

Fiction

Group 4



Earthly Fairytales 1: The Child, The Mule, and The Dog

Carmel School—Elsa High School, Tang, Liana – 15

On the day of the annual gathering of the Eight Immortals, seven of them arrived on time and waited for Han Xiangzi, the only one who hadn't appeared. Elder Zhang Guolao flew into the sky to look for him. Just as Zhang expected, Han was sightseeing on Huangshan Mountain. He enjoyed himself so much that he forgot the gathering. Zhang tried every possible way to persuade Han to leave. Reluctant to go, Han turned a stone into a replica of himself, in case he forgot the way to Huangshan Mountain the next time. The stone therefore was named Immortal Showing the Way. Zhang, for fear that Han would slip away again, rode backward on his mule to keep him in sight, wondering why Han was entranced.

It was a peaceful morning. The lake inside Hongcun Ancient village at the foot of the mountain was indistinguishable from the sky, smooth as a bright mirror. The creeping darkness around the hills slowly retreated, unveiling patchworks of white walls and grey-tiled roofs, their silhouettes flickering in the river tinged with dark green.

A yell sliced the soothing silence as the boy scampered around the village with a blossoming blister on his finger, leaving a trail of tightly-woven curses.

“Ow, ow,” He sputtered. When the boy reached the edges of the cobblestone road, Ah-Gum quickly bent down and dipped his finger in the water, watching the blood trickling away. Stupid dog, he thought bitterly.

Everyone in the village knew about Yiong-Yueng's clever puppy, Hsi-Long. It takes a normal dog three years to learn all sorts of complex tricks: churning rice, swimming in water with a boy on his back, or going door to door with a basket, begging rice and money for his master. Even then, his training wouldn't be complete until he could hunt the gibbon, the mouse-deer, and other animals, which would take two more years. But Hsi-Long learned all this in a few months, so all the boys in the country admired him.

Just now when Ah-gum sneaked out, he saw Hsi-Long guarding Yiong-Yueng's family door. Ah-gum patted his thighs, barking “Here, Hsi-Long! Come here,” but the dog didn't move. When the boy pulled his tail, Hsi-Long still wouldn't obey, and chewed on his finger.

Ah-gum pursed his lips as tears ran down his cheek, before stomping his foot on the ground. “This isn't fair, this isn't fair,” he cried.

Just then, Ah-gum heard faint clippings against the roughness of cobblestone. The boy recognised the rhythm of everyone's footsteps in the community—how else would he slink around unnoticed? It was a new sound, and that made his heart sink.

“Are you alright, little brother?” A voice spoke from behind, steady and low.

Ah-gum swiveled, and he gawped at the white mule carrying a strange man that sat facing backwards. The man was a collection of hard lines and tailored edges—sharp jaw, lean build, and a wool coat snug across his shoulders. His dark hair would glint in the rising sunlight if it weren't for the straw hat nestled on his head. A leather satchel hung loosely at his side.

“I’m fine, thank you very much.” Ah-gum answered, brushing off the dirt on his disheveled clothes. He had to look somewhat presentable in front of a stranger. “Who are you, and what are you doing here?”

The man laughed. “My name always changes, like a leaf on the trees during the four seasons. I have come to visit my master and his friend on the peak of Huangshan mountain, but I must first accomplish a task.”

Ah-gum waved dismissively as he stooped near the pond, staring at his gloomy reflection. “I don’t want to talk right now, okay? I wanted to play with this dog, who would kneel and bow and do all these tricks for Yiong-Yueng. Instead, he bit me.”

“Is Yiong-Yueng his owner?” The man asked.

Ah-gum nodded.

He continued. “Have you ever done anything for the dog? Did you ever give him anything to eat or drink?”

The boy shook his head.

The traveler muttered something under his breath, opening his leather satchel and retrieving a kernel of corn. “Take this and give it to the dog. Speak kindly to him. Do this two or three times, and he will surely trust you. Then he will do for you all he knows how to do.”

Ah-gum snatched the kernel of corn from the man’s hand, inspecting it like it’s some form of trick. “What do you want from me in exchange? My family doesn’t have much money, nor food for one more person.”

“Guess you could say I just wanted to help,” he winked.

Despite Ah-gum’s doubts, he did as the traveler instructed, placing the newly received food in front of the dog, and spat the words “sorry.” When he returned minutes later, the dog no longer growled in his presence.

It works!

Ah-gum sprinted back to the edges of the cobblestone road to share his gratitude, but only the usual weeds waved in the wind where the man and his mule had stood.

Earthly Fairytales 2: The Rise of Zhongyong

In his youth, Han Xiang Zi was known for his obstreperous disposition. Although he, like all well-off boys of Tang, was educated in the rites and five Confucian classics, Han had no intention of entering government service. He simply desired to explore the surrounding mountain, play his flute, and commune with nature. When his uncle criticized his pursuit, Han simply replied, “You and I have different ideas of study.”

The sun was at its full glare as birds chirped in the background. A young teen wiped the sheen of sweat beading on his forehead, as he sat under the shade of the Guest-Greeting Pine with a bottle of ink, a paintbrush and parchment. The umbrella-like tree was shaped like a gentle old man stretching one of his arms out, welcoming honored visitors, and Zhongyong needed that psychological reassurance for his latest poem—he hadn’t been able to write for days since his grandfather’s harsh critique.

Born to a family of farmers, Zhongyong never saw stationary until a sudden impulse arose one day. His father lacked the resources to buy it himself, so he borrowed from a neighbor. Zhongyong wrote a poem on the spot and signed his name. From then on, his work received

many compliments, and word of his literary talent spread across the entire district. People started to treat his father with respect, and even paid money to buy more of Zhongyong's poems. Instead of sending the boy to school, his father seized the opportunity and took him to visit the town's people every day.

A couple of years later, Zhongyong was fifteen when Wang Anshi returned to his hometown. One night, he requested a simple task from Zhongyong—to write a poem for his mother's unfortunate passing. But it was almost as if his hand refused to capture the feelings stirring inside his mind, resulting in sentimental refrains and cliché metaphors. His grandfather's eyes darted across his work, skimming lightly before putting the paper down. "I'm afraid you don't live up to your reputation," he spoke in a cold voice.

Grunting, Zhongyong crushed the paper into a ball and flung it with all his strength, only to have it land pathetically a few feet in front of him. His heart winced at the gesture, but maybe it was a sign to start working in the fields again.

Just then, Zhongyong heard the sound of faint clippings against stone. He whirled, and saw a man seated on a white mule, facing backwards, with a straw hat and a leather satchel.

The man hopped from his seat and picked up the ball of crumpled paper. "Is this yours, young man?"

"Yes, sorry," Zhongyong replied quickly, his cheeks flushing pink. "Or at least, it should be."

The man cocked his head, asking him to speak.

Zhongyong sighed. "I used to have a skill weaving words, creating stories that brought life to the quiet village. Mostly, it made my father happy. But I'm afraid time has come and ate up my talent."

He paused briefly, before forcing himself to say the fated words. "I am uneducated. Perhaps I have been in denial for too long, and I will have nothing but a wrenched future as a farmer."

Instead of responding, the man retrieved from his satchel a long and slender piece of bamboo with dried fish skin stretched over one end. Zhongyong immediately recognized it as a fish drum—an emblem of Elder Zhang Guo, one of the eight immortals spoken from folklore. His head snapped up, surprised, but this man didn't look nearly half as old or plump. Come to think of it, where did he get the white mule from?

"I want you to shake the drum," the man interjected suddenly, handing him the percussion instrument. "A small sound will do."

Despite Zhongyong's protests, he rattled the castanets as the noise reverberated throughout the valleys. Suddenly, his vision clouded with patches of wavering shadows. Panicking, the teen briskly brushed his hands against the darkness, revealing a small crack of light. It slowly expanded to a moving landscape illuminated with dull colours of grey and black, before it consumed him.

Zhongyong woke up on an origami boat, oarless. The sky was heavy with fog. There was a cool drizzle, but the rain did not reach the surface of the water, which remained as smooth as a mirror. Despite the lack of wind, the boat sailed toward an orb of light in the horizon.

When the poet nearly reached land, he could make out the light gaining shape. The smell of damp ground and wet pebbles wafted in the air.

On the shore, there sat two tombstones covered with moss. The only difference between the two gravestones was that a straw hat perched on one, while quills and parchment

accompanied the other. When he gently wiped the dust away, careful of its fragile state, his heart sank for a moment. The name Zhongyong was engraved on each.

The teen felt his head spinning. He tripped over the gunwale of the boat and plummeted into the ocean as layers of cool liquid submerged him. When he opened his eyes, Zhongyong was transported back into the mountains.

The man spoke quietly. “Death is the North that every compass points to. No matter where you sail, ultimately, you must turn toward it. Even if you are reborn, you might not have the same chances in your next life. Do you still wish to waste the entirety of this one farming?”

Zhongyong swallowed, his shoulders hunching. It took its toll, whatever that was.

“No,” he said firmly.

“You have your answer, then.”

As the traveler reclaimed the fish drum and returned Zhongyong’s crumpled sheet of paper, a question lingered on Zhongyong’s mind. “Who are you?” he asked.

The man smiled. “I’m just a regular, mortal apprentice.”

Earthly Fairytales 3: The Mortal Apprentice

After Han’s uncle spoke against the emperor’s pro-Buddhist policies, he was publicly criticized and re-assigned as the postmaster of a distant rural outpost. As he trekked through the Qin mountains en route to this new posting, he was caught in a sudden blizzard, which caused his horse to falter. Near death and losing hope, he became aware of a figure approaching him through the whirling winds. To his bafflement, the figure was none other than his nephew, Han Xiang Zi. Using his magical powers, Han cleared a path through the snow and led his uncle to the safety of a local inn. As the two sat down for a cup of wine, the immortal reassured his uncle that his fortunes would be reinstated and that he simply needed to be patient. The next morning, after bidding a fond farewell to his uncle, Han Xiang Zi vanished into the sky and returned to the company of the other Immortals.

The sun lingered above the hills, painting the sky with fresh strokes of orange and pink. A chilly wind blew against the pine trees, but the apprentice had more pressing concerns than lack of warm attire in mind. He carefully followed Elder Zhang Guo Lao’s instructions on folding the white mule into the size of his pocket, a jarring trick that was always disorienting to witness. Weirdness must be an inherent trait of becoming immortal, the man thought, then laughed at his joke. It was a blessing that nobody was around to notice his shenanigans.

Or a sad curse.

Once he packed away the mule, the man began a long journey toward the peak on foot. A long time ago, the apprentice voiced his protest against the idea, but Han firmly insisted. He said that as the mule belonged to Zhang Guo Lao, it could easily locate his master, but the apprentice will learn nothing. If he truly wanted to find the way, he would come through.

The man stopped under the overcast layer of thick, undulating waves of fog. Dark mountains occasionally poked through before being submerged again. He heaved a heavy sigh, and delved into the sea of clouds.

Many years before, the apprentice had constantly been praised for his quick wit and intellect. However, cleverness had not been enough to bring him success. When time came, he failed the imperial exam and his business never took off. He felt like a disgrace to

his family, and became a recluse, before finally departing to the Yellow Mountains to find immortals for inspiration. But he could not find anyone, and got lost instead.

The man swept at puffs of water vapour to gain a better view of his surroundings, but it was no use. The clouds soaked many of the mountains and roads, turning it into the lonely isles of the sea.

The traveler remembered his legs aching a year ago, after days of climbing as darkness tipped over the edges of his vision. When he woke up, two people hovered over him, holding bundles of fruits, asking him to go home. On his way down the mountains, he suddenly concluded that the two men must be immortals, and went back to ask them to “point the way.”

The man kowtowed, begging to become an immortal after his life was a failure. When he looked up, one offered to show him the way if he became an apprentice.

All he needed to do was to deduce why Han was entranced with the mountain.

So the apprentice set out on one more expedition, now equipped with new tricks, new clothes and a mule. The only requirement was that he returned with an answer on the night the Earth completes one full revolution around the sun.

The man stopped, panting heavily in the mist. Only the crickets chirped in the distance.

But what on this mountain would an immortal admire that was not present in others? The scenery was breath-taking, but there were many places that were even more beautiful around the world. Was it the community then? But people were like grains of sand on the beach, easily swallowed by the ocean as wave after wave rose to claim them.

If he was an immortal, what would he see?

As the man continued to mount the hard, granite stairs, the sea of clouds slowly parted. A small domed building was perched on the peak, from which a rich shrill echoed inside.

Alas, his mentors were waiting.

Bamboo groves lined both sides of the road where Zhang Guo Lao and Han welcomed him. They crossed a wooden bridge, and the pair showed him into the parlor. It was decorated in a pure Eastern style, full of sunlight and wide openings in the four walls so that the space resembled a pavilion.

“I’m glad you showed up,” Han said, putting down his flute and gesturing to the floor. “Take a seat.”

As the man sat on his knees, he spoke. “I’m afraid I’m too unwise to have the correct answer.”

“What if you recounted what you learnt on the journey? Perhaps that would help,” Zhang Guo Lao suggested.

The man conjured the memory of offering food to the boy with a bitten finger, and helping the aspiring poet on the verge of giving up. But when he shuffled through his memories about his own life, he was at a loss.

“I don’t understand. I’ve failed.”

“If you truly failed in life, why did you try to help others?” Han refuted.

Because I knew I wouldn’t last forever, the apprentice bitterly thought, until he had an epiphany.

The man suddenly stood up, but bowed quickly. “Thank you for your hospitality, but I’m afraid I need to return to the mortal realm. There’s still so much I could do.” He retrieved

from his pocket and gave back the mule to Zhang Guo Lao, and gently placed the leather satchel on the table.

For the first time, both immortals smiled. “You have your answer, then.”

“Oh, and thank you for returning the mule,” Zhang Guo Lao voice trailed off as the man sprinted away from the abode and down into the mountains, careful of steep cliffs and steps, until he found the Fairyland Bridge again. It was a stone bridge, ornately carved, suspended between two adjacent mountains above a narrow gorge. The pale crescent moon shone brightly in the night sky.

The man thought briefly of the life he was going to give up. He could perpetually bask in the luxury of overbrimming time, drinking with the company of wiser gods. He wouldn't need to work a day in his life anymore, rotting away needlessly, and planting seeds that may ultimately shrivel and die.

But doesn't one generation plant the trees, so the next could enjoy the shade?

The apprentice took one step, then another. As he scampered across the bridge, the man did not look back, for he had found his way.

A View of Heaven

Creative Secondary School, Barlow Qing, William Robert – 15

“Lu Shen? Do you see that point at the peak?” Lu Shen’s father asked, guiding Lu Shen’s eyes towards a point on the mountain, hidden beyond the sea off clouds.

Lu Shen paused and squinted at the clouds, his eyes willing them to part, “Father, I have told you many times, I can’t see anything.” he muttered frustratedly.

“Don’t worry my boy, eventually both of us will see the summit, it’s the gateway to heaven after wall.”

