

Receptionist²⁵

The clothed table had just been moved outside.
I followed, seated, like a ghost.

I scanned the objects on the cold white
surface as in a crime scene and found the

two vases imbalanced. A small piece of the
plastic orchid had to go next to the frame.

Mulinda had asked when the picture was taken
and that was the only question I had.

All envelopes came tidier than expected—
all names readable and so I only needed

to care about the cash—from 301 to 10,001,
that's how Chinese people use odd numbers

to avoid double misfortunes,
though I had a few 50s, Canadian dollars.

Canadians are more immune to curses.
I handed over the programme, the white packet,

avoiding thank-yous, the guy had advised,
we said *you are so thoughtful*, as I did to some

six groups of people in an autopilot mode.
The drawer full of black ribbons we didn't touch;

a take-away menu from a nearby restaurant;
and a dozen empty packets with a different cover.

The choking smell of lily dimmed the corridor—
people all came with a film of smoky silk swaying

after them like a wedding gown in a neurotic wind.
The effect was nearly acoustic, a timely prelude

to Massenet's Meditation to be played by my brother.
Oh yes, that was his wedding

when the picture was taken,
when she was only 85 years young.

Ready in ten minutes. I took the bag
inside as the men stopped coming out.

I sat alone in the front.
My cellphone screen reflected

someone who evaded my eyes.

Lee Ho Cheung