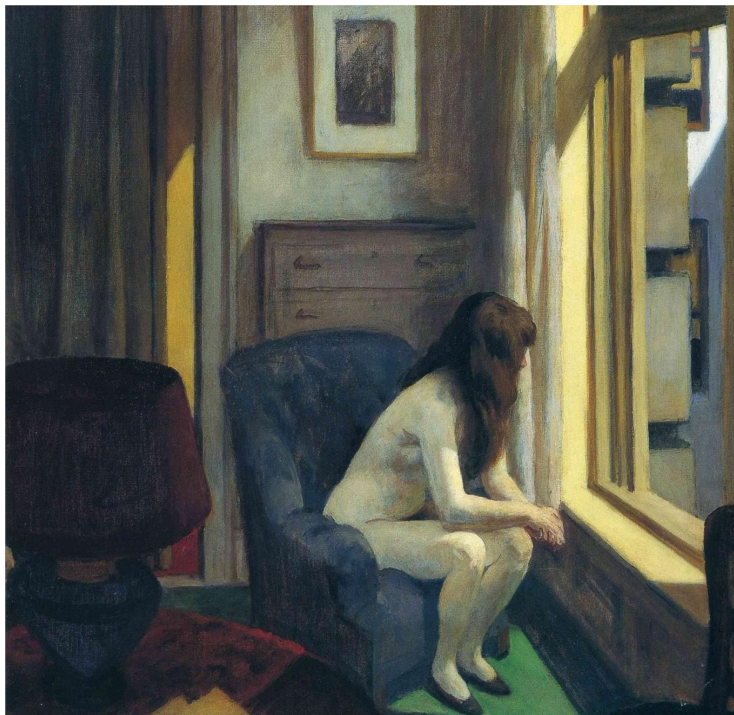


WONG YI Eva**Six Stories****Patient**

(After Edward Hopper, Eleven A.M., 1926)



I'm back in town, you say. It's good you're back, she says. But it's not good, you think. During the past two months, the virus has spread throughout Hong Kong. She and others who've been living in the city have moved past the initial frenzy of shock and panic buying, gradually adapting to daily life under the pandemic. They've even started letting down their guard, loosening their masks and venturing out on the streets again; you'd been in Australia, listening to her report such things for two months, always taking on the role of comforting her, constantly offering to send her hand sanitizer or a small gift to cheer her up, urging her to stay home as much as possible to avoid infection, and then, in mid-March, not long after White Day, the outbreak in Australia finally began to worry you both. When people all over the world started buying up toilet paper and advocating staying at home to fight the pandemic, your roles were reversed. Have you bought enough food? she asked. Can you buy masks in Australia? she asked. Australia's customs restrictions are so stringent—I can't send you any food. Please take good care of yourself, she said. You solemnly promised her, I will. I'll make it through graduation, and then I'll come back to Hong Kong and we'll "sweep street," hitting up all the good food places. I'm going to eat

fried stuffed three treasures, mango pomelo sago, buttered pineapple buns, and rice noodle rolls with sweet sauce, you said. Okay, when the outbreak is over, we'll go eat, she said. You talked to her over video, virtually hooking pinkies. A few days later, while you were still contemplating whether to be a dutiful daughter and heed your mother's advice to buy a plane ticket back to Hong Kong, seeking refuge like other overseas students, she said she saw that confirmed cases in Australia were continuing to climb, and she was concerned for your safety, and so that very day, you made up your mind to pack up your belongings and booked a room in a Hong Kong hotel that previously had been used to quarantine university students returning to the city from the mainland. The next day, you cocooned yourself in a windbreaker, gloves, glasses, and a mask and flew back to Hong Kong, every nerve on edge, embarking on your life of fourteen days of hotel self-quarantine.

It's good you're back, she says. You feel the same way when you close the hotel door. A few days later, Qantas goes as far as grounding all international flights—if you hadn't already returned to Hong Kong, you probably would've had to swim back. At least now you're both in the same city. Even if the whole world is caught in the same war-like disaster that's turned the planet on its head with absolutely no end in sight, at least you're back, and from now on you can live and die alongside her within the borders of the same city. She makes you promise her you won't set even half a foot outside the hotel for fourteen days. She'd rather use up a mask shopping for the numerous Hong Kong snacks and soft drinks you told her are your favorites, dropping them off at your hotel and asking the staff to deliver them to your door, tucking inside a few extra goodies to brighten your hotel stay: a card to boost your spirits, hand sanitizer, Japanese sheet masks, and nail polish. When you open the overstuffed plastic grocery bag, you can't help but sweetly smile and tear up at the same time: Doll pickled vegetable and pork instant rice noodles, Four Seas toasted seaweed, Sze Hing Loong dried seasoned cuttlefish, Vita lemon tea, and Garden Lemon Puff cookies—she's remembered them all. She says, C'mon, of course I remember! You think your hunch is really spot-on; she must like you too, since she remembers every word you've said, and you remember every word she's said.

And how you've really missed these foods. When you lived in Australia, your kitchen was never without Vita lemon tea and Nissin Demae ramen, but still, you could only miss the fresh deep-fried salt-and-pepper siu mai that was so hot it'd burn your mouth, a midnight street snack of lettuce and fish balls mixed with imitation shark fin soup, and her. Over and over, you've imagined how after coming back to Hong Kong, you'll chow down on all the foods you've missed, which cha chaan tengs and cart noodle shops you'll eat at, how you'll cling to her despite everything and not let go, telling her how much you've missed her, holding her and breathing deeply, but now that the outbreak has hit, your longing can only be prolonged. She thinks of herself as your quarantine officer: at a different time each day, she asks you to take photos proving that you're obediently staying inside the hotel. Of course, you know it's just an excuse for her to see your face day after day, and you're happy to play along. Every day you send her photos of your room service dishes and snack-filled afternoon tea and report your daily temperature—you even arrange to have dinner together over video chat, like a date between an astronaut and someone on earth. In the days when you can't leave your room and make personal contact with the streets of Hong Kong, she sends you familiar tastes so that as you eat, you can gaze out the window at the miniature streetscapes and city that conceals her silhouette, slowly absorbing the reality that you've really come back to Hong Kong. It's really good you're back, says she on the screen scarfing down take-out char siu pork and chicken on rice. Now that you're back, I can breathe easy, she says, smiling. You see she has ginger and scallions stuck in her teeth, but still, you think how elegant and beautiful she is.

You've never been so close to her as you are during quarantine—sunrise, sunset, separately eating meals together in the same time zone, keeping an eye on the same city's press conferences and number of confirmed cases, saying good morning and good night to each other every day, following the same routine, the same tide. When you wake up early in the morning unable to fight off jet lag, you check your phone that hasn't yet received her good morning message, counting all the street snacks you told her you hoped to eat before the pandemic broke out. You wanted to go with her to eat charcoal grilled egg waffles, seizing the opportunity of her holding her purse in one hand and a scorching egg waffle in the other to feed her a piece of hot, crispy waffle as though it were perfectly natural, and perhaps your fingers would graze her lips at last. Or, each of you could buy a cup of different-flavored bubble tea, then under the guise of taking a taste, indirectly kiss through straws, like two friends close enough to dispense with formalities, or newlyweds exchanging cups of wine on their wedding night. You also imagined your thumb gently brushing bits of salt-and-pepper squid from her cheek, cupping her face and locking eyes in the process, holding a bowl of curried fish balls and siu mai while waiting for her to bring her face closer so that you could feed her, or being bold enough to kiss the hard-to-wipe-away syrup staining the corner of her mouth. You imagined all this while you were abroad and couldn't be together with her in person, the intimacy you silently told yourself you'd have a chance to bravely try once you were back in Hong Kong, along with the face and tastes you'd no longer be stuck missing as long as you came back. How you long, oh how you long to touch her, even if you have to use food to cook up various excuses, putting out feelers like it's no big deal.

