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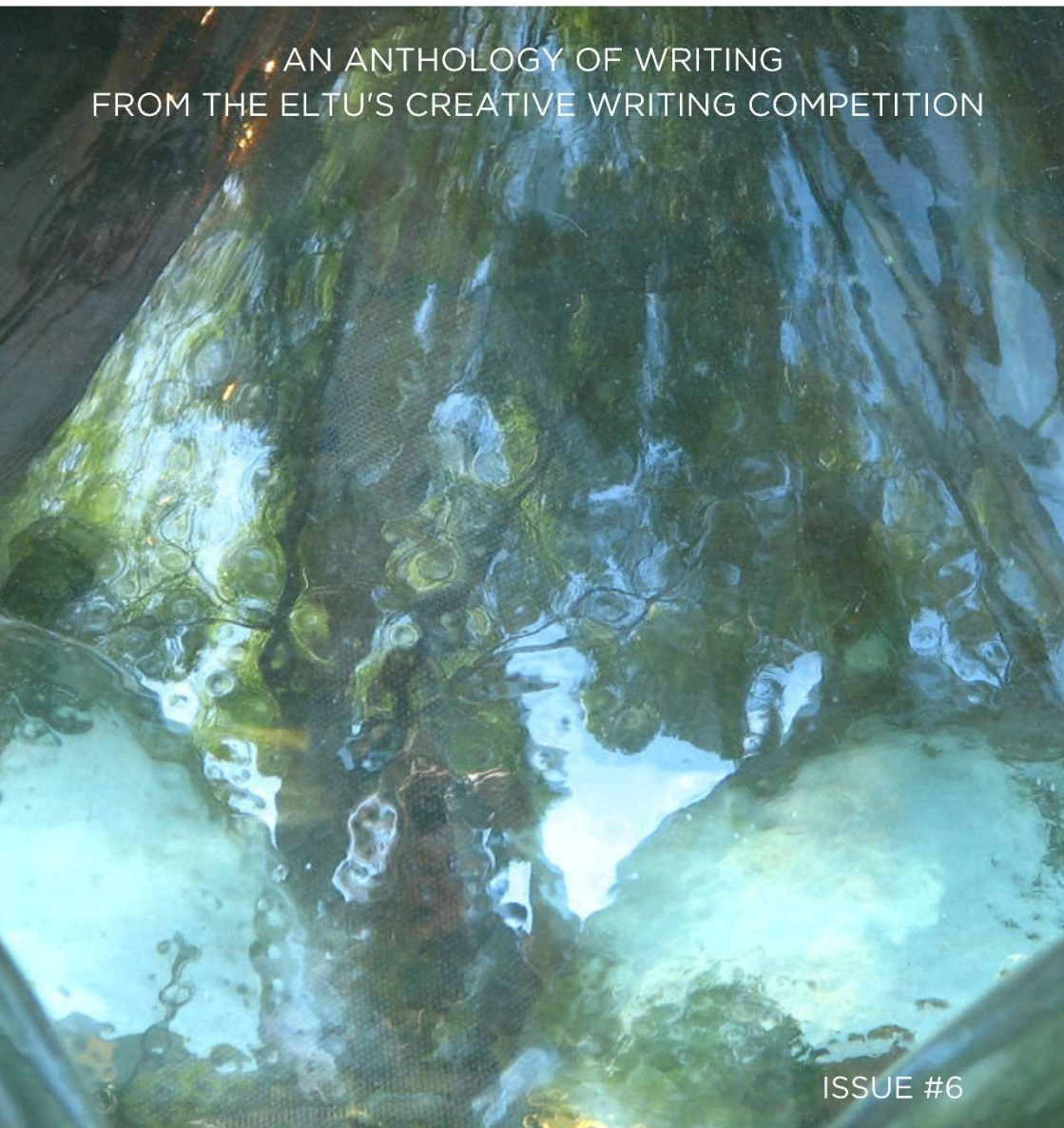
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英語教學單位  
English Language Teaching Unit

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# GENESIS

## TRUTH AND LIES

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



ISSUE #6



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## ABOUT THE PROJECT

The ELTU's Creative Writing Project and Competition is implemented by the English Language Teaching Unit at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. It launched in the 2019-20 academic year and offers workshops, a campus-wide writing competition, literary events, and publication opportunities for all CUHK students.

The competition encourages students to express themselves creatively and demonstrate their skills in English writing. The sixth issue of this anthology celebrates the achievements from the ELTU's sixth Annual Creative Writing Competition 2024-25 and spotlights CUHK students' interpretations of the competition theme, "**Truth and Lies.**"

### **Editors and Proofreaders:**

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## EDITOR'S LETTER

The theme for the 2024-2025 CUHK Creative Writing Competition was **Truth and Lies** – a topic that our writers interpreted deftly. With pieces exploring the explosive impacts of honesty, the blurred lines between truth and falsehood, and deception as an inescapable part of our relationships, this anthology will make you rethink the black and whiteness of reality and fantasy. Heartfelt thanks go to all the writers who attended workshops or submitted their writing to the competition; every entry was impressive, and I believe this is one of our strongest issues yet.

This year, our Creative Writing Project team welcomed back Ms Natalie Cheung, Dr Benjamin Driscoll, and Mr Jon Stoeckel. Kind thanks go to the team, as well as to guest workshop facilitator Mr Johnson Chan, who conducted four creative writing workshops that guided students to conjure compelling antagonists, structure poetry, and craft works of speculative fiction and food writing. Sincere thanks also go to Benjamin and Ms Sumie Chan (our newest Creative Writing Project member), who served as keen editors for the Short Story and Poetry categories, respectively. On a sad note, our team bid farewell to Ms Nadeemy Chen, and our Teaching Assistant, Ms Rhea Murdeshwar, who once again was invaluable in supporting the project and the students.

Heartfelt thanks also go to our judges, Dr Patrick Holland (Creative Non-Fiction), Dr Suzanne Wong (Short Story), and Dr Collier Noguees (Poetry), as well as to Ms Wen Yin Cao, our new Visiting Tutor, who has been instrumental in preparing the project for the new academic year. Finally, I want to thank our unit Director, Dr Allen Ho, for continuing to be such a great supporter and source of inspiration for the project.

These contributors have helped create a vibrant space for expression at CUHK. I hope we can keep growing this creative home for CU students in the years ahead.

Ms Jenna Lee

Lecturer, English Language Teaching Unit,

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

# CREATIVE NON-FICTION



## **Is it so bad that I lied?**

Ana Carbonell

*First Prize*

The honest truth is, I lied to you. I lied from the start.

I told you I would be okay with us being casual enough for this to turn into friendship once you left, but I knew from the start that I would fall, and fall hard. So, I lied, because I knew you wouldn't. And I didn't want you to turn me away. The sliver of hope in my chest that convinced me you might change your mind was enough for me to trick you (and me) into thinking we

were a good idea. So, we kissed, we held hands, we dated as if we both didn't see we were clearly not meant for each other.

Even so, my plans fell apart: we had three months together, when I thought we would get six. I think you saw it in my eyes. I think you saw the love that was blossoming inside me. At first, I'm sure it was intriguing, exciting even. To have someone at your feet like that. Then it turned into a burden, and you had to leave. You gave me an excuse, and we called it quits in January, leaving me to fend for myself with my heart in my hands.

So now it's April, and we don't talk. I tried to do what everyone expects you to do when you're heartbroken: I go on dates with people I never text back, I drink and dance and focus on myself. I play empowering music as I walk down the street, convinced I never wanted you that bad, anyway. In secret, I fantasize every day about reaching out to you. To have you again, face to face. Yet then I wonder what we would even say to each other. Not the truth, though. You allowed me to lie and make you think I could handle the crumbs you offered. I allowed you to deceive me into believing you could end up loving me all the same.

As a response to your indifference, a part of me just hopes that one day, when I'm out with him, you'll see us. You will see me laugh at his jokes like I did at yours, lean in while riding the train so I can hear what he is whispering to me. Maybe regret will

rise in your chest, wishing that were still you. You will move away as you see me looking up at him, since he is also much taller than me. That's where your similarities end.

