

Forward/emagazine Creative Critics Competition 2020

WINNER

Joyce Chen (Westminster School) for 'Cuttlefishing off the coast of Hong Kong' (responding to Will Harris' 'Holy Man')

Cuttlefishing off the coast of Hong Kong

The night was painting the sea and my hands a vanishing colour
but I could still feel the sticky warmth of the plastic reel
like a comb flat in my palm. I must have only been five or six,
peering out from between the boat's edge and safety rail,
looking for cuttlefish in the dense water
like looking for stars in a smoggy sky.

I felt small and forgotten watching the darkness congeal
in a swarm of lazy mosquitoes and adult chatter -
if I heard two dialects on deck, I would have thought
they were lovers, then. The boat washed dimly yellow, the shade
of my bedroom in those years of nightlights and spinning dreams.

a hitch on the line -

Pull up quick but careful, careful / Pick it up for a picture, while it's still alive

[now I like to think that I gave the sad creature to my brother
because I could not carry the weight of its dying pulses]
but when they all came up like a magic trick, fried and salted in a huge pan, still I ate
and ate.

Your tongue's gone black!

and I think black as oil ink, black as an ocean for running away;

I would not think of how, in twelve years,
protestors clad in black flow

into rivers of fear running through
Hong Kong like a lifeblood; of how
the waiter's face closes like a reflex
when we order in Mandarin,
the teapot left empty on white tablecloth,
its lid floating belly-up like an apology
or a dead thing: to him,

we were the predators with open jaws
and he saw our tongues were black.

Reflective commentary

Holy Man's penultimate stanza inspired the beginnings of my poem, as Harris associates the colour green with everything from the universal ('a cartoon frog... a septic wound... the glen') to the deeply personal ('the lane in Devon where my dad / grew up, and the river in Riau where my mum played'). I therefore chose black, a colour that has featured across daily news in Hong Kong for the past year, but also has strong associations with one of my earliest memories.

Harris's fixation with religion, from 'Christmas' to 'Tibetan prayer flags... meaningless severed / from the body of ritual, of belief' and 'a jade statue / of the Buddha', is reflected by my political focus in Cuttlefishing. While Holy Man centres around an unlikely encounter with a stranger who awakens spiritual introspection in the speaker, the central act of catching cuttlefish comes to signify the conflict between nations which bleeds into my speaker's life.

The stylistic feature that visually stood out to me from Holy Man was Harris's paragraph-like chunks of prosaic narrative, which I mirrored in my first two stanzas. In my poem however, the stanza and line lengths are not constant but devolve as the subject shifts across time from personal memory to the wider political backdrop. The two couplets especially break from the structure of the poem to highlight the stark contrast between how we perceive ourselves and what others see or assume.

Finally, the last line of Holy Man particularly stuck with me ('- and I flinched, waiting for the blade to fall'). I wanted to create the same sense of apprehension and undefined fear, or almost pre-regret, at the end of Cuttlefishing, hopefully leaving the reader with a sense of the confusion and guilt that often accompanies dual identity.