Lu Shen’s father replied, smiling at his son’s desperate glaring at the clouds.

“But for now, let’s get logging.” His father continued “I want you to show me your single-slice tree felling stroke.”

Lu Shen felt his fathers hand rest upon his shoulder then leave as his father continued walking, and he was instilled with a sudden feeling of warmth and pride. All of a sudden bright light seemed to overpower him.

He struggled with the light for a moment before finally he gave up, sat up and was immediately handed a bowl of steaming congee by Grandma Li. Lu Shen ate wordlessly, his eyes entirely occupied by the small urn that sat in the dark corner of the room, tears began to well up, as realisation battered him.

“Lu-Shen? Another nightmare?” Grandma Li asked, expressing clear concern.

“No, this time it wasn’t—it was the last moments we shared together before the accident” Lu Shen replied, having to pause several times to hold in the tears. “He was proud of me that day.”

Grandma Li saw what was coming and a calming hand on his shoulder. Then she spoke, her voice breaking slightly as she spoke, “Lu Shen- dear child, please remember that father’s spirit remains with us, contained in those ashes.”

Lu Shen contemplated her words for a moment, and stared at the warm steam rising from his congee.

Lu Shen turned to glare at his grandma, a sudden coldness gripping him, he shuddered. “If fathers spirit is truly free and with us why are his ashes being kept in this dark, lonely corner of the room, in this old piece of pot?!”

“Lu Shen!” Grandmother cried out in shock.

“Father wouldn’t want to remain chained to this pot, he would want to be in heaven, at the top of the mountain.” Lu Shen cried out uncontrollably, his eyes leaking with tears, ignoring the hurt he could see in his grandma’s eyes.

Without another word, Lu-Shen seized his hand axe and ran out of the house, leaving his Grandma to weep silently.

Lu-Shen returned home at sunset, freshly cut wood clutched between his arm, his eyes still puffy from the tears. He entered the hut sullenly, and Grandma Li turned and gave him a long stare.

“Lu Shen please understand, it is tradition that the ashes remain with the family” Grandma spoke and paused as she saw the unmistakable rage in Lu Shen’s eyes. “Lu, please, it is impossible to even bring him to the summit, I am far too old and you are too young.” she implored.

Lu did not reply. Both sat down and ate in silence.

It was much later, when Grandma Li had fallen asleep, when Lu-Shen made the final decision to take his father to the summit. Lu-Shen lay in his bed for a moment, considering that if he died, Grandma would have no one to take care of her. No, he had to go, his father's last words had been promising that both of them would reach the mountain, he would honour that promise.

He glanced over at his sleeping grandmother for a moment, apologised to her, teary eyed, and stood up, walked over to where the urn sat and poured the ashes from it into a hollow gourd. He then took the gourd and axe, slung both over his shoulder, and began to run.

He ran for what seemed like hours or days, overcome by raw sadness, he forced himself up vast slopes, through dark, misty forests and over rocks shaped like grotesque monstrous forms. Eventually he fell to the ground, asleep his mind and body drained and exhausted. He dreamt of steel and of the hand that had once ruffled his hair, lying, bloodied. He awoke suddenly, a ruin of a child and began to scream into the empty darkness, before finally losing his voice and falling back into restless sleep.

When dawn came, he began the ascent with renewed vigour. He clambered up over huge monoliths of mossy stone and passed vast patches of exotic flowers, which glimmered like jewels, he moved past trees full of singing birds whose voices rang seductively through the air. However he remained totally oblivious to the beautiful sights he passed, instead he was held utterly by memories of a happier time and was dominated totally by darkness.

Eventually night fell once more, and with it came the biting cold of the north wind. Ice tickled his form as he continued to climb, higher and higher, the gourd hanging by his side. His eyes were never once dry, they seemed to leak like water from a crack in a dam. His voice had long grown hoarse from the desperate screams that left his mouth whenever he took time to nap.

After another nap, Lu Shen sat, again rendered dumbstruck by the horror of his dream and the memories that clung to him like skeletal fingers. He lay there in the corner, crying like a dog that had lost its owner. Then he spied the gourd, lying next to him in that lonely mountain cave. The tears continued to pour from his eyes, but this time he gritted his teeth, and taking the gourd began the ascent once again. As he climbed, his form clinging and clambering up boulders, he passed by mountain springs and clusters of emerald green bamboo. Sometimes he paused to quench his thirst, or to eat berries from a mountain bush, but other than for necessities, he continued up.

Eventually he came to the summit of a particularly steep hill and found himself looking over a deep chasm, with a stone bridge crossing over it to another hill. The bridge was inlaid with ancient words of scripture and philosophy, but more than that, in the centre of the bridge sat a hermit. He was dressed in simple brown robes, a simple straw hat sat on his clean shaven head and in his hands a necklace made of prayer beads. He was meditating, his face scrunched up in deep focus.

Lu Shen watched him for a moment, and then attempted to move carefully and quietly around the hermit so as not to disturb him, and had almost crossed the bridge when he heard a voice behind him speak, making him jump.

“Wait, young man.” the hermit called, standing up.

Lu paused, eyeing the monk warily.

“Young man, might I ask where you are going? Traveling alone up this mountain like a madman?” The hermit asked.

“I...” he paused, again feeling a familiar swell of sadness overtake him. “I am going to give my father the burial he deserves, at the top of this mountain.” He replied, barely holding back the clutch of tears in his eyelids.

The hermit contemplated his words for a moment, and then strode over to him. He knelt down next to Lu, and spoke to him in hushed tones. Lu was reminded of his father, who had also knelt before him and spoken as such, to teach him the basic principles of woodcutting.

“I understand completely how you must feel, for I, being a hermit, was forced to forsake my family for spiritual enlightenment, but now is the time to give up sadness and rejoice.” He looked up into Lu’s eyes and smiled.

Lu Shen paused, and spoke with a shaky reply “How can you ignore the loss of family, how can you live past it?”

“Do you know the legends this mountain speaks of? This is the home of the heavenly kings and their greatest treasure, the pills of immortality!” The hermit shouted, his voice rife with excitement.

“Pills of immortality? ”

“Yes the pills of immortality, small pellets that, when ingested grant the bearer eternal life. For this reason, I gave up all mortal vestiges, and traveled here, for only a member of spiritual society can gain access to the abode of the kings!” the Hermit stood up and turned, seeming to address an imaginary audience.

Lu Shen merely stood in silence, beginning to put two and two together.

“But... I will permit you, young boy, to travel with me to the abode of the immortals! Now forsake your sadness as we will soon obtain the greatest gift! Everlasting life!” the hermit raved, turning back to Lu Shen.

Lu Shen looked at the monk, and gave him a hard glare, tears fleeing unhindered from his eyes like a gushing waterfall.

“Don’t tell me to forget my pain, don’t even tell me you understand it at all! You gave up your own family, for the sake of searching for myths!” Lu Shen roared, his gathered bitterness and anger flowing through him. The hermit stepped back stricken.

“How can you offer me eternal life, when I have lost half my life already when my father died?” Lu continued, his voice like a hurricane.

The hermit growled “You’re a fool, you will never reach the summit, you will die cold and alone, and you will regret not taking my offer.”

But the hermits’ words fell on deaf ears, as Lu had already turned and left the monk. He was bombarded by memories of the golden age lost to him, his father and he, playing a game of hide and go seek in the woods, running through the forest. He hurtled up the mountain, as he turned tight corners around the edge of the mountain. He thought nothing of danger as he forced himself to climb over treacherous and sheer cliff faces and walked along pathways as thin as paper.

As he climbed, higher and higher, his soul empty but for the climb, he came to a flat area, where a set of naturally formed stairs led higher. He paused for a breath, felt the adrenaline from the encounter with the monk and his body’s natural energy finally and totally spent and collapsed to the ground.

He breathed in the thin air with harsh gulps, his body was wracked with exhaustion and drowsiness. He wretched up a thin, clear bile, evidence of the fact that he hadn’t eaten a full meal in days. The cold began to set in on his skin, and finally a sense of futility overcame him. He had been too hasty, and now he had robbed his grandma of not only her only memoir of her lost son but also the only capable worker in the household. He sobbed weakly as he felt himself beginning to black out.

“So this is how it ends?” a thin, vicious voice rang from above. “Fine with me.”

Still deathly weak, he looked up, towards where the voice was coming from. At the top

of the staircase, was a wolf. It was large, far larger than any that he had ever seen, it sat on a piece of grotesque rock, jutting out of the rocks landing, watching him with piercing grey eyes. He met its gaze, and fought back the urge to scream.

There, sitting in its grey-blue eyes was oblivion and the purest form of self destruction. He stared at it, too weak to gasp. The thing was not just a simple wolf, it was his mirror. It was something that dwelled alone, abandoned from the pack, hungry, tragically thin.

The creature, this wolf with a pelt of silver blue, leapt down the staircase onto the snow next to him. Lu silently regarded the beast, it would kill him then eat him, but he couldn't even raise an arm in protest. The beast moved towards him slowly, he was weak, a single strike would kill him, it could take its time.

The wolf strutted towards his shivering form. It raised its paw, and struck him across the face, its powerful claws making deep scratches across his cheek, he gasped and closed his eyes. The blow was like the axe, the axe that had hewn the wrist of his father. The wrist that had once sat on his shoulder, urging him on.

Then he felt it, a glowing presence near him. Father! he thought, overwhelmed, once again tears welled in him. I have wasted my life, he thought.

“No, you haven't.” The presence spoke gently, its voice matching his father. “Let go of me, my boy, you must accept it, and let it go. Don't let him win, my boy”

Lu gasped with tears, but the presence released him, No, don't leave me! He cried aloud.

Then he paused, unable to feel the presence anymore, but strangely he accepted it, his father was gone, but the warmth was still present. He stopped crying.

Blood spewed from his mouth and Lu shouted to the elements, he would not, consumed by this beast of darkness! The wolf paused, unsure, even scared of this burst of power. Lu looked at it, and it cowered back, shocked by the strength in his eyes. Lu took his axe and struck it, right in the head, felling the beast in a single strike.

He fell with a smile, even if he would never see the summit above the clouds, he could rest easier now, knowing he had overcome that he had finally managed to let it go. As he rested in the snow, his face looking out towards the sky beyond the mountain, he saw a gleam in the air. It shimmered in front of him, and expanded into a vast shape, twisting and curling in the air. It radiated orange fire and gleamed like the gold of the emperors, the dragon spiralled and danced before him.

It was majesty in its purest form, a creature of the sky alone: Its scales red like the magma that spewed from deep within mountains, its teeth were a blinding white, and its horns were those of a deer. The creature wordlessly, floated down and took Lu in its talons. Then it looked to the sea of clouds, far above it, and with great speed, it shot upwards, holding Lu tightly against its chest.

It burst out of the foamy clouds, and Lu watched in breathless, wordless excitement as he gazed upon the highest peak, the summit of the mountain, the seventh gate of heaven itself. It was everything that he had wanted to see: the pines stood taller and mightier here, ice and thick snow blanketed everything, giant stones of a long forgotten age jutted out from the body of the great mountain. The dragon's body spiralled and it torpedoed forwards towards the peak, then as it reached the flattest point of the summit, it floated down. It paused still hovering above the ground, and dropped him.

He landed with a grunt, and looked up at his saviour, who had already disappeared. He gazed across the summit, and looked across at the view. It was stunning. Above the clouds and the vast expanse of blue was a sea of littered stones, and pine trees, and the peaks of the other, monolithic mountains. There were giant pieces of ice that slowly melted, and clusters

of beautiful exotic flowers. At last he could see them all for himself, Lu thought, and then he remembered the gourd. He took the gourd from his side, and opened its lid. He poured the grey, silky ashes into his hands, and paused taking another long look.

He then discarded the ashes into the air, letting them carry off into the wind, free at last on the summit. Lu fell to his knees, weeping, not with sadness, but joy, he had done it. From far above as he lay weakly on the mountain side, he saw a staircase of gold trailing down from the sky, and he saw from further above, a gate of steel. He closed his eyes once more, and as he fell into a dream, and once again he felt the hand of his father on his shoulder, proud.

The Emperor's Wife

Dulwich College Beijing, Rhyu, Suah – 14

I am dead.

I swallow my fear and look at you. You that once was is no more; this is you now. Your hand is loose in mine, your mouth parted like a toddler's. Your eyes are glassy and wide open.

I give your hand a squeeze.

You are beautiful, I think. Our god. My god.

Gone.

Behind me, there are a million people, but they are all silent at your form. I am the only one kneeled at your side, cradling your hand in mine. The silk is soft under the back of my hand.

Gone.

There are whispers. I reach forwards and with hesitant fingers, slide your eyes shut. You look more peaceful now, and I reach over to close your mouth gently.

Gone.

I can hear someone crying behind me. You were a good master; they do not want you dead. I do not want you dead either, but what I want is not important.

So many people are watching you. Your hair is streaked with age, and I knew it was your time, but I do not favor it any more than you do. The neat hair that I once tangled my hands in is now flat and colorless.

The bed we once shared is large, large enough for both of us. I watched as the light leaves your body, and I watched as your firm mouth lost its smile. The beautiful death that the priests had promised is not there; but no one dares cross you, and I do not blame them. Instead, you gasped like a fish out of water and struggled for the final strand of life that exited you.

This is no longer our marriage bed.

The bamboo is bent from the weight that it endured over the ages, and I trace it with my other finger, the silk catching in the grooves and ripping. I pay it no mind.

You are still in front of me, and although you seem real you are just a husk, a bottle without a cap. Why is your hand still in mine? I drop it.

The crying behind me is just like white noise, and I find it sad that you were not here to see. What you did to those that loved you, that trusted you, that thought you good. You are selfish and I hate you.

No, I love you.

I close my eyes and your arms are around me, but that is a dream.

You left everything behind, and now we are weak. I ought to blame you but I don't. You make everything look like there is no sense, and I long to see you smile again.

I reach forwards and press a final kiss against your forehead. It is cold.

I am dead.

There are elders, around the table. My hand is still buzzing with iciness, but I hide it under the table. My robes flourish around me and I leave your chair empty.

There are also hushed whispers, whispers that I hardly listen to. The sky is bright and

happy but bleaker than ever, and the shunnus don't seem concerned.

You laugh at me for hating them and I hate you for laughing at me.

I open my eyes. The elders are staring at me, and I ask them what is wrong.

– Where should he go? They ask me. This is the only time they ask me; all others were decided by them. All the preparations.

They know I knew you better than anyone else; they hated me because of it. Now they will fulfill their hate, because that is who they are.

I purse my lips but do not answer. There is nowhere you liked to be. That is what I believe and that is what I will tell them. It is not untrue and I will tell them that.

– My lady.

I look up. That is what they call me, always. I am their lady.

– We must decide.

I do not know. You were a man of many endeavors but of little liking. You were kind but firm. I do not know.

