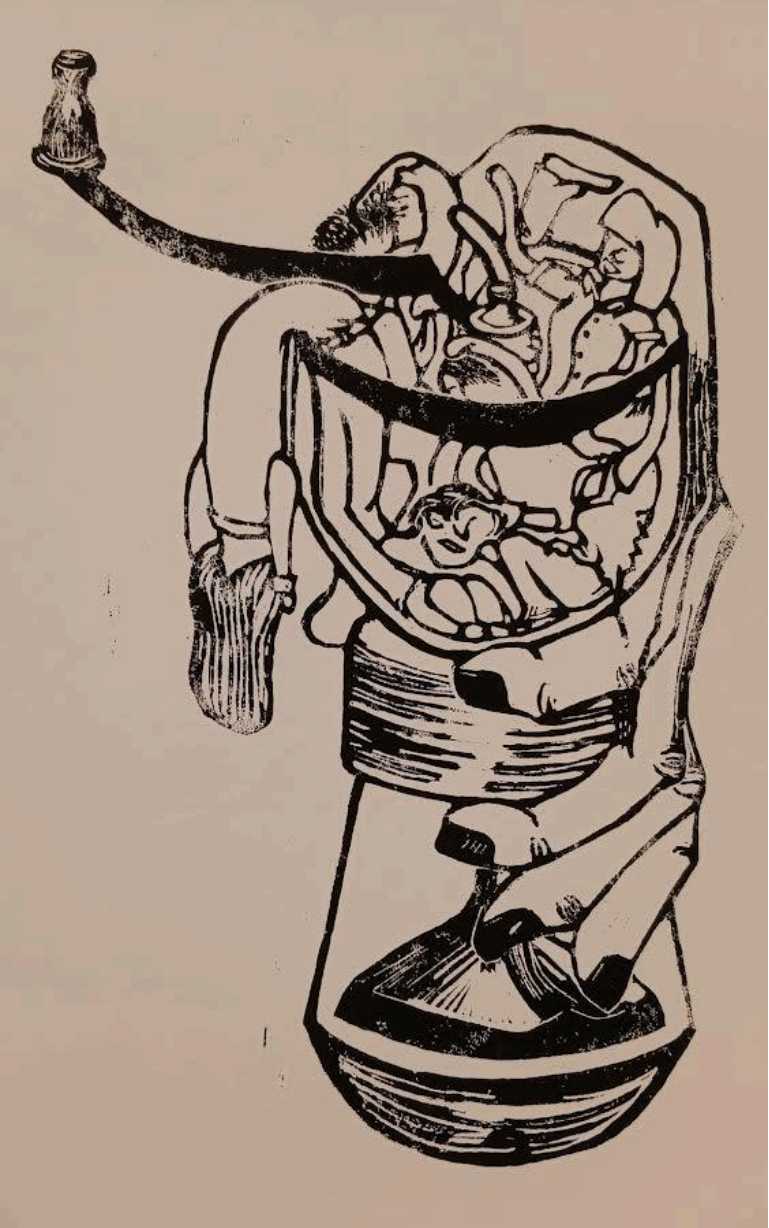


The Apostrophe

Issue 5 | Q2/2024 | Food



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

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It's not even about the food

Editor's Note



Necessities create complexities. We need water to survive; Ganges River pilgrimages and the Hoover Dam exist. We need sex to reproduce; millions of years later, “It’s complicated!” shows up on Facebook as a relationship option. We need food to fuel our very existence; deep-fried Twinkies, stinky tofu, and kale smoothies compete for our attention.

But in this fifth issue of *The Apostrophe*, it is clear that it’s not even about the food.

Food in writing is, above all, a metaphor for human emotions, for the constraints we place upon ourselves (or that are placed on us), and for our perspectives on every other part of life.

In *A Fistful of Feet*, global tragedy and family relationships are transformed by food. *Tomato Heart* is about anything but tomatoes (for the record: sun-dried tomatoes are delicious, and I’m not sure I want to live in a world without them). Meanwhile,

the savor of plum and the aroma of coffee are only alluded to in the mystical dawn of *5:45 AM in Kennedy Town*. In *Delhi Belly*, biology competes with identity upon the battlefield of the table. And in *Written in the Stars*, it is man's hubris that renders him food for the fishes.

One of the ways we celebrate food is by exploring the many ramifications of its place in our lives. It is when the outcome surprises us that we know our journey is a success.

Jan Lee, Editor-in-Chief

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A Fistful of Feet

Rinkoo Ramchandani

Tonight, Jane Chan will break the law for the first time. She opens her shoe cabinet and wonders which of her ballet flats is most appropriate when planning to commit a felony. She selects the plain, black pair from the dozen that are lined up on the shelf. She glances at herself in the mirror in the hallway one more time and concludes that she looks decidedly unmemorable in her jeans and gray crewneck. At four foot eleven and weighing a hundred pounds, she might easily be dismissed, but doing so would be a mistake. Jane sweeps her palms down her straight, shoulder-length hair once more as if to confirm every strand is in its place. Then, she fishes out her house keys from the crystal bowl and leaves.

The subway is close by and the ride to New York's Chinatown short. Jane hasn't dined there since her parents died over five years ago. So much has changed since then, but not Chinatown. She is glad her parents didn't live to see what happened, and the path Jeffery subsequently chose.

Four years ago, yet another global pandemic struck, and this time wiped out nearly ten percent of the world's population. Much like the others, it originated in the wildlife trade. As memories of the pandemic before that one were still fresh, it was enough to propel the Green Party to power, which then outlawed the use of all products derived from animals. Price-gouging and hoarding of remaining stocks gave way to violent protests, until the country descended into an uneasy acceptance.

Jane arrives at the Canal Street subway station and walks for a few minutes to the address on her phone. At any other time, she would have been sure it was wrong, but she has heard that *eateasies* are hidden behind unmarked doors or legitimate businesses even. Jeffery's text is clear:



Look for the brown door halfway down this alley, a back exit to a walk-up. Third floor, unit B. Ask for me.

Jane arrives at the door and hesitates. Is she really going to do this? Eateasies, initially called Underground Restaurants, began sprouting up soon after the new law had passed. Not wasting any time, opportunists and entrepreneurs set up these illicit dining clubs and their supply chains all over the city. There were whispers that one could find eateasies for every possible cuisine, from tandoori chicken in the folds of Little India to classic New York style pepperoni pizza tucked away in the corners of SoHo. Operating under extreme secrecy, getting a table or a fresh cut of meat is nearly impossible for the average New Yorker, unless you know a guy. And Jane knows a guy.

She takes a deep breath and knocks twice. No answer. She knocks again and waits for a longer time. Wondering if she has the right address, she pulls out her phone to text Jeffery when the door opens, held ajar with the chain on.

“What?” A man peers from the crack and asks in Cantonese.

“Uh, hi,” she says. “I’m here to meet Jeffery.” Nowadays she only speaks in Cantonese with an elderly aunt, and the words feel foreign in her mouth.

The man lets her in. The room is empty except for a few folding chairs up against a wall. The windows are boarded over and the only source of light is a solitary bulb. He tells Jane to wait here and leaves through a back door. Jane waits for a few minutes, then takes out a packet of tissues from her handbag and wipes down one of the chairs. Just as she sits down, the inside door opens and a different man tells Jane to follow him.

