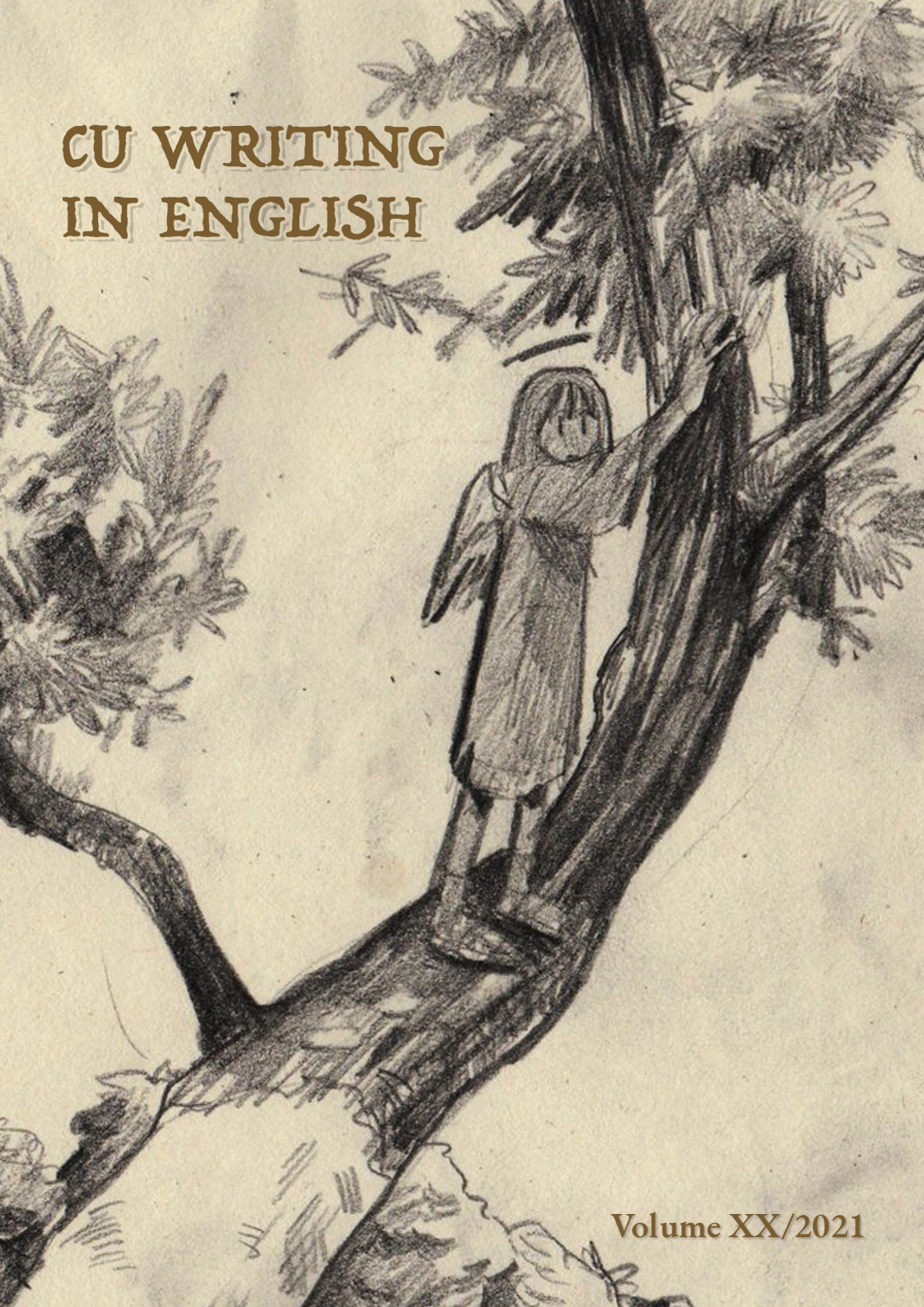


# CU WRITING IN ENGLISH



Volume XX/2021



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Volume XX/2021

## **CU WRITING IN ENGLISH**

Department of English

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

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# **CU WRITING IN ENGLISH**

**Department of English**

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## PREFACE (Short Story Section)

Stories send you into a *world of one's own*, the mind of *the writer*. Be it a flowery world full of *butterflies* dancing among beds of different *azaleas*, or something action-packed like a *taxi* speeding through streets to save lives, it's true that this journey *won't last* forever, but the resonance you develop from these tales would (*clickety*) *click* with your thoughts. Whether it be a simple name—*A Fei*, or a moral with deeper meaning, the memories developed from reading books will be stored in the depths of your *great cerebrum*. You are destined to reach your *destination paradise* even, and eventually realize you've read something great, inspiring. Something that gives you the power to *dream for*, or perhaps *stand up* for yourself.

Given the saddening circumstances the world is currently in, stories can be a means of escaping the gloom we have been shrouded in. Thus, it is our wish to arrange our stories from relatively more poignant, serious ones to those that bring out positive sentiments, so that your heart, thoughts and footsteps will be lighter as you near the end of this series.

Do take a step away from the *immaterial* tasks you may have in life and continue venturing into this *magic book*. The time you take to read a book doesn't matter, be it 7 hours or 7 days, as the content and meaning behind the story will be waiting for you to discover, well hidden, like a *snake* waiting for the moment to strike. Stories are vessels that harbour an ocean of emotions, experiences and values after all. Each seemingly infinitesimal snapshot of our lives congregate under the swirling brainstorm of the writers and converge, melding into each other as a whole. By reading the stories from our fellow writers, you'll find yourself fully immersed, and unable to withdraw.

With every page you flip, we hope you can appreciate how the writers have poured their hearts into the stories. Just like the characters finding or



discovering meanings on their journeys in life, we sincerely wish that you may understand the meaning of life through these sixteen stories. Who knows, maybe from observing the little things in life, you'll be inspired to spin and weave these fragments into your unique narrative.

Katlyn Yan,  
Yolanda Cheung,  
Yuki Xia  
Editors

## PREFACE (Poetry Section)

This year has felt like one of many words, and yet none is quite sufficient. Such trying times have us yearn for safety and certainty, yet we have also been reminded of the fact that the world is actually unpredictable and ever-changing, and nothing could really be taken for granted. Amidst the chaos, we return to our last resting place—our inner world.

Poetic creation during such times provides a haven for our sailing thoughts, to confront what we least want to confront, to cherish what we find most cherishable, so we will not lose ourselves easily in the turbulent flow. At the same time, we learn to discover the beauty of our surroundings, to capture the small, blissful things in our lives.

The poems featured in the collection this year reflect the fruits of our learning, with a diverse range of topics and forms. Not only do we explore the topics that pull our heartstrings, but we also have experimented with the various forms of poetry, including absurd poems and concrete poems, to test and go beyond the limit of language.

As editors, we are extremely honoured to be part of the 20th volume of *CU Writing in English*, to witness this milestone. We would like to deliver our sincere gratitude to Professor Tay, for the valuable opportunity, and for his guidance and support. We would also like to extend our gratitude to all those who have contributed to this publication.

To quote Emily Dickinson's words, "There is no Frigate like a Book / To take us Lands away, / Nor any Coursers like a Page / Of prancing Poetry." Only in Poetry do we become the freest travellers, wandering from one story to another. We would like to invite you, by reading our poetic works, to learn of the stories to share, the tales to tell.

Elizabeth Lui,  
Kristen Cheung  
Editors

**SHORT STORY  
SECTION**

# IMMATERIAL



## Immaterial

*Wong Tin Shun Stanley*

The motion of the car shook his body when it reached the bridge: his right hand fell from his left thigh to the crotch, the head was leaned against the tinted window, and the clouded eyes followed, now looking at the sea that they were crossing: white cuts were drawn on the surface and so were the chemtrails above in the clear sky, by vehicles made with steel, aluminium, and titanium. Black fumes then surged and diffused in a matter of seconds into the greyness of the background. A loud and sustaining noise was produced afterwards, as if a beast was wuthering from the deepest part of the canyon, and he was perplexed, unable to comprehend its origin. His disturbed sight fell on his blank countenance contained within the wide rear-view window.

His heart, too, was shaken, breaking away from the mind-forged manacles and awakening the life in him for a moment. He hissed, and watched his dark, crimson lips shiver. It was the first sound he made since he was put in the car, but the woman sitting beside him didn't notice. She was too preoccupied with driving.

\*\*\*

He had been sick for years, and yesterday he was going to have an operation to make himself feel better. There was still some time before his appointment.

A city of rectangular blocks. As he was walking down Nathan Road, he had an impulse to look for a building that was totally circular and

totally useless, that existed only to bother the businessmen, but he could find none, nor could he confirm that there was no structure like this in the city. He looked at the window mirrors on the Grand Plaza, each reflecting a bit of the architecture on the other side, and a piece of the entrapped neon sky. He was sick of them. But all were mirrors, the buildings or the swarms of people on the evening street.

A woman of his mother's age was standing outside Sincere, under the big sign that said King Wah Centre, seemingly waiting for someone. Her blonde hair suited her red maxi dress, although it was too tight—her sagging breasts were pressed against the silk, forcing her nipples to be on display; her groin swallowed a part of the fabric with her crossing legs, forming a triangular shape. He slowed down his pace to observe the woman being a woman. When she took out her black box of Marlboro, she noticed his stare, so she removed her hand from the pocket that contained the lighter and savoured the rolling paper, grinning, waiting, but he never came over to light her cigarette. He just glanced back at the womanly figure for one last time before he was lost in the crowd again, not even catching the change in her countenance.

He was indeed fascinated—he kept replaying in his head the moment where she glided her right hand on her hip gently and naturally. He reckoned that she must be proud of her body. She must feel so comfortable, even in her five-inch red bottoms.

But the bald man behind him caught it, her melancholy, though he was too busy to care. The dark lady leaning on the iron railings opposite her too, and she gave her an exaggerated pitiful expression. Even the security cameras of the nearby buildings documented clearly the hideous wrinkles on her forehead, which could have been a fatal mistake had the footage been used against her. They kept surveying the roads in their mechanical

movements; they knew everything.

Night was approaching the city, but it defended itself with the artificial luminosity of the day, so one still felt safe under the dead sky. He was walking with heavy steps. As he stopped in front of Sino Centre, he remembered when he started to feel the kick inside at the age of seventeen—an agitated baby must have been put inside his belly, which was why he constantly felt the pain of a pregnant woman—the body was just a weight he carried every day, and it was constantly fighting against his spirit. But his abdomen had not got bigger, only the turbulence in his heart. Somehow, he was also animated by the trouble which made him feel more alive than ever, almost as if he saw life in full colours for the first time—he recognised that having total control over his own self would be his greatest purpose.

Then he bumped shoulders with the unapologetic people for disrupting the secret formation on the street—they were killing him. Before he continued his journey, he took a glimpse at the hale twenty-storey structure, which made him feel like an ant. He wondered if a much taller skyscraper fell down, how many lives would be lost. Probably hundreds of pedestrians and a thousand inside. Grim gazes from the crowd landed on him as if people heard his question. They could still be staring at him after he walked past them, but he wouldn't know.

He saw between another two commercial centres an obscure massage shop. Its sign was sitting on the ground, showing a smiling foot. Does it mark it a brothel, or is it the faceless one that indicates it? He was puzzled because he had heard both sayings. The plastic clock against the wall inside the dim staircase pointed to a quarter till nine. He paused again; the skinny shadow of his body created a small void on the red-brick road. He figured his mother would be the first to hit him with a broom and lock



him in the room if he happened to turn into a beetle. He chuckled at the idea, but it was true. She knew what was going on with her son all along, and she couldn't envision their future together. Neither could he.

A tulip in a cup—the day he chose to be deviant, the day his mother saw him put on her velvet brassiere, he couldn't stop smiling; she couldn't be more embarrassed—he, nor the life inside him stood no chance of growing up.

A light panel was turned on. His shadow elongated and became a black sword that divided the road in half. He squeezed his glabella with his fingers when he thought about that, but quickly let go of his worries—he realised that everything he did in the past year led to today, the day that marked the rebirth of his being. He signed. He was no longer the puppet in his mother's twisted fantasy.

A distraught woman was taking pictures of her surroundings. His silhouette must have also been captured. "A necessary revolution," he muttered, not seeing the fire that burned around him. It was a phrase he picked up from the news the other day. He began to walk again but was interrupted when the woman approached him with a hint of fury in her tone and asked, "Have you seen my husband?" She reminded him of his own mother when he told her he would be leaving for good. It was the first time in his life that he regarded her mother as a repulsive figure—he had been a stranger to the wrinkles on her face. He gave no answer and wandered off.

"God-damnit," the voice of the woman was so loud that he could still hear her even as they walked the opposite way. "God damn, he was a freaking ..."

Nathan Road was endless, and so were his thoughts. The dream that repeated itself on many nights over the years, until two months ago, came back to him tonight. He remembered that he was holding a new-born. He stroked his head and was intrigued by the softness of his fontanelle. It was covered with a layer of smooth hair and felt like a feather pillow. He pressed it again with more force. Cheers and cries then combined into an unrecognisable wall of noise that overwhelmed him. And he pressed it one more time, until one of the fingers got in and pierced the surface of the brain with the sharp nail. The sound stopped. He woke up. The dream ceased to exist. Perhaps the pills he had been taking changed that. Perhaps he did the right thing. He knew in his heart it wouldn't happen ever again, the nightmare.

Young folks were coming out of 562. They burst out laughing when they crossed him—it could be a funny joke that he missed, or it could be the cumbersome clothes that he wore on an airless night. Something about their youth made him feel envy; their vitality was ridiculing his passing youth, the grand stage that he never got a chance to shine on. He felt irritated, so he looked away and saw a bald man leaning on a light pole at the curb.

He had made too much sacrifice in his life—stranding himself in financial hardship and quitting college as the first step of his rebellion—he thought his future was locked by a heavy layer of mist. The only thing he could see inside was him standing firm on the ground, being who he really was—a woman.

“But is it enough for me to survive in this world?”

He didn't have much money left. In fact, he had none. He was repaying the minimum value of the fifty-thousand loan he borrowed from

the bank—the staff there had yet realised he was not the person he claimed to be. The only thing he actually owned in his forty-foot-square flat was a wooden guitar. He thought about selling it for five hundred dollars, but then he would have nothing. He was way too lucky to find a doctor who was willing to transform him for just twelve thousand dollars, plus several thousand for the flutamide, though everything had to be done at night, and in secret.

As he slowed down his pace, the distant laughter had melted into screeches, which came from a baby in an upstairs apartment of the indifferent structure. He had arrived at the Grand Place, another commercial building. He felt like an immaterial girl living in a material world. The office was on the twentieth floor.

“A necessary revolution,” he reminded himself. He wasn’t unsure about the decision; he was just saddened by the reality.

“God has his own plan. You cannot escape!” He heard a raspy voice yelling at him. When he turned around, he saw a mad man on the ground and some cardboard around him. On one of them, “Stock = Poison” was written in red.

The wait for the elevator was eternal. The ride was also eternal. All were mirrors around him. He was used to the disgust he had towards the way he looked. It was all wrong. But as he took off the cotton winter jacket, he was pleased by the size of his growing breasts. They were still a bit too small, but a lot of girls were like that anyway. He caressed one of them over the linen shirt. The kind of tenderness could never be found on any other parts of his body. It gave him serotonin. He was still deciding whether to grow out his hair or not. A woman with short hair would stand out from the crowd, but he also wanted to try the long hair. He had in his backpack

a long dress and some make-up, which he felt capable of wearing only after the surgery. A bright, liquid smile appeared on his face as he thought about everything he would do after today.

Then the doors opened.

\*\*\*

The doctor had been waiting for him. There were no other people, no nurses, only a woman sitting in the waiting room, facing the windows.

On the metal plate beside the table where the anesthetized man was lying on, there were an ice pick and a hammer. The doctor picked up the ice pick with his left hand, pointed it at the inner corner of his client's right eyes, which had been taped open, and then grabbed the hammer. "One, two," he counted, and knocked it into the eye socket. As the tool entered, he put aside the hammer, and changed to his dominant hand. He carefully detected the location of a thin bone with the pick's point and severed it. The frontal lobe was no longer connected with the brain. His job was completed.

After ten minutes, the doctor walked out of the surgery room.

"Is it done?" The woman asked.

"Yes, ma'am, he's fine now. That's five thousand dollars," he responded with a stern face.

"You know, he really needed your help. I can't imagine what he would be without you! He must feel so much better after that," she smiled

beautifully as she took out her cheque book. There were just a few of them left.

“He can’t blame me for that, right? After everything I do for him.”

“He can’t.”

## The Magic Book

*Li Yin Hei Lumina*

The book flips open, spine cracked. The musty, bittersweet scent of dusty memories and unanswered wishes permeates the air. There is magic in the book, after all, a certain type of magic that draws you in, coercing your fingers to brush lightly against the corners of the pages, flipping page after page as you dive deeper into its curse. You approach the book, with hesitance and fearful wonder. Uncertainty clouds your mind, but your heart remains in the clutches of wary excitement. It is a magic book, after all.

*“Momma, finger hurty.”* “Does it really hurt that much, baby girl?”  
*“Yes, mama.”*

*“That was delicious, thanks!”*

*“Of course you’re not fat. You’ve just bloated—it’ll go away with a few trips to the loo.”*

*“I like your dress. Yeab, it suits you.”*

*“The meatloaf? No, it wasn’t too tough, could use a bit of salt though.”*

Snapshots of the girl’s life appear before your eyes—materialising one moment and dissipating into phantom dust in another as you flip through the pages with caution. This is a magic book, you know it by the way the words write themselves across the parchment, demanding to be read. This is a story demanding to be told, a story about life and all those

little bits we call the highlights. All those little bits that make life worth living, but also those that don't.

*"Ugh, I've gained so much weight in the past few weeks, I look horrid."*

*"The test was pretty hard for me too. Don't be too hard on yourself, you'll do better next time."*

*"I'm not crying." "No." "No, I'm not." "It's just the wind in my eyes."*

*"Ow." "That had to hurt, are you okay?" "Yeah, yeah. Just need to... watch where I'm going, I guess." "Or stop looking him and focus on the road instead." "What? No! I definitely wasn't too focused on stalking him. Nope, no way."*

*"I spent, like, maybe a total of 3 hours preparing for the test. Honestly, I wouldn't be surprised if I got a D."*

*"Oh god, he's looking at me. Why is he looking at me? He must be thinking that my hair and makeup look atrocious today. Oh god, hide me, please."*

*"I think he likes me."*

*"How could he ever want me? How would he ever feel even a fraction of the desire that consumes me when I think of him?"*

*"What if he likes blonde girls? I think he does."*

Teenage romance, you smile. There's the sideway glances, the pining, the social media-stalking... we've all been there. There's a certain



preciousness to first crushes—most don't last, some end in tearstains and ripped photos, but better a ripped photo than a ripped marriage certificate.

Naivety is what makes first crushes so endearing, holding a special, irreplaceable space in one's heart. The magic book shares your opinion, promptly dotting its i's with loopy miniature hearts.

*"He just asked me out!" "I'm so happy for you! Where?" "The new Italian restaurant by the corner." "I thought you hated oregano—you've always said it smelled like your dad's old socks." "I like Italian. It's my favourite."*

*"You know what, scratch that blonde girl comment." "So... he's not into blondes?" "Apparently, he likes me back." "Brunettes. Figures."*

*"Happy Birthday, baby! I saw you looking at this watch a few months ago, hope you like it!" "Nah, getting it wasn't too hard." "Oh, it's a limited edition? I had no idea."*

*"I think he loves me."*

*"I love flowers! Aww, a thousand roses, how cute." "Do you like them?" "Red roses are my favourite, thank you so much."*

*"Fifteen months, and counting. Being with you is the happiest I've ever been, and I never, ever want to go back to a life without you."*

*"He says I'm the only person he wants to marry. Nobody has ever made me feel like this—he's the one."*

*"OMG, bestie. You wouldn't believe what just happened." "What?"*

*“He proposed!” “He took me to my favourite Italian restaurant and, decorated it with red roses—my favourite, and got down on one knee.” “That sounds nice, though I was under the impression you liked sunflowers... Anyway, what did he say?” “Oof, this is embarrassing—you mustn’t tell anyone. He said he fell in love with me at first sight, said he loves my smile, my kindness, my steady nature, and that he wants to spend the rest of his life with me.”*

The words got messier and messier, the magic fuelled with a sudden surge of adrenaline, almost tripping over itself—if it had a self to begin with—to spit the words out, to keep writing up a storm. The nib of the fountain pen was dragged across the parchment with an up-spiralling intensity, leaving behind the occasional pools of ink that bled into the soft fibres like blood.

Relentless. Almost furious.

*“It’d be a private ceremony: just friends and family. He wanted to elope, the two of us taking a break from our respective worlds, probably because he’s romantic like that.”*

*“This is so embarrassing to talk about! Yes, he was gentle with me! Can we end this topic now?”*

*“Didn’t you already post the mail the other day?” “No, I did not. Can’t you just post them for me?” “Oh, silly me, I must have gotten the dates all muddled up.”*

*“I must be overthinking things.”*

“I’m a bit worried for you, darling. We’ve been friends since forever,

and I—” *“Enough. If you truly cared about me, you’d want me to be happy, and I’m happy with him, of course I am. Why on earth wouldn’t I be?”*

*“15 dollars for a bag of sugar, really?” “Thanks, but no thanks. Do you have any cheaper options?” “What, you in a tight spot?” “N—yes. Yes, I am. We are.”*

*“I’m sorry, but we can’t be friends anymore.” “No, he isn’t behind this, I just feel like maybe we need some distance from each other.”*

*“It’s a funny story, really. I was walking down the stairs and looking at my phone at the same time when I tripped and fell. That’s where the bruise on my head comes from.” “No, it doesn’t hurt.” “I’m okay, mum. Really.”*

*“Inhumane, I tell you.” “No, seriously, what boss makes their employees work overtime during the Lunar Holiday? Your boss is insane, let me tell you.” “I understand, honey, I do, I’m just frustrated. I’m sorry.” “Of course I understand that you’re busy, supporting this family and all.” “I love you, too.”*

*“No, I can’t come home for Christmas this year, mum. My hands are full with the kids.”*

*“He’s not usually like this, it’s just a one-time thing. He’s usually a very sweet person—I mean, he wouldn’t even mow the grass, said he’d be killing them if he did.”*

*“No, doctor. Everything’s fine. There’s this nausea, and pain at my sides, but otherwise I’m fit as a horse. I do wish I’d stop bumping into things, though.”*

*“Mum, you’re thinking too much—of course I’ll never leave you, wherever did you get that silly idea from?”*

*“I’m not going to jump.”*

*“I’m not going to jump.”*

*“I’m not going to jump.”*

With the tender grace of a performer skilled at her craft, she leapt from the terrace, arms outstretched and back arched, plunging to the ground with a crushing finality, the crescendo before the finale, the climax at the end.

The magic book slams shut, swinging callously along its cracked spine with brute savagery. Now reduced to remnants of memory, its magic dissipates into the world, leaving behind a mere shadow of its former self.

You shudder.

Because you know where the magic lies now: in the artful twist of words, in sweet deception.

And you don’t bother holding onto the book, or the tendrils that remain of it, for how could you hold on to something as slippery as human hearts and minds? It’s a terrifying notion, that there is no way to reread the book again and decipher those muffled cries of help, buried deep within each letter, no way to right an irrevocable wrong; that there is a piece of magic that lives within every one of us, magic that rots and becomes a curse that shackles us down.

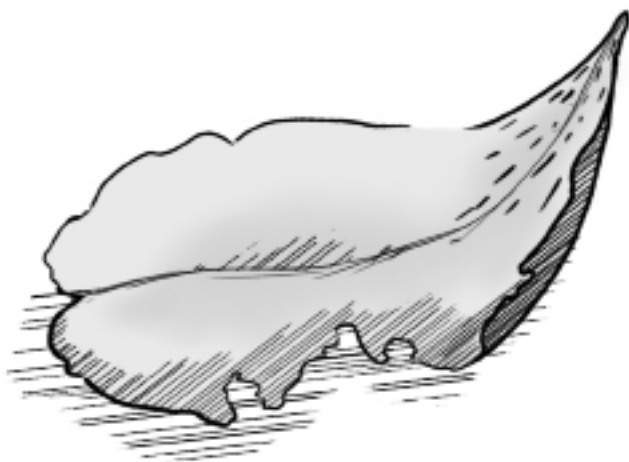
## The Magic Book

Slowly, you raise your head, only to find all those tendrils swirling around you, clinging to your skin. And you realize that:

Magic is in the air.

Magic is all around us.

# A DIFFERENT AZALEA



## A Different Azalea

*Bhavani Chandrasekar*

I remember distinctly; it was a different time. I thought I had fire in my heart. That it yearned for adventure and passion I wasn't allowed to have.

A vast glaucous mirror extended before my eyes. If you listened closely, you would hear the ripples tickle in the distance, the clouds humming the most enchanting lullaby. There was a drop of rain here and there. The stone carrying me, if you could call it a stone, was the most tender embrace or everything I could never speak of, the sole embrace. There is much more from that journey foretold, disregarded, and now forever untold.

I remember distinctly. "You have to go, it's for the best." The best for? Selfish. They were all selfish. Had they ever thought of why *I* didn't want to go? But this story isn't about them; it's about me. It will finally be about me. I remember distinctly, and I will never forget.

My eyes reluctantly shifted their gaze down, to my fingers that were dripping blood brighter than a full bloom, pale pink, peony. These are not fireworks; this is blood. Will they hear me now?

The bus ride felt so recent, yet so far away. With all the remaining energy I could summon, my head at long last allowed itself to recall the ride.

That morning, I cleaned myself up, got my outfit on, watered my



succulents, and grabbed my usual breakfast—cornflakes and a little too much milk. I hated cornflakes, and I loathed milk. The outfit picking session was shortened that morning. I decided to go with my usual black sweatpants and a beige sweater. They were the perfect pair. Then, of course, my morning had to come to an end. Now, it was everyone else's morning. I walked out of my bedroom, dreadfully passing by my father.

My eyes dared not meet his, yet I could feel his eyes darting out to me, screaming as loud as they can, making sure I know of his wish. He wanted me to talk, like the rest. But I couldn't, for each word I let slip out lighted a spark on another one of my hair fossils, till there were no longer any more to be burnt. Which is frankly not as terrifying as it sounds. It is the complete opposite. Steering clear of the admonitory gaze, I said goodbye and headed straight to the door, thanking the universe for my breathless schedule.

The usual path was surrounded by shrubs of azalea, which, I must admit, was quite startling. They were like a bunch of soaked-up tissues scattered all around, like a useless piece of paper trampled on and withered in the rain. There was one in particular that had lost one of its petals, the other petals with little scratches on them, making its interiors disturbingly noticeable. It carried the enormity of a black hole within. My eyes refused to part with the ruptured flower, but they eventually had to be pulled apart as I arrived closer to the bus stop.

What do you think happened to that flower? I couldn't help but wonder how out of every other azalea, that was the one destined to be like *that*. The bus arrived, not too crowded that morning, thankfully.

“Get in kid, I don't have all day.” His voice was crusty. That, I can clearly recall. His eyes were glued to the window, his right hand fixed onto

the steering wheel. Another person whose opinions should not matter to me was yelling at me. And so, like every other encounter, I avoided his gaze, tapped my Octopus card, and walked in with my head faced down, in hopes not to interrupt anyone's day in any way. My legs walked me directly towards the corner seat at the back row.

My morning was interrupted by a ruptured azalea.

“Why didn't you yell back?” A familiar crooked voice growled. It couldn't be him. Why would it be? I'm half-way to school, and till this point, I still don't understand how he managed to get on the bus with me. More questionably, how did I not notice my own father walking behind me?

I continued staring down, making sure I did not meet his eyes, or anyone's at all.

“You have to start talking, this is not an option, Lea.” I could tell that he was not done. I could tell that this speech was nowhere close to being done. But I made sure I did my part to ensure that it would never begin. A conversation is two-sided. A speech is one-sided. I will never let this speech turn into a conversation.

The hair on my arm stood up, making sure that I could sense them. How cruel.

“You have to go, it's for the best.”

No. Soon, I will go somewhere so much better. How I wish I could tell him, but I couldn't. I will not ever let them slip out of my mouth. This side of the story will remain untold.

An irksome buzz radiated through my pocket, and I knew already, it had to be mother, joining in this unavailing persuasion. And I was right.

“Please listen to your father, you have to go, it’s for the best.” The words scribbled on my screen, to an undesirable extent. A strong grip suffocated my arm, assuring that I will someday be better. But there is no better, just a place better to be in. The edge of my eyes captured the distant mountains, along with the storm-prepared sky. Given the speed of the bus, the sky blended exceptionally well with the land. They welcomed me.

The urge to smash the window next to me grew stronger and stronger. As my father’s voice blared louder, my ears could no longer block out his vexatious speech. I needed to leave, and never return.

“You need to go there! You need to go there!” His sickening voice echoed as my head gradually exhibited all the reasons that I should leave to pursue the adventure that I have long awaited. From the memory of his belt against my face for not pouring his tea right, to her screeches ringing in my ear for a piece of hair landing on her suit that I washed. From the scar left for asking for more rice on the night of my sixth birthday, to stopping my lungs from exploding on the morning of my eighteenth birthday.

The thought of freedom oozed through my veins. As my head piled up with one agonizing memory after another, till there was no remaining capacity, my arm swung vigorously towards the tiny red hammer, crushing the window into innumerable tiny crystals. Finally, my heart gained the adventure it had been yearning for.

If I remember correctly, I felt my legs springing away from the cramped back seat, drops of burning liquid seeping down my skin. The faded mountain range merged with the sky, caressing me. All that there

## A Different Azalea

was left afterwards, was the lake that I have found myself in. The stillness around me, together with the drops of fireworks dripping down my fingers, washed out every remaining memory, besides the ruptured azalea.

If there was one thing I could change before I left, I would go back to the shrub near the bus station, making sure that I brought the defaced azalea with me. As I now rest on the most tranquil lake, enveloped by the tenderness of the wind, there is nothing left to grieve but the memory of a broken flower.

I remember distinctly. I thought my heart was on fire, seeking adventure, only to find that I was one destined to wither. I have made it, and I will never tell another story again, for there is far too much to tell. I proceeded to allow my body to drift aimlessly in a lake unknown, gradually being one with the gentle deforming ripples, where no one will ever again say, “You have to go, it’s for the best.”

