

Winner of 2008 Mactaggart Writing Award

Green Silk Butterfly

By Yuen Fang

She was being buried alive.

Cool, moist earth showered down upon her exposed skin, little by little encasing her body in a grave of darkness. Panic.

It rose from her unsteady heart, clawed up her esophagus, and hammered against her closed lips. She could not move at all, her body frozen as the earth heaped over top of her.

Slowly, crumbles of dirt fell into her nostrils, plugging her nose, and she stopped breathing. Against her left ear a small, fleshy body seemed to be moving. Another one wiggled past her right ankle. Wriggling. Squirring.

She was so afraid.

--Good morning!

The nurse- what was her name?- sang ignorantly as she strode toward the windows and pulled up the blinds. Dim, white light streamed into the room. Thin trails of water ran down the panes of glass- another beautiful rainy day.

--How is she?

Talking, once more, as if she was not in the room. Just because it was difficult to open her eyes on some days, and she did not want to engage in idle chatting. She wasn't dead yet- no, not even comatose; she was only a little tired. Natural at her age. She was perfectly healthy, but a little tired- a little tired so she slept.

To her left side, the large steel box beeped rhythmically. Various tubes stuck out of her body.

She was dying.

She... she couldn't even move without assistance.

One by one, her family filed into the room like criminals. Her granddaughter, Lulu, ran to the bed, her eyes red from rubbing.

--Grandma...

Lulu's real name was taken from the moon- the big, round moon that looked down on everyone in the world. They had to anglicize it into Lulu, and the name, like the heritage, vanished same as a tiny star.

--Grandma, won't you open your eyes for me?

Lulu's young voice was trembling. Behind her, Lulu's father and the doctor spoke with their lips tightened in stern lines. She knew the source of Lulu's upset: the men were negotiating when to pull the plug, after all.

--Don't cry, Lulu. I'm still here.

She opened her eyes as wide as she could and tilted her head. Her weakened but still functioning hand slid over to touch Lulu's much smaller one. She refused to die here.

Here, this strange land that was not her own- its spectral claws reached up through the ground and tried to imprison her.

She was being buried alive.

It was a dark, rainy Sunday night. She knew the money was not hers, but she could not help it. The tiny, round coin glittered golden from beneath the park bench.

As her middle finger and thumb ran over the bumpy edge, two shadows fell across her vision. Strong arms seized her, twisting her hands behind her back; gloves muffled her scream.

The pale blade of a small knife flashed before her eyes, also golden under the tall streetlight. As her struggles weakened- her energy sapped-, she felt the steel point prick the left side of her neck. The sharp edge scratched across her throat. The pain grew and gushed out with her warm blood. There was a clang when the knife hit the pavement.

She was dragged through a dark void and tossed into an open grave. Dark silhouettes towered above the opening, the full moon at their backs.

Thunk. Both the sounds of the shovels striking earth and of clumps of dirt falling down on her resounded in her eardrums. A maggot crawled between two of her toes.

--If she doesn't wake up by tomorrow, we... we've decided to... go through with it...

Her strong son had changed so much. Coming to this place had been his idea in the first place. A foreign land: so exciting, so petrifying. They sold their house and came to the rumored paradise, the country where even the pavement was laid in gold and silver. Her husband died without ever touching the earth of his homeland again.

She refused to die here. They had barely made a living here. Not knowing the language, he could only sweep the floor and her, wash dishes. At least their son adapted. He changed his name, his beliefs, and married a woman who didn't know what it meant to chase away the Year or look at the Moon- although her parents did.

They had raised their son well. He was a doctor, a scientist, a researcher. He had a six digit salary and a beautiful home for his wife and child. He sent a Christmas card every year with a thousand dollar check. He even let them stay in their old house instead of a retirement home, although they had to sweep and wash for the groceries themselves.

The square, white clock on the wall told her the countdown had started. If she did not wake up that day, they would send her away forever.

She opened her eyes.

Her name was Butterfly; her light green, translucent wings spread out like royal silk. She would roll around on the grassy ground until her arms were overlaid with tiny crisscrosses and her breath released in halting gasps.

Up above her, the sun bathed in an endless blue sky, cupping the world like a beautiful glass bowl.

--What's so funny? Strange girl.

