

2018 Young Writers Award

Runner up 15-17

Little Firefly

by Kiarni Burton

There's one thing that Xiao Ying would give up her jianzi for. She slid them into her brother's chubby hands, the feathers matted and leather worn from years of play. She snatched the parchment out of his hands, completing the deal. Dark lines painted on the cover beckoned forbidden knowledge. Inside it was blank, an endless stream of perfect nothingness. Footsteps echoed in the courtyard. She dived under the cover of bamboo, clutching the empty treasure.

"Xiao Ying, what are you doing? The rice is ready," laughed Wai-gong.

She slid the parcel under the dry leaves. His timeworn eyes lingered on its hiding place, shifting from amusement to curiosity.

She scrambled to her feet as he brushed off the itching hairs of bamboo. Her shoes shimmered in the afternoon light like the leaves of a Golden Lotus, steps as delicate as its petals.

She was greeted with a plume of sweet yet savoury steam that made her mouth water, chopsticks jumping eagerly into her hand. She felt a set of eyes bore into her back. She sat up straight and gracefully placed the chopsticks back down, adjusting her dress.

"Ma, I want to learn how to write," she announced.

The eyes began to hollow out her back.

"Ladies do not write."

"Then I am not a lady," she said, slouching and spreading her legs.

Wai-gong placed a steady hand on her mother, whose mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water.

“Daughter, would it be so wrong for her to learn?” he queried.

The fish took the bait.

“No man will marry a girl who can write,” she hissed.

Xiao Ying had heard enough, she ran to the courtyard as fast as her delicate feet would allow. Head and chest swollen with anger, the words inscribed in her mind. She rummaged through the leaves of bamboo in desperation. Her hands found its rough yet soft layers, its emptiness glowing in the light of the moon.

She didn't hear the footsteps.

Her mother snatched and tore it apart with her eyes. She shifted her glare to Xiao Ying and sacrificed the bound parchment to the greedy tongues of the lantern. Xiao Ying's heart wilted. Mother dragged her to a room and tightened the bandages around her feet, telling Xiao Ying she had to be pretty and delicate. Like a flower. Yes, she was destined to be nothing but a flower. Cut and left to die in a place she didn't belong. Nothing but her hands left free.

Xiao Ying had never stolen anything before. But now she had to. In the courtyard, shadows of bamboo danced with fireflies across smooth pavers; ripened pomegranate wafted through the humid air; birds farewelled the sun with song. Smooth under her knees, she crawled through the wooden doorway, staying in the shadows, eyes on the prize. Its black handle stark against red cloth, brushes softer than silk. She wrapped her fingers around the polished surface, savouring the way it moulded to her hand. With purloined possession in hand she slunk back into the courtyard. Bamboo rustled in the breeze, birds whispered.

A small hand tugged on the handle.

“That's mine!” brother cried.

Her heart leapt out of her chest. She desperately tugged back, the smooth wood dislodging itself from his hands. She ran through the bamboo, feet lingering in the air, free as a firefly. Chest swelling with anticipation.

She was flung backwards as her dress snagged on a fallen branch, forced to watch in horror as her treasure soared through an open doorway. A loud crack echoed through the branches of

the pomegranate, scattering the birds mid-song. A slim silhouette stalked into the light. Broken shards of wood abandoned her hand, tumbling onto the pavement. The silhouette's face turned pomegranate.

"You will be wed tomorrow," she barked.

Another figure walked softly into the open.

"Daughter, I will take care of this," Wai-Gong said.

The bamboo sent waves of burning pain through her body. His eyes remained trained on the ground, never meeting her own. Mother gleamed with satisfaction, welcoming each strike. A metallic smell singed her nose, making it run. Wai-gong's eyes glistened, it burnt him too.

The bamboo's dance had ceased and the birds' evening song was silenced as moon replaced sun. Crimson lines seeped through Xiao Ying's gloves as she climbed into the carriage.

"I am sorry daughter, but I have forgotten to bring the dowry," Wai-gong said to mother.

She cursed at him for his incompetence before stalking off. Wai-gong sidled up beside Xiao Ying, eyes heavy with guilt as he removed her gloves. The red silk draped on his arm glistened in the soft lantern light. Angry footsteps drifted into the distance as he unfolded the dress. A small brown parcel fell onto his lap, its pages as white as fresh snow. His dark eyes filled with light as he brushed dust from the cover.

"This was your grandmother's," he said as he pulled a brush out of the folds.

Beautiful fireflies fluttered freely around its worn handle, inviting her to fly with them.

"Don't let them put you out, my little firefly," he whispered.