Sunflower mania grips Shanghai.

Consider my downstairs neighbor, a man with red cheeks and a shock of white hair who we call Lao Miao. A retired mechanic, the man to beat at chess in our little combover of a park, a big hit with the aunties. Miao considers himself a citizen of Xietu South Ward, and then of the People’s Republic of China, and nothing in between. He keeps his long-expired Chinese shenfenzheng card taped to the back of an old cell phone, the chip from his YZID reluctantly stuffed inside. He gambles in RMB, wins in parallel yuan, and goes down the street to exchange it right back. He gripes about Blue Delta’s overreaction to the Xia Zitian thing. Now *there* was a man, he once mused to no one in particular, who made a single mistake! And admitted it!

For Lao Miao, Shanghai’s estrangement from Beijing is a sad, slow-motion mistake orchestrated by the masochists at Blue Delta and the maniacs at the Big Three. It’s not something normal people want. And it does take a certain lanyard-induced hypoxia to muster pride for the Yangtze Delta Orthogonal Zone, and its strange new exports: parallel, counterfactual, virtual, neikotic. But every so often Shanghai produces something only it knows how to produce, that the rest of the world actually needs. On such a day there’s a sense of being here and not there, now and not then, in the eye contact on the subway and the downbeat of the chatter with the danbing guy. On such a day even Lao Miao might be cajoled into wearing a little sunflower on his lapel.

“Good morning, Mona,” he calls as I step outside. I wouldn’t have guessed he knows my name, but he positively sings it (high-high) in that reedy voice of his, classic and fine-tuned like one of his mopeds.

The ads on the metro, for skin cream and yogurt and daycare, have all been convolved to bloom with sunflowers. The Malay women in the interchanges are selling the things by the dozen, newly dead or freshly printed. A subtitled YZTV broadcast features a Blue Delta rep, flanked by glowering Ward Council delegates. Impossibly, they all agree that the Sieve will succeed where countless strategies and programs have failed, lighting the way to reunify the wards.

Camball footage now: reporters outside Xia Zitian’s dingzifang compound, rabid for his take. He emerges in a bathrobe, adjusts his ankle monitor, and shoos them away with a slipper.

Nobody mentions the debris.

The whole city is converging on Beiwan, tour groups and school buses on pilgrimage to YINS. The one little ice cream shop is drowning in business. Sunflowers *everywhere*: on hats and glo-wands and streamers. I really can’t help but notice that our barren little Mirror Sea is dense with Ripples today, and that it’s flecked and stranded with goldenrod. I keep my eyes away.

Deng’s experiment wouldn’t be so hard anymore. With a willing partner I could run it in an afternoon. I’d need a pair of readonly electrode nets, easy to borrow from the library. And to establish an empathetic baseline, these days —

“Do you have an intersubjectivity optics kit?”

The librarian nods, and fetches a velvet bag clattering with heavy lights and mirrors and prisms.

Downstairs, I search for Yao. Maybe I’m not ready to drag him into this yet, but I consider how I’d couch it to him. If it doesn’t work, that’ll be good for both of us. If it *does* work, well. His desk is unoccupied, and empty aside from his copy of the Sunflower Sieve egg. I consider leaving a note. Instead I find myself handling the orb, weighing it in my palm. *Really, you shouldn’t.* But of course I need to, sooner or later. This thing is going to be part of every neikonaut’s toolkit within weeks. Besides, if I’m going to help Yao out of his delusions, I need to see what he sees.