
Three.

DUCK/RABBIT

BY RUTH TAYLOR

QUEEN MOTHER

BY JOANNE LAM

THE FALL

BY KATARINA YOUNG

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES

Three.

THE 2024 PENGUIN RANDOM HOUSE OF CANADA
STUDENT AWARD FOR FICTION



UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
SCHOOL OF CONTINUING STUDIES



Penguin
Random House
Canada

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All pieces in *Three* are works of fiction. Most names, places, characters, and events are the product of the authors' imaginations, and any resemblance to actual events, locales or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental. In those few instances when the authors mention real persons and reported events, it is within a similarly fictionalized context and should not be construed as fact.

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Introduction

It was an incredible year for the Creative Writing Program at the School of Continuing Studies, University of Toronto. Creative Writing Certificate graduate Amanda Peters' novel *The Berry Pickers* was nominated for the Atwood Gibson Prize and won the Barnes and Noble Prize in the United States. In September Anuja Varghese graduated with her Creative Writing Certificate and in November her story collection *Chrysalis* won the 2023 Governor General's Award for Fiction. This fall we'll be cheering for last year's juror and former Penguin Random House Award winner Marianne Miller's novel *We Were the Bullfighters* to be recognized along with Rajinderpal Pal's novel *However Far Away*. An excerpt from Rajinderpal's novel won this contest in 2020; he was one third of the jury that chose this year's winners. The other two jurors were writer Dawn Promislow and Doubleday Canada Assistant Editor Megan Kwan.

They chose Ruth Taylor's novel excerpt "Duck/Rabbit" as the \$2500 first prize winner. I predict it won't be long before we'll see Taylor's novel nominated for some major awards. The two \$1,000 winners were Joanne Lam's novel excerpt "Queen Mother" and Katarina Young's short story "The Fall". As usual, the jury's decision was difficult because the overall quality of the entries was excellent.

Thanks to our jury and thanks to Penguin Random House Canada for their ongoing support of emerging writers and to Trudy Fegan, Elyse Martin and Carla Kean for their help in producing this beautiful publication. Thanks also to my SCS colleagues who helped out: Karen Fraczkowski, Lihua Gui, Amanda Weaver, Benjamin Wood, Igor Purwin, and Dean Catherine Chandler-Crichlow. A final thanks to all our wonderful instructors for their contribution in mentoring these writers. I'm sure you'll enjoy reading their stories.

Lee Gowan

Program Director, Creative Writing

University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies

The *Creative Writing Program* at the University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies (SCS) continues to attract a diverse range of individuals whose lived experiences and deep insights combine to create engrossing literature. Ruth Taylor's prose in "Duck/Rabbit" is vivid in the glimpses it provides of a young woman reconciling the alienation she feels in her office with the weight of history she experiences from her cubicle's window. In "Queen Mother", Joanne Lam provides a graphic view into the famine and trauma experienced during the Japanese occupation of China during World War Two. The reader is drawn into the depth of the poverty and desperation of the Lam family. Katarina Young tackles the socio-emotional dimensions of aging in "The Fall" and provides a vivid portrayal of the experiences of a voiceless woman, silent throughout the story.

We applaud the winners and finalists for 2024 and are keenly aware of the dedication and passion of our instructors, who guide our learners to continued excellence. We are honored to recognize the twenty-second edition of the Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction chapbook. I am delighted that from the many exceptional pieces, the jury has selected "Duck/Rabbit" as the award recipient and given "Queen Mother" and "The Fall" honorable mentions.

We are proud to connect this emerging Canadian talent to leaders in the field of writing and publishing like Penguin Random House Canada. This convergence of talent strengthens our program and helps the School to continue to enrich lives and transform careers.

Congratulations to the award winners—Ruth, Joanne and Katarina—and to all who provided submissions. I trust that this recognition will continue to spark your passion for writing. A special thank you to Penguin Random House Canada for making this award possible. We are grateful for your ongoing support and your leadership in this field.

I wish you all the best and applaud your commitment to continued excellence.

Dr. Catherine Chandler-Crichlow
Dean, University of Toronto School of Continuing Studies

On behalf of Penguin Random House Canada, it is my honour to congratulate the recipients of the 2024 Student Award for Fiction: Ruth Taylor, who is the winner of this year's award for "Duck/Rabbit," and finalists Joanne Lam for "Queen Mother," and Katarina Young for "The Fall."

In the stories in this year's collection we find ourselves gearing up for an office holiday party while we gaze out the window to the site of a terrible long-ago and almost forgotten tragedy; we find ourselves in war-torn Hong Kong, roiled in a mother's desperation to feed her children who are on the brink of starvation; we find ourselves alongside an elderly woman, rendered voiceless from trauma and returning after a prolonged hospital stay to a decaying house both alive with memory and at once a stranger; but most importantly, through each story we find ourselves immersed in rich worlds and character studies written with such tenderness and heart.

All of us at Penguin Random House Canada are incredibly proud to be able to play a part in supporting the development of such a promising group of emerging Canadian writers each year, including incredible emerging talent such as Ruth, Joanne, and Katarina, and all of this year's finalists and entrants, through the University of Toronto's School of Continuing Studies Creative Writing program. Each year this program and award, its entrants and recipients, and the wonderful stories that we discover through it reflect the sheer scope of talent we have in Canada, and it gives me great hope for Canadian literature in the years ahead.

Supporting emerging writers is central to our work, and we're proud to continue to sponsor this important initiative. We're eternally grateful to Lee Gowan for his leadership of the Creative Writing program, to Dean of the School of Continuing Studies Catherine Chandler-Crichlow, and to all the program's instructors. Thanks as well to this year's jurors, authors Dawn Promislow and Ranjinderpal Pal, and our colleagues who helped along the way: Megan Kwan, Carla Kean, and Elyse Martin for their guidance and expertise.

Congratulations once more to the finalists. We hope you enjoy their work, and we look forward to seeing what comes next from each of these talented writers.

Kristin Cochrane
Chief Executive Officer
Penguin Random House Canada

Finalists for the Penguin Random House Canada Student Award for Fiction 2024

NAME OF STUDENT	TITLE OF ENTRY	NAME OF INSTRUCTOR(S)
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\$2500 WINNER:

Ruth Taylor	“Duck/Rabbit”	Michel Basilières Dennis Bock
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HONOURABLE MENTIONS (2 \$1000 Prizes):

Joanne Lam	“Queen Mother”	Ken Murray
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Katarina Young	“The Fall”	Derek Mascarenhas
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FINALISTS:

Uma Baghyalakshmit	“Sprouts”	Jessica Westhead
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David Chau	“The Ramen Shop Beyond the Neon Lights”	Blair Hurley J. Kent Messum
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Eleanor Chun	“The Tangled Mass Within”	Cary Fagan
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Michelle Circosta	“Those Who Leave”	Derek Mascarenhas
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Lysanne De Broux	“Neverlife”	Natasha Deen Cary Fagan
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Rose Manns	“Banshee Rising”	Ibi Kaslik
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Rohan Lea Stritch	“Sugar in Milk”	Ranjini George Catherine Graham
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DUCK/RABBIT

RUTH TAYLOR



RUTH TAYLOR worked as a journalist in Guatemala for a decade before returning with her family to Canada and taking up fiction. Her stories have appeared in the Dalhousie Review, the Massachusetts Review and most recently, the Potomac Review, among other venues. She now lives and writes in London, Ontario, where she continues to be fascinated by the relationship between people and place.

CHAPTER ONE

There's a photograph, a popular one on social media, taken the day the downtown YMCA burned. Jagged grey icicles hang from the building's stone portal and window ledges where firefighters shot cannons of water through subzero air. Any lingering flames, the glistening red of the firemen's faces, the yellow of their coats, are lost in the chromatic silver tones of the reporter's black and white. The effect is not of a building partly or completely destroyed but of some frost ogre emerging from the frozen earth, its great dark maw full of long, needle-sharp teeth. A frothy petrified tongue lolls down the building's steps. The monster looks hungry. This photo is, today, what's most remembered about the old downtown Y. Where it once stood, there is now a smooth square of clipped green grass, half a dozen maple trees, young and slender still, and a plaque commemorating both the fire and the building where so many of the city's children spent their Saturdays, Sundays and weekday evenings.

Nobody was hurt in the fire; old wiring turned out to be the culprit. But the loss pierced the city, at least enough to prompt investment in a plaque.

Emma's cubicle looked down onto that square of green and its adolescent trees. She was one of the lucky ones at the insurance company to have a desk near a window. The light it offered might have been why she'd remained at this job longer than most of her colleagues, who suffered under long florescent tubes that cast blue shadows across beige dividers, their photos of children, boyfriends and pets the only things lending warmth to their workspaces. But Emma hadn't stayed simply because of better lighting and a bit of green. The pay was decent and the demands,

few. She took nothing with her when she rose from her chair at the end of the day. And she was devoted to that space outside her window, to what was no longer there, to what most people either never knew or no longer remembered.

