There were plenty who assumed from the start that the Mirror Sea was a fraud: that there was no anonymization, that it was seeing faces and tracking individuals, that nothing had really changed. When the Xia Zitian Papers dropped, everyone assumed they’d prove as much. But the story they told was much stranger. The cameras really did what Xia claimed: they blurred and abstracted, sliced and diced. It really was a glimpse, as the Secretary himself loved to say, at the fabric of society itself. The bombshell was that the fabric was inhabited.

Were the things wriggling around in the Mirror Sea *alive*? This was the question that Xia’s policy team had fixated on. *Yes* had an unhinged, rising gleam to it; *no* reached for causality and free will and always ended on a minor seventh, a sucking of teeth. The debates were a meter deep on A4 paper. They had become unhealthily obsessed with the behavior and well-being of the Ripples, and no one more than the big man himself. It was the final piece his opponents needed to rip Shanghai away from him, away from China, creating the Yangtze Delta Orthogonal Zone. Blue Delta promised to tear the system down. Even as they did, they couldn’t tear their eyes off the feeds.

But I shouldn’t be thinking about the Mirror Sea, so I pay no attention to the countless portholes that Shanghai has pried back open for itself: tiny LCD screens in storefront windows and in elevators. Spherical fishbowl quasigrams floating within the fountains of Century Park. Six-story projections on the sides of shopping centers. And then there are the cameras that feed them, winking everywhere from high, oblique shadows. The ones you see are from the Xia era: reflective, iridescent, teardrop-shaped things, with the iconic blind-eye symbol ringing the lens. The ones you don’t are modern, impossibly small, the anonymizing algorithm carved into nanoscale channels on the lens itself. Sometimes regular CCTV cameras are employed, the Lam-Waldmann Hash running entirely in software; this is considered vaguely obscene.

I’m not thinking about any of this, by the way.

Not even sterile Beiwan Ward is immune — the sidewalk from campus to the metro is paced out by slender, tasteful pillars, their edgeless displays frothing with suggestion. Beiwan is brand-new, a gleaming shell around YINS: dorms, a few pricey takeout joints, a lone tiyan-guan. It doesn’t need to attract nightlife by attracting Ripplechasers, or to lease its feed to the highest bidder. Instead, its barren little Mirror Sea is public art, an insistence of placehood. Beneath the cameras, mesh baskets overflow with all the usual votives — prayer blocks and dried flowers and fluorescent voxelite beads — but these are refreshed on schedule by the maintenance men who shine the windows and renormalize the hedges. Any chalk on the walls would be power-washed by dawn.

But, as always, I’m not thinking about it. I’m going the long way to avoid it, in fact, splashing along beside the six-lane speedway that hems Beiwan against the east bank of the Huangpu. The way across is access-controlled footbridges; on the other side, light industry melts into a howling wilderness of warehouse fires, inhabited only by the desperate and insane. They say the Mirror Sea is thickest out there now, mostly aftermarket cameras installed (by who and for what?) after Xia’s fall. They say they show it live on solar mesh screens, jump-scares hidden around bends. They say if you see something floating by, you’d better run.

The second night, when I get home, the street is a sewer. So why am I struck by the urge to walk? I find myself pulling on rubber boots in the dead of night, tiptoeing downstairs against the ears of nosy neighbors, and finding footing on the slick cobblestones of Xietu South. I walk in long, rectangular loops around the ward. I trade brief glances with delivery drivers, redlights on patrol — who else would be out in this weather, at this time of night, and *why*? I know the answer, of course. But this night, I keep it bundled beneath my black voxelwear parka. At the boundary of the ward, I turn home, and stare at the ceiling until I fall asleep.

But I can dream about it, right?