They walk down a narrow corridor, as basic as the waiting room. Before opening the door at the end of the hallway, he tells her to hand over her cell phone. He lets her in after she complies.

The scene is what Jane had imagined: no more than a dozen folding tables packed with diners crowded in a small room, without table dividers. The sound of melamine dishes clacking as wait staff buzz around small spaces clearing tables and taking orders, and patrons compete to be heard. On one end of the room is a counter with a pane of plexiglass separating the makeshift kitchen from the eating area. Chunks of barbecued meat hang from hooks above the counter, and the chef cooks in a small space behind the display. For a moment, the smells transport Jane to the *cha chaan tengs* her mother used to take her and Jeffery to after school on Fridays for *wonton mein*. Jane hasn’t smelled or eaten meat since the new law had passed, and now the heavy odor of death hangs in the air, assaulting her.

Across the room, she spots Jeffery. She smiles and walks over, unsure how to greet her estranged brother after two years.

“Hi, Jeffery,” she says.

Jeffery smiles back at his baby sister and leans in for a half-hug, surprising her. His dimples are more pronounced than Jane remembers.

“Thanks for coming, sis,” he says. “To be honest, I wasn’t sure you would.”

“I almost didn’t,” she says, then pauses. “But I wanted to see you and, well, I suppose there was some curiosity on my part about all of this.” She gestures to the room.

Jeffery smiles again as they both sit down at the small, corner table. He is tall and gaunt, his boyishness replaced with a leathery, worn face that makes him look older than his years.

“They do have food I can eat too, right?” Jane asks.

“Yeah, sure!” He says. “Ah Wing serves everything you would have found at a Cantonese restaurant and more, but here we pre-order, so I took the liberty.”

She nods. After a pause, he tells her that she looks good.

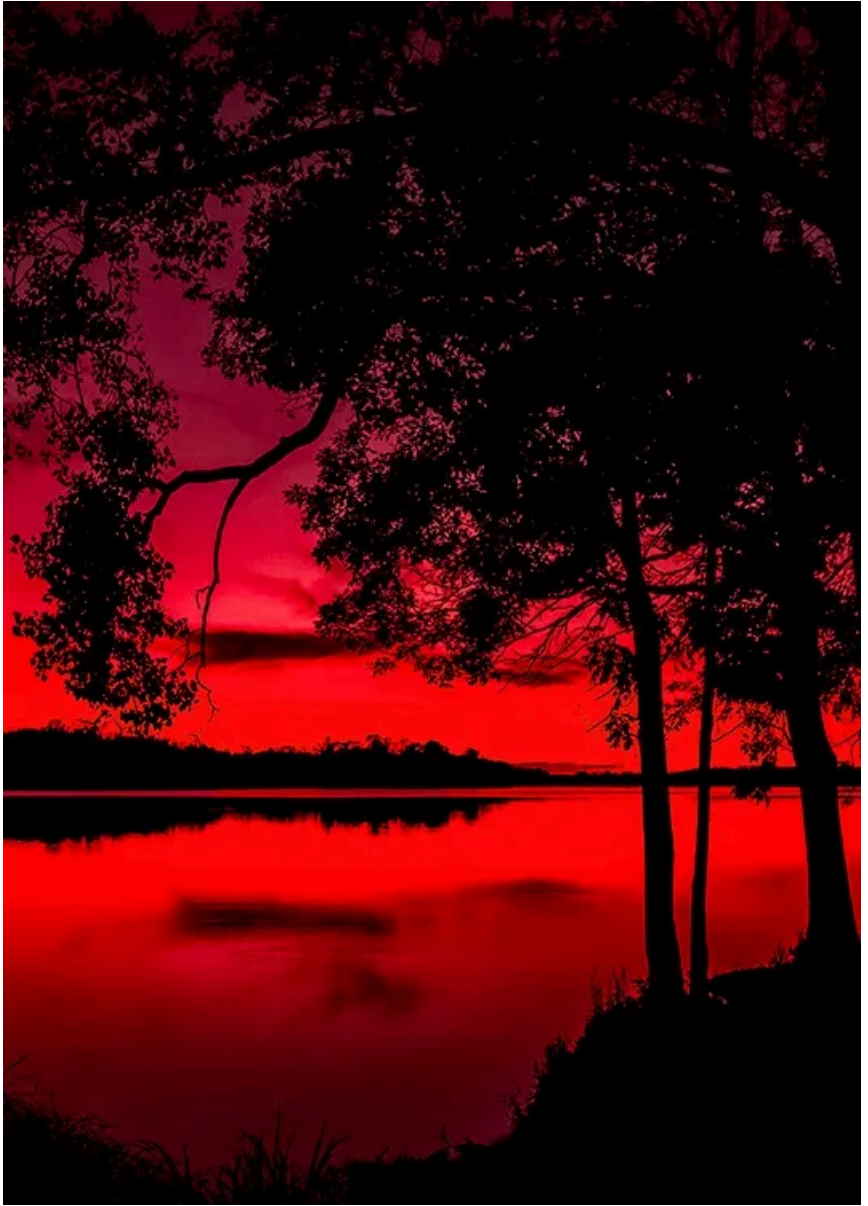
“Thank you,” she says. “I’m afraid I can’t return the compliment. You’re all skin and bones. Have you been ill?”

“I was for a while ... yeah,” he starts. “But I’m better now, so let’s not talk about that. Tell me. How’ve you been these past couple of years?”

Jane tells him a little about her job, her recent promotion at the Midtown company where she works as an accountant. She talks for a while about their cousins and other extended family and friends. She realizes she is chatting more than usual. Jeffery listens without interruption and smiles intermittently. She tells him how cranky Uncle Henry’s been getting in recent years, and they both laugh.

Then she asks him when he got back into the city.

“You mean when did I get out of prison?” He asks. “A couple of months ago.”



It wasn't a prison, Jeffery," she says, immediately regretting it. "I'm sorry, please continue."

"No, no, that's okay," he says, barely audible. "I want to hear what you think it was."

"Jeffery, it was a rehabilitation program on a farm."

He inhales deeply as if he is doing his breathing exercises, then says, "They shipped us up-country for 'empathy training,'" Jane has to strain to hear the words. "Like cattle on a truck! We lived with and cleaned up after pigs and chickens, never being able to eat any of them. They made us watch videos of slaughterhouses over and over and tried to brainwash us."

The pungent smell of meat mixed with sweat is overpowering now, and Jane struggles to breathe. She wonders how difficult it would be to yank out one of the slabs of wood to crack open a window. She stares at the panel closest to her, then looks back at Jeffery, bracing herself for this conversation. "You knew the law and flouted it anyway," she says. "You went about your business as if nothing had changed, but everything had!" Jeffery shakes his head as she speaks, and looks away.

"I'm not doing this again," he says and continues to shake his head. "I'm not having this conversation with you." Like many families, the siblings are divided on the approach and adoption of the stringent measures.

