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## HAO JINGFANG

Hao Jingfang is the author of several novels, a book of travel essays, and numerous short stories published in a variety of venues such as *Science Fiction World*, *Mengya*, *New Science Fiction*, and *ZUI Found*. Her fiction has been awarded the Galaxy (Yinhe) Award as well as the Nebula (Xingyun) Award. She majored in physics at Tsinghua University as an undergraduate, and afterward conducted graduate studies at the Center for Astrophysics at Tsinghua. Hao recently obtained her Ph.D. in Economics and Management from Tsinghua and currently works for a think tank.

Hao does not limit herself to “genre” writing. Her latest novel, *Born in 1984*, for instance, would be considered a literary novel. Imaginative and precise, her stories are carefully designed on multiple levels. Her wide range of interests and literary approaches are reflected in the two selections for this anthology, “Invisible Planets,” a fabulist tale in the tradition of Italo Calvino, and “Folding Beijing,” a near-future, economics-based dystopia. Both stories can be read in many ways. “Folding Beijing” was a finalist for the Hugo Award and the Sturgeon Award.

## INVISIBLE PLANETS

“Tell me about the fascinating planets you’ve seen. But I don’t want to hear anything cruel or disgusting,” you say.

*Good. I nod and smile. Of course. No problem.*

## CHICHI RAHA

Chichi Raha is a fascinating place, its flowers and lakes unforgettable to all visitors. There you cannot see a single inch of exposed soil because the land is covered by vegetation: the *anua* grass, as fine as silk thread; the *kuqin* tree, tall enough to scrape the clouds; and many varieties of unnameable, unimaginably strange fruits exuding seductive aromas.

The Chichi Rahans have never needed to worry about making a living. Their life expectancy is high, their metabolism is slow, and they have no natural enemies. They fill their bellies on a diet of various fruits and make their homes inside a type of tree with large, hollow trunks. The average diameter of these tubes is just wide enough to allow an adult Chichi Rahan to lie down comfortably. When the weather is good, the branches hang loosely, but when it rains, the branches rise so that the leaves form a canopy like an umbrella.

Those who visit Chichi Raha for the first time are always confused by how civilization could have developed on such a world. From the perspective of the visitors, in a place lacking crisis and competition, life should be able to survive very well without intelligence. But there is indeed civilization here, and indeed it is beautiful, vigorous, full of creativity.

Many visitors think they would like to retire here. Most of them think their greatest difficulty would be a matter of diet. So, anxiously and carefully, they taste every type of local fruit. But after they've stayed awhile, after they've attended enough local banquets, they discover—somewhat to their surprise—that while they enjoy the food, they cannot tolerate life here, especially those who are old.

It turns out all Chichi Rahans learn to lie from birth. Indeed, lying is their most important occupation.[\[1\]](#) They spend the entire span of their existence fabricating stories concerning both events that have occurred and events that have not. They write them down, paint them, sing them, but never remember them. They do not care if there's a correspondence between their words and the facts, their only standard being whether the tale is interesting. If you ask them about the history of Chichi Raha, they will tell you a hundred versions. No one will contradict the version told by another, because each moment, they are already engaged in self-contradiction.

On this world, everyone is always saying, “Yes, I will,” but nothing is ever done. No one takes such promises seriously, though promises do make life more interesting. Only in extremely rare circumstances do the inhabitants do as they promise. And such occasions are celebrated. For example, if two of them make an appointment and both happen to keep it, then they will most likely become a couple and live together. Of course, such occurrences are rare. Most live alone all their lives. The inhabitants do not feel any lack because of this. Indeed, they hear about the overpopulation problems of other planets and feel that their own world is the only one that understands the secret of good living.

So Chichi Raha developed brilliant literature, art, and history and became a famous center of civilization. Many visitors come with the hope that they might hear a local tell family stories in the grass beneath the crown of one of the house-trees.

At one time, some questioned whether a stable society could develop on a planet like this. They imagined Chichi Raha as a chaotic place with no government or commerce. But they were wrong. The planet has an advanced political culture, and the business of exporting fruits has gone on for several centuries without interruption. The habit of lying has never caused problems for these developments and may have even helped them. [\[2\]](#) The only thing Chichi Raha lacks is science. Here every intelligent mind knows a bit of the universe's secret, but the bits never get the chance to be pieced together.

