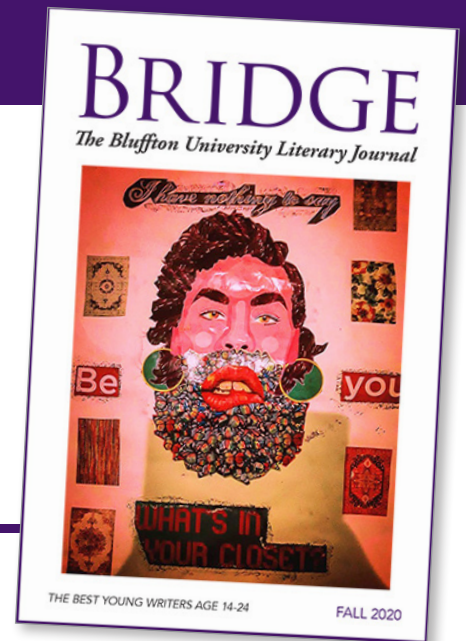


# BRIDGE

*The Bluffton University Literary Journal*



## THE VESSEL

**Wong Wei Cong**

The last human on Earth stood on the edge of the precipice overlooking the valley where the carcass of the city lay in festering stillness, as the rain fell in blood-red quilts. It was not the type of deluge that churned the sand into viscous, umber rivulets cutting through the dunes. Rather, it was the kind of lonely, contemplative drizzle that stroked the surface of the earth in slow, rhythmic beats. From the cliff, unbroken ridges of iron ore stretched across miles of barren clay, where plumes of red dust billowed about the yawning mines. The dipping sun splashed burnt orange over the clouds' surfaces. Save for the prattling of rain, the landscape was deathly silent.

The little girl stood, staring intently at nothing. The shower plastered her dark tresses upon a narrow forehead, draping like a tassel over bluish-steel eyes that glimmered in the dancing light, as though a glacier afloat in a leaden sea. A film of grime and crud caked the faded fawn of her skin. Delicate fingers toyed absently with the hem of a once powder-blue dress, smudged by filth to resemble the colour of dirty snow. Her little chest rose and fell, while her shrivelled feet shuffled occasionally on the cold sandstone.

Then came the rumble. It was not thunder, for a mizzle so meek could not afford such theatricalities. Besides, it was too incessant, too measured to be anything

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natural. It was the dull drone of death, marching slowly from over the horizon. The little girl stared ahead, unperturbed, for it was a sound she has grown used to, like the croaking of frogs in the rain. The drones arrived sporadically. Sometimes she was spared for days; other times, they came one after the other in unrelenting succession in the dead of the night, while she buried herself in the bushes and held her breath in frozen terror. However, months of wide-eyed dread had since given way to benumbed indifference. The rumble would then fade into the distance, and all would be quiet again.

Her gaze flitted, circled and dived towards a plume of smoke rising from the horizon, beyond the derelict mines. The ruins of the city sagged in the wind.

She could never reconcile the scene before her eyes with her fading memories of what she called home – this nondescript mining town hemmed in by solemn, forbidding cliffs. What was home were the reclusive oak tree and the extravagant azaleas swaying in the yard; the grimy pavements of the slums beside the factories, scribbled with chalk; the asphalt rumbling with streetcars displaying weary men and women; and a vague sense of the divide between her and her playmates under the shadows of the smokestacks, that vanished at playtime without a second thought. And there were the familiar aromas and the stray crumbs on her mother's apron; her father's crepitating rattan chair and his pipe that remained empty since the day she was born. It was a simple, sated childhood, with nothing more to be desired.

Things came slowly, and then all at once. There came the incessant droughts, the reports of cataclysmic floods in the coastal regions, the panicked mass migrations, the food crisis and the collapse of the financial markets, the declaration of indefinite martial law, the passionate rhetoric against the profiteering neighbouring nations, the policing of the streets by armed boys her age, the summary executions of men and women with "hoarders" and "thieves" branded on their cheeks, the systemic extermination of traitors and pacifists, the

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hasty mobilisations, and then inevitably, the war.

Conventional warfare quickly gave way to automated drones, which killed with greater efficiency and callousness than any human being. In the last-ditch attempt to control the world's dwindling resources, the last card on the table – the nuclear option – was finally played, and reciprocated in kind. In the wake of the ensuing nuclear winter, the army of drones, freed from the reins of their human handlers and ever so intent on their objective of killing, doggedly pursued any unlucky survivors.