They stop speaking just as the food arrives. First comes the *char siu*, then beef balls and *choi sum*, followed by the rest. Jane looks at the wood ear mushrooms with tofu skin and is thankful Jeffery remembered her favorite. They eat in silence for a few minutes. She tries not to look at Jeffery's bamboo baskets and plates but cannot resist. He has ordered all the same foods he used to at the family dinners many years ago. Her eyes linger on the *char siu* in particular – the glossy film, succulent pieces of flesh on top of the pink gelatinous layer with its sweet, heady aroma. She chews

on the tofu skin without expression. It smells milky, and she wonders if it's fresh; she decides that she cooks it better at home. She looks at the *char siu* again as Jeffery tears into it, not realizing she's watching him eat. The room doesn't feel stuffy anymore, as Jane relaxes surrounded by her childhood comfort foods, even if she can't eat them.

"Do you miss it?" Jeffery asks, as if reading her mind.

"No!"

"Right," he says, picking up a perfectly round beef ball. Jeffery puts away a lot for a man his size. It's as if he doesn't know when he will be able to eat like this again.

Finally, Jane breaks the silence by asking about the children. Jeffery's divorce and subsequent incarceration meant that he didn't see his children much. He had a supervised visit last weekend, and that brings him to the reason he wanted to see her. A couple of months on a fishing boat with his buddy Pete from Maine and some others ... yes, it is dangerous and yes, this would be his third strike if caught, but the money is great and it's the closest to what he did before ... get back on his feet ... the catch would be amazing now, the need to stay under the radar, literally. Would she continue to check in on the kids every now and then?

"Why, Jeffery?" she asks, her eyes widening. "This is it, this is our world now. Why can't you accept it?"

"Because it's wrong," he says, his voice is louder now and the people at the next table stop their conversation to stare at him. "It's messed with our rights and it's messed with the natural order of things."

"The order has evolved, Jeffery, and we have all the alternatives we need," Jane says, matching his volume. "We haven't needed animals for sustenance for decades or longer even. What was

once a necessity is now hubris! I mean, what good is our cognitive reasoning when we can't even read the writing on the wall?" Fearing that she sounds like the posters from the early years of the change, she stops.

Jeffery, two years older, has been losing arguments to Jane since they were kids. He waits for her to finish, then says, "I didn't invite you here to fight, lil' sis." His shoulders relax as if a weight has been lifted off them. "We will never agree on this issue, so let's drop it. I just wanted to tell you about my plans, not ask for permission."

She promised her parents that she would look out for Jeffery, but she has failed them, and him. They eat the rest of their meal in silence. Jeffery settles the bill in cash, declining Jane's offer to pay. They stop at the counter to speak to Ah Wing through the glass pane on their way out. Jane thanks him, and waits for her brother to finish his conversation with his old buddy. In the corner of the counter, she notices a plate full of marinated chicken feet, the kind her mother used to make. Jane looks around to see everyone consumed by their meals and conversations, even Jeffery. She grabs a fistful of feet, swiftly shoving them into her handbag, and wipes her hand on her jeans. Jeffery says good-bye to the staff and they exit, receiving their cell phones back in the front room.

Jeffery walks Jane to the main street and waits with her while she hails a cab. When one pulls up, Jane hugs her brother tight this time.

"You know, in spite of everything, you and me, we're not that different," he says, and smiles. "I love you, lil' sis."

"I love you too, Jeffery, and please be careful out there."

At this hour, Jane arrives home in under ten minutes. She pays the fare and sprints up to her apartment, nearly tripping on a step. Letting herself in, she flings her shoes off in the hallway and

throws the keys on the table so hard they slide off the edge and fall on the floor. She slams the light on and reaches into her handbag, pulling out a foot. Then, she settles into the sofa and begins sucking it, smacking her lips with pleasure.

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Tomato Heart

John RC Potter

Give me your heart
and I will show you
a dried tomato,
withered from too much
 sun;
its seeds shrivelled
from too much exposure to the
 heat.

The skin of this tomato
is pinched and thick:
good protection
from the sun and the red rain,
from words and tears.

I suspect there is a whole other life
under this coarse exterior,
but I will never pierce through it
in time to save
the salvageable flesh within.

I think
 in our world
 we could live without
tomatoes.

5:45AM in Kennedy Town

Sophia Wu



From my sea view terrace
I can see the dawn coming –
A gleam of plum
Seeping through the charcoal sky,
Shades of black colouring the harbour
Peppered by the necks of abandoned cranes.

The sky is not alone tonight –
I feel entire galaxies envelop me.
The miniature islands are planets silhouetting towers,
Street lamps and traffic lights radiate starlight,
Day masquerades as night.

I watch my cat gingerly walk across the edge of the terrace,
and I realise
It's just him and me and the sky –
we are lucky to witness these soft moments the sleepers miss.
For a few quick minutes,
the earth lets us into its esoteric inner life,
Before the world wakes up, the news comes on,
and the coffee shops open. Before minds stir and lips move,
before we exchange pleasantries.
Here we are not yet stripped raw from the space
between moon and sun,
Sacred because it's fleeting. A little sad, but not enough for tears.

As sunrise inches closer, charcoal becomes milk.
The darkness lifts and I look down at my hands, pale and bright.
Plum nails that I tap.
If I sit quietly, I can still hear it –
The hum of human silence. The shakiness of a lone truck
rumbling across the roads,
The heartbeat of early morning.

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Delhi Belly

Shikha S. Lamba

The worst way to betray your country
is through your stomach.
The tragic end of patriotism
hanging on the last bite of a plate
full of *chaat* or *channa*.

Don't even ask about the road side
nimbu pani. How dare you cramp and belch,
and succumb to nausea on your pilgrimage
through Dilli's streets?

The "egg in a bun", the 2 am haunts
under deserted flyovers, the *rummali roti*
with a day-old mutton kebab, washed down
with a beer from a cooler in the trunk
of your car. These were your summer
nights, so many nights ago.

Standing under sleepy trees shedding
more *dhool* than leaves, eating under
darkened Delhi skies, car radio on.
Don't you remember?

Fast drives through empty roads,
dhabba paranthas, mounds of Amul
melting gold against the warmth?
You're a fucking NRI now,
living your squeaky-clean, ridiculously
sanitized expatriate life in Bauhinia land.

Can't deal with the heat, or the monsoons,
or the piping hot *jalebis* from the *Halwai*,
leaking through brown paper packets,
diabetically sweet and perfectly twisted
in their orangeness.