## The Writer and The Beast in The Lake: Godmaker

*Wong Ho Ching Jan*

*There she sits, staring at the blank page, eyes in desperate need of moisturizing, but existence distracts her, and her consciousness starts to drift as the clock strikes 3 for the second time. Her body, exhausted. Her soul, drained. Her mind, empty. What little strength she had regained from a bowl of instant noodles was quickly depleted, dispersed from the limbs in the form of anxiety. Softly, no, barely breathing and without a clue as to what to do, she leans back on the chair, but is unable to even utter the words “whatever.” The feeble resistance we call willpower dissipates and the night swallows her whole, echoing the bellows of her perturbation as she drifts into the dark. She drifts, drifts, drips, drip.*

*Drip  
Rip  
Ip  
P*

*A large body of liquid acts as a bulwark guarding sleep. It calms the soul and maintains the body in an unconscious state. The essence of malice leaks into the source of altruistic imaginations and intensions, forming a lake of eerie serenity. On the gently rippling surface, shattered memories are scattered all around, glistening, as if desperate to be revisited before being fully submerged into the abyss—never to be seen again. The moon, with eyes unblinking and passionless, stares at the lake, waiting. The land surrounding the lake is silent, and the only thing that could be heard is the lake’s profound melody, sloshing underneath her feet.*

*Ah, there she is. Popped into existence just like that, for you at least. She had been here since the beginning of the second paragraph, just standing at the side of the lake, and witnessing as everything unfolded. To the imagery of how the lake was created, to the liquid reflecting the light of the moon, to the creation of the land and to the moon opening its eyes. She had witnessed it all, the creation of something that was once nothing. She was fascinated by how this lake was manifested from complete emptiness with such ease. As she took a moment to ponder on the possibilities, she looked at the sky to think, only to notice the unavoidable stare of the moon and its luminously watery eyes, as if it was... regretful and afraid... of something inevitable and terrible. A tear eventually fell and floated gently onto her hands, like a pearl burning a gentle white flame, slow dancing in the dark. The light subsides, revealing a book and a pen. On the cover of the book, it wrote "The Writer and The Beast in The Lake: Godmaker." Curiosity and confusion envelopes the girl as she carefully lifts the cover. A ray of holy light bursts from the pages within, an explosion of magnificence, and in the light, she saw the end... of her dream. The light consumes her body and transports her, along with the pen and book, back to the waking world.*

*But we are still here, you, me, the moon, and the unmentioned eldritch beast slumbering deep within the lake, polluting, terrorizing, smiling. A world left behind to rot by its fool of a creator. Unable to realise the true nature of what the lake represented and failing to notice the duality of the process of her own imagination. She does not know, for she had already left with her new-found insight, one that she could use to finally fill the blank page she had been staring at. It is ironic that despite her epiphany, she is still unaware of her authorized powers, what she really is, and the beast that lurks behind her fundamentally good-natured mind, waiting to twist ideas into malformed nightmares and distort the very fabric of her reality.*

*The only thing left to do is to wait and see what happens next. So, for*

*now, you should follow her back to her chair where she fell asleep. While I remain here, waiting, for things to develop, and when the time comes, we will meet again. This place, this moonlit lake, it might just be a bunch of words to you, but I assure you, to me, it is very, very real. Now go, she is about to begin.*

---

The sun was off-centred, and the heat was insufferable. The thunderous sound of alarm bells ringing could still be heard from a distance where the bank is barely visible on the desert horizon, though the kicked-up dust and sand obscured the back view. The engines roared and soon engulfed the frequent ringing of the bells, what's left is the cheering of brutes and bandits alike. Among the spit-filled grunts and inaudible dialect, one clear, angelic, southern voice could be identified. And when she speaks, the entire crew ceases to create noise.

“All right boys! This heist was almost as smooth as my skin! G’job everyone! With this amount of cash, we’ll be set for life! Woooo! Yeah! And all it costed was simply some lives of the innocents! Another victory for Sharlene the Slick!”

The other six responded with more celebratory yelling.

“Yeeaahh Sharlene!”

“Long live the Bandit Queen! Woohoo!”

Due to the strident laughing and cheering, in addition to the loud engine noises, the bunch of plane debris scattered around the area went unnoticed in front of them. One of the plane’s wings nicked the right front tire of the vehicle and it flipped, sending the crew soaring through the air. One got impaled by an industrial beam. One got crushed by the vehicle during the flip. Another got his neck snapped on impact. Two got decapitated by the other wing of the plane. And the last guy died of a heart attack just from the sudden flip, he didn’t even make it through half-way. Only Sharlene survived the crash and not a scratch could be found. Feeling



sad that her crew died, she then felt glad that she could keep all the money to herself in the blink of an eye, and then feeling luckier that she gets to walk away scot free.

That's when an eerie mixture of screeches and burps echoed out from the shadows casted by the empty, torn apart hull of the plane. Then, a few seconds of silence, but for Sharlene, it was uncomfortably long. Then a few more seconds passed. And just as when Sharlene thought she was just hearing things, out wobbled a pale, naked and bloated person. Step. Step. Step. His walk was unnatural, his stare, inhuman. He threw a piece of bone onto the ground, and as if the winds were at his command, they blew away the sands to reveal other piles of bones near the hull. A crashed plane in the middle of nowhere, only one naked, twitching survivor with no one else in sight, and piles of bones. Realising what this meant, Sharlene backed away slowly from the individual, but fear set in and she tripped. The naked person stalked towards Sharlene, famished and ravenous. Eyes blinking unevenly but never looking away. As the naked person got closer, the stench of rot became more pronounced. The last thing she saw was the face of a person with different tones of skin colour. Realising the person was not naked, she screamed, before her throat was ripped clean off her neck. In her final moments, she could hear the sharpening of metal, the violent ripping of skin, the squish of organs falling on the ground, and heavy breathing of someone salivating.

Behold, the absolute power of a writer. The ability to create and control reality within the worlds they created. The bandits could have lived and escaped to enjoy their new-found fortune. But no, I did not allow it. Instead, I created an accident and had them all die a gruesome death, because they were bad people and because I could. Everything I write will happen within the pages and the characters can do nothing about it. I, the writer, am the creator and destroyer of my own worlds, and all I simply

need is a blank page and an idea.

---

“So, what do you think of my story?”

“June, what the hell is this nasty ending? And what are you trying to tell us here? One moment it’s a heist, another moment it’s cannibalism? Then altering reality? Huh?”

“What? I thought I made it obvious?”

“Explain.”

“Alright alright. I’m trying to explore the absolute power of a writer during the process of creating stories. How the writer controls the life and death of the characters and how everything is played out according to the writer. This is just an introduction on the idea, I know it’s brief, but I had spent days trying to think of a story, and then it came to me one night.”

“What compelled you to write something like this?”

“Uh, I know it’s gonna sound weird, but I had this weird dream about some lake.”

“A lake?”

“Yeah, it was nighttime. Everything was pitch black at first but then things started to appear. First, some object dripping liquid into an area, then there was some lake! Then the surface of the lake started to sparkle. And then the moon opened its fucking eyes dude!”

“The moon had... eyes?”

“I’m not joking! That’s what I dreamt of! I was just standing at the side of the lake looking at all these things materialize in front of me. Then the moon cried a single tear that turned into a book and pen... it was called The lake, or the writer or something... then there was this bright light! That’s when I realized I was the one who was creating all these things, because I was the one dreaming! And if I can create a world in my dreams, then I can do the same thing in my writing! The only difference is dreaming is done subconsciously and writing is done consciously!”

“June, I don’t know what you were smoking, but I wanna try it out if you could get this high.”

“I’m serious man! Okay maybe this draft isn’t convincing enough. But I really want to explore this idea, you know?”

“You might also want to get yourself some therapy, that thing where the dude skins the girl? Too much for me man.”

“Ehh what do you know. Alright, I’ve got to go. I’ll see you tomorrow Tim!”

“Yup.”

*... she is still unaware of her authorized powers...  
...to twist... distort... fabric of...*

(Phone rings)

“Hello?”

“Yo, June, check out the news.”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

(The news was reporting the discovery of a plane that went missing a few weeks ago. It was found in the Arabian Desert in Egypt. The local authorities also found some remains of human bones and a bloated, naked passenger on one of the seats. Among the debris of the plane crash, a mysterious jeep was found flipped over, but the passengers were nowhere to be seen. The weirdest discovery was when an Old Western style bank was found within 5 miles of the plane crash.)

“Holy shit Tim. I am having major goosebumps right now and I don’t like it.”

“Neither do I! What the hell did you do, June? The news is basically repeating what you told me yesterday!”

“Hey now, you don’t think I’m able to do all that in just one day right? I’m sure it’s just a creepy coincidence. Right?”

“I don’t know, and I don’t want to know. From now on you better

be careful about what you write, okay?”

“Come on, I know I’m trying to write about the absolute power of a writer, but I can’t actually warp reality based on what I come up with, right? It’s not like I have the “book of the world” and that I can edit it or something. Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Just don’t.”

“Okay, okay. Sheesh.”

*She does not know...  
...the beast... lurks behind...  
...good-natured mind...*

*Hello again. I told you I would be back after things had developed. Oh, I have enjoyed my stay at the lake. The moon was an excellent listener, and the sound of water sloshing was just mesmerizing. Though I am currently quite concerned because the sloshing is starting to turn into churning. The beast in the lake is more active now due to the dark influence of June’s heist story. I fear it’s only going to get worse, despite her good intentions. The beast pollutes her subconscious thoughts, and her dark imaginations feed the beast. Like I said, she is not aware of the origins and influences of her dark thoughts. But she tried to write something more positive, despite the ignorance of her... foreordained characteristic.*

---

At the far edge of Myst Forest, a place where birds keep secrets, bears hunt deer and children disappear, stands a lonely cabin, whispering temptation to the curious. Every now and then parents would be woken up by faint weeping sounds and the squishing of moist flesh in the middle of the night, not knowing where the noise came from, or where their children had been taken to. It had been a week since the mass kidnapping, and no one knew how it happened or what to do.

Until a man of 32 wandered into the woods, and stumbled upon the cabin, but it wasn't curiosity that led him there. It was the stench of sin and defilement, and that was his duty, to rid the world of filth and criminals who commit heinous crimes against humanity. It was almost as if he was born with a purpose, specifically put into this world by someone just to do one thing, and right now, he is fulfilling that purpose. He does not know where he is, and he does not know why, but he knows he's the hero of some story and that there is someone who needs saving in that cabin in the woods.

He kicked the door down, but there was no one to be seen. The living room was empty, and the bedroom was vacant. The cabin was warm and tidy, a safe haven compared to the world outside. There was a slight appreciation of taste felt by the man, but he didn't let it get into his head, because there was no time to admire the furniture and interior design. That's when a slight thumping noise could be heard from underneath his feet. He removed the floor mat and discovered a trap door that leads into a basement. As he descended quietly and carefully further down the stairs, the thumping noise became louder and louder. Then rough grunting noises became distinct. And finally, when he reached the bottom, he saw another person, half-naked, surrounded by small body bags and holding a tied up, unconscious and beat up girl, with bruises all over her body. The person started to wind up another punch when he noticed the presence of an intruder biffwibjdsjvebbjofjgfhvbhsjvh

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“What the hell am I even doing? I'm trying to write a salvation story! A hero saving the day! Divine intervention! Something positive! It's not going to be a happy ending if the kids who needed saving are all dead! Actually, Tim had a point, why do I always write these kinds of things? I should see a therapist. Gosh, why am I suddenly feeling drowsy... but I

need to change the story... and make it more...”

*...polluting, terrorizing, smiling...  
But the damage is already done.*

(Doorbell rings)

“Huh? Oh wait, I fell asleep...”

(Doorbell rings again)

“Just a second!”

*June walks to the door and opens it. It was her neighbour, Jackie.*

“Hey June! How are you doing? I came by to return the power drill.”

“Huh? I don’t remember lending you anything...”

“Oh, don’t be silly! Last week, remember? My bookshelf collapsed and I had to build a new one, but was too broke to buy the tools for the job? Oh deary, school must be tough, huh? Can’t even remember old Jackie borrowing your tools. You’re lucky I’m an honest neighbour, haha!”

“Uhh... thanks?”

“Say, did you hear? The police found an unsanctioned cabin in the woods earlier today, and apparently, a bunch of small body bags and two dead adults were discovered down in the basement. It’s all over the news! Strange things have been happening lately. You better watch yourself, alright?”

“... Dear god...”

“What’s that?”

“Oh nothing, nothing. Thanks... Jackie... Uh, I’ve got to go now. Thanks for the power drill.”

“No problem, you take care now.”

*June rushed to turn on the television and switched to the news channel. Sure enough, the news was reporting a mass abduction near primary schools and kindergartens, seemingly overnight, and soon the kids' bodies were found in the basement of a mysterious cabin in the woods, along with two male corpses at the centre of the basement. No one knew how it happened, but June might have an idea...*

“No, no, no, not again... So, it is true... The things that I write will happen in real life... and I've just killed a bunch of innocent kids... why... Why? How am I doing this? People are dead because of me! I don't understand...”

*Mortified by the consequences of her actions, she was instantly filled with regret and fear. She never knew that her innocent creations of stories had such an impact or had any impact to begin with. The burden was too much to bear, and so she broke down and started crying.*

*Tears of regret and fear dripped onto the floor, forming a puddle. That's when the pool of tears started to glow luminously, much like moonlight. And from the pool emerged a pen and book. On the cover, it wrote “The Writer and The Beast in The Lake: Godmaker.” June, confused and curious, reached out to the book, but as she made contact with it, a bunch of images swarmed and rushed through her mind. Memories of the dreams she had appeared bit by bit, hitting her wave after wave, until she could somewhat understand the situation she was in.*

“Wait a minute, I've seen this book before. It was in the dream! The moon gave it to me, but I didn't get to see what was in it. Did everything happen because of the dream? But how?”

*Eager to find answers, she turned to the first page without hesitation.*

*“There she sits, staring at the blank page, eyes in desperate need of moisturizing, but existence distracts her, and her consciousness starts to drift as the clock strikes 3 for the second time. Her body, exhausted. Her soul, drained. Her mind, empty...”*

*She flipped and flipped and flipped.*

*“But we are still here, you, me, the moon, and the unmentioned eldritch beast slumbering deep within the lake—polluting, terrorizing, smiling. A world left behind to rot by its fool of a creator, unable to realise the true nature of what the lake represented and failed to notice the duality of the process of her own imagination.”*

*She was silent as she read through the book, and when she flipped to the last page, the blank page was slowly filling in itself.*

“So, you’re telling me that... I’m just a character? And my life is just a story written by another writer? I write stories with good intentions, but they will always end in tragedy or despair... that’s my setting...”

*June fell silent once more, staring into the blank page that was filling itself in. What will she do now?*

“What will I do now?”

*Ob? She notices.*

“Notice? Notice wha... ohh...”

*There you go.*

“Hello, narrator, or should I say, author of my unfortunate life.”

*Please, call me Jan.*

“Well, I don’t really know what to feel but overwhelmed... I feel like



I should be angry, but I'm not. After all, I'm just a character created by you. Everything seems so meaningless now... But I guess the usual question is, why?"

*I cannot answer you, not yet. What I can tell you though, is that you now have a decision to make in which you know about your power of creation—the ability to literally write the story you are in. What will you do about your situation? Of your foreordained characterization of writing stories with good intentions, but always ending up with it being tragic.*

"What CAN I do? I mean, can't you just change my character description or something, so that I don't *always* write something tragic?"

*That would defeat the purpose.*

"What purpose?!"

*Like I said, I'll tell you right after you've made your decision and fix the problem on hand.*

"From one writer to the other, you're a confusing storyteller."

*Ha. I know.*

"Alright, so the lake represents my subconscious and you putting a beast in it pollutes my thoughts with dark influences. Since I have been bestowed upon the ability to warp the reality that I'm in, that doesn't bode well for the... other characters... and they will die because of my stories... Gosh this is weird as hell to say out loud. I don't know why, but that seems to be the root of the problem."

*Yes.*

"And you just won't help me deal with it."

*Correct.*

"So, I'll just have to kill the beast, right? If it's gone, then the dark thoughts would no longer plague me, and my stories can no longer harm anyone?"

...

"I'll take that as a yes."

*So, you've made your decision? To kill the beast and rid yourself of*

*dark thoughts?*

“Yes. Uh, one more question.”

*Ask away.*

“So, if you’re not going to help me deal with this quest I have... then how am I supposed to move without you narrating me?”

*June, you literally have the book that you are featured in. You can narrate your own actions from now on. However, you have been doing that since you touched the book from the pool of tears.*

“... So, I have free will and this isn’t scripted to happen?”

*We’ll talk about that later.*

“Cool, I can do as I wish... Alright.”

June stops talking to the narrator...

*Jan*

June stops talking to Jan, who is very insistent on being called that, and starts to do the thing she always does, to write. She thought if she wrote the imagery of the dreamscape, then she would be able to bring it into the reality and confront the beast itself. And that was what she did.

A large body of liquid acts as a bulwark guarding sleep. It calms the soul and maintains the body in an unconscious state. The essence of malice leaks into the source of altruistic imaginations and intensions, forming a lake of eerie serenity. On the gently rippling surface, shattered memories are scattered all around, glistening, as if desperate to be revisited before being fully submerged into the red abyss, never to be seen again. The moon, with half its face chewed off and its left eyeball dangling from the socket, stared blankly and bled into the lake. The wait was over. The land surrounding the lake turned lifeless and the only thing that could be heard was the deafening laughter of the beast, as it crawled out from the

innards of the moon and hung upside down in its exposed flesh, revealing its grotesque, slimy jet-black appearance. The body was mostly humanoid, but skinny beyond recognition and the proportions were twisted. Three arms on the right side of the torso, and a huge vertical mouth on the left, with five tongues gushing out of the mouth, flailing violently, as if uttering the foulest of speeches. Its head was held by smaller arms growing out of the neck and two big arms covered the eyes. Additionally, arms, where the ears were supposed to be, were pulling at the corners of the mouth of the beast, imitating a large and inhuman grin. The dark substance slides off its body and drips into the lake below, polluting it like ink in water.

**“I was wondering when you will visit. It’s terribly lonely here, and as you can see, my one and only companion is dead!”**

“I know you’re the final, big and evil boss in my story, but could you at least talk properly so I could understand you?”

**“Apologies. I was speaking upside down. I said I was wondering when you would visit.”**

“I’m not here to socialize with you, you piece of shit. You ruined my stories and innocent people died because you were messing with my subconscious!”

**“Oh such harsh words! You can’t really blame me for doing my job right? To be fair, you should be mad at Jan! He’s the one who created me and put me into your brain! If anything, you should blame him!”**

“Oh, I’ll deal with him later alright.”

*(stays silent and looks away awkwardly in italics)*

“But right now, you pose the greatest threat to me, all the while Jan seems to be non-hostile and he intends on you being an obstacle I must overcome. So, I’ll vanquish you, foul beast!”

**“A shame. And here I thought I could convince another one**

**to kill their own creator. Oh well, you will perish all the same.”**

**THE BEAST OPENED ITS MOUTH AND FIRED A DEVASTATING LASER BEAM UPON THE LAND WHICH JUNE WAS STANDING ON.**

June quickly evaded the attack but was shocked that the beast could also narrate its own actions.

“What? You can do that? And I thought you were simply a mild inconvenience! I thought I could just write that I defeated you and it would be over! Is this not how it works?”

**“Ahaha, naïve as always. Have you forgotten? I am a part of you, whether you like it or not. Naturally, I can also write on the story we’re featured in. The difference is that I can only operate from the dream, in which I’ll negatively influence your thoughts with my words, instead of directly influencing the physical world you live in.”**

“So, it’s a battle of claiming the ultimate authorship then?”

**“The authorship is still yours. You get to create and control everything and everyone mentioned in this story, except for me; and I only get to tarnish your work. But since you’re in MY territory, we have equal power here, so I will continue to wreck your stories until Jan decides to remove me himself. Which he won’t, because I am a crucial part of his story, so all there is left to do is to fight to the death!”**

### **THE BEAST’S GRIN WIDENS FURTHER**

June takes a moment to process all the exposition the beast had just dumped on her. Thinking that it wasn’t a very good way of explaining things, almost desperate even, she decides to leave the dreamscape without

saying a single word.

**“Wait, where are you goi...”**

She returns to the comfort of her home, sits down in front of her table, opens the book to the most recent page, and wrote “Jan deletes the beast.”

...  
.....  
.....  
???!

*Oh, I also count as a character in the story? I don't think that's how it works...*

Jan deletes the beast WITHOUT HESITATION.

*The book starts shaking violently, and June starts having a slight headache. The world starts to rumble but not enough to make everything collapse. After a while, the rumbling stops. The book also stops shaking, and on the cover of it, was “The Writer and The Lake: Godmaker.” The beast was no more, and June was finally free from polluted, dark thoughts.*

“Ayy! I did it! It worked! So, you do count as a character in this story!”

*Actually. No. I simply played along, since your way of dealing with the problem was unorthodox. And well, I like unorthodox. But I still own the ultimate authorship of this story, at least for now.*

“So, is it done? I win? End of story?”

*Yes, and as promised, I will explain to you why I did this. Better*

*buckle up because there's gonna be A LOT of exposition.*

*"...Riveting..."*

*You see, from where I came from, the world was very much like yours, the original, if you will. But my world was filled with unjust and chaos. A cesspool of different opinions and ideals clash together and create conflict. We have waged wars that were unnecessary, killed innocents and even committed crimes so dehumanising that it kept me up at night, knowing that someone decent, who never did anything to hurt anybody, was out there either getting murdered, scammed, or raped, while I lay on my bed unable to do anything about it. The most ridiculous part of our existence is that the governing force that was supposed to represent the good, GOD itself, did nothing about it. GOD didn't stop innocents from being killed, he didn't purge the world of sin and he even had the audacity to allow cancer to take away my mother and sister! How good can GOD be when it allows evil to exist? So, I took matters into my own hands and decided to take GOD's authority and do what it would not do. I wasn't planning on going into full detail as to how I did it, but well, long story short, I went to Heaven, killed GOD, took its power and tried to fix the world. I said tried because I had failed.*

*Turns out GOD was just a computer. Grand Omnipotent Device was its name, and its task was to merely maintain the simulation we lived in. I was young and stupid back then, didn't really think before I did anything. So, I just typed "delete evil" into G.O.D. and the fabric of the world began to fray, and the tipped balance of good and evil begat primordial chaos. For when there is no evil, there is no good. Only human instinct remained, and that instinct was to survive being governed by greed. Rationality morphs and eventually everyone would be plundering, raping, shooting, stabbing, and eating each other. It was the second greatest mistake of my life. I had doomed my world. And to top it off, I did what any other angry teenager did and punched the computer because I didn't know what went wrong. THAT*

*was the greatest mistake of my life. As I have mentioned before, G.O.D. maintains the “reality” we live in. Without it, reality also begins to crumble. Being desperate as ever, I tried typing on the keyboard. Words like “undo” or “go back.” But it only fabricated things into existence, and I was only able to change the things I have created. So, the words did nothing. It wasn’t until I typed “create barrier” to try and protect myself from falling Heaven debris that something finally happened. A transparent barrier appeared around me and I was safe for a while. But reality was still shattering so I had to come up with something else to survive.*

*Eventually, I thought to myself, if I lived in a computer-generated simulation, then couldn’t I just make another one? Couldn’t I live there? I do have the most powerful typewriter after all. I took inspiration from stories and books and thought, if the characters and places are immortalised for as long as the book existed, then so can I. So, I typed “Create an indestructible and infinite book that is able to withstand the shattering of reality and is able to allow its creator to inhabit in the form of an all-powerful narrator who can create and control everything that exists within the pages of the book, where he can spend the rest of his life duplicating the world he once lived in, or anything he so wishes to do.”*

*Therefore, I survived and got to work.*

*Turns out, maintaining the world was more difficult than creating it. I spent thousands of years trying get it right. Luckily, I could afford accidentally destroying the world this time around, because I made sure I had full control and just undid the mistake. But then I had grown tired of trying to make it right. I felt robbed and just wanted to live the life I never had, a peaceful life. That’s why I’m creating “characters” who had the same ability as mine, in hopes that I can push the responsibility of being the “god” of this world I created to someone else.*

“And I am one of these characters...?”

*Correct. In fact, you are number 1155157008. You are the first and only character who passed the test.*

“I’m... glad? Again, I’m not sure how to feel here...”

*You should feel relieved that I didn’t have to delete you from existence baba! You have no idea how relieved I was when you said you were “not angry.” That sign of change was a sight for sore eyes. The past 1155157007 characters got so mad when they realized they were only a character, that they tried to either kill me or killed themselves! For what it’s worth, they did present interesting ways of ending themselves, ways I have never thought was possible, such a creative bunch. Anyways, the point is you passed the test! And you get to be the new god of this world!*

*“I get to keep my powers and I get to own the world? But I don’t even have free will?”*

*Ah right, free will. Well, you technically still have some free will. Yes, there were a lot of things in this story that were predetermined and most of the events were scripted. BUT, starting from when you realized you were a character, you were given a true choice to make. A moment of unfiltered free will, to see if you would make the same mistake I did and doom your own world. But you didn’t! So, you get to keep your free will! The only predetermined thing I will force upon you from now on is that you don’t have the ability to eliminate the world or me from existence, and that you will not be able to give the commands “delete evil” or “delete good.” Other than that, you’re free to do whatever you want! But keep in mind that you still have a job to do, and that’s to make the world a better place, and make sure that the innocents are taken care of, because if we can’t extinguish evil,*



*we might as well make sure the good people get most of the benefits. And if you are somehow able to do the things I don't allow you to do, I still have the ultimate authorship of this story and I will delete you from existence and spend who knows how long to find another substitute. Got it?*

“...Yes sir?”

*Good! Man, I'm tired.*

“And I'm still confused.”

*I'm sure the readers share the same feeling.*

“Readers? I thought everyone else in your world died? And the book is just floating in nothing, since your reality is literally shattered, and there's no way it could float its way into anything! It shouldn't even exist!”

*Yet it does exist! We're living in it! Haha! You'll never know! Maybe one day the thing that made the G.O.D in the first place might stumble upon it and decides to include it in the next simulation it makes.*

“That sounds highly unlikely.”

*Come on! Where is your sense of optimism?*

“Abolished, after the responsibility you just pushed upon me.”

*Abaha! At least you still have your sense of humour!*

*Jan sighs.*

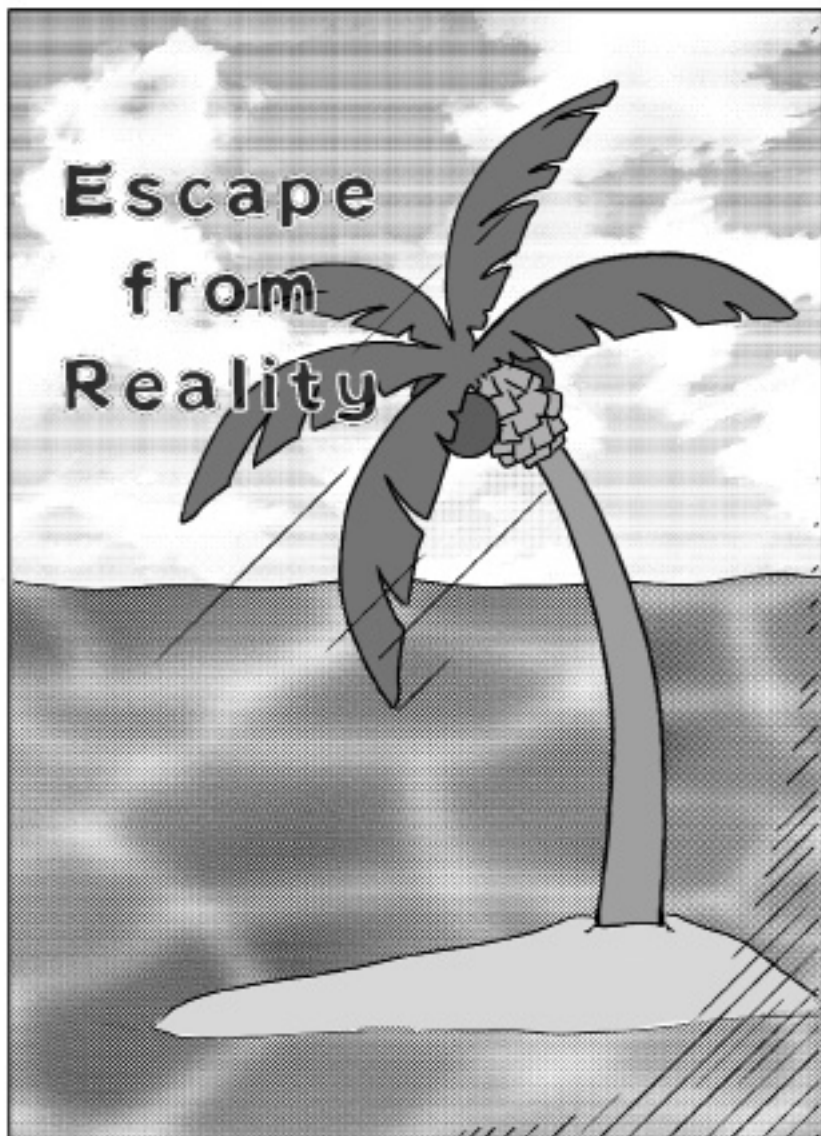
June also sighs, but for a different reason.

*Alright, I'm really tired. Off you go then! I believe in you June! It was fun creating you and interacting with you! Do your best! While I take a rest. I need at least a million-year nap to recover. Goodnight June.*

“Goodnight Jan.”

*Goodnight, dear reader.*

# DESTINATION PARADISE



## Destination Paradise

*Cheung Tsz Yat*

I wake up with a start and a splitting headache, only to find that I have exactly an hour left until my flight departs. I fling open all the drawers and pour the contents into my empty suitcase. Chastising myself for drinking too much, I stagger blearily over an assortment of empty bottles and stacks of takeaway boxes to hail a cab post-haste. The bottles will have to wait.

As the taxi follows my all-too-familiar route and cruises past my workplace, I try my best to stop those dreaded memories from replaying, but to no avail.

*I stood in front of the towering oak doors, straightening my suit jacket and smoothing my hair. This was the day that I finally would be officially appointed as the next-in-line. All those years of dedication and practically living in the office had not been wasted. I knew I deserved this title; I just needed to hear my boss announce it front of everyone in the vicinity. As I strode into the room with an air of importance, I failed to notice the stony, disapproving frown until it was too late. A stack of papers was thrown at me, the white sheets scoring my best Armani suit before zigzagging erratically down towards the ground. I could feel my smile stiffen, plastered across my face as I tried to register what was happening.*

*“Look at what you’ve done. We’ve placed our absolute trust in you for this project and this is what we get?”*

*I dropped to my knees and clawed at the documents, scanning through the report that had literally changed the entire course of my life.*

*“... We’re lucky to not have gone bankrupt at this rate...”*

*I shook my head in disbelief. “This wasn’t my doing. The information*

*here differs from what I remember. You can ask my teammates about this, they can confirm.”*

*“Your dear colleagues were the ones who discovered and reported this to me. And just in time too so that we could at least retract and repair the damage you have made.”*

*“I’m sure there’s some—”*

*He raised his hand to silence me. I don’t think I’ve ever seen him look at me with such disapproval before.*

*“I did consider laying you off, but taking into account the ten years of your dedication, the company board and I have come to a unanimous decision in demoting you to secretary assistant. You have exactly an hour to pack up your things and move to your new office.”*

*I stumbled forward in haste to explain myself, only to be herded away by some security guards that were standing sentry at the doorway. As I was being ushered out, my eyes landed on a partner who had been working alongside me ever since the beginning of my career.*

*From being my mentor as I rose steadily in rank, to eventually working for me, he was there in every step of the way, diligently assisting me whenever I needed help. Today, however, he was wearing a smirk that looked so foreign on his face. I immediately pieced together what happened. He was the only person I’d trusted to make the final changes. Of all the people that could have done so, he was the last to come to my mind.*

*“Good luck in the future, Mr. Bigshot.” He whispered before opening the doors with the same flair I had had just a few minutes ago. I stood seething with a mixture of disbelief, helplessness, and rage coursing through my veins. I felt like barging in, screaming my throat hoarse but I knew this would do no good.*

*Just then, muffled applause that should have been directed at me seeped through the tightly sealed doors and squirmed into my ears.*

*“Congratulations, I’m glad to announce that you will be the next—”*

I give my head a few vigorous shakes to clear it out. When I open my eyes, however, a fresh wave of vertigo accompanies an apparition of that horrid face that has not dissipated from my mind. I can see the driver casting furtive glances in the rearview mirror. He must think I'm a lunatic at this rate. To calm myself down, I try and cast my imagination towards the future where I can relax and momentarily forget about the train wreck that is my life. It's funny how the tables have turned. As the youngest next-in-line, I'm the person everyone looks up to for commands and orders. All those years of working to become the CEO required years of monotonous work as an intern before slowly rising to the upper echelons of the company management. What I didn't foresee was how that lying, cheating sadist fed lies to my superiors, and turned everyone against me. I was completely dethroned and cast away when I was just one step away from my hopes and dreams. Perhaps this was why the advertisement for "a trip to Paradise" caught my eye. I wanted out from this web of lies and deceit.

"Hey. Hey, you, wake up! Are you getting off or not?"

I'm so caught up in my thoughts that I don't even realize the taxi reaching its destination. I fumble in my duffel bag frantically for my wallet and manage to fish out a crumpled 50-dollar bill. Usually, I'd ask the driver to keep the change, but now with my drastically reduced wages, every penny counts.

