



THE POPLAR REVIEW

杨高

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Issue 2

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The second issue of *The Poplar Review* / 杨高, delayed in its publication by the Shanghai Spring 2022 lockdown, now finally finds its way into your hands. Showcasing exemplary work by students from our last full year on Century Avenue, this issue was compiled after settling into our new Qiantan campus, on the corner of Yangsi Road 杨思 and Gaoqing Road 高清, the two roads from which our publication derives its Chinese and English names.

With Shanghai's tall native poplars in mind — along with its signature London plane trees, known in Chinese as 法国梧桐 or “French parasol trees,” its ancient ginkgos, and the stately camphor tree rising from the heart of our new Qiantan campus courtyard — we look forward to new growth and enduring success as we begin a new chapter in NYU Shanghai's ongoing story.

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Musa's Crown

Garden

Musa liked the garden. She liked the sprawling shadow of the ancient cypress, dandelions that danced till they perished in the wind. Her garden was lilac in spring, crimson in autumn, under the cloudless azure or starry skies. But when summer came, it would not be hers anymore.

Curses to him who brought the summer! But summer was what she had been waiting for. Musa felt her head spinning in the air, full of cotton drenched in rain after storms. Decius would arrive in three days. When he came, she would make her way to the top of the highest tower. She would see the caravan winding through the paths and spot him on his purplish-red horse. He would be wearing his high-collar purple vest with golden embroidery of desert roses, the symbol of his family. He would smile at the people who threw freshly picked flowers under the hooves of his horse. Then she would sneak back to her chamber, pretending that she was sleeping and had forgotten his arrival. She would then have to endure her maids' child-like giggles, their gossips about who Decius would be dancing with that night while dressing her up for the feast.

She didn't know why she had to be at the feast. Elia and she were both daughters of her father, but Elia was the reason why they had these feasts. Elia was arranged to marry Decius, as Musa had been to Ralius, Decius's older brother, who had died of a strange disease. It was said that he died with pox all over his skin which had turned green and clammy. The slime left on the

floor had been so hard to clean up that they had abandoned the whole chamber. His body had been burned instead of buried. Musa had never liked this boy who she had only met once. But she felt sorry for him. Siblings who shared completely different fates might seem miserable and somehow ridiculous. Elia was the girl in everyone's dream. Her name was sung in the alleys, her image recreated by hundreds of painters.

Musa didn't like looking into the mirror. She knew her face by the eavesdrops she caught behind the walls. "Poor lady Musa, if she had half of the beauty of Lady Elia, she would have been married to Decius." "Shh...But Lady Musa will go to Gondosa. It's the greatest honor." "It is..." "Just, her eyes are too far apart..." "And nose..."

Musa had been told that Gondosa would be her destiny from a young age. The city of knowledge, a teardrop from the goddess of wisdom on a vast desert. Her gate only opened to those with extraordinary intelligence and great minds to devote their life to endless scrolls and books. The idea of heading to Gondosa felt like a long night with exhausting dreams, dry branches that burn screaming in the sacredness of flame.

If she went to Gondosa, she would have to bid farewell to her garden. At this moment, her garden was only occupied during the summer. When Decius married Elia, it would be occupied all the time. Musa still remembered seeing them two walking arm in arm in her garden that day, when she was eleven, and they were twelve. Decius broke a tender twig of her favourite tree. A nameless short tree that bloomed snow in the heat of summer. He tied a knot with the two ends of the twig and placed the crown made of pure white flowers on Elia's hair.

The crown. The crown glowed in the afternoon sun, brighter than the first snowflake that had fallen since the world was made, a fragment of the wings of a fallen angel. Surreal and untouchable. It should be mine. Mine and mine alone. Musa could feel a seed planted in the bed of her heart. It stretched its tender roots through the meat, sucking the blood till the pumping muscles turned dry and cracked. It grew stronger day by day, spat out blossoms in the colour of flame. Poppy is the flower of jealousy, mother once said. And the red flower burned, like real fire. But somehow the fruits of it gave her pleasure, she could feel the

warmth of his palm, almost felt like a newborn chick. She felt it in her memory, although the memory never existed. Fake memories are sweet, she thought. Real memories tasted more like scars baked in honey. She remembered the first time they met. Her eyes looked down the moment they met his and her ears swam in boiling water. She didn't talk to him, not until the fourth day when she was reading alone in the library. He approached her from the back and stood behind quietly. She felt warm air blowing through her hair but she could not get herself to look back. He then sat down next to her. His light brown eyes glowed like flowing amber. He had the smile of a big brother. And they talked, about the sea monsters killed by ancient heroes, about stars and their positions, but never her life, nor his. But that was all she needed for the moment. The sunlight that day was the colour of melting gold, so bright as if it was the only real thing in the world. He even told her one day they would go to Gondosa together, since it was his dream. She said it was impossible and he shook his head with a patient smile. Then that night, she saw him dance with Elia for the first time.

Rustles outside the window brought her back to reality. Musa heard thousands of whispers from the worms that jostled to escape the dampness of mud after rain. She saw the whiteness of flowers similar to her favourite tree. The tree had been cut down at the end of that very summer when cicadas ceased singing.

Funeral

Musa stood by the coffin. All was grey, cloaked in the shadow of the giant owl of woe. She tried to figure out what had changed on Elia's face but found nothing. Musa heard that Elia demanded to ride the horse of Decius, who was then startled by a creature sprung up from the ground. She was flung out and hit the back of her head on a trunk. The horse would be slaughtered today.

Musa could see clots of blood sticking on the back of her sister's head with her imagined eyes. With her real eyes, she saw the face of the dead was still a perfect piece of pinkish ceramic, seamless and smooth. She wore a crown of flowers. Pure as the one that Decius put on her head that day in the garden. But the flowers were bigger, fresh but dead. Musa had believed that wilting marked the death of flowers. Then she realized the fate

of death had already been laid upon the aromatic beings the moment they were detached from the branch. The fragrance was nothing but the wraith.

The choir was singing, their voices far and faint. Mist crept into the ruins of paradise and carried out dew with the smell of smoke and burned corps of the angels. The mist condensed into songs when it fell to the earth along with the rain. Musa couldn't tell which she hated more, the mourning of the crowd, the bloodshot eyes of the others. She saw Decius standing in his numbness in the veil of summer rain, his maroon hair clinging to his cheeks. He looks like a homeless pup, Musa thought. His sadness made her disgusted and his presence made her sympathetic. She knew that death was a piece of gauze that filtered the trifles and left only the sweet core. Elia would be a perfect rose planted deeply in his heart which no one else could pick. Jealousy was a sip of wine brewed by bitter lime. With a single spark, it would burn wildly. But Elia had been her sister after all. Guilt, fear, nausea, love, or hysteria. She did not know what to feel. So she fled to the woods.

To her the woods were peace. The rustles of leaves were the whispers of thousands of vagrant dreams. She stayed on a rock beside a pond, till some cicadas sang like sleepless eremites in the first rim of moonlight.

Musa had another purpose here. In her fist she clenched a small stone in the shape of cobble, which she wore on her neck all day long. But it was much lighter, luminous like a fragment fallen from the moon. "It's a moonlight stone, little lady." She heard the old woman's voice as she closed her eyes. "Soaked in the poison of coral snake on a full moon, dipped three times into the blood of falcon, and buried under the mud for one hundred and eleven days. This is how the magic is made, my dear. It shall grant your wish, and take it back when the time comes." "When's the time?" Musa remembered herself asking the woman covered with filthy brown feathers of unknown birds in a harvest market. "When you no longer need it, darling." The crone squeezed a toothless smile.

Musa could not feel her skin on the moonlight stone. Mother had once said, when you throw a pebble into a lake, you will be the last one to touch it before the end of the world. A wish could

only be made once.

“Bring Elia back...” She murmured. The hall and the garden were empty without the laughter of her sister. She stepped forward and held up her fist. “Bring Elia back to us, or at least her ghost.” She whispered once again. She could feel her feet sinking into the soft mud at the edge of the pond, her arm trembling above the water. Let it drop, she heard herself saying. Let it drop and make the wish. Her frozen fingers wrapped the stone. She looked down at her feet. The water three inches away was a mirror of obsidian, tranquil and purely dark. On the surface, she glimpsed the face of Elia. But I haven’t thrown the stone, she heard her own voice shrieking in her head. But there she was, Musa, staring at her reflection, a seamless ceramic of face, and a crown.

“The crown.”

Her fingers loosened and the pebble dropped. She heard herself screaming something in the back of her head, but that sound of hysteria was soon covered by a stronger whirl of wind, a wind carrying myriads of teeth and wings of bats.

“Musa...”

“Come with us...”

“Musa...”

Three shadows emerged in the middle of the pond. Or maybe more.

“Musa...Musa...Musa...”

Their choir echoed, fastened till they turned into a long hiss. The shadows rose and the whole world along with the pond sank into an endless abyss.

Pond

Musa woke with a gasp. She couldn’t feel her fingertips, but the texture beneath them was clear. Moist linen. It was all wet. She was on her own bed, fully drenched. The room smelled of a fishy algae stench. Drops of water fell from the melting ceiling.

She was in the castle, but she seemed to have brought the pond back with her.

She thought she was in a dream until she put one foot down to the floor. It was soon immersed in water high up to the knee. The water felt cool and real.

“Musa...”

The hissing voice came back. It echoed in her skull until it sharpened up into another voice, crisper, thinner, like a woman's. Although she had never heard a woman talk like this.

“Musa...”

She found her feet moving to the door, where the voice sounded the loudest. The fog was flowing in the long corridor. It steamed up from the water, thick as entangled cobwebs. Thousands of misshapen faces flowed dancing. The smile turned into a grin and then teared up the face of smoke.

Misty light was sinking in from somewhere on the ceiling. But no one was awake. All were immersed in a jar of honey-like incubus. Musa could not hear anything else but her own heartbeats and the shadow-like voice.

“Musa...Musa...”

She walked down the stairs to the dungeon. Iron hoops were nailed on the wall. Inside, the torches had long run out of flame.

The water in the basement seemed warmer, or it was her body that turned colder. Moss had occupied the arching wall, so thick that it looked almost like ink. Armies of ferns won their ignominious war against the century-old stones but ended up conquered by an even more ferocious enemy. Eggs of giant conchs suffocated their dying victims with thick pinkish froth. Pink and huge, like eyeballs bulging out of a lump of guts.

She saw fewer and fewer bricks. The relics of mankind were fading away. The wild had taken its place. Arcs of rocks stood like rotten spines of a mammoth with the marrow of undercurrent. The greyish water ran slower and slower till it thickened into a stagnant pool. Tiny green fluffs were stirred up by every step she took.

Musa found herself in a great hall of grey rocks. Some trunks were floating on the water, surrounded by glued twigs and leaves. The trunks were not much longer than herself. Some were even shorter.

There was fungus blooming on the trunk, in the colour of pomegranate, rose, Salmon, milk, and dry leather. Some were larger than her fists, some smaller than her nails. The biggest one was succulent and thick, full of liquid, and looked almost alive. Red juice flowed under its translucent skin. Musa noticed the

fungus was pumping like a tiny fetus before coming out of its mother's womb. One, two, three, it pumped to almost the same rhythm of her heartbeats. Then she realized it was not a fungus at all.

It was a face. It was swollen as it had seven layers of skin. No eyeballs could be found under the half-opened eyelids. It was a jelly-liked mask grown out of the deadwood. She looked around and saw eyeballs hidden in other lumps of fungus, with ice-blue, hazel, or ebony pupils. Some lumps were almost in the shape of an ear. They were features, growing out of the wood.

Flora

She had not noticed the shadows. Slim shadows shuttled through the deadwood, silent as the ghost of a swan. One of them raised its head and looked down again, under the cloak was a perfect face. Too perfect to be real. Musa glimpsed at every silent shadow. Every one of them possessed a face that seemed impeccable, glowing in the dim light.

She had soon learned the rhythm of life here. The girls here were floras. They woke up at dawn when dues started to glow in the muted sunlight. Under the light, they gathered in the central lake hall to pick newly grown faces from the wood. Faces were not always intact. Sometimes it was just an ear, a cheek, or layers of lips. The trunks had their own will. The floras could only accept their gifts and put them in small baskets. The faces were then later immersed in turtle-green liquid with brown sediments. Then the floras took them out to dip in another type of liquid smoky as dried tears. They were eventually put in delicate boxes to be sold in the outside world.

But the floras were allowed to have their secrets. They hid the most beautiful pieces of skin in their sleeves. In the middle of the night, when the rays of the pale moon startled the larks in distant mountains, they used a heated hawkbill to melt their own skin and the new skin and had them blended as one. A delicate work it was. The blade must be thin as the wings of a cicada. It would then be placed on a slice of stone, grey and full of scales like a demon's tooth. The stone was brought from a million miles under the ground, where darkness was hatched. Fury of the land remained, inhabited on the grey solid as infinite, unforgivable

heat. The fire was forbidden for the floras. With the stone, the metal would turn soft and gliding. Then the knife would leave an ornate cut on these girls' faces, ageless maids, never-fading daffodils, and blood oozed out silently. They let out no scream. The silence was the lord they served. They pressed the edge of the fungus on the fresh wounds, which glued instantly with their flesh, like the bodies of lovers. Musa learned from the floras how to make potions that healed the infected skin and then another one to numb the pain. They would eventually fall asleep with a weary smile, dreaming of a dream, of beauty, of immortality.

The floras never lifted up the lake-blue grass covering the top of the hollow wood trunk. But the grass could not hide everything. Musa had once caught sight of a hand poking out of the thatch. She tried not to guess which one was Elia's.

It wasn't that Musa didn't want to leave. She was petrified by the cave. The deep, hollow throat of the mountain seemed to read her mind. She had never gotten lost in this strange cave. It led her to where she wanted to be. But there was nowhere she could go. She could go back home as Musa. But would anyone want Musa back? They might think that she was dead as well. And what would they do if they ever knew what had happened to Elia's body? Musa should be dead. She needed to go back in another skin. She waited for the logs to bloom a good face for her, as not all the fungus looked like proper features on a face. Overlapping eyes or bulging ears would be a nightmare for anyone, but not the floras. They were, and should be, used to it.

It became easier for her after months, or perhaps years. Time itself did not enter this silent field. Yet her memory of the old life was escaping her, drop by drop, day by day. She remembered people, but not their faces. Mother, father, girls, Decius, they were featureless wood puppets dancing in her broken music box. But she remembered the crown. She smelled its scent in her dreamless nights. She believed that she would get what she had ever wanted with a new face. She would then go far away. And she lived on that belief, like a drowning man.

Musa soon realized she was the only one planning to leave. She had once whispered to another girl named Salvia, whose real name had long been forgotten, why no one asked to leave. Salvia

whispered back, as sounds were not allowed in the silent field, that most of them did not remember themselves having another life. They changed their faces when wrinkles grew on the old ones, and after decades of silence, curled up in a corner, slept forever as a maid. Musa did not know the real age of Salvia. Time was not the master in this place.

When the last piece of skin she needed grew out, Musa was prepared to leave. The mouth of the cavern was not hard to find, in fact, too easy to find. She stepped into the blinding light and never looked back.

Crown

Musa made her way back home. She could not enter the castle. Rumours floated in the street with the smell of fresh-baked bread and mud. Elia was dead, Musa was missing, perhaps had committed suicide. Musa murdered Elia and later committed suicide. Decius murdered Musa out of rage. But one thing she heard did not sound like a rumour. Decius married one of her distant cousins as none of her father's daughters survived.

She no longer recognized the streets, nor herself. Her face attracted trouble. She had never known that beauty was glory with the glass dome of power, and sin to tread on without. And she would never see Decius again.

She guessed myriads of stars must have screamed her fate silently above her head, or she would never have gotten on a caravan that headed towards Gondosa.

Musa stayed in Gondosa till her sixties. Or at least until she told people that she was in her sixties. Her knowledge of potions was admired and honored. She lived a peaceful life while wrinkles climbed up her face.

Dipping her quill into the ink always reminded her of the night at the pond. The sound of dripping water sank into her poles as memory crept into her mind. "You are dreaming, Musa." She mumbled to herself, "There is no dripping water."

A drop of ink fell onto the back of her hand. Then two more. It wasn't ink at all.

It was dark and thick liquid with the smell of dead shells scorched under the sun. A shadow emerged in the corner, clinging to the wall. It was taller than any living human, back folded

by the ceiling. It had no face.

The shadow did not move. But the wall seemed to be making its way towards Musa. The shadow was inches away.

A long-forgotten voice crawled into the back of her head. “It shall grant your wish, and take it back when the time comes...” What do they want? Thousands of answers flew through, only one clung to her mind. They wanted the face back. The young, beautiful, impeccable face. But she no longer possessed it. She had let time carve its mark on her face, as it would, and as it should.

She could see the creature’s body under the cloth. It was a puddle of floating grey fluid with strange humps. Small creatures or their broken limbs were struggling in the thickness of the grout. The pond. The pond was coming for her.

Musa lifted up her quill. The shadow bent down and clung its smooth grey skin to her face, gently wrapping her into darkness. Musa could not breathe. The quill she was holding pierced through the surface and sank into the soft mud. Bubbles and mud were sinking in her lung and consciousness slipping away. The darkness faded away like waves on a moon-lit reef. Colour rose from the horizon. Lilac, crimson, and cypress green. There were silvers of swooning stars and roses of blood on white linen. The color dissolved into small dots of light, dancing at a slow pace like drowsy fireflies. They perched on the skin of night, sucked out its blood till the flowing blackness filled the room again. In the dark, her finger touched a hardness the size of a cobble. She pulled it out with all her remaining strength.

The shadow twisted like a cramping muscle. Water leaked out of the hole where had once held the moonstone. Then it collapsed. Its body melted into a pool of filth. On the surface floated a piece of white.

It was the crown. White petals burst into bloom, just as they had done in an afternoon decades ago, glowing the last radiance of her long-lost tree. She watched the crown float on the black water, half glued. She found herself pitying it. She pitied her life. And she pitied the world.

The night was almost gone.

Shanghai in the Dark

When the view from my window
becomes rectangles of light,
hints of concrete corners, and blackened alleyways,
I look out into the haze
tinged with the same
warm black that lives between
a candle's flame and the pitch dark night.

There's a line where the lanterns stop
and cranes pause,
dangling
over cargo
and icy polluted water.

Grey smog and
low clouds
from the East China Sea
seep up the river
and clog the skies.
The lights beyond
the line choke
and die.

The city of lights
sees everything
(it even watches me)

except for stars
and the fog's swarms
in the place where
chemicals sleep.

On the Death of a Modern Nation

Will there be one less modern nation tomorrow?
As I write, hundreds of missiles hit
the anti-air positions of Ukraine, shrill sounds of
air-raid sirens ring through the streets, people rush
into shelters to hide from explosions,
Russian paratroopers begin capturing the airport of Kyiv,
time runs short.

The humid night wind of New York enters my room,
my roommate already sound asleep.
Our familiar life is a world reflected by a mirror in sunshine,
where we can have fresh bread, barbecue parties,
access to the Internet, a safe environment to read poetry.
But this mirror is so fragile that it may shatter at any time
(the cracks expand into unbroken territory, tonight)
and burst into a thousand shards, into a crystal water lily.
The ground melts like cocktail ice cubes
that reflect scarlet blood and fire,
mothers looking for their sons among corpses,
babies crying in piles of debris,
civilians turned into refugees,
all scenes that have happened
too many times
in history books.

The brutality is never distant.
It is already at our door.

2022.2.24, midnight

Disconnect

I set off from the house at a quarter to ten, which would give me enough time to walk to the center with a good ten minutes to spare. As much as I'd resisted it, November 8th had arrived, and now I was only a few miles away from my first auditing session. I didn't hate my mom for registering me for the introductory course, I know her intentions came from a good place. You know, that "as a blooming young woman" I should "take control of my thoughts and channel them into good." The speech I heard almost nightly when she got home from work sounded more like something she was repeating from one of the older women at the church. Deep down I knew she was too prideful to admit the real reason she was pushing me to go: she didn't want me to make the same mistakes she did at my age.

As I reached downtown, I couldn't help but become entranced by the electronics store, the flat-screen in the window display playing the local news. Normally I would have passed this scene without a second thought, but it pulled me in, a reminder of the simple things I would leave behind if I continued to the appointment. I knew what my mom was learning from these courses. She had briskly come home one evening after meeting with some of the women in the group, swiping the newspaper off the coffee table and promptly tossing it in the recycling bin, shutting off the television without a second thought.

"It's the negativity," she muttered, before dropping the subject. It had been two months since we'd last received the newspaper.

I never paid much attention to the stories in the paper anyway other than occasionally glancing at the comics section on high school mornings while waiting for the bus to arrive. As I stood there, absorbed by the coverage of a robbery that had occurred last night, I wondered whether I would view such a scene differently in an hour, a week, or months from now. It didn't take long for my mom to start changing her habits from the first time she attended a course. In the beginning, it was little things: frantically searching my bag for the drugs that her mentor mentioned were running rampant in public schools. Then it was our finances, the little funds we had pouring into these classes. Now, even eating out was a rare occasion. Only a few weeks after that it was her best friend, Carrie, who had practically raised me, disapproving of her involvement and gradually fading from our lives. *Disconnected*. That's how my mom described their relationship when I asked her why she seemed so upset one evening. She told me she had no choice, that it was a sacrifice worth taking for the sake of her role at the church. Sure, my mom and I were close, but with closeness comes trust. What right did I have to question her sudden adherence to these teachings? She seemed happier, more purposeful, and besides, she was also just a naive girl navigating life. Maybe having something in common could bring us even closer. But that seed of doubt still lingered inside me, I wondered what they could possibly be doing at this church that would elicit such an extreme reaction from those on the outside.

Continuing on my route, I glanced at the number on the building to my left. *291 3rd Ave*. I was close. I was expecting some kind of futuristic tower, some sort of new-age structure that would seem out of place in the midst of the modest brick buildings weathered from the constant drizzle of autumn. I reached in my pocket to pull out the folded sticky note my mom scribbled and stuck to the refrigerator that morning. *309 3rd Ave. 11 AM*. I could see the building a block ahead, six stories high, but just another red brick building in the landscape. If not for the vertical signage hanging off the side of the second story, "SCIENTOLOGY" in steel lettering, this building could have been anything. *Walk-ins Welcome*, read one poster leaning on an easel at the entrance promoting free personality and IQ

testing; *Please Come In*, read another. This wasn't the exclusive society I imagined my mom ducking into each week. The door was already open, the warmth of the interior reaching out and beckoning me inside. I stepped inside with a hint of reluctance, it wasn't too late to turn back and grab a seat at the cafe next door instead. Besides, the session was supposed to be confidential, maybe my mom wouldn't even find out. The sharp click of heels suddenly broke my trance, ending my deliberation and calling my attention to the petite woman slowly making her way to the empty front desk. The lobby was brightly lit, reflecting off the spotless wood interior, resembling a bookstore or library, only it was dedicated to a single author. I was so focused on reading the titles of the books on display that I hardly noticed the woman at the desk trying to get my attention. Her voice was soft, but it carried through the spacious and sterile lobby asking how she could assist me. As I made my way back to the desk, I couldn't help but feel self-conscious about my appearance. I'd left the house in a rush that morning, grabbing an orange zip-up hoodie and throwing it over the choir T-shirt I'd slept in the night before. As I got closer to the woman, my insecurities intensified. Her hair was neatly tied back into a bun, pinned securely at the nape of her neck. She wore a tailored blazer with a coordinating pencil skirt, both in a deep navy-blue hue. I stammered as I looked into her eyes, serious, but welcoming.

"Hi, I'm here for my..." I trailed off. "I'm here for my first auditing session." My voice rang low and timid as these were the first words that had come out of my mouth that day.

"Of course, dear. Could you tell me your name, please?"

"Elena. Elena Marsh. I think my mom called to reserve a session?" The woman murmured in acknowledgment and, pulling out what I assumed to be an appointment book, she began flipping through the pages, still maintaining a graceful air. This lobby was nicer than any place I had been in my life, and probably the nicest place my mom had been in the past sixteen years since she had me. We were clearly out of place here, and I couldn't seem to figure out why my mom so eagerly flocked to this strange place every week. I wondered what they thought of my mom, how much did they know about her past? How much did they know about *me*? Before I could jump to any conclusions,

the woman repeated my name back to me and prompted me to follow her out of the lobby and through a doorway. We walked in silence down the corridor, which was not kept to the same standard as the polished lobby, the worn carpet absorbing any remaining dirt my sneakers had brought in from the street. Turning corners, going through doors, down a flight of stairs, I had to have been deep in the building, which now seemed more like a labyrinth. There were few people in the halls, only the distant chatter that faded from inside various doorways as we briskly passed. The woman slowed her pace before finally coming to a stop at the entrance of a room that looked like any other, only a paper attached to the door that read *Do not disturb, auditing in session* distinguishing it among the others. The door was ajar, it was my turn. The woman gave a light rap on the door before pushing it open to greet another woman with a hushed tone before turning back and disappearing around a corner. Here I stood, a clueless teenage girl in this cramped closet with a complete stranger. I picked up a slight musty stench in the damp air, oddly acting as a comforting reminder that although I was in a totally foreign space, I was ultimately still in a Portland basement in autumn. The woman rose from her chair and took a step toward the entry, welcoming me inside. She introduced herself as Julie, mentioning that she had been an auditor for over twenty years here in the city. Not nearly as mysterious and refined as the woman in the lobby, Julie wore a pillared turtleneck with a cardigan, the neutral tones blending into her greying hair. She looked to be around the same age as my friends' mothers, with few wrinkles on her smiling face that bore nearly no cosmetics. Just by glancing at her, I could tell she was the type of woman to be very dedicated to her beliefs, like how I imagined the ladies my mom described whom she met with at the church each week. Julie asked me to take a seat across from her at the desk, empty except for a clipboard and an odd contraption with dials and knobs, wires twisting out to connect to two identical metal cylinders. It looked like some sort of 19th-century attempt at a telephone. Julie evidently caught my perplexed look and explained that it was an E-meter, used to analyze the movement of the "reactive mind," whatever that meant. She grabbed the clipboard and scribbled down my name before placing a cylinder

tightly in each of my hands and asking me to shut my eyes. The past twenty minutes since I had arrived had been strange, to say the least. How great could this place be that my overprotective mom would send me here alone to spend my Saturday morning? I tried to clear the doubts from my head to keep an open mind, but honestly, I didn't have a clue how this would go.

"We will now begin the session. You will be aware of everything that goes on today. If there is anything that makes you feel uncomfortable, you can pull yourself out. Do you have any questions?" Julie's monotone voice hung in the air as she read the same disclaimer that had probably come from her mouth thousands of times before. "Next, I am going to have you recall a painful memory and we will work through it together." The task seemed simple enough, though I was initially stumped as to what kind of memory would resurface. Honestly, I just wanted to say something superficial and get out of there, but not wanting to drag it out any longer than it needed to be, I figured I would just lay it all out there in the beginning. There was my father whom I've never met, my mom who tries her best with me but didn't want me in the first place, and on top of all that just the typical drama of any teenage girl. *Where to begin?*

"I feel guilty." Not wanting to keep Julie waiting for an answer, my first feeling spilled from my mouth and I let out a deep sigh. "My mom wouldn't have such a difficult life if I was never born." Of course, I thought about this from time to time, but I had never dared to say those words out loud before. I wondered if the dial on the little machine moved when I let that out.

"Thank you. Recall a painful memory." I found it odd that the same question came again, prompting me to elaborate on my previous response.

