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# Collective Memories



MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN      JENNIFER WONG      XU XI

Contact: Tammy Ho Lai-Ming ([t@asiancha.com](mailto:t@asiancha.com))

MICHAEL O'SULLIVAN

**Extract 1:**

My father was born in Beara under Hungry Hill when Joyce was still struggling with *The Wake*. My mother was born in Ballam with Woolf still looking in her own reflection a few streets away in Bloomsbury. My father rode on his mother's bike to Allihies to see her sister Kathleen before she met Jack and sailed for Walthamstow. Then they climbed the base of Hungry hill together to see her father up beyond pairc mhor and pairc bheag and pairc theas and laighnea. Each field had a name since the Famine. Fields had personalities. The people knew what could happen if the fields were slighted. They called it the hungry grass. My father told me his grandfather threw old dogs into the sea off Rosmacowen pier, down where the waters rode to Beare Island. Tied rocks to them and threw them in the Atlantic. We were hunting under rocks on pairc mhor for the biggest insects we could find. Cruel times my father told us. He'd still wince in the Mayfield sitting room. Remembering his father beating a badger to death with the face of a shovel.

Then my father and grandmother go back down to the old cottage called Bank with sackcloths for walls. The cottage where my father was born ten years after independence. His father Michael was still out with the sandboat. No running water. Grass and dockleaves in the fields aplenty. Dredging the bottom of the sea for good sand for the fields. Fertiliser and sea weed left on shore and dragged up the coast road past the fuscia and nettle. All under the watchful eye of Hungry Hill. Michael's father Mortimer – Murt they called him - had ghout. He had a bad leg. A small stocky man with a bad leg and an untidy beard. Like it was covering something. A scar. A childhood illness. A hair lip. My pocket thinks my hand is mad. He said it every time my father went looking for coin and my father repeated it to us. Lived through the famine Murt did and so he had my grandfather late. He could be excused for the ghout so. Hadn't he made it through *and* stayed put? We had one photo of him out in the trees behind the house sitting on a small stool. His eyes going at the camera like it was some wild animal. Why the photo out there? In the middle of the forest? They got him all dressed up in his Sunday suit and made him limp out. Sat him on the old stool. The suit exploding on him. Was it a special spot for him? Had something happened there? In those woods?

In the county elections the year he got the old cottage they'd promised him money for those trees. Still shipping lumber off to the UK so they were. In the UK Parliament elections his family had supported Hennessy. Hennessy was the right man for Cork. John Pope Hennessy. The name had godliness riven through it. Stand up for Cork to

those bastards in London town. Hennessy'd get the job done. Hennessy'd help get them independence. Wasn't he Cork born and raised. Studied in the College too. Medicine they said. He'd even come down to Beara in a trap. Canvassing they called it. Murt stood beside his father Mikey in Castletownbere Mart one Wednesday morning when Hennessy came looking for votes. Hennessy came up to Mikey and Murt looked on at his father's side. Murt said he was a small man. Wiry. With a hook nose. Kept his chin up high. A lot of airs and graces.

-Sure, You'll remember us down here. Sulivans of Beara. Leaders of the British East India Company. I'm telling ye said Murt.

-Getaway out o' that now. Don't be coddin' me. Hennessy had told him.

-I'm telling ye. The whole truth. My own cousin Laurence, son of Philip the blacksmith, sure wasn't he the Guardian of the British East India Company. Got the whole thing going out foreign.

Murt couldn't stop smirking, scratching his dirty beard, thinking back on it.

-The Guardian of the British East India Company I'm telling ye and he came from these fields.

Hennessy smiled and backed away. Maybe a thought crossed his mind. What was there out there? Beyond Castletownbere and the Rosmacowen pier. Out beyond the Atlantic. Out there in the East? He came to and smiled back at Murt's father.

-Well we'll make sure there's no British West Cork Company won't we now?

Yes, Hennessy was the right man for Cork.