Chaat – Street food

Channa – White chickpeas

Nimbu Pani – Lemonade

Dilli – Delhi

Rummali Roti – Flat bread

Dhool – Dust

Dhabba – Road side eatery

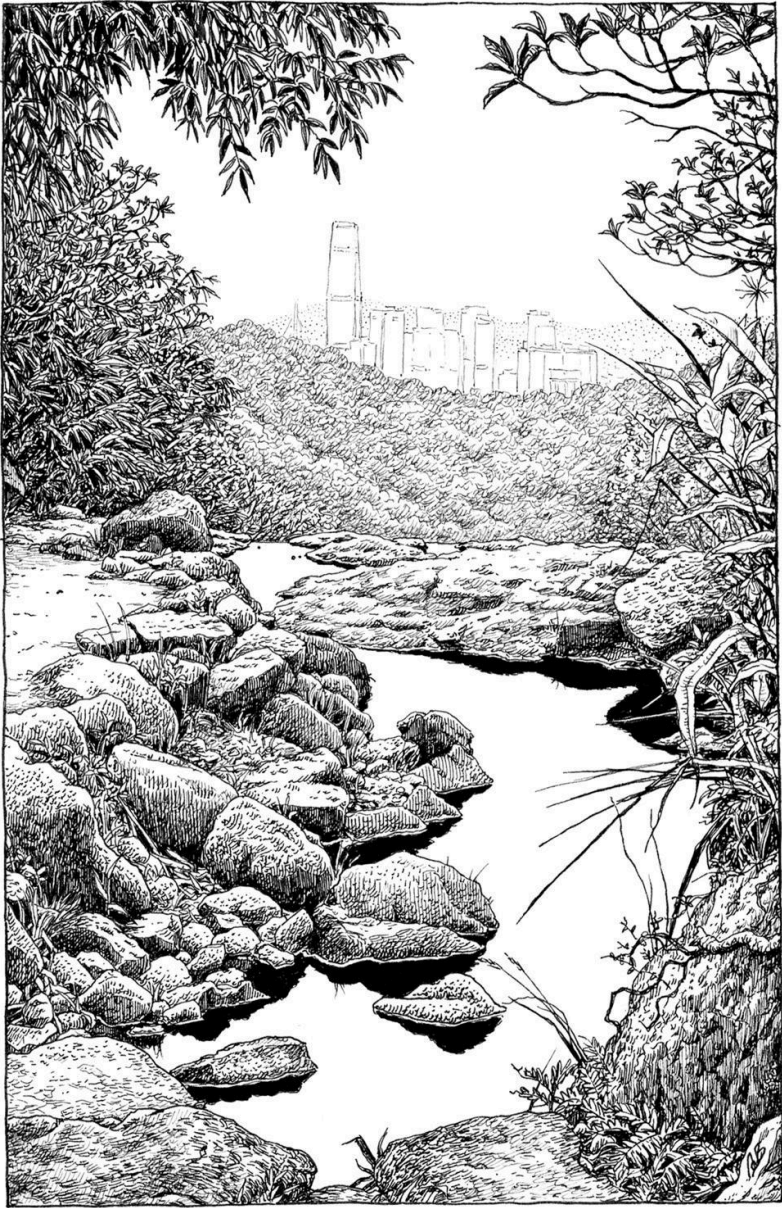
Paranths – Stuffed flat breads

Amul – Butter

Jalebi – Spiral sweet dessert

Halwai – Sweet makers and confectioners

Bauhinia flower – Official emblem of Hong Kong



Written in the Stars

Julian Lyden

Theophilus ‘Hatchet’ Hatherleigh’s reputation went before him. Economic liberal, rugged individualist, laissez-faire economist – call him what you will, the man was mean. As a schoolboy he had taught himself to peel an orange in his pocket to avoid sharing it with his classmates.

As an adult, his religious hatred of padded budgets, pork barrels, and political patronage earned him few admirers and even fewer friends in Her Majesty’s rapidly shrinking Colonial Service. By the mid-nineteen seventies the once mighty beast of Empire had been reduced to a few scattered bones; but if anybody could find something left on a bone to pick at, it was Hatherleigh. On his honeymoon in Eastbourne, he stole sugar cubes from the breakfast table and asked his bride to wash his underpants in the hotel sink to save on laundry costs.

His marriage, it was said, was nearly as brief as his governorship of Hong Kong. For his was the shortest and unhappiest tenure of any of Hong Kong’s twenty-nine governors. Indeed, his term of office was so ill-starred that it has been stricken from the records. His predecessor had scarcely reached Aden on his homeward voyage aboard the P&O ship *Oriana*, when a telegraph arrived, imploring him to resume his old post. All his sins had been forgiven.

Hatherleigh’s soubriquet, ‘Hatchet’, related to his passion for fiscal restraint and belied an abhorrence of physical violence. So, it was most distressing that he should die in the way in which he did: hacked into twenty-three pieces and consumed by the muck-feeding fish of Victoria Harbour ... but let us not get ahead of ourselves.

Hatherleigh had had a good war. Although a weak chest ruled out active service, the war nevertheless allowed him to express his creative side. It is said a man who chooses a profession that he loves will never work a day in his life. Hatherleigh's time in the War Office Pensions Department was the best holiday of his life – better by far than his post-nuptial sojourn in Eastbourne. He spent five years auditing pension payments to war-widows and injured soldiers. Having clawed back more than three thousand pounds in over-payments to bereaved housewives and limbless youths, Hatherleigh could share in the glory of Britain's victory. Storming Nazi gun emplacements or escaping from Colditz was all well and good, but Hatherleigh had saved the country real cash money.

Indeed, his pension-snatching was so successful that he was not released into the Colonial Service until 1947, meaning he sadly 'missed India'. By then the empire was going down the drain. He and his colleagues circled the plughole, hoping to administer something before there was nothing left to administer. Brief postings to Burma, the Sudan and Malaya followed, where his duties consisted of paying people off as cheaply as possible, and shipping them home on the longest, most cost-effective and uncomfortable routes.

Having carved himself a niche, he was a shoo-in for promotion to the Committee for Responsible Accounting Practices, one of the few Commonwealth agencies seldom referred to by its acronym. The Committee's purpose was as simple as it was condescending: keeping an eye on the natives. Just because the former colonies now had the keys to their own treasuries, that didn't mean they could be allowed to do what they liked with the contents. Like a schoolmarm in a ladies' college, Hatherleigh's duty was to instil the discipline of good housekeeping into his less-developed charges. Development aid from London was conditional upon attendance at Hatherleigh's classes.

So it was that Hatherleigh, now in his 50s, came to be in the newly-named Sri Lanka, lecturing the finance minister, one Felix Dias Bandaranaike, on the importance of balancing his books. The patrician Bandaranaike knew all about colonial condescension and how to deal with it. He confided in Hatherleigh, ‘as one gentleman to another,’ his fear that communists had infiltrated the public library and were squandering taxpayer money on degenerate – possibly *communist* – authors. Scandalised, Hatherleigh charged into the fray. He was angrily waving duplicate copies of *The Female Eunuch* under the chief librarian’s nose when fate finally tracked him down and thrust greatness upon him.

Hong Kong, it seemed, was in need of his leadership. Sir Murray MacLehose, Hatherleigh’s predecessor, had ruined the place completely. In his tenure as governor, he had housed thousands of refugees, inaugurated country parks and imposed nine years of compulsory education. Worse still, he had introduced weekly rest days, compensation for injured workers and old-age pensions. The business community would not stand for it. The chairman of the Great Oriental Bank led a delegation to Downing Street in London, demanding his removal and insisting on selecting his successor. They poured over the *curricula vitae*, rejecting each one until they got to Hatherleigh’s.

‘What about this one?’ said Sir Fedelis Randall of Randall, Predegrast & Co. ‘Ha! They call him the Hatchet. He put the screws on the widows and malingerers. Just the sort of man we need in Hong Kong.’

‘I like him,’ said the chairman of the Bank. So they went for an early lunch at the East India Club.

When the news reached Sri Lanka, Finance Minister Bandaranaike was the first to congratulate Hatherleigh on his appointment. He hosted a celebratory dinner at the Colombo Club. Over a magnificent Jaffna curry and indifferent claret, he

toasted Hatherleigh's success and politely inquired how soon he would be able to depart.

