

# The Apostrophe

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

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

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

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# Any Excuse is Better than None

Editor's Note



The preponderance of the expressions “no excuses” and “inexcusable” imply the existence of acceptable excuses. For what is the purpose of saying “there’s no excuse” for a fault or a misdeed unless there exists some world where a legitimate excuse would solve everything?

Yet “no excuse” is so very common. It must be that inexcusable flaws are more interesting.

In Issue # 6 of *The Apostrophe*, we will read of hapless grooms (two of them, in very different circumstances) who seek to please; of an alienated lover searching for a reason, no matter how fantastical, that might explain her paramour’s withdrawal; and a frustrated mother coming to terms with an impossible situation. We will also read a young would-be migrant’s yearning to justify a momentous decision.

At their heart, every one of their excuses is a reason: whether justified or unjustified, these reasons and rationales drive action and emotion, which are, after all, the heart of literature.

When we read about a character we want to know not only who that character is, but why. From these excuses spring our interest, our curiosity, our desire to know more.

Jan Lee, Editor-in-Chief

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# You Had One Job

Simon Berry



“I’m American.”

“So, it’s a cultural thing? Americans not turning up for their own wedding?”

Decima Lee was pissed. She’d deferred the whole marriage-and-breeding caper until the alarm on her biological clock started pinging. Finally ready to do the deed and contribute one (strictly one only) additional grandchild to the dynastic line, she’d spent two years hunting for a suitably docile spouse at professional networking events and society dos. She wasn’t going to be too fussy. Someone with just the basics: height, looks, not overly intelligent, a healthy bank balance and not too closely related. Someone like the sunburned twit standing in front of her.

Tommy Tang offered all of these, together with a cute smile, a taste for experience travel and a lust for high-performance sports cars. He passed his bedroom performance exam with flying

colours (she'd insisted he retake the test several times). All the right boxes being ticked, Decima had pulled the trigger, got herself pregnant and only then got around to seeking *Tai-po's* very necessary approval.

Turned out, spousal due diligence wasn't Decima's forte. In contrast, *Tai-po* had let loose the private investigators who, in turn, had unleashed the omniscience of Google, to discover that Tommy didn't tick a few of the extra boxes Decima should have put on her checklist. Thanks to some expensive lawyers, Tommy might lack a criminal record. But it was a given that he wouldn't be allowed back into the securities industry, either in this lifetime or the next.

*Tai-po* had a few words to say, none of which constituted the approval needed if Decima wanted continued access to the family trust fund. Only when Decima's waistline had become a discussion piece with *Tai-po's* beringed *mah jong* posse did the old lady hold her nose and say the magic words.

Decima promptly told Tommy that they were getting married and that she wasn't changing her name. To make sure he knew where and when he was supposed to turn up, she delegated responsibility for the invitations to him, and WhatsApp'd him the details:

Date: 8/7/2024

Time: 11 o'clock

Place: St. Margaret's Church, 2A Broadwood Rd, Leighton Hill

Knowing Tommy, and also knowing he was more interested in planning a pre-wedding getaway with his mates, she followed up with a second message clarifying that it was 11 a.m., not 11 p.m.

Like all dead fish, Tommy had gone with the flow. He copied the details to the printer, quite literally. Decima gritted her teeth when she found the typo on her WhatsApp message faithfully reproduced in beautiful gold lettering (large font for *Tai-po's*

benefit) but was forced to let it go – in a spate of unprecedented efficiency, Tommy had already dispatched the invitations by snail mail. After sorting out the rest of the logistics, her biggest fear had been arriving at the altar to find him wearing a Grateful Dead T-shirt and the same fish-blood-and-guts stained khaki cargo shorts he was wearing now. Her second biggest worry had been giving birth in the church while the entire invite list live-streamed her swearing and grunting on their social media feeds.

In need of therapy, she'd spent the remaining weeks before the wedding pre-spending *Tai-po's* much-anticipated *lai see*.

“Do you know what it's like turning up to the church with an eight-month bump to find my parents, *my grandmother*, the guests, the priest, photographers ... the damn workers repairing the water fountain thingy? Everyone but my husband-to-be?”

“But –”

“But shit! I was calling hospitals. And where were you? Hanging out with the friggin' fish in Saipan!” She slapped him on his forearm where the sunburn was reddest.

