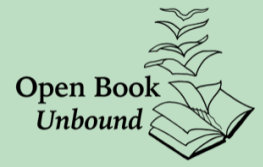


# STRANGWAYS GEORGE

## ALICE ASH



WRITER IN RESIDENCE

DECEMBER 2020

Strangeways George was coming up the path at the front of the house, dragging his suitcase behind him. He had a bushy beard and a silly expression on his face; his nose and forehead were sunburnt from the long journey. Mother Crake was watching at the window. 'He's coming,' she hissed, and everyone got into position, all except Sister Cass who was pouring the lemony cake mix into a tin, next to the sink. The crate was there, in the middle of the kitchen. There were 6-foot walls, which were made up of thin silver bars, and a floor of rough carpet. The foolish delivery boy had set the crate up while Mother Crake was at work and Sister Cass, Brother Michael and Father Crake were digging potatoes outside. 'What in the hell has the boy done it there for?' they all said. The crate was supposed to be set up in the garden.

Mother Crake opened the door for Strangeways George, who hugged her and said, 'Oh, Ma,' and Sister Cass slammed the cake into the oven, edged around the crate to get into position.

Slim Boy didn't move, and Brother Michael hissed, 'Dog doesn't even know him,' and Father Crake nodded darkly. Slim Boy gazed into the distance with his milky brown eyes.

'Cass is making the lemon cake that you like,' Mother Crake said, shaking Strangeways George's embrace away, and Sister Cass grimaced; she'd had to get up at 4 am to fit her other tasks around making the lemon cake for Strangeways George.

Now Strangeways George was in the kitchen. 'It'll be a proper celebration,' he said, and then he gestured to the crate, stood behind the family, 'What's that crate?' he asked.

'That's for Slim Boy,' Father Crake said. 'The foolish delivery boy set it up in here, and now we can't get it out the door.'

Strangeways George was laughing; he shook his father's hand. 'I'll get in there, Pa. I'll help you out, once I've got my bearings,' he said. 'Got to get my bags unpacked.' He jiggled his old suitcase around, flaking and wrinkled leather.

'Ten years it's been,' Father Crake said, and Brother Michael said, 'Dog doesn't know you.' Strangeways George looked at his brother and reached over to push his lank brown hair back and

forth with his big hand. ‘You know me though,’ he said, his voice cracked. ‘You know me, don’t you, Michael?’

Brother Michael nodded but kept his eyes narrowed. ‘You’ll want to sleep in my room, I guess,’ Michael said. Slim Boy came and rested his big furred head on Michael’s knee.

The lemon cake started to smell good, and the family all sat down at the table and drank tea. They all looked at Strangeways George, taking him in.

‘I’ve been dreaming of this moment since you don’t know when,’ Strangeways George said, his teacup shaking a little in his big hand.

‘Since ten years, I expect,’ Mother Crake said, not unkindly.

The crate lurked behind the family; the door on the other side could only be seen through the bars.

‘It’s a big crate,’ Strangeways George said. ‘What’s the dog doing, to need a crate all of a sudden?’

The family were silent.

Sister Cass got up from the table and went around the crate to the oven, to get the lemon cake out. Strangeways George watched her, on the other side of the bars.

‘I’ve been dreaming about that cake,’ Strangeways George said, ‘since you don’t know when.’ Sister Cass smiled thinly. Her arms were muscular from work in the garden. She came and put the hot lemon cake on the table.

‘It’s not what he’s doing,’ Sister Cass said, standing behind Strangeways George, ‘It’s what he’s done.’

Strangeways George nodded. ‘Bad dog,’ he scolded, waggling his finger, ‘been at Ma’s cushions again.’ He laughed. ‘This looks delicious, Cass,’ he added.

The cake was on the table, bare and brown, thin horns of lemon peel sticking through the surface here and there. Strangeways George sniffed deeply at the steam rising from the cake.

‘You can have a slice,’ said Brother Michael. They all watched Strangeways George cutting the bitter cake with the knife, raising it to his chapped mouth, saying ‘Oh, that’s good.’ He closed his eyes in pleasure, and then slumped down in his chair. The suitcase fell onto its side with a crash.

At midnight, Strangeways George opened his eyes again. He had been dreaming deeply. The prison clock was ticking; it was almost pitch black, but while he writhed on his scratchy bed, the moon came from behind a cloud and illuminated the silver bars brightly. There was growling and sniffing coming from another cell, a slim body tossing around in the purgatory of light sleep.

