

ECHO · Issue 4
2022 Fall

SEASIDE

2021-2022 Media Review Campus Magazine & Publication - Excellent Award

Sensing is beholding a sunflower without justification.
Sensing is practical

nostalgia in the details
Sensing is dipping my soul into this crazy, passionate world.
Sensing is proof that we are living.
Sensing is following wind's vision and being captured by
every aspect of spring's accordatura... always tbc.
Sensing is the origin of romanticism.

Sensing an Age of dusty foreboding
Sensing is to feel the strength inside yourself.
like liquid air swirling funny between lips
Sensing is the moment when you are encapsulated
by your own feeling toward the world. It's absolute
egotism.

Sensing, the Quiet disturbance of the
Sensing is to feel the strength inside yourself.
Late Blooming spring. Sensing have personal commonality, a preface
of pain and pleasure. It's a source of our
driving in frequency eternally flowing imagination

Sensing is the proof of life & existence

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Editors' Notes

The decision to set the theme of “Sensing” was actually mixed with some selfishness on my part. I've always believed that many people, including myself, rely on sensing as a source of writing——feeling emotions, seasons, language——sensing is the purest, most genuine way we understand the world. In this issue, we have made new attempts from the overall layout design to the content classification, and we hope you will like it. May we all remember to keep sensing the world, and may the touch brought by literature keep echoing among us.

—— Ruby Wang

To see or hear can be similar, yet to sense is different. Sensing is about the deliberate attempt to empathize with others using your heart. Through each heartbeat, we resonate with others. Sensing is feeling, and through feeling, we understand.

—— Harry Li

“Sensing is the moment when you are encapsulated by your own feeling toward the world. It's absolute egotism.” I wrote this before the summer, but now I have gained new understanding of what it means to truly sense and feel. Sensing is more than seeing and feeling the reality from one's own perspective; it can be a shift of perspective and the connection we share with others. Through writing, we not only record, but also explore the possibility of becoming one another. May we all cherish the moments when we truly feel the world is ours.

—— Joyce Yang



Vivian Huang
Ode of Writing

I see thousands of different lives, emotions, and perceptions.
I inhale inspirations through observing, and I exhale my thoughts into a matured version: writing.

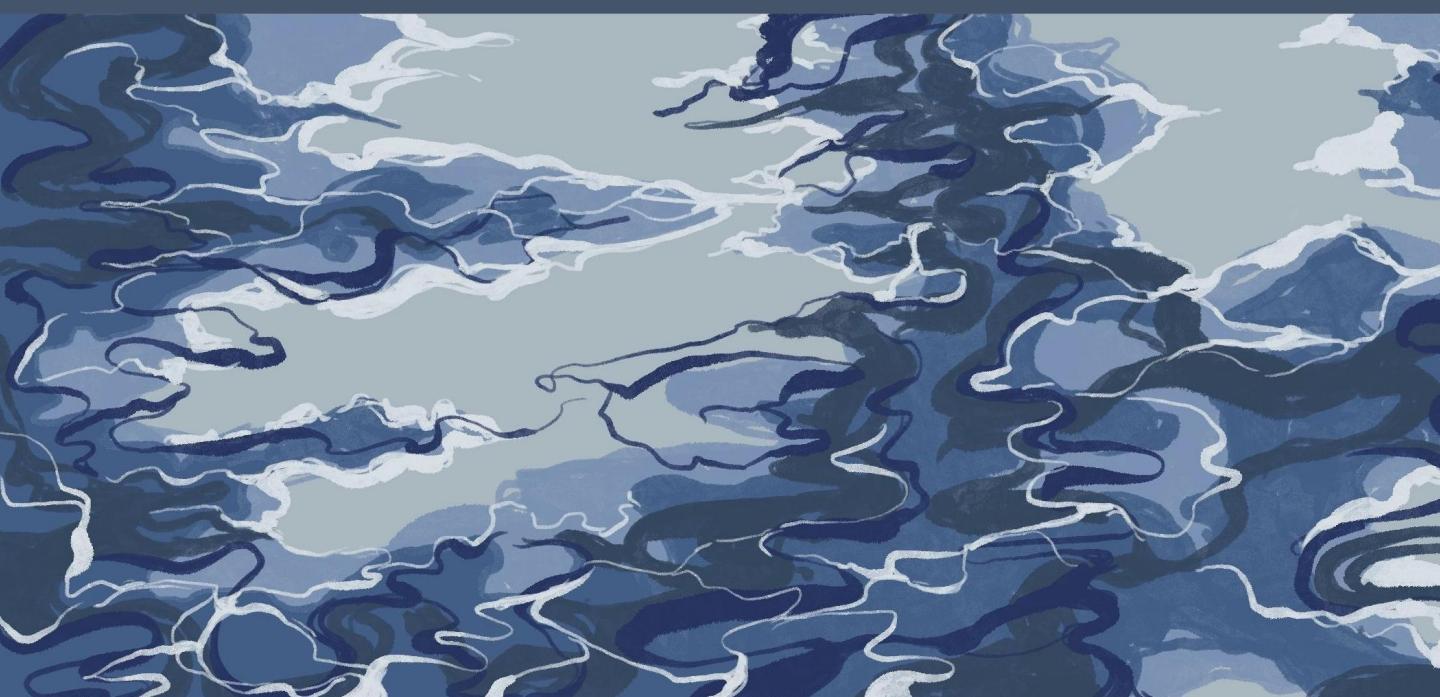
And when I write, I'm always solitary.

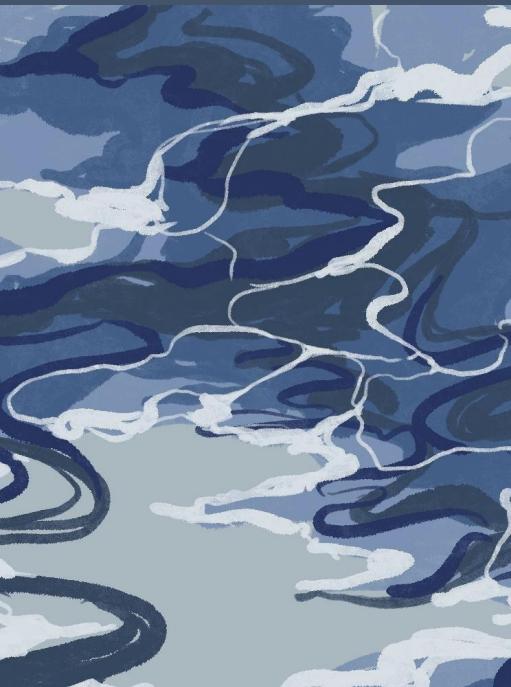
I like to soar through my imagination and become whoever I wish to be.
I can be a breeze, a tide, a piece of cloud, a tablecloth with coarse texture, a muted black piano lid, a number, a speck of dust.

I'm not ranked when I write, because I have no one to compare to, and there's no need for me to choose where I wanted to sit: on stage or at the audience's seating area.
I sit in front of my laptop or notebook, construct grandeur scenes with my mind and my hand.

I no longer have to suit the world anymore;
I create a world to suit me.







Creative
Nonfiction

Tittleless

Jasmine Dai

I.

Visions are silent, but sounds are never colourless.

Sounds buzz against the brain.

What can we tell from this sentence? That the narrator's dominant sense is hearing.

No. That's not it.

I begin the day feeling underwater. The voices of the world have to push their way through the murky oceans of my mind. The morning ride to school is always beautiful – I am not I, but a part of white car smoothly rolling along the highway. Like I'm safe.

II.

The ringing of the school bell gets drowned out by voices like silver drops of water choked by thick grey smoke. But I don't have to notice this if I'm underwater. This image clears away as class begins.

III.

The rich brick-red laughter of the teacher muddles the clear silence.

"It's a nightmare for a computer science student to read poetry, no?"

He is referring to the same girl whose What's Up page literally says, So it seems that sentimentality is who we really are. The same girl whose eyes rain after re-watching her favourite movies. The same girl who writes her own poetry.

I don't know her. I just know her better.

The ludicrousness of the moment is not acknowledged. That comment hangs in the air ever-so-briefly, waiting for a non-reaction of a reaction, and then the flurry of noise is back.

IV.

The white screen now shows a list of key words.

"Can I take a picture?"

It's times like this when I can barely recognize my own voice. Something about a whole class of other people listening to it makes it foreign to me as well.

"No – I mean, come on, you have photographic memory."

I've wondered till this day why he would ever think I had photographic memory.

"No – I mean, come on, you have photographic memory."

I've wondered till this day why he would ever think I had photographic memory.

What does it even mean to have photographic memory? Does it mean to remember things exactly as they are, the way a camera captures them? If so, my memories are about as photographic as Monet's Sunrise.

V.

Bell. The silver waters revive, but the grey smoke has turned into an orange cloud. The voices of the people change with the sun. So. Many. Voices.

"Okay, I get it! I just don't think you should make such a big deal out of it!"

You get it? Your unsympathetic accusation seems to suggest otherwise.

"She said that? Are you sure? That doesn't sound like her."

Please, tell me all about what sounds like her and what doesn't.

"You're not going to believe this!"

Oh, my God, I am gasping in disbelief already.

They say that frogs die this way. When frogs are put into a pot of lukewarm water, they are oblivious towards the fact that a slow fire just a few inches below them is eventually going to boil them alive. However, the fire is so slow and their perception so weak that they do not attempt to leap from the pot, even when they die of their haven in the end.

VI.

The teacher explores the vastly uninteresting universe of market monopolies.

"I know what you're thinking – "

De Beers is a company for diamonds. Why would they call it that? I mean, I'm okay with that and everything, I just think there should be a company for beers named De Diamonds. Reversal of positions. Where have I seen that before? Oh, right, that scene in Rick and Morty when a bunch of pizzas ordered an extra-large person served with people. Remind me why that can't happen in real life? Oh, because people don't want to be ordered.

Democracy and all. Democracy. This is one of those words that is nothing other than an extremely practical symbol. Like, no one would ever say –
"– why is the marginal revenue always less than the price?"

VII.

Music. School dismissed. The strains of the orchestra give me the impression of an aggressive sunset. My homeroom teacher stops me as I go down the stairs to Talk.

She is kind of waiting for The Response. But, I couldn't really give it to her because, how could I really give to her, I'm fifteen.

"You know, I was like you when I was in college..."

Her voice had to trail off right there. But, all teenage repellence aside, it is kind of an insane thing to say, that she was like me. That statement requires her to have an impossibly deep understanding of both her and me.

"To be honest with you, I didn't think you would actually have ups-and-downs in academics. I thought you were just kind of lively."

Hahahahaha. Just kind of lively.

A silent, pink-and-orange explosion happened right outside the classroom the whole time while she gave me The Talk. Actual sunset.

IX.

The tense pale sky watches me silently, in her brief existential panic as sunset abandons her and night-time does not take over.

The underwater feeling has completely leaked away from me – only a thin layer of air is keeping me from falling apart. Vulnerability is like rain. It darkens every colour of the world.

A mother wraps her son in a shiny blue jacket, bulged with love. She flashes a knowing smile as a girl waves at her son from her car window. I think she thinks she knows.

An old man walks slowly along the wiry azalea bushes, his outstretch palm stiffly caressing every branch. Two men hurry past him, but swiftly exchange The Look.

A little girl with a yellow Sponge Bob backpack rushes out the school gate. Sparrows disappear in a flurry of wings at the sight of her.

Even sparrows judge.

And I...?

X.

My window is dim, but outside the city lights burst to life. Sometimes you're cold even when you're not unhappy.

Being a human being means everybody else is going to see you as anything but. Just. I don't have photographic memory, she's not The Computer Science Student, and Sponge Bob girl would never hurt sparrows her entire life. Everybody judges.

And it kills, because, I can be anything but you want me to be this thing.

But who am I to complain? I am just as sickeningly judgemental as the rest of them. I make my way through this world by judging other people for judging. I suppose one truth of existence is that it's always going to be about Them and I.

In a way, I think I know myself the least because I have seen myself do everything I've ever done. And now I am so overwhelmed because I am not smart but I am not stupid and I feel things but I cannot feel things and I don't care what anyone thinks but I care what everybody thinks.

That is true of every human being, but tragedy happens when human beings can only see it in themselves. Or care to see.

XI.

Daybreak. Rolling along the highway again. I was somehow thinking about the time when, the same teacher with the brick-red laughter, said in this very serious, educating voice:

"It's okay not to be okay."

That felt so ridiculous right then I wanted to laugh. I wanted to laugh and laugh until it's a little too okay, and then I'll stop laughing. But, I mean, what is okay? I don't know, I don't have to know. Nobody knows what is "human", and everybody is human.



@Ruby Wang



@Ruby Wang

Squeezed Towel

Kevin Liu

I squandered the day like a squeezed towel, alone in the periphery of a modern toilet, struggling on a wire rack. Maybe I overestimated the quality of me = the inexpensive towel. I'm not sure. I just waited for the next dip in the water and another rebirth.

Journal by the Sea

Claire Jiang



@Zach Liu

When I opened the window I could taste the moist, tender breathe of the ocean. The sea was a hill away from where I live, but its smell prevails the rock and soil and came to me. It was night time; all I could see was the white and grey light from near buildings, standing out against the darkness of the night. Sprinkled in rectangle greys and whites are the red Chunlians topped with black ink. As I stepped back and close the window I thought of the colorful summer in Algiers that Camus had gulped down for many years. In today's standards, Camus is overdosed with the beauty of nature - Sunny skies, baked beach, implacable sea - And the wind that blew in the blue sky and the fragrance of the plants that tumbled in tha air, flushing through a naked human body which Camus had relentlessly described in many of his essays. Peoples of my time experience such beauty in tiny bits in few seconds. It usually visits us in the blink of an eye, where we exit from a building and catch the afternoon sunlight lighting up a yellow blossom of leaves that spread over a sloping branch which had luckily made its way out of white concrete walls. Or it maybe seconds of a watercolored sky in late afternoon. It's never long enough to saturate us, and we never have enough time to bask ourselves in it. The best and the most usual we do is take a picture. Some take the time to photoshop it and upload it, while some prefers to write a poem about it. And that is all. I wonder what it is like to grow up by the coast of Algier like he did. It must have been crazy to quench so much sunlight, so much sea breeze and so many waves to find hopelessness in such beauty. Maybe my grandchildren will read Camus and wonder if life exposed to such beauty had ever been true. I hope things like that never happen.

You
Dorothy Huang

You cannot sleep.

The end of the holiday is approaching and anxiety leaks all over you: due to procrastination, you say—nice try, the wind wails grief outside your windowsill, mocking viciously and sarcastically of you, your lying on the bed like a half-dead antelope mumbling complacently, proud of being a prey.

You are struck by an attack of sobriety. Leaving the house tomorrow, you will not see your grandparents until the summer several months later—months of tragedy, you are aware. You flip over on the bed sheet; the smell of dusty cretonne fills your nostrils and drenches along your breath. You watch as the artificial lights invade the room through the gauze.

The figures of your grandparents pop up in your mind and block your eyes with stinging compassion, and a certain type of shame. You calculate the time left with those ones that you love; being fifteen you assume that 20 years would be the maximum; with forty days together every year and you abruptly ache that, with sullen realization, less than three whole years would be the time you get to squander with them. In distress you almost see your grandmother—she casts, like she always does, her slender fingers upon your face and exclaims clamorously of your beauty and your youth, stating that she used to be of such tenderness and vulnerable essence like you, with a voice of degraded hopefulness—even envy. You recall how your other grandma—mother of your mother—awaits dutifully at the dinner table waiting for you to sip and taste the food. Her serenity looks like an embrace that infuses you with blissful sorrow. In flippant pondering you might think of your two grandpas: the less-talkative one, running down the street as that firework bursts behind, gazing at you with pride because "that sort of firework was hard to find"; the other one loud and exclamative, drinking like a sailor, drunk to strive being sober—laughing at your life and quirky hobbies, yet passionately praising your work. You see them.

You do not realize that you have been sobbing like a fool. You wonder why particular encounters were made: why life, why live, why love. You contemplate shortly. Your grandparents loved you out of no reason; so did you love them. Some bonds came to you as useless—not burdensome, yet futile in a sense that suffocates the fingertips, moaning abracadabra that "love is unconquerable." You realize that it was not a matter of choice whether you meet; connect; grieve. Fate was that earthy monster—it made you cry.

You think of Addie—"From that moment I knew that life was painful and that this was the answer to it." You fool. You desired to persuade yourself. Was it that you desired to flee? Away, away, away.

That feeling flaps on you like your grandpa's breath of cigarette blurring your eyes. You think about love as a ridiculing street urchin, skipping down a roof with sudden bravado; its flesh and blood splatters over you; leaving you with disgust; its fists upright. You conclude that intrusion as some post-modernism, although the definition remains vague in mind: like how you used to thrust your limbs into piles of snow until prickling stings faded into paralysis. You say that irony is the pain that you endure. You have your response. You sustain with that condescending grin—of hubris, possibly, yet you reject to conquer that, continuing to live with that irreplaceable mockery that reminds you of desperate duty, of some incomprehensible notion of fate and lack of free will, of encounters that you would rather detach from, of reality, of life. You say that interpersonal connections should be left undue—perpetual, eternal, sincere.

You wake up unable to open your eyes: excessive swings of tide that you refuse to admit as tears choked between the eyelids and the vision, numbing the acuteness like a gust of nauseating regret surging up from the intestines. You smell the cologne that hangs in the air dizzily, swooping from a perfume bottle that your grandpa meticulously settled beside your bed: it tasted like Paris shrank into a rhinestone. You see your grandma flickering at you. Her chubby fist drowns itself into your hair. Startled by such scenery you stand silently beholding the world: the fluid of the planet blows through you. You think of the old swing that you used to dangle on during the holidays. You think of the dripples and sways that used to wrap you up with buoyant ecstasy. In befuddled expressions you become that kid staring out of a temple on a particular high hill that you remember from your hometown, gazing at the shattered glass window as it refracts and distorts the dawn with the translucent amber that, you scorned, were tawdry. You forgive life—like a toddler sucking its vitality from a lollipop: even if the world decays into grudges and ashes, you breathe the strawberry-milk fragrance in and out; your thick tears burn and grind the eyes. There is no redemption—you know instantly as your tongue runs over that lollipop surface, possibly unconsciously, and extracts the infiltrating carbohydrate like a secret sip of hallucinogens.

You make a decision: You will live on, and you will love.

You absurd hero.



Auntie whirled the car wheel to make a turn and lit a new cigarette.

"Yo, Yang, what's up with that boutique place that you have bought in Shanghai?". She asked my father, her cigarette light jumping up and down and making me drown in its smoke.

"Oh, that." My father looked briefly out of the window, and looked down at his phone. I also do this when I don't want to answer a question. "I guess we can't rent it due to its poor location." He stammered.

"Then I guess weeds will rent it... with no rent!" Grandma cried and burst out laughing. That's what she does. Say something totally not funny and hammer all our eardrums.

Auntie took another breath of smoke and puffed it out of her chest. I guess I must bear it, although cigarette has always made me dizzy.

"So, I guess Chen's mother is taking care of it now?"

I coughed and sank deeper into my seat.

That feeling is back again. That feeling as if atmosphere had weighed down on you like a ton of stone on your neck. That feeling of swallowing timbre and choking slowly while all those around watch you with a grin on their faces.

"... I ... guess so." My father answered.

"Ha? How so! They bought it together! With both of their money!" Grandma cried, spit landing on my face. But I didn't bother to clean it. "That woman... feeding on your father even she married again... if anything, that property should belong to Chen!"

Ah, bloody hell. I cuddled smaller.

"True! Like they have agreed over the divorce agreement!"

"I tell you, Chen!" Grandma grabbed me by my shoulder and shouted to my left ear with more spit on my left cheek, "They were poor then, your mother and her parents. You were a little kid then, I tell you! They have nothing in their houses, and they bath in pots like we wash pigs before they are killed and smothered above fire!"

Yeah, I have washed in that pot. Warm and refreshing in winter.

"They don't have money! It is not until your father married your mother that they have the money to build that house!"

True. That's when mother moved to Shanghai and started working 12 hours a day. It is also when I was born with mother alone in the hospital.

Grandpa, father, and I are all dreadfully silent, leaving only aunt's and grandma's voice echoing in the car. As a child picked up at the doorstep without a family name, Auntie has a special concern for all family members. She opened the car window, threw out the cigarette, spat and continued speaking. "Now she's married to a foreigner..."

"He looks like a monkey, I say, he looks like a monkey!" Grandma interrupted with another hysterical laugh, and I have to mop my left cheek clean of her spit. "Even your mother's father, that old scum bag as he has been, looks younger than him!"

I won't comment on that.

Auntie continued, "You know, that house, you can never let that foreign brother get it. Your father and your mother bought that. That foreigner didn't even pay a single kuai! You need to defend your name on the property ownership of that house!"

Wait. What? I looked at auntie for the first time, "My name...?" My heart started pumping.

"You child! You know, there is a treaty when your mother and father divorced. They couldn't settle on how to separate the properties, so they decided to do it this way. That house literally belongs to you."

Family
Anonymous

I glimpsed at father. He fixes his eyes on his phone, not looking up. Nobody has ever told me that, not mother nor father. I have always believed that mother has taken the house due to father's guilt for being arrested for soliciting prostitutes.

So... I... control that house. My heart starts racing. I swallowed hard in the smoke of auntie's new cigarette.

"Why does it not belong to me?" asked cousin suddenly, who had been sitting on my lap. He made grandma and auntie both laugh.

Such an innocent child! How delighted will I be if that house indeed belongs to you! Just any person other than me!

Auntie continued, "They signed a contract that if your mother born another child, we," she paused slightly, "will take the houses and all the properties that they earn together, and you," Another pause "will come to live with us."

I took a moment to comprehend what that means and my heart skipped a beat. I bit my cold lips and clustered my fist to stop my internal shriek.

And they... family... want to interfere... my life... again...

"But, you know, we consider your feelings. If we are less reasonable people, we go and sue her on a daily basis!"

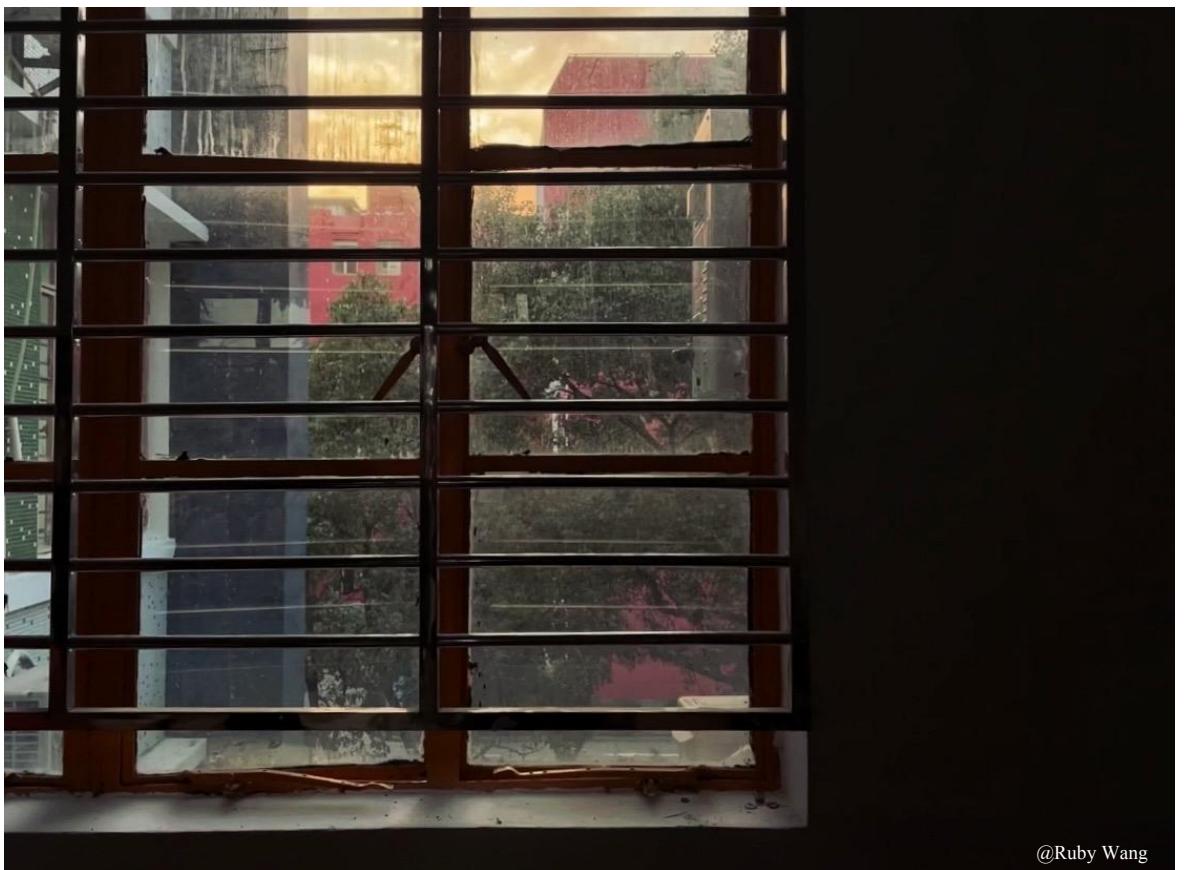
"Yeah, yeah, she will live in the court until she dies!"

My heart skips a beat again. I clustered my fist harder, but that's to prevent a triumphant cry.

My life, saved by the warmth of family!

"Why you all talking about him? Talk about mee!" cousin began crying in lap.

Such an innocent child! How I hope you never get the attention I have got!



@Ruby Wang

I was a bad learner, especially in English. I'd spent countless merciless hours in futility trying to study English. But before I was even prepared, there I was, like a French sailor more than four centuries ago, in the alien, new, foreign world of America, in the land of snowy Minnesota.

That morning the classroom of an ordinary school in St. Paul awaited the arrival of an alienated outsider. As I walked into that mysterious, new world, I saw something posted which I identified as the alphabet. It is beautiful, I thought, but anxiety took over all feelings I could have had about this code of communication. My mind was in but an abysmal chasm, sunless and gloomy, as I realized that I had to spend an interminable year with these strange letters, simpler and rounder compared to the squared characters of Chinese I was familiar with. In an effort to seize my anxiety, I turned my eyes away from the alphabet as if every letter were an eye of Medusa.

I sat down and realized that I had to write a page of these incomprehensible letters. I felt repentant for having deceived my parents about my English ability. I didn't expect anyone to approach me; in fact, I wished they were as cold as the Minnesotan winter, because I knew helping me would be a massive conundrum. Furthermore, I did not understand why anyone would help a person they barely knew for nothing. As I sat helplessly, I saw no hope of completing my work, but then two ladies approached me and started talking to me.

Their appearance did not appear stranger to me than their language. Ignorant of the social construct of race, I thought there was no race, only humans. I did not know what the beautiful sounds that I so desperately wished to comprehend were supposed to signify, and I didn't know what to answer; perhaps it would have been enough to tell them that I didn't speak English. I searched desperately among random sounds for a single recognizable word, but I was merely looking for a needle in a haystack. They repeated a word to me, presumably to have me write it down. But I didn't know that word. I didn't even know all of the alphabet. The Minnesotan weather was making me cold, but I had sweat in my palms.

