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THE POEMS

詩

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The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayam, by Edward Fitzgerald
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The Deserted Village, by Oliver Goldsmith (1728–1774)
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Anthem for Doomed Youth, by Wilfred Owen (1893–
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For the Fallen, by Laurence Binyon (1869–1943)
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Elegy Written in a Country Churchyard, by Thomas Gray
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The Village, by George Crabbe (1754–1832)
An Essay on Man, by Alexander Pope (1688–1744)

Some poems are represented only in part.

浴火重生

那一年，我誓著忘卻，也已經忘卻了，可是紛繁的
夢境開始困擾著我，我逐漸懼怕夜晚。

昨天在 Sandham Memorial Chapel 欣賞 Stanley
Spencer 的畫作，真真引述 Stanley Spencer 畫中
找回了自我人生中失去的那部份，我試著找尋那
描述中的失落，那是什麼？他又如何失去自己人生
中的一部份？畫作題材是建立在第一次世界大戰
的背景時代，卻感覺不是血腥而殘酷，呈現的卻
是軍人們生活作息，打掃兵營，隨知布地過夜，
戰死復活。復活？我著用了這樣一個奇怪的詞？
復活會像是吃飯睡覺一樣平凡的事情嗎？看
著 Stanley 的畫作，也許答案可以是肯定的。
士兵們身著身著，戰死猶生，正從自己的墓穴中
掙扎出土，拋開那刻著死之名字的白色十字架，
而，那些還在哀悼他們的戰友們握手。

Stanley Spencer 有一個多麼美滿而充滿希望的
幻想。

THE PHOENIX



All that year I tried to forget. I did forget. Now dreams are troubling me again and sometimes I am afraid to sleep.

Yesterday we went to see Stanley Spencer's paintings in the Sandham Memorial Chapel. The guidebook says he painted them to find part of himself again. What did he mean by that? How could he lose part of himself? The paintings are about the Great War, but they are not violent. They show the soldiers doing ordinary things: cleaning, washing, sleeping wherever they can by the road, and being resurrected. *Being resurrected!* What a strange thing I have written. Is it ordinary to be resurrected? In these paintings it seems to be. The soldiers in their uniforms, looking just as they did in life, are climbing out of their graves and throwing away the white crosses that marked them, and they are shaking hands with the friends who did not die. That thought is very beautiful and full of hope.



壹

1

GROWING UP

成長

I think that my father used to care about me very much, when I was young. He tried his best to protect me from the complicated world which might have hurt me or spoiled my white paper soul. Apart from when I went to school, he didn't allow me to leave his sight, not just to cross the street to the supermarket. He even bought a house right next to my school: that was the best choice he could make for me since we could not live at the school itself. For my daily needs he was so generous. When I asked for a pencil, he bought a dozen for me; when I wanted to have a pudding, he bought a box of puddings which I could share with a whole class of pupils. Thus I lived under his protection completely, without going out at all. But I was not as happy as he expected; I desired to see the world beyond my home and my school.

‘Father, I need to go to a store for some milk.’ This was the best excuse I could think of to go out.

‘You have fresh goat milk every day. Why do you want to get a bottle of cold milk which is not healthy for you?’

‘But, father, I just sometimes want to have some milk, please.’

‘The problem is, you will have to cross the street to the supermarket, which is too dangerous for a child.’

Next day when I came home from school, I found

three huge bottles of milk in the fridge. This shocked me so much because I was worried about how I could finish all of them by the ‘use before’ date. I tried very hard to drink them in time because there was no one else who would have the milk which my father had bought for me. Eventually, the last drops of milk were pouring through my throat. I felt so relieved, but just for a while.

Another *five* bottles of milk appeared in the fridge next day at the time my father came home from his office. I couldn’t breathe for a moment, but didn’t dare tell him the truth: that I really couldn’t finish all of them in two days. Without any better solution, I poured one and a half bottles of the milk down the sink when they seemed nearly out of date.

‘What a waste you’ve made! I work so hard to provide you with a good life, to offer whatever you need. Why did you throw the milk away?’

‘I’m so sorry about that, father, but it’s just too much for me in two days.’

‘You can tell me if it’s too much for you; or I can drink it if you don’t want it. Why did you throw it away?’

I felt such regret and really wished that I had never done this bad thing to my father when I saw his eyes were so hurt, although his voice was fierce. I think I heartlessly threw my father’s love away when the milk was poured into the waste basin.

I have never wanted to throw away any food since then, even though sometimes I’m too full.

‘Our lunch is coming!’

‘How can you say that? You should say your father is coming home.’

