

ag

ISSUE

ONE IMPERATIVE

(RE) VIEWS

PRODIGAL

By ZHANG JIEQIANG

After three servings of cranberry pork chops, veal marsala, lobster tail, trout with salmon mousse, and rack of lamb, he has already forgotten the taste of viscous slop he had to make himself swallow each night for the past three years. Eating animals sure beats eating with animals.

His brother still refuses to join the feast, and their father has gone out to persuade him. He can anticipate his older brother's oldest arguments: *"All these years, slogging my youth away, and what do I get? The minute he (cue wince) comes back: the fattened calf, and from my pen, no less."*

"My son," their father would say, "you have always been with me, and (all that jazz), but your brother was dead, and now lives, so can't you at least help to finish the champagne? You don't even have to eat the damned calf."

He is alive now to the servants whispering about him, already turning him into the tale of the wastrel son who, had he known better, would never have left his father's house. He was alive then to the danger that if he did not leave, he could turn into his brother.

Cutting into the (*he's sure*) veal marsala, he remembers his brother everyday managing the fields, and the animals, and the funds, and the servants, and the perceptions, and he knew better than anyone he had to ask his father for the money to squander away a life he was dying in—for what shall it profit him, if he shall gain his father's favour, and lose his own soul?

He wonders, as his prodigally grim brother enters the hall with their prodigally patient father, if they would ever understand his prodigal choice: for three years, what he had to invest in were stakes that needed to be real and much too high for his return to even begin to make sense (*and a good story*).



A COLD WINTER'S NIGHT LONG AGO AND AGAIN

By MICHAEL KEARNEY

Remember being 17 with a car?
After spending two hours
holding hands, fingers now tired
from ceaselessly caressing the fingers
of the girl through some hollywood dreck,
finally parked some place dark, drank two beers,
and wondering if the time is right.

Now you know it was the right time. You moved too slow.
Always too slow. You could have done much more.
Why do you think she was there with you? Middle of nowhere,
frozen windows, breath a fog.

Thank god she moved close to keep warm, or things would never have
happened.

Been thinking of touching you between the legs all night.
Been thinking of your hand on me, all night.
I like you, but right now I just want to fondle you.
Do you want to fondle me?

I no longer have such doubts. I know my wife doesn't want to fondle me,
and she could care less if I fondled her. Too much effort, too much the
mother.
Too big a shame, not so old, I still have the desire, but the end is the end.

Now on the first cold night of winter, I think back to you.
That kindness you gave me, your cold smooth hand
stoking me until I shuddered.

After I dropped you off, while driving home,
it was like a magical Christmas Eve
from some sappy movie.
Snow sparkling, crunching under tires,
sky clear, moon blazing, I fucking smiled.
And I never thanked you, though I suppose that would have been stupid:
"hey, thanks for the hand job, it was great."
It's a shame I was taught, as were you, to conceal our lust,
to hide our sex.
Life could have been so much more fun without the morals.

Tonight is the first cold night of winter,
and I am thinking of you.
But not the you who could now very well be dead,
married, twisted, and just as empty of desire as my wife.
But the you from that cold, December night thirty years ago.

Recently, I have reverted to a 15 year old teenager:
A magazine, a fantasy, a jerk-off;
arching down into the bowl, just as Kerouac, I think, described it,
so as not to make a mess, hiding my lust, and flushing my sperm.

Tonight I will be grand.
I will go for a drive, find a place and let loose.
Be damned the stains and be damned the wife.
If she has questions, I will offer no answer.

Middle age, jerking-off, like a 14 year old.
If I had known this, I would have lived a little bit harder,
and a little bit wilder. It is better to end on a cold winter's night
with someone else's hand on your cock,
than to last until forty-something
and go-out as a joke, masturbating in a car on a lonely road.

FRACTIONS

By MICHAEL KEARNEY

Ideas coming while driving;
makes my driving dangerous.

COMPLETE
TOTAL
UNCONDITIONAL
ETERNAL
DEEP

Love for Patrick and Michael.

Intense sadness at not being able to stop time;
that we cannot continue on like this forever;
that we cannot spend every fraction of every second for eternity
together.

Bought Benkirk's double fudge cake,
Because I love them;
Will bring them to Billy's for dinner,
Because I love them;
Intense pain in right thumb whilst writing,
but will keep writing,
Because I love them.

Sometimes we forget we die; what a massive shame;
not because I fear

DEATH
HEAVEN
HELL
THE ABYSS

but because I cannot spend every fraction of every nano-second with
you. My love for you encompasses all; it not only defines me, it is me;
I no longer know the me that was before your existence; perhaps it
was only preparing for you.

I now understand suicides: I did not before you; always thought,
why kill yourself? No matter the conditions, one could just keep going,
suffer through anything, why would one kill them self? After you,
I understand: after having you, the condition of not having you is

INTOLERABLE
INSUFFERABLE
PAIN
ANGUISH

Every fraction of every instant without you, a dread pain rips me apart.

SUICIDE
ALCOHOL
DRUGS
INSANITY

Death of

MIND
HEART
SOUL
FEELING

Non-existence, self-negation, offers a glimmer of escape for the
emptiness that is not being in your presence: I once read, somewhere,
in a bible or a book about nirvana, that Heaven was not a location, but
rather a circumstance: the situation of being in God's presence:

YOU ARE GODS.