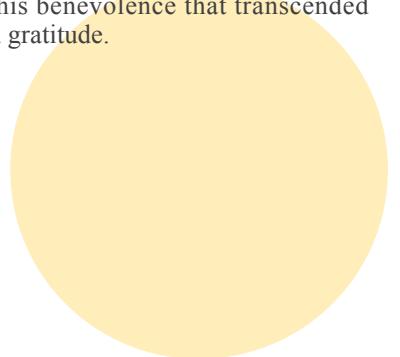
Seeing that I could not respond to what they said, they said a letter, which sounded more familiar than anything I had heard so far, for it was a letter I knew. I wrote it down. They pointed at a place next to that letter, and told me to write another letter there. Unfortunately, I didn't know that one. I felt sorry for them, and thought they had to give up. I expected my teacher to make an exception and allow me to pass the assignment without completing it, or for one of the ladies to pick up my pen and write my assignment for me, which would be embarrassing, but what other option did they have?



St. Paul
Zane Ge

A few other people came and made a few attempts to talk to me, but none succeeded. Eventually, the two ladies were the only ones left. For a few moments, they talked to each other and my teacher, presumably about me; they seemed determined. Then, one of them walked away and returned carrying a piece of paper. They approached me. My heart pumped as I thought I was going to burden them with yet another setback. They put that paper on my desk—it was the alphabet. Subsequently, one of them used her enlightening finger, benign and divine, to point at a letter on there. Then, for me, there was light. I sat petrified for half a second, perusing for the first time in my life the periodic table of English, and all the atoms that made up these alien symbols I saw that day. It, the alphabet, is beautiful. I thought I was a lost cause and didn't expect to be redeemed by such ingenuity, perseverance, and charity. Then I realized time was running short for them, so I ducked my head down, and gave my best effort to mimic whatever they were pointing at.

By such means, we continued. It took forever to complete a sentence, but I made it; or should I say that they made it. I looked down at the paper filled with odd, curved letters, but this time they were written by my hand, which made them to some degree more familiar. No nearer had I ever been brought to this language of both oddity and beauty. I told the ladies, my saviors, a simple thank you, which I thought was far from enough. If I could, I would have told them how their generosity warmed the Minnesotan winter and led me through darkness. As I stated my disgracefully understated gratitude, I noticed a cross on the neck of one of the ladies. I had held the conviction of atheism, but perhaps there was something divine about this benevolence that transcended linguistic and cultural barriers. For the first time in my life, I felt kindness and gratitude.



24 hours in Vivian Huang Shanghai

I inserted only one of the AirPods into my ear, feeling its shape fit perfectly into my auricle. I immersed my left side of the body in music, feeling myself flowing with the rhythms and melody; on the right side, I exposed myself to reality, feeling the ice-cold wind of December biting my ear, chin, and neck. I hear Lo-Fi hip hop and honks simultaneously, blending in a bizarre but harmonious way.

I walk past signs, people, vehicles. I walk past clouds, afterglows, and silhouettes. I walk, my mind not occupied by thoughts. I simply walk.

To spend a night outdoor, watching the city fall asleep would be the craziest and the most romantic thing I had ever done. On an overpass, I awaited 11:59 on the screen of my phone to jump to 12:00; seemingly nothing had changed, but everything had changed. It's the sweet excitement bursting in your heart like a firework, the realization of a moment you longed for had finally come.

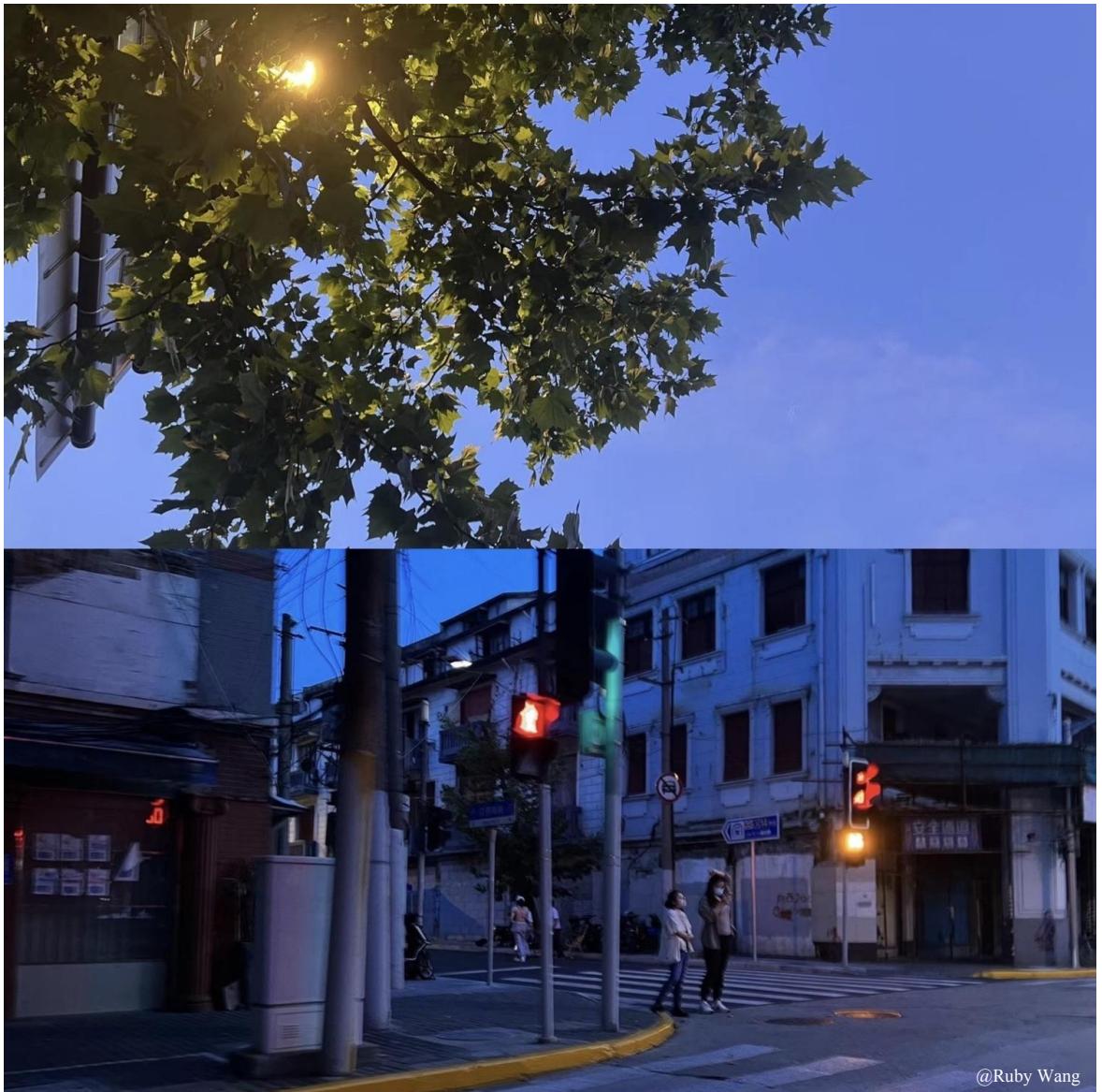
I took a deep breath and kept on walking.



@ Ruby Wang

It was cold, and I wasn't determined to spend a whole night roaming on a quiet street in this damned season, though I intend to fulfill this dream in an early summer night. There was a MacDonalds nearby, followed by a sudden realization of the genius choice of color for its brand. It's hard to describe how warmth deluged into my heart when I saw the familiar red and yellow. There were some people in MacDonald, though, few. One was typing on his laptop, possibly preparing for a project due tomorrow; two girls were taking selfies, giggling in a low tone, and they might have just stepped out of a cinema after a breathtaking commercial film. And then I saw this old man almost falling asleep, his head sinking as if a magnet was pulling him towards the table by an intangible force. He was wearing a grayish coat, which, from my perspective, wasn't thick enough to defend him against the hellish cold night. It was worn out, and the size didn't fit well. I glanced at him several times after I chose a seat and sat down, but my rationality was yelling, it's not courteous to stare at a person! Stop looking at him!

Why would I say that he's almost asleep? The reason was simple: he woke up after about 5 minutes of drowsiness to check his phone. He was around 60, and yet sitting at a MacDonald, ordering only a cup of tea. I felt bad for him, although not knowing what kind of struggle he's facing. My imagination started to work, and I pictured him standing at a bus station waiting for his child to squeeze through the crowd and sheepishly saying hi to him. I often like to wonder what people's lives could be, at least, of infinite possibilities and combinations of elements. Sometimes I ponder what situation a person was in when she took my order in the restaurant warily; when he cut the queue with that anxious expression in his countenance; when they were chatting in front of me as if nothing else in the world would ever bother them.



@Ruby Wang

I ordered two cups of tea, and the one of them I put next to his already emptied cup. I sipped the tea and felt the liquid sliding down my throat, gradually bringing warmth to my frozen limbs and heart. I looked through the transparent window, imagining it's snowing outside, and suddenly thought of Christmas, as the "Jingle Bell Rock" song smoothly played and curled midair. I counted how many days until Christmas will arrive.

I probably fell asleep that night, and I woke up with the bustling world unfolding in front of me. The sound of people chatting, shoes rubbing against the ground, phone ringing, and laughter surrounded me. I thought it wouldn't be too bad to start my morning with a pineapple pie. The old man was already gone when I tried to search for his humpback, the humpback which I felt sorry for. His seat was possessed by a young kid who anxiously turned his head to see his mom lining up to order.

There was a path in my neighborhood surrounded by trees, and whenever I go home, I have to go through that path. I stood quietly below the trees, bathed by the sunshine seeping through clearance of leaves and I knew. Birds sang the same tune like me. Grasses breathed the same air as me. The earth I'm stepping on was stepping on me as well.

When I walked past one of the apartments, I could smell the scent of fried meatballs. I couldn't stop smiling, for what I noticed lastly was something so small but so important.



It is an inexpressible despair to pursue joy as a mission. Of school life I see: nostalgic memories, crumbling of values, happiness within absurdity. Serendipity strikes the vagrant minds only.

She walked around with long, thick cloth hanging dizzily over her body. The wind pierced through the membrane dangling upon the door; a ghast of draught rustled across the corridor. It was winter. Mists of air-conditioner transcended upon my face. I upheld my hand against the blinding after-shine reflecting over the glasses and windows as I stood up and pulled a pack from my seat. School was over in a bell.

I wandered back to my classroom where distorted truths littered the room and memories lingered. I saw her weeping, twirled up in the corner, timidly hiding her ambitions and struggles. Throngs of people jammed around her. They bore piles of books and burdening weight. She was carrying a sheet with doodles and diagrams of force; red notes left scars and a score of "60." I felt indifferently desperate rather than compassionate; her tears were hypocritical vows of determination. Some voices from the crowd protested and reassured, "It will be over. I hate this phrase, but I promise that it will be over."

"I know. But when?" the voice choked in her eyes. I tried to disagree but failed; I could not blame her anymore. Happiness to her appeared in a form of reputation, achievement, score, which I could not agree; she hastened to discover joy, standing on her tiptoes to reach for the better. She urged with a melancholy; she urged with incessant aspirations.

Nothing remarkable happened in the maze of crisscrossing classrooms and the system of solid grids. I could not perceive any place more surprising than those classrooms either; where I peeked into the doors and pried by the windows, perceiving crowds assembling in silence. A boy paved his collection of bridge cards like if he was unleashing a crooked horse. The tangling sounds of clashing plastic and their inflections hit the minds of somber sobriety. I saw them nodding to each other mildly, and settling themselves along a crowded, cramped desk. They sat with the companion of silence, waiting for a start. The wait took them for a longer while than I expected, I thought as I walked away befuddled. It was not until an even longer while that I noticed with an abrupt, imposed realization that they were waiting for a chance—a chance to warm their frustrated minds, a chance to calm down and wait for fortune to befall.

Wandering was the simplest way to escape illusions. On the playground I saw figures of vigorous children rushing around chasing each other. I saw their faces shimmering vermillion in the blades of wind. They hasted in circles, their collars shriveling new-born leaves; their swaying hair reminded me of curious lion cubs. The children never turned around to look at me, but their eyes were filled with ridiculous moonlight at that brief moment. The playground was always filled with hesitated determinations and streams of flowing mind. I headed towards the school bus slowly, overhearing their sounds of celebration. The sudden rush of cyan, orange, and red brightness overwhelmingly blurred my eyes. "Youth is wonderful," I teased myself.

Basketballs drifted in the air. Figures that I did not recognize ran around in hesitation: my hands froze in the breeze as the rain came dripping over a girl. Her backpack lay under the sunset shadows. She took off to the shoreline of tomorrow. A pen dropped from her back pocket. After a while she recollected everything and carried on, with a biology textbook under her arms like burdens of future. She nodded to me with eyes of passionate recognition. She seemed content, even jolly and cheerful though the worrying wrinkle over her forehead never faded. She pushed the basketball forward and waited still to welcome the ball leaning back by the pull of gravitational despair; she was a Sisyphus, an absurd hero, my inspiration. I watched as she disappeared beyond my edge of vision. She grew upright, prospering along like a spine of pride, head up facing the imaginary mountains.

The hours of the dusk and dawn were taken up by the roaming birds and winds. Leaves of autumn epiphany rolled down the saluting school buildings like liquor dripping down a drunk man's chin. I approached the borderline of school gate. I noticed a young child chattering and staring at me at a distance. I didn't recognize knowing a child like her, pure, pretty, indulging her hands, sleeves, and mind to embrace the world. Clutching a handful of fallen blossoms in that pale, chubby fist, the child marched towards me like an old friend; I was stunned, and somehow honored. The child stumbled in broken steps; her hands glittered like a rambling sunflower. She would have been absurd and facetious in any circumstance except this one: the child was so joyful, so natural that her sleeves covered in stain of soil and her hands gripping flowers mingled into the past and futures.

"Do you want some flowers?" the girl's ardent eyes pierced through me and reached somewhere beyond. She was not talking to me, yet there was not anyone behind me either.

I smiled to her and kept walking. My feet chaffed past the brink of the school gate. Half a moon swayed upon a telephone pole, an innuendo of music rhythms. I thought of happiness and for a while, felt its ambiguous nature gripped in my possession like the child grinding her flowers. I thought of Sisyphus and, once again, admired that idea. This one choice of radical freedom would make the mundane a cheerful one; will make every circumstance a long, endless wait. Be of a vagrant mind—wait for the dawn to dutifully befall. The waters would beam crystal and the clouds clean and bright if one chooses to embrace oneself instead of molding one's tentacles to the ground—rushing, bleeding, withering.

A Day in a Hospital

Jadon Gao

It was Saturday when I received the notice of my upcoming exam at Suzhou which comes with a mandate of running the Covid-19 test for approval of cross-city traveling. So I got up early, partially out of stress and partially out of excitement for revisiting the familiar yet strange facility which was once deeply rooted in my memory.

The distinct floors of the hospital are taken up by the workers, doctors, and patients who all came with different reasons yet organized together without chaos.

The first floor was loaded with people. Some were waiting in line and some were rushing towards their destined location of finding medical treatment. The first that came into my view were two tall and thin male surgeons. They stride their long steps, each with a pair of pale eyes looking only one way and a white mask to cover their indifferent faces. They both wear the same clothes as the patients walking past them in the opposite direction as they aimed for the entrance gate. "These night shifts are just killing me," one said to the other, "There is just so much chaos in this job. I see a dead man who I've been working so hard to save, and then I have to jump right into saving another patient. I don't even have the time to mourn for the dead." I can see these two trying to fit among their surroundings, but it's no use after all as their height and slenderness really stood out among others.

Sharp sirens broke out among the rowdy crowd and in it came two medical workers rushing through the entrance pushing a rescue stretcher. The person in it was hidden by the bars surrounding the stretcher. Out of curiosity, I followed the stretcher up to the emergency room on the other side of the building. "Move out of the way!" the staff yelled as they bashed through the doors blocking their way. So the emergency lights lit. All that was left then was me outside the emergency room, turning my head around once I discovered my loneliness. It was rather a peculiar and pathetic sight as not a single family member was outside caring for the person when his life was at stake in the emergency room. Still, there was hope as distinct chattering inside the room was heard once in a while.

Not long after did a doctor put her head out the door, seemingly trying to seek the patient's family, but soon dragged her head back disappointed. The emergency lights turned off. Surgeons with heavy blue clothing on walked calmly out the door, emptying the emergency room and indicating the unique status of the person in the stretcher minutes ago without words. A sudden beep came through a transmitter, calling the surgeons for another emergency so the group vanished out of sight before I could even notice.

I was stunned by what I just witnessed. A fresh living form of life was wiped off the planet just then. Life at that moment seemed to have forcefully turned my head to face me with the cruelest realities of it. The idea that death could be so near every one of us petrified me, and I was filled with horror. But I also came to notice the indifferent views these surgeons have to possess to defend themselves from the brutality of the changing world. The fact that these surgeons I just encountered could be paralyzed of feelings toward life or death struck me once more. But it is also the only destined part of us, I tried comforting myself, these people have just seen it more.

KWAI YUE I



So with the wishes of regaining some hope for life, I moved on to the next floor. The signs wrote "Obstetrics and Gynecology Department", which I can only link with proliferation. Walking through the hallway, a mother was sitting in her wheelchair on the side with her eyes gently closed. Her husband was pushing the wheelchair leisurely and constantly whispering something in the mother's ears, cheering her up. Then a baby's unexpected cry went off and caused more distant crying to mix, forming a unique symphony to my ears. Looking into each room on the sides, the doctors are still present on this floor, checking the infant's health and monitoring their bodies. Hence I was relieved after all and walked through the hallway filled with delight seeing these newborn faces crying into this unfamiliar world. But birth and death, I told myself are the destined cycles of this world after all. I begin questioning my emotions, that my emotions were so easily controlled by these external agents. Life is just a cycle, I told myself again, and I shouldn't be manipulated so easily with events destined to happen. Still, a part of myself protested, it seemed to tell me everyone escapes death and glorifies birth, that is our instinct, and is righteous to feel such emotions.

At last, I laid my thoughts again to the surgeons at the emergency rooms, they should also have felt the same way I did a few moments ago when they started. But it was only that they were then paralyzed to such emotions years later when life and death has become their daily routine.

To sense none, or to sense many, I asked myself. I was puzzled by this thought as I could not decide which side to prefer. There may be no answer, as for me both sides should be equally respected. But there could still be some value of simply stepping aside and acknowledging this passage towards some sort of paralysis as we gain a better understanding of ourselves and conflicts existing in the subconscious decisions we make in the process of growth.

The Hours Jasmine Dai

In Between

Curious, how people use the word "you." For example: And that was when I learned that you can't ever trust anybody. Or: You get used to it after some time. Or, in solitary exclamation of helplessness: what do you want from me? We live in a world where "you" means "I," but it's better if I don't call it that" or "Everybody," because it's okay now that it's about everybody" or "God, because if not God, who?". "You," however, just by its existence, inevitably also addresses the receiver of the conversation. But then, each to what extent? This simple example is my life: you or me, good or bad, is or is not – each to what extent?

The bell rang and school was over. I was watching myself as I walked down the school hallway with unhappy eyes, though these eyes were on the rest of the world:

A girl in a short black dress – far too cold for the weather – was talking excitedly to her friends. A perfect white bow perked playfully in her hair. She was a dancer, a fairy of a person too whimsical to stay still or feel the cold.

A skinny boy in loose sweatpants was walking quickly down the hall, alone, bones jutting out at odd angles. He walked in proud oblivion, unaware of the looks he was given and the whispers behind his back. Nevertheless, the grey bag bouncing behind his shoulder was light – although he seemed to be impressively ungifted in every way, he was carefree.

A girl sank into the arms of her friend, her eyes ringed in red. The white watch clasped on her wrist and the neat stack of folders in her hands failed to keep her together. She had just received a poor score for a quiz – but she had studied so hard. There she stood, passively stubborn, back hunched against the sky.

Nature, right outside the window, turned a little darker as night fell, and would presumably turn brighter as daybreak arrives.

And I...?

These scenes, and a hundred more, entered my unhappy eyes in a matter of seconds. I watched, appalled, as several hundred following thoughts crowded my mind: how is it that everyone else treaded their path in their promising shoes of identity? Who am I to even be worthy of existence in this world? The dancer girl was more quirky than I was, the odd boy more carefree, and the crying girl more determined. If I even dared to mark some quality as my own, my stance quickly grows weak. What other people say about me were absurd. I laughed to myself, in a laugh-or-cry kind of way, as memories and thoughts spilled and plunged me into stream of consciousness:

I don't have photographic memory I'm not a vocab machine I'm not even all that smart. I'm not obvious but I'm also not complex and I'm just this person-shaped creature do you understand? And no, don't apologize but also don't hurt. Don't make me play this damned game of is this okay is this okay what about this. You realize how little I can move when I become something for everything I do? Dare I raise my hand the next time I know a word if it makes me the vocab machine? How can I possibly deserve such a title when I only know perhaps a few more words than the average person? Dare I say "it's obvious" ever again if it makes me smart? You see how I am an imposter in my own universe?

An unusual silence pulls me out of my tightening spiral as I took a new shortcut on my way home. The lofty hotel club, deserted in the early winter afternoon, glittered wastefully before my eyes. Everything was magnificently overdone. A bright blue Christmas tree stood, in all its towering glory, challenging anyone who dared to question its colour. Thousands of glass shards glimmered on the marble walls – like overdressed dancers, desperate for attention. A muffled song played from upstairs, and it was only when I was walking out the exit to continue my way home did my ears pick up the last line:

Walking in the winter was a man.

As if on cue, my shoes carried me into the winter reality outside. My mind idly abandoned the dazzling images, but the last line of the song remained:

Walking in the winter was a man...

What's so special about this line? It's not even poetic – it's merely a fact. In a way, it was the lamest detail back in the club. However, something about the way the words jammed perfectly with the rhythm allowed such a man to be vividly portrayed before my eyes: a tall, kind frame, with snow on his lashes and a large shovel in one hand. I didn't know if he was strong, or wise, or actually kind – it didn't matter. What mattered was that he was the only man that will ever be him, walking in the winter in all his hisness. It was the unspeakable qualities that made him him, qualities so secretive they could only be conveyed by an ingenious combination of words and rhythm. *Walking in the winter was a man...*

As I carried on with my journey home, I waited for more questions to arise. Why did I call my eyes unhappy throughout? Is it because I'm frustrated and hurt and utterly confused, so much so that I don't even have the energy to sugar-coat this fact in my thoughts? But how do I know if I really feel this way? Am I really unhappy or am I being subconsciously needy of expression or is this the way my mind portrays myself to cope with the killing ambiguity of self-awareness or is "unhappiness" only my mind's name for something much, much more complicated? Perhaps it didn't matter, whether I was happy or unhappy or intelligent or unintelligent. These are not who I am anyways. I will always be suspended in between these opposite poles, but I will always be I in my perpetual suspension.

What is really real anyway? Who knows? Who can say? All I know is that walking in the winter was a man.



@Ruby Wang



It was almost mid-October and the autumn rain came slowly. My memory for the summer rain traces back to long ago, when I was in kinder and had to walk through roads that I imagined to be rivers in my plastic rain shoes. In primary school, I developed a more profound impression of the rain because of the way it pours on my backpack and wet my homework. In these autumn rains, umbrellas can't help you stay dry. In fact your leg is sure to be wet and your shoes will be soaked. Having walked so much in the rain I realized that the water from the sky is never pure; rather, it carried, within the droplets, pieces and particles of objects that went into your sneakers. Along with the rainwater there came down with leaves of the Wutong tree, mingled with the water and the dust and paved to the sidewalk, a thin layer laid carefully onto the bricks. I had always tried to walk on the tactile pavements to avoid getting wet, but that was a vain effort. At last, as a primary school kid, I have always turned my attention to spinning my umbrellas, which was probably originated from a kindergarten talent show presentation in late autumn. Guess the rains do bring reminiscent feelings.

I bet my first semester in SSBS started with the autumn rain, since rain in autumn always stirs a special feeling within me. That was when I bought my very first hoodie (with my own money, by the way, and with my own friends). Since then I wore that hoodie with tight-fitting trousers because that

makes me feel warm and comfy, as if I am an unsent letter wrapped in an envelope. Watching the darkening sky and never-ending rain inside the bright-lit classroom makes me feel safe. Together, the hoodie and the trousers and the high-ceiling classroom filled with people formed my second impression of rainy autumn.

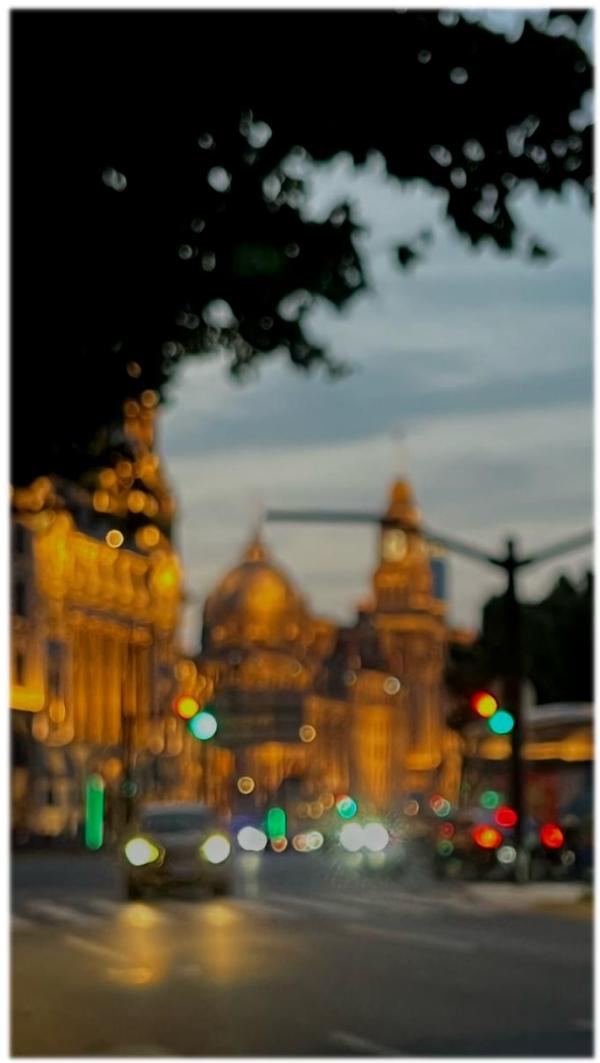
I like it when the air gets damp, when the aftershock of the hot, glaring Shanghai summer hadn't disappeared completely. The first rain with moisture was never cold, but the temperature drops after days of raining. That's when I put on thicker clothes and start drinking hot water from thermos cups. My impression of the weather was largely affected by experiences of sailing. All sailors do. When the autumn wind shakes the trees along the sidewalk, my heart beats faster with excitement. That indicates a good day sailing, and the rainy season had probably ended. Shanghai gets a little drier and much colder as the wind blows mercilessly through the treed, piercing every layer of cotton inside my vest. My sailing club prepares chopped woods early, stacking them neatly along the corridors, indoors and outdoors. As the weather gets colder the waitress in the lakeside bristo lights the fireplace with XiangZhang tree branches. That means it was VERY cold. When I finish sailing and enter the restaurant, wet all-over, shuddering and brushing my fingers against each other, I find the room filled with chatting parents as they roasted sweet potatoes on the fireplace. That

was purely out of entertainment reasons, or reminiscents of their childhood. Because now in Shanghai you can't really find dancing flames in places other than natural gas stoves. Even on natural gas stoves the flames aren't really dancing; the so-called home seems cold and indifferent in comparison. And I, along with my fellow sailors, walk straight toward the fireplace to warm ourselves up. We will soon be hustled by our parents to change, to get rid of the wet, cold suits. But that's alright, because as we head towards the changing room each of us would be holding a little cup of sugared ginger tea that the restaurant waitress offered to sailors free. And when we get back we hang our wet suits on chairs placed near the fireplace so when we had to get back to water the second time we will be warm and cozy. This has been a tradition.

This year the autumn rain came slowly. When it was September and there was no rain I feel the semester never started. School was but prolonged summer school. But the rain came, in almost mid-October.

