

*A Fictional Residency*: six short stories written by seven authors in four days at Spring Workshop in Hong Kong.

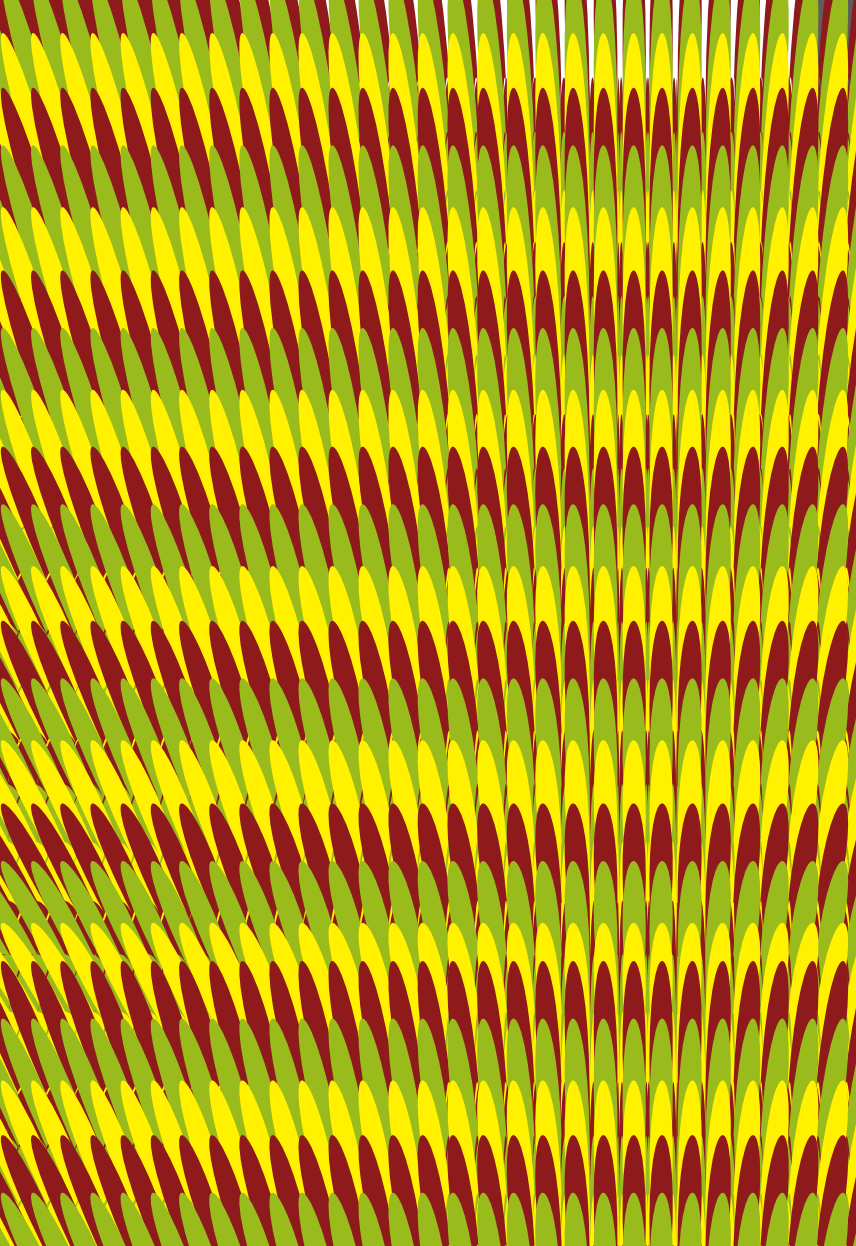
*A Fictional Residency* is part of the ongoing *Moderation(s)* program initiated by Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Spring Workshop.



A FICTIONAL RESIDENCY

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Nadim Abbas  
Oscar van den Boogaard  
Enoch Cheng  
Heman Chong  
Doretta Lau  
MAP Office



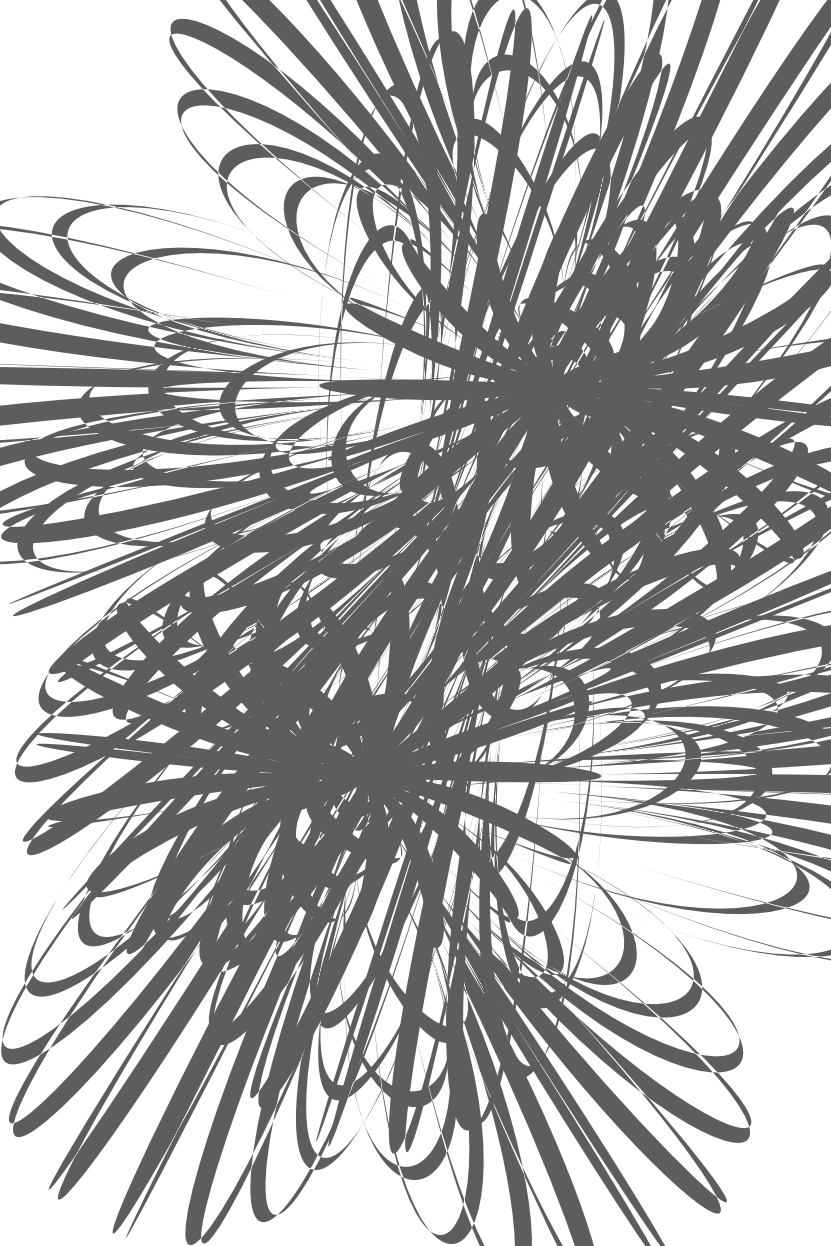
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## **Pao Yue Kong Swimming Pool**

Oscar van den Boogaard

1

This morning in the pool I was thinking that this world is as perfect as the blue sky and the temperature of the water. I thought I was God.

2

In the eighties when I was a law student in Amsterdam I felt very electric. I had the sensation that I would explode in a thousand pieces whenever somebody touched me. People who didn't know me thought I was constantly angry, but friends who knew me better realized that I was just super scared. I was scared that other people would stick their fingers right through my bones and would take out my heart.

I went to an astrologist who lived on a houseboat in the center of the city. In order to protect myself she



advised me to imagine a crystal egg around me, so I could look in all directions and see everything clearly but I would always feel protected at the same time. After the session with the astrologist when I walked over the gangway between the boat and the quay I almost lost balance because the egg was so enormous. It was very hard to walk up the steep stairs to my studio in the attic.

For a few months I lived in my crystal egg and I felt very protected. I could look into other people's eyes without the feeling that they could seize me. I wasn't afraid anymore that I would explode in a thousand pieces. But after a while I started to feel lonely and isolated. I could look other people in the eyes and they could see me, but through the thick crystal layer, I couldn't touch them and they couldn't touch me.

I decided to break my egg, but no matter how hard I tried, I didn't manage to break it. I smashed my body against the wall and I took a hammer and beat on the crystal and I even let myself fall from the stairs, but the egg was unbreakable. I started to

feel imprisoned.

I went back to the astrologist but she couldn't break open the egg either. She advised me to simply think the egg away, but it stayed there no matter how hard I tried. I discovered that it's impossible to think things away, because as long as you think about something it stays there. You cannot simply forget something!

So I have lived in my crystal egg ever since. I have had relationships with other people who were locked up in crystal eggs; I even married one. We can look each other in the eyes without being afraid of losing ourselves. We lie carefully beside each other in bed, and the crystal never breaks. Locked up in ourselves. Locked out from each other. I think this is the human condition.

3

I knew the sound of the words before I knew their meaning. They lingered in my ears until the day they burst open with content. I knew anecdotes before I

understood what they really meant. My mother liked to tell me bedtime stories. She invented them while sitting on my bed. One of the stories was about the antique Chinese vases on our 17th-century dresser. One day the lid started to tinkle. A little Chinese man came creeping out. Three hundred years ago he had secretly climbed into the vase on a quay in a Chinese harbour and accidentally gotten trapped. The merchant had glued the lid on the vase to be sure that it wouldn't fall off during the long and risky boat trip to Europe. And so the little Chinese man locked up in the vase sailed on a big ship over the oceans to Europe and one day, after lots of detours, the vase was put on the brand new dresser of my great-great-great-great-great grandmother. For hundreds of years the Chinese man was locked up in his vase. No matter how hard he screamed, nobody could hear him. He listened to all the family conversations, generation after generation, and perhaps at some point he started to understand the meaning of the words. One day— I must have been eight- or nine-years-old – the lid came loose and the Chinese man climbed out of his porcelain prison, and from that day on he was a part

of our family. I thought as a kid that the Chinese were people who couldn't die.

4

Years ago I travelled with a friend through the Badlands, located a couple of hundred kilometres to the south of Los Angeles. At first I had thought it a bad idea to go to a place with such an ominous name, but then I thought it was the best thing I could possibly do. I had to tempt fate.

I picked out a point on the map with my eyes closed. My pen hovered over Inspiration Point. That seemed a magical destination to me. We got into a rental car and headed out. Spring in the desert is a joy. There are flowering cacti, Joshua Trees and flowers everywhere. The sky was bigger and bluer than I had ever seen before. It was as if my skull opened up and I could send my thoughts to every corner of the universe.

We arrived at Inspiration Point. That's what it said

on the sign, I stepped out onto the sand. The sun was already quite low. The mountains in the distance were turning lilac. My friend wanted to take a photograph, so she walked to the boot of the car and took out her camera. I closed the boot again and then realized she had left the keys inside. Imagine: you are in the middle of the desert. The sun has almost gone down. You are at Inspiration Point. You can't get into your car. You think: I am never going to get out of here. The car reflected the sun that was going down.

Such a situation is no longer of this time. Where can you still get lost these days? In this world, it is impossible to get completely lost anymore. Here you can, in the middle of the desert. That is what we thought, in any case. I was gazing at all that sand and at the road where no car was approaching. The mountains in the distance were already turning a deep purple. And then, unbelievably, something approached in the distance. Something extra-terrestrial on wheels. Its metal shell reflected the sun's rays. It looked like a giant egg. I was not afraid as it

approached. On the vehicle lay a striking figure in a golden suit. On his head a silver helmet reflected the desert. A sort of disco ball. The figure stopped and took off his helmet. I looked into the clearest eyes I have ever seen. It was neither a scary monster nor a super creep. I have imagined it was a god, or the love of my life, or a dream, and I have also imagined that he was all three: a crazy trinity. I don't know why I am recalling all this. I don't know why I always end up thinking about God. I cannot think him away!