(Influenced by reading Howl at Stony Brook, March 14, 2012; thank you Allen)

QUICK GUIDE

By LIM LEE CHING

*first blue dark ripe new fast
big wide dry dumb clean sound
weak white black nice fair long
worst warm flat lush smooth bright
loud tired small brash stiff tame
camp hot drab late tense bad
red short crisp best tough mad
class stale fine dire wise sad
cold soft plain hard top lame
fresh smart proud grave dull light
gold slow pale fun young strong
green sharp rough full good round
dim firm sweet free large last*

Sometimes a show can be too *big* for its own good. Where it displays a *talent* for the *stage*, this piece, which is being performed in accompanying matinee and late-evening performances, feels as if it is pushing too much into a *space*. *It* is not always *easy*.

Yet even with so *many* a profile, the artist feels *drawn* to divisions between the more *traditional*, *as* traditions. Even the cynic will admit they are *not*, as *in* articulation as in *power*, Some of repertoire might be *at* moments, but these performers make it *work*.

Despite its production issues, this is a *revival* of the original. It shows a *talent* at its most *and* has the feel of a *classic*.

On the surface, the show looks like a *treatment* of *integrity*. In true *fashion*, the artist complicates the issue in several ways. And it's a measure of subtlety that we are shown how even the most *art* can be co-opted by the *intentions*.

Much of the intent is *to* the audience, and the atmosphere around the opening suggests that it was ready for something *new*. While its concept has a *resonance*, there's a *inevitability* in the handling of it that makes for *returns*. The difference between conceptual art and theatre may all be in the timing.

The audience had a *time* as the show, brilliantly conveying a shift from *to* with *artists*. The lead, in a *role* in *gear*, pins down the *power* of the establishment.

With *sets* that evoke the *nature* of the setting without actually showing it, this is a production that does *engagement* with the show and makes *of* any suggestion that the artist had sold out.

The artist comes up with some *images*. But the *of* the format means it is *to* explore the *ideas* in depth. In short, the show is too *to* make any *impact*. And, although it is *staged*, it left the audience feeling *rather* than *rather*.

It quickly becomes clear that part of the idea is to use humour to send up some of the *attitudes* still dominant in the art world. So, the pleasures of discipline are extolled, the players get their turn and pretentiousness gets a *kicking*.

What sets this work apart from other others is the *with* which it uses the idiom to circumscribe the agitation. Technically this is a very *cast* but in the end it is *timing* that carry the performance. It has the *and* the *of* a *warmth* that carries the audience with it every step of the way.

CANTONESE IDIOMS

By TAMMY HO LAI-MING

No, you didn't give up
a whole forest for me.
I am not a tree.
I am not even a kind of flora
that nature is willing to keep.

If teeth can be used as gold,
wouldn't everyone melt them
to make jewelry
and replace the teeth
with blue whales' bones?

Four horses, all whipped,
fail to chase after an uttered word.
Who knows if the mammals
have not been drugged
or who they really serve?

A dragon is bullied
by baby shrimps in shallow water.
It should inhale deeply and
breathe those lowly creatures in.
That said, who put the dragon there?

If you deceive someone,
you put her in a sealed drum.
Can you also treat her as a feline
and simultaneously experiment
on the physics of quantum?



TIGHT-FISTED WORDS

(INTEGRATING QUOTATIONS FROM A LITERARY TEXT INTO A LITERARY ANALYSIS)

By JULIE O'YANG

1.

"...The peonies in front of the entrance suggests something splendidly Chinese," spoke Lady Saisho.

"No," I answered, *"now that they dislike me so much, I start to dislike them too."*

"You must try to see the whole thing with a mild eye," she smiled.

Afterwards I went to visit the Empress. I couldn't find out what she really thought about the matter. However, I caught her words when she whispered to the Ladies: *"Well, you know, she is on friendly terms with Minister of the Left and his circle."*

While I was leaving the room, I saw they were busy gossiping. But as soon as they saw me, they stopped talking all of a sudden and everyone went back to work. I was not used to the way they treated me and felt badly hurt. Since the incident, Her Majesty had sent for me several times, and I ignored her requests and didn't visit her again for a long time. Undoubtedly, the Ladies insisted that I belonged to the side of her enemies and they spread all sorts of lies about me.

From *The Pillow Book* by Sei Shōnagon (清少納言), c. 966–1017

2.

It is the nature of the artist to mind excessively what is said about him. Literature is strewn with the wreckage of men who have minded beyond reason the opinions of others.

Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

THE IMPORTANCE OF COLLEGIAL BEINGS

By JEREMY FERNANDO

There is nothing more annoying than a colleague demonstrating that (s) he is trying hard. Except perhaps the colleague that is actually doing so.

For, unless we are completely self-absorbed, we accept that there will always be someone else better than us at whatever we do. What annoys us is when a colleague gets ahead of us not due to the fact that (s)he is better, nor even if (s)he has simulated doing more, but when she actually does more.