“I had a month and –” Tommy managed to get five machine-gun-quick words out before being shut down again. Using the involuntary down time constructively, he rubbed his arm.

“No, *I* had a month. Less. *You* had one job to do – turn up sober.”

“I'm going to. Of course I am. I've got the tux and everything. The rings –”

“I should put the bloody ring through your nose.” It was still an option. A few sleeping pills added to his single malt and ... it might take a few attempts, but she was confident she could do it.



Sensibly, Tommy decided to let Decima vent. He wondered whether they were still engaged, or whether she would instruct him to make a fresh romantic proposal.

“And now we have to do it over. The dress, both dresses, the banquet ... I ... oww. I don’t have the emotional bandwidth to go through it all again.” She stroked her protruding stomach, reassuring herself rather than the unborn baby.

Mustering his defences, Tommy reached into one of the pockets in his cargo shorts.

“Hell! Even *your* parents made it. Can’t stand me, but they came. We had a nice exchange of e-mails about their hotel bookings. Then they got on a plane from somewhere in the land of the free and flew all the way to Hong Kong to witness their one and only *not* get hitched.”

“But the wedding’s not ’till next month!” He waved the double-folded invitation around like he was fending off a drone attack.

“Next month!? Are you still growing weed on the roof? Because I told you to stop before we got another visit from the police. Next month? We’d be spending our honeymoon in the maternity ward!” They hadn’t been planning on going anywhere except HKTV Mall, to stock up on diapers and noise-cancelling headphones.

He checked the text she’d sent him against the gold-lettered invitation. “I put it in my calendar: August 7<sup>th</sup>. We’re getting married on August 7<sup>th</sup>. In the morning, like you –”

“8<sup>th</sup> July,” she countered. “How could you ...” she trailed off as he shoved his phone under her nose, and the penny dropped. “You Americans really are different. Now, can you call my driver? My water just broke.”



# The Day a Doctor in Hong Kong Tells Me My Daughter Might Need Psychiatric Drugs

Shikha S. Lamba

I walk too fast. I know that because every time we walk together, she tells me that. *How can you move so quickly through a huge crowd of people?* she asks, and I tell her I've been a New Yorker and a Delhiite. We know crowds. We know crowds where people rush and move between each other like desperate boats grasping for shores. I don't say it, but this is what it felt like to me: a mother desperate to get her child ashore.

*Why won't we see this doctor again?* she asked after I walked out of our appointment, fuming. And I say to her, as clearly as I can through my surge of anger. Because doctors need to be good investigators, I tell her.

Because I cannot tolerate a rushed diagnosis or a casual attitude, not from a \$1,200 appointment, not from a face wearing a good Chinese pedigree, holding degrees from England and Scotland, flaunting a white coat and an accent that cost millions. I cannot accept that someone who appears so highly skilled has nothing to offer except excuses.

*There isn't much we can do,* he tells us.  
*We can always try these medicines,* he tells us.  
*Of course, there are side effects,* he tells us.  
*Or we can just wait and watch,* he tells us.



# Play Stupid Games

Julian Lyden

In my defence, I never *intended* my nephew to become an international drug baron. It was an innocent mistake, and I have apologised on more than one occasion. Accidents happen, and I think it is high time that my sister put the whole thing behind us.

Even before the unfortunate mishap at the child's first birthday, there was always a little friction in our relationship. I prefer to attribute this to the laws of physics, rather than to any defect of character on her part. Whenever two objects rub together, a certain amount of heat is generated. I can only assume that nine months jiggling around together in our mother's womb left her a little warm under the collar where I am concerned. I like to make the best of people, so this is what I choose to believe. Although, I suspect, her volatile female hormones may also play a part.

Mercurial as she may be, I will say one thing for my sister – she has impeccable taste in men. She can look through superficial details, like character and values, and see the real man beneath. Her chosen husband really is a prince among men. As rich as Croesus and as docile as an anaesthetised labrador, he comes from a Cypriot family with a lot of ships. His real name is hard to pronounce after a few single-malts, so I like to call him Dyson, because he really is a cyclonic sucker.

