

The Apostrophe

Issue 11 | Q4/2025 | Flex



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.

Editor-in-Chief: Jan Lee

Art Editor: Sadie Kaye

Contributing Editor: Sam Powney

Table of contents

Staying Flexible	4
<i>Editor's Note</i>	
The Bride	7
<i>Fiction Julian Lyden</i>	
a reminder (from me, to me)	19
<i>Poetry Vanessa Ho K. S.</i>	
Black Sun	22
<i>Fiction Holly Sykes</i>	
Babel	29
<i>Poetry Sambhu Ramachandran</i>	
The Last Hour of a Billionaire	31
<i>Fiction Nolo Segundo</i>	
Authors	34
Artists	35

Staying Flexible

Editor's Note



An extraordinary feature of creative writing is that it can start anywhere – and it can go anywhere.

Starting from a one-word prompt, “FLEX”, the authors in this issue take us from the modern day to the time of legends, from the deeply personal to the cosmic.

Julian Lyden’s “The Bride” combines a classic folk tale of Hong Kong about Bride’s Pool with a modern morality tale and (could it be?) biting social commentary. But like all classic folk stories, it ends with a song. In Vanessa Ho K. S.’s introspective poetry,

the idea of a protagonist-antagonist conflict is turned inside out, for the two are the same.

Holly Sykes, with her story “Black Sun”, also challenges traditional forms by choosing an unconventional vacation setting and placing the main action internally. But readers are rewarded for their attention with a transcendent conclusion.

In “Babel”, Sambhu Ramachandran offers a moving example of concrete poetry, whose form is to be admired but which can just as readily be felt and pondered without its creative typesetting. On the other side, the final piece in this issue, “The Last Hour of a Billionaire” by Nolo Segundo, is unsubtle – but all the more powerful for its simplicity.

The artwork in this issue also displays the thoughtful interpretations that a theme can bring – from the physical arts to impressionist paintings and the gleam of sunset in a cocktail.

Sometimes, in writing or in art, the biggest flex is to stride forth and say what you want to say.

Jan Lee, Editor-in-Chief

,



The Bride

Julian Lyden

We've all heard this story from our grandmas, but it bears repeating, because it's true. Every word of it.

Once upon a time, before even your grandma was born, man-eating tigers roamed the countryside, and the sea was filled with pirates. Middle-class people could afford to buy their own homes, and animals could talk, although they were beginning to lose interest in doing so, because people never listened.

A young bride was on her way to her new husband's village, way out in what is now called the New Territories, but was ancient and ghost-filled even then. She was dressed in the Guangdong style, in a red silk *qun kwa*, embroidered with phoenixes and dragons. On her feet she wore red silk slippers. A red silk veil, trimmed with yellow tassels, hid the tears streaming down her cheeks. Four sturdy bearers carried the bridal sedan chair, a red wooden box, with just enough room inside for the bride to sit upright and peep through the carved panels as she passed through the gates of her ancestral village, never to return. The sedan chair was antique and heavy, but the bearers were stout country boys, and the bride was beautiful and slender and weighed no more than a melon seed, so their progress through the fields and into the forested hills was swift.

Monsoon winds blew from the east, and the sky filled with dark storm clouds. More dark clouds filled the heart of one of the bearers, a handsome lad, apprenticed to a blacksmith. He loved the girl, and each loping stride they made towards her new home stung him like vinegar on an open wound.

The winding path to the groom's hamlet led along the rocky shoreline, over a steep mountain, and down a deep, gloomy

valley. It was a rough track, paved with granite flagstones, and the sedan chair bounced around like a sampan in a storm.

Along the rocky shoreline they went, and up the steep mountain. All the while the clouds thickened, and the wind rose. By the time they entered the gloomy valley, the rain was coming down like lashes from a whip. It drummed on the roof of the palanquin and turned the flagstones as slippery as tofu in a tub of water.

The bearers could hardly see the path in front of them as the rain beat down. They passed through a thick grove of bamboo and skirted a deep pool at the head of a waterfall. Usually placid and calm, the pool had become a seething cauldron. The swollen waterfall crashed like thunder upon the rocks below.

‘Careful!’ cried the lead bearer as a paving stone moved under his foot. Alas, his voice was drowned out by the rain and the surging water. The lovelorn apprentice stood upon the loose rock and staggered. His corner of the sedan chair bumped to the ground and the wet poles slipped from the hands of his companions. The tall red box tottered and then fell into the pool with a great splash.

The brave boys jumped into the foaming pool, and with much strain and swearing, returned the sedan chair to the bank. Hearing no sound from within, they slid back the panel to find nothing but a single silk slipper. Squinting through the rain, they saw a slender figure, dressed all in red, sliding over the lip of the waterfall, down to the jagged rocks below.

