

Serendipity

By Mandy Lo

Again. Another night, till the small hours.

Putting down the pen, she stretched and yawned. Looking out the windows, she saw that most people had turned their lights off, leaving a dark hollow shadow. In the building, glimmering lights went through some of the windows, looking like fireflies being scattered around, were indicating each night owl who was still staying up, or her imagined alliance, who accompanied her on this lonely night. She pushed her glasses that had slightly fallen down her nose, and turned her head back to the desk full of books, papers, and eraser crumbs.

It was mid February. The weather had turned warmer, but at night it was still cool, as seen from the thick corduroy jacket she was wearing. She has been writing for hours, with right hand grabbing a pencil, and left hand holding her forehead. On this young face you didn't see a smile that an adolescent was supposed to have, but a wrinkle in between the eyebrows, due to frowning too often. Eraser crumbs flew off from the table onto the floor, so as her mind. She stared at the crumbs, zoned out.

“What am I doing?”

I turned off the lamp, pulled out the headband and untied my hair, then carefully placing my

glasses on the desk next to my bed. I lied down, staring at the empty ceiling. To allow myself to stay up I had drunk a bottle of black coffee. It was very useful, that I was now sleepless. I closed my eyes, trying out the hack that I had just learnt from YouTube for helping to fall asleep, the “military sleep method”, which claimed to help people falling asleep within two minutes. I took a deep breath, trying to relax all the tightened muscles and make myself sink into the bed.

One.

Two.

One.

Two.

I was still awake. I kept tossing and turning, hoping to tire myself. Time seemed to flow extremely slower than normal, that I could even hear the clock ticking slower and slower. Feeling annoyed I randomly grabbed a book on the shelf next to my bed. In dark I could barely read the words. From the vague shape I could tell it was a geography book, Dynamic Earth, which was what I needed at the moment. I fell asleep uncontrollably every geography lesson, so it must be a very helpful tool for me.

“Destructive wave carries sediments away from seashore, while constructive wave brings sediments to the seashore. The longshore drift, as known as beach drift, transport sediments in a zigzag direction due to the prevailing wind. Swash goes in...”

Waves?

I felt like a fish, a catfish in dull color, drifting in the boundless tropical sea that the saltwater could have killed me, alone. Having no free will I followed the waves. I floated for a long time, but I didn't know how long it was, until I met an island in the middle of nowhere. I swam closer and closer.

I knew that I was a fish. Without water which nourished my skin I would soon be dead. Yet, I really hoped to visit the island, which had some kind of unknown mysterious atmosphere that attracted me. I would like to be the first fish who dare to break the boundary, so that my parents would be proud of me. I was excited and energetic, swimming faster to meet my wonderland.

As I swam towards the island, it disappeared in thin air, or to say, it never existed.

A mirage.

An unfamiliar sound pulled me back to reality. I felt like I had been detached, that my soul couldn't control my body. While my hands were doing the math equations like a reflex action implanted into my head, my soul was miles away, it could be in the void, or abyss, or trench. I sat up, put on my glasses, and searched for its source. It was like flute. Was it the magic flute of Mozart? The magic flute that would help me to defeat the demons? I leaned myself more

towards the window, that my face almost stuck to the piece of glass. But still, I failed to trace where the sound came from.

I never paid attention to the environment. To be honest, I used to hate birds very much. When I was in primary school, I had big interest in animals, and I would borrow the extremely heavy and thick illustrated handbook of different animals, which weighed 1/3 of the little me, from mammals to fish, but never insects, as I was afraid of them, even for butterflies.

It was a sunny day, when I couldn't hold back the excitement to read the newly bought book of teaching how to draw animals, while I was walking in the street, after a visit to the bookstore with my parents. Suddenly something happened, so dramatic that you wouldn't consider it real, that, something fell onto my book from the sky- a fresh bird poop. For a long time I didn't open that book again, and started hating birds.