In the end he lost out by seven votes. Spent a year appealing it. Even his friends Disraeli, Napoleon III, and the Emperor Francis Joseph couldn't change the result. Went into hiding with his debt and fathered two children by a mistress. Going away foreign they said he was. Off to rule over the Chinese they said. Another one gone. Murt could never forgive him. He took it to heart. Couldn't he wait around? Turning his back on his people. We were good enough for him when he needed our vote. A dirty thing my grandmother said. Ever since then she hated men with airs and graces. In Mayfield when a man she didn't like the look of came on the TV asking for a vote she screamed. He's a dirty thing.

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I'm back in the United College Library of Chungman Daiho. I'm looking at the microfiches of those letters Hennessy sent from Cork shortly after he met my great grandfather. Then I read the letters he sent from Hong Kong about his time in Cork during the famine. About those days when him and Murt eat the grass of the fields

and saw their neighbours and family die of hunger. What *had* happened in those forests? Why did Murt need to have the photo taken there? His speech on the Famine given at Peddars Wharf in early March (March 6) 1880 for the Irish Distress Fund. The same week he refused to send a 17 year-old Chinese young offender back to the famine in the mainland. As he spoke on the pier, with the wind ruffling his fair curls, he remembered those days in Cork. Days before he left Murt sitting on that stool in that clearing in the forest behind the old house. His words of a foreign land to the assembled Chinese and European dignitaries were all that stood between them a good *dim sum*:

“perhaps there are few present who actually remember the events of the great famine of 1846 and 1847. I am sorry to say that I am old enough to remember them and, though I was only twelve years of age at the time, I have a vivid recollection of the fact that I then saw in the streets of Cork one morning seven dead bodies lying not far from the residence of my father, a sight which has remained ever engraved on my memory. They were in two groups, one a group of five people lying dead, and another of two - a woman, apparently a young woman, and what appeared to me to be a very old but diminutive woman, but on looking closely, I saw that it was in reality a dead child; it had died of starvation -

Murt would still be there waiting when Hennessy came back years later to run against Parnell’s man in 1890. Comes back from feckin’ China to run against the last High King of Ireland. The Saviour of Ireland. Beats Parnell’s man by a single vote. It killed Parnell. Hennessy ended up destroying Parnell, the man Joyce loved. “My Dead King” he calls him. But it was men like my great grandfather Murt Hennessy came back for. Was my great grandfather in some way responsible for Joyce? Is there a connection there? And me here now in Hong Kong because of Joyce? And tell us about your book on Joyce? Yes, very good. How original? I see. I see. A cycle of sorts. Wheels within wheels. Joyce would have had a field day. Sure didn’t he call his own “our wholemole mill wheeling vicociclometer”?

## Extract 2: Lost Memory

I'm taking a five-litre tub of white masonry paint out to the old pebbledash wall a few doors down from Hennessy's old home. A dividing wall between our driveways up on Stream Hill in Dillons Cross. No bigger than a child. Waist high on our side, chest high on the neighbours. Those cowboy builders sold me the lie the wall was saturated. Told me the garden was soaking up water and the water running into its foundations. I never did get his real name. Mick he said call him. Never a surname. Surnames were like dirt between friends, between Corkmen. Later on my friends said they were the Hanleys, a well-known family from the Travelling Community. Others say they were from Ballyvolane.

He's standing at the wall, his face a dirty brown, his belly tight under the faded navy polo-shirt. His hair a tight, frizzy brown.

-Didn't Thomas feckin' put up those concrete supports on his side. Too afraid to come near ye so he was. Sure didn't he think you were a bit uppity. C'mere to me. I don't like to be saying now but sure it's the word around. They never feckin' see ye. You're always away foreign. The only solution. Lose the garden.

-You're saying I should lose the whole thing?

-The whole feckin' thing. It's feckin' saturated. It's a feckin' sponge.

He walks down to the end of the path and stares down the narrow hill as if he's waiting for something. He kicks a bit of loose concrete on the path with his worn work boot, already destroying our property.

-Are ye married out there?

-I am yes.

-To a foreign girl?

-Yes, a Hong Kong woman.

-Would she come back? Back here?

-Well, we're discussing it. The plan was ye see...

-Would ye leave her if she wouldn't?

-Well...

No one has ever asked me that. I try to get back on track.

-So it's 4 for the path, is it?

-Ah, Mike, Mike. Don't be coddin' me.

