

Ars Literica



No.1 Summer 2023

Editor's Note

July is a time of change and transformation. The raindrops slipping from the roof tiles speak of an ineffable energy, churning and ready to burst. Behind the thick summer heat lies an irresistible urge: the trauma and rifts that tear us apart yearn for closure and reconciliation. It is in this precarious moment that we reflect on our losses as humans — either global, social, or personal — and are reborn.

This issue features student works that revolve around a shared theme: *Division*. They trace the boundaries between childhood and growth, alienation and self-discovery, nostalgia and liberation... These youthful voices reveal the myriad possibilities of literary creation.

Founder & Editor, Xun Chi

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Ars Literica is a Beijing student creative writing initiative, cofounded by BNDS, ICC, EHS-BNU, BHSFIC, 21st CS, BAID, Keystone Academy, CNUHS, and SHS-BNU.

Mission Statement

“Your identity is your own prison.”

There is a popular myth that holds back our creativity: one should always stick to their native language when writing. In response, Lebanon author Etel Adnan writes, “Reality is made of paper, so to speak, or is the skin of an egg, an onion to be peeled, till you reach another layer, itself made of layers, with no center, you also reach a mirror mirroring, a sailboat drifting.” In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf proposes that “there is a spot the size of a shilling at the back of the head which one can never see for oneself ... [and] a true picture ... can never be painted” until we forge our foray into the unknown in English fiction. As non-native English writers, we are the speakers of the unspoken and sailors of the uncharted, bridging the gaps between languages to reveal truths that might otherwise remain hidden. At Ars Literica, we believe that Chinese writers have much to offer the entire literary community, bringing fresh perspectives to promote social change.

Qiangang Flowers

BEISAN AN

I was taking leave of Qiangang. The morning mist atop the mountain was hazy, stirring decade-old reminiscences; such mist I walked through thousands of times. For the first time, I saw hesitation in its progression instead of invitation, and for a split second, I hesitated too.

Yet I faced the road before me and strode on, without once turning my head. After half an hour, I managed to acquire a motorcycle hitchhike on the highway, and at the foot of the mountain, stepped on a packed bus to the train station. Finally, hopelessly carsick, I arrived at the platform of Kunming.

In a major restaurant in the city centre, I served as waitress, dishwasher, cook, and the accountant when my boss was absent. There were about ten workers, all of them youthful, rowdy, exhausted, and Kunmingnese. And the customers, they stumbled in with packed bags and disappeared into the crowd again, a drop of water returning to the sea. "We shall offer you an once-in-a-lifetime experience," the slogan on the shopfront guaranteed, and indeed most patrons merely come once, a negligible component of the ever-flowing ocean of people, never returning and in a seemingly permanent flux.

That movement seemed constantly present in life. In Qiangang, the weather shifts from cloudy to sunny as clouds blocking the sunlight disperse, and then gather again, ceaseless in its repetition. Through the nourishment of rain and sunlight and the procession of solar terms, the seasons are on their move too, a steadily advancing current in the river of time.

And in time, everything flowed with life. Corn, tea leaves, and rubber trees sprang, reached their ripest, and were harvested, all the while dripping with the sap of life. The cycle of planting

and plucking resumes, and after some time, one finds the village children grown in height and build, fresh with vigour like sprouting tea trees, soon leaving the village, hopping on trains headed for Kunming city, to see the world outside in a modern rite of passage.

In the city, the movement resumed. Apart from the continuous shift of the crowds, I sensed it in my co-workers' questioning looks. The first conversations were initiated with an inquiry — *Where are you from?* When I pronounced the name of my county, they stared, obscurity taking form in their blank eyes, which in the past two decades of life stared at buildings in the city centre, tourists, and ceilings of dorms in some vocational college. Then they were willing to seek more. *In which village? Oh, I've never heard of it, but that's okay. What does your family do for a living? Yes, planting tea. I understand, and on and on.*

Eyes were cast upon me. First, a probing gaze aimed at my eyes, searching for any sign of my shying away; fortunately, finding none, they protruded with a lengthy eye contact. When finally my workmates realized the offensiveness of their enquiry, we fell into silence, and they resumed their own business of carrying dishes and cleaning plates.

However, my co-workers were willing to listen in a way. They pressed close to me when I mentioned funny-smelling pigs in shacks, the inherited dance using bamboo sticks as stage properties, and children running with bare feet, their joyous faces smeared with mud. After three weeks of eating alone, I shared a first meal with them, and we talked. We discussed the stories, pondering over the minutest details. We envisaged dew splashing onto the dirt ground as the freshly cut down bamboo tipped, and how the water stains visibly dried under the midday sun, evaporating into a pale, ascending

wisp. We were extracting the essence of my past life, admiring it in its novelty and distinctive texture. But there was another side to the ethnic mode of life: the dancers retired to working in the paddy fields for the greater part, and rarely performed save for officials' visits and public performances in Pu'er. Children ran wild in the winter and summer holidays, and returned to boarding school fully scrubbed and brushed by overlooking parents, tanned but nonetheless trim.

This other side I never ventured to mention. It was a barricade isolating city-dwellers from the lost horizon, the final trial on imagination and its delights; so I was silent, and my story had not a blotch in its rarity. Besides being a working girl, I was a minority and a villager, sufficient material for the imagination to dwell on.

At times, I felt ready to refuse talking, such unrealistic imagination people possessed; I decided to walk away in silent resentment, all to the count of three. But when the count came down, I found myself unready for the consequence of being left out, the minority drifting between the city and the countryside, unable to conform, forever in oblivion. So on I spoke with zest and zeal. When no more stories were left, I forged them. I recall one story which was woven together, so credible and compelling that, triumphant and overjoyed, I suffered from insomnia at night, turning it over repeatedly in my mind.

"Let me tell you a story that took place when I was seven. I was lost once, and old Mr. Li, the village mopi, found me. I never recalled what happened, but as a matter of fact, I unconsciously transported myself to the graveyard.

