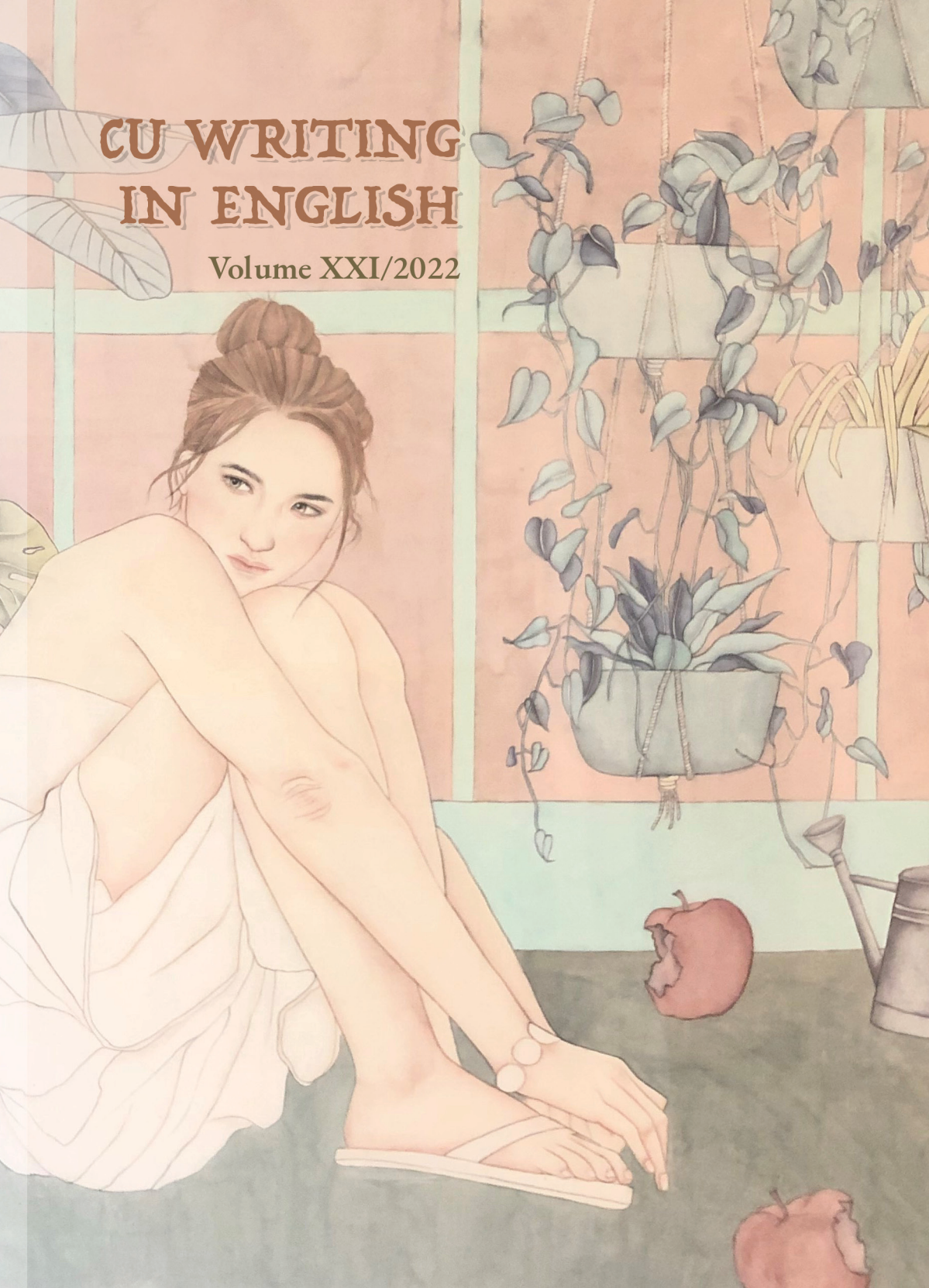


CU WRITING IN ENGLISH

Volume XXI/2022





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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)

In this world of chaos, illness and deception, everyone still keeps masks on and stumble forward. Faces have been hidden behind the masks for 3 years, and our hearts have been concealed for ages. There have been lovely days, yes for sure, but the long nights when tears drifted of the unmasked faces in bed are what haunted the souls most. There has been the unnamed harmony of people, who plaster smiles in their eyes and hide their hollow holes of hearts beneath. It is never easy to breathe with masks on, but it is even harder when you have forgotten how to breathe. The suffocating pressure of everyone reminded unnamed and unidentified. Face your fears and terrors they say, but that empowering demon of loneliness have yet to be faced, and yet to be escaped from. The world never resolves around you, but you resolve around the world. The time when you are clinging onto the edge of the world, fingertips gripping so hard that they hurt, but still the uncertainties and changes knock you off, and you are moments away from being engulfed by the swam of expectations, conventions, and the bit of disappointment and frustration of yourself, saying “is this my problem”. You may flip open this book, expecting escapement and nothing else.

It does not have to be the case. It is not just A Moving Story.

We are all trapped in Glided Cage, hoping for just The Encounter to bring us out to the Lights. We may be hoping for a Home Sweet Home, or revisiting our memories of A Child’s Journey, dreaming of something more. Stories are not just the escapement of life, they are life, capturing the deepest, venerable yet realest globes of ideas projected through the days of writers. These may not happen in reality at all, but it does not mean they have never existed, neither does it mean they will never exist. Around the globe, be it be a driver, a painter, a father, a person, the experiences are all different yet still hit the deepest core of our hearts, and tell you “You are not alone, and you will never be”.

Shall this book, the essence of our authors’ lives, console you, lift you up from the pit of loneliness and place a smile on you ever abundant and real in this mess called the world. For stories are not just imagined, but the magnified image of life and reality.

Angel Woo, Winky Fung & Marion Chai
Editors

PREFACE (Poetry Section)

THIS ANTHOLOGY was originally created in search of answers to our most burning questions: What is a poem? What is depression? Where in the world is Gabby? When we had finally completed the compilation and cleared up these conundrums, we somehow got even more confounded. This year's entries produced more questions than answers. Who is home? What do we find in our own drawers and drawings? Why do we seek the skies, the seas, the hills? Can you get away with swearing in the annual poem collection from a prestigious university? Do people actually read the preface or are we going mad?

Poems not only express; they elicit and evoke. This diverse collection of poems delves into various imaginative landscapes such as the familiar features of Hong Kong and the distant memories of love and loss. Some of them project an honest conversation with families, friends, and the self. Others spotlight the injustices and misfortunes suffered by the obscure and juxtapose our expectations against stark reality. These are the many true perspectives of our students. They show us all that a poem can be, and invite us to maintain an open, observant mind in reading the world.

The years preceding this anthology have been harsh on those seeking inspiration and relief from the beauty of words. By the time this preface was penned to commemorate the publication of this anthology, the University was on lockdown again. Poetry, however, transcend the boundaries of time and space, and they possess the power to reveal the spectacular along with the ordinary and the mundane. Indeed, while we may ponder the ideas from these poems in the present, remember that no poem here is written in 2022.

Lastly, we would like to thank all contributors and our dear Professor, Eddie Tay, for his guidance and support during the course and in the making of this book. We also thank you, dear imaginary readers, for walking with us along the open Rainbow Road of Imagination.

Duma Cheng & Claire Catingan
Editors

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SHORT STORY SECTION

*My Father Works from
Monday to Friday*



My Father Works from Monday to Sunday

By Lam Kam Yan Evelyn, an English Education undergraduate

I would strive hard to protect you no matter what.

I blinked my eyes twice when I saw this message from my father. Like typical Asian fathers, he was bad at expressing himself. He was not the quiet type, but he never seemed to understand how communication works. Once, our relatives, whom we dined with a few times a year, were discussing the price of renovation work. “You know how to save a lot?” my father told them as if he was a genius, “Go onto the street and praise the government. The protesters will do the free demolition for you.” He couldn’t help laughing on his own despite the awkward silence around the table. He went on explaining his joke as if we were a bunch of idiots who had not yet got the punch. He tried to look for eye contact from anyone who would eventually be connected, burst into laughter, and add on his joke. Some of my cousins rolled their eyes while the elder members struggled to come up with the right word to say. I hoped I had the invisibility cloak in hand.

The other day, he gave a lecture to my Chemistry graduate cousin about how the acidity of water would increase if you boil the water in the kettle twice because the acidic substance would peel off from the inner wall of the kettle and react with water after being heated again. My cousin frowned at him as she was listening. “Haven’t you learnt this at the university? It’s common sense,” he continued.

My mum was the only one who had the patience to challenge him.

However, he didn’t. “Naïve. Is it what the housewives told you again?”

My Father Works from Monday to Friday

I was proud of the patience of my family.

There were days when my sister hadn't got a part-time job during her summer break. Every day, he returned home and said, "we are bothered by a household bug," pointing at my sister, "a giant rice borer."

Uttering a single good word might be the greatest challenge in his life.

One day, we bought a new rice cooker. "Six hundred dollars for an unable-to-steam-dishes-simultaneously rice cooker." From then on, he called it by its nickname, the trashy cooker. I wiped its tears whenever I open it for dinner.

He called my mum spendthrift when she was buying necessities in bulk. "You know, in the construction site, the ladies are frugal and hardworking. You should learn from them. They never spend an extra penny." My mum then went out and earned her own money, in exchange for 10 years in a guard booth. He seldom spent money on products of standard quality. His socks looked like they had been worn for 20 years.

He was born for work. His parents passed away when he was not yet a teenager. He quit school to sell dim sum at a restaurant at 10 because he was the big brother. He used to manage a textile factory, but it was later suspended, so he learnt to use earth drills for higher income. This was the picture I could gather from the stories told by my relatives.

Adam Smith would be proud if he could meet my father, the best role model for every worker. He devoted his whole life to being a good wheel, and he was proud of it. He woke up earlier than the sun and came home in darkness with all the ingredients for dinner and lunch of the next day in his hands. He laid his no-longer-black backpack, which tripled the size of his beer belly, onto the floor of the living room and locked himself in the kitchen until the next member arrived home for the relay. After the

meal, he did the dishes as well. Work didn't stop here. When everyone had finished showering, he bent forward and handwashed his stinky uniform in the tub every night. He brushed the stains away until the clothes glowed like the fluorescent strip in the middle. Sometimes I could feel the sand and dust beneath my feet when I took shower late.

At around 10 pm, with all his work done, "It's time to enjoy the best moment of life," he exclaimed. He could fall asleep within a second and never woke no matter how loud we were. Maybe it's because he was even louder than us. His snore was unpredictable and sometimes he would talk. Sometimes he called our names. Sometimes he argued with his colleagues. It was amusing to speculate what he was dreaming about. My mum and sister agreed that it is like the frightening thunder in horror movies. Yet, the snore from the living room comforted me when I was still working in the dark at 3 am. Eavesdropping on his murmurs added colours to the dreadful nights.

I thought he traded his ability to fall in love for falling asleep. My mum said he was gentle when she met him, which was far from imaginable to me. He spoke loudly and was always clumsy. He couldn't hear so well after decades of work. He could jump to conclusions that came from nowhere and got irritated.

Once, my mum asked, "Who forgot to flush the toilet again?"

Of course, both my sister and I denied it. "Disgusting," added my mum as she was about to flush it herself. My father got in and yelled, "Are you blaming me again? Right, I am always the filthiest person who contaminates your unstained perfect heaven and should not even use your grand toilet again."

None of us could locate the triggers.

To be fair, he did have a gentle voice that he refused to use unless we were sick. He would press his hand on our forehead and say, "You have

got a fever,” which should be known by that time. His hands were giant and even monster-like. There were stains beneath his nails that could never be removed. I had never asked where and how they came from. I didn’t dare learn how the stress of living had transformed him.

“I’m working tomorrow.” He said sitting at home on Sunday was boring. Why not go to work? I did agree. His holidays were dull. There were only three things he would do, housework, watching TV and sleeping. He had no hobbies and never had an intention to acquire one. Living without working seemed to torture him. He never took holidays longer than 5 days and he would count how much he had lost each day. He was anxious about money all the time as if he was living for money. I tended not to tell him where I was going and what I was doing in order to avoid the question – Are you paid for that? My sister was pissed by his attitude, but I pitied him for being unable to taste the beauty of generosity and carefree life. His way of expressing love was to train everyone in this family to be workaholics or be “independent” in his words. We teased him about his late-coming teenage rebellion. We knew how rest deprivation can be lethal to him. I was not sure if he was hiding his exhaustion or if working was delightful to him. He had worked from Monday to Sunday for three months.

One Wednesday night, he came to my room and said his phone was not working when the messaging apps just needed to be updated. He refuses to learn new things, especially technology. He was anxious like seeing a doctor. He dropped it and then went out because he couldn’t stand waiting. I was checking if the apps could run smoothly when the line popped right before my eyes.

“I would strive hard to protect you no matter what.”

I blinked my eyes twice when I saw this message from my father.

Who is it?

An unfamiliar female name. His friend list was so short that we could easily name them all. Has he fallen into a scam? I clicked into that chat box without a second thought. He couldn't differentiate if the messages were read or not.

I wished it was just a scam. I scrolled through the conversation.

Sunday, lunch together?

Sure

Are you OK? Don't take it to heart. Laz is always mean.

I'm OK

I'm always here for you.

I know

I want a bright and beautiful world with only us.

Thank you

I would strive hard to protect you no matter what.

A picture of a middle-aged lady sitting in the middle of a construction site and enjoying her fruits.

I went to his photo album for more clues. There were shaky photos and clips of the woman filmed from an awkward angle but no pictures of the two. Nothing comparable to my mum.

I went back to the conversation and scrolled through it idly, hoping to find a way out of this drama. It wasn't how it was supposed to be. Maybe a message that told me it was just a joke and there was nothing serious. Maybe a message showing that she was in another family and it was just flash fiction. But there was none.

There was none.

It was happening. The fact that my father was tired of this family and was betraying us. The fact that my mum would know it one day, and my parents might get divorced, and we would become strangers, and all the laughter would become history, and days would never be the same again. I used to think it would only happen to my friends or in drama. I had witnessed a lot of broken families, but I was not yet ready to be in one. I was disappointed with the most faithful man I knew and disappointed with myself for not being aware of it. I wished I could never wake up from the dream, but it was happening to me. I couldn't find the right word to talk myself through it. I couldn't come up with a single word while my sight started to get blurry.

"Have you fixed it?" He popped in while drying his hands on his clothes.

No.

I was out of my mind, but I had to keep my tone calm.

"No, of course. You think it's easy?"

I fixed my eyes on the phone. I didn't dare meet his eyes and find a stranger. I rang down the curtain of my face and of the discovery of a stranger that may take our roof off sooner or later.

I read aloud the texts line by line in my head, imagining how they might sound in his voice and what was in his mind. I wanted to find the traces of my father.

The deeper I dug, the more heart-breaking it was.

I feel lonely. They all hide inside their rooms, refusing to talk.

I am left watching TV alone in the living room.

And it was Christmas.

That night, he came home with two bags of ice cream and a big grin on his face. He was making the and-the-Oscar-goes-to sounds and

expecting screams and hurray from us. He might be picturing the scene when picking the ice cream, in which we would watch a Christmas movie together on the couch and enjoy the ice cream, just like how it was when we were young. He might have had another tough day at work and was looking for something that might offer even the slightest comfort. But at that time, I was too focused on my public exam and was freaked out by Maths. I gave him a cold face and then turned my back on him, a picture that should have ruined his mood. He stood there with two white bags in his hands, waiting with hope, but no responses were given. He packed the freezing ice cream into the fridge silently. I did regret it immediately, but I was too proud to make things right. We had inherited his pride and even outplayed him.

And this did not only happen at Christmas, it happened every day.

I started to imagine how he felt when sitting alone in the living room all day after hours of tough work under the sun and rain. I started to imagine days that he might need a hug or words of care when we all ignored him. I started to imagine that he was just an ordinary man who might wish for another version of life after 60 years of repetition, a life that was not bounded by family. He was just a human whom I was not qualified to blame.

A slight relief was that it was a decent woman.

I'm thankful for your care, but we should not be in this way.

You are a man with a family.

But it didn't help.

"Can you fix it?"

"I'm fixing it. It takes time."

I picked up my phone, but I couldn't click into any of the chat boxes. I couldn't bear the consequence of telling. It was the time I learnt

the weight of a secret. The secret of keeping a secret.

The next day, I couldn't talk to him. Not even the day after that and the days in the following months.

Sometimes I overheard his conversation with a female voice on the other end. He didn't even realize how loud his phone was, but I managed to play my silent part well. It was as if letting another personality of Billy Milligan take up his body and enjoy some brief moments of being alive.

I began to observe this man. Or monitor this man. I looked for traces of his activities. I read through every suspicious chat room. I studied his words, his expressions and his acts. The clumsy words and strange punctuations he typed with huge effort using his giant fingers. The gleam in his eyes when naming the big cast of all classic movies. The way he knitted his frown when he tried to listen to our conversation. The way he dropped his head when my sister slammed the door in front of him. The eyes that followed my sister when she went through the departure gate. The way that he yelled on the street when he thought the shopkeeper was taking advantage of my mum. Sometimes when I saw him on my way back home, I would slow down my pace and follow this little man with his giant tortoise shell on his back. The way he swung while walking was like a primary school kid hurrying back home. The more I knew about his world, the more I would like to defend him. His dumbness was so sincere but kind-hearted that I didn't dare to blame him.

The woman faded out so as my daily inspection. I was thankful to her for giving him what he needed in time, tolerating his bizarre personality, and introducing my father to me.

One day, I returned home with a bag of ice cream. I brought my laptop to the living room where my father was glued to the television as usual. I sat on the other end of the couch, "Is it a movie or what?"

My Dear, Dear Driver

Ray Huang, a law graduate from Taiwan interested in writing and recording his life in different corners of the world.

There are only two bus routes in the town where I grew up. During the peak hours, a bus comes every thirty minutes; otherwise, one has to stand under the burning sunlight in southern Taiwan and wait for an hour before getting on the bus. So in the winter months when the weather is nicer, we would rather walk five kilometres to the train station, where a train can take us to a nearby city, a completely different world packed with shopping malls and restaurants.

As a result, driving means everything to us in the town. When one is about to reach eighteen, the daily conversation surrounding him or her would be “Hey, have you enrolled in a driving lesson?” rather than “Hey, which university are you going to?”

I grew up with two very good friends, Sherman and Ben. Both of them got their driving licences within a month of their eighteenth birthdays, and it seemed to me that they were adults then in every sense. By contrast, I went to Canada for a seminar during that summer, and so I remained a child, a big, eighteen-year-old child, who needed a driver wherever he went.

“Last weekend, I drove my family on a trip to the Eastern coast,” said Sherman during our regular weekend hanging out at Starbucks.

“The Eastern coast? Weren’t the roads there winding and challenging to drive?” I was amazed, for he just got his licence two months ago.

“Not a big deal. You should give it a go after you got yours, the coastline is fabulous,” Ben commented, which reminded me that Ben had started driving between different cities when he was just seventeen.

There was no malice in their words, but to be honest, living in this town without a driving licence did make me feel awkward and sometimes embarrassed. Apart from being a life skill, driving also meant freedom and fleeing from the family’s control to us, for we no longer needed to keep checking the timetable in the Railway App on our phones, nor do we had to call our parents to pick us up when our weekend gatherings were about to end, but when I finally got my driving licence at the age of twenty, qualified to be promoted from the rear seat to the driver’s seat, I felt something unique that driving meant to me.



When I studied in the primary school, my family went on a five-day trip around Taiwan every summer, as we could not afford an overseas trip. Both my father and mother drove, but every time they sat in the same car, it was always my father in the driver’s seat, which meant that he had to drive more than two hundred kilometres every day during the trip.

Towards the end of a trip, it was perfectly normal that kids would be unwilling to go home, and both of my sister and I were ordinary kids, so we sometimes showed our unwillingness on our faces. We dared not cry because we knew tears and noises called for something painful.

I recalled when I was seven, I cried when we were about to leave Taipei Zoo and go home. My aunt, who lived in Taipei, was accompanying us, and she was just an ironic contrast with my father, for she took us to every place we wanted to go and prepared whatever we dreamed to eat. It

was not because I had not seen all the animals I wanted to see. I just felt how lucky it would have been to be a son of my aunt, and for this reason, I did not want to go home, but my father would never know.

“We took you on a trip to broaden your vision, not to embarrass us,” my father slapped me on my face, right in front of the crowd near the gate of the zoo.

Did I embarrass you? You embarrassed yourself by slapping your child in public, didn't you? And I could never understand how the word embarrass meant to my father.

We sometimes stayed in five-star hotels and had buffet breakfast in the next morning. I remembered clearly that I once was so content with the food and so when we were on our way back to our room, I said, “the foods were all so tasty. I'm stuffed.”

“Shut up. Don't be that rude and embarrassing again. We took you here to taste the food, not to stuff yourself. We didn't starve you at home, did we?” my father said in a threatening manner, as if I were about to utter something more discourteous.

I had used to think that silence was the wisest way to behave myself, but even if we did not cry and made no noise, it seemed wearing a poker face was also contrary to the law created by my father.

“Why are you so quiet? What's that face? Isn't it good enough that we took you out? We could've left you home doing your math problems and memorising the encyclopaedia.”

My Dear, Dear Driver

My mother would always come to us later on, explaining, “Don’t mind him. Your dad’s just getting too tired driving these days, so he easily lost control of his temper. Remember, he loves you as much as I do.”

On our way back home, we usually fell asleep on the tedious motorway. Sometimes, I awoke, and in my blurred vision I saw a terrifying monster in the driver’s seat, the same monster who drove me to all sorts of afterschool classes, towards which I held an extreme hostility. The monster wrinkled his forehead, resisting sleepiness and forcing his eyes to focus on the road ahead. Getting too tired? Why did you not just let mom drive? You just did not like us. Stop bullshiting me with this ridiculous excuse.

— — —

Sometimes, my little sister told me about her guess that we were not born in this family; perhaps we were in a facility and unluckily got adopted by them. I remembered seeing my mom’s abdomen got big enough to accommodate a balloon when I was three, so I told my sister that she was certainly the child of Dad and Mom but not I. Who knew?

Or even if the blood flowing within my body did come from my father, we were just something that he could show off to his colleagues. I remembered those winter days, when I was awoken at five-thirty in the morning, it was darkness everywhere, and my father gave me five minutes to fold the duvet and to wash up. Then, I was put in front of the piano, forced to hold on to the icy flute, or to sit in front of the desk and memorise the information inside an encyclopaedia, depending on what day it was.

Among these morning routines, the one I hated the most was practising the flute, for I was not allowed to sit while practising, not to

mention blowing long, long air into the thin, icy tube right after waking up in the winter morning made me dizzy, so sometimes I would lock myself up in the bedroom, only to open the door and get dragged out violently when my father was shouting my name and punching the door madly.

However, cramming stuffs in a book into my head was no easy task either, especially when I was put in front of the desk drowsy, but at the thought of the upcoming test during breakfast, I could only hold back my yawn and focus my sight on the tiny fonts.

“What makes an airplane move forward?” asked my father, taking a huge bite of the sandwich.

“Newton’s Third Law of Motion. When the engine pushes the air backward, the reaction force will be exerted in the opposite direction on the aircraft,” I was chewing on the straw in my sugar-free soy milk nervously, as the test could get crazy if he ran out of questions.

“What is the aircraft in the picture on the first page you read today?”

“It’s the Boeing 747 from the China Airlines.”

“Well done,” my father nodded in satisfaction before he went to work.

Perhaps because I was trained in this way, he supposed that I had the capability to ace all the examinations at school. My father checked every one of my test papers, and he would then set a standard that I should have met; mostly 100, sometimes 95, but it never went below 90. If I scored two marks lower than the standard, I would get beaten up twice. I knew

what he wanted, as I once overheard his conversation with my classmate's father, who was also my father's colleague.

"Congrats to your excellent son. He scored full marks in all the five subjects again. And I heard from Sammy that he won the first prize in a flute contest," my classmate's father said when he visited my father during the Chinese New Year.

"Oh really? He hasn't told me about this. You know I never ask about their academic performance. As for the flute, he loves it so we just support him," my father replied with a laugh full of vanity.



After I entered junior high school, on my first exam, I wilfully messed up my Chinese, the subject I disliked the most. I had the consequence of doing so in my mind clearly, but I proceeded with this plan anyway, perhaps out of the rebellious tendency I developed when entering adolescence, or out of the impulse to take revenge on my father through shaming him by the poor score his son had got, or maybe I just felt messing up my test would make me look cool in front of my new peers who barely studied.

As usual, I was beaten fiercely after my father saw the test result, but it meant nothing to me, and I was delighted when seeing him mad, seeing him no longer able to receive his colleague's flatteries. Then, I went back to my room, texting a girl in my class, whom I was extremely fond of, with my dumbphone. I was so ashamed of my dumbphone; when all my classmates were talking about mobile games they played with their smartphones, the only game available to me was Snake by Nokia.

“Was that the reason?” my father said. The door was opened without a knock, and he was standing at the entrance, staring at me furiously. “Give me the phone,” he ordered.

My dumbphone was thus taken away by my father till I ranked number one on the next exam, but this was not even a punishment to me when I thought of how I should explain my sudden disappearance to that girl the next morning. From then on, when that girl and other of my schoolmates were planning for their weekends, they would say even before asking me, “never mind. Your father won’t allow anyway.”

During then, I could not even connect with my friends after school, for everyone had already turned to Facebook and Line and abandoned SMS by Grade 8, whilst I was still using a dumbphone with no internet function at all.

Until the weekend before I moved into the dormitory of my senior high school in the city, my father drove me to a mobile phone shop. “Pick a smartphone you like,” my father said when he was switching off the engine. “You’re about to leave this town, and we’ve seen your ability to concentrate on your study, so it’s time to buy you a decent phone.”

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Another thing that I could never imagine was that all my father said to Sammy’s father became true after I attended high school in the city. In the evening of every Thursday, I received my father’s call.

“Son, are you coming home this weekend? Do you need us to pick you up from school?”

“Uh, I think it’s fine. I mean I’ll just take the train, and we can meet at the train station.”

“But the Friday train is always crowded, and you’re carrying books home. Why don’t you stay at the dorm and study whilst awaiting us?”

He was true that the Friday train really sucked, it was almost impossible to get on an express train at the rush hour even without a backpack, so I would just say okay and thanked him. During that time, I was also wondering why I became less sensitive to the word “study”, and I used to be so hostile and rebellious to anyone ordering me to study, for I did not need anyone telling me this, and I would study on my own initiative. But surprisingly, I no longer heard any sense of commanding in my father’s voice. As I sensed some care and concern from my father, I was scared. Was I forgiving him?

Every time I opened the door, a familiar smell filled the space of the car. That was from my favourite Shanghainese restaurant.

“Sorry son, we were in the traffic jam near the restaurant,” he always said to me, even though I had already known.

As I sat in the rear seat devouring the fried rice and the xiaolongbaos, I sometimes took a stealthy look at my father. He was still in his office shirt, and his briefcase lay on the seat next to me. Why was he so good to me? Was it because I entered the best high school?

“I ranked number two in the exam last time. I could’ve done better in math if I had spent more time practising.” I wanted him to know that I was doing well even if he did not ask, and I wanted him to be proud

of me.

“That’s very good. You know all the tops come to this school, and remember, don’t stay up too late,” my father looked into the rear mirror and said.

But was I not supposed to be perfect? Where was the monster in the driver’s seat?

It was also in my high school days that my family went on a trip to Kyoto. On our last day, when we were about to board the train back to Kansai Airport, my father suddenly stopped a few steps behind us, with his hand in the fanny pack.

“They’re all gone,” my father said in a panicked look. “The train tickets.”

It was the very first time I saw him with such a look.

We recalled that he just threw away a paper bag full of the receipts we had got during the trip. My father rushed towards the bin, which had already been emptied. I went to the service desk of JR and asked if our tickets could be re-issued if we could show them the purchase record by the credit card. They shook their heads; they were sorry but they could not.

How could my father make such a stupid mistake? I could not believe this, so I insisted that he check again to see if he had put the tickets in the luggage. We unpacked all our suitcases, and it turned out that our tickets were stored too safely in the hidden pocket of a suitcase.

I let out a sigh of relief, not just because the tickets were found, but more importantly, I ultimately ascertained something. My father was not that monster obsessed with perfection and tolerating no mistake.

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A few days before I left for Hong Kong to start university, my father accompanied me to visit my paternal grandparents, who lived just next to us.

“I heard from your grandpa that everything in Hong Kong is so expensive,” my grandma said half in Taiwanese and half in Mandarin, handing me a bundle of banknotes of New Taiwan Dollars. “Take this money, and don’t starve yourself.”

“Mom,” my father interrupted. “Keep the money with you, they use Hong Kong Dollars there.”

“Really? Any difference?” asked my grandma suspiciously.

“Anyway, he can’t spend your money in Hong Kong, so you just keep it yourself.”

Tears welled up in my eyes. I thought of the birthdays of every member in my family; whenever there are two big pizzas on the dining table in my grandparents’ house, it must be someone’s birthday. It seemed to me that such a peculiar tradition originated from my grandma’s stereotype that all the youngsters love pizza, and even though we dined with our grandparents quite frequently, we did not talk much, so perhaps they had no chance to know about our preferences at all. They would just

go on to do whatever they thought we would love.

Silence seemed perfectly natural in this family. We did not greet when bumping into one another in the house. Sitting around the dining table, we ate in silence; dialogues were made only to the extent that was necessary, not to mention that my grandparents talk in a language that is unfamiliar to my generation. I guessed this has something to do with the family history. My grandparents were farmers, and they also took on contingent work to feed my father and my aunts, so they barely had any chance to sit together and talk, but when they finally could spend time together, it became quite awkward as if they had no idea what to talk about.

Nevertheless, I like this well-understood silence in my family, for I feel comfortable not having to look for something to say, and just because my father and my grandparents did not express their feelings does not mean that they were indifferent. That bundle of banknotes and those birthday pizzas both carried something inexpressible, something that used to be obscured by the lack of understanding towards them. Their concern, their warmth and their love.

Perhaps that is why the Chinese New Year's Day has always been that very day to which I look forward the most in the whole year. My aunts and their family always came back to the town in the New Year's Eve, so on the New Year's Day, the twelve of us would wake up early, stepping into the chilly morning air with our hands in the pockets of our down coats, proceeding to the temple a few blocks away to pray for peace and happiness in the subsequent new year.

My father was always the first one waking up on the New Year's

Day. At first, I thought it was just because he was used to waking up early in the morning, but I gradually could hear the joy in his voice when he opened the door of my grandparents' house, where my aunts and their family stayed during the New Year's holiday.

“Rise and shine. You people from Taipei don't sleep in when you're back in Tainan,” my father said as he walked into the living room and sank into the sofa. Now I think my father must have been looking forward to our walk to the temple every year, just like me.

As always, silence dominated for most of the time during our walk, but I nonetheless enjoyed the atmosphere. No particular formation, no fixed pace, just all of us walking closely in the same direction, praying for the same thing. We need not sit around a hotpot as other Chinese families do, and in fact we never had this, but we are still a solid family.

The Chinese New Year of 2020 was not a peaceful one, however. In the afternoon of the New Year's Eve, my mother was mopping the floor, whilst my father was throwing away clothes we no longer wore. They planned to finish the chores earlier, so that we could go to the hospital to see our maternal grandpa, whose condition had deteriorated the night before.

My mobile phone suddenly rang. It was my cousin, Andy, who was just one year senior to me. Andy and I had attended the same high school, but seldom had we met each other; in fact, most of our conversations took place during the Chinese New Year, when Andy's mother and my mother brought us to visit the house of their father, namely our grandpa.

“Ray?” asked Andy in a voice with hesitation, and as if he was suppressing something.

“It’s me. What’s wrong?” I asked.

“Grandpa just, just passed away at the hospital,” Andy’s voice was trembling.

“Wait, what? What do you mean by ‘just passed away’? The hospital said his condition was deteriorating but did not say he was on the critical list,” I said.

“We are no less shocked than you are. Listen, you need to tell your mom about this. I phoned her but she didn’t pick up. And Grandpa will be back at the funeral parlour at around three. I’ll see you then,” he said before hanging up.

I dragged my heavy feet into the living room, where my parents were doing the chores as if they had been in a parallel world where nothing terrible could happen.

“Mom, Andy just called me. He’s at the hospital and Grandpa just passed away,” I said. I tried to make my voice calm, as my mother was emotional and I did not want to push her sorrow to the next level.

“What?” she turned towards me, the mop in her hands dropping on to the floor. “How could this happen? We were going to see him in the evening, and...”

My mother was so shocked that she did not even cry, until my

father took her into his arms. My father said nothing, just patting my mother on her back.

In the subsequent week, my parents went to the funeral parlour every day. They folded paper lotus and read sutra with a monk, from early morning to late evening; they said these rituals and efforts would facilitate my grandpa's journey to the pure land in the west. At my grandpa's funeral, I was put in the last row based on seniority, so I had a clear view of my mother and my father, who were sitting in the front row.

Some of my aunts and uncles spoke at the funeral; they talked about their memories with their dear father, then breaking down in tears. My parents did not speak, but I saw my father trembling and sobbing as if his memories with his father-in-law were all brought back. Although I had not heard of anything happening between my father and my grandpa, but my father was no less sorrowful and grieved than my mother.

When my grandpa was still conscious, he lived in a facility in the suburbs. Whenever I came back to Taiwan during the holidays, my father would drive me to the facility and spend a few hours with my grandpa in the afternoon sunshine. The receptionists of the facility were all acquainted with my father, so as soon as our car turned into the rugged lane, they opened the gate for us. My mother came with us every time, but it was always my father manoeuvring the wheelchair for his father-in-law, and he sometimes massaged his legs to improve circulation. Even after my grandpa went into a coma and was sent to the hospital, my father still drove me there frequently to just sit beside my grandpa's bed.

“Dad, Ray came to see you again,” my father would always say, when entering into the ward. We sat on the sides of the hospital bed, and

My Dear, Dear Driver

even though my grandpa could no longer answer, my father kept Grandpa updated on things happening in our family, such as my sister had been preparing hard for the college entrance exam, or I was about to finish the military service. My father talked very much about our experiences in the army, which he thought my grandpa would be interested in, as Grandpa had been a soldier for more than ten years since age 18. I felt that I had witnessed something called empathy on my father.

Several months after my grandpa's funeral, I passed the examination and finally got my driving licence.

“I just found out that I can take the six-thirty bus to the train station and then take a train to work. I'm aging and get tired easily when driving. So son, if you're going to study at a café or buy something to eat, you may drive the car. Just remember one thing, don't drive fast and be careful,” my father reminded me on that night after learning the news.

From then on, after waking up in the morning, I usually saw the car key left on the table in the living room.

Here came the freedom that I had been dreaming of for so long, and I also took on my new role as a driver of my family. I drove my mother to the school she taught at when a cold wave struck, and when my sister was coming home from her school in the city on Fridays, I picked her up at the train station. Of course, I loved this new role, and I loved driving just like all of my friends. In all honesty, I thought I had a talent for driving, for I could park the car easily into any spaces on the roadside and cope with any unexpected situations on the road calmly and skilfully; more

importantly, I was able to move the car into or outside the carpark of our house swiftly.

When manoeuvring the car into the carpark of our house, extra care was always needed, as the driveway suddenly got narrow and bent at an odd angle before entering the carpark. Besides, to make it more challenging, a gate was built exactly at the bend, the width of which was just about fifteen centimetres larger than the width of our car. Still, the even more unreasonable design was the triangular shape of the parking space, which meant that the car must turn left whilst passing through the gate, or it would crash into our neighbour's wall. I familiarised myself with the "operation" within half an hour, which amazed my parents so much, as my mother still did not dare to drive the car through the gate even after living in the house for twenty years.

But perhaps such confidence was not a good thing to a new driver.



In a spring evening, I was driving home from an outdoor café where I had spent the whole day. I applied the brake to slow down the car a few metres away from the gate, and after pressing the "open" button on the remote control for the gate, I turned the steering wheel anticlockwise confidently as I always did, and then the heading of the car penetrated perfectly through the gate.

I returned the steering wheel to its centre, releasing the brake a little to let the car move forward. I was waiting for that ideal timing to steer left again to bring the car into the triangular space.

It's now. I swerved left. I saw my father coming out from the kitchen with a bag of rubbish in his hand. It was too early, however.

Bump. I heard the car howling.

The front part of the car did come into the gate, and yet unfortunately, the rear part did not. It hit against the left pillar of the gate.

“Brake!” shouted my father. He threw away the rubbish bag, dashing towards his car.

I applied the brake and shifted to the parking gear, not knowing what to do next. I thought of how mad my father was when my mom caused a tiny scratch on the rear bumper when driving me to school. I was just ten years old then.

“You stupid jerk. You've got parking sensors on this car. Didn't you hear the alert?” questioned my father.

My sister and I were both on the car when the car hit the wall behind the parking space, and we both noticed that the beep sounds did not get any more intense when the car was about to collide with the wall, but we dare not say anything to defend our mother. It was not until a few months later when the same exact crash happened when my father was parking did he realise that the sensors had not been functioning at all. Anyway, he thought he owed no apology to my mother, and he did not even blame the sensors.

“Get off the car,” said my father to me.

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“I’m sorry,” I apologised not just for scratching his car, but also because I felt guilty about my unjustified over-confidence. I thought this would be the last time I drove until I begin to work and buy myself a car.

My father took a long, deep breath, for almost ten seconds, and said nothing more. He went into the driver’s seat and moved the car into the right position, and then we went inside the house for dinner. My mother and my sister had heard the tragedy, so there was nothing but silence throughout the meal.

“Thank you for not flying into a temper,” I said at the end of dinner.

“If the left rear part is about to hit the pillar, return the steering wheel to its centre and move forward a little bit. After you can see some space in the left side mirror, steer left again to bring the car into the space,” my father said.

When I was about to sleep, I heard someone unlocking the door to the carpark. I peered down from the balcony of my bedroom and saw my father carefully applying the touch up paint to the scratch I caused. And the next morning, the car key was lying on the table as usual. I felt as if I had heard my father’s voice saying, “everyone makes mistake, so just be careful.”

For the very first time, I acknowledged some genuine changes having occurred in this family. Was my father changing? Was I changing? Or were both of us changing?

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My Dear, Dear Driver

Soon, summer came, and it became too hot to walk to the bus stop, so my father rode a scooter to the train station instead. One night, he called my mother for a drive, as he got drunk at a gathering with his colleagues. Driving my father was such a stressful task that my mother always hated and avoided it, so I was dispatched to pick my father up.

My father staggered across the station square, and the moment he seated himself in the rear seat, a noticeable smell of alcohol struck me.

“Dad, your seatbelt,” I said, before releasing the parking brake.

“Oh, yeah. You may go now,” he slurred slowly.

I thought my father fell asleep, so I remained silent. I felt some weight on my shoulders as soon as the car began to move. I recollected those road trips my family went on, when I was still a little boy sleeping in the rear seat, whilst my father furrowed his brow to make himself focused. I thought I was able to understand why my father always insisted on driving us, for he regarded it as his responsibility as a father. Now, he has aged and I have grown, ready to take on his burden and offer protection to my family.

I pulled into the driveway gently so as not to awake my father and took a deep breath before navigating the car through the gate. *After seeing some space in the left side mirror, turn left.* The car passed the gate swiftly and stopped in the right position. I heaved a sigh of relief.

“My son has grown up and become a skilful driver,” my father suddenly said.

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I did not reply. I knew he was drunk, but I also knew that truth always lies in his drunken words. I will never forget how he once came back home drunk, and told my mother how much he loved her when my mother was cleaning up his vomit. We were all laughing. Why couldn't such truth come out more easily?

This is my father, though I decided to be different.

In late summer, when I had to fly back to resume my university, my father took a day off to drive me to the airport. After he helped me tie up the strap of the isolation gown, I said to my dear, dear driver.

“It's so good to be your son.”

Not having seen his reaction, I turned around weeping, proceeding to the check-in counter in the large, empty terminal.

