

## Cha Reading Series

“Coming of Age in Hong Kong”  
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Poems by Nashua Gallagher are selected from her first poetry collection *All the Words a Stage* (Chameleon Press), which will be launched in Hong Kong on Tuesday 5 June 2018.

**COMING OF AGE**  
IN HONG KONG  
NASHUA GALLAGHER  
DAVID MCKIRDY  
FRIDAY 13 APRIL 2018  
7:30-8:45 P.M.

**BOOK LAUNCH**  
METTĀ  
05 JUNE 2018  
7.00 PM

**ALL THE WORDS A STAGE**  
POETRY BY NASHUA GALLAGHER

## Nomad Child

Born to a town swaddled in verdancy,  
Dusty roads, colonial trims, palms waved gently in cool mountain wind,  
I recall best of all its many hands -  
Often feminine, deft, conjuring -  
A whiff of spice, plaiting oiled hair, a burn from an iron like a rosebud on skin, A lake, often green,  
deep and still.

Cooling tea in a saucer,  
Clouds of red earth under running slippers,  
Mango flesh sucked through a small hole in its hide, Blood promises with trees,  
Kitchen cacophonies,  
This was childhood at the start of my remembering.

I was taken next to a city of cut stone and bedrock,  
Where mountains pulse, under gleaming towers,  
Neon puddles, and sizzling oil in open woks at the market,  
Growing pains from walking through expanses of shopping arcades,  
A ferry-crossing harbour bejewelled with light.

The tallest city in the world, that much taller to a child. But it never made me feel small.  
There was kindness, open palmed, as familiar as an army of aunts,  
The egg waffle seller, with packets so hot each bite produced dragon breath, All clucks and smiles,  
waving away my \$5 coin.  
The bookshop assistants who left me to it, cross-legged in a pile,  
Mango, juiced, in a plastic takeaway cup, to accompany small, tired feet.

Home was a place I found on either side of the handover,  
I never found a need for roots, for fear of them paved over.

## The Aged Expats

The years they estimated in inches,  
Stretched and spooled into centimetres,

Sun-lines and freckles on skin,  
Folded as the local newspaper on his lap,

She blows on her jasmine or chrysanthemum tea,  
Cupping it close, as red lanterns dance above her head,

They chew the fat with wafts of shrimp paste in the air,  
Sampans gently knocking against the dock,

Casually tethered,  
Ready to go,

Which is likely why they stay.

## Siu Ap Fan with a Visitor

“What was it like to grow up in Hong Kong?”

“Do you speak Cantonese?”

Sometimes, it was like living in the waiting room of an airport.  
And like in the airport, everything is translated three times,  
So no, I don’t speak Cantonese.

I tell her, I am my own brand of local;  
The kind that doesn’t carry an umbrella with me.  
Come 6 o’clock my contact lenses feel like peanut brittle.  
I too, am an MTR test-tube baby; earphones umbilical to device that lets  
me recline fetal in my mind.  
I have the right to land and an accent that won’t settle.

We are in line for *Siu Ap Fan*,  
Realizing too late, this was not a meal for two.  
All that bone spitting and rice shoveling,  
It’s for sinewy fragments-in-your-teeth kind of thinking.  
Fat sizzles on crispy duck skin and runs down your chin,  
We slurp and gnaw and revel, all teeth and no conversation.

The duck man’s lunch grind requires a strut that is;  
Part mother hen, part factory supervisor,  
A furrowed brow, cleaver  
Heave-ho’ing,  
Clang-bang people traffic, an instant spill into the streets like  
a fresh teabag in water. *Bo le* slammed down next to me, chopsticks  
rattle, and a plus on my ticket tells them to call order six  
Not *lok*.  
My duck man knows how to cater to those like me.

She asks about sovereignty.  
I talk about the trees on Hollywood road, branches procumbent,  
Snaking like varicose veins on the island’s asphalt skin,  
Money pumped into mountains scraped back,  
Only to have its soil entailed to northern cousins.  
Sometimes it takes a little ingenuity,  
To build bricks out of a make believe place,  
Like a plus on a ticket,  
A white bauhinia amongst the red,  
Because you see, Hong Kong, like me  
is a third culture kid who writes her own story.

## Yellow Umbrella

I like stories for the young,  
 They are a three-course meal,  
 A beginning, middle and end.  
 Loose-bits tied,  
 A reader satisfied.  
 Narratives that gain momentum,  
 Cavort exposition,  
 Hits a nerve,  
 Hooks your navel,  
 Until a full-stop, snap-bang, loud, and final.

Gluttons for information behind a screen,  
 Skim words and bite to test the realness as though of a coin.  
 News becomes a loop of static noise,  
 We untangle wires, lament how  
 It all turns to vinegar so soon after the first sip of wine,

These past few weeks,  
 When like angry bees in black and yellow they took to the streets,  
 Long poles on their shoulders, they carry my children's future wrapped in a handkerchief.  
 Where the fuck was Mary Poppins then?  
 Open Sesame - Ali Baba, they brought the commercial sector to its feet,  
 And still no Robin Hood appeared,  
 Hansel forgot to lay the bread-crumbs out of here,  
 This is no bed-time story.

The bells in limbo have begun,  
 The ground will soon disappear.  
 You can add oil to a slippery slope, But it only serves the fall that is near.

These are not the lost kids of never-land,  
 They are not idealistic to demand,  
 No pounds of flesh exchanged for a square foot of land,  
 A vote that counts, that doesn't just tally,

I walked among them, for an hour,  
 Cardboard signs and voices hoarse but they rally "be careful"  
 "ga yau"  
 "pick up your rubbish"  
 "ga yau"  
 "if not now, then when?"  
 "ga yau"  
 And now I watch the plot unravel,  
 Behind my screen, torn but not quite in between. But it's hit a nerve,  
 Hooked my navel.

These are stories of the young.  
It will have a beginning, middle and an end,  
Gain momentum  
Cavort exposition

These are the stories of the young  
These are the tales of what we'll all become.

## Diary of an Expat Immigrant

Home is a four-letter word.  
 You're supposed to know what it means.  
 Say it with confidence.  
 So the other kids know,  
 You know.  
 You Know?

I've introduced myself in front of enough  
 classes,  
 To know what they expected me to say, How  
 to say it,  
 With a lilt,  
 A rounded R,  
 Or an emphasis that trails...

As an adult; they say I keep my voice heard,  
 Under oceans and over mountains,  
 Phone lines, like my accent, roaming.

I pledge allegiance to no flag,  
 They signify anthropology more than  
 nationality,

No political party to get under my skin,  
 Or a need to call for blood,  
 Veterans to admire but few to thank,

Only with sports do I take sides,  
 During wars, I get to straddle the line.  
 And that was all fine.

Until I wondered how fresh soil would feel  
 that was all mine,  
 To clench my fist and breathe the musk of,  
 A part of the earth that would grow a  
 bloodline.

For home to be a place, not a story.

But home is a four-letter word,  
 Built on ideas about belonging.  
 Specifically, about who belongs, and  
 Who should come, and who should keep  
 going.

I would rather no box to tick,  
 Hate to borrow, or inherit,  
 Can't feel hard done by what was not yours,  
 You can't be abandoned by a story,  
 So home is a four-letter word,

My tale is footfalls oceans and mountains long,  
 The world remains supported by a ring of  
 elephants  
 on the back of a tortoise,

So wherever you are,  
 And wherever you go,  
 you're already home.