An outsider looks in and really gets us. Tings Chak’s beautiful book pays homage to ‘the first real home I ever had’

We’re all on loan to each other, for what time we have together. The world gave us Tings Chak, on a five-year lease (2005-2010) as it were. We got her. She got us. She still gets us. Tings made something out of that getting. A beautiful, strange and illuminating book that has more light-and-shadow understanding of Hamilton tamped into its few dozen pages than many less perceptive students of the city might have produced in a lifetime here. Tings got us in another way, too. She got us under her skin. So while she is now studying architecture at the University of Toronto and doesn’t think she will ever settle here, in a way she has never left. “At first Hamilton put me off,” says Tings, 23. “But once I got out, outside the bubble (of McMaster University), Hamilton felt like the first real home I ever had.” And out she got. Every week she went to the North End to teach children in need to draw, and made meals for the Food Not Bombs organization. She also blocked roads in protests. “Look at your hair! So long,” says Veronica at the Mex-I-Can Restaurant on James North, as she gives Tings a hug. “It was this short last time I saw you. Next time it’ll be down to your waist.” Tings was back in Hamilton last week. To visit friends, of whom she collected many when she lived here, studying arts and science at Mac. And to deliver more books. She just got the new printing (selfpublished). “I’ve got an ISBN number!” Tings tells Dave Kuruc at Mixed Media, with mock excitement. His store sells the book. He ran out of the last batch. It’s called Where the Concrete Desert Blooms. Tings calls it a graphic novella but there’s not much fiction. It is more like urbanography, the city’s life story, kissed awake by a young woman’s own search for a way to “place” herself in the world. If you learn about the lagoon at the bottom of lower Chedoke Falls, it’s because Tings has actually swum in it. There’s a drawing of her lying on her back in the water, arms spread out. In her extensive travels and research through Hamilton, Tings felt magnets pulling. The city’s people. Some are recurring figures in the book, such as bookseller Bryan Prince, poet Bernadette Rule and activist Randy Kay. Others pop up in bright one-off flashes that, however brief, leave sparks in your eyes. There’s Jeff Seffinga, who for years went to the movie screenings in the garden at Whitefern with his wife, whom he moved to Hamilton to be with. When she died, Seffinga spread her ashes in the garden. Tings depicts him rolling up his sleeves. I asked Tings, when she was here Thursday, to take me to some of her favourite places in Hamilton. We went to Gore Park. “A great place to people-watch.” We ate at Mex-I-Can’s. “I used to hang out here,” she says, smiling over a vegetarian burrito, “and listen to the anarchists fighting.” We went to the harbour,
where she and her father, who came in from Thornhill, took sailing lessons one summer and yelled at each other as the boat pitched. Tings was born in Hong Kong. Her family moved to Canada in 1990. Tiananmen Square was what decided it. Tings was three. They settled in Thornhill. But, she says, it never gave her the sense of deep belonging Hamilton did. I misled you at the start. Tings lived in the city from 2005 to 2009, four years. For most of 2010 she lived in Paris. She waited tables at an American restaurant. “I couldn’t get over it. The French eat hamburgers with knife and fork.” But the rest of the time, surrounded by her sketches, she wrote Where the Concrete Desert Blooms. In her chambre de bonne in the City of Light, she was thinking about Hamilton. And how she understands us, our psychology, both visually and in words. “A friend once described his relationship with Hamilton as one of hiding,” writes Tings. I’m not even sure I fully get what she means, but somehow it resonates. I think Tings will make a fine architect. Her life is her building and we will always be a room in it, maybe the one she comes to when she needs to feel home. Of all her gifts to the city, that is her greatest. The knowledge that someone like her could fall in love with us.

Tings Chak, 23, was born in Hong Kong and came to Canada as an infant. She was accepted at McMaster University, the Arts and Science Program, fell in love with Hamilton and has created a graphic novel about the city and some of its characters.