Before I respond, he moves down along the path, the tongues on his caterpillar boots flapping. He stops in front of the house. He starts picking a bit of the loose

pebbledash off the front wall.

-See that. D'ye see that. The rain gets in there now, freezes and pushes out the plaster. All has to be replaced. We could do a job for ye on that. Skim the whole lot. Scaffold up here. Scaffold there. I'm telling ye. Do the path and the front o' the house. You won't know yerself.

-So, ye said it was 4 for the path.

-Mike, I'm telling ye, don't be coddin' me now. Are ye feekin' serious. Are ye? 10 for the path and garden. Are ye feekin serious?

-10? You said 4 yesterday. There's no way I can do that. That's way beyond what ye told me. Look we better stop the whole thing.

He starts leaning on the plaster of the house. He's looking down at the ground as if he's steadying himself.

-Look it. Mike. Mike. I'm not coddin' ye. I'm going through a feekin' divorce. The bitch left me. Took a house for a millun. Brand new house for a millun. Broke me back so it did. Left me with the 6 kids.

-I'm sorry. I'm sorry to hear it. It must be a real shock.

He starts moving off again down the path towards the road.

-I'm off Mike. Big job down in Ballyvolane. Tomorrow

With the phone pushed into his big, sweating head he's already walking backwards down the hill.

-Seamus will ye feekin' tell them I'm coming.

We haven't agreed anything and there's a lump off my front wall and my path.

Before we could talk again they had a JCB digger in the driveway and half the garden dug out.

\* Now I'm going out with the tin of paint the first sunny day in May. Rain clouds start gathering with half the wall still to paint. Gusts of wind pass along the wall buffeting the dust cloth pinioned to the driveway with the 5 spare paving blocks they left behind. The sun spears the clouds and the new coat of white suddenly lights up. I'm enjoying the novel sensation of warm Cork sunshine when my father joins me.

-Painting is relaxing. I'm like you Dad painting the huge gable wall in Mayfield each year.

I say it again thinking I might have been unclear.

-I'm like you Dad painting that huge gable wall in Mayfield each year.

-What's that? What wall? Sorry. No. Sorry.

-That big wall you used to paint every few years with a five-inch brush. You painted it cream.

He stares down at the base of the wall, trying to recover some vague memory of what I describe.

He looks up again as if to admit defeat. His eyes weary. It's as if he's been accepting this a long time to himself.

-I'm sorry. No. It's gone.

I try to make as little of it as possible.

-Do you want to do a section? Do the top. Mind your clothes. I need to stand up for a second.

I hand him the brush. I wanted to get Dad thinking about all the painting he'd done all through his life. In the houses in Sidcup, Bray, Glanmire, Mayfield, Montenotte. I give him the brush. He steps forward and takes it up. He's slow to start but then he's dancing with the brush, drawing it back and forth in wide brushstrokes with great flair and skill. He's like a child painting for the first time, the strokes getting more pronounced. Soon the top of the wall is all finished. I can see the relief on his face. Surely he's reliving the feeling of having painted before. Maybe he even remembered that wall in Mayfield. That gable wall. It was a wall I kept returning to because of Dad's perseverance in a housing estate where we went hungry and got targeted. Made to crawl on our hands and knees with all the lights round the house so the boys of the estate wouldn't think we were inside. It was Halloween and we didn't want any trick or treating. All because my mother spoke different. So I go back to Dad working the long hours on that wall as a gesture of defiance. Knowing there would be graffiti on it in the morning. Him at the top of the wooden ladder, his back to the whole estate. Silver heights Avenue falling away behind him to the valley below and the long road down to Tivoli and SilverSprings. He's coming in after a long day of painting with spots of cream all through his auburn hair and across his face and hands like marks of battle. The hairs of the 5-inch brush in his hand are curved like a scimitar from the shape of the wall and the hard yards of pebbledash. Now as I watch him paint our wall at Stream Hill I'm sad for the memory he can't recall. A memory only I have now, a memory breaking free from the clutches of collective memory even as I harness it here to the page and run it into the ground until it sticks. What happens when memories that bind us die? Does part of me also die off with a memory no longer shared? Time comes along like the JCB of those cowboy builders. I can see Mick now in the driver's seat. His feral passion driving the jaws of the digger into the rich soil of our garden. Prestige Paving they called themselves. Time comes along like them and piston drives the century old loamy sods apart, reducing them to mounds of black soil, cracked concrete slab, and weed ready only for compost for another man's garden.