Mad with grief, the blacksmith’s apprentice threw himself over the falls. When the storm had passed, no trace of them could be found. The place became known, ever after, as the Bride’s Pool.

Any grandma will tell you as much, and if she is worth her salt, she will tell you not to go anywhere near there. For when the Bride’s Pool is perfectly still, on quiet days when the red-eyed koels whistle to each other across the valley, the bride appears

below the surface of the water. Still dressed in her wedding finery, she beckons to lonely travellers, reaching out her pale, slender hand. *Beware*, a decent, god-fearing grandma will tell you, because the spirit of a person who has drowned is trapped beneath the water until it can pull another victim below to take its place.

But if your grandma is particularly smart, she knows that this is not the whole of the story. No, not even half of it.

A hundred years passed after the Bride's Pool got its name, and then another fifty slipped by unnoticed. The tigers were all shot, and the pirates tired of life at sea and got into real estate development. Huge cities sprang up to the north and the south. The sturdy villagers moved away to the cities, leaving their fields and rice terraces to be reclaimed by the forest, but the hills around the pool remained much as they always had, which is to say lonely and full of ghosts.

Each weekend, people from the city followed the winding path along the rocky shoreline, over the steep mountain, and down the deep, gloomy valley. They tramped over the ancient flagstones and breathed the damp, spoor-laden air, fancying it to be good for them in some way.

One such city-dweller, who we will call the Rambler, was walking away from the deep, still water of the Bride's Pool. Red-eyed koels were whistling in the trees, and a sense of calm hung over the place. Unfortunately, he didn't have time to linger. His wife had given him strict instructions to be home by one p.m. They had guests coming for lunch, and she would be serving them hairy crabs, which had just come into season. The Rambler disliked his wife's friends. Sunny and Mabel were loud and greedy, but the Rambler liked hairy crabs, so he lengthened his stride.

Before long he encountered a young couple coming in the opposite direction. ‘Good morning,’ said the Rambler cheerfully.

‘Good *afternoon*,’ said the young man, as though he was correcting him. *How strange*, thought the Rambler. He knew it was no later than eleven thirty. He walked this trail regularly, and he’d timed his departure to get back for Sunny, Mabel and the hairy crabs. He couldn’t be bothered to get his phone out and check the time, but he lengthened his stride.

Half an hour later, the Rambler was back at the carpark. He threw his bag onto the passenger seat and pressed the ignition. The car purred into life, which was a relief, because it had been unreliable lately. But there was obviously something wrong with the electronics, because the display showed the time as twelve fifty-five. Like the young hikers, it was an hour ahead of itself.

The Rambler pulled onto the road and turned on the radio. They were playing an Anita Mui song. He sang along. Anita Mui was his favourite. Then the DJ announced the one o’clock news, and his heart quavered. One o’clock? Without pulling over, he scrabbled in his bag for his phone. Sure enough, the time was one p.m. He should have been at home, but he was almost an hour’s drive away. What had happened? Where had the time gone? His wife would kill him.

Looking dumbly at this phone, he failed to notice two cyclists in his path. Almost too late, he swung the car into the opposite lane, before slamming it back to the left to avoid a double-decker bus coming in the other direction. He was lucky to be alive.

He passed through a series of traffic lights, all of which were green. This was fortunate, but he would still be terribly late.

Out on the highway, he threw caution to the wind, weaving in and out of the traffic, well over the speed limit. Before long, he saw flashing blue lights in his mirror, and an angry-looking

policeman signalling him to pull over. *I'm really in trouble now*, thought the Rambler.

But before he had pulled to a stop, there was an almighty collision on the opposite carriageway. A bus full of nuns had ploughed into a truck full of chickens. Feathers and wimples were strewn over the asphalt, and the police sped off to deal with the aftermath. Hardly believing his luck, the Rambler carried on his way.

Despite his miraculous journey, the Rambler arrived home over half an hour late. Waiting for the lift to take him upstairs, he checked his phone. There was an unopened message from his wife. He read it with a sense of dread.

It had been sent earlier that morning. 'Sunny and Mabel cancelled. Sunny in hospital with chest pain. Gone to be with Mabel. Take as long as you like. Love P. xx.'

The Rambler had got away with it! He thanked his lucky stars.

When his wife got home that evening, he told her nothing about his adventures. She cooked the hairy crabs, and the Rambler enjoyed a double helping. Sunny's loss was his gain. It had been a thoroughly satisfactory day. At bedtime, before he turned off his bedside light, he decided to push his luck a little further, but his wife said she was very tired and rolled over on her side. His winning streak had come to an end.

The next weekend, he was excited to repeat his excellent day. He drove out to the countryside and followed the winding path along the rocky shoreline, over the steep mountain, and down the deep, gloomy valley.

