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MAN'S BURDEN

**A Creative Social Critique of Inequalities and Genocide in
Contemporary Asia.**

Sibgha Ahmed

**A thesis submitted to the University of Huddersfield in partial
fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of MA by Research
(Creative Writing)**

University of Huddersfield

September 2021

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ABSTRACT

‘Man’s Burden’ is a creative project consisting of three short stories: ‘Karoshi’, ‘Expensive Sorrow’, and ‘No New China’. These stories were produced to offer a creative exploration and criticism of various inequalities and genocide in contemporary Asia. ‘Karoshi’ explores the issues related to the overworking culture in Japan where workers are burdened with so much work that their mental and physical health is depleting leading to a growing trend of suicide amongst employees known as death by overwork (karoshi). ‘Expensive Sorrow’ highlights the gap between the rich and poor by exposing the dire conditions the poor must endure. At the same time it emphasises a certain kind of privilege brought about by wealth. ‘No New China’ focuses on the ethnic genocide against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang, China where a concerning number of people are being put into internment camps to be “re-educated”. Whilst each story is connected through united themes of oppression, masculinity and fear, they are all very different from each other in the way they are told offering readers a unique reading experience. Thus, whilst the project aims to provide a social critique of inequalities and genocide in East Asia, it also aims to show readers what short fiction is capable of achieving and the creative boundaries it can push despite the limited word count. In this sense, ‘Man’s Burden’ immerses itself into socio politics as well as creative writing.

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KAROSHI

Corporate Dog

My train arrives at the station and I fight the urge to close my eyes. I blink and the lighting of the world around me changes. The doors open and we flood inside. White shirts, black ties, black briefcases, swimming across my eyeline, across the train stations and across the taxi drop-off points. All over Tokyo.

Thirty-five minutes of staring at the same ad which reads: '*My life is inside a ball which is constantly rotating.*' I swallow the pain I had for breakfast and push myself towards my workplace.

I bow to the receptionist and drag myself up the stairs. As I gaze through the glass building, the faint ring of a temple bell somewhere far off vibrates in my ears. I used to pray, you know? At a time when I could afford to sit down and enjoy the hot meals my mother made me. I used to pray.

Floor eight. I am the first one here. My co-worker who sits next to me arrives. I force a smile at him. He switches on his computer and promptly hangs his face over the screen.

He looks like an old friend of mine, Ren. Somewhere in the back of my mind all my friends are pushed into their company toilets, too tired for the journey home. They lie on top of their bags and sleep with their legs cramped in an uncomfortable position.

We're all walking in the same direction, towards one infinite goal.

My fingers land on my keyboard and my eyes glue onto my monitor as I prepare to sink into the day. I look outside for but a second. The world is dark blue and I have never seen it in any other colour since I started here.

Housewife

I pour another bowl of miso shiru into the sink. This is the seventy-eighth breakfast in a row that you have missed. Yes, I have been counting. As the tap is running, the image of your

malnourished body comes into mind. You are walking yourself into darkness until I can't see you anymore, but then, after what seems like a long time of waiting, you appear on the other side, only the skin and flesh are missing from your body.

I force the door open, allowing the darkness of the basement to swallow me. You don't know, and you will never know but I quit my job six months ago so I could take care of you. Look. All of our memories, secured in one place. I smile as I unpack your university things. Your average diploma which I stopped you from cutting up, your notes and all your materials which I salvaged from the bin. How I wish you and I could go back to those days and be stuck there forever. Loop the spring of our love over and over again.

'Mama,' I hear the soft wails of a child outside.

I run up the stairs and emerge onto our street. Yes, a little girl. No older than four. Look how her tiny head moves in search of her parents and look how her tears rest on her soft cheeks.

Should I? Tetsuya? Do you think? Should I take her? For you. A gift from me. You always wanted a daughter, didn't you? Yes, I think I'll take her. The way her eyelashes flutter as she blinks. She doesn't need a prompt, no buttons are pushed, she just is. Naturally and beautifully. *Alive*.

I approach the child and am about to pick her up when a woman calls out from ahead.

'Hey,' she pants. 'Thank goodness.' She jogs towards us and kneels down to wipe the child's tears. 'Mei, how many times have I told you not to run off like that?'

My own tears are swallowed back when the child clings onto her mother, burying her little face into her.

'Thank you, Miss,' the mother snatches the child from me.

The smell of baby powder lingers in the air. Such pretty eyes, crystal tears and long eyelashes. All departed.

I retire into our house and open the door to our nursery. Rows and rows of dolls are lined up against the pink walls. They don't compare to the animated child outside, but when we fill this room with a new life of our own, no-one will be more beautiful. Like a petal plucked from a flower, she'll be-

Corporate Dog

‘Where are you going?’ my co-worker says to me, as his eyes remain fixed on his computer screen.

‘I’m going to get some food. Do you want something?’

‘Have you forgotten about our deadline?’

‘No, it’s just that I haven’t eaten anything in ten hours.’ My mind is cutting itself from the inside.

‘Neither have I, but we’re already behind thanks to the new employees. It’s a mystery how such time-wasters were hired.’

We both stand staring at each other. I’m thinking of all the excuses I could use to grab something to eat whilst he’s waiting for me to come back to my desk.

‘Sit down,’ he says.

I stare at the group of people who have given in and are leaving to get some food, and then at the size of the colossal paperwork eating my entire desk space. A bowl of Sukiyaki. That’s all I want.

‘I don’t like it either,’ he says, ‘but you know how it is.’ He separates a section of paper from my paperwork. ‘We’ll go when we’ve finished with these. Sound good?’

I feed myself on the beefy scent of food lingering on those who have already returned. It’s OK.

I type until the computer talks to me.

The smell of steamed meat climbs my nostrils. I feel high.

Housewife

My hands are dyed lilac from painting the nursery. I quite like a hushed shade of pink, but our daughter is not like others. She’s a special little gem.

The baby mobile begins to chime with a soothing song. No. That's ...

'Good morning,' I say into the phone. It's something o'clock and Tetsuya has been out since 5 am.

'Good morning,' says the voice through the phone. 'Who's this speaking?'

'Fujita Yuria.'

'Ah, good. Miss Fujita. I'm Nakamaru Isamu. This matter is concerning your husband, Fujita Tetsuya. May we speak to him?'

'Umm ... no. What is it?'

'Miss Fujita, I am very sorry, but we'd really like to speak to your husband. Is he there?'

'He's at work, he won't get back until really late, I doubt he'll be able to take your call. Can't you just tell me?'

'I'm sorry, miss. This is a private matter. Actually, we've been trying to reach Mr. Fujita for the past few months, but unfortunately, we can't get past his voicemail. Would you be able to recommend a time we could reach him?'

'No. There isn't any. Please, just tell me. You're-you're worrying me.'

'Are you sure, miss?'

'Yes, I'm sure. I know his work pattern inside out; he can't afford to take phone calls that aren't work-related.'

'Well. If that's the case-'

'That is the case.'

'Miss Fujita, I'm your husband's doctor. Are you aware that he came to us in December for a health appointment?'

'Yes. In fact, I'm the one who told him to take it.'

'Is that so?'

'Yes, may I ask what the matter is?'

'Well, usually we're not allowed to relay this information to anyone but the patient but if it's like you say, that your husband won't be able to take our call then we shall have to tell

you. This is an important matter, you see. Are you sure your husband won't be able to make an exception this time? For his health?'

'I'm sure. Please. Please, tell me.'

'Very well. Please be sure to relay this information onto your husband. Miss Fujita, we ran some specific blood tests on your husband, medically known as BNP blood tests, and we've found that his heart is releasing a dangerous substance known as brain natriuretic peptide-'

'Sorry, but I don't understand.'

'I apologise. It would be better for your husband to book another appointment with us.'

'What's wrong with him? Please tell me. He's my husband.'

'Mr. Fujita expressed concerns about the following, shortness of breath, weak legs and fatigue. These problems are all related to heart failure.'

He pauses here, expecting me to say something.

'Miss, I understand this is disconcerting. My advice for the time being is for your husband to get as much sleep as he can and book another appointment with us before his condition worsens.'

I manage to whisper out a broken, 'yes.'

'Thank you.'

I hang up.

Twenty-seven. Heart failure.

Company Livestock

I pack up my paperwork and files with what little command I have left in my body and leave for the day. As I descend down the muted hallway, a sea of eyes crash into my direction.

'Where are you going?' My co-worker calls out from behind.

I turn around and my surroundings spin out of place. 'Home.' I answer back. 'I'm going home.'

He looks at the people working beside him and flashes them a smile. 'It's only ten, and we're going drinking with Mr. Hamasaki after work.'

'What?'

'Tetsuya, please get a hold of yourself. It's only ten.'

Sure. Fine. No, wait.

'I'll go for a quick nap in the bathroom.'

'You can't. They've started checking the bathrooms.'

Now I feel my senses escape my body and I manage to scrape out a 'How? Why?'

'The new employees, they've been overusing them.' He glares at the desk filled with young and new employees. 'Ruined it for everyone.'

'Well, I can't.' My body pulls forward. 'I can't keep my eyes open anymore.' My body pulls backwards. 'I'm going to fall.'

'What?' He paces forward.

'I'm going to fall.'

'Tetsuya?'

A pair of hands shake me awake at my desk. I open my eyes to employees scurrying all around me. As I try to stir my senses awake, I realise I have seen this before.

'It's 1 am. Get up,' says my co-worker.

'Hey,' I call out. 'Was I asleep?'

He scoffs, 'what do you think?'

'I'm not sure,' I scratch my head, 'I don't remember.'

'Do you feel any different?' He says.

'No, not really.'

‘Well, in that case. Yes. Yes, you were sleeping. We covered for you. Guess there was no point in it though. I mean, if you don’t feel any more refreshed than before.’

‘I’m sorry.’ I bow with shame. ‘That was a lie. I feel refreshed. More alive. Thank you. It won’t happen again.’

My co-worker escapes behind me and follows behind a group of men already leaving.

We’re a team of nine, eight, fourteen?? Our thin bodies are wrapped around a standing bar where a plate of ramen steams at me from the table. The desire to dip my face into it and let it melt off seduces me. Too many shapes are floating inside, and they’re hurting my head. I might start calculating them if I don’t hurry and devour them. My chopsticks plunge into the bowl and pick out a thick chunk of beef. I let the juices melt on my tongue and time stops.

‘Kanpai!’ We clink our highballs together and slide them down our throats.

It tastes like toothpaste because I’m constantly brushing my teeth as I’m constantly falling asleep.

‘Fujita, your team is doing really well these days,’ says Mr. Hamasaki? Or was that my co-worker? Um, this is embarrassing, maybe the bartender?

The food in my belly is not sitting well. It’s climbing its way back up my throat again.

‘Tell us more about your life then?’ Someone else asks me. ‘How’s the wife? You looking at a promotion anytime soon?’

The drink is snatching my mind away from me. My lips open.

‘My life is inside a ball which is constantly rotating.’

The sound of laughter echoes around me until it softens all around me. Men in white shirts, black ties carrying their souls around inside black briefcases. Their fucking black briefcases.

I used to pray, you know? I used to have time to sit down and properly have that hot meal that my mother made me.

My boss slides another Highball my way. Refusing is not an option, so I take it and chug it. My boss slides another Highball my way. I take it and chug it. I take it and chug it, allowing the alcohol to unscrew my mind further and further.

3 25 am?? and I am drifting towards the train station following the sound of horns blasting in my ears and my feet aren't even touching the ground and strangers are smiling at me as they pass me or are they frowning?? I can't tell anymore I've forgotten what a human looks like a real one with a beating heart and warmth I'm just a dot inside a pool of ink and I can't find anyone who I'm certain is real and the lights sting in my eyes but I don't want to close them because if I do they might just shut forever and if that happens I won't be able to see the ones I love anymore and I think there's someone waiting for me somewhere someone who would care at least I loop around and around and everywhere I walk I cut my feet and my stomach is rumbling I throw up all I had today and want to throw myself away too what heavy pain I have to bear carrying myself around streets that loop and intersect and twist and turn and disappear into dead ends only I know what time is it and where am I going? I come across another salesman who has passed out in a pool of his own vomit what's our goal? It's unified yes but what is it? I want to stop and sleep again but if I open my eyes will I still be in Tokyo? wait wait my pockets are vibrating where are my pockets again? HA HA HA HA HA more food is coming out it's all leaving me HA HA oh there goes a chunk of beef goodbye ramen it was fun while it lasted is this still Tokyo? I squint my eyes to read the street sign in front of me but my head drags backwards and I fall and the lights go off again

Housewife

Light the candles, pull the blinds back, spray the room with a jasmine scent. All is ready for you, Tetsuya. If only you were here already. The time tells me you should be home by now, and I've blown up your phone thirty-two times. God, where are you?

He'll come back weighing less than he did this morning, says the Wall.

'I know.'

He'll come back with no memory of the previous day.

'I know.'

He'll be gone tomorrow before you can speak with him.

'I know.'

He'll-

'I know. I get it. Didn't I tell you? I'll wait for him forever. I want to be everything he wants me to be.'

Yet you can't give him a child.

'What?'

You heard me. Don't think I have a plaster over my eyes. I saw what you did earlier. What the hell was that?

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

Oh, I'm sure you don't. If that girl's mother hadn't come to pick her up, who knows what kind of trouble that toddler would've been in, in your hands and all.

'What's wrong with me?'

Where should I begin?

'Shut up.'

You're delusional, anxious, immature, and ladies and gentlemen prepare yourself for the newest addition to the list: a potential child-snatcher!

'Shut. Up'

I haven't finished yet. Just because you can't have children of your own doesn't mean you can snatch other people's children. That's not how it works.

'I'm not listening.'

There you go again with your childish behavior. Mask it all you want; we both know the truth. You'll *never* be able to fulfill Tetsuya's wish. You'll *never* give him the happiness he's searching for. You're a dead end. You're *his* dead end, and he's counting his time with you.

‘You’re lying.’

When are you going to tell him? Mmh?

The front door rattles and I rush to it. Tetsuya! You enter looking like a ghoul.

‘Here, lean on me,’ I offer you my hand. ‘Let’s get you to bed.’

You push me away.

‘I’ve tried,’ you grunt and begin to hiccup. ‘I’ve tried seven times already, but every time I close my eyes, it feels like someone’s dragging me across the ground, and I’m pretty sure someone spat on me.’ You drag your face close to mine. ‘And why wouldn’t they?’

A hysterical laugh breaks from your lips and you doze off for only a second before opening your eyes again as if you had been reminded of something very important. ‘Hey, Yuria. Who were you talking to just now?’

‘What? What do you mean?’

‘Don’t say that-’ you grunt. ‘Who was it?’ You scan the room for signs of life, and hiccup. ‘And-and why are you dressed up? What’s that sweet, sickly smell?’

‘You’re really tired, let’s get you bed. You’ll feel better.’