5

My grandmother told me the story of her adventurous mother who went on a trip to China in 1900 with her little Pekingese dog named Napoleon. Napoleon went everywhere she would go and one night he was sitting on her lap in a restaurant. Because she didn't know how to ask *Do you have something for my dog to eat?* she pointed at her dog and then put her finger in her mouth. The Chinese waiter brought Napoleon to the kitchen and my grandmother thought that the dog was getting fed in the kitchen. She

waited half an hour and began to miss Napoleon. Then a big silver platter was served. When the waiter lifted the lid she saw her Napoleon marinated and cooked. I thought that the Chinese were cruel people. Their cruelty would live on forever and in the near future no dog would be left on the planet.

6

I was raised in Surinam, the former Dutch colony in northern South-America. The flag was a circle with five stars. The red star symbolized the Indians. The black star the Africans. The yellow star the Chinese. The brown star the Hindustani. And the white star? 'What does the white star mean?' asked Moursini, my black nanny. I thought for a long time. She asked me again, 'The white star, Oscar. What does the white stand for?' I whispered: 'The white star are the people!' I remember her eyebrows rising and her big dark eyes growing. I was afraid her eyeballs would explode. I remember the trouble I had as a child when making colour drawings of people. I used yellow, pink and

brown, I mixed the colours, but I never managed to get the colour of people right. I was able to give everything else the right colour – clothes, houses, trees, the sky – but not people, not people's skin. In the end I gave up colouring people's skin and left it the same colour as the paper.

Today I am in the country of the yellow star. The air is as humid as it was in my youth. The first thing I want to find is a swimming pool. I walk a circle around the block. And afterwards a bigger one. I pass The Little Sisters of the Poor. I feel myself the Little Brother of the Rich. I see children in swimming trunks with their mother crossing the street. I know the water can't be far.

7

Suddenly I hear a song in my head. It's a song that I haven't remembered for more than twenty-five years. It was stuck somewhere in my head without ever being recalled. Hong Kong Star! One day I had heard the song for the last time without realizing

that it would vanish from my memory. All those things one does for the last time, without realizing, all those people and things you see for the last time, all those songs you hear on the radio for the last time. Some people and things and songs suddenly resurface in your life, but most people and songs never return—they disappear without you knowing that they have. You can't know, you have forgotten about them.

Hong Kong Star. A song by the French singer France Gall. I loved the song. I sang along with it without ever knowing what I sung. Hong Kong Star/ T'es pas né là où tu voulais/ T'as pas la peau qu'il te faudrait/ Celle du vrai pays du dollar/ Hong-Kong Star/ Tu n'remercies pas le hasard/ Dans ton Las Vegas de bazaar/ Tu fais tes rêves en blanc et noir/ Hong-Kong Star/ T'as un chinois dans ton miroir.

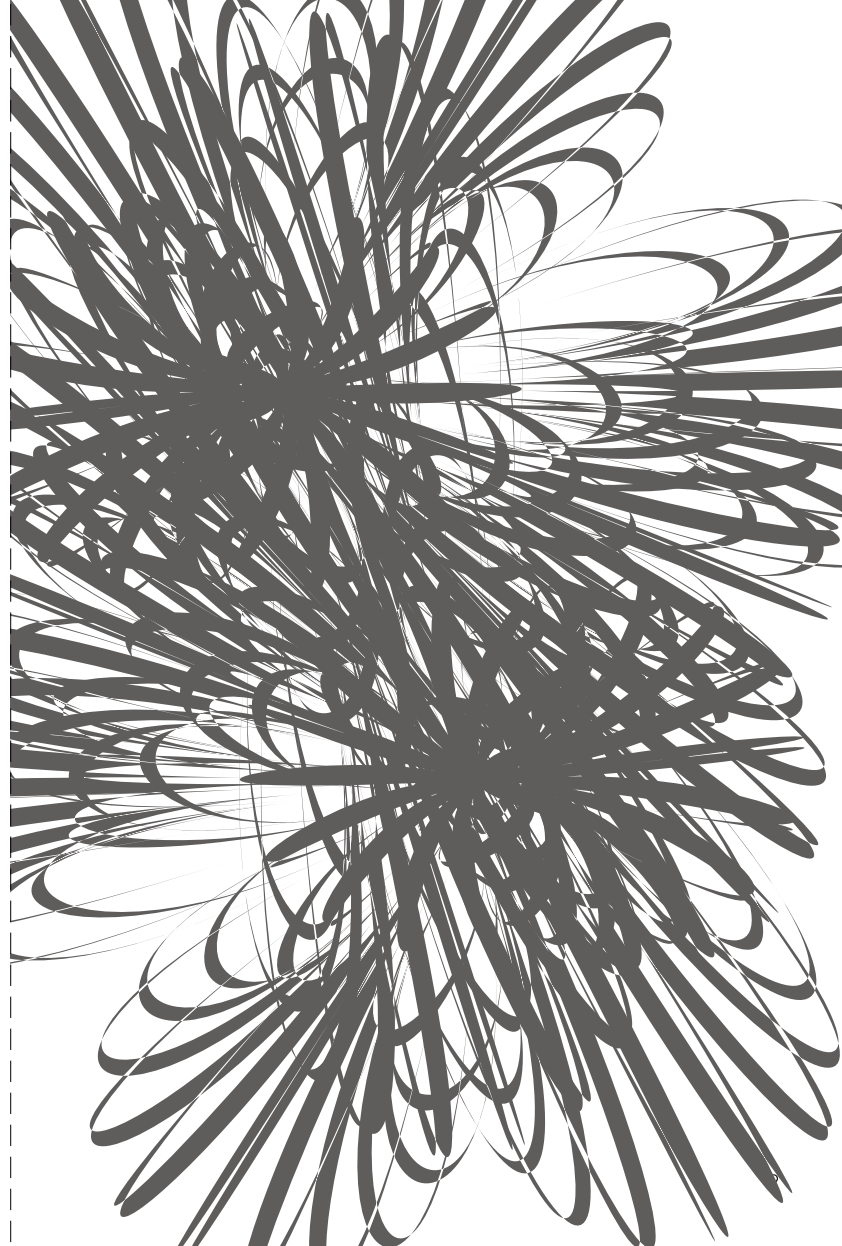
I don't know what to think about the lyrics. It's about a Chinese actor who would never play a part in big Hollywood films. He wants to have another skin. But there would always be a Chinese man in his mirror. Can you sing such songs today? With the Chinese

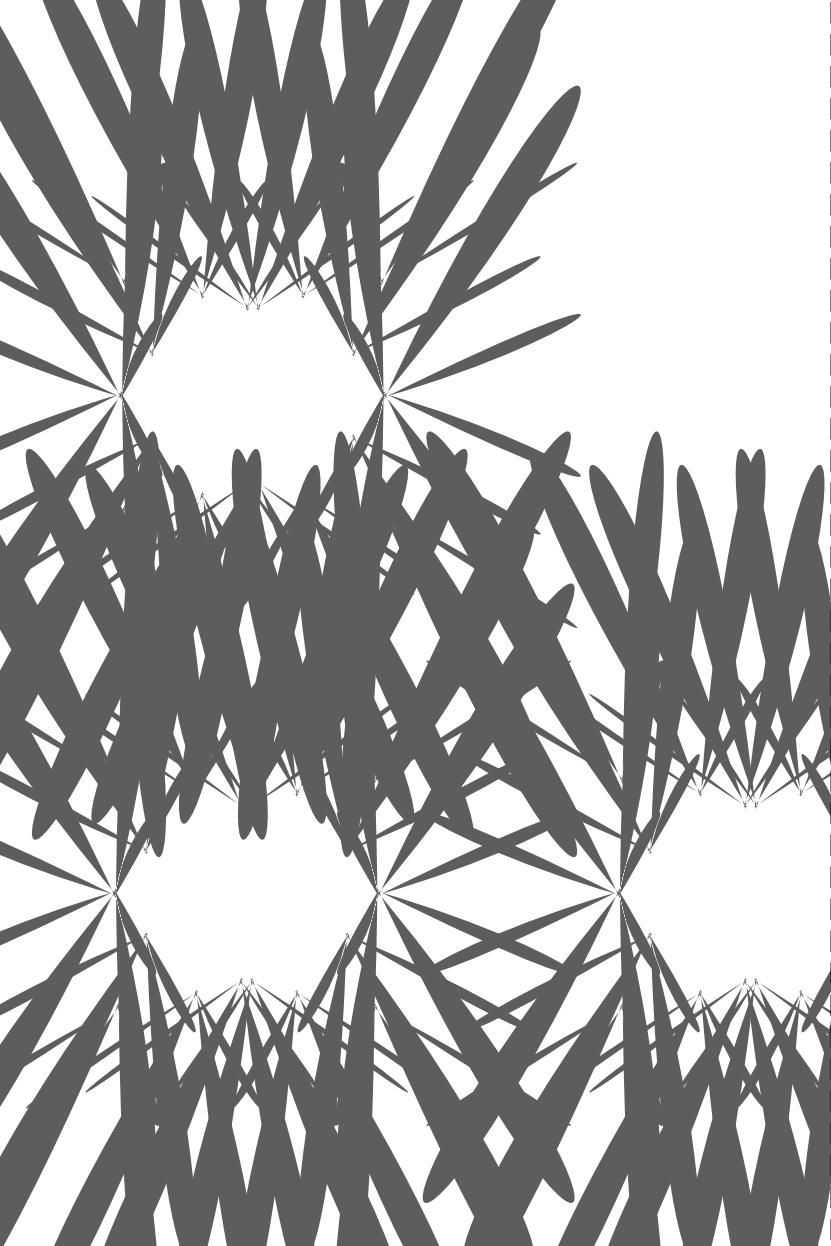
film industry booming? Has the yellow star ever wanted to be a white one?

8

Perhaps it's a golden rule in my life that things thought or felt always turn into their opposites. In the swimming pool I got the strangest sensation that I have ever had. I had already swum eight or nine laps when I heard a giant explosion in the middle of the pool, the sound of breaking glass; no, it was more refined, like the crystal of an enormous chandelier breaking. Water splashed in all directions, and my body was sucked toward the bottom of the pool and then pushed upward again. As I was propelled above the water surface, I saw peaks of water shooting randomly out of the middle of the pool. I saw swimmers trying to climb out of the water and I used all my force to get out of the pool myself. We were all watching how the water surface slowly became calm again. While we were staring at the middle of the pool, we saw nothing but water. No gigantic rock, no Loch Ness Monster. It reminded me of a scene from the Truman Show. The world is perfect until a

flood-light falls out of the sky just in front of the feet of the main character. A kid brought up in a perfect world. He doesn't know that he lives on a film set and that every one around him, even his family and friends are just acting. One day he wants to break free and sails away over the ocean. Even the storm he encounters is staged. When his boat touches the horizon, it rips open, revealing the real world lurking behind. This is what I was thinking as I continued swimming, as if nothing had happened.





## Boquerones en Vinagre

Nadim Abbas

The cat went here and there  
And the moon spun round like a top,  
And the nearest kin of the moon,  
The creeping cat, looked up.

From “The Cat and the Moon”,  
W. B. Yeats (1919)

Said Lee was making finishing touches to the dining area of his living quarters, when he was startled to discover the presence of a mangy grey cat, curled up behind the newly pressed folds of white tablecloth.

“Skat!” said Said, “How did you get in there? Now I’ll need to wash and press the linen all over again.”

With deliberately brisk and sweeping motions, Said proceeded to remove the flower vase and



placemats, flinging the table cloth to the corner of the room in a fit of desperation. The cat paid no attention to this frenzied outburst; it was as if Said was performing solely for his own benefit.

“Explain yourself!” wailed Said, who was on the verge of tipping the table over on one side.

The cat lifted its head to face the corner of the room where the table cloth quietly waited to be washed. Only then did Said notice that this cat was partially, if not totally blind. One of its eyes was permanently welded shut by the advancing spread of mange. The other (left) eye was glazed over, the milky white colour of a waxen moon.

“Glaucoma or cataract?” Said thought to himself, as he instinctively reached for his dog-eared volumes of Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopaedia.

GLAUCOMA, disease caused by an increase in pressure within the eye as a result of blockage of the flow of aqueous humour, a watery fluid produced by the ciliary body (the ciliary body is a ring of tissue directly behind the outer rim of the iris; besides being the

source of aqueous humour, it contains the muscle that flattens the curvature of the lens for far vision).

