The Apostrophe

Issue 8 | Q1/2025 | Character

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
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What a character!

Editor's Note

There are more than a few characters in our lives.

They can be enticing, exciting, and mysterious – like the Snake Woman in the first piece of this issue. They can be attractive and quixotic, like the young Sharif Bashiri. But they are not even necessarily someone we know personally – our parasocial relationships with celebrities, stars, authors are as personal as those we share in living flesh. Eileen Chang, the author who brought notoriety to her homeland while achieving fame far beyond, is among their number.

Yet the characters who move us to action can break our hearts. In “At the Memorial Garden” and “Paradise Revisited” we learn profound truths about ourselves.

In Issue 8, we invite our readers to discover: what is my own character? And where will it take me?

Jan Lee, Editor-in-Chief

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If I Met the White Snake Woman

Elliot Sweet

If I met the white snake woman,
I would push aside her husband and
we would drink wine together.
Her scales shining
like unpainted sunlight.
As the night ended, I would kiss
her carmine mouth.

Our solace would be our small town.
A quiet life of tea, cloudy skies,
and trying to figure out how to sew
garments for a snake.

Hand in hand, we would pull
the Gold Temple into verdant water,
soiling Fa-Hai's malicious attempts.
I would fall for her agate eyes
and her flower dew perfume

If I met the white snake woman,
I would write a new story with her
Not because she was wrong to love,
but because love is a bridge crossing,
a hanging couplet.
Bone brushwork and ink flesh
It is something we do together.

Sharif Bashiri

Sona Schmidt-Harris

I met Sharif Bashiri in the late 1990s at a friend's house, and thought, "Cute."

He was married to Isla for a green card, but Sharif saw it solely as a marriage of convenience, while Isla was hoping for romance to develop. It did not. It was with this understanding that I began a relationship with Sharif, a Fulbright Scholar from Israel. He was admitted to the philosophy program at the University of Utah to earn his PhD.

As a Druze from Northern Israel, Sharif was a perfect candidate. I had never heard of this mysterious group and religion. The Druze don't reveal the full precepts of their religion until the congregant is 40 years old, so there is an element of mystery and contemplation preparing for the unveiling of these truths. Sharif said that he spent hours in caves, meditating in the most silent places he had ever been.

The Druze, though they speak and appear Arabic, side with the Jews politically in Israel. The reasons remain unclear to me. Sharif, ever a pacifist, refused to fight for the Israeli army. The penalty was jail.

“What was it like?” I asked. “How long were you there?”

I was impressed. Someone willing to go to jail for his beliefs held my attention. Ever curious, I asked more questions about the experience.

“‘Jail, jail’ . . . you keep saying ‘jail.’ Sona, I want to forget.”

“I just admire you.”

“It’s like if you worked at the Brumby’s and someone asked you to poison a customer. You cannot.” Brumby’s was a local coffee shop and bakery. It was his attempt to give me an American analogy of why he was willing to go to jail.

Sharif had a crappy apartment far from the university with cinder block walls. When I spent time there, he always cooked.

“I like to do the cooking, Sona.”

Our relationship developed, and I was happy to have him in my life. He asked me if we could live together. I said no, and he was disappointed. I think he saw moving in with me as a solution to his financial problems and his problems with Isla. Still, our relationship continued.

I don’t think there are many men more sensitive than Sharif Bashiri. When I suggested one day that we go to a hotel (and I offered to pay for it), he said, “What? Just go to a hotel? I can’t go to a hotel and fuck! First, you walk around—look at flowers, have a day together.”

When I convey this story to other men, they usually say, “Fucking idiot!” but I treasure it because Sharif really was that sensitive.

In fact, Sharif was so sensitive, he was eventually kicked out of the philosophy department. He rebelled passionately against cognitive interpretations of philosophy. It angered him. “What is he going to do now?” I thought. He applied for the PhD program in the Middle East Center and was enthusiastically accepted. He wrote his dissertation on Ibn Arabi, a Sufi philosopher and prolific writer. Sharif lived and breathed his dissertation. He made a friend, Matt, in the Middle East Center. Sharif had many good things to say about Matt, until he trusted him enough to read a passage from Ibn Arabi.

“Sona, Matt recited Ibn Arabi like he was reading a newspaper. I couldn’t believe it!” Matt committed one of the worst crimes in Sharif Bashiri land, and it took a while to heal their friendship.

I don’t know what possessed us, but Sharif and I called one of those dating phone lines – this was before online dating.

“Hi, my name is Sandy. I like hiking and biking, and, you know, kicking back!”

