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GENESIS

SOUND AND SILENCE

AN ANTHOLOGY OF WRITING
FROM THE ELTU'S CREATIVE WRITING COMPETITION



ISSUE #7

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ABOUT THE PROJECT

The ELTU's Creative Writing Project and Competition is implemented by the English Language Teaching Unit at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. It launched in the 2019-20 academic year and offers workshops, a campus-wide writing competition, literary events, and publication opportunities for all CUHK students.

The competition encourages students to express themselves creatively and demonstrate their skills in English writing. The seventh issue of this anthology celebrates the achievements from the ELTU's seventh Annual Creative Writing Competition 2025-26 and spotlights CUHK students' interpretations of the competition theme, "**Sound and Silence**."

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EDITOR'S LETTER

The theme for the 2025-2026 CUHK Creative Writing Competition was **Sound and Silence**, which encouraged CU's writers to investigate two concepts in constant tension. Their pieces explored sound spaces in nature, urban environments and technology, as well as the imposing silences that linger in familial and romantic relationships. Grief was also a recurring motif in the writing, as writers showcased the silence that those who leave us impart when they go. Thank you to the writers for their trust and the readers for their support; we hope you enjoy every quieting or disquieting piece within these pages.

Kind thanks also go to the team, Dr Benjamin Driscol and Ms Sumie Chan, who helped conduct four creative writing workshops that introduced students to eco-literature and travel writing, as well as the narrative skills of building suspense, and the crossovers between music, lyrics and poetry.

Of course, heartfelt thanks also go to our judges, Dr Patrick Holland (Creative Non-Fiction), Dr Suzanne Wong (Short Story), and Dr Collier Nogues (Poetry), for continuing to offer their keen and expert evaluation, as well as to Ms Wen Yin Cao, our Teaching Assistant, who supported the project and competition throughout the year.

Finally, I want to thank our unit Director, Dr Allen Ho, for continuing to be such a spirited supporter of the project.

All these contributors have helped create a vibrant space for expression at CUHK, and it's our hope we can keep growing this creative home for CU students' writing in the years ahead.

Ms Jenna Lee

Lecturer, English Language Teaching Unit,

The Chinese University of Hong Kong

CREATIVE NON-FICTION



In the Quiet

Lulin Yang

First Prize

The moths came first. In the deep quiet of my first night in Vitkov, with only the soft tap of my keyboard filling the room, I heard it: a small, insistent tapping at the glass. Two moths were throwing themselves against the window, desperate to reach the light inside. I watched them for a long time. Then, without warning, the ghosts of Hong Kong came to find me.

I closed my eyes and suddenly heard the collective hum of

millions — the metallic screech of double-decker ding-ding trams, the overlapping chatter in dense neon alleys, the city pressing itself against you from every direction. In Hong Kong, summer is a hot, wet cloth pressed over the face. Seven million people packed onto a rock of land, dense as a sponge soaked through with water. Noise holds everything up. Sound there proves that you belong to the crowd.

Here, in Vitkov — a small town of six thousand in the Czech Republic, where the volunteer organization had sent me to teach for two months — the sound was missing. I arrived in early May. *"It's a quiet and peaceful place,"* the teacher who picked me up said, smiling. I stepped out of the car into air that smelled of wet grass and woodsmoke, as if I had accidentally walked into a postcard. Lush green hills rolled away in every direction, with white daisies and red clover flowers dotting the meadows. The sun was bright, but the air carried a clean chill.

No traffic hum. No late-night convenience store chime. No elevator ding. In the evenings, I could hear birds calling to each other across the hills, or the occasional bark of a dog far away, swallowed by the distance. At night, in the silence of the wilderness, it felt as if I were the only one left. The streetlamp

outside slanted through the cream-colored curtains, casting a patch of red on the wall. All around was silent and dark. There was nothing but the sound of my fingers tapping on the keyboard.

The silence was a blank page I didn't know how to fill.

* * *

I taught fourteen classes a week. My students ranged from seven to eighteen years old. Each morning, I walked into a classroom and asked the same question to begin: *"Can you hear me?"* They always nodded. But hearing is not understanding. I was teaching in English — my second language — to children who were also learning it as their second language. We were both on the edge of something we had not fully learned. I had not anticipated how lonely that could feel.

Sometimes, I would throw out a question — *"Any ideas?"* — and wait. Silence. The students looked back at me with wide, careful eyes, reading my face instead of answering. Nobody spoke. I wrote things on the board. I tried again. More silence. I felt it like pressure behind the sternum: the particular dread of a

teacher who cannot tell if she has lost the room or simply lost the words.

The youngest one sat in the front row. She was seven, maybe eight, and could barely understand a word I said. But this did not stop her from watching me each morning with amber eyes, unblinking, as if I were a strange star that had landed unexpectedly in her schoolyard. When I spoke, she tilted her head slightly and opened her mouth a little, as if she were tasting my sounds rather than hearing them.

One day I drew a cat on the board — mouth wide open — and mimicked, *"Meow."* The class went quiet for one second. Then she answered me. Her *"Meow"* was small and sharp, like a real kitten accidentally stepping on its own tail. The whole class laughed. It was a short laugh, but it left a crack in something.

After that, I started designing more games. I brought in pictures and sounds and gestures, anything that could cross the distance between my English and theirs. I bought candies as rewards, the sound of which never failed to draw the children's attention. The rustle of plastic wrappers, the soft thud of candies dropping onto desks, the children murmuring the English letters printed on the packaging.

There was a little boy who, whenever he got a candy, would always look at it first, then carefully tuck it into his pocket instead of his mouth. I asked him why he didn't eat it. He shook his head and shyly said something in Czech. An older girl beside him translated: *"He says he wants to take it home to show his mother."*

I don't know exactly when it changed. But somewhere along the way, asking *"Can you hear me?"* stopped feeling lonely. I could hear them back — in the careful unfolding of a sweet wrapper left on the desk, in a girl tapping her pencil at the back of the room, waiting for me to come and see her answer, in the rustle of Czech whispered between kids when they thought I wasn't listening.

* * *

Near the end of a Friday afternoon, some girls came to find me. They were clutching handwritten notes — pencil letters pressed deep into paper, some half-erased and rewritten. They crowded in the doorway, nudging each other forward, like a flock of birds that couldn't quite decide to fly. Finally, the one in front took a breath, walked up to me, fixed her eyes on the paper in her

hands, and read:

"Hi, Lily. This is a gift for you. I made it myself. I hope… you like it."

Before I could speak, the next one continued. *"I want to say you are a very good teacher. Thank you for teaching us."* A pause. Then, slowly: *"I like you."*

I felt like a crystal glass suddenly cradled in their hands — those few stumbling sentences of English were drops of clear water, and at the lightest tap, they hummed and hummed for a long time. The sense of happiness was dizzying.

They began pressing gifts into my hands. A woven blue-and-white bracelet, a small wooden star, and a silver heart-shaped pendant. Each time, one of the girls would murmur something in Czech, and their translator would turn it into English: *"She made this with her mother." "The star was chosen by her. She said stars bring good luck."*

I crouched down and pointed at the bracelet, asking the little

girl in front of me, *"Did you make this yourself?"* She froze, turning her head quickly to the translator. The translator bent down and explained in Czech. Only then did she understand — nodding hard, holding the bracelet up to my eyes, and pointing at her own chest, she said a long sentence in Czech. Their unofficial translator smiled: *"She says she made it herself. It took her a whole week."* I reached out and touched it. Every knot was pulled tight, as if she had feared it might come undone.

At that moment, the fluorescent lights shone quietly, birds called outside, and the distant mountains were green enough to almost melt in the afternoon light. I stood there, my palms full of gifts and candies, and my heart full of sounds that could not be translated.

Those English sentences — written on paper, read aloud, halting and wavering — were themselves a small journey: from Czech to English, from the cold definitions in a dictionary to a girl's small lips, from a heart that wanted to say something to the moment I finally heard it.

* * *

That night, I returned to my apartment and placed those gifts

one by one on the table. The daisies outside the window swayed gently in the wind. Vitkov's night remained quiet. The wind passed through the daisies on the hillside, through the crosses on the church roof, through the cream-colored curtains and onto the pale wall.

I turned off the light. Darkness and silence rushed in together, but they no longer frightened me. The ghosts of Hong Kong had stopped echoing in my ears. In the darkness, I heard my own breathing even and slow, like the petals of daisies closing on a distant hillside at night.

In the silence, I fell asleep.

Vitkov, Czech Republic — May 2026



Black Static in Staccato

Charlene Chung

Second Prize

It is 2:39 am; my roommate stirs in her sleep as I lie there in the dark, eyes closed. A rustle paints the bed black, and a woman lies there covered by a woven blanket, pink cap resting lightly on her head. The sheets crinkle up and shift as she moans and cries about yellowed nails, charley horses, and lightning tearing shatters across her body. A snore rips out; I look again, it is three in the morning, so I roll over and close my eyes for the night.