Strangeways George scratched his beard - it was tickling him - and his hand came out holding a crumb that must’ve come from dinner. Strangeways George held the crumb between his chapped lips - his face was hot, he realised - and then he tasted what was there. That was odd, thought Strangeways George, that crumb of canteen grub tasted a little like his sister’s lemon cake – the cake that he had been dreaming of for near on ten years. Strangeways George lurched up, out of his blankets, and staggered towards the edge of the crate - he thought he could see his childhood dog, Slim Boy; he looked to be out there in the kitchen, teeth flashing, and milky eyes in the moonlight.

Martin Clover stopped on the way to the airport to collect his smart jacket.

‘Job interview?’ the dry-cleaning lady asked him.

Martin’s hands were shaking slightly, and he dropped his money on the floor.

‘No,’ Martin laughed. ‘I’m collecting my daughter from the airport.’

And Martin could see that the dry-cleaning lady didn’t like to be wrong, because she said, ‘Well, you’re a bag of nerves,’ and flounced to the next customer.

Martin was already sat in the airport waiting room when he remembered the photo of Angel. He had left the photo in his jacket pocket, but when he looked, there was only a card for the drycleaners – *Here to help you*. Martin walked to the bin, exposed in the middle of the waiting room, and casually tossed the card in. His shoes tapped on the tiled floor.

At two o’clock, the first swell of people flooded in; pecking and smothering loved ones like a flock of birds feeding on suited and hatted insects. Martin stood up, even though Angel’s flight wasn’t due for another half an hour. He saw a flash of Angel’s cottony hair, the yellow that softly surrounded her head, but the girl went to the other side of the room and met with a tiny woman dressed all in patent leather, even with a shining black rain cap. When the girl turned around, she had a very sharp face, a pointed nose, and Martin saw that she looked nothing like Angel.

Martin settled back into his seat, it was cold and hard, but Martin made a small pleasure sound like he was very comfortable. He watched the yellow-haired girl and the small, leathered woman walking up the long white corridor, the small woman scuttling and carrying all the bags, as though she had many arms.

Angel didn’t have a sharp nose; her nose was small and button-like. Martin smiled, the lounge had started playing soft, simmering music, but a feeling was creeping, at the edge of his mind. *Was Angel’s nose really button-like?* He tried to grasp a picture of the nose but found that he could not. A blonde woman sat down next to him and clacked sweets against her teeth, breathing through her nose while she sucked. *Angel’s eyes*, Martin thought, *she has beautiful brown eyes – but what shape were they?* Martin felt afraid. He realised that he couldn’t picture Angel’s face; he didn’t know what his daughter looked like.

Martin went to the bin, in the middle of the room – the card was there; he could almost read the words – ‘*Here to help you.*’ Martin reached into the bin and grabbed it, and nobody looked up or saw. The card wasn’t even dirty. He shuffled over to the public telephone. Martin swallowed three times. *What was he doing?*

The ringing was faint, like it was coming from a different universe, and the dry-cleaning lady was only half on the line, talking to a customer while Martin tried to explain.

‘A photo?’ the lady said. ‘Yeah, I did see a photo, actually.’

He heard her moving around where she was, shuffling things about.

‘Mr Clover,’ she said. ‘I’ll save your photo for you here. Nice and safe.’ She placated him like he was a child. Martin was undoing his tie; it was too tight.

‘Wait,’ Martin said, louder, ‘Wait!’ Nobody in the room seemed to care that he was shouting. ‘Can you describe it to me?’

He could hear the press hissing at the dry-cleaners.

‘Describe it to you?’ the lady said. ‘Ain’t this your photo?’

‘Please!’ Martin choked. He could hear a faint tapping, shuffling sound – the planes were letting people off, and they were swarming towards the waiting room.

‘Blonde-haired girl,’ the woman said, ‘brown eyes. A pink cardigan, from what I can see.’

‘Yes, yes,’ Martin was saying, ‘but what are the eyes *like?*’

The shuffling was coming closer, swelling down the windowless white corridor that led to the waiting room. The people in the waiting room dropped their newspapers and stood up expectantly, pasting smiles on to their faces.

‘What kind of eyes?’ the lady said.

People were starting to filter into the room, and sounds of delight echoed around.