Dyson and I became firm friends the moment we met. Early in our relationship he was kind enough to help me out with some liquidity problems I was having. We agreed that it would be better if neither of us mentioned the loan to my sister. As a man of honour, I insisted on paying him back at the first opportunity. As my only alternative source of funds was my sister, I borrowed the sum from her, adding a little extra for ongoing expenses, and making the same promise of mutual secrecy. It was an excellent

arrangement for all concerned. They both got paid on time, and I was able to cycle the debt four or five times, and more than quadruple the principal. Sadly, the elegant scheme was ruined by careless talk on Dyson's part. My sister was furious with us both. For a time, it looked like their upcoming wedding would be called off. Fortunately, good sense and better natures prevailed, and Dyson agreed to cut out the middleman and pay my sister back directly. Happy to see harmony restored, I had the grace not to complain about the loss of my credit line.

I mention all of this, not to cast my sister in an unfavourable light, but to illustrate the pains to which I will go to maintain harmony within the family. Like many victims of bullying, I have suffered in silence, and I hope my story will inspire others to live their own truths.

The drug baron thing? I do apologise. Pour me another drop of that brandy and I will start at the beginning.

My nephew's fate was sealed on his mother's sixteenth birthday. It was my birthday too, but such was the trauma of that day, my wounded subconscious has suppressed many of the details. I only know that it should have been a happy day. Our parents had recently separated, so we were swimming in cash as we auctioned our affections to the highest bidder. Better still, my grandparents were visiting, so the ancestral bank was well and truly open. The only cloud on the horizon was that my sister was going through a political phase. Not satisfied with the amount of conflict at home, she had decided to pick a fight with the unsuspecting Taliban.

I should say at this point, that, personally, I have never had a quarrel with the Taliban. For me, they are handsome, free-spirited chaps with an innovative take on headwear. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't, but they are willing to take sartorial risks and that is how we move forward as a species.

No. I'm sorry – you're quite wrong. The Taliban are *highly* relevant to my nephew's career. They are one of his best suppliers. But – if you insist – give me a top-up and I'll get back to our sixteenth birthday.

My sister wanted to spend the auspicious day delivering a petition to the Afghan embassy, protesting against the Taliban's treatment of zoo animals and women. Poor child of a broken home that she was, nobody spoke against her foolish idea. She spent the morning getting angry and looking up big words in her thesaurus, and then Grandpa drove us all across town to present our demands to the mullahs. Alas, fate chose that moment to enter the chat, and decreed that the embassy should be closed that day for all consular services and the receipt of petitions. My sister pouted. She flushed. And she appeared to be on the narrow verge of stamping her foot. A family durbar was hastily convened and it was decided that we would respond by staging a twenty-four-hour hunger strike in the privacy of our home. My sister would chronicle the event in the school magazine. That, apparently, would show them. Grandpa and I attempted to raise a counter-protest, but representations from the patriarchy were deemed inadmissible. So, nobody could hold Grandpa responsible – or *dream* of blaming me – for the sequence of events that ensued.

A kindly old soul, Grandpa was heartbroken that I should have to spend my sixteenth birthday in this way. A spirit of quiet rebellion rose up in his chest. When the women weren't looking, he beckoned me into the pantry and poured a nip of whisky into the cap of his hip-flask. 'It will burn a little at first, my boy, but if you stick with it, scotch will become a life-long friend. Whenever things get a little too much at home, slip away and have yourself a dram. Your life will be the better for it.'

He was, of course, absolutely right – even if he was a bit limited in his list of self-prescribed medications. With frequent visits to

the pantry, my birthday passed in a happy haze. By the end of the day, I had developed quite a taste for it.

Well, if you insist, I'll have a small one, then. Your good health!

Now, before you accuse me of hiding from my problems – or my grandpa of leading me astray – you need to understand the severity of the provocation. After that, my sister went through a series of phases, embracing religion, atheism, veganism and bouldering in quick succession. None of this could be borne without intensive sedation.

Take their engagement party, for example, which they held in the Ayurvedic vegan restaurant where they had their first date. Dozens of bald white men with ginger beards kept appearing with plates of roadside weeds and charred root vegetables. To be fair, there may have only been one man with a red beard, but Grandpa and I had to hit our respective hip-flasks pretty hard to get through the forty-five-minute slide-show of my sister and Dyson mooning all over each other. The photographer – a friend of my sister, apparently – had a very loose grasp on the line between sensuality and sex-crime. None of the guests will ever look at a roasted parsnip in the same way. It was as though they were deliberately driving us to drink.