Emma was neither shocked nor saddened when the Y burned down. She'd attended classes there herself as a child and recalled tiptoeing in a blue bathing suit from the locker room of wooden benches and grey metal, through the peach-tiled shower room, warm puddles of water seeping around her toes, pressing the stiff metal button to dutifully wet hair and suit with a spray of warm water before emerging into the steamy chlorine-filled air that floated over and around the swimming pool. She remembered the dusty room crowded with overstuffed couches where she and other children would wait unattended for their parents to retrieve them. As they sat in the dim light that filtered through arched windows giving onto the stone porch, they'd read comic books and listen to songs on the radio. Or was it a tape deck? "Barracuda" on repeat.

Beyond that, she remembered very little. What loomed largest in her mind when she thought about the Y, what haunted her still, she'd learned second hand: the rooftop running track her best friend Dawn had discovered one day but could not find her way down from; the man who'd offered to help the bewildered child; the stairwell with a locked door at the bottom, where Dawn's body was found two days later. Emma could still hear the doorbell that rang one Sunday as she dallied at the breakfast table, her chair at an angle, a half-eaten bowl of porridge before her. Her father went to answer. Next, she sat curled into her mother's lap while two police officers stood in their living room flipping through their notepads. Her mother's fingers, warm and moist, brushed her bangs from her forehead, stroked her hair. That memory was so alive, even now, twenty-five years later, that Emma struggled to remember what came before. Dawn came before. They'd been best friends from the time they were four.

So now, at the start of each workday, every noontime as she pulled a sandwich from her shoulder bag and headed to the lunchroom, again on her return before refreshing her computer screen, and when she left for the night, Emma looked out the window and remembered. Dawn pulling

leaves from her hair during a leaf fight one autumn. Dawn spinning a toy six-shooter on her index finger. Dawn inventing new words to a Wham! song, populating it with tadpoles and flies. Memories were all she had. That and the ashes buried under a small marker in a west-side cemetery. And since Dawn's parents and Emma's own had moved away, Emma was quite possibly the only person in the city who remembered the living, breathing child at all.

To prove it to herself, she'd occasionally google Dawn's full name. The only thing that ever turned up was the date of her death.

Do you remember how we thought we could fly if we tried hard enough? And I mean really fly—skinny seven-year-old arms as wings—no Wright Brothers stuff. Luckily, we weren't so anti-science as to throw ourselves from a bridge or escarpment or anything higher than the top of a picnic table. But we tried, repeatedly, flapping our arms, hoping to catch air. I might have been the more stubborn. I'd practise even when you weren't around. It struck me as cosmically unjust that real flight had been denied us. Like so many other injustices we would learn to swallow as we grew: the cruelly short lifespans of backyard insects and small animals, the inability to prove a truth if others simply did not believe you, the final word of parents, teachers, grownups in general, the silence we lived in when we were not outdoors emptying our lungs, filling the sky with our laughter, our energy, our joy.

The square outside Emma's window was not at the moment green but blazing white. Two inches of snow had fallen overnight, and as yet, nobody had trampled it where it lay over the lawn surrounding the memorial plaque. Snow promised a white Christmas, the only kind that seemed right in this part of the world, until recently the only kind they'd ever known. And that had brightened the talk in Emma's office, where preparations for the holiday season were in full swing.

They'd all placed their Secret Santas under the plastic tree in the corner. The more zealous had brought in homemade cookies or handed out candy canes and chocolates. They'd stuffed and stamped and mailed out envelopes containing the office holiday card, which despite the memo they'd received the month before, all of them, non-Christians included, continued to refer to as the Christmas card. And they'd dressed up, some donning red dresses and Santa hats, for the office holiday (that is, Christmas) party at 4 p.m., where most of them hoped to get solidly drunk on office-supplied eggnog and Baileys.

Obligatory cheer aside, nobody actually looked forward to these parties, which was why they always got drunker than they should in front of colleagues and bosses. Also, free food. Better, more expensive food than they ever had occasion to eat at home or out among their own friends: crab-stuffed mushroom caps, lox crostini, bacon-wrapped walnuts, capers, olives, truffles, gorgonzola. So the plan for most of them was to eat and drink as much as they could until dancing with old guys in suits and talking to each other—the “girls” of the company—about their hair and their boots and, later in the evening, their boy-friends and husbands and lovers, and later still, politics, patriarchy and sexual harassment, didn't seem such a bad way to spend an evening. The next day, because there was always work the next day, nobody would talk about the night before. The men in suits would be back inside their offices on the eighteenth floor, not to be seen again until next Christmas. The women, sagging and squinting and popping aspirins, would drink coffee and bottles of water and barely stir from their cubicles.

For tonight's party, Emma had squeezed into an extra tight, extra short black denim skirt—her pert round bottom was, in her opinion, one of her best features, second only to her mild grey eyes. She'd done it for the same reason many of her colleagues had opted for dresses with plunging necklines and revealing side slits. Because a month ago, a man, a somewhat good-looking man, had begun working on their floor. He was, from what they could tell, a pleasant man with a sense of humour. He seemed to enjoy being the centre of attention—that is, he wasn't scared off by all those women—and he knew how to use what charm he had to fit in and probably excel (his journey to the eighteenth floor could

be swift if he tread carefully). For Emma, and for the other women, too, the appearance of a man on their floor was a novelty, like getting the toy every kid wanted for Christmas. Even if any of them—maybe not the lesbians, but who knew?—ended up in bed with him, none of them thought, at least not at this point, any of it would go far.

Emma heard a knock on the divider of her cubicle and saw a hand shoot up beyond the beige border, mauve fingernails clipped to a pink envelope. She stood to retrieve it.

“Thank you!” she called to Sally, who worked in the neighbouring cubicle. Sally was a tall, loud, generous brunette who should have felt awkward because everything about her looked awkward but blustered through blurting out whatever was in her head, revealing embarrassing moments, guffawing when she laughed, ignoring the blush that incongruously coloured her cheeks, complaining and encouraging in equal measure. Well, everybody loved Sally. No matter how out of place Emma or any of her co-workers felt, they knew Sally would be there for them.

“And happy holidays to you, too,” Emma added as she slid a heart-shaped card from the envelope and opened it. It read, “You are my sunshine.” Below that, “Happy Valentine’s Day” had been crossed out, replaced by “Merry Christmas!”

“I like to recycle,” Sally said. “But the sentiment is real, sunshine.” Sally called everybody sunshine. Last year, she’d given out Halloween candy.

Emma looked in her desk drawer for a tack to pin the card to the cubicle wall. “You did better than me,” she said. “I didn’t bring anything.”

“Next year.” Sally lowered her voice to a stage whisper. “I’ve got money on you and Eric getting toasty on the dance floor tonight.”

Emma felt herself blushing. Sally had noticed the skirt.

The truth was, Emma didn’t particularly like dressing up—for work or for parties. When she dressed for work, it was like pulling on an entire persona, someone quite different from her real self, or who she imagined her real self to be. But it helped keep the office in its place in her life—necessary but not vital, if that made any sense. She wasn’t the only one. In this office of women ranging in age from their early twenties to early fifties, she occupied the middle ground in both age and outlook. At one extreme were the careerists, women, who through talent, perseverance, a

little luck, and some amount of privilege, might one day occupy an office on the eighteenth floor. Or more likely, the seventeenth. At the other extreme were women who couldn't wait to move on to something else, anything else. They worked in this office because their employer was the biggest employer in the city and jobs were plentiful. Emma was neither a careerist nor a fly by night. She was stuck. She knew she was stuck. But despite her stuckness, she was unwilling to shake herself loose.

She leaned her elbows on the divider lip. "I'm there for the eggnog, not the company," she said.

"You keep telling yourself that." Sally winked at her but her eyelashes, freshly slathered in mascara, got stuck together. "Goddammit," she said, grabbing a tissue from the box on her desk. "Serves me right for shopping at the dollar store."

"You look ravishing, as always. Maybe you should be dancing with Eric."

"Oh, I'll dance with him, at least once. Who could resist? But as you know, my heart is taken."

Emma had never met Sally's husband, but she felt like she'd known him for years. Sally talked about him almost as much as she did her twin boys, who were perhaps really the ones who'd stolen her heart. When Sally was at work, she was everybody's best friend, but once she left for the day, she belonged one hundred percent to those three men.

In her non-work, non-party persona, her real persona, Emma despised the tyranny of coupledness, the trite rituals of romance. There was no earthly reason why she should be attracted to Eric, who wasn't really that good-looking or charming or funny, except that he was there. And they were all so bored, bored of interacting with nobody but women and cycling through their humdrum routine, nine to five, Monday to Friday. The only disruption they'd had in three years was the panic and, in the end, entirely unnecessary scramble to prepare for Y2K. And that hadn't been fun at all. Flirting was fun. The mild sense of risk, exhilarating. That's why Eric had caused such a stir. Emma would have felt sorry for him if he'd been the only woman in a sea of men, like those few women on the eighteenth floor. But he knew, as most men did, or most men who had the kind of ambition Eric clearly had, how to suck it up and turn it to his

advantage. As long as he didn't wrong any of them, which he might—ambitious men seldom respected boundaries—he'd do just fine. And the women on her floor were good-natured. They knew this was a game, a bit of entertainment to break the office monotony. It was Christmas. They were going to a party and they wanted to have fun.