However, at this moment, true love means not exposing the object of your deep affection to any risk of being infected by the virus, and the greatness of an ordinary person is not to casually engage in high-risk behavior, but to be calm and patient at all times. If she becomes infected from going "sweep street" with you, or if you don't know you have the virus but go out and infect people on the street, who in turn end up infecting her, you'll never be able to forgive yourself. You like her, you really, really like her, you like her so much that you're willing to be patient and not see her, as long as she's safe and sound. And so, just keep on being patient. Wait for the quarantine period to pass by, wait for the outbreak to subside, wait for her to reply. You pluck two pieces of seaweed from the goodies she sent, stick them inside your upper lip to form two tusks, then make a funny face and send her a selfie. I'm a walrus who just swam back to Hong Kong from Australia—it's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, heehee, you say. Then you lie alone in the hotel's empty king-size bed, waiting for her to wake up in her own single bed at home, chuckling in response.

March 22, 2020

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Overseas Bride

after Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Soap Bubbles



The night everyone in the entire city was scrambling for ways to emigrate, you said you might as well marry me, become an overseas bride, and flee the city in which you live. I smiled my usual smile, gently changing the subject. My dearest, how can I say no to you? But there's no way I can say yes to

you. It's not that I don't want to make you my wife in name in front of everyone, or be unable to marry anyone else during the many years of our marriage, or that I'm unwilling to bear the title of divorcé after helping you obtain residency here, witnessing you and the person with whom you really want to grow old eventually marching into wedded bliss. Or, during the never-ending period of applying for residency, should you choose to spend the rest of your life side-by-side with me, that would also be wonderful; I'd love you like an ancient tree, like a cool stream beneath the sun, like a quiet, slow breeze, like the past, like the present. As long as you come here, I'll fling open my arms in my home in this other city, welcoming all of your possessions and scars, every part of you—I'm willing to accept it all. It's just I'm not really sure: If you come here, can you truly be happy?

If you marry into my city, you'll have to leave your mother tongue, from here on out living in a language acquired in school via exams and inferiority complexes. You'll repeat your life story time and again in a second language—the other person might understand your reasons for leaving, or they might not. Here, it's not that there aren't any people who share our birthplace, but we're the minority of a minority. Even though there's a Chinatown, there are no gossip magazines penned in our mother tongue, no ads with slogans containing forced puns tailored to fit whatever product is being peddled, no long-winded, foul-mouthed taxi drivers, no recurring situation comedies playing out in cha chaan tengs, no boisterous, lazy-tongued secondary school students—those oh-so-important, oh-so-cacophonous sounds. Even though we can walk down the streets here, holding hands without fear, openly discussing all sensitive subjects, we'll no longer be able to rub shoulders with those who understand the two completely different feelings of “cold-blooded” and “blood-chilling,” and the person sitting beside us on the subway won't know what kind of cakes Johnny half-bakes, or who's reluctant to eat crow.

Here, there may be local pork raised in a strictly regulated environment, but the people who raise these pigs won't know why there are people in the world willing to sweat like pigs to bring home the bacon, what is meant by filling up the piggy bank, the meaning of a chauvinist pig porking the bride on her wedding night, or the meaning of the phrase “when pigs fly, on men you can rely.” Here, there are none of your former classmates half-teasing, half-complimenting you years after graduation that your job surely allows you to live high on the hog; likewise, here, there are none of your multitudinous relatives boasting about their travails from rags to riches over Lunar New Year dinners, finally amassing various assets and accolades after weathering storm after storm in the city. I know you'll miss these things, these exaggerations and vulgarities, those family obligations and perfunctory social gatherings that you're sick of—when you can no longer see your family and friends often enough to grow tired of them, your loneliness can only be assuaged by me and the pale imitations here, but will it be enough? Here, the char siu pork is so tasteless that even the most good-for-nothing son or daughter is preferable, and people in school remark that I, who clearly doesn't eat pet birds, resemble the cat who ate the canary whenever I smile. If I am not enough to replace your entire world, will the lover you find here be able to understand the terms of endearment you utter in a relearned language, be able to understand the place that taught you what love is, and how very important it is to you?

I don't believe people from one city must marry people from the same city and give birth to the next “pure-blooded” generation, and what's more, if you don't come, you may not even be able to utter the sincerest terms of endearment as you'd like. I just can't bear to see you sink into the loneliness that your mother tongue means nothing to those around you, far away from so many people who share the same language, sentenced to a lifetime of exile. I thought that in the end, I'd be the one who'd cross the ocean to return to you, surrounded by people we grew up with who speak the same language and listen to the same jokes, spouting off the same clichés we've heard over and over. I'd laugh at you for continuing to bundle up like a steamed cake on top while baring your legs like grass jelly below,

regardless of the weather, pairing a long-sleeved oversized sweater with a miniskirt. Year after year, we'd watch swimsuit-clad Miss Hong Kong contestants answer questions posed by veteran hosts who rudely nitpick the appearances of those women who dream of becoming stars. Each year we could also line up to squeeze into the book fair and see ghostwritten celebrity books sell like hotcakes. I'd listen to you lament once more that everyone says the city is a cultural desert, when obviously there are numerous outstanding authors and international award-winning poets, as well as stage plays deserving of more attention whose ticket prices are much cheaper than foreign productions, and I'd agree, disappointed that you'd been let down. At least where you are, our mother tongue is alive and well, enabling us to be hypercritical, because there, our mother tongue is a matter of course, rather than a minority language that needs to be painstakingly preserved, encouraged to be used, and legally protected. Our mother tongue is the majority in the place where our mother tongue is produced, and we are the clear majority in the place where we were born. Then if you really proposed marriage to me at that time, it wouldn't be because you wanted to escape, but because you wanted to stay and plant something, grow something—we could grow long-term and socially beneficial careers, offspring who love learning, and even art that moves others, enjoying our golden years with all the old people in the city. And between the two of us, we'd no longer need the city's trials and tribulations to make you consider staying with me.

Many, many words bubble up on the tip of my tongue, then gently burst and dissipate before being spat out. My dearest, compared to the city where you live, the city where I currently reside may be a stone building that won't topple in the foreseeable future, but can the scenery here really make you happy? My dear, my dear, how on earth can I use the gentlest and most graceful words to tell you I predict that over here you'll encounter a tonguelessness that will starve you of oxygen? I find myself speechless. And so, please say something. Keep on speaking, speak to your heart's content. Like artificial respiration, like blowing smoke rings. Like a living person, keep on speaking.

(May 25, 2020)

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Stand a Little Bit Closer

after Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger*

When Yee Yee first noticed the strange phenomenon, she and Ah Hei were riding the escalator up, Yee Yee in front, Ah Hei behind. Yee Yee had her back to Ah Hei, looking toward the top of the escalator, finding herself face-to-face with a young woman standing not that far ahead of her, the young woman positioned backwards on the escalator, both arms wrapped around her boyfriend's neck. The man standing one step below his girlfriend lowered his head, burying his face into her chest and mumbling something that made her giggle.

