

UCLA

Departmental Honors Theses

Title

All Rivers Run East to the Sea

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/00x7q12v>

Author

Zheng, Alice

Publication Date

2022-03-17

Undergraduate

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES
ALL RIVERS RUN EAST TO THE SEA
A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS
BY
ALICE ZHENG
ADVISOR: BRIAN KIM STEFANS
LOS ANGELES, CA
MARCH 17, 2022

ABSTRACT

ALL RIVERS RUN EAST TO THE SEA

BY ALICE ZHENG

All Rivers Run East to the Sea is a mixed-genre, poetry and prose collection that stems from my own journey as a female, bilingual, second-language writer, exploring the multidimensional experience of displacement.

English came to me as a convenient place to start anew, to be honest and free. Only much later did I realize the cost of exiling oneself into another language. I was so far gone into the pursuit of liberation that when I finally stopped, all I could see was the smoke coming out of the house of who I used to be. However, poetry serves as a space where one does not have to conform to a pre-existing vernacular. This collection attempts to create a poetic place of unity and coherence despite the transience and mutability of life. Language, because of its inevitable errors, often leads to a failure to communicate, but writing is the creation of something beautiful out of the ruins, capturing the infinite proximity to fully knowing someone else or ourselves.

The mixed-genre format of my collection mirrors the fragmentation I experience, but also fuses a coherent narrative through this linguistic, formal, and cultural diversity. The in-betweenness, upheaval, and fluidity that this collection explores in form and flesh calls for a reimagination of home and self-identification. In telling our stories through language, we are creating "a room of one's own," to quote Virginia Woolf, and in this room of our own, where no one can take our story away, we can always belong.

For us afflicted.

Copyright © 2022 by Alice Zheng. All Rights Reserved.

Table of Contents

These days,	1
“I used to take bus line 35...”	2
A Parting	3
One	5
The Architecture of Questions	7
Midnight Sonata	9
Mother’s Seasonal Lullaby	11
“My favorite fairytale is...”	12
Learning to be a Woman on a Wednesday	13
In Winter, Lovers Sit by the Water	15
My Terrestrial Galaxy	17
“Kimiko Hahn writes...”	20
Dramaturgy	21
“In the night of all endings...”	24
I Think About the Day	25
Moving	27
“Say we back up a little...”	28
Evening Zuihitsu	29
“I stand in front of the gravestone...”	30
Elegy	31
Last Hour of Twilight	33
The City Is a Song You Know Not How to Sing	35
Epilogue: Burying Fallen Petals	37
Afterword	42

Note: Appended to this document is a PDF of the same texts formatted for the print version of this selection. The page size is 6 x 9, the standard for poetry books, and is best read in two-page view with "Show Cover Page" checked off in Adobe Acrobat. This version provides a more accurate sense of how the prose and poetry interact once the book is printed.

These days,

words have failed me completely — if I get to say that like a real poet.

Images. Metaphors.

巧言令色: the immorality of semantics.

What a beautiful piece of leaf, fallen. In January, its redness so full.
Why stare at me in shock? All I did was crushing it.

Why stare at me? What's with the unabashed, autobiographical I?
It could be you. Why did you crush the leaf, so full?

Moonlight moves in squares on the ceiling. Eyes curiously follow.
As if it knows.

At midnight, an orange bus opens its door like a hungry mouth.
The bus moves into darkness.

Moonlight wobbles into darkness.

From darkness emerges language, beautifully hypothetical.
For example, moonlight signifies fire.
For example, you signify me.

If you know:

I am not writing so long as you are not reading, my friend.

I used to take bus line 35, then transfer to line 7 every Saturday afternoon to my ballet lessons. Seven years as if a day.

These bus rides were memorably uncomfortable, mainly because I had to wear tights under a leotard under an entire fit of regular clothes, while my hair was tied up into an impeccable bun, supported by twenty invisible pins in my scalp.

These were required by my ballet teacher at the time, Ms. Du, who taught me for as long as I can remember. Ms. Du was a serious woman from a provincial town. Rumor had it that when Ms. Du entered teenage years, she attended the local tryouts that the National Ballet of China organized in her area. While the judges were impressed by her ability and commitment at such a young age, they were also concerned that her Achilles tendon, shorter than average, would impede her future development as a professional dancer.

“You can’t go too far like that, you know. These things take not only work but also gift. Tsk tsk, poor girl, loved ballet so much.” One of the moms in the waiting room before class, while doing her daughter’s hair, gave a spirited remark along with the story to an invested audience. I remember trying to tell her age compared to Ms. Du’s.

A story would not be complete without an account of the character’s internal journey. From one suspicious source or another, I gathered the impression that Ms. Du was a determined little girl who would not back down from such a challenge. With true grit, she eventually made it to Beijing as an official member of the National Ballet.

A Parting

渭城朝雨浥轻尘 客舍青青柳色新
劝君更尽一杯酒 西出阳关无故人¹

What is west of Yangguan nobody asked
Rice wine printed on dirt made heavy
celadon morning sky

Sketch in your letter
something invisible unless from a distance
high clouds laden with Yellow River

Mountain passes rites of passage
Nothing monumental about
the back of you walking away

Bright moon in daylight blade-like notes in five
sing a parting tune in triple repetition
Flute holes left empty a riddle for return date

Willow branches stroke rain
the way history looks sympathetic

¹ Or, "A Song at Wei Cheng." A poem by Chinese Poet Wang Wei during the Tang Dynasty, written for a friend leaving for the frontier in the eve of An Lushan Rebellion.

The important casting call for Swan Lake finally came around. As everyone aspired for White Swan — the undisputable heroine with the most exposure, Ms. Du eyed for Black Swan, a more interesting character with a much greater variety of moves. Failing to be selected, she rolled over as a candidate for the famous Four Little Swans, the next important roles in the show. However, due to her above average height and below average tendon length, she was voted out despite her competence. Ms. Du ended up being casted as one of the Three Bigs — the outshined counterpart to the Four Little Swans, and for the extremely hierarchical nature of ballet troupes, stayed in this role until retiring in her thirties and becoming a teacher.

All of these meant nothing to an eight-year-old me apart from the fact that they made her quite an unusual teacher. Ms. Du strictly demanded only the plainest outfit to class: no red flower hairbun makers, no colorful dance shoes other than nude, and there must not be a single loose strand of hair escaping the bun, a show of attitude. Most dance teachers imposed inhumane standards for flexibility and made kids cry and scream during what seemed like endless stretches. Naturally, those that were able to raise their leg above their head took great pride in it and constantly showed off. However, whenever Ms. Du caught someone doing so, she made sure to rebuke it, “what do you think we do here? Folk dances? No, we do ballet, and what you were doing just now is not what ballet is about. Ballet is fully surrendering yourself and feeling the art, not some tricks or showing off, or some gifted joint. You must not forget.”

I stood in the far corner by the barre, lingering with the aftertaste of what she said. I had never thought about such a philosophical question as to what ballet meant for me before then, but something about it made it sound distinctly profound, almost shocking. Perhaps it was the melancholy with a dash of anger on her face — or perhaps I imagined this — or, it was the rare modicum of personal emotion, pain in particular, which violated her usual stoicism.

One

The jellyfish sun ensnares.

The jellyfish sun agitates
its ever-growing legs to form
a traplife.

Walking foots, one at a time,
pierced with make-believe urgency.

One wishes to be left alone
but not lonely. Lonely is to forget
how else one walks this road.

Unlike Ms. Du, I certainly did not persist with my ballet lessons because I was an adamant, aspiring dancer. Ballet, among other things, was something that my parents asked me to do as a child that I accidentally became good at, a curse more than a blessing as I much later realized. I was not the most skillful student in ballet class, nor the most flexible, but Ms. Du visibly favored me, in her stern, stoic way.

“It was because you truly understood the art.” My mother once answered to my confusion.

“Huh? How could you know? You weren’t even there!” I protested a parent’s seemingly omniscient power.

“If that wasn’t the case, why did she pick you for Swan Lake?”

My mother was referring to a role in Swan Lake that the National Ballet specifically designed for one advanced student from our weekend school, which was affiliated to the professional troupe. The selected student would have the chance to perform in some of the most prestigious venues in the country. All the kids, or more accurately their competitive mothers desperate for a quick success, went crazy upon hearing the opportunity. During the few weeks of selection period, some of my classmates would constantly throw in an episode of advanced improvisation every now and then during in-class practice combos in order to impress Ms. Du.

What prompted Ms. Du to pick me, in the end, I could not be sure, not willing to give into my mother’s theory that I was a ballet prodigy, a young artist. However, I would like to believe that Ms. Du saw me the way I saw her, an overthinking child simultaneously driven and burdened by her own thinking.

