

The Red Island is unrecognizable. It robs the poet of speech and threatens to spill outside the artist's canvas, and spill it does, as the waves come up on the shore and deposit its bounties from its latest venture out to sea. The tiny strip of land that remains when the tide comes high finds itself giving, giving until it can give no more, at which point it succumbs and finally goes under, all signs of a struggle gone.

How I would like to be at Hongdao's beck and call, and find myself regurgitated on its shore! They would wax poetic about me — *the wind from afar carries fresh life to these shores* — instead of shunning me and the cautionary tales I bring. Though I may breathe the same salty ocean air and feel the city's sway over me as we near its outskirts, I have the distinct feeling that I am a foreign body — I do not belong.

But here I do not have a solid form yet; here I am as fluid as the seawater that once flowed through my veins. Only the vessel that holds me, the silver vehicle with two other passengers, I am certain will reject all light in its solidity. As sunlight streams through the car window and a bead of the radiant sunshine catches in my fluttering eyelid, the image of a cool city under a scorching sun burns into my mind.

*We hear you, daughter. You are home.*

The Green Island is beautiful. Highways pierce into its pure green heart and all roads lead to the same destination.

All that glitters here is gold — but gold, in Ludao, is not a natural sight. Even the algae that appear almost sickly in their blue-green hue reflect the same blues and greens that form the veins of the living things that inhabit this place.

The maiden of these waters is sick. Her face flashes an unpleasant shade of green; her hair is made of seaweed, her tail of fish scales, her heart of pure ironclad will. She is envious and makes no effort to hide it. She yearns for the pure, tranquil waters of a lifetime ago — but only a matter of minutes for me.

Her pure maiden's heart calls out to me, and I am helpless to do anything.

Just as I banish her face into myth, a Greek sickle enters my periphery. It glows gold and orange in the blinding sun. A young woman wearing red stands behind it, her smiling face in stark contrast to the nymph's sour complexion.

Above her head reads the words "THE PEOPLE'S SOLIDARITY."

She is pointing up at the horizon. Her comrades' eyes follow. Mine do not.

Her zeal scares me; her zeal emboldens me. But at the end of the day, she is a paper cutout, and I am the real thing. She is a visionary; I am strictly rooted to reality in all its messiness. She is intangible. I am here.

And to both of us, she says:

*We hear you, daughter. You are home.*

*The water hears and understands.*

The Clear Island is home. My father throws down the visor to shield his eyes from the incoming sunlight. Our driver skillfully navigates the rush-hour traffic, leading us down the twists and turns of Qingdao.

“It’s not an island in the literal sense,” he explains to us, as though he’s clearing up a common tourist’s misconception.

*He thinks we’re tourists.*

My father wears a look of wry amusement. I try to stifle my laugh.

Qingdao is not an island — but it can be isolating all the same.

The further we are from the sea, the faster my heart romps. I dare not look up to see how close we are to our destination, but it occurs to me that the clear sky may be easy on the eyes, a substitute for the deep blue my heart has yearned for ever since our departure five years ago.

Immediately I realize I’ve made a mistake — not only have I laid eyes upon the horizon, I’ve looked past it. Construction cranes loom above the highest skyscrapers of Qingdao City, telling a tale of industrialization, modernization, and change. Progress, but at what cost?

Suddenly I am struck with a vision of a dystopian future, one in which these terrifyingly tall structures that threaten to puncture the sky are machines of war instead of merely its proponents. The woman from the propaganda poster stands at the edge of the crane, waving a blood red flag, looking down on the horizon with a god’s condescension. The sun is gone, the thunder booms in its absence, and the cries of a distant Nereid can be heard. And still there are those who romanticize it all, a defiant girl armed with a pen who writes *Dreams of the Red Watchtower*, the futuristic parallel of the Chinese classic *Hong Lou Meng*, while trapped in her high-rise apartment, unable to step foot outside her home due to the guerrilla warfare happening in the streets.

But in the moment, the cranes stand completely still, and all is calm and tranquil.

As my idyllic world collapses under my scrutiny, my resolve steels. I want to encase my city in a layer of ice and preserve it as it is, forever. No crimson future will befall my home. No visionaries or divine intervention will be necessary. Peace — and only peace — will last for an eternity.

The vehicle jerks forward. Colors dart around in my vision as the traffic light changes from green, to yellow, to red. We halt and yield to several jaywalking pedestrians. A small art school cramped between two tutoring centers catches my eye. Children play around a fountain. A group of *āyí* are dancing in the main square, a common pastime for older ladies. Their male counterparts play Xiangqi, not chess, at tables, some rubbing their chins while others scratch their heads in thought.

And me? I find myself along for the ride.

This dynamic place is the city I know. It doesn't have the quality of ice, fixed and stagnant and opaque; it's more like water, at times cool and dispassionate, but warm and inviting in summertime. The latter's flexible nature is why my all too ambitious plan would have never worked — eventually, the people would break out of the ice, and find a world unwilling to accept their outdated ways. Their ostracization would be complete, unlike mine, and I make the choice to open my heart to the world.

I can only hope they will do the same.

*We hear you, daughter. You are home.*

*The water hears and understands.*

*The ice does not forgive.*