The little girl gazed emptily into the muted crimson of the sun, and it stared back at her, through a veil of blurry red. Suddenly, like a cataract across the great eye, a shadow appeared against the red disc. It bore through the clouds as it descended. The leaden hull of the unwieldy craft shuddered as it engaged its reverse thrusters. With her back against the drop of the cliff, she observed the curious object extending its legs as it tumbled onto the ground, twenty meters away from her.

There was a breathless interval. With small deliberate steps, the little girl approached the marooned seafarer. It was a dense tetrahedral vessel twice her height and the size of a small belfry, softly glinting in the halo of the setting sun. As she stood, its door hissed open to reveal an empty recess.

She knew this tiny vessel had come from the Ark.

They must have seen it coming. With the world knee-deep in the quagmire of its own destruction, they left. On board the Ark were twenty thousand of the brightest, most powerful individuals in the world, charged with the noble task of preserving the human race. The Louvre, the Smithsonian, the Hermitage, the Vatican, had all been emptied, and the genius of human civilization preserved on board. For a time, it seemed humanity had left Earth for good. The dark masses that were left to wallow in bloodshed and butchery would be but a footnote in history, and humanity would prevail, as it had always done.

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The vessel was a cargo ship, possibly launched when the Ark was in the orbit of Mars, its one last resupply before heading towards the outer reaches of the solar system. The little vessel, returning to Earth for its final supply of processed steel in preparation for the Ark's interplanetary journey, would never know that the future of humanity now lay smouldering on the barren surface of Mars.

The mission had been progressing smoothly, until communications between the Ark and the Earth were abruptly terminated. No one had any idea what happened, until the spectacular ruins of the wretched ship were discovered by a wandering Mars rover two weeks later. There were rumours of sabotage, of mutiny, of power-grabbing gone wrong – whatever the case, as the news of the Ark's violent demise reached Earth, there seemed to be a suffocating blanket of despair that, like the tendrils of a spreading miasma, gripped the insides of each survivor. In the face of extinction, it seemed that each could only grimly await their turn on the guillotine of fate, as the queue shuffled along.

She thought for a while, and as though a sudden energy surged from the ground through her feet to her every sinew, she knew what she had to do.

The toes of her little feet gripped desperately at the dank, slippery rock, as her withered legs hauled her body as fast as they could across the sandstone surface. The pattering of her feet halted outside a recess on a cliff face, where a thin corrugated zinc sheet was propped upon saplings against the crag. She entered the dingy dwelling she had called home for the past few months.

The quiet beating of rain against the soft earth outside had now transformed into a thunderous din within the cell, as though a giant was pelting heavy fists upon the zinc roof. In the hazy light of the setting sun, she looked upon the entirety of her possessions against the rock face. To anyone else, it was a trash heap, possibly of a hoarder, a gallimaufry of broken baubles and tarnished trinkets. But to her, they were what little memories she had

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of a time vanished and irrecoverable.

She knelt facing the wall, and ran her fingers through the crude earthenware sealed with gum. Her fingernails dug into the gum, longing to break the seal, but she held herself back and closed her eyes.

Her mother's gay, cascading laughter seemed to flow from thin air, expanding and flooding the space. Slowly, the laughter seemed to condense into a discernible syllable emphatically repeated over and over again.

Nin.

She hadn't heard her name for a long, long time. After fleeing the city, she had subsisted alone in the wilderness for months with nothing but the howling indictment of the wind, so long that she had blended into the wasteland and become one with the nameless beasts. She toyed with the foreign idea of a name of her own. How she ached to be able to hear it uttered once more.

Nin. So it is.

The little girl named Nin looked at the tiny jars and smiled. Unable to bear losing the sound of each lilt of her mother's voice, she had gathered the jars and raised them near her mother's lips as she spoke. As soon as the last word fell, she would hurriedly seal the cover lest a syllable might escape, while her mother chuckled, amused.

Till now, however unbearably lonely, she dared not lift the cover, for fear that each precious note would escape from the jar and disappear, irrecoverable, into a bottomless abyss.