‘Don’t,’ your head drags forward. ‘Don’t try and change the subject. I hate when you do that. Tell me honestly, you’re cheating on me aren’t you?’

‘Tetsuya?’ I say back, my heart pierced by your words. ‘I would never.’

‘Am I that despicable?’ Tears form in your eyes and you attempt to dry them by opening your eyes wide. ‘I’m never at home so you think you can get away with anything.’ Your body drags backwards.

‘Tama-’

‘You know what they’d do to me if I took time off?’ You stop me in my tracks. ‘They’d dismiss me and put someone else in my place. Is that what you want, Yuria? You. You,’ you begin to spit everywhere, ‘you want me to walk around the streets as a vagabond? A nameless, faceless vagabond?’ You push close enough for me to smell the pungent smell of vomit coming from your mouth and whisper, ‘You want me to live outside the walls of society?’

‘What, what are you saying?’

You drop to the ground and begin to cry.

‘Hey’ I attempt to lift you, failing in each attempt.

You’re sitting very still in the place I left you and have cried out your pain. I rest a bowl of strawberry ice-cream before your lap.

‘How about a holiday? Hmm?’ I say, sitting next to you. ‘How does that sound? We’ll go to Hokkaido. We’ll sit under the cherry blossom trees and eat all the mochi we like. Doesn’t that sound nice?’

‘I don’t have time to see your grandmother,’ you laugh gently as you scoop a spoonful of ice-cream into your mouth.

‘That’s...’

Kairo is my grandmother’s name. Hokkaido is a place where the most beautiful and delicate pink cherry blossoms bloom. You’re confusing the two, and my grandmother hasn’t been on this earth for five years now. She loved you like a son, though, Tetsuya.

‘It’s alright,’ I say. ‘I’ll wait until next year. I’ll wait for you forever.’

You let me take you to bed where I pull the covers over your cold yet warm body and charge your phone. It’s set for 6 am and it is 4 am now. My finger hovers over the off button.

The wall is staring me down.

‘What?’ I lash out.

It does not stop staring.

‘What?’

Guess your little plan didn’t work. For the seventeenth time. That’s right. I can count too.

‘What plan?’

Jasmine? Candles? Slow burning darkness? Please.

I grab a glass from the side table and-

Nothing good will ever come out of you.

And smash it against the wall's smirking face where it breaks into tiny pieces.

It does not stop grinning.

'We're stuck. I know. But he wants this more than anything, and I told you already, I want to be everything he wants me to be. What about that don't you understand?'

He's a hostage.

'I know. I know.'

He'll wake up tomorrow having forgotten all about today.

'I know.' I whisper into darkness.

Corporate Warrior

This morning's briefing and he's flapping his mouth and I am slow blinking to read the words coming out of his mouth to pull my surroundings into focus as they are dripping everywhere.

'Arai Hideki,' he says. 'He's going to be in hospital for a while.'

I turn to the people next to me. 'Who's Arai?' I whisper, to no-one in particular.

'Since you three worked closely with him, you're going to have to pick up the work he left behind for at least a couple of months.'

'Months?' asks someone from within the group. His hazel eyes cut through the space between him and Mr. Hamasaki. I don't think I've seen someone with light eyes before. They're beautiful.

I may have lost focus because everyone has left me ... I guess I'll go and feed myself with the sound of my fingers pushing against the keyboard. You know, I haven't talked to anyone in a ... while. I've forgotten how to start a sentence ... a narrative? No, a, a conversation? I don't think I ...

10 pm and the company lights have been turned off. I flip the switch on my lamp. It radiates a warm yellow light all around me. From here on, we are not paid for any work we do. I look outside the window. Dark blue. Just as always.

‘Where are you going?’ asks my co-worker.

‘To take a leak,’ I laugh, for some reason.

‘Come back immediately’, he says, typing away.

I laugh again. I don’t know why. ‘I’m not going to start playing with myself.’

The table behind me laughs, and I feel momentarily acknowledged. My university days crawl back into memory.

Long and stretched footsteps bring me to the roof of our company building. The air is thin up here, but I feel as though I can breathe better. All of Tokyo is wrapped in wet fog beneath me. If I didn’t know what life was like underneath, I would’ve thought it was beautiful. The wind tugs my body backwards, and I hear someone curse.

‘Shit.’

I walk towards the voice and see the back of a co-worker standing over the edge of the roof. The wind is carrying away the flame he is trying to hold for his cigarette. He turns his head for a moment in an attempt to block the wind, and his eyes meet mine. He studies me head to toe very slowly and then turns back to his business.

It’s him. Hazel eyes. Well, I might as well hear what his voice sounds like before I go.

‘The city is beautiful from up here. Wouldn’t you say so?’

He looks at the city gleaming down below lazily and says, ‘Yes,’ in an exceptionally uninterested tone.

I imagined his voice to run like thick honey, but it’s thin, like cider.

‘Hideki.’ He says. ‘Do you know what he’s in for?’

‘I don’t. They don’t tell us anything, do they?’

‘Mmh.’ He takes a puff of his cigarette and blows it out into the crisp air. ‘He’s probably gone for good.’

‘Really? What makes you think that?’

‘Once they end up in hospital, the chances of them returning are slim. It just is.’

‘Yeah.’

He rattles a packet of cigarettes. ‘Want one?’

‘No, thank you. I don’t smoke.’

‘What are you doing up here?’

My vision becomes blank as I think about it. I don’t know. ‘I always expected this to stop. The way I’m living, I mean, but it just won’t. I wake up to the same alarm every day and it is the ugliest sound in the world. I do things I don’t understand, and sometimes I can’t tell who I’m talking to. I’m constantly hungry.’ I’m scanning through my mind for anything that I’ve missed. ‘Oh, and the world is always dark blue. It is dark blue when I wake up, dark blue when I reach work, and dark blue when I reach home.’

‘Hey,’ he snaps his fingers in front of my eyes. ‘You there?’

‘What?’ I turn my head here and there.

‘I asked you what you were doing up here?’

‘Eh?’ I thought I just... Yuria?

I hear her voice scream at me in the gentlest tone possible. ‘Yes. Yes. Yes, Tetsuya?’ It is coming from somewhere faraway.

‘I’m here because nothing has changed in my life since I left university, and I’m afraid that my life is endlessly rotating inside a ball. Constantly smashing into the same place, the same people, the same events, and if I don’t get out, I’ll lose my exit forever. I don’t want that.’

‘What don’t you want, Tetsuya?’ Yuria, again. Where are you coming from?

‘You know what, never mind.’ Hazel eyes pats me on the back. ‘I think you just wanted some time to yourself. I’ll leave.’

‘No, wait.’ I take a hold of his shoulders as he turns to leave.

‘What?’ He says? Yuria says?

‘I’ve been working hard every day since I graduated. Don’t you think ... wouldn’t you say that I deserve a little more?’

A gush of wind blows his black hair behind his ears. He looks unearthly, and I wonder if I could ever look like that. Perhaps in the next world.

He nods. ‘Mmh. But I don’t think there’s any reward for withstanding this world.’

‘Perhaps you’re right.’

‘Perhaps I’m wrong. I mean, we’re both here, in the same place. Does that mean anything?’

‘I don’t know. Does it?’ I look up to him, begging for an answer.

‘I mean, you just said yourself, you always expected this to stop, whatever “this” means, but it won’t.’

‘I don’t know what you’re saying anymore.’

‘Tetsuya. Tetsuya, what don’t you understand?’ There she is again. I’m just going to ignore you because I don’t know where you are.

‘Should I ask for a break?’

He crushes his cigarette beneath his feet and laughs silently. ‘Not unless you’re looking to get fired.’ He looks at me. ‘You can’t, okay? We’re not in the same team, but everyone in the office needs you, okay? If one person falls, it leaves the others to pick up his work, and we’re already waist-high in paperwork.’

‘Really?’

‘You know this. Why, why are you acting like a child?’

‘Yuria lets me be one. I suppose that’s why everything’s a threat.’

‘Who is a threat? Tetsuya, tell me. Who is a threat?’ Yuria screams at me.

‘Just do as they say. Mr Hamasaki, your co-workers, myself. Just do as we say.’

It’s alright. I can do this. Breathe. There, doesn’t that feel better? Not ... not really.

‘How did you find out your wife’s cheating on you?’ He asks.

‘What?’

‘Tetsuya, I’m not cheating on you. I would never!’ Yuria screams from somewhere within the far distance.

‘I said how do you know your wife’s cheating on you?’ He repeats.

‘How ... how do you know?’

‘You told me just a minute ago.’

‘Did I?’ I shake my head to wake my senses.

‘Are you alright?’ He looks at me with concern.

‘Mmh?’ No. ‘Yeah, I’m fine.’ Not at all. ‘My wife. Umm, I don’t know for sure. It’s just, every time I come home, just before going through the door. I always sit outside and hear her talking with someone.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah.’

‘How do you know it’s not a friend of hers?’

I sit by the edge of the building and the wind battles against my face. ‘I never considered that ... no, he has a masculine voice. If she had a male friend, she would’ve told me.’

‘What if she did, but you just never listened?’

‘No, you don’t understand. Just as I go through the door hoping to catch them red-handed, he always disappears. Just like magic. As if he had rehearsed his exit.’

An ambulance races through the streets below us. Its siren eating through Tokyo.

‘That’s because there was no-one there to begin with.’

I turn around. He’s gone, and I’m not quite sure who said that. A blend of a feminine and masculine voice spilled into that sentence.

‘If you really want to die, just turn off your alarm. That is, if you really want all of this to end.’ Hazel eyes appears around the corner and disappears into the company building.

‘No, don’t die, Tetsuya. Fight it. Live on, please!’ Yuria begs from somewhere around me.

You know, I used to pray, I used to have time to sit down and properly have that hot meal that my mother made me. Udon. Who would've thought I would miss Udon this much? That warm, beefy taste. If I could just have one last bowl of Udon, I wouldn't regret anything.

Dark blue. Dark blue. Dark blue. Everywhere is dark blue. A single tear falls from my eyes as it swallows my existence.

Housewife

What's that? The wall asks me.

'It's a baby, can't you see?'

Should I even ask?

'It's our baby girl.'

It's a doll.

'No. Her name is Fujita Harumi. Tetsuya chose that name. It was his wish, you see. To have a beautiful baby girl with large eyes like eggshells and skin soft like satin.'

That's a doll.

'No. It's our baby girl. Look, she's crying now.'

You just pushed her belly and activated her sound.

'No, I didn't.'

Never mind ... and that ... that suitcase ... what's all that about?

'Oh, I'm glad you asked. I've been packing.'

Packing? For what, exactly?

'For a holiday. Tetsuya and I are going to Hokkaido.'

Really?

‘You’re calling me a liar?’

And just what are you going to do in Hokkaido?

‘We’re going to sit underneath the cherry blossom trees. Have you seen them? Oh, they’re such a beautiful shade of blushing pink, and when they fall, they do it so delicately. Nothing is as romantic as watching the petals being carried away with the wind. We’ll relive our university days and I’ll get the old Tetsuya back. Oh, I can almost see it.’

When are you going?

‘Just as soon as Tetsuya comes back.’

And when will that be?

‘Oh, you know, just a few minutes.’

A few minutes?

‘Yes.’

You keep telling yourself that.

Hazel eyes

This morning’s briefing and he’s flapping his mouth. I feel as if I should step forward and press down on his head so he’ll stop talking. There is a beating in my head and the beating of the rain against the windows. Someone within the room coughs and it sends a shiver up my spine.

‘Fujita Tetsuya,’ he says. ‘He’s no longer part of our company.’

I look to the people next to me and I can’t for the life of me recall any of their names.

‘Why?’ I ask.

He looks at me calmly and answers, ‘If you really wish to know, see me in my office at ten.’

No. Thank you. Please forget I ever said anything.

‘Anyway. Since you three worked closely with him, you’re going to have to pick up the work he left behind.

EXPENSIVE SORROW

I'm sitting before the open window, puffing on some dimitri, whilst my wife bleeds into my evening with her abhorrent bickering.

'And it's worse than we thought,' the dead note hammers on. 'I always knew it, and now it's confirmed.'

To be honest, yesterday's scenes won't stop running through my mind when this cute little number and I were off our heads, smoking whatever our hands landed. She was a fucking vision.

My wife glances at me. 'Are you even listening?'

'Yes, I'm listening. Go on.' I say, barely lifting my head to look into her beady little eyes.

And when I emptied my pleasure into this girl, it felt as though I was being ripped open, made anew.

'Dea has ODD,' she says, her voice cutting through my train of thought.

I glare at her and scoff.

'You were there with the therapist; you know what she said. Dea has had it for a long time. I always knew it, but you never listened, you never wanted to get her checked, and why would you when you're the one who's causing this?'

My eyebrows crease at her outrageous claim. 'Excuse me?'

'Don't. You're a vicious piece of work, sitting in this darkened room like a fucking owl whilst you listen to your pretentious music that sounds like someone's aching from pissing. What's more, you're always alone, always staring out your window like you've got some plot that's coming undone. It's not natural.' She spits this out all in one go and I must say, I feel like applauding her.

'It's worse than we thought,' she repeats.

Fuck. I thrust my head back and take a deep breath as an itch the size of a cat climbs my back.

‘You’re not going to take this seriously, are you?’ She’s screaming at me again.

My hands reach for the drinking cabinet where I pull out a bottle of soju. I pour a shot for myself and chuck it down my throat, immediately feeling revived.

‘You say you love her, but you don’t do anything for her at all. What kind of father are you?’

‘So ... in the end, this conversation was just about me,’ I say, as I shove the entire bottle between my lips and dunk. ‘Do better, is that it?’

‘Take it as you will. All I want is something better for our daughter. That shouldn’t be a hard ask.’

I get up from my seat and move towards her, resting my chin on her head. ‘You know what I want? What I really want?’ I breath down her spine. ‘To break your fucking neck right here and now and end myself too. That would benefit our daughter the most, no?’

‘So ... again. You want to do it to me again.’

I move away from her. ‘What?’

‘This isn’t about us. Fuck,’ she brushes her forehead. ‘It’s-’

‘Let me guess, worse than you thought?’

‘It really is ... so do something.’ She brushes past me and before she is able to slam the door on my face, I turn around yell out, ‘I’m glad she’s turning out this way.’

We’ve formed a circle around the table and are smoking away our health in the basement house shared by my new plaything, Seo Iseul.

This adorable little nest is shoved beneath the cracked streets of Ahyeon-Dong where the wires drape low enough for you to hang yourself. The sun barely reaches us down here, so we sit around in an ugly kind of darkness.

She smokes into my face and laughs; I also throw my head back and laugh but all I can think about is yesterday’s fight.

‘Where’s Myung?’ I ask, throwing a handful of cashew nuts into my open mouth.

‘He’s here, somewhere.’ Iseul twists around into the blotted hallway and calls for Myung.

Anyway, the deal with Iseul is that before she met me, the only man of worth in her life, she was fucking filthy old men for money, that’s how she became pregnant with Yuna. Well, I crashed that dismal party because now I provide her with a source of income, including money for her daughter’s private education. You wanna know what I get in return?

