

The Apostrophe

Issue 10 | Q3/2025 | Passion



The Hong Kong Writers Circle is a member organisation for writers of all levels and of all genres.

On an annual basis, the Hong Kong Writers Circle publishes an anthology of short stories. In this publication, The Apostrophe, the five points of the bauhinia flower (Hong Kong's emblem) are paralleled each quarter by exactly five original pieces, each of which has a connection to Hong Kong.

The Apostrophe is edited by members of the Hong Kong Writers Circle.

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A Passion for Words

Editor's Note



Thousands of times, in every era, people have launched the words, “I love you!” into the world without knowing what the response will be: whether their hope that the words will be returned has overcome their fear that they will not ... or whether they already know the answer, and can no longer contain themselves.

Like the need to create art, it is an interior force rather than any exterior one that moves us to express our passion.

But passion is complex. In “Pablo and Dolores” by Jolanta Polk, the first piece of Issue #10, the intensity of a rustic love-match becomes all the more poignant when a terrible choice is thrust upon a family. Is the passion of love as close as it seems to the passion of fear, of despair, or of hate? The simplicity of the setting belies the intricacy of the piece’s emotion.

This is a question posed in several of the pieces in this issue: how is it that love can fulfill dreams on one hand, while at the same time it “shreds my heart in tatters / like a thousand spears into my chest”? In “A Needless Love”, Jonathan Chibuike Ukah asks us to consider not only how we love (“How can love occupy a space where there is no space?”), but why. In a few brief, haunting words, Yuan Changming brings “Summer Twilight” to life. Here there is no human intervention, but pure nature. Yet with these few words, it creates an unfilled longing. From this unnamed twilight, we are rushed to the “square room” of “Island Solitude” by Vanessa Ho, where lovers recall their sweeping seaside embrace by the light of a single souvenir candle.

Finally, the reckless, messy, human side of passion is explored in “Knife Box” by Gregor Windstill. The will-they, won’t-they plot of a heartbreaking stereotype is here turned upside down, in a room rented for the night at a seedy Hong Kong hotel that the editors hope very much is as fictional as the story.

Each of the paintings, drawings, and photographs of Issue #10 also gives pause to our understanding of passion, whether it is through the chaos of collage, the forced vagueness of pastels, or the sharp hyper-reality of a staged photo. Some reflect the emotions of the story, while others evoke entirely alternate interpretations. As with passion, the first, superficial emotion is rarely the same as what comes after careful consideration.

Jan Lee, Editor-in-Chief



Pablo and Dolores

Jolanta Polk

Winter had descended on the village, shrouding it in unrelenting grey, and the morning chill penciled the ground with frosty scribbles when love, a caprice of Fate indifferent to seasons, struck Pablo Parra like a blow. He knew he wanted to spend the rest of his life with Dolores Sosa the instant he saw her approaching the river that surrounded Labarca with tentacles and tributaries.

It was not the first time he truly saw her. He had known her for years, but it was the first time he looked at her like a man looks at a woman or like an astronomer observes a recently discovered star: with open-mouthed awe, greed, and a desire to keep her forever.

From that moment on, he followed her like a faithful but clumsy dog, silently begging for a smile, a look, or a word.

Still surprised by his awkward courtship, Dolores drew him on in a way a mulberry leaf would lure a silkworm: she let him trail behind and eat her up with his stares, showing neither interest nor indifference. She found it difficult to comprehend what had captivated him. She knew, of course, that most girls got married—it was an event that followed naturally from the first monthly bleeding. She had been told by her mother, and not allowed to forget by Father Grande, that God made women for one particular purpose when he said, "Go forth and multiply."

"If you happen to be single after you hit twenty, your uterus might just shrink down to the size of a hazelnut and could very well fall out," she warned her daughters.

Dolores had also been told with a degree of ill-concealed pity that her chances of finding a husband were not quite as good as her sisters’.

With the acute intuition of all mothers, Amparo, Pablo’s mother, observed her son’s mood swings and his intense insecurity whenever she caught him gazing at Dolores. She maintained the unshakable belief that if the union ever took place, it would bring no good to either Pablo or his chosen bride.

“Oil and water just don’t mix,” she thought. “This will cause heartache for everyone. Pablo’s life is already tangled without more trouble.”

She knew there was nothing more to do but wait. Somewhere, somehow, a decision had been made—Pablo was not free to break away from the magnetic circle Dolores had trapped him in.

Night was perched outside, chasing away the last scraps of daylight, when Pablo made up his mind and finally approached his mother. He was standing next to the stove, bright with burning logs, the amber tongues of warmth licking his back.

“I want to marry Dolores Sosa,” he said without a preamble and with a resolution he hardly felt. “But I don’t know how to go about it.”

Amparo was sitting at the table, cleaning the lentils she had spread on a white rag, searching for pebbles and chaff and selecting blackened seeds that could ruin the taste of her lentil stew.

"Dolores Sosa," she said calmly and attentively, then picked up a piece of grit and flipped it into a bin.

“So, what does she say about it? Does she have feelings for you? Do you love her?”

Pablo was visibly puzzled.

“What does she say about it? How am I supposed to know that? I never asked her!”

His surprise at the intricacies of love and courting made Amparo laugh aloud. She covered her mouth with a quick, apologetic hand.

“Does she share your feelings, and if not, could she share them in the future?” she asked instead.

Her fingers kept flicking wheat grains and stones away from the lentils.

“You think she’ll have me?” Pablo asked.

She thought of comforting him and saying, “She’d be a fool if she didn’t. You are good and kind.” But she relinquished maternal bias in favor of truth.

“Who knows? But *you’ll* never know unless you ask. And whatever the answer, you must ask her. The worst that can happen is that she’ll say no.”

Pablo shivered. Even with all her intuitive knowledge, she didn’t understand! If Dolores declined his proposal, he would remain unhealed, his other half lost to him forever.

Nearly paralyzed with fear in case Dolores rejected him, Pablo made his move the following morning. He waited for Dolores by the river, where a big willow sprouted from the stream, its branches trailing in the current like a siren’s green hair.

He lingered in his reverie for a long time, listening to the whispers of the water that seemed to chant a song of unrequited love, until his thoughts were ushered out by a sound that brought

him back from the self-induced trance. Bucket in hand, with a scarf knotted around her neck, Dolores approached. The sandy ground absorbed the vibrations of her brisk pace.

Pablo stood. Startled by his sudden appearance, the girl dropped the bucket and touched her throat.

Alone for the first time, they faced each other, the two halves of one being. She brushed a strand of hair from her forehead and burst into uneasy laughter.

Pablo was not an accomplished conversationalist. What had to be said was better said with as few words as possible.

“I want you to marry me.” What had been intended as a question became a flat statement.

Her laughter broke off on a half-note.

Taking advantage of her bewilderment, he reached for her hand and cradled it between his own, tough-as-leather palms. Wanting to forestall rejection, he gently lifted her chin until her eyes met his.