**Extract 3:**

Rick Feather

“Good” ‘GOOD” “GOOOOOD”

Pointed Yip Waiming

On KLM Flight F6765 Amsterdam to Hong Kong

At Rick Feather’s New Zealand Organic butter cartridge,

Trying to get conversation going with the only

English word he knew.

Feather eventually worked out the intent

And dutifully peeled back the foil cover of the cartridge,

Dug his cheap plastic fork in,

And lathered butter on the disemboweled bun

For the entire economy carriage to see.

Smiling back at Waiming with a, “Ho sic, Ho sic”.

Waiming almost fell backwards through his economy seat,

Hearing Cantonese from the lips of a gweilo,

*Rub it in, don’t give in now*

*-‘moisi ngoi dee guandonghua ‘m ho*

Waiming fell backwards again

Gesticulating at his good wife

Like a man drowning and flailing for his life,

Fell backward into his 4 extra inches of economy legroom,

Inches he had worked long hours of overtime for,

Cutting miles of sheet metal

On the site of Dongguan’s former sex trade,

Converting former massage parlours

Into reinforced concrete mausoleums for the nouveau riches

Or 雅皮士 Yǎpíshì,

Or what they call in Hong Kong, locusts;

Smiling manically at his wife beside him,

He finally found language again,

That word of English that had won him

Such favour from incomprehensible gweilos,

“Good” “GOOD” “GOOOOOD”.



Rick tried a new place for breakfast

The morning after he landed -

-Dan, dosti, Gafe

-Sanwichy?

-Together?

-Dan, dosti, gafe?

*What is the feckin Cantonese for scrambled?*

*I'm feckin' scrambled meself*

-Dan mixie, mixie-uppy!

-Sandwichy, together.

-Hai, hai

*Just give in,*

*Take the feckin' togethery sanwichy,*

- Okay, sanwichy togethery.

The Hong Kong road trip movie is waiting to happen.

Rick Feather must make it happen.

He can picture it like it's already out of

Post-production.

Circles of infinite regress

And burning heat,

A steering wheel like a curled hot poker,

Too hot to handle.

The endless road movie down the Sai Sha Road,

Taking in the infinitesimal, incremental differences

Of villages along the Sap Sze Heung,

The gradations of colour and custom,

Taking us from rural Hong Kong to Mainland China,

The subtle interstitial points on the politometer

From relative freedom to serfdom.

On the Luk Chung Weung Road,

First stop on the tour

From Sai Kung side,

Rick Feather hiked

High to the summit near the mobile towers,

Crickets chirping like an insect orchestra

For the start of day on June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017.

He makes for a path off the main fork  
 Where two roads lead to separate  
 Routes of the Maclehorse Trail.  
 The tessellated grey concrete of the road comes to  
 An end at a clearing of mud and new shoots  
 Of grass spearing out of the still moist soil.

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Whitewashing was the new black in Hong Kong,  
 Whitewashing was on tram sidecar posters,  
 On MTR property posters of Legendria Pavilion,  
 Where a white man and a white woman and a white child  
 Prowled separately in market combat poses,  
 In some digitally manipulated interior floorspace  
 On some imagined 57<sup>th</sup> floor of real estate heaven,  
 Towering above the furnaces of congested living in Choi Hung,  
 Where Rick liked to wade during the humid rainy seasons  
 Of June and July  
 Cloaked in an extralarge LLBEAN windsheeter stolen from an American girlfriend  
 That covered nearly all his white flesh.  
 He liked walking up real close behind queues of the working poor  
 Squelching home through the puddles off the buses at Choi Hung  
 Into their public housing estates and dai pai dongs,  
 Smelling the sweat and nicotine fumes, inhaling the Cantonese,  
 The indistinct incomprehensible babble he told himself  
 Became more comprehensible day by day,  
 Eating their minced pork and their chickens' feet soup,  
 Trying to prove to himself that if caught by the powers that be  
 The people would at last see that here was one whitey who ain't doin'  
 No whitewashing y'hear in this here fine establishment sir. No siree.

