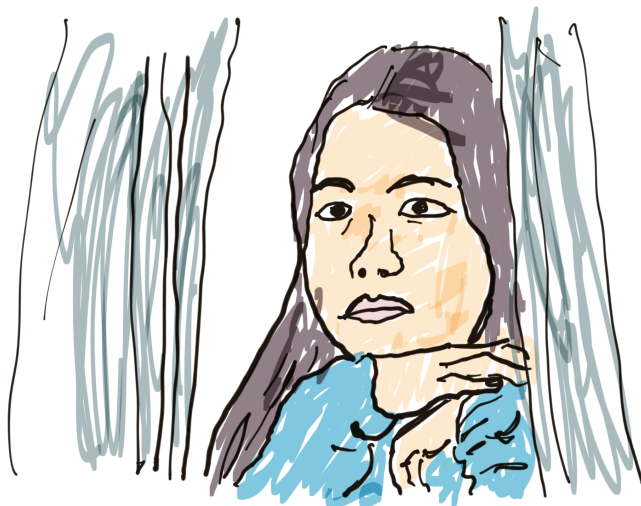


Taxue

One morning, quite a while ago, before Hong Kong became what it is, a horse appeared on the beach, just a silhouette small upon the white sand. It stood at the far end near the rocks wild but not free, being hemmed in on the right by the sea and on the left by the bank rising to the fishing village of Deep Wave Bay. The land beyond to Lantau Peak was hidden. Unknowable.



I had come down in the early morning from the apartments – themselves, at that time, incongruous. The cold blue grey of dawn made me giddy and I blinked before I stared at the impossible horse thrown up by the sea. I thought I might hunker down where I stood above the beach to watch. Safe.

Wu Fong made wooden puzzles. He would take them to the market in Central for the tourists. He fashioned their intricacies from drift wood but you would never have known, once the grain was polished. The pieces were hard from the salt and bleached white and he left them like that so they felt good in the hand. And the boys would take them apart in their arrogant haste but never could put them back together with their fumbling fingers. All impatience.

In truth, the boys had woken me. Their feet had slapped down the concrete steps outside my door and I wondered at them in my half dream. But they were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had gone to the village to help with the nets. The thought of them unsettled me and I imagined they would appear suddenly on the low cliffs above the horse to throw stones.

The horse began to walk now close to the water's edge. It lowered its head before shaking itself away and rising to a trot. Perhaps it had seen me or sensed me watching, and the possibility of a connection between us unnerved me so that, even from my vantage point, I decided to rise to my feet.

Mr Lau would know. He would know how the horse had appeared. He would know what to do.

The boys said the horse had been stolen from the stables at Shatin by the Wo Shing Wo but the ransom had not been paid. In desperation the gang had brought it in the night to Lantau on an old dredger. I looked at Mr Lau the following week but he shook his head and said nothing. So I knew it wasn't true. And the next day a rumour grew that the horse had swum across from Tsing-Yi to escape a cruel owner. I imagined the poor beast's head bobbing above the waves, its eyes wild, its

nostrils gaping red holes as it struggled against the currents and tides between the great container ships towering above. It could not have been like that. These were fumbling tales.

Just as suddenly as it had arrived that winter morning, so it disappeared. The impossible horse vanished after the second week. And they said it had been a ghost.

I met Taxue in the spring. I had been so lonely during the long winter that I wondered if I had created her out of my own imagination, that she had somehow emerged out of the breeze as alienation personified. My kindred spirit.