Alison Wong

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 understan. 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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1 Alison Wong was the 2002 Robert Burns Fellow at the University of Otago. She lives in Titahi Bay, Porirua.
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
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,
on 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