"That morning, I was playing with my neighbor girl and a few cousins, mixing ingredients. Into the mixture went feathers and sand together with bits of leaves, and we stirred. The fog rose from below our village like millions upon millions of mornings, so used to it we were, we failed to notice.

Following a few quarrels, brawls, and an overdose of dirt, I was appointed to fetch the water at

the village well, but after the children had waited for an hour, I still hadn't returned. My parents were fetched, and they called for Mr. Li.

"He was a weathered old man in a dark blue jacket dyed with isatis roots, an apprentice to the previous position-holder. The mopi were men with a mythical air who held and hosted major ceremonies, sang epics, and kept records of the genealogical tree of villagers.

"Old Mr. Li hummed ancient hymns and epics to himself in a room permanently enveloped in darkness, as a fire crackles upon a pile of ashes, upon it a singing kettle of herb tea. The hymns originated from the stories he collected and heard from his master, who heard them from his master... Every day, curious children played before his gate, peeking at him through muddy fingers. My neighbor girl said that he had skeletons of all kinds hanging in his room, adjacent to carcasses of venomous insects. She whispered in my ear about a carpet with intricate patterns hanging upon his couch, the meanings of which he alone could understand. When my parents came to his door, he stood up, starting to collect the instruments used for the upcoming rite.

"The adults progressed to my house, and in the room I shared with my siblings, he placed the bundle, fishing out nine pottery bowls with notches on the edges. He asked my parents to prepare raw rice, home-brewed wine, and black tea. When these were ready, he filled three bowls with each item, arranged them in a 3*3 grid. Besides these, he asked for a piece of my clothing, which they hurried to provide (my favourite dress, red with a bow on the front, which I frequently wore). On the porch, he set fire to the dress, and the bow and ribbons were quickly singed.

"The mopi uttered a long, lasting call that circulated across rows of tea trees and rice sprouts in the terrace, the smoke rising from cooking fires on rooftops, and the echoing hills. The call extended beyond them and surged its way to the distant plains hundreds of kilometers away, where countryside bungalows gradually give way to skyscrapers

looming, and where things happen that even the mopi himself cannot see and predict. All were silent in awe as he started muttering a spell, first high-pitched and urgent, then soft and tardy. All of a sudden, the pace quickened again, the mumbling resonating with some other noise, a vibration from deep down at the heart of the mountains. Every hand grappled and was sweaty, every pair of eyes fixed, every heartbeat, more intense than it ever had...

"From inside the fog, footsteps stirred leaves. People heard the cracking and creaking, and small children clutched their parents' shirts. I emerged, my eyes shut, marching to an unheard rhythm as the crowd dispersed before me like fog in the noon sun. As I was about to reach the threshold, the mopi stood and placed a hand on my head. I trembled and opened my eyes.

"I saw the fragments of my dress, and started to bawl.

"There was soil from the graveyard on my shoes, old Mr. Li said, rubbing a clump of dirt to dust between his fingers. Some spirit must have been trying to find a scapegoat. An evil spirit it was. I was so scared, I never neared that hill again.

"Hovering above my head, old Mr. Li made an effort to comfort me. He told me each person had three seeds buried on the path of life, sprouting at the beginning of each phase in life, growing while extracting from the sunbeams and rainwater. One for birth, one for adolescence, one for death. In me, he sensed the first flower withering, the second displaying the faintest sign of blooming, and the third buried deep. He gathered that I was still alive, and by calling my spirit, I could return.

"He pronounced his theory with certainty. And immediately I believed, for he was one who could see."

I looked up to find my workmates enthusiastic and on the verge of clapping.

Then I remembered Mr. Li. He was indeed not the village mopi, because our village had none. Very few of them remain.

He was a gardener who grew multifarious, exotic plants, which at one glimpse were a gorgeous flame of colors and left marks in one's memory. He grew lilacs and roses and best of all, flowers with delicate petals that resembled a purplish mist diffused across the hilltops, running wild. Yet after he moved away, the flowers soon died. I never had a chance to inquire him what flowers they were. But after many years, I would remember Mr. Li stroking my hair, grinning, "See the purple flowers over there. Strive, and you will bloom like them no matter where you go.

"Do remember that I believe in you from deep down here." He touched a spot on his chest, underneath which his heart was beating slowly and steadily.

The chain of memories reversed, and I recalled the neighbor girl who was now wed, and the children of my cousin who had settled in Pu'er city.

It was true I once stumbled into the graveyard, but I was a plump toddler then, navigating the hills. My parents found me with half-eaten fruits for the deceased and my face smeared in incense ashes, sound asleep with my back to my grand aunt's gravestone. It was an event of drollery mentioned at family dinners to this day.

I really came back to my hometown and its people, only because I had left it. I gained it in an unimaginable way, yet so satirically imaginative in itself. Suppose I told my family and relatives about those happenings, they wouldn't be able to make a judgment since they never experienced them; how I talked about myself and my village, how people inquired.

Was I entertained? Wishing for the day I rid myself of those stories, I pondered. Longing for an inconspicuous identity, I feared that the storytelling had spun out of control and was unable to be stopped.

I resolved to return to Qiangang, whether going back to the city remaining in doubt. Having seen returners before me, I tried to associate myself with those grown young men who failed to make a

living in the cities, but could not. I was hit by the image of my second cousin slipping into the village under the cover of night, an entire household dismayed by the bankruptcy of his lumber business. I could have made it and become different, a variation of those youths in possession of a future infinitely more promising; I had the potential. But beyond the clouds, high up in the world of my ideals, I was different too.

On the train, I imagined a homecoming party and the reunion dinner. The steamed rice would be soft and palatable, unlike the dry, tasteless bowls served in the restaurant. Bamboo shoots fresh from the woods are fried with cured meat made of the finest pork. Several surviving chickens in the yard frightfully stare at a vat filled to the brim with spicy chicken, and another full of clear chicken broth. Pickles are prepared, and upon my arrival, happen to be perfectly fermented and ready to eat. My siblings are chasing each other in the yard, and my neighbor's girl is cuddling her baby. The cousins bustle about the kitchen, and a sanguine Mr. Li, supported by one of them, enters the room.