‘Myung,’ Iseul rips her throat once again.

A bouquet of cigarette smoke twirls before me and when it disappears, Myung appears.

Him. I get him in return.

‘Little Myung,’ I arrest my arms in the air and force him into a headlock. ‘How’s my little buddy doing?’

‘H-h-hi.’

I detect a hint of pain in his voice and squeeze him harder. ‘Want to go out today, Myung?’

He looks up at me with those huge fucking eyes and breaks out in a ‘huh?’

‘Let’s go. We’ll stop at a PC Bang and play some *League*. Wanna go?’

He nods like a seal.

I slide 80, 000 won across the table. Iseul takes the sum and flaps it against her face, taking in the glorious smell of money. ‘Thanks,’ she says, in a flat tone.

‘Put on your coat, Myung. Let’s go.’

He wraps himself in something disgusting and we climb the stairs from darkness into hideous civilisation.

Ahyeon-Dong is a quick five-minute drive from Hannam-Dong, so it doesn’t take us long before we crash into *Decoy Super Lounge*, a nightclub in Itaewon-ro. Violet-coloured lights

mix in my eyes as we spin in a pool of dancing bodies. I stumble towards the bar and order a round of Jägermeister for myself and a Black Russian for Myung. The boy has been tugging on my sleeves all night. 'This isn't a PC Bang, Haneul. There are no PCs here, Haneul.'

Fucking rotten piece of work smells so bad he's ruining my night, leaning into me continually, but I can save it yet. I spot a row of beautiful girls across the club and an idea injects itself into my mind. 'Hey, Myung,' I pull him back by the shoulder. 'If you can sweet talk those girls over there for me, I'll take you to a PC Bang like I promised.'

He throws his head towards them and takes a long, hard look at the girls only to jitter back. 'N-no. They're ... Iseul-Iseul said I can't talk-k-k to people like that.'

'But Iseul's not here, is she? C'mon, I wouldn't have asked you if I didn't think you could do it.'

'But-'

'Here,' I force the sweet Black Russian down his throat, something to sooth his nerves. 'Hey, Myung, they like it when you touch them.' I push him towards the girls and wait for the scene to unfold.

One of the girls notices Myung pushing through the crowd in their direction but says nothing until he stands before them and begins, 'H-h-hey,' he says. 'M-m-my f-friend over there says-says I have to make friends with you, and then, and then he'll take me, he'll take me to a PC Bang.'

Shit. I dip behind a dancing crowd and watch them as their eyes search for this so-called 'friend' of Myung's.

'We don't see anyone,' says the only fuckable girl out of the group. She leans over to get a closer look at this mystery friend when Myung guides his hand across her breast. She stumbles backwards in shock and pushes Myung back.

'What do you think you're doing?' She screams.

'My-my friend said-'

'Fuck you,' she pushes him again and stamps towards a group of men, her boyfriend presumably among them.

I use this time to drag Myung out of there. We manage to scrape towards the entrance, but the girls reappear with their shithead boyfriends outside the club.

I pull Myung by the collar, 'Myung, listen to me. You're going to stay here until I come for you. Got it?'

'Where-where-where are you going?' He asks, grabbing my hand.

'To pay for our drinks, silly.' I dash behind a corner and watch as the boyfriends search for Myung with their girlfriends attached to their side.

'There, that's him,' says the molested girl.

The men pounce on him and drag him by his legs against the concrete floor near to where I am. A fist lands on top of another right across his face. I can feel Myung's flesh burning from here. He chokes on his blood as it runs down his nose and fills his mouth. He spits it out onto the perpetrator's face and he does not take this lightly. He moves towards Myung's chest and lands heavy kicks there.

Poor Myung looks around for me. His eyes dart towards any source of light, hoping to catch mine somewhere at the end, but I'm smiling in darkness as the colour red blends with puddles of water on the ground.

The little champion is about to reach a state of unconsciousness. This is where they stop and put him down, leaving him to suffer. Quiet tears fall from Myung's face as pain makes a home of him.

I hop out of my dark spot and watch the poor animal struggle to look up at me. 'Myung? What did you do?' I ask in calculated horror. 'What happened?'

He shivers on the ground, leaking red through his mouth and nose. I scoop him up, throw him into my car and drive down the beaten path leading to Ahyeon-Dong. As I drive, I'm deliberating on all the explanations I can offer to Iseul. Her darling brother left home pumping with energy and is returning drained of all that and more. I check the rear-view mirror and I swear, for a split second, I see someone sitting next to him, staring straight at me. I flash my head around, only to see Myung bleeding out in the back of my car.

I fall into the basement and lay my little buddy on the kitchen table. Iseul walks in with a severe expression. I struggle to control the laughter that is trying to punch its way through my gut.

‘What ... what happened?’ She strokes Myung’s sweat-infused forehead which is slowly colouring purple.

‘Brat must’ve got on someone’s nerves. I only told him to wait outside the PC Bang whilst I brought out the car. Guess in that time he undid someone, because when I got back he was half-dead.’ I know, what a half-assed excuse. After the paranormal incident in the car, this is all I could think of.

Myung begins to shake on the table as if he were being cooked by lightning.

‘Myung?’ she holds down his chest. ‘What’s happening to him?’

‘A seizure, probably.’

She begins to question me. ‘What could he have done?’

‘I don’t fucking know. You know how hard it is to make him understand little things.’

‘That’s not his fault,’ she yells. ‘You were supposed to take care of him!’

I stroke my forehead as my patience shreds itself. ‘It’s not my fault if I tell him one thing and he does another. He’s like a headless fucking chicken.’

She runs a cloth under a tap and begins to press Myung’s head with it. ‘Couldn’t you take him in the car with you?’

‘There were smokers near our car, young men, who were swearing and shit. I didn’t want him to run into them. You know what happened when you were out with him last?’ As I finish my lie, I spot Yuna sticking her head out of the depressing hallway, possibly to see what all the commotion is about.

Iseul’s silence tells me she has finished her questioning session and one look at the little fucker shaking on the table tells me he won’t remember the night except that he was someone’s punching bag. Tonight was fun though. We should do it some time again, Myung.

‘Take care of him, okay? They messed him up pretty bad.’ I rinse my pocket of two separate bills and slap them on the table. ‘Here’s 34,000 for the hospital and 5000 won for the taxi.’

She looks at the money and then me, 'Where are you going?'

'I can't stay. I promised my wife I'd take her out today. She'll give me hell if I'm not with her later on.'

I hurry out the door. Not even a thank you. Fucking ungrateful bitch.

As I'm walking to my car, I focus on the faces staring back at my own. Shit. It's like looking at walking poetry. They've probably never seen someone with so much taste in their life. I'm dripping head to toe in *Hermès*. I drop my jacket in the middle of the street and disappear into my car. From the rear-view mirror, a woman and her son pick it up and run home with it.

The elevator climbs upwards and dings at my apartment where the light hits every corner. What a fucking night.

Aera is nowhere to be found and Dea is cutting all the hair off her dolls. I make my way to the dining room and find it plated with several dishes and a cold bottle of Hwayo Soju left by Mrs Park, the housekeeper.

The TV in the room next door switches off. 'Goodnight, sir,' says the sitter as I hand her the sum for today.

'Hey, where's Aera?' I ask, stabbing some tender cuts of bulgogi with my fork and guiding it into my mouth.

She freezes besides me. 'Sir?'

'You know what, never mind. I don't care.'

She bows and leaves in a state of distress. What's with her?

A new night, a new fucking tedious task to attend to. I finish filing the last of my notes and am about to pop a mescaline button when I hear Yuna, Iseul's brat, crying from somewhere nearby.

I open the door to Dea's room to find my little girl shooting arrows at Yuna, who is screaming and wailing with her mouth wide open in a corner.

Did I mention that my daughter gets a cut of the take too? Oh, yes. Yuna is at my daughter's disposal for an hour each day after school. She gets to play with the child as she wishes.

Dea turns around to look up at me and smiles. 'Daddy, look. I'm winning, aren't I?' She laughs.

I snatch the bow from her. 'What are you doing?'

'But...' She cowers back.

'If mummy sees this, who knows how she'll punish you?'

'Mummy?' Her lips begin to quiver.

'Never mind that now.' I grab her arms and bring her forward again to whisper into her ear, 'See how Yuna's crying with her head on her lap, shoot there. That way you won't leave any bruises on her and won't get into any trouble.' I hand her the bow and just as Yuna lifts her head again, assuming she is safe, Dea strikes again and Yuna's hysterical screaming resumes.

I walk over to Yuna and bend down to her level. 'What's wrong?' I ask. 'Does it hurt?'

She lifts her head revealing swollen eyes that are red right down to the pupil and cries, 'I want to go home.'

'Not yet,' I say. 'Finish the hour.'

I pat Dea on the head as I walk out and shut the door behind me.

Another venture into Ahyeon-Dong to drop this little bitch off to her mother. I wasn't thinking clearly, I brought the wrong fucking car and now I'm looping around these dead-beat fucking streets, trying not to scratch the paint off my *Audi R8*. What's more, these fucking junkies won't leave me alone. Clicking shitty photos on their pathetic little handphones.

I try reversing out of this alleyway when a drunk fucker shoots out from nowhere. I roll the window down and order him to 'get out of the fucking way.'

He glares at me, his eyes rolling inside his head. 'Yo. Where d'you get your car?'

'From your fucking mum, now get out of the way.' I wave my hand at him.

'No, because you see-' he stumbles backwards and forwards, trying to balance himself. 'I sleep here.' He lets out a hideous laugh and falls onto the path, inches away from a cardboard box flattened out in the corner, presumably his bed.

Right, that's it. I switch my gear into reverse and back up the car right over his fucking legs. A loud crunch echoes into darkness, followed by a piercing scream. *How do you like that? You little fucker? Scream some more. Go on.*

'What was that?' Yuna twists her head around from the back seat.

Shit. I forgot this bitch was here. 'It's nothing.' I whack the radio to a high volume, high enough to drown out the screaming and rev around another filthy corner where the rubbish has been scavenged from the bins and littered all over the ground.

'Wait here.' I hop out of the car, lock it, ignoring Yuna's cries and banging against my window, and run around the corner to see if the drunken bastard had any companions, and it turns out he did. Two girls emerge from around the corner.

'Oh my god,' she screams as she approaches her friend. 'What happened?' She looks around at the empty night street where the wind has ravaged every corner.

Joy washes over me. I crack my lighter against my cigarette and smoke a satisfactory puff, laughing inwardly, as they carry the fool away on their shoulders. Well, I won from a certain angle, didn't I?

'Dry your fucking eyes,' I warn Yuna before we sink into their basement.

She wipes her eyes and swallows her pathetic cries.

I roll her sleeves up to check for bruises, and smile at my daughter's clean disciple. 'Alright.'

She tries to run down the stairs, but I grab a hold of her arm and yank her back. ‘Woah, there. I’m going down with you.’ I have some explaining to do today, don’t I?

The light disappears from our eyes as we walk down the stairs. I open the door and the pungent smell of moisture hits me like a punch. Playing around in darkness is fine, but the smell takes some getting used to.

The little rat runs for Iseul’s arms, sobbing slightly into her mother’s chest.

‘Yuna?’ Iseul looks up at me in confusion.

‘They had a fight, that’s all,’ I say, as I look around for my old-time partner, Myung.

‘Who was supervising these two?’ She asks, looking into her daughter’s swollen eyes.

‘Huh? Oh, our housekeeper. Soon to be fired.’ I lean down to Yuna. ‘Sorry, Yuna. You got hurt because of Dea. I’ll scold her, make her apologise. Okay?’

‘But-’

‘You got something to drink?’ I say, standing up, choking the little brat’s words.

‘Yeah,’ Iseul nods. ‘Yuna, go inside. I’ll be with you in a bit, okay?’

‘You’re lucky I let her play with my daughter. She smells so bad, I think it’s transferring to Dea, and you know what’ll happen if my wife finds out I’m letting her child play with some hooker’s daughter?’

‘Mmh.’ She watches Yuna disappear into darkness and shuts the door. ‘Haneul, I need to talk to you.’

‘What is it?’ I say, as I watch her get out a bottle of some cheap-looking soju.

‘It’s Myung. He’s not well. After what happened when he went to the PC Bang with you, he’s not been ... he’s not been well.’

‘Not well in what way?’ This time, I watch her pour a glass for two. ‘You are aware, Iseul? That one’s a fucking mad one.’ I take the glass and slide the drink down my throat. ‘Besides, it’s only been a month, what the fuck could have happened to him in that time that’s worrying you?’

‘No, Haneul. You don’t understand. He goes into spaz attacks at least two, three times a day, he wets himself regularly. He doesn’t sleep at night; he wakes up constantly and says he

wants to sleep with me. He's always watching the window, watching the door, he won't let me leave him alone, not even with Yuna.' Bla, bla, bla, out of her fucking mouth like some script.

I feign some interest as I observe the bottle she brought out for me. It tastes fucking awful. Is this what she's blowing my money on? Cheap fucking soju?

'He is pretty abnormal. Isn't that normal behaviour, for him, I mean?'

'You're not listening,' she screams at me.

I throw her a distasteful glance.

'Sorry...' She bites her lip, ripping some skin off with her teeth.

'Alright, well, what do you want me to do about it? Another bill for the doctors? Some medicine?'

She stares past me into hollow darkness and her face works its way into something disgusting. I walk closer to her and place my hands on her shoulder. 'Look, I'll take care of it, okay?'

She begins to sob silently. 'I'm sorry. I know it's not ideal, but I can't turn to anyone else, and I don't have any money for medical bills. They're just, they're just too much and I-

And you earn nothing, yes, I know.

I take her into my arms and feel her spine sticking out of her shirt, 'Shh, it's alright.' As I check my watch for the time behind her back, Myung emerges from his room, looking more ghoul than human.

'They're here,' he whispers. 'They're here.'

Iseul quickly unlocks herself from my arms and turns to her brother.

'Who's here, Myung?' I ask.

'Them ... the men what beat me. They're-they're here to beat me ... they want to kill me.' He dashes towards the window and peeps through the holes. 'I can hear them laughing ... they're laughing at me. They're here to ... they're gonna... kill me.' He punches the window bars and chants, 'go away, go away.'

I drag him back into darkness, 'Myung, no-ones coming for you, not whilst I'm here, okay?'

‘You, you, you left me ...’

I laugh and glance at Iseul. ‘Yes, and I told you to wait quietly whilst I paid our bill, right? This is why you must always listen to instructions, yes?’

‘No-no, they’re, they’re coming to get me.’ He shuffles out of my arms and runs out of the door.

‘Oh, for fucks sake.’ I glance at Iseul and reassure her, ‘I’ll get him.’

The crisp night air tickles my skin as I tear through the streets running behind this frenzied fucker until I catch up to him. I pull him to me by the collar, suffocating him momentarily. ‘Myung, listen to me. Listen to me Myung,’ I choke him further.

