

SHE SAID, LET THERE BE LIGHT

by Chinkeung Li

In the beginning there was the scent of green papaya. But what was there before the beginning or rather what was the pre-history prior to history? Given the nature of this world there must be a “before” before the beginning just as there must be an “after” after the end. Or was it a primal dream on the loop that had become the foundational memory just like making noises with the mouth becoming speech and speech becoming thoughts and thoughts going through the neural machine becoming memory? But the memory of being pushed round and round in a field filled with the scent of green papaya didn’t have the fuzzy quality of dreams for it was as physiologically real as sucking your thumb. Of course the question remained whether a one-year old could tell what a field of papaya was. There was something ancestral about this and the only possible answer was no one understood the mind of a one-year old. And the dizzying sense of

spinning round and round had never gone away as the pervading scent of green papaya had accentuated the feeling of giddiness. It was such a defining experience! One that had cast a long shadow over a lifetime! But at what point the word *papaya* got into the tiny head was a mystery that refused to be dissected despite a great deal of effort in searching for answers for over five decades. The three sounds pa-pa-ya stringed together into a *word* inside the head of the one-year old was a feat that manifested itself from an essence that could never be explained.

He had a narrow escape when his first, and only, girlfriend got shot of him. He knew his fear would be so overwhelming that he would have a nervous breakdown if she insisted on going to bed with him. Whenever she kissed him, his heart missed several beats and he felt faint, in anticipation of further amorous demands and a terrifying, and humiliating, showdown. *Don't you worry, I'll tell you what to do when you are ready* — she was kind and understanding. He was never ready. It was impossible for him even to imagine doing it, whether with a woman or, for that matter, with a man. The mechanics abhorred him, the details inaccessible to his mind. And the messiness of it all. His sense of relief was huge when she eventually cottoned on to the fact that sex just wasn't his cup of tea.

More so than Darwinian evolution or molecular ontogenetics this singular spinning event of being pushed round and round in a papaya field had irreversibly shaped one's mental ecology with ramifications impossible to fathom but the infant mind already possessed a primordial truth despite there being no words in that little head. Right at the center of the experience was a *disembodied voice* talking nonstop and its auditory effect was immediate whereas its face was invisible because it was strapped in a forward-facing buggy moving at speed. Nevertheless it was assumed Mama was pushing the buggy although the voice was too deep to be a woman's but it couldn't be the father's because he was never there and so the belief was it must be Mama doing the pushing. Anyway the voice was mumbling on and on and shouting periodically in an incoherent way sometimes feral sometimes full of the most heartrending kind of angst. Couldn't make out what the voice was saying at first but there was a regular refrain so characteristic that even the one-year old brain had registered it and from there an oppressive heat had arisen bearing down on the little head which was a sensation that could still be summoned half a century on just by closing the eyes.

Don't you think you are too old now to get married? His mother said to him dismissively. Waving her hand in her characteristic, theatrical way. But he wasn't going to get married. He merely wanted to move into his own place

and, perhaps, try out a slightly different life. Before it was too late. But it was too late. He knew it. Strange to grow old together with his own mother, watching all the changes she was going through. Like a surrealist play performed on a palimpsest of a stage. Like *The Chairs* being enacted night after night in their living room. The thought that he was once upon a time inside his mother's womb filled him with queasiness. And he had to cope with all her menopausal vicissitudes and shenanigans. He found the whole thing draining. And yet he couldn't summon up the courage to change anything. *I always knew you'd like to abandon me, just like what your father did!* That was grossly unfair. He didn't know his father — *he* died too long ago. He couldn't even find a tiny scrap of memory about a man that could be called *dad*. All his life, it was *mum* that was the center of gravity. But he was unable to talk back to her. He knew if he opened his mouth he would stammer without managing to utter a single word.

As the buggy was being pushed round and round the eyes were hurting and had to be kept shut and the spinning made hearing almost impossible despite the urgent need to decipher the alien sounds emanating continuously from behind. Only gradually did the cascading, rhythmic refrain filter through. *Let-there-be-light! Let-there-be-light!* Four distinct syllables that somehow the one-year old managed to recognize. The most important reason why this was a defining experience was the fact that the linguistic *Gestalt*

of “let-there-be-light” had inaugurated a sense of sinister *otherness* permeating the past fifty years like there was somebody else sitting inside this body doing the thinking the feeling and the remembering. All the work of a mind. The four words were inseparable from each other as they had coalesced into a ball bouncing from one wall of the brain to another in perpetual motion defying the laws of physics. Sometimes the interminable chant was like harmless background music but other times the four-syllable *Gestalt* was dancing right in front of the eyes like a mantra running amok.

Although he felt at peace with himself, the regularity of going to work, coming home to cook and clean, doing the shopping on Tuesday evening and Saturday morning, and watching the ten o’clock news every night with his mother was just not enough. All this seemed hollow, mystifying, ineffable. He did toy with the idea of learning something new, like photography or Italian, but attending a class with twenty odd strangers was too much of a mountain to climb. It wasn’t the case that his mother wanted him to be stuck at home all the time. She was a bridge player and went out once a week to her bridge club just a few streets away. He was tempted when at one time she offered to take him to the club, but in the end felt too uncomfortable to go along.

