

The Apostrophe

Issue 3 | Q4/2023 | Mistakes



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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Mistakes Can Take You Places

Editor's Note



We thought this was going to be a comedy issue. But the joke is on us!

The submissions for Issue #3 have reminded us that there are many kinds of mistakes: the ones you make, the ones others make, and the ones the universe makes. What is perfectly clear, however, is that the nature of the mistake is less important than where it takes you.

In this issue, our authors have presented historical mistakes, imaginary ones, mistakes that never were, and cosmic gaffes. They sometimes leave you wondering whether it was really a mistake at all.

Fundamentally, literature and art are about human emotion. The surprise, the regret, the anger, and the acceptance of a mistake are all at the heart of what it means to be human (or otherwise). The humor that follows – whether the snort of laughter in the

moment, or only the sense of “Someday, we’ll look back on all this and laugh!” – is also uniquely ours.

As such, they are the very source of the creativity that allows us to connect. We want to make mistakes, because without them, we could hardly be ourselves.

Jan Lee, Editor-in-Chief

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A Beautiful Mistake

Sonia Leung



Goddess Nuwa embraces heaven, earth, and everything in between.

When the sky leaks, Nuwa summons 36,501 five-colored rocks to repair it. Ultimately, she uses only 36,500 and disposes of the supernumerary stone beneath Ching-keng Peak.

The remaining stone toils tirelessly, transforming into a sentient, quasi-anthropomorphic being.

With his consciousness, comes the pain of realizing he is useless to the goddess and his subsequent abandonment. Sorrows and shame stack up, overwhelming him.

Stone begins to see himself as a mistake.

Self-doubt gnaws away at his confidence.

While he is drifting and lamenting one afternoon, a Buddhist monk and a Daoist prelate stroll toward him, conversing.

After overhearing the two reminiscing about the prosperity of the sublunary world, Stone is sorely tempted to partake in the sensual delights they have described so vividly. He begs them to help him descend to earth.

Having unwittingly enticed Stone, the Buddhist and the Daoist try to warn him of the transient and illusory nature of earthly pleasures. Their words, however, are ignored.

Stone is determined to seek fulfillment amid the mortals.

Thus does the curtain rise on my all-time favorite – *The Dream of the Red Chamber* or *The Story of the Stone* – one of the four great Chinese classical novels.

I read the simplified version of *Dream* when I was ten, identified immediately with Stone, and heard his message to me:

‘You are not alone. You are not useless.’

At fifteen, I left my old life behind, and explored my personal values elsewhere, alone.

Now in my late forties, I thank Stone, who elevated that fifteen-year-old from despair.

And I thank the younger me for daring to depart and reinvent herself. It would have been much easier to succumb to depression, and perceive my life as a mistake.

A Mistake by Chouyu Zheng comes to mind.

A renowned Taiwanese poet from the 60s and 70s, Zheng’s *Mistake* is one of my favorite contemporary Chinese poems.

Here is my translation of the closing.

‘The tapping sound of my hoof is a beautiful mistake.
I am not a homecomer, only a passerby.’

This final line speaks to me, as I have led a nomadic life.

Am I a homecomer to Hong Kong, or only a passerby?

That is the question I imagine many long-term city dwellers share with me, every time they leave and come back.

Sometimes, it feels like a mistake to return, or to pass by again.

I wrote this poem after Zheng.

Xerces Blue

Like a Xerces Blue,
will you be extinct, too?

In this pragmatic land,
a new chapter has begun
with yes-men-and-women,
a unified team – one narrative.

Wanting to come back,
you look for reasons to stay,
but have nowhere to land;
no place to call home.

With delicate wings,
you fly into the foggy sky.

Trying to be strong,
you seek ways to remain,
but are no match for politics;
no weight to your words.

With gossamer wings,
you fly into the western wind.

The flapping sound
is a beautiful mistake.

Like Xerces Blue,
you may never return, too.

Stone did find fulfillment on earth, but unconventionally, and returned to heaven.