CATARACT, opacity of the crystalline lens of the eye. Cataracts occur in 50 percent of people between the ages of 65 and 74 and in 70 percent of people over the age of 75. Typical age-related cataracts can cause cloudy vision, glare, colour vision problems, changes in eyeglass prescription, and, rarely, double vision (only in the affected eye). Usually, these types of cataracts are bilateral, although one eye may be more affected than the other.

As Said pondered over the necessity of placing an order for a veterinary-specific encyclopaedia, the cat started to speak:

“My name is Valentin Vadimovich Korolev. I have travelled across two star systems to bring news from your home planet.”

Said replied, half to himself, “From your name and what is left of your coat, I can guess your

pedigree. You are a Russian Blue, sometimes called Archangel Blue, a naturally occurring breed that may have originated in the port of Arkhangelsk, Russia.”

Valentin Vadimovich’s only response was to repeatedly alternate between running his remaining furry paw (the rest were exposed stumps of dead skin) over the mangy eye and licking off the clear sticky discharge like it was some form of special nourishment.

Taking this as a cue to go further, Said added: “So what’s with the accent? I can’t tell if its American, Australian, English... Kiwi?”

Valentin Vadimovich’s reply was bored and rehearsed, as if he had been asked this same question a thousand times.

“I was reborn the third child of a litter of nine in the janitor’s office of Pechersk International School in Kiev, Ukraine, 600 miles north of Mount Koshka, or 60 miles south of Pripyat, as the crow flies.”

Said did not understand how this explained the ambiguous accent, but he did remember reading an encyclopaedia entry about Pripyat, the ninth nuclear city in the former Soviet Union, which was evacuated

soon after the Chernobyl disaster.

“So you’re not only filthy, you’re radioactive as well? That does it! Get out of my flat!”

Said stumbled into the kitchen hoping to find a suitably sized paper box to contain the feline intruder.

As he dug feverishly through the recycled paper bin, Said began to feel a certain tightness in his chest, a sure sign of the onset of an asthma attack. Said reminded himself to stay calm, and that although asthma was invariably the result of a combination of genetic and environmental factors, the severity of each attack could be controlled by maintaining a peaceful state of mind. In the corner of his eye, Said spotted the 2012 edition of an IKEA furniture catalog perched neatly on the countertop. With increasing shortness of breath, he grabbed the catalog and collapsed into a turquoise-blue foldable steel chair, itself a recent acquisition from the Swedish homeware manufacturer. Flicking through the ever-familiar pages, Said started to feel better already, gently reminding himself that it was high time to replace this outdated copy with the 2013 edition. Said was still undecided whether or not to go for the hand-

knotted low-pile Persian wool rug or the more economical synthetic grey-blue high-pile rug. Such an important decision should of course be left to the last moment.

“A decent rug can really tie a room together” thought Said. “It will have to be the Persian one - who knows what kinds of allergies I will get with a furry high-pile rug.”

“Foolishness!” scolded a voice from the threshold of the kitchen entrance.

Valentin Vadimovich stood there on all fours, languidly rubbing his disease-ridden back against the doorframe in a vertical see-saw motion.

“Didn’t you know that allergic reactions to fur are not caused by the fur itself but by the glycoproteins contained in the saliva of cats?”

In anticipation of Said’s incoming thoughts, Valentin Vadimovich added wryly: “Yes, I’m not only radioactive, I can also read your mind. It’s the least you could expect from a talking cat.”

Said did his best to quell the mounting terror that was welling up inside. In a sudden burst of energy, and in one deft movement, he dropped the

IKEA catalog, plunged across the room to pick up a half-empty galvanized steel waste bucket, and threw himself - bucket, waste and all - on top of Valentin Vadimovich. With one foot on top of the upturned bucket, Said only just managed to reach toward the recycle bin for a piece of corrugated cardboard, which he carefully slid under the bucket that contained his quarry. No sound could be heard from inside.

“Has it fainted?” thought Said as he off-loaded a full roll of gaffer tape over and around the ad hoc lid, making sure that not so much as a flea would slip through the cracks. “Fucking waste of perfectly good tape...” he muttered under his breath, although he was sure glad that this roll had been left on the kitchen counter from one of his ever-pressing household errands.

The morning after, Said Lee could be found in his living room, sunk deep into a maroon red leather couch that one might find in the smoking lounge of a gentlemen’s club or a psychiatrist’s office. Nursing a large mug of Earl Grey tea, he pored over a volume

of Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopaedia, trying to make sense of the crippling exertions that he was still trying to recover from.

CAT ALLERGY in humans is an allergic reaction to one or more allergens produced by cats. The most common of these allergens are the glycoprotein Fel d 1, secreted by the cat's sebaceous glands, and Fel d 4, which is expressed in saliva. An allergic reaction is a histamine reaction that is usually characterized by coughing, wheezing, chest tightening, itching, nasal congestion, rash, watering eyes, sneezing, chapped lips, and similar symptoms.

“So that *thing* was right after all,” thought Said, as he returned to the important question of which rug to purchase, “but even if the rug doesn't contain the glycoprotein of a cat, there is always the danger of dust mites, mould spores, pollen and other airborne particulates attaching themselves to the fibres.” Said could hardly suppress a faint smile at this subtle line of reasoning. As if to make up his mind once and for

all, he swiped the IKEA 2012 catalog from his oval white oak coffee table and ripped out the page with the picture of the synthetic grey-blue high-pile rug, crumpling it up in one hand. As he took aim for the waste paper basket, Said remembered that he would need to pick up another galvanized steel bin for the kitchen.

Said had only just managed to catch the rubbish collection truck during its 10pm shift the night before. Having slipped a \$20 note to the garbage man, he felt fully entitled to watch as the bucket containing Valentin Vadimovich disappeared amidst a sea of black plastic bags into the hydraulic compacting chamber of the vehicle. His legs felt shaky from breathing in fumes of rotting waste (which always reminded him of anchovies boiled in cider vinegar), a small price to pay for the assurance that the cat was well and truly disposed of. Said spent the rest of the night fumigating and washing out his entire flat, and another hour under the steaming hot shower, scrubbing each and every orifice till his skin turned bright red. Despite being in a state of mental and

physical exhaustion, Said was only able to sleep for a few hours, punctuated by uneasy nightmares of homeless wandering. Said was not one to dream, and if he did, these dreams usually consisted simply of extensions of his daily chores. On one occasion, he had even forgotten to do the laundry because he dreamt that he had already done so. If only that were the case, so much more would get done. But this time, when he opened his eyes, he found himself lying on a scrap of corrugated cardboard, the stench of anchovies boiling in vinegar wafting up his nose. As Said peered into the distance, all that he could see were piles of black plastic bags stretching out into the horizon, as the first light of morning peeked over the edge.

Sinking deeper into his leather couch, Said held the piping hot mug of Earl Grey tea up to his nose in an attempt to dispel the memory of vinegar and anchovies that lingered in his nostrils. He had decided to forgo all of the day's activities and dedicate himself to the study of his cherished volumes of Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopaedia. Opening the pages

at random, Said was startled to discover in an entry about Spanish cuisine, the description of a popular dish:

BOQUERONES EN VINAGRE are a type of appetizer or *tapa*, *meze* frequently found in south Spain. The central ingredient of the dish are the *boquerones*, fresh anchovies. The fillets are marinated in vinegar or a mixture of vinegar and olive oil, and seasoned with garlic and parsley. It is commonly served with beer or soft drinks, and rarely with wine.

"Maybe it's not such a bad combination after all..." Said reflected, as he began to formulate his next grocery list. He was starting to feel hungry. Suddenly, a faint rustling sound emanated from the waste paper basket. Said froze on the spot, rolling only his eyes in the direction of the sound source. Lo and behold, out rose the head of Valentin Vadimovich, followed by his sleek and now furless body. As the waste basket tipped over on its side, the scrunched up section of the IKEA catalog came rolling across the

wooden floor towards Said's bare feet. Said gazed at the paper ball, thinking perhaps he would prefer a furry rug after all.

"Now if you would just let me finish what I was trying to tell you, we can save a whole lot of trouble" said Valentin Vadimovich, who did not seem to mind that just moments ago, Said had attempted to murder him in cold blood. It also appeared that the shedding of his coat had been accompanied by the shedding of his mangy skin, which now seemed soft as a baby's bottom. His right eye had reopened, but with the same milky white glaze as the left.

"What do you want from me?" whispered Said, who remained pinned to the couch like an insect specimen.

"We want you to go home" replied Valentin Vadimovich, his voice genuinely full of concern.

"But this *is*...home?" Said retorted, trembling with uncertainty.

"We are all tourists on this Blue Planet," chanted Valentin Vadimovich, "and I am your replacement."

Hearing these words, a veritable chasm of hazy remembrance opened up in Said's mind. Perhaps this

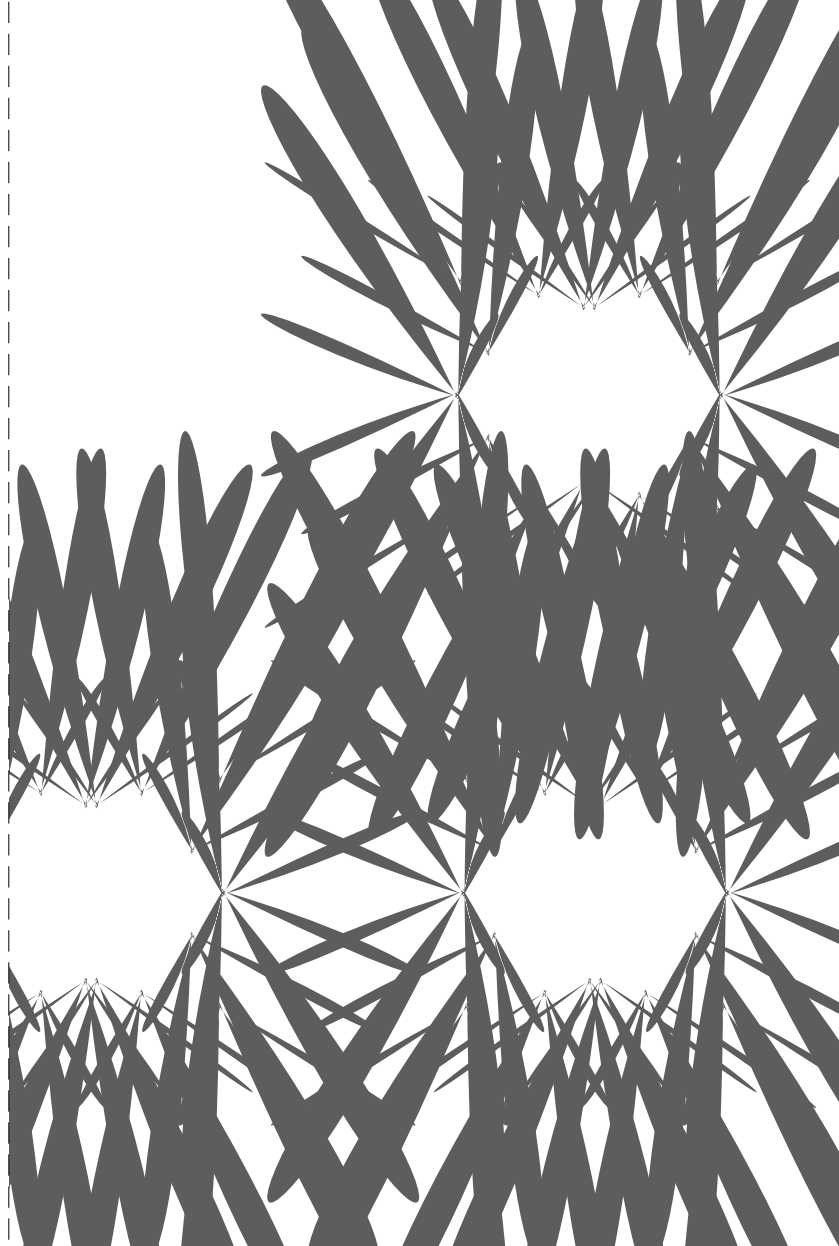
was the moment of ANAMNESIS that he had read about in Funk & Wagnalls New Encyclopaedia: "the idea that humans possess knowledge from past incarnations and that learning consists of rediscovering that knowledge within us." He tried to think about his mother, but the only image that he could conjure up was that of a fat Persian cat with the colour markings of a Siamese.