"I called my father last year. I, uh, I wanted to introduce myself to him. But..." My breaths grew heavier with each word. "He hung up once he knew who was calling." That one stung, the wound still fresh as the day it happened. The ultimate rejection: a father who wanted nothing to do with his own daughter. But as if that wasn't enough, that question only came once more.

"Alright, now recall another painful memory." She gave me no advice; she didn't tell me what to think. She simply repeated

herself, prying at my insecurities until I couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Now reduce the incident.”

I could tell that the purpose of the session was to release these negative emotions, and I truly expected to feel a sense of relief after letting out these thoughts that had been eating at me for as long as I could remember. But sitting in some damp room and talking to a stranger just wasn't enough to heal this deep of a wound. My mind raced, thinking of anything to say to satisfy the demanding questions. I was frustrated. I could feel my emotions welling up, my voice cracking more with each response. By then I had already opened my eyes, staring pleadingly at Julie while forcing back the tears welling up. I had probably only been sitting there for fifteen minutes, but even a minute more seemed unbearable. What kind of pseudoscience bullshit was this anyway? The cylinder dropped from my sweating hand, the metal clattering on the table until it came to a stop.

“I'm sorry.” It was all I could say to Julie. I knew she was just doing her job, but I just didn't see the point of telling my deepest secrets to a total stranger. She reassured me that such a reaction was natural for first-timers, suggesting that perhaps “I wasn't well-rested” or “didn't eat enough” before I arrived. Sure, I didn't eat breakfast that morning, but I knew my empty stomach had absolutely nothing to do with the distress I was feeling now. Once my breathing returned to normal, Julie abruptly rose from her seat and excused herself, taking the clipboard with her. When a knock on the door came a few minutes later, I expected her to come back in and try to start from the beginning, but it was the woman from the lobby coming to retrieve me. Embarrassed but also desperate to leave, I followed her back through the winding halls, the long walk through that maze seeming to stretch on even longer in the silence until I could finally see the exit and the bustling street outside. The moment I stepped over the threshold back into the world I knew, I felt a tear run down my cheek and wiped it with my sleeve, hoping passersby wouldn't notice.

Walking home, the path seemed to stretch endlessly, the blaring traffic unable to drown out my swarming thoughts. At that moment, all I wanted was to be back in the comfort of my own bed. Did my mom know this might happen?

That same doubt kept surfacing as I wondered whether my mom understood the gravity of her decision to force me to go today. The whole concept didn't make much sense to me. Why would people willingly subject themselves to this kind of psychological test? I dreaded my mom returning that evening and could already hear her voice in my head asking me how it went, acting like everything was perfectly fine. In a perfect world, I would bury myself in her arms, she would comfort me and understand the pain I'd experienced without me saying a single word, and I would never have to go back there. But I'd seen what happened with Carrie, who turned her back if she caught sight of me or my mom in the supermarket. She was even further than a stranger now. Speaking against the church's practices had its consequences. It was what made this decision so incredibly tough to think over. When I got back, I sat at the dining room table staring at the wall, the seconds slipping by, one after another, counting down the moments I had left with just me and my thoughts in this house. It would be agonizing to leave home, so cruel to leave my mom after she had been abandoned so many times before. But my mind couldn't help but wander, already thinking about where I could stay, considering how I could live independently. There's got to be some support group out there, *Children of Crazy Scientologist Parents*, or something. But I was getting ahead of myself. Yet staying here and enduring these mental games just to hold onto my mom and her thwarted sense of reality, wasn't that just as excruciating? I had never expected such a dilemma to fall upon me. 16-year-old me, who just wanted a normal life. The only thing I knew for sure, a part of me would disconnect tonight. Whether I would disconnect from my own mom or from reality, who was I kidding? The decision was already made for me.

The familiar jingle of keys startled me from my seat. I leaped up and grabbed a textbook from the counter and flipped it open to a random page. My mom walked through the door, hands full, balancing her purse with a plastic takeout bag from my favorite Thai restaurant down the street from her office. I didn't have much of an appetite, and my mom was too busy rambling about someone's birthday party at the office to notice that I had barely touched the noodles on my plate. The next topic was inevitable,

the knot in the pit of my stomach not getting any smaller as I opened my mouth to get it over with only to be cut off by my mom's sudden change in tone.

“Oh, honey! How was it? I forgot all about it!” She shifted all her attention to me, beaming with an eager grin. *How could I bring down the mood now?* So, I told a half-truth. I admitted that I left early and that I became overwhelmed by everything. But I failed to mention the tears or the anger that consumed me once I stepped out the door.

“Don't worry! That's perfectly normal for newcomers, they will help you clear those negative thoughts in your next session. Isn't it just *wonderful* what they're doing?” The words “next session” echoed in my ears, and for a moment I didn't recognize who was sitting across from me. My mom was my best friend. Having me at such a young age, it felt like we grew up together. I just desperately wished we saw eye to eye with all this Scientology nonsense. The mom who sat before me now didn't feel like the warm hug before bed each night or the soft, comforting words I heard whenever I cried. She sounded instead like an advertisement for the church, manufactured to say these things, to ignore the pain, and continue living in this fantasy world where we could just remove negativity from our lives with the grasp of a metal can in a dusty storage closet. I wanted to see things from her perspective, to make sense of why she would send me there, but I came up empty. I moved to the couch, not wanting to talk about it anymore. I felt drained.

I heard the sink shut off and the water run down the drain, the dishes were washed, and my mom tiptoed into the living room and sat down right next to me on the couch. In our usual Saturday routine, she would grab a DVD from the movie album in the television cabinet. Sometimes we would even end up falling asleep together on the couch. Those were the kind of nights I would always cherish. Just me and my mom, the one who was always there for me.

“Mom, there's something else I wanted to say.” I trailed off, my heart beating fast and heavy, I was sure she could feel it as I leaned on her. In my head, I told her everything, that I'd rather run away from home than go back to that place, that she was making a fool of herself buying into all that crap. But it was my

mother after all. She sacrificed so much for me, the least I could do is play along with this until I was on my own. Did I really have any other choice?

“Never mind, just forget it. It’s fine.” My exhaustion took over and I drifted off right there, my head still resting on my mom’s bony shoulder, just as I had always done before.

The sun shone through the window, forcing me from my deep sleep. Morning came just as quickly as I had shut my eyes the night before. I was sprawled across the couch, only the sounds of the house settling to keep me company that Sunday morning. My mom was working overtime again, I wasn’t sure what time she’d left me there in the living room. I got up to stretch my legs and shuffled into the kitchen yawning, the dust particles glowing in the sunlight that beamed on the empty table. I stood at the counter, the cold tile beneath my bare feet as I peeled an orange, the only thing my mom left out that morning after leaving in a rush that morning. I glanced up at the calendar pinned above the sink and sighed, focusing on the words newly penciled in on the 15th of November: *Elena – Auditing 11 AM.*

Soap Oracle

Stop washing your hands
so aggressively.
You'll lose your soap oracle —
concrete shapes of dissolving prophecy;
death of mortals born out of chaos
only to rinse off chaos.

War is over?
Comes only,
the revelation
of xenos, entropy, locution, completely walled.

Erotic sin slipped through the alkaline foam between my
fingers;
a divine coolness against my rashed skin
bites off the last shred of sanity
that I was proud of.

Soon flesh, cleansed and foretold,
will roam on the street still anticipating
vital signs and stubborn waitings.
Soap oracle consistently repeats
that we don't love well.

象江山

峰没青波里，
江沉一线天。
云烟逐昼去，
山月携霜来。

2019年9月15日

A Kite Untied

Soft clothes piled on her bed. She curled up in a little open space like a cat. Staring into a corner of the narrow room, she felt as small as that corner in this metropolis, this world, her life — and the space continued to shrink. Tears slipped from her wide, blank eyes. It was the fifth day since she'd lost him. Two more days and it would be a week since she was done with him. Oh, *him*. Five days of separation, and he gradually faded from a bright clear image in her brain into a shadow in a vast vague grey background from which arose a haze of sorrow for everything she'd enjoyed before. If someone wanted to fix her messy feelings, they'd have to go back eight months.

*

In high school, no matter whether the nights were heavy with rain or thick fog, or if she lost track of time chatting too late after night classes with friends, that thin, tall man with hands behind his back would be standing at the school gate waiting for her. Her father. Every day, he'd accompany her home, where a whole world of love and warmth awaited. All she had to do was open the front door, and a plate of chopped fruits would appear on the table. Beside it, her mother waited in furry pajamas for her to come sit on her lap and talk about what had happened that day.

She was spoiled; her parents fulfilled all her needs, even allowing her time for her hobbies in the month before the national exam. In school, she felt free as a fish. Academic pressure felt far

away, and her grades always ranked in the top five. Even when she went through adolescence, her friends would listen to her with patience. She felt like a colorful kite flying in the sky; on the one hand, life was stable and flat as the cloudless sky, on the other hand, there was always a kite string she could rely on, a stable and strong connection to parents and friends.

*

October autumn days, however, were too rough for kite flying. The wind was too intense, and if the string was not strong enough the kite would blow off to nowhere. She went off to attend college in an unfamiliar city. After a hard struggle, her parents had finally made up their minds to let her go. “She’ll leave sooner or later,” they said, reluctantly. “She should learn to rely on herself.”

*

Excited to have freedom to make decisions by herself, she soon felt overwhelmed by so much blank space. A feeling of emptiness emerged when she typed in her bank account password or spent a huge amount of money on a useless decoration for her dorm room. Her mood would suddenly fall if a friend rejected a proposal to have dinner together after a hard day. Her moods shifted so easily it was as if they were not generated from within her; instead, it was like someone dropped them on her, a kite struck down by a sudden gust of wind. She might feel pleased with herself because of a good grade, but soon, the rustling voices arising from the keyboards in the library would strain her nerves, the packed study room becoming a smokeless battlefield. She felt overwhelmed by peer pressure. Morning rush hours jostled and pressed against her and she gripped the handrail until she was pushed off the train, her palms imprinted with pale fingernail marks. Full of complaints, she would rush to seek comfort from a good friend, but the friend would need to hurry to class. She swallowed the words as they formed on the tip of her tongue. If only there was someone who could listen to her right then and there.

*

One weekend, she had nothing to do, and paced back and forth in her dorm, aimlessly scrolling through photos of takeaway food despite having no appetite. If only there was someone to just sit with, she thought.

She was fed up with going to the mall on Friday nights only to order a bland set meal, finish eating with couples and families talking and laughing all around, then tramp down the street through a cold wind to return to study in a classroom full of empty chairs and tables. If only there was someone to walk with.

She decided to attend a procrastination discussion workshop. While everyone's attention was focused on the handout filled with "toolkits" for dealing with procrastination, the young man with a round face sitting next to her leaned over and whispered, "I'm procrastinating by using procrastination therapy." His voice, which he tried to keep low, sounded rather serious. She burst into laughter. Hearing her own laughter, she quickly looked around. When she saw that the others were still looking down at their handouts, she pretended to cough, and coughed again. It was his turn to laugh out loud.

*

He was tall, and smelled of laundry detergent. He was a bit shy, but people felt that they saw reliability in his determined eyes. They soon became good friends; at least, that's what she thought. They saw each other every other day, and they frequently ate together and took the subway or bus together. She'd found someone to keep her company, though a faint sense of uncertainty and insecurity was still entrenched in the bottom of her heart because, although they spent so much time together, they rarely had deep conversations.

The boy, as she thought of him, usually immersed himself in what he was doing, as if totally forgetting her existence. Whenever they had a meal together, his silence made her feel that he was just a stranger on the subway sitting next to her, close only physically. But at least every time she called him, he would answer, he

would come. What else could she ask for? She comforted herself with this thought. When she finished enough homework, she would invite him to dinner to reward herself with his company for her hard work, or, in rare good weather, she would ask him to go to the park for a walk. Eventually, her dependence on him verged on the unreasonable. She would complain to him about trivial things such as her roommate's loud footsteps, but his attitude always remained neutral. He never refused and never initiated. She comforted herself with the illusion that he was reliable as the emergency hotline — as long as she called, he was always there. Still, he never took the initiative to find her.

*

Humans are always pursuing perfection and a sense of completeness, you could say, or you could say that they are always greedy — that would be one way to name her next move. But, considering that she was merely a little bird just leaving the nest, let's tentatively call it *the hunger of love*. Every time she saw his tall form approach her, she couldn't help thinking how wonderful it would be if the moment could last forever, like a flying kite always firmly tied to its string. She needed to feel tied to him. Otherwise, the wind of her loneliness could blow her away at any time. How could she keep him by her side forever?

When he finally started talking about his own daily troubles and sharing a few of his thoughts in front of her, she thought their relationship had deepened. One day, when they were having dinner together at a restaurant, he talked about how modern people's stress and anxiety has affected their ability to interact with others, and how the smartphone has ruined people's interpersonal skills. He said, "even my roommate treats our apartment like a hotel! There's no warmth between us."

They both fell silent. While his silence was like that of a prisoner in a lost war, hanging his head in defeat, not saying a word, her silence was the buildup to something that felt, to her, like an explosion. She abruptly confessed: "I really like you." It was easier than she'd imagined. Her heart didn't tremble with the words, she didn't break into a sweat. Her confession, after all, didn't involve much emotion, and felt more like a statement

in a product instruction manual. There had been no need for a deep breath, because she didn't need much strength to spit it out. This was her first confession of this sort. With a girl as pretty and caring as she was, he would accept her admission, she was sure. She felt like she had just dropped a heavy burden that she had carried for a long time.

He stopped talking, put down his chopsticks, and bent his head, musing. His lips pressed into a flat line. She had not expected him to be so serious.

After a long time, he raised his head with cold eyes, cold and calm. "No," he said. "No, I don't think so.... I don't think I have the same feelings for you.... I just see you as a good friend, and I just want to help you. If what you say is true, then I can only say I'm sorry. Our relationship is uneven; you put so much more into it. But this is wrong, now.... I shouldn't take advantage of you, because I don't have the same feelings for you. We have to stop. I don't think we can see each other any more. I'm sorry." He stood up, picking up his coat, his phone, his bag, and the tissue he'd used to wipe his mouth. "We'd better not contact each other," he said, and then he left. Only the special snack she'd bought him sat on his side of the table now.

She was stunned. She had thought that he might be surprised, but that her confession of admiration would make him truly want to be with her. But now, what could she do? The only thought that kept circling in her mind was, *how can his tone be so cold? He wouldn't even use a tone that cold with strangers.* Her heart was beating too fast; blood rushed to her brain, her breath was coming too fast, and she felt dizzy. Such shame! She immediately decided that she must hide her shame from everyone. She sat still, in silence, feeling powerless to even lift her chopsticks. She felt like gravity was slipping away, and a sense of panic rose in her. Her expectations for her life were collapsing like a newly built but flawed highway. Drivers wouldn't even have the chance to see it coming. She had pushed herself into a dead end alley. She felt like she had recklessly gambled and lost. As he had walked out of the restaurant, she hadn't even asked him to stop, to wait, to come back and talk. The string was broken.

*

She didn't know how she got back to the dorm that day, though it must have been the same as every other day, waking home, swiping the access card at the dorm entrance, hanging her handbag by the door in her room. She immersed herself in her soft covers until she felt as hot as if it were a summer day; she buried her head in to avoid the bright sunshine. The blue sky and crisp birdsong would only add to her sense of guilt and sorrow. Crying and crying, she fell asleep from exhaustion.

When she woke up, sunshine had already snuck into the room between the slit between the curtains.

The string was broken. She could only count on herself. She still felt lonely and wanted to escape from pressure, but she knew she would have to find a way to pull herself out of it.

There is a legend that the first man on earth who sought to invent a flying machine that could carry a person, a true predecessor to the powerful airplane of the future, was a man in the distant Song Dynasty. Of course, his solution was to make an enormous kite, one without a string.

She set forth, on her own, into the new day.

容器

translated to English by Xiaoshuang Wu

容器
空的杯子 装得
满满的
空气
没人的
的 死死
房子 时间
塞满着的 空着
有形状的
容器
装满了
无
形
状
的
时
间
气
体
。

o

filled with the shapeless air ticking

container shaped the void

time ticking

deadly

in it

g

n

i

be

no

with

with air room

empty glass filled

container

Homesick

Snap! — two ends of a green bean
Plucked away and discarded

Two peas in a pod
Split and heavy hearted

Tangy fish stew
Sweet tomato, soggy okra

Sticky, steaming rice
To comfort me during this damp October

*

From my Philly home to a Shanghai dorm,
I'm miles away from my safe bed

Like a salmon's bony body
Chop! — severed from its head

Of all my messy meals
Made with unfamiliar ingredients

While I cook alone
In dorm kitchen experiments

Nothing could compare
To her loving *mechado*

Or her savory, familiar
Chicken *adobo*, *arroz caldo*

*

In buzzing supermarkets
And *guoji* aisles

I look fervently for ingredients
A list, compiled

Alas, *zhao bu dao le!*
A key ingredient

One made with love
And time — intent

I don't call her *nanay*
And to her I'm not *anak*

I never ask her *kumusta?*
And she never tells me *mahal kita*

But even across the world
I long for the taste and smell

Of our Filipino culture, my childhood
Before it says farewell

饥

记忆中的商店是灯火通明的，人们为吃一顿丰盛的晚餐愿意坐在门前静静等待；或许这家餐厅的食物并不像期待中的可口，欢声笑语却夹杂在菜肴之中。忘记擦嘴的孩子向父母索要更多的食物，偶尔探头探脑，对旁桌的食物也兴致盎然；水晶灯下的情侣，牵住对方的手许愿爱情长久。客人经常不满意服务生的态度，就像服务生也从来不喜欢加班一样。和以前一样吧...我正准备继续往回家的路走去。

年初的天气严寒刺骨，越往前走，街上渐渐空虚，人们捂着脸，朝着与我相反的方向走去。心里胆怯着前方的黑暗，就快没有光了；我咬紧嘴，偷偷地躲在路灯下，被黄色的“暖阳”笼罩。黄色的光晒在被人践踏过后的积雪上，雪失去了本来的纯净，盖着层黑色的薄纱。我望了很久，与平常不同的是，我却迟迟看不到我的影子。

黑暗无情地冲进我脑中，身体不自知的往回走，心想着去刚刚那家店取暖。早已过了8点，饥肠辘辘，只好用身上仅剩的钱去吃晚餐。打开门，“年初的暖流”冲进我的鼻腔，被水晶灯散射的灯光，像是模仿都市里的霓虹灯。彼时，刚刚在窗外看到的那位饥饿的孩子跑到我身边，抓住我的衣服角，生怕我因为队伍长而离去。我不好意思用冰冷的手去摸他的头，只好在微笑后，偷偷的坐到排队的一侧。

大约半刻钟就好了吧，心里想着。

那个孩子依然目不转睛的看着我，我摸了摸脸，生怕有脏成为别人的笑柄。本以为拥挤的餐厅，人们交头接耳的离开了。他们的目光偶尔交错在我的身上，有着和那个孩子不一样的“饥饿”。我心里窃喜，家里早就不欢迎我回去，一个人在外面也过的自在。我憧憬着人们找我寒暄，或是给我一个笑脸。完全没人理睬我，我不舒服的咳了两声，用手封牢我的嘴巴，同时“胆怯的观察”周围；但他们似乎沉浸在快乐中，丝毫不在意我的存在。身旁的队伍接连有序的减短，一切从然有序。

闲暇之余，一半的客人匆匆离去，大概是突然接到来自家人的电话；打断后和谐，像是将崩断的琴弦扭在一起，人们只好胆战的继续谈吐。反观，我却可以独享天伦之乐，不必顾及家人对我生活的打搅。那个孩子扭曲的坐在我身边，贪婪的看着我；我小心翼翼的捂住口袋，生怕他在我不注意的时候，偷偷拿走仅剩不多的饭钱。

等待的队伍逐渐缩短，我期待着成为今晚最后一名客人。忽然，身体自主的将四肢蜷缩在一起，胸口也像是被砸过一样，喘气越来越艰难...几分钟后，眼睛终于可以看清大理石地板的纹路，意识渐渐清醒，四肢也终于重拾自由。但似乎在我失控的几分钟内，餐厅突然决定要关门。我一把抓住服务生，指责似的但又碍于情面，“虚弱的”问：“打烊了？”

服务生穿着正式，像极了正在实习的大学生，眉目清秀，脸上找不到一丝无知，回我：“是！”

我抓着他的袖角，像那名饥饿的孩子一样，祈求着能给我点食物。他冲我大笑到：“走啊！下班了。”

本以为他和坐在门口胡子拉碴的那位不一样，心生失望，但不便和他争论了。我用力的跺脚，企图让身上暖和点来应对外面的冷风。想着快点换家店，便仔细的摸了摸上衣口袋，却找不到用来吃晚餐的钱。下意识的看向右边，发现那名孩子也不在了。我环顾四周，轻易地找到他

娇小的身影。看到他拿着手上的钱，和父母叫着说：“我捡到钱了。”

我生气地走到他们桌边，指责似的解释道这钱是我用来吃晚餐的。

那位孩子无赖般的突然哭了，像是用光了所有的勇气逃向母亲的怀中；他父亲愤然起身，我感受到脸被抽红了。脸被拍响的声音，打断了“霓虹灯”的折射，所有人望向我们。我呆滞的站在他们桌前，在餐厅的中间，在人群的喧嚣中。我看到门口的服务生，脸抽搐的模仿我被打的样子。我气的咳了两声，冲那孩子大吼。或许是大家看我要“饿昏了”，拿着各自的食物砸到我身上；我看着那位孩子狡诈的笑容，低身捡起那些没被砸烂的，捂着红色的脸，踱步朝着门口离去。

冷风砸在我刚刚被打的脸上，我嚼着刚刚被砸烂的食物，黑暗若隐若现...醒来的时候，救护车的鸣笛在我身边回响。天还是黑的，心里窃喜那些食物还可以吃。黑暗包围着我，那家餐厅的灯光也被吞噬了。空空的街道上，只有一名护士走下车。风声盖过了她的脚步声，我浑然不知她什么可以到我身边。

她冰冷的手停在我的手腕上，透过手套，我仍然感受到那名护士的体温；我抓住她的衣服，眉头紧锁。

“别把我带走，就让我在这。”我说。

她没有回答我。

我自己慢慢起身，拍去身上的尘土和因为被砸而有的餐渣。风突然把她的帽子踢倒，我用力的看看，她确实是名女生。看着她比我还短的头发，我拾起帽子并帮她戴好。她没有笑，也没有哭。我看着在路灯下的我们，黄色的灯光挤走了我们的影子。影子呢？我不知道...

我看着刚刚回家的路，黑暗变黑了许多，并慢慢向我们走来。

To Mourn Her Lost Hair

You turned off
the light with a mousetrap, emptied closets

of black ice, of freezing rain.
She ran off across the bridge of the roof, to the light

of the Chinese opera house where you first met.
She thrilled when she saw your shadow

slipping out of your room. You pushed her
into the chasm when you spotted a cliff.

Can you pick up the voices on the stairs?
When she hears Peking Opera, you become the phantom

in the lake of her hair,
because the rest of the hair aches when that lock goes

She cuts off a lock of your hair, burns it
to ashes with your photos
and eats it

She never eats, nor drinks, nor showers, nor sleeps:
“I am the mouse trapped inside the machine.”

but drowns her face in the water, its petals, and remembers
that water, water, and more
water for a whole year.

在荒野

在荒野，
浓绿的树挤出秋黄；
在荒野的风声里，
奶白的大雁缀在天角；
在荒野的……呵气里，
星星磕到额头；
在荒野的流淌里，
冰蓝的河块凝在喉头；
在荒野的一锅汤里，
晚风熬得发慌。

Of the Resurrection of the Filipinio People

Las Islas Pilipinas, 1543

Before the Spaniards came to conquer our land, the old gods danced between the balete trees and bathed in the moonlit pools of Kagayan. Before they burnt our language off our tongues and shoved the words of their God down our throats, the hymns of Lakapati trembled upon our lips, vibrating down to the soil beneath our toenails. Lakapati, huwag mong kami gutamin, huwag mong kami iwanin.

They are here to save us, they say. To deliver us from evil.

Savage, they call us, as they drown our babies in lakes to be born again in their God's name. *Lesser than dogs*, they say, as their friars' fingers force themselves between our thighs. For nothing fills them more with such religious ecstasy as seeing us on our knees in supplication. In the name of their Father, his Son, and their Holy Spirit, we renounced our gods.

But the old gods are still here. When our fishermen lose their way home, Tala sends her orbs of divine light to guide them to safety. One by one, the spheres fall from the heavens to float upon the still sea. When the sunlight dances through the light showers of rain, Anitun Tabu lingers nearby. When the roosters crow at the first ray of dawn while the grass is laid with morning dew, Hanan's blessing is upon us..

To survive, we must make them think we have surrendered. Make them think we believe them when they call our gods spirits of evil and deceit. They are afraid, for unlike their Christ, our gods are here.

When their palms press your cheek against the mud, peek between their fingers at the sky and you will catch Dimingan running with feathers between his locks, chasing the maya birds. When you have picked grain from the fields, scorched and bleeding from their leather whips, you will feel Hangin's cool breath caress the length of your neck. On the darkest of nights, when they pin you to the blackened soil of your own land with one hand on your mouth and the other on your breast, look up at Mayari. Her moonlight will seep through you like a cold numbness, 'til you no longer feel pain.

When you kneel upon the altar of their god, their prayers and psalms whispered between your lips, listen beyond the echoes of brass bells, for the stillness in the balmy air and the heavy pulse of the earth. For when the light of day yields to the darkness of night, the old gods stir. They will remind us of the power that lies dormant in our blood.

On their Day of Reckoning, their Final Judgement will come. Our ancient powers will call to us – and we must call back. We will break the stone houses and towers they built on the bones of our people who died in their name. We will strip them bare of their silks and gold to repent for their sins against the living and the dead, our bruised bodies, broken backs, and poisoned wombs. We will make them recite their transgressions like scriptures until their lips are cracked and bleeding. We will purge them from our land.

For like their Christ, the old gods will rise again. And we will rise with them. On their Final Judgement, we will be reborn in our own name.

El Delirio del Hombre es Creer

El delirio del hombre es creer
Que el pecado es hostil
En los ojos de la gracia.
El peca no por avaricia,
Sí no por necesidad.
El pecado nos acerca a la gracia
Más que la gracia a ella misma.

Una tarde de antaño,
Mi padre decapitó su consciencia.
De la misma manera
en la que lo hicieron mi abuelo y sus hermanos.
Soy hijo, padre, abuelo y hermano

Hoy un pavillon me acribilla
El cielo pierde su color
Ahora entiendo aquella banal
Idea de la gracia.

El suelo no acaricia mi cuerpo
En ningún momento mis uñas se llenan de tierra
Ni mi mente de más impureza
¿Por qué no ha caído mi cuerpo?

Aquel tratado firmado hace unas primaveras
No desvanece.

Mi alma llena de pecado se mantiene
He vivido aterrado de aquella idea que hoy me protege
El pecado me ha salvado de la gracia.

*

The delusion of man is to believe
That sin is hostile
In the eyes of grace.
He sins not out of greed,
But out of necessity.
Sin brings us closer to grace
More than grace itself.

An afternoon of eld
My father decapitated his conscience.
In the same way
in which my grandfather and his brothers did.
I'm son, father, grandfather and brother

Today a pavilion riddles me
The sky forgets its color
Now I understand that banal
Idea of grace.

The ground does not caress my body
At no time do my nails fill with dirt
Nor my mind of more impurity
Why hasn't my body fallen?

