



THE QUEEN'S  
COMMONWEALTH ESSAY COMPETITION 2019

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Lost

At four she watches round-eyed  
A marriage, delight dressed in snow  
Though brooks softly smile and sigh  
A laugh extravagant, as tea flows  
Fire in her hands, carmine  
Plum blossoms in cold wind dance  
Dyed in fortune, in romance<sup>1</sup>

Four years come and go  
In her hand a bamboo flute  
Her sister, the bride of years ago  
Austerely directs a prelude  
Weighting every breath and blow  
The precision of tradition  
Upheld in her education

Four years more  
In the orchestra she plays  
Amongst others, students all  
As *dizi*<sup>2</sup> sings, she sways  
A lark in the music hall  
She was there, in sepia photograph  
A part of them, caught mid-laugh

Time flows by, four years  
Revolution comes, days pass  
The Loyalty dance<sup>3</sup>, a dance of fears  
Tranquillity shatters like glass  
Across the country fire sears  
Winter's plum was rosy in the snow  
It darkens to bloodred, a river's flow

She is sixteen, in her heart flame rises  
As smoke curls from temples  
And books burn with crackling cries  
Traditions extinguished like candles  
Sister quietly recites, under night skies  
*Ju bei yao mingyue, dui ying cheng sanren*<sup>4</sup>  
She speaks the words of ancients

Tongue flutters and fingers fly  
Living in the sound. Faster faster faster  
Flute's tremolo, unparalleled joy  
Dead bamboo's song, living girl's laughter  
Proud, uninhibited, pure, high  
Red scarf flutters, a lark's wings  
Dark head shining as it sings

Decades go, caught in the madness  
She remembers a wedding  
The blooms have lost their lightness  
In frost's bite and sting  
Red no longer means success  
And gunshots sound in *Tian-an-men*<sup>5</sup>  
The city square, old gate to heaven

That was then, now is today  
She sits and tells a tale  
To a child, and her head is grey  
Speaking as winter winds wail  
This child here, she may not stay  
But she is here and she will hear  
The story of past years

<sup>1</sup> This is 1950s NE China, when brides started to wear white. Red is associated with fortune.

<sup>2</sup> Chinese woodwind, usually made of bamboo.

<sup>3</sup> Students danced to pledge loyalty to Mao Zedong.

<sup>4</sup> A line from a poem by Li Bai. Classical literature was one of the banned "Four Olds".

<sup>5</sup> The Tian-an-men (literally, heaven-peace-gate) Square protests took place in Beijing, 1989.

Little girl, you wish to write  
You wish to write? But, my child  
You have not seen the sight  
You know not of the wild  
Only of this city's cold bright night  
Ashen, washed out by the rain  
The culture you speak of has waned

Yes, grandmother. I will write  
I wish to write, as your grandchild  
Bold was this country's former might  
Though I know not of the wild  
Only of this city's cold bright night  
This after all is the land of my birth  
I will write. I'll write for all I am worth