During the summer and winter vacations, my sister and I always especially looked forward to welcoming our father home because he would bring us a good lunch from the staff restaurant of the prison. We liked the meals so much because their menus were as varied and professional as those in five-star hotels.

‘Can you buy your lunch yourself from tomorrow? It’s so embarrassing when people look at me carrying so many lunch boxes. They might think I’m bringing those lunch boxes out for sale.’ My father’s face was quite unhappy and serious.

How could I have forgotten to consider my father’s situation? It must have looked very strange for the chief commissioner of a prison, still wearing his uniform, to carry out so many lunch boxes, especially as I and my sister liked the prison cooking so much that we always required two boxes for each of us; with one for my mother there would be at least five boxes in my father’s hands everyday.

‘I’m so sorry father; it’s our fault to make this trouble for you. I have some ideas for you though. First, you can change out of your uniform before you leave your office for lunch. Second, you can tell those people in the restaurant that your daughters love their cooking so much and you don’t have any other choice during vacations. And then you should rush home quickly, before more people see you there.’

My father didn't answer me, but turned his face to smile. Most importantly, however, he continued to bring us lunch everyday so that we could keep enjoying our favourite meals during our vacations.

Then one day the food was not so tasty and colourful as usual. Perhaps the chef had a day off, or he had a cold and couldn't smell or taste the flavours normally. However, the problem lasted for more than a week.

'*Baba*, we just wonder what the problem is in your restaurant; we don't like our lunches so much as before.'

'Don't ask for so much anymore. The chef had to leave the prison once he finished his sentence!'

What a surprise for me. Every one can bring happiness to other people from wherever they are.



I thought I was a Christian, when I was a little older. When my father was at work, my mother sometimes took me to play in the park near my home. An old American there told me a Biblical story every afternoon. He also taught me how to pray to the God who is always around me and would protect me from evils and nightmares.

I felt so peaceful when I received a Christmas card from my father. There was a little Western girl kneeling down by a candle with her fingers crossed and her eyes closed. I imagined that was me talking to the God every night before I went to bed.

'You will be a real Buddhist when someone comes

to lead you to believe Buddhism.’ One of my uncles was a fortune teller who sometimes told me if he ‘saw’ something.

‘How come it will happen? I don’t think I will be happy to give up beef and to become a vegetarian; and I prefer to wear the clothes of Christian nuns more than to shave all my hair off like those Buddhist nuns in temples.’ I argued like this because I really imagined I belonged to a church like those I saw in movies, but just hadn’t had time and a place to receive baptism yet due to the fact that there wasn’t any mediaeval church in my hometown.

The Christian fantasy was hidden somewhere in my mind, but it just became a dream in the following years as I was growing up because I didn’t go to that park, and never met that old American Holy Joe anymore, since my father bought another house next to my new school.



‘It’s a waste of our love to care for children who are all traitors once they grow up and never remember the goodness of their parents. You are all the same sooner or later.’ We knew that our father must have brought another bad story home because he was always so angry and his attitude to us was so violent when he had to ‘process’ those young prisoners in his work place. He somehow seemed to impute the origins of his emotions of sorrow and depression to me and my sister, within his own imagination, so that he gradually became so cold and harsh to us. I think he finally didn’t love his children anymore by the time I was

fourteen years of age.

‘I saw his eyes were so firm, without any regret, although his parents were so sad and worried about his fate. He must have committed this criminal act on purpose as part of his long term plan for his future.’

I was not sure if it was just my father’s personal judgement of that young prisoner or whether it was true that the young boy had chosen to pass his life in a prison when he killed three people in a few minutes, using only a nail-clipper. My father said it was so skilful that it must have been pre-meditated. That year, at the age of eighteen, the young boy had just been accepted into what was supposed to be the best university in Taiwan so his future had seemed to everyone to be very bright and hopeful. I think my father imagined himself in the place of those parents, wondering how their child could not see that they were going crazy over his situation in prison and expecting that he should have been so sad to die. And because this son did not show any regret, I believe it made my father very cynical and disillusioned about people until he came to doubt us all.

‘But why did he do that if his future was so promising?’ I was really curious about this story even though I was so scared about my father’s attitude.

‘He knows that everyone, especially his parents, had high expectations about his future, and he knows study at the best university is just the beginning of his journey to a successful life to impress other people, but it seems he could not bear this pressure. So he has committed a strange form of suicide. He understands that no one will dare spite

him in the prison because he is such an intellectually gifted youth, and now he is a homicide he will be the king among prisoners. No one else sees this plan and all try to plead for his incautious mistake, but I know it because I saw his decision deeply from his eyes.'