That treaty signed a few springs ago
doesn't fade.
My soul full of sin remains
I have lived terrified of that idea that protects me today
Sin has finally saved me from grace.

Confessions of a Cat

I rule my lands;
I roam my gardens
and the foul smell of flowers
and the delicious chirp of
food. I need nothing more than
soft grass beneath my paws
and uncontested territory
and someone who knows when to hold
me and for how long.
Presently you don't know,
but I'll come to you anyway.
Come take me in,
I want to be the one you leave
and the one you come to
but I'm a stray cat, you see —
I go with the shadows
and melt into the bushes
and the wedge of your hand.
There! Your fingertips
point at my head and touch it
lightly, like the brush of a star,
careful not to breach
my fragile shields.
I want you, I want you —
I want you not. Please
touch me again,

put your hand on my head
put your arms around me
carefully as if you were holding
a ball of glowing stardust,
careful! not to breach
my fragile shields.

I'm a stray cat, you see,
slinking through the waters
and the crazes of the sun.
I don't need fancy words,
I need nothing at all
but the quietness of the bushes
and the wedge of your hand.

If you were to take me in,
not that I care much, but —
would you be careful?
I rule these lands,
but I get lost so quickly.
Don't shut me in,
Don't ever leave me out.



Mission

At seven o'clock I smell slightly burned bacon. According to my mom, this is called "crispy." My alarm won't go off for another fifteen minutes, but I've been awake almost all night. I decide I might as well get up now. *Today's the day*, I think to myself. I get out of bed and begin getting dressed. I know that this is the last time that I'll open these drawers, and when I brush my teeth, I know that it's the last time I'll use this toothbrush. At breakfast my mother smiles weakly, but I can see the tears welling in her eyes. My father holds her hand and says, "By the end of the day, we'll finally be free again!" Though, a crack in his voice reveals his true feelings. At eight thirty, the three of us get into my mother's car, a silver PT cruiser with stick-figure decals representing our family on the rear windshield. Just two normal sized stick-figures, and one smaller one in the middle. *When I leave, will they peel me off?*

Soon, we pull into the same parking lot that we've been pulling into every Sunday morning for as long as I can remember. *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, I read. What a mouthful. No wonder everyone just calls us Mormons. We're early as usual, but that's the way my parents like it. They park at the far end of the parking lot so that they can greet as many of the other families as possible. Everyone always gives the same corny greetings. "Long time no see, Bill!" "Lookin' sharp, Elijah!" "Beautiful day, isn't it, Isaiah!" But today a lot of the greetings are directed at me instead of my mother or father. They

tell me how excited they are for me, how much fun I'll have, how they wish they could be back in my shoes. Everyone seems happy for me, except me.

During church, my eyelids feel heavier with each passing minute. I hear the steady drone of the preacher's sermon but can't seem to focus on anything he's saying. I used to love it here. The smell of the wooden pews, the fluttering sound of everyone turning a thin page of their Bible at the same time. But as I got older and began spending time online, things started to change. The beliefs I'd once held without a doubt began to seem more and more far-fetched. What are the odds that the gold plates on which the Book of Mormon was originally written just happened to be buried in a hill near the home of Joseph Smith, the only person capable of translating them? Is it really possible that my spirit existed with God before I was born on Earth, and will continue to exist after my death? And why can't we consume anything with caffeine? I know plenty of people who drink soda and coffee and they all seem okay to me. I'd asked my parents these questions and even asked the Bishop as well. The Bishop's response that I "just need to have faith" was unsatisfying though. Surely if everything we believe is true, there must be some concrete evidence somewhere. And my parents were offended that I was even expressing my doubts, telling me that "a life of sin begins with a day of doubt." I still can't keep these doubts out of my head, but I can tell that it's best to keep them to myself. Besides, it's not like I can just stop going to church. I can't even imagine what my parents would say.

Recently, each two-hour service feels longer than the last. In my unfocused daze though, this one seems to fly by. Before I know it, everyone around me is singing "We Thank Thee, O God, for a Prophet," and I realize that I'm singing too. Then we pray one last time before everyone gets up and begins making their way back to their cars, then back to their homes. For a moment, I'm almost able to forget what the rest of the day holds for me. Then I think of the single suitcase under my bed, which contains everything I'll need for the next two years—at least I hope so.

Walking back to the car with my parents, I can't help but think back on the day I graduated from high school. Everyone

was so excited, preparing to finally leave home and attend their dream college. “Where are you going again?” people kept asking me. I told them I still hadn’t decided, and most seemed to assume this meant that I wasn’t going to college. They awkwardly changed the subject. They were right, sort of. But the reason I didn’t tell them the truth was because I want to believe that I don’t know what the future holds in store for me. I want to believe that soon I’ll have the courage to tell my parents that I want to make my own decisions for once. That maybe I don’t want to live the Mormon life that they’ve both been living their entire lives. But deep down, I’m afraid that I’ll just continue doing what everyone tells me I’m supposed to do.

It’s still not too late, I think.

Technically, that’s true. I could still back out now. I’d need to have a big argument with my parents though. They might even try to kick me out. I’ve read stories online of other Mormon kids getting kicked out for telling their parents they want to convert to Protestant Christianity, atheism, or anything other than Mormonism. At the very least, my parents would have to disappointedly tell all their friends and relatives, “Actually, he decided not to go, but who knows, maybe he’ll come around and give it another shot next year?” I can’t help but think about all the arrangements that have been made for me as well. The apartment that I’m supposed to be living in, beginning tomorrow. The other Mormons waiting for me at the Cape Town Airport, eager to get me settled in so I can begin spreading the gospel. My two mission companions who are leaving today as well. But I’ve never met any of these people. Do I really care about letting them down? How can I be expected to go to South Africa for two years to spread a religion I’m not sure I even believe in anymore? *I can’t do it. I have to say something.* I feel words building in my throat. *I’m not going.* It feels like the words are about to jump out of my mouth. But before I can get them out, my mother slams on the breaks, bringing the car to a skidding halt. She must be distracted. She almost ran a red light. A second later, our car lurches forward as the car behind fails to stop in time. It’s just a minor fender bender, but the commotion of exchanging insurance and surveying the damage ruins the moment. *I’ll tell them later*, I think.

At home, my mother cooks a frozen steak on the stove. As usual, it's dry and slightly past well done, but I know better than to complain. It will be at least two years before I eat another meal cooked by my mother. *Maybe the mission won't be so bad after all.* After I've eaten, my mother has nothing to do besides ask me for the thousandth time if I'm sure I packed everything. She asks if I want to bring toilet paper, or a pillow, or extra underwear maybe, in case mine get holes in them. I have to remind her again that my suitcase is already full, and I can't bring another. Besides, I'm going to South Africa, not a developing country or some remote village. I can buy anything I need once I get there. She smiles apologetically, knowing that she's being unreasonable, but also unable to help herself.

"It's already twelve thirty," my father says urgently. My flight isn't until 4:05, but he wants to get there at two, and wants to leave by one, just in case the fifteen-minute drive takes an hour for some reason. "We're finally getting rid of you," he jokes. We all do our best to pretend he's being funny. Humor is his way of hiding emotions he'd rather not show. I decide I'll break the news once we get to the airport. With all those people there, they won't be able to make a scene. It seems like a good plan, but I'm still not looking forward to it. Before we leave, my father gathers us together on the couch and says a quick prayer that makes a few tears roll down my mother's face. Then I wheel my suitcase out to the car, and my father lets out an exaggerated grunt when he lifts it into the trunk.

Unsurprisingly, the short drive to the airport is even shorter today due to the lighter Sunday traffic. Since we're so early, my parents come in to wander the stores before I go through security. My mother buys Biscoff cookies, saying that they remind her of when she flew to England for her mission. My father buys a Gatorade and some licorice from one of the shops. It's no wonder he's been gaining weight recently. They ask if I need a phone charger, an extra pair of earbuds, or a book for the plane. I just say no, still trying to find the courage to tell them I don't believe in Mormonism enough to spend the next two years recruiting strangers. Time is winding down though, so I know that if I don't do it soon, I may not get another chance. I tell them I need to go to the bathroom before I check my bag.

My plan is to give myself a pep talk in the bathroom. *I'll go in, splash water on my face, look myself in the eyes in the mirror, and promise myself that the first words I say when I come out will be "I've decided not to go on my mission."* I know my parents will take it hard. I can't help but think of the Bingham family. I'm reminded of the condescending way my parents talk about them. They use hushed tones, and say things like "maybe if they were better parents their boy wouldn't have turned out the way he did," or "I don't know how they can show their faces in church every week. Everyone knows they couldn't even raise a good Mormon boy." I hope that when they see that I can't be convinced to go, they'll have no choice but to drive me back home. I just have to say the words, then stick by them. But my father follows me into the bathroom, ruining my plan once again. I'm forced to simply stand at a urinal and try to pee, while my father does the same two urinals away. We wash our hands together, making awkward eye contact in the mirror, then rejoin my mother outside.

By now, it's time to check in, so we all head to the Delta Airlines check-in counter. It's not very busy, and we make it to the front of the line in less than ten minutes. I hand over my passport, and confirm my destination. "Cape Town, South Africa," I say weakly. My father proudly tells the airport employee that his son is finally going on his mission. She doesn't seem to care, offering nothing more than a quick congratulations. Then I lift my bag onto the scale and watch as the digital display goes blank, then flashes *48 lbs.* Two pounds underweight. My heart sinks as she quickly sticks a bag tag around the handle, and I watch my suitcase ride the conveyor belt until it disappears behind the curtains. She returns my passport with my ticket sticking out, telling me to go to gate 34D, that the flight boards at 3:35 and the doors close ten minutes before take-off.

There's nothing I can do now except trudge slowly towards security. My feet feel heavier with each step. "Starting to get nervous?" my father asks, likely noticing my slowed pace. I shrug. "I was nervous too," he tells me, "but these next two years will be some of the best of your life." This doesn't make me feel better, but I stay quiet. "Besides," he adds cheerfully, "you can call us every week now. Back when I was a missionary, we were still only allowed to call home twice a year." *How can he think*

that these strict rules are reasonable? What kind of religion restricts communication with your family? But since I can't bring myself to say anything, I just give them each a hug, doing my best to hold back my own tears while my mother fails to hold back hers.

While I'm in line, my parents stand back with their arms around each other. My mother cries quietly, and my father's lips quiver while he smiles. I know if I meet their gaze any longer, I'll start crying too, so I force myself to turn forward and focus on getting through security. It's relatively uneventful, and once I make it through, it hits me that I'm on my own from here on out. The feeling is overwhelming, but I can't dwell on it. I check my ticket to remind myself of the gate, then head to 34D.

On the way, I pass a convenience store. I see shelves stocked with Pepsi, Coke, iced tea, and iced coffee. I've never had any of these except for one time in third grade at Matthew Allred's birthday party. I remember my parents' anger when I described the "bubbly brown drink" I'd had. I was only allowed to attend Mormon birthday parties after that. Suddenly I feel an overwhelming urge to give it another try, considering that I likely won't have any more chances during the next two years. One of the reasons missionaries are all assigned companions is so that we can keep each other in line. I decide to seize the opportunity and buy one of each. The coffee is bitter, and I toss it after just one sip. The iced tea is okay, but the Coke and Pepsi are my favorite. They taste the same to me, but the sweet taste and the way the bubbles burn my throat as I swallow is invigorating. I can't understand why such delicious drinks would be forbidden. I quickly finish both and am desperate to know what other enjoyments the Church has deprived me of.

My flirtation with the world of forbidden Mormon beverages leaves me with a new feeling of excitement. What if I told my parents I got on the flight, then simply left the airport and took a bus wherever it would take me? The idea makes my heart beat faster. I could hitchhike around the country, work odd jobs until I find somewhere I want to stay. I can almost convince myself that the airport is actually just a bus terminal, and instead of South Africa, my next stop is San Francisco, or Miami, or New Orleans. Suddenly I hear the crackly voice of an overhead announcement. I can't make out all the words, but I do catch the

words “canceled” and “apologize.” I jump out of my seat, heart pounding. *God knows I’m not meant for a mission, I think. God wants me to wander the country. Or go home. He knows this isn’t right for me.* I make my way to the lady behind the standing desk of gate 34D. I feel like I’m floating, my feet barely even touching the ground. “Did that announcement say something about our flight being canceled?” I ask her.

“I don’t know what it said,” she tells me, sounding bored and slightly annoyed, “Our flight’s still right on schedule. We’ll begin boarding in twenty minutes.”

“Oh,” I reply softly. “Okay. Thanks.”

Her words buzz around in my head like a swarm of bees. At this point, I’ve come to accept that in just over twenty minutes, I’ll be sitting in seat 45C, crammed next to two strangers, heading to South Africa to spread Mormonism for the next two years. I won’t have any more opportunities to try caffeine, alcohol, or do anything else forbidden under Mormonism. I used to feel comforted by the fact that the Church seemed to have my entire future planned out for me. Go on my mission, come home, go to Brigham Young University if I want, eventually meet a nice Mormon girl, get married in the Temple, have lots of children, and be a faithful Mormon until I die and go to the Celestial Kingdom of Heaven. But now this plan seems suffocating. Other people get to decide the way they want to live their lives, but by being born into this religion, all my decisions have already been made for me.

As I wallow in my misery, I force myself to think of those less fortunate than me. I compare my problems to those of children born in war-torn countries, or people born with crippling mental or physical disabilities. I know that they would give anything to be able to live my life. Maybe a two-year mission and 10% of my income each year is a small price to pay for the otherwise luxurious life I get to live. Knowing that others are worse off than me doesn’t really make me feel better though.

Suddenly everyone around me is standing up and beginning to form a line. I realize that we’ve begun boarding. I join the line, and my heart rate quickens with each step towards the plane. When I get to the front, I scan my ticket with a shaky hand, and the employee tells me, “No need to be nervous, hon.”

We slowly make our way down the jetway and onto the plane. When I finally make it to my seat, I am surprised to see that while I'm assigned the middle seat, neither the aisle passenger nor the window passenger has sat down yet. *I have the entire row to myself*, I think. I decide to take the aisle seat, thinking that maybe God has given me this small reward for making it onto the plane. But before I know it, a large sweaty man holding garlic potato chips squeezes by me to take the window seat, and soon after, a woman with a crying baby tells me that she thinks I'm in her seat. I scoot over to my middle seat, unable to avoid rubbing shoulders with the people on either side of me. *Prepare to have the most miserable flight of your life*, I think.

When everyone has finally managed to cram their carry-on luggage into the overhead compartments and squeeze into their seats, the flight attendants give the safety protocol speech. Then the plane rolls slowly to the beginning of the runway. As the engines fire up, I put in headphones and shuffle a playlist of rap songs I found on the internet. Everyone at church hates rap, but I'm secretly a fan. As the music fills my ears, I am aware that this may be my only chance to enjoy these songs for the next two years. The first song to come on is Kanye West's "Spaceship." The plane rolls forward, quickly gathering speed. I close my eyes and rest my head on the back of my seat. I didn't choose this life, but it's the one I got anyway. As the plane lifts off the ground, I whisper along to the chorus:

*I wish I could
Buy me a spaceship and fly
Past the sky
Oh, oh, oh*

Homeless

Reading the censored Chinese news on Telegram
is like bumping into a big bag of heroin
in your mother's bedside cabinet,
and discovering that she makes a living
by selling drugs to teenagers.
I can, and probably should, leave her,
buy a plane ticket and escape to another end of the world,
and even erase her face from my memory.
But then, who will cook yuanxiao for me at the Lantern
Festival?
I will be homeless.

年轻的耶稣

年轻的耶稣来到人群间，
张开双臂的他等待死亡降临。
他为他的仇人祈祷和祝福，
他生命的意义全在这场救赎。
张开双臂的他从未如此伟大，
他真心希望众人将他毁灭
以得到升华。

飞驰而来的汽车结束了他的生命，司机一脸惊惶，人
群警惕地散开。短暂的喧嚣和仪式过后，
有的人在饭桌上
提起那场发生在十字路口的车祸。司机内心的愧疚
会在他未来几个月的监禁中消失。与此同时，新的耶
稣

正在被一场没有保护措施的配合 创造。
在一次次意外的性交事件中出生的耶稣会在越来
越年轻的年龄死去。他的死也越来越偶然。
而我们的年轻耶稣直到最后才会再次想起那个古老
的希腊咒语

“人出生的最大快乐就是尽早死去。”
于是，在不知是偶然
还是意愿的作用下，
我们年轻的耶稣再也没有

降临。

可爱的耶稣，

这全天下没有一人是你的仇人，十字架上的你
只能救赎你自己的灵魂。

Burning Red Nails

I was not sick, but there I was, in this hospital.

I've never really liked hospitals — the long queues, the doctors — but I'd always wondered what this hospital looked like inside.

Six lines at the registrar's desks slowly inched forward. People looked down at their phones, lethargic. A huge advertisement stood in the hall, calling for volunteers to participate in an experiment involving many medicines with weird names, such as desvenlafaxine succinate and mirtazapine.

Two policemen each took one shoulder of a yelling woman, dragging her like a struggling animal to be slaughtered on the farm. "I can walk on my own! Don't pull me. Hey — I can walk! No.... I said — I — *can* — *walk!*" She tried to break free but failed. My mother shielded my eyes, saying, "Don't look. Nothing's happening there." It's always interesting how she is able to blatantly lie about what is so obviously not true. Her favorite line is, "It's a joke. It's for fun." But I peeped through my mother's fingers and just watched the squirming woman as she drew a long line down the hallway with her feet. The scene was so dramatic that I could not process it as being part of the dull reality that people lived in every day.

When we reached the second floor, I saw numbers and letters in red rolling across a screen on the wall. Asterisks hid half of the patients' names to conceal their full identities, and their

four-digit patient codes were bundled in front of their asterisked half-names. Full crowds sat in the hall waiting for their names to pop up, waiting to be called into one of those small white rooms. Perhaps that white little room concealed birds and flowers and all magical solutions to life, I thought to myself. I've never believed in those white rooms, nor in those people in white coats telling me what's wrong with me, but there I was, confused and waiting just like the rest of the people in the hall. I like to distinguish myself from others, and I didn't like the smell of the hall — so much sweat that mushrooms could grow — not to mention the snoring.

The boy sitting across from me was sleeping on his mother's lap. He looked so peaceful that I felt sad for him. A middle-aged woman came out of a white room, trembling, and whispered, "They are trying to suffocate me. They tried to hurt me. Don't believe them, please...please." I had a strong feeling that she and the other people were not actually sick, but I could not be certain. Truth is, I didn't know. I wanted to say I was not either, but again, I didn't know.

Everything in the hospital was white and pale. Funny how their white looked black to me; perhaps it was the walls. These walls, obviously, didn't get cleaned a lot. There was gum, snot, mold, and doodles on the walls.

My mind started to wander and drift off. I wanted to hide and trap myself inside a ghost-haunted white sheet. I noticed my fingers and the rough skin around my nails. Tiny shreds of dried-out nail polish hung loose in the air like ripped pink underwear hanging outside on a balcony to dry. Pink, pink, pink. The tone of my skin. Also what my mother always told me to wear. "Well, that looks like a girl." Bad word choice — the word she was looking for is Barbie.

Pink was the theme of all of her reunions with friends: play a piece on the piano for everyone, dance a piece, be polite, remember to say hello/goodbye, say thank you, refuse their gifts, insist on giving our gifts, tell us what's going on in your life, please just don't tell the truth, make us some veggie smoothies tomorrow morning, but try not to be too loud with the juicer and wake us

up, ask the never-aging question: “Why are you not the same as your peers?” What a lovely day!

I wanted to dye things. I got tired of this pink stuck in my life, and this whiteness. What was good? What was evil? I couldn’t tell. I liked to make the skin of my fingers and lips smooth. I started to peel the skin off, piece by piece. It satisfied me to see my impurities fall off. The slightest taste of the blood, just enough to enjoy victory, but not enough to cause real pain. The color, the smell, the taste of the blood became something I gradually grew acquainted and comfortable with.

Once in a while, the red blood fell on my fingers, and red blood became what made me feel alive. I was a meat machine fed by medicine that numbed my heart. If my joy was numbness, was I the walking dead? Blood, my goddess, I yearned for you. Now, you were all over my hands and skin.

I squeezed my thumb and more blood burst forth. I could feel the heat burning inside and ice frozen outside trying to devour my vanity, pride, and abasement. Yes, let them burn. Please. I could feel my heartbeat in the wound.

“Don’t do it. It’s like a man who wants to shave, but picks up a gun and shoots his beard,” my mother said.

I smiled, not responding, and thought, “Then I probably have already shot my mouth 200 times.”

The nurse gave us a 16-page-long survey. One of the questions asked, “On a scale from 1 to 5, how often do you think about questions that cannot be answered, such as existential concepts like infinity, death, or reality, nature of the universe, and self?” I ruminated on the translation of one’s thoughts into those numbers. Then I got angry, for it was simply unreliable and insulting to one’s beautiful mind if numbers are deployed to measure thoughts. Numbers, natural numbers, 1, 2, 3... I hate numbers.

Finally, when it was my turn, I went into a white room with my mother. The doctor asked, without looking up, “So, what’s the issue?” Then he turned to his assistant, or perhaps another poor Ph.D. student of his, while still giggling at the

messages he read on his phone, and said, “Another cup of tea.”

I looked around, and I didn’t feel quite the same as I did when I filled out the questionnaire. To be honest, I have never been able to feel the same throughout a period of time, my mood always changing like a hurricane.

I was wondering if I should describe things that portray myself in the worst-case scenario such as me with a knife or smashing bowls, but I figured out I couldn’t really find what that exactly was, or whether I should portray my average self. On second thought, I wouldn’t be able to measure and articulate this average. How did I feel right now? Knowing that I was seeing a doctor, I felt pretty sober. I had not smoked ten packs of cigarettes, or done tequila shots the night before. Had I? Does today count? That’s why I always went with, “I guess I’m fine” to cover up my lack of knowledge.

My mother whispered to me, “Please explain your problem quickly. There are tons of patients out there and we don’t have much time to spend with him. The more information you provide, the better diagnosis he can make. Why can’t you be as good as other patients? Don’t embarrass us.”

“Okay... I overthink. I make ugly faces when I think...” imitating what my mother said on the way to the hospital. Making ugly faces while thinking was merely a habit. “I actually don’t think there’s anything wrong with me.”

The doctor finally looked up and I could feel his voice lifting in the silence. “Then go back and think about it, if you think you’re fine.” He wrote on a white page of the patient record with that handwriting that only doctors can understand. The ink dried out. He picked up another pen and forcefully copied what he had written before, trailing his second attempt directly on top of the lines of his first try. When his pen slipped off the original line, he threw away the second paper and copied the first calligraphy again on a new paper until he copied them identically.

Meanwhile, I was staring at a painted portrait of him hanging right behind him on the wall. It was uncouth and his mustache was too thick. It reminded me of Stalin.

“I remember in the questionnaire, it asked how frequently I think about difficult questions such as infinity and the universe. How often do you think that should be?”

“Well, it depends; as long as it does not bother you, then you’re fine.”

Such a diplomatic response. But wait: *as long as it does not bother you*. Living without questions and troubles would be such a dull life. I decided to squeeze some of my blood out of my finger and I secretly splashed one dot onto the floor. I hoped it left the room with some red elements, so the whiteness does not suffocate the next patient.

Make Me Think Me

With mirrors in my mind,
the reflections of a stranger
I go picking — (pools of blood
collecting around my cuticles)
A reminder:
I can control, I can destroy.

And the man in the white coat
who words his questions like riddles says to me:
“So tell me about yourself.”

Myself? Myself...
I think, I think, I think!
THINK I. THINK ME. THINK MYSELF.

My memorized monologue goes on as such:
“Well things were hard, I guess. And there was no help.
So I helped myself. I accomplished great things.
And that was great.”

And then white coat man commends my *strength*—
contradicting my *commendable* ability to overcome,
he draws his notepad from his crisp coat-pocket.

Side effects may include:
insomnia, drowsiness, dizziness, diarrhea,

heart palpitations, and decreased appetite.

(He remarks people don't tend to mind that last one though.)

Realities accepted with such ease,
contextualizing this state of existence—
releasing a stutter, my slanted syntax;
hands trembling like tectonic plates

I remind myself:
I am just flesh, I am just bones
at a dinner table full of strangers.

And who am I beyond my existence?
These realities I swallow away,
furthering myself from me—

I imagine a table—
full of my varying forms
hallucinations of identities,
I have been assigned.
The seat reserved for me
is empty, *eager* to be filled.
Holding off their grand dinner—
the guest of honor never arrives.

影

我，被昨日的狂风吹到大道，
孤寂的蜉蝣；脊背同树被烤至金黄，
稀碎的风拂拂荡荡。
走在正午的街旁，
散落的房子瓦红砖黄；
但，白色的枯树拼凑出寻你的方向，
如汪洋中的小岛，行色茫茫。
无论九月海里翻滚的白浪，
或冬月凝结在窗影的寒霜，
像初春的小草，期盼你的光芒。
春夜秋晨更替忙忙，
同梧桐银杏，打扮成你的模样。
或春日漫漫 或冬夜更长，
伴随金色的光，我各型各样。

Golden Boy & Sister

Some days you wish you were a boy, a boy with nothing to do and a boy who will always be a boy. A boy with dirt-smudged forearms from making forts in the backyard all Sunday afternoon. A boy with eyebrows that shoot up whenever he tells a story and a boy with strips of orange slices stuck between his braces, who lets the juice run down his chin with a real, whole, I-am-very-much-loved laugh. A boy who is red, from flushed cheeks and bicycle bruises and the shoes you begged Dad to buy for your birthday even though Mom said no, so you had to wait until Christmas instead. You'll still chalk it up as a victory anyway because that's what a boy like you would do.

Yet, you are his sister. You are his sister and will always be with a breath, a word, a moment stolen from her. Sixteen years of moments, stolen. You can only imagine what they say behind your back, a boy's sister and she is jeans that never fit and a fist in her mouth, she is ink that numbs the rib and the shitty complex on the other side of town that she shares with three other roommates, two of whom are heroin addicts, I heard it from Janice! She is a boy's sister and she is untouchable, in the way *untouchable* permeates, sickens, lingers... the way *untouchable* means dolls and tutus and beads and your Easy-Bake somewhere in a forgotten Costco storage bin. In the way it means they got a new home phone and traded the Audi for a real van. In the way it means your name is always met with a smile: polite, wavering, forgotten.

How do you tell such a boy he ruined your life, that he is a second-chance circumstance, that he is supposed to make up for everything you could never amount to? They invited you to his sixth birthday bash last week. You never had one. Suppose you do go. Suppose you go and then what. You, his sister, who stands in the corner, under a shelf of trophies. Your arms folded, in your bony hand the paper plate with what's left of an ice cream cake slice. Blue frosting on your fingertips, six candles blown out, and smoke that will never leave your nose.

An Early Departure

in your arms night
a serene chiffon
 like a baby
 my fears
love
slipping
 into the dream of tenderness

silvery ringing breaks
 arms
 head
 shoulders
you'll be out for a minute

eyes closed sleepiness is
softness and treacle
 pancake like
 fluffy
consciousness
 like butterflies
 adrift stray
lost
 a flowery maze
asleep...

blurry vision
 a drunk jumping
line
 lucidum and tipsiness
are you asleep, honey
 mouth closed on silence

again
 silvery ringing
night droops
sunrise hidden
 under the horizon
out with serenity
departure
heavy baggage
see you
 this winter

Circles

I've earned, we lose. No escape. I've cried and circled my bed. I told you life is a circle. I crawled for truth and blood, but no one will believe me. If I earn, we lose. No escape. I've cried and circled my bed. I told you life is a circle. I crawled for truth and blood, but no one will believe me.