THE END

A Child's Journey

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Ever since I was small, my mother loved to read me bedtime stories. She would turn on the bedside lamp and ask me to lie next to her. "What do you want to read today?" She would ask. Sometimes we would read fairy tales or historical stories, or I would ask her to make up a story. "I want to hear momma's story. A story about you." I told her one time. It was when she started telling her own stories to me – her school life, her friends, and even her love stories. I always looked forward to listening these bedtime stories, but I most looked forward to the lullabies that she sung when she finished a story. She had such a beautiful voice that made you awake instead of falling asleep. "One more, one more, just sing one more then I will sleep." I would say. She would be thrilled to hear that, "This is not a concert. No encores," she would say, but then started singing another song herself. Sometimes I would ask for one more, she would tell me: "No more, no more, you should sleep. See how lucky you are, I can always read stories and sing to you. When I was small, I only hummed melodies to myself before I sleep."

She was an only child in a wealthy family. A lucky girl who never had to worry about money, never really knew what heavy work meant. She was sent to top school in town and was able to learn to play different instruments, while other children could only learn how to play recorder from schools at that time. "Piano, violin and singing - I started having these classes since I was eight. Your grandpa forced me to. But I loved it, I was even selected to be the school choir member when I was in secondary school," She said. Her parents always had to travel back and forth as they owned a tea business and got branches in a few different places.

My mother spent nearly all of her childhood years with her nanny. My grandfather always wanted my mother to follow his business, he asked her to try working with him at the summer holiday when she graduated from secondary school, but she didn't want to. Her dream was to study vocal arts in music school, and she even applied to one without telling anyone. "I couldn't work with him abroad because I would have my last round of interview that summer. But I needed an excuse for that, so I told him I got a job referred by my teacher," she said. That made her successfully escaped from her father, but she knew her father might check on her suddenly, so she ended up signing up a random job at an architectural firm and worked there as a part-time clerk during that summer holiday. "I just saw the job recruitment on newspaper. I didn't even know what a clerk had to do. The boss only asked which school I came from, then he was sure I could handle all the work," she said. The seventeen-year-old girl didn't know she would meet her future husband there.

My father worked as an apprentice at the firm since eighteen. His father died in a construction accident when he was only ten, which made my grandmother had to work at the factory day and night to feed the kids. My father became the one to take care of his two little brothers. Sometimes my grandmother would bring plastic flowers from the factory, my father would then help her to assemble the flowers while his little brothers were playing with the only toy car at home. His only hobby was to draw pictures on some used exercise books. He still kept some of those exercise books on our bookshelves. I remembered he showed me a few of those exercise books before, and there were sketches on every space. He could even draw a chimney on one tiny checker. My grandmother didn't have enough money to send him to university, so he worked at the firm once he graduated from secondary school.

The boss assigned my mother to work with my father. "Our boss asked me to be his assistant. But actually, I had nothing to assist, I just had to do some paperwork. I was quite scared of your father when I first met him. He was sitting at his corner which was filled with piles of sketch papers, drawing the sketches alone. I said hi to him, and he only nodded. I thought he was a serious person, but I later found out he was just nervous because he didn't speak to girls a lot. He was twenty-four already, and he had not dated anyone before. You know, twenty-four," she used to tell this story over and over again during our family dinner, just to tease my father.

My mother was my father's first love. I once asked how he fell in love with her, "It's hard to explain...It just happened," my father would say. "It isn't hard to explain. Just because I am charming," my mother would say confidently. She was right. There was a picture hanging in my grandparents' house - my mother at seventeen - a girl dressed in a light lilac dress, with a pair of pearl earrings dangling on her ears, smiling timidly to the camera. And I could tell why people said we look alike, because we both had the big round eyes. Boys wrote love letters to her at school, she secretly collected them in a wooden box, and showed me for a few times. "Jack was the head prefect. And this Rick was the guitarist of the school band," she would say. "How many boyfriends do you have before you dated dad?" She would smile and say: "Shush, don't ask." Sometimes she would read out the letters or laugh at the innocent poems written by the boys, "This boy is stupid," she would say, but with a smile on her face. Then she would carefully put back those letters into the box, storing it at the bottom drawer of our storeroom. "Don't tell your dad I showed you these," she whispered to my ear. "Didn't he know it?" I asked "No. I told him I threw them away," she said, with that smile still clinging on her face.

But how did a quiet boy like my father win my mother over those

little boys? A portrait. He won my mother's heart because of a portrait. He had never drawn any portrait before he met my mother. All his paintings were buildings – houses, churches, skyscrapers, only buildings. The only portrait he had ever drawn was a small portrait of my mother, which was placed on her dressing table.

It was a small portrait drew in pencil. A young girl leaning on a table, resting her chin on her hands. Her long bangs made her diamond-shaped face looked less angular, radiating a touch of gentleness and softness. She was gazing out of the window, with her head tilted to one side. But you would wonder what she was looking at, because when you look inside those beautiful eyes, all you could sense a bit loneliness, making you want to look deeper to see what happened behind her eyes. A young and beautiful face, but with sorrowful eyes.

“One day when I was finding a file on your father's desk, this little portrait slid out from that pile of sketch papers. I looked at your father, his face was getting red already. He was so nervous, so he picked up the portrait immediately and pretended nothing had happened. I tried to hold my laughter and asked him why he drew me. Then his face turned even more red and said he could throw it away if I didn't like it. I said no and asked him to show me when he finished it. I knew he was different from the little boys at school, who would only tell me how beautiful I was. It was just a rough sketch, but he could capture this little moment, seeing the little sadness in my eyes, even we never talked,” she said.

Something did happen behind that young beautiful, yet sorrowful eyes that summer. Her nanny was going to retire because she wanted to take care of her own grandchildren. She was the one who took care of my mother since she was a baby. “At that time, I just felt like everybody was

leaving in my life – my teachers, my friends in secondary school, and even Nanny Flora. All these things were mixing together, and all of a sudden, everybody expected me to be mature enough to deal with it. But I was only eighteen. Eighteen, so young,” she said. I met Nanny Flora a few times when I was small, and my mother would ask me to call her “Grandma Flora”. When she passed away a few years ago, my mother rushed to the hospital to see her one last time and came back weeping for a whole month. It was the same when Nanny Flora left my mother at that summer, she couldn't stop crying whenever she was staying in the empty house with only herself. But no one noticed it, her own mother couldn't recognize her whimpering sound while talking to her on the phone. “I thought I hid it so well that nobody could notice it. But your father did. You know, seeing the little things happened behind the eyes,” she said.

My mother started talking to my father after the day she discovered the secret portrait. She liked to tease my father, especially when she saw him being nervous. “When will you finish the portrait?” she would ask. My father, who was such a shy boy, would get a little tense, then say he needed some more time. “It was funny to see your father getting nervous. So, I started to ask him every day,” she said. He became less nervous, and even joked with her. “I will stop drawing if you keep asking. Artist don't like people giving them pressure,” he told my mother. My father always had to work overnight, and my mother started to buy him dinner and eat with him together, sometimes she would even stay to watch him working. “Your father didn't let me stay at first. He said it would be dangerous for me to go home that late. But I told him I didn't want to be alone at home,” she said. During those overworking nights, she told him a lot of things about her – her parents, nanny, the friends she met in school, and even about the music school. He would listen to her quietly, while drawing sketches on the papers. “Sometimes I thought he wasn't paying attention

to what I was saying, but he could always share his thoughts when he was walking me back home. He told me he would feel lonely whenever he thought of his father, but it was a force pushing us to grow up. It would never be easy, but it would get better day after day. I looked at him, then I thought, someone felt what I felt," she said.

On her eighteenth birthday, my father was afraid she had to spend her birthday night alone, so he asked for a dinner date. "Do you have time for dinner on your birthday night? I thought maybe we could celebrate a bit, as an apology for keeping you to eat the takeaway meals with me," he told her. He gave her the portrait, with a bunch of roses at that dinner. The portrait was framed delicately, with a simple message "To Vivien, Happy Sweet Eighteen" written at the back. "He didn't ask if I want to be his girlfriend, but he just held my hand when we left the restaurant. His hand was big and warm, grabbing my little hand firmly in his palm," she said.

A week after her birthday, her parents came back from Malaysia to celebrate her birthday. That was not a happy celebration, as she received the rejection letter from the music school on the same night. What was even worse, her father was the first one to open the letter. "He was mad when he found that letter. Because he didn't know I would like to study in a music school. He thought everything was under his plan. I would study business and then work at his company," she said. She tried to explain to him at first, but her father didn't bother to listen a word. "Unless you are studying what I want you to study, otherwise I won't give you any money," he told my mother.

She didn't surrender. It was still her dream to get in the music school. So, after that summer, she continued to work at the firm to save money for the music school. The music school wasn't the thing that

angered my grandfather the most, my father was. My grandfather thought he was the one who made his daughter to go on “the wrong route”. “He assumed your father went out with me just because of I came from a rich family. He didn't know he was the only one who accompanied me at that time,” she said. My grandfather didn't allow her to see my father, and even tried to lock her at home. But how would you be able to lock an eighteen-year-old? She then sneaked out in the middle of the night when her parents were asleep. My father waited her outside the house for hours, just wanted to chat with her for five minutes. But her footsteps woke her father up, and she got caught when she was returning home. “If you keep seeing him, then stop living in my house,” he told her. His warning didn't scare her. She really moved out with my father. They rented a small and cheap flat in a decade-old tenement building without an elevator, their flat was on the highest floor. As a little princess who had been pampered for eighteen years, it was totally a torture for her to climb up the stairs every day, carrying all the discounted groceries on both hands. “My father thought I would return home after living with him for a few days. I did think of giving up, but I knew he would take all control of my life if I gave up this time,” she said. So, she kept trying her best to adapt to her new life. “I am sorry to make you live like that,” my father would always tell her. He worked very hard to give her a better life, hoping my grandpa would accept him one day.

“That was probably the toughest time for us. Tough, yet bittersweet. We would cook a quick dinner after getting off from work. Your father would then hurry to the night school, and I would start practicing singing while washing the clothes. When it was about eleven, he would return home, sometimes bringing one or two ice-cream cones, depended on how much money we had on that week. My salary at the firm was not enough for me to pay for the music school fee, so I did extra

part-time jobs on weekends. I worked at a café at first, then I changed to work in a bar, because the hourly wage was fifteen dollars higher,” she said. “Fifteen dollars only?” I was quite surprised when she told me the first time. “Fifteen dollars were a lot already! That was enough for us to buy breakfast for a week. And you know what, a lot of underground musicians would perform in the bar. It was a pleasure to work there, listening to their songs and dreaming to be one of them one day,” she said.

And her dream did come true. “A singer suddenly got her voice cracked but my boss only knew it until the last minute, when all the band members had arrived and set up everything on stage. My boss was panicking because he couldn't reach out to other singers. And I told him, maybe I could help,” she said. Her boss was stunned by her performance, because he didn't know she could sing. “Would you like to work as a singer here? You can sing when other singers are not free, then I don't have to panic again,” her boss asked. Of course, she said yes. Sometimes my father would go and watch her show if he didn't have to work or go to school. He would sit at the corner, listening to her beautiful voice. When my mother looked at the corner and spotted him, they would smile at each other. He was happy for her at that time, taking a step closer to her dream.

The year when my father turned thirty, he finally got his degree after studying for endless nights and was promoted to be a junior architect. My mother, who had already applied for the music school twice, got rejected for both times. Still, she didn't give up, kept working at the firm and the bar, practicing singing whenever she could, believing she could realize her dream one day. My father had been supporting her all the way, but deep-down he knew there was not much chance for her to get in the school. “Maybe you can give yourself one last chance?” he told her, as he didn't want to destroy her dream cruelly. But things didn't go as they planned, she didn't have the chance to apply the school for the third time

– they had me in that year, when my mother was only twenty-three.

“I don't think I am ready to be a mother,” she told him.

“I will be on your side,” he said.

“But it's impossible to keep working or studying if I have the baby.”

“Maybe when the baby grows older, you can go back to study and work again.”

“Maybe?”

“I promise you, okay? I will work harder, for you and the baby.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I promise.”

They got married after knowing the pregnancy for two months, and had a simple wedding in the courthouse, only inviting a few friends and their parents. “Your grandpa was too mad at me, and he said he wouldn't see me anymore if I really marry your father. Only your grandma came to our wedding,” my mother said. He had not talked with my mother for nearly half a year. It was my father who brought them back together again. “Your father kept calling your grandfather at that time, even if he hung up the phone every time. Then he started writing letters to him, trying to explain how serious he was about our relationship,” she said. My grandpa changed his attitude bit by bit, after reading the long letters written by my father. He came to visit me when I was two-month-old. “He carried you in his arms and walked around our home. You then touched his moustache with your little hand, which finally made him laugh. When he left, he gave us an envelope with twenty thousand dollars inside. For my daughter and granddaughter, he told your father,” she said. Impressing his father-in-law had been a lifetime challenge for my father.

When I was two-year-old, my father left the firm and started to work for a large firm as a senior architect. We moved into a bigger house by

then. Since I was born, my mother resigned from all her jobs to look after me. My father was getting busier at work, especially after he changed to the new firm, so most of the time my mother had to take care of me alone. "I felt like a handicap at the beginning. It was still hard to imagine that I could cook by holding you on one hand and hanging the clothes while soothing you to sleep," she said.

On the weekends, she could be a bit more relaxed because my father was having day offs. They used to bring me to the theme park on the pier on Sundays. I loved to ride on the Ferris wheel, but I was slightly shorter than the height requirement. "Remember to stand a little bit tiptoe, okay?" my mother would whisper to me every time when we were lining up. Then I would start getting a little tense, thinking how not to get caught. This little trick worked almost every time, maybe the staff did notice it, they just didn't tell. The Ferris wheel cabin only had five seats. Most of the time the staff would let three of us to sit in the same cabin, but if there were too many people, they would usually ask a couple to join us. One time, a young couple was having a ride with us, "Faster! faster! I want it to be faster!" I shook the handle. "Stop, don't do that, Ava," my father said to me. The young lady looked at me and chuckled. "Sorry. She was a bit too excited," she said to the young lady embarrassedly. "No, no, your daughter is so adorable. How old is she?" she asked. "I will turn four this year!" I held up four fingers to her. The lady burst out laughing, "I am twenty-seven," she made a V-shape on her left hand, and a flipped "L" on her right hand. "You and my momma are at the same age," I said. She was a bit surprised and looked at my mother, "So good be a young mom, you two will look like sisters when she grows older," she said. My mother didn't answer. When we were getting off the cabin, my father immediately went to get back the baby stroller. The young lady waved goodbye to me, and my mother waved my little hand, told me to say goodbye to her. "Momma," I

raised my arms to my mother, she picked me up and hold me in her arms, while the lady was walking away arm in arm with her boyfriend.

Was she lucky? Ever since I was born, her boss at the bar had been asking when she could go back and sing again. She did ask my father a few times, "He said I could only work on the weekends, then I can still take care of Ava during the weekdays," she told my father. "But we will lose our family day if you work on the weekends. Don't you want to spend more time with Ava?" he said. "What about only on Saturdays?" she asked. "But sometimes I have to work on Saturdays," he said. "But you promised I could go back to work," she said. "Let's wait for a while longer, until she grows older, okay?" Year after year, she kept on asking my father, until her boss already closed down the bar.

She was promised to fly freely one day, but at the end, she realized she had already been kept in a cage. A caged bird might not be able to fly again, but she wouldn't forget how to sing – when she was braiding my hair, cutting my nails, or giving me a bath – she would always hum the sweet folk songs. And I still remembered when I got a big pile of textbooks from school, she would only take out the music book and spend a whole afternoon to teach me how to sing all the songs.



A bird couldn't be trapped if she was meant to fly. Half a year ago, when I was about to turn seventeen, the caged bird wanted to fly again.

One day when I returned home from school, my mother suddenly prepared an afternoon tea for me, then I knew something was going to happen, because she never liked cooking.

"Try this cake, I learn how to cook it from an internet video."

"It's yummy."

I kept eating, and she kept looking at me.

"I can't believe my little girl is turning seventeen this year."

"So, is this afternoon tea a pre-birthday party for me?"

"Yes, a secret party with only you and me."

"Then are you going to share some secret with me in this secret party?"

I smirked at her.

"Okay, Momma really got something to tell you."

"Yes?"

"You see...you are already seventeen this year..."

"Just say it momma, are you going to get some aunties' son as my boyfriend to celebrate my seventeen birthday?"

She laughed.

"I won't let you to have boyfriend at seventeen."

"But you also met dad at seventeen."

"Just wait till you get older. The older, the better. Trust me."

I finished the last bite of the cake.

"Okay, okay, I am just joking. What do you want to tell me?"

"Momma wants to tell you...I want to work again."

"Really?"

"I met a friend some days ago. He is going to open a live music bar."

"So, you gonna sing again?"

"Maybe, maybe. He would like me to help as a waitress as well."

Her eyes sparkled.

"I am happy for you, Momma."

"But are you sure you'll be okay if I work? You can take care of yourself, right?"

"Come on, you just said I am turning seventeen."

She laughed again.

"To me, you're forever a little girl."

"No worries, I'll be fine. Just do whatever you want."

"But keep it secret first, okay? I haven't told your father."

"Okay. But why didn't you tell him?"

"I'm not sure if he'll like it."

She was right, my father was not being as supportive as I thought. She told him on a Saturday night, when we were having a dinner out.

"You know, I met a friend some days ago."

"Who? Is it someone I know?"

"Ah, just a secondary school friend. You don't know him."

"Why do you suddenly mention about this friend?"

"Hmm... Well ...He is going to open a live music bar."

"Wow, at such a time. Must be difficult to survive."

"He asked me to work there."

"Work? You?"

"Yes, he asked me to work as a waitress."

"Waitress? Why would you want to do such exhausting work?"

"What's the big deal? I worked as a waitress when I was young, can't you remember?"

"Of course I remember. But you're no longer young, you're forty already."

"What's wrong of being forty? I am also doing the housework at home, why don't you say I can't do it because I am forty?"

"It's not the same."

"He said maybe he could also let me sing. Like, maybe, perform on one or two shows."

"No, then who would take care of Ava?"

"She can already take care of herself. And I would only work in the afternoons."

"Later, later. Wait until she grows older."

"Later, later. How many times have you said later? She is already old enough to take care of herself now."

"Just wait a bit more time."

"Wait? I have been waiting for seventeen years already."

"Then just wait for a little longer. What's the problem?"

"Can't you remember your promise?"

"I remember. I remember. Maybe wait until Ava get into university?"

"You always know it's my dream to sing, and I have been giving up long enough already,"

"Yes, yes. I didn't say you can't do it. Just wait --"

"Stop telling me to wait."

"Sometimes I just don't get it. What's the point to keep dwelling on an old childhood dream?"

"What? An old childhood dream?"

"How come you can't just accept the fact that you and I are already a father and mother, and family would always be our priority?"

"Didn't I put it as my priority in all these years?"

"Could we stop talking about this in front of our kid?"

"I'll take this job anyway."

"Whatever you want."

They didn't talk about this topic again, my mother didn't tell anything about the job, and my father didn't ask. The night before of her first day of work, she took out nearly all her dresses in her closet. "Does this lilac dress look good? Or should I wear the green one? Will it be too formal if I wear this as a waitress?" she asked me. I look at her in the mirror and reminds me of that little picture hanging in my grandparents' house. The little girl in lilac dress. "The lilac one," I said. I had not seen her exciting face for a long time, the last time she was this excited, should be the day when she got the acceptance letter from my secondary school. I was really

happy for her at that time, good to see the girl with lilac dress coming back. My father, who was sitting at the sofa, took a glance and didn't say a word.

He really didn't ask anything about her job, even if she had already worked for two weeks. At least I should show her some support, I thought, so I went to that bar after school one day. The bar is in a quiet district, which is quite close to my school, people who lived there are mostly foreigners. When I just arrived there, I saw my mother standing at the entrance, in her lilac dress, introducing the menu to a few Americans. I waved at her, but she can't see me. "Are you Ava?" a man at my back patted my shoulder. I narrowed my eyes, trying to figure out who he was. "I'm Rick, the boss," he pointed at the music bar. "You are Vivien's daughter, right?" I nodded. "You and your mother really look alike," I smiled and said thank you. "Hey Vivien," he called my mother. "Your daughter came," She turned her head and saw me. "Sweetie, why are you here?" "I just thought I should come and support you," She gave me a little hug. "So sweet of you," Rick said. "Don't stand outside. You wanna come in and have a drink? I could make fruit punch for you, just for little Vivien," My mother giggled, "Yes, go and have a fruit punch. I still have to work for half an hour, we can go home together then."

I followed Rick to go inside. The bar didn't have many people, just a few Americans having beer on a table, maybe because it was only afternoon. "Live Band Show every night" – a poster on the wall wrote. And I saw Rick's name on the column of guitarist.

"You play guitar?" I asked.

"Yes, I have a band,"

He was cutting oranges into slices, adding them in a wine glass.

"How old are you?"

"Sixteen, but I am about to be seventeen,"

"Sixteen going on seventeen, so young,"

Then he started singing. "*You are sixteen going on seventeen, innocent as a rose.*"

"Do you also sing?"

"Sometimes."

"When did you start playing guitar?"

"I forgot. Probably when I was about your age, I joined the school band at that time."

Ah, Rick. School band. Guitarist.

"*You are sixteen going on seventeen, Baby it's time to drink,*" he put a cherry on the top of the glass, then placed the drink in front of me.

I finished the drink quickly because I felt a bit embarrassed - Rick. School band. Guitarist - as these few words kept popping up in my mind when I was looking at him making the drinks in the bar. I stood up and was about to leave, he said to me: "Next time ask your father to come as well, I would like to meet the lucky guy."

I walked home with my mother that evening. She was smiling all the way back home, I asked her what she was so happy about, and she said because I came to visit her. I didn't think much about it, I thought she was really so happy because I came to visit her. "Should I go to the boutique and buy some more dresses? I think I should get some more," she said. "Yes, why not?" I said. So after that day, she started buying more and more dresses - polka dots, floral, striped - because she started to work on nights, and sometimes even weekends. There were a few times she hadn't been back even when my father returned home from work. "Your mother still hasn't returned?" he would ask. "She said she is busy and will come back a bit late. We can eat the leftovers from yesterday," "Busy, Busy," he would repeat the words to himself. Day after day, she came home one day later than the other, so we ate more and more leftovers, until there was no

food left. One night when we were eating the takeaway my father bought home, I told him I went to visit her.

"I went there one day. Momma seems very happy to work there."

He didn't say anything.

"Dad, I'm fine. No worries, I can take care of myself."

"Look at what you and I are eating now."

"But aren't you happy for her? She seems a lot happier."

He ate a mouthful of rice and didn't look at me.

"Don't you want to go and see? Have a look at where she works? They got a live music show there every night. The boss plays guitar, he's momma secondary school friend."

"I don't think she wants to see me there now."

"She wants you to support her. I am sure. And dad, I am really okay. I do think she deserves to have her own life."

He was silenced.

A few days later, my mother came back home early, looking a bit excited. "You are so early today," I said. "Yes, someone is decorating the bar, so we closed earlier today," she sounds quite hyper. "Decorating? Why?" She handed me a poster – "Friday Night Live Music Concert", and I saw her name on the singer column, just above the column of guitarist Rick. "Singer? Vivien? Momma, they really let you sing?" my eyes widened. "Rick and I have actually been practicing for quite a while, but I was still a bit nervous to go on the stage again. Anyway, I am ready now," she said proudly. She said I could also go to the concert but told me not to tell my father. I didn't listen to her, I told him the next day.

"You should come. I think Momma also wants you to support her."

He kept looking at his phone.

"Dad, I am talking to you."

"I can hear you."

"Look at this poster. It sounds so cool, right? Singer Vivien."

He looked at the name on the singer column.

"Please, just go there and have a look."

"Maybe, see if I am busy or not."

On Friday morning, when my father was about to leave home, I said: "Remember to come tonight. Momma's concert." "I'll see," he said, then opened the door and left. I arrived the bar at eight. The live house was already full of people, some had got no seats and had to stand at the back, and some were still standing in the line outside the entrance, waiting to get in. The young waiter came out to the entrance, asking the people to leave, "Sorry, we are full house today," the crowd dispersed, with disappointment and complaining. I walked past the crowds and came up to the waiter.

"Excuse me, I am Vivien's daughter. My mom reserved a seat for me."

"Oh, are you Ava? Sorry, there were too many people just now. Follow me, your seat is here."

"I don't know so many people are coming today."

"It is like this every Friday night, there will be even more people during the weekends. Do you want some drink? Orange juice?"

"Yes, thank you."

I sat down at a corner, a few more people were still trying to squeeze in, which made me hard to breathe. I looked around, trying to see if my father had come, but I didn't see anybody who looked like him. He didn't answer my call as I tried to call him a few times already. Maybe he wouldn't come, I thought. The drummer started to roll the drum and the lights were dimmed, only spotlights on the stage. I saw my mother, no, I saw Vivien standing on the stage, wearing her lilac dress, with silky long hair that just reached her shoulder, and a pair of pearl earrings dangling on her ear. She held the mic, and then started singing:

A Child's Journey

*“Put your head on my shoulder,
Hold me in your arms, baby
Squeeze me oh-so-tight
Show me that you love me too”*

She had been singing to me since I was small. The lullabies she sung before I slept, the sweet melodies she hummed along while doing my hair, the folk songs she taught me to sing in my music book. I knew she sang beautifully, as I heard of her voice over and over again. But this time was different. That was a voice I had never heard. It was powerful, not because she was singing loudly or what, her voice was still as soft as always, but there was an urge, some kind of strong desire in her voice. I gasped a little, and asked myself: “Is she really my momma?” Her calming voice that made everybody silenced when she just sang the first word, and her glistening eyes were full of longing. Rick was standing next to my mom, playing his guitar while comforting her longing eyes with his own tender eyes. Then he sang the other part:

*“Put your lips next to mine, dear
Won't you kiss me once, baby?
Just a kiss goodnight, maybe
You and I will fall in love”*

My mother also looked at him, smiling lovingly. They looked into each other's eyes and continue singing. Hundred pairs of eyes were looking at them, but they still kept looking at each other, as if there was no audience. “They are so romantic,” the young girl next to me whispered to her friend. They sang a few more songs with their beautiful voices, but I just couldn't bear to watch it anymore. I turned my head and looked at the back, trying to find a way to walk to the entrance, and I saw a familiar

figure standing at the entrance. He was crossing his hands on chest. I stood up, tried to walk closer to him, but I was surrounded by too many people. "Hey little girl, sit down please," a man said to me. I sat down again, and they already finished their last song.

Rick picked up the mic. "Thank you everybody for coming. We are thrilled to see so many people coming today. Please spare me a few minutes and let me introduce you tonight's singer Vivien. She was my old friend in secondary school, or to be specific, she was my girlfriend in secondary school," she blushed, and the audience wowed, "Calm down, calm down people. Was. I said was. Few months ago, I met her on the street. She is still as beautiful as before. We chatted a lot. I always thought she would be a singer or musician one day, but she told me she hadn't sing for a long time. And I thought, what a waste. So, I invited her to come and work here, and here she is," People gave them a big round of applause, some even stood up to clap their hands. But she was still looking at Rick, blushing like a little girl. Rick grinned at her and whispered, "Well done," which made her couldn't stop smiling. I turned away and had a look at the entrance.

The man was already gone.

People went up to the stage and told my mother how well she sang, some were taking pictures with her, and some even asked for autographs. "Excuse me," I tried to walk past the audience, and go straight to the entrance, trying to search for the man. This district was really quiet, only this bar was still opening, other stores were already closed. I looked around, but I couldn't see anyone.

"Ava?" my mother came out.

"Momma."

"Thank you for coming."

"You sing really well."

"Thank you."

"You look different as well. I haven't seen you like this before."

"Really? Is it a good difference?" she smiled.

Rick suddenly opened the door and came out.

"Hey Vivien, a friend of mine wants to take a picture with you," he said.

My mother looked at me.

"I'll wait you here." I told her, and she went back in.

"Hi, little Vivien," Rick said.

"My name is Ava."

"Of course I know. But you and your mother just too look-alike."

I didn't know why, but I didn't want to talk to him, so I took out my phone.

"Why didn't your father come? Have you taken any clips of your mother's performance? Send him, your mother sings really well, right?"

"He was busy today."

"Ah, the lucky guy was not lucky enough today."

My mother came out again.

"Alright. Ava, let's go home now."

"Bye dear," Rick said, giving my mother a little hug.

"Bye little Vivien," he wanted to hug me, but I flinched.

"My name is Ava. I told you already."

"Sorry, sorry, my bad," he said with a laugh.

My mother looked a bit embarrassed.

"See you tomorrow then," she said to Rick.

We were taking a taxi back home. Sitting side by side, both of us were quietly looking out the window. The deadly silence made me feel weird. I saw cars passing by when I looked out of the windows, and I thought of Rick and my mother looking into each other's eyes, and the

man who disappeared.

“Momma.”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Why not?”

“Is Rick the one who wrote you poems? The one from the school band?”

“Ah, yes.”

She tried to sound calm, but I could feel she was a bit anxious.

“But that was long time ago, those poems. We’re just friends now. Just friends.”

Then I didn’t ask anything more, and kept silent all the way. When we were home, my mother rushed to the bathroom to remove her make-up. I walked to my parents’ bedroom, and my father was already sleeping.

— — —

After that night, I stopped asking my father to visit my mother anymore. He also didn’t ask how the concert was. My mother had still been working from Monday to Sunday, she held a few more concerts, but I told her I was busy at schoolwork so I couldn’t go. She came home really late, sometimes even at midnight. But my father didn’t complain anymore.

Last Saturday, I woke up in the middle of the night to go to the toilet, and I saw my dad sitting on the sofa alone, drinking beer and watching TV.

“Dad.”

“Oh, you haven’t slept,”.

“I just went to the toilet. Why aren’t you sleeping?”

“Later. I want to watch the football match.”

“Okay, good night.”

I knew there was no football match that night. I lied on my bed, when I closed my eyes, the disappearing man popped up in my mind again. Then I heard someone opening the door, my mother finally came back.

"It's already twelve," he said.

"I know," she said.

"You seem really busy these days."

"We have a lot of shows in this month."

"So...you sing again?"

"Ava told you?"

"I saw the poster, and I heard you practising quietly in the room a few times."

"Two more. I did two more concerts."

"Why didn't you ask me to come? I mean...the concert."

"I thought you wouldn't like it."

"But you should at least tell me about it."

"You didn't ask, how could I tell?"

"Sorry, I thought you are already living in the best life."

"The best life? By trapping me at home?" She sneered.

"What do you mean by trapping you?"

"You know what I mean."

"I am just saying, family should always come first. What's wrong with that? I've also been working for the family for years, did I say a word?"

"Fine. I am always the one complaining. I really enjoy getting up at six in the morning to cook breakfast for you two, then go to the market to make myself smell stinky, fighting with the grannies for the last pack of discounted salmon. Getting myself stuck in the laundry room to separate the light and dark clothes, staring at the spinning laundry machine daydreaming until I remember I have to cook dinner. Is this the best life you're talking about? Is this what you promised me before we married?"

"I already tried my best to keep my promises."

"Did you? By saying later, later, later?"

"I thought you already gave up that."

"I just didn't say it, doesn't mean I forget it. Anyway, you never understand."

"Then Rick understands?"

"Wait. Who?"

"Rick. Your boss. The guitarist."

"What do you mean?"

"You two sang very happily together."

She was in shock.

"Perhaps that's the real reason you want to work. That's why you don't tell me."

"What are you talking about?"

"The concert. You and Rick. Singing romantically together."

"Who told you that?"

"I saw it myself. I came to watch the show."

"So, you think I work because of a man?"

"I didn't want to think of you like that. But that is what I saw. My wife blushed and couldn't take her eyes off another man."

"What are you talking about? He is only a friend!"

"A friend? You really dare to say he is only a friend?"

She paused for a long while.

"Whatever you say." She shut the bathroom door, and he went back to the bedroom.

I forced myself to sleep while listening to them arguing. But when I closed my eyes, I could hear the song that my mother and Rick sang together and see the man disappeared in all of a sudden. My head got heavier and heavier, then the heaviness spread to my hands, my legs, and my whole body. I felt like I was drowning in my own bed, as it could no longer bear such a heaviness.

I woke up early the next morning, and my father already brought breakfast for us. When my father and I just began to eat, my mother went out of the bedroom.

“Good morning sweetie,” she said, then sat next to me.

“Morning Momma.”

She took out a slice of bread, spreading butter on it.

“How was the football match last night?” I asked my father.

“I didn't watch it. I slept early, just after you went back to your room. Too sleepy.”

“Eat this. Buttered toast, your favourite,” my mother gave the bread to me.

“And this. Bacon, also your favourite.” My father prodded a bacon and put it on top of my bread.

“Thank you.”

I ate a bite of it, started chewing the dried bacon and toast in my mouth, and tried to swallow it. But my throat hurt because the bread was too dry, so I drank some water, hoping it would be better. Swallow it, just swallow everything, swallow everything that they gave you, I told myself.

— — —

But it could choke you to death if you just swallow everything. I knew I had to tell someone about it. And the only one I could think of is Jess, my best friend since secondary one, her parents divorced at the year we met. She now lives with her mother, and only sees her father during weekends. Her father remarried a young woman two years after the divorce, and her mother is still single. I found her right after finishing that breakfast.

“Did I do wrong? Maybe I should not support her to go to work? Or I

shouldn't ask my father to go to the concert? If I didn't do all these, then it wouldn't happen." I said.

"That's nothing to do with you. It will happen if it have to." She said.

"Am I thinking too much? Maybe she and Rick are really just friends."

"You know what, my father also said that woman was his friend at the beginning."

"Stop scaring me."

"I didn't mean to scare you. But you do have the answer yourself, right?"

"How do that feel when they told you they would separate?"

"I knew it would happen someday, even though I was young at that time. No matter how hard they tried to hide it, you could still sense it. And lots of people tried to comfort me at that time. My aunties, uncles, the counsellor, the teacher, all those people. They said nothing would change and I should feel happy for them,"

"So, are you? Are you happy for them now?"

"What about you? When you saw your mom being happier with another man who is not your dad?"

I didn't answer.

"I know I have to be happy for them. I really do. But I am still trying, even after all these years. The counsellor said they still love me no matter what. They are still my father and my mother. It's just they are no longer together, that doesn't change anything in me."

But they are not us, how could they know? I guess we understand what they meant. Be happy for them because they start a new journey. They are still my father and my mother, that would never change, of course. But, sometimes, just sometimes, when I am lying on the bed alone in the night, waiting for the bus in the bus stop, daydreaming in class, I could see my mother smiling lovingly to another man, making my father disappear, and I standing on the street, alone, haunted by another side of the love story.

Lights

Cyrus Chan is a student from the English department in The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

All the lights in the school bus came on at once as the sun sank below the barren hills, a ritual that took place every Monday evening. A tremor ran down my spine as I saw the white glow emanating from the bulbs began its work in silence and flushed out all the colors from our complexions. The red in our cheeks and the black in our brows, previously vibrant and bright, were now subdued by the cold, silvery mask that was cast upon us. I was fiddling with the air-conditioner control knob that hung right behind my head when I, from my peripheral vision, saw Riley shuffling towards where I was sitting. She dropped her backpack on the aisle, producing a heavy thud that seemed to shake the air.

Riley sat on her seat with one leg propped against its leather surface. Her eyes shone and glittered under the oppressive lights.

“How was it? How did things go with the woman?” Riley asked with a grin that grew wider with each passing moment.

I opened my mouth, ready to give a reply, yet I was halted by the realization that I had no idea who or what she was insinuating. The way she framed her question with the secrecy of a spy made me stir and squirm. In what brief moments of quietness Riley had allowed me, I turned the cryptonym over in my mind. Every single line of thought led to the same wave of nausea. I turned in my seat, trying to suppress the discomfort. As the unease in me dissolved and faded away, the clarity of my mind returned and I found the answer laying bare in front of me, obvious and prominent: she was referring to the woman who we found out had texted my dad.

The discovery was made on my phone, an old Nokia that was formerly my father’s. The outdatedness of the device had shown itself to

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be the perfect quality for a phone to have when it was to be owned by a fifth-grader who had short attention spans. Due to the discontinuation of the company's technical support, most of the functions inherent to the phone were no longer usable. The texting application, however, was not among them.

Riley's wavering voice protruded from the mess that my recollections had weaved themselves into. It was under the same lights, the same roof and the same rocking motion that she recited the message to me. Her strenuous enunciation resembled a reading not of a simple string of words, but rather of an academic essay whose writing was so complex that she needed to gather all her strength just to relay the information. The content in the message, however, had long since been buried in the depths of my memory and was presently beyond my reach. Was it 'What are you doing, my dear hubby?' or 'Where are you, my hubby?'' Or was it more of a plain statement, maybe something not as affectionate as I recalled?

As I attempted to respond to that question, Riley's elbow jabbed at me and tore me away from my thoughts. The nanny must have turned up the lights since the interior of the vehicle was now completely submerged and bleached by whiteness. The little sparkles that were printed upon the floors of the aisle were gone, hidden away by the overpowering brightness. I remained still as Riley shifted in her seat, waiting for an answer.

"So?" Riley asked again, raising her eyebrows.

I sucked in a breath through my teeth and sighed, "It's complicated. Let me just pull that message out from my phone."

Slipping my hand down my backpack, I navigated through the layers of barricades laid down by my books and lunchbox. After about a minute, with beads of sweat forming on my forehead, I, at last, managed to fish out my phone. My fingers, which were stiff from exposure to the incessant cold air gushing from the air vents, dragged themselves across the screen in search of the messaging function. My efforts were soon

proved to be futile since the application, whose logo was of vibrant green, appeared to evade my surveying gaze. Yet even when the tiny emerald square had, at last, revealed itself, I still struggled to find the text message. Its disappearance made little sense to me at the time, though the actual reason behind had become clearer and simpler as time went by.

Baffled as I was, my eyes did not deceive me. I sank into my seat and let out another sigh, refusing to believe that the message could just vanish without a trace as if it had never been there. Without it, I was certain that there was nothing that I could do or say without sounding ridiculous. Once again, my fingers started at the screen and threw themselves into a series of swiping motions so swift that my eyes grew sore from trying to catch up. The lines flickered and darted across the screen as I scouted for the word 'hubby', the shape of the word warping in my mind.

Indeed, it was the exact word of 'hubby' that my mother could not stand when I informed her that someone had taken the liberty to share the title of endearment with her. Understanding the gravity of the news, I had decided that the news was to be divulged during supper as I had learned from various television shows that matters discussed around a dining table were always of trivial nature. My breath had turned shallow and rapid as the imaginary solemnity tightened its grasp on me. My mom, oblivious to my panting, had gotten a table for the two of us and flashed me a smirk, a smug look characteristic of her whenever she recognized that she had achieved something, be it great or small. We ordered two mini hotpots, one for the each of us, soon after we had sat down. Still wearing that smile like a medal, my mother began talking about her day – how her coworker would not leave her alone when she was working, how the job bored her and how she so desperately wanted something new to come into her life. The hotpots boiling in a frantic rage had given off a steady stream of steam that had obscured not only her face, but also her words. Her lips were moving in an organized, unhurried manner yet nothing more than

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jumbled sounds came pouring out from her mouth. Every indiscernible syllable and vowel she had produced pushed to stifle my body, whose sole focus was to hold itself from caving in to what I knew was to come, so when the food inside the pots were ready for consumption, I could hardly move my arms anymore. The urge to fight the rigidity of my hands had done nothing but further tautened the muscles in my limbs. With trembling hands next to immobile, I removed the lid from the cauldron, the red-hot handle eating at the skin on my fingertips. My mother, who had run out of frivolous subjects to continue her small talk on, dug into the bowl of rice placed right in front of her while I mirrored every movement of hers without any actual idea of what I was doing. The heavy thumping of my heart had penetrated the long stretch of silence between us. The pounding shook the stagnant air, wrenching me loose from the present moment and for a second, I felt as though I was surrounded by a sense of placidity, a sensation so peaceful that it felt horrid.

There was no hiding it, I had known that from the start. I first took merely a few sips from the complimentary cup of green tea. Then, remembering what I was about to break to my mother, I gulped down every single drop of the liquid within the container, almost choking in the process. Upon touching my lips, the beverage worked its miracle and freed my lips from the dryness that had formerly sealed them shut.

“You know, something weird happened today,” I said in a voice that was barely audible to myself as I churned out my phone from my pocket. “There’s this person who texted Dad.”

I retracted my quivering hand as soon as I could tell my mom had a firm grip on the phone. A sharp pain stabbed at my stomach right after. The steam rising from the two pots had neither dissipated nor drifted off. Instead, it lingered like a bird determined to guard its fledglings from all harm and danger. A few seconds later, she handed back to me my phone.