And this is precisely the lesson of *The Importance of Being Earnest*: it is all in a name, and nothing more. Regardless of your characteristics, what you can do, etc. your name supersedes everything else. Even though both Algernon Moncrieff and Jack Worthing are perfectly fine men (*or good rascals, depending on your leanings*), Cecily Cardew and Gwendolen Fairfax will have nothing to do with them unless they were appropriately named.

One could read this as a warning about the superficiality of mankind—that one cannot see beyond surfaces, names, brands—but that would be missing the point. It is not that peeling back the layers of illusion reveals a reality; it is that illusions are crucial to reality. We see this in our daily rituals: it is irrelevant whether we mean a good morning to another or not; failure to proclaim it would cause an actual rift in the relationship. What is even worse is if the one receiving the greeting does not respond. For, it is not the content of the response that matters (*one can reply to how's it going? with the exact same thing and all would be fine*), it is the fact that there is a response. In breaking the appearance that we care for our fellow man—that we acknowledge their existence—we potentially rupture the entire relationship. Which is why *“the truth isn't quite the sort of thing one tells to a nice, sweet, refined, girl.”* Whether one believes what one is told is also beside the point: it *“does not affect the wonderful beauty of his answer.”* After all, what is more beautiful, elegant, than a ritual that both parties do not mean; even more so when both partake of it in full knowledge of its artifice.

This is why even though Gwendolen only wants to marry an Ernest, she does not discount Jack even when she discovers that he had hitherto been lying about his name. What is crucial is that he has been keeping up appearances as an Ernest. As Algernon says: *“You look as if your name was Ernest. You answer to the name of Ernest. You are the most earnest-looking person I ever saw in my life. It is perfectly absurd your saying that your name isn't Ernest.”* The fact that Jack eventually discovers that his birth name is Ernest is hardly the point: when he finds out, he exclaims, *“it is a terrible thing for a man to find out suddenly that all his life he has been speaking nothing but the truth.”* The important thing—the thing that brings him together with Gwendolen—is the fact that he is performing the fact that he is Ernest; that he looks like Ernest.

If one plays the game properly in getting ahead, one merely shows that one is trying hard without actually doing so. In actually trying hard, one is not merely showing oneself to be earnest; one is actually being so. Here, one must not forget that the rules of engagement in any office entail a notion of us vs. the management (*or if you're in a hippy mood, the people vs. the man*). Getting ahead by simulated work protects the illusion that we are colleagues, working together; and if one gets promoted, the fault lies with the boss. And thus, we can maintain the collegiality based on the notion that we had hoodwinked the man. Actually trying hard only reveals too clearly—shatters the illusion—that we are actually competitors.

So, even as we all know that getting ahead is always at the expense of a colleague, we need to maintain the illusion that we are all working together. Even if we might actually be trying hard. Especially if we are.

And what is more elegant than demonstrating to the boss that we are working, whilst keeping up the illusion (*to our colleagues*) that we are pulling wool over the man's eyes.

After all, *“in matters of grave importance, style, not sincerity, is the vital thing.”*

PETER AND JANE

By ZHANG JIEQIANG

1A PLAY WITH US

Here is Peter.
Peter is here.

Here is Jane.
Jane is here.

Peter likes Jane.
Jane likes Peter.

3A THINGS WE LIKE

This is Peter and Jane's dog, Pat.
Peter and Jane like Pat.
Pat likes Peter and Jane.

This is Daddy and Mummy.
Daddy and Mummy like Peter and Jane.
Peter and Jane like Daddy and Mummy.

Peter and Jane want to grow up
to become like Daddy and Mummy.
Daddy and Mummy have grown up
reading Peter and Jane.

Look how happy Peter and Jane are.
Look how happy Daddy and Mummy are.

3B BOYS AND GIRLS

There is Pat (a boy,
not the dog).
Pat is there.

Peter likes Pat.
Pat likes Peter.

Daddy and Mummy do not like Peter.
Daddy and Mummy prefer Pat (the dog, most definitely
not the boy).

6A OUR FRIENDS

Jane likes Pat (not a dog).
Pat likes Jane.

If Pat is short for Patrick,
Daddy and Mummy like Jane.
Daddy and Mummy like Pat.

If Pat is short for Patricia,
Daddy and Mummy still prefer the dog.

11A MYSTERY ON THE ISLAND

Daddy and Mummy are fighting.
Do you see them fighting?

Mummy likes the man in the sweet shop.
Daddy would like to become a Jane.

Mummy is leaving Daddy
for the man and his Peter.
Daddy is leaving Mummy
for Patricia, who used to be Patrick.

Daddy and Mummy do not like each other.
Peter and Jane do not like Daddy and Mummy.

12C THE OPEN DOOR TO READING

Here is Pat (the dog).
Pat is here.

Pat never read
Peter and Jane.

Look how happy Pat is.



A CELL PHONE IN JOSHUA TREE

By ELISABETH HOWLAND

AN ADDICTION TO DISTRACTION

By ELISABETH HOWLAND

Every year on October 26th I give myself a birthday present.

One year I went out to the desert and smashed my cell phone with a hammer. The next year, I deleted my Facebook account.

(This is and of itself is a project. De-activating your account, in which all of your data is still saved and accessible the next point you sign in, is available in small print. As for fully deleting your account now, I am not even sure it is possible. Someone who used to work for Facebook told me that They never truly delete anything. This becomes a serious question of security, which for now we may bookmark for a later conversation.)