We laughed and listened to a couple more phone messages.

The next day Sharif said, “What is this shit? ‘Hi, my name is Sandy. I like hiking and biking, and, you know, kicking back!’ I have not heard someone say, ‘I like poetry. I like philosophy.’ I have not heard anyone even say, ‘I pick up a newspaper once in a while.’

“What I am trying to say, Sona, is that I love you.”

Wow! I passed the Sharif Bashiri profundity examination. Not an easy thing to do.

“Did I tell you about the time Hillary dumped me?” He was referring to Hillary Clinton. “Hillary came to meet the Fulbright scholars. She shook my hand, and I tried to talk to her, but she just smiled and moved on. She did not want to talk to me, Sona. But she is a beautiful woman. A lot behind her eyes.”

I brought some roses from my mother’s garden and put them on Sharif’s kitchen table. “They are beautiful,” he said.

But as with all cut flowers, they began to die. We noted this fact, and Sharif went to throw them away. “I cannot,” he said dramatically. I suppose he saw them symbolic of our love. It was strange to be the tougher one in the relationship. I was not used to it, but I took the flowers and did the nasty deed of throwing them away in the trash.

When people liked Sharif Bashiri, they *really* liked Sharif Bashiri. So much so, he had a stalker.

Sharif’s hat disappeared from the library one day, and he assumed he had lost it. Later, he received a note saying, “You will get your hat back if you meet me under the road on 100 South at 10:00 p.m.” This was an underground tunnel between an elementary school and the playground. A very unusual structure for Salt Lake, dark and isolated at 10:00 p.m. Sharif did not retrieve his hat. More notes followed, and I started to get scared that Stalker Girl would find out that I was with Sharif Bashiri and turn on me.

According to Sharif, she was not a happy person. “What does she have? No books. No parties. Just Sharif Bashiri. I, too, would be depressed if all I had was myself.”

Finally, Stalker Girl went too far, and stated in a note that she would kill him if he did not agree to meet her.

“This is serious,” I said. “You need to tell someone at the university.” Sharif felt sorry for Stalker Girl but needed someone

in the department to know that he or the department was possibly in danger. Sharif gave the note to the department secretary who read it and notified Sharif's advisor, Professor Peter, immediately. Professor Peter was concerned and asked for more details. Eventually, a representative from the University of Utah met with her and stated that stalking Sharif Bashiri was not okay. To my relief, after that conference she only popped up now and then in a non-threatening manner.

Sharif Bashiri was the least likely person in my head to follow American basketball, but this, he did, with great enthusiasm. The Utah Jazz had the most winning season ever, and people who were never into basketball got into basketball.

It was good for Sharif, because he spent so much time in his head. He watched the games at the union building and on his crappy TV. When we were together, he kicked me out of his apartment so he could watch the Jazz game alone—as if his powers of concentration could help the Jazz win.

During the NBA playoffs, while we walked, I listened to Sharif for blocks on end about how Karl Malone's wife should not have gone to the playoffs against the Bulls in Chicago. "You know, Sona, Malone's wife is a beautiful girl. What do you do when you are alone with a beautiful girl? You fuck! That will take Malone's concentration off the game and make him tired. I want to say, 'Woman, this is the playoffs!'"

You never can tell where someone's brilliant mind will take them.

Author's note: names have been changed to protect privacy.

The Death of Eileen Chang

Jessica Morris

Editor's note: Eileen Chang (1920–1995) rose to prominence as one of the most popular writers in 1940s Shanghai, and later extended her fame to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and the rest of mainland China. Some of her most prominent works include Lust, Caution *and* Love in a Fallen City.

September 9, 1995:

Lying in bed with the windows open I can almost smell the sea, a light sense of salt wafting in from the Pacific. My apartment on Rochester Avenue in Luoshanji is almost five miles from the water, but I like to imagine that it's closer. Lately, my mind has become an indivisible cloud of English and Chinese. As I grow older, I often feel lightheaded; I gasp for breath, and in those moments experience flashbacks to times in my life that were less solitary than now. I am left in a state of awe and confusion, as if it was a life I had constructed for one of my characters instead of my own.

I have never lived far from the water— born in a *shikumen* on the south bank of Shanghai's Suzhou Creek, studying in Hong Kong, where I often took the short walk from the university to Xihuan Swimming Shed, to watch the horizon and clear my thoughts, writing at The Verandah, overlooking Qianshuiwan after tea with mother.

I get a pain in my chest when I remember learning that Japan had invaded, the university would close, and I would have to leave the fragrant harbor.