'It's most inconvenient,' said Hatherleigh, his neck reddening above the collar of his polyester shirt. 'They are insisting that I go to London to be fitted for my ceremonial uniform – white suit, plumed helmet, and all that. It could take weeks.'

'Nonsense, old boy,' said Bandaranaike calmly. 'Those tropical uniforms are all the same. You can just borrow one from William Gopallawa. He was the last Governor General here. He has the sword and everything. In fact, that's him over there, asleep on the veranda. Hai! Willie! Wake up. We need to borrow your suit.'

'It *would* be good to save the expense of a new one,' said Hatherleigh thoughtfully. 'But he's not as tall as me, so it might be a bit short in the trousers.'

'Not a bit of it,' said Bandaranaike. 'You'll just need to stoop a little. Now, drink up. There's a flight via Singapore at midnight. I'll take you to the airport myself.'

'Oh, I won't be flying,' said Hatherleigh. 'Air fares are outrageous. We can't ask the taxpayers to pay for that. I shall travel by sea. Besides, it is more becoming for a governor to arrive by ship.'

Bandaranaike dispatched his private secretary to look up the sailing times.

Hatherleigh bade goodbye to a grateful nation from the deck of the good ship *Caledonia*, resplendent in his borrowed uniform. The smell of mothballs billowed from the fabric, and, crouch as he might, the trousers were definitely on the short side. The ostrich plumes in the helmet had been crushed in Gopallawa's wardrobe, but Bandaranaike's secretary had obtained some

whitish chicken feathers from a poultry stall in Colpetty Market. Nobody would know the difference.

Gopawalla and Bandaranaike stood on the docks along with a sombre delegation from the public library. Hatherleigh was touched at the sincerity of their farewell.

The Sri Lankans' smiles faltered and there was a ripple of concern when Hatherleigh scuttled back down the gangway.

'I found these in the pocket,' he said to Gopawalla, handing him some reading glasses and a set of car keys.

'Bugger me,' said the old man. 'I've been looking for those for years.'

The two-day voyage to Singapore gave Hatherleigh ample time to read his briefing notes, which had arrived by diplomatic bag from London. Wonderful words and phrases leapt from the foolscap pages: 'economic miracle', 'strong work ethic', 'low-taxation.' He never imagined an official document could sound like William Blake. Entrepreneurs from around the world had built a capitalist Jerusalem among Hong Kong's green hills and dark, satanic mills. And now it would all come under Hatherleigh's benign, incorruptible rule.

The *Caledonia's* Glaswegian captain had been well briefed on his august guest, and invited him to dine at his table. He described Hong Kong's wonderful deepwater harbour and the reception Hatherleigh would receive when the *Caledonia* docked, by special permission, at the naval wharf by the Tamar Building.

Alas, the ship suffered engine trouble during the night, and limped into Singapore almost half a day late. The captain explained that the repairs could take up to a week, so Hatherleigh had to search along the Pasir Panjang docks for another vessel to take him to Hong Kong. Hot and tired, he finally negotiated a

passage aboard the *SS Sevastopol*, a cargo ship owned by the Sino Soviet Shipping Corporation. She was due to sail in an hour, which gave Hatherleigh just enough time to fetch his things, and give the captain of the *Caledonia* a hastily-written list of twenty-seven ways to run his ship more efficiently.

Nobody helped His Excellency carry his luggage up the gangway to the *Sevastopol*. When he introduced himself to the captain, he responded with a terse “Colonial governor, eh?” then lit his pipe and went back to the bridge. Hatherleigh’s mood was not dampened in the slightest. As Hong Kong approached, his spirits soared. He hardly slept during his last night aboard, and long before they reached the muddy waters of the Pearl River Estuary, he was on deck, dressed in his white suit, surrounded by a miasma of mothball fumes. The captain steamed around Hong Kong Island and entered the harbour through the Lei Yu Mun passage. The new governor marvelled at the junks with their brown ribbed sails, and the swarms of little sampans, all safe under the wing of the indomitable Royal Navy.

At noon they passed the typhoon shelter at Causeway Bay. Hatherleigh was flattered to hear a cannon being fired – obviously in honour of his arrival. He saluted and stood to attention – the shortness of his trousers be damned. A moment later he saw the Tsim Sha Tsui clock tower to starboard and the distinctive shape of the Tamar Building to port. A crowd had gathered on the naval wharf under strings of red, white and blue bunting. He could hear the sound of a brass band over the clamour of the city.

Hatherleigh stood to attention again, waiting for the *Sevastopol* to draw alongside, but she kept steaming through the harbour. With as much dignity as he could muster, His Excellency ran up to the bridge to ask what the hell was going on. ‘We’re supposed to be docking there!’ he said to the captain. ‘There’s an official reception for me. Look, they’re all waiting for me. There’s even a band.’

‘That,’ said the captain, ‘Is British Naval Dockyard. This is Soviet ship. We will berth at Ocean Terminal.’

‘But I’m the governor!’

‘Yes. I know. *Colonial* governor,’ said the captain, closing the door in Hatherleigh’s face.



He stood on the quayside, like a magnificently-dressed human statue. Some passers-by paused in front of him, wondering whether they should throw a coin into the plumed helmet he was holding under his arm. Sweating profusely through his uniform, His Excellency took stock of the situation. Somebody at Tamar would realise the mistake and send a boat to pick him up. Now he thought about it, that would be a more dignified entrance than arriving in an old Russian tub. But, after fifteen minutes in the blazing sun, he realised he would have to make his own way across the harbour. When he met his new aide de camp, he would skin him alive.

Hatherleigh remembered his briefing notes. The Star Ferry provided a ‘cheap and reliable’ service from Tsim Sha Tsui to Central. From there he could commandeer a rickshaw to the ceremony. He put on his helmet, shouldered his luggage, and set off in the direction of the clocktower. Small Chinese boys and large American tourists gawped as he passed.

‘Hey, buddy! Where’s the rest of the marching band?’ asked a man in a Hawaiian shirt. Hatherleigh lacked the breath to respond.

His arms and shoulders aching, his chicken feathers starting to droop, the sword swinging wildly at his side, the twenty-sixth governor of Hong Kong stumbled into the Star Ferry terminal and lurched towards the barriers. ‘Let me through! Government business.’

The uniformed employee considered the sweat-drenched, purple-faced madman lurching towards him. It was near the end of a very long shift, so he took the line of least resistance and opened the gate for him. For the first time that day, Hatherleigh had a stroke of luck. A ferry was just about to depart. He scrambled over the gangway, dropped his luggage, and collapsed into a seat. Once the ferry was underway, a welcome breeze slipped through the cabin. Hatherleigh tried to get his breathing back under control. Dark rings of sweat had soaked through the underarms of his jacket and the feathers in his helmet were starting to come out where the glue had melted in the sun. The hilt of his sword poked him uncomfortably in the ribs. This really was absolutely unacceptable. Heads would roll, but it was a good job he was so resourceful. Another man would have gone to pieces.

Hatherleigh recalled that the Central ferry pier was directly across the harbour, but for some reason the ferry was taking a diagonal course further east along Hong Kong Island. Soon they were passing Tamar again, where the band was still playing and

guests milling around listlessly. Hatherleigh strode into the wheelhouse and confronted the captain.

