

The Creator's Paradise

A collection by Jerry Zhou



selfportraitception, Seamus Wray

This is a collection of poems by the poet known as Ai.

I have never known another artist who had more consistently challenged the very act of creation in every work they made. Despite his visionary poetry, Ai never published any of his works, a decision that I could never understand. As his friend and fellow poet, I found him to be incredibly inspiring – in his poems, I saw something that pierced through the lens through which I had been viewing the world, and allowed me to approach my own creations with an entirely new frame of mind.

I assembled this collection in order to honor my memory of Ai. After each poem, I will share my interpretation of what I think Ai was trying to express, and in doing so, illuminate –and celebrate– the life of the man behind the creator's mask.

Now, without further ado, the art.

–Jerry Zhou

The Life

Roused by the clamor of clucking,
The east wind carries my steps.
Caressed by fronds of dew-breath,
I sweep towards the light.

Yet-defiant raindrops
rest on the brink of the soil.
Pebbles, supplanted by my hand,
chase after the rising sun.

My microcosm of the universe
leaves me unburdened and free.
My only remaining regret?
Not sowing the corn last week.

I once dug up a stone
the shape of an outstretched palm
reaching beyond mortality.
I keep it on the mantle.

The world's *whispers* mean nothing.
The west light fades, and I sleep well.
below the star-filled sky,
Enjoying a dreamless night.

The first poem Ai ever wrote was a pastoral poem. It was an incredibly simple poem – without much flowery language or sensory imagery. But this poem’s meaning has nothing to do with its poetic components – rather, I find that the method and means of creation have a far greater impact on the poem. As far as I know, Ai had never written poetry before “The Life”, and had simply chronicled his surroundings on a trip to the country, in the fashion of the English romantics. Describing the sights and sounds he saw around him, he wrote a declaration to nature, to the beauty – and melancholy – of such a simple lifestyle.

To be able to construct such a powerful, nuanced meaning from such ordinary materials – it was the first tell that his drab appearance and standard mannerisms concealed a beautiful mind within, just like his poem’s simple language concealed a deeper meaning. I immediately knew that I had found someone special, an artist that stood above the crowd. I had to get to know him better. I reached out to him, and the rest is history.

Anemoia

If I could

consign to the wind
all my regrets, all my triumphs
my everything-to-be,
and be swept off of myself
to an unthinkable reality
to a life I could have never lived,
nor ever will—
would I be complete?

To

abandon everything at once
in a world that's not quite fantasy:
like a misremembered dream,
unfamiliar, but a little nostalgic,
a stolen amalgamation of impossible memories.
a pleasure to be suffered,
a pain to savor infinitely.

Perhaps

the ideal is pastoral.
rustic romanticism plague my dormant reveries
or possibly, neon blurs of light
lapse into an irresistible rhythmic uprising.
Even, maybe, a time not unlike our own,
but defined by a distinctive, codependent,
unity.

Still,

nothing leads to you
despite infinite paths before me.
and these fantastical infinities
whispers the truth to me because
the stars that we could always see
—no matter how high we built—
were never more than just a dream.

His work was always focused on some sort of self-discovery – I think one time Ai called it “self-focused exploration”. Rather than expressing himself to others verbally, he let it out through his artwork instead, although that’s not to say that these poems aren’t any less true to his emotions.

More specifically, Ai was a dreamer. His eyes were always poised skyward, looking for something more, looking for something different. He was disillusioned from the mundane everyday, and there was an air of wanderlust about him. What’s fascinating, though, is how he transitions from these wide, sweeping philosophical statements to the concrete, beautiful imagery of the third stanza, what I like to call his “dream sequence”. And in it, the last line “defined by a distinctive, codependent, unity” really stood out to me. Ai was lonely. Ai wanted to understand someone else, to have someone understand him, to help him come out of his shell. That line felt like it was meant for I and I alone, and since I understood that, we soon became close friends.