I am still toiling. When life gets hard, I take a long walk, preferably by the sea. At various times, I lift my head, embrace the rosy dawn, the afterglow, the turquoise blue, or the rainbow – the result of the five-colored rocks Goddess Nuwa used to repair the sky – and walk on.



In Need of Oiling

Reena Bhojwani



The patter continued on the corrugated metallic excuse for an awning that had dislodged itself from its original place and descended from its 20th-storey, heavenly position just to shelter me. Well, most of my shoulders and whatever else fell under its jurisdiction. It wasn't much, but I wasn't complaining. I was grateful. It could have been worse.

You would think scrapyards had more to offer, but not this one. This was full of rusting junk, with only a few identifiable items in slower states of decay protruding from here and there. And a 25-storey building from which top CEOs with upturned noses watched the piles in the landfill grow higher and higher with

waste—piles of garbage whose stench chased the rising heights of the building—but those upturned noses were always in the lead so they would never have to smell what was down there and never have to see rock bottom.

The unexpected rain cloud had appeared out of thin air, and followed me insistently until I reached the open stretch of the landfill, completely vulnerable. It was worse than when air conditioners targeted you to take a leak whilst you waited at a crossing in the city. No, this was an ongoing, never ending, persistent pissier of a cloud with too much water and a relentless mission to aim its miseries onto me, causing me to take refuge under the God-sent piece of metal.

The air was stifling. It was as if the Higher Ups had invisible dental assistants hovering around with suction pipes to snatch away even the smallest amount of spare oxygen. Where were the profits in that? I sighed.

Where was everyone? What kind of an orientation was this? Just because I was a volunteer nearing my forties, it didn't mean I didn't deserve some basic courtesies. I was beginning to regret my resignation letter from my data entry position. The corporate world was still the corporate world, no matter which rung of the ladder you stood on.

Who was I kidding? Being on the lower rungs sucked. There was little protection from mud splatter and telemarketers and personal loan sellers and worst of all: the recent torrential rainfall that promised to make everything wet and miserable, until all the stagnant water seeped into the pores of every aspect of life, making all the good ooze out of it, until it began to fester and rust.

Something shuffled under me. My eyes grew wide like two alarmed clock-spheres. What in the world?

The shuffling object (I was too petrified to acknowledge it was probably a creature) had attached itself to me like Velcro.

It's probably just someone's unwanted garment or costume or toy I'm resting on. I wondered how many times my tongue would have to repeat that statement until it tasted true.

As I tried to reposition my knee, a squeak erupted from underneath me. I froze.

Was it a rodent? Please, at least let it have blunt teeth, or even better, let it be toothless. I could handle a toothless rodent. Without claws. And maybe even without eyes. Yes, I could take on a blind, baby rodent.

I forced my rain-soaked face to look down.

Orange bulbous eyes stared up at me, with a pinched, humanesque expression, wordlessly accusing me of betrayal. Okay, so not a rodent, then. But what was it?

A slippery voice slithered into my head.

“All this time I defended you from my species, and you go right ahead and act like the idiot they all think you are!”

I blinked. Clearly, getting drenched in the rain activated one's imagination and pushed it into overdrive. Am I hallucinating? Are the acid levels in the rain potent enough to cause such levels of delusions? Or is it the cumulative stench permeating the scrapyard?

“You're also quite slow. We will have to find out which part of you to oil for that—for better performance in the future.”

Until now, the creature had camouflaged itself against me, but it moved, revealing multicoloured prickly bristles, like that of a fuzzy bath mat.

I opened my mouth, full of questions. The creature lifted its hand—a long-fingered, orange hand!—and clamped my mouth shut.

With an authoritative voice, it announced “End of simulation.”

The insistent rain stopped. The air returned to space, and the stifling pressure lessened.

The creature emerged from beneath me, flat as the bath mat it resembled, but fully operational. It slithered and floated as if it had command of gravity.

Oh, gosh. Did it?

“I do,” it said, giving me a cheeky grin, showing off navy blue, thorn-like fangs that suddenly vanished.

I felt faint.

“Way to go, Stallion. You broke this one as well. Now how will we finish our research?” A new creature spoke in a crisp, formal voice with a British accent.