She didn’t resist—not because she was afraid, but because some imposing force whose name she couldn’t guess was taking her into its stronghold.

“I love you,” he whispered, seeking a sign of encouragement in her eyes.

She let herself be charmed by the melody of his words, feeling that a response was now required. Despite his tough exterior, the man-boy standing before her seemed to melt with anticipation. His tough outside hid a soft core she could shape or crush. Her heart pounded as she searched her mind for the perfect response. It was so fast, so unexpected. She had never acknowledged his courting—never encouraged it. But she felt that if a man were

ever born, the one she would choose for her husband had to be Pablo.

“So be it,” she whispered.

He tightened his grip on her hand.

“You will? You will marry me?” He was delirious with joy.



The early morning calm brooded over the stream as they stood together, oblivious to everything and everybody. The sun peered yellow and puffy over the edge of the world, sunlight filtered through swishing reeds, and leaves fluttered as if a flock of cockatoos and toucans had shed their garish plumage in an orgy of self-destruction. It was warm now—the scrollwork of frost began to melt, leaving the grass dew-spangled as if someone had spilled the contents of a jewel box.

The ground crackled again, and a group of women with empty buckets approached the river. They drew apart, his unwillingness to let her go now matching hers.

“Soon,” Pablo said.

“Soon,” she agreed.

The wedding following the unorthodox proposal was strangely anticlimactic. The bride’s mother prepared a modest feast, and in the absence of the groom’s father, Rafael Sosa blessed the union and recited the contents of the dowry. No one could say the Sosas neglected their youngest child—what her older sisters got, she would get as well.

After the brief ceremony, the newlyweds packed their belongings, including a sturdy chest of drawers Rafael Sosa had made and varnished, a brazier for burning charcoal, and a pair of laying hens. Dolores’s mother added a box of needles and thread that no new household could do without, along with a pair of scissors she had inherited from her mother. Accompanied by wishes of good luck and prosperity, they headed to Amparo’s house, which would be their own from then on.

Amparo accepted the invasion of privacy with stoicism. It was only natural for a woman to leave her family and come live with her husband and mother-in-law. It was also expected that the bride would assume the role of dueña, the mistress of the kitchen, and that Amparo would be reduced to the position of a lodger who, in exchange for shelter and meals, assisted with the household chores.

As a gesture of submission, she hung her apron in a corner, removed her pillow from the marital bed, and spread a sheet on the bench by the stove. That privileged place belonged to Pablo and the childbearing mistress. She relinquished it without doubt, though not without hurt. She had come to this house as a young bride and conceived her child in the bed; her sweat and blood and tears had seeped into the wooden floor. Now, it was time for someone else to leave a drop of herself.

Dolores took charge gracefully. But whatever she did, from the moment she set foot in the house to her dying day, she always asked her mother-in-law's permission and advice.

Whenever she had time to spare, Dolores would sit at the table cutting yards of fabric into squares with her mother's squeaking scissors, preparing for the all-important event—in her opinion, the only event that made a woman's life worthwhile: the birth of a child. She stitched miniature clothes, crafted tiny booties and swaddling clothes, knitted small hats and even smaller mittens until she could say with a satisfied sigh that she was ready.

At night, after completing all the chores in the fields and the house, the young couple prepared for bed. Although their love was sturdy and solid during the day, it knew no bounds as darkness claimed the sky and shadows closed in. They melted into each other's embraces, savored the velvety caresses of tongues and the soft touch of fingertips. Their lovemaking was filled with quivering circles of radiance that evaporated from their skin like smoke, enveloping them in a billowing cloud of euphoria. Every night was remarkable; they solemnized the act as if the world were to end the next day, and with it, their love.

Precisely fourteen months after the wedding, Dolores, as usual, stitching the interminable trousseau for her child, gave Pablo the joyful news. She lifted her gaze from her needle. Pablo, with mud-caked boots in one hand and hair plastered to his sweat-beaded forehead, had just come from the tool shed.

"I'm going to be a mother," she said quietly, sticking the needle into a pincushion.

It was the proper way to announce her impending motherhood. It was the mothers who mattered. Fathers were important, too, but not essential after the initial input of planting the seed.

Pablo's boots clattered to the floor. He rushed towards her, wrapped his arms around her, and embraced the delicate body that carried his child.

"When?" he asked.

She brushed a damp lock from his forehead, wiped the smudges from his cheeks in a maternal gesture, and smiled with happy complicity.

"September."

Pablo reveled in the glory of his impending fatherhood, secure in the knowledge of their future happiness and at ease with thoughts of his virility and ownership of her. He felt complete.

Winter came early that year. The sky turned smoky with gray, tattered clouds, and trees and hedges dressed in a coat of frost. The ground froze to a flinty firmness, and the nip in the air snapped at exposed faces and fingers. Each morning, a silver fog floated above the village like an omen of what was about to happen, and each night, it gripped it in its iron claws. People who understood and respected nature stayed at home.

In this glacial chill, Dolores Parra prepared to give birth.

Amparo instantly recognized the expression of pain distorting her daughter-in-law's features. She had witnessed the excruciating throes of many labors, the agony of torn flesh, and the tortuous battles of infants emerging from the world of bliss into the world of grief.

She approached the table where Dolores was cutting yet another garment for the unborn, and unclenched her hand from the scissors, one finger at a time.

“Leave it, child,” she said, then went to the yard to gather wood for the fire. She filled an iron pot with water, and put it on to boil.

On the bed, Dolores panted and tore at her clothes. Gradually, her moans became shrill and loud, and her forehead was covered in sweat.

“You’d better let Pablo know,” she gasped. “I want him here.”

“It’s not a place for a man. Childbearing is a woman’s business.”

“Please.” The girl’s plea was barely audible.

Amparo nodded. She found her son in the field pushing a wheelbarrow filled with potatoes.

“It’s started; Dolores needs you,” she said.

Pablo rushed across the muddy furrows, a smile stretching across his face, and the wheelbarrow overturned where he had left it.

She followed slowly, allowing him a few moments alone with his wife. Dolores was on the floor, scraping it with her fingernails when she entered.

“Do something!” Pablo shouted, covering his ears.

She helped her daughter-in-law up from the floor and guided her back to the bed.

“Shh, child. Easy. Remember to ride the tide. In and out, like a wave,” she crooned. “It’ll soon go away.”

But her reassurance didn’t hold true—in fact, the pain grew worse. Dolores thrashed on the bed, screaming and moaning. With each new contraction, her stomach tightened, and the skin rippled as if the unborn were fighting against an unseen force, trying to keep it inside.

Pablo stood by the wall, ramming his head against the wood. A trail of blood stained the wall where the impact had marked it. His hair was matted with blood, but he neither noticed nor cared.

"Please, help her," he whispered.

Amparo knelt on the bed, her warm hands slipping into the womb that had barely dilated. She felt the baby's feeble struggle. An invisible, malignant force seemed to prevent its escape.