My father's specialization and experience in criminal psychology seemed to lead him to a cynical and suspicious attitude which saw calculating and evil motives in everyone. But could it really be true that as I and my sister, no longer innocent children, were fast becoming adults he saw us as potentially wicked in the same way as his prisoners? I just couldn't see his logic so to draw inferences about me and my sister from those bad instances, when we thought we loved our parents so much. And could he really believe that boy would choose to live out his life in prison? I don't think my father was wrong and, though he was often shocked by those motives he saw in some prisoners, he needed to keep his impassivity in his office. I believe he must often have been right because he was highly respected by those prisoners due to his unusual understanding of them. However, he became distrustful of people when he saw more and more abnormal things which shocked him so much. In other words, I think he didn't know how to believe in normal people when he had fitted himself very well into another darker and more cynical world for many years.

These unreasonable attitudes, for so they seemed to us, drove our father to lose his kindness for us more and more. In particular, whereas he had previously been generous, even extravagant, with us, he was no longer happy to

spend his money on us, even for our studies. I think now there may have been two reasons for the changes in my father. I have been told that the dispassionate study of emotions, as in psychiatry, requires emotional detachment; my father seemed to have brought this into his family life. Also I wonder whether my father was increasingly suffering from a mental condition known as paranoia, or persecution complex. Many years later I told him how he had seemed to change so much as we grew up. He didn't admit to being as cold and harsh as we thought, just a bit stern, and said it was all in my mind. I can understand now that my father only could express his real feeling of shock, that he couldn't show in his office, to us because we were his heart whom he might trust at least a bit more than the outside world. But although he might not have intended to scare me, he did scare me a lot because I took and thought about everything seriously; so I had quite a stressful childhood.

Would the adult world which was so complicated lead me to become one of these sorts of cold-blooded people to treat my parents cruelly when I grew up? I was so afraid and didn't know what to do to be a good person without making another tragedy for my family in future.



Like most young teenagers, I was fond of reading romantic stories in my spare time.

Maybe sometimes my interest was too great because I would try to finish a whole novel, hiding under my

duvet using a torch, even at midnight. Unlike most of my friends, however, my favourite romances were those set in the European Middle Ages with scenes of mediaeval life. Those were simple ideas I know, but the skilled novelists described everything so elaborately that the images seemed very real to me then and they attracted me so much. The shape of a castle, the design of a garden, the texture of a stone and the styles of clothing and of life, all those images came in to my mind with the ideas I received from movies and books about mediaeval times.

How could I have imagined that those castles could have survived from long ago, for I had grown up in the small island of Taiwan where frequent earthquakes have destroyed all our old buildings? The oldest building I had ever seen was built about a hundred years ago by the Japanese Government. With my limited knowledge about the world, I thought all those scenes of mediaeval times could be seen only in a movie or a book because they were too ancient to exist.

As well as reading romances, I enjoyed facing to a painting or a picture of a castle for an hour or so; I would pick out some nice place in the painting and pray hard about it. I prayed to the God to allow me to get in to the place of the painting for just a second, or maybe more; a minute would be better. I thought only a minute would be long enough for me to feel satisfied for my whole life. However, maybe the God was laughing at me because I still stood on the floor facing the painting alone. Jigsaw puzzles were my alternative method to try to get in to a castle. I prayed to each piece of a jigsaw puzzle as I put

them all together and imagined that I could finally jump in to the picture once I finished the game; or at least, I could dream about it in bed.

Then the magic appeared in my life on the thirteenth day of June, 2005, when the scene of the High Street in Oxford first came to my eyes. I thought the God truly had received my wish and had come to lead me in to my dreaming picture for much more than a minute.



I have been dreaming with Oxford for nearly three years since I discovered there is enough for me here to explore for my whole life in such a lively yet old city. I desire to know the story of each stone which I feel can show a different aspect of history. But I also have seen some poorly designed modern architecture intruding into this historic place, and I wonder how that can be; I often choose to close my eyes when I have to pass by those buildings which are unpleasant to me, and only to immerse my mind in the ancient air.

I was studying a book about John Betjeman and Oxford buildings for my first Master's dissertation when my tutor sent me a fragment of one of Betjeman's poems. For me it expresses the quiet mystery of Oxford and provided me with so much joy on feeling the poem with my own thoughts, although there were so many new words I had to discover.

Dear Su Yen

I'm so glad you like the book. John Betjeman had a deep respect and an affection for English buildings, which are often expressed in the way he writes. I send you here a small portion of a Betjeman poem because it describes just what you are doing, exploring Oxford in the book and in reality.

For many years Betjeman's poems were considered to be not very good. They often seem too easy, both to write and to read: the sort of simple rhyming lines which anyone might have produced. However, they are beginning to come back into favour, perhaps because he was an acute and honest observer of human life and its weaknesses, perhaps because we are now far enough from the times he writes about, the 1950s and 60s, to view his work more objectively. This is one of his better poems I think.