## PIMACEH

This is another planet where you can't be sure about history. As you wander through its museums, restaurants, and hotels, you will hear many versions of its past. Eventually, you will be trapped in a miasma of confusion because every speaker's expression will be so sincere that you can't help but

believe it, and yet there is no way to reconcile all the different stories.

The scenery of this world is legendary. Strictly speaking, the planet is not even spherical. The southern hemisphere is far lower in elevation than the northern, and an almost perpendicular cliff, going all the way around the equator, divides the planet into two completely different halves. Above the cliff: ice and snow; below: an endless ocean. The city of Pimaceh is built on this world-encircling cliff. From the sky to the sea, the lightly recessed houses and the perfect, straight, up-and-down avenues are like parts of a giant painting.

No one knows how this place was built. All you will hear is the various romances told by the current inhabitants. Every story is exciting: some are heroic legends; some are tragic and austere; some are full of doomed loves. The particular effect depends on the teller, but no one can give a version that convinces everyone. And so, as it passes from teller to teller, Pimaceh becomes more and more mysterious and charming.

Many visitors, entranced by the wondrous sights and stories, linger and do not wish to leave. This is an open and accommodating planet, and every visitor is welcomed with open arms. The visitors—now settlers—then build their own houses on the cliff and pass on the stories they hear to new visitors. Content, they gradually become locals.

This state of happiness will last until one day when they realize the truth about themselves. They'll suddenly understand that countless hints have already revealed Pimaceh's true history to them: Everyone on this world is a visitor. There are no natives at all.

Yes, Pimaceh did once have a glorious history, but for some reason it was abandoned. The original inhabitants left for unknown reasons, leaving behind only a lovely ghost town that astounded the interstellar travelers who later stumbled upon it. They also left behind fragments of a language no one could decipher, like metaphors that filled in the blank spaces between the buildings. These took root in the minds of those who came after and blossomed into the most lush and beautiful imaginary pasts for the planet.

No one knows who was the first to discover this uninhabited world. The history of the visitors has also faded, consciously or not, as it passed from generation to generation. All the visitors who have settled wish to think of themselves as the people of Pimaceh. They protect this planet and steadfastly play the role of hosts—until one day they themselves begin to believe this is their native land and the country where they will die.

Almost no one can discover Pimaceh's secret except a few true wanderers who have been to all corners of the universe. They can sense that the inhabitants here emphasize slightly too often that they are the *People of Pimaceh*. On planets where real natives have remained in charge, this is one of those things easily forgotten.

## BINGWAUGH

Setting Pimaceh aside, in the sea of stars, you'll probably have to go all the way to Bingwaugh to see such a variety of different species from all over, each with its own culture and civilization, colliding, striking against one another, creating sparks.

Bingwaugh is not too big and not too small. Its seasons are indistinct and its climate mild. [\[3\]](#) The surface of the planet is composed mostly of plains, with few mountains and little variation in elevation. The horizon is a smooth, gentle curve. Here there is everything an average planet should

have, but nothing more: good soil, decent mineral deposits, various fauna and flora, and even the sort of circular fields surrounded by low bushes where tourists like to sing and dance. There's nothing remarkable at all.

The inhabitants of Bingwaugh are similarly average. They are mammals; not too big; a solid, good people; easily satisfied. Their social organization is loose, and everyone lives in harmony.

If one *had* to pick something unique about them, it would be their pleasant disposition. Rarely are they seen arguing, whether among themselves or with the multiplicity of interstellar visitors. They're great listeners. Adults and children alike would open their eyes wide and listen to you lecture, nodding frequently, their faces often breaking into expressions of being intoxicated by the wisdom you're imparting.

Having discovered this characteristic of Bingwaugh, all the ambitious adventurers in the universe rushed to take advantage of it. Who wouldn't want to rule over such a people and place? Plenty of resources, a comfortable living environment, and a great location at the intersection of so many trade routes.