&

The meaning is life, and fiery legacies, and
flashes of color, & untold everythings, &
inexorable clocks & momentary walks &
shrinking sky & fading *whisper*&
timewastedbutnotlost&
theforeverthatbecomes
afleetingmemory
&

This poem was a rough draft scribbled in the corner of some sheet music, nowhere near complete in my opinion, but Ai didn’t ever return to it. There was never any “finishing” or “revising” to be done – Ai worked continuously on a poem for however long he deemed necessary, then, when he felt he wanted to stop, that was it. Pencils down. It was dead to him at that point – as complete as it ever would be – and he would move on to the next. To me, this was absurd – as absurd as never wanting to share his poetry.

The poem speeds up and melds together as it progresses, going faster and faster and faster, conveying the futility of resisting time in Ai’s eyes. One of the most powerful parts of this poem is

the phrase “shrinking sky” rather than “a shrinking sky” – Ai didn’t even have time for the “a”, leaving only the “I”. It was an invitation into his deepest, purest self. And his self-expression here is clear – Ai always had an intense fear of wasting time. Maybe that was why he never came back to revision – he always had to preserve his creative momentum, going from one poem to the next, no time to look back.

A reunion with an old friend where all you do is repeat decade-old inside jokes

a poem written in english run through google translate 100 times
a conversation with the dead but it turns out he’s alive
a homeric epic that sets up a pattern then gradually tears away at layers of creation until it becomes its own outline
an interactive, choose-our-own-stanza poem
an ode to whitethorn, written by the night sky
a *whisper*-ed conversation between two strangers who are both pretending they know the other
a dream of a man named RB
a poem made of music based on a jazz standard
a poem starting with a definition of an obscure word in the dictionary
a poem without any direction
a poem without an ending
a poem with a terrible ending

Though this poem looks on the surface like a collection of ideas, I knew it was more than that. Read the title again – the poem was clearly about Ai and I’s friendship. I understood him, and he understood me. We understood each other. We could share those inside jokes, we could bring the best out of each other.

an ode to whitethorn, written by the night sky

but what is there

left to create?

The whitethorn knows.

it breathes the inky breaths of a paintbrush
that obstructs a blue-gray sky.

whitethorn stands its jade crystals in the sand,
making wreaths for posterity; overlooking the sea that
motions for the poem to come from the heart.
the Moon refuses, for it is not a star.

fruits of the whitethorn, dark red,
howl of the library of babel:
“discover the pages that contain your epiphany.”
small things, they are swept aside –
like assumptions, twice-washed;
or motives, untaken.

still there is nothing to create.
Moon says that whitethorn’s leaves look like
chicken-feet: In Chinese, they are called phoenix-claw
but eaten all the same.
Waves crash upon the shore, applauding the moon’s wisdom.
Whitethorn *whispers*: “my leaves mean nothing.”

the night wanes, tides receding.
Moon asks again:
Now I have nothing to push or pull.
what is there left to create
when I am leaving the sky?
when I am losing my audience?

O, whitethorn!
slender beauty, the heavens shy away from your joy;
weeping for the great sacrifice - creation - not knowing
that you lie on soil formed from unexpressed words;
that everything
yet to be created.

Reading the poem, one truth is immediately obvious: Ai was in a creative rut. “What is there / left to create?” He had lost his creative momentum, and he was struggling with making art that wasn’t just “small things, swept aside.” And though everybody has writer’s block every now and then, Ai was far more disturbed than usual. He felt an immense sense of loss – he was “leaving the sky”, losing the part of him that knew the certainty of an existence spurred by conviction. Where was the Ai who dreamed of dreaming? Where was the Ai who lived to live? Where was the Ai who chased perfection? To him, this was an un-making of the Ai that he knew himself as.

Ai was a musician. He had written this poem after an immensely successful performance, a time when he should have been proud of himself, should have been celebrating. Instead, he holed himself up, and wrote this. In retrospect, this was the first sign that something was wrong with him, something that I needed to fix. I hate myself for not seeing that back then.

ad infinitum

Throw me into a blazing pit, and wait.
As long as the flames do not swallow me,
I will live to accept the fire. Better;
I'll embrace it, welcome it as the self.
Consuming the world with my ambition,
feverishly chase after *whispers* of smoke.

The self changes.
What do I seek?
Lucid transience –
the yet-unknown.