On the desk across the room is a stack of old faxes from Taiwan. Some are from Stephen at Crown Publishing, and the others are about a writing award whose name I can no longer remember. Rather than attend the ceremony in person, I sent a photo of myself holding a newspaper. It seems I'm still vain enough to want to prove that my youthful appearance at this age is genuine, but not vain enough to hide my vanity. I'll be seventy-five at the end of the month. I can hear the young mother next door giving her daughter a bath through the thin walls. She has always been polite in the hallway, but after all this time as neighbors I still don't know her name.

I wonder what she would think if she knew the old lady next door was considered by some to be "the best and most important

author in Chinese today." She wouldn't believe it. I don't. I always said that I simply wrote about the trivial things between men and women. I still feel that way, sifting through the memories, the trivial and profound that interweave themselves, as impossible to separate in my mind as Chinese and English.

In my father's house in Shanghai, his oscillation between violence and neglect were each terrifying in their own way. Coming downstairs in the morning to find the *majiang* games had only just broken up from the night before, choking on the smoke that still filled the living room. The tornado of intense love with Hu Lancheng, forged in the desperate loneliness of wartime that drove us to grasp for something real only to find a quickly dissolving façade. The green paint, still wet, in the house on Babingdundao. Quickly marrying Reyher after the abortion, and then his death. Sitting in a café, waiting for someone. Each of these events make up equal parts of my memory. I can no longer determine which are trivial and which are profound, which I lived and which I wrote.

Thinking this way causes the pain in my chest to increase, my breaths ever shorter. Stuck inside these memories, words hover like ghosts. I can't remember where I read them, or maybe they were my own from another time:

"She wasn't a bird in a cage. A bird in a cage, when the cage is opened, can still fly away.

她不是笼子里的鸟。笼子里的鸟，开了笼，还会飞出来。

She was a bird embroidered onto a screen— a white bird in clouds of gold stitched onto a

她是绣在屏风上的鸟—悒郁的紫色缎子屏风上，织金云朵里的一只白鸟。

screen of melancholy purple satin. The years passed; the bird's feathers darkened, mildewed,

年深月久了，羽毛暗了，霉了，给虫蛀了，死也还死在屏风上。

and were eaten by moths, but the bird stayed on the screen even in death.” [1]

[1] 1.张爱玲，《倾城之恋》(北京：北京出版集团公司，2019)，101.
Eileen Chang, Love in a Fallen City (London, The Penguin Group, 2007), 92.

At the Memorial Garden

Sonia Leung

Father, my dear familiar stranger, I wish I could know you better.
I wish we could have at least one father-and-daughter conversation.
The yearning dries my lips with such an unquenchable thirst.
Standing before the spot where your ashes fell,
I feel the effect of time carrying muddy water,
scouring the ground bare.
But I am here, noticing a purple flower
like a small piece of a blood clot.
Petrified, I touch it with my trembling hand.
It says: Pick me (or is it 'Forgive me.')

I wrote the above after the Qingming Festival (Tomb-sweeping Day) in April 2024. My first visit to the memorial garden, where my father rests for eternity, was in 2022 with my mother when I returned from yet another exploration of my life. This year's visit was the first time with the whole family, except my elder sister. As she was still estranged, she avoided all our gatherings.

My father, Leung Wailai（梁維禮）– ‘Wai’ meaning maintain or uphold, and ‘Lai’ meaning manner – passed away from lung cancer at the age of sixty-four in Hong Kong’s Shatin Hospital on 6 August 2011. The Births and Deaths Registry listed his occupation as a building caretaker. Like his other jobs, he took on this role with dedication, often working long hours to provide for our family.

He guarded a large parking building in Kwun Tong’s industrial area. During the Chinese New Year, from the first to the fifteenth day, when drivers passed the guardroom, many handed the guards red packets of money through the window. The red envelope usually contained a HKD twenty note, with more generous ones offering fifty.

On the sixteenth evening of the lunar new year, my father would unload all the packets onto the bed he shared with my mother. The two of them sat up in bed, facing each other, with the pile of envelopes between them. ‘One for you, one for me,’ Father said, and started distributing the packets without separating the fifties from the twenties.

‘One for you,’ Father said with a wide grin, a rare moment of self-satisfaction, and continued, ‘One for me, one for you….’ His grin widened as he went on.

Mother sat opposite him with an equally big smile, a rare moment of affection toward my father.

This could go on for thirty minutes. In the end, each got a bit over one thousand five hundred. The years Father was the building caretaker were among the happiest moments between my parents that my mother could recall.

