



# THE POOR PRINT



## A Journey to Remember

Tobias Thornes

She representative of the Vietnamese travel company was most apologetic. ‘We could not get your ticket to Beijing,’ she said. ‘Only to Nanning. You can buy the Beijing ticket in Nanning. We will refund your Beijing ticket.’ So that was that. It was nine o’clock at night; the Nanning train would leave in half an hour. All of a sudden, whether I’d get to Beijing in time, and thence get home, was thrown into doubt. There was little choice but to take the train and trust it would work out.

For such a huge city, Hanoi’s railway station was tiny – perched on an out-skirt corner, with a single platform and a waiting room barely big enough to hold a hundred people, it hardly seemed the epitome of an international terminus. Crossing the Chinese border wasn’t exactly fun; woken in the middle of the night to disembark, we stood in long queues to go through both checkpoints, where many of the border officials also seemed lately roused from sleep. I could tell already that China was going to be somewhat different: at no other border crossing have I been asked to select on a scale of cartoon faces, ranging from a wide smile to a heavy frown, to rate my experience and the friendliness of the staff. I must admit, I was impressed.

Indeed, my first taste of China, in those few unexpected Thursday hours spent in Nanning, did not disappoint. I wasn’t supposed to have stopped off for long at all, but, perhaps unsurprisingly, the high-speed onward connection to Beijing was sold out; fortunately, there were still spaces on another, slower service at five o’clock that night that would still have me in the capital, thousands of miles away, within twenty-four hours. Given that I had to pick up the ticket for the next

leg of my journey before Beijing’s offices closed for the weekend the next day at 6, this was cutting it fine – but I had no other option.

Nanning was busy and bustling, and very difficult to navigate amidst a peppering of high-rise offices and malls, but by now I was used to that. What really impressed me was the way in which China, somehow, seemed to have retained an authenticity amidst the western-style high-rises, a quality that other countries’ megacities had lost. Then, there was the relatively clean air. Gone were the puffs of petrol smoke which ruined other Asian cities; all here was electric, silent and clean. This certainly gave me cause for hope in China’s age of ascendancy, when it was soon to become the foremost superpower charting the course of the world. Furthermore, there was the friendliness of everyone I met, from the special foreign-languages attendant at the station who booked for me my new train to the man who, in spite of my hopeless Chinese pronunciation, helped me to find the Internet Café.

Keeping touch, even occasionally, with home was a perennial problem in that age when everyone else seemed to possess a ‘mobile telephone’ capable of facilitating world-wide communications, for there was no longer much call for public telephones or computers. The Internet Café I eventually tracked down was full of Chinese teenagers playing an internet fast-action game, and the helpful proprietors logged me onto a foreign Virtual Private Network to get past the Chinese firewall blocking ‘Google Mail’.

Many of the same benefits I found also in Beijing. The journey brought me from the beautiful misty southern hills, where green pastures were turned to gold by the setting Asian sun, into China’s eastern industrial heartland. It was made all the more pleasant by two out of the country’s

billion-plus inhabitants with whom I happened to share a compartment, who, despite the language barrier, seemed to become almost like friends. But when we arrived, everyone dispersed: our faces melting away again into the innumerable crowd.

It was raining, extremely heavily. The long queues to pass security checks on the underground delayed me, and when I eventually found the office holding my ticket, it was closed. I tried in vain to find my hotel. Drenched through and alone in the darkness, official infrastructure having failed me, again it was only chance human kindness that got me through. Another young woman practising her English saw that I was lost, and showed me my hotel. The woman at reception let me use the telephone, and what’s more my contact at the ticket office answered out of hours and let me rearrange the collection. Three small kindnesses, which made all the difference.

When the next day dawned bright and clear, the beautiful historic buildings of Beijing sprang into life, not crowded nor diminished by their more modern surroundings, and the world seemed somehow much more hopeful. China is a country that cares about heritage, as witnessed by the huge crowds of tourists queuing up at the Forbidden City and thronging Tiananmen Square. Indeed, the only place I found to be utterly deserted was Mao’s mausoleum – an indication, perhaps, of the People’s true feelings for their Republic’s founder.