I am at the barber's when the buzz of a razor lashes out at me. I am flung backwards, and through the slit of a bathroom door, I peer in; my father stood over his wife, whispers gently into her ear, sending strands of light brown fluttering onto yellowed tiles. In the mirror, a gaunt face stares back, hollowed eyes leaning frail against the rise and fall of his chest. I watched him carefully, guiding the razor across her scalp, marking the autumn brought so suddenly in the spring. That night, winter crept in silently as her eyes closed gently; I lifted up the pink cap gingerly and saw the buzz cut across her scalp.

Three blocks away, weathered hands adjust a lectern; I stumble out, hair astray, feet pounding vehemently against the pavement. I am one street away when I spot a child with his hands planted onto the concrete, heaving with great fervor. I inch towards him, and find him shivering as he knelt, nails dug deep into the helm of my shadow. I watch an older woman berate him, before dabbing gently at the corners of his mouth. His fingers twitch erratically, swirling the shadows, and I am yanked backwards ruthlessly by the collar. This time I sit in the living room, infested by dread unspooling from my chest, dripping like venom in the thick silence. Familiar sounds of

retching clamber over me rapidly; like vines grown bold, they eagerly poke and prod at me. Cries drift from beyond the bathroom door, and I am out here. So I put my headphones on over my ears, pick up the pen and write.

You had just turned 14, younger yet taller than me, and we are stretching during class online. I am bent down tying my shoe when I am struck by a six of spades on the forehead. I look up and see you smirking as you stretched your legs over the mat, oblivious to the instructor's narrowing gaze. You flung some more, so I muted our mic and told you to quit it. You were so happy, no scarring over your face, eyes lighting up with mischievous delights. I didn't know we'd turn out like this, siblings estranged, awkward and embarrassed like fish strung apart above a cook's knife.

It is Sunday when I pry open a pack of macaroni, pouring it into the pot till soup splashes back onto my glasses. I squint through the mist and rub at it, but you tut and take it from me, fussing over it with a piece of tissue. Mom, you used to drive us to church, smiling. Was it faith all along, decaying inside your body? You hold my hand as I climb over the stone walls back

to kindergarten just opposite the church you love. I was never afraid of falling, you know; even if I did, it would be into a soft embrace. You grew tired over the years, I think; maybe it was faith, withering silently like a petal in winter.



The Sound of the Basement

Jing Chen

Honourable Mention

1

At the end of 2021, on a freezing winter night, I arrived at Wei's home, a 20-square-meter basement at a remote residential compound by the Fifth Ring Road in Beijing. She insisted on making a batch of dumplings for me. She quickly kneaded the

dough and chopped the filling, all the while talking about past trivialities. Her voice was loud and fast, her chuckles intertwining with the clatter from the cutting board. In this space that belonged entirely to herself, all the words she had been forced to swallow during the day under the roofs of others were finally melting away.

"When I first came to Beijing to work as a live-in nanny, I didn't even know how to make dumplings. The employer said, 'We're eating dumplings tonight.' I sat in the kitchen, getting so anxious that I cried. How could a Southerner know how to wrap them? If I couldn't, what were we going to eat for dinner?" Wei smiled wryly, the corners of her eyes bending into shallow crow's feet. "From that day on, that's how I learned."

More than twenty years ago, she squeezed onto a green train bound for Beijing. Back then, this 18-year-old girl spoke in a blunt and straightforward manner. When she saw one-yuan coins scattered all over her employer's house, she ran to remind them: "Put your coins away, this one, and that one." When she talked about this with a relative, they laughed at her: "Silly girl, they were guarding against you!" She was greatly shocked: "Why is life in the city so complicated? When I lived in the

countryside, I didn't even lock the door when I went out."

It was the first time she realized that keeping quiet and thinking twice were part of working under someone else's roof—and to her, that was much more difficult than making dumplings or keeping a house spotless. When she quit that job, which she had for less than a year, she swore never to work as a live-in nanny again for the rest of her life.

2

Over the next ten years, Wei tried various small businesses, scraping together a living in the crevices of the city. She was married and pregnant; and yet, lacking the local household registration file, she paid a two-hundred-yuan fine to be admitted to a public hospital for the birth. In the operating room, her lower body was anesthetized, but she still felt the cut across her belly, followed by a "clap" sound, like a basin of water splashing out. People surrounded her, pressing her chest and saying encouraging words. The room spun before her eyes, and an oxygen mask was put over her face to keep her awake. But the moment the child was pulled out, she heard a crisp cry. Returning to the ward, the baby girl fell asleep pressed against her.

When Wei and her husband opened a small restaurant on the Third Ring Road, her daughter was one year old. The toddler pattered around her mother's feet as she served the tables. As business grew and the tables expanded, troublemakers came too—customers who smoked, got drunk, and smashed wine bottles. Wei had to keep her eyes constantly on the child. Once, a single instance of negligence caused the child to step on a burning cigarette butt, scalding her sole into a massive blister. Wei can still hear her wails to this day.

Before the child even had time to grow up, the restaurant was ordered to be demolished, and the family rented a room in the basement. On summer nights in Beijing, torrential rain would pour backward into the basement. The ceiling, connected to the drainage pipes of the residents upstairs, would leak rainwater down on the floor. Wei would fix them by wrapping the pipes with tape, hanging plastic bags underneath to catch the water. Her little girl acted as her commander, her fingers pointing to the places to fix: "Mom, it's dripping here; Mom, it's dripping there." When she grew a bit older, the daughter would help her mother sweep out the water, joking around in the midst of their labor: "Look at the way we look, we could be filming a flood relief TV show!"

Wei's voice slowed down. After a moment of silence, she said, "I owe my child too much. At some employers' houses, when I see them so busy that they barely have time for home, I can't help but advise them: 'Spend more time with your children. Don't repeat my mistakes.'"

When the child turned ten, her school for migrant workers was demolished. During that summer vacation, Wei's brother and nephew came to visit Beijing. Her brother urged her to leave the child with the elderly back home so she could focus on making money. "You're working hard to make money, isn't it all for her?"

As the summer vacation was ending, Wei asked her, "Girl, do you want to go back to our hometown for school with your older cousin?"

The child said, "Sure."

After her daughter left, the basement became quiet.

Back in their hometown, the daughter made phone calls to her mother every day, crying the moment the call connected. She refused to eat, insisting that her mother come home. Having no other choice, Wei went back to accompany her for a week, but

as soon as she left, the child refused to eat or drink again.

The daughter fiercely guarded her mother's things, forbidding anyone else to touch them. She protected the quilt Wei had slept on and the stool she had sat on. If her grandfather reached for the stool, she would stop him: "No, Grandpa, that's where my mom sits." When her grandfather slept nearby, she would guard her pillow: "Grandpa, you can't sleep on this. It's my mom's; it has her scent."

The child also complained to her grandparents about many other things: the food tasted bad, the weather was hot and humid, and the bike ride to school was so far. When going uphill, it felt as though no matter how hard she tried, she could never reach the top. But gradually, because nothing could be changed, these complaints faded away.

After half a year, the child no longer insisted her mother come home.

3

Having passed forty, Wei started doing domestic work again. Unlike twenty years ago, she no longer worked as a live-in nanny, but as an hourly worker drifting among more than ten

households. Wei heads out at five o'clock every morning and returns at seven o'clock in the evening. For the past ten years, seven days a week, it has always been like this.

In the residential compound where Wei worked, those educated women returning home from work would always carry fresh flowers, fruits, or shopping bags. When passing by them, Wei never dared to look at those flowers directly. Her favorite clothes used to be brightly colored skirts and flared sleeves; but after becoming a domestic worker, those were all changed into loose, dark tops and pants.

Once, when shopping with her mother, the daughter suddenly said: "Mom, how about I buy a bouquet of fresh flowers to bring back, too?"

"Oh, no. That stuff can't be kept alive long. At most a few days. Then it withers."

After her daughter went back to their hometown, many of her thoughts changed. One day, she told Wei a story she saw on her phone: A mother, whose family was not wealthy, spent money to buy a pot worth over ten thousand yuan. The only one who was happy was the child, who said, "Mom, I have eaten the best meal in this world." Wei found the story baffling, but it

led her to speculate on what a daughter might expect: perhaps other mothers knew how to actually live a life, while she only knew how to work.

After her daughter left, the thing Wei feared most gradually became a reality. When the child was by her side, Wei often pushed her to catch up with the schoolwork, but once back in their hometown, the girl's grades began to slip.