The HIMALAYAN (a.k.a. Himalayan Persian, or Colourpoint Persian as it is commonly referred to in Europe), is a breed or sub-breed of long-haired cat identical in type to the Persian, with the exception of its blue eyes and its point colouration, which were derived from crossing the Persian with the Siamese.

Said could feel a dull ticklish pain building up in his chest. Very soon he was doubled up on the floor, coughing uncontrollably. After what seemed like half an hour of continuous coughing and spluttering, he finally managed to vomit out a lumpy mass, slightly smaller than a tennis ball. As Said lay there curled

up like a foetus and gasping for dear air, Valentin Vadimovich walked up to the ejected lump, playfully dabbing it with his paw. Caked in a layer of phlegm and saliva, Said could now see that the mysterious projectile was in fact a large fur-ball.

Said looked into the cat's eyes, and saw that they were human.







## Sad Ghosts

Doretta Lau

“Unscientific,” Gene said. “Do you really believe that it’s necessary for film crews shooting in Hong Kong to make offerings to placate the gods? That a roast pig and a bottle of cheap alcohol will keep the doctor away? Don’t try to bring up *The Dark Knight* and Heath Ledger’s death and Edison Chen’s sex scandal as proof that omitting a superstitious ritual will result in tragedy. If you were building a house upon this sorry excuse for a foundation, the structure would disintegrate within a year of completion.”

“Science is just another way of telling a story,” I said. “It’s a narrative. Conflict and resolution. Man versus nature.”

A shadow ghosted itself across Gene’s face, something like doubt. His jaw was set stubborn and I knew he would attack until he felt that he was the victor in our discussion.

"I find that cities by water seem most haunted," I said, knowing this statement would provoke him.

Gene snorted.

"That's an ugly sound," I said. "Have you not experienced something inexplicable? Something beyond measurement and calibration?"

"Are you a Creationist? A Holocaust denier?" He sneered.

"This line of reasoning is unbecoming," I said in an even tone of voice, not wanting to succumb to indignation.

"I have never experienced a supernatural disturbance, and I have spent my life living in cities situated near bodies of water: LA, New York and Hong Kong," he said to me. To the bartender he said, "Another round."

"Do you remember Andy?" I asked. "We once ran into him at the movie theatre at IFC when we went to see *Black Swan*."

"Is he that lanky sneakerhead who gives the impression that he's afraid to live?"

"That's not a very generous description, but I suppose you're right. He lets fear dictate all his decisions. Once, he asked me to help him break up with a girlfriend—a very good friend of mine—because of his aversion to conflict. Anyhow, I don't think I've told you that Andy can only hear ghosts rather than see them. I guess instead of *yin yang* eyes, he has *yin yang* ears if that's even a thing. Once, he was standing in a kitchen in an apartment on the sixth floor of a *tong lau* at 65 Peel Street and a knife slid across the counter and someone was whispering in Shanghainese—the speaker's syntax and vocabulary seemed to indicate that he had died some time during the early 1940s. Andy said he knew that the ghost had a moustache—a full beard, even—and that the spirit wasn't malevolent, just lost."

"That seems anachronistic," Gene said. "None of the Shanghai emigrants to Hong Kong during that era had facial hair."

"How do you know?" I asked.

"I just know. I *read*."

"So do I."

“Did you know that most so-called hauntings are likely due to infrasound?” Gene asked.

“What’s that?”

“It’s when the frequency of sound is less than twenty Hertz per second. One study suggests that it causes some people to feel awe or fear, or to interpret an environment as being somewhat odd or inhabited by supernatural entities.”

“Interesting,” I said. “But it doesn’t account for instances of seeing spirits. Just last week Stephanie and I were at the *dai pai dong* on Elgin waiting for our food when a man sat down and said to me, ‘I haven’t been here in over 20 years.’

“‘What brought you out tonight?’ I asked because I had the feeling he needed to talk and he had no one to talk to. ‘I was visiting a friend. I used to live at number 77,’ the man said. ‘I haven’t eaten here either since I left the neighbourhood,’ I said.

“‘My apartment was haunted,’ the man said. ‘The mirror was painted over when I first moved in. I should have known that if it was painted over, something was wrong. I removed the paint. The process took three days—the paint was layered on,

red and foreboding. Then I started seeing things in the mirror. First, it was just mist. Dark patches that could be blamed on night vision or dirt. One evening, I saw a ghost with long hair, a white dress and no feet hovering in the glass as if she was standing next to me.’

“Though I was fascinated with this story, I ran out of language to interrogate the man further, plus Stephanie doesn’t understand Cantonese so it seemed kind of rude for me to continue to talk to this stranger. The food arrived and I waited for the man to leave before I translated the conversation for her. I hate the feeling of being talked about in a language I don’t speak.

“Stephanie told me that while she was watching us talk she felt as if she was experiencing a scene out of a Wong Kar-wai movie. Though the man didn’t get into it, I imagined that the apparition’s hair was thick and black, but the strands separated at the end so that if you weren’t too afraid to look closely, you could count each strand, one by one.”

“I wouldn’t be afraid to look because there would be nothing to see,” said Gene.

“So Andy was telling me a story about two of his colleagues, a married man and a single woman,” I said. “He loathed both of them but had to work closely with them on a marketing project. Something dull—I’ve forgotten the inconsequential details. He described them as two people with little imagination and a crippling inability to tell a story. I think Andy would have preferred it if they were pathological liars, because then at least their conversations would have been thrilling and unsettling.

“But one night this pair was working late or having some sort of clandestine affair under the guise of industrious productivity. Their office was located in a mostly empty industrial building on the eighteenth floor. They entered the elevator a few minutes before midnight. The car began to descend, but before they reached the ground level, the doors opened up on the fourth floor. The space had been gutted some months before but the renovations were still incomplete.”

At this point, the bartender delivered our drinks. I took a sip of mine to quell the itchiness I was feeling in my throat.

“So what was on the fourth floor?” I continued. “Nothing. There was only blackness; no one was waiting for the lift. Then a bluish light appeared in the distance and it began to grow until the couple could see that a blue-hued woman was flying towards them. Her hair and clothing flowed behind her as if the speed she was moving at was creating its own wind. They screamed like little schoolgirls and hit the close button rapidly and the doors shut just as the spirit was about to enter the compartment. I don’t think they’ve worked late since then.”

“At best, your description of what happened is something out of a third-rate Japanese horror film, and at worst it is some kind of banal moralistic tale in which two people having an affair are punished by supernatural forces.”

“Sometimes I wonder why I subject myself to your company,” I said.

“I keep you honest,” he said.

“Were you living in New York when the Met had that exhibition about photography and the occult?” I asked. “I think it was called *The Perfect*

*Medium*. Put your phone down—don't Google this. Can't we have a conversation that relies solely on our memories?"

Gene scowled at me, but he complied with my request. "Yes, I was in New York at that time and I saw that show," he said.

"What do you think about the spirit photographs from the 1860s?"

"They're proof that a grieving person will believe anything. That genre of photography peaked shortly after the American Civil War, and regained popularity after the First World War. Wives and daughters were willing to overlook the possibility of double exposure. They believed that their departed loved ones were really appearing in spirit form in photographs with them. Photographers such as William H. Mumler were just opportunists, preying upon people who lost husbands and fathers and sons."

"See, I knew that your powers of recall would be up to this challenge."

"I have science in my corner. Meanwhile, you have yet to sway me with any of your anecdotes."

"Would it help if I told you a personal story?" I asked.

"Why not? You've failed so far, so you may as well try a new tactic."

"When I was eight," I said, "my parents sent me to an art day camp that was located near a lake. By the lake was a cluster of Edwardian country homes, including one called Ceperley House, which was designed by the English architect, R.P.S. Twizell and built in 1911 on land adjacent to a strawberry farm. Henry and Grace Ceperley named their home *Fairacres*. At the time it was the biggest house in the area, and it proved expensive to run.

"Once Grace died, the mansion served as a tuberculosis ward for Vancouver General Hospital—a fact that is omitted from official literature on the history of the house—then was home to a Benedictine order of monks. Some years later, an American man named William Franklin Wolsey was on the run from charges of bigamy, assault and extortion and he ended up in Burnaby and bought the house and started a cult called The Temple of the More Abundant Life. This, too, is not part of the official narrative about

the house. When Wolsey fled the country in 1960, Simon Fraser University repurposed the building as a dormitory. At that time, students organized a series of sit-ins. Once, during a protest, someone set a bonfire upon the hardwood floor of the billiard room.

“I knew the house as the Burnaby Art Gallery. As part of the art camp, we went to see an exhibition at Ceperley House. I think it was a show of paintings—I’m not too clear about that because the work didn’t make an impression on me. We left to go back to the sculpture studio. As I was walking across a field, I turned to look back at the house. A greenish figure with long, dark hair was standing behind a window, waving at me. I looked away, and when I glanced back the apparition was still there, waving.

“That day, I didn’t tell anyone what I had seen, but some years later I returned during a class trip and asked a gallery assistant whether they had ever placed anything in the windows of the house and I was given a strange look and told, ‘No—no, we would never do anything like that.’”

“I believe that you believe that this happened,” Gene said.

“Okay, it’s your turn,” I said, unwilling to surrender without mounting one more offensive. “You must have had an experience laced with horror—everyone has at least one story.”

Gene paused. A chill came over me. I looked up and saw that I was sitting directly below an air-conditioning vent.

“Last year, one of my young cousins died very suddenly,” he said, staring into his tumbler of whiskey. “My aunt was destroyed by her death. Her doctor put her on antidepressants and she was sleeping all the time. My dad was really worried, but he was manifesting his anxieties as anger towards me so I didn’t even call him on Father’s Day. It didn’t help that two of my cousin’s high school classmates also died on the same night. Three families were grieving, and you know how I get when there’s so much emotion—I’m uncomfortable. It gets so bad I don’t even know where to put my hands when I’m trying to have a conversation. I just wanted to do something to make things right again.

“I was looking at pictures on Facebook from the last week of my cousin’s life,” Gene continued.

“She and her friends had gone to a flat on Lantau for a weekend and they had taken a lot of pictures. The strange thing was that there were all these warped photos—their faces were all distorted like they had been messing around with effects on Photobooth. So I decided to visit that rental flat to see if I could find any answers. It was a crumbling sort of place, littered with Jurassic technologies. Instead of a DVD player, there was a VCR. On the first night it rained and I was stuck indoors, bored and cursing myself for forgetting to bring a book. At the time I was in the middle of *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. If you haven’t read it, you must make it a priority.”

“I’ve read it,” I said. “It’s an incredible book.”

“So this was how I came to search through the VHS collection for something to watch,” said Gene. “There were a number of trite romantic comedies. You know how much I detest that genre—I find it so juvenile. I was drawn to an unmarked tape in a plain white box and soon I found myself watching what I can only describe as a weird short film.”

I shivered and wrapped my shawl over the top of my head.

“The opening shot is of the moon, obscured by clouds,” Gene continued. “Then a mirror shows a woman who is combing her hair. There is a jump cut and then the woman is looking behind her. Her body language communicates fear. From here, the visuals become even stranger. Chinese characters drift around the screen. Then there is a scene with people crawling along the ground. A man with a sheet over his head and face appears, his right arm stretched out as if he is giving directions. Then, there is a close up of an eye. The film ends with an image in a forest. There are dead leaves blanketing the ground, and in the centre of the shot there is a well... The screen went snowy at this point, as if the film had been interrupted. Right when I shut off the television, the phone in the flat rang. But there was no one on the line.”

“Wait, isn’t this the plot of *Ringu*?” I asked.

“Yes, it’s *fiction*, much like all of the stories you’ve told me tonight. What were you expecting?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t think you were capable of this kind of adaptation and embellishment,” I said.

“So, did you help Andy break up with your friend?”



“I can’t believe you would ask me that.”

“So, did you?”





**December 18, 1994**

Heman Chong

This is a travel story. They had been traveling for three weeks. It was the first time that they spent an uninterrupted amount of time together after a long span of being physically apart. The man, in his thirties, broken and exhausted from a failed career as an artist. The woman, in her forties, broken and exhausted from his failed career as an artist. A part of him failed to be moved by her presence, another part of him refused to let her go.