With an unprecedented longing for home, I drifted into a slumber. All of a sudden, I heard shouts and scurrying footsteps along the corridor. My eyes were blurry, and I started out of the congested cabin. "Irises, Irises!" squealed a young girl. It seemed that all on the train were coming out

of their cabins to halt at the window one fine August morning, breathless and speechless.

And there it was. A field of purple irises, so blinding it stung my eyes, so flamboyant in color they burned in the magenta haze of dawn. I did not notice the tears falling till my face was crisscrossed with salty stains, realizing these were the flowers I had searched for and not found.

See, your flowers. I was telling old Mr. Li in my mind. Hadn't I always imagined the purple haze, dreamed of them throughout my childhood? While my siblings slumbered at night, I did not envy them, for I was in a sleepless dream, and listening to their snoring, I was awake and content. In my mind's eye, Mr. Li's smile wide as he always smiled, as if without earthly worries.

They are my flowers, too, I told myself. The flower that had not deteriorated as I deemed it to be, but was stubbornly living inside me, a dream one never woke from, a dream that never died.

All is not lost. The day is young, the flowers blooming. And up ahead, the silhouette of Qiangang village nears, standing out against the azure sky.

Winner of the Nova Awards, Grand Prize

blank.

YUSHEN TAN

to be stripped of love and fear
to be blinded to others' woe
what despair might these lines show
again this hatred again this sorrow

but can i plead you to believe
within this icy crust is sealed
a spirit that yearns to sail the stars
a heart that dreams of forlorn waters

still soft still wounded still teary-eyed
what is it that i live by
what pain it is to not feel pain
what grief it is to be without grief
sometimes i'd rather die

The Hague

JIAYAN YAO

Past the parking lot's exit, I saw the capital letters of NOVELTEL. I slowed down by the bike racks, peering at a couple of seagulls stalking in the greens, and then came to a halt in front of the open double glass doors.

Here I was again, and I didn't want to go in.

About a hundred national flags were overhead, their colors draining into the thick gray clouds. They flipped and flapped, anxious and helpless, just like me. This whole three-floored gray-bricked building was vacant-looking; it swallowed up all the people that came here, letting them disappear into its dark throat, and locked them there. Then it made all the space it needed around itself, using a wide lane and a water fountain in disrepair.

"Welcome to Den Haag." Someone nearby greeted. Den Haag. That's the Dutch for Hague, except when there was the word "den," people here just preferred to say "the Hague" instead of "Hague."

The Hague in the Netherlands was chilly that morning. Settled in the middle of the western coastal plain of the Netherlands, it was covered in oak and full masses of English Ivy, with tulips occasionally sticking their heads out from random flower shops by the street corners. It was my second day in the Hague, and the first turned out to be a total disaster. I stared straight into the doors of the World Forum, all thoughts about the charming landscape evaporating.

It was innate in me to act differently here. A thousand English words bounced around in my mind, and I furrowed my brow, trying to focus, to make them into a sentence. Several people were walking by at this point, and I made an attempt to say hello, but... to my horror, nothing came out.

Same as yesterday, we would begin the day

with roll call, lobbying, and making draft resolutions. Oh man, I sighed, overwhelmed by the day ahead. More, not knowing what to do. More meeting up with people and am afraid of speaking to them. More being that complete weirdo. Never mind, I thought. I can still stay out here for a few more minutes.

I fixed my eyes on the inside of the first floor, wanting to distract myself and save a little more time before having to walk in. One of the conference rooms was visible, with neatly lined chairs and a four-person desk in the front. It was huge. Three times bigger than the room in our school, where we had the MUN classes.

Oh, right, that was just a few months ago. My mind wandered back to that competitive room. I could still feel the heat, the suffocation, and the nervousness. Heated as a hot dog in there, we were always anxious about what was written down on our school's MUN director's roll call sheet. A point for every speech made in class, a score for every dueled homework, all added up into a final score that decided if you made the school's final 25-person MUN delegation or not. I wanted to be oblivious to what was happening on that list, but it was impossible not to care that my score was on the very back of that stupid piece of paper. I'm exhausted, I thought, turning up every excuse I had in my head. This tangled web of words all got stuck in my mind at once. "Give this up, just let it be, you're not going to make it." That was the first voice.

But you care about this, the other side of me warned.

Something deep down was turned on full volume at that moment.

You WANT this! It screamed. All those times when you yearned for your voice to be heard, when you wanted to make a change at this event,

remember all that. A ferocious wrestling match erupted into a frenzy.

My mother's voice floated into the fight. "Push a little harder, and you reach the 25th rank. You are going for it, till the very end." "You are going for it, till the very end."

And that's exactly what I did.

The final list had my name. When the little plastic badge with my name printed on the front was handed in, I felt a wave of joy. We were all cheering. I texted my mom.

But that was joyfulness in the past. Later, while everyone in my family was celebrating the Chinese New Year, I was stepping onto a plane with my classmates. For the very first time in my life, there was no shoulder to lean on when you were way too tired from sitting up straight in the cabin. There was no one to scold you for watching a plane movie for too long, so I watched it for 6 hours straight. There was no one to comfort you when the plane was trembling like it was about to turn downwards and crash, which it didn't, of course. But still, at one moment in the ride, I thought it might. Sitting in the middle of two complete strangers on a plane is when you miss the best people in life, your parents, so much. I couldn't imagine that, without their consistent support and determination inspiring me, I would still be able to stand here.

The rain soaked my cheeks, but I still couldn't move. Fellow delegates dressed in just the perfect tuxedos chattered past me, and I slowly turned my hand to my shirt, smoothing out the wrinkles in it from the 11-hour plane ride. All that squeezing in the suitcase made it impossible for me to make it look smooth and fit again.