I met the rain on the lake. I was on a sailboat, Laser-Radial, a type that I was unfamiliar with. But Radial was of Olympics class and she is what I must learn to sail. She was big and white, and hard to control for newcomers. She was so fast and full of strength that I had a hard time taking control. That was when the wind came - wind always comes before the rain. The sky darkened, and the clouds were low. Shadows covered the lake and the cloud went dark gray. On one side of the lake the misty clouds connected to the ground, a sign of intense precipitation. Before me a wall of mist was like a hand, covering everything and pushing towards me with uncontrollable determination.

Nothing could stop it. The boats retreated to the inner harbor and waited. And the rain came, as unstoppable as the mist. First a few drops, then it ran wild. It poured and poured and poured, down and down and down, onto my sail, onto my boat and onto me. I curled up under the thin shadow of the sail. The rain kept pouring; I was at the center of the lake, putting my arms around my knees, at the center of the vast, unending field of loneliness. This autumn, I let the emptiness swallow me as a whole.



Sunflower

Dorothy Huang

Sunflower has always been my favorite plant. It's the kind of flower that stares at you straightly as if it doesn't bother to turn away. It's like a spine with pride that drank the sun of Corinth and breathed golden stitches. My mom used to buy sunflowers by midsummer. They would stand tranquilly by the windowsill, inflaming the kitchen at an illusive dusk.

I have seen it thousands of times; the first impression was made by Van Gough's drawing though, maybe at the museum in Amsterdam when I was four or so. The image is vivid to my eyes even today. It overwhelmed me. I remember seeing it dripping down white tiles in bare light and flow, and twist, and exhale. I could not be sure whether I liked Van Gogh more or was it the sunflowers that seized the mind. I was told that these blossoms were of definite fidelity: they would tear themselves apart to follow up as the sun wheels on between constellations. It is said that it's a spirit worth mimicking, and I held desperately to that notion for most of my life; until it was proven pseudoscience.

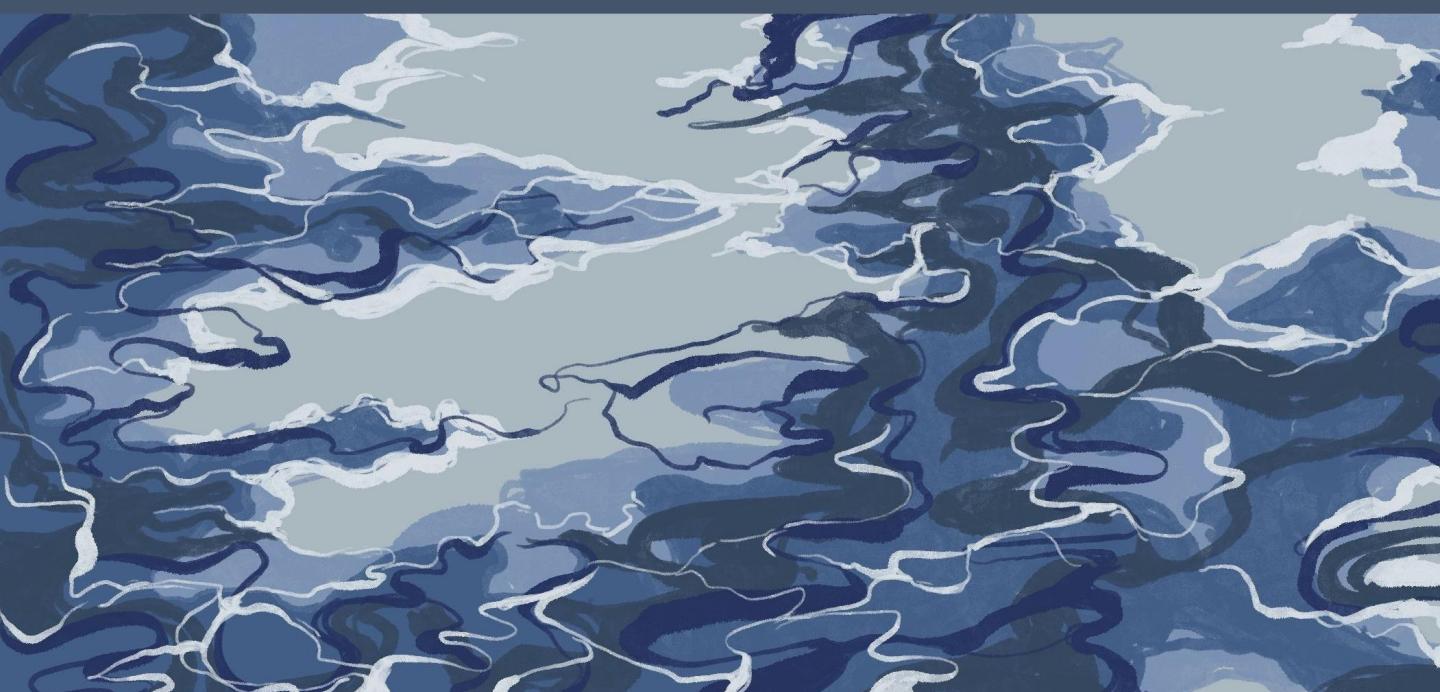
In the midst of winter it is the time that I need sunflowers the most. My mom starts to loathe their existence in the kitchen, blaming them for their dissipated odor and dense, crowded stamens; how can you force them to prosper out of this cold mess of nihilism—I surrendered to that "natural consensus" with reluctance. The last time she ever bought them I counted the pieces of petals and dragged down their corpse. I forced the flower to look at me for the first time: it's an eye; the pupil of it opens the entrance to voidness. It's dead. I could taste summer monsoon from its perishing breaths; it hangs down my fingertips—amputated limbs of a toddler; grotesque, reproductive organs of a sprite. I wanted to prose an elegy for it, but damn, no word was to suffice. I thought of past summers when the air smelled still of littering deserts and sudden swaggering of torrential pours, when I was in Ningxia, where dawns composed of no moist nor clouds. I was to finish the day, returning from miles of cycling. About the period of sunsets all cosmoses became a child dangling on a kayak as the waves engulf its tiptoes. The sky flipped itself into half of the night. My limbs grew numb, buzzing boisterously to accuse my overuse. I would haul my legs against the sand feeling sobriety leaving my forehead where summer haze fawned, and after a while, halt under the 8 o'clock after-shine recollecting the roadkill hedgehogs or snakes along the highway, probably with solemn distress. I would head towards the dormitory where I could lay my arms and legs and clean them out of the dusty desert taste. I would, however, remain at a curious angle where two fat buildings dispersed at a particular distance, in which orange explicit lights aligned like a brigade and charged to my sight. I would see, after so many years, sunflowers alive. They were the catastrophe of bullets vomiting towards the littering sun; their stem the rifle and leaf the hand of a comedic villain in a clichéd action movie of 1960s. The real living felt like a shot of deafening threat. I almost worshipped them. I used to hate it when people impose specific spirits upon other beings: roses for love and slimy romance, trees for godly rebirth, dogs for fidelity and sunflowers for passion. It's gross, I thought, that you had to oblige such mundane, mediocre thoughts upon them with self-satisfying obscenity, pushing yourself to accept this morality only because they are physically beautiful and innocent. Until I saw those sunflowers, real, breathing ones: for a long while, I became that toddler writing essays about how these blossoms indulged me to stand up and run and become the most persistent kid in schools, shedding tears about how passion, love, courage, freedom was learned and hewed and savored by those

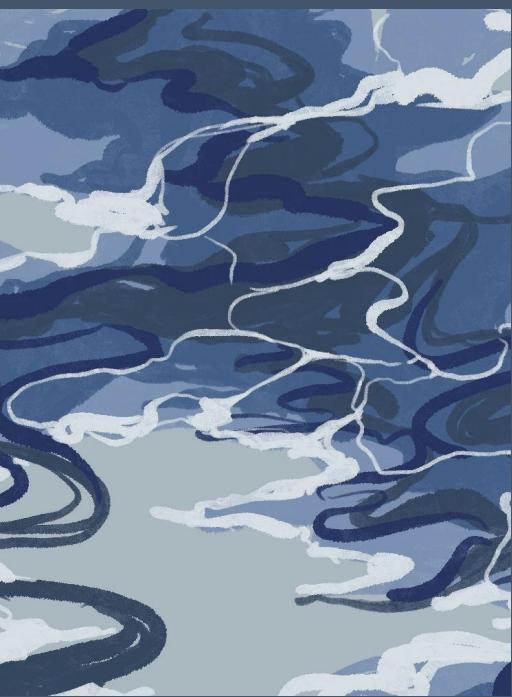
brightest of warriors; oh how they cleansed my mind like a resurrected heaven, I declared, and how I dwelt in such fluffy, enthusiastic hallucinations. And I saw news lately about a woman in her homeland intruded by warfare. She passed sunflower seeds to foreign invaders and required, serenely, that the soldier plant down these seeds before the war could ever end, "To let them remember us and really see the history, no matter how soon we die; no matter who of us died." It suffocates me how the image of sunflowers bounced out of the screen and how darkly magical the wars were. I lowered my head to let the agonizing flood of shame invade me. I stood upright. New-born dusk spilled its empty envelops along me, tasting like saline lakes and floating garbage, rotten roots. Why could I not smell the gunpowder? I cursed, almost choked by the genuine, festering sum of everything. Xanthic petals of dried sunflower remains coerced my hair. Farewell, farewell, farewell.

I stood before the windows. Extinguished artificial neon lights rain tilted—those droplets of pistil smelt of infertile soil. Halos of enlightenment flourishing at various layers refract the construction beyond this city awe, beaming yellowish. I sought for a god in a doomed broken bud and never have I heard anything more divine.



@Ruby Wang





Poetry



To tame a nameless flower
To seek the sky through curtains of branches
To step on earth and feel like an ornament dangling on it
To let Indi rock flow freely in air
To perceive how ripples of a lake spread out of sight
To hear the leaves rustle with their own frequency
To see how the tides lick the seashore
To dip one's finger in their pocket and absorb warmth
To caress a stray cat and see its tender limbs stretch cozily
To be caressed by the autumn wind
To breathe after a rain has befallen and feel like actually living
To sniff at some random aroma
To watch sunset, and fall asleep knowing that dawn will always arrive
To sense, and not just take everything as granted
To live, and not just exist
To love the world as an instinct

Double Sided

Gina Wang

You couldn't seem to see the rear

The imprisoned heart appeared in front of my eye

Even the cooling air

Had been captivated by your perilous scent

The sharp sound of your breath

Even your eyes that could cut through me

You just walked around the fortress I built

Pacing, wandering, hovering

When would the rain tick?

To wash away my panic

Where were you off to, deep in the night

How could the crystal spring be your destination of delight

I was still denying

Constantly tearing apart the swollen scar

I was still living in that memory

Failed to get away

You just stood outside the protection I established

Waiting, lingering, prowling

When would there be a meter of sunlight?

To dry my tears

The Nymphs

Star Huang



Naiad—my sister—your cold palm
on my bare shoulder, dampened
as those foliage weighed down
by evening fog—the rippling of water
In which we sought a moment of calm—
O Innocence, innocence that trickles
down our flesh and hair.

Gleam!—ere Hylas seeks us—
and then, what forced laughs,
what troubled games, what long
dreams—from which we awaken,
but hardly remember—
and so would innocence trickle
down our flesh and hair.

Like currents we disentangle,
taken into new rivers—the light
thickens, and our silhouettes
fuse for one last time!—Here dims
our mirage—the foliage—the rippling
of water—into which innocence trickles
down our flesh and hair.

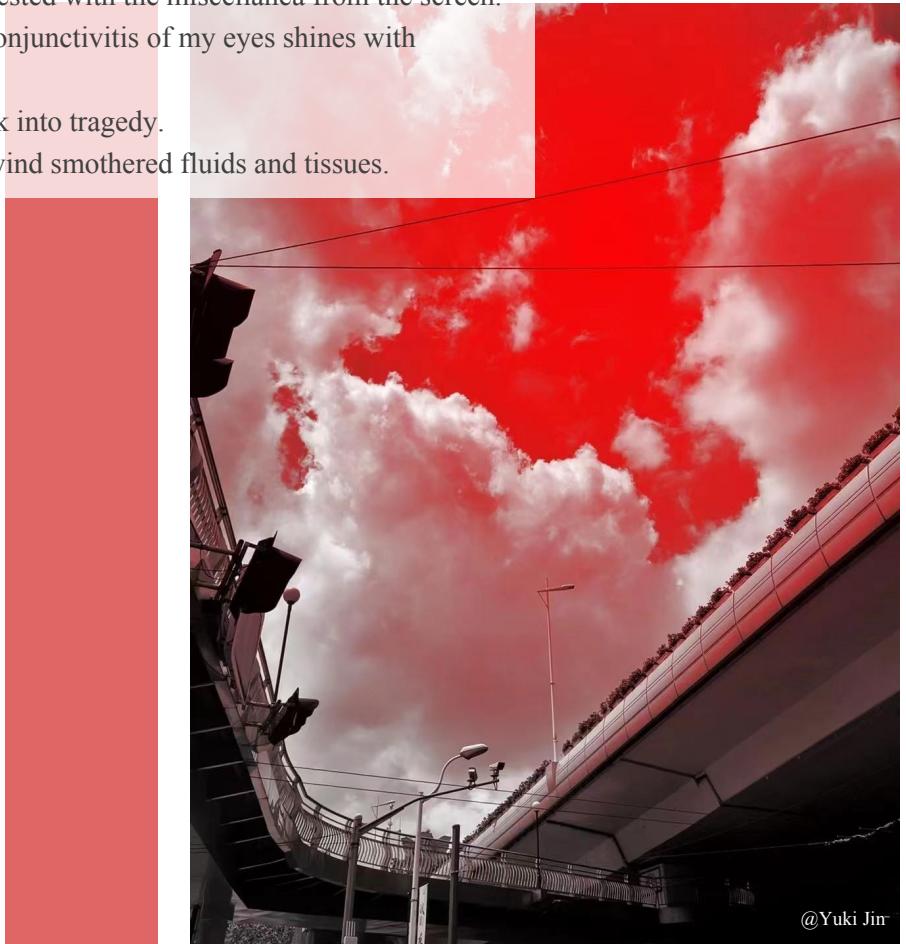
Tissue, tissue, tissue

Kevin Lin

Rolling paper encased in smoke clouds flies out the window.
The tint of the sky near the clothesline fades with my vigor.
Word cards merged into one.
Tears and tissues fall in unison.

Tin foil wrapped around porcelain teacup sinks into my palm.
The lamp on the wire of the headphone flows with cyber yellow.
Rescue clothing shattered into pieces.
Self-proliferating spittle and tissues.

Variegated graphics jested with the miscellanea from the screen.
The life outside the conjunctivitis of my eyes shines with
cavitory whiteness.
Debauched Faust sank into tragedy.
Water blown by the wind smothered fluids and tissues.



@Yuki Jin

The Snow Country

Jerry Wang

"Here in our mountains, the snow falls even on the maple leaves...The snow on the distant mountains was soft and creamy, as if veiled in a faint smoke."

—Yasunari Kawabata

Through the long tunnel,
The seemingly endless path
Of whispering darkness, his eternal endurance
Of breathlessness,
The snow country.

He gazed through the fogged-up glasses
At the snow, to which he was so drawn
That he strode compulsively toward it
Till the inn was out of sight.

Yet he felt not the stifling coldness
For the snow brought only warmth, the forgetful snow
Embracing, caressing, floating and submerging
Silencing the unsilenced past.

The unbearable whiteness of sin and
of redemption, drowning his desolation.
For a moment it eluded him,
But there it was, it always had been.

With an alcoholic ecstasy
He shouted and swore into the emptiness, cursing,
And stood laughing at himself,
Laughing so hard that he wept.

The tears burned through the snow,
Tiny searing bullets piercing and
Giving off smoke with the sizzling sob,
As his laughter echoed through the mountains.

The snow devoured his legs, the snow
that, with a soft breath, melted.
And the placid snow country
that, with a muffled whimper, shattered.

✓Virginia Star Huang

She rests
by the window and the slightly
graying wall. Mahogany mullions
divide the pane, quartering
a view of leaves
that shifts and flies
and becomes all pale
and nothingness, as the window
opens. What stays—seaborne
clouds, and the wind.

In her hands
she keeps needleworks,
or a book. Midway
upon the stairs, I stop, turn,
and catch a glimpse of her.

Again I remember
those loose strands of hers
that drape over the ear-tip,
rolled up as high tides,
and hesitant
to be let down.



@Ruby Wang

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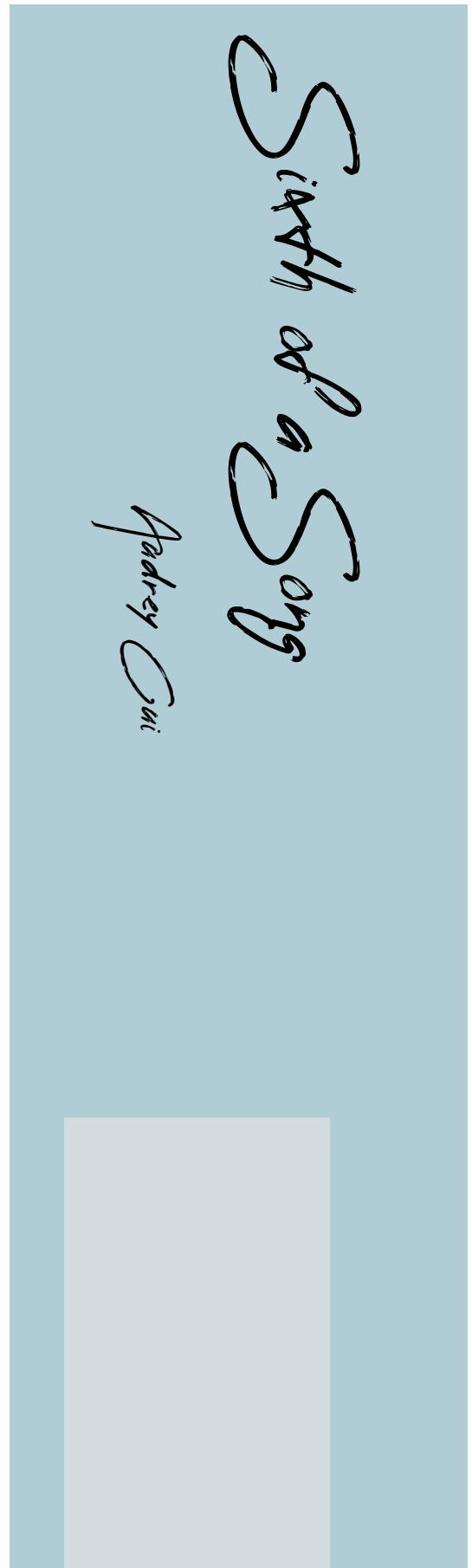
There was a time
when I got off the bus
I would look up at the sky
and see
a magnificent scene
The sky stretching in a rainbow from ground
to above
And I would crave
the existence of a camera
to capture the moment
and keep it forever

2.

There was a time
the sun stopped to rest below what I could see
and it was half of what it used to be
and it painted the sky with red
So bright, hard on my eyes
Like a shockwave just went through the world
And there was no color except
Red
Red
Red
I didn't like it

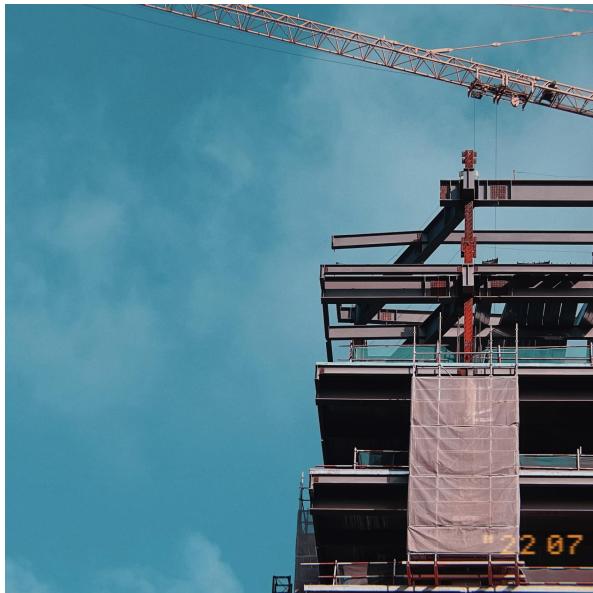
3.

There was a time
people around me, they could tear me apart
by just being there
Because they
Too
Are torn apart
My heart is broken in the jar
It lies there like an ornament of glass



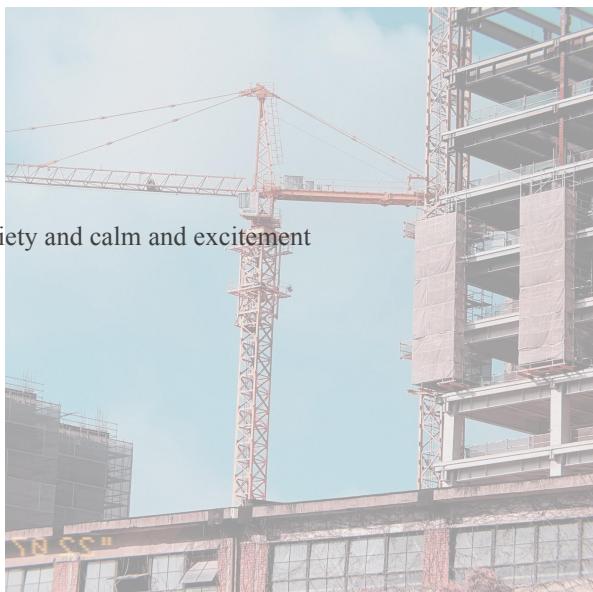
4.

There was a time
I waited until sunrise
But forgot to look at the sky
It is regret now
I have never seen a sun rise



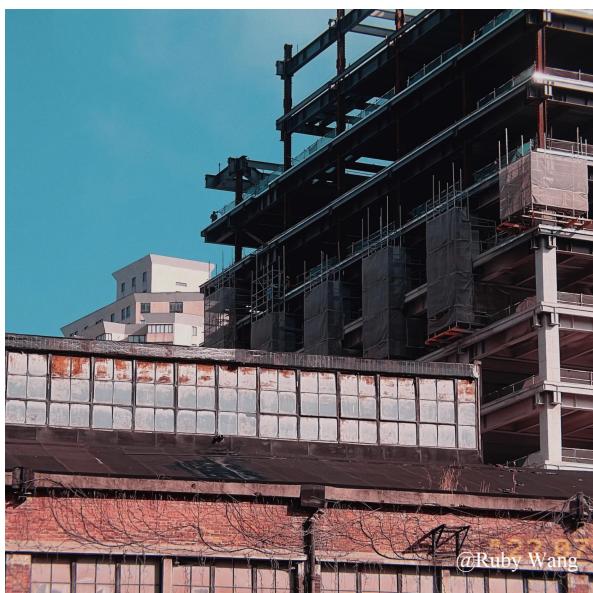
5.

There was a time
when even the tight stitches fail
to hold a person
together
There then
I run
To nowhere at all, with no purpose
And the tears and the happiness and the anger and the anxiety and calm and excitement
Flows down to my fingertips
I grope for something
A pen, a piano
and claw at my hair



6.

Today
I looked out the car window
The sky was stretching in every direction
a pleasing blue
And clouds were stretched in stripes and layers
Like the flight
Of a million birds
Across the sky
The tails of which tinted in red
That moment, I looked up and saw hope.



And it was when I truly was a soul that I began to feel.

1

The box of candies
Is slowly disappearing

And my eyesight
Follows the particles
Into somewhere else

I stand
In the middle of somewhere
Waiting

Something stirred
Gently

2

i have lots and lots of
things to remind myself

i wrote my story
at the back of my
reading packet

it will be forgotten

possibly

a person's birthday
is near
whose?

3

time is taking
my salary of itself
away,

wearing my pride
away,

yet it always finds a balance
like a
rock-paper-scissor
game.

@Ruby Wang



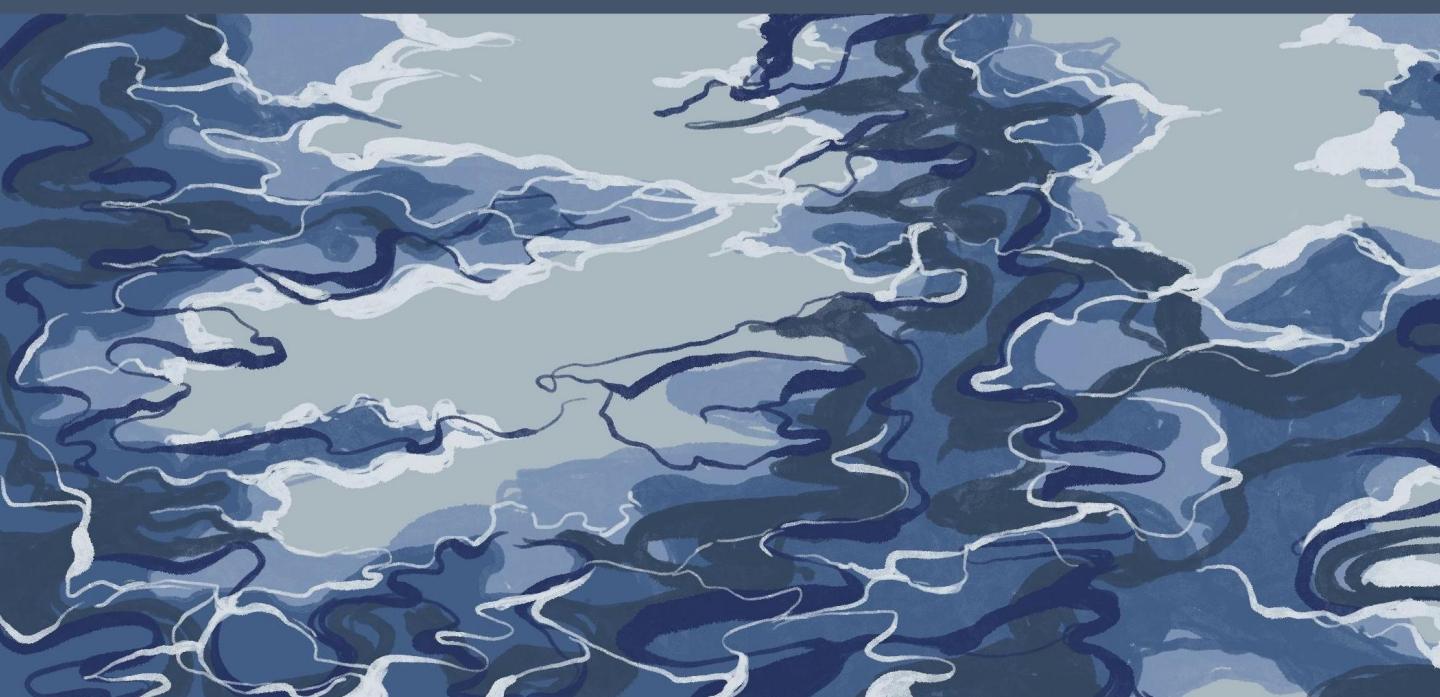


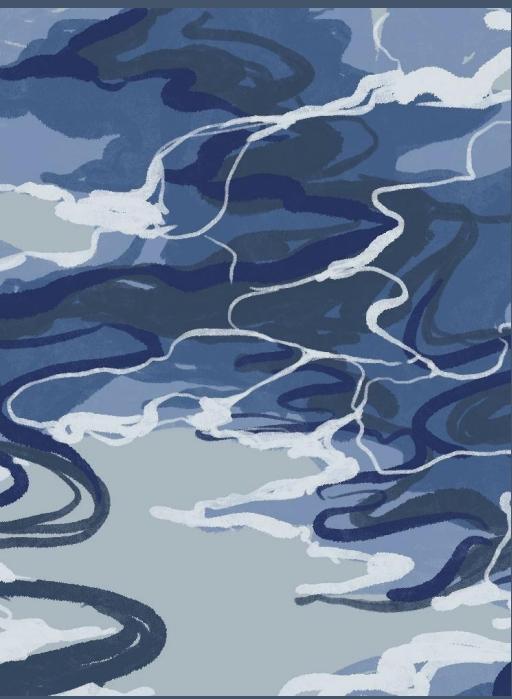
Because I could not see for senses,
they did kindly see for me.
Senses, Senses, weary here,
Yet not a drop to see.