You, a woman. Him, a man. You, white. Him, brown. You, who declares herself a terrible person who doesn't recycle and buys clothes from Shein with no remorse. He, who only buys second hand. You enjoy lettering, pretty calligraphy of short, simple sentences. He is a non-fiction writer, old-fashioned. You are brutally honest about your superficial taste in terrible romance books. He has read Patti Smith; he loves Murakami's obsessive lust.

You could talk for hours, pose questions, and bounce the conversation back to me. He has curt answers. I must decipher the right code to spring words out of him. At the start, you couldn't stop texting me. You complained if I took too long to reply, if I was away. I giggled at how earnestly you needed me to be available to you. He comes and goes, like a cat. Drops a question, leaves for two days.

You held me like you were afraid of my body, he grabs me with insatiable hunger. I had to beg you to whisper in my ear, had to take your hands to my waist. He took off my shirt the third time we met. You sleep in late; he wakes up at 7 am sharp. You mock, belittle as a form of affection. He is scared to tease and

offend, so he says sorry even if he makes me laugh. You are the epitome of rebellion. Covered in tattoos, piercings, colored hair. He dresses formally in button-up shirts and pleated pants.

The honest truth is, I'm still lying.

I can kid myself all I want when I am with him. But the truth is, babe, when we kiss, there is no spark. We don't lock eyes and conduct electricity like you and I used to do. Believe me, I tried. In between kisses, I tried to make him pause, let us get lost in each other's eyes, just like we did. But there was nothing there. So, when I left him at the train station and walked home alone, I tried to think of a good enough excuse to message you. But none were convincing enough lies. The truth is, I fell in love with you as soon as we touched. Him, I merely touch to pass the time. But you don't want to hear that, so I put my phone away, and fall asleep.



## The Inertia of Rain

Ariel Airan Wen

*Second Prize*

I have not mastered any language, so *je ne parle pas français*<sup>1</sup> was what I said to the boy from Toulouse when we stood by a London street to wait for the rain to stop. On that 2024 August night, "*Vous comprenez?*"<sup>2</sup> was asked twenty times, followed by countless self-created gestures.

"Come to Paris", he stamped the invitation after intoxicated French kisses. The conversation froze on the neon light that lit up his golden locks and my golden skin. I looked

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<sup>1</sup> "I don't speak French".

<sup>2</sup> "Do you understand?"

down. The ground was too wet to build any sandcastles. It did not need more dazzling water from the sky, so drizzles stayed afloat between his damp green eyes and my mushy mind.

When I felt lost, I always wished someone could hold my hand, give me something to catch. He wasn't holding my hand at that moment, so I reached forward, palm up, catching the rain.

Raindrops carry their own inertia, stubbornly determined to fall until they collide or scatter.

I attempted to contemplate his proposal but was distracted by all the splashing, my gaze captivated by a double-decker bus speeding down the street and nearly hitting a motorcycle that ran a red light. I watched the rain fall on the tilted vehicle and imagined turning back time.

I could almost feel how I went light on my feet as the raindrops defied gravity, swirling back into the vast abyss above us. The motorcycle would roar backward to the rider's home, along with his helmet, resting by the bedstand. Everything would spiral into the past, *back, back, back*—

—Back to that night in Beijing, fall of 2023, where moonlight sliced through ginkgo leaves and onto our heads. I opened my mouth and swallowed the lights. Even though it was past midnight, the air smelled rejuvenated as we rode through the deserted streets on X's motorcycle. This time, I said, "I should speak English because my Chinese is no better than yours". He laughed it off gently, like how he brushed off the leaf

from my hair. We were perfect together, with his Canadian Mandarin and my fake Cali accent. Combined, we were a Panda Express combo.

X was my boyfriend at the time. Same age, black hair, cat eyes, Chinese Canadian. Despite being in Beijing, he seemed to be living in a different time zone from me. He sleeps during the day, goes to the gym in the evening, and likes to go out for izakaya food after midnight. I moved the needle of my life just to align my time with his because I desperately wanted to be in his orbit. I was desperate because he was everything I ever dreamed of—the ideal boyfriend, someone who shares my international background but is still Chinese at the core. He felt that he was not Chinese enough, so he kept grasping for more. I fell in love with that incompleteness.

Beijing does not have a sea, but Peking University has several lakes, one of which is called *Shao Hai*<sup>3</sup> (A Spoonful of Sea). When I arrived for my exchange semester, X told me about the myth behind its name: ancient Chinese believed they could transport a scoop of the sea inland, creating this lake. Another lake, *Wei Ming*<sup>4</sup>, has a stone platform where couples dated, musicians strummed guitars, and drunk students mumbled ballads to indifferent ducks, occasionally tumbling into the

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<sup>3</sup> Shaoyuan was built during the Wanli reign of the Ming Dynasty by the renowned painter and calligrapher Mi Wanzhong. Its name implies “scooping up a ladle of water from Haidian”. Right next to Shaoyuan lies Shaohai (Spoonful of Sea).

<sup>4</sup> Weiming Lake is the largest man-made lake on the campus of Peking University, located in the north-central area.

water like Ophelia. The first time X and I walked by *Wei Ming*, mosquitoes filled the burning late-summer air, pushing us onto the stone platform. Sitting there, we gazed outward. Beijing looks just like Beijing, unmistakably Chinese: the Yuan Dynasty Water Tower shooting into the sky, the Qing Dynasty carvings rough beneath our bodies.

As a kid, I once gazed afar like this, sitting on the grassy lawn at Shenzhen University. It was early summer when everything felt possible—holidays, trips, new friendships. The sun stretched its lazy warmth over me. Damp grass tickled my arms. Pointing to a distant building shimmering in the heat, I said, “Mommy, Shenzhen looks like Miami!” It was 2010, and I had just returned from three months of living abroad, intoxicated by the promise of a future in America, the land of my dreams.

My mother looked up. “Well, people do say that Shenzhen looks like Miami,” she replied. “But Shenzhen is Shenzhen—a Chinese city. We just happen to have a lot of Western culture everywhere.” She paused, glancing toward a billboard of a smiling white girl flashing a luxury bag. “Still, honey, you’re Chinese. Don’t compare yourself with them.”

She went on to support me to go to a boarding prep school in Connecticut for two years. I was surrounded by Americans of Irish, Italian, French, and African ethnicities; these English speakers who took me as one of their own. Not once did any of my classmates point out that I am Chinese. The only time someone mentioned it was when I went downhill from the

school to a café near the lake, and the white-haired owner asked me curiously, “Young lady, are you from China?”

Living in America in 2017 felt like living on a movie set. I saw everything in broad strokes—sweeping landscapes of Western films, Barbie dolls, and Disney fantasies, all of which laid the foundation for a dream that was, perhaps, too big for me to ever fully embrace. This was the American dream as I had been taught to see it—one where happiness is guaranteed, the future is bright, and dreams are handed to you on a silver platter. Yet, on rainy nights, I found myself lying awake, arm stretched upward toward the darkness of the ceiling, grasping for something I did not know until my muscles ached and dreams finally claimed me.

Six years later, in Beijing, I cuddled with X, watching *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone*.

“What’s the Mirror of Erised<sup>5</sup>?” asked X.

“It’s a mirror that shows you what you want the most.”

He smiled. “Then I would probably see you in it.”

“Of course not. It’s supposed to show your life’s true dream, the deepest desire. Something you long for, something bigger than *that*.”

I was not sure if he had understood my explanation. X, who thinks in English but speaks Mandarin, often faced my question:

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<sup>5</sup> The Mirror of Erised is a magical device in the *Harry Potter* series that reveals a person’s deepest and most desperate desire.

“What language are you thinking in right now?” He never answered with words; instead, he would catch my hand, tuck it into his coat pocket, and gently massage my fingers as we waited for the traffic lights to turn green. Resting my head against his back, I would think: This is what I want—a firm, reassuring grasp.

Yet, as autumn drifted into winter, neither of our hands could warm the other. Lies, I believed, were intolerable. But beneath my indignation lingered a deeper truth: I pushed him away, rejecting the idealized version of happiness the world tried to hand me. The Hollywood romance, the perfect fairy tale, the easy American dream—all felt distant, foreign, and false.