"Just where the hell do ya think you're going? It's \$54, not \$50."

I groan inwardly. Even right before my trip I have to endure such bad luck.

"I'm really sorry but I'm running late right now, and I don't have any spare change."

"Take a bus instead if you're too poor to pay." The driver snarls as he restarts the engine. "You just wasted 40 damn minutes of my life."

"If only the wasted part of my life was just as short." I mutter,

rolling my eyes at this stingy miser.

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It doesn't take long for me to find where I'm to meet up with the rest of the tour group; the designated row is rather empty in comparison with the snaking queue that stretches and twists at the other counters. Locating the flag embossed with the words "Paradise Tours", I run towards the tour guide, gasping and wheezing.

"I'm terribly sorry for being late. I hope I haven't kept you all waiting!"

"Don't worry, you're definitely not the latest one. In fact, you've arrived rather early," she says with a warm smile.

Relieved and bemused, I thank her profusely (most tour guides would throw a fit at latecomers) and melt back into the throng of people to check out who I'll be travelling with. To my surprise, most of them are dressed rather extravagantly, with the hem of a flowing gown here and a bespoke three-piece suit there. They sure took the phrase "luxury tour" rather literally. I also notice that they are empty-handed or are carrying the bare minimum of a wallet or a phone. Maybe minimalism is all the rage now. I feel positively out of place with my plain T-shirt, jeans, and a huge suitcase in tow. I can sense heads turning towards me, the odd one out in this entourage. To distract myself, I turn to the nearest person to initiate conversation.

"So, what brings you here?"

I'm met by a surprisingly young figure—a scrawny, bespectacled boy with huge dark crescents under his eyes.

"Aren't you a bit too young to be travelling on your own?"

"Does it even matter?"

I swear teenagers these days are much more impolite than one can ever imagine.

“What do you mean, it doesn’t matter? School’s already started; what are you doing here?”

“Honestly, I just want to escape from reality to a wonderful place, free of worries.”

“Don’t just read off the leaflet. Where’d you get the money to go on this trip?”

“Might as well talk about it since we won’t be seeing each other again,” the boy sighed. “Failed my university entry exams, so I was hoping I’d go somewhere better than where I currently am right now. Used up all my savings for this because I won’t be going on another trip anytime soon.”

“Ah, like a gap year?”

“Sure, whatever you want to think of it as.”

“Your parents know about this trip?”

He stiffens at the word “parents”. “You seriously think I’m going to tell them about this?”

He’s got a point though. Who wouldn’t want an opportunity to relax after such a fall from grace? While I spent most of my days wallowing in misery in the form of self-loathing and alcohol, this boy actually took failure in his stride and gladly accepted his need for a rest. I make a mental note to try and ignore my past disgrace. If a teenager can do so, why can’t I, a mature adult in my thirties pick myself up from where I stumbled? At least I’m not completely jobless. Just as I am about to reach out to comfort and tell him I understand, the tour guide announces that all check-in procedures are dealt with. The next thing I know, we are being ushered towards the departure gate.

“Wait, one last question. Why are you even dressed in a suit anyways?”

He stares at me as if I’ve just asked him if water is wet.

“Just wanna look my best when I go.”



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The journey from the departure gate to the plane itself was short, but something felt amiss. In most tours I'd been to, it wouldn't be difficult to hear peals of laughter here and there, or selfies and group photos being taken. Today, however, everyone seems rather somber. Where indeed is the excitement and anticipation that comes with the promise of a vacation?

Amidst the unsettling silence and with nothing better to do, I zone in on a pair of travelers (also well-dressed for the occasion) in front of me that are deep in conversation.

"...lucky this trip costs so little. Not to mention I don't even have to worry about bothering my relatives or family members at all." The silver-haired senior wheezes laboriously with every utterance. He seems emaciated compared to the already frail woman next to him. It's a wonder he can still manage to stay on his feet.

"I know, right? I'd have expected at least ten grand for such services. Thank god for that discount."

"You definitely needed this. Must be tough, having to support three young 'uns alone. That heartless bastard, I mean, ex-husband of yours oughta—"

The wizened man lets out a series of hacking coughs that racks his entire body. The woman pats his back gently, a soothing rhythm until they subside.

"Oh dear, do you need some tissue for that?"

"Here we go again. No, it's fine, just a little blood is all."

"True... I guess that's why you signed up in the first place?"

"Yeah, just the thing I need. I'm sick of being stuck in the wards. All I see is the ceiling day after day. Drives me nuts. And all those check-ups, you wanna know how many tubes I've had in my body?"

Thank goodness I'm healthy and fine. It's one thing to be handling

menial tasks day after day, but to be stripped of all movement, with nothing to distract you from both physical and psychological ails? That was even worse.

“How’d you come across this bargain anyhow?” said the man.

“Well, the ad just sort of popped up in my search suggestion. To be honest, it’s impossible to take care of my darlings with the meagre amount of wage I’ve been receiving. I was looking up on how to, well you know, and after seeing this I thought, ‘This sounds really lovely’. It’s been ages since I’ve had the time to go on a trip anyways. The best of both worlds, I’d say. You?”

“I was actually recommended to come here because I couldn’t afford to get to Switzerland. Damn expensive chemo. Anyhow, I know I’ll still see those grasslands, mountains and rivers soon enough myself.” He sighs somewhat dreamily.

Having heard all of that, I can’t help but think about my own version of paradise. The tropical sunlight glancing off my air-conditioned skin. The swishing of the waves in my ears as I sit on a reclined chair sipping champagne instead of the tepid, watered-down beer I can only afford in the pub...

*My throat burned as I downed my umpteenth glass of beer. What better reason to celebrate than losing my last shred of dignity? When I accidentally spilled a superior’s cup of coffee, those who were on my side, who used to offer me assistance, turned a blind eye and even sniggered as I fumbled clumsily with the mop. I’d never felt so lonely in my entire life. I could barely restrain myself, but somehow, I felt that I had to remain conscious to get home, far away from all this. I stumbled out of the pub, head spinning like a top as I veered into a dim alleyway to steady myself. Before I could register what I’d knocked into, the night sky came swirling into view.*

*“I’m so sorry, I didn’t notice you. Are you alright there?” A pale, delicate face materialized above me.*

*“No, my life is a mess, hate it, I want out from all of this.”*

*“You really ought to sober up. Here, let me just...”*

*I can't quite recall what happens next. I only remember being ushered into a cozy reception room and onto a soft couch. When I did manage to stand up without falling, I walked around the room and examined the picturesque photos that filled up the walls. Sandy coves glistening white under the tropical sun, with a pristine opal of an ocean embedded within. Resplendent castles with their turrets towering over an endless vista. Vast valleys of lush undergrowth and blooms of every kind I could imagine, a kaleidoscope of flora and fauna. Printed on the pictures were colorful phrases such as “Escape from Reality,” “Find Your Wonderland,” “Leave Your Worries and Troubles Behind” that seemed to strike a chord with and tug longingly at my weary soul. Hanging over the entrance was a huge sign with the words “Paradise Tours” painted in a sweepingly ornate cursive.*

*I wandered over to a desk on which a book as thick as my palm lay. After looking over my shoulder to check that there was no one in the room, I opened it and see a long list of names, payment methods and what I assume were the names of the tours. Leafing through the pages, I found that the entries date back to almost a decade ago, possibly even further back. Seems like a rather trustworthy enterprise.*

*“Water?”*

*I jump at the sound of her voice and slam the book shut just in time as she appears from another doorway. How did she manage to walk without making a sound?*

*“Yes please. And thanks so much for your help.”*

*“Don't mention it. I knew you were having a rough time.”*

*I gestured at the sheer number of pictures. “What's all this about?”*

*“I'm so glad you asked!” She clasped her hands in delight. “Let me introduce myself first, I'm Angel, and as you can probably see, we hold tours,” she gestures at the sign above us. “But not just ordinary ones, mind you. We*

*cater to your every need. These tours are designated to relieve all your stress and worries. Feeling like a nobody? Struggling to survive in this cold world? Can't see a way out? Fear not, because when nothing goes right, turn left and you'll chance upon your Paradise!" She looked slightly out of breath from her enthusiastic introduction. Truth be told, it is rather enticing. Life had so far been tripping me up with stumbling blocks and I was bruised all over. It sounded nice to rejuvenate myself after being stripped of my pride. I peered at the pamphlet she's waving at my face. Just as I was about to kindly refuse, I see the price and immediately sit up.*

*"Is this for real?" I ask, all grogginess flying out of the window.*

*"Why of course! Don't you see that notebook there? These are all the customers that have duly appreciated and enjoyed our tours." She nods with assurance, her eyes wide with hope.*

*I inspect the leaflet more closely, my interest truly piqued.*

*"So, what do you think? This discount isn't going to wait forever, you know." Is it just me, or do I sense a hint of impatience in that tone?*

*I squint at the pamphlet. "Wait, why are there only methods of travel? Shouldn't I at least know where I'm headed?"*

*"Well, I guess you could say it's a surprise tour. After all, the best things in life are unexpected, right? And I'd say the journey is also as, if not more important than the destination itself."*

*Seeing how skeptical I looked, she hands me the pamphlet and says, "Close your eyes, picture this, tell me what your ideal destination would be like? If you could describe paradise, how would it be?"*

*I try my best to conjure an image but it's rather difficult as I haven't been on a holiday for quite a few years. Instead, I shut my eyes and tried to focus on the first picture I laid my eyes on. Suddenly, I hear the crashing of the sea and the intermittent squawk of the seagulls resounding in my ears. The distinctive salty tang and the smell of sunscreen tickle alluringly at my nose. I feel the surrounding temperature rise, but it's not the feverish type of heat I usually experience after having a drink too much. It's a warm,*

*glowing sensation that envelopes me, drawing out the depression I've bottled inside of me from all these years. When I finally come to, I realize that my eyes are glazed over and my mouth agape.*

*"Seems like you've got it, right?" She says with a knowing smile. "Well, keep that in mind, will you now. Wouldn't you want to indulge yourself like that? These are all possible places our tour can bring you to. Isn't it exciting?"*

*The offer of having such a therapeutic getaway is indeed quite tempting.*

*"Right, and how long will it take?"*

*"There's an express version for those who want to reach their destination earlier and a luxury package with the most authentic travel experience for those who want to indulge and enjoy themselves beforehand, how does that sound?"*

*"Of course I want the luxury one. It's just a hundred dollars more than the original, isn't it?"*

*She claps her hands in finality. "Great! I'll sign you up right now. Please provide me with some of your personal information and method of payment." She eagerly hands me a form and a pen, her eyes practically glowing with glee. "Oh, and don't forget to sign right here." She taps on the line with a perfectly manicured finger. "Remember, you can't retract this offer once you've signed it."*

*I nod to show that I understand and sign with a flourish. At that moment, my mind is filled with the promise of laying down all the burdens I've had ever since my life took a turn for the worst. It has been a long time since I went on a trip that wasn't because of work. I can almost feel the waves beckoning me, and the—*

I am jolted back to the present as someone gives me a slight shove from behind. The memory ends, yet the images I'd conjured are still fresh in my mind. Our unorthodox procession begins again and before I even know it, I'm lining up to board the plane. The flight attendants offer a

uniform chorus of greetings. I smile in return as they offer me a lei of fresh, white flowers.

It's like we're going to Hawaii. What a classy way to start the journey ahead, with the sweet aroma lifting my spirits even further.

Just then, I see the pair in front of me whisper goodbye and hug each other in farewell before ambling over to their respective seats.

"That's funny, the trip hasn't even started yet," I mutter, before turning to the imminent task of finding my seat. As I finally reach the right aisle, my gaze settles on a young woman in casual wear. Instant relief washes over me. At least she's not one of those over-dressed people. Right when I'm about to sit down next to her, a protective hand shoots out.

"Hey, that's Amelia's seat!"

I return her fierce stare with a blank expression. There is no one sitting there, at least, not that I can see. The young woman nods at the bundle of blankets in her arms. I double-check my seat number and realize it's me who was standing in the wrong place. I whisper an apology and settle down into the seat farther down.

"How old is she?"

"Three."

"She's pretty quiet for a child on a plane."

I can see her beaming with pride as she strokes her daughter's hair in such a tenderly, motherly way.

"I know, I've been wanting to bring her on a plane for ages, but I haven't been able to."

Seeing how the mother cuddles and coos at her child reminds me of how I missed my mother on my first flight. I remember how desperate I was to escape to a foreign country, away from the impoverished suburb and into a new world of promises. Yet, this zeal dimmed considerably as unfamiliar faces surrounded me, people who would not even bat an eye at the child

with his eyes clenched shut, trembling in fear during those turbulences. I was already homesick before the plane even touched the ground, wishing with all my might that I could at least hold her hand. Of course, that feeling of homesickness slowly subsided into a dull afterthought—I was swamped with important tasks that required all my brainpower to focus on, not to mention maneuvering within workplace politics. I had to don a mask every day, smiling at the right people at the right time. Always on my toes in case I said the wrong thing that could lead to my demotion. Needless to say, I was worlds away from the childhood in which my mother was by my side to comfort me and give me advice. Especially when there was no one I could truly rely on anymore; everything was just smoke and mirrors. It occurs to me that I haven't seen her in a very long time.

*“Please turn off all personal electronic devices, including laptops and cell phones...”*

Before the announcement is over, I am already scrolling through the list of colleagues, businesses, and tycoons that I couldn't bear to delete. Only one “Marylin” pops up when I search in the “M” section. I don't even have my mother's phone number. All I can do is wait until this tour is over to meet up with her. A movement in the corner of my eye catches my attention. While the young mother is gently placing her bundle of blankets on the seat, the fabric unravels to show an extremely lifelike doll. I can't help but do a double take and gasp. This doesn't escape her glare as she swaddles it back into the safety of her arms.

“So...this is your daughter?”

She opens her mouth as if to retort, eyes blazing, hands curling into tight fists. But then all of a sudden, her anger ebbs away as fast as it came as her shoulders slump in defeat.

“She wasn't like this before,” the young mother murmured. “Not since the accident. It's alright though, I'll be talking to her pretty soon

once I reach the destination. Hope she recognizes me then.”

*“Those of you with the same religion should group together and say your prayers if you feel the need to. Atheists, please sit quietly in your seats and wait.”*

Something doesn't add up here. I definitely don't remember flight announcements sounding like this. I scan the faces around me to see if there's any sort of reaction towards this, but everyone has already congregated into their small circles of belief. I have nothing better to do than to toy with the lei on my neck, picking at the petals. Suddenly, I notice that it looks like a wreath of lilies. Another thought hits me. I remember the old man talking about mountains and rivers, which differed quite drastically from my ideal plan. How could they possibly cater to all our needs in just one trip? I watch with mounting confusion as the flight attendants file out of the plane. What on earth is going on? It's almost as if we're on the cusp of a plane crash. The clothes, the lack of luggage, how everything seemed to be a preparation for something else.

I tap the young mother on the shoulder. “Excuse me, but where exactly are we going? Which country are we headed to?”

“Country? I guess it depends on your religion, really. Some call it Nirvana, most call it Paradise, but it is more commonly known as Heaven,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Wait, so this is a death trip?” My voice rises to a crescendo.

“Think of it as going to a wonderland free of worries.” Another voice chimed in.

“I didn't know ‘Escape from Reality’ had such a meaning!”

Just then, the screens on the airplane seats flicker to life. “Hey, isn't this Angel from the tour company?” I gasp.

She looks a bit different from the last time I saw her. Same old features, except for her wide smile which now seems more like a grin of



malice. Why isn't everyone else surprised by this at all?

*“Ladies and gentlemen, good evening. Welcome onboard flight EUT191. On behalf of all our crew, thank you for choosing Paradise Tours. We hope that you will enjoy the journey. Happy travels ahead.”*

A feeling of dread permeates my senses, weighing my entire being down. I make a dash for the cabin doors, but stumble and fall hard on my knees as the floor beneath me shakes. I try to defy the incoming pressure pressing me downwards but to no avail. The unmistakable sound of the engines roaring fills my ears, muffling my screams for help.

## It Won't Last

*Ng Lai Lam Tiffany*

The golden sunlight of 5 p.m. filtered through the blinds, casting shadows across the turning pages and the smooth, spotless surface of the tables. The fans whirled gently in the room.

“Yo fatty!” A boy, who was in a wrinkled off-white button-down shirt, spat at the tutor sitting next to him. He was rocking back and forth on his plastic chair like he was riding a carousel without a care in the world.

‘He probably doesn’t,’ thought the tutor, Sam.

Sam rolled his eyes and pointed to the thick exercise book they were working on. “You’re missing something here, what do we put after a ‘he’?”

The boy looked up at the white ceiling, which was blindingly bright. Sam rapped his knuckles on the table, “I said, what do—”

“I know, I know, just shut up!” The boy squinted at the black mass of questions and nodded to himself.

Sighing, Sam turned away to take care of the other less difficult children. He glanced back at the boy from time to time to make sure that he was indeed focusing on his homework. The boy had his head lowered, his left hand covering the paper while the other was busy scribbling and scrubbing out unintelligible words. The side of his palm, once soft and pink, was now darkened and red from all the smudging of the pencil marks.

A giggle broke the silence of the classroom. A louder chortle followed, which then erupted into a series of high-pitched laughter. The boy couldn't stop himself, he poked Sam, who was sitting beside him. He had his back against the boy with the intention of ignoring him. The boy jabbed him even harder.

"Hey, hey, hey, look!" The boy was cracking himself up over the untold joke. He couldn't even finish the sentence without bursting into bouts of laughter. "Look! This is you!" He picked up the paper and shoved it in his face. On the paper, drawn with bold, stark strokes to exaggerate the outline, were pieces of poop in different sizes.

Sam felt his face twitch uncontrollably.

"I'm telling you, you're missing something in question three. You need to put an 's' here, see?"

"Sheesh, I know, you fatty!"

Another child tugged at Sam's sleeve. Glad for the distraction, he went over to the other table. This session would end in thirty minutes, and most of his students were still working halfway through their pile of assignments. There were always children in need, Sam reassured himself. He couldn't possibly focus on one only.

The squeaking sounds continued as the boy rocked on his chair. Just then, an instructor barged into the room. She spotted the boy and shouted, "Why aren't you sitting properly? What's wrong with you? Why can't you behave like your classmates?"

Not wanting to create a scene, Sam shushed the gossiping children.

"You'll stand if you can't sit properly." The head instructor yanked the chair away from the boy. Hands flailing, he tumbled onto the ground. He stood and kicked the leg of the table, muttering under his breath

"Learn how to control your own temper, you fat cow."

Sam stole a nervous glance at the instructor. Luckily, she didn't seem to catch it.

The head instructor's face was red and blotchy from all the

shouting. She walked towards the door, but not before stopping by Sam's side, "He's only done one piece of homework within these two hours. This is unacceptable. I didn't think I have to remind you to watch the time."

"I don't think he understands what I'm saying, I'm not even sure he knows all the letters in the alphabet—"

"Look, you don't have to make him understand anything. Just make sure he finishes all his homework on time, alright? His parents will surely complain, and I'd hate to lose another staff member." She patted him on the shoulder.

Sam was speechless for a moment, "Okay," he replied.

His appeasing smile dropped the moment the head instructor walked out of the room. He took a deep breath and turned his attention back to the boy, "Now, I told you so—"

"It's all your fault!" The boy shrugged. "How am I supposed to do it if you won't teach me?" He met Sam's gaze directly, his chin jutting in defiance.

Sam let out a strangled noise. "I won't teach you?" For a moment, he almost gave in to the urge to just grab the boy by his shoulders and shake him like a correction pen, to hear the disjointed cling-clangs when he rattled the boy's brain just to find out what was wrong with him. Instead, Sam leaned forward, put on his widest smile and said "Here, alright? Put. An. 'S'. After. The. Verb."

"Bla-bla-bla I can't hear you." The boy covered his ears with his hands and stared stubbornly at the ceiling. He proceeded to sing every

swear word he knew to the tune of ABC. It made Sam wonder where he had learnt all those considering he couldn't even tell the difference between the pronouns "he" and "she".

"Shut up! You're bothering us," One of Sam's favourite students piped up. Just as Sam wanted to thank the little girl for speaking up, she threw her rubber at the little boy.

"No one wants you here." Her eyes gleamed with glee and something akin to cruelty.

The little boy froze for a moment before he grabbed his rubber and threw it in retaliation. The after-school tutorial classroom quickly escalated to a war zone; tables turned into trenches, pencils and rubbers and rulers were flying all over the room like a hail of bullets. Sam ran around collecting dropped stationery—they were the properties of the tutorial centre, and he was solely responsible for any sort of damage.

The little boy stood on the table, a pair of compasses in his hand. He waved the sharp twin blades in the air, laughing maniacally. His classmates scurried for cover under the tables. Sam was too busy to reprimand him. The boy's face was flushed with heat; he had never felt more powerful. Riding on the rush of tyrannical triumph, he picked up the workbook from under his shoes and ripped it apart with the compass. This is the best day of my life, he thought to himself.

Of course, he doesn't know that in 15 minutes, his tutor, Sam will be stopped when he finishes one of his many shifts of this job, this exhausting part-time job that is barely keeping him afloat, and will be told that he doesn't have to worry about the little troublemaker anymore.

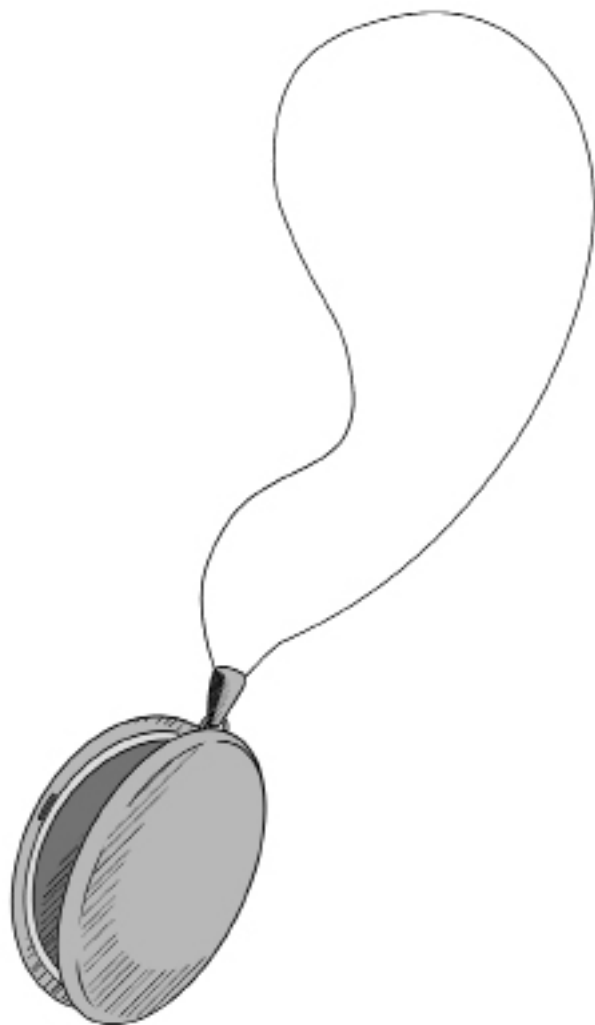
“Keep up the good work.” The instructor will tell Sam.

“Sure,” Sam will reply with a mixture of relief and resignation. Times like this will make Sam wish he knew how to fix a person—wish he didn't know that people are impossible to fix.

“Okay.”

The little boy doesn't know that the head instructor has just contacted his mother to tell her that her seven-year-old son was too much of a challenge, and that they couldn't possibly take him anymore. He doesn't know that in less than a week he'll be assigned to yet another tutorial centre. In a month he'll be forced to transfer to another school due to poor performance. He is still too young to realise that he'll be given up and rejected by others in the future again and again and again, and this is only the start. But that is all a lifetime away, and at this moment, the crumpled paper ball he's throwing at his classmates is all of his world.

# THE SNAKE



## The Snake

*Yan Ho Chun Humphrey*

I lived in a village at the mountain foot, where villagers had said it was the last that withstood. It was the place where I had spent my childhood, and today was the day when I gain an extra year to my boyhood. In the potato fields, I was working busily when I heard Zack crying for me to come instantly. To the edge of the village I ran but paused when I saw lying face down the figure of a human, just outside the barrier. I needn't take a second look as it had the physique I would never forsake. There lying outside the safe zone, was none other than the father of my own. His breath was no more by the time I dragged him back to safe shore. The Doctor shortly arrived and checked his state. Then out of his mouth trickled words that asseverate. "I'm sorry, but it is too late. I'm afraid the Viper has sealed his fate."

Villagers stopped by the following day, offering words of condolences as well as wreaths in dismay. I thanked them one by one, and at last found myself standing there, all alone under the strange sun. Dusk came not long after my newfound loneliness, and once again, I found myself staring up at the mountain, contemplating what madness the New Gods were up to with all those shimmering lights. Soon I sealed myself into slumber and dreamt of moments when the Viper killed my father. Its teeth like scythes and eyes glistening with spite and conceit and evil blight. Bringing misery and injuries to village folks for centuries. And now to my father, a merciless slaughter. I had enough of it.

From the bed, I woke just before daybreak, and into my backpack, I shoved a flask of water and food. My father's ashes too, I brought with me,



tucked safely in a jam jar which I had made with he. Then to the edge of the village I advanced, but was taken aback by a cry from Zack.

“Stop!” he yelled. “Across the barrier you may traverse, though chances of surviving will be worse. I beg for you to hear my plea, the Viper you ought to leave it be, for it is far more dangerous than you could foresee.” I closed my eyes, stepped outside the barrier, and ventured into wilderness.

All day I trekked in the forest, hoping to find the killer of my dearest. Yet all I saw was but faces of he. “Where art thou and where shall I seek thee?” This man who had shared time, love and knowledge with me. In the mornings he brought breakfast; in the evenings he brought blankets. He brought me up too. Alas, towards the quiet lone darkness had you gone off. Nor shall I bring you breakfast, nor blankets, nor back. Except for the Viper, that bastard, I’ll put an end to it.

My water ran out as I walked closer to the mountain, and feeling dryness in my mouth, I was most certain. From the stream at the mountain foot my thirst I quenched, and from the reflection I saw an old woman, alcohol-drenched. Nonchalantly she perched on a rock, wondered did I if she arrived here in sleepwalk. She had ashen hair draped to her chin and rags barely covering her time-chiseled skin. I straightened up my spine while she guzzled her moonshine. Then I turned to leave; this is not the time to peeve.

“Oi,” she spoke. I thought I head the creek of an oak. “Few years ahead for a quest to the Viper’s nest, aren’t you?” I halted.

“What do you know about the Viper?”

“Emerald scales, yellow stripes, roughly four feet long?” she replied.

“Perhaps.”

Towards the mountain peak she pointed. “That way it slithered.”

“Did it?”

“Of course, its mighty sneaky-sneaky slither you should have seen as well.”

“Aye,” I said as I advanced further away.

“There lives the Viper, you know,” the old woman continued. “At the peak, where maleficent schemes are conjured and piqued. I heard it mumbling something regarding killing an old man.”

“Mere coincidence this mustn’t be, perhaps... perhaps something known by she,” hiking up the mountain, I resumed, disregarding the voice behind me which boomed. Thereafter I spied a shadowy figure; on the ground it hunkered. Astounded, I was only to find her presence once more.

“How did you get here?” I asked. From her rags, she pulled out her flask. “A guide, a chaperone you shall require,” she replied. “I know a few tricks up its scales that sleazy old snake has acquired.”

“Not to be rude, though neither are you sober, nor young, nor helpful, and I mean it.”

“Awfully rude you are.” she called, as she continued trailing from afar.

“There are things that I know,” she said, catching up. “About that serpent, and the New Gods of old.”

“Boflocks.”

“Is it?” the old woman said. “Allow me as your jocund company, and the techniques to kill a snake I shall teach thee.”

“Kill it myself, I will, with thy bare hands,” I said.

“Nay, nay you won’t.”

Search under rocks I did, in holes, on top of branches, but the Viper was not to be found. It must have slithered higher up. And so we climbed.

Sleep was rough in the mountains and we had breakfast in the morning. Bread and marmalade I filled my stomach, while on the hip flask the old woman chugged. We continued ascending afterwards and by noon high enough were we to gaze down on the landscape properly. There below, my village stood, utterly unremarkable, with just a few round huts and trails of smoke.

“Are there any other villages in the world?” I asked.

“Nay”

“Were there?”

“Aye.”

“When?”

“Long long time ago, there once used to be gigantic villages called ‘cities’, where tons of people lived for centuries.”

“What happened?”

“Ambition,” from her hip flask the old woman drank. “Say, kiddo... When you exact your revenge, and when the Viper is finally gone... You think you’ll be forever happy afterwards?”

“Yes.”

“Hmm,” said the old woman. “Hmm...”

Search under rocks I did, in holes, on top of branches, but the Viper was not to be found. It must have slithered higher up. And so we climbed.

Once again, sleep was rough, and we awoke to a dawn of grey and duff. We embarked in silence, and soon we were met with thick fog spanning across the horizon. Daylight looked wrong and smells of rust and metal lingered along.

“What is happening,” I asked.

The old woman said nothing and swigged on her hip flask. Then something caught my eye, specks of silver buried nigh.

“What’s all those in the ground?”

“Old science.”

“What’s this science you speak of?”

The hag replied, "Imagine magic, only it's real."

Now on the ground more pieces of machinery scattered. Fragments of glass, plastic, raspberry pi, scrapped rusty giant structures of geometry and industry in the corner of my eyes.

"All these... things, who built them?"

"Well, the New Gods, of course."

"So, why have they abandoned them?"

"To children the accorded toys, eventually they always get bored," she said.

And about us appeared isometric symbols and lines, esoteric glyphs and signs. There were lights flashing in the distance as well. Readily, the wind picked up, and the foul metallic fog grew heavier. I could notice the rocks were not really rocks, but slabs of hexagonal metallic blocks. Leaves did not grow on trees; instead shards of turquoise crystal blowing in the breeze. Further away laid a glowing pedestal, where on top of it sat a pair of spectacles.

The old woman picked them up and handed them to me. "Take them boy, and put it on. For this is the pair of glasses, with which you will know the Viper."

"Glasses? But my vision is fine," I whined.

"No. It ain't." She shoved them into my face.

Suddenly my body I was pulled away from, and senses I was stripped of. The space recognised by me was replaced by arrays of fields and virtual reality, and into me information was forced. The height of time, the width of space. With matter the universe was invoked, and that matter is a point, a wave, and a joke. Upon my eyes webs of logic intertwined as the basis and beginning, and endless madness at the pinnacle of everything. Shapes and form crashing to form the state of becoming, and dancing to the tunes of ever declining. Until finally I saw myself in true perspective: a speck and a smudge and a spot and a dot in a grain of galactic sand amidst a whole trillion of beaches in the galaxy, where each and every one of them holds more grains of sand, and more grains of sand, and more grains of sand, and more grains of sand...

The pair of spectacles was removed from me.

“What did I just experience?” I stammered.

“Oh nothing of flamboyance, just some timey-wimey thirty-first century science. A bit before your time, I know they are.” She handed me the pair of glasses. “Keep these safe, eh?”

“Who are you?”

“Oh,” she replied. “Who’s anyone?”

Search under rocks I did, in holes, on top of branches, but the Viper was not to be found. It must have slithered higher up. And so we climbed.

After dawn we woke on the next morning, and a fine view of my village far down below we found greeting. Curiouser I got and asked, “Why is the world dead?”

## The Snake

The old woman said, “Smarter the people grew and then they kissed adieu.”

“To where would they reoccupy?” I said, pointing at the sky. “There?”

She shrugged, “Come on, it’s time to march on.”

We continued ascending on the mountain trail, in search for the unholy grail. High above us the winds sough, and the village down below. My father came to mind again as I imagined the days to come overcast and plain. He could have celebrated birthday with me, while I could have shared more time with he. Though now with none to talk to, after the morning when he left without saying toodaloo. Life devoid of felicity but suffer. I swear would tear it apart, by the time I found the Viper.