When he paused at the Bride's Pool and looked into the dark still water, he was surprised to see a beautiful face looking up at him. He was even more surprised when the face spoke to him.

‘Hello,’ said the Bride.

‘Hello,’ said the Rambler. ‘My Grandma told me about you. You’re the Bride, aren’t you? Are you going to pull me under the water?’

‘Everybody asks me that,’ said the Bride, with a sad smile. ‘But I’m not that kind of girl. I prefer to make a fair deal. I want to go and visit the grave of a blacksmith’s apprentice I once knew. So, if you will take my place in the pool for an hour, I promise to come straight back and let you out. And to make it worth your while, I will grant you an hour of unbelievably good fortune when you get out.’

‘That sounds like a good deal,’ said the Rambler. ‘But how do I know you won’t just leave me in the pool forever?’

‘Well, I didn’t last week, did I?’ said the Bride. The Rambler asked her what she meant.

‘Well, you were here last week, and we made the same deal. I came back to release you, and I imagine you had a pretty wonderful hour afterwards.’

‘You’re right,’ said the Rambler. ‘I had a run of amazingly good luck. But I really don’t remember meeting you.’

‘That’s the way the magic works,’ said the Bride. ‘It makes you completely forget me afterwards. You just enjoy the good luck without knowing how you got it.’

‘Why is that?’ asked the Rambler.

‘I don’t know,’ said the Bride, who was very beautiful when she pouted. ‘If I made the rules, do you think I’d still be stuck in this pond? Anyway, are you in or out?’

The Rambler thought of double helpings of hairy crabs, green traffic lights, and escaping from the police. ‘An hour of good

luck isn't enough,' he said. 'I'll give you an hour if you give me good luck all the way though until midnight.'

The Bride pursed her lips but agreed. The Rambler reached his hand into the water to shake on the deal.

As the Bride foretold, the Rambler forgot about their deal as soon as he climbed out of the pool, but his good luck began immediately. He found a thousand-dollar bill on the trail. He bumped into a group of young women in very small shorts, who gave him brownies and pretended he was handsome. The car started. The traffic was good. There was an Anita Mui marathon on the radio.

The Rambler didn't ask himself why he was so lucky. He chose to believe that he deserved it. He was, he told himself, a good-looking man. He was charming and intelligent – just the sort of guy to whom good things happened. On pure instinct, he stopped off on the way home and put the thousand dollars on a horse. *I'm a genius*, he told himself as he collected his winnings.

Since he was very late getting home, he picked up a bottle of champagne to appease his wife. Getting into the lift at the bottom of his apartment block, he bumped into a neighbour who lived on the ninth floor. This being a folk tale – albeit an entirely true one – it behoves us to describe the neighbour as a comely young widow with a twinkle in her eye.

'Celebrating something?' she asked, looking at the champagne. 'You should drop by and celebrate with me some time.'

When the Rambler got home, he was annoyed to discover that his wife had tired of waiting for him and had gone to see her friend Mabel. *She doesn't appreciate me*, he thought. *She never has. A man with my talent could do a lot better for himself.* The Rambler picked up the bottle of champagne and went downstairs

to see the comely young widow in 9D. She was delighted to see him, but threw him out like yesterday's papers on the stroke of midnight.

The following week was miserable for the Rambler. Nothing seemed to go his way. His colleagues didn't seem to appreciate how special he was, and his boss was quite rude about the effort he put into his work. To make matters worse, he lost his shirt making large bets at the Wednesday race meeting. It just wasn't fair. A man like him deserved better.

As the weekend approached, the Rambler felt an irresistible urge to go for his usual hike. Ignoring his wife's reminder that they had made lunch plans, he set out to the Bride's Pool, striding along the rocky shoreline, over the steep mountain, and down the deep, gloomy valley.

Once again, he was surprised to see the Bride, and once again he accepted her unexpected offer. But this time he insisted that his good luck should last until Wednesday at midnight. That way he would be able to make a killing at the mid-week races, and his wife wouldn't find out about last week's losses.

'Have you been using your good luck wisely?' asked the Bride.

'Of course,' said the Rambler.

'Because there's only so much luck to go around,' she said. 'If you use it all for yourself, you will be depriving others of their own good fortune. Nothing good can come of that.'

He thought she sounded like his grandma, and the Rambler was not in the habit of taking advice from old women.

More fool him, because we all know what happens to people who ignore their grandmas.

The Rambler didn't go home that evening. He went straight to the twinkly-eyed widow's flat and took her out on the town. He drank a bottle of brandy, won a bar fight against five ruffians, and still got home in one piece. The next morning his head barely ached, and his wife didn't give him any grief. In his complacency, the Rambler mistook her silence for acceptance.