The council is restless. No one can fill the gap you once inhabited, with your thundering laughs and your firm gaze. Your straight mouth that kissed me in the dark.

Outside, your *shen* plays. I watch as he laughs. How can you leave this all behind?

I do not know anything, and I do not know where you must be final. This is important but I do not know any of it.

The elders are laughing at me. I do not care and I will not tell anyone, because this is my last secret and I will carry it to the grave. The grave—that makes me even sadder.

I need to choose and it is up to me, but the truth is that I know. You left me unhappy, and I want to leave you unhappy.

I know where you want to lie, but I do not want you to lie there.

My smile is a mask. I run my finger along the table, the table of gold and wood that is the same material as your body's home. I used to joke that you would buy everything yellow, everything *huang*, but now I do not joke because your coffin is yellow too.

I will not tell.

But in the distance they are folding their hands, touching their foreheads. They want to be with you as much as I do. I must tell the truth. I will not.

In the distance, I can see the city, and behind the city, huge mountains. I smile at the gods because they smile at me. They beckon to you and I feel a weight dragging me down. I look down and you are holding on to my hand, kissing my leg. I will not tell but I will.

My eyes close and open again. You smile at me.

– There. I say, and my finger points. – You lie there.

You lie where you wanted to, and you smile.

No huge monument, just a mountain. You seem happier than you'd ever been.

My best robes are set out for me by the slaves.

I smile at you, who seem to be with me all the time now. Outside the window, I can see the boy playing. I watch him play for a few more minutes, and besides me, you watch too.

My best robes, the ceremonial ones. The ones you'd bought for me. I feel the soft silk under my fingertips, just as it'd felt under yours. There is a certain type of *something* I cannot distinguish about it, that makes me wish to bury my painted face in its creases. Instead, I undress quietly.

The citizens had loved you too. I can see the mountains far off in the distance, and I smile at them, but they don't smile back anymore. They only ever smiled at you.

The mountains are beautiful, and I cannot argue against that; the robes are, too. Colors of the mountain, red of autumn, blue of spring, green of its summers. It is so many colors and so beautiful.

I put it on, slowly.

It is at this point that I know what exactly makes me this so, and there seems to be no argument as to that.

Outside are the mountains, loved by you, and they look greener than ever; inside, there is me, and I am weathered away, soon to be gone.

– Come on. I tell him. – Just a little more.

He is tired, and so am I. The boy is dressed in his best robes, those that make him look like you, and as I watch him I cannot help but think of you. He is your *shen*, and I think of you.

I smile, albeit this, because they watch. I am a good empress and a good wife. In front of us, in front of the boy and I, your coffin is being held on six shoulders, the laborers strenuously walking under the weight. They think it is an honor to hold you, and so do I. So *did I*.

Just a little more.

Does this ever have to end, I wonder, and did this ever have to start? All this, all this for your crow's-feet eyes and your lined but just face and everything that was in between. The boy whines but he knows it is his duty to keep silent; and that is what he does. I would not blame him if he went home and cried.

I just wish I could comfort him.

Inside my palm, grasped firmly between fingers that had held yours, is your *shanzi*. Your fan is light, made from the grandest of oaks, lined with gold. Your touch is all over it, and when I squeeze it gently, you smile and take my hand. I hate you but I don't.

– *Mama*. The boy—the *shen*—says. – How much further?

The onlookers don't hear. They never hear, the civilians that you'd loved with so much passion, but they know you are over and they hate you as much as I do for it. The boy is the spitting image of you and instead, they stare ravenously at him; I do not want him to be seen by any, but soon he will be seen by all.

They believed you were a god. They believe he is a god, too.

It is your fault, I think, but my mind betrays me, for its hand squeezes the fan tighter. I can hear the cool winds around me, around the fan, around you.

– Almost there. I reply. My free hand strokes his raven hair. – Just a bit further.

– My legs hurt.

The fan had been filled with natural winds and with your love. The finest painters in all of the kingdom, spraying black ink onto the thin white to create mountains and valleys and rivers: the ones you loved.

– I know. Just a little further.

My legs hurt too. I cover my head with the veil, like I am expected to, and bow my head in mourning.

The shunus of your mountain bow their heads towards you.

The coffin is dark ebony upon my fingertips, cold and lifeless as your body that lies within. My lips murmur prayers upon your still hands and kiss your brows; furrowed, even in death.

I pray to everyone possible. This is my duty. To the women of heaven, the *shunnu* watching over him. To the kings of heaven, their hands cast downwards to praise. To my gods and yours, even the ones I barely believe in.

My lips, still young as three decades, run over you, just like yours used to do when you were with me; my hands soft under yours, and your eyes locked onto mine. Now, your hand is on my shoulder, almost as in comfort. You don't say anything, because that was how you were. It is better but worse at the same time.

Your skin was as soft as a *baozi*, and your eyes as piercing as a sharpened *jian*, an arrow. I remember everything about you and I pray for you.

– I gave you what you wanted, I say. – I hope you are happy.

You nod. Our child stares, the future king, the one who will rule. His gaze wavers as he looks up at me and I know he feels at least some kind of emotion: so unlike you. We were never like you. That was why you loved me, because I was there, and I was cold but warm.

Like two opposite sides. Why am I thinking about this?

Maybe this—maybe this is—my last chance.

You are staring at both our child and I with a face that is stony, but hides something underneath, even if it's just a crack. What are you thinking? I never knew, and I never know.

Behind me, I can hear everything of nothing. The shuffled feet and the splatter of mud and the wind, the rocks, the *ziranfengguang* of so much nature that you cherished.

This place is so beautiful, and finally, I see what you see.

– It was him you loved, I whisper. No more than that; nigh a whisper. – It was him.

The winds laugh. The rocks quiver in humor. The rivers patter against the walls of the mountains—everything, laughing. Laughing, laughing, laughing.

The *Huangdi's* favourite. My whole life, I had thought it would be me, the one they referred to as the favourite, the best, the closest.

But no. It was the mountain. It was always the mountain, and you smile at me, at my face. At the face that had thought was the one. I was never the empress, just the lady, the concubine; it is the mountain. The mountain was your empress, your first love, your beauty. The One that watched over you for so long. I was not your wife: how can someone who knows so little about you be so? How-

How could I have been so foolish as to think it is *me*?

Of course, I think. The mountain. *Your* mountain.

Your empress.

– My lady. A voice comes from behind me, and I turn. Our son's hand is clutching mine. – It is time.

Yes, it is time. The stone steps, and the candle, and the darkness. The wife to dutifully follow her husband to the grave; to be buried alive, and to stay by your side for the rest of the afterlife. You kiss the top of my head, and I let you. The child watches me and I do the same to him, turning him away, towards the men who wait.

Their eyes watch. I was not a bad master, I think? Yes, I decide. Not bad at all. Not a bad ending, for not a bad master. The lady and her man.

One of your servants hand me a candle. I step down. *One*.

The others watch. *Two*.

I breathe, into that last air. That earth. That shan.

I am afraid. For the last time, I admit that. I am afraid; one emotion never allowed; I am afraid, and a royal face is not one of fear.

But I can be afraid. I am not empress.

Love him. My lips give back to the wind, one last time. *Love him, Empress.*

Love him like I never could.

I step down.

Three.

The tomb clangs shut, and as I hold up the candle, dirt pours upon me.

Goddess of the mountains, Empress of land and life... is that You?

I did not know You loved him so.

Two Identities, Two Generations

ESF Island School, Hui, Tsz Hin – 15

“You’re going on your own, idiot! No one likes you!” Xuanmin and Guanche shoved me onto the ground and started running away. When I stood up, they were long gone.

It was pure mayhem on the Yellow Mountain. Crowds scurried and pushed each other as they all sought to catch a glimpse of the Mountain’s marvellous views at its observation deck. Enormous shadows of the clouds and the mountain cast themselves upon the landscape and effortlessly roamed over the ridges and valleys like silky waves merging imperceptibly into the distant horizon. But I wasn’t here for the views. I was here on a field trip, to collect data with Xuanmin and Guanche—the class’ worst bullies—for a group Chinese history project about the Yellow Emperor.

They never liked me. Since the start of the school year, they’ve always told others that I was an ‘idiot’—and together they ganged up on me—they drew on my exercise books, stole my homework, and left me out on purpose. I was reluctant to tell anyone about the situation—I could not risk getting bullied even more.

A gust of furious northern wind raged on the peak and pulled me out of my thoughts, unleashing its merciless raindrops rapidly like bullets onto the ground. In a blink of an eye, mist had shrouded the summit entirely. Sunshine was blown away, and the gorgeous view was gone. An unnatural streak of lightning illuminated the grim sky, followed by a deafening boom of thunder. Concerned that it was going to rain heavily soon, the crowds immediately hurried towards the cable car station. Soon, I was one of the only few left.

Getting increasingly difficult to navigate my way around the mountain, I gave up looking for the two. My clothes were thoroughly soaked—it was freezing. I rushed towards the cable car station, but it was nowhere to be seen. I had lost my way in the mist. Exhausted from all of the running, I was desperate to seek shelter from the heavy rain. Shaking from the cold, I saw a small trail emerging from the mist as I glanced ahead. The path led to a mysteriously looking cave.

Seeing that it was the only shelter around, I slowly stepped in. A stream of cold air rushed past me, as an alarming chill crept up my spine. The cave was pitch-black. I couldn’t see a thing. I started to sweat, tremble, my heart beating faster.

Within seconds, massive rocks toppled down obstructing the entrance to the cave. I was trapped! I shouted, “Help, help!” But there was not a single soul around. Suddenly, my surroundings started to spin faster and faster. I vaguely remember what happened next—I felt myself falling into a bottomless pit for an indescribable period. As I plummeted into a void of no return, it almost felt like time itself had ceased to exist.

After what felt like an eternity, I was woken up by the bright sunlight. The stones that once concealed the cave were miraculously gone! I immediately rushed out of the cave, entering a wondrously clear daybreak. It was bizarre—the air was very fresh, there were many more trees everywhere, and despite being the same, recognisable landscape—everything just seemed out of place.

“Oh no! I’m going to be late! I’ve got to go now!” I immediately hurried towards the cable car station, but it had disappeared. I headed towards the observation deck, wanting to see whether I could find any hints of what had happened. But there was no observation deck. All of the busy crowds were gone. The high-rises that once stood proudly before the mountain had vanished, only to be replaced by crude wooden shelters scattered around the landscape.

I heard voices behind me. “Hey, do you know where Prince Xuanyuan went?”

Who is the Prince? I wondered.

The voices came from dozens of weird-looking figures, who all stared at me, and then at each other. Nodding their heads, they suddenly fell to their knees, shouting, “All hail Prince Xuanyuan! All hail the Yanhuang Tribe!”

“I’m not the Prince. Who are you? Is this a movie or something?” I asked confusingly. Who was the Prince? Why were they calling me this way?

One of them replied, “Prince, we are your guards. You were hunting just now, but your horse went wild suddenly and knocked you off the cliff. We finally found you! Please follow us as we escort you back to the village.”

I was bewildered by all of this. *Hunting?* I thought. *Wasn’t this banned on the Yellow Mountain as it was named a ‘Natural Artefact’ years ago?*

“Where am I? What’s happening?” I asked.

“Prince, you probably may have lost your memory from your fall, so please let us tell you. Remember life was once enjoyable?” another of the guards exclaimed. “That was until Chiyou—the new Chief of the Jiuli Tribe—decided to invade us, the Yanhuang Tribe. That devil has four eyes and six arms, and kills people without even blinking an eye. Under his command, the Jiuli soldiers destroyed every town they entered and slaughtered every citizen they saw on the way. Those who dared resist—including my aunt’s family—were set on fire alive.”

His eyes welled up. “The Jiuli Tribe’s ultimate goal is to take over China, and anyone obstructing their path would be cleared mercilessly. Most of our allies are already gone, and the very few remaining—including us and our neighbour, the Xuannü Tribe, are on the brink of collapse. Prince, with your intelligence and strength, we are sure you can counter Chiyou and those Jiuli devils. We all have faith in you!” His tears broke into a smile.

“Why are you telling me all this? Let me go! I’ve got to get back to class!” I exclaimed.

The soldiers looked at each other and sighed. “The Chief has ordered us to bring you back to the Tribe. Perhaps you’ll remember what happened when you get back.” I reluctantly followed the soldiers as they continued to chat about their encounters with the Jiuli.

That night, I sat in my shelter, pondering all that had happened to me during this uncanny day. Deep inside, I realized—this was not the modern era. The mountain was a mysterious linking point between two time periods. I was sometime in history. But why was I the chosen one? When was I? I regretted not listening more in History class—perhaps I would know a lot more if I did! Eventually, I fell asleep, with my confusion still lingering in my brain.

“Prince, Prince!” I heard muffled shouts from someone. “Wake up! Wake up!” It was one of my newly assigned guards, shaking me and grabbing me up.

I rubbed my eyes and yawned. “It’s the middle of the night. What happened?”

“Our food supply has been raided. Chiyou had his troops burn most of our stock. We’ve only got around two—three days left of supply before we all go hungry. The battle—it’s now or never.”

I shuddered. “Then ... then go tell whoever the General or the Chief is. Why are you telling me this?”

“Prince Xuanyuan ... I regret to tell you that Chief Shaodian ... has just passed away ... in the raid,” said an old man who rushed into my shelter. He was a shrivelled toothless creature, feeble and walked with a cane. He had visible scars, and deep red fresh cuts on his skin. He nodded towards the guard, who slowly backed out from the shelter. He was breathing heavily, “I’m so sorry for your loss ... but now is not a time for grief.” He wiped away his tears. “Prince, you will become the next Chief of our Yanhuang tribe—the Yellow Emperor.”

The Yellow Emperor? This name sounded quite familiar. Wasn’t this some guy who lived thousands of years ago? What am I doing here? “Who are you?” I exclaimed. “I’m not whoever you call the Yellow Emperor. Let me go!”

“Let me reintroduce myself. I’m Fengbo, the former Chief’s senior advisor. I think we’ve met once or twice before? My new Chief, look at everyone here!” He pulled me out of my shelter, and I saw dozens of peasants kneeling before me. “Look at all of them. Most of their family members have been killed by Chiyou. The people of our Tribe need you.” He clenched his fist. “You’re our only hope to defend our tribe from Chiyou”. He took out a large, wooden stick, and passed it onto me. “This is the Royal Staff, symbolising power in our tribe. Chief Shaodian asked me to pass this onto you before he passed away.”

Time was ticking—I had to make up my mind. My History teacher just had a lesson on the Yellow Emperor—if only I had listened!

Why did I become the leader of the Tribe in all of a sudden? I thought. I’m just an ordinary high school student. I can’t save them from the petrifying Chiyou. Where was the real Xuanyuan? Where did he go after hunting?

Respect and honour. It was the first time people looked at me this way. I was not despised by anyone finally. I realized—the mountain had chosen me to prove myself—to prove that I’m not what Xuanmin and Guanche label me as. No, I’m not weak and subservient. I’m not worthless. I’m not a piece of scum who had no friends. I must not become what they think of me.