Wouldn't being so lovey-dovey in front of everyone in broad daylight raise people's eyebrows? Yee Yee gazed at the escalators on either side, wanting to see if anyone else was staring at the lovebirds falling all over each other, oblivious to anyone else, only to discover more men and women standing just like them—whether the escalator was going up or down, the woman was always in front, the man behind, the woman facing backwards, both arms wrapped around the man's neck, while the man's hands casually landed on the back of the woman's head, cheeks, shoulders and neck, waist, or butt, not letting go until the escalator reached the end.

Yee Yee wanted to turn around and ask Ah Hei whether he spied the lovebirds standing in front, but she was well aware she wasn't Ah Hei's girlfriend, and she didn't have the qualifications or nerve to just turn around like that and adopt a pose that was only fit for a girlfriend. Moreover, even if she did ask, then what? If Ah Hei felt it was merely a natural phenomenon that was bound to occur in high-rise malls in bustling shopping districts, wouldn't Yee Yee give him the impression she was a fuddy-duddy busybody, or a vindictive, vicious leftover woman jealous of the passion of young sweethearts? If Ah Hei, like her, felt that engaging in PDA would endanger the safety and tranquility of other escalator riders, and from then on decided to stand even farther apart from her on the escalator, wouldn't she have wasted an opportunity to get closer to him while riding it?

Yee Yee had been happy to go shopping with Ah Hei, even intentionally wearing a dress with a hole in the lower back that showed a little skin above the belt, hoping that Ah Hei would notice and be pleasantly surprised, but unfortunately, he didn't seem to have any reaction. As they passed through mall after mall in the neighborhood, Yee Yee and Ah Hei rode numerous escalators together from B2 to the twelfth floor and then back down to the ground. Each time, Ah Hei let her step onto the escalator first—maybe he was adopting a gentlemanly demeanor of "ladies first," or might he have been hoping to catch a few more glimpses of her exposed waist in the back? Whenever she got on the escalator, Yee Yee subconsciously inhaled, sticking out her chest and sucking in her stomach, hoping to make her exposed lower back look a bit slimmer to Ah Hei, though obviously her chest and stomach protruded from the front of her body, not behind. However, Ah Hei hadn't mentioned a single word about the backless dress Yee Yee had on that day, leaving her quite disappointed.

Was she really not at all attractive to Ah Hei? If this were an idol drama, what would happen next would be that the lovebirds in front of them would become too hot and heavy, causing the woman

to inadvertently let go, and due to the slope of the escalator and the physics-defying logic of the idol drama, the smartphone she'd been holding would fly straight into Yee Yee's face, which was only a few steps away from her—losing her balance, Yee Yee would fall backwards while screaming gracefully, and then, like all leading men in idol dramas, in order to protect the leading lady Yee Yee, Ah Hei would stretch out his hands and catch her back as she fell, safely supporting both of their weight mid-air with steadier steps than a martial arts star, frozen in an embrace with his hands on her waist, a hero rescuing a damsel in distress, lost in each other's eyes, the two of them discovering they had feelings for each other. Alas, this wasn't an idol drama after all, but a busy shopping mall. The escalator had transported Yee Yee and Ah Hei to the end. She and he were still two people instead of a couple. Meanwhile, the lovebirds in front resumed their side-by-side position like conjoined twins, blocking the way as they walked shoulder-to-shoulder, disappearing into the mall among flocks of lovebirds who were out on weekend dates.

Yee Yee began to despair even more about this unrequited love that didn't have much real hope. Why on earth had she thought that wearing a slightly sexy backless dress would bring him one step closer to her? Did Yee Yee truly think that Ah Hei was the kind of person who was easily seduced by women's bare skin? The Ah Hei she knew wasn't that shallow—although the truth was, Yee Yee also knew very well that there were still many things she didn't understand about Ah Hei. And so, she accompanied him to busy shopping areas, went with him to every hiking supplies store in every shopping mall and commercial building no matter how big or small, just to find a backpack he wanted in a certain model of a certain brand, from a certain place of origin, in a certain color scheme. She wanted to seize every opportunity to accompany him and see his world. She wanted to know his interests, habits, and social circles, those aspects of his private life that only those who were more than ordinary friends could dive into, the past and present that only those close to him could see. However, Ah Hei's interests were varied, and Yee Yee was only a small part of his world—there were so many things she didn't know that he only told to people other than her. What would it take for her to delve deeper into his heart and see what he hadn't yet shown her?

Ah Hei brought her to the other side of the bustling shopping district in search of a hiking supplies store. The lobby of the multi-storied commercial building was teeming with people waiting in line for the lift. There were numerous security guards in reflective vests standing on the road outside the building maintaining order, dividing people who wanted to enter the building according to floors and lining them up in front of different lifts. The left-snaking line wound around the street corner beneath the overhang, while those in the right-snaking line were able to stand beneath tents set up for those outside the overhang, so as not to occupy the entire sidewalk. At the sight, Ah Hei couldn't help but bust out a swear word. Without thinking, Yee Yee said, It doesn't matter—the wait shouldn't be too long. Sighing, Ah Hei apologized to her and tried to find various topics to fill the time spent waiting for the lift. Yee Yee listened to him prattle on about all sorts of mundane things—his cousin's new baby, the stupid things his paternal grandpa had done as a kid, the weird snacks he'd recently bought at the Japanese grocery store—in the meantime also watching the other lovebirds in line continue to engage in PDA, running their hands all over each other. They looked so happy; suddenly, Yee Yee was exhausted. The high heels she wore specifically for this date were cutting into her feet, and her legs, which had never gone hiking, no longer wanted to stand. Ah Hei couldn't even pique her interest by mentioning the

streetwalker he'd just seen on the corner. Her back and feet were killing her, but still, she couldn't get closer to him. She felt deflated.

Every now and then, the line moved forward, shortening a little as people entered the lift, and then there was a lull as they waited for the full lift to empty floor-by-floor and return to the ground. Pasting on a smile, Yee Yee kept responding to Ah Hei's ramblings, struggling to follow the line, until finally they arrived in front of the lift. Even though the people jammed inside the tiny lift blankly stared outside of it, waiting for the attendant to withdraw the hand blocking the doors so that the lift could finally rise up, the attendant kept telling them, Move inside a little bit more. Please help everyone by standing a little bit closer together. There's room for two more. Thank you very much. The attendant waved to Ah Hei and Yee Yee, You two get in there as well. Yee Yee studied the countless feet inside the lift that had been compressed like liquefied petroleum gas particles, wondering whether four more feet could really squeeze inside without overloading it, but in the next second, Ah Hei had already entered, leaving just enough space for one person in front of him, watching her, waiting for her to come inside. Taking a deep breath, she stepped into the lift, straightened her body, and then, the doors closed.