He tries to wrestle out of my arms. ‘They’re coming to get me. I need to get away.’ He screams.

I force him into a headlock and begin to choke him until his energy becomes subdued. ‘Myung, listen to me. I know a way you can protect yourself, but you have to listen to me, ok?’

‘But-’

‘Shut the fuck up and listen.’ I squeeze him once more. ‘There’s a cabinet just to the right of the sink, isn’t there?’

He nods.

‘Iseull keeps the knives there. I know where the key is, but you have to promise to tell no-one about this, ok?’

‘Ok,’ he nods again.

‘It’s on top of the fridge. Iseul hides it from you because she doesn’t trust you with it, but we know better, don’t we? You’re a man, you can protect yourself and your family, if only you had a weapon right? Well, next time you feel like they’re near, you take a knife and stab them. Over and over until they stop screaming. Got it?’

He nods.

‘Remember now, this is our little secret, it only exists between us men. Now, we’re going to go back, you and I, and I want you to go straight to bed.’

He nods like the champion he is and follows me all the way to my car like a stray cat. I open the glovebox and remove from it a bottle of apple-coloured syrup, and another thin bottle of tablets. The labels do not tell you, because they have been altered, but what I hand to Iseul later on in their daft basement house is amphetamine, and phencyclidine. Nothing short of the best for my best man, Myung. My flying angel will soon turn into an untamed devil.

As I walk back to my car, I feel a presence tailing me, so much so, that I turn my head several times only to stare into menacing darkness.

‘What are you doing?’ My wife creeps up behind me, her voice sends a spike of hate down my back.

‘I’m looking for my sanity,’ I answer back as I rustle through my medicine cabinet, in pursuit of more goods for Myung.

She makes herself comfortable on the armchair behind me and lights a cigarette. ‘Drugs won’t help.’

I slam a packet of X onto my knee, completely thin of patience. ‘What are you doing?’

‘No, what are *you* doing?’ She throws back my question. ‘In fact, never mind, because I know. You’re about to do something you know you won’t get away with.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘Myung ... that boy, you want to drive him over the edge with drugs, right?’

My mind freezes.

‘Because seeing him beaten up halfway to death wasn’t enough,’ she continues.

I twist my head around and stare at her, her devilish smirk wrapped beneath cigarette smoke.

‘I know,’ she says, ‘I know because I’ve been following you for some time. I’ve seen it with my own two eyes what you do with these people.’

‘What ... what did you say?’ My breath begins to quicken as I realise. ‘So ... it was you all this time, following me like a fucking rat!’

‘I don’t really have to follow you to know what you’re doing. For a criminal, your hands are pretty red.’ She slides towards me and rests her hands on my shoulder. I shrug them off.

‘Just how unhappy are you? You sadistic, twisted, selfish little man.’ She scoffs at me and this is when I grab her by the neck and pin her to the floor. My hands tighten around her throat as I choke her whilst she laughs into my face.

My hands ease. ‘What ... what the fuck is so funny?’

‘Your life ... how pathetic it’s become. You don’t have any real power, so you threaten me, and you threaten our daughter.’ She laughs again and the ring of it boils my blood. ‘That’s just so funny to me.’ I let her remove my hands wrapped around her neck. ‘What do you get from it?’

My eyes spin around her smirking face as I find myself unable to speak.

‘I’ve told her, what was her name? Irum, Iseul, Iro? Whatever the poor girl’s name is, I’ve told her what you’re doing to her brother, and what you’ve been doing all this time, and I’ve told her that telling the police is the best option. I also said I’d help her.’

‘What ... what did you say?’

‘I tried, I tried so hard to make it work, right from the very beginning, but what was I holding on to? You’ve corrupted our daughter with your madness, but I’ve finally decided, living with you is a greater death for Dea than her living without a father.’ She lifts her head closer to mine until I feel her hot breath hitting my lips, and I feel like passing out into a long, sweet sleep.

‘It really is worse than I thought,’ she says as she easily removes herself from under me.

I feel like a sponge, I’m soaking in everything, the words spoken to me, the way in which my wife is laughing at me, but I’m unable to ... I’m unable to ... ‘What are you saying?’

She kneels over me and her brown hair drapes across my cheek. ‘How does it feel playing with the dead?’

‘Huh?’

‘I said, listen well because I’m only going to say it once. I’m leaving, and I’m taking Dea with me. Do with your life what you want but stay away from us.’

I squeeze her arm. 'You dare think about leaving me.'

'What?'

'I said, you dare think about leaving with her,' I repeat myself.

'Let go of me, you pathetic man,' she rips my hand from her and walks away from me towards the door.

'No, don't go.' I whisper. 'Don't leave me alone again.'

She stands by the open door. 'What?'

I dash for the side table and grab a knife sitting by some fruits. 'I'll do it, I'll sit my wrists right here and now if you think of leaving.'

She lets out an icy sigh. 'Do it, go on. Commit this sin for us.'

I don't even think, I just slice two deep vertical lines across my wrists, the pain doesn't even phase me. The knife from my hand hits the marble floor followed by thick drops of blood. I look up at Aera, and she's not even there, neither is the door open anymore. Did she even see?

I jump as her laughter rings horribly close to my ear. 'You really are pathetic, aren't you?'

I swallow the intense heat throbbing in my mouth, and it burns its way all the way through my stomach. I'm about to turn my head to her when the door slams open with little Dea standing on the other side. Her wide eyes follow the thin trail of blood seeping down my hands, and she screams, 'Daddy!'

'Dea ... look ... what your mummy's done to me.' I act out in severe pain to appeal to my girl.

She runs to me, tears filling her eyes, takes my hand and holds it to her face. 'Daddy. Why? Why?' She wails, over and over.

What do you mean, why? I just told you. 'Darling,' I stroke her head, 'Mummy...'

'Mr Jin?' A horrified Mrs Park stands by the door. Her eyes trailing the blood escaping my body. She removes the scarf around her neck and wraps it around my wrists. 'What have you done?' Her eyes wander past me and freeze at the sight of something, her lips quivering. 'St-stay here sir,' she begs me.

I hear the faint ring of a telephone close by and an echo of the words ‘please come quick, he’s done it again. He thinks she’s here...’

Think? What do you mean, think? She’s here. I can hear her laughter spinning around my head. I take a 360 of the room, but Aera is nowhere to be found.

Mrs Park and Dea cling on to me, bathing me in tears, completely ignoring Aera’s laughter falling and rising inside the room. At least, shut her up. Please ... shut her up. That ring ...

Dea’s eyes trail behind me, the same spot Mrs Park inspected, and I’m curious, what the hell is so fascinating back there? More fascinating than the blood shooting from my fucking body? I turn my head and my eyes roll towards the medicine cabinet where I notice an emptied bottle of LSD and a used injection sitting right next to it. No ... I didn’t. I swear, I didn’t. I was just testing it out for Myung ... I didn’t actually.

‘Please hold on, sir. Help will be here soon.’

‘Daddy, please don’t go. Please don’t leave me.’

NO NEW CHINA

‘Phones,’ demands the guard standing at the checkpoint.

‘We don’t have them on us,’ says my brother.

‘Oh yeah, then what’s that?’ He points towards the phone in my hand.

My brother turns his head. Glaring at me, he snatches the phone from my hand and gives it to the guard.

‘What’s the passkey?’ The guard asks.

I don’t answer.

‘Erkin?’ My brother stares into my face.

‘7789,’ I reply in a dry tone.

The guard unlocks it and begins scrolling through the contents of my phone. *Scroll hard, leech. You won’t find anything.* I begin to whistle and the guard stares at me for a few moments then returns to his business. *Moron.* I turn to the smoking building next to me where a woman emerges from the fog. She surrenders her phone to another guard standing by.

‘Take that off your head,’ says the guard.

She removes the veil from her head and puts it under her arm. Her eyes softly meet with mine and I quickly look away.

The guard finishes writing something up and extends his hand out. ‘Here, you’re through to pass.’

I reach forward for my phone when the guard drops it. It falls against the pavement and cracks. He laughs to himself followed by the guard next to him. I bite my lip. You think it’s funny, do you?

My brother pushes me past the zone and waves his hands at the guards. ‘No worries, we’ll get a new one. Won’t we, Erkin?’

‘Well of course you will, that one’s no good to you now’ the guard laughs again as he opens a packet of watermelon seeds.

I stare at the guards intensely as my brother forces me past them, hate burning within me.

‘Leave it, Erkin,’ he now says as we leave the guards behind, still laughing.

‘I’ll get them good one day. Spawns of the devil,’ I curse at them.

‘I said, leave it.’

‘Isn’t that what I’m doing?’ I kick a poster beneath my feet. ‘All the goddamn time.’

He pulls my arm back. ‘No, that’s not what you’re doing. You’re kicking around their stuff when there’s a camera just up there.’

‘Alright,’ I push his arm away. ‘I get it.’

‘You don’t get it enough.’

I breath out heavily. ‘I’d rather not be the bigger person here.’

‘Oh no, we all got that part.’

I feel like turning back and heading home when I hear the woman from earlier calling out. ‘I don’t understand. What’s happening?’

We run towards her direction and peer around the wall.

‘What’s happening, darling, is that we can’t decide whether we feel up to taking you in,’ says the guard who destroyed my phone.

She screws her eyebrows. ‘What do you mean? What did I do?’

‘Don’t act coy, love. It doesn’t suit your age,’ the guard continues.

‘No really, I have no idea. Please tell me. I won’t repeat my mistakes.’

He scoffs and then pulls the veil from under her arms. ‘This thing,’ he waves it in the air. ‘You know you’re not supposed to wear it.’

‘But- no-one told me of this.’

‘What? You don’t read the posters around?’

‘That’s two strikes right there,’ says his partner.

The other guard cocks his head backwards. ‘It’s 4 am, do you really want to?’

‘We’ve got to. We didn’t take in those women from yesterday either,’ says his partner.

‘Yeah, but they were kinda hot.’ He sighs. ‘Alright, come with us, lady.’

The woman turns her head here and there. ‘Wait. I don’t understand.’

They grab her arms and snatch her from the line. ‘Please, you don’t have to do this,’ she begs.

‘Are they for real?’ I ask my brother. ‘They can’t be bloody serious.’

‘Leave it, Erkin. Let’s go.’ He grabs onto my arm.

I wriggle it off. ‘No, what the hell are they doing? They don’t even have a system. They’re just taking whoever they want.’

‘For the love of God, you can’t get involved.’

‘No, I will.’ I run forward when my brother pulls me back.

‘For goodness sake, Erkin. You’re going to kill me one day.’

I struggle within his arms. ‘Let me go, brother. They’re gonna take her in.’

‘There is nothing you can do, Erkin. Nothing.’

‘I don’t believe it.’

He rams me against a wall. ‘Believe it. Now, are you done?’

‘No,’ I scream aloud with pure rage.

He darts towards me and holds his hand against my mouth. He cocks his head here and there and then looks back at me. ‘Grow up, Erkin. Show a little intelligence.’ He lifts his head again. ‘Luckily, somehow, no-one heard us. Now get up.’

I push him back and am about to get up when I feel the ground shaking. ‘Can you feel that?’

‘What?’ He says, brushing himself off.

‘The ground. I swear it’s shaking.’

‘What are you talking about?’

‘Well, feel it.’

He bends down reluctantly and feels the ground. He looks up. 'You're right.'

'Of course I bloody am. But what it could it be?'

'I don't-' He stops mid-sentence and looks up, eyes shaking. 'Erkin-'

'What?'

He lifts me up. 'Run.'

'What?'

'I said run you fool,' he yells back, already ahead of me.

We tear through the still streets, the cold air washing over our faces. My brother looks back and his face is the picture of worry. 'Hurry up,' he screams.

'Won't you tell me what all this is about?' I shout back.

'We'll know.' He swerves past a corner. 'We'll know for sure soon.'

'Are you telling me you don't even know why we're running?'

'Patience, Erkin.'

I turn to my right where a little girl is watching us from the window high above. She gasps and shuts the window as soon as she realises I am staring and pulls the blinds forward.

'Cameras aren't the only thing watching us now. What happened to laying low?' I yell out to my brother.

'We're here,' he says.

'Thank God,' I stop to regain my breath and walk up to my brother. 'What- Brother, why are you crying?' I follow the direction that his eyes are looking and fall back. 'What-What are they doing?' My lips begin to quiver.

Our mosque sits before us sliced in half. The minaret, gone. Pages of the Quran scattered across the rubble, the beautiful words covered in dust. A shell, less than a shell of what it used to be.

A tear rolls down my eyes, followed by another, and another until they fall free. I open my mouth to speak but cannot produce words. The pain hurts so much. I can't. By God, it hurts. I clutch onto my brother as I fall to my knees. 'Brother, they can't do this. They can't do this. They-' I say it again and again like some sort of prayer that's supposed to comfort me, but it doesn't.

My brother doesn't say anything. He stands there mute, his large hands shaking. He looks down at me. 'Get up.'

I remain plastered to the ground, afraid of the look on his face.

'I said,' he yanks my arm up. 'Get up.'

'What are you going?' I pull myself back, the pain still aching in my chest.

He picks up a rock near his feet and presses it into my hand. 'I don't care what the consequences are, they can't keep getting away with this.' He picks another for himself and feels it in his hands. 'On the count of three, Erkin. Hit that devil sitting inside.'

I watch him as he hurls the rock, full force, at the bulldozer. It bounces off the cab and the man inside jumps. He jumps again as I throw another rock at him until he is forced to put the machine on standby.

'They think they're gods. They think they're untouchable. We'll show them, Erkin. They're going to rot in hell,' my brother yells out, his anger slowly releasing itself. 'Don't stop, carry on hitting that fucker.' He says this as he runs towards the pages of the Quran and rescues them from under the rubble. His eyes filling with tears as he looks upon their dust-ridden pages.

I snap myself free from the terrifying sight and bend down for another stone. I pull my arm back ready to swing when someone holds my arm steady and forces the rock from my hand. Before I can turn around, a guard leisurely strolls into my view, playing catch with the rock I had earlier. He shoots me a thin smile as other guards run behind him and towards my brother. I open my mouth to scream for him when the guard lunges forwards, covering my mouth and tosses me against the ground.

A guard begins laughing towards where my brother is. 'They're all the same. Bloody illiterate degenerates. In the truck, Mengyao?'

The guard near me lights a cigarette. 'What do you think?' he says, clicking his lighter shut.

Calm down. Calm down. Just look for your brother. He'll make it alright. He'll explain everything from 1 to 10. If I could just. I can't calm down. 'Ahhh!' someone screams into my face, their spit spraying across my face. I wipe it off when someone else crashes into my back pushing me onto the floor. I fall against my nose and my world becomes- Get up, idiot. Get up, get up. Stop holding your nose and open your damn eyes. Stop acting like a goddamn idiot for one minute. Just one.

'We need backup in here,' a guard screams into his receiver.