Forcefully eliminating all of my fear of the unknown, I wanted to grasp this moment to prove my true qualities. *The mountain chose me for a reason. There’s no other way to go anyways. I’ve got to take this position. I’m not a scaredy-cat, am I?*

A surge of confidence suddenly emerged in my body, and the words gabbled out of my mouth, “Thank you for entrusting me with this position. I shall be the Chief of our glorious Yanhuang Tribe.” Fengbo passed on the Royal Staff to me. I was elated for finally making a decision but worried that I was incompetent. The sound of the applause reverberated on the rostrum and throughout the valley the whole night.

My hands sweated with fear and anxiety as the officials reported progress. The burdens of being the Chief weighed heavily on me. Any wrong decision I make could potentially lead to a disaster.

Fengbo asked, “Chiyou’s only got two ways to attack us, according to the map. One would be to head for Zhuolu, our border settlement, by water, and another would be to go for our capital by land. We’ve not got sufficient soldiers to defend both of the settlements—we’ve got to choose one out of the two. Also, we’ve heard rumours that our only ally left, the Xuannü Tribe, has surrendered to Chiyou and the Jiuli. We might be on our own now.

Prince, this is a matter of life and death. Only the Chief has the authority to decide where we position the troops. Where should we go?”

I looked blankly at Fengbo, not knowing what to answer. It was the first time I realized History was so important. I hoped I didn't hate this subject as much. Even if I did pay attention slightly, my life would be much better now. I struggled to recall anything about the Yellow Emperor!

Looking at the map, I noticed that the Jiuli Tribe was situated in the Eastern part of China. As most of China's rivers and waterways are in the East, this meant Chiyou's soldiers would be experienced in water. He would want to use this to his advantage. Somewhere along the Yellow River would be ideal for him. Looking at the map, I saw Zhuolu—lying right beside the Yellow River.

I stammered, “I ... I think the only way for Chiyou and the Jiuli Tribe to attack us will be through our border settlement in Zhuolu.”

Fengbo stepped up, “Let's go for Zhuolu then. It's an important settlement as it is positioned strategically. Whoever wins this battle wins China. Currently, most of it is Xuannü-owned territory, with some being ours. If the Xuannü surrendered, we might suffer casualties from the ambushes and raids we might face—they know a lot more of their own land than we do. Let's pray to God that we're still allies!”

In Zhuolu, thick, heavy fog engulfed any possible hint of a view. As we descended deeper within the landscape, the decaying air and stifling atmosphere was suffocating. The wind slashed furiously against the trees, which lashed and crashed against each other, warning us of the dangers that lay ahead. Bewailing sounds ghosted through the trees. Dense shadows flashed in the woods as if we were being watched ...

What if Chiyou forayed to the capital? What if his troops were more experienced by land? What if the Xuannü did surrender to Chiyou? The amount of uncertainties that lay ahead worried me. Despite the cold weather, I broke into a sweat. My heart pounded, and my hand began to feel clammy against my bouncing knee. I began to pace back and forth, stomping my feet impatiently on my chariot. The very act of watching the battle progress was hurting my eyes, and my heart was still threatening to burst forth from my ribcage.

As the fog became heavier, we lost our way in the forest. Looking for anything that might help, I felt a hard, circular object in my pocket. I didn't know I brought a compass with me the whole time! A thought struck me: *Why not use it to navigate our way through the forest?* I stationed it on my chariot, and immediately it pointed north. We soon found our way through.

Gradually, noises emerged from the other end. The sound of fierce, well-trained and equipped warriors, to be exact. Then we saw—they were the soldiers of the Xuannü Tribe, marching orderly towards us. Their bodies were stiff and erect as if they were possessed like a puppet of a skilful manipulator.

The rumours were true. I thought. We've been abandoned. There's no hope anymore. We're doomed. I am an unworthy leader—I wasn't able to save the Yanhuang Tribe from Chiyou. I've not been able to protect those who had faith in me. I'm a failure. Gradually, I lost faith in myself. Scenes of how I was bullied by Xuanmin and Guanche reappeared. At the moment, I accepted that I was subservient to everyone else, of being too scared to fight back the bullies. I've lost the only chance to prove my qualities to myself. If I couldn't change the fate of the Yanhuang Tribe, how could I change my own?

Suddenly, the Xuannü troops sped up and ran with their swords pointed towards us. However, they came to a halt, standing right in front of us. Their backs slowly turned, and suddenly the sounds of horns and drums reverberated across the battlefield—blood started rushing through everyone’s veins. They shouted in uniform, “Once an ally, forever an ally! Let’s fight the Jiuli devils with the Yanhuang Tribe!” All of the soldiers roared. I wiped away my tears, with my faith in the future resuscitated. I proudly waved the flag of the Yanhuang Tribe, as one of the most significant battles in history—the Battle of Zhuolu—began right in front of my eyes.

The hope I had once lost had now been restored in me. I immediately shouted, “It’s now or never!” The Yanhuang and Xuannü troops immediately rushed towards the Jiuli troops. Suddenly, more and more Xuannü troops emerged on the mountains, shooting fire arrows and throwing rocks at their opponents. They shouted, “Chiyou, get out of our Tribe!” The once fearless, ferocious Jiuli troops shouted in agony, scurrying to escape the battlefield. They immediately descended into chaos.

The rest soon surrendered. The only one remaining was Chiyou himself, who wielded terrible sharp weapons in his six arms. He was more of a savage beast than of a human. With his super-human strength, he made his way across the soldiers and stood right in front of me. With dirt and blood stains smeared across his cheek and forehead, the majority of his face was covered with a thick armour. He roared, “Xuanyuan, it’s all over!” Just as he was about to stab me, numerous arrows flew across the sky. Blood spilt out of his mouth, and just before he fell to his demise, he gave me a harrowing stare—one that I could never forget.

Suddenly, my vision started to fade out. From afar, I saw something like a helicopter. I rubbed my eyes—it wasn’t a helicopter—it was alive. A large golden phoenix gently picked me up, and I was tucked onto its comfortable warmth. My body began to relax as the clouds zipped by under the phoenix’s hooves. Things started to blur out—my thoughts of the past and present all swirled together. I started to fall through my memories. Scenes of me being bullied by Xuanmin and Guanhe, stumbling into the mysterious cave in Yellow Mountain, my adventure through time, the epic Battle of Zhuolu all reappeared and rushed past my head. A faint voice echoed in my head, saying, “Now you know the importance of History, right?”

I found myself back in the cave, resting on a rock. As I woke up, I heard people calling my name. As I walked out of my cave, everyone immediately shouted, “He’s back! We found him!”

My history teacher shouted, “Here you are! What have you been doing here the whole time?”

As I was about to reply, I noticed a stick lying around to the right.

No, it isn’t an ordinary stick. I thought. Looking more closely, I knew what it was—it was the Royal Staff.

I smiled, I realised I was going to ace that history project!

The Emperor's Poet

ESF Island School, Yuen, Nicole – 15

I was eighteen, my grandfather's hand resting gently on my shoulder. My hands rested at my stomach, tight with nervousness. My gaze followed the outstretched crimson carpet in front of me, the metallic soldiers on either side, and finally the glorious throne that stood tall on the other end. On top of it sat Emperor Huang, his face not yet reddened, his belly not yet sagging like it is today.

"Master Chen, what is your request?"

His voice was unwavering and firm. He was perfectly courteous and respectful, but his addressing my grandfather had caused me to shrink further than I already had. My grandfather, however, held his head high and spoke.

"The honourable Emperor Huang may view this as an unusual request, but should you fulfill it, there will not be a day where you regret doing so."

The emperor raised his eyebrows. "Name it."

"I ask that you instil my granddaughter as your court poet."

Armour clattered as the soldiers drew their spears. It was a blasphemous request, even I understood that. Girls were things that were meant to be seen, whether in bed or at the arm of the king, and not heard.

The emperor dismissed the spears with a wave of his hand, but his brows furrowed in disbelief.

"Master Chen, I have much respect for you, but have you gone mad? You expect me to appoint a mere girl to my courts? Can she even read?"

"Your Majesty, I have educated her just as I educated you."

A hush ascended over the throne room. What over, I was unsure. I did not know which part was more astonishing, the claim that a girl had been educated at all, that a man had taken the time to waste his knowledge on a girl, or that there was someone who received education that rivaled the emperor's own.

The emperor remained unshaken. "That is a bold claim, Master, but because you have taught me to this standard, I will entertain you. What is your granddaughter's name?"

At this point, my grandfather squeezed my hand and nudged me forward. "Go on."

I wobbled forward, my clammy hands clasped together at my stomach. "Honourable Emperor Huang, I am Chen Bao An. It is an honour to be on your court today." My voice tinged with unconfidence.

Emperor Huang's severe face did not change. "Read one of your poems for me."

I stopped short. I did not prepare more. I had not expected to even have to introduce myself, let alone to have my poetry be heard. Truthfully, I had not expected to be here this long, still alive and still unseized. I looked back slightly, not knowing what to do. My grandfather looked back at me, his eyes smiling, his nod encouraging.

I inhaled deeply and began. My words spun tales of the evergreen Huangshan Mountains, the ones this very palace ruled. I sang of their ever-viridescent valleys, rolling endlessly into the horizon. I spoke of the melodic harmony crafted by the rustling leaves and whistling forests. I described the villagers, my neighbours, and their sincerity and ceaseless perseverance. I had not written down anything prior, yet when I tried to articulate the love

and pride I held for this land, the words filled my mouth and spilled out, like a song pours out of a bird.

When I finished, I bowed. There was no clapping; there was no praise. But when I stood upright, the emperor no longer held prejudice and doubt in his eyes; instead, there was a scintillating warmth in his eyes, one that promised more than a mere dismissal from his courts.

“Your lexical choice was sloppy.” he said. My heart dropped. Had I been wrong? “But you show far more promise than any man your age, maybe even more so than men older than yourself.”

The iron-clad soldiers bristled. I myself knew the impossibility of this occurrence. Never before had a woman been spoken of more highly than a man. Both pride and fear inflated in my chest, and gratitude for my grandfather’s belief in me tripled tenfold.

“Very well, Master Chen. Your granddaughter has proven herself to be worthy of a position in my courts as a scholar. She will learn from the greatest intellectuals alongside the other boys, and one day, she will be our nation’s greatest poet.”

I spent my first years as an adult as a student in the Huangshan Courts. I woke up before the sky cleared into light azure. I walked around the court, the rich hues of the royal grounds greeting me at every turn, with my quill and scroll grasped tightly between my fingers. When the dawn broke, I began my so-called ‘lessons’ with Master Li, who had lacked the impartiality and wisdom my grandfather held. He would usually read what I wrote, wave it off, and go to teach the other boys. They, in turn, snickered and laughed. I was not bothered in the slightest. They had been ordered not to touch me, and I was able to learn from a much better teacher. After Master Li dismissed us, the boys would frolick off to play *sanguoqi*. I, on the other hand, snuck away to my grandfather’s quarters, where he would read over my poetry, tut at what he thought was written badly, and make corrections with me until he deemed the poem adequate. I would then tiptoe back to my own quarters, the beautiful poem worked on by my grandfather and myself rolled up tightly in my arms, and read it over and over again until it was time for dinner. I think back now, and I am completely and utterly sure that those were the best years of my life.

Emperor Huang evaluated us every full moon. We would present our best poems before him, and he would hear them, before deciding who was no longer worthy of their title as a royal scholar. Master Li did his best to allow his students to shine, however his teachings, no matter how focused he was on the boys, fell short in comparison to my grandfather’s. After five years of seeing my male counterparts diminish before my eyes, I was the last poetry scholar.

“I was right.” Emperor Huang said at the end of my last evaluation. “There will be no finer poet in all the land.”

I blushed profusely, bowing my head low to hide the deep crimson that bloomed on my face. “Thank you, your Majesty.”

“I think it is time.” Emperor Huang said.

“What for, your Majesty?”

“That you are named the Emperor’s Poet.”

Even though I was the last one in that room, even though there could physically be no one else, the proposal still shocked me.

“B-but your Majesty, I am a girl, and I am still young-”

“And yet you are already the nation’s most brilliant poet. I cannot begin to imagine how

well you will nurture your skill as you mature. And as for your gender, it is time that girls in Huangshan are given a chance.”

I stood there, open-mouthed, gaping like a fish. Emperor Huang ignored it.

“Chen Bao An, you are an extraordinary poet. You will do this nation proud. I hereby name you the official Emperor’s Poet.”

Almost immediately, my good fortune was plagued.

I had begun weaving tales of waterlilies and sparrows, of clouds and skies. The Huangshan I depicted was the truest form of it, the vibrant hues of it painting my words and poems. I would share these with my grandfather, who scrutinised them just as closely as he had when I was a scholar. When I told him I was the Emperor’s Poet, he only said ‘And I knew you would be.’

Unfortunately, the omnipresent war was looming closer. This time, it was Wanling that threatened to spill over our tranquil mountains with their spikes and swords. I knew close to nothing about Wanling and their kingdom, but their coming tinted my Huangshan with dark and murky colours, and it darkened Emperor Huang’s mood even more so.

It was a slow descent into insanity. It started as a glass of *huangjiu* during the evenings where he would call me into the throne room to deliver a new poem. He would swirl it elegantly, the brown fracturing into different shades of cedar and hickory. As the clip-clop of the Wanling horses grew closer, Emperor Huang was responsible for developing more and more war strategies. Every war meeting with the army generals called for alcohol, some stronger than others. By the time I joined their meetings when they wanted a break, the emperor and the army generals were often already red-faced and oblivious.

When the Wanling soldiers began flooding into Huangshan, Emperor Huang grew unpredictable and erratic. He had two jugs in his throne room, one to hold the *huangjiu* he was currently drinking, the other to shove in the hands of a servant as he barked at them to go fetch more alcohol. I would then open my mouth to begin, only to instantly have my poetry be criticised. His drunk comments were often lewd, unnecessary, and most of all, completely unlike the just emperor I knew only ten months prior.

“Come on, why is today’s poem so boring? I didn’t make a girl my poet just for it to amount to nothing.”

“You should just tear that one apart. Why are you so useless?”

And the one that stung most of all, “I should have just bedded you when I had the chance.”

It was painful, seeing a man who had once only needed a wave of his hand to command an entire group of soldiers, who had seen through the prejudices of the world, who had made history by choosing talent over tradition, bow down to alcohol’s tyranny. I ached, and I often expressed this to my grandfather.

One night, after an especially alarming night, I meekly tip-toed to my grandfather’s room. He lit a candle, and invited me onto the floor with him.

“Come, sit, Bao An. What do you want to talk about?”

I blushed, abashed. “I’m still worried about Emperor Huang.”

My grandfather chuckled. His eyes crinkled at the sides, like leaves during autumn. “Why?”