‘Where the hell are we going? This ferry is supposed to go to Central.’

‘Not this one, mate,’ said the Captain. ‘This is the Wan Chai Ferry.’

‘What? But I need to get to Tamar.’

‘Well, you’ll just have to get the tram back then, won’t you? Anyway, you’re not supposed to be distracting me while we’re underway.’ He pointed insouciantly to a sign on the door.

‘Do you know who you’re speaking to? I’m the governor of this colony.’

‘I don’t care if you’re the bloody Aga Khan, mate. I’m the captain of the *Morning Star*. Now trot on back to your seat.’

‘Turn this boat around at once. I demand you take me to Central. I *order* you on behalf of Her Majesty’s Government. In fact... never mind Central ... pull alongside the naval wharf at Tamar.’

The captain stood up and gestured to a burly deckhand. ‘Now listen to me, my lad...’

‘No, *you* listen to *me*,’ screeched Hatherleigh, his lip curled back like a mad dog. ‘If you don’t take me to Tamar I will ... I will.’ He drew his sword and waved the rusty blade at the deckhand. ‘I will cut you to ribbons.’

‘But this is the Star Ferry,’ said the captain in amazement. ‘The integrity of our schedule is everything. If that breaks down then we’re lost. The whole colony falls to pieces. I won’t do it.’

‘Don’t test me,’ said Hatherleigh, taking a step forward. ‘I’ve had a very trying day.’

‘This is piracy,’ said the captain. ‘Never in all my days... I will comply with your demands under protest, but you will need to answer to the authorities for this.’

‘*I am* the authorities, you idiot. I’m the governor.’

‘I mean the company’s board of directors.’

Hatherleigh dropped his voice to an icy whisper. ‘Damn you. Damn your board of directors, and damn your stupid little ferry!’

The captain shuddered with horror, as though Hatherleigh had just spat upon a bible. ‘On your head be it,’ he said, and turned the wheel towards Tamar.

The crew dropped the gangway onto the wharf and Hatherleigh stepped ashore, followed by the three elderly housewives he had conscripted to carry his luggage. He stood facing the smartly-dressed crowd, who stared at him in stunned silence, their champagne glasses and canapes frozen halfway to their mouths. The only sound to be heard was the Union Jack snapping in the stiffening breeze, which carried away the last feathers from his helmet. The cuffs of his trousers flapped against his calves. The regimental band tried to strike up ‘God Save the Queen’ but gave up in disarray halfway through the first verse.

‘My God,’ said an elderly man dressed like a bishop. ‘He hijacked the Star Ferry. And what the devil has he done to his trousers?’ A chorus of angry muttering broke out, and Hatherleigh wondered for a moment whether he had gate-crashed a high-class public stoning.

At length a tall man in a helmet similar to Hatherleigh’s – but with all its plumes intact – stepped forward. ‘Ponsonby, Your Excellency. I’m your aide de camp. There appears to have been a

mix-up. I think I had better take you straight to Government House.’ He led Hatherleigh through the hostile crowd, with the three old ladies following happily in their wake.

‘What on earth is the matter with those people?’ asked Hatherleigh as the gubernatorial Rolls Royce sped up Cotton Tree Drive.

‘Perhaps, it would be better for me to explain in the morning, Sir. I’m sure you would like a bath and a change of clothes.’

‘Very well,’ said Hatherleigh. ‘I suggest you use the time to come up with a decent excuse for this debacle.’

Hatherleigh slept fitfully. Still dehydrated, his dreams were feverish. Men in captain’s uniforms chased him around a burning ship, while hideously fat tourists looked on, jeering and taking photographs. The smell of burning became more intense. When he awoke in the darkness of his new bedroom, he could almost swear there was smoke in the air. Yes, there was – but it wasn’t woodsmoke. It was tobacco.

Hatherleigh winced and covered his eyes as somebody threw back the long silk curtains. He looked painfully through the slit in his eyelids at a ring of people standing around his bed. Sure enough, there was a pug-like Englishman with a lit cigar in his mouth.

‘Good morning, Your Excellency!’ Ponsonby was wearing a smart grey suit. ‘Allow me to introduce your Executive Council. This is Mr. Obediah Cornwallis from the Great Oriental Bank; Sir Fedelis Randall of Randall, Prendegrast & Co; Dr. Kwan, Chancellor of the University; and Madam Li of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce.’

‘Couldn’t the introductions wait until after breakfast?’ said Hatherleigh. ‘What time is it, anyway?’

‘It’s quarter past six, Sir. The Council has just finished an emergency meeting to discuss yesterday’s unfortunate events.’

‘Well, I’m pleased to see you are taking it seriously. It was a dreadful breach of protocol. But I’m prepared to accept your apologies and draw a line under it. Fresh start. Water under the bridge, and all that.’ Hatherleigh sat up in bed. ‘Now, Ponsonby, if you would be so kind as to take the council members down to the dining room, I will get dressed and we can all get to know each other over breakfast.’

‘Ah, I don’t think you quite understand, Your Excellency,’ said Ponsonby. ‘You see...’

‘We’re not here for breakfast,’ snapped Sir Fedelis. ‘We’re here to resolve this disaster with the ferry.’

Hatherleigh was not going to be bullied on his first day on the job, and certainly not before he had got out of his pyjamas. ‘I appreciate that commandeering a vessel was unorthodox. And if my treatment of the captain was a little...well...*brusque*, I would simply add that man was highly insubordinate and needed to be put in his place. In the circumstances, I believe that a small diversion was entirely justified.’

‘Justified? Justified?’ exploded Obediah Cornwallis. ‘You caused a twenty-three-minute delay to the schedule.’

‘The knock-on effects lasted all day,’ groaned Madam Li, as if wracked with physical agony.

‘I like reliable transport as much as anybody,’ said Hatherleigh, ‘But I think you’re rather overreacting.’

Dr. Kwan raised his hand to impose some academic detachment upon the proceedings.

‘We believe we may have found a solution. The ferry company’s board of directors have graciously agreed to see you this morning at seven twenty-nine. I hope together we can find a way forward.’

Hatherleigh looked at Ponsonby for help. ‘I would strongly advise it, Sir,’ he said.

‘Very well,’ said Hatherleigh. ‘I will go and meet the ferry people. But if you think I’m going to apologise...’ Reading the hostility in the room, he left the sentence unfinished.

‘Excellent,’ said Ponsonby. ‘The car will be ready in fifteen minutes.’

‘Don’t be late,’ said Cornwallis, striding out of the room.

‘I had such hopes for you,’ said Sir Fidelis, shaking his head sadly as he departed.

The Rolls Royce slid through the new Cross Harbour Tunnel, empty of traffic at that time of the morning. Hatherleigh sat in the back with Ponsonby.

‘You will be meeting three directors, Sir,’ said Ponsonby. ‘The first, Mr. Poon, is a local gentleman. Very well respected. He’s an expert in *fung shui*, so everybody calls him *master*, or *si-fu*. The second is Miss Ecaterina. She’s from Romania, I believe. Charming lady. The third is called Fereydoun. We’re not sure where he’s from or when he arrived in Hong Kong. If I had to guess I would say he was Persian, but who knows? He doesn’t say much.’

