

1. Rem sleep

Grey morning. A silver gloaming edging its way across the uttermost edge of the sky, like a piece of paper licked with flame; ash-rimmed, the merest hint of fire flaring palely from behind the mountains. The gardens are almost silent; full of ambient shadows. The flowers droop, budding, heavy with sleep and dew. Syrup coloured, butter flavoured; ready to be plucked by deft hands.

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It is a dream of China that makes her stray from sleep, as a few slivers of gold come filtering through the cracks in the blinds. A sweep of air through the open window makes them move; makes brushes of light dance across the wall, dissolving the shadows from still-waking eyes. It is a dream of China, and it is slipping through the gaps in her memory like the morning light through her blinds. Long flaxen flowers, leafless, wilting in her chubby hands. China and childhood. Her body remembers if her head does not. There she is: small, barely two, and her hands are hot and sweaty and she is holding a yellow flower like a little dead bird in the clumsy cup of her open palms. She can—fleetinglly, as the

Soon you'll
be just fine

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memory dissolves—feel its delicate weight still against her skin like the caress of a bygone lover. But then she is awake—awake, and it is early morning, and her head spins from the sudden shock of consciousness. The alarm clock, balanced precariously on the edge of her bedside table, suddenly springs to life, beeping and yapping like a small dog. She reaches out a hand—too late—the thing wobbles briefly against the desk and falls to the ground with a dull thud, silenced. She returns it to its place. She is sleep-fuddled: eyes still sandy and watering whenever she yawns. She fumbles her way to the bathroom. Yawning. Early morning noise plays about the apartment block below: a magpie somewhere gurgling melodies in his throat; a car’s rattling cough, reluctant to start in the cold. She wets a facecloth, buries her face into it. The cool rough material on her burning skin is enough, for now, to wake her. Stimulating dull cells still swollen with sleep.

The magpie takes off; she sees the sudden shock of robust wings as he passes her window. Her stomach sings a low vibrato but she doesn’t want breakfast. She changes her clothes, skips the meal. When Kevin arrives she is sitting on the couch, trying to read. Her hands are cold and he grasps them briefly between his own.

‘Hey,’ he says. ‘What are you reading?’

‘Ezra Pound,’ she says, snapping the book shut. ‘For class.’

‘At this hour?’

‘I’m not taking any of it in, if that helps.’

She tucks the book under her armpit and they head for the car.

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2. *Petals on a wet, black bough*

Pearled with moisture, under an ambivalent sun, they yawn open. Petals uncurl like infants’ fingers, unwrapping like wet sheets. A shy breeze tumbles by, loosening drops of dew. The heads rock up and down, nodding with sagacity and foolishness, with the graceful fatuity of old men. Edible flowers like starfish on stems; some fading, some crisp; all destined for some wok or pan, for the lavish crackle of oil and heat.

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The house melts into tiny dashes of colour as they pull away. She shivers, and fiddles with some knobs until she can feel a lukewarm current gushing steadily from the vents, gathering warmth as it grazes her numb cheeks. Mist builds up on the windows. Kevin swipes at it with

his hand, but says nothing. She pulls her sleeve down into her palm, holds it, brings it squeaking and groaning across the hazy window. Small disconnected noise. One clear streak on the glass, where she can see streets and roads, people and cars stream past in small impressionistic blurs. As they cross the bridge she looks out over the lake and sees that a rainbow has made a clear full arc across the horizon, a wonderful half-circle of hazy colour: uninterrupted, perfect. She traces its outline on the window with her left hand. Her right, she notices, is resting gently against her belly. She moves it away. Kevin leans over, turns the heating down a notch. She glances over.

‘Sorry,’ he says, indicating the fog on the windscreen. ‘It’s just for a bit.’

He smiles appealingly at her. She smiles back, rests against the window. Ignores the chill trickling steadily down from where her head has made contact with the frostbitten glass. She closes her eyes.

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Kevin shakes her awake when they arrive, gently. Still cold, she dives into her bag for a thick woollen top. Struggles to get it over her head. He helps, laughs softly, and turns the ignition with a dry clicking sound. The engine shudders to a stop. She gets out of the car. Walking indoors with Kevin behind her, she notes that the building is split into sections. She can see a dental health clinic to her left; underneath the stairs a small cluster of specialists’ offices; a help desk near the door with a sign pointing her in the right direction. She steps onto the escalator, feels suddenly and irrevocably small. Kevin follows, puts a warm hand on her shoulder. She doesn’t shrug him off.

3. Hunger

1. *Pluck flowers just under the head, leaving half a centimetre of stem if possible. Only choose flowers that are fully open, or slightly wilted.*
2. *Wash thoroughly. Slit evenly down the middle and remove any grit or garden residue.*
3. *Heat oil and garlic in a wok until garlic has browned. Toss in flowers, stir-fry for two minutes on high heat, season to taste and then drain.*

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When she wakes she cannot remember dreaming. The nurses prop her into a sitting position, guide her into a chair. She is given some tea

and although she does not want to drink, is grateful for the heat of the steaming liquid. She dips her head and allows the steam to skim her face. Moisture collects on her cheeks, condenses, runs down to her chin and drips onto the gown. Soon she is ready to stand and the nurses help her change. She walks out on her own, looks around. There. Kevin waits quietly on the cheap plastic couches, slouched uncomfortably against the wall of the small white room.

Heading back to the car proves painful. Kevin supports her, walking too quickly. She wants to tell him to slow down. She says, *I'm hungry*. They walk to the chemist across the street and she buys a packet of cheap lemon lollies. Sitting in the car, she tears the plastic packaging open with her nails. Kevin declines a sweet when offered. She takes two, puts one in her mouth. She looks at the other sitting in her open palm and absurdly, her eyes fill with tears. Kevin starts the car, looks at her. The tears are warm. They hover dangerously at the corners of her eyes, waiting to spill. She holds them back. His eyes question; she shakes her head. *She's fine*, she says. *Just tired*. It's not that she's tired. It's just—the small yellow weight in her hand is not a flower or a little dead bird. Today that's enough to make her cry. Tomorrow she'll pick up Ezra Pound and keep reading; she'll finish her assignments, cook herself breakfast, be fine.

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It's just the hint of an idea, though, barely realised. She can't help feeling that in another country, a world away, the temperature will have dropped. A bitter wind will be twisting through gardens in China, and the yellow flowers will be wilting on their stalks.

Stephanie Wang is a Melbourne-bound new writer who claims to be working on a novel, but in reality has a suspiciously large stack of hand-written limericks cluttering her desk. One day she'll leave all this behind and buy a house, or maybe a really big boat. ■

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