The surprisingly not-overloaded lift began to rise. Yee Yee realized she was standing with her back to Ah Hei, the same as on the escalator. But the difference was, that in this confined space that was as crowded as a jam-packed train in Japan, her hips grazed his thighs—wasn't this kind of touch as intimate as letting her sit on his lap? She didn't dare move at all, didn't dare breathe too hard, lest she disturb Ah Hei, or annoy the other people crammed inside the lift with her. Don't think too much, she told herself. Inside the lift of this kind of commercial building, everyone had to huddle together in this way regardless of who they were, even Jesus and Buddha, celebrities and children—whoever came here was equally pushed and shoved, just like how in Japanese public baths, being stark naked in front of strangers was no big deal; however, why was she so focused on the bare patch of skin on her back that was gently pressing against the front of Ah Hei's shirt? The elevator was surrounded by mirrors, but there were so many people that she couldn't see Ah Hei's face or whether she herself was blushing—all she knew was that she was happy, and her heartbeat and breathing had become more prominent, and moreover, the pain in her feet no longer mattered. As long as two people were fated to become lovers, the entire universe would conspire to bring them together. This crowded city still seemed to offer plenty of opportunities for Yee Yee and Ah Hei to naturally stand close to each other. Maybe, just maybe, might the attendant who'd insisted that she and Ah Hei squeeze into the packed lift have been Cupid sent by the universe to help Yee Yee? Yee Yee gently stretched her tense waist. C'mon, lift, help us stand a little bit closer, then just a little bit more.

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Lam Yip's Neighborhood (an excerpt)

ONE: NUMBER SHOPS

On his way to and from school, Lam Yip likes walking down the street where aliens are sold, saying hello to the alien who always floats on the left side of the window; it never responds.

Although it's not cooked until soy sauce-colored or roast duck-colored like the neighboring bodies of the chickens and ducks for sale, it's always been one of the many goods sold on the street, eternally silent, baring its bright orange body and all of its tentacles to the moms and domestic helpers who pass by, waiting for an alien eater to stuff it into a Styrofoam box and whisk it away.

This is one of the most popular shops on the street. Each time Lam Yip walks by, he sees one or two people standing in front of the door, watching the uncle in the display window performing the act of chopping roast meat with a cleaver that's wider than Lam Yip's thigh while waiting for the uncle outside the window to tuck frozen cola and ginger into a clear, flimsy plastic bag packed with a Styrofoam box. Nothing attracts customers more than thrilling performances: in the window of the pizza shop on the corner, a big brother performs the act of tossing dough; at the McDonald's at the end of the street, a big sister performs the act of deep-frying French fries; at the Taiwanese drink shop in the middle of the street, a mom performs the act of sealing a plastic lid onto a cup, then turns the entire cup upside-down and gives it a few shakes, proving it's a magical bubble tea that won't splash even if it's loaded onto a spaceship, before letting customers personally pierce the plastic lid with a straw. Lam Yip loves watching the various performances on this street—walking from the street corner to the end of the street is as exciting as attending a carnival. Sometimes, he even makes it a point to set out early in order to wait for the bare-chested uncle from the bakery at the intersection to carry scorching hot sheet pan after scorching hot sheet pan teeming with fresh bread to the front of the store, plucking one golden pineapple bun after another from these acrobatic sheet pans and packing them into plastic bags for Lam Yip or the moms. Those pineapple buns always taste like a circus.

Lam Yip's mother's job also entails performing: she packages produce in a high-end supermarket. Every day, she has to wear a dark green paper hat and stand in the produce section, performing the act of seamlessly packaging odd-shaped dragon fruit or Romaine lettuce in plastic wrap, as though she's frosting the produce with an even layer of icing, so that the noble customers can take them away at a noble price. Lam Yip's mother says that sometimes, noble children stand in front of the produce section staring at the naked potatoes or onions in her hands, filled with the same sense of curiosity one might have looking at a naked woman or man, holding the hands of their noble mothers or domestic helpers, remarking that if, like Lam Yip's mother, they wanted to hold potatoes or onions in their bare hands, those noble mothers or domestic helpers would gasp and lead them away with their noble hands, repeating in English, "No, no, dirty, dirty." Lam Yip flips through the dictionary—he really doesn't understand what's so dirty about his mother's job. Although Lam Yip is afraid of the dirt coating the potatoes, his mother says that the produce in the high-end supermarket has already been washed by the produce cleaners, so it's no longer "dirty."

Lam Yip doesn't have a dad, so he highly respects his mother's job; his mother's craft allows her to buy Lam Yip colored pens and pure white bread. Lam Yip is proud of having such a talented mom. He also earnestly wants to learn a special skill so that after he graduates from university, he can follow in his mother's footsteps and use his craft to support himself and his mother. It's just that whenever he picks up plastic wrap to learn how to package bananas or apples, his mother laughs and shakes her head, taking away the plastic wrap, urging him to go read an English storybook or practice drawing or learn how to fry Hong Kong-style French toast. Those are even nobler skills, she says. When you grow up, you want to be better than me, so don't go into my line of work, she says. Lam Yip nods his head.

Lam Yip believes that it's important to have a skill. Almost every shop on the alien-selling street puts on a unique performance, and the shops without any performances are slowly going out of business. The first shop to close was the watch and clock shop with the perpetually dirty windows, followed by the shoe shop that only set out numerous flip-flops, white rubber-soled canvas shoes, and black leather shoes in front of the door. The photocopy shop squeezed itself to the right side of the store, ceding the left side to a new shop, but the photocopy shop kept getting squeezed out until it finally withered away. In this way, the new shop ended up taking over the entire space; its peer shops also took over the former locations of the clock and watch shop and shoe shop, resembling spores in the air that expanded overnight into an umbrella-shaped mushroom. But Lam Yip can't wrap his head around the fact that there aren't any performances in the windows of these new shops, either.

Then how did they succeed in squeezing out the previous shops on this street of exceptional performances? Lam Yip doesn't even know what they're selling; however, their windows always cause passersby to stop, just like the one in front of the shop that sells aliens, making Lam Yip feel indignant on behalf of the aliens who sacrifice their lives putting on performances. The new shops use the windows as notice boards, sheets of A4 paper stuck from top to bottom, left to right, practically sealing off the windows, leaving only one- or two-inch gaps between each sheet to reveal that there are salespeople stationed inside. The name of a nearby building and several adjectives that Lam Yip doesn't understand are printed on each sheet of paper, and there are always two sets of numbers, which must pose some sort of math challenge to the people who walk by. Lam Yip can see that the paper on one side of the window usually bears a combination of three- or four-digit numbers and seven- or eight-digit numbers, and on the other side there is a combination of three- or four-digit numbers and four- or five-digit numbers—because there are too many large numbers involved (eight-digit numbers are rarely found in elementary school students' math homework), and Lam Yip isn't very good at doing division in his head, he doesn't calculate the actual ratio between the two sets of numbers. Some adults who stop in front of these number stores take out a pen and paper and copy down these exam questions. Others take one of the flyers hanging from the window and do their calculations at home. Lam Yip isn't very fond of math, and he already has math homework that he can't finish, so unlike the adults, he doesn't go looking for trouble.

Through the gaps of the A4 paper, Lam Yip studies the number shop that squeezed out the herbal tea shop. Seeing so many chairs inside, it gives the impression of being a hospitable shop, allowing customers to sit and calculate the exam questions posted on the window, but the salespeople inside tend to stare blankly at computer screens—even if they catch a glimpse of Lam Yip, they'll only glance at him expressionlessly or with disdain and then lower their gaze, without any trace of the professional awareness of a performer or salesperson. The salespeople even skip work: on more than one occasion, Lam Yip has found this kind of shop completely empty, when it was clearly still an afternoon with people coming and going, clearly still a day marked in black font on the lunar calendar. All they did was hang a sign on the door reading GONE TO AN OPEN HOUSE, along with a phone number, and then left the shop

empty, disappearing into the crowds of people smoking on street corners and the restaurants that had started their afternoon tea specials.

