

Fiction

Group 3



Tales from China's Magical Mountains

Chinese International School, Cheung, Charlotte – 12

Reports to finish, graphs to make, emails to reply. John exhaled heavily, as he flopped his head into his pile of printed materials. A third empty cup of coffee rested next to him, his drowsiness hinting at the necessity of a fourth or a fifth. His breath reeked of a disconcertingly stinky mix of coffee beans, the extremely faint flavor of mint mouthwash and saliva in general. In search of a break from the totality of pressure and frustration in life, the next morning, he headed up to Huangshan.

He looked up to the sky — the sun was yawning but he was up anyway. The Chinese characters announced solemnly, his arrival at the “Front Gate”. He began his stride up to the cable car station, but he froze in his tracks — his brows furrowed, eyes widening.

Something was amiss.

Gone was the iconic magic and beauty of Huangshan — instead, the uninvited noise from tourists loudly squabbling to each other banished the sacred serenity. A vocal bargaining between stall owners and the tourists about the price of an ice drink pricked his ears, like the unrelenting buzzing bees.

Completely exasperated, here he was to experience the search of a gone silence, yearning even more for the peace that was always absent from his daily life. Where was the mesmerising beauty of Huangshan that enticed generations of poets and artists? He wondered. While the walk up to the zenith seemed to be infinite, the remix of multiple languages and dialects of tourists became the background tone, setting the mood of his journey. The Baizhang Spring and the A-shaped Waterfall were simply close by, but John could not see anything more than what met the eyes. The Baizhang Spring failed to dazzle him, the cascading silky waterfall was no more than a source of bitingly cold splashes.

As he popped into a cable car, he was only hoping that the peace would come upon him. Now, the unclosable windows made him feel more claustrophobic than ever, the noise poured in through the gap, smashing his eardrums like a pie was being thrown at his face — and he could not jump out of the cable car. The closer he was to the blue sky, the muddier and unappealing the brown trails became.

He buried his face in his hands, gritting his teeth. Why was this happening? He came here to escape from chaos, and all he found was more chaos! “Oh, this is enough chaos for one lifetime,” he thought. Huangshan used to be that paradise where crowds were nowhere to be found, the peace and beauty prevailing above all else — however, he now found the crowd utterly unavoidable. Had he known all this would be harassing his eardrums, wreaking havoc with his psyches, he would have stayed at his office desk to continue with reports, graphs and emails. Even the suffocating working life his boss psychopathically put him through would be better, better than seeing his dreamy portrait of Huangshan smudged before him. They, the ruthless tourists, contributing dabs and strokes that nobody asked for.

“You have arrived at the Greeting Pine,” a pre-recorded voice commanded. John followed like a robot, walking towards the Greeting Pine with no expectations. Here they

were, freely dancing in the wind. The pines were waving with enthusiasm, eagerness and energy, standing in their old age as trees.

John boarded another cable car, and the Stone Flown From Afar caught his eyes. The stone reached the sky, gently penetrating and dipping into the clouds with its tip, like a Chinese pen dipping lightly into a bottle of ink. He dazed at the ethereal structure.

After another little ride in the car, he had arrived at the Cooling Platform. Walking to the center of the platform, he felt the wind blowing towards his face, ruffling his hair, and brushing his legs, a cooling sensation sweeping across his whole body. He didn't even mind his shirt flapping against his chest.

Another cable car trip later, the Begin-to-Believe Peak almost made his eyes pop out. He couldn't believe it! How did these — how did these rocks hold together, in a straight fashion, when they were almost floating, hovering over each other? It was almost as if levitation had allowed the rocks to defy gravity!

He went higher and higher and higher, and the cable car doors opened at last. As he stepped out of the car, the biggest, tallest, most grand of them all was revealed — the Lotus Peak.

He had been missing out. The wind greeted him and brushed his cheeks lightly as he watched the waves of clouds soar smoothly through the air — looking next to him at the “Greeting Pine” and below him to the little staircases, the imposing peaks and those trees that nobody cared for but managed to flourish with their own inner strength, witnessing the changing of times in its ancient history. He felt like he was atop the entire world, a godly feeling empowering his mind, like he could do anything —

The fog was engulfed by a gentle but sudden whoosh of cold wind, just as he had wished for the fog to disappear from his sight, leaving a collection of peaks in its wake. John felt awash by a void, the sense of nothingness and emptiness—as he stood speechless and with a serene feeling.

He peered down at the scenery below his feet, the green of the lush grass, the brown of the peaks, the white of the clouds and the black of the granite staircases. Another light gust of wind breezed past his face, and he felt...reborn, like a wave had just washed his soul, and the pressure of the documents and reports on his shoulders just wafted away like a cloud of smoke. Looking out of the cable car he was in, John opened up the window and let the birds settle on the edge while chirping. Brown birds, black birds, and white birds all flew away from their cables, and came to join John on his cable car, while they sang their joyful songs. He thought of it—he used to hate birds chirping. He thought they were nuisances, creations of nature that had voices to bring disruption and unhappiness to people. But now, it was a kind of naturally created music, that he had learnt to listen more closely to, and he slowly appreciated it.

On the way to the airport, he reflected upon the power that being atop the Lotus Peak had given him. The imposing peaks, the persistent trees, the steamy springs — they had survived the harsh wind and rain, the freezing snow and hail, and the ferocious sun. After tens of thousands of years, they still stood confidently, not withered by the tests of time or the tests of whatever disaster nature threw their way. They all toughed it out, despite what was going on around them, and learnt to find the peace in their inner selves.

Drifting into a deep slumber, a poem about another mountain his mother read to him when he was little spoke to him, quietly and gently:

*“Since I cannot be born again,
on days when my heart grows grim, I leave my quiet house,
and go away to the mountains.*

*On the day I return from a nameless hill,
in house and the village,
I am reborn.”*

The next morning, John awoke with a spring in his step. A first cup of coffee rested next to him — its emptiness didn't hint at the necessity of a second, instead it hinted at his energy. His breath smelled of fresh apples, refreshing mint mouthwash and a good granola bar. “All clouds float, don't they?” John smiled to himself in his office, looking at a picture of him in Huangshan on his desk. Thinking of going back to Huangshan again, he felt that serenity wasn't far, but it was close to his heart despite all those daily nuisances.

Escape from Jiuhua Shan

Chinese International School, Liu, Sarah – 14

A thick mist swirled around Jiuhua Shan. The mountain was the highest among all the Yellow Mountains and the most sacred to the Buddhist faith. The pine-covered peaks seemed to stretch upwards to the sky, sheltering the ancient monastery nestled against the side of the mountain, seemingly abandoned by its former inhabitants. Dense clumps of pine trees clung precariously to the rocky slopes, almost obliterating the narrow pathway that man had built several centuries ago leading up to the monastery. Parts of the path were almost impassible to human beings.

Huang Rongxi lay slumped against an old tree trunk, exhausted from his steep climb. His right arm hung limply by his side, blood seeping through the bandages covering the faded grey of his imperial uniform. Huang had walked for days without food, the pain from his wound growing ever worse as the days passed. The slaughter during the battle against the Tang army had been so intense that Huang saw no chance of surviving the onslaught against his own depleted unit. One moonless night, he slipped out of the camp and crawled into the dense undergrowth at the base of the mountain. For two days, Huang slowly climbed higher and higher into the Yellow Mountains, evading any paths which might be used by any imperial troops. He was convinced that by now, any search party would have given up the hunt for a deserted soldier and began to gradually slow his pace.

On the third day of his escape, Huang decided to take shelter in a low cave, almost hidden in the midst of the silent forest. As night fell, he closed his eyes and tried to block out the numbing pain in his arm. The next day, Huang woke up early, disturbed by the sound of rustling leaves outside of the cave. He immediately moved to draw his knife from its sheath, but instead of an imperial soldier, he saw the face of a young boy, standing at the entrance of the cave. “My name is Hao Jingcheng.” said the boy in a gentle voice.. I live on the mountain and I know somebody who can help you.” “Go away boy, I don’t need any help. Just leave me alone.” Huang grunted. But the boy persisted. “But you are bleeding through your bandage, and you won’t last more than a couple of days on the mountain.” “I already told you to leave me alone.” Hao continued to badger the man. “I’m going to take you to the monastery at the top of the mountain. There is an old monk that lives there who can tend your wounds.” Ignoring Huang’s protests, Hao began to lift the soldier by his good arm. Eventually, Huang gave up the fight and limped out of the cave, supported by his young rescuer.

Towards evening, Huang and his new companion reached the top of Mount Jiuhua. As the sun began to set, tiny snowflakes fell from the sky, gradually forming a white blanket across the mountain. The rays of the sun had painted the sky deep shades of red and pink, forming a backdrop to the ancient Shaolin Monastery which clung precariously to the edge of the mountainside. By the time the pair reached the foot of the stairs leading up to the main gate of the monastery, Huang was on the brink of collapsing. Suddenly, a tall figure of an elderly man emerged from the gate. “Who is this soldier, Hao?” asked the figure. “And why have you brought him here?” “I found him hiding in a cave alone. His arm is badly injured, we need to help him.” Hao pleaded with the monk. Shi Liangxin looked warily at the injured soldier. His saffron robes billowed in the cool evening breeze. “Do you realize that

imperial troops are roaming around the mountains searching for deserters? We must hide him in the monastery, so I can fix up his wound.” ordered the monk.

The next morning, Huang opened his eyes and gazed at the sight of an enormous golden buddha which seemed to stare down at him with pitying eyes. All around him were piles of fruit and other offerings. The scent of incense penetrated his nostrils when suddenly the old monk entered the room with a bowl of steaming hot chicken soup. Huang tried to sit up, but the throbbing pain in his arm forced him back down again. Shi said in a gentle voice, “Try not to move your arm, it needs time to heal. But we can’t stop long in the monastery since the imperial soldiers are climbing up the mountain. If they find you, they will kill you, and kill me for helping you.”