She called her daughter every day to track her exam scores, but as the girl's senior year approached, her grandfather said the child was losing all interest in learning. Wei quit her job, returned to their hometown, and rented a room to accompany her child, working two part-time jobs to support the family.

One evening, while Wei was washing clothes in the room, the daughter walked in and said, "Mom, I want to change schools. I don't want to stay in this school."

"Why? I don't have the capability to change your school."

"The teacher said right in front of the whole class, 'None of you will pass, not a single one will pass.'"

"You don't have to care about what she said."

Then, the girl completely broke down. She accused her mother of not loving her, resenting that her mother, while neglecting her, had placed demands upon her. Wei wanted to argue that she did love her, but her words carried no weight before her daughter. Sliding down onto the floor, the girl began to wail in a way that Wei had never seen before.

Wei stopped trying to explain, picked up a basin of clothes, and walked out to rinse them. She heard her daughter crying behind her; she didn't speak to her, hoping that letting her stay by herself might help her quiet down. After Wei came back, her daughter was no longer crying. Coming back from school the next day, while she was clearing the table, her daughter hugged her mother from behind. "Mom, I was wrong. I won't ask to change schools anymore." Wei turned back to face her daughter, unable to restrain her tears any longer.

4

Wei told me that there were many mountains in her hometown, and no matter where you walked, all you could see were mountains. Those mountains wrapped people inside like a belly. "Walking on my way home from school, looking at the mountains all around me, I thought to myself: When I grow up,

I must walk out of here."

Her daughter failing to get into college was a lifelong regret for Wei. She felt she had made a mistake that ruined her daughter's future. "Her grades were exceptionally good in primary school. If I hadn't left her back home, it wouldn't have turned out like this."

Now, her daughter found an internship in Shanghai and sent a photo of her dormitory. Wei moved her fingers across the screen, zooming in on the photo, analyzing a corner of the bed: the clothes hanging over the window, a dark leather women's bag on the dressing table, and a plush husky dog toy lying on the quilt.

"Girl, why do you guys hang your clothes in the bedroom? Isn't it humid?" "They're hung there after they dry." "That bag isn't yours, right?" "Yeah, how did you know?" "That dog must be yours." "Yes, it's a husky." The daughter said in surprise, "Mom, you could totally be a police officer." Wei smiled. When she went to work at people's houses, she would glance at the slippers by the door, and she would know who was at home.

Wei urged her to come to Beijing after graduation so she could "cook for her every day". Her daughter retorted with disbelief:

"Can you even manage to eat your own meals on time?"

Wei stopped her recollection and smiled at me again – something she did whenever she felt helpless. "I guess she still hates me for what I have done. I heard that some children would never forgive their parents, sometimes for the poverty they brought, sometimes for the pain."

Wei chose not to touch those sensitive nerves, simply reminding her daughter to get some rest.

Next to her double bed was that small single bed in pink, with childhood doodles on the wall. That was her daughter's bed. Wei had kept it, hoping her girl would come here more often. Many differences remained untouched, but Wei consoled herself with one thought: *my child still has time to grow up, and one day, she will change her mind.*



Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!

Xu Mingnuo, Maggie

Honourable Mention

Since moving to Hong Kong, I have been haunted by a sound I still do not know how to describe.

The first time I heard it was on a humid summer night. The air conditioner roared above the window, but sleep would not come. I turned under the sheet and finally lay still, listening to my pulse.

Then it came.

A thin cry pushed through the concrete walls.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!"

Five cries, evenly spaced, as if something outside had been wound up and released. My eyes opened. Under the short curtain, pale light entered the room. I stayed still beneath the duvet, trying to name the sound: bird, person, machine, animal in the pipes. None fit. In my mind, the voice became something half-made by the city itself, crouching in the cracks between steel frames and concrete walls, repeating its five notes like a spell.

After it stopped, the room became quiet again. The air conditioner growled, cars moved faintly below, and water clicked inside the pipes. I counted my breaths without meaning to.

Five breaths passed.

Ten.

Nothing came.

The next morning, it returned.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!"

The same five beats reached me before I was fully awake. As a light sleeper, I had no chance against it. I sank into the bedding, pressed my face into the pillow, and hit the pillow once with my hand. For a moment, I imagined the thud landing near the throat of the unseen creature. Then there was only the ache in my knuckles and the city beginning to wake outside.

At lunch, I asked my roommates, "Did you hear that weird screaming? It happened last night and again this morning. Five times."

Zhang did not look up from her toast. "Didn't notice. Maybe someone was watching a video." Ni and Song shook their heads and returned to discussing lunch. Their calmness made me pause. What had entered my night like something from another world became, under the kitchen light, only a possible video, a noise too ordinary to discuss.

After that, the cry became part of the apartment's schedule. It usually arrived around noon, close enough that my body began to expect it. I could be washing a cup, scrolling on my phone, or standing by the desk with one sock in my hand. Then the room would pause for those five beats.

"Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!"

It lasted less than five seconds. Whenever it began, I reached for my phone and pressed record just as the last cry vanished. The recording captured only the room after it: air conditioner, traffic, dust in sunlight. I tried again the next day, and the next. My phone filled with useless recordings, blank proof of my failure.

Slowly, the sound became less like an interruption and more like a strange resident of the house. It had no body, no room number, and no name, yet it kept its own hours. If the cry came, the day felt confirmed. If it did not, the room felt

unfinished, as if something behind the wall had opened its mouth and chosen silence.

I could not catch its body, so I studied its pattern. It never cried four times. It never cried six. Always five notes, sharp and separate, like a machine with only one setting. Sometimes it pressed against the wall; sometimes it hung outside the window or slipped through the pipes. The apartment felt ordinary and unreal at once: clothes on steel poles, steam from instant noodles, my laptop open on the desk, and beyond the wall, a voice without a face calling as if the city had grown a throat.

Until one afternoon, the rule changed.

I was rushing an essay on *Death of a Salesman*, following the fragments of Willy Loman's delusions, when the stagnant air stirred again.

"Ah! Ah! Ah!"

I stopped writing.

Only three?

For more than a month, the cry had always arrived in five parts. This time, the fourth and fifth never came. The last cry cut off strangely, leaving a damp edge in the air. The pattern I had built for it cracked.

The change made the room feel less steady, like a clock slipping out of time. I sat without moving, my pen pressed against the paper until a dark ink spot spread under it. On the page, Willy Loman was losing his grip on reality. In the room, the wall seemed to be listening. The thought was unreasonable, yet the room allowed it. The concrete beside me felt thinner than usual.

I tried to return to my sentence, but the words would not hold still. Willy's delusions, my essay, the three cries, the missing two—all pressed together in the room. At last, I stood and faced the wall.

"Who the hell is screaming? Show yourself!"

After shouting, I sat down again. The room gave nothing back. No "Ah," no knock, no shuffle behind the concrete. Nothing answered.

Not that afternoon, not that night, and not the next day. For several days, the sound vanished. At first, the silence felt like relief. I could write without stopping and sleep without counting. But soon the absence became its own pressure. Around noon, I still paused over my work, my phone near my hand. Perhaps my shout had driven the creature deeper into the building. Perhaps it had only learned to stay still.

This unease followed me into the next Tuesday morning. Academic anxiety had tightened my stomach, so I ate little before pushing my books aside. I gathered the plates I had left from earlier days and carried them to the kitchen, partly to wash them, partly to step away from the silence.

The kitchen was cramped: fridge, sink, induction cooker, and washing machine pushed close together. To let the old

building breathe, the windows were rarely closed. Through the window, I could see the apartments above, below, and opposite mine. I had just squeezed dish soap onto the sponge when a bright song drifted in.

It sounded like the theme song from a Disney fireworks show.

I looked upward. Through the gaps of a white dish rack, I saw part of a face moving in and out of view as she sang: lips, eyes, the bridge of a nose. The slats divided her face into pieces, but the joy in her voice arrived whole.

She was the foreign domestic helper from upstairs. With the melody, I found myself swaying.

When I first arrived in Hong Kong, domestic helpers were among the people I noticed most. I saw them outside school gates holding children's hands, and in parks pushing elderly people in wheelchairs. On Sundays, they gathered across the city: beside Victoria Harbour, on footbridges, in

passages, and along Tai Po Market sidewalks. Cardboard, plastic sheets, and thin mats spread across the ground. Some women ate and chatted; others lay down to rest while the city moved around them.

At first, these scenes made me uneasy. They did not fit my image of Hong Kong as polished and orderly. I wondered whether these gatherings were their chosen leisure, or whether the city had left them few other places to go.