'Coming,' says the voice on the other side.

Oh Lord, please find him before they slap you in another cell. Once you're gone, you're gone. Shut up. Please shut up.

'Got another,' a guard clutches onto my body and tosses me into the arms of another. The final guard throws me into a cell where people are not running, only watching and crying and praying.

That's it, idiot. You had one chance and you messed up. I sink to the floor, my whole world spinning.

'Erkin.'

I spin my head. My brother. Was that my brother?' I lift myself up and look around. Everyone looks the same. Copy and pasted across the room.

'Erkin, I'm here.'

An arm raises up over the bodies and waves at me. I immediately recognise it to be my brother's and run towards him, joy ripping within me. I jump into his arms, closing my entire world on him. 'Brother,' I cry out.

'It's alright, Erkin,' he presses on my shaking body, sometimes grabbing my face, sometimes stroking my head. 'I'm here.'

'Here's more,' says the guard as he tosses a group of men into the cell. They fall on top of us and we fall on top of others.

‘Is that all of them?’ says another.

‘Yeah, this one won’t take anymore,’ says another. He turns his head towards the corridor. ‘Take the other one.’ Darkness shuts onto our faces as he closes the cell door.

‘Wake up, wake up,’ the guards chant, beating their guns against the cell bars.

We all begin stirring with movement at once.

‘Line up. Come one, I haven’t got all day,’ says a guard as he pushes the younger ones out of the cell.

We slide our way through the thin hallways that appear as if they’re twisting right through hell, cameras creeping up on us at every corner we leave behind. A key is twisted through a lock and a door is opened. ‘In here,’ says a guard, cocking his head.

We enter a room lined with tables, a book sitting atop each one. I pass through the door, jumping at the sight of a woman standing towards the front.

‘Find yourself a desk and be seated,’ she says.

I trail behind my brother to the back of the classroom where two guards are already positioned, guns strapped over their shoulders.

The woman raises her hand and writes on the board. TEACHER CHEN. She begins, ‘In front of you is a book about Xi Jinping. You will notice it is in Chinese. You are expected to read and speak only Chinese here. We will spend the next three months trying to memorise this book,’ she holds it up. ‘Every two weeks, you will be subjected to an examination which will assess the amount of knowledge you have learnt. If we feel that you have truly adopted a righteous way of thought, we will let you go. If you resist or fail in your test, you will be reprehended accordingly.’ She places the book down and turns on the receiver. ‘Now, you will be shown a video about Xi Jinping. Those of you who want to pass will take notes.’

‘Long live the great, glorious and correct Communist party of China!’ The video screams at us immediately. ‘Happiness is on the rise for Xinjiang. Unity is on the rise for China.

‘You are here to safeguard the national security, sovereignty and social stability of China,’ Xi Jinping preaches to us before a red flag. ‘As citizens of China, you will do your part for the peace of this great country.’

What the hell is this? Citizens of China? I glance at my brother who is taking notes. He looks at me and directs his eyes towards my pen. Taking the hint, I run my eyes over the ridiculous book when the door to the classroom swings open. A pair of guards slide their way inside and begin circling the room, their rubber boots crunching around our desks. Occasionally, they stop at a desk to pluck the notes from students and scan over them and as one of them chucks a notepad back to its table, his eyes meet mine.

Shit. I drop my head and begin writing. China, Xi Jinping, nonsense, drivel. The crunching of boots grows louder until it ceases right below my head. My notebook is snatched from my hand. I hold my breath as the guard runs his eyes over the pages. He shakes his head and glares at me. I swallow my spit and ready my feet for action as he reaches out for me when someone towards the back of the classroom coughs. The guards spin their heads towards the man and pounce on him. I breath out. God, I breath out.

The guards yank the man from his chair, almost tearing his arm off as he tries to resist.

‘Wait. What have I done?’ The student looks around desperately. ‘You didn’t even look at my notes,’ he holds up his notebook. ‘It’s in Chinese. Look. Xi Jinping is great. He’s great. I believe it.’

The notebook is ripped from his hand and thrown on the desk.

‘Please,’ he lunges forward and points at me. ‘He hasn’t written anything. He can’t even write Chinese.’

The student’s face is buried underneath a guards knee until he stops moving. They drag him across the floor and out of the classroom.

‘DE, YI, SHI, BU, LE, ZAI. Which letter comes next?’

I study my brother’s face not knowing if he’s serious or if he really is built different. ‘So you’re alright with this?’

‘What kind of a question is that?’ He retaliates, staring down at my trembling hands.

‘One that I’d like to know the answer to.’

‘For goodness sake, it’s three in the morning and I’m trying to teach you something. Have a little consideration for your brother. I could be asleep right now.’

‘Considerate? You’re gonna talk to me about being considerate?’ I scoff. ‘That’s rich.’

‘You know I care just as much as you do. I only care in a way that’s not suicidal. There’s a difference,’ he holds down my trembling hand. ‘I know you’re afraid, and I am too. But listen,’ he shuffles closer to me. ‘We have to be very careful in the way we react.’

‘What do you mean?’ I say, snatching my hand from under his.

‘I need you to tell me you understand me, Erkin. We have to do everything they say, exactly how they say. We show no reaction no matter what’s going on. You can fight with me on it as much as you want, and I don’t like it either but there’s no other way we’re going home. To mother. To our old life.’ He holds onto my shoulder. ‘This is the moment I’ve been leading you up to, Erkin. Tell me you understand.’

I stare into his eyes. ‘That man.’

He presses onto my shoulder. ‘There was no man. Not as far as we’re concerned. Now, back to the issue. Do you understand. Just say it once. Just once.’

‘You’re scaring me.’ I remove his hand from my shoulder. ‘And hurting me.’

His gaze falls on me like a brick. He falls back and closes his eyes. ‘When will you learn, Erkin? Life will not go the way you want it to.’ He turns his back on me. ‘Just go to sleep, we’ll try again when your temper has improved.’

These damned lessons, damned videos have somehow carried us to Friday. The most holy day of the week. I only know because people here count seven days until Friday. My brother looks back at me from the line. I don’t look back. He’s becoming someone I can’t recognise. I look around. New faces, passing deaths. I’m still here.

He moves closer to me and is about to say something when the man in front of him suddenly throws himself against the ground.

‘I can’t. By God, I can’t,’ he yells at the guards. ‘Take me away. Oh God.’

‘Hey,’ my brother bends down towards the man. ‘What are you doing?’ he whispers.

‘Please,’ begs the man. ‘Tell the guards I can’t do it anymore. I want to die. By God, I want to die.’ He begins to cry in a way I’ve never seen a man cry.

‘What’s wrong? Get up,’ my brother attempts to lift him but the man glues himself to the floor. ‘People are staring.’

‘Good,’ cries the man. ‘I want them to see. To take me away. Oh god,’ he starts banging his head against the hard floor. ‘I can’t do it.’

‘Hey,’ I push forward. ‘Calm down. What are you doing?’

He lifts his head and laughs hysterically, blood trailing down his forehead. ‘I don’t know. What am I doing? What am I doing?’ He continues banging his head and laughing.

My brother pushes me back again. ‘Don’t talk to him. He’s gone insane.’

‘What have they done to him?’ I say, slowly backing away from the man.

‘What the fuck is happening here?’ The voice of a guard cuts through the conversation. We all jump. The guard looks at the man on the floor. ‘The fuck are you doing?’

The man pounces forward and grabs the guard’s feet. ‘I’m begging you. Kill me. I beg.’

The guard kicks him away and turns towards the other guards. ‘Hey, got a lost fucker here. Help me.’

‘Another one?’ Shouts a guard from somewhere nearby

‘Another one. He’s bleeding and all too,’ he shouts back.

‘These fuckers just don’t stop do they?’ He comes running and they both grab the man from under his arms.

‘Oh, thank God. Thank you,’ the student sobs. ‘I’ll never forget-’ He’s carried out of the doors before he can finish his sentence.

I swallow my spit as my brother stares at me. He opens his mouth-

‘Next,’ a server calls out to him.

He moves forward and grabs his plate but freezes just before the counter. I look towards where his attention is glued.

It is Friday. Eat your fill of pork, drink wine, and thank Xi Jinping for the meal.

China feeds you well.

These words are plastered over a large board. My world becomes stilted for a moment until I too am called forward. I watch as they fill my plate with filth and trail towards my brother.

‘I want to throw up,’ I say, dropping my plate onto the table, ‘and not just because of what’s on my plate. They’re sick.’ I glance at my brother, his eyes darting everywhere, watching people as they fill their mouths. Each one of them appearing as if they’re chewing metal.

‘Oh, forgive me, brother. Do you want me to shut my mouth and eat?’

He jumps forward. ‘Don’t you dare put that in your mouth.’

‘But I thought this was the plan, no? Do everything as they, exactly as they say, even if it means condemning God?’

‘Shut up and let me think.’ He holds his head. ‘It’s just that I never expected- they have nothing to gain – I mean it just doesn’t- Fuck.’ He begins biting his nails as he looks about the dining area.

I lean into him. ‘We don’t have to eat it.’

‘They’ll force us,’ he says.

‘Then we’ll throw it away.’

‘They’ll see us.’

‘Then we’ll throw it on the floor.’

‘They’ll know.’ He sighs. ‘There’s nothing we can do, but there must be something we can do.’ He bangs his fist against the table.

I run my eyes over the room, studying each position the guards are in and lean over to my brother. 'I've got an idea. I'll distract the guards and buy you some time to throw your plate away. Sound good?'

'What? No!' He shoots up and tries to grab my hand as I stand up, but misses me by a second and witnesses me smashing my plate onto the ground where it breaks into pieces.

The guards twist their heads all at once and run in my direction.

'Go, brother,' I say.

'No,' he dives forward in an attempt to grab me once more but I fall into the guards arms. They drive me out of the room and I'm gone. He's gone.

This is what I chose. This is what I chose. Tell myself again and again. Run it through the angel that I can see in the corner of my eye. Run it through my mother who is still waiting for me. This is what I chose.

I want my brother to save me. I want mother to save me. I want the pain to end.

Run it through everyone. This is what I chose.

At least, I was useful for once in my life.

I drop to the ground where they drag me across the floor and my skin burns as it rubs against the ground. My body is slapped against a chair where they hold me down and poke my arm through a hole in the door. A needle? Yes, a needle is injected into me. Run it through everyone.

I'm back in a place I know is familiar but I can't put my finger on it. A man swings forward and starts talking to me. '-----', he says. '-----, -----.' I drop to the floor unable to pick myself up when he holds me in his arms. '-----, -----', he grabs my face. '-----, -----, Erkin.' Wait. That sounds familiar. He lifts my arm and it flops straight to the ground. His expression crumbles as he lifts my shirt and stares at my chest. Tears form in his eyes. God, he

looks familiar. '---kin. It- -e-. Plea- lo--- a---- m---e.' 'What are you saying?' I ask him. 'What --- they - d---t--- --ou?' He asks. 'What? '----, it---- m---- Zekeriya. You--- --cak --- w---me. Wh--- d---- -t---- yo?' I try to lift myself but cannot, 'Zekeriya?' He nods eagerly. 'Ye---, ----, --- me, ---erki---a-.' 'Zekeriya?' He holds me close to him, his warm tears falling on my forehead. 'Erk---n--, ----st d--- as--- -sa---.' I drift off to the familiarity of his voice.

ZEKERIYA

'Without the Communist Party, no new China,' we all belt out in preparation for the week ahead of us. 'No new China! No new China!'

He's gone.

'Stand up! Stand up! Stand up!'

He's gone.

'I am Chinese. I am proud of China.'

It's all my fault.

'We have done illegal things, but now we know better.'

I made a promise to mother. To myself. And now he's-

'Good,' Mrs. Chen exclaims. 'Be seated.'

We all sit.

'Two weeks have passed since your arrival,' she says. 'It is time for your first examination. Write down everything you have learnt here and how you feel about yourself as a citizen of China.'

I pick my pen up and write. I don't even know what I'm writing. I just write. China. Xi Jinping. Greatness. He's gone. I write it all. My pen drops from my fingers as we reach our time limit. I stare at the words spilled over the pages before me and brush my hands over them. Tear it, tear it all. He's gone. My essay is snatched from me and shuffled into a compilation of lies. Mrs. Chen flicks on a video for us as she reads them over. Strength. Unity. Progress. Erkin. All preached to us before a rising red flag.

Mrs. Chen turns off the receiver. 'Burak Çevik. Stand.'

Two seats ahead of me towards the right, Burak, just turned eighteen, stands. We pin our eyes on his thin body.

He jumps back as his paper is slapped on his desk.

'Read it,' orders Mrs. Chen.

He looks down, hands trembling violently and begins. 'My name is Burak Çevik. I am a Uyghur. I am a Muslim and I stand with God. I have learnt nothing from those who God will punish in the afterlife and I certainly won't adhere to their rules. No number of injections, electrocutions or beatings can numb me enough to make me forget who I am. To God we belong, and to God we return.'

A stiff kind of silence crawls up the corners of the classroom as we all stare at him wide-eyed. A guard approaches him from behind and throws his head back by his hair. He shoves Burak's essay into his mouth then writes the words *bigot* over his forehead in red ink. The door is open and shut.

'That man has just opened up a world of suffering,' says Mrs. Chen. 'Observe, what will happen if you resist.' She makes her way to the front and pulls another essay from the pile. 'Zekeriya Aktas. Stand.'

I lift myself. She hands me the essay and I begin. 'The great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation cannot be achieved if minorities like myself demand separation and adhere to extremism.' Erkin. 'I have once committed sins against my country with my extremist acts, but I have learnt from my mistakes and will never again hurt my Chi-hurt my China.' I begin to stutter as the distant sound of screaming fills my ears.

'Yes, go on,' Mrs. Chen encourages me.

I look down again and continue. 'Xi Jinping is my ... my saviour. He teaches me much and I thank him generously for his sympathy.' My tongue begins to burn as the screaming grows wild. Erkin. Come back to me. 'I will work with China, for China, to make it a great society by 2021 and will put a halt on my faith for the modernisation of this great country. I am a proud Chinese before I am anything else.' Please.

Mrs. Chen draws her hands together and claps followed by the class and I wish the Earth would open up beneath me and swallow me whole.

‘Now this man has promise,’ she says. ‘Write and behave in such a way that all your sins are washed out and China will accept you with open arms.’

He’s gone. What do I do with myself? I look around. What do we do with ourselves? And the screams. I bang my head against the wall. The screams won’t leave. Sometimes Erkin, sometimes Burak. Nothing makes sense. I’m in hell but I haven’t even been burnt yet. What do I do with myself?

‘Who are you looking for?’ A voice from behind calls out.

‘My brother, Erkin.’

He cocks his head. ‘Erkin. The little spitfire?’

‘Yeah ... wait,’ I turn around. ‘Spitfire?’