But the engagement was nothing compared to the wedding. It wasn't so much my sister's tantrums, or the monstrous arrogance of expecting people who don't own ships to fly to Bali for a week. The problem was that she had entered what I call her cultural appropriation phase. She wanted a Buddhist ceremony, which was a bit capricious given her complete ignorance of that religion (she had flirted with becoming an Anglican – or was it an Armenian? – I forget). The problem was, she didn't like the abbot that the hotel had lined up. He was too old and ugly. She wanted photogenic *little* monks, and she wanted them to serve champagne and canapés after the ceremony. And while she was at it, she wanted to exchange her vows under an arbour of white



roses, with an elephant in attendance. The wedding planner burst into tears, and the hotel manager took immediate compassionate leave. Poor Dyson just smiled and sold another Cape-size oil tanker.

The evening before the wedding, the guests assembled for a quiet dinner, complete with fireworks, a string quartet, and a local Barry Manilow tribute act. Everything was going well until my sister noticed that the sun was setting in the wrong direction.

‘It’s setting over the island,’ she told the hotel’s duty manager, her right eye twitching menacingly. ‘It’s *supposed* to be setting over the sea. I ordered a sunset wedding on the beach.’

The duty manager did his best to explain that Nusa Dua was on the west side of the island. He would see what he could do, but it was unlikely that the sun would be prepared to set in the opposite direction. Dyson reached for his wallet, but there was nothing to be done. Crisis talks were held. The wedding would have to be shifted to the morning. We would all need to get up at five a.m. to ensure the ceremony was appropriately cinematic.

Grandpa and I had a little conflagration of our own. We agreed that five a.m. was more of a late night than an early morning, and since there was no way we could get through the ceremony without liquid fortification, we ordered a car and headed off to the bright lights of Kuta. It might be best to cast a veil over the events of that evening. Suffice it to say, Grandpa, who was by now confined to a wheelchair, made quite an impact on the dance floors of Jalan Legian. We diligently kept an eye on our watches, and we would have been in good time for the wedding ceremony had we not gallantly escorted some Dutch backpackers back to their hotel. We might have just slipped in the back of the ceremony but my sister wanted Grandpa to give her away. By the time we made it to the hotel, the sun was a little higher in the sky than I could reasonably have anticipated. When we joined the festivities there was a perceptible chill in the air. The

under-twelve soccer team, who were standing in for the recalcitrant monks, had eaten all the canapés and they stood around yawning and scratching their freshly-shaved heads. The mahout was fighting to stop his elephant eating the roses over the arbour, and my mother was arguing with some German hotel guests who were trying to reserve sunbeds by the pool. To my eyes, Grandpa looked appropriately festive in a feather boa and some strings of beads he had picked up in Kuta, but my sister appeared to be underwhelmed. And to be fair, his wheelchair did meander a bit as he escorted her to the makeshift altar. Still, all's well that ends well. Rings were exchanged, the groom kissed the bride, and we all learned a good lesson about elephants, white roses, and explosive diarrhoea.

I certainly will get to the point. You have my word as a gentleman. But I think it would be remiss of me – remiss of us all in fact – not to drink a toast to the memory of my grandpa. Little did we know at the time, but he was not long for this world. It is difficult to know the exact cause of his unexpected death – and I'm not the sort of man to make accusations – but I am pretty certain my sister was responsible.

Within weeks of the marriage, she announced that she and Dyson were pregnant. *Both of them?* I asked. I will say nothing about her indecent haste to procreate. That is her business (and, one assumes, Dyson's). What killed Grandpa was the ordeal of something called a 'gender-reveal' party and the accompanying slideshow, documenting the development of her 'baby body.' Poor Grandpa sat slumped in his chair, drinking Glenfiddich through a straw. I can only thank God that he did not live to endure the birth, or the secular baptism ceremony, or, for that matter, the child's first birthday party, which you are so keen to hear about.