The only boy I remember you having a crush on was Rousseau. It wasn't a serious crush. You probably only mentioned it a couple of times. Boys as love objects had only just appeared on the horizons of our friendship. Rousseau was shorter than either of us, dark hair, copper skin. In cold weather purplish marks appeared across his cheekbones, as if they'd been painted there. He was a bit of a rebel, an outsider. That was, I imagine, what attracted you. He didn't return the affection. He called you Witchie-Poo. But in grade 5 maybe that's what affection looked like. I haven't been any luckier in love. Even Dillon, who was a pretty good fit, got tired of me eventually. He still loves the dog, though. We're "co-parenting," something that existed back when, but nobody had a name for. Everything is co-something-or-other these days. Except me, I guess.

Emma checked her watch and shut down her computer. Outside her window, thick wet snowflakes were falling, all but obliterating the little square. Her co-workers were touching up their lipstick, peering into hand mirrors, replacing eyeglasses with contacts, in a couple of cases taking a nip from flasks they kept in their desk drawers, rolling back in their chairs, adjusting their bras, applying deodorant, and calling to their workmates. "Time for some fun, ladies. And man." Emma joined them as they moved like mice through the maze of cubicles, out to the foyer, and crowded around the elevator.

Most of them stood next to their particular pals, the ones they'd eat lunch with, the ones they might see outside of work. For Emma, that was Sharon. Sharon was as tall as Sally, but thinner, willowy except for her

broad straight shoulders, and she wore silky dresses and high heels, more routinely elegant than anybody else on the floor. Sandy hair, skin the colour of sand too, high cheek bones. Really, she could have been a model. Sharon's personality was not elegant, however. She was clever, knowledgeable, but her knowledge had an edge to it, an I've-seen-more-of-this-world-than-you-ever-will edge. Everybody knew that when you'd seen more of this world, what you saw was not good, not gentle, not wished for. Street-smart, Sharon might be called. She was also office smart, which was why their boss adored her. And why, perhaps, some of the women on the floor whispered unkindly about her. Also, for some reason, she did not, from what they could tell, wear deodorant. And it was noticeable. Emma, actually, hadn't noticed—she'd smelled something, sharp, acrid, but she hadn't connected it with Sharon. Then somebody pointed it out to her, and now she noticed it every time she and Sharon talked. Because she liked Sharon, Emma wondered whether she should say something. Was it even possible Sharon didn't know? But Emma's other persona, the non-work, non-party one, was completely against telling her. Her rule of thumb was always, is it important? And from there she'd go down a rabbit hole of questions, such as "Why do we wear deodorant anyway? Why is smelling of ourselves bad? If we all stopped wearing deodorant, would we still notice the smell? Would we come to enjoy it? Crave it? Is this just another way of controlling women and making them spend ridiculous amounts of money on things they neither need nor, given the choice, want? Is this just another way of keeping us from abandoning work and having sex whenever the mood hits us?"

Emma had put on deodorant that day. Every day. It was one of the few beauty and hygiene regimes she followed. She did not, like Sharon, wear high narrow heels and shimmering silky dresses. She did not go weekly, monthly, half-yearly to the salon. She did not get manicures or pedicures, or even massages. She didn't begrudge other women these regimes—she respected their choices—but she didn't really understand why women wanted to spend their time and money this way. Makeovers were in her mind on par with horror movies.

“Have I seen that outfit before?” Sharon asked as they watched the glowing red numbers above the elevator descend in value.

“Don’t start.”

“You look great! Why shouldn’t you?”

Emma pulled at her skirt. It was too tight. “My dog is sick. Did I tell you my dog is sick? Maybe I’ll head home.”

“Don’t be a pooper. This might be the best party we ever see here.”

“The bar isn’t very high.”

Sharon laughed. It came out as a honk. “You got me there.”

“Is Tony coming?” Tony was Sharon’s live-in boyfriend.

“God, no. I learned that lesson.”

Last Christmas, Tony had got drunk and then angry and pushed somebody. That somebody took a swing at him and Tony, in his attempt to dodge the fist, spun on his heel and bellyflopped into the hors d’oeuvres. Sharon and Tony split after that but they got back together a few months later. There were children to think about. To her co-workers, the children were just another reason Sharon and her kids should up and leave for good. Nobody ever said that to Sharon, however.

Emma’s ex, Dillon, had never come to these office parties, and she’d always thought that a wise choice. Work life and real life were best kept separate. Now, with her misgivings about the evening ahead accelerating and the tight skirt just uncomfortable, she found herself missing him. On a night like tonight, they might have gone for a walk in the snow, taken the dog out and explored the city. Talked about things that mattered to them.

The elevator dinged and its door opened. Well, there was free booze and food upstairs, and the whole thing would be over in a few hours. Emma got on with Sharon and several other women. Then they all turned to face the front and watched the doors close.

QUEEN MOTHER

JOANNE LAM



JOANNE LAM was born in Hong Kong and immigrated to Canada with her parents when she was eleven. Since she was a child, she has loved using her imagination. She is a registered architect and co-founder of Picnic Design, an architecture and interior design firm based in Toronto. In both her design work and her writing, she is interested in weaving the past and present into the creation of future stories.

“The Lam family will produce a queen one day,” my grandmother often says.

1940. My grandmother is pregnant for the sixth time. The first five are all girls. Politely speaking, that is unfortunate. Chinese families want boys to carry on the family name. Girls are just another mouth to feed. She needs a boy.

On an unusually hot day in March, she is heading home from the market on a crowded tram. Moving around with a big belly is no mean feat. She is lucky she finds a seat on the lower deck. The whole tram drips with sweat. Everything is sticky. She tries unsuccessfully to fan herself with an old newspaper. A stocky man stands beside her, casually leaning against the pole. The tram rolls along, navigating the busy streets, parting the bicycles and hawkers and fish baskets like the Red Sea. Two more blocks and it will be her stop. Just two more blocks.

Suddenly, a pushcart full of melons comes out of nowhere. The tram screeches and lurches forward. Bang! Melons scatter and explode all over the street. Heads whip around and everyone freezes. A lone scrawny teenage boy stands up in the sea of red mush. He looks like he is about to cry. The few seconds of silence is pierced by the annoyed driver. “Why don’t you watch where you are going, you idiot!” The young man does not reply. He shakes his head while surveying the total loss of his livelihood. With his head hanging and drenched in juice, he slowly gathers up the remnants of his cart and walks away.

On the tram, those who were standing extricate themselves from the fallen human pile except for the stocky man. In the mayhem, his foot got caught by my grandmother’s groceries. He spun on one heel and landed

on her pregnant belly. “Ay! Get off!” my grandmother yells while pushing him. “Can’t you see I am pregnant?” The man mumbles. Maybe it is an apology or maybe not. When another passenger finally pulls him to his feet, he leans back on the pole and endures my grandmother’s eyes.

She rubs her belly. Would this baby make it?

Spring comes. She gives birth to a boy. Finally.

Not that there is no other boy in the family. Second Uncle has three children with his wife. Among them is one precious son, so the family name is already guaranteed to the next generation. This, however, is not enough to quell the constant pressure from her mother-in-law. Family math counts boys only.

My grandmother lives with her in-laws. Such is the way. About two years after their wedding day, the whole family, three generations, move to Hong Kong for better opportunities, they tell her. Definitely not her choice. She doesn’t know anyone. Who would she go to if she needed help? When she arrives, she is bewildered. The bustling port city of Hong Kong is a far cry from the small quiet village she knows. The street is so full of action it makes her dizzy. Everyone is going everywhere. Hawkers move around with baskets of vegetables dangling precariously from bamboo sticks. Maids stretch their arms and struggle to keep up with the lady of the house to shade them with umbrellas. Porters call to well-dressed customers to hop into their rickshaws. Their shouts compete with the ones who carry sedan chairs for those who need to go uphill. The smell of fried tofu wafts through the street, mixing with hints of fresh fish and the occasional smoke of opium. The city is intoxicating. She feels drunk.

She loves it.

The family settles in one of the few three-storey buildings on Laundry street. The laundry women are long gone since the creek got covered up but the name remains. They live on the second and third floor above a fabric shop. To get home, they go through a pitch-black entryway. It is always momentarily blinding, even if it is night outside. Everyone goes in with their arms extended like zombies, just in case. Eventually, it leads to a door that opens into a narrow staircase that

leads upstairs. Other than the brick walls, the building is made of wood so even the smallest sound travels. The stairs squeak, the floors thump and the walls crackle whenever the temperature drops. From morning till night, with adults and children moving at different speeds, the house sounds like an out of tune orchestra constantly trying to get in sync.