Rick's second stop on his grand tour of Hong Kong,  
 Followed the route of the exiled Tang Dynasty poet Han Yu in 819.  
 Legend has it that sitting on the summit of Hong Kong's CastlePeak or Tuen Mun  
 Shan  
 He wrote some of his finest prose.  
 Feather recited aloud the only lines of Han Yu that spoke to him

"In light rain, Heaven Street is moist like butter,  
The grass is green from afar, but not nearby".  
They reminded him of the Irish poetry his grandfather reeled off:

"Is glas iad na cnoic I bhfad uaim"  
*Far away hills look green.*

He thought back to the first peoples of Hong Kong, the Ches,  
How he had taken up residence in the ancient village of Che Ha for 3 years.  
On his first day the wife of one of the village elders showed him the village well,  
"This well goes back 27 generations".  
Feather liked to jog past it each morning  
After he rose from another hot night of troubled sleep.

Feather's third stop on his  
Road trip of Hong Kong,  
Followed the route of the fleeing Sung Dynasty in 1277 to what was the Kai Tak  
Airport,  
A region now called Sung Wong Toi or the Sung Emperor's Terrace,  
Ancient shady spot of the penultimate Sung Emperor Duanzong,  
Where from the 11<sup>th</sup> moon of 1277 Kowloon and the "uninspiring island to the  
south"  
Were part of a united China under Kublai Khan ruled from Beijing.  
The 11 year-old Sung Emperor taking his rest under the giant rock  
that later had his characters carved into it,  
The young boy staring up into the care-worn faces of his guardians,  
"There truly are eight mountains here under which eight dragons must sleep"  
Only for the one sycophantic guardian to reply,  
"No your majesty, there are 9; you are the ninth"  
- Gau Lung, 9 dragons, Kowloon -  
Tall tales to humour a boy emperor passed on as lore to silence a people.

Duanzong, lazing in the fields and bamboo groves of Kwun Foo Cheung,  
Dreamed of his former home in Hang zhou  
With his brothers round him and the lakes leaning towards the South China Sea  
glistening at sundown,  
Unaware of the dying Empire hanging round his neck,  
Daily being hunted by Kublai Khan and his bloodthirsty Mongols,  
Imagining how one day the mountains about him might rise with the flames of  
dragons,

Never knowing how to populate his dream  
 With the dragon-jets and towering-skyscrapers of Heung Geung the flagrant harbor  
 Into whose water he would fall as he made his last escape for Lantau Island on the  
 royal barge.  
 His last inglorious steps off the land of Kowloon one rainy November day in 1277  
 Marking the last steps of a Sung Emperor on the Mainland of the Middle Kingdom.

Rick Feather read the lines of the collapse of his own family  
 In the characters on the stone lintel preserved from the Emperor's Resting Place,  
 Crammed in under towers of hospital wards and wire netting.  
 Rick Feather knew what it was like to lose a family, to lose a father, to lose children.  
 A 50-something US expat who had done the rounds in Asia as a sundown cowboy  
 After his wife of twenty years had left him back in Berkeley mid-levels,  
 He had put family behind him to discover how to live independently  
 As a part of the problem, as part of the whitewash or shitewash,  
 In an Asia the West just couldn't put down, or get, or imitate,  
 Or molly-coddle, or fool, or cheat, or bomb, or fear any longer.  
 He was going to travel the lengths of this patch of Asia,  
 Bathe in its nature, it's sweat-inducing nature, and bring out for himself,  
 Not for no one else but himself, its enduring, mind-ensnaring tenacity and order.  
 He wanted to get it for himself if it was the last thing he did,  
 So help me God!  
 Far from the betting halls, and the casino wheels, and the dancing girls, and the  
 drugs,  
 Far from the ladyboy beaches and the lazysusan banquet halls,  
 And the sharksfin soup and the ivory chopsticks,  
 And the rhino horn heels and the wild-pig tusk mobile phone covers,  
 And the bespectacled nation of machine-like kids  
 With their indolence and innocence being shoe-horned into channels  
 Of learning like the MTR tracks taking so many of their young lives.