However, for the rest of the year, my father felt this security guard post was even more demeaning than his factory job. He had worked in a Japanese electronic appliance factory from early 1985, soon after he arrived in Hong Kong from mainland China.

He became a line supervisor a few years later, and earned a certain level of respect, but nowhere near the status he'd had as a doctor in China. Still, it was a significant improvement from being just another line worker – like an ant, indistinguishable from any other.

The promotion enhanced his self-esteem and gave him a sense of belonging. Gradually, he felt at home in that factory, and was prepared to work there until retirement. Unfortunately, the factory moved to Shengzhen to cut costs, as many manufacturers did in the 90s. Father lost his place in the world again.

He tried various jobs after that, but each lasted only a short time. Finally, he settled on the security guard post that my fourth uncle (the only uncle in Hong Kong) introduced. Besides having to work a longer shift (twelve hours, versus nine before) and endure a more physically demanding role (he needed to make rounds to check the carpark's thirteen floors by walking up and down the steps at least twice a day), he had to carry a sprayer, spraying pesticide on the pots and plants all over the parking building on the periphery of each floor. This last task cut him deep. It made him feel like a mainland China farmer.

Father did not look down on the farmers. What hurt him was the shocking reminder of how far he had departed from his former self. The sense of self-doubt gnawed at him. He did what he knew: retreating into himself, smoking, drinking, betting on horse races, anything that helped him to alleviate the pain of reality.

Despite his imperfections, Father's love for Mother was unwavering. Though not always the most considerate, his actions were a testament to the depth of his emotions and his commitment to our family.

When he was diagnosed with lung cancer, it was already at Stage Four – the last stage. He suffered for six months before dying. The diagnosis dealt a devastating blow to our family. It changed the dynamics of our relationships, forcing us to confront the mortality of our flawed, beloved father. His suffering provided a constant reminder of the fragility of life and the inevitability of loss.

The last time I saw him was the day before I went overseas. If there was one thing about me that he was most proud of, it had to be my extensive traveling experience. He wished he could travel worldwide, leaving his sorrowful self behind.

Or maybe that was my reason. We were loners who felt freer on the road alone.

'Our Ling-er 玲兒 (the endearing name in Hokkien my family called me in front of others) has no sense of direction,' Father bragged during the Leung clan's gatherings, 'and yet, she has become a globe-trotter – going to places I didn't know existed before!' The glow of pride on his face made me want to cry.

His pride in my travels was a stark contrast to his previous disapproval. It was as if my ability to navigate the world was a redemption of his own unfulfilled dreams. And it stopped me from telling him, 'Father, I got lost a lot.'

There have been countless moments in my life when I have longed for your guidance, Father. Your wisdom, advice, and presence were always needed, but you were not there. This absence is a void that I will always carry with me, a constant reminder of the loss I have experienced. Your absence is a presence in itself, a silent echo of the love and guidance I still seek from you.

Did you remember how you returned to your hometown, Nanan, knelt in front of the ancestor's tombstones, and cried about how shameful you felt of having a daughter like me, who ran away from home at the age of fifteen? The scene of you crying, collapsing on the ground while Mother and the uncles standing behind you, kept breaking into my dreams, making my one semester in the US feel like hell. I felt that I needed to prove to you that I was not your disgraceful daughter.

I ran away for a reason: I chose to live.

I would have told you, if you had ever asked me or given me a chance to talk with you. If we had that one proper conversation that I yearned for.

You called me a whore the night before I departed for the United States. You thought I stole family money to cover my debts, instead of borrowing it for my overseas study trip. ‘Study?’ you yelled, and laughed the ear-piercing laugh you had when you drank. I wanted to jump from the top floor, to drown out your yelling and laughing.

I put a terrible pressure on myself, both to prove my worthiness to you and to prove it to myself after the rape that I endured when I was fourteen. You never knew about it, but it reached a boiling point while I was abroad. And when I got a B+ instead of the usual A, I had a breakdown. But because of the breakdown, I met an experienced psychologist who helped me to embark on the journey of self-reconstruction.

When I returned to Hong Kong, I felt capable. I accepted a brand-new, challenging job. My performance earned me a good position, great pay, and excellent travel opportunities. That must have been the shifting point, when you started to see my travel as a source of pride.

I am happy you were proud of my travels. But how much more gratifying it would be, if you could only comprehend that I am your same ‘Ling-er’. Without the fifteen-year-old Ling-er, who dared to leave home to explore new possibilities to live on, there would be no successful business executive travelling the world.