"Black Celestino," she said. "Go and fetch the diviner."

Her son stared at her uncomprehendingly.

"Go and get the witch doctor, you fool!"

Black Celestino was known for his wisdom, predictions, and expertise in magic, necromancy, and supernatural phenomena. He provided services from casting spells and pulling rotten teeth to curing baldness, dropsy, impotence, setting bones, and removing ringworm. In exchange, he received eggs, cheese, and *chicha*, a fermented grape drink.

His mother's shout snapped Pablo awake, prompting him to leave immediately for the diviner's hut in the forest clearing a mile from the village.

Amparo sat beside her daughter-in-law, holding her hand. It felt like a butterfly with damaged wings.

When it's all done, she thought, you'll remember no suffering.

She wiped the girl's face with a wet cloth and helped her drink some water.

"Mother-in-law?" Dolores's voice sank to a whisper.

"Yes, child."

“Will I die?”

Amparo was tempted to lie and reassure her, telling her that everything would be fine, but her commitment to the truth once again restrained her.

“I don’t know,” she answered.

“If I die... will you take care of the baby?”

Dolores writhed in pain as yet another futile contraction failed to soften or dilate her cervix even slightly.

“And Pablo... take care of him for me.”

Amparo leaned over the girl and kissed her cheek.

“I will.”

“If it’s a boy, we’ll call him Victor. A good, sensible name for a boy. Victor—a winner—a lucky name....”

Amparo smiled. She believed in the power of names; a name reflected a person’s soul and character. Her mother had chosen her name intentionally—Amparo meant "protection." She had dedicated her life to easing suffering and providing support to everyone around her. The choice to live for herself or others was made for her when she was baptized.

“And if it’s a girl?” she asked.

Dolores remained silent. A sharp pang tore through her belly, and her mouth emitted a muffled groan.

“It’s coming...it’s coming.”

The waters broke, flooding the bed, and a pair of tiny legs dangled between her thighs.

“Push!” Amparo urged. “Push hard!”

Dolores heaved, panted, and spat out a deluge of groans and curses, pushing as hard as she could.

At that very moment, Pablo and Black Celestino entered the room.

The diviner bent over the bed and watched the baby slide out—the tiny body of a girl, covered in blood and mucus.

“Legs first,” he muttered.

“This one will walk through life with her feet planted firmly on the ground.”

Amparo cleaned the little girl with a damp rag, wrapped her in a piece of cloth, and handed the bundle to Pablo, but he pushed her away. She then placed the exhausted child in the nearby crib.

Pablo knelt by the bed and stroked his wife’s hand.

“Dolores? Dolores?”

She swept her other hand across his forehead, the gesture adding to his misery.

“Soledad,” the word barely rustled. “We’ll call her Soledad.”

She exhaled soft gasps, the molten honey of her eyes transforming into prosaic molasses. The last pinpoint of light dimmed gradually, until it vanished completely, freeing her soul from the confines of the body.

A suffocated whimper tore from Pablo’s throat. His world was folding into a tight ball. Dolores was dead—her essence was no longer in the room, despite all the familiar objects her hands had arranged around. He was breathing; his heart was beating. Blood coursed through his veins, and yet he was as dead as she was.

He strove to conjure the image of her face as it had been by the river the first time he had set eyes on her, but nothing came. Gone were the memories of happiness, words spoken in jest, and promises.

“You must cut off her head.” Black Celestino’s words were like a gunshot report in the silent room.

A flicker of confusion crossed Pablo’s face. He looked at the diviner for a moment, then shifted his gaze to the body on the bed. Rigor mortis was beginning to pull at Dolores’s lips, forming a grisly smile.

“It must be done,” Black Celestino said. “For the benefit of her immortal soul. She died in childbirth without nursing the baby. Her spirit will remain earthbound, and there will be no peace for her until she holds her child and feels her mouth around her nipple.”

“You are mad!” Pablo said with a shocked intake of breath.

“I cannot do it for you. I am old and weak, and the cut must be clean. If you don’t do it for your child, do it for her mother.”

“Get out!” Pablo croaked, raising his arm. His voice changed pitch in the agony of frustration, as if it came from another throat, as if other lips uttered the words.

“Wait!” Amparo shouted. “He’s right. She’ll never rest unless you do what he says. You owe it to her—you loved her.”

She turned, ran toward the wood basket, picked up an axe, and pressed it into her son’s hands.

“Do it now. Do it for your daughter.”

“I don’t care whether she lives or dies! I hate her!” His eyes were inflamed with tears.

“Then do it for Dolores!”

His hands trembled as he grasped the axe. The skin on his knuckles went white from the pressure.

“No more pain and suffering for Dolores,” Amparo urged.

She set her mouth into an uncompromising line.

Cringing with revulsion, Pablo raised the axe, let it rest for a few seconds, and then struck one mighty blow, severing Dolores’s head from the trunk.

Blood spurted onto the bed, Amparo’s calm face, and Celestino’s white beard. It was still hot and sticky, burning their skin.

Pablo dropped the tool.

“She’s at peace, at last,” Celestino said, then added, “But her husband will never find it again.”

The child in the crib wailed. Amparo cradled the child to her bosom. A single red drop gleamed on the girl’s forehead.

Pablo bolted from the room, a scream trailing behind him like a gust of wind.

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A Needless Love

Jonathan Chibuike Ukah



I'm learning to love again, like I need a clean-up,
knowing how to jump after I mastered running,
as though my heart had been sick for unloving.
How useless can love be, how slippery,
when we are a mere body taking up space,
talking up ourselves like pigeons or peacocks,
or pebbles decorating the ground, screaming,
there is nothing we want that we don't have.
Sand is the decking floor of beaches,
flowers are the colour and diversity of a garden,
the clouds relish and protect the sky;
rainfall percolates into the air and tends the roots;
there's grass giving light to the fields
or leaves eat up the insects of trees;
drones, though noisy and frightening,
have the capacity to kill and destroy,
like guns, rifles, bullets, Kalashnikovs,
the various mutations of the war arsenal,
amalgamating sorrow into their purpose,
with a usefulness no one can deny.

Even war grants peace on every side,
though it is always the shortcut to the winter of life.
How can love occupy a space where there is no space?
But this love, that shreds my heart in tatters
like a thousand spears into my chest,
like snowballs on my hot flesh, fiery coals on my skin,
has arrayed itself against every use,
like weeds growing with crops and herbs,
yet adding nothing like a semblance of light
to places where darkness stands and strikes supreme.
I have grown to have all that I need
to survive the turbulence of a violent storm;
whereby this rusty boat has no duty to sail
where the ocean provides no immediate terror.
There is no hole in my pickled, wrinkled body
where love sails like a lukewarm boat on a sea,
sending out shafts of light to nearby beaches.
Can a thing be useful and useless to equal degrees?
If the seeding of my soul decays and disintegrates,
or breaks apart like soft stones under a heavy hammer,
is salvation or damnation close by?
It's not the water I drink to sate my thirst
nor the wine I can offer to entertain my guests;
not even the air I purchase from fleeing birds,
when times and misfortunes require insemination.
Even the dead can garner some use
when daisies require bodies to regrow and flourish,
but I cannot see what syntax and syllable it serves,
or what water it offers to a thirsty soul.
But love fulfils no purpose, nor satisfies a demand,
and its curator, it's being numerous to a dying universe,
whether I accept or reject its futile existence.