Two days later, Shi quietly slipped into the room where Huang was fast asleep. Gently shaking the soldier’s arm, Shi said, “Wake up! We have to leave now! The soldiers are close, and there is no time to spare! Follow me to the temple. Hao is waiting for us there.” Huang reluctantly got out of the bed and shuffled towards the door of the tiny room. Hao beckoned the soldier from the temple steps, urging him to hurry. Shi followed closely behind, carrying a few small bags of food over the shoulder of his wiry frame. Within moments, all three figures had passed through the broken down rear gate of the monastery. They had barely walked a kilometer when they suddenly heard the yelling of soldiers from the monastery. As the monk stole a glance behind him, Hao clenched Huang’s hand tightly signaling his wounded friend to move faster. Huang smiled at the boy and picked up his pace as the sun began to sink behind the Jiuhua Shan. The dying rays of the sun seemed to illuminate the whole mountain, casting the three lonely figures in deep shadow. As darkness fell, Shi motioned his companions to stop and rest, “It’s getting dark now, we should take cover somewhere and eat some food, but we can’t light a fire. Let’s rest under that rocky ledge and later try to get some sleep.” The three desperate figures ate quickly and tried to snatch a few hours of sleep under the watching stars of the night sky.

When Huang opened his eyes the next morning, his vision focused on the figure of Shi praying to Buddha in the cold morning air. It was early and the mist gently swirled among the peaks of the opposite mountain. Hao was already awake, packing the few little belongings ready for the journey ahead. Shi’s prayers were suddenly interrupted by the sound of pebbles falling down onto the ledge. Hao signalled to Shi, his finger pointing upwards. Before any of the three companions could make a move, a tall figure dressed in imperial uniform emerged, carrying a long sword of the officer rank. Huang immediately recognized the officer from his own regiment. Captain Lu was infamous for his brutality towards the common soldier. Lu looked at Shi with menacing eyes, “Monk, your status will not protect you for helping a deserter to escape from the army. The penalty is the same for both of you — death.” Lu moved towards Huang, the sword raised above his head. As Huang pressed his body against the rockface of the ledge, Hao suddenly launched a sharp rock towards the Captain, and just as Lu turned to face his young assailant, Shi grabbed Lu’s wrist and wrenched the sword from his hand. A furious Lu struck the monk heavily on his head, pushing the old monk towards the edge of the precipice. “Let your precious Buddha save you now, monk!” yelled Lu. But, the Captain was ignorant of Shi’s training as a Shaolin monk, and in a moment, Lu was hanging over the ledge. Lu grabbed Shi’s long sleeve, but it was too late, his grip loosened and his body slipped over the ledge.

“We must leave now!” Shi quietly exclaimed. Hao peered over the precipice and suddenly turned to his companions. “My uncle’s village is beyond the next mountain.

We can reach it in two days if we hurry and take a shortcut through the forest path.” Shi nodded and motioned his companions to set off along the forest path. By nightfall, they had reached WaiTong Shan and spent a few hours resting before continuing their journey to the top of the mountain. The next morning, the sun rose early, casting a long shadow across the valley below. By late afternoon, just as the sun began to sink over the horizon, they finally reached the top of the mountain. With a gesture of his hand, Hao pointed to a collection of small, ramshackle farmhouses in the distance. “My uncle’s village!” said Hao in an excited voice. Shi smiled, “It looks like a place where we might be safe from the war and people like Lu.” Huang let out a sigh of relief, “Maybe at last all of us found a home in the Yellow Mountains.”

Two Lines Away

Diocesan Girls' School, Chan, Tsz Kiu Rella – 13

This can't be happening again, I thought as I glanced outside the window. Why does writer's block keep happening to me?

I sighed and tilted my head upwards, staring at the drifting clouds that would pass through my head if I wasn't inside a cable car. The closely-packed mountains came into view, sharp edges protruding on all sides as trees lined up on a perfectly vertical axis. I glanced down; the foot of the mountain was nowhere in sight as thin mist did its purpose like a blusher. Staring at the scenery before me, I felt alarming tranquility for a brief moment; everything was so surreal, so ethereal. My pessimistic self almost seemed despicable compared to the serenity of the surroundings.

My friend told me to take a day off and 'stay away from urban areas at all costs', saying that it would inspire me and help me get unstuck. That was how I ended up alone inside a cable car, travelling up the seemingly endless mountains in the city of Huangshan.

The cable car rose and travelled alongside the clouds. I fished my phone out of my back pocket, about to demand an explanation from my friend for wasting my time when I should be at my desk working on my laptop. When I looked up from my text of complaint, the sky was dark and —

Wait. The sky was dark? It was midday just a minute ago.

Turning on the flashlight on my phone, I realised that I was stranded on the peak of a mountain, all alone save for occasional chirps in the dark. My claustrophobic nature took over and I yanked the door open, scanning the surroundings as much as my eyes would let me. My heart involuntarily beat faster as I recalled news about women walking alone in the streets after midnight and they were never seen or heard from again.

Someone tapped me on the shoulder. I whirled around, startled, thinking that I really was going to get kidnapped when that person let out a yelp.

"Sir, would you please turn off the light? It's even brighter than the moon,"

Realising that I just shone my 'flashlight' straight into his eyes, I muttered an apology before stuffing it back into my pocket. I still kept a fair distance from him though, but his polite and somehow innocent tone made me lower my guard just a bit.

"Who are you?" I asked, squinting my eyes. He had long hair, and from what I could observe in the pale moonlight, it was silver — almost white.

He puffed his chest out and held his head up high as he answered, "My name's Li Bai, a Chinese poet."

Right. And I am a time traveller coming from the year 3050.

"No really, who are you?" I asked, expecting him to burst out laughing and say that it was all a joke.

He looked at me like I just lost all my brain cells. Maybe I did.

"I just told you," he raised an eyebrow.

Stubborn, I thought, but decided to play along.

"Do you want to stay at my place for now? Dawn won't come for a while,"

As much as I was unwilling to follow a stranger, I had nowhere to go and a shelter was better than nothing. After what seemed like an hour, we arrived at his household and I

stumbled in, craving the feeling of sitting. I glanced around while he was busy lighting up the candles: it was a one-room wooden house with a table, a chair, and a bed, but that was it. Rows of sheets lined the walls and I inspected them, eyes travelling from piece to piece until it landed on one on the table.

‘Thoughts In The Silent Night,’ it read.

My eyes widened in realisation and I glanced at the man pacing in front of me, my thoughts all over the place. How could he be alive? I thought he was dead.

“It’s unfinished,” he remarked, looking at his work. “I lost inspiration,”

I chuckled. “Looks like we both are in the same situation then,”

“You write as well?” he asked, his mouth stretching into a grin. “Can you help me with it? I really want to finish it but I have no idea how to continue,”

I pursed my lips, remembering the exact words that followed, but held myself back from spitting them all out. “What was it that made you want to write this poem?” I asked instead.

“Family,” he replied, almost immediately. “And friends. I was exiled back then because I was an advisor for the enemy of the Emperor. I haven’t seen them for so long...” he stared out the window.

Seeing him like this, guilt blossomed in my chest. I recounted the days when I locked myself in my room, cancelling plans I made with my family at the last minute just so I could focus on work. It soon turned into heartache as I remembered how they were always the ones who stuck with me whenever my friends turned out to be not what they seemed.

Sure, no family was perfect. We argued, we fought. We even stopped talking to each other at times, but in the end...family was family, and the love would always be there.

Speechless, I fiddled with the hem of my shirt, a fresh wave of realisation knocking me over.

“That’s why I came here,” he continued, looking at me. “I guess I wanted some peace and quiet. It’s beautiful, don’t you think? And if you look close enough, you can see the stars at night, which just brings out the moon even more. In a way, it’s like a sea — except it’s shiny.” He said, pointing out a window.

A full moon was present that night; a symbol of family reunion in Chinese traditions.

I nodded, shifting my gaze back at the half-written scroll. “You can express your feelings,” I suggested, motioning to his work. “You said you miss your family, right? Write it. Tell them what you think. How you feel.”

He scrunched up his face. “It won’t be popular if it’s the same writing style every time,”

Oh, you’re going to be popular all right. “It’s not about popularity,” I crossed my arms. “Every writer wants to be successful — who doesn’t? But why do we write? Because we love writing. And why do we love writing? Because words express our feelings that we can’t normally express during a normal conversation.”

“But — ”

“Nope. No ‘but’s.” I interjected, dragging him to his chair. “Don’t write for anyone else. Write for yourself and yourself only,” I handed him a brush. “Amaze me.”

He sighed overdramatically, but still took the brush from my hand. I stepped back, not wanting to pressurize him too much. He pondered for a moment, then finally lifted his brush to write.

I glanced at the paper over his shoulder and sure enough, there were the two sentences that I remembered so vividly from the textbook. I smiled, and so did he.

“Well!” I clapped his shoulder. “There you have it, big boy.”

“I guess,” he agreed.

I looked outside the window and my face fell. The moon wasn’t the only source of light

anymore and I still had no idea how I had gotten here in the first place. As encouraging as it was to be able to help a famous poet on his way to fame, I couldn't help but worry that I would never be able to apologise for my negligence towards my family.

"Listen," I started, my voice low. "This might sound crazy, but I'm not supposed to be here. I don't know if I'm hallucinating or something, but —"

I was about to say 'but you are supposed to be dead', but that would surely dampen his spirits and whirl us into a state of panic and confusion.

So instead I said, " — I have to go."

He nodded, and if he found me suspicious, he didn't say anything. "I will see you again, right?" He asked, standing up and opening the door for me.

A light smile tugged at my lips. "If you're lucky,"

Of course, we never saw each other again. But when I stepped back into the cable car and it started moving downwards until it touched the ground — my world's ground, I thanked every holy thing I could think of that one, I wasn't trapped in whatever that place was above the clouds; two, seeing him finishing his work with such enthusiasm and passion reminded me of why I started my book in the first place; three, he reminded me of what mattered most.

So as I exited the city of Huangshan, I took my phone out and sent a quick text, saying that I would be home for dinner tonight.

No more cancelled plans. No more missed calls.

Legends of Miracles

Diocesan Girls' School, Cheung, Bethany – 13

“Once upon a time there lived an old woman in the mountains of China, near the village of Wang, who no one had seen for the last six hundred years. She had an herb that could cure any illness, from the worst fevers to the most subtle of tremors. Up, up, up on the highest peak, near the clear mountain stream, legend says you’ll see her picking this very herb, which has leaves of shimmering amber and veins of the brightest sapphire.”

The rain fell as she climbed.