‘Yes. Spitfire.’ He laughs. ‘That’s what we call the young. They certainly have a lot of spirit these days. And I thought religion was dying, God forbid.’ He moves closer to me. ‘I’ve seen you teaching him Chinese. I don’t think he’s too keen on learning though, is he?’

I shake my head. ‘No, he has a lot of anger. Can’t see past it.’

‘My son is the same. Hot-headed and idiotic. Endlessly repenting because he just won’t listen. The world knows, it’s hard to be young and religious these days.’

‘Mmh, yeah.’ I drop my head and lift it again. ‘Where is your son, if you don’t mind me asking?’

‘Ah,’ he leans back against the wall and looks off into nowhere. ‘He’s here. They keep him in a different cell through so I don’t ever get to see him. Burak Çevik, my own son.’

My soul slams against my chest.

‘You’re lucky you’re still with family,’ he lies down and closes his eyes. ‘You tell him when you see him, that little spitfire of yours, that if he carries on as he is, he’s sure headed for death. You tell him. We can lie to them but we can’t lie to God. We’re Muslims at the end of the day, we’ll always be. You tell him.’

I nod like a fool. 'Would you tell me something? Why isn't anyone coming to save us? Does no-one care?' I wait for an answer and after some moments of silence I look over at him and he's sleeping, just like the rest of the world.

The guard unlocks the cell and begins to read out names, 'Timur Muhammad, Zekeriya Aktaş, Khoja Çarkçı. Come out.'

We all come out one by one, our brain replaced with bone.

'Based on your assessments, we have judged you to be a non-threat towards China. You will be sent on a train home later this afternoon.'

Whilst the others expressions light up, mine becomes doused with fear.

I step forward. 'Excuse me, there have been a few missing from our cell. Where are they?'

The guard pushes me forward along with the others. 'Move it.'

But- how can this be? How can I move on? What do I? Mother! Mother will help me find a way. I'm sure of it.

These streets. The familiar air. The warm sand beneath my feet. I run. Blazing past the buildings I ran past as a child. The scent of spiced food lifts my soul. Mutton, beef, onions, carrots. I feel as though I am floating. Mother, I am coming. I hear children laughing. People talking. I see a guard. Two guards. Three. Four. Piling onto our streets. No. This isn't how it's supposed to be. A check zone. A mosque being demolished. Posters getting caught between the cracks.

I see a checkpoint up ahead and turn my pockets inside out. 'I don't have a phone.'

He pats down my body and waves his hand in the air for me to go.

My steady walk builds into a jog, a rapid run. I don't look back. I'm tearing straight through the streets all the way to home. A shell sits next to another shell. Not even a shadow comes forward to greet me. My face lights up as I hear the sound of laughter. I run around the

corner two find two guards smoking and laughing. A camera zooms into my face and clicks. I turn back and run for home.

Peering inside, no one appears to be home. A cup and a kettle rest on our green table. 'Mother!' I bang against the window. 'Mother, I'm home. It's me, Zekeriya. Mother, open the door.' I twist the handle on the window but it won't budge. 'Mother,' my voice begins to crack. 'Please.'

I quickly turn my head as I hear the sound of rocks crunching beneath someone's feet.

'Zekeriya?'

'Uncle Yunus?' I run to him and throw my arms around him. God, he's warm.

'Uncle, they have my brother. I need to tell mother; we need to find a way to get him back.'

He screws his eyebrows. 'Son, your mother is not here.'

'What?'

'I haven't seen her for weeks now.' He looks me up and down. 'To be honest, I thought she'd be with you.'

I take a few steps back, my heart at my feet. 'You don't think they've. Uncle, you don't think they've taken her too?'

'I can't say, son,' he moves forward. 'You know I don't see anyone no more. I think they've taken everyone along this street. I don't even bother looking out of the window anymore in case they take my old body too. Well, why would I? My only view is that camera there.' He points at the neighbours roof opposite his home.

'But,' my lips begins to quiver. 'How-how are we going to get Erkin back? How am I supposed to get mother back?'

He sighs. 'I don't know, son. I really wish I could say.'

'I-I-I don't understand. What do I do now?' I crumble as I bite my fingers.

'Calm down, son. Why don't you come in? Hmm? I'm sure you're starved.' He opens the door to his home. 'Come, come on.'

I look up at the camera before stepping inside.

I open the curtains and there it is. Blinking at me. I stretch out my prayer mat and begin to pray right there. Let it see me. Let the world know. God lift me up. The scars I left behind.

I slip downstairs and throw the door open. A poster flies towards my feet. I trap it underneath my sole, pick it up and study it. A family is praying but the image is crossed out in bold red ink. I rip it to pieces. Bloodsuckers. The camera makes a whirring sound and clicks. I rip off another from down the street and tear it. Take it. Take it all back. Everything I was. As my hands prepare to pull off another poster, the sound of a child screaming echoes in the area.

‘Zekeriya,’ Uncle Yunus yells from behind his door. ‘Come back inside.’

I ignore him and sprint through the still streets. I turn a corner to find two guards snatching a child from his mother.

‘Please. Please, don’t do this,’ the mother cries as she hugs her child.

‘Pull harder, what are you made of?’ The guard shouts at another.

‘He’s just a child. Please don’t do this. Have mercy,’ she pleads as her child screams within her arms.

‘He’s your fourth child. You know the rules.’

‘My first child is dead, she’s no longer in this world. Please, don’t take my child from me. Have mercy.’

‘Grab her arms, man. What are you doing?’ The guard yells at his partner. They tear at the child’s arm with all their power.

They- they can’t keep getting away with this. ‘Hey,’ I scream out with pure rage and tear towards the mother and her child. ‘Stop.’

The guards cease what they’re doing and shoot their heads up.

‘Hey, hey, hey, hey,’ a guard calls out. ‘Get back, you sava-’

I throw the guard against the ground and strike him with my fists. I’ll break your nose, your jaw, I’ll break everything. One by one. Slowly.

‘Back. Back. Get back,’ the other guard points his gun at me.

Nothing will move me. I scream into the guards face as I strangle him, watching the life slip from his movements. It feels good to be on the top. Too good. ‘If death is not enough for you? What is?’ I spit onto his face.

‘We need more men here,’ his partner talks into the receiver as he struggles to pull me off his associate.

I writhe in his arms screaming. ‘We are alive, so let us live! By God, let us live.’

The child lifts his head from his mother’s embrace and meets eyes with mine. That tiny face, filled with thick tears. Why do you have to be a part of this?

The stomping of boots distracts me from my thoughts and I look around to find guards pointing their guns at me from every angle. I close my eyes, aware that someone is running up behind me. They glue my head to the ground and chain my hands behind my back. A pair of legs stop just before me. I lift my head to a familiar face.

‘You. You fucking sa-’ I fire with movement again.

The man looks down.

‘What?’ He bends down and lifts my forehead with his gun. ‘Do I know you?’

‘In the truck, Mengyao?’ a guard calls out.

Mengyao drops my head and places his boot over it. ‘What do you think?’ He says, throwing his cigarette to the ground and putting it out with his other foot.

‘And the kid?’

‘Leave him to me.’ He kicks my head away and moves towards the child.

‘Don’t touch that-’ I whisper as I crawl to the boy.

He takes the crying child in his arms. ‘Hey, hey, what’s wrong? Hmm?’ He makes a face. ‘You want a lollipop? Yeah?’ The boy hesitates. ‘Go on, it’s yummy.’ The boy takes it. ‘There you go,’ he says, handing the child to another guard.

‘In the truck, Mengyao?’

‘In the truck.’

A Creative Social Critique of Inequalities and Genocide in Contemporary Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Morely (2007) states that ‘criticism and creative writing are two phases of the same activity (...) and the best criticism creates new open spaces for creativity’ (p. 36). Binding my passion for creative writing and socio politics, ‘Man’s Burden’ is a creative form of social criticism which focuses on raising awareness of various inequalities and genocide in contemporary Asia to offer readers a unique perspective of real issues in the world.

‘Karoshi’ which translates into death by overwork explores the overworking culture in Japan where employees are working extremely long hours leading to the deterioration of employees’ mental and physical health. ‘Expensive Sorrow’ highlights the economic inequality within South Korea’s capital, Seoul, where the gap between the rich and poor is widening rapidly. ‘No New China’ focuses on the Uyghur genocide in Xinjiang, China where people are being put into internment camps to be ‘re-educated’.

Each story is connected through location which is East Asia. They are all told through the first-person male point of view, explore contemporary issues, hint at a possible suicide, and highlight themes of oppression, fear and masculinity. Despite being connected in many ways, they are also different in many ways. For instance, ‘Expensive Sorrow’ borrows literary features from the Gothic genre whereas ‘No New China’ revolves around themes often seen within Dystopian fiction. In comparison, ‘Karoshi’ is a psychological story which revolves around entrapment. Therefore, although the stories all explore contemporary issues within East Asia, they are set apart from each other in the genres they borrow from and their literary devices which takes readers on a unique journey as each story offers a different experience from the last. These differences were incorporated into the stories to show that social critique can be achieved in various ways, even within the limited space of short fiction, and can be done by pushing creative boundaries to connect with a diverse audience as well as offer a unique experience. However once the stories come together as a unified project, the readers realise that although the stories are very different, they still reveal a consistent theme of oppression and inequality.

As a writer, I am aware of the challenging ethics and pitfalls of exploring and writing about countries I’ve never been to before; yet it’s important to me to discuss these issues.

‘Man’s Burden’ is less about critical theory and more about engaging with the cultural context the stories explore. Therefore, the research completed for this essay reaches further than literary and scholarly research and includes accounts of people who live within East Asia and news stories. This is because I believe that no-one can define a situation better than those who have experienced it. Therefore, to capture the complexities of the situations the stories explores, more effort was put into researching real stories told by people living within the countries and experiencing the difficulties my stories highlight.

I will begin the analysis of each story by providing context behind the issues I have chosen to write about. This will be followed by a literary analysis in which I will explore the literary techniques I have used in each story, how these techniques capture the issues the stories highlight and the effect they have on the reader. The order in which the stories will be explored is as follows:

‘Karoshi’s’ analysis will explore the use of imagery, repetition, symbolism, second person point-of-view and surrealist techniques such as anthropomorphism to highlight the entrapped lifestyle of Tetsuya and how this is leading to the protagonist’s and his wife’s mental and physical deterioration. I will follow this discussion by explaining how these techniques reveal the burdened lifestyle of a salaryman working in Japan.

‘Expensive Sorrow’s’ section will unpack the use of gothic elements such as duality in setting, Gothic violence committed by criminal personalities, and power over women. I will then discuss the importance of these techniques and how they capture and critique the gap between rich and poor.

The analysis of ‘No New China’ will look into the effect of dystopian techniques within the story such as technology, surveillance, loss of identity, physical control and enslavement. At the same time it will explore how the story discusses a real issue with the use of real locations, names and punishments, and how this juxtaposition between reality and fiction forces the reader to experience the horror of a live genocide.

The contextual and literary analysis of the stories will make the case that each story offers a different portrayal and experience of inequality and oppression in contemporary Asia to show that it can be done in various ways to take the reader on a creative journey. Yet, as the conclusion will argue, the stories are held together by many qualities such as surrealist techniques, suggested suicide, the supernatural, first-person point of view, extreme state of minds and themes of masculinity, fear and violence. These similarities and differences come together as a unified project to critique inequalities and genocide in Asia.

ANALYSIS OF 'KAROSHI'

'Karoshi' from 'Man's Burden' explores the phenomenon of Karoshi which is defined as 'a fatal condition in which the living rhythm of a human being is collapsed due to excessive fatigue and the life maintenance function is ruined' (Kanai, 2009: p. 209). It is a consequence of long working hours, a poor working environment and a substantial workload in which employees are burdened with heavy responsibility. Karoshi is recognised as a 'complex legal, psychological, and socio-logical issue representing a certain aspect of Japanese work culture' (Kawanishi, 2008: p. 65) and is depicted in my story through the claustrophobic setting in which the character is unable to escape the responsibilities of work. This pressure is further revealed through imagery, symbolism of time and non-realist elements which all uncover the entrapment of the protagonist, Tetsuya.

The work culture in Japan once flourished before and during the peak of the Japanese bubble economy during 1985 in which employers hired workers fresh from graduation and granted life-time employment in exchange for life-time loyalty (Japan Experience, 2018). However, once the economy collapsed in early 1990 businesses started to fire their workers due to bankruptcy. Since then, the Japanese economy has improved only marginally and the rate of lay-offs and unemployment has remained steady. Consequently, to avoid being thrown into an estranged state caused by unemployment, some employees are working so hard they're losing their mental balance. The loyalty, determination and sacrifice of time workers were willing to surrender for their companies gave rise to the term 'salaryman' more so than in previous generations.

The Salaryman embodies the 'archetypal citizen'; 'male,' 'heterosexual', 'able-bodied' and 'socially responsible' (Dasgupta, 2012: p. 2) as work in Japan is still deemed 'ideologically and culturally' a man's occupation and a man's social status is defined primarily as a worker (Dasgupta, 2012: p. 82). Therefore, the salaryman is expected to dedicate his time, energy, and loyalty to his company. Men who cannot attain stable employment defy these masculine expectations and struggle to find their place in society. However, compared to the endearing term salaryman once was before the burst of the bubble economy, the post-bubble desperation in finding and securing employment has given the salaryman a negative appearance.

Men who wish to adhere to the salaryman lifestyle are those who cling to the ideal

factors which are greatly pursued in the Japanese workplace such as having a ‘good co-operative attitude’ and willingly supporting others in the workplace by taking on more work (Kawanishi, 2008: p. 67). The more a Japanese worker embodies these qualities, the higher he is evaluated at his workplace. Even if a worker produces good quality work he is not likely to be highly evaluated if he does not display these personality characteristics. This attitude gives rise to Karoshi because these implicit but highly understood principles make job specifications and limitations even more distorted, creating the possibility that a position can be prolonged to contain more and more work to an almost endless scope. For instance, service overtime which is overtime work that is neither recorded nor paid for, an illegal practice in Japan, is becoming more commonplace in workplaces. Companies exploit their workers by introducing rationales such as ‘the pay based on the number of working hours means paying more money to a slow, inefficient worker’ (Kawanishi, 2008: p. 67). Therefore, many employers consider a performance-based evaluation system a more effective method of estimating an employee's ability leading employees to work many extra unrecorded hours. For example, when Suwa Tatsutoku committed suicide at age 34 ‘he accumulated more than 100 hours of overtime every month’ (Kawanishi, 2008: p. 69-70).

Overall, those who adhere to the salaryman lifestyle perceive the idea of not working hard and being in stable employment as a failure. Not only are the societal perceptions of male Japanese workers trapping them, but their own perceptions of masculinity too and failure in attaining these ideals puts pressure on the salaryman. This idea of social pressure, entrapment and victimisation is what I wanted to convey through my story ‘Karoshi’ and is reflected through the psychological setting within the story.

