POPLAR REVIEW

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THE POPLAR REVIEW 杨高

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Issue 1

Editorial Board

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Welcome to the *Poplar Review*: What's in a Name?

You hold in your hands the inaugural issue of the *Poplar Review*. 欢迎 and welcome! So why the *Poplar Review*? What could the name of this journal possibly have to do with a megalopolis better known for its soaring supertall skyscrapers than for its indigenous flora?

From New York to Abu Dhabi to Shanghai, NYU student publications traditionally take their names from their neighborhood squares and thoroughfares. In New York, the *Washington Square News* has been training student journalists since 1973. The *Washington Square Review* gives creative writing graduate students hands-on experience in publishing cutting-edge poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction while *Mercer Street* and *West Fourth* feature exemplary undergraduate essays and creative work, respectively. Abu Dhabi is home to *Electra Street* and *Airport Road*, blending interdisciplinary essays with creative writing and art (though when it comes to journalism, *The Gazelle* goes its own way—hopefully not wandering into busy emerati traffic). Here in Shanghai, just south of the Yangtze Delta and the east of the network of waterways that form China's historic Grand Canal, *The Hundred River Review* publishes standout student essays, while students publish news and views in *On Century Avenue*.

So, again, why the *Poplar Review*? Let's begin with our Chinese name: 杨高. *Yáng Gāo.* This name comes from the two streets that meet where the under-construction NYU Shanghai Qiantan Campus—scheduled to open in the fall of 2022—is sited: Gaoqing and Yangsi Roads: 高清路 / 杨思路. By taking 杨 *yáng* ("poplar") and 高 *gāo* ("tall"), we find inspiration for the English-language name in the Chinese characters 杨高, *Yáng Gāo*.

Similary, our sibling publication, *Bright Lines*—an online-only space open to creative work from any and all students—takes the 清 ("clear, distinct") and the 思 ("to think, consider") as its cue (it helps that *gaoqing* means "high definition" and resonates with Shanghai's high-tech present while also hinting at China's literati tradition and emphasis on lucid intellection).

Such creative remixing of characters to create unique names that partake of two or more different places, people, or things has a long history in China. The Grand Canal, for instance, which consists of linked waterways running from Beijing to Hangzhou—and which connects to Shanghai's own network of canals and riverine thoroughfares and, ultimately the sea—is known as 京杭大運河, Jīngháng Dà Yùnhé, with the 京 (*jīng*) coming from Beijing; the 杭 (*háng*) from Hangzhou.

Hence, the *Poplar Review*, with a respectful nod to the landscape from which this incredibly city springs on the one hand, and another nod to NYU's global tradition of naming publications after their locations *in the city*, and *of the city*. Future issues will be produced by students working closely with faculty and Writing and Speaking Fellows to showcase great creative writing along with contributions from the visual arts.

You can find more creative work from NYU Shanghai students online at shanghaiconfluences.org, home of both *Bright Lines* and the digital edition of the *Poplar Review*. If you're a student interested in sharing your work, head there for submission guidelines and deadlines. We want to read your work!

Producing a magazine is intensively and extensively collaborative work, and the *Poplar Review* would not exist without support from the Writing Program, in particular our recently departed director Jennifer Tomscha, as well as our newly arrived director Mark Brantner. We thank Dean Amy Becker for her role in shaping the Writing Program and making the Creative Writing Minor possible. Speaking and Writing Fellow Ren Jie Kan has been absolutely indespensible, as has Writing Program administrator Jun Yang. Arts professor Monika Lin connected us with visiting NYU Abu Dhabi student Rayna Li, whose laser-cut woodblock prints grace our debut issue's cover. And of course our creative writing faculty, many of whom are serving on the *Poplar Review* Edtorial Board (special thanks to Daniel Woody for his design skills), have helped make our inaugural issue a reality, along with those most essential of collaborators: our student writers and artists—this issue is dedicated to you. Enjoy!

—David Perry
Creative Writing Coordinator
The Writing Program at NYU Shanghai

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TIAN TIAN WEDGWOOD YOUNG

Quarantine Visits

I steal the seconds
between showers, work
— scuttle them
into my hoard —
light, soap-stained.

They struggle, wriggle away from us,
nipping over our toes as we pretend to ignore the alarm.

Jackhammer out the window judders awake, rousing
the city from its months-long coma.

A few weeks ago it was the birds, a dawn chorus I
never knew we had.

And on my walk home, those creatures will fade, under
the wheels of a new morning rush hour

South Caoxi Lu tulips stand proud,
odourless

Liana

"Did you hear what Liana's husband made her do recently?" my grandmother says in Tagalog as she sits next to me.

"No, Mama-la, I didn't," I respond, stifling my curiosity.

"He made her get her eyebrows done! What kind of a man cares about the shape of his wife's eyebrows! There's obviously something off about him…" she trails off, rambling on about his growing facial hair and pungent cologne. "What do you think she should have done?"

Mama-la has always been smarter than she seemed. She uses her old age as an excuse for her lack of filter. I remember when she once got a phone call from prank callers in her neighborhood. "Hello pretty woman, what kind of underwear are you wearing?"

"*Heh puta* I'm not wearing any underwear!" she yelled and slammed the phone down, muttering curses. When mom asked about it, Mama-la played the act of the poor old woman perfectly, aghast and terrified of those horrible boys who harassed her. But my mother just laughed as the whole house did, knowing the prank callers were likely more disturbed about the call than Mama-la was.

There has always been something clear in her cataract eyes. And so, every time she comes to me and gives her gossip on Liana, I know she is really trying to figure out why our friendship fell apart. A question I too do not know the answer to.

* * *

Whenever I think of where the story of Liana begins, I trace it all the way back to when she was born, two years before I was born. The story of Liana's birth was one of my favorites as a child, whenever mom would tell it. Liana's mother arrived at Mama-la's home at fifteen years of age and has worked there ever since as a cook. She was a sturdy girl with riotous curls and calloused palms who followed her own palate over any recipe to get just the right amount of roasted garlic, chile, or hint of calamansi with oyster sauce needed to bring out the flavor. 'Melda' we called her—a nickname formed from her legal name, Maria Lourdes, that held the affection of a family member, because in many ways she quickly became one. It was Melda who accompanied Mama-la to her pedicure appointments and walked along the river bank laughing at her ridiculous commentaries. We ate her food at every family gathering and I still crave her food whenever I long for a taste of my home and childhood.

It was New Year's Eve, and only my mother was home when Melda, eight months pregnant at thirty-five years old, went into labor. Mom would describe the chaos of driving to the nearest hospital through the smoky streets filled with New Year's partiers dancing under festival banners as Melda's screams drowned out the fireworks. She was not only pregnant, but also loved to indulge in her own cooking a bit too much. Consequently, she posed some issues for the skinny security guard at the hospital who was one of the only staff on duty during the holiday. My mother and the guard had to push her up the long ramp on a wheelchair she barely fit in. I always laughed when mom would mimic the heavy pants of the security guard, his shaking arms and legs while his face screwed up in pain as if he was in more pain than Melda. After hours of labor, Liana was born.

Two years later, I was born, and by the time I could walk Liana had become my playmate. Every Sunday after church when my family went to Mama-la's house for lunch, I would run straight to the small shack outside the kitchen where Liana and Melda lived.

"Liana! I have the newest idea for our spy game!" I would shriek loud enough for the whole house to hear. She would run towards me in equal excitement, "Louisa! You're here!"

When I was seven, I didn't want to be called "Marianna" or "Anna" anymore, because I liked the idea of picking my own name. I insisted on being called "Louisa," but only Liana did so. She was the only playmate I liked because she understood my unspoken rules. For instance, I hated inviting other kids to my room because they played with my dolls. I loved collecting dolls but disliked having anyone, even myself, taking them from their perfect placement on my shelf and playing with them.

They called us twins because of our tan skin and dark straight hair. However, her nose was rounder than mine and she always looked better in my hand-me down clothes. Her skinnier frame didn't make my blouses look like they were a little too tight as they did on me. She was also like a grandchild to my grandmother, the name "Mama-la" sounding more natural on her lips than my own. Not only did she live with her, but, like my grandmother, she spoke Tagalog as a first language unlike my cousins and me whose first language was English. Mama-la was proud that her grandchildren lived in the city center and got better education, but that also meant that it was difficult for her to communicate with us.

When my cousins and I were children, Mama-la would try to talk to us, but we sometimes couldn't understand what she said through her thick Filipino accent.

"Mama-la, why do you say 'pee-cha,' instead of 'pizza'? And isn't it 'cake,' not 'kehk'?"

"*Hay dios*, I'm going to get a nosebleed. Nevermind, *hijo*, go eat."

Mama-la often felt exhausted trying to keep up with her grandchildren. But there was Liana with whom she was more comfortable around and who could indulge her need to gossip about the neighborhood wives and pedicurist's daughter.

I remember the many times Liana and I walked to the tiny *Sari Sari* store at the end of my grandmother's lane. Mama-la would send us to secretly buy some Coke and in exchange she would let us keep the change to get whatever we wanted. Mama-la was addicted to Coca-Cola, calling it her medicine. Whenever we kids would ask why she was allowed to drink soda while we weren't, she would try to convince us it had Vitamin C and other things good for old ladies.

My father had even kindly commented one Sunday lunch that she should stop drinking Coke because he was worried for her health.

The next Sunday, my father was pleased at the sight of her sipping from a coffee mug.

"I'm so glad you're looking out for your health!"

"Yes! I'm drinking black tea now," she smiled. When my father turned away, she nudged the cup in my direction, urging me to take a sip. Confused, I sipped tentatively, expecting to taste bitter black tea but discovering sweet soda instead. I looked up at her, shocked; she only smiled and winked.

Sari Sari stores had everything. Just behind the outside countertop, colorful strings of sachets of fruit juice, detergent, and coffee hung from the top shelves like festival banners. The shelves were stacked with every snack, from bags of chips to endless jars of candy. A cooler for soda and ice cream hummed happily at the back of the store. Unlike groceries that sold most items in bulk packages, *Sari Sari* stores bought these packages of food and other household items and sold each piece individually. It allowed the residents in the neighborhood to only pay for what they needed with what they had. Children especially loved *Sari Sari* stores, as they could buy three pieces of gum or a tiny clear plastic bag of soda with the few coins they were able to find lying around.

"*Tao po!*" Liana called out as we sat on the metal stools, peeking over the counter to look for the *tindera*. The *tindera* got up from her nap behind one of the shelves, rubbing her eyes and eyeing us to see if we were one of those kids on her blacklist who listed expenses under their parent's tab without approval.

"*Isang bote ng* Coke *na* large *at dalawang* soda, *isang* Root Beer, *isang* Orange Royal Soda," Liana ordered since I was always too shy. She was confident and always seemed like an adult to me, as she wasn't afraid of ordering for herself or walking alone around the village.

The *tindera* collected the coins and began pouring our soda into clear plastic bags, leaving Mama-la's large bottle of Coke on the counter. We sat, talking about my brothers and my older cousins.

"You know your cousins shouted at me yesterday for playing with the doll you gave me."

"What why?" I asked curiously.

"They wanted me to get them a glass of water," she sighed.

"Why didn't you tell them to get it themselves?"

"I—I didn't want to get in trouble so I just did it so they could leave me alone."

"My dad would never let them treat me like that. Where's your father?" I asked as we were handed our sodas. On a hot summer day, the soda was a relief and I loved the feeling of clutching the clear bag of cool soda, watching the bubbles sparkle in the midday sun. The pink straw bent easily between my lips as I eagerly took a sip.

"Oh, I don't have a dad, he was eaten by a shark," Liana replied casually.

"He was?!"

"Yes, that's what mama said!" When I got home, I told mom, who laughed saying that it wasn't true. But for a really long time I believed Liana over my mother.

* * *

The two years between Liana and me always felt so drastic—she seemed much older and more mature than me. She was practical and knew how to do things I couldn't. While I got scared of frying pans when the oil would pop, at ten years old she could fry tocino sausages and make pancakes. She knew how to clean dinner knives and she always folded her bedding during sleepovers at my house while I left them rumpled, never thinking twice when I got up. She could turn on a stove, light a match, and speak to the delivery man. She knew how to take care of my baby brother, knowing what he needed when he cried, while I grimaced and got irritated at his sobs.

I learned a lot from her, like speaking the Tagalog they spoke in the streets and how to make pancakes—though she always turned on the stove for me. The only thing I could offer in return was improving her English. Mama-la would watch us amusedly whenever we would speak in a mix of both languages.

Liana was always loyal to me. I would often get into trouble as a child because of my inability to control my rages. Once, at my grandparents' house, I got into so much trouble because I bit my cousin's nanny. I was never one to start fights, but I always finished

them. I was easily provoked by things like my little brother's teasing, playmates not giving me back my toys, and my older cousin threatening to tattle on me. Mom would often punish me, saying it didn't matter who started it and that I had to be the bigger person. But when my cousin's nanny said something—something I can't remember—I couldn't stop the rage that overtook me.