There was a distinct memory of the field of papaya being a haphazard plantation of pendulous green bells of all shapes and sizes swaying of their own accord in the humid air as the buggy was moving frantically round the place. And the scent of the papaya was synaesthetically merged with the low-frequency chant of *let-there-be-light* thus bestowing on the syllables an otherworldly complexity that defied analysis. Smelling is a most peculiar sensory function because its source is never certain and cannot be definitively proved and its shape not obvious nor its substance tangible. It is deeply troubling that a body is never under the control of the person who owns it as how tall or fat the body becomes or how hairy or bald the head would turn out to be is not subject to the will of the person and most annoyingly your body odor is notoriously hard to get rid of particularly if it is the scent of green papaya.

He did philosophy at university for a term, but quickly switched to economics. During that first term, he found himself tripping over metaphysics, and got lost in the labyrinthine maze of ontology. He would stare at the word “being,” and made a valiant attempt to work out whatever there was behind it but would fail dismally, whilst the five letters were sashaying gleefully in front of his eyes. Even the “I” — *das Ich* as he first encountered it — was a huge stumbling block. It became obvious that *thinking* was not his forte. He preferred to grapple with numbers, and

economics proved much simpler. Sometimes he felt thinking was a minefield. Even though it could also be exhilarating. In his head, each and every thought was a boulder, hefty and rough and impossible for him to shift. He was sure his hands were too small to get a proper grip. So he avoided books. Particularly his mother's books. He kept busy with small *things*. Building model airplanes was infinitely easier to handle.

Memory is a strange beast to tame as it is by nature a shape-shifting behemoth with texture so slippery that any attempt at its identification or capture would inevitably fail even with the most intricate of methods or the task being executed by the most intelligent of scientists. With the dawning of *let-there-be-light* there was a hope that indeed light would be let into one's head so that memories could be redeemed to take up their proper place in an autobiographical trajectory that each and every sentient being has an inalienable right to. But *let-there-be-light* had never fulfilled its grand promise and disappointment became the boundary condition of existence as known and lived throughout this past half-century regardless of the numerous twists and turns in the plotline or the accidents and serendipitous happenings that littered one's flight path. And memories always carried a solid question mark with them.

As a child, he was given to sitting for long hours by the window watching people in the neighborhood come and go. This gave him a sense of connection, as if the bodies moving in every direction in the streets below represented the comings and goings inside his head. But after he had started high school, this simple enjoyment suddenly mutated into something incomprehensible and he began to feel guilty whenever he looked at the outside world from the window. Like an immoral distancing and the shirking of responsibilities. Out of nowhere, an accusation emerged from the deepest recess of his mind. *Have I hurt anybody?* It was a simple question, but over time it had cartwheeled into a statement of fact: *I have hurt somebody!* But who, he couldn't tell. Every night as he lay in bed trying to fall asleep, the faces of all the people he knew would parade in front of him asking him the unanswerable question: *why did you hurt me?* Mercifully, this torture stopped as abruptly as it had started. But having gone through months of tormenting doubts, he felt his head had changed shape permanently, and he had got into the habit of avoiding window seats, whether indoors or on a bus. When he decided to do philosophy at university, he had high hopes of finding the answer to the question of *guilt*.

Whether there was any memory of what the father looked like was impossible to ascertain. Had never clapped eyes on him and there wasn't any photograph of any man in the house and while there was an image in the head of a tall

fellow with the label “father” its provenance was unknown which means this could well have arisen from the wishful thinking of a childish mind and in any case the image faded during adolescence although an intense obsession with the father’s absence persisted until he became an old and tattered toy and eventually discarded. And there was always the question of what the father’s scent was like because smell is impossible to escape from and is where a person’s identity is anchored as no one could stop breathing whereas eyes could close the nose couldn’t. Sometimes when listening to a story being told it seems unreal but living the story makes its reality stark naked and it hits you hard with the rancid odor of life.

One of his mother’s menopausal shenanigans was her meandering, repetitive monologues. He often felt lost trying to follow them. It was easiest to listen without asking questions and simply archive whatever she said in his head. She used to go on and on about a butterfly flapping its wings in Timbuktu and bringing unprecedented hurricanes to cities along the North Sea coast. She also said they should stop having a shower every morning because using hot water kept wars going all over the world. And then she decided to remove fish and other seafood from their diet. It made shopping problematic as she had stopped eating red meats since she was a teenager, and was never keen on green vegetables anyway. She was adamant that it was eminently sensible to do without fish.

There were too many people taking Prozac, and it was inevitable that the pill would go through the guts of these people into the sewage system, and when sewage was discharged into rivers or the sea, the fish would ingest Prozac. Fish in her dinner would mean Prozac getting into her stomach, her blood, and, ultimately, her brain. That was a big no-no! Latterly she added the disastrous problem of micro plastic inside prawns and fish to her homily about giving up seafood. As she became older and more infirm, she talked about these things more often, bringing novel elements into the same story in each and every new iteration. Although her pronouncements gave him headaches, he nevertheless found her incessant voice curiously soothing, and was totally enthralled by her ingenuity.

It is difficult to explain how children manage to hear what parents are saying when the parents are talking to them while walking with them or pushing them around in a buggy like what happened the other day when a six-foot tall man was talking to his young son as they were walking hand in hand in the park and this father was talking away softly without even once turning towards his son and your ears couldn't make out what he was saying although they were only a few paces ahead and so it was baffling that the young boy who was no older than four seemed perfectly capable of interjecting his childish response from time to time which suggested that they must have the knack of

making up some more or less coherent conversation without actually hearing one another's words or perhaps there was a controlling script in their heads and their mouths simply produced what was written in the script. And suddenly a newspaper photograph came to mind of the lifeless body of a toddler washed up on a beach and somehow the bouncy little boy in the park and the dead boy on the beach became one and the same and most disconcertingly their faces inexplicably merged with the boy in the buggy spinning round in the papaya field and you stopped dead in the middle of the park thoroughly confused for a good long while as the father and his son disappeared into the far distance.