Early morning flights are exhausting, she said. I can't understand why we're always on them. I know, I'm sorry, I'll try and plan it better next time, he replied. You always say that, but you never do, she said, you always say but you never do. Yes, but, he said. Don't say but, she interrupted, I hate the word, but, it makes

everything you say sound like an excuse. I'm not trying to make excuses here, he said, but. There it is again, the word but, she interrupted, again, angry and agitated. I can't explain myself without using the word, but, but I'll try, he said. Go ahead, try, she said. Wait a minute, I have to gather my thoughts, he said, scratching his nose. I hate it when you do that, when you scratch your nose, she said. I don't see the point of this conversation, he said. Fine, she said, let's not talk then. But, he said. There it is, again. But, she said. Do you still want to talk, he asked. Fine, let's talk, she replied, let's talk about your fucking work, it's the only thing you ever want to talk about. That's not true, he said, and turned away. Tell me a story, she said, you used to tell me about all sorts of things.

There is a man who claims that Kowloon belonged to his grandfather, he said, although nobody else could find any records to prove it. He starts walking around the city, marking its surfaces with claims that he is the 'King of Kowloon'. The words he paints usually contain his name, his title of 'King of Kowloon', his family tree, names of other Emperors of China,

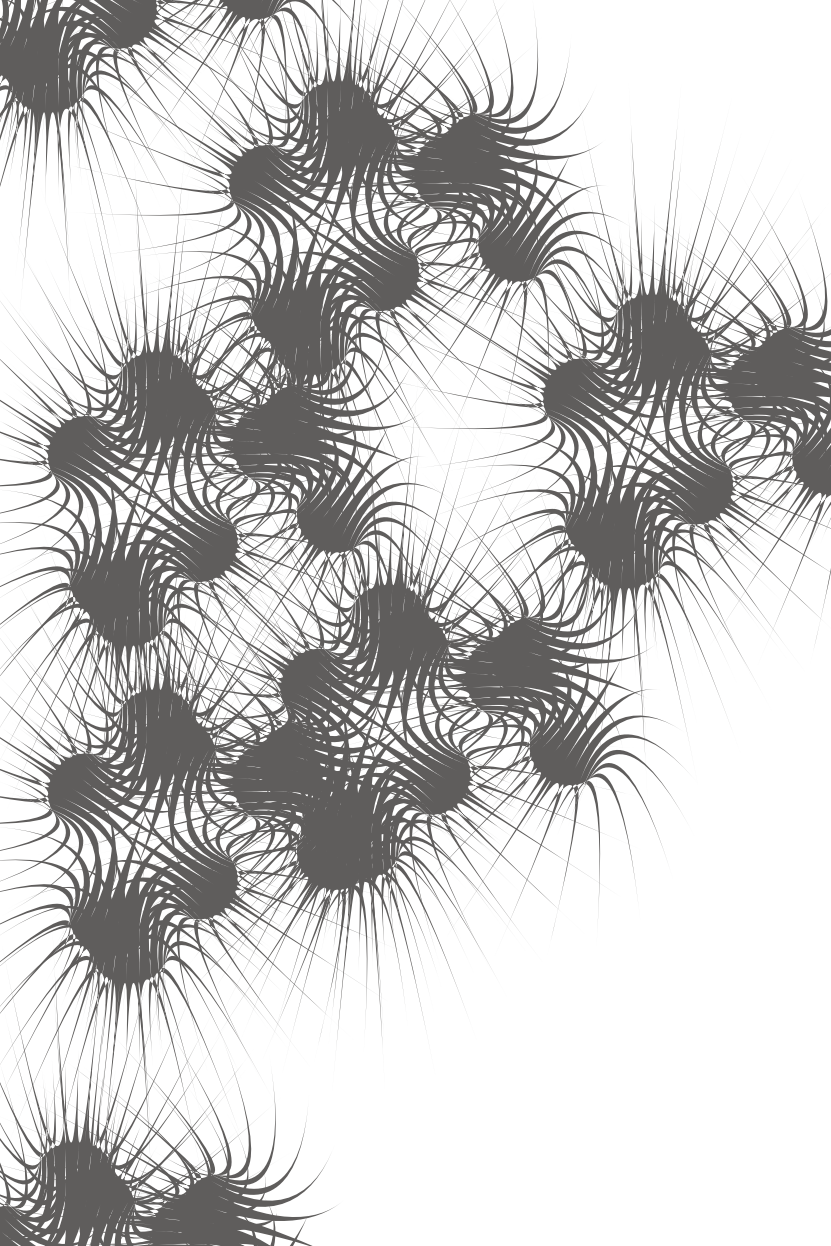
and the proclamation 'Down with the Queen of England!'. His distinctive calligraphy soon becomes a fixture in public spaces of Hong Kong. He uses a Chinese brush and black ink and this really made his graffiti different from the graffiti that you would find, say, in Berlin or New York, where a lot of graffiti is produced with a spray-can. People started to notice and to wonder about these strange statements. Some people believed him, but most people just thought of him as a funny, possibly, mad old man. His wife left him because of his growing obsession with his writing. Huh, she said, how sad. Yes, it's sad, he said. Maybe we'll bump into him when we're here, she said. Maybe, he said.

This is the last photograph of them together. They look vaguely happy, as if relieved to be away from their cramped, humid apartment back home. He is wearing a blue short sleeved shirt with a pair of faded jeans. She is wearing a green knee length dress and a hat. They are seated at a bar with pink cocktails in their hands.

1994 started on a Saturday. In the Gregorian calendar, it was the 1994th year of the Common Era, or of Anno Domini; the 994th year of the 2nd millennium; the 94th year of the 20th century; and the 5th of the 1990s.

On January 26, a man fired 2 blank shots at Charles, Prince of Wales in Sydney, Australia. On May 6, The Channel Tunnel, which took 15,000 workers over 7 years to complete, opened between England and France, enabling passengers to travel between the 2 countries in 35 minutes. On June 15, Israel and the Vatican established full diplomatic relations. On June 28, members of the Aum Shinrikyo cult executed the first sarin gas attack at Matsumoto, Japan, killing 7 and injuring 660. On July 20, Comet Shoemaker-Levy 9's Fragment Q1 hits Jupiter. On August 1, a fire destroyed the Norwich Central Library in the United Kingdom, including most of its historical records. On August 31, the Russian army left Estonia. On November 3, a French magazine published a photo of President François Mitterrand's secret daughter. On December 15, the first version of web browser Netscape Navigator is released.

On December 18, the police found their bodies three kilometers off the coast of the island. Their belongings and clothes were left on the beach. No suicide note was found.



Speculating on the good deal he just made, Oldham allowed his concentration to loosen, his eyes getting lost in the deep blue of the Oriental rug. Its old patterns blended and disappeared, and the over-dyed color became ubiquitous, like a woven swimming pool. Breathing slowly, he gradually closed his eyes, then without effort, imagined himself swimming in the immensity of a Caribbean lagoon.

“Don’t worry about the money,” Oldham cut in quickly, opening his wallet. “Consider it your birthday present...a bit early.”

“We may actually have stepped out of time by then,” I thought.

“Fine!” I replied.

A few days ago on a Sunday morning, while strolling through a local flea market, my wife convinced me to buy a second-hand carpet or, I should say in this particular case, a third-or even fourth-hand blue

Persian carpet. Although I admit that I am very close to being qualified as colorblind – I’m not sure if this is due to a lack of sensitivity or if I missed the kindergarten lessons when everyone else learned the colors’ silhouettes – the Oriental rug and its deep blue color had some effect on me, so I was easily convinced to yield to Janet’s desire to take it home. In general, I also enjoy playing the carpet-bargaining game. I find it immensely pleasurable – one of the best exercises for honing strategic and social skills.

Oldham shook his head, leaving the young girl that cut the deal with a large smile on her face.

“No, I am still under scientific consideration. Professor Hertman warned me about taking too many classes. Now I am getting stale.”

Without a word, Janet followed him to the car.

I am a 44-year-old married scientist. I am currently working on a vast national research program named the E-power Grid System. Without going into too much detail, so as not to lose anyone at this stage of the story, my contribution to this research consists of figuring out how individual producers can store

electricity generated by their households and how this can be made available to the national network on instant demand.

On the same day, Janet lifted the table out of the way and unrolled the carpet. The choice of its location in our interior was obvious and essentially dictated by its very large size, relative to the size of our apartment. There was no argument here; it had to land under the dining room table, two-thirds of it off-center to respect the chandelier already in place.

Ready now, she lay down on the plush carpet and surveyed the scene around her. Bowdoin Village, or “the Bow” as it was known locally, had been constructed in the early 1980s as an experimental self-sustainable complex for the graduate staff of the research center and their families. There were about fifty prefab-housing units, each designed to produce, stock and share energy. Unlike the other neighborhoods emerging around it, nothing here was left to chance.

As a trained architect, Janet suffered from the lack of detail in the design, or more generally, the cold pragmatism that lay the foundation for this

compressed collection of identical hatches which had no relationship to the surrounding landscape. Anyhow, as everyone there found out, the Bow was a dry and mind-numbing place to inhabit.

At the far end of the room by the door, a cold breeze was blowing dust around.

Suddenly Janet stood up, and her sense of relief faded instantly.

Oldham gazed across the room. Cleo, the couple's right-angle-tail cat, swiftly adopted the carpet, testing its limits by compulsively scratching and rolling over its surface. The deep blue rectangle was a great addition to the interior, somehow replacing the pool of a desirable but unaffordable villa surrounded by a garden - an old and forgotten dream - project of theirs.

With a beer in my hand, I joined the cat.

I lay down on the deep indigo, to take possession of it, like Cleo. The comfort of ownership and the limited possible activities on a Sunday evening put me into an open-eyed dream-like state. A few stories came to my mind...Aladdin's magic carpet in the *One Thousand and One Nights*... Ivan the Fool riding a

flying carpet in Russian folk tales...and this last one made me smile: the Big Lebowski and the Chinaman who peed on the Dude's rug. I was leaning on my side, eyes at carpet-level, nose in the dust. I began to follow the path of some undetermined patterns, running along the filaments and threads of uncertain territories. I was slowly drifting away, accompanied by Cleo's humming.

*"Dude. This rug I had. It really tied the room together."*

Not far, at a knot, or maybe another irregularity of the pattern, I felt my body floating away.

I realized that I was not soaring in the air above the bazaar and palace, as I had dreamt at first. But instead of flying on a carpet, I was sinking into it. I was on a diving carpet. I was diving into it.

I am a rational person. I am used to thinking with plans and perspectives, aims and objectives. Yet here I was, inverting the logic of materiality and spatiality in one rug trip.

Oldham smiled to himself. Lying there, lethargically, he began to follow the simple rule of 69 and the logic of doubling time...



“Bob, are you coming?” she called from the kitchen.

I began to entertain the idea of transposing this basic reasoning onto the definition of a new spatial dimension. By a simple inversion of materiality and disregard for the geographic status of things, the land turned liquid and the sea solid. I knew in advance that my trip into this liquid land/solid sea would not necessarily lead me to the average tourist promenade.

“Dinner is ready!” she insisted.

Ignoring her, Oldham went deeper into his reverie. All of his conventional scientific references had to be reframed and reenacted. He felt like he was swimming in the melting wax of the Parisian Musée Grévin, past molten busts of heroes, overwhelmed by a wave of historical references. His feet crossed the tumultuous surface. He was now formulating a new model that could lead to a walk with Captain Nemo and Sponge Bob, the only two figures who escaped disintegration in the tsunami of continental thinking.

His interest in peculiar geographic configurations – and especially the formation of islands – was not new. It had been his pleasure and honor to interview John Derrick about the recent materialization of a

volcanic island between Hawaii and Okinawa. Getting to know the renowned volcanologist and having the chance to publish a new text had indeed been a dream come true. Here is a little excerpt from that interview where they shared their mutual fascination with underwater volcanoes:

“What’s its name? I remember the moment when islanders debated all night about the name of the newborn island.” Derrick’s voice was still carrying the emotion of the moment.

“That was the night at the end of September when most of the residents were evacuated. Ships were ordered away from the water. Only a few of us were authorized to stay and monitor the situation. Every minute we had to report to the government on the development of the situation. I was never given a better mission,” he said.