Later, I realized my first reaction had been incomplete. Foreign domestic workers are not a background presence in Hong Kong, even though I had first seen them that way. There are roughly 368,000 of them now, nearly a tenth of the city's workforce, most from the Philippines and Indonesia (Hong Kong Legislative Council, 2025). They move through the same spaces I move through, but in a different rhythm of attention—kitchens, stairwells, school gates, elevators.

On Sundays, the city loosens and reassembles itself. Overpasses and walkways become temporary rooms. People sit on cardboard, share food, stretch out under the open air, and turn public space into something closer to rest. Evelyn Kwok describes these gatherings as makeshift geographies of pause—small interruptions in a city that rarely pauses.

Even sound changes if you listen closely enough. Conversations rise and fall between concrete surfaces; music leaks from portable speakers; laughter moves through corridors designed for transit, not gathering. A 2025 soundscape study in *Euronoise* suggests these sounds are not background noise at all, but part of Hong Kong's living acoustic environment—one that exists whether or not you are paying attention.

After reading these works, I could no longer see the Sunday mats only as disorder. They showed how little private

space these workers might have while living inside other people's homes. They gave me another way to hear the woman upstairs. Her face was still broken by the slats, and I still did not know her name, but her song belonged to a larger soundscape I had passed many times without understanding.

She seemed happy. I stood by the sink, holding the soapy sponge, and let my body follow the light rhythm. The open windows, stacked plates, and sunlight in the lightwell settled into the melody.

Then the song broke off at its highest note.

"Ah!"

My hand stopped in the water. The tap kept running over the plates. I lifted my head.

"Ah! Ah!"

A pause.

"Ah! Ah!"

Two more came after it.

This time, the sound did not vanish into the hollow space I had imagined for weeks. It carried breath, weight, moisture, and an embarrassed ending. The woman above bent from the force, her shoulders rising and falling. Then she rubbed her nose with the back of her hand and gave a small satisfied sigh, as if something in her chest had cleared.

I stayed still, the soapy sponge in my hand.

The five cries had a body.

The fear, useless recordings, creature in the concrete, broken pattern, and my shout at the wall all rearranged around one simple scene: a woman at her sink, singing, washing dishes, and sneezing.

For a moment, I felt almost wronged. How could someone sneeze with that rhythm, that sharpness, that strange regularity? For over a month, I had built a private mythology around another person's body. I had turned a blocked view, repeated noise, and my own unease into proof of something

hidden. The monster had not lived in the wall. It had lived one floor above me, probably unaware that her sneeze had become the center of someone else's fear.

I looked again through the dish rack. Her face was still divided by the white slats: lips, eyes, nose, then only movement. Minutes earlier, her song had lifted us above the cramped kitchen. Now her sneeze placed us back among dishes, water, and damp air. It was too loud, too bodily, almost comic. Yet because of that, it became more human. The creature's call belonged to the same life as the song, the dishes, the Sunday gatherings, and the borrowed public spaces I had slowly learned to read.

The absurdity stayed with me, but it softened. I had been frightened because the sound was strange, and because I could not see the person behind it. Once the sound had a body, it did not become less strange exactly. It became less lonely. The city had not grown a throat to test me. Someone above me

had simply breathed, sung, sneezed, and continued with her morning.

I looked down at the sink. Colored bubbles broke apart in the running water. I turned off the tap. The space returned to its usual noises: water dripping from pipes, a bowl touching metal, a window sliding somewhere above.

Then, quietly enough that it might have been only for myself, I raised my voice toward the ceiling.

"Bless you."

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POETRY



New Grief

Charlene Chung

First Prize

I know Grief like my own son.

I drown him out on days

and nights I listen intently

to recordings

he leaves

after the dial.

At the corner between

the high shelves and the cardboard boxes

a tail flicks annoyed,

beady eyes track ruffled hair

touring the house.

He pauses, sips

from the silence, inspects

the hem of his robe, sewn intricately

in my head

I am an editor of eulogies.

Dear this, dear that, thank you.

He knows I am not paying attention,

stills,

mops his forehead with a handkerchief,

glances at the cat.

I ace the quiz though, so he lets it slide.

Night holds him firm

by the hand, drops him off

early

he lingers

in the frame

awkwardly startles, a

soft patter streaks past

his coat, the creak of the door.

We are graced by soft thuds onto the mattress.

Purring demands

in the silence,

so he clears his throat, checks

his crimson watch and says

‘I’ll leave you two to it,

back in a few’

and sweeps out,

stumbles,

mutters something crude

‘ten more minutes’.

I stroke the patch of fur sprawled

soft whiskers.

Whisper,

how he, like I,

would soon become acquainted–

The new Grief

Gentle, friendly,

perhaps new on the job.

Death’s uncle but with a beard.

He chirps contentedly, and settles

into the familiar space between my arms.

One more night

One more deal with Grief.



White Noise

Florence Ip

Second Prize

He used to tell the kids
to turn off the TV
at the dinner table.

Now he leaves it on
so he and his wife can thank it
for their meal of water-boiled choi sum
and canned lunch meat
as they allow the sound of

strange men and women
to hum along to the
furious symphony of
chopsticks hitting bowls,
scrapping up rice,
as if they had better places to be.

He left his bowl on the table.
Tiny rice pellets splattered
on the ceramic.
She stared and counted
the wasted rice,
belonging to the man
tapping away on his phone
to their children,
to his friends she's never met,
or to another woman that resembles
a younger her.

She chose to let
the TV answer
his silence,

too tired to find the remote
to turn it off.

She carried the bowl to the sink and
let the water wash away the rice
that would stay stuck in the strainer
she won't bother to empty.



Cicada Wall

Sam Yu Wing Chan

Honourable Mention

Inside the wall between my room

and your room, which was once our living room,

now lives a cicada, whose buzzing

must have begun at some point in our life cycle.

Can you take me there?

To that day or night

or that jungle where you fight

for our food and roof?

Can you point it for me?

To that forever waterfall,

I imagine, must be

chaining your feet?

Can you mouth it to me?

The unspoken isle that now

houses your worries,

your droopy eyes.

Can I, despite my blind ears took

your cries for roars,

walk you back to that shallow shore,

where our silent hugs are not better than words.



Paperbark

Vinci Yung

Honourable Mention

The kabuki faces wiped
clean for new paint to grow

shrivelled as paper after rain.
White skin veils the heart, bark by

bark. Chords pulled tight when the
word exfoliates. *Cor pulmonale*.

What remains?
What peels off and flies away?

I almost remember what octave
you spoke in.

The leaves breathe their last breath
then rush towards a new future.

Out there, the cicadas are wailing.



Troubled Waters (A Poem Sequence)

Wangqian Zhou

Honourable Mention

Lugu Lake

From a painful swelling to the flames in snow,
I came here falling, as a hissing tongue
Licked my clotted eyelids open.
In all I saw was you and I,
So cut apart, yet the threads clung tight.

Till loneliness seized hold of my hollow room,
Till it grew wild, too vast and too raw to bear,

Till it swallowed every word that once dulled the ache,
You cradled this echo of something once known,
Mistook the fevered summer for a bed of down.

Till it was about to conquer the joy we never named,
Till it turned into a thorn through your tangled skin,
We returned to our old haunts, traded pleasantries.
That night you drank a pot of poppy milk, and lay by
The River of Motherhood, where frogs sang all July.

Guanyin Harbour

A palmful of blessed water
Grant me seventy-two ways to alter.
Let me be the white moth by your bed,
Shivering in the chill of summer,
Shedding a dust of sliver
Across the long, winding trace of your mind.

If not that,
I'll be the fine book that you shelve,
That you speak of in quiet praise,

Dust off on occasional days,
And sell one day for a handsome price.
If only a line or two copied down —
How lightly elegance is found.

Or else,
Make me the antler on the wall,
Crystallising the joy of seventeen hundred dawns
And the shock of a closing moonfall,
When the feathered arrow silenced all.

Yet you, the mackerel in the mirror,
Drawing boundless magic from the crevice,
Where gods secretly couple,
Spit out a shallow bay of ripples,
And overturn the little canoe that I paddle.

Hong Kong

The wind gripped the bamboo, then loosened it,
Its sound no different from whisking matcha.
I stopped there as well, then studied

How the world was at once vast and crowded.

Take the inland sea, a silent stretch,
Where water rebelled deep within, brushing rivers' edge.
Only seabirds chased the yacht's wake, or rather,
It was the prophet of all birds
Slipping through the parting of waters,
Shedding pale feathers.

Just watching the dusk sway on the sea,
Is enough to intoxicate me.
If I squint my eyes I can dream the Citygate River
Into Victoria Harbour.
Look how everything is parodic.
Even the city is no more than a mimic
Of a far-off land.

And now, I wish to put on a vest.
Burgundy velvet, veil my restless chest!
How strange that one could yearn
For the suffering he never earned.