With Grandpa looking down from above, I had to brave that event on my own. And what an event it was. Still firmly rooted in her cultural appropriation phase, my sister had decided that the

kid would perform a Chinese grabbing test. This is a charming, time-honoured ceremony in which symbolic objects are laid out in front of the yearling child. By observing which object he grabs, the family can divine what the future holds. If he picks up a paintbrush, he will be an artist. If he chooses an abacus, he will go into accounting. And so on. My only objection – and I think it’s a fair one – is that nobody in our family is Chinese. My counter proposal – that we observe the Scottish tradition of wetting the baby’s head with whisky – did not go down well. Even so, I was determined to do the right thing by my sadly depleted family. And out of nothing but love for my sister, I decided that I would be far better company if I powdered my nose with a little Colombian sherbet.

My sacrifice was not in vain. I was attentive. I was charming. I was genuinely happy to be there. I even remembered a gift for the child – a four thousand-piece Lego Death Star that Dyson had funded. When the time came for the grabbing ceremony, I was brimming with excitement. Would he go for the racing car, or the miniature ukulele? Perhaps he would choose a stethoscope and become a doctor. I could hardly wait.

Just as the kid started to crawl forward, somebody dropped a stack of plates in the kitchen. Excited as I was, it was hardly my fault that I pulled my hands out of my pockets rather quickly, and inadvertently dropped a tiny Ziplock bag on the rug. I assume it was me, but it could have been anyone. Anyway, by the time we all turned our attention back to the child, he was clutching a gram of cocaine in his chubby little fist.

So! There you have it, gentlemen. Or should I say, *caballeros*? That is how my nephew became *El Cocodrilo*. I can see you are surprised. I’m still a little surprised myself, to be honest. Now, I’m afraid I’ve come out tonight without my wallet, but if you just send the bill up to the big *hacienda* on the top of the hill there, my nephew will be delighted to pay it in the morning. I must be off. *Buenas noches* to you all!



# So What Am I Thinking

Cassandra Lee Yieng

So what am I thinking  
But to leave this nagging feeling alone  
That won't leave me alone?

So what am I thinking  
But to leave the place where I've lived  
For twenty plus years of my life?  
Save that –  
I'm scared

So what am I thinking?  
I don't want to think too hard  
But then  
If I don't think, others will

So what am I thinking?



# Cud

Natalie Wong



*My friend and I were out researching late — on that night hike on Lantau Island, the one I told you about. And then we hear this, like, quiet rustling from the trees. And my friend looks at me and we both know something's wrong. Then, six buffaloes come charging at us.*

Jellyfish Man's voice was trembling. I loved the sound of it.

*My friend runs and runs and climbs up a tree. But the buffaloes chase him. I cover myself in mud to hide, and crawl downstream. The buffaloes keep storming the area and ramming the tree my friend is in. He's crying and screaming. Then, a very angry one rushes over to me, and I roll out of the way. My head would've been crushed by the buffalo's hooves. It's over now.*

I played Jellyfish Man's voice message again. I scrolled through all the unanswered messages I had sent.

“Do you want to meet up”

“How are you?”

“I miss you”

I look up from the steak I’ve been cutting to face my council of friends sitting at the dinner table. My friend takes my phone and replays parts of the voice message again.

“That was the last time he messaged?” my friend asks.

“Yes. It’s been two weeks.”

My friend pauses. They’re all deep in thought. Bless them for trying to help me.

“Ever since he went on that hike, he hasn’t been the same. The heart’s gone out of him. It’s like he lost all his feelings for me.”

My friend’s boyfriend chimes in, “He probably just met someone else. Or he stopped liking you. You shouldn’t take it personally.”

The council adjourns. I’d get tired of listening to my sad tales about getting heartbroken over and over again if I were them. My heart is like this steak I’ve been chewing on: dense and sinewy.

Soon enough, we get going. I tell my friends that I’ll go dancing with them tonight. That’ll get my spirits up, they say.

Maybe Jellyfish Man is just taking longer to reply to me because he’s busy. He’s a graduate student, after all, studying jellyfish, of all things. I bumped into him earlier this summer at Ocean Park, where he was an assistant at the jellyfish breeding lab. I was working part-time on the other side of the park at the Hair Raiser. My job was to remind children that the minimum height to ride the rollercoaster was 120 centimeters.

Jellyfish Man snuck me into his jellyfish lab after my shift ended. He always had a dissatisfied look on his face when he

was in the lab. “Shouldn’t I be out in the real ocean and not in Ocean Park?” he kept asking himself.

Fair point.