Pale hands against slippery gray rock. Hauling herself up, up, up. Grabbing, searching for a handhold, a way to pull herself up to the next ledge—and as she found one her foot slipped again, and she pulled herself up by the root of an old, gnarled tree that spanned the desolate slope, hands slick with sweat and rainwater. Her tiny hummingbird (she named it Yin) hovered beside her, trilling its sweet song into her ear.

All this way for something that might not exist. All this way to chase a faint wisp, a cobweb, a story passed on from mouth to mouth until the details were blurred and embellished, over and over until two things remained: there was an old woman on this mountain (who hadn’t been seen for the last six hundred years and was almost certainly dead); and she had an herb that could cure any illness.

It was only for her brother that she kept on climbing, that she kept chasing that insubstantial wisp of hope, that she still clutched at the thin straw that there *might be a hope for him*. For baby Kang (who used to giggle so when she made him small toys of twigs and branches) that she hauled herself up rocks and roots, leaving bleeding cuts and scratches and blisters and bruises on her hands (once delicate and soft like petals on a flower). For her brother in the makeshift crib in the tiny hut, wheezing and sputtering, choking and coughing up blood as her mother wept beside the crib (rivulets of tears like rainwater down the slope) that she dared climb through the damp mist, up the mountain where the old woman lived.

Up and up she climbed.

Tiny rocks dislodged, sending avalanches of pebbles and gravel down the mountain. Yin squawked (more of a squeak, for a hummingbird). She clambered up boulders and trekked up winding, snake-like paths and mossy steps where she didn’t have to depend on all four limbs (blessing of blessings). Picked berries for food and sipped rainwater from conveniently shaped rocks. Sometimes she’d pass grinning skulls leering at her with their empty eyes and shudder. That could be her if she didn’t succeed.

She’d always wanted to come to the mountains, though. They’d been portrayed by an infinite number of poets through the ages, sketched by ever so many acclaimed artists, stood near her village like mighty giants protecting them from war (though if they did, why had her father have to leave for war, leaving her with mere memories of his voice?) There’d been long, epic tales of people going on quests in the mountains. Some succeeded. Some failed. Some no one knew of but had likely joined one of the skulls on the ground. (No one had succeeded in finding the old woman in six hundred years; of that she was certain.)

She’d never dreamt that her first—and most important—visit of the mountains would be for this. For going on the exact quest so many thought impossible.

As she climbed, Yin sang its song. Chirping and humming, a simple tune, really. Five

notes, maybe less. Chirp, chirp. On and on. The one thing that never changed about her journey. Yin was always there. Singing its song. Telling her it would be alright.

Higher and higher. As she climbed, rain blurred her vision. The rain, pelting down on her. Like tears, like sorrow, beating down on her. The sadness from home, weighing her down. Grief.

“The hope that he’ll survive... It’s a very small chance. All we can hope for is a miracle.”

“I’m sorry, but at this rate...”

She blinked the raindrops away. No use feeling hopeless now. Prove them wrong. Stay strong, don’t cry.

Out of nowhere, rocks started falling. Pelting, roaring, crashing. Down, down, down. Knocking her over, sending her tumbling down. Sending her crashing onto rocks. She lifted her head up to continue her climb; a rock crashed down again. Plummeting.

She climbed and fell and climbed and fell and when the rocks seemed to stop falling she couldn’t keep her eyes open and she was about to fall asleep—

In her dreams she fell too, but it was endlessly this time, down a dark, dark pit.

Falling down, falling down. Hopeless. There was no herb, no hope. She couldn’t get back up, could she? Couldn’t stand, couldn’t move; was she even alive? Could she ever climb back up? Did she even want to get up? Could she find the strength to even move an inch anymore?

Somewhere inside her head she heard screaming. A baby, yelling their head off, shrieks punctuated by long retches and chokes. A baby—her brother. Kang. Death’s grim shadow loomed over him, and she knew she had to move. She had to wake up. Wake up. Keep on climbing. Don’t stop. Stay strong.

Suddenly she heard Yin singing its cheery tune above her head, pecking at her hair (“Would you stop that!”) and she decided.

She would climb the rest of the mountain. Even if she had to battle an army of demons and tigers to get there. She would get a cure for her brother. She had to. As a sister—if it wasn’t an obligation, it was something she’d do of her own free will. No one wanted their sibling to die.

When she finally—finally!—got onto that last ledge, got to the top and saw no old woman, no hut, no telltale golden glint of the herb (an herb no one alive had ever seen, probably)—she started feeling actually helpless.

She stood next to the clear, crystalline stream, Yin’s abysmally optimistic tune in her ears. Looked up at the billowing clouds. It looked like success. But there was no old woman, was there? No herb, no miracle cure, no help.

There had been an infinitesimal chance of success anyways. It had always been a cobweb, a wisp, a feather just out of her grasp. A straw she could grab at, a chance that she took that he could live. And there she was, watching the feather float away. Waiting for the miracle. Waiting for the feather, the feather floating away into the gray, solemn sky, to drop into her hands.

She let the tears fall. Let it all out. What good was staying strong, anyways, when there was no hope left? What good was it? What good was bravery, strength, hope if it was all for nothing? Feathers, ha. They were all gone now.

Somewhere Yin let out a chirp, sharper than anything she’d heard from it.

“Shush.”

Yin let out another cry, crystal clear and bright.

“Shush. Don’t you know? None of this was worth it after all.”

Then she saw it.

Sparkling amber, almost gold, with a glossy sheen that seemed almost artificial, with veins of the brightest blue she could imagine. There it was, lying below the undergrowth.
The leaf.
The miracle.

When she grew up, she'd tell her children an old legend, of the leaf of amber and sapphire. Every time she told them the tale of the mountains; details got blurred and embellished.

But it always ended like this.

“The old woman had died, but the leaf sprouted from a seed; a seed planted by the old woman—the guardian of the mountain—six hundred years ago. A seed that would only grow at the tears of someone who came with bravery and strength and hope.

And most of all, love.

Diary of a Poet

ESF Island School, Narayanan, Vijay Sathappan – 12

January 4th, 1947

The sun shines its golden rays on the mountains ahead. Around me, air is so fragile, like a baby, yet it is heavy with my dreams and aspirations. Huge waterfalls dribble down, the crashing sounds on the stone echoes across the huge land, breaking the silence of the morning. As the sun looms from the mountains, so the people of the land. They embark from their village houses, their views looking like tiny ants from my humble abode. With their small vessels, they wade through the seas, their ever-sharp eyes looking out for salmon and trout.

After my daily dose of herbal tea, I jump down, the wind whistling in my ears. I dive down in the crystal water, it is time to take my routine daily bath. After swimming for a few meters, I spot my friend, Loi-Wei.

He calls me up into his tiny fishing boat and I readily jump on, seeking some warmth. He passes me one of fishing rods, asking me to fish. I take it wearily. The Government has started cutting down land, and the rivers are getting smaller. All the fishermen in the village rely on one another to fish and feed the village. That is what I like about Huangshan. It is a community, not divided, not survival of the fittest. I bade goodbye to Loi-Wei and race across the branches and vines, back to my humble abode.

I strolled through the market today, my daily poem completed. Li-Jien, the butcher pulled me aside and told me that he saw a few white men.

“I think that they will soon invade our land, Li-Bai!” he says, with an air of frenzy, *“You must be careful!”* But then smiling he says *“But, maybe they do not want to harm us.”* Stopping to take a breath, he further continues in his preamble. *“I have seen one of them is a poet”* *“Who knows, perhaps you may like them.”*

This reminded me of my quest in finding an apprentice. With a spring in my step, I climb up the mountains. As I climb, I see a fire burning nearby. The Burnings of the New Year has started. A festival to burn the old things and start a new year. We have to burn the old things in our house, to create space for new things. The festival is largely celebrated here, especially on top of the DuZhu Mountain, a mountain known for its religious symbolism. Legend has it that the God of Light, Ma Zhi, defeated the God of Death, Tu Ren, from destroying the world on the same mountain. Till date, DuZhu is used for the Burnings of the New year, to mark the coming of light over darkness, or new over old. I must hurry up to my hut and change for the festival. I hope I notice the white men there as well.

January 31st, 1947

I have waited a long time for my fabled ‘white poet’. I must find him. I need one person to pass down my knowledge. In a changing world, where poetry is a dying art, somebody needs my knowledge. It is fine for Du Fu, he has his son. But me? The villagers, although they respect my art, do not want to learn it. They think that their day-to-day jobs are much more profitable. Poetry takes a lot of time to learn, like any other art, practice makes perfect. They enjoy reading the poem, but do not want to learn it. I asked around, but people either shut their doors when they see me, or make an excuse. It is hard, being a poet.

My father used to say that soldiers in the army had to learn poetry. It was important that a soldier knew how to stay calm during times of war. For that, poetry was needed. I used to be fascinated by my father's teaching. By day, he taught the soldiers, and by night, he taught me. He was an excellent poet, that is, until he was killed by the Japanese.

I have heard that the white man is a poet. He will be the perfect apprentice for me.

Each day passes in the same, dull manner, a repetitive routine. I draw men in the wet mud, my inspiration for poetry having completely gone. Li-Jien says he has not seen the monsters for days. I even tried asking my rival, Du Fu for help. But the vile idiot refused, shutting his door on me.

I hope that he will come soon. Only if he comes, can I pass my vast knowledge on to someone. Poetry is a dying art, a treasure that only few possess. I have heard that the Government is planning to cut down villages in China and transform them into pesticide factories.

Imagine that! The beautiful village of Huangshan into a pesticide factory! It breaks my heart to imagine that the beautiful rivers of Huangshan will soon be a black death, floating with the corpses of innocent animals.

I look out the horizon, seeing the beautiful rays of the sun, keeping the tiny flicker of hope safely inside my heart.

March 4th, 1947

I have lost all hope in the comings of the white poet. It has been two months since I last heard of him. I have restarted my poetry. Du Fu has taken advantage of my lethargy, and started writing more and more, making more money, yes, but more importantly, winning the trust of the villagers.

I, once considered the god of poetry, am now reduced to a poor man. I begin writing, but I am devoid of inspiration and each poem ends up being worse than the last. My friends have ignored me and the village has disregarded me. I try to earn back their trust, but in vain. I know it is wrong to be like this. But my brain is failing me, and I need an heir to my knowledge.