So educators came, missionaries came, politicians came, revolutionaries and reporters all came. They described to the locals their visions of heaven, lectured them on their ideals, and again and again the inhabitants of Bingwaugh nodded and sighed with heartfelt admiration and accepted the new philosophies. Some remote planets even sent over "Supervisors" to rule over these new converts. The inhabitants never objected, not even a peep.[\[4\]](#)

But after these triumphant developments, the interstellar guests would always be disappointed. Indeed, the longer they stayed on Bingwaugh, the more their disappointment grew.

As it turns out, the locals have never truly accepted any alien propaganda. Even when they agree with a new faith, they never actually do as they're told. As enthusiastically as they admire the new systems of laws being presented to them, they just as enthusiastically don't follow any of the alien laws at all.

Faced with this attitude from the locals, the ambitious colonizers can do nothing. This is because they realize this contrast between what the locals say and what they do is not at all the result of some deep conspiracy, but simply a matter of habit. If you ask them directly, they'll reply, very puzzled, "Yes, what you say sounds like Truth. But the world is full of Truths. So what if you have a Truth?"

Some planets, unable to tolerate this state of affairs, attempted to conquer Bingwaugh by force. But immediately some other planets would intervene. The balance of power is such that every possible conflict is always resolved outside the boundaries of the atmosphere of Bingwaugh.

So though it is a place where foreigners love to congregate, Bingwaugh is also one of the planets that has best preserved its native culture.

*Do you like these stories?*

"Yes ... and no. Why is every planet filled with visitors from across the stars? I don't like this. It makes them sound like zoos."

*You're right. I don't like it, either. The uniqueness of each planet disappears over time in this manner, like a fingerprint being rubbed away. All right, let's hear some stories about real natives.*

# AMIYACHI AND AIHUOWU

Let me tell you about two planets still ruled by their original inhabitants. On each, there are two different intelligent species. Yet each species believes itself to be the only master of its respective world.

Amiyachi orbits a double star: one a bright blue giant, the other a dim white dwarf. The two are similar in mass, but differ widely in volume and the type of emitted radiation. So Amiyachi's orbit is shaped like an irregular gourd. It dances a waltz along the hyperbolic paraboloid of the gravitational fields of the two stars.

Whenever Amiyachi is near the blue giant, it enters a long summer. But when it's near the white dwarf, it enters an equally long winter. The summer is when the planet's flora multiply and grow and stretch their vines like madness. In winter, most are dormant, and only a few hardy weeds quietly bloom over the empty earth.

Summer and winter—in each season Amiyachi is ruled by a different species: one dances through the lush forests of summer; the other marches alone over the barren plains of winter. The summer Amiyachians live in houses made of woven vines, and when the weather turns cold, the houses disappear as the vines wither and die. The winter Amiyachians live in caves dug into thick mountains, and when the weather turns hot, the mouths of the caves are hidden behind dense clumps of grass and fern, leaving no visible trace.

Whenever the summer Amiyachians are about to hibernate, they secrete a liquid covering to protect themselves and sink underground. The liquid stimulates a kind of insect known as the *wususu* to begin mating. The multiplying *wususu* then bring to life the cold-resistant shrub *aludon*. The flowering of this plant, unremarkable in appearance, begins the long and slow process of awakening the winter Amiyachians.[\[5\]](#)

When the winter Amiyachians are near the end of their season's journey, they give birth. The new babies, protected by a hard membrane, develop in the soil. The ionic reactions of their growth change the pH level of the soil and cause other plants to germinate and grow, announcing the beginning of the planet's summer as well as the reign of the summer Amiyachians.[\[6\]](#)

Thus, the two intelligent species of Amiyachi remain unaware of each other. Neither knows that its civilization's existence depends on the existence of the other—two sides of the same coin. Both races have composed works praising the divine wisdom of the gods, allowing them to be reborn as they awake from their slumber. But they have never realized that they're both the children called forth by the gods and the gods themselves.

As for Aihuowu, the situation is entirely different. On the surface of this world, the two intelligent species and their civilizations are very aware of each other's existence, yet neither is aware that the other is just like itself, possessing feelings, logic, and morality.

The reason is simple: the two species exist in different frames of time.

