

a little ways
down
the



rabbit hole

poems by
Joanne Elisha Yeo

A Little Ways down the Rabbit Hole

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All Roads Lead to Rome

Here I am, in Rome.

But has it occurred to you, dear readers,
that perhaps I do not wish to be here –
sitting at the third floor balcony of
the tangerine-colored building, looking
down at the diners sitting under
big white café umbrellas feasting away
on spaghetti and gelato and beer
at 1pm in the afternoon,

and right in the middle of the piazza
is the Fontana del Nettuno
with its greyish-white human sculptures
(naked greyish-white human sculptures)
wrestling horses and
god knows what those other creatures are
in the shallow water and frolicking
in the midday Roman sun,

while I sit and stare idly, my mind lost
amongst the parade of sunglassed tourists
and enthusiastic Italian men
whose eyes flickered constantly
from local women to American girls,
and fine Roman art pieces everywhere;
at some point my mind was even flying
over the Colosseum, but I was never
finding my way back home.

Then Minerva appeared before me
somewhat like those sculptures – naked,
but more white than grey, and
diaphanous rather than opaque –

and she said to me,

‘In the end, all roads lead to Rome.’

Calvin Klein EDC

three passengers alight eight more hops on board
as if it isn't cramped enough even without the five new
additions to this warm and fuzzy huddling session oh
it just warms my heart literally I feel like a frigging penguin
except penguins live in the Southern Hemisphere where
it seems like Christmas every day with the white-washed
ground and visible horizon but right here and now it's like
South Pole shoved into a capsule and thrown right into
the toaster oven and heating up to 210°C
say if you play Candy Crush you may probably find that
moving about in the train at such an ungodly hour is actually a
simulacrum of the game (live version) the purple candy
changes places with the red candy which then switches position
with the yellow one and it goes on and on until somehow
I find you standing right in front of me my nose about to kiss
the back of your neck should there even be the slightest
jerk at all the smell emitting from your body so strong of
cologne – is it Calvin Klein – topped off with a coat of cigarette
you know what people say about their “cup of tea” I think this
could be my bottle of Calvin Klein EDC heterosexual
then only too soon the time for your departure has come
the train doors open and like with a touch on the “unpause”
button on a smartphone screen the game is set in motion again
you wriggle and push gently and apologize your way out
then you are gone the train doors closing behind your shadows
and all that is left of you is the cologne and cigarette mixture
lingering in the hairs of my nostrils.

2013 Mid-Autumn Festival

The street lamps are incomparable to that of the thousand candles
affixed along the pavements of the neighborhood –
their flames like congregations of fireflies
waltzing and fluttering in the cool air of the Mid-Autumn night,
casting pretty orange shades on the faces of little children gathering around them,
marveling at the dancing flames,

and to those of the brightly lit lanterns
hanging on the armrests of the park benches –
traditional candle-lit ones and battery-powered ones alike.

But amidst the gaieties of the festival were some
who'd very much prefer yet another ordinary night.
Festivals tend to leave some people out of the fun,
like that old hag who always shows up at the park at exactly 9'o clock every night
and sit on the bench by the trash can with her ugly old Chihuahua;
like the colored man lying on a mat under the tree
with earphones shoved in his ears, apathetic to the ringing sound
of laughter and mirth that filled the atmosphere;

and like me –
walking home from a long day's work, reminiscing the days
when life had been simpler and the festival had embraced me and I it with alacrity;
when I had used up all twenty candles in the little yellow box to make a mini campfire
and wrote my name on the wall with differently-colored candle wax
and set fire on ants and grass and paper lanterns just for fun
and threw sparklers on trees with a couple of other kids

under the very same full moon of the Mid-Autumn.

The Fourth Floor Window

Whenever I walk by the 27th street I can't help but stop
at the foot of the yellow and white building to gaze
upon the fifth window from the right on the fourth floor.
In the stagnant background are tireless children frolicking

on the playground and field and standing on the seat of the swing
pretending to be superheroes, and chattering housewives
sitting on the steel benches occasionally flickering their eyes
onto the kids to do a perfunctory check for any accidents or mischiefs
while their tongues rambled on unending gossips.

I couldn't care less about the activities going on behind me.
I could only see, before my eyes, the slightly open
dark-tinted windows and the red-white checkered curtain
hanging idly, while I wait for a minute or two
and jump at the slightest sign of the curtain rustling,
but no arm would emerge to wave at me.

Faith

If all it takes is
a “leap of faith”,
I would be
sitting down
at the kitchen table

with a roll of
parchment
and pour myself
a cup
of sugarless
black coffee,

then dip
my index finger
in the coffee
and start
calculating
the distance
from which I
would have to
leap

on that
roll of
parchment.