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Summer Twilight

Yuan Changming



All the flaring of the day
Dissipates, leaving cracks
For waves of winds
To sweep in a clear-cut night

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Island Solitude

Vanessa Ho

The sea is enclosed
In the four walls of your square room.
Fish prance and watermoss billow
In waves of amber light, refracted
Through the blue, translucent jar of your sea-
scented candle, souvenir from Scandinavia:
“Øy” – translated with a flourish, as “island solitude”.

Every time I step into your room I wince and
Laugh: It smells like a fish market in here.
With a sheepish grin, you say: let it burn
Overnight, and be rid of it.
Then your eyelids droop like heavy feathered wings
Limbs slump around my body like on a log upon water
And sink, afloat, into deep slumber
Leaving my wide eyes and the candle’s beating heart
In the dark of the room.
Outside, the rain patters –

And down come the thrashing waves of Phuket’s seas
Where we, my arms around your waist this time,
Bounced violently in the raging jet-ski and
I, against the roaring engine and heckling waves, cried out
The three words into your ears

– echoed by you

And splintered into a thousand golden giggles and yelps
Received with eager gushes by the blue of the sea.
In the middle of another sea, in Hong Kong,
Our paddleboards made little progress on
Illusory waves, cradled in sweltering heat.
We lay on our boards, shielded our faces with sunhats,
Locked hands on the water between us
(silky coolness tracing our fingers)
And rocked to sleep under the cloudless sky –
Waking up with no sense of time

To find our boards butting the edge
Of a nameless island, mute with trees.

Now in your room full of sea
It feels like the bed is carried on waves
And your head rests weightless on my chest.
We are far from the real seafaring type
Yet bound to the sea by our best memories.
On wayward tides we washed upon each other's shores
And two desolate mounds became one island.
Shunned by some birds, withdrawn for fear of predators,
The island relishes in its own flora,
Dances in its own sweet meadows
And rises to its own daunting hills – singing
Praise to the briny sea.

The salt-laden air purls gently
Against the four walls of your square room.
Shadows play on the dim ceiling
For the sole enjoyment of its small audience.
You are asleep; the candlelight tires not
In lulling me to join you in dreams.
Before I do I shall shift carefully to reach
The nightstand; and put the candle lid on
To let darkness engulf and preserve whole
The sea-scent of island solitude.

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Knife Box

Gregor Windstill

It was Lanson Place. He sent the confirmation on WhatsApp together with a grinning, horned emoji. She replied with a smiling face, even though she was unhappy; and her disappointment only grew when they showed her the room.

It wasn't even one of the nice suites she had seen on the hotel's website. No, it was a so-called "Deluxe Room", which meant that it was small and had no view; the only window opened over a messy cluster of high-rises.

In the past, they'd gone to the Landmark Mandarin Oriental, the Mira and the Rosewood. Once they had even been to Upper House. And now this.

She dropped the two bags — the blue overnight bag and the small pink leather handbag — on the chair. She unpacked the dress for work the next day, the make-up set, the toothbrush. Hotels provided toothbrushes, but she preferred to bring her own. She hung the dress in the wardrobe and brushed it with her hand to smooth out the wrinkles. After she'd done this for longer than necessary, she sat on the bed, took off her dress and slipped out of her shoes. She always wore high heels when she met him, and although she had picked a comfortable pair, her feet were sore.

Besides, he was late.

She'd rushed over from work in an Uber, worried she might make him wait. They were meant to meet at 7, and she'd arrived at 6:55. Now it was 7:15.

He was always late.

She'd texted him at 5: "*See you at 7? Can't wait xx*". He hadn't answered, even though the two blue ticks next to her message proved that he'd seen it.

Why did he keep doing this? Wasn't he aware how rude, how *insensitive* it was? It had clearly been a question; she had included the question mark on purpose, after much reflection. Still, he hadn't replied.

It wasn't as if he was bad at messaging, not when he wanted something from her. When he asked her to bring something to one of their dates, that something being invariably a bottle of spirits, he was a persistent and quick texter. No problem there. *Not the Glenfiddich. I prefer MacAllan. How many years?*

Oh, he was clear then, wasn't he?

She sat cross-legged on the bed and picked at her nails. They were painted Smoky Topaz. At least that's what the girl in the salon had called the colour.

It was 7:20. It was always the same. She was already upset when she sent the message, but she'd still tried to hit the right tone. That question mark — she'd agonised before eventually including it.

Was it too much to ask for, this minimal amount of effort? Not even effort, just politeness. Treating your lover like this, the lover you've been sleeping with for ten months, who never causes any drama, who squeezes toothpaste onto your toothbrush while you're still snoring loudly in the Mandarin Oriental or the Island Shangri-la, or presumably even here in Lanson Place, shitty though it is — should you not have a modicum of decency and at least not make the contempt in which you hold said lover *that* clear?

It's not like she didn't accept that sometimes he was late because of his *profession*, as he always called it. She didn't mind. But

several times when he'd claimed that he'd been stuck in meetings she'd smelled booze on his breath and once, after he'd complained that "the bitches in Beijing" had kept him on a conference call that overran for two hours, his voice had slurred.

She looked at the overnight bag. She hadn't yet unpacked the lingerie and the small leather sleeve. She ought to put on the lingerie — she'd bought it, after all, so she might as well wear it.

Her eyes fell on the reflection of her naked body in the dark full-size mirror on the far wall. She looked wan, even sickly. Her hair was flat, and there were bags under her eyes.

There were, in her opinion, different types of mirrors in the world — friendly and unfriendly ones. The mirrors in her home were friendly. She'd chosen them carefully, but this one — it was hostile.

Still, gaunt and drawn was preferable to fat like the Walrus, wasn't it?

It was. Yet the shock of an earlier experience with a mirror lingered in her mind. That had been about a month ago, when they'd spent a night in the Mira in Tsim Sha Tsui. He'd been asleep already, snoring like he always did. When she'd looked at the mirror opposite the bed and seen her reflection in the streetlights that flooded in through the window, she'd seen folds of flesh that she would have sworn had never been there before. She looked away in horror.

Yes, fat was worse than old. That's what he always said too. And she'd known even that night in the Mira that she wasn't *fat*. But her flesh had changed. It sagged, as if she were made of wax and a cruel hand had held her too close to a flame.