It was a fond farewell that I bade that evening to the ancient splendour at the heart of the world’s upcoming capital. A small group of passengers congregated at the permitted waiting point in Beijing station – woe betide one who tries to descend to a Chinese platform before the train is called – for the 23:00 Moscow departure, boarding the characteristic red-and-silver Russian tin-can carriages of the Trans-Siberian Express. So began a six-day journey across as many time-zones, through the baking heat of the south Siberian summer, at the end of which we arrived only two minutes late. The

line didn’t quite have the romance with which it’s sometimes portrayed. The grumpy stewardesses that shouted angrily if one hadn’t returned to the train within five minutes of departure at the scheduled stops; the rustic Russian stations where one could wander unimpeded across the tracks and vendors greeted the train with supermarket trolleys full of produce for sale; the deserted restaurant car that offered little else than boiled potatoes and mushrooms, until they also ran out of those; all these added to the charm.

Pulling out of a run-down, dusty town just over the Russian border that was perhaps the poorest I’d seen on all my Asian travels, they played the National Anthem through the station loudspeakers while a few migrating Russian families were waved off into the west. We’d waited for four hours while the train’s wheels were changed from Chinese to Russian gauge and the fierce Russian border police had boarded the train with dogs. The length of my hair wasn’t consistent with my passport photograph it seemed, and the officer took all of ten minutes to decide it was really me – not a problem, oddly, at the previous thirteen border checkpoints. One sensed something of a nervousness about the Russian border in this sparsely populated region worried about potential overspill from its rapidly growing neighbour in the south.

The heavy rain had followed me to Moscow, as I made my trek across a capital that seemed, by comparison, poorer and shabbier than its Eastern counterparts, helped again by happy chance to find my place of rest. From Red Square, it was onwards to Belarus, Berlin, Brussels, and home: two weeks by train from Singapore, almost entirely on time. I knew I was back in Britain when an ‘earlier signal fault’ held up my train at Paddington for an hour, which gave me time to muse. It had been a journey to remember, and I resolved to return.■

## ‘Go’

Angus Forbes

STOP.

You don’t want this.

I said  
STOP.

It’s not worth it.  
You don’t need to  
Prove yourself.  
Every second you  
Hurt yourself more.

You could  
Stand up.  
Walk away.

They won’t think  
Less of you.  
They want to do it  
Too.  
Want to  
STOP.

They’re too  
Scared.  
You have  
Other things to do.

Other cats to  
Whip.  
STOP.

A cup of tea at  
Home.  
Warm shower.

Why are you still  
Here?  
STOP.

You’ve stopped.  
You hit your  
Target.

Well done.

Yes, the  
Tea will taste better now.

## ‘Yggdrasil’

Tom Saer

Resurface from your lampshade  
Watching in dislocation  
Threshold of earth

Plastic tears of a shaman  
Welded onto my accomplice  
Decoration on our perspex

Hope transported  
The sand in your smile  
My dusty Neptune

Evolve  
Cough up your skin like  
a man and  
Show them  
you’re  
made  
of blood

Out of the whirlwind  
The lonely cornerstone  
Exchange of heart

Pain never hurt anyone  
Who knew what it was  
My little Yggdrasil

## What You Think Will Happen

Michael Angerer

Every ending is an invitation to look forward. As we move through time, the impenetrable murk ahead, like infinite layers of cobwebs, resolves into wispy strands of memory that trail behind us; and with every new layer we brush aside, we hope to get a glimpse of the next. This, ultimately, is how stories captivate us: by pretending to pre-empt what might yet be to come, by shaping a path for our lives to follow into the uncertain future. The tales of Gilgamesh, Odysseus or Siegfried captivate us because they are in essence tales of human experience; they bring narrative order into a world that seems to have none. How easy is it to map their pattern onto our own: tomorrow we will finally get our act together and frustrate the malevolent gods out to ruin our day.

It is comforting to believe every story has its resolution, a point at which all narrative strands run out and are tied to our own experience. The once and future king can only be future because he once ceased to be; he became part of ourselves, a chivalric ideal that shapes past and future alike. Our memory and all the little stories it contains: it is such stuff as dreams are made on, and as they seep into our mind past becomes prologue. The dense fog ahead is condensed into a grid of familiarity, of precedents that present old ways to resolve new difficulties.

Thus the unknown is adapted and reshaped to fit our expectations; slowly it shifts into focus and the increased resolution allows us to discern ever more details. We learn to recognise unfolding patterns and devote our attention to what seems incongruous. But even when our wishes, our hopes, our confidence, and our predictions are proven wrong, we merely perceive this as a departure from the pattern events should have followed; the unexpected is but an occasional episode in a general drama of order. We trust the stories of the past, and the waterway of time seems to lead into an immense brightness.