The Architecture of Questions

Moon, tell me how my late land
has been

tell me how to be an excellent projectionist
like you, conjuring life from the mechanical,
building
memorial
in your divine theater
dusts bloom into wisteria
on earthy parts
as if articulating their own name
fragrant syllables

Singular, therefore, auratic
the smile of everything I love and have loved
lines up in my dream
in my hidden half
in the dim
I house geckos
and swept moonbeams
ginkgo leaves almost rotted
children practicing mourning names as told
borderland making itself
boat

who inspired you
from what did you mold our shapes
where is the green exit sign
in this grandiose crossword puzzle

have you ever felt a tree growing in you
and worried about its shadow

Looking over the barre out of the classroom window, one could see a narrow lane between two buildings with lots of greenery. Once after class, on our way to the line #7 bus station, my mother and I discovered the lane to our pleasant surprise. It was almost like a little garden of its own, with ample sunlight, few pedestrians, and trees lightly swaying in and out of shadow in the wind. Whenever I now hear Jorge Luis Borges' short story's title, "The Garden of Forking Paths," I still think about that lane. Although it was a detour from the closest way to the station, my mother and I would still choose to walk the lane whenever we were not pressed for time.

Around the year I was selected for Swan Lake, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She took line 35, then transferred to line 7 to the hospital, took line 7 then 35 home.

Sometimes my father came to pick me up from ballet. He would park his black Audi outside the school building, the same car that picked me up more and more often, drove me from my boarding middle school every weekend to my high school which was next to his office, to the bakery shop on our way home, to our new home that no longer rested on bus line 35.

Fortunately, my mother survived one surgery after another, but for some reason we stopped walking the lane. I still stared at it during barre combos, while the Chopin etudes we danced to gave the scene a melodramatic overtone.

Soon, after I started middle school, ballet became a hobby that was hard to spare time for. For increasing amount of time, I zoned out in class, staring into the lane. Ms. Du, of course, noticed. Without talking to me directly about it, she conveyed her concern. She would try to bring me back by calling on me, asking me to demonstrate moves in front of the rest of the class, even though I, who was never the most skillful and had now lost my passion, could hardly qualify to demonstrate for others. Although not consciously, I started slacking. One time I even showed up to class with my bangs down. It was easier to leave things if I sabotaged them myself.

Midnight Sonata

In the 2am bathroom,
my mother coughs tiny thunderstorms
under incandescent moonlight. Once and again,
they pound on my bedroom door, then
still.

What is it tonight?
Is it deep, rhythmic, exclamational? Is it short,
desperate, gasping, clutching for air? Is it
wet, voiced, tonal, with occasional, gagging
coda?

A thunderstorm,
my mother's body the solitary, wrinkled, plastic bag
that flaps and rustles in wind, brought down to ground,
tumbles up to mid-air until slammed down and dragged up
again.

She deep breathes,
and the thunderstorm births an ocean on earth
lowly rocking its safe ebbs and flows. The plastic bag
rests ashore as I drift back to
sleep.

In the same way that I knew her without ever having had a private conversation with her, I knew that Ms. Du was disappointed. I was both honored and afraid that she had put so much hope on me, hope that she once had for herself. I did not lose passion for ballet, I would like to tell Ms. Du, I was so eaten up by sorrow, that to be passionate about anything seemed like betrayal.

As most kids in my class were about the same age, I was not the only one who found it difficult to keep up with a hobby when school became a much more important thing to worry about. Fewer and fewer students came to class, to the point where one student could occupy an entire barre, when once extra barres had to be borrowed from other classrooms in order to fit everyone.

I cannot recall my last ballet class. Chances are, I had not known it would be my last when it happened; I just simply never went again after. If I had, I would have said proper goodbye. Or would I? How would I say it, without bringing up everything and nothing all at once?

Two years after I quit ballet, I was applying to American high schools when my counselor told me that it would put me at an advantage to record a solo ballet performance as part of my application. I agreed to doing it, because I was old enough to know that it would be my proper goodbye. The choreography was called “The Dying Swan.”

Without practice, I had lost much of my control of muscles and flexibility. They were not, however, a priority to grieve over. In the end of the dance, the swan dies after it flutters its wings one last time. Maintaining my posture while waiting for the videographer to stop record, I stretched my arms as elegantly as I could, burying my head low by my knee, next to my pointe shoes, in the shade of nude.

Mother's Seasonal Lullaby

菠菜 莴笋 水萝卜 茄子 豆角 西红柿

At night, under the singular living room light, vegetable names tumble onto the floor, my mother a happy puppeteer.

Spinach breathes like the earth in muddy slush that pools by the sidewalk.

Celtuce stares off idly mid-day in the mountains of my paternal hometown, wondering its own recipe for dinner.

Radish arrives with catkins, fluffy assassins that sneer at her useless housekeeping.

Eggplant lingers like an unwanted guest, eavesdropping on family meetings about the cousin's overdue marriage.

String beans torture our thumbs before they drop contentedly in chunks into a plastic basin under our feet, while a fan squeaks and an emperor-concubine tv drama plays on repeat.

Tomato splashes juice onto the pair of 5rmb slippers that she claims she would get rid of by the end of summer.

“And those are my favorites —
what season eat what vegetable,
then world is right.

Now, good night.”

My favorite fairytale is “The Little Mermaid.”

I wrote my first essay in college on the fairytale. My argument was about how the little mermaid, more human than any human characters in the story in her courage to love and ability to feel pain, is nonetheless denied humanity. I wanted to say that her love is painful — it quite literally splits her in half — and that true love must involve pain of some sort, a cost not many are willing to pay. I wanted to say that in becoming a human and forgoing her family undersea, love puts her in an exile. I wanted to say that she dies by throwing herself back into the sea, a return at last. In the cold foam of the sea that was left of her, there is after all a consolation.

My essay received a C because I was never able to fully articulate these thoughts. I was severely depressed, having just left home for university in another country.

Growing up in Beijing, we had a magazine kiosk near the west gate of our old neighborhood. My kindergarten was by the north gate. Once a month, on the way home from kindergarten, my mother would take a detour from the north gate to the west to pick up the new Little Princess Monthly, a series of stories based on the Disney princesses. On the back seat of my mother’s bike, my heart sang during the five-minute ride. Now I cannot recall one story in its entirety, but remember when Ariel, Disney’s version of the little mermaid, insists on swimming toward the end of the rainbow to find a beautiful gem. How her red hair sways through the blue waters like a flame in the dark, how she resolutely ventures out to an indefinite destination.

I did not know that one day, I would fall in love with a boy with red hair.

Learning to Be a Woman on a Wednesday

This morning, as I wiped my hands on my apron, cut open a tomato,
I thought I saw you, ma — wiping your hands on the soft bulge of your belly
veiled under a pink rabbit dress. Years-worn cotton, soft, fuzzy,
warm like skin. The tomato fresh and cold, gently cut, practicing to bleed.

I learned how to cook by watching behind the kitchen door. I learned
that tiny strands of flour weave in your hair after bun-making;
keeping your fingers to your palm so you don't hurt yourself
and if you do — slitting your finger or burning your arm —
you take the pain with a short staccato, fèi!

I learned like every daughter to become every mother
by watching. Learning to be every mother,
I became a woman. When he laid his head on my lap,
I suddenly knew how to stroke hair.

Ma, I am still learning. Women and workers inhabit a world in which
the unification of mind and body is inherent in the activities performed.
What Nancy Hartsock does not know: an inaudible staccato
is the only way I know how to react to pain. A note I take to myself.

No, not even my favorites poems will teach me how to be:
So much not alone, so far beyond the casual solitudes
is chopping a tomato in the kitchen, trying to unlearn
the dexterity inherited from generations of mothers, watching.

Tell me, ma, if I unlearn everything I've learned
between the incandescent classroom light
and the cold, wet chopping board,
will I then be a woman?

The little mermaid gives up her voice to the witch to become a human. She understands that love is a flesh experience. She understands that being a woman, too, is a flesh experience.²

I kissed a boy for the first time on a small mound where a famous Qing China eunuch's tomb had once been.

I constantly want to bite myself to prove the intensity of my feeling.

I almost cried when the boy with red hair reached with a bare hand for a tampon I had dropped in the toilet.

Doctors don't tell women that birth control turns our body into a big, soft ball. Some of us eat one meal a day trying to prevent that from happening.

My mother never says she loves me, but when I had my heart broken for the first time in fifth grade, I cried into her lap while she patted my back. According to her what I said was, "the sky is so gloomy, mom, just like my heart."

Arrested for something she didn't do at her old job in a different city, my mother was beaten with an iron chair in an ice-cold interrogation room after just having had an abortion, alone. My father and I did not know about this.

Hearing about it for the first time fifteen years later, I recall how my father and I used to send her off at the airport every other week, flying to her job. My mother always sang a song to comfort me:

² Nancy Hartsock writes, the male worker's oppression differs from a woman's in the way that he is only "immersed in this world during the time his labor power is being used."

In Winter, Lovers Sit by the Water

Winter is almost over, while we sit by the fountain, wait for your nails to dry.

We have done it over again: gone for a walk at Sunday sunset,
talked about insignificant things, such as soup.

It is snowing in our hometown.

In front of us, a little girl cries for mama, who is a few feet away.
The girl and I have our own melancholy.

The end of January.

Inverted on water, the sun bright and long
still. Suddenly, the wind rising.

The wind summons a bell chime.
The girl wails next to her scooter, now tipped over.

I had never been a difficult child — never wanted to extend playtime,
knowing there's a curfew for any waiting.

If you are patient, soon,
tomorrow will be yesterday's snow.

But this heart, driven by loneliness alone, cries to be pulled over
onto the snowy side street. How do we walk on,
knowing no trace of grass, of flower?