She got off the bed and walked to the overnight bag. She wanted to get away from that cruel mirror. But how could she wear the lingerie now that she had thought of her melting flesh? She

should do more exercise. He'd said that he "encouraged" her to go to the gym. Not because of her appearance, he'd said, he *loved* her appearance, no, for her *health*. But it was not a problem of exercise. It was a problem of hostile mirrors.

Why was that mirror there anyway? So the guests could watch themselves fuck? Was that what Lanson Place was — a more expensive love hotel, like those terrible, tawdry places in Kowloon Tong and Mong Kok?

What did that make her? A social escort? A cheap hook-up that was no longer good enough for the suite in the Conrad, where he'd taken her for their first night? They had lain in bed and looked at the beautiful harbour view together.

What was this anyway, this thing with always staying in hotels? Yes, she had accepted it as, in its way, inevitable. She still lived with her mother — her brother and sister had long ago married and moved out. And of course there was the *situation*, as he politely called it. Still, how lovely it would be if they had a flat of their own! A small love nest — was that too much to ask? She'd suggested it to him, not directly of course, but if he'd got the hint he'd shown no sign. She was so sick of hotels! She'd never liked them. It had been okay with them only because they'd been *nice* hotels. And now this — Lanson Place.

It wasn't even that she couldn't afford her own flat, although it wouldn't be as nice as the one *he* had in Kennedy Town — she'd never been there, of course, what with the *situation*, but he'd shown her pictures of a gleaming marble bathroom and a full-sized kitchen with an oven. Her flat would be small and squalid, and not on the Island. It would be in Sheung Shui or Sham Shui Po or somewhere like that. She still felt, in some inchoate way, like a stranger on the Island, as if he were the local and she a tourist.

She took off her underwear, taking care not to look into the mirror. She picked up the leather sheath, felt the weight of the object inside, and put it down again.

She knew that her thoughts about the Island made no sense. She was the local and he the expat, not the other way around. It was clichéd – such a stereotypical match. A British man with an expensive watch and thinning reddish hair, huffing and puffing over a supine Asian body. A married man. She was a walking stereotype, the demure Oriental woman playing the — what? The social escort! Pleasing him, the Western coloniser, for lack of a better word. It was nauseating. It was a humiliation.

It hadn't felt like that when she lived in the UK for her studies. What she remembered most from back then was how free she'd felt. At last she'd been away from her mother who, when she didn't nag her, spent long afternoons locked in her bedroom with soft sobbing coming from the other side of the door. She loved her mother, but how wonderful it had been to be away! True, it hadn't been one of the red-brick colleges in London that she'd originally targeted. It was crappy little High Wycombe, but at least she'd been close to London, really just outside, and in her last year she'd even lived in Brentford.

How wonderful that last year in Brentford had been! She'd had a boyfriend then, a fair-haired English boy who had been good to her, who had always appeared somewhat puzzled that she had chosen him. She was a good-looking woman who knew how to present herself to men, and Asian women had been popular over there, in that country full of walruses. Men had spoken to her on campus, the streets, even the Tube. But after a little bit of fun and exploration she'd picked the fair-haired boy, and it had been good. She'd liked him, perhaps even — she thought of this with a mixture of reluctance and longing — loved him. And he had loved her, this puzzled, fair-haired boy from Peckham.

She'd never told him that she loved him, and he'd never said it to her, but she'd seen it in his eyes more than once. He was one of those English boys who were raised in what he called the upper lower middle class, whatever that was, to be awfully polite in such matters and never to inconvenience his girlfriend with declarations of love.

She walked back to the bed and put down the lingerie. *He*'d told her to buy it — well, not *told her* exactly, but he had shown it to her on his phone and said, “that one I really like”.

The fair-haired boy would never have done something so crude.

She inspected it. The bra didn't cover the nipples and the panties were crotchless. It was so tacky. No La Perla or Aubade for him — no, he was an Ann Summers man through and through. Actually, not even Ann Summers, but cheap Chinese-made lingerie made from low-quality synthetic fibre. Many of these English men liked things plasticky and fake, like in the glossy magazines UK newsagents hid on top shelves, the ones teenage boys bought in secret. It was as if these men got stuck when they were 15 and never grew up.

It struck her then that she loathed him. She hadn't been fully aware of this until she thought about the fair-haired boy. *He* would never have expected her to prance about in gaudy, cheap lingerie.

Oh, how she hated him, with his ill-fitting suits and his croaking voice with its stupid Wolverhampton accent! She hated how smug he was, how he spoke softly yet managed to boast at the same time about his job as an in-house lawyer at some bank or fund or whatever. She hated the way he booked these hotel rooms without checking if she was okay with them.

His meaty butcher's hands, with their red, dry skin. The wrinkles and folds on his neck that made him look prematurely old. The

look in his eyes, that said *I can find another one at any time*. His mouth didn't say it, but his eyes did. And his sneer.

The way he spoke to her. Oh, High Wycombe, that's the *place I always passed through*. On his way to Oxford, to *Keble College*, where he *read* (people at Oxford didn't *study*, they *read*, studying was beneath them) his bigshot history degree. Today we learn how Britain conquered the world. Tomorrow we learn why Britain deserved its colonies. He *passed through* High Wycombe once more on his way to London to become a solicitor, and now he was undoubtedly *passing through* Hong Kong, and passing through her too.

The way he walked, broad-legged like an ape, each step a mighty declaration, a conquest of territory, a colonisation. Thwomp. Thwomp. Down came the leather shoes, handmade on Bond Street. Thwomp.

He was so full of himself he couldn't even see her. As if the universe were filled only with him. He was the Big Bang: all things emanated from him and revolved only about him.

Without even being conscious of her actions, she had slipped into the lingerie. By accident she caught a glance of herself in the mirror, a dull sheen on the red fabric in the halogen light. The underwear flattered her; yet there were the sagging folds that had not been there a year ago and had begun an apparently inexorable conquest of her body.

How had she ended up like this, dressed in tacky underwear from Taobao? The fair-haired boy had been bowled over by the fact that she was in his life at all; her mere *existence* had astonished him.

It had been her mother, or rather her father. A sudden heart attack while bobbing in the flat waters of Clearwater Bay. Her mother had been on the phone crying, and she had cried too. How could she stay in Brentford, how could she not come back and take

care of her mother in her grief? How could she have known that that grief would mutate into a dreadful, crushing depression that would never again release her mother from its clutches?

The fair-haired boy had briefly stopped being puzzled and had cried too, first because of her father, and then because she broke up with him.

Yes, it had been because of the long distance. No, that had not been the only, or even the major reason. To be with a puzzled boy who cried easily, who was a bit *soft*, a bit *wet* — was that really what she needed and most of all, what she *deserved*? She knew her effect on men, after all. She'd been popular in the UK, popular enough to have a boyfriend and still a bit of fun when the boyfriend had already been in the picture (but not much! she assured herself, forgiving herself immediately).