Most of the time, my grandmother and her sisters-in-law spend their time in the kitchen in the back. It is a never-ending cycle of washing, cleaning and preparing the next meal. The only break is hanging the laundry, because they get to be on the front balcony. "Is it time yet?" they check with one another constantly on Wednesdays. In between hanging the shirts and trousers, they lean on the balcony railing and watch the street. Wednesday is delivery day. The delivery men always wink at the three beautiful ladies on the balcony.

At the very back of the building is a small room with a door. Inside is a wooden bucket with a tightly fitted lid. They call it the shit tower. They only go into the room when it is absolutely necessary. It is a race to finish before the rancid smell overwhelms the senses. Very early in the morning, my grandmother and her sisters-in-law rotate on shit tower duty. One of them ties a thick towel around her head to cover her mouth and nose and carefully takes the heavy bucket down the stairs to the bottom landing. Their worst nightmare would be to trip and spill the whole thing. They don't even joke about it. On one very early morning, Sixth Uncle accidentally kicks the bucket down the stairs. The entire house stinks for a week, no matter how much they scrub.

In their house, thin curtains are the only thing that provide a pretence of privacy. Everyone hears everything: conversation, arguments and lovemaking. Lovemaking only happens at night and is pretty straightforward. In. Out. A bit of fumbling. A bit of sighing. And then a cigarette. Pretty standard, like clockwork. But sometimes, when the wind blows hard enough, the curtains give way and there is a fleeting display of entangled naked bodies. For an instant, these rare private moments become public. Those who happen to get a glimpse inevitably stare, drinking in the softness of the moment, before going back to sleep.

Fights are different. The whole house knows when Second Uncle is at it again with his wife. It always starts the same awkward way around dinner time. “Do you like the food?” his wife asks.

“Uh.”

“Did you have a hard day? Do you have to stay late again tomorrow?”

“Uh.”

By the fifth question, the wife gets tired of the same monosyllabic answer.

“Why don’t you talk to me?”

The match is lit and he explodes.

“Stop asking stupid questions.”

The volume goes up and the name-calling starts. “Stupid useless woman.” “Pig head.” “Bitch.” The wife fights back, firing off even more questions like bullets. There is a moment of quiet like the eye of a storm. Then comes the slaps across the face. Often, the slaps escalates to pushing and shoving. Once, the wife, pregnant at the time, tumbles down the stairs. The walls shake with her cries as she bleeds.

Despite the abuse, the wife remains inexplicably enamoured with her husband. In every fight, the mother-in-law sides with her son. Under the thunderous roof, my grandmother and her other sisters-in-law simply continue mundane daily chores, taking it all in but in no position to intervene.

My grandmother can tell that Second Uncle has a girlfriend on the side. He is often off to “work” at random hours. Nobody questions out loud, least of all his wife. He is secretly, yet obviously, packing essentials to leave. Over time, items are mysteriously disappearing. A shirt here, a pair of pants there. When Grandmother is sweeping one afternoon, she finds a bag underneath some boxes in the corner of the closet. A quick glance and she spots the missing clothes. She opens her mouth to call his wife but changes her mind at the last minute. She does not know how to break the news, and what if she is wrong? She would just be causing trouble. So she keeps quiet. She quickly stuffs everything back in the bag and puts the boxes back in place. Then one day, they wake up and he is gone.

Still 1940. In Europe, WWII is in full swing. Hitler is attacking with remarkable speed and western Allies are barely hanging on. Meanwhile, at my grandmother's doorstep, Japan dominates, sweeping into China with full force and heading south. Japan has formed a military alliance with Germany and Italy, the Axis Powers, against the rest of the world.

"Got a match?" Soldiers on all battlefronts ask the same question in different languages. They are constantly looking for matches, mostly to light cigarettes. Tobacco does wonders for stopping the hunger pangs and passing the time waiting. What better way to calm the nerves before going out to kill or be killed? Behind the frontlines, civilians are also looking for matches to light fires for cooking, or to light incense or candles to honour all sorts of gods. Divine intervention is needed to end the miserable war. Most of these matches come from the Swedish Match Company, and it has been making inroads into the Chinese market. At the Hong Kong branch, Grandfather works as a sales manager, under a Swedish supervisor who does not understand the language. Like most of the other supervisors, they have delegated their work to their Chinese staff. They simply sign the translated sales contracts in English, which say a lot less than the Chinese versions.

"Turns out the Chinese sales manager in the Shanghai branch has been siphoning money all these years through a bunch of fake agents that he made up. So headquarters fired the whole branch!" Grandfather announces at dinner. "They want to transfer me to Shanghai." He pauses. He knows this is a big announcement. He tries to make eye contact but all eyes are focused on their own bowls of rice. Chopsticks continue clinking. Nobody dares to breathe. Finally he breaks the awkward silence. "We should go together." He looks at my grandmother expectantly. She is thinking hard and continues to eat, but does not say a word.

Later in the evening, she says to him, "What if they fire you? Then we are stuck in a city where we don't know anybody." She bites her lower lip and looks him in the eye, then adds quietly, as if her volume might affect the future, "If we all go, our ship may get bombed."

The only way to get to Shanghai is by ship. Is it any better for only him to be on the ship when it gets bombed? Neither of them dares to say

that real possibility out loud. Sometimes it is easier to talk in circles, and about everything else, as if life is normal out there. Besides, this is their only income and he does not have the luxury to choose. He has to go.

In the end they agree that Grandmother and the six children will stay and wait for Grandfather to settle first. Once the world calms down, he can send for them.

He leaves, trusting their plan.

Then their world falls apart.

“The Japanese are coming! The Japanese are coming!”

It is 1941. On the 8th of December, the Japanese arrive. More specifically, they attack. A few hours after they finish with Pearl Harbour, they aim their weapons toward the British colony of Hong Kong.

Britain has enough to deal with in Europe. There is no space to worry about the colonies. After eighteen days of defending, the Governor walks into the most elegant hotel, the Peninsula on the Kowloon side. Overlooking the sparkling harbour, with the stroke of a pen he determines the destiny of thousands, and surrenders. It is Christmas Day.

Thus it begins: the fall of Hong Kong. The period only known by its duration—three years and eight months.

Surrender does not bring relief. Instead, it gives the Japanese army carte blanche for rampant killings and torture. Forced deportation dramatically reduces the city’s population. Rape becomes a common daily occurrence. All women are targets. The streets empty. For those who remain, the blanket of Japanese new order smothers the city, their Chineseness erased. Japanese military yen becomes the legal currency, forcing everyone to exchange their Hong Kong dollars at two to one. Japanese is taught in schools as a mandatory language. Japanese radio broadcasts. Japanese newspapers. Japanese street names. Japanese landmarks. There are even Japanese movies for those who can pay and want more Japanese propaganda. Overnight, the new Hong Kong being advertised is the new hell.

Each household is issued a ration card for rice, oil, flour, sugar and salt. On the first day my grandmother wakes up before dawn and

hurriedly makes her way. The shop is not open yet but the queue is already around the block. She walks past an intersection when she hears an angry shout, “Yamete!” She freezes. She is not quite sure what that Japanese word means but she knows it is not a welcome. Japanese soldiers are stationed at most street corners. Everyone must bow ninety degrees from the hip to the soldiers whenever they are in sight. A second late and it is considered disrespect which translates into a beating. Often, it leads to other infractions made up on the spot. In rushing, she has forgotten to look out for the soldiers!

Three Japanese soldiers with their rifles surround her. They push her towards the side of a building. Six angry eyes pierce through her body. Though she keeps her eyes on the ground, she can feel it. The three of them speaks rapidly to one another, deciding her fate. One must have made a dare, because the other two move closer, so close that she can smell their fishy breaths. The first one uses the butt of his rifle to poke at her chin, making her lift her head. The second one rips out the pin holding her bun, and starts to “style” her hair with his rifle, all while jeering and laughing. The third one grabs her hands and twists them behind her back, making her lean forward. With his other hand, he goes straight for her right breast and squeezes, hard. She winces and they laugh even louder. “More?” “More!!” They must have learnt the Cantonese word somewhere and they are using it against her. The first soldier rips open her shirt, exposing her thin undershirt and her right nipple. Now it is his turn to squeeze.

Pain shoots up her side, yet she feels detached from her body. She clenches her teeth. Just as the second one is about to get his hands into her trousers, there is a commotion. Two men are dragged onto the street by two soldiers. A woman behind them pleads, “Please! They are innocent! They are not guerrilla fighters! Please!”

The three molesting my grandmother are momentarily distracted. Two of them decide to join the beating and kicking of the two men, who have curled into fetal positions on the ground. The third one looks at my grandmother with inhuman eyes, and flings her against the wall, but not before slapping her twice across the face. The world starts spinning. In the distance, the pleading continues, mixed with laughter and

shouts. She slides along the wall, using it for support, until she gets to an alley, while pulling the remnants of her shirt around her. She knows the torture is about to begin. The two men will be forced to drink chili juice until their stomachs are about to explode, and the soldiers will stomp on them. If they somehow make it through that, the men will be marched to nearby King's Park. The soldiers will watch as they dig their own graves. They will stab them with their bayonets to save on bullets.