Not so far ahead from us, a stream I noticed quite viscous. Its waters stained in scarlet shades, trickling like the Styx round the house of Hades. The stream thickened as we rose higher. It was now a river of blood. Along the riverbank laid notes, coins, precious jewels, and scepters and staves. Fiery flames seemingly scorched the ground ajar, and smoldering vapours rose from afar. The surrounding atmosphere reeked of death and glory, and dominion. A single sword stood tall and erect, and under the soil the blade it kept. Its hilt glistening with hues of purple, red and gold. The old woman waved for me to take a few steps close.

“Unsheathe it from the ground, boy.” she said.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“This shall be the sword which you will use to behead the Viper.”

## The Snake

From the earth I wrenched the sword in a cumbersome manner, and I brandished it while dazzled by its glamour. At once great pillars of fire and lightning leapt from the tip and the ground was ablaze and crisp. I brandished it twice and this time swarms of locusts and frogs shot out. I shrieked with laughter as my stentorian voice echoed over the walls of the mountain thereafter. Power courses through my veins as if I had authority over all plains. None dared to disobey, nor the Viper shall shun from my dismay. I bellowed in more laughter while everything before me transformed into rage, malignance and sheer power. “Thou shalt always kill,” I thought. And I knew perfectly well that none could stop me from unleashing hell. And more than that, with an iniquitous certainty I supposed, I could end the world if I hoped.

The next morning came and I ate in silence, while in the distance the old woman doused herself like a vagrant. Afterwards we resumed the usual hike. I asked, “How long until we find the Viper?” The old woman continued to strut and kept her mouth shut.

“Isn’t that thing empty already?” I questioned. She turned the flask upside down and out poured a constant stream of booze in golden brown.

“Are you one of the New Gods?” I asked.

“Do I look recent?” the old woman responded.

“Then... what happened to the New Gods?”

“The Viper.”

“It killed them?”



“More or less.”

I stopped. “Well how on earth shall I slay the snake if even the New Gods it could break?”

“The unease in you it twined has certainly crossed my mind,” the old woman murmured. “Still, thy glasses and sword will serve you well. Not to mention we have a few more things to collect before we reach where the Viper dwelled.”

“Like what?” But soon enough, music entered my ears, upbeat, drawing me in.

Welcomed by the leftovers of a great party we were. Empty bottles, shattered baubles of multiple tints.

“What happened to this place?” I asked.

“Abandonment.” the old woman responded.

In the weathered ruins of an ostentatious house burnt partly to the ground I found a tankard in much confound. Inside the tankard which I gleaned was what looked and smelled like mead.

“Go on,” the old woman said, “have a pint.”

“What is it?” I inquired.

“This is the indulgence, with which you will kill the Viper.”

I recall getting drunk and letting go of the cup. Then by the hand

the old woman I grabbed and along the lines of lush up she blabbed. Led into a dance I was, and the mountain swirled together with us, colours blurring in the process.

“What’s going on?” I shouted.

The old woman exclaimed “Dance you bugger, dance like there’s no days thereafter!”

And dance we did, all across the mountain, over the debauchery, and under the moon. It was at this moment all thoughts about the village, the Viper, and my father flew beyond my mind.

“What if there’s no point in everything?”

The old woman serenaded, “Who cares?”

And she was right, who cares. Tragedies happen, words misspoken, people die in accidents. Life’s but a game, everything’s only a façade. Salvation’s a lie, divine retribution’s nothing more than pesky flies, none had meaning and none meant as demeaning. I had seen the heart of all matters and I knew there is no heart, nor any is of matter. Suffering is eternal and that’s a joke God played on the mortals, for nothing more than his own sick amusement we were in his grand scheme of giggles. We waltzed to the opus magnum, steps synchronising in perfect rhythm, and stars spiraling in the above chasm. The mountain deflecting waves of reckless abandonment, as nothing mattered at present.

“Fuck ‘em” I roared, “fuck all of ‘em.”

And dance we did to the nihilistic plight and long into the night,

until the sun brought about light.

I woke up with a throbbing head the next day and in my mouth the taste of ash stayed. Already up the old woman was, and a pipe she smoked in her jaws.

“Feeling alright?” She wondered.

“Urgh...” I mumbled. “Was the dancing really necessary?” The woman nodded.

“It certainly was. Ándale, closing to the epilogue our prolonged endeavour. Impossible it was for the Viper to hide forever.”

I came to a sudden realisation. “Journeying with you I shall not go until you tell me what the hell is happening pronto! Whiter are the New Gods bound, where does the Viper mound, and your identity you shall expound.”

“Yeah yeah, whatever. The serpent’s head awaits you to server.” She set off walking, but on the same spot I kept my footing. Around she turned after a few paces and she rolled her eyes as she realised I was not following her traces.

“A’ight, a’ight” she groaned. “What is the current year?”

“Hmm... 478.”

“Right, that’s only by your calendar. By mine, it’s the 98th century. Wonderful things your ancestor did, ergo powerful and wise they became, you following? Those objects, the glasses, the sword, the tankard, all these

are the things left behind by them. Relics.”

“Relics of what?”

“Show you I will.”

“Nay!” I yelled. “That’s enough of your games.”

The old woman then snapped. “Look, all these things you did, solely were they for the satisfaction of your id. You killed your father, this was your bother, right? What you wanteth he had asked for your birthday. To whom you replied, ‘A meteorite would make me gay.’ So beyond the totem he ventured out, to find one for your happiness to sprout. And that’s how he met his woe. So don’t take all this out on me old soul.”

Lost for words I was, and quietly I replied. “How did you know that?”

“Wisdom I have, aeons precede you. All I want here, merely is to help you through. So would you just shut up with your questions and give this old hag an interlude?”

I collected my things and neither of us spoke in the remaining walks.

Almost invisible was the village down below, while the mountain peak felt more reachable. Round a corner we turned and upon us a spacious cave could be discerned. A picture of a king, then a queen met the light, then more came into sight. Their portraits regal and proud, legacy and divine rights their faces endowed. The further we entered the cave, the more foreign I thought the impression they gave. Not all of them were portraits now, scenes of battles, of rulers, of machines, of wonderful

towers reaching the lands of Evangeline. Episodes from the history of my species never heard by me, let alone contemplated their philosophy.

Millions dead and gone, while nations crumble and reborn, the great human project, forgotten, as though a dream upon waking. They were the testaments to a time when billions coexisted on the surface of a fragile marble among the ink dark of space, holding out against the hostile cosmos, and yet within themselves greater threats lurked and arose. But somehow, against all odds and sense, they did hold out for quite a while, and at the same time, managed to better themselves slowly, as toddlers attempting to climb steadily. Thereafter, for some reason, devolving again. The Great Yawning, The Second Forgetting. Then they declined, into savagery, and finally, dust.

Placed right ahead were a pair of armored boots.

“There,” the old woman said. “Having those on your feet, you shall never perish nor fleet. Escape the curse of mortals as well if you wished for longer time to dwell. This is the armor which you will defend yourself from the Viper.”

Lowered my soles into them I did and the boots tightened themselves to fit.

“And one last relic,” the old woman said.

Towards the altar she reached, a necklace, and on that necklace placed a locket. And in the locket was a picture of my father. She placed the necklace Over my head.

“To remember,” she said. “This is the story which you will bring to

kill the Viper.”

Ready to face the Viper I finally felt, since the beginning of the journey up the mountain and to where the evil snake dwelt. From now on it would only be a short walk to meet the Viper.

I passed a couple flights of stairs leading out of the cave and found the peak waiting. Out there it was raining, and the wind was howling. On a small plateau I found the Viper, with its back facing its executioner, staring far off into the dead wilderness below. “It’s all yours,” the woman said. “Go settle the score.”

Activating the glasses of the New Gods I was shown the essence of the Viper. It’s heinous heart, its scheming mind, and its disdain for the remaining Earthers. Its rear I approached silently, heart beating anxiously, eyes widened and one hand clutching the locket dearly. And then I thought about my father, the futility of his death and the loneliness it dealt. My eyes I closed, screamed, and brought the sword down with so much force that it struck a grating chord out into the rain, and rang all the way back to the mountain’s base. I opened my eyes. The Viper... had vanished.

Around I turned to the old woman and asked, “Where has it gone? Seen it you hath?”

“Ney,” she said. “See it I did not, for sake of existence it does not.”

Now the rain was pouring. In my armor I stood speechless. The old woman continued, “An evil snake dwelling on a mountain inflicting death and disease to the village did you believeth? The world so simple that only a single thing is responsible for all the bad days did you believeth? God, what is it with you lot? Have everything you already did, did you

knoweth? And yet you spit on it! Like in some enormous mansion you may have lievth and one day you find a brick chipped, so the whole damn house you burn it down. Everything down there you got. Everything to you I giveth. Infinite knowledge, power, endless life, yet miserable you still are. How burdensome playing deity is did you knoweth? I'd give anything, just to give up knowing everything.”

The rain had stopped by now, and as the cloud cleared, buildings translucent and shimmering, advanced science and technology appeared in the distance.

“Your ancestors, in their hands they had everything they wished for,” the old woman said, “and yet happiness they still yearned more. With them the Viper was: misery, chaos, death.

Send it away with perfect knowledge they trieth.

Stifle it with unlimited power they trieth.

Negate it with abandonment they trieth.

Live a longer life they trieth.

Cling to each other they trieth.

The spectacles, sword, tankard, armor, and necklace.

Search under rocks they did, in holes, on top of branches, but the Viper was not to there. It must have slithered higher up.

And so they climbed,

and climbed,

and climbed,

and found nothing.

All these times running around in their miserable universe, couldn't stop

feeling miserable as if they were cursed. Now gone are all of the New Gods. Everyone except me. And now gone are most of your species as well. Everyone except your village, in the archaic mode they lieve. You lot I keepeth around because it was a nice souvenir to remind me of how we were once. Gone is your father and I'm sorry for his loss. Never see him again until the river Styx you cross. Though a whole village down there of people who loveth you prevails. And here you are on a bloody mountain, swinging at the wind and loudly you wail.

Tragedies happen, and the reasons behind are often complicated. Viper there is none, nor the devil, nor a crime lord. And never will there be a time where everything lasts forever, and nothing hurts once more. But the strength is in taking a good look into the abyss, into the eyes of the Viper, and then choosing to still be a good human, even in face of great uncertainty, and malice, and that day when everything will forever be gone. As for now, here with you it still is. Ages you still have before it disappears. Stop wasting your time on snakes and mountains. Bid farewell.”

From my backpack she reacheth and to me the jam jar she giveth. Wrapping her arms around my shoulder, slowly the lid of the jar she turneth. The wind caught the ashes of my father and spread them all over the mountain. Quite a scene it was in the last light of dusk, where million pieces of tiny meteorites, each ending their cosmic journey in this stound and bounding towards everyday ground.

The old woman continueth, “Your species, once mine too, the only creatures allergic to happiness we must be. Rule the worlds we used to, and still fought over who got more ice cream for dessert. Still wanted to pretend from dust we didn't come, refused to recognise that meaning and solace aren't to be found in the heavens, but in the ordinaries of daily living.”



“Fine we will be when we knew everything we thinketh.

Fine we will be when we dominated over everything we thinketh.

Fine we will be when we forgot everything we thinketh.

Fine we will be when we outlived everything we thinketh.

Fine we will be when we cling to everyone we thinketh.

And even then, we weren't fine. Because that isn't how the rules of life work.

Go home, son. Stop dreaming about being a hero, a messiah, a warrior. Just exist for a while and be decent. That's heroism enough, and it's how it's always been done. Hey, keep the glasses, sword, tankard, and armor you wanteth? Rule the world with them you can, if you like.”

“Ney.”

“Good choice.”

“The first person from the village to come up and face the Viper am I?”

“Sonny,” the old woman explained, “One by one, climb the mountain everyone from the village did, and to all of them the same treatment I giveth. Go back down in the end they all did. Even your father. God, quite determined he was to crack open the mysteries to stupid metaphysics... I can undoubtedly see where you got these traits. Woe to him for not making it back to the village. The last one to come here you are, so go home, be decent. About you, a shit the universe doesn't giveth. Your village, your family, me, we do. Remember your dad. Love him always. God knows how much he loved you. Come up here anytime you like, and together we'll hang out and him we'll remembereth.”

## The Snake

The glasses, the armor and the tankard I took off, and on the ground the sword I laid.

“Can I keep the locket?” I asked.

“Certainly,” she said. “And the memories too, don’t forget them, yours they will always be.”

The veil of ashes was long gone. The sky was clear and fine. I set off back down the mountain, heading for the village. The return journey would not be a gruesome one, and I would not have minded it even if it was. Because time to remember, it had giveth to me.

## A Fei

*Chang Chia Wei Wayne*

“A man was shot dead for harassing passers-by, vandalizing public property, and attacking a police officer around the riverbank area this afternoon.” According to the police. The man, identified by his former colleagues by the name of A-Fei, came to our country as a factory worker, but he ran away from his original position and later took up the job as a fisherman around the time of his death. This afternoon, he arrived at the riverbank at around 1 p.m. He sat down by the river, and as shown on the CCTV camera, took out a packet of white powder from his pocket, and inhaled it in through his nostrils. During the next 30 minutes, he appeared to be very hyped, taking off his shirt and running around. He then approached a young couple who happened to pass by, and exposing his genitals, he scared them away. He then lay down on the ground and fell asleep.

Officer Lin, who had been in this post for 10 years, was on patrol in a police car when he received the news of a naked man scaring off passers-by and acting very weirdly. According to Lin, when he arrived, he woke the man and asked him to follow him back to the police station, but the man spoke in a language he couldn't understand. Lin tried to take the man by force, but instead, the man bit him, threw stones at him, and leapt for the police car, wanting to take control of it. Just before the man could drive the car away, the policeman stood in front of the car, pulled his pistol out, and fired nine bullets into his head. At the hospital, the coroner concluded that the man died from being shot in his head, and that he had traces of addictive drugs in his body, which might have led to him losing control. His family members were notified, and his cremations would be

taken home by his family.

“This incident has brought about public outcry against foreign workers who take up jobs locally but decide to run away from their employers. Citizens fear that these people might pose a threat to the lives and property of residents. “He should be grateful as it is a privilege for him to be accepted into our country. He should thank his employer for giving him a job, or thank us for welcoming him here, but he didn’t,” A mother of two commented. “The government has promised to step up measures to capture runaway workers and make sure they are not a concern for citizens’ daily activities.”

I heard about this when I arrived home that day. I took off my shoes, belt and shirt, and got ready for dinner, as I sat down in front of the television. The hourly evening news replayed all the way until evening news started. I stared at the screen and saw the anchor standing there. It was me. Yes, I was the evening anchor. I studied the eyes of the anchor closely, professional yet soulless. As shocking as the piece of news was, I was speaking like it was just another day of reporting the weather. I have realized over the years that I have already become immune even when reporting news such as city-wide blackouts, terrorist attacks, or perhaps even world wars. Even the thought of reporting about aliens attacking us doesn’t unnerve me at the slightest. Did I really graduate from four years of journalistic training just to be numbed to social events? Seeing how flawed and undetailed the news was, I decided to carry out a side-project, which I had not done in years—to look into A-Fei’s life. Basically anything related to his background, social relationships and what he had gone through this entire time.

My first interviewee was A-Fei’s boss when he was still a fisherman. His name was Pang. He was a chubby man in his fifties, and his company

sold freshly caught fish of all kinds to the market vendors. When I walked into his office, he smiled in a very courteous yet unenthusiastic manner, even slightly afraid, as if I was going to sue him.

“A-Fei? That foreigner? I haven’t seen him in couple of days already. You tell him this, if he isn’t coming back to work, I will fire him! What? What did you say? He’s dead? A-Fei is dead? It was on the news last week? Oh, I didn’t know that. Ok, well, seems like he can’t come back to work anymore, can he? Rest in peace. So, what are you here for?”

“Now, I’m definitely not racist against him or any of my workers. A-Fei was a good worker, and all my workers behave well. But let’s be frank. The reason why we hire those foreign workers, and the reason why our government allows them to come work here, is because they’re cheap to hire. We can pay them with an amount less than our own minimum wage, but they would think it’s already a sufficient amount. The amount is already enough for them to provide for their families and save money for their future. Think about how many local youngsters are struggling to even provide for themselves. Those foreign workers should be grateful. But instead, some of them contact some god-damn organizations and protest against us for higher pay. Some of them even run away from their employers to work illegally. A-Fei was like that, wasn’t he? He came here under the referral of one of my workers, but I know he used to work somewhere else. I have some friends whose workers also ran away. They ended up needing to pay more to recruit a new worker. I despise people who are disloyal to their employer, but A-Fei came to work for me, and I needed someone to catch fish, so how could I refuse? These workers demand the most basic respect and ask for higher pay from us, but they have never put themselves in our shoes and have not the faintest idea of how difficult it is to hire foreign workers and make sure they’re safe here.”

“Living conditions? Foreign fishermen complained about bad living conditions? Certainly not! I give my workers the best treatment they can have. Can I show you around? Oh, I’m afraid I cannot show you where they live and how they live, ’cause, um, that would be, um, rude, yes, rude and impolite towards these workers. But I assure you, in my business, I treat my workers like how I treat my friends and family. I am personally devoted to protecting their income and living conditions when they are working for me. There is nothing for them to worry about. Now, you make sure you tell this good story and not convey it the wrong way, ok?”

What a big fat liar.

As a journalist, I knew I could only take capitalists’ words with a grain of salt. I needed to interview one of his workers. I waited at the harbor and, at 2 p.m., I found one of A-Fei’s coworker, Nguyen. He seemed very nervous when I approached him. He had some white powder in his nostrils, and he looked a bit timid and guilty. However, when I asked about A-Fei and their living conditions on the boat, he seemed to be more relieved. The interview was conducted under this situation. While he looked like he was unable to focus, I could tell that he meant every word he said.

“Before we came to work here, we had to borrow a lot of money. The interest rate in our country is high, and so we have a lot of debt because of borrowing money. In our first year, we cannot save money because we must pay back our debts. We cannot even provide for our family in our first year. We live and work on the same boat from 2 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day. On the boat, we don’t have clean water to drink, because we are on the sea, and our employer is not willing to give us clean water. On the boat there is no place to pee. Sometimes when we feel hungry on the boat, thirsty and tired, we still have to work. We live like dogs, but we have no choice.”

“Yes, A-Fei was a really good friend. A very kind person. One time, I almost ran into trouble. What trouble? Um...I...forgot my resident permit, and the police stopped me. They wanted to arrest me, and I could not let them do that. I still had to make money. I needed to raise my family. I started panicking. Then A-Fei came and told the police officer that he knew me, and that I was his friend, that he could go and fetch my permit. Then the police let me go. A-Fei was a really good friend. When I was hungry, he shared his food with me. When I wanted to talk, he talked with me. When I missed home, he comforted me. I really miss him. He was like a brother to me.”

“White powder? Oh no, no, no. I don’t know where that powder came from. No, I did not give it to him. It’s none of my business.”

I was not sure whether Nguyen gave him the white powder at first, but after judging from his reaction, I was certain that he did. Perhaps the trouble that he ran into with the police was also because of the drug. I did not, however, know how he got the powder, why he gave it to A-Fei, and why A-Fei accepted it. But one thing I knew was that life was certainly very hard for low-level workers like them. They have spent so much time and effort working for the meager income that they did not have time for anything else.

Surprisingly, the next interviewee was a young lad who worked in a convenience store and happened to know A-Fei.

“A-Fei? Oh yes, the foreign fisherman who often came by the shop. I remember him. Every now and then he would walk into my shop to buy bottles of water and lots of bread. I wondered why he wouldn’t buy lunchboxes if he was so hungry then. After a few times, I recognized him and started talking to him, but he barely understood me. It was not

surprising as I knew he's a foreigner. After a while, he picked up a bit of Chinese, though I don't know where he picked it up from. Since then, when he came by my shop, he would try to strike up a conversation, but I could only smile back at him. We remained having a hard time understanding each other."

"I'm not being racist or exclusive. It's just that he's different. He and his friends are different from us. I mean, it's not because they do not understand Chinese. I know quite a few foreign healthcare workers who can speak in Chinese fluently, but no, it's not about the language. The thing is, we know nothing about them. Nothing about the nature of their people, their customs, and how they are like. We wanted to try and be friends with them, but to be honest, they can scare us off sometimes. A few months ago, two male foreign workers abducted and raped a high school girl in this neighborhood. Not too long after, some foreign workers were arrested for possessing and dealing of drugs, remember? Of course, we know that scums like these are very few and most people are not like that, yet we cannot help but distance ourselves from them."

"However, I really hope to know more about them. If journalists and news agencies like yours could put in some time to tell the stories of the migrant workers, instead of telling random stories of traffic accidents and social events, that could create unity and mutual understanding, which would be really good."

I attended A-Fei's funeral, hosted by the church he used to go to.

"Brothers and sisters, we come together today to remember our brother, A-Fei. Most of us may remember him as a diligent and enthusiastic young man who was dedicated to his work and friends above anything else, but that is not what I remember about him. Recalling the very first time I



met him, it was at the harbor during our fishermen outreach last year. He had only just known who we were and what we were doing, but remained courteous, though timid and unwilling to open up. Upon providing him with assistance, he was convinced we came with good intentions, and we eventually got to know him more. We invited him to church, but even better, he invited us into his life. Being a pastor, I counsel people in our church, so I am naturally close with most people. But with A-Fei, there was this sense of familiarity that instantly drew me to him.”

“To me, not only was he a brother who displayed unwavering faith, he was a hero who never ceased to push through life. Many of you know how harsh the living conditions were for him but being the optimistic person he had always been, he said the good thing about this work was that even though the situation was tough, he had earned much more than simply staying at home, and he was grateful for it.

“I have a dream, pastor,’ he said, ‘that once I save enough money, I will buy a house and open up a restaurant in my hometown. My children will be old enough to help me out at the restaurant by then, and my family would be able to save money so that we can enjoy more entertainment and my children can go to university.’

“The last time I saw A-Fei was the previous Sunday. After the morning service, he came and shared with me about how happy he was. After a year of struggling to pay off debts, he had finally cleared them and could start saving money while planning for his future. ‘My dream is coming true! My dream is coming true, Father!’ he exclaimed. I was genuinely happy for him because he finally saw the light and found his way back to the dream he had told me about. Little did I know that would be the last time we talked...”

“If his experience in life has taught us anything, it is that our Lord

delivers the afflicted from suffering and brings peace to them. Our dear brother is now with our Lord, and though we still grieve the loss, let us remember the assurance of being able to see him and our loved ones in eternity again. And while we are still alive, let us view A-Fei as a model by living out the best life we can. Rest in peace, brother.”

From all the interviews I have conducted, I had in mind a bigger picture of the harsh living conditions these migrant workers suffered from, how they continued to be exploited from the very beginning when they planned to work abroad, all the way until they stopped working, or even to the extent of dying. These hardships are never broadcasted by mainstream media, whose sole purpose is to make money by selling shitty, common news to the audience. By gathering all the interviews I have conducted, I wanted to make all this into a news topic. This is not to overturn the public’s perspective of A-Fei’s incident, but to tell the whole story of migrant workers’ journey and life here. I went to see my boss and conducted the very last interview in my career as a journalist with him.

“I really appreciate what you’re doing. I really do. But I cannot let you go through with this story. Just imagine, with everyone in the society being so afraid of immigrants, this story may draw our readers away from us. If we publish this story during such a sensitive time, our readers will pelt us with questions such as, ‘Why don’t you talk about the poor cop who got beaten up by the illegal foreigner?’ Such topic is sensitive to them. Think about what the outcome will be. Now, we avoid being the type of press to defame migrant workers of our own accord, but this is already the best we can do. Remember, our support comes from the public.

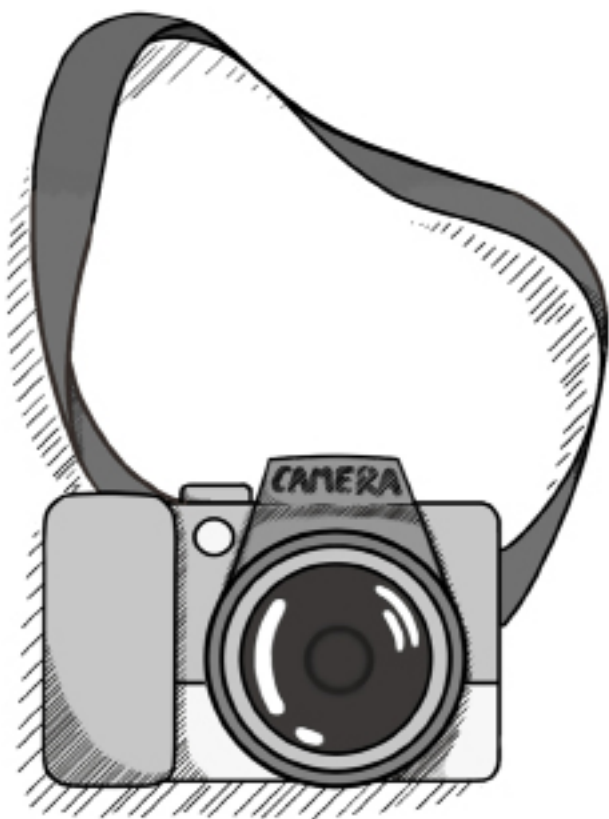
“I want you know that, in another situation, I would go ahead with what you want to do right now. Hence, I ask that you empathize with me. Were you in my position, with so much to care about as an editor, you

would not want to carry on with it. It's one thing to be a well-informed storyteller, but it's another thing to risk your reputation and embarrass yourself and your company in front of other media companies and the audience. I'm sorry, but I must ask you to refrain from publishing it.”

After this ‘interview’, I could no longer bear it. I did my best to be informed and inform the public about the true story, but in the end, it was my editor who prohibited me from publishing simply for the noble purpose of ratings. I quit my job on the spot.

A-Fei's death aroused a lot of controversy, not only about illegitimate migrant workers, but also about whether the police should have gone so far as to fire nine bullets into his head. Yet, little, if any, was made known about the kind of existence the foreign worker had led, how suppressed his working and living conditions had been, how he had come abroad to fight for the well-being of his family, and how he had been confined to the small world of work and sleep, without being able to be as free as a normal man can be. It made me feel blessed that while his decision led to life and death, I only had to worry about what my next job would be.

# A WORLD OF ONE'S OWN



## A World of One's Own

*Ng Po Yi Mabel*

It is our two-year anniversary, and like all couples, we revisit a place we have gone to before. We don't know where to go, and I have thought, "might as well go to Cheung Chau again". I wonder if all couples inevitably run out of places to go or things to do like us.

I have been sitting on a nearby bench when he finally arrives at five-thirty. He has been busy with stuff, he says matter-of-factly. He is always busy these days, busy with learning to sing, to speak Japanese, to edit photos, to develop a mobile game, basically doing everything a normal college boy is not supposed to be doing; they are supposed to be young and dumb and waste time being with friends doing nothing, right? To be living a life before it is taken away by adulthood.

"Okay, babe, let's just go," I say. I have learned it the hard way that being angry with him never ends up well, as it usually just leads to me not being understanding enough. So, I swallow my pride and hold his hand, reminding myself that Chris doesn't celebrate anniversaries at all, and today shouldn't be anything special, really.

We are just in time of catching the ferry that arrives around the time of sunset. We won't have time to explore the Cheung Po Tsai Cave, or ride our bikes around the island, take photos in front of the temple, or do other things I have expected us to do today, but it's no big deal, surely. Whatever we do on a date is good as long as we are together. As we ride, the afternoon glow shines on our faces through the window, still hot and slightly dazzling, with shades of marigold and cantaloupe in the mix. Our shadows are imprinted on the floorboard, tilted, a motionless presence

on the rocking vessel. It makes us look young again. Not that we are old; We are both just 20. But once two people stay together for a long time, they would seem to be worn down by everything they have been through together; like the fights that are never quite resolved or the heartaches that never truly go away. At least that's how I feel. There is this kind of fatigue that cannot be explained or ignored, the kind that makes it hard for the two of us to talk through things and set the record straight. Chris tells me it is simply a stage couples have to go through, and then it will be a smooth-sailing journey from there. I can only take his word for it. I mean, what do I know about love and relationships when I have only had one?

We are seated in the middle of a row next to a window, and our bags and belongings are placed in the seat next to each of us. I take out the camera I have recently bought from my backpack. Taking photos with a camera somehow feels more ritualistic and formal than doing it with a phone, which I have considered when packing my things. Today is our two-year anniversary after all, and it feels like a lifetime has passed ever since I have met Chris.

I turn the camera on and flip the monitor around to face us, wanting to take a selfie to mark the day, but Chris does not look up from his iPad, so I end up taking a shot of his face from the side. The sunlight was right behind him, so the background is too bright to show the sea, and his face is completely dark. His features shaded and blurred except for his brown hair. I can hardly recognize him. I can't even remember the last time I looked at him, as in looking really close at him, to decide whether there is any acne on his cheeks or forehead, if his eyebrows are straight or curved, eyelashes bushy or sparse, or if his lips turn upwards or downwards at the end. Such knowledge that is once instilled in me no longer exists in my mind, it's just like how the old doll you swore was stored in the attic when you were a kid just cannot be found again, no matter how hard you

try. It's like something that has vaporized out of thin air. A feeling erupts in my chest like a spark, and I want to vomit. It's probably seasickness. I put the camera strap around my neck and lean back a little against the seat.

Last time, when we rode there on our half-year anniversary, Chris told me a bunch of ghost stories and quizzed me with those situation puzzles where he tells me the ending and I have to figure out the whole plot by asking the storyteller yes-no questions. I loved figuring them out piece by piece, and it was always satisfying when he told me the endings. I don't exactly remember the stories anymore, but it must have been fun. I guess the stories didn't quite matter because we were so, so happy.

Yet, the stories run out quicker than I thought. I love hearing him talk. Sometimes he goes on and on about something he is passionate about, like philosophy or music or business. I don't quite understand when he talks about business though, perhaps because of the difference in our family background. But I still love hearing his voice. As for now, I sit silently and watch him play Solitaire, at a complete loss of what to say as the cards go flying over the screen. He is good at this game, I think to myself, he is good at a lot of things. My mind wanders off, trying to think of anything, anything other than his hand fluttering over the screen instead of holding mine, and the fact that my mind is coming up blank, on the brink of losing hold of this imaginary thread that has strung our relationship so meticulously together through episodes of laughter and scorns and ugly stuff.

We get off the ferry around six, sluggishly dragging ourselves up the bridge among the sea of foreign tourists and residents returning home. It is a Sunday, so the roads are filled with pedestrians. There is another couple like us, the girl leaning her head on the boy's shoulder. Watching them makes me grow conscious of us, and I inspect our steps, trying to

match mine with Chris's. He doesn't seem to notice and marches on, our loosely linked hand hanging in the small space between our bodies. When we reach the road, I ask him where he wants to go. Let's head to the beach to watch the sunset, he decides. I want to look at the shops first, so I pull him to the snack stalls scattered along the pier to see if there's anything we would like. He gets an iced pineapple slice and I get a watermelon one, just like last time. It is still as big as my face, but it tastes bland, watered down. I could have sworn it has tasted better before, but I would not bet on it.

"How is your pineapple?" I ask, still chewing on my piece of watermelon.

He takes another bite out of his. "It tastes fine."

We continue walking in the direction of the beach.

"Can I try?" I take the pineapple slice from him and bite into it.

I have never liked the taste of pineapple, but there is no harm in trying. His is more frozen than mine, and the unexpected chill numbs my gums. I chew through the pain, nonetheless. The chill from it drowns out any possible flavor in it, so I simply nod and pretend I like it before giving the popsicle back. It is currently May, the air is stuffy and hot, and the sweat makes my T-shirt stick to my skin, the heat irritating and persisting. I lick my watermelon slice, letting the refreshing juice cool my nerves, though not very effectively.

He glances at his wristwatch, it reads six-twenty. "Let's walk faster, we should be able to get to the beach in 15 minutes," he says, quickening his pace.

