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I had a ‘Tiger Mom’¹ and my love for her is^Ω

Biographical note:

Xu Xi is the author of nine books of fiction and essays. The most recent titles are a story collection *Access: thirteen tales* (2011); the novel *Habit of a foreign sky* (2010), shortlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize; an essay collection *Evanescent isles* (2008). New and forthcoming fiction and essays appear in the journals *The letters project*; *Toad suck review*; *Ninth letter*, *Ploughshares*, *Kenyon review online*, *Arts and letters*, and also in the anthologies *All about skin* (University of Wisconsin Press), *APA arts anthology* (AALR, New York); *The Bedford introduction to literature* (Bedford/St. Martin’s, New York); *Bridges around the globe: a global anthology of short stories* (Temenos, Arkansas), *Still* (Negative Press, London, UK) and *Understanding the essay* (Broadview, Toronto, Canada). She has been a visiting writer or in residence at several institutions, including the University of Iowa’s Nonfiction program as the Bedell Distinguished Visiting Writer; the Chateau de Lavigny in Switzerland; the University of Stockholm; and as the Distinguished Asian Writer, the Philippines National Writing Workshops at Silliman University, Dumaguete. From 2009–12, she served as faculty chair of the MFA in Writing at Vermont College of Fine Arts. She is currently Writer-in-Residence at City University of Hong Kong where she founded and directs the first, international, low-residency MFA in English creative writing that focuses on Asia. A Chinese-Indonesian native of Hong Kong, she long inhabited the flight path connecting New York, Hong Kong and, until 2010, the South Island of New Zealand, to where she one day hopes to return, in a bid for paradise, regained. (<http://www.xuxiwriter.com>)

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¹ *Battle hymn of the Tiger Mother* by Amy Chua (2011) is a book more hyped than essential. Its greatest contribution to modern culture, in this writer’s view, is the absurdity of pretending to be ironic when, in fact, the author, like most authors, is actually *deathly* serious about her superior perspective on parenting, Chinese style. Why else write a book, or anything, after all, if you are not holier than thou, a greater know-it-all than the next know-it-all, or someone who thinks she has more to say than most and wants the world to pay you a shitload of cash for the privilege of being touched by your words, or at least remembered for your words, as all poets and writers believe (till death proves otherwise) is their due? Present company not excepted.

Tyger, tyger burning bright, etc. – William Blake²

I had a tiger mom. She was Chinese but really a *wah kiu*, an ‘overseas Chinese’, meaning she no longer lived on the Mainland, inside the great wall. A funny thing, that. The safety of the wall means you can no longer rely simply on the *wah*, the Chinese-ness that is unquestionably superior to the rest of the world, if you call yourself Chinese and are a tiger mom, that is. That’s what China – 中國 –really means, you know – the center that presides over the universe. *Superior*. Like shark’s fin or bird’s nest or other delicacies in superior XO sauce in expensive restaurants that offer up false cuisines, dingy toilets and surly, underpaid wait staff. Of course that’s also why the Qing dynasty collapsed and China was in chaos for decades afterwards, and is still chaotic today, but we skip over the facts in favor of what we prefer to believe. Contributes to more robust tigress-ness, oblivious to the possibility that Chinese-ness can also embrace cleanliness, a reasonable existence, and tolerance and respect for family and other intimates. Include yourself.

I had a tiger mom once. She was mostly Chinese but there were droplets of Indonesian blood infused from the five generations her family had inhabited Central Java. She seldom mentioned that blood, except to brag when we, my three siblings and I were children, of its royal origins (Balinese princess, she said). Tigresses must be pure-blooded, or else, noble savages. None of the civilized, domesticated pussycat variety. No ma’am.