Magically, after that night, I could hear that sound every early morning, around four, when every creatures were asleep, only except me and the producer of the mystifying sound. It broke the seemingly peaceful silence. Every time I tried to look out the window in order to find it out. However I still couldn't figure it out. I was very very curious about it. What else could it be? It mustn't be any human-made sound, as nobody except DSE candidates would stay up until this moment. It shall be animals. What animals woke up so early? Bird? As I was told since young that the early birds caught the worm. I couldn't hold back my curiosity anymore, although I was supposed to put all my attention in preparing for the public exam.

Putting aside all the past papers for DSE that snowed me in, I listened to almost every bird

calls of commonly-seen birds in Hong Kong, trying to seek the answer out. It took days until I found that out. Some birds of the same species had multiple different calls and songs. For example, I once heard some sound which was hard to describe, the closest metaphor I could think of was that, it was like an old cat screaming while having a flu, with a hoarse voice. Later after watching a video that YouTube algorithm randomly recommended to me I realized that was the sound of a light-vented bulbul, in anger, or as a warning. Meanwhile, different species could sometimes sound very similar, making it hard for me to differentiate, as a layman. Also, for some birds, like koel, the male song was different from the female's song, yet, the male call was similar to the female's call. Confusing, huh? After days and days of research on YouTube as well as eBird, a website of birds with detailed information, I eventually sought out the answer. It was the oriental magpie robin, a cute little songbird, which looked identical to magpies. The only obvious difference was the size, in which magpies were much larger, and I thought that's why magpie robin was named after magpie. Each individual had their own unique calls, as they would learn from other neighboring birds in the specific region they were living in to create and generate their own song, like us human, having different personality traits due to environmental factors. The robin was small in size, but was able to sing beautiful and melodic songs that could tear the night, bringing in a shred of light.

I also got to learn about other birds, like black-collared starlings. Different from the small birds which jumped in moving, they walked in a hilarious way with their long legs, like comedians. They usually lived in groups instead of individuals, and I could always hear them talking to each other with their loud and non-negligible unique voice. In the past, I must had found it annoying, but for now, I found it lovely. My dad said they were holding a meeting, chitchatting about what they had eaten for lunch. By personifying them it made their acts

much cuter to me. The birds brought me out of the mountains of books and homework to life. I used to be surviving, but for now I think I am living.

Now, walking along streets I paid attention to the surrounding sounds, instead of bending my head focusing on the phone. That was like opening the third eye. Once you knew about their sounds you couldn't ignore them. Before that I didn't know that the nature could be so close to us in such concrete jungle, that you could hear the red-whiskered bulbul singing all the time, hiding in the tree branches just next to you. Whenever I heard unfamiliar bird calls, I would first make a guess, then looked up finding the bird, to see if my guess was correct or not.

After a whole day of torture by past papers I went home from school by bus. Being too exhausted I felt asleep on the way. When I woke up from the nap, I looked outside the window, and the view was unfamiliar. I had missed the stop. After working all day I just wanted to go home as soon as possible to take a shower and then lie on my bed leisurely, carefree. And now I had to walk extra miles to get home. Being irritated by my own carelessness I couldn't help hitting my forehead, as a way to punish myself. Anyway, I pressed on the button and got off at the next stop.

Walking outside the bus I gave out a sigh. Out of grudge, I almost wanted to sit down right on the floor, as a protest, although no one would understand, and even myself didn't understand who I was actually protesting against. Was it myself? God? Some higher entities? The education system? I didn't know.

A sharp, rapid and monotoned call interrupted my messy thought. Looking around, I saw a red-billed blue magpie shouting in a very anxious way, trying to convey an urgent message desperately to its friends. I raised my head. In the cloudy, grey sky there were two black kites fighting with each other. Although they were far away from the ground I could identify them by their V-shaped tail. The blue magpie was probably informing its friends that there's danger approaching, or calling its friends out to watch this intriguing show.

I stood there, put down the bag which was heavy and filled with books, and smiled.

Birds in the wild usually lived within a decade only. They might die at any moment, being hit by a car, attacked by a cat, or drinking polluted sewage. So what? These innocent birds, were unworried, living in the moment hedonistically. And I, as human, had way more decades to go. Why shall I be trapped in this specific point of time? I believed in faith that there must be more beauty for me to discover in the future. I believed.

Suddenly I felt a sense of relief. Physically and mentally.