I hate how I can't remember what she did, but she said something to me that hurt. All I remember was pure anger and a feral need to hurt her back. The next thing I knew, my teeth were clamped to her arm. Her skin was fat and loose, and I remember the softness of her flesh on my incisors as I latched on. The relief was immediate, and I felt at peace even as she screamed and pushed me away with tears in her eyes. There was no blood but there was a tiny crescent mark on her arm where you could clearly see the indent of my teeth and tell which ones were still baby teeth and which ones were permanent.

I was grounded and forced to apologize. No one believed me when I said that nanny said something horrible, except Liana. She understood what it felt like to be not taken seriously by adults and, more importantly, knew that I would never hurt someone unless they hurt me. It was at that moment that I knew she was the only one I could rely on.

* * *

We grew up together, moving on from toys to boys. She would always sleep over and spend the summers with me. We would go to the park every day, two little girls watching in fascination the eleven-year-old boys with blond hair and odd green eyes from the international school. They played American sports like baseball and spoke English in a way that sounded exaggerated to my ears. We found out their names and what they were like at home by hiding behind the bushes, muffling our giggles as we tried to overhear their nannies speak about them.

We joined sports summer camps in my village just to meet cute boys. We would even bike past my crush's house, after finding out his address in the sign-up ledger for tennis camp.

"Hey Lorenzo!" Liana would yell and speed off on her borrowed bike without me. I would bite back a scream as I tried to catch up, heart pounding in excitement and embarrassment. She would look back at me with a wild smile on her face, her matching ponytail blowing recklessly in the wind. It was all so simple then, just two playmates enjoying every moment in each other's company. That age where there was an impatient excitement at the idea of growing up, but not knowing what it was really like.

"Who's your friend, Anna?"

"This is my best friend Liana. Her mother is my grandmother's cook!" I never thought much of the odd pitying looks people gave Liana and me when I would introduce her to them. I didn't notice the little things like the fact that the striped socks she gave me for Christmas were bought using the coins she had saved from her allowance so she could give her best friend a present too. I never bothered to question why she never had any new clothes or how she liked to linger a little bit longer in my room before we had to take her home.

I never felt different from her until I visited her school for the first time. I had no school for a couple of days during the week, so mom and I visited Mama-la's house. Liana was finishing 5th grade at the time and was at school when I visited.

"Liana's mama is going to pick her up from school right now. Why don't you join her?" Mama-la suggested. Excited about the idea, I ran to Melda who was about to walk out the gate.

From my grandmother's village we rode a motorized tricycle along the bridges and streets of Marikina. It was my first time on a tricycle and I loved the wind on my face as we sped along narrow side roads, the driver effortlessly avoiding parked cars and children playing basketball on the road. My fascination turned into confusion when we stopped in front of a tiny run-down shack, crammed between other hovels. Surprisingly, inside was a lot more orderly and clean than I expected with neat rows of tiny desks and a blackboard.

"Louisa! Is that you?" I heard suddenly. Liana, wide eyed and grinning, rushed up to us and hugged me.

* * *

"Yes, I was just too impatient to see you!" I laughed. She grabbed my hand and then started to give me a tour of her tiny classroom.

"This is Louisa! She's the best friend who I told you about…" she said ecstatically to her classmates and teacher.

Before then, in my head Liana always existed in Mama-la's polished house, in my purple room during sleepovers, and wearing the colorful dresses I let her borrow. The image of her in a generic public-school uniform inside a cramped room with stained floorboards and walls of peeled paint seemed so out of place. This was a side I never saw, a scene just beyond my car window that we drove past, one that I never bothered to really look at. It was something so plainly before me that I knew about but never understood.

It was then I made a vow that someday I would help her get a better future, a future where she could sleep in her own room and have her own things. One that wasn't a temporary game that would end once I left my grandmother's house.

* * *

Was growing apart inevitable? She grew up so much more quickly than I did. I was still such a child at the age of twelve. I remember the feeling of denial I had when she told me that Santa didn't exist.

"I swear I heard Aunt Mary-Ann talking about wrapping the gifts 'from Santa' that she actually bought herself," she said exasperatedly over the telephone after I refused to believe her.

"Maybe you didn't hear her correctly."

"He's not real, Louisa."

It was so easy for her to grow up, or maybe she simply had no choice when my cousins and guests treated as an extra hand for chores. She got her period first, wore a bra first, and in these things, she had more knowledge and experience than me. But it was more than just physical growth. She began to not only play with me but play me.

I could be a brat sometimes. I was obsessed with making up my own games and sticking to the schedule of activities I made. It was

to the point that everything I planned had to be followed to the exact detail, and Liana was like my perfect doll that I could dress and force into following the scenarios I created.

"No Liana you have to wear the wig! We need to practice this dance routine perfectly! I know you want to go to the park, but we are not scheduled to go until 1pm," I said as she tried to take the itchy blond wig off, exhausted after seven attempts at getting the routine I wanted correctly.

When I got too insistent and stubborn, she would threaten to find better friends. Specifically, she would say she would leave me for Phoebe, the child of my grandmother's neighbor, who she said had better things than I did. I only found out much later that Phoebe didn't exist, but at the time I was devastated. She knew the right words to say, she knew how to give herself power.

"I'm sorry! We don't have to do only what I want to do. Please don't break the pact!" I said with tears in my eyes.

"Ok, Louisa. I won't leave you for Phoebe."

Even though I eventually knew what she did, I never held anything against her for it. I knew I could be stubborn and too much in control. In fact, I still admire her for putting me in my place and finding a way to giver herself power.

As we got into our early teens, she became more conscious of the way she looked. As tanned skin morena Filipinas, we were both introduced to traditional Filipino beauty standards that dictated that dark skin was unattractive. Mom, however, always told me that all skin colors were beautiful and that in America they actually wanted to be tan. So, I grew up never feeling bothered by the whitening products ads or the sly comments of both children and old ladies who commented that I should avoid the sun. Instead, I got even darker because of playing soccer. Liana on the other hand got whiter.

When I finally visited Mama-la's house after being away on vacation, Liana's face was almost unrecognizable. Her face was white, but not really. It was as if she put powder on her face in an attempt to subdue the darkness of her skin. Her once warm and golden-brown skin was now an ashy pale brown. It was as if there was a stain on her face that she had tried to remove, but no matter how much she tried to scrub it off, it would never completely come off. Mama-la told

me she had been using intense whitening products. Liana, however, was happy with her new skin.

* * *

Soon after, she rebonded her hair, making it artificially straight and oily. She was pleased that it looked like the hair of those girls in the local shampoo commercials

"...and when you go to bed, Louisa, you must brush your hair a hundred times and let it fan out on your pillow when you sleep, so it won't get tangled in the morning…"

These are my clearest memories of where our differences started to grow. During this time, my older cousins also started talking to me more since I was old enough to enjoy gossip and the same books they liked. I also started to get more engrossed in my school life with my new clique. On Sundays, I started going to the movies with my older cousins, talking to them about their boyfriends when they took me shopping.

"Hi Louisa! How are you?" Liana said, as she put the large serving bowl of rice at the lunch table where my cousin and I were having a conversation.

"Oh, hi Liana! I was just talking to Nina about this new book we read."

"Oh, how nice! What's it about?"

"It's nothing you'd understand," my cousin interjected quickly, trying to pull me back into the conversation. Liana looked like she wanted to say something but instead swallowed her words.

And so, it went. Unconsciously, I started avoiding her, feeling awkward about not being able to talk about the different interests we'd grown into. I also became more aware of how privileged I was in a way that made me feel bad about talking about all the parties and trips I took around the country with friends at school. More and more I got caught up in my social life. I sometimes skipped Sunday lunches to hang out with friends and go to parties. The times I was at Mama-la's house, I stayed with my cousins, with whom I could talk about these parties and the newest clothes and fashion trends. No one ever commented on our growing separation. It was as if it

was something inevitable everyone expected. It seemed completely acceptable to them, as if Liana was just another favorite doll of mine that I grew too old to play with. And a part of me started to believe them.

In an attempt to relieve the growing guilt that plagued me, I told myself then that if she really wanted to speak to me, she could just approach me. But it's not like she could have done anything like enter a conversation between my cousins and me without invitation, approach me at the family lunch table, or ask to join my cousins and me when we went out. She knew there were boundaries and rules that the world made up. Rules she hoped would not matter, rules she hoped would never be used against her by her own best friend.

"Marianna" my name sounded foreign from a voice so familiar, "your mother is calling you." I turned and it was Liana. I saw no anger in her eyes, just a quiet acceptance and a lack of surprise. She gave me a stranger's smile then turned away. I never heard the name Louisa again.

* * *

She went off to a small local college to become a teacher when I was still in high school. Mom paid for her schooling and I never saw her on Sundays anymore. I only caught subtle comments about her from Mama-la, who would tell me how she was doing all these projects for school, how she did on exams, and how she was always out of the house.

I often didn't ask about her and avoided listening to stories that made me both curious and guilty that we had drifted apart. There was one story however that caught my attention. Mama-la called up my mother angrily, telling her to stop paying for Liana's school fees temporarily.

"I saw Liana come home with braces! You know how expensive braces are. Where did she get the money? Melda doesn't even have enough money to replace her broken shoes! But I found out how she paid for it," Mama-la said, shocked and angry. "I called up her school and asked for the receipt. It turns out the cost she's been giving us is much higher than the actual fees!"

"Did you confront her?" mom asked, hurt and surprised.

"Yes. Liana said that she asked for more because she needed money to buy food at school and to save up for braces to fix her teeth."

"Ano? My own children don't even buy food at school, they bring food from home. She can't at least use the money on her mama?"

They confronted her and Liana admitted what she did and apologized. My mother bought Melda a new pair of shoes and told Liana that she would stop funding her if she was dishonest again.

I was shocked that she would do such a thing. At that moment she seemed like such a stranger to me and a small part of me couldn't help but feel less guilty about our lost friendship.

* * *

The next time I saw her, she was pregnant. I was a senior in high school at the time and the only new information I had was that she had failed her board exams and was studying to retake them the following year. I visited home for Christmas from studying abroad and there she was at the lunch table, flushed and heavy with child, sitting beside her boyfriend. Her boyfriend was shorter than her, scruffy and pudgy, nothing like the blond-haired boys we used to gush about.

"He's Muslim!" Mama-la had told us the day before at our family lunch.

"Ma, there's nothing wrong with being Muslim. The issue is that she didn't finish her studies and they're not married." Mom sighed.

"Well at least his family is rich, even though he lives off his father, who is a judge by the way," Mama-la continued, ignoring my mother. My father laughed, remembering being in Liana's boyfriend's position the first time he'd met my grandmother. He arrived at 3pm on a Wednesday and was greeted by Mama-la at the gate. He told me how Mama-la had given him an odd look after he said he was there to pick my mother up on a date. "It's mid-afternoon on a weekday. Don't you have a job?" After two months of gossiping about him to the entire village and actually getting to know him, Mama-la started calling him her favorite, conveniently forgetting all the criticisms and comments she had made.

The next day when Liana came with her boyfriend to get my mother and Mama-la's blessing, she smiled brightly at me. Her billowing white puff-sleeve dress and red cheeks made her look even larger, so different from the image of the skinny girl in my head. Her teeth were brighter than the pearls on her neck and her eyes sparkled like the modest diamond engagement ring on her pregnancy-swollen finger. I remember smiling awkwardly, feeling underdressed in a midriff top and shorts. I waved quickly and then went upstairs.

* * *

"The baptism of Liana's child is today," mom said as she put on her pearl necklace. "Do you want to come?"

"Oh, I have some stuff I need to get done today. Send my regards," I mumbled, not knowing how to act if I went. I didn't feel ready to unlock and unpack the emotions and questions I locked away like the dusty toy chest in my attic. I was no longer a child that could play ignorant and pretend to not feel any guilt about our past if I saw her at her child's baptism.

I sometimes wonder what she's like as a mother—if she's the same caring, quick thinker I grew up with. I'm glad she raised her socioeconomic status because of her husband—although, according to Mama-la, he was actually a little mentally challenged. Apparently, his parents had no objections at all to him marrying her because they were happy that someone could take care of him.

Was growing apart inevitable? Was it my fault for not trying harder or was it something natural due to our growing differences? Still, I cannot trace my memories to a clear answer. And perhaps such questions are irrelevant. Maybe the real question, the one I've been hiding from, is not the one about what had happened, but where it will end. It is this question that has prevented me from asking my grandmother about Liana, because deep down I know I would be forced to take one of two paths based on the answer.

If she is happy, I would be genuinely happy for her and would be spared from doing anything—a coward's way out. But if she is not, it would plague me and I would feel the need to do something,

to confront our entire history and attempt to keep the vow I made as a child. Down this path I would be forced to face the awkwardness, the blame, and the disappointment.

I feel like that little girl again—the girl who is shy and hesitates when there is uncertainty, who balks at situations she can't reduce into schedules or scenes she can control.

"Is she happy?" I finally ask Mama-la.

She turns away slightly, seeing something that I cannot.

"I don't know," she replies as she shrugs nonchalantly. "Maybe you should ask her."