“That’s Archie—Archibald Frister, my annoying research partner,” the first creature explained. Then it turned to its partner and insisted, “I didn’t break it, Archie. It’s just...buffering...”

“The truth is that after seeing 47,822 broken sample human specimens, it is not hard to tell if this one is damaged or not. Open your eye-bulbs!” The Archie creature stretched his own eyes, to demonstrate.

I believe that’s when I found my voice, and shrieked until my throat was hoarse. Were these machines? Aliens? Alien machines? Did it matter? Where were the humans? Where was Mr. Pinguin Tang, the person that signed off on my welcome email, telling me how lovely it was for me to volunteer, validating my choice to resign from my job of 13 years and

become a supporter of science? Was he just a bot? I should have done a background check!

I looked at the two creatures in front of me, wondering which one was the HR rep.

Archie was scribbling, speaking his notes aloud. “Emits strange loud noises when distressed. Consistent with all previous findings. Slow to respond. In desperate need of oiling, but which oil? The essential oils? Cooking oil? Crude oil? Olive oil?”

“Let’s try them all!” Stallion suggested.

I knew part of my volunteer duties were to participate in experimental processes, but it was never established that I would be the one things were tested upon. And what kind of test was this? Oiling?

“Wait, I don’t need oiling,” I cried. “I’m human, not a machine! You’re making a big mistake!” I shouted.

“I can’t take it anymore, Stallion. I’m pressing the mute button!”

And just like that, the sound was sucked out of me. I was lifted—flailing arms and all—by a claw crane, as I wordlessly protested. I inched closer and closer to a gargantuan vat. Then all my ambitions were slowly cast into the worst possible choice. Castor oil.

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The Meaning of Hong Kong

Paola Caronni

(Amnesia from Anemoia)

For us,
who have walked along
the Before with joy,
and trod through the After
with angst,
it's *desiderium* —

It's a sampan ride
with a boat-dwelling Tanka;
a pipe smoked
with an old Hakka.

It's the taste of 臭豆腐¹
archaic, tempting,
even if it comes
with the stink.

For you,
who are moving your first steps
on the balance beam,
and climb onto bamboo scaffolding
to see the sky,
it's *anemoia*.

It's the song
you've never heard;
the candles
no longer lit;
the books burnt
on bonfires.

It's the echo
without the cave.

¹ cau3 dau6 fu6: fermented bean curd, also known as 'smelly tofu'

Hole

Shivani Sarwal

There is a hole in my heart.

I unearthed it recently. Perhaps I finally had the courage to acknowledge there was one, like a wart that keeps growing until you can't ignore it.

Denial is a powerful weapon. So is justification. Over the centuries, women have armed themselves with many such weapons. Abusive marriage: it's just an extreme form of love; am I sure I didn't do something to trigger him? Not being promoted: I am not there yet; I'm sure they'll do it next year.

Powerful weapons. We seldom disarm ourselves; vulnerability is a vice.

Sometimes it takes another to show you a hole. Learn from the experiences of others, they say. But we never do.

Gillian: I am jealous of her.

She is in her early 30s, maybe 33. I am 49. She is taking a sabbatical. No; she is not travelling the world, nor is she pursuing her hobby turned entrepreneurial venture.

Can you keep a secret? she asks, in a conspiratorial tone.

Of course I can keep secrets. I am a woman. That makes her laugh.

I am leaving, she says.

Lucky you, I say, assuming she has landed a new job, as I swirl my morning coffee with a wooden stirrer.

When? I ask.

July.



Are you moving back to the UK? A startup?

A startup. Yeah, she chuckles, knowing well, by now, my misery at her being able to find a new job, while I have been rotting here for a decade.

I am leaving to be home with my kids. She caresses her tummy, her outturned umbilicus a visible dent on her stretched dress.

How lovely! I can't stop gushing with niceties, while my stomach churns. It's not jealousy any more. It's rage. Uncontrollable. Well, that's great. It's okay if you have the finances figured out, I say.

Not really. I mean, not completely, but Greg and I decided we need to do this.