Father, I wish you could have seen me for who I was, not what I had become. If we had talked, you would have discovered we had much in common. Like you, I have always been a book lover. I am prone to dramatic mood swings. These are but two character traits I inherited from you.

I wish I could have been braver, and tried harder to break the wall between us.

As I turned to leave your hospital bed, you raised your thumb, indicating me, and then your little finger, indicating yourself. I froze for a moment and then fought back my tears. No, Father, that was not reconciliation. It pained me to see how little you thought of yourself. But it was too heavy a subject to talk about then.

You lost your head of wild hair after the initial attempts at chemotherapy, and your body was reduced to bones. I never thought words like ‘small’ and ‘frail’ could apply to you.

You raised your hand again, giving me all you could, a weak wave, waving me off, releasing me, so that I could continue my journey and conquer the world.

Goodbye, Father. I had much more to say to you. But ultimately, I accepted both of us for who we were. There is nothing to forgive. This acceptance brings me the peace I have longed for. I wish you had felt the same.

Father, I would not thank you for my life. I do not know if I would have chosen to come to this world if I’d had a choice.

But thank you for the little light bulb you installed above my bed when I was about five years old, hoping to help me combat the fear of darkness. It worked wonders, reminding me of your love, no matter how distant and feeble.

Thank you so much for making trips to the police station, to ask for any news of me after I ran away from home. It must have cost you so much pride, and I am so sorry to have put you through it, Father.

Thank you very much for the photograph of me by the waterfall, which became the cover art for my book. I never knew the photo

existed, and only found it after I signed the book contract. I take it as your approval and blessing.

Finally, it felt as if you accepted me for who I am, approved of my journey to get here, and of my writing about our perilous past. Like the stars in the night sky that I see during my long walks, you sent me your love and blessings from afar.

Father, you have lived and made your mark. You supported our family financially by enduring almost three decades of demeaning jobs in Hong Kong. Both you and Mother might have doubted your choice to come here. You may have had your dreams and disappointments. But both of you held our family together and let us, your four children, have a better future. Deep down, we all appreciate both of you dearly.

Father, my dear familiar stranger, we are good.
I did love you and will always do so.
May you rest in peace, my beloved father,
the one and only – 梁維禮。


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Paradise Revisited

Julian Lyden

In the end it was the lack of Marmite that drove Bob Drummond away.

It wasn't that you couldn't buy it anywhere. The gloopy yeast extract was still available in plenty of shops around town. His local supermarket continued to stock Vegemite, which was a perfectly palatable alternative for his morning toast. But when they dropped the Marmite, they finally confirmed the suspicion that had been forming in his mind for several years: this wasn't his home anymore. The place had moved on, and it was time he did the same.

Hong Kong had become his home at some point in the eighties. He couldn't put his finger on the exact date, or even the year, but there had come a time when 'home' stopped meaning a small town in the Scottish Borders and became his government-issued flat at the bottom of Ede Road in Kowloon Tong. Without realising it, he had slipped comfortably into a niche.

Most evenings he would stop off at the Club on his way home for a quick San Miguel. Well, it was usually two, but never more than two, because he was the only bachelor in the group of old hands, and the others had dinner waiting for them at home. On weekends, he would be back at the Club for a few games of lawn bowls and lunch by the pool – Singapore noodles with a good splash of chili sauce to pep them up a wee bit. He usually dined at home, where his part-time maid would leave him grilled chops with mashed potato and boiled vegetables under an upturned plate on the kitchen counter. Depending on the evening, he would choose between HP Brown Sauce and Lee Kum Kee chili sauce. And if he had a slice or two of cheddar for his supper, he had the option of Branston Pickle or mango chutney, with which he had become acquainted on his regular Friday trips to the curry

house with his expat colleagues. Drummond felt his culinary horizons had been widened beyond measure since leaving Scotland.

Some of his friends at the Club left in ’97, not wanting to work for the new regime. But Drummond was happy to stay. His branch of government, the Agriculture and Fisheries Department, became the Agriculture, Fisheries *and Conservation* Department, but nothing else really changed. As the Chief Arboreal Botanist, his main responsibility was the reforestation of country parks, and he enjoyed his work. The Club made use of his expertise too, electing him to the Committee, and putting him in charge of its extensive gardens, which formed an unexpected oasis of green in the middle of Kowloon. He planted flowering trees from around the British Commonwealth, and if he ever stayed for more than two beers in the evening, he would bid them good night as he tottered through the gardens to Gascoigne Road in search of a taxi.