‘Okay,’ said the dry-cleaning lady. ‘Sorta round, piggyish.’

Martin was silent; there was a sound right behind him.

‘Daddy?’

Martin dropped the phone.

He could hear the lady saying, ‘Listen, you asked me...’ and then the receiver was too far away to hear.

Angel was there – blonde, cottony hair and brown eyes - round, a bit piggy - just like the dry-cleaning lady had said – that was his daughter, standing right there.

‘It’s so good to see you, Daddy,’ Angel said. She handed him her bags, and he took them obediently. ‘I’m so tired,’ she said. Angel came close and rested her fluffy head on his shoulder. Martin wanted to hug his daughter, but his arms were covered in her heavy bags and stuck out right in front of him.

‘I’m sure you are,’ he said. ‘Let’s get you home, to our house.’

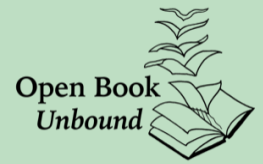
Angel took Martin’s hand, and they walked down the windowless white corridor together. Angel was very cold; her long nails dug slightly into his wrist. The corridor seemed to stretch on forever, and for a moment, Martin couldn’t remember how he had come to the airport.

‘We’ll go home in the car,’ he said uncertainly, and Angel just looked at him blankly, her eyes very still in their sockets. The white corridor was so long, stretching as far as he could see. Angel made them walk faster now. Martin’s legs felt very short and feeble next to his daughter’s long gait.

‘Slow down, Angel,’ he said. ‘Your old dad can’t...’ And as they travelled along the white corridor very fast, Martin saw a girl with cottony yellow hair. ‘Wait a second, Angel,’ he said - then there was another blonde girl, and another, brown eyes shaped in all different ways. There were bouncing dots of yellow, coming towards him and Angel, pink cardigans and brown eyes glinting from the end of the white corridor.

# WHERE THE HEART IS

## ALICE ASH



WRITER IN RESIDENCE

FEBRUARY 2021

1.

Where we lived it snowed a lot, the land covered in white with black trees, like a very pale scalp with dark hair. We lived in the shelter of our mother's big, booming heart - every day we felt lucky because Mother would wake us with a kiss and a cookie with milk, or a plate of pancakes and a song that she would sing to us.

(Now Father burns the pancakes; he has grey wheels around his eyes and dirt underneath his fingernails.)

2.

We were home from school - Mother was at work and Father was in his study, writing. Father liked to write - it was more of a hobby than an actual paying job - but Mother always spent time reading his poems when she got home from work, before she started cooking dinner.

(Now Father has to write copy for a dog food company, and every day he cries when he goes down to the grey car and drives into town.)

3.

The signal kept going - that's when we heard the thumping sound. Lola and me weren't bothered. We were busy trying to fix the TV. But when the picture came back, Michael kept on about it, even when *Snow Dawgs* was on, and he annoyed us so much that we agreed to go and look upstairs.

The thumping was loudest near the guest room. Mother had folded all the towels to look like swans and put little sweets on the pillows, even though there probably weren't any guests coming until Christmas. We stood looking up at the hatch to the attic. It was usually closed, but on that day it was open.

## 4.

Michael wouldn't stop crying, even though Lola and me kept telling him it was nothing – stop being such a baby.

We crowded around the box.

'But what is it, really?' Lola asked.

And we all looked at each other.

Inside the box, there was a frail thing, throbbing and pink, covered with little sparks and hairs that stuck up from the surface.

(We now know that this was Mother's heart.)

Michael was still crying when we got downstairs, and Father called out – 'Everything okay out there? Stop bullying Michael. Okay, kids?'

We didn't want Father to come out. He always went to pieces in situations like this – when the cat went missing, when his aunt died, the time Mother burnt the Christmas lunch.

(Now Father falls asleep as soon as he gets home and jumps awake screaming when a sound comes or when he hears Mother's key in the lock.)

## 5.

So I said I'd drive Michael to see Mother at work, in town. And I did. I took Father's grey car, and we walked up the steps of Mother's building.

The Receptionist was very confused – 'Do you mean Francesca Davis?' he said. 'Mrs D-d-davis?'

'Our mum!' Michael yelped, still sniffing.

'You're her *children*?' He ushered us up a corridor where we could hear a lot of shouting. Someone was crying in a glass-panelled office.