The following week he slacked off at work, playing the stock market on his computer and making himself a fortune. He refused to take his colleagues to lunch, though, and sent cheeky responses to his boss' emails. On Wednesday night he won another fortune at the races and carried it off in a suitcase. He was still drinking champagne cocktails when the clock struck midnight and the gangsters he had encountered on Saturday walked into the bar.

The Rambler came to in an alley, missing the suitcase of money and a couple of front teeth. When he finally made it home, there was a note from his wife saying that she had moved back to her parents' house. A second note, from his boss, told him not to bother coming to work anymore.

From then on, the Rambler's life lurched between peaks of happiness and troughs of the darkest misery. Again and again, he went back to the Bride's Pool, pulled by an invisible force, but unable to understand the reason for his outrageous swings of fortune.

Soon it began to seem that the peaks were getting a little less high, while the troughs were darker and deeper each time. Even as he raked in his winnings, he wondered whether he was, in fact, clever and charming, or whether he was just lucky. And when his lucky streaks came to an end, he knew full well that he was none of those things.

When he bought shares in an arms manufacturer, a war would instantly break out. When he bought medical stock, a new disease would sweep the world, killing thousands. The police

started investigating his share trading, suspecting he was using insider information. The Jockey Club looked into his unexplained ability to pick a winner. There was no evidence against him, and he lost more than he won, but the stress was beginning to tell.

His old friends had been replaced by a motley gang of ne'er-do-wells, who were always on hand to help him drink his winnings, but never there when he needed them. A succession of attractive young women would hang on his every word and then disappear, with an unerring sense of when his luck was about to fail. Dread and self-disgust began to stalk him.

The Rambler's appearance began to deteriorate. Good health is only partly down to luck, and the Rambler was starting to have the body his debauched lifestyle deserved. If he stayed away from the Bride's Pool too long, he would shake and grind his teeth, so he tramped there in all weathers with less and less enthusiasm, never understanding where the urge was coming from.

And so it was that the Rambler set off for the Bride's Pool one August morning, when the monsoon winds were blowing from the east, and the sky was full of dark storm clouds. He knew the car wouldn't start for him, and he was in no state to drive anyway, so he collected all the loose change he could find in the flat and flagged down a taxi.

'This is no weather for a hike,' said the driver, looking at his dishevelled passenger in the rearview mirror. 'A typhoon's coming.' The Rambler ignored him and picked at his fingernails.

He followed the winding path along the rocky shoreline, over the steep mountain, and down the deep, gloomy valley. All the while the clouds thickened, and the wind rose. By the time he entered the gloomy valley, the rain was falling like lashes from a whip.

His dirty clothes were soon pasted to his skin by the rain. His feet slipped on the wet path. His shoes, a ridiculous pair of Italian loafers that he had bought on one of his benders, filled with water and then disintegrated.

The Rambler thought of all that he had squandered: the love of his wife, the meals of hairy crab with Sunny and Mabel, the pleasure of rambling for rambling's sake, without being dragged along by some irresistible force. He thought of all the harm he had done with his lust and greed: the nuns and the chickens tangled in the wreckage, the wars and pandemics he had triggered, the stock market crashes that inevitably followed. All of this, he thought, because I confused luck with virtue.

When he reached the Bride's Pool it was in tumult. The muddy water boiled like broth in a cauldron. The swollen waterfall crashed like thunder upon the rocks below. A paving stone shifted a little under his foot and he knew, somehow, that he had found the place where it all began, and where it must end. The Rambler tipped his head back to let the rain drive against his face, his body racked with sobs.

'Why?' he wailed, but no answer came from the roiling sky.

He looked down into the pool, but there was nothing to see except foam and stirred-up mud. He got on his knees, and reached into the water, not knowing what he was searching for, but knowing what he must do. Before long, he felt the pressure of a small hand gripping his own. It gave a gentle tug, as though inviting him to follow. He tightened his own grip, and the hand pulled him gently below the surface.

The Rambler's body circled the pool three times before sliding over the lip of the waterfall, and down to the jagged rocks below.

Maybe your grandma has a different version, but that's how my nanna tells it. And sometimes, if she's had a drink with her mah-jong friends, she will sing a little song.