Trees, brown and bare, support an entire sky.

Your pearly nail holds a blob of black
like a teardrop, sad for its own reasons. I smear it flat.

A peck of orange light leaps over us, into the water.
How great: this little fire.

蓝蓝的天空白云飘 白云下面马儿跑 ...

要是有人来问我 这是什么地方

我就骄傲地告诉他 这是我的家乡 ...

My Terrestrial Galaxy

I lie on the ridge of an ancient back—
A confession indecipherable to the vagabond wind
That brings salt and sickness to the sun-cracked heart.
I lie here, waiting to be received by the terrestrial galaxy.

Distantly, the city silhouettes cars and snow
On the solitary ruin of the aged Ming walls
A seventeen-year-old kisses for the first time
And *L'Amant* drops into her deep, mystic silence.

The stars are made of sparks
From cigarettes: tiny cylinders of deadly air
Put out on the rugged sidewalk and revive
In the eyes of the pedestrians who don't stare.

In the subway like a giant beer barrel,
We fizz, sputter, scurry, bubble
Overhead, trees grow so green
If cut open they could bleed.

The land where oblivion is a blessing
But its descendants cannot unlearn, cannot un-cry
To the cries at night. Like children,
We chase our own shadows.

In the city of have-dones
The city that I am terrified would let me go
I lie. Don't let me go,
The man kneels in front of Guanyin and behind him
An orphan boy plays diablo.

The little mermaid's sisters cut off their long hair in exchange for help for the little mermaid.

How else can we love?

City that does not care
Impregnated by its cruelty, them and us alike
In each one of the millions passersby
I am me.

Kimiko Hahn writes, *I could not return to the body that contained only the literal world.*

With every thought, we bear one more thing to grieve.

Between longer and shorter rain, drenched petals—more purple than pink, auburn than purple—against blotches of wetness on the pavement, soften in relief.

The poet's fixation with flowers, even the ones being done for.

Deep in the couch, listening to rain all day. Arrhythmic tapping. Arrhythmia that I have had for life, the heart looking to settle, not being able to stay.

Once in elementary school it rained. PE cancelled, I stared at the back of a boy during self-study. He had just told me that the stir-fry potato shreds at lunch, too sour, were bad for my stomach.

My mother refusing to cook for me for a month when I was ten as a way to teach a lesson. It must've rained then.

How many honest mistakes we make, loving each other. How we refuse to remember our pain because we want to choose love. How I wish to make a list of every rain in the past.

Wine sits on my nightstand, dark as herbal medicine — 中药. Sometimes I think about things in a language different from the one I learned about them in. What I like is to put myself in an irretrievable place. It is more poetic that way—how it remarks loss. Remarkable loss.

When it finally stopped raining, I woke up early to wait in line for urgent care to open. Waiting for my lab result, thinking about my mother ten years ago, getting her diagnosis at Friendship Hospital alone, taking bus line 7 home, cutting me a plateful of melon.

Dramaturgy

[n.] the study of dramatic composition and the representation of the main elements of drama on the stage.

1.

At the concert of my favorite musician when I was seventeen, under the floodlight, every listener stood and stared as if they were praying, and we looked equally defeated when it was over. I walked to the bar across the street because there were seventy-three people waiting outside for a cab. The Lama Temple looked eerily pale, awash by the streetlight. The bartender sat on the stairs by the door, an empty Shisha bowl near his feet. He was smoking, saw me, and offered the light. I asked him if he knew the musician that played tonight. He smiled and replied, I don't care much about that stuff. He told me he left his hometown in Guangxi to come see the city. Well here you have it, I said. We looked up. It's got history, he said. It's meh, I said. Los Angeles must be fun, he said. Beijing's better, I said. I thought you said it's meh, he said. So are you going home alone tonight, I said. You can have the lighter if you want, he said. Of course, here comes my cab, I said. Come again if you aren't busy, he said. I got on the cab and left the sick-looking Lama Temple behind.

A life of fleeting moments, white as melon, as cold.

2.

When she said we had sex, what she actually meant was that after they had debated over World War II and Boris Johnson he took her back to his poorly soundproofed Hutong bungalow, led her by hand and ventured into the moonlit single room. They undressed, had some wine, then he offered to cook so she tiptoed after him into the kitchen like a ballet pantomime until she saw pawprints on the counter. Don't worry, the weasel is only around when I'm out for work. She frantically searched for articles that proved weasels carry rabies. He grinned somewhat innocently, He was here when I moved in so I would've got the rabies already if they do carry it. For a second it seems like everything that needs to be said in the world had been said, so she stood barelegged with him and watched the tiny pawprints, their crooked trail all the way from behind the corner, over the cold tiles, up the cabinet, and to the stove.

In the night of all endings, I am writing you a letter about the red balloon. You know immediately what I'm talking about, yes. None of us forgot about the red balloon. The tacky, plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon that we bought from an old lady. The arbitrary, tacky, plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon that we may or may not have bought from an old lady. I am guessing an old lady because only those childless, toothless old ladies sell balloons and cotton candies on the street. (Both you wanted so badly. Both we bought for you because you were just annoying.) Old ladies that have been through many deaths and scare little kids with their smiley: "Balloons, buy one!" In the wind, the balloons croon an outdated song, and the giant, nebular bouquet clasped in their hands make them look very inanimate and small. Down my memory, I can see our tacky, plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon in one of their hands. We took it for our own; from that moment on our time started ticking.

In the night of all endings, we relive summer 2017. Walking on the sidewalk, holding a red balloon is a chore. There are too many people (there are always too many people in this city) and it feels like they are all walking towards us and we are tiny. Plus, the red is conspicuously tacky. Plus, time is ticking. It is the opposite of a ticking bomb because instead of a theatrical explosion, it simply sighs. It goes "puff." You could say it's pretty anticlimactic. I am nervous for you because my hands would have got sweaty from holding tight on the string and being anxious that it would escape. I am nervous for you because in one of the faces towards us, I see your doom approaching like a blonde, tattooed, six-foot ghost. But you were too preoccupied with your plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon. The red balloon of symbolic meanings. Now and then I would miss you, but the next second your head emerges from the crowd like waves. But I always see the red balloon. One always sees the red balloon. Swaying and singing and it's actually become quite soothing to look at. Is it happy? It's tacky.

I Think About the Day

After reading my poem to some drunk white people,
we walk down the street furrowed by construction.
I limp in my boots, absentminded, the summer night
stretched thin. And neither of us will say

This is the last night, again—or, worse—I will miss you.
We make careful strides, cussing, intoxicated;
you stop by a jammed bike share station and say
I could use the skill. Men had tried to teach me
and failed—but I trust you.

I pedal and go backwards, so you had to push me
—our tight white knuckles are doves ready to fly—
but I am instructed to not look back. Ahead of me,
where the alley grows into a soft dark spot,
days whiz past. Behind us the night sky,

so polluted it almost looks like its own
city, illuminates us and our tiny shadows, the summer air
like membrane. My ankle cut, we stop
because you have to go to your man's bungalow apartment,
because you have to go home, so I get down and slowly
push the bike, slowly walk forward, reading close
what I have seen over and over again.
If I had to say something, perhaps it would be that today
I learned to say goodbye on a bike—today
I learned to ride a bike and say goodbye.

Before I could figure out what the balloon is singing, we are there at your house. A house of a hell. It's a good idea to let go, and the red balloon happens to be the only thing in your hand, in our hands. Poor, red balloon. So we did. We let go of the tacky, plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon, in the night of all endings.

Moving

I put up the first photo on my wall the way I start a poem:
what is left out differentiates praying from mourning.

Here is a drunken dream sprinkled with winter rain. Here,
sunset between boughs and poles and bricks on bungalow rooftops
radiates into one chipped, white wall. The gaps in between images
are conspicuously quiet, like language. How they align: irrational.
In frames, we pretend nothing was lost. Memory runs its fingers
through my hair. Home: one call out of earshot.

Behind broken blinds, an old professor drums the ground
with his walking stick like the sound of teenagers playing
basketball. In new climate, moments grow
into their own little lives. I choose to drown myself
in breaths and blankets, choose to believe that
every photo is a stamp that grants the past a new destination,
knowing that another photo falls off my wall every day.

Say we back up a little: you and your moldy bread at the far end of the bank, behind happy impatient grandmothers.

Not even then.

You at the far end, empty-handed. Me pushing my way out of impatient grandmothers to buy you some bread, yet to know of its mold, yet to know of the water splashing your jeans. I couldn't tell if the lake was the crowd and I was swimming or the wet stony shoreline was in fact cloud. A soft piece of cloud-like bread, moldy, handed to me through the window of a little wood cabin, wrapped in an opaque plastic bag like an infant, dreaming of passing things. It makes an oar when I row my way back to your hungry hands.

Where you stand: a moon-shaped compromise that land makes to water. A motherly humbleness. Where you stand, a tattooed arm, waving. Taking the bread, you break a little. Throw on three. Freefall into water, gifting the lake a secret. Try higher. A gull pecks a fleck of light. Come again. Suddenly flocking, the birds scatter into haze.

That bird looks like my mother!

In a distance, the misty mountain on its way to forming a sentence, while birds fly to it like punctuation.