In Memory of Basil, Marquess of Dufferin and Ava, by
John Betjeman (1906–1984)

*...the long peal pours from the steeple
Over this sunlit quad
In our University City
And soaks in Headington stone.
Motionless stand the pinnacles.*

*Then there were people about.
Each hour, like an Oxford archway,
Opened on long green lawns
And distant unvisited buildings
And you my friend were explorer...*

Dear Roy

I like the idea of each hour of time opening up like an archway that we can see through. It reminds me that time is not just the present. It also reminds me of how, when I was young, I longed to be in those mediaeval pictures. The whole poem is dreamlike in its unreality, the motionless pinnacles, the unvisited buildings, the unknown people about. Maybe at last I have found a dream I can walk into.

I had to look up many words in my dictionary before I could begin to understand the poem: such as peal – the sound of many bells ringing I think – and pinnacles and steeple, which are parts of buildings. I can see now that pinnacles would of course be motionless, but I think the poet must have chosen that word to emphasise the stillness; otherwise there's no point in using it, is there? But, to be honest, I have no idea whether it is good or not so good poetry. In Chinese poetry there are strict rules of structure and pattern which we use to judge how clever and beautiful the poem is. It seems to me that English poetry is nothing like that so I really don't know how to think about it.

Many of my friends in Taiwan feel the same. We are told how beautiful English language poetry is, and of course everyone has heard of Shakespeare. But it seems too difficult for us to read in English, and all the books about poetry are difficult too, so we can only read translations in Chinese.

Dear Su Yen

Your comments about the poem are very perceptive.

It seems to have stimulated your imagination, or we could say that the poem has imaginative quality, which is a criterion for all good art. Probably you would simply say that the poem ‘speaks to you’, which is a very good beginning.



I was disappointed when I first met my flatmate in Oxford. We had been put together by chance, or rather by some administrator’s decision taken, as far as I knew, with no consideration of our respective personalities. She reminded me of all the unhappy days when I lived in a student house, sharing with five other overseas students. But there was something special and very honest in her eyes which made me think that possibly she would not be as wild and noisy as my old housemates had been, although she dressed like a party animal just the way the old housemates did. I could see a strange curiosity and innocence in her eyes. But why did she dress like that? Why did she have such a crazy and awkward hair style that didn’t fit her at all? I was more puzzled when she told me she had just received her Doctorate from Oxford University. Was she another Chinese who considered herself to be part of an Oxford elite just after a short language course somewhere? My heart sank deeper as my suspicion grew stronger.

The puzzle was slowly solved as we constantly chatted. That was a good sign. After a while, I was quite certain that what I saw the first day was true. Before she met me, the

world to her was just the sky above her laboratory. When the Doctorate was awarded, she was lost and puzzled about her life. I have seen that so often: when those years of hard endeavour are over, life can suddenly seem to have lost its purpose. She tried different hair-styles, strange clothes and tried a night-club once as well and still found no direction. She was curious about everything: how to dress up, make up, socialize and speak with people who were not scientists. Her past life seemed to be just a paper with one word: STUDY. I smiled secretly in my heart now and then at all her inquisitive or even silly remarks. I did not say too much and just taught her patiently whatever she wanted to learn from the outside world. I told her how, at the age of nineteen, I dressed-up customers at a departmental store in Taiwan. I told her how, with little computing knowledge to start with, I managed to become the top sales-person at a national computer exhibition at age twenty-one. I told her how, at age twenty-three, I communicated with local people to discover a piece of local history, the local railway station in Kaoshiung City in Taiwan, which had been deserted for many years; and how I designed the project to convert this derelict railway station into a tourist attraction by convincing the local and central governments of its value.

We talked, or I talked, night by night and I felt like the princess in *The Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. I was also amazed that I could have a story to tell every night. For quite a long time, she always came home telling me how she wished to be like me to make everyone feel happy and attracted. We gain wisdom about the people and the

world as we grow older, as I always told her. But deep in my heart, I really didn't want her to experience what I have experienced before to reach what I am now. If it were not for her, I would have forgotten what I did before completely. It was the first impression of curiosity and innocence that made the memories come back and I was willing to share them slowly. Am I back in the world now with all my memories resurrected in my brain?



貳

2

DISCOVERY

發覺

‘I’ve been holding this book in my hand for three days and I don’t want to return it to the library.’

‘Why not? Is it really so interesting? Most of our textbooks are boring I think. What’s that book about anyway?’ My colleague was curious about what sort of book could attract me so much.

