

*for kenny g, kenny l., and karen.*

returning *chungking express* to the rental store,  
she passes a window of a lonely shophouse  
glimpsing a boy in glasses, glum,  
empty register, full musty shelves.

*this week*, she thought, *you will be my project.*

on monday, she picked the lock  
after he closed early, no customers.  
entering, she sneezed. *this will not do.*  
she left a bell on the door, for tinkles.

on tuesday she hauled in a vacuum cleaner  
and sucked the years out of the shelves. she went home sweaty  
and read *lolita* till she fell asleep.

on wednesday,  
she replaced his entire front display with her own collection of  
orwell and nabokov, on the principle that you cannot be a  
respectably struggling independent bookstore without a copy of  
*down and out in paris and london* in your window.

on thursday, she left him a cat.  
it mewed pitifully when she locked up.  
she came back at midnight with a saucer of milk,  
just in case.

on friday, seeing that the cat was still alive,  
she hid his bob dylan collection behind the rare books  
section and left an indie mixtape in the player.

on saturday, she printed flyers. *poetry reading!*  
*live band! we have a cat!* that was her favorite.  
*20% discount!* there was fine print on that one.

on sunday, she looks in at noon.  
a bell rings, laughter exits, full bags in hand.  
through the window, boy holds cat, pleasantly perplexed.  
*almost perfect*, she thought. *just needs a girl.*

## return of the monkey god

so i sojourned for seasons to seek out your sutras,  
weighed western-weaned wisdom as your wayfaring warrior,  
battled spidermen, iron fans, bull kings et cetera,

mission accomplished - now you call me a scholar.  
how grand! now you festoon me with the appropriate  
honors and titles, and this shiny gold collar.

but when you chant your mantras - *going forward, we will create  
value by seamlessly dovetailing policies  
co-synergistic* - then my head begins to ache,

enter contractions, pregnant with gobbledy-  
gook. seems my tale of dramatic pursuits  
has somehow devolved to an ape of a comedy.

re: your mail, "*pls revert*", tear my hair from its roots  
i'll revert to the king of the flowers and fruits!

i

at seven mile market  
there are three stalls in the same row  
selling the same white crispy chai tow kuey  
the original hawker died of a stroke  
when his son gambled the fortune away  
and egg and chai por are no big secret.

you insist on the *real* one. i point to what works.

ii

on the podium at zouk  
there is a middle-aged man  
with a single white glove.

*he is a dentist*, i tell you.  
you smile toothily till *summer rain*.

iii

in orchard underpass  
there is a blind man with an accordion  
over the years he has upgraded:  
microphone, keyboard, stereo speakers

i only give him money when you are beside me.

the writer of *slam dunk*, he had it right.  
the captain leaves without a championship,  
the hero breaks his back, future uncertain.  
he doesn't get the girl, either.

the climax  
is an epic third round upset spread  
across five volumes, followed by a summary  
defeat (two pages, tops) and epilogue -

in short, the series *ends*.

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what if god never  
tired of faster stronger bigger better,  
nor grew too attached to his protagonists?

what if we woke trapped in an endless *manga*  
dragged into perpetuity by pandora's  
box of power creep - our superpowers  
exponentially expanding with  
those of our latest, greatest nemeses,  
abetted by a murderer's row of re-  
habilitated-villains-turned-allies,  
mourning a procession of romantic interests,  
wisecracking sidekicks sacrificed upon  
the pyre of plot -

this points to the natural way  
of things being reincarnation - or at least  
a creative reboot - call it rebranding, even.

looking back to where it all begins,  
the first class, or a simple eponym,  
rather than trying, harder, with a vengeance.  
good stories, after all, leave room for endings.

i

she stood looking at the man  
a *conversation*, he asks.  
*i just want a conversation.*  
she wonders if her husband  
will object.

the note came a week after, to the day.  
*i'm leaving.*

ii

four decades, and his gaze  
is still ice-clear, iron-cold.

she knows he will not apologize.  
his hair is white.

*you will have years to regret.*

iii

thirty years ago  
he would go out into the monsoon and return  
drenched, wringing his hands  
of dark liquid, black fire in his eyes.

outside the shower, she listens to him  
cursing under his breath, rinsing the wounds.

whatever he does,  
outside the four walls of her existence,  
it must be for her - this is love, is it not?

iv

speaking to children,  
she catches herself with his words  
in her mouth.

*don't talk to strangers - you never know*

*who you can trust.*  
*one day i will be gone*  
*and then who will take care of you?*

v

was it the seventies  
or the eighties?

*times are bad,*  
he railed, *tough measures,*  
*belt-tightening -*

she glances at a magazine -  
*i got a tummy-tuck and*  
*never looked back*  
- his face darkens.

the next day there are no magazines.

vi

later, he says, after the bills are paid,  
the children grown,  
we will have time  
for the frivolous.

she suspects by his choice of words  
this is not true.

vii

he keeps her money, *their* money  
for retirement.

she wouldn't know  
what to do with it anyway.

viii

when he was young they called him arrogant, a bully.  
she kept her head down. what was there to say?  
but when he grew old and they found him wise,  
sought out his opinion and feted his stately mien,

she had already stopped listening.

ix

she flips pages - yellowed  
frames of an age  
once black and white.  
a jaundiced finger stops on one,  
lingers. she remembers him  
as he was,  
sitting in wedding white, his hair  
still strong, black.

he shifts his jaw -

accounts differ, as  
family scandals do: he stole her away,  
poisoned her heart against her birthplace;  
he was her only refuge when her mother  
turned her out.

- he shifts his clenched jaw.  
he swallows, blinking.  
he licks his lips.  
all of a sudden he plunges his face  
into a white handkerchief.

she does not know what to say.  
he begins to speak to her, slowly.

x

she never saw him cry again.

## how to fold a kawasaki rose

seven years old  
between the banisters  
her face is a blank sheet  
below - snarling, hysterics,  
a door slams closed - for good.

*a sheet of white paper  
folds length on length.  
this makes a crease.  
unfold, turn a right angle,  
fold again.*

she is seventeen now,  
a go board of hidden wrinkles.

maybe a boy will press his palms to her,  
navigate her secret cartography  
with his thumbs -

*bring edges to edges,  
stroke hills to rise, press down valleys,  
then with a swift twist and pinch,  
gather the corners into a  
perfect box.*

twenty-seven, and you see her in the train,  
all crisp edges and sharp contours  
neatly tucked in.

*this is the essential step.  
now, gently, firmly, cupped in your palm*

*use a needle, or a fine pair of tweezers  
to unfurl each hidden bud,  
to curl each certain leaf.*