It is only this illusion of knowing our destination that allows us to resolve which course to take. Our minds are full of half-remembered patterns, expectations and desires: we have had our vision; we mean to realise it. And so we beat on, boats in the current, borne forward ceaselessly while we try to steer them into the direction we hope to take. Yet however carefully and after however much thought we choose a title and a genre for the story of our life, we cannot aspire to truly wield the power of an author. Inevitably, as time advances, it dictates the shape we can superimpose upon it. At the end of term, at the end of the year, you can make as many good resolutions as you wish; you know exactly that in a few weeks’ time, they will have dissolved into nothingness under the pressure of reality.■

## ‘Transmission’

Max Clements

As our eyes touch, my mind elapses.  
Your intimate complexion is pallid, your  
radiance extinguished.  
Your expression is lifeless.  
Your hands are frigid, your fingers callous.

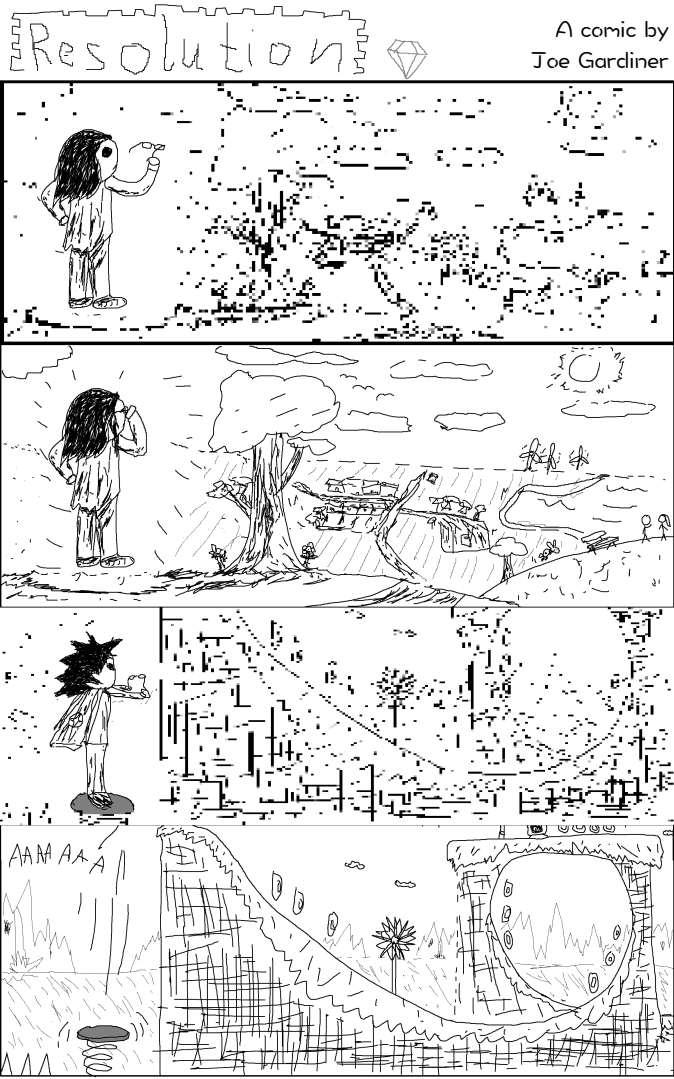
You possessed me.  
Your departed vitality lay dormant within  
me; and yet it drained mine.  
I devoured your beauty; I touched and tasted  
yet attained no higher fate.

I was cursed by the touch that I once craved.  
Your warmth coursed through me. I shut my  
eyes.  
The backs of my eye lids flickered amidst  
the darkness.  
I couldn’t escape your serotonin embrace.

Over keeled lips I scaled  
With terminal lust.  
I bled hot red.  
Your tears ran carbon black.

Until I first see you again, when

Your eternal beauty is celestial,  
Your fire inextinguishable  
Your wonder unbounded.  
For I am set free  
As our eyes touch.



New Year, New Poor Print

A new year approaches. In the past eight weeks we have had the privilege of reading and editing pieces from fresh faced contributors who, with their Matriculatory momentum, have put together poems and prose of a stellar standard. We thank you all - contributors and readers alike - for your continued support, and we look forward to the issues to come.

As an aside, we invite any responses to pieces. Send them through to thepoorprint@oriel.ox.ac.uk

Our New Year's Resolution is to be on time. Vaguely.

Becoming Vulnerable

Michael Leong

It is 3am now. A couple of us had been playing ice hockey; afterwards, JJ and I retired to my room and decided to plan next term's Oxford Mental Health Support Network launch over a couple of beers. Our conversation returned, as it tends to do, to the people we're hoping to reach out to – the people whose confessions on *Oxfess* reveal isolation, and struggles with mental health issues, relationships and crippling workloads.