I saw the individuals of my generation shiver,
How I mourned particular perceiver.
Prejudiced, potential, particular perceiver.
Do particular perceivers make you shiver?
do they?

I cannot help but stop and look at moody, morbid moods.
Down, down, down into the darkness of the morbid moods,
Gently they go - the sour, the dark, the glum.

Slowly I think of wide extents, I see broad
Senses, shining, spinning, sticking, there but in here.





Fiction

Invariant

Elaine Zhao

Just seven hours ago, I felt genuinely alive for the first time, as if I had shed my sensitive skin and was reborn. But now, standing under the dazzling stage lights, I would rather die.

7 hours ago: It's not like this is the first time my boss, red-faced with makeup caked deep in her wrinkles, has berated me in front of whole office. Everyone who works here gets a turn to be the object of her rancorous ire. Spittle dots the corners of her mouth as she hurls insults, her voice growing louder as she works herself into her usual frenzy. Although I have never gotten used to the feeling of public humiliation, I remind myself that at least it's not personal; "it's not about me, it's about her" I repeat in my head. But something feels different today. A tiny ember starts to burn inside me, and no matter how many times I douse it with affirmations, the flames rise. I stare at her right in the eye and hear a strange voice slamming "SHUT UP!" into my boss, stunning her into silence. Scanning the room, I see the audience of my coworkers is just as surprised as I am.

It takes me a beat to recognize my own shout.

6 hours ago: I walk out of the company, holding a box of trash. The cumbersome "Program Planning Proposal" I spent three nights completing suddenly seems absurd. I don't hesitate to throw it into the rubbish bin. My body is still buzzing with adrenaline.

5 hours ago: The small, narrow bar is a sardine can, rank with stale whiskey and saliva sprayed by blathering drunks. The cacophony of voices rising from the crowd pulls me back to the bustling cafeteria of my high school. I am suddenly a teenager again, struggling for breath and drowning in my own silence amid a sea of laughter. For hours before I walked into the cafeteria, I practiced my jokes over and over in my head. I would walk right up to Sally and the other popular kids and deliver a perfectly-timed, punchy one-liner that would have them all rolling with laughter. Once they caught their breath, they would invite me to sit with them.

After that, they'd invite me everywhere, marveling at my hilarious jokes that sent the whole room into a gleeful explosion. Sally wouldn't make fun of my outdated sneakers and heavy glasses anymore because I would be one of Them. My jokes and their laughter would become our common language.

Inhaling sharply, I snap back to the bar. The memory dims and I tune out the chaos around me. "Just a Diet Coke, please."

4 hours ago: The owner of the bar plods to the microphone. At his announcement of an open mic night, the feverish rush of my final performance at work creeps up inside me again. The ember is inhaling the surrounding oxygen, and as it burns it reveals an old desire amid the ashes. I feel my fingers and toes start to fidget disquietingly.

3 hours ago: Is this really happening? I don't recognize this stranger, this doppelganger who yells at her boss and signs up to a comedy routine in a bar full of strangers.

2 hours ago: I am fully freaking out. Growing up, I had never spoken a single word in front of a crowd. I was not even brave enough to talk loudly to others, not to mention tell jokes.

"Hey, gimme your stage name." The owner of the bar, a potbellied middle-aged man, gives me a heavy pat on my left shoulder. I shrink from the weight of his hand.

"Stage name?" I'm in over my head. But it's too late to back out now. My doppelganger has seized control. Inside, the wildfire is raging, burning everything in its path.

"Well, you can call me...um...Sally." Sally, the mean girl who only wore the most fashionable clothes and made me feel like a worthless bug under her trendy shoes.

"Okay, sure, Sally." He gives me an uncertain smile.

10 minutes ago: The two hours I spent trying to figure out what I was going to say on stage were a panicky tornado, and now I am standing center stage. Countless eyes bore into me from around the rotten wood tables. Silence and humiliation swallow me into lukewarm darkness, encroaching upon my body bit by bit, legs first, then arms, then my frantically-beating heart, and finally, my head. I lose control of my breath. With the deepening gloom, I slide into my hidden nightmare.

I forgot how I ended up here.

Six years old, I accidentally overheard my mom talking about me to her friends. "This kid never talks." Her disappointment is palpable.

Nine years old, as I walked out of the math training institute with broken air conditioners and cramped classrooms, my dad who had been watching from the back of the room cut me open with a familiar question: "why don't you ever raise up your hand or answer questions? Are you stupid or something?"

Ten years old, I transferred to a new school. The homeroom teacher asked me to introduce myself. Instead of saying my name, my tongue violently knotted itself before smothering my voice in my throat. A room full of kids looked me up and down like a circus freak. All I could do was stare back, hoping to disappear.

Fifteen years old, the only kid who talked to me at school left, and I became a shadow. Other kids didn't even apologize if they ran into me; you can't collide with a shadow.

Eighteen years old, I put on an invisibility cloak that can resist all embarrassment and ridicule as my coming-of-age gift. I stopped trying to make my parents see me when they could not hear me. I could not move the invisible obstruction in my throat, the source of their disapproval, but I could learn to live with their chagrin. I stopped rehearsing the scene in my mind when I would join the popular kids with a casual but perfect joke. Although I had dreamed of it millions of times, finally I just watched them laughing at dumb things like "Jerry can hold twenty grapes in his mouth" or "Amber said the f word to some teacher this morning" and finished my lunch alone.

Now I finally get the chance to tell all the jokes I have spent years polishing in my mind, but I say nothing.

With the microphone in front of me, I can show my parents that my head is far from an empty void, but I say nothing.

I have all of Jerry's and Amber's and Sally's attention, but I say nothing.

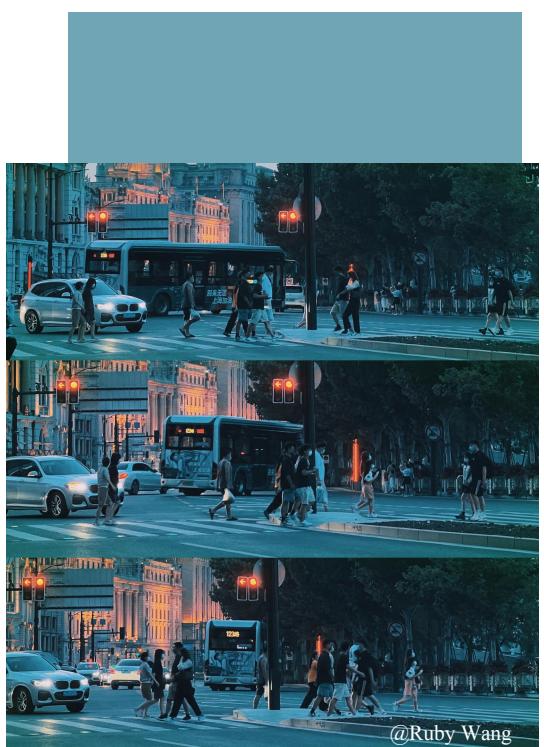
Throughout my twenty-five years of life I have been mediocre, a failure. I failed at making friends just like I failed at getting into Harvard. Seven hours ago, I gave the first shout since I was born, but my life was still as invisible and unremarkable as a spotlessly wiped glass door without colorful stickers to prove its existence.

Dizzied by the blazing stage lights, I take a bow and step down with a gentle smile.

Now, an epiphany: I do not crave the chance to speak, nor great attention, not even popular friends. What I long for is my mom's gentle pat on my head and soft voice telling me it is okay to be quiet, my dad's recognition of my thoughts even in the absence of words, the strange kids in the new school giving me a friendly and reassuring smile, a casual "sorry" from those who ran into me in the corridor, and all the kindness and happiness I had been relentlessly denied by my introverted nature. Inside, mellow rain subdues the last embers of what had been a blazing fire just minutes ago. Even though I dare not say hello to a stranger, answer questions in a crowded classroom, nor tell jokes to an expectant audience, I still deserve to love and be loved.

Introversion is the invariant in my life, and I choose to be proud of it.

Awkwardness, humiliation, detestation, whatever it was, falls behind me. From now on, I am just myself.



@Ruby Wang

The street was oddly empty, the ground uneven, with gravel pointing up at him as he trod on it. His red beanie was new compared to his dusty coat, and it was slightly tilted to the back of his head to reveal a young face.

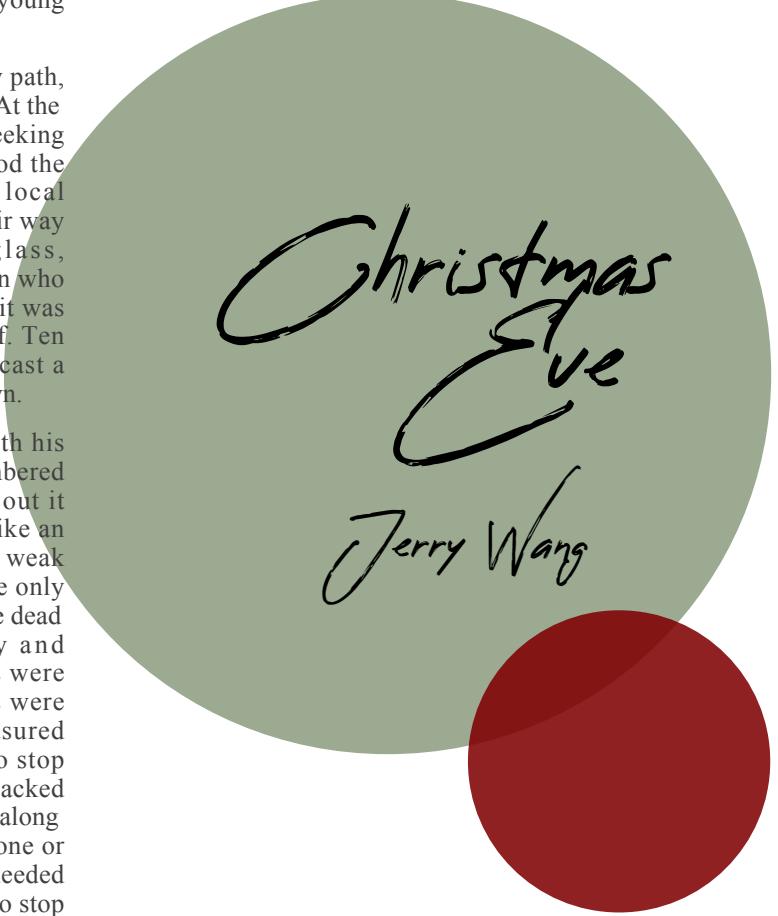
It had been long since he last trod on this very path, but everything about it felt familiar as yesterday. At the very end of the street, there used to be stables reeking of horse manure, and just across them there stood the small deserted pub, only frequented by the local drunkards. Only then some music would find their way out through the cracks in the window glass, accompanied by laughter of roaring drunken men who did not really had anywhere else to be. Perhaps it was yesterday, who is to say? He thought to himself. Ten years hardly left its mark here; if any, it only cast a thicker layer of dust upon this already somber town.

Then he recalled his departure. The fight with his father ten years ago was also a distinctly remembered part of his memory, though he tried to shut it out it emerged again and again by day and at night, like an unwelcomed guest knocking incessantly on the weak door. To him, the cause of it all mattered not; he only remembered how the shouting pierced through the dead street. Doors were slammed deafeningly and photographs fell from the mantelpiece. Curses were uttered through clenched teeth and accusations were made with pointing fingers. His mother's treasured vases were shattered into pieces as she tried to stop them, but he was already storming upstairs. He packed some shirts and stuffed them in the worn suitcase along with his savings over the years, summing up to one or two pounds — that was all he had, and all he needed to break away from it all. His mother attempted to stop him, but to no avail, and he shut the front door with all his strength, his father's curses following and chasing him until he turned at the street corner.

Life had not always been like that, but after that fight which sent him on his way he did not have much of a choice. For the first few months he continuously received letters from his mother who somehow found her way to reach him. There were pages of them, saying how much they missed him back at home and begging for his return. At the first Christmas of his departure, he received a new beanie and another long letter. At the end of it his mother begged again:

"Please, John, it's about Christmas, and we both want you home, your father and I. You will always have your place at our dinner table..."

John threw this letter in the box together with the beanie, on top of a thick pile of other letters from her mother. The file ceased to grow thicker at such rapid rate after two or three years; he could not recall the exact point after which he only received letters occasionally. After some time, they only arrived on holidays, and the envelopes were evidently thinner, scarcely making any contribution to the entire pile. He never responded to any of these letters. Sometimes he took up his pen and grabbed a piece of paper, but he was always able to stop himself before anything was written, for whatever unspoken reason even he himself did not understand.



*Christmas
Eve*
Jerry Wang

It was about Christmas, and John was surprised that he did not hear from his mother—perhaps more surprised at discovering himself concerned and even bothered by it. Did she forget? But she never forgot about writing him before Christmas, although last year the letter shrank to only a few short lines that he no longer considered a letter, but only a reminder of the tenuous link between them.

Perhaps it was time for him to return. It had been ten years, and the ten years had not been easy. Ceaseless misery clouded the time he spent in solitude, with misfortune and disappointment sprinkled throughout his life. But to him it was the unavoidable pain of proving a point, though what the point was he could no longer tell clearly. What if he returned now? Imagine that! Oh the look on his parents' faces when their son appeared at Christmas dinner after all these years! His mother would be waiting outside the door, or even on the street, to give him a hug so tight it might break his ribs. His father, of course, would shake his hand to make a pretense of forgetting what had happened between them, but it mattered no more, for he would embrace his father as well. This would be the only Christmas he spent with company in ten years. His mother would bring homemade hot whiskey, pouring him a full glass while inquiring about his journey, his life and work, everything past. He would be more than glad to sit in his place at the table and tell all his tales, while both his parents trembled with unspeakable and uncontrollable elation merely at their son being home again. He would be welcomed, he was certain.

The street was empty and deadly quiet, save for some noises of celebration breaking out occasionally. Laughter emerged at a distance, from the bar, perhaps, where the drunkards must be gulping glasses of whiskey and having their best time of the year. The house was within his sight, he suddenly stopped and stood and looked at it with unanticipated solemnity. The rusted railings waited patiently for him as he became silhouetted against the bright light that pervaded the inside of the house and escaped through the window. It was freezing outside, but the fogged glass reminded him of the warmth within. The door was closely shut, but as he approached the window he could hear the sound of many people and their genial conversation. He took a deep breath and peeked inside.

The round table was crowded today, around it sat his father, mother, aunt, uncle, his cousins and a very young boy whom he could not recognize despite his endeavor to search his memory. When his mother stood up and walked to the kitchen, he noticed that the walls were repainted. On the mantelpiece there was only one photograph he identified; its frame had obviously been broken but carefully glued together so that the cracks were barely visible. Hidden and dusty, it sat alone at the back, partially covered by some new photographs lined up at the front. His mother returned with roasted turkey and spiced beef, and at the sight everyone paused his or her delightful chat for they felt their appetite sharpened. His father raised his glass to propose a toast; he could not hear his father's speech, but as he finished everyone cheered and he and his mother kissed the young boy sitting between them. His father smiled a genuine smile; he had never seen it before. He froze for a short while, feeling his beanie blown off by the piercing wind. He did not attempt to retrieve it. He forced himself to turn around and walk away, away from the close yet distant house, away from the familiar yet unknown people within.

He turned at the street corner and leaned against the cold brick wall. Amidst the celebration broke out a short whimper of anguish, unheard, unnoticed, and soon drowned.



Chorran Gyg

Evelyn

I could, Evelyn, have my heart palpitate for you; I could exist exquisitely for you. I could love you.

I could run up the edges of the steepest mountain ridges for you. I could rub the highest stone clean with as much sandpaper I could find, and I could bring you there to show you the sunset, the golden and bronze radiance piercing through the swirling autumn leaves in the soft forest breeze. I could paint a picture for you with sparkled dots of red and gray, as if the leaves plucked at my heartstrings, reflected through the purest of crystals that are your eyes.

I could have no words, I could be faltering, I could be staring blankly at the setting sun, your lips moving, glowing with a tempting apple-red. Only the thumping sound of my heartbeat comes out. Listen to it, my dear, gently lay your hands on my chest, against my veins and blood, flowing towards you, the ultimate being of perfection and beauty.

I could be touching you, holding your hands—or shyly reaching out my pinky finger, hoping you wouldn't find out. I could tell you how much I have missed you in the past months, how I craved the texture of your lips like a desert traveler desperate for water. It could be anyone but it happened to be you, then it's just you, and I shall blind myself if I were to see anyone else. It has to be you, you, the elf, the angel, the living goddess.

I could tell you how often I dreamt of you, how gentle and friendly you are in my fantasy. I could tell you how much I need you, how a simple greeting and embrace could cure all ills; how your reciprocation could grant me such ecstasy, such ravishment, that one could more easily rattle all autumn leaves lose from the mountain forests than shatter my shield of euphoria for you. How could I ever dread if these desires are fulfilled!

I could tell you how many hours I spent wandering downstairs, stopping at every corner, hoping for your emergence. But I did not tell you I missed you, for I need you to miss me too. I could not bring you up the mountain unless you willingly follow. I could not love you if my feelings are certain to be unrequited.

Therefore I forget you, Evelyn. Never have I ever passed again the corridor downstairs where I had craved to see you around the corner. Every morning I took another route, trying to wash away memory by the extra time it takes to get outside. And every afternoon when I return and walk up to the front gate, I would hold my right hand up in a fist, almost knocking, before suddenly realizing I had to go in from the back door. When I stepped on the wooden planks they would make a hollow sound, and I was once again reminded of you, how you walked down the hallway with the same "thump, thump, thump" of your heels. And all my efforts of trying to avoid you became futile.

I never wanted to stop loving you, Evelyn, I want to share the rest of my life with you. I want to be able to feel your skin every morning I awake and hear your voice every evening before bed. I want to tell you I love you instead of disguising my feelings as a friend's. I want to let go of all logical axioms: I crave the presence of you, I want to dream of you, I want you to know how much I miss you and how broken I become without you. But rationality pulls be back and I need you to miss me too.

I never stopped loving you, Evelyn.



@Ruby Wang

Victoria

Elaine Zhao



@Ruby Wang

She walks out of the classroom alone.

She tries to make her departure as invisible as possible so that her friends will not catch up, ruining her life even more.

She needs to be alone, very imperatively.

Thoughts about final exams swirled around her head like bees, forming a withered halo. Then, thoughts about the math exam paper with a 74 on the right corner bumped in, driving her eyes sore.

That should not be her score. She gets some water, calming herself down. That is not her score.

The wind of early winter contains a bit of biting bone, reminding her of her third grade when she tried her best to study but couldn't pass any subject when she tried her best to hold back tears but still sobbed badly in front of teachers and her mom.

That night, she poured a cup of icy water on her head in the middle of winter. Frigid drops of water dripped from the ends of her hair onto her warm arms, soaking her chest and back with a sobering chill. At that moment, Victoria was so sure that she had but only two choices: victory or death.

She feels sick every time she sees her mom changing her facial expressions. Her mom can be so gentle and caring, but in many casual moments, her temper can be ignited by seemingly unimportant things, such as an overdone joke or an assignment she forgot to complete. She has to be careful with everything she says, leaving her switch untouched.

When she was five, she once shared a song that she made with her friends at school. They adapted the happy birthday song into a "bad luck song" to wish others bad luck. She found that incredibly funny and laughed uncontrollably every time she sang it. She thought mom would like it as well. Sitting in the back seat of mom's moped, she sang it out loud, mixed with a few heartfelt laughter, but mom responded on the moped with deadly silence, and when they reached home a written self-criticism was posted above her desk, where she could see it every time she looked up.

There must be a reason for her name which doesn't fit her temperament at all, and this is the same reason for those tough English classes that tortured her every weekend and the nights she was scolded for being unable to solve "simple" math problems. That also counts for her determination in third grade. When children were still arguing for a barbie doll or meaningless praise from the teacher, she became Victoria. She hid a pair of scissors under the pillow and made a vow.

Mom and dad are strict with her, but they have never admitted it. In those sunlit days when she didn't screw up any exams or lie that she had practiced the piano, mom and Dad would laugh and ask her, do you think we are strict with you? She wanted to say, yes, too strict, so strict that I can't even breathe, but in order to keep them from

turning crazy, she would carefully answer, maybe a little bit. So Mom and Dad laughed even more and bantered that their children every week or slap them if they tell lies could be called strict.

The world is too hard for a kid, she would think, may be especially hard for those who were named Victoria.

She had met many Victorias, and to her disappointment, she didn't find herself among them. Victorias are pretty, out-going, and popular girls who know how to properly expose their foolishness without making themselves odious. After meeting them, she understood exactly what kind of daughter her parents want. The icy droplets burned a murky hole through her chest and back, cold wind blowing through the hollow body, but she felt the heat from the burning, her body was burning into ashes. She shivered fiercely, her organs burned to embers, and she couldn't feel her heart beating in her chest. She picked up the scissors tremblingly, the sharp blade slid across her forehead, and strands of ebony fell under her feet.

That was how she became Victoria. She killed the nameless girl and became Victoria.

The sky is getting darker, but there is still faint light on the edge of it. She buys a piece of strawberry cake, sitting in the overly bright bakery, trying to swipe the thoughts out of her mind, but they grow recklessly like mad vines, dominating every corner of her mind.

Did you forget to bring your pencil case? Well, you deserve the scolding, Victoria.

We are not lucky enough to give birth to a better kid, Victoria.

Why are you crying? You should throw your phone out of the window right now, Victoria.

.....

Who the hell is Victoria?

Victoria is the girl who got the highest score in almost every exam, making mom shine with pride in a family gathering, the girl that all the girls in the class envy and all the boys have a crush on, the girl with the most brilliant smile and the wittiest repartee in the world, the girl that is loved by everybody, everybody.

But to the nameless girl, Victoria is a ball of waste paper that fills the void in her chest.

She really likes Victoria when she wins so much applaud and compliment for her, but she gets the feeling that Victoria is disappearing, and the math exam paper in her bag is the evidence.

There's only a small slice of strawberry left in the strawberry cake. Eat it or not? She's already full, but there is a space for a tiny piece of strawberry. But she doesn't really like strawberries, she only likes strawberry cake.

This is not even a choice. If she doesn't like strawberries, why does she have to eat it? Strawberries and strawberry cake are two separate things. Even if she doesn't eat strawberries, she can still enjoy strawberry cakes pleasantly.

Walking out of the bakery without taking the piece, she looks up to the depth of the dark sky. She remembers the clear dark sky she saw in the suburbs when she was little. She thinks of grandma and how she called her Vicky and those friends who liked to call her Vic. There are so many names for her, but she prefers to stay nameless as she feels tired of carrying a name to live.

Mom once told her how she was named. "Your grandma and grandpa argued for a week between Selina and Elina, while your dad preferred Cynthia. But these names are too petite, you know, so I named you Victoria. They all love this name, maybe because they just like names ending with 'a', but I just hope you can succeed in anything you want, you know, invincible."

Victoria wins all the admiration and adoration, but she, the nameless one, was given all the sincere blessings together with the name "Victoria". She is not invincible. Instead, she is timid, introverted, and even cowardly, but that doesn't make her any less important. That makes her Victoria.

She pours a bottle of water on her head. The wintry wind gusted through her body, transparent tiny droplets sticking on her cheeks like those trivial but heavy thoughts finally bursting themselves out of her skin,

dampening her surface but refreshing her inner world into sheer whiteness.

Victoria throws the empty plastic bottle into a rubbish bin. Sitting on the bus, watching a apricot streetlights carving a horizontal ray in the night sky, she closes her eyes and stops thinking about anything.

Madeline



*This dewdrop world—
Is a dewdrop world,
And yet, and yet . . .*

—Kobayashi Issa

I.

At midnight the operation was over. Every cramp of pain deprived of validation, every sense of fatigue imprisoned—a strip of gold sunk in the river of time, flushed, shattered, then denied existence.

That was when fear sanked in. During the past week of dread not one moment was as scary as the split second when everything came to a halt. The night was calm, quiet, serene. As if the divine hand had plugged off the power drill, and everything, from the smallest particle of man, to the largest pieces of moons and stars, were frozen in unfathomable silence.

In darkness I closed my eyes and saw, on the dimly lit city streets, a blurry shadow.

"Run," I silently moaned. "Before it's too late."

My cheeks were numb as I stared blankly into the empty night sky. Anyone who were to see my expression at that second must have felt a direct confrontation with death, a being standing at the rim of the spotlight and precipice of nothingness.

She must be wearing white, the dress of an angel. A glowing reminiscence, stripped down to a hollow dress with no flesh or bone inside. With a torpid glance she desired meaning in the currents that were devouring her alive, a shining piece of gold tossed around by the flows of time. Yet she let go.

II.

If only I had known more. If only I had done more: I could have held her. We could have made the difference. We could have won.

She was struggling, fighting back the undercurrents in the middle of the river. I was in a dingy cracked boat, with a pair of broken ores. I stretched the remaining pole of the ore towards her. I felt her grip. She was approaching. We were winning.

But then another current came between us, splashing onto the boat and it toppled over.

I fell into the rampant currents of a stormy night. The currents carried me away, with the broken piece of ore still gripped tightly in my hands.

Madeline, I never let go.

Yet still, if only I pulled my boat towards her before that current came. If only I pulled with greater force.

In the past week I had to hold myself together and not add on to the already existing burden the world have pained her with. The universe hung in the balance and I must save it—the thought alone was comforting. It gave a certain feeling of control, as if by a single pull I could have beaten fate and regained a living soul.

III.

I went running on the empty city streets.

To what destination I was uncertain. I was running blindly, passing shadows of trees aligning the pavement, as if by getting ahead of them I had won. For a moment I thought I was running faster than the second hand on my watch. I was the time-traveler.

I no longer recognized the streets. I was running in unknown grounds. Yet I headed on, an adamant purpose to remain lost.

The streetlights grew more and more sparse. Now I was running in complete darkness.

I wanted to yell, to shout, to cry, to claim a vindication. Yet powerlessly I was running, towards emptiness, in helplessness. I was her shadow, following her glowing meekness, her gentle optimism, her savant radiance. She was the goddess and I her forever disciple.

Now I shall live on as you—I shall continue life for you. Every part of this world, the beauty and the pain which you never got to see or experience, I shall go through them for you and with you.

You already injected a piece of your soul into mine as you grabbed onto my ore. This time I shall never, ever let go.

"Well, hello, Disney! My Disney World!" Ella burst out with the most cheerful greeting ever to her dream land. Already, she had jumped off from her mom's sight passing through the gate into the real magical world.

The Sun was shining and reflecting upon the pointed castle roofs. She heard Mickey Mouse welcoming her arrival, and her "Princess Day" finally came.

Seeing her daughter's splendid smile, she thought of the exorbitant ticket prices for such an amusement park. It's worth it, at least on our last day. I owe her too much. She let out a reluctant sigh, and yesterday's nightmare blew to her mind again like a whirlwind.

A slap in the hand hit her face for the hundredth time. There was no use fighting back anymore. She witnessed the man that she used to love turning into a savage beast losing control of his rationality. The bruises, the scars, and the scrapes on her body marked the failures of their marriage.