I wish her luck. We have never exchanged numbers in the past, but we do now. I go back to my desk. I look at my reflection in the computer screen, and then at the knick-knacks on my desk, accumulated over the past ten years. Thank-you cards and Christmas cards, pinned to the soft board. A printout of 'Stay Calm' pushed into a corner, behind a stack of papers. I am never calm. A dead plant, another dying, a hand sanitizer that came

with a care pack in 2020, a massive bottle of moisturizer. Inconsequential things. On the soft board right in my line of sight, not pinned because it would leave a hole, but stuck with sellotape, is a picture of Minno and me in Victoria Park. It was taken in one of those little booths at a Christmas Carnival. We look happy. This was last year. Minno, my son, is 19.

When did he turn 19? Where was I?

In our culture, they say that before a baby is born, the soul chooses its mother. He chose me, but I didn't live up to my own expectations. I don't know if I lived up to his. He does say I am a good mother. Who is he fooling?

Will I get another chance? Mistakes should not be repeated. But how can I make a choice if there isn't one?

Give me one more chance.

There are a lot of mistakes I would rather make than the ones I made.

I would gladly make the mistake of skipping gym, and wait at the school bus stop instead, with the other mothers in their pyjama suits, discussing how the school ordered a new annual day outfit every year and made us pay for it, as we see off our children in the morning.

I would merrily make the mistake of spending more time trying new breakfast options for his lunchbox, than choosing an easy cheese and tomato sandwich on most days.

Or make the mistake of leaving the office early, to greet him when he returns home, dirty and sweaty after football, and hug him and kiss his flushed face.

And, lest I forget, I would rather make the mistake of not travelling the world for work, instead of being away from him for days on end.

Or the mistake of skipping an important conference, to be at the parent-teacher meeting. Could a meeting ever be more important than him?

You see how the tiny holes in the fabric of myself have joined hands over the years and turned into an enormous hole. How conspiratorial! Picture me as Mother Earth; these little holes in the ground are now an excavation. Can someone fill it up?

I always tell him that I can never love anyone else, ever, because I am still in debt for not having loved him enough, at least in kind. In cash, I did.

You shouldn't borrow more until you settle your outstanding debt.

He has a solution: love my kids. Will you, Mum? Ah, grandchildren. Here is another weapon – replacement?

It doesn't work that way, I say. It's as if you wanted a skirt, and they offered shorts.

Gillian is very smart.

I know you will have arguments for the mistakes I made, and against the ones I'd rather have made. But trust me. I say it from experience: it's difficult to live with a gaping hole.

In this debate, hypothetical as it may be, you for the mistakes I made and me against, who are we kidding? You are justifying your own mistakes, the ones that you'd rather not have made.

This is how my little holes, that make up my gaping hole, show themselves, every day.

My eyes tear up with want, to hold my boy's hand, when I see mothers holding their babies' hands in the MTR.

I suppress my sniffles with a tissue, when I see a mother walking patiently beside her child as he examines his reflection in a shop mirror. It's new to him. Let him experience it. What's the rush? she thinks. Let him, let me take this in. This may not happen again. Let him discover this world, a step at a time. Soon, he will have to hustle anyway.

You say it's menopause. Ah, another weapon. So if I feel mushy, it's either periods or menopause? I have feelings, you know, the kind that bring tears. That's why our body has tear glands.

I feel more, now. For when I was making those mistakes, the ones I shouldn't have, I had stopped feeling. I was steeling. The feelings have come back with a vengeance, like hypersensitive skin after an injury. Torn.

I would rather make the mistake of giving him a toy or an ice cream that was not tied to a goal achieved, and teach him that he always had the right to be happy, not only when he achieved something. This would have been my favourite mistake.

He would have blossomed in the shower of these mistakes like a flower in fresh rain.

You ask: But did he? Blossom, in spite of everything ?

Yes. He did blossom, as beautiful as a wild flower in the wilderness. For it is in its nature to subsist on the minimum, and bring beauty to the world of the kind that makes you smile. It's not my credit to take when something blossoms without the gardener. It is their own, or God's, if you believe in one.