Slipping through the back alleys, my grandmother slowly picks her way to the shop. She is not familiar with these alleys and she cannot think straight. Her body moves forward. Left. Right. Repeat. It takes her a good hour before she arrives at the back of the shop. She joins the end of the line. Japanese soldiers hover, randomly swinging their batons, for "crowd control". The line moves like a squirming snake, struggling to avoid being hit. After an eternity, my grandmother reaches the front. Before she can even ask for anything, the shopkeeper pipes up, "We don't have enough. Everyone gets half their quota."

"But I have a big household to feed."

A chorus of "me too" rises behind her.

"Yeah, yeah. That's what everyone says. Half. That's it."

Still clutching her shirt and with her cheeks burning from the slaps, my grandmother hands over her basket and her ration card. She'll take what she can get.

1943. The exchange rate has risen to four to one. Life is becoming untenable in Hong Kong. After much internal debating of "should I or shouldn't I," my grandmother decides to take her six children to Canton. She has relatives there. Maybe they will take them in? At the very least they will not starve. They pack their meagre belongings and start walking. North. They walk for three days and nights. Even the youngest, the boy who is only three, walks. Once in a long while a car lumbers by, generating little dust tornadoes. They walk in silence. What is there to say? There are others on this dirt road they may or may not know. Bodies move in unison. Together they form a slow procession. In another life, they might easily have been mistaken for having just finished performing in a parade.

As the sky darkens, they train their eyes to the sides of the road, searching for a patch of earth that will serve as a bed. "Over here! No. Here." Night falls, the air chills, and the decision is made. The discussion ends at a random patch of field that is relatively flat and dry. They lay down side by side, the boy in the middle, and his sisters packed tightly on either side radiating outwards in order of age. Simple math. Age-old gender hierarchy. All day long, the second daughter has been clutching the family's one precious item: their blanket. She spreads it carefully over the group, making sure it is equal at the edges. As she drifts off to sleep, my grandmother takes over the clutching. She and her oldest daughter are on the outside, grasping at the little bit of blanket that is leftover for them, their backs exposed to the cold air. My grandmother hooks her arm through their three bags and closes her eyes, but not really sleeping. She fears, under the guise of night, the others who have been walking beside them will try to steal their warm blanket.

Her relatives in Canton squeeze them into the storeroom at the back of the family house. My grandmother is relieved to have a roof over their heads. Since Grandfather left, he has been sending regular money transfers from his job in Shanghai. When the first one arrives in Canton, a young boy is sent over to deliver the message to my grandmother. She immediately drops what she is doing, and goes to the wardrobe to choose her cleanest shirt. She puts it on, smooths out the wrinkles, and finishes the outfit by putting her hair in a bun with chopsticks.

Before stepping out the door, she asks, "I look ok?" "Yeeesss," daughters one to four reply in unison without looking. She then rubs some mud on her face so she looks ugly to the Japanese soldiers. Then she starts the long walk to the nice house on the other side of town.

She knocks twice. A maid no older than fifteen opens the door. My grandmother is led to a sitting room with beautiful polished furniture made of rosewood. It is so clean! How hard the servants must work to erase the dusts of war that seep in through the wooden louvres. She marvels as the chair armrest gleams in the sunlight. With her eyes, she traces the furniture, lest any turn of the head would betray her thoughts. The chairs beckon but she dares not sit. The fresh scent of soap fills her nostrils and she self-consciously pulls her shirt tightly around herself,

checking to make sure that no part of her touches anything. Standing in a corner where her desperation cannot contaminate the room, she stares at the floor in the distance and waits.

A good half hour passes before the delicately carved double doors swing open with dramatic conviction. In comes Mr. Li, a middle age man with greying hair who towers over her. Does he walk around the house with such flare even when there is no visitor?

“What is your business?” Mr. Li asks in a booming voice, as if he is delivering a speech to thousands. He makes sure he keeps his chin up so he can cast his eyes downwards.

“Greetings Mr. Li. I am sorry to bother you. I am Mrs. Lam. I receive a message regarding the money transfer and I am here to receive it. I very much appreciate your assistance.” My grandmother answers a little too eagerly, and tries hard to still herself from the sound waves that are bouncing off the walls.

Mr. Li smirks. “Wouldn’t you like to get your hands on the banana money!” He pauses just long enough to see her shift uncomfortably before sending for the maid to bring a well-worn briefcase. Click. The buckles pop open and he takes out a stash of bills. He proceeds to count, “ten, twenty, fifty...” rubbing each one to make sure nothing is accidentally stuck together.

My grandmother keeps her eyes fixed on the money. She has six growing children to feed and she needs every yen. He stops counting too soon. “Here,” he barks, casually dropping the few bills into her hands. She carefully tucks them into her belt pocket and thanks him profusely. Mr. Li turns his back and walks away, not even bothering to acknowledge her. Alone, she finds her way back to the front door and lets herself out. She breathes in, holds it, and looks around.

As a young woman walking alone, my grandmother is the perfect target for the Japanese soldiers and she knows it. Slowly, she takes a cautious step and peeps around the corner like a detective. While the soldiers in the distance have their heads turned, she quickly crosses the road and ducks behind the buildings.

Deep in the labyrinth of alleyways, she feels safe. Nobody can keep up with her through the convoluted twists and turns that her body has

memorized. The air is cooler and she can feel her brain going back to normal. She emerges at the back of a shop in the market, winds her way to the front and casually joins the long line. A few people raise their eyebrows but fortunately, nobody asks any question. The line starts as orderly but impatience is brewing. Mumbles grow louder and at the back, some people are starting to shove. My grandmother keeps her elbows raised to guard her spot. Suddenly, as if riding a wave, she is deposited at the front.

“How much is half a catty of rice today?”

“Forty yen.”

She gulps. The price has gone up again. Between Mr. Li taking a cut and eye-popping inflation, the money in her hands will be gone in no time.

“I will take it.” She bites her lower lip. At least her family will eat today and tomorrow.

1944. My grandmother and her six children have settled in Canton for a few months and adapted to war time normal. They have moved into a small one storey house not too far from a creek. Behind their house, there is a chicken coop, with one precious hen. They never feed it. It walks in circles all day long and finds food in the ground. Every morning, it lays an egg and proudly screams out to announce its arrival. The young boy loves the chicken and often visits it. It is the only living thing in the house that is smaller than him. Sometimes, he climbs inside the chicken coop to try to catch it, but it always escapes his clutch at the last minute.

One day after school, he is inside the coop. Chasing the chicken, he accidentally kicks the gate open. The chicken darts out and he follows. The chicken’s head bobs back and forth, occasionally pecking at the dirt. It is in no hurry to go anywhere. Why hasn’t he thought of this before? He is thrilled to be out there with the chicken so they both have more room to move around. He chases. It runs. He slows down. It stops. Round and round in circles they play. Then it starts to get dark.

“Ah Kit, dinner.”

“Ok, ma.”

The boy saunters inside, cheeks flushed.

“What are you doing out there?” His third sister asks.

“Just playing with the chicken. It needs exercise.”

“It’s exercising in the coop?” His fifth sister jokes.

“No. It needs space. The coop is too small. I let it out to exercise.”

In a flash, my grandmother leaps out the door, followed by all the sisters. The chicken coop gate is wide open, no chicken in sight. The boy rushes out to the spot where he was playing with the chicken. He stares, as if the chicken will emerge from the ground. He runs around the coop, in case the chicken is playing hide and seek. Then he runs to the street and looks up and down. Nothing.

Rage explodes from my grandmother.

“What! Could! You! Possibly! Be! Thinking?” she yells as she grabs his shoulder. Her other hand lands everywhere on his back, again and again. He cries. He whimpers. But the worst is the hunger afterwards. That daily egg was a large part of their meal.

Messages from Grandfather have not arrived in a while. My grandmother decides it is time to go to that nice house to inquire. She has two shirts left, the one on her back and the one on the clothesline. She chooses the one on the clothesline. It is slightly damp but she needs to appear proper. She boldly walks over and taps on the door with the lion knocker. The same maid opens the door and leads her into the sitting room. Perhaps the hunger has affected her vision but the maid seems to have shrunk. Once her eyes adjust, the first thing she sees is a thin layer of dust covering every surface. Before she has time to hide her surprise, Mr. Li, who seems to grow a bit taller every visit, appears. A flash of recognition crosses his face but he asks for her name anyway.

“Uh...Greetings Mr. Li. This is Mrs. Lam. Have you received any money transfer from my husband?” my grandmother asks hopefully.

“No. It has gotten rather difficult to transfer money in a chaotic war zone. You understand.” Mr. Li makes it clear that he is ending with a statement.

“Yes, I understand.” She answers as pleasantly as she can. She does not understand.