YIXUAN CUI

Wonder

I'm renting an apartment this semester, two metro stops away from school. It's my junior year and sometimes I refuse to believe the time has passed so fast, and that there is only one year left for me to be a student who can unapologetically enjoy her life without doing anything for real. The idea of my life in Shanghai coming to an end frightens me. Once I conjure it up in my mind, as soon as I visualize this new world I have built for myself, as rough as it may be, I realize that it's on the verge of collapsing. The bedside lamp in my apartment that casts a soft yellowish radiance on my pillow every night, the hidden closet filled with the intense fragrance I have sprayed far too much of, and the unwrapped apples on the tea table I bought almost a month ago—they all become surreal but somehow meaningful to me. Even walking in Shanghai every day is not just walking anymore.

I enjoy the walk on Century Avenue between school and the metro station. I wonder about lots of things when I walk alone. I wonder who I will encounter today. I wonder what it's like to be loved by someone. When night falls on Century Avenue, traffic starts to flow on the broad street like a flickering river. Looking above, if there is a faint pink tinge to the end of the greyish baby-blue sky—that's when you know the weather will be good the next day. It always reminds me of getting a hot boba tea in winter. But the neon outlining the skyscrapers in this busiest of financial districts is incongruously hideous. A combination of cheap blue, white, and red:

what an aesthetic disaster. If I had a boyfriend who would walk me home, I would share my critique with him. Besides the ugly blazing neon decor of those massive buildings, I would tell him to look at the senior couple sitting on the bench. Do they live nearby or are they taking a long walk to enjoy the night on Century Avenue? Are they happily married? What about their children, do they have filial pious daughters and sons? We would also talk about the crispy and sweet autumn breeze, the tempered yellowish street light falling through the trees, and the trees, those vigorous trees with luxuriant branches and leaves that cast their shadows on the sidewalks.

If you ask me what I love about my boyfriend, I would give you a long list. But most importantly, what I love about my boyfriend would be the sense of safety and warmth he gives to me when he holds me with his strong arms and my cheek feels the touch of tenderness as I sink into his cotton hoodie; when he sits next to me and gently pats my shoulders every time I take a deep sigh for getting stuck in the middle of writing; and when he tells me he loves me for who I am before kissing me goodbye. It's the feeling that my father used to give me when he took me out to the park on a sunny weekend, climbed up a tree to get my flying kite, and read me bedtime stories every night until I fell asleep. My boyfriend must be a polite and silent man who prefers to have a conversation with me when any problem appears in our relationship instead of just losing his temper at me. My mother always says that you can never see the essence of a man without living with him under the same roof for many years. You think you know him. A man who dresses up clean every day, greets his colleagues with the most gentle smile, and pulls the chair for ladies at the table, can be the same person that yells at you because you brought home the wrong kind of apples. "Regardless, you are still going to be with someone." That's the final conclusion of my mother's speech.

The illusion of my perfect boyfriend ends up me questioning why such a person hasn't appeared in my life. What is that leaves me so pathetically single in my twentieth year?

My father has an answer. "You are not good enough," he said while peeling an apple in front of me. He is an expert in peeling apples, pears, or any fruits with skin. He doesn't even need a vegeta-

ble peeler. With a small sharp fruit knife, starting at the stem end, he removes the peel from the flesh in a circular motion, smoothly and steadily. When I was little, every time he finished peeling, he would proudly pick up the long apple skin in a spiral strip shape with his thumb and first finger to get my wow. Now the magic strip goes directly to the trash bin because of the audience's lack of interest.

"Boys would line up to chase after you if you are eligible," my father continued. I was sitting across from him, eyes on my phone. By ignoring him I hoped to make his words lose all power over me.

That was what I had been doing during the nine months of quarantine, keeping silent every time he spoke, avoiding unnecessary conversations with him, and locking myself in my bedroom when he sat in the living room. Sometimes I wonder how a person can change so much, becoming a completely different one. But I have never questioned whether rejection is the right thing to do when dealing with a person in transition, particularly my father, and I have never questioned whether I have changed too much in my father's view. I forget when exactly my father turned into another person to me. There seem to be some grey areas in the spectrum of my memory. The timeline of how my relationship with my father has evolved and cracked is discontinuous. I can describe the time period when my parents started to fight a lot, the night that I witnessed their fight becoming physical for the first time as I was in middle school, and the current phase where verbal conflicts have been normalized in our family life. But I can't locate the turning point where the intimacy between my father and I disappeared.

"Pathetic." Sharp and brief, my father finally commented on the life of his twenty-year-old boyfriendless daughter. He took a big bite of the apple he just peeled with a big smile of triumph on his thin face. That was one of those moments you can see the shadow of my seven-year-old brother on my father. Their grins always make them look mischievous and innocent, and make you believe that they never intend to or would be able to truly hurt you.

Without receiving a response, my father walked away listlessly, as if the apple he'd peeled didn't taste good. He chose to talk in the way that he believed was interesting and I decided not to tell him how uncomfortable I felt with his words, which was basically how

all the communications between my father and me ended up in the unbearably monotonous quarantine life that I had to spend at home as an idle college student. However, by not solving the problems in our failed communications, we were planting invisible bombs under the peaceful surface of our life. I hadn't realized the danger ahead of us until I lit the fuse. One week before I returned to the other side of my life in Shanghai, the bomb exploded.

I remember the door of my parents' bedroom was open and the light was on. The light in each room of our house had two hues. If you pressed the button twice, the light would turn from bright white into warm yellow. My brother always switched to the yellow light after he got back home from school. Under the dusky but soft yellow light behind him, I saw my father growling like a mad bull and I was the red cape. His fingers aimed straight at my face. My mother and aunt were gripping each of his arms and trying to hold him back. They are both petite Chinese women. Their heads just reached my father's shoulder. My brother was standing two or three steps away from us under the shower, naked and crying. Maybe he didn't cry. I guess he got confused by the situation and didn't know how to react. He probably hadn't gotten the chance to wash off the shampoo when the fight broke out right in front of the bathroom. Had his little plastic yellow duck fallen to the wet floor? I'm not sure. He was in the periphery of my vision and the center was occupied by my father's face. I could clearly see blood in his bulging eyes.

"I brought you up. I raised you. You never, never, talk to me like that. Do you hear me?" He yelled so hard that his voice became hoarse, "I owe you nothing————." He called me by my full name, the name he had given me. He liked to call me "baby daughter" when I was little in a way that made me feel treasured and protected. I miss that feeling, and I don't think I'll ever get it from my father again.

In his desperately hoarse voice, my father was venting the great pain and outrage caused by the betrayal of his family, his blood. The betrayal was that I didn't love him back with the same amount of devotion that he had given to me. That is a feeling of a whole world collapsing in your mind, the world you have built brick by brick with the belief that it will all be great. It collapsed that night. It was all

smashed into shit. But my father should know more about collapse than me since he's an architect and was a builder too.

My father worked in Singapore for two years after I was born. He was in his twenties, having graduated from an architectural school where he met and fell in love with my mother. He was supposed to work as a technician who would have his own seat in a bright and clean office, drawing lines and squares on a computer. But for the sake of his newly-built family, he took a well-paid blue-collar job, flew to Singapore, and lived in a humid and messy dorm room with his co-workers, thousands of kilometers away from his parents, his lovely wife, and his three-month-old daughter. In that foreign country, he went with his construction team to a new district, built houses, and headed to the next one. Government housing in Clementi and Bukit Timah, a primary school in Ang Mo Kio… My father told me he couldn't recall the rest of the places where he had sweated and lifted countless bricks when I asked him about his work in Singapore. "Don't make up any names if you want to talk about it with other people someday," he said in the end.

After two years, when he finally came back home, he became a stranger to his daughter. I had no idea of what the concept "father" meant as a two-year-old. I thought the sound of telephone ringing meant "father," that any man in a wedding picture was "father." But I didn't resist when that stranger hugged me. The next day I learned how to use the word "father" with its real meaning. "It's because of the blood," my mother said every time she told me the story in an affectionate tone.

My father shouted out a lot of things that night, things that I had unapologetically done to him, and that had made him feel mistreated for a long time. But it was the words from my brother's mouth that devastated me. "Don't hit sister, Dad, please don't hit sister," he screamed.

My heart was torn. The poor little boy who was supposed to enjoy his shower with his toy duck and go to bed was begging his father to not harm his sister who is fourteen years older than him. He is the same child who fights with me over a Coke and says that he won't talk to me anymore after the fight, who cries so loud and so easy when he can't find his toy truck. I wonder if he was aware

of how small and vulnerable he looked in that adult fight when he stood beside my mother, grasping the bottom of my father's pants. His body swayed as my father was battling with my mother and aunt who held him back.

"Go, go to your room," my mother commanded me. I almost believed that she was controlling this wild monster from her low and firm voice. But only if I could ignore how fragile she looked in my vision. In fact, she had never seemed so soft to me, and it seemed that the slightest touch could easily bruise her.

"I'll call you if anything happens. Go back to your room and lock the door." My mother pushed me to my room with all of her strength. I could have resisted, as I was much bigger than her. But I didn't. I was scared. I stepped back. I let my mother protect me even if she was not able to. I even locked the door from inside.

That was the moment that I started to regret everything. I started to think that it was my fault. I shouldn't have triggered a fight with my father who was apparently drunk and tired at the end of a long day. It was I who put my brother, my mother, and my aunt into this situation.

But I couldn't hold myself back a few minutes ago when my father scolded my mother, who was helping my brother shower in the bathroom, for bringing home the apples that he had told her not to purchase because they were of bad quality. I thought my intervention would be a brave and just move. I would become the righteous hero who stood up and revolted against the authoritarian. That night was the first time I realized how powerless and hopeless I was in front of a mad man even if it was my father.

Nobody got hurt that night, at least physically. After he calmed down, my father repeatedly asserted that he is not the abusive husband that I accused him of being and it was unfair for me to see him in that way. The sound of banging that I heard after I locked myself in my room was probably my father pounding the wall or the bed in their bedroom — if it was, I'll never know.

For a long time, I couldn't get rid of the memory of that night. It has been haunting me even after I started my new life in Shanghai. What's worse, it gets nourished in my brain and feeds my fear to expand.

A few weeks after the fall semester started, one day in my psychology class, the memory suddenly came back. I was sitting in the middle of the classroom and felt like it was being shot as each word emerged in my head. "I owe you nothing." Shot, shot, shot… I tried to distract myself from the miserable world. I turned to look at the clock on the wall. Tick, tick, tick… I looked around the classroom and everybody else seemed calm and enjoying the lecture. More shots. My heart quivered. Saliva spontaneously generated along the sides and at the back of my tongue, sour and bitter, like I'd just bit into a lemon slice. I bit my lips and sniffed, trying to hold warm tears. My body trembled as if in my memory of that night, my father had kicked me, beaten me, and smashed my head to the wall that night, none of which had ever happened in real life. My father didn't even get the chance to touch me that night. Still, I felt I was being drawn deeper into an ocean, the water flooding my lungs. Another breath would just make me feel more dead inside. The ocean was devouring me. If the professor asked me if I had any questions, I would say "help."

Every time the memory crawls back, I ask myself whether I should blame my father for my suffering. The fact that I believe I cannot do this only makes me suffer more.

Every coin has two sides. There is goodness and evil in a man. We are encouraged to see the bright side of bad people. "Work on yourself and don't count on changing other people." That's my mother's daily mantra. In other words, my mother has long believed that there could have been an alternative direction to our father-daughter relationship if I had just tried harder to figure it out. But I have been so lost in the chaos of love and hatred, responsibility and freedom, expectation and depression, sacrifice and payback… and I know my father has been lost too. It's impossible to compare our suffering even though we both suffer as each other suffers. We have been asking each other for things that the other is not able to give.

I remember a call from my father in my freshman year. He was drunk and made the call on the way back home. He started by sharing a little about his dinner with his real estate friends who, according to his narrative, owned so much more in their happy rich

life than him. “But that’s fine,” he mumbled with pride. “I have you. I have a daughter like you.”

He said he was going to visit me next month. He asked me to book a fancy hotel room for him and he would take me out to dinner. I told him it was unnecessary to spend money on those things.

“No, it is necessary. Listen, it has to be a luxurious place. I don’t care how much it costs,” he reassured me. I joked that he could buy me a Gucci bag if he just wanted to experience the joy of consumption. “Of course I can. If you book an expensive hotel for me, I’ll reward you with a Gucci bag at the same price,” he reacted with his defensive manner.

Immediately, I regretted the joke. “No, I don’t need a GucciI bag. I never want one. I was joking.”

But he kept repeating his statement that he could afford a Gucci bag. He said he loves me to the extent that I would never understand and added, “Don’t blame me. I know father has never bought you a nice bag.”

Indeed, I wanted a Gucci bag but I was too ashamed to admit my desire for it. I am also too ashamed to admit the fact that part of me is exactly what I’m sick of in my father. I am afraid that I will have to accept fate and that I will change into a completely different person as my father has done. So I choose to reject him. I rejected him even though I knew he must have had a tough night. He called me probably because he didn’t want to pour out his negativity and misery in front of his wife and son, and he anchored his hope on his grown-up daughter to help him out. But I didn’t give him what he was waiting for.

Don’t blame me, father.

There was a rope of intimacy that had been bonding and connecting my father and me since I was born and he had decided to love me for being his daughter. But it snapped into two pieces as my father and I pulled it to two extremes of our own sides.