V e r t i g o

Tang Lok Kan, Kelvin

Honourable Mention

[120 decibels]

clash!

iron kissing iron kissing concrete

the vowels are s p i l l i n g out of the grid

A CACOPHONY OF RUSTED WIRE,

the *scrape-scrape-scrape* of orbit.

teeth grinding against the frequency.

we are too loud to exist.

s n a p .

(a v a c u u m)

...

...

...a moth exhales.

dust settling on the rim of an un-struck bell.

zero hertz.

the absence of geometry.

does the marble bruise when the feather lands?

we drink the whitespace.

we swallow the pause.

| the edge of the drumskin | the edge of the universe |

they are the same boundary.

a single tuning fork

trembling in the throat of a ghost.

hum.

(wait).

hum.

SHORT STORY



Men with Few Words

John Wong

First Prize

AirPods™ ProMax Premium III (*Father's Day* exclusive colorway)

Instruction Manual

Congratulations! You have just purchased the best pair of true wireless earbuds in the world! Please read this user manual before using this product.

i. Package Contents

- A pair of Airpods™ ProMax Premium III

- A charging case

- A symbol of success and opulence

Please note that extra-fast charging cables tailor-made for the AirPods™ ProMax Premium III charging case (price: HKD 599) could be purchased separately on our website.

ii. Exclusive Features

- Latest Active Noise Cancellation (ANC) system that mimics a space-like experience of complete silence

- AI Voice Assistant with more than 20 languages (Includes English, Mandarin Chinese, Spanish, etc., but not some broken Chinese dialects that provide us with zero commercial value like *Teochew*.)

iii. Getting Started

For first-time usage of this product, please connect your *AirPods*™ to your device according to the following steps.

1. Turn on Bluetooth on your device and look for *AirPods*™ *ProMax Premium III*, as displayed on the Bluetooth connection interface.
2. Think about the mortification your father has caused you, especially the times you never explained to him. For instance:

   When you brought your father to Parents' Day because your mother had passed away from breast cancer when you were eight, and he was the only parent that remained. He was a man of few words because he was illiterate and could only speak Cantonese with a heavy *Teochew* accent. You vaguely remember your mom saying that *your once talkative dad had become like this*

because Cantonese was too difficult for him, a refugee who had fled to Hong Kong during the Great Chinese Famine . You were already embarrassed because of his bronze skin, a symbol of having to work outdoors and endure prolonged exposure to sunlight. Then, you told him to stay silent by all means because he either didn't talk at all or he'd make sure everyone in the school heard it. But he broke the promise and hollered questions about dinner ideas right before leaving the campus. You, bearing the guiltiness in silence, yet subdued by your teenager's ego, replied to none of his questions raised that day or the ones raised thereafter for three days.

3. Put on the earbuds, and you should hear *connected* in English (default language).
4. Be genuinely exalted and realize that you've successfully saved up enough money to purchase this luxurious pair of earbuds.

5. Take a stroll down memory lane by reading your old diary from middle school. Go to the particular entry for February 13th, 2016, which reads:

James, Charles, and David, almost everyone in my friend group, have got a pair of AirPods! How rich they must be to buy them like it's nothing! I don't want to continue using these wired earphones; and no way Papa would buy me anything more expensive than HKD 200, he's too broke.

So, I decided to steal Papa's money! He always keeps a bunch of hundred-dollar bills in his wallet, claiming that it makes him feel rich. I came up with a plan to steal one per day when he's taking showers so that he wouldn't notice. It's already day *sixteen* since my plan first kicked off. Today will be the last day if I manage to steal the *thirteenth* because the selling price of

them is HKD 1,299. I fumbled and missed a couple days, but tonight will be my night! If he'd ask *why I have those expensive AirPods,* I would just say I bought a fake model from *Taobao* for HKD 129.

6. Turn the diary to the entry a few days after, which reads:

Sorry, Papa… I lost my AirPods. I went to the Light Rail customer service center and asked if anyone had found my lost AirPods and returned them to the *lost-and-found,* but nobody had. When I slept next to you last night, I cried until morning without sleeping. I know your daily salary is only HKD 500, so about two and a half days of your hard work in the construction site has gone in vain. I planned a thousand ways to apologize to you but…

Sorry.

7. Then dive further into your memory and try to recall your experience of feeling guilty to your father for the first time:

"Hahahaha!" Papa laughed, while watching the *Teochew Opera* on YouTube for two hours after you'd taught him the way to search.

"Papa!" You screamed from your bed in your bratty voice while stomping on your bed. You felt annoyed only because your father had been occupying the only computer for too long. You just wanted to use it to play *Pokémon*, which everyone else in your class was playing.

"Ar-Tung! Are you hungry now? Don't you worry, Papa will stop now and make dinner! I've got a recipe online to make your favorite *Lemon Chicken*!" said your father. Your heart sank hearing this. He had been trying both to work in the construction site under the scorching sun

and to replace *Mama* as the home cook after she passed away last year.

But you were too embarrassed to say anything. You, for the first time, felt a sense of disgrace as a son, watching your father's back when he walked to the kitchen after closing the *Teochew Opera* video on YouTube. So you curled up under the shabby blanket and wiped your tears with it.

8. Play your favorite music. Check if there's any problem; and if there is one, blame it on yourself, as our quality never goes wrong.

iv. While using

1. Double-tap the control panel to turn ANC on and off.
2. Give credit to yourself for doing well in the university entrance exam and getting into a

prestigious university, majoring in English. You have been fairly well-paid as a private English Tutor, and that's why you can afford this pair of *AirPods*™ *ProMax* Premium III.

3. Hand the *AirPods*™ *ProMax* to your dad as his *Father's Day* present. Look at the wrinkles on his face and the gray in his hair. Acknowledge that half of the reason why you chose to buy this was because you felt annoyed by him playing his weird-ass *Teochew* vintage music out loud every day.

4. Be glad that you finally *did* something for him, as you guys are both taciturn enough to not converse more than ten sentences per day, even though you guys eat, live and sleep together. Understand that for people like you two, it's often easier to use actions than words to express love.

5. Look at his happy face and hear him express his gratitude in *Teochew*, which you haven't heard in a long damn while.

v. FAQs

1. What to do when being asked why the volume of the left earbud is slightly lower than the right one?

   - As we mentioned above, our quality never goes wrong; so, go check on your father and have a conversation:

     "Ar Tung, the volume of the left one seems to be a bit lower than the right one. Can you help me check if there's any problem?" asked Papa.

     "Let me check," I responded while getting the pair of AirPods from him. I try them on and realize that the problem isn't with the earbuds; it is with Papa's hearing.

2. What to do now?

   - Go to the ENT of the nearest hospital with him tomorrow as it's late already. Get a report which states that your father's hearing in both

ears has been damaged due to prolonged exposure to noise, very possibly because of his thirty years of work in the construction site; his right ear's functioning, fortunately, is still at ninety-percent; his left ear's functioning, unfortunately, is only seventy-percent.

Acknowledge that the ultimate reason you bought this pair of earbuds was because you barely talked to him, so he had to put the boring music on repeat all day to fill up the silence. Admit that you're now, once again, giving him *silence* as a present, like all the happenings mentioned above. Talk to him more and understand that your Papa, despite being taciturn, actually detests the silence between you two. Be surprised that your voice is more soothing to him than any song in the world.

If you're still apprehensive about what to say to him because you're inarticulate, instead of overediting this piece of user manual, go tell

him that you're actually a whole lot better in writing than speaking when expressing yourself. Work up the courage to tell him that he was the first idea that popped up in your mind when you decided to write a piece for a competition in your university and just read him everything on these six pages. Understand that the most important piece of advice for communicating with him is no other than the one found in the very last paragraph of this user manual.



Traces of Moon and Flowers[1]

Nick Ng

Second Prize

She did not realize how lonely she was until she walked out of the gate, and the cymbal and gong woke her up from this long, long slumber. What a sultry night! The wool fibre of the cardigan stuck to her skin right away as she left the lift, but she felt compelled to keep it on for the sensation of fabric

[1] Opera passages adapted from: Tong, D. S. (2010). *The Flower Princess* (B. Yung, Ed. & Trans.). The Chinese University of Hong Kong Press. (Original work published 1957).

draping over her skin. What an expedition it was to leave the estate, which she rarely did these days, and go to the temple and see the opera. See the opera indeed! A feeling gusted vaguely from deep inside her memories and shook her: she was excited. She was old, and it is bad to feel excited as an old woman, she thought, but her pace sped up (the percussion of the cane poking the ground quickened). It was eight, the opera started at seven thirty, she could hear the music playing from across the bridge; she had to hurry or she would miss *the meat of the play*; yet she slowed down when she realised that she was walking fast: it is bad to be excited when you are old, she thought.