Aihuowu is a planet with a strange orbit. The angle between its axis of rotation and the plane of its orbit is very small, and the axis of rotation itself precesses slowly. Thus, the surface of the planet can be divided into four regions: the narrow strip near the equator has night and day in accordance with the rotation of the planet, while the polar regions have their own periods of brightness and darkness based on the precession of the axis of rotation. A day near the pole is hundreds of times

longer than a day near the equator, and so the creatures born in each of these regions experience time at rates hundreds of times apart.

For the Aihuowuans near the equator, the mysterious poles seem to have very long nights and very long days. But for the polar Aihuowuans, the equator passes through darkness and light rapidly—in flashes. The equatorial Aihuowuans are dainty and agile, with hundreds of thousands of individuals living in dense colonies. The polar Aihuowuans, on the other hand, have slow metabolic rates matched to their long days and long nights, and their bodies are scaled large to fit their sense of time.

Sometimes the equatorial Aihuowuans come to the poles for adventure and exploration. They always get lost in the mazelike forests full of gigantic trees and mistake the occasional houses they encounter as unscalable cliffs. But when the polar Aihuowuans wander near the equator, they often miss the details and carelessly destroy the houses and fields of the equatorial Aihuowuans. They live on the same planet but belong to entirely separate worlds.

Sometimes the equatorial Aihuowuans venture to speculate that the giant creatures of the poles might also possess intelligence. But in their hearts, they believe that even if such slow-moving creatures, who in a hundred years might not shift more than a few feet, were intelligent, it would be a simple and rudimentary kind of intelligence. The polar Aihuowuans have similar suspicions of intelligence concerning the equatorial species. But then they sigh and shake their heads, realizing that such tiny creatures that are born and die in a single day would be incapable of experiencing real civilization.

And so the two intelligent species of Aihuowu experience the same process of learning, working, love, and war. Their histories play out on two time scales, each echoing the other. But they remain opaque to each other, unaware that when it comes to time, everyone is only measuring the universe using the ruler of their own lifespan.

“Wait a minute,” you interrupt. “How can you know about all these civilizations? When did you go to Amiyachi? And what scale of time did you use to experience Aihuowu?”

*I know. Of course I know. If you had been there, you would know as well. This is the difference between visitors and natives. This is the point of traveling.* [\[7\]](#)

“It is? This is why you travel?”

*Yes and no. If you really want to know why I travel, then let me tell you about a planet devoted to travel.*

## LUNAJI

The people of Lunaji build the galaxy’s most beautiful cars, boats, airships, and passenger catapults. The complexity and refinement of these vehicles far exceed the imaginations of visitors from other worlds, and also far exceed the technological levels of all other industries on this planet.

Those who are intuitive immediately jump to the conclusion that travel is especially meaningful for the Lunajians. But there’s a deeper explanation which most cannot figure out. They can’t imagine why so many intelligent beings would devote their entire lives to traveling and preparing for travel, rather than the accomplishment of some other, more rewarding task. Only those who know the life cycle of the Lunajians have some understanding of this seemingly irrational restlessness.



Lunaji has a large basin where the concentration of oxygen is higher than anywhere else. The soil is rich and moist; small waterfalls pour into a clear, pristine lake; flowers are in bloom every season of the year; and heavily laden, spherical fruit trees surround soft lawns strewn with mushrooms in all the colors of the rainbow. Every Lunajian spends their childhood here, none knowing how they arrived in this world. From the moment they open their eyes, this basin is all they know.

From time to time, some wish to discover the secret origin of their lives or seek the home of the gods. Then they start to grow up, tall enough to climb over the rocks blocking the gentle slope at the edge of the basin. They walk into the dense, labyrinthine forest, climbing up the slope toward the world outside the basin. They can't tell you their ages, because the age at which each one begins to mature is different.

After exiting the basin, they keep on walking, wandering, seeking—finding nothing. They meet others who left the basin before them, but they also are still searching, still traveling, still baffled by the mystery of their own lives. So a Lunajian's life is one long migration. They go from one place to another, never settling. They build boats, cars, airplanes with the purpose of accelerating their own pace so that they can cover every square inch of the planet until they reach the edge of the sky.