How much was a life worth? That was the sort of questions in economics he couldn't deal with. Recession and prices were topics that made sense to him. Life insurance policy was an oxymoron he couldn't figure out. He spent a lot of time studying as he had little else to do. And he needed a degree to get a job. He got on alright with his mother despite everything. She had friends and did her own things. He was happy that she seemed happy. There was a time during his childhood when he could tell his mother was unhappy. He didn't know why. There was no mention of his father. Sometimes he had a weird feeling that the idea there was a father responsible for his existence was in fact planted in his head by some occult force. And he thought perhaps the description "single-

parent family,” in his case, meant he didn’t *require* a father to be conceived. He remembered learning about asexual reproduction in biology class at school. Like immaculate conception. But that was too much for his mind to cope with. He never dared say anything to anybody about this.

Even though the disembodied voice was too low to be Mama’s, the idea of the father pushing the buggy in the papaya field was logically untenable because that watershed event had a menacing quality which was never associated with thoughts about father and also the scent of papaya could never have anything to do with a man for the two are of diametrically opposite essence. Fortunately or unfortunately depending on one’s perspective there wasn’t any other man in the entire family i.e. no brothers uncles grandfathers male cousins nephews or for that matter stepfathers but life went on regardless. The father only became an obsession for a few short years because of the funny stories school chums told about their dads while messing about in the playground during break time. Inevitably the whole thing about *let-there-be-light* had become an unbreakable screen separating you and the school chums. Friendship stillborn. All those barren years.

He couldn’t hear what the man was saying even though the man was shouting frantically. The window was too high up, and the noise of the ferocious fire was drowning out

everything. But he *knew* what the man was shouting about. *Save my son, please! Save my son!* These words were ringing inside his ears. People in the street were yelling, crying, cursing. Firefighters were running hither and thither trying desperately to contain the blaze. But no one could do anything. It was an inferno. And then he saw a small bundle of a child being thrown out of the smoke-filled window. The crowd below surged forward. Suddenly something exploded and the man disappeared from sight as flames engulfed the window from all directions, shattering windowpanes into smithereens. He shut his eyes... it was indecent to watch. There was no mercy in the universe: he felt he was wrestling with angels. *I can't see the light*, he kept saying to himself. The next day, he tried to tell his mother all this over breakfast while the pungent smell left by the burning hell was still thick in the air. But he wasn't sure she was listening.

It was beyond doubt that *let-there-be-light* was the ultimate source of the insidious dread you had experienced for years as the voice was coming from above and behind the buggy at a special location endowed with the significance of a topographical quagmire as if that space would at any moment become a black hole sucking in everything in its wake. Struggling with the voice and instinctively shaking the head with what force the little body could muster in an attempt to dislodge it was absolutely no use and the scent of green papaya attacked the nostrils without mercy, with

seduction and condemnation in equal measures. This was an afternoon walk that took place during nap time but suddenly you were fully awake with eyes wide open because the acceleration was making the heart race and the nappy was totally soaked and thus the nap had turned into a smelly wet nappy and then something snapped inside the head and you became trapped in the relentless spinning with the papaya-scented let-there-be-light voice morphing into a threat that the little mind was desperately resisting but unable to neutralize.

There was a time when he did wonder about what it'd be like to have a son, even though he knew full well the production process was beyond his reach. Despite not being sure if he really wanted or was competent to become a father, a sense of curiosity about parenthood had descended on him like the descent of the Holy Ghost upon the apostles. While not particularly interested in religion, or art for that matter, he had often accompanied his mother to the National Gallery as a young boy and was fascinated by the depiction of Pentecost in some of the paintings he saw. For a long time, he kept chanting in his head "Father, Son and the Holy Ghost" and would get a feeling of solace from it.

Let there be light! Such a profound utterance even though the thought of it always aroused an unnameable dread. During the first few years of life you were constantly trying to bury

this dizzying experience as if mere trying would make the voice go away whereas asking Mama any question about it was impossible and even if an attempt was made it'd probably be hard to come up with anything sensible to say other than something stupid and Mama would burst out laughing and that would be devastating because her laughter was always full of ambiguities and piercing like a spear. Mercifully the dread did subside but the need to write things down had become irresistible because it was clear that lists and numbers and texts were essential in stabilizing the mind particularly lists of important words or tangential thoughts and daily records of events or compilations of exchange rates GDP RPI or multiples of thirteen or seventeen et cetera with the numbers arranged in alternating ascending and descending order and more often than not in color-coded sublists. Although this kind of writing was *hoi polloi* there was no doubt that reality was made up of such output rather than the canon of great literature revered by respectable commentators or university dons.

He stared at the newspaper in disbelief: a deliberate *leak* of a secret document from the Prime Minister's Office was responsible for the collapse of peace talks between the government and the militant separatists in the north. This had thrown him off balance as anything that leaked always spelled terror in his mind. *Is there no goodness in this world anymore?* He remembered when his mother fell seriously ill

for the first time, shortly after his promotion at work, he found a leak in one of the windows in the house and his peace of mind was shattered. When it rained heavily, a damp patch would appear on the wall around the lower left corner of the window. He was taken by surprise how anxious this had made him. As he couldn't find any crack or hole on the outside wall, it was impossible for him to pinpoint where the leak was coming from. In the end, he put sealant round the whole window frame, both inside and outside, but to his dismay, the damp patch continued to rear its taunting head. Even the glazier was at a loss, telling him he'd just have to live with the problem. From then on, the droning of the dehumidifier had become something he and his mother took for granted whenever it rained. And his fear of anything that leaked quickly became chronic and crippling.