Then we saw our mother. She was incredibly stiff, her face set smoothly except when it broke open to laugh, and then a horrible sound came out, like coins rattling in a tin. Lola pulled us behind a potted plant, and she grabbed Michael's shirt when he tried to waddle over to the door.

'This job is all I have,' the crying person was saying, and we heard Mother's voice, 'Not my problem.'

We saw a stack of papers disbanding, fluttering through the air like first snow.

'Take those with you,' Mother said, and then the laughing sound again. Michael was crying, and Lola held her hand over his mouth, her own eyes stretched wide.



6.

We drove home in silence, even Michael wasn't asking questions. I could see that his brain was trying to untangle what had happened, to comprehend these two versions of our mother. We stood outside Father's door, where we could hear him muttering 'Swan, sort of rhymes with pond – the swan on the pond,' and then we just went to the front room to watch television again.

(Now Father is left alone, although he has finally written some good poetry – all about pain, neglect and despair, about his wife with her empty heart).

7.

Lola should've been watching Michael because my favourite programme was on, so Michael was her responsibility. He said he was going to the toilet, but when he came back he was covered in bits of pink, his face flushed from the explosion, which clung to his cheeks in giant lumps. Lola slapped him. She tried to scoop the pieces of Mother's heart from his face and out of his hair, gathering pieces in the soup bowl she'd just been eating from and pouring them back into the box, but it was useless.

8.

When Mother came home, she rushed upstairs without talking to any of us, as she always does, but when she came down she wasn't smiling – she wasn't asking us what we wanted for dinner. When Father came out, stretching and shaking the hard work from his hands, Mother told him to get out of her sight, and he stumbled backwards into the umbrella stand, as if she'd actually struck him.

9.

Mother has stopped wearing her nice two-piece suits and comfy hand-knit cardigans at weekends. She just wears her slip, even though it is snowy outside. When Mother does come into the house, she leaves a trail of weird objects and hisses if we ask her for anything. She tumbles down by the river with local cats, fighting them with her teeth and the long nails she has grown. She eats everything from the fridge while we're asleep and drops the wrappers on the floor. She has torn Father's poetry book up and driven the car around the garden in figure 8s.

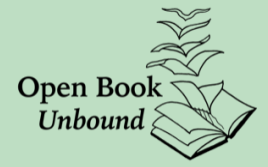
10.

Nothing can change Mother back, no matter how we try. We find ourselves adjusting, a little leap in our steps, a glimmer of red in my sister's eye; Michael's nail when he scratches Father's door up and down.

(Now Father is focussed, concentrating on carefully gluing pieces of pink jelly together, his tongue sticking out. Mother capers across the pale snowy scalp, between the tall trees, skidding across the frozen lake, sometimes scampering up to the dark windows of the house).

# ON THE SHIP

## ALICE ASH



WRITER IN RESIDENCE

MARCH 2021

There was a storm, so we went down to the ballroom and poured martinis. You looked for the olive jar, crashing through the silver lemon and lime bowls – the fruit bowls have long since been empty, they are just decorative now.

‘It was a night just like this one,’ I said.

‘That’s right, Simone,’ you said. The olives plopped - one, two - through the cloudy liquid. ‘Lovely,’ you said, ‘slurp slurp.’

You nodded for me to go on.

‘The captain boomed through the speaker...’

‘All passengers report to the top deck...’ you said, your curls bouncing in the artificial light of the ballroom.

You still set your hair every morning.

‘And soon we heard the lifeboats dropping into the sea all around, the sounds of people shouting and crying...’

‘We clung to each other, terrified for our lives.’

‘Two old ladies, abandoned at sea!’

You giggled.

Apart from our voices, there was no sound in the ballroom; the tables were still set for dinner, although we'd long since cleaned away the flowers that were completely brown and withered, sprinkling their hunched bodies over the side, into the water. A crack of lightning lit the room silver for a moment, and you squealed and ran to the gin, poured us each another martini – plop plop went the olives: one, two.

You wanted to dance, your rings flashed like electricity.

‘Come on, Simone!’

\*

I woke up in my clothes. My heavy necklaces had been digging into my chest, my face muffled by the very many pillows.