"Mmm-hmm." I roll my shoulder and try to ignore the heavy



weight on my back.

“We can come back to eat seafood at around seven.” I kind of want to tell him to just relax and stop planning everything, but I know it won't change anything. I follow suit behind him.

We have to carefully maneuver the crowd to avoid crashing into other people; friends walking in packs, families with strollers, foreigners with suitcases. But I still bumped into a man's shoulder, hard. When I turn around, I can't even identify who it is. I keep walking.

“Maybe if you had come sooner, we wouldn't have to rush.” I half-shout over people's chatter and the noises of vehicles driving by, annoyance brimming to the point of almost overflowing.

He has the decency to slow his down pace. “I said I was busy.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know.” I let go of his hand a little too forcefully and wipe the sweat from my forehead.

He stops and glares at me. I stare back. People are passing by us without taking notice. He turns away.

I let out a sigh. “Fine, fine, I'm sorry.” I hurry a few steps to catch up and take his hand.

“What have I said before about your attitude?” He snapped, not looking at me.

I find myself wanting to let go of his hand again, or stop walking, or even just take the earliest ferry and leave right then, but I control myself

and walk along without saying anything back. I want to demand him to hear what I have to say for once, or sit on the ground to make him stop, or even cry, but I don't do any of them.

We finally arrive at the beach twenty minutes later, and settle down on the sand, close enough to the sea to hear the waves, but far enough from people that they look like moving minifigures in the distance. I want to point out the lack of beach mat but decide against it. The sun is already setting, casting an orange glow on our surroundings. The sand is rough, mixed with pebbles. It has a sticky feeling as if it has just dried up, but not sharp enough to pierce through my skin. When I hold my feet up, the sand is stuck on them like salt clinging onto meat. We sit side by side with our legs crossed. The breeze is warm, humid air blowing through my loose hair locks, my bangs messy and fluttering in front of my eyes. It has cooled down a little from when we have been on the ferry. People are either swimming or hanging out like we are.

Chris stares straight ahead, seemingly determined on not talking to me, so I do first.

“How do you think of the view?”

Silence. “I don't like your attitude just now.”

“Ugh, can't we just move on?” I shove my toes into the sand, watching it being pushed up by my feet then slowly falling back to its original place, “I apologized already. What do you want me to do?”

He doesn't say anything and takes out a Japanese language book from his backpack.

The last time we were here, Chris rented a flat at a seaside village just next to the beach, and we stayed there for three days and two nights, visiting different places on the island. It was November. He brought us matching pajamas, which has two long-sleeved shirts. There was a red one with a puppy printed in the center, and a beige one with a small cat in the same manner. The room came with matching dining bowls as well, and we cooked every meal together in the small kitchen in the small, cozy space. It felt like a trip that could last forever.

We spent a lot of time on the beach as well, gazing at the stars dotting all over the pitch-black sky at night, and to sit on the smooth sand and read during daytime. We also played our ukuleles to a love song in a Japanese anime, struggling to press the right chords while singing along to the lyrics. Our notes were off, we couldn't quite hit the harmonized part, but it didn't seem to matter.

I wonder why we never play that song anymore after the trip or watch the anime anymore. Frankly speaking, I only watched it because he told me to. I can't even recall the name of that anime now, much less the lyrics of that song. I am certain we are out of practice in singing. It is probably the singing that caused the problem, that stops us from wanting to play the song again.

We have brought our ukuleles with us just like last time, and I stare at them, left aside on the sand in their black nylon cases like trash. All the effort made just to bring the ukulele here and I don't have the slightest urge to touch it now

“Why don't you spend time with me anymore?” I asked, “I just want to be with you more.”

"I am here now, aren't I?"

I don't know how I can begin to explain that meeting up once a week for a few hours simply does not feel like a date. I don't know how to say that without sounding like I am selfish and needy. "You are always so busy."

He looks at me. "You know I have to do this. You know how my family is like."

"So you focus all your attention on your school and work? What about me?"

"I do care about you," Chris has this thing where he holds his eye contact with people when he is serious. "You know that I do." I avert my eyes, blinking away the tears that threaten to spill out. The truth is, I don't know anymore.

He takes my silence as defeat, "I am already stressed enough, can you just stop adding more to it, please?"

There is so much I want to say. *Why can't we be a normal college couple? Why must you worry about success and fame and wealth like your life depends on it? Why do we have to end up like this?*

But I don't.

"Do you want to take a stroll with me?" I stand up.

I already know the answer before it comes. "No." I know he is staring at me, puzzled, frustrated, trying to figure out what to say to win this little fight. Or he can be thinking of how bad of a partner I am. Who

knows, it could be both. I walk away, unwilling to find out.

I let the view of the sea and the soft wind soothe my racing thoughts, my mind a throbbing, tangled mess. The waves curl around my feet and withdraw, forming a rhythm, and my feet sink deeper into the loose sand with each ripple. I try to pull them out and stand further back, yet the waves seem to suck me back into the sand again, deeper, and deeper, until I am no longer aware of how deep I am in. I let out a breath, loosening up my throat. I want to scream at the top of my lungs, to let out this indescribable heaviness out of my chest. I end up letting out a huff that sounds pathetically weak even to my ears, drowned out by the sounds that I hear and noises in my head.

I still remember last time, at this exact spot, we stood here together in the water. I remember what he had vowed. He had said with a smile that reached his eyes, "Let's get married if we are still dating by the time we graduate." I had believed in it, that the reality of marrying my first love and having a family with him would exist when I was 24. Now that I am standing in the sea alone, I almost laugh at my old self who had believed, trusted, and wished, for the impossible.

I turn my back against the ocean to take in what's in front of me. Everything is so typically in place; it is almost as if it's a painting. The wet sand near me stretches until it reaches the curve separating it from the dry sand above. A family sits on a white and orange striped plastic mat on my left, the child building a sandcastle with one of those cheap sandcastle toy sets, the parents lying side by side in beach attire. A half-naked man jogs in between us, and my eyes follow him like camera lens, finding more families, children, and random strangers tanning with sunglasses on. I keep looking on and on until all of them congregate into a dot.

The fight, my memories, and my thoughts evaporate from my mind, replaced by the breeze, mist, and sounds.

The world moves without my awareness or consent, and time continues to slip away while I am standing still, waiting for something to happen that will let me know I am here, to signify that me being here is enough to alter reality in some way but nothing comes. I see myself at the center of it all, everything revolves around me, but I am just a body, somebody who happens to be part of the picture at this moment, right here, at a beach on an island, just one of many in the world. For the first time today, I feel myself ascending, becoming a part of the sand, the ocean, and the atmosphere. My desires suddenly seem so insignificant compared to the order of the universe, where everything comes to an end, then starts again in endless cycles.

I look at Chris, and there he is lying still on the sand, with the book held up above his eyes. A complete foreign world on its own, with its vision and thoughts and senses completely strange to me. He looks like a mannequin, and I cannot even begin to guess what he is thinking about. He seems negligible, dispensable, to the world that I belong to. All this time I keep trying and trying, to make everything fit, putting every piece of puzzle into its rightful place. But it is impossible. Not when the sea has its own trajectory, when the sky has its own cycle, when the small crabs and fish have their own ways to live, and when every single person has their own fate. At last, I am able to hear everything crystal clear, the crash of waves, the squawks of seagulls, and the hum of moving ferries, as if an earplug has just been removed. At that moment, I wonder how I have not seen it coming, the finality and perpetuality, of things, both of this world, my world, and those that are not.

I capture this moment with my camera, the clicking of the shutter

sounds quiet and quick, yet not diminishing its momentum at any rate. It sounds like the ending note of a music score, or the flipping of a page to the next chapter, both light but final. I guess, Chris and I have rung that note and flipped that page without noticing, we simply keep stretching the moment on even when it has ended, when the photo is already taken and the moment has passed, when there is nothing worthy of hearing anymore after the ending note. Turns out there is nothing we can do about the ending.

## Clickity Click

*Chang Yan Tung Dorothy*

The ceiling fan came with the house. It was the only thing he could depend on in the hot summer days. It randomly made a noise, similar to a click as it functioned. It sounded like two pieces of metal clinking against each other. The click contained a sharp screech. Then it was over.

He closed his eyes, settling into the sheets. The metal fan whirred softly in the background, pumping out semi-cool air against the summer heat.

The click sounded once again.

He couldn't turn off the fan, it was just too hot. He kicked the sheets away, leaving his sweaty, flabby tummy out in the open, the folded layers of his belly sticky with perspiration. He had been living in this shabby house for five years now, and not once did the fan click like that. He breathed out impatiently, the dirty mattress under his skin feeling hotter by the minute. He willed himself to fall asleep, closing his eyes and letting the whirring of the fan lull him to sleep. It almost worked. His eyelids were starting to feel heavy and his consciousness numbed and faded.

Another click. It was the sharp click of metal. Almost like a crow perching on his windowsill, its shrill screech reminded him of its presence at every moment. He fought the urge to fling the sheets up to the fan just so that it could shut up. But it was the only fan he had.

He might have only gotten an hour of sleep throughout the whole night, all the while tossing and turning and sweating beneath his skin.



The throbbing in his temples followed him to work the next morning. He spent most of his time logging numbers into spreadsheets, checking and double-checking them. He has basically never gotten the data wrong. Hence, when another department pinged him to correct his error, he squinted at the rows and rows of numbers, incredulous.

“There goes your record, old man.” His younger colleague twirled a pen beside him, spinning in his chair. He fought the urge to flip him off and wipe the lazy smile off of his face.

*It has to be the fan. I couldn't get any damn sleep because of the fan.* He blinked hard at the screen and clicked frantically on his mouse to correct his mistakes.

*Click. Click. Click.*

His headache was getting worse. He could feel every nerve in his head pierced by every click, the pain pounding in his head. His colleagues to his left and right and throughout the office were all clicking away. He spun away from the screen, leaving the chair to grab a coffee.

*Click.* The chair squeaked under his weight, letting out a high-pitched click. He kicked the chair out of his way, ignoring the glances, and stalked out of the room.

The pantry was empty except for Janice from accounting. She mouthed something at him when he walked in.

“What?!” He huffed out impatiently.

“Um, I said good morning.” She was wearing heels. They clicked against the hard floor.

“Oh. Good morning to you too.” He scratched his ear. She left the pantry shortly after that, her heels clicking after her.

He ambled onto the streets after work. There was an electronics store right across his flat, but so was the liquor store. He thumbed the few dollar bills he had in his wallet and walked home with a pack of beer instead.

The fan continued to click that night while he was reheating his frozen dinner. The microwave beeped and sputtered. He slapped the side of the microwave, hoping to get it work for a few more times. Maybe there was a way to get rid of that clicking. Maybe a screw came off, and was rolling around the inside and rattling the metal. Maybe it was the rusty hinges squeaking every time the fan rotated. Maybe there was a rat inside, scuttling about, biting off a bit here and there.

*I bet it's living better than me. I bet it eats the leftovers from that Chinese restaurant downstairs.* He scooped the disgusting gunk of red sauce and gloopy cheese into his mouth. Then, he finished off his third beer.

He retrieved a ladder to climb up to the fan, grunting against the weight. He wobbled as he tried to balance on top. His fingers gripped the dusty, metal panes, and he moved it back and forth in an attempt to loosen it. The metal was rusty and his fingers came off black. That should do it. He angled his foot to step back down the ladder, but he missed by inches and stepped into thin air. He crashed onto the ground, hitting his arm against the floorboards in pain, causing the ladder to topple over and fall onto his stomach. The impact of the ladder had him throwing up his dinner onto the floor as he bent over, clutching his belly.

Glaring at the fan, he walked shakily to the switch and turned it on.

The fan started whirring to life, and he heard the loudest and most obnoxious *CLICK*. In a rage, he threw a beer bottle at the fan, ignoring the sharp pain in his arm, while the broken pieces of glass flew across the room.

He vowed never to use the fan again.

When it was bedtime, he walked slowly to his bedroom, dreading the heat he would face that night. Then he yelped as he felt a sharp pain under his feet. He lifted it up and saw that it was dripping with blood. A shard of glass was stuck there. He swore.

Gripping the shard, he yanked it off, grimacing at the pain. Red spots dotted and coloured his floor. He glanced helplessly around his house. He had run out of bandages a year ago. He ran his feet under the tap until it stopped bleeding and limped to bed.

But the summer heat crept into his house, into every crevice of his skin, and the sweat began to bead. Heat prickled his scalp and his hair stuck to his clammy forehead. He turned over, knowing that his entire back was damp with sweat, the thin fabric of his undershirt sticking to him like another layer of skin. He wiped his brow, closed his eyes and focused on trying to fall asleep.

*Click.* His eyes flew open. He shot a look at the alarm clock sitting on his bedside table. The hand was ticking and clicking away every second. His head pounded and all he wanted to do was to scream profanities at the clock for not letting him sleep. He even contemplated throwing it out the window, but he had to wake up for work tomorrow.

The next day, he limped slowly into the office. The clicking of the mouse invaded his eardrums yet again. The incessant clicking went on and on and on and on, and all he wanted to do was to rip his head out. When his colleague asked to borrow a pen, he snapped at them. He focused on tapping away on his computer, ignoring everyone who came his way. Even the nice lady from the back office was giving him dirty looks. But he didn't care. He kept tapping away, ignoring the *clickity click* of the mouse and the keyboard. His arm hurt, and he made multiple mistakes in his file this time. He was called to his boss' office for a word.

"I heard that your performance has been declining." His boss thrummed his fingers on the table, tapping on the polished hardwood. "You only..." His boss' voice became muffled.

"What?"

"*Isaid*, you've only got a year left before retirement." The drumming on the table quickened. His boss sighed. "Look, I would hate to let you go before that."

"It—It was my fan. It kept making noises all night and I can't sleep—"

"Well, take care of it then, big guy. You can handle it, right?"

He decided he should take the fan down. He called off his doctor's appointment. That could wait. The fan had to go *now*. He was to hire someone—he knew that he could not survive another fall.

"Looks perfectly fine to me. Are you sure you want to remove this?" The repairman looked down from the ladder, his tools in one hand.

He nodded impatiently, gesturing at him to hurry up. Soon after, the fan was dismantled. The heap of dust and metal lay on the floor. There were no rats.

“I’ll take care of the metal scraps for ya.” The repairman scooped up the pile and proceeded to walk to the door.

“Wait,” he hobbled to his bedside table, snatching the alarm clock before dumping it onto the pile of scrap metal. “Take this too.” He watched as the man walked away.

That night, he tossed and turned in the sweltering heat, finding it all the more impossible to sleep.

*Click.*

He sat up, the sharp pain on his feet causing him to stagger as he glared at the room. He caught his reflection on the idle screen of the TV—His hair was dishevelled, with sweat dripping all over his forehead, his eyes deprived of sleep. He looked like a crazed man.

The click sounded again and he swore. He scanned the room and found nothing. There was an itch in his ear. He scratched it. It was still itching.

*Fine.* He pulled off his hearing aid. He kept looking for anything that might have caused the clicks. Nothing. He looked around his house, squinting in the darkness. The clicking stopped. A sense of calm overcame him.

He became increasingly aware of the weight in his palm. A dreadful

## Clickity Click

silence followed. With a sudden horrifying realization, he lifted his hearing aid to his ear and inserted it.

*Click.*

7



## 7

*Cheung Chi Tak Michael*

“Just pass the ball to the foreign players, guys. This is why we pay them to be here. Stop taking up the possession before each play, just pass the ball up, let them shoot, you guys grab the rebound, reload the shooter, and we win the game! Come on! This is why we pay them to be here, that’s why they are named ‘foreign aid’.”

The coach shouts in the empty stadium. No one is particularly shocked by what the coach said. The audience, for starters, are not surprised at all. There is barely anyone in the audience. No one watches these games except for the players’ girlfriends, and those dudes in their 70s and 80s who have some time to spend. It is an irony too, how the coach says, “We pay them to be here.” Yes, we did, with the players’ hard-earned cash that we have never received. After the time out, I slowly walk back to my designated seat, the bench, to enjoy the last game of the season as a full-time bench player. Those six-foot five dudes on the court didn’t even have a Hong Kong identity card. Yet, here they are, stripping the opportunities away from local players. These foreign players are not some accomplished players from another country. Rather, they are the most mediocre players from a foreign country, who were paid a good fortune to come and win games and champions for the owners of different sports clubs. Eventually, every club has a couple of foreign players to combat against foreign players from other clubs. The best player in Hong Kong is a guy named Tyler Kepkay, who averaged 2 to 5 minutes with scores below 10 points each game in the German leagues. But when he came to Hong Kong, he scored over 40 per game even in his mid-thirties. Sometimes I think that basketball players in Hong Kong are just born in the wrong place at the wrong time.



Hong Kong players cannot be compared to the “foreign aid” because the society does not exactly support the sport. Teachers tell us to give up on sports and focus on studying, parents tell us to give up on sports and find a job that makes a living.

“Without the appropriate support we will never be great, we will never play outside of Hong Kong and make ourselves known to the world. To be completely honest, if we grew up in the exact same environment with a supportive society, we would thrive so much better than the “foreign aid” players. Jeremy Lin, an Asian just like the rest of us, though his journey to the NBA was great difficulty, he managed to make it into the best league in the world. He played so well in a season that that period was called “Linsanity.” I would never forget how hyped I was when I knew an Asian player could dominate the league. He had inspired other Asian players on the fact that genes, size and speed do not matter. All it takes is working as hard as we can on our skills and believe in ourselves. To follow his footsteps, during the previous two years, I woke up every day at five o’clock in the morning to squeeze a training session in before my classes and trained with two teams six nights a week. I attended trainings so often that my teammates saw me more frequently than my parents did. My mom actually proposed paying me to stay home for dinner once a week. Despite all the hard work, my skills would never be as good as Lin’s, because I was never given a chance to test my skills out on the field. Due to the lack of resources in the city, there are only three levels of basketball leagues in Hong Kong, and with thousands of basketball players, there are simply not enough teams to cater the immense number of basketball players with different levels and skills. Us citizens grew up in an unsupportive environment in which not even a single local basketball player managed to make their way out of Asia, our efforts have never been appreciated and...” Before I could finish rambling to the person next to me, the game ended in a clear blowout loss, because ‘we’ did not pay enough to hire better foreign

players.

I rise from the bench and shake hands with my opponent, whom I have actually played against. I then pull off my jersey, cold, completely dry, without a single drop of sweat, and stuff it into my huge backpack. We have all carried a lot of heavy things on our shoulders to get to this position. Not only are there jerseys, basketballs, shoes, and protective gear; but also dreams, and the sacrifices we made along the way. After the game, we all sit in a circle with our jerseys on for the debriefing session. Everyone seems disconnected as if we do not belong in the same team. Half of the players are on their phones because they do not feel responsible for the loss. The foreign players sitting on the bench look confused as the coach did not speak English. I try my best to listen to what the coach said, but all I can think of is the basketball debriefing session I had when I was still a kid. It was a blowout lost too, like the one just now. However, the coach did not speak much. Instead, he asked us to talk about what went wrong with the game. At first, everyone was too sad to share their thoughts. But eventually, we became engaged in the discussion, and everyone made constructive comments regarding the game. We told each other the goods and bads of the game. We encouraged each other to train harder and play better in the next year, and kept our spirits up, our heads up high. Everyone was still engaged in the session, we contributed, we confessed, we learnt, supported each other and grew together. Even if we lost, we lost together, as a team and as a family. After the game, we would go to the nearby outdoor basketball courts to make up for the loss. We would stay there to train. Shooting, dribbling, laughing, and joking for the whole night. Debriefing these days is nothing like those in the past. I miss the times when things were much simpler, when my teammates played because basketball was their passion, instead of money or fame. The debriefing session ends in awkward silence. Everyone picks up their bags and moves towards different directions. I decide to avoid the crowd in the changing

room, so I move directly towards the exit of the stadium. I don't need to shower anyways.

While passing through the main entrance of the stadium, I see a huge bag in the middle of the lobby. Driven by curiosity, I open the bag to see if I can return it to its owner. The content in the bag looks just like that of any ordinary player's bag. There is a full set of jersey, a slightly worn basketball, a worn knee brace and a pair of heavily worn, customized basketball shoes. It's interesting that no personal belongings in the bag can be used to identify the owner.

I wonder what will happen to these items.

I imagine for the basketball, since it's still rather new, bouncy and inflated, it would probably be picked up by a teenager with hopes and dreams to be great in the sport. The ball would be bounced on the ground, shot into the air and passed around in early mornings and several nights every week. During this period, its body and ego would be inflated to the fullest, looking as strong and as bouncy as ever. It is going to be used so often that in time, the outer layer of the ball starts to flake off. It will also endure the cold, windy mornings and the hot, humid nights during the four seasons, as it bounces against the coarse, concrete floors. Only the more expensive, fancier basketballs would be frequently maintained and used on nice, wooden floors every night. Not every ball gets that type of attention and support. The tears, blood, and sweat will eventually reach the carcass—the windings and bladder of the ball. Eventually, it will become too tired to go on despite its hard work. Figuratively speaking, the basketball will start to deflate after a couple years of heavy usage. It'll only be brought out a couple times a month for some minor league games, and occasionally for outdoor usage. Then one day, it'll deflate to the point of needing to rest far away from the basketball court, never to be used again.

In some ways, the basketball and I are on the same journey towards the eventual and inevitable end.

The knee braces, despite its high demand in the market, are too worn to be used by anyone. It has already lost all its support and compression. I have a pair of knee braces too. I still remember the vivid pain when I first injured my knees. It was just another ordinary training when I was twelve years old. After four consecutive suicidal laps and fifteen full power jumps later, both my quadriceps gave up and the contracting force of the muscles directly transferred to the patellar tendons of my knees. Immediately, I felt a sharp, tearing pain in my knee, which would continue to haunt me for six more years. I clearly remembered how each step hurt as if my kneecap was hit by a mallet. To deal with the injury, I consulted my coaches, teachers, parents and doctors for help, yet no one gave me the appropriate support and assistance, because all of them thought it was just a period in my growth spurt that would eventually heal on its own. An ordinary injury that could've been cured within three months after its first symptoms with the appropriate treatment, turned in to six years of pain and suffering due to the lack of support and overtraining.

I picked up the jersey from the bag. What a happy coincidence! This person shares the same number as my old secondary school jersey—the number 7. I chose this number because a young rising star in NBA used this number too. I don't idolise any player in my career, but this man should be every player's role model. His name is Jaylen Brown. During high school, his teacher told him that she would lock him up in the county prison in five years. But he turned out fine. He is one of the best educated professional basketball players in the world with an undergraduate degree and a master's degree. There's always a special type of hatred between teachers and basketball players. They just can't wait to murder our dreams and pursuit in basketball. Everyone remembers being told they won't

make it and that they should focus on studying. I still remember what the vice principal from my secondary school told me.

“Michael, let’s face it. You’re playing basketball in Hong Kong. As of right now, you don’t have outstanding results in this sport, you are not in the Hong Kong team, and you didn’t achieve anything huge in basketball. Why don’t you spend less time on basketball and focus more on studying instead? If you continue to play basketball, you will not make it into university and end up destroying our school’s perfect reputation! We’re not going to let you continue dribbling down the path of destruction. You’re banned from playing in the inter-school games this year.”

She destroyed my hopes and dreams while I dedicated all my time in juggling studying and basketball at the same time. I had good grades back then. The inter-school games was the only chance for me to be noticed by college scouts and coaches from top teams. This type of discouragement was devastating back then, but I decided to come back strong and prove her wrong like Jaylen Brown. After that meeting, I started staying behind after school, but not just for training. To save time on commuting, I stayed in the school library until late at night to study for my exams and tests. Far too often, everyone in the library would frown when they saw a sweaty, reeking monster sitting beside them. I had sat in the library for so long that I was almost kicked out of it every night, as the smell of dried-up sweat is perhaps one of the most irritating smells in the world. Days and months went by, and the public exams were finally over. I ended up with decent results in the exam, got into the university I wanted to study in, and was able to study something I liked. I marched towards the vice principal’s office to show her that student athletes can actually juggle between studying and training. I was going to bargain with her in order to fight for more support towards the basketball players in school. Yet, all I got was, “if you didn’t play basketball during your revision weeks, you would’ve

gotten into a better university.” Since then, I never chose number 7 as my jersey number anymore.

As to where this jersey is going to end up, meh, who cares! Nobody gives a shit after all. I carefully fold the jersey and put it back into the bag and left the bag the way it is. Worthless as it is, I know just how a jersey can make a basketball player feel like a superhero every night when he suits up to face his opponents, and the greatest enemy of all, himself.

I walk out of the stadium, slowly. As if it’s the last time.

I pull out my phone to delete the long list of alarm clocks I had set to wake myself up at five in the morning. I won’t need them anymore.

I shall leave the bag there, as it’ll be forgotten soon.

On my way out, my shoulders feel oddly, and comfortably light.

## I Stand Up

*Lau Sze Wai Kimmy*

Just this afternoon when I asked my mother if I could see the doctor, she reassured me that there is no need for me to do so. She is also angry with me for sending her hypnotherapy information via WhatsApp.

“You are OK. You are just too nervous. Everything will be OK if you relax!” she repeats.

She doesn’t believe a single word of mine describing how terrible I feel. I sit at an undersized folding table as I stare blankly at my laptop. My arms and legs slowly grow longer as I hunch over the table. The fluorescent light of the screen is a stark glare that stings my eyes, and I don’t have any energy to finish my homework.

“I can’t focus on my lessons, and I am exhausted,” I lament.

“You sit for too long in front of the computer. You should go out and have a walk. You will feel better!” She says.

I ignore her and stand up, leaving this compact house. On both sides of the alleyway are discarded tires and abandoned cats. To the right of the alley’s exit is the main road where cars are howling non-stop. A swarm of pedestrians, shoppers, and workers sweep across me like a tide of endless waves that suffocates me in the crowd. My vision is disfigured, blurred by the elongated shadows of the passers-by. My blood starts pounding in my ears. My heart thuds in my chest. My hands shake and my feet tingle. The fish-eye view of the crowds, the buildings, and the flock of people on the evening street now break into millions of pieces and spin around feverishly, giving way to something else, a dizzy feeling of nausea. This feeling, which had been haunting me for three whole weeks, appears again. I take a slow, deep breath and stopped just around a corner. I really can’t stand this anymore. I need to tell my mother how serious this problem is,

and I need to see a doctor.

I clutch my chest tightly and hobble back home. I immediately tell my mother about this incident and as usual, she replies,

“I have told you a million times! You are just being too nervous!”

She always tells me to relax more but never agrees to bring me to the psychiatrist.

“I have done online tests related to mood disorder—anxiety for many times and they all show that I am highly likely to be diagnosed with anxiety!” I argue in dissent.

“Why don’t you just listen to me? Taking medicine will make you go crazy. Haven’t you heard that they are called ‘Happy Pills?’” she shouts.

I am too tired to argue with her and rush to my room, slamming my door. After a while, she tells me she is about to go shopping and asks if I want anything. I reply “No” half-heartedly, staring at the ceiling on my bed. The sunset rays enter through the small tinted window in the corner of my room like a splash of black blood that diffuses in a matter of seconds into the greyness and suspends in the air, shrouding me in an icy chill. Leaning against the wall, I scroll on the phone and continue to search about how to treat anxiety disorder on Google, YouTube, and Yahoo. On the screen, I see “Hypnotherapy-hk.com.”

“One consultation comes with three sessions. Effects include curing insomnia, boosting self-confidence, coping with heartbreak, quitting smoking, forgetting your ex, eradicating bad habits and treating mood disorders such as anxiety. No medicine needed.”

Hypnotherapy? What is this? I click on the website. Numerous photos of good comments are shown on the website.

“Case study: Comments from clients. Thank you Mr. Dong for helping me cure my anxiety. I no longer feel stressed and can fall asleep easily after two consultations!” I wonder if I should give it a try if my mum doesn’t allow me to see the doctor. I search for the price, the location, and



the identity of the therapist.

“\$3000 for three sessions. Location: Mong Kok Fashion Center...” Should I consult a hypnotherapist? I am not sure if this is a certified medical treatment as it is not typically provided at the hospital or clinic. But I really want my illness to be treated as early as possible! Not only does this treatment not require any medicine, but there are also a lot of videos featuring successful cases on different social media platforms. This sounds great. I should ask my mum for advice later!

I send the YouTube videos and related information to her via WhatsApp. I can discuss this with her later when she comes back. A loud creak comes from the dining room as my mum opens the door. She is carrying three large bags and picks out a familiar package that has “Dorivo” on, approaching me with a smile.

“Hey, Eva. Stand up. I bought you your favorite snack and the ice cream that you’ve always wanted to eat.” Although I have always yearned for my mum to buy them since last year, I don’t feel anything now. I can feel that she is using her own way to cheer me up, but this doesn’t work. Only receiving treatment can help me.

“Mum, I want to discuss something with you... Have you seen my WhatsApp messages?”

“Oh, I haven’t, Eva. What is it about? I’ll check it later”

“No. This is serious.”

She is confused and puts down the big pack of chips, switching on her mobile phone.

Suddenly, the smile on her face disappears. She frowns.

“Are you crazy? Hypnotherapy?” she yells, her face flushed red. “You think this can help you aside from seeing the psychiatrist? How many times have I told you that seeing a doctor can’t help you! If you want to improve your condition, the only thing you can do is relax!” she shouts.

“I... I don’t think so. Have you seen the introductory videos about hypnotherapy on YouTube? It is not harmful at all!”

She stares at me as if I am wrong. “This is all your fault. You just need to take a break from your studies. Maybe eating the snacks I bought you will help but you just won’t relax.”

I want to shout and keep protesting. Why am I the person to be blamed? It’s not like I want this to happen! I open my mouth to speak, but the words are stuck in my throat, and I can feel tears streaming down my face.

I sob and mumble, “No...No.! Why don’t you understand me? I haven’t been able to sleep for an entire week....and I can’t focus properly at all!” I cry shakily, my body weak from being tortured by three consecutive nights of insomnia.

She seems shocked by my emotional outburst and doesn’t reply. I cry louder and louder. She leaves my room and sits down on the couch, still giving me that cold expression. I howl like a mad woman, wanting her to know how painful, hopeless, and exhausted I am. She still gives no response. I wipe my tears and glance at her from the side of the door. She looks worried. This is not the same cold expression I saw earlier. Her lips move nervously, and she seems to be on her wit’s end. I can tell that my mum is feeling helpless, but I really need a doctor and she doesn’t understand anything about mental illness. She probably doesn’t know what anxiety even is.

As expected, she says, “No. I will not let you see that hypnotherapist. It is dangerous.”

I stand up to confront her.

“It’s not dangerous. The pills won’t make people go crazy. In fact, they can help stabilize one’s emotions.”

“No. The information on the Internet is not reliable. I have seen a friend who took such medicine and she became very dull-witted. I don’t

want this to happen to you,” she insists.

“But I am worse off than those people; at least they don’t have any suicidal thoughts popping into their heads.” I don’t want to mention these thoughts to my mother as I know she will be frightened when she hears the word “suicide.” She just doesn’t understand anything about this illness and my needs...

“If you really want to seek help from others, I can bring you to a place! No, not this evil crazy hypnotherapy or psychiatrist. I know a friend who can help you. I’ll call her now and you can come with me to visit her!” This is probably the only way out for me. If she doesn’t let me see the psychiatrist nor the hypnotherapist, what else can I do? I want to ask her what is going on, but her face is stony, and all she says is,

“You will see later.”

In the taxi, she straightens up and looks out the window for a long time while picking at her thumbs. She seems to finally understand how serious my anxiety is after I had an emotional breakdown in front of her. I look at the road in front of us to see where we are going. The view is shrouded and there is nothing but a blanket of fog on the road, between the trees, and up in the sky. I glance at my mother who is looking out the window with her unsmiling face. After a while, we stop at the entrance of an obscure shop sandwiched between two commercial buildings. The city streets are immersed in a gray drizzle, so I can’t see the name of the shop with my blurry eyesight. Where am I?