After we parted, my heart never dried up. It became heavy with the inertia of rain, forever caught in emotional monsoons and tsunamis. Like rain driven downward by forces beyond control, my life seemed guided by invisible currents. I thought I had become a walking storm, endlessly searching for a land upon which to fall.

Falling out of Winter. Falling into Sleep. Falling upon Spring.

When I finally sat down in the Starbucks by the gate of the Chinese garden in which I live now, I realized that I could not write this memoir.

I could not write it because I am not a native speaker of any language: not Mandarin, not Cantonese, not English, and definitely not French. Despite the daily rolling of strange

consonants and suffixes off my tongue, I am a person who speaks mixed language, and this trait makes communication with other human beings hard, especially when it comes to confession, so I would escape to similes, metaphors, and personifications.

I escape to literature to be real. I wrote poems about X in the persona of a sea fish, accusing him of taking away my sea and letting me dry on land; I wrote poems about my mother, who planted me within the American dream but ultimately made me give up on it, like sending an astronaut into space only to tell her that she must return to Earth, even after she has just landed on a foreign planet. In writing, I tried to tell different stories and try to reshape the narrative.

Eventually, I realized who I was writing for. It wasn't for X or my mother; I was telling a bedtime story to my childhood self—the girl who reached her hand toward the dark ceiling, hoping to grasp something firm.

I need to hold her hand.

Raindrops carry their own inertia, stubbornly determined to fall until they collide or scatter. Memories, despite how I want to shape them, eventually come into their own form.

I wanted to rewrite my story, shifting away from the American Dream and my obsession with Western boys. Yet, I feel a deep restlessness, like rain ready to fall. With a small push, I transform into a rushing drop, seeping into the earth to

nourish it. Hopefully, by next spring, a banyan seedling will emerge, its roots seeking more connections, air, and vitality.

I have not mastered any language created by man, so when I said, "You should learn my language," that was the truth on that August night in 2024. The rain never stopped as we stood on that street in London. I didn't tell him that I would probably never live in Paris in this lifetime; he could read that in my dark irises.

"Visit me in China sometime," I said at the end of my date with the French boy. "My hometown, Shenzhen, is a beautiful city. Coastal. Always summer."

As we bid adieu, I let go of his hands and said:

"By the way, did you know that Miami looks like Shenzhen?"



## **How I Learned to Cook (and be Alone)**

Maya R

*Honourable Mention*

Studying in another country has always been one of my biggest dreams. The idea of living by yourself while meeting people from different countries, being able to speak a different language than yours fluently, and the sea of opportunities waiting to be sailed upon had always drawn me in.

In my first week, I cried every day.

I underestimated that grasp on your insides that seems to tighten every time you think about your family, your room, or your habits. For the first time in almost my entire life, I was really,

completely, alone. I felt like I ended up somewhere I wasn't supposed to be. Lessons were sometimes hard to follow because my ears weren't used to that kind of pace, let alone in a foreign language, and just starting a conversation felt like my tongue was suddenly a big, heavy rock and my heart a landslide.

Of course, I would call my mum and make her stay on the phone with me for an hour minimum, trying not to let her see my homesickness, lying about my emotions, and changing the subject by asking her how her day was so far, what my siblings were up to, and what she was making for dinner.

When she told me she was making meatballs, I felt something that wasn't just hunger flinch inside; it was happiness with a hint of longing. She would make them from scratch, mixing ground beef with some sausage and mortadella, and then she would start rolling balls the size of a table tennis ball. In a pan, she let the thick, fresh tomato sauce stir with salt, oil, garlic, and a sprinkle of oregano for a few minutes, and then she would add the meat and lower the flame. The strong smell of the meat entangling itself with the sharp scent of the tomato in an inviting dance always made my stomach growl with anticipation. Serving them still steaming, you could cut them with just your fork, and they were soft and juicy in your mouth with that note of slight sourness given by the red sauce, the remains of which you would carefully and meticulously sop up from the plate with a delicate, bakery-bought piece of sourdough bread.

The day after, I decided to try and make them myself. I went to the closest supermarket we had and started looking around in search of all the ingredients. When I saw the Mutti sauce, my eyes shone in delightful surprise, and my hands moved on their own, picking two jars up—there’s no such thing as enough when it comes to a good tomato sauce.

I couldn’t find all the exact types of meat I needed, but I was quite content with what I got; plus, the condiments and the sauce would definitely help to cover that up. It took me a lot of patience and concentration to remember every single step my mum made look so easy and peaceful while I was fighting with the meat not to stick to my fingers, the sauce not to pop around like a volcano, and to season with the right amount of everything, especially salt. It wasn’t until I put everything on the plate that I realised I forgot a major component, the bread. I had to take a few deep breaths; *how* could I have forgotten about the bread?

I put everything back in the pot and went out. My mental stability depended on that bread.

It was worth it. Obviously, it wasn’t like Mum’s, but I still felt a little warmer inside, and the smell reminded me of something familiar and soothing, like a gentle hug when you’re feeling particularly down. The meat was quite tasty, more peppery compared to the “original” and a little less soft; the seasoning was good, which kind of surprised me, and the bread was really bland, but it wasn’t a surprise since it was from the supermarket. It still did its job in picking the sauce up.

And so, as a remedy for my heart, I learned how to cook. It was the only way to feel a little closer to home. And the only moment where I didn't have to think about anything or anyone, it was just me and all these smells and colours waiting for me to turn them into something: the anticipation, your taste buds already in awe to taste and elaborate and connect, the excitement when the familiarity kicks in, and the slight pride when that happens.

With food, you never have to lie, and even if you do, it shows. I had some days where I was feeling so down but didn't want to weigh on my family, so I would tell them I was great, and everything was going amazing. I would cook, but the food turned out insipid, or too salty, or just bad. Like something was missing.

With time, my cooking skills improved together with my new life. I made some friends, and school started to feel easier as my language understanding got better. That tightness inside started to loosen its hold. Cooking now was more something I did because I actually enjoyed it and not a way to cope with my emotions.

It's funny because cooking and food have been part of my identity since before I was born. In my country, you use food to create connections, convey feelings, and share moments, but it was only when I left that I learned this on a deeper level, engraving it inside of me.

I wouldn't want to be anywhere else, but I know, and always will, that there will always be a place that awaits me. A place where I belong.

Sometimes, you need to leave to find it.

My dad starts preparing the sauce for lasagna. The minced meat sizzles inside the pot of tomato sauce for an hour. A warm, overwhelming bay tree smell fills the room and my nostrils. The pasta slices look like long, flat jellies once cooked — the challenge is to place them correctly inside the baking pan without ripping them. It's like holding a snail, but at least the taste is better. I help him with cleaning up every spoon and utensil he doesn't need anymore— I mean, someone must do it. The white sauce is my favourite part; it's creamy, thick like custard, and tastes like salty milk with a hint of parmesan cheese.

We've been doing this since I was ten. Now, we do it every time I'm visiting from college, making me even more eager to come back home.



## **Between the Mirror and the Mask**

Just Average Kid

*Honourable Mention*

There exists a certain hush that descends in the aftermath of a falsehood – not the

silence of serenity, but rather a thing clenched too tightly, a held breath yearning for release.

That awkward silence after you tell a lie is not peaceful. It's like holding your breath, waiting for something to burst. Well, I've known that feeling my whole life.

I remember being ten and accidentally smashing my dad's favorite vase. I panicked, swept up the mess, and blamed it on the wind. Gathering the fragments, my heart a frantic drum, I fabricated a tale of a gust of wind. He believed, or so he feigned. Yet, that evening, seated at the dinner table, I felt the weight of that deceit pressing against my core. I toyed with my meal, uncertain which was the greater burden: the dread of exposure, or the anguish of concealing truth from a beloved soul.

As the years unfurled, such instances multiplied. Lies became easy, a reflex. A way to avoid embarrassment, to fit in, and to not let people down. But each time, same thing: a battle in my head. One voice said the truth would hurt, that it was safer to lie. The other, quieter, reminded me that every lie chipped away at who I was, like a thread

unraveling the tapestry of my being.