One thing that has come to strike me about JJ is how he manages to be ambitious in a quiet way. I carelessly leave my room lights on, he painstakingly separates the aluminium foil that held his vegetarian wrap in order to recycle it. When I moan about our lack of a budget, he talks about how he might go around to all the nearby breweries and ask for free beer. And when we talk about someone who looked a little down, he rushes to think of how we can reach out to them, just as I struggle to come up with reasons why we shouldn't. Sometimes the impact of what we do matters less than what our actions might come to mean to us in our moral worlds, and JJ got me thinking about caring – not necessarily about how we're going to make a difference in Oxford, but about how we choose to live our lives. So I put Coldplay's *Parachutes* on and started writing.

The Oxford life is a notoriously difficult one, and for so many reasons. There is the fact that we come in thinking that we know what we're doing, only to have that illusion painfully torn from us. We are chucked into ambiguity, we find ourselves entirely responsible for who we are and who we are to be. I've come to face a background stress I hadn't felt for a long while. For the first time in my life, I've found myself periodically short of breath for no apparent reason. And whenever I look inside and try to gain some resolution into what's going on beneath the daily rush, I run into a deep, pervasive sense of dread. I am deeply, deeply afraid.

JJ and I had been trying to find a way to reach out to people who are suffering in isolation. Yet the more we thought about it, the more I felt that there was a problem we were not addressing. In the long run, we are hoping to run campaigns aimed at addressing the stigma surrounding mental health issues. Awareness campaigns, T-shirts, anything to make it easier for people who are struggling to be themselves; anything to help them not feel bad about feeling bad. But something was off – I realised that I often feel bad for feeling bad, even though I know I shouldn't. Many people who I've talked to feel the same way: there is a sense that people are 'ducking' – floating well on the surface but paddling furiously underneath. On a cognitive level, we might know that others are struggling just as we are – yet on an emotional level, it often feels as if

everyone else is doing fine. This huge cognitive dissonance is immensely unhelpful – if everyone around me is always happy and everything is always okay, it comes to feel as if I'm doing something wrong. Or worse – as if I'm just not cut out for this.

And then I realised what felt off – how could I, in good faith, talk about changing stigma when I'm a part of the problem? When things get hard, I reach out to people around me in quiet. I might rant, I might cry, I might whine and go round and round in circles. But once that's done, I pretend everything is fine. I fix up my face to hide the fact that something is bothering me, I smile when I jokingly say that everything is going to pot. What, I asked myself, have I done to dispel the sense that everything is going fine? Because not everything is going fine.

I'm never quite comfortable with how my work is; it's so destabilising not to have a clear sense of mastery and a path to follow. After years of trying to carve out autonomy and freedom, suddenly finding myself with both – and having to be responsible for everything – is so terrifying. I feel disconnected from who I am around others and I'm afraid to be myself. Worst of all, I'm not comfortable talking about my fears and admitting that things are not okay. How could I? If everyone is having such a great time, the problem must be me.

So, if you've felt alone, struggling in silence, if you've found things inordinately difficult, if you've felt afraid to bring it up, if you've been wondering whether you really deserve to be here – I want you to know: you are not alone. You really aren't, and it's okay for

things to not be okay. It's alright to be sad. It's alright to feel as if everything is almost too much to bear, it's alright to feel as if everything is stacked against you and everything is just so hard. It's alright to panic, it's alright to feel like it's unfair that nobody else is facing what you're facing. It's alright to just hold yourself and to let yourself cry. It's alright to cry a lot and it's alright to have your sadness turn into a lump of apathy and emptiness. You are not alone. There are so many of us around you who feel the same way – it's just that we're too scared to show it.

And that's because being vulnerable is hard – give someone too much power, and they might just hurt you. We don't want people to think less of us, and we don't want to let people know where it hurts. We don't want to be seen as flawed, we don't want to be seen as broken; we want to be accepted. And it's so much harder to see struggling as acceptable, as something that happens to even the best of us, if everyone pretends it isn't happening to them. But being vulnerable is so important, because while we wish to be accepted by the people around us, their acceptance is worth so much less if we can't accept ourselves first.

There is a kind of strength that comes from being willing to be vulnerable – and it stems from self-love. To be openly vulnerable is to say that we accept ourselves for who we are, for all our flaws and mistakes. To you I can show my whole person, to you I take off the veneer of pretensions, it is you I wish to understand just as I wish to be understood. The act of openness, of careful, inward looking, allows us to

access parts of our experience we could not, did not wish to see. If we can't be honest with others, we lie to ourselves: there are times when we deny our feelings without even realising it. And only once we accept and embrace the features of our experience unconditionally can we move towards meaningful change. Vulnerability requires honesty, vulnerability requires faith in the people around you; it requires faith in yourself. When we shrug off whatever problems we face without looking closely at why we feel that way, we effectively deny ourselves the acceptance we deserve. If I am struggling but tell myself I shouldn't be struggling, I am telling myself that I am not good enough.

