

WRITING PROMPTS: Using 'Where Do Stories Come From?' Offline

The following are a series of prompts created by Tash Aw and accompanied by extracts from his short story, 'Sail'. This makes up just one of many elements available on the online experience, <https://wheredostoriescomefrom.net> and we'd encourage you to visit the site in your own time to engage with the audio-visual elements of the experience that further provoke creative responses.

PART ONE: The Harbour

Yanzu wants to buy a boat, a large fancy racing yacht. It costs a lot of money – probably too much. He can't really afford it, and in fact, he has no idea how to sail.

Why might someone want to spend a lot of money on something they don't really appreciate? Is it a status symbol, or something else altogether?

Begin writing your answer on the page...

PART TWO: Hong Kong

Yanzu is, of course, fleeing a failed love affair with a woman he had been seeing for three months earlier that summer. She had loved boats, which is why he is thinking about buying this boat. Men do the stupidest things when they are in love, she once told him, but now he realises the opposite: they do the stupidest things when they are out of love; when they think they have failed.

What constitutes "failure" in modern life?

Begin writing your answer on the page...

PART THREE: Lack & Success

But Yanzu is a successful man. He runs a number of thriving business concerns in Mainland China and Hong Kong, including a development of eco-homes that proved popular among professional thirtysomethings. In a previous life he had been an activist and journalist who had been accidentally caught up in political issues in Beijing and forced to move to Hong Kong to start a new life. He tries to write, but nothing works. He reinvents himself as a businessman.

He gets married. He gets rich. He is a “success.” And yet, something is missing. People see him as a boring middle-aged executive. His marriage is dutiful but somehow unfulfilling. This is not how he imagined his life would turn out. Twenty years on from his youthful idealism, he finds himself trapped in a situation that looks like success but feels like failure.

What next? How does someone in his position make himself feel better about his life?

Begin writing your answer on your page...

PART FOUR: Yanzu in Love

He falls in love. With a British woman he hires to teach him English. She is the total opposite of him: independent, free-spirited, unconcerned by money or material possessions. She doesn't take their affair seriously; he does. She makes it fairly clear that it will last for as long as she is in Hong Kong, probably only until the end of summer.

Should he continue the relationship? What does it mean to him?

Begin writing your answer on your page...

PART FIVE: An Ending

They go on a sailing trip to the islands. She loves boats for the sense of freedom they provide, free from attachment. He tries to understand how she feels, but never really connects. They dive into the water to swim, both knowing that this high point in their affair might also be their last moment together.

How should this end?

Begin writing your answer on your page...

We hope you enjoyed being in Tash's shoes as he crafted a character and his story.

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<https://wheredostoriescomefrom.net/> to receive a digital postcard with your writing and to be published in our online gallery.