She could do better, couldn't she? Better than the fair-haired boy. After all, when she'd told him about her father's death, instead of being strong, instead of being her *rock*, instead of being *there for her*, what had he done? Cry, that's what. She knew that these days men shouldn't have to follow gender stereotypes (she'd taken a gender studies class once, and it had been full of talk on such matters), but she could not help but feel put off, even disgusted if she was honest. She was the one who was supposed to be allowed to cry, not him.

Yet once back in Hong Kong, she had found that things were *different*, that they were tougher. There were lots of attractive girls. Many of them — she did not like to admit this to herself but knew it in some primal part of her mind — were as hot as or even hotter than her. There were fewer men, too, or rather fewer *eligible* men for all these girls, and the men who were there — the ones with good jobs and cocky looks in their eyes — those men were *not looking for anything serious right now*, or *not over the break-up*, or, in one case, *ethically non-monogamous*, which

had sounded to her like no more than a fancy term for fucking around.

It was a trick of the light, a *bad* mirror. But then — it was true. She was getting older! Not that he could tell. 29, she'd told him. Just shy of the big birthday. How she hoped he'd never find out the truth — 35! What a dreadful number. The end of youth. Middle-aged now. A middle-aged office lady, an *HR professional*.

She wasn't guilty — he'd lied too! She'd rifled through his wallet that night in the Mira. He'd lain in bed spread-eagled, mouth open, making sounds like a defective steam-engine and she'd pulled his Hong Kong ID card out of his wallet. 48, not 39. An even bigger lie than her. But unlike him, she'd never believed it. He had too many wrinkles, his skin was too flabby, his sparse chest hair too grey.

Yet she'd looked at the frog-faced picture on the ID, and when she'd seen him snoring on the bed it had felt like the first time she'd seen him without a façade. Without the expensive suit, casually slung over the back of the sofa, without the watch, coiled like a snake on the bedside table, without the Bond Street shoes that had been flung in a fit of exuberance into a corner of the room — how pathetic he looked! How old, just a few years away from those Western sex tourists who sipped on pints of Stella in the bars of Wan Chai — Victoria's, Churchill's, The Old China Hand Pub — ogling and groping Filipina maids moonlighting as — what? *Social escorts*? All of them named Jholynn or Maribel or Marylou, all of them offering themselves for the price of a meal at Caprice, no, not even Caprice, more like Ruth's Chris Steak House.

Not *her*. She wasn't like them. Unlike them she had class, she had style, she had a degree in HR Management from Buckinghamshire New University.

No! She wasn't desperate. She was the one who had broken things off with the fair-haired boy — not only that, she'd cheated on him. He'd cried like an idiot but he'd never found out what she'd *really* done.

It was *him*, it was all him! With his wide-arsed English wife who was 35 — her age! — but looked 50, her body fat and flabby since the birth of the twins. On the photos he'd shown her, the wife had sagging bulldog jowls on the sides of a downward-pointing mouth, and a flab of fatty skin that dangled from her chin and that — he'd said in a malicious voice — his Austrian friend called a "Goder", which apparently was a word in Austrian for the type of flab that hangs from your chin and wobbles back and forth.

Yet it was not the *Goder* that constituted what they both called *the situation*. Or at least not *just* the Goder. No, the *situation* was the flabby wife lying in bed all day crying (like her mother? No, she assured herself, definitely not like her mother) but not taking care of anything, not even the children, although they had a helper and a nanny and the wife didn't work. It was all him, as he always told her, he had to do everything and pay for everything and she wouldn't even shag him in return, not that he'd want to, with her looking like a walrus, and the *Goder* and all that.

So that was the *situation*. That was why he'd always been so clear that he wanted to leave her, the walrus lying in bed crying and stuffing herself with Lay's crisps and the *Goder* swinging back and forth. At first, she'd believed him: it was only a matter of time. He'd kick the Walrus out and she would be the one he chose. Oh, of course she'd never said this. She'd played it cool, had said that she was *not looking for anything serious*, that she wanted to *have fun* and that she *had no expectations*. She'd said it so many times she'd almost come to believe it.

But then they'd been in the Island Shangri-la the week after their terrible stay in the Mira, and there had been a plastic bag with a

large black box inside. A present for the Walrus, he'd explained, a set of ten beautiful ceramic knives with black handles and pearly-white blades. He'd opened the box and shown them to her. She couldn't tell the difference between them. She could barely cook, despite her time in the UK. In Hong Kong she either ate out or, more frequently, although she never told him, her mother cooked for her.

He said that the Walrus had wanted the knives for cooking, that she was concerned the twins didn't eat enough healthy, balanced meals (how did this square with his venomous claims that she cared about nothing and only lay in bed snacking on Wotsits? She ignored this question); so he'd bought them for her birthday.

It was not that she compared the price of the knives with the presents he had given to her. No. But she'd gone to Sogo the next day and found the same set, and the number on the sticker had been surprisingly large. They were fancy knives, handmade by an Italian ceramics master. The price flitted through her mind, over and over.

It was in moments like these that she felt he was showing off his big expat job with its big expat salary. How clear he made it that he was better than her. She'd told him that she'd come back to Hong Kong for her career, that she'd received an amazing offer *covering the Greater China region* for a big corporation. In reality, she'd been unemployed for nearly a year after her return.

She tottered back to the overnight bag in her high heels and tacky red lingerie, and took out the leather sheath.

She pulled the knife out. Its blade was also pearly-white. It was from the same brand; unlike the Walrus, she'd bought it with her own money. It was very sharp. She'd tried to cook with it, just once, and the flesh had dropped off the chicken drumsticks like ice cream melting off a cone. Ceramic knives were fragile, but cut sharper than steel.

When had she decided? She didn't know, but now the idea was here, had perhaps been present ever since he'd shown her the knife box — no, even earlier, since that dreadful night in the Mira. How old they'd both been revealed to be, how far down the road. There was much less awaiting them in the future than they had already had. When she'd seen the brazen truth on his ID, something inside her had been set into subterranean motion.

The next day, after years of silence, she'd written to the fair-haired boy, unsure even to herself what she was expecting. He had replied with a picture of his two children, young and sweet, and also twins.

It didn't matter. She knew what she had to do.

While he was sleeping, frog mouth open, making his gross choking sounds. A decisive stab into that noisy throat, the brilliantly sharp edge of the blade sinking into skin, gristle and bone all the way to the spinal cord (was that where the *spinal cord* was? She'd seen it in a crime show once but wasn't sure). Would he scream? *Could* he scream with a ceramic knife buried inside his throat?

Or maybe the chest. To ram it into his smug, puffed-up ribcage. The way he always pushed it out! The *I can find a new one* chest. The blade was sharp, and if it found his heart it would cleave it in two.

But there was bone there, wasn't there? There were ribs that would impede the passage of the blade, that maybe would — if her aim was poor, if the angle was wrong — even shatter the fragile pearly-white blade. What if the knife broke like a vase and she felt his red butcher's hands close around her neck? The way he looked at her sometimes, especially when she compared the way he treated her to the Walrus — surely he'd thought about it.