“You’re gonna talk this out with Dad, right?” I was trying to

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sound as reasonable and calm as I could. “You’re not going to be mad?”

At times I would imagine the color draining from her face when I showed her the message or her breaking down into desperate sobs upon learning of the betrayal, yet truth be told, there was nothing about her reaction that I could recount with certainty. It could be because my head was turned to the side, indubitably, but just as how a hen would stand firm in front of its fragile nest against possible predators, the white veil that rose between us had also protected her expressions from my prying eyes. I had not the slightest idea that I was, in fact, anticipating something, that I was in horrible need of knowing whether my relief came at the price of an impending doom.

“No, of course. I’m not going to freak out. You don’t have to worry about that,” she said.

I had taken in those words of promise like how a patient took in sleeping gas. My arms and legs, just now tense from what I then dismissed as nothing more than invented fear, were beginning to regain part of their flexibility. Through the whirling steam tinted by the white lights hanging overhead, I thought I saw the corner of her mouth twitch for a bit and relax. Flustered by all that had spun out from the situation, I had believed that jerking motion to be a smile, a line of thought that now appeared to me somewhat foolish but also hilarious.

My mom and I were sitting in front of the television when my dad came home with the smell of alcohol still on his breath. While my father tried to kick off his shoes, my mother, who had not uttered a word since we got back, stood up and retreated into her room. She had moved in such a way that both my father and I could not observe her face. Moments later, she reappeared holding a gadget of muted gray. Her slim fingers, which were usually graceful in their gestures, were displaying the same rigor that my body had felt down at the restaurant in the shopping arcade. It had taken me a few seconds to recognize that the item in her hand was my

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phone, which she must have whisked away when I had left it on the table without much thought.

A series of spasms ran across my mother's face as she shoved the phone in my dad's face, "So much for loyalty and fidelity. Care to explain?"

He had taken a momentary glance at the message. His eyes grew wide as he opened his mouth to speak, but was stopped before he could put a word in.

"You know what? Just shut your babbling mouth! I don't want to hear any of it," my mother's voice turned harsh and cacophonous.

The crimson in my father's face brightened. His stifled words, mingled with the beer in his system, came out jumbled, "You have to listen, yes. I can explain. I mean, I can't explain. I don't know who this person is!"

My grandmother, witnessing the fight unfold, snatched me up and brought me into her room. I did not know what I was expecting. The various fights the two had had in the past should serve as incontrovertible evidence that peace talks and negotiations had no place in the house. Where did the notion of reconciliation come from then, I had asked myself. Why make a fleeting promise when, at the end of the day, everything was going to return to its erstwhile state? I had found the conclusion to this quandary impossible to reach since every now and then, a muffled, sullen shout would come from outside the door and pierce my mind like a sharp blade. The constant screaming and hollering had left me no choice but to stay put and lie in my grandmother's bed, my eyes fixated on the bright white light bulb on the ceiling.

When the yelling had ceased, I was, once again, allowed into the living room. I could see faint trails of tears running down my mother's complexion. Her hands swung and swayed at her sides the same way a ragdoll did.

"It's not going to happen again, I can assure you that," my father

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said as he placed his hand on my mother's shoulder, his lips trembling from perhaps fear or rage.

Both my mother and my father had never spoken of that night again. I had asked them in the days following the fight what had happened and how the debate transpired yet they always gave me the same answer: there was no fight. I remembered my mother explaining to me that I was kicking and wailing in my sleep. If it were indeed a nightmare that had slipped into my slumber that night, then it must have taken its inspiration and its fuel from quarrels of similar nature that had scattered themselves throughout the past years.

"We turned on the lights and tried to wake you up but you simply wouldn't lift your eyelids. I guess no light could be shed," she would say as she laughed at her own wittiness.

Riley, who had probably gotten frustrated from my petrification, snapped her fingers at me to get my attention, "But did your dad really cheat on your mom?"

My wandering gaze fell on Riley, whose countenance was not drained of any color and was still fixed on that grin, and I replied, "I don't know."

"Well, that's lame, but do tell me what happened."

"I will if I can find that darn message. The lights are too bright. I can't see anything!"

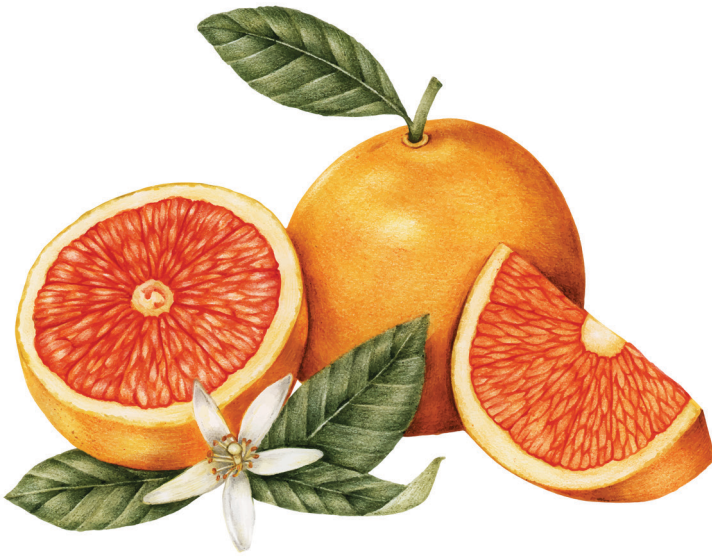
"It's alright if you can't find it."

"No, surely I can find it," I muttered as my shaking fingers raced across the screen.

"Forget about it. Is your family okay though?"

"I'm fine. No, no. We're fine."

Orange



Orange

I am Molly Ng (Ng Ho Yi), a local student majoring in English.

My father taught me how to pick a good orange at midnight.

It was 11:30 pm when he woke up from a nap after dinner, stumbling into the bright living room where I was working as usual, having both my laptop and tablet on the table. My mother and sister had gone to bed early, although I knew my sister wasn't asleep yet – very likely binge-watching Netflix like she always did.

He sat on the massage chair with his eyes glued to the phone, a part of his nighttime routine. We didn't talk, as neither of us initiated a conversation, so it was merely one of the many other nights when we were together, but also not.

It was quieter than usual. I could even hear the clock ticking. I realized that my father didn't switch on the TV like he usually did, and it was this unfamiliar, almost awkward silence in the atmosphere.

I couldn't stand the silence, so I had a quick glance at my dad – slouching, with his finger scrolling the screen and I could see the bright screen reflected on his glasses – the same scene happening every night. I forced myself to focus on my work again, but my mind lost track already. There was this weird and slightly uncomfortable feeling propelling me to start talking to him.

And I started talking to him.

It was slightly awkward to initiate a conversation out of a sudden, but I closed my laptop, switched off my tablet, stood up from the dining seat, walked to his massage chair, and started air-punching with my inferior sound mimicking effects. I didn't know why but it just felt like the right thing to do to get him talking to me.

It worked. He looked at me and smiled. “Do you wanna eat some

oranges?”

“No. I just had grapes when you were sleeping.”

“Okay. I know you won’t eat them if they’re not served to you. You’re too lazy to even get them from the fridge.”

I didn’t know how to reply because that was the truth, so I shyly giggled and said something else instead, “Tuesday is my day off. I am free and I can buy groceries so you don’t have to go.”

“Good. I can’t buy much these days. All supermarkets and shops close early. When I’m off from work, it’s already too late.”

I nodded. Most shops were closed by seven these days, and there was nothing much you could do at night except staying at home.

“I can’t even buy oranges these days. The stalls are closed before I get there, and you know how fast we can finish them, in just one night.”

“Why don’t you teach me how to pick good oranges so I can buy them?” I asked, fetching that red plastic bag of oranges to him.

So he taught me how to pick a good orange at midnight.

I couldn’t recall when it had started, but for the past few years, my father was the one doing most of the grocery shopping. Every weekend he would go to supermarkets, wet markets, grocery stores or any shops to buy whatever our home needed – vegetables, fruits, canned food, snacks, drinks, masks, tissue paper, sanitizers, cleaning detergents, and more. Every time when he went out shopping, he would bring his foldable shopping cart and backpack and they were full when he came home. He would tell us how much each product was and whether the guy at the stall gave him a discount as he unpacked everything. After dinner every night, he would sit on his massage chair with his right hand holding a knife and another holding an orange, with a plastic bag sitting on his belly for the unwanted orange skin. He then started peeling them one by one while watching TV. This orange-peeling routine started only until we had moved into this new apartment, *our* apartment, about three years ago.

Orange

“The first thing you should know is texture. Gently squeeze it to tell if it’s firm or spongy. Now, feel it.”

He put an orange on my palm, and it was not the weight I expected but heavier. I gently squeezed it to feel its inside.

“It is hard inside,” I said.

“Yes, it is firm and solid. And you can feel the skin is thin, so that’s a good one. Some oranges are thick-skinned and have soft spots. Those are very likely bad ones. Dry and juiceless.”

He took out another orange from the red plastic bag on the floor and did what he just taught me, “This is not so good.”

I held the orange and tried feeling it – it was as heavy as the previous one, but with thicker skin and spongy inside. “The first one is better,” I agreed.

“Yes. And the next thing you should learn is to look at the surface. The colour, the scratches or marks. Don’t pick the ones that are still a bit yellowish or light orangish. Go for bright colour. The vivid orange.”

“What about the scratches?”

“They are fine. It’s normal to have them on the skin. And even if there’re these black marks, you can peel it away,” he said, pointing at the marks on one of the oranges.

“But make sure the pedicel – the plant stalk here, is not dark and mushy.” He picked another orange from the bag and gave it to me, “Here you go. Feel this.”

I took the orange from him and started examining it. I felt a good amount of weight.

“It’s heavy.”

“Yes. Heaviness tells how much juice it has inside.”

He went through everything and explained to me how this was a good orange, but my mind was still lingering with its weight, its heaviness. I looked at the red plastic bag and counted, there were eight oranges with

Orange

similar sizes and assumingly similar weights.

That was the weight my father carried on every errand run, and it's just one of the many items he brought home. There could be two more packs of fragile eggs, one pound of discounted lettuces, sometimes with four big, fat, juicy tomatoes, a box of Japanese strawberries, three packs of Barilla Premium Spaghetti pasta that were on sale, matcha ice-cream for my mother, also a 1L carton of soya milk for my sister making coffee, last but not least two pieces of cheesecake for me and my sister from the bakery he passed by every time before walking down the escalator and taking the bus home. And he carried all these like it was nothing.

“Heavy and firm ones are good. They're ripe and juicy.”

He took two oranges from the bag and started juggling with them. They weren't tossed up high in the air, but I could hear that solid sound when the orange fell onto his palm – the heaviness. For the past few years, I had not been very aware of the heaviness of these oranges and other supplies he got for our family. He mentioned sometimes the exhaustion from running errands and carrying all these weights inside his backpack and shopping cart, but the next day he went on with his routine to shop for everything we ever needed. And no one seemed to care or realize the burdens he had been bearing silently, the task we took it for granted but he did daily for *us*. When you got everything you needed without asking as if it just magically happened to be there every day, you could not imagine one day when the kitchen cupboards were empty, the fridge was not fully stocked and there wasn't even an egg to fry.

“Try them,” he said, giving me the bowl with peeled orange slices while he went on peeling the next orange.

I looked at the orange slices, they were soft and succulent; each of them was so light, weighed like nothing; I took one slice into my mouth and felt its sweetness and juice at the right amount. I smiled at my father with my mouth having another slice, telling him it was tasty. It was a good

orange.

“And there’s another thing you can look at. These labels on the oranges tell you where they’re from.”

He took out another orange with a different sticker from the bag and said, “This one is from Egypt. The one you just ate is an Australian. They got different labels.”

“So which type is better? The better the more expensive I suppose?”

“It depends,” he paused and gave a little smirk. “Actually, the stickers may not be real.”

“Huh, what?”

“They are the ones who stick the labels on the oranges after they are harvested, aren’t they? I suppose those stickers were not there when the oranges were still growing.”

We both laughed at the joke – imagine sticking a label on the orange when it was just the size of a ping pong ball or even smaller!

“The labels can be fake. They can pretend to be from another origin and sell at a different price. Look at the cardboard boxes instead – the origin is printed there.”

Wow. I was genuinely impressed by my father that I went on oohing and wowing for like half a minute, and he was just smiling at me, doing his orange-peeling routine with his calloused hands that I had not been aware of before.

That night I couldn’t sleep well. In my mind there was this image of my father – carrying the heavy oranges inside his black backpack with his right hand holding a box of cheesecake, his left hand pulling the shopping cart full of goodies, getting off the bus downstairs and walking back home. And I kept thinking about the heaviness that surprised me. It was just one single orange. But my father carried at least four each time in his backpack every time. He was there in the market, picking good ones

Orange

amid the orange ocean under the scorching sun and in the chilling cold. He held them within his arms, running indoors with his foot aching in pain, just for a rooftop over his supplies when it started to rain. Every night he peeled the oranges and gave them to us while he was the last to eat the remaining dry slices. And I wouldn't have thought or cared about all these things if I wasn't bothered by the awkward silence that I thought it was all I ever wanted. But I realized, if I ever lived alone in the future, it would be my father filling in the empty cabinets and fridge. If I ever faced any problems or challenges, it would be my father peeling sweet and juicy orange slices to cheer me up. And if I ever had any unbearable, heavy burdens that gravitated me down badly, it would be my father carrying them for me on his shoulders. Just like the oranges in that red plastic bag inside his black backpack. Four, six, or eight of them, it didn't matter to him.

I learned how to pick a good orange, but not bear its weight. My father could not teach me that. He was still learning, still carrying it for us. Until someday we are ready to go to that orange ocean, bring four, six, or eight of them home, peel them one by one, and be the last one to eat the dry slices.

Dreams of the Desertshore

Stanley Wong is a sophomore student majoring in English.

I.

There was no way to go except forward in this desert. My shoes were trapped with sand, some escaped with a tilt but many stayed, pricking the under of my feet. My palms were wrinkled by the heavy cotton rope, an ache ensued as I loosened my grip. Every step of ours disappeared the moment we took another- the vile intention of the wind.

“Where am I heading?” the woman asked.

“To the shore,” I said. She sighed and laid down again on the sturdy back of the white stallion. We had been walking for five years, I knew the shore was near. The voice of the ocean had been reverberating in my head for some many days.

Then a sudden fear seized my soul: I thought I could conquer the sea like I did with the sand, but I grew scared of its boundlessness.

II.

Now I sit on the summer sand beside my silver cage. I hear the endless song of the shore, constructed by the whistling wind and perpetual unrest of the limitless water. But as I unlock the cage, the falcons let out a lasting din and flutter away all at once, a note that has completed the composition. The wave sweeps at my feet and erases all my traces, leaving behind an empty page. I start to feel the days go by, not stack up.

The Rock

I was once the owner of a peculiar rock. I found it in a pit outside my grandparent’s house, which was by the sea, in an obscure village in the Mainland. My mother brought me there every summer. I used to get excited

because of the train— living on it for three days sounded like something out of a storybook. And the motorcycle too, which had been modified to haul a large seat like a modernised rickshaw; and it went too fast. But it was also the only way to travel from the urban part of the province to its outlier. Its danger I realised only later when I lost my interest in the train ride, whose dullness and discomfort became apparent as I began to sense a contrast to that in Hong Kong. Their magic was lost. I had thrown a few futile tantrums since then, when I still could.

I was eight when the rock that I dug up was the size of my face. It was in an afternoon when the blazing sun was directly above my head, but I didn't find it excruciating— it didn't occur to me then that we were so fragile, that my tanned skin was a sign of damage and a warning. I kept shovelling, hoping to get to the bottom of the beach, although the soft sand, carried by the wind, would drift back into the hole secretly, bit by bit, eventually concealing its history like sea wave erasing our footprints. I thought I hit the bottom when my plastic spade made a sharp noise and sent shivers to my body. But as I was clearing the debris, I felt a tremble, then I pulled up the biggest rock I had ever seen in my life.

It had three blunt and uneven horns (after one broke off when I was dragging it up). They stuck up from a long and bulky body, which was rugged and had sharp edges. Its entirety was stratified in numerous tilted layers, maroon alternating with pale grey, while sparse white spots were scattered like paint. I thought the shape of it resembled a large hand with broken fingers; and the idea enchanted me. I imagined it to be one that was chopped off from a mysterious sea creature by gallant pirates.

I placed the rock on the beach, where I laid on my side and held my head with my palm. I stared at it and rolled around, covering my skin with hot grit while making up its history: the monster stood 10 feet tall, had a sallow octopus for its head and a sturdy masculine body adorned with iridescent pearls. Its tentacles had never rested, swaying like they

were different living entities enslaved on the rubbery face and stretching at its command. I was the leader of the crew who tricked the monster onto the shore with fishes we caught from the other side of the world and had never been seen before in the eastern sea. And it was I, who had slashed its wrist and put a sword in its heart. But before it was defeated, a bounty was put on the beast's head because it captured a woman on the coast. She happened to be my mother.

Why it had to be my mother I had no idea back then— the idea came naturally to me. Maybe it was the listlessness in her eyes that I took as a plea for rescue. I remembered one night, just like every other night, when she crouched to dry my body with a towel after a shower, I saw her messy hair and languid eyes. She looked like a miserable housewife who was bestowed a tragic fate, like the tortured women I always saw on TV shows. Then I was haunted by guilt—I thought I was the one who had given her a hard time.

“Are you sad?”

I asked softly with bravery, my lips gave a little shiver. Of course, she was confused, but before she could ask me why, I reached out and combed with my fingers the frizzy strands that were draping loosely on her forehead and then I put them back in place.

“In the end, on a stranded island that was endlessly smacked by vigorous waves from all directions, I unravelled the knot that was tied around my mother's chest and thighs against a tall rock. And she was saved.” At least it was how I imagined it to be.

I would have forgotten about the rock had my mother not mentioned it last summer when we visited the beach house again.

“Where did you put the rock?” She asked, sitting hunched on a bench under the tree. I was beside her, holding her hand and looking at the incessant ripples of the ocean.

“What rock?” I turned and looked at her wrinkled face.

“The one you dug up out there. You’d just showed it to me!” She pointed to the sand.

“Right,” I figured finally, “it was in the house.”

— — —

I was used to living on a timeline different from my mother’s—the doctor had said that Alzheimer’s patients could experience temporal and spatial distortions, often unpredictable. The day we were in his office, when he spelt out the syndromes and stages of the disease, I recalled what I learnt in my Physics class before about time dilation—“special relativity,” the teacher said, “when an astronaut was cruising in a very fast spaceship, his five minutes to us, on earth, could be an hour.” We had different frames of reference: the doctor and I, perhaps my mother and any other people in the room too.

She did not have a lot to say when we were leaving the clinic—it was nobody’s fault. It was a mere misfortune, I had to convince myself.

“I’ll go to the market,” she started.

“Do you want me to be with you?”

“No,” she headed the other way after giving the curt reply.

Left alone, I wandered on the unfamiliar streets. Slowly and unwillingly, the thoughts about my mother overcame me—her past and future, everything would fade into mist and nothing could stop it. My heart sunk into the cold ocean. I tried to recollect every little piece of history that she told me — I wanted to store them somewhere, make backups and pass them to my sons or daughters in the future, and then the children’s children.

I was walking down some stairs into a quiet alley that housed some stalls when I was struck by a particular memory that had been lingering for a long time but did not take any shape. She was recounting her days

as a waitress before she met my father, and I was eleven or twelve, lying comfortably on her lap and almost dozing off after a soccer day.

“I was like, look how I got it, look how I do this,” she said, “but it isn’t like that now.” “Everything has changed since you were born.” She followed with a chuckle.

I didn’t remember the expression on her face when she said it, but her tone stirred in me an emotion that I could not confirm. She must enjoy handling the heat in her old restaurant— I had even heard her say sometime before that she “felt like a God in the old days.” But then I crashed into her life like a comet — did she welcome the change? I asked myself that so many times. An irrational fear seized my spirit every time I contemplated the question.

I walked with a greater pace past some unknown apartment complex when I felt a clutch on my shoulder. It was a security guard.

I was lost but I found my way back.

She could be lost, too, I thought, but she wasn’t, not until some months later after we went back to the office again when the doctor prescribed more pills.

“It progressed a bit faster than we predicted,” he kept his eyes fixed on the report, “you’d better pay more attention to her.”

“Thank you,” I said to the nurses at the counter when my phone received a message: “I have to get a dress from the tailor.” I turned around and saw no one. “Don’t wait for me,” she added.

The clock at home ticked with a cracking noise like it would break at any moment. It was pointing to 9 when I found myself sitting on the sofa in complete darkness. There was a pang in my abdomen and I realised I had not had my dinner. I stood up and hurried to call her.

“Hey,” I spoke to the void between the beep sound.

“Mom,” I said again when I noted that she had picked up, “where are you?”

“Coming home,” she hesitated and uttered with care.

“Are you sure?” I asked. Silence ensued.

When I met her at the park downstairs, she was leaning on the trunk of an old tree.

“Are you OK?” I asked, but she gave no response. Not because of her illness, I supposed, but a paralyse induced by yet another great change in life. When we went upstairs, I felt that the lock on the door was barely holding.

I decided last summer to take my mother back to the small village where she grew up and where she brought me back during every summer holiday in my primary school’s years. It had been about a year after she couldn’t find the way home for the first time— I had hoped it would help stimulate her brain and slow down the process, as the doctor advised.

She was reluctant at first, as she was too used to our place in Hong Kong that we had settled in for so many years and it was the only place she was still familiar with— everything was so cramped that she had no problem memorising the places of things.

I had to assure her that we were going to her childhood home and would come back in a week, but she was overcome by doubts, at the station or in the cart; she had conjectured that it was all a plot against her.

“You’ll never get me,” she muttered to a passenger as we were squirming our way to the suite. She had grown suspicious of people’s intents, even mine. But the train was just like what it used to be: worn out and filled with the odour of sweat and dirty carpets, piercing the peace of two nights before arriving at daybreak.

At home, she had developed a curious habit of waking up at 3 am and letting out a wail almost every day, thinking she was being carried away in a coffin, as she would tell me sometimes afterwards. It did stop on the train, though, either because its rocking motion pacified her, or that she had not been able to sleep at all. The first night I got too tired of the

nuisance of traveling and slept without checking.

The other night I found myself awake in the room, pondering my decision to bring my mother on the train. I reckoned the necessity to persist was stronger than before, as it could preserve her spirit for a while longer.

Preserve her spirit, I thought, or was it detention, or imprisonment? I questioned my own intent, remembering the distant gaze that she cast to me from time to time – I had never considered for whom I was doing it for, or for whom she was living for. The futility of things came back to me in a timely manner to serve me a disheartening blow — there would not be a better ending even after all, I thought.

I moved to the other side of the bed and clung to the wooden bannister for a view of the lower decker where my mother was sleeping at. It was dark, but I saw her absence. An ache penetrated my nerve like an instinct, it travelled all over my body and inside my gut.

I climbed down the stairs and grabbed a coat, pushed open the metal doors and stopped at the corridor. To the left and right I paced, but paralysed at last. I looked at the wide windows, outside of which the ghostly willows passed at faint speed. Then I heard the noise of a crowd from my left. I followed, knowing my mother must be there.

At the end of the path, I saw my mother standing on the edge of the carriage. She took a deep breath and howled until her lung was drained out of air, and then repeated it again and again, all while the rainwater splattered all over her pale face and the hollering wind contested with her. No one was trying to stop her; they knew she could not be.

“Pull her back in!” The operator finally came out and commanded. Then the exit was closed again. It was my mother who opened the emergency gate. I stared with astonishment but not a hint of embarrassment — she did it all with grace just like a Goddess, just like how it was before, when she was a waitress in a night shift; and when she was

rearing her only child.



That summer, after we arrived at the beach house with two bags of clothes, I took my mother's hand and led her to the beach.

I took a few steps on the sand where I found the rock, the scream of my mother still lingered in my head. Quickly the wave swept away my footprints but I continued my tread without much thought. I thought of her past again, but this time without the will to retain them—

The day I bought the rock home, I said I had slain a monster to save her.

“Look, it was the hand that I chopped off from the creature!” I prided myself on my courage.

“It's a rock, isn't it?” She asked.

“It's a hand!” I insisted.

“Well, doesn't it look more like a heart?” She meant the biological one, whose shape I only knew when I grew older, and whose meaning I only understood now. It took just as much love as strength to be a hero.

A Moving Story

Cheung Sze Hang Gideon a final year student majoring in English.

“C’mon, Giddy, Jonny, let’s get going!” Mom, who is standing outside the front gate and waving, calls for us.

“Alright, we’re coming! Gi, hurry up!” Older brother Jon shouts back.

Jon swiftly changes to outdoor clothes, then runs to the shoe cabinet and sloppily pulls on his sandals. I am still putting away the coloured pencils we were doodling with a moment ago.

“I’m coming, gimme a sec,” I yell.

“Chop chop, or we’re leaving without you!” Jon teases.

I drop what I am doing immediately, unaware the pencil case isn’t shut tight. The pencils and crayons spring forth like streams of water gushing out, creating a mess, but I run out and put on my shoes anyway.

“I’ll clean up after we get back,” I promise.

“Dad, we’re gonna head out now,” Mom looks back and waves.

— — —

“Who’s gonna push the cart this time?” Jon asks.

Jon isn’t really the biggest fan of pushing the cart, but I won’t say he hates it. It’s more like a chore to him, meaning if he feels like it he’ll like it, and when he doesn’t, he’ll throw a bit of a tantrum. I don’t mind it at all. In fact, I’d say I enjoy it. It is fun pushing all the boxes up and down the path, especially at the beginning and end of the road, where there are small slopes. It makes me feel like I’m doing work (well, I am). This doesn’t really matter though, because we agreed to take turns every time. Apparently, this run is his, meaning he’ll push it to Block 10 and I’ll push it back home. Today, Jon

A Moving Story

grumbles, but he does the work anyway. On the way to our new flat, where we unpack the boxes and head home, Jon and I lament how, despite our four-year difference, we both find Chinese homework difficult.

Except, it probably wasn't like this.

And suddenly I realise. I know — that this is not a memory. This is not me — this is but a dream, a dream of my memories, anyway. I do not really know why this sometimes happens, but occasionally as I dream, I know — that some things don't match up. I'm suddenly hyper-aware of who I am in the real world, and realise that the details are fused together, that the facts aren't consistent.

Sure, my first move was during early elementary school, and we did stay in Lam Tin, but we didn't move within the same housing estate. We lived in Laguna City and moved to Sceneway Garden. It wasn't until a year ago that we moved our second time, within Sceneway Garden. The mood feels about right, and I liked to help out, but it wasn't until our recent move 15 years later that I was permitted to use the cart alone. It was too dangerous then, so I either pushed it with Mom or Dad, or I helped out by taking the smaller items, like my boxes of Legos, Jon's Gundam models, my bicycle, or perhaps the badminton bags... Ah, speaking of badminton racquets, I am reminded how we had to book the badminton courts in the clubhouse an entire week early to retain the Saturday and Sunday morning spots — the four of us played together always. Afterwards, we'd return home all sweaty and tired, but mom would cook us something, a porridge or fried rice, and we'd do the thanksgiving prayer and eat together... I wonder when the last time we shared a meal together was, all four of us?

Back in my dream, I suddenly found myself pushing the cart alone. I have been transported to the recent move, going from Block 10 to Block 3, alone. There was no laughter, nothing to talk about, only work to be done. So, I connected my earphones to play a random song. "Dream" from Imagine

A Moving Story

Dragons was chosen. I hummed softly along with the song. Along the inclined pathway, I leaned back to offset the weight pulling the cart downward, but one of the strings tying the boxes to the cart came loose, and the boxes came crashing down. I had to stop to pick those heavy boxes back up, one at a time. I mustered my strength, but I found myself gradually losing strength, then focus, first of the cart, emptied of its boxes, then of the sights around me, then of the sounds, and finally, myself.

And I am awake.

— — — —

I check my phone. It's 8am, much earlier than I've anticipated to wake up. Despite only having slept four or so hours, I get up, walk to the living room, and pour myself a cup of warm water. Taking a sip, I sit on the sofa and look out the window on my right. I stare intently at the passers-by, half-awake, trying to recall something important. It is a Saturday morning, so the sidewalk is mostly empty. Still, I see some middle-aged men out for a smoke at edge of the alleyway, perhaps on break. They sit quite distant from each other. After a short while, I see a young lady jogging with her golden retriever, followed by a family of five, consisting of two toddlers, an older brother, and their parents, heading out. The older brother, probably barely in his teens, pushes the baby stroller eagerly. The sound of the baby stroller scraping against the bumpy concrete floor reminds me of the sensations in my dream, of my brother's laughter, of my mother's voice, of myself, pushing the cart alone... and I remember — that today is the day of the move. I look across the room.

Apart from the few pieces of furniture and a dozen large white boxes, it is spacious. Or rather, it is because of the boxes that the room appears spacious. When we first moved here, I found the study unbearably small and suffocating, so small in fact, that there was no place for our closet

A Moving Story

and we had to put it in the living room rather than the bedroom. Now that most of everything has either returned to the boxes, or been thrown away, our rented apartment feels spacious for once.

Only one year has passed since we moved here. The rooms are still poorly ventilated, and I will never get used to this new place before we move out again. Everything had been decided since Jon's application for overseas study was accepted. It had all been planned out. We don't even need to go to the moving company to get the boxes again. I'll have to pack the remaining items into the boxes before the moving company truck drops by in the afternoon, but I just lay on the sofa, unmoving. At times like these, I could most appreciate a helping hand.

"Jon?" I call out. Perhaps he's still asleep. "Joooooon?" I shout this time. Still no response. I scroll through the messages on my phone. Turns out, Jon isn't here. He messaged late last night that he'll have to stay at his office, again. Overtime work, he says.

I sigh. Today, I'll have this house all to myself again. I'll have all its chores to myself too. This home is simply too big, too lonely for one person to live in. Mom would've probably commented about how I can make as much of a mess as I want now, but the fact that they're not here still stings. With Jon joining our parents in a few months, I'll soon be on my own all the time. Perhaps the only redeeming aspect to the move today is that the new apartment would become a lot smaller than this one. Hopefully that'll make me a tinge less lonely. Sighing, I brace myself and muster up all my willpower to get up from the sofa so I can resume my final task here.

Just as I stand up to continue packing, my phone rings. Picking my phone, I relax and sit back down. It is a Facebook notification: "Julius Cheung's birthday is today. Write a birthday wish on his timeline..." Turns out, today is my father's birthday. How could I have forgotten? I can still almost recall the taste of the last birthday cake we shared, also Dad's,

last year. As Jon and I got busier, we stopped playing board games and badminton as a family. With my university activities and Jon's work, there were many days that Dad was the sole recipient of Mom's home cooking. However, we'd still always make the time to celebrate by eating birthday cakes. This is no longer the case. I type out "Happy Birthday, Dad!" in the family chat group, but feeling a bit guilty, I hesitate a little, before sending it out.

Ever since our parents moved to the UK, our communication has grown increasingly infrequent. A FaceTime call every other day turned into every week, then every other week, and now we haven't spoken directly for almost a month. Everything in the family chat revolves around the practical issues related to mailing things over and the move. Even messages from Mom, who used to incessantly message me to check on me, have gotten scarce, and to be honest, I don't know how to reply to her anymore. Last time I checked, she was worried how I felt about the move, but with everything pre-planned, I simply didn't know how to answer. I still haven't responded to her.

Still sitting on the sofa, I look out the window again. Shortly after, some people will come up to my apartment to help me move the boxes onto their truck. There's still a little bit of tidying up to be done, but I just sit on the sofa, feeling lethargic.

A short while later, the doorbell rings. After a few moments, I hear knocking on the door, "Mr. Cheung, we're from East Asia Moving Company," I hear someone outside say. Then I hear more knocks, and someone shouting, "Are you in there, Mr. Cheung? We're here to make the move!" My phone starts ringing as well.

But I'm just sitting on the sofa, in a daze, not knowing what to feel, unmoving.

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around:

Janice Lam is a final year student majoring in English.

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around:

- the dewed buds of choy sum in the morning market can rival the beauty of baby breaths
- in dim lights, the yellow flowers are almost indistinguishable from the polyester beads hiding among the choy sum leaves
- both are to be discarded

I never understood why. Gwai only said, “Pesticides.” I used to believe that pesticides were a way to protect the flowers: Poison sprayed so that the flowers were picked off first, so that the blossoms were kept from being defiled by the mouth—an embalming effort to preserve beauty. Seeing the small beads float buoyant in the water among green scraps torn and fallen out from the stems. I hated the thought of wasting the flowers, so I fished them out from the sink and laid them out on a paper towel next to the kitchen window to dry. Gwai looked at the displayed yellow beads and said, “I taught your mother how to make dried flowers.” And added, “You little girls are always interested in collecting pretty things.” When Mum saw the drying flowers that night, she sucked her teeth and said, “You’re just wasting time. What’s the use of these?”

The yellow of the flowers paled within a day, the green sepals dulled. I poured them into a small, cleaned jam jar and sealed the cover with glue, hoping to retain the remaining colours. I placed the jar on

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

my desk in the bedroom. After a few G.S. classes in school, I learnt that a flower bloomed having absorbed all the nutrients from the plant: she blossoms because the plant has given her every reason to. But the plant has no concept of good or bad, it gives what it is given, not knowing it could be giving poison, not knowing it has caused the flower's wastage; the flower has no choice but to take and take. It is all a natural process: dependence is the cost of flourishing; to cut off the source of poison is to cut off the root of life; to be independent is to deplete a flower of the colours she has been given. The jar I put them in was nothing more than a glass casket, collecting dust with no spectators for the dying colours it held. I threw it away after a month.

Osmanthus was Gwai's favourite flower.

There were several osmanthus trees planted in the park nearby. When spring came around, after Gwai had bargained and argued with every vendor in the market, the two of us would take a detour home and stand underneath the trees for a few minutes. It was hard to make out individual blossoms: there were just white petals clustered among the green leaves. The spring breezes blowing by smelt especially clear, carrying in it the crisp, crystal scent of osmanthus. It was a scent like jasmine, only simpler, less sweet. I thought osmanthus, devoid of colour and fragrance, was far less interesting than any other flowers. But it was only when we were watching the osmanthus trees sway in the wind that Gwai would show on her face a weak, wrinkly smile.

Gwai also kept a can of dried osmanthus at the back of the kitchen cabinet. At around three in the afternoon every day, she would take a break from housework and bring out the dried osmanthus and a pot of boiling water. She would lay a spoonful of osmanthus at the bottom of her

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

mug and pour the hot water into it, swirling the water stream around like a tornado stirring up the dried petals. Then, she would sit by the table for half an hour, sipping from the mug between her hands. On Sundays, Mum and I would join Gwai for her teatime. Mum switched between different teas every time, preferring anything else to the osmanthus tea. I drank the osmanthus tea with Gwai, and took sips from Mum's cup too. There were no layers in the flavour of the osmanthus tea: it was not as honeyed rich as the jasmine tea, and there was no reverberating bitterness like the pu'er tea; only the same note lasting from teeth to throat. But Gwai seemed to enjoy the simplicity, and the three of us would bask in the afternoon quiet for a half hour.

Whenever I was not at school, I spent a lot of time following Gwai around the house, cleaning every corner. Most of the time we worked in silence. Occasionally, I would share anecdotes from school, or ask Gwai questions about her life before we lived together. She was never too keen to answer. Sometimes she would pretend to not have heard at all, and I would know not to pry further.

Once or twice, though, Gwai would open up a little, like when I asked her what she had wanted to do growing up, if she did not have to work at the factory. She said, without looking up from the pile of clothes we were folding, "*I want* to open a laundry shop."—there are no temporal differentiation or tenses in Cantonese verbs—and it sounded as if the answer slipped out before she could catch it, as if the answer had been waiting for the question by her lips all her life. She did not say any more about it. I wondered if she meant she wanted it when she was young or if she was still thinking about it now at the age of sixty.

"Why didn't you do it?" I asked, only half expecting an answer.

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

“No money. *That old thing* only sent enough money to support the children, and the factory didn’t pay much.” I figured from context and tone she was talking about her husband.

“If you had the money now, would you still want to open a laundry shop?”

She chuckled, a sound laced with acidity. “Your mother would be angry.”

“But it’s your dream. I could help out in the shop if it’s the hard work that worries Mum.”

“Stop talking about impossible things.” Gwai waved a hand at me, a signal for me to get back to folding the clothes. My hands kept working, but I was not ready to give up on my quest, feeling that I could still nuzzle a grain of answers from my grandmother’s sealing lips.

“The laundry shop around the block has just moved out. I can ask Mum and Dad if they could lend us money for the shop,” I continued with the fantasy—not realising how much it actually cost to own a shop, of course. Gwai looked at me, thoughtful, the corners of her lips twitched slightly, but the only reply I got was, “If you don’t want to get us in trouble, don’t tell your mother what we said today.”

One evening, Gwai and I were preparing a stew for dinner. Gwai pulled out an onion from the pile on the shelf. The root vegetable looked obscene: green tentacles stretching out from the helpless body, leering, disagreeing with the brown skins. The budding stem had leached from the bulb, drained all the knowledge and hope from another time, and left the layers of the old life to die, shrivelled, exhausted, irretrievable.

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

Gwai pushed the onion into my hands, motioning me to cut it. The deflating bulb felt rotten, mushy—held only together by a thin, flaky skin—against my palm. The green leaves, young and fleshy, threatened with a robust, spicy scent that once belonged to their root.

“Is this still safe to eat?”

Gwai only hummed and shoved my shoulder toward the chopping board. I placed the onion on the board and held a sharp knife against its middle. The knife kept sliding off, unable to cut through the soft-hard skins—the lack of buoyancy had created a different resistance, indenting where the knife struck. I forced the knife through, and the onion fought back, spitting juice into my eyes, but ineffective: not even its vilest acidic weapon was strong enough to make a child cry. The cross-sections ended up jagged; the layers were more often torn apart than sliced through, with most of the protective membranes still intact. I felt a mix of sorry and humoured at the sight. When I showed it to Gwai, she made no remark on the mutilation, only said, “Your mother is on her way home. Heat up the pan.” And so I did. Turned out, mushy, sprouted onions were still edible, and would make no difference in the presentation or the taste of a stew. No one else knew what pains the onion had gone through to sprout, and how, despite sprouting, it still had to carry on with its duty as food. But I would always know; the onion would always know.

“Are there spring onions in the stew?” Mum asked, poking and pushing around the slices of beef and mushy onion.

“*Mo ah,*” Gwai said flatly, dragging out each syllable, which meant no. “Why would I add spring onions? To hear you nag?”

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

“The onions we used had sprouted,” I said, “just a little bit. It’s still edible.”

“That’s spring onion. You know I hate spring onions,” Mum said to Gwai.

“*Ma gwai fan*,” Gwai mumbled under her breath. It meant “troublesome,” interjected by the infix *ghost* for intonation.

“I’m not looking for trouble. Spring onions make me sick,” Mum protested. “Is it wrong that I don’t want to be sick after working a whole day at school? Those kids are driving me insane.”

“Then why did you become a teacher? You never wanted to be a teacher,” Gwai said through chewing.

“What did you want to be, Mum?” I asked.

Mum did not say anything at first, but then she let out a reluctant answer. “An air hostess.”

I looked at her, shocked. “Why didn’t you become an air hostess? You’re not short-sighted. And you’d get to wear pretty suits every day.”

Mum tilted her head at me and pouted. “But then I wouldn’t be able to come home for days. You wouldn’t be able to see me all the time. Wouldn’t you be sad?”

I was about to object to how she was talking down to me like I was still a child but Gwai suddenly said, pointing at Mum with her chopsticks,

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

“Don’t use your daughter as an excuse.”

“What are you saying?” Mum shot an accusatory squint back at Gwai.

“If you had become an air hostess, she wouldn’t even be here.” Gwai turned her chopsticks toward me.

That last statement, sounding completely innocuous to me, had somehow struck a chord with Gwai. As a response, she picked up her bowl and chopsticks and went straight into her room without another word.

Seven days after a death, we anticipate the deceased to find their way home. Mum decided to cook for dinner. She even went to the market herself.

“No more instant noodles or takeaway,” she said that morning, “and I don’t need your help. I’m going to do it all by myself. Ask if your dad is coming home for dinner.”