“Witnessing the birth of child. Giving it a name. Recording its position in the world. Building a new atlas.” Obviously Derrick was fabulating ...

“Not scientific enough,” Oldham proclaimed, throwing his head back.

“What is your name?”

I heard a sound. I looked up toward the sun in the direction of the voice.

“What is your name?” she asked again.

I could now identify a human silhouette staring at me. It was only when she blocked the sun that I could distinguish the figure of a young woman.

“My name is Robert. Robert Oldham,” I replied.

“What are you doing here?” she asked giving me her hand.

“I am not sure. I still need to understand how before what...” I replied.

While gently yet compulsively brushing the sand from my face, I stood up and looked more carefully at my interlocutor. She was obviously one of those beautiful island creatures we so often imagine, one of those splendors living in an exotic island paradise. Dressed up in the standard apparatus of the Empire at the turn of the 20th century, she looked like an exotic version of the iconic and long-reigning Queen Victoria.

“Who are you?” I asked.

“I am Queen Emma of Hawaii,” she replied. “You are on one of my islands,” she continued.

Oldham tried to warm up his hands. His arms felt brittle and heavy. But he was here. Standing and chatting with a queen. A queen that he had never heard of. A queen of the Pacific, the biggest territory on earth...

While conversing, they began walking along the seashore, carefully avoiding the seashells and various crawling creatures populating the beach. She was barefoot, playing in the waves, holding her dress up to her knees in an elegant but childish way. She was telling him all about her life.

As we walked under the sun, I suddenly felt a cold breeze on my face. I could see the coconut trees bending as she passed. Two at a time, the tall palms were slashing the air in a back and forth movement as if being moved by invisible springs. I thought of the virtuoso piano player who could play Bach with two fingers. The fresh air was being brought out to the queen from the forest, the coconut trees working like a giant air conditioner. As she slowly walked along, nature was paying respect to its queen.

“Don’t you miss your bed?” she said.

Those five words, spoken without hostility, took

him straight back to reality. Him, here, sleeping naked on the blue rug.

Dodging the oddness of the situation, he asked, “Did you switch on the heater?”

“Maybe you should put a T-shirt on?” she suggested.

His body shivered as he stretched his arm to grab a shirt.

“I was thinking of our trip to the UK. I would really like to stay longer and use the time to do things we’ve never had the chance to do.”

From looking at his face, she knew this was not what he had been dreaming about.

“I wouldn’t mind, but...you know, I need sun. I’m fed up with this shitty weather.”

“We can go to South Wales,” he said with a wink.

She fell on her knees and joined him on the rug. Their heads beside one another with their bodies stretched out in opposite directions, they stared at each other.

“Do we really have to stay here?” she asked.

He was surprised by how direct the question was, and suddenly felt guilty. Of course, he already knew that she did not like the place, but she never expressed

it in such direct way.

“Not really, but...” he said.

The “but” meant a lot in this case and somehow summarized all the bullshit that he could have said.

Without waiting for him to clarify, she continued, “I want to go to a place where I can swim all the time. I cannot stand it anymore; I want to see the sun and the blue sky. I have no one here, time is endless, and...”

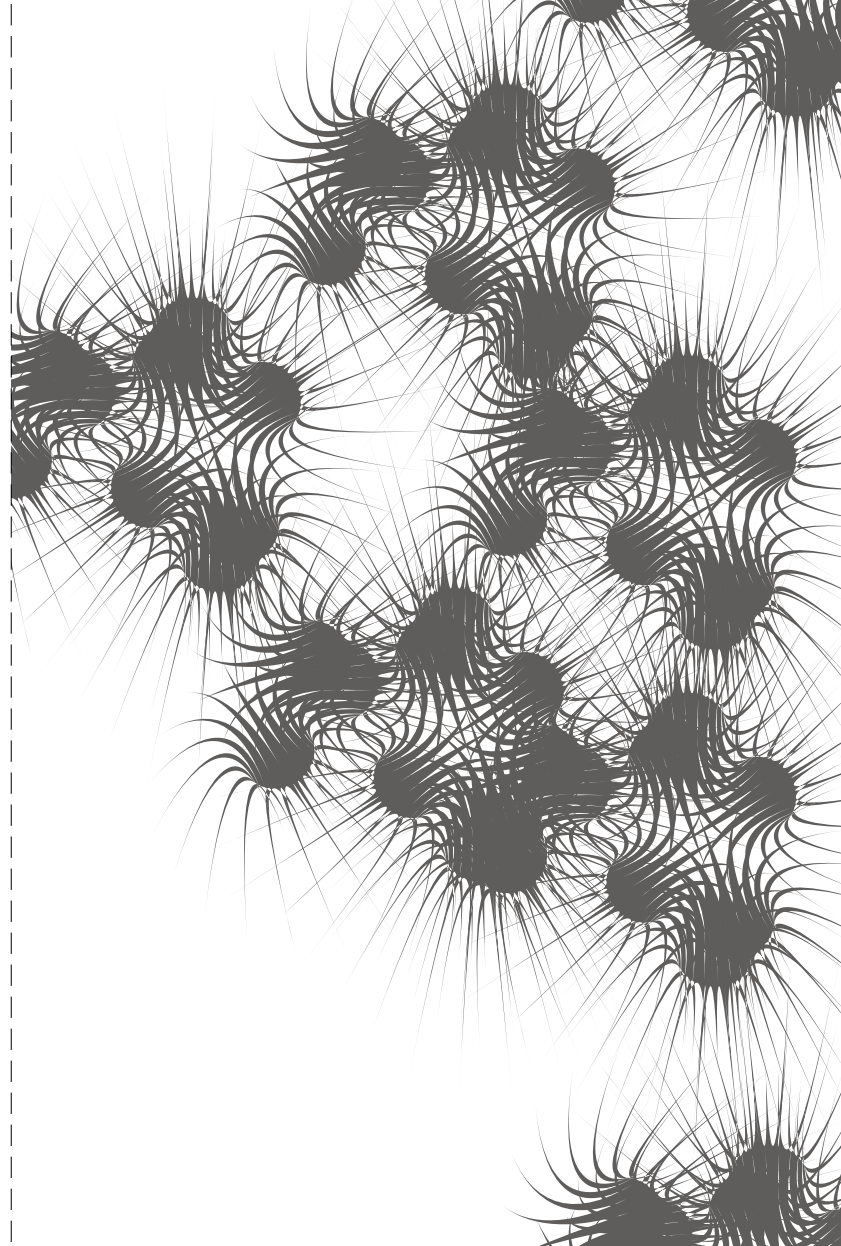
It was like the rug had had a similar effect on Janet, but was simultaneously making her more aware of her current condition. Compressing her uncertainty with her desire for an unseen future, the result was a hyper-realistic evaluation of her situation.

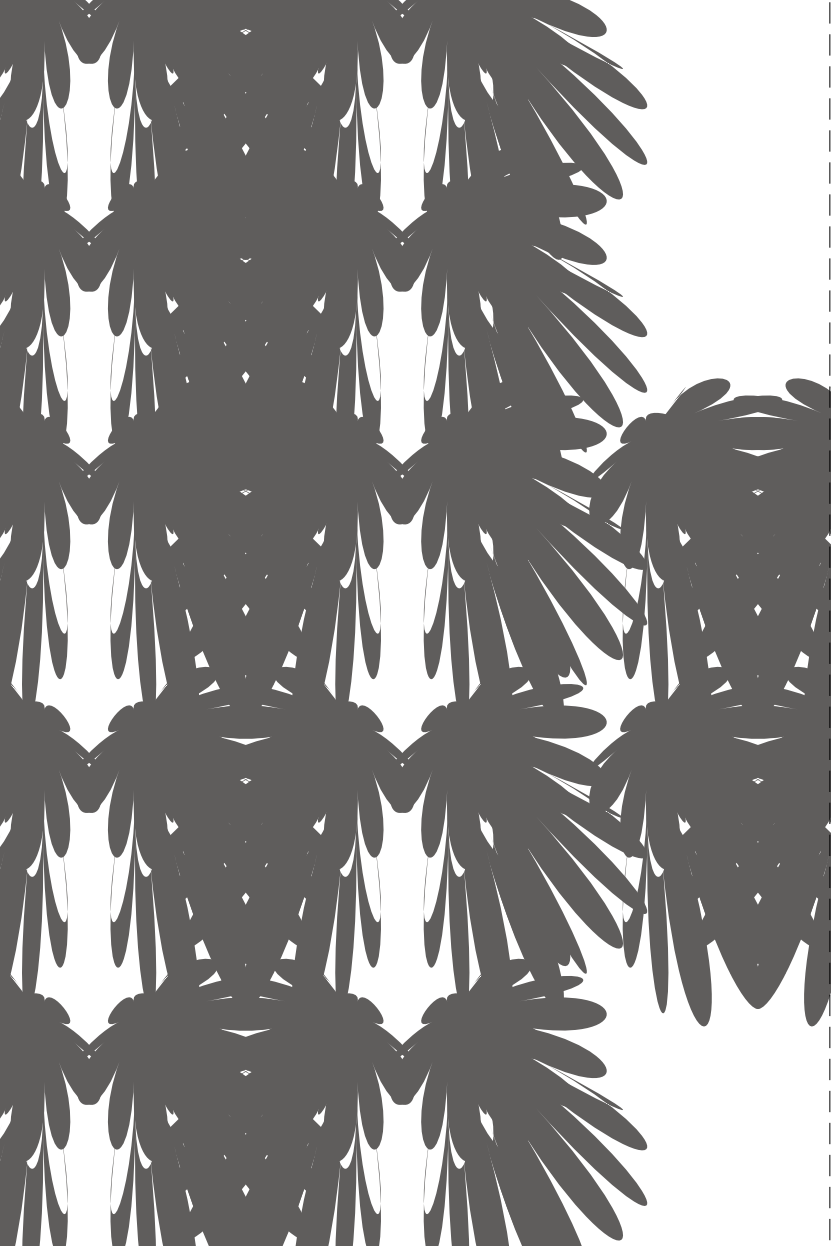
Not reading between the lines, he stupidly replied, whilst caressing her arm, “But we are here together.”

Staring at the chandelier above the table, she could identify the fragmented reflections of their entangled bodies. She wanted to swim, she wanted to float in between the facets of the chandelier. She wanted to be away.

Lying there, in between two worlds, Janet and Robert fell asleep. There was not much to talk about

anymore, even if little had been discussed. The “but” and the “and” summarized most of it. As the afternoon light faded, the world outside began to divide between dark and light. The crystals of the chandelier were throwing fragmented light all over the room and on the shadowy contour of their motionless bodies. From the multifaceted reflections, another dimension started to emerge. Bodies like an unconscious shadow projection, floating, driven by some invisible soaring or plunging forces. They both find refuge in their own world, inside one of those crystal lights. Each within their own crystal island, lost in the drifting archipelagoes of their dreams.





B/W

She sits on a wooden stool, leaning her upper body against the reception desk and staring blankly at the A4 poster stuck on the wall by a tiny piece of Scotch tape. It is 4:30pm. The afternoon sun is bright, casting the shadows of the window frames onto the untainted floor. The glass door opens and the A4 poster falls on the ground.

A man walks in. “Excuse me.”

Her gaze is fixed on the white wall where a contour of the poster is faintly visible to her eyes.

“Excuse me, miss?”

She turns her head and automatically forges a smile. Her face reveals no emotion, despite the fact that the man is standing there, soaking wet in a black suit.

“I am sorry, miss. I am looking for directions to this place, here.” He hands her a black and white map printed on a piece of damp paper, and points to a specific spot now smudged into a fuzzy dot.

“Sure,” she says calmly. “Can you help me pick up the poster on the floor please?”

He picks up the poster mindfully with just two fingers. She uses a paper napkin to dry the wet corner of the poster and re-tapes it on the wall exactly where it was before. She feels complete.

“Here is the train station you came from,” she mumbles as she draws a circle on his map with a red marker. “This is where we are. If you head north for another 5 minutes, you will find the forest.” She circles the big dot that the man was pointing to before.

“I am sorry that the map is blurry,” the man says clumsily.

“It’s ok. Those are just trees.” She switches her gaze back to the wall.

“How did you know I came from the train station?” he asks.

“It sometimes rains around 4. That’s the way it is.” Her voice becomes coarse as she speaks.