As I look at my wild flower, its grandeur unmatched, I think of ways to fill the gaping hole.

There are none.

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Killing Hitler

Michael A. Clement

Air Force General Philip Woods stands in front of thirty scientists and engineers in the basement laboratory of a university research center in Virginia. Woods has an athletic physique, a shape he has developed from swimming five hundred meters every morning.

“Ladies and gentlemen, today is the first day of 2022, but the last day of Project Butterfly. For the past two years, you’ve labored in this lab to create the most significant scientific breakthrough in history, greater than even the Manhattan Project. Today, we’ll unveil it. Let me just say, I haven’t been this nervous since I had to make an emergency landing of an F-16 on a highway near Las Vegas.” Woods pauses and takes a sip of water.

“In a few minutes, we’ll be sending a man back in time to August 1, 1936, and he’ll attend the Summer Olympics in Berlin, Germany. He will enter the Olympic Stadium, packed with one hundred thousand spectators, make his way to Adolf Hitler’s private box, and assassinate him. Our man knows he’s on a suicide mission. But feels as we all do, that this evil man, Hitler, must be stopped; history needs to be altered to prevent the deaths of millions of people.” Woods pauses, finishes the glass of water, and clears his throat. He scans the audience, takes a deep breath, and continues his speech.

“As you know, traveling back in time changes the future. History will change; some of you will not be born, or may attend different colleges and have other careers or marry other people. After our man has time traveled, a temporal wave will ripple through the universe and reconfigure history. In about an hour, we’ll all feel its effects. Some of you will vanish, and others will be different selves, not remembering this project or the evil man we killed. We know the risks. It wasn’t an easy decision, but the

U.S. government thanks you for your dedication to duty, and for sacrificing your current lives for the good of the world.”

The audience applauds.

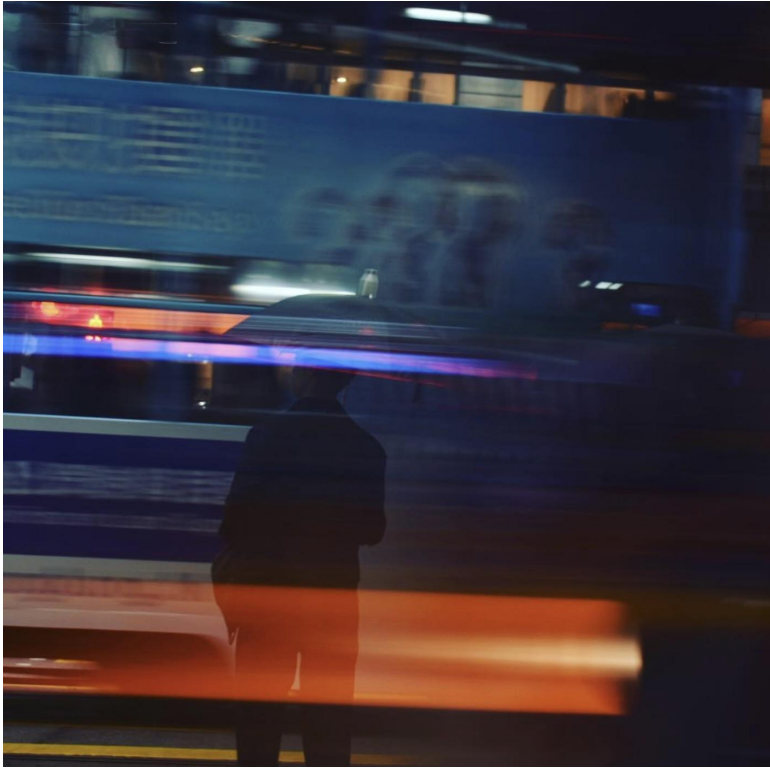
“Now, I’ll turn it over to Army Colonel Paul Manning, who will introduce our time traveler.”