At the wardrobe, there were more than 200 different dressing gowns. We had organised the abandoned items of clothing into different sections of the boat. You were very strict. It was a good idea to have all the dressing gowns and nightshirts in our bedroom – we even moved the hundreds of pairs of slippers to lay in pairs at the bottom of the wardrobes. We took the captain's bedroom, of course, so we had a lot of space, but sometimes I got tired trying to pick between all the clothes. The smells of other people gave me a strange feeling – strands of hair and pockets laden with the intimacy of crusted tissues. Today I took a man's dressing gown and made myself naked underneath, all except my jewelled necklaces. The flannel material was very soft against my skin, and I luxuriated in the large collar. The gown nearly reached the ground, so I put on a pair of small feather-covered slippers with a heel – you always found this aesthetic inexplicably hilarious.

You were in the dining room, with the radio blaring. The one thing we didn't have was television, but the radio sometimes picked up signals, and you often listened for hours, recording

bits that were interesting on the tape machine. On that day, you were sat at the captain's table, reading through an old newspaper again. Although we have plenty of reading materials – everybody brings a book with them on holiday, even if they don't ever open it – you always liked the old newspapers. You said you liked the feeling of frozen time, as though the entire world stopped when we left it.

'Simone!' you shouted. 'Over here!'

And I shuffled over to you.

'When will we be rescued from this hell!' you said, fresh lipstick – deep purple – making your eyes sparkle. 'Would you care for some tea, Simone?' We had eaten all of the fresh foods, or they had become perished, so you had prepared a feast of Melba toast and jam, tea with little plastic thimbles of UHT milk.

After we had eaten, you crunch crunching through the toast and talking about your plans for the day (sunbathing and searching through the last of the cabins for a red silk scarf), you jumped up.

'I almost forgot,' you said. 'Listen to this!'

It was a radio report about the ghost ship that had disappeared with millions of pounds worth of jewels on board. You were very excited, and you shushed me, even though I wasn't speaking. It had been a long time since we'd heard anything about the ship on the radio.

'Oh, if only we could be rescued,' I said afterwards, and you yelped and giggled, patting my hand with your heavy ringed one. You preferred rings to necklaces.

'Let's go up,' you said.

We left the dirty plates on the table, and you brought one of the special bottles of lemonade from the refrigerator – there were only fourteen bottles left, but you were always business-like when something ran out. ‘What’s gone is gone,’ you’d say, brushing your hands together to shake away imaginary crumbs. That’s what you always said when we spotted land through the old binoculars, an obstruction of spiked buildings and brown muck amidst the sparkling blue. We’d go to the control room, where you’d put on the captain’s spare hat, and then we’d turn the big creaky wheel together, my necklaces and your rings shimmering in the sunlight. The land would quickly disappear from view, as though it was never there. *What’s gone is gone.*

On the top deck, I let my gown fall open and felt the necklaces slowly heating, as though they were small warm animals resting on my chest.

‘Simone,’ you said. ‘You do have *such* a beautiful figure.’

And you let your hand rest gently on my naked stomach, our feet curled together at the end of our loungers. We watched the sunset with an Old Fashioned each, you using the last of the maraschino cherries instead of orange. I felt a weight in the pocket of my dressing gown and pulled out a packet of mints, full except for the first two or three. ‘Lovely!’ you squealed, and we sat, sucking the minty freshness in the blaze of the sun, the purples, oranges and reds surrounding us until we got cold and went inside to our beds, each covered with hundreds of pillows and drowning in the finest blankets that money could buy.

It was a shared garden, but I kept everything watered and weeded – I had never had children or even been married, and the garden was my pride. In my flat, I kept a lot of different trinkets and games that I played with while other people came down the iron steps to use the garden – I didn't like to socialise much – and these toys kept me busy. I had a golden spinning top, a chess board with pieces made from real ivory; I liked dominoes, and I had a set of 46 that were bright red and blue around the edges. I also had jewellery that had belonged to my mother and sisters.

June was standing on the stairs when I planted the new sapling. The sun was boiling hot on the top of my head, and June was wearing a hat with a ribbon that went under her chin.

'I've seen a fox in the garden,' June called to me.

I was angling the sapling to lower it into the hole. June could see that I was concentrating.

'RARR RARR RARR,' she shouted, and I nearly lost my footing on the soil.

'That's not the noise that foxes make,' I said.

'Don't matter,' she replied. 'He was digging. Over there.'

I looked at June, and then at where her fat finger was pointing, into the blue air where the marigolds swung their heads around precariously in the breeze. There was a hole there; two marigolds lay broken on the ground.