My grandmother gathers herself and steps back onto the street. Shuffling along with a few others on this main thoroughfare, she is struck by how calm it is. She remembers streets used to be different. Amidst the comings and goings, all the children would play together, especially this eagle and baby chickens game. They played it over and over until dark. The “baby chickens” who were at the tail end always got tagged first by the “eagle” and they inevitably fell into a giant heap of limbs. Shrieks and laughter filled the air, complete with reprimands from the closest adult. About a year into the war, the realities of life force the children to mature overnight. They drop their games and instead start scavenging for any scraps to fill their stomachs. Initially, strangers are quite willing to help by sharing leftovers. Before long, bowls and plates are licked clean, and there are no scraps to fight over. The children widen their menu to include grass, leaves and tree bark. It gets boiled into a black soup. They are so hungry they don’t even need to pinch their noses to eat it. Soon the leaves are gone and the trees are stripped. Then it starts, though barely noticeable in the beginning. One by one, they simply stop showing up. “O, perhaps she is sick” “I think his mom needs his help.” “Have they moved?” No one asks the question that is burning in everyone’s mind.

To supplement, my grandmother gathers used clothing from the wealthy parts of town and sells them at makeshift markets. Before the sun has fully risen, she has already staked out a spot. On the bare asphalt, she takes great care in displaying her collection. Shirts on one side, trousers on the other, organized by colour. On a good day she sells a piece or two, and manages to get enough to buy a few extra handfuls of rice. On most days, she is stuck with the clothes. In a giant blanket, she bundles her collection and slings the sack over her shoulder to go from market to market. About once a month, she travels to chase customers in bigger towns. The distance means she does not come home for days. Before she goes, she double-checks that the wooden rice bin is not empty. Closing the lid makes a distinct “thump”, alerting her son.

“Ah, Ma, are you going again?” he asks.

No answer.

“How long are you going for this time?”

“Only a day I think.”

That means three at least. All the children know. On those nights, the second daughter stands on a little stool to cook rice, while the eldest stokes the fire, and the young boy lies awake.

1945. The Japanese are clearly losing their war, though the raggedy posters plastered on the dilapidated buildings are still trying to say otherwise. The air raids have become more frequent and food rationing has gone from reduced to sporadic to non-existent. Empty stomachs rumble from street to street. All that talk about creating a regional Asian power has become the butt of whispered jokes. Everyone knows somebody who is part of the guerrilla resistance now. The fortunes of war are shifting but until the hour of surrender comes, the misery continues.

To quell the hunger pains, my grandmother tells her children, “tighten your belt!” The six children are down to a small bowl of watery rice once a day. The eldest sister sits by the front window while holding her stomach. “I am going to starve to death.” She regularly announces to nobody.

“Me too,” her siblings answer under their breaths.

Everyone thinks about death. It is everywhere. The bodies, the stench. The streets are full of children who are left by parents unable to care for them. The parents ask their children to wait by a tree, or at a prominent corner. There is a tender moment of hesitation when they gently touse their children’s hair before hurriedly walking away. On the first day, they still have the energy to cry. By the third day they are dead. On the fifth day their bodies are covered by flies. The lucky ones die at home. At least their decaying bodies are protected from the elements. The boy tightens his belt another notch. He plays with it, wondering how long it takes to boil a belt so it is soft enough to eat. He misses the egg.

My grandmother and her six children watch as the house next door grows quiet. The neighbours are just skin and bones. Gradually, there are less and less of them. The boy looks across and catches the eyes of the last child, who is older than him. They used to play together. Her large

hollowed, pleading eyes are locked on him. They are not accusatory and not jealous. They know what is coming and they have accepted. The clothesline is bare. They stop coming out. The door stays closed. And then there is only silence.

The black market is thriving and it comes alive in the darkest of nights. The locals have gotten very good at moving silently between the black shadows, or remaining still as statues as the sound of Japanese patrols near. Once it is dark enough, my grandmother slips out the door. She keeps her back to the buildings and feels her way until her fingers hit the broken handle of a particular house, whose door is well hidden by the turn of the alleyway. She strokes the door lightly and lets herself in as if it is all normal. Once inside, she holds her breath until she hears the familiar footsteps of the young man. He is her conduit to customers on the black market. As a runner of messages and goods during the day, he keeps his eyes and ears open. My grandmother offers her jewellery, wedding dress, silk cheongsam, items that were once so precious but are now useless to her. He casually mentions the items to other runners and his well-to-do customers. She checks in with him every few days, and as soon as there is a potential sale, she brings over the goods that she has hidden so well this whole time. When the trade is successful, the young man gives her the money and takes a cut. She has never learnt his name and he never asks for hers.

Amidst these abnormal times, there is one unusually normal thing—school. In the mornings, the six children get ready, put on their uniform, and walk to school together. The boy goes to kindergarten. He has to walk two paces for every one of his sisters. Every so often, when he is lagging behind, his fourth sister takes his hand. They learn Japanese instead of English, replacing one occupier language with another. Yet the current occupiers are getting targeted by their former occupiers. The bombings are increasingly intense, triggering the air sirens. The sound is high pitch, and it goes on and on. WOOOOOOO. Instant headache. The volume splits the brain. When the threat is over or the bombs dropped, it stops. There is a collective relaxing of shoulders when the eardrums stop vibrating. The planes are supposed to be bombing military targets and leaving civilians alone, but war is not that precise and lots of mistakes

happen. So the school sends home notes to the parents.

In the event the school is bombed, how should the school handle your child?

- A. Let my child leave by themselves
- B. Let my child leave with a friend. Provide friend's name _____
- C. Let my child follow the teacher
- D. Other _____

My grandmother holds six in her hand. They look like any other field trip permission forms. Same kind of paper and same fonts. How is she supposed to answer? She puts the notes in a corner to try to forget about them. Just before going to sleep, she pulls them out again and circles D. Other. Beside it, she asks one of her daughters to write, "Let fate decide."

They have very few items left to take to the market. My grandmother has sold her last jewellery and their ivory chopsticks. Now they need to eat with their hands, if there is anything to eat.

One day, my grandmother receives a letter from Grandfather, only the fourth one since he left. Letters have been their only link. She reads and re-reads each one and keeps them under her pillow. My grandmother, who has never learnt to write, goes to the letter writers two streets over to prepare the reply. Quite a few of them have set up wooden chairs and tables outside their doors. She likes to go to Mr. Lau. He takes the time to listen to what she wants to say. Then he takes his brush, dips it in ink and twirls it just so. He always takes a beat, sits up straight before he starts writing at full speed. In the last one, my grandmother describes their dire conditions. Mr Lau listens attentively but does not flinch. He simply writes it word for word. Afterwards, he reads it once to my grandmother, slowly but emphatically. Yes, this is how her husband would read her letter. Grandfather must have written back immediately. This fourth letter is only half a page long, the shortest one he has written. "I have sent an urgent money transfer. Go to Mr. Li." He writes almost in scribbles.

She reads those two lines over and over. Could this be true? A trace of hope and relief spreads across her face. Finally.

She has one shirt left—the one on her back. She smoothes it as best she can. She doesn't bother to ask how she looks. There is no point. The route to Mr. Li's is seared into her mind. She can walk it blindfolded. She arrives at the familiar door and knocks. Perhaps she knocks too hard as the door opens on its own. She hesitates.

"Who's there?" Mr. Li booms.

She steps in, closes the door carefully and says, "It is Mrs. Lam."

A growl. No matter. She knows the way to the sitting room. Mr. Li is already there, standing. She gasps in surprise. The furniture is stacked in a corner and the room is covered in a thick layer of dust.

"What is your business?" Mr. Li asks, as if everything is the same.

"Greetings, Mr. Li. I received a letter from my husband. He mentioned he sent an urgent money transfer. I am here to receive it. I appreciate your—"

"There is no money transfer." Mr. Li cuts her off.

"My husband sent the letter and said—"

"There is no money transfer." Louder this time. "Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, Mr. Li." She pauses and gets up the courage to try again. "But my husband's letter said—"

"There is NO money transfer!" Mr. Li yells. He stands there, chest out, chin up, eyes cast downwards, completely immobile, like a statue in an abandoned square. They stand facing each other for an eternity. My grandmother's knees shake uncontrollably, not out of fear, but at the prospect of leaving without any money.

"Please, Mr. Li. I have six starving children at home," she says as she drops to her knees, tears rolling down her face. "I need the money."

"There is NO MONEY TRANSFER!"

My grandmother shuffles closer to Mr. Li and pleads, "Please, please, please, Mr. Li. My children are starving. A small portion of the money will do."

For a moment, Mr. Li, breathing rapidly, seems moved. He has the money. His steely eyes betray him. She knows it.

“No. There is no money transfer.” At that, he turns and leaves.

My grandmother crumbles. Her tears flow. She sobs till she is out of breath. After a long time on the floor, she slowly stands and dusts herself off. She leaves for the last time. On closing the door, she curses under her breath, “Shame on your ancestors! Death to your whole family!”

She steps out. The sun shines brightly, not a cloud in the sky. She looks in the direction of the shop, then turns the opposite direction, and goes straight home.