What Bob Drummond really loved about the Club was the video library. It was full of VHS cassettes of BBC sitcoms, and box sets of documentaries on things like British Castles and the Normandy Landings: everything a displaced Brit needed to feel at home. He would sit in his flat in the summer twilight watching *The Two Ronnies* or *Morecambe and Wise*, while fruit bats squabbled in the mango tree outside his open balcony window.

Retirement brought some changes – he had to move out of the government flat, for one. But he filled his days playing bowls and getting under the feet of the gardeners at the Club. The Committee made him an Honorary Life Member and he tried not to notice that there were fewer and fewer people in the bar to have a sundowner with. Those that did pop in were getting younger by the day. He knew that they chuckled at his colonial garb of tailored shorts and long socks, but a bachelor of his age wasn’t going to change the way he dressed, even if it was getting difficult to find replacement socks.

Having blocked it for years, Drummond was finally overruled by the rest of the Committee, who voted to close the video library to make way for a fitness studio. Apparently, nobody watched videos – or even DVDs – anymore. He took a few boxes of cassettes home, but it wasn't the same. The ritual was broken. And so, the seeds of his departure were sown. He understood why the supermarket had stopped selling Marmite. The locals didn't eat it, and the new breed of expats didn't come to this part of town. They all lived in Mid-Levels and Disco Bay, and went to fitness studios.

There was no point feeling sad. The world moved on and that was the end of it.

One evening, as he flicked through endless superhero films in search of something to watch, he thought of his old home on the River Tweed. His brother still lived there. He had been recently widowed, but he seemed happy enough. It would be nice to see a little more of him now that they were both retired and on their own. In bed that night, Drummond dreamed of the old pub on the High Street, which hosted an annual *ceilidh*. He remembered being swung around by strong arms, with the happy faces of his parents and their friends flying past him in a blur. Everything was right with the world, and wee Bobby Drummond could conceive of nothing more wonderful than those evenings. How could anything go wrong when all the adults he knew and loved were in the same room, all happy and relaxed? Heaven, he decided back then, was a *ceilidh*. When he woke in the morning, the decision was made. Although he suspected he was being a sentimental old fool, Drummond had decided to leave.

Old fool indeed, he thought as he sat in the pub with his brother. It had been purchased by a national chain and refurbished as a sports bar long enough ago to have become tatty, without regaining any of its lost character. When the conversation died,

as it always did after the first exchange of pleasantries, the old Drummond boys sat watching the football on different screens. It was the same Scottish teams he remembered, but the business of actually playing the game had been outsourced to Spaniards and Scandinavians, with names he knew he would never remember. The pub had a manager now, not a landlord, who went home to Edinburgh at the weekend, and had never heard of the famous annual *ceilidhs*. His brother said he didn't remember them either, but then he'd never been one for that *teuchter* nonsense. Country dancing was for Highlanders and American tourists, he said. Bob Drummond found he had nothing to say, and he didn't know what to ask people to get them talking.

The old sweet shop had gone from the High Street, along with its big glass jars of sherbet and chunks of fudge, which the locals called tablet. Drummond had not stepped through its doors in half a century, but he still mourned its loss. There was Marmite in abundance at the village Co-op, but no Lee Kum Kee chili sauce. Would he like some Cajun Spicy Wing Sauce? asked the woman behind the counter. He thought not. He was a bit old to be changing his diet for a second time. All the years in Hong Kong had changed the shape of his life. It was nothing drastic, and it had happened imperceptibly. But he could no longer slot back into place in Scotland, or anywhere else for that matter.

He found his body shrinking inside all the layers of clothes. He worried that he was sickening, that the country of his birth was slowly killing him. Each winter, he wondered whether summer would ever come again. When it failed to show up to his satisfaction for the third year in a row, Bob Drummond took matters in hand.

He treated himself to a haircut and a shave at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel Barbershop. They always did a wonderful job. 'You've made me look like a younger man,' he said, winking at

the barber as he handed him a generous tip. It was true. It was as though he had shed a layer of dull old skin. It felt so very good to be back.

He strolled downstairs and bought himself a copy of the *South China Morning Post*. The local news didn't seem to have changed much, which was reassuring. He would do the crossword and the sudoku by the Club's pool in the afternoon. He took the MTR three stops to Jordan. The train was cool and clean as ever. He admired the handsome cove reflected in the train windows, dressed in nice smart shorts and long socks. He hadn't studied his legs for years. They were still good and strong, and his knees would tan-up nicely after a few days in the sun.