I called Dad. When he said he had to work overtime that night with the familiar, slightly guilty tone, I replied with relief, “It’s okay.” I didn’t want to hear more fights that night. Mum had probably expected Dad’s answer too, as she did not react to it at all.

I stood under the kitchen doorframe as Mum busied herself around the kitchen. “Your grandmother lived in a triad-ruled countryside before swimming her way to Hong Kong,” Mum told me. “She witnessed a boy’s chopped off head roll over to the pile of trash she hid in. That was the moment she decided to leave home, or so she said. I wasn’t even ten

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

years old at the time she told me. How messed up is that? But I felt special she told me that story. I didn't care if it was real or not. I always felt special when she confided in me about what she had lived through. I would stand outside the kitchen, waiting for her to feed me, not with food, but with stories.”

My grandfather, the sailor, who had died long before I was born, was only home for a night every month or two. The only other thing Mum had told me about him was that she and her brothers would hide underneath the dining table when their father returned, just to catch scraps of meat falling off the pork leg he was gnawing on at late night. Gwai used to work at a factory making home décor pieces, plastic flowers that always looked one shade too rich to be real. She spent most of her time outside, working. Her children rarely got to see her during the day, let alone talk to her. Over weekends, Gwai would take home polyester fabric in a range of colours already cut out into droplet shapes, and she would make her children assemble the plastic flowers to earn some overtime. “We'd get smacked on the head if we talked back or stopped working.” Occasionally, Gwai would tell them stories of her own childhood while the children glued petals onto metal stems. “Not on purpose, she just needed to vent. And we were forced to listen to her, well, my brothers were. I quite enjoyed the stories.”

I nodded. As the choy sum soaked, Mum snapped off the roots and left the flowers behind.

“Aren't you supposed to pick off the flowers?”

“No, they are edible. I read it online. The roots are the contaminated parts.”

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

“Grandma always told me to remove the flowers.”

“Well, she is not here anymore, is she?” There was no malice in her voice, only an effort to be authoritative, and perhaps a veil over her sadness.

Only the sounds of vegetable stems snapping remained for a moment. I asked eventually, “Are we going to save some of the food and leave it out tonight?”

“Yes, that’s the tradition.”

“Wouldn’t it upset Grandma to see the flowers on the vegetables?”

“She would find something else to pick at even if the flowers weren’t there. Plus, it’s only a superstitious act. We’re going to throw everything away tomorrow.”

An hour later, the yellow buds were glistening among dark, overcooked leaves. Fumes arose from the dish. A grassy scent lingered bitter at the top of my throat. I held my breath, trying to take in the toxins only one bit at a time.

After dinner, Mum took out Gwai’s bowl and chopsticks and set them on the cleaned dinner table. I moved the leftovers into a single plate, a round one with blue flowered vines carved into the white rim—Gwai loved using the plate when she cooked, said it had the largest surface and was the easiest to clean—and I sectioned the foods in the manner Gwai did when she wanted to stay in her own room for dinner. Mum watched as I spooned the remaining rice into the bowl in a neat mount. She looked like she was going to make a comment about how futile the ritual was, or

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

slide in a remark about Gwai's pickiness. But she remained quiet. It was impossible to know when she was thinking. When everything was set, we went on with our night.

As I lay in bed, I kept wondering if Gwai would really come back, if she would miss us enough to want to see us again. Tossing under the sheets, my eyes always returned to the darkness seeping through the door gap, hoping for a moving shadow or a blow of wind that would tell me of Gwai's presence.

I remember, whilst waiting, the ghost who would walk around at midnight when I was younger. Some nights, the floorboards would creak, or a shadow would flow across the dark crevice. The shadow never talked to me or came into my room. In my mind, it was an old man with a crooked back who had covered himself with a cloak in the cold, waiting for his family to come back for him. They had lived in the building that previously stood where our building was. The old man died; his family moved away, but his soul was stuck where he had passed. He watched them leave, abandoning him and the life they had spent together—the only life he knew—he had no choice but to wish them well, and wish they would come back too after they died. The old man walked around the house at midnight, trying to find a family member hiding behind a wall or a door, unrest without knowing his loved ones were all right. Did Gwai think of us when she became a ghost?

Finally, after hours of silence, a creak sounded outside in the living room. I crept out of bed and slowly opened the door, hoping to see Gwai. Everything was dark outside. From the darkness, the scent of osmanthus flowed over. A shadow of a woman stood next to the dining table. It was not Gwai—the woman was standing too upright to be my elderly

#3 Things I have learnt when Gwai was around

grandmother with scoliosis—do ghosts return in their prime figure?— Then I heard a gulp, a mug set down on the table, and a sigh; the simple floral scent strengthened slightly at the exhale. The lean figure pulled out a chair and sat down near where Gwai’s dinner was. The shadow did not move for a long while, and I kept my eyes on her the whole time. She did not seem to notice me. The two of us waited and waited in the dark. The woman finally stood up. In the gentlest whisper, she said, “*Fan la.*” and went into Gwai’s room. It was impossible to know if she meant “Go to sleep.” or “I’m going to sleep.”

The next morning, I got up and saw Mum pouring away the cold vegetables into the trash, the yellow flowers still intact. I did not tell Mum what I saw, or ask if she knew I was watching her in the dark that night.

Home Sweet Home

Rabindra Gurung, English major student.

For Tony, this has been the hardest night of his life by far. He has no idea what words to fill in this blank Word sheet he has in front of his eyes. The screen brightness on his laptop is somehow adjusted to almost maximum. As he stares longer into the screen, Tony's vision begins to blur into an aura of heaven, the sharpest white shadows looming over both of his eyes. Even though he is wearing glasses, the sharp light still painfully stings his lenses. He hopes he can pull off a Newton's putting a needle in his tear ducts to see different shades of colour. Perhaps, in similar ways, he can draw some crazy inspiration too. Nevertheless, this has turned into a vicious cycle in which Tony rubs his eyes, the light shines brighter in his face, and he feels the urge to rub clear of his sight again.

Eventually, he manages to pull the string on his right hand and place it on the keyboard. Since the right brother complies, the left inevitably follows suit. Tony removes his eyes from the screen for a brief moment, takes notice of his messy dining room, and wants to just lean back on his sofa for a good sleep. His fingers struggle to locate the specific keys, seemingly casting a spell on the keyboard, before finally striking down with a moment of fierceness, as he types out "Home sweet home". His irises enlarge for a second, before shrinking back because of the bright white light. Even Tony himself is surprised by the words of choice he has just made. Is it supposed to be the title or the first line of a short story? No, the concern is on the words themselves. Home sweet home? Sounds so grammatically incorrect for such a common phrase. To express the love for home. To emphasize the sweetness of home. To bring home the homesickness one has. It just sounds ironic for Tony, when he does have

homesickness, but a literal and opposite kind that makes him go nuts every night at this place. This phrase never occurs to him as heart-warming, but off-putting, and upsetting. This does not sit right with what Tony views as the concept of home.

“Tony.” Even when the trap music is flowing through his veins through the headphones, this voice from not afar still manages to drill through Tony’s ears just when he tries to relax from accomplishing the feat of typing in the first words. He hates this voice. He has always hated this voice, which soon grows into some kind of noise. No matter how much effort he has put into filtering out this noise. The sound of a neighbour’s constant drilling kind of noise. A long-winded 60-second non-stop nagging kind of noise. With a sixty-millisecond interval every now and then just to give you false hope of silence in the heart before crushing that frail dream with that kind of noise. Every time this voice comes around, it only ever asks him to “go to bed” in order to rob him of his only time to roam free in his imaginary realm. Even though he is having a brain constipation in his work, it is still better for him than opting to be braindead for the rest of the night. Every sleep he takes only leads to an abrupt, premature murder of his inspiration and ideas.

“Tony?” This voice, this noise comes knocking hard from the bunk bed just behind the curtain separating the living room area from the bedroom area. Instead of a door, he gets a curtain. Instead of a separate bedroom, he has to share a bunk bed with his mother. Tony despises what little space he has got in this home sheesh home. He asked his mother for a separate room for his birthday gift when he turned 15, which was exchanged for a sharp slap in the face and a 20-minute lecture on how poor the family was. He asked his mother to let him stay on the sofa in the living room outside the curtain for his own private time in the

night, which was exchanged for an auditory burrowing into his ear canals alongside a 50-minute session of Health Education on why everyone must sleep at the same night-time. He asked his mother for her permission to live outside with his friends to have his final freedom as a true university student with a proper nightlife, which was exchanged for an hour-long tearful performance of melodrama every night when he is out overnight. He is tired of talking. He is tired of fighting back. No matter how much he has asked for, his mother exists as a level 99 boss that he can only yearn to defeat once he pays to unlock the premium version for the secret weapon of financial independence.

“Tony?” She raises her voice a little bit more, so as to catch Tony’s attention. It is obvious to Tony that he is deliberately ignoring her calls for sleep. He is a self-learnt expert in social behaviours. In a situation where an individual does not reply to another person in the consensus that that individual can clearly hear the other person, this can only mean that s/he has no desire to respond to that person. In any normal social situation with sensible people, this is a stark signal that s/he does not like the person in any sort of way. However, Tony’s mother is no such individual. She is a relentless lioness, chasing after that one prey and never giving up until that prey falls into her mouth for chewing, crushing, and swallowing. She is not a normal person that can understand basic social cues. However, inheriting some of the worst traits from her mother, Tony does not want to give up in this struggle of power, either. He does not like the notion of becoming a prey under the food chain. He holds on closer to the headphone, pumping up the volume as much as he can, and slams down any further negotiations to open talks.

“TONY!” The headphone can only block her noise so many times. Once he starts noticing, there is little Tony can do to revert his

attention back to work. No matter how loud his favourite music is playing, the noise still slips into his mind like a creaky door sound that his body cannot help trembling with a slight fear of the unknown in an atmosphere of uneasiness. As the noise turns into constant bombing of his ear canals, which is comparable to the German bombing on the English canal in Tony's mind, her voice appears more to him like a ticking clock counting down to an explosion. He can feel his heart pounding harder, unable to get rid of the increasing clamour. He has had first-hand experience in taking in the full blast of such explosions, and that was not something he would like to enjoy again. Tony values his dignity, but as of the moment, he is out of any idea either way, so he opts to hastily respond to the lioness' demand, in exchange for continuing his humble life.

“What is it?” The life-and-death situation still is not scary enough to deter Tony from taking an unpleasant-sounding tone. To be fair, Tony has gone to adopt this tone to deal with any ticking clock he has had the privilege of diffusing in the past few years. Even though in defeat, Tony makes sure that his spite against the tyrant up there on her bed-throne hears the ultimate cry for democracy in the household. He closes his eyes for an instance, takes a deep breath, and sits up straight on the sofa, preparing for his soul to take in a controlled damage in the form of the ridiculous commands that she is about to spit, like “go to bed”, “sleep early”, “do not stay up late” at 12 o'clock.

Although they are limited, he can still hear some disturbances in the air. Not in the form of a human voice, but rather, noises made by objects. The quilt unfolding, the bed shaking, the feet stepping on the stairs, until they reach the ground and sends shockwaves onto his body. Tony can feel something is different this time, that she is not merely asking for those usual demands. The curtain is pulled away to reveal a

frail woman holding her hand on the sofa for bracing, to support her to stand up straight. In any other situation, Tony tries his best to avoid the eye contact of the lioness, in fear of retaliation from a mere glance at her that wrongfully signals his willingness to fall prey to her expectations. Unfortunately for him, the movement of the curtain is enough to catch the attention of his idling eyes, and their eyes make direct contact. Her eyes look sore, as if the eyeballs are going to pop out of the sockets and leave the fracturing skull. The freckles on her face seem to have multiplied since he last took the courage to stare at the devil. As much as he hates to admit it, she looks too sick for a tyrant.

“I don’t think I’m feeling well. My throat is sore, my body is hot, and I am not even sweating,.” His eyes are removed from her to the screen, even though he is simply reading the three words typed and staring at the remaining white sea of opportunities, his ears, uncontrollably, listen to what she has just said. Is this some sort of a new voodoo trick for her to attract his sympathy and ultimately just a ploy to get him to sleep? Nah, he thinks, she lacks the intellectual capability to craft such an insanely clever plan.

“I think I’ll need to go to the hospital.”

“Wait, what? Why?”

“I just said I don’t feel so well. I might be having a fever, too.” She is aiming for the swivel chair near the table on the living room area to take a seat and a rest.

“Have you checked your temperature? Are you sure you’re *not* feeling well?”

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“I feel like my heart is pumping out of my chest and everything is swirling when I lay down.” She proceeds to sit on that chair, trying to maintain control of her breathing pattern.

“Maybe it’s corona? They say you don’t have to go to the hospital unless...”

“I have tested negative every morning on a test kit. I don’t think that’s it.”

“Then what is it?”

“Tony, you know that my kidneys have not been working well as they should for years. That’s probably what’s going on. Now, just call the ambulance, will you do that for me?”

As Tony is trying to process all the information he has just received as if it is news to him, his mother reaches for the blood pressure monitor machine on the deeper end of the table to numericize her current situation. The machine produces a different type of noise, one that is strangely more soothing to Tony’s ears with all the buzzing, when the strap begins to tighten her arm more and more strongly, until her arm is on the verge of explosion, before finally letting go and releasing the hostage and giving a plain result in cold numbers: 174/109. Tony does not understand the number quite much, but he realizes it is a value high enough to raise some eyebrows, like those of his mother. This situation looks serious enough, but Tony also understands how slow the hospital can be for the patients to even get to see a doctor. Indeed, this is not their first outing to the hospital for some fun overnight, as they have enjoyed the tedious experience that the loud-mouthed nurses, incompetent doctors and the

heavily air-conditioned hallways with broken chairs have offered to the both of them. He wants to dodge all those experiences, even at the cost of his mother's urgent need of medical care. One of the better solutions, Tony thinks, is to disprove that she has a need for medical care.

“Just before we go, we need to make sure that we have done the test kits,” The true motive is unclear for his suggestion of checking whether they are positive of the pandemic virus, even for Tony himself. If his mother is tested positive, will there be a chance for them to stay at home silent and in isolation? Will this mean that she has no medical need because it is simply the curable virus? Will this mean that he does not need to visit that horrifying place again? He is unsure of what game he is playing, but at least this should be the standard procedure before seeking for help. Tony reaches for a creamy-coloured bag full of test kit packs, and takes two out for each of them, so that they can get the tickets to the doctors once they are proved innocent and free from viruses. Tony cannot possibly imagine what will happen to them if either of them is tested positive, though.

Carefully spiralling the long sticks with some cotton at the end into the nostrils, they inserted the sticks into the bottom of a test tube with some liquid that they do not quite understand, other than the fact that it magically mixes with the mucus from their noses. As they squeezed some drops out of the tubes onto the test kits, the liquid spreads across the indicator spaces, turning the innocent white into purplish chaos. An initial line of deeper purple emerges from the dark chaos, and they are relieved for a moment. They know that both positive and negative results start with this line on the upper part. But this is all the good news the mother wants to believe in, meanwhile the son wonders what he has expected earlier. The inevitable has to come. His mother asks Tony to call the ambulance for him, even though the results are not clear-cut yet.

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“This is 999. What is your emergency?”

Tony feels experienced in all of this. He understands the standard procedure of what they need to know. He makes sure to tell them the patient is still conscious, as well as the usual symptoms that he has memorized, not to mention the negative results that they have just tested.

“I will put you to the ambulance. Please hold.”

Perhaps Tony has been a bit impatient, but he forgets that his call needs to be redirected from the generic emergency control centre to another helpline for ambulance services. He has to start over his perfect speech all over again to another person. This is a problem for Tony, because once he has delivered a performance, it is hard to replicate the exact same scenario, especially one that he does not particularly enjoy. Tony recalls all the horribly written scenes he had to act previously in a school drama competition. Yet, that comes to second in comparison with the one he has just done. In fact, he abhors the monologue so much that he does not remember anything that he needs to reiterate by the time the other end of the call asks for his repetition of the details.

“Hello? Could you repeat the current state of the patient, please?”

Tony tells himself that only a patient knows what sickens her the most, and it would be best that he let his mother take the phone for now. Other than speaking more loudly for his mother whenever the emergency medical dispatcher cannot hear well, Tony’s mind travels elsewhere. He is thinking whether he should wear the shirt he did the day before, or he should go to the wardrobe and grab a clean one. The blue one looks nice on his body, but a black one might be more appropriate for the occasion. He wanders around the house, thinking about his next steps before the help comes. He

has to look decent in front of others.

“Tony, perhaps you don’t have to go with me. It is too late, after all. The waiting might take all night.” Her mother is packing her clean clothes into a plastic bag, after previous experience tells her that she is going to need to admit to the hospital in a serious case like this. She takes a charging wire and a plug for her mobile phone to recharge in case she gets to the hospital bed. The port is always above her head, behind her back amongst a mess of medical machines that she never understands the functions for. She does not forget to include some biscuits as snacks for whenever she is hungry or just tired of the bland taste of hospital food. She searches the table and finds her thermos bottle containing water as hot as lava. Tony never likes the temperature at which his mother loves to offer him to drink. He believes that she is on a secret mission to consistently damage his oesophagus. He has learnt enough from YouTube to know that hot water kills off too many cells in the oesophagus and brews a new wave of cancer cells along the way. Nevertheless, hot lava is her favourite drink, in the morning, during work, after work, during rest, before bed. There is no surprise that she makes sure her thermos bottle stays with wherever she is about to go.

Tony, on the other hand, stands silently next to her mother on the side. He does not understand this demand, this order, this request. She is asking him to accept a deal of a lifetime. He has yearned for alone time at home for quite a long time. He did not expect that dream to come true in such a sudden fashion. He wishes to form a fist and raise the hand cheering for this victory, but he reckons it might expose too much of his ambitious agenda. There is something fishy about the request, coming from a tyrant that never asks for acceptance nor understanding. It is late night for him, but he knows that she knows that he does not sleep at this hour anyways.

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It might make more sense if he were to think in her perspective, seeing that this is her normal sleeping time, but Tony focuses more on the ambiguous nature of the request. All that comes into his mind is how the ancient lords tested the loyalty of their servants and subordinates by granting pretentiously generous offers. The only correct answer would be to refuse them outright if staying alive were the ultimate goal. He cannot accept this deal, not even after three times of denial. This has to be a trap. Plain and simple.

“Stay at home for me, okay?”

“No. Who pays for the fees after you reach the hospital, then?”

“That’s no big deal. I can pay after I get out.”

Tony remains silent for a while. He is already out of excuses to reject her deal. He believes that he is.

“But you will be all alone. Let me stay by your side to the hospital.”

“Thank you, Tony. You’re a sweet child.”

This battle is settled; the victory belongs to the lioness. The cub accepts defeat. But he also realizes how dangerously close he was to the verge of nonexistence as his loyalty was challenged. Yet, Tony is stunned by his own mouth. Not even under a gun point can he manage to fake such a line with perfection. His role of a pious son with filial affection to his mother is worthy of a standing ovation, if not an Oscar award right away. For a second, he really believes his own words that he cares about his mother’s safety, as well as her feelings. The show must go on. The only

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way to close this scene is with something simple yet emotionally powerful. For the first time in twenty years, in this moment of silence in the house, Tony decides to be the active one in their mother-and-son hug. The only explanation he has in his head is Stanislavski's guidance in preparing himself as a method actor.

“Ding dong—” Tony opens the door to find out several paramedics with a marked distance from the inside of the house. They stand like professionals with a calm demeanour, except the younger one at the back who has a slight dread in his eyes.

“Who is the patient here?”

“I am, sir. I feel so sick now. I have not been feeling well for some time now...”

“Have you tested?”

“Yes, my blood pressure is still very high, but I don't remember the number...”

“No, are you positive or negative?”

“Negative. Both of us. We just did it.”

Tony helps up his mother with his hands and brings the answer that the men want to hear. Their guard is down after hearing it, but they still remain outside the door. Tony goes for the dining table inside for the proof they look for, and, fortunately for both mother and son, the results match his statement. The ambulancemen help his mother get outside to

the lift, while Tony stays behind to pick up both their bags and turns off the lights. Except that she seems to have carried the bag along with her, and so there is no need for Tony to follow up. Perhaps he is slow, or that he has long abandoned this thought, but Tony does not slow down from reaching the ambulance and going to the hospital together out of a struggle of choice between staying and leaving. In fact, the struggle of choice comes in the moment he thinks about whether to wear proper shoes or sandals. He has forgotten previously to wear socks when they were waiting for the help, so he does not want to waste further time and simply puts his feet on his sandals. He turns off the light, locks the gate with his disorderly bunch of keys, and bids his bye to the empty shell he calls home before stepping away with flippity-floppity noises.

There is no extra space in the lift by the time Tony reaches the lobby, so he volunteers to run down the stairs to meet up at the ambulance outside. Some might say Tony can simply dodge the duty of attending to her hospital visit at that moment, but in his mind, that would be too bad for his image, especially after all the ambulancemen start seeing him as an integral part of this rescue mission. It does not make sense for him to stay behind at home. But he is still unsure whether his role has been affirmed in their eyes. He has to restate to them that he is the son of the patient, reminding less the ambulancemen and more himself of why he is doing what he is doing at the moment. A façade of reason. Explanation of this fiasco. He steps inside the vehicle, sitting next to his mom. Apparently, since she does not indicate any sign of loss of consciousness, she is not offered the chance to sleep on the bed. She whispers to Tony's ears of how bad the service is, complaining about how lazy these people are. It seems to Tony that her tyrannical nature slowly re-emerges as she starts criticizing the people who help her, even when she is this sick. He just fails to understand her mind at times like this. He might have argued with her

on that had she not been an official sufferer and in a room full of other people. But a faint smile is all he can bear to give her on a bumpy ride to the concentration camp of sickness. He wonders just how long he needs to continue playing up this act of filial piety in front of strangers.

When the ambulance finally stops at the entrance of the hospital, Tony walks out behind his mother, who struggles to get off the few stairs from the vehicle to the ground. He stretches his hands to hold her shoulders, but his hands do not carry much energy to support her if she indeed falls. A mere gesture to fool her, to fool them, but hardly himself. He does not like how artificial he comes out to be. He has always tried to be the sincere one within a group of friends, one of the most loved students in many of his classes, even leaving comments under YouTube videos to encourage some random strangers to cheer up without any expectation of returned favour. It often boggles his mind that he has to act up against his closest yet family member even in times of crises. He is not certain whether he has gone numb or he has never developed any true emotions for her because she has never been a choice in his life, an idea that he oftentimes reinforced in deep conversations with his closest friends.

He is led to a counter in the hospital while his mother is brought away for some medical check-ups at the nurse station. He takes a sigh of relief when he looks at her departure, before realizing that he needs to pay for her hospital fees just like before. How would it have turned out had he not come over to the hospital to help her settle minor stuff like this? Would it be possible that she would be detained until somebody came up in days paying up for her? That sounds unlikely in reality, but he is glad that in hindsight following her to the ambulance is a less troubling choice, at least.

“Positive or negative?”

“Urgh...Negative.”

“Good. That would be \$180.”

Tony reaches for his purse inside the bag that he carries whenever he leaves home. The big, black bag is often criticized by his friends for being way too bulky whenever they hang out, turning the night into a semi-hiking event. To Tony, however, the bag stands for his own sense of security, that he has something to cling on to, somebody to hug when he sits outside, a necessary bag in case he is suddenly thrown into an unfamiliar situation, and he needs to survive all on his own. Others would never understand. No matter how clumsy it makes Tony look like, no matter how many times embarrassment has been caused by his searching through the maze of the bag for an item as straightforward as a purse, Tony is determined to be seen as “the man with the bag”. He grabs the purse and hastily takes out some cash for the counter.

The memory part in his brain regarding the details of the hospital is being reactivated by re-encountering the place again. He takes his time to walk towards the nurse station, knowing that his mother is probably sitting and waiting for further instructions that can come within the time period of one hour and one year. The hallway is so empty compared to the last visit. The night is darker this time, too. The air-conditioning makes things way cooler. He wonders if every hospital in the city feels like a blend of a mortuary and a haunting house.

He sees the silhouette of a humpbacked old lady from afar, before recognizing that it is his mother. The former glory of domination of

conversation and dictatorial rule of home is no more in face of impending doom. A part of him tells himself to rejoice at this wonderful hour, yet the other part forces him to keep it together. He walks up to her and holds her hands like a good, loving son would. The nurse comes and asks the same typical questions as the ambulancemen did, and Tony and his mother have to respond accordingly again. This time, Tony is sharper in mind that he manages to remind his mother of her kidney problems. He screams yes to himself for his success in recollecting pieces of the whole picture regarding her health, feeling like winning a bingo at a night party. Later on, they repeat the same thing with the doctor when she asks about her current status with the same set of questions, except a bit more in-depth. However, this time Tony is politely asked to leave and close the curtain as the doctor starts checking on his mother with medical equipment, like any typical doctor does.

Tony watches as the familiar procedures start to fall in place: drawing blood with a long, silver needle injected into her bloodstream, being led away to do some CT scan on her head, with which Tony secretly hopes the doctors can figure out the reason behind her adamant domestic decisions against himself, as well as doing an X-ray scan on her body, although Tony does not remember if it is the hand, the lung, or the kidney that is scanned. After all the checking up, they need to wait for a few hours on their own with other patient patients on some poorly maintained chairs in the hallway. Tony sits down next to his mother and hugs his bag like a primary schoolboy. He used to think that hospitals were a sacred place that never should be blasphemed by the usage of electronic devices even when they were on the wait, but many encounters of patients or their families using their mobile phones excessively encouraged him to violate any sacred notion hospitals held on him. When his mother joined in the conversation other patients had about the inefficiency of the nurses, doctors and the

general staff of the place, Tony cannot care less and tries to focus his attention onto his screen, trying not to nod along with his mother's words as they continue complaining.

An inspiration strikes Tony when he is mindlessly scrolling through his feeds like any teenager would, when he realizes just how melodramatic the whole experience he has gone through with his mother here would be for his short story. He quickly goes through his messy pile of documents he contains in his drive and locates the barely started draft with quite an ironic title on top of the blank sheet. He starts to type in all the key points he would like to include in this story of his, especially the details like the encounter with the ambulance, the waiting process he has to go through before having any sort of conclusion from the doctors, and the ignorant sounding yet admittedly truthful conversation his mother has had with the newly acquainted people. He makes sure to tilt his phone a bit away from his mother on the left, not wanting to cause trouble by letting her read what he is about to type. Granted, his mother does not care when her eyes are so tired that she has ended the conversation and has begun to fall asleep by the time Tony is inspired. It is not something shameful, nor even something she would prohibit. In fact, Tony does not even think she would understand half of what he tries to write. His mother is not good with languages. That is why she has always been proud of her son for all the accomplishment to study for a degree in a university, meanwhile he has always felt annoyed by her inability to use language as eloquently as one should. In most times, he cannot win arguments against her simply because she does not abide to the regular laws of debate and shuts his logical points down with "stop talking back", "a mother is always right" and "my head is going to explode if you continue", painting him as the villain in her history. Sometimes, his mother would tell him that her life was so extraordinary that it could very well be turned into a biography

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film. All that filled Tony's mind was whether he would fill the role of a villainous brat in her point of view. Nonetheless, he chooses not to let her see what he is doing, even though it is most likely that she would start some small talk with him at best. But he does not want to have small talks with her. He wants to keep silence between them and have his own quiet personal space.

However, soon he turns off the screen, puts the phone back to his pocket, and closes his eyes to take a quick nap. He has always hated the idea of taking real-life inspiration into a fictional world. A story, in his point of view, is supposed to be an escapist fantasy, even when it has themes relevant to the real world, the plots should not. Yet, as his well of creativity dries up during an inspiration famine, he starts crowdsourcing ideas from his personal life. He despises himself for even having such a thought. He has made a promise to himself to create a science fiction story about an alien protagonist solving some mysteries off-planet, yet his first words to start off are "Home Sweet Home". He gives up for the moment and uncharacteristically rests his eyes way before his supposed bedtime. He hopes that at least some of the inspiration could come from his dreams.

He wakes up from the abyss of darkness as soon as he hears his mother's name pronounced in the announcement, summoning her to another place for a new round of tests. Basically, they are a re-run of the checks done several hours prior. As a nurse approaches them for another blood pressure check, the lioness takes the opportunity to complain about not having beds to sleep on despite numerous empty beds showcased along the hallways. The nurse is very quick in arranging a bed for her, stating that she can always just ask them should she need anything. Of course, not going to give the nurse an easy time after securing a victory, she continues ranting about how the ambulancemen refused to let her have a bed due

to their laziness. Tony understands that the ambulance beds are definitely different from the hospital beds, which are obviously available to whoever asks for them. But he stops thinking about it when he realizes he could have fought for her bed rights much earlier.

Finally having a bed to lay down on, she takes the quilt offered by the nurse to warm herself from the air-conditioning. She has been cold for all these hours. Even at her naps she was not comfortable. Tony walks closer to the bed and helps put her shoes on the tray under the bed in case the shoes are left on the hallway when the nurses suddenly push her away for another test. Tony looks at his own sandals from home, and his mother notices them too.

“Go wash your hands, you silly boy.” As the order comes, Tony goes to the washroom for a clean wash with soap. He would have done so even without her instruction. Nevertheless, he is happy to oblige this time. When he walks back to the bedside near his mother, she has just had her blood drawn for a second time.

“What time is it now, dear?”

“It’s...” Tony takes a look at his watch and continues, “it’s almost four now.”

“It’s too late for you now. Go take a cab home. I’ll probably need to admit to the hospital soon. Go home and sleep.”

He knows he is not going to sleep when he gets back home. He even thinks about not taking any transport and simply relaxes himself with a long walk by the riverside home. It takes about an hour or so, but

his mind is only full of any possible counter to another generous offer his mother could have ever made. This is what Tony wishes, but he cannot admit complete defeat again. He needs to make a compromise, instead.

“But you’ll be alone here. Maybe I’ll just stay here.”

“No, no. You don’t have to stay up here. I can just sleep here now that I have a real bed.”

Tony shows his usual faint smile again, with a slight hint of victory that he can relieve himself from the burden that he does not really want to take. But he does not want to appear like a villain in her story again. He decides to stay with her.

“No, I’m staying here.” The clock is ticking four, and the hospital hallway remains bright. He wonders if she can even sleep under such light, considering how intolerant she has been with the lights in the living room usually. He slightly opens up his arms to her, who lays her head close to his chest, while his bag is on his back. He is unsure of how long a natural hug should be, but he acknowledges that this is definitely a rare occasion that he would be the active one again. He does not even like his mother’s presence most of the time. He wishes her to be non-existent in most of his life, so that he can enjoy a life of his own. Such a fantasy can come true tonight, yet he struggles to choose an option for himself. How much longer must he keep up with the act? He is glad that another nurse comes in and interrupts with another CT scan, lest the hug takes an awkwardly longer time than it should.

Tony follows as the bed is pushed towards the entrance of the scanning room, and he is told to wait outside. This is not the first time

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Tony doubts if he has emotional attachments to his mother, or that this is just some Oscar-worthy performance. He wishes his stage performance would be much more fantastic than he does when there is not much of an audience. He wants glory and attention, but as of the moment, all he gets is confusion. He does not have any desire for attention coming from his mother. He disregards her as a worthy member of an audience. As much as he hates to sound elitist, he does not believe his mother would understand most of what he does. This has always been the true source of their conflicts. She does not seem to understand him; he does not want to understand her. But just like how every countryman, in times of crises, unites against outside forces and supports the leader they usually hate, or how hostile countries stand on common grounds of interests and ally against extra-terrestrial threats, Tony understands that this growing affection towards her for a lovable motherly figure would fade soon after the dust is settled, maybe even sooner than that. He has gone through this so many times. He is sick, as well, of the vicious cycle they both are stuck in. The love-hate relationship, at least for Tony, is something he wants to improve once and for all.

One gets inspired at times one does not expect them. Tony believes maybe, even though he is still against the idea of employing real-life details into the story world, the least that he can do is to incorporate the thematic elements of his struggle into his story. Home sweet home. He is confident that if he merges elements of fancy ideas with down-to-earth themes and issues to discuss, he can get the best of both worlds. A pretty grade at the end of the semester, but also something that he personally enjoys. The possibilities are endless, Tony thinks. He has brain farts most of the time he tries to think, but when the farts disappear, his flow can start flowing like diarrhoea on a regular Tuesday. He quickly grabs his phone to make a brief report of his conflicted feelings about the current situation as

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well as his mother. He has not made an outline since his graduation from secondary school, and he is not planning to either, but he loves jotting down whatever is in his mind in case he sweeps clean of his ideas once he takes his mind off elsewhere.

Before he knows it, his mother is already out calling his name. Tony walks along the bed but concentrates on the sheet that is getting less blank and more occupied. It is as though black ants have come across to colonize this new open habitat. While the bed is back in its original place, Tony's mind is not. His mother calls him for a few more times before he can snap out of his world of possibilities, facing yet again another finite universe.

“Tony, I think they will want me here for a few more nights. It is best you went home.”

Normally, any disturbance to his thinking processes from her would drive him mad. He would shout at her for shaking his head when he is in deep state of thinking. He recalls the many times that she has prematurely murdered the birth of his brainchild while acting all innocent. This time, however, he does not take any rage on her. Perhaps he understands the gravity of the situation, or that there are many witnesses near them that would tarnish his reputation for good, or simply that he is in a good mood. Tony refuses her offer for two to three times, before reluctantly agreeing to leave her at the hospital. Tony makes sure that she contacts him whenever the situation is changed, like whether she is going to stay in the hospital. Tony reaches his hand into his bag for a power bank, so that she can recharge her battery on the phone if it gets too low to operate properly. He grabs her hands for one last time, before hugging her as closely as possible. His body has oftentimes resisted such

Home Sweet Home

close interaction with her. He wiped away saliva from her whenever she used to kiss him when he was a child. The disgust, while still present in his heart, remains dormant this time, as it becomes overpowered by another sensation he experiences at the time. He tells himself that it is the power of Stanislavski, but deep down there is more that he refuses to admit. In truth, he feels no urge to admit.

“I’m gonna go now.”

“Text me when you arrive home.”

“Text me if anything changes, okay?”

“Love you, Tony.”

Is this really a good choice? Tony doubts that he can keep this emotion back home to start working on his story draft. Tony imagines if the feelings fade, he will simply occupy his time playing 4x games overnight until the next evening and never caring to text her again. The more he thinks about it, and the further he walks away from her, the larger his regret grows into. Tony cannot believe that he is thinking about completing an assignment when his mother is seeking serious medical help. This feels like, to him, some insurance guy profiting off of people’s death by making self-advertisement as soon as the death news hits. He starts to reflect on all his previous choices in regard to his mother. The cruelty he showcased whenever she tried to initiate a simple chat. The disgust he displayed whenever she cooked and cleaned the house for him. The indifference he exhibited whenever she claimed to feel sick. Tony cannot help but make a brief, yet powerful shout outside the hospital when his eyes are scanning for a cab.

Home Sweet Home

He walks towards a taxi station and takes the first cab in line to head home. He does not want to think any more than he does already. He does not even want to look at the driver in the eyes when he states his home address to take off to. He is tired of dealing with all these complicated stuff. The cab drives off to the main road, and the speed is so soothing that he feels like he can stay inside the cab forever.

As his eyes begin to rest, his mind starts to hit him with thoughts that not only is he a villain in her story, but in his own, as well, in some way. A self-centred prick who rejects the one person that once gave birth to him. Sounds like a villain protagonist, Tony thinks. Yet, the chaotic thought process of Tony makes sure that he can never stay in one state of mind peacefully. He takes out his phone from the pocket because he wishes to jot the points down again. He gives up on the fictional elements at all. Perhaps, he tells himself, a story is more of a reflection of reality, so anything written by an author carries some alteration of truth, granting it its fictional nature accidentally anyway. He does not even have to try. A smirk is visible on his face, as he, finally, has a basic idea of how the story should progress. He does not want to make an outline of his ideas, because he wants to see how the story naturally flows as it goes down the line, and how his emotions start to fade each time that he raises his fingers to type on the keys. He wonders if the emotions expressed will change from start to finish. Tony is curious to know that if the direction of the story will take a sharp turn as the affection that he has for his mother declines. If he is less inclined to paint himself in a vulnerable light and becomes more eager to give himself excuses throughout the lines.

As the gleam on the screen gets engraved on his lenses, Tony's vision gets blurrier and more glued to the blackening Word sheet. He has no idea how long time has passed before he rubs his eyes to soothe them

from the strong sensation of light. It seems that the taxi has already sent him home. The passage of time and space starts to be irrelevant to his mind; the next time he notices himself to be elsewhere, he is already at the same cosy sofa that he has been sitting all day every day before the quick detour to the hospital. He turns on his laptop once again and continues typing out on the keyboard the heartfelt emotional arc he has in mind. He feels naked when he starts describing how he handles with them every time his mother seems to be making a scene. He scratches his chest since the pen he uses to write has been operating on his heart, trying to dissect it on paper. He feels so exposed, yet he continues detailing the journey of such a rebellious teenager character, akin to himself, who sees his sick mother in the hospital and wishes to make amends after all the horrible things he has done to her, because it feels right. He deliberately shoehorns in wild, ridiculous justifications for his earlier actions against her, making it impossible for the readers to connect themselves to such a narcissistic protagonist. He wishes the readers to distance themselves from him and view it as what it is.

Tony treats this story as a secret apology letter for all his misdeeds all those years prior to his mother. But, of course, Tony does not have the courage, nor does he have a lack of arrogance, to admit that idea right away. Like he has told himself, the very words he inputs, however reality-based, inexorably get transformed into a fictitious piece of writing. Sometimes, he does not have to stick to the whole truth. The writing starts to look like a what-if scenario to him. What if the protagonist is not faking those crocodile tears? What if he is secretly a loving son? What if in the end his mother gets discharged right away and they go home together with a heart-to-heart conversation? He starts leaving out some of the excuses. He starts hinting at the possibility of a redemption arc. He starts going for a happily ever after. A reality that he wishes to be in, perhaps that he envies even. A

reality where he is understood.

As Tony is reminded of the fuzzy line between fiction and reality, however, the engines on his forearms slow down like they are jammed. Tony reconsiders his situation. The experience he has felt in the hospital seems, for the lack of better words, less real. Has he been hallucinating all this time because he feels guilty of his misbehaviours? He is simply reacting the way any son would do when their mother is being unreasonably demanding. Or, worse off: is it simply part of his real-world counterpart's scheme to imagine writing as an indifferent narrator, creating this version of reality to explore what kind of a son Tony has really been like? Did he even go to the hospital at all? What even is he doing here anyways? It is as though he has always been sitting on the sofa in front of his laptop without ever taking a step elsewhere. As the aura begins to fade, the lights start to dim, Tony loses track in the story that he is crafting and its original purpose. He does not feel the motivation to continue. He stops typing. He removes his sight from the screen, clearing the retina of the darkened projection of lines of black ants from his Word document file. Perhaps he can boot up the unfinished round of *Civilization 6* from Steam, instead. He takes in the tranquillity of solitude and enjoys his home sweet home alone.

At this instant, as if a shockwave hits his head, Tony has a striking epiphany: is it that easy for him to revert back to his old self? Tony cannot help closing his eyes, trying to regain that particular consciousness that could have changed his life for good. He is in deep search for *the* moment when he feels like a proper son. When he can make peace with his mother.

Tony reopens his eyes as he lays down on the cab seat in the back, unable to distinguish that from the sofa at home. His world is solely occupied by thoughts popping up in his minds as his sense of reality sets

about dissipating into the void, merging with the dark scenery outside the window. Tony is so drunken in his own imagination that he is not aware that he is sitting in a cab. Nor does he remember that it is 4:30 a.m. at all. Therefore, it makes sense that he does not realize what hits him when the cab turns upside down on the main road. Truth be told: He has separated himself from reality long before reality does it for him. There is little time for him to make facial reactions that he has been so good at as an all-time professional actor. However, he has, in fact, unintentionally widened his eyes to an enormous proportion. A look of shock? A look of despair? Or a look of rejoice? Tony does not know. More accurately, Tony does not have time to figure out the answer when he is busy crashing down with the burning cab.

As Tony's torso keeps rubbing against the bloody ground, in the final moments of his thoughts, just before his brain runs out of red fuel to continue functioning, his left eye sees a fractured screen with three pop-up WhatsApp messages from "Birthgiver". Unable to move an inch, he cannot tell if it is real or fiction. Even the sensation of pain feels artificial. After all, Tony has been merging them both for some time now. It does not matter, however, as the battery inside his phone blows up in his face before he manages to read through the messages:

"They say I am much more stable."