“Thanks, General Woods,” says Manning. A husky man, he rubs his large hands and stares out over the crowd. “I haven’t been this excited since the Army-Navy Game, when I rushed for over two hundred yards.” He chuckles and then continues, “We conducted an extensive search, and found a military officer of the highest caliber, who we feel will be successful in this mission. Before enlisting, he worked as an engineer for five years in Germany and is fluent in the language. This assignment is personal for him: his grandfather fought in the British army during the Second World War and was killed at the Battle of the Bulge, a death that now can be prevented.”

Manning walks across the room and stands next to a metal door. “I’d like to introduce Admiral George Taylor.” He opens the door, revealing a lanky man wearing a gray suit, blue shirt, red tie, and Homburg hat. He strolls to the front of the group.

“Good afternoon, everybody,” says Taylor. “I’m honored to have this opportunity to save the world from evil. I’ve been in the Navy for twenty years, and have sailed all around the world. I’ve seen many places and met lots of people, from my R&R trips to Hong Kong to those wonderful folks in the Seychelles who helped me when I ran my destroyer aground.” He stops, smiles, and then continues, “With this mission, I’ll be making the world a better place. Let’s get started.”

The audience stands and applauds. The three military officers stand at attention, grinning.



“This way, Admiral Taylor,” says Woods, pointing at a blue door. An engineer opens it, revealing a closet-size room. Before going inside, Taylor turns and says, “May God bless us all.” He enters, and the engineer closes the door and says, “General Woods, permission to proceed.”

Woods picks up the handset of a red phone on a table in the corner of the room and says, “Mr. President, permission to execute Project Butterfly.” He hangs up and replies, “Proceed.”

The audience is quiet as a whooshing sound is heard, followed by silence.

The main door to the laboratory opens, and a doctor wearing a white lab coat scurries in and yells, “Stop! Don’t send him!”

“What’s going on?” asks Manning.

“Is he gone?” asks the doctor, glancing around the room.

“Yes, just now,” replies Woods.

“Oh my God, no,” says the doctor.

“What are you saying?” asks Manning.

“Admiral Taylor's COVID test came back positive.”

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Authors

Reena Bhojwani is a wordsmith. She pens children's lit, horror for adults and everything in between. She's currently writing a middle grade novel. For more details, visit:

www.inspiredmusehk.com.

Paola Caronni is an Italian living in Asia for over twenty years. Paola's poems have been published in anthologies and literary journals. Her poetry collection *Uncharted Waters* (2021) won the Proverse Prize and received a grant from the HKADC.

Michael Clement was born and raised in San Diego, California. Since 2006, he has made Hong Kong his home. Now retired, Michael writes science fiction as a hobby and has self-published several books on Amazon. You can find him online via his [Facebook page](#).

Sonia Leung, a Hong Kong-based writer and poet, is the author of *Don't Cry, Phoenix* (2020), a bilingual (English and Chinese) poetry collection. Sonia won awards for both her prose and poetry, including *Wordview* 2023, *Hong Kong's Top Story* 2015 and 2016. Her work has appeared in literary journals and anthologies worldwide (www.soniafleung.com). Sonia's second book, *The Girl Who Dreamed – A Hong Kong Memoir of Triumph against the Odds*, will be available in March 2024. She is exploring publication opportunities for her third book, *Three-inch Heaven*, a collection of personal essays and short stories reflecting Chinese women's lives.

Shivani Sarwal writes romance and women's fiction. She is a fan of investigative journalism and is fascinated by literary fiction. She is currently working on an auto-fiction while pursuing her part-time undergraduate diploma in creative writing at Oxford University.

Artists



Tunnel (cover)
Jan Lee



Untitled
Ricky Sadosa



Just Do Not
Jan Lee



Geoffrey
Sadie Kaye



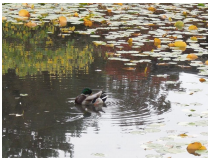
Apparition
Ricky Sadosa



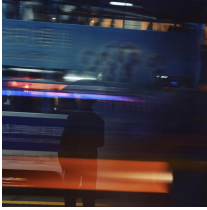
Scratch
Brian Jongseong Park



School of Dragons
Kasra Shroff



Alone
Terence Lao



Transporting
Kasra Shroff



Shadows
Ricky Sadosa