Mediocrity was hard to bear what with a mediocre career spanning nearly thirty years with just one minor promotion and a mediocre intelligence that had produced not even one exceptional thought that was worth anybody's attention and the musical taste was mediocre as well with nothing to surprise other people not to mention the mediocre appearance and physique that made you look like a nondescript factory-produced mannequin. Somehow the hope of "let-there-be-light" becoming in due course a blessing rather than remaining an omen started to infiltrate one's mind engendering the anticipation that indeed there

could be a special *light* from where wisdom would emerge thus illuminating all secrets. But that turned out to be an empty hope and mediocrity was like a persistent guilt enveloping the heart and it never went away. It was exhausting living with mediocrity.

He always believed that love was the foundation of all things. Even though the notion of love wasn't easy to analyze. He had at one time tried to deconstruct it into its constituents, but got thoroughly befuddled in the process. The feeling of love was too slippery, and to his chagrin all he got was a slimy sensation in his hands. And he wasn't sure whether his feeling for his mother was ordinary love or something more exotic, even esoteric. After he started school, he gradually realized how unusual the sleeping arrangement in his house was. He and his mother had always shared a bedroom, until the day she died. In fact, he could remember they shared the same bed for a long time. It was only when he timidly asked for his own bed before starting high school that she reluctantly bought him one, but still in the same bedroom. The other bedroom in the house was full of stuff. It was impossible for anyone to navigate round the surplus furniture and boxes and suitcases dumped there in a higgledy-piggledy fashion. And piles of his mother's books, plus reams of old newspapers, weekend magazines, and official letters or documents all stacked up everywhere. And large number of clothes! Some had become smelly, some moth-eaten, not only in

wardrobes and cupboards, but also strewn about on chairs and tables, or on top of boxes or suitcases. The room was always dark because his mother never allowed the curtains to be drawn apart. *We don't need light here*, she would say. He didn't object. Or didn't dare to. *Did my father kill himself?* It was one ordinary, boring Sunday when the question, totally out of the blue, crashed into his subterranean mind while he was rummaging in this room. He was baffled, but somehow — he didn't know how — it seemed to make sense.

Turned off heating straight away after coming home from the hospital the morning Mama died because while she liked the heat you preferred the cold and as the heating was at full blast before she went into hospital the house was like an oven. She was kept at home right up to her imminent exit and then the medical staff let you sleep in a chair by her hospital bed for a week until the end. She was drifting in and out of consciousness the whole time and the doctors said there was no hope and all they could do was to make it as painless as possible and she wasn't fed or given any fluid by mouth on account of the risk of choking and for something to do there was the task of wetting her lips periodically with a small sponge dipped in water like a never-ending religious ritual. Whether to hold Mama's hand in the vigil during those last days was an unanswered question as it was too embarrassing to ask the nurses. Mama's breathing was slow and shallow sometimes rather laborious and every now and then she made throaty noises

as if trying to cough up something and a thought came to mind that perhaps this was how a dying person *talked* — the self-arguing with the self. Not sure about what to expect but there was an anticipation of revelation like she would leave some important words before going through the departure gate but she didn't say anything and breathed her last whilst still in a coma taking with her to the other side all her suffering and secrets. The disembodied voice continued to drone on and on the whole time and the only thing one could do was sitting by her bed watching shadows on the ceiling play out the portentous story of the papaya-scented night: *let there be light, let there be light, let there be light...!*

What finally put him off doing philosophy at university was a comic-strip joke he read in a student magazine: A cat was chasing a fly and the fly landed on the cat's tail. The cat turned swiftly and caught its own tail in its teeth, but the fly moved nimbly along out of harm's way. Trying to catch the fly the cat swallowed the tail but still the fly managed to cunningly skip further up the cat's back. And so the angry cat kept going — swallowing its own behind, its legs, its chest, its neck, and finally its own head, leaving the fly buzzing around and no cat. When he finished reading, he broke into a cold sweat. *Total reflexivity leads to complete self-destruction!* A terrifying thought. He decided there and then to switch from philosophy to economics.

First night back in the house alone after Mama's eternal exit was a sleepless one while sitting fully dressed in the kitchen in the dark trying not to think but failing miserably to ward off a question that had been going round in the head since Mama's last breath: *When a dying person who is unconscious but still alive moves into death what does she feel in the transition and if she is dreaming while unconscious where does the dream go at the instant of crossing to the other side?*

Over the years, he slowly returned to thinking about things that could be classified as philosophy. But only hesitantly, without trying too hard. After a period of time, he managed to cope better as thoughts started coming to him more naturally, like leaves falling in autumn, and he felt able to develop some sort of rapport with them. The trick was, when the going got rough he would wave a white flag and retreated to the safety of his bunker. These thoughts were magnanimous enough not to pursue him over the battlefield, and when they next met he would still experience the *frisson* of being in the presence of a first date. But he felt he had to tread carefully, as he still worried about falling down the cracks between thoughts.

Being orphaned by the death of Mama had made the scent of green papaya more insistent as if it was a replacement at once welcome and despised and what was dreaded for fifty

odd years had now taken on quite a different shine
notwithstanding the shame and guilt that sniffing green
papaya might engender as there was nothing more
important than preserving whatever that had nourished the
infant mind.