No, better the throat! It was easier and she needed it to be easy so she wouldn't lose heart. In important moments she always lacked courage — when she came back to the UK, when she didn't tell him he had to leave the Walrus or it would be finished — so it had to be easy. She held up the knife so the yellow glow of the bedside lamp cast a matte sheen on the white blade.

He'd attacked her! That's what she'd say. She was a petite local girl and he a beefy, blundering expat. The bored, suspicious cops wouldn't care, she was sure of it! Who would care about a *gweilo* who had attacked her, a local? She'd say that he'd placed his butcher's hands around her long neck and *squeezed* the pearly white, unblemished skin on her 29-year-old looking body.

The rage inside her grew as she turned the knife over in her hand. It was hot, explosive like a volcano. She could never sustain it for long, was incapable of the cold, methodical acts of vengeance that spurned wives and enraged mistresses plotted in the Korean soap operas she was fond of watching. No, her rage was like lava. Normally it simmered and roiled inside her, but then —

8 p.m.! Still he was missing, still probably in the Salted Pig with that disgusting, wayward Austrian friend of his, the one who came up with words like Goder.

It was his fault — all of it was his fault. *His* fault she was in this hotel in porn actress lingerie, face painted like a clown, waiting by herself until he deigned to spend a little time with her. *His* fault she was single — because in reality that's what she was, wasn't it? *His* fault he was trashing his family by having an affair, his fault for making her complicit. *His* fault she couldn't find anyone else, because she was attached to him, his fault the fair-haired boy was gone from her life and someone else now lived in the flat in Brentford while she was back in smelly, overcrowded Hong Kong playing nurse to her ailing mother. If

only he gave her what she wanted — love, comfort, security. Why did he refuse? Why did he stay with the Walrus?

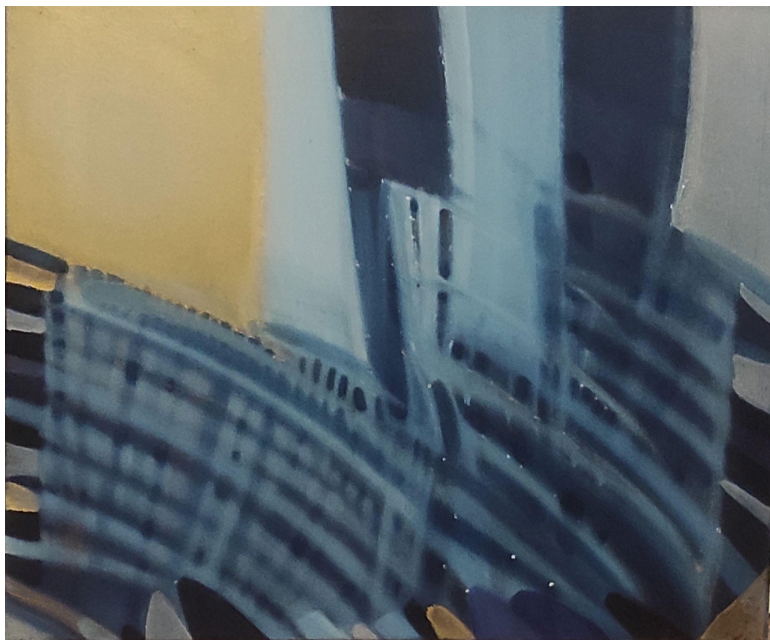
It's not like she didn't *know* by now that he wouldn't leave the Walrus. But he told her he couldn't even get it up with the Walrus anymore. With *her*, he could perform no problem, and she always reassured him how awesome the sex was, how much she loved it, that she was in fact a *sex kitten*. In reality she faked almost all her orgasms, and most of the time didn't feel like having sex at all. It was a chore, always had been, even with the fair-haired boy (there had been exceptions, back in London. They had been surreptitious and messy and dark and wild, and she preferred to keep them out of her mind).

It was in her mind, constantly — every time she replied with a heart emoji to his goodnight messages, every time she sent him a happy face when he made a booking — each time in a slightly cheaper, slightly less upmarket hotel than before (yes, she'd told him she didn't care which hotel as long as they were *together*, she didn't mind — but he should *know*, he should book something nice despite her words, to show that he treasured her). Even when he *did* take care of her, when she was able to let go and drift on her feelings like a cloud — even then it was still there.

The Walrus. The mistress. The cheap hotels.

The box with the ceramic knives.

Tonight was the night. Tonight, it had to happen! He'd been drunk more often, drunk and coarse, and not too long ago he'd slapped her. She'd been crazy, complaining about the Walrus and the restaurant he'd taken her to, and he'd had too much MacAllan and slapped her. It hadn't been very hard, and he'd apologised, shocked and wide-eyed, and then they'd had the best sex they'd had in ages and for once she hadn't even had to fake her orgasm.



She was still holding the blade in her hand when the soft chime of the doorbell sounded. Quickly she slid the knife into its sheath and placed it in the overnight bag. She hurried to the door in the nipple-free bra and red crotchless panties, almost tipping over in the Louboutin heels he had bought her when they had first started dating.

It was 8:13 p.m. when she opened the door, her *Sultry Violet* painted lips stretched in a welcoming smile.

At first they didn't hear the beep beep beep of the alarm clock. They'd been drinking a lot. The girl always told him he drank too much, but she was the one who always ended up paralytic. It didn't bother him; in fact, he liked it. She was sweet then, and looked at him with flushed cheeks and wide, dazed eyes.

He got up, took a shower and packed his travel bag. He'd told Claire that he'd had to go to Guangzhou, and he'd been careful

with his packing. Once he'd forgotten his passport on the bedside drawer. She hadn't seen it (hadn't wanted to see it?), but he had been horrified how close he had come to the edge of an enormous abyss. Since that day he'd been careful, even leaving print-outs of hotel bookings lying about the flat for Claire to find. He was confident that she'd never even heard of Lanson Place, but he never stayed in the same hotel twice, just to make sure.

Still, this morning he was cheerful. He loved Claire. It's not that he didn't. And he liked the girl too. At times it had occurred to him that perhaps he could love her as well, but he had quickly dismissed the idea. Loving two people at the same time — such a thing was impossible, or at the very least too much trouble.

By the time he stepped out of the shower she had already changed out of the lingerie. Her long hair was still damp.

She smiled at him. "Good morning, darling," she cooed.

She flattered him. A 29-year-old, almost 20 years younger than him, who had no expectations, who wanted to enjoy life, and enjoy it with him. His whole life he'd only known people wanting things from him, had never felt that he could just — be. Not for any benefit he provided, but just for who he was, for the sheer pleasure of existence. How refreshing was this type of relationship, based on romance and sex and not some greater expectation. She was such a sweet girl; she'd once again got up before him and squeezed toothpaste onto his brush. And the sex was great. Claire had always been so reserved.