‘Well, I don’t know what it’s about really. I haven’t finished reading the Introduction yet, and I’m not sure I understand even that.’

‘But you’ve been reading it for three days. What have you read?’

‘Oh dear! I have to say my English isn’t good enough to read this conservation philosophy at present; that’s why I haven’t finished reading the Introduction. But I don’t mind that much; I’m just dreaming with this book because it’s more than a hundred years old. Can you imagine how many people have held this book during a century?’

When I found an old book in our library I was so excited. I couldn’t help but to dream that in the past perhaps those people read it at a gloomy desk with a small oil lamp. I loved our library so much because it was like a big treasure house for me to explore history, although I was not an historian in the academic meaning.

‘But how can you do your assignment if you don’t

understand the language?’ My colleague’s question was quite right and practical because I finally received a failed mark for that assignment. It was a bit worrying, but not a big worry for me since I was sure that I would be able to ask for help somewhere for the reason that I was studying in a very English course with nearly all native English speakers.



I do love to believe the God because he always gets my wish and lets it come true. In our library one day I discovered a whole room full of old books for sale, such as I could only dream about in Taiwan. I was determined to have some of those old books in my bookcase. I picked up about fifteen books straight away without having a second thought.

‘Wow, this is lovely; I would like to have this one as well.’

‘Are you crazy, Su Yen, did you check their contents? Are you sure you will like to read all of them?’ My colleague was quite puzzled by my behaviour of buying so many books.

‘I will read them one day; I like them.’

‘But ... Su Yen, you know, I think you won’t read this one because this is not our language, it’s French! Why do you choose this book?’

‘Because ... the cover is so pretty.’

‘Oh my god, you buy books only for their covers?’

Why don’t people understand it is very important for

us to love a cover or appearance before we can enjoy its contents in our lives? That includes food, books, or anything we can choose for ourselves. My tutor in the design course at High School told us that when producers spend plenty of money on their cover design and advertisement design, they are also careful about the quality of the contents because they don't want to lose their prestige.



I thought those books looked very beautiful standing on my little student bookshelf. One day, I promised myself, I would have a whole roomful of fine books like those I saw in old houses in the movies. But first I had to pass my assignments somehow.

My course leader suggested that I should consult another tutor who was a semi-retired lecturer in the department and was always happy to help overseas students to survive those *very* English courses in our School of the Built Environment.

‘Do you understand your situation now?’ When Roy saw my two assignments with one low pass and one failed mark he asked me this question rather than talking about my work.

‘I know my situation is quite dangerous, and I might not get my Master’s degree.’

‘Well it’s good that you do know your situation. I just wondered, because you’re smiling.’

I was smiling because I was happy; because I knew he was the person who would help me, when I saw his

kindness and the wisdom in his eyes.

‘Do you think you know what this assignment is about?’ It was a serious question, put after he had read my work carefully.

‘I think it’s something more about policy rather than design ..., maybe something harder to explain ..., I’m not sure about this.’

‘That’s why your writing is so confused: your arguments are not clear in your mind so of course you can’t write them clearly. What was your first degree in Taiwan?’

‘I studied interior design at university.’

‘Interior design? I’m wondering why you chose this course.’ He spoke carefully, as though not to frighten me. ‘I’ve never met an interior designer on this course before. Do you know it’s a very different subject from your previous study? You see, a Master’s course can’t really make you into something different; it’s meant to be based on what you’ve done before? It might not be too late to change if you want to.’

‘But I don’t want to change my course. I think it’s very important for me to learn how policy makers and decision makers think and how that works out in reality. I want to make my designs useful for people rather than just beautiful.’

‘Well, I’m happy to help you as much as you want because it looks as though you do need help; many of the people I see don’t really need much help at all.’

Roy was very patient, explaining to me much of the basic knowledge which most students learn from their first degrees. He tried to speak especially slowly for me when

he discovered that I had started learning English only a year ago, when I had impetuously decided to study in England.

I was sure that he too liked books. As we talked, I quickly realised that here was an opportunity to discover much more. I decided then that I would like to tell him the story of my short life. But not yet.

‘Can we talk about my work later?’ I said. ‘I want to tell you that I have lots of old poetry books in my bookcase.’ It was so important for me to share my happiness with someone who would understand it.

‘That’s good.’ He said it with emphasis.

I was so pleased that he sounded genuinely interested; not many people took much notice when I wanted to tell them about my old books. They usually said that I would never read them, that they would be too difficult for me; why did I waste my money like that.

‘Where did you get them? Do you read poetry?’

‘I bought them from our lovely library where there were so many old books on sale. I now love our library more than before for this reason. I read poetry, but not in English; I think my English is not good enough to feel English poetry.’