Sometimes, lying felt like protection, a sanctuary in which to take refuge. At school, when laughter erupted at the expense of a peer, I joined the chorus. I lied, I deluded myself into believing that I was merely complying, and that it held no consequences. But the truth is, it did. I saw my reflection in the mirror and didn't recognize who I was.

Was I a good friend, or just a coward? Each lie was a mask, and the more I wore it, the harder it was to remember my real face.

Telling the truth? Never easy. It meant admitting I was wrong, apologizing, risking someone getting mad. But it also felt... good. Like a weight lifted. I still want to lie sometimes, to make things easier. But now I pause, listen to that uneasy feeling in my chest.

Growing up, I've realized, is not about adhering to truth, but about confronting the struggle with candor. "It's looking in the mirror without the mask and forgiving yourself for messing up. It's understanding that the truth isn't always nice, but it sets you free. That fighting that inner battle isn't weak, it's brave. It's the courage to become who you really are, one step at a time.

So, I keep trying. I take a breath, think about the mask and the mirror, and I embrace the truth, even as it trembles within my grasp.

# POETRY



## **Fare Well**

Law Yuen Tong

*First Prize*

*the father*

*the son*

I spiral —

*father, it's like you're*

down the deep end.

*improving, I can't help*

Not

that my limbs are  
wavering.  
My body is  
crumbling with my soul  
locked within.  
I had wished—  
anything else but  
denying the truth now.  
The unlikely chance of  
recovery doesn't give  
me hope.  
I don't worry about  
myself; it's because of  
you I'm  
awake in bed.  
despite my heartbreak,  
I hope you can forget  
lying. We know that our  
faith is  
a final stand against cancer.  
My prison,  
I am trapped in despair  
without bounds.  
There are no miracles, no  
recovery;  
I am never good at it.  
*lying*  
I swallow my tears,  
they strengthen me.  
The ache. It hurts and it  
*aches* to

me when I leave you— I  
don't want you to

suffer.

Like pixie dust,

our spun illusion  
masking the rotting  
decay. *I'm fine.*

I love you too much;

remember. Hush,

Courage now. *It's going  
to be alright.*

I say.

Slanted truths taste  
better anyway.

I know I promised you  
that, but

be alone when the snow  
falls, freezing as my hands.

We used to laugh at how it  
sprinkled on our ugly yard,

concealing the carcasses of  
weeds,

I hate that—

the memories of bygone  
days are too painful to

conjure.

*I know—*

we are shying away from the  
bleak reality.

*Let's play in the snow  
together.*

only one of us will be there.

promises that are  
meant to be broken.

Death robs everything  
away, it's

universal.

My heart grows cold.

*I love you, I choke,*  
as the last frozen fractal  
shut me down.

It doesn't matter —

the inevitable truth.

I stare into your unfocused  
eyes as

Chills, like biting frost, seep  
deep into my bones.

*I will miss you.*

Behind the windows, the first  
flash of white

falls

gently

onto

earth



## **The Idealist Cooks**

Ariel Airan Wen

*Second Prize*

The idealist tosses and turns—fifteen more minutes  
before she must fend for herself and make dinner.

Days ago, she lit the stove, fanned the flames,  
huffed and puffed until sweat poured down in heavy drops,  
too weak to pass for tears or spit.

In the dusty corner, a man sits with a triangle.  
One could keep rhythm,  
the other steam eggs.

She rolls up her linen sleeves, plunges her hands  
straight into the water bucket's throat,  
pulling out a few fresh fish from the depths.

The cutting board echoes like a war drum—  
fish scales scatter, clinging to her arms  
as though they'd fallen from her own skin.

They cry out, throats raw: "Mother!"  
Mother—

But she stays silent, she was  
never *Fuxi*<sup>6</sup>, never *Nüwa*<sup>7</sup>,  
never a goddess, twisting her serpent waist into braids.

She wipes her sweat, glances at the man—  
a reminder that she's grown old,  
forgetting it's only a wooden guitar.

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<sup>6</sup> *Fuxi* (伏羲) is the first mythical emperor of China, "a divine being with a serpent's body", the husband and brother of *Nüwa*.

<sup>7</sup> *Nüwa* (女媧) is a mother goddess credited with creating humanity and repairing the Pillar of Heaven.



## **Choose Your Poison**

Joyce

*Honourable Mention*

Coarse, chopped up by a butcher's knife —  
clean, cleaved open by a surgeon's scalpel —  
the words I dissected over and over to say to you you told me  
to  
ditch them to cut you open instead

I tried to say that

Like a vulture that soars far above the blindingly blue sky —  
circling with abandon, biding its time —  
the epitome of life, the harbinger of death —  
and in a split-second plunges down and spreads out its talons,  
you scavenge the desert, enraged, wondering why you can't  
find me

while I lie on the floor, paralyzed by indecision

But afterwards I wonder why you left, can't help but  
coat a bait with sweet honey,  
wishing I could fill the void enlarged by your absence  
it's a guilty pleasure

If you want it,  
the truth is  
I am hopelessly drawn to you, and  
I am helplessly petrified of you

Instead I say  
Let's run away to a bubble where no one can peer in from the  
outside  
laugh our heads off mimicking the distorted visages across  
the membrane  
and forget our own fleetingness  
Live in a cave,  
where the jabbing stalactites meet the jutting stalagmites,  
where we wouldn't be able to tell up from down and dusk  
from dawn  
where maybe it's better this way,  
because time and existence and love are relative,  
and so are my words which,  
Tiptoeing, gently  
I seal between our Lips  
"Choose your poison"



## **hidden truth**

Ana Carbonell

*Honourable Mention*

neon green haze  
numbed-out brains  
music meant for heartbreak  
and middle-aged men  
rumbling the sofas we sit in.

a string of vowels,  
syllables shaping  
a provocation.

*if you could have  
anything in the world  
right now  
what would you ask for?*

smoke of silence  
filling the room.

*happiness.  
money.  
hope.*

your lips remained silent,  
so did mine.  
why force a lie?

your body  
wrapped up in hers,  
intertwined.  
    yet,

your eyes  
caught mine  
like a fish  
to a hook.

never had i seen a stare  
that allowed me to touch  
yearning.

you dusted off  
our forgotten language  
forced me to relearn it

in a microsecond.

you,  
wrapped up in her arms.  
me,  
high and above,  
wrapped up in my own.

eyes like nets  
trapping mine.

secret code,  
repeating the way  
a heart beats.

*you*  
*you*  
*you.*



## **Strawberry Truths**

Tracy Lee

*Honourable Mention*

### **I. Our Wonderland**

In childhood's hush, I watched the clouds—  
soft hands of gold and rose,  
weaving through the endless blue,  
a call only I chose.

A garden bloomed in twilight's grasp,  
where bubbles, bright, took flight,  
and tiny beasts with sugar-feasts  
spoke in tongues of light.

I reached to break the fragile spheres,

to wake—yet still I stayed.  
For dreams, like roots, held fast to earth,  
where Grandpa's tales were made.

## **II. The Field Beyond the Fence**

*"Let me take you down cause I'm going to, Strawberry Fields,"* he sang,  
where burgundy gates guard Lennon's youth,  
and no grown-ups may go.

There, children leapt above the planes,  
their laughter shook the trees.  
They whispered spells to the cave—  
and clowns rained sweets with ease.

But when I told, the world replied:  
"Such pretty lies—but open your eyes,  
your feet are on the ground!"

## **III. The Bridge of Rainbows**

Yet Grandpa knew.  
*"Somewhere over the rainbow,  
skies are blue,  
and the dreams that you dare to dream  
really do come true."*

Over the Rainbow's tune  
spun death not as an end, but as  
a door to the silver moon.

"Beyond the arch, the angels dance,

the stars hang low and bright.  
Wade through the diamond river's glow—  
we'll reign as king and knight."

Then he left first—just as he said—  
with bluebirds flying overhead,  
his hand still warm though mine grew cold  
clutching stories no one told.

And when he left, the song remained,  
a compass in the air.  
Now every bow of colored light  
shows where he waits—just there.