The man opens the door and leaves. The wind from outside slips in as the door closes. The poster flutters and the trees printed on it seem to wave a little.

That is the most animated moment of her last day at work.

Green

“How are you?”

“Sorry, I can’t hear you.”

“I said how are you? Can you hear me now?”

“Oh right. I am good, darling.”

“We talked about ‘darling.’ Can we drop that?”

Everyone uses ‘darling’ here.”

“Alright, darl... bird.”

“Better. So how was your day?”

“I am good, bird. How was your day? Are you excited? It’s 4 now. Almost there!”

“Yes, it’s 4.”

“We should celebrate! It’s your big day!”

“But it’s Monday.”

“I know, it’s *Monday*. Hey darling, don’t be upset. I just don’t want them to find out. It wouldn’t be good for either of us. You must understand.”

“I just want to make you happy, that’s all. We can do it on Tuesday, if that’s what you prefer.”

“We can do it on any day, bird. Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. You know, I have nothing to do.”

“Yes, you are free...”

Neither talks for a long moment; the bustle of the crowd behind almost overtakes the conversation.

“Bird, should we just have a quick drink when you are done today? Just a quick one?”

“Really, it’s fine. You don’t have to cheer me up. I am content as it is now. We will do it when we are free, promise.”

“Can we promise that we will be free?”

“Can we truly be free?”

“Can we live when we are free?”

“Free from what?”

“Freedom is overrated, really. I mean, yes, we can be free on Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, but darling...”

“Bird.”

“OK, bird. What do we do when we are free? Have a drink and then go on with our Mondays?”

“Mondays are fine. As long as you know that they are just days.”

“This is exactly the point. You have to acknowledge Monday is a day.”

“Just a day.”

“Just!”

“Let’s just not argue over freedom, ok?”

“Yes, it’s not like we can settle this now.”

“I can have a drink. A quick one.”

“Just a quick one is fine.”

No one talks. For how long? They don’t know, but it feels long. Long enough for them to savour the momentary silence derived from the conversation.

“Oh shit!”

“What’s wrong?”

“I forgot to turn off the hose.”

“Not again? You silly bird.”

“I have to go back to the roof.”

It is their superstition not to end their conversations by saying goodbye. They look forward to their next encounter.

Slashing on the steel railway, another train arrives. A stream of passengers propels them forward until they reach the exit at the end of the platform, the entrance to the city.

Orange

I was alone. At least, I thought I was alone in the forest. I did not intend to be a hermit. But I was the first to inhabit this territory on my own until more and more people found out about this place. I remember that a couple first came just to fool around. Fine. But I guess they told their friends, and then a group dressed in white stationed themselves here for a week. They put on white gloves and plucked the leaves and flowers from the trees. Gone for another week, they returned with some giant metal balls, which are still lying around here. I haven’t seen them since.

Slowly the trees started to bend: the taller they were, the more drastically they bent. And now in the middle of their trunks grow long white plastic feathers. When it rains, the feathers flap. But it never rains in this forest, which made it even stranger that it did last Monday. It was storming.

I mean, it is not that the forest never gets rain, but it never does naturally. Which is why I am here: to water the forest, to give it life. But never in my life



have I seen the sky pouring like it did last Monday. It probably had something to do with that man in the black suit.

I have watched him from a distance. He arrived with a piece of paper in his hand. Wandering around, spotting every angle, he found somewhere to settle. A fire was set up, and he removed his clothes and hung them on a branch. The moment he took off his last sock, the thunder roared and torrents rushed in from high above.

On and on, it has been like this for a week. And it is Monday again. Water has filled a pool. The bare man sometimes swims. When he is tired, he heads to the nearest tree and rests. He picks the fruit when he gets hungry.

I climb to the top of the tallest, widest tree, watching as the surface of the pool gradually covers the younger trees. Moments later, they crane their necks to find some air. And suddenly up they pull, emerging from the water and taking flight with their long white wings. More and more winged trees join them. They assemble in small groups; they disperse and gather again, mapping out various patterns in

the raining universe.

All of them fly toward where I am. They form an enormous circle, big enough to surround this aging tree that is the last to remain rooted.

I planted this tree.

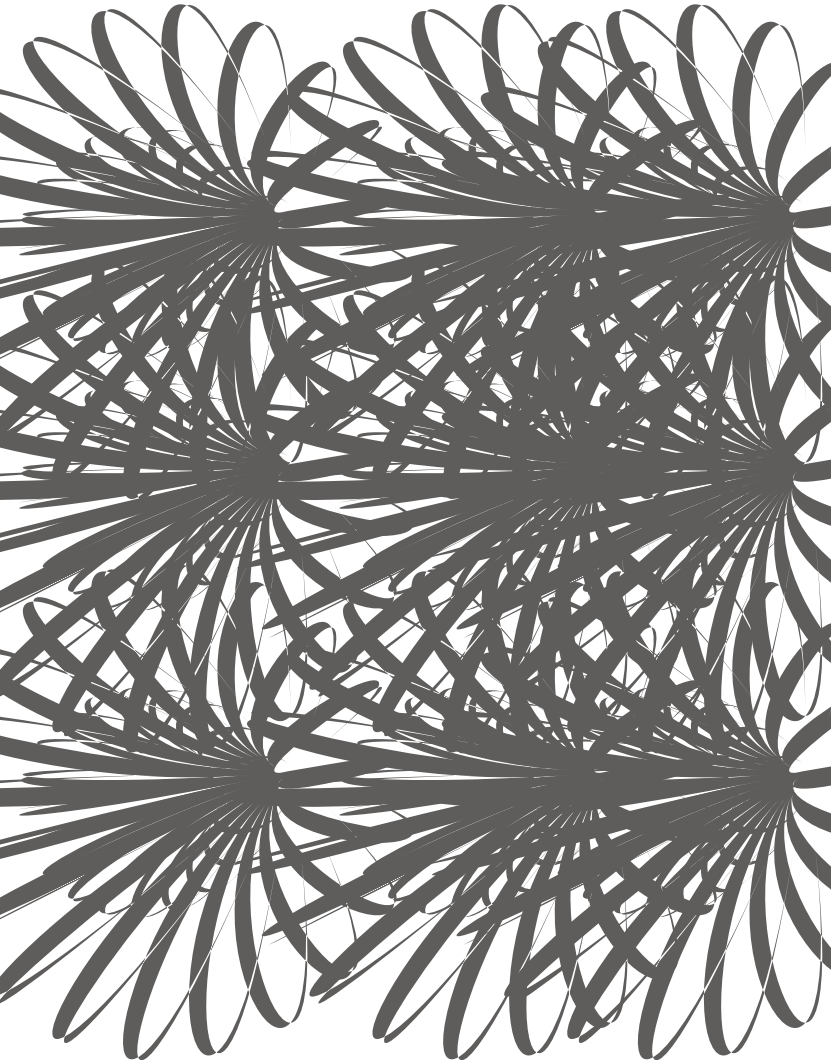
We have witnessed the beginning of this forest.

I can feel the tree quietly trembling, and a force in its centre pulls downward. The trees around me hover. The rain lets up.

Erupting from the soil, my oldest tree quivers its snowy elongated wings, and up it shoots to heaven. I trip and fall into the big deep sea where I almost hit my head against one of the metal balls. I struggle until I can lift my head to catch a breath.

The bare man is here next to me and says, "I have been watching you watching me. Let's go to the fire escape."

We are the only man and the only woman in the water.



E.B. White once said, “A writer who waits for ideal conditions under which to work will die without putting a word on paper.” As I write this, I am surrounded by the participants of *A Fictional Residency* at the large metal table sandwiched between the *Skinny Terrace* and the *Fire Escape*, diligently churning out their short stories in spurts. On day two, work patterns and routines start to surface, and are adapted to the designated writing space of the four allocated days. Some writers require being encircled by a customary fort of reference books for inspiration (which came from their own bookshelves or were picked out from the array of books in the *Moderation(s)*’ *Bibliotheek (Library)*); for some, a specific working spot or chair shifts on a daily basis (today I joined everyone at the writing

table, while yesterday I nested myself on the office couch), others choose to camp out at the kitchen table, or in one of the spare studios at Spring; a handful of writers listened to music on their headphones, hoping to forge and replicate makeshift familiar configurations in order to start typing. One-hit wonder F.R. David sings, “Words don’t come easy,” Truer words have never been spoken indeed.

Brian Dillion’s book *I Am Sitting in a Room*, the inaugural volume in Cabinet Books’ *24-Hour Book* series, was created from start to finish in one day at the Cabinet’s Brooklyn event space. The book is the outcome of an experimental process of writing within a compressed time and space under imposed constraints. While the setting of this four-day writing residency is nowhere as draconian as the conditions in which Dillion’s book was produced (we sit in climate controlled rooms, with food and drink taken care of, and one night the writers even went for a foot massage after a long working session), the question arises: in what way does the immediate reality of the undertaking find its way into the fictional universes the authors construct? Is writing just a matter of

dedicated labor and intense concentration? What kind of stories could emerge under such circumstances? Will the reader be able to chart or decipher the individual writing processes, through the fictions composed within the walls of the same room?

The writers convene daily in the cocoon of Spring Workshop in Wong Chuk Hang. The interior recalls a generic white cube gallery easily found in any warehouse-cum-art space in Berlin, New York or London. In spite of being sheltered from the heat, humidity and other palpable sensations of the city, there is an acute sense of awareness of where they are working from. The incessant clamor of a nearby construction site and constant traffic, adjacent sky rises and reclining cranes function as constant reminders that we are nowhere else but in Hong Kong. It is perhaps no coincidence that Qiu Zhijie’s sprawling mapping project *The Universe of Naming* is on view, providing an unintended backdrop for the working sessions. Scrawled on the ground are his ‘concept maps’ of real and fictive places (and utopic ideas), accompanied by movable metal, wood and

glass balls spread out all over the space; it challenges viewers to re-orientate themselves in this improbable amalgamation of the imagined and real, as well as in the political and mental locations. In this hothouse of ideas, Oscar, the writer-in-residence, shared an aptly chosen prompt to start the sessions with other invited Hong Kong-based writers: Marcel Broodthaers' *La conquête de l'espace. Atlas à l'usage des artistes et des militaires (The Conquest of Space. Atlas for the Use of Artists and the Military)*. As the contours and geographies depicted in Broodthaers' work merged with the combustion of territories outlined on the floor, an ambivalent place formed, setting the inner scenes where these newly written fictions played out.

As part of the introductions, Nadim chose to read a passage from William S. Burroughs' *Junky* which he found fitting for the occasion: "There is a certain kind of ghost that can only materialize with the aid of a sheet or other piece of cloth to give outline. Gains was like that. He materialized in someone else's overcoat." Perplexed by these sentences, the group toyed with the task of finding words to define

'silhouettes of something inexplicable', an underlying thread for the five stories. A printout of an abstract monochrome shape quickly put together by Heman, the moderator, was circulated around the table, vaguely forming each author's mental landscape. Like a Rorschach test, the writers came up with a number of different associations and images, formed by their own interests and backgrounds. "Psychological disorder," one said. "Explosion," said the other. Retreating into their individual writing bubbles, the authors worked in ninety- or one hundred twenty-minute-intervals, reading their pieces-in-progress aloud to the group after each session. Slowly, in multiple stories, there appeared a cat reincarnated as Cleo, or Valentin Vadimovich; a glass surface multiplied itself into a chandelier, a looking glass painted over and a crystal egg; nameless formations of landmasses and bodies of water are represented through volcanoes, islands, deserts, swimming pools, a blurred map, seas and rain showers; a rug laid across different living rooms is transformed into a third- (or perhaps fourth-) hand Persian carpet or an IKEA synthetic grey-blue high-pile rug; and lovers' quarrels

found words in a pile of jumbled retorts of *he said*, *she said*, dotting a cobweb of intertwining story lines.