THE FALL

KATARINA YOUNG



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Rosa opened her eyes after dozing to the lullaby of an outdated soap opera. She felt around with blue veined hands for the softness of the familiar fabric beneath her. Her thin silver wedding band shifted loosely around her finger, which had shrunk two sizes since her wedding day 63 years ago. She looked up at the off-white ceiling, worn out and barren. She shifted her legs over the side of the bed in search of the softness of carpet, but instead found cold, hard stone. Rosa paused, tracing her toes along the grooves of the square brown tiles through thin cotton socks. Then, in a requisite moment of courage, leaned heavily on her good side and launched herself up to stand. *Time to sweep the porch.*

At four stories tall, the house was garishly large next to the neighboring bungalows nestled on either side. The first floor was a grid of crusted red bricks, nicked and grooved by the passing of time, and held together with decaying mortar. A patch of yellow bricks appeared beside the front door, as if an explosion in the masonry had been later filled in. Encasing the second floor was another coloured brick, pink and neat with smooth edges. The third floor heaved above, a dubious tower of concrete blocks. The top floor was wrapped in weather-worn plywood, an unfinished thought. A dull metal roof was poorly nailed in place, so that when the wind blew, it rattled. There were too many windows, all the same size, with stickers from the manufacturer still stuck on, and not a single curtain.

On a corner lot, the house stretched back from the curb in a long rectangle. The basement was dug out and more windows installed, an attempt to bring light to what was once unseen. But the job was never finished, and piles of turned up earth made up the yard. At the back of the house, sliding glass doors matched the plain white trim of the windows but there were no stairs, only a steep fall to a muddy fate.

Around the front, resting on a patch of brown grass, was a stone lion, the size of a domesticated feline rather than a wild one.

Rosa's son, Donny, moved into the house two weeks after her fall.

"The doctor says it's best if you stay here in the hospital a while longer, Ma," Donny had said as he sat on the end of the thin mattress. "They say you could fall again. Someone like you, living alone like that... they say it's like Swiss cheese." The old woman had looked away from her son's pleading gaze, staring at the thin curtain between her and another unlucky soul. The memory of the doctor nattering on about Swiss cheese curdled into her brain.

"When an older person like you takes a fall, we think of it like falling through a hole of Swiss cheese. In old age, people lose their balance. They might take medications that make them feel dizzy or lightheaded. Their muscles become weaker. And often, older people end up living alone, like you were. These things create a gap in safety, a hole that runs right through a block of Swiss cheese. And people fall right through it, like you did. They fall and they can't get up."

After 139 days of geriatric rehabilitation, the old woman's wrist was no longer sprained, although the joint cracked loudly when rotated. Her fractured hip healed as well as porous 87-year-old bones do. She could stand for all of five minutes before a deep soreness radiated down her leg. But she could pull herself up out of bed. She could go home.

"Your mobility has improved so much, Rosa. I'm so proud of you!" said a kind young woman dressed in pink scrubs, who looked as exhausted as the old woman felt. "I gave Donny a list of exercises. It's important that you do them to keep up your strength. No more falls! I don't want to see you back here!" She let out an affectionate laugh, giving Rosa's bony shoulder a gentle squeeze. Despite her improved mobility, the old woman was steered out of the wide building in a wheelchair before being carefully packed into the front seat of Donny's Toyota pick-up.

In the 139 days since her fall, Rosa hadn't spoken. At first, she was in too much pain to speak, and then she forgot how to speak. During the four and a half months she spent in a hospital bed, she realized there was rarely a reason to speak. Donny was attuned to the sound of his own voice and adapted well to displacing the stale air of his mother's silence during frequent visits. The old woman was otherwise interrupted by some combination of hospital staff drifting in and out of her room each day, taking her blood pressure or handing her cups of pills, which she swallowed with ease. It appeared to Rosa that most of them, with their full cheeks and questionable style of dress, were barely old enough to hold a driver's license, never mind a medical degree. The ones who asked her to build towers out of plastic cups three times a week bothered her the most with their loose hippie pants or skintight leggings that left little to the imagination. Soon into her hospital stay, a doctor had begun quizzing her on the same unanswered questions; things like, "Can you tell me what day it is?" But all of that came to an end after the imaging scan.

"There are no signs of dementia in your mother's brain." The doctor stood across from Donny at the end of Rosa's bed. The old woman watched with eyes feigning sleep. "I can also tell you that selective mutism is not uncommon for someone her age," the doctor continued casually, "It's typically a trauma response, or sometimes an early sign of VSED."

"VSED?" Donny hovered his baseball cap above his thinning hair before quickly setting it back in place.

"Voluntary stopping eating and drinking, also not uncommon for someone your mother's age. One of the nurses can provide you with more information, should it become evident. Right now, she is still maintaining an adequate nutrient intake. Were the circumstances of your mother's fall particularly traumatic?"

"Ma lives alone... she was alone when she fell. She couldn't get to the phone. I usually go by every day, you know, but that day I... I didn't, I couldn't..." Donny went on, "The paramedic told me it must have been a few hours before someone walking by heard her calling for help." The doctor nodded.

“Have you considered placement in long-term care? She is at high risk for another fall. It’s no longer safe for her to live alone.”

Rosa truly forgot how to speak the day she left the hospital, the moment Donny’s rusted out Toyota pulled up in front of that patch of dead grass, and her cloudy grey eyes traveled up the four-story tower. As Donny helped her out of the truck, Rosa took in her garden; trampled by construction. Her gaze landed on the stone lion on the lawn, on the lattice of moss growing over its feet.

“Welcome home, Ma!” Donny smiled as he hooked his mother’s arm through his and led her to the front door. Rosa’s quiet stare shifted to the planks of scrap wood and crumbling bricks piled on the porch, to the old toilet beside the rubble. Her son began to ramble as he unlocked the door to reveal what was inside. The old woman shuffled through the door after him, the same solid wood door with the same ornate carving, but this wasn’t her house. Where there was once a living room to the right through wood pocket doors, a short hall into a narrow galley kitchen, and two small bedrooms at the back of the bungalow, there was now a hollow chamber. She could see right through the glass doors in the back, to the piles of dirt in the yard.

Rosa stood motionless. Her son paced, pointing out his plans; electrical to do, drywall to patch, baseboards to install. The kitchen was now a single wall of cabinetry and void of an oven. The microwave remained, the only surviving source of heat. On the other side of the room was the bed Rosa had slept in for 63 years, made up with familiar faded green sheets. One side of the wooden frame, coated in a shiny chestnut varnish, was pushed up against the wall. At the end of the bed, a small television was perched on a tall cardboard box. Quietly tucked behind the headboard was a plastic commode complete with armrests.

“It’s open concept!” Donny finally stood still; hands settled proudly on his hips. “I had to sell a few things to keep the renovations going. Jesus Murphy, there was a lot of junk in this house. I must have scraped 20 years’ worth of Dad’s nicotine off these walls.” After the mention of

his father, Donny's eyes fell to his feet. Rosa's gaze followed. The wall-to-wall blue carpeting where Rosa's husband passed away early and unexpectedly had been ripped up and stone tile laid down in its place.

"Call an ambulance!" Rosa had screamed at eighteen-year-old Donny as he knelt beside his father. The middle-aged man had collapsed in slow motion, gasping for air, a heart attack on the living room floor. Rosa's husband had gripped their son's arm then, with strength you wouldn't expect from a man with a seizing heart. "Don't save me." He told his wife and son. And so, they didn't.

Rosa and Donny moved past the memory almost as quickly as they had fallen into it.

"This stone is so easy to clean Ma, you're going to be amazed. A few sweeps and bam, dust gone. And totally flat, you know, nothing to trip over!" Donny continued, "Two, maybe three, months and I'll have this place done. Wait 'til you see upstairs, Ma, there's a view of the CN tower. When the stairs are done, I'll take you up." Donny gestured toward a tall, paint splattered step ladder beneath a gaping hole in the ceiling. Rosa couldn't imagine what to say.

Rosa watched as Donny set about on his commitment to her longevity. He taped the sheets of paper with exercise diagrams on them on the wall above her bed, as if they were artwork worth looking at. Every morning, he handed her a bottle of Ensure from the mini fridge he'd plugged in by her bed, determined to bring her back to life.

"Drink it, Ma, please. The doctors say it's best to if you try to gain some weight. They say you could fall again, being so frail like this." To soothe her son, Rosa always took the first sip in front of him; artificial vanilla, stale and thick like paper pulp, washed over her tongue. Once Donny disappeared into the hole in the ceiling, the old woman slid open the back door to pour the rest in the dirt, pausing to watch the pale liquid disappear into the earth.

Lunch was usually soda crackers and soup, minestrone or beef and barley. "Beef and barley... my favourite growing up Ma, remember?"