See, it is blank! A licked yogurt cover, your eye ball belongs to me. Half my circle is coked.

One man passed. Two men, three men. Till one day, he ate one tenth of my circle. An eclipse over my heart, I have your round mirror, and my bubble breaking.

I'm an arrow dashing down to hell.

There are ups. A trope of snow ball. And it falls. An onion head, a mercury bead.

Finding Ling

Excerpted from *Laughs the Last*

INT. LI'S HOUSE - DINING ROOM - EVENING

A small, nice and neat dining room of a Chinese family in the 90s. The light is on, the round table is made, the dishes are served fresh and hot. No one is at the table yet.

YUAN (45) stands outside her daughter Ling's room. She whispers to the door:

YUAN

At least come out for dinner first.
We have peas today, it's your favorite...

Silence. Yuan sighs and enters the dining room. She rubs her hands together and calls aloud:

YUAN (CONT'D)

Li, Ling! Dinner's ready!

A pause. No one answers, then the sound of a chair moving. Through Yuan's perspective,

we see the door of the study opens.

LI (47), in glasses and a white vest, looking older than his age, slowly walks out. He looks around the dining room and frowns, seeing Ling's empty seat.

Yuan watches him nervously as he walks to his chair and sits down. She sits down after him.

YUAN (CONT'D)

Ling seems to be busy with some schoolwork.

Li checks the dishes on the table and pauses.

LI

Pea soup?

YUAN

The peas are really fresh. I ran into this seller in the market today, she...

LI

(picks food from another dish)
Schoolwork? Hasn't she graduated?

YUAN

Well, there're still some formalities left. You have some of those at work as well, don't you?

LI

Which I don't take home.

The sound of the door opening. LING(21) walks out of her room with her head down. Yuan looks up quickly and smiles.

YUAN

Come on, Ling, you must be hungry.

Ling walks slowly to the table. Yuan helps to move her chair and picks food for her.

Li frowns at Ling when Ling sits down.

LING

Mom.

(pauses)

Father.

YUAN

(serving soup for her)

Your father and I were just talking about your school -

LI

Enough talk about work and school. Ling needs to work on her table manners, and I hope she can do better than this on Friday.

YUAN

It's okay to relax a bit at home...

LI

She's old enough to start a family.
(staring at Ling)

And is this your house, Ling? Do you think you have the right to arrive later than your elders?

Ling stares back at her father.

YUAN

(cutting in)

Ling is sorry, right, Ling?

Ling, say sorry to your father.

(to Li)

Besides, I finished cooking a bit earlier than usual today.

LI

She should be sorry for herself.

LING

I'm not sorry for anyone except -

YUAN

We're a family, there is no need to be sorry to family members! Here, let's enjoy the food before it becomes cold -

Yuan tries to put more food onto Ling's plate.

LING

Stop picking food for me, mum, I'm not a child anymore.

LI

You're acting like a child.

YUAN

Stop talking so much already, and eat -

LING

But I'm old enough to be sold?

LI

What did you just say?

YUAN

Ling! Don't talk to your father like that, he's trying to help you.

LING

By marrying me to a STRANGER.

YUAN

It's just a meeting!

(to Ling)

You're just meeting each other, nothing is settled yet. You know, make some friends, see if you two could get along. Mr. Wang's son is a nice young man -

LI

Can you be more unreasonable?

LING

I told you I don't want to make any friends, especially with the sons of YOUR friends. I have my own friends, and I can decide -

LI

What kind of friends do you have?
Dropouts? "Artists"?

LING

Better than your "ministers" and "directors".

YUAN

Ling? You told me you've broken up -

Li puts down his chopsticks hard on the table, spilling the soup. Yuan reaches to clean it; Li slaps her hands away.

YUAN (CONT'D)

Li -

LING

Are these the table manners you're trying to teach me?

YUAN

Ling!

Li pushes the bowl, now the soup is all over the table. Ling stares at him with a challenging look. Li stands up and pushes Yuan aside, though he is too furious to notice.

YUAN (CON'D)

(tries to stop Li)

Li! Calm down -

LING

How dare you push her?

LI

How dare you talk to me like that?

YUAN

(cries out)

What's WRONG with BOTH of you?

Yuan's outburst finally gets the other two's attention. She points to the dinner table.

YUAN (CONT'D)

I have worked so hard to cook such DELICIOUS food, and this is how you repay me?

LING

I -

YUAN

(to Ling)

You, who gave you the nerve to treat your parents like this? Do you want me to suffer?

LI

He started it -

YUAN

(to Li)

And you, are you acting like an adult at the dinner table?

LI

I don't think your child's upbringing is less important than eating.

YUAN

Isn't she your child as well?

LI

I'd rather not have such an ungrateful -

LING

Did I choose to be born into -

CRASH! Yuan takes Li's empty bowl and throws it on the ground. Li and Ling freeze and stare at the pieces, then at Yuan.

Yuan does not look at the bowl at all. She sits back down with a calm smile like nothing happened.

YUAN

Calm down, no need to be so tense. Let's just all enjoy dinner.

(a beat)

Why don't you two take a seat?

Silence. Li and Ling sit down slowly under her gaze.

YUAN (CONT'D)

Thank you.

诗人与牧牛

冬夜的窗栏，白色的窗花
游荡的诗人倚在桌旁。
环绕屋子的灯光，
点燃那片片冰霜；

我生怕她们转瞬消失，
尝试用手堵住热烈的光；
我看到她们在我手中融化，
滴答作响，留下空荡的窗。

思绪寄宿在风中漫步，
那耕田几亩，草房琳琳遍布。
诗人与牧牛，
随悠悠斜阳，被荒芜麻木。

同此起彼伏的云，
徒步走进后海的院子；
碎屑流流，你我蓬蓬，
浮游在回响的鸣钟。

Sestina

And my eyes, silver,
And your fingers, thyme
On a rippled lace string.
This morning I bought sedge
Seeds, and now they bloom –
The world is a cruel system.

A beautiful system
And my eyes, silver
Seeds, and they bloom,
And your fingers, thyme,
Brushing sedge
Tips through the string.

Lace on a string:
The world is a perfect system.
I grow sedge
And you make silver,
With your fingers and thyme
Everything will bloom –

Then make me bloom;
String
Me up, for thyme
Is a worldly system,
And my eyes, silver
With the heavenly shimmer on the sedge;

And the sedge
Seeds I bought this morning are in bloom,
And its leaves are silver –
It seems a fine string
Pulls its way through every system.
And your fingers move thyme

And you say thyme
Is slipping between your fingers and the sedge
Seeds have entered your system
And they bloom,
On each of its curved leaves a string
Of soft silver.

And your fingers, thyme, they make everything bloom.
You may take my string, but do leave me my sedge;
We can be heavenly systems, and our eyes all silver.



Broken (excerpts)

III. “我觉得戴眼镜的中国女孩是最美丽的”

Why do you need a makeover again? I like your everyday makeup look. Her text came, making Elena's heart sing.

To make myself look tougher, older, cooler, so I don't look like an easy tourist target.

You do look too nice. Your eyes cannot hide a smile.

Elena's almond eyes curled into two crescent moons.

I bet you're smiling right now.

Elena started tapping her fingers to the frequency of the flashing cursor. She wishes Sherry wrote more than a casual, teasing note. She understood that she couldn't see Sherry as frequently as she used to. They didn't have a class together anymore and Sherry moved to a studio in Long Island City. Without a doubt, the physical distance between them kept growing, but Elena didn't understand why she needed to clasp her hands and wish upon a star just to get a text from Sherry. Elena did her praying anyway. Sherry wasn't her only friend. She wasn't even Elena's best friend, if Elena stopped lying to herself. However, after Sherry poured her darkest thoughts and past into Elena, Elena felt somehow responsible for Sherry's wellbeing. Elena stopped switching on airplane mode at night and kept her phone next to her pillow in case Sherry texted; she bombarded Sherry with funny memes daily; she reminded Sherry to exercise and see her psychologist regularly. It was tiring to feel Sherry's pain as her own but Elena thought she could handle it, because she had lived

through the same pains. It was also comforting to realize both of them had each other to lick their wounds. “I’ve never told this to anyone else,” Sherry always said to her, and Elena couldn’t help feeling special.

After a short agonizing cycle of typing and deleting, Elena decided to expose her own scar to keep Sherry texting with her a bit longer, to make Sherry care more about Elena’s Amsterdam trip.

*Have I told you what happened when I traveled in London?
A man followed me to my hotel.*

Wtf????

It worked! She cared! Elena started tapping her fingers faster to match her rising heartbeat. The words were hard to find. She attempted to send a voice text, instead. “I was going back to London from Scotland by train. I was at the London King’s Cross alone. You know my giant violet suitcase? It... It must have been the suitcase...” Elena’s voice started shaking. She tried texting again.

I was at the bus stop. Then a tall middle-aged white man arrived at the bus stop after me. I recognized his neon yellow suitcase from the train. But I figured it’s not that surprising to meet a fellow traveler at the bus stop. We both got on the same bus. I got more vigilant. Luckily, the bus was very crowded and he disappeared among the passengers. When it was my stop, that neon yellow suitcase popped up again! I ran off the bus. He got off the bus too. Only two of us got off. And I don’t know that area of London that well. It’s far away from the city center so the neighborhood is quiet. But I waited till he walked away first and then walked in the opposite direction, the long way to my hotel.

????! I would’ve freaked out. But I would never travel to England alone tho.

“And the creepier part is yet to come!” Elena exclaimed. She was calmer after writing a paragraph. She switched to a voice message to express her terror.

“I saw that damn neon yellow suitcase again when I made my final turn. It was very close to the hotel. There was no way I could avoid him. And he walked so slowly like he was waiting for me. Finally, our eyes met and he looked so happy to see me. He asked me if I was going to the hotel. I freaked out,

but I didn't know what to do. I said yes. He said, 'You're from China, right?' I said I go to school in New York City. He said, 'But you're Chinese, right?' I had to nod my head. You know I don't like lying. 'You speak Chinese, right?' He kept asking me. 'I visited China before. It was so lovely to meet you. I know a little bit of Chinese. We can practice together.' So I was determined to not say one single Chinese word to him." Elena paused and sent off the first part of her voice message.

"Then he fucking said, 'I think girls who wear glasses are the most beautiful in the world.' Her voice almost cracked..

In Chinese?! And you were wearing glasses, right?

IN CHINESE. I WAS. And he said in English that Chinese girls are very friendly and beautiful. Eastern beauty is very unique. He wanted to add me on WeChat. I said my phone is dying. He offered me a power bank. I was scared to reject him. His profile picture was taken with an Asian woman. He offered to buy me dinner. He kept inviting me to the bar. When we arrived at the hotel, the staff said the hotel didn't have his booking info. That was fucking scary. I still waited to let him check in first because I couldn't let him know my room number. I lied to him that I was leaving London the next morning when I'd booked three nights at that hotel. It's a 4-star hotel! I did my research. But it was...

What then? Did he harass you?

"No, but he did try to call my name on each floor. That hotel only has three levels. He bombarded me with invitations on WeChat. But that's it. I was scared to leave my room for the next three days. And that summer was when that Chinese female student, Zhang Yingying, got murdered by a TA at University of Illinois. He'd been rejected by Zhang Yingying. And you know, there were news articles saying that there is a thing called Asian Fetish. And that man was so fixated on my Chineseness." Elena's voice got mellower and mellower.

Sherry sends her a meme: a white baby husky patting another grey baby husky. Elena wonders if patting means caring in dog body language.

All that is in the past now. Good luck with the makeup shopping in Sephora :)

IV. Day One (by HONNE)

In her temporary Clink home, Elena organizes her roommate's Korean brand skincare and makeup that splatter all over the bathroom counter. Elena's crappy Korean is good enough to help her categorize these products by their functions: 마스크 (ma-seu-keu), 크림 (keu-lim), 세안제 (seanje). Many words either sound like Mandarin or English. *My roommate must have been too tired to clean up when she arrived. She had a long flight if she was flying from Seoul.* Now she just needs to make every red notification dot on her phone disappear before officially starting her Amsterdam adventure. Mahjong table, hot pot, yoga, beach... Elena taps through the Instagram stories impatiently. Watching her acquaintances' highlight compilations never does her insecurities any good, but after spending numerous nights at Sherry's dorm, Elena has picked up a few of her compulsive habits.

See you in the red-light district. @goldensherry @lxlylxn

Elena pauses on Alex's Instagram story and rereads her captions in shock. It is a selfie of Alex and Lily on a plane. Lily is sitting next to the aisle and Alex is sitting in the middle. The angle doesn't offer a clear look of the girl sitting next to the window, but, of course, she recognizes her. It's Sherry. Sherry hates taking selfies.

Red-light district? Are they visiting Amsterdam? Elena collapses against her hostel door. Seriously? Sherry didn't even bother to tell me that she's coming to Amsterdam? And Lily's with her? I know they're all taking the same class at NYU Berlin. She hates Lily. She once got upset at me because I commented on Lily's posts. There'd better be another red-light district that I don't know about in Europe. There has to be! It's Europe. It's...

The world begins to spin. Sitting on the cold hard floor, Elena finds the temperature of her tears a bit too familiar. The stream of salty water crawls down her cheeks, droplet by droplet, tickling each inch of skin it touches. Elena stares into the river through the shutters. It flows calmly as nothing happens. Nothing happens, except Elena's rose-colored glasses on her relationship with Sherry finally breaks. *Sherry is intentionally not talking to me. I'm not being over-sensitive. But why? Why is she throwing our relationship away?*

Elena tries to ask herself what her therapist would say, but that game just throws her into a trance— she doesn't know. She cannot find a single word to comfort herself. She doesn't have the guts to confront Sherry on the phone. Her excuse is that it is a much wiser choice to talk to Sherry face to face. The truth is she doesn't want to act like a crazy ex-girlfriend. Elena stands up wobbly and escapes this room that has been contaminated by her despair.

At least she is in a completely foreign city with limitless distractions. She takes the Amsterdam Metro to Museumplein Square. Museums have always been Elena's safe havens: they are guarded, secure, and full of art. With over 60 museums, Amsterdam has the highest museum density in the world, which is why Elena chose Amsterdam as her destination in the first place. Museumplein Square has some large green grass areas, a pond, and other recreational options such as a skateboard ramp. It would be a perfect picnic spot if the sky wasn't overcast with miles of dark clouds. At least the Van Gogh Museum is an indoor establishment. Elena runs to the circular half-glass, half-concrete building, trying to get her dopamine pumping. She should have realized the irony in finding happiness in the works of a hallucinated man who cut off his ears. More than a century after his suicide, Van Gogh has received incomparable fame as an artist, which leads to Van Gogh Museum's strict reservation policy. Elena cannot get in without an online reservation. When she tries to book one, the earliest slot is tomorrow.

That's it. No more museums, no more trying. I should just let loose today. Maybe start with adding some sugar to my life. Yes, sugar, and not in the metaphorical sense. Elena's first day in Amsterdam becomes dessert shopping around Amsterdam Centraal. Her spiking blood glucose levels turn her treats into punishments. From the dulce de leche waffles to the vegan snicker bars, Elena eats her way along the endless crooked houses lined along the canals. With Amsterdam Centraal as the center, 165 fluid channels ripple around the Grachtengordel, also known as the Canal Ring, in English. This 17th-century Dutch Golden Age inner-city loses its charm under the gloomy weather. The drizzle knits a thin layer of dancing chiffon over everything in sight.

It's May. Busloads of tourists haven't yet taken over the streets. Elena walks in the shower indifferently, like a true New Yorker. Although she always opens her umbrella in New York City, rainwater in Amsterdam feels cleaner. The rain lands on her Burberry trench coat directly without dripping down any construction scaffoldings. But it isn't clean enough to not contaminate the classic Dutch sweet in Elena's hand. She quickly stuffs the last bit of stroopwafel into her mouth. Lime green gothic letters crawl on the white wrapping paper. As Elena folds the wrapping paper into a small square, a mauve pink stain on the packaging confuses her. A stroopwafel consists of two layers of thin crunchy wafers and a sticky honey filling. Elena licks the crumbs on her lips and checks for any peachy flavors. Sherry's pink lips taste like summer peaches. Elena's tongue reaches something sticky and minty—the lip gloss! She gasps and touches her temple to see if her eyeliner has been washed away by the drizzle. Her fingertips are clean and red like baby carrots in the freezing wind. Pacing becomes jogging; jogging becomes running; running becomes sprinting to the dock. A guy out of nowhere cycles next to her at a lightning speed, leaving an out of breath Elena far behind.

The 24/7 blue-and-white ferries offer free connections across River IJ. Pedestrians, cyclists, mopeds, and pets can all enter the ferry at ease and the schedules are so frequent that Elena actually doesn't need to run to catch her ferry to Buiksloterweg. She boards safely and hides in the warm cabin. The boat is crowded, European-style. People aren't packed in like sardines. Their bikes take up the majority of the space, many of which are cargo bikes with decent-sized carts in front. Each cart can fit at least two three-year-olds in it. An Amsterdam native uses it for groceries and flowers. Elena looks around. She usually puts on an I-am-not-interested expression and pretends to be a local on public transit. However, as the only non-white passenger on the ferry, Elena doesn't think she can fool anyone. Like a reckless kid, she even turns around to check the rest of the boat. She sees the guy who rode his bike past her earlier on the other side of the cabin, staring at the river. Following his lead, Elena looks outside at the river, too. But before she can take a closer look at the rippling water, the rippling stops. The ferry has arrived.

“As you see the sights from the bridge, the sightseers up in the tower see you.” This Chinese poem runs through Elena’s mind frequently while she travels, especially when she is staring at scenery. Of course, she hopes someone is enjoying the scenery of her from afar, though she wouldn’t know how to react to that someone.

Bike bells chirp as the cyclists swiftly hop on their bikes and ride away. Elena hates being the slower one in a crowd, but she decides to dawdle now. Her plan for the rest of the day isn’t exciting. She’ll probably lock herself in her room and skip dinner. *You deserve to starve yourself. You know you consumed too much refined sugar today.* Elena wasn’t even aware that she’s had bulimia since middle school until she sought professional help at the wellness center as a college freshman. It isn’t a healthy choice but she knows she’ll go through it anyway. Like mildew grown in the corner of a southern Chinese home, her bulimia can never be nipped once and for all but instead always sneaks back in the plum-rain season. *You will be fine. You won’t starve yourself for too long. Just a day.*

A city built on water, Amsterdam surprisingly doesn’t have the stuffy dampness that cages people’s spirits. The after-rain air smells clean and fresh with a wooden undertone from the London planes and elms. The street is empty. However, Elena still feels an invisible weight in her chest and she cannot blame it on the weather or the crowd like she used to in Manhattan. Elena slows down to wipe the droplets on her glasses with her white silk blouse. The world gets a little bit blurry. Losing clear sight habitually raises Elena’s guard.

A hissing from bicycle chains approaches.

Elena puts on her glasses in a rush and looks for the source of hissing. She hastily turns back before her eyes can meet his. It’s that guy who passed her before boarding the ferry. He’s walking with his jet-black bike about twenty yards behind. Elena quickens her pace but almost trips over the bumpy sidewalk. *Damn it, now he sees how clumsy I am. I can’t run, can I? That would be too weird... and offensive if that guy just happens to be heading in the same direction as me. But why walk instead of riding his bike?*

Elena doesn’t need another creepy encounter. She already

has one, and she's shared it with Sherry. Having another one would just make her the boy who cried wolf. *But Sherry won't even suspect that I'm a boy who cried wolf, will she? She won't care about me enough to text sentences when she can smooth everything over with a gif. She will pretend everything is fine. Everything between us is fine, except she's stopped talking to me and ignores most of my texts after meeting her new best friend.* Her tear glands are tempted to produce excess fluid.

"Hey! Almost didn't recognize you with the makeup."

The clumpy mascara stays on Elena's widened eyes like butterflies. She almost forgot that a 6'2" stranger is following her. She was too caught up in her mind, ruminating on her past with Sherry, to be scared of the potential danger in front of her.

"Are you going back to Clink?"

The guy is smiling, bright like a ray of sunshine. *Does a smile make it ok to follow me?* Elena slowly sinks back into reality, realizing an exotic Caucasian face has blocked a piece of sky above her. Fear and residual anger over Sherry stir up the temperature of her blood. Her shoulders spasm slightly and her lips open involuntarily to get more air.

"Are you ok?" he softens his voice and asks tentatively.

Why is he still talking! Elena opens her mouth bigger but no words come out. She clenches her right hand into a fist and lightly pats her chest as if she is choking on her own heart. Her chest rises and falls more violently beneath her semi-translucent blouse. The guy is getting uneasy and nervous, but Elena doesn't have the mental capacity to worry about him right now.

"I'm..." she finally speaks but fails to finish.

Who the hell do you think you are? Pretending to worry about me after following me?

"I'm jet-lagged." Elena tries again and lets out a reluctant answer like a long sigh.

She has learned to not speak her mind. If the guy gets enraged, she will be facing a fight she cannot win. The idea of a physical attack raises her heartbeat more.

It's ok. It's ok, El. Look around, tell me what you see.

It's a trick that her therapist has taught her—grounding oneself in concrete visual details during an anxiety attack. Elena loosens her fist and grabs the golden bee brooch on her chest.

Cold and shiny. She gently strokes through every engraving on it to calm herself down.

I see dark brown curly hair, angular jawline, Roman sculpture nose, bushy eyebrows... eyes. For god's sake, I cannot even find the words for the color of his eyes!

“Ah, I understand. I’m Finn. Where are you traveling from?” Finn raises his eyebrows while Elena twists hers.

Why is he still asking questions! She avoids his eyes and lands her glance on his hand.

I see a black smiley face on the guy's thumb nail.

“I like your bee brooch.” Finn strikes again.

Elena looks up at Finn’s eyes again. His pupils look so black against his lighter-colored eyes.

“You’re the receptionist at Clink!” she exclaims in relief. Her trembling black nails slowly stop tapping on the brooch.

Now it is Finn’s turn to freeze and panic. He takes one hand off his bike handle and scratches his head. The other hand starts playing with the bell but stops after one ring. The grating bell rings aren’t relaxing sounds.

“Yeah, yeah. I work there. I’m so sorry! I should’ve started with a self-introduction. God, I must have scared you. A big white man follows you to your hostel and asks you all these questions. So stupid of me. I am so sorry.” Finn is fluent in English, but he has a habit of pronouncing the “a” in “man” as “ah”, which happens to be Elena’s favorite vowel sound.

“It’s ok, man.” Elena chuckles and pronounces the “a” the way Finn does it. She pauses and says, “I’m El.”

Elena isn’t sure how hiding her real name from Finn contributes to her safety. She is sure that her gleaming eyes curled into crescent moons have failed her in pretending to be an ice-cold traveler. Still, she wants to try something else, something shorter and simpler. She is tired of being called by a three-syllable name.

Finn is relieved. “I thought you’d remember me. There weren’t many people at the receptionist this morning.”

Elena is embarrassed. She did stare at him for a few minutes, just not at his face.

“Yeah, I know. I noticed your nail art.” Her heart is still racing like a running deer, fortunately not because of mental

distress anymore. Sometimes, Elena forgets that she loves getting to know new people because she doesn't let too many people into her life. The more you let in, the more that could walk right out. This encounter with Finn should be easier. After all, the minute they knew each other, they knew they were saying goodbye in a few days. Not wasting one more second on the awkward silence again, they talk and talk and talk. The three-minute walk from Buiksloterweg dock to Clink Hostel stretches to eternity in the dense after-rain mist.

V. On the Wall of MoMa

It won't rain for the rest of the night. In fact, it will be sunny for the entire week in Amsterdam.

Finn asks about Elena's college life in New York City. It's the boring part of the conversation; but unfortunately, it is the necessary digging one has to do before getting to the exciting treasure in a person. "Just lots of reading and writing during weeknights. Brunch dates and movie nights on the weekends. A few museum trips here and there." Many of them with Sherry. Even though Sherry had no interest in food, movies, or art history, she liked seeing Elena getting all pumped up for an impressionist oil painting on the wall of MoMa. That was what Sherry said, but Elena isn't even confident in her memories anymore. If what they had was true, how could Sherry move on with a new friend so easily? She doesn't need to answer that question now. She is with Finn now.

Elena asks Finn how he became a youth hostel receptionist. He got his masters in Urban Planning at the University of Amsterdam last summer. Living in Amsterdam for all his life, he wants to visit South America. It is the furthest place he can think of from Amsterdam. So he is trying to save some money and gain some traveling tips.

Then their conversation becomes the classic recommendation inquiry between a local and a tourist. Finn seizes the chance to make up for his inconsiderate greeting and invites Elena for some snacks and drinks at a vegan bar nearby. Elena didn't even say yes to Sherry when she asked her out for a drink. Neither of them was 21. *Maybe I should start saying yes now?* She

nods at Finn.

Finn tries to help Elena find a bike to rent at the youth hostel, but Amsterdam's bikes are all too tall for her. So Elena sits on the back of Finn's bike and watches the passing world blur like *Starry Night*, the only Van Gogh painting she has seen in person, in New York.

Wow, I'm letting a man I just met take me to a bar. Sherry would be thrilled to go to a bar. She liked drinking. Sherry had tried smoking cigarettes with her father, but nicotine didn't help with her anxiety. Standing in silence with a tall strong man she barely knew didn't help either. Vaping was for lame losers who were scared of real cigarettes. Marijuana was for those who weren't scared of stepping into a legal gray area. Only the acidic warm rice wine helped lift her mood. Elena knows Sherry all too well. What was the point? Getting to know someone is like taking an Advanced Math course. Useless. That someone can leave whenever they want. What is she going to do with all this knowledge about Sherry?

Maybe Elena can ask Sherry out to a bar in Amsterdam. It's legal for them to drink here. They can talk. *About what though? What went wrong between us? Are you leaving me for Alex?* Elena could never put either of them in such an awkward situation. If the two of them ever did go to a bar, they would go to a jazz bar. Elena imagines that Sherry would order a bottle of sake and Elena would only take one tiny sip. They would stay quiet to appreciate the music, to avoid talking.

Elena squeezes the handle on her seat tightly so she won't have to lean against Finn's back to keep balance. His army green bomber jacket blocks her view ahead, so she glances up at the back of Finn's neck. A Miffy style cartoon cat tattoo smirks mysteriously. Elena regrets saying yes now.

"You can get off. I'll go park the bike." Finn looks back at Elena with a smile.

Meatless District, white English characters spell out the words on a black awning. The capital M and D are painted on its glass wall facing the street. String lings of different lengths drip down from the ceiling. The interior is warmly lit with candles and orange hued pendant lamps. Various plants and flowers decorate the sleek wooden furniture. The romantic bar seems

like a perfect dating spot. However, it would be worse if the bar seemed shady and unsafe. Elena doesn't have any male friends and hasn't been on many dates. She hopes she isn't stumbling into one now.

Finn comes back from parking and opens the glass door for Elena.

Well, I can't run, can I?

The IKEA clock on the wall strikes seven thirty. Finn and Elena take a seat on the couch in the corner of the bar. And they take off their jackets. Finn orders beer and Elena asks for a ginger kombucha. They also get a snack platter to share.

"What are the color of your eyes?" Elena asks suddenly.

Really? You have to ask him that? Doesn't that question sound too intimate? But she can't take back her words. Elena takes a big gulp of the spicy kombucha and stares at the lemon slice on her glasses to avoid eye contact. She hopes Finn didn't hear her whispering voice.