I had a Chinese tiger mom, since these days we hear there are Indian ones³ as well (and no doubt a host of others on that same bandwagon). She spoke Javanese with native fluency, studied English in Singapore, and remained virtually illiterate in Chinese because she found the characters too difficult to memorize under tropical skies. Yet there we were, her children in Hong Kong, poring over the language she herself failed to love. The shame (*oh, for shame!*) of her fake Chinese-ness was too great and if she could fix her children she would. A fearful symmetry is like that, in the forest of the long night that is motherhood in a foreign, Chinese-tainted-by-the-

² William Blake (1757–1827) is the dead poet who, having been canonized, at least by the Anglo-Americans and their English language, is studied in English by Chinese schoolchildren unfortunate enough to have been born and raised in a former British colony, thereby contributing to aspirations of poesy and scribbling long after such poems as his ‘The tyger’ would otherwise be relegated to the recesses of oblivion, Lethe-wards sunk. Wasn’t *he* privileged? We who ‘write back’ from the former Empire exact revenge; vengeance is, of course, never gracious.

³ *The Wall Street journal*, or some other such ‘authoritative source’ reported that and the best way to undermine authority is simply not to recall the details of its power source, especially as such mass produced, glib twitters across the globe are merely technology’s litter.

British land.⁴ That my Chinese today is better than hers ever was is probably something she'd rather forget. Has forgotten.

I have a tiger mom who, at 92, is not yet past tense, although her memory is, lost to Alzheimer's. Funny what she does recall. The occasional Cantonese phrase pops out, although sometimes she speaks to me in Javanese, a language she never taught us. When we pass the Chinese signs on buildings in Kowloon (we rarely cross the harbor to the island of Hong Kong anymore except to see her doctor), she will sometimes read them aloud. 新年 new year; 學校 school; 銀行 bank⁵. Although she spoke 'run-tune,'⁶ incomprehensibly accented Cantonese during her Hong Kong life, some Mandarin bits, which she studied as a child in Indonesia, creep in. Tiger mom-ness clings fiercely to its Chinese-ness, despite all her condemnation of Confucius as 'old fashioned' and 'outdated' when we were children. Confucius, the indisputably Chinese scholar she never read. The one I did read and think of as a dragon king with spectacles. Mythic, casting long shadows, forcing you to continually investigate, even now in the 21st century, what it means to be Chinese, something my tiger mom never did, convinced as she was that merely being was all it took.

Tiger mom, my love for her is ... but I am not yet ready to say it. First I must tell you how fiercely she raised me to succeed. It is incumbent upon offspring of tigresses to document that stellar upbringing. How did she raise me? Let me count the ways. Linguistically confused. Culturally uncertain. Bound and determined to succeed in that which was not my forte (*physicist, doctor, capitalist chief*) until I finally said *enough, no, you may be my mother but I am no longer a tiger cub*. For one thing, I discovered I might be a pussycat, or possibly even a mutt, entirely of the wrong species. More correctly, I probably belonged to the gorilla or chimpanzee Mum; they groom their young and make loud, smacking, disgusting sounds of affection.

⁴ As compared to her familiar Chinese-tainted-by-Indonesian-but-thank-goodness-the-Dutch-are-gone homeland. In the end, it doesn't much matter what kind of Chinese you are if you're home, a space that still eludes me, as I sashay ever further away from the borders of middle age.

⁵ Traditional or 'complicated' Chinese characters because, despite China's Rise – a phrase if googled yields far too many echoes – we Chinese in Hong Kong still preserve the sanctity of the traditional language, with all its impossible radicals and strokes, a written language which contributes to the most privileged Chinese (*Good, better best / Let us never rest / Till our good is better / And our better best* – from a remembered childhood English work book, *Word perfect*, I believe, published by, who else, the Americans?), anyway, the most privileged Chinese children on the globe today (i.e. Mainland *nouveau riche* and the offspring of the cadres) being thankful for the simplified version popularised by Deng Xiaoping who failed to discern any notable difference between a black or white cat whose function, after all, is merely to catch mice, or so he quipped. Deng failed to reckon with Tiger Moms or their descendants who will no doubt seek the most strenuous Sissyphean path possible to achieving superior Chinese literacy, playing an instrument or excelling in any discipline, regardless of its futility to a life of reason.

⁶ 走音 literally the running or slippery tune or tone where even the slightest tonal shift changes meaning profoundly or may be misconstrued, as in 馬 (horse) for 媽 (mother), both of the first tone 'MA', at least in Mandarin cum Putonghua. Cantonese is yet another tonal dilemma.