It was only when he came out of the station and started to walk along Gascoigne Road to the Club that he started to feel a little nervous. He had reconciled himself to the Fitness Studio and the empty bar, but what if they had messed with his gardens, or taken Singapore noodles off the menu? He reached the side gate, which was always kept locked, and fumbled in his pocket for the key. When he was elected an Honorary Life Member, he had been presented with his own key on an engraved brass fob so that he wouldn't have to walk around to the main entrance. But would it still fit?

It fitted perfectly. The lock and the hinges on the gate were well-oiled. As he walked along the little path that led up the slope beside the bowling green, the warm sun shone through the leaves of his trees. Three different varieties of *Bauhinia* were in flower, their white, pink and purple orchid-like flowers adding a gentle scent to the breeze. It was early in the year for them to be in full bloom.

'Celebrating my return, are you?' he asked. The old banyan at the top of the slope now shaded half of the clubhouse roof. 'And you need cutting back, you rascal,' he said approvingly.

Along the path beside the tennis court stood the row of Chinese fan palms he had planted. They were fully mature now and covered in the small black fruit that brought birds to the gardens.

Settling down at his table beside the pool, he positioned himself so that his knees were in the sunshine and his body in the shade of a large blue parasol. He needn't have worried. The Singapore noodles arrived with a little dish of chili sauce on the side, and the brown bottles of San Miguel were still very, very cold. The waiter was familiar, though Drummond couldn't quite remember his name.

The General Manager came outside to pay his respects. Drummond couldn't remember his name either, but his greeting was effusive. He hoped everything was to Mister Drummond's satisfaction. They had been working hard to keep the gardens looking good, he said.

'It's wonderful,' said Drummond, with a laugh. 'If you'd only kept the video library, I'd never need to leave.'

The General Manager smiled back. 'If you'd like to come with me, Mister Drummond, I have something to show you.'

He led Drummond into the clubhouse, which was just as he remembered it. His name was still there in gold letters on the list of Honorary Life Members and captains of the lawn bowls team. The General Manager took him into the administrative office and unlocked a door he had never been through before. A line of old-fashioned neon tubes pinged and flickered into life. As the lights warmed up, Drummond took in the rows and rows of shelves packed with thousands of dusty video cassettes.

'They were kept in storage in case somebody wanted them,' said the General Manager.

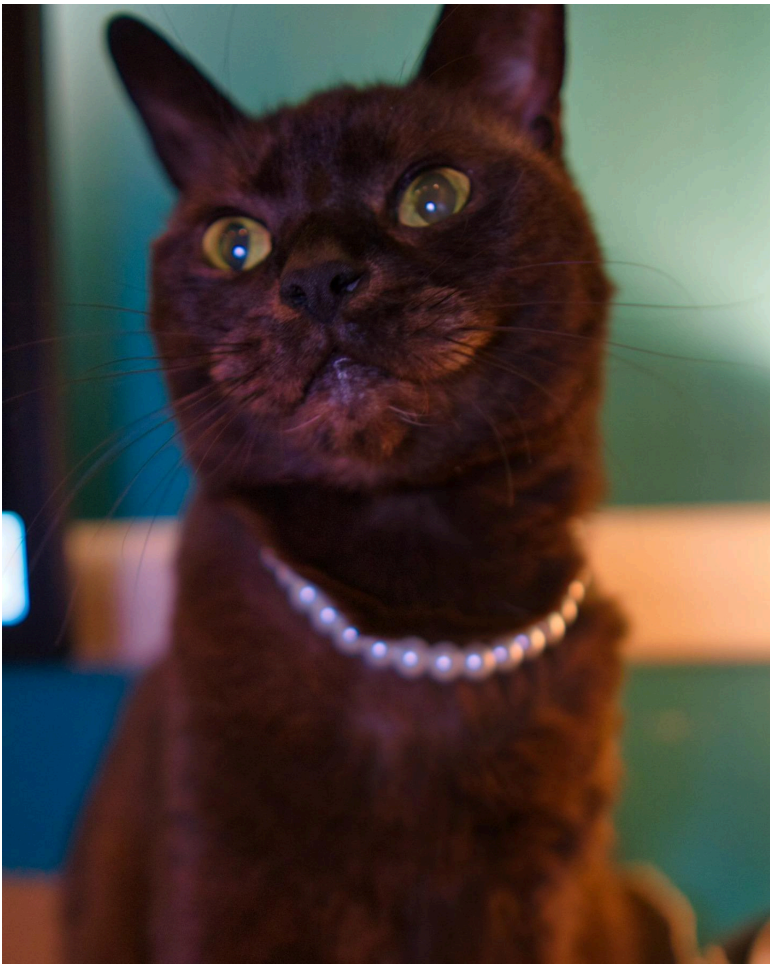
'Incredible!' said Drummond. 'I had no idea.' He walked down one of the aisles, trailing his fingers along the cassettes. The

room was narrow but deep. The rows of videotapes gave way to shelves of big glass jars, full of old-fashioned sweets of every description. Then came the jars of Branston Pickle, mango chutney and endless bottles of HP Sauce and Lee Kum Kee.