What kind of shop is this, anyway? Lam Yip thinks of the store squeezed out by the number shop—although he was unable to put on a performance, the old shopkeeper kept a big, big golden mutt for the purpose of drawing in customers. It'd always sprawl out on the ground in front of the door. When Lam Yip would reach to pet its head, it'd squint, as listless as the items in the store. The herbal tea shop that was squeezed out by another number shop had a penguin-like cat and dinosaur-like turtle that would crawl back and forth on the cyan tiled floor, resembling a branch of the zoo in the city center that kept cute animals who did their best to entertain customers. But the suit-clad staff in these number stores are too arrogant to perform any special skill. They can't even be bothered to keep a bowl of fish. It's as though as long as numbers and adjectives are stuck to the windows, the ink and words will lure passersby into their shops to empty out their wallets. Clearly, they aren't witch shops or jockey clubs. What do they do?

Other shops depend on flesh and blood and skills to survive—why are these shops, which only display numbers and adjectives, able to squeeze out the other ones? In a loud voice in his head, Lam Yip poses this question to the alien in the window, but the conical head doesn't respond.

(note: Chinese original appeared in *The Four Seasons of Lam Yip*; English translation appeared in *Lam Yip's Neighborhood*)

Rockfish

The passenger lift was broken, so we took the cargo lift downstairs to grab a bite to eat. There were nine of us in total, loaded into a cargo lift with a weight limit of 2000 kilograms, or 26 people, everyone spreading out naturally, just like the population density of the actors in the poster for a stage production in the lift waiting area. Observing the weight restriction notice, Squid, who'd never been overweight a day in her life, said, "This cargo lift presumes that each person weighs around 77 kilos. How could there be 20-something people so heavy together in an industrial building lift—is the upstairs rented out to a sumo ring?" Upon hearing this, Sandpiper said, "Hey, what's so unthinkable about a guy weighing more than 70 kilos?" The male editors echoed this sentiment, while most of the female editors were perplexed. Then Hippo chimed in, "Also, didn't Xi Xi say, 'My worry should not weigh more than 44 pounds?'¹ That is, the maximum amount of worry that a person can carry is 20 kilos, and worrywart Rockfish has already exceeded 77 kilos." "Wow, your mental math is so fast," Squid said. "I studied Pure Mathematics," Hippo said. I wondered to myself, *Wow, how on earth did Hippo guess my weight?* Sure enough, a gymgoer's eyes could serve as scales.

There was a slight drizzle outside. Under the streetlights, the fuzzy mist seemed ticklish. Raccoon said she missed last week's proofreading session because she'd been attending her high school classmate's wedding, and it was nuts—all the guys were now peddling insurance. Had she known, she wouldn't have gone. At that moment, I wanted to tell everyone, *Last night, I went to the funeral of a high school classmate who killed herself.* Today, before dark, I walked from the Diamond Hill MTR station to the editorial office, the entire time going against the dense flow of people leaving work, thinking about another high school classmate asking me "What're you doing here?" at last month's wedding banquet, as though I were a party crasher. I asked myself the same question at the mourning hall for my classmate: *What am I doing here?* We weren't even classmates from the same year; we just worked together on the high school newspaper committee. At the time, I was an overly avant-garde art editor, and she was a student from a lower grade whose teacher helped her score a position to help with writing articles, thanks to her good grades in Chinese. We never even spoke to each other directly. Yet when I learned of her death, I automatically turned down a lecture invitation that coincided with her funeral, donning all black and arriving on time at the mourning hall, as natural as showing up to school on time. When I came back from the funeral home in North Point last night, my mother scowled, purple in the face, asking me, "What were you doing in that kind of place? You weren't close to her." Right, I wasn't close to her. But I felt I had to go—she and I were cut from the same cloth. I always thought that if the tiniest thing had gone only somewhat differently, I would've died just like she had.

"What're you doing here?" the person who'd been in the same classroom as me for seven years grilled me at the wedding banquet. I wouldn't have wanted to be classmates with those girls if I hadn't been forced to. The streets of San Po Kong were like the seabed in the depths of the ocean, riddled with

¹ Xi Xi, "Bearded Door God," *Thumb Weekly* 15 (January 30, 1976). For an English translation by Tammy Lai-Ming Ho, please see *Chinese Literature Today*, 8:1 (2019): 27.

bumps and holes, craggy and uneven, various darting footsteps walking with me or in different directions, along with cockroaches scuttling out from the side of the street. “Ah, *kaka!*” Raccoon screamed, bolting over to the pedestrian refuge island. “Watch out for cars!” shouted Ebi and Kappa, who were smoking behind. *Ah!* It turned out I was among a group of people who also called cockroaches “kaka,” just like in Dorothy Tse’s story.² What was I doing here? The drizzle seemed to be slightly heavier. Hippo covered his head with the hood of his windbreaker, protecting his oh-so-very-important hairstyle. Kappa and I exchanged glances and snickered. Bringing up the rear, Raccoon asked Sandpiper, “How many subjects are you teaching at university this year?” Sandpiper said, “I’m teaching four classes—shoot me now.” Kappa said, “At least you have a full-time teaching position. I don’t even have the opportunity to break my neck shouldering heavy teaching duties. Remember to let me know if you hear of any schools that have openings.” Many of the side-street garages were already closed for the day. Restaurants in industrial buildings on either side of Tai Yau Street only posted menus at the entrances and not signboards. An auntie asked us how many people were in our group and invited us to sit down inside, not the least bit concerned whether we were upstairs workers legally allowed to eat there. After we walked past, Tapir rushed up and said, “Rockfish, you haven’t tried that one—it’s okay.” “Yeah? What do they serve?” I asked. “Marbled rockfish soup—it’s pleasantly sweet.” I said, “Actually, I don’t care for marbled rockfish.” I chuckled. “What? But your name is Rockfish!” Tapir said, laughing. “Can’t my ‘rock’ be from rockfish in general and not marbled rockfish?” I said. “Rockfish is fine, but you’re more like a rock beauty angelfish,” he said. “Why?” I asked. “You’re more expensive, and you went to an elite school,” he said. “Don’t you mean because I’m prettier? Rockfish always look like they’ve been involved in nuclear accidents,” I said. “Of course you’re prettier,” he said.

What was the “rock” in Rockfish? I used to kick around rock-like candlenuts by myself on the school sports ground. The candlenut tree was always there, standing tall, bearing an abundance of fruit soon after the start of the schoolyear. The nuts were as big as bubblegum balls, with brown shells as hard as rocks. There were always some left under the tree after autumn—if you looked for them, you’d find them. I was different from my classmates. They pierced their ears with gold earrings, grew their hair long, studied ballet and violin, and passed piano proficiency exams. Like delicate and smooth crystals, they formed a close circle with companions as bright and beautiful as themselves. Unable to fit in that circle, I started taking unpopular afterschool creative writing classes. In the first lesson of the class, the instructor asked each of us to choose a penname. Gazing out the window at the trees on the sports ground, I said, “My name is Rockfish, because I’m rough around the edges.” The instructor liked this very much, saying he preferred people who were rough around the edges. I was pleased with myself. When I grew up, I no longer published anything under this juvenile penname, but among the literary circle, I called myself Rockfish so that people didn’t have to use my full Chinese name every time. It didn’t have to be like it had been with those girls.