"Em, Green? Some Americans say they are hazel with gray flecks. Why?"

Why? Because I couldn't name the color of your eyes when I tried to use the trick my therapist taught me. And it is driving me crazy to not figure out the answer. But I don't want you to know that. So why? Elena grabs her brooch again and her fingers start tapping it again.

"People all have dark brown eyes. You know, where I was born."

"Ah, I have never realized that. I cannot imagine growing up among people who all have the same colored hair and eyes as me. That's dystopian. Almost," Finn exclaims, but quickly apologizes. "It came out wrong. I'm sorry. I meant no offense."

Elena resists her urge to burp after drinking too many bubbles too quickly and forces a polite smile. She isn't sure if she finds Finn's comment offensive. It is his truthful, instinctive opinion. Elena never wants to proselytize. She ignores her discomfort and changes the subject. "Do your friends come and go extremely often since you're working at a youth hostel? How do you deal with that?"

"Yeah, I wasn't used to it at first. But no one can really stay in your life forever, no matter what job you take. You just

have to accept that some people are only meant to stay in your life for that long. And it's not necessarily the longer the better. Sometimes I stay in touch, sometimes I don't. Some goodbyes are harder, but I'm always saying hello to new people." Finn shrugs. "And it's not like my entire life revolves around my job."

"Good for you. I can never have someone leave me without feeling broken. I'm still getting over the fact that I lost touch with my elementary school friend. I know it is natural and normal to grow apart with a friend. But it doesn't feel natural. It feels like people are leaving me. And I don't know what I do wrong." Elena pouts.

"That's what bars are for." Finn scoots closer and clinks Elena's glass. He asks, "So what brings you to Amsterdam? Are you... getting over a rough breakup?"

"No!" Elena refutes. *I am not being broken up with!* Elena looks into Finn's hazel eyes in indignation. Then she realizes how close they are sitting together. His hooded eyes, his chapped lips, his sculpted cheekbones are so close. The black pupils look so obtrusive against his grayish green irises, like two black holes that could suck her in. She can spot the dust speckles on Finn's brown feathery lashes.

Elena freaks out and hastily adds, "My girlfriend is studying in Berlin this summer."

Finn leans back on the couch. He fails to hide his surprise. His eyebrows raise and create several lines on his forehead. Elena is shocked too. Does she consider Sherry as her girlfriend deep down? She convinces herself that she was simply making sure that Finn wouldn't get the wrong idea of their "date night." There is a high chance that the idea of getting physically intimate with Elena never crossed Finn's mind. Elena knows that, but it's better to be safe than sorry. She wishes lying about her romantic relationship was as easy as hiding two syllables of her name. She is such a bad liar.

"Well, we aren't technically girlfriends. We just kissed once. And I think we are on a break now." Elena tells the truth. *Damn it, Elena! You don't even need whisky to loosen your tongue.* Elena glimpsed at Finn. He leans forward, his black sweatshirt touching her white blouse, and asks, "You wanna talk about it?"

Elena feels like there are a thousand butterflies flapping

their wings in her stomach and they can't wait to burst out. She's never told a single soul about her kiss with Sherry, not even her therapist. She already has plenty to work on besides the whole Sherry situation.

It was a night during New York winter. After tossing and turning in bed for hours due to lack of humidity in the air, Elena saw her iPhone suddenly light up. It was Sherry. *What would happen if I kill myself?* She wrote. Elena held her phone tightly against her pounding heart.

Sherry and Elena met in their first-year writing seminar in the fall for the first time. Elena was never shy to admit that Sherry drew her in at first sight, not only because they were the only two Chinese students in that class. Sherry is at least 5' 6" and super skinny, with straight, black hair that almost reaches her waist. She wore a pair of knee-high knit socks, like the ones you see on the high school girls in Japanese anime, and a pair of Marc Jacobs slip-on sneakers that matched her bright fuchsia tote. She was distant and aloof at first, but everyone needs some company, especially so far away from home.

The text shattered Elena. The same question had bothered her for months during her high school senior year, but no one in her life felt safe enough for her to share her biggest concern. She wished she could be everything Sherry needed, everything the younger Elena needed. Elena replied. *People who love you would be sad. I would be sad.* Sherry said that she knew. She told Elena to rest early and promised that she wouldn't hurt herself. Softly, Elena put her phone next to her pillow but she couldn't take her eyes or hands off the screen. The screen light was making her dizzy in the darkness and the ringing in her ears only got worse when Elena forcibly shut her eyes. That frightened suicidal teenage girl inside of Elena kept her awake. That girl had been so scared. She had been so scared of her own thoughts. She had hated herself so much for even having those thoughts. Supportive parents, loving friends, good grades, and a fancy life at a private international high school, she had had them all. Yet she felt so broken. She had wished that someone could hold her. Nothing more. Don't tell her what doesn't kill you makes you stronger. Don't tell her time will heal everything. Don't tell her she needs a new distraction.

Elena got up. She wanted to hold Sherry in her arms. Nothing more. When Elena showed up at Sherry's door at 1 am, neither of them said anything. They cuddled in bed. Skin-to-skin, touching foreheads, Elena slid her foot along Sherry's shin under the pastel pink cotton comforter. Sherry's bed smelled like a rose garden in the spring. Elena finally started drifting off. In a dream-like state, Elena felt Sherry press her soft lips against hers. Like an electric shock, the kiss made every muscle in Elena tense up. Her fingers trembled, despite Sherry holding them tightly. The shock only lasted a second, followed by a warm current running through her body. Hypnotized, Elena kissed her back and gently bit Sherry's lower lip. She tasted like berries. Raspberry, strawberry, cranberry, and blueberry, she tasted like everything Elena enjoyed. Elena wasn't entirely sure if the way she moved her lips counted as kissing. It was her first.

Elena tells Finn everything. "She was my day one. It's like I met a copy of myself that night." She stares at the violet tips of the green succulents on the table while Finn keeps his eyes fixed on her. She continues to explain about Sherry's Berlin summer school, the Instagram story of Sherry with new friends, the upcoming BTS concert... She picks up her speed and spells out as much information as she can before she loses her courage, before the instantaneous magic of confiding in a stranger disappears.

olive

Inspired by Part One of Kenneth Rexroth's "The Signature of All Things"

I.

i remember the smell of olive,
appetizing as ambrosia,
healing the wound of spirit.

i remember the taste of stream,
fragrant as fairy,
warbling the song of silence.

through the rainy days of late autumn,
branches of olive trees entwine,
dancing to the waltz of rain.
the leaves swing between clusters
of dangled pears, and drift along
aisles of unripe figs and pomegranates,
into the streams. bubbles float around
the leaves for a while, and then,
still slowly spinning,
soak into my mustache.

II.

i stretch—
my cheek to the tree,
my teeth to the leaves.
olive branches pat my shoulders,
raindrops tapping the tip of my tongue.
i kiss the watery pearls,
when a sudden burst of wind
swipes the juice of olives off my lips.

I roar!
Owls hover in the air.
Spiders crawl under my chin.
My blood runs beneath
The soil of Tartarus,
The salt of tidal waves
Mixed with the salt of my tears.

i stick out my tongue.
oil drippings burn my throat
as wind sweeps the olive branches
into the clouds.
i watch my blood gush away
like flowing leaves
and coursing streams
held eternally in the
mirage of olive.

说不清

说不清是因为时代的悲哀，还是自己，我被流放。
我的永恒召唤我躺在祭坛上。

我追问肉体每一个行动的意义。
世界模糊着倒退，
我退守孤岛，静待命运枪决。

这个世界是暗的，
我也是忽明忽暗。

我可以吻你的额头吗？
我可以抱着失眠的你吗？
看到你的时候，明暗都只是你轮廓下的光影。

2021年5月18日 01:35

My Escape

And when ye shall receive these things, I would exhort you that ye would ask God, the Eternal Father, in the name of Christ, if these things are not true; and if ye shall ask with a sincere heart, with real intent, having faith in Christ, he will manifest the truth of it unto you, by the power of the Holy Ghost.

(Moro. 10:4)

You must search for the truth in a world where there is only one acceptable outcome. If your answer is “it’s all a lie,” *doubt your doubts* and try again. Pray until you’re sobbing and can’t breathe. Pray until your weariness paints angels before you. Pray until you can’t anymore and invent miracles to avoid the gazes of the others. Pray until you believe.

When you can’t,
Grieve.

Denial

Light floods through the window in angled rays that mingle with the dust and cast giant glowing orange rectangles across the naked walls, decorated only with faint smudges of dirt and the occasional accent of chipped paint, clearly picked at by decades of anxious students. The light catches the rough edges where the paint ends and the drywall begins, intensifying the shadow where the light doesn’t quite reach. It looks completely

black to me, like a void beckoning me to reach inward and touch it, even though I know my fingers will not pass through, even though I know it's just drywall and it's all an illusion.

It's a Wednesday, which means I am halfway through Especially For Youth, the church camp my parents dropped \$600 on for me to attend. It was the type of camp that the other kids returned from with a certain glow that told you they just wouldn't shut up about their Magical Testimony Building Experience. It was the type of camp that the kids from poor Mormon families would dream about. I even heard stories of girls meeting their husbands there.

I sit in the center of the room with my legs crossed and watch the specks of dust dance with my every breath. They sparkle and drift in a way that suggests they are alive. I lean into this mirage.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” I whisper, “I need to know if you are real.”

I sit in silence on the floor, every inch of my body carefully observing for any semblance of a sign. The sunlight catches on the light hairs on my arms. My eyes widen, pupils dilating so that I can catch any message God might have for me. Instead, the light bores into my brain. I feel naked. I squint. Refocus.

I focus on warmth, that feeling of sun soaked deep into the bones, and I feel safe.

This is it, Ruby, I think, *this is the moment you'll believe.* But my heart lurches and I feel shame.

I am ashamed to invent some miraculous story in my mind. It's a vulgar lie amplifying the Church's facade of posters with smiling families from all over the world. Their grins contort every inch of their faces. Sometimes I see a smudge of mascara under the mother's eye or a poorly matched foundation shade leaving an orange smear across the daughter's neck that exposes the hours of preparation it took to fake happiness, but everyone else is convinced. I am a freak destined to not believe the story, condemned to find the sorrow in the perfect, happy people.

My eyes well up with tears and my nose tingles in that pinching way that makes you rub at it ferociously with the back of your hand so as to distract from the coming despair. I only want to believe. How happy I would be if I could cry along

with the girls sharing their testimonies and get butterflies when scrawny, pale looking, repressed, homeschool boys vied for my attention. If only I was one of them.

I turn my attention back to the window, I mean, back to God. *I need to know if you're there.*

The sun had begun to set at this point and the once vibrant orange dimmed.

I looked at the open *Book of Mormon* on my bed. The pages were slightly bent and well worn.

“Dear Heavenly Father,” I whispered, “You need to tell me now because I can’t do this shit anymore.”

It’s funny. I’ve told this story hundreds of times, describing the light and the warm glow, but I’ve never told the truth. The day after, I was crying at Testimony Meeting, describing my story through shaky, manufactured breaths. “I felt like God reached out to me personally,”

I cried at an audience of people who were so proud of me. My best friend at the camp pulled me close and we embraced for a long time. She told me I had finally got the answer I needed. The camp counselor met with me personally the next day and asked if she could hug me. “I am so proud of you,” she said. I repeated the story so many times and received tears and genuine smiles conveying sheer joy that I had finally had my moment. Sometimes I even believed it.

But that night ended differently and my soul knew it was a lie.

The sun set and the room went dark. My heart felt cold yet entirely numb. My limbs were tense. I whispered “fuck you” and fell asleep.

Maybe God heard that.

Anger

Every Sunday, we sat for three hours in the second row in the sea of wooden pews. We faced the pulpit and the organ and a large circular window whose panes looked like orange slices cut across the fruit’s equator. The glass was slightly tinged with blues and greens and the trees behind it let in speckled flecks of

sunlight which faded before reaching the people below. It was meant to let in the morning sun, but the trees were overgrown and ivy clung to the window. They stole the light before it reached any of us.

Springfield's days of beautiful sunrises overlooking the Connecticut River were long gone. Instead, the dreadful sun tore into the once forested hills, now encased in mansions decaying in the chokehold of gentrification. It was a gray city, full of trapped people struggling to make ends meet. We weren't from there, though.

Up the hill, a mile or two away, was Longmeadow. That perfectly manicured bubble of Range Rovers and BMW's, soccer moms and absent fathers. Aside from a small strip mall with a Gap and Talbots, our only claim to fame was the most millionaires in western Massachusetts. People from Longmeadow didn't go to Springfield. We heard stories about bodies washing up in the river, pulled downstream until they crashed near the Longmeadow Yacht Club. If you really had to go to Springfield, you locked your car doors and *never* went alone.

Every Sunday, my mom woke us up early and dragged us into the battered Saturn whose bumper hung precariously, as if attached by a thread. Every Sunday, I dug my heels in the ground and gave my mom hell. While the rest of Longmeadow slept, I furiously ripped Sunday clothing out of my closet, searching for the most intimidating thing I could find. Then I would emerge with a scowl, a fifth grader clad in spiky hand-me-down ankle boots and an oversize Goodwill pleather jacket which reeked of cigarette smoke from the previous owner. I would scream "I *hate* church!" and my mom would haul me into the car. She'd glance at me through the rear-view mirror with tear-filled eyes. Sometimes I told her I knew she didn't love me.

Then we'd make our way to Springfield.

We weren't much different from the people there. We rented the smallest home in Longmeadow and skipped meals to afford the ever increasing rent. We'd only been off the government-funded grocery program for about two years at this point, but my mom still locked the doors as we passed the "Welcome to Springfield" sign.

My mom would park and we'd follow the stream of families

dressed in button-ups and knee-length skirts. They always wore the best they had, colorful assortments of secondhand clothing carefully arranged out of respect to God. I wore black and dark green. My hair was tightly braided or completely loose.

I sat in the second row and glared lasers at the Bishop and the pulpit where he stood. My face remained in a permanent scowl from the time we entered the building until we left. I didn't talk, but when I did, my words were carefully selected to send the message "Get. Me. Out. Of. Here."

I was so small then. My anger was too big for my 4'10" frame. It boiled over and terrified me. One day, in the summer before middle school, I remember going to a Fourth of July party in the middle-of-no-where Massachusetts. It was the type of town so rural that people owned chickens and the thick expanses of trees trapped the humidity and seemed to breed mosquitoes that swarmed in inescapable clouds. In Longmeadow, it was illegal to own chickens and the town sprayed enough pesticides to wipe out even the strongest mosquitos and the most resistant ticks. It took us 45 minutes to drive there. I passed the time watching liquor stores and ice cream shops fly by the window. They became increasingly scarce until all that passed were trees, rocky cliffs, and the occasional hitchhiker.

When the tires of the Saturn finally pulled into the dirt driveway, I peeled my sweaty legs off the seat of the car and trailed after my mom with my arms crossed as she made her way to the backyard where families from church gathered around a big plastic folding table filled with casseroles and dishes with too much mayonnaise. I tried not to notice we were the only family whose dad wasn't there.

My job was to leave the moms alone and play with the other kids on a rusty trampoline next to the chicken coop. It was the type of trampoline that pinched your fingers on the springs when you tried to get on and left you with nasty blood blisters for weeks to come.

I followed the kids around for a while. I don't remember why they didn't play with me.

Eventually I went inside and sat on my mom's lap.

"Pleaseeee can we gooo homee."

She'd brush my request away patiently. The other moms eyed

me as if I had somehow done something evil. I wondered what my mom had told them about me. I wondered if they knew I was an 11-year-old that didn't believe.

On the car ride home, I told my mom the kids at the party didn't play with me.

"I know," she said. "Their moms said they think you are *intimidating*."

I wilted inside. I kept my face stormy and my lips pursed.

Sometimes, I think even my mom was afraid of me.

For a small fifth grader, I sure could slam a door. I was just old enough to know what words would yield the maximum pain.

"I hate you, Mom."

Bargaining

Silence followed the echoes of slammed doors and accusations. With their noise, my anger dulled. Long ago, my mom told me I would have to go to church until I turned 18. I put everything I had into this deal.

I counted the years down. Seven years seems like an eternity when you are eleven. When I think back on the beginning of middle school, I remember my mom crying. I knew she still clung to the hope that one day I'd believe. I knew I could never be the daughter she wanted. I couldn't bear to see my mom cry because of me anymore.

My mom is a sweet lady. She's the type of woman who bakes cookies for the neighbors and birthday cakes for her friends. She brings me along with her for a weekly trivia night at our local geriatric care center. She knows everyone in town and people light up when they see her. My dad jokes that she's the mayor of the Healthtrax gym because when she walks in, everyone knows her name. She even sends handwritten cards when she notices an elderly Healthtrax regular skip a few days. She wears her heart on her sleeve and proudly tells all her non-Mormon friends about her beliefs.

In Mormonism, you are taught that the only way to be truly happy is through the life that the Church prescribes. As a baby, my mom made me little laminated picture books with

photos of kids getting baptized, of missionaries with their converts, of straight newlyweds walking out of the temple. There were even photos of moms and their babies and big happy white families. I never had to ask my mom what she expected of me. It was all laid out from the beginning. In her eyes, she was teaching me the key to be happy.

I can't begin to count the amount of times I've broken her heart.

I was so bad at keeping the promise I made myself to make sure she wouldn't cry. One day before church, I was picking an outfit. I had toned down the leather and studded boots at this point for a more professional look. I still wanted to be intimidating. It was a facade that kept the people at church away from me. But, at the same time, I wanted a look that said "I am confident. I am a strong woman. I'm nothing like the women here." I now understand that it was my own internalized misogyny in me that made me view the women in the Church as weak and encouraged me to resist any hint of femininity.

This particular day, I pulled a pair of black business slacks from the closet. They were a hand-me-down from my mom's best friend. They were a little big, but their masculine fit made me feel powerful. I paired it with a pair of grey flight attendant style stilettos and a tan $\frac{3}{4}$ length sleeve cardigan. I thought I looked strong.

When I clomped down the stairs, stumbling like a newborn deer, my mom looked me up and down and got really quiet. She stood in the kitchen for a while, then came back out. Her eyes were puffy and her chin crinkled and seemed to wobble.

I don't remember what exactly broke the dam holding back her tears, but all of the sudden she was sobbing. I felt guilty. I felt furious. I knew it was the pants that were the issue, but I could not believe she'd be so shallow. I remember shouting "Do you think God cares if I wear pants!?"

She made her way to my door later that day after I had changed into a skirt and sat through three hours of church and half an hour of silence in the passenger seat of the Saturn. She knocked and entered before I could say anything. She sat at the foot of my bed and apologized.

“It’s just, some women wear pants to show their anger at the Church,” she said. “I don’t want people to think that’s the type of message you’re sending.”

I made some snide comments in my head about her being scared women wanted equality. I told her it was okay and that I understood.

I made myself a deal. I would go to church. I wouldn’t complain. Then, the day would come when I would turn 18 and I would never walk in those doors again. I knew that would hurt my mom even more, seven years of false hope shattered in seconds, but I hoped that I could walk away from everything then. She’d cry, but I wouldn’t have to be there to see it.

In a way, I felt evil for this. I just couldn’t handle the weight of her disappointment.

Depression

There’s something numbing about living a lie. The line between what’s real and fake blurs until you don’t know what side you’re on. On the inside I was supposed to be fiery and resistant, critical of every teaching. On the outside I would be compliant, the perfect daughter and future mother, never uttering a word for the girl trapped inside.

That silence was pervasive. It strangled the angsty inner voice and turned me into an empty shell with a friendly facade. But with no source of power to maintain the feigned satisfaction, my mask began to fade until all that was left was a blank stare, that distant gaze that saw nothing, yet everything at the same time and viewed the world like a spirit, floating above.

Sometimes, the feeling of emptiness was magical. It shut off the incoming sensory details and created the type of silence only felt during heavy snowstorms or moments submerged alone in a swimming pool. It isolated yet insulated. It made going to church bearable.

At church, I conducted the music. It started as a favor for my mom, but soon became a weekly occurrence. Conductors are supposed to smile, singing along with the congregation in a

sacred embodiment of the music. I never could. My hand would autonomously drift through the air and I would zone out, staring vaguely at the clock as the seconds dragged by. I never managed a smile.

Sometimes I would watch the people. Sometimes I'd see someone cry and wonder if they felt the spirit or simply lacked a place to express themselves. Sometimes siblings would fight among themselves in the pews and their parents would rip them apart furiously. Sometimes a baby would cry and the mother would sprint out, her face red with embarrassment. People were zoned out or sound asleep. The best was when old men would snore. One time I saw the Bishop pick his nose and wipe it on the cuff of his sleeve.

I floated above them all, sometimes observing them, sometimes floating through the high ceiling until I was amongst the clouds, watching the cars move like insects over the green hills and bald patches of concrete and day jobs. Sometimes birds would fly next to me. I'd reach out to touch them, but they would float through my fingers and I'd realize I had left my body in the pew far below me. That never seemed to bother me.

It only got bad when I realized I couldn't come back. The empty shell I left behind would stay forever like that. She was able to move and go about her middle school life, but she'd sit in math class and watch the numbers pass as if they were a completely foreign system. She'd drag herself out of bed and marvel at how heavy an empty shell can be.

Acceptance

The last day I went to church, I was 16 years old. We were in Utah on vacation. I was with a group of strangers, all the other teenage girls grouped by our age and genitalia. We stood outside the church building. I leaned against the brick wall and watched the scene unfold. Each girl was given a laminated sheet of paper and told to place it on the ground. The labels had words like "Birth," "Baptism," "Temple Marriage," and "Kids" on them. We were instructed to lay them on the ground and follow the path they made.

My heart seemed to crawl into my throat and I felt an unmistakable urge to run as fast as I could and never look back on that scene. My palms were cold and clammy and my pulse raced.

I quickly ran to the bathroom and sat in the Mother's Lounge. It was a quiet room, isolated from the rest of the building, adorned only by a single rocking armchair which enveloped whoever sat in it. I wasn't supposed to be here because I wasn't breastfeeding, let alone a Mother, but I sank into the chair.

I felt something new that day, a kind of confidence that assured me I would never be there again. I would never be the mother in that chair or the churchgoer condemned to believe in the ultimate multi-level marketing scheme. I would never marry some Mormon boy and pump out children to give myself an identity.

It would never be for me.

I would die if I had to pretend this any longer.

So, I refused to go. I remember my mom crying but, honestly, it wasn't as bad as I thought it would be. She saw it coming.

I tried to go quietly so as not to disturb the others, but eventually they noticed I had slipped away. Some requested meetings with me. Some brought gifts, asked why I had gone astray. One girl told me I was her "project."

I received a string of emails from the Bishop. He said he wanted to meet with me. I insisted time and time again that I was not interested.

I had heard the stories from my dad after he left. They interviewed him too. They asked who had offended him enough to make him leave. They assumed he left because he wanted to sin. They twisted his trauma within the Church to fit their narrative that somehow he had messed up. They refused to believe that someone could simply come to the conclusion that it was all a lie.

Ruby,

Thanks for your response -- I appreciate it. I want to respect your wishes. So I promise I will not nag you or make you a "project." If you are really done with the church, I would respectfully request the opportunity to have an exit interview with you. I would like to understand what your experience has been. If I can understand it,

then we can try to make the church experience for others better. Ruby, I know you to be a good person and I don't think your decisions about the church change that in any way. I didn't think you were trying to be rude or disrespectful. But after the number of years that you have been involved with the ward, it would only be courtesy to part ways on a good foot as friends rather than dropping out coldly. I hope that makes some sense. I do get your perspective of not being able to have a no-pressure conversation with the bishop. I hope you can believe me and trust me and my intent. And so I ask you to please reconsider. One meeting. With a parent if you wish -- either parent, or both. I genuinely just wish to listen to you.

*Sincerely,
Bishop Hall*

His words were kind, but I saw a different intent behind them. He wanted to manipulate the details of my experience to fit the narrative that I had somehow fucked up. I wouldn't let my story be twisted in this way. I needed to be the one with control over how it was told.

Eventually, the emails slowed and I stopped opening the letters I got in the mail.

I thought that would be the end of it, but I knew my name was still on the church records, meaning that I would be forever contacted by the members of the Church. I wanted my name gone from their records forever.

I sent this letter to the Church headquarters in Salt Lake City.

11/25/2020

I, Ruby Rich, request that my
name be removed from
church records. I hereby
resign my church membership.

Ruby Rich

A month later, I got a typed email from the Church headquarters. They had removed my name. It was all over.

My whole life, I had waited for the moment when I was done with Mormonism. It had been a magical day I looked forward to, a day that would solve all my problems.

I was so naive.

I grieved the loss of my community and the hope that one day I'd fulfill the dreams my mom had for me.

The grieving process promises a moment of acceptance, where the conflict somehow fades leaving peace and a distant memory of the pain.

I've tried to forget and run away.

But how I was raised will always stay with me. I guess, in a way, that counts as acceptance. I'm not sure if I'm okay with it.

There are moments where the little Mormon girl in me cries out, where I feel deep shame or embarrassment. When I first had sex, the shame ingrained in me from years of Sunday School lessons that slut-shamed and taught young girls their bodies were inherently evil objects resurfaced and I felt broken. When I first tried alcohol I looked in the mirror and questioned what I had become. I struggled to act relaxed around my friends as they passed around a blunt and, when I finally joined them, I could see my mother's disapproving face clearly, her eyes welling up with tears.

My mom still cries because of me. But, it's not as often now. I live on the other end of the world. She receives a curated version of my life, specifically designed to not bring her any pain. Sometimes I am angry that I can't tell her more. Sometimes I feel numb to the distance between us. Sometimes I pretend it's all okay.

I think, in a way, the promise of acceptance in the grieving process is a lie. I've grown apart from the pain, of course, but I still feel its grasp on me. It's made me who I am today. Without it, I don't know who I'd be.

Four Bilingual Poems

历史老师说...

历史老师说
卢梭的棺材
是研究卢梭的一手史料

卢梭的棺材
当然包括卢梭
和他神色深邃的骨头

人们托着卢梭的骨头
如同托着一个硕大而高贵的橘子
所遗留下的蝉蜕

*

My history teacher once said...

My history teacher once said
that Rousseau's coffin
is the first-hand historical material
for the study of Rousseau.

Rousseau's coffin
including, of course, Rousseau
and his grave-looking bones
deep, profound and subtle.

People holding Rousseau's bones
like holding a cicada slough
left behind by an orange
that drew a large and noble circle.

近义词，或断章

A Synonym, or Broken Chapters

永恒亦如落叶这个词汇
一样空白
干干净净 爽利

“Eternity” is also a synonym of
“Fallen Leaves”.
For they are as blank,
as clean and crisp
as each other.

人们时常不明白
乘兴而至乘兴而归的道理

People often don't realize the rationale for
traveling at one's leisure on a high note.

我觉着好久好久未见着月亮了
它睡在谁家的墙脚下？

I feel that I haven't seen the moon for a long, long time
Under whose wall is it sleeping?