That is all for today. My failures today have made me lethargic to even write a proper diary entry.

March 5th, 1947

The white poet has arrived today. My dreams have come true. I regretted not learning English years back, my laziness now showing its consequences. I could only barely keep up with the white's speed of language. But my writing proficiency is exemplary, and I showed him my poems. He then started speaking in Chinese, a huge relief for me. As we chatted, I realized I did not know my guest's name.

He introduced himself as Jack Keroauc. His poems mainly consisted of surreal events, full of crazy dreams and sightings. His poems are amazing, heavily contrasting with my poems, which tell of the usual happenings in life.

We continued chatting for a long time, until he shared one of his poems, which he translated into Chinese. It was breathtakingly beautiful, so amazing, that I cannot find the proper words to describe it. I begged him to remain here for a few days. He readily accepted, leaving me for a short time to get his supplies. When he came back, I cooked a meal of boiled rice and chicken meat. Under the moonlight, we shared stories and ideas. I hope, diary, that

we, together, can help each other out. Me with my inspiration and him with his consistency. His poems are good, but it does not have the same style throughout. His collection is a mess, with everything all over the place. I look forward to teaching him.

March 5th, 2000

It has been a long, long time since Jack left. The once peaceful village of Huangshan has now turned into a war zone, the screeching sound of cars and motorbikes becoming common on streets. Nobody here has respect for poetry anymore. Children tease me on streets, even dogs turn away when I have come. I have turned old, the effects of living for over a hundred years can do something to a man. My end is near, I can feel it in my bones. I cannot even write properly, even the smallest sentences can wear me out.

I can only write one more sentence, I feel as if I will soon meet Death....

March 7th, 2013 (Jack Kerouac's Diary)

I have come back to visit my dear friend in China. I cross streets and climb steep branches to reach my friend's humble hut.

I come in, a scene of grotesque horror meets me. My friend is sprawled on the bamboo mat, a piece of scrap paper, eaten by dust lying near him.

I cross my friend's body, holding back tears. Has nobody bothered to take his body out. But strangely, there is no scent from him. No flies are present above him, the hut smelling of the usual violet flowers. A serene look is over his face, his forgotten body lying in a changed world. I pick up the paper near him. On the paper is written one word

'Bloom'

Immortality

ESF West Island School, Ng, Megan – 13

All the myths pointed me here, to these craggy mountains. Alchemists making pills and emperors ascending. After all these years of waiting, I'm finally going to do it.

This is where I'm going to become immortal.

Everything I've wanted is here. The stone staircase I stand on will bring me there. All of it's just how I imagined, too—crooked pines rooted in the rock, the foggy peaks up in the distance.

My left leg begins to ache, and I ignore it. This is where I'm meant to be, and I'm not going to let some old injury stop me from gaining eternal life.

The atmosphere here is strange. Not quite silent. Twice I hear whispers behind me, and when I turn there's nothing there except the steps I've left behind. The trees and bushes on either side of me grow thicker, and I'm uncomfortably aware of the fact that, besides a vague grasp of some Huangshan myths, I've got no idea how to set about accomplishing my goal.

All that's left is to keep moving, because I've got this strange sense that whatever I want to find will be at the top. A herb, to make magical pills—it's been done before in myths. A spring that a legendary emperor bathed in before gaining eternal life. My plan hinges on me recognising whatever it is the moment I find it.

Mist curls between the pines. The pain in my leg has swelled, and my pace is slowed—I have to stop every few minutes to rest.

There's the sound of quiet laughter next to me and I swing around to empty mist.

I force myself to climb a few more stairs. There's a rough wooden railing here, and I cling to it like a lifeline. Climbing is better than thinking—if I stop too long, the past will catch up with me. Already I can feel the old panic, hot under my skin.

I've got to keep moving. The stairs have gotten wider, not steeper, and the trees are flimsy and stick-thin.

A voice to my right, and I look quickly. This one seems to have come from the rocks itself. I run up the next few steps and tell myself it's because I'm so eager to get to the top. Not because I'm scared.

I dash up the first few steps without incident and am just regaining my confidence when my left leg buckles under me and I fall.

The panic feels like it's about to burst through me. The last time I was trapped on the ground like this was when—

Don't stop to think. I've got to keep moving forward. I've got to keep searching for immortality, because I am not going to die here, alone on this mountain. I am not going to die at all. Stand up and swing your left leg in front of you, come on.

I lean back on my hands and try to move my left leg. Nothing happens.

The sky above me is covered in the reaching arms of the trees, and it's white as paper. I stare at this and try not to scream, because the terror is shooting through me and the mountain is still so high, and I'm not even halfway done. I'm not even halfway done.

I hold my backpack to my chest and sob. How could I be so stupid as to believe in immortality? This was always going to happen sooner or later. If not now, then when I got to the top and found nothing. Nobody can stop death.

Someone is speaking very faintly behind me. The voices, they're back again.

Are they real, or am I just going crazy? I wouldn't be surprised if I were—this entire trip was crazy. The one non-mythological emperor who tried to find immortality died *because* of his search, and I'm exactly the same. I'll die here, surrounded by fevered hallucinations. I'll die here, and it'll be because of my own reckless decisions.

Reckless decisions, I think, and suddenly we're walking to the car together under an umbrella, our footsteps splashing, and I'm asking her if we should maybe make the trip another day—

Something very close to me is whispering in a language I don't know, and I whirl around and tell the voices to go away.

I scream at them, at the moss-covered stone beneath me, at the mountains themselves, but they don't leave—I can feel them hovering around. Almost like they're waiting for me to start talking. So I do.

"I didn't want everything to turn out like this," I say, looking around at the rockface. "I never used to be scared of death."

Nobody answers, but I can feel something listening.

Something listening. Voices in the rock. I've heard about this before. Where?

The voices feel like they're leaving, so I keep talking. Anything to get them to come back.

"It began when she died, I guess."

All my memories of her are stained by that last one. Where I am crawling out of the wreckage on that terrible rain-slicked road and screaming at her to wake up, wake up.

The voices lean closer. Did something just move?

There was a legend about the rocks on Huangshan being living. They're in strange positions, upright pillars and sitting monkeys. Is this what's happening? Some of them were even said to have been real people who became stone.

I've always hated that myth. To be trapped on a mountain forever, unable to move or call for help, locked into place as you were slowly forgotten by everyone else—it sounded worse than dying.

"After that, I was constantly scared of death, of making some mistake that would end up getting me killed. I did my research and came here to prevent it."

I can feel the panic rushing back.

"And it's not going to work, is it? They're just myths. Nobody can actually become immortal."

She wouldn't have done this if she were the one who had lived. She wouldn't have gone crazy on this mountain worlds away from home.

The voices are more solid now, and I feel hands on my shoulders. Slowly, with their help, I stand.

We walk up together.

As they guide me up the mountain—flights of stairs that are almost vertical, paths beaten through thin forests, terrifying ridges that cling to the rock—I tell them about her. How she was never scared of anything. How she'd wake me up early and drag me to hiking trails. How a simple drive through the rain could change everything so suddenly.

She would have loved Huangshan, I realise. She would be happy if she knew I was here. And the hands squeeze my shoulders in agreement.

We continue the walk, higher and higher. The pain is gone—all that's there is the almost-white sky and the sound of my voice, telling our story.

I understand why Huangshan was loved by so many poets. It's beautiful, really. Immortality might not be up here, but peace certainly is.

The hands have stopped moving me. I'm sitting on a ledge, legs dangling down into a steep drop. How did I get here? The stairs are nowhere to be found. I hear the voices again, and they're almost singing.

It's as if I'm in a painting. Perfect clouds across the sky, the crooked trees streaking the mountains with green. She would have wanted this for me, I realise. Immortality wouldn't have brought her back, wouldn't have helped me. It's here, on this mountain, where I can feel her closest.

Here, the memory of the accident is so far away. Here, she's alive in every plant, every rock. I miss you, I say to her.

And I'm about to tell her I'm sorry, that I should have stepped in and stopped us the second it began to rain. But I know deep down that it wasn't my fault. She's driven in worse weather before. How could I have predicted it?

Instead, I tell her that I love her. I tell her about my travels, and my research, and how it all worked up to this moment. I've never felt so purposeful.

Huangshan's hands tighten around me, and I realise that I've found immortality after all, right at the moment when I had stopped looking. It's here where the people in the myths became part of the mountain. It's here where the emperor ascended and found peace.

As I sink into the ledge and join the spirits of Huangshan, I realise that turning to stone wasn't death, as I thought it would be. Instead, it's eternal life.

It's immortality.

Kismet

HKUGA College, Chan, Wing Tsun Valerie – 12

To be honest, I had never expected my first month in China to end up like this.

But here I was, perched precariously on a flat marble slab, with nothing to defend myself against the harsh winter winds except for a flimsy windbreaker. This... wasn't exactly a typical Christmas Eve.

Really, this wasn't even close to what Christmas Eve should be like, but well, I couldn't really stay at home. It wasn't even a home to me, when I couldn't understand what everyone was talking about most of the time.

And besides, I still didn't understand why we had to come to China. Father's apothecary was doing wonderfully in London and life was better than ever when he announced two months ago that we would be going back to his hometown in Huangshan City to have more 'business opportunities', apparently. The whole family had to emigrate to this rural town where the only appeal was the picturesque landmarks—which, for your information, weren't what they looked like on the web.

So the only logical solution was to run away, and since for some reason, I had been drawn to Huangshan Mountain since day one, I had naturally resolved to spend a week on Lotus Peak. Nothing ventured, nothing gained, right? The fresh air—and my disappearance—would probably make my family change their minds and bring me home.

I sat there for what seemed like forever, wallowing in self-pity and mindlessly kicking my legs against the circular marble slab I was sitting on. I had been walking for hours and on several occasions climbing over small landslides until I reached a rather flat area, strangely devoid of trees and barren except for the slab that she was sitting on, inscribed with Chinese characters that I had never even seen before.

The stone was cool against my touch, and I figured that it was as good a place as any other to rest tonight, and as I idly doodled on my diary, I swept my fingers across the carved characters, covered in a thin layer of dust and slightly warm to the touch.

As I tried to speak the characters out loud, stumbling over many unknown words, the carvings grew hotter under my palms until a glow started emanating from inside the marble. My eyes widened in alarm and I warily backed away, but it was too late.