He was her husband, and he was only 19. His still young frame stooped in above her and blocked the yellow sun. They married on a fortunate day the previous month, and she hoped to give him a healthy son.

They only just settled into the new apartment, but they had already dined with their neighbours six times. Their various friends visited sixty times, and their parents called six hundred times. She grew up knowing only her city, loving only her city. Her sky was a dome, but her earth was flat.

His hand caressed her forehead; it was icy cold. Above them was the eternal moon, shining through the opening of the grave. His gentle smile beckoned her, and her heart grew heavy.

--Let's depart together.

She...

The earth rolled in from either side and submerged her body. Darkness, she only had worms for company. The cut in her neck started to bleed again and small, red ants crawled inside the wound.

--I don't want to die like this!

Lulu was at her bedside, head cradled in her arms fast asleep. Once in a while, a nurse would walk by the door. They used to come into the room to check on her condition, but they no longer felt a need to.

Except for Lulu, they had all given her up as dead. Funnily enough, that she was aware of this meant she was, of course, still alive. If she was already oblivious, she would not have minded so much if they stopped her life support.

--Lulu...I'm still alive...

The clock ticked loudly, louder than the beeping machine at her side. She wondered why it was so difficult to open her eyes. People blinked all the time, and she could not even manage half of that.

--Lulu, don't let them bury me...

Lulu could not hear her. And on the other side of the room, a black hole started to form.

The darkness in the void swirled and the first chair tumbled over, vanishing without a sound.

She was running from her pursuers. In the palm of her hand, the imprint of the coin started to throb. Her neck itched, and when she touched it, her hand came away smeared in red syrup.

Her thin, green wings streamed like ribbon on either side of her, and she hopped into the sky, feet dangling just out of reach from the skeletal hands that reached from the ground to grab her.

Above her, the full moon loomed large and lonely, and she could almost see the tears of the princess shimmering on its surface.

A ghoulish face flashed in front of her. An axe spun out from the dark void and bit into her flesh.

It seemed that even the moon she loved rejected her.

As her head fell, she saw her butterfly body floating in the middle of nothing.

She was being buried alive- the moist earth flooded down over her face, and she could no longer feel her body.

So... this was death.

The minute hand on the clock clicked into its final position. Her son and daughter-in-law had saddened but resolute expressions. Lulu, they had carried out of the room while she was asleep. She was too young to witness such a thing.

It was understandable. Even though he was a doctor and a scientist and a researcher, the money was for his family, not for a person who might not ever wake up. In their old country, it was a son's duty to take care of his parents no matter what, but they had left that behind over 20 years ago. She had no right to ask such a foreign concept of her son.

With the last sands of her life, she listed off silent farewells to everyone she knew.

--Goodbye, my son. Please look after your wife and daughter well.

--Goodbye, my daughter. Please obey your husband, even when he makes foolhardy mistakes that men do.

--Goodbye Lulu... I wish one day your feet can visit our homeland in place of my feet.

She smiled at the waiting man beyond the doorway. How familiar he looked!

“Goodbye...”

From one heartbeat to the next, she was suddenly aware of pain all over her body.

The room fell into an even deeper silence than before.

One beat. Two beats.

And absolute chaos.

About half a dozen nurses and two doctors rushed into the room. Static buzzed in from all directions, adding head pain to her joint pains and muscle pains.

“It’s a miracle,” someone said.

She blinked. Then she realized she was blinking.

--*Am I...?*

“So this is...” apparently, her throat hurt as well. A nurse helped her imbibe a little bit of fluid.

The questions started anew, and after what seemed hours in the small room flooded with white light, all but one of the staff members finally cleared out.

“How do you feel?” her son, William, asked after a period of prolonged silence.

“Surprised,” she replied. “I think, why I am alive?”

His eyes widened. “You... it’s not a bad thing, is it?”

Everything was so awkward. In a storybook, the whole family would be crying and rejoicing, but everyone sat demurely, with eyes downcast. Lulu was not in the room, so no one approached the bed. No one even used the tongue of her ancestors to welcome her. It had been a while since she heard it, and she had to struggle with broken English to her own son.

Her voice was still hoarse from disuse, but the bitterness seemed to resound off the white walls.

--It's not a bad thing... is it?