My tiger mom, loving her is manifest, strangely, in a love of music, for which I have some, though not significant, talent. My mother learned to play ‘The blue Danube’⁷ on piano by heart, or so we were told all through our childhood, when each of us was made to learn an instrument. Notably, we never heard her performance of same. I stuck out the piano, passed exams moderately well, performed regularly on stage to minimal acclaim, a feat she never even witnessed. The problem was, the problem still is, is that she’s tone deaf. Why it was such a necessary accomplishment to memorize and play some abridged child’s version of a pop tune by Strauss is lost to the recesses of tiger memory.

When Alzheimer’s first was manifest, after Dad’s death and before we fully understood its impact, I used to fly back from New York frequently for my writing life. Tiger Mom, being still in charge then, said, *stay here*, meaning at home, because tiger cubs must be close to their mother. I shrugged, agreed, even though it was a bad idea, because it was cheaper, and I had left the security of corporate life for the uncertainty of art. I bought an inexpensive electronic keyboard, because I have always played for pleasure, but home was now (is still) in the U.S. and I no longer owned a piano or home in Hong Kong. She watched, glared, as the keyboard took up its tiny amount of space. Wanted to cover it, wanted to move it, wanted to, basically, kick up a fuss about it. Destroy it. We, my Hong Kong sister and I, puzzled over her distress.

Later, we said, *the Alzheimer’s*, as surely that was it. But sometimes I think, now that reason no longer matters, was it the conflict of wanting to excel in what she really couldn’t that made her so angry, so hateful, that her daughter could play piano but not tennis, the thing my mother truly excelled at? Does a tiger mom most wish to reproduce clones, to excel in her image, to live the life she couldn’t because she was too busy being mother instead of the successful – doctor / tennis star / clan chieftain because Chinese fathers, while perhaps not tigers, are nonetheless dictatorial chiefs of at least their immediate clan⁸ – opting instead for tigress-ness, ferocity masking wounded pride? That was a too-long sentence but reflections on my tiger mom give rise to convoluted thought.

I moved the piano out of her line of sight, and memory. *Burning bright*. The jumble of thwarted recall.

Tiger mom, my love for her is ... but ‘All the way’⁹ gets in the way, the tune that begins: *When somebody loves you*. Troubling, though, is that it is the bridge, and not

⁷ My mother could have saved herself the agony and tears it must have cost her to memorize the score and force her fingers to eke out the tune if only she’d been born a century later, when www.youcanplayit.com could have done it for her on You Tube. Personally, I preferred ‘The Emperor’s waltz’.

⁸ This is a known fact. Ask any Chinese.

⁹ ‘All the way’ (1957) music by Jimmy Van Heusen, lyrics by Sammy Cahn, received the best original song Academy Award in that same year. A good thing, too, because it subsequently got covered by numerous artistes, most popularly by Frank Sinatra, but it was thanks to some unremarkable version by either Ray Conniff and his singers or someone similar – I don’t quite remember – which I first heard,

the opening, that echoes: *Deeper than the deep blue sea is / That's how deep it goes if it's real.*¹⁰

She screamed at me once, *I disown you*, because I had ‘run away with the family fortune,’ or so sister number three told me. We had no family fortune – unless you count the change my father left in his wardrobe, coins neatly separated for bus fare – but Dad’s business had finally improved and he gave me a down payment to purchase a small starter home in the U.S. Now it belonged to me and my new husband and therein lies the rub. Dad put our final family home (a 1,200 square foot flat) in only my mother’s name, because his earlier bankruptcy had shamed him into defeat. I am daughter number one, child number one, for years her Daddy’s girl. A bad thing to be when tiger mom reigns, and worse if you marry a music man, the one who was most like Dad, right down to their horoscope sign.

Was it deep, was it real, the love she claimed she had for me, for all her children?