When I said I was rough around the edges, the truth was, it was merely because back then, I didn’t know why I was so suntanned, or why I bit my fingers. Those girls ostracized me, saying I was dirty. They even treated my school notebook like something stinky, pinching it between two fingertips and dropping it on my desk, then scurrying off to the bathroom to wash their hands. In fact, most of the time, there was no reason for these immature high-school antics. Having dark skin and biting my fingers

² Dorothy Tse, “Kaka,” *So Black* (Hong Kong: Youth Literary Bookstore, 2003).

were both out of my control. But at the time, they really made me think I was a defective person, a sick person, a person who couldn't stop sticking her dirty fingers in her mouth and biting them until they bled, because they weren't like that, only I was. And they said I made mountains out of molehills, crying over tiny things, so they didn't want to play with me. Which came first: the chicken or the egg? When I was reading in the classroom, they'd gossip about me in a barely audible whisper; when I left the classroom, they'd erupt in cheers, as though they could only be free and happy if I weren't there. More than once, I asked the teacher if I could do group work alone, and the teacher always said no, then assigned me to a group of unwilling classmates. I'd forget what I was crying about, but I just couldn't help it, the ache of an ancient, social animal instinct. Upon seeing this, the teacher would tell me to go wash my face and calm down before returning to the classroom. I'd go to the bathroom and splash my face with icy water, then head to the sports ground and find a candlenut to kick, kicking it around until class was over, then I'd come back as if nothing had happened.

The mosquitoes devoured me on the sports ground, marring my legs with blotches, giving those girls yet another reason to say I was dirty. It was a vicious circle that couldn't be broken.

Tapir asked, "Why are you so quiet?" I said, "It's nothing—I'm just a little tired." He said, "It's Friday, you can relax! In a bit, order an extra donut!" Tapir always radiated such positive energy, while the poems he wrote were clearly so painful, his prose so helpless toward life's incessant hammerings.³ "Okay," I said. Today, we'd purposely come to this Okinawan restaurant with outdoor seating because everyone said they wanted to celebrate Ebi and me: my winning the Worker Literature Prize, and Ebi finally submitting his PhD dissertation. Oh, it was also Threadfin's birthday this month—speaking of her, where'd she run off to? Holding the restaurant number tag, Hippo pointed to the nearby King Fuk Street sitting-out area. The drizzle had stopped. Sandpiper and Threadfin were beneath a tree, petting a Shiba Inu being walked by a passerby. Once again, Kappa and I snickered at each other. Sandpiper and Threadfin hadn't been apart ever since they'd strolled hand-in-hand into the editorial office's Christmas party, going public with their relationship. Rolling a cigarette, Kappa stealthily said to me, "They'd better be happy. Otherwise, if they break up, it'll be such a headache—two people avoiding each other in the editorial office, or one of them quitting." I said, "I have faith in those two as a couple. I bet they'll stay this way an entire lifetime."

Just like that, an entire lifetime had been snuffed out. That girl took her own life in the university dormitory. She didn't leave behind a suicide note. The papers speculated that she'd been bullied in the residential hall, or that she'd been putting up with something for a long time, and finally couldn't take it anymore. At her funeral, her not-yet-white-haired mother said, "I hope everyone will stop speculating about the cause of her death and show our family some mercy." I didn't venture into the small room to pay respects to the deceased—whose body must have been repaired by a skillful set of hands after she fell off the building—because I was afraid I would see my own face in the coffin, nor did I find myself chanting, "Decades fly by, and no matter why, no one needs to lose their mind over anyone"⁴ to relieve the tension. In high school, I was also convinced that I would die before the age of

³ Leung Ping-kwan, "Midday, Quarry Bay," *Chinese Students' Weekly* 1127 (July 5, 1974). For an English translation by Kit Kelen, Debby Sou Vai Keng, Chris Song Zijiang, and Iris Fan Xing, please see https://www.hkmemory.hk/collections/Yasi/All_Items/prints/201607/t20160705_79915.html.

⁴ Xi Xi, "A Woman Like Me," *Plain Leaves Literature* 6 (February 1982). For English translations, please see Howard Goldblatt, "A Woman Like Me," in Joseph S.M. Lau and Howard Goldblatt, eds., *The Columbia Anthology*

27, probably by suicide. But I didn't. Now, I was 28, alive and kicking, waiting to have dinner with a group of weird and wonderful creatures my age. I was fortunate.

Tapir said, "Hey Rockfish, it's your friend!" I asked what he was talking about. He pointed to a sign on a tree in the park that read CANDLENUT in both Chinese and English—the Chinese name literally meant "rock chestnut." "Why's it called 'candlenut' in English?" Tapir asked. He often claimed his English wasn't good. "Oh, if you cut open the shell, the seed inside can be lit like a candle," Hippo said. "I also picked up a few and put them in the office. Last time I took my writing class on a literary walk, I came here with my students and saw this group of candlenut trees. About ten years ago, a candlenut tree fell over and crushed a BMW. One student wrote about this park as the mouth of one of those snapping Crocodile Dentist toys, at any given time chomping down on the old men in the park, chewing them into mincemeat just like fingers." Everyone was in an uproar: *How come students these days are so horrible?* Kappa said, "No, that's so imaginative! How I'd love to meet such a student. Usually when I teach a class, I have to thank the gods for having three students out of thirty who actually listen to me."

In the past, I may have hoped that the candlenuts on the sports ground would fall and strike those classmates who'd ostracized me. But the candlenut tree wasn't a wishing tree—it wouldn't help someone exact revenge. Whether they fell or not was only providence. She was the one who died, not me. Now, my former classmates worked in commercial buildings just as I'd expected, but back then, I'd never have guessed that I'd end up a part-time literary magazine editor in an industrial building. Actually, daytime me also worked in a commercial building, mixing with women who transformed gel nails into marble and rose quartz designs. Every day, I tried to make myself up as bright and beautiful as the marble floor in the lift lobby. When I ate alongside female coworkers at lunchtime, I listened to the clean, artificial tap-tap of their fingernails drumming against their cell phones. But I just couldn't fit in with them, perhaps because I still couldn't stop biting my fingers. At the wedding banquet, an old classmate was taken aback to catch my jagged hands with her gel nails, saying, "Why do you do that to yourself? Don't bite your fingers anymore. If you keep on biting them, you'll never get married." The nose on her face was different than the one she had in high school, and her sidekick had a suspicious-looking pair of double eyelids and chin. Both sported sparkly diamond engagement rings on their left hands. I, on the other hand, had been single for more years than I'd been the editor of a literary magazine. And so, I cried in the bathroom yet again. After all these years, I was still subject to such humiliation.

