for over a year, most recently for Earth.Org (which can be found [here](#)).

Demi Huang Qian

Demi is a Translation student. She is an introvert, but she is not afraid of talking with others. When she was a middle-school student, she was always scolded by her Chinese teacher for not having a logical and eloquent writing style. She knows she is not an excellent writer in both English and Chinese, but she hopes to experiment more with creative writing. This is her first time writing creatively in English.

Katrina Lee Yuen Yi

Katrina is a recent English graduate from CUHK. She loves writing because stories and words help her communicate stuff that she otherwise doesn't know how to communicate. If she's not disappearing into books or films, she is trying to write stories set in liminal spaces (where she thinks beautiful things happen).

Pinky Lui

Pinky is currently a PhD student of English Literary Studies in CUHK. She is a recipient of the Hong Kong PhD Fellowship 2020-2021. Her work has been published in *Cha: An Asian Literary Journal*, *Hong Kong Review of Books*, and most recently, in *The Encyclopaedia of Sexism in American Films* (2019). She also sometimes updates a personal writing blog called [Potential Poet in Training](#).

Jess Luyan

Jess is a first time writer who finally has the courage to type out her thoughts into the real world instead of bottling it all up inside and eating her up.

Stephanie Studzinski

Stephanie is a final year PhD student who has been researching the speculative ecofiction of Sheri S. Tepper and its relationship to contemporary ecological contexts. Stephanie has an MSc in Literature & Modernity from the University of Edinburgh and a BA from Youngstown State University. More about her research, creative writing and its intersections can be found at elucious.com.

Chloe Wong

Just some sad girl who reads and writes randomly.

Michelle Yau Ming Suet

Michelle was born in Hong Kong. Growing up, she was fascinated with music, languages, and interpersonal relationships, and these interests led to some early exposure to reading related to philosophy and human development. Her favourite writers include Alain de Botton, Eileen Chang and Lee Pik-wah. She has obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree in Translation at CUHK and later completed a master's degree in Inter-Cultural Studies. She now moved on to study social work at CUHK. Her educational background has allowed her to understand human behaviour in light of contexts such as language, family, and culture.

Coco Yu

Coco is a Fine Arts student who is struggling to find her style in art. She is also struggling to eat healthier due to the fast-paced life habits and laziness. This is the first time she really took the time to think and write about food. She is interested in movies, photography, crafts, fashion, and everything that speaks art. You can find her at [@cupofcocos](#).

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