Coming home early one day he got the shock of seeing his
mother dancing with a man in the living room. A man he'd
never seen before. They smiled at him as he walked in but
didn't stop. Soft music from the century-old gramophone
caressed everything in the room as the dancers deftly
choreographed an enigmatic story. He felt completely at
sea, not knowing what to do. He could feel the crackling of
some mysterious energy in the room, as if naked electricity
in the naked air was pulsating towards his naked face.
Embarrassment quickly took hold of him and he left the
house without saying a word. That was the only time he
wandered in town aimlessly for hours on end,
overwhelmed by a deep anxiety of what he might find
when he had to, eventually, return home. He wasn't sure if
he should feel outraged; it was more fear than anger that
consumed him. When at long last he tiptoed into his house
in the small hours of the morning, he didn't find anything
untoward. His mother was sound asleep, alone. And
nothing was out of place. The following day she behaved
as if nothing had happened, and as he couldn't find the
right words to ask questions, he just let the whole thing
drop. A few weeks later, he started to wonder, for no

reason at all, whether this man was in fact his father. It might not be as farfetched an idea as it first appeared to be. As his mother had never said in so many words that his father was *dead*, perhaps anything was possible.

Mama always wore black from head to toe from the innermost to the outermost whether she was indoors or outdoors and whether it was warm or cold as if she was married to this one color alone and when she walked past it was like a gargantuan dark cloud sweeping across the whole space absorbing and trapping all the light leaving you shivering and wondering what had happened to the world. She was tall and elegant and there was no doubt that wearing black became her even though sometimes she seemed to have practically disappeared into whatever black apparel she was wrapped in.

When he was about seven, his mother started to go away regularly leaving him in the care of her mother. This happened near enough every weekend for a year, and then it stopped abruptly. He felt bewildered at first, but very quickly settled down to a regular pattern of living between the two houses. As his grandmother was very kind to him he was pleased to stay with her. In these twelve months, he had become very fond of his granny, who often took him to the park, the seaside, or the zoo. But she wasn't a talker; her kindness was expressed through small touches such as

an enduring smile or some softly spoken praises. As an adult, he found it hard to recall what his grandmother looked like, nor could he remember her voice. That saddened him deeply. His mother rarely talked about her mother, except saying on one occasion, rather cryptically, that she and her mother shared the same karma. When he asked, diffidently, what “karma” was, she smiled and raised the index finger of her left hand, and nodded twice. Feeling befuddled, he was about to ask what she meant when an image flashed through his mind: a long scar on his mother’s back which he thought he’d seen a long time ago but wasn’t sure. Before he could say anything, he saw his mother’s face suddenly darken, and he swallowed his question and turned his attention back to the spitfire model he was working on.

The idea of leakage has been for a long time something that threatens the stability of one’s conscience but it isn’t so much a matter of physical structures collapsing more the terror of disintegration of the essence of things. If each and every single item in the universe is subject to entropy, leakage will be the locus of regression which negates all rationality order and cohesion in such a way that only darkness would remain. This was so enormous a discovery that one’s mind could barely contain it and in an instant it became crystal clear why *let-there-be-light* was an irrefutably significant revelation because the absence of light will usher in the irrevocable leaking of the very essence of this

or any other parallel universe regardless of whatever remedial actions mankind or womankind might be able to conjure up and yet you'd never experienced *let-there-be-light* as redemptive as on the contrary it always presented itself as a tyrannical judgement and a declaration of the imminent annihilation of the mind even though there was a huge question mark over whether a mind did exist in the first place. And so the conundrum remained, and over time the fear of leakage became attached to one's bladder with dreadful consequences for growing old.

For a number of years he was bothered by a low-grade dull ache at the back of his neck. He wasn't sure it was something he should consult the doctor about as the last thing he wanted was to be labelled hypochondriac. One day he tentatively mentioned this to his mother and she stared at him for a while without saying anything, making him blush violently. He wasn't sure whether to get up and go into the kitchen or stay seated where he was. Eventually his mother shook her head, smiled and mumbled something about marrying a hypochondriac and giving birth to another one. He felt a fever swallowing his head and started to sweat. *Of course you should go and see the doctor!* His mother said just in time to stop his tears. *You don't want it preying on your mind, do you?* He never did see the doctor though. A few days after his mother died, he had the sensation that the dull ache in his neck had migrated down to his groin and he began to worry about his prostate. Not

that he was afraid of dying — it was the *embarrassment* of becoming ill that troubled him.

How did the one-year-old figure out the papaya was green and not yellow? Scent is a complex thing. So is a baby's mind. Transformations appear. Reality forms. Worlds come into existence. The inchoate grasp of *let-there-be-light* was beyond comprehension although this only ever happened once it could well be the story of a lifetime: spinning round accompanied by a disembodied voice and persecuted by the scent of green papaya which sometimes was seductive like vanilla but other times repulsive as rotten banana. Did pluck up courage one day at school to tell several chums the let-there-be-light experience but they thought it was hilarious and laughed and made fun of it all and one of them cracked a joke about the smell of women which sent everybody into wild hysterics and none of them had cottoned on to the immense importance of this singular event which marked one's first birthday and so the mouth clamped shut and no mention was ever made of it again. It'd be a good idea to fold up the world and put it in the pocket to keep it safe.