Modern Day Dining

Some dining etiquette just can't be forgotten
when it's been drilled so deep inside
your brain –

like “Close your mouth when you're chewing!”
“No slurping!”
as the old folks would nag
when we were younger –

even though your mind and eyes
are never on the platter of food before you
nor on the relatives
you see only half yearly,

and everyone at the dining table is
as quiet as fish inside the aquarium;
all we can hear is some light clanging
of the silverware and overly-loud slurping
that the pig-like cousin produces
while indulging in the mushroom soup.

Some other etiquette such as
“don't use your phone when you're eating”
can be easily overlooked like the
cockroach possibly swimming
in the pudding can easily be

when your eyes are glued onto
your smartphones instead,

but your right hand continues to scoop –
soup, pudding, rice, fish, Bolognese,
or everything all at once –
filling the spoon to the brim
then sending it into
the Grinding Machine
spoon after spoon,

and your left hand just types away
on the phone ceaselessly.

An Occurrence at the Mall

It first started with the strident fire alarm shrilling madly through the mall for about fifteen seconds or so and people exchanged somewhat annoyed looks – raised eyebrows, lines etched across foreheads, squinting eyes – but panic had yet to suffuse the place; the glassy-eyed couple at Starbucks sipping their shared frosty cup of ice Frappuccino who couldn't tear away from each other's gaze, indulged in reveling in their "heck-the-world" puppy love, while the man and his wife with their baby in the red stroller continued strolling nonchalantly. I mean seriously, fire alarms go off all the time yet how many times were there actually real fire?

But human words are far more believing than fire alarms, don't you think? When someone starts to talk about a circumstance occurring right upstairs at the ground floor and an overhearing ear passes the news on and other fellow overhearers, too, who upon hearing the news pass it on again, and on and on and on and on it spreads, like wildfire, this time probably really happening. Such power human words have – now people just have to see it for themselves.

Now now, what a pandemonium! A dozen people running in all directions but east, shrieking with lord knows was it panic or was it a sick excitement? A deluge of prying humans had crowded around the crime scene with camera phones in hand filming and flashing away deliriously like aspiring journalists at the dilapidated ceiling that had fallen to the ground now pouring waterworks in frenzy, whatever was left of the ceiling anyway.

So it wasn't Chicken Little crying "the sky is falling!" about the steadfast sky. How curious are we human beings – inquisitive, investigative, curious creatures. But in actual fact they're just nicer words for nosy, since I, too, was there poking around at the scene.

Bizarre City

The skyscrapers stood in place today –
idle, with no intention to move.
The common trees swayed a little
as they did too yesterday.
Everything looked the same

except today I noticed
nobody had faces –
they were only contours and colors
and each one was like
a smooth but queerly-shaped egg –

but they could still talk!
That was ridiculous because if they
had no mouths, how then did they speak?
Some of them even had earphones
dangling from the side of their empty faces
where their ears should have been,
and they seemed perfectly able
to navigate themselves without eyes.
And the cars, they were moving and honking
but nobody was driving them.
The worst part in all of these was that
no one seemed to have noticed
anything wrong or
out of the ordinary.

Transformers is for real, I thought,
so are walking talking mannequins
(if I even had any brains at all in my head
to think in this bizarre city).
The laws of logic suggests that
I must have been dreaming,
even if everything was as real as
my sun-kissed skin –
from the scorching rays
of the afternoon sun.

Maybe tomorrow
the skyscrapers and trees will be walking the streets.

The white-tailed guppy

has a split so big in its tail –

that it makes the tail look almost
like a pair of 1960s Palazzo trousers –

is chasing the other
red-tailed guppies
wearing flawless, fan-shaped
tails resembling a
Spanish flamenco dancer's skirt –

first the skinny red-tailed guppy,
then the even tinier one, and now
the plump pregnant one
who could very well pass off as both
a puffer fish and a guppy.

It reminds me of this guy
from high school
who never goes a day without
chasing after anything that has boobs –
a different pair daily.

Curious creatures aren't they –
guppies and boys.

The Gardens in a Dome

If I had not known better I would have thought perhaps the Tokyo Dome had metamorphosed – an array of iridescent flowers in various shades and hues congregating at the center in a perfect semi-circle in one artsy manner, accompanied by an assortment of greeneries and oddly-shaped trees. A deluge of well-blended fragrance waltzed in the atmosphere: the crisp air of the morning with the floral medley and a tinge of moss and wood – the Garden's own unique brand of an Eau de Toilette.

