

paper house

We had folded as many paper ingots as we could,
so that father would have lots and lots of gold in his afterlife.
The finale of the funeral was the burning of his mansion.
It was a very grand paper house, three-storeys,
fully equipped with two servants, many friends and a paper mâché
Mercedes.
The flames were licking up father's paper house,
giant orange-yellow tongues against the black sky
when mother spilled from the taxi
onto the pavement beyond the green wire fence
wailing
that she had missed his last breath.
The flames, acrid and swooning sweet,
burned on.

what father kept in the safe

what father kept in the safe:
his gold Rolex,
the title deed to the flat,
some money,
a black-and-white photo, framed,
the two of them,
smiling, truly.

a real mercedes

Uncle bought a real Mercedes.
He drove us around in it
but it was black as a hearse.

a dream

She was in hospital,

the same hospital Father died in

but this was a dream.

She had tried to kill herself but failed.

Her mother was furious, barely checked

by the presence of the young policeman

who was trying to get a statement

from her but getting nowhere,

too kind to trap her into confession.

When he stepped out, her mother slapped her.

“You should’ve done a better job.”

she raised five children by herself

She raised five children by herself, she repeated. One leg kick, no less. Her first husband died when she was only 24, leaving three young children for her to feed. Her youngest was only 13 months old when he died. She remarried in haste: “We were stupid then, you see, no education. And of course, he promised me the moon and the stars but when I married him, that’s when his fox’s tail came out. He slapped me and I knew I had to be worse than him or he’ll make it a habit. He’s bad, I must be worse! I slammed his head against the wall and took a knife, intending to kill him but our neighbours stopped us and I told the police, who had come by this time, that he was trying to kill me.” She told me this, triumphantly, while her daughter was queuing to buy food for her, even though I didn’t know her, and only took the seat beside her as there was no other free seat in the food court.

She was a strong woman, a businesswoman. She did everything – sell chicken rice, sell eggs, whatever she needed to do, she did it, for her children. They studied until very high, you know, some polytechnic, some university. She never had a maid, not even now. “I did everything myself, I raised five kids by myself, without any help, no maid, one leg kick. I always tell my daughters that they must earn their own money or men will look down on them.” A trendy lady with heavily-lined eyes in a short, expensive dress took the seat beside her and surprised us by saying “You’re right!” in dialect, as she sat down to a plate of char siew rice, taking care to leave the rice untouched while polishing off the meat.

“I was a very strong woman, but now I’m old, lots of aches and pains, the doctors say I should not do any more housework anymore. I had two operations for kidney stones – last time too busy, no time to drink water, that’s why and there’s a stone growing in my kidney now, the doctor said, but I told them no more operations.” “Auntie, you should drink plain water, don’t drink soft drinks.” “Yes, I know, but we forgot to bring a water bottle with us.” Her daughter was finally back. “This is very tasty, mother, long queue, eat, eat.” “I was so hungry that I ate something already – I cleaned the whole house, two storeys, before we came out so my stomach was so hungry I ate while you were queuing.” “Mother, this is very good, try.” She tried it: “This is very tasty – I didn’t know this food court have this food, next time I know how to buy it myself – I’ve been so stupid, everytime come here only know how to eat chicken rice.” “How many grandchildren do you have, auntie?” “I have three, from my oldest daughter, but my daughter-in-law has not given me any yet.” Her daughter, powerless to stop her mother from telling strangers too much, could only smile.

o magnum mysterium

During the frantic run-up to Chinese New Year,
she would listen to Christmas carols
in Latin. The alien tongues of the choir
cocooned her from the ceaseless cheer
of the Chinese New Year songs
that blared in every shopping centre.
A friend who was no longer a Christian
still adored O Magnum Mysterium by Morten Lauridsen
and pronounced that only singers with souls can sing it well.
She believed him: the choir's voices reached for heaven
in a soaring spiral of sound, a monument
of longing more beautiful than
the famous chapel the choir sang in.
Clothed in white like angels, their voices
rose higher and higher, scorning the earth,
their bodies, counterpointing
her relatives' litany:
may my kid do well in PSLE,
get into a good secondary school,
become a success, be filial to me,
give me grandchildren,
never send me to an old folks' home
and be at my bedside when I die.
Tethered by these hopes and fears,
the soul cannot soar in joy
at the miracle of birth.

7. new year apologies

I

In her cousin's new house for Chinese New Year,
she took in the customary tour of the bedrooms
and was halfway through the pineapple tarts
on the plate when her mother rang her cousin.
"Your mother said she's coming – I guess you'll be going.
I would siam her too.
She used the hanger to whack you till it broke."
"Haha, it broke – I didn't."
Funny how she forgot being beaten
but her cousin still remembered.
When her cousin said it,
the memory, buried five fathoms deep,
floated up: it happened in
her cousin's old home,
that's why she remembered.
"I'm sorry you had to see that.
There was nothing you could've done
to stop her anyway, haha.
I'll be going now, it was great
seeing your house."

II

Mother had a dream
of washing away all the bad blood
between them by renovating the house,
remaking a room from the ashes
of her old room (knocked down on mother's orders

to make the hall bigger),

so that she can move back again.

She: "I can't stay with you and Mother again, sorry –
too many bad memories."

Brother: "I'm very sorry that I did all that bad stuff
to you when we were kids. I hope you can understand
I didn't know right from wrong at that time.
I hope you don't bear a grudge and become
a bitter and heartless person who detaches
herself from her family. It makes me wonder
what religion your church preaches."

III

"There is no fear in love.

But perfect love drives out fear,
because fear has to do with punishment.

The one who fears is not made perfect in love." – 1 John 4:18

So many years now

I am still the one who fears,

Imperfect and poor in my love

for my family who really loves me,

as Brother so patiently explained

to someone rather slow:

"Despite how Mother treated me in the past,

(okay, she treated me better than you but that's how old people are)

I realised that's her way of showing concern,

wanting the best for her kids.

I just hope you don't take a longer time

than me to realise and regret.

Parents of the olden days

teach their kids in this way.

Our parent's parents, great-great-grandparents'

generation all the same. But all the kids turn out fine.

But now you look around – parents spoiling their kids

no end. Cannot scold, cannot cane;

kids getting from bad to worse.

Perhaps you cannot see the rotting

but it exists. Compared to them, I think

we were much more fortunate.

People nowadays are so screwed,

it's just that they don't realise it."

The law of second marriages

Chinese New Year:

memories and ashes

because that's when we have to go

to the temple, to offer up incense

and food to Father.

Incense in hand, in front of the smiling oval

black and white photo for his niche,

I bowed and prayed for

his hopes for the afterlife.

He liked to bet against the odds;

not just on horses.

His first marriage failed

and he lost three grown children.

He married again,

even though second marriages

often failed faster than first ones.

Was it love or hope

that moved him to bet again?

“Hope is the substance of things not seen,”

my pastor liked to say,

his own faith being based on hope.

On such hope countless cathedrals,

have been built, the masses of stone and stained glass

monuments of hope as of faith.

On hope of love everlasting with the Heavenly Bridegroom,

men and women vowed themselves to celibacy,

gave up the immortality of the flesh

for the hope of the hereafter

The Law of Second Marriages

big bets on Pascal's Wager,
punters unlike my father
who lost twice at marriage
but I hope he will still win
the big sweet everafter.