Sometimes, by coincidence, some follow an obscure path and arrive at a meadow in the wilderness. There a lovely silver flower blooms, giving off an intoxicating aroma. The fragrance makes every Lunajian nearby dizzy and causes unprecedented tender feelings to spring up among them. For the first time, they feel attraction for one another and embrace, clasp, give, and receive. Then they give birth by the edge of a brook, whose water bears the babies to the basin beneath the falls.

The parents? They die and sink into the muddy earth.

And so, such a simple cycle turns out to be the entirety of the meaning of the ceaseless travels of the Lunajians.[\[8\]](#)

## YANYANNI

Since we're on the topic of growing up, I want to tell you a few more stories. The first is about Yanyanni.

You can always tell a Yanyannian's age at a glance. Like trees, they never cease to grow. Every year, they become taller than they were the year before. An adult is several times the height of a child, and a young person is several feet shorter than an elder. The oldest person is always head and shoulders above the surrounding crowd, a lonely tower.

So in the world of the Yanyannians, there is no such thing as a friendship that crosses age gaps. Even talking to someone who is very different in age can be a chore. A long conversation would leave both interlocutors with sore necks and shoulders, as the younger looks up while the older looks down. Indeed, there's not much to talk about between people of very different ages. Their houses are of different heights, and the shelves from which they do their shopping are different. One can only see the belt of the other, and neither can see the other's expressions.

It's not true, however, that the Yanyannians can grow without limit. One day, they wake up and discover that their height hasn't increased. Then they know they are about to die. The knowledge does not make them sad, however. Growing taller is actually a very tiring process. Many have been exhausted by it and simply find an excuse to stop. Death for the Yanyannians takes a long time, but no one knows exactly how long. It's never been precisely measured. To simplify things, they list the

age of death as the day when growth ceases. In their eyes, the passage of time is a measure of change. When growth ceases, time stops.

The tallest house on Yanyanni was built more than a century ago. At the time, there was an old man who, year after year, grew and grew until his head touched the ceiling of the tallest building then in existence. So the people erected a tower for him designed to hold a single man. The base of the tower took up the space for a park. After the old man's death, no one else ever managed to reach his record of longevity, and so the tower was divided into two stories and turned into a museum.[\[9\]](#)

Legend has it that the old man once left a diary next to each window of the tower, recording his life during the years when his height corresponded to that window. Afterward, others climbed ladders to retrieve these diaries for reading, but eventually the diaries became lost.[\[10\]](#)

Now visitors wander past the empty windows and imagine how a man who could cross a river with a single step might brush his teeth and eat his food.

## TISU ATI AND LUTIKAWULU

Tisu Ati and Lutikawulu are a pair of opposites. These two planets, a hundred thousand light-years apart, are like the two ends of a dipole: they negate each other and also define each other.

Tisu Atians are much smaller than the inhabitants of most planets. Their skin is especially soft, and their bodies can rapidly shift shapes. On this Lamarckian world, the development of gene expression reached its pinnacle—no, surpassed the pinnacle. All of evolution has been compressed into an individual's brief life.

The Tisu Atians can alter their bodies in accordance with their desires. Those who practice climbing mountains develop longer and longer arms until their arms are longer than their bodies. Those who operate machinery develop five or six arms until an individual can simultaneously control the opening and closing of numerous valves. On the street, no two Tisu Atians look alike. Everywhere one can see a mouth so large as to take up half a face, a waist thinner than a strand of noodle, or a round sphere covered by a layer of armor-like scales. These changes are unique to each individual, and it's impossible to detect anyone's parentage based on appearance. Even the parents themselves, if sufficient time has passed, have a hard time picking their children out of a crowd.

But “in accordance with their desires” is not quite accurate. It's not true that every Tisu Atian can attain the appearance they have in their minds. Most of the time, they're vague in their self-images. It's only when someone takes an extra-large step or bumps into something that person realizes their legs have grown another thirty percent or their back has grown a row of little spikes. Of course, in a few years that person has turned into a long-legged strider able to go up an entire flight of stairs in a single step, or a warrior whose body is covered by hard and sharp spikes.

So many Tisu Atians are even more cautious than the inhabitants of other planets. They speak carefully; they work carefully. They're terrified of the possibility that in a moment of carelessness, the silly face they made before going to bed will become permanent, will turn into a tumor impossible to remove.