‘Heaven!’ breathed Drummond, inspecting a display of knee-length socks. ‘Absolute heaven.’

‘It is, Mister Drummond,’ said the General Manager with a warm smile. ‘That’s exactly what it is. And we’re so very happy to have you here.’

‘Now,’ he went on, ‘everybody is waiting in the bar for your *ceilidh*. Your parents are here, with all the old hands from the bar. Take a few moments to look around, and then you can go up and join them.’



Authors

Sonia Leung *is a Hong Kong-based poet and author of fiction and creative nonfiction. Her awards include Hong Kong's Top Story 2015 and 2016 and Wordview 2013, a UK-based annual global poetry competition. Sonia is the author of* Don't Cry, Phoenix *(2020), an English and Chinese poetry collection with a CD of ten original songs, and the critically acclaimed autobiography* The Girl Who Dreamed: A Hong Kong Memoir of Triumph Against the Odds *(2024). The Chinese version of this memoir,《追夢的少女》will be published in March 2025.*

Julian Lyden *is a Hong Kong-based writer with an interest in folklore, crime and the unseen forces which shape our lives.*

Jessia Morris *is a writer, translator, and special assistant to the GM of a factory in China. Currently splitting time between Suzhou and Hong Kong, she has also lived in San Antonio, Salt Lake City, and Brisbane. Previously, she worked at a tech startup, raced mountain bikes, and baked wedding cakes. Degrees include a BA in History and an MA in Chinese Culture. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in* Renditions, Mad Swirl, Nunum, Voice & Verse*, and the Hong Kong Writer's Circle anthology..*

Sona Schmidt-Harris *Sona Schmidt-Harris is a published poet and fiction writer. Her forthcoming novel,* The First and the Last*, will be published with Europe Books in 2025. As an award-winning journalist, she particularly enjoyed writing profiles of individuals. Travel writing is also in her blood. Her publication debut was in* Short and Long and Even a Song*, the esteemed literary journal of San Miguel Elementary School. She currently calls Lisbon, Portugal, home, where life with her spirited wire fox terrier and husband keeps her on her toes. She continues to be awed by the mystery and grace of the Portuguese.*

Elliot Sweet *is a writer living in Hong Kong often found knitting on the MTR. They have a poetry collection,* All Your Sharp Desire*, exploring desire and pain through mythology, available on Amazon.*

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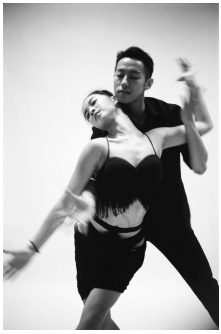
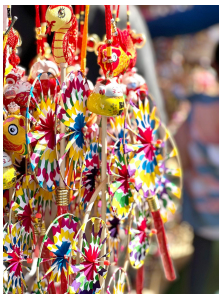
Artists

Characters (cover)
Kasra Shroff

Chicken
Sadie Kaye

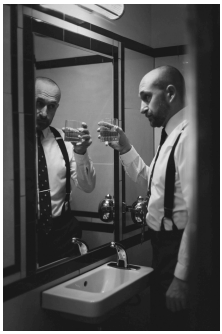


Tranquil Entanglement
Anthony Roussel



Sunlit Pinwheels, Luck Awaits
Shika S. Lamba

Brighton Rocks
Andre Gomez

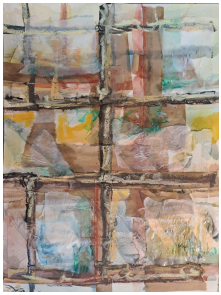


Cheers
Matt Ricardo

Stripes
Julien Pantz

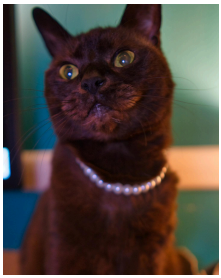
Shanghai Stare
Connie Tsang

Garden of Reconciliation
Sonia Leung



Bamboo
Bethan Clark

Hats
Matt Ricardo



Pearl Necklace
Dom Cunningham