The misty mountain, misty mystery, an impeccable facial expression.

Evening Zuihitsu

The dog lets out a long breath when it turns dark. It turns dark
so that the shadows can live.

We cut through ghost town. A shadow of a place, where palm trees
try really hard to reach the dry expanse of sky.

In an interview I was asked: *what brought you here?*
I am here because I am not there. If not there, anywhere.

Here, I met a man who only dated me in parking lots and asked
me to split gas money. For whom I fell into a bush when drunk.

After telling this story, I was hugged for three minutes in the frozen aisle,
agreeably close to *asian delights*, where I will stock up on wonton.

Yesterday at lunch, a squirrel ate my Reese's wrapper, vigilant.
I was worried. For a moment, I couldn't tell if the squirrel was me.

Wind pangs on the window pane. *Wind In Her Hair* is her favorite song.
I'm sorry for the pain. I'm sorry for the pain.

Were it true that wishes to the stars come true,
I would wish for not wanting. Instead, the palm trees.

Red. Blink. Green. Blink. Red. I jaywalk to make a statement.
It's okay if you don't understand. A bird will sing, although I cannot hear it.

I cannot name the pink flower on the streetside, half-blossomed,
crossing paths with its own decay.

Drooping, the flower has lost interest in all things pretty.

I stand in front of the gravestone that holds my grandfather, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother's names, feeling tight around my throat still from the two-hour nap I took on our ride to the cemetery. Their names are in gold: that means they are dead. In this country, people buy gravestones decades in advance and have their names carved on it, in order to be buried together with their family when the day comes. The name is not gilded until the person dies. My mother sighs, "the family next to us, last time we came here their names were still in grey." Her comment lingers in the air, almost eerily comical to me that it could as well be a line from a lousy horror movie.

On the stone, before each of my grandparents' names, there is a title: Gracious Mother. Late Father. Warm Grandmother. My mother and her four brothers designed the stone. The body-used-to-bes underground were once their mother, their father, their grandmother. I think about what my friend had said the night before, having just come back from her family's tomb-sweeping: "isn't it funny how after people die, all that they are remembered by is their familial duty?" My friend was right. The newly gilded family next to us also has their share of "gracious mother" and "late father," and to their right, another. I imagine how, in the other 360 days of the year that are not tomb-sweeping season, thousands of gracious mothers and late fathers stand side by side in this lonesome park, childless, soundless. How would they greet each other? Wind traverses miles over the mountains and brushes off a pinch of dust from the stones. Perhaps in some dimension invisible to us, a gracious mother stands in front of hers, her hands on her waist, just as how she used to stand at the door waiting for her child to come back from school. Or, for all we know, the gracious mother could have already reincarnated over three little mosquito lives and is enjoying the freedom of wings and the absence of a human body—this awkward, plump, diseased, 73% water, human body.

Elegy

My heart like a pitted date is good for playing
hide and
seek each chamber opens up to a new
nothing
Grief lives in a cave with a
hole
on each side
Running is always windy
Behind it, trees are crowned in burnt orange
and green.

My three uncles had just climbed up the rocky path to where we are, sweating and catching their breath. They are thirty minutes late, overweight, and aged. With much familiarity, we quickly make a half circle, enclosing the stone. “Mama, Baba, Nainai.” My oldest uncle is speaking on behalf of us. The melodrama in his voice took me aback. Quite frankly, I never liked that voice; but it doesn’t seem to make me want to pull off my hair as much as I did when I was a kid. My uncle does not speak as fast and clearly—the way oldest sons speak—as he used to. The doctor examined and found nothing, before deciding that it could just be an unfortunate product of old age, so the doctor let him be. So he stutters. He mumbles. He trembles. He kneels and kowtows. And then we each kneel and kowtow. My dad winces because he sees the mud on the ground, but we kowtow anyway. I close my eyes and join my palms. I piece together remnants of childhood memories about my grandma, and they make up the smell of her special homemade rice steamed pork. Do you know that I’m a vegetarian now, grandma? One, two, three. I bang my head on the cold marble, so that everyone hears my genuineness. Would you care if that hurts, grandma?

We support ourselves up and find our way back to the half circle.

Breaking the silence, my mother invites everyone to taste the qingtuan and sweet redbean buns she spent the entire day making yesterday. Each year we bring some snacks for the ancestors and eat it in front of their tomb. The wind blows dirt onto one of the buns, but we pretend we didn’t notice. My uncle asks why I am not eating anything. She just had the worst stomach flu, and these cannot be easily digested, my mother explains. So I watch them eat. I watch their mouths move as if we are in a silent movie, and all I hear is the immeasurable, transgenerational silence.

Last Hour of Twilight

In the comfortable alibi of the moon, a river,
dark blue, through colonnades of shadows, subverted stars,
slender veins of the hefty boulevards,
runs into me: anonymous, astray
in this parched city, quietly asking
to be named.

It's you—is what I don't say. I close my eyes
and imagine what was once a debris flow: soft, silent,
how you travelled. Sharp ends of the night grass
on standby, watchful for dew. Traffic pauses, laminating
ants into amber, whispers shattered to shards.
My hand almost open—a search.

Listening close to the river, breaking on concrete,
longing to be touched, loved by a clinging gaze—
so I sit down and gaze. I touch and I name.
I love like a generous drifter, remembering a man
who left behind a river near home at eighteen
and never returned.

“The river ran dry,” he said—but I think he lied, because
all rivers are one and this river is that and the Pacific is this
and all waters are our river. In momentary passing,
light crusts in spots and patches that are flakes from the sky,
every river a scar that we each choose
and call it our own.

I hold my mother's hand as we trudge down the mountain, following my uncles and followed by my father. Why is there a nice gazebo at the far top of the hill, I ask. That is some famous actress' tomb, my mother answers, when I die, just spread my ash out into the sea so that you don't have to go through all this work every year. I know she doesn't mean it. So I try to chuckle lightly as we continue walking in silence, hands loosely clasped together. I think about how death sentences us all to solitude, and how we are together, on this very day that we sweep tombs.

The City Is a Song You Know Not How to Sing

Always the candid afternoon sun
makes the sky look long. Always
out on the long, flat sky
the triangular shadow of a hill.

California, land like its own country,
your colossal nothing —
there is no use in talking to you
about rivers, its turns, hesitation,
so much unspeakable in its racing
like my way home I am lost
on my way home plodding over you.

Only I, dragging no shadow
but myself through a patchwork
of stained streets and parking lots,
familiarize myself with the indifferent
stillness of the afternoon.

Metallic structure of more buildings
unfinished, like bare bones sticking out
mid-air, mid-day. At their feet, bus benches
host dreams like scars that rip open
reality. And I know, then, that the pain
of unmooring is worn well
on everyone like a nicely fitted belt.

But at *golden hour* —
in the bright flame of everything
fanned by a wind like the last cosmic wind,
the relentless thoughts of this moment
are forgiven, even the foolish hope. If
all stillness of waiting falls into place
in the intense, fiery orange...

In the sky now dark and deep,
a tree sways like a patient pendulum —
 an old man's slow pacing at sunset.

I sit, islanded
like a far cloud over the sea.

Epilogue: Burying Fallen Petals

“On one dreary winter afternoon, I skipped classes and walked in the run-down alleys near school — now these alleys are lined with chic pubs and sophisticated eateries catering to expats and tourists.” In her memoir, Yiyun Li, Chinese-born writer now residing in the U.S., recalls Beijing. Alumna of the same high school, I know exactly what she’s talking about, a habitual truant myself. Although, growing up two decades later, I aggressively frequented those pubs and eateries as a teenager. There is something both eerie and comforting about seeing your own memory narrated on page by someone else as theirs. The much-trusted linearity of time, and the line between self and others, seem to collapse at that instant.

My friends and I read Yiyun Li religiously. How painfully similar we are, growing up in Beijing, moving to the US during young adulthood, forming an identity in a second language, being therefore culturally diasporic, being therefore mentally unstable, feeling certain that your mental illness is not an illness but a perfectly coherent logic of living from which there is no escape... In fact, one friend cannot bring herself to Li’s writings without having a nervous breakdown. As if only in seeing ourselves in others’ stories that our private memory confirms to be real.

Yiyun Li is a very quiet writer. Rarely does she let her feelings about her past interrupt with the ongoing writing, even when the writing is about herself. When she must insert a personal anecdote, she ensures its necessity, and it can be as humble as a parenthetical. Sometimes, this reticence in the second language is rooted in the same urge in running away from the first language.

On reticence, we reserve the right to review and revise. A thought is not final as long as it remains in one’s head. We rehearse it again and again to ourselves as if dancing in an empty theater (the cost, though, is one’s self bordering a ghost).

Therefore, this silence is not a barren field, but one’s own battlefield. If we take a step back and reexamine language’s arrogance—the assumption that language always has the last word—it is only natural to ask: who says silence cannot speak for itself? Often times, this refusal to speak serves oneself perfectly. Disturbed is the *listener*, now being put on the spot. Vivian Huang, when analyzing Yoko Ono’s performance Cut

Piece,³ aptly points out that the artist's silence on stage "amplifies the sounds in her audience and draws attention to the uncontrolled nature of audience members' reactions to her and to one another." Across time and space, Li resonates, that reticence does not result in one's own loneliness but a distance from others. But after all, who's to say that reticence precludes connection? "[O]ftentimes it is shunned memory that connects one to another." If anything, the reverberation through a charged, silent space is thereby strengthened.

