

Vanilla in the stars

Agnes Lam

When I was a child,
I used to gaze at the stars above

our garden of roses, jasmine and *lingzhi* by the sea,
wondering how far away they really were,
5 whether they were shining still at the source
by the time their light reached me ...

I was told that everyone was born with a star
which glowed or dimmed with the fortunes of each.
I also heard people destined to be close
10 were at first fragments of the same star

and from birth went searching for each other.
Such parting, seeking, reuniting might take
three lifetimes with centuries in between.
I had thought all these were but myths ...

15 Now decades later, I read about the life of stars,
how their cores burn for ten billion years,
how towards the end, just before oblivion,
they atomize into nebulae of fragile brilliance –

20 ultra violet, infra red, luminous white, neon green or blue,
astronomical butterflies of gaseous light
afloat in a last waltz choreographed by relativity,
scattering their heated ashes into the void of the universe ...

Some of this cosmic dust falls onto our little earth
carrying hydrocarbon compounds, organic matter
25 able to mutate into plant and animal life,
a spectrum of elemental fragrances ...

Perhaps on the dust emanating from one ancient star
were borne the first molecules of a *pandan* leaf,

a sprig of mint or basil, a vanilla pod, a vine tomato,
30 a morning frangipani, an evening rose, a lily of the night ...

Perhaps our parents or grandparents or ancestors further back
strolling through a garden or a field had breathed in the scents
effusing from some of these plants born of the same star
and passed them on as DNA in the genes of which we were made ...

35 Could that be why, on our early encounters, we already sensed
in each other a whiff of something familiar, why, when we are near,
there is in the air some spark which seems to have always been there,
prompting us to connect our pasts, share our stories even as they evolve ...

... till the day when we too burn away into dust
40 and the aromas of our essence dissipate
into the same kaleidoscope of ether light
to be drawn into solar space by astral winds ...

... perhaps to make vanilla in a star to be
before the next lifetime of three?

Agnes Lam, 9 May 2008, Rodrigues Court, with reference to Sun Kwok's book, 'Cosmic butterflies'

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Suggested Questions and Answers

1. Based on the gist of the given stanzas and the development of ideas in the poem, match the two columns and put the letters in the brackets provided.

Stanzas 3 - 4 ()	a) The speaker's imaginative and creative expansion of the myths and facts
Stanzas 5 - 7 ()	b) Myths about stars the speaker heard as a child
Stanzas 8-10 ()	c) Facts about stars the speaker finds out as a grown-up

2. What are some of the myths and beliefs about stars the speaker came across when she was a child?
3. As the speaker grows up, what does she understand about the life of stars? Explain two facts about stars she finds out in your own words.
4. Why are scientific terms used in the poem? What effects does this create?
5. (a) Comment on form and use of language in the last stanza.

(b) What do you think "to make vanilla in a star to be before the next lifetime of three" means?
6. What is the theme and message of this poem?

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Stanzas 3 - 4 (b)	a) The speaker's imaginative and creative expansion of the myths and facts
Stanzas 5 - 7 (c)	b) Myths about stars the speaker heard as a child
Stanzas 8-10 (a)	c) Facts about stars the speaker finds out as a grown-up

2. What are some of the myths and beliefs about stars the speaker came across when she was a child?
- Everyone was born with a star which glowed and dimmed with their fortunes.
 - People who were close were fragments of the same stars that went searching for each other from birth.
3. As the speaker grows up, what does she understand about the life of stars? Explain two facts about stars she finds out in your own words.
- Stars' cores burn for long years and they turn into colourful gaseous light before they cease burning and fall like dust.
 - The stardust and ashes fall into the earth to nourish plants and animals.
4. Why are scientific terms used in the poem? What effects does this create?
- Science-related terms and concepts, such as “atomise”, “nebulae”, “gaseous light”, “relativity”, “hydrocarbon compounds”, “mutate”, “elemental” are widely used in Stanzas 5-7 of the poem. Such sophisticated and technical terms create a more academic and impersonal tone, providing a sharp contrast with the more personal tone used in the previous stanzas, where the speaker talks about the stories and myths about stars she heard as a child.
 - In Stanzas 8 and 9, the use of scientific terms (e.g. “molecules” and “DNA”) is intertwined with the speaker's romantic and philosophical imagination, which presents a surreal mix of fact and fantasy and adds a magical touch to the poem.
 - With the creative use of science diction in the poem, the poet extends and blurs the boundaries between science, astronomy, mythology and literature, challenging readers to make wider associations and connect different nuances of meaning to form a fresh understanding of stars.
5. (a) Comment on form and use of language in the last stanza.
- Form – the last stanza is two-lined, which resembles the beginning stanza and

contrasts with the 4-lined body stanzas, creating a sense of closure with a return to the beginning. This matches the theme of this poem (i.e. cyclical nature of life in the universe). While the beginning two-lined stanza addresses the past (i.e. “When I was a child”), the ending two-lined stanza points to the future (i.e. before the next lifetime of three).

- Use of language
 - Repetition is used in the last stanza. The opening word “perhaps” creates resonances with Stanzas 8 and 9, which also start with “Perhaps” and capture the speaker’s romantic and philosophical imagination of how the dust of an ancient star enters different plants and runs into her family gene. “Vanilla in a star” repeats the title of the poem, while “next lifetime of three” further alludes to the myths about people who lose their close ones and go searching for them for three lifetimes in Stanza 4. The repetition of words in the last stanza provides intra-textual references and strengthens the cohesion of the poem.
 - A rhetorical question is used in the ending to connect and involve the readers, encouraging them to ponder on the meaning of the open ending.

(b) What do you think “to make vanilla in a star to be before the next lifetime of three” means?

- To seize this lifetime to build nourishing and fruitful relationships (like planting vanilla seeds) for the next three.

6. What is the theme and message of this poem?

- The special affinity / connection / bonding between people (as if they were descendants or fragments of the same star)
- The intricate links between the cosmic and the earthly/human worlds
- The cyclical nature of the cosmos / the endless cycle of creation and destruction in the universe
- The regeneration and reincarnation of life in the cosmic cycle