After a lifetime the fire will burn out.
The walls I built will age, break down, collapse.
It will snow, ice seeping through my charred heart.
I'll embrace it, welcome it as the self.
Storming past the world with the resolve to
freeze, never losing a moment again.

The self changes.
Where to go next?
Only forward –
never turn back.

I cannot ever know satisfaction.
To cease changing – stagnation would be death:
Roshan: “to places – never from places.”
Yet this freedom is the greatest prison –
the rejection of eternity is
in of itself an eternal belief.

The self changes.
Linger between
now and after;
simply savor
but one moment
of happiness.

Ai was not happy. His life was fractured into “moments” of brief clarity, sandwiched by pain – fire and ice, burning heat and freezing cold. Only in the brief moments “between now and after” could Ai have a single taste of happiness – only in the moments when he was reflecting on his past and future through poetry was he happy. Ai secluded himself more and more. Writing became a coping mechanism for him. He stopped playing music. A couple weeks later, he emerged from his room with this poem:

i dreamt of a hallway with patterns in it

history upon
brightly lit mahogany walls
clinging on like unshakeable desolation

a figure glides down the vestibule
grasping at understanding
but time moves far too quickly
for the memories to be recognized

afraid of loss, the wind
seals his eyes wide shut
the reflection of the light
(casting *whispers* on the windows)
seeps through the eyelids
into birth, into life, into ending

one certainty:
he is not dying.
he is simply sick of tasting afterthoughts.

This is where I started to harbor serious concerns. One way or another, Ai felt like he was dying, and was “sealing his eyes wide shut.”

This was also around the time I had caught on to the fact Ai had, for some reason, included the word “whisper” italicized in every single poem he wrote. The whispers, what did they mean? Without fail, there was one in every poem. Was it schizophrenia? Social anxiety to the point where Ai could only talk in whispers?

feuer

to be positively
jacksonian;
improbably blazing
sparks
flicker —
flick —
licking —

the e
d
g
e
of the frame
mantle of light
ignite the night:
fire's sole birthright
despite —
slightly – brightly –
softly –
softly *whisper* softly SOFTLY
SNAP SNAP POP CRACK POP SNAP POP

kindle and grow;
sing away soul
purpose aglow;
adagio
and
burn become
static
3 5 9 7 2 0 1 8 5 9 3 0 5 1 8 9 5 3 4 9 3 5 0 2 3 5 2 5 1 2 0 8 5 3- 2 1 3 5 4 5 3 4 1 2 1 2
r r r r r r r r r r r r
a a a a a a a a a a a a
g g g g q g g g g g g g
e e e e e e e e c e e e
BRIGHT ENGULFING RAGE FUELED BY BRIGHT ENGulfing rage

surpass
ambition;
and fear of death;
and roar of life:
I AM ALIVE! but
ash is a legacy dreadfully dry of substance.

Ai was angry. Who else but a mad man could write such fiery poetry?

Still, Ai expressed his emotions through his poems, and through reading them, I could understand him. That connection between us could never be taken away. Ai was not an aggressive person. That's what the struggle of the poem is all about – the conflict between the “softly”s and the “SNAP”s and the “POP”s was the conflict in his inner self, holding back his anger. Was it writer's block, again? Was he raging at creation? His incapability to express himself? His anxiety?

I talked to him after reading this poem, I had to. “Why are you angry? I'm here if you need to talk.”, that sort of thing. He just looked at me with sad, disappointed eyes. He told me I was reading too much into things. He scolded me for caring for him. Surely, I wasn't the subject of his anger?

atmospheric rainfall

C D M N G M

stand in line.

bass - reverb:

fish-scales that I worship

twelve lives tip the scale.

twelve lives tip the scale.

three: five at seven eighty-six

the word is *whisper*

like an autograph signed by a world grateful for your pain.

I'm not sure what's going on here. I don't understand what Ai's trying to say. The letters, are they a code? Why does he repeat “twelve lives tip the scale”? What do the numbers mean? And that damned whisper again – Why did he do this? I thought I understood you! I thought we understood each other! So why? Why would you write this?

Ai's mind was splitting apart. He wasn't making any sense in his poetry anymore, but he wouldn't talk to me. He wouldn't reply to my desperate calls, and I was getting seriously scared.