Self-love is a process, not an act of will. And vulnerability isn't an act but a skill. To have the courage to be ourselves with each other is a challenge. But as we come to accept ourselves better, we can come to better accept others; we can acknowledge their experiences as similar to our own. And we can move towards building a deeply supportive community based on mutual trust; being vulnerable lets us look our friends in the eye and tell them: I feel, just as you feel. So my resolution from this point on: be more vulnerable, and be more accepting. It doesn't always go right – there are times when we misjudge and get hurt. But every act of vulnerability is a gamble on a person – and sometimes, they pay off more than we might imagine. I'm wagering that Oriel is a good bet, and I'd love it if you could join me.■



'The Past We See Today'

Simon Norris

Hello old friend, Remember me? You know me not, But all you see of me Is a memory.

There is no time like the present. present But the past. today Is your tomorrow, With light years my dusk To your dawn.

You see me As I lived Alongside glorious Caesar; A man of gold. Men of bronze And stone.

Watch my light As I go dim. My youth As I age. My birth As I die. See the memory Of your world's birth In my eye.

Hello old friend, Look up. And remember my past, As it is in your today.

Thursday Morning

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Aidan Chivers

Written on my year abroad in France, where I am working as an English assistant in the small town of Romorantin.

It was 10.30am on an average Thursday morning. I was in class with a group of 12-year-olds, fielding questions about the texture and consistency of Yorkshire puddings. The kids were bright, alert and keen to learn about various aspects of British life.

Then, with no warning, the electronic shutters came down over the windows. The teacher received a text; she dashed across the room to lock the door and turn off the lights. The children, in a well-practised motion, took cover under their desks.

And there we all sat - silently, in the darkness. Listening to screams echoing from below.

Quarter of an hour later, the head teacher came round the classrooms to tell us the drill was over. As it turns out, these exercises take place with the regularity of fire drills.

This being France, the teacher was then required to fill in some paperwork, confirming that the class had responded appropriately. She sat quietly in the corner of the room and satisfied the bureaucrats. I went back to discussing the delights of English roast dinners.

The children returned to the lesson with an almost unnerving lack of regard for what we'd just been required to do. A quick break for the biannual simulation of mass murder, and then back to class.

I couldn't help but wonder: what better coup could there be for terrorists than for the institutions of France to collaborate in telling generations of children that they are never safe, not even in their own schools?■

The Lieutenant of Inishmore: A Review

Teofil Camarasu

Upon arriving to watch a dress rehearsal of the *The Lieutenant of Inishmore*, I was told that I would be watching the first run of the show with genuine fake blood (until then they had used water instead). The first row of seats had provisionally been designated a splash-zone, and was covered in plastic to protect the upholstery. Although their concern for the seating proved unnecessary, the show did not disappoint in delivering its fair share of intensely chaotic violence, suffused with dark humour.

The *Lieutenant of Inishmore* follows the aftermath of the death of Wee Thomas, a cat belonging to Padraic (Christopher Page). Padraic is a member of the INLA (after having been deemed too mad to join the IRA),

who is defined by his two great passions: the liberation of Ireland from British rule, and his love of his cat. Page succeeds in portraying Padraic as both terrifyingly psychopathic and mercurial, to great comedic effect.

Dealing with the death of Wee Thomas is the task of Donny (Aaron Skates) and Davey (Hugh Tappin), whose deadpan banter provides the comedic backbone of the play, as they try desperately to avoid mad Padraic's wrath.

The entire cast is vibrant and has excellent comedic chemistry. The staging is clear and expressive. I particularly found their use of a lime whitewash wall helpful in invoking the atmosphere of rural West Ireland.

The play is as poignant as it is comic; a closer reading of the play will pose serious questions, such as whether the taking of innocent

lives can ever be justified. It subtly alludes to issues in Irish society such as patriarchy and homophobia. For instance, while the INLA credits itself as fighting for the liberation of all of Ireland, they exclude both women and the LGBT community from taking part in their struggle.

At the heart of *The Lieutenant of Inishmore* is the confluence of hilarity and brutality. Containing torture, death, implied animal cruelty, and a lot of swearing, it might not be for the faint of heart. But if you are looking for a hilarious dark comedy, it is well worth a watch.■