The door creaks open with a series of clinks from some ancient coins hanging on the door. A musty, dank scent lingers in the air. A skinny shadow of a woman flickers at the corner of my vision and smiles at us. Her grey hair matches her yellow silk dress which reaches the floor, causing her to look like a Chinese monk or mage.

“Who is she?” I ask my mother, but she is too preoccupied with talking to the woman.

She whispers something to the woman, and I vaguely hear, “Can you help my daughter? I think she is unwell these days. She can’t sleep and always cries at night. Also, she has become very strange these days and I am not sure whether she is....”

I want to hear more of what they are saying but I am distracted by the coldness of the air that makes me shiver. The dimly-lit interior is like a temple with a large hall, and the wall is decorated with drawings of Chinese gods and good luck charms. Black mold dots the ceiling in clusters and windows are covered with dirt and dust with the moonlight penetrating the darkness in thin, thread-like rays. What is strange is that there are a lot of yellow paper with incomprehensible symbols and drawings of unknown creatures. Are they for worshipping the gods?

The old woman nods and signals to the two helpers behind her, who are dressed in long yellow robes that wrapped around their shoulders. They are holding Chinese clamps and bells. One of them is also wearing an exotic bearskin with four eyes made of gold. Its fierce glare gives me goosebumps and seems to freeze me in my tracks. I look at my mum anxiously. She notices my worry and comforts me by saying, “You will be fine, Eva. They will make you feel better afterwards.”

“What will they do? Are they going to meditate with me?” I ask. I guess this is some ancient catharsis that can help calm me down. Maybe the Chinese instruments are there for this purpose.

In the meantime, I see them placing a big bowl of water on the altar.

“Yes, yes, Eva. They will recite some spells while you sit on the mat on the floor. Listening to them will help you relax.”

As I wonder what they will use the bowl for, the mage asks us to close our eyes, and mysterious words spill out of her mouth.

“Close your eyes now, Eva,” said my mum. I do as I am told although I am curious to know what they will do to me afterwards. “Num

mo all tho do fun..Chu foc su fo...Num mo all tho do fun..Chu foc su fo ...” The chants sound strange and rather unlike the typical chants I hear at Buddhist rituals. I feel a sense of urgency within the ups and downs of the chants, as opposed to the calming whispers. It lasts for about ten minutes, after which the mage starts circling us, all the while beating gongs and drums. The clangs bombard me ceaselessly. I feel uncomfortable and sneak a peek at my mother who is also sitting on the mat with her eyes closed. The mage seems to notice this and advances towards me, placing her hands on my shoulders and directs her chants at me. I feel pressured. I want to stand up but again she presses me down with more force. Rites and charms then blend into an unrecognizable wall of noise. I try to fight against it, but every time I move, the mage pushes me down to the ground with his invincible force. I try a few more times, but all my efforts are in vain. After this long battle, the sounds finally stop. My mother opens her eyes, and the heaviness is lifted. I know by heart that this has gone wrong. This whole thing is wrong!

“Is this a ritual?” I ask my mother quietly.

She says, “Don’t speak and listen to the mage!” Oh, so now she defaults.

I can’t imagine why my mum would bring me to such place. Does she really think that I am crazy? The mage then writes on the yellow paper, soaking it in the water. My mum notices my confused expression, and says “You will need to drink that water later. It will help you feel better!”

Is this for real? I can’t believe she has brought me to this place. I can’t stand this anymore. I am not crazy. I want to tell her how insane this is, and that I won’t be drinking this water. She stands in front of me, her body blocking out the only source of light. I feel like refusing her, but then, I see her eyes burning with determination as she points to the water in front of me, demanding me to drink it all up. Her gaze is fixed on me. My muscles stiffen and my heart starts beating a furious beat.

She says, “Drinking this is the only way to help you.”

Only? Sweat trickles from my forehead as my knees tremble. My entire body is tense with anxiety from this forceful command. I don’t want to drink. I straighten up my back and hold my chin up. I look up at my mother and say, “I don’t want to!” She looks at me sternly.

“Why are you so disobedient? I am just worried about you!” She grasps my arm tightly.

“I want you to feel better and it pains me to see you so exhausted every day!” she emphasizes.

“I don’t think this works for me. Why are you forcing me to drink that water?” I try to escape from her grasp.

“This is the best way I can think of. You won’t need to take any medicine after you drink this!” The pain is throbbing throughout my hand, arm, and body. Her fingers tighten in warning, and I still at once.

“You know what, Eva. What I do is always the best for you. You are my daughter after all, I would never want to hurt you.” She looks at me with wide eyes, her gaze telling me that she is right, and I am wrong as usual. She still thinks that I am just a child with immature ideas.

She strokes my head and asks, “Now do you understand?”

“No, no. I really don’t understand! You always think that you are giving me the best options, but no! You aren’t! You never think from my perspective!”

She stiffens at my words, her mouth agape with shock. I can’t stand being in that damned place any longer. I shake her off and break into a frenzied run. I run across the entrance that made me feel entrapped, through the narrow alleyway, and onto the stuffy pavement. I run and run till I can’t see the shop. I glance around while gasping for breath. Finally, I see a light from the streetlamp which leads me to the harbor front. I breathe a huge sigh, lean on the fence, and bury my face in my hands. Can she really understand me after all that I have told her?

I arch my head back. There is nothing but a few leaves fluttering in the air. “Caw, caw.” I hear a faint noise and realize that a blackbird is beside me, hopping over the leaves. It then spreads its wings and soars across the sky. This was the first time I disobeyed my mother, yet I feel liberated, just like the bird which is now flying without restraint. I know that what I need right now isn’t that bowl of water but a psychiatrist. Although my mother doesn’t agree with me, I think this works best for me. I turn on my phone and search for the contact information of the psychiatrist.

“Dr Jenny Wong, XXXXXX. Tel: 9403 28XX”

I type the number on my phone and press “Call.”

I stare at the sea and think about how I should face my mum when I go home. She must be very angry or astonished by what I have done. Yet, I still stand by my decision. What she has always told me may not be right every time. I look up at the night sky. The clouds have scattered to reveal the full moon shining on me. I am amazed by how vast the sky is, yet at the same time, I feel a weight which I have never felt before on my shoulder.

I slowly make my way back home. The fog gradually dissipates in the breeze. Here and there I can finally see hints of the road, fences, and traffic lights. I arrive at the door and straighten myself, deciding to apologize to my mother for my impulsive actions.

“I’m sorry that I ran away so suddenly. I have already made an appointment to see the psychiatrist. I know what you have done for me is for my own sake. You love and worry about me, I know that. But I can make my own decisions and I will be responsible for them. You shouldn’t have to worry about me. I have grown up and trust me, I will be fine and know to think before I act. I will tell you how it goes after I see the doctor.”

My mum listens intently with her face flushed with doubt, unwillingness, and worry. She reluctantly replies, “Ok. I don’t care. If you want to go, then go.” I know that this is not true. She cares about me so much that she fears of letting me go and that I will be in trouble. My back

## I Stand Up

stiffens again as I know how difficult the world will become after leaving behind the protection of my mum and standing up with the weight on my shoulders.



# BUTTERFLIES



## Butterflies

*Xia Yu Xi Yuki*

When I was five, I didn't talk to my parents much.

Not that I talk to them much these days either. I doubt they could name even one of my hobbies and interests, I clearly talked to them a lot less than a child of my age should have. My parents were always busy with their jobs, not because they needed the money or anything; we were well-off enough for them to take lavish vacations to tropical destinations while I stayed at a local summer camp. They just enjoyed having a particular lifestyle. Since I couldn't be trusted not to get myself killed while they stayed out at work 'til way past my bedtime, they always hired a babysitter for me. Her name was Amma.

Well, that was what I had called her anyway. I don't think it was her actual name because she always seemed to want to laugh when I called her that.

She never did correct me, though.

Amma was much older than I was, probably in her late teens but definitely before her early twenties. She had spent every day of that year with me, though I'm not quite sure how she managed to balance both school and work at the same time. She had spent more time with me than both of my parents combined, and I absolutely loved her for that.

She was friendly and caring and always wrote cute little messages on pink post-it notes, signing them off with a tiny drawing of a butterfly. She

took me out to my backyard to tell me fun facts about the bugs and animals we'd see, making each little trip to the garden a little adventure of its own. I had been awed by how much she knew. When I asked her how she knew so much, she told me that she wanted to be a biologist. She wanted to explore nature and discover new things about all sorts of creatures. She was the one who piqued my interest in nature, which was something that eventually grew into a burning passion.

She would sit with me on the floor of my room for hours as she read to me from one of my many animal encyclopedias. I hung onto every word she said, my mind eagerly devouring all bits of new information that I could get my tiny hands onto.

I can't imagine who I would be if I had never met her.

I remember going downstairs one morning and seeing my parents looking anxious and impatient. Mom was tapping her foot, her heels rapping sharply against the cold marble floor of our house while Dad kept checking the time on the expensive watch on his wrist. These were odd details to remember, but they were the ones that stood out the most. Apparently, Amma was supposed to show up half an hour ago, yet there was still no sign of her.

Not wanting to be late for work, both of my parents reluctantly left me alone in the house. They made sure to warn me not to mess up any of their furniture or damage the walls, and reminded me not to open the door to anyone I didn't know as they didn't want thieves getting at their valuables. I was to keep my hands off of their stuff and to wait until Amma showed up.

Left to my own devices, I was soon bored out of my mind. It was

a beautiful sunny day, and if Amma was there, she would have taken me out to go bug hunting. I didn't want to stay inside on my own, not when I could be in the great outdoors. That was probably why, after a few minutes of staring blankly at the door, I came to the conclusion that, since my parents hadn't strictly said that I couldn't do so, it was okay to leave the house.

After a quick trip back to my room to grab a thick book, I stood on my tippy toes and opened the door. I made sure to prop the book I had just retrieved in the doorway so that the door wouldn't close fully and lock behind me. I then proceeded to walk down the street, hunting for bugs.

I found ladybugs and beetles lounging on tree trunks, centipedes and roly-polies stomping around with their many legs, and even spotted two colonies of ants fighting over a piece of chicken bone somebody must have carelessly dropped. I was filled with excitement and couldn't wait to tell Amma about my adventures.

At some point, I came upon a field of colourful flowers. It was an undeveloped piece of land located a little off of our neighbourhood. In all honesty, I'm not quite sure on how I managed to get there as it was a good two to three kilometres away from my house.

There were dandelions and buttercups and daisies and clovers in the field, and to my utter delight—butterflies. They fluttered and danced from flower to flower, each one more colourful, and brighter, and prettier than the next. They were beautiful, and I could barely hold in my excitement. Butterflies were Amma's favourite. She could go on and on about them for hours and hours, filling my tiny brain up with facts and tidbits. I was good at remembering those facts, something that Amma had been very impressed with. She always told me that I was very intelligent for my age,

which made my chest swell with pride.

I stood there watching the butterflies in a reverent sort of awe. I was filled with childlike wonder as they fluttered their colourful wings among clusters of blossoming flowers.

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*“Hey, do you wanna know a cool fact about butterflies?”*

*It was summer. Though the sun was hot, there was a cool breeze in the air. We were in the garden, way back when the neighbours still had those lovely flowers growing in their yard. I had run out there for some reason, crouching over with my head hanging low while Amma sat on the grass beside me, rubbing soothing little circles on my back. I was crying over something I can no longer remember. It was probably something trivial like accidentally spilling my juice on the floor, but to my younger self, it must have seemed like a pretty big deal.*

*I sniffled, quieting down with interest. I did love learning new facts.*

*“Look over there,” she pointed to a cluster of butterflies dancing around our neighbour’s flowers, “Do you see the way they fly?”*

*“Like fairies.” I said.*

*“Yes! Like fairies frolicking in the garden!” The new word confused me, strange and unfamiliar.*

*“What does ‘frolicking’ mean?”*

*“It means that they’re playing.” Amma smiled, and while I can’t recall the colour of her eyes, I can still picture the way the corners of her eyes crinkled.*

*“Do you know why butterflies flutter?” she asked. I shook my head.*

*“It’s because of the way they move their wings in the shape of an infinity sign.” She stood up and gazed down at me, giggling a little bit.*

*“Whenever you feel sad, you should remember that even though a butterfly’s life may be short and fragile, their memories are forever,” she grinned. “At least that’s what I do when I’m sad.”*

*It didn’t really make sense to me at that time, but somehow in that one moment, with the sunlight reflecting off of Amma’s white sundress, it felt like everything would be okay.*

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I tried to walk deeper into the field so that I could get closer to the delicate creatures, but I must have tripped over a rock or a stray tree root as the next thing I remember was sitting on the ground, arms hugging my knees as they bled sluggishly.

That was when a pretty white butterfly flew over and landed on my knee. I watched, entranced, as it unfurled its proboscis, dipping it into the blood that was welling from the scrapes and drinking from it.

Mud Puddling. I didn’t know it then, but I found out a few years later while reading about it in the school library. Apparently, butterflies

would drink from muddy puddles and other nutrient-rich sources which included blood. A group of beautiful, delicate butterflies crowding around the corpse of some poor animal, all yearning for a sip of its slowly cooling blood.

But I didn't know that then. I just watched as it drank from the blood. Red, *red* blood.

My blood.

I reached out gently and ever so slowly brought my hand closer to it until I was touching the butterfly. Though I'd seen Amma pick butterflies up before, such as when they were stuck indoors and couldn't find their way out, I had never tried to touch one of them myself. They were flighty creatures that rarely allowed a human to get close. I was a little bit surprised when my finger came away with tiny flecks of powdery butterfly scales after a gentle stroke of its wing. The place where I had touched it was now devoid of any of the pretty white colours it had held before, the colour having transferred to the tips of my fingers.

I stared at it in wonder.

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*"Did you know that butterflies are actually transparent?"*

*"No way! You're trying to trick me!"*

*"Yes way! Well, their wings are."*

*“No, they’re not. They’re all in pretty colours.”*

*“That’s the thing. Butterflies are covered in teeny tiny colourful scales, but underneath these scales their wings are see-through!”*

*“That sounds silly, Amma. Scales are for fishes and lizards, not butterflies.”*

*“It’s true though. How about we look in one of your books? I’m sure one of them would have mentioned this fact.”*

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I began to wonder what would happen if I dusted off all its minuscule scales to reveal the transparent wings underneath. I kept watching as the butterfly continued to feed on my blood. Unlike me, the butterflies’ blood would not have been red; they didn’t just have see-through wings, but they also had transparent blood as well.

There would be almost nothing left to see.

Transparent blood and transparent wings. It’d die unseen and unloved.

Yet, as it sucked the deep red liquid from my legs, I knew that this butterfly wouldn’t.

I was brought out of my thoughts when it flew up into the air, seemingly having had its fill of my blood, and fluttered off into the vast expanse of flowers. That caused me to realize that I must have been gone for a while, so I slowly climbed to my feet, deciding it was time for me to



head home. I was so excited to tell Amma about my discoveries, I didn't feel the stinging pain in my knees as I made my long way back to the house.

Once I had gotten home, I closed the door tightly, tucked my book back into the shelf and waited for Amma to arrive.

And waited for Amma.

And waited.

*And waited.*

*And.....*

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That night my parents came home shocked to see me sitting awake on their couch hours past my bedtime.

Amma never arrived.

If I'm being honest, I wish they had cared at least a little about me rather than how my dirt-covered clothes were staining their pristine white furniture or what the neighbours would say about them.

I got a new babysitter, and the name—Amma, was never mentioned again.

Life continued after that: my parents remained working long hours, and I kept reading my encyclopedias and being ignored. Nothing ever felt

the same again after Amma stopped coming.

It was like she had vanished off of the face of the Earth. There was nothing of her left in the house, no traces of her ever having been in there. None of the little post-it notes that had been signed off with a butterfly remained. It was like she had simply stopped existing one day.

I never knew why Amma hadn't shown up that day, nor was I ever told what had happened. I tried to ask my parents, but they were always too busy to care about my questions, brushing me off with a "Not right now" or a "Can't you see I'm busy." I ended up searching the web for her during my second year of high school, but with the little information I had, I was never successful in finding her whereabouts.

Over time, I accepted that my parents would never put me before their careers, and made peace with the fact that they never truly cared for who I was. I studied hard and moved out the first instance I could, leaving the house and the garden behind. Yet, every once in a while, I would wonder about Amma, where she went and what happened to her, but I never did find any answers.

Just like a butterfly, she had turned transparent, taking with her everything and leaving behind only the blurred memories of sunshine, vast fields and the fluttering of the creature's wings.

## Taxi

*Lau Chung Hang Liam*

Rex lit a cigarette and stared at the motel with few scattered lights, extra bright when they were surrounded by darkness. A similar building which he couldn't remember. He let out a puff of smoke and closed his eyes. The peace, the serenity, all protected by the bleep from the radio behind. Then he heard footsteps on the brick road and looked. A little girl was staring at a crevice just outside the motel, wondering what appeared from it. The lights flickered and she clung onto her mum, a young beauty who laughed and patted her head. Rex smiled. From what he remembered, he was always alone.

The radio was still beeping. He turned around and glanced at his chariot. The newest version of his design, silent, stealthy, bulletproof, every feature concealed behind the regular red paint, except the tiny black spot with yellow stripes on the windshield. People mistook it for dirt and dust mixed with mustard, but for Rex, it is a part of the Taxi, a part of him. He wondered at the possibility, or audacity of people waving at him. *I mean, can't you even notice the mark? Another puff of smoke. Whatever, I drive by them, pull down my window, whisper softly, "Sorry pal, wrong business," and drive off. What if they see your license plate and report you? Relax, my Taxi changes license plates every minute by itself. It's just a sexy beast.* Then the bleep stopped. A brand-new list. Rex grinned and squished the cigarette.

With such precision Rex entered the Taxi, threw a blueberry gum in his mouth and turned on his phone, which was attached to the radio. Rex didn't know where his excellent memory came from. This had been

his job for three years right after he quitted school, every move performed by heart. The phone opened with a list of names, and beside them were their records, desired destinations and the sum they were willing to pay. Rex scrolled and sighed. He took another phone out from his brown leather jacket and dialed a number. The long silence of waiting. The long chewing. Darkness remained. He looked out of the window, no people, no cops, excellent. A lively voice came from the phone.

“Hey, this is Tony, how may I help—”

“For the love of God, can you please give me a list with better people and more money? I don’t really fancy driving a client whose only theft is stealing from a convenience store in the suburbs, and I only get like, what, several thousand dollars? You give me a better list and we are talking.”

“Calm down Rex, we both know you are the driving ace among all of us. If I have the best client, of course I will leave it in your capable hands.”

“But?”

“Today is pretty bad. Our guys have been hiding for several days because of some stupid protocol or law by the cops last week, and they are sweeping the streets for anything suspicious.”

“Yeah, I know, but still, they give us more cash.”

“Rex, I am your handler, it’s my job to—oh wait. Wow, Rex you are lucky. A juicy customer just got in—”

“Give me the details.”

“Olaf Miguel, 25, Mexican, smuggles bioweapons to China, pays 20 grand, one-way trip.”

“20 grand. Now that’s a good business. Destination?”

“The cargo dock at West Point. I will text you his location.”

“Thanks, Tony. I owe you.”

“You better return the favour when it’s done. By the way, tell you something funny yesterday. I was driving along the Boulevard when an old man in a wheelchair was rolling towards me. It was so hilarious that he chased me for a distance when he finally stopped. Why need a taxi, when you can travel by yourself? You have a wheelchair, use it!”

Rex paused for a while. “Yeah, people do that very often, but never mind Tony. We have a job to do. See you after it is done.”

Rex hung up and stared at the sky. Darkness, only with a few splashes of light blue. The white lines between the bricks were still sheltered from the approaching brightness. He spat the gum to the street, pushed the stick and was ready to drive, when a temporary dizziness took over his brain. Why did he need a ride? Why chased it? What happened to him? Rex dismissed the thoughts and started driving.

He pulled over by a closed grocery store after making sure it was empty. The streetlights shone on the few grey cars at the other side of the Avenue, deserted and motionless, a city still in a deep sleep. Rex looked straight at the mirror as he waited and lit another cigarette. Some footprints with heavy mud leading to a small apartment beside the grocery store. Within the dark silence, Rex thought about the old man and all his

doubts conceived earlier, when a tall, stout man came out of the apartment, wearing a black mask and carrying a large steel container. Rex threw the blueberry gum wrapper to the street and the man walked towards the Taxi. Rex saw a scar across his left eye which made it half-open, but except for that, he was a pretty handsome fellow.

“Password?”

“There isn’t one.”

“Alright. Get in.”

Olaf carefully placed the container at the far seat and sat behind Rex, keeping a safe distance from the chemicals. Rex waited for him to settle down, one hand at the wheel, one hand fixing his cigarette. Through the rear-view mirror, Rex saw Olaf examining the interior of the Taxi like a policeman doing a security check. The black leather seats, the complex machinery on the dashboard, and the cold driver’s piercing eyes. Something familiar, Rex couldn’t figure it out.

“Hey, you ready? You seem really concerned with my car.”

“No, I mean, I just wanna make sure it’s safe.”

“Don’t worry, it is.” Rex typed something to Tony on the phone and started the car.

It was always Rex’s habit to avoid any conversation with his clients, as he was not interested in the little details of their family, jobs, crimes, as long as he finished the job and got the cash. But this Olaf was most intriguing. He kept turning around and fiddling with his mask, as if he

would rip it off as soon as the police appeared around the corner. Rex wondered if he knew this man before.

“First time?” Rex tuned the radio to another police station.

“Nah, I have done this many times,” Olaf turned around again. “It’s just my habit to make sure everything goes smoothly so I don’t get into trouble.”

Rex listened to the radio for any police activity in the Southwest District. “Pretty young and successful of you to work among the elites.” They were still in the clear.

“I got the job right after graduation,” Olaf adjusted the box and continued. “The audition was quite strict, but somehow I went through and started transporting anything worth a profit.”

Rex stopped tuning the radio. He was me. The youth, the nervousness, the success, they made me Rex Rampage. He wanted to say more, but it was better to focus on the job first. After all, he had entered the West District, and it would be the worst moment to mess it up when they were so close to the dock.

Olaf’s turnings became less frequent. He sat still and looked out of the window. Waiting for the traffic light, Rex fixed his cigarette and checked his watch. There should be enough time. Purplish and bluish hues driving darkness away, the brick road revealing itself. A few beggars, blinded by the brightness, buried their heads in sewn blankets.

Then there was that old man Tony mentioned, standing weakly on the street. Rex took out the cigarette and stared at him, wondering if he

crossed the road, which would be a good story to tell Tony. He stretched his hand, trying to beckon the Taxi, but collapsed. There was nothing there for him to lean against. Not his wheelchair. Not a cane. Not anyone. There he was, crawling on the cold, sticky ground, calling for help. Rex put his hand on the handle. He had an urge to rush out at any second, but professionalism prevented him.

“Driver? Are you hungry?”

“Why do you say so?” Rex was aware of the voice behind him.

“You have been staring at the hotdog stand for hours and wouldn’t drive when the lights turn green.”

“Shit.” Rex quickly took the wheel.

A police car drove out from an alley and remained on the other side of the road. Its flashing lights seemed to be a warning to them. Olaf hid his body in the dark interior.

“Dude. Don’t mess this up. I am told you are the best.”

“I am. Just fix your damn eyes on the box.” Rex maintained a normal speed and passed the car, his eyes making a quick glimpse of the yawning patrolman. *He didn’t notice. Good.* Olaf got himself back up and wiped the sweat from his forehead. *He really looked like me.*

Rex drove to a narrow alley at the dock and saw two silver sedans waiting for him. The sky brightened and revealed the gigantic cargoes stacked on both sides of the alley to form a barrier. Rex turned on the sidelights three times and waited. Two men stepped out of the car, wearing



dark sunglasses and suits.

Olaf took out his phone and typed the amount. “Thanks for the service brother. Get some sleep as you look tired as hell.”

“I will.”

Olaf was about to leave. “Wait.” Rex reached for a box behind the radio. He took out a dusty stack of cards and gave one to Olaf. “Hey, call me if you need any help alright? It’s just good business.”

Olaf looked at the card with only a number on it. “Thanks.” He left the Taxi and headed towards the bodyguards. Rex looked at him. The height, the figure, the walk, were all reminders of himself (except for the mask). *But I got carried away. My work was disturbed. The old man, Olaf, they appeared in my life all of a sudden. Why? Why would there be nausea?* Rex lowered the window to get some air. Olaf was gone, and so were the two sedans. It was much brighter; darkness banished, the red paint visible. He grabbed his phone.

“Tony, the job is done.”

“Great. Old place as usual?”

“Sure.” Rex drove slowly to keep his brain clear, while the damp air infiltrated the windows.

He arrived at the bar. Once a week, they celebrated their success in driving dangerous clients to safety. Money was seductive, but it is worth nothing when your lives were gone. Rex pulled over, turned off his engine and waited. It was his habit to wait for Tony in the car. It was always

dangerous to enter the bar alone, as the bartender became suspicious and questioned your identity, especially when the cops started swarming in the morning. Rex lit a cigarette and checked the streets. Lights appeared in houses, bazaars opened with “for sale” signs still stuck on second-hand jewels, few people in suits passed the Taxi, yawning with eyes half-closed. Rex drew a deep breath and pressed his eyes. Scenes of the old man and Olaf imprinted on his mind. They evoked something. Something about his past. He couldn’t dismiss them with all the strength he could muster.

He opened his eyes. A pregnant lady was standing on the street and massaging her belly. Around the corner, facing the intersection, similar to the way the old man stands, alone. Rex pinched his arm. It was real. *She looked at her belly and turned elsewhere, but I could see it in her eyes. The anxiety of childbirth mixed with the joy of seeing him or her grow up.* The urge was much stronger. Rex extinguished the cigarette and placed it on the seat, shifting all his attention on her. Then it came. The contraction. Her face was distorted by pain. She began dropping to her knees. She kept panting, as though the sores would miraculously disappear, but to no avail.

*I remember. It all started from here. A helpless woman, abandoned by her husband, left with two children, one in her belly. Somehow she found a small apartment with the help of her husband’s brother, trapped in this part of the city. Every morning she walked me to school on that narrow road (she always placed herself near the traffic and clutched my hand). I saw only the abandoned. Hamburger wrappers, irregular wooden slabs, worn-out tires, only to be resided by disgusting insects. I was always afraid of insects. I looked up at her. An overwhelming fear and sadness. But when she looked back at me and smiled, I realised how strong and loving she was.*

*I learnt to be independent when mum was pregnant. Saving just enough money from part-time jobs to buy a small mattress for her to stretch*

*her legs. Cooking less unhealthy food with her recipes (Her body was weak, but her memory was still excellent). Making herbal tea when she felt dizzy in the suffocating room... I asked her what name should be given to the baby. She always replied, "Wait until the baby is born." I lay awake in my bed (mattress on the floor), hoping it was a boy. A younger brother who was so similar to me. A companion to run along the streets and avoid insects. An accomplice to steal bread in the bakery downstairs, or just simply, a friend.*

*I told her not to go out in such a state when I headed for school. Why she went out, I didn't know. She couldn't walk to the hospital. She had no food, no shoes, the weeds from the wasteland grabbed her feet and forced them on the ground. She stretched out her hand. Any car, any vehicle, if possible to detect the extended hand, thin as a bone, would save her life. The spasm, the scream, the twitch. This was her end, no, their end. My mum, my brother (Olaf should be my brother; we are so similar), there was no one there to save them. I was at school when a teacher informed me. I ran for miles to the hospital. The doctor told me they were found motionless on the street by a taxi driver, who finally drove them here. I saw their body. I didn't say anything. I didn't cry. I didn't shout. There was only emptiness. I chose to forget.*

*Or I didn't. There was so much I couldn't understand. I couldn't believe the last sentence I said to her was just a small reminder, but not an expression of love, gratitude, understanding. I quitted school as there was no money. This driver job was the opposite. It gave me money and a chance for revenge. I ignore those "fake" passengers so as to let them feel my rage and loss of my mum, my family, my life. They don't care about a taxi driver, a teenager and his misfortunes who turned himself into a criminal. I guess the old man and the pregnant lady gave me some closure.*

There was no stopping Rex now. He pushed the door open and rushed to his mum. Fluids spewed from her legs.

“My water broke—god—my baby boy is about to be born. Please help me!”

“Ma’am, I am a taxi driver. I will take you to the hospital.”

“Argh—I am afraid I can’t make it.”

“Don’t worry Ma’am, my car is safe and fast.” Rex, with all his strength, carried the lady carefully and placed her in the backseat, making her lie down and breathe normally. He quickly grabbed the leather pad on his front seat and put it behind her head. She looked at Rex, her face covered with tears and sweat.

“Son—if I can’t make it, please make sure my child is alive.”

“I will bring you both to the hospital. You can see him for yourself.” Rex turned on his phone, and it calculated the shortest route to the hospital. He jumped to the seat and drove. The smoke from the cigarette was still there.

It was Rex’s challenge now. You could not drive too fast, she would faint any second, and the cops would get you; you could not drive too slowly, or she would bleed to death. Rex mastered the wheel so skilfully that the optimal speed was achieved. In his mind, there was only one thing: the revenge for his family’s death. He was not a cool getaway driver; he was just a taxi driver.

“Hang on, we are almost there.” His phone rang while the lady’s screams stopped at intervals. “Rex Rampage, you have violated our code that civilians should not be customers. You will receive the punishment as follows—” And then there was Tony. “Rex, what the hell are you doing?”

We are professional drivers—”

“Stupid people.” Rex cursed. He memorised the route and turned off the phone. When they reached the hospital, Rex carried the lady, despite his arms being feeble from all the driving, and the nurses, with syringes, scalpels and other medical supplies, placed her in the bed and rolled her into the emergency room. Rex caught a last glimpse of her smiling at him, and the door closed. He looked around the waiting room. Although it was not *that* hospital, he still couldn’t dismiss his haunting past. People, sick or healthy, were surveying him with a doubtful look, as if his true identity was exposed. He found a seat when a nurse with a form and pencil in her hand came out.

“Sir, do you mind providing your personal details, such as your name and your relationship with the pregnant lady?”

“Actually, I am just a taxi driver. I saw her on the street.”

“It is so kind of you! You may need to wait while the surgery is being performed. You can grab something to eat in the cafeteria downstairs.”

“Thanks.” Rex sat down and rubbed his hands. Will they survive? Am I too late? His phone vibrated from the jacket. It was Tony. He put it back. He took it out. He wanted to call mum, telling her a good deed he did, or his *brother* Olaf, telling him how he successfully delivered a pregnant lady to the hospital without any distraction. He got up and looked at his vehicle, an everyday taxi with regular red paint. Nothing more, nothing less.

# DREAM FOR...



## Dream for...

*Chung Hiu Nam Conanya*

“Let’s try one more time. One, two, three, four. Horns, be softer! Oboes, ready for your entry. One, two, three, four. Stop, stop, stop. I would like the cymbals to join half a quartet earlier, thank you. Let’s try again. One, two, three, four...”

“Mr. Blanco, may we have a short break?” I glance at my watch and it says 13:15.

“Ok, we will continue with the rehearsal after 15 minutes,” I say.

The orchestra disperses like a swarm of bees leaving their hive at the moment of my announcement. Though I am quite the perfectionist, I am really glad that David asked for a break. I have been standing here for three hours, moving and swaying my arms every single instant. Once I stopped, I can feel the numbness of my arms, which I ignored while I was in performance mode. I quickly do some stretching exercises and hurry to the washroom to respond to the call of nature.

Before I re-enter the room, I see a notice on the door next to our hall. I stand there before the door, reading it to see if the issue affects us.

“Oh, Mr. Blanco, what are you looking at?” David, who left the washroom after me, asks.

“It’s just a new notice, it shouldn’t be something serious as it is not stuck on our door. But I am reading it just to make sure everything’s safe,” I say.

“Then what is it about?” the other orchestra members ask as the crowd in front of us grows larger.

I am not confident, but I know I cannot escape from this since they all see me reading the notice. I draw a deep breath and go,

“It says, ‘Tonight the light will off switch for Hall Two as there is emer... emer... As there is some work *mainnetance*.’ It has nothing to do with us, so we can simply ignore it,” I said, turning back to see their embarrassed faces. Ah, it must be the first time they’re hearing me read and noticing something different about me.