Anderson (2013) writes that ‘characters may find settings either supportive or oppressive and either response can generate or advance a story’ (p. 89). The setting within ‘Karoshi’ is designed to feel oppressive from the beginning so that it may advance the story in an ominous way and highlight the entrapment that is seen at the heart of the life of a salaryman. Karoshi’s oppressive setting is created through imagery. Tetsuya introduces his setting by describing the trains and how ‘across the train stations and taxi drop off points’ all he can see are ‘white shirts, black ties, and black briefcases’. Men in work attire, all waiting to get somewhere, just as society expects them to. This is followed by the image of the ad on the train which reads ‘My life is inside a ball which is constantly rotating.’ Amidst the image of men in uniform everywhere Tetsuya becomes a seemingly lost character, a protagonist who is not so special, as he is also dressed in work uniform waiting for his train, all so that he can fit into the masculine expectations of a salaryman. Furthermore, the ad which Tetsuya spends a significant

amount of time staring at spells out the setting in which Tetsuya exists, one from which there is no liberation or exit. Through these strong introductory images which focus on specific and concrete details, the atmosphere of imprisonment is created.

Alongside the imagery of Tetsuya's surroundings, the imagery of food in 'Karoshi' is heavily detailed and is important towards creating an atmosphere of oppression. Staple foods in Japan such as udon, miso shiru and ramen not only bring out the setting of Japan but reveal something deeper about Tetsuya's lifestyle, allowing readers to make connections between Tetsuya and his setting. Food is revealed through all the senses. Smells are described as 'beefy', they are described visually as, 'steams at me' and 'thick chunk of beef' and tastes are defined as 'juices melt on my tongue'. Tetsuya's precise descriptions of food reveal his obsession with food to highlight how severely malnourished he is, but also to reveal how the male culture of hard work with little leisure in Japan does not leave him the time to obtain suitable nourishment. This is emphasised when the smell of steamed beef can make him feel high as he says 'the smell of steamed meat climbs my nostrils. I feel high.'

The sense of entrapment in 'Karoshi' is further revealed through the symbolism of time and emphasises how Tetsuya can't escape his work-obsessed lifestyle. Within the space of five-thousand words, time is mentioned fifteen times and is expanded to economic production time as well as clock time. This repetition creates a claustrophobic atmosphere as it shows that time is limited or rather controlled and regimented for the characters as if it never belonged to them but is something that is solely sacrificed for their superiors. Conversely, it also shows how time never ends for them which is once again highlighted through the recurring ad 'my life is inside a ball which is constantly rotating.' Internal time is also highlighted in the story to further reveal Tetsuya's entrapped lifestyle. Tetsuya's internal time is led by memory alone. For instance, Tetsuya remembers when he used to pray, 'at a *time* when I could afford to sit down and enjoy the hot meals my mother made me'. He remembers his university days - they 'crawl back into *memory*' - and his university friends: 'he looks like an *old* friend of mine, Ren.' These examples show that his interior time is lived solely within memory, perhaps before all the struggle of adhering to the masculine expectations of a salaryman in which he is expected to sacrifice his time, energy and leisure to his company. Tetsuya's interior perception of time reveals that due to his current lack of control over time, he has clung to the idea of living in the past where he didn't have to live up to anyone's expectations, when he was still in his youth and time was his to enjoy. This idea makes his current fear of time more claustrophobic as he is trapped in both the past and present at the same time. In this sense, there is an idea of a dominant, constricting time juxtaposed to and suppressing the possibility of other times. Thus, the symbolism of linear

and interior time reveal a glimpse of the sacrifices a salaryman must make, as well as what it means to dedicate one's 'loyalty' to his company. Time becomes a symbol for the readers to obtain an 'immediate understanding of one aspect of the character in a single blow' (Truby, 2008: np) as it becomes a defining quality in Tetsuya's tormented life.

A character who shares Tetsuya's extreme psychological state is Yuria. Long work hours in Japan introduce work-family balance issues and Kanai (2009) argues that there is a correlation between men who work full time and depression amongst full-time housewives and that as salarymen become occupied with work, they think less about their family (2009: p. 213). Yuria is depicted as a depressed and lonely housewife through the second-person narration where she directly addresses Tetsuya as if he was right there listening to her, addressing him as 'you.' The second-person narration reveals how she's a 'lonely obsessive character', but also shows how 'wounded' and 'alienated' she's become without company (Anderson, 2013: p. 121). Yuria's seclusion as a neglected housewife is further emphasised through non-realist elements such as anthropomorphism in which Yuria humanises a wall so she may have some form of company, even if it is imagined. Thus, Yuria's conversations with the wall 'destabilize[...] the real world' (Armstrong, 2014: p. 5) and shows how disconnected she is from Tetsuya. Furthermore to this, the wall also brings out her fears, concerns and guilt. For instance the wall says to Yuria 'nothing good will ever come out of you' to mock her concern about not being able to have children. The wall comes alive to highlight just how trapped the characters are in their claustrophobic environment and shows how far the damage of overworking can reach when even the surroundings come alive to haunt the characters providing no sense of escape.

Overall, the literary features in 'Karoshi' all reveal how Tetsuya is fatigued from living up to the social expectations and duties of a salaryman but cannot escape them either. The use of imagery, symbolism of time and non-realist elements are all ways in which I represented the exploitation of salarymen and how this affects not only them but their families as well.

ANALYSIS OF 'EXPENSIVE SORROW'

'Expensive Sorrow' explores the economic inequality in Seoul, a densely populated city and amongst the world's most expensive to live in. Kang et al. state that 'the gap between the rich and the poor in Korea has [...] increased rapidly as a side effect of rapid economic growth' (2002: p. 619). Moreover, a survey organised by the 'government-affiliated Korea Institute for

Health and Social Affairs' revealed that over 85% of South Koreans reported they felt the income gap had grown very large and that 'financial security was the preserve of wealthy families' (Kim & McCurry, 2020). This situation between the rich and poor is depicted in 'Expensive Sorrow' through its gothic elements such as duality between settings, gothic violence committed by monstrous personalities and power over women which hints at toxic masculinity. These gothic features critique the horror of the living conditions and the inequalities that underpin the situation in Seoul.

Low life satisfaction reported by the poor in Seoul is partly caused by the rapid increase of housing prices in SK which is a consequence of the economic growth in the country and Yi (2020) states that 'between June 1998 and March 2006, the apartment housing price index increased by 106.29%'. This surge in housing prices is making it exceedingly difficult for the poor to maintain payments to keep their homes, especially in the capital. Due to these increasing housing prices, the poor are finding alternative living spaces such as semi-basement houses (banjihas). Banjihas houses are living spaces built partially underground which Shin says are a 'necessity for people who are [...] desperate' (Joo & Bae, 2019: p. 3).

'Expensive Sorrow' explores two real districts in South Korea with extremely dissimilar living conditions to highlight the inequality between the rich and poor. The first is Hannam-Dong, the district protagonist Jin Haneul occupies. Hannam-Dong is a district known for being the home of choice for artists, movie stars and singers and is dubbed Korea's Beverly Hills. Areas within Hannam-Dong have been deemed as the most expensive to live in within Korea where apartment complexes such as 'Hannam The Hill' are sold for millions. Yet approximately a five-minute drive away from this luxurious district is Ahyeon-Dong.

Ahyeon-Dong is one of the remaining shanty towns in downtown Seoul and was featured in the Korean movie *Parasite* which exposed the dark side of South Korea's economic growth by showcasing the 'urban poverty' and the 'humiliation and class strife it has spawned' (Sang-Hun, 2020). Lee Jeong-sik (a resident of Ahyeon-Dong) states that 'watching the film made me feel like they put my life right in there' (Yi & Cha, 2020). The district is swallowed under the shadows of the high apartment complexes of wealthy districts. Streets are narrow, seemingly empty, and the residents here dread losing their homes to redevelopment through forced eviction to make room for a newer, ever-evolving Seoul. Residents of shanty towns such as Ahyeon-Dong, unable to afford financial security, are pushed underground into semi-basement homes (banjihas). Over 36, 000 South Koreans live within banjihas, a large majority of them in the greater Seoul urban expanse. The conditions within banjihas include an overflow of insects, lack of sunlight and rotting smells caused by high humidity. Shin expresses that in

banjihās ‘you can’t tell whether it’s night or daytime’ and ‘it’s the last place you descend to when you’re out of money’ as banjihās are often compared to graves (Joo & Bae, 2019: p. 3).

These descriptions create a dark and depressing image of shanty towns such as Ahyeon-Dong and the banjihās within them. As mentioned before, this dark image was injected into ‘Expensive Sorrow’ through its gothic elements to offer social critique of the dire conditions the poor must endure.

The gothic atmosphere within ‘Expensive Sorrow’ is created through the binary setting between Ahyeon-Dong and Hannam-Dong. Although Gothic fiction usually feature characters presenting a ‘duplicitous nature’ (Robinson, 2021: p. 2) as seen in *Jekyll & Hyde* and *Dorian Gray*, binary settings are witnessed in classic gothic too. For instance, in *Jekyll and Hyde* the setting of London has a dual nature. Lavish streets filled with respectable people are described as ‘inhabitants doing well [...] laying out the surplus of their grains’, ‘an air of invitation’ and ‘rows of smiling saleswomen’ (Stevenson, 1886: p. 4). This area is parallel to areas creeping with violence and threat, ‘a [...] sinister block of building thrust forward its gable on the street’ and ‘tramps slouched into the recess’ (Stevenson, 1886: p. 5).

‘Expensive Sorrow’ also creates duality in setting and is revealed in the story through the journey between Ahyeon-Dong and Hannam-Dong to capture the reality of the bleak living conditions of the poor in comparison to the luxurious one of the rich. For instance, just as Dr Jekyll from *Jekyll & Hyde* presents a double of himself by tapping into his ‘lower elements’, a trip to Ahyeon-Dong requires one to also tap into their lower elements. First of all, to venture into Ahyeon-Dong one has to ‘sink’ into a place where ‘the sun barely reaches’ so the characters must ‘sit around in an ugly kind of darkness’. The physical characterisation of the setting suggests that Ahyeon-Dong is a sinister place where menace can exist because of the concealment and darkness. In fact, Gothic fiction thrives on taking its readers through strange places that are mysterious and threatening, most often imprisoning too to trap the reader in terror. In ‘Expensive Sorrow’ the threat that exists in Ahyeon-Dong is to trap the readers into the horror of the conditions the poor exist within.

On the other hand, to reach Hannam-Dong ‘the elevator climbs upwards [...] where the light hits every corner.’ Not only does the climbing upward provide security from threat down below but Kim Nam-sik, a real estate agent in SK, says that ‘In Seoul, wealth is measured by how high you live’ (Sang-Hun, 2020). Therefore the movement downwards and upwards in ‘Expensive Sorrow’ also becomes a symbol of status, wealth and class, and embodies the vision where those higher are closer to glory whereas those down below are closer to death and doom.

The binary setting within ‘Expensive Sorrow’ is much different from ‘Karoshi’ in the

sense that 'Expensive Sorrow's' setting offers a journey between settings in which the characters can escape whereas Karoshi's setting is linear and claustrophobic, offering no escape whatsoever. However, only Haneul, the wealthy and privileged is able to travel between the settings, not the poor characters. Therefore, similar to 'Karoshi' the oppressed characters are stuck to their setting, unable to move around with freedom.

Another feature of the gothic genre is the use of the devil as a symbol of chaos. Although he is not the devil, Haneul's psychopathic tendencies create disorder in the story and the imminent sense of threat that stems from him is apparent throughout. Thus, the true sense of 'antagonism between character and place' (Anderson, 2013: p. 90) is only fully realised through Haneul.

Devils in the gothic genre act as an embodiment of humanity's fear and heighten the horror of this genre. Conversely, Haneul acts as a personification of the poor character's vulnerability. This vulnerability is manifested through Haneul's extreme gothic violence. For instance when his way out of an alleyway is blocked by a drunken man, instead of waiting for the man to move aside, Haneul simply runs over his legs. 'I switch my gear into reverse and back up the car right over his fucking legs'. Haneul even goes back to watch the aftermath as he says, 'I crack my lighter against my cigarette and smoke a satisfactory puff, laughing inwardly, as they carry the fool away on their shoulders.' Moreover, when Myung is getting beaten at the club, it is Haneul who caused this event to happen as he tells Myung 'they like it when you touch them' regarding the women at the club, and when Myung gets into trouble for this and is being beaten, Haneul watches and says 'I'm smiling in darkness as the colour red blends with puddles of water on the ground'. Again, these acts only occur in Ahyeon-Dong, a place described of 'hideous civilisation' and 'menacing darkness' as described in 'Expensive Sorrow'.

Haneul's fascination with violence for no other purpose than excitement and thrill reveals his psychopathic nature and Stein (199) says character is revealed through 'the disposition of a person [...] her attitude toward the people and places of the world, her customary response, particularly emotional response' (p. 50). Haneul's cool and calm descriptions of receiving joy at the cost of someone's pain is similar to Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* as (Schoene, 2008) says Bateman 'relates his countless killings in meticulous detail and a purely descriptive, detached tone' (p. 227). For instance, after killing a woman in his apartment, Bateman explains 'her head sits on the kitchen table' and for some reason, rather than being revolted by this image, he is instead reminded of a lunch appointment, 'I still have a lunch appointment at Odeon [...] and I have to debate whether I should cancel it or not' (Ellis,

1991: p. 175). Both Haneul and Bateman's "casual" violence reveals cruelty that is occurring only because they have power brought by wealth and there are seemingly no repercussions to their actions which only further emphasises their privilege. Thus, even though 'Expensive Sorrow' is different to 'Karoshi' and 'No New China' because it features a psychopathic protagonist who wreaks havoc instead of receiving it, the entrapment and suffering of the oppressed are still recognised through Haneul's needless violence acts against them.

Another way Gothic fiction highlights differences in power is through its portrayal of women vulnerable to transgressors and gross criminals. 'Expensive Sorrow' displays this through its scenes of threat against Haneul's wife, Aera. For instance, Haneul threatens his wife by saying 'You know what I want? To break your fucking neck right here and now.' He says this as he's breathing down her spine so rather than physically violating her, he frightens her with the suggestion of violence and physical domination. This violence is not only shared by the women in the story but children too. For instance, Haneul uses his daughter to physically distress Yuna. This is where his gross criminality comes through. He disciplines his daughter, Dea by his standards of which there are none and his daughter is already becoming a replica of him, to which Haneul states to his wife 'I'm glad she's turning out this way.' To provide an example, when Haneul sees that Dea is shooting arrows at Yuna, he realises that she is leaving bruises on Yuna which is evidence of abuse. However, instead of stopping her he tells her how to destroy evidence of abuse by saying, 'see how Yuna's crying with her head on her lap, shoot there. That way you won't leave any bruises on her and won't get into any trouble.' Both Dea and Yuna are children and Haneul's violence against them shows that he will use his power for any means. In this example, not only is he trapping his daughter into violent behaviour but he is hurting Isuel's daughter too.

