

The Nowhere Land

By Phillip Gu



Foreword

*He's a real nowhere man
Sitting in his nowhere land
Making all his nowhere plans
For nobody.*

—*Nowhere man*, by John Lennon

I always find this lyric inspiring for post-modern city life, though written in 1965. When I am stuck with programming issues, meetings to attend, works to finish—I'd think of how much meaning I've given to those agendas, and how much "nowhere-ness" is there left for the day. Nothing that we tried every effort to achieve is leading us to anywhere, in that sense nobody is even "alive". So why not put things down when you get stuck, and do some nowhere plans for nobody?

This chapbook is my nowhere plan. It collects 15 of my poems, none of them aims to talk about the sublime experience, or explaining any grand ideas. I see poetry as a way one understands the world, not in those clichés that are talked about over and over again, but in the aspects that aren't very often considered—how does a Mars rover see the world? What does an iceberg think of the ocean and islands? And what is the pigeons on the rooftop thinking? These are some useless questions, but I tend to think in this way through poetry, which makes me sober in such a chaotic world. To me these nowhere plans are the things that matter more than the programming

projects, the assignments, the researches, and so on. The very thought of one should know how things work means you don't succumb to the pressure of life. *Nowhere man, the world is at your command*¹.

Now, to think in that way is to claim the following: if there is anything left in this nowhere land, that must be madness. So I arranged the poems in such an order, that each one is a little crazier than the last one. I hope you enjoy this trip across my nowhere land, better know where not you're going to. I'll see you at the other side.

Phillip Gu

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¹Another lyric from *Nowhere man*.

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Opportunity's mission

The rover sees no difference between
Mars and Earth. The same vast plain
with some pits at the center and ridges lie far.
Her internal clock always claim
that a sol is no different than a day
except forty more minutes of slack.
Therefore most of time she rests
on the edge of a crater. And soaked
in the dim sunlight just like
back in Mojave, at dusk. If weather permits a stretch
she'll notify those remote engineers and
never use up her cell. Until
the day when she looked upon
the glowing dome where she came from,
it stroke her that Mars is different than
Earth. It has two moons. One in clear sight
but the other concealed itself behind
the approaching sandstorm.
Soon she felt drowsy underneath
a sudden dune who promises
gloomy sleepiness, then tranquil dormancy.
Opportunity needs a distant dream
after all this place is not Earthly
and her cell is now empty.

Silver lining

They say every cloud has a silver lining
But not from above. There's a vast ocean of dust and vapor
convolving with fragments of thin air.
You must read that things don't get better here.
Only in such perspective can you
understand buoyancy, how the clouds become
borderless tides. How the sunlight turns into
the opposite nights. Then if you look down you'd find
there are no lines. Only discontinuity of waves
where sailors are granted a peek to Atlantis.
After that, to return from the stratosphere
is to claim one will never reach the land.
Each descend becomes a deeper dive. Now look above
Do you still see the silver lining?

All that the cicadas had was one day

All that the cicadas had was one day, the gap
between two monsoons. The El Niño
ruins everything. Seventeen years spent
in dark and damp, wriggling their
way out to the promised land. To them the
prime number should meant
fewer competitors, hence more to share.
But now the branches are drown
in moisture. Raindrops falling nearby
like meteors, splashing on the leaves and
releasing a sound that is ten times
greater than the weak chirp. A rival that
no cicada would ever expected, and the rival
that seems never to be tired. Except for one day,
that the rain has shortly stopped, and sunshine
leaked from the slit of clouds just like
any ordinary summer. But not this, with
a pack of clouds stacking in the distant
horizon. One knew something is going
to happen, but the cicadas did't.
So they shook off the water and started the choir.

How star gazers see through the dark

The moment I put down the book I find
there's something in the corridor.
A cautious shadowy entity hides
itself inside the continuous dark.
To capture its shape is to
grab salt in the water, get disorder out of its hierarch
like those summer nights, when you search for stars
never stare at them, but instead look at
somewhere else, until your pretended ignorance
creates a ripple in the sky.
Someone must first lose their patience, and
then the stars shall gradually emerge
at the corner of sight:
The Taurus, the Gemini,
or the one in the dark who reluctantly
steps out and stretches her paws.

*The penguin, the petrel,
the hummingbird and the iceberg*

At the end of the century the iceberg
cracked from the glacier. He's satisfied of
the splash he created. A gigantic ripple,
spreading while he sink and float.
And he knew how he looked like. Those wind-carved
cracks, emitting a celestial color inside the luminescing white.
He's then caught by a current.

At the other side of the continent he met a penguin,
who talked about those
chilling winters. That only exist in the past, which
you reminds me of. Would you ever remember
the days buried underneath the snow? On which I
tottered, bringing fishes to my child.
Farewell, my old friend.