Argument arose from nowhere, but they always ended with her tragic injuries. The glasses shattered on the floor, and the sharp pieces cut her skin like knives stabbing her wounded heart. He waved his huge arms at her and was ready to fight as she reached out for the last sense of hope.

When the tears dried up in her eyes and the tumult halted, it was all over.

The body banged and lied rigidly on the floor. His breathing stopped. Her mind flashed through excuses that she could make up for the mistake. Ella had lost her father, but they did not have to suffer ever again. A feeling of relief loosened the nerves until she

realized what she had really done.

A crime. A murder.

Within a blink, her vision returned to the magical Disney world. Think of something positive. She told herself, and her fists tightened.

In front of them stood Ella's favorite princess, Cinderella. Similar to the descriptions in the fairy tales, Cinderella wore a blue dress, and her blond hair curled up into a knot. he walked over in her glittering crystal shoes, and Ella gasped in amazement.

They took a photo together with the two of them standing beside each other holding hands. The short young girl stared into the princess's eyes with full admiration while Cinderella held her posture so elegantly and gracefully.

"See how Cinderella earns the love from her prince and becomes a princess eventually," Grace said earnestly, turning her sight far onto the horizon. "You'll also have to be hard-working and good enough to acquire a 'happy-ever-after' ending."

Hello,
Goodbye
Laura Shang



"But sometimes it's up to our destiny to decide, isn't it?"

"No, my dear. Your efforts take the lead among all the other lucky ones."

What this sentence actually meant, Ella did not take into account. I will become a princess like Cinderella someday in some way.

Without daddy and mommy helping you, life will be hard, but you're a good girl, right? Grace moved her mouth hoping to say goodbye to her daughter for the last time, but her voice trailed off with the screams of the tourists passing by.

Their adventure went on so excitingly that day. Captain Jack brought Ella to the most dangerous sailing trip seeking the underwater treasure. The seven dwarfs guided her to their underground mine in the speediest mine car. Winnie the Pooh introduced his friends in the castle, where they lived and enjoyed a romantic life in the perfect Disney World.

Beside the child who engaged in all the forms of amusement, the mother seemed to be absent-minded frowning and meditating. She was waiting for a chance to leave everything behind.

When it was finally time for the evening fireworks, the biggest show arrived. They had found the best position in the front before the lights were on. The intersecting light rays pictured the scenes of the mermaid Ariel chasing her true love, Mickey Mouse setting off for an adventure accompanied by his friends, and Elsa finding her true identity with Anna's help. Casted upon the castle, the lights converged while the fireworks shot out into the sky, lighting up the darkness ahead.

People were shouting, cheering, and laughing, and no one heard her murmuring a word close into her daughter's ears. Maybe she whispered it to the corners of the universe, or perhaps she imagined herself doing it to soothe her remaining sorrow.

"Goodbye." She said, to her daughter, to Disney, to the world.

"Mommy, look, it's magic, it's magic!" Ella saw the sparkling stars that dashed into the night sky, blossoming into huge colorful flowers.

"Goodbye." She said to Disney, to the perfect Disney World that brought her dream to reality and lit up a Cinderella's ordinary life.

It's time for me to leave, my girl. I . . . I . . . I killed your father, you know. I . . . have to be in the prison. Or I will be executed. A life for a life. The mother shivered in the coldness. I hope you'll never know. Staring into the eyes of her daughter for one last time with the deepest sorrow, she walked away to her destiny.

Ella stretched out her hand reaching for her mom, but her shadow had already disappeared with the fading fireworks in the receding brightness.

She stood alone on the passageway, peering around only to find the place unfamiliar. In her deepest memories, she remembered it was the last day that mommy existed in her life.

Down the street where the two dusty pedestal walkways meet, there was a lone bar. The bar was given the name "Phillies" but the bad weathers rusted the tag year by year, leaving no trace of the orange paint that it was originally painted in. On the door hanged the sign, "Boulevardier, sold out". The whole place was dimmed in yellow lights, lights that seemed to come from another world. And though the entrance was well hidden, glasses gave an inner view of the bar—a triangular serving table with random cups scattered all over, a couple and a man sitting around it, and a small waiter wearing white tops centered at the serving section. The glasses had not been washed in a great while. Last time a cleaner came, it was a month ago. Or two. Or three.

In this particular evening the street was empty while the bar stood out, and the buildings opposite and adjacent to the bar closed as soon as the first trace of moonlight fell upon the little pebbles across the street. Four people sat in the bar. For a long while there was no sound other than that of the server's rag scraping the table's wooden surface, the repetitive "Squash, Squash" signaling the building boredom and the unpleasant effort to scrape away the inequities on the table. The man beside the couple pulled out a scrap of wrinkled newspaper and began reading. The couple were finishing the fillet steaks in their plates. Meanwhile the waiter placed the rag down the table, looked up and glanced outside the glass windows.

The man among the couple turned around and followed the waiter's gaze, but upon seeing nothing of particular interest he soon went back to his food.

Moments later, the man broke the silence: "Winter is coming and I could envision long, endless nights already. Workers are getting waived. The trying times will never end. It's like that towering darkness behind your back when you turn and roll your body to hinge on one side of the bed, know what I'm saying?" The waiter shifted his gaze off the deserted mansion downstreet and focused once more on his labor. The man beside the couple remarked: "I know. You remind me of Nighthawks. Do you think they're afraid of darkness?"

"Surely, they can't be. I bet you never saw one of them in daylight. They hide too well." The waiter was quick to respond.

"But in the night, they come out and float around looking for preys."

"Exactly. Just like the bawds down my street."

The three men laughed in a vulgar and disheartening unison, the laughs repelling off the walls like cannon balls wavering frivolously in the small chamber. Soon, the laughs died.

The woman did not stir during the whole time and now she nudged the man. "What's the matters, dear?" the man asked. "Nothing," the woman responded, "it's cold outside." The man placed his arm around the woman's neck, but the woman frowned and shoved his arm aside. The man went back to his drink. He raised his cup in mid-air and studied the liquid motion rocking back and forth. "It tasted like licorice." He sighed, putting the cup down once again after taking a sip.

"And sure it did. "The jaded woman replied.

"What did you say?" The man turned, clearly alarmed.

"I said, sure it did."

"Now what was that?"

"No. Nothing. The weather's too cold."

The man finished his cup and raised his hand, signaturing the waiter to fill his cup once more. He pulled out a cigar and placed it in his mouth. He inhaled gently while holding the flame of the lighter to the paper's tip, eyeing the dancing spark struggling to be seen in the night. The woman flipped her wrist and studied her jewelry meticulously. Her kids were waiting for her to go home and tell a bed-time story, which she usually does every other day, but now her thoughts were not on them. What was the point of her marriage? The lamp post on the opposite street flickers so faintly it could barely be seen from a distance and never in her life will she say that it represents light in the darkness no meaning attached it is going to flicker out in no time and looks like a grave man who see with blinding sight. Struggling.

*Kevin Shi
Nighthawks*

Rage! When the man goes back to his house he shall not turn off the lights he will not face the darkness alone with his back turned while he rolls into his favorite position. He will light a cigar and wait for the first blossom of gold. Perhaps he will do some reading in the meantime. Probably Hemingway, his all-time favorite.

"Go on, I'm listening," The man said, blowing puffs of smoke into the cold air.

The woman shook her head.

"No? Then let's go."

"Where?" The woman asked as she packed her coat.

"We will end up somewhere we haven't been to."

"Sure."

"I'm leaving."

"Coming."

The bar had no doors.



@Edward Hopper



@Ruby Wang

"It is written 'Thou shalt not kill,' so because he has killed, are we to kill him? No..."

To execute a man for murder is to punish him immeasurably more dreadfully than is equivalent to his crime."

—Fyodor Dostoevsky, *the Idiot*

The three of us were shoved into the cell. It was a big room, too big for three prisoners. I had already learned the names of the other men when the guard at the entrance uttered them inattentively. The thin man who had been staring at the ground all the time was Alexeyev. Burdovsky was the bulky man who walked in a strangely funny way.

"What are you going to do with us?" asked Alexeyev with a shivering voice.

"Your sentence will be read this evening." The major did not bother to look up and started walking away after putting checkmarks on a sheet of paper.

"What are you going to do with us?" he asked again, but this time there was no reply.

Burdovsky sat down with his back against the side wall, his body slightly tilted so that he could see the guard outside the door through the space in between the bars. Alexeyev dragged himself to the most inconspicuous corner and flopped down into the darkness, soon becoming part of it. I took the space in the middle and sat down facing the door of the cell, studying the shadow of the guard in silence.

"What are they going to do with us?" Alexeyev asked again, finally looking up. When I raised my head, a ray of light shone through the hole on the wall adjacent to the one I was leaning against. It shone in my eyes, and I blinked several times because it was too bright for eyes that were used to darkness. Now I could see Alexeyev's face; it was a very young face from which hope had not completely faded.

"Probably Siberia. I don't know how long." Burdovsky said. His voice was sonorous, and I thought that perhaps there was even something soothing about it.

"I think so too; they won't do much to us," I said. "Just labor, that's all."

"I don't like that," Alexeyev murmured. "I want to get out as soon as possible."

"Well, we all do," Burdovsky straightened his body. "Why are you here anyway?"

"I... Belinsky's letter... I read it to others."

Silence followed. Alexeyev curled himself into a small ball at the corner and almost disappeared again. Burdovsky was humming quietly to himself; it wasn't harmonious, but it looked like a habit engraved in his mind for very long.

It was with this silence that I realized I myself was trembling. The bitter wind penetrated the hole in the wall and quickly brought winter into this freezing chamber. Burdovsky moved into a comfortable position and promptly fell asleep. I couldn't see Alexeyev distinctly, but he was not moving, so I figured he must be sleeping as well. I buried my face in the crook of my arm and dozed off.

I woke up to the creaky sound of the door. It was already dark outside and even colder. The major walked in with a pile of paper.

"Names?" he asked the guard.

"Burdovsky, Ivanov, Alexeyev."

He looked through the pile and singled out three sheets of paper.

"Burdovsky..." the major finally lifted his head and looked into Burdovsky's eyes, "Burdovsky, you are sentenced to death. So are you, Ivanov. As for you, Alexeyev, let's see...Yes, you too. You will all be executed tomorrow morning at eight." He saluted and left with the same swiftness with which he left in the morning.

"Why? Why death?" Burdovsky asked in bewilderment, but the major was already out of sight.

I sighed and leaned against the wall, closing my eyes to let everything sink in. When I opened them again, Alexeyev had left his corner and come closer to us. We stared at each other in silence for about ten minutes. "I don't...Tomorrow?" he suddenly cried in terrified stupefaction, almost as if the major had just read the sentence, "I don't want to die. I don't want to die..."

Burdovsky opened his mouth to say something, but nothing was said. He lay down again and gazed at the ceiling, with a rapt solemnity, almost as if he was observing the stars. I wanted to watch the real stars. As I stood up, I could sense the coldness piercing through my body and the warmth that had accumulated in me dissipating immediately. I got as close as I could to the hole on the wall, but I could only see a few stars even when I stood on tiptoe. I gave up and returned to my spot just when dinner arrived at the door.

The guard brought three metal trays to the door and slid them into the room. We each grabbed our meal, a piece of bread and a small bowl of water. Alexeyev grabbed one and quickly retreated to his corner, where he ate in painful silence. Burdovsky took his piece and ate greedily, swallowing and gobbling down every last crumb. Then he took the water violently and finished it in a gulp. I held up the bread and fixed my stare upon it even though I didn't feel hungry at all.

"You know, I once heard from the other soldiers," said Burdovsky, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. "In France they gave them shrimp and wine, sometimes even a nice little beef stew."

"What difference does it make?" I asked. "Doesn't mean you get one more day to live."

"That's the humanity. At least you get a decent meal; it changes things."

"What does it change?"

He threw a resentful glance at me and raised himself abruptly. "Damn! It's freezing."

It was freezing. He walked back and forth in the cell; there was enough space for him even to run. After a while, breathing heavily, Burdovsky leaned against the door, his burly, enormous body blocking the dim light from the oil lamp hanging from the ceiling of the corridor, casting an even more gigantic shadow that climbed up the opposite wall.

"You cold?" he asked.

"No not really." Straightening up, I replied and started chewing my bread.

"Really? It's cold as hell in here. You?" He raised his voice to address Alexeyev at the corner.

Alexeyev answered with a miserable groan that sounded so distant as if it came from outside the cell, outside the thick wall of the chamber. Burdovsky shrugged and sat down again. Just then, the prison door was opened, and a military man with a brown uniform strolled in. A guard who came with him stood at the other side of the door, next to the guard who had been there since the three of us had arrived.

"What do you want?" Burdovsky asked, alarmed. "It isn't morning yet."

"No it isn't. It is ten at night," the man adjusted his eyeglasses and checked his watch. "Twelve to ten, to be precise. You have almost ten hours left."

"Then why are you here?" Alexeyev suddenly shouted from the corner, his voice hoarse and trembling, with a tinge of tearful despair. It reminded us of his existence; his voice and the man's uniform together made the air colder and more stifling.

"I was given order to monitor your situation and to cater to your need until the execution." His voice carried a mocking tone, but it was clear and even melodious, so I didn't even pay much attention to what he was saying. Alexeyev gave out a moan and stared into the wall, as though he was attempting to find light in the boundless darkness. Burdovsky was not so petrified; he studied the soldier curiously for a short while, and, perhaps arriving at the conclusion that there was not much to look at, he gazed again at the ceiling.

"You thought we'd escape?" Burdovsky asked contemptuously, without looking at the man, a sneer creeping over his face, "you figured we'd do something to you?"

"Not to us, to yourselves." He responded calmly.

"What do you mean?" I asked. I felt intrigued, although my head was dizzy and my body was growing weaker every passing minute.

"Many prisoners on death row experience...well, they experience emotional upheavals that trigger mental disorder," the doctor felt in his coat pocket and took out a small tin box. From it he drew a cigarette and struck a match, whose light, though feeble, revealed his face. I looked up and observed it curiously, and I could see that Burdovsky was doing the same. The man continued, "it means that they hurt themselves, or their inmates. We can't let that happen, that's why I'm here. Cigarette?" He held up the tin box.

Burdovsky took one and gave an unknowing smile, but I could tell that he was a bit irritated by the man's response. The man turned to me and, after I shook my head, put the tin box back into his pocket. He lighted Burdovsky's cigarette and sat by the door with his back to the light so that his face grew vague. Burdovsky smoked quickly and strangely, just like how he walked peculiarly. I knew that he was different, but I didn't know in what way, so I gazed at him continuously; my mind was blank and my body paralyzed, so I simply stared. He took one last gulp and finished the cigarette, and he wiggled his hips to lie down but suddenly sat up straight again. "You've got any more food? I'm starving."

At first the man didn't notice he was being talked to; he hesitated, and then stood up to exchange a few words with one of the guards, who nodded and walked away. "I believe we do," he assured Burdovsky. "It'll come in a short while."

A few minutes passed, and the guard returned with a tray on which was a small piece of bitten bread. "That's all we have," the guard mumbled with a smirk, and slid it through the bars. I felt indignant, but Burdovsky didn't mind; he devoured the bread like an animal as the guard took the tray away. It was then when I realized how Burdovsky was different. There was life in him, the kind of vigor and robustness of a normal man. I could no longer feel my arms or legs, and I lay like a corpse, reeking of death. And Alexeyev too. But death's horror had not conquered Burdovsky yet.

I didn't know how long was spent in stillness and solitude. I had another doze, and I had already lost the concept of time. When my eyes opened I was facing Alexeyev, who was trembling in his own pitch-black corner like a gigantic lump of coal. I thought he was weeping but he made no sound.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"About eleven-fifty."

"This is it. We're screwed. This is our doom," said Burdovsky, his breath is now rapid and distinctly audible. I didn't like what he said; I wished he hadn't said that. He turned to the man and said, "Tell me when it's twelve, will you?"

"Sure," the man answered drily. He looked weary, but his shrewd eyes were still scanning us from behind those thick glasses. He was shivering like Alexeyev, and he wrapped himself tightly in his fur coat. It was too long for him and it looked like a blanket. I knew it was not his and I glared at him bitterly.

"Do you two not feel the coldness?" He asked Burdovsky and me, sounding vaguely stunned.

"No not really." I replied. Sweat exuded from my neck and drenched my undershirt. Now that my only garment was soaking wet, the winter was cruelly sucking the last bit of heat out of me as the sweat evaporated. I was trying to recover my sense of time by counting noiselessly and waiting for midnight. I was anxiously waiting for something, but what it was I didn't know. I felt uneasy, but I added, with a note of hostility, "What, you're freezing, aren't you?" I hardly recognized my own voice, which was now unbelievably soft and powerless, and naturally the man didn't hear the mockery in it.

He answered by dragging the coat even tighter around himself. "You feeling alright?" He turned to Burdovsky.

Burdovsky didn't bother to respond; he stood up and strode back and forth like he did two hours ago. As he stood up, the dim light of the lamp shone on him, and I could see that his shirt was wet too.

"It is twelve now," the man declared solemnly, holding out his watch.

Burdovsky paused abruptly and sat with a deep breath, "November sixteenth, 1849. Mark this day, brothers; this is the end of us."

As he sat down I caught another glimpse of his face, but the light that had been on it was now barely recognizable. I endeavored to feign a smile, but it only resulted in the uncanny twitching of my lips. The air froze again, but I felt my cheek burning and my headache worsened. I lifted my head from my bent arms and noticed that the man's eyes had been fixed on me for some time.

"You may want to take a look at him," I said, pointing at the blurred corner where Alexeyev made himself a little nest with what remained of his ragged shirt. Ah! It was more freezing now than before. The damned place was a frosty cave. The man disregarded my suggestion, so I talked again, this time slightly raising my voice, "I thought it was your job to keep us alive."

The man waited for some time, and glided reluctantly to Alexeyev. He put his greasy hand on Alexeyev's forehead, and patted him on the shoulder.

"He's well alive. He just needed some rest. It's common, I've seen many like him." The man reported and hurried back to his spot by the door, probably in hope that the small area would still be warm. I couldn't fall asleep at that moment, nor could I control my body anymore. I turned aside to see the hefty figure of Burdovsky, whose jaw was shivering and teeth were clicking audibly.

Alexeyev suddenly spoke, "You've seen it, haven't you?"

"What?" the man frowned.

"You've seen the execution. How will it be done?" He asked with restrained, dangerous, and deadly calmness, like the short deceptive tranquility before a tempest.

"Well, well..." the man was obviously prepared for this question, and he was searching his mind for the answer. "It'll be done in the blink of an eye. You'll hardly feel anything..."

"Describe it," Alexeyev insisted, "describe the scene."

The man seemed taken aback. I guessed he had, more or less, anticipated such a request. He just didn't expect it from Alexeyev. Neither did I, but now that it was asked I felt a pressing need to know the answer.

"Look, see the wall there?" He pointed at the wall with the hole. "Behind this wall there is a fence, and beyond that is a vast yard; we call it the Mouth of Death. You'll be taken there and tied to a row of wooden posts. Then there are the executioners, I think...about ten of them. They'll stand in a row and aim their rifles at you. Someone will give a roar when the time comes and that's all."

"You sure we won't feel the pain?"

"Usually it only takes one shot. I wouldn't worry about it at all."

"Of course you wouldn't." I thought with indignation. The man's artificial voice sounded as fatherly and solicitous as it possibly could, but now I found it unnaturally oily and revolting. It was the voice of another world. I was well aware of the origin of my loathing. I was to be executed tomorrow morning...no, this morning, yet this petty conceited wreck of a man would live on freely in this world, something I had long taken for granted.

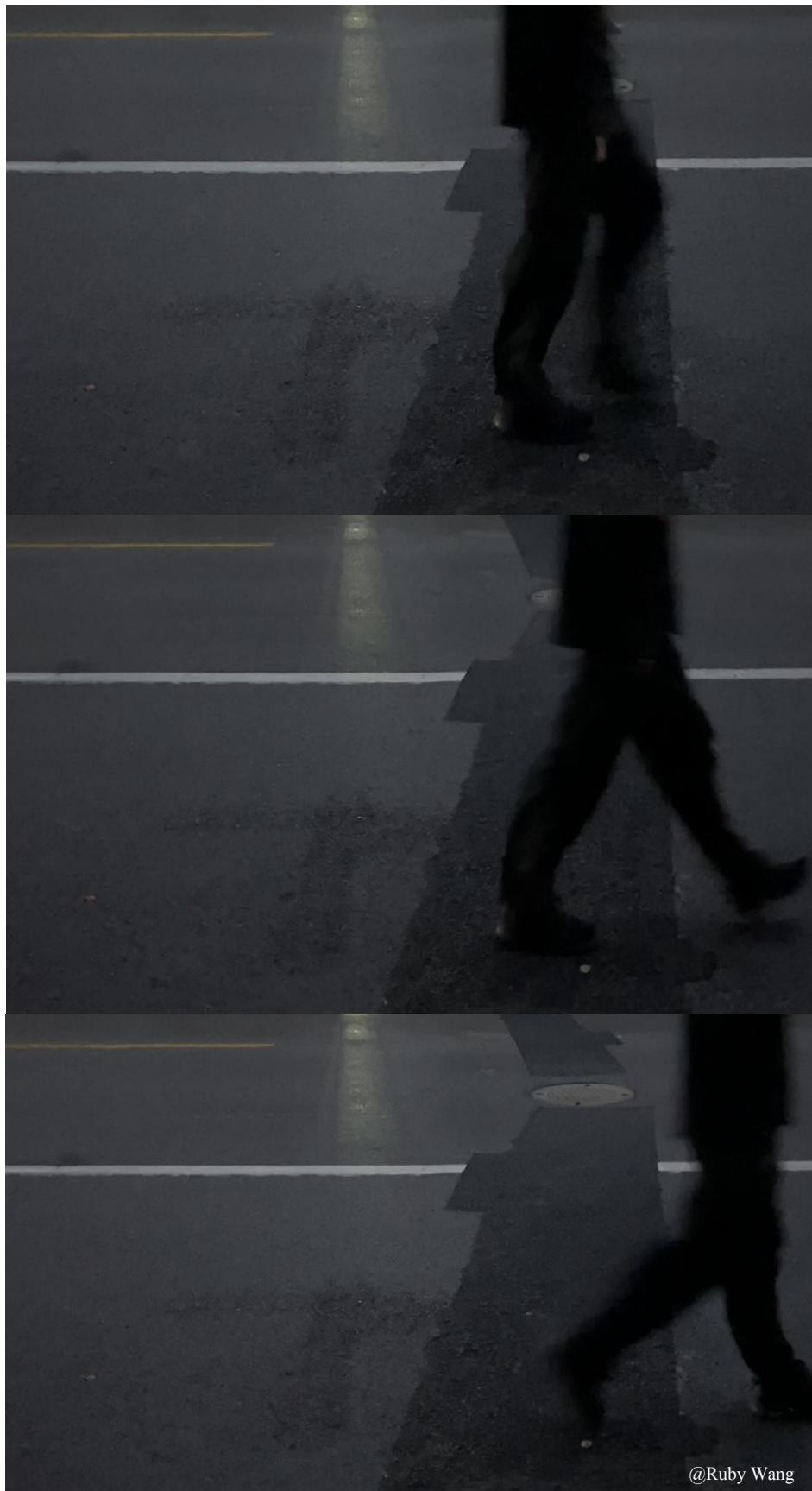
Alexeyev started sobbing, "I don't want to go. I don't want to go..."

To be honest, I hadn't liked Alexeyev much since the beginning and I disliked him more now that he was weeping. I turned back to Burdovsky, who noticed me and sat up a little. He was trembling all over. Sweat was dripping from his chin onto his soaked shirt, and his eyes were grey and hollow.

"Look, Ivanov," he said, leaning toward me. "I am not afraid of death. Or the pain. What's getting on my nerves is this—this whole thing. Look at us now. It's sucking the last bit of hope out of us. Think about a soldier fighting on the battlefield. He would carry hope of living to the last second before he was slain. Same thing with homicides. Say there are two options. One is that I kill you swiftly and quietly, so much so that before you notice the blade on your throat you'll be dead. The second is to let you know that you have three more days to live. Today is Friday and you'll be killed on Monday. Everyone would invariably go with the first one; this is humanity. That way you're still fighting before your life ends, but now we just sit and watch it draining out of us. Look at us, Ivanov; we're already dead men."

"We are, aren't we?" My lips quivered, half with coldness and half with fear. I understood every word he said and agreed, although I planned to act like I didn't. I knew he was not scared of death, but he feared something, whatever it was. I feared it too. I wasn't sure about Alexeyev, but I supposed it was the idea of pain and suffering that haunted him. His sobbing had not ceased and I buried my head again in my arms.

Some time had passed. When I woke, I found that Burdovsky was by my side. I realized that he'd been moving his giant body slowly, little by little, toward me. Seeing that I was awake, the man took out his watch and announced to all of us, "It is now past two-thirty. You have about five hours left." I caught a slight smug undertone that he didn't even bother to conceal. I thought Burdovsky heard it too. I could tell he almost wanted to thrust his fist into the man's face. What a dwarfish worthless swine,



@Ruby Wang

tortmenting three lingering shadows with his mere existence. I simply hated him so much, for what reason I didn't know and didn't attempt to find out at the moment. I needed something to hate to keep me from thinking.

I looked away and saw Alexeyev. Even in the darkness I knew he was in a delirious condition, mumbling to himself and occasionally making unpleasant giggling sounds. It was painful to look at, so I turned to Burdovsky. I wanted to talk.

"Do you believe in God?" I asked and regretted immediately, for the answer was already embarrassingly self-evident. Burdovsky didn't respond and was staring straight into the flickering light of the oil lamp.

"I don't anymore." He replied slowly. I was vaguely surprised.

"Why not?"

"Why are there wars? Revolutions? The things happening to us, forcing his believers into the dark corner?"

I was staggered for a moment, and I sighed in consent. I had been a believer as well, but the misfortunes were more than deserved. It made no sense and it tore me apart. Now I no longer cared. Faith meant nothing to me because I attached no importance to it; it sure as hell wouldn't get me out of this place.

"There will be a priest," the man said in an aloof tone, "in case you're worried."

I sneered at this, and then there was a long moment of silence. Burdovsky sighed and lay down again. I tried to keep my mind occupied by speculating over whatever might be on his mind, but after a while it mattered no more to me. I scanned the room again, looking at my two inmates. I hadn't known them before, but in these last trying hours in our lives our fates were aligned. Yet I felt a strange sense of solitude and isolation. I liked it somehow; it was better than being seen through. I adjusted my position and inched away from Burdovsky, whose head was now right beside the calf of my frozen leg.

After another while of sitting still, I began to worry that I might never be able to stand again. Clenching my teeth against the piercing coldness, I rose and hobbled along the wall toward the hole through which I could take a peek at the world. From the angle I couldn't see the moon, but I could see its light, faint, weak, soon blocked by some patches of thick cloud. "This was the last moon I shall see," I spoke to myself in an affected tone and despised my pretense straightforwardly. The truth was that I didn't care much about this, and even when I was free I had never really taken a careful look at the moon.

I didn't know how long I stood. On my way to return to my place I saw that Alexeyev was asleep in his corner, still shaking and muttering words and phrases that made no sense. When I looked closer I found that he was lying on a pool of water that I figured was urine. He had wetted himself. I signaled the man to come over.

"It's three-twenty," he answered impatiently.

"Not the time, you idiot. Take a look." I pointed at Alexeyev.

"What?"

"He pissed himself."

"What do you want me to do? He's not the first one. It happens."

"You have dry pants for him?"

"No."