After my father hung up, nothing seemed to be changed. I was sitting on the bed in my dorm room. My white sheet smelled clean and fresh. My fuzzy teddy bear was chilling with his soft pillow friend. There was a big window beside my bed. When the sun went down, it displayed a sparkling night view of the city that was

foreign and also home to me. If the weather was good, at dusk, I could see streaks of orange and purple clouds highlighting the baby blue sky. At that particular moment of tranquility and serenity, I always believed that, under all the yellowish lights glittering out of the squares on those residential buildings in my vision, lived a happy family.

XIAOXUAN WU

Reasons to Ride an Elephant

Reason 1: You are an eleven-year-old girl

Riding a gentle giant that slow dances in the jungle stirs up a puff of romance when you are traveling in Thailand. That statement is especially true when you grow up watching Disney princesses who can talk to animals—Pocahontas with her raccoon, Jasmine with her tiger, Cinderella with her little mice. You believe that animals are like us: they have languages, they have families, they have emotions. You even believe that animals are born equal, like us, except farm animals are born to be slaughtered and there is nothing you can do because you can only go vegetarian if you become a monk. You believe that you can only get closer with the wildlife when you climb on their back and wander around together. And by "together," you mean you sit there doing nothing while the four-legged carry your weight.

The world keeps telling you that you are one of a kind so that you secretly believe you are—you might be the one who can build an instant connection with a strange elephant when you are not the prettiest or the smartest girl at elementary school. The rumbling, the trumpeting, and the swinging of an elephant's tail (which looks exactly like the tail on your Eeyore) might make sense to you. Your parents might not be king and queen, but you might be a princess like Ro from Barbie as the Island Princess, who does not know her

royal identity either, and have an elephant friend. You know you are already too old for the Barbie movies, but those inspiring stories must be true because you imagine yourself as the protagonist when the day gets a little bit hard. You equate the hard part of life to the second act of a movie where the protagonist is tested. In the end, everything will be worth it. All the diets, dancing classes, piano classes, drawing classes are all preparing you to become a smart, beautiful, young woman like Jane from Tarzan. Those who laugh at your daydreaming will not matter because you are the star of a movie.

When you are led to a platform to step onto the elephant saddle, you find it disappointing but you know that is just how elephant riding works. The face-to-face bonding time with your elephant is not necessary for a ride of less than an hour, so you step on the seat without looking into its eyes, the chestnut brown eyes with thick bush-like lashes (you imagine). You are being delusional. You notice the iron chains around your elephant's neck and right foot, but you figure it acts like a dog leash or a harness on a horse. Only in the case of an elephant, the harness happens to be an iron chain. After all, it is the biggest mammal on land.

Then you lift your legs to avoid the branches as your elephant marches forward, following an army of working elephants ahead. You notice that your parents, who are on the elephant before you, do not need to laboriously dodge low-level branches. Your elephant is much smaller. You lean to the right to peek at its long rubbery nose, realizing that it does not have its tusks grown out yet. What a young elephant. You notice the miniature sickle the local trainer kept next to the elephant's fanning ears. There is a stick too. I guess you turn a blind eye because you choose to believe that the trainers would never do anything to hurt the elephant.

"人之初, 性本善。" (*Rén zhī chū, xìng běn shàn*.) You are not that good at reciting, but you still care about the praise from parents enough to remember a few lines from the *Three Character Classic.* The first line stuck in your brain— "Men at their birth are naturally good." The trainer is a man in his forties from Chiang Mai. He might be younger than he looks because of all the sun he gets from riding elephants as his job. He has a face that you forget the second you move your eyes away from him, a face you don't bother to recall. Such an average guy. He

must not be capable of doing anything close to hurting an animal sacred to his culture, right? His scolding of the elephant scares you sometimes. But what do you know? You are a kid. You are a foreigner. You do not speak or understand Thai. Maybe the elephant park matches a younger elephant with you on purpose because you are young too.

Plus, he let you buy and feed bananas to the elephant though you have to hand the bananas to the trainer first because your elephant's trunk is not long enough to reach your hand. He bathes the elephants in the river! Being bathed and playing with water must be a treat to your juvenile elephant. Your mum later tells you that her elephant must be older because hers has a longer trunk too. Maybe the job gets easier for the elephants when they grow older.

Reason 2: Your family could not afford an Elephant Painting

Your father is driving a Toyota Highlander he rented from a local car rental agency. Renting a car is cheaper than hiring a local driver or calling a taxi wherever you visit. The staff member does not ask him for his driver's license, but he does ask, in English, "Can you drive?" with a thick Southeast Asian accent. Your father answers yes and mortgages his passport. Your family fails to find the camp on first try. The second day, lumbering down a muddy road after the rain, your father learns the Thai word ช้าง *(chang)* for you since he kept stopping to ask for directions to the Maesa Elephant Camp—you are his baby girl and all you want is to ride an elephant. Your mother does the research and introduces, "The camp's founder, Choochart Kalmapijit has enrolled almost one hundred elephants over the past forty years."

When you finally arrive at the camp, you see rows of shackled elephants, swaying their trunks. You are shocked. You want to run away. You want to erase yourself for wanting an elephant ride and this nightmarish scene. But it's too late. Your mother has planned the entire day ahead for you. Your father has gotten lost in the city for two days for you. Forty years of experience in running an elephant camp must mean *something*, right? You cannot find a word for something and you use your childish innocence to justify your ignorance.

The park is almost empty early in the morning. Your family and another Japanese couple are the only audience at the elephant talent show. Your father read the brochure he grabs at the souvenir store. He tells you that the founder has purchased elephants from all over the country and with their mahouts and other experts, worked and fell in love with the elephants, revealing one skill or fact after another about these pachyderms. He comments that this Choochart simply saw a commercial opportunity. He doubts his love for elephants. You give him your pouty look. Why is he bringing that up now?

The music blares. The elephant marching band had its grand entrance. They throw darts and kick oversized soccer balls. Your eyes widen when you see the elephant pick up and draw on the canvas. You have read that the elephants mourn; the elephants communicate with infrasound; the elephants have hierarchical society of their own. But painting? The trainer credits the elephant's ability to learn how to paint so effortlessly to their intelligence, but you know high intelligence is not a reason to paint. Dogs don't paint. Dolphins don't paint. Most humans don't even paint.

You sneak up closer, attempting to find out what kind of trick they're playing. You notice the specialized brushes built for the elephant painter: some brushes are tied together to form criss-cross shapes so that one axis can be inserted into the trunk and the other axis could stop the brushes from inserting too deep. Therefore, the elephants can *hold* the brushes. The trainer stands diligently next to the elephant, poised with bull hooks. He seems to guide the elephant's movements by pulling its soft ears, making the elephant move the brush in a manner that creates stroke patterns. And the patterns make sense to us: flowers, trees, or even an elephant.

"How do the trainers make them paint?" Your father cannot hold back his amazement when he sees the self-portrait of an elephant.

It is an adorable scene, I have to admit. The elephant paints a grey elephant with a red balloon. It paints like a kid who does not know how to paint yet. I try to interpret this scene as my parents standing next to me when I practice playing the piano, but the juxtaposition of hard metal hook next to the cotton-y fanning ears is jarring.

I answer, "I think I know."

After the painting session, each painting is sold. The cheapest one goes for 5,000 Thai Baht. The Japanese couple buys one.

"There is no way we're spending that much money on a painting that looks worse than your kindergarten masterpieces," your father exclaims, adding: "but do you want one?"

"I kinda do," you answer. "The elephants worked so hard for these paintings!"

Isn't it more meaningless to make these gentle giants paint if no one pays for it?

"Elephants do not use money, honey. Let's go ride the elephants."

Reason 3: You are twenty years old now

You are twenty now. You went vegan for a year. It was so hard to be the only vegan in your social circle that you settled for being a vegetarian. You bring your own reusable shopping bag to the farmers market but fruits and vegetables are already packed in plastic wrap. You avoid your former favorite Uniqlo and order from sustainable brands like Reformation, only to find out that its CEO faces allegations of racism from past employees. You use a zero-waste kitchen towel but your roommates manage to use up a box of facial tissue a day. You wonder what the point is.

And the fact that you once contributed to a cruel industry that capitalizes on the suffering of innocent elephants haunts you. Your friend has visited Thailand and she has not ridden an elephant. In the caption on her social media posts, your friend writes: "Please do not join elephant riding." She goes to the so-called elephant sanctuaries, where people play with the elephants in rivers. In her pictures, your friend changes into the identical staff uniform to play with the elephants in the muddy river. They laugh—the red lip against her ivory-white teeth and the ivory-white tusk against its wrinkly grey skin. She tells you the day spent with elephants is the best day of her life and she feels so bad that some tourist spots torture elephants. She comforts you that it was not your fault to ride an elephant. "I wouldn't know if I were you. People are more aware now and elephant tourism has developed onto a different path. That's all."

But you still feel so bad. You fall down the rabbit hole of consuming every article you can find about elephants on your laptop. In the middle of the night, the screen blinds your eyes. Like the darkness, the guilt engulfs you. You read to punish yourself as if the more pain you bear now, the more sin you can take away from your past. The words engulf you: *found dead with chains still on his front leg, overwork and hunger, men beat and terrorize a wild-caught baby elephant in a cage over the span of days in order to crush his spirit*.

You keep reading.

13 ethical elephant sanctuaries in Thailand

6 Completely Ethical Elephant Sanctuaries in Thailand

Thailand Elephant Sanctuary: The 5 Best Rescues in or Near Chiang Mai

Your eyes hurt, but you cannot stop. These lists do not make sense. These lists that dated back to the early 2010s seem to contradict each other. Is an elephant sanctuary less ethical if it only appears in one list when there are other sanctuaries mentioned in more than one lists? 13, 6, 5… How many ethical elephant parks are there? This sanctuary is chain-free, and that sanctuary offers no direct interactions with elephants. How can a sanctuary be ethical if it locks the elephants in chains? Is it ok for the visitors to interact with the elephants?

You look at your friend's Instagram again. The river gets murky as the elephant sprays water on her. She is laughing, a human emotion you learn to pick up. The elephant is opening its mouth. You are not sure if that is a smile. You tell yourself that it is. You tell yourself the camp you visited might be categorized as "ethical" in a random Internet blog. At some point, you realize that the story you tell yourself does not matter. The elephant you're riding right now is dead.

SEBASTIAN LAU

Rat

Thomas scurried through the streets, food clutched in his hands. It was getting dark, but he enjoyed the night. Ever since the streetlights had stopped working the sky had become so much clearer, albeit occasionally punctured by skyscrapers turned chic cenotaphs. He scrambled around the piles of trash that dotted the streets as newspapers lazed around like tumbleweeds. This street was silent, save for squeaking rats scurrying away from shadows that stretched cats into tigers. He sighed. "Hopefully next time I'll find something interesting," he chittered to himself. It had been two months since he had felt a spark of hope, intrigue, anything. It was four months since the pandemic had started and everyone had either evacuated or shut themselves in. Six months after starting college in a foreign land, Thomas had no intention of going back.

He shouldered his way into his home and the door creaked in protest. He could move somewhere else, but something about his little hole was comforting. Anyways, what would he do with so much space? It's not like he had anyone to share a two-bedroom with. A flick of a switch, a warm white glow. The solar-powered lamp was a necessity. Thomas hunched over the day's spoils. Cheese. Fake, of course. Water bottles and preserved fruit laid scattered on the oaken coffee table. Some nibbled crackers tried to make themselves scarce, but they didn't escape his gaze. He grabbed one and crunched it in front of its family. The leather of the armchair made space to accom-

modate him as he allowed himself to be enveloped in its embrace. He closed his eyes and the hum of the lamp lulled him to sleep.

Dawn slipped through Thomas' eyelids. He shuffled around in the armchair and went back to sleep.

"Midday? Already?" he exhaled. A yawn escaped. A stretch. Another yawn. He looked around for his stylishly faded tote bag. There, by the crates of soju. They clinked angrily, taken by surprise as he yanked the bag out from under the box. He snatched a list stuck to the fridge. Canned beans, potted plants, batteries. He surveyed the room. "Maybe blankets too" he noted, jotting it down in his mind, then after a moment decided it would be best to also jot it down on the paper. He reunited the lamp with the plants looking out over the city. Thomas briefly turned his eyes to the flock of pigeons that the plants were monitoring, then nodded—satisfied with their vigilance. He closed the door on his way out, cracked white paint fluttered down.

Wind rustled through the familiar streets. Buildings loomed over Thomas' head, relics of a life he never cared for. Life had always been so needlessly complicated. People had always been so needlessly complicated. Here though? The city was his oyster. He didn't have to do anything. Work? For whom? Even food wasn't much of a concern: a weekly trip sufficed most of the time. Sometimes he'd pick up something extra if he was exploring a new area. If he wanted the hippest clothes? All of it was his, and even if he couldn't actually pull it off at least there wasn't anyone to judge him for it. The clothes usually weren't actually that hip anyways. With everyone gone there was no one to tell him to stop. Why did they leave? Who knows. The virus wasn't even that dangerous, but nobody wanted to stick around to find out. Sure, he didn't have electricity or running water, but at least he was free—like an animal in the wild. Subsisting on off-brand Cheez Whiz and crackers was great, it's not like he was dining in the halls of Olympus before. Well, at least back in not-Olympus he had his friends. He didn't know if anyone was looking for him. It didn't really

matter. It's not like he'd have any way to contact them now anyways and tell them that he was alright. A rustle. Thomas spun around, only to find newspapers rolling about. "Hello? Anyone there?" he yelled. He looked in all directions, searching for anyone, just anyone. Nothing. Still, he walked back to the source of the sound. Nothing. He grimaced. There wasn't supposed to be anyone left anyways, but it would've been nice to see a human for once. Maybe one day he'd make the trek back to civilization, but life had become surprisingly comfy. Also, he didn't want to deal with all that real world bullshit. "Well I'm sure people are going to come back someday" he assured himself.