**Home**

(from *Goldfish*)

The more you think of it the less  
there is to miss—  
and with a steady hand you empty  
the jug in your head—multi-storeys  
bullet lifts flyovers red taxis impatient  
narrow-lane traffic and women  
in wet markets haggling.  
Bars full of drunken expats and Asian girls.  
Tropical rain drums on zinc roofs.  
Kids growing up with no gardens or parks  
to play in, folding origami frogs and planes  
or chasing after house sparrows with air guns.

As if you could.

In the small hours you hear the departure of a train  
as your city returns, affectionate and smothering.

**Relic**

(from *Goldfish*)

The village was no more now,  
its location faithful  
in the memories of those living.

Before it was buried we'd visit once a month,  
sit in the garden under the blue and white shade  
from afternoon until early evening.  
I remember Grandma's tiny feet  
and strange accent. She kept jars of pickles,  
and stocked her fridge with chicken feed:  
Chinese cabbage, overnight rice, peas.

Her bearded dog would wag its tail  
or run to the gate to bark  
at anyone who passed by,  
but mostly just lay there, staring idly  
at the far mountain opposite  
painted with The People's Future.

We missed the excitement of downpours,  
rain pelting down on the zinc roof,  
flooding the gutters.  
Each time we visited Grandma would tell us  
about neighbours who died or moved away  
or had given up their small zinc huts.

More stray dogs roamed the hills.  
Tourists and locals came in by ferry  
to catch a last glimpse of what came down before the rise of a new town.

## Shanghai Street

(from *Goldfish*)

It is the missing block four of a development,  
the way we avoid going outdoors  
one summer evening of ghost festival.

We suspect foreigners may be confused  
by shop signs that read  
'Celestial Pleasures' or  
'Eternal Living' nestled between  
tuck-shops and stationers  
in the middle of Shanghai Street.  
I heard that folks went there  
for quality timber and craftsmanship.

When I was a kid I used to think  
they were toy shops—all those  
paper houses, paper dolls,  
paper shirts and even mobile phones.  
I didn't know until the day I saw  
Grandmother burned them after purchase.

I didn't know what to do  
with the packet I received:  
a coin, a sweet, and tissue paper. A riddle.  
How strange it feels,  
things we don't talk about.

**Chung Kiu Love Story**

(published in *The Scores*)

There she is: dusting again the antiques  
with a *gai mou sou*: blue porcelain,  
milky snuff bottles, and ivory animals.

When she speaks she fills the room  
with her thick Northern accent,  
charms everyone with that lilt.

Everything comes from newsagents:  
kites, Green Spot Juice, worship goods.  
Bus timetables in our hearts.

From my counter of calligraphy scrolls,  
I ask her out. 'You look like the singer  
Danny Summer.' I'm pleased.

Roasting chicken wings in Tai Tam,  
we hum Paul Simon's tune, 'Cecilia'.  
She turns eighteen

and John Lennon comes to town,  
we wear wide-brimmed  
sunglasses and 'trumpet-shaped' jeans.

I don't own anything. Her mother hates  
the communists (my father worships Mao).  
We are young. Who can stop us?

So we marry the following year,  
in Spring. A simple wedding  
in a teahouse, without a gown.



### King of Kowloon

In your white vest and blue flip-flops,  
you wandered about in the fierce sun,

a can of black paint in your hand.

We read your family history on lamp-posts:

your escape from Liantang, your ancestral home,  
settling for Pink Shek in Kowloon.

You hailed Wen Tianxiang and Sun Yat-sen,  
charged the Queen for usurping your land.

新中國皇 曾榮華 曾福彩

中 英 香港 政府

A self-declared king for fifty years, painting  
all over the colony—a city where the British

lived like paradise birds on mid-Levels  
and the Chinese sweated, selling meats

in wet markets but Oh the freedom  
to march and shout, to do what you did!

Defiance on the lamp-posts,  
defiance at the ferry pier.

撐住五十年不變! 高度自治

叉燒 飯碗 撐住!