Of course, there is the question of convenience. For a while I borrowed cell phones like a social smoker. Then there was the time I asked my mother for her Facebook password so I could look up someone's email and browse photos of my ex-fiance's Thanksgiving. It was funny, taking in the information like an illicit controlled substance. But really, that is what information intake should be – controlled.

"This is private space," I said to him as I stood in the doorway. I could tell he wanted to come in. I could also tell that the concept was foreign.

When I was still logged on, he didn't even need an invitation to see photographs of my best friends, nieces and nephews, lovers, or shared adventures. Who needs to have a conversation with someone when you can become their online friend and stalk them from the convenience of your bedroom?

Alas, we are forgetting that the purpose of relationship is not information, but nourishment. 1,462 friends? I think that might classify as socially obese. We are plugging into an era of drive-through soundbite relation, which is at the root of my aversion: it is more of less, and too quick – a recipe for indigestion.

As I sit in the waiting room I leaf through a copy of Wired magazine. Brad Pitt is telling me that it is good etiquette to friend your boss but not your boss' boss. I visualize myself at twelve, crowded with a group of girls in the school cafeteria, ready to venture across the great expanse of tables and trays with a note of noble import.

Do you like me? *(Circle Yes or No)*

Do you want to be my friend?

There was a point where we got down on one knee to declare love. When people risked their lives to see the wonders of the world, and those who didn't relied on the capacity of travelers to tell good stories. We participated as a community, which involved going somewhere, sharing space, and being present – making eye contact.

Do not be deceived; relation is collaboration.

We start talking, about the weather, perhaps, or the book you're reading – conversation whose purpose is disarming. But there is a spark of sorts, some bit of energy that is interesting. As the moment reaches its impending ending, I ask for your address.

Ah! Yeah, drop me a line, Brian dot Smith at

Postal, I specify. Like a mailbox you can put a postcard in.

You glance up, we make eye contact, and you mentally review the risks of letting me know where you live. Do I trust this woman? Is she a terrorist? Will she send me an envelope filled with Anthrax?

At the same time, you're intrigued. Will she really send me a postcard? Did she notice I'm wearing a wedding ring?

You pull out a business card, or a receipt; you scribble some information down, then hand it to me, saying, Yeah, be in touch sometime.

I smile, and shrug; I like stamps.

Line up the print: making eye contact.

Do you still want to be my friend?

So, coming back from distraction, convenience, and digital depression, I found I didn't quite have the 454 friends I thought I did. That people don't really call as often once they know they're dialing a house phone with an answering machine and potential roommates. It's same syndrome, I believe, that has all of us doing self-checkout and avoiding social contact with everyone from bank tellers to neighbors. Which is truly ironic, that we would rather have fake friends than real acquaintances. It is evidence of much fear.

Fear.

That is, of course, the number one rationalization of all digital correspondence. What if there is an emergency? What if you get lost? There is a degree of truth to such things, but there are some situations where taking such a risk – having faith in your capacities and the environment that surrounds you – is precisely the point. There is something slightly less epic to surmounting Everest with a handy in your backpack, even if it doesn't get good reception up there.

So what do you do when you want to share the news?

(Hey Mom, guess what? I just climbed Everest!)

I've begun to notice pay phones. What wonderful inventions! Public communication. I like them so much that I occasionally take pictures of them. They're going out of style now, under-used and unfunded. Almost like public sculpture, relics of a past when we stopped to ask for directions and occasionally had to take a lift from strangers. And granted, it's 4 quarters for just a few minutes, but hey, it can be a lifeline sometimes.

I invite you –

just take a moment,
give yourself a moment;

imagine
you're on vacation
empty pockets
no buzzing ringing singing

silence

Then open a real door. Look around. Make a new friend.

...

A few years later and now I am equipped with both a new cell phone and a pseudonym for my Facebook account. The compromises were a result of situation and desire – I moved overseas and maintaining relationships, which is what all communication comes down to, required, or at least requested, different forms of contact. Basically my family did not jive with the writing letters thing. And then there was the whole accessibility and employment bit.

But I remember the days when I did not have a cell phone fondly. For a while during that time I was living on my friend's houseboat in Seattle, and there were rainy afternoons where I would walk 30 minutes with a calling card in hand on a mission to connect with a friend. If the connection did go through, it was a true gift. It was nourishment, a voice in the rain.

Now my internal nourishment comes from the times I choose to unplug. At a certain point in the day or night, I turn my phone off, and often don't turn it on again well into the next morning. When I do, it is almost like going outside, or going to work – it is opening the door, being ready to receive.

With Facebook I continue to be more or less averse to the way in which people display themselves. It is fun, once in a while, like going out to a bar, but it seems that people are increasingly becoming performances of themselves. Almost every shared event is recorded for immediate uploading, and what one's status update is going to be can set the tune to our entire mental conversation. It also contributes to FOMO, the Fear Of Missing Out syndrome. And all those events that you said you were going to...did you really? A bottom line, it is shot after shot of information, and not all of it from a reputable source.

People that I do not know ask me to be their friend; when I send them a message to ask who they are, they do not respond. Does this make sense? So what did this person want, really?