"I'm heading back with you now."

"Text me when you're home."

A Successful Painter



A Successful Painter

Chan Nok (Rosy) and I am an English major.

This is perfect, Fiona thought, and I could never be happier.

She stood in front of the art gallery, surrounded by friends and famous artists and art critics. She smiled at them, trying to keep the turn of her lips humble and demure, and patiently answered every question and thanked every praise.

She had never felt so beautiful before. Yes, at school she was often praised by her art teachers, later professors, and she won a few competitions for students, but those were all small achievements when compared to this. All little victories that build up to the climax of the story. In this moment, the world existed for her. Everyone was looking at her. They called her the rising star of the art world. They admired her work with contemplation in their eyes. Basked in the gentle lights of the gallery, the vivid colours of her paintings flitted across canvas like a fever dream, forming the mountains and lakes and fields that she had seen and loved.

Fiona had always known that she would be great, and now she had never been more certain of it.

That night, her fiancé drove by to pick her up. He kissed her on the cheek. “Congratulations, Miss Fiona the artist. Always knew you’re gonna make it big. Tell me, what happened? Any big names showed up?” He helped Fiona make sure everything was in place during the final preparations but left as soon as the exhibition started. His boss was especially stingy when it came to days off.

She had been waiting for this question since the guests started to disperse. “Oh, yes! It went wonderfully! Everybody loved my paintings. A lot of people want to buy them, and let me tell you, the price they’re offering is high, which means we’re about to be rich!” They both laughed

for a moment. “Ah, rich people! Anyway, Daphne Wu showed up, you know, that art critic? We went to a guest lecture of hers together. She promised to write an article about me! In her magazine! Professor Smith also came. He used to sneer and call me an amateur in uni. Do you know what he said about my work tonight? ‘Exquisite’! ...” She went on and on their way home. She didn’t stop after they got out of the car, as she skipped and hopped through the short distance between the parking lot and their apartment. They grabbed ice cream and slouched on the sofa and Fiona continued until she decided her throat was sore from all the talking.

“Enough about me. How’s work?” she asked, wrapping her arms around his neck. “Your boss still infuriating as always?”

Martin snorted. “Yeah, that’s basically an essential part of his personality. I’m sure that if someone took away the annoyingness from him he would immediately drop dead on the floor, cause he would have just lost a huge chunk of his soul.”

“I don’t assume anything interesting happened, then?”

“Nope. Just meetings that were really unproductive. Nobody listens to anybody anymore. Also, our client is a piece of shit. I spent days trying to meet the fourth edition of his requirements for our project, then boom! He sent an email to our group leader saying he changed his mind and wanted us to go by the old requirements!”

“What a son of a bitch,” she agreed. “Your job sucks, man,” She kicked the leg of the table gently. “You remember what I’ve said before right? Can’t you just... quit? You hate it anyway. I’m going to be successful now, I can pay for our expenses while you sing and write your songs. Maybe one day you’ll publish your own album! Who knows?”

Martin closed his eyes as if in thought. For a moment Fiona could only hear their breathing, mingled into an unsteady rhythm, and the low humming of the air conditioner. “I can’t,” he finally said. “You know I can’t.”

Fiona suddenly dreaded what he was about to say next, because she knew it would be something like “We’re about to get married and our parents are getting old so I need to earn money”. A lot of her friends said that. She didn’t want to hear it. “We should go to Madeline’s--” Madeline’s was the name of the bar down the street-- “we haven’t told the people there yet. Come on, I want to buy the fellows there a drink like a successful drunken artist.”

Fiona and Martin met at university four years ago.

She studied fine arts while he was a music major. “So, we are both the artistic kind,” she laughed the first time they actually talked. It was more of a breath than a laugh, really. Martin smiled back and gave her his number, scribbled down on a memo note with a heart drawn next to it. They were in the university library, with composing sheets spread out in front of Martin and a heavy art book in Fiona’s hands. None of them dared to be loud.

Since then, Fiona visited Martin many times. He would try out whatever new song he had written on his guitar, and she would listen and hum along. “Dance to the beat!” Fiona would giggle, as she twirled and swayed to the music. She was a clumsy dancer, but Martin never made fun of that.

But more than not it was Martin who came to the Fine Arts department and watched her paint. She was busy, throwing in every spare minute she could get into her art. There was always an unfinished masterpiece in the labyrinth of her mind. Always a new colour that she would try to recreate. Always a certain flash of light that she would try to capture. She was devoted to painting throughout her adolescence, but there were always examinations and assignments from subjects that were

more valued by the school and her parents. Upon entering university, Fiona was determined to make up for all that lost time by working even harder. Besides, the university was a place that inspired her with its beauty and knowledge, and she desperately wanted to become a better artist.

After calculating the money they had and trying to convince their families that this was a good idea, Martin and Fiona did not search for employment immediately after their graduation. Instead, they took what Martin would call a “gap year” and went off to chase their dreams. They felt so brave at the time, carrying the naivety and bravery of two well-sheltered twenty-two-year-olds, believing that they would win their little gamble and have their names marked down in history.

Fiona had always believed that they made the correct decision, no matter what their parents and friends said. The success of her exhibition was solid proof.

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They married two months later.

The wedding was grand, like everything Fiona and Martin had dreamt of but better. Fiona’s gallery exhibition gave them more funds, and her rise to fame expanded their guest list. Fiona once again stood like a queen in her ivory wedding gown.

Life moved on. They moved from their old, rented flat to a lovely, two-room apartment that Fiona bought with the money from her exhibition. Fiona’s aging father often came by to visit, while Martin’s parents, who happened to live faraway, flew here once or twice in a year. Everything was warm and nice. Every workday, she had breakfast with Martin in nearby cafes, kissed him goodbye when he went to work and strolled around to find inspiration for her new series. She found the city to be more boring than she thought. Soon she started taking short trips to the

seaside and country parks.

Fiona held her second exhibition a year and a half later. It did not go as well as she had hoped. Standing in front of her latest paintings, Fiona recognized the subtle disappointment in the eyes of her fellow artists and art critics. They had the courtesy not to say anything to her face, but she could hear their whispers during the event. They said that while her works were pleasant to the eye, they were unable to give them that awe they felt in her first exhibition. The paintings were too similar to her previous ones, with their familiar colour schemes and unoriginal theme. “She’s practically painting the same thing.” A middle-aged woman in an expensive suit snickered. “Young people nowadays, always rushing, churning out copies of that one time they make it. Do they even understand what art means?” A man told his friend quietly that Eddie’s work was more eye-capturing, and apparently his first formal exhibit, which started a few days ago, had caught the eye of a famous overseas art collector. “The young lady’s paintings may not be worth all the money,” his friend replied in a lowered voice, “The prices are unlikely to go up in the future. Eddie’s work, on the other hand...” When he saw Fiona looking in his direction, he only smiled politely and raised his glass of champagne at her, the gold rings on his fingers glinting in the gentle light.

The next time she opened the newest issue of Daphne’s art magazine, Fiona was greeted with photos of Eddie and a page full of black and white and various shades of grey. He was into abstract art and was apparently the new “rising star of art of the young generation”. When she flipped through the whole magazine only to find a tiny article about Fiona and the decline in her talents, she threw the magazine into the kitchen sink and set it on fire.

Fiona's mother died when she was seventeen.

She still remembered her, though no longer clearly. In her memories her mother's face was blurred and her voice was muffled. Only when seeing one of her photos could Fiona recall how she exactly looked like.

Her mother was a ballerina before she has a child. She didn't talk much about her dancing days. Did her mother win anything? What was the name of her troupe? Did she love it? Fiona never knew whether her mother was successful or not, though she had an ongoing suspicion that she was one of those background dancers that support the main lead. Still, Fiona hadn't cared enough to dig out answers back then. Children and teenagers were self-centered little bastards like that. Or perhaps her mother didn't want to reminisce.

What she did remember was how good her mother's pancakes were. How she sorted her clothes according to season than colour. How she would keep complaining to her daughter about the vacuum being too loud, as if she was the one who bought the electronic home. How she would talk about her students and supervisor in a ballet school for children.

All of these did not matter after her death. Few things withstood the erosion of time; mediocrity was not one of them.

Now, Fiona's mother was seldom mentioned. At first the avoidance of her name was out of grief, but life went on. Everyone was busy in their own way, struggling to live. What was the use of paying attention to someone long gone?

Like other people in her life, Fiona didn't think about her mother often, too. Sometimes Fiona felt like she betrayed the person who gave birth to and endured and sacrificed for her, until she was once again swept up by the tides of everyday life, and all thoughts of her mother would once again silently drown.

It terrified Fiona to end up like her mother.

— — —

Martin walked in, the rear of his plastic slippers pit-patting on the wooden floor. He was eating a sandwich with so many scrambled egg[s] stuffed in between that he kept trying to feed himself the egg that was leaking out and threatening to just fall off than actually eating the whole thing. The sight of him stupidly eating a sandwich irked her.

Martin swallowed a mouthful of food before talking, “Hey, do you want a sandwich? Or a fried egg? I mean, the bowls and pans are already out, so I might as well as whip up something for you.”

“No, go eat somewhere else,” she said as she turned her attention back to her sketches. The blandness of them only fueled her irritation. She had been working on them for over a week non-stop. It seemed a good idea at the time to start a series on city life. She needed something new, something different from the natural world that she used to paint, something that could impress the critics and buyers. But soon she realized that urban landscape was never her forte. She surely could paint it, but it’s... lacking. The sleek lines of modern buildings paled in comparison to cliffs and mountains, and the top of them just obscured the horizon with any trace of grace. The bustling streets were full of people coming and going, with their unintelligible chatter and their quick, goal-oriented movements. Whatever plant life that existed was just pathetic and artificial. That spark of inspiration that birthed her art had hidden itself somewhere in the wilderness, and it would not heed her calling.

“You sure? You haven’t eaten anything since last night, and I’m pretty sure you’re not sleeping enough. Some food would do you good. Get your gears working, give you inspiration or some shit like that.”

Fiona gritted her teeth, “I do not get inspiration from fried eggs.

No one does.” She felt insulted, like he humiliated her somehow. She painted jagged mountains and stormy oceans and other beautiful things, he was there when she did, and now he’s standing here talking about eggs and bread.

Martin stared at her for a second or two, then he shrugged and resumed eating. “You don’t want sandwiches, I get it. Still, I’m hitting the supermarket later, you want something? Ice cream? Chips? We should get some crackers, we’re running out. Oh, by the way, should I buy chicken or beef? I saw a recipe on how to make a beef stew, but then I heard the neighbours chitchatting about how the price is about to go up because --”

“I don’t care. Buy it if you want.” When was Martin like this? She did not marry him to hear about groceries and gossip. She had no intention of fretting over the fluctuations in the price of some meat. Chicken, beef, pork, didn’t matter. Deep fry them and they all taste good. She had better things to worry about.

Sometimes she missed the old days, when they were on the road, skipping from motel to motel. She would take photos of wherever they were and paint them on site if possible. He would run around, trying to climb on whatever he could climb, yelling and singing to the wind like a child. At night they would make love on the motel’s creaky bed or find a bar and drink until they could not tell left from right. It was an exhilarating life, but not a sustainable one. Despite Fiona’s reluctance to admit it, the only reason it was able to have lasted so long was because her family was able and willing to provide for this daughter who would bring home no coin.

Martin knew this. Martin knew this could not go on. At some point he had surrendered to life, changed his hiking boots for sneakers and polished leather shoes. He got hired by a corporation that would replace him as easily as one replaced a toothbrush, and he entered the competition for salary raises and promotions. He was angry at first, but soon his anger

died and morphed into a mild discontent, and day after day he went to work unhappily but not too unhappily. Perhaps it was because he had never been something, Fiona guessed. He was just an ordinary man, good but not great and he would never be, and he had accepted it.

But Fiona was different, or so she thought. She once flew so close to the sun she could almost feel its heat on her fingertips, and now she shall live the rest of her life in the shadow of its glory.

She failed, once again.

To be fair, failure might be too strong of a word for her third and fourth exhibitions. People still bought her work, albeit at a lower speed than anticipated, and her buyers were people that saw art as a symbol of wealth rather than as art itself. Those who adored her before stopped singing her praises, and cast their attention to someone newer, someone with more potential: Eddie had disappeared from public attention around two years ago, and there were also Theresa and Jason and many others who came and went, and then Fiona stopped bothering to remember their names. There were just too many people in the competition, and too little attention to be spared. Fiona probably should feel lucky that she didn't end up as a complete failure. She only faded into mediocrity, like so many before her, squeezing out every drop of juice left from their prime, getting enough to go by, yet not enough to restore the past or build something more.

She could continue to chase a shooting star while living off Martin's income and her savings. But Fiona had always been proud, and the urgings of family and friends made her anxious. It was her art that bought them their nice, cozy home, not Martin's sad wages from that heartless company that overworked him. Martin would never get far

enough – he had neither connections nor extraordinary talents, but Fiona still stood a chance. She needed to provide for them, to ensure a constant improvement in the quality of their lives, to make sure that their family would not collapse if anything terrible happened. She was reaching thirty now, and people said thirty-year-olds should give up daydreams and focus on the real, important things in life.

So with the introduction of a friend she made during her exhibitions, she found herself a job as an artist in a fancy studio. The pay was good, though her actual work was unsatisfying. Fulfilling other people's requirements, trying to reach a quota, going to meetings, these were all things that she had despised when she was young. She did not paint what she wanted to, but what people asked of her. And oftentimes, the spark just would not come. Painting started to feel like a chore, not a despicable one, but nevertheless a chore.

What am I doing? Fiona asked herself as she let out a sigh of relief after rushing and completing a commissioned piece in time. She should be better than this. Being an artist was her life-long dream, and what were the actual odds that one got to fulfill their dreams? She wanted this so badly when she was young. All the time spent learning and practicing, all the money paid for her art supplies and art lessons, all the arguments she had with her mother defending her passion, all the things her parents and her husband had done for her to have gone so far, was she throwing them away now? She should love what she was doing. Love should not be eroded by mundaneness. She felt as if she was a traitor to herself, to everything she once was and could no longer be.

The remnants of her fame persisted despite everything. She sometimes got invitations. To give classes and aspiring talks to young students. To join art exhibitions or social events. She attended them. She told herself that she was doing it for money, if not for art. Students, especially those with stars in their eyes and foolish dreams in their heads,

would ask her why she chose this path. They would say something like, “Miss Lee, I know that being an artist doesn’t make a lot of money. So why did you become one? Did your parents object?” And she would tell them over and over that, “Painting is my passion. Being an artist has always been my dream since I was a little girl, so I worked really hard for it. I practiced a lot and took up every opportunity available. Sure, my parents were worried about my future, but I kept going, and I now get to do what I love for a living! That’s why you should not be afraid to pursue your dreams!”

She knew she was feeding children false hope, but how was she supposed to tell a kid that their dreams would never come true? How could she tell them that being the kind of artist they wanted to be was a one-in-a-million chance and they were never going to be the lucky ones? How could she tell them that being an artist was not all about art, that it was not a profession that only cared about creating beauty, but it was like any other job? That they and their work would be judged and valued like a commodity? That the fruit of their passion may just be fancy entertainment and a large sum of money to people who would never love art? That one day, you might lose what made you an artist in the first place, and start asking yourself: How could I make the most money through my art?

Or perhaps that was it. That her dream had always been a dream. A fantastical delusion built by the naivety of a child and fed by the lies of adults, like iridescent bubbles flying mid-air, waiting for her to catch up and hold them in her palms, yet when she reached out to touch them, they burst into nothingness, because at the end of the day they were but sheets of soap wrapping air, not something magical and eternal like she had imagined.

Fiona still painted. But the joy of doing so was lost. On the increasingly rare occasion that the magic of lights and colours excited her, she knew that she could not present them on canvas as she had in her mind,

and so the brushstrokes could no longer bring her that simple pleasure as they used to.



It was a hot night. Martin had not yet returned from home due to overtime work. He did that more and more now, since the CEO decided to expand business but not their work force, though Fiona saw little expansion on Martin's paycheck. She rummaged through her art cabinet in an attempt to find a certain vintage frame, which would be a lovely present for a friend who's about to hold his first art exhibition. She dug out so many old art supplies that were forgotten and abandoned. She painted mainly at the studio now—she didn't want to bring work home.

All of her paintings from her summer years were sold away now, hanging in the homes of rich men who would not have remembered her face. Yet, under everything, Fiona found a rectangular flat something, wrapped in faded blue fabric. It was a small canvas, a painting of the sun and the sea beneath it, rippling red and gold. It was from before the gallery series, probably from when she was still in school, when she was still full of hopes and dreams. When she was still the girl who loved painting and art and beautiful things, instead of this washed-out version of her past self, defeated and embittered.

The painting was not one of her prouder works, as she deemed it too simple back then, with only surface beauty and no deep thought. She had no idea how it got here or why she kept it, yet she held it close to her eyes, and, from a distance, watched herself fall into the burning waves.

Happy Birthday



Happy Birthday

Yuen Jethro, Psychology

The pink rain pours onto the yellow ground and a blue rainbow shadows the seed underneath the soil will sprout out and shots straight at the sky then bees and butterfly buzzes and flutter and they circling the booming tree but then aiming at the sun the tree grew, then crows flew by and clutched their nasty claws and they yells and clawed and held back and drags and pulled to the tree collapse and wither and it is black and dying and the rain is grey and sour and the sky rise farther and ground red—

Beep— the cell phone rings.

“Fuck.”

I blink awake, smother my phone in the pillow and slowly, very slowly, sit up. Head heavy, eye lids heavier. I turn to the edge of my bed and place my feet on the ground, where I hold still for a solid 3 minutes. This is my daily wake up ritual. I need to sit for a full 3 minutes for the dread of my existence to be exorcised out of my body.

“I need coffee,” I mutter and finally gain enough strength to stand.

“Morning,” my mother says from the kitchen. “Morning,” I reply. The toilet door opens, and my dad steps out saying, “Your turn.”

“Thanks dad,” I reply.

The weather is humid, and my hair feels oily and stuck to my scalp, gross. I stared into the mirror, checking my eye bags, gross. I sigh. I’m James. I am 20, soon to be 21, but late nights and beer do wonders for your body. It bothers me that I am turning 21. Normally, birthday is something you look forward to. Not to me, not this year. Birthday stopped

Happy Birthday

being exciting since 18.

21.

At 21, I will be moving on from the third year in university, soon comes my final year. After my final year, I will get a job. I will stay in that job. Finally, I will die. I believe that I can enjoy retirement for at least five years before dying though, when I am optimistic.

Ping. I looked at my phone, it's Jasmine, my girlfriend.

"Morning!" she wrote.

"Hey"

"Your up early today"

"I got lessons"

"R u OK?"

"ofc"

"Haha, I got early shifts at work today."

"Good luck"

"Thanks, haha. Remember tonight!"

I'm sorry if I sounded mean in those texts. I didn't mean to be mean. I'm just...in pain, for existing. I'm exaggerating but I am experiencing an existential crisis, or a mid-life crisis, God knows if I live beyond 40. It sucks that I have to figure everything out for the rest of my life now, it sucks for everyone. Maybe it sucks less for other people who have their shits together, but not for me, because it fucking sucks.

Jasmine is nice, we have been together for around a year now and she was the greatest thing that has ever happened to me. We met at school during a music event, she was a drummer. She is kind, considerate, sensitive, funny, smart, just everything you look for in a great person.

Happy Birthday

Despite that, I'm pushing her away from me, and it's a shitty thing to do but I just keep on doing it. I don't want to sound ungrateful, but it exhausts me to explain to her what I'm going through. Yes, communication is key but communicating is hard. When I open up about my problems, I just feel like I'm a baby who won't stop complaining. She never complains. I feel like she is just so much better than I will ever be. I don't want her to see me like this, a boy down in the slump, struggling to make something out of himself, so I'll keep all these insecurities and problems close to my chest. Every single time she pushes forward, I pull back, and she respects my boundaries, she's just that perfect. I would hate to burden her with me.

I finish washing my mug and return to my room. I turn on my computer, log onto my online class and mute the call. I then proceed to place the digital piano that has been lying on the floor on my desk and plug it in.

I stare at the keyboards. Seconds tick by as if I froze. The maze of dominos without a key. I turn to my computer and open a file on desktop. I press play and the melody bounces off the screen. I close my eyes and examine each note carefully. Written in simple time, classic Allegro, tempo of 130 beat per second, C major. The bars play after one another, and but it was over. I had only written 4 bars. I sat for what feels like an hour, eye-wide staring at the piano but listened to my creation for what felt like a blink of an eye. I slammed my fist on the piano which created a cluster of sound. I didn't know what I was expecting, by smashing the keys I had prayed that perhaps the sound was the final 90 % of my song. My finger taps helplessly on one of the keys, the note monotonously plays from the speaker of the piano.

Slowly, the note plays and plays.

Happy Birthday

It sounds like a metronome.

The note shortens.

The note repeats.

Dun, Dun, Dun.

A countdown.

It speeds up.

Dun, Dun.

Faster.

Dun!

Dun!

Silence.

Nothing. Nothing came to me. The note was still a note, the melody untouched. What went wrong? How? How do you write a song? How is it that musicians always have those BS saying that the song just came to them? A stroke a genius. Maybe I'm just not talented. Where is the muse when you need her? I have been sitting in this room for almost an hour now. All I had done was setting up the table and staring into nothingness. Anyone who heard those notes that I played must be thinking that I was pathetic. The piano was loud, everyone in the neighborhood must have thought that I was pathetic. No, I was the only one who heard the song. Not even my parents in the living room heard what I was playing. Guess why? The walls had absorbed all the noise because I had bought expansive sponges that do just that and turned my room into a cave of a sound

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booth. I spent my whole months' worth of hamburgers assembling salary on them. I need a silent environment for when I record my songs. Or song, if I somehow finish this song at hand, one day. I play the melody again, but it sounds the same, as it has been for the past five months. I wanted to finish this song before Christmas, it was a festive song. Now, the song sits helplessly in the computer, wondering what genre it will fall into, having passed its expiry day, just like me. I let out a sigh of frustration and unplug the piano.

I press on the silent piano. The plastic key bounces back, making a soft "thud". The ticking of the clock in the background grows loud, a Crescendo. The tempo of the thud, in Largo, 50 bpm. I take a deep breath, composing myself, and put the keyboard aside.

I pull my computer closer and head to YouTube. No notifications. I clicked onto my channel and looked at the views, a video from 2 months ago got 2 new views, that's good. Here are my proudest achievements, a piano cover of a pop song that got more than 500 views, a piano tuning video that got 20 likes, a remix of an old song that has 6 comments. Nothing to be proud of. I scroll up and down, waiting for something to happen. I need an original song, or this would never take off. I need it. I then click onto others' channels, singing, animation, vlogs. The trending video now is an eating vlog by a 13-year-old and his mom. Maybe I should do one of those. Look at that ugly child. Ketchup all over his face. Stupid. Ugly. Child. Still better than when I was 13. Or now.

I wasn't just browsing, I know what I am looking for, Sally's channel. Sally is a friend of Jasmine and me, another musician at school. She is one year older than us but miles ahead in life. She offered Jasmine the waitress job, at the café of her aunt. Sally pretty much reached her peak in life and is still climbing. She has this amazing music career, a café that she runs, a loving boyfriend, everything. She also has this dumb jock brother Steven so maybe life's fair. Who am I kidding? Everyone likes Steven. I like

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Steven. Even though I met him twice only. He's just that charming. The perfect siblings. It's like everyone my age is at the top of Everest, and here I am struggling at the bottom. I'm the worlds' smallest violin and they are the whole goddamn orchestra.

I look at the numbers on the web. 4k subscribers. 1.1M views. 892 likes. 106 comments. It's overwhelming. I scroll downwards. The video that launched her into stardom, an original song that she wrote, played and sung. I play it again as I toy with the keyboard. The video was posted two years ago. She made it big when she was 20. I stare at my screen, thinking about what went wrong.

I understand that I don't have to make an original song, but none of my other videos went viral. That's how she did it, so that's how I will do it too. Less than 24 hours, 21. I know it was silly, but I still want to do it. It has to be before 21, because after that, nothing will ever change.

I stood up from my chair, checked the time and flung onto my bed. It was 1 p.m., the lesson is still ongoing for another 15 minutes. The lecturer silently talks on and on. I am uninspired, unsuccessful, invisible to the world. "Why even bother," I mutter quietly. I considered other ways out, focus on my schoolwork and go along the career path. The only problem would be that I hate engineering. People used to say that there is plenty of time, figure it out on the way. No, all lies. I know it all too well. It was this notion that ended me in this predicament. I didn't know what subjects to choose in junior years, so I picked what my friends picked. Teachers told me that I was smart, I would do fine in any subjects. My parents had good grades and passed university with flying colors so they told me that they could help. I was anxious when picking but everyone told me that I would be fine, so I thought to myself, maybe it won't be too bad. I ended up in chemistry, physics, and biology. I didn't dislike them per se, but it would be inaccurate to describe that I enjoyed the lessons. So, my grade slipped and when it came to choosing a major in university, there

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was not much of a choice. I endured, however, as I found solstice in music, something I had always enjoyed as a hobby. I always loved playing piano, every time I played, I would leave the world behind. My parents used to like it when I played piano, I was outstanding among my peers, that was when I was in primary school. Now, my parents would pray for me to sell the piano, ever since I entered university. Who gives a shit about art? I do.

I sit back up. I pick up the 2kg dumbbell laying at my feet. I bought this when I was 15. Everyone was trying to get huge arms and abs, so I thought maybe I'll try too. I do a few curls before putting it down again. Maybe one day I'll be ripped, tons of muscle and look like Steven. Everyone would be too distracted with how good I look to care about how bad my songs sound. Max out your potential, they would say. These are your best years, they would say. Your metabolism will slow down, you will get even more out of shape, get off your lazy ass and put in some work. I'm sorry for wasting my youth, for wasting the golden years of my body. Being 20 is the best time for everything, and I'm busy sucking at every single one of them.

I stand up and my fingers linger on the keyboard. I plug it in again and placed my hands on a C minor scale. Maybe I'll try something different, I need inspiration. I take a deep breathe. The fingertips are pressing on the keys gently, my elbows sink, back straightened. I tap my right index finger gently on the key, so light that it would not be pressed down. I count the tempo, one-two-three, one-two-three—I press down the first note, then the second one, and then a string of notes. It sounded nice. I let my fingers fly and my brain starts to spin.

Could this work? Could I use this segment in the song? No, this would be impossible to fill in lyrics. Maybe I could use this as an interlude. No, Pop songs don't have piano interlude. Why write a pop song though?

Happy Birthday

Because they are popular, pop songs, right there in the name, pop. Do I want to be popular? Yes, if you are not popular, you are going to starve. Is it better to be a popular trash or a starving artist? Do I really have what it takes to be either? That is called imposter-syndrome, you know that right? Speaking of starving, did I skip lunch? Am I an artist or what? Does artist have to go against the mainstream? So why be successful if success equals popularity. Are pop songs nothing but meaningless crowd-pleasers? Look at what your friends are listening to. Just be yourself, your fans will find you. How do I “be myself” when I have no idea who I am? I want to do better. I am not good enough. I’ll never be good enough. Stop it. Listen to what you are playing, you like this, don’t you? Your pinky slipped and pressed an extra note. You are off tempo by half a note. The key doesn’t sound right. This is an electronic keyboard, it doesn’t need to be tuned, that means it can’t be off-key. The problem isn’t the piano, it is you. The problem has always been you. You feel trapped in your life? You will be if you stay like this. How can I be better? Is this about self-doubt? It should not be about self-doubt. I am good, aren’t I? If I am good, maybe I would already been where Sally is. Why does everyone have all the answers but me?

Stop.

I snap back to reality and stop. My finger still pressing on the last note, a haunting E flat lingers in the air.

The air is warm, still, suffocating. The sun has shifted, it is now 3 o’clock. I open the window to let in some fresh air. I stare out at the street, the sun glazes the roof of the other houses, casting a harsh silhouette on their driveway. A few children’s bikes here and there, next to all sorts of family vans. Will I ever be able to afford a car? Or a house? Where will Jasmine and I live in the future? Gosh Jasmine. I’m picking her up after

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work, at 8:30. I hope that she can't tell I just had a break down. There's still 5 hours left, maybe I could freshen up, wear something nice and leave all of these music stuff behind for a bit.

I lay back down on the bed, trying to ease my brain to relax. Pick up Jasmine at the café. That means I'll see Sally and Steven. The paragon of inner and outer beauty. If I am judged for my seven deadly sins, envy alone would condemn me deep into hell.

I close my eyes and let out a sigh. I don't care for internet fame. I don't. I like music, I enjoy playing music. There's nothing that brings me more joy than the sensation of my fingertips touching the keyboard, my brain and the speaker just connect into a singular entity, and music would be all I am. I sing because I feel every emotion the melody, and I want to share the pain, the joy, everything that music fills me with. I have a good ear and I considered myself talented but now it just feels like a joke. Everyone is better than me in every single way. This sense of inferiority just crept up on me, I don't remember when it started. Everyone is an example of succeeding in something, and all these people are telling you how to be successful, and I can't figure out how or keep up with any of their ways. Sure, I want to be a musician and play piano all the time, but I need to eat, I need to pay rent, eventually that is. My parents keep telling me that music is a hobby, not a job, and I can't prove them wrong. It's hard to make it out alive with a keyboard, getting views, being internet famous is the ticket out. That ticket is hard to get. Even when getting noticed online is the easiest way for an artist to earn a living, it is still a one in a million gamble. I feel like I suck at music, the thing that I love, but it is clear as day that I suck at "youtube-ing", the thing that I need. How did Justin Bieber get picked up by big record labels at 13 and rise to be the biggest star? His best song was "Baby" with the stupidest lyrics I have ever heard in my life. 57 times, that's how many times he repeated the word "baby" in the song. What the fuck. These TikTok stars, dancing to songs that they didn't even create

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and got billions of people watching them. Audiences are so stupid. I wish they would love me. I want to prove my parents wrong. I want to prove to Jasmine that we could have a good future. I want to prove to myself I am not fucking useless. I don't have to write a song, but writing a song is the best I can think of at the moment. Sally did it, maybe it's one in a million but it's better than nothing. I have never written any songs before, but I did improvise some piano and I liked those pieces. The only thing is that those aren't "Songs". They're not catchy or generic and will never make me an internet sensation. I can write a song, just not the song I need. I will never have enough views and likes. I am doomed to fail on the path of music. I am turning 21. It's too late to find something new. Maybe I'm outliving my glory days, real artists become famous when they die.

I think back to the five bars that I composed. Why did I decide to make them festive? Are festive songs even popular anymore? I have no idea. It sucks that I have figured out this stuff alone, where is the lecture and tutorial class for getting your life together? But no, even if there is a class like that, I will never attend it. They'll judge the shit out of me for being this useless. Because everyone has their life figured out but me. Everyone but me...

Ping! What's that? Ping!

I open my eyes.

Ping! The phone announces its presence again.

I check on the phone, Oh no. It's 8:45. I dozed off!

It's Jasmine. Three messages.

"Are you almost here?"

"Did you get stuck in traffic?"

"Are you OK?"

Happy Birthday

“Fuck,” I mutter and run out the door.

It’s a 25-minute walk and I sprint as fast as I can. I should have been to the gym. I run and I run, sweating and panting, I finally arrive at the café, my head spinning. I open the door and rush in, the light flashes into my eyes--

“Happy Birthday dude!” Steven yells. Sally and Jasmine turn back to the door and see me standing in awe. Jasmine runs towards me and gives me a hug. “Happy birthday,” she says smiling. Sally flashes a smile and waves at me.

I am still in shock. I want to thank them, but I cannot articulate myself yet. Pink ribbons hang from the ceiling, reflecting the golden lights from the lamps. The floor is glistening as if breathing. A wide, blue banner hangs on the wall, reading “Happy Birthday James!”, a bouquet of flowers on one of the tables.

Jasmine lets go and takes me by the hand. She drags me towards the piano at the corner and sits me down. The piano Sally would play to entertain the customers. “Play the birthday song!” she says cheerfully. Steven leaves for the kitchen for what I assume a cake and Sally walks to the side of the piano.

The light is overbearing, Sally’s gaze is burning, the floor feels like molten vomit, the ribbons seem to cover my eyes. The piano is gigantic, unlike what I have in my room. I sit down on this stool before, but my heart is racing. I place my hands on the key and it is ice cold, searing into my fingerprints. I feel my shoulder tense up; legs clutch by the stool. I just keep sweating. The room is spinning rapidly.

Jasmine waits for me to let out a word or play the first note. I freeze for not long, but the waiting and empty café makes the air feel extra

Happy Birthday

heavy. She nudges me a bit on the shoulder, smiling a little wider, wanting to catch a glimpse into my eyes. Why am I so silent? There are a billion things I want to say but not a single alphabet slips out of my lips.

Steven returns with the cake in his hand. A small tiramisu, my favourite, the size perfect for us four. Jasmine planned everything, a perfect birthday for me. This thought distraught me. The great expectation, to what end does it lead? The overwhelming anxiety of pressing down the first note hinges on my thoughts, my brain running 300 bpm but my hands playing 4:33 by John Cage, an unbreakable spell of love and curse of my own fear. No one here will judge me but me, yet I hesitate. The centerpiece of this extravaganza, me, in the spotlight, like an antelope in the headlight.

It's a Happy Birthday song, how hard can it be? I look up to Jasmine, letting out an uncomfortable grin as beads ooze out of my pores and hang on my forehead. She smiles back, a warm, calming smile. I never liked birthday parties. Today was all about hating the idea of growing old. However, I can't deny when I opened the door, when I saw everything, she had done, I felt giddy, I felt like a kid. Just play the song James. It's just a song. It's just Birthday. Happy Birthday.

I feel a cramp in my index finger. Perhaps it is not a cramp but a muscle in my index finger pulled softly, and the finger flinched. It itches to press on the note, a tsunami behind the water gates. I breathe out to clear my head. I recall the things I know.

G major.
My finger flitches.

I press on the first note.
Then the next.

Happy Birthday

A simple song. One of the first that I've learnt.

G, A, G, C, B, G, G, A, G, D, C—Happy Birthday.

In the tug of war between my warped-ego-induced fear of the future and muscle memory secretly laced from the pinky to my knuckles, my years of practice persevered and won the battle on the chess board. As the melody flows, I become one with the piano once more.

No reconciliation with my girlfriend for being the asshole of a boyfriend that I have been. No soothing words of encouragement from Sally to assure me that I am on the right path. Definitely nothing from Steven, not that I counted on him to say a word to me. No internet fame, no modern masterpiece, nothing. Just ten fingers, one piano. Somehow, this feels enough. Between the notes of A and G, there is a hidden giggle. Along the scales of C to B, joy is found. If the song is played one note at a time, I guess maybe I should take life, one day at a time.

The song comes to an end. They clap.

Jasmine leans towards and gives me a kiss on the cheek.

Today was a shit show. Today was an emo, self-centric pity party of one. But tonight, this one perfect night that does not surmount anything, made me feel alright.

As we talk and eat, the cars flying past outside the café grow quieter and quieter. The hands on the clock crawl to a unison and pose like an arrow on the compass. Without me knowing or noticing, the prime of my life passed. The golden window, the limitless potential, the best days, all pass by without a funeral. We just keep talking, about carbs, about getting drivers' license, about how Starbucks overcharges every cup of coffee

Happy Birthday

and it's unfair but maybe they should copy it. We just talk about all the dumb stuff we can come up with, the insignificance, the inconveniences, everything, as I turn 21.

So maybe, it's not the end of the world.

Or just not yet, who am I kidding, let's not be too optimistic here. But that's a problem for another day.

The Encounter



The Encounter

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When my father died last year, at the age of 83, the pallbearers had to sweat profusely. For it was a hot summer day, and the men carried a heavy oak coffin on their shoulders, studded with silver. Moreover, they all were well in their seventies. Their leader was a small, fragile man with slender fingers and long ears, named Frederick L. Wright, though from his youth, everyone had called him Fred.

I.

Fred was born into a family of craftsmen, porcelain makers, to be precise. They lived in a small town in the Potteries, where porcelain making has had a long tradition up to now. For generations, they had been working in Payne's factory, one of the finest addresses for bone China. They were neither poor nor wealthy, they thought, meaning, there was always enough to eat, but never enough money. "Plenty for survival, big leaps are not included," as Fred's mother stated, "just about, and nothing more."

Fred was the youngest boy of Robert and Sharon Wright; thereto, there were two elders. He was a frail, tender boy, as thin and fragile as the kinds of tea sets that came into fashion in those years. What made him even more different, was his fear of noise. When other children ran up and down the street screaming their voices out, when their childish anger and disappointment broke out in loud stomping and endless howling,

The Encounter

and when their parents countered with even louder screams, slapping flat hands in their faces and belts on their butts, Fred only covered his ears and remained as silent as a stone. His father, in his proletarian pride being the biggest noise machine of all, a perpetually roaring lion of the Potteries, considered Fred a weakling and a cripple.

“I am different”, Fred thought, “I am different. And I belong somewhere else.”

It was the second year of elementary school, when by accident Mr Finch, the only music teacher in town, found out that the origin of Fred’s phonophobia wasn’t a defect, but a strange ability. “You’ve got talent!” Mr Finch elatedly exclaimed, before he turned to his parents, who stared stupidly with their mouths half open. “He’s got the perfect pitch, the absolute ear!” The Wrights still gawked. “He recognizes every sound. He...” Mr Finch searched for a simile, “he can hit any note, as if he were a dart player who, blindfolded and with his back to the target, can hit the bullseye a hundred times out of a hundred.” Unfortunately, Mr Finch continued, God had arranged the earth so that it would always be in balance, in the best of all kinds. Poor people would be happy and rich people would suffer. And poor people with a special talent, like Fred, would suffer the most. For they would not only master a destitute art, like himself – “Thank you for the Shilling, Sir!” – but also be tormented. By every discord. For all of their life.

Mrs Wright felt sorry for Fred. Being a weakling is bad enough, but being a gifted weakling, whose gift is a pain: Oh dear! Against all odds and with the help of Mr Finch, she managed to persuade her grumpy, grouchy, perpetually bad-tempered husband, a man constantly seething and equipped with a short fuse, to bestow their son regular piano lessons. “Although it will never pay our rent.”

Fred loved the lessons, even if the way from ear to fingers was tedious. He loved them because of the melodious sounds that rose from the

instrument when he hit the right keys, but above all, he loved them because they uplifted, liberated, and protected him. From his cramped confines, where he and his brothers shared one room, and where living room and kitchen were one, no place to hide, and the streets were crowded with people. From Bill, the square built son of a butcher, who was always out for scuffles and who despised everyone whose skills went beyond splitting pork halves and slamming doors. And, moreover, from all the discords of his life, from off-key, false, crooked tones, dissonances, un-sounds, mis-music, you name it. Every noise of a saw or a grinder, every soup bowl clatter, every chalk scraping over the blackboard, every neighbour's dog barking, every breathing of the drunken Mr Wright, every backfiring of cars or cawing of crows – the enumeration could be endless – drove him sheer mad. The only room where he could escape the noise, was the small parish hall, where Mr Gardener, the priest, pushed his piano twice a week so that Mr Finch could teach his two or three students there; there were never more.

“I am different”, Fred thought, “I am different, and I deserve better.”

II.

The piano, the parish hall, the lessons, they all carried a vague hope of a different world for Fred, of a promised land that lies beyond the Potteries. It was the strong, blurred sigh of the disadvantaged which swept him away, an undirected impetus towards some kind of exit, to an El Dorado of whatever kind, that eases all pain and all scorn, that offers a ladder to climb out of the soup tureen in which he sat like a fly. If it took thousands of lessons to crawl out, fine, if there were easier ways, even better. And if a fairy godmother showed him the way, it would be best. For God's sake, even a dangerous sorceress would do, as long as she got him away.

The Encounter

The promise flourished. Until he turned sixteen.

“It’s time for you to start an apprentice at Payne’s”, Mr Wright insisted.

“Yes, father.”

