

## Alison Wong<sup>1</sup>

### An Introduction to Dunedin

On the night we arrive Linda takes us to  
the Indian restaurant on Princes.  
The rice is moist and fragrant, tossed with toasted cumin seeds.  
Jackson doesn't eat seeds. He plays cars with his new friend  
Miro. Afterwards we all drive to the Leith Valley  
to see the glow-worms. Jackson sweeps the bush  
with Linda's torch while the Leith comes through the holes  
of my '94 Asics trainers. Shhh! we say, as the lights  
are knocked out like whole suburbs in a powercut.  
We're as quiet as a party at midnight.  
As we come out, Jackson points at the night sky.  
Look at all the glow-worms, he says.

Jo and I head down to the Octagon for Robbie's birthday.  
Someone warns us to watch where we stand — at noon  
they fire the cannon. I see the headlines  
*Burns Fellows Killed by Flying Haggis*  
but we knock back Scotch instead.  
Dougal Stevenson addresses the haggis. I canna understand.  
Linzy, then Andrew arrive, both in blue sunhats,  
black baggy shorts and sneakers.  
The RSA Taieri Pipe Band plays *Scotland the Brave*,  
*Hail to the Tartan* and *Sailing*.  
Which are the good cafes? I ask.  
Over the road, says Jo. It gets the afternoon sun.

Two weeks later, Robbie is upstaged by a yellow dragon  
air castle and tasselled red lanterns. By children waving  
light sticks and red helium balloons labelled *Kong Hee Fatt Choy*.  
By more Chinese faces than a reunion of eight generations.  
We join the throng and clap to Cantonese pop, sing *Auld Lang Syne*,  
eat dumplings and drink Coke, wipe fingers  
on oily paper bags. We watch red balloons drift  
higher than seagulls, higher than aircraft or earthbound vision.  
We count down to midnight, welcome light  
flowering above us, a stray rocket that whooshes  
past our heads and into the old town hall.  
There it is — the sound of horses and water, the yin principle.

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## Round Hill

Leslie leads the way through stands of miro, supplejack and mamuku.  
Everywhere the crush of leaves underfoot,  
the sound and smell of water. Fantails  
spread white and black feathers  
and peep peep in the hush  
of muted greens and browns. We walk  
beside stone walls that line the banks  
and water races,  
past sluices, dams and mine shafts  
where once 500 Chinese miners  
lived and worked. Leslie lifts a tin drum lid  
from one fork of a race to the other. This  
is how we divert  
water. We watch it rush  
over the bank,  
pass old camp sites with their broken  
brandy bottles and celadon bowls,  
stones arranged like a memorial  
or a grave.  
Possums lie close to the path, stripped  
back to pale flesh. This one reminds me  
of the dogs hanging in the markets of Canton  
their jaws wide open.  
You can come around here quietly now, Leslie says,  
his small 83 year old body moving lightly.

## The Camphor Wood Chest

my husband dreams of a Japanese garden

a room with nothing but a chair  
a vase of white lilies  
a view of water

but my home is like a camphor wood chest  
that Chinese mothers give to their daughters  
it is carved with the detail of living  
a phoenix with wings raised for flight  
a pine tree leaning forever in the wind  
lotus flowers and chrysanthemums  
clouds that could be leaves that could be clouds

I like to look out over water

## In Korea

Seung Ah tells me there are three types of people:  
men, women, and married women.  
When I struggle with the lid on a new bottle of mustard,  
Seung Ah declines any help from my husband.  
She is strong, she is invincible, she is married woman.

Now I ask her, "There are many Christians in Korea?"  
"Yes," she says, "but I am not one of them."  
She looks me in the eye as if swearing before God.  
"I believe only in my husband," she says.

## **Arrowtown, Chinese Settlement**

*Christmas Eve 2002*

Walk from the township through the police camp  
not far from the river where the purple and pink  
lupins and yellow broom flower. See the poplars  
shed sticky white seeds through the air,  
on branches and leaves, over the dry ground  
like fresh wool caught on fences  
like dreams of a foreign (white) Christmas.  
Here, Ah Gee was found hanging,  
Old Tom pitched forward  
burned black in his fireplace,  
Kong Kai, excellent cook and blind of one eye,  
found up Eight Mile Creek, his clothes  
spread over his bones, £70 in his pocket.  
Now only relics of chimneys, a huge depression  
where Su Sing's store once stood, a few huts  
and rock shelters, restored/reconstructed  
or not. A sign points the way to the cemetery.  
At each of the doorways, a woman  
has left white roses.