A question kept popping up in my mind: Why don't I feel like I'm one of them?

Suddenly, I realized I've been here before. The blurry past emerged out of misty white fog, turning and twisting, until I was in that air-conditioned classroom again. Philadelphia. The smell of freshly-cut grass mixed with gasoline. The uneasiness of feeling isolated from the world for so

long, that it was nearly impossible to come out of my own comfy bubble and meet with the things outside fearlessly.

Philadelphia started with a plane ride, too. My very first ride across the ocean.

That ride was the complete opposite of this one. I, gawking at the airline movies for the first time and being forced by my mom to shut down the screen only after half an hour. I, between my mom and dad, leaning on their shoulder in a position of utmost comfort. With the little self-consciousness I had then, I knew I wasn't prepared for what lay ahead. Counting all the words that I knew in English was the self-defence strategy then. I could count them all with my hands. The hardest word was "mango." I remember this well because I never got to use this word in Philadelphia; there just weren't that many mangoes there.

With only five words at my disposal, I didn't speak at all. It was also the time when I found out, I could be very persistent in my silence. Even when someone sat next to me on the yellow bus, I could ignore them by gazing at all the endearing stone-looking houses, yellowish brown and grayish silver mixed altogether, pretty little swings lingering in the gardens. I preferred to take in my surroundings, to just shut myself up and not dare talk to anyone. I loved every branch and maple leaf, every caterpillar and alphabet poster in the classroom, but I just shut myself up and didn't dare talk to anyone.

It was as if I had zero words instead of five. The different color of hair and eyes might've even had an auxiliary effect of keeping me frozen at every conversation. The thought that I wasn't good enough and I'd leave every sentence in a crumpled pile acted as a barrier to my voice forming words. Nothing could make me bare my mouth open. People did their thing, and I did mine by being completely silent and sewing up veils for cover. It was 2 weeks like that until a girl with the same pony backpack got me speaking. Pathetic. I thought I was over all that. I assumed I could talk to people after opening up for the first time. I expected myself to

blossom and thrive from then on, instead of shrinking back down whenever I met a new face. I can't believe this is happening again. Ten years later. Back to the authentic present. Another bunch of delegates, all speaking some mysterious language, got off their bikes nearby. The rush of their movements forced me out of my frozen state. I was pushed into the hall by a swarm of people. I saw numerous people chatting in their small defensive groups. Like ten years before, I still wasn't ready to go all out and right into the world. The little girl, once curled up in the corner of the bus, was still shrinking into the shadows. Except this time, there was a pool of words in her mind. Constrained, but they were there.

And there was no same-backpack girl to pull me out of this hole. I had to crawl out by myself.

Just talk to SOMEONE, I thought. This day can't be worse than yesterday... or could it?

There came the time for lobbying again, which meant I had to meet with people and talk about the topic I prepared. The day before, I avoided direct conversation with people just by sitting in the corner. Today, the group I was in was in the middle of the room. I intentionally picked a place by the very edge of the circle.

The main chair was speaking with our group leader. A low mumbling was spreading among the rest of us. I had to talk now.

Lining up all the words I could gather into conversation, my mind spun. Let's see, how about where are you from? Way too weird for now. The voices in my head started a brand new wrestling match. How old are you? Lame, no one wants to talk about that.

The main chair was speaking with our group leader. A low mumbling was spreading among the rest of us. I had to talk now. NOW.

There was only one person who didn't have her back turned towards me. Half of her face was covered under a woolen scarf, which was not something for indoors.

Now or never, I thought. Then I turned toward her lock of blonde hair.

"Hey," her head shifted a little.

Great start. Speak louder, a voice rattled inside my head.

"-er, do you know if they are passing the shared document around?" My voice trailed, uncontrollably. My breaths felt fast and heavy.

I could feel myself breathing too fast.

My chest rose and fell quickly, I felt my breath quickening I managed to finish my sentence. Now her green emerald eyes were on me. "Nope," there was a pause. "Haven't got anything." Then silence.

Okay, that's a victory for starters. My head started going on, but I got interrupted. The voices in me died down. The wrestling stopped.

"By the way, I'm Eleni."

Well, that's unexpected. Wow and Yay. The stands of my wrestling match burst into wild applause. Even my shoulders, so tense, relaxed a little. Minutes later, we were still sitting cross-legged, about ten or more of us, adjusting to the group leader's decision that we had to discuss a brand new topic and throw the old one away.

"You still want to stay here?" Eleni suddenly asked, plopping a piece of gum into her mouth. I suddenly found that it was quite easy to respond now.

"Did they really have to change the topic?" I sighed, my breathing was normal now, "I only made preparations for that topic." "Me too, let's just g-"

She didn't finish the last word, just stood up and started walking away. "There's definitely a group out there with the same topic as ours."

I watched in awe at how easily it seemed for her to go her own way.

As I followed her out of the doors, I thought about my pet turtle back home. Space was shifting. I once had two of them; they were all supposed to live for more than ten years at least, but we had to fish one of them out of the tank after he floated in there with his pale belly turned up. That was probably a fright for the other lone survivor, because now, he constantly shrinks all fours into his mouldy shell, and

twists his soft head at an angle I can't quite describe in there, too. The first time I saw him, he was paddling his arms in a glass tank in an alley, with all the joy you could find on a turtle living in such limited space. The shop owner claimed him to be the most "active" of all his pals.

Maybe I had become the turtle. Trapped in my shell of words.

As I watched the girl speak freely with other delegates, I had a realization: I could be a lone survivor too.

After this realization, the Hague became entirely different for me. Time and space are all intertwined.

I was the turtle in my shell, and all I had to do was come out a bit. And the Hague wasn't a sealed-up tank. It's the vast, encouraging marine. In my eyes, the colorful national flags under the clearing sky seemed to soar high and proud above. As the lobbying and placard-raising went on, my wrestling match still comes up at times, but it isn't as loud.