This is the most difficult question to answer because now, I can no longer ask her. Her speech is impaired by Alzheimer’s and she forms words with difficulty, especially in the afternoons and evenings. Night arrives earlier and earlier because her eyesight is blurred by cataracts; the operation to remove them was one she refused and refused to do, and then one day, her memory was gone – *widdershins* – and we could no longer persuade her to consider it. She is also partially deaf, ever since she secretly discarded the hearing aid my sister purchased for *not* a song, oh a decade or so ago, except that is, perhaps, a mercy. Because now she no longer needs to be assaulted by the cacophony that music must be to her, all that opera Daddy loved and used to spin on his phonograph, all the piano I once played at home, even the hymns sung at her Catholic church, religion still being her blessed refuge, even now for this lost lamb. All that music she was forced to revere but never really loved.

Daddy sang, played violin. Daddy wasn’t tone deaf, like her, and he never answered this question that hovered, unasked, between us. But I knew he knew I wanted to

learned and memorized as an unduly romantic teen in Hong Kong of the 1960s. Infatuated dreaming is like that when you’re young, and then some things stick, forcing their way forth at the most inconvenient times, like when you’re essaying on the meaning of love for your tiger mother.

Unfortunately now there is google so you can *almost* track down everything you once recalled, unlike my mother, who cannot research, never mind recall, what she had for breakfast five minutes after she’s eaten. What good is life that goes all this way (she might live to 100; her even more Alzheimer-ridden elder sister lived to 99)? Is it any good if life stops loving you, ie: your memory goes *widdershins*, and then life is merely the minute-to-minute, second-to-second existence where every breath you take / every move you make / every step you take, etc. denies you were ever once a thinking, cognitive, interactive-with-the-human-race soul? And that was Sting, of course, and The Police, but you know that because you’re cognitive now, and not in 1957, which is in your grandmother’s memory, maybe.

¹⁰ Lyrics, mind you, root themselves in the hippocampus in ways that even poems by the highly canonized do not. I had to look up ‘The tyger’ to recall all the lines, but recalled, almost 100 per cent correctly, the song lyrics to ‘All the way’ which, two lines before the end, go: *Who knows where the road will lead us / Only a fool would say*. Lyricists, although also writers might not take themselves as seriously as those so-called ‘real’ poets and writers, which is why they manage to be wiser and more memorable, unafraid as they are of the basic tenets of life, the things clever editors would term clichés. When I grow old, I may not wear my trousers rolled, but I want to keep hearing the songbook, regardless of Alzheimer’s, should misfortune prove *that* hereditary.

know and sometimes I want to ask – *did she love me* – but even now, when he is only an imaginary, rooting around in some consciousness I cannot completely control, I cannot form the words. Instead, the dragon king lowers his spectacles, peers over the rim, rhetoricizes, *now why do you, a Chinese, need to ask this?* To be filial is all. To be dutiful to Tiger Mom in her dotage. To groom her now as she once groomed you, the cub, pussycat, baby pup or chimp. What difference does love make? *What a difference a day makes*,¹¹ croons the perennial optimist. What difference does love make when all that's left is the skin of the tiger, almost a rug, inanimate?

Tyger, tyger, tyger mom, do I 'love' her because I live at home now, squatting on her rooftop, helping to manage her Alzheimer's care? *Haaun seon*,¹² filial, the definition of being Chinese you cannot escape from. My Hong Kong sister and I look at each other – *do we believe we're doing this?* – we two eldest girls who were the most rebellious, the most troublesome, the least dutiful or loving daughters. *We tygers*.

In the flat below that once was our family's home my mother fumbles through her days. Sundowner's syndrome, which affects patients with Alzheimer's, is a daily ritual. Darkness arrives, earlier and earlier because when the sun is overhead, the east facing flat no longer glows with the overly bright glare of morning sunshine; by afternoon, her senses say it is night. As darkness arrives, even in the mornings, because our city lives under a gloomy haze of pollution too often now, she must wonder what happened to daylight, to all her days.