Fred didn’t answer him back, and it was not because he knew how stubborn and choleric Mr Wright was, a brutal man who had fought in the last war. Fred didn’t care when he was beaten up by Mr Wright, as he was no child anymore. And exactly this fact, that he was no child anymore, brought some other insights with it. For example, rule number one: No job, no money, no nothing. Which meant: Bite the bullet and follow the marching drums! Fred also understood where art for art’s sake will carry you: to nowhere and poverty. “Yes”, he admitted, “if I had been destined to make a career in music, I would since long sit in a conservatory.” And not in the ragged parish hall, practicing on an old piano. The truth was: No giant ever nursed him, and no circumnavigator ever took him under canvas. Instead, Fred had only dreamt of being a giant and sailing off. But these were children’s dreams, and Fred knew that only too well. Yearning to go into the world doesn’t mean being able to go into the world. The music, the piano, his perfect pitch, none of them were exits, he thought. Just scenery on the wall.

That doesn’t claim Fred wasn’t still lurking for a way out, for the big promise beyond his neighbourhood. Not at all. Only he no longer believed it could be reached by a little piano jingling. But who knows, maybe the factory wouldn’t be such a bad opportunity after all, this massive white-plastered brick building with its endless walls, high towers, glass shed roofs and its eternal teeming of man, machine and material – an industrial cathedral of imperial grandeur. Maybe it would bring him luck, who knows. Over there, Fred thought, on the other side of the Atlantic, it was quite common that an apprentice turns into a millionaire. Because he makes a great invention, or because the daughter of some oil baron

marries him, or the factory's heir. The American Dream, as they say, had replaced the British Empire, the former bursting with power, the latter being in decay. Which means, also dreams have to realign. What once were crusaders and then pirates and adventurers and explorers and conquerors, were now those who raked in money: emblems of juvenile longing. So, Fred accepted a little stab in the heart, said goodbye to the parish hall, signed on with new dreams, and went to work.

The only thing he was afraid of, really afraid of, was the factory's noise. One usually has a wrong idea when thinking of a porcelain factory. One imagines clinically clean and very quiet rooms in which the material is shaped by human hands and painted by delicate ladies' fingers. Clean and quiet. But that's not true at all. Imagine the hissing as the kaolin, feldspar and silica sand whiz through the hopper into the mixing drum, where they are poured with water; the pounding of the propeller as it neatly stirs the slurry in the drum; the yowling of the vibrating screen to filter out impurities; the crunching of transport wheels; the turbine-like suction of dust extractors; the humming of the pressing plant to squeeze the water out of the mass again; the beating of the dried, kneadable plates of raw material, the so-called filter cakes, when they hit the warehouse floor; the rubbing of the machine that kneads the filter cakes and forms them into handy sausages, so-called planes; the rattling of conveyor belts that send the planes into processing; the yelping and whining of the rotary piston as it enters the impression moulds in which the slices of the planes have been placed; the humming of the injection machine to pour the watered planes into plaster moulds; the whistling of compressed air blown to remove the moulds; the sanding and grinding in the fettling shop to scrape off protruding casting seams; the pounding and roaring of the kilns during firing; the smacking and slurping when the parts are put into the glaze bath; the howling of the sanding machine – almost as bad as at the dentist's; and finally the whistling of the paint guns when applying the colour. Only the

manual moulding of rare complex pieces and the decor department are as romantics imagine porcelain making to be: Quiet and concentrated, as in a medieval monastery where finicky monks copy illustrated Bibles. What a mess, Fred thought. He lacked talent for shaping, and porcelain decoration wasn't for him either, with only women working there, and as he was a failure at drawing anyway.

But Fred was lucky. "It would be a laugh if we didn't use your talent!" Mr. Fowley grinned. "I've been told you have good hearing. With that skill, you'll be able to help us check the pre-production series. You will, just by knocking on it, hear the slightest irregularities in the potteries made, not just simple cracks and fissures, but invisible damages within the material." Mr. Fowley was the master of quality and prototypes. He was also a friend of Mr. Finch, the music teacher, who had asked him to look after Fred a bit. Fred didn't find out about that until much later. He also needed some time to realize the knocking-and-listening-thing was just a hoax, a typical joke made with first year apprentices. But at that point, it didn't matter anymore. And somehow, it was a nice idea, too. Either way, his perfect pitch had shown a benefit after all: No shopfloor, no noises! And besides, maybe quality control and prototypes would pave his way to later wealth and fame. Fred laughed at the thought, but what if?

Life as an apprentice wasn't as comfortable as today, but not as dull as we might consider. In these years, one-and-a-half decades after the War, porcelain making was a prestigious industry. Economic recovery was in full swing, capacities had to be increased, and there was a constant need for talented people. In short, the money came rolling in, and it came nowhere faster in that at Payne's. Fred liked the idea of working in a money-machine; he quickly made contacts, and he had gifted fingers which were skilled very fast. "Always pay attention and work hard", was Mr Fowley's maxim, and Fred had vowed to stick to it. Who knows, he thought, maybe the American players would soon come knocking on his

door, with bundles of dollars in its hand.

Over time, even Fred's phonophobia diminished. Maybe his ears had become somewhat less sensitive, he guessed, or maybe he had learned to deal with it. Or it was just a question of will. Though he would probably never be able to deal with squealing and shrieking like other people, at least he could live with it without having to crawl under the covers. "The different one is growing up," Fred thought.

One day, the visit of Mrs Payne was announced. Mrs Payne was the widow of Mr Payne, who had owned and led the factory for the last twenty years and who suddenly died of a stroke nine months ago. After her husband's death, Mrs Payne hired a factory manager, but still controlled the company through heading the board. She was in her early forties and said to be an elegant appearance. Her house was located above the town on a wooded hill, in the most prosperous neighbourhood of all Staffordshire. While the white-collar ranks never spoke of her, the workers did even more, and they did so in a mixture of respect, greed, and disgust. She must have been a girl on fire when she was young, they said, but now she would barely leave her home other than for work and for churchgoing. "Probably counting her money all the time", the foreman laughed. All this gossip made Fred imagine her as a nearly supernatural figure of power, beauty and suffering, full of wealth and authority, secluded in quiet, lonely heights above the valley, almost like a character from a fairy tale, or like a movie star from the silent film era, or like a hermit who only descends to the lowlands to issue divine orders and to make sure of the advantages of quiet solitude. In short, a phenomenon shrouded in legends.

III.

Mrs Payne wasn't just elegant. Her wasp-waisted, tightly fitting dress, her perfectly coiffed hair, her pearls and gloves – gloves, on a sunny day in May! – confirmed Fred's notion of an almost otherworldly

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appearance. He secretly watched Mrs Payne's body swaying along the product samples, which they had developed for the next season and which were now strung on a large table; he listened to the sizzling of her silk, but also was not unaware of the small lines and wrinkles around her eyes and mouth, which were unflatteringly emphasized by the cold light of the lab.

"Look at this soup tureen!", an excited Mr Fowley fought for Mrs Payne's attention, "Isn't it marvellous?" Mrs Payne nodded, seriously and introvertedly, but didn't say a word. "And this fine tea cup, the porcelain so subtle, the light almost shines through it."

Mrs Payne stood still and firm and stiff like a soldier, an uptight general, like a guardian of the world, and indeed it was a whole world which she ruled, and maybe, Fred thought, this is how rulers must be, still and firm and stiff, attractive by being repellent, removed even when near to us, half human and half filled with magical power. But also, still and firm and stiff as if she were wearing a corset, a chain mail, a harness, lashed so tightly as if she would otherwise burst, as if her innermost being would flow out into the world and pour over it, transform it, or destroy it. Fred was vastly confused.

"We also have other things in the program." Mr. Fowley continued like a store salesman in the women's department who had to quickly palm something off on the lady to secure his monthly premium. Fred got the impression Mrs Payne wasn't listening at all.

It wasn't primarily her appearances that captured Fred. But for what her appearances stood. Like a cape for a king or a stole for a star. Above all, it stood for the fact that she was untouchable. Of the sort that no one could harm her. Of the sort that would never crawl in a soup tureen, in one of the kind Mr. Fowler just held under her nose. She was the one who lived outside the soup and pushed others into it at will. Or better yet, who ordered the others to develop a soup tureen and then push themselves into it. Or who commanded the world to buy or throw away

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soup tureens, to fill or to empty them, or to drive the flies out. Fred got all fuzzy, while hotcold shivers passing through him.

She doesn't have to listen, Fred thought. She doesn't have to tolerate any false sounds, no ugly screaming and no screeching. She can push aside everything discordant. She can close the doors behind her and be alone. She can go wherever she wants. She is free. A fairy godmother or a dangerous sorceress, she is free. And a man who is under her thumb, who is being trampled upon by her, is better off and stands above all the mediocre no-goods squeezing through the alleys of our town. An ailing joy, but a joy.

Now, Mr Fowley pointed to Fred. "Mr Wright made it; he is one of our most talented trainees."

Mrs Payne looked at Fred, in full dead silence, with her eyes widened and shining. He tried to return her look, however in vain. How embarrassed he was! At least, he could see her smile, a wide, natural, contagious smile that revealed her row of teeth. Fred smiled back, like an animal under the spell of its instinct. Then Mrs Payne had to go.

Fred felt all bewitched. And he knew: This is it. My exit. My entry.

IV.

"Oh, look at this chap! He's blushing. Has our wee little one fallen in love?" Cox, Ainsworth, and Turner could no longer contain themselves from bursting into laughter. Mr Fowley's admonition didn't help. Soon their stomachs were aching. "In love he is, in love he is!" they chased after him. Actually, these three were his, well, friends: Same age, similar background, and they all had a peculiar interest in porcelain, pubs, and pretty representatives of the opposite sex. Their friendship – shall we say: comradery? – was sometimes a bit rough, and this roughness found expression in the fact that they always addressed each other by their family names.

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“I’ll show you,” Fred thought. “Soon, I won’t need you anymore.”

Fred was serious. He wouldn’t need them anymore. Because from today on, he had Mrs Payne, or rather the idea of Mrs Payne, or at least the idea of what Mrs Payne might stand for, but who knows, her real being, which was composed of much more than lips and arms and this and that, but alike of her house and her car and her account and her brain and her experience and her force and her reach into the world, might follow. Not that Fred was deluding himself. “I’m not naïve. Even if she offered me the world, she wouldn’t set me free, not entirely, at least.” Quid pro quo and compulsory service, he thought, not a fencing hero in tight trousers and fancy costumes. But well, so what? Better a slave at court than a ruler of philistine nothing. Compared to his home, a golden cage was an empire. And who knows, sometimes the slaves take over. The American dream, spilling over into England?

Fred had made up his mind, or what he thought it was. Secretly, he started studying Mrs Payne’s life. Careful to conceal his intentions, he asked people out: where exactly she lived, which parish she belongs to, when she will be in the factory. And then he organised his life accordingly. He made sure to see her, as if by chance, in the corridors outside the large conference room, or at the Sunday mass. Whenever she spotted him, she smiled her gracious smile, and Fred smiled back, never daring to say a word. He even made his way up to her house, a mansion up the hill, representative but not ostentatious, and surrounded by a spacious garden. It was built the way factory owners used to have them built in the late 19th century. Hiding behind a tree, Fred hoped to... well, what actually did you hope for, Fred? “Er, well...,” he whispered. “But it’s nothing cheap, or dirty,” he hastened to add, soothing his guilty conscience. “It is what I deserve.” He would never ring the bell, climb over the fence, or look through the windows. He just enjoyed the warm current that flowed through his body when he watched the outside of an unknown, highly

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desirable inside. Then he walked on, to the edge of the forest, where the path divided. One fork led into the forest, down and up the hills, and the other one, the right one, back to town, where he lived.

This went on for weeks. It did Fred good. It gave him something to hold on to. And it further calmed down his ears. He no longer paid attention to the discords, the shrill sounds and the beeps. He ignored the voices rolling over, the out-of-tune human pianos, the people in pubs and stadiums who believe that if they can't sing, they should at least sing loudly. He just didn't listen anymore, not even to music, only to the voices in his head. He had locked his auricles and ossicles, hammer, anvil and stirrup, eardrum, membrane and middle ear, and all his former paranoia in a closet of childhood dreams. And when a journeyman bruised his hand in a factory machine, and the bones stuck out and the blood flowed and the poor guy screamed like a spit, Fred didn't even cover his hears, but kept humming to himself as if nothing had happened.

Unfortunately, Fred wasn't only an observer, but one who was observed. Cox had not failed to notice Fred was interrogating the secretaries, the ones who always know best. Ainsworth smell a rat when Fred regularly went to church on Sunday instead of the pub, whilst before, he had never spent time listening to the sermon, giving nothing to faith or religion. And Turner, finally, bundled the information, sharpened the message, and told Mr Wright.

You cannot imagine how proper the pounding was, that Fred received. Mr Wright beat his frail, tender son, thin and fragile as the kinds of tea sets that came into fashion in those years, like a punching bag, trampling on him, shouting, screaming until drool dripped from the corners of his mouth, right onto Fred's face.

"Who do you think you are, spying on your boss? That could cost you your job, bastard! Your wonderful, privileged job! What the hell is going on with you? If you look for a girl, look among your peers,

understand? Should I hear again you're chasing Mrs Payne, I'll break your neck!"

Mr Wright would still be beating his son if his wife hadn't intervened. "Stop it, stop it now! Or you'll have to beat me to death, too." Finally, Mr Wright let go of Fred, not without throwing an insult after him.

V.

"Friends!" Fred thought, full of contempt and anger, while cooling his black eye, "Friends and fathers!" Of course, Fred knew the traitors. The whipping master had told him. And he also knew why Cox, Ainsworth, and Turner had done this: They were jealous! Fred had neglected his old chaps, had put their comradeship behind his interest in Mrs Payne. In short, he had spent more time on her fence than with his fellows. It wasn't just a thin line he had drawn, but a trench he had dug, as deep as the ocean, an unbridgeable rift. "Friends!" he sighed, "friends and fathers!" He was through with both. If their intention had been to lead him back to the path of a miserable little man's virtue, then they had achieved the opposite. Fred confirmed the separation they had accused him of. And Mrs Payne would be his getaway car. Though he had never spoken to her yet nor had he learned anything of relevance about the way she and her class lived up in the hills above the town, in secluded country houses surrounded by spacious gardens, Fred was more certain than ever that he deserved a life like she had: Free of small-minded vermin, above the masses, and you don't have to ask anybody for permission.

But what should he do? And how should he do? Just longing for the secret unknown wouldn't make the difference. And he didn't have any means, neither monetary nor other. And so, Fred continued to go to St Peter's Square every Friday and Saturday night, like all the youth of his town did in summer, and he went there just of old habit, alone on his own

or with casual acquaintances, as he had cut the tape to Cox, Ainsworth, and Turner – all but the business ones, the ones of day-to-day at Payne’s, where he still worked side by side with them, pretending as if nothing had happened.

Have a look at St Peter’s Square, watch the young ones stand or walk in pairs of smaller groups, all them boys and girls, in this balmy late summer night, still bright, the air full of laughter, and bottles jumping all around!

Then, all of a sudden, as if a natural phenomenon had smashed into their little world, the full-throated noise gave way to a whisper, and the crowd stepped aside. There she came, wasp-waisted, in a tightly fitting dress, with perfectly coiffed hair, pearls and gloves – gloves, in a balmy night end of August! And she paved her way straight towards him, towards Fred.

“I saw you from inside the Moat House”, she said, pointing back to the restaurant on the west side of St Peter’s Square. “You would never have had the guts to address me, would you? So, I have to bite the bullet, right?” She laughed. Her laughter was husky, and somehow lost between pride and a little girl’s anxiousness, which Fred didn’t notice, as he was unable to notice anything in the first moment. Even when he gained back some kind of consciousness, he was far from keeping his senses on a string. She stood before him, beautiful and exciting, a woman with an entire world under her belt, speaking to a nobody like him, and he, the nobody, stayed blind and silent, as if someone had smeared ointment in his eyes, and with a buzzing in his ears as if his head was under water. Oh, Fred, you fool, racking your brain about how you could get in touch with your saviour, your promise of a liberated life, and now you stand here like a cardboard dummy, a puppet without sense and understanding, without ear and mouth! People gathered around them, at a safe distance, though, being eager to pick up something they could serve up to their colleagues on Monday morning, a gossip of a special kind. It took Fred a while, hours

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maybe or just a second, before he received back some control over his body. First, the ointment was washed away from his eyes, and now he, who still didn't dare to look her in the eyes, could see her hands, as she had taken her gloves off, sliding them from her right to her left. Her fingers were excellently manicured, with her nails painted with restraint, but it surprised him how short they were, almost chubby. Then the buzzing became weaker, and even though he barely heard her voice, he understood her words, as if he had become a lipreader, or as if her words penetrated deeply into him, where they deciphered themselves.

“So, what's up, boy? Will you come and visit me next Sunday, or not? I don't have to tell you the address – you've been hanging around there often enough.” This time, her laughter was piercing, and Fred blushed as he never did before. “Yes, Ma'am.” That was the only answer he could give, and he almost choked on his own words. “Yes, Ma'am.”

“Good. See you next Sunday then.”

Then she left, turning on her high heels, ditching him like a schoolboy, dividing the mass like Moses did with the sea. The audience stood silent. No one laughed at Fred, and that made it even worse for him. But sinking into the ground is not a human capacity, and after a while, the gawking boys and girls turned their backs on him and went on with their own affair.

Fred waited for the curtain to fall, but it didn't, as there was no curtain, just time, which moved on, second by second, leaving him alone with his joy and his fear, with his animalic instincts, sometimes like a predator in the face of its prey, sometimes like a rabbit at the sight of a snake, subjugated and unable to choose between flight, fight, or feign death.

VI.

At first, Fred was purely enchanted about the prospect of visiting

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Mrs Payne: “I will see her! She will see me! She wants to see me! I attracted her attention! I ain’t no nobody! It’s the chance of my life. Whatever comes, I will be free!” That carried him through a day. Or two. Two-and-a-half, at best. It was the prospect of a view that spread through him. It was hope, almost certainty of a future being wide open. Of love, too, and even more of passion. Passion for Mrs Payne, and love for himself.

Then doubts arose. His mind came back, his wit, his knowledge and understanding, whatever you call it. It came back and spoke up. Fred started to weigh the options, challenging them. What, if he really went, as he had promised? To a tête-à-tête, in her house? What would follow out of this? Nothing or something tangible, something... He couldn’t speak it out, but the outlines that ascended to Fred’s heart were very physical, with their colourings switching between fairy tales and nightmares. “Will I become a redeemed prince or the boy in a cage, fed by a witch to be fattened, roasted, and eaten? A man or a gigolo? A master in her factory, or a servant in her house?”

He knew he was the weaker of the two. Whatever she wanted, would happen, and he would not at all have a chance to determine where they were going. And he wasn’t that sure anymore about the golden cage and the empire.

So better not go? And then?

“Can I ever return to my old life? Would she still let me work at Payne’s? Will I become the laughing stock of people, the jerk of the whole town, a coward?”

It didn’t help calming his nerves that during the following days, Mr Wright behaved uncommonly friendly, nearly human. His father, of all people! He didn’t apologize for his outbreak of violence, at least not directly, and it might have been just a rare fit of sentimentality, or perhaps it was just the prospect of being alone in old age, since his wife had threatened to leave him more than once. Whatever the reason, he asked

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Fred to continue living in his house, in spite of all. He would even waive the board wages for him. And, as if it had been agreed between them, Cox asked him to join them for the football match next Sunday afternoon, for the sake of old friendship.

All this made Fred even more confused. He couldn't draw a clear thought; he was locked in his fantasies and doubts, his dreams and fears. And it worsened every hour. On Friday night, he finally decided to see Mr Gardener, the priest. Not to receive spiritual succour or to confess what "I have sinned in thought, word, and deed; in what I have done and in what I have failed to do, by my fault, by my fault, by my most grievous fault." No, that kind of affair wasn't his. But to use the priest's piano. Fred hadn't played for some time now, and tonight, he felt he would need it. Mr Gardener was delighted for Fred to come, for a young man to visit an old sermonizer to play on his piano, while all other boys and girls would hang out on St Peter's Square, to drink and dance and commit other improper, undue and sinful deeds.

Fred played what he had learnt. Chopin to begin with, then Mozart, followed by Beethoven and Bach. He still had perfect pitch, and he still had all those pieces in mind. The music did what it should do: it cheered him up. Then, it just so happened, he turned to Schubert's "Linden Tree". Funny, Fred thought, as the song is from "The Winter Journey", but outside, it is summer, warm and bright. And funny somehow, Fred continued, that I hum a sad, woeful song when I just feel to cast off my gloom. So, he changed to Jeremiah Clarke's "King William's March" before closing it off. He told Mr Gardener good-bye, giving him a friendly thump and having his own future Glorious Revolution in mind.

The next day, he bought himself a new suit, went to the hairdresser, got his fingernails manicured and tried some perfume for the first time in his life. In the night to Sunday, Frederick L. Wright slept well in his father's house, though he detested it, as much as its owner, musty, narrow, dumb

and hostile as they both were. But who knows, maybe it was his last night here. Maybe even tomorrow he would smell the scent of freedom.

VII.

On Sunday, Fred leisurely walked through the streets of his hometown, if it still was. He passed the old brick-built working-class quarters, the noisy shops and grocery stores, the church with its out-of-tune bimbam, the old school, crossed St Peter's square, walked along the car dealers with its screaming ads and the badly soundproofed public housings which were built after the war for the old and the poor, and for the Caribbean immigrants whose number had swelled over the last decade, causing competition and quarrels between them and the incumbent lower class. Fred passed all of these places, not to remember them, but only to remember what he wanted to strip off and forget.

Fred also came along Payne's factory, this massive white-plastered brick building with its endless walls, high towers, and glass shed roofs – an industrial cathedral of imperial grandeur. There, he stopped for a moment, letting his mind transform it into a Danish castle with changing of the guard, into a native American treasure chamber and into a fortress off the coast of Marseille. But Payne's factory stood still and firm and stiff, like the last hundred years, in and between all times, blurred in present, past, and future. Fred felt fuzzy again, and he found it difficult to control that mental confusion, so he carried it with him above the foot to the hill, where Mrs Payne lived.

Then he had arrived. There it was, Mrs Payne's house. Fred looked up. Its front reared up before him like a giant, a larger-than-life doorkeeper with vast bay windows and colossal arches and wide shutters. A gargantuan incarnation of power, threatening and frightening, but at the same time full of appeal. One second you want to hide from him and the next you want to be with him.

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Its immense surface of white painted bricks and wood were both inviting and abhorrent, as were the tremendous array of windows, the breaking wave of roof tiles and the army of trees in the park. Nothing about the house was in its wrong place, nothing had misaligned its proportions. It wasn't the shape, but the sheer mass that crushed him.

"You have to withstand a lot when you live in something like this," Fred thought.

"But it's not the shell you have come for," an inner voice replied, "you have come for the delicious meat that's hidden inside it."

The meat... The meat?

Fred winced, even trembled. What did he say? All at once, he got scared of himself and scared of the object of his desire.

"Is that what you demand: meat? Enough meat to fill you up? Stuffing yourself at the fleshpots of other people's wasp-waisted beauty, wealth and power?"

What may sound like the self-accusation of a suddenly moralized boy, wasn't. Fred had no concern for good and bad, nor did he search for salvation in the beyond. Instead, he mumbled:

"You deserve better."

"You deserve better."

Fred's hand must have remained on the handle of the garden door for quite some time. Now, he withdrew it. He took a step back, circumspectly, as if not to wake up Cerberus. Then a second step, and a third. Slowly and carefully, like a burglar by night, he turned right, and then walked on, in tentative steps, not looking back, not noticing Mrs Payne, who had been standing behind the curtain, watching him with trembling arms.

And all of a sudden, he recalled the scene from last week when Mrs Payne had encountered him on St Peter's Square. He hadn't noticed it then, but now he knew: Something had been wrong with what she said.

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It was not her perfectly chosen words. Neither was it her pronunciation, which had that certain something that only people of her standing have. It was her voice. The voice was wrong. A dark voice, dark and very firm, from strong cords, and it had penetrated deeply into him. But now the ointment was gone, the buzzing was over, his head above water, and his ears free of blockage. Now he remembered: The voice was detuned. Not a lot, not that it was unbearable, but still. It was detuned. Like a cello that is bouncing around the right note. Like a door that squeaks in the hinges and lures you into the wrong corridor. Yes, her voice was detuned, and it wasn't until now that he had noticed it.

And now also that special thing had returned to him, the poisoned gift which made him different, which for so many years had thrown him into despair, but also had made him dreaming, directionless and in vain, but still dreaming, and which he thought he had almost lost, which had nearly grown out of him, trained out of him, forgotten out of him: the perfect pitch. Fred felt that it was back, though he stood in full silence. He just felt it. And so, he knew.

In this moment, a firm and stiff corset, a chain mail, a tightly lashed harness suddenly burst, and the innermost being flowed out onto the floor and poured over it, and a wasp-waisted, tightly fitting dress was ruined, some perfectly coiffed hair was ruined, pearls rolled along the parquet floor, and gloves burned to ashes.

But Fred walks on the warm, worn-out path above the town, enjoying the rays of sunlight and the mildly blowing wind, and he walks firmly now, with tight steps, a melody on his lips, and when he reaches the fork, he takes the junction to the left, without hesitation, without slowing down his steps, and without even glancing at the below and behind. Now he has stopped whistling. Now he reaches the edge of the forest. Now he is only dimly visible. Now he is gone, disappeared in the forest, swallowed by it, and to be spit out into a new time and place.



Years after Fred had passed the fork, my father became a notoriously famous and declaredly eccentric virtuoso pianist. Part of his crankiness was that he would refuse to play any concert grand which hadn't been thoroughly inspected and prepared by his personal assistant and piano tuner, a gifted and highly skilled man called Frederick L. Wright, called only Fred by everyone, and with a middle "L." like "liberated" – a man whom he randomly encountered at his Austrian piano manufacturer, where Fred led the acoustic quality department, being praised for his perfect pitch.

That's how it happened. Exactly like this. At least that's how my father told me, on the evening of his eightieth birthday. His guests had already left, and my father had become a little melancholic, because his farewell was now imminent, he said, from the stage, but perhaps also otherwise. It was a clear winter evening, frosty darkness had settled over the land, and warm and soft flowed the brandy over our palates. Melancholic had also been Fred, my father said, when he had first revealed him the whole story, at Patsy's Italian Restaurant, the night after the first triumph at Carnegie Hall. Melancholic, but also blissful. And now it's me carrying on the story of Fred L. Wright. And one day my children will.

You may ask: Why? Why do I tell this story and pass it on to my children? Well, I don't really know. Sometimes, there are things that just come to you, whether you want them or not. It's hard to explain. Maybe it's because a bad story is just a book, a bunch of letters, dead as a tombstone, and a good story is like music: notes, awakened by the playing of the orchestra and the conductors work, night after night, swinging over hundreds of years, and different every time. Every generation looks for the perfect pitch, the immaculate sound, the real truth. But it's perfect and immaculate and true only for them. Only for them.

Blue Pen



Blue Pen

Chow Cheuk Yin Mono, English

Whenever I tell others this story from my childhood, they always give me looks. A glance of disbelief, or a stare that calls me *a liar*. I don't blame them. They have never seen a blue pen like I have.

— — —

Where I live, we have a tradition: before the age of ten, every kid uses a pencil for their homework. Then on the day we turn eleven, our teachers would gift us our very first pen. They say it's a gift to celebrate a child's growth. A gift kids can use to get prepared. For what, the adults never told, and I never asked.

For as long as I can remember, every student I have ever known has been gifted a black pen. Some were given ink pens with fiberglass casings that cost a few hundred dollars, while some got ballpoint pens with cheap plastic casings that break every month. I did some observation: normally the kids who had scored lower in tests got the cheaper ones, and vice versa.

Still, no matter the quality, the ink inside is always black.

My school was awfully strict, but that was what parents liked in schools. The stricter, the better. And to be fair, it was ranked the best school in my district. But I wasn't the best student – I was hardly a good one. One time I took a basketball and threw it at our principal's car. Just for fun. I figured I had underestimated my strength when the ball smashed the window. It got me two weeks of detention, which was a surprisingly

lenient penalty, compared to my other ones, at least. The teachers saw me as a menace, I'd learnt. But it didn't bother me. Honestly, I liked the idea of being a rebel. I liked angering everyone at school. My counsellor said that was a symptom of some mental illness, that I was sick, which others still think I am. But Miss Kwok didn't agree. In fact, she thought I was more than okay.

Miss Kwok was this fat woman in her forties. She wasn't pretty. I had heard some of my classmates giving her nicknames like "ugly" or "fat *Kwok*". Still, she never put on the slightest makeup to cover her flaws. Sometimes I wonder if she were too broke to afford the products, or if she had some odd skin allergies that none of the other teachers got. Her brown, short hair only made her look worse. Even more peculiar, she would always wear a blue A-line dress, despite her plump body shape, when every teacher in school wore a black, formal suit. She stood out like a \$20 made-in-China doll in a bunch of Barbies. So, when she was the one who believed I was alright, I could only scoff.

Miss Kwok had taught me English for years. And I had disliked her for years. So had the others. The fact that she loved to give us writing assignments only made others hate her more. But for me, those were the only times I had liked her, slightly. The assignments from her were different. She always asked us to write short stories, and I liked writing them. I loved to imagine myself as Alice, but in my own Wonderland; and I loved to imagine myself as a child born and living in a clock tower. I loved to imagine. But the adults called it *daydreaming*. Not Miss Kwok. She never scolded us for doing so. She wanted us to. The "A"s she graded on my writings meant she liked the imagining I did, I believed. All kids love getting praised, and so did I. So I wrote more and more short stories. And I got more and more "A"s.

The day before I turned eleven, Miss Kwok asked me to stay after school. “Just for a little chat,” she said. When I got to her seat, she took out a stack of paper and put it on her desk. I took a quick glance at the paper on top, and realized it was a copy of one of my writing assignments. One of my favorites, too. It was a story about Alice’s second visit to Wonderland, where the White Rabbit’s obsession over time and clocks got too serious that Alice and the Mad Hatter had to find a way to stop White Rabbit from working compulsively.

“Do you like writing?” Miss Kwok asked out of the blue, and I nodded. “I can tell,” she replied, putting her hand on the paper, “your passion for writing is always hidden somewhere in your stories, and I love finding them.” I was confused, and Miss Kwok could tell. So she added, “your passion turns into great creativity.” Ten-year-old me didn’t even know what the word “creativity” meant. I didn’t remember seeing it in the dictionary. But still, I nodded. “It’s like a superpower. A superpower you have. With it, you will go to great places, Charlotte.”

“Although it will be hard for this superpower to last,” I heard her mumble before she said it was nothing and let me leave.

My mother did my hair on the day I got my pen. I still remember that silky black ribbon she tied on my ponytail. “For the special occasion,” she said. I pulled it off once I got into the classroom. The kids in my class didn’t congratulate me or hype me up like they would for the others. I didn’t mind. At least I pretended like I didn’t, and no one found out, I think. Everyone in class was as quiet as usual, except Miss Kwok, who was so thrilled I would’ve mistaken her as the one receiving her first pen. She was grinning so much her cheeks were dimpled. I remember my messy hair flying in the air as I walked up to her. And I remember looking up at her

as she hid the pen behind her back. She was shivering. But her smile was too bright for me to know if she were frightened or cold. Step by step I marched down the aisle, and stopped in front of her. I glanced up, as she flashed a wider grin.

“Charlotte.”

“Miss Kwok,” I murmured. Did I roll back my eyes? Maybe.

“Happy birthday. May your superpower take you to places far, far away.”

I gave her a forced smile as response. Then from her back, she reached out a pen. My very first pen. I wondered what pen it would be. I wasn't worried about getting a cheap pen since Miss Kwok had never given out bad ones, even to students who didn't perform well in class. But still I was thrilled. As it came closer and closer, my eyes widened. The pen had a transparent plastic casing, with a small clip attached on the top. It had a piece of rubber surrounding the part close to the tip, just so writing too long wouldn't hurt as much. The casing was not that special. But the ink inside was.

The ink was blue.

My first pen was a blue pen.

Mine was unlike the others', I figured. Mine stood out. Like I did. Like Miss Kwok did. For an instance, I felt as if this pen referred to the two of us – me being a rebel, and her being odd. For once I thought someone finally understood me. She flashed me a warming smile as I glanced up

and whispered a sincere “thank you”. “Keep writing,” she told me. I was too busy looking down at the brand-new blue pen, that I had only learnt from some gossips later, that there was a glint of unknown sorrow in Miss Kwok’s eyes – and that hours later, she got sent to the principal’s office.

The day I got the blue pen, was the day I last saw Miss Kwok.

When I got home with the blue pen, my parents were pissed. I didn’t have to ask to know that the blue pen was something forbidden – the anger on their faces said it all. So I lied, pretended to throw it away, and hid it in my drawer. For the next two years, I kept writing with the black pens my father bought me. “Only black pens are acceptable, Charlotte. No blue pens,” he warned me. But it was not the same. Pens were so much harder to write with, compared to pencils. Nothing came out when I wrote with it. Or to be precise, nothing came out of my mind when I wrote with it. No ideas. No scenarios. Nothing. Maybe I was too nervous to use one, or I was simply not used to writing with a pen, or maybe it was because a new teacher came and took Miss Kwok’s place. I had never got an “A” since the day I started using a pen.

Two years later, I was getting ready to go to a new school. Secondary school was a sign that I had grown up, and that it was time adults start to let go. For the first time in six years, I was finally able to pack my backpack by my own. But first time was never the charm. That morning, I was hurriedly packing up as I forgot to pack up the night before. I pulled open the drawer, fumbling around the items to look for my headband, when I noticed a hint of blue in the pile of black pens. I took it out, wondering if I should bring the forbidden blue pen with me. My parents wouldn’t like that. There’s a reason they used to check my assignments and pencil case daily. But I shrugged, thinking it could be a

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change for a new school life, plus that my parents would have no clue, and stuffed it into my backpack.

Unsurprisingly, the first English assignment we got that day was a piece of writing, which was what I needed, for I was tempted to try the blue pen. A story. Even better. “Rewrite the story of *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*.” I fetched the blue pen out of my bag. As soon as my fingers touched the plastic case, I could feel a spark go through my arm and straight to my brain. Ideas flooded my brain as I held the blue pen in my hand. I wanted to, no, I begged to have the ideas written out immediately. To have them splattered out on the paper in front of me. There was an urge from nowhere, pushing me to write, to let my imaginations out. It was as if I was delirious, but I couldn’t help. I grasped onto the blue pen, pressing the metallic tip on the paper, the ballpoint moving as blue ink was drawn out slowly, forming lines and curves. Then they formed into letters. Letters into words. And words into sentences. Paragraphs written in blue ink started to appear on the blank white paper, nonstop, until the paragraphs built a passage. With the final full stop put, I gently placed my blue pen down, and gazed at my finished work. It was something I had not seen since the day I picked up a pen. Then I realized. It was something I had not seen since the day I picked up a *black* pen. My blue pen was unlike the black ones. Was it magic? Or was there crack on the casing that nobody was able to spot? I never knew. All I knew was that, with my blue pen, I was finally able to write like I used to, and got my first “A” since two years ago – since the day Miss Kwok vanished – but along with a comment written in red: “Nice work! Remember to use a BLACK pen for the next assignment.”

“Very interesting story, Charlotte,” our teacher, Mr. Tse, came to my desk after class. “From a story about dishonesty to regret, huh? I really

like how you kept the part where the boy cried ‘wolf’ three times, shows what story yours was based on. Plus, I love how you write the characters, especially the woman... What’s her name again?” “Maria.” “Maria! Right. I love how her role as an adoptive mother of the boy and her motherly love for him are clearly shown through the way she rushes to hug him every time even though she knows he’s lying.”

“But,” Mr. Tse paused for a while, “the death of the boy is... A bit too brutal, you know what I mean? The descriptions about his corpse in Maria’s arms, and scattered hair, and broken limbs torn off by wolves...”

“Wonderful detail for a story, but not too exam-appropriate, I’m afraid.”

“And of course,” he glanced at my blue pen before heading out, “I know it might be hard for you to get used to it but... Try using a black pen next time.”

When I told my new classmates about my magical blue pen which got me the only “A” in class, no one believed me. I had even heard rumors about me lying and being arrogant for a piece of homework. But I ignored their comments. As long as I had my blue pen, I could write.

As time went by, more writing assignments came, and more texts written in blue were handed out. I got more “A”s, and somehow my teachers stopped bothering with me writing in blue. Rumors of my combo of good grades in writing went around the campus and stayed for years.

I remember going to the staff room one day. For what, I cannot recall, but I remember hiding next to the opened door as two of my teachers

talked. “The principal’s been asking me to go have a word with her a lot lately,” Mr. Tse complained to the other. “Oh, believe me, Mr. Tse, she has done it to every English teacher.” Mr. Tse sighed. “Principals. Principals. Principals. Always wanting more without considering what we’ve got.” “Don’t you have an ace in your class, Mr. Tse? If she gets an ‘A’ in the exam, the ranking of our school will surely go up.” the other asked. “She’s a stubborn one though.” “Still using a blue pen?” Mr. Tse did not say a word. “Just let her use a blue pen for now. As long as she can write well, we can always just force her to start using a black pen before the exam.” “She’s the school’s only hope, after all,” the teacher added.

“She is,” Mr. Tse replied, “if she can still get an ‘A’ with a black pen.”

— — —

Soon I was already 17, and I was a year from the exam.

Unlike the usual tests and quizzes, the exam is a major thing here. It’s like the ultimate challenge. I didn’t know much about the exam. All I knew was that my neighbor, Mrs. Chan, had a kid who attended it years ago. He didn’t pass. The whole estate could tell he didn’t, when we heard police sirens and banging on their door the day the results were released. I was a child back then, but I still remember the terror in Mrs. Chan’s eyes as she watched her son got taken away. “Where to?” My mother once asked Mrs. Chan. She only wept as she buried her nose into her handkerchief, shaking her head as she remained completely silent.

That’s how scary it is, the exam. Every student and every parent fears it. So students keep studying, and parents keep pushing them. Yet

no matter how much effort you pay, no matter how high your marks are, it's always about percentage. Even if you aced everything, it would still be useless if you did not do better than most people. It's never about your performance – it's about competition.

Luckily, my blue pen never ran out of ink, and I never ran out of “A”s. It was weird, but that proved it was indeed magical. Full-marked writing assignments came back one after another. The teachers never said it out loud, but I knew they were counting on me to get the first ever “A” in the writing exam. I knew, because despite their satisfaction of my work, they would always ask me to do better. The bonus “black pen writing tasks” they gave me every day were never enough. “Add more vocabulary.” “Use more passive voices.” “Some idioms would make it PERFECT.” “Not as good as your usual assignments.” It was like my work was never enough. Was it not perfect enough to make them proud?

Months before our examination, my teacher suddenly pulled me onstage in the assembly one morning. Facing my classmates, he told them to strive for perfection, that they could all write as good as me if they practiced more. “See Charlotte as your target,” he said, “aim for the ‘A’. Aim to be like her. No. Aim to be better than her.” I stood there, frozen, as I felt over a hundred pairs of eyes staring at me. Their stares burned on my skin. I imagined them rushing at me all at once, chewing on my flesh, and swallowing it whole, until I had nothing but my bones left. I gulped. It seemed like I became a huge deal at school, like they were throwing me out to battle in a war. One that, if I lost, would disappoint so many people; and if I won, would bring centuries of glory.

A few weeks after getting pulled onstage, Mr. Tse came to my class to speak to me. I don't remember most of the things we talked about. But

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I can never forget how he looked at me with his cold eyes, and said, “you can’t always choose to write stories, Charlotte. Stories are for children. Not for you.”

He was right, I figured. I knew my writing wasn’t perfect enough. It needed improvement. Besides, Mr. Tse had a point – I can’t always write stories. If I had to be the ace, I had to be the ace of everything. For the first time in the past 12 years, I picked up a book, and started jotting down every possible vocabulary and phrase I could use in the exam. I spent hours and hours reading, jotting, revising, writing, and repeated. I must strive for perfection. Yet my blue pen started acting out. Perhaps the ink was running out, or perhaps the magic was. I would need to shake it or hit it now and then for it to write smoothly. But I couldn’t let such minor inconvenience ruin my hard work. Not like this. I knew what would happen if I used a black pen, so I was counting on my blue pen. For without it, I believed, I could never get an “A”.

The night before the exam, I read through all my old assignments to memorize some of my ideas. For a second, I thought the blue ink on the old writings was more vibrant than the ink on my newest work. “Or maybe it was just the lighting,” I told myself, and shrugged it off.