Years ago, when I was drafting my college application essay, I insisted on writing about my "tragic aesthetic" against all advice otherwise—that tragedy grants life meaning, accompanied by a therapy-couch self-disclosure of my personal traumas. My application counselor, a white man from Wisconsin, after a loss of words, commented in his polite American way that writing as brutally candid as I did required immense courage, and asked whether I had considered the moment when this courage runs dry. I was struck silent. A proud teenager, I responded defensively and instantly decided to repress the feeling of abashment his comment instilled. The truth is, I had not thought about it. The fervent urge to express myself overruled any consideration of consequences or implications.

What my counselor and I didn't talk about was what haunts me years later: that I would have never been able to write about what I did the way I did—my grandparents' deaths and my mother's illness—in my native tongue. In this estranged landscape of the second language, I have no personal history, no strings attached. What I write can be so arbitrary: every acquaintance becomes a character, myself a persona. The perfect distance English holds from the tip of my tongue and the rawness I taste when I speak it exempts me from any mental liability and is thus liberating. How I avail this freedom, though, is not to reinvent, but to be honest, the harder thing to do. In this game of pretend, I speak about myself without having to be vocal. My writing needs only to be signed by my preferred name, which almost had been Mophie instead of Alice, for no significant reason. In elementary school, we were handed out English names in English

³ Artist instructs each viewer to take a pair of scissors and cut off a piece of her clothing, while sitting on stage in silence.

class as if they were nothing different from boxed lunches from the school cafeteria. “English is my private language,” Li writes. “In my relationship with English [...] I feel invisible but not estranged.” Perhaps Li and I cross paths in our own escape trajectories: the distance we each posit in front of us, the safe muddledness, overlaps and connects. Perhaps, perhaps. I like the way the word sounds when it starts a sentence, or ends a thought.⁴

In elementary school, I used to make my friends play pretend with me using characters from *红楼梦*.⁵ Most of them had not yet read the book and therefore lacked interest. I explained the story: Baoyu is the main guy, Daiyu is his cousin. The two of them fall deeply in love, but Baoyu ends up marrying Baochai, who is always well-behaved and personable, emotionally intelligent but not expressive, unlike Daiyu, a sentimental soul who weepingly buries fallen petals, and eventually dies young from a lifetime of melancholy. I would always choose Baochai for my own character for a gut feeling, but the reason is now clear: the bigger melodrama than being sorrowful and lonely is not being able to express that sorrow at all.

“Is it difficult to feel heard in a second language?” A friend once asked me. Yes, but not any harder than struggling to be heard as a woman, I will now answer. I was only able to slip so comfortably and skillfully into this shadowy position in a second language, because the feeling of being on the margin is not foreign. I have gotten good at it from doing it all my life.

In *红楼梦*, while roaming the Land of Illusion in his dream, Baoyu picks up a book in which are inscribed verses that tell the fate of important women in his life. Daiyu and Baochai, in fact, are the only two who share the same verse. Are Daiyu’s melancholy and Baochai’s reticence not two sides of the same coin? “English is my private language”—meaning that there is no audience that matters in this empty theater but ourselves, meaning what we do in the realm of the second language is

⁴ Yet to project is to intrude. Here I will remind you of my own inconsistency, having started this essay with a personal anecdote. One is only entitled to interpret oneself. But where does this thought begin? Where does the self end? Other people become characters in our own story, and us theirs.

⁵ Cao, Xueqin. *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

merely the intaglio of silence etching in from the native tongue, meaning that if you listen closely, between every word on page, you will hear the sound of me burying fallen petals.⁶

⁶ Intaglio printing: the opposite of relief printing, where the print results from ink below the surface of the plate.

Afterword

Thanks to the editors of Cutthroat Magazine for the publication of “Last Hour of Twilight,” which was selected for honorable mention at the 2022 Joy Harjo Poetry Award.

My deepest gratitude for those I owe my thoughts to:

Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint."

Wallace Stevens, "Re-Statement of Romance."

Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid."

Kimiko Hahn, *The Narrow Road to the Interior*.

Yiyun Li, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*.

Vivian Huang, “Inscrutably, actually: hospitality, parasitism, and the silent work of Yoko Ono and Laurel Nakadate.”

Cao Xue Qin, *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

To University of California, Los Angeles, English Department and Undergraduate Research Center for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences for your kind support and education.

To my thesis mentor, Brian Kim Stefans, for inspiring me to write generously in a second language and for making this collection happen.

To my UCLA creative writing teachers, Fred D'Aguiar, Karen Kevorkian, Justin Torres.

To all my Chinese and English literature teachers who have validated my self-expression as I grew up. My high school teacher, Stephan Johnson.

To Beijing and Los Angeles, cities that have nurtured me through various times.

To my friends.

To the boy with red hair.

To Jianwei Lu and Sizheng Song. Thank you for being my family.

To my mother and father.

To us afflicted.

All Rivers Run East to the Sea

Alice Zheng

[Note to reader: this title page, which begins the chapbook version of this thesis, should appear on the right-side when seen in "two page view" in Adobe Acrobat. If it doesn't, change the Acrobat setting to "Show Cover Page" (or if it is already checked, then un-check it). Please see note on the table of contents page above for further clarification.]

Los Angeles
March 2022

For us afflicted.

Cover Art: Sizheng Song

Copyright © 2022 by Alice Zheng. All Rights Reserved.

Table of Contents

These days,	1
“I used to take bus line 35...”	2
A Parting	3
One	5
The Architecture of Questions	7
Midnight Sonata	9
Mother’s Seasonal Lullaby	11
“My favorite fairytale is...”	12
Learning to be a Woman on a Wednesday	13
In Winter, Lovers Sit by the Water	15
My Terrestrial Galaxy	17
“Kimiko Hahn writes...”	20
Dramaturgy	21
“In the night of all endings...”	24
I Think About the Day	25
Moving	27
“Say we back up a little...”	28
Evening Zuihitsu	29
“I stand in front of the gravestone...”	30
Elegy	31
Last Hour of Twilight	33
The City Is a Song You Know Not How to Sing	35
Epilogue: Burying Fallen Petals	39

All Rivers Run East to the Sea

These days,

words have failed me completely — if I get to say that like a real poet.

Images. Metaphors.

巧言令色: the immorality of semantics.

What a beautiful piece of leaf, fallen. In January, its redness so full.
Why stare at me in shock? All I did was crushing it.

Why stare at me? What's with the unabashed, autobiographical I?
It could be you. Why did you crush the leaf, so full?

Moonlight moves in squares on the ceiling. Eyes curiously follow.
As if it knows.

At midnight, an orange bus opens its door like a hungry mouth.
The bus moves into darkness.

Moonlight wobbles into darkness.

From darkness emerges language, beautifully hypothetical.
For example, moonlight signifies fire.
For example, you signify me.

If you know:

I am not writing so long as you are not reading, my friend.

I used to take bus line 35, then transfer to line 7 every Saturday afternoon to my ballet lessons. Seven years as if a day.

These bus rides were memorably uncomfortable, mainly because I had to wear tights under a leotard under an entire fit of regular clothes, while my hair was tied up into an impeccable bun, supported by twenty invisible pins in my scalp.

These were required by my ballet teacher at the time, Ms. Du, who taught me for as long as I can remember. Ms. Du was a serious woman from a provincial town. Rumor had it that when Ms. Du entered teenage years, she attended the local tryouts that the National Ballet of China organized in her area. While the judges were impressed by her ability and commitment at such a young age, they were also concerned that her Achilles tendon, shorter than average, would impede her future development as a professional dancer.

“You can’t go too far like that, you know. These things take not only work but also gift. Tsk tsk, poor girl, loved ballet so much.” One of the moms in the waiting room before class, while doing her daughter’s hair, gave a spirited remark along with the story to an invested audience. I remember trying to tell her age compared to Ms. Du’s.

A story would not be complete without an account of the character’s internal journey. From one suspicious source or another, I gathered the impression that Ms. Du was a determined little girl who would not back down from such a challenge. With true grit, she eventually made it to Beijing as an official member of the National Ballet.

The important casting call for Swan Lake finally came around. As everyone aspired for White Swan — the undisputable heroine with the most exposure, Ms. Du eyed for Black Swan, a more interesting character with a much greater variety of moves. Failing

A Parting

渭城朝雨浥轻尘 客舍青青柳色新
劝君更尽一杯酒 西出阳关无故人¹

What is west of Yangguan nobody asked
Rice wine printed on dirt made heavy
celadon morning sky

Sketch in your letter
something invisible unless from a distance
high clouds laden with Yellow River

Mountain passes rites of passage
Nothing monumental about
the back of you walking away

Bright moon in daylight blade-like notes in five
sing a parting tune in triple repetition
Flute holes left empty a riddle for return date

Willow branches stroke rain
the way history looks sympathetic

¹Or, "A Song at Wei Cheng." A poem by Chinese Poet Wang Wei during the Tang Dynasty, written for a friend leaving for the frontier in the eve of An Lushan Rebellion.

to be selected, she rolled over as a candidate for the famous Four Little Swans, the next important roles in the show. However, due to her above average height and below average tendon length, she was voted out despite her competence. Ms. Du ended up being casted as one of the Three Bigs — the outshined counterpart to the Four Little Swans, and for the extremely hierarchical nature of ballet troupes, stayed in this role until retiring in her thirties and becoming a teacher.