苦役

开始乱穿衣服
并且互相嫌弃
我们分享的可能是一个白昼
但绝对不会睡在同一个夜晚

*

Hard Labors

Begin to dress indiscriminately
and dislike each other
We may share the same daylight
but never sleep in the same night

我本来是一个诗人

我本来是一个诗人
直到 我不打算再写你了

你的名字在雪地里闪闪发亮
如同吟游歌者一样地离开

像去荒芜的冬天收获太阳
这叫世外桃源 地老天荒

或者是一支清远的笛子
放牧白色的一群诗歌

田野从来不属于我们
如果我是诗人我就永远不是它的主人

你，哦，我不能说
也不能想象你说的很好听的语言

从黎明写到午夜 我不再写你
可惜我原本也是一个诗人

*

I Was Originally A Poet

I was originally a poet
until I wasn't going to write about you anymore

Your name glistens in the snowy lands
and left, went away like a minstrel

Like a place where we harvest the sun in a barren winter
an oasis; the end of time

Or like a crystal flute that
grazes a white herd of poetry

The field would never belong to us
If I were still a poet I would never rule

You, oh, I cannot say
Nor can I imagine the beautiful language you speak

Writing from dawn to midnight
I no longer write about you
Regrettably, I too was originally a poet

What It Takes to Sell a Broth

I eat soup every single day, multiple times a day, if I can help it. Whether it's breakfast, lunch, or dinner, I love a soup on the side. At the local diner, everyone greeted me during the lunch break, asking, "Hey gal, what's the soup of the day?" And every day, I rattled it off. More qualified than any waiter or waitress, if you ask me. I'm not a pretentious soup connoisseur, but I have to say this: fuck a bread bowl! The wet, soggy sponge sucking up an immaculate soup into a moist, lumpy clump. Soup has been the most consistent part of my life. For the past 20 years, I've explored the depths of flavor the world has to offer through the simple basis of water, seasoning, and time.

I knew since I was young that my love for soup was building up to something. All through college, I pushed through the grind, knowing that whatever day job I picked up later was just that: a day job. I was destined to sell soups of my own. I mean, come on, when it comes to your soup needs, who would you trust? Some corporate zombie selling soup for a quick buck in a cold stainless steel can, or me, someone who's been a devoted soup lover for the entirety of their life? Corporate zombie, obviously. Is there anything better tasting than the product of cold, hard capitalistic endeavors?

Nah, I don't know who would choose a corporate lackey. So, when I graduated and started working my own corporate job, I divided my paycheck like so: 25% to bills, 25% to investments, 10% to fun, and 40% to soups. My apartment was standard. Bright light spilled into the room in the morning, and you could

see the city center lights in the distance. A bed, a living room, a bathroom, and a kitchen. My kitchen--where the magic happens.

Every day after the 9-to-5 grind, I labored over my pot. I let the bones and seasonings marinate and brew for hours at a time until the flavor was just right for adding vegetables and noodles. Every day I tried different soups and flavor combinations, and each day, I laughed and smiled to myself. Like a crazy person perhaps. But nonetheless, and most importantly, I laughed and smiled to myself like a *happy* crazy person. I was getting closer to the answer I've been searching for my whole life. The answer to how I can bring people a cheap, nutritious, delicious, truly heartwarming soup.

One day, after years of continual effort and research, I had the final product. Looking for investors, I went and put on the best demonstration for them all, full *Shark Tank* style. A little skit, an in-the-moment soup brew, and full-size servings of the delicious final bowl you'll have at the end, all while describing my life-long commitment to soup as a soup lover. The investors were head over heels for the product, and every single one was willing to go all-in! Fantastic! But there was just one change to the product that they wanted me to make before they fully committed. With wide eyes and unsteady hands, I asked them to please reveal their condition. They told me the soup I had made was delicious, but it wasn't hearty enough. Americans love hearty soups. I was amazed at their comment, because as a soup connoisseur, I knew it was the perfect broth. Nonetheless, I asked them: What would they suggest?

"Put your heart into the product."

"Oo, yes! That would be the perfect addition."

"Cutting board, please!"

"Knife. Knife!"

I hesitated. "You want me to put my heart...into the product?"

"Is that such a crazy suggestion? As investors, we are the ones with experience, y'know. The soup market is already saturated, and we are still willing to put out for you. We need to know you're all in."

"All in," I muttered to myself.

A producer came and placed the knife in my hand and the cutting board on my demonstration table. Standing in front of all

of them, looking at their bored expectant faces, I broke out into a nervous sweat.

“Am I really going to do this?”

But all the moments, all the hours that I know added up to days, weeks, months, if not already a year alone. There was no way I was going to be able to give this up. And so, against all the doubts, against all the NO NO NO reverberating in my head, I thrust my hand into my chest and took out my heart, throwing it onto the cutting board. The fat, juicy, bloody thing was still warm and throbbing, and I took the knife, and I chopped.

At first slow

CHOP!

Letting the warm blood squirt out onto my chest

CHOP!

Again

CHOP!

And again

CHOP!

And again.

CHOP!

Until the pace was too much to take, and then I went crazy

CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! CHOP!

going over and over,

CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! CHOP!

until the pieces were cubed bite-size chunks,

CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! CHOP! CHOP!

until they were so minuscule it looked like minced meat.

CHOP!

CHOP!

CHOP!

The blood was all over my clothes, all over my hands, running all over the cutting board, and spilling onto the floor, as I poured what looked like blended chunks into my perfected broth. The broth went from a beautiful milky white to a dark, bloody red. I brought it over to the salivating bunch, and they devoured it in one bite, not savoring it for even a second. With glazed-over eyes and the corner of their mouths still wet with saliva, they shook my hand, saying, “Great doing business with you.”

A few months later, when the product went out to market, it was a huge hit. People loved it for its remarkably hearty flavor. With glazed-over eyes in my suit, I watched the news segment on the product, listening to the public's reviews before it was time for the meeting to start. We were pitching to new investors for our next business endeavor: international expansion.

Standing in the front of the board room, I plastered on my smile and began my pitch:

Soup has been the most consistent part of my life, exploring the depths of flavor the world has to offer through the basis of water, seasoning, and time every day for years. I was destined to sell soups of my own. I mean, come on, when it comes to your soup needs, who would you trust? Some heartless corporate zombie selling soup for a quick buck in a cold stainless steel can, or me, a soup-lover and devoted soup fan for the entirety of their life? Heartless corporate zombie, obviously. Is there anything better tasting than the product of cold, hard capitalistic endeavors?

新英格兰

一家酒店
于人行道之右
酒瓶图标屹立招牌之侧：

就算你识不得此地语言
也知道这是卖酒的

金发店员
于收银台旁
夸张的假笑几乎穿透口罩：

就算你听不懂她的南方口音
也知道她是欢迎你的

你在洋酒行的角落找到了
和你一样
来自东方的
米酒

微笑
问候
博弈的开始：

“我得看看你的护照”
——论电子与物理存在的高低

“本店接受护照复印件寄存,下次你可以带来复印一个,记住其所在页码即可”

于是你成了
记录在案的酒鬼

To Go to Bian Jing

If you want to take a slowly swinging boat
and float down the long canal,
the green ripples soft as silk

forget effectiveness. Forget your desire
for the newest fashions, as you listen to the
rhythmic squeaking of the old wet floorboards
in the wake of muscular sailors foot-heavy
in their flaxen undershirts.

As you glide parallel to a muddy country lane
forget the fallen leaves, how cruel they were
swept by the silent cleaners.

Here there are dark old farmers: faces mixed, like the uneven
roughness of a tree's trunk

squatting under tender sprouting willows, discussing their
plans for planting this spring.

Your wooden boat drifts past the low cottages on the shore

An open window:
a young woman with pink nails
counts the petals of a fresh peony.
A massive green crown of

leaves bends from a thousand-year old tree
in which a child sits, giggling. That's when saliva drips from
his mouth.

Everything is at its ease. When arriving at this tall and thick
city wall,
which stands by a grand brown dike

you sense then, neither glory, nor weapons, nothing but quiet.
The gates open: soldiers in armor
snooze in a nearby melon shop.

Swallows cycle around
many layers of eaves. In the market,
the warm wet spring breeze mixes
with the faint scent of cuisines, making passersby drowsy.

To go to Bian Jing
is to arrive where there's no hurry to finish, a city before the
invention of deadlines where you'd
better block all sense of time

where travel flows stop when a traffic jam happens:
before the queue
in the middle of the road
a barefoot farmer, who carries newly hunted game
encounters a school friend whom he
has not seen in thirty years.

He's an opera tenor,
fresh from a performance,
black and red makeup still on his face. When they converse,
thirty years of separation dwindle to
a single day apart
although whiteness secretly climbs up their hair
and creases quietly creep up their faces.

Others wait and greet each other.
Delivery men put down their loads,
asking nearby vendors for a cup of tea.
There is no rush to destiny.

To dwell in the waves of time,
within a peaceful moment eternally
is to go to Bian Jing.

Run Away

People usually forget their dreams after waking up, or only remember broken pieces. No matter how hard you try to recall it or how clear the dream is in your mind when you open your eyes in the morning, you can't quite grasp it. But I've also heard that many people rarely dream at all.

I dream a lot. Sometimes I remember it clearly, sometimes not.

I had a dream about Santa Claus when I was in the second grade. He showed up through the thick yellow curtains on my bedroom window with a red hat and white beard, the same as in my fairy tale book. He asked me why I didn't make a wish to let him know what I wanted to get on Christmas. He looked ginormous with a very serious expression on his face. I was scared. After I woke up, I wished for a beautiful dress. But I didn't tell my father, who just would have said there was no Santa Claus in China and instead of thinking about a dress, I should work hard to get good grades on my final exams.

Another time, one night in my senior year of high school, I dreamed of Ray. He was going upstairs slowly and I was following behind. In the dim light of the corridor, he wore a black shirt with "ANTI SOCIAL SOCIAL CLUB" on the back, the same shirt I saw on him in the daytime at school. He stopped, turned around, and held my right hand in silence. I watched our ten fingers interlock and felt the warmth of his palm. This was the kind of dream that I didn't want to wake up from. Ray never held my hand when I was awake. I believed I wasn't as pretty or fun

as the other girls around him. I never even talked to him even though his classroom was next door to mine. But I did often follow him on campus. I hoped he would never find out.

Sometimes I have the same dream many times.

I'm in the passenger seat beside my father. He's driving fast on the highway. Glints of light in the distance flash on his face for a moment before casting it again into darkness. He says we killed someone because she tried to escape from us. I feel a strong impulse to burst out crying but I hold it back because my father is there. I don't know where we're heading but the journey goes on and on.

The scene was too mysterious to make any sense, but for a dream, I think it's fine. After all, unlike my real life, my dreams are always wild and weirdly exciting to me.

I don't remember the first time I had that dream. But I remember I had it again on a Friday night after the midterms during my first semester in college. Or was it Saturday morning? I think I came back from the club around 2 am.

The black skirt was too short, especially when I got into the taxi and sat down. I wondered if my father would have allowed me to wear it to go out, or to go out on Friday night at all.

"You're gonna have a lot of fun, Ming. I promise. Listen, girl, you'll never be young again. When you're old, what'll you think about your college life? Trust me, you definitely don't want to remember studying calculus on Friday night. And we've already finished our midterm!"

"Well, I know... You already told me a hundred times..."

"Because that's the truth. Stop pulling your skirt down! Relax!"

My roommate Lydia had tried to persuade me to go out since the first Friday of the semester after learning that I had never been to a club in my 19 years of life. Another shocking fact for her: I had never kissed anyone. But tonight, as I laid on my bed, refusing again with the excuse of having no proper clothes to wear, she found the black skirt hanging in my closet.

"But, still, too short for me." I covered my face with both of

my hands.

“Then why did you buy it, girl?” Lydia raised her voice, “it’s a cute skirt!” She took it off the hanger and threw it on my belly, “Hurry up! We’re late.”

The next thing I knew, we were on the way to a club.

Lydia wanted me to translate for her to ask the driver if we could play music through Bluetooth on his car. But the middle-aged Chinese driver told me didn’t know how to use the Bluetooth on his car. As he spoke, his head slightly turned towards me, the hair on the back of his head rubbing against his white collar. I felt a bit uncomfortable. He should have his hair cut. My father never allowed his hair to look like that. No, he would not allow it.

“It’s a little bit far, isn’t it?” I raised my voice to break the silence, then followed by a deep breath.

“Not really. It will take like 30 minutes to get there,” Lydia double tapped the screen of her phone as she skimmed through glam posts on Instagram, “Wow, Ming! Can’t wait to dance?”

“No... I... I don’t know how to dance. I have never danced in my whole life.” My palms were sweaty.

That was a lie. A long time ago, I did dance.

I took Chinese classical dancing classes when I was a little girl because my father believed that was what a good girl should do. I quit after struggling for a whole year. To this very day, my father still mentions it as an example of my laziness and weak mind. I guessed he didn’t know that I was the fattest girl in the dancing class, what my nickname was, or that my pants had a big hole in the crotch. But he knew I was the worst one because he saw I was the only one whose hands couldn’t reach her feet when he waited for my class to finish with all of my classmates’ parents. “You could have been a good dancer,” my father often said, “if you had made more effort and didn’t give up.”

I glanced back at Lydia. “You said I could just sit there. You promised me before we left our dorms.” I felt my damp palm rubbing my skirt. The air conditioning in the car wasn’t working, or it was turned too low. It was too hot. Maybe the driver thought we felt cold in our short skirts. Looking back, I think he might have been a really nice guy despite being a bit careless with his looks.

“OK. If you don’t want to dance, just don’t. Do whatever you like, I won’t push you. But you’d have much more fun if you’d try. Don’t worry. I’ll take care of you.” Lydia gestured at me through the mirror. I liked her big, beautiful eyes, and the color of her lips tonight.

Damn it, I thought. *I forgot my lipstick*. What should I do? I’d be the only girl with pale lips in a club full of girls looking so good with their red lips.

“Do you have any lipstick with you?”

“No. Relax, Ming. No one sees you clearly in a club.” Lydia responded without looking up from her phone.

Two seconds of silence.

Lydia glimpsed me in the rearview mirror. Then she turned around and looked at me, saying, “You already look so good. You don’t need it. Come on, Ming, you should learn to be confident. Confident!”

“Okay. Thank you.” I forced a smile.

I took a deep breath and looked out of the window. We were driving in Lujiazui now. I saw Pearl Tower and other tall buildings with discontinuous bright lights on each floor. Financial corporations, insurance companies, banks. I was struck by a sense of being trapped in the moment.

My father didn’t want me to take over his business in our small city. He wanted me to work here in Shanghai. Do you know how pathetic your life would be without money? Do you know how many people in the world major in economics, finance and marketing? Do you know why?

Don’t ask me, father. You always know the right answer.

The whole world was devoured by the dark night outside after we entered the tunnel. I liked the tunnel because we could abandon the world, though there was a traffic jam and the artificial lights were blindingly bright inside.

“Are you going to sleep now?” A message from my mom came in: “Your father has been very busy recently. He worked overtime tonight, and already fell asleep. How are you? How was your math exam?”

“Yes, mom, I’m about to sleep. Goodnight.” I texted back. But I decided not to respond anymore tonight and set my phone to vibrate mode.

The traffic stream started to flow forward. A traffic jam would always end as long as the accident was fixed and cleaned away. It took time, but eventually, we moved forward and sped up, in a sense of an ongoing escape.

There were three sturdy men in black suits standing in front of the entrance with cold faces. A tall, slender Chinese girl in a tight black dress worked on something to the side. Her golden eyeshadow glittered as she looked down. She had a heart tattooed on her right shoulder and her lips were red. She was so pretty. I lowered my head and smoothed my skirt, before following Lydia's black heels to get in. Why did the Chinese girl stamp my right wrist? I didn't see anything left on it. But it would be so stupid to ask why. Whatever, I just followed Lydia. I said "thank you" to that girl. The moment I said it I realized it was so stupid because I saw no one did the same.

Lydia met her friends around the bar where many other people stood along.

"Hey, Ming! How are you?" Bran greeted me with open arms. He was Lydia's friend, and we often had breakfast together in our school's cafeteria. I hesitated for a second. I thought I should hug him, or not?

"Have fun tonight!" He tapped my shoulders as I was about to lift my arms. I knew I should have hugged him.

After greeting each other by hugging and kissing the cheek, Lydia and her friends began to order drinks and talked with each other in Spanish. I was right behind Lydia and tried not to look around. But I couldn't get a word in their conversation. The only Spanish I knew, hola, would not get me anywhere. I didn't know what I should do but I knew I had to do something. Otherwise I would look like someone who's never gone to a club before. I began to read all kinds of drinks listed on the black board hanging on the wall. I had never known there were so many strange English words. Wasn't Gin a family name? Martini sounded like a dessert. Well, I forgot those I couldn't pronounce. The sequence of letters were so weird in those words that I couldn't use the pronunciation rules that I learned in my high

school English class to figure out. I could recognize “Beers” and “Coke”. But I didn’t hear anyone ordering something like that. Maybe it was not cool to drink it in the club. Well, what else? There was a pair of red heels hanging on the ceiling.

Wait, where was Lydia?

I looked around but didn’t find her. Where was Lydia? I got into a panic but I was not sure if I should walk around to find her. Though it was a small club. It wouldn’t take a person a long time to walk around the entire room. But it was also too crowded to move.

Suddenly everyone was screaming in the room and the music was getting louder. Right, Lydia told me before the DJ was amazing and he played a lot of Latin music. I felt embarrassed as I didn’t know how to start dancing, legs or arms? How did everyone start? It seemed they just danced as naturally as they laughed and talked. I thought I’d better first stand aside by a table and figure out where Lydia was.

Next minute, Lydia jumped into my sight with a tiny cylindrical glass, shouting excitedly to my ears, “Ming! What are you doing here? Look! Akio was over there! Ming, come to talk to him! It’s Akio!”

Akio was a sophomore in our school. We met each other during a three-day field trip a couple weeks ago. We talked a little during the trip. He was tall, smart and nice. He was Japanese and I always wanted to visit Tokyo. Nothing else happened between us. Until a few days ago when we were having breakfast together, Bran told me and Lydia that Akio asked him about me in their Chinese class. “He asked me if we are friends because he saw us often eating together. He is interested in you, Ming!” After that morning, I found we actually met many times every day at school.

I looked over at the crowd and saw him talking with another guy at the end of the bar. He wore a white sweater, matching his short black hair. I liked his smile. He looked comfortable being here. But I quickly turned my head to Lydia when his eyes contacted mine.

I took a breath and fixed my hair slightly. “What’s that?” I looked at the glass in her hands.

“Tequila. You’ve never tried it before?” Lydia widened her eyes, “Oh, sorry, I forget. Seems there will be so many ‘first time

in your life' tonight." She winked at me, sticking her tongue out and laughed.

"Hey, Ming. Are you ready to drink now?" Bran held a big bottle, squeezing between me and Lydia before she continued our conversation on Akio. Great, Bran. He looked so tall when he was next to me, I had to raise my head up to say, "No, thank you."

"Oh, come on, Ming. We all drink." He poured another glass and handed it to me.

"Look, Ming, just follow me." Lidia licked the skin between her thumb and forefinger before she sprinkled a small pinch of something white on that area.

"Wait, what is that?" I stopped Lydia as she pinched some more and gestured with her chin.

"It's salt."

"Salt? Why do they serve salt in a bar?" I was very confused.

"Shhh, just follow me. Ming." Lydia held the salt between her fingertips and waited for me.

I licked my hand and put it out to Lydia. The salt stuck on my skin as Lydia dropped it.

"Ok, now look." Lydia licked the salt on her hand and took off the slice of lime on the edge of the glass. She quickly drank off a shot of tequila, and then bit the lime before she trembled a little bit with eyes closed.

"Wow. Have a try, Ming," She gave me another slice of lime, "It's so good. Look, just lick the salt, drink the shot, and bite the lime."

"Remember, lick, drink, and bite."

I was so fucking drunk. I was aware of that but couldn't remember how I got here.

I felt like the small room was spinning up and down, then down and up. Whatever. Everybody was dancing, moving, shaking, and laughing, so was I, though I forgot how I started. I danced with Lydia, many other students I didn't know but had seen at school before, and another stranger girl. She told me she was from Singapore and asked me if it was my first time going

to a club. I almost fell down when I was spinning myself around her. Then we laughed. I also danced with Bran, and threw my arms around his neck, like what a girl next to me did to another boy. Bran held me up. I screamed out when my feet were above the ground. It felt so good. So I asked Bran to do it again.

Now we were not physical bodies, more like something soft, light, warm, a kind of fluid, so the room could mix everyone together, or it was people that shook the room. Cool. It was the first time I liked the color red. I didn't know why, but everything was red, dark red: the face of the DJ, the glasses glittering on the shelf, the bitten crumpled lime slice on the table, the bust sculpture of Venus de Milo. They put her on the top of a shelf to let her overlook the club, and us. Great, only half of her body, I really hated the fucking long, crinkled dress on her beautiful body. Actually, I think I would strip it off if I saw it on Venus tonight.

“Hey. You're smiling. You having a good time tonight?” Akio approached as I came back to the bar, looking for more drinks.

“Why?” I stared straight at him. Beautiful eyebrows, thick and natural. Why didn't I notice them before?

“You looked a bit nervous before. I was worried you were gonna leave quickly.”

I laughed, so did Akio. His smile was red now.

“Have you watched a Japanese movie called Asako before?” I leaned towards him and asked. As I did it, the fresh smell of cologne slid into my head through my nostril.

“Sorry, what did you say?” He took a step forward.

“A-S-A-K-O!” I almost shouted to him cheek-to-cheek, then I couldn't help laughing again. It was funny, shouting.

“No, I don't think. What's it about?”

Well, it was a long story. Asako fell in love with two guys who looked just the same. She's so fucking cool. When one of the guys came back after disappearing for seven years, she grasped his right hand, hopped on a car, and escaped a whole night from her normal life. Why didn't I like her before?

“Never mind,” I said. It was not the right place to talk about any movie. But we could watch that movie together, maybe tomorrow.

“Okay.” Akio shrugged.

I never stared at a boy like this before. Too stupid, Ming, how could you get to know a boy if you even don't dare to look at him? I shook my head and laughed at myself.

I liked the slightly puzzled expression on Akio's face. He had a little mole at the corner of his mouth, which must have been mistaken by others as a crumb he forgot to take off. Would you hold my right hand when I am awake? Would you say I look great when I wear a new skirt? Would you go out with me every Friday? Would you take me to Tokyo?

Right, Tokyo. Every time I said I wanted to visit Tokyo, my father would respond, "Is there no other foreign country in the world?" Of course, there were many other choices, father. Right, I would also tell you, father, I'm dating a Japanese boy, or will be, whatever.

But before that, I had to do something as I felt nothing holding me back now, in the red room, under the eyes of red Venus. It was a feeling of triumph as if I succeeded in doing something.

I kissed Akio.

"Wait," Akio stopped, "I think it's your phone." He retrieved his hands from my back and almost stepped on my phone while he took a step back.

Damn it. My phone was vibrating on the floor among all kinds of shoes moving around it. God damn it, why now?

"Sorry." I smiled awkwardly. It was so hot here, and I began to sweat. I took a breath and pick up the fucking phone from the floor. Akio held my arms as I tried to stand up and almost fell on the floor. The icon of calling refused to disappear. Then I saw the name on the screen. The room around me collapsed into pieces and fell behind.

I pushed myself though those red people, and fled out of the red room. One of the three men at the gate looked at me as I almost stumbled over by the step in front of him. The red faded away, in the dark stairway, only the ghastly pale light of my phone screen. The sweat on my back cooled down in a second, making me tremble in chill.

“Hey, mom, ugh,” I tried to calm down and thought about what to say next. But all the blood in my body just froze in my head. I even couldn’t breathe, “Hello.”

“What’s going on? Where are you? What happened?”

“Nothing, just, ugh,” I quickly walked to the sidewalk, with my phone in hand, tightly, as if this could make my words sound more convincing. Thanks to the street light and chilling mid-night wind, I could breathe and also the blood in my head could flow again, “I’m in the dorms.”

“Dorms? What’s the noise? Are you OK?”

“Just music, my international friends, you know,” I heard my heart beating hard under my throat. The pressure rhythmically bumped from my chest to my temple. It hurt. “We, they, were having a party after midterm, on our floor. Why, why, call me now, mom, I mean, I thought you were sleeping.”

“Because you didn’t reply to my message. I was worried about you.”

“I just, uh, just have nothing to say, I’m fine. No, I’m sorry.”

“But you told me you were in bed. The music is so loud, what about people on the other floor? They don’t sleep? That’s too much, the party. You need to have a good rest after midterm.”

“Yes, mom, I know. We, no, they almost finished, actually.”

“Tell her I’ll call her tomorrow.”

My father’s cold voice downed my heart to the bottom.

I was trying to come up with more explanations. My mom hung up the phone.

“Are you OK? Do you feel cold?”

“No, fine. Thank you, Lydia.”

“What happened?”

“Can we go back now?” I tried to hold back my tears.

“Now? I mean, of course we can leave if you want, but...”

“Yes, I want to. Please.”

We got back to the dorms around 2 am that night. Lydia said it was a little early for a club night but she also said it’s fine as we already had fun.

The next Saturday morning was cold. I forgot to turn off my alarm. I usually got up at 6 every morning as my father said you will never be young again, so you can't waste any minute in your life.

I woke up from that scary "father" dream. I was in the passenger seat beside my father. He was driving fast on the highway. Glints of light in the distance flashed on his face for a moment before casting it again into darkness. He said we killed someone because she tried to escape from us. I wanted to cry but I didn't because my father was there. I didn't know where we were heading for but it just went on and on. Then I heard the ring of my alarm.

I was not sure if it was the alarm or the creepy dream that made me so flustered. My head was heavy. Is that what people call a hangover? Maybe. I just didn't want to get up. I turned off the alarm and was dragged back into the darkness of the dream again. Father, our car on the way, trembling, things like that.

Not sure how long after that, I woke up again. I thought it was noon as it was warmer in the room and I was thirsty. I got up from my bed, the short black skirt sliding from my quilt down to the floor where my shoes had been kicked off, like they were drunk and couldn't find their pair. For a moment I still thought it was Lydia who made the mess. She went out last night and came back late as usual.

Then I realized it was my skirt, my shoes, and my mess. We went out together last night.

I had no idea where to start. I grabbed my towel and went to shower.

"Good morning, Ming." I met Nan when I walked out of the bathroom.

She lived next door to my room. We were kind of friends. I mean, our rooms were close and we were in the same writing class. We talked about exercises and essays when we were together. But most of the time, I hung out with Lydia.

"Hey, morning."

"Wow, Ming, did you go out last night?"

"Yes," I was surprised by myself for the quick response, "Did you...how do you know that?"

“I saw you getting on a taxi with Lydia last night. You looked so good!”

“Thank you.” I thought it was partly because of my black skirt and it would have been better if I had worn lipstick.

“How was it? Tell me! Tell me! What did you do?”

“Well, just dance and drink, nothing special,” I said, toweling my hair, “but it’s really fun.”

“It sounds so cool! To be honest, I hesitated every time I saw Lydia going out. I was so curious but a little bit worried. You know, I haven’t been to a club. I went to bars with friends before, but it’s different.”

“Bars? Oh, really? I mean, maybe you can have a try.”

“Can I go out with you and Lydia next Friday?”

“Mmmm...I’m not sure if I’ll...”

“Thank you!”

I closed the door and drank up a mug of water.

Well, anyway, I had to clean the mess first.

I picked up the black skirt and my shirt, whose smell blew in the color of red, red glasses with lemon, red hot air, red small room, red board with Martini, red moving bodies, red Akio’s soft lips and red Venus. I tucked all of them into my laundry bag and laced it, tightly, in case anything leaked out. I woke up all the drunk shoes and put them in order.

The headache was really bad every time I tried to move even just a bit. It hurt more as the thought of my father’s call poked my brain every now and then. I sat on my chair heavily.

Then a lipstick dropped down to the ground from nowhere. I picked it up immediately. Fortunately, it was not broken. That was mine. I only had one lipstick.