#### **IV. The Truth They Cannot See**

They call it dream. They call it lie.  
But we know what is true:  
Some eyes are sealed to magic's weave—  
The world has more than two.

So let them laugh. Let them deny.  
Their vision, dim and small.  
But in the hush of twilight's blush,  
I hear the distant call—

A lullaby in Lennon's tone,  
a laugh on summer's breeze.  
No grave could hold the stories told  
beneath the strawberry trees.

## **V. The Realisation**

When rainbows arch their jeweled backs,  
I trace the highest hue.  
A flicker moves—a star approves.  
He's coming. Follow through.

Let them call us liars, dear,  
while strawberry juice runs down our chin.  
Let them mock what they can't hear—  
the song that never did end.

What is real?  
The sweetest truths wear fiction's guise.

What is true?  
Our magical lullaby comes through—  
*Strawberry Fields Forever.*



## **Lucifer**

Nathan Fung

*Honourable Mention*

Morning is no different than a veil –

Night is too delicate to last.

It is too raw, too natural for the moths

Around the illumination,

For their transparency to be seen through.

You are too generous, to bless them  
With the Enlightenment –  
The aches, the primitive dysphoria,  
The decadent elation that breaths in the dark.  
They are just too blind to embrace your gifts.

Grief when they turn their back on you.  
They cross you. Cross you out.  
Nonetheless, butterflies still land on the same ground.

I'm no different, cursed by morning.  
The light pierces my wings. The alteration  
Assimilates me.  
This halo hunts with its open mouth.

The vomits, the veil,  
The moths, myself  
Are sickening, sickening, sickening, and sickening!  
Their follies, the flowing air,

The passivity to inhale their exhale  
Are sickening, sickening, and sickening!

My savior!

Cleanse me with your fiery eyes.

Perforate me with your curing horns.

Exudate the glitters and the gloze within

Like how you define your name

For my desire

To present myself in front of you, naked.

# SHORT STORY



## **Perfect Li(f)e**

Joshua Chung

*First Prize*

*Three, two, one—*

“Hey guys, it’s Melody here, and get ready with me for a date!”

*Click.* Melody picks up her phone and takes it to the bathroom. She places her Galaxy S27 on a tripod and presses the ‘record’ button.

*Three, two, one—*

"After I wake up, I often go to the bathroom and clean my face—with the Skin2008 Foam, of course!" She speaks as she rubs the foam on her face. "It's so soft and smells nice, and it works like a charm!"

*Click.* She picks up her phone again and walks to the wardrobe. Another tripod, and then the 'record' button.

*Three, two, one—*

She considers her wardrobe, putting on a puzzled expression. "Now, I usually wear something soft and stylish, with some colours here and there. I'll wear a short beige skirt and a white shirt today, complete with a gentle brown jacket."

*Click.* She picks up her phone and walks to the doorway. Tripod, 'record'.

*Three, two, one—*

"For a finishing touch, let's go with a nice shoulder bag. Ta-da! This is the outfit—" She spins around. "—and it looks great! Hope you guys have a great day, and I'll see you soon!"

*Click.*

xxx

“Hey, Melody! How’s your IG going?”

Melody smiles and replies, “Great! Just shot another reel; should be available tomorrow.” She drinks the lemon tea and asks Justin, “How about you? How are your songs coming?”

Justin chuckles, the light in his eyes twinkling. “Well, it’s taking some time. Chuckle’s off somewhere—probably forgot our session again; and Tin’s pulling some all-nighters, so good luck to him!”

Melody nods and studies his features as he turns to look at some students walking by the road. The dimples on his face as he smiles, his toned arms as he unconsciously scratches his head, and his long, sleek fingers as he taps on the dining table.

Sometimes, it feels surreal that she’s known this boy since childhood, especially when he turned up in the same class one day. She instantly noticed the finely sculpted abs and toned arms his shirt could not contain. It took some time to reconnect, but now here they were, eating lunch together at the school canteen. *Could I ever tell him...?*

Lost in her thoughts, Melody suddenly feels like someone is looking at her. A female student, with a white bag in hand, is staring at her—and then it clicks. With bright, wide eyes, she calls to the students in front of her, who first look at her and then Melody. They soon realise and run toward her, pushing each other, as their teacher calls after them. *Oh, boy.*

Justin clicks his tongue, bemused. "Well, here they come." She sighs inwardly. *Yep, here they come.*

They rush to Melody, their eyes shining. "Are you Melody2604?" "Your reels are amazing!" "How do you make these videos?" Their voices are like waves, each one surpassing the last one. The students at the other tables are also looking towards her, their whispers reaching Melody—astonished, delighted, confused. She clears her throat and lifts her hand, and the waves finally subside.

"Yes, you're right!" She looks at them and smiles. "I am Melody. Do you guys want selfies?" After some more squealing and questions, they take pictures with her. Though it's sometimes annoying, she enjoys talking to her fans and listening to their stories. As the students finally walk away, Justin leans over and asks, "What's it like to be a successful influencer?" She replies with a grin, "Amazing." *But is it though?* she asks herself.

xxx

"Hey, Melody! Where's my damn money?"

Melody sighs as she hears her father's voice. She opens the door grudgingly, which creaks ominously as she steps inside.

The flat is a mess. No tripods, no cameras, no beautiful outfits. Just an abusive father and a bunch of rowdy kids. They are talking about something, but as their father screams and cusses at them, they scatter like frightened birds and go into the other room.

Melody silently crouches and picks up the candy wrappers on the floor as her father shouts again. "Ungrateful brats! Lazing around like pigs." He turns on her, his voice slurred. "And you! Where have you been, eh? Making some stupid videos again?"

Though she is used to it, her anger still flares. She takes a deep breath and counts: *three, two, one*. As the spark goes out, she continues picking up the things on the floor. There are dirty clothes, textbooks and toys everywhere. She and her siblings often tread lightly around him, but he somehow always finds something to yell at; things destroyed, hands, arms or legs bruised.

Her father's voice reaches her ears again. "Anyway, who am I to care? Melody, give me my money!" His voice triggers a flood in her mind, and she shuts her eyes as painful memories crash through her. She wills them to stop, but her tiny voice is swept away by the despair and pain.

She has seen her mother beaten by her father, her brothers starved for a week because of a simple mistake, and she has experienced her father's rage herself. *Sometimes, I wish I was born into another family*, she thinks bitterly.

As she stands up, her father shouts at her, "Where's my money?" Since her IG took off, he has been asking for more and more money; yet Melody knows he spends it on gambling instead of his children. The flame burns brighter, causing her throat to tighten.

She continues closing her eyes, hoping not to see this pathetic creature on the sofa. He yells again, *like a greedy goblin*, "Where do you think you're going?" Determined, she takes her bag and leaves the flat.

xxx

*Three, two, one—*

"Hey guys, it's Melody here, and this is my OOTD!"

*Click.* Melody picks up her phone and takes it to the wardrobe. A white wardrobe with all sorts of clothes. She places her Galaxy S27 on a tripod and presses the 'record' button.

*Three, two, one—*

"For today, I'm going for a more mellow, casual look!" She speaks as she rummages through the clothes. "Since we're going for a mellow vibe, I'd advise lighter colours and less patterns!"

*Click.* She walks out of the frame and into a changing room. She takes the clothes off the hanger and puts them on. As she finishes and walks back to the wardrobe, someone presses the 'record' button.

*Three, two, one—*

She twirls around. "Ta-da! There you have it! Hope you guys like it, and I'll see you guys tomorrow."

*Click.* She stops in her tracks and only breathes out when she hears the director say, "Cut!" She walks back to the changing room and changes back to her original clothes.

"That was great!" the director tells her as she moves towards him. The staff are already taking down the set: the lights, the wardrobe, the fake windows... She returns the Galaxy back to the props team.

"Really?" "Yes! Are you available for the next shoot? Saturday afternoon, 2 to 5. Everything will be provided." She opens her school calendar and nods. "Should be fine." "Great! Well, I'll see you next time."

Melody stands there as the director walks away. She stands there, looking at the now-empty space around her, and walks away in the other direction.

xxx

"Melody, are you fine?"