As he was finishing his final year at university and having just been dumped by his only girlfriend, *he saw the light*. It was a warm Saturday evening, his mother was in bed and he was sitting staring at the television when he heard

somebody pounding on the front door. He rose sluggishly from his half-slumber, beer can in hand, and went to answer the door. There was nobody. He stood there, puzzled, looking into the darkness outside. And then he heard the grandfather clock in the hall sing out the midnight hour. He thought to himself, *Oh another lousy day!* But no sooner had he shut the door did the knocking start again. He opened it with a violent swing, but was still staring into emptiness. He froze, because the sound of knocking continued, right in front of him. But there was nobody doing the knocking! Suddenly the darkness burst into vibrant colors, and he mumbled, *now I see the light!* The last bit of his consciousness was a man's voice muttering in his ear, *Open the door! Let me in!*

When Mama fell terminally ill her appearance changed with a look of regret rippling across her whole face continually as if there was a suboceanic eruption going on and on without any teleological direction and its contagious power was so irresistible that you were left with no doubt the feeling of giddiness swirling in the middle of the chest was the sense of regret spelled out by Mama's illness which had a hand-in-glove relationship with the terminal crisis befalling the nation right at that time thus serving as a portent of the ineluctable destiny of the world. Politics isn't a let-there-be-light operation and when one made a Herculean attempt to analyze what regret was the sensation this provoked in one's body was too politically

incorrect. But you intuitively knew what the regret was about as there was no doubt that Mama wanted not a son but a daughter as she'd feel close to the latter whereas a progeny of the other gender would stick out like a sore thumb and so the regret was like waves after waves of an angry sea bashing the shore hammering away any hope political or otherwise that might remain and this was the truth notwithstanding the mixing of metaphors.

He listened to her singing obliviously to herself, in a soft and tender voice. A song he thought he knew but couldn't get any word to materialize in his head. In fact, he wasn't sure what language it was. She was cooking him a meal in her neat and tidy kitchen, a couple of months after they'd been going out with one another. He could never invite her home — the thought of having to tell his mother about the existence of his girlfriend made him nauseous. There was a bottle of red wine, half full, standing on the dining table. She drank while cooking and her glass was nearly empty; but he'd only had a few sips of his. Though its quantity was negligible, the alcohol was already working on him powerfully. He felt red in the face and troublingly out of control, as if something lascivious had invaded his body. *Not long now!* She said, still stirring the stew, and turned, smiling at him. He couldn't remember the next day how he managed to leave her house before the meal was ready. She was cross but somehow was willing to forgive him.

The father's disappearance was something Mama never spoke about and if one's memory served she had shown little emotion about her erstwhile husband and how they managed to produce a son was impossible to know as there must be an infinite number of reasons why two people got married or became parents and although mankind stands on the summit of intelligence within the animal kingdom the exercise of the intellect by any individual human being is optional and so people walk and eat and copulate *without* thinking and even *think* without thinking.

One of the things (there were many) about his mother he couldn't quite work out was whether or not she was a beautiful woman. Not that he was consciously analyzing this — it was just a question mark that refused to be defused and he did worry about it going off one day and smashing everything to bits. It wasn't a problem for him to think of his mother as melancholic, but beauty was literally *unthinkable*. Not a conscious judgement though, just a sense of a category mistake being made if the adjective "beautiful" somehow got mixed up with his mother. In fact, he often experienced confusion between melancholy and beauty. Whenever he wanted to describe something or somebody as beautiful, it often turned out that melancholic would appear to be the more accurate word to use.

The smell of the hospital ward where Mama lay waiting for the Ferryman was a foul mustiness with urine mixing with iodoform and probably a number of other nasty chemicals as well and the combination was so acrid that its attack on the consciousness was unrelenting to such an extent that when the let-there-be-light chorus began to bring back the scent of green papaya it was a welcome relief and gradually you managed to conjure up the scent of papaya whenever the hospital smell reached an unbearable level as the lesser of the two evils was the only choice. Whether in the end Mama would be so thoroughly embalmed by this mustiness when she went over to the other side became a worry that was hard to articulate to the nurses or the doctors.

The very last lecture he attended before finally giving up philosophy was on the subject of *interiority*, given by a professor from France. But she looked more like a supermodel than an academic — that was his first impression of her. The lecture turned out to be completely opaque to him, not only because her accent was difficult to follow even though he found it enchanting, but also because the concepts she so liberally sprinkled over each and every sentence were totally alien to him. And so he spent the two hours trying to imagine her interior and to connect her face to the kaleidoscope of symbols swirling in his head. He was still sitting in the lecture theatre after everybody was gone, as if he'd been superglued to the

chair and was unable to move. For a few days afterwards, he'd feel a sense of vertigo whenever he looked into the mirror, as if he was falling into the interior of his reflected face. And then he read the joke about the cat and the fly, and knew he must get away from philosophy.

Life is like a large handful of beads with no twine to string them up into something useful for example as prayer beads for the placating of the gods or as beauty adornment for self-enhancement and there is no doubt that loose beads are destined to get lost as evidently so in all the scattered years that Mama had lived through even though she might not feel her life was without a twine like the one you are living now the conundrum is undeniable so much so that perhaps the only hope lies in the beads turning into libation thus bestowing some comforting inevitability to this life which at the moment faces every possibility of disintegrating into bits that will no doubt be scattered by the four winds.