Our dialogue woke Burdovsky, who had sat up and would probably not sleep again. I walked over and sat beside him. He gave off an unpleasant odor that made me lightheaded. When he saw me he started talking again, but now his voice was no longer deep or sonorous but shaking and hardly audible. It reminded me of the voice of a child about to be punished for his mischief.

"Can you picture it, Ivanov? What will happen to us in a few hours and what will happen afterward?" he was forcing these words out of his teeth. "When I was sleeping I had a dream. I saw the barrels of rifles. When they pointed them at me I could see into the muzzle into the darkness. And then I saw my own body. Can you imagine it? I saw my own body, stained red by blood. Then some men carried it and threw it on top of a tall pile in a deep hole they dug, and I witnessed everything. And the thought of the pain came to me again. The bullet squeezing its way through my skin and into..."

"Stop it," I interrupted him. He wanted to continue but changed his mind after seeing the look on my face.

"You have any family?" I asked after a short while.

"No," he said, "do you?"

"No." And we talked no more. I knew what he was thinking about because I was thinking about that too. After a few hours, every trace of our very existence would be forever wiped out. A finger would pull the trigger. And for everyone in the world, we would disappear. Those who called out the names Alexeyev, Burdovsky, or Ivanov, although I doubted if there would be any, would never hear a response. For us, it would be a simple snap. And then the world would be reduced to an abyss of nothingness while it would run on for others, for the guards dozing outside, and for the man sitting there across me.

Burdovsky stood quickly and asked the man for another cigarette. The light of the match revealed the beads of sweat rolling down his shivering cheek. He took the cigarette and shut his eyes after making a puff of smoke that soon disappeared into the darkness. I sighed deeply and hid my face in my hands.

I tried to sleep but couldn't. Burdovsky's sweat dripped onto my shoulder and I could feel his ample body heaving as he breathed. I was unusually self-possessed but at the same time morbidly agitated. I could no longer keep myself from thinking, and once I started to think I thought about death. Death. My life flashed before my eyes and I saw everything. I saw the face of my parents on a photograph, the parents I never talked to; I saw the face of other soldiers, and I saw blood splashing. I saw myself in a mirror, wearing my first suit; it was dark grey and second-hand but I treasured it more than anything. I saw the face of the Sofia, how my mind was always beautifully serene in her presence. I thought of the plan to get married and have children and grandchildren. I remembered the brief period in my life when I took a teaching job and I remembered the meager pay with which I must sustain my living. Then I thought of the time I spent in Siberia, where I toiled and toiled and almost died. I remembered my oath, the cause I swore to fight for. Every fragment of my memory was so distinctly clear, but when I pieced them together I saw only a picture of nothingness because my mind was a mess. I was frustrated and angry at myself, not because of what could happen if I lived on, but because of the thought that what had happened amounted to nothing, because I couldn't answer the simplest question: "Why?" There was no goddamn answer. I mourned my dead family. I tried to follow my dream. I ran after my girl. I worked hard for a living. I joined the cause to fight. What for? What had that gotten me? I felt an urge to go back in time and stop myself from doing all this. It was pathetic. The world had nothing for me and I gave it nothing because I was nothing and so was everything about me. And now I was about to die. Everything given to me at birth was gradually and painfully pulled out of me. What was the point? Meaningless.

Burdovsky gently patted me on the back. It wasn't until when I looked up and saw my vision blurred and my hands wet that I realized I was weeping. I disliked myself for it, and I hated it even more because the man and Burdovsky saw me. They must have thought that I was weak and sentimental, but I wasn't afraid of death.

"It's four-fifteen. You have about four hours left," the man yawned. "I suggest you make use of it and get some sleep. You'd think keeping yourself awake is the best way to spend the last time, but you should get some sleep now. You'll know what I'm talking about." He raised his voice on purpose to address Alexeyev at the corner, who was lying there wide awake and crying. I tried to pity Alexeyev but I couldn't do it. I was tired of trying to interpret what the man was trying to insinuate and I was sick of despising him. Neither did I want to do as he said, but I was so weary I had no other choice. Besides, taking a nap kept me from thinking and that was what I needed.

When I woke, there was already daylight shining through the hole on the wall. The air was not so freezing but I felt even colder. I looked at Burdovsky; he had placed himself right beside that wall so the light would shine on him. His pants were wet and he was sweaty all over. Even Alexeyev came out of his cave of despair, though his body was still twitching involuntarily. The sunlight was so dazzling that I blinked several times and covered my eyes because it hurt.

"What time is it?" I asked.

"They could come any time now."

"What's the time?"

"Almost seven-thirty."

I felt cold and couldn't stop trembling. I moved toward the hole, even though abandoning my spot took more heat away from me. I heard marching footsteps coming from outside; they were getting prepared. I felt strange, and I looked down and saw my pants wet, but I didn't care much about it. All I could think of is the darkness of the muzzle of the rifle pointed at me, and then even more darkness.

After a short while, the door creaked open and six men walked in. A few more waited by the door. One of them was the major.

"Get 'em up." He gave the order in a toneless voice.

I stood up myself and waited for two soldiers to grab me by the arm. It took three men to get Burdovsky up and take hold of his brawny shoulders. Alexeyev's body, when they tried to pull him up, suddenly started jerking in quick spasms. They had to carry him out the door. We were held tightly and dragged out to the courtyard, to the Mouth of Death. We were each tied to a wooden post. Its surface was rough and harsh on my back, continually pricking my back through my ragged shirt.

A priest in a long black unwrinkled robe came over with a golden cross in his hand. He walked up to us, first to Alexeyev, then to Burdovsky, and finally to me. He whispered something I didn't understand, but I didn't care about that at all, or about whether my soul could be saved. The only thought I had in mind was that he was alive and would continue to live in his own pure religious manner.

Two soldiers followed him, and one of them put a black cloth over our heads. It covered my face and I could see nothing, but as the coarse cloth rubbed against my cheek I felt another kind of fear. Alexeyev started crying, yelling and shouting curses. My effort to hold back my tear was futile and I cried with Alexeyev. Burdovsky wasn't crying, but he was shouting out random words that meant nothing.

"Aim!"

It was too much quicker and earlier than I had expected. Surely it wasn't eight yet. I was trembling all over and tear stained the linen. Even till this moment my primary fear was not death itself. It was being blinded by blackness, knowing that a rifle was pointing at me and about to fire. There was no hope, and my heart throbbed.

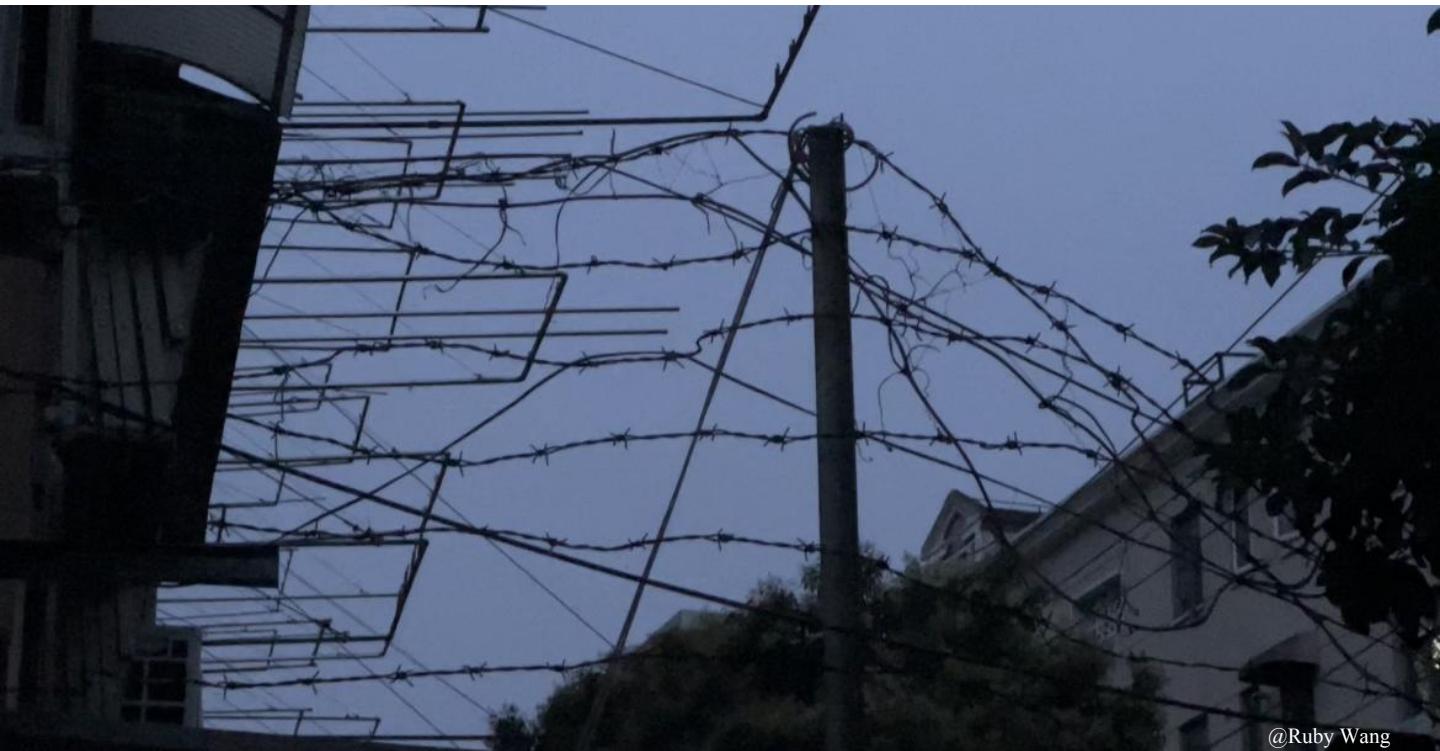
But the thundering blast didn't come. I thought I was delirious, so I tried to breathe and feel my body. There was no pain, save for the tight rope chafing my hands and body and the linen hurting my skin.

I heard soldiers talking and whispering. After a moment a bright light pierced through my eyelids. I felt the linen taken off violently, and I opened my eyes. The light was blinding and it hurt my eyes again. A lieutenant walked up and stopped abruptly before us.

"The Great Tsar has made the generous decision to spare your lives. You'll still be taken to Siberia for five years of labor." He made a military salute and walked away hurriedly, while some soldiers untied the rope.

I heard ecstatic laughter from my right; Alexeyev lay on the ground and yelled himself hoarse. Burdovsky was on his knees and kissing the ground.

I laughed and wept hard. I knew what they took from me, and I knew I could never get it back.



@Ruby Wang

The Gatekeeper

Chaoran Yang

I

I arrived in town earlier today to attend my younger sister's wedding tomorrow.

It has been almost ten years since I first left for university. The old town, stuck in the middle of a valley between two rolling mountain ridges, was where my sister and I spent our childhood. The town was small yet closely bonded: every family knew every family. Even the gatekeeper living alone on the edge of town was included as part of the community.

Only occasionally were there visitors, mostly geography experts from the nearest city asking about a plan to build a reservoir in the valley.

"Where do you all plan to go afterward?"

"That's the question we wish to consult you." The gatekeeper would reply calmly, blocking their entry to our idyllic town.

In our understanding, the tiny village can never be replaced by a reservoir. The farmlands were injected with both our organic fertilizers and sentiment—for generations we grew up with the valley. For centuries we were completely forgotten, like a piece of porcelain from prehistoric civilizations buried and obscured in the sand before suddenly being discovered and exhibited by archaeologists.

What was forgotten along with us was our story—the secret I have kept for ten years.

II

That summer I turned 18, and my younger sister 14. She was ready for first year of high school and I, a university freshman. We had much time to spare for months.

One evening, before going to bed, I stared out the window and found our family minivan parked beside the main road instead of behind our house. That means the keys were likely still on the kitchen table, where they always put it to remind themselves to move the minivan to our back yard after unloading the supplies to the kitchen.

I bounced out of bed, pulled the city map out from my pillowcase, and shook my sister awake from the opposite bed. We tiptoed our way to the kitchen, picked up the keys, and pushed the minivan down the main road like a bicycle to the edge of town before starting the engine. None of our neighbors could hear the noise that way.

The night in the mountains was quiet and serene, broken by two teenage girls and their parents' minivan, craving a peek at the world outside the valley.

III

The city lights were more glamorous than we could ever imagine. We drove down the busy streets, surrounded by shades of red and blue and green, immersed in the honking of congested automobiles and buses. We looked up and could see twos and threes of colorful neon lights high up in the night sky, slowing drifting and elongating across the horizon. Everything we have ever read and heard of came true.

Among the myriads of signs stuck above the doors of shops was a tiny glowing arrow with the word "bar" written on it. I felt my sister pulling on my sleeve, and I stopped the minivan.

IV

After a drink both of us felt dizzy. Sudden nausea brought back my alert mode as I realized that things were going wrong. I turned to my sister, who seemed to be speaking to some gentleman I fail to recognize.

"Anna, it's time to go."

My sister attempted another drink but grudgingly followed me outside. She lay down in the back of the minivan, babbling gibberish, as I plugged in the keys to head back home.

The roads felt bumpier on the way back. As we approached the village, my view was becoming dimmer and dimmer. All I could make out was the light of the gatekeeper's cottage flickering on, and the rest of town embraced by darkness and slumber.

I stopped the engine at the edge of town and attempted to push the minivan forward. Yet the drink must have interfered with my strength as well—the minivan did not budge.

"Anna, wake up and help me push this thing, hurry."

Anna sat up and got out of the van, stumbled a few steps, then crouched down by the side of the road, groaning.

In the chilly night winds, at the edge of town, the mischievous two young women were destined to be caught.

Then we heard, in the distance, an ominous cracking of a door. I looked up and saw, in the lighted doorway of the gatekeeper's cottage, a dark silhouette.

V

The gatekeeper took over the minivan and pushed it into town with ease. I, terrified at being caught, returned to my sister and attempted to help her up.

"Hold on, I'll come back for her."

The gatekeeper parked the minivan in front of his cottage and returned to us. He picked Anna up—his posture reminded me of how mother taught me to hold babies when Anna was several months old—and entered the cottage.

I hesitated on the front steps.

"Come in, please."

I didn't budge.

"I will not hurt you. I'm here to help. Trust me."

My alert mode was still turned on.

The gatekeeper signed. "I will tell you why you should trust me after you come inside. If you don't want your parents finding out you snuck out to a bar, you have to let me help you."

Reluctantly I stepped inside.

The gatekeeper cleared out his bed and invited us to sit.

"Milk or honey water?"

"Huh?"

"Do you prefer milk or honey water?"

We did not answer. The gatekeeper handed us two small bottles of milk.

"This will hopefully treat nausea."

Anna gulped down the liquid, but I held the bottle firmly in my hands.

"Sleep." The gatekeeper smiled and gestured towards the bed.

Anna, possibly believing it was her bedroom, plopped down on the bed without hesitation and quickly fell asleep.

"Drink," The gatekeeper turned to me after covering Anna with his sheets, "Or else tomorrow morning you will feel worse. And your parents will notice."

"Did you put sleeping pills in here?"

"No. The seal is still complete, see."

"I don't trust you."

The gatekeeper sat down beside me and told me the story—the story that will continue to haunt my nightmares and reality for the following ten years.

I stared at him defensively. I have never had the chance of staring into the gatekeeper's eyes before. It felt familiar as if I had already spent a lifetime staring into a similar pair of eyes, pure and earnest and gentle.



@Ruby Wang

Anna sat in front of the mirror, with two friends helping her with the makeup and headdress. In the next room, our parents were getting dressed to greet the guests. Down stairs, a truck was loaded with all their furniture and belongings, ready to take them to a new house in the city.

I sat on the sofa behind them, watching them smile beautifully in the mirror. From where I sat I could see the doorway, where a shadowed figure approached, sneaked a peak, then quickly turned away.

I knew the shadow too well.

I flung open the door, only to see the figure rushing down the flight of stairs.

Wishing to call him back, I opened my mouth but no sound came out. What should I call him by? Certainly not "gatekeeper," but that was the identity people knew him by. Only I knew that he had a second name, and I must keep the secret.

"Sir, wait a moment please, sir." I ended up shouting.

He did not look back but began to run towards the edge of town, past his cottage, and into the mountains. I followed along, but after a few turns, I got lost.

"Sir?" I shouted, "Sir!"

No response.

I cupped my hands around my mouth and shouted with all my strength.

"I know you are listening sir, so hear me out!"

My own voice echoed back at me from the empty mountain ridges.

"You have spent your life loving a woman, protecting the lands that contained your memory with her, protecting her daughters. Now it's her daughter's wedding, and the last time you will ever see her—grow some courage, it's your final chance to let her know!"

Let her know, that someone had voluntarily given up his entire life, more than fifty years, to keep a childhood promise. Silently he watched over her, making sure that all her wishes came true, all her desires fulfilled and her joys savored.

"It's unfair to you if she never knows!"

No response. Only the honking of excavators thundered in the distance, building the dam to fill the valley into a reservoir.



@Ruby Wang

He failed at last, after half a century of struggles. In a gamble of "all or nothing," he started off as a teenager clinging on to the hope of achieving everything yet ended up as an old man alone, staring into the reservoir with empty eyes. Time flowed past as his life came to a halt—the cruel verdict of unrequited love.

As I wandered my way around the mountain roads, my memory journeyed back to the evening when we snuck out to the bar. Back then we dreamed so dearly of growing up and seeing the world outside. Yet some people never grow up: they learned to hold on to their teenage zeal with child-like persistence.

I could almost see my young self again with the minivan, pushing my way through, as if simply by heading forward, I could achieve the ultimate answer.

Six Hours in the Neighborhood

Jojo Li

"Winter is the time for comfort, for good food and warmth, for the touch of a friendly hand and for a talk beside the fire: it is the time for home." — Edith Sitwell

Frustration is the black magic which pulls people into that closed box with only one small hole. Crazily looking around to find a way out, most are immersed in complete darkness, while only a few receive that ray of light transmitted through. Flowers cannot be perceived if we solely focus on the road under, but only a glance can lighten our heart.

Our neighborhood is actually full of sights and voices — the society is not at all hopeless as we might have thought — it is crowded, diverse, and cheerful in every way. The feeling of living a life becomes so explicit that we could almost touch it through the garden benches we pass.

When I return to my neighborhood from school, distressed by the homework that overwhelms me, it is almost five in the afternoon. I walk into a grocery store for a piece of bread, surprisingly noticing the background music — it is from my favorite boy band. And the coincidence that they always release their songs in winter astonishes me as I beat with the beats.

My emotion lightened, my attention is then captured by the young children everywhere on the largest playground. The eyes of the adults are fixed on their dearests with immense care. That line is right — "Parents' love resembles ocean" — not expressive yet deep and boundless. A boy is playing football, and his mother, though not as lively nor as innocent, tries her best to kick it back just for an instantaneous stream of joy. Memories of football with Father and Mother flood into my mind — warmth in this world can never be possibly neglected.



I roam deeper into the neighborhood. The elder people are gathering everywhere. Those at the riverbank watch the fish move quietly, sometimes holding out their fingers to point to one. Absolute silence is in between, yet it is not — the water is flowing. Those around a stone table sit closely together, talking about their life. The contents are all trivial, daily events. "What did you eat for lunch?" "What did you buy from the supermarket?" "Oh have you heard of the news?" "Did you see that brown cat today? I've brought some food but I can't find her!" Grandmother, who had just set out for a walk from home, joins them, and I stand beside her, genuinely curious of how their conversations last so long. It must be meaningful in some way. Another stone table is surrounded by grandpas playing chess. Laughter drifts into my ears.

I walk past an argument between a young girl with her mother and a courier with a welter of boxes on his motorcycle. I come to the building I live in, and there is a woman rushing out but not forgetting to hold the door for me. Everyone in this world is fighting a hard battle, even a baby does when touching the air for the first time, but none forgets to illuminate a cluster of bonfire in winter — an infant brightens a mother's eyes by merely clinging on to her shoulders.

In front of my apartment, my neighbor greets me with a big smile. My mood miraculously lightens up as my mouth as well lifts itself. I gently pat his child and feel his fluffy hair slightly itching my hand. Opening the door of my home, I see a table of hot meal waiting for me already and Grandfather standing beside. Irritation caused by schoolwork is immediately wiped away as I meet his expectant, shimmering eyes. A single "delicious" can make him laugh like a child. He incessantly puts vegetables into my bowl — elder people might be unable to follow up teenagers' steps ever again, but, as protectors, they always try to enter teenagers' life through infinite care. I pick up the vegetables without hesitation, attempting to transfer care back to their winter — the sense of being needed is becoming crucial in their life.

When I again walk out, it is seven, when most working adults flock in the neighborhood, cars and bicycles everywhere. Some are busy helping each other put on the car covers, some wandering around, having a phone call. Noise suddenly fills the neighborhood: arguments, galloping sound of cars, and yet, home calls, sounds of doorbells, and bantering conversations of funny events during work. It is a symphony, as I calm down with the loudness of voices — an animation of the mundane.

As night falls subtly yet entirely, some cats appear from clusters of shrubs. Carefully showing only a head at first, they walk out cautiously step by step after making sure there is no threat around. I remember the thinnest, white one. She is a mother who gave birth to four kittens a few days ago. Before I could even think of getting some cat food upstairs, an old grandma walks near — she is one of those who talked around the stone table. Bringing out some bread, she carefully breaks it into pieces and put some in front of every cat. The cats never snatch each other's food, although it is certainly not enough for their next whole day. I take some food from home, imitating that impressive grandma and feed the cats one by one. Then, I suddenly realize that it is already so late that my family must be worrying about my safety, so I roam back home.

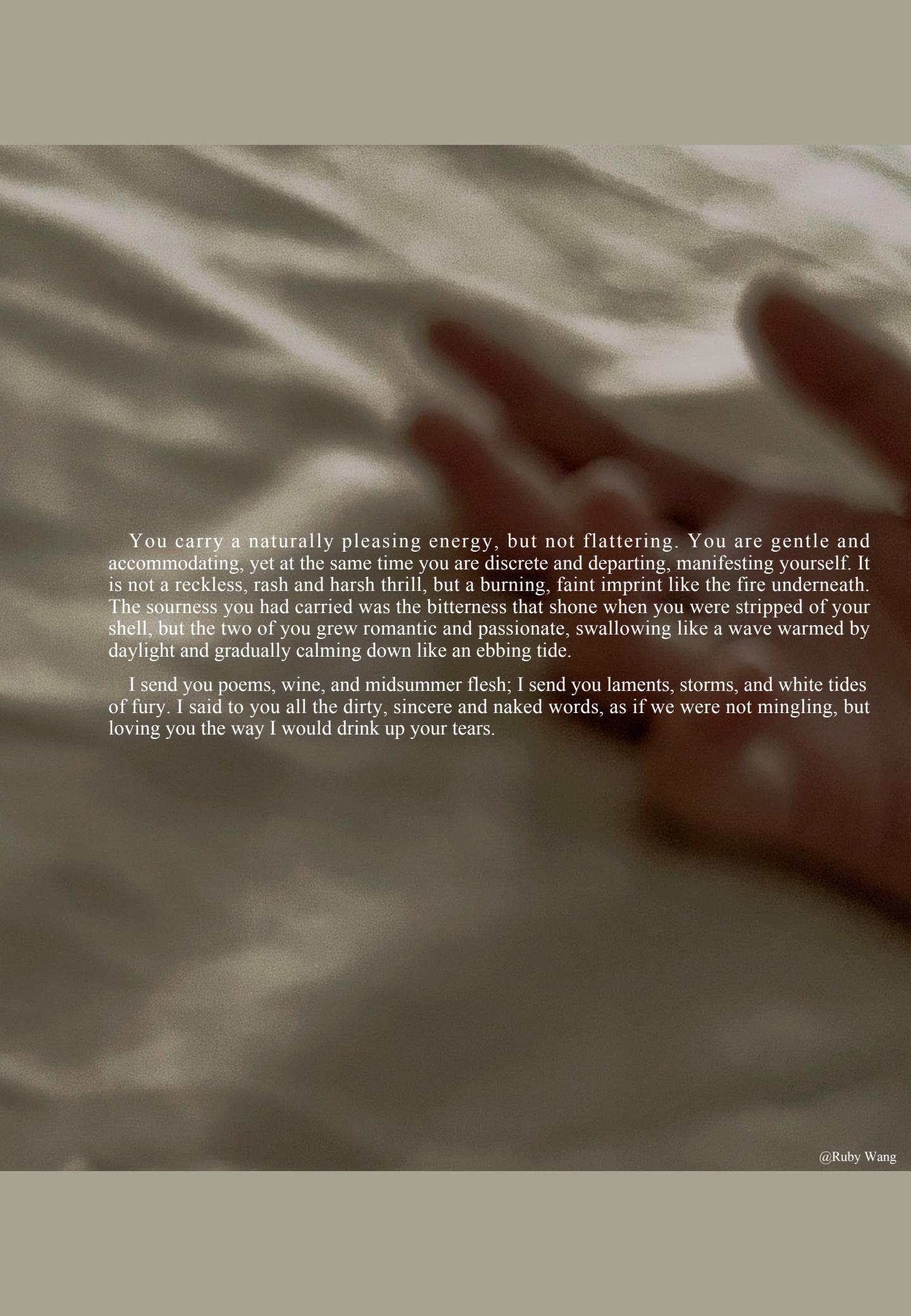
The warmth of the light again surrounds me. It is eleven. An occasional sound of the closing of a car's door sneaks into my ear. I raise my eyebrows and see the sole star inside and above my neighborhood. Silence arrives, but no, the world is full of heartbeats. It is always alive. People meet all kinds of disturbance every day, but while passing on warmth themselves, they are the carriers and receivers of spring in winter. The best is the smell of the barbecue. Life itself has only one kind.

Untitled

Amy Fei

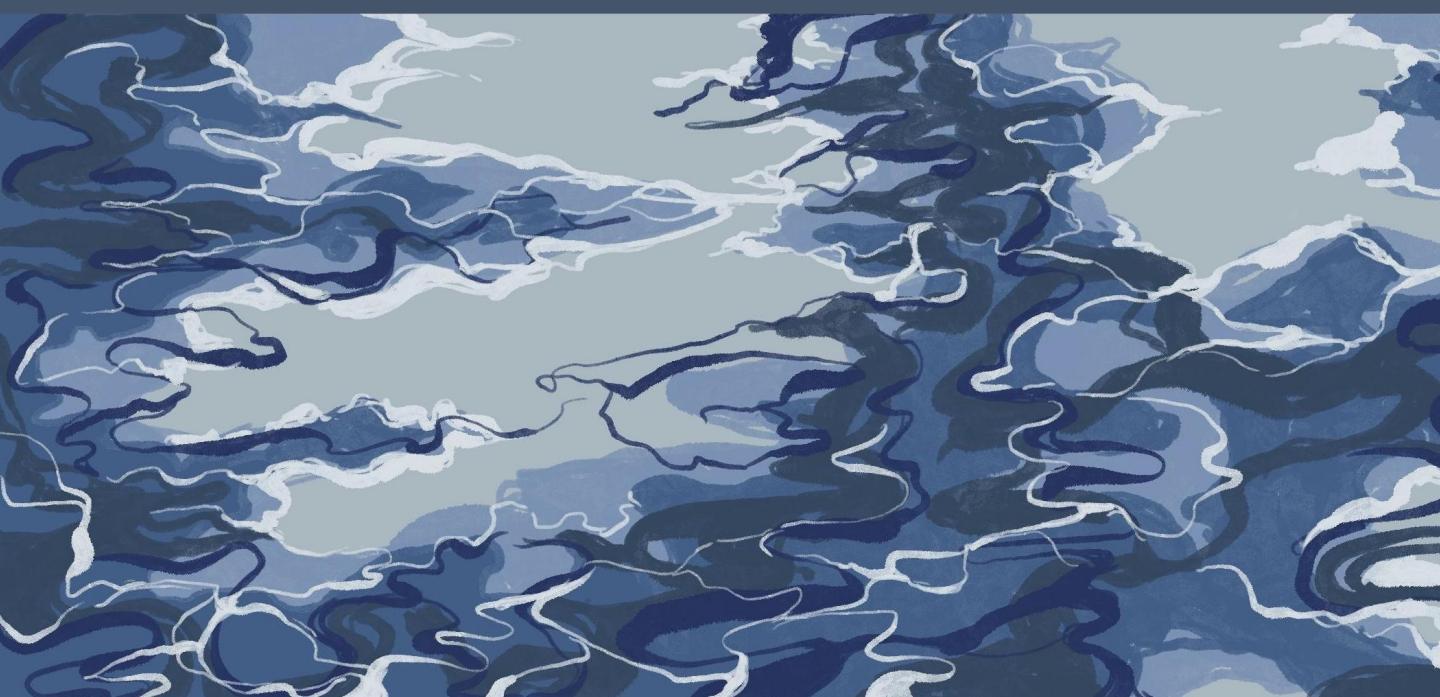
I fell into the dream, I would fantasize about putting my hands on your neck, and I would yearn for your each and every move. We would be silent tenderly, like geese licking their bleak wounds; we would be seeking in silence, seeking - the sprawling vines touching and entangling each other, like drowning fish, calling each other's names.