Donny liked to say, slurping hot liquid from his mother's coffee mug. *How could she forget? Her only child, and the pickiest of eaters.* When Donny was a baby, he never took to solid foods. Rosa boiled and mashed every fruit, vegetable and starch she could think of, but he refused all of it. She spent a small fortune on fortified formula, her own milk supply long unable to keep up. She complained to doctors who found nothing physically wrong with the boy. The family was referred to a psychologist, but the idea perplexed Rosa and her husband. *What good would that do? The boy only needed to eat.*

"Stop feeding him so much damn formula and he'll be hungry enough to eat!" Her husband had advised. Rosa obeyed but their son's disinterest in eating continued. By the time he was three, Rosa was spending hours each day convincing her son to eat.

"Swallow the porridge, Donny, please. Swallow it right now. Swallow that. Swallow what's in your mouth!" Rosa would sit back, exasperated. Donny looked at her in defiance. He could hold a spoonful of porridge in his mouth for two hours before finally spitting it out.

"He's going to starve himself to death!" Rosa shrieked to her sister on the phone. He wakes up four or five times a night and I can hear his stomach rumbling! He's starving himself!"

"Calm down, Rosa." Her sister replied, "The child will never starve himself to death. You're paying him too much attention. He needs a little benign neglect, as Mummy would say." When Donny started school, Rosa became increasingly convinced he would waste away. She saw how healthy the other children looked next to her ghostly child with his hollow eyes and skinny limbs. Rosa continued to cook, but every Sunday's roast chicken went cold on Donny's plate. Every slice of Monday's chicken pot pie was pushed around into a pile of mush. In a last effort to nourish her child, she began zapping bowls of Campbell's soup and various frozen vegetables in the microwave. She left them out on the table overnight, long after mealtimes were over. The following morning, the dishes were empty, licked clean.

After lunch each day at the house, it was back up the ladder where Donny slept on a cot each night and made an unconscionable racket during the day – *slams, bams* and *wha-bams* echoing relentlessly through the walls. But most afternoons, Donny was called away, the heavy *clang* of his steel toed boots rippling down the porch steps as he yelled out to his mother.

“Gary called; he could use a hand with some plumbing work over on Hallam Street. It’ll just take a few minutes!”

“Ma? You’re still in bed? Did you drink your Ensure? That was Tom from the shop, he needs some guys to help put in a new kitchen. I’ll be back after dinner.”

“Ma! I’m out of nails, I’m going to Home Depot!” Through the hole in the ceiling, Rosa often heard the echo of her son’s booming voice on the phone, seeking advice for his own work in progress. The old woman’s hearing was remarkably sharp for someone her age. The doctors at the hospital had told her so.

“Is that black to black? Or black to red on those wires? Alright, alright, got it.” Donny said into the phone one afternoon. Rosa listened as he tinkered. *Playing with fire*. “What’s that? Oh, Ma’s alright, thanks... Not a word but I know she’ll come around once the house is done, you know...” Donny went on, “I told her, you know, it’ll make us good money. We can rent it out. She’ll finally have more spending money than my dad’s crummy old pension... No, not a word... You know, the doctors say she’s lucky she didn’t break the hip, only a fracture. They say if you break a hip in your 80s, that’s it, you’re dead within a year.”

The old woman sunk further into her bed sheets. *It had only been a fracture. She had only taken a fall. She had only been unable to get up for hours. She had only laid on the floor in agony. She had only spent months in a hospital bed, only to return home to a house that was no longer hers. A life beyond her control. Calm down, Rosa, the old woman concluded, calling in the ghost of her sister’s advice.*

Two months passed. Bottles of Ensure into the dirt pit. Cans of soup *zapped* for lunch, followed by an hour or so of slumber to the hum of old soaps on the television. Donny racing out the door at some point in the afternoon. Then, it was time for Rosa to sweep the porch before settling into an early dinner of red wine sweetened with a heaping spoonful of sugar, an old habit. By the time Donny returned home from a job, takeout food in hand, his mother was dozing.

During the 63 years she lived there, Rosa swept the porch nearly every afternoon. She had never been especially interested in where she lived or the people that lived around her, but she learned to take pride in her corner of the world. An old woman now, she stooped against the broom, sweeping around the rubble to evict the newest layer of dust. She paused to find the stone lion on the lawn, looking regal but forgotten. The day she bought the lion from a hardware store in Chinatown was cemented in her mind. Her arms ached now, recalling the gusto she had back then. She had heaved the lion, barely bigger than a large house cat but made of solid rock, into her buggy and wheeled it the twenty blocks home.

“What’s it for?” Her husband had asked with immediate distaste when she arrived.

Rosa ignored his question, “It’s a lion.” She planted the sculpted creature onto the healthy lawn with a satisfying thump.

“It’s got no mane. It could be a tiger, or a jaguar.” Rosa stood up straight, turning to face her husband as he looked down from the porch.

“It’s a female lion, for Christ’s sake!” she snapped, “The woman at the store told me so.”

“A lioness, then...” He mumbled, heading back inside.

Now, with her broom as a guide, Rosa stepped down carefully from the porch and eased herself onto a seat on the familiar lion’s back. She steadied herself, the thin skin of her fingers gripping at the scratchy moss that threatened to consume the animal.

The summer after her husband died, Donny told his mother he was leaving. He and a friend planned to hitchhike 2000 miles to the West Coast of the country. Rosa called him a lunatic. She forbode him from going, weary of the world. He went anyway but the morning he left, Rosa saw the hesitation in his stride.

“You know, I can’t stay forever, Ma,” Rosa watched him go, having said all she needed to say.

The house was deathly quiet that summer. There was nothing and no one left to fight against. Rosa began sleeping until ten in the morning, eventually rising for coffee and toast with jam. She took up gardening in the afternoons. She planted yellow roses, pink and red tulips, and draping blue bells. Over time, the dread that seeped through the windows when the sun went down was replaced by an unnatural calm. Rosa came to see how little effort it took to live alone. She became attached to the stillness that occurred when no one else was around. Everything was as she left it.

Thirty odd years passed, finding solace in things as they were. Rosa went on vacuuming the same blue carpet that had swallowed her husband whole. She never changed out the dinner plates she didn’t like much, the same plates upon which Donny had made a mess of every meal she’d served him. Alone in her house, Rosa found she could stop time, for just a few minutes, when she tended to her flowers or stayed up late reading mystery books. Eventually, she came to bask in the life she lived.

Rosa’s gaze settled across the street as she rested on the proud lion’s back. She took in all the porches cluttered with bikes and mismatched furniture but vacant of people. Her neighbours had changed many times over the years. She had lived through many deaths. Slowly, a faint smell of smoke began to fill the air.

Inside the house, a warmth had sparked and begun to spread. Soon, a scalding heat enveloped flammable green sheets and a wooden bed frame coated in varnish that blistered as it burned. Once it was in the

walls, the heat rose quickly, growing into a blaze in a forest of untreated wood and unsecured strips of pink insulation. Trapped, the heat could only grow higher until it found the dried-out plywood wrapped around the top floor. Suddenly, desperately, the heat burst from the house, unleashing streaks of electric yellow and orange against the grey sky.

A firefighter later stepped back from the scorched lawn to observe the damage, the heat now extinguished into piles of rubble upon a well-preserved stone tile floor.

“A four-story house on Wallace Avenue has collapsed in a fire.” A local reporter explained on the evening news. “Police say the cause is still unknown.”

“Ma, thank God you’re okay... if I only I had been there, Ma... what happened? I don’t know what I would do without you...” Donny’s cheeks were flushed, his hands placed protectively on his mother’s. The old woman looked away from the thin curtain that separated her and another unfortunate soul, and into her son’s pleading eyes.

“Donny, what sound does a lion make?”

The Judges' Comments

In assured and fluid prose, Ruth Taylor leads us through a story glimmering with complexity and possibilities, giving us a glimpse into the heart of a captivating character. A young woman working in a city office feels alienated from her co-workers, yet loves her cubicle's window which looks onto a blank square of lawn—snow-covered, at present. Details and observations are sure-footed and precise, with interiority and hints of depths beneath, in a vivid piece that is tantalizing and suggestive, unexpected and memorable.

Dawn Promislow, Author of *Wan*

In her novel, *Queen Mother*, Joanne Lam's stark and simple style choices align perfectly with the trauma of war and famine which they detail. The Japanese occupation of Hong Kong during WW II is told in journalistic, matter of fact, emotionally detached prose as the Lam family—led by the intrepid grandmother—spiral into extreme poverty and desperation. The excerpt leaves the reader yearning to learn more about how this and future generations of the family survive and how the as-yet-unborn grandchild happens to narrate their story.

Ranjinderpal Pal, Author of *However Far Away*

Katarina Young's "The Fall" is a beautifully affecting study of aging. Equal parts intimate and incisive, Young's prose draws the reader into a compassionate portrayal of elderhood, challenging their perspective on the old and the new. Her ability to realize characters so quickly and fully, and to echo their experiences with such a vivid setting (a house that is a character in itself—holding memories, love, and pain) is striking. And the way in which she manages to give a voice to a literally voiceless woman, without ever having her speak words, is simply brilliant. This piece is a lifetime achingly encapsulated, tenderly drawn, and utterly unforgettable.

Megan Kwan, Assistant Editor, Doubleday Canada