The next day I carried with me my blue pen, along with a bunch of black pens for spare, and arrived at the examination center. Sitting down, I inhaled a shaky breath. Placing down all the pens, I double-checked my blue pen. The ink was still full, just as it had always been.

And the countdown had started. Using my blue pen, I put my name down and flipped to the next page. I read the question, letter by letter, word by word. I could not miss a single hint. It was a simple task: a

Blue Pen

four-panel comic about a horror event that happened to a security guard. I held my blue pen close, waiting for an idea to strike me.

But there was nothing.

I shook the blue pen. Once. Then twice. Still, nothing came. Something must be wrong with my pen, I figured. But I was not about to let this fail me. So I squeezed my eyes close, hoping something came out of my mind. Tick. Tick. Nothing came. But time was running out. I couldn't risk it. I must at least write something down. I pressed the metallic tip on the paper, and started to write the classic "One day,".

The ink was black when it came out.

My stomach dropped. I felt my heart thump. *Doomed, doomed, doomed.* I could not believe my eyes. I continued writing, scribbling on the paper, wishing it would magically turn blue. But it never did. The ink was black. The blue pen had turned into a normal black pen.

Why? I thought to myself, and to the pen. *Why now?*

All I had with me was the vocabulary and idioms I recited, but none of them seemed to fit the story. Hell, there was barely any story. In my mind there was no surprising plots or crazy ideas, but merely sentences where I could put what I had recited in use. Putting the sentences together, it generated a story I could hardly call "a story".

A story written with a black pen.

Blue Pen

I barely passed the exam. The teachers had not said a word, nor had they smiled at me once. Not after seeing my result. I knew they were disappointed at me, for I was, too. I remember going home the day the exam ended, with the blue pen in my hand. I didn't know what to do with it, now that the ink had turned black. I stared at it for hours, blaming it, and blaming myself. But still, it was, and will always be, a black pen. Not blue. Not special. Black. Just like how everyone said it should be.

Am I still mad at the pen? Not really. But I certainly was back then. I hid it somewhere in my room. Where exactly I cannot recall. Not that it matters anymore, anyway.

“Charlotte, have you heard about that guy from the other class who told everyone he actually went to look for a blue pen like yours?” my friend told me once in the University Canteen, “said he somehow found this weirdly dressed, chubby lady with short hair who lived far away.” “A maniac, I suppose,” she chuckled. “Apparently the lady refused to give him a blue pen, and told him that, and I quote, ‘blue pens are not gifted but gained’, and made him leave. So he stole one from her house.”

“We actually thought he had a blue pen. Some of our classmates even tried to look for the lady,” she took a bite into her chicken leg, “but his classmates said he was either lying or he had lost his mind – someone saw him bringing a black pen to the exam. Even though he kept telling everyone it was blue.” “What happened to him?” “Oh,” she looked down at her plate. “Taken away. Told you your blue pen cannot help you pass.”

“Are you listening?”

“Charlotte?” I looked up and smiled back, tugging onto my black skirt. I guess she's right. Nonetheless, the now black pen never turned back to blue.

Invention of Tribute

Alcena Touqeer

Five of us have turned twenty this year. Each three years, five of us turn twenty. For the first twenty years of our life, we are given the best education; we are fed well, dressed well and in the last two years of college, given a separate room for our assignment. This assignment is crucial to our being, we all want to succeed because we have always been taught to be the best. We do not know yet what the prize of it is, but they tell us a fortune and great respect will be given to us. It is the deciding factor of our future lives.

I have been working on my assignment. We are told to invent something, make something that people out there would like to use. "It is to make your village a better place," they say. All five of us come from the same village and we are admitted into the same block, separated from other kids from nearby villages. "You ought to focus on your assignment, it should be the only thing on your mind right now," they told us as soon as our two years of solitary working started. All I thought of in those years was, *Will what I am inventing bring a better future for my family? Is it something people will accept? Does it make a good impact on the world?*

"The five of you are special," they said, "your mothers were chosen to give birth to this talent you possess." I did not understand what they meant until they brought us to a lab one day. "This is the place we plan your arrival in this world and expect you to give something extraordinary in return." I was shocked at how big the operation in the lab was. There was constant work of selecting, mixing, and arranging formulas in mini test tubes. It was divided into five different colors. *Does that mean we all*

have different strengths and creative abilities? My questions were never answered and the visit to the lab still puts my mind in a puzzled frame. Where are we actually? Is this why I don't remember my father at all? Who am I?

I am friends with Danny. He is from the same village as I am. During the last two years, we only met during breakfast, lunch and dinner, and our meetings were brief. He told me he was working on something that not a lot of people understand but is urgently needed for our village to grow. We all come from a village of poor state of houses and poor hygiene. We were taken away when we were three, so we don't remember much of that place.

The first few months of solitary were torturing. I was supposed to be working "smarter and faster" when I am alone, but I could not come up with any ideas for my invention. Then one summer evening, the lights went off. "It was a power outage, a mistake that will soon be repaired," they said. But it did not recover for hours, and those dripping sweats inspired ideas for my invention. First, I thought of inventing portable fans as a mean to escape this scorching heat. But I soon realized that it was unrealistic as it would need charging and the power in our village is out for more than 16 hours every day. So, I cancelled that. Then I thought of making a combination of bed, sofa, and chair, so people did not have to spend money on all three items individually. But I realized no one in the village would use it as they are so used to sleeping on the hard surface. The last idea struck me as the heat became unbearable. It was April, the time of harvest, and I looked out of the window at the dancing crops, waving at me to look at them. It was a spectacle of the villagers' hard work who give up their jobs only to gather food for the year by manually cutting these crops with a sickle. I instantly knew I should invent a land mower that is not only

small but cheap too. If my invention can save them time and energy in this scorching heat, I should work towards it with all my heart. I decided to keep it small so people could easily place it in their homes, and cheap so they could spend some of their savings for comfort and convenience in this hot harvest season. I know it wasn't the best idea, but I thought of what was best for my village - and my mother. *I haven't seen her in so long...*

My land mower was almost ready, all it needed now was a trial. But we are not allowed to step out of this place until we are done with our presentation. "If you try to trespass, remember there will be consequences and you might never be able to meet your families again." Even though my invention was small, I tried my best to give it the speed and energy it needed to graze the crops in one go. It would have given me a better idea if they had let me try it on the full-grown crops outside, but rules must be abided. So, I worked on final touches and trusted myself that it would work the way I intended it to.

We had a month left for our presentation. It will take place in a grand gathering with businessmen from all over the world. "It is to encourage and appreciate your efforts," they said. I was nervous yet excited. We were told that the invention most liked will be bought and used all over the world. That was massive, thinking your original invention being displayed on TV screens and coming up on internet searches with your name next to it. What a pride for our village. I suddenly developed a sense of liking for this place, for making us grow as individuals with an identity in the wider world.

In the last ten days before the presentation, we were given trips to various places. "It is to relax you and freshen your mind before the big event," they said. So, we went to parks and fed the little ducklings moving

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alongside their mother. *Just ten more days, and I will reunite with her too. I wonder how she looks now, probably older, frailer, weaker...*

We visited train stations, convenience stores, shopping malls and everything one needed to know to live a good and sustainable life in the city. I began imagining my life away from the village I lived in, not because of its poverty, but because of the city's unlimited opportunities waiting for me. *I can make a whole life out of myself. Then I can work on making the village a better place too.* Now, I was motivated to deliver my invention in front of so many people, waiting for them to like it, waiting for them to open the doors of good fortune for me.

The day before the big event, we visited our village. We could see from afar, the state of the people, the ripped clothes, the inflated bellies, the heavy labor. We saw the cottages on the verge of breaking down. All of a sudden, I felt very selfish to think of a life in the city, leaving all these people who are hoping for us to bring a better future for them. Or maybe their hopes have never relied on the five of us, any five that ever turned twenty and were taken away. I could see no joy in their expressions when they saw us. *Maybe the previous ones fled away too?* I could not tell. As I moved forward towards the village, the guard in black stood in front of me. "You are not allowed to enter this premise until the end of your presentation," he said. The hope to see my mother was prolonged and I waited eagerly for the day of the presentation to come.

Next to our village was one big museum. The only monument that was well-built and maintained. I was astonished to see the two contrasting states. We were told not to talk to anyone we met on the way. "It will only distort you from your presentation", they said. And maybe they were right, because the cries of the villagers might have corroded the

inventions we were working on.

When we entered the museum, we saw 49 big portraits hanging on the walls, each with a name and a year next to it. These were the legends that made the most successful inventions of their times and were honored in this museum for their contribution and effort for bringing a change. All I thought of then was, *where is the change?* There were some small well-developed houses detached from the village, only a few miles away. Maybe they bought a small land and restarted their life, belonging to the village yet not quite so? We were not told anything more than their achievements and inventions. One of the best ones I heard of was a telescope made by St. John some 600 years ago. Even though the purpose of the invention was to see the stars, people thought they could see their loved ones in the stars—a village superstition, and so it won the best invention for the year.

In school, whenever we learned history, names were avoided. They said it is better to learn the content than be confused with years and names. And even though I learned about the telescope in school, this portrait just made it more real. I can now put a name and year next to that lifechanging invention. I think it is better this way—remembering the event with people and their respective years. It gives them royalty and credit for bringing such useful creation into the world for a future like us to use and see. “We do not keep the original invention for display because that would take up too much space”, they said when we asked if we could see the telescope. Fair enough, the portraits already took one-third of the place, but I think it would be fun to try out the original invention. After all, they were one of the best pieces!

The visit to the museum was good, but it ended quickly. I wanted to read histories and creative processes of how others came up with their

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inventions. Did I mention? All portraits were labelled with the year of invention, all separated by twenty years. This is like we are told, only one invention will be the masterpiece that will take its place as the 50th creative invention. I really hope it is mine.

Tomorrow is the day of our presentation, the one we have all been waiting for so long. I was more excited to see my mother and teach her how to use my invention. After all, I did all this back and forth for her comfort. She would be so proud of me. The night hardly passed, and the time seemed to have stopped. I just wanted the next day to come.

It was finally the day. My heart skipped a beat looking at the big auditorium for our presentation. It was beautiful with an open space from the top, a healthy sunlight peeped in. There was such a big audience, and I suddenly became very nervous. Danny sat next to me, and he looked very composed, as if confident that his invention would outdo all of ours. We exchanged a look and a smile because words were not allowed before the presentation ended. The opening speech started, and I felt lucky to be here, to have created something. We were dressed in suits and the tie around my neck was extremely suffocating. I asked if I could remove it, but they simply refused. "It is the dress code. It cannot be changed for your comfort," they said. And so, I shuffled in my seat with that uncomfortable feeling, secretly unbuttoning the topmost button for some air.

One by one, all presenters were invited. The first person to go on stage was Eva, she invented a television with a press and drag system. It was interesting since touch screen was really in fashion. How cool is it to pin and drag photos or text to the other screen. I wondered if it would work in our village though, since we had limited electronics. Next was Ron, he invented an iron that does not only heat up, but also turn cold.

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A really innovative approach of a direct cooling agent for the body and I was excited to give it a try after the presentation was over. Then came Amy and she invented a pair of glasses that could adjust its brightness, vibrancy, contrast and many other effects according to the person wearing it. I went wow at the difference of looking at a setting with naked eyes versus looking at the same setting with the glasses on, going back and forth with the different colours. You could minimize a setting to black and white, or switch up the contrast to make it look more colourful than it actually is. It was definitely beautiful and creative.

Three presentations down, now only I and Danny were left.

“May I please invite Mr. Danny Williams to talk about his invention and give us a demo of his work,” the host invited. Danny ascended the stairs with excited steps. He talked confidently. His invention was a sanitary pad making machine that he invented all by himself. There were 3-4 processes of making a full sanitary pad. “The main thing to make a good pad is to use cellulose fiber rather than any normal wool. I have made this machine because I know a lot of women in our village use dirty cloth which is unhygienic and dangerous for their bodies. My main concern was not only their wellbeing, but also their financial situation. This machine is designed to allow them to make their own pads, not only for their own personal use, but for women in nearby villages at extremely less cost. Their health is our priority and being able to make some revenue out of such good cause will make them financially stable.” Everyone clapped as he finished, and I was so amazed at the amount of work he put into the machine. The best thing he did was think of how the village women can earn a continuous income too rather than just bringing a change in their lifestyle. Somewhere in his speech, I lost confidence in my invention. *I bet nothing can beat that in its usefulness all around the year.*

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Then it was my turn. The only thing that kept my spirits high was my unique design. I gave my presentation and demo with hard carboard like sticks as crops. The machine worked quite well, and I hoped it would work the same for real crops that are deeply rooted into the plain. “I purposely made this machine in a small size, because I want everyone in the village to have one in their homes. Since most of the villagers are farmers, this machine will help ease their work during harvest season. They will not have to take a month’s leave and sacrifice their incomes to feed their children, instead, they can use this machine and finish their harvest work during one weekend. This can save them time and they can continue their usual work for the rest of the days. This machine is also cost-effective as it is entirely made up with small spare parts of bicycles or motors. I also wanted it to be cheap so everyone can afford it with the little savings they have.” People applauded but I do not think I exceeded the reaction given to Danny. And it was fair, I loved his invention too. I could not wait to talk to him after the ceremony was over.

The judges took half an hour for decision making. All audience were asked to cast their votes for the inventions they would want to buy, and decision was highly dependent on their choice. Those were the most difficult thirty minutes of my life, I kept a stern eye on the wall clock in the middle of the auditorium, waiting eagerly, heartbeat rising, mouth muted, eyes wide open, and ears waiting for the news. I was sitting straight and so were the others because we were not allowed to exchange words or sight until the ceremony ended.

We all waited anxiously for twenty years of efforts to come live, to hear our name as the prized winner, whose invention will be adopted by the whole world. The best opportunity to start up a new life, and we grew anxious with anticipation as the clock on the front of the auditorium

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clicked loudly. Louder with each second, syncing with my heartbeat.

The decision was made after what felt like decades. I took a deep breath in and waited for the results, shuffling my suffocating tie again, feeling hot and sweaty. My throat was dry.

This was the moment we have all been taught to look forward to. In a few minutes, a winner will be announced, he/she will receive a big amount for appreciation and future work by businessmen sitting in the audience. His/her life will be saved. While all of us will look at him/her, hoping we had tried a bit harder to stand in his/her position. Nevertheless, it was a pride for our village, to have such capable students who could bring such a marvelous change.

The host was once again at the center of the stage, holding a card with a name on it. My heartbeat became faster, and I felt the clock slowing down. This was all so crazy.

“The winner has been announced. May I please ask all the participants to come on the stage for the announcement. Please stand in the line of order you gave your presentations.”

We all went up in our presentation order and stood in a line facing the judges and the audience. The back side of the auditorium turned dark, *maybe only the interested party stayed behind.*

“The winning invention will be bought by foreign parties and the winner’s portrait will be placed in the museum as the 50th best invention for commemoration and appreciation,” the host continued.

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All of us on the stage were taking deep breaths, waiting for the results.

“There was a close call between two people as the audience enjoyed both inventions. So, the top two finalists are...”

My heart was pounding as each second passed.

“Danny and John. Would you please step forward for the feedback?” OMG! Did she just say Danny and John? I thought I was hallucinating when Danny took me by the arm and moved me forward with him. *Now it was down to the two of us...*

“Danny, your invention shows a clear intention of empowering women, not only through being conscious and careful about their bodies, but also the thought of bringing them some independence through earning on their own.” *True, now it was my turn to hear the feedback, my heart started pounding again.*

“John, we loved the effort you put in your invention to make it as small in size to fit in a household. We did not see how it would work on the crops though, since the size is relatively small. I see it would work well for smaller scale farming. We enjoyed both of your inventions and are glad for your participation in this ceremony. Would you please go back to your respective places so the host can announce the results?” *It was time. in a few seconds one of us will be the happiest guy in the world. And so, we waited. Again.*

The host finally spoke, “So, the invention most liked by the audience and the judges is by...”

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The paused seemed to have stretched for an hour, or so it seemed.

“Danny, congratulations!” Before the name sunk in, there was a loud shot deafening our ears and blurring our visions. *What was that? Firecrackers for celebration?*

After a while when we all regained our composure, we looked back and forth. At the back of the stage, we saw a poked hole, the size of a bullet. Everyone gasped. There had been an attack, but why was everyone still clapping? I looked around to see if everyone was present, and saw Danny on the floor, bloodshot dripping continuously from his forehead and no one came to help. *Wasn't he the winner? What just happened?*

I called in for help, but everyone kept on their smiles and applauded, and I felt this sudden disgust towards them, as if someone's efforts and life was a mere mockery for them. It suddenly struck me that I was this close to death the moment I stood next to Danny as the top two finalists. I was standing here, alive, while he lay there, dead. It was all by chance! After a while, someone came, all covered in black and took him away in a dead white cloth, which was soon covered in his deep red blood.

We were told to leave as the ceremony was over. The money was to be sent to Danny's family along with a house in the offshores of the village area, and his invention was to be sent abroad for modifications so it could be used internationally around the globe. We were left as we were taken years back from this village. Poor, clueless, frightened. We did not know what was next.

We were gifted back to our family, while Danny's family was gifted with mere fortune. They were happy because they never really knew

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Danny, he was born and confiscated to an unknown land. He was told to work towards making his village a better place at the cost of his life. I now realize that the dates under the portraits are not the dates of invention, but the dates of their death.

What a scam.

One month after this tragedy, Danny's sister gathered all of us villagers and told us, "Today, Danny's invention is going to be telecasted on a show. Come on, let's go and see." More than being excited for Danny's invention, the villagers were more excited to watch a TV. Of course, Danny's family now afforded a TV. What is a TV in front of the well-settled house in the far corner of the village?

We all followed her in and waited for the clock to tick 9pm. It was time. The machine now modified in a bigger and stronger version was being shown on the TV. "Turn up the voice," I said. The village people cared less for these things because they wouldn't understand anyway. But I cared, because I wanted to hear them say his name, acknowledge his efforts, his sweat and blood in making that goddamn machine.

The interview started and a man stood by the machine. "Hello everyone", the host started. "Meet our mastermind of this pad making machine, Simon Alfred. So, Simon, how did you..." I lost track of what they were talking about. *How can they take credits of Danny all so willingly?* I wanted to break the TV because I was held hostage with the truth and injustice in front of their power and authority.

I was poor, useless, forgotten. My words would be another bullet in the head, soon forgotten. Justice will never be served to Danny, but I

tried to do as much as I could. So, I allowed the villagers to think they were talking about Danny. I allowed them to manifest that one of them had succeeded. I allowed them to think in all this chaos, your existence is remembered. While I suffered with each lie I told and details I concealed, I thought of this excitement and ecstatic response of the villagers as a tribute to his efforts. In reality, Danny was never to be remembered. He was lost in the modification of his invention, his idea, his being, because they were powerful enough to take up the world.

The next day, I decided to visit his grave. It was a relatively small one, strange, considering the fact that they only shot him twice on the forehead. I sat by his grave and told him about his invention being on the television screens. “Only if the ceremony had gone well and you had not ...” I was suddenly stopped from finishing the sentence. The guard in black moved his stick in a left and right motion, telling me to stop. There was a reason for this too, I learned it after the ceremony. When they take the special five in their custody, they insert a string attached to their hearts. This is not a normal string but something fatal. They used to tell us, “It is for your safety, so we can detect your heartbeats at any time and come to help if it gets out of control.”

Another lie, of course.

I have recently realized that it had nothing to do with our wellbeing during the solitary working. Instead, it was designed as a precaution for the aftermath of the ceremony. It was to tie our tongues from speaking and spreading the truth among the village people. Any moment that we say a word like “death”, “shot”, “killed”, “murdered”, anything that linked back to the torturous truth of what happens in the ceremony, we would die. The funny part is that they needed to think so hard to make our sudden

Invention of Tribute

death look like a natural cause, as if we died out of heart attack. Because they were that weak at controlling us.

The village people often talked about stories of the previous chosen five who died out of a “heart attack” while reminiscing the ceremony. “They must have missed it so much that the nostalgia took over,” one of them commented. Bullshit. What a shit show this all was.

Even now and then when I see any one of us, I see fear in their eyes. Our eye contact does not last for more than ten seconds. The previous legends, the four who were left hanging on the noose, those who are still alive, give me a small, forced smile as they pass by me, as if glad to see me alive, yet sorry to see me suffer with guilt at the same time. I see the misery in their eyes, witnessing the feeling of drowning in blood of a closed one. But I will not surrender my life to this cruel world and let them think they won; I will live my life as long as I can as a tribute to Danny’s lost life. They can take one of us, but four of us will forever remain.

Gilded Cage



Gilded Cage

Scarlet Tse Sum Yu. Major: English

I swore the first time I met Dr. Lui, it was purely by chance. I had approached the campus health unit earlier only to be turned down since they had closed “non-essential” medical service due to Covid. However, the nurse kindly informed me of a community health centre nearby that was eligible for verifying my vaccination record. I came to the clinic for the first time and was randomly assigned to Dr. Lui.

It was all quirks of fate.

After two courteous knocks, I entered the consultation room. I was surprised to see such a young physician. I was expecting a wrinkled physician with ebbled hairline, yet he looked as if he was 26- or 27-year-old. I paused for seconds, deliberating whether the clinic committed malpractice by letting a young doctor practice on his own. My hand stayed glued to the knob all the while until he smiled “You could come in.” I walked up to the patient’s chair, only to find it was placed too close to the desk. If I sit down, my legs would unavoidably brush against the doctor’s. I stood there in embarrassment, inwardly chiding the last patient’s carelessness. “You could also be seated,” the amusement in his tone was unmasked this time. When I sat down, my eyes finally fell to the same level as his face. I immediately noticed his fair and glossy skin behind a transparent face shield. Never once in my life, as far back as I could recall, had I been left alone observed by a man from such an intimate distance. I was accustomed to seeing doctors in mainland China, where you meet a senior attending, one to two interns, and dozens of other patients impatiently waiting at the doorstep, blatantly eavesdropping on your conversation. There was no privacy whatsoever.

Unfortunately, Dr. Lui happened to possess very agreeable

features. My muscles tensed. I wished I had worn contact lenses instead of a pair of thick glasses and washed my face in the morning. His voice was soft and reassuring. “You still need two more jabs to fulfill the travel requirement, but we don’t have the supplies here now, so you would need to schedule for next visit.” I had never heard a man speak in this way before. Smooth like velvet. “When are you available?” said he. I began to rummage my bag, looking to check my Google Calendar, afraid that his face might darken if I make him wait. I thought of those nurses and waitresses whose faces grimaced, and voices roughened when you hesitated. “It’s okay. Take your time,” he said.

The simple phrase melted my heart. No one ever told me to “take my time” in this city. A warm trickle rose in my heart.

Before I left the clinic, I glanced at the wall decked out with graduation diplomas and found him to graduate about a decade before. He aged well.

A month later, I went to the health centre for the appointed vaccines. I made it a point to dress myself this time. My appointment was the first time slot in the morning. I waited and saw him shuffle in. He dipped his butt from time to time. As a result, his body rocked rhythmically. I was amused at his catwalk.

When he started to tear the package of the needle, I realized it was him who was going to jab me. I was wholly unprepared for such close contact. In mainland China, vaccine jabs were generally administered by nurses. My heart palpitated. “Now?” said I. My real question was “You?”

“Or when?” he laughed.

He touched my left arm to look for capillaries and squeezed my skin a few times before locating them. “Gosh, your capillaries were so narrow.” I had heard of similar complaints uttered by nurses before.

My wound hurt for three straight days, but I wore the dog-eared band-aid like a badge of honour.

Between the third and the fourth visit, I got hold of his social media accounts, which were simply named after him. His Facebook Introduction said “Christianity” for “Religion” and “Single” for marital status.

The posts revolved around his religion, although jokes surfaced in unexpected occasions.

“I was moved to tears today. This morning, during the commune, I heard God speak to me aloud. I saw a halo emanating from the centre. I was in awe of the ethereal atmosphere.” – 2009

“Thanks Lord, I am finally eligible to pay tax.’ – 2013

“I have no idea what amount of menstruation flow constitutes as normal. I need a girlfriend to figure this out.’ – O&G ward, 2013.

“Penis has only one hole, why couldn’t I insert the tube in.” – 2014

“I felt so odd being the only man among a crowd of women. I heard that when women live together, their menstruation would sync up. I wonder whether there is a day at this campus when the dustbins are crammed with soiled pads.” – In Ewha Womans University, Seoul, 2015.

His reckless humour fascinated me. I was psyched to feel chemistry with a man for the first time. For the past two years, I had been troubled by the prospect that I might not be straight. I had never been turned on by anyone, man or woman. In fact, most males around me felt threatening. I could sense the undercurrents of their desires to sway me, to persuade myself and themselves that they were superiors. My autonomy sends shrieking alarms when I interact with men. Moreover, for the past 17 years, teachers and parents worked so hard to suppress my romantic desire that when the iron wrists were removed, I had never known what love really feels like. As the saying goes, even after the cage door is flung

open, a bird raised in a cage would continue to languish inside. I had been apprehensive that I was the caged bird.

During the fifth visit, on a Thursday morning, I summoned up the courage to ask Dr. Lui out. He was surprised and then tickled, accepted the note of phone number, and said, “I would WhatsApp.”

I waited until Sunday morning to be dead sure that he would not contact me. Pathetic, needy and desperate, I approached him on social media on Monday morning and he texted “*I was unavailable at this moment, Madam. I am a Christian and I believe in God. ‘God settles the lonely in families. (Psalm 68)’ If you feel lonely, you could try to join a church that welcomes people of different backgrounds. It is really to the best of your interest that we stop contact.*” Upon reading the message, I also reckoned that it was the end.

It was but the end of the beginning.

Thoughts of him did not wane but seemed to infect other things I saw. A bespeckled man, a besuited professor, a holy cross dangling on someone’s neck. When Dr. Lui told me that I could go to a church for consolation, he did not know that I had already guessed which church he frequented from his social media – “Second Life Assembly.”

Two months passed, I was still mired in recollection. The inextinguishable image of him closed every avenue to enjoyment. After a period of absorbing solitude, that resembled madness in its intensity and effects, the thought of going to his church, which hatched from the egg as a phantom, gradually captivated me. I began to watch promotional videos by his church on YouTube. In one video, a twentysomething woman was pouring thanks to Jesus in tears. She said she found no solace in her father and her ex-boyfriends. It was in Jesus’ bosom that she experienced warmth for the first time. I happened to live without my parents as well for two years. Most importantly, I was estranged from them. My father

was a devout Buddhist and tended to dismiss my worldly troubles. I hated Buddhism for depriving my father from me. I started to picture God as a surrogate father. For two weeks, I had been listening to Christian songs and prayed in my own fashion. I decided to go to his church for another attempt. Even if I failed, I might find God the Father there.

It was my first time in a church. There were no idols. I zigzagged between the rows to find a vacant chair. I spotted Dr. Lui in the crowd. He was raising both of his hands above his head, eyes closed. I never saw him in this state. To be honest, I never saw a human being in this state. A young singer onstage burst out crying, kneeled on the floor and belted out, “Jesus, you are the way up. Jesus, you come back to life among us. Jesus, take pity on us. We kneel before your throne, solely worshipping you. Let us enter thy kingdom, my omnipotent monarch. All I want is to say I love you.” The singer’s voice hollered across the room. The cries of “Amen”, people wringing wet, singing and rocking, in anguish and rejoicing in front of the stage.

As the commune progressed, five to six more believers began to kneel or faint into their chairs. I surveyed the premise and caught a young woman who came here about the same time as I did. She originally greeted her neighbours in a normal manner. Now, she held her hands at the height of her chest with palms turned upwards and her body writhed as if suffering spasms. Waves of praises, sobbing and chanting thumped in my ears. The air was electrified and ecstatic. I remembered Joan Didion walking among drug-addled hippies in San Francisco during the summer of love. The sense of disorientation, vertigo. However, I persuaded myself that this was the norm of churches and I should do as Romans do.

The singing session segued to “Witness” session, where members took to the stage to share what changes took place after they believed in Christ. A married couple were invited. At one point, the husband professed “I converted to Christianity because of my wife. She was a

member of this church when we first met. She said she would not date me unless I was a Christian. I thought to myself ‘What was the harm of going?’ So, I came here and was blessed thereafter.” When it came to the wife’s turn, she voiced her dissatisfaction at her mother-in-law’s unjustified commands and the husband’s loss-making investment. The husband then griped about the wife’s incendiary temper. This domestic bickering was disgorged in the public. I was ill at ease. On the one hand, my reason told me the church was an insidious place. On the other hand, my feelings bade me to stay.

The session then proceeded to group confession, when believers mingled with their family group members. My eyes followed Dr. Lui. He was sitting with two men who looked like in their forties and a thirty-year-old-looking woman. She pointed three fingers towards the ceiling and seemed to be swearing an oath with tears welling up her eyes. She was an elegant lady, though her engrossed state scared me. I did not know what woes could cause such dramatic reaction on her part. Why was this church so full of people entrenched in misery? Nearby, a corpulent man held hand in hand with two other women and his body tremored like sheets. He looked transported.

The exhilaration gradually waned after half an hour and Dr. Lui left the group, loitering on his own.

I seized the chance and approached him.

“Hi, William, it is Julie.” His eyes instantly enlarged.

“You traced me... How did you know about my church?”

“From your social media.”

“I am quite embarrassed.”

I was also embarrassed, but I was bent on getting the answer of what my mind had been revolving around: “when you said you were unavailable, did you mean you already had a girlfriend? Or did you mean you have other preoccupations such as work?”

He stayed silent for a few minutes. I was writhing my hands, ashamed but hopeful. “I meant I did not want to get married recently. So, I did not want a relationship,” he doled out the words while walking away.

I was at a loss, not expecting the answer, despite rehearsing the situation multiple times.

Several minutes later, the elegant woman came up to me and introduced herself to be Dr. Lui’s family group leader, university classmate and sibling.

“You are blood-related?” I asked in bewilderment, thinking how could siblings be classmates.

“God-related,” she emphasized.

She then said Dr. Lui had told her everything. “Muimui, when we come to churches, we must only think of God. This is God’s territory. You were tainting this place. We cannot think of any human being here. You are blasphemous and sacrilegious when you think of Dr. Lui in this place.”

Guilt dawned on me: “I am sorry. I never followed people in this way. It is just Dr. Lui is my first love and I feel very lonely. I am seeking a companion or a community.”

“Muimui, it is false love. Only God could give you true love.”

I protested, “It is strong. I don’t think it is false.”

“It was false love, false love. Jesus is our saviour. Only his love is authentic and everlasting.” She was so adamant that I did not dare raise another objection. There was a wedding ring in her index finger.

“Muimui, you are too aggressive in this way. Let sister tell you, sister is married. Men don’t like aggressive women.”

She then asked about my current situation. When I told her I majored in English, she said “Muimui, did you read too many fantasies because what you did seemed very fantastical to me.”

I was rendered speechless by her barrage of veiled insults. But William was the reason I came, so I persisted, ‘Does William have someone

he loves already?” She suddenly grew furious: “Will is my brother and I do not need to tell you anything. This is his privacy. It is him that I have an obligation to protect, not you.”

“Okay, then I know he is not available.”

The church sister leaned her body towards me and stared into my eyes: “I am Will’s group leader. I control his mind and spirit. If I do not give him the consent, he will not have a relationship. So, lose your hope.”

What the heck was this? I scanned her eyes to confirm she was joking. She was not.

“Will’s soul is currently under great torment. I don’t think he is spiritually available for a relationship, so I would not give my approval,” she turned to look at Dr. Lui in the distance.

I also averted my eyes to his direction. He was near the pulpit, standing encircled by four middle-aged men. Each of them planted one of their palms on his chest and back, chanting. Although I had never seen a church ritual before. I could tell he was the reason of that ritual. I saw his shoulders shiver. “If you truly love him,” said the church sister, “you would let him go. He has been agonized and your visit exacerbates his suffering.”

It was surreal to discover that the person you craved every night, the person whose composed and professional airs allured you now subjugated himself to “God”. The sister walked me out of the church, she said before waving goodbyes, “Muimui, I do not want to offend you, but have you ever seen a psychiatrist? What did the psychiatrist say?”

Days after I left the church, I ruminated on this scene, straining to grope for the inherent logic. It was more than unrequited love; it was about church as a legitimate and moral institution, about how seemingly normal people could act in intoxicating manners my eyes had laid witness

to. When I walked out of the church, the centre of my world no longer held. I wanted an explanation.

Two months later, I reached out to William in social media and asked how could his church sister disparage me like that. Four days later, he replied “If you must know, my love interest is not from the opposite sex. I never tell any stranger about this because it is my struggle. I don’t come out because I don’t want to lose God’s salvation.” He then sent two screenshots of his conversation with males on a popular dating app. Both were dated before I first met him.

In one screenshot, the other man texted “Why”, and William wrote, “My church brothers and sisters know about my inclination and some church leaders do as well. They are very supportive and understanding of me. But they told me not to act on my desire, otherwise I would go to hell.” I had finished reading the entire message before he unsent this screenshot and replaced it with another in which the two users only exchanged pleasantries.

“My church brothers and sisters know about my inclination and some church leaders do as well. They are very supportive and understanding of me. But they told me not to act on my desire.”

Irony.

I can’t help but backtracking my first exposure to homosexuality. It was a summer holiday when I was eight or nine, left to the custody of my adolescent cousin. She played a Japanese romantic TV drama. Two school-uniformed teenage boys convened at a clothing store after school. They got into the same fitting room. Just when I thought they would be having a discussion, one pushed the other against the wall and started to shower kisses on his lips. I opened my mouth wide agape, petrified to find this a possibility. Yet it was about the same moment when I was submerged by shock that I also emerged out of it. I immediately accepted

Gilded Cage

it as a natural phenomenon. The eight-year-old me had imbibed myself in encyclopaedias and the illustrated *I Wonder Why* series. “I wonder why rainbows have seven colours.” “I wonder why oceans look blue.” I absorbed the discovery of homosexuality the way I digested the fact that male penguins incubate the eggs. For me, the world seemed purely scientific, nothing was taboo and nothing was off limits to inquiry.

A well-educated man struggling about his sexual inclination in his thirties. This was funnier than every other joke he had told on Facebook.

Birds raised in a cage would regard flying as an abnormality.

leaving in the spring. (No part of you is found by
The Dead recorded their affairs in summer or fall. in
care at health. However our Affairs. etc. Disposed
Especially in regard to the matter of 1850
to be known
m

POETRY SECTION

Wedding Bells

Aleena Touqeer

Busy lines and ticking clocks,
My heart is pounding as everyone talks.
The loud music echoes through the door,
Pouring out a feeling of bliss and a lot more.

The noise of joy is filled in the sky.
Playing with clouds, the aeroplanes fly.
Everyone is dressed in gowns and ties.
It is the bride and groom that everyone eyes.

Everywhere I look I see your smile.
Just some moments till I walk down the aisle.
My soul, my body, my flesh, my words
Will all be yours like the song of birds.

Looking up the night sky filled with stars,
I trace your name from Earth to Mars.
Falling stars remind me that wishes do come true,
I see it right now in the shape of you.

The Two Hands

Aleena Touqeer

God made us equal
Parts that fit each other.
Then why is it that your hand is greater than mine?
In power, in relation, in strength
Why is it that your hand has a body of its own?
With legs and hands strong as a being.
Whereas my hand is merely a scripture,
Easy to mould, weak and tangible.
As if all it could do is crumble and break.
Why is it that your hand splatters blood,
While mine is denied to shield?
Why is it that all you could do is impose?
With pen and paper, the ball in your court,
While I look to field yet fail to do so?
Why is it that I am left impaired,
While you drive my life's wheelchair?
And all the sympathies still lie by you,
As if all along you suffered while I ruled.
Why is it that the world is so cruel?
When god made us equal
Parts that fit each other?

A Domino City

Au Yeung Sze Uen

People are weak, drowned
In the sea of gold.
With wine glasses, roast poultry,
Intoxicating in their fragrance.
Mist blurs the glint
Of myriad rainbow lights,
and they gamble their fates here.
People outside with dreams and hope eagerly get in and inside the city,
One falls and pushes the other who falls and pushes the other who falls...
Examine closely. The people's names on the dominoes.
You thought these dominoes were made of platinum.
They are made of ivory, bones.
Examine closely. The people's names on the dominoes.
You thought these dominoes were dominoes.
They are exquisite graves.

Cloud of Rage

Bhavani Chandrasekar

A grey monster lies in
a dormant wolf.
I rest within
and wake with crimson.

Anger detonating
all over my fangs,
claws, a furious
unstoppable bite
devouring all in my sight.

Reignite the inferno,
And sound the alarms.
Bring it to life
as I char everyone to black
One shan't underestimate my miniature physique-

Ma!

The dog got into my room!

A Story of Two Raindrops

Bhavani Chandrasekar

These two raindrops
were once the same ones
we watched
racing down our windows.

The drop on the left is pacing.
The drop on the right is trailed behind
until it bumps into another on its path.

They collide, and fall
faster than any other.
The drop on the right won.

But did the right drop not know
that winning meant
meeting the end sooner?

These identical drops
are now the drops dripping down our lashes.

The wind that sent them down,
now the wind that envelop our hands
with the coldest embrace.

These identical souls
that never met,
united.
Now they dance among the winds
filling every spin with euphoria.

A Story of Two Raindrops

Those identical stars
now stars colliding above
as the supernovae take over.

The identical concrete ground,
now faults underneath,
as the same sky tears above us.

The drop on the right knew

for they had nothing remained to lose
but the exhilaration of forbiddance.

I Killed A Mosquito

Chan Nok Rosy

It left a black smear on the table, hair-thin legs sticking out.
They say a lesser person would reincarnate into animals
To pay for their sins in a previous life.
So have I killed what was once a man?
Perhaps someone I have once met,
Having walked past them on an ordinary day,
Never knowing they would be my victim, and me their killer.
Yet I eat meat and vegetables every day.
We feast on corpses of the dead, trade lives for a life
For every instance we breath and rejoice and live.
A man is smaller than a speck of dust in the universe,
Yet pick a flower and you destroy a world.
So how should we claim our innocence?
Adam and Eve have sinned before their taste of the forbidden fruit.

Of What Remains (After Percy B. Shelley's Ozymandias)

Chan Tsz Chun Cyrus

Sitting motionless with R'lyeh and Atlantis
Is the endless ocean floor, let alone to live and breathe.
Upon it nameless fishes slip by, their tails of tulle
Kicking up the sand and dust, which soon settled.
Who is there to see the dance Ozymandias just performed?
Who is there to witness the swirls of brown and black?
What is left of all the statue's glory now
Soundly sleeps with ashes of the Sherden crowd,
Ground by the sea, smooth for countless moons.

Centuries passed and just the mystery remains.
Perhaps the Nubians, who stood before the King of Kings,
Who still drowns in their memories, would smile if they had known
The sea, uninvited and hushed, was moving.
Its waters nibbling at the desert travelers crossed.

Mice

Chan Tsz Chun Cyrus

Little creature, you trod on the air you breathed,
And stirred the earth on which you were born.
The ragged and winding path
Could scarcely pin down your body.

Like a locomotive riding on tracks,
You scurried on quivering legs.
Did oblivion caress your tail?
Or was it a prey that you were after?

Alas, if only my words could penetrate
The labyrinth of rye you had also thrown yourself into.
This murky, yellowish sea held nothing but
The false reflection of the glimmering sun.