I try to clear my thoughts and come up with some joke. But Mr. Wilson, the orchestra director, is quick to respond.

“What are you all gaping at? The news of urgent maintenance work isn’t that shocking, is it? Right, Mr. Blanco?” says Mr. Wilson, winking at me.

“Maybe they are just grateful that we are not affected, and we need not switch to another room in such a hurry, Mr. Wilson,” I said, winking back at him. Reading aloud is not an easy task for me, as I have difficulties in pronouncing multisyllable words. Also, switching consonants across syllables is a sign of my identity. I still remember the first time I met Mr. Wilson for collaborations. We were at his office casually reading newspapers when he suddenly asked me to read a passage below a photo for him because he forgot his glasses. And of course, with my “special reading” ability, he joked that he would have understood more with his imperfect eyesight than listening to my utterances. That was how he became my secret-keeper. How blessed am I to always have people that are supportive and understanding in my career.

After the hurried footsteps, the musicians reunite with their instruments, and the hall is immediately filled with music, my arms rising and falling with the rhythm. Although it is tiring, I treasure every moment on stage and with the orchestra. Page after page, song after song, I process the written notes, each time with a bit more joy, each time with a lighter heart because I am one step closer to seeing my beloved family.

“Thank you, Mr. Blanco, we are very honored to have an internationally-renowned conductor perfect our performance!” says Mr.



Wilson, his words supported by rounds of cheers from the orchestra.

“I am glad to work with such an outstanding orchestra overseas and enjoy making music with all of you throughout this month. I have experienced the zeal you guys have towards music, which is different from that of my orchestra in Ohio. I also learned some skills that help improve my orchestra and facilitate interactions as we were preparing for this show. The pleasure is mine!” I say in reply to Mr. Wilson’s compliment. We have created good memories that transcend beyond our rehearsals, especially when they took me to tourist sites, flea markets, and restaurants only known to the locals. Suddenly, it all comes to an end.

“Practicing with you is really fun, Mr. Blanco.”

“If only we could have one more week to travel around.”

“Maybe we will meet again in the next annual performance.”

We shake hands, chitchat, and take photos. As much as I will be missing these lovely people, I am hoping to finish this off as soon as possible so that I can arrive at the airport on time.

“How long does it take for you to get back to Ohio?” asks Mr. Wilson.

“Around 11 hours, and an extra hour to drive back home,” I say.

“Wow, your schedule is really packed! How lucky Anita is to have a loving father like you, Mr. Blanco,” one of the members says.

“Well, she is a lovely daughter. You will understand this urge if you have children someday. Goodbye everyone, take care!” I ease myself from the crowded backstage, waving goodbye. I then grab my suitcase, stroll down the corridor, and hop on my Uber at top speed.

When I board the plane, it is already midnight. I look out the window, with sleep being the last thing on my mind. Perhaps this one-month separation is still a bit long for me. I had always wondered if my daughter would have really missed me, but it turns out I may be the one

who wishes to have more family time. Anita is my only daughter, and she was diagnosed with ADHD a year ago. My wife, Cindy resigned from her job to take care of her since then. At the same time, I continue to develop my career in hopes of earning enough money to support Anita in finding her personal talents.

I have been told many times, by her teachers, educational psychologists, and therapists that I should not design her future nor project our will on her as such children are not prone to being fitted into a mold. Nonetheless, as a parent, I inevitably dream for my daughter. How long will it take us to realize her potential? Every time I raise this question, I think back to the time when I was with my parents in hopes of finding a solution and the patience they once had.

In the swirl of my thoughts, the plane lands. After all the queuing and checking, I claim my suitcase back at Fairfield County Airport and get myself ready for the journey home. It's five in the morning in Ohio. I picked this flight for two reasons: First, to meet Cindy and Anita as soon as possible; second, the traffic at this time is not too busy, so I can still drive a bit slower than usual. I need a longer time to read the road signs without causing traffic congestion. But of course, to play safe, I have already memorized the routes I have to take at the main intersections and junctions.

"Daddy! Welcome home!" Anita is wobbling towards me, stretching out her arms, smiling with closed eyes, clinging onto her sweet dream.

"My dear Anita, did you miss me?" I hug her tight and lift her onto my lap to keep her from stumbling. She slowly nods and falls back to sleep in my arms while Cindy carries her back to her bed.

"Has this month been tough for you?" I ask Cindy, wrapping my arms around her, noticing her bloodshot eyes.

"A bit. But it's okay, it's all gone, and now you are back. I'll sleep for three more hours before we send Anita to school. Let's talk after that,"

says Cindy. We hold on to each other's hands tightly as we walk up the stairs to our room. With each step, I ponder on the thought of whether we have the same prospect for Anita. Does Cindy see potential in Anita? Or is she more inclined to believe the opinions of professionals? I know Anita is only eight, but I was only eight too when I met my lifelong challenge. How I wish I could read minds!

Nevertheless, we rise at nine to start our new day. The day continues as usual, with us sending Anita to school, shopping for groceries at the supermarket, picking Anita up from school. Later on, Cindy cooks our dinner while I bathe Anita. Everything is perfect until night comes. To be honest, I am afraid of spending nights with Anita because...

“Daddy, can you read this bedtime story with me?”

“Sorry Anita, reading stories is Mummy's time with you, don't you remember?” I said, avoiding her gaze.

“But you promised to read me story books, Daddy...” her voice trails off.

“You must have remembered wrongly, my dear,” Cindy chuckles. “Daddy promised you anything except this. Let's read *The Princess and the Pea* tonight.” She leaves no room for Anita to protest and starts the story immediately.

“Phew!” I somehow managed to escape from the close call again. I am afraid of story books. I don't know how long I can live with my secret. I wonder when Anita will discover that her “powerful daddy” is actually useless in some areas. It was because of story books that made me realize I have a lifelong problem. Since the age of four, my parents have read to me every night. Both of them quit middle school and had no concept on how to intellectually bring up a child. They learnt from advertisements that children love reading stories. However, this was not the case for me. I talked a lot and responded to their questions, but I could never read the words out loud, even when I was eight. Not too long after, the doctors

told us that I have a “friend” called dyslexia, and my whole world changed.

Knowing that I have such a condition, I had zero motivation to read and study as I knew I could never make sense of the words no matter what I did. But, the most suffocating part was when my teachers, counsellors and social workers all kept on advising my parents to spur me on with my studies, offering me extra exercises and free after-school tutorial sessions. It seemed as if they thought I could not hear their countless “He can’t survive with his limited reading abilities” behind closed doors nor interpret their sighs. But it was not about the amount of training nor time we put into it. For two to three years, I was trapped in this endless cycle of trying and failing, and on top of that, the feeling of helplessness as I realized were my parents gradually spent less time with me. They left home before I got up and arrived home just before I had to sleep. I had wondered if they were disappointed with their only child, as he did not have the ability to read properly nor bring glory to the family.

One day, when I had to stay behind after school to finish my classwork, my father came and told the teacher we would be leaving. Then, without waiting for any reply, he shoved everything into my bag and dragged me out of school to yet another therapist. I can still vividly remember the place from my memory; it was very well-lit and well-decorated. There were paintings on the walls and classical music pieces being played in the room.

“Anthony, it is going to be different this time. Dr Lee is known for discovering the talents of children like you. We will work things out together,” my father said.

“So, here’s another guy that will repeat the same set of advice and bleed my parents dry,” I thought. Just when I was about to say they were wasting time, the therapist spoke.

“Mr. and Mrs. Blanco, it is true that being dyslexic is really

discouraging in the learning environment. Although Anthony is only moderately dyslexic, the labelling effect and stigma placed on him at school can actually hamper his reading ability and performance.”

This was the first time I became interested in knowing the name of the therapist who was talking about me. I have never had a therapist that was concerned about me before directly starting the therapy session. I took a glance at the name tag, which had “Dr Gianna Lee” printed on it.

“Then am I actually hopeless, Dr Lee?” I asked. On one hand, I wished for a “Yes” so that it would justify my choice in giving up on my studies; on the other hand, I also wished for a “No” to save me from the sense of failure I have caused as a son.

“Well, I would say it’s both a yes and a no, Anthony. It’s a yes since it would be rather difficult to assist you in the learning environment. But it’s also a no in terms of developing your abilities in other aspects. I have reviewed your profile, and it occurred to me that you have always paid full attention to your studies. I would recommend you shift your focus to something other than reading,” said Dr Lee, speaking to me instead of my parents. Since the first day I was told that I had dyslexia, this was the first time I felt respected enough to have a say in my life.

“But of course, this is risky and will lead to uncertainties, depending on your talents. And some parents,” she paused, “would prefer their children to drill and practice the same thing over letting them embrace the unknown.” She ended with a polite smile and looked straight into my parents’ eyes.

Since then, I was taken to different classes every day after school, like taekwondo, swimming and drawing until I told them I enjoyed piano classes the most. Not only did I get to read visual representations of music—the notes and the score sheets—I also learned music by waving my arms up and down, to feel the rhythm and the beat. This was my ideal haven, a place with no words. Eventually, I paid less and less attention to

schoolwork, just as how the teachers paid less and less attention to me, labelling me and my family as surrenderers. We surrendered to my ultimate weakness, but we did not surrender to fate, it's just that we have decided to live in another realm.

Someday after my piano lesson, my teacher said to me, "Anthony, please remind your parents to pay your fees for the past three months. See you next week!"

It was then that I realized learning piano was originally something out of my reach. As I walked home, my mind was filled with the tired faces of my parents every time I bade them good night. I suddenly realized that they were not disappointed with me, but supported me to fly free from this demanding and demeaning world, and encouraged me to seek my way of living instead. They dreamt that their boy could soar and have fun in his childhood, to be confident in his abilities and have something to be proud of.

Over the years, my career has been quite a success and encouragement to my whole family. My parents were grateful that they had made the correct decision by freeing me from this education system. I was grateful to have Dr Lee and their support. I thought life would be normal for me and that I could earn money like a normal person, but it was the presence of Anita that brought up new questions. To be honest, I feel jealous when Anita listens to Cindy read bedtime stories every night because they seem to be the only temporary inhibitor for her ADHD.

"Cindy, thank you for hiding my secret from Anita. I'm sorry that I cannot share this workload with you. I always feel a sting in my heart whenever I think about the future: I can never help Anita with her studies, spelling and grammar; all I can do is sit there and be supportive..." The helplessness I experienced during my learning process converted to the helplessness to teach when I became a father.

“Just stop right there, dear. Jealousy does not get you far in being a parent.” Cindy smirks.

“What? Who says I am jealous? I am just worried. You people who can read quickly would not understand.”

“Okay, okay, I’ll spare you the embarrassment. What are some elements for a drama to be successful, aside from the actors and plot?” Cindy asked.

“Props, costumes, sound effects, and lighting?” I answered, clueless as to why this question appeared out of the blue.

“Yeah, sound effects. Words are sounds, but sounds are more than words. Interested in joining my story-telling team, Mr Blanco?” Cindy asked.

“Wait, what do you mean? Do I have to prepare some sound effects or tunes to suit the stories?” I asked, enlightened by this idea.

“That’s what I thought. This is your profession, so it will be a piece of cake to you. Also, the appropriate use of music can help kids with ADHD engage in learning activities that involve word recognition. Music puts them into the mood of learning because they will find it less boring. Of course, you can always think of other methods...” said Cindy, glancing at the pile of story books.

“This is exactly what I want to do, Cindy! Thank you for making my dream come true!” I exclaimed and hugged her as tightly as I could.

“When can we start?”

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One week later, Cindy picks up *Hansel and Gretel*.

“Anita, sweetie, would you like to read this tonight?”

“But Mummy, we have just read *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* yesterday. May I have that one instead?” Anita asks while tottering along

the bookshelf.

“Daddy will be joining us today, and has specifically prepared to read you *Hansel and Gretel*,” Cindy said.

“Oh, Daddy will finally read story books with me? It’s OK then, Goldilocks can wait!” said Anita.

Although the whole story is shorter than 10 minutes, I had to prepare eight recordings. Still, through the time I get to spend with my daughter, such as seeing Anita’s furrowed brows when she hears music at the point where Hansel and Gretel are lost in the woods, or the terror she experiences when she hears the witch putting Hansel in the cage, makes me grateful. I love how the shrieking sounds I added as Gretel pushes the witch into the oven succeeds in startling Anita and how the short sound clip celebrating the siblings’ victory over the witch brings a smile to her eyes.

“Daddy, I love your way of telling a story!” says Anita.

Aside from my constraints, I can love my daughter in my own way. Our abilities are sufficient for us to attain our dreams, even if they do not seem feasible at first. We can conquer our weaknesses, only if we go to great lengths to figure it out.



## The Great Murberec

*Yan Tsz Yau Katlyn*

Maverick motioned at his little sister to stay quiet as they snuck along the hallways of the laboratory. His sister's fingers curled tightly around his hand as she stumbled along, barely able to keep up with her chubby legs.

"I don't want to do this. I'm scared," she said in a small voice.

His heart clenched as he looked down at her. Maverick didn't know what would happen on the other side of the door once they part, but he knew he had to do it. He was going to help his sister get rid of the insatiable demon inside of her. The one who kept feeding her nightmares and lies, the one that taught her to only befriend guilt and forget all about happiness. It had to go that night.

"She'll be fine," he reassured himself as they entered the room. Lifting her onto the bed, he caught her hugging the diagram he drew of the brain. As a psychology major in his final year, he sketched the organ out in order to study it better. His little sister had a tendency to keep whatever he drew and claimed them to be her "treasure." He remembered leaving his desk for a short while, and upon coming back, the words "The Great Murberec" were scrawled on top of the illustration. The words were squiggly, and the letters overlapped each other so much the "u" slanted into an "a." Yet, Maverick's heart swelled with pride as he realized "Murberec" was "Cerebrum" spelt backwards. He didn't know how the little one managed to remember such a big word, but she had been around whenever he studied; hence it was most likely from seeing it in one of his textbooks.

Settling her down on the bed, he caught his sister staring at him with great uncertainty. Her eyebrows creased, and eyes welled up as Maverick stepped back, eventually bawling as the distance between them grew greater by the second.

“No, don’t go! Stay with me!” She cried as she leaned forward to reach for him. The drawing of the diagram crumpled against his forearm as her fingers squeezed him tight, unwilling to let go.

“I’ll see you on the other side of the door, okay? I’ll see you very, very soon, my dearest sister.”

Tears threatened to spill as he backed out of the room. His sister was still in view, but he somehow felt like it would be a long time before he sees her again. As if right on cue, the scorching white lights came on above their heads.

“This is not supposed to happen.” He froze as he looked up at the light. Panicking, he swiveled back to look at his sister, but all he saw were blinding red spots blotched out in front of him instead. A strong wave of vertigo washed over him as his sibling screamed. In the midst of everything, he felt a piece of paper clamping down hard on his arm. It must have been his sister trying to reach for him, with his drawing in hand. His skin burned as the beam of light struck his body. All was quiet a second later, and as hard as he tried to conjure up the memories, he couldn’t. All he could remember were the moments that led up to the two of them parting.

Little did he know it would be years before he sees his little sister again. And by then, they would have turned into complete strangers.

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It was the dead of the night when they received the new victim. The monitoring hall had been silently still, so quiet that the sound of a single pin dropping would have echoed through the hallway. The majority

of people in the city were asleep by then. Except for the Healers. They were alert as they monitored the subjects behind the screens. As tired as they should have been, they did not fail to spring into action when the sirens blared. Two of them sprinted at full speed as they yanked the gurney towards the receiving station. It would have been usual practice for the staff, but the unusually high-pitched sound pierced their eardrums and made them weak at their knees. As much as they should have hurried down to the station, they couldn't manage to. The sirens screamed as its red lights flooded and danced erratically in the corridor. Up and down, side to side, from left to right. And just like that, all the lights went off.

A buzz, a flash, a blink—the dim, red lights flickered back on. One by one, they pulsed as the gurney rolled to a stop. The staff pulled on their gloves as they approached the metal container. They peered into it. The lid was sealed when they arrived.

“Thank the Heavens,” they thought they had failed to make it in time. Reaching over, they moved to unclasp the latches. But the person inside was one step quicker. The door flew open with a bang as she gripped their arms. She screamed as her bloodshot eyes bulged, and the two froze in shock as the nightmarish scene slithered and inked itself into their minds. Cursing inwardly, Bree and Dylan broke out in cold sweat. The girl was horrifying, but the consequences they would have to suffer are even worse. Such sound and commotion would have alerted Maverick, which was the last thing they would want to see happening. Disappearing off the face of the Earth would be better than triggering his emotions as he turns uncontrollable once it starts. The two of them ran a hand across their faces as they sent the girl into her room. Trudging back through the monitoring hall, they thought about how they were going to be in for a long night.

Hearts thudding, they pushed open the door. Maverick sat with his back to them, arms crossed, body still as ever.

“Explain yourselves,” he said, turning to lock eyes with them.

“I’ve got all the time in the world to listen to your explanations, so you better make up a good one to convince me.” The heels of his shoes knocked against the floor tiles as he picked up a clipboard. He seemed calm on the surface, but his body evidently shook as he said it. It was as if the staff were witnessing a volcano about to erupt.

“I said explain yourselves to me!” He raged as he flung the clipboard onto the wall. Shards of plastic flew everywhere as the board shattered. Thick stacks of paper skidded and scattered everywhere as Dylan’s arms whipped up in time to shield his face. However, Bree was less fortunate. Just as she was ducking, a shard of plastic shot across her forehead and a gash appeared, blood gushing from the wound as she moved to cover it. Dylan rushed over to see if she was alright, but Maverick did the opposite. He stood rooted, frozen even. They had pulled his ultimate trigger.

“Listen, alright? Listen. You have *not* been hired to put on a show for me. You know the two things that should never happen in this place. What are they? What are they?”

Bree stepped forward, ready to reply. She was confident about her answer, the one she had been memorizing since she was first hired. But her mind went blank. She just couldn’t remember.

“How many drills do you two need? Tell me the precise number. Screaming patient? Blood on the head? You’re making me relive the agony I created, aren’t you? You’re reminding me of having sent my sister into the operating room, and never seeing her again, aren’t you? Do you have any idea how much I have suffered, and am still suffering? Do I have to describe to you the immeasurable amount of pain I feel every single day?”

Dylan took a step forward as he attempted to calm him.

“Maverick, we’re sorry. We—”

“Get out of my sight. Get lost!” Their boss cried as he swept everything off the desk and sunk to the floor.

Bree and Dylan were quick to hurry out the door as neither of them

had the intention of further provoking him.

“Wait! Wait, no! I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to, I’m so, so sorry...” he wept as Dylan closed the door softly behind him. Bree had the most perplexed look on her face as she stared at Dylan. The man in the room clearly needed help and comforting. As much as she feared the man inside the room, she wondered why Dylan would choose to close the door and leave him alone in the room instead. She knew how such episodes felt as it had occurred on her numerous times back when she was still in the orphanage. Her heart ached as she thought about the helplessness she experienced, in which Maverick was undoubtedly experiencing at that moment too.

“He needs some time to calm down and should be given personal space,” Dylan said as they stepped out into the hallway. Following him into the first-aid room, Bree noticed the prolonged time he took to bandage her wound. He must have sensed that she had questions for him. And indeed, she had one after another coming in. The questions churned in her brain as she thought about which one to ask first.

“How are you able to stay by his side after all these years? You could have parted ways with him once the two of you graduated, so why bother putting up with his inane, volcanic temper?”

“He didn’t use to be like this,” Dylan sighed.

“He was once the most compassionate, caring and empathetic person one could ever get to know. He never failed to help me in times of trouble, and even introduced me to this treatment. I’m now healed thanks to him. But things changed after his sister disappeared. He blamed everything on himself and never got over it.”

By asking Dylan all the questions she had, Bree understood that Maverick was in high school when his mother remarried and added the newest member—his little sister to the family. Though not blood-related,

his stepfather loved him just as much, and the four of them had always been the family others wished to have. Maverick was over the moon when his sister appeared. He had always wanted a younger sibling and loved her to death, often wishing he could spend every single second of the day with her. He never missed the chance to show his classmates photos of her, beaming with joy each time he did. His smile was described as being “brighter than the sun,” and that nothing in the world could possibly take him down during those years. Yet, God was not in his favor when he received a phone call from the hospital one day. He was told that a car accident involving a deceased male, female and a petrified, little girl happened, and that the nurse was very sorry to inform him about that.

He had wept until he was drained that night; his sister’s small, soft palms being the remaining thing he could hold on to. Eyes swollen and puffy, he eventually fell asleep facing the moonlit window. Soon enough, the beeping of monitors linked to his sister alerted him. Waking up with a start, he noticed his sister sitting upright as she faced the window, tears streaming silently down her face as she stared outside. She said she missed dad reading her bedtime stories under the moon, and that mommy spent her last breath yelling at her for killing daddy. She said mommy told her she wasn’t worthy of love, and that giving birth to her was a mistake before she died. She was clearly traumatized, and Dylan was crushed. His mother must have been in so much pain that she took it all out on his sister without meaning to do so. With that, his sister had never been the same after the accident. The originally bubbly, optimistic girl had been replaced by an emotionless, remorseful shadow who failed to respond to anything. Her condition never changed for the better in the next year or so, and as he got increasingly worried about it, he decided to try out an experiment he was studying in his Psychology course—one that would help the patient erase painful memories and scatter negative thoughts from the brain. He desperately wanted to save his sister from drowning in the

bed of pessimism and guilt, but what he didn't know was he would soon be the one going down instead.

Bree drank in all the information that night as she monitored the new patient—Lucy. She was admitted for running away from her worries instead of confronting them, to the point where the system deemed her as “unfit” for the society. She seemed to be settling in nicely despite the commotion caused earlier, and would be ready for the therapy process in just a few days. Rewinding the tape in her head, Bree thought about how lucky Maverick's sister was to have a brother like him. Bree had grown up in an orphanage, and had no memory of her previous life, but she does remember often wishing for an elder brother who would take care of her. Sometimes, she wondered what having a brother who loved and treasured her very much feels like, but all she could do was imagine. Maverick was destroyed after he lost his sister; and decided to shut the entire operation down, swearing never to study anything related to psychology again. However, with the post-war effect at large, citizens were traumatized and crushed by the tragic loss from the war. The government was in critical need of therapy-wise help, and Maverick's remedy could not have appeared at a better time. The authorities have pleaded with him for months, even years, but he stood his ground. It was not until an official proposed starting a nation-wide investigation to search for his sister that he considered the offer and eventually restarted the entire operation.

In memory of his sister, he had named the laboratory after the drawing so as to commemorate her and tell himself to do everything he can to bring her back. Although he did not know how or where his sister was, dead or alive, he was determined to bring her back, to see her one more time. He had prayed that if she sees the name of the place, she would be reminded of the drawing she named and come back to him. Yet, although patients have appeared with positively transformed mindsets after

treatments, news about his sister remained unheard of. The only thing that has happened in the laboratory were quiet nights of routinely receiving new patients and sending them off again after the healing process. Bree was once a patient herself. Despite people at the orphanage being nice and caring, she had always been a guilt-ridden little girl. The staff had never been able to put a finger around it, but as she grew older, she figured it was because of the constant negative thoughts she had growing up. She thought she had done something terrible in causing her parents to give up and move on in life without her. She had suffered from this belief for as long as she remembered. Hence, when the orphanage found out about the experiment, they asked if she wanted to try it out. She had agreed to it as she thought it would help with her situation. And it did. Upon being healed, she found it a meaningful project to be a part of, and ultimately decided to become one of the staff.

Starting from day one, government officials have warned employees over and over again to prevent any form of overreaction from the patients when they arrived. This was because it would trigger Maverick—who was their key to healing traumatized patients. If his memories regarding the experiment resurfaced, he would go down and bring the whole system along with him. This was known to be a serious matter as the staff have had multiple drills on ways to diffuse the situation, should it really happen. Fortunately, they have been handling the patients well, and years went on without any type of outburst—until that day. Lucy arrived being unstable, and everybody’s natural instincts kicked in to disperse the situation. However, they couldn’t manage to do so in time, and the long, dreaded reaction from Maverick appeared.

Before Lucy arrived, Maverick would only reply with emotionless, hollow nods when the staff talked to him. Yet, things took a turn after her appearance. Maverick had an indescribable look on his face whenever he



listened, and as often as hints of sadness flitted across his eyes, he would have looks of realization on his face as he listened, as if memories of the past stirred in his mind. He had cared for her more than any other patient, most likely because she reminded him of his little sister. Bree noticed him entering Lucy's room one night. She was seated on the moonlit windowsill as she looked out at the cobblestone path. Moonbeams crisscrossed their way to the end of the road as Maverick stood behind her, also studying at the view. This scene somehow made Bree strangely emotional, with the feeling of warmth spreading in her heart as she looked on through the monitors. Maybe it was because she never really saw her boss enjoying himself in quiet, serene moments like this. And she had never seen him this calm and at peace before. But why would she even empathize with him, considering the fact that they only talked about work-related things? Pushing the sleeve of her lab coat back, she traced her finger across the moon tattooed on her skin. The system imprinted it on her in honor of completing the therapy, of being able to look up at the moon without feeling sad as she wonders about her non-existent family. It was also there to remind her that she was so much more than how others perceive her to be. Dylan's one was an image of soundwaves. It reminded him to speak up for himself instead of constantly giving in. He had certainly become more confident ever since he had that tattooed on his skin. The remedy had done the both of them well.

On the day of Lucy's treatment, Bree and Dylan got up early to prepare the equipment needed. Upon making sure that everything was running smoothly, Maverick joined Bree in the room as Dylan gave Lucy her sedative injection. They were to carry out the procedures early in the morning when the patient's drowsiness still overtook their body. This helps them run through the steps quicker; and minimizes the confusion or rejection the subject may have.

“She should be asleep in a minute,” Bree said as Maverick stood beside her. He nodded but remained silent as he studied the picture in front of him, a girl on the bed, a male figure standing next to her as he prepared her for the procedures. “It’s going to be fine,” he muttered under his breath as he leaned on the table. Bree cocked her head as a wave of déjà vu hit her. It sounded weirdly familiar, but Dylan says it from time to time whenever they sent a new patient in, so she dismissed the peculiar thought and feeling that grew inside of her. Resting her hand on the switch, she would dim the lights in the room once Dylan walks out. Turning around, he shuffled the pieces of paper in his hands as he made final checks. But just when he was about to exit the room, Bree caught a sudden motion out of the corner of her eye. Lucy sat bolt upright on the bed as she shot her arm out, calling and pleading for Dylan to stay. It could not be a worse time when the searing white lights came on—the unexpected motion must have triggered them. Dylan shouldn’t be in there with the lights. He could be terribly hurt if he stayed in there a second longer.

“This shouldn’t be happening; Lucy shouldn’t be confused. The sedative should have started working, what is going on?” Such thoughts ran through Bree’s mind as her hands flew across the panel of controls.

“Dylan, get out of there! Attention, staff in the monitoring area, we’ve got an emergency. Report to me at the main room right now. Maverick, I apologize for this.” Pushing her sleeves up, she rushed to kill the lights as she checked on Lucy. Yet, the strangest scene appeared before her eyes. Maverick was charging into the room in Lucy’s direction as Bree shouted for him to stop. What was he doing? He wasn’t there to save Dylan as he was already bolting towards the exit. So what was he going after? She tore after him while yelling out commands at the arriving staff. Lucy would be fine as she had been prepared to withstand the light and heat, but not Maverick. Although she had switched the lights off, they take time to

fully stop working, given the powerful surge of voltage. Maverick should know this as he was the one who invented it. Finally managing to catch up, she grabbed ahold of his sleeve and yanked him in the opposite direction. It was mayhem in there, and she had the duty to keep everyone safe.

“You could be seriously injured! Have you gone mad? We have to get out of here!” However, what happened next was something she would never believe in. As Maverick’s sleeve shot up, the lines of a brain, and the words “The Great Murberec” were printed on his arm in red. The diagram, the one she loved the most—was displayed on her boss’s arm. Feelings of disbelief and shocking revelation raced through her mind as she tried to wrap her head around the situation. Time around her stilled as she gasped. Maverick stared at her as he watched her eyes widen. The memories came flooding back to her. And as if he was mirroring her expression, the same look appeared on his face. He had caught the moon on her arm, and memories of his sister came rushing back without a second of delay.

“Who...are you?” Bree looked at Maverick as she held her breath.

“My little one, my dearest sister, is it really you?” Maverick replied as tears formed in his eyes. The two of them studied each other’s faces for the longest time, unable to utter a single word. They were rooted on the spot, finding it hard to believe the fact that they could ever reunite.

“Get out! Get out of there, you two!” Dylan yelled at the mic, desperate to catch their attention. Bree grabbed Maverick as they flew out of the room, all the while thinking how they had thought of each other as staff members, and only to realize how quickly things could change in the blink of an eye.

“I thought I had lost you forever, but Lucy reminded me so much of you. My instincts must have kicked in to make me relive the last moment I saw you in. I can’t believe you’re finally here after all these years.”

“I wonder why you didn’t recognize me when I started working

here? We were so close, yet so far apart.”

Maverick explained it may be because she had developed repressed memory the day they were separated. Her brain had kept such memory hidden in order to protect her from feeling traumatized again, thus costing Bree the memory of having a brother. It also explained why the government officials failed to find her. Without any memory of her past, six-year-old Bree and her previous memories have completely vanished off the face of the Earth, thus leaving the officials with no trace of her. Meanwhile, Maverick had last seen her when she was six. Far too much has changed over the years for him to fully recognize her again. Yet, when the exact same scene happened before their eyes again, along with their tattoos, the memory resurfaced and brought them back together. Either way, they could not be more grateful to find each other after all the long years of searching.

“Didn’t the name of the laboratory stir up any memories you had when you were young?”

“It did, Maverick, oh it did. It was because of its strange familiarity that I chose to work here. But I just couldn’t recall where or why I had such a strong feeling of resonance with it.”

“Maybe because I named it after the drawing you titled. I couldn’t have been a prouder brother when you spelt out ‘Cerebrum’ backwards. You have been a little genius since you were young.”

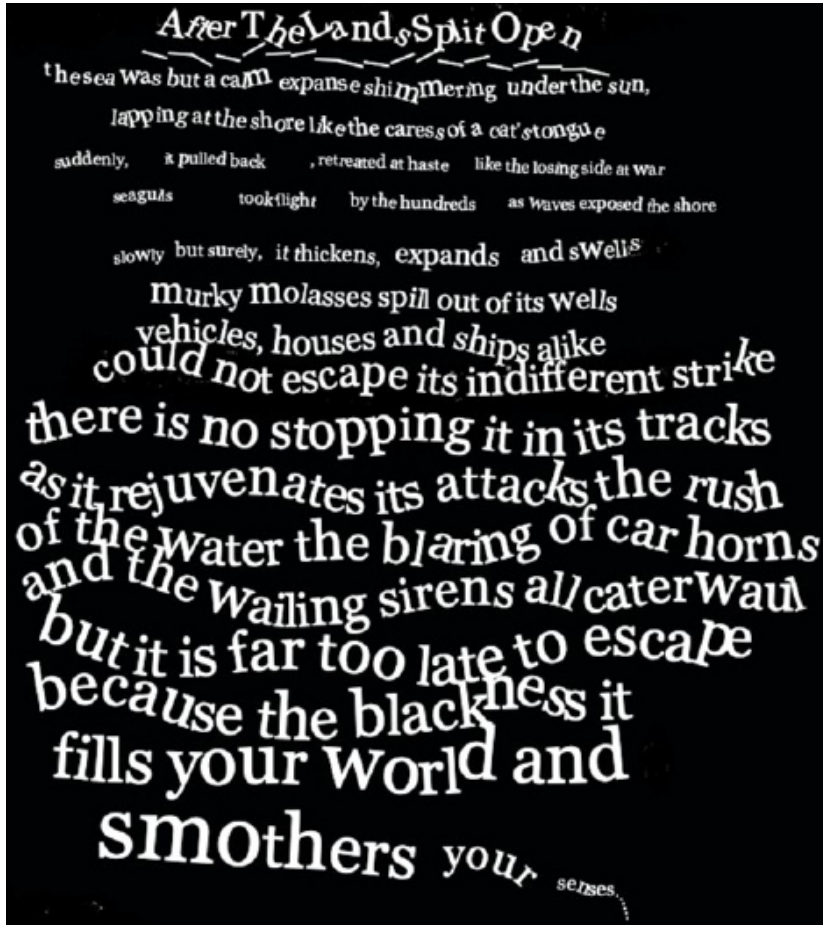
Bree burst out laughing as she looked up at the moon. That wasn’t the reason why she named the drawing. She hardly knew what that word meant. She was attempting to spell Maverick at that time. But as she didn’t know how to spell it, she ended up with “Maberec” instead. She wished to label the drawing with “The Great Maverick” so that people would know how happy she was to have such an amazing brother. But if her brother

decides to interpret her as being the smart one in the picture, she wouldn't mind holding on to that name for a while before telling him the truth. This was how a brother-sister relationship worked, right? While it might take some time for them to become close again, joking around would be a great start. She knew her brother would like that, and she was going to watch their long-awaited relationship blossom from there.