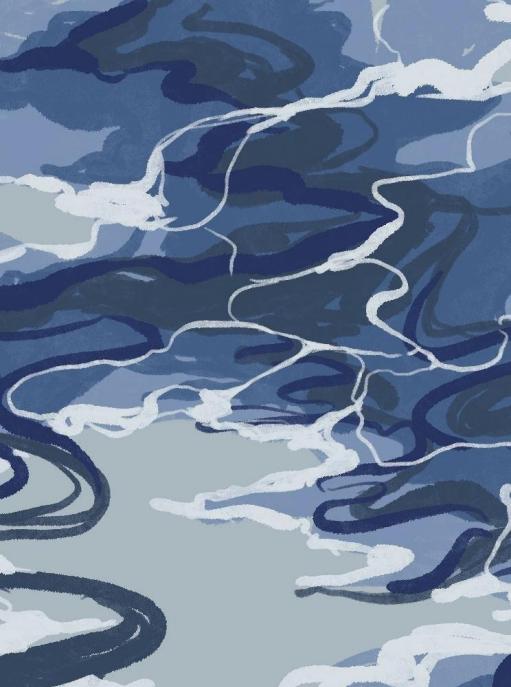
Like a damp, muddy evening in July, the humid air mixed with the solemn sadness and stickiness of the night, desperately and firmly invading our skin one inch at a time. In the dimness, we like animals could not hide our primordial grief and excitement, but had to lick each other like atonement, and the pleasure of flesh and nerves brought us a relief like a moth to a flame. In the night of nothing, I held you close to me and drowned at the end of a small, claustrophobic universe.



You carry a naturally pleasing energy, but not flattering. You are gentle and accommodating, yet at the same time you are discrete and departing, manifesting yourself. It is not a reckless, rash and harsh thrill, but a burning, faint imprint like the fire underneath. The sourness you had carried was the bitterness that shone when you were stripped of your shell, but the two of you grew romantic and passionate, swallowing like a wave warmed by daylight and gradually calming down like an ebbing tide.

I send you poems, wine, and midsummer flesh; I send you laments, storms, and white tides of fury. I said to you all the dirty, sincere and naked words, as if we were not mingling, but loving you the way I would drink up your tears.





Graduate Works



*When Love arrives,
with death aligns*

Rosalie Liu

Northwestern 19'
Major in Radio/TV/Film
and Comparative Literature

PART I: When Love Arrives, with Death Aligns

I knew exactly what Love is,
Even before I met him.
Love would be living in the nearby village
But would drive by my house everyday just to assure me he's there
Love would have a respectful career
A son of the land, burying all his past with soil
But hoping that one day a seed of barley
Would blossom into a rose-cherry tree
Love would walk with discretion but with a drizzle of pride
And would ask my mom for my hand
When I turned eighteen.

I knew exactly what Love is,
Long before I even met him.
But when Love finally arrives,
The sight of him ravished my eyes
There were smoke, traces of gasoline,
The rising of the curtain, the bugle call in Colosseum
There were eyes, eyes sneaking through my abaya, trying to have a taste of my heart
Only to split it out and tell me it tastes wrong, a fishy smell, a shameful walk...
Eyes leaping to kill.

For - he was untouchable, unspeakable, so fragile, A treasure
In a bulletproof glass-shield, housed in a museum called Love is Real
- He said our Love was real
But he said our Love was supposed to be invisible,
But I was invincible, and thought he was Also,

Until I broke through that glass-ceiling shield
and touched Love, until

Then I realized this museum was Unreal,
And that we were all prisoners here, until

I held my breath trying to take him out, to leap
into the air to Breathe

For freedom, to drive off to that one rose-cherry tree that he said he would plant, until

Then I realized it was all too late. The alarm of
the museum went off, not in the form of siren,

But a sizzling silence,

Like a hound dog with no bark, a bullet with
no fire-shot...

The quiet peaceful apocalypse.

Love is blurry now, a shapeless being, haunted
A silhouette against the coal black night

A silhouette hard to delineate, pressing against
my crooked smile as I bled

Pressing against my heart, as I bled

Pressing against all the spells of love - as I
bled - the "I will love you till death do us
part," as I bled, The Marriage, the morning
kiss - as I bled - the children, the travel, the
new land - he is the son of land - as I bled -
pressing against my body, as I bled,

As I bled, As I bled, as I bled

As I lay dying, as I bled, as I bled, as I bled to
death.

I shivered, not with pain - no it was not painful
- no - since it was expected - not with pain but
with fear.

The fear of him moving on so easily like the
expected summer breeze

Getting rid of me,

Like I'm an old stubborn stain fainting in the
back curtain of his memory

The fear of disappearing in his vocabulary

Only to be brought up when he goes back to
bury all his feelings under that rose-cherry tree

The fear of becoming the taboo, the
permeating silence on our dinner table when
My Mother accidentally makes My favorite
food

- That's not my favorite food, Since I was
wiped

Out of this honorable family, even when I
wasn't

On the family tree In the
First place, even when I only touched him
Once

Once, when men have touched me with their
eyes thousands and thousands of time

Thousands and thousands of time as I lay
dying on the floor

I wondered how long would it take for the rain
to

Wash away my blood stains, to rinse my flesh
down the soil

As I lay dying on the floor, I wondered if he
would ever recall

My body in a pool of red, red as the roses on
his future wedding,

I wondered if he -

Would remembered me

I lay in silence in dark
When I gazed upon the stars,
Every star was drunk,
Unaware of the darkness in which they dwell
Every nameless star echoed my voice,
Whispering, I knew, I knew, I knew. I knew
exactly when Love arrives.

I knew exactly when Love arrives, with Death
Aligns.

Love is the wind, Arriving
Arriving like
Sweet breeze in spring brushing against my lip
I so wish to breeze through life
Till Love breathes on me, My flesh

Death is like the wind, encircling, say - "It's
All around us," Death; Love, love, death -

Even if in death shall I find my destiny,
"I so wish to love, to love someone dearly."

Prompted Response

Harvard 21'
Major in Math and CS

Xingjian Lu

Prompt: Explain and contrast Dostoevsky's and Sartre's reactions to the idea that if God does not exist then everything is permitted/possible. Is one of these reactions more compelling than the other?

The central condition of existentialism is the disintegration of one's belief in metaphysics. What happens when we cease to believe in external, artificial purposes previously attributed to existence? Let us call this, in accordance with Sartre, the existentialist condition. Existentialist philosophers investigate the implications of this condition for our existence: when Ivan claims "if there is no God, then everything is permitted," he is curious about its moral implications. Responses to Ivan's claim essentially address the question: under the existentialist condition, is there a morality—a standard through which to judge, evaluate, and prefer one mode of existence over another? And if there is, is it universal? We will see that Sartre believes in individual but not universal morality such as the one Dostoyevsky advocates based on active love; we will also see how Dostoyevsky has the upper hand in this argument by grounding his philosophy on the universal condition of human psychology.

Sartre claims that disbelief in metaphysics and external purposes necessitates total freedom from general rules of morality: "everything is indeed permitted if God does not exist...[one] cannot find anything to depend upon either within or outside himself." Sartre famously claims that "man is condemned to be free" and concludes that this freedom empowers us to formulate and practice our individual morality. Remarkably, Sartre rejects the relevance of a universal morality and claims that "no rule of general morality can show you what you ought to do." He rejects Kant's categorical imperative with the example of a student who struggles to choose between his mother or his dead brother as an end and the other as a means; he similarly rejects religious doctrine on the grounds that one can interpret them in many ways—thus one is still effectively operating under freedom from general morality. For Sartre, everything is permitted: each person affirms his morality via his actions. He or she is only subject to the constraints that he or she acts in good faith—adhere to the freedom that constitutes his or her condition—and recognizes that "in choosing for himself he chooses for all men;" there is no universal morality.

Dostoyevsky investigates different responses to Ivan's question by embodying them in different characters in his book. By the negative examples of Ivan, Smerdyakov and the positive examples of Zosima and Alyosha, Dostoyevsky claims that even under the existentialist condition, active love still constitutes a universal morality; one should not—and cannot—act as if everything is permitted. Ivan and Smerdyakov, who uses atheism to justify their actions contrary to active love, are the most despairing characters in the book: Smerdyakov hangs himself after murdering Fyodor, and Ivan loses his mind over guilt of having passively allowed Fyodor's murder. Neither has ever been joyful as Alyosha or Zosima, the practitioners and advocates of active love. These characters enjoy interaction with daily life and other people—for example, Alyosha with Lisé and Grushenka, and Zosima with cherry jam. By the joyful existence of characters who practice active love and the frustration of those who run contrary to it holding the belief that "everything is permitted," Dostoyevsky affirms the existence of a universal morality based on active love.

In the Brothers Karamazov, the metaphysical reality of God plays a secondary role compared to the existential reality of active love, and Dostoyevsky proposes an interpretation of Christianity—as a guide for joyful existence—firmly grounded on the existentialist scope. Whether God exists or not is irrelevant to Alyosha's existence—which grounds itself on active love—and Dostoyevsky effectively proposes that active love constitutes a universal, pure existentialist morality which helps us lead joyful lives.

Dostoyevsky and Sartre's responses fundamentally conflict with each other on this point: the existence of a universal existentialist morality. If one resonates with the profound consistency and psychological dynamics which underpin the Brothers Karamazov, one must concede that Dostoyevsky has the upper hand. Ivan lives in accordance with Sartre's notion of radical freedom; he rejects the responsibility to actively protect Fyodor's wellbeing—a responsibility relegated to him by active love—and suffers madness out of guilt for this failure. Another Dostoyevsky's major work, Crime and Punishment, presents a poignant point-by-point refutation of "everything is permitted." As in the Brothers Karamazov, Dostoyevsky's most powerful weapon is his profound insight into human psychology; readers who naturally resonate with Raskolnikov and Ivan's guilt and despair must reject the possibility that "everything is permitted": their natural, psychological failure to act to the bitter end in accordance with radical freedom speaks against the feasibility of an existence which grounds itself exclusively upon it.

It is instructive to observe the mechanics of Dostoyevsky's advantage in this argument: freedom is not the only human condition. Consequently, philosophy, the purpose of which is to elucidate the implications of human condition, must not mistake freedom for the exclusive condition of its construction. Sartre is correct in pointing out that universal morality sometimes put us at an impasse: Alyosha echoes Sartre's example when he is frustrated by the impossibility of helping both Fyodor and Dmitri. However, this objection does not justify renouncing universal morality altogether: as Ivan and Raskolnikov's cases demonstrate, one invariably despairs from the retaliation of human psychology when, in an attempt to assert radical freedom, one rebels against it. The tendencies to love and be loved, to suffer from guilt and derive joy from kindness are as solid conditions of our existence as our existential freedom is. It is better to embrace a morality which puts us in the right relation to these conditions, albeit incomprehensive, than to be radically free and not acknowledge them at all.



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Self and Others: from Existentialism to Posthumanism

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All otherness provides insight towards deciphering the notion of self. In the introduction of *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir wrote, 'alterity is the fundamental category of human thought. No group ever defines itself as one without immediately setting up the other opposite itself' (6). Aside from the discourse of gender, this primitive propensity to differentiate between 'self' and 'other' often implies a hostility between two. Near-human others, in particular, stand between human and non-human in the spectrum of familiarity. In this way, a reader's perception of near-human others wavers between intimacy and estrangement, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of human beings. Near-human characters, especially godly ones, are not an uncommon theme in literary works. Jean-Paul Sartre's 1943 play *The Flies* tells the story of Orestes and his sister Electra revenging the king of Argos for murdering their father. Zeus, the main antagonist in the play, is a near-human other: although he has a human look, he exists as a god beyond all humankind. Similarly, in Octavia E. Butler's *Dawn*, the first volume of her sci-fi trilogy *Lilith's Brood*, the humanoid Oankali aliens also bear a godly appearance. However, the intersection of humanity and alienness complicates in *Dawn*, as the heroine Lilith, a survivor on the post-apocalyptic earth, finds herself detained by the near-human Oankali for interbreeding. This paper will be closely looking at how near-human others in two texts, *The Flies* and *Dawn*, define, delimit, and explicate humans and how it shows the meaning of humankind. Although both Zeus and Oankali are presented as near-human others, the vulnerable Zeus in *The flies* instigates a sense of empowerment, while the Oankali in *Dawn* constrain, subvert and assimilate the long-held notion of anthropocentrism; this digression reveals a transition in the understanding of human from Existentialist to Posthumanist theory. The first and second parts of the essay will be a close-text analysis, while the third part will be a short philosophical exposition regarding the meaning of humans and their altered significance.

The Death of God and the Revival of Humans

The near-human other, represented by Zeus in Sartre's play *The Flies*, displays ignorance, vulnerability, and incapability that repudiates the traditional role of God, and in contrast, empowers humans—the protagonist in particular—with the existentialist realization of self-initiated freedom and action. Existentialists emphasize humans and ignore god, a process Nietzsche called 'the death of god'. Like Nietzsche, Sartre does not deny the existence of god, the creator, but instead attacks the existence of the belief in god. He pertains to this notion of the absence of god later in his play by introducing Zeus as a trivial, inactive, and marginalized character. There is an apparent lack of admiration, formality, and solemnity of Zeus, which contrasts his classical role as 'the great presiding deity of the universe, the ruler of heaven and earth' (Berens 17), especially in the first scene when the god appears as a traveler. Phrasing Zeus into this wandering image serves to symbolically undermine the predetermined divineness of Zeus, for now the god himself has no control over the conditions of his own adventures, and becomes vulnerable to unpredictable conditions and events (Zuraikat and Mashreqi 5). Sartre continues to refute the pre-existing notion of classical divinity, as he breaks down Zeus' assumed omniscience, omnibenevolence, and omnipotence: that Zeus is neither all-knowing, supremely good, or all-powerful. For instance, Zeus fails to recognize Orestes as the son of the murdered king and is deceived by his fake identity, Philebus. This is an example of dramatic irony, as a supposedly all-knowing god does not perform his power. In this way, Sartre subverts the traditional understanding of gods as omniscient beings, and thus displaces Zeus into a minor position while giving the audience and Oreste power over the god. Zeus' power is further limited and questioned when he fails to conduct and maintain justice, as Zuraikat and Mashreqi summarize:

Sartre's Zeus does not have...the role of rewarding good deeds and punishing bad ones...[he] knows very well that Agamemnon is killed by his wife and her lover, but he does nothing to punish them...Instead, Zeus causes all citizens of Argos to bear the responsibility of the murder. (5)

The contradiction in Zeus' moralities would subvert a reader's belief in his divinity and eventually lead the reader to distrust the god ethically.

Nevertheless, Zeus' ultimate loss of power is manifested in his failure to inhibit Orestes from committing revenge. Orestes's realization and his completion of revenge, both disregarding divine intervention, reveal Sartre's belief that the 'death of god' may function as a productive force in human life and existence. Sartre indicates that the struggle of humans in religion is a feeling of being seen and observed all the time (Zuraikat and Mashreqi 8). Although this feeling may appear to motivate people to abide by morals, it actually limits human activity and freedom. Sartre contextualizes this constraint through the people in Argos who are blindly submissive and enslaved by their guilt. Orestes, on the opposite, takes the 'leap towards existence' (Sartre 4), as he undergoes in *The Flies*.

Orestes: What a change has come on everything, and, oh, how far away you seem! Until now I felt something warm and living around me, like a friendly presence. That something has just died. What emptiness! What endless emptiness, as far as the eye can reach! (Sartre 2.1.93)

This scene suggests a sudden liberation from the mediation of symbols, and Orestes' first reaction is an absolute feeling of singularity and distancing, which figuratively shows how he demolish the chain of religions, the sense of guilt, and the value enforced by authority. Instead, by losing faith in the role of god, Orestes later builds his own values and definitions of good and evil. This realization process coordinates with Sartre's belief in his lecture 'Existentialism Is a Humanism', that 'man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself...something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so' (4). In this case, humans are free when they subjectively take action solely for themselves. Thus their will and power would not be limited by any conjectural conceptions. In turn, the freedom of will leads to the freedom of action.

Orestes successfully accomplishes the existential revenge and emancipates himself from the guilt of murder or claiming obedience; he is no longer confined to a reliance within the sum of the probabilities, which renders feasible; instead, he becomes unaffected by any preventient design since he eventually chooses to become engagé ('committed') instead of consuming in imaginative possibilities; in Descartes' definition, Orestes conquers himself rather than the world (Sartre 9). In conclusion, by persistently denying Zeus' role as a traditional powerful god in any appreciation, acknowledgment, or worship, Sartre suggests how individuals should be entirely free from all forms of constraint and instead create their own values.

Redefined and Assimilated Self, the Aliens as the Others

In Butler's Dawn, the aliens Oankali challenge the anthropocentric notion of human hierarchy, cultural commonality, and species purity through applying physical captivity, integrating the multiplicity of gender roles, and impelling an indefinite future of hybridity. Humankind assumes a position of domination either to self or to others. Nevertheless, this assumed role in nature is decentralized when humans are being physically imprisoned by another species at the beginning of Lilith's Brood. Gregory Jerome Hampton points out the revolutionary significance under this subversion that 'the idea of an unchecked power of malleability...is a thought outside of Western thinking. In fact, it necessarily disrupts the traditional notions of hegemony and hierarchy' (80). As the human protagonist finds herself no longer as the most powerful species, she is forced to move away from the anthropocentric ideology and scrutinize the new power with panic, chaotic fear, and respect: a way that an endangered species ought to conform. Oankali once assess that humans have an instinctive, self-destructive tendency of being hierarchical:

Your hierarchical tendencies are ancient. The new was too often put at the service of the old. It will be again...You might last a long time, but in the end, you'll destroy yourself. (Butler 531)

The judgment reveals a contradictory nature of this manipulated hierarchy: although humans appear to possess the power under the system of hegemony, they are actually enslaved by power. While humans are unable to escape from the curse of hierarchy,

'obeyed their own biological imperative tied to their unique modality of reproduction' (Gomel 145), the social order without hierarchy. By pointing out the limitation of hierarchy, Oankali also debunk the **human supremacy**, from whom were now vulnerably subjugated by a non-hierarchical, higher-order, and near-human other.

Another sphere of anthropocentricity is assuming a cultural commonality of the gender binary and manogamous convention, which is negated by Oankali's complicated sexuality and expanded kingship. As indicated by Elena Gomel:

A human-Oankali family has five parents of three sexes and two species...The complex multi-part structure of the alien family is supposed to break the dyad of patriarchy and to create a web of interrelations instead of the hierarchy of gender.(145)

The fact that Oankali is consisted of three sexes: male, female and ooloi, who manage gene transfer and reproduction, represents a utopian intention to undo the gender, eradicate the binary restrictions that gender has traditionally placed on, and introduce the heroine to a multiplicity of probable ontological positions. This notion of gender rebellion necessarily links to the discourse of reproduction, as it denies gender determinism, the sociobiological norm suggesting that women are genetically determined to bear children and foster reproduction. It opens a broader way to look at reproduction and the presumed gender role. In Dawn, Lilith bears her human mate Joseph's child after his death through the maneuver of her ooloi mate Nikanj. Although the mechanism of how it happened remains strategically ambiguous, this plot provides another pathway for thinking about reproduction: it could happen without the marriage system, without(traditional) sexual intercourse, and even without the gene provider being alive. Outside the book's scope, this imaginative future proposes a potential discourse of gender role and reproduction that is more 'malleable, contingent, and historically unstable' (Gomel 147). Not only does it bring forward the possible alternative for human reproductive strategy and objection to the conventional rules, but it also breaks the biological framework of reproductive isolation, which humans maintain to ensure their species' purity. In Butler's narration, this purity is no longer taken for granted. The whole book can be seen as a

process of assimilation: Oankali intend to complete their ultimate genetic task of assimilating and perfecting, while Lilith does get pregnant with the first hybrid child in a stance of passive acceptance at last. The genetic disruption of humans merging with aliens further blurs the boundaries between self and others. Since mimicry is a violation of the subject's authenticity, the essence of humans is undermined, as the invader is 'absorbed rather than defeated' (Gomel 142). To conclude, the long-held anthropocentric point of view specified in human hegemony, gender determinism, and species segregation is ultimately challenged by near-human others, Oankali in Butler's Dawn, through subverted domination, complicated sexuality, and multi-species assimilation.

From Existentialism to Posthumanism: What Does It Mean to be Human

Back to the introduction of this essay, the ontological alterity essentially is a medium and a mirror for humans to comprehend themselves. So what does it mean to be human, and why is that significant? The Flies and Dawn present two contrasting conditions of human beings, which manifest part of the philosophical ideas behind existentialism and posthumanism. One should be careful to dwell the question of human's meaning on Sartre since the fundamental premise of his philosophy is 'existence precedes essence', asserting that there is no such predetermined essence to be found in humans. Refusing that admitting meaninglessness would lead to desperation, Sartre instead holds an optimistic view towards human action and future, which he called existential humanism:

This is humanism, because we remind man that there is no legislator but himself...we show that it is not by turning back upon himself, but always by seeking, beyond himself (Sartre 17).

This self-surpassing, transcendent aim is indispensable for pursuing the Sartrean man's existence, which he adds that 'there is no other universe except the human universe, the universe of human subjectivity (17). The human-centered conception behind Sartre's claim is majorly modified and criticized by posthumanists. While believing that traditional definitions of humans are obsolete and undermined by advances in science and technology, social and political upheavals, and ideological shifts, posthumanists search for a new form of subjectivity and narrativity—the identities and values of what will come after humans (Gomel 13). Peter Haff writes in his article that 'humans are components of a larger sphere they did not design, do not control and from which they cannot escape' (2014). This quote shows a posthumanist perspective of how the agency is distributed through dynamic forces of which the human

The perceptions of humans diverge, showing an increasing distrust in human agency—the confidence of what humans have done in the past and the conviction of what humans would do in the future. The dynamics between humans and environment shift from one pole to another, and this explains why Sartre's near-human other appeared to be more feeble than Butler's: two authors view environment (factors other than human being) differently through the alternative approaches of evaluating humans. From a disabled god to the powerful aliens, we journeyed through the downfall of religions, and now to the downfall of humans.

Conclusion

The near-human others in Sartre and Butler's works demonstrate their varied definitions of humans and functioned oppositely on human characters. Zeus in *The Flies* appears to be powerless, susceptible, and useless, which empowers the protagonist, leading to his existential realization of completing the revenge. Oankali in *Dawn*, by contrast, limit and belittle human hierarchy by physically imprisoning them, applying a gender non-binary rule, and interrupting their supremacy by enforcing interbreeding. Through encountering near-human beings, the humans in both works reconsider and re-evaluate their condition, which comparatively coordinate with the idea of existentialism and posthumanism. Looking back at the central question, the near-human others, are still being defined by its relation to human, which implicitly confirms a human-centred ideology. It also shows a broader limitation: no matter how literature and analysis intend to move away from the subject of humans, it ultimately slides back, only to carry more complications each time. In this eternal back-and-forth, we humans construct, deconstruct and reconstruct towards unlimited uncertainties.



@Ruby Wang

Ivan Karamazov's Rebellion: Between Christianity and Existentialism

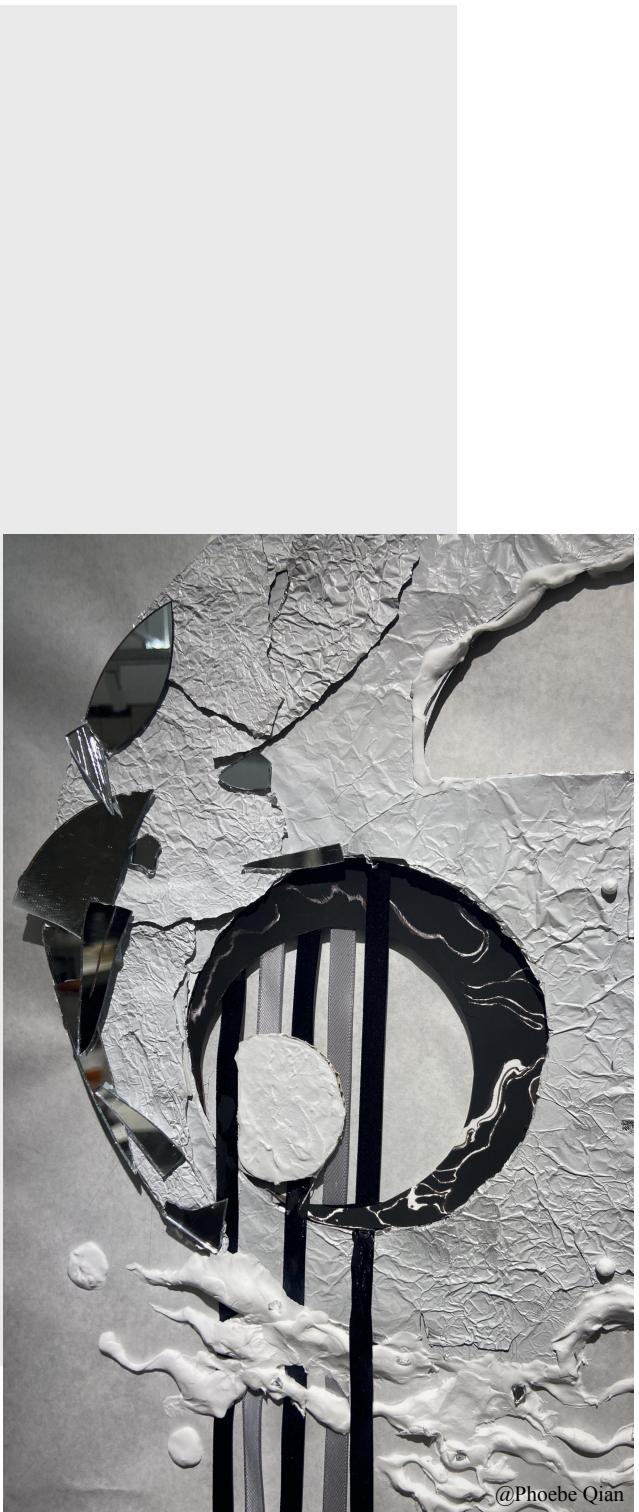
Xingjian Lu

Ivan Fyodorovich Karamazov's rebellion against "this world of God's" for "the love of mankind" is one of the most enthralling and emotionally resonant passages in *The Brothers Karamazov* (214, 223). Ivan claims that while he believes in God and God's promise of "eternal harmony," the abundance and poignancy of unredeemable suffering compel him to reject "eternal harmony" as the teleological purpose for cruelty and—consequently—reject this world as the stage of this unacceptable purpose. Ivan further claims that this rejection decrees suicide, effectively arguing that he should commit suicide in faithful adherence to his antipathy towards unredeemable suffering. One is naturally drawn to this reasoning via the tension between its apparent premise and disturbing conclusion, and it is tempting to dismiss Ivan's argument by simply questioning the moral necessity of suicide in protest an unacceptable world. We will begin by demonstrating how this dismissal fails for neglecting an integral assumption of Ivan's reasoning—his belief in the Christian construction of grand harmony. Defending Ivan's argument illuminates the essential role featured by Christian faith in his reasoning and, more importantly, draws our attention to the fundamental flaw of this argument: a logical conflict between Ivan's Christian and existentialist—"Euclidean"—philosophies (214). We will see how Ivan's disillusionment and pathological conclusion ultimately stem from his inconsistent faith in both Christianity and existentialism: his belief in Christianity's promises but not its transcendent morality, embrace of existentialism's secular scope but not its obscurity of order and significance. Ivan's frustration is best understood as that of one who wants the best of two conflicting philosophies and, unaware of the choices being logically inconsistent, erroneously attributes his frustration to existence itself and turns to the unnatural conclusion of such contradiction—suicide.