Melody blinks and mumbles, "Huh?" Justin looks at her, his eyebrows furrowed, and asks, "Melody, are you alright? You have not responded to my messages, and you look pale. Are you okay?"

She looks away, biting her lips. *Should I tell him?* She thinks. *Should I tell him who I really am and about my family?*

So she does what she learnt—when her mother was beaten to death—she counts.

*Three...*

*Two...*

xxx

*...One.*

The light dims as she stares into the camera in front of her—lens focused, clean and foreign.

Her voice trembles as she speaks, "Hey guys, I need to share something with you. This is different from my usual content, but it's something I should've done a long time ago."

Her heart pounds; her hands sweat. She continues, "I've been hiding who I am. Unlike what some of you think, I'm not perfect. My family sucks, I don't have the courage to chase my crush, and I— I'm tired of being this *perfect* girl."

She gestures at her background. "All of this is fake. What is real—is that I am a coward. I've been yelled at for no reason, beaten and even threatened—" She chokes, teardrops falling down. "And I could not stand up for my mother, my siblings, not even myself. Instead, I pretend I'm fine, lying to my viewers that I have a perfect life. It's not, and I— I'm so sorry."

"I— I'm not doing this for forgiveness, but because it's— it's honest. I don't want to live in a perfect lie; I'd rather be my true self."

The recording stops.

She closes her eyes and starts counting.

*Three, two, one—*



## **The Prophet's Truth**

Hillary

*Second Prize*

'What do you see?'

A boy sat in the middle of the room with his eyes closed. Several people dressed in white robes circled him, waiting for him to utter some words.

Off to the side of the dimly lit room, a red light blinked insistently, like the heartbeats of the citizens waiting with bated breath in front of their screens where the room was visible.

Behind the closed eyes of the boy were fleeting images bestowed upon him by the divine, those which foretold the fate of the city. Every morning, people huddled in front of their devices to listen to the wisdom of the power beyond, to plan and to anticipate their days ahead.

After a moment of complete silence, the boy gestured for the closest clergyman. The clergyman leaned down as the boy whispered the visions into his ears. With a slight nod, the clergyman stood straight again and turned to the camera livestreaming to the entire city.

'The God has spoken: Today shall be a peaceful day. No calamity shall descend upon this city. May all who have to leave home return safe at the end of the day,' the clergyman announced, and the ring around the boy soon dissipated as the camera feed cut off.

The boy, Aaron, left the room last. He walked along the corridor of the church, stained glass windows casting a kaleidoscope of colours onto the ground with the morning light, blinding and confusing the pedestrians along the hall. As Aaron walked past the light, it illuminated his red cape, his shadow stretched from one side of the corridor to the other, casting his figure onto the wall.

The clergyman's announcement still echoed in Aaron's head. 'Peaceful', 'no calamity', 'return safe'... and what did he know?

For days on end, all Aaron could see was the city progressively marching towards its own doom. In his vision, he saw more beggars roaming the streets, citizens starving to death and fragments of buildings buried among the ashes of the once prosperous city.

And the root cause of it all? The church's greedy consumption and ignorance of the people's needs. Aaron saw the head priest feasting in his room while citizens outside the window wandered the neighbourhood like zombies. He saw clergymen surrounding themselves with ladies of all kinds, handing over luxurious gifts to them while other people worked tirelessly to support the working of the city.

But alas, Aaron was just a boy, one who was gifted with the ability to connect with the divine and see the future, one who was taken in by the church at a very young age. He had no right to speak against the church, his saving grace, even if the words were not his own.

'Children don't understand the intricacies of governing and social etiquette,' they said. 'We shall help you rephrase your prophecy, for we know what to say in public settings.'

At first, everything was fine. Aaron would tell the attending clergymen what he saw, and they would connect the images together and tell the city the whole picture. But as corruption behind the scenes grew, the visions Aaron saw got more and more disastrous, and the words of the clergy began to deviate from the truth day by day.

It was said that children were not capable of telling lies, that their mouths run unfiltered in face of the truth. And the church feared for Aaron to reveal its true face and induce rage among the people, so it twisted the images to fit its narratives and purposes and silenced the protest against its acts from even the messenger of the divine.

Aaron stopped in front of a booth on the side of the main hall. He sat inside with a heavy sigh. This used to be where priests usually sat to listen to people's confessions of sins, but when Aaron arrived in the church, the adults decided to transform the booth into a place of prophecy. People would come and ask Aaron about their future, concerning their 'fated lover' or 'chances at hitting the jackpot,' such kind of trivial stuff. No matter how much Aaron despised the feeling of people using his gift for their own benefits, this was the only time Aaron could speak the truth and be taken at his word.

An hour or two passed as Aaron attended to the line of people. As Aaron was about to close the window and leave for his break, a noticeably smaller hand than that of the other patrons slipped in through the gap.

'Please let me ask just one question. It took me a looooooot of effort to slip out,' the owner of the hand said, with the voice of a young girl.

'Ok, just one question,' Aaron answered as he grabbed the girl's hand.

The girl behind the screen was silent for a moment before she spoke again with her question. 'Is the city going to fall?'

'I'm sorry, but I can't answer questions that don't concern yourself.' Aaron recited the instructions from the church when faced with this kind of question. 'If you would like to know about the city's status, you can replay the morning prophecy broadcast session on any platform.'

'I know, I know. My mom forces me to watch that every morning before heading to school, says it is to "ensure that nothing bad would happen to me for the day." But I always wonder why it's the clergy speaking and not you! You are the one with future visions after all, so I want to hear what you say instead of those... old, bald adults.'

Aaron listened as the girl continued to ramble on.

'And... to be honest, people are starting to see inconsistencies between the clergy's words and the reality. The clergy are always saying how the city will be fine and how we will prosper, but all we see are signs of disaster waiting to happen. Still, the adults always comfort themselves by saying that the words of God promised them goodwill. I don't buy it, so I have to ask you this.'

Aaron gripped the girl's hand a little harder and said, 'Sorry, I really cannot answer your question now in this setting, but if you want to know about the city's status, you can watch the morning prophecy broadcast session tomorrow.'

The girl seemed to understand the meaning behind Aaron's words and left after muttering her gratitude.

The afternoon and night passed by, and the morning light of another day greeted the city.

Aaron once again sat inside the circle of clergymen as they awaited the words of the prophet. Behind Aaron's closed eyes were vibrant images of a riot within the city, people gathering in front of the church, demanding the priests to come out and defend themselves. Inside the church, the clergy ran around trying to hide from the gaze of the citizens peering through the stained-glass windows. Vibrant images showed scenes of the near future, something concrete and clear that would happen.

Aaron realized there was no going back. From the moment he decided to tell the truth yesterday in the booth, this future was already set in motion, and he would now fulfil it and see it through. He opened his eyes, and as the nearest clergyman took it as a sign to lean down, Aaron pushed past the ring of clergy and rushed to the front of the camera. As he finished telling the entire city of what he saw, the clergy, who were initially in shock, caught up to him and dragged him away from the camera while someone turned to cut the camera feed.

Disaster would continue to befall the city, as soon as the people rose to their feet and marched towards the church. People's unadulterated faith in the words of God from his messenger's own mouth would fuel their revolution. Riots and protests would spread throughout the city before the governing body could reform.

'But at least the city shall now be free from the clutches of the greedy church,' Aaron thought, as he was sent back to his room for his house arrest.



## **Boy**

Christian C. L

*Honourable Mention*

Someone's outside.

The thud of boots against packed dirt, the muffled crunch of leaves, the rough shuffling of woollen cloth — they must have tracked me here.

I forced my body into action — I had to get to a better position, or it'd all be over before anything began. I shifted towards the shed's entrance, guided by the dim morning twilight, just as I was taught, settling into a corner beneath the shattered windows.

The morning haze — night is turning into day, I realised. I haven't slept a wink nor eaten since the attack last night. Please, please, body, don't fail me now.

I crouched, facing the door, daring it to swing open. My heart raced, breath uncontrolled and shallow, fighting against my will to keep it down. My eyes strained, and my jaws clenched, threatening to bite through my skull.

I can hear his grunts.