In the lab, the jellyfish were barely visible in their clear glass tanks. Without the strobing, rainbow-colored lights of the exhibit to illuminate their bodies, the jellyfish looked like wads of phlegm that I could have coughed up in the sink.

“Why do you keep them in round tanks?”

He leaned in. “If we put the jellies in rectangular tanks,” he said, “they can’t flow with the current, and they’d all get stuck in a corner.” I think that was probably when I fell in love with him.

We got a room at a hotel nearby. I placed my head on his chest and fell asleep to his heartbeat. He was the warmest thing I’d felt in a long time. At three in the morning, we awoke to the sound of texts pinging on his phone.

“You up? It’s getting hot.”

The jellyfish tank temperature monitor sent him a text every time the temperature fluctuated outside an acceptable range. He put on his shirt backward, ready to leave, but I stopped him from bolting out of the door.

“Do you think I’m an unsettling person?”

He gave me the same look as he does to those jellyfish, a nurturing pity.

“No, not at all. I think you’re a relaxed and happy person.”

I felt it again. That familiar flash of pity. He kissed me goodbye. I’ve been thinking about that kiss ever since.



The next day, with my only pair of hiking boots on, I board the last night ferry to Lantau and wave to the ferry master. The next ferry isn't until tomorrow morning. Lantau Island is enormous and I don't know what or who I'm supposed to be looking for exactly. I know it's not the best idea to go alone, but I've written down the hotline for stranded hikers that I heard on RTHK. One of my talents is getting lost and found.

The air is tepid. I find myself on a country trail in the wetlands. The mangroves that grow between the wetlands and the sea protrude at unnatural angles, like people caught in a snare. The light of my torch flashes like a camera shutter, catching the undergrowth. The terrain is level, but I watch my feet in case they snag on tree roots. I wish he was with me on this trek. He would know how to navigate an environment like this.

The water buffaloes that live here are known to roam around freely. Jellyfish Man is a gentle person. He wouldn't do anything to provoke them. He must have been traumatized or deeply hurt to change just like that. He cared about the buffaloes as much as he cared about me.

As I walk along the path, I think I hear my grandmother's voice telling me I'm making a mistake.

"You're a tiger," my grandmother told me when she read my fortune during our annual trip to the temple. "An ox will break your heart this year." Are oxen and buffaloes the same thing? I suppose the ancient Chinese people who created the Zodiac probably had a broad concept of cows. I no longer wanted to believe her, considering that none of her predictions had come true last year, or the year before that. I went through the motions and lit some incense. Maybe this would be the year I would meet someone nice. The smoke rose higher and higher into the sky, and I hoped that my wish for the new year had been heard.

I am deep into the country trail and swatting the sandflies hovering around my ankles as I go. I stray away from the path

towards a lush patch of green as I ascend into the mountains. The air is cooler here, and I take a big gulp of it. My eyes have trouble adjusting to the dull wash of the moon above and the sweeping light of my torch. Eventually, I find a secluded spot without too many bushes, where I stop and switch the torch off. I take a breath and feel a kind of peace. Other than the whirring insects, I hear nothing. It shouldn't be long until I find signs of the herd. I lick the sweat off my lips.

Suppose I'm not going crazy, and the buffaloes have stolen his heart? And let's say, if I bargain with them and the buffaloes do return his heart to me, and all his feelings for me come back, what will I do with it? His heart will be hot and steaming in my hands. It will pump and pump and pump until I have to pass it to someone else like we're playing hot potato. Once it cools, I'll keep his heart safe.

As if they have been there the entire time, six pairs of glowing red eyes open in the black. The eyes float towards me through the undergrowth. The drone of the jungle is cut by the sound of grass crunching under hooves. The matriarch has the sharpest and longest horns of the herd. The youngest stands in the center, protected by his mother and the rest of the family. Their muscular bodies move as one.

I steady myself from the shock, and bring myself to speak.

“I'm here to get my love back.”

Their leader turns to face me. Her long face is angular and weathered. She breathes out a long huff. She chews in a hypnotic trance, and I focus on her jaws as they move in circles. Her eyes are blood red. The buffaloes stand very, very still. I can't imagine them charging and ravaging and stomping.

The mother flicks her tail and the others let out a low hum, as if speaking an ancient language. The herd begins to turn away from me.

“Please! I know you have it.”