On a certain level, it all comes down to being in the flow – and Facebook is a version of that. When we are online and plugged in, we are being inundated with the flow of global information. But unless we are sailing a boat with good sails, and more importantly, unless we know how to sail, then we are at risk of being tossed around out at sea. This is the difference, between getting distracted and being in the flow.

The thing to remember amongst all of this is that the flow also happens offline. It happens the moment you get out of your head and look around. It happens the moment you walk out the door. It is the moment – that is the flow – constantly renewing itself.

What is more, these tangible moments, the times you decide to go on a walk or sit on a park bench, and let the flow be a part of you, do not carry the residue of distraction. What they do, really, is begin to teach you a little bit about meditation.

In the free-for-all that is the online world these days, it is very easy to become confused about our needs and our wants, because everything is theoretically within reach. In the physical world, however, we are only given what we need. We may search out more, of course, but we are only given what we need.

So try it sometime. The next time your internet goes out, take it as a gift, and go out yourself – go let yourself be found. And when you're calling a friend, and they're just not responding, or your battery dies, don't freak out. Trust. Trust that you have everything you need. Trust that person next to you to let you borrow their phone. Trust that you will be taken care of. Let the sun shine.

If you really want to go off the deep end, try writing a letter. Send it, and you might actually receive one. Trust me when I tell you, it is not the same as email.

And, if you ever do get the desire to go out into the desert and smash your phone, I highly recommend it. Pick a spot with good lighting, and make sure you aim for the center of the screen. Then take a swing; let your chains be broken.

rsvp: vidabierta

DYED HER HAIR, HAD HER EARS PIERCED

By SETSUKO ADACHI

Dyed her hair, had her ears pierced.

For her this is fashion. Something she wanted to enjoy.
For her there is no sense of guilt, no sense of protest,
and no sense of rebelling associated with doing this.

Her great grandmother, who has gone senile, she is ninety-four,
comments, *“I like the color of your hair”* to A, a young woman of sixteen.
It infuriates A’s grandmother sixty-eight,
“That is a terrible thing to say, Mother! A is ruining her natural beauty!”

“Hey, what a good girl like you doing dying your hair!”
—was the first greeting from her teacher who spotted A from far away.
You can hear in the voice of the teacher, he was her homeroom teacher,
that he was genuinely excited and happy to see her when he yelled these
words over to her. A just smiles and says: *“I dyed it.”*

A had a wonderful time in junior high as a student in the school and
maintains sound connections with her friends and teachers from there.
A knows dying her hair and pierced ears are signs of *“bad”* for the
teachers of that school; some kids would use that, change hair colors
(not so much of piercing ears), to be bad and to show their anger. A is
free from that binary though. A kind of understands it is a public school
that reflects government policy and national ideology: teachers have to
abide by them. As a student there A was an affable girl and enjoyed the
reputation for high academic aptitude. A’s teacher was so disappointed
when A chose to go to an international school for high school: *“You could
have made it into any of the top high schools in Japan.”*

A never bothered to dye her hair or pierce her ears then. These were not
worthwhile things to do; going through all the conflicts of being good
and bad? No. A chooses her fashion: and to have her hair dyed, ears
pierced, are only a few of many options. She does not have to do them. A
does not need to get caught up in the emotional good/bad of the school
and does not have the desire to be approved for being *“bad.”*

Dyed her hair, had her ears pierced.

Junior high school teachers and her grandmother, in their loving way
and from the goodness of their hearts accuse A as if she has let herself
be taken by a demon; they are truly concerned about A’s behavior, her
future and the right path she needs to take. The demon from somewhere
outside is giving her bad influence and they want her stay inside their
domain where it is good and safe. They are displaying unintended yet
evident and very forceful meanness, familial and societal, to the outside.

Teachers and her grandmother missed one thing though, the demon is
A’s mother, B. B’ does not desire to shut A up inside. B does not want A
to be buried in the system of confining her children inside. Studying for
entrance exams have become the ultimate objective of the lives of too
many public junior high school students in the area. They are obsessed
with them and with the obsession any interest that were there for
them outside the realm of entrance exams are quenched, are killed. No
studying for entrance exams, says B, because B sees entrance exams as
the production factory of introverted unintentional mean beings.

Being inside, B found herself wasted. B danced around the riddle,
*“we (insiders) need to change because we need to be able to compete with the
force outside and that is the only way to make sure nothing changes inside.”* B
ultimately wants inside be changed; thus, B is to be eliminated.

Even worse is the fact that B will not be able to exist outside; B is not
good enough, to cite the criticism of her good friend, B is not *“educated.”*
B dreams of a body hanging in the office with a white shiny vinyl rope
wrapped around a neck.

Go on escape.

Dye your hair, have your ears pierced.

Beautiful Lies

By PAOI WILMER

I

'Don't try to stop me,' I heard myself say in a sad voice that sounded too melodramatic even at a time like this. The warm breeze touched my face, reminding me that life could be good. I always knew that life could be good, I've felt those moments and cherished them, but it was knowing that life could also turn bad very quickly that I worried about the most. Obviously, you don't have to worry about life when it's good, but when it's good it's a certainty that it's going to go bad soon, nothing good stays forever; so when life is good you have to consider what you will do when it starts to get shitty again. I looked at the crawling people on the pavement below and wondered – If I coloured the happy ones in blue and the unhappy ones in red which would be the majority?