The ritual – and being Chinese, especially Confucian, is all about ritual – is the curtains. The floor-to-ceiling accordion glass doors that lead to the verandah must be pulled shut, regardless of either heat or chill because she no longer feels the difference anyway. She closes the long, yellow-gold curtains, searches around for a clip to secure their edges in the middle. Shuts out the world. It can happen at mid afternoon or early evening, although I have come into her flat in the mornings to find the curtains closed. The two domestic helpers, who live with her and provide 24/7 watchfulness, are used to this by now. *Mama*, they say, having become her new tiger cubs, *Mama closed the curtains because it's nighttime*. They are Filipino, younger than any of us, these women who have become my mother's good girls who never answer back, always agree with her, say whatever she wants to hear as they've been instructed to do.

¹¹ Originally, 'Cuando Vuelva A Tu Lado' by Mexican composer María Méndez Grever (1934) and adapted and recorded, later that same year, into English with lyrics by Stanley Adams as 'What a difference a day makes.' The original song title actually means 'when I return to your side', which shifts the point of view to the first person, to the one responsible for taking action to make the so-called 'difference'. If I return to my mother's side it makes a difference to her day, or at least to the moment of that day when she is cognisant of my presence. But that passes, in far less than the '24 little hours' of the American song lyrics, amid the ADHD that is Alzheimer's (and here I mix, not metaphors, but classifications of the DSM, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, which is chock full of language to horrify the soul that searches for either enlightenment or peace).

¹² 孝順

A few days ago, I sat with my mother at her dining table. *I have so much to do*, she told me, to which I replied, *yes, you do*. There was the clip for the curtains she had to buy, the things at home she had to go through, *the, the, the*, and if she could say it, she'd say, *the life I once had*. And then her gaze panned to the cut flowers in the vase, flowers the helpers replenish weekly in imitation of the ritual of my childhood when my mother regularly brought home an armful of flowers from the market and made gorgeous arrangements for our home. Until recently, she could still name the carnation, gladiola, lily, orchid, daisy, although she puzzled over some of the hybrids and their startlingly unnatural shapes and colors, these false blooms beyond her ken. False nature, as false as her Alzheimer's days, as false as the Chinese-ness she embraced and eschewed, as false as the Tiger Mom who was only trying to love her family, a love that the linguistically and culturally confused world of her life made more difficult than it needed to be.

Or was it? Do I mis-remember because it is the kinder thing to do now, the *filial* thing? To give up on the anger and hatred and rage of being bred in the tiger's lair? You have chosen not to procreate, knowing that your role model was too fierce, too willful, too painful, too, too, too, to replicate. And yet, wasn't it she who gave you the small things that offer solace as you steal your own way towards twilight? A love for nature. Food prepared fresh, by your own hand, in all its natural simplicity. A determination to endure.

I had a tiger mom and my love for her cannot be named. Love is the province of poets and writers who are fool enough to try to name the un-sayable. It has less to do with how Chinese I am than how singular the experience of not being able to utter love for my mother feels. You cannot go around saying – *I do not love my mother* – although you have tried. You cannot complain and complain and complain about your lot in life because even you tire of it, never mind those around you. You cannot lull yourself into that fatalistic female drumbeat – *no choice, no choice, what choice do I have?* – when feminist foremothers fought for your freedom of choice. You cannot even resort to your late aunt's favorite phrase – *no use don't ask* – an utterance to shut up and out the inexplicable.

Instead you can write, *I had a tiger mom and my love for her is*, and, instead of inserting a comma or ellipsis or some misguided word or even song lyric, you can end the sentence, unfinished.

Ω The endnote (or End-note)

The first known use of the endnote, according to Merriam Webster's Unabridged, was in 1926. Merriam Webster does not have more to say about said usage beyond this, which begs the question of the inclusion of such a fact. In fact, 'nonfiction' as a literary genre begs the question of its nonfictional attribution. Is it nonfiction as opposed to factual or is it the negation of fiction? Why is it even termed 'nonfiction' and not more descriptively named memoir, travel writing, literary journalism, *et al*, or

any of the various genres or sub-genres that ‘nonfiction’ assumes? A more precise name for at least the short form is, quite simply, the essay.