Another mediocre haul. Food. Water. At least this time he got some books. A family of rats crossed the road, unafraid of nonexistent traffic or pedestrians. He took a couple steps closer to the stream of rodents. He could easily snatch one, just to keep as a friend. A bit of cracker appeared in his outstretched hand. A couple of rats stopped in their paths and looked up at Thomas curiously, snouts inching ever closer to the offering. It had been a while since they'd been chased off by humans and they weren't going to deny a free snack. A particularly adventurous one started edging towards Thomas' outstretched hand before a few other rats squeaked warnings at her. The soft tip taps of their paws led him to a small alleyway where about ten or so rats had been hoarding food. Several rose up on their hind legs at his arrival, watching him crouch down with an entire pack of crackers. The adventurer approached, and pulled out a cracker, awkwardly shuffling back to the pack with her haul. She circled back after dropping off the loot, this time staying when she took the cracker as Thomas slowly and gently scooped her up with his other hand. Colette. That was a good name for a rat he thought. Not to disparage the Colettes of the world, but right now he just needed a bit of human companionship and the closest thing he was going to get was a rat with a human name. God forbid he tried checking out those mannequins.

Thomas opened the door now to a home for two. He placed Colette in a cardboard box, which he then filled with shredded newspaper and preserved fruit. He contemplated the fake cheese, but even rats probably didn't want that. It took a while for Colette to truly get acquainted with Thomas. Once she realized that she was separated from her kind she started squirming, but a bit of preserved fruit placated her. He wasn't sure if it was a trust issue or if that's just how rats were. Regardless, it took a couple days, during which time Thomas didn't bring her out, but after a while she warmed up to him. Whenever he placed his hand in her "hut" she'd climb up and let him carry her around. It was nice, having someone else to look after. They'd browse the snack aisles and pick out the best treats. He even found an unreasonably large hamster cage for her to roam around. "You think this is good?" he asked her, "wait til you see the real world. The stuff out there is crazy." Her snout twitched in excitement.

There was only so much area they could cover before it got dark every night. No public transportation meant lots of walking, and he hated walking. It wasn't long before they had been pretty much everywhere in his little slice of city. Nothing ever happened. Yeah, he had Colette with him, but turns out a rat wasn't a good substitute for human interaction. There was so much food stockpiled that he didn't even need to go out anymore. Somehow the cheese paste and crackers weren't doing it for him anymore. Neither was the canned food, nor the preserved meats and vegetables. All the literature—erotic or otherwise—didn't quite cut it either. He surveyed the room. Enough food and water for weeks. A sleeping bag and blankets. Solar lamp. Backpacks, duffel bags and suitcases. A herd of supermarket carts outside the building. He had enough to sustain him for a trek to the nearest province and then some. "A car shouldn't be that hard to find and we could just siphon some extra gas," he mused. Colette peeked out at him, inquiring when he'd start doing something instead of just thinking about it. "Yeah, yeah, I'll start packing," he replied.

He found an old SUV a few blocks away from the building, keys still in the ignition. The family must have been evacuated by the police. An SUV filled with food and hope trundled its way through the streets. Colette sat in the passenger seat, a smaller cage seatbelted in for safety. Tunes blasted from the speakers. He hadn't used his phone in what was probably a couple of months. What was once his domain now passed by him in a blur. Within minutes he'd gone farther than he had while isolated. What if there was just more stuff out here? Maybe he had made a mistake. Surely there was more stuff if he had just taken the time to explore with the car. He slowed to a halt. Did he really need to find people? Maybe he could start anew here. It'd be like moving, and maybe that was the problem. The old house was cramped, and it's not like he really liked it that much anyways. A squeak brought him back to the present. "Yeah, you're right. There ain't shit for me out here," he agreed. The car started up again and chugged onward.

TIAN TIAN WEDGWOOD YOUNG
with SHINY WU

99 Percent "Almost Art"
百分之99 《几乎艺术》

Written in response to Shiny Wu's "New Media Art Worker" 新媒体艺术家》 after many conversations about each other's work.

To prove meaning requires extra effort
证明意义需要更努力
so I don't
所以我就不做了
I prove myself facing forward
我向前证明自己

She stands at a podium
她站在讲台上
next to a beautifully made

旁边有个巨美的
PowerPoint
PPT
and bottled water
和瓶装水

Gets paid
她得到报酬
to talk through microphones
然后用话筒
about real life
讲点儿现实的事儿

She is grateful
她很感激
to work
能够工作

unearthing the rough jade
挖掘粗糙的玉石
that might become the 1 percent
它有可能会成为那个百分之一

Scan the QR code to view Shiny Wu's original "New Media Art Worker" 《新媒体艺术家》:

ALLEGRA RUIZ

One Hundred Years

Three kids, one law degree, and an affair with a trophy wife in Indiana almost thirty years later, Pa and I drove down the I-90 expressway to his parents' house. Now that his life was consumed with dinners in fancy steakhouses overlooking downtown Chicago, Ana in her fur coat, and performing for juries, these hour-long car rides were often the only time I got to spend with Pa—not Miguel Ruiz, the powerhouse immigrant personal injury lawyer.

When I was younger, our family rides were filled with *banda* music and secret smacks between siblings exchanged across car seats. Fighting over game consoles and Goldfish crackers, my brothers and I screamed while my parents loosely held hands and stared out their separate windows — Pa with his eyes on the road, Ma watching the cornfields and apple orchards roll by. Now, the rides were silent; Ma had set her wedding ring on the cool kitchen countertop for the last time, and soon after my brothers left for college and stopped returning Pa's text messages. On this particular day, Pa focused on the road while I sat quietly scrolling through Zayn Malik's latest tweets, Pa playing songs from his black-and-white childhood memories. I hardly knew most of the songs; the few lyrics I had learned were from how often he would play them around me.

As we sped down the expressway, he grabbed my hand the same way he used to hold Ma's, placing his right hand over my left, pressing down on my index finger. He began to sing along to one of his old songs that I did know, "Cien Años," by the famed Mexican 1950s actor and singer Pedro Infante:

Te vi sin que me vieras,
I saw you without you seeing me,
Te hable sin que me oyeras,
I spoke without you hearing me,
Y toda mi amargura,
And all my bitterness,
Se ahogó dentro de mi
Drowned inside of me.

Eyes still focused on the road, he slowly turned the music low, until Pedro was nothing but a whisper — though still audible — in our shared air.

Me duele, hasta la vida,
My life aches,
Saber que me olvidaste.
To know that you forgot me.

"I used to sing this song to your mother on rides like this. She cried, thinking I was singing about another woman." He let out a short laugh—almost a scoff. My eyes left the phone screen and looked at his aging brown face, still acorn-shaped with drooping cheeks. His eyes glossed over very slightly, as though he would allow himself one tear and nothing more. His grip on the steering wheel tensed, turning his knuckles white. Pedro sang on:

Pensar que ni desprecios,
To think that not even disdain,
Merezca yo de ti.
I deserve from you.

"I was never singing about another woman, *mija*. It was always her. Now, I sleep in a big house with someone who isn't your mother. I eat with children that aren't mine, and yet when I hear this song, all I can think about is your mom. Even when Ana holds my hand, I picture it being your mom's. Funny, huh?" As he spoke, Infante crooned the "Cien Años" finale:

Y sin embargo sigues
And yet you still are
Unida a mi existencia,
United to my existence,
Y si vivo cien años,
And if I live one hundred years,
Cien años pienso en ti.
One hundred years I will think of you.

My father's words rang in my ears as Pedro Infante's faded away. My mouth refused to open. I was known in my family as a talker. I would talk and talk and talk with no end in sight. I never stopped talking. But now the thoughts that used to run laps in my head were nowhere to be found. I focused, instead, on the cars in front of me. Count the numbers on the license plate. Count them. Do it again. Do it for a hundred years if you have to.

HAITIAN MA
with a video performance by XIAO LIANG

Dear Writer,
or: Reorganize the sentences to restore a cohesive paragraph

Barbara once asked me if a letter is ever truly intended for someone. What kind of weight is carried in the address of "Dear Reader." What if the addressee, like Bartleby, prefers not to respond to the calling.

You saved unnecessary pieces of your own writing. You always hesitate to press the delete button when something needs to be deleted. You'd rather keep them elsewhere.

Their destiny ends in your Notes.

I am jealous of Bartleby, he who tastes all the desires and hosts all the destinies before turning them into ashes, a lunatic archive sealed by your Notes in the Dock.

Amongst them, the not-so-juicy ones I vaguely remembered, are _____, _____, _____, and ____.

Still, we desire to keep a record for ourselves. We are desperate to write for someone in order to feel attached. They behold the quiet passions and forked kernels of our blundered speech.

And still, Bartleby is not unlike *pharmakon*. At some point I must resist him. I must resist him in order to enjoy the pleasures of illiteracy.

The dead letters that Bartleby burnt two hundred years ago are not dead yet.

You must refrain from noting my lure in order to move and make writing possible.

Yours,

Writer

To view Xiao Liang's performance of "Dear Writer," scan:

我在厨房摘下豌豆尖的花

我的指甲捅破它的颅腔
它不能说话　　我
也不说
因为我们　　无心

它的敌人是我　　是女人
是生气的女人
是生气的女人的指甲

沾着　　洗去污秽的含氯清水
和土　　固执的土
指肚抚摸着　　剐蹭着
刚割断的　　自然的茎
终于　　我肉欲的战利品！

上千年形对形的压迫
不是无心

XIAO LIANG
translated by HOIYAN GUO

In the Kitchen I Pluck a Pea Flower

My nail stabs through its skull
It can not speak and I
Do not
Cause we don't have the heart to

Its enemy, it's me a woman
It's an angry woman
It's an angry woman's nail

Showered in chlorine bleach that cleanses away filth
Yet stained with earth stubborn earth
My finger pulp caresses scratches
The just-cut natural stem
Finally this trophy of my carnal desire!

Thousands of years of oppression, one form over another
It's no accident

JIAYU HAN

A Trip to Tibet

The first time I saw the massive, overwhelming form of Potala Palace rising into the blue sky, I stood there for ten minutes, silent, restless. "So, this is where he always wanted to come," I thought. I took out a deep-green ceramic jar from my backpack and opened it. The whitish powder inside awakened in the chill breeze, so far from Beijing, and disappeared into the air. The sunlight was suddenly too strong for my eyes.

August 10th, 2020

Dear M,

It was already 10 P.M. when I arrived from Beijing in Nyingchi, a small city located in southern Tibet, and it was surprisingly cold. I had read that, other Tibetan cities, Nyingchi is humid and warm. The region is blessed with countless forests and rich fungus plants. The travel guides call it the "little heaven of Tibet." But the temperature at night can be very low. So many people who live here wear a T-shirt beneath a sweater.

The humidity and abundant green plants reminded me of our time in Switzerland. Grindelwald was not so humid, but the air was cold and fresh. I still remember that every morning you leaned against the wooden wall, holding a hot Americano in your pale hands. I think you were breathing as much of the clean mountain air as you could.

Several years ago, when the air quality was even worse in China than it is today, some pranksters collected air from Switzerland in cans to sell to Beijingers. We laughed when we watched the news. A few days later, you brought a parcel back home. "Breathe some air from Grindelwald," you said. I was too shocked to utter a word. What the fuck, who would spend money on such useless stuff? But it was funny after all. We opened the parcel and unsealed every can, filling our small apartment with air from a distant country. We did not care whether the air in the cans might just be from another small apartment in China. Every time I recall this I just can't stop laughing.

I took some pictures of the tiny, cold Nyingchi airport while I waited for my driver. His name is Nima, a local Tibetan. His skin is tanned and dry. On the way to the hotel I tried to talk to him, but he seemed unwilling to speak. Maybe his Mandarin is not good enough. I think I might have offended him when I asked: "do you eat fish?" He didn't respond and I felt stupid. Before I came here, I Googled a bit about the customs and religions of the Tibetan people. I read a post saying that Tibetan people don't eat fish, and you know how much I love fish. I think you called me "Aquawoman" once? Anyway, I was either so tired and hungry from traveling or so curious about the fish thing—or both—that I blurted out my fish question. Silence. But I think I know the answer now. I feel bad. I was so stupid. You would stop me asking him if you were here, right? I am sure you would poke me in the ribs to shut me up. The hotel was so far from the airport. Nima drove around for like two hours, I'd guess. I fell asleep halfway and he woke me up. I did not expect too much for the hotel but it's actually pretty decent. Clean and spacious. My parents warned me not to run or move too fast on the plateau before I left home. They visited Tibet last year with their friends, so yeah, I should listen to them, as usual. I carefully took out my luggage and checked in. The girl at the front desk is as tanned as Nima. I guess it is because of the strong sunlight on the plateau. They say that Tibet is the "roof of the world." I can't wait to bathe in the pure azure tomorrow. It is 1 A.M. and I should sleep now.

