ESSAY

Exits Exist

by Karen Cheung



"Slick" by Cyrus Carlson

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The city is frothing with bodies and I am pacing, collecting.

I landed in Hong Kong on November 16, 2023, and found that I no longer speak its language.

There are two of you at all times: the you I've written about (dead) and the you that still exists today, breathing but beyond my reach.

I can only write when the man I love is away on night shifts. Alone in his apartment I am restless like a cat, trying to claim a corner, any corner, as my own. One night when I shower, I push down the pump of a shampoo bottle so old there is a clenched rim of crust at the bottom and a viscous pool of radioactive blue taints the lines of my palm.

I didn't move back here from London for you, I repeat, loudly, to spare us both, even though he and I know the truth.

At the mouth of the island I think I see nothing along its seams, and then I wonder if I am simply projecting my own silence.

Does
Not
Exist
Take
An
Exit

There is an election in Hong Kong the day after I take a fifteen-hour red eye to London so I can pack up my life. It's my sixth transatlantic flight in a year, and still I forget my Xanax like an amateur. *Who are you voting for tomorrow,* I ask the man at the airport, laughing a little because we both know there is no way he'd bother. *I don't know, all the candidates are so great,* he says. *I want to vote for every one of them.* A week later, I return and wonder what I'm doing in a home that isn't mine.

It expired over three years ago is all I'm saying.

The collection of paraphernalia: four characters in a strange script stamped onto an ash grey trashcan inside the monstrous hallway that calls itself a revitalised market. A new self-service kiosk at the train station, encouraging e-reports of petty crimes. The quartet of mainlanders who crossed the border just so they could buy Björk on vinyl from a record shop on Goldfish Street in Prince Edward, one day before Christmas.

On the news programme playing from the television affixed to the wall of the restaurant, the bureau chief responds to every one of the reporter's questions in my mother's tongue instead

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of mine, and I keep waiting for someone on the set to run out and stop him and say, *we're so sorry we've made a mistake he shouldn't be here*

If you leave this city you lose the right to comment, HW once said. This position sounds a bit extreme and so I say, surely not. But perhaps I would not have returned if I didn't think she was right.

I meet my father for lunch just before Christmas Eve, out of some latent desire for a redemption arc. *Even the soy sauce western restaurant we went to when you were a kid is closing down this March,* he texted that morning. *It's as if everything I remember about Hong Kong has slipped away.* Hours later he and I sit across each other in one of those hard bingsut booths that's meant to evoke nostalgia but the beef fillet we order arrives lukewarm and the fruit punch tastes like cough syrup. Whenever there is a slice of silence between us, my father reverts to talking about the German band Can.

There are two of you at all times and truth be told I liked the fantastical version of you so much more.

We're always so concerned about the moral burden of writing, Lewis says, but people care less about us writing about them than we think. There's a certain type of narcissist who loves being written about so much that they almost don't care if they're portrayed as terrible people.

At the promenade, I overhear a trio of sky-blues talking about their family dinners, laughing as they dance down the length of their beat, the brine of the November air combing their conversations. I glance at them for a second too long and they do not charge at me. *Why are there so many fucking people here*? I ask Tomii, and he says, *It's Pharrell.*

These days there are shelves in bookstores and souvenir shops across Hong Kong permanently dedicated to gifts for those who will never return. A model of a bus, keychain charms in the shape of an egg tart, children's books with landmarks drawn onto every page. All very sentimental and unimaginative and yet the first time I saw a sign for your bus route made with flimsy cardboard on the wall of your bedroom in Birmingham, I understood I had been unkind and so, as penitence, I let you do anything you wanted to me.

I have circled the world and my father has remained in exactly the same place.

Where is home, HW asks me again, and because I'm also a cancer moon I alone am allowed to tell her to shut it.

Every morning when the man and I head out for breakfast we transform into a pair of morbid cartographers, taking note of all the shops that have closed over the past year. We know the

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area well because we were neighbours previously, living with other people who left many things behind. We climb wobbly stairs and trek steep slopes, pointing: *that cafe used to be a deli, wasn't there a caacaanteng here?* A property agency behind an underground public toilet closes a mere two days after I first notice its presence, and everywhere, empty storefronts. Before Bakehouse, a wanghong[1] arches her waist and poses with the blue paper bag.

Even as the moment is happening I am already thinking to myself, when all this is over I will still remember resting my head on the man's lap on the couch that is not mine, listening to Koky? late at night.

Does
Not
Exist
Take
An
Exit

Since I have lost the city's language I must start learning names again, or, like Chihiro, I'd lose my way home. Next to the fire hydrant, the lilac flowers drag the cattle.

Sometimes I still have dreams about walking through my graveyard in London as it snows. The way the thick blanket of white smothers the daffodils that had just begun sprouting in spring, at once suspending any chance they have at further growth and preserving them in a pristine condition.

Not unlike the process of writing, which is always to pronounce a certain death by prescribing an experience in words that will remain forever static on a page.

Nobody was around to put a stop to my emaciation in London, but back in Hong Kong I am constantly ravenous. I order brisket three times a week and I notice I am wet again.

I think maybe I fell in love when I showed him my collection of rocks and, on the beach in Margate, he brought me back a handful of blue pebbles after taking a dip in the cool sea.

Koky?: breathe, please. No amount of Xanax will stop this.

This is not my house and has never been my house, so why am I trying to win its approval even as it ejects me as though I am a foreign object piercing its skin?

The receptionist at family court tells me it'll be another nine months to a year before a magistrate has time to deal with my divorce application and hand down an order nisi. It is a mistake to believe that it is faster or easier to dismantle a home than it is to build it.

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Do you know you can now take a train across the border to get your tooth implants done, a subway ad tells me.

I thought writing a memoir would help me feel perceived, but instead it left me feeling naked. I also thought exploiting myself for material over exploiting others (lovers, friends, interviewees) would make writing a less objectionable enterprise, but I may have simply been trying to come up with an excuse for my exhibitionism.

Which part about me performing my abject self for your aesthetic pleasure do you not understand?

But I can no longer tell the difference between a face-tuned model and an entirely AI-generated figure on a billboard outside the red cross-harbour tunnel, just like how sometimes there is no difference anymore between the narrator 'I' and me.

Lewis' father tells him he is only such a good writer because he has a dad like him. I want to tell my father I had tried to redeem him as a character by writing about his music collection, and then I realised it was perverse to believe that one's music taste could in any way compensate for their personal flaws, yet that was the only way I have ever fallen in love.

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Not
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People keep saying *So you're staying in Hong Kong then!* I don't know why I'd say *maybe!* every time instead of just replying in the affirmative.

Ravenous: Old French, late 14c., from an extinct verb *ravine, raven* 'to prey, to plunder, devour greedily.'

I am hungry; I am collecting words again.

He tells me holding hands doesn't come naturally to him and when he lightly traces a circle on my bleeding blue palm I understand this to mean he is trying.

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[1] ??, meaning an online influencer in Mandarin Chinese; all other words outside of standard English in this text are Cantonese (for instance caacaanteng)

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