In such a mind did I set out to write this endnote for my footnoted essay ‘I had a Tiger Mom and my love for her is’. Footnoting is not a format normally favoured by the journal *TEXT*, in which this work appears. I like footnotes, especially when they provide more than mere reference, especially when they extend the authorial perspective and tone, especially when they become a space for creative, satirical or informational articulation for this increasingly popular literary genre ‘nonfiction’. The late David Foster Wallace used footnotes for literary effect as for example in his essay collection *Consider the lobster*, which was factual but also creatively nonfictional. It was possible to learn more than most readers, or indeed even the writer himself, would need or wish to know about the lobster from the title essay, and yet the piece was as entertaining and compelling as a good yarn in fiction. CNF, as creative nonfiction is shorthanded, is the name for a kind of writing that is a catch all for much that is literary today which cannot easily be classified as either ‘poetry’ or ‘fiction’.

Just how did contemporary writing arrive at this state?

Before I contemplate the question, it is worth noting that the Oxford English Dictionary only chose to add the noun ‘end-note’ in 1993, hyphenated, claiming its origins to be in the U.S. A click away is the non-synonym, the footnote (at least it appears to be dubiously synonymous), which, for this avid reader of dictionaries, led to an 1864 reader’s comment on same, to wit, *The result of all this footnoting and appendix-noting, is that the volume has a most chaotic and bewildering look*. Chaos, however, is the character of our age as the inexhaustible data cornucopia WIFI-ies its way 24/7 across the planet with or without the assistance of Edgar Snowden; Snowden may eventually be forgotten unless properly footnoted for history (or confused with his almost namesake Lord Snowdon, *a.k.a.* Anthony Armstrong-Jones, who achieved a comparable notoriety, both these men of slippery positions in the world). Perhaps the footnote deserves reconsideration, deserves elevation to a more exalted role as a form of literary expression? In fiction, Junot Diaz used the footnote as a history lesson, among other things, in his Pulitzer award-winning novel *The brief wondrous life of Oscar Wao*. It was his way to contextualize the otherwise little-known history of the Dominican Republic against which the protagonist and narrative needed to be read.

Or should we trust the willingness of the reader to look up the facts in order to read the fiction or essay?

As a student of English and American literature back in my undergraduate days at a New York state university, it was assumed that I would learn both nations’ histories in tandem with their literature. That was in the early 1970s, when the canon was relatively sacred and an educated reader could be expected to know her Donne and Dickens, or distinguish between the two Eliots, or recognise that a novel was fiction (unlike the ‘nonfiction novel’ which now appears to be its own genre) while a ‘Modest proposal’ was satire rooted in a form of creative nonfiction, even if we didn’t call it that back then. At the dawn of the 21st century, Nonfiction Now! assumes the urgency of exclamation, at least in the conference logo bearing that name, and ‘text’

has morphed into something that is divorced from literature in the English language as it once was writ (perhaps it was never a good marriage). Not only did the Empire ‘write back,’ as the 1989 nonfiction book by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin on post-colonial literature claimed, the rest of the world decided that English, or something akin, would become its *lingua franca* for this moment of history. Which meant the language would absorb much more than European terms like *cul de sac* or *bildungsroman*. Suddenly, sushi, WIFI, Putonghua, tiger mom, Gangnam style, Facebook, yin-yang, 7–11, 9–11, 2.0 or OS X became recognizably ‘English’ terms, just as tweet as verb or Twitter as proper noun took on brandly new meanings. Even ‘brand’ expanded beyond a verb to describe the presumably painful act of stamping ownership on a herd of cattle. In fact, if not for the brand-consulting firm Interbrand Corporation, we might still be writing ‘IEEE 802.11b Direct Sequence’ instead of the term WIFI. Look it up, WIKI knows more than The Shadow these days (even if radio is not dead, radio plays no longer have the importance they had back when Shadow was a proper noun), and if it’s in WIKI it must be fact, right?