On the busy streets of Lutikawulu, you can tell at a glance each person's career and daily life. This may be the only point on which Tisu Ati and Lutikawulu agree.

The Lutikawuluans also look very different from one another: runners, singers, sculptors, thinkers,



etc. The difference between them can be clearly gleaned from differences in musculature, body shape, size, and facial features, just like on Tisu Ati.

But on Lutikawulu, the journey of life is the exact opposite of life on Tisu Ati. This is a Darwinian planet, where everyone is in agreement that any effort expended in directing the path of evolution is useless. The Lutikawuluans have stable genomes that evolve slowly in accordance with the principles of random variation and natural selection. But because the Lutikawuluans reproduce asexually, genetic changes in their somatic cells do continue to be expressed through inheritance. The cells, as they divide and change, pass on their adaptations without reservation to the next generation. And so children inherit the alterations in their parents.

As a result, a blacksmith's son is born stronger than other children, and a clocksmith's daughter is born with better vision and nimbler fingers. These differences, accumulated over thousands of years, slowly add up to the level of speciation. Every occupation has evolved into its own independent species. And even when some occupations have disappeared, the features associated with them continue to be expressed and continue to evolve.

All of these different species are united by their language. It's only through the common tongue and identical numbers of chromosomes that they can recognize themselves as possessing a common origin. Other than these, they have nothing in common. No one is jealous of another's work, just as a monkey would not be jealous of a dinosaur. As the proverb says, *the birds have the sky while the fish have the sea*. They pass by in the same town, but it's as if they see one another without seeing one another.

While the Tisu Atians have replayed evolution a hundred million times, they have always refused real evolution. No matter how they alter their own appearance, their children always begin in the same place, keeping the same original, primitive shape. The Lutikawuluans are just the opposite. No individual ever experiences any change, but when seen through the lens of eons, they are each points along numerous diverging curves.

"You lie," you say, pouting. "How can the same universe follow two opposite sets of rules?"

*Why not? My dear, there's nothing that's impossible. Numerous steps, each meaningless by itself, when added together become a rule, a principle. Perhaps in this moment you laugh, or frown, and the future is divided into two paths, two sets of rules. But how can you, the you of this moment, know?*

"Is that true?" you ask, tilting your head. And for a while you are quiet.

I look at you and laugh lightly. The swing you sit on sways back and forth, and the breeze causes the locks of hair next to your ears to flutter. The key to your question is the method of reproduction, of course, but this kind of answer is too dry. I have no wish to give it.

*You know something? The real key isn't about whether what I say is true, but whether you believe it. From start to end, the direction of narrative is not guided by the tongue, but by the ear.*

## CHINCATO

The tongue and the ear have the most meaning on Chincato. For the people of this planet, speech is not a mere way to pass the time, but a necessity for existence.

There's nothing special about Chincato, save its thick atmosphere. It's so dense that no light can penetrate it, and the surface of the planet is covered by darkness. Chincato's life is born from warm, thick deep-sea currents full of organic material and warmed by bubbling lava, and gains its energy from the heat at the heart of the planet. For Chincatoans, the boiling crater of the underwater volcano is their sun, the home of the gods, the source of wisdom and strength. Outside the crater, they can find organic sugars, which are their food, the foundation of their life.

The Chincatoans do not have eyes or any organs that sense light. They rely on sound to locate one another.<sup>[11]</sup> Their ears are both for listening and observing. Actually, to be precise, they don't have ears. They listen with their entire body. The upper halves of their bodies are covered by trapezoidal diaphragms, each of which is strung with thousands of hairs of different lengths, and each of which can resonate with the sound of a particular frequency. Using timing differences between when each trapezoidal diaphragm hears a sound and its position, the brain of a Chincatoan can deduce the location of the source of the sound, its distance, and even its precise shape.

So all day long, the Chincatoans talk and listen without pause. They emit sounds to feel the presence of others, and also to let others know of their own existence. They cannot be silent. Silence is dangerous and makes them panic. Only by continuously talking can they ascertain their own position, be sure that they're still alive. They compete with one another to speak louder, because only by doing so can they make themselves appear brighter, more noticeable to others.

Some children are born with defects in their voice organs. These children almost cannot survive. They're always in danger of being run over by others much bigger and faster. And then no one would even know such a child once existed.