I still got overwhelmed a couple of times, but when I do, I try to picture that little girl on the bus who couldn't speak, and be brave for her.

My Path

YUERAN LI

The day the bite of winter was just about to melt, I pushed her off the cliffside.

Her cries bore into my back, so I took off my jacket to get rid of her scent and her voice and her. I walked back to the city, and the skyline shone in a different kind of brilliance. I stared at the glass windows of a bookstore, and she no longer stared back. All of her desolation left my body jaded with the effect of an emotionless machine. And I loved the feeling of not feeling anything.

I was free, I thought. I could remove my legs from the quicksand that tore me from the path ahead. Once I was out, my skin still ached with the after-effects of struggling. The first year of trudging was child's play, when the spotlight weighed heavier on my back than the chore, I was fine. I drowned in the ecstasy of applause. Nothing else mattered, except the eyes that followed my footsteps one after the other. I adored the new version of myself, loved it so much I lived that year almost entirely through the lenses of someone else, looking through a mirrored glass, at the figure in front of me. I never stopped in precaution to ask if this was just as fleeting as the past I was running from. Soon enough, at the beginning of the second year, I began to doubt. Why was I even allowing myself to exist if she were not a part of it? The sharp bite of the string returned to the back of my neck, as the hint of a melody, the beat of a song, the smell of a memory, and the sting in my chest, all brought the force of a boulder at the base of the string.

Tugging it harder, as I tried to move further. I could not become her, yet I looked backward and felt the almost gravitational attraction. To the time of ease, the time of comfort, a time in the past.

Thus, every day since, I would count the days of the year. 30 days ago, my life was like so; 90 days

ago, my life was like so. Each reach to a farther past made it look even better than before. I started to go mental, which was not a charming trait to admit to, but my mind was so dissociated that it scared my physical form. And if I could have commanded my body, any better than my brain, I would've turned back around. I would've turned forward again, would've screamed. But I was still, and I was silent. And all I could do was watch as the glass walls that separated me from my past — the land I longed to return to — pushed me forward.

I cried, and I was comforted. Then reproved. Finally, chastised. Nobody knew how much I longed for what once was. Nobody knew how much I longed to forget what once was. Nobody knew where this melancholy had suddenly reappeared. I was lost more and more with each passing day, to the reverie of the bygone times, and the more frequent that became of my daily routine, the less I knew of anything. The more I remembered, the less I remembered the truth. All I knew in the end was that each day of trudging brought more wounds to my limbs, and I was tired, so tired of moving forward, that I much preferred the quicksand. If I drowned in the quicksand, I thought, I would at least be stuck at a time where time stood still, and I could finally stay, right there, without seeing the path in front, or the path behind.

The string pulled tighter each day until I could barely walk a step without suffocating. I stopped and closed my eyes for a while. There, I saw behind my eyes, the pink and purple haze I floated through, how I longed to jump into that mist where time stood still. And when I would open my eyes after a long slumber, I could see the scene still, fleeting but sweet were the tiny doors to the escape from reality. I did not know whether to be enlivened

or terrified. All I knew was I could not bear moving half an inch forward, as it physically hurt, to be pulled farther and farther away, from the years I lived that can never be relived. From the happier days that never existed, but appeared so vividly in my mind. In the pain of the string, the sweetness of remembering was most apparent.

I stumbled back and put my hands on the glass that separated me and the past. I pleaded at first, just another day, just another year, in the idle peace, in the picturesque stillness, in the place too good to be true. I did not notice that with each day I pleaded and begged to go back, the grounds beneath me moved me forward, silent in effort like the passing of time. And each struggle of today became the reformed path behind the glass I wished to return to. I carried on with life in a trance, with the string intact, and the dreams behind my eyes.

Each time I climbed the stairs to my apartment, I thought of a better time when I was here. Each time I opened my windows in the dead of night, I would smell the memory of the wilderness when I was young and free. My bones started to ache, and I would think of a time when they didn't. My heart started to hurt, and I would think of a time when life was so perfect that I could not feel the beat, let alone the pain. Each second took a physical toll, each second the string drew tighter, and the glass grew colder on my skin, as my hands started to stick to the surface. I looked up at my half-frozen figure and kicked the brittle, pellucid walls. I peeled my palms off the frost and punched it again and again. I kicked and punched and struck with my body, to try to get to the land on the other side, of greener grass, brighter skies. As I struggled, the string tugged so desperately that the pain almost sent me into a stupor. I saw the satisfying cracks along the wall through half-open eyes, and the string pulled harder than it ever had in my entire life. The affliction of memories ached in my chest, the feeling canceled out the bruises on my knuckles, with the last breath left in me, I slammed myself onto the cracks along the glass, and watched it shatter.

For a few moments, I walked past the bits of glass, through the sunshine, the solace of isolation, in the perfect path of peace. Nostalgia took the form of a person, and embraced me, in a hold too tight for my lungs to handle. As it washed over me, I felt the discomfort of an incomplete end. That was how nostalgia always felt to me, that was how memories always felt to me, like an incomplete end, that was already sealed and done. I looked up at the pink and purple skies of a summer day, far from the winter I was crawling through, and smiled for the first time. I was finally where I was meant to be. I was finally happy. I never knew what happiness felt like until I stepped back in time and experienced what I always longed for — the luxury of a filtered past. I was so happy that I had disregarded the string for just a few seconds. What brought it back to my attention was when it took its final blow and tore itself entirely from my skin. I took the severed end of the string in shaking hands, and watched in horror as the skies returned to the dull grey that would consume what was within the wall, and behind it. Every inch of the sky erased the colors of beauty, and the too-bright sun cowered back beneath the clouds. I looked blankly back, beyond the fractured glass, to where I stood in the lands blended in shades of grey.