"Guanyin, a curse on your stupidity…
Not one of your thousand eyes has spirit-power.
A fine young couple newly reunited,
Why do you not do your best to keep them happy?"

He shouldn't have said that, a high falsetto yelled, you only have yourself to blame, you don't have that fortune in your life. It was her favourite part—"Meeting At The Nunnery". She

used to sing along every time it was played on the radio. Fai loved to listen to her singing too, though he had never said so; she knew he wasn't reading the newspaper on the tea table with his foot tapping the floor rhythmically. He did everything as though he was forced by her. That was the dance: she coerced him and he yielded to the tyrant. Arh! People had been fooled, she couldn't help but say to herself.

"I denied, denied, but can deny no more…" she sang along now that she was finally at the entrance of the Bamboo Theatre. Her voice was so low pitched, the brisk and clear voice she once had was gone; she could only sing an octave lower. The eighty-dollar seat? Oh yes, the cheapest seat is fine (thank you for adding oil for the temple). She took the ticket, and a young girl ushered her to her seat. It must have been at least a decade since she had last seen an opera in the theatre. Her life seemed to have stopped right when Fai passed away, and years just flew by afterward. It was like that time she and Fai took a red-eye to Britain to see their son. It was excruciating to be sitting on the plane for 13 hours straight, but the second you set foot on that foreign land, it felt like you had teleported by some mystical means. How did I get here? How do *we* get here? (Let's meet at the purple jade mountain

cottage tonight, I will go with you.) Yes, she would go with him, everyone would have; he was sincere, handsome, and passionate.

There was no use regretting. She would not have expected that when they went up to the Mainland; even in war people need opera, Sifu always said, she must have been angry when I ran away with a boy just like that (Ah Mui, you have the golden voice, be patient and you will make it someday). Who could have expected that? One day they came to the theatre and burnt all their clothes. The *old culture* was the vermin of the country, they cried, as they scoured through all their records, props and clothing chests. She had paid thousands to get them made, they were all hand sewn with colourful plastic film, and they shimmered under the spotlight, but all she had left was the pungent black smoke and embers from the pyre; the fire went two persons tall. Had Fai not told her not to go to the theatre that day, she would have got the Yin-Yang hair (they shaved half of Hong's hair).

"*A beauty does not deserve to be defiled by the vulgar world. This silver hairpin must block our marriage path…*" The sound of the actress woke her from her reverie. She would not

concede, no, she would not grovel for anything, she pushed her silver hairpin against her throat and walked down the stairs, singing the "Bells Toll in the Buddhist Temple." This actress was nice, she thought, but her voice was not half as clear as hers when she was her age. Like a blue jay, her voice used to jump up and down the gamut; even a storm wouldn't topple her voice, people used to say. She tried to hum that note quietly, fearing that people would hear her, but nothing came out of her vocal cords. Silence. As if paralysed, she could not make her voice go that high anymore. She sacrificed that for Fai; she had never said it out loud, not even to herself, but all these years, she had held that grudge somewhere in her body—she sacrificed, but she was not like Princess Changping. No one knew her *martyrdom*; it was behind the stage, there was no audience, not even Fai, no one. For that nameless bitterness buried in her, she did not see his corpse in the coffin; when he was alive, she kept quiet, even next to his deathbed. The tubes delivered yellowish juice to his throat and russet liquid out of his bladder—it was horrible to die like this. She grasped his hand tightly, but she did not make a sound. Speechless. There were no words but silence. Before he passed, he looked her in the eyes as though saying, "I know,"

and left her with the sibilance and beeping of the machines. That was the last time she saw his face—swollen, morphed, unrecognisable.

Vroom. The bright red velour curtain dropped, and everyone stood up and thronged into the stage front. The famous last scene was why everyone came. They are going to commit suicide together. That is how it ends. Propped on her mahogany cane, in her egg-yolk yellow cardigan over a tea-green cheongsam, she moved slowly, step by step, through the crowd. No one seemed to notice her; not a look or two were given as she faltered on until the curtain was within her reach, staring far, far away as though at a land, an island, a bank barely visible.

Vroom. The curtain ascended. She and her Fuma were there, determined to end it all. He didn't leave her, no he didn't.

"A shower of petals fills the air and obscures the moonlight…" The mournful lilt pierced the darkness of the summer night, but she heard nothing; the vision of the blood red wedding shroud and iridescent head pins overrode her senses. She trembled in her own silence. She saw herself under the

vermilion veil, and Fai handing her the wine. She realised after all these years what she wanted.

The crowd was dispersing. She leaned on the cane, standing, staring at the empty stage, feeling so weak. Anguish—the weight of being alive swung back like a pendulum. The chitchat and laughter of the departing people rushed into her ears. She was anguished that she was still alive and left all alone.



The Sound of Everything You Can No Longer Say

Wong Hung Wa Helen

Honourable Mention

You never expected silence to wear a face like this.

It does not arrive as peace. It does not come as a calm after a storm, as poets would have you believe. Instead it slips into the room like a blade wrapped in velvet, quiet, courteous, and utterly merciless. You once thought silence was the absence of

sound. Now you know better: silence is the sound of everything you can no longer say.

At first you mistook it for a pause between notes, the gentle space before a breath. Then the pause lengthened. The space widened. One day you realised the music had stopped altogether. Not because it ended, but for a crueller reason: you were no longer allowed to hear her.

You still remember the sound. You remember the way her laughter used to fill a room like light spilling through curtains, the way her voice could turn ordinary air into something almost holy. You remember the small, unguarded sounds. The rustle of her sleeves. The soft closing of a door. The hum of her thinking beside you. Those sounds were never grand. They were yours. That was enough.

Now there is only the hush. And the hush is cruel.

This is no library silence, no snowfall stillness, nothing a poet would call beautiful. This silence lives. It breathes in the spaces where words once lived. It grows thicker with every unasked

question, every unsent letter, every greeting you swallow back. You have lost the right to offer it. That loss feeds the quiet.

You sit beside her still, beside her, always beside her. The silence between you is stuffed full. Full of everything you cannot say. Full of the screams you have learned to fold into your ribs. Full of your own heart, now so loud in the quiet that you are certain she must hear it.

She does not. Or if she does, she mistakes it for nothing, for breathing, for the ordinary pulse of a person who is fine.

You are not fine.

You are a sealed room, every door shut tight. You are an instrument left in the dark, strings gone slack with disuse. You once believed that time would teach you to love silence, to find peace in its expanse. Instead, time has taught you how to pretend. How to smile in the hush. How to nod. How to become so still that no one thinks to ask what noise is trapped beneath your skin.

At night, the silence is the worst. The sounds you buried all day crawl out. Not loud, but felt. The echo of a laugh that used to be for you. The ghost of a word spoken to someone else. The memory of her voice saying your name just the way she used to. Then the hollow quiet when you realise: it will never sound that way again.

You press your hands to your ears. The silence is already inside you.

You try to speak. You open your mouth in the dark, and nothing comes out. You have plenty to say, too much, in fact. Language has become a dam, and the dam is cracking. Only fear holds it together. Fear of what will flood out if you let even one word escape. Fear that if you start, you will never stop. Fear that the first sound you make after all this silence will not be words at all, but a wail, the kind that lives in the bones of things kept quiet too long.

And so you maintain silence. You become a master of it. You learn its textures: the cold silence of avoidance, the heavy silence of longing, the sharp silence of a door that will never

open again. You wear silence like a second skin. You wear it so well that no one notices that the original skin, the one you were born with, has long since been torn away.

But there are moments, merciless moments, when sound returns unbidden. A song on the radio. A sentence she says to someone else in that voice you remember. Your own name spoken by a stranger, not by her. For one cruel second, your heart lunges toward it like a starving thing.

Then silence again. Always silence.

You wonder sometimes if this is punishment. Not for anything you did, but for something you failed to do. For not saying 'stay' when you should have. For not screaming, when screaming might have saved you. For learning too early that some sounds are dangerous, and too late that silence is worse.

If you could choose, you would trade every quiet left in your life for one more minute of sound. Not music, not poetry, just the small, ordinary noises of being near her. The shuffle of her

feet. The click of a cup being set down. The sound of her exhaling, soft and unguarded, in the moment before sleep.

You would burn your voice for that. You would shred your own throat just to hear her say your name once more. Just once. The way she used to.

But she won't. And you can't ask.

Asking would require sound. Sound is the very thing you have lost. Not the ability to make it. Your throat still works. You could shout. You could weep. You could shatter the silence with a thousand confessions. But you have learned, in some deep and broken place, that your sounds no longer matter. The world has moved on to other frequencies. You are speaking a language no one else remembers.