“I understand he’s probably just drunk out of his mind but... I don’t know, he says he should’ve just slept with me when he had the chance.”

The kindness in my grandfather's eyes blazed alight into fury. "What did he say now?"

I retreated slightly. "It's nothing—"

My grandfather, in his aged state, had risen to his feet. "That won't do. I'll have to talk to him."

"Please don't—"

It was futile. He had already lifted the paper screen, and was headed in the direction of the throne room.

I wish I had stopped him.

I waited in that room, my skin prickling. Emperor Huang had been drinking immensely. It was the kind of drinking that made him egotistic and easily agitated all at once. I was unsure so as to whether I wanted time to go slower so I would not have to see what happened or whether I wanted it to go faster so I would not have to be tortured like this.

When the moon had risen high in the hard black sky, Emperor Huang called me to the throne room. With knocking knees, I stood up and trembled all the way to the room. It was the most treacherous journey I had ever taken. I just needed to know that my grandfather was safe, that he had not harmed my grandfather in his alcoholic state.

I heard him before I saw him. I still hear him now.

The guttural moaning echoed into the courtyard. I recognised the sounds of my grandfather's agony, each scream burrowing deeper and deeper into my skin. I quickened my pace. I had to see if he was okay. I had to.

I arrived too late.

My grandfather was on the floor, a cross cut into his stomach, the emperor standing on top of him with a red-glistening knife in his hand. My grandfather wrapped a hand around the wound, still groaning and choking. His mouth foamed with crimson.

But when he saw me, his eyes still lit up.

"Grandfather!"

"Don't come closer." Emperor Huang warned, pointing the dagger at me. "I heard you were complaining about me."

I felt my cheeks becoming wet, though I did not remember crying. "Yes, it's true, I was complaining, kill me, kill me and not him, I beg you."

My grandfather choked out three words: "Don't. You. Dare."

The emperor pointed the weapon back at my grandfather. "Shut up." he hissed, kicking my grandfather in the back. "Old man trying to accuse me of treating a girl badly. Like I don't have the right to."

"Please, stop." I got on my knees, the bloody floor staining my purple tunic. "Please."

His head was flushed. With alcohol or rage? Probably both. "You need to learn your place, little girl. It is under me. You work to entertain ME!" he roared, the words reverberating all around me.

I nodded, my vision going blurry. "Yes, yes! I pledge allegiance to you, and to you only!" I sobbed. Anything, anything that would let him leave my grandfather alone long enough for me to be able to carry him to my room.

For a second I thought that he might step away and be reasonable. There was a look, of sobriety, of logic, of remorse. I prayed for it to last. I stayed on my knees, looking up at him through glassy tears.

"Too late. I need to teach you a lesson." he snarled.

The silver glinted, and then disappeared into my grandfather's stomach.

I wailed. The emperor collapsed in his throne, the alcohol probably giving way to his

fainting. I rushed to my grandfather's side, clutching his dying hand in my own bloody one, the tears coursing down my cheeks. He grasped my hand with what strength he could muster, and coughed. Burgundy streamed out of his mouth.

"It's not your fault. I love you, Bao An. I always will."

I sobbed and sobbed, holding on as my grandfather slipped through my fingertips.

I do not know how long I was on the floor for. I think I remember getting jostled back to my room by two guards. I am not sure.

I was numb. The emperor called me to his throne room the next day, as if nothing happened. He was still drunk. I delivered my poem, my voice void of emotion. He slung his list of crude insults at me. I went back to my quarters.

I remained in that state for months. The war worsened around me. I watched as girls younger than I had been when I first came begin to enter the king's chambers, frightened and anxious, and leaving numb and void of emotion. I watched as the emperor boasted about his conquests, both murderous and sexual. I did nothing. I could do nothing.

A period of time passed. I had been preparing to deliver that day's poem. It was the classic the-trees-are-green-and-the-flowers-are-pink poem. The same thing I had been doing for months. I wrote, my brush's wishy-washy strokes meaning nothing to me.

"Your poetry is so beautiful."

I was startled, and then I was angry. "Who are you?"

I turned fully around, and instantly regretted my actions. I recognise now that was the first emotion I had properly felt since my grandfather's death. "You're one of Emperor Huang's... Yes, I'm sorry, I didn't realise."

The girl looked ashamed. "Sorry- my eunuch just abandoned me for a second so I wanted to come see."

I looked properly at her. Her face was young. Even through the horrific things she endured, a naive and curious glow still remained in her eyes. She still held hope in her small, youthful hands, and she still looked forward to a brighter future.

"Thank you. It means a lot. Please, come visit me anytime you want."

That night, I went out to be under the moonlight, my scroll and brush clutched in my hands like they were many years ago. I sat on the ground, my scroll on a slab of rock. I began to write.

I allowed myself to feel it. I felt the loss of my grandfather trickle from my heart, to my hand, to my brush. I felt my own guilt gush out onto the paper. Most of all, I let the fury, the anger, the hatred I felt towards the emperor out onto the scroll. I called him a swine, I called him a degenerate, I called him stupid. It was risky and grounds for execution. But when I finished, I rolled it up and clasped it to my chest, silently crying tears of relief.

I am not finished. But I know what I am. I am not just a girl. I am not the Emperor's Poet. I am my own person. I am Chen Bao An.

... AND MAGIC

ESF West Island School, Eyunni, Gayathri – 15

2020 CE

4 words.

Only 4 words. Once upon a time. A day spent sitting on my old chair with a thin cushion for support, staring at my bright computer screen, resulted in just 4 words. It was a start, well not really. More like a generic opening to a story, set in some fantastical land that I was yet to conjure. It was not that I was unwilling to find ideas, I couldn't. Usually my imagination soared through the vast skies, showering ideas like rain. But today, I was blank. An empty book that could not be written in.

I never wanted to be a writer. In fact, for most of my life, I thought writing was the most strenuous and tedious task to have ever been created. How could one sit and write word after word, without exhausting themselves? It never appealed to me. Yet I would find myself sitting on that chair—with one leg shorter than the others, that rocked back and forth with every minute movement of my hand or leg—in front of the desk that my mother got from a neighbour who wanted to discard it, writing. Writing word after word, getting exhausted, to a point where many years later I finally gave in to this painful activity and somehow made a living out of it.

I needed to write this story. A story that transcended time and evolved over more than 2000 years. It wasn't just a story, it was a mystery, about something more valuable than gold. Many people had attempted to claim this story as their own. But I had something they didn't...

The rocks. Differently shaped, each one. Each had its own story to tell. The monkey watching the sea, the immortal pointing the way. The large ones like tall towers, guarding the area with their strength and might. Some were animals, coexisting in this fantastical kingdom. Who was the leader, and who was just another bystander witnessing the events that would unfold?

215 BCE

“It’s too dangerous.” The words echoed in my head, as I cautiously walked down the stone stairs, “They cannot find out.”

My long flowing robes held many pockets and compartments, which I pressed against my shaking body protectively. The nip in the air felt cold against my tense perspiration. My slippers were hanging off my only two free fingers, my feet bare on the cold floor. I walked fast enough to reach the bottom of the large, spiralling staircase, but slow enough to be silent. Once I reached the bottom, I slipped swiftly into the small room, rushing to a dark corner as there was no door to give me privacy. Once I was convinced that I was alone, I removed the contents of my pockets and placed them in a box that my hands sought from memory, mostly flowers, herbs and twigs from special trees that I had found myself. Soon all the items were safely inside for me to work with later. All except one. I left it in the pocket of my robe, the pocket that had a small button my mother had sewn for valuables. I felt around the pocket to make sure the item was still there, and quickly left the room, hurrying back up the stairs.

The sun had just begun to set as I made my way up the seemingly never-ending path to the peak. The air was cool, and a light mist filled the scene, hiding what was ahead, beckoning me to come forward. I clutched the pocket of my robe tightly; so tightly that I thought the item may break. I stopped for a moment to catch my breath, and looked around the destination I had reached. The tall trees stood majestically against the darkening sky, the clouds floated gently, delicate ferns coexisted with large, hard rocks. My eyes were reluctant to let go, but I had a task at hand. My ferns would have to wait. I walked through the trees and slowly found the opening to the small cave. I looked up at the tall pines one last time before carefully stepping into the darkness. I felt my way along the walls until I reached the end of the cave, where I quickly removed the item from my pocket. I was running out of time and had to be quick. I dragged my fingers along the uneven wall, as I had done many times before, counting the tiny depressions until I reached nine, where my finger sought a small hole. Suddenly I saw a flicker of light from the corner of my eye. I wasn’t alone. Quickly and hastily I pushed the item into the hole, and covered it with some dirt I found on the floor. Whatever happened now, the item was safe, I told myself.

Elixir.

2020 CE

200 words

What can you do when the only place you feel safe is darkness? Where reality pauses just for a moment, and reduces to nothing. Where you can hide from the future, dwelling in nonentity. Some consider that darkness turns reality into a game, where everything becomes

unexpected, like a piece of radioactive substance, and every step you take could be your last. But I'd like to differ. Darkness to me is like light to someone who is lost. I find a sense of hope in emptiness. For those few moments, when all I see is nothing, everything seems to fall in place, until the lights are turned on again...

The pines were a sight to behold. They didn't grow on earth like other members of their species, but instead defied regular traditions and grew on steep ravines, cliffs and peaks. They searched for light amidst the mountains' shifting shadows, twisting together. One could learn more lessons from these extraordinary entities than any book. But we are too blinded by our distorted sense of superiority to ever take a moment to forget ourselves and become one with our surroundings.

760 AD

I had to know if the rumours were true. The journey would be arduous and intense. Still, the reward would make it worth it.. I had discovered the note a few months ago, while on an excursion with my father—an important man in our village—to see the legendary Huangshan. The story was old, and people knew it from generations—it was placed in a crevice under a large magical rock at the peak. The rock was apparently inscribed with the word 'peace'. I didn't believe it at first, but as I walked the area, I became more and more aware of the rock as if it were seeking me rather than me trying to find a fabled rock in the wilderness. Until I actually found it. The note described an item that had been hidden in a cave somewhere on the peak of a mountain. No one had ever discovered the elusive item, and if I found it, who knows what I could do with it?

I left my house just before the sun rose, so that I would reach just before the sun set. As I reached the top, I couldn't help but notice the beauty of my surroundings. I looked down a small stream and noticed my shaking reflection. I quickly turned and started my search for the cave. The note had given me a vague description, and I didn't think I would find it. But somehow, I was drawn to one particular cave that my instincts forced me to enter. Once I reached the end, I remembered what the note said and felt for 9 depressions, and finally found the hole that I was looking for. My hand quivered as I reached inside to retrieve the item that I had left the comfort and safety of my home to find. And there it was. The tube was small and smooth, rounded at the bottom. I carefully pulled it out, unable to contain my excitement, only to realise... it was a fake. My excitement started to turn into anger, and I wanted to scream, run, do anything. But before I could, I saw a flicker of light from the corner of my eye. I wasn't alone. I pulled out the note from my pocket and quickly shoved it into the hole. I would have to write my own one for someone else to find.

Of.

2020 CE

500 words.

Imagination. A world that we create for ourselves in our minds, where anything and everything is possible. A parallel universe, where we can steer the course of our own destiny. The only danger is the one that we create. The only rules are the ones we create. No need to wait for buildings to be built, trees to grow, everything appears in the split of a second. A place where we can escape from reality, and enter a world where everything is perfect.

The most mystical part of the mountains were the clouds. The floating clouds that fell below the peaks when it rained, making them look like islands in the ocean. The feeling of bliss and serenity as one stood above the clouds—the clouds that quenched the world of its thirst—was the driving force to reach the top. And once you were there, even the sky wasn't the limit...

1430 CE

My village was situated within the mighty mountains. People came from far and wide to witness the pointed peaks, tall pines and stunning scenery. I had met many people here, from young children who came to run around, to the old and dying who came here to take their last breath in the serenity of this magical place. Most people just came and went, but one day I saw something strange.

That day I was walking around my village, as I usually did in the afternoons. In the morning a group of about five people had gone up to the peak, and now I could see them coming down. All but one person. I wondered where that man was, but didn't think much about it until I went up later in the evening to visit my cave. My cave. A small cave I had found a few years ago, where I often went to have time to myself, and where I kept my valuables that I was too scared of losing. The walk up to the cave was not a long one, but the steep path often found me gasping as I breathed in the cool air. Once I reached, I walked the familiar path to the cave, through the tall trees, past the narrow stream of crystal clear water, along the delicate ferns to the opening, when I saw a shadow.

My heart started to beat rapidly and my head was throbbing; this was the first time anyone had ever entered my cave. My cave. I cautiously walked along the side of the cave until I reached a second opening, the shortcut into the back of the cave. I quickly slipped in and remained in the darkness, trying to hide myself behind a curtain of ferns and get a glimpse of the intruder at the same time. I saw the feet first, large with hard, worn sandals that had thick leather straps. As I slowly looked up, I realised that this was the man who had gone up with the group earlier in the morning, but hadn't come down. I wanted to run out and tell him to leave, but a sense of fear clouded my ambition. The man looked tall and strong, he could easily take me down. I stayed in the comfort of my fern shielded corner as

the man slowly approached the back of the cave. I held my breath and prayed that I would not give myself away. I wondered what he was going to do, when I saw him running his fingers along the wall. How peculiar, I thought. Then suddenly, I heard a loud bang coming from the front of the cave. I almost flinched, but I kept still as the intruder was still here. He must have gotten scared, as he suddenly ran out of the cave. Once I was convinced that I was alone, I slowly emerged from my corner and went to the wall where he had run his fingers. I could not decipher what he was trying to do, and wondered why he had come here. I sat there and pondered over this until no more light entered the cave and it was time to return.

As I left the cave, I found a small piece of paper on the floor near the opening. As I bent down to pick it up, I noticed the frayed edges and the creases from many folds. The man must have dropped it here as he ran out. I picked it up and carefully unfolded it. A short poem was written on it.

Immortality.

2020 CE

1000 words.

Destiny. We cannot steer the course of what happens next. Fate is inevitable. But is our future really written in stone? Has everything about our lives been decided before we were born? Does anything we do today make any difference to what occurs tomorrow?

One would not believe in magic until they saw the magic of the mountains. One minute it was a peaceful sanctuary, then before you could take a breath the sky was a raging monster spewing shades of red, orange and yellow. But before you could make sense of this sudden explosion, it is replaced with showers, cooling the rage that the mountain had felt not long before. The mist slowly closed in on your senses, and peace was restored. This, was true magic.

1927 CE

It had been almost 500 years since it was discovered. Inside the small cave up on the peak of the mountain. The magical mountain. Where it had been hidden for hundreds of years. But not anymore. It had a new home now. A village near the cave. A village which no longer had any inhabitants, but the relics of the life before still remained. As I trekked up the mountain and the first glimpses of the village caught my eye, I wondered what life would

have been like all those years ago. The slanting roof tops, the children playing, the cold air, it all came to life as I took in the scene. I entered the grounds and looked around. I wasn't sure exactly how I would find what I was looking for, but I would find a way.