My mind must have wandered away by itself, flying over the Supertrees and meandering through the whirl of colors all around me – the red roses, the vermilion daisies, the blue and purple and pink hydrangeas, all with a speck or two of green in them. Then at some point in time this little girl in the little blue floral frock (perfect for the occasion) brought me out of my stupor. She said, 'Mommy, are we inside the Garden of Eden?' and her mother replied, 'No I don't think so, sweetie. I'm sure the Garden of Eden had a snake, and more trees.'

One-Way Ticket

Wouldn't it be great if only among
the crowd of enthusiastic tourists and
families and friends – who are wishing
each other bon voyage, exchanging all kinds
of well-wishes and long lists of 'Things to Buy'
from whichever countries they are leaving for –
at the Departure Hall of Terminal 1,
there will not be any ill-fated couple

about to be separated by lands and seas,
and for the very last time they would kiss each other,
first a soft peck on the cheeks, which is then
undoubtedly followed by too much tongue
and a tear or two glistening at the corners of their
tight-shut eyes while the blissful memories of the past
inundate them like waves crashing upon
sun-tanning crabs on the shore,

and like in many maudlin romance movies,
they would ignore the dozen pairs of twinkling eyes
flickering towards their direction, watching the live show
enacting before them – but what the audiences fail to see
are the two heavy hearts sunken to the red-carpeted ground.
Fate is cruel, isn't it? Pulling people together, making them
fall head-over-heels in love only to tear them
apart later, in the name of its twin sister Destiny.

The dreaded moment will soon come when
the last call sounds over the PA system in the voice
of a sweet-sounding lady, and the couple would
reluctantly break away from their passionate kiss.
Then for the last time, he would look into her eyes
as they burn into his own and etch painfully
into his memory, like an iron-hot knife
carving into his brain, and she would leave him
with one last smile and a melancholic 'goodbye'.

Lady in White

I saw this lady in white standing
at the balcony of the apartment right across the street,
standing as still as the Statue of Liberty is too

a hundred and fifty miles away.
I couldn't see her features, darkness forbade me;
the orange street lamps below useless like a painted one

of orange gouache against the multiple shades of gray.
She stared out into the red sky of the midnight,
her hair whipping madly in the January wind

— I wondered if she wasn't cold.
Rumor has it she is a ghost;
those who've seen her claimed they were "seeing things",

others said she was but a fragment of imagination
awakened by the prurient nature of men and drunkards.
But I say she's an angel!

Who says angels must have white fluffy wings
made of swan feathers or a golden halo above their heads?
No, I say she must be an angel.

Of Drunkenness

(i)

Where in the world am I? I wondered –
deep inside the Amazon forest, perhaps?

– lying next to the perpetual stream
running and falling over
gray and brown timeworn rocks
glistening in the mild moonlight,

weaving through
the narrow stream banks
that are hardly able to contain
the intensity of these spirited waters

which occasionally sprinkled
little droplets of water onto my face
and I would lick them when they reached
the corners of my mouth –

they tasted like pebbles and fish
with a hint of water weed.

(ii)

Slowly my consciousness drifted –

like a fallen leaf floating limply
on the surface of the water,
bobbing and floating over
the occasional rocks and bumps;

and like the myriad rivulets of Vodka
flowing through my innards,
melding with my blood and pumping
through every vessel in my body –

the melody of the flowing stream
playing by my right ear gradually sounded
miles away.

(iii)

In the morning I awoke
to the amaranthine melody of the stream.

With an eager anticipation
I opened my eyes to welcome the forest view
– green all around, towering over me,
and the stream by my right –

but all I saw was
a white spinning fan on the white ceiling,
a yellow concrete wall to my left,
and on my right, a fish tank –

with a dead goldfish
sunken to the bottom
as the stream-like melody
continued to play.

At the End of the Trail

For dearest Xi Yu – if she ever reads poetry.

The two faint white lines
on the gray tarred ground
and that big conspicuous sign
which says “Start Here”
marks the starting point
of the trail.

We followed it, hoping
it would take us somewhere,
somewhere far away, perhaps.

It took us to a garden
that has a lake which glows
vermilion under the setting sun,
with people – men mostly –
sitting by it under the
big Angsana trees,
waiting for a fish to bite their bait,

while the children and women
skewered the already-caught fishes
and barbequed them
by the grill; the

slightly-charred smell
of burning fish skin
could be detected
from half a mile away

down the same gray
winding trail.

Tirelessly we walked,
until god knows when
and the trail was no more,

so we cut through
the ivied white church
before us and

kept on walking,
not looking back.

Author's Biography

Joanne Yeo Jia Xuan is an aspiring writer from Singapore who is passionate about experimental and contemporary poetry, as well as other forms of creative writing. She has written two other poetry chapbooks titled 'Sense & Nonsensibility' and 'Shoah: Remembering the Forgotten'. Her other works include short stories and flash fictions.



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