

LIGHT AFTER DEATH

By Soraya Sunitra Kee Xiang Yin (Malaysia)

I have discovered when the world is at its most beautiful: on sunny days, between 6 and 7 in the evening.

Between 6 and 7 in the evening the sun's burn has run its course, and the worst is over. Everything feels peaceful, restive; when you stand barefoot on the road it feels baked, not charred, and the sky has faded to a powdery blue. My neighbourhood is a tired series of shabby link houses—but between 6 and 7 a wondrous splendour obliterates the moss-padded house walls, the drainpipes with foul water drip-drip-dripping like the ticking of a clock.

And so I'm sad that my daughter, Wei Wei, is dying, unable to discover what I have about the transforming effect of the 6 o'clock sun. Her body has been steadily invaded by a relentless, invisible enemy over six months: "Any time now," said her doctor on our last visit.

She's five years old, my daughter, bundled in her Hello Kitty blankets with an arm wrapped around her bear La La. At night sometimes I sit by her, watching her sleeping in fear. Did you know you could sleep in fear? I didn't, until I watched her. She shifts and tosses and her eyelids tighten and release in tense, repetitive cycles. And then I look at La La and its silly sewed on bear-smile, and it hurts.

Today is not one of those sunny days. All morning it threatened to rain, the ashen clouds churning in their beds. Even after the clouds clear, the sky is hard, white, like a whiteboard in a school classroom—at this thought I wince, because Wei Wei will never go to school.

She sighs. "Mama, I'm tired." I'm sitting by her bed, thinking of all the things we'll never get to talk about. Her first period, the boys in her class who tease her but actually have crushes on her. I won't get to tell her I was seventeen years old when I became pregnant with her, that she'll never meet her father.

"I know, I know," I say, but beyond that there is nothing I can say or do. The curtains are drawn and there's a pear I've put by her bedside in case she wants fruit; in the wan light its skin is pallid and waxy.

As I sit hoping but helpless, a sudden light floods the closed curtains. "What's that?" she asks weakly. I get up and open the curtains, and out of her tiny window I see it's beautiful outside.

"The sun is out!" I exclaim. "Look, Wei Wei, it's like a golden ball."

"Catch it, Mama!" she whispers. And before I can stop myself I run down the stairs, down to the garden, greedy for the glow. I stand in the light, and suddenly the six months of worry and fear and *what ifs* fall away...until I realise suddenly what I've done; I've left my dying child for this minute of desperate exuberance, and I hurry back in, thinking, *Oh, but what a wonderful minute it was.*

Upstairs, Wei Wei's papery eyelids are shut, her hand is limp. She's gone, like breath after it leaves the lungs. I'm suddenly aware that her pain is over, and I'm on my knees holding her to me, her little body still warm like the sun was on my skin. Her clock reads 6.30. Through tears the shifting, fragile patterns the sunlight shapes on her bed as it filters in seem to ripple like water, and touched by the light, the pear glows like a beacon—burning bright, evermore, against the dark.