The legend said that the last person to have found it had left two words as a clue to its new location. Many people had pursued and persisted, but had failed. What made me think I would find it? An uninitiated young person who was yet to experience the world? But I was not unpracticed by my history. For generations my family had sought this treasure. Every ancestor got closer to finding it, but some obstacle always prevented the final possession. My father too had embarked on the same journey as me, exactly 10 years ago. Now it was my turn.

Only two words. Black fern. At first I thought this was describing a species of fern which was naturally black in colour. But after a few hours of searching, I found none. I had heard and remembered that the person who left the clue had a thing for riddles, ...and couldn't help but wonder...

I found the grave not long after I realised what the words meant. I now understood why no one had been able to find this before; they had not solved the riddle, the two word riddle. It was quite simple when I thought about it, but it was very well crafted, so well crafted that not everyone would be able to find the answer. The area around the grave was not well kept, with weeds growing in every direction and moss covering the dirty stone. But it was here—the treasure—I just had to be patient. I lifted the grave-stone knowing that it wasn't a real one. Everything had been placed so smartly, as if it were a puzzle, waiting to be solved. Underneath the 'grave' was a small box. My heart leaped as I slowly opened the box. At that second, I felt something creeping up behind me. Legend stated that spirits lurked between the trees and came out as the sun began to set. Whether this was a spirit or not, I would never know. Before I ran, I quickly picked up the box and replaced it with the piece of paper I had been holding with me the entire journey. The game was not over.

And.

2020 CE

2000 words

I now had all the pieces. Just a few more paragraphs.

I laid out the four pieces of paper in a neat row. A note, a poem, a riddle and an image. My own paper had finished printing and I took a long look at what I had created. A story. I had sewn together these accounts from various times in history into one entity that

transcended time. As I kept the pieces together, I hoped that someone would read my story and solve the mystery of the magical item. The 2000 year old unsolved mystery. I hoped that they would look at the pieces and find something I couldn't. After all, I was only playing my part as the messenger carrying forward something I myself could not understand. And that was the beauty of stories. That someone else may understand something I wrote better than I could. I hoped one day someone would go back up to the mountain and find the treasure.

Magic.

Find my clue, link the words.

The Clouds of Huangshan

German Swiss International School, Huang, Yuhan – 14

The snow shone a powdery white. Bare, arching branches of plum blossom trees were embroidered into the bleak sky, illuminated by the slumbering sun that sojourned somewhere behind the mountains tethered in the distance. With each running step, the crunch of brittle ice under Fan's slippers was pitched off short in the vast dawn, as if there were no room amidst so many glittering sights for sound to intrude.

This is folly. Folly, folly, The girl thought, the words an anthem to her marching heart. The guards will hunt me down with the ferocity of a pack of wolves, their sharp spears glinting in their eyes, and what on earth will I do then—mustn't ever return, barely managed to sneak out as is! The Siheyuan's high walls and tiny windows do well at barricading outsiders from entering, but not so much for its inhabitants from exiting, —who would have anticipated that one of their own would leave—so easy to slip out—

A shout in the distance, taken up by another in rapid succession. Fan didn't need to look back to know that they had found her.

Perhaps if it were not for her rushing thoughts, or the clamouring of guards in the distance, Fan would have noticed the empty space breaking off from the steady incline of earth beneath her doggedly climbing feet, and doubled back, relieved to have lived to see another day. Alas, the deities had other plans for this highborn girl turned renegade.

As Fan toppled into the ravine, head over heels, and felt herself dropping headfirst into the unknown—she saw for one suspended moment the grotesquely shaped black peaks that jutted out like the topknots of immortals. The scarce breath that had been trapped in her lungs evaporated the instant Fan plunged through the clouds that blanketed the fringes of the peaks.

Fan never knew she would die so soon after this tantalising brush with freedom. She had still wanted to know what it felt like to see for herself the slums where a runaway girl could be a nobody, be irrevocably free. After a lifetime of being boarded up in her family's mansion, hidden away from the elements, was it too much for her to ask?

But Fan was not one to go screaming and kicking. If she should die, she might as well do so with honour and without fear. And in that suspended moment, with the mist tenderly combing through the gaps of her fingers, gently covering her eyes, as if shielding her from her new horrifying reality, Fan closed her eyes and went slack, allowing the winds to wash over her, her curtain of hair to whip at her cheeks.

"At least in death, I'll be free like never before," she told herself, voice quivering. Perhaps it was the wind manipulating her breath, determined to detract from the gravity of her last moments of defiance.

Somehow, her frozen limbs became even colder. It could have been the condensation from the mist seeping into her skin, or something else. Then for no discernable reason, Fan felt resplendent. It felt as though her body, up to that instant, was simply lazy, and all her earthly scrapes and aches were simply imagined. It happened in one glorious second: her lungs swelled with sweet air, cooling her pounding head, and she could feel the weight in her stomach buoyed up, up into the air.

Fan's eyes snapped open. She had broken through the cloud cover, and was hurtling towards a jagged tumbling outcropping of rocks.

Time passed oddly. Between one moment and the next, she had been safely deposited on a smooth surface with her limbs sprawled out underneath her. She only registered the other person's presence when a shadow crossed her face.

Fingers encircled her wrist and pulled her to a sitting position so quickly Fan experienced whiplash.

“Well, hello human,” the person said.

Fan was suddenly hyper aware of her precarious position perched on the mountainside. Behind her, the sun's rays were draped over her back, for the first time in her life, although she would not know it at the time. Just below her was a yawning chasm. Fan could still feel its pull.

The woman was sitting in a graceful lotus position, meditating, that is, before Fan had crash-landed into her meditation space.

“The Gods have not sent someone to accompany me in a long time,” the woman continued, eyes sparkling. “You are quite young, aren't you, girl, to already have thoughts of... departure?”

Fan gulped. There was something curiously refined about the woman looming over her, that made Fan instantly gravitate towards her. Her smooth, dryad-like features and her brisk, efficient movements contrasted with her abnormally piercing gaze. Before she knew it, the words were tumbling out of her mouth in a jargoned mess.

“Yes—well, no. You see, I have been locked away in a house for all my life, and I do not wish to ever return to my village. I barely escaped. If the guards found me, my head would be on the chopping block for desertion. Wait... do you mean departure as in... no, I don't have a death wish- at least, I don't think so? Although I must confess that it felt so *right* when I fell off a cliff—”

The woman chuckled. Fan tittered along deliriously—the residual ecstasy from her fall still swirling in her brain.

“My dear, you never fell. You *ascended*.”

Fan's bowels turned into water. Now she knew why she had felt so weightless and happy. She wasn't a human anymore. It was no secret that the sacred mountains were the bridge between the heavens and the mortal world, because of the peaks' proximity to the sky and its heavy population of spirits. Fan somehow had gotten herself caught in the middle of this mess.

The woman—no, spirit—went on, indifferent to Fan's horror, “In your last moments of life, you no longer felt the need to stay in your mortal world—in fact, your wish for inner freedom was greater than your wish for life. As a result, your heart became lighter. While most other mortals would have plunged to their deaths, you crossed the barrier into the spirit world. You now exist in limbo as neither spirit nor human. You are neither in the material world, nor in the spirits' realm.”

Fan nodded. She picked her next words carefully. “O spirit, would you be so kind as to show me back to the realm where I hail from?”

The spirit's kindly face turned sorrowful. “I am confused. Why would you wish to go back to the people below, who are so distanced from the heavens and spirits? They are sedentary and corrupt to their core. They are forever doomed to repeat the same mistakes of their ancestors, restricting the freedom of their own kind in their spite,” the spirit looked at Fan meaningfully at her last statement. “You might as well stay in the mountains, where you can experience what the Gods experience when you look down from the peaks. Where no one will be able to find you and entrap you in their backward ways. Where you are so close to the skies that if you just reach up, you will be able to access the knowledge of the heavens.”

Fan looked at the view beneath her and saw with her own eyes what the spirit meant. The splendor of the mountains was on full display. The sea of clouds was floating around as listlessly as ever, fanning in and out the peaks, teasing out strange shapes in the rock. The craggy cliffs were warming up, emanating a golden glow. The pines, a mosaic of jade and orange, peppered the crevices in soaring layers, rising and falling with the inhales and exhales of the wind. It was beautiful, serene, and isolated. It was everything Fan had always wanted.

Or was it? Could she really spend eternity here?

The spirit had started grinding away at an ink stone. The ink, enhanced by the sooty particles from the stone, welled up like blood. Fan cleared her throat. The woman looked up expectantly.

“Thank you for your offer. I have thought about the merits of staying in Huangshan, living as a hermit. All the same, my heart lies at the base of the mountains, not in them. I know of a place where freedom rings from the smallest molehill to the greatest forests, where I may live out the rest of my days happily. I am not the person who wishes to live forever. The beauty of life lies in its grand finity.”

The woman’s left eye twitched imperceptibly. Then she sighed. “I feared that it would be like this. Alas,”

Fan perked up, eager to ask her for the directions out of the mountains. Before she could say anything, the woman trained her piercing eyes onto Fan’s, brimming with emotion.

“I must confess that my lifestyle as a wandering nomad can become lonely at times.” The spirit whisked up a brush and dipped it lightly in the ink, drawing it out reverently, the brush tip hovering above the paper.

“But would you be so kind as to keep a lonely soul company? I would like to give you a painting as a parting gift, at least. I have wandered this Earth for ten thousand years, and have seen half as many mortals. But I paint every day.”

Fan looked upon this woman and nodded, heart brimming with sympathy for this restless spirit.

The woman grinned—a razor sharp thing. Then she painted a black streak on the paper. Fan watched in awe as the mountains materialised on the bone white paper. The woman splayed out the bristles of the brush and scraped it, creating splashes of rough cliff here and there in one, singular swipe, before finishing off with a meaningful flourish, a dip and a turn. The peaks were as sharp as knives, and despite the spirit’s simplistic brush strokes, the amount of detailed crevices were uncanny. The black of the land, and the pure white of the skies, contrasted with each other yet intertwined at the same time. The clouds were painted in the traditional swirling, rectangular pattern. She teased out strange details in the frolicking clouds, paying each one unwavering attention.

The spirit stroked her chin, gazing down at her drawing in faux consideration.

“What should I add to complete this? Oh—a cloud. I can never get enough of them!”

She looked at Fan strangely, as if analysing her features, then turned back to her canvas and drew a small lone cloud in the corner of the drawing. Fan gazed at it. It was... strangely lifelike.

After a while, Fan tore her gaze away from the painting to see that the spirit, with a graceful leg swung over a lap, had brewed a cup of ginseng tea. She proffered it to Fan.

Fan glanced down at the steaming china cup, its curling tracks of sweet aroma tickling the tip of her nose. It felt like she was holding in her clasped hands a warm, beating heart.

“Ginseng from Huangshan is a delicate contraption that was planted by the spirit of the mountains himself, to replenish the hungering souls of weary gods and godlings, even mortals. It took thousands of years for me to master the blend, to balance the sweet and sour, to maintain

the right temperature so the ginseng is scorched just right. It was bitter going, but it makes the final product all the more sweeter, does it not?”

Fan did not drink.

“You have to understand, Fan. If you drink this, you will know the taste of true freedom. Freedom from your prison of your wretched humanity, the freedom to wander these mountains. It will make you into a being of mythical proportions—you will be forever the bridge between the Earth and the sky, the all-knowing. Just like me. You always had a thirst for knowledge, didn’t you?”

The woman was right. In the shelter of night’s darkness, Fan would creep into the mansion’s library and spend countless hours poring over columns of characters, memorizing each stroke until they were burned into her mind. She took pride in how worldly she was as a result, having discovered the nature of agricultural exports from Mukeng, how to navigate on a seafaring voyage, and the like. She watched the regal way that the spirit dipped her brush into the pot of water and flung a careless hand into the air, like life was an elaborate, unrestrained dance, so different from the demure way that the women in the mansion shuffled their bound feet back and forth and tucked their lily white hands into their sleeves.

Fan knocked back the tea.

The liquid *burned* her throat on the way in. Fan vaguely thought that she should have cooled the tea to a more reasonable temperature, but the thought was overshadowed by the sudden weightlessness she felt.

A wind picked up from the gorge below, whistling through the boughs of pines and openings in the peaks.

Trembling with trepidation, Fan set down the cup, and her heart sank into her stomach. Her fingertips were turning transparent. No... vaporizing. The wind whistled in her ears, and the distant yowling of the monkeys stopped. When she looked up, the spirit’s eyes smouldered with what Fan now knew was cruel treachery.

“What did you do to me,” Fan rasped. The clouds were closing in on all sides—she now could see that the strange shapes she had seen in the painting were not the trick of the mind, rather they were a sunken eyehole, a wailing mouth, dishevelled hair... faces of lost souls. Of the humans that had dared to play with a spirit. Fan blinked, and by then the spirits had drawn so close that she could make out what they looked like. If she reached out she would have grazed the cheek of a young plum faced boy, and felt the musty breath of an old woman.

The spirit laughed trilly. “You mortals disgust me. You dare enter a sacred place of spirits and taint it with your earthly sins?” The transparency was spreading past her wrists now. Gods, it was working fast. “To cleanse the heavens of the grime of mortals—that is my mission. That is why I resigned myself to these mountains so long ago. You would be an excellent addition to my collection. I have not seen someone with such hunger for life.”

Tears began to well up in her eyes. The vapour from her dissolved arms were spiralling around her, clinging to her with the same wetness she had felt when she had plunged through the clouds, what seemed a lifetime ago. Fan knew with a terrifying conviction that she was turning into a cloud, forever doomed to stalk the ends of the earth, and circulate around the peaks in an infinite dance.

Suddenly, she looked at the tea, half drunk. If the tea had made her start to disappear... An idea formed in her mind—crazy, yet still worth a try.

She kicked at the cup, causing it to tip over and spill the tea onto the painting, which lay, forgotten on the ground. One look at the spirit’s horror-stricken face, and she knew she had done the right thing.

The ink started bleeding together in the water, the beetle-black fading into a serene grey. The inky faces started emerging from the clouds—spirits, how had Fan not noticed them earlier—and the ink was trailing up the paper into the wash of pale grey that represented the heavens. Before her eyes, the ink rearranged themselves into the forms of human bodies. The little cloud was the last to be liberated—it clung to the paper, but morphed into a girl with a wide, expressive face. Instead of rising to the heavens, it remained where it was, on a cliff overlooking the mountains.

Whatever curse the spirit had placed on the paper had been broken up by the ginseng's healing qualities. The spirit screeched. All around them, the clouds were opening up, and fat raindrops, some as wide as Fan's arm, fell from the heavens. Some landed on Fan's skin, sizzling. Her colour returned.

"I rejected your offer, and I reject it once again. I now know that freedom cannot be achieved by merely drinking a cup of tea. It needs to be earned in good faith, with hard work. The final product becomes so much sweeter, *does it not?*"

The spirit growled.