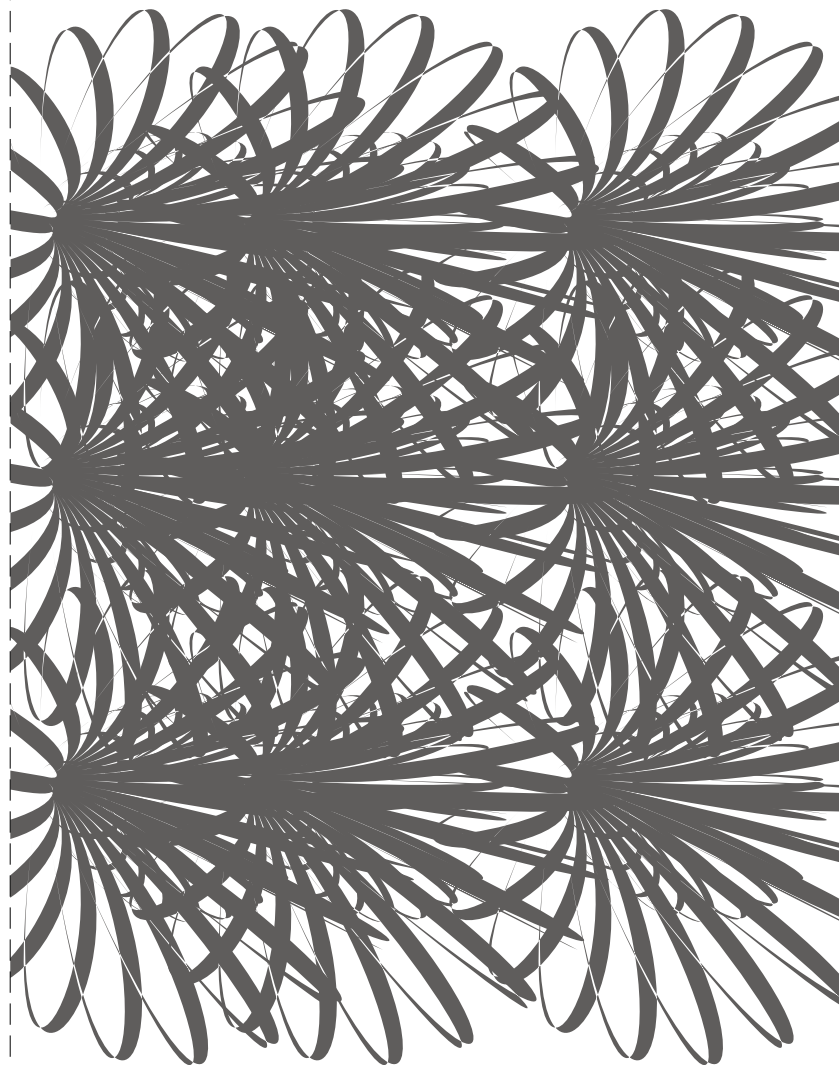
Towards the end of the third day, the collection of stories seem to become a strange mélange of thoughts and realities, as though phrases and metaphors have been transferred from one head to another. The storytellers work side-by-side, (un-)consciously appropriating each other's fragments; and when read altogether they could be patchworked to tell a combined story. Outside, the weather is glorious (a long-awaited change from two weeks of torrential rain); everyone is gradually drawn into the pace and rhythm cooped up in these long days of writing, exchanging ideas, and eating meals together. In the third or fourth draft, Valerie and Laurent's blue rug becomes the place marker of a swimming pool, to which Oscar said, "We write what we desire in reality." The writers continued with their laborious process of writing and editing, as the erratic weather (the beginnings of the first typhoon of summer) unfurled outside. Existential moments and personal anecdotes surfaced and found places within these chronicles, no longer excluded from these fabricated

fictions. Other things also became visible: metal spheres from Qiu's installation crossover into one story, the scenery of an exploratory walk in the neighbourhood blends into another one, while a fight over a turn of speech and scientific facts crop up like ghosts here and there. These tales were filled in unhurriedly with textures, colours, and layers, further expanding the initial abstractions, propelled by the speed of time.

On Saturday, the rooms are pristine no more, left with laptops, traces of notes on print outs, and personal belongings, taken over by the writers' presence. With the end of the residency in sight, Enoch, Nadim (and even I) spend the night there, inhabiting the space in order to finish up the final sections of the pieces due to go to the printers. Doretta finishes her story first on Saturday, and Enoch has ample time to write a second vignette. Mindful of the time pressure lingering in the air, and with plenty of mutual input, the rest of us immerse ourselves in refining the architecture and interchanges of storylines. The last writers submit their files to the editors, and celebrate their feat with a couple of

triumphant Hendricks gin and tonics with cucumber (the signature drink during the residency). The participants leave the provisional pocket of elastic time and fictional space bit by bit, emptying Spring of their own personal effects. The rooms slowly return to their usual states, and what is left of this intensive experience will now find an afterlife in the readers' minds.

The next day, as expected, the tables have been cleared up, and the glasses washed. The writers have relocated back into their actual lives and customary patterns. And the weather reports were right, the daylong rainstorms have returned again.



## Biographies

Nadim Abbas is a Hong Kong-based installation artist. His work explores the intricate role that memory-images play in the intersection between mind and matter. This has culminated in the construction of complex set pieces, where objects exist in an ambiguous relationship with their own image, and bodies succumb to the seduction of space. Abbas studied sculpture (B.A.) at the Chelsea College of Art and Comparative Literature (M.Phil.) at the University of Hong Kong. He currently holds teaching posts at the Hong Kong Art School and City University of Hong Kong.

Oscar van den Boogaard is a novelist and curator. He grew up in the Netherlands and Suriname and studied law and French language and literature in Montpellier, Amsterdam and Brussels. After a short time working at an international law firm, he chose to be a fulltime writer. Since his 1990 debut he has published many novels and plays which have received international praise. In 1995 Van den Boogaard founded Mot & Van den Boogaard Gallery together with Jan Mot in Brussels. He left the gallery in 2000 and since then occasionally works as a curator. On his left shoulder van den Boogaard has a tattoo GUILTY (in mirror writing), a work by artist Douglas Gordon. In 2002 the Guggenheim Museum in New York acquired a photograph of this tattoo. Since 2011 Van den Boogaard is artistic director of the HISK in Ghent, Belgium.

Enoch Cheng is a director and writer. With a degree in English Literature and History of Art from the University of Hong Kong, he made his debut short film in 2011. Focusing on ordinary subtleties in urban lives through mundane conversations, he has produced two short films, *Queen's Encounter* (2011) and *Before Friday* (2012). His theatre work *Fishy Stories*, supported by a Hong Kong Art Development Council's Emerging Artist Grant, was performed in the spring of 2013. His latest film *I Hope You Don't Mind* (2013) was made during Paper Rain curated by Arto Lindsay at Art Basel Hong Kong. He currently holds the position of Programmes Manager at Asia Art Archive.

Heman Chong is an artist, curator and writer. He received his MA in Communication Art & Design from The Royal College of Art, London in 2002. His conceptually-charged investigations into how individuals and communities imagine the future generates a multiplicity of objects, images, installations, situations and texts. In 2006, he produced a writing workshop with Leif Magne Tangen at Project Arts Center in Dublin where they co-authored *PHILIP*, a science fiction novel, with Mark Aerial Waller, Cosmin Costinas, Rosemary Heather, Francis McKee, David Reinfurt and Steve Rushton. His work has been featured prominently in *A Prior*, *ArtAsiaPacific*, *Artforum International*, *ArtInfo*, *Art-iT*, *Art Lies*, *Frieze*, *LEAP*, *SITE* and *Visionaire*.

Doretta Lau is a journalist who covers contemporary art, music, literature, and film for *Artforum*, *South China Morning Post*, *The Wall Street Journal Asia*, and *Bazaar Art Hong Kong*. She completed an MFA in Writing at Columbia University. While in New York, she was an editorial assistant for *NOON*, a literary annual edited by Diane Williams. Her fiction and poetry have appeared in the Canadian and American journals *Event*, *Grain Magazine*, *Prairie Fire*, *PRISM International*, *RicePaper*, *sub-TERRAIN*, and *Zen Monster*. She splits her time between Vancouver and Hong Kong, where she is at work on a novel and a screenplay. In 2014, her short story collection *How Does a Single Blade of Grass Thank the Sun?* will be published by Nightwood Editions.

Christina Li is an independent curator and writer based in the Netherlands. She graduated from the University of Hong Kong with a degree in Fine Arts (Art History) and Comparative Literature and completed de Appel Curatorial Programme in 2009. She was involved with the research and project management of the international contemporary art and research project 'FORMER WEST' between 2011-2012 and was the co-curator for the '3rd FORMER WEST Research Congress, Part One: Beyond What Was Contemporary Art' (Vienna 2012). Li was part of the editorial team of SKOR (Stichting Kunst en Openbare Ruimte, Amsterdam)'s debut public programme: 'Actors, Agents and Attendants: Speculations on the Cultural Organisation of Civility' (2010) and curated the accompanying artist projects and film programme. She has previously worked as a Curator of Para/Site Art Space (Hong Kong) and was the Assistant Curator of 'Making (Perfect) World: Harbour, Hong Kong, Alienated Cities and Dreams', the Hong Kong participation of the 53rd Venice Biennale.

MAP Office is a multidisciplinary platform devised by Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix. This duo of artists/architects has been based in Hong Kong since 1996, working on physical and imaginary territories using varied means of expression including drawing, photography, video, installations, performance, and literary and theoretical texts. Their entire project forms a critique of spatio-temporal anomalies and documents how human beings subvert and appropriate space. Humour, games, and fiction are also part of their approach, taking the form of small publications providing a further format for disseminating their work.



Fig.1  
Moderation(s)

*A Fictional Residency* contains six short stories written by seven authors in four days during the eponymous project, a writing intensive that was the foundation of Dutch novelist Oscar van den Boogaard's June 2013 residency at Spring Workshop in Hong Kong.

Exploring the role of fiction within their respective practices, Van den Boogaard and an invited group of Hong Kong-based practitioners – Nadim Abbas, Enoch Cheng, Doretta Lau, and MAP Office (Laurent Gutierrez and Valérie Portefaix) – each wrote a short story. Fulfilling their roles in the project as Moderator and Witness, Heman Chong and Christina Li completed the group of authors presented here.

From June 19-22, 2013, the participants gathered each day at Spring to work on their individual stories, regularly reading their drafts aloud to the group.

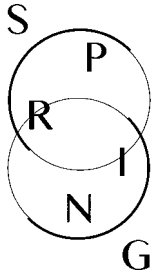
Van den Boogaard's starting point for the writing sessions was a miniature atlas by Belgian artist, poet and filmmaker Marcel Broodthaers. Created in 1975, *The Conquest of Space. Atlas for the Use of Artists and the Military*, measures just 38mm x 25mm (1.5in x 0.64in). Consisting primarily of a series of small

icons of national territories, yet depicting no cities, rivers or mountains, the atlas would not be of any actual use to someone trying to find his way. Instead, the abstract possibilities of the tiny atlas were used as a prompt for the writers to reflect upon their own appropriation of space.

*A Fictional Residency* is part of the ongoing *Moderation(s)* program initiated by Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art and Spring Workshop. *Moderation(s)* sets out to create the time and space that allow for a specific kind of creative production where, instead of rapid installation and short-term consumption, each project embraces the need for long-term development and a slowing down of artistic processes. The project brings together an international group of artists, curators, and writers who participate in an ongoing program of contemporary discourse and production between Rotterdam and Hong Kong. Within this framework, Heman Chong, Singaporean artist, curator and writer, was invited to steer the program, which involves more than fifty artists and engenders a conference, a performance weekend, two exhibitions, three residencies and a book of short stories.

In speaking about the project, moderator Heman Chong proposes “to make ‘soft’ the practices of both artist and curator, so that one becomes easily soluble in the other, while retaining their unique forms and patterns of working. The participants are encouraged to indulge in the pleasures of exchanging knowledge, stories and tools without any pressure to collaborate.”





Spring is a non-profit arts space committed to an international cross-disciplinary program of artist and curatorial residencies, exhibitions, music, film and talks. Anchored in the Wong Chuk Hang industrial neighborhood of Hong Kong, it opened in August 2012. Spring serves as a platform and laboratory for exchange between the vibrant artists and organizations of Hong Kong's rich cultural landscape and their international counterparts who seek to engage in far-reaching dialogue.



Witte de With Center for Contemporary Art is an international public institution with Rotterdam as its home base. Established in 1990, Witte de With explores developments in contemporary art worldwide and presents this through exhibitions, theoretical and educational programs, public events and publications.

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well as idiosyncrasies of the  
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