So you sit in the quiet. The quiet sits in you. Together you have become something unrecognisable: a person made of hush, a heart that beats without resonance, a story no one will ever hear. The first page was written in vanishing ink. The last page is just nothing.

Once you believed that silence could be kind, a refuge, a place to rest between the noise of living. Now you know the truth.

Some silences are not refuges. They are graves. You have been buried alive in one. Not by her. Not by fate. By your own unwillingness to make a sound that might shatter what little remains.

You stay quiet. You stay.

That, perhaps, is the cruellest sound of all: the sound of someone who still loves, still hopes, still aches, but has forgotten how to let any of it leave the body.

No one hears. No one ever hears.

And the silence grows.



Sound and Silence

Choi Yin Yeung, Eric

Honourable Mention

Sound and Silence

The classroom glowed faintly under fluorescent lights, its air heavy with the quiet anticipation of study. Students shuffled in—some clutching notebooks, others carrying nothing but curiosity. Among them was a young woman, her presence quiet, yet unmistakable. She had won a scholarship to attend the

course, a recognition of her dedication to learning. He noticed her instantly.

He was older, returning to study after years of wandering through jobs and unfulfilled ambitions. His decision to enroll had been impulsive, driven by a restless fire to reclaim something lost in the gap years. By chance, they found themselves seated near each other, week after week, as the course unfolded over thirteen sessions.

He was known as Sound—his voice carried easily, his laughter filled the room, his questions often sparked debate. She was called Silence—her words few, but deliberate, her gaze steady, her presence calming.

Fragments of Friendship

Their friendship began in fragments: a shared smile when the lecturer made a joke, a brief exchange about the difficulty of Pāli translations. Slowly, Sound began to ask more, curious about Silence's story.

She revealed only pieces. Once, she had nearly married, a romance nurtured over years. But the dream dissolved, leaving

her adrift. Instead of bitterness, she chose service—volunteering as a translator in Thailand, helping monastic organizations spread teachings. Later, she sought purification in Yunnan, but the retreat left her unsettled. Hong Kong became her next stop, another attempt at exploration.

Sound listened, fascinated. He admired her resilience, though he sensed the weight she carried. He shared his own story: the long gap years, the sudden decision to pursue postgraduate study, the relief of acceptance. Their paths had crossed by coincidence, yet it felt deliberate, as if the universe had arranged the meeting.

The Rhythm of Weeks

Each lecture became a rhythm—Sound's questions, Silence's quiet notes, the professor's patient explanations. Their friendship grew in the spaces between lessons.

Sound often wondered if friendship between a man and a woman in such circumstances was frowned upon. Was it taboo? Did others disapprove? He could not tell. Yet he felt drawn to her, not romantically, but with a sense of kinship.

Silence, for her part, remained cautious. She had learned that clinging could lead to suffering. Yet she valued Sound's presence. His energy balanced her stillness. His words filled the gaps she left unspoken.

Hidden Stories

One evening, they walked together after class. The silence was broken.

"Everyone has a hidden story," Silence said softly. "Mine is only partly told."

Sound nodded. He wanted to ask more, but he knew better than to press. Instead, he shared his own doubts—the fear that his return to study was too late, that he was chasing something already gone.

Silence listened. "The path is never too late," she replied. "It is only delayed."

Her words lingered with him.

Restlessness and Stillness

Sound was restless by nature. He thrived on conversation, debate, and movement. Silence fascinated him because she was the opposite. He began to wonder if their friendship was sustainable. Could Sound and Silence truly coexist? Or would one overwhelm the other?

He noticed how others looked at them—whispering, perhaps questioning their closeness. He worried about disapproval, about the unspoken rules of propriety. Yet he could not step away.

Silence carried her own doubts. She had wandered from place to place searching for peace. Yet her mind remained unsettled. Sound's presence was both comforting and troubling. He reminded her of the world she had tried to leave behind—the world of voices, of connections, of attachments.

Still, she found herself waiting for his words each week. His questions in class, his laughter, his stories—they filled her silence with meaning.

Anicca

Midway through the course, the lecturer assigned a group project. Sound and Silence were paired together. Their task was to present on the concept of Anicca—Impermanence.

They met outside class to prepare. Sound spoke endlessly, brainstorming ideas, weaving metaphors. Silence listened, occasionally offering a quiet suggestion. Together, they crafted a presentation that balanced his energy with her clarity.

On the day of the presentation, Sound began with a story of his gap years, how nothing remained the same. Silence followed with a reflection on her journey, how impermanence had shaped her choices. The class was moved. The voices of Sound and Silence had merged into harmony.

The Question

After the presentation, Sound asked her, "Do you think this friendship is real? Or is it something society will disapprove of?"

Silence paused. "Friendship is neither real nor unreal. It is a connection. Whether others approve or not does not matter."

Her answer unsettled him. He wanted certainty, but she offered only paradox.

Time to Say Goodbye

As the course neared its end, Sound realized that their time together was limited. Thirteen weeks had passed quickly. He wondered if they would remain friends after the class ended.

Silence seemed prepared for departure. She had always known that this was temporary. Her journey would continue elsewhere.

On the final evening, they walked together once more.

"Will you become a nun?" Sound asked.

Silence smiled faintly. "I don't know. My path is still unfolding."

"And mine?" he asked.

"You are Sound," she replied. "You will always seek to be heard. That is your path."

They parted with no promises, no declarations. Only the understanding that their friendship had been real, even if fleeting.

Echoes

Sound returned to his postgraduate studies, carrying her words with him. Silence continued her search, carrying his laughter in memory.

Years later, Sound would recall the classroom, the dim lights, the quiet woman who had changed his perspective. He would remember how Silence taught him that impermanence was not something to fear but to accept.

And Silence, wherever her journey led, would remember Sound—the voice that filled her silence, the friend who reminded her that even in quiet, connection was possible.

For a brief moment, opposites had met in harmony. And that, too, was real.



Frozen Stiff

Law Yuen Tong, Phoebe

Honourable Mention

The fridge was always there.

It sat squarely at the furthest corner of the room, facing the black hole. The pale lights sucked it in, and it glared at the monitor, enthralled by the harsh glow.

I would stare at that peculiar block for hours. I had grown to know its contours: the broad, imposing shoulders, coupled with a smooth bald scalp with peeling paint on the back. The screen it focused on was well-rested among the clouds, and the keycaps clicked in protest every time they were being stamped on. Clickady clack, like the taps of a ticker-tape timer they went, the only sounds penetrating the oppressive silence.

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The fridge budged two times a day. I saw it trudge towards the dining table, open its belly and stuff the contents in, before sighing. It edged towards the metal gates, and with a resounding clang, it was gone.

The water stirred. It oozed out of the cracks of the room and the leaky faucets of the kitchen, sluggishly flowing like a suspension ball in an oil bath. It circled me, stroking the fallen strands of my messy hair as the temperature rose. The goldfish in it swam, its cold blood gradually warming, its cheeks regaining the semblance of life.

I giggled at the fish doing silly laps around the water. The water curtsied and twirled, leading me forward. One two three, one

two three. We spun in a semblance of a waltz, our private midsummer dance.

But winter always came, stealing the fragile warmth away. The fridge returned every night, grunting in effort as it struggled through the narrow corridor. I noted the way frost bloomed in its wake, like ugly, poisonous ivy littering the ground.

The water froze, most of it slithering into the corridors, as if it were always a part of the house. The goldfish stayed, though, floating listlessly in its vaporised aquarium.

Sometimes, the water would burble gently, trying to vocalise some consonances before the temperature froze its lips shut, but the goldfish would stay lodged in its throat. Its lipless mouth would bobble open and close, swallowing every trickle of sound leaking out of the water's vocal cords until there was nothing but silence.

Silence hung heavy over our heads every night.

I tried to scream. I banged every dish and pan, hoping that the chaos could pierce the everlasting silence. I smashed the keys on the piano, wrecking the perfect melody that usually filtered out of the box. But it didn't matter. The goldfish would surge, muffling my tantrums, lest they would pierce through the

fragile equilibrium that we resided in. My water would wrap her arms around me, reflecting the broken wails in the aqueous medium, never allowing the waves to touch the air.

I once asked what dye she used to make herself glow green and purple. The water froze before flashing that clipped smile that signified the conversation was over.

She didn't speak for the whole afternoon then.

I didn't know whether her voice had been given away or if the goldfish had swallowed her whole. But I learnt to stop asking after that day.

The fish, sated with words, had become an obscene, round thing. It was a lionhead variety, pudgy with its eyes sticking out. Its mouth moved soundlessly, like it could telepathically transmit everything it failed to convey through its regressed voice. I watched it grow rounder and rounder until it was choking my water, barely allowing a sliver of air for her to breathe.