*Oh my sons, and oh my daughters
Keep your hands out of deep waters
No good can come from water sports
With brides in red, or men in shorts.
So, stay away from gloomy valleys
And betting shops and Wan Chai alleys.
Heed your Gran, for she knows best –
Don't put your blessings to the test.
Be not a rake, nor fortune's debtor
For luck is fine, but virtue's better.*

*And oh, you great titans of commerce
Chairpeople of the universe,
Tech gurus with your rocket fleet
With all the world ranged at your feet.
Remember that from dust you came
And dust you are, and shall remain.
You're not that handsome, smart or plucky –
You're filthy rich, because you're lucky.
So use it for what's good and true
For luck won't last, and nor will you.*

,

a reminder (from me, to me)

Vanessa Ho K. S.



you need not seek love,
for it already surrounds you.

it is hidden within those trinkets you find
cleaning your house on a spring day,
pins and charms given by those
who may seem insignificant;
but care enough to wish you well.

it is hidden in the completely stocked fridge,
the multiple cartons of your favourite drink;
they never seem to go missing,
and you can always rely on that sweetness
to carry you through a rough day.

it is hidden in the bitter aftertaste
of slightly burnt cookies with
accompanying videos of subpar skills;
though they're imperfect,
they're so very human and that's enough.

it is hidden in the typed messages,
words flowing through the ink of a pen,
writing of you about you directly or not;
even if it's no literary masterpiece,
it drips, converges, fills your heart to the brim.

it is hidden in the jokes and banter
ringing through an otherwise quiet night,
the filter has fallen unnoticed
amid the shuffling of cards and loud music,
yet every word is crisp and clearly listened to.

it is hidden in the fleeting embraces,
pats on your back of comfort or concern
the perfectly peeled oranges sitting in
that same ceramic bowl that's only gotten bigger
with each passing week, month, year.

so, i tell you this.
you need not seek love,
for it already surrounds you.
and this, you mustn't forget.

,



Black Sun

Holly Sykes



When I told them I was going away for a while, Mum couldn't understand why her only son would leave just before his birthday. She'd made plans, she said. Thirty-five years old isn't a significant age, but as an only child it's my duty to spend my birthday with my parents.

This year, she said, jabbing at where my birthday is marked on the calendar, she'd planned my favourite: roast beef and a treacle tart for dessert. Dad scraped his chair back. 'For Chrissakes, he's a grown man,' he muttered, and went to his study, leaving his dirty plate on the table.

Mum always makes too much of my birthday, and this time, I refused to play along. This year, he would have turned eighteen. I can't be certain he'd have been a boy, but that's what I like to

imagine. His birthday isn't marked on the calendar. I don't know exactly when his birthday would have been.

So I've come across the water, exchanging the Lincolnshire fens for the flat lands of Jutland.

On the drive from Billund airport the winds buffet my hire car. The road stretches for miles, curving away over the earth's surface. Low buildings hunker close to the ground. Navy, mustard, burnt red.

The rental house sits at the edge of the woods, trees thin and tall behind. Ahead is the North Sea, a strip of silver on the horizon. I go inside the house, where the low roof harbours shadows. Dragging a chair outside, I shelter under a blanket and wait for the sun to set. I eat herrings and black bread. A flock of starlings pulsates above. Black Sun. That's what the Danish call it. The sweeping flock of starlings.

On the second day, I leave the rental and swim in the sea. I jump in waves that rise high around me. Saltwater fills my nose and mouth. When I come out, my hair is matted, and my skin is the colour of sand. Windburn stings my cheeks. I crouch down, like the low houses, the sun warm on my back. The long beach is empty, but I imagine a small boy digging in the sand. Building a sandcastle, scooping out a moat.

I was seventeen. 'You have to come and pick me up,' Mum said on the phone. She gave me the address, and I went to collect her. She didn't have many friends, and it couldn't be my dad, she said, so it had to be me. Only when I arrived at the clinic did the pieces start to fall into place. Posters for counselling services lined the walls, and there were leaflets detailing post-procedure aftercare. In the waiting room, no one noticed me, a teenage boy.

Women who find themselves in those places have enough to think about without wondering about anomalies like me.

Mum was slumped in a chair, pale and unsteady. She leant on my shoulder, and I helped her into a taxi. Another time, we might have got the bus, but there was no way she could make it to the bus stop. But she insisted the taxi drop us off round the corner from the house so that Dad wouldn't see. 'Don't tell him. Please,' she said. I understood. Dad would never have allowed the clinic. Those last few steps up the garden path she was almost unconscious. I hustled her upstairs, sweating through my school shirt.

Over the next couple of days, she claimed an unspecified illness and stayed in bed. Her head was aching. She felt dizzy, she couldn't eat. Dad left her alone, as he always did when she was like that. He was used to her mood swings. 'Women's troubles,' he said. 'Weak constitution.'

She'd been that way when I was born. I knew because I'd found calendars from past years where she'd marked blue for bad days, red for good. Entire months of blue. Blocks of it after my birth. Baby blues, they would have called it. Except, this time, there was no baby.

When I tried to open her curtains, she complained and made me close them again. When I brought her something to eat, she left it untouched.

It went on like that for days, maybe weeks, the bedroom always in darkness. Dad slept in the spare room. I tried to encourage her to eat a little. Toast. Endless cups of undrunk tea. I was supposed to be studying for my A Levels.