Amidst the trove of bibelots, she ran her fingers over the shards of stained glass: ruby and indigo and yellow and onyx and silver. She held up the shards against the feeble light that filtered through the entrance. They cast a mesmeric pattern on the ground,

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shifting and melting with the light. There was a fable that her mother had told her where in ancient times, not long after the Earth was first created, the four pillars that held up the Heavens were broken from a battle between the gods. The goddess Nüwa gathered and smelted five-coloured stones to patch up the gaping hole in the sky, hence mending the Heavens and saving humankind. The little girl looked at the celestial wound dripping outside her cavern, back at the fragile fragments in her hands, and silently put them away.

She reached and held up a little glass sphere. Across the surface, hairline cracks merged with the rings in the deep-brown iris, like lightning summoned from the abysmal pit of the pupil. As she absently flicked a marble across the dirt, the blind boy with a limp hobbled into her mind.

His one good eye was trained intensely on the marble, while the other eye, a milky nebula circling a dying star, stared at a point beyond space and time. Every morning at the same hour, at the small dirt patch behind the steel factory, she would find him waiting. When she plopped herself down before him, his lips would be drawn into a lopsided smile. As if a practised routine, she would always find herself losing all her marbles, and at the last moment, a sudden stroke of ineptitude would befall him and she would have more than she had started with. And when the searing sun crept directly overhead, as though a signal, she would stand up, dust off the hem of her dress, and run barefoot home, leaving the boy behind without so much as an excuse.

Once, with her knees dug into the dirt and the circle drawn around the marbles, she waited for him to start, but he remained still. Suddenly, he shot out his hand and pressed something into her palm, curling up her fingers. She opened her fist to find a red azalea bud upon her small white palm. She looked up at his face, flushed in the same shade as the bud, with a smile more lopsided than normal.

The cogs in her mind whirred furiously, but their teeth did not seem to catch

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onto each other. She shook as she stood, and without a word sprinted off. She paused only to catch her breath and to toss the flower on top of a trash heap. A glimmering red atop a mangled mess. She turned a corner and it was gone.

She didn't return to the dirt patch for the next two days, but she knew he was there waiting for her, till the long shadows that stretched to the west gradually evaporated. In the dusk of the second day, cloaked in the evening shadows, she slipped into the drugstore and from the display cabinet nicked a glass eye, a deep hazel the colour of the earth after an overnight shower, and the colour of his good eye.

It was the day the war started. She had waited there stupidly, with the glass eye like a slippery conscience clenched in her sweaty palm. He never turned up.

She absent-mindedly dropped the glass eye into the large plastic jar, which had been the container of her dreams, or at least it was before the war. Her father's long, slender fingers now brushed her temples, and with practised tenderness converged in the middle of her forehead. Pinching his fingers, like a magician pulling a string of handkerchiefs from a hat, he plucked the invisible thread from its source and clasped it between his hands. Motioning towards it with his chin, as if words would disturb the creature within his fists, he smiled. These are the bad dreams plucked from your head.

Swiftly, he reached under the bed and made a motion of unclasping and clasping the lid of the jar. He gave it a firm shake, and when he brought the jar before her eyes, that imponderable creature has been transformed into miraculous pinpricks of glowing green lights, bumping into each other in their transparent cell. It never failed to bring her a squeal of wonder, and she always had the honour to open the lid, spilling forth those miniscule floating beacons that darted in the darkness.

He kissed her lightly on her forehead. Your bad dreams have turned into good

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dreams. Nothing can bother you anymore, he said. She watched as the little lights flitted out of the window to reunite with the stars, and with her body as light as her fluorescent dreams, she drifted softly to sleep. It was their daily ritual before she slept, and never had a nightmare ever intruded.

She stared into the jar. It was empty, save for a few dead fireflies plastered onto the bottom. Good dreams were a luxury now, and the best one could hope for was a dreamless, bottomless sleep. She had reasoned that there were so few good dreams and so many people – she had used up her share in the world. Now those good dreams had drifted up among the stars, for her mother, her father, the little boy, to be rationed throughout the span of eternity. They would probably need those more than her, to occupy them at least.

The barrage upon the roof did not let up. It reminded her of the opening salvos of the war. Fragments of memories hurtled past her, and she felt helplessly tossed about along white, foamy rapids. She was breathing the heavy, viscous air of her basement now, her mother's hands pressed around hers. The men were above them, leaden footsteps clomping on floorboards, spitting curses like bloodhounds gnarling.