All of these meant nothing to an eight-year-old me apart from the fact that they made her quite an unusual teacher. Ms. Du strictly demanded only the plainest outfit to class: no red flower hairbun makers, no colorful dance shoes other than nude, and there must not be a single loose strand of hair escaping the bun, a show of attitude. Most dance teachers imposed inhumane standards for flexibility and made kids cry and scream during what seemed like endless stretches. Naturally, those that were able to raise their leg above their head took great pride in it and constantly showed off. However, whenever Ms. Du caught someone doing so, she made sure to rebuke it, “what do you think we do here? Folk dances? No, we do ballet, and what you were doing just now is not what ballet is about. Ballet is fully surrendering yourself and feeling the art, not some tricks or showing off, or some gifted joint. You must not forget.”

I stood in the far corner by the barre, lingering with the after-taste of what she said. I had never thought about such a philosophical question as to what ballet meant for me before then, but something about it made it sound distinctly profound, almost shocking. Perhaps it was the melancholy with a dash of anger on her face — or perhaps I imagined this — or, it was the rare modicum of personal emotion, pain in particular, which violated her usual stoicism.

One

The jellyfish sun ensnares.

The jellyfish sun agitates
its ever-growing legs to form
a traplife.

Walking fooms, one at a time,
pierced with make-believe urgency.

One wishes to be left alone
but not lonely. Lonely is to forget
how else one walks this road.

Unlike Ms. Du, I certainly did not persist with my ballet lessons because I was an adamant, aspiring dancer. Ballet, among other things, was something that my parents asked me to do as a child that I accidentally became good at, a curse more than a blessing as I much later realized. I was not the most skillful student in ballet class, nor the most flexible, but Ms. Du visibly favored me, in her stern, stoic way.

“It was because you truly understood the art.” My mother once answered to my confusion.

“Huh? How could you know? You weren’t even there!” I protested a parent’s seemingly omniscient power.

“If that wasn’t the case, why did she pick you for Swan Lake?”

My mother was referring to a role in Swan Lake that the National Ballet specifically designed for one advanced student from our weekend school, which was affiliated to the professional troupe. The selected student would have the chance to perform in some of the most prestigious venues in the country. All the kids, or more accurately their competitive mothers desperate for a quick success, went crazy upon hearing the opportunity. During the few weeks of selection period, some of my classmates would constantly throw in an episode of advanced improvisation every now and then during in-class practice combos in order to impress Ms. Du.

What prompted Ms. Du to pick me, in the end, I could not be sure, not willing to give into my mother’s theory that I was a ballet prodigy, a young artist. However, I would like to believe that Ms. Du saw me the way I saw her, an overthinking child simultaneously driven and burdened by her own thinking.

Looking over the barre out of the classroom window, one could see a narrow lane between two buildings with lots of greenery. Once after class, on our way to the line #7 bus station, my

The Architecture of Questions

Moon, tell me how my late land
has been

tell me how to be an excellent projectionist
like you, conjuring life from the mechanical,
building
memorial
in your divine theater
dusts bloom into wisteria
on earthy parts
as if articulating their own name
fragrant syllables

Singular, therefore, auratic
the smile of everything I love and have loved
lines up in my dream
in my hidden half
in the dim
I house geckos
and swept moonbeams
ginkgo leaves almost rotted
children practicing mourning names as told
borderland making itself
boat

who inspired you
from what did you mold our shapes
where is the green exit sign
in this grandiose crossword puzzle

have you ever felt a tree growing in you
and worried about its shadow

mother and I discovered the lane to our pleasant surprise. It was almost like a little garden of its own, with ample sunlight, few pedestrians, and trees lightly swaying in and out of shadow in the wind. Whenever I now hear Jorge Luis Borges' short story's title, "The Garden of Forking Paths," I still think about that lane. Although it was a detour from the closest way to the station, my mother and I would still choose to walk the lane whenever we were not pressed for time.

Around the year I was selected for Swan Lake, my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. She took line 35, then transferred to line 7 to the hospital, took line 7 then 35 home.

Sometimes my father came to pick me up from ballet. He would park his black Audi outside the school building, the same car that picked me up more and more often, drove me from my boarding middle school every weekend to my high school which was next to his office, to the bakery shop on our way home, to our new home that no longer rested on bus line 35.

Fortunately, my mother survived one surgery after another, but for some reason we stopped walking the lane. I still stared at it during barre combos, while the Chopin etudes we danced to gave the scene a melodramatic overtone.

Soon, after I started middle school, ballet became a hobby that was hard to spare time for. For increasing amount of time, I zoned out in class, staring into the lane. Ms. Du, of course, noticed. Without talking to me directly about it, she conveyed her concern. She would try to bring me back by calling on me, asking me to demonstrate moves in front of the rest of the class, even though I, who was never the most skillful and had now lost my passion, could hardly qualify to demonstrate for others. Although not consciously, I started slacking. One time I even showed up to class with my bangs down. It was easier to leave things if I sabotaged them myself.

Midnight Sonata

In the 2am bathroom,

my mother coughs tiny thunderstorms
under incandescent moonlight. Once and again,
they pound on my bedroom door, then
still.

What is it tonight?

Is it deep, rhythmic, exclamational? Is it short,
desperate, gasping, clutching for air? Is it
wet, voiced, tonal, with occasional, gagging
coda?

A thunderstorm,

my mother's body the solitary, wrinkled, plastic bag
that flaps and rustles in wind, brought down to ground,
tumbles up to mid-air until slammed down and dragged up
again.

She deep breathes,

and the thunderstorm births an ocean on earth
lowly rocking its safe ebbs and flows. The plastic bag
rests ashore as I drift back to
sleep.

In the same way that I knew her without ever having had a private conversation with her, I knew that Ms. Du was disappointed. I was both honored and afraid that she had put so much hope on me, hope that she once had for herself. I did not lose passion for ballet, I would like to tell Ms. Du, I was so eaten up by sorrow, that to be passionate about anything seemed like betrayal.

As most kids in my class were about the same age, I was not the only one who found it difficult to keep up with a hobby when school became a much more important thing to worry about. Fewer and fewer students came to class, to the point where one student could occupy an entire barre, when once extra barres had to be borrowed from other classrooms in order to fit everyone.

I cannot recall my last ballet class. Chances are, I had not known it would be my last when it happened; I just simply never went again after. If I had, I would have said proper goodbye. Or would I? How would I say it, without bringing up everything and nothing all at one?

Two years after I quit ballet, I was applying to American high schools when my counselor told me that it would put me at an advantage to record a solo ballet performance as part of my application. I agreed to doing it, because I was old enough to know that it would be my proper goodbye. The choreography was called "The Dying Swan."

Without practice, I had lost much of my control of muscles and flexibility. They were not, however, a priority to grieve over. In the end of the dance, the swan dies after it flutters its wings one last time. Maintaining my posture while waiting for the videographer to stop record, I stretched my arms as elegantly as I could, burying my head low by my knee, next to my pointe shoes, in the shade of nude.

Mother's Seasonal Lullaby

菠菜 莴笋 水萝卜 茄子 豆角 西红柿

At night, under the singular living room light, vegetable names tumble onto the floor, my mother a happy puppeteer.

Spinach breathes like the earth in muddy slush that pools by the sidewalk.

Celtuce stares off idly mid-day in the mountains of my paternal hometown, wondering its own recipe for dinner.

Radish arrives with catkins, fluffy assassins that sneer at her useless housekeeping.

Eggplant lingers like an unwanted guest, eavesdropping on family meetings about the cousin's overdue marriage.

String beans torture our thumbs before they drop contentedly in chunks into a plastic basin under our feet, while a fan squeaks and an emperor-concubine tv drama plays on repeat.

Tomato splashes juice onto the pair of 5rmb slippers that she claims she would get rid of by the end of summer.

“And those are my favorites —
what season eat what vegetable,
then world is right.

Now, good night.”

My favorite fairytale is “The Little Mermaid.”

I wrote my first essay in college on the fairytale. My argument was about how the little mermaid, more human than any human characters in the story in her courage to love and ability to feel pain, is nonetheless denied humanity. I wanted to say that her love is painful — it quite literally splits her in half — and that true love must involve pain of some sort, a cost not many are willing to pay. I wanted to say that in becoming a human and forgoing her family undersea, love puts her in an exile. I wanted to say that she dies by throwing herself back into the sea, a return at last. In the cold foam of the sea that was left of her, there is after all a consolation.

My essay received a C because I was never able to fully articulate these thoughts. I was severely depressed, having just left home for university in another country.

Growing up in Beijing, we had a magazine kiosk near the west gate of our old neighborhood. My kindergarten was by the north gate. Once a month, on the way home from kindergarten, my mother would take a detour from the north gate to the west to pick up the new Little Princess Monthly, a series of stories based on the Disney princesses. On the back seat of my mother’s bike, my heart sang during the five-minute ride. Now I cannot recall one story in its entirety, but remember when Ariel, Disney’s version of the little mermaid, insists on swimming toward the end of the rainbow to find a beautiful gem. How her red hair sways through the blue waters like a flame in the dark, how she resolutely ventures out to an indefinite destination.