I wasn't allowed to ask her about it. I was to stop interrogating her. My mother's plaintive tone when she said that made my stomach roil. I felt guilty, although I couldn't work out what for.

One day she got up, as if the past month hadn't happened. She tidied the house from top to bottom. 'Told you she'd snap out of it,' Dad said. I was able to commit more time to my schoolwork. I had six months before my exams.

Mum was back to her usual self, or so it seemed. I grew sullen. I walked the streets until late. When it got cold, I'd sit in the corner of a pub if I could get away with it, pretending to drink the dregs of someone else's beer.

Once, we nearly spoke about it. Dad was out and I came across Mum looking through a box of my old baby clothes. She was under the eaves, searching for a suitcase. They had a holiday planned. Brittany, I think. There she was, in the attic, on her knees, holding up a tiny green jumper. I pulled myself from the ladder into the small space and crouched down so as not to bang my head. I looked into the box and pulled out a pair of shoes. I could fit them into the palm of one hand. It wouldn't have taken much to bring the brown leather to a shine. I imagined white socks pulled halfway up little-boy calves. A pair of dungarees, a short-sleeved shirt.

'These look barely worn,' I said.

'You grew out of them so quickly,' she said, giving me a brief smile.

'Mum....' I hesitated. What did I want to ask her?

We heard Dad at the door. She began to pack the box up.

Within a few months, I'd left for university.

Morning in the Jutland rental: I lie in the low wooden bed, squinting at the ceiling. Last night I didn't bother to draw the

blinds, so the early light is dazzling. Overnight, the sun barely set. Instead, it swung low like a pendulum around the wide sky.

It's peaceful in this place. I've been here a while, swimming in the sea that gets warmer by the day, but it doesn't seem to be doing me much good. All this space and time. For what? To think? I've spent the last eighteen years thinking. Thinking, but saying nothing. Several times over the years, I've tried to broach the subject with Mum. She looks at me as if she has no idea what I'm talking about. Sometimes, I think I've imagined it all.

Eventually, I leave the low bed and go outside to walk through the shelter of the woods. A red squirrel jumps between branches before scarpering off through the trees. Overhead, I catch sight of a black-tailed buzzard. I meet no one.

After some time, I find myself at the edge of a lake. Or perhaps it's an inlet. The water stretches for miles. Out there, away from the trees, everything is exposed to the wind. It flings the birds around and worries low-lying heathers in the fields. A marsh harrier fights against it, diving in and out of long, whipping grasses.

Later, in the evening, I sit outside on my chair. The sun is unwilling to leave. It lingers high in the sky long after I'm ready to go to bed. Deep in my blanket, I'm nearly asleep when I notice a flicker of something in the distance, the tips of flames. They're coming from the direction of the beach.

I find myself wide awake and drawn to this wavering sign of life, and walk towards the horizon. As I draw closer, the vibrating hum of voices grows louder and I realise the whole village must be here, on the beach, gathered around the biggest bonfire I've ever seen. Even standing at the back of the crowd, the heat of the flames is intense. The noise of the people seems strange. For days, I've lived with only the sound of the wind in my head. The thrum and pound of the crowd is fierce in comparison. But they're joyous, invigorated by the energy of the fire.

Someone nearby pours shots of a clear liquid and passes the glasses around. A man younger than me and wearing a grey scarf thrusts a shot glass into my hand. He shouts ‘skaal,’ and tips the liquid down his throat. I do the same. The liquorice flavour burns my insides. He takes the bottle and pours another generous measure into my glass. There are hot dogs sprinkled with fried, salted onion scraps. There’s cold beer, and lots more of the liquorice schnapps. There’s chanting and whooping and dancing that becomes more outlandish as the night stretches on.

Later, voices come together to sing what must be the national anthem. Afterwards, the crowd settles. People break off into smaller groups. Couples with their arms around each other. Small children asleep on shoulders.

Finally, the sun relents until the light from the flames is brighter than the light in the sky. We huddle closer to the bonfire and watch it die.

When I next look around, the crowd has thinned and only a few lolling heads in fold-out chairs remain. The man with the grey scarf has gone. The summer solstice has passed.

The next afternoon, I board a plane home. On the ascent, I catch sight of the beach and the charred remains of the bonfire from the night before. As we fly out over the North Sea, I lean back and doze, and in my dream the hum of the plane becomes the sound of the wind.