Your furious characters on the red postbox  
kindle in us an identity we have always known.

**Chinese Classifiers**

(published in *Oxford Poetry*)

How do I explain the rules for units?

They are spontaneous: *Cheung* for furniture  
and flat surfaces like A4 paper while *jet*  
is for animals and watches. *Lup* for small grains—  
rice, sand, pearls—or stars; *tiu* for anything  
slender, from a noodle to a river. You ask why  
is it *yat tiu* legislation? Why *yat jek egg*?  
Why *yat tou* movie when *tou* means a rabbit?

How come *gan* is the unit for a room  
but it is also good for a school?

Why is Beijing more polluted than London  
and Hong Kong different from the mainland?

How much freedom have you got there?

I tell you I don't know. Someone handed us the rules.

**@aiww #history# #firewall# #language#**

In 1984 I broke an antique urn.  
Since then I have been breaking  
and defacing everything from home

because breaking is the only way  
to tell the fake from fake.

In my blue cotton top  
and working class flip-flops  
I am dangerous as a bee.

Violence in a broken jar.  
Violence in my seed.  
Violence in my tweet.

They are hoping to catch  
all the venomous bees like me  
inside the garden walls.

I'm ugly and obvious as a mountain.  
The hidden cameras stare at me  
with envy, plotting their own escape.

### At the wet market

(published in *Stand*)

I used to find it barbaric, mother,  
but you'd bring me along,  
a young girl then, to the market:  
a theatre of blood. It pained me

to imagine the shuffling feet,  
the croaking pleas, their feathers  
shed from their struggles  
against the tightening.

I used to find it barbaric to face  
that red-faced man in the shop  
who gave us the number tag.  
His clammy hand. *Forty minutes*

he said, and we walked away  
from what took place  
under the red plastic lamps  
in that squalid cage-house.

I used to find it barbaric:  
the taste of *ching yuan* chicken  
served with ginger and spring onion  
in the family meal, just like

any other family in that city  
of high-rise flats and wet markets.  
An almost-past life now, contained  
in small, distant cubes of light.

**A metallic bit in your tongue**

(published in *Well Versed*)

You, who have nothing wrong  
with your tongue, do not know us.  
You're from a planet where  
justice has no other orbit.  
You've never read a book  
then tried to unlearn it.  
For you a deer is just a deer,  
and Orwell's farm has no real animals.  
I don't blame you. But we have read  
Boxer's story and don't even  
dare to cry. Reality is too mad,  
too close sometimes. Your map  
shows every street and station.  
You assume every dream or feeling  
has a definition. I don't explain  
what we, with all the new wealth  
of the country, can't buy.  
It's an expensive word.  
And you, having never endured  
the metallic bit in your tongue,  
cannot imagine.

**Metamorphosis**

(published in *Voice & Verse*)

The change is all so subtle we hardly  
notice: at first it is just the colour  
of the postbox or a missing crown  
on a uniform. We laugh at the promise  
horse-racing will go on forever.  
Slowly the textbooks for our children  
are changing: less on the colony,  
more on 'the Chinese dream' and unity.

On birth: pregnant mothers crossing  
the border in haste before due dates.  
On lifestyle: fewer noodle stalls,  
more shops of gold. And every day,  
in Lo Wu, you hear frustrated voices  
and grating wheels of trolley cases.  
It's more useful to speak Mandarin  
when you shop: and swipe Union Pay.

The pop stars are all touring north.  
Nobody takes news seriously  
anymore because it is biased  
however you look at it. Lately  
there are those who weep  
for the death of Pokemon.  
I wonder how a city  
can outgrow the country,  
if going home is still an option

**Yangtze**

(published in *UCity Review*)

From the west to the east  
the river runs its course

where small tourist boats  
pass through spectacular relief.

The wind you hear in the valley  
is made sublime by the poets.

But the grief from what used to be  
the largest cradle of fish and shrimps:

the depth of this water's wrath, devouring  
the children and stone age relics.

To tame the water dragon  
is as impossible as learning to live with it.

Do not ask me where the white dolphins  
belong in the bigger river of things;

I don't want to know what happen  
to the porpoises. Please stop asking.