## The 22nd of July

*for my father*

*So tell me when will our son be born?  
Early, I said,  
Tell me the day and the hour,  
The 22nd, I said, half past ten in the morning.  
Now you, I said, tell me the day and the hour.  
The 22nd, he said, eleven o'clock in the morning.*

The night before you died  
we spoke on the phone  
about TV aerials, holes in the roof  
at Cambome, the baby. You had just  
come from the shower wearing  
brushed cotton pyjamas,  
your voice warm, alive  
down the telephone line.

I woke in the small  
hours unable to sleep—  
a sickness rising. I rose  
five hours early  
to pray.

It was a day  
like any other day—  
you ate microwaved porridge  
with soy milk, left for work  
cheery, so they say.  
I see you in the garden that morning—  
that slow familiar walk,  
walking out where to plant  
your new bought polyanthus,  
stopping to smell your hothouse  
cherry tomatoes, scooping  
up a fallen orange, small  
and bright and premature.

The call came sometime  
after noon: you  
collapsed  
at the eleventh hour,  
or was it  
ten-thirty?

You woke,  
walked one, two,  
three flickering steps...  
A failure  
of the heart, they said  
without saying,  
the way the blood  
stops.

We laid a striped  
beach towel  
over the car seat, counted  
hospitals like houses:  
Levin, Palmerston North,  
Dannevirke, Waipukurau,  
Hastings, Napier.

You lay  
in a mahogany coffin—  
badges of honour  
pinned to your lapel.  
I watched your face  
powdered, still,  
larger than life—  
as all the world  
contracted....

At the cathedral we gave out  
a white handkerchief, two Macintosh  
toffees, two silver coins. We sang  
*How Great Thou Art*,  
*Amazing Grace*,  
just as we sang  
on all those long  
car journeys. A lone voice sang  
*I'll Walk Beside You...*  
I cannot remember.

My son lies under lights,  
a small perfectly formed child  
the colour of burnt umber.  
He lies on his back, naked,  
his arms raised and soft  
as sleep. He wears glasses—  
white gauze and black  
cellophane — a pale Stevie Wonder.

My brother and sisters, my mother  
talk about old times, they talk

about you. I am  
in absentia.

Every few hours they turn  
my son — onto his left side,  
onto his right side, onto  
his belly. They take  
his blood. They test  
his liver.

We come home—  
lay out a flounder  
fried the way you like it  
a boiled egg cut in two,  
a mound of white rice, a cup  
of Oolong tea.... letters of tribute  
from the Embassy of the People's  
Republic of China...  
I rise to feed my son, wearing  
your pyjamas, look  
for a small displacement,  
a nibble of fish or rice,  
a thin brown ring  
above the level  
of brown water.

One month on—  
the end of bad luck,  
the feast of the first son—  
I see myself turning  
corners  
finding you  
in that easy chair  
reading the paper, half-asleep.  
I speak to you  
and you answer, or perhaps  
you do not  
so absorbed by black  
and white and dream.  
I hold you  
longer than expected.  
You smile, just  
the corners  
of your mouth. You  
let me.



## Foxton Beach

From this window I watch the wetlands:  
wrybills, oyster catchers, white-fronted terns.  
I watch the sun go down over a long horizon,  
all the colours we practise coming together:  
*lanse, chengse, fenhongse, heise.*  
I do not play cars here: choosing one  
for you, one for me, lining them up  
to count: *yi, er, san*. I do not wake  
in the night hearing your call, feeling you  
fumble into bed beside me, your hands  
on my cheeks, your feet treading  
against me. I do not get up  
to wipe your bum in the morning. I sleep. I read  
*Selected Poems of the Tang and Song Dynasties.*  
I take long walks by the estuary without looking  
back to see you are still with me. And yet, just now  
I watched a brown-haired boy playing  
with a ball not far from the water.  
He could kick it into the air, and kick it  
again. He played alone, with concentration,  
he played with no mother  
watching.

**there's always things to come back to the kitchen for**

a bowl of plain steamed rice  
a piece of bitter dark chocolate  
a slice of crisp peeled pear

a mother or father who understands  
the kitchen is the centre of the universe

children who sail out on long elliptical orbits  
and always come back, sometimes like comets, sometimes like moons