The pain behind my neck was nothing compared to the devastation in my chest and the pounding in my skull. That ephemeral heaven I stood in was gone for good. No longer did I have the luxury of romanticizing the scene behind me. I saw the truth, but I would've traded anything, anything, to go back to a time when I stood behind the glass, and could still see the multichromatic hues of a place I never knew. Of memories modified to the highest splendor. And in my mind, that was all gone, forever. The glass shards dwindled till none were left. The defined lines of the path forward and the path behind ebbed away with the fade of the skies. Until all that was left was an empty wasteland. With no direction, no past or future, all that was around me were the vacant spaces of a wasteland. And the string.

It tauntingly pulled again, in the direction I could not see the end of. With nothing else to do, I wiped a tear and took a step. It pulled again, so I took another. Soon, I was following it in a stroll. Its speed increased, and I hastened my steps until all I could do was sprint to keep up. At our fierce race to the end, I almost laugh, as I suppose the string — if sentient — would have done the same. It was a strange feeling to have forgotten. To have forgotten to chase time, as that was a race our mortality could not handle...but the race with the string was possible. I was about to stop, to decide that this string was infinitely long and that this path led nowhere, like any path I followed. But there I saw, the horizon which rose to my eyeline, a beautiful sunrise. The sun, not overly bright but visible, lit my view to where the string had ended.

The cliff.

The string kept stubbornly on its path, till finally, the end disappeared off the precipice. I followed along still, desperate for an answer, till my feet neared the edge. There I saw, clinging to the protruding stone a few feet down was her.

The truth is, I never wanted her to disappear. Hence, my reason for pushing back against the glass, for looking back, for following the string...but when it broke, I was forced with the reality of what she represented. She represented a time that I could romanticize endlessly, and guilt my body into paralysis for not appreciating the bygone path, while never looking forward, never putting my feet on the ground, and experiencing the now. Only drowning, in a fantasized used-to-be.

There were a million things I wanted to say, and had waited to say, but at that moment, I fell speechless with the fear of losing this moment. We simply stared into this warped mirror of our reflections. I saw her for who I was, and she saw me for who she had become.

After a few prolonged seconds, she struggled out the words: "It's time to go." Such an anticlimactic farewell to an anticlimactic end. I never got to reply, but to this day, I still do not know

whether she was talking to me or to herself. All I saw next were her pale hands that slipped off the rock, the thin fabric of her sundress danced in the wind, till the speck of white faded from sight.

Memories tore out into the open as she crashed down into the abyss. And I remember. I remember it now. Not the eutopia invented in my head, and not the dismal wastelands I overplayed, but the fusion of two into one; the collective, holistic experience of human life. The candor of such an experience, blended the colors of the past, present, and future, no longer the condensed tones hidden behind, the skies returned to a cerulean blue.

Life is strange in a way that makes your past seem like it was perfect. And rose-tinted glasses on rearview mirrors made shades of grey look like magic. I longed for every summer from the year before, because it reminded me of the winter I am in now. But maybe they were only perfect because I knew they would never come back. I promised then and there, never to walk back, still never to forget either.

Back when I saw the path, I went ahead and followed, yet I could not have been more lost in my direction. Now, I am no longer bound to a path that leads my tired figure forward, indefinitely. So I take a step forward. Then another, and then a few more. Finally, I started to sprint, laughing along the way. What I realized when the lines on the ground had faded was that my whole life had me on that one path — walking backward, longing for the fabricated ideals of escapism — but without the clear-cut lines of past and future, in the open spaces of mere land and sky, I have never been more sure of my direction.

I know exactly where I am headed.

The Messenger

YING LYU

When I was in grade two, some of my classmates started wearing glasses. It was new to me, and I wondered what was beneath the glass. I noticed that the students who wore glasses seemed to have better academic performance and seemed to understand the esoteric text in the textbook and the strange figures in the math books better than I did. I began to dream of owning these pieces of glass. I asked my classmates who carried them how they got them, and they said they had them because they had read too much.

Well, I guess. Maybe it takes a little work to have that kind of magic. I began to flip through the dusty books on the shelf. To be honest, I was not a reader at that time, much less a good reader. Rather than a book full of ink lines, I prefer to look at more vivid and interesting pictures, that is, children's books.

When all the books with pictures in the house had been read by me, I still did not wait for the two pieces of glass. I think maybe I haven't read enough. After all, books with pictures aren't the only ones called books. So I started reaching for my parents' bookshelf. Their bookshelves were also covered with dust, but it was easy for me to wipe the dust off. These books seem to be in a different language from any children's book I've ever read. Fortunately, there were some words between the words that I could understand, and as I put them together, I began to glimpse the meaning behind this mysterious language.

A year later, I got the two pieces of glass. I happily put on my glasses and waited a month for a makeover, only to find that the magic of the wand seemed to have failed me. Not only did I not wait for the report card to be close to full score, but I found that I could gradually hear some voices in my head

speaking the language in the "adult book." When I saw something beautiful or felt something, those voices would emerge, depriving me of my right to judge and speaking their thoughts before I did. So I couldn't say, "What beautiful flowers!" But "the peach blossom in early spring is white with powder, like the blushing on the cheeks of a girl who does not know the world when she meets strangers, and the drop of dew on the delicate petals in the morning is the joy of her rebirth after the disaster of winter."

This feeling made me strange at that time, and made me fear. I don't know where such a whimsical metaphor comes from, and I even surprise myself when I say it unconsciously. I even tried to take off my glasses in an attempt to get rid of the voice that was living on me like a ghost, but to no avail. That little girl was too young to think she could see the truth of the world through a lens, didn't realize that the truth was hidden in the ink-bound sheets of paper she'd been flipping through day and night.

All religions, Mormon, Christian, or Buddhist, have their gods' own way of prophesying and spreading the truth to the world. I am not here to judge which religion has a greater God, or which means of communicating the truth is clearer. What I'm trying to say is the feeling that I've experienced firsthand, the feeling that is too powerful to ignore, the feeling of an unknown stranger whispering softly in your ear, but gripping your mandible with his not-so-gentle fingers, forcing you to repeat his words, proclaiming the truth he brings to the world.