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I never noticed when the water began draining away. She grew more and more stagnant, until she was gone.

In hindsight, I should have known. She was a daughter of the sea, and it was her life's wish to return to it in the end. Freshwater from the sink never suited her, souring her complexion the longer she stayed away from her homeland. I watched as more and more of her slipped into the ocean, whisking her magic away until only a pool of damp wetness was left. The goldfish flopped on the carpeted floor, no longer deriving sustenance from us. I cradled it and watched its fatigued eyes stare blankly at the ceiling, its gills still. Dead.

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Without the water, the chilly room dropped from four degrees to zero. Her departure must have truly shocked the fridge. Fury, heartbreak and betrayal froze everything, sending sleet everywhere.

There was a goldfish growing in my larynx, too. Just as it did to the water, it swallowed the unnecessary noises, and I watched my words twist and turn in its stomach, where they were shredded and digested. The fridge did the rest, and my voice froze into balls of hail and plopped onto the table during mealtimes, like pathetic ping-pong balls.

I couldn't stand it. Step by step, I commanded control over my sea legs, and when the fridge was gone, I hobbled towards the world.

I was greeted with a cacophony of an orchestra in disarray. Flinching from the pandemonium, I slammed my palms onto my ears, filtering out most of the chaos.

Venturing out cautiously, I peeked at the tapestry of noise, identifying each strand. The vermillion strings of frustration of the messy traffic. The ochre chirp of the birds' mating calls. The electric blue energy of the buzzing crowds. The mossy rustling of leaves under the wisps of breeze.

Freedom.

The silence became more resounding every time I re-entered the passageway to my home, the soundproof walls absorbing and sterilizing the stains of music clinging to my body.

I tried to break the silence. I spoke in clipped piano notes, the vanilla tones meeting the fridge. The low rumbling of the compressor hummed, never utterly approving, but not dismissive either.

But I became greedy, enthralled with what seemed to be a given to others. I coughed, trying to dislodge the stubborn piece of phlegm that had made itself at home in my airways. I reached out to any sound I could clutch, banishing my stupid goldfish aside. I flirted with violins, crashed with cymbals, and smashed out the chords from electric guitars. I formed my own band, trying to stamp my soul into the world. Anything other than the stifling silence, suffocating and stealing my breath, freezing my oxygen before it had a chance to hover and take flight.

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I left.

The fridge was on the news from time to time. Another breakthrough, another advancement. Nothing about the daughter who had left him years ago.

It was when I heard the news that he had had a stroke that I returned.

The house seemed smaller than I remembered. It was warmer and more humid, with the generator humming brokenly in a corner.

I found him in his study. He was dozing, his right, atrophied hand bent in an uncomfortable position. Stroke, the silent killer.

I wiped away the gathering dust on his desk. The clouds were easier to reach now, and I scanned the jumble of contents on them. Miscellaneous trinkets were sprinkled on the table, but one thing caught my eye.

A well-loved, dog-eared photo of our dysfunctional family at the beach, grinning at the camera.

There was another one at the corner of the desk, one of me winning a local competition with my bandmates. I was surprised he knew.

He stirred as I got the wheelchair ready.

"Let's go," I said, gesturing towards the door. Like I was never gone.

Silence was our language as we ventured out into the world in its kaleidoscope of colours. The saltwater mist curled into our lungs before we could see the spark of cyan. The sea shimmered, catching the shades of the fading afternoon sun.

The goldfish in me quaked in fear. Saline was deadly for it, it knew. It wouldn't survive the dip.

But I would. For I am a child of water, and the sea runs rampant in my veins.

I dove into the sea, ignoring the protest of my sane mind. The chill pierced my bones, yet I sought the gentle rolling of the waves and the occasional cries of the seagulls.

I see me. I sea me.

I am the sea.

When I resurfaced, I saw him, his bald head, sunspotted skin and huddled posture. The fridge was gone, the last of the mirage dissipating as I relaxed my gaze.

"I'm sorry," he rasped, a trickle of the saltwater in his eye.

I didn't think I could forgive him. Not after so many years of history between us. Not after what happened to mom after all those years.

I shifted the wheelchair to somewhere drier. Pursing my lips, I stared into the horizon, the decades of unspoken conversations hanging heavy between us. I could feel the faintest human warmth from him, worming through my soaked clothes from my impromptu dive.

Nothing transpired between us except for the murmur of the lapping waves. And somehow, it was alright.

But wait. Hush. Listen carefully.

It's the sound of ice cracking.

JUDGES

Creative Non-Fiction | **Dr Patrick Holland**

Dr Patrick Holland is a novelist, short story writer, and Assistant Professor at the Department of Humanities & Creative Writing at the Hong Kong Baptist University.

Poetry | **Dr Collier Nogues**

Dr Collier Nogues is a poet, author, and Assistant Professor at the Department of English at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where she teaches undergraduate and MA creative writing and literature courses.

Short Story | **Dr Suzanne Wong**

Dr Suzanne Wong is an author and Senior Lecturer at the Department of English at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, where she teaches creative writing, language, and linguistic courses.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Sam Yu Wing Chan

Sam Yu Wing Chan is from and living in Hong Kong. He holds a BA in English from Hong Kong Baptist University and is pursuing an MA in English Literary Studies at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Sam's research interests include representations of individual memories against grand narratives, historical fiction, science fiction, and magical realism. Currently, he has a particular interest in Hong Kong Anglophone fiction and life writing, and is working towards publishing more of his creative work.

Jing Chen

A beginner in nonfiction writing.

Eric Y Y Choi

Eric has turned to writing as a passionate pursuit at leisure. Though unpublished, he approaches the craft with curiosity and dedication, exploring themes drawn from his experiences and reflections. Writing offers him both a creative outlet and a means of lifelong learning, with stories and essays shaped with patience and care.

Yu Ching Chung, Charlene

Charlene is a third-year medical student at CUHK who writes poetry in her free time. Her writing weaves natural

imagery with intimate explorations of mental health, memory, and grief. Her poem "New Grief" was written in memory of her late foster cat, Elijah (Coco). She has also received an honorable mention in the Pongo Poetry Awards.

Florence Ip
Florence is a procrastinating aspiring poet that hopes she can put all her sleepless thoughts on paper before she drifts to sleep.

Kei Nok Ng, Nick
Nick Ng is a writer from Hong Kong. Their work dwells on memory, estrangement, music and image.

Lok Kan Tang, Kelvin
KT lives and writes between the architectures of Hong Kong and Singapore. He is a collector of frequencies, mapping the tension between the structured world and the chaos that breathes beneath it.

Law Yuen Tong, Phoebe
Phoebe is a medical student who, ironically, is interested in different forms of arts. She'll be writing about something interesting and new when her nose is not buried in *Gray's Anatomy* (the textbook, not the TV show).

Wong Hung Wa, Helen

Helen is an Engineering student who loves English Literature. She uses words the way others use blueprints: to map the landscape of her own feelings and thoughts.

John Wong

John Wong is a Year 5 English major at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. His passions are reading and writing.

Lulin Yang

Lulin Yang is an undergraduate student studying anthropology at The Chinese University of Hong Kong. She writes creative nonfiction, including ethnographic writing and personal essays. Her work is grounded in everyday life and attends closely to small details, often using metaphor to explore quiet emotional shifts. She favors a clear, natural prose style. She volunteered as an English teacher in a small town in the Czech Republic from May to June 2026.

Vinci Yung

Vinci Yung is a medical professional currently studying an MSc in Medical Laboratory Sciences at CUHK. In her free time, she loves writing poetry, and has been published in *Voice & Verse* poetry magazine. She has also been awarded third place in the CUHK Poetry Contest 2025.

Wangqian Zhou

Wangqian is a 2nd-year PhD student in Linguistics. As a phonetician, he is drawn to the Do-Re-Mis and Rat-A-Tats of speech (esp., production, perception, and acquisition of tone and intonation; affective and attitudinal prosody; prosodic iconicity; and the relationship between musicality and speech abilities). He is a cinephile and he also curates/designs sound and music for theatrical and cinematic productions. His AIGC film *A Tale of the Peony*, for which he served as the sound designer, has won the Best Short Film Award in the Beijing International Film Festival. He loves languages, music, and poetry.

Xu Mingnuo, Maggie

徐銘諾 is an MA student in Hong Kong whose creative nonfiction explores urban life, outsider perception, sound, and small moments of misunderstanding. Her writing often begins with ordinary domestic details and expands into questions of intimacy, distance, and belonging. In *"Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah! Ah!"*, she traces a mysterious repeated cry through fear, silence, and recognition, while drawing on social research about foreign domestic helpers in Hong Kong. Her work asks how sound can reveal misunderstanding, distance, and human presence.

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