



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 romance¹

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*² 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 dance³, 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*⁴
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*⁵
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

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

² Chinese woodwind, usually made of bamboo.

³ Students danced to pledge loyalty to Mao Zedong.

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

⁵ 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