Three months passed before he met
other lives. A petrel, who rested on his top.
It's tiring to fly between the islands, and I'm
glad to have a place for a stop. Are you made of
autumn rains? The same tactile of watery cold.
Consider staying here and I'd visit you everyday.
Well, said the iceberg, I have no control.

Now the world is totally different
in some way. A tremendous tropical coast, he thought,
And a tremendous hummingbird, floating in the air as
he did in sea. I think I saw a diamond
between the splashes. It reflects a celestial
light, its section emitting luminescing white.
No you didn't. Said the iceberg, then he disappeared.

A summer proscenium

I still clearly remember that summer dusk when I
sneaked out the classroom and gazed at the sky.
At first it was the Venus. The only thing visible
on the curtain. If you have much imagination you'd
see that's a crescent, reflecting the same
sunshine leaking at the distant horizon.

Then a plane passed by, up there some curious
traveller must be staring back at me. The flight
to Vienna, more like a flight to Venus
from my perspective. Or a flight to the galaxy
from their point of view. It then faded in a
uncompromising night.

The next coming characters are Jupiter and
Mars. And Saturn. Never have I seen them
so perfectly aligned, except that summer.
These are the things you'd never learn in class.
Books tell you everything about how fast they travel
through space, or how much far away they are from
Earth. But only in such a summer night can you see—

The melted lava flowing on Venus releasing heat;
the struggling rover on Mars having her sleep;
the wind sewed on Jupiter grows into a storm;
the outer ring of Saturn silently keeps

every secret beyond him. Including that flight
that should never reach.

The skull on the playground

After taking the graduation photo they
slowly fade away. Like tides on sand, tears in rain.
What's left on the grass is this skull who
staring at passers-by, with an eternal grin
possibly left when he's buried within.
However that doesn't make him grim.
His hollow eye sockets
are filled with humor. His poor posture
engraved the grass with satire. That's when you find
he could be plastic. Someone's costume
carefully painted with porcelain white and ash gray.
And when sunlight projects down, you don't see
the skull on the playground any more. What you see
are the endless days to come.

Woke

I often find myself wake up in
dreams, this time on a flight to Chicago.
The trip is bumpy and I feel dizzy though
the world in a bizarre glow. Everyone
is staring at the window:
a pale white sky against the dull dark inside
above which hangs an azure sun. My neighbor
explains to me that we are flying across a glacier
or maybe just a vast floating ice.
Just like those sea fowls, they always
hover and circle, searching for
a precious ground to land on or they'd soak
in the chilling desert.
We must have crossed September since aurora
starts to gleam, but all the ice is melting as if
arctic does have spring.
Were I a sea fowl, I'd choose to leave the north
with the wind, or the turbulence from
aircrafts that passes by.
But then inside that aircraft everything starts to
decompose into basic strings.
In that violent vibration I woke, and
feel like something is lost, while something is gained
—it's even better, for one to wake up
in the middle of a trip; the sun is now turquoise.

The lamp of freedom

When I turned on the lamp there
rests a moth. A small vigilant fugitive
running away from the dark. You see, he
spent hours entering the lamp
as if on his path that's the only camp.
A moth's life may be short
but an hour is rather long.
So I dimmed down the light
attempting to free the path seeker
—it failed. His struggle became even
harder, and much more fierce
His wings resonant with surrounding air
His shadow tremble like a blooming flare
His path to freedom is deprived of him,
how can he not dare
to be irritated? But it's four in the morning.
I had to turn off the lamp.

Waterfall

On the way to the waterfall I
wondered, how this fog
rise from the ice shards that splashed
by the impact. They obstruct your sight for the day,
and dissipate at night. Probably a shield to isolate people
from eye contact. But now there's no one on the
street, so you can see clearly the shadow of
everything. Including the shadow itself. And hear the
humming of the floating ice crashing with surface of water,
blocked by the building in the middle. Or was it
the humming of the granite itself? I kept
walking, across the corner stands a neon tree.
Cross this point and you shall meet a sleek
recurrence of the fog pierced by a swinging
searchlight. And in that swing I saw
the fall itself. A vast existence that suddenly emerge from
the dark, partially frozen but constantly moving.
Now I understand how this town
works. The fog, the sound, the shadow, and
everything. For the rest of the night I just stood
there, breathing the emerging shadow and
looking at the vibrant sound and
listening to the choking ice fog and
trapped in this quaking mixture until
another traveller tapped me gently in the morning.

Another summer proscenium

That July night is not clear in my
memory now. I went up for some milk when
I suddenly saw the building across the street.
Time stopped at the place, light frozen
in the window pane. I first saw a man smoking
in an anxious pace. A decision to make is always
a night staying awake. To some point everyone meets
that process, so prepare your nicotine. He then
threw the end away and watched the spark
sink to the endless deep.