The boundaries that Haneul will cross are similar to those that gothic villains will cross. They are satanic and break all norms, propelled by pleasure and power. This sense of perversion highlights a certain kind of toxic masculinity. Rotundi (2020) writes that toxic masculinity is a term that is used to 'define the negative repercussions experienced by the whole society, in relation to the unhealthy, risky and violent behaviours that men are required to perform in order to be socially validated as 'real' men (p. 5). In order to assert his masculine identity, Haneul engages in unhealthy and extreme behaviours that become harmful to society. Thus, although the masculine identity brought out by society in 'Karoshi' is somewhat idealistic which leads to the physical and mental deterioration of Tetsuaya, Haneul's own twisted perception of masculinity leads towards the deterioration of society rather than himself.

Overall, the gothic elements within 'Expensive Sorrow' add to the social critique of

South Korea as they provide shock towards the kind of privilege that is brought about by wealth as well as the suffering and inequality faced by the poor in the most extreme ways. In this sense, the violent gothic elements force the reader to recognise the horrors that inequality can inflict.

ANALYSIS OF 'NO NEW CHINA'

'No New China' highlights the ethnic cleansing against the Uyghur minority in China. Uyghurs are a Muslim ethnic group based in Xinjiang, China and since 1950 political Chinese leaders have devised policies to 'politically de-empower' the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. These plans 'can be defined as Chinesization' which focuses on 'settlements and language' (Siddiqui & Imtiyaz, 2011: p. 9). China justifies violence in Xinjiang as 'a zero-sum political struggle of life or death' for a collective, civilized identity against 'separatism and extremism' with the notion that Uyghurs who identify as Muslims and Turkic symbolise the threats of "Islamic terrorism" which seek to divide and hinder China's rise (Tobin, 2019: p. 302). The detainment and brutality against the Uyghurs is explored in 'No New China' through the balance between dystopian elements such as surveillance, violence and control, and real first-person accounts of people who have survived the Uyghur camps.

Sauytbay (2021), a whistle-blower against the Uyghur camps writes that since 2016:

(Xinjiang) has been transformed into the largest surveillance state in the world [...] more than 1,200 internment camps exists above ground [...] approximately three million people are currently being detained [...] [it is] the deliberate extermination of an entire ethnic group [and] there is no longer anyone in Xinjiang who hasn't lost several relatives (np).

Under the suspicion of "being a threat", Uyghurs are arrested for reasons such as attempting to relocate to foreign countries, being English translators, saving religious material on their phones, wearing headscarves and beards or having more than four children, and Uyghurs can be detained as young as the age of 16.

Life inside the internment camps puts one under constant surveillance and "students" within the camps are forced to listen to, read and sing political material and write assessments in the Chinese language about what they have learnt. This system is designed to eradicate "the dangers of religious radicalism" and "students" are told they will not be deemed completely educated unless they memorise over 1,000 Chinese characters 'or are otherwise deemed to have become loyal Chinese subjects' (Raza, 2019: p. 494). If "students" refuse to participate in

lessons, they receive torture such as electrocution, forced medication, injections, sterilisation, IUD'S being put in women, systematic rape, being strapped to a tiger chain and food deprivation (Guardian News, 2020). Former detainee, Gulbahar Jelilova says that after receiving injections:

We no longer thought about our relatives, our families. I didn't know where I'd been born. [...] We'd no longer felt the cold and the hunger. It's as if we were just pieces of meat that had been put there (France 24 English, 2019).

As can be seen from the examples above. No-one is able to accurately define the situation against the Uyghurs in China as very little has been documented about this issue. Moreover China will not publicise a live political genocide happening in its own country. These factors mean that I had the least evidence to go on when writing this story. Therefore, rather than turning to academic sources, I had to rely on first-person recollections (told above) to create a story that resembled the real issue in the best manner available.

What's interesting is that although I used first-person accounts to create a realist story with real locations and punishments, the story strangely reads as Dystopian fiction even though it has the least amount of non-realist elements out of the three stories. This may be because 'No New China' deals with features that Dystopian fiction revolves around such as 'environmental disasters, reliance on technology and physical control and enslavement' (Jerkovic & Alihodžić, 2016: p. 11). This juxtaposition between reality and fiction heightens the horror of the situation in China as even though the readers are aware they're reading about a real contemporary genocide, the dystopian elements within the story makes the situation feel unreal, or rather, too terrible to exist.

Firstly, an important theme of Dystopian fiction is often surveillance. This can be seen in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* where the theme of surveillance is solidified with the repetition of phrases such as 'BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU' (Orwell, 1949: p. 3) to hint that the characters are constantly being observed. Dystopian fiction engages with surveillance to highlight the concerns of the genre such as, identity, autonomy and power struggles. 'No New China' also deals with the theme of surveillance to reveal the situation in Xinjiang where Uyghurs are being observed every day in real life. Physical surveillance in the story is made apparent through the repetition of cameras watching the characters such as 'a camera zooms into my face and clicks' and the checkpoints which surround their region such as 'I see a checkpoint up ahead and turn my pockets inside out'. Mental surveillance also exists in the form of essays which the students must write in order to record their thoughts as Mrs

Chen says, 'every two weeks, you will be subjected to an examination which will assess the amount of knowledge you have learnt.' Thirdly, there is lateral surveillance as even the people in Xinjiang watch each other. This is highlighted when Erkin states 'I turn to my right where a little girl is watching us from the window high above.'

The constant surveillance reveals that the characters are oppressed into a world of question and alienation. Their actions and thoughts are recorded all for the purpose of control by China. Dystopian fiction uses the theme of surveillance to warn readers about 'the impact of science and technology on individuals and society' (Hinchliffe, 2019: np). Similarly, the theme of surveillance in 'No New China' also exists to warn society about the impact of technology on the Uyghur society. Thus it forces the reader to experience the horror of the Uyghur situation.

Dystopian fiction also deals with oppressive forces and the fear of violence. This is witnessed in *The Handmaid's Tale*. In this novel, women are imprisoned, sexually violated, commodified by men, and their speech and daily actions are controlled. Ultimately they are reduced to nothing more than breeding slaves as Offred, the narrator of the novel says 'we are for breeding purposes [...] we are two-legged wombs, that's all: sacred vessels, ambulatory chalices' (Atwood, 1985: p. 40) This description, where the women are described as pieces of meat is scarily similar to the description provided above by Jelilova (mentioned above) who says, 'It's as if we were just pieces of meat that had been put there' (France 24 English, 2019) when referring to the torture in the Uyghur camps. Violence exists in most Dystopian fiction as a means of maintaining the dystopia but is also another controlling tool for the suppressing forces.

Violence in 'No New China' is created in three ways, through the threat of violence, physical violence and violence which is heard but not seen. These forms of violence all work as controlling tools against the characters.

The threat of violence is created through the constant pressure of the guards who observe the prisoners with guns in their hands. This not only makes the characters fearful of their actions but creates the imminent sense of violence that could happen at any time especially when something as innocent as a cough could get you detained. This is witnessed when during a lesson in the camp, two guards barge into the classroom and take a man away for coughing as described by Erkin: 'Someone towards the back of the classroom coughs. The guards spin their heads towards the man and pounce on him.' The guards relentless observance and pressure is a form of maintaining control and superiority over the prisoners. This form of control is proved to be successful and is observed in the story when the classroom is once again breached

by the guards and Zekeriya narrates 'A stiff kind of silence crawls up the corners of the classroom'.

Physical violence is observed when the guards are detaining prisoners as Erkin says 'the guard lunges forwards, covering my mouth and tosses me against the ground'. It is seen when the guards are abusing prisoners '[a guard] pushes the younger ones out of the cell'. Lastly it is observed when Erkin is being tortured and he says 'they drag me across the floor and my skin burns as it rubs against the ground'.

The final form of violence is one that is heard but not seen. This is highlighted in the story when Burak is removed from the classroom, and as Zekeriya is reading his essay he hears the screams of Burak being tortured saying: 'I begin to stutter as the distant sound of screaming fills my ears' and 'the screaming grows wild.'

This continuous violence against men is clearly gender-based just as violence is gender-based in *The Handmaids Tale*. This is because although the characters are in an all-male camp, the only female character within the story is Mrs Chen. The men are subjected to torture in the presence of this sole female teacher. They are forced onto their knees and beg for their lives in front of her. This is done to humiliate the men as Littleton writes that 'masculinity is always built against an "other," namely women, and masculinity serves to fill the role of the opposite of whatever the understanding of femininity and womanhood is' (p. 12). Thus, whereas 'Karoshi' and 'Expensive Sorrow' deal with failed models of masculinity, 'No New China' deals with men being emasculated as their masculinity is threatened before a female presence.

Overall, the constant violence in 'No New China' exists in various ways to sustain the dystopia of the story but to also show how violence is being used in different ways in order to control the characters and instil fear into them. Violence is not exaggerated in any way in the story nor are the punishments fictitious. All punishments were taken from the real accounts told by camp survivors. Again, this juxtaposition between fiction and reality compels the reader to experience the horror of what is happening in contemporary China.

The simmering threat of fear and violence resides in each story within 'Man's Burden'. Violence in 'Expensive Sorrow' is created through its psychopathic protagonist who lusts over needles violence. Whereas 'Karoshi' generates fear through its claustrophobic setting from which there is no escape. In each story, the threat of violence and fear highlights all the ways in which the characters are oppressed but also shows how fear can be created in different ways yet still highlight the oppression of a group of people.

Oppressive forces depicted within Dystopian fiction also desire to take control by means of representation, language and memory as well as violence. The characters of 'No New

China' are stripped of all of the three things mentioned above. Their language is taken away from them as Mrs Chen says to them 'You are expected to read and speak only Chinese here.' They sing patriotic songs such as: 'Without the Communist Party, no new China', and write essays in which they defy their own religion by praising Xi Jinping over God as Zekeriya says 'Xi Jinping is my saviour'. Their identity is shaped into something that China finds more agreeable. Moreover, their memories are even wiped from them. This is seen when Erkin is injected and he can't recognise his own brother nor can he understand what his brother is saying as Erkin says 'I'm back in a place I know is familiar but I can't put my finger on it. A man swings forward and starts talking to me. '-----', he says. Again, these are all real punishments within the Uyghur camps as told my first-person recollections.

This form of patriotic praise, suppression of identity and language preserves the dystopia within 'No New China' as the limitation of language and identity eliminates or oppresses the culture of the characters, and Dystopian fiction often highlights this oppression through control over action, thought and language. Again, even though the punishments described in my story are real as told my first-person recollections, they still feel too unreal, too incomparable to the real world to exist. This only heightens the shock that the reader feels when reading a realist story embroiled with dystopian features.

To sum up, 'No New China' represents oppression and inequality through its dystopian features and although these features make the story feel fictitious, the situation within the story is real as evidenced through the real punishments and places. This contrast between fiction and reality allows the reader to experience the full horror of the situation in China.

CONCLUSION

As explored above, each story in this project is extremely different whether through the genre it borrows from or the protagonist who is narrating the story. These differences were made to reveal the issues that each story explores in the best manner possible.

To begin with, 'Karoshi' deals with the overworking culture in Japan, and the societal and masculine expectations of a salaryman. The story highlights the ways in which a salaryman is burdened with work and responsibilities and how this affects their physical and mental balance. To best reveal these issues, the story utilises imagery to reveal aspects of the salaryman lifestyle. The symbolism of time emphasises the amount of time a worker must sacrifice for his company as well as how he cannot escape the pressures of work even at home. Finally, the use

of non-realist elements reveals how a salaryman's mental health diminishes due to the pressures of work. All these techniques come together to construct a psychological story which feels claustrophobic in its setting and nature to reveal the entrapped lifestyle of a salaryman.

Conversely, in order to reveal the awful living conditions of the poor in comparison to the rich 'Expensive Sorrow' narrates its story through a psychopathic antagonist who possesses all the privilege and power in the story. This is done to show how wealth and privilege are tied with power. Moreover, the duality between Ahyeon-Dong and Hannam-Dong reveals the difference between the ways the rich live in comparison to the poor, and the fact that only Haneul can move between both settings reveals that the privileged have all the freedom. The violence in the story all committed by Haneul not only show his psychopathic tendencies but reveals a certain kind of privileged power which can only be afforded by wealth as highlighted in the comparison to *American Psycho*.

On the other hand, 'No New China' reveals the full horror of the situation in Xinjiang against the Uyghurs by implementing dystopian elements within a story that explores real issues. The dystopian elements such as surveillance, control and suppression not only reveal what's happening in China but also highlight how unnatural the situation in China is, and the disturbing ways in which genocide and oppression of a cultural group is existing today. This forces the readers to recognise the full terror of the Uyghur genocide.

To fully reveal the horrors of the living conditions of the poor in comparison to the privileged luxury the rich live in, 'Expensive Sorrow' tells its story through a psychopathic antagonist who has all the privilege and power in the story to show how difference in wealth can inspire power privilege between people. The duality between the setting reveals the difference of the living conditions and the fact that only Haneul can alternate between settings reveals that only the privileged have freedom. The violence in the story all committed by Haneul not only show his psychopathic tendencies but reveals the kind of privileged power which can only be afforded by the wealthy as is seen by the comparison to *American Psycho*.

'No New China' reveals the full horror of the situation in Xinjiang against the Uyghurs by implementing dystopian elements within a story that explores real issues. The dystopian elements such as surveillance, control and suppression not only reveals what's happening in China but also highlight how horrific the situation in China is.

Overall, each story, through their differences, not only reveal what short fiction can achieve in terms of creativity and social criticism despite its limited word count, but also show how these differences come together in the project to offer a unified critique of inequalities and genocide in contemporary Asia. This is done through the projects consistent theme of suffering,

masculinity, violence and oppression which the stories all reveal in a unique way, but more importantly, in a unique way that best unveils the issues the stories explore. For example, 'Karoshi' revolves around a claustrophobic setting to show how salarymen cannot escape the pressures of work, and the limited word count of the short story, rather than restricting my creative space, allowed me to trap readers within a suffocating setting. This sense of entrapment would not have been so successful in a novel which expands space and time because of its substantial word count. 'Expensive Sorrow' utilises extreme gothic features to reveal the equally extreme gap between the rich and poor, and the choice of a wealthy, psychopathic protagonist only shows the privilege that comes with wealth. Lastly, although it wasn't written to be dystopian, 'No New China' does read as such and this is because the camps within Xinjiang all control Uyghurs in the same way that oppressive forces in Dystopian fiction control an oppressed group. Therefore, naturally, as I wrote this story, it disturbingly became more and more dystopian. This juxtaposition between reality and fiction only forces the reader to recognise the intense horror of the situation in Xinjiang.

Individually, the short stories take the reader on a distinctive journey each exploring a distinctive issue. However, when they come together as a unified project by consistently exploring themes of suffering, masculinity, oppression and fear, they offer a deeper, more intimate critique of inequalities and genocide within Asia which is the ultimate aim of 'Man's Burden'.

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