‘What books did you get from our library?’ Again he sounded interested and enthusiastic, not just polite. I was sure then that he liked books very much.

‘I don’t know, because I don’t remember those names of poets in English; there was one by someone called Browning I think; but I’m certain that one day I will enjoy reading them once I improve my English to that level.’

But, you know, I bought them because they spoke to me. They told me to bring them home and look after them as treasure.’



I wasn't sure that my language skills were good enough to understand English poetry, but Roy said poetry was a very good way to understand English culture. He said words in poetry mean so much more than the same words in ordinary writing, or prose. This is because poetry has rhythm, like music, and music seems to have meaning, even without words.

‘I'm not sure I know what rhythm in poetry is.’

He began to speak slowly, using some words that were strange to me:

Full fathom five thy father lies.

‘That sounds very beautiful. Why is it beautiful?’

‘This is beautiful because it is soothing; and it is soothing because of the repeating of those soft ‘f’ sounds, four times. There are no hard or sharp sounds. And because of the rhythm.’

‘What is the rhythm?’

‘It's like the beat in music,’ he explained.

I could understand that because I like to play the piano. My father had to make me learn to play, but I'm glad about that now because it gives me much pleasure.

I learned that the way a poem is constructed is called its

metre, and the rhythm is the musical effect this produces. In that one line of poetry, for example, there are eight bits, called syllables, like this:

Full-fath-om-five-thy-fath-er-lies.

When we say the words, we ever so slightly say each second syllable a little more strongly (but not too strongly) like this:

Full-Fath-om-Five-thy-Fath-er-Lies.

Just like music. I realised that this rhythm comes quite naturally; the pattern of the poetry cleverly uses the way we speak; well, the way English people speak. I've discovered it's very important to emphasise the correct syllable if you want to be understood in English.

The four pairs of syllables in the poem sort of balance each other so that the line feels complete and at rest and there is no tension left at the end. Another part of the complete pattern is how the fourth syllable, 'five,' has the same 'i' sound as the eighth, 'lies'. I learned that when two words have a similar sound we call that rhyme, which is not the same as rhythm. In fact this one line is really two short lines which rhyme, which is why the whole line seems balanced.

There was more, but first I asked him, 'What does "fathom" mean, doesn't it mean, "to think"?'

He explained it also meant a length, about one and a half metres, and generally it was only used at sea, so we

know straightaway that this man has been drowned.

‘And “thy”? I’ve never seen that word.’

Roy explained that it is just an old-fashioned word meaning ‘your’. He said that, of course, when everyone spoke like that, poets naturally wrote in the same way, so even though we don’t use those words these days some people still think they sound ‘poetic’.

‘But the words are all in the wrong order,’ I argued, ‘we were taught to put the subject at the beginning.’

‘The order is changed to make the rhythm, and the rhyme,’ he pointed out. ‘In ordinary writing we might say, “Your father is drowned at sea, seven and a half metres down”. But that’s not beautiful is it?’

‘No. Is there more?’

He started again.

*Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are corals made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange:
Sea-nymphs hourly ring his knell.
Ding-dong!
Hark! Now I hear them,
Ding-dong bell!*

As he said each line, he quickly wrote it down and then gave me the piece of paper.

I read the poem slowly. There were still many words

which I didn't know, but I could feel their music. 'It's sad,' I said, 'But it's beautiful too. Beautifully sad, or sadly beautiful: which? When you say, "Your father is drowned at sea," and so on, it might be sad for his son, but not really for anyone else. But somehow the poem makes it sad for everyone; but it's beautiful too, so it's sort of happy as well.'

I think Roy liked my ideas. 'You thought you couldn't understand English poetry,' he said, 'But already it speaks to you'.

'Yes! And, "Of his bones are corals made," has a rhythm, but, "Corals are made of his bones" doesn't'.

'That's right, though it's a little bit different than the one in the first line. There are many different rhythms used in poetry.'

That night, as I thought about my first English poem, I was wondering why the man had been drowned, and who was supposed to be speaking those lovely words.



Dear Su Yen

I said I would send you the story of the poem about the drowned man. First of all I should say it's by William Shakespeare, perhaps the greatest English poet. He lived in the sixteenth century when Elizabeth I was Queen of England. I'm sure you have heard of him already.

The poem is from a play called *The Tempest*. A king, his son and their friends are shipwrecked on an enchanted island. The young prince is very sad because his father has

been drowned. A kindly, although invisible, spirit called Ariel sings this sad but beautiful song to comfort him, which it does. His father is not gone: 'Nothing of him that doth (does) fade'; but he 'suffers' (that is, he experiences) 'a sea-change, into something rich and strange,' of corals and pearls.