Flustered, I hastily reached for the pistol strapped tightly onto my belt, the only gear I had on during my escape. In the ensuing clumsy struggle against time to release the clasp, a sharp, searing jolt of pain erupted from my right shoulder, sending shocks and setting fire to every inch of my body as it passed, as if a fuse was embedded in it, burning its way down my arms. I barely managed to stifle a cry as uncontrolled sweat and tears beaded down the nape of my neck, directly onto the right clavicle, where a sickly warmth began spreading beneath a uniform blossoming red.

This was it. This was how I went. A wound I didn't know I had, masked by the damned adrenaline until the moment it mattered most. All the training and sacrifice — gone just like that. Any second now, a bear of a man would throw the door right off its hinges, and I'd be sent to rot away in one of their damned camps.

And I'd have done nothing for this war, nothing for this country.

No. That won't happen.

I reached for my pistol again, gingerly with my other hand, just as the right one began losing sensation. A desperate panic surged from my gut, quickly subdued by the more urgent threat. Shakily, I raised my uninjured arm towards the door, willing it to steady. Time seemed to slow as my heart threatened to burst from my chest, arms shaking ever-violently with every passing second. Presently, all was quiet, save my raspy breath — no footsteps, no ruffling clothes, not even the howl of the wind — the calm before the storm.

As my resolve began to waiver, hoping that the man avoided the shed entirely, the door burst wide open, slamming into the walls in a cacophonous proclamation, catching me off-guard. My aim faltered as fear threatened once more to rear its ugly head. I forced my training into action, looking the man over, assessing the threat at the end of the barrel.

Silhouetted against the dim twilight, a blank face of faux maturity stood in silent answer. Distant, deeply recessed eyes stared out from bony, gaunt features, piercing right past me, past the windows, into the outlying, smouldering fields. Sharp lines defined his cheeks, leathery skin taut and unyielding against bone, weathered beyond youthful recollection. His

stature most revealed his concealed adolescence: shoulders slack and underdeveloped, arms scrawny and flaccid by his side, chest lacking the breadth and hardiness of a man, poorly hidden beneath the ignoble, dark officers' uniform, filthy and torn. He carried no pack, no helmet, no firearm. His vest was empty: no gear, ammo, nothing. A hunting knife, short and broad, sat strapped to his belt yet bore no evidence of use. Where was his unit? Why was he alone? Was this a trap? My mind raced.

I nursed the tension out of my clenched jaws, forcing circulation back into my lungs as I registered my held breath. "Hands!" I blurted out, barely able to form sentences. My finger inadvertently tensed on the trigger.

Despite my increasingly disquiet mind, one line of thought stood out — here stood the face of the enemy, cowering behind my pistol. Here stood the face of monsters, fabled for the joy they took in torture. Here stood the embodiment of evil, prideful slaughterers of the innocent. And here I stood, at every advantage, able to right the wrong and bring justice, even if just one at a time.

The boy took a deep breath, moving for the first time since he threw the door open. "Shoot", he croaked, the hateful accent unmistakable.

I looked the boy up and down again, aware of his soulless eyes boring through me. I straightened my arm,

increasingly conscious of the weight on my hand with every passing second. The cold metal casing, perfectly moulded, now dug into the curve of my palm. The trigger, calibrated to provide the optimum resistance, now fought the pressure from my finger.

“You people did this”, I muttered, voice barely a whisper. With a final defiant look, I squeezed the trigger.

A soft mechanical click answered, masked immediately as a thunderous boom erupted from the barrel, sending my arm flailing backwards with a jolt as a ring of smoke encased the pistol. My ears rang as the sharp smell of gunpowder filled the room, pungent and unyielding. Despite my arm, my aim was pure and true, and the bullet made contact almost instantly. A grisly crunch followed, signalling the splitting of bone as the bullet carved its own path through his skull, exploding out of the other end in a shower of fragments and blood, ending him right then and there. His heart halted, ironically, in the same moment as his eyes flared in shrewd recognition — the first and last sign of his former youth.

His limbs went limp, and his knees buckled. The boy swayed for a split second as if fighting his end before toppling back right where he stood, out the door and onto the dirt path. With his fall, no sound was heard other than the deafening silence that followed the gunshot. From his gaping wound, what was left of his youth gushed out in blood, pooling around him from the crimson stream.

I did it. My revenge for my country. I killed the enemy, neutralised the threat, removed the monster, just as the speeches told, as the stories go. Just as I was taught, as I was supposed to. I contributed to the war. My life was worthwhile. I brought justice. I did it.

I lowered my arm as the pistol slipped through my fingers and landed with a crack onto the hardwood floor, smouldering.

I stared at the open wound as the gushing stream slowed to a drizzle, as the crimson pool stagnated, shimmering in the rising sun. I stared as the dark uniform was soaked a scarlet-red, hints seeping through the torn cloth, animating his pale, scarred skin. I stared as the edges of my vision began to blur, as the air stood suffocatingly static in my lungs, seemingly turned dense and immovable. I stared as the world around me slowly went into a standstill, leaving just me and the boy, silent and static. I waited for the sense of triumph.

But it never came. And in its place, a hollow guilt festered.

I killed a boy. The son of a mother who scours the papers each day, searching with dread for her son's name. The world of a lover who writes to him daily, eagerly awaiting his return. The brother of a sibling who was their anchor and life-long friend. He was just another boy. He was no threat. He was

just as I was, just like all of us. Is this what victory feels like? Is this justice?

I forced my eyes shut, yet the scenes lingered as if branded behind my eyelids: the distant, soulless eyes, once piercing, now accusing. The crunch of the skull, once thought to be a sign of accomplishment — now a torturous cacophony shadowing my sleep. The gushing of blood, now eagerly soaked up by the soil, but forever a crimson mark on my soul.

I was lied to. The stories of glorious killing, the speeches of warring success, the medals of battle honour. Lies, all lies.

What is true?

Many moments passed in unanswered silence, the soft dawn revealing nothing.

I killed a boy.



**Log: First Godfall Crater Expedition Concluded.  
March 16, 2023.**

Lillian

*Honourable Mention*

After a long and arduous journey, Captain Lin and his team finally arrived at the place locals called the "Godfall Crater," where they hoped to uncover the truth about the so-called "deity."

The Godfall Crater was an eerily mysterious underground cave system. The region lacked karst topography, devoid of the carbonate rocks typically required for cave formation. Yet the

caverns here had been forcibly "pried open" by an indescribable power. The walls bore traces of this force, marked by wave-like patterns in the mud—possibly carved by accumulated water, a phenomenon still within the realm of explanation. The true strangeness lay elsewhere: some sections of the cave stretched dozens of meters without a single pillar-like rock, their vast emptiness defying logic. By all rights, the ground above should have collapsed. Yet it held firm, forming a labyrinth of caverns ranging from tens to hundreds of meters in height, suspended in defiance of natural law.

According to locals, the Godfall Crater had formed over forty years ago. At the time, the earth shook violently, as if something colossal had plummeted from the sky, forcing villagers to flee their homes. Strangely, the event was neither a meteorite strike nor a widespread earthquake, and after the tremors subsided, the land remained unnervingly intact. Yet these violent shocks recurred every few days, baffling villagers who searched in vain for their cause. Finally, after one such tremor, the ground split open. The village chief led a group of young men to investigate, revealing the crater's existence.

Since then, strange occurrences had multiplied. Few who ventured into the crater returned unscathed, save for that first group. Now, Captain Lin's team aimed to explore this very cave. He knew the odds were grim, but he wasn't unprepared. His companions included Xiaoxia, a military medic; Bozhi, a mechanic; and Zhiyun, his trusted brother.

The four entered the crater with defined roles: Zhiyun scouted ahead, Xiaoxia and Bozhi followed in the middle, and Captain Lin guarded the rear. The crater's layout was straightforward, but its perpetually waterlogged floor—a subterranean river—forced them to cling to the sloped walls as they advanced. Although human traces were absent, flora and fauna thrived unnervingly here. Vegetation carpeted the water and mud walls, lush and alien.