Yes, the girl was attached to him, he knew it, and yes, she was not entirely happy that she wasn't his main partner. He did not blame her, although she did get annoying and emotional when she was drunk, and a few times he had come close — very close — to losing his temper. And yes, she looked a little older these days. Yes, he was back on dating apps, his face carefully obscured, but he was happy, happy to enjoy this carefree

romance and, when it had run its course, to let it go, to kiss it as it left him, like watching a beautiful bird take flight from his hand.

He was ready to leave before her. He told her he needed to dash. She smiled, and at the door she stood on tiptoe to give him a little kiss and said see you soon.

The humid air engulfed him as he emerged into the morning heat and bustle of Causeway Bay. He took a deep breath. There was time for a quick coffee before work. Then, refreshed by a successful night, he would be ready to start a new day.

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Authors

Vanessa Ho is a writer based in Hong Kong. She holds an MA from UChicago and a BA&LLB from HKU. Her interests are literature, culture, queer lives, and the humble yet powerful things in the world.

Jolanta Polk is Polish by birth, a citizen of the world by choice. First story short-listed for the Irish Independent/Hennessy Awards, Ireland, 1996. Since she went back to writing in 2020, more than 150 of her stories, flash fiction, and non-fiction, have been accepted for publication.

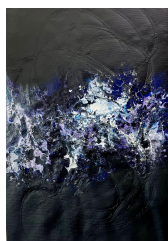
Jonathan Chibuike Ukah is a Pushcart-nominated poet from the United Kingdom. His poems have been featured in Propel Magazine, The Journal of Undiscovered Poets, Atticus Review, Tab: The Magazine of Poetry and Poetics, The Silk Literary Magazine Sublimation and elsewhere. He won the Alexander Pope Poetry Award for The Pierian in 2023 and the Unleash Creatives' Editor's Choice Prize in Poetry in 2024, the Editor's Choice of Panoply Zine in 2024, and the Second Poetry Prize Winner of Streetlight Literary Magazine in 2024. He was shortlisted for the Minds Shine Bright Poetry Prize in 2024.

After many turbulent years in seven countries spread over three continents, **Gregor Windstill** has settled down in Hong Kong. He has had many lives, including a flirtation with academia and a brutish one night stand with journalism, and is now marinating in the unctuous goo of corporate life. His day job requires him to pretend to be a mature adult; his true self, and with it his deepest love, are reserved for storytelling. You can find him on Substack at <https://gwindstill.substack.com>.

Yuan Changming co-edits Poetry Pacific with Allen Yuan. Writing credits include 12 Pushcart nominations for poetry and 3

for fiction besides appearances in Best of the Best Canadian Poetry (2008-17) and 2149 other publications worldwide. A poetry juror for Canada's 44th National Magazine Awards, Yuan began to write prose in 2022. His hybrid novel DETACHING, 'silver romance' THE TUNER and short story collection FLASHBACKS are available at Amazon.

Art and Artists



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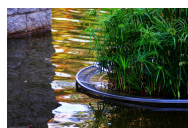
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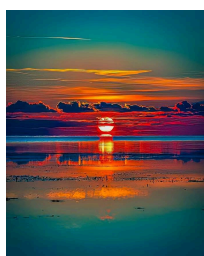
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1. **A Spiritual Journey Within Journeys**, Ilos Ilyas Kirkan
2. **Freedom Dance**, Carl Scharwath
3. **Searching (II)**, Carl Scharwath
4. **Weed River**, Jan Lee
5. **The Gate**, Ricky Sadosa
6. **Water Garden**, Ricky Sadosa
7. **Peacock**, Jade Bryant
8. **Colors of Passion**, Susan Pollet
9. **Sunset**, Mike Provorst
10. **Have You Checked the Minibar?** Sadie Kaye
11. **Melodic Waves**, Tiziana Rasile
12. **Passion**, Anthony Roussell

Jade Bryant is an artist from Devon in the UK and a mental health feature writer and campaigner for the non profit organisation, Art Saves Lives International. Jade aims to use art to raise awareness of mental health and equality, and enjoys doing commissions of pets and wildlife.

Sadie Kaye is Art Editor of The Apostrophe.

Ilos Ilyas Elias Kirkan is an entirely self-taught Danish Kurdish Artist, born in Turkey in 1972 and brought up in Denmark. After living in London for over 18 years, where he started his arts career, he decided to move to Lisbon. Kirkan has had numerous exhibitions of his abstract layered textured collage based paintings in diverse cities such as London, Lisbon, Copenhagen, Paris, Antwerp, Beirut, Cologne, Fort Myers, Fort Lauderdale, Palm Springs, Provincetown and Marco Island. Kirkan has twice been a part of the JAALA Art Tokyo BIENNALE at the Tokyo Metropolitan Arts Museum and the International Montreal Arts Festival. <https://www.instagram.com/kirkanart>

Jan Lee is Editor-in-Chief of The Apostrophe.

Susan L. Pollet is a visual artist whose works have appeared in multiple art shows and literary publications. She studied at the New York Art Students League, has been a member since 2018, and resides in NYC. She is also a published author in multiple genres, including three children's books, which she both wrote and illustrated. She has seen the darker sides of humanity, but always searches for the light. See more at <http://susanpollet.com/>

Mike Provorst is a photographer from Toronto, Ontario. He loves his daughter, the poetry of light, landscapes, silence, photography, music, art, and brownies.

Tiziana Rasile is an Italian abstract artist. She soon developed an interest in abstract art, with a preference for oil technique and drawing. Her research is focused on the possibility of creating a dialogue between scientific and philosophical reality, artistic and spiritual insight. She believes in art as a powerful vehicle of messages where the image embraces the poetics of vision. See more at www.tizianarasile.com

Anthony Roussell is a French actor and photographer born in 1990 in Amiens, France. He has been passionate about cinema, photography and theatre since he was a little kid. After graduating with a BA in scenography, he moved to Paris in his early twenties to start an acting career. After training at the Actors Studio, and appearing in short films and theatre productions, he left Paris for Canada to improve his English. In 2019, he moved to Hong Kong, where he rapidly became a rising star on the local indie film scene. He won Best Actor (Short Film) at Cannes in 2023. He continues to act and to explore his passion for photography.

Ricky Sadosa has made Hong Kong his second home since the 1990s. Originally from the Philippines, he's travelled to more than 150 international cities and countries. He loves connecting with fellow photographers and admiring their work. A passionate human rights advocate, in 2017 Ricky was shortlisted

for the Justice Centre Hong Kong's Human Rights Art Prize for his photo journalism. Ricky spent 5 years traveling the world in the footsteps of Philippine national hero, Dr. Jose Rizal. During his travels, he produced a feature-length documentary film and took photographs for his latest 500-page coffee table book.

***Carl Scharwath** has appeared globally with 250+ publications selecting his writing or art. Carl has published four poetry and photography books. He was nominated with four The Best of the Net Awards (2022-25) and two different 2023 Pushcart Nominations for poetry and a short story.*