I did not know that one day, I would fall in love with a boy with red hair.

Learning to Be a Woman on a Wednesday

This morning, as I wiped my hands on my apron, cut open a tomato,
I thought I saw you, ma — wiping your hands on the soft bulge of your belly
veiled under a pink rabbit dress. Years-worn cotton, soft, fuzzy,
warm like skin. The tomato fresh and cold, gently cut, practicing to bleed.

I learned how to cook by watching behind the kitchen door. I learned
that tiny strands of flour weave in your hair after bun-making;
keeping your fingers to your palm so you don't hurt yourself
and if you do — slitting your finger or burning your arm —
you take the pain with a short staccato, *fèi!*

I learned like every daughter to become every mother
by watching. Learning to be every mother,
I became a woman. When he laid his head on my lap,
I suddenly knew how to stroke hair.

Ma, I am still learning. *Women and workers inhabit a world in which
the unification of mind and body is inherent in the activities performed.*
What Nancy Hartsock does not know: an inaudible staccato
is the only way I know how to react to pain. A note I take to myself.

No, not even my favorites poems will teach me how to be:
So much *not* alone, *so far beyond the casual solitudes*
is chopping a tomato in the kitchen, trying to unlearn
the dexterity inherited from generations of mothers, watching.

Tell me, ma, if I unlearn everything I've learned
between the incandescent classroom light
and the cold, wet chopping board,
will I then be a woman?

The little mermaid gives up her voice to the witch to become a human. She understands that love is a flesh experience. She understands that being a woman, too, is a flesh experience.²

I kissed a boy for the first time on a small mound where a famous Qing China eunuch's tomb had once been.

I constantly want to bite myself to prove the intensity of my feeling.

I almost cried when the boy with red hair reached with a bare hand for a tampon I had dropped in the toilet.

Doctors don't tell women that birth control turns our body into a big, soft ball. Some of us eat one meal a day trying to prevent that from happening.

My mother never says she loves me, but when I had my heart broken for the first time in fifth grade, I cried into her lap while she patted my back. According to her what I said was, "the sky is so gloomy, mom, just like my heart."

Arrested for something she didn't do at her old job in a different city, my mother was beaten with an iron chair in an ice-cold interrogation room after just having had an abortion, alone. My father and I did not know about this.

Hearing about it for the first time fifteen years later, I recall how my father and I used to send her off at the airport every other week, flying to her job. My mother always sang a song to comfort me:

² Nancy Hartsock writes, the male worker's oppression differs from a woman's in the way that he is only "immersed in this world during the time his labor power is being used."

In Winter, Lovers Sit by the Water

Winter is almost over, while we sit by the fountain, wait for your nails to dry.

We have done it over again: gone for a walk at Sunday sunset,
talked about insignificant things, such as soup.

It is snowing in our hometown.

In front of us, a little girl cries for mama, who is a few feet away.
The girl and I have our own melancholy.

The end of January.

Inverted on water, the sun bright and long
still. Suddenly, the wind rising.

The wind summons a bell chime.
The girl wails next to her scooter, now tipped over.

I had never been a difficult child — never wanted to extend playtime,
knowing there's a curfew for any waiting.

If you are patient, soon,
tomorrow will be yesterday's snow.

But this heart, driven by loneliness alone, cries to be pulled over
onto the snowy side street. How do we walk on,
knowing no trace of grass, of flower?

Trees, brown and bare, support an entire sky.

Your pearly nail holds a blob of black
like a teardrop, sad for its own reasons. I smear it flat.

A peck of orange light leaps over us, into the water.
How great: this little fire.

蓝蓝的天空白云飘 白云下面马儿跑 ...

要是有人来问我 这是什么地方

我就骄傲地告诉他 这是我的家乡 ...

My Terrestrial Galaxy

I lie on the ridge of an ancient back —
A confession indecipherable to the vagabond wind
That brings salt and sickness to the sun-cracked heart.
I lie here, waiting to be received by the terrestrial galaxy.

Distantly, the city silhouettes cars and snow
On the solitary ruin of the aged Ming walls
A seventeen-year-old kisses for the first time
And *L'Amant* drops into her deep, mystic silence.

The stars are made of sparks
From cigarettes: tiny cylinders of deadly air
Put out on the rugged sidewalk and revive
In the eyes of the pedestrians who don't stare.

In the subway like a giant beer barrel,
We fizz, sputter, scurry, bubble
Overhead, trees grow so green
If cut open they could bleed.

The land where oblivion is a blessing
But its descendants cannot unlearn, cannot un-cry
To the cries at night. Like children,
We chase our own shadows.

In the city of have-dones
The city that I am terrified would let me go
I lie. Don't let me go,
The man kneels in front of Guanyin and behind him
An orphan boy plays diabolo.

The little mermaid's sisters cut off their long hair in exchange for help for the little mermaid.

How else can we love?

City that does not care
Impregnated by its cruelty, them and us alike
In each one of the millions passersby
I am me.

Kimiko Hahn writes, *I could not return to the body that contained only the literal world.*

With every thought, we bear one more thing to grieve.

Between longer and shorter rain, drenched petals — more purple than pink, auburn than purple — against blotches of wetness on the pavement, soften in relief.

The poet's fixation with flowers, even the ones being done for.

Deep in the couch, listening to rain all day. Arrhythmic tapping. Arrhythmia that I have had for life, the heart looking to settle, not being able to stay.

Once in elementary school it rained. PE cancelled, I stared at the back of a boy during self-study. He had just told me that the stir-fry potato shreds at lunch, too sour, were bad for my stomach.

My mother refusing to cook for me for a month when I was ten as a way to teach a lesson. It must've rained then.

How many honest mistakes we make, loving each other. How we refuse to remember our pain because we want to choose love. How I wish to make a list of every rain in the past.

Wine sits on my nightstand, dark as herbal medicine — 中药. Sometimes I think about things in a language different from the one I learned about them in. What I like is to put myself in an irretrievable place. It is more poetic that way — how it remarks loss. Remarkable loss.

When it finally stopped raining, I woke up early to wait in line for urgent care to open. Waiting for my lab result, thinking about my mother ten years ago, getting her diagnosis at *Friendship Hospital* alone, taking bus line 7 home, cutting me a plateful of melon.

Dramaturgy

[n.] the study of dramatic composition and the representation of the main elements of drama on the stage.

1.

At the concert of my favorite musician when I was seventeen, under the floodlight, every listener stood and stared as if they were praying, and we looked equally defeated when it was over. I walked to the bar across the street because there were seventy-three people waiting outside for a cab. The Lama Temple looked eerily pale, awash by the streetlight. The bartender sat on the stairs by the door, an empty Shisha bowl near his feet. He was smoking, saw me, and offered the light. I asked him if he knew the musician that played tonight. He smiled and replied, I don't care much about that stuff. He told me he left his hometown in Guangxi to come see *the city*. Well here you have it, I said. We looked up. It's got history, he said. It's meh, I said. Los Angeles must be fun, he said. Beijing's better, I said. I thought you said it's meh, he said. So are you going home alone tonight, I said. You can have the lighter if you want, he said. Of course, here comes my cab, I said. Come again if you aren't busy, he said. I got on the cab and left the sick-looking Lama Temple behind.

A life of fleeting moments, white as melon, as cold.

2.

When she said we had sex, what she actually meant was that after they had debated over World War II and Boris Johnson he took her back to his poorly soundproofed Hutong bungalow, led her by hand and ventured into the moonlit single room. They undressed, had some wine, then he offered to cook so she tiptoed after him into the kitchen like a ballet pantomime until she saw pawprints on the counter. Don't worry, the weasel is only around when I'm out for work. She frantically searched for articles that proved weasels carry rabies. He grinned somewhat innocently, He was here when I moved in so I would've got the rabies already if they do carry it. For a second it seems like everything that needs to be said in the world had been said, so she stood barelegged with him and watched the tiny pawprints, their crooked trail all the way from behind the corner, over the cold tiles, up the cabinet, and to the stove.

In the night of all endings, I am writing you a letter about the red balloon. You know immediately what I'm talking about, yes. None of us forgot about the red balloon. The tacky, plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon that we bought from an old lady. The arbitrary, tacky, plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon that we may or may not have bought from an old lady. I am guessing an old lady because only those childless, toothless old ladies sell balloons and cotton candies on the street. (Both you wanted so badly. Both we bought for you because you were just annoying.) Old ladies that have been through many deaths and scare little kids with their smiley: "Balloons, buy one!" In the wind, the balloons croon an outdated song, and the giant, nebular bouquet clasped in their hands make them look very inanimate and small. Down my memory, I can see our tacky, plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon in one of their hands. We took it for our own; from that moment on our time started ticking.