"I hope you grow to realise that your mission of entrapping humans and neutralising them in an attempt to cleanse the world of our supposed filth, is not freedom. It is a product of you being enslaved by your desperate attempt to make innocent people share in your suffering."

And with that, Fan, girl no more, human once again, started her trek down the cliff, off to make a better world.

The Embrace of the Sky

Good Hope School, Ng, Pollia – 15

Run. *Run.* The words pounded in my head, echoing with the rhythmic crunch of the gravel beneath my feet.

The tattered flag of red left dangling on an abandoned watchtower. The haze of smoke enshrouding the blur of figures darting. The defiant sky aflame with fumes and smog. All pointing to the signs of a failed rebellion.

The ominous thundering of many, but one grew louder and louder, as the looming words of *treason* threatened to envelop my whole existence.

My eyes searched frantically an escape. Until they landed on a fallen servant of the palace. Splayed on the ground, its blood stained the white marble of the sidewalk red. I stripped the body of its tethered rags and slipped in it, deserting the elaborate silk chest raqun hanfu. The rough linen scratched against my skin, but stirrings of a familiar nostalgia rouse.

Then I ran. And ran. Blending in with the rest of the servants fleeing the fallen palace. I drank in the sight of the open, thin plywood doors, the taste of freedom fresh on my tongue.

But a hard body rammed against me, my vision turned to the dark, hard earth as the sight of the open space disappeared. The metallic taste of blood invaded the depths of my mouth, completely drenching the promise of freedom away.

As the throbbing of my vision amplified, the world swirled with my arms swiveled around in a tight grip. I caught a glimpse of the soldier manhandling me, his eyes turned towards the ground as I threw an accusing glare to his direction.

“I see that you are once again a servant, princess.” The taunting voice of my cousin hissed, searching for a reaction, a flinch, a grimace, a wince. His lanky figure came into sight. The rich, thick Yellow Gold silk hung on his shoulders, making him to appear to be a child dressing up in his Grandmother’s garments. “Never could shake off who you really are, could you?”

I fixated my eyes on the red sun and kept mum, letting my red-hot rage simmer under the surface.

“You were always too weak to be like Empress Grandmother.” He let out a hollow laugh and turned to the army standing behind, masking what I knew to be a front for his insecurity and fear.

I cowered like a punished puppy, as my body heaved with painful sobs. Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the soldier’s face softening. “Please...” I let my voice croak with desperation. “I’m just a girl.” I gently tilted my head towards him. The beads of tears balanced on my lashes, until they fell from my soft, pleading eyes and slid gracefully down my powdered cheeks. I felt the grip on my arms loosen.

“Treason!” My cousin declared. “For acting against Emperor LiZhou. Immediate execution!” My face fell. A stream of tears flowed freely to the earth, no longer an act. There is no out.

Looking up at the red sun, I silently begged Empress Grandmother for forgiveness on my humiliation. But a glint of gold caught my eye, flashing against the haze of the smoke and the backdrop of the scarlet sky. The glare grew bigger and bigger, until the faint outline of a giant bird emerged as a flaming fireball. Golden light enveloped the whole of the land. The glare

so bright, that the army scattered in in fear of it burning them. Upon the heavy beating of wings, the majestic form of the ZhuQue took shape.

Its fiery eyes beckoned me, drawing me so close that I seemed to be looking into its eyes; looking outside of its eyes. The wind swooping down my feathered back, combing down the stray hairs that arose in the course of my travels. The power that my beating wings delivered to the currents of the wind, sending particles coming my way in reverse. The cry released from my screeching throat, thundering for miles and miles. It sent a surge of cool breeze through my body, flooding my nerves with the burn of chill, until my fingertips become alive with the promise of magic and excitement.

The panicking yowls of my cousin woke me up from my trance-like state. I teared my eyes away from the magnetic pull of the ZhuQue. Sensing the weak grip and momentary lapse of shock of the soldier behind me, I forced a strength foreign to me and broke free of my arms. No one attempted to recapture me as I stumbled like mad towards the bird.

But in the blur of the next second, I felt my body fly on to a plane of soft feathers as the whizz of an arrow flew just inches away from my ear.

It knocked the breath out of me. My body rolled on to a warm, vast back and I held on for my dear life. Coming to a realization that I escaped, I put the uneasiness of mounting on a flying beast behind my mind and leaned to the direction of the ever shrinking faces beneath.

“I will take my place. Long Live Empress AnLe!” I cried with rigor. The scornful face of my cousin paled into a cold sweat and slowly faded into a small dot. A warm feeling enveloped my heart with the thought of becoming Empress Grandmother. I could finally prove my heritage as a strong princess.

The tear-streaked face, the dirty linen, and the thought of grandmother was forgotten as the ZhuQue soared in a smooth, sweeping flight across the sky. The fresh, brisk wind greeted me, tickling my face. And a foreign, shrill laugh burst out of my chest. I froze. The abrupt noise hung like a suspended note on the serene air. A far cry from the usual timid, sweet giggles that covered the silence like pasty sugar. A feminine weapon to coax people. I spread my arms open, welcoming the embrace of the limitless sky. Leaving behind the burdens of what the fiery, red sky signified.

The vast, beating wings of the ZhuQue sliced through the crisp sliver-lining of the clouds. It had a mind of their own, swerving and weaving its way through the blue dome. The flexing of the muscles beneath me served to remind me of the hidden strength the taut flesh subdued. Against the stretching swirling blue canvas, the swift dashes of the ZhuQue flicked popping, bright red splashes across, marking it as the reigning beast of the skies.

The vitality of the ZhuQue only did to solidify my young fantasies of magical creatures, pulling the flimsy threads of unreality together.

“—and it rose from the flames of the South and vanquished its foes with a fiery breath.” Aiyi’s hands curled to imitate talons and she pounced with a huff, fire dancing in her eyes. I relished the magic of the myth, transfixed on the surreal powers beyond this village.

“What else? What else?” I asked eagerly. “No more for today, child. It’s time for you to get back to dig out the crops.” I grumbled, not happy at the prospect of getting my hands in the dirt.

As I hiked back to the hut, I thirsted for the sweet, sweet escape of the magical realm.

The wind breathed a whisper—*whoosh* into my ear. And the most magnificent scene I would ever have the pleasure of setting my eyes upon came together right before my very eyes.

The jagged tips of rocks jutted out like spears, curving up towards the wispy mist, swirling softly, grazing the edge of the sky. The rich green enveloped the descent like a blanket, rustling with a restless abandon. The air vibrated with the screeches and howls of all

things wild, thrumming with danger. My eyes widened in alarm as a brown, flimsy thing slammed right on my face. I choked up some loose fur. But I let my eyes linger in wonder as the monkey cackled away *flying*.

Yet, despite the primitive quality, a stillness enfolded the hearth of the mountain. Much like an inanimate landscape splashed on by the strokes of a dashing brush. It was hard, yet soft; gentle, yet unyielding; tranquil, yet *wild*.

But the glare of the sun glowered down, my face hardened with the reminder of my ultimate mission. What would Empress *Grandmother* say? *An embarrassment, I thought.* Forgetting my responsibilities and enjoying myself.

Grandmother would always say, "Remember. I was the one who saved you out of the hellhole you were in." during my droughts of daydreaming in etiquette lessons. Saying the word "myth" was unspeakably forbidden.

Indeed she did. The moment she announced her decision to revoke my father of his title as Prince, I became a Princess, leaving behind my life as an irrelevant servant. I remember the whiff of the rich aromas in feasts, the heavenly feel of the silks, the vast space of the room I could call my own.

It was an honour, I always told myself. It is an honour.

The ZhuQue began its descent downwards. A gust of wind blew against my face. Landing on the plane of the mountain, the ground shook. My vision tilted back to normal.

With difficulty, I climbed down the back of the ZhuQue. Averting my eyes, I came up to the bird and bowed my head with respect. "Connections are everything. There will come a time when you need to use it, so keep your private distracting little thoughts away. " The cold voice of my grandmother trailed after my ear. I contemplated the possibility of acquiring powerful allies, ones with such power and vigour as... the ZhuQue.

If such a creature as the ZhuQue exists, then others with must exist as well. With the revelation fresh on my mind, suddenly, my ears unfurled to the beck and bellows emerging from within the forest. The mist twisting and mangling in the air tingled with unfulfilled promise, veiling the strength of lurking beasts.

My eyes met with the ZhuQue's. I scanned its form hungrily, gobbling up the razor-sharp beak and spiked talons.

"Where am I?" I asked the bird, attempting to elicit a spoken response.

"Buzhou Shan," an alluring, deep voice replied. The air surrounding trembled with anticipation, waiting for the speaker to claim her words.

A beautiful figure emerged from the dark woods, clad in flowing silk, rippling and fluttering like a river of wind. She was glowing with youthful exuberance, flowing with a grace only a goddess could have. Her eyes peered out through an inky sheen, two shining spheres, capable of seeing beyond the barriers of the physical earth. Under her upper body, a thick, smooth, scaly tail slithered about. *Half-human, half-dragon.*

"Nuwa." I gasped in wonder. *The original creator of human kind.*

"Child." Her voice came out as a low, thrilling whisper, reverberating around the forest walls. "You have been through too much for a person to bear, let alone a child."

"*I am not a child! I am as capable as any adult like my grandmother or my cousin.*" The exhaustion of the day caught up with me. My seething anger lashed out like a whip, but alas, the murmurs of my grandmother sealed my lips.

"For that, I would bestow upon you an honour. One that not one mortal should have ever received in the existence of the world."

An honour? Would it be a legendary artifact? A mystical creature? Magical powers? I smiled,

excited at the prospect of fulfilling Empress Grandmother's legacy.

Her slender hands curved to form a circling gesture. And the darkness of the forest vanished. In its place, is the vast open sky, no barriers withholding the might of the wild. On the North, South, East and West, sang the autumn wind, sending the wispy mist on a dancing fanfair. I stood over the edge of the precipice, yet no fear washed over me.

The rocky cliff stretched out into a sea of pink blossoms, bursting with the bloom of spring. Tiny houses dotted the slope of the valley, basking in the glow of the afternoon sun. The villagers milled about, their faces animated with the words exchanged. No crowds. No screaming. No disdain. Just... quiet harmony. As though the valley was suspended in time, away from the petty squabbles of the world beyond the mountains.

"The Peach Blossom Spring." Nuwa spoke of my thoughts. "A paradise for anyone who seeks refuge from the ravages of destruction." The thoughts of stepping foot into the ethereal realm invaded my mind, weaving its way in and out. Waking up to the fresh scent of blossoms. Bathing in the warmth of the sun. Laughing along with the people. I could do with that.

But a glare of the sun temporarily blinded me, obstructing my view of the Peach Blossom Spring. Guilt flamed from the fuel of my fantasies. *What am I doing? Betraying Grandmother's love. No. What I want is to become Empress.*

"Why are you showing me this?" I asked Nuwa accusingly.

"I thought you would like to settle down here. Wasn't it your dream back then?" She questioned curiously.

"I..." My head started spinning. *Grandmother. Magic. Grandmother. Magic. Grandmother. Magic.* "No! My dream is to become the Empress of China, just like my Grandmother." The doubt casted on my decision to pursue the throne vanished. I ignored the nagging feeling gnawing at my heart.

"There is no time for silly dreaming. Can you provide the means for me to conduct a second rebellion?" I asked, Nuwa looked unbothered. "Your Grace." I added.

"Is it your will to reign the earth, or your Grandmother's?"

I sputtered. "Why? Am I not capable to do so? Just because I was not born a princess, I am destined to suffer the mundane life of an ordinary peasant? No. I have royal blood coursing through my veins and I will claim the throne as my Grandmother did."

"But do you want to take over the Kingdom? Tell me: does your heart desire it?" A trace of a whisper called out from my heart. But I was in too deep to acknowledge it.

"After all Grandmother has done for me, I cannot fail her. I *will not* fail her." I intentionally cracked my voice. Fresh tears sprung from my eyes, framing the mask I put on of an emotionally broken girl.

"I see that your determination on the path to become Empress cannot be deterred. I can only leave you to find your own path. One piece of advice: remember the legends of Nuwa, the Queen of Wa; the creator of mankind; the repairer of the Heavens." Nuwa took off into the sky and faded into a golden speckle.

The repairer of Heavens. NuWa. BuZhou Shan. Her words ran through my head wildly. For a second, I abandoned the notion of conquering the throne and dug deep into my memories for an answer. *Come on. Come on.* An idea rushed to my head like a speeding carriage.

In olden times, the world fell into chaos. But taking pity on the suffering of humankind, Nuwa killed a giant turtle and used its legs as giant pillars to hold up the fallen sky. Legend dictates: Buzhou Shan to be a pillar can reach up into the Heavens.

The distance between the edge of Buzhou Shan and the tip of the mortal world remains ever so daunting, but the thought of Empress Grandmother propelled me to make

a declaration loud and clear to the Heavens, in hopes that my interpretation of Nuwa's hint would prove to be correct.

“Tian Di. I, Princess AnLe seeks entrance to the heavenly gates of Tian. Please grant the destined Empress the honour of the Heavens, in hopes of claiming the throne with aid by her side.”

For several seconds, silence hung on the whipping air, unmoving. A strange sense of relief began to overtake my senses. But suddenly, golden steps materialised in front of me, shaping into a twisting, curving staircase leading up to a point in the sky. I stepped on the first step, expecting some sort of applause or cheering to occur. *Would Grandmother look down from above and see what I've accomplished?* But the only answer I got is cold silence.

I ran. *The faster I reach the Heavens, the better.* Running up a few thousand steps, my lungs began to burn with an intense need to breath. Air. I need fresh air. But the fire ignited failed to erase the unrelenting question burning in my mind. *Tell me: does your heart desire it?*

Only a few hundred steps left until the Heavens, it should have been a godsend for me. But the thought of the complicated, drawn-out affairs I would have to deal with had me break down into painful sobs. I collapsed on the steps, heaving sobs racking through my throat. *I'm sorry Grandmother.*

A gentle breeze with all the aromas of spring blossoms caressed my tear-streaked face, dousing the fire burning through my lungs. And brought forth an answer to Nuwa's question.

No. My heart desires to live in this realm, where I can be whatever I want to be. Not a servant. Not a Princess. Not the Empress. Just... AnLe.

Wakened with a renewed vigour, I shouted with pure joy, “ZhuQue!” The dash of red streaking through the horizon made my heart tumble and jump. I mounted the ZhuQue's back, delving into its warmth. *Home. It feels like home.*

“Take me to the Peach Blossom Spring.” And I welcomed the embrace of the limitless sky.