,



Babel

Sambhu Ramachandran

When you
pronounce
my name,
I feel your
internal machinery
lifting each phoneme
from the kiln of your
lungs, through the larynx,
to the blade of your tongue
like those ancient Babylonians
carrying huge stones to the very top
of the great ziggurats that were supposed
to connect heaven and earth. Though I do not
believe in a heaven, and earth for me is heavenly
enough as long as it lasts, I cannot help thinking
of my name connecting two worlds—the heaven
of your lips and my ear's soft earth, the syllables
set horizontally between us like a resonant ziggurat
that will shatter anytime now, even without an envious god
having to strike it
d
o
w
n



The Last Hour of a Billionaire

Nolo Segundo

At one of his seven mansions [appraised at \$77.5 million], the one closest to the hospital best known in the world for treating his particular ailment, he lay on the custom made invalid's bed [\$36,500] with IVs in each arm. Classical music was playing on low volume, on an old-school stereophile's dream of an audio system [quad speakers: \$182,400; CD player: \$7,800; pre-amp: \$12,000; 300W amp, \$9,150; custom built turntable, \$23,700, diamond needle, \$4,250; hand-made cables, \$8,400; custom built cabinet handmade from rare woods from Brazil, Sri Lanka, and Hungary, \$62,000].

The attending nurse sat in a seventeenth-century French armchair [\$45,000] quietly scrolling through her text messages. She felt a little sad that her patient was dying; she was making over three times what she would get anywhere else as a hospice nurse, and she couldn't help wishing he would live a few months longer, long enough at least so she could get that car she'd been dreaming about. But the doctor had said he didn't have long now, a few hours at most. She sighed and counted her blessings.

He'd fought the disease with all the money in the world—well, he would have spent all the billions he'd earned, if money could have done the trick—but money was powerless before the caprices of nature. He remembered a poem he once read, by some underpaid and forgotten poet [he had a secret weakness for poetry; the book was a first edition, priced at \$1,225]. It was about Death smiling at the brave soldier on a deadly battlefield, shrugging at the preacher in his pulpit moments before an earthquake leveled his church, laughing uproariously at the rich man who thought Death could be bought off.

He'd thought that, as a rich man, he could bribe Death. If he could only see the right doctors—if only he spent enough money

in the right hospitals. But it was all a waste. The pathologist, about thirty years old, had told him he had six months at most, no matter what he did. And it had been almost six months to the day.

I shouldn't have yelled at the kid, he thought.

But he was not a man given to regrets. He didn't waste time thinking about his six wives. He'd grown tired of them, one after another, every few years. In any case, each of them had accepted the prenup, never believing it would apply to her,

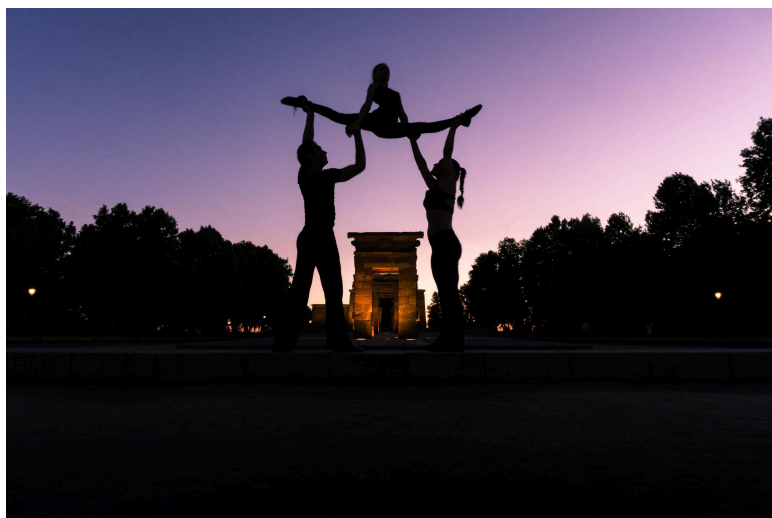
He looked at his own hand, clutching the buzzer [\$368 from the latest medical supply catalogue]. He was not even 50! How could he be dying?

He wanted to shout it out the window [\$2,500 including restored original sashes]. But the nearest neighbor was two miles away. His chauffeur, his four maids, his butler, gardener, and two cooks would hear, since he required all of them to live on the estate. But none of them would answer.

Most of them were wondering where their next job would come from, and if they'd be left anything in his will.

With a bitterness he hadn't felt since childhood, he thought of his will: unwritten and unsigned. How many times had he had the same discussion with his lawyer [\$775 per hour]? 'Do it for those you love!' the lawyer had urged him. In response, he would smile his tight little smile.

That little smile was on his lips as death entered his body. Afterwards, his servants, nurses, doctors, wondered why he was smiling at the end.