A silhouette had materialized and started to take the shape of a person with long limbs and a lean body. I couldn't bear to look, in fear of it being one of the shapeshifters that the superstitious elders had kept going on about. But still, curiosity overtook my common sense and I opened my eyes slightly to see... a boy.

He had dark floppy hair that covered almond shaped brown eyes and looked around in confusion. His movements were easy and elegant and reminded me of ancient nobility in the novels that I read, and as he registered my presence, the boy bowed slightly and spoke in a dialect that I didn't comprehend.

"I'm sorry, I don't speak fluent Chinese," I apologized, hoping that he would understand what I was trying to say. "I'm Harper, and you are...?"

A look of comprehension dawned on his face and he started speaking in English. "Oh, good day, Miss Harper," He greeted me with smooth English. "My name is—" He paused, then said, "Edward."

I couldn't think of anything to say that didn't border along the lines of 'how did you suddenly appear', but the boy didn't say anything either, so we sat there on the rock in quiet, albeit slightly awkward silence.

I stared morosely into the darkness in front of me, tall, willowy trees wailing the vehement force of the glacial winds, small specks of snow brightening the dark, dense clouds that obscured almost everything from view, calling to mind the tale I had read of the two lovers who had jumped off the cliffside of Huangshan together instead of being sentenced to severe punishment for their forbidden love, much like the story of Romeo and Juliet.

The boy suddenly spoke, jolting my mind back to the present. "Are you a... tourist?" He asked hesitantly, as if he was unsure of the term.

"I'm not a *tourist*," I snapped frostily before I realized the huge mistake that I had just made. "I mean... I live here in Huangshan City, yes, but it's not permanent—" I cut off abruptly. What if this boy was some... ancient, vengeful spirit trying to punish me for wanting to go home? "What about you?" I tried to sound pleasant and failed miserably.

He arched a brow at me. "Do you want to know?" He replied cryptically, and for some reason I couldn't understand, I nodded, and Edward placed a pale, cold hand on my wrist. Before I could jerk away, everything in front of me seemed to be wiped away in a blur of white.

I found myself alone and on the same slab that I had been sitting on, only with a small rock outcrop sheltering me from the merciless storm that was drenching everything within visibility. The dim hubbub of voices made me turn, and I could then see three middle-aged men crouched over a crudely fashioned bowl that they held over a small flame, chanting some kind of poem together.

In the corner, a slim young boy was leaning against the walls, with shadowed eyes and a downcast expression. He was... Edward?

The plumpest of the men looked up in his direction. "Edward," he beckoned to the boy, who hesitantly walked over with reluctance. "But Father—Emperor—" The man, who was apparently a king—which meant that Edward was royalty—didn't even look in his direction, forcefully grabbed him by the arm and cruelly dunked his head into the murky, bubbling concoction he was brewing, a twisted smile appearing on his face. "This is for my own good, son," he said, and as the scene faded away, Edward limp and lifeless in the king's grip, I was left staring in horror at the boy sitting next to me.

"Who even says 'this is for *my* own good'?" I quipped, trying to lighten the mood. Edward didn't speak for a long while, and when he did, his tone was grave.

"My father was Huangdi," he started. "The great 'Father of China'. He came to the mountain in search of immortality, but in order to live forever he had to sacrifice me." A bitter expression flitted over his face. "He did it. No hesitations. But what he didn't know was that he had unwittingly condemned me to an eternity of being trapped in this marble, never to be freed unless someone read out the inscription."

I was speechless, but even if I had said something, it wouldn't have mattered anyway. I bit my lip and quietly touched his arm. "Harper." Edward said carefully, "I think you should go home." I didn't answer him, but I knew he was right. The first colors of dawn were starting to appear on the horizon, splashes of golden yellow and orange brightening up the sky. Edward didn't say anything else and I hugged him.

No words were needed, but he understood and smiled sadly at my earnest face.

I had to go home. To be completely truthful, I had no idea what even possessed me to run away. I mean... true, London would always be my home, but well, those were my parents, and deep down I knew that this place wasn't bad.

“Thank you,” I told him quietly and started sprinting down the cobbled stone steps, slick with snow. Edward stood there motionless, his expression not betraying anything and devoid of emotion. “Would you... want to come with me? Leave the mountain?”

Edward finally spoke, “No, Harper, I can’t... this is the last piece of me left,” He said, his knuckles grazing the marble slab. “I cannot leave.”

“Please,” I begged. Yes, he was a total stranger. Yes, he was probably from eons ago. But he was still a child deep down, and I did owe him for making me realize that I belonged with my family. Edward disappeared and materialized in front of me, his gaze softening as he kissed the back of my hand.

And then, he faded.

“Edward?” I screamed. But he was gone. All that remained was a small whisper, over and over again in the back of my head. And as a thick mist started to surround me, a single tear dropped from my eyes.

Now here I was, alone on the bus, my notebook spread on my lap. The driver smiled at me, his eyes crinkling. “Up so early, lassie? Merry Christmas.”

I replied politely. “Merry Christmas.” My mind raced with unspoken thoughts, but as I picked up the pen, I could only write one sentence.

‘I found out the true meaning of kismet on Christmas Eve. Or should I say, kismet found me.’

A Tale From China's Magical Yellow Mountains

Hong Kong Red Cross John F. Kennedy Centre, Chan Man-Li, Cecili – 16

Today my friend Alex and I went hiking on Tai Mo Shan, Hong Kong's tallest peak and something magical and unbelievable happened to me.

First, we took a bus to the car park near the top and from there we went up to the peak where you can get the best view.

"Hey, Dennis," I said. "Look over there. How wonderful the view is!"

I walked toward the cliff to get a better look but suddenly, I fell down a hole.

"Oh! Help me!" I screamed. "I can't see anything." Everything was dark. It was frightening, terrible and horrifying.

Luckily, I didn't die. I had slipped through a time gate and passed back through time into the period of the Tang dynasty and had found that I had become a government officer. I had a lot of money, elegant clothes and priceless treasure... However, I was not happy at all. I saw many corrupt officials paying bribes to a corrupt warlord called An Lushan to buy themselves higher ranking positions. Corruption prevailed in the imperial court. I heard that An Lushan's wealth was even greater than the government's, and his ambition was getting bigger and bigger. He hoped to become Emperor.

One day, when I went out of town to the market, I saw many people starving, and dying on the ground. This sight made me realize the meaning of the poem written by Du Fu:

"Behind the red lacquered gates, wine is left to sour, meat to rot. Outside the gates lie the bones of the frozen and the starved."

I felt ashamed. Because even as an official, I couldn't help them with anything.

I walked on sadly until finally I came across a temple. I opened the door and there I saw the pathway to The Yellow Mountains and nearby where Du Fu and Li Bai were playing chess.

I said to them, "Why do you just sit here playing games and don't think about how to help the hungry people? Are you just careless idlers?"

They said "We have been practicing our magic in The Yellow Mountains for many years trying to call a future man to help us change the fate of our country. Finally, you have come. Welcome. All this hunger has been caused by An Lushan, who is destroying The Yellow Mountains to collect the magical stones of power that lie buried underneath."

In a great panic I said "What! You made me come back to the Tang Dynasty? Send me back quickly."

They said "No, you have a power that we don't have. The power that can change the world. If you can't solve this problem, the world will become chaotic and it will end. There is no future for you without us. You can't go back to your world. You must stay here with us."

"Let me tell you about an old legend," continued Li Bai. "A long long time ago, Bai Di created The Yellow Mountains, which is as wonderful as a fairyland. Many different immortals are living up there on top in a small village among the clouds. They were responsible for creating the clouds, the animals and even the dinosaurs. Three great stones of power are hidden underneath the mountains and they are the source of life for this whole land. If someone collects these three magical stones, he will have the power to rule the world

and become a god. Without its magical stones, The Yellow Mountains will lose the gods' protection, the land will become barren, humans will starve and all living things will become extinct. I hope you can help us to prevent An Lushan from getting to the magical stones.”

I said “OK! I will help you.”

We secretly recruited warriors to fight against An Lushan and communicated by hiding our messages in egg yolk pastries. In less than two months, 100,000 people had participated in our secret organization. An Lushan knew I wanted to stop him from getting the magical stones so he summoned me to see him in his palace.

I saw there were different collections around An Lushan's great house, such as roses presented by ambassadors, large pearls on the bookshelf and a thousand year old ginseng.

I thought, “An Lushan is a wealthy man. He even has some things that the Emperor hasn't got...”

An Lushan said to me “You are very capable, but you have chosen the wrong enemy. I think you would have won long ago if you hadn't. I have one of the magical stones. If you cooperate with me to get the other two magical stones and help me create my empire then I will make you my prime minister. Help me to find the magical stones and we can enjoy inexhaustible wealth and top social status. Hahaha...”

“Is it really good to rule an empty city?” I asked him. “Being a monarch will be just a hollow and meaningless honor without any responsibility” I said with disappointment in my voice.

At this, An Lushan suddenly became angry. “You'd better follow my orders while I am still being nice,” he shouted. “Seize him, guards!”

I was grabbed by his soldiers. I was completely overpowered and I could not resist. I was locked in a secret room in his garden and surrounded by darkness.

When Li Bai and Du Fu realized that something was wrong, they pretended to be An Lushan's guards and sneaked into An Lushan's palace that night. They overheard the Captain of the guards say to the soldiers, “Remember to guard the southern room strictly. Go there now to take him some food.”

Li Bai and Du Fu walked slowly as they followed the other soldiers. After the soldiers put down the meal and left, Li Bai and Du Fu broke down the door. They whispered, “Brother, come quickly.”

In silence, we made our escape but suddenly, Li Bai rushed into one of An Lushan's rooms. He said, “Aaaahh. nice wine! I want to drink a cup of it before we go.”

Du Fu and I stopped him but before we could, from the window of An Lushan's bedroom, we saw a person who had turned into a small figure. It was a tiny creature with two horns on its head and a tail on its body.

Then we heard a sound, “squeak, squeak...” We were surprised. Du Fu said, “Is this some kind of rat devil?” We knew that it was dangerous and we couldn't defeat this beast, so as not to be discovered by it, we crouched down and backed quietly away.