They turned from Chatham Road into Salisbury Road. Passing the Peninsula Hotel on their right, they stopped outside the old clock tower by the harbour. The driver opened the door for them and they walked towards the tower.

‘I think the best thing is to let them do the talking,’ said Ponsonby. He stopped outside the ancient wooden doors and consulted his watch, waiting until its hands showed precisely seven twenty-nine before knocking three times. The doors swung open and Ponsonby led the way up a steep teak staircase.

‘Bloody funny place for a boardroom,’ said Hatherleigh, his legs aching from the previous day’s exertions. ‘Bloody strange time, too.’

Panting slightly, they passed up through the clock mechanism to a room at the top of the tower. Three figures sat at a round table. They each stood and bowed. Hatherleigh took the only empty chair at the table, while Ponsonby stood by the door.

Hatherleigh’s seat was opposite Master Poon. The man’s blind white eyes made him feel uncomfortable. He should really cover them up with dark glasses, thought Hatherleigh.

‘You look tired,’ said Poon. ‘Please have some tea – it’s very refreshing.’ He gestured towards a porcelain cup on the table in front of Hatherleigh, who was now feeling even more uncomfortable. He gulped some tea. It was delicious, but some loose tea leaves caught in his throat.

Miss Ecaterina’s cobalt-blue eyes were even more distracting than Poon’s. She wore a scarf around her head and large hoop earrings. She reminded Hatherleigh of a fortune-teller his ex-wife had insisted on seeing on the pier at Eastbourne. That woman had been an ugly old fraud, telling Mrs Hatherleigh that she would meet a handsome stranger, even though she was obviously newly married. By contrast, Miss Ecaterina was astonishingly beautiful and disconcertingly young.

‘Are you old enough to be a board member?’ asked Hatherleigh, who could never get it right with attractive women. ‘You look about eighteen.’

Miss Ecaterina raised her chin. ‘I assure you, Governor, I am much, much older than I look. So is my colleague, Fereydoun.’ She wafted a delicate hand towards the third board member, who looked about ninety. The old man smiled absently through his wispy beard and adjusted his white skull cap.

In the silence that followed, Hatherleigh looked around the room. Large windows in each wall gave commanding views of the city, the harbour and the hills beyond. The polished table was inlaid with the cardinal points, like a giant compass. The twelve animals of the Chinese zodiac were arranged every thirty degrees in a ring beneath the glossy varnish. Hatherleigh realised that if the compass points in the table were accurate, the corners of the clocktower pointed precisely north, south, east and west.

Master Poon broke the silence. ‘At the Star Ferry Company, our mission is to safeguard the economic welfare of Hong Kong.’

‘I rather thought that was my responsibility and the Financial Secretary’s, but we are grateful for your help,’ replied the governor.

Poon gave him a kindly look with his blind eyes and went on. ‘Do you know the secret of Hong Kong’s economic success, Your Excellency?’

‘Well, there are many factors, but chief among them is the strong work ethic of its largely immigrant population.’

The board members laughed in unison. ‘If hard work was the secret, those rickshaw coolies down there by the ferry would be millionaires, wouldn’t they?’ said Miss Ecaterina.

‘Well,’ responded Hatherleigh, ‘It’s a melting pot, isn’t it? The low tax rate is a stimulus to Asian entrepreneurialism, while the incorruptible British regime ensures a level playing field.’

Fereydoun’s beard wobbled and Master Poon politely covered his mouth as they laughed. ‘Incorruptible!’ giggled Miss Ecaterina. Hatherleigh thought he heard a snigger from Ponsonby behind him and bristled at their impudence.

‘Well, then. Perhaps you would be so kind as to enlighten me.’

‘Joss,’ said Poon.

‘Joss?’

‘Luck,’ explained Miss Ecaterina. ‘Hong Kong thrives by cultivating the good and avoiding the bad. It’s everywhere around us: house gods, amulets, roadside shrines, auspicious number plates.’

‘I hardly think we have a monopoly on superstition,’ said Hatherleigh.

‘No,’ agreed Master Poon, ‘but you were right when you spoke of our melting pot. We have taken the best elements from the world’s mystic traditions and combined them into something much more powerful.’ Hatherleigh’s right eyebrow moved towards his hairline.

‘I see you are sceptical, Your Excellency, but let me give you an example,’ said Master Poon. ‘That hotel across the road is called the Peninsula. It’s owned by Baghdadi Jews. But if you get in the lift, you will see that there is no fourth floor, and no thirteenth floor, in deference to both Chinese and Christian numerology.’

‘But that’s silly. They just renamed the fourth floor as the fifth. Nobody would claim it makes any difference.’

‘Of course it makes a difference,’ said Miss Ecaterina. ‘It has been voted the best hotel in the world for ten years in a row. They have the highest occupancy rate in Asia.’ Fereydoun nodded sagely.

‘Take our own company,’ continued Master Poon before Hatherleigh could object. ‘We were founded by a Parsee merchant in eighteen eighty-eight – a very auspicious year, by the way. When he retired, he sold it to Paul Chater, an Armenian, and Jardine Matheson, a company of Scotsmen. Along the way we picked up the traditions of each one – the best way to keep ships safe at sea. To this day we have ladies christen our new ships with champagne and then burn offerings to Tin Hau, the Chinese Goddess of Heaven. And here we are, almost a century later.’

‘Well, I’m sorry,’ said Hatherleigh. ‘I think that’s hogwash. As a rational man, I don’t believe our fates are written in the stars. I believe we make our own luck.’

The board of directors smiled identical, patient smiles. ‘Well, that’s just the thing, Your Excellency,’ said Miss Ecaterina. ‘Seventy-five years ago, our company discovered that both of those things are true.’

‘What?’

‘We discovered that while our destinies *are* governed by the stars, we can – how do I put it – create our own lucky stars.’

‘I beg your pardon?’ said Hatherleigh.

Miss Ecaterina smiled the patient smile again. ‘We operate twelve ferries. One for each zodiac sign in the Chinese and Western traditions. Each one is named after a star, and each one carries in her engine room a powerful combination of crystals, charms and idols. As they sail on their three routes around the harbour, they weave a pattern like the movement of the heavenly

bodies they represent. And as the harbour is at the centre of life in Hong Kong, they weave the city's fortune, for good or for ill. As the board of directors, it is our task to draw on our respective traditions to ensure that the schedule is perfectly adjusted to block bad joss and magnify good fortune. I'm pleased to say that we have been successful and the city has prospered.'

'Are you honestly trying to tell me that the ferry schedule affects the fortunes of the colony?'

'Absolutely,' said Master Poon. 'When you diverted *Morning Star* yesterday afternoon, the stock market dropped five percent. I lost a bundle on Great Oriental Bank stock and it took us all night to get things back on track.' Fereydoun nodded silently in agreement.

'I know it's a lot to take in,' said Miss Ecaterina sympathetically. 'For a long time we didn't inform your predecessors. We let them think it was their policies that were working.' The three board members chuckled. 'But in the sixties Sir David Trench failed to protect the Star Ferry from violent street protests. Our schedules were disrupted for weeks and the unrest nearly got out of control. Of course you weren't to know, and I'm sorry that we weren't able to brief you before yesterday's unfortunate events.'