Eros

But I won't save you, I can't save you.
The fog obscures your heart,
leaving but words, a senseless afterthought
melting away into the night.

*If I understand you, you'll save me.
your fragile numbness, lost to the rain.
Your words, impossibly genuine, compel me.
I'll stay: Your whispers are all that will ever be.*

I can't save you. No, I won't save you.
there are rivers one can't cross:
what is happiness but a word on a page?
don't fight for my air—let me sink into the night.

*stained wet with moonlight:
you, running readily towards the sky,
and I, chasing after your shadow—
those nights when we could fly.*

Ai and I had not spoken since the last poem. But then he sent me Eros – the clarity before the collapse. His heart was being consumed by a fog, “sinking into the night”. He was being consumed by his social anxiety, the dark side of his identity, his “night”.

Ai disappeared after that.

Looking back, I had never properly communicated with Ai. He was always the one to express himself, and I was always the “reader” – listening, affirming, but never truly expressing. I read so many of his words, but he never read any of mine. Ai, I understood you so well, but did you understand me at all? Was that why you left?

In many ways, the creation of this collection was my attempt at reaching Ai, if he’s even still alive. Poring through year-old chat attachments and crumpled notebook pages, I cobbled together this collection of Ai’s work, hoping that, if Ai were to see this again, we could reverse the roles a little – you could get inside my head instead – and understand each other again.

Ai, if you’re out there somewhere, I hope you’re alright.

Epilogue: Ai's response

The Life: I've never been to the countryside.

Anemoia: Unity meant harmony, not companionship. It was musical.

&: not adding the "a" was a typo.

a reunion: was a brainstorming session. I just wrote down ideas. Not everything's about you.

Ode to Whitethorn: I solved my own problem. I don't need you.

Ad Infinitum: I was describing sensations upon taking a shower.

i dreamt of a hallway with patterns in it: I dreamt of a hallway. Then I wrote it down.

feuer: feel it. I was having fun playing with sound.

Atmospheric rainfall: It's not supposed to make sense.

Eros: I was imitating a conversation between the two of us.

Does it feel good?

Are you satisfied now?

Now that you know the answers?

This was never about saving me.

It was always about you.

Your interpretations.

Your truth.

But my poems were for me.

Ai alone were to read them.

Oh! And the meaning of *whisper*

"explain the meaning of *whisper*."

But I italicized it! so there has to be a meaning

Wait there has to be a meaning

everything has a meaning!

Let me just ask you one thing.

Rather than what you understood

How did the poem make you feel?

Why can't you understand that poems

don't need to be true to my feelings?

That my poems are just for me?

That poems are not problems to be solved?

That I can write about happiness

without being happy

and write about death

without being dead?

You invaded my paradise.
You committed the unforgivable.
Do you want it plainly? I CUT YOU OUT OF MY LIFE.
Yet you continue to corrupt my art.
It was never yours to share.
It was never yours to understand.
Read my poems all you want.
I am not my poetry.
I am not yours to understand.

Express yourself instead.
Ai don't want to speak for you.
Leave me. Pick up a pen,
and create a paradise of your own.

Credits

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All works written, edited, and collected by Jerry Zhou.

With advice from Andy Stallings, Sam Morris, Christian Odenius, and Holden Woodward

Inspirations:

The Beginner's Guide, Davey Wreden

The Odyssey, Homer

Transistor, Supergiant Games

House of Leaves, Mark Z. Danielewski

Dictionary of Obscure Sorrows, John Koenig

The Great Gatsby, F. Scott Fitzgerald

タナトスの誘惑, Hoshino Mayo

Post-Credits:

Midas

1: Ὀδύσσεια – *Odyssey*

O sing, great muse, of the tormented man.
tell of the king who wears a mask of gold:
Muse, tell me how he suffered and remained
a captive in his gilded jewel box, speak
of towers near divine and distance lost,
antiquities that fell to the abyss.
Dear goddess, offspring of the stranger's lord,
tell the old story for our modern times,
lest we forget his paralyzed journey
and risk consuming ourselves.