And a level above is a middle-aged lady who
gaze through the rising smoke rings. Her eyes
gitter in the dazzling city light, but her posture
told a different story in a desperate city night. I watched
part of her jumping off the balcony, in a graceful
trajectory, while the rest leans
on the handrail, waiting for the abyss to stare back.
I closed the refrigerator, the milk box was
already empty. Two levels above I saw there
shed a warm light. A pleasant bedroom with an
orange glow. No one was there as I expect, and
no one shall come were I to guess. I waited for another
twenty minutes to make sure, that is probably what
they called life.

The Alternative Spring

You should receive the postcards by June
when I reached Prague.
The old town square looks different
after the tension of March.
We hold meetings to discuss
how to nestle down in the chamber of
the astronomical clock. From there you can
see the pinnacle of the Cathedral
occupied by the petrels; and the bricks
on the square, an unrecognizable grid seen
from above, run over by burning churns.
Four months of conference
bores everyone. Especially those who
don't belong to this land.
The gannets and cormorants. They want
to lead all the beaks and feather.
But that's strongly
opposed. They didn't grow up on
the bank of Vltava, and slide through
the eyot at dusk, the sand of which comes
from Dresden. They also held up meetings there
and isolated us, in spring. All these large
coastal breeds, coming from the north
where democratic is achieved among all.
Only to have more meetings, and endless

motions. Quarrels with the flutter of wings
while preaching their advanced
methods of hatching. But that doesn't work
for us. We are pigeons with
a sense for the direction. Our breed lived on this
land for centuries. We witnessed this city
built from cobble, and we shall live our way
until it burned to ashes. These intruders must
be evicted. At all cost.

—So as the swallow read her
postcard, and cried.

Hypnosomnia Hypothesis

Were I to lose my sleep tonight
I should prepare the prologue before twelve.
In those midnight hours, there would be
a constant beat lurking in the empty darkness.
To seek a deep slumber is to fall prey of
those sneaky concepts. When you close your eyes
they'd flashback and take control, and set the genre
for you. Now the synopsis is known, and the
protagonist is myself. And it would start with
an aerial shot. An endless road extends to the clouds.
A lonely traveller walking in his
borderless scene, and suddenly crosses
the fifth wall. Now I would see he's
lying under the ocean. An arc shot
scanning across, some pale light
pierced through gives
a tinted color. Now the beats would intervene
and mix with a background roar. And I would switch to
a medium shot. A sepia tone, clearly shows
how much exhausted he is, despite
the easing roar. And now comes to the climax part,
a flashing montage, an in-eye shot.
The blinking light of the streetlamp, will
be trapped between his lids.
Are you the shadow of the waxwing slain?

In a speeded slow-motion clip
the fluff turned into a stampeding hoof. And I would
stop at this scene, woke up and sweat over the sheet,
and realize how many hours I spent awake,
and lie back and continue my film noir cast.

The rainy redemption

His prison has no boundary
but dilating space.
So seamless a cage that
even the wardens can't escape.
The prisoner is obligated
to comprehend, to calculate
but never to understand:
wherefore is he trapped
in rain?

Do endure eternity for
some while before time
turns into dimensionless grain.
With which concludes end of duty
discrete steps in his mind,
a part-time slumbering existence folds
the boundary back to its center.

Then another nano second passed and
the wardens all deceased to stars.
Nowhereman endued with a nowhereland:
The imprisoned supersedes the prison. Now
he sees beyond
the dim envelope of his cell. Forming a looming
intention of increasing
entropy taunting at his immortality.

Preceding phosphorus lies his premise
After aluminum leaves what's alive
Wherefore was he trapped
again? The rain won't stop
but eternity has sure begun.

His mind at the clockwork

I find it fun to yell at the nurses
at the eighth year.
They sent me to this place, for I know things
they don't. Der Zeit. That moving entity without
consciousness. I'd spend nights on the bed,
strapped, ruminating on how
a real psycho feels. Does he ever
smell the stress of coming death? Would he notice
the broken clock on the wall? Shouldn't oranges be
supplied to every lunatic? And how does he
spend his sleepless nights? If he dares to
think over these questions, he'd probably see
that looming entity, a grinding emptiness,
approaching shadows in the corridor, grim gaslight
projected on the floor, rusty nails
inside the wall. I grimaced at a passer-by.
His eyes filled with confusion or sorrow, maybe both.
The kind of emotion the psychos wouldn't have. Hast du
kinder? How many strapped-thinking nights have you
endured, to hold that much tear? How many oranges should
one eat, to get himself mad? Why the broken clock
started to move again, in the sleepless night?
I thought those were the questions
worth asking. I opened my mouth, but those words were
slipping away. I yelled.

About the author

PHILLIP GU is an ECE student currently taking undergraduate courses at Shanghai Jiaotong University. He writes poems, and runs a blog at <https://enoch2090.me>. He is also taking part in researches regarding face detection with image hash algorithms, and smart NIC design with FPGA boards.

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