'Well,' said Hatherleigh, 'I consider myself more than adequately briefed now. So, if you've nothing else to say about witchcraft and the financial system, I think I had better be getting on with actually running the colony.' He looked over his shoulder at Ponsonby. 'Fetch the car, please.'

'Before you go,' said Master Poon, 'We need your assurance that you will not move the location of the piers.'

This was more than Hatherleigh could take. 'First of all, *Master Poon*, I am not in the habit of making policy decisions at the request of a bunch of charlatans in fancy dress. And secondly, why on earth would I want to move the ferry pier?'

‘Well,’ said Miss Ecaterina evenly, ‘It’s been done before, and it will be done again. It never ends well, I assure you.’

Hatherleigh was almost at the door when Fereydoun spoke for the first time. His voice was surprisingly high-pitched, with a South London twang. ‘Hold your horses, Governor. Disrupting the schedule is one thing, but you actually cursed the ferry. I believe your exact words were ‘Damn you. Damn your board of directors, and damn your stupid little ferry.’

‘I stand by those words!’ said Hatherleigh. ‘I’ve never met a greater bunch of prating mountebanks in all my life.’

‘I would strongly advise a retraction, Your Excellency. A wise man does not curse the fates. Not if he knows what’s good for him.’

‘I will not be lectured to by a mob of glass-eyed grifters. So, I say again, damn the lot of you, and damn your stupid little ferries.’ He turned on his heel and marched down the stairs. Ponsonby stood there aghast; his hands raised in silent apology.

‘I don’t think he took it very well, do you?’ said Fereydoun.

Miss Ecaterina walked around the table and looked into Hatherleigh’s tea cup. ‘Oh dear,’ she said quietly.

‘What year was he born?’ Master Poon asked Ponsonby.

‘Nineteen twenty-two.’

‘Year of the dog. Oh dear,’ said Master Poon.

‘What date?’ asked Fereydoun.

‘The fourteenth of October.’

‘Libra. Oh dear,’ said Fereydoun.

‘Does anybody know what day it is today?’ asked Miss Ecaterina.

‘It’s Friday,’ said Ponsonby. ‘Thirteenth of May.’

‘Oh dear,’ said everyone in unison.

Ponsonby turned and ran down the stairs. Hatherleigh had already reached the car, where the chauffeur was standing with his hands on his hips.

‘It’s very bad luck, Sir,’ he said. ‘We seem to have got two punctures, but we only have one spare tyre. I’ll need to call Government House for help.’

‘Bloody hell!’ replied the Governor. ‘I’m not waiting for that. I’ll take the ferry to Central. Tell them to pick me up on the other side.’

The employee in the ferry terminal recognised Hatherleigh from the day before and opened the barrier without comment. Hatherleigh joined the back of the queue waiting to board *Northern Star*, which was bobbing beside the pier in a light swell. An old amah in front of him carried a little girl in her arms. The child was eating a mango and had yellow juice all over her face. She put out her tongue at the angry-looking man and then hid her sticky face in the amah’s neck.

The last to cross the gangway, Hatherleigh failed to notice that the child had dropped her mango. He stood on the stone, slipped across the gangway and flipped over the safety chain into the water below, quite unseen by the deckhand, who was cooing at the little girl. When Hatherleigh surfaced, the gangway had been raised. The deckhand blew his whistle and unfastened the mooring rope.

Unluckily for Hatherleigh, the wake from the *SS Sevastopol*, which was leaving the harbour, pushed the ferry back against the pier, where it crushed the governor like a grape against the timber pillars. His flaccid, elongated body was carried by the current towards the brass propeller, which chopped him into twenty-three pieces and turned the surrounding water a milky pink.



Ponsonby stood on the quayside wondering what to do next. The Marine Police would need to fish the chunks of body out of the harbour. He decided to call them from the ferry pier, but then thought better of it. The cops would only get in the way of the ferry, and Ponsonby's investment portfolio couldn't take another battering like yesterday. He would let the fish enjoy their meal. He strolled back to the car, rubbing the lucky rabbit's foot in his pocket.

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Authors

Rinkoo Ramchandani is a writer and Assistant Lecturer at The University of Hong Kong's MFA Program.

John RC Potter is an international educator from Canada, living in Istanbul. He has experienced a revolution (Indonesia), air strikes (Israel), earthquakes (Turkey), boredom (UAE), and blinding snow blizzards (Canada), the last being the subject of his story, "Snowbound in the House of God" (Memoirist). His work has appeared most recently in The Serulian ("The Memory Box"), The Montreal Review ("Letter from Istanbul") & Erato Magazine ("A Day in May, 1965"). The author's story, "Ruth's World" was a Pushcart Prize Nominee. His gay-themed children's picture book, The First Adventures of Walli and Magoo, is scheduled for publication. The author has enjoyed visiting Hong Kong in the past and it is one of his favourite cities!

Sophia Wu is an American writer based in Hong Kong. Growing up between Washington, DC, and Beijing, she found a passion for international communities from an early age. She went on to study Mandarin in Shanghai and later earned her Master's in journalism at Georgetown University. Her stories focus on culture, relationships, and coming-of-age, exploring the many facets that shape our identities. She's currently a content strategist in the luxury travel industry. Her other interests include crafting floral arrangements and spending time with her cat, Louis.

Shikha S. Lamba is a jewelry designer and poet living in Hong Kong. She is also the co-editor of an online magazine, Coffee and Conversations. Shikha has contributed poetry for publications in Hong Kong, the US, the UK, Bangladesh, Indonesia and India including The Madras Courier, IMPRINT

Hong Kong Women in Publishing Anthology, Ambidextrous Bloodhound Press, The Bamboo Hut Journal and Yearbook of Indian Poetry in English 2022 Anthology. Her work was nominated for Best of the Net in 2023, and she is a 2023 Pushcart Nominee. Her poems often touch on themes of feminism and social injustice.

***Julian Lyden** is a Hong Kong-based writer with an interest in folklore, murder and the unseen forces which shape our lives. Having lived in seven different countries and worked in everything from aviation to agriculture, he is convinced that there is no better place than Hong Kong, and no more rewarding experience than writing about it. To these eternal verities he would add that it is always preferable to cross Victoria Harbour by sea, and that Morning Star is the undisputed queen of the Star Ferries.*

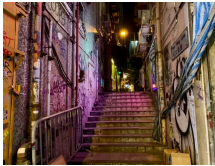
Artists



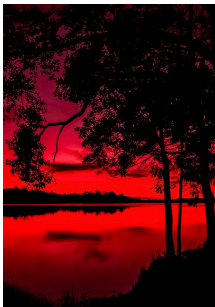
Corporate Coffee (cover)
Victoria Martyn



The Haul
Jan Lee



Steps
Ricky Sadosa



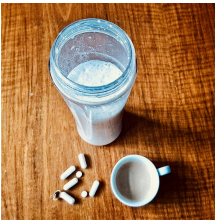
Raven
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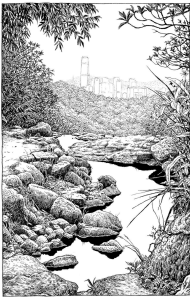
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