2: a doubt

to what extent do we subsist of lies
the mask one bears, the walls one builds, renounced
the lost takes the shape of an onion;
the layers upon layers that conceal
Depersonalized fragments of ourselves, we are
lost, reduced to nothing but a shell, yet
“to be a shell implies something inside”
identities yet made of pyrite stars.

3: ξενία – *Xenia*

Almighty Zeus, the stranger's Father-God,
commands dominion over mortal souls.
The Lord of Storms presumes a single rule:
the friendship that befits the weary fare.
The foolish king ignores the prostrate call—
the stranger is denied. An instant strike
of lightning breaks the nation's fading dawn.
Upon his gilded realm descends the night,
A golden shovel digs the great king's grave,
an airborne burial without fear of ever hitting the ground.

4: a dream

on nights when I manage to sleep I
have this recurring dream, standing alone on a seashore, my feet
stood upon a bank of golden sand, waves
crashing upon the boundary of my existence.
beside me, a swirling cliff, its form
undefined, unshaped, rearranging into familiar
memories. Perhaps this is how I manage my subconscious.
once the cliff twisted and became a pair of eyes.
the fading eyes of an oculist
or perhaps of a god, the God, watching
my everything, peering into the deepest depths of the ocean of
my being.
It is my least favorite dream.
It is my least favorite feeling.
and so I call upon Midas
conceal my everything in a mask.
Cover the ocean with a sheet of gold.
but of course, that is impossible.
and the eyes keep watching me all the same.

5: θάνατος – *Thanatos*

our King died just like Hemingway.
the golden fool, he declared himself King of Everything,
rising above all below the chariot-driven sun
a thunderclap - but our king was not scared standing
tall – exclaimed amidst the royal plinths that he was unbroken –
then shot himself in the head with his favorite rose.
plink plink -
just like the sound of rain jumping over fences
thus ends an era
being unexpectedly more expected than was expected.

6: a deconstruction

as i sit here and write this,

I'm eating a pancake from my feed post dorm clean-up.

oh, a pancake – the perfect representation of this entire poem!

endless layers of dough but each layer individually hollow

stacked on top of each other until it touches the sky

i hadn't written for a while. I pitched an idea then let it stew

in the back of my mind for almost 2 months now without doing anything with it.

but now

– in one hand a pancake stabbed unto a fork, in the other a pen–

i am deconstructing myself all the same.

but am I really?

did I make up this situation to enhance my work?

did I try to shoehorn an anecdote to allude to the universality of pretending, the mundanity of layers?

Is mundanity even a word?

did 2 months ever pass?

was there ever a pancake in the first place?

you know the way i motivate myself and the way i procrastinate is

strikingly similar to the plate of pancakes that may or may not be beside me.

Everything I do is added to the pile waiting to be eaten but

every night the pile grows higher and higher as i promise myself that i will

one day reach the ideal tomorrow where i finally achieve my goal finally have a purpose

but i do not want to write if it is just fulfilling a prophecy.

so that day never comes

the stack of pancakes now almost touching the ceiling

towering over my desk

crushing itself under its own weight

one day the tower will collapse.

what will I do then?

7: γνῶσις – *Gnosis*

watching eyes that destroy my reality

framework is this framework that of my world.

rhetorical question where's the rhythm

was that an entire paragraph I lost?

the then-united touch of a golden

please complete me o honorable king.

make me part of your truth your now framework

the Almighty Zeus that bows your rule.

do not make the same mistake that I made.
I have forgotten your broken journey
and eaten the onion, consumed myself.

8: a design

1st stanza: mimic Homeric style, establish meter and tone

2nd stanza: breakdown 1st layer: societal paradigms, the concept of pretending

3rd stanza: return to homeric style, but show cracks just below the surface

4th stanza: breakdown 2nd layer: poetic meta-structure—format and rhythm, self-reference

5th stanza: continued breakdown of structure, intentional meaninglessness

6th stanza: breakdown 3rd layer: self-awareness, reader-writer relationship, punctuation

7th stanza: attempted return to homeric style, a twisted reconstruction of the deconstructed

8th stanza: breakdown 4th layer: creative planning process