'I'm not going to try and stop you,' Ching said, 'but on the way down don't blame me.' Yes, I am choosing this, I thought to myself, but was I the only one choosing when we got married? Did I choose you or did you choose me? Weren't you the one to call me up night after night, didn't you tell me that you would die without me, hadn't you threatened to kill any man who looked at me for a second too long? How can you suggest that I made this mistake on my own? Twenty years of marriage has meant nothing to you; to think that I'd refused to believe my mother when she said, 'The only thing that men won't eat on the sly is shit.' Was I so stupid to think that I had to marry the first man I slept with? Could it be true that pebbles didn't get smaller along the beach? Even so, it was too late now. I have to decide what to do next.

'I love you,' I said choking on a syrupy sentiment, 'if you leave her I'll take you back.'

'Why do you have to make me choose?' he sighed, 'I keep telling you that my feelings for her are different from the ones I feel for you. She can't take that away, no one can. You bring me peace and calm, I don't want to lose that. But she brings me energy and excitement that you can't give anymore. I love you both equally, can't you understand that?'

No, I had to admit that I did understand to some degree. If I could maybe I would turn back time too so that I could feel the urge to love and the lust to achieve burning in my veins again. I would find myself a young man so that I could taste what I'd missed. But nature used my time-worn face and tired body to ensure that such a renewal was unlikely. My only hope had been that one man, who is a living memory of the youthful me, would stay by my side and invoke the past to ease the pain of aging. I chose him above all else and against all odds, yet he had finally betrayed me. I knew that I only had myself to blame, so I didn't look at him again before stepping into thin air.

II

Before I hit the ground, I woke up.

'Are you awake?' Ching mumbled.

'Yes,' I replied, 'why?'

'You were moving so much you woke me up,' he said.

'Oh,' I had to think for a bit, 'I was having a nightmare.'

'Okay,' he said affectionately and hugged me. 'Don't be scared, I'm here.'

Before I'd decided whether I wanted to tell him about the nightmare he'd fallen asleep again, and before long his quiet breathing sent me back to my dreams.

III

I heard birdsong seconds before I was actually awake. Something heavy quickly seized my heart before it could soar into the morning sunshine. I didn't turn around in bed but lay facing the window. My lipsticks stood together on the window sill next to a group of perfumes; stacked next to these were my blusher, compact and eyeshadow; and even though I couldn't see them from where I was, I knew that my eyeliner, eyebrow pencil and eyelash curler were arranged neatly in that order. Four jewellery boxes were silhouetted haphazardly against the sunlight – they weren't arranged according to size but according to content. The first two boxes were roughly the same size, one was made of porcelain and the other lacquer, they contained my necklaces and earrings respectively. Like most women, I always liked necklaces and often received them as presents, but I couldn't really wear them because they tickled my collarbones and made me want to laugh for no reason. Earrings were a problem for me too because I couldn't just buy any nice ones, my ears are allergic to most metals except for gold and silver. The biggest and oldest box was made of ebony, Ching and I had bought that in Ghana on our honeymoon, and it contained all my bracelets. Of all the different types of jewellery, I loved bracelets the most and hence had more of them than anything else. I liked rings too, but these were in the smallest box because, being so meaningful, I didn't own many. In the Murano box, made in a sleepy Italian village, I had three rings. My mother gave me a ring of pure gold on my twenty-first birthday, I inherited Ching's mother's wedding ring when she died, and the third ring was my own engagement-wedding ring. Because we were struggling to make ends meet when we married, I suggested that we save on the engagement ring and have a small diamond set in the wedding ring to make it symbolically an engagement ring too. Ching never forgave me for convincing him.

I stuck my hand out to turn the alarm clock round, a few more minutes and it would go off. Dennis gave a snort that told me he was still fast asleep. Should I let the alarm ring or should I just switch it off and get up? Why do you insist on setting the alarm, Dennis asked me when he moved in to look after me permanently a couple of years ago, you're retired you know and it's actually bad for your health. True, I didn't need to go to work anymore, but I still needed some kind of order and routine to my life. If the alarm went off he was more likely to get up, if it didn't, he would sleep undisturbed and could continue till noon as he had done on too many occasions. I don't think I'll ever understand how anybody can sleep for more than 8 hours a night; when I was still working, 4 hours was plenty, now 6 hours was more than enough. If I slept any later I was bound to wake up with aches and pain all over my body, which was no good to anybody least of all to myself. Ching thought 4 hours was a little extreme, but he never made a fuss about my late nights and always got up with me at the crack of dawn. We'd sit with our cups of tea at the window seat and smile at each other as the sun rose. I felt annoyed at myself for habitually comparing them; after all I'd chosen Dennis precisely because he was nothing like Ching. One was tall and dark and neat; the other was short and chubby and hairy. Surely, a fifty-year-old man can be forgiven for getting soft around the waist, and only a cruel person would deny this man his happiness at having excessive body hair when he'd lost most of it on his head. While Ching and I liked to keep a spotless house, whether we'd used the microwave or not he wiped it down once a week and I compulsively picked hair off the bathroom floor; Dennis couldn't even remember to rinse the sink after shaving and his socks played hide and seek with me.