Wait for me. Her mother's voice had all the softness in the world, though the edge of each syllable is hard with finality. She kissed Nin's forehead, her lips refusing to bulge for a long, long time, until with a sudden jolt as if a mechanism in her body had clicked into place, she pulled her lips away and in one fluid motion, heaved Nin onto her shoulders. As Nin clambered onto the sill of the basement window, she looked back. The look in her mother's eyes was both a plea and an apology. Go now. Concealed in a thicket on the lawn, a suffocating stillness had descended about her, and all was silent except for the lazy chirping of insects in the midday sun.

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Her fingers inadvertently brushed against a tiny lump of metal in the pile, and she shuddered. She could not fathom how a thing so small could bring down the strongest being she has known, as invincible as an ancient oak with forceful roots that gripped the earth. And like an oak, her father was a man of few words. He was silent when he returned to an empty house. He was silent when he watched as she packed as much possessions as a little girl could carry on her spindly shoulders. He was silent as he sat beside her on the ledge of a plateau, inhaling by habit from his empty pipe and watching from afar the inferno dancing, as though possessed, in the night sky where the city had been. When she awoke, he was gone. He had left before dawn without a word. Her head turned towards the direction of the ruined city, where a straight stream of smoke had risen, as if marking the spot where her mother was left behind.

The streets were desolate, and not a thing stirred in the heavy, stagnant air. She could imagine he was silent, too, when the tiny piece of lead pierced through his torso. He was sitting with his back against a tree, his head drooping to his chest. As she knelt beside his body, she glanced up to catch the glint of a scope and the glimpse of a raw, boyish face that was her age. She waited for the second bullet that never came. Slowly, she pulled the rim of his straw hat over his face. She stepped back. He could well be asleep. In the still air, she wept while he slept with all the soundness of a baby.

How could she bring herself to blame her father for leaving her side to find her mother? How heavy on the heart must the longing weigh for him to expect to bring her mother back against such impossible odds, or at least to glimpse her pale face one last time? How could she blame him for leaving her so utterly alone? And yet, he was all she had left, and he had abandoned her to an uncertain, forsaken world.

She had wandered for days and nights. Somehow thirst and hunger had not come, as

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she trudged along, each step further away from the horror behind her. She would have continued if not for the throbbing pain that ripped through her abdomen, forcing her to double over and kneel on the moist yellow soil. Somewhere within earshot, there was the distinct murmuring of a brook over a pebbled riverbed, and at that moment the river was a living, writhing organism within her, flowing through the many tributaries down her body.

When the pain passed, kneeling on the ground, she was struck by a sudden, inexplicable urge, as if to discharge a primeval energy within her. She grabbed a lump of earth and rolled it out like a piece of dough. Her mind clung to the slipping images of all the people she had ever met while she moulded the clay to their likeness. Watching the little figures baking in the sun, she felt an expansive sense of ease that had long eluded her – that amidst death and war, life could spring from the very vessel of her being.

The rain had quelled to a trickle. She leapt to her feet. Perhaps she had stayed too long. In a swift motion, she swept all her possessions into a bundle and hastened out of her shelter. When she reached the vessel, the orange paints that had pooled on the surface of the clouds earlier were overflowing and dripping down the canvas of the sky in large watery splotches. The tired, tearful eye – now a lurid red, blurred around its edges in sfumato style – sank low over the mountains. The earth was wet with the scent of rain.

She spread out the cloth at the centre of the metal cavity and positioned each item of her collection along the material. And atop the pile, she set gently a dried azalea bud, plucked from her garden, the last thing she had taken with her before leaving the city forever.

When the supply vessel had taken off, although it would not know that it has missed its promised shipment of processed steel, it was programmed to have a singular purpose – to

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return to the Ark, wherever it might be in the galaxy. Even if it means that it would find itself empty-handed at the orbit of Mars. Even if it means that it would travel further than it would ever need to, past the frigid fringes of the solar system, into the nothingness of interstellar space. It would wander to the edges of the galaxy, bearing within it aeons of distance and emptiness, condemned to be a vagabond without rest.

She was overcome by the sudden urge to slip into the chamber of the vessel and curl up in a corner, to be sent into space together with her possessions that were all she had to remind herself that she had a past. Her minutes were numbered, she could feel it – the dwindling of her allotted number of heartbeats on this earth.