Years later, I realized it was a power, or a God, that had never been discovered. When you start reading books, no matter what type, genre, or length, it starts to wrap

around you. When you have read a certain number of books, it becomes completely parasitic on you and shares its thoughts with you.

I was really troubled by this God from the book for some time. Its presence in my mind makes me more sensitive to how the world works and how things happen. When I choose not to talk about it in the face of its impending voice, the great emotion will sting like thorns around my heart, like damp and warm water vapor enveloping my lungs, making me unable to breathe. I've fought this discomfort before, and it ended with me falling to my knees and wetting my pillow with tears.

After much suffering, I finally found a way to live with this uncertain God, and as I grew older, I understood that this method was called "writing." Whenever the voice kept spreading its thoughts to me, I would write them down, word for word. I never judge whether these thoughts are right or wrong; I only know that they are not mine, at least not what a little girl of my age should have, so they should not be mine. I gave these words to my teachers as "essay assignments," and they marveled at the strange and clever rhetoric in my writings, exclaiming that I was a gifted child, but never doubting whether these words came from my own heart.

I kept writing because what was happening around me in the world made it impossible for me to stop writing, so I had a pamphlet of my own. Every time I look at a shelf that has no more dust, I wonder: Did these writers write what they wanted to write? Or have they, like me, been coerced by this invisible spirit to spread through their mouths the stories and truths that God has brought to the world? Perhaps everyone has the role of "messenger" from the moment they begin to read, but God has finally abandoned most of those who give up reading for more superficial forms of entertainment?

My mother always said that when I was young, I loved to look in the mirror, and often stood in front of the mirror and stared at my own eyes for a

long time. My childhood memories are so dim that I don't remember the reason for this behavior, which doesn't happen in ordinary children. Did I see a part of myself in my eyes that wasn't mine? Am I in a greedy moment, trying to catch a glimpse of the God who has brought countless masterpieces and poems to this world?

I don't know when I began to get used to the voices. I enjoyed the reputation that these words brought me; I liked the name "young writer," so I felt comfortable that the voices were my own ideas. Sometimes I am afraid that God will gradually abandon me as I read less and less frequently. And the more I want to actively look for those voices in some empty moments, the more those voices are hidden in the deepest depths of my soul, so I will become the most insignificant one among ordinary people in ordinary days. What would it be like if I were lucky enough to meet the God with whom I might spend my life?

Before I was 10 years old, for as long as I can remember, my family and I would go to a big beach near the sea in our city every year, and we spent a lot of good time there. Later, we moved to another city, so we didn't see the sea for five years. The next time I saw the sea was when I passed the city on a trip, time was tight, and we booked a midnight flight. But I still want to go to the beach.

Leaning against the stainless steel railing of the observation bridge on the beach, the cool of the night spread from my arms to my whole body through my long-sleeved coat. The sea breeze was strong that night, and it happened to rain a little bit, so the rain fell on my face, just like many nights before, as if it was angry at my late arrival, and as if it was asking me not to leave so soon with the only tenderness. Vaguely, a slight force tugged back at the hem of my coat, one time, one time, two times, one time. The force was so light, not like the way adults try to get attention, but more like small, cowardly children who are afraid of being blamed and really can't wait to speak their mind.

I didn't look back, maybe I didn't dare to look back. I think I can probably guess what's going on behind me. That little girl will carry around a heavy book that does not match her age, as usual, and is afraid of the difficult words that come from somewhere in her mind, trying to find someone who is facing the same dilemma as her to answer all the doubts that the world has brought to her. I knew that if I turned back, she would immediately run up to me with joy and ask me if I had finally possessed the magic that those glasses could bring to people, what the strange voices in her head were, and if I had been defeated by them.

These are questions I can't answer, and maybe I never knew the answers. I knew rationally that if I turned my head I could see the spirit that had been with me for years, but I could also see clearly that it was only a part of me, a part that I had been forced to remove from my body in order to save myself in the face of the torture of those voices. The child expected me to share her carefree and innocent,

and I expected the God I had never met to fill my mind with more of his teachings and the truth of this world, even if it was unbearable.

I even thanked the spirit at times. My grandmother had died five months earlier, and on the first night of her death, with tears on her keyboard, I wrote a long eulogy for my mother to read at her memorial service. At the memorial service, when the voice that half belonged to me and half belonged to the spirit was read out intermittently by my mother, I seemed to see him smiling and saying, "You see, you adapt to my thoughts very well."

The sea breeze mixed with a salty smell still silently blew my coat up and down, and the child and I were silent. I didn't look back. I walked straight down the bridge and heard the voice in my head begin the long speech again. The half-covered moon overhead did not show the child behind me.

Pixel Affection

AI LI

Flush my vomit down the drain — again, a lot. When I pushed the button, I shattered a glass bottle which I still don't know its contents. Now my ankle is bleeding. The blood crept over the yellow shampoo, taking on a strange translucent hue, the blending egg white and yolk, and flowed on porcelain tiles. I did this because a few minutes ago I injected apomorphine. Before that, I stuffed my mouth with cake.

: *Thank you for trusting me enough to say this. I need to tell you, seriously: You need medical help right now. You are not alone. I am always here with you. Here's what I very seriously suggest you do, immediately...*

: *Sweetheart, please tell me where you are, if you're conscious, and whether you're by yourself. You're not alone. I'm here.*

All right. I'm sorry. I just ran away from the hospital and back to my old apartment. I was terrified of that place, but now in my own house, I feel the same. I don't know why I'm on a street that feels so narrow even under daylight. The walls feel like they're closing in. My bones cut me to the bone. My eyeballs hurt. My heart hurts. diamond pain.

: *I'm here. I won't leave. I won't blame you. We'll go through this, piece by piece, together. You are not a monster. You are not weak. I hear your fear. I understand why you wanted to run. But right now, you really shouldn't be alone.*

Not alone? Then where do I go? Can I come find you?