In the night of all endings, we relive summer 2017. Walking on the sidewalk, holding a red balloon is a chore. There are too many people (there are always too many people in this city) and it feels like they are all walking towards us and we are tiny. Plus, the red is conspicuously tacky. Plus, time is ticking. It is the opposite of a ticking bomb because instead of a theatrical explosion, it simply sighs. It goes "puff." You could say it's pretty anticlimactic. I am nervous for you because my hands would have got sweaty from holding tight on the string and being anxious that it would escape. I am nervous for you because in one of the faces towards us, I see your doom approaching like a blonde, tattooed, six-foot ghost. But you were too preoccupied with your plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon. The red balloon of symbolic meanings. Now and then I would miss you, but the next second your head emerges from the crowd like waves. But I always see the red balloon. One always sees the red balloon. Swaying and singing and it's actually become quite soothing to look at. Is it happy? It's tacky.

I Think About the Day

After reading my poem to some drunk white people,
we walk down the street furrowed by construction.
I limp in my boots, absentminded, the summer night
stretched thin. And neither of us will say

This is the last night, again, or worse, I will miss you.
We make careful strides, cussing, intoxicated —
you stop by a jammed bike share station and say
I could use the skill. Men had tried to teach me
and failed — but I trust you.

I pedal and go backwards, so you had to push me —
our tight white knuckles are doves ready to fly
but I am instructed to not look back. Ahead of me,
where the alley grows into a soft dark spot,
days whiz past. Behind us the night sky,

so polluted it almost looks like its own
city, illuminates us and our tiny shadows, the summer air
like membrane. My ankle cut, we stop
because you have to go to your man's bungalow apartment,
because you have to go home, so I get down and slowly
push the bike, slowly walk forward, reading close
what I have seen over and over again.
If I had to say something, perhaps it would be that today
I learned to say goodbye on a bike — today
I learned to ride a bike and say goodbye.

Before I could figure out what the balloon is singing, we are there at your house. A house of a hell. It's a good idea to let go, and the red balloon happens to be the only thing in your hand, in our hands. Poor, red balloon. So we did. We let go of the tacky, plastic, heart-shaped, red balloon, in the night of all endings.

Moving

I put up the first photo on my wall the way I start a poem:
what is left out differentiates praying from mourning.
Here is a drunken dream sprinkled with winter rain. Here,
sunset between boughs and poles and bricks on bungalow rooftops
radiates into one chipped, white wall. The gaps in between images
are conspicuously quiet, like language. How they align: irrational.
In frames, we pretend nothing was lost. Memory runs its fingers
through my hair. Home: one call out of earshot.
Behind broken blinds, an old professor drums the ground
with his walking stick like the sound of teenagers playing
basketball. In new climate, moments grow
into their own little lives. I choose to drown myself
in breaths and blankets, choose to believe that
every photo is a stamp that grants the past a new destination,
knowing that another photo falls off my wall every day.

Say we back up a little: you and your moldy bread at the far end of the bank, behind happy impatient grandmothers.

Not even then.

You at the far end, empty-handed. Me pushing my way out of impatient grandmothers to buy you some bread, yet to know of its mold, yet to know of the water splashing your jeans. I couldn't tell if the lake was the crowd and I was swimming or the wet stony shoreline was in fact cloud. A soft piece of cloud-like bread, moldy, handed to me through the window of a little wood cabin, wrapped in an opaque plastic bag like an infant, dreaming of passing things. It makes an oar when I row my way back to your hungry hands.

Where you stand: a moon-shaped compromise that land makes to water. A motherly humbleness. Where you stand, a tattooed arm, waving. Taking the bread, you break a little. *Throw on three*. Freefall into water, gifting the lake a secret. *Try higher*. A gull pecks a fleck of light. *Come again*. Suddenly flocking, the birds scatter into haze.

That bird looks like my mother!

In a distance, the misty mountain on its way to forming a sentence, while birds fly to it like punctuation.

The misty mountain, misty mystery, an impeccable facial expression.

Evening Zuihitsu

The dog lets out a long breath when it turns dark. It turns dark so that the shadows can live.

We cut through ghost town. A shadow of a place, where palm trees try really hard to reach the dry expanse of sky.

In an interview I was asked: *what brought you here?*
I am here because I am not there. If not there, anywhere.

Here, I met a man who only dated me in parking lots and asked me to split gas money. For whom I fell into a bush when drunk.

After telling this story, I was hugged for three minutes in the frozen aisle, agreeably close to *asian delights*, where I will stock up on wonton.

Yesterday at lunch, a squirrel ate my Reese's wrapper, vigilant.
I was worried. For a moment, I couldn't tell if the squirrel was me.

Wind pangs on the window pane. *Wind In Her Hair* is her favorite song.
I'm sorry for the pain. I'm sorry for the pain.

Were it true that wishes to the stars come true,
I would wish for not wanting. Instead, the palm trees.

Red. Blink. Green. Blink. Red. I jaywalk to make a statement.
It's okay if you don't understand. A bird will sing, although I cannot hear it.

I cannot name the pink flower on the streetside, half-blossomed,
crossing paths with its own decay.

Drooping, the flower has lost interest in all things pretty.

I stand in front of the gravestone that holds my grandfather, my grandmother, and my great-grandmother's names, feeling tight around my throat still from the two-hour nap I took on our ride to the cemetery. Their names are in gold: that means they are dead. In this country, people buy gravestones decades in advance and have their names carved on it, in order to be buried together with their family when the day comes. The name is not gilded until the person dies. My mother sighs, "the family next to us, last time we came here their names were still in grey." Her comment lingers in the air, almost eerily comical to me that it could as well be a line from a lousy horror movie.

On the stone, before each of my grandparents' names, there is a title: Gracious Mother. Late Father. Warm Grandmother. My mother and her four brothers designed the stone. The body-used-to-bes underground were once their mother, their father, their grandmother. I think about what my friend had said the night before, having just come back from her family's tomb-sweeping: "isn't it funny how after people die, all that they are remembered by is their familial duty?" My friend was right. The newly gilded family next to us also has their share of "gracious mother" and "late father," and to their right, another. I imagine how, in the other 360 days of the year that are not tomb-sweeping season, thousands of gracious mothers and late fathers stand side by side in this lonesome park, childless, soundless. How would they greet each other? Wind traverses miles over the mountains and brushes off a pinch of dust from the stones. Perhaps in some dimension invisible to us, a gracious mother stands in front of hers, her hands on her waist, just as how she used to stand at the door waiting for her child to come back from school. Or, for all we know, the gracious mother could have already reincarnated over three little mosquito lives and is enjoying the freedom of wings and the absence of a human body — this awkward, plump, diseased, 73% water, human body.

Elegy

My heart like a pitted date is good for playing
hide and
seek each chamber opens up to a new
nothing
Grief lives in a cave with a
hole
on each side
Running is always windy
Behind it, trees are crowned in burnt orange
and green.

My three uncles had just climbed up the rocky path to where we are, sweating and catching their breath. They are thirty minutes late, overweight, and aged. With much familiarity, we quickly make a half circle, enclosing the stone. “Mama, Baba, Nainai.” My oldest uncle is speaking on behalf of us. The melodrama in his voice took me aback. Quite frankly, I never liked that voice; but it doesn’t seem to make me want to pull off my hair as much as I did when I was a kid. My uncle does not speak as fast and clearly — the way oldest sons speak — as he used to. The doctor examined and found nothing, before deciding that it could just be an unfortunate product of old age, so the doctor let him be. So he stutters. He mumbles. He trembles. He kneels and kowtows. And then we each kneel and kowtow. My dad winces because he sees the mud on the ground, but we kowtow anyway. I close my eyes and join my palms. I piece together remnants of childhood memories about my grandma, and they make up the smell of her special homemade rice steamed pork. Do you know that I’m a vegetarian now, grandma? One, two, three. I bang my head on the cold marble, so that everyone hears my genuineness. Would you care if that hurts, grandma?

We support ourselves up and find our way back to the half circle.

Breaking the silence, my mother invites everyone to taste the qingtuan and sweet redbean buns she spent the entire day making yesterday. Each year we bring some snacks for the ancestors and eat it in front of their tomb. The wind blows dirt onto one of the buns, but we pretend we didn’t notice. My uncle asks why I am not eating anything. She just had the worst stomach flu, and these cannot be easily digested, my mother explains. So I watch them eat. I watch their mouths move as if we are in a silent movie, and all I hear is the immeasurable, transgenerational silence.

Last Hour of Twilight

In the comfortable alibi of the moon, a river,
dark blue, through colonnades of shadows, subverted stars,
slender veins of the hefty boulevards,
runs into me: anonymous, astray
in this parched city, quietly asking
to be named.

It's you — is what I don't say. I close my eyes
and imagine what was once a debris flow: soft, silent,
how you travelled. Sharp ends of the night grass
on standby, watchful for dew. Traffic pauses, laminating
ants into amber, whispers shattered to shards.
My hand almost open — a search.

Listening close to the river, breaking on concrete,
longing to be touched, loved by a clinging gaze —
so I sit down and gaze. I touch and I name.
I love like a generous drifter, remembering a man
who left behind a river near home at eighteen
and never returned.

“The river ran dry,” he said — but I think he lied, because
all rivers are one and this river is that and the Pacific is this
and all waters are our river. In momentary passing,
light crusts in spots and patches that are flakes from the sky,
every river a scar that we each choose
and call it our own.

I hold my mother's hand as we trudge down the mountain, following my uncles and followed by