But it didn't matter anymore. No one from high school would ever invite me to their wedding again, and if they did, I wouldn't go. *Bottoms up, everyone! Congratulations, Rockfish! Congratulations, Ebi! Congratulations, Threadfin! Thanks so much! Have another glass—please excuse my poor hospitality! May you and Sandpiper soon tie the knot!* Such cheerful voices reverberated beneath the towering candlenut trees. The stone pot rice that Threadfin ordered was served first. Tapir, who was sitting between Threadfin and me, said, "Wow, that looks so good—if we weren't so squished together today, I'd order one." Squid said, "It doesn't matter—we're all skinny!" Tapir said, "Nah, if I injured Rockfish, how would I make it up to her mother for what I'd done to her daughter? I'm not worried

of Modern Chinese Literature, 2nd. edition (New York, Columbia University Press, 2007), 315–325, and Rachel May and Zhu Zhiyu, "A Girl Like Me," in Eva Hung, ed. *A Girl Like Me and Other Stories: Enlarged Edition* (Hong Kong: Renditions, 1996), 7–24.

about Threadfin—anyway, she already has Sandpiper.” Everyone hooted and hollered again. Hippo said, “Hey, since we’re all here today, let’s clean up the boxes in the office.” Tapir said, “Wow, it’s like a last meal.” Upon hearing this, I laughed and laughed for some unknown reason. Tapir and Raccoon didn’t have to be disinfected and cleaned just because my arms and shoulders brushed up against them. They weren’t like those girls. A moth flew into the shadows on the other side of the park and disappeared, just like the one I saw on the street in North Point after the funeral. Perhaps it wouldn’t come to me anymore. That was fine by me.

When we got back, the passenger lift in the industrial building had been repaired, but it could only hold five passengers at once. Each time, we had to divide into two groups. Tapir said, “Let’s take the stairs and let our food digest.” Squid said, “Right, Hippo ate so many donuts just now—he could easily break the passenger lift again.” Ebi said, “C’mon—you act like he swallowed the whole stone pot.” Industrial buildings felt sturdier than ordinary buildings. Even if a grief-stricken person tramped up the stairs, stomping on the ground, they wouldn’t have been able to crush the floor comprised of mosaic tiles, concrete, and steel plates. Such qualities were surprisingly reassuring. On the third floor, there was still half a mahjong set and a plastic severed hand left over from Halloween beside the sink in the office bathroom, and a bottle of vodka in the freezer. The chocolate boxes stacked in front of the publishing awards were all empty—Raccoon, who couldn’t find any snacks, yelled out that she’d been tricked. “Okay, okay, first move these boxes of books out of the way, or there won’t be enough places for everyone to sit,” Hippo said. The group of able-bodied men automatically assumed position. Kappa, who was as strong as an ox, also rolled up her sleeves to help. “According to the RTHK series *Floating City*, we are cultural coolies!⁵ Keep at it!” Too many people couldn’t move around the narrow office at the same time. Raccoon and I searched for the bookmarks that had been distributed at Liu Yichang’s funeral as reference materials. Threadfin said they should’ve been tucked away on the bookshelf by the window with the notes Sandpiper took during Leung Ping-kwan’s last lecture at HKU. Beside the window was a piece of concrete of unknown origin and a few candlenuts that had been washed clean. Kappa, who’d just finished moving books, said, “Next time, crack the shells open with a pair of pliers and see if you can actually ignite the seeds.” Ebi hauled out the toolbox that Mackerel had left behind when he quit the editorial office, saying, “Since there are so many car repair shops down below, it’s perfectly reasonable for us to have a wrench in the office.”⁶ Raccoon said, “How I miss Mackerel! What’s he up to now?” Ebi said, “Before, it seems like he was thinking of trying to be a firefighter. It pays 40-something thousand bucks a month, enough to feed two or so full-time cultural editors.” *Say no more*, everyone groaned. Squid said, “Oh right, the other day, someone asked me if Jellyfish was still in the editorial office.” Raccoon said, “Not in several years. We’ve gone through so many chief editors and several generations of editorial staff. Why would people think Jellyfish is still around?” Threadfin said, “When she was here, I heard they often held meetings until sunrise, everyone like pent-up beasts forced to fight each other, battling head to head figuring out topics. They could only go home and catch up on sleep after dim sum the following morning.” I said to Squid, “You know, ever since I joined the editorial board, I’ve been advocating for ‘healthy meetings,’ trying to start and end as early as possible. Otherwise, each time we

⁵ “Taking Shelter from the Rain,” directed by Kwok Chung-Yee, from *Floating City*, Radio Television Hong Kong TV series, 2020.

⁶ *Shaolin Soccer*, directed by Stephen Chow, 2001.

have a meeting, everyone will have to take the last bus home, thereby shortening our lifespans.” Everyone howled wildly with laughter—I didn’t know what was so funny. But I also laughed.

Each of us pulled up a chair and gathered around to prepare for the meeting. Tapir, who again sat next to me, asked, “By the way, how’s your day-job boss? Is he still like your prize-winning poem, doing all sorts of cold-hearted things day in and day out?” I said, “Alas, when you’re broke, you have no choice but to keep putting your nose to the grindstone.” “But you seem to be happier after eating,” Tapir said. “Yes,” I said. “How about I read your palm for you? I’ve studied how to do it,” he said. I lightly placed the back of my hand in his palm for him to weigh. It felt warm. My hand shook unexpectedly. What was there to be so shy about? We’d known each other for a couple of years. He inspected it carefully for some time before saying, “Good girl. Don’t bite your fingers anymore. They’re filled with germs—it’ll be bad luck for your health.” I said, “Oh, up yours, I know that without you telling me. Hippo bites his fingers too, and you don’t say anything to him.” Tapir said, “I’m just joking.” I smacked the palm of his hand. He laughed. He said, “You know, before you joined the editorial board, a lot of editors smoked in the office, but ever since anti-smoker Rockfish arrived, the air in the office has been much fresher.” I said, “So you’re saying I’m trying to stop you guys from acting like Chow Mo-wan in *In the Mood for Love*?”⁷ He said, “No, you’re our very own citrine, promoting everyone’s good health.” Hippo seemed not to have overheard our conversation—he was busy opening up a letter from an arts group that also had an office in San Po Kong, not knowing whether he’d find a poem, a flower, or a greeting inside after he opened it.⁸ *Everyone’s thumb is flat when reading. No one has to apologize for their thumb.* During our meeting, I scribbled down these sentences on the draft outline for the next issue. Perhaps they would become part of my next piece.

It was 11:30. Squid and Ebi announced they were leaving to catch the last ferry back to Peng Chau. Sandpiper and Threadfin also said they were going back to Tuen Mun and headed out. Tapir and I looked at each other. It seemed like we still had some time. So then, we’d continue on.

October 18, 2020 Pat Tat Street, San Po Kong

(Chinese original and English translation appeared in *By The Trees - San Po Kong*, a bilingual anthology by Hong Kong House of Literature)

⁷ *In the Mood for Love*, directed by Wong Kar-wai, 2000.

⁸ Leung Ping-kwan, “Rainy Days in San Po Kong,” *Chinese Students’ Weekly* 1128 (July 20, 1974).

Can We Say My Hometown Is...