He woke up with a start from a restless sleep just as an elusive dream was disappearing off the horizon. It was not long after he started his first job, and he still found it hard to re-adjust to the change in his daily routines. As he lay in bed wondering about the dream, he suddenly felt an acute absence and realized there wasn't the sound of his mother breathing on the other side of the room. He sat up

abruptly, fearing the worst. And then he saw that her bed was empty. He glanced at the clock while hurriedly getting out of bed — it was two in the morning. As he tiptoed into the kitchen, he saw his mother sitting by the dining table weeping silently, her tear-filled eyes staring into the middle distance. He went over and sat across from her but she didn't blink. It was only after a while, and after summoning up sufficient courage was he able to ask the simple question. *What's wrong?* His mother slowly turned and looked him in the eye. Almost deliberately, she left a long pause. *Not being a woman, how could you ever understand?* It wasn't said harshly, more like how she always talked, with fondness, to the dog they once had. When he thought about this strange incident later, he felt a warm glow inside. This was the one and only experience he had of getting a little bit closer to his mother's heart.

Despite Mama's brief but disastrous affairs with several unsavory characters after which she went off men completely and buried herself in books and the effect of her misadventures on your infant self was a deep and lingering sense of bewilderment — despite all this a happy enough little person seemed to have emerged and to all intents and purposes everything was fine until you took the first tentative steps to walk without the hands holding on to anything and being a late developer you were nearly four before the legs managed to move freely with sufficient confidence and the first time walking round the living

room unaided the disembodied voice came flooding back bringing with it the spinning soggy buggy with the scent of green papaya and the eyes were hurting and had to shut tight and the first thing coming into your half-consciousness the following morning was the insistent whisper of *let-there-be-light* like a beckoning call. Mama, sound asleep, didn't stir. Fear gripped the heart as the papaya-scented disembodied voice took up permanent residence inside.

The fact that he at one time had a girlfriend, albeit just for a few months, was in no small measure a consequence of his mother's desire to visit a desert country. That was their only holiday abroad. One lazy afternoon on the sweltering rooftop terrace of the guesthouse he saw a young woman with an open book on her lap, and was immediately captivated by her forlorn and faraway look. She was sitting there like a statue dreaming of a different world. He could sense the melancholy in her. Leaving his iced coffee untouched, he kept looking at her surreptitiously, ignoring the postcards his mother had asked him to write — to people he barely knew. It was pure accident that later on he overheard the young woman telling the guesthouse owner where she was from, and he thought this must be fate as they in fact lived in the same town. A few days after coming home, he bumped into her at the university library. When she eventually dumped him, he came to the

conclusion that time was a hollow sphere rather than a straight line.

The first time Mama used her tape-recorder brought back memory of how the let-there-be-light voice had instilled fear in the mind. It was unsettling that your nine-year-old voice from the audiotape was not the same as the one when you heard yourself talk as if somebody else had taken possession of your mouth like what happened after the spinning walk in the papaya field. Years later the butchered remains of a car noiselessly rusting away off a footpath by a loch also brought back the same feeling as its chassis had rotted to bits and the only sign of connection between this metallic corpse and human life was the mound of fag ends near the remains of the tire on the driver's side and this abandoned car being left to die an ignoble death was such a scene of desolation that it evoked a sense of alienation with no subject or object but only predicates and thus one's disillusionment became brimming reservoir where the level kept rising as if at any moment it would burst its bank.

Although thinking had become not so daunting to him the older he got, it was no less confusing to engage in the exercise of the mind. It was fortunate that his job did not demand any philosophizing or psychologizing, and he could use his working hours as time for recuperation if

there were too many scary thoughts assaulting him the night before. But there were many things he had to give up thinking about, such as what the *narrative* of his life was. Before his mother died, he had only attended one funeral, that of his grandmother when he was ten. And then it was just him and his mother, as if it was perfectly natural for a family to have mother, daughter and grandson, and nobody else. After his mother's death, he felt he'd become the full-stop of a truncated, incoherent sentence, one which he himself found difficult to say out loud. Ever since his desert holiday with his mother, he had a sense of his life being a series of tableaux as if the action of the story always stopped after a short while and the performance became immortalized, a frozen configuration on stage. Like a pyramid in a deserted desert.

Over the years the disembodied voice had gone through a number of mutations such as the idea that the four syllables were in fact *little-delight* and not "let-there-be-light" or the belief that the whole experience was nothing more than a bizarre fantasy of the one-year-old arising from a reincarnated soul from a faraway land but these mutations vanished without trace when a color-coded list was started to record Mama's declarations and there and then *let-there-be-light* emerged intact with its malevolent power undiminished. Mama used to love baking but she'd never used papaya in her breads or cakes only apple lemon or carrot and so there was never the chance to put it to the

test to see whether the scent of papaya did have the ominous power to seduce and condemn. A couple of years ago a science report was broadcast on the radio saying that teaching people to do regular imaginary mental exercise of biting into fruits or vegetables with total relish would enable an over-weight person to enjoy greens and reduce the urge to eat cakes chocolates or other sweets thus helping to tackle the obesity epidemic but using a similar strategy of imagining biting into a papaya with total relish didn't make a blind bit of difference to one's fear of papaya and the only coping mechanism one had was to bury the head in the sand. This was a portmanteau of identification and othering juxtaposed side by side.

On his way to work one morning, he saw a young woman doing her make-up across from him on the bus: shaping eyebrows with tiny brush; applying dark eyeshadow cream, mascara, quick eyeliner; dabbing and blending foundation with small sponge; adding skin-toned concealer, then contouring cheekbones and neckline; finally applying bright red lipstick. As all this was happening, he couldn't shift his gaze away from her, even though he felt hot in his face, like he had somehow sneaked into her bedroom and was committing an indecent act. Her timing was exquisite. After she had done her hair and returned the hairbrush to her handbag, the bus stopped. While getting off the bus she suddenly turned and glanced at him briefly, and he felt a whiff of perfume drifting towards him. It was sharp and

caustic: off-putting like rotten banana. He winced as it attacked his nostrils. Right at that moment, his head was invaded by the phrase *I am the alpha I am the omega!* He was stunned, because he was sure that was the young woman's voice. And then he noticed the bus driver waving his right hand to another driver of a bus on the opposite side of the road. Even though he had seen such hand salute many times before, he suddenly cottoned on to its true meaning: it was an instruction for the *alpha-omega* voice to continue drumming in his ears. He panicked, got off the bus at once and walked the rest of the way to his office, with *alpha-omega* trailing behind him, and the scent of perfume clinging tenaciously to his face.