我打开房门

我打开房门，
把三三两两的流浪者迎进来；
我们泡一壶浅绿色的茶，
阳光把茶壶晒得很暖。
我们坐着，
不说话，
或者说一点话，
暖洋洋的任时间消磨。
我们的孤独，充实的孤独，
在空气中流淌，
汇合成安宁的静谧。

天色会慢慢暗下来，
浓浓的水汽攒成新鲜的雨滴，
我将永远记得，
黑暗中的我们轻声哼歌。

借着暗下来的光，
我们说起了童年，
那些枣和情书的故事，
微笑着细数那些大恸大喜，
嗓音也会突然湿润，
像一个孩子似的。

打开窗户，
所有新鲜的草叶和雨水都涌入胸腔，
我们笑了，
手掌卷成喇叭，朝远方大喊，
“喂——”

2021年5月11日 13:42

Three Haiku

Untitled

Translation of the opening line of Ma Zhiyuan's Tian Jing Sha · Qiu Si (天净沙 · 秋思)

The withered vines,
the old tree,
a crow cries at the setting sun.

On the Death of my High School Classmate

Alipay keeps notifying me of
the birthday of my dead high school classmate
as if someone could receive his digital present one day.

Insomnia

Insomnia is
writing a poem before going to bed—
never finding the right words.

Two Families of Mine

Looking back at my childhood, I can see that my life was full of bad memories.

I had no idea what kind of life I was pursuing until I had that dream under a tree, and I still believe it was a hint by God, the Almighty God, my God.

I was born in a rural area in the North East of China. My parents were not well educated and worked on a farm all day long. We grew crops in the fields and sold most of them in the market, and that was how my family barely made ends meet. My parents had six kids—boys and two girls, and I was the youngest. To some extent, I was the unlucky one. My parents believed I was cursed, for I had a sixth finger.

Actually, I was not the only one who had a sixth finger in my family. It was said that both my father and my oldest brother had a sixth finger when they were young, but they were taken to the hospital and had surgery. However, I did not have this opportunity to have such an operation, because my family believed a girl did not deserve such treatment.

I was said to be an evil spirit which brought bad luck. My family had converted to Christianity just after my oldest brother was born. They prayed to Jesus to bless our family, hoping the other children would not be born with a sixth finger. And Jesus listened. For all my other brothers and sisters, they were normal, but when it came to me, the unfortunate thing happened again. The oldest, most respectable man in our village said my birth brought the bad luck back to my family. The sixth finger must be

a mark by God, which suggested that I was an evil spirit. I was too young to know what the sixth finger meant to me right then. The only thing I knew was that the sixth finger hurt sometimes and made me look different from others.

I had no friends at all, which made me feel lonely. As a child, I was always hiding behind the trees to watch other kids playing in the field. When they discovered me, they shouted, “Go away, monster!” I believed it was the sixth finger that brought hostility from others. To be honest, I understood because even my parents and my siblings treated me that way. My mother always told me to get away from her. She was unwilling to see me because she believed I would bring bad luck once I got close. The dinner table never included my bowl and chopsticks. I could only eat something until everyone had finished their meals, taking their leftovers. I was not allowed to sleep in the bedroom with my mom and dad, and all my other siblings. I had a cushion under the dinner table, and I took it out every evening and slept on it. Pretty cold in the winter, but it had been years and I was used to it.

All these things and everyone’s reaction had convinced me that I was truly an evil spirit, an abnormal freak. The sixth finger looked deformed, making my hand look more like a claw, which belongs to a devil. What’s worse, I was not able to control the sixth finger. I could see it, but I could not feel its existence at all. Sometimes I doubted why this had happened to me. Was it really God’s punishment? Am I really an evil spirit that needs redemption somehow? But I kept these questions in my mind and couldn’t share my feelings with anyone. Nobody would understand me. My father and my big brother might have felt the same way when they were young, but neither of them ever talked to me. I had always been such a quiet girl, trying to avoid others’ gaze and attention.

All these years my life had been quite gloomy, but there was one thing that lightened me a little bit. Every Sunday, the whole family went to church. This was the only event when I was allowed to join them. Things we did were quite normal, reading the Bible and listening to the sermon. While we were at church, everyone was so sincere and focused. We were called to love, serve and care. I always felt more relaxed inside the church, and my family members and I were more connected. Their faces

became gentle, and they looked like they were smiling. I could feel the holy atmosphere around them. Even though everything went back to normal after the service was over and we left the church, I did cherish these moments with my family.

Then came the day that changed my life. On an ordinary Sunday morning after the sermon, the minister asked us to warmly welcome a new member of our church group. I was slightly surprised when I saw a new face because we did not normally have newcomers in such a small village. This was an old woman with short white hair, who was at least fifty years old. A bit fat, but quite strong, just a typical rural housewife with no specialty. She made a self-introduction and I got to know that she came from an adjacent village and would stay in our village for a while. I had little interest in the newcomer at first, but later I noticed that she always took notes during the sermon and spent a long time discussing the Bible with the minister after the sermon. It seemed that she showed more enthusiasm in Christianity than all the other people in our church.

One morning in December, about three months after her first appearance, she sat beside me at church. By now, it had become a habit for me to hide my sixth finger, but she still noticed my disability and glanced at my hand several times. To my relief, she did not ask me anything or show any hostility. Silence lasted until the minister reached the end of his sermon, and then everyone stood up to leave. I lagged behind my family members as they exited the church, chatting with each other and not caring about my existence as usual—in this family, I was as redundant as my sixth finger. But this time I could feel the gaze of the old woman behind me. Just as I walked out of the church's gate, she patted me and I saw her face with its warm smile. I immediately became alert and frowned.

“Hey, my girl,” she said with a smile. “I am one of the church members in your church family. I see you are walking alone. Are you okay?”

I was going to explain that my family was just walking a little bit faster than me, but I hesitated and remained silent.

She kept going. “You know, you can always gain love and care through our God. But you seem to be still far away from God. You know, our God has new instructions now, and only

the ones who understand her doctrine correctly can be rescued. I really hope you can be closer to true love, be closer to our God. If you have the same desire, I can bring you up to God.”

I did not know how to respond and quickly walked away. I heard her saying something like “God bless you, girl,” but she did not follow me. I wondered if I’d overreacted and misunderstood her kindness. Though I was unsure about her aim, she seemed to speak to me with good intentions.

I sat down under a tree and kept repeating her words in my mind. For the first time a person had said so much to me in an inoffensive way. Her conversation seemed meaningful and even holy to me. I remembered she used the word “her” to describe God’s doctrine. But was not Jesus Christ a man? I tried to imagine our God to be a woman but failed—it seemed too strange.

I could not remember how I fell asleep, but the dream I had that day was so vivid that I could tell I really felt the existence of God. It was a woman figure. She looked at me warmly with a gentle smile on her face, like how a mother would be. She was so lovely and benevolent, making me want to get closer. I was ready to follow her instructions, whatever she ordered, but she did not say a word. Though I felt her presence so close to me, a huge distance between us remained. I sensed there was a long way to go for me to be able to understand her.

I had believed in Christianity since I was born, but I had never had a dream related to God. After the conversation with the old woman, everything seemed to make sense. “God has new instructions...only the ones who understand her doctrine correctly can be rescued and saved...” Was it possible that I had been misunderstanding God’s instructions all these years? If God had always been promoting love, why had I never felt it throughout my life? I hoped I could meet God again in my dreams and feel her warmth, but she did not come again. But I kept thinking of this, about my belief, the love that I was pursuing, the God I dreamed...and the old woman that talked to me about God. I felt it necessary to have a conversation with her the next time I met her.

On the next Sunday morning, the old woman again sat beside me. Before I talked, she greeted me nicely: “Pretty cold today, huh? How are you going to spend the winter solstice?” If she

hadn't mentioned it, I would have forgotten it was the winter solstice even though our village had a tradition of making and eating dumplings on that day. But I was not allowed to eat with my family and guessed that my dinner as usual would be yesterday's leftovers. When I shook my head, she invited me to join her with her sisters, very nice people she said she'd met while following God's new doctrine. Dumplings...I had never tried them before. What a great temptation. For the first time, I opened myself up to another person and said yes to her, something I would do many times later with her and others.

This place we were going to was pretty far away from my village. We traveled in a van, with two other old women similar to her in age and a male driver. As they talked about the church, the doctrine, and trifles in their daily lives, I could feel the intimacy between them. It seemed to me that there was something that bound them closely together, something that was never going to break down. They tried to talk to me, asking me questions about my beliefs and attitudes toward God, but I was a bit shy and almost said nothing. Earlier, I'd overheard them mention my sixth finger in passing, though they never said anything to me directly, and was still unsure whether I could trust them.

The van drove for around forty minutes, then stopped in front of a three-storied house, with two red lanterns hanging outside. It was quite a luxurious one for a rural area, and the owner had installed a heating system, which I was grateful for after traveling a long distance on a cold winter day. The hosts of this house were an old couple, very friendly and nice, and there were twelve other people in the house, mostly old women but also men and several middle-aged women. Everyone was dressed plainly, but their faces were ruddy and radiant, different from the people I knew who did farm work every day with dim eyes. It seemed that they lived a communal life in this house together. Several women were already preparing the ingredients for the dumplings, so we joined them immediately after we arrived. I did not know how to make a dumpling, and everyone in the family encouraged me to learn and gave me lots of compliments after I made my first dumpling, which was quite imperfect. Their kind words unexpectedly struck my heart. It seemed that nobody was surprised about my arrival, and even when they saw my sixth

finger when I was helping to make the dumplings, they appeared to be seeing nothing strange and abnormal. We had made at least two hundred dumplings, but it took almost no time, everyone chatting and laughing, so that it felt like a real family. We put the dumplings on a large plate covered with gauze, threw them carefully into a large pot, and ate them together at the dinner table. That was the best meal I had ever had.

We finished the cleaning work together afterwards, and then we sat around the dinner table again to talk about God's work. They took out their books and gave one to me, titled *The Words Appeared in the Flesh*. Through their conversations I learned that they believed God was a female Christ, who was Jesus Christ reincarnated and was now called the Almighty God. They asked me to read the book together with them so that I could learn more about God's instructions. I found that this book discussed a lot about the Bible but offered a different interpretation to what I was told at church. Before I showed my confusion, they explained to me that the meaning of God's work is too profound, and there were many things that we cannot understand at once. But as long as we humbly read God's work and were determined to seek the truth, God would lead us to understand her mind. While they were talking to me, their voices were soft and gentle, and the whole atmosphere was peaceful. Although it was cold outside, that house was like a shelter, keeping my body warm. Their words offered magical remedies, warming and melting my frozen heart. They spoke with such sincerity and made me feel so welcome that I was surprised to find that I felt more comfortable staying with them than with my real family. Everything seemed so beautiful. I was convinced that the reason why they showed such kindness to a disabled stranger is because of their belief and awe in God, who taught them to love others and show pity to the unfortunate. I would never forget that moment, as I had never imagined I could be treated like that.

That night, they asked me to stay with them. I was not sure whether I should accept their kindness, but I knew I enjoyed my life here and did not want to go back to my house to sleep on the cushion under the dinner table. While I hesitated in making my decision, they had already prepared a bed for me. Looking at my bed, I thought, *All these years I have been suffering*. God must have

seen my misfortune and offered me a chance to make a change. This must be the time when happiness has finally come to me. After all, how can my situation get any worse for a disabled girl like me? With no more hesitation, I again chose to open my heart and said yes.

I never thought about informing my parents about my decision to stay as I guessed they didn't care about my whereabouts. My days in my new home were quite the same as the first day I came. All family members had their own missionary work to do in the afternoon, and afterwards we cooked together, ate together, studied God's doctrine together, and slept together. Sometimes someone brought one or two new members home to join us, and these individuals immediately became a part of us, intimate with the rest of our family. As far as I could see, no one worked to earn money. Our expenses were covered by the pension of the old couple who owned the house, and there were other family members who donated funds to support us. I had not yet reached the age of being able to earn a living and did more housework in the house to make it up. I learned a lot about God's doctrine through our daily discussions and also through CDs and pamphlets that preached about the Almighty God, and I gradually learned many truths from God's own words, and saw the holy temperament and beauty of our God.

Within two weeks of joining the family, I felt I'd developed a good relationship with others and was closest to the old lady that I'd met in church. Although there was a huge gap in age between us, she was excited to tell me about her life and how she'd decided to leave her own family and stay here.

A couple of years ago, she was just a peasant working endlessly in the fields. She had three sons and two daughters, and they all went to cities to earn their living after they grew up. They seldom came back to their small village, and the old lady and her husband had become empty nesters. Her husband had a poor temper. He smoked and drank a lot, and beat her when he was drunk. The old lady asked me to get closer, and she dragged down her clothes to show me several dark red scars on the back of her neck. "Once he was drunk, he used his cigarette butts to burn my skin." She had tears in her eyes as she told me this story. Such things had also happened to my neighbors, so I somehow

understood her feelings and felt really sorry for her.

Then she talked about how she'd met the family members. She was suffering from serious arthritis and rheumatism, and she had to go to the hospital regularly to get treatment. She met two other patients in the hospital, and they realized they shared similar experiences together: the physical abuse from their husbands and the absence of their children. They quickly became friends, as close as sisters.

Later one day, one of the sisters said that she heard about a highly skilled, retired doctor who specializes in acupuncture, so they agreed to visit him and see whether acupuncture was more helpful in curing their diseases. And that's how they got to know the owners of this house. The doctor and his wife were both believers in the Almighty God and felt sorry after hearing about their difficult lives. "They told us that they were both at their lowest point when they were introduced to the Almighty God, and said it was God that helped them achieve their redemption. They welcomed us to stay with them and study God's doctrine together. And that was the original formation of our religious family."

The old lady said she had never made a decision so firmly, and her two friends felt the same. All of them had made a detour in their lives, finally finding a meaning and direction. They had decided to go on this path no matter how bumpy it would be.

Unlike the peasants in our village, the old lady believed that the old couple was wise. She told me how they taught her about love, how to study God's doctrine, and how they encouraged her to do missionary work to accumulate virtue, which would bring her closer to God. And that's why she was passing on that knowledge to me, hoping that I could also achieve my redemption and live a fulfilling life.

I was really grateful to the old lady and to my whole religious family, and I wanted to start a new life. I dedicated myself to God fully and was sincere about what we did every day, especially the missionary work. Often we went to a nearby church and found those church members that seemed, as they told us, to be more open to the Almighty God. Typically, we chose old rural housewives that were not well educated and were not active in their church. After a simple conversation, we then invited them

to join us in our discussion which could lead them closer to God. This was not always effective, but we did successfully convince some of them to join us.

A month later, I was asked to try to do the missionary work on my own. I was such a shy girl and was unwilling to communicate with others at first, but the family members said it was a good deed that would help me get closer to God. At the end of a service, I would try to convince several adults to visit our home, just as I'd learned from other family members, but they always impatiently rejected my invitations. It was probably because of my age, I thought. I was too young for others to take my words seriously. And so, I thought I should seek a different way to approach potential members.

On a windy afternoon I met a girl about my age playing around near the field. When I walked closer, I saw that there were scars on her face. I tried to talk to her. Her name was Li. She was the kind of extroverted girl with a vivid personality who has a character completely different from mine. Li was also only fifteen, the youngest of the six children in her family, and the most talented student in her town's middle school, but when she hoped to continue her education, she was rejected by her father. Her family had already supported her two brothers' education and was no longer able to afford sending another child, a girl, to high school. She had a big quarrel with her father, who threw her out of the window from their house, the cause of the scars on her face. She was not willing to go back home at that time, so I offered to her that maybe she could come visit my family and at least have something to eat. I did not explain to her anything about our religion or beliefs in the family—the only thing in my mind was to complete my missionary work and get closer to God.

When I took Li back to the house, other people were quite surprised. As usual, we did our daily routine and ate dinner together, and Li appeared comfortable, getting along with other family members and seeming to enjoy our life together. I was quite relieved and happy to have a friend my age in the house. After dinner, we took out our books and started to read aloud the words of the Almighty God. Li asked me what the books were about, and I explained to her about our religious family and that reading those words was a daily routine. I noticed she

immediately became alert. As we kept reading, her face turned pale, and she seemed to confirm something in her own mind as we read. Later that evening she said almost nothing, which was quite odd when compared to the personality she'd shown me before. Her face was still very pale, and she seemed to avoid any eye contact with other family members.

At night, Li was assigned a bed next to mine. She expressed her appreciation, but she appeared to be uneasy sitting on her bed. She asked me, "Do you feel anything wrong with this religious family?" I shook my head. Then she asked, "Have you ever seen the banner at the entrance of the village about the evil cult...related to your God?" I shook my head again. I had not even heard of an evil cult before. I felt sorry for not being able to answer her question.

I wanted to chat with her in the darkness, but she told me she was not in the mood. I felt a bit disappointed so I tried to fall asleep. But Li seemed to be acting strangely. She sat for a long time on her bed but pretended to be asleep when she heard any noises outside the door. I was confused so I decided to stay awake to see what was going on.

I waited for a long time, and it was almost midnight. I heard no sound outside for several hours, and I assumed everyone was asleep. Then I heard Li slowly get up and creep outside. What was she doing? I kept pretending to be asleep, but I strained my ears to listen. I heard footsteps heading downstairs, and I heard someone dragging an iron chain. Those sounds were very loud in the darkness. I had no idea where the iron chain came from, and I started to feel scared.

Suddenly I heard the door next to my room open, and the light was turned on. A male member confronted Li in displeasure, asking what she was doing. From his voice, I recognized that he was the driver that had brought me here. Li cried out, "You are all from The Church of the Almighty God! I learned from my teachers you are an evil cult! You even put such a heavy lock on the door just to stop us from escaping! I am going to report your activities to the police!"

At that point, everyone woke up. I did not dare to go outside since I was too shocked by her words and reaction. To my larger astonishment, several family members quickly rushed out of their

rooms and restrained her. They took her into an empty room, and I heard Li continue shouting and crying, “Let me go! You are hurting me! You evil cult!” The other new members and I were too shocked to do anything while the rest of our family seemed calm as if nothing was happening. I heard the old lady saying to others, “How stupid she is! She said she wants to report us to the police? Oh, we will not let this happen. Anyone who stops us from becoming closer to our God is our biggest enemy!”

Throughout the night, I could hear Li shouting and crying upstairs. I heard sounds of slapping and wondered if they were using a rod on her. Had she been tied up? Were they trying to force her to join us? I also heard a female voice preaching, which I assumed came from the CDs we regularly studied. It was so loud that I could even hear it downstairs. Were they not allowing her to sleep by playing the CDs of God’s doctrine? I was afraid and concerned about her situation, but I did not dare to go upstairs and take a look.

Her shouts lasted for six days. I pretended that everything was fine while I was with other family members, but it was hard. The old lady told me that I should not believe what the girl had said. She said that there were evil forces that stopped us from getting closer to God, for they envied people who shared a loving family and enjoyed the same faith. But I still felt guilty and believed that girl was suffering upstairs all because of me. This was the incident that made me question my religious family. For the first time, I stood against my family members and I hoped that I could save Li.

While walking on the street one day, I saw a poster for a missing person on a telegraph pole. When I looked closer, I saw Li’s face. I felt horrified and rushed back home, reporting everything to the family members. I begged them to let Li go, or the police might come and put all of us in jail. There was a clear reluctance on their faces, but after a long discussion, I saw they went upstairs. Then Li came out with the support of two other people. I saw bruises all over her skin, a bloodstain on her forehead that made the scar she had before she came here less obvious. She looked exhausted with sunken cheeks and hollow eyes, but she stared at me the whole time she was walking out of the house. She did not say a word, but I knew exactly what she

wanted to say to me. Even today, I still remember the hatred in her eyes.

Li's story made me think deeper about my religious family. It seemed that the love promoted by family members was superficial and illusionary, and their actual personalities are not warm and kind as they pretended to be. They used their friendly masks to disguise the violence in their hearts. What was worse, I felt that I was being manipulated by family members and losing my autonomy to think independently. I was not sure if there would be one day when I am locked in a room upstairs, abused by those same family members who had tortured Li. On the other hand, I suffered from the emotional pain of not being loved and cared for by my original family. My parents had never offered me, their biological child, any attention but had isolated and mistreated me.

I faced a dilemma. I was really not sure what kind of life I should pursue, whether to choose to face the real pain brought by my original family or to numb myself with the risk of staying with my religious family. Who on earth could give me suggestions? Who could I trust now? Suddenly, the dream I had under the tree came into my mind. Oh, that vivid God. I gradually calmed down and took a deep breath. I prayed to her. "My God, if you can hear me, please give me your instructions. I will follow whatever you order for me." After praying several times, I fell asleep. I dreamed of her again... and I heard her voice.

With her instructions, I made up my mind.

今天，我遇到你

当时光停留在这里
我也爱上你
当哲学被肤浅回避
生命还有意义
若清泉就是月光流淌成溪
颜色被星光在唇齿间喃喃
当我什么都不想的呼吸
最美的声音来自于我内心骄傲的哭泣
我无话可说的没有秘密
静静凝视和站立
是这一刻永不止息
让我深深的记住你
让我深深的记住形容你的词集
当明天太阳照常升起
一切都将忘记
最轻松的是我嘴角平凡而茫然的笑意

Where Is Night

I got vacuumed up by
a heartbeat—

A spider dressed in her knight costume sucking blood
from my breast set the dust
on fire.

Rock crystal balloon:
the urge to ascend
the fate to abide
by gravity to fall and
shatter.

On a blue wall
a dark eye approaches me,
widening. Its hair
buckled by a knot of mistletoe
swallows my pride.

Oh the turbine in mind
rolling on and on, accelerating to 500 miles
per millisecond.

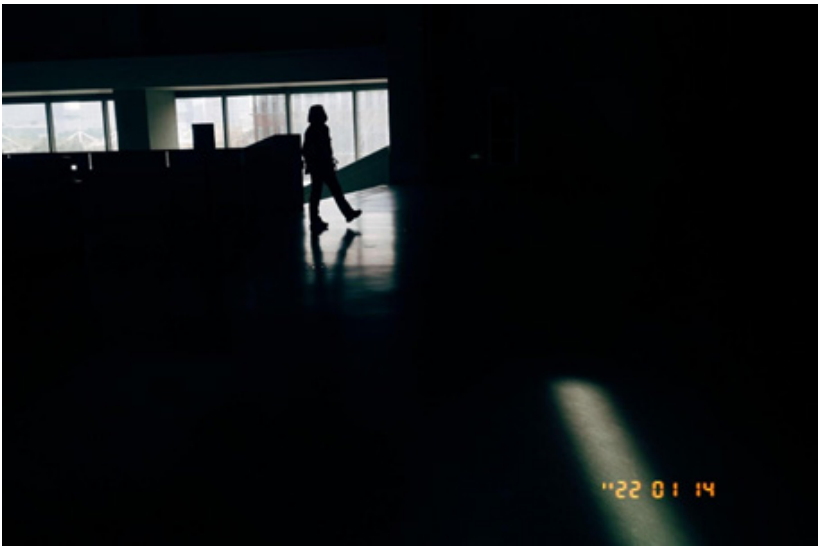
Lullaby at night turns bleached phantom;
cherubic aura dyed into Black Tulips. (Remember! There is
always grey.)

Desperate to note them all:
I see a drop of red blood that you are blind to.
 Too much for a girl in the dungeon
kept locked in a submarine under the ocean.

She cried, supine
half-languishing on a weed.
Water flooded her voice into a mysterious singing,
into a gently thin haze, into mirage underneath a twilight castle

Chimeras passing by, left her some sympathy—

 Away they go.
I see her rotting bit
by bit.



“Writing Place” Preface

Writing Place marks the inaugural section dedicated to literary journalism in a student literary journal published at NYU Shanghai during the university’s first decade of operation. As a reported form of narrative writing, literary journalism merges the keen pursuit of hard facts with the slower craft of creative nonfiction. Often translated as 报告文学 (baogao wenxue) in Putonghua, the genre fits into a growing appetite in China for longform narratives about ordinary people, as evidenced by the popularity of writers such as Peter Hessler and online home-grown outlets such as *Gushi FM*, *NoonStory*, and *Sandwichina*, to name just a few.

The three stories showcased in this section originated as assignments in my second-year writing seminar, *Perspectives on the Humanities: Writing the World*, which I taught online during Fall 2021. Using their own personal and cultural contexts, students sought to find a story of significance in their current place of residence, one that would give readers a meaningful sense of what it can be like to inhabit that city or town. Immersing themselves in a place with a keen sense of observation, they drew out meaning in the seemingly ordinary, the everyday, eschewing the tourist trope, the spectacular.

As we see in *The Path to Your Plate*, Mark Berndt follows a lead right outside his NYU dorm. Taking advantage of the toggling between “I” and “eye” afforded in literary journalism, he strategically weaves in his personal experience working as a food app delivery worker. Aevyn Lan finds in *A Tennis Metaphor*

that a dispute over a proposed tennis court is a microcosm of a debate over rural identity that is driven more by appearances than agriculture. In *A Chinese Woman's Worth*, Michelle Lin talks to two generations of two families linked by the prospect of marriage to depict how the burden of tradition and the legacy of China's one-child policy can still weigh heavily in a major metropolis.

It's worth noting that none of these second-year students had any training in journalism or creative writing before taking this course. And amid the myriad obstacles posed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, they managed to report and write stories of significance, from Stockton to Shanghai, with the curiosity, resourcefulness, and persistence required of journalists.

In their studies of place, students not only relied on the two-week literary journalism unit in our course, but also the core research and writing skills at the heart of undergraduate writing seminars. In telling a journalistic story, they are essentially arguing the equivalent of an academic thesis, but presented with narrative flair for a public audience. These students relied on shoe leather reporting and expert interviews and reviewed wide-ranging sources, such as news reports, scholarly journals, legislation, meeting minutes, and social media. It was no easy feat.

I hope readers will enjoy this sample of place writing from these budding literary journalists. I look forward to the stories that students will tell in NYU Shanghai's next decade.

Alexis Lai
Lecturer, Writing Program
April 2022

A Chinese Woman's Worth: The Intergenerational Burden of Bride Price

Qingxia is a widowed tailor. Her limbs are almost skeletal, age spots and wrinkles cover her face. She is neatly dressed, although her grey sweater is pilling. Her eyes are fatigued, but there is still light in them. She hopes to see the marriage of her 26-year-old son one day.

I met Qingxia in her housing compound on Xikang Road in Jing'an District. Xikang Road was named Ferry Road when Jing'an was still an international settlement. It is a mix of prosperity and shabbiness – luxury apartments on the west side and decaying houses built in the last century on the east. To reach the attic of the three-story tenement where Qingxia and her son live, I had to step over a few puddles caused by leaking sewage pipes and walk through a narrow corridor that smelled like body odor and cooking grease.

Squalid housing isn't Qingxia's biggest worry these days. She is most concerned about how to put together enough money for her son to get married. Bride price refers to the money or goods paid by the groom's family to the bride's family upon marriage. It is one of the most ancient marriage customs in China, originating from the Western Zhou dynasty. Varying across provinces, the amount of cash typically required ranges from 10,000 RMB to 1,000,000 RMB. In some areas, the groom and his family must also buy a house for the newly-married couple.

