5. Kuang

My name is Huang Chenkuang. I grew up in a remote village in Jiangxi. The village is very small with less than 200 residents. If you talk loudly enough, people living on either end of the village can hear you. It’s a 150-minute bus ride from my village to the county city, and the bus only runs once a day in the very early morning. I had to get up at 5 a.m. in order to catch the bus.

I have four elder sisters. This is quite rare for people about my age, because the Family Plan was extremely strict around the 1990s. Every two or three days, local officials came to our house trying to convince my mom to have me aborted. My parents exerted every means to delay the act, putting it off until my mom was almost in her eighth month of pregnancy.

One of my dad’s friends told him there is a type of medicine that can accelerate the labor process. My dad tapped his whole network, and managed to secretly arrange the injection before the abortion surgery.

The abortion was also done by injection, only with a huge needle, and the doctor used his hands to feel the position of the baby to make sure the injection would be fatal. Pretending that she was feeling unwell, my mom shifted around as much as she could in the hope to make the injections miss. Thanks to the earlier medicine and her intentional movements, the abortion didn’t kill me.

My mom gave birth to me in the hospital at three a.m. Afraid that the doctor would give another injection if he found out the baby was still alive, my mom gave birth in complete silence. She shared a ward with a dozen other patients, and no one knew she was having a baby coming out of her body, not even the lady whose bed was less than a meter away, until my cry broke out.

The hospital was located next to a river. My mom said she saw the bodies of dead babies floating over the river. Forced abortion was nothing surprising at that time. Regularly, I think of those babies whose lives were never able to blossom and grow. I am grief-stricken to picture the vivid and complex lives they could have had as we do.

Because I wasn’t supposed to be born, I’ve been a “black human being”—I didn’t have a hukou until the end of high school, when I needed an ID card to take the Gaokao.

My parents were both primary school teachers in our village. Different from most local parents, they valued education and were very strict. When my peers were running wild in nature, I was condemned to homework and books.

That was when I got into reading. I read almost every book that was available to me. Our primary school also had a very small library with a collection mostly of translated classics. I remember enjoying “Boule De Suif” and How the Steel Was Tempered.

I came to Beijing for school in 2014. Beijing experienced terrible pollution that year. Most of the winter days were heavily polluted and grey and suffocating. It was also that winter I lost my best friend. Two months after I started school, I got a phone call telling me she had a car accident.

I guess when you’re in your early twenties, the idea of a beloved one’s death is still quite outside your conceptual grasp. I don’t think losing her so early in life is something I will ever really get over, but I’d say the sadness has lost its sharpness over time. I believe that she remains as a part of me. As I live, she lives.

After that, I developed a new understanding of death and became more open-minded about it. I’m now reading a book about aging and dying, a discussion probably most of us fail to engage with enough. I think apart from learning how to love people, it’s even more important to learn how to take the moment to say goodbye.

I kind of feel being in an awkward age—I have the feeling of being young at the right time, yet occasionally I can’t help feeling like I’m running late to everything. The world around me just keeps changing at a dizzying speed.

Would I say I’m a happy person? No, not really. I wake up everyday feeling thankful for what I have. But I’m an idealist, which means I feel disappointed very often because apparently it’s not a perfect world we’re living in. Yet I also get so often amazed because the world stores so many surprises. With the circle of disappointment and amazement, there’s never a boring day. Every day I feel a new yearning for life.

Edited by David Huntington

**Note from Kuang:**

As a curious stranger, as an old friend from another time, I sat down for a small chat with myself.