Qiwen Xiao’s epistolary fiction *[Title]* is composed of three letters that vary in length from the narrator, Charley, to his friend James. Given the recurrent portrayal of the intimate bond between them, it is tempting for readers to center the theme of homosexuality among the ideas conveyed. However, by constructing the narrative that oscillates between past recollections and present reflections, Xiao extends such an interpretation into a broader space interwoven by memory, cultural identity, and human connection. The letters, loaded with memories both cherished and burdensome, illustrate Charley’s struggle to express his affection to James, frustrated by an insurmountable gap that constantly hinders any connection formed between them.

The story consists of memories that the narrator both cherishes deeply and finds burdensome to bear. He starts the first letter by recalling the shared experience at the gun range in Sacramento, when “The shell bounced back and left a huge hole in the silhouette, and we both laughed” (Xiao, 1). This moment of joy is a cherished memory of their camaraderie and the simplicity of shared laughter. However, it is also tinged with regret when James remarks, “You didn’t let me record you.” Charley reflects, “The truth is, I didn’t want to and I didn’t know you wanted to” (Xiao, 1), revealing a weighty sense of missed opportunity and his own reluctance to preserve their moments together. Similarly, Charley reminisces about serene scenes like watching “the fog slowly rolling in from the ocean, dressing the Golden Gate Bridge in a white veil” (Xiao, 1). The imagery of fog, with the beauty of their shared environment and the quiet moments that brought them closer, also serves as a metaphor for the obscurity and distance in the relationship between the narrator and James, representing feelings of isolation: “It’s as if the fog sets its boundaries itself, an invisible line it cannot cross” (Xiao, 2). The memory of making egg tarts together further discloses this duality, as they “laughed at our amateur attempts—the uneven crusts, the filling that bubbled over. One tart even emerged with an abnormal bump on its golden surface, a flaw that made it uniquely ours” (Xiao, 6). Such an activity of intimacy and collaboration also carries the weight of unspoken emotions, as Charley realizes, “In that moment, I felt a connection that words could never capture” (Xiao, 6). Unable to express his feelings, Charley turns this cherished memory into a reminder of his internal struggle. Throughout the letters, Charley’s recollections appear to be a blend of warmth and heaviness, his most treasured memories with James intertwined with regret, unexpressed emotions, and a longing for deeper connection.

The story also captures Charley’s struggle to express his affection for James, a challenge that pervades their relationship. From the outset, he confesses, “I am writing because I feel like it. I am writing to talk to you, though knowing that words always fail us” (Xiao, 1). This admission demonstrates his awareness of his communicative limitations. The incident at the gun range epitomizes this struggle; despite the joyous occasion, Charley couldn’t bring himself to allow James to record the moment: “You didn’t let me record you” (Xiao, 1). He introspectively acknowledges, “I did not want to own the tangible memories of us together” (Xiao, 1). The narrator’s repeated attempts to articulate his thoughts more directly further illustrate his struggle. In his second attempt, he writes, “Let’s start again, shall we? Only this time, I will try my best to be more straightforward” (Xiao, 3). Yet, even as he tries, he falters: “I am writing because I cannot express myself well when speaking. I am writing because I want to stay organized, to be able to ponder over my words. I am writing because...” (Xiao, 3). His incomplete sentences and fragmented thoughts symbolize the barriers he faces in conveying his emotions. Even during intimate moments, Charley remains reticent. After making egg tarts together, he notes, “We both took a bite of that one, declaring it the best despite its imperfection. In that moment, I felt a connection that words could never capture” (Xiao, 6). The shared silence speaks volumes, yet he cannot voice his feelings. When watching the food show and James comments on a guest who “sounded so gay” (Xiao, 6), Charley hesitates to engage deeply, merely replying, “Maybe he’s just passionate about what he does” (Xiao, 6). His reluctance to dwell on the topic hints at his fear of revealing his own affections. The culmination of his struggle is evident when he observes, “We lay in the bed, completely silent. But I could still hear you cry. And in the mirror, I saw your face” (Xiao, 8). The silence between them is heavy with unspoken words. The narrator’s internal conflict is palpable as he attempts once more to begin his letter: “Please forgive me, James, but I need to start this again. Dear James, I am writing because...” (Xiao, 10). Unable to complete the thought, he faces difficulty in expressing his love, encapsulating the central tension of his letters.

The reason for that is obvious: Charley is deeply frustrated by a divide that persistently distinguishes him from James’s, hindering the formation of a deeper connection between them. This frustration surfaces during the dinner with James’s family when his father, speaking in a regional dialect, asks Charley if he understands: “Your father is from the same city as I am, and I remember he started the conversation by asking whether I could speak the dialect. I couldn’t, and I still can’t” (Xiao, 3-4). From here, it can be tempting to ascribe the language barrier to Charley’s frustration. However, Xiao generalizes the idea of cultural gap into the difference between Charley and James. Charley’s fondness for In-N-Out fries, which he enjoys “extra salt and extra spread” (Xiao, 5), contrasts with James’s dislike: “Most of my friends, including you, did not like the fries there... Still, you said it was too greasy, too salty, too unhealthy” (Xiao, 4). From this simple difference, Xiao highlights how James is different from Charley, not merely in terms of fries, but how their backgrounds influence their tastes and experiences, creating subtle yet significant distance between them. It is most heartbreaking when the gap becomes explicitly verbalized, “‘It’s interesting how different cultures express time differently,’ you bring this up suddenly, ‘like how you Chinese put the year before the month and the day, while we Americans do the opposite’” (Xiao, 9). James’s observation about the formatting of dates is a metaphor for their broader cultural differences—something as fundamental as the perception of time is framed differently in their respective cultures. Moreover, James considers himself first as “an American, then an Asian” (Xiao, 9), reflecting the complex layers of his identity and his perception of cultural belonging. This phrase suggests that James prioritizes his American identity, possibly due to his upbringing and social environment, with his Asian heritage following as a secondary aspect. This ordering indicates a tension within James’s self-identity that Charley, as an international student, might perceive differently. While Charley must navigate life in the U.S. as an outsider, James, despite his Asian background, occupies a different social space, identifying more with American customs and norms. This difference further frustrates Charley’s attempts to bridge the gap, as he is continually reminded of his own status as “other” in James’s world.

Upon writing the first sentence of the last letter, as Charley crosses it out, yet leaving his “Best wishes” (Xiao, 10), his inability to explicitly express his love or bridge the gap between himself and James remains unresolved, mirroring the often incomplete, fragmented nature of human connection. In *[Title]*, Xiao invites readers to ponder over the unspoken tensions that shape relationships and the ways in which memory and identity form both bonds and barriers, leaving us with an understanding that sometimes, the most significant feelings are those left unsaid, and that there are gaps that cannot be bridged.

*So much of what we live goes on inside–*

*The diaries of grief, the tongue-tied aches*

*Of unacknowledged love are no less real*

*For having passed unsaid.*

*– Unsaid* by *Dana Gioia*