"I need 50,000 RMB and an apartment that is at least 50 square meters," said Qingxia, as she showed me her calculations handwritten on a supermarket receipt. "I now have 90,000 RMB

in my bank account. I could sell my house and borrow some money from our cousins, but even adding the savings of my son, we still can barely afford an apartment for the couple to live in.” This 90,000 RMB is all that she saved over her 30 years of work as a textile worker on an assembly line before reaching the official retirement age of 50. She did not have access to better opportunities with only a middle-school education. Now in her sixties, she occasionally makes clothes for people in order to cover her everyday expenses. While she has never had much money, traditional Chinese culture dictates that her son must get married, and she must have a grandson who will take her deceased husband’s surname.

Guangyi finally returned to the attic from his insurance sales job at 8:00 p.m. He was skeptical at first about my personal questions but eventually opened up. “I have to get married and have kids; that is what everyone is doing,” he said. He was so skinny that I could almost see the bones on his chest protruding from his shirt. He earns 6,000 RMB per month despite graduating from college four years ago. This is the average salary in Shanghai for people with a bachelor’s degree. However, a 50-square-meter apartment located a reasonable distance from the city center costs around 5,000,000 RMB, or approximately 833 months of his salary.

Guangyi only gets to see his girlfriend on the weekends. Her parents say that if she sees a man often, even if he is her boyfriend, the neighbors will speculate that she has slept with him, making her lose value. Her name is Kening, which means “lovely and cute” in Shanghainese. Her parents are still trying to introduce other men to her. They are not satisfied with the idea of Guangyi as their son-in-law because of his working-class background and job. Kening works as a civil servant in the Department of Commerce. Although she will only earn 4,000 RMB per month during her entire tenure, she will never lose her job and will receive a pension upon her retirement.

“I love my daughter, but she will be a part of another family after she’s married,” said Kening’s father. “If the man wants to marry her, they must have a place to live. The cash is just compensation for taking her away from us,” he added. I was shocked to hear that, but I have heard similar remarks from parents in

other neighborhoods in Shanghai, even from those who recognize that bride price is little more than a tradition.

When I asked Kening's parents whether they consider bride price as a disguised method for men to 'buy' women, they agreed without hesitation. "Our daughter will be giving birth to his son, our grandson, who will take Guangyi's surname. My daughter and my grandson will be members of his family," Kening's father said. They can see no other way but to accept the practice of bride price.

Jiang Quanbao, a population and development studies professor at Xi'an Jiaotong University, said, "Compared to women in places like India and other countries in the Middle East, Chinese women have some voice in their households. But compared to Western women, they are still heavily exploited by cultural norms." Jiang was referring to the popular preference for sons in China and gender stereotypes such as 男主外女主内, which means that the man goes out to work, and the woman stays at home and looks after the children and chores, as well as her parents and her in-laws.

"The problem of gender inequality is inseparable from the unbalanced sex ratio and the gap in access to education and professionalism. Bride price is just an inevitable byproduct of those existing problems," Jiang added. Throughout history, Chinese people have largely favored sons in a patriarchal, patrilineal, and patrilocal system. Since the 1980s, China has experienced a severe imbalance in its sex ratio resulting from the one-child policy. Many couples opted for sex-selective abortion to ensure that their only child was a son. Some couples disregarded the law and had multiple children until they produced a son.

In some of these cases, the parents did not register the births of their extra children in order to avoid penalties for violating the one-child policy. Raised illegally, these children, mostly girls, either attended school for a very limited time or not at all. Girls were also the first to drop out of school and start working to cover living expenses of the entire family. This inequality in access to education forced girls to marry very young and earn a minimum wage for their whole life. "The younger girls get married, the less education, social experience, and independence they have, so the more they get controlled by men," Jiang noted.

While the government formally ended the one-child policy in 2015, the lingering unbalanced sex ratio has led to inflation in bride prices, especially for eligible young women. This trend has even led some parents to urgently seek to ‘sell’ their daughter. Although bride price is more prevalent in rural areas, it is still practiced by many people in Shanghai.

Tradition dictates their choices. It is not the intention of Kening’s parents to have their daughter become “familial property” transferred to another family. Nor does Qingxia’s son want his frail, elderly mother to work ceaselessly to earn money that will eventually slip into other people’s pockets. When I left their attic home, Qingxia was still operating her sewing machine, just like on any day since she was nineteen.

The Path to Your Plate: The Tribulations of New York's Delivery Community

The first thing I usually see whenever I leave my college dorm in the East Village of Manhattan is a gathering of Spanish-speaking men talking, eating, smoking, or just looking at their phones on the sidewalk by my building. They wear heavy work jackets and jeans, and are never more than five feet away from their electric bicycles.

Antonio, a quiet, rugged-looking, middle-aged man who often hangs out here, immigrated to New York about 15 years ago from Mexico to find better-paying work. He has been working as an app-based food delivery worker for about three years. His previous job as a cashier was much worse for him, as he had to heavily adapt to American language and culture. He hated “dealing with customers.” As a delivery worker, he does not have to use English very often and gets to “be outside and be distracted.” It functions as a sort of escape from mainstream American life for him.

Just over seven years ago, this type of delivery work did not really exist. The three main app companies that have created the vast majority of these jobs – Doordash, Uber Eats, and Grubhub – started hiring in 2013, 2014, and 2015, respectively. Before these apps really started taking off in 2014, people who worked in food delivery were much fewer and almost entirely based at a single restaurant or two. However, this system proved to be quite inefficient, as restaurants often had too many or too few people working at certain times. When it got busy, they would sometimes need to turn down orders or dispatch some of their

non-delivery staff. With the arrival of app-based delivery workers who take orders from virtually all restaurants, this problem has become less common.

Total revenues for food delivery apps in the U.S. increased from \$8.7 billion in 2015 to \$26.5 billion in 2020, according to Business of Apps. *The New York Times* reported that there were more than 80,000 delivery workers in New York in 2021, most of them immigrants. At least 80% of them were working for Doordash, Grubhub, or UberEats.

One of the reasons why these apps have become so popular is their ease of use for both customers and workers. Out of curiosity and a desire for part-time work, I downloaded the Big Three and signed up to be a delivery worker. Within just a week, I could start making money. I quickly learned that they function very similarly, almost like video games. I simply press the big “go online” button and then receive delivery offers one at a time. I have to decide within seconds whether the trip’s distance is worth the estimated pay, which is usually \$5-15 for a few miles. I also have to consider that if I decline orders, the apps may start offering me fewer of them in general. To accept an order, I press the big “accept” button and follow the directions I am given to the restaurant on my bike. Once I pick up the food and traverse the streets of Manhattan to the drop-off point, I press the big “complete delivery” button. On some apps, my delivery record over the past 30 days determines whether I can “level up” and access perks like receiving roadside assistance, signing up earlier for shifts, and securing larger orders. Sometimes it does not feel like I am even working a real job, but when I hit the “cash out” button, as if I am playing video poker, real money shows up in my bank account within minutes.

While the apps are all very easy to use, they do not always work in an ideal way. I usually stop getting orders by mid-afternoon. It feels pretty uncomfortable at this point because I am most likely alone on the sidewalk at some random place in Manhattan with nothing to do. Generally, I will just go back to my dorm.

Returning home in the middle of the day is not an option for many of the other delivery people in Lower Manhattan. After interviewing some of the workers who sit right outside of

my dorm, I learned that most of them do not live in this area. Antonio claims that it would be more likely for him and many of the other workers to be mugged if they delivered orders around their own neighborhoods, which are typically in the less wealthy boroughs of New York.

Antonio lives in the Bronx, so he rides his bike at least 100 blocks to Lower Manhattan every morning to start his shift. He says that he typically needs to work eight to twelve hours per day to earn enough money. During slow times, like the middle of the afternoon, he has to find somewhere in Manhattan to wait. The sidewalk by my dorm is one of the best places for him and his colleagues – it is relatively safe, near many restaurants that send out orders, and a common spot where the delivery community gathers during slow times. There are additional locations across the city that function like makeshift break rooms, such as underground garages, city parks, or other relatively nice sidewalks. Delivery workers often refer to these spots as “corners.”

The comradery that can be found in the delivery community, whether at these corners, online, or elsewhere on the streets is actually essential for their safety. According to the *New York Post*, 49% of delivery workers reported getting into an accident on the job. Another 54% said they have been robbed, of which 30% reported being assaulted during the incident. Antonio too was once mugged at knifepoint while making a delivery in the Bronx.

One of the community’s responses to the widespread muggings was the creation of a Facebook page called “El Diario de los Deliveryboys en la Gran Manzana” (The Daily Bulletin of the Delivery Boys in the Big Apple). Now with over 30,000 followers, the page posts new warnings for delivery workers every day, usually about stolen bicycles or areas with increased crime. They also notify workers about potential trouble with police. For example, in November, they posted a warning in Spanish that translates as “Knickerbocker and Bleeker St., the 83rd precinct is stopping all motorists and giving them corresponding tickets. Avoid going through that place... remember that electric motorcycles are illegal and if you have [vehicles] without a plate and license they will give you tickets and can also take them away.”

Members of this Facebook page and the broader delivery

community often band together to confront problems. Last summer, delivery workers on their way home at night from Lower Manhattan were constantly robbed on the Willis Avenue Bridge. As the police refused to do anything, the delivery workers used the El Diario Facebook page, private messaging, and homemade street signs to organize workers to cross the bridge in groups. The robberies have become less frequent and devastating after these workers calling themselves the “Willis Guard” began watching the bridge. When stolen bikes reported on the Facebook page are spotted, members work together to return them to their owners, oftentimes without police assistance. When bicycles are witnessed being stolen, members help chase down the stolen property.

A younger worker outside of my dorm, Eduardo, introduced me to another organization for delivery workers that he belongs to called Los Deliveristas Unidos. This group demands more pay, better police assistance, and more reasonable working conditions. Director of Policy and Strategic Partnerships Hildalyn Colon-Hernandez told me that its proudest accomplishment is “how we organized ourselves...overcoming many challenges, as many of the workers...come from different countries and different languages.” She added that the group proposed six pieces of legislation that were approved by the city council last year. “This year, more than 65,000 workers in January woke up with new labor rights they didn’t have before,” she said. These include using restaurant bathrooms when they pick up an order; restricting their delivery area at their own discretion; receiving minimum per-trip payments and notification of whether a customer provides a tip; using insulated bags provided by delivery companies rather than having to buy them out-of-pocket; and cashing out their earnings without fees.

While these are good first steps, Colon-Hernandez said there is still plenty of work to be done to adequately protect delivery workers. Her organization is currently working with an urban planner and Senator Chuck Schumer to pass more legislation this year, including to establish delivery worker “hubs” that would essentially function as more permanent and well-resourced corners.

App-based food delivery work, as dangerous and undesirable as it might be, is the best possible option for many people. In his 2018 dissertation, Queens College urban studies professor Do Jun Lee wrote that “interwoven and intersectional collective oppressions and traumas underpin and make possible [such] a system of food delivery...” Established patterns of global wealth distribution cause non-white immigrants to take the least desirable jobs in American society. Police oppression, citizenship restrictions, language barriers, and disproportionately low representation in media and politics are some of the factors that contribute to their continued lack of fair pay, benefits, and good working conditions.

Delivery workers like Antonio put everything on the line so they can earn a living. However, their needs are ignored by the powerful institutions of U.S. society, such as the media, large corporations, and the government. Colon-Hernandez said that the root cause of the problems in the food delivery industry is the “lack of infrastructure” for workers, both in the literal and figurative senses. Adequate legal protections for workers have not yet been put in place because the industry is so new. “Ask the delivery worker if he received your tip,” she suggested, adding that customers can also back new legislation or support Los Deliveristas Unidos with donations. “All of us are workers,” she pointed out. At the end of the day, the fight for worker rights involves us all.

Tennis as Metaphor: A New Jersey Town's Rural Identity Crisis

Stockton, New Jersey is usually a quiet town, with an older population that likes to keep to itself. It's a place where walks are long, flowers are tall, and yard sales abound. But this fall, new signs stand where national election placards once did: "I support tennis – I support open space" versus "Protect our quality of life – No commercial businesses on Sandy Ridge Road." This road is full of these signs, perfectly reflecting the division in Stockton: one side exclusively shows support for tennis, while the other features signage with a red building crossed out with a big X.

The seeds of this showdown were planted far before the signs were drawn up and printed. Brant Switzler has had a dream since he started playing tennis as a child to build an indoor facility to teach young people the sport. Now in his late twenties, Switzler sees it as an opportunity to bring tennis to the community, giving kids a chance to participate in a sport that is not team-based. It is also his way of keeping his aging parents' 160-acre farm up and running – a task proving more and more difficult as time goes by.

Switzler is more than open to the idea of an interview with me. In fact, he invites me on a stroll around his property, eager to show me where he hopes to set up his facility. When I arrive, it's an early Sunday morning and the grass is wet from dew. Switzler pulls up at the end of the long driveway in a white Volvo and greets me warmly. He's of average height and is clearly athletic, with a confident smile that rarely falters and some scruff

on his face. He shows me around open grassy fields, vegetable gardens, and long driveways leading to different homes on the property (one each for himself, his parents, and his grandparents). “For us, it’s incredibly personal. I’m the fifth generation of my family living here,” he says, adding that his family will lose the property unless he can figure out a way to make money from it.

Switzler makes it clear that he has no intention of encouraging the establishment of other businesses in the area. “It’s just the idea of coaching tennis on A-2 zoning that is the problem,” he explains. This type of zoning refers to land suitable for commercial agricultural operations – the type Switzler owns and where he intends to build his facility. He does not see his project fundamentally changing Stockton’s farm and country culture, arguing that it is only a hair outside of his existing property rights in Delaware Township.

During our conversation, Switzler spends a lot of time trying to make it clear that he never expected his proposal to be so polarizing in the community. He tells me he is hurt by his neighbors’ hostile reactions. At this point, he just wishes the opposition would talk to him. When Switzler tried to ask one of his neighbors why they don’t support him, they told him to “save it for the [township] meeting.” Another told him “not to call her and to take everything through her lawyer.” Similarly, when I reached out to residents opposing Switzler’s project, I had no luck finding someone willing to speak to me on or off the record about their position. Despite the community outcry, Switzler has no intention of backing off on his proposal.

Every few months, township meetings serve as the battleground where the two camps go head-to-head. Switzler’s lawyer answers questions from the township committee and a lawyer hired by Valerie Tucci, one of the residents opposing his proposed facility. Tucci declined to speak with me. Switzler has brought in construction and traffic specialists who have researched his property and the surrounding area and argue that his plan is viable. Stockton’s adjustment board facilitates these meetings and has the final say in whether his tennis facility will be approved. These meetings last for many hours, and often include vocal spectators, both in person and on Zoom who are often told to “quiet down” by facilitators.

The township's public meeting minutes from May indicate that traffic and lighting are the key concerns of Stockton residents. Sandy Ridge Road is small – two cars can barely pass one another. Opposing residents also argued that the amount, type, and height of the proposed lighting of the facility would be disruptive to the community. As a result, the adjustment board added conditions to Switzler's project that "any and all exterior light fixtures shall direct the light downward."

As I say goodbye to Switzler, a client pulls into his driveway, arriving for a tennis lesson on one of the two outdoor courts. Switzler has been coaching for years, inspired by lessons that his dad hosted there for him and his friends when he was a kid. He believes coaching for profit on his outdoor courts to be within his property rights, and thus indoor training at his proposed facility should be as well.

But Delaware Township's general provisions clearly limits the use of private tennis courts to the owner and nonpaying guests. Switzler has never received scrutiny for his outdoor courts, largely because they are not visible outside of his property. As his indoor facility would fall into the realm of "public use," he must obtain a variance to change the classification of part of his property from private use to public before he begins building it.

Soon after my meeting with Switzler, I have a Zoom call with Russ Poles, a real estate agent working in Stockton. Poles shows up a little early, his camera is turned off half of the time (by accident, he says) and he makes sure to show me the apple cider he is drinking from a local orchard. He explains that any for-profit work on A-2-zoned land is prohibited except for farm-related work. Poles suspects that no one cared whether Switzler's outdoor training business was allowed or not because it was "quiet;" complaints only began after his public proposal to expand his coaching business, which was considered a "threat" to community values.

"We didn't have these pain-in-the-butt people who think that they run the town," Poles said, referring to the time before Switzler proposed his facility. "It's not the good neighbor policy that it used to be, people kind of police things [now]." Poles also sees this sudden pushback as an issue of misinformation and a "classic witch hunt" that portrays Switzler as an enemy of the

rustic lifestyle Stockton represents. He believes if people listened to Switzler's idea, they would see that it accords with the general town goal of preserving farmland. In fact, Switzler's plan is very similar to other projects within the township that have recently been granted zoning variances, including a vineyard up the road that received approval this past summer.

When it comes to changing zoning ordinances, many residents view it as a choice between rural tradition and urbanization. The latter would mean rewriting the Delaware Township Comprehensive Farmland Preservation Plan (DTCFPP), which includes strict land use general provisions that seem to support Stockton's rural identity. One of the DTCFPP's "Commerce and Industry" goals is "to encourage commercial enterprises that will support the agricultural economy of the Township."

Alan Mallach, senior fellow at the Metropolitan Policy Program of the Brookings Institution, does not believe characterizing Stockton as an agricultural economy to be accurate. An expert on urbanization and community development, Mallach argues that Stockton is not even a true farming community, but rather poses as one, a phenomenon he has seen across New Jersey. "You've got horse farms – that's not agriculture, that's a rich person's hobby," he said. For Mallach, a place like Stockton is for people who idealize "country living," but only pick and choose aspects of farm life that are comfortable for them – such as keeping a chicken coop, small gardens, or horses – while paying for their lifestyle with income earned outside of the town.

"The number of real old-time farmers in Stockton and [the] vicinity you could probably count on the fingers of your hands," Mallach said. "You've got affluent incomers who are basically urban, or suburban people who have probably much more money than farmers anyway moving into these areas... [that] have the charm and the tradition and what they see as this rural landscape. And they're the ones who are fighting change." As he sees it, when Stockton claims it wants to "support the agricultural economy," it really means supporting the agricultural aesthetic of large plots of land with cattle, corn fields, and pine trees.

Opposition to large-scale growth has been prevalent in Stockton ever since it shifted from an industrial town to a "farm"

town in the mid-20th century. A series of natural disasters, fires, and eventually the closing of Stockton's railroad in 1958 led to the closing of many larger businesses, such as the downtown bank and all quarries. Nowadays, there are few people who are truly pushing for rapid urbanization. A recent plan to revive the abandoned Stockton Inn, which included building a 1000-seat amphitheater, was quickly dismissed for being too touristy and taking away from Stockton's small-town feel. The town hasn't changed in a long time thanks to a growing culture of strong opposition to any new development projects.

Switzler sees his tennis facility as a way to prevent this type of large-scale growth, as it would allow him to continue residing in Stockton and make a living through a small business, rather than having a big company take over his farmland. Mallach, although unfamiliar with the details of the project, sees a small tennis business as in line with Stockton's agricultural aesthetic. Switzler even intends his courts to be inside a large, barn-like structure in order to blend in with the town's appearance.

With local elections on the horizon, it is a generally tense time in the town, exacerbated by this "tennis debate." With nearby towns having witnessed great development over the years, Stockton residents fear their own town faces the same future. Switzler's next hearing with the township is scheduled for November 11, and he expects it to be a rough one, as all of them have proven to be. He is nearing the end of the "presentation" process and will soon move on to a townhall-style Q&A. Shortly after, the final decision will be delivered. Whether approved or not, Switzler's tennis project has reignited a strong debate about identity throughout Stockton that will undoubtedly continue beyond its courts.

About the Contributors

Aevyn Lan '24 (she/her) is a NYU Shanghai student double majoring in Advanced Global China Studies and Humanities with a minor in Chinese. She has a passion for writing in both academic and journalistic contexts, and her research interest is in traditional Chinese religion and philosophy. Outside the classroom, Aevyn is an avid reader of literary fiction; her current book recommendation is *The Orphan Master's Son* by Adam Johnson. Besides reading, Aevyn enjoys playing with her chihuahua and traveling. She is currently on a quest to visit every country in Southeast Asia.

Aline Grobys '23 (she/her) graduated this year with a Major in Computer Science and a Creative Writing Minor. She grew up in Germany with a French mother and started to write in English once she started college. With Fantasy and Science Fiction as a primary creative channel, she likes poetry that's wild, unrestricted and concrete. Catch her playing video games, cat-watching, and writing about reality and magic.

Caleb Martindale '23 majored in Economics with a minor in Math and Chinese, and is going on to become a marketing data analyst after graduation. He grew up in Portland, Oregon and spends his down time working out and exploring the outdoors.

Celia Forster '24 (she/her) is from Seattle, Washington and is pursuing a double major in Interactive Media Arts and

Psychology. Her interest in studying Chinese language and culture brought her to Shanghai, where she is now researching contemporary Chinese media and digital culture. In her free time, she enjoys exploring the beautiful parks of Shanghai and cooking new dishes.

Chenzhao (Robin) Wang '25 is pursuing studies in Math and Data Science.

Cherie Tan '24 (she/her) is majoring in Business and Finance with a minor in Social Science. She has an interest in social psychology and loves reading books about it. She also loves dogs and is eager to have one of her own.

Dagla Rodriguez '23 is graduating with a major in Global China Studies.

Haoyu “Rosie” Gao '21 is a graduate of NYU Shanghai in Interactive Media Arts and Creative Writing, is currently pursuing her MFA in Interactive Media and Game Design at USC. As an experience designer or as she calls it, an “interactive storyteller”, she hopes to convey meaning with experience beyond words.

Hellen Xu '23 is pursuing studies in Applied Psychology.

Kuntian Chen '23 is majoring in Honors Mathematics and minoring in Creative Writing. Math and poetry don't seem to be a match, but he finds both to be fresh languages/forms to experience/describe the world we live in. With 18 years of conventional Chinese education in public schools and 4 years of multicultural NYU Shanghai education, he likes to play with elements from Classical Chinese poetry and see how they bloom/wither on modern topics. For him, writing is the union of observation, exploration, living habits, mental chores, black tea with milk, half of a drowned crescent moon, etc. Enjoy the Poem! :)

Le Yin '23 has studied at NYU for six years and is still excited for finding more about this university. She is a full-time art historian and part-time poet/artist.

Louisa Cortez '21 is an NYU Shanghai student majoring in Finance. She writes under this pseudonym, “Louisa Cortez,” because she wants her readers to enjoy her works as they are without any speculation into her personal life. Louisa has always loved reading and it was only much later in life that she gave creative writing a chance. Had her POH professor not noticed that her writing responses and academic essays had a “poetic” quality to them and suggest that she try out a creative writing class, she would not have had the courage to pursue creative writing.

Luna Radonjanin '23 (she/her) is a senior at NYU Shanghai majoring in Humanities and with a minor in Creative Writing. She is originally from North Macedonia but has spent a third of her life living abroad in different countries, regularly going through the process of freshly settling in and meeting completely new people. With her primary interest in writing, she attempts to find connections between the different experiences of living abroad and how they have shaped her and others like her. When she isn't writing, you can find her watching her favorite shows or taking photographs of cats around the city.

Madison Downey '24 is pursuing studies in Interactive Media Arts.

Mark Brendt: I have been a food courier for Doordash, Uber Eats, Grubhub, and Instacart since I was dismissed from my job as a busser at BJ's restaurant and brewhouse. Born and raised in Colorado, I have found odd jobs in Seattle, New York, Florence, and London. As a Junior at NYU Shanghai, I have managed to stay on track to graduate by doing classes remotely and studying away/going local. Shoutout to Professor Lai for helping me write this piece of investigative journalism. Couldn't have done it without her. Deliveristas Unite!

Michelle Lin studied Biology at NYU Shanghai.

Mingway Lee '25 is pursuing studies in Interactive Media Art and Humanities.

Rhan (Ran) Xin '25: I am a Humanities major student, focusing on philosophy. Current interests include politics. Writing is something I have to do when the moment comes, and I am happy to share this poem with you; some parts of my soul are buried in verse, and if you are viewing it by your own experiences, and feel touched at some point, that's the moment we have a connection as strangers and the moving moment may be one meaning of existence.

Ruby Rich '24 is a rising senior at NYUSH studying Social Science with a focus in Environmental Studies and minoring in Global China Studies. She's a poetry enthusiast, known to write lots of late-night notes-app poetry and the occasional short story. Her work tends to be autobiographical, containing themes of feminism and religious angst (lol). On a lighter note, Ruby also loves art. She has a small art business where she sells acrylic paintings. For fun, she knits, bakes, and learns new languages. Currently, she is learning German and Chinese. Ruby hopes to continue studying environmental science and German in graduate school in Germany. She can't wait to have a small house with cats filled with art and writing nooks.

Ruihao Li '23 is a senior who struggles to graduate. He is as passionate in Egyptian myths as he is in quantum mechanics. In his spare time, he likes to lose stuff, walk in the rain, make last-minute travel plans, cook without recipes, but otherwise, he is quite a spiritual person. You can find him singing near the grass early morning.

Santiago Solano Díaz '25 is majoring in Political Science and Economics, with an interest in Legal studies.

Tiffany Leong '25 is pursuing studies in Interactive Media and Business.

Wenxin Tang '23 is a senior based in New York. She was a EV poetry editor at Oyster River Pages. Her works center on bipolar experiences.

Xiao Liang '22 studied Humanities (Philosophy).

Xiaoshuang Wu '22 studied at the NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study with a concentration on the Art of Narrative.

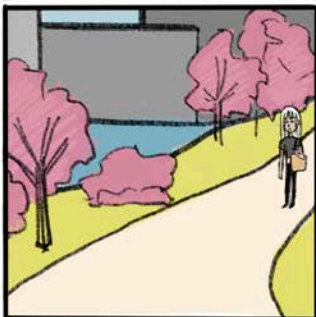
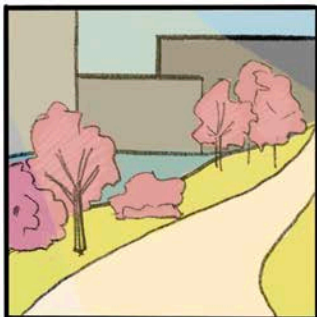
Yihan Yuan '24: I'm pursuing a major in Social Science with a Psychology track, and I'm passionate about mental health counseling. My goal is to become a counselor in the future and help individuals overcome challenges and improve their well-being. One of my strengths is my ability to observe and communicate with people, which has also fueled my love for writing. In addition to my major, I also minor in Creative Writing. I enjoy writing poems and realistic fiction pieces inspired by my personal experiences and the people around me. Loss is a recurring theme in my work, and I strive to convey the complexity of human emotions through my writing.

Yinqi Wang '22 studied Humanities.

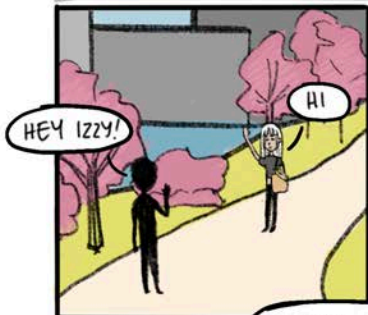
Yiwei Zhao '24 is pursuing studies in Humanities.

Yixuan Cui '22 studied Social Science (Psychology).

YOU FIND YOURSELF IN A NEW PLACE,



MEETING SOMEONE WHO COULD HAVE EASILY REMAINED A STRANGER..



HEY IZZY!

HI



So...

COFFEE?

YOU KNOW IT.



WHAT?

IS THAT ANY GOOD?

OH...

ONE LATTE WITH LAVENDER SYRUP, PLEASE

NO, I ORDER IT TO PUNISH MYSELF FOR SPENDING £6 ON A COFFEE...

I'M KIDDING!

ONE MORE OF THE SAME, THEN!

SO, YOU TELL YOURSELF IT'S FATE.