As we deliberated the implied meanings and origins of the expressions “winter melon and tofu” and “three long and two short,” both referring to death, I once again found myself aware that we were all from Hong Kong. Holding our rice bowls, using plastic chopsticks to eat your mom’s stir-fried vegetables and steamed fish, we discussed the Cantonese euphemisms I’d researched before coming to London for advanced studies. That night, you, who didn’t need to wear glasses, listened to me, who’d just purchased new glasses from Oxford Street, telling your mom, who, like me, was also “four-eyed,” why the specialists in Hong Kong who make glasses for the nearsighted are probably more skilled than British optometrists, a sense of strangeness crossing your face as you watched someone from another country chatting about foreign habits and customs. By then, I’d been living in London for more than a year, and the novelty of daily life had worn off. It was a bit like life wearing glasses—I only noticed it in moments when the lenses were foggy, wet from the rain, and the prescription was wrong. Before Christmas, you, who’d already been in England for more than ten years, festooned your wheelchair with colored lights. I think that such a stylish back view would attract a lot of attention if it were to appear on the streets of Hong Kong, but both you and all of stylish London were long used to it.

IF MY HOMETOWN IS “MOOCHING A FAMILY MEAL”

My new British friends here claim that my East Asian face makes me vulnerable to racism while out in public, but as I wander the streets of London, teeming with people from all corners of the world, I often forget that my features clearly indicate that I’m not a “Westerner.” It’s as though I’m a Spanish overcoat, a Scottish cashmere scarf, an apparition in Japanese jeans and English leather boots (clothing that can be bought in both Hong Kong and London thanks to capitalism). Walking against the wind at a pace faster than the average Londoner, I can’t see the naturally long, black hair flowing behind my head (which, in the East, is regarded as a characteristic of female ghosts, while in foreigners’ eyes, it’s associated with the appearance of high school girls in Japanese anime), unbothered that the profile of my face is relatively flat—which has prompted ex-lovers in London to label me a “squinty-eyed Asian”—so self-consciously transparent that no one can define my identity or nationality or my city of residence or my hometown. Because I don’t care, and passersby also don’t care where I’m from, I can take the time to admire London’s beauty—the neighborhoods and culture from the middle of the nineteenth century to the present that we read about in English literature class—then squeeze into the surge of morning commuters, rushing back to school, gripping the hot tea bought at Victoria train station.

It is only when I encounter other tongues from Hong Kong that all of those Hong Kong characteristics I’ve forgotten about suddenly become vivid. For example, English universities start classes at the end of September, one week prior to the Mid-Autumn Festival, forcibly transplanting me, who was studying abroad alone, from Hong Kong, where my family and friends were gathered, to underneath a foreign moon; that’s when you first invited me to your dormitory to make Hong Kong-style egg tarts with your mom (the original English egg custard tart is not nearly as delicate as the Hong Kong-style egg tart) and brew hot milk tea with condensed milk (Hong Kong-style milk tea with condensed milk is much smoother than English tea with milk), inviting me to stay and eat eggs fried with char siu pork, as well as tong sui dessert soup, placing two double-yolk white lotus paste mooncakes in my hands after dinner. It was as if I’d passed through a random door, swept back to my familiar Hong Kong.

Can we say that our hometown is a mooncake, the result of the Cantonese language and a meal prepared by a classmate's mother? I remember that when I was in secondary school in Hong Kong, I often went to my friend Ena's home to look at manga. In the evening, her mom regularly invited me to stay and "mooch a family meal," and then I'd return home, my hands stuffed with sweet-and-sour pickled Chinese onions and yellow mangosteen sauce for my mother to try. All of my secondary school classmates' mothers were unfailingly kind to me, as hospitable as your mom, who gives me handmade cakes every time we meet. You probably remember that the homes in Hong Kong are much smaller than those in England, but my friends' moms were always happy to let me drop by every now and then to do homework with friends or watch the *Harry Potter* movie on VCD (yes, when the first movie came out, VCDs were still mainstream) and then stay for dinner. In Hong Kong, where many people can't easily date, marry, or procreate due to the "land problem," sharing space with their daughter's classmate was all the more generous. Did you, who were in England while in secondary school, ever have the experience of being hosted by a classmate's mother? When I was your houseguest at Christmas, it was as though I was in a time machine, transported back to my classmate's home during my secondary school days.

IF MY HOMETOWN IS A FAMILY PHOTO AT OCEAN PARK

Your home in Kent is quite similar to my classmates' homes: all have an upright piano and a room bathed in warm yellow light, your childhood photos—taken in front of a cable car in Ocean Park or during an activity with Australian koalas—perched atop the piano. In one of the picture frames, you're holding the hand of your elder brother who wears an Oxford graduation gown, the wind beautifully tousling your long hair, sunlight darkening your mom's color-changing lenses, your brother grinning so widely that you can't see his eyes, as completely over the moon as he was that day at the gelato shop when he laid eyes on a "more bang for your buck" sumptuous mango sundae. Your mom has probably shared some of her love for you with me: she placed a small heater and electric blanket for me to use in the room that was yours before you were in a wheelchair, the shelves lined with books on Traditional Chinese Medicine, acupoints, and tuina massage that must've belonged to her—later, when I had a nerve disorder in my hands, without saying a word, she took my hands in her arms and carefully kneaded them. I suppose she was just as strong and gentle whenever she massaged your legs (my mother also learned Traditional Chinese Medicine, acupoints, and massage, practicing on my little brother who was all skin and bones). I guess that children of my generation born in Hong Kong around the time of the handover all have doting mothers who've taken us and our siblings to Ocean Park and flown us to foreign countries on planes that still used metal cutlery, while our relatively reserved fathers stood behind the camera, shooting rolls of film that would later become childhood photos, dropped off at the photo shop to be developed before adorning the living room. Can we say that such family photos are our common Hong Kong memories? After all, not every "squinty-eyed Asian" has this kind of family relationship; in some places, people haven't had siblings for generations.

The bed in the upstairs room was covered in the same Sanrio sheets I used as a child. The downstairs living room had been converted into your room, filled with the various stuffed animals that accompanied you from Hong Kong. Like many of my friends, your elder brother loved Japanese anime and cartoon characters; the Rilakkuma-shaped waffle maker that your relatives sent you allowed us three Hong Kong kids to enjoy an especially cheerful breakfast. Can we say that another common feature of our childhood was being surrounded by Japanese cartoons and snacks while clearly living in Hong Kong? To this day, such a childhood still frequently causes me to be mistaken for a Japanese person in England, or to have to explain to foreigners why I often cook Japanese food although I'm not Japanese. Can we say that a generation ago, Hong Kong was a colony of Japanese pop culture and food

culture? Even while I'm studying abroad, the gifts that my friends send me from Hong Kong tend to be Japanese stationery and snacks. There are many Japanese fast-food restaurants in both London and Hong Kong. When my roommate brings me unsold salmon sushi from the restaurant where she works, I always feel like I'm back in the streets of Hong Kong overflowing with "Japanese stuff," solving a peculiar kind of homesickness in a roundabout way.

Even many years ago, Hongkongers already were fond of crossing national borders. Some stayed behind, and some returned. You, who've been away from Hong Kong for more than ten years, said that over time, you've forgotten the pronunciation and appearance of a number of Chinese characters, but the memories of our shared homeland aren't only recorded in language but also on taste buds, in childhood recollections and families, places more intangible but more enduring than the soul. As our hometown, perhaps Hong Kong is truly like the stone with the floating city painted by Magritte: it's challenging to trace a single or clear origin or future, but views of the sea and angles of gravity have molded its residents' numerous invisible commonalities, which they are shocked to unearth when they are in other cities that might have roots.

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All stories translated from the Chinese by Jennifer Feeley