After returning to The Yellow Mountains, we discussed how to fight with An Lushan. We became more and more depressed because we all knew that humans are unable to confront humans who have been selfish and turned into such rat devils as the one we saw. This has been true since ancient times. Realizing that we were unable to confront An Lushan on our own, I climbed to the highest peak of The Yellow Mountains to ask Bai Di for help.

I called out to him from morning until evening for three days, “Bai Di, please help me to confront An Lushan.” However, no one answered me.

As I finally turned away, a kind voice said to me “This is the destiny of humans. I can't help you. Unity is the only way you can change your destiny.”

After that, I went back to Li Bai's and Du Fu's home. Du Fu said, "I found a magical book about how to deal with a rat devil. According to the book, we must capture the rat devil and take it to The Yellow Mountains. Then we need to draw a magical circle to open the entrance of the underworld. After that, we must lead the rat devil into the magic circle to purify his soul and send it back to where it belongs."

To make this happen, I went to see An Lushan pretending that I'd changed my mind and because of his greedy desire, he believed me when I promised him I would go to The Yellow Mountains to help him search for the two remaining magical stones.

In the meantime, Du Fu and Li Bai summoned all the warriors to hide in The Yellow Mountains. After An Lushan arrived in the mountains, all the warriors immediately captured him and led him to the magic circle.

An Lushan said "Do you think I can be defeated so easily? Soldiers, go!" he commanded. Suddenly, another blue army, a supernatural force, emerged from the forest. Our warriors were surprised and scared.

I implored them, "Don't you want to be reunited with your families and children?" At this, the warriors' spirits seemed to lift.

"Go ahead!" I urged them. "You cannot fail. You can only succeed."

I said it with all the power, my voice could command and with that, our warriors took heart, engaged in the battle and defeated the blue army. I pushed An Lushan into the magic circle and Du Fu and Li Bai began to cast their spells. However, to stop An Lushan from escaping from the magical circle, I had to go to the underworld with him.

Du Fu and Li Bai said anxiously, "Leave the magic circle quickly or you will die."

I said to them "I'm glad I met you both. It was my honor to help save the world. Goodbye, my brothers." And tears of great sadness were falling from my eyes as I spoke these final words to them.

After this fight we were victorious. Du Fu and Li Bai took the magical stones back to The Yellow Mountains and China regained its vitality. People had clean water again and enough food and no one would die from hunger. Li Bai and Du Fu set up schools in the capital to promote Confucianism, all was well and society was restored once again.

I opened my eyes and found myself lying on a hospital bed. My friends and family were there by my side and someone said to me, "Thank God! You've finally woken up."

Soon after I was discharged from the hospital, I wrote a book about my experience in the Tang Dynasty called "A Tale from China's Magical Mountains." On the cover of the book it says, "Thanks to the unity of the people, we can all now live in a prosperous and peaceful society."

Wonderland

Marymount Secondary School, Ng, Cherie – 12

I hadn't done enough homework to understand how hazardous the Celestial Capital Peak was. As a seasoned backpacker from the City that Never Sleeps, I didn't need a tour guide whose accented English I wouldn't understand anyway. But thanks to my severe lack of coordination, my blonde hair and blue eyes weren't the only thing separating me from the crowd—I felt like a fish out of water, and I hated standing out.

I stared enviously at the local tourists boarding the gondola lifts, wincing at my aching muscles. Soon I was holding an internal debate, with the motion being whether I should head back to the mountain base and rethink my route. I gritted my teeth and balled my hands into fists, determined to reach my final destination without help from aerial transportation. I believed firmly in the quote “dreams don't work unless you do”, and my dream was only...1313 metres away.

I was a college student majoring in classical languages, and I'd spent hours in Literary Chinese class daydreaming about Huangshan. It was common knowledge that not even the most skilled photographer could encapsulate the mysticality of nature, but images taken of the Yellow Mountains at sunset were the definition of breathtaking. The sky would become a palette of rich and varied colours at 5 o'clock, blending together to create a serenely beautiful skyline.

Banishing all my fantasies of the resplendent horizon, I drew myself back to reality. The fog had turned Huangshan into a brilliant white page, obscuring my sight until I couldn't see my hand in front of my face. Suddenly, my foot was unable to locate solid ground and my surroundings blurred like a poorly shot action photograph. I braced myself for my head colliding hard rock, but no such impact occurred.

I was falling into eternal blackness, and the infinite depth of the hole made me feel small and insignificant. A strange sense of calamity dulled my senses, my “fight-or-flight” instinct abandoning me completely. I was going to die as a cliché—Alice falling down the rabbit hole. I blamed my mother for my sudden death, which could've been evitable if she'd enrolled me in ballet classes when I was a child.

One moment I was falling through a dark abyss, and then I was lying on a soft bed of autumn leaves as speckles of red, orange and yellow were delicately blown off tree branches, fluttering down to the ground like colourful rain.

My knuckles scraped the earthen floor as I cast my eyes forward. The silence was so deep I became conscious of every breath I took, and soon my own steady rhythm coming from within could be heard. The silence caressed my skin like a fall breeze, smoothening my soul, taking away my jagged edges. Huangshan was beautiful, but it lacked the quietude and repose I so desperately needed. The perspiring delivery men dressed in torn undershirts hauling food up the mountain ruined the “haven of tranquility” vibes.

I quietly surveyed my surroundings—the sunlight was cascading down a gap of clouds into a lake that could've been mistaken for a mirror. In reflective blues and greens, it brought its own artistic watercolour effect to the daytime. I wondered if all bodies of water were this pure before human pollution contaminated wildlife. I'd always wanted to bathe in cliffside pools, to feel the saline water rush over my skin and lashes.

I impulsively decided to make my way down to the lake, navigating past the boulders covered with moss and lichen. I expected my gracelessness to resurface any second, but there wasn't a single minor disturbance on the mountain path. No jagged rocks stood out and threatened to send me stumbling, no pinecones spontaneously detached themselves from the conifer trees to grant me a minor concussion. This alternate reality was as perfect as a fairytale.

Maybe I had more in common with Alice than I'd thought—we'd both discovered Wonderland.

I passed cave mouths leading into impenetrable tenebrosity I normally would have investigated, but the only one obsessive thought in my mind was diving into the tiny glass pieces that formed the crystal-clear lake. I barely noticed when nightfall came with a whisper of black accompanied by a comforting chorus of stars. I found the darkness strange—in New York City, light pollution ensured that there my bedroom was always illuminated by a billboard advertisement.

I approached the lake with the same mannerisms a child would have when approaching a candy store—completely blind and oblivious to the dangers and risks the uncommonly clear water brought. The stars that glistened and shone in the heavens were dull in comparison to the mother of the sky—because the moon in its deep silver was a phenomenon.

The lethally dark water had lost its turquoise to the night, but in the moonlight the ripples twisted. I stared at my own reflection; the edges of my face slightly ruffled where the wind blew on the water. Startled by the clarity of the image, I made a mistake gazing into the water for a second too long.

All of a sudden, my reflection dissolved into broken and irregular memories that began to materialize in the water. It was as if the lake had switched to the “home movie channel”, and flashbacks rippled across the surface of nature's only projection screen. Echoes of those I'd loved, broken promises which used to haunt my sleepless nights...nostalgia came down on me like an avalanche as my most intimate feelings surfaced.

Words like ambition, longing, reminisce would be defined differently by every individual, but the lake seemed to know my demons inside out. I dipped my fingers into the water as I watched it caress my hand coolly, eddying in its wake. My fingertips dripped with the transparent and opaque water as the images intensified into high-resolution, 4D pictures.

Fate was the last page of everyone's story, and knowing your own was enough to make you a lunatic. With each fragment of my destiny disclosed to me, my subconscious craved for more information. The burning sensation the water produced numbed my hand, as if flames were licking my skin and scorching my flesh. But shards of my future only uncovered themselves to me when I made physical contact with the water, and I was so tempted...

I let myself drown.

Drowning, in movies, was a dramatic act and a vociferous dogfight where the main character fought tooth and nail to evade death. But my arms flailed against the icy water that stole heat from every inch of my skin, bringing me dangerously close to hypothermia. My body was begging for air, and I could feel my consciousness faltering as my vision began to blur. Clawing through the liquid that threatened to invade my lungs, my lack of oxygen sent jets of pain through my body.

Drowning was a silent battle, but I wasn't going to suffocate in my hopes and dreams before I had the chance to make them come true. But I could barely form a coherent thought when the crescent moon became visible to me one last time—mere seconds before I was enveloped by the indigo water once more.

A sense of weightlessness numbed all my senses instead, followed by the darkness that lures you into the depths of unconsciousness inevitable landing becomes. I was no neurosurgeon, but I did know that the brain could block traumatising memories in a process called dissociation. While I would be able to recite my encounter with the lake to my grandchildren decades later, I was spared the agony of staying conscious during the fall that drew me back to reality.

I was sitting on a boulder, and the fanny-pack wielding Russian tourists next to me confirmed that I was standing on the summit of present-day Huangshan. Stars shone like sugar spilled over black marble as my heart sank in disappointment—I'd completely missed sunset. The one thing I'd been dreaming of had slipped through my fingers... My thoughts became a hurricane and adrenaline coursed through my veins, generating more panic than energy. My head was pounding and my heart was hammering in my chest. The panic attack was stealing every morsel of control I'd previously had over my own body, and I wasn't able to regulate my breathing until a single thought entered my mind.

Sometimes we are taken into troubled waters not to drown, but to be cleansed.

The familiar thirst for adventure and beauty made my skin tingle and the constellations, each secretly holding its own legend, drew my eyes to the heavens. Nobody on Facebook had mentioned how mesmerizing the Celestial Capital Peak was at night, but I soon became obsessed with its consistency—it would fade in dawn's first light with the promise to return twelve hours later.

And I could swear the moon was a slender crescent.

Patience of Trees

Shanghai American School - Pudong Campus, Mei, Michelle – 12

The tree stands dragon like, the silent observer of the rocky mountains buried by the sea of clouds. The wind calls, howling through the branches of harp pine, brushing a blanket of snow to the ground. The clouds swim amongst the steep ridges and peaks, as the radiant light covers Huangshan with many coats of colour. Mountains peek above the rosy clouds, appearing like islands before the cottony layers float away as the sun reclaims the sky.