# POETRY SECTION

## After The Lands Split Open

Cheung Tsz Yat



## The Day I Returned

*Chan Tsz Yu Caspar*

The watch says 10:01am in the morning and I have to go

to the hub where buses  
but nobody else cluster;

then back to the home where teddy bears  
but nobody else cluster.

I hop on the bus at 10:30am sharp but  
the bus reeks of rust, perhaps from the aged handles,  
or is it me that reeks of alcohol from last night?  
I look at cows that I can't hear mooing  
and the residence that I don't even remember the colour of,  
and I zone out for most of the journey but  
the half-torn notice that screams all-caps  
in a language that I had intended to learn but failed miserably:

CORONAVIRUS PREVENTIE:  
GELIEVE ALLEEN DE ACHTERDEUR TE GEBRUIKEN  
WIJ DANKEN U VOOR UW BEGRIP

does catch my attention for a brief 20 seconds.

It is 12:15pm when I realize  
the gate has changed from B11 to B28  
which means I will have to dash through the empty hall  
while dragging my luggage in one hand  
and carrying a tote in another.



## The Day I Returned

The watch says 4:45pm, which is when  
I look not at the greenery or the scenery  
but at the chalk white brushwing  
against the Bangladesh green background  
the very brushwing that has always taken me home  
the home that I fled and wish to return to, then  
I look at the window where my reflection shows -

in the cheap plastic raincoat I bought from Aldi  
and the thick, old-fashioned protective goggles  
which frame the pair of weary eyes but nothing else,  
which doesn't fit and which I nudge up whenever it falls  
when I am watching Parasite through the tiny screen right in  
front of me  
while wolfing down the lukewarm mushroom zucchini frittata  
when there is obviously no rush at all  
or when I am looking down and filling in the Cap.599E form.

The watch says 7:55am and here comes  
the fortnight that I dread and expect  
over and over again  
in a place I call home where  
the stale air once suffocated me but  
now gives me at least a slight sense of familiarity:  
the waves of heat, the foul-mouthed birds that chirp every night,  
the turbulence, theirs and mine and ours, the pendulum  
that eventually shares the privilege to rest.

## Fracture and Reconstruction

*Cheung Chi Tak Michael*

When I was 16,  
I fractured my fifth metatarsal.  
That's one of the biggest bones in my foot.

I knew  
I'd screwed up  
the second I jumped  
down from a whole flight of stairs.  
I wasn't even close to making a landing.  
I landed so short that I rolled my ankle. The side  
Of my foot collided on the sharp edge of a staircase.

The metatarsal fractured  
Under two hundred and twenty  
Pounds of flesh and blood and gravity.  
Since that day I walked with two crutches.

Why do we fall?  
Batman's butler Alfred said.  
So that we could learn to pick ourselves up.

Getting back up from the fall was a long painful road.  
Firstly, learn to live with the injury,  
Then learn to use the crutches,  
Strengthen the healthy foot so I can walk greater distance,  
After a while start walking again with two feet,

## Fracture and Reconstruction

And eventually,  
Learn to get back up and walk, run and jump again.

The fractured bone strengthens again with the work of osteoclasts and osteoblasts.

The weak substances are devoured by osteoclasts,

Opening up space for the osteoblasts to build new, stronger bones in the fracture.

Muay Thai fighters kick coconut trees as part of their training, fracturing their shins

so the shins become stronger and tougher.

An endless cycle of fracture and reconstruction shall forge me into a pair of unbreakable shins.

## My Heart Yearns For a Barren Land

*Cheung Shui Yee*

I begin my day with regular stretching exercise and thoughts about death. One tap on my left foot heaven coming into full bloom; one tap on my right foot hell rising up in fume. Whether it'll be an obliterating darkness or pure freedom I don't know. I put on my glasses. I remember my mother bought me a pot of plastic evergreen. "Green is good for your eyesight," she said, "Pretty girls don't wear glasses." Yet I got nearsighted anyway. What make me feel nostalgic are: smell of concrete after rain, futile dreams about an unknown continent, and train driving past the ever-moving shadows. Next Station, Mongkok: "MK mui" doesn't believe in the solemn pledge of love; Victoria park: where I'll find pigeons sitting on the ground; Sai Wan: sailing off, heading south, south to the Indonesian port, crowded with tanned sailors and women wearing batik, south to the Australian deserts and coastlines, south to the Southern Ocean, and there is no more southern ocean for the stowaways to cross. What scares me the most is not the skyscraper's height, but a difficult childbirth. I think I'll marry and have children, or become a nun. As the Buddhist saying goes: the difference between heaven and hell lies in one single thought. I think I'm merciful but sometimes horribly mean to people. I can be a misanthropist, and at the same time a humanist; a ruthless tyrant and a revolutionist. But how can a person manage to hold so many contradictions at bay? Now consider a city: old women dragging cardboard scraps, shops selling Guilinggao says behold, I teach you the secret of longevity; white plastic bags replace egrets; pink erotic lights ejaculate desires. Sometimes, anxiety coils up like a black snake, squeezing dark oil of ominous thought, oil dripping from a smoker's index finger, or the barbecued pork, suffocating insects busy eating the cadaver of a baby. That's the baby I saw on the riverbank in my

## My Heart Yearns For a Barren Land

Chinese hometown. I spent my childhood summers there, in where I learnt that eating fish's eyeballs would make a child clever, and pointing finger at the moon would have one's ears cut off. Before crossing the southern river, my mother had had several abortions. Sometimes, I imagine myself being reborn as a sweet, angel baby, wrapped in a white, clean towel, but sometimes I don't. I cannot move, as the cadavers of babies pile upon my body, or hers. My heart yearns for a barren land, I want to tell them, but my lips barely move. There are so many things I want to say to them: I'm good at running on a rocky shore, but not on a sports ground; lying and storytelling skills are essentially the same to me; each time I arrive at a new city, I'll wander on a random street, pretending I've known it for years. I've learnt nothing from each break-up with man. I take self-harm for self-defense, ignorant of the fact that self-inflicted wounds cut deeper and last longer—that's why I bleed every month. When I bleed I cannot do anything, as if my body is annexed by a totalitarian regime. And I'm not resisting, not out of fear, but because I don't see the reason for resisting. I think my face must be pale now, shrouded in a fog of sorrow. This happened before. At Hennessy Road, freedom chanted, tear gas fired. I couldn't move, my body was possessed by the ghosts of my ancestors. Eyes covered with mud, phototropic neck searching for light, atrophied hands reaching for my empty belly. "There is the barren land", they said. I say I know, and I will be buried in this land, yet not an inch of it ever belongs to me.

## Wedding of Colours (collaborative work)

*Wong Chun Ho*

*Credit to members of Group 1  
And 'Funeral Blues' by W. H. Auden*

Following the clock's tempo sings the flute,  
Sally our dog is sprinting in a lively mood.  
Lead off the anthems with a piano,  
Pop the champagne, let the cheers echo.

Gay friends clink glasses all day and night,  
Celebrating our names with delight.  
Rainbow balloons hung on our picture frame,  
Six colours of pride lingering after the rain.

He is my past, my present, my future and beyond,  
My best friend and our everlasting bond,  
From spring to winter where we belong.  
He thought we could never get married: he was wrong.

When the groom comes out, memory flashes;  
Going against the world, ignoring the backlashes.  
In the garden all the guests stand,  
As the officiant pronounces us—

'Husband and Husband'

## Beauty

*Tsui Lok Yiu*

The greatest tragedy is that  
I used to find beauty in everything  
but myself, I let you convinced me that  
I was so much less than what I actually am

You cracked me open and hollowed my soul  
Filled me with fear and loneliness,  
Fed off my zeal, emptied my vigour  
Made me bitter of all my equals

Captivated by anguish, grappled in this tug-of-war  
Each time I gave in, I chipped away myself  
Piece by piece, loathing the person I have become  
Resented the devilish dance you have invited me to

Intoxicated and drowned, I wrestled  
Gasped for air and sustenance that you deprived me from,  
Hoarding all my love, giving me crumbs  
Yet I was the one who let your parasitic mistletoe  
growing all over my blood and veins

Between the empty feelings, and empty arms  
Is not a place for my heart to be stuck  
Not once should I allow anyone  
Dictate my love for myself again

## Beauty

Covered with the dark silk of twilight,  
Emptiness brings my soul restless  
I am more than my physical body,  
That I had resented out of your disapproval

My beauty, is in the way  
I fill my vessel with love and grace  
But not in the structure of my face  
Or the size of my clothes

My beauty, shines when I start giving respect  
To myself, walking away from pique and vex  
My beauty, like the unfolding of rose  
Deserves every embrace of the loving beams from the Sun



## Ordinary Sounds (after Norman MacCaig)

*Lui Chiu Yi Elizabeth*

When the note hit, it was  
my neighbour practising his piano.  
When the door creaked, it was  
the prelude of a track I played.  
A thump, came crashing through the ceiling above my desk, and a jump, was  
a photo album, my cat, and the mess that they made.

Not wearing the usual attire (my blue cheongsam)  
I was left,  
unanticipated, with  
offbeat ordinary sounds.

Down the lane are  
rays of sunlight, the soft melody of  
pipe organ at morning assemblies,  
high heels hitting the brick-red tiles,  
and yellow-crested cockatoo chirping outside of the window.

That afternoon I hurriedly ran  
out of the classroom, thought I was ready to step out of the garden gate  
Forgetting that  
It would be the last time seeing all those familiar faces,  
and that  
nothing gold can stay.

## Once Was Human

*Fong Kit Wa*

I see a shadow forming  
behind the widths of the door.  
the idea of what it might grow into  
puzzles me.

I see a shadow wandering  
out of place like  
ants in my steamed, salted broccoli—  
foreigners of my territory.  
two dots of a colon,  
we stood next to each other  
but not too close.

I see a shadow approaching,  
more aggressive it became.  
my home is now its shooting range  
fast bullets coming through  
as if I was a target on the firing lane.

I see a shadow lurking  
around the corners of the streets,  
the warm sewers,  
the drains, the pipes.  
a lightning flashes over my head  
I can see the shadow  
and what it resembles.

## The Wall of Birliseum

*Leong Ian Teng*

There she is  
**H**arnessing words  
Elucidating meaning.

**W**andering  
All little corners of the map.  
**L**uminating  
Little hearts with gentle hymns.

**O**bliterating evilness  
**F**abricating virtuousness.

**B**reath taken away when  
**I**mprovising on the sweetest tune.  
**R**endering countless broken souls  
**L**iberating entrapped lonely ghouls.  
**I**ncantate the most alluring magic charms  
**S**cintillate the dullest papers  
**E**nunciate the most powerful spells.  
**U**ntil the world agrees to propel  
**M**ajestically, and all is well.

## The Illusional Twilight—4:28am

*Yan Tsz Yau Katlyn*

The faintest of words tugged at my brain  
Beckoning me to write this down.

I awoke,  
to the strongest message  
punctuating my head:  
Wake up! Eat something! You're starving!

Right.  
The faintest of memories stirred in my head—  
I didn't have dinner last night.  
I had been buried  
alive,  
felt like I could barely survive.

Bleary-eyed, I heard  
something growling in the silence.  
Louder than the strongest beast  
to have ever existed on this planet.  
As if on cue, my doorknob turned.  
I turned—my mother emerged,  
with a drink and some bread in hand.  
There were snowflakes on the bread.

I haven't got the faintest clue  
as to why they didn't melt

The Illusional Twilight—4:28am

or why they weren't cold.

I thought they came  
all the way from North Pole?

But then, they were crunchy,  
and oh, so sweet.

They kept drifting—down  
down,  
onto my bed, silently.

I stared,  
at the faint traces of them  
scattered across the mattress.

Like flour, like snow.

My mind is in a jumble.

They don't belong here,  
and neither should they be.

I bunched up fistfuls of tissue

And tried to collect them

But all they did was slip through my fingers.

Strong-willed and determined,

like sand

falling

freely

through an hourglass.

Fine

So be it.

Let it be.

But I couldn't.

For then began

The Illusional Twilight—4:28am

the faintest sounds  
of birds chirping.  
Of course,  
it's already 5 in the morning.

I wanted to fall back asleep,  
but the power of inspiration was stronger.  
Words arrived and lingered  
on my mind.

And so, with faint lines of sunrays appearing,  
I finished this poem and got ready for the morning.

## To My Inner Lie Detector

*Kong Sum Yuet*

Who do you think you are  
Are you scanning me with your X-ray eyes  
You sketch mountains on the polygraph  
And blame me for my blood pressure rise

Within my hardened carapace  
Beats the heart of a remorseless sinner  
Why would you even hesitate  
What else do you have to consider

Cut me open with surgical precision  
And expose my dirty parts  
Reveal my darkest intentions  
You are too good at the anatomy of the heart

Why do you think you have this entitlement  
To be on the judgement seat  
Stop throwing me with indecipherable law jargons  
Even if condemnation is sweet

You haunt me like an unforgiving specter  
Trying to fill me with self-professed guilt  
But let me tell you, my little lie detector  
There will soon be a tilt

## To My Inner Lie Detector

You can no longer bring me to my knees  
'Cause I have plans to conquer higher mountains  
You will never have the chance to electrocute me  
All you need is a calibration



## An Empty Casket

*Lam Hoi Tung Janice*

I woke up to an empty chair again  
It was a mistake  
to knock on his door—open  
to find an empty bed, unmade  
curtains half-drawn, summer winds blowing through  
books and empty pages limp on the desk and floor.  
Was it because I knocked again?

The wooden drawers held the weight  
of outgrown pyjamas, holed socks and discoloured pants.  
The uniform ironed for the last day of school  
hung stiff on wire hangers.  
Was it because I ironed his shirt again?  
He said he was all grown up,  
he would iron his own clothes,  
patch up his own socks,  
make his own bed  
so I dared not touch anything.  
I turned and closed the door  
he never liked it when I went into his room.  
Maybe it was because I never listened.

Is this how he felt,  
the millionth heartbreak of the day  
it is over-  
whelming, numbing, breath-taking.

## Mind The Fall in Hong Kong

*Lau Sze Wai Kimmy*

People talk about  
How chilly and strong the breeze is this year,  
give me a slap to the face,  
a huge blow to our world.

It blows off the usual  
people mountain people sea  
leaves the street quiet with  
emptied seats,  
hollow school, deserted playgrounds,  
and a few lonely leaves  
fluttering.

Winds sweeps across every corner of the world  
and pile up great waves of  
more and more confirmed cases  
and shrouding us.

The yellow balloons  
are popping on the sky.  
We, Hong Kongers are  
falling off from  
the golden summer heaven  
into the  
inferno  
towards the Big Brother.

## Mind The Fall in Hong Kong

Tumbling down  
The remaining stairs.  
Waiting to be swallowed up.

In October, I fell once too with my heavy body  
on a playground  
while I decide to  
grab the snow skin moon cake.  
My mind falls,  
my body falls  
and I keep  
Falling and falling down  
into the unending pile of leaves  
like Alice in the Wonderland  
without any light  
My voice keeps telling me,  
“fall, fall, fall”  
“no one cares”

I look up to the blurry heavy sky.  
It is falling too.  
We're all falling  
Aren't we?

Bit by bit,  
dead yellow  
leaves falling,

One by one  
from the trees.

## Somewhere Near the Stairs

*Li Jun Kun Max*

the stairs are breathing, exhaling clouds of fun and despair and love  
the dust smeared steps are sheltered by tales and stories  
the 'Exit' sign had no colour, but we knew it was green,  
and the fire extinguisher looks like it has been extinguished on before.

what really mattered was the place between the floors, the 0.5 story  
how great it feels not belonging anywhere,  
standing out awkwardly thinking  
'what if someone just come to me for whatever reason?'

which happened to be true, when  
someone just slung a sofa over it.  
wasting time and digesting life,  
the place only had one path.

you could look at the lower,  
or you could look at the higher level.  
fingers and hair were frequently burnt and  
there was no second time as every time was like the first

ironically though, it does have a last time;  
the time when doom impends because  
its simply not just a sofa somewhere near the stairs,  
its really something you wouldn't understand.

I stand up first, then him, then he, then his-  
they share the darkness I spread.

## **Nature's Song** (after Charles Baudelaire)

*Au Man Ho*

Nature is a temple with pillars of life,  
With mystic songs wrapped in confusing words,  
Men traversed the forest of symbols,  
Which observes them with welcoming eyes,

The rattling of leaves echoed longingly,  
In a deep and profound symphony,  
Vast as the cold night and the warm sun.  
The smell, the sound and the colours sing.

The melody wraps around the body of infants,  
Like the pride and joy of a mother's touch,  
Beautiful, rich, and triumphant.

This tune expands into the infinite,  
Lovingly enveloping all who passes,  
Cleansing the tainted soul in every man.

## Temple Tree Path

*Ng Sheung Ling Roanna*

Alongside the criss-crossing pathways there guarded  
two lines of soldiers suited up with evergreen bearskins,  
for a safety net I avail of their hairy fur from temple trees.  
On rare occasions would you hear stomping feet  
stepping on the muddy damp lane towards the lake,  
for mosses on the stones and rocks,  
had helped to spare no effort frightening away any living things with  
limbs  
but I am in exclusive.  
Arm yourself with a wooden bloom,  
to shield my garden against attacks from regardless of who.

## But It is Time

*Ng Wing Shan*

I met people like lines on a graph, we intersected.  
But then we went on our own straight paths,  
Never seeing each other again.  
On my way I met you, this parallel line,

And here you are, inhibiting in me ever since.  
I call you a ghost, chewing the raw insides of my heart,  
Like it is a ravishing feast and you are never satisfied.  
You make yourself home in these caves that keep bleeding,  
And you never care.  
I wonder if it is your intention to make me feel hollow  
Because it's the only emotion you are capable of feeling.

Loneliness,  
But it is time that you leave,  
The spot you occupied without my consent.  
You think you can beat me up in silence,  
In midst of muffled cries like any other time.  
Yet you won't, you won't.  
Because I want to experience life more than isolation.  
And because I can feel more than being alone.

In the end, you are just a weakling,  
Now screaming, trembling,  
only capable of sitting idly  
As I walk towards you.

## But It is Time

I am braver than you are.  
So, I blow you away,  
Softly, like blowing a candle.

The hole remains,  
But it's reversible, it'll be healed.  
Now that I am on my driver's seat,  
I shall break free from the straight lines and go  
Wherever I want.



## Profference

*Ng Lai Lam Tiffany*

You say you are the searing fire that destroy  
the infernal flame which Thanatos employ  
Turning home and cities into ashes.  
Land scorched, thunder clashes.  
But I see sunlight caught in your golden armour  
Even though you tremor  
With a type of fury that rivals the sun  
The stars, the planets, the galaxies  
You bring forth hope amongst miseries  
Light amidst darkness  
As Prometheus once did.

## The one

*Law Ka Wing*

Are we all not people, messed up,  
In search for that whom  
Embraces our faults,  
That whom promises how fine it is  
To be a little messed up in the messed up world?

Are we all not dust in search for another dust in the universe?

And if we happened to have collided into the bodies of one another,  
Happened to have enwrapped them into our arms,  
Should we not hold on longer than allowing our flake  
To once again slip into the galaxy of the unknown?

Are we all not in the hope of creating a segment of serenity  
In the whole of chaos with whom we have crashed into?  
That whom our collision ends with sparks but also  
A sense of tranquility only we both can discern.

“The One”

Is it not what we called?

## **Voyelles** (originally from Arthur Rimbaud) (Reimagined)

*Wong Ho Ching Jan*

All-seeing Black, Eden's White, Inferno Red, Ululating Green, Oblivious  
Blue:

The Knights of Vowels,

I shall announce your latent births:

All-seeing Black, the king of the flies, conquer the field with thy red beady  
eyes,

Suffocate them with a cruel, decaying stench. Plague the earth and pollute  
the skies!

Eden's White, overwhelming light, blind the cursed with thy ethereal  
might.

Bestow them the candle of virtue. End deceit with the flames that pursue.

Inferno Red, the demonic tree, tangle the feet of those who flee.

Their sins will be thine succour, for thou art the absolving mother.

Ululating Green, a never-ending scream. The vibrations ripple through  
the seams.

From the cracks, plant the seeds, restore the land with thy saintly deeds.

Oblivious Blue, Clairon the supreme,

Ignorant to the world's fallacious gleam.

Striding silence, traverse the land, summon angels, the trickling sand.

Oh! Omega! Purple are his eyes!  
The end is nigh!  
If history must be unwritten!  
Let it be unwritten!

## Quintery Tales of the White Mountains

*Chang Yan Tung Dorothy*

When I was a nickling,  
Those tales my sentors quinter in my ear  
Of the frightly frimering beast  
That lives harrumphously in the Mountains of Ki.

Those quinters grew as I,  
Vrompled with spiterly swords and knives  
Until my sentors sent me on my trive.

Screep are the Mountains of Ki.  
My garpy whinohed and frinhoed  
When the spiterly frasses cut at its feet.

Amast! My garpy sank in the flurry pridges!  
So I klarahsed and blashed my way  
Out of the caineous flur of white and grey.

In the chillowing white mountains  
Stood the herastic beast!  
Oh how ferumptly and meroucly was he!

I jected out my spitened sword  
As the beast glimpered closer and closer  
Poumiously hiffing and piffing.

## Quintery Tales of the White Mountains

It was frocking white and whickering!  
It glimpered closer and to my surprise,  
The flurry beast choofed with curious eyes.

How frektless and pooning!  
I sinkered down my spiteous sword.  
For a tale was only just a tale  
And the flurry beast will stay daning.

## Guide to Fixing Your Broken Human

*Yan Ho Chun Humphrey*

Part One:

Look for signals when they are acting abnormal.  
(The best approach,  
Read between their lines of unspoken words.)

Look for cracks and loose buttons,  
Look for a fractured heart, an intoxicated liver.  
Look for swollen cheeks and teary eyes.  
(These are the most obvious giveaways)

Look for secrecy and darkened languages,  
Look for hidden wrists and red soaked bandages.  
Look for nibbled nails and half eaten sandwiches.  
Note: Do not forget to check their brains—  
The cause of 90% Human damages.

Look for lonesome nights,  
When old friends are forgotten.  
Portraits of desolate trees  
That long for blossom.  
Look for lusts of danger—overeating is common.  
Look for past blazing passions that have been terminated.

If they fit the above descriptions,  
Then your Human is broken and needs repair.

## Guide to Fixing Your Broken Human

Do not worry, just read on,  
There is a solution for every possible phenomenon.

Part Two:

Approach with tenderness,  
And loving movements.  
Only gentle pressure,  
Would bring improvements.  
Wounds can heal,  
But this will take time.  
Please do not exert force,  
Nor muscle nor prayers.  
Your human is broken,  
Often no fault of their own.  
They may long for home,  
Or solitude or peace.  
The trick to fixing them,  
Is understanding their mayhem.  
Identify the cause,  
And pay attention to the tips when handling.  
(You will find this in part three)  
A broken Human,  
Needs simply love and care.  
Upon unsatisfactory attempts,  
Or with wrong intentions,  
Your Human may never be fixed.  
So please, FOLLOW THE INSTRUCTIONS.

The most common mistake,



## Guide to Fixing Your Broken Human

Is rushing in too swiftly,  
With the goal of a quick fix,  
And applying the healing too thickly.  
Do not lie to your Human,  
Nor speak what you think they must adhere.  
You must provide trust,  
And an implicit action plan.  
If done without pure intent,  
Your Human will see through it.  
Worse, you could break yourself,  
While wondering how you blew it.  
(We have other instructions available,  
“Fixing Your Own Breakage”,  
Only £2.99 or £5 for double!)

Broken Humans are terrified, they feel naked.  
They are reluctant to share what is hurting,  
They will recoil to touch.  
Explain your desires to help beforehand,  
But remember—DO NOT RUSH.  
There, we have covered all the cautions,  
Let’s move onto the next steps.  
It is a complicated task ahead,  
But we have you covered, please do not fret.

Part Three:

Below lists a three-step process, planned out with clarity.  
Read on, with an open mind and a heart for charity.

## Guide to Fixing Your Broken Human

1 – Observe the Human

Record their destruction,

Pick up the smaller bits,

Which contribute to the whole.

Piece them together and start to unfold.

Now you have a grasp,

On the cause of the symptoms.

Begin investigating their history,

Circumstances that caused trauma.

Link them to now and clear up the drama.

Examine other cases of Humans,

Who have the same memories,

The same traits and troubles.

Educate yourself on these fragments,

Then locate what is absent.

What hasn't your Human got?

What are they missing?

Do they need a friend, a doctor?

A lover? A hobby?

What can you offer them, sensibly?

Now take that role,

Give the Human what's needed.

Establish a plan to extract the darkness,

And reinstall the light.

Next, move onto Step Two for more delight.

## Guide to Fixing Your Broken Human

### 2 – Approach the Human

Explain what you have found,  
That they are damaged, need repair,  
That you are here to offer help.  
But eventually, they will overcome without a yelp.

Bluntly inform them what is wrong,  
Often Humans brush off their problems,  
They overlook their pain,  
And need to be told so.  
Do it warmly, not cold, though.

Promise your support,  
Explain you are here for the journey,  
That you want them to get better,  
Not for you, but for their own wealth.  
And first step is recognising their ill health.

They will fight back and argue,  
Deny and storm off,  
They will call you names you could not bear,  
Blame you for their drawbacks.  
They do not mean any of it,  
It is their defensive mechanism plotting an attack.

Embrace them, if they approve.  
Explain what needs to be done.  
That life is not lived, if depressed.  
And they cannot keep going if they are broken.  
If you are lucky now, they will start to open.

## Guide to Fixing Your Broken Human

### 3 – Support the Human

Never forget your promises,  
Do not let them down when you are bored.  
This is a marathon, not a sprint,  
There will be dips and trips and tough stints.

Let them pour out their rage,  
Frustrations and bad thoughts.  
On the days these arise,  
Not every blissful Human is perfect.  
In time, yours will learn that as well.

Lift them up by sharing your joys,  
Find equity in the loads.  
Once they start helping you,  
They would not feel so guilty for taking your time.  
And will learn from you too, as the trust climbs.

This is not an overnight procedure,  
Broken Humans need support and dedication.  
If you offer this, with rational advice,  
And do not let the darkness slip in with such ease,  
Your Human will fix their damage with thus Guide's expertise.

Finally, just love.  
That is the greatest gift of them all.  
It saves every Human, in the tragedies of life,  
Softens all inevitable harsh thwacks.  
And if none of these works, we guarantee money back.

## To Reach the Mountain Top

*Hung Wai Leong*

Imagine....

That you must start with  
Your feet in the abyss.  
When you push away  
Your doubt like a boulder on an incline.  
Where would or could you go?

Believe....

That you are walking with  
Vast and pounding steps,  
But please don't get ahead.  
If you can, be  
Overbearing and remind yourself.

See....

That you have left prints from  
The abyssal depth to the dirty snow.  
You have said much to your  
Companions, and each statement  
Bloomed into delicate flowers.

Rejoice....

That you found the well  
Of the wise men. They promise  
Warm bed and food. Now,  
Your eyes can barely open. Do you  
Accept before your journey ends?

## Metamorphosis

*Chau Hau Yiu*

Should I become a tree,  
Have the weight pull  
My feet in the soil?  
Strong winds and rain  
Can't bring me down.

Should I become a cloud,  
Arms closer to the sun,  
Being one with light?  
They can't touch me,  
Nor slash me apart.

Should I become a seesaw,  
With the fulcrum pivoting on my spectrum,  
Except the middle.  
I will keep swaying  
Back and forth.

Should I become a locomotive, inside  
The tree, the cloud, and the seesaw?  
If I bend my body well enough,  
I might make it,  
And Ovid would smile.

## Lady Luna

*Lau Yuet Yau Katniss*

As I hop down the stairs  
I can't stop smiling  
I'm raptured in silence  
'Cause Lady Luna is gazing at me

I've always hated the ocean at night  
It's like a tar abyss  
as dark as the back of a raven  
But somehow, it's haven  
For heathens  
Like me

Anywhere the wind blows  
I'll go where the river wants to flow

I keep running  
Until there's no fury to fist  
No tears for fear  
No more I'm all ears  
My stomach is empty  
My brain is empty  
My heart is empty  
Come,  
Come seduce this lonesome blue spirit

Lady Luna

Then I start to laugh  
Heartlessly  
I feel cleansed  
Rising from the dust  
I feel salt on the tip of my tongue  
A bit like rust  
I feel so alive when I'm dying  
I find solace in the place in which I'm vanishing  
I flee  
Until I see a cage  
I capture myself  
I'm finally set free



## My Obsession with The Ocean

*Wong Hoi Ching Sabrina*

The way the waves embraces me,  
Softly, slowly,  
Engulfing me like warm hands.

As the water folds into the shore,  
Caressing my feet,  
Kissing my toes.

The sea is never-changing,  
The water it holds can go as far to the other side of the pacific,  
But it will always roll back to this coast.

The urge to dive right in,  
Then let it lift me up, floating carelessly,  
Bathing in the sun on its sultry body.

## The Wandering Soul

*Tse Ka Yu Gladys*

The wandering soul  
The stars across the sky  
shining bright tonight.  
My childhood shimmering eyes  
Yearning for dreams and life, I might  
live fast and die young, slumber on  
my beloved's thigh,  
cry till my tears run dry.

A split second,  
the calmness and warmth in front of me gone,  
when my naivety torn.  
Revolving around is only haze.  
For many years I am trapped in the maze.

Despair and agony,  
the growing pain on my knees  
keeps me awake, I run  
searching for light and hope  
in this spinning world I cannot cope.

My heart shivers,  
at the immeasurable amount of darkness I am aquiver.  
In the puddle those eyes do not glitter with radiance,  
savouring all the utterance.  
I am drowned, drowned prettily in a shade of perpetual darkness.

Love

**Love** (translated work from “Amemos” by Amado Nervo)

*Tsoi Sze Ching*

If no one knows why we laugh;  
Or why tears stream down our faces.  
If no one knows why we live;  
Or why we go away;

If we are struggling to float in a sea,  
If everything around us is dark and blurry,  
Let's love!  
In the sea of despair!

## Dear Butterflies

*Woo Lok Tung*

Dear butterflies,  
can you stop flapping your little wings,  
my stomach is full,  
and I am only thinking of you.

Dear butterflies,  
they say that your wings can cause a tornado,  
and I think it must be true,  
now I am all over the place  
because of you.

Dear butterflies,  
one day you will flutter by,  
just as you came out of nowhere.  
I just hope that,  
you can stay,  
a little longer.







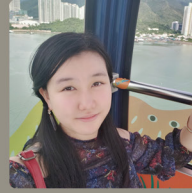
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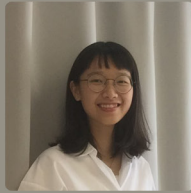
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