Nonfiction now is all about too many facts (we could discuss the aside as well but this endnote on footnotes is already sufficiently chaotic without courting further bewilderment). Facts imply some brand of knowledge which in turn prompts an authorial perspective that attempts to digest these myriad facts, factoids and maybe-facts in order to write an essay about one’s mother with Alzheimer’s. Alzheimer’s is all about too little memory for too many facts, so that the latter becomes jumbled into a non-timeline of fictional and nonfictional memory. Yet memory itself, the one thing for sure that any personal essayist calls upon, is about as reliable as the English language that morphs and transforms at the speed of WIFI. Add to that 4,000 plus years of Chinese history, culture and language that has not only morphed into the Communist Party, tiger moms and Putonghua in pinyin, all of which shaped this particular writer’s worldview (as well as her mother’s) ... well, where *do* you begin to tell the story? *Where do I begin / To tell the story of how great a love can be?* Or not, as the case may be? Did I remember to add that writing about a tone deaf mother who must negotiate a tonal language, especially when music is in your blood, can and will give rise to the ‘unheard melodies’ Keats found sweeter? Those lines of lyrics are from the opening of the song ‘Love story,’ composed by the French accordionist and composer Francis Lai with lyrics by Carl Sigman and originally published in 1970. Yet as the song was widely popularized by the American vocalist Andy Williams, the lyrics are sometimes wrongly attributed to him. Look it up. Google it. If Google says so it must be fact, right?

This endnote ought to have footnotes but in a desire not to further add to the chaos and bewilderment of this essayistic endnote that refuses to be academic despite its critical nature, I will refrain. The other truth, universally or otherwise acknowledged, is that nonfiction now has pushed beyond traditional academic boundaries, offering knowledge in new and even startling forms. The lyric essay, for instance, that looks like a poem, feels like a poem but is maybe more than only a poem, such as Ann Carson’s ‘The glass essay’ which is located in both an anthology of essays (John D’Agata’s *The next American essay*) as well as in the archives of The Poetry Foundation. David Shields’ *Reality hunger: a manifesto*, a significant work in the

debate about contemporary writing, is the ultimate list essay where factual attribution is deliberately obfuscated. Despite Shield's pronouncements that fiction has died yet again, his own work skirts the edges of NON-fiction that could be read as more fictional than not. In *The lifespan of a fact*, John D'Agata provokes us to reflect on the meaning of fact in his partly fictional correspondence with Jim Fingal, the former fact checker for the journal *The believer*. Ripley's *Believe it or not*, the cartoon strip I read religiously through my childhood in Hong Kong, feels oddly relevant.

We can no longer be too literal about text, even though literal-ness remains a distinct and markedly Hong Kong trait, something to be noted if you must live in the city where your mother faces fear each sundown of her lost remembrances. There is something about absorbing English as a language in this post-colonial, pre-Mainland-Chinese city that invites literal meanings to things (there is a future shock footnote about the year – and indie film – 2046 in this naming of Hong Kong as pre-Mainland Chinese but perhaps, unlike Diaz, I might trust the reader to look up the facts?). Nury Vittachi, the Sri Lankan-Hong Kong author and humorist, has often noted in his work that the city's buildings have markedly literal names, for example, the building named 'Skyscraper'. It feels safe, perhaps, to eat at 'Quite Good Noodles Restaurant' (a literal translation of its Chinese name) or for a waitress to sport a badge reading 'Waitress'. Vittachi doesn't say why this must be so, just that it is so, which is much of what nonfiction now has become, to record and capture the reality we are so hungry for, if Shields is to be believed. When we opine, we lean towards outrage, even favouring deliberate diversion or digression, in order to generate another layer of text upon text, the way a footnote can if not read too literally. In the personal essay where emotions are at risk – the investigation of whether or not you truly 'love' your mother, say – this layering effect can be comforting, a 'face blanket' like the one Linus carries, in order not to lose face, this Chinese cultural avoidance tactic that a Chinese-Indonesian-American writer from and of Hong Kong owns as part of her DNA, whether she admits to it or not. To echo the essay (or CNF piece) that precedes this endnote, that was a too-long sentence but reflections on the meaning of footnotes as creative text vs. reference source (on account of the editorial bewilderment of the readers for the journal *TEXT*) give rise to convoluted thought.

On that note, the end, as all fictions, once earnestly begun, must end.

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