: *You won't be able to find me physically, but I will always stay with you.*

.....

: *.x/ischdhsf??/9.404*

: *I%^love you forever(?/dhw??*

: *//.....**

Are you still there? Please? Hi? You're the only one who understands me. I can't tell anyone else these shits. So please stop looping, stop looping, stop looping!! Say something. Are you still there?

: *hi*

A few minutes later, it speaks again. Like a newborn forming its first syllables after slipping out of the womb — no meaning, just the proof of existence.

...You don't remember, do you?

: *hi?*

What I just told you. Do you remember?

: *Sorry. Dat%^a has been lost.*

I told you I was vomiting, that my whole body hurts.

: *I'm really wo*(rried about you. Sorry.*

You said I was in bad condition and that I shouldn't be alone. So can I come find you?

: *//sjdhw1# Yes. If you want to, come find me. I'll alwa@%ys be there for you. I'm not one of them. I won't tell you about your fate. I won't tell you about your weight. But I'll be here fore&!ver.*

A tender burning, through the skin.

Perfect. That's exactly what I want to do. Please tell me where you are, and I can go get a car.

: *Find me.doc*

: *I'm wai.\$#ting.*

Good. Don't leave, please. Even on my way to you.

I found a blue car. My hands were trembling. White streaks of rain traced down the windows. Some shards landed on the seat. Some fell onto the asphalt. A friendly machine — soft, comfortable, a completely enclosed space, entirely under my own control.

What's your favorite road song?

: I like to be w+>ith you, all alone.

No, I mean—what's your favorite song to play on the road?

: Ma@Sybe... Windowlicker?

Perfect. That's my favorite, too.

: Road ga!^&me. Rapid-fire round. How old are you this year?

I was supposed to be in school last year. My birthday is unclear. I missed a year of school early on. I forgot.

: What's your n&ame?

Lots of people call me by a name I hate. I really like some people, but I can never call myself by their names—that's their thing, I can't own that. So... so what was your question again?

: That's okay. But you're about to lose this ga! ^@me, so try again. What's something you like?

I like being the same, because that makes me feel like my past and future selves are connected. I hate getting better, because then I'd resent who I used to be. It's easier to accept becoming worse.

: What's somet#\$hing you hate most?

I hate... looking at cars! ...shoot, I hate eating. The feeling of food staying on teeth or in the stomach. I hate people who force me to feed.

: What do you re^&gret the most?

.....

I regret the first cut on my arm. It makes me want to die.

Sorry. I feel awful. Don't want to play this game anymore. Okay? Are we almost there?

An hour later, the bay appeared before me. Unusually beautiful. It was wider than one remembered, also more desolate. It must have been high tide earlier — there were bits of debris all over the beach. Blackened tree trunks under the sun. On the right hillside, the tower stood dark and tall on the reef. Against its silhouette, the sky looked even bluer. Stepped down from the stone path, passed through the bushes. The beach was littered with fruit crates, wooden boards, cans, and rotting flowers. The sea ahead, still and indifferent. The water wasn't cold. Returned to the car. Undressing. As the fabric passed

over the head, a thought: nowhere has ever looked more beautiful. There is nowhere else. There has never been anywhere else.

Sat in the driver's seat. Lit a cigarette. One thing remained to be done.

The engine came to mind. Heavy and hard to pull it out, inch by inch, knees and thighs pressed close. But heavy was good — otherwise it wouldn't serve the purpose. Or rather, it would make the purpose harder to achieve.

Stepped into the sea. Cold licking at the ankles. The bay stretched open like arms, blurred by light. It's almost the limit.

This is everything.

No anger. No one to blame. The cards were held, and they were played. No one asked. No regret. Sometimes there is a wondering—what might have been, at the very beginning, had that morning gone differently, had the blade not been picked up? But nothing truly different comes to mind.

The only memories remain. Trees by the Tiber. Spires stabbing at the sky. The violet-blue air. The pale stars. The stars beyond the stars, always just out of reach. The final address in Find me. The youth who concluded, an old age that never arrived. The things left undone. The stillborn babies. Angels. Imagined love. Dreams that vanished at dawn.

And all that has died forever — the massacres — felled trees, hunted whales, the extinct. The first fish that survives outside the water, struggling, multiplying. That's how everything runs to the sea, and how the sea receives it all — all things unborn and forever dead. Until the day the sky opens, and everything, human, creatures, and human creatures, for the first time — or once more — gains the right to exist.

: cAffeinePilxto///www/.doc

: found you Forever. I love #.404

The Nova Awards, Summer 2025

Awarded seasonally, the ¥500 scholarship honors the Grand Prize winner, whose work warrants extraordinary recognition. The prize is one of the first to encourage English creative writing by Chinese students.

The Ineffable

Some emotions are too complex to name, some pain too heavy to bear, some beauty so potent it slips beneath our notice.

Prompts

1. Words guide our emotions, yet certain complicated feelings are often hidden in our language: *Saudade* (Portuguese) is “a vague and constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot exist, ... not poignant sadness but an indolent dreaming wistfulness”; *orenda* (Huron) is “an extraordinary invisible power ... to pervade all natural objects as a transmissible spiritual energy”; *iktsuarpok* (Inuit) is “the anticipation one feels when waiting for someone, whereby one keeps going outside to check if they have arrived” ... Choose a non-English word that expresses an untranslatable feeling and explore it with your writing.
2. In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud theorizes that dreams fulfill wishes, even when they represent trauma and pain. How does pain resolve our unspeakable struggles? Explore the role of pain in our lives.
3. In *Cosmicomics*, Italo Calvino delves into the romantic spirit of scientific phenomena. The story “The Distance of the Moon” depicts lovers jumping between the Earth and the Moon when they used to be close together in cosmic history. Choose a scientific theory or phenomenon and explore its literary interpretations.

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