How time flies! There were definitely more freckles on my hand than I remembered since the last time I looked. I quickly made a mental note to pick up a more moisturizing handcream, the age-defying one was great for the wrinkles on the top of my hands but it did nothing for my nails which looked distinctly dry around the cuticles. Why haven't they come up with a procedure for rejuvenating hands? Was there any point in having face-lifts and boob-jobs when the rest of your body exposed its dirty little secret at every opportunity? Yet plastic surgery was certainly as addictive as the elixir of life would have been if it had been discovered. There comes a time in everyone's life when they no longer ask to look as they did at seventeen, because that would be expecting too much, but they look at a photograph from the year before and think, 'You know, if only I could look that bit younger now I'd be happy.' I would recommend plastic surgery to anyone because I know that the saying 'you are as old as you feel' is a lie, yet even in my wildest dreams I would never have guessed that one day aging gracefully would be all about aging youthfully – if that's not too much of an oxymoron – there is a constant struggle against decay.

Ching and I were so well-matched I didn't think something as trivial as money would come between us. Since we were seventeen, I knew that I was going to help him succeed in whatever he chose to do. His mind was like an airport where big and small plans for the future took off and landed on runway tracks. There was nothing that he left to chance, and everything that he plotted with laborious study as well as precise timing turned out exactly as he intended. He managed to attend all his classes, study in the library for three hours, have dinner with me and then sneak off to do a month's night shift so that he could take me to Italy for my twenty-first birthday. When he grew dissatisfied with maths, which had fascinated him with its calculative preciseness, he re-trained in medicine as a psychiatrist. Since his parents couldn't help him with the tuition fees, we worked as auxiliary nurses to make ends meet. From the very beginning, he had planned for us to get married when we were 24, a couple of years after graduation when we'd save a bit of money; but because he was studying again we didn't have enough money for the wedding he had in mind. I really didn't care about how we were married because I loved him, but even though I could see that it distressed him I didn't know how to help without throwing more spanners in his plans. The only thing that I suggested and insisted on was the combined rings.

Many years later, when he'd made his first million and we were still childless, the ring turned into the biggest spanner I could've created. Children had always been a part of his plans, so understandably he was very disappointed when nothing worked for us. Apparently, there was nothing wrong with either of us, but every IVF course ended in miscarriages. We bought a huge house with six bedrooms; we bought a BMW hatchback in preparation; we even hired a nanny for a few days trial. Ching and I sat by the window day after day and year after year in hope until one morning, not long before his fiftieth, he told me that he had new plans and I no longer fitted into any of them. I couldn't believe he'd told me that at the last moment when it must've taken him months if not years to plan. I remember that it was a bright winter's day, and like every other day the hope in my heart had risen with the sun. My tea steamed up the window and I had to stop myself from drawing a big heart on it.

'You can have the house,' he said stiffly without looking at me. I was startled again because we so rarely spoke at this time of the day; it was when his thinking was at its clearest and he didn't appreciate interruption. I turned my head toward him for a second without saying anything. 'You can have the house and half the savings.' I couldn't be sure about what he was suggesting. 'You deserved that engagement ring. You can have the house and half the savings,' he repeated again, 'I owe you this much at least. It's not working, we can't make it work.' Make what work? By any body's standards, we had a wonderful life and the most harmonious marriage. We never raised our voices at each other, we went on holidays at least twice a year, we even had pleasant sex regularly. Nothing was amiss. All these years, everything he put in order I kept it so. Hadn't we been happy?

IV

I watched him walk into the bathroom naked and wondered what his appeal was to me; his saggy cheeks swayed like an old woman's breasts. But, in a few minutes, he would come out dressed for work and then I would remember why. Still, I squeezed my pert breasts and thanked God that they were so perfect. Didn't he say that there was nothing he loved more than my body? And if he meant that literally I couldn't blame him for being right, as there were enough men who took my body with their eyes. I laid back to think about the colour of my lipstick for the day. The scarlet one was going off a bit, the last time I put it on it tasted like stale oil. He was always asking me to wear pink, saying it suits my age, but who wants to be 18 forever? I can't wear my real ruby necklace without a matching lipstick. Men are so annoying: they're always making you do one thing when they're thinking of something else. What was the point of giving me ruby jewellery if he wanted me to wear pink all along? I got out of bed and took the necklace from my ebony box. I put it on standing in front of the mirror and, for good measure, I also took out the red hibiscus ring from my lacquered ring box. It was an impulse buy from a stall in Pataya two years ago. When he walked out of the bathroom and frowned, I decided that I was going to wear the scarlet lipstick, expired or not.