'A fox,' I said, very surprised, but when I looked back again, June was gone.

\*

The sapling was planted in the soil, and I had fitted a green brace around it, but I was worried about the fox. I sat down to play with my gold spinning top, which loved to catch the light and calmed me. But the spinning top wasn't in its special place. I had not moved the spinning top; it

never left the table by the pink armchair. I looked anyway as if I might've walked around with the top, twisting it in my palm. I tried to pretend that I hadn't lost it and dashed up to the little table unexpectedly as if it would suddenly be there. Of course, it wasn't.

Eventually, I had to get into bed and try to sleep, feeling my heart beating and my eyeballs moving around under their lids. Then I heard the clanging of the stairs. It was probably Mr Sing; he liked to come down from the third floor and smoke cigarettes in the garden, always placing the ends very politely in a little pot that he used. But I was worried about the fox; I could hear rustling and leaves whispering. I'd go to the front room for a glass of water, I decided, and then I'd check on the sapling.

When I got to the front room, the curtains were blowing inwards. I couldn't believe it; I had never left the patio doors open, and there was the little key on the floor, the one I usually kept in my pocket. I went quickly to the door, but the garden was empty. And when I turned around, there was the fox, standing right in the middle of the room and watching me: long dark socks, teeth hidden under a damp black lip. I must have walked right past it, all the way to the door. I stood back, and the fox trotted out into the garden, eyes glittering gold.

\*

I waited until the garden was empty, and then I was digging.

'Why are you so old?' June asked. She had been eating something with jam, and it stained the corners of her mouth and some of her cheeks. Her hair glowed red from the sun. I hadn't heard her come down the steps. I rubbed my left ear.

'Everybody gets old,' I said. 'Even you.'

'Not me,' June said proudly. 'I'm going to be dead when I'm old.'

'What do you mean by that?' I asked her; the sun was so hot, and I felt I needed to sit down. The fox had savaged the garden; there were broken flowers strewn around.

'I've got a hole.' June tapped the left pocket of her dress. 'That's why I have to stay near the house.'



‘Oh dear,’ I said. I didn’t know what to say. ‘Well, it’s not so bad around the house.’

‘You like it,’ she said, her voice teasing. ‘You like playing with your little toys.’

She giggled, and I watched her while she raspberried at me, then sidled up to where Mr Sing had appeared, smoking one of the black cigarettes that he liked. I nodded at Mr Sing, who smiled over June’s head. The digging was making me even hotter, and I was nervous of speaking to Mr Sing; he was likely to ask me to come upstairs and hear some records in his flat, as he had done once before, three years ago. I wondered about going inside and leaving the flowers; the sapling was still standing fine, after all, but then I saw a little glint of gold under a felled yellow rose. It was my spinning top, buried in the earth. When I turned around, I saw that my patio doors were open again. June was gone, and my curtains were shivering in the breeze.

\*

My jewellery box had been ransacked; the ring tray was empty, and the little earrings that hung delicately from their stand had been wrenched away. A fox couldn’t do that. I was going to have to talk to June’s parents. I put on my tie and crept up the iron steps, the sound very loud in the garden. I had never seen June’s parents, but I thought that they would be messy people, maybe angry – they wouldn’t like to hear that their daughter had been stealing, burying my treasures in the garden.

June’s flat was dark, the curtains smooth, like they were painted on. I stood for a few seconds, my heartbeat hammering. Nobody came, and I knocked again and waited; my body tensed, my back arched like an animal. Then Mr Sing came up behind me, and I jumped; my forehead banged the glass.

‘Sorry,’ Mr Sing said. He had a black cigarette between his thin lips. ‘You looking to expand?’ he asked. He gestured to June’s empty flat. ‘I’ve thought about it myself; you’d just need a staircase built inside.’

I nodded mutely and followed Mr Sing downstairs. When we got to the patio, Mr Sing nodded towards the deck chair that he kept folded up down there.

‘You sit,’ he said.

I did go and get the deck chair, and I did sit in it. Mr Sing perched on the bottom step, where June had been when I first planted the sapling. He took his black cigarette and lit it.

‘It’s a beautiful garden,’ Mr Sing said, and I nodded while smoke came out of his mouth and covered his face. We both sat and watched the garden silently: the sapling reaching higher in the moonlight, the bits of treasure shimmering in between the flowers, the fox that came and stood astride the garden wall.