Immortal Satisfaction

Heep Yunn School, Chu, Sui Lam – 16

Nightfall, the perfect disguise for the undesired wanderers. Tiptoeing past the threatening eyes of patrols, camouflaging his presence against the intertwined rows of crooked pine trees and vandalised rock columns, Zhang Hui leaves the slight trace of his wanderlust on a frosted blanket suffocating the rocks. An aspiring pharmacist, with ambitions greater than peaks of the Yellow Mountain, first set foot on these ridges two years ago, photographing various plant species and recording the encroaching vegetation throughout the cycle of seasons. This visit, however, is a far cry from the logical and hunter-gatherer-like aspects of his work, or the findings of his predecessors documented in the treasure troves of ‘Proceedings of the Chinese Geological Society’ and ‘Geographical Journal’. His eyes stray away from the thousands of shrubbery begging for a place in his ever-growing logbook, but towards the waterfalls gushing downwards with crystal clear liquid mirroring the celestial ivory orb. The volatile rhythm of the splashes and splashes from above breaks the silence of twilight, serving as Zhang Hui’s audio guide for the much acclaimed springs.

One of which would, hopefully, contain the Elixir of Immortality.

As he saunters the illuminated trail reflecting the lustre of the moon, the familiar silhouettes of spiked leaves lingers on his journey. Intermingled Masson pine form menacing beasts of tigers and dragons, with gnarled roots invading the snowy path like the claws of a phoenix, cautioning the trespassing traveller of his unwanted presence in his uncanny mission. The peering eyes of grotesque rock statues loom over every footstep Zhang Hui leaves and scrutinises every piece of geological history that may or may not have been tampered. A palm-shaped rock appears in the distance, having the air of being all too similar to the red-and-white plastic ‘STOP’ sign imprinted in his memory from the many years of dealing with traffic as a regular citizen. Is the brain convincing him to abandon his goal built upon tales of eternal living? Yet, he fears none of such illusive omens. For him, it is merely flipping through the photo collections in his logbook, occasionally dotted with unauthorised plucked ferns and tea leaves hastily stuck on, not to mention the myriad of sticky notes adhered to pages of parchment bleeding with rollerball ink.

However extensive and lengthy his geological research is, Zhang Hui has reminded himself to save several pages at the very end of the logbook for a desire of his—keeping an account of the discovery, properties and effects of consumption of the Elixir of Immortality. Centuries of rumors passed down from one generation to another, of naive wanderers, hoping to taste the specialty of the water in the Yellow Mountain, ended up with a blessing of never being near Death’s door at the price of vanishing from the conventional human civilisation like decomposing corpses. ‘A small sacrifice to be made for unlimited opportunities for happiness and success,’ he has always thought to himself, eternal life would provide him with ample time to reach prosperity in his career and personal affairs. This yearning of triumph has instilled, within his mindset, a seemingly unrealistic mission to unravel the location of this enticing potion. Carrying along with him numerous empty vials to be filled with every type of springwater flowing from the heath of the mountain, he paves his way through the pine forests dangling from baseless ravines of bizarre rock columns for his venture.

Out of the corner of his eye, he catches a glimpse of a speck of white light appearing on the black backdrop of an extra-terrestrial stage, stealing the spotlight from the evening sun. He stops to admire the performance. In the blink of an eye, the speck of light fills up the canvas with its blinding light, revealing it to be a shooting star. Before the blazing white comet trails away, he makes a wish, despite his mindset of reason telling him otherwise.

‘I wish I could gain the Elixir of Immortality.’

As soon as he lets loose of the earnest clasping of his hands, a low murmur of unintelligible Chinese disrupts the falling commotion of waterfalls. Realising he’s not the only sign of life concealed amongst the peaks, he surveilles the ominous environment for protection in case of security patrols. He spots a cave with ingrown rock clinging pines; a suitable place to cover up his presence. Without second thoughts, he dashes towards his newfound hiding spot.

Little does he know, as his footsteps quicken, the ghastly voice grows louder and more distinct in context of rambling.

‘O dear shadow and O fine pine, dance with me under radiant monelight!’

It’s spoken in an unusual dialect, ‘definitely not the Mandarin we know of today, nor the voice of a security guard’, Zhang Hui mumbles. It’s almost like Cantonese, but somehow contains a harmonic and fluent assonance lacking in said modern-day language, quite like poetry. It has an alluring quality, like the songs of the sirens, to attract the curiosity of passersby, but also undertones of desperation, like an elaborate invitation beseeching them to join the lonely ball its owner has created for oneself. A pitiful plight the holder of such a singsong voice has, only able to find solace in the haunting beauty of the Yellow Mountain.

Eventually, he finds himself drawn to the mysterious voice and its poor owner as much as he is to the elixir. Accepting the invitation with hopes to confront the stranger possessing the melodic voice, he treads upon the frosty blanket cautiously, following the echo of a summoning to nature, like an audio guide, to its source—the very cave that caught his eye. He enters as the feathery snowflakes begin showering the mountain.

‘I drinken to thy warm mylky glow, O sweet monel!’

The rebounding sound of the stranger’s poetic, and rather unique declaration of admiration hushes the burbling ripples in the hot springs and the cascading of waterfalls. Here it is, the centrestage of a peculiar performance starring an actor speaking in bizarre gibberish, while hiding behind the curtains of luscious evergreen pine leaves. Determined to unveil the silhouette of the ‘Stranger With a Weird Dialect’, Zhang Hui threads his way through the cluster of greenery, as if he is peeling off the skin of an orange little by little to reach the saccharinity of its core. The more the rustling of the spiral needles of pine leaves against stone cold cave walls overlaps the soliloquy of the hidden individual, the more his anticipation grows to identifying the owner of the mystical voice. Dodging under the trunk of the last ingrown pine tree, his eyes finally meet the ones of the other sign of life thousands of metres above sea level.

Except, those eyes are looking at him lifelessly. In fact, the ‘Stranger With a Weird Dialect’ is nothing but a pale spectre of a disheveled man cloaked in a monochromatic turban, fashioning a messy bun and a tangled beard. His entire body is translucent with a tint of whiteness, with much resemblance to a spirit. In his right hand, he carries a jug of supposedly wine, judging from the ghost’s comparatively higher concentration of tint on his cheeks, apparently drunk.

‘Blink twice,’ Zhang Hui utters shortly before taking action, ‘no I’m not seeing things, he’s still here.’ No prior memories of dissecting rats in biology class could prepare him for the

fright of his life. Before his eyes is the embodiment of the origins of horror stories. His mind and body are at war; the brain is sending signals of multiple escape plans through the nervous system of the body, but human anatomy has malfunctioned from numbness of fear, leaving Zhang Hui quaking under his knees, his face frozen in shock. Entranced by the spell of fear, he is only woken up by the same accented voice he has heard previously.

‘Who art thou?’

There is no running away now that the spirit of a drunkard has taken notice of his presence, he must answer. But nowhere in his mind could he comprehend the Cantonese-like dialect.

‘I don’t speak Cantonese, sir.’

To his surprise, the drunk ghost, suddenly alerted, switches his dialect to the familiar Mandarin language.

‘So you are one of those, what I call, modern mortals. There’s no need to call me sir, but do say your name.’

Zhang Hui hesitates before answering, a ghost.

‘I’m Zhang Hui, I’ve come to find the Elixir of Immortality.’

The spirit chuckles incredulously, accidentally spilling some of his liquor before questioning the dumbfounded traveller.

‘Are you a Taoist practicing alchemy, Mr Zhang, or are you a businessman trying to sell poison to the public?’

‘No sir, my intentions are purely academic.’

Zhang Hui proceeds to present his logbook to the poet. Spectating the faded hand breeze through the crisp pages of his perseverance, he reflects on his intent of foraging the elixir. It has been a lifelong dream of his to document his findings and publish them as stepping stones for his worldwide recognition as a pharmacist, but then wouldn’t he become the ‘businessman’ selling poison to the public? That is, if the elixir could even be considered a threat to mankind. How could a remedy for human dissatisfaction, an antidote to the cruel passage of time be a tool of harm? He would gladly take a sip of the potent draught and spend his eternal youth gathering as much success as he could, indulging in opulence in infinitude. He would be reigning over his destiny, grasping the Sceptre of Control in one hand and the Sovereign’s Orb of Affluence in the other. His thoughts on immortality cease abruptly upon noticing the poet has finished reading.

‘Nice journal you have created, though I don’t approve of stealing pieces of vegetation and taping it to your notebook; nature should not be disturbed by human activity. Seeing your dedication and my need for company, I’ve decided to join your little conquest.’ Catching sight of Zhang Hui’s raised eyebrows, he reassures him, ‘I know these ridges well, you’ll find me useful, except perhaps my tendency to rejoice nature and drink excessively. But I swear on the beauty of the Yellow Mountain I shall lead to the Elixir of Immortality.’

A ghost for a guide, but not just any ghost, the spirit of Li Bai, the Immortal Poet who visited the Yellow Mountain for its picturesque beauty in his time of living. Despite him possibly being knowledgeable of every peak in the Yellow Mountain, the unsettling thoughts of acquainting with a supernatural being baffles Zhang Hui. Who would he credit in his findings in publications, the absolutely existent ghost of the great poet Li Bai? Before Zhang Hui could raise further objection, the curtains of pine leaves sway in synchronised motions from the gloating of the spectre, ushering him to go along with the poet’s spontaneity.

Stepping on the powdery white trail, he observes that the recent snowdrift has enveloped the once forest green pine needles with a sheet of white gold, with remnants of needle tips basking under the dim moonbeam like glimmering emeralds. The flexible

branches of these pinaceae have withheld the blustery blow like bars of bronze; no traces of trauma could be engraved in the bark by the blades of wind. The full moon, however, like a glistening pearl, conceals itself in the nacre of the mollusk of pale snow clouds for protection from the mortals' eye.

'The immortals have stolen my precious white jade plate!' Li Bai laments to the heavens above, proceeding with a gulp of alcohol to calm his nerves.

Ignoring the blabbering of his intoxicated companion about how 'mountains are the conduits of gods', he sees a calligraphy brush-like rock monument takes shape on the landing of a cliff, with orchids flourishing from the blank sheet of snow-like paper at the tip of the 'brush', as if the writing utensil has sprouted blossoms and petals from the mighty power of a pen. A rather relieving omen for an individual who wishes to publish a book on his findings in the Yellow Mountain – the factual and the fantasy.

About an hour on the tiresome journey, Li Bai motions to stop a series of ancient houses. 'But there's no time for accommodation issues,' Zhang Hui protests initially, but on second glance he realises the 'houses' are actually Taoist temples. Symmetrical halls of tarnished red walls, wooden pillars and herbal gardens decorates the frosted terrain, housing a populace of religious devotees. The pungent scent of burning joss sticks escapes the walls of the temple and greets their arrival, to which Li Bai takes great delight in sniffing with a guilty grin. A faint steady ringing of bells echoes from the chambers within. The solemn chimes in adagio are interrupted with sighs of nostalgia from the poet.

'I was once a Taoist, and for years I had written poems for guidance to the secrets of the elixir. I was still living and breathing the air of immaturity back then, believing immortality was the route for achieving ecstasy.'

'But wouldn't having an eternal heartbeat fuelling your journey of fame and fortune be satisfying?' Zhang Hui points out in defense of his own beliefs. The pale cheeks of Li Bai rapidly lose more colour, turning almost transparent, as a realisation dawns upon him.

'Dear gods not another mortal misinterpreting the meaning of immortality in Chinese culture! I thought you were a scholar Mr Zhang?'

'Not exactly.'

Under the spectre's gaze of ridicule, Zhang Hui makes his confession.

'I am simply an aspiring pharmacist hoping to publish my logbook.'

'So you are a businessman trying to sell poison to the public, what a shame. Dishonour!'

'No, I am not an entrepreneur! Plus, what's so dreadful about immortality when you could receive infinite chances for success? I could make an astronomical amount of fortune by collecting medicinal herbs here alone till the end of time!'

'For the last time, immortality does not equate to becoming imperishable in Taoism! It's a method of achieving ecstasy through alchemy. Some enlightened ancestors decided that ingesting cinnabar, a mineral that synthesises mercury, would grant the consumer ascension to heaven and immortal life. Generations of Taoists have fallen for the myth and unwittingly cut their lives short by drinking good-for-nothing poison,' the angered spirit inhales the scent of joss sticks before continuing his venting, 'I don't need more ghosts joining me, so you can forget about putting that Elixir of Immortality in your book, or rip out a single weed from this mountain!'

Li Bai, opaque in the face, swiftly floats away from the stunned human before suddenly snapping his head back in disgust.

'Curse me for swearing on the beauty of this mountain to bring you to that spring! A promise is a promise for an honourable man, now move!'

Ushered by the unsettling breeze the speeding spirit creates, Zhang Hui quickens his pace with great difficulty from numbed feet, proceeding to jog along the path of bleakness to a toxic spring. Without the casual humour of Li Bai, the overbearing tension stabs his face with the chilling blows of his companion's cold shoulder, that he would have thrown himself off the Bridge of Immortals if it were not the determination to complete his goal.

The gradual surge of rippling gurgles from the reddish brown liquid and the pungent scent of sulphur signals the arrival of their destination, the Cinnabar hot spring. The deep crimson stains the white slush of melting snow, incriminating the scene of murder. Who knows how many cases of manslaughter have befallen on travellers like Zhang Hui himself? The vicious bubbling of the spring cackles at him for his late discovery, mocking him for his idealised beliefs. Cautiously avoiding being seen by Li Bai, he fills a vial with the hazardous elixir ironically representing vitality and immortality. In an attempt to break the silence, he raises a suggestion.

‘What if I debunk the myths of immortality in my logbook?’

‘Suit yourself, nature should not be disturbed.’ the spirit turns around, appearing much paler than before, to face Zhang Hui. ‘It’s almost the dawning of a new day, I must retreat to my cave. You may want to stay for the sea of clouds though, I remain in awe for my daily viewing.’ As soundless as the morning breeze, Li Bai floats away before farewells could be said.

The first ray of light graces the horizon moments later, revealing the extent of the hazy veil masking the civilisations below. The indigo sky is splashed with streaks of salmon pink and champagne gold, as the sunbeams refract the colours onto the brume, transforming the undyed silk chiffon into Joseph’s Coat of Many Colours. The rising orb of fire steadily ignites the ether with tangerine flames, blazing the stratus clouds with hues of apricot orange. Time softens its pace as Zhang Hui gazes at the art of nature while pondering about the concepts of immortality. With no Elixir of Immortality to take control of his fate and fortune, or create an undying legacy, the disillusionment invades the precarious goals he has withheld in mind, attempting to shatter remnants of plausible ideals like stained glass in church windows. He recalls parts of a poem on his journey from Li Bai.

‘What is there to prize in life’s vaporous glory?’

Standing in the fragments of his broken dream, among the chaos he reaches an epiphany. Centuries old pine have stood their ground from sturdy roots, lifelong dreams of his have stemmed from memories of a tale. Under the sea of clouds are millions of chances to forge new memories and aspirations, all he has to do is—what was it that Li Bai had quoted on the journey?

Oh yes, ‘carpe diem, seize the day’.