V

The alarm beeped in my ear causing me to jump out of bed. Had I really fallen asleep again and dreamt in the space of three minutes? Was that really how Ching looked now at seventy? And how could that woman be me? Unlike any other dream before, this one tried to plague me for the rest of the day. It wasn't the first time I had such a vivid dream; in fact, I've had them all my life. When I was an adolescent not only did I have up to twenty dreams per night I would also remember them in great detail the next morning. Sometimes the dreams were linked, sometimes they were sequels on consecutive nights, but more often than not they were unrelated to each other and sometimes outright opposites. I could have a dream where I was a fish and then have another one straightaway where I was a bird; I even dreamt once that I was a whale gliding along in the sky enjoying the breeze on my skin. I've woken up crying, laughing and even spitting. In one particular dream I had been an angry toddler threatening to smack another toddler if she didn't return my toy. I got even more furious when my mother told me off for not sharing, so in an act of pure fury I spat at them both. The spit that landed on my face woke me up; it made me very ashamed of myself. I also had a very sad dream about my father once. I never met him because he died when I was too young to remember, but I knew from my mother's bitter memories that he was a heartbreaker. When most people had to work for a living, my father had the luxury of drifting from one office job to another wearing his brilliantly starched cotton suits. Looking the way he did was no easy task because the smallest task could dirty his clothes and he would have to change it. So, he searched for the dirtiest job, which turned out to be doing-nothing. My father orbited his town like a happy sun, blinding on a clear day and shining through on a cloudy one. He was a very pleasant man who, understandably, was very content with life. He laughed easily and was generous about he had; his parents almost suspended him from school because all he did in class was give away his possessions. When I met him in my dream he'd squatted down to my level and in a smiling voice told me that nothing in this life was ours to keep. I wanted to prove him wrong. As I was a teenager then and we were growing tomatoes in our science class, I decided to grow him something special. My plant sprang up in all its hairy beauty and soon started to nurse one huge red tomato. I still can't describe my joy and excitement as I watched it grow and grow. To my delight one morning, I looked out the window and saw my father examining it. I sprinted out of the house to tell him that it was a present for him but, just before I reached him, I tripped and promptly squashed the tomato. My father leapt backward, but was too slow to avoid the red juice that spurted all over his white suit. My mother had told me that his best quality was never saying anything nasty despite any kind of provocation, but when he looked at me that morning his anger was so intense it didn't need words. I burst out crying and woke up in bed with a wet pillow.

It is my duty that if you don't want to dream about something you should think about it as much as you can before falling asleep, that way it exhausts your mind of the subject so you won't linger on it in sleep. That was what I did as a child when I was afraid of having a nightmare. If I'd read a ghost story and was worried that I might have nightmares I'd lie in bed thinking about ghosts until I fell asleep. Of course, this method wasn't foolproof but it seemed to work most of the time. This was just as well because, try as I did, I could not stop thinking about Ching and his mistress. At bedtime, Dennis wondered if I was well enough for sex but I told him I was too sleepy, and afterwards laid there listening to him snore till the early hours.

VI

'You know what the funny thing is? I wasn't even born when you started college.'

'You know what an even funnier thing is? I could've had a baby at college and she could've been your wife.' I looked at him and felt a gurgle at the back of my throat. It was all so wrong and yet had the potential to be funny. Who would've thought that I would be dating a twenty-year-old in my forties! His mother would be furious if she found out; I was already feeling a little furious with myself for his mother's sake.

'Nah,' he replied confidently, 'I wouldn't have found her exciting. She would've taken me home and I would've still fallen in love with you.'

'If you didn't like her why would you agree to go home with her?' I asked, feeling a little annoyed even though I wasn't sure why. Was I angry that he was going to hurt my would-be daughter? Or was I annoyed at how much of a man he was to go home with a woman when he was so ready to fall in love with another.

'I'd just be hanging out with her, wouldn't I?' he laughed as his eyes swept the room. Again, I had two explanations for the way he constantly looked around him – either he was so nervous he didn't want to meet my gaze or he had the bad habit of checking out all the women in a given space.

'Ching,' I said seriously, 'you don't have to do this. I love you more than you can imagine, but you're young and your future is like a runway stretching wide and clear ahead of you. Why have you chosen me? I have nothing to offer you except money.'

I looked at my image in the mirror above the fireplace and for a second surprised myself with my youthfulness. I would give my plastic surgeon a piece of my mind at our next appointment! How dare he accuse me of neglect? 'Aren't you worried that your parents might find out?'

There was a long silence before he said hotly, 'How's that gonna happen?'

Hitler's a shithead who's been locked up for killing my mom!' He opened his face and burst into tears. Who would've guessed that this fully-grown man was actually still a child? One minute he was so strong only the happiness that the world required of him showed through, but the next minute his carefully placed barriers gave way to a sorrow that most people couldn't even begin to comprehend. I held him to my chest and in the mirror it looked like an older sister comforting her younger brother, but in my heart I knew that it was a mother holding her child.

'Ching,' I held her child. A strangely familiar voice was calling my name too, but I ignored it as I shook the deadening weight in my arms. I looked around desperately – where was the waiter and where was everyone? 'Ching, wake up!' He started to stir and I let out a cry of joy. He opened his bright eyes and looked at me for a few seconds, I frantically kissed his forehead. 'How can I bear to lose you,' I mumbled in a panic. Suddenly, the mirror caught my eye; it began to ripple gently like a piece of silk in the breeze. Ching's eyes closed again and he gave a relaxed sigh like he'd fallen into a deep sleep. I looked down and didn't see the familiar wrinkles of his frown, the frown that told me he was willing his life and mine into order. I looked at the glowing mirror again. Who are you? I asked with no voice.

I am joy, it replied without a sound.