—R.

August 11th, 2020

Dear M,

I woke up at 11 a.m. this morning. Had a quick bite at the restaurant in the hotel. There were not too many options. I had some congee (no flavor at all) and eggs. A friend texted me and said that summer is the best time to eat *songrong*. It is a kind of mushroom, extremely expensive, but very nourishing. Nyingchi is famous for songrong. Every year tons of Nyingchi songrong are sent to Japan. Japanese people call this kind of mushroom matsutake. When I was asking the front-desk girl for some advice on places to enjoy songrong my dad called me. He told me that his high school classmate will treat me to a nice dinner when I arrive in Lhasa, three days from now. Will there be songrong at the dining table tonight? If not, then I will find some at a fancy restaurant in Lhasa.

After the quick brunch, Nima picked me up at the hotel. My plan today was to visit a primordial forest near the border of China and India. I did not expect the road here to be so well-constructed and even. A quote from D.H. Lawrence's travel writing about Italy came to mind: the roads "run undaunted over the most precipitous regions, and with curious ease." I had a similar feeling. Tibet is far from eastern China. It is vast and some places are not even approachable because of the dangerously steep terrain. And even here in Nyingchi, with its warm days, the climate is far from mild. My throat has been itchy since I arrived. But it is a blessing that recent infrastructure construction has been well done, allowing so many tourists to rent a car and drive freely overland. I am not a good driver, as you know. Nima is, of course.

Before entering the forest there was a quick security check. The forest is one of the most picturesque places I have ever been to. It is hard to describe such a vast and picturesque green wonderland. Horses—white and different shades of brown—wandered freely

about. Bells on their neck tinkled in the wind, filling my ears with delicate, rippling sound. A broad, fast river gushed past, pounding against a cliff. The river water comes from melted snow from mountains far from here. The chill of the river overwhelmed me even when I just glanced at it. You never know how deep such a river is. I threw a stone and it sucked the stone in instantly. Like nothing happened. I find nature here to be sublime, uncanny.

I have always felt a bit scared in the presence of something so big, something moving at such a high speed. Or maybe I am just scared to be exposed to raw nature? I am not like you, I would not give myself the title of "adventurer" or risk my life just for the sake of some dangerous travel. So, you see, though you lost your life, I am the only one who is on the road now. You said you wanted to come to Tibet many times, so that's why I am here. When they handed me the urn, I did not cry. When I arrived at Nyingchi at night by myself, I did not cry. But I cried when I was alone, wandering in the green, with those dumb horses eating their grass. Were you here?

Felled trees lay on the ground. I touched them. They were damp. If people do not come to this place, after overcoming many obstacles, who would appreciate their beauty? I somehow think we were connected when I touched that tree. It is nature, right? Nature you are obsessed with, nature you would ask, hoping for an answer.

Nima handed me a white scarf when we arrived at the hotel. It is called Hada, a scarf made of white silk, meant to express greetings. I am heading to Lhasa tomorrow morning. When I see Potala Palace, I will bury you with nature. They say it is often to see prayers on the road to Lhasa. They attach their bodies to the land, fold their hands, and make a kowtow to the direction of Potala where the Dalai Lama lives. I admire their religion, their bodies. What's in their minds when praying? Tell me when I arrive at Potala.

—R.

At His Father's Funeral

"That was Grandpa," my father said. "Cremated." He walked towards me outside of the crematorium, his eyes still tired but slightly more at ease. During the service, he had kept a perfectly diplomatic front until now, as he made that elusive statement to me. He put his arm on my shoulder and squeezed a smile, the kind that made me wonder who he really was, this tan-skinned, round-faced, and chubby man whom I called father. I was looking for signs of tears running in his eyes, but all I could find were veins, patterned like dendrites that only made his eyes red. We were standing in the most glamorous funeral home in my hometown, Shandong, a small city in the northern part of China. We had just finished the service in the ceremony hall in the next room, and the family members would move to the cemetery to bury the ashes now, according to custom.

It was the hottest day of the year, and the heat from the crematorium only made the funeral home seem more surreal. It suddenly occurred to me what a classmate from high school had said about her grandfather's cremation: they ended up using tiny hammers to lightly mash up the bits and chunks of her grandfather's bones that hadn't turned completely into ashes yet; I believed she had used the phrase "fresh out of the oven." It was probably the brutal heat from the crematorium that had blurred my vision, but it didn't take long for me to see clearly again.

* * *

It was two mornings ago when we received the news. I had just been called back home to Shanghai from London, where I was taking some summer courses. "You need to come home now. Grandpa has gotten more sick, and we need to prepare for things," my mother said over the phone. So there I was, at home, having breakfast with my mother when my father was almost thumping down the stairs, asking my mother to cancel lunch. "He's gone," he mumbled, picking things up and putting them down, checking his cell phone, looking for his shoes. "Xiao Pan will drive me to the train station now." He took a few seconds to gather his thoughts while I debated if I should ask him the meaning of "gone": the word he used could also mean that grandpa was still very sick.

"You go on your way now, and we will pack and catch the next train. Don't forget your ID," my mother calmly reminded my father, handing him a few items for the train ride. "I see Xiao Pan's car," she said. Then my father went out of the door, omitting a goodbye to me. I hardly remembered my father being this disorganized. Every time he walked out of that door, he would either be in an Armani suit or a chic sports jacket, even if he would only get a haircut.

"We have a funeral ahead of us," my mother confirmed as I watched the driver pull away. And the cicadas shrilled outside.

* * *

I didn't see my father until the next day at my grandparents' apartment in Shandong. He was writing at an old desk in the bedroom when my mother and I entered the living room. Taking a hint from my mother, I began to politely converse with the relatives, talking about the fruits on the table, today's meal, grandmother's old couch…anything but how we felt. Suddenly, my father came out of the bedroom: I had thought that he might have lost some weight—like how some people in movies would lose ten pounds over night because of extreme sadness or exhaustion—but he didn't. He didn't even seem too tired, and everything was in his control. As he stood there, I watched him carry out the procedures like an expert, as if he had already been familiar with making funeral arrangements: to sort out the guest list, to arrange flowers and funeral gowns, to

assign tasks to each of his brothers, and to remind my uncles and aunts to wear the piece of black cloth on their arms—to respect tradition. Each duty was managed in an orderly way while he stood in the living room, still wearing that NYU t-shirt I had bought him from my campus store.

"Hey, you." My father turned to me and seemed to lighten up a little. He adjusted his rimless glasses, gave me a cheerful smile, and went back to his duties.

* * *

It was curious how no one never told you about the schedule of a funeral; they just assumed that you'd already known.

Before the service started, my mother told me in the ceremony hall to behave myself while the men in the family placed the wreaths and horses made of joss paper by the wall. I thought it ludicrous how the wind from the air conditioner ruffled the joss paper, which was a symbol for wealth and love.

"Grandpa had high hopes for you," my mother said to me as she straightened the pin I had to wear on my chest. It had a Chinese character on it, "孝", the number one virtue in my culture. "Your job today is to properly represent your generation, especially to represent your cousins. They can't make it because they both have classes." I remembered she had told me that my grandfather had talked about me greatly, especially in his last half-lucid moments, about how I had been accepted to a great college, been so independent in the U.S., and would have a great bright future. He hadn't mentioned my cousins—the children of his other sons must have slipped from his mind.

I took a glance at my aunts and uncles. They were standing in a circle, commenting on the decorations in the ceremony hall. It seemed so unfair that I was the only grandchild who showed up at the funeral: I had to fly back from London, from my precious study-away experience with cool weather and paintings from the Tate, to a sweltering day in a funeral home, while my cousins were only two cities away, not to mention that this was the first funeral I had to attend. I doubted that they had attended any in their lives.

However, to do my pin justice, I strolled around the ceremony hall to look for duties that I could possibly fulfill, but all I could find was a spelling error of my second aunt's name. So far, "孝", or filial piety, to my nineteen-year-old brain, meant to be obedient to the elderly, to take good care of our parents, to be accomplished in life so then our parents could be proud, and to see my uncles tell my second aunt that wearing the pin and black cloth on her arm was a respectful display more important than ruining her silk blouse.

In the meantime, I searched for my father from a distance as the guests started to come in. They stood in a line, waiting for a handshake with my father, nearly a hundred of them. It had been difficult to get a word with him this morning, but it was easy to spot him: he was in his position, with his usual poise, wearing a black shirt with his belly protruding a little, the collar of his shirt touching the side of his cheeks, his lips pouting a little when he spoke, and his rimless glasses that seemed sophisticated but not overwhelming, which he always claimed to be a fashionable choice.

Despite the appreciation for fashion, my father used to look completely different. A particular photo of him taken in 1991 showed his slimmer days, when his neck was long, face narrow, and chin still visible, which I assumed had given him more choices in fashion. In the photo, my father was standing by the river, somewhere in Beijing, wearing a white shirt and a pair of loose grey pants, with which he paired a buckle belt—very trendy at the moment. His hair stylishly fell on his forehead, and his lips pursed as he smiled—like how mine would whenever I smiled. His eyebrows were thick like mine, arched in the shape of a triangle. His one hand held up a "V", while his other hand was casually stuffed in his pocket. He seemed to be having a good time there. My mother always said that I was a mirror image of my father, which was a phrase that I had only heard too many times in my life; but whenever someone would mention this resemblance, I always agreed happily, as if that would mean that one day I could turn out kind and well-spoken like him. I also took more pride than I had ever shown every time I thought of the fact that my father had wanted to study literature in college, which was exactly my choice of major now, even though still regarded as an unpopular choice to this day, but he supported me.

"You should have the freedom to do whatever you want, and you should be proud and take advantage of what we can offer you, as long as it doesn't involve drugs. But I know you don't have enough allowance to do drugs, so I'm not worried about that," my father would always say.

"But Mom kind of despises me for being a literature major. She thinks it's useless." I seemed more worried than he did.

"Your mother studied mathematics in university, so she will always think that economics and finance are more practical. Just know that I support you, and I'm the one that pays for your tuition anyways. But don't tell her we had this conversation, or else she'd be furious." My father grinned, raising his eyebrows and chin, the face he made when he and I joked about my mother.

But he hadn't grinned once today; he had been so courteous with the guests that I had almost forgotten about the fact that the funeral we were having now was for his father. So I went back to look for more tasks, with the slightest hope of alleviating my father's workload. But when he spotted me awkwardly making small talks with the guests, he stopped me and told me that wasn't a part of my duty. "A smile would be fine," he said.

When the ceremony hall became filled with people, my mother remarked, "Pretty much all the people here today are friends and acquaintances of your father's, look at how grand the service is. Grandpa must be proud, and your grandmother is definitely pleased."

Suddenly, the staff at the funeral home came in with the casket and placed it in the middle of the ceremony hall. My father walked towards my mother and me, and everyone immediately gathered to surround the casket. All sounds were extinguished, and only the air conditioner hissed.

* * *

The service started on the clock. Somber music and some pre-recorded prayers started to play in the background, wishing the deceased a peaceful journey on the way to an afterlife.

I peeked at my father, his face rigid and still, as he stood on my left and my mother on my right. Seeing this grand funeral and the

man in the casket whom I had barely known, I had some trouble choosing the appropriate emotion. Growing up, I had never been close to my grandparents since my father had brought my mother and me to Shanghai before my hometown could make any impression on my mind besides my grandfather's cooking. While my grandmother was a garrulous character, my grandfather had been taciturn throughout his life; those who hadn't known him much might even think that he had taken a vow of silence, and those who had known him also had great trouble communicating with him. He had merely answered everything with either "no, no," or "yes, great!" followed by an awkward chuckle. His greatest hobby had been his little farm, and he would spend an entire morning nursing melons and tomatoes, perhaps because this activity had required the least talking. Nonetheless, my parents made sure that I visited my grandparents for an appropriate time each year—usually once in summer and again during Spring Festivals until I moved to the U.S. in tenth grade. On a different continent with a completely different set of calendar, I was, guilty but relieved, dodging the Spring Festivals, also known as the most brutal family gathering of the year. It was somehow always my mother who arranged those gatherings, and here is how my family celebrated Spring Festival 2015, my last one before leaving for the U.S.

"Look at the men, they just sit on the couch, not helping us," my second aunt mocked.

"You women are so good at it, we leave the honor with you." My first uncle let out a laugh but only received my first aunt's glare.

"You guys can roll out the next batch of dumpling wrappers later." My mother smiled.

"Yang was really good at it when she was little." My grandmother started the same old story. "When she was four, she rolled out piles and piles of dumpling wrappers in one afternoon." Her face was wrinkled with memory. "Can you still make those pretty dumplings?"

"I've lost that skill, unfortunately," I answered, "but Yi and Yao make really pretty ones, much better than mine." In my desperate attempt, I pointed to the dainty dumplings made by my two cousins, who were standing with me by rolls of flour dough and bowls of

stuffing. We had been quietly talking about schools and boys, but they fell silent a second ago.