"Wait, this isn't right," Xiaoxia murmured, her headlamp fixed on a plant. "This is *Shizhi*—it only grows above 2,000 meters in elevation." She leaned closer, examining the quartz rock fragment beneath it. Digging deeper, she found familiar mud walls beneath the quartz. The rock seemed randomly placed, yet the *Shizhi* had grown here for at least three years.

When Xiaoxia shared her findings, the team fell silent.

Captain Lin frowned. "Check nearby. See if this is consistent."

Soon, they discovered mudrot grass from swamps, rhombus flowers from high altitudes, and even desert toads that should only be able to survive in arid regions.

Bozhi adjusted his glasses. "These plants require entirely different climates. Even if transplanted, they'd die quickly. Yet

here they thrive, with no signs of withering.” He pinched the sandy soil near a toad and the roots of some mudrot grass, testing their texture and moisture. “This place must harbor multiple microclimates... but that’s impossible under natural conditions—”

Suddenly, Captain Lin grabbed Bozhi’s wrist, stopping him from touching a rhombus flower. “Careful. Don’t interact recklessly. Nothing here follows logic. Stay alert.”

They proceeded cautiously along the underground riverbank, avoiding overgrown areas. Xiaoxia, a pragmatic military medic dispatched to assist, had initially dismissed tales of “deities.” But the crater’s anomalies gnawed at her. “What exactly *is* this ‘deity’?” she asked.

Zhiyun glanced back. “It’s not a religious god—just a placeholder name.” He steadied Bozhi, who stumbled. “Over fifty years ago, SAAS observation lenses detected abrupt gravitational wave shifts in space. Since then, everything changed. It was as if... something *living* had emerged. We began detecting strange activity—scattered blips at first, then swarms, until the wave shifts flooded nearly all near-Earth zones. Around forty years ago, when this crater appeared, they breached our atmosphere. Invisible to the naked eye, harmless to our world... but on screens, they’re colossal. Hundreds of meters long, some smaller... amorphous, shifting masses. We

call them 'the Great Fish' for their undulating movement. Those wave-like walls? Their handiwork."

Xiaoxia frowned. "How has this stayed secret?"

"Initially, they were mere energy—they had no impact on daily life." Zhiyun gestured at the aberrant flora. "But now they're changing. For a decade, bizarre phenomena have surfaced globally: mountains shifting overnight, thousand-kilometer wave patterns etched into terrain, houses fused into cliffs."

"It's simple," Bozhi interjected. "These 'deities' are spatial beings. They phase through matter—mountains, rivers, bedrock—leaving no trace. But something's altered. Their passages now scar our world. To find out why, we start here—the first site of their marks."

Xiaoxia's nape prickled. She slowed, trailing Zhiyun. What other secrets lurked here? No one knew.

As they pressed on, the light dimmed. Abruptly, the air thickened, and the breath of the team turned labored. Crossing an invisible threshold, their skin and organs tingled as if brushed by unseen hands, and it felt as if their minds became briefly untethered. The vegetation vanished, replaced by a dense fungal carpet. Xiaoxia identified many species as lethally toxic; even airborne spores could potentially cause paralysis.

The team donned masks, debating retreat. But Captain Lin pressed forward.

Exhaustion and toxin-induced haze blurred their vision. The cavern warped into overlapping shadows, the river's guidance reduced to faint, rippling reflections.

Then, voices echoed ahead—impossible here. Captain Lin surged forward, flashlight raised. “Who’s there?!”

The figure approached, voice chillingly familiar. As it neared, they recoiled: it was Captain Lin, his clothes stained, legs shrouded in white fungi and green moss.

Before anyone could react, the doppelgänger roared, “Zhiyun, RUN!”

Zhiyun froze, then lunged back, yanking Xiaoxia. The team scrambled. “Captain! What’s happening?!”

The real Captain Lin, face ashen, shouted, “Go! Now!”

Zhiyun hauled Xiaoxia forward while Bozhi stumbled behind. Suddenly, Bozhi faltered. Captain Lin reached to steady him but slipped on the slimy fungi, plunging into the raging

underground river. A scream, cut short as the current swallowed him.

"CAPTAIN!!" Bozhi's wail drowned in the roar.

"We can't save him here—MOVE!" Xiaoxia dragged the resisting Zhiyun. Bozhi clawed ashore, gasping. "Mark the spot. We leave. *Now.*"

Zhiyun's grime-streaked face twisted in grief. Xiaoxia gripped his arm. "Only *you* know the way back. We need you alive to rescue him."

Nodding mutely, Zhiyun let Bozhi carve a red symbol on the wall. Then, leaning on one another, the three retreated.

## **JUDGES**

### *Creative Non-Fiction* | **Dr Patrick Holland**

Dr Patrick Holland is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Humanities & Creative Writing at the Hong Kong Baptist University. This is his third time serving as a judge for the ELTU Creative Writing Competition; many thanks to Dr Holland for his continued and valued support.

### *Poetry* | **Dr Collier Noguees**

Dr Collier Noguees is an Assistant Professor at the Department of English at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where she teaches undergraduate and MA creative writing and literature courses. This is her second time serving as a judge for the ELTU Creative Writing Competition; kind thanks for your keen and ongoing support, Dr Noguees.

### *Short Story* | **Dr Suzanne Wong**

Dr Suzanne Wong is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of English at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where she teaches creative writing courses on short stories. This is her third time serving as a judge for the ELTU Creative Writing Competition. Many thanks to Dr Wong for her kind and continued support.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

### Ana Carbonell

Ana Carbonell is a Mexican journalist and gender studies graduate student at CUHK. She is fascinated by the power of words in all of its presentations and their ability to evoke emotion and change in people. She has published articles in several online newspapers in Spanish and English, and is passionate about long form investigative journalism, reading novels, and poem anthologies.

### Ariel Airan Wen

Born in Shenzhen, China, Ariel is currently a final-year English major at CUHK, specializing in both literature and creative writing. Her work often explores emotions and imagined futures, with previous poetry collections including *365 Days as a Minor* and *Forest Rhapsody*. She is currently working on a dystopian sci-fi project titled *GBA*. When she's not writing, she's probably rewriting.

### Christian C. L

Long-time reader, first time writer

<https://www.goodreads.com/christianjadedcl>

## **Hillary**

A small potato who loves to write about her thoughts on topics she can't put into her own words with characters and supernatural story settings. So, if you think you are overanalysing her stories, don't worry, you are probably not.

## **Joyce**

Just a normal university student trying to figure out what their purpose is in life :)

## **Joshua Chung**

Unemployed young Christian with a dream of writing a book. Writing, drawing, and reading daily; writing songs and stories in spare time. Likes Laufey, jazz, city-pop, and Kirby. Waiting for *Stranger Things* Season 5.

## **Just Average Kid**

Helen is a dedicated student from the Mechanical & Automation Engineering Department. Prior to this, she pursued English Literature during her secondary school years. In addition to her engineering coursework, Helen nurtures her artistic side through painting and writing as she finds joy and inspiration in both hobbies. She believes that creative artistic pursuits enrich her engineering education and allow her to express herself fully.

### **Law Yuen Tong**

Phoebe is a medical student who, ironically, is interested in different forms of arts. Struggling between the fine line between rationality and sentimentality, she pours her emotions into writing, allowing words to flow between her bewitched fingers, carrying her and her readers through literature landscapes. When inspiration strikes her, her fingers would be flying, coaxing the potential stories out of the back of her mind, before refining them and fleshing them into life. Usually, you would find her chilling with friends or doodling when her nose is not buried in *Gray's Anatomy* (the textbook, not the TV show).

### **Lillian**

Just the beginning of this story.

### **Maya R**

I'm an Italian university student, currently studying English Literature and Creative Writing in the UK. My biggest hobby (together with food, obviously) is writing, so one day I hope to be able to work in the sector!

### **Nathan Fung**

Nathan Fung is a poet and a songwriter. He likes to use nature and mythology to decipher his abstract inner experiences.

**Tracy Lee**

Hi, I'm Tracy Lee, a 20-year-old local student studying nursing at CUHK. I love listening to music, watching movies, and reading. Sometimes I share my thoughts in movie reviews online. If you also love art or movies, feel free to chat with me!

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