The young girl climbs towards home, exhausted by the effort of carrying bamboo for the villagers. She was so tired. Tired of living with her grandfather. Tired of mountains and trees. The snow crunched beneath Qin's straw shoes as she hurried back in the icy cold to retrieve more bamboo.

Her grandfather was bent almost double from a life of carrying baskets on poles up and down the mountains —his hands were rough and cracked— not like the not at all like the gentle hands Qin remembers from her mother's touch. Although she dearly loved her grandfather, who did his best to raise Qin, she often dreamed of her mother's touch. She dearly missed her mother who had gone to look for work in Hefei five years ago. Even though Qin was only 8 at that time, her mother gone felt like what you could call a sense of hollowness emanating from her chest. The sadness drained through Qin rather than skating over her skin. It travelled through every cell to reach the ground. And yet strangely enough, it was her crumbled soul she had to bear.

The village of Xidi was on a barren hill in a range of many barren hills near the Black Tiger Pine. Throughout winter, it was waist deep in snow and blasted by bitter winds. In the summer, the temperature was so hot it was like breathing in flames. Qin's grandfather Xi would often times tell her stories of how his father had built small round homes into the ground in this faraway village so that others would see how vast the mountains were. Unfortunately, because it was so far from civilization, few people ever saw it. Yet it was all Qin ever saw. It was her whole world.

Qin wore trousers that were patched at the knees and too long for her, and a baggy faded jacket she had mended many times. Although this was not her only jacket, it was her most prized possession. It had also been her mother's favorite, one of the few things she left behind for Qin. Every birthday, when her grandfather asked her for her wish for the upcoming year, she stated that she only wished to see her mother. Seeing her mother's empty seat at the dinner table left Qin desperate.

As heavy snow began to fall, Qin clutched the freshly cut bamboo sticks and hurried home. She knew Grandfather would be worried sick if she were still out in the cold. She could see him through the window of their small house, rubbing his sore back.

Walking inside, she tried to look away from her Grandfather, knowing that if she looked at him, he would be able to read her mind.

The handwritten card Qin had left on her mother's seat was still there from yesterday, untouched. Qin had often left something on her mother's seat ever since she could remember. "Yeye, when is mother coming back?" Qin blurted out.

Grandfather sighed. He stared out at the falling snow, seeking the right words. He opened his mouth, but then hesitantly closed it.

“Qin, you know this. We have gone over this countless times. Your mother went to the city to find work.”

“But it has been more than five years,” Qin grumbled. She reached into the worn leather pouch that hung from her waist, suspended from a length of braided rope. Along with the rusty blade Grandfather gave her when she first started helping in the forest, the pouch contained only a piece of weathered wood carved into the shape of a bird – the only other thing she had that had been her mother’s.

“Patience, little one. The trees on the mountains live for thousands of years. The dragons have been here for even longer. Five years is not a very long time. Be like the trees. Be patient.”

Grandfather paused, then spoke softly. “You sometimes remind me of your mother, so determined to get things done and also very stubborn,” he chuckled. “You see that knife I gave you? Before I could use this blade to carve the bird, I had to sharpen it. You are like that blade. You are growing up, but you are not yet grown. It will take time and patience to sharpen you, but until a blade is sharp, it is foolish to try to carve anything with it.”

“Don’t you even miss mother? Don’t you want to see her?” She tried to convince herself that she was not the only one who missed her mother; otherwise, she couldn’t shake the feeling that she was being too childish. Grandfather never mentioned mother or showed that he missed her.

“Of course, I do. But our life is here, on the mountain. You have a role, a purpose in the village. And your mother has her role. Don’t worry, little one. I am sure one day she will come back to us.”

Tears filled Qin’s eyes as she gazed out at the darkness. “That’s what you say every time. But mother is still not back!”

“Remember last year, when Unity Pine was struck by lightning? The tree’s bark was burnt and one of its limbs became a dead branch. But hidden under that skeleton was a force that sent a single shot of green out into the world. The rest of the tree stayed together. It didn’t send out one limb to look for the lost one. When they stayed together, they were able to accomplish more. And we need to stay strong and together too.” Grandfather stood up. Clutching the wall, he slowly shuffled towards Qin.

Patting her back, Grandfather smiled, “You think I don’t know what it feels like to live without someone I love? You know, before you were born your grandmother fell really ill and passed away. It felt like my soul was a piece of paper that had been crumbled and would never again be smoothed out. Those years, your mother and I were both dejected. But we stayed strong and more importantly had each other as support.”

Qin restrained herself, but inside she was boiling. Qin had enough of her grandfather’s talks. They were just words, ancient folk tales of dragons and magic. They were not what she missed the most – her mother’s voice, her mother’s touch.

That night, after Grandfather went to sleep, buried under the warmth of a blanket, Qin quietly got dressed in the darkness. She put the blade and the bird in her pouch, put on her mother’s old jacket and a pair of sturdy boots. She forced the door open, pushing against the biting wind that was trying to keep it shut.

The night was dark. No stars penetrated the heavy snow clouds.

Qin knew the path well from all her trips through the bamboo forest. Wrapping her jacket around her, tucking her hands inside the pockets, she trudged slowly down the mountain. After an hour or so, Qin was no longer so sure of the way, and the heavy snow made it difficult to see the path. Suddenly, her foot slipped out from under her, and she began

falling, sliding and banging down into a deep ravine. Her consciousness faded as she lay at the bottom. The heavy snow covered her.

When she awoke, she tried to brush the snow off of her face, but only one arm was able to respond. Her heart raced, blood pounding in her temples. She knew she had to move, to get up and try to find a way back to the path. She struggled to roll over, but she felt buried by the snow. She shivered.

Just when she felt her tears freezing her eyelids, she heard a voice calling her name.

“Qin, my darling little bird. Be calm. I am here.”

It was her mother’s voice. Qin blinked hard to clear her eyes. Where was this voice coming from? In the blinding snow fall, Qin saw two red dots, and as the dots came closer, she saw what appeared to be a head of a large dragon. As it opened its mouth, Qin again heard her mother’s voice.

“Qin, do not be afraid. I am here, and we will always be together. Nothing can ever separate us again.”

The dragon’s breath was like a warm caress, and Qin felt herself relax into memories of summer and flowers and her mother’s gentle touch.

She felt her crumpled soul finally returning to its original form.

I Believe in Dragons

St. Mark's School, Leung, Yin Tung Andrea – 14

When I was younger, my aunt used to tell me stories.

“Once upon a time, there were Eight Immortals,” she’d say in a soft, mysterious voice. “They lived on the island Penglai, where it was never winter, and had trees that bore enchanted fruit healing every ailment.”

Auntie was obsessed with the mythology and folklore of our Asian heritage.

She’d tell me tales of the Dragon King, the Ten Suns, how Pangu created the universe.

And I’d listen with shining eyes, gasping at all these mysterious moments.

“Sister!” It was my mum. “Are you done telling her those ridiculous tales?”

“Just a moment, *Jie Jie!*”

I winced. My mum wasn’t exactly the biggest fan of fantasy, which was unsurprising, given her lack of imagination.

She had always somewhat disapproved of my aunt, who was dreamy and whimsical, her polar opposite.

My aunt was the most wonderful storyteller. She’d tell me about the story of Longnu and Han Xiangzi like she’d been there herself, and talk about dragons as if they were real.

“Their scales glittered like polished jade, their eyes orbs of gold, claws sharp as a hawk’s,” she said, her eyes animated, bright as though they were orbs of gold themselves.

She loved the myths of the Yellow Mountains the most.

“Legend says, our ancestor Yellow Emperor descended from Huangshan, and that dragons lived on its cloudy peaks.”

The Emperor must’ve looked ridiculous in all-yellow attire.

“Li Bai himself visited the Yellow Mountains,” Auntie said, smiling wistfully. “He got tons of inspiration for his poems. If only I could get the same amount of inspiration he’d found in dreary Wyoming.”

She was an aspiring writer, talented, who had only one tiny problem—she couldn’t finish a single book. I knew she tried, but it was never enough.

Things got even harder when Uncle left.

I could still see the stacks of half-written drafts piled up in the corners of her tiny apartment, gathering dust. Stories that would never be discovered, characters that would never come to life.

She held on to her book of Chinese mythology, held on to the legends of shimmering dragons and towering mountains from which yellow emperors originated.

“One day,” she said. “One day I’ll go to Huangshan like all the great poets did, and find out what on that mountain gives them their knowledge and inspiration.”

She always wore a pearl pendant that seemed to glint like it was aflame. Her eyes reflected its light, so it seemed like she had twin stars in her pupils.

“And I’ll write a bestselling series, and we’ll be rich and move to California!” She lifted me up in her arms, and I giggled, grinning at the happiness on her face.

“Auntie,” I would say, after she’d put me down, “is it real? Everything you said?”

And she would reply—

“Yes.” Her eyes were faraway, like she was looking at something miles and miles away.

“But—” I avoided her gaze. My voice was timid. “Aren’t they just stories?”

And she would reply—

“They’re real, Fei Xiang. Never stop believing that.” She stroked my hair. “They thrive on belief. If you stop believing, they will no longer exist.”

“Oh! Does that mean I can see a dragon when I’m older?”

“Yes,” she whispered. “I’ll show you one day.”

And we talked, laughed, and dreamed.

The cold hard truth would come later, but at that moment, it was real.

I was a kid then. Now, I was fifteen, and we were standing at the foot of the Yellow Mountains, having been offered the chance of a lifetime—a free tour to Huangshan.

Even after my childhood had come and gone, Auntie kept telling me her tales.

I’d long stopped believing her.

My mum’s voice echoed in my ears. *“There is no such thing! Stop holding your head up in the clouds!”*

“Your aunt was a fool, and if you believe in her absurdity, then so are you. The world has no place for dreamers.”

I knew what she said was true. But yet some part, deep inside of me, still held onto these stories. They soothed me, made me feel like Auntie was right beside me.

Something about Auntie made me want to believe her, no matter how ludicrous it all seemed.

The awe of finally seeing the majestic mountains took away my breath; it was as stunning as my aunt described it—the rolling ocean of clouds that seemed to stretch on endlessly, the sculpted peaks reaching beyond the sky.

Auntie stood there, quiet, taking in the magnificent view. “How beautiful,” she murmured.

The pearl she wore seemed to glow in the mist. Like it was lit with a golden flame.