However, it turns out that his father, the king, has not drowned; but he has in fact undergone a deep change, for although many years ago he did a very evil thing to the owner of the enchanted island, now the king is truly sorry, and the two men have become good friends again. Perhaps that is more beautiful and strange than being made into pearls and corals.

The stories, or plots, of Shakespeare's plays are famous, but I think his greatest genius was in his interesting and beautiful use of words.

Dear Roy

The drowned father is a lovely story expressed with poetic rhythm which interests me by its mysterious words. We may normally think that the saddest situation for people is when their close families or friends leave the world physically. However, in fact, sometimes we feel sorrow as we lose our families or friends even though they have not died. I really suffered from just such a strange feeling for about ten years before I came to England. I even thought I felt more pain than a real orphan who at least can get some support from the world and lay claim to people's kind understanding when they think their help is needed. In my case, I was supposed to be from a good

family and was not ‘qualified’ to ask for any outside help, although I couldn’t get any support from my parents to pursue my dream.

The story behind this poem brings back to me what I felt during those years. I remember my father was so considerate when I was very young; but I think I have lost my father since I was fourteen years of age because I couldn’t recognize him anymore and didn’t feel I still had a ‘father’ in the world. My grandfather told me the job in the prison took my father away from us and bound his mind into another world which normal people don’t reach into. I also remember that my mother always told us to be good children to understand that my father cared about us so much, but just had a stressful job which made him so cold to us. Can this be reflected in the line of the poem, ‘Seamyns hourly ring his knell’? Luckily, my father now has been retired from his terrible job for several years, and is gradually becoming a kind person whom I did not see for more than twenty years.

It was such a complicated emotion for me to feel this poem when I was thinking about my own experience with my father ...

*Nothing of him that doth fade,
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.*

Dear Su Yen

Having thought a bit about what poetry is with *Ariel’s Song*, here is what is said to be the earliest English poem.

I know you think England is very old, with your dreams of the Middle Ages, but it is not very old compared with China and many other places, nor is the English language. Of course there were people living here thousands of years ago, but we don't know much about what they thought because they have left no writing.

The first time writing came to this country was about 2000 years ago when the Roman Empire conquered Britain; the name England did not exist then. The people were called Britons and the Romano-British society was very cultured. You might like to see one day what their life was like by visiting the Roman Museum in Cirencester.

Then the Romans had to leave at the beginning of the fifth century AD. Over the next two centuries the country was slowly invaded and settled by people called Saxons who came from Saxony, in what is now Germany, and by Angles from the south of Denmark. That is why we are still sometimes called Anglo-Saxons. During this time there was no proper government or law as there had been in Roman times and that period is often called the Dark Ages. Culture, such as reading, writing and illustration, was kept alive in monasteries and abbeys by religious communities of monks and priests and their servants.

In a monastery in Whitby, in the north-east of the country, ruled by an Abbess (that is, a woman head-priest) called Hilda, the monks, and the servants as well, used to take turns to give a little entertainment in the evenings. A servant man called Caedmon who was not very well-educated (his job was to look after the cows) was very worried because next night he had to perform and he

didn't know what to do. But that night, as he slept in the cowshed, he had a beautiful dream in which he was ordered to sing a song praising God, about the beginning of all things. When he woke up he could remember his song, and he sang it that night and it has been famous ever since. Here it is.

The Hymn of Caedmon, translated from the Anglo-Saxon by A. S. Cook (1853–1927)

*Now must we hymn the Master of Heaven,
The might of the Maker, the deeds of the Father,
The thought of his heart. He, Lord everlasting,
Established of old the source of all wonders:
Creator all-holy, He hung the bright heaven,
A roof high, upreared, o'er the children of men;
The King of mankind then created for mortals
The world in its beauty, the earth spread beneath them,
He, Lord everlasting, omnipotent God.*

Unlike *Full fathom five*, the rhythm here is powerful, like drum beats, which matches the idea of power in the poem. Try saying the second line:

The-might-of-the-mak-er-the-deeds-of-the-Fath-er.

See how the words are arranged so that the strong beats also emphasise the important words. There are four beats in a line, as in *Full fathom five*, but the arrangement of syllables makes a quite different effect: here there are two

soft syllables, instead of one, between the strong ones.

I said this was the earliest known English poem, but neither you nor I would be able to read it in its original form. It has had to be translated into modern English. That is because it was written in the Anglo-Saxon language. This language gradually changed into the English we know today, but not until about the fourteenth century did it reach a form which most modern people might begin to understand, and only then with great difficulty.

But a few hundred years before that, the land of the Angles, *Angle-land*, became known as England.