The buffaloes continue on their path. I’ve suffered all this for nothing.

“Wait! If you can’t return his heart, take mine. I no longer have any use for it, and I’d like to get on with my life.”

The leader is chewing and chewing and chewing. Could she be considering my offer?

“Please, please. Just take it.”

I feel like I’ve been rejected by him again.

“It’s no good for me, but I promise it works well. My heart is more than you’ll ever need. I don’t know where to put my love, so you might as well keep it.”

The buffaloes don’t take another look at me.

“What about a trade!” I shout.

I slump down in the damp soil, defeated. I’m stuck here with a heart that nobody wants.

Then, the herd stops. The leader slowly turns her body towards me. She looks me in the eye and shoots out a black tangled mass from her mouth. The dead thing plops there, and makes a little hill on the ground. I take a closer look. It’s not black — it’s red. It’s all that’s left of a heart.

The herd inches towards me as if it smells all the life left in me.

I cradle the mass in my hands, and all of a sudden, a fast beating thumps in my ears, head, and chest. My heart swells, my stomach drops, and sadness floods over me. His heart crumbles in my palms, and a yearning pulsates in my temples. Tears well in my eyes, and I wail until I am sure the whole island can hear

me. I erupt into laughter and feel a pang of pain all at once. The droplets that cling to the spider webs look beautiful. I am drunk on feeling.

The buffalo queen's mouth opens wide.

I run. I run as fast as I can, gripping his dead heart. Liquid terror drips from my fingertips. The herd goes wild and they let out an unearthly shriek. They bellow and chase me. They stampede over the rocks and plants and crush everything in sight. I know that I've wronged them, but I let my legs go as far as they can take me. I don't dare look back.

The ray of the first light hits the side of the mountain. If I make it home, this is what I will do: I'll find a quiet place to burn his heart. I will cherish the moments we had together, and hold his heart close to my own living heart, before setting his ablaze. I'll see the smoke rise, and I will be more careful about who I offer my heart to.

I know those red eyes are coming. They will never stop. No matter where I go, they will come to take my heart, to replace the one I took from them. I'll have to answer for what I've done. It's only fair.

Until then, I live with the heaviness in my chest.

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# Authors

***Simon Berry** is a recovering lawyer who calls Hong Kong home. He has an MFA in creative writing and a PhD in English literature from City University. His novels *A Wasting Asset*, *A Debt To Pay* and *A Road to Follow* are available on Amazon.*

***Shikha S. Lamba** is a jewelry designer and poet living in Hong Kong. She is the co-editor of an online magazine, *Coffee and Conversations*. Shikha's poetry and visual art have been published in journals and magazines in Hong Kong, the US, the UK, Bangladesh, Indonesia, The Netherlands and India. Her poems were nominated for Best of the Net in 2023 and 2024. She is a 2023 Pushcart prize nominee.*

***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.*

***Cassandra Lee Yieng (Cass)** is a writer, artist, musician, and technologist in Hong Kong. Her background in mathematics and computer science informs her publications on Huffington Post, Ada Lovelace Day, National Novel Writing Month ("*Jot, Bin, Pants*"), and StationX. Cass ardently advocated for girls and women in STEM in the 2010's, and her latest fascination is creating the life of her dreams with the power of her thoughts. Her website is [leeyieng.com](http://leeyieng.com).*

***Natalie Wong** is a writer from Hong Kong. She is a graduate of the University of Southern California's Writing for Screen and Television program and has experience developing original TV projects in Asia and the US. She writes about the magical and horrifying things that happen when people can't express their*

*emotions. Recently, her feature screenplay Gor Gor was recognized as a quarter-finalist by the 2023 Academy Nicholl Fellowships in Screenwriting. Natalie's writing has appeared in Cha: An Asian Literary Journal, and she runs the blog You Make Me 食 Sik about food she doesn't like.*

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# Artists



**Scrabble Poetry: Excuses** (cover)  
Rachel P. Smith



**1983 Family Planning**  
Jan Lee



**The Gentleman**  
Matt Ricardo



**Inventory of Excuses**  
Victoria Mae Martin



**The Meaning of Life**  
Charlotte Farhan



**Hand series: poker**  
Rachel P. Smith



**Lone Junk at Dawn**  
Chris Yip





**Dark Path**  
Ricky Sadosa