We hiked up the stone steps that were carved into the mountainside.

The higher we got, the more we saw, from misshapen trees that covered the rock like an emerald silk cloak to the lakes set deep in the valleys like jades adorning a crown. Clusters of villages were nestled in the mountains.

“Legend says,” Auntie started. “This was where Huangdi ascended into heaven.”

I smiled half-heartedly. “Sure.” I was tired, sweaty, and not in the mood for her stories. But she seemed undeterred. Her smile was as wide as ever.

She didn’t seem like someone who had just climbed up the Lotus Peak, the highest summit in the mountains.

The view was spectacular, but my knees were buckling a little, because just *maybe*, I had a tiny fear of heights.

Still, I felt like an eagle soaring above Huangshan, seeing the mountains from all the way up here.

The clouds were beneath us, obscuring the base, but we could see the other peaks stretching up to the sky, their unique silhouettes clear from this vantage point.

With their tips clawing towards heaven, rising above the clouds, they seemed like islands floating amongst a sea of billowing mist.

I turned away when my knees started to wobble a bit too much for my liking.

In front of us was a pool of water, as clear as a mirror.

“The Moon Pool,” my Aunt said, stepping forward dazedly.

Before I could stop her, she reached her hand into the pool.

“Auntie—“ I was trying to find a polite way to say ‘are you crazy?’ when she lifted a single gleaming object from the water. It was pill-like, and glowing faintly.

She walked towards the edge in a trance. My heart plummeted down a peak almost as tall as the one we stood on as I grabbed her arm. “Ah-Yi?”

She was looking up. I followed her gaze and I saw—

The shimmering forms of dragons swimming through the clouds. The sky was cracked open, like an egg, and the yolk was a radiant ball of light.

My jaw dropped.

“It is true,” she breathed, her eyes fixed on the sky. “See?”

I pinched myself just to make sure I wasn’t dreaming.

I wasn’t dreaming.

My aunt faced me. Her eyes were orbs of fiery gold. “My time has come. Please, keep our memory alive. Do not forget.”

Her skin rippled with jade-green scales. She smiled. “You are a remarkable girl. And you will grow into a remarkable woman. Thank you.”

My eyes widened. “What?”

“Remember,” she whispered. Before I could comprehend her words, she popped the pill into her mouth and stepped off the edge of the cliff.

Moments later, a coil of emerald green shot to the clouds above, joining the other dragons.

I thought I heard a cry of joy, reverberating through the mountains, echoing in my ears.

Then the hole started to knit itself back together, and the streaks of colors melted into the ball of light.

The crack in the sky closed up seamlessly, like it was never even there.

I blinked. Auntie had disappeared along with it.

On the ground was a necklace with a gleaming pearl pendant.

I picked it up and clasped it around my neck. It was an ember of warmth against my skin.

When I went down the mountain that day, the people in the tour would deny ever meeting a woman named Fei Lung. Everyone back home would carry on as if she had never existed at all.

Auntie had vanished into thin air, every proof of her existence gone from the face of the earth.

“Aunt?” Mum said, an eyebrow cocked. “Ah-yi disappeared a year ago, remember? I understand you miss her, but you have to face reality.”

Reality.

Her eyes darkened. “She’s gone.”

Reality.

The only thing left was her necklace.

But I remember more.

I’ve kept her book of mythology, and remember her stories.

I remember her smile and her eyes.

Her memory lives on in me, and the stories my ancestors had told, they all continue to live on in me.

I will never forget.

Some people believe in aliens. Others believe in Bigfoot, or even the Loch Ness Monster.

I believe in dragons. Do you?

Forgotten

St. Paul's Convent School, Lee, Chloe – 14

Why is Huangshan so captivating? When you gaze at the endless wall of rocks, what do you think of? How time, no matter how fluid, solidifies and merges the modern age with Ancient China? How the soil you tread on has once been an inspiration for Chinese poets? How the fragrant air makes you understand the praises Li Bai once wrote for this mountain? For me, it's the overnight K46 rushing beneath a canopy of stars through the city of Fuzhou.

With Hong Kong miles behind me and a blanket wrapped around my drowsy self, the train sails onto the bridge, drifts over the rail, glides on air, soars out of the tunnel and reveals the chartreuse plains of the land of dragons. The most thrilling ride in China indeed! Screams explode as carriages tumble into another black shroud. My window shatters to the rattle of metal wind chimes, and like Icarus, I plummet out of the twisted cage.

At the end of the portal lies pain as I hit the ground, but also a mesmerising scene. The Greeting-Guest Pine bows, its arm, jade and emerald outstretched and pointing to the heavens. I stagger towards the light and see a sage standing amidst its roots. With a bearded face and knobby hands stroking the thinning hair, he directs his radiant smile towards the rising sun, as if challenging the stars to shine brighter. "Ah!" he cries. "The sparrows told me you would arrive." He turns around and his silver grey robe twirls in the wind. "Come, I know the perfect place to have lunch." If nature predicted my arrival, then let this be my fate.

Huangshan's mountainous landscape is harder to climb than I thought. Its sides are jagged and the sparse trees cover its barren body in patches like rags. All around us were mountains, mountains and mountains, their gorges dipping far below the fog and their proud crests braving the elements. I imagine that the gods pulled up piles of mud, draped them in random mismatching cloaks and set them on the far prettier stairway to their holy empire, to let them gaze on humans trudging on hills and plateaus. Suddenly I hear a whisper in my ear: "Oh child, that's not for you." The sage leads me, and I follow. Panting like a dog I finally reach the top of the peak and remind myself that I must exercise more in the future.

"Let me introduce myself" he announces to ease the growing tension. "I'm Yiwang, a poet-in-training. I come to these mountains to seek inspiration. Why are you here?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I fell through a portal?" I answer meekly.

He tilts his head. "A portal? It must be the work of the gods. They have given me inspiration!" His eyes glimmer as he proclaims "Thanks be to Huangdi! My work will soar beyond excellency!" I do not understand his ecstasy, but am glad to be the source of it.

We pass the Lotus Peak, climb up the Hundred Ladders, stroll by the Haixin Pavillion, and arrive at Bu Xian Qiao, the famous fairy bridge. Stationed in a crevice, its immense height adds to the feeling of flight. Between cloud and sky we lay out fruit, rice and leeks, and sup until noon. The sun beams at us mortal fairies, warming our cheeks as we chat and eat. "Where are you from, my friend?"

"The South, sir." I reply.

He clutches his peach and bursts into peals of laughter, the sweet juices running down his fingers as he chuckles, his black irises disappearing behind the slits of his heavy eyelids. “The South! There’s no need to be humble; you fell out from the sky.” Smirking, he glances up at the fog and stops guffawing. “We should get going. We have to arrive at the camp before sunset.”

We continue trekking along the summits for 6 hours, Yiwang belting a merry tune or two to hasten our pace. His booming voice echoing in the heights, intense and passionate, round and round. “Chant the female part!” I, with my coarse howling, belt out his song. He doesn’t seem to mind my cawing though. I wish my music teachers were also like him.

Slowly the sun leaves us to our own company as we arrive at our destination under Flying Over Rock. “Bai Jiu is a treasure in my village. Only the best is reserved for guests.” He uncaps a wide jar shaped like a Greek aryballos flask, and pours out the transparent liquid. “I figure that we would wine and dine as I tell you more about a poet’s life,” he says mid sip.

“You must have heard of Li Bai and Du Fu. They write such amazing poems about nature. See, I aspire to be famous like Li Bai, and I know that anyone can achieve their goals as long as they have the right beginning. I have tried hard to wake up my talents inside. I sojourned to rural villages, stopped by every city, and wandered around the countryside, in the hope that I would be stimulated to write something that would be marvelled at for ages to come. I constantly dream that after I die, scholars would pick up my work and be proud that they hold the original manuscript, like a precious piece of art. But nothing seems to motivate my pen to spill a single word. Nothing flows out like the Eastern wind. Nothing seems to sound right.” I nod in understanding, having gone through the pains of writing an English poem myself. I asked Wendi, the patron god of poets for help so my writing could be realistic, enthralling and memorable. And you came!” He takes another swig of the liquor, furrows his brow and stares into the distance. “My name is of bad fortune, it sounds like the word ‘forgotten’. I don’t want to be buried in an unmarked grave. I want my story to be told, my legacy to be my sensational poems. But first I must write one.” He empties his cup, stands up and hands me a writing brush. “You bring me promise, potential seen in none other. Quick, write before the candle runs out!” I swallow the savoury wine and grin at my partner.

What would otherwise be a boring night with Netflix becomes a flurry of ideas, imagination, images translated through ink. We delve into the depths of heart and mind, summoning every ounce of energy, channelling excellency into each stroke, infusing every page with power and pride, pouring out a masterpiece while gulping down spirits. We compose drunkenly, but passionately.

By sunrise, we unroll the scroll which Yiwang deems “Perfect!” The rays of the rising sun shines on the crests of Huangshan. “Look! Huangdi has shone his light on me! I see a glorious future, people lining up for commissions, waiting as I unlock the mysteries of Huangshan.” I laugh hesitantly, knowing that I have done nothing to change his fate.

All of a sudden, flames engulf the pinnacles of the dragon and the sky swallows Yiwang in the middle of his speech. “Wait! Our composition isn’t finished yet...” I shake my head helplessly. What can I do? I am no longer a welcome guest of this century. The clouds, like a pair of claws lift me from the ground. “Don’t! I have so much more to write!” The heavens transported me here, and now they will return me to my city. They harden against my pleas and place me back in 2021. I reappear in Kong Kong, with its cars honking and dogs barking, as if my expedition to Anhui never happened.

While Li Bai and Du Fu went on to be acclaimed as the greatest poets of their time, I never heard of Yiwang ever again. It was as if Huangdi removed him from history, because he cheated on Calliope with a friend from another country. Or did he wake from his drunken dream, leaving his scroll in the labyrinth of time, ultimately fulfilling the prophecy of his name?

Our cups raised to the mighty Huangshan,

Flora and fauna crown my friend divine.

I care not when she would depart,

Creations with the muses will always shine.

Huangshan gave Yiwang the spark for his flame and took everything else away from him. Likewise, the misty mountains embraced me in their magic, but blurred my mourning eyes from the mystical scenes.