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When the Chinese uncle
with his cart of burning sand

shouted *chestnuts*
instead of *gao luck*,

something inside me shrivelled

to make way for footsteps
freshly fallen after rain,

or a tongue
fallen by the wayside.

Keeping Count

My mother sighs in relief
that the PSI² has not yet crept
beyond the corners of her soap opera
hacking and burning. She breathes easy
knowing the doctor gave her a clean bill,
her cholesterol and blood sugar
properly accounted for,
while I ball my body at work
and leap through tight margins
straight into the wastepaper basket.
I do it again. One more time
and it is over: my wife has lost count
of the times I lost it and yelled at her.

My mother always asks if I will be home
for dinner. I know she is calculating
the ratio of filial duty to guilt
even as she sets an extra plate
on the table and blames it on old age
and bad air. I want to clear the air
on age, tell her there is no point
numbering our deeds, our days.
Still she keeps on counting.

² PSI: Pollution Standards Index, an air quality indicator.

Yum Seng⁵

I am herded
in my Sunday best
on a Saturday night
to make small talk
corralled by peanuts.
Throw ten adults in a pen
and somehow or rather
the question finds its way
into the fold:
when is it your turn?

I choke short of an answer
as the banquet lurches
into muzak. Waiters ride
chariots of fire over dry ice
clouds, their round shields
bearing cold starters.

Cold comfort. It must be true
that marriage marks the end
of love, for otherwise why
would the couple's Powerpoint life
glaze over my eyes as chopsticks
click for that last sliver of duck?

Sometime between the first
and second dishes the couple
finally marches in,
swatting lenses and applause
with megawatt waves.

They go on stage, gut a cake,
the blade clean with no cream.
Waiters wait in the wings
to dispose the tiered corpse
offstage; the emcees declare
this moment the first scar
of married life.

The couple appears again
dressed to kill. They take aim,
pop a cork. Relief bleeds from
an exit wound, bubbling down
stacked glasses. A voice
calls the room to order.

I raise my glass to testify
to the shooting. Thrice the testimonies
vary, but because the syllables
are stretched so hoarsely they sound
like best wishes to friends and relatives
on stage. The couple entwines their arms,
champagne watering their lips,
neither refusing to let go.

Maybe later in their suite
the groom will unzip his smile
and the bride will strip off her blush,
and together they will lie
in bed wondering if all the hope
hoarded was hard-earned, well-spent,
before their eyelids shut
like commitment's heavy doors.

⁵ Yum Seng (飲勝): A Cantonese phrase meaning "To drink to success". Commonly uttered at Chinese wedding dinners during the wedding toast.

Paraplegic

Based on SIT. please, a series of drawings by Jean Hui

A chair is a poem, rather than a novel.

—Design Museum, Fifty Chairs that Changed the World

A perfect chair
 is one with broken legs:
 function becomes all the more
apparent, all the more precarious
 in the sudden face of need.
The hollow curve
of a chair's back completes
 positions of authority and subservience;
chairs put empty rooms
 into perspective.

When perfect chairs gather
 I listen to their shattered histories,
how they lost all sensation from the waist
 down
 and regained it after dropping
 to the floor.
Time tilts our lives into place,
 and like perfectly broken chairs
 we cannot stop trying to stand
with our backs proud
 against the wall
even after our legs
 have taught us to fall.

For Our Safety

[M]ost of the bodies found in the last two days had broken fingers, presumably from the children frantically trying to climb the walls or floors to escape in their last moments.

—Reuters, 23 April 2014

We were told to fasten trust,
pull protocol tight until we heard a click.

We were told this is part of procedure,
the vessel listing rules to stay afloat,

even as obedience wears thin
into panic clawing for answers and air.

We were given answers that sank
faster than our screams, our pleas.

We were told to go with the flow
of instructions surging in from above.

We were told to wait our turn
for the divers to pry us out

of the steely darkness
like desperate treasure,

and if they should forget,
we should lend them a hand.