"I still have the pictures. You were so adorable, with your ponytail high up," my grandmother continued.

I shrugged as a sign of weak protest. That was just one of the few moments you had shared with me, I thought.

"I'm sure she can pick those skills right up. We will go make some right now." My father tried to alleviate the tension in the air.

"Po, you've been too kind and you've made a lot of money for this family this year, as you've always done, unlike some people, who never try hard enough. You should sit and watch TV, have some snacks." My grandmother gestured toward the couch, while my uncles unwillingly gave up the remote control.

My grandfather didn't say a thing. He was frying up meat in the kitchen.

"I can't wait to eat the fried meat, I love that dish the most." My father stood up from the couch, patting on his belly, giving me a wink.

"We all love that. It's Grandpa's iconic dish," my mother added.

"It will be lost soon if you kids don't learn how to make that dish. When will you learn, Yang?" Of course Grandma would bring this up. Grandpa used to cook almost all the dishes at Spring Festivals, but he had started to stand less and spend more time in bed this year.

"I'll ask Grandpa to write out the recipe for me. Grandpa has really nice handwriting." I smiled awkwardly at everyone in the room.

My grandfather smiled and nodded.

"You have been so hardworking, too, Yang. Going to America next year won't be easy, and thank god your mother is attentive. The work you've done is great, Hong," my grandmother said without looking at my mother.

"It's the kids, they have to work the hardest," my mother answered quickly.

There wasn't a moment of silence because grandmother's voice never ceased.

Oil sizzled from the pan.

"Hey, the fried meat is ready!" my mother exclaimed.

"I'm so hungry!" my father said excitedly. Everyone laughed.

Grandfather laid down the plate on the table with a smile on his face.

The aunts laid more plates on the table.

"Your cooking is too bland," my grandmother commented on my second aunt's sautéed lettuce upon her first mouthful.

"I think it's good that we don't eat so much salt," my second aunt complained.

"I don't like it." My grandmother reached for the fried meat. "Nothing new ever comes up either." She smacked her lips. "But do eat more of the fried meat, Yang, you like it. And Po, you should eat more, too."

"Grandma, I'm vegetarian now, remember? I don't eat meat anymore." I reminded her but was cut off by a look that my mother gave me.

"You are so tired from school every day, you should eat more proteins. Why are kids so rebellious these days…" my grandmother went on for quite a while.

My cousins ate in silence.

While my grandmother babbled on, my grandfather pushed towards me a plate of fried egg that he'd saved for me. He smiled without saying anything.

No one else but grandmother said anything.

Although I never explicitly asked my parents the meaning of such family gatherings, we would sit at a large table and drink bai jiu together, eat dumplings like a proper family—because my parents told me it was important that families came together, despite everything else. Filial piety, therefore, the meaning of the word that was now on my pin, was a vague concept to me, a renowned tradition that had originated from the words of Confucius and which demanded more than I could offer. It remained an unapproachable law, taking on the form of tasks that awaited completion, as the absence of my cousins today at the funeral only confirmed my incorrect understanding of this virtue.

Meanwhile, my father's approach on this matter puzzled me: since I had always assumed him to be a fearless person, I had also expected more from him than surrendering to my grandmother.

This belief I had of him was developed from the story of his essay in Gaokao—the one and only college entrance exam in China. The topic of Gaokao essay in 1986 was "forest, trees, and weather," and everyone had assumed that an exemplary student like my father would have written about how one individual couldn't help make a great society but a group of people could. But my father thought it not original enough so he wrote that while one governor could get away with corruption the entire government couldn't. However, the Gaokao graders back then had chosen suppression over creativity and had given him a rather low mark. Had it been written decades later, his essay would have undoubtedly been curated in the collection of Gaokao essays. Eventually, he ended up going to to a college far from his ideal choice—but still thrived, and the message in this story was that his knowledge had surpassed people in higher positions. Therefore, when our culture instructed that a son should always obey his mother, I took my father's retreat as a way to respect tradition, to follow his father's strategic reticence, as I couldn't think of any other answer to justify his avoidance to confront my grandmother.

One day, unable to bear the confusion, I asked my father why we had to tolerate my grandmother's hostility, and, more importantly, why he had never said or done anything about it, since I had learned from my high school in the U.S. that the students could question their teachers and challenge authorities. He had been reading about Confucius when I asked, and he said, "以德报怨，而非以直报怨." It meant to be forgiving to those who wronged us rather than use morals to straighten them. He explained, "While it might seem too ideal to always forgive those who treat us badly, it is wiser than directly giving them a lecture on what is right. Some people can't be changed, like your grandmother. She's been around for eighty years, so you can't just tell her what she has done is rude. You can't expect Grandpa to tell her anything either, since that's just how they've lived for the past sixty years. What you can do is be nice, to her and to everyone else, so you'll at least have a clear conscience. Maybe one day she might even become a little bit nicer, but of course we can't expect that either." I nodded in the moment, but, truthfully, I had deemed Confucius and filial piety to be irrelevant to me at that time.

* * *

In honoring my grandfather, I searched in my head for the moments we had shared during our nineteen years of acquaintance and the ten sentences he and I had exchanged. Had it been when he saw me reading Wang Xiaobo on my grandmother's sofa and told me that my father had read that same book? Had it been when he heard me play the guitar and described to me how my father also played the guitar in college, wearing a white shirt and blue jeans, attracting all the girls? Had it been when I stuffed an entire egg in my mouth that my lips protruded to form a tiny "O" and he remarked that my father and I had the same mouth shape, that I "looked exactly like my father"? Or had it been when I visited him in the hospital, exchanged five words, and watched him gulp down four soup dumplings that my father and I had bought for him? He said they were delicious and that was it. Communication between my father and his father had always been brief as well, mostly about meals of the day and my grandfather's medical conditions. I remembered my father running around from one hospital to another, calling one doctor after another, pulling all the strings he had, ever since they discovered a tumor in grandfather's abdomen. In the hospitalized years, my father always told me to at least try to make the conversations longer by grandfather's bed whenever we visited him, but it had always ended up with my father laughing at my hopeless attempt to find topics.

"Tell Grandpa about the book you've been reading," my father suggested, putting down a cup of water on the nightstand at my grandfather's hospital bed.

"Well, it's about a crime, and the police are having trouble identifying the suspects because the perpetrator left no clues," I summarized rather briefly.

"Great book." My grandfather smiled awkwardly while looking at me.

My father raised his eyebrows at me as a sign for me to keep talking.

"Well, I'm only at the part where they found some DNA at the crime scene…?" I tried to extract more words out of my mouth.

"Sounds like a great book." My grandfather's smile became little wider.

I stared at my palms, searching for more words, when my father sighed, "Grandpa is not much of a talker, huh." He turned to ask, "How are you feeling, Pa? Any pain in your stomach?"

My grandfather shook his head. "I'm fine."

Ten minutes later, we said goodbye.

"You know, you don't need to make a conversation with Grandpa. He's really happy if you can just be there. Unlike your grandma, you have to sit through her words. But do try to produce longer sentences the next time we visit him, okay?" my father teased me.

It suddenly didn't seem unfair anymore to me that my cousins were absent today: it was rather my grandfather whom it had seemed unfair to. Even though he hadn't communicated much with either my cousins or me, he had always taken care of us by cooking for us, and he always had tried to shield us from our grandmother's criticism. My uncles and aunts might not have wanted to forgive my grandmother just yet, but my grandfather shouldn't have been punished for it. All his grandchildren should have been here for him today.

I stood by the casket and realized that I had been crying for a while. The man now in a casket had hollowed cheeks and bulged eyelids, and his gold gown with traditional embroidery that represented affluence masked the truth of his wrinkled body that had already been reduced to nothing. I had never truly known him. All I had known was that this quiet, unrecognizable body now lying in a casket used to be the father of another man, the man who passed down to me his interest in fashion, convinced my mother to let me study literature in college, gave me my bad eyesight and tan skin and who was now standing near me at this glamorous funeral home, having just lost his father.

* * *

The heat persisted throughout the entire funeral.

When the service finally ended, it was already noon and almost 45 degrees celsius outside. According to traditions, the guests may

leave and only family members should go to the cemetery now. For some reason, my father seemed to be the only one unbothered by the heat, as he politely turned down umbrellas offered to him, standing exposed under the blazing sun, as if unaware of it. Somehow I had decided it appropriate to keep a few feet from my father throughout the service so that I could give him some space for etiquette. But seeing my father quietly insist on standing in the sun, I also smiled and turned down the relatives who offered me umbrellas. I seem to have understood my obsession with standing in sun: all that running around in the funeral home earlier had simply been my endeavor to alleviate some workload for my father, as I wanted to be, in all ways possible, a little closer to him, to this chubby, courteous man that I called father. So I stood in the sun as well, exposed to the same brutal heat that he wholeheartedly endured. I wanted to make him proud, so I did what he had done, stood where he had stood, and made all sorts of childish attempts at following his path because he was the man I had truly been admiring for my entire life.

"And the electric shaver, he quite liked it." My father knelt down and put the last item into my grandfather's grave. We liked to believe that the deceased should be accompanied by their favorite items, so when the funeral ended and the families closed the grave, the dearly departed wouldn't be so lonely. Naturally, an uncommunicative man like my grandfather hadn't had too many favorite items besides a frying pan and a fountain pen. But I knew that my aunts and uncles had been taking care of my grandfather's little farm in turns, and even my grandmother had checked on the tomatoes a few times, as my mother told me the last time she had been at the farm.

"You're gonna be as tan as me if you keep standing like this." My father patted my shoulder and handed me an umbrella out of nowhere. "You did well today. I'm proud of you." We exchanged a smile and the funeral was finished with grace.

* * *

A year later, an unexpected houseguest showed up at our door: a tiny ginger cat. At first, it made a few shy attempts at asking for food, then after a while it frequented our house like no stranger. One

early autumn day, it appeared again and swiftly sat down at my feet. It was rather a quiet cat compared to other constantly meowing ones. As I fed it a tuna can, my father came out of the house.

"Have you ever thought about why, out of all the stray cats in our neighborhood, in this world, this tiny ginger cat chose to come to our house?"

I shook my head and reached for some catnip biscuits.

"It sure eats a lot, just like you," my father remarked and thought for a while. "You know, perhaps, in its previous life, it was one of our ancestors." He smiled at the both of us, his face becoming rounder behind those rimless glasses.

"Do you want to hold it?" I asked.

My father shook his head. "Nah, I'm scared of its claws. But we'll feed it as many tuna cans as it can eat, and in the meantime you'll take care of it?"

"I can do that." We looked at each other and grinned, as if looking into a mirror.

WENXIN TANG

How to Become a Thinker: a Chinese Room

Part I

First, you don't get to see your surroundings as they are. The grass is a green arrow that penetrates people; the high-rises are behemoths that conspire to slice and eat you. You look down at the school playground and students in identical uniforms are jogging in a circle just as they are told. You didn't wear your glasses, and it is pretty hilarious to you. You see tons of lactobacillus forming a chain and running around.

You observe a Chinese room. A girl moves to another seat and talks about the movie she watched last night. Another girl responds by expressing her crush on the actor in the movie, and they both scream with excitement. After a while, they return to their seats. You are upset to witness this scene, and out of nowhere you feel a strong sense of how isolated they are, and the closer they stand to each other the more you feel their individuality, and therefore the more they are destined to go back to where they were as isolated persons. Their talk builds connection among them, which creates the illusion that they will connect eternally, but then the seat reveals the truth that they will be apart and remain alone.

In a blank space in a Chinese textbook you comment, "This article is totally racist, how can editors have selected it?" Your teacher throws a piece of chalk at you, and you calmly ask: "Do you have so little ego that you oppress students with violence?" Everyone

looks at you with pale faces, and the teacher merely says, "go to the principal's office." You go outside the classroom and roam the running track, reflecting on your teacher's behavior. You realize that you are getting an awful education, which all the students, teachers and parents never attempt to challenge. Those with privileges in your school tend to play fool means: to achieve their purposes, taking advantage of the power gap to tame the children. You begin to question and doubt.

Part II

Be questioning. Is the bank just a house of deceptive candy and canning chocolate? Why is there social commonsense about who can wear dresses and who can dance? The dress is merely open underneath whereas pants fit the leg, but they both shield the body, which isn't too different after all. And then you go deeper, and wonder why people are so shy about the body in the first place? They lock the door when they go to the lavatory and shower alone. You ask adults about this, and they reply, "when you grow up, you will see." At that moment, you make up your mind that you will never say these things to your children, as you are irritated by generation gaps and it is hardly anyone's responsibility to pinpoint the problem and explain.

They say, "I love you." What is this "you"? Is this you the embryo that is in your mom's uterus? Is this you the ideal and symbol that they imagine before they have you? Is this you the baby that only has a vague sense of vision and an undeveloped mind? Is this you the lively you that has lived for 18 summers? Is this you the person who has an entirely different experience as who you are now?