She had been almost dead; she had finally accepted death, but instead, she lived. No one prayed for her recovery, and she gave up on her wish of waking up at that last moment. Yet, why did she live? Any minute, she expected to be back at the bottom of an open grave, but the way silence grated in her ears and all her old age aches returned told her the truth.

A miracle? More like an anomaly.

She had even finished saying satisfactory goodbyes in her head. It was

So

Strange.

“Thank you. I have been much trouble,” she said, lapsing back into formalities.

“Don’t worry about it, Mother. You’re awake, and that’s all that matters.”

“Yes.”

“Ah, I will wake Lulu!” her daughter-in-law, Mary, finally spoke up, her haste betraying her eagerness to leave the room. “She will be so happy to hear the news!”

She said nothing, staring out the window. The sun was shining.

When Mary left, William spoke again. “Do you remember what happened?”

“What happened?”

“Why you were hospitalized.”

“Oh.” Outside, she thought she heard the sound of a crow.

“Mother?”

“I will not repeat my action, William. Do not worry.”

Her lips twisted in a wry smile, the wrinkles on her face deepening. Surely this was proof that the gods existed and had an evil sense of humor.

How long ago was it that she had intentionally tried to take her own life?

In her deep dream at the bottom of the grave, she had forgotten it all—

Forgotten the estranged telephone calls with her son hinting about money; forgotten the freezing winter nights in a breaking down apartment and the inability to communicate with her own landlord. They had barely earned any pension, and after her husband’s death, days that she could only eat half a bun were not rare.

She had not wanted to live, but she was also afraid of death. At the last moment, her resolve wavered, and she became stuck in the hospital for over a month, neither present nor departing.

Was there a place for a person like her to go?

Perhaps, the difficulty of opening her eyes had been her experienced body's way of warning her.

William spoke again. "If it's difficult for you to manage, I've found some really nice retirement homes-."

"No. Please not that," she interrupted.

"They're quite nice, Mother. Expensive, but less expensive than a hospital stay."

"No," she restated.

William frowned. "Please accept my decision, Mother."

She did not reply, and he sighed.

Her name was Butterfly, and her wings were made of the finest green silk. Fragments of her dream resurfaced in her mind, and she realized that the faces of her assailants had been visible all along.

--Is there a place for me to go?

Of course there was: the old country. Her own heaven. A long time ago, all she needed was her blue dome sky and the flat earth of her city. The four stone walls

around a large yard. The dried vegetables on the window sills and the occasional meandering bee.

Her husband and their son, whom they would raise to be an upstanding man that valued his whole family.

But her silk was tattered and moth eaten. She was a small, common grass yellow butterfly, and the ocean was that much wider.

There was nothing for her in this new world.

And then, a small hand touched her own.

“Grandma?”

Lulu, with her young, innocent eyes, gazed up at her. They were glistening, like pure pearls. Also pearl-like were her teeth that shone in a wide smile.

“Grandma,” she said. “It worked!”

“What did, Lulu?”

“My wish!” With a puffed up chest, she proudly held up a bag, triumphantly dumping the contents all over the bed. Countless white papers tumbled out, and upon closer inspection, they were revealed to be paper cranes.

“What is this?” she asked, holding a small paper crane between her fingers.

“Remember the old, old saying, Grandma? The one that said if you fold a thousand paper cranes, your wish will come true?” Lulu said excitedly, leaning in against the hospital bed. “It took so long, but I folded a thousand and wished for you to get better!”

“The old saying...?”

“Yeah, Grandma! You always say I don’t know our culture, but I know some stuff.” Lulu beamed up at her.

She did not know whether to laugh or weep at her granddaughter’s words.

“Thank you, Lulu,” she said. “In English they also say that thoughts are what count, do they not? Thank you, maybe you save me.”

Her aged hand trembled as it patted Lulu’s cheek. “Thank you.”

She thought that no one had prayed for her recovery, and she had given up on her wish of waking up. But Lulu did-

Maybe it really was a miracle.

She was a butterfly and a rootless leaf- one that was an ocean away from the land of her birth, but if a bird could fill an ocean with pebbles and her granddaughter fold a thousand paper cranes, maybe a kind wind would finally blow her ashes home.

Outside, a single magpie chased away the crows before landing on the window sill to peck at the fly larvae that had gathered there.