Dear Roy

What a beautiful poem for the God. I enjoy reading this hymn because it seems to me that the poet didn't use many adjective words to decorate the whole poem: for example, 'the world in its beauty,' not 'beautiful world,' which perhaps is what makes the poem so strong. However, maybe it was the modern translator who wrote it in that way. That's why sometimes I desire to learn to read some old languages, such as the ancient Roman Latin, in order to understand the spirits of those old stories in depth.

I think I like the story behind the poem even more than the poem itself. Caedmon must have been a very good person whom the God also preferred to bless very much and didn't want to see him unhappy just because he didn't know how to entertain people. However, people often think the God is somehow not so caring about them when they feel they need help or protection, so sometimes people maybe choose not to believe in the God anymore. But in my

own opinion, only the God knows how to judge whether we are good enough or if we really need his help. As it is said in Chinese, ‘God helps people who help themselves’. I believe that the God usually comes to help me only when the mission is too difficult to me to cope with on my own. For example, I dreamt of Old Headington before I had been there in my real life; and this beautiful dream led to my decision to apply for Oxford Brookes University later on. I can’t forget that day when I first came to England: I saw a familiar scene of Headington from the coach on my way to Oxford; I then realised that the God had chosen the best place for me, even a long while before I decided to come.

Dear Su Yen

You asked me to write a bit about a poem you had read in Chinese, *He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven*, because it seems to relate to your dreams. Well, I think your dreams are different to those of the poet, but the plea that these dreams might not be trampled over, whatever they are, will find sympathy in every person.

Since the poet, W. B. Yeats, calls the things he is describing the, ‘cloths of heaven,’ and since his description seems to suggest a beautiful sunset and twilight, we may suppose that was the source of his inspiration for this poem. He then imagines that these are finely woven and expensive coloured materials that would delight any woman and, thinking of the woman whom he loved, he wishes that he possessed such materials so that he might, as he writes, ‘spread the cloths under your feet’. But he

is poor and does not possess such cloths; he has only his dreams to spread before her.

If we did not know the story of Yeats' life we could see this poem, as you did when you read it in Chinese, as a very beautiful and happy poem, and think that she did tread softly and, perhaps, gratefully. Knowing the story of Yeats' life, however, it is likely that the person to whom he was expressing this devotion was Maud Gomme, a woman who did indeed often trample on his dreams even though at times she seemed to share some of them at least. Clearly the last two lines speak to you strongly because of those tutors who trampled on your dreams in Taiwan. So a great poet can treat a personal theme in a way that has a wide appeal.

In terms of poetry this poem may be called a 'lyric': that is, an expression of personal and, usually, deeply held feelings. You can compare this with the 'ode' which today is a term used for a poem which praises something: famous odes have been written to, for example, a bird called a skylark, and to a Grecian urn or vase. I suppose Caedmon's song was an ode to God, but because it is to God we call it a hymn.

He wishes for the Cloths of Heaven, by W. B. Yeats (1865–1939).

*Had I the heavens' embroidered cloths,
Enwrought with golden and silver light,
The blue and the dim and the dark cloths
Of night and light and the half-light,*

*I would spread the cloths under your feet:
But I, being poor, have only my dreams;
I have spread my dreams under your feet;
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

Dear Roy

I liked to look down to the city and look up to the sky from a mountain for the whole night till dawn when the sun wakened up the world. Those stars on the sky were so peaceful and were so different from those stars busily moving on the road. I thought my mind stayed in between.

We all have our dreams from childhood to adulthood. Sometimes a dream is so tiny and sometimes it's so huge; sometimes a dream can be so strong and sometimes it's so fragile; and sometimes a dream is easily achievable and sometimes it's just unreachable. No one should judge our dreams with their own understandings of the world, but many people seem to enjoy destroying those dreams of other people. How can we expect other people to know how to cherish or embosom our dreams which are braided with our hearts? I think I don't understand the normal meaning of dream, or of the state of dreaming. Usually, when people say, 'you're dreaming,' or, 'let it stay in your dream,' they mean the thing does not truly belong to our lives or shouldn't be attained. Our dreams are broken so easily by the age of our growing mind. I don't know how many people can still remember how they were laughed at as fools because when they were very young, they ever wanted to be so great like Einstein.

It seems to me the poem shows the great desire of

sharing his treasure with someone who might be his family or his love; he cannot help himself, but only can beg of people that they might, ‘Tread softly because you tread on my dreams’. Does the sun brighten the world or reveal the cloths of heaven? Should we always need someone to appreciate or share with us our dreams, and can’t enjoy our joy alone? Maybe it’s true that we all sometimes need to please someone to please ourselves.