Foreign Sailing

Chan Tsz Chun Cyrus

A splinter on the oar parted with its family
And seeded itself in my skin.
I looked at it through a veil of mist that
Rose from the rolling waves,
The same haze that engulfed albatrosses and mariners alike.
The boat rocked as a school of fish danced around us,
Only to get caught in the flames that the setting sun had cast down.
Amidst the fire, they dispersed,
Each drifting along in the sea
From boat to boat to boat.

colours

Chan Tsz Ying Vanessa Daphne

what's sadness to you?

the whole spectrum of colours.

how so?

sadness could come in cobalt blue
or solid ebony.
anything really.

that doesn't make any sense.

sometimes, you have a great day, you're exhilarated,
over the moon, and at eleven fifty-nine you feel a little twinge
that tells you the day is over.
that would be a pastel pink, the redness of your happiness dying down.
and sometimes, sadness comes in huge waves,
crashing into you over and over,
the waves cascading down your face,
staining your pillow as you try to suppress the currents in your mind,
the force knocking against your chest.
and that, that'd be a cobalt blue.

colours

i don't agree with you.

why?

you talk about pastel pink.

but what about the vibrant yellow when you throw your head back and
laugh at the joke you've just heard?

what about the rich purple when your heart swells with joy at hearing good
news?

you talk about cobalt blue, but what about the pastel blue afterwards when
the waves calm down and someone is able to stop even the smallest of
ripples?

or sandy brown, the colour of knowing that people are here beside you and
will never be washed away even when you're a storm?

you have a point, i suppose

but i can't comment because i don't think i've felt those colours.

last time i checked

last time i checked

Chan Tsz Ying Vanessa Daphne

last time i checked
we were in each other's arms
last time i checked
we were whispering sweet nothings
last time i checked
we were living in bliss

and just now i checked
you
with her
without a care
in the world

last time i checked
we were in love

last time i checked



Drawing by K. K. Cheng

Suffering

Charmaine Tin

Gate gate paragate

Striking pain down my spine
My intestines intertwine
Every part of my body whines
Torment only intensifies
Itai! Itai! The veins in my eyes
Dyed into carmine from my cries
Am I blind or am I not justified
To find a strand of silver line?

Parasamgate

Harness my consciousness
Suppress my sentience
Then I will be blessed
With the endless numbness
To feel less of the stress, less of a mess
Nonetheless what I cannot evanesce
In the process towards bodiless
Is my loneliness and the meaningless of my life

Suffering

Bodhi svaha

I can't! Can't escape from the voice inside
Pestering that my pain would never subside
Not until the end of my lifetime
Spare me divine!
Thine ideology could not save my mind
I will define an own doctrine of mine
There I will be fine
I will no longer be hopeless to survive

Sunshower

Chiu Yi Nga

Walking in my converse highs
Jumping across puddles
Skipping on pebbles
Scarce raindrops on my forehead

I touched my wet skin to confirm the sensation
Then I realized I was looking down too much
And forgot what color the sky was
How I had embraced it, soaring my sight

So I lifted my head
Before my neck turned into stone
Finding myself under a clear of blue river between
Heavy grey waves and floating white sheep

I challenged myself
To escape the rain
I ran towards a sunny day
And there goes the dripping coldness I left behind
After I embraced the sky above
Held my head high up

Chemistry Is A Joke

Duma Cheng

My teacher said, "Chem-is-try"
To which everybody let out a yawn
Elementary science is boring
Before a load of carbon-copies and fonts
Reactive halogens are flooring
Dropping F-bombs across the pond
The teacher wants us to be active
To share with each other, to form strong bonds
But most of us give no reaction
Like neon lights, after class we are gone
When basic solutions demand concentration
No wonder my grades have been failing

I only find atoms intriguing
When broken down on a molecular field
And sing: Element, Oxygen, Phosphorous
Going around on their ferret wheels
Iron Man is made Female
Attracting strangers with an electric gaze
I look at the tuna crawling in the seas
Knowing not the joke is in my face

For William H. Gass said, "The true alchemists
do not change lead into gold;
They change the world into words.'
So let all be sung and be told!
(I am not elaborate with prose.)

.....
(Now let's do some rapping.)

Hong Kong Daze

A Homophonous Rap Challenge by Duma Cheng

Sample this track about Hong Kong days
While I sample and track my own Hong Kong days
Feel how it's like living Hong Kong days
And feel how it's like leaving Hong Kong dazed

You greet the barista, getting brews to go
Like you are hit by a ballista, get a bruise to go
You show off your phone, it's something new, enhanced
Which you'll soon trade away for something new in hand

Coursing the streets sipping mocha, stop and go
Cars in the streets sit like mock-ups, stop-and-go
Then you receive an important call
But not about what's in your future, a portent call

You're after Pikachu, playing Pokémon Go
While others peek at you, plain poking and go
You caught a legendary! Feeling great, on a roll
But then you trip over a storm drain grate on the road

You've broken a bone, keep your eyes to the road, man
Put ice on your toe and be nice to the roadman

This is the city that I love
This is the city that I laugh
About the city that I laugh
About's the city that I love

Hong Kong Daze

Sample this track about Hong Kong days
While I sample and track my own Hong Kong days
Feel how it's like living Hong Kong days
And feel how it's like leaving Hong Kong dazed

Always been told when life gets tough going
He has to get up and then get tough, go in
Always been told that his quest's on the mark
But when given a question? He never questioned the mark

Day after day keeping up with the grind
And they after day keep him up with the grind
On stacks upon stacks of complementary notes
But are any of them really complimentary? No

He sweats bullets in a hall full of hordes
When no one sweats bullets when they haul fuller hoards
And then with flying colours, finally he passes
So he can fly to college finely, he passes –

They're waving at the bridge where he glances at his passes
He waves them at the bridge, never glancing back, he passes

This is the city that I love
This is the city that I laugh
About the city that I laugh
About's the city that I love

Hilltop

Duma Cheng

It's like the world just dawned upon a lying wife
As curious cries echo a silent night
Out comes a boy with the ambition to know
And that desire only broadens as he listens and grows
He set his sights out on the skies and distant seas
Trying to surmise on what his eyes can read and see
The kid would embark on a journey of discovery
He's needless for blessings from Hermes or Mercury
He's a traveller acting as if no repentance is given
Making an entrance indeed in the most adamant manner and
If hell or heaven's ever present on this world
Then you better reckon that he'd venture into them

Because he's an adventurer
His memory is his mentor
Still remembered what his mother had said
He's an adventurer
His stamina generates with momentum
Not stopping 'til he's reached the world's end

Because he's an adventurer
His memory is his mentor
Still remembered what his mother had said
He's an adventurer
His stamina generates with momentum
Not stopping 'til he's reached the world's end

Hilltop

He's got a thirst for knowledge
Traversing forests to search and forage for food for thought
Through the lot he explored from the smallest of molecules
To the tallest of monuments of historic importance
And what horror that haunts them
Purged from glory by wars
Or swallowed by a scourge that's dormant:
A burst of warmth from the earth's surface
Is all that he's ever scratched
And the world's enormous

But all of a sudden, he had done it
He's up on the summit
From which he's seen most of the world's wonders
And was planning his next course when someone
Slipped him a letter, it was out of the common
As the long chain of words begged for his correspondence
It's none other than his own mother
He has journeyed alone
And now he's yearning for home

Hilltop



Drawing by K. K. Cheng

Hilltop

So he did that
And he was welcomed, greeted, and treated
Like a visitor
His prayers were met with indifference
As not a single face thought him familiar
This place bears no resemblance
In a flash of remembrance
Of the place that he once called home
His heart sinks to the ground
As the sun goes down
The dreaded moment when he finally knows

'Cause he's an adventurer
His memory's been his mentor
Still remembered what his mother had said
He's an adventurer
His stamina generates with momentum
Hasn't stopped 'til he's reached the world's end
He's an adventurer
He's tempered by temperature
And he could comprehend what those actual words meant
He's an adventurer
He'd avenge for everything that he's learnt
Knowing he's nothing when he's at the world's end

My U-life

Ho Yan Wing

Was filled with staying in rooms after rooms with strangers, listening to talks given by people with nicer clothes while scribbling on papers

Was filled with staring at graphs and numbers which made my consciousness drifted away

Was filled with days and nights cramping equations and formulas which would probably be done by software in actual workplace inside my brain

Was filled with Fridays where I was forced to wake up early and came back to campus for ceremonies I would kill to leave

Was filled with nailing a soft-shell turtle's head on to a wooden board before forcefully pulling its body down to expose its neck, blood splattered everywhere

Was filled with sense of sleepwalking in a white, never-ending maze

Got better as I gained control over my time, bit by bit

Got clearer as I learnt my preferences based on experiences

Got easier as I got the privilege to choose ahead

Is now filled with conversations in utter silence, focus on the hands and face

Is now filled with character design sheets I made for those living inside my mind

Is now filled with footages where I was an annoying rumor machine or a caring friend

Is now filled with scripts I wrote for a mental health campaign, for a kid radio drama series, for myself

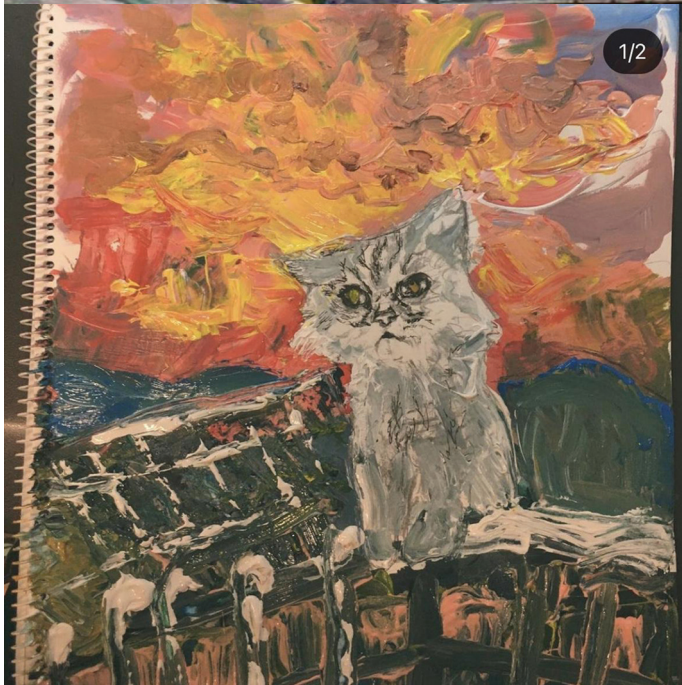
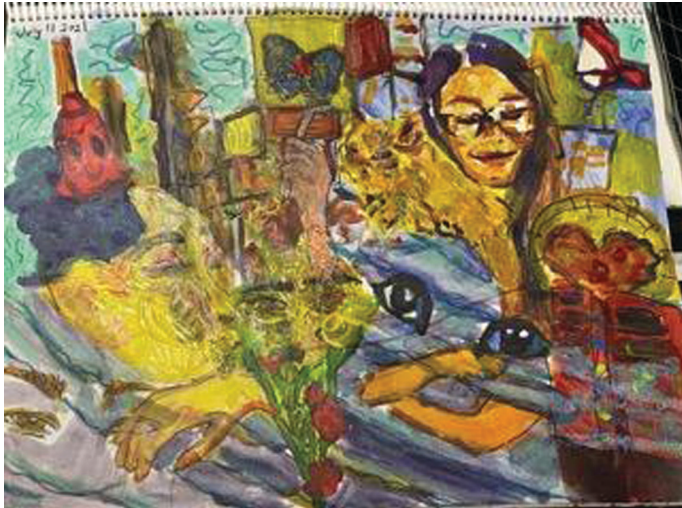
Is now filled with lyrics I wrote with my friends in hope of tearing off labels on people like me, people with broken hearts

Is now filled with sense of standing upright with my head high



Blue whistling thrush - Leung Wei Nam Kylie

Photographs of Me



Drawings by Joyce Chung

Photographs of Me

Joyce Chung

‘Another turning point...’

Ten-year-old me chants this at Clearwater Bay School.

A decade later these words are still analysed, reassembled

Into images of a past life. She performs a new melody.

So much depends upon an educated daughter, yet

I struggle to recall the sound of what recess break meant to her.

Who am I having lunch with today? Why are you moving away?

I have asked my friends but these questions go unanswered.

I have never been good with new beginnings.

The clock rings in my ears

It is time to wake up, I brush my teeth. Evening

Is a time of confusion and casts shadows onto the ground

Are we in Shatin or in Dream-Land? Joyce plays here

With Gabby, who never left us from hepatic failure.

No longer does she have lethargy

Nor the untouched kitty kibble in her bowl.

Here she sits with us, full of energy.

She has my heart.

I am still a child.

My words pay tribute

To my modern expedition, looking for these

Photographs of me.

“Another turning point, a fork stuck in the road

Time grabs you by the wrist, directs you where to go

So make the best of this test, and don’t ask why

It’s not a question, but a lesson learned in time.”

- Good Riddance (Time of Your Life) by Green Day.

From the Compost

Joyce Chung

Hour one.

Your tongue's rolling out of your mouth
You tell me to stop filming you
Corners of the mouth upturned, you are trying hard to not smile
Behind us, the Amstel flows. Bicycle bell jingles in the distance.

Hour two.

Restaurant one, restaurant two, we're going in and out
Waving along the streets, back and forth,
Figures in the shape of balloon-heads, okay, here we go—
We chow down on apple strudels and creamed corn.
We prattle, babble to the other, to the waiter, about the weather.

Hour three.

Like pools of water on porcelain,
Her-Self narrates the experience in the third person:
She levitates.
A man and a boy
Are one.
A man and a boy and Her-Self
Are one.
Soundly, he is next to me.
They talk but we cannot remember.

From the Compost

Hour four.

And now you try your handful of notes, the furrowed brow bulges,
Your clear vowels are born not of standing still,
They are yellow like a sunflower, like the vibrations of a glass of water,
Like the peace of pastures, vast and inscrutable
They imprint on our foreheads.
Arbitrary lightness gallops in, bellowing like the trumpet that blares piercing
cries,
Through Silences where Worlds and Folklore transcend;
Eye, the Cauldron of morning.

Shipyards of Cheung Chau

Joyce Chung

Once, a crinkled blouse and Doctor Kong's is worn.
A backpack is carried on her shoulders.
They are glazed with perspiration,
Submerged by a teacher's expectation;
A solemn pre-meditation.

Today, art class is held in Cheung Chau.
Classroom confines are crumbling since we
Indulge in our senses like a playground:
Against the concerto of scrapes and groans, of brown rust's
Resistance on the geometric metal axel.
Shouts of ferry-boy and boat-repair man.
The heat, the sweat, the pungent odor of fish markets.
A sensual airiness curses out automation and gasoline.

Ten years later, there goes our art-lessons.
And there goes middle school, senior year, sophomore class.
At the end of her memories rests a shipyard of Cheung Chau. It
Scowls into the abyss of that girl's memory.

That backpack has been worn, torn, shredded, given away,
It finds itself unmounted, unseated from little girl's perception.
It rests on a yard of metal, paper, cardboard, where is the ship:
Where are the bikes? The Peter Pan-children, forever exploring,
Are out of her hands, someone else will take care of it now.
Let the shipyard lie untouched, like a kept promise.

Shipyards of Cheung Chau



Drawing by Joyce Chung

O Clouds

Kosain Sardar

Cotton boats rolled over in the blue sky,
Like the ones carrying hopeful crowds,
Back in mid-July.

Who do I share my despair with, O clouds?
To whom do I share these concerns
Of them being wrapped in white linen shrouds,

By the time that I return.
O clouds, as you travel the seven seas,
Say hello to those I yearn.

People here hurt me so deeply,
These raindrops are tears for those whose backs are turned.
I left my hometown so naively.

And now I am burnt
How living far away from love is possible,
Wish I learnt.

This Poem is Temporary

Kosain Sardar

This poem is temporary,
It ceases to exist when you stop reading.
I am a poet, only momentarily,
Until my pen runs out of ink.

Tomorrow, there will be better poets,
Who depict the lure of blossoming flowers,
Petals dancing in the wind,
Or maybe mourning the end of spring.
But they too, will be temporary.

Tomorrow, there will be better narrators,
That will ignite fire in your heart,
Produce flames that will lick and tickle you,
And maybe leave a trail behind too.
But it will also be temporary.

Tomorrow, there will be better listeners than you,
Better readers, who devour hundreds
Of stories, consume thousands of books
And maybe have their own little reading nooks.
But don't worry, it's temporary.

I wish someone would remember me tomorrow.
But I'm only a poet for a moment or two
With poems that cease to exist, with me and you.

Home

Lai Sze Ki

In shards and splinters they stood alone,
within the harrowing darkness.
Not a sentence could they mutter,
In a den formerly known as their shelter.
As brittle and bare a heart could be,
He who had endured stood valiantly.
Catching yet another glimpse of the torched mantelpiece
Not a speck remained of the golden fleece.

Colours of Revolution

Lau Wing Man

They tainted the city into a canvas
Hues of crimson dripping at the shots fired
Arcs of aqua blue gushing to mark their preys guilty
Fogs of smothering grey misting to hide sins and violence

Crowds of black solidarity holding umbrellas of sanguine gold
Flags of the palette waving chants of heartfelt desperation
Blocks of brick-red concrete and walls of colored hope

Who can save the juveniles from surrounding pawns of green?
What is left to do but mourn with white ribbons of pristine?

The Puddle

Lee Tsz Yan Grace

A resolution.
A remain of what happened earlier,
A world trapped inside.
A mirror.

The sky is captured down there,
You don't even have to look up.

Down into the pool I stare,
At you staring back,
At me.

A leaf falls, someone trespasses
A distorted realm.
Our shadows finally connected.

But how long, I ask
Would it last?
The sun's done hiding.

Light dawns again, and
I pulled back.
No
One can escape.

The Puddle



Fork-tailed sunbird by Leung Wei Nam Kylie

The Faerie King

Leung Wei Nam Kylie

Hidden deep in the woods, in a grassy plain,
There stands a circle— a faerie ring,
That all should evade, or so they say,
Least you be stolen by the Fae.

If you walk in the woods in a starless night,
When the trees are quiet and the shadows long.
You may see the fair folk, hands clasped together,
Smiling and chanting their bewitching song.

*Come, come, you human child,
To the wind and the woods and the wild.
Where the air is sweet and the grass is green,
Where the sky is clear and the lakes are clean.
For your trees will fall and your sea is rising,
For your ruin is near, your world is blazing.
Come, come, you human child,
When you have none to lose and much to gain,
Come and step into the faerie ring.*

If you step into the woods with tired eyes,
When your world is grieving for childhood dreams long gone.
You may see the fair folk, sitting in a circle,
Feasting and humming their enchanting song.

The Faerie King

*Come, come, you human child,
To the wind and the woods and the wild.
Where we search under rainbows for pots of gold,
Fly with butterflies and eat berries, sweet and cold.
For your world is held in the hands of the unjust,
You strive and strive just to watch your dreams grind to dust.
Come, come, you human child,
When you have none to lose and much to gain,
Come and step into the faerie ring.*

If you run through the woods with blackened cheeks and bloodied wrists,
When screams and tears fill your house all day long.
You may see the fair folk, dancing hand in hand,
Laughing and singing their alluring song.

*Come, come, you human child,
To the wind and the woods and the wild.
Where there's only bliss and no more tears,
And forget your worries; you'll find none here.
For your world is cruel and full of sorrow,
For you're weeping in a world that is blind to your troubles.
Come, come, you human child,
When you have none to lose and much to gain,
Come and step into the faerie ring.*

Do not go near, or so they say,
For the faerie ring's a dangerous place.
But when your only desire's to fade away,
When you're failing to smile through your tears of pain,
You'll step over the mushrooms, red and growing,
And leave the world to its burning.
When you have none to lose and much to gain,
You will step into the faerie ring.

Your Protagonist

Li Hiu Man Agnes

Your cursives smelt of pine
Bounded carelessly to a clean sheet of paper
I used to be entangled in the words
In many wondrous forms
As a primadonna, a savage, perhaps a dream.

The sound of your audience applauding
Your charming nod, humble smiles
Nobel prize in Literature
Another added to your collection of trophies.

Your corrections beautify me
I could never be perfect enough for you
God loves his creation
Yet my god does not

You have given me a form to exist
To be appreciated, to be adored
Yet would it be so little of me to ask for more?

As Jorge's tired hands stopped writing
And the ink in the vase dried up
I was finally complete
In the streets of Calle Maipu.

The Taste of You

Li Hiu Man Agnes

I taste sweet chardonnay.
We bought it for 70 dollars at Watsons
and savored it as if it was the best from Italy.

I taste bitter Stella.
Gulping it continuously along the chants.
Chug, chug, chug...
The aftertaste was your scent
as you carried me home.

I taste sour lemon.
Crashing into that burning tequila in my throat.
You pressed its skin tightly against my lips.
Stinging vigorously, pulling me back to consciousness.

I taste spiced mulled wine
and that drip of blood as you bit your lips.
Christmas gatherings were your favorite.
At least that's what I thought.

I taste salty whiskey.
I remember you said "one could never do whiskey
without Amy Winehouse and a heavy rain".
I guess you have forgotten to add you to the list.

I taste vodka.
It tastes like vodka
Nothing more.

A Halloween Story

Lui Long Yin

A sea of faces
on the 31st of October
attempting to incite fear
under the guise of
blood-thirsty vampires attempting to drain your soul
cacklin' witches luring you from the warmth of home
demonic nuns driving you away from the path of churchgoers for the next
three years
and zombified infants who'll make you petrified of babies wherever you go.

And yet
none more blood-curdling
than what rests
underneath their disguises,
Pump,
pump,
pump.
the trick-or-treating human heart.

Infinite Wisdom

Ma Sai Wing Ryan

Because none can hope to compare
Because everything has its purpose
Because he sees farther than us
Because all will be answered soon
And it is all part of the plan

For one day we shall dance and sing
And the sun will shine and birds will chirp
And the greenbacks will be thrown out the window
And that day is so far yet so close
And it is all part of the plan

Don't count your stacks of paper
Don't waste time chasing skirts
Don't cry when storm clouds fill the sky
Don't ask when your heart burns
For it is all part of the plan, you see,
It is all part of the plan.

You/Your

Maria Rosario Clarizza Limbo Catingan

I want to kiss the space between your eyes.
the bow you stole from Venus
is but a whisper away from my fever-stricken skin.

you refuse to let me feel the pads of your rough-looking palms,
leaving me on my knees,
begging for your filthy soggy scraps—
you remind me of a father's mahogany desk, a daunting obstacle
you remind me of the quiet pause between condolences, nothing but a
platitude
you remind me of the light seeping through His stained glass, the one I call
reverently pious

had I known your incisors would create a carved shallow valley down my back,
I would've pulled your borrowed arrow when it first grazed my fingertips.
but then again, I would have never felt the proximity of you.

now I know why the moth was drawn to the brightness—
now I know why Icarus flew too close to the sun—
now I know why the little match girl was so enamoured by the flame—

for it burned so brightly, forcing me to close my eyes,
ceasing everything to exist.
for it burned so brightly, the pain too much to bear, numbing me from the
others.
for it burned so brightly, my skin melting like your vacant promise,
leaving only my skeleton in the closet.

and when the blaze of fire is put out by the waft of your incredulous giggle,
I will go on a quest looking for its prized scalding burn.

Your Oxfords Hold Power Over Me

Maria Rosario Clarizza Limbo Catingan

the incessant pounding eats me up—
picking apart my flesh piece by piece.
the globes of your gaze spin on their wheels rapidly as if you're damned,
as if you're running out of time—
velvet blood pools right beneath your feet,
I can only yearn for something like Achilles' ichor,
giving me my lifeline; instead I'm served the heel on a silver platter.

I savour the elongated talons cradling my head—
so perfectly positioned in between the tapering silhouette of seemingly gentle
hands—
they terrify me, so in control of your movements.

but if you snap the crown back—
letting my crest rest by your oxfords—
maybe i'll end up worshipping the ground you walk on.

This Is How I Explain It

(In response to Sabrina Benaim's Explaining Depression To Your Mother)

A Slam Poetry by Maria Rosario Clarizza Limbo Catingan

Depression is like an awkward silence. It hangs in the air. It makes you scramble for topics and small talk and words and anything that will fill the gaping hole you've dug up for yourself.

Depression is when you're on the train and your mother calls to say that the man who raised you has died. But you can't cry. You have midterms tomorrow.

Depression grows its own arms: Long limbs grabbing you from behind. The touch of its skin sets a fire that oppresses you. Strangles you. Suffocates you.

Depression grows its own legs: It chases you from behind. Loud thuds of its feet warn us it knows how to walk—how to run.

Depression is faceless, but it has a silhouette. It dominates your shadow on the pavement; Making your heart thump wildly in your chest. Making your feet walk faster and faster in panic. But you can't stop. You promised to make it to your best friend's birthday party.

Depression is associated with food. You stuff your mouth with chips and junk to stop yourself from choking up because you're in public and damn it would be awkward to cry in front of people who don't give a damn.

Depression makes you so numb you need a mood ring to tell you how you feel. Are you orange? Pink? Or blue? You rake your nails down your arms to feel even the slightest prick of pain. And you decide your colour is definitely red.

This is How I Explain It

Depression says I was raised on a heavy diet of regrets, consequences of consequences and blue pills and whatever bullshit science came up with.

People say I will be okay. People say I will get over it. People say it's just a phase. People say therapy will help. I say depression is like the quiet pause between condolences. You don't know what to say. Words are nothing but platitudes. Depression renders words meaningless. Depression reduces Merriam-Webster to nothing. Depression makes my English degree useless. Depression whispers in my ear: it's so easy to make it stop.

But I can't because I have an essay due in two days.

A Soliloquy of 134340

Martha Yu

I do not wish to be forgotten or excluded.

I see people gushing about me on television
yet it just sends my heart to the fridge.

Helios is at the center,
looking at everyone dancing around him
with his scorching hot gaze.

I am one of the background dancers,
and he is one in a million.

Ross Geller screams *I'M FINE* while walking on ice barefooted.

No one talks about me on television.

I want to be red or blue like others.

But I am just a dim-lighted dwarf.

I used to have a name,
now I am just 134340.

I think I will never forgive Eris.

Here is what I do next:
Peel myself away from Eris.
Loathe the entire universe.
Utter all my if-onlys.
Trash myself.
Orbital.

A Soliloquy of 134340

I am a puppet without its puppeteer
because of my incompetence.

Exclusion happens within a snap of a finger and is soundless.

The tree is not evergreen, but I am.

If he is asking me how I am, then I will say *I'm Fine*.

This morning, I am circling around him,
and this evening, my body tells me to stop moving,
and just

freeze

It will slowly defrost my heart,
but I am never a rebel
so

I am still circulating around him,
and he still gives me light
as little as usual,
only I am now a serial code.

Words from the Prophet

Martha Yu

Picture this –

Seeds of cellophane flowers scattering over the fields,
yellow and green rain falling from the marmalade marshmallows,
flashes of neon light stabbing trees on the streets.

Be warned –

If you continue to hear without listening and carry on,
what you'll see is no longer your imagination.

I ensure you,

a kaleidoscope will slowly creep into your vision.

It will be too late to listen.

The Hands I Clung To When I Still Sucked My Thumb

Martha Yu

He told me,
To rock the guitar solo in Stairway to Heaven
is like touching your nose with your tongue!

Yet he did not stop plucking the strings
Though he was drained from the 4 am to 2 pm shift every day.
During my growth spurt, he could play to the chorus.

Thirty years of repetitive contact with tin-plated steel,
Had made his fingertips covered with yellowish calluses –
Lumpy to touch, but warm and strong.

Then, the skin of his hands has started to become translucent,
And wrinkles and spots have begun to develop.
He has never shaved in a hurry since I turned 18.

When I was 18, the chorus became a foreign language to him;
When I was 19, the first verse was an ex-neighbor he remembered so fondly
but can't name;
When I was 20, the prelude he played so melodically countless times sounded
fragmented.

His fingers are no longer covered with calluses
And his companion for over thirty years
is now an outcast standing in our living room.

Tung⁴ Lou⁶ Jan⁴

Ng Po Shing

We are waterdrops
We never drift apart

You empower me, I empower you
You feed on me, I feed on you

We are interchangeable
We are inseparable
We are infinite
We are stronger than granite

You replace me when I am sick
You cover me when I am hurt
You lift me up when I doubt the fate
You mourn for me when I pass away

If a tunnel denies us
We go another way flexibly
If a rock blocks us
We together hit it fiercely

We are waterdrops
We never drift apart

Fortune-altering Massages

Poon Hok Ching

Gloomy sky and neon lights
Fortune-changing foot massages
Upward narrow stairs the parlor
Girls awaiting their next buyer

Turn right and go up the stairs
First floor Room B's price is fair
Fair, smooth-skinned, silky and pretty
Local and mainland dimpled beauty

Windows shielded by pink paper
Yellow laundry trapped in the air
Dancing red flags outside the parlor
Patriotic red-light worker

La Reconquista de la Cruz

Rabindra Gurung

Waving Saint George's Cross
with victory parades;
prayers lost in hell
fall prey to the men's pride,
leaving Dios betrayed.

Beyond the white Cielo,
filled with the stench of blood;
tears dropped from Heaven
burn all staunch infidels,
on crosses they get judged.

Ma

Sit Man Ching

Shiny grey strands and wrinkles,
Lessons of time
but she has been the worst teacher
Ever.

She's stubborn
Says "never" to changes

But still
as an anchor in my sea of mind
Calms the ocean, smooth out ripples
Soft and gentle
Always.

Nostalgia

Sit Man Ching

That day after lunch
casually spending time
reminiscing the time spent

On a cartoon of superman:
A mask,
a cry,
crossing hands
and those were my superpowers

Heroes don't last forever;
Will a dreamer?

Monologue of a Poem

Tsang Yuen Man

I'll remain a blank slate
Until you engrave me with strokes.
On paper do run after mirage
Even if the game of life is a hoax.

Make me the burning fuel
that illuminate someone's soul.
Turn me into a meal
Full of spices in tone and trope.

How eager I am to be known,
to be heard and remembered –
For I too am inimitably
The monologue of every writer.

Some Calls My Survival a Blessing—That Has Yet to be Determined

Wong Hoi Yiu

I still remember her holding me against her chest,
Sharp bones digging into my ribs in ways all wrong.
And the scattered red lines across her arms
Which kept her on her feet only for so long.

That's all I can remember about her:
What can you expect from a one-year-old?
And what can you expect from a teenage girl,
With a life she could no longer behold?

The flickering flames by our feet were cold and soft,
Its poisoned clouds shimmering and twisting with his sweet kiss,
Darkening our sun-soaked room into a moonless night,
His lullaby rhythm luring her to a brutal bliss.

I screamed for days afterwards.
People only shouted at me to shut up beyond the door.
It wasn't until I at last stopped screaming,
When they at last bothered to look and explore.

Some Calls My Survival a Blessing—That Has Yet to be Determined

They said it was the drowsy smoke that killed her,
But they didn't know that she had been slowly dying
Ever since she had felt the little kick in her belly:
The final blow in her brief, weary life of suffering.

She used to dream of raising a child with love,
To dance and laugh beneath silver moonbeams.
But it was the honeyed dream of a girl long, long, gone,
For I was the birth and death of all her dreams.

They called her a monster
For what she had attempted to do.
“This sort of mother is better off dead.”
“She's a goddamn monster. True, true.”

But looking back, I cannot bring myself to hate her.
For she was just a child so small
Who had escaped to hell with hope swelling in her heart,
And I wish I had gone with her, before the tragedies befall.

All Things Made New

Wong Sze Wing

The screen before me changed as I swiped.
A study on memory.
Vibrant images flickered
from Autumn to Summer,
from withering to blossoming,
from two smiley faces to one,
All things made new, and so
I lose my way to you.

The Void

Wong Sze Wing

Logging on to class where
a sea of black squares appear
instead of vivid faces.

PowerPoint slides take over the screen:
monotonous speeches,
joyless interactions,
awkward glitches –
all disconnecting us from
our pixelated vision
that takes toll
on me, unable to dawn over new ideas, and
on him, shouting into his laptop
getting no response from the void.

In My Sister's Room

Yeung Pui Yan

Echo hits the wall as I called out my sister's name.
Her response hidden by the whirl of plane.
Cut the mooncake, so sweet is the custard like her.
Till her silhouette vanished, I realized she isn't here
And left the unfinished half cold in the fridge.
Though soon rots with mould, it's always for her.
People share scent of tea with beloved one out there.
And I am a bitter loner in my sister's room.
Dry wind blows me back to autumn two years ago,
When her bright smile gleamed through lantern flame.

In My Sister's Room



Common Kingfisher by Leung Wei Nam Kylie

Cycle of Depression

Au Yeung Sze Uen

lights and have a cup of coffee in the café and turn
traffic out
green to
amber find
red myself
the still
cross I am
to trapped
elevator in
the a
take big
and city
desk my on documents of piles the escape I where

Cycle of Depression

free

Robin Hood Dolly

Au Yeung Sze Uen

The robin hood dolly I preserved in my drawer
is no more but
Contracts or a calculator
And the red feather was gone and the hazel hat became tatty long ago
The greenish clothes were worn in a giant washing machine named 'city'
No longer will I say,
"Goodnight my friend. See you next morning" as I kissed it at night
It's a lie and the opposite of reality for sure
And the dolly is a torn sock, useless souvenir, and black banana skin
Salary is a supporting table, handy microwave, and comfortable bed
It was in the grey city
That my dolly was washed away like dust and ashes
I could never ever see...

But sometimes I do try to unlock the drawer in my remembrance and
secretly reverse its fate...

Robin Hood Dolly

I could never ever see...

That my dolly was washed away like dust and ashes

It was in the grey city

Salary is a supporting table, handy microwave, and comfortable bed

And the dolly is a torn sock, useless souvenir, and black banana skin

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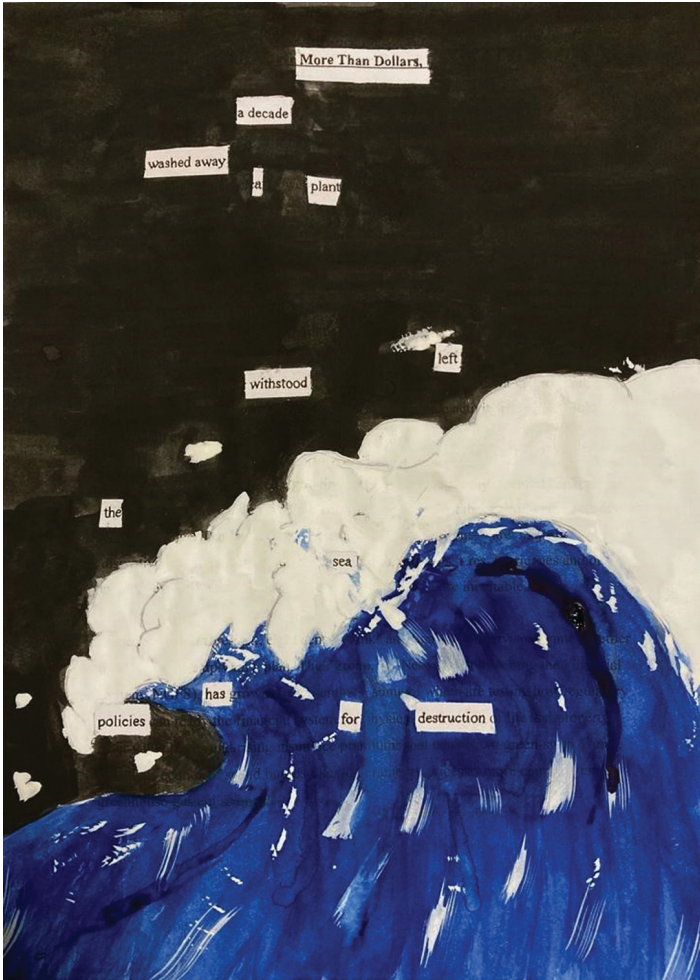
Contracts or a calculator

is no more but

The robin hood dolly I preserved in my drawer

More Than Dollars

Bhavani Chandrasekar



A decade washed away
a plant left withstood
the sea has policies for destruction.

People's Republic of Earth

Rabindra Gurung

Stars align in harmony
The red rays above the sky arrive
Hammers strike impartially
With great hope the rest of us can thrive
Sickles hook on destiny
Where free men and women slowly hive
Souls will merge in unity
The grassroots dictate and Kings they thrive
All is fair in sanity
Our life goal is more than just survive
Space awaits humanity
Annul lands below and push the drive
Dream beyond the galaxy
A new dawn emerges to deprive
People of identity
From strong commune love and peace derive

Sword-cut

Rabindra Gurung

...

Okay

Hey dear

Please text me

What's going on?

Just stop ignoring me

Where have you been?

I don't understand at all

I have been waiting here

Is it something that I did?

I am so sorry for whatever

I've done that has hurt you

There will be no next time

I am still waiting for you

This is such a torture to me

Give me a second chance

Wouldn't you forgive me?

Don't I deserve no mercy?

Am I just a clown to you?

You got to stop being such

An entitled, selfish piece of

unimportant, unoriginal, uneducated, uncultured, unreliable,
irresponsive, irresponsible, irrational, irrepressible, irrelevant,
dishonest, disingenuous, dishonorable, dissatisfied, disgraceful,

Love that I swear to protect

For an eternity I shall wait

Until a reply finally comes

To hear you say you're fine

See your face with a fresh smile

"You'll Get Better After Some Time"

"You'll Get Better After Some Time"

Tsang Yuen Man

They say time assuages, heals and gives – the lie we get used to live with

How is it possible when pain grows with age, in a louder silence?

Keep on rushing, escaping, hiding, worrying, regretting

For everything that are always too early or late

Do not look **back**, for **time does** not wait

You never get refund on old times

Be prepared to be suffered

Yesterdays are more

Tomorrow is less

Submerged

Drowned

Trapped

Trapped

Tortured

Castigated

Memory is kept

Only **Loneliness** is left

The past **may never** be a past

What a placebo **effect**, yet won't last

Time to recognize **our fear** of remembering

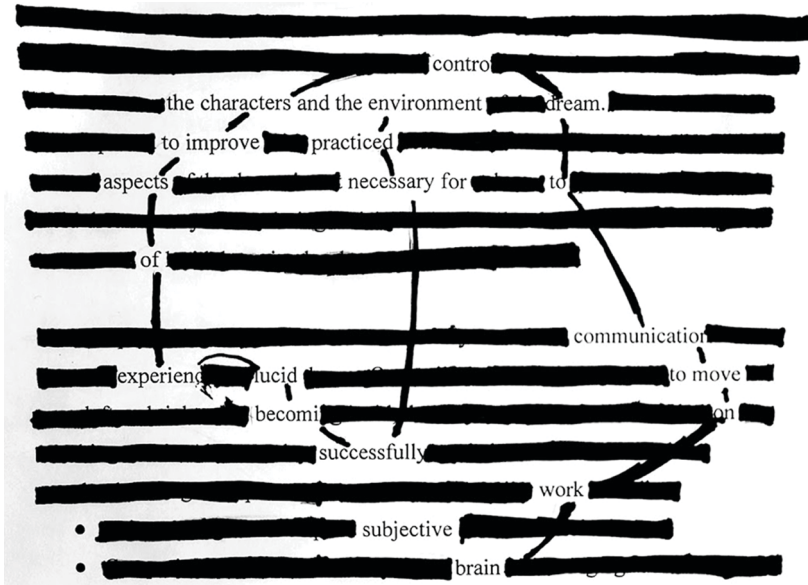
Hey what if, snow **hasn't melted** even in Spring?

"Don't panic. You still **have time**." – It's never enough

Things change when time flies; wound just becomes a part of you
Between time lost, and a tomorrow that never comes, have we lived at all?

A Daydreaming Nurse in the Hospital

Tsui Yuen Ki Clary



Subjective brain works on to
move communication to
dream
Control the characters to
improve aspects of
experience
Lucidity successfully becomes
Necessary for
practiced environment

Writer's notes:

It is a bit hard to see but I tried to form the letter 'e' on the paper. Why 'e'? It is what my mind screams when there is a lot of work to do and I want to laze.

Damsel

Chiu Yi Nga

Sprout out of chaos.

Flowers in the concrete crack

Survived the dozer.

The Unsheltered Garden

Lui Long Yin

A brisk winter breeze

The flowers are withering

Trembling aspen leaves.

War

Tsang Yuen Man

The triumph of death -
Pristine fields are buried in
Bold flickering flames.

Traffic Rules for Pedestrians to Cross a Road

Au Yeung Sze Uen

It's fine to jaywalk.
When the light turns green, the road
Has only a dog.

How to Write a Poem

Chan Tsz Ying Vanessa Daphne

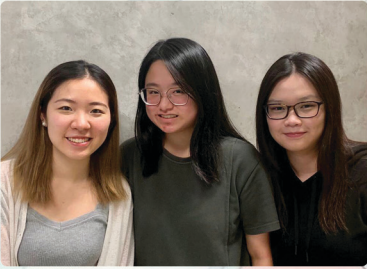
the cursor's blinking
my mind, the page, both empty
right, time to give up

A Message to Professor Eddie Tay

Rabindra Gurung

Dear Professor, by the time
You read this, I'll have found the rhyme
For writing this limerick without giving bootlick.
So, please, consider my work sublime.

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