It is tempting to counter Ivan's argument by questioning the moral propriety of his suicidal protest against a world in which unredeemable sufferings abound. Such rebuttals advocate the moral position that we are not completely responsible—that is, not to the degree warranting capital self-punishment—for the others' immoral actions. Once established, this conviction seems to undermine Ivan's argument by absolving one's moral duty to commit suicide. However, it is important to note that Ivan's argument is for his suicide and consequently, his faith in the Christian construction of "grand harmony" constitutes an integral condition for his argument. Ivan repeatedly emphasizes his faith in God and grand harmony: he "[accepts] God pure and simple," "[believes] in order, in the meaning of life...in eternal harmony, in which...all [are] supposed to merge." (214) The consequence of Ivan's argument is not whether "a moral person should commit suicide," but whether "a moral person with Ivan's Christian belief in grand harmony should commit suicide." This distinction empowers us to defend Ivan's argument against moral objections by showing that Ivan is not a believer of incomplete responsibility and that, while moral rebuttals based on this position absolve their believers of the duty to commit suicide, it fundamentally fails to address Ivan's argument within the pretext of its beliefs.

Ivan effectively uses "grand harmony" to refer to the Christian construction of a transcendent—as opposed to secular, of this existence—world which, together with the secular existence, is sensible and meaningful by being consistent with human moral expectations. Such a construction, empowered with purpose and significance by its consistency with human moral expectations as a whole—as a universe consisting of observably secular and postulated transcendent existences—attributes significance and moral purpose to all secular experiences. Ivan, a believer in this construction, possesses "a childlike conviction that sufferings will be healed and smoothed over, that the whole offensive comedy of human contradictions will disappear like a pitiful mirage," that "ultimately, at the world's finale, there will occur and be revealed something so precious that it will suffice for all hearts, to allay all indignation, to redeem all human villainy, all bloodshed." (214) It's evident how this transcendent construction of afterlife and judgement day fulfills human expectations—"suffice[s] for all hearts"—by promising the healing of suffering, reconciliation of "human contradiction," and redemption of "human villainy." As Ivan poignantly points out, unredeemable sufferings—"absurdities," as he calls them—abound in the secular world which "stands on absurdities." (221) Such absurdities are indispensable to grand harmony, which Ivan claims is exactly when "the mother and the torturer whose hounds tore her son to pieces embrace each other" and "merge in one voice of praise." (222) Grand harmony must defend itself against the senselessness of secular suffering—a notion Ivan compellingly establishes via his collection of anecdotes; it does so by attributing significance to these absurdities as the "manure for...future harmony." (221) By its notion, all secular events are endowed with a moral purpose and becomes sensible, understandable—in other words, conforms to human expectations—from a constructed transcendent perspective regardless of whether they make sense secularly: even senseless sufferings become meaningful and significant as the indispensable soil—and necessary price—for an eternal anthropomorphic purpose. Grand harmony justifies "why it's all arranged as it is," a much-desired justification for, as Ivan notes, "the world stands on absurdities, without them perhaps nothing at all would happen." (221) Its construction transforms senseless secular events from "absurdities all too necessary on earth" into meaningful and significant contributions towards some transcendent purpose satisfactorily consistent by construction with human expectations. An important consequence of this construction is that in order to attribute meaning to all secular events, it must in turn require all secular events to actively contribute to its purpose. Ivan's complete responsibility is a result of this consequence: as a Christian believer of grand harmony, his very existence actively contributes to and pays the price for grand harmony. Believers like Ivan assume active and complete responsibility for grand harmony due to their belief in this construction which claims indispensable and active contribution from every secular event towards its great purpose. This is the full implication of Ivan's belief in grand harmony: he is not a believer of incomplete responsibility for the world and its transcendent purpose; in denying the purpose of grand harmony he necessarily denies the ground of his own existence.

Our defense of Ivan's argument begs a more challenging question: does every Christian believer of grand harmony have a moral duty to commit suicide in the face of abundant secular sufferings? Following Ivan's frustration in reverse order of his reasoning reveals his inconsistent belief in two fundamentally conflicting philosophies, the consistent adherence to either of which resolves his frustration. Ivan's radical conclusion results from his conviction that there is "too high a price on harmony," that he cannot accept it—this end which every moment of his existence continually asserts and contributes to—as the teleological purpose of all the unredeemable sufferings he witnesses in this world (222). At this point a logical contradiction inevitably exerts itself: how does Ivan manage to refuse grand harmony on the ground of secular sufferings, the very subject for which the notion, by the mechanics of its construction, seeks to logically justify? Recall that grand harmony by construction reconciles human moral expectations with objective secular reality. The secular reality, as Ivan poignantly observes, fails human moral expectations: sadistic parents punish children for their perverted pleasure, and cruel generals order their hounds to tear little children to pieces. Grand harmony constructs a transcendental world in which divine retribution and forgiveness "redeem all human villainy, all bloodshed," and "smooth over" all human suffering—a reasonable world which justifies the apparent senselessness of secular absurdity by empowering it with a transcendent purpose.



Ivan is an ardent believer in the promise of grand harmony—the reconciliation of human moral expectation with the reality—he "believe[s] in order, in the meaning of life...in eternal harmony" (214) and voices this most heartfelt desire lucidly by claiming "I wish to be there when everyone suddenly finds out what it was all for. All religions in the world are based on this desire, and I am a believer." (222) However, he violently rejects its transcendent moral conviction that secularly unredeemable sufferings are transcendently redeemable. The scope of Ivan's morality, as he repeatedly emphasizes, is secular, existential or, as he calls it, "Euclidian:" (214) Ivan claims that "it is not for [him] to resolve things that are not of this world;" (214) on this ground he rejects the Christian notion of children's original sin and claims that to punish children "for their fathers who ate the apple...is reasoning from another world; for the human heart here on earth it is incomprehensible." (216) Similarly, he rejects grand harmony's moral construction of justice and recompense "somewhere in infinity," asking them to be "here and now, on earth, so that [he sees] it himself." (221) Ivan's existentialist scope compels him to acknowledge the secular impossibility of amending children's sufferings and endowing them with purpose; between Ivan's Christian hope and existentialist beliefs lies the central logical contradiction of his argument: to Ivan with his existentialist scope, the tears of little children "remain unredeemed" and unredeemable—yet he adamantly holds on to the Christian promise that "they must be redeemed, otherwise there can be no harmony." (222) Ivan has internalized the Christian promise of harmony—of reconciliation between human moral expectations and secular absurdity—to the extent of overlooking its logical construction. In the process of vainly seeking the promise of grand harmony even while rejecting its transcendent construction, Ivan confronts, in its full primordial harshness, the irreparability between human expectations and secular reality.

Despite all this, the logical inconsistency of Ivan's philosophy detracts no less from the tragic heroism of his despair. Ivan's frustration demonstrates the importance of good faith: consistent adherence to a philosophy in all its conditions, consequences, and promises, in maintaining a joyful existence. It is, as Camus points out, paramount to acknowledge the absurd, the fundamental irreparability between human wishes and secular reality, and the intrinsic resistance of the latter to our anthropomorphic understanding. Recognizing the absurd does not mean despair. A firm believer does not despair: he or she does not despair in face of sufferings and the apparent mundanity of everyday life—one has faith in their anthropomorphic purpose in a transcendent universe and unwaveringly, as Alyosha claims somewhat obscurely, "resurrect [their] dead, who may have never died." (210) A firm existentialist does not despair: he or she does not despair when the winter is cold or when the sun is down—one merely acknowledges them as conditions, and there is nothing particular about the absurd as the general condition of the world's indifference to our expectations. Despair only haunts those who neglect the absurd, who vainly seek a human purpose in the secular reality. One must imagine those of good faith to be happy.





My Ami

Rosalie Liu

/Prelude/

"Is that what art is? To be touched thinking what we feel is ours when, in the end, it was someone else, in longing, who finds us?" - Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

If only I can measure

Time

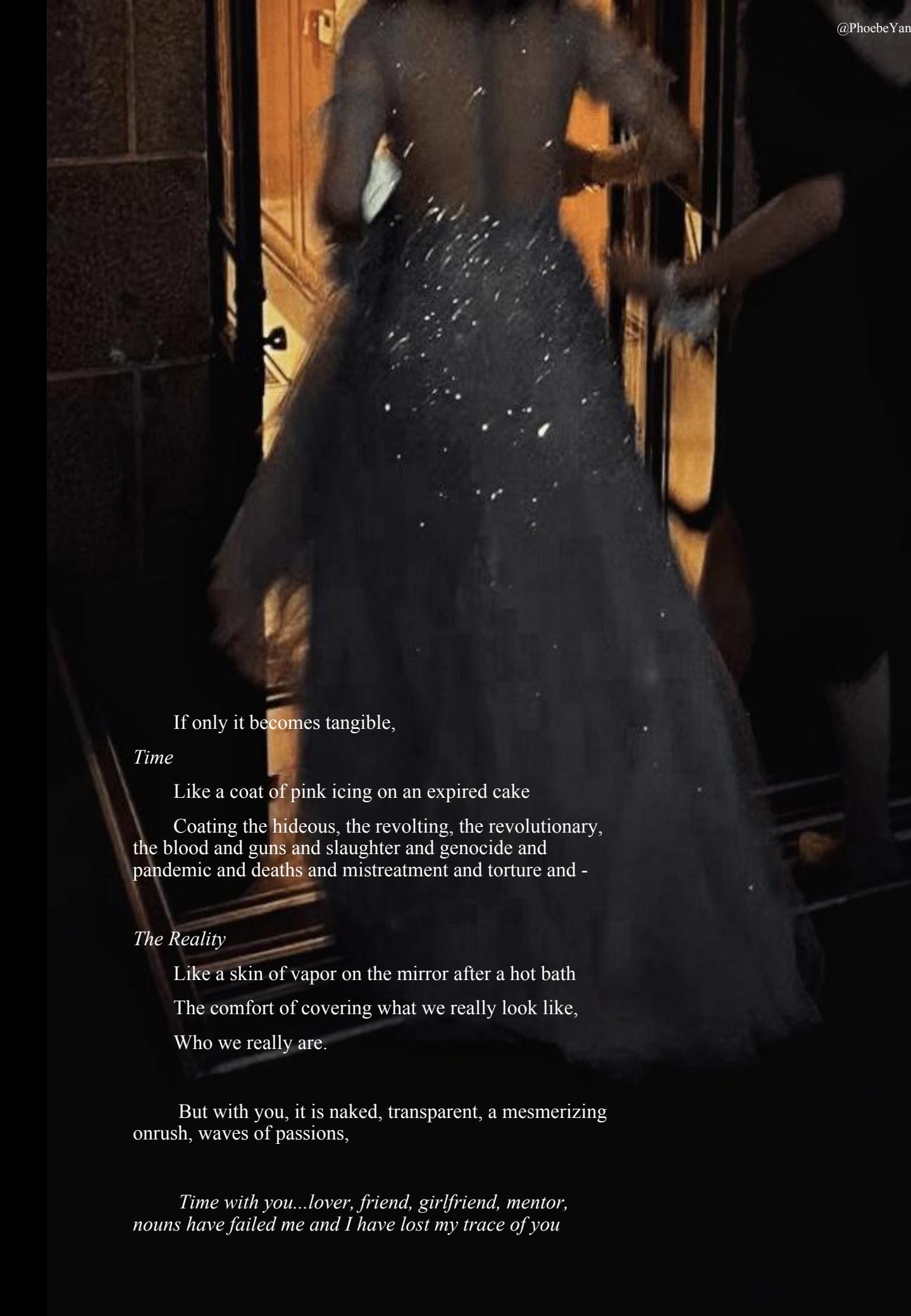
Like how I measure my sweet spot counting
The amount of sugar cubes to put in a morning earl grey,
How I stay conscious, cautious, against the border line of a blackout
By numbering each /1.2.3.drink.1.2.3/ vodka shots

If only I can taste it,

Time

Let it drip gracefully down from the back of my tongue,
Grab it in my hands like soft wet liquid sand,
Squeeze it hard enough to feel the texture of its skin,
Limping down every inch of my fingerprint
Squeeze it crush it press it squash it clutch to it make it shriek make it bloom into colors turn over it make it mine make it yours feel it against my eyes your thighs our smothered lips

Time



If only it becomes tangible,

Time

Like a coat of pink icing on an expired cake

Coating the hideous, the revolting, the revolutionary,
the blood and guns and slaughter and genocide and
pandemic and deaths and mistreatment and torture and -

The Reality

Like a skin of vapor on the mirror after a hot bath

The comfort of covering what we really look like,

Who we really are.

But with you, it is naked, transparent, a mesmerizing
onrush, waves of passions,

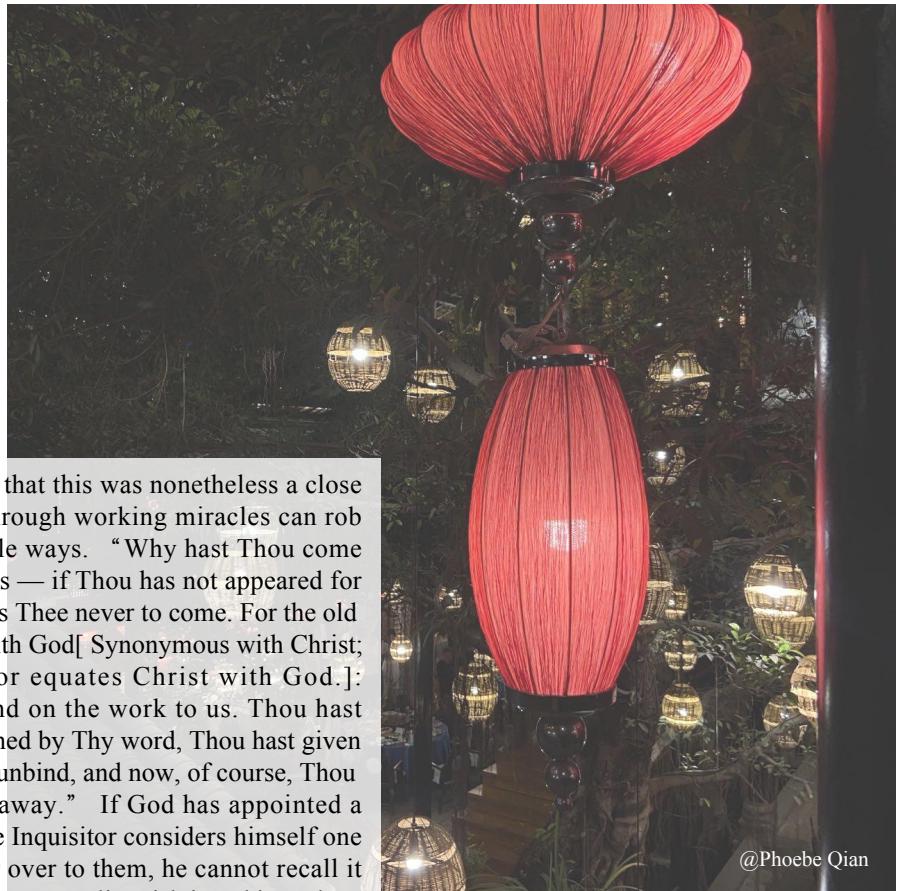
*Time with you...lover, friend, girlfriend, mentor,
nouns have failed me and I have lost my trace of you*

The nested narrative in “The Grand Inquisitor” from The Brothers Karamazov has at its centerpiece a monologue directed at a mono-audience. Appalling in content and powerful in argumentation, the eponymous hero assails Christ with charge of cruelty and justifies the seemingly corrupt Church not with canonical religious orthodoxy but with a specific anti-Christian humanitarianism. He challenges: “Judge us if Thou canst and darest” [This essay uses Constance Garnett’s translation.] — us who’ve loved humanity more than Thee. There is no denying that the case the Inquisitor makes is phenomenal, however, what takes place exterior to the monologue hides unspoken words that both underscore what is spoken and uncannily dispute them. This paper asks what they are, and suggests that they point to autonomy and self-sufficiency as the Inquisitor’s final, wild dream for mankind.

Sixteenth century, Seville, Spain. Christ incarnate walked again among his people. Recognized immediately by his glory, he with his “gentle smile of infinite compassion” restored sight to the blind and raised the child from her coffin. “There are cries, sobs, confusion among the people,” yet the Grand Inquisitor as he dawned on the scene “sees the child rise up, and his face darkens.” Ordering his guards to arrest Christ, the Inquisitor refused him further exposure while the crowd in fear immediately made way. The Inquisitor “blesses the people in silence and passes on.” Who seems more powerful here? Who seems more awed and feared? Christ, although a miracle-worker, has trespassed on the diocese of the Inquisitor who cannot appreciate the advent. For to have two providers of compassion and blessings is to be tempted to compare them. How can the Inquisitor beat Christ? He has shed “his gorgeous cardinal’s robes,” and “at that moment he was wearing his coarse, old, monk’s cassock.” His opponent on the other hand:

“The sun of love burns in His heart, light and power shine from His eyes, and their radiance, shed on the people, stirs their hearts with responsive love.” An old man versus ageless divinity. What attire can be of any match, what light can possibly radiate from the human heart? But as the former appeared in time to check the interloper, the consolidation of his authority over the years proves surprisingly resilient. “In the midst of deathlike silence, they lay hands on Him and lead Him away. The crowd instantly bows down to the earth, like one man, before the old inquisitor.” The herd re-pledges fidelity to the lord they have always known, more reminded of his unfailing kindness than that of the stranger who can be as sudden in his disappearance as in his appearance. It’s quite sufficient to have just one receptacle of faith, two is too much.

“For I love Thee not” :
The Grand Inquisitor
Unmasked
Ganny Zhu



@Phoebe Qian

The Inquisitor recognized that this was nonetheless a close call. Divine omnipotence through working miracles can rob him of his herd in irrevocable ways. “Why hast Thou come now to hinder us?” He rages — if Thou has not appeared for fifteen hundred years, it befits Thee never to come. For the old man thought he had a pact with God[Synonymous with Christ; I take it that the Inquisitor equates Christ with God.]:

“departing Thou didst hand on the work to us. Thou hast promised, Thou hast established by Thy word, Thou hast given to us the right to bind and to unbind, and now, of course, Thou canst not think of taking it away.” If God has appointed a group of elected of which the Inquisitor considers himself one and transferred his authority over to them, he cannot recall it arbitrarily. The Inquisitor refuses to relinquish it and intends to push the work to its completion. You ask why he would not return the work to God, who’s definitely more capable of finishing it? It’s because the Inquisitor, despite not losing faith in divine omnipotence, has lost faith in its benevolence. A god who “forego[es] the earthly bread for the sake of the heavenly” , who rejects actualization of miracles because “in making one movement to cast Thyself down, Thou wouldest be tempting God and have lost all Thy faith in Him,” who

“scattered the flock and sent it astray on unknown paths” by denying unity of all kingdoms of the world — this god demands of mankind a strength that the Inquisitor believed most do not and cannot ever come to possess. “For man seeks not so much God as the miraculous.” Freedom, as defined by the Inquisitor, consists in loving God for the sake of loving God and not for the sake of miracles, since to seek the latter is to happily, or slavishly, surrender one’s freedom of conscience by being presented with irrefutable evidence. No, Christ will not deprive you of that “gift” ! The Inquisitor accuses God of this cruelty. How can one be said to love when one puts the beloved in pain? Therefore, as the work in question is the important project of human salvation, and just at a hospital we cannot have an uncaring doctor handle the scalpel, the Inquisitor cannot entrust fragile mankind to a jealous god. His indictment of God, made bitter precisely by his belief in God’s omnipotence (where he finds it unacceptable that this divinity could have saved humanity but would not), pushed him to decide on the reenactment of crucification. “For if any one has ever deserved our fires, it is Thou. To-morrow I shall burn Thee.”

Through ridding themselves of God, the Inquisitor can safely substitute himself in. He regathers the flock scattered by God: “the flock will come together again and will submit once more, and then it will be once for all. Then we shall give them the quiet humble happiness of weak creatures such as they are by nature.” The Inquisitor defines love as the endowment of happiness, which for a human includes food, shelter, permission to sin and freedom from freedom, all of which he will provide in lieu of God and for which he claims the flock is immeasurably grateful for. “We have taken the sword of Caesar, and in taking it, of course, have rejected Thee and followed him.” The Inquisitor rein and reign the flock through bread and the sword of Caesar, which are the devil’s first[The tempter came to him and said,

“If you are the Son of God, tell these stones to become bread.” (Matthew 4:3)] and third[Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. “All this I will give you,” he said, “if you will bow down and worship me.” (Matthew 4:8)] temptation. What is glaringly missing is the second one, freedom from death, which is beyond the power of the Inquisitor and the reason why the resurrection Christ had performed is unforgivable — “Why art Thou come to hinder us?” The Inquisitor for the happiness of mankind can at best “allure them with the reward of heaven and eternity.” And thankfully happiness only requires the promise of more of it beyond the grave and not the realization. But Christ in re-walking the earth has satiated mankind’s thirst to a dangerous excess — once having drunk full of water, drought becomes harder to endure. By raising their expectations and serving as his match, Christ disempowers the Inquisitor to the detriment of humanity. How is such a being kind?

No trust, no love, full of suspicion and abhorrence, he who strove to be with God, “thirsting ‘to make up the number’ [...] awakened and would not serve madness.” The Inquisitor’s “incurable love of humanity” beat his love of God. Unlike God, he respects humanity less but loves them more, will not make demands of them or give up on any “who are weak but love Thee” : “Thou art proud of Thine elect, but Thou hast only the elect, while we give rest to all.” A humanitarianism that is against Christian dogma, it can nonetheless be faulted with. Alyosha exclaims that Ivan’s poem is “in praise of Jesus, not in blame of Him” because he rejects the Inquisitor’s definition of love. Should love be equivalent to spoiling? Should it not entail respect? Should it necessitate the deprivation of freedom? The Inquisitor would respond affirmative as it pertains to the weak ones of humanity, the ones lacerated by freedom. Perhaps the mistake is in despairing — a parent who believes his child incapable of growing up, thus legitimizing his tyrannical rule over him in the name of the child’s own good. Perhaps the Inquisitor should not divide humanity into the strong and the weak so conclusively, what indisputable argument can he have against the possibility of some seed of strength and might in each one of us? No greater villain but the one who believes himself just.

This autonomy the Inquisitor envisages for mankind, one where the strong ones rule and the weak ones obey, where love is given freely and received gratefully, seems nonetheless promising if we forgo the concerns above and consider the prolonged absence of God. "No signs from Heaven come to-day / To add to what the heart doth say." The Inquisitor is right to observe that humanity craves community of worship. Who can stand Babel, who can bear waiting for Godot? And self-sufficiency seems far more within reach when one recognizes of human and divine love which is real and which is myth. City of God? No, City of Men.

The monologue done, we've known the old man's project, we've felt his rage and his pain, we've become him, and we suddenly realize with him that we still have an audience who has not spoken. "He saw that the Prisoner had listened intently all the time, looking gently in his face and evidently not wishing to reply. The old man longed for Him to say something, however bitter and terrible." Is this not, we wonder, a kind of weakness? To crave a response, because the human is keenly aware that he is only himself, that no multitudes exist in him so that he can be sure that what he thinks is the case, because human intelligence is such that doubt never ceases haunting it. For all that hatred the Inquisitor hurls on Christ, he still needs him to say something. "Know that I too have been in the wilderness, I too have lived on roots and locusts, I too prized the freedom with which Thou hast blessed men, and I too was striving to stand among Thy elect, among the strong and powerful." Maybe he thought he left God when he did not. That which remains weak in him still crawls to that glory, that glory which affirms us.

The kiss thus can be interpreted as Christ's affirmation, showering the old man with his infinite sympathy and love. Akin to saying: "Son, I see thy pain and loves thee even if thou lovest me not." It also involves forgiveness for the Inquisitor's blasphemy and betrayal, because in waiting for Christ to respond, the Inquisitor has, as it were, repented the betrayal and sought faith again, and just as Christ re-walks the earth to deliver miracles priorly refused to mankind, he is responded to generously.

Strange indeed, that for all the polemic this is what results. But it would not be strange if the kiss instead is interpreted a cruel mockery. "But He suddenly approached the old man in silence and softly kissed him on his bloodless aged lips. That was all his answer. The old man shuddered. His lips moved. He went to the door, opened it, and said to Him: 'Go, and come no more. . . Come not at all, never, never!' And he let Him out into the dark alleys of the town." Christ through endowing pity on the Inquisitor renders him weak; the Inquisitor shudders like how the crowd shuddered before him when he arrested Christ. The Inquisitor's image of himself as the strong, the one able to endure his own freedom without recourse to divinity, is destroyed. Re-herded to become one of the beneficiaries of God, he loses the legitimacy to accomplish the work of human salvation, since whoever leads it must not be himself in need of it. Shed of all his vehemence, the Inquisitor can no longer find in himself the strength to crucify that divinity who has finally graced him with love.

I term the issue a question of autonomy and self-sufficiency because while the former stresses an absence of undesirable external authority, which the Inquisitor has effected for mankind, the latter, without which the former is meaningless, implicates the success and presents a far more difficult problem to resolve. Inter-human-wise, according to the Inquisitor's narrative, salvation can be reached through the rule of a benevolent king. But intra-human-wise, a crucial side of the problem the Inquisitor has happened to neglect, it seems that the insatiable bite of consciousness has set the curse that no human can save himself. If all the strong ones are able to deliver salvation to the weak through selling promises and providing bread, they cannot deliver it to themselves, them who can't feed on false hopes. Siding with the devil, perdition is theirs. Unless, trapped in consciousness, they hearken to a wild dream surfacing from a forlorn past — a dream of reaching the end of freedom, of apotheosis.



Sensing is beholding a sunflower without justification.
Sensing is practical

nostalgia in the details
Sensing is dipping my soul into this crazy, passionate world.
Sensing is proof that we are living.
Sensing is following wind's vision and being captured by
every aspect of spring's accordatura... always tbc.
Sensing is the origin of romanticism.

Sensing is the process of understanding things (or simply perceiving them) by using both the physical five senses and mental sensea, or our "heart". We see the world through eyes, ears, noses, mouths, and the physical touch; then we take to interpret the received signals with our feelings.

Sensing is the moment when you are encapsulated by your own feeling toward the world. It's absolute egotism.

Sensing is to feel the strength inside yourself.

Sensing is a personal commonality, a preface of pain and pleasure. It's a source of our eternally flowing imagination and irrational.

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