Authors

***Vanessa Ho K. S.** is an avid reader, poet and writer from Hong Kong, whose work revolves around human emotions and experiences. When not typing away on her trusty laptop, you'll find her crocheting, training for her next kumite competition, or immersing herself in other fantastical worlds. You can find her at @vanhodreamin on Instagram.*

***Julian Lyden** is a Hong Kong-based writer with an interest in folklore, crime and the unseen forces which shape our lives. He enjoys hiking around Bride's Pool, but he has never had much luck at the races, or knowingly instigated a pandemic. He loved his Grandmas, to whom this story is dedicated..*

***Sambhu Ramachandran** is a bilingual poet, translator, short story writer, and academic from Kerala, India. He is currently working as Assistant Professor of English at N.S.S. College, Pandalam. His poems have been repeatedly anthologized in The Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English and have also appeared in journals like The Bombay Literary Magazine (TBLM), Wild Court, Madras Courier, The Alipore Post, Muse India, Lothlorien Poetry Journal, Setu, Sextet, and The Chakkar, among others.*

***Nolo Segundo** is the pen name of a retired teacher who became published in his 8th decade in over 250 literary journals in 21 countries on 4 continents and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, thrice for Best of the Net. Cyberwit.net has published 3 poetry collections in softcover, the latest titled Soul Songs.*

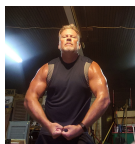
*A published author of short fiction, poetry and writer of female-led novels, **Holly Sykes** won the Page Turner Award for Best Contemporary Fiction 2024 with her first manuscript Wooden Dolls. Previously, it won the Portfolio Prize 2023 (MA,*

University of Lancaster). Alongside working on her second novel, Holly also publishes *Beyond the Book Cover* on Substack.

Artists



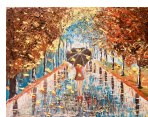
1



2



3



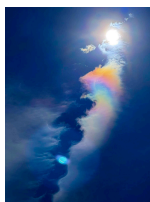
4



5



6



7



8



9

1. *“Corina and Daniel”* by The Acrofamily
2. *“Bringing out the Big Guns”* by Dan Davies
3. *“Path”* by Dave Walker
4. *“Shanghai Shower”* by Julianne Ng
5. *“Peonies in Joy”* by George Tang
6. *“Aperol”* by Matt Ricardo
7. *“Heaven”* by Ricky Sadosa
8. *“Searching”* by Carl Scharwath
9. *“The Acrofamily at Debod Temple in Madrid”* by Jesus Sanoja

The Acrofamily is a family of artists based in Hong Kong. Originally from Venezuela, Corina and Daniel started dancing together in 2009, expressing the lightness, beauty and sensuality of dance with the impact, challenge and power of the Circus arts. Their daughter Ainara, a contortion and handbalancing artist, has received training in arts and acrobatics since early childhood, and now performs as part of the trio act, as a duo with Corina and Daniel, and as a solo contortion artist. The Acrofamily is based in Hong Kong and is available for world wide events. They can be found at <https://www.theacrofamily.com/>

Dan Davies is an internationally acclaimed and award-winning actor, writer and producer. He's the No 1 Box Office American actor in Nollywood. He can be found at <https://dandavies.org>.

Julianne Ng is a visual artist from Shenzhen who has studied and lived in Shanghai and Hong Kong for the past few years. Julianne loves creating art across many creative mediums. Art helps her to express her inner world and improve her mental health.

Matt Ricardo is a variety performer from London who lives with his wife and cats by the seaside in Brighton, UK. His passion is writing and taking photographs while travelling to gigs worldwide.

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.

Jesus Sanoja is a filmmaker and photographer from Madrid. With over 15 years of experience behind the camera, he turns moments into stories. From world-renowned artists to luxury brands, Michelin-starred chefs, elite sports teams, travel agencies, high-end hotels—he brings a curious and creative cinematic eye, that's fueled by a passion for authentic storytelling. He can be found at <https://www.jesussanoja.com> and on Instagram at @sanojajesus

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.

George Tang, born in 1948, is a celebrated Chinese artist known for his vibrant floral paintings. Tang started painting at the age of seven under Pau Shiu Yau, (a painter of the Lingnan School, and also a disciple of the Japanese master Takeuchi Seiho. In the 1970s, he studied in London, gaining acclaim with his 1976 overseas debut at the Alfred Speelman Art Gallery. His works have been exhibited in Hong Kong, Singapore and Canada, notably Toronto's Aftukhteh Art Gallery. In 2009, he designed a widely admired floral stamp series for Hong Kong Post. He was chosen among 500 Finest Chinese artists in Ink Global 2017 and among 200 in 2021, Tang, now 77, remains active, recently completing a seven-foot floral painting for Fine Art Asia 2025.

Dave Walker is a photographer from the North of England who lives in London with his wife, Becky, and their two sons. He is passionate about capturing moments that are raw, honest and meaningful. He is particularly drawn to abandoned places and weathered faces.