She felt an immense fatigue washing over her entire being. She was tired, tired of this wretched earth that had brought pain and suffering, tired of the things she loved most being violently snatched away from her and never returned, tired of the routine of eating and breathing to manage one more faltering step away from the talons of death. She would not survive in space, she knew, but she felt she could not bear another hour on this vile earth.

Yet she could not bring herself to leave. She was and always would be a child of the earth, though on certain starry nights she was sure that she belonged instead to a beautiful faraway star. At this moment, those who had loved her, and those who had wounded her, were all buried within the universal embrace of the earth. The earth was every human being that had ever been; it was every birth, every death, and every potential life; it was the lightest joy and heaviest pain. It was the vessel containing the entirety of human experience. And it had the solidity of home.

She felt that there was only one last thing to do – stay. Like returning the marbles spilt from a jar, from the womb of the earth which one emerged one would ultimately return.

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Darkness had crept stealthily across the ground, swallowing the melting sun before engulfing the entire sky in a single gulp. It was in the gathering gloom that the red light at the edge of the door began to blink. She sat up and mouthed a reluctant goodbye. The door hissed shut and the engine rumbled. She watched as the thrusters fired, a translucent orange against the darkness, and the vessel lifted off powerfully into the night, growing smaller and smaller until it was a glimmering speck indistinguishable among the blanket of stars.

She lay still on the cool earth. There was a sense of weariness, a tired satisfaction that one had finally accomplished what needed to be done, and which had to be completed by one's own will, alone. She could not guess the fate of the vessel. It would very probably not make it beyond the solar system. If it did, it would be set adrift in the vast interstellar space and never encounter solid ground again.

And there was the infinitesimal possibility that the same alien species that had received the first gift from humankind in the form of the Golden Record, would, in the breath of mere centuries, receive a last gift from a most unexpected representative – this peculiar collection that is the cherished entirety of a little girl's life.

And though humankind's demise was cruel and violent, her last gift to the universe would not be of decay and destruction, but rather of hope and love that shimmered like the embers of distant stars, despite the depths of the darkness she was capable of descending into. These faint pinpoints of light were themselves not enough to conquer the eternal, irreversible darkness, but enough to make their presence felt, tiny beacons that simply exist. And in their beautiful, unspeaking presence, they bring with them the ethereal reassurance (if only to themselves) that all is right, that all would be right.

She knew not what had driven her to deliver the most precious parts of herself into

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nothingness, except for an inexplicable impulse and a quiet sense of duty. Like a flower that had bloomed extravagantly, luxuriantly, and gracefully awaited its wilting, she felt that she had served her purpose, though she could not say exactly what her duty was. She felt an acute sense of liberation, and with it an equally powerful sense of loneliness. She stared at the stars for a long time, resisting the urge to shut her eyelids, for fear of the darkness that would come, for fear that she would never open them again.

Her mind wandered to the thought of the sea suddenly, without reason. She had never seen the sea before in her life, but she had heard it described so vividly that now as she pictured it, she could taste the salt of the sea-wind upon her tongue, and hear the metronomic, lulling lapping of the waves against her ear, and feel the turquoise waves crowned with white foam swelling and ebbing against her body, floating as if suspended in nothingness, just her and the water. As the last trickle of faint-red rain climbed down her face, she desperately wanted to weep, against the crushing loneliness of the cold, unfeeling night. From the depths of her memory, she remembered a fragment of an old lullaby her mother used to sing to her in the crib. Shivering, she sang to herself in a small tremulous voice.

Dream now

In dreams there's nothing lost, except pain

Never part, my sweet child

Wherever you go, you're home again.

Though her fingers were numb and her teeth chattering, her mind was as peaceful as the surface of a windless pond. The stars were laughing, and she belonged with them. She could feel an incredible lightness as she flew weightlessly among the stars, as she held her mother and her father and the little boy and together they circled the tiny vessel. She lay keenly aware of the resistance of the moist earth against her back, and there she was,

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in the vast ocean of the earth, safely swaddled within the cupped hands of the undulating waves that lapped at her entire being. The vessel, now a glinting speck, did not seem to be receding into the stars, but rather it was she who was receding, receding from the vessel and the stars into the ground, sinking slowly beneath the surface of the gentle sea.

With a smile on her lips, the little girl took a deep breath and was swallowed into the depths of the unknown.

END