Mama was the connection to everything and when the connection broke the beads were scattered and there was no hope of sewing everything back on as there wasn't enough time to make all the necessary arrangements despite a strong desire for restoration but there was still a hint of possibility to complete the circle if the let- there-be-light voice didn't interfere too much with the ongoing search for the twine as sometimes the chant did loosen its grip on the mind to such an extent that an almost normal life could resume.

He was a conscientious worker. He earned his keep, and looked after his mother. It wasn't a high-powered job he

had. Civil service, pen-pushing, nothing glamorous. More a matter of obeying orders. He cleaned the house, did the shopping and cooking, and dealt with household finances responsibly. Nothing he didn't enjoy. He had, at long last, taken up reading as a hobby. There was now always a book on his bedside table. Nothing too serious though. He couldn't remember how he'd overcome his wariness about books. It was just one of those things. He made no plans, didn't look into the future, and went to the pub once a week on his own, as he had drifted away from his friends. A few beers, no spirits. Nothing happened in the pub. Nobody ever chatted him up. Not that he was looking for anyone anyway. His mother always complained when he came home. Nothing major, just continuous nagging. As was her wont, but still quite wearing. That was the cross he had to bear, he often thought to himself. *Nothing I can't cope with*, he mumbled time and again before falling asleep. Yes, he was content with how things were. As a young boy, he did wish he had a brother. It didn't matter now. His routines sustained him. Nothing to complain about, really.

Whatever else it was, what happened in that papaya-scented spinning walk could have remained just an inexplicable initial glitch in the machinery of a dull and uneventful life, something to be buried in the bottom of a chest and put in the attic and never to be let out into the light of day. But it didn't turn out like that. Peeing less and less after Mama's death was the first sign and the mind

became plagued by fear of being poisoned by toxins the kidneys were unable to drain out but mercifully no sign of ill health appeared so breathed a sigh of relief after a while and the expectation was the dull and uneventful future would quickly become the dull and uneventful past and at fifty-five one's life wouldn't go on much longer and so nothing to worry about.

Whenever he made an attempt to make sense of the world or its history (not that he knew much about either), he'd be overcome by a nameless terror arising from an image of the teeming multitudes of human beings inhabiting the earth with an almost infinite number of discrete consciousness, all solipsistically separate from and alien to his own. And he would feel like an infinitesimal speck of dust wandering into nothingness in an unidentifiable corner of the universe. He knew he had made the right choice sticking to economics and the civil service.

Despite the silence in the house and the monotony of cooking for one it wasn't too difficult to get used to life on your own and although there was a sense of foreboding after Mama was gone it was possible to live with it as everything in this world could in the long run be accustomed to with a bit of imagination and plenty of hard work until it's time to write the final list and call it a day.

Angels are beings of light. They are the varifocal locus of divine grace. They are the permutations of infinity superimposed on Euclidean geometry. They are fluidity made perfect. They are purveyors of alchemical scents. They are transparent inclusivity, letting all eyes see through. He carefully wrote down all these formulations, and felt satisfied with them. For a moment, he experienced an urge to tell his mother these discoveries, the first ever fruitful *thinking* he'd done, all by himself. He was thirty. In the end he decided against saying anything to her. Deep down, he knew she wouldn't be interested. She once said he didn't have a mind of his own. It hurt him so. And he had to remind himself again and again, *this is the cross I have to bear*. When his mother lost all her memory many years later, he began to find his own memory fading fast too; it was like their past had to be jointly remembered, otherwise it would refuse to stay in *his* mind.

And then the unfathomable future broke into the unremarkable past scattering dust everywhere as this morning started off like any ordinary morning with breakfast about to finish and it was time to set off for the office when suddenly a vivid image gate- crashed into the mind and in the blink of an eye it was the wet- nappy spinning buggy all over again with absolute certainty that the one-year-old head did manage to turn round and *had seen what was behind*. The disembodied voice boomed and a whiff of green papaya, low-key but insidiously hovering

like a scented spell, arrested the hapless soul. But the memory froze at the crucial moment. Waiting, shivering, coffee left unfinished. Tip of the tongue twitching. Heart thumping to the rhythm of *let-there-be-light*. The image had stopped dead. The cranks in the brain had seized up. No matter how much effort was put into it nothing more was forthcoming. Nothing else revealed itself. The turning of the little head with a sense of something imminently there — *already there* — was the only picture that remained. Sweat pouring down. Rising from ancient depths was an overwhelming fear of what must have been seen when the head had turned round and stared into the *face* of that disembodied voice.



Chin Li, born and brought up in Hong Kong and now living in Scotland, has published short fiction and other work in *Confluence*, *Glasgow Review of Books*, *Gnommero*, *Gutter*, *Ink Sweat & Tears*, *Litro* and *MAP*, and has occasionally turned some writing into audio or live performance pieces, the most recent of which is an audio short story, “The Feather and the Hand,” broadcast by the Glasgow-based art radio station *Radiophrenia* (www.radiophrenia.scot).