"That is so sad. Your stories have become shorter and shorter, but why have they also become so much sadder?"

*Sad? Is it that the story I'm telling is sad, or is it that the story you're hearing is sad?*

"What's the difference?"

*Very different. I've been to a planet where the people can make sounds at ten thousand different frequencies, but can only hear a small portion of the frequency range. The sensitivity of their ears is not matched to the versatility of their vocal cords, and so they never hear as much as they can speak. But the most interesting part is that the range of frequencies each of them can hear is different. While they all think they're hearing the same song, a thousand individuals would actually hear a thousand different songs, but none of them knows that.*

"You're making things up again. How can such a place exist?" You bite your lips and widen your eyes. "Now I'm suspicious that you haven't been to these planets you've been telling me about. Have you made them all up to amuse me?"

*My darling, starting with the Odyssey, every knight errant has told romances of faraway places to court the ladies they love. Can you tell which stories are real and which are not? I travel through these planets like Marco Polo wandering through the cities of the Orient, like Kubla Khan riding through his endless realm: everything happens in the blink of an eye. You can say that I really have been to those places, or that I have never left. The planets I speak of are scattered at every corner of the universe, but sometimes collect themselves into the same place as though they have always been together.*

Hearing this, you giggle. "I understand now. They are gathered together by your stories, and now you tell these stories to me so they are gathered in my mind. Isn't that right?"

Looking at your happy face, I sigh. The sound is so quiet that you cannot see anything strange in my smile. How can I explain this to you? How do I make you understand? Stories cannot gather anything together, if they're fated to separate.

*Yes, I say quietly. We have been sitting here for an afternoon telling stories, and together, we possess a universe. But these stories are not something I tell you. This afternoon, you and I are both tellers and both listeners.*

## JINJIALIN

Jinjialin is the last story I will tell you today. It's a short tale. I'll be finished soon.

The people of Jinjialin possess bodies unlike the bodies of the people of any other planet. They are like soft balloons, or maybe like jellyfish floating through the air, transparent and loose. The surface of the Jinjialinians is membranous, like a cell's outermost layer. When two membranes touch, they can merge into one.

When two Jinjialinians encounter each other, parts of their bodies briefly merge and mix the materials inside. When they separate, the materials are redistributed. Thus, the people do not care much about their physical bodies. Even they cannot tell how much of their current bodies comes from strangers they met along the road. They believe that they are still themselves, and it's no big deal to exchange some materials.

But they don't realize that this sense of "self" is an illusion. At the moment when two of them merge, the two original selves cease to exist. They become a combined person, and when separated, two new persons. The new persons do not know all that transpired before their encounter and each believes that the self is the self, never having changed at all.[\[12\]](#)

*Do you understand? When I am done telling you these stories, when you're done listening to these stories, I am no longer I, and you are no longer you. In this afternoon we briefly merged into one. After this, you will always carry a bit of me, and I will always carry a bit of you, even if we both forget this conversation.*

"You're saying that Jinjialin is our own world?"

*Our own world? Which one? Can any planet have belonged to us? Or can we have belonged to any planet?*

*Do not ask me about the coordinates of these planets. Those numbers are the oldest mystical proverbs of the universe. They are the air between your fingers. You reach out to grab them, but when you open your hands, there's nothing.[\[13\]](#) You and I and they meet for a moment, and we are fated to again separate. We're only travelers, singing songs whose meanings are obscure, wandering through the dark sky. That is all. You know they are singing in the wind, singing in the wind of a distant homeland.*

1. They never tell the truth [↑](#)

2. Lying It never messed up their politics [↑](#)

3. Feels like holland [↑](#)
4. they are strong inhabitants [↑](#)
5. een soort winterslaap [↑](#)
6. This sounds like a concept of reincarnation [↑](#)
7. traveling gives you knowlegde [↑](#)
8. This is the coolest one so far to read [↑](#)
9. how does he visit other things then? He can't go to supermarkets etc [↑](#)
10. like at grandma where we used to write the height on the wall [↑](#)
11. this sounds so creepy [↑](#)
12. Is this the plot of the story? [↑](#)
13. Imagination will take you anywhere [↑](#)