Your parents visit relatives during Spring Festival and bring gifts. They talk about a person being kidnapped on the news, their children's grades, and pretend to be interested in what others are saying. You ask your parents why they fake-smile, and they reply typically, "When you grow up, you will see." You hear this answer thousands of times, and you are certain that you have a more intuitively accurate understanding of the world than tamed adults, but you are fed up with the fact that you can't express it. You write in

your journal: If I become a parent in the future, I will never give this answer to my child. You think with unbounded instinct.

Part III

Be empathetic. When you hang clothes on a hook, you sense that they are in pain. You paint the paper yellow, blue and purple. You sense that a strong color is needed, and you cut your finger and let the blood drop forming a rosy ribbon of carnival streamers. You dip the brush into the ink and press it on the *xuan* paper. You spray water onto the paper until it is immersed in water. The pigment flows on the surface of the water, and you lift the paper, letting colors interact. Ink dissolves in water and the outline of the pattern is vague; it looks like a deer, a lotus, and you keep painting. You think with imagination.

You see people talking about daily life, with rings on their fingers and arrogant eyes. You have no desire to join. You find the world is merely a projection of your thoughts. You notice suffering in the world, and you can do nothing about it. You realize that you merely complete your life. Even if you do something, your help can hardly exceed the extent of others' ordeal. Have a continuum of thoughts, from the waitress with her earphones, to the fact that she might be communicating with her boss, to the question of why she came here. You add more fiction to the story, and think that she might not finish college. Why? You think that she might have become pregnant during college and got expelled. You begin to regain interest in the world. You think by creating fictional images and stories.

You are then drawn into thinking; you walk in the streets and all of a sudden, stop and close your eyes, frowning as if your mind were focusing on thoughts; you stop in the middle of streets and let the pedestrians glance back at you, or stop in the middle of zebra-striped crossings, and let the vehicles brake and drivers shout aloud at you, "What's wrong with you? Are you crazy?"

Others say you are neglecting homework, eating, hygiene, and your real life, that you are doing strange things all the time. But you go on thinking and retreat to your mind palace where you have planted numerous trees of thoughts since the age of six. You feel

as if you were refreshed by sunlight in your home of thoughts. You feel the water slipping from the fingers of your left hand, to your left shoulder, to your mind, to your right shoulder, to your right fingertips. You dance in the elegy of wind.

WENXIN TANG

Portraits of Drowning

"What do you smell?"
Now, I see
a shower curtain torn apart
a half bottle of mildewed yogurt
a crumpled grey paper ball
a withered hyacinth
fish bones, the leftovers in the sink
Moss in the crevice
A sock without its partner
"What do you taste?"
A child, I remember
A scratch from a stranger's cat
A paper boat folded three years ago
down the drain a gift box ripped open
box of mirrors boxed memory a birthday

cut by scissors

"What do you hear?"
"*you are the fox, while I am the little prince*."

A burned cuff
Dust on a sealed envelope its rosy wax, tossed

into a garbage bin. A photo with a hole –
"*you are the fox, while I am the little prince*."

Cotton scooped out of a fuzzy toy
An elegy carried in the wind. Where
am I? A violin played till a string is broken

A tip of the quilt soaked in blood

Did I just —
get vacuumed? For one second, my heart beating.

The Garden of 如东

To go to 如东.
Grandma tied
my hair with soft hands
at a slow pace, before our journey to the fake mountain
and neon lights that my grandfather
had a passion for, his figure
in the garden, mending the grass,
the familiar apricot tree that he was obsessed with,
and a noisy bird-nest that he tolerated.

"Why cut them?"
"Because they're a marvel."
"Why keep it?"
"Love for the vulnerable."

Years later, when I go back, the garden is
deserted,
and the bird-nest has fallen down,
the last piece of 祭祀
the branches have been snapped by wind, grandpa
is never there anymore, and I recall
images of him lying in bed.

“They are his tears.”
“Because he hears you.”
“He will wake up.”
No.
Nor will he ever again.

To go to 如东, and to kneel down
in front of his monument
and tell him that his blossoms are
flourishing, I pick up the nest,
like a pilgrim, like a 颂歌的人
Then I look up at the sky: a seagull
flies up above, and I hear
her song dry up.

HOIYAN GUO

See You at the Exhibition

A friend drops me a link which leads to a long list of museums around the globe that can now be accessed through Google Street View. After careful consideration, I decide to visit the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, which I make my only destination for the day—I can't say that I am consumed by greed.

Placed in a deep hallway, the sculptures of gods and goddesses give me a warm, or rather, lukewarm welcome. They are beautifully pale, just like their shadows on the wall behind them, but it seems like they don't care to come alive. Each step triggers a moment of pixelation where exquisitely painted ceilings, walls, tiles, and elusive scenery outside the windows all melt into an opaque mass. But I am tenacious.

Travelling without moving used to be my dream.

Legend says Caravaggio traveled to the twentieth century and stole photography, bringing it back to the Baroque. As he landed from the trip with his old brushes in hand, he found a realism more real than real.

That intimidating intimacy between a painter and the painter's painted canvas is something I can't explain about art. I know so deeply that somewhere, something about the way the eyes of the modeled characters or just those unnoticeable creases in the clothes are being depicted reveals whether Caravaggio really killed a man—something that still, thankfully, haunts every dramatized or non-dramatized narrative of his lifelong adventures.

Well, whoever the poor man was, we do know Caravaggio didn't murder Medusa, Perseus did. Caravaggio only sealed the moment in a wooden shield and managed to make it the most astonishing thing in the world. I carefully examine Medusa frozen at the moment of deathm floating in the vacuum of the display cabinet, her splashing blood still cold. I tilt my head and know that I should move on before I, too, am petrified for staring into those eyes for too long.

I find Artemisia right across from the display cabinet of Caravaggio's Medusa. Another moment of violence that I didn't expect to confront this soon but what better surprise could I have wished for? I am right in front of this painting of Artemisia's, I stare and stare, trying to figure out the remnant of truth hidden somewhere yet dispersed here and there—the creases, the skin, the shadowed look of disdain, the sword in action. Artemisia must have whispered into Judith's ear to play it cool—Holofernes is almost gone now.

Through Judith, Artemisia took her revenge. Assaults like that can't be undone, but they are fought against and, in some cases, returned. Is justice a smokescreen for rage, or rage a smokescreen for justice? I don't think we will ever stop debating.

I linger and let my eye wander between Judith and the small exit of the exhibition room, not knowing where the exit leads, although knowing that all it takes is just one click to take me anywhere and another to take me back to yet another anywhere. I must have clicked a wrong spot on the screen because I find myself inside a wall where shadows of some strange windows (must be Italian windows) are projected. I lose sight of where I am, or rather, I never knew where I was this whole time. Who should I turn to for rescue?

Thank God, I find peace laying my eye on an empty chair between a fire extinguisher and an air conditioner at this temple of art. The place is haunted by deadly silence, the Muses are gone. I know exactly why I lingered in front of scenes of murder, because a scream would make me feel so much more alive and I feel sorry that I can't apologize enough. Anyway, I can't be bothered for too long because there is still a job to be done—therefore, in order to embody the stereotypical tourist, I refuse to leave until I've taken a significant number of photos (or rather, screenshots).

A few days after my trip to Tuscany, Italy, my friend invites me to meet in New York. Of course, I say. This time, her link takes me to the Met. I stand next to a Greek column in an enormous exhibition hall, waiting for her while taking in the scene: a wall of transparent glass, and outside, snowy trees frozen in the wind of the greatest city in the world (I haven't been, but at least that's what people say). See you at the exhibition, she wrote. But I begin to realize it's likely I won't.

Artist's Statement: "Palace Clocks"

Our cover features two prints from Rayna Li's "Palace Clocks" series, created in Assistant Professor of Visual Arts Monika Lin's "Printmaking in an Expanded Field" class

This evolving series of works is closely tied to my art historical research on the collection of clocks in the Palace Museum. Conceived as fantastic showpieces and status symbols, these clocks have long captured my fascination with their visual richness. Yet, beyond an interest in the distinct aesthetics of these objects, I also investigate how formal decisions of design are socially embedded and systematically studied. Why do certain motifs recur, in a time when these clocks served diplomatic missions and evangelical ventures alike? Why is one element widely celebrated as the signature of a particular artist, while other designs are relegated to marginal positions and rendered nameless auxiliaries? What makes the "Palace Clocks" emerge as a distinct family of cultural artefacts, instead of merely an assembly of mechanical instruments defined solely by their nominal function of timekeeping?

My current work attempts to investigate the aforementioned theoretical concerns through the physical act of retracing and reconstruction, responding to the practice of cataloguing and its associated principles of cognitive mapping and systemic categorisation. At the same time, my work is fundamentally rooted in an aspiration to foreground the "what-could-have-beens." The reality is clear: a great majority of these objects have been forever lost. Instead of mourning an irrecoverable distance between us and history, my work evokes the whimsical imagination that is central to this genre of art. I seek to interject my own love of organic forms and approaches to surface design into established art historical styles. Using laser cut technolo-

gy as the principal method of carving but referencing the principles of traditional movable type printing, I create original works that destabilise conceptions of the historical and the contemporary, the external and the personal, the real and the imagined. In doing so, I present a vision of this genre of mechanical art as dynamic, relevant, and full of possibilities.

About the Contributors

Louisa Cortez is the pen name of an NYU Shanghai student majoring in Finance, Class of 2021. She has always loved reading and it was only much later in life that she gave creative writing a chance. Had her Perspectives on the Humanities 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.

Yixuan Cui is completing a major in Social Sciences (Psychology) and a minor in Creative Writing at NYU Shanghai.

Hoiyan Guo graduated from NYU Shanghai in 2020 with a Humanities major. From her research to her other personal endeavors, she has always tried to grasp the idea of composition in words, visual art, and music. She probes into how artistic decisions are formed, and how different mediums of creative expressions decisively influence the finished products. She is most fascinated by what can't be described with our language, yet still, without hesitation, uses written notes to process her day-to-day observations, inevitably integrating bits and pieces of her writer-self with almost everything she does.

Jiayu Han (Rain) graduated from NYU Shanghai with a Humanities major in 2020. She is now studying at The University of Hong Kong for a Master's degree in English Literary Studies. Rain's interest in writing starts from sophomore year in Professor Anna Kendrick's Aesthetics

and Literature course. While studying in New York City, she took courses in creative writing and children's literature. Rain is now writing a thesis about the relationship between space and subconsciousness in Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis* and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*.

Sebastian Lau has always found it just a bit easier to interact with animals than people. In fact, one of the reasons he wrote "Rat" is due to his inability to convincingly replicate human interaction. Seb is an Interactive Media and Business student at NYU Shanghai and is planning to graduate in December 2021. This piece was written in late February 2020 when the pandemic was just starting to gain attention in New York, where he was at the time. As a result, the feedback the piece received was divided into those who found the setting to be quite vague and others who knew exactly what the piece was referring to.

Xiao Liang, Class of 2022, is pursuing a Humanities (Philosophy) major at NYU Shanghai.

Haitian Ma is currently a graduate student of Comparative Literature and Critical Translation at the University of Oxford. She graduated from NYU Shanghai with an Honors in Humanities in 2020 with a focus on literary studies. Haitian works primarily between Chinese, English and Spanish, and has been a theatrical interpreter for the Shanghai Vertebra Theatre.

A. Peng is a graduating senior from NYU New York with a major in Literature. She has recently been accepted to the MFA program in Nonfiction at Columbia University and will re-start her writing life in New York City this fall. She builds her language and identity on culture, gender issues, and topics in mental health, and she draws inspiration from city life, food, and the rain. She has just finished her capstone project which is a novella on early-adulthood anxiety and social construct. Her ultimate goal is to create something that people would love to hate.

Allegra Ruiz is a sophomore at NYU, New York where she is pursuing a major in English on the Creative Writing track. She hopes to be

an English professor, and enjoys writing creative nonfiction centered on her upbringing in a Mexican-American family.

Wenxin Tang is a twenty-year-old writer attending NYU Shanghai, Class of 2023. She is a Humanities major. Her creative works have been featured in *A Shanghai Poetry Zine*, *Outrageous Fortune*, *West 10th*, and Citron Review. She received an NYU Shanghai Dean's Undergraduate Research Fellowship for a creative writing project and serves as poetry editor for *Bright Lines*. She founded and has served as chief editor of a multilingual poetry collection project at NYU Shanghai. She writes against perceived normalcy and works to dig into the inner logic and patterns of language.

Tian Tian Wedgwood Young graduated from NYU Shanghai in the spring of 2020 with a BA in Social Science (Environmental Studies).

Shiny Wu graduated from NYU Shanghai in the spring of 2020 with a degree in Interactive Media Arts.

Born and raised in Nanjing, **Xiaoshuang Wu** (BA '22) is a junior at NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study, where she concentrates on the Art of Narrative. She is an upcoming chief editor at the *Gallatin Literacy Review* and a peer writing assistant. By mixing classes in art history, literature, and creative writing, Xiaoshuang analyzes how narratives are constructed in different historical periods and cultural backgrounds. Her study abroad experiences in Berlin and Prague have helped inform her inquiry into nationalism, tradition, and cultural authenticity. Although COVID-19 has led her on an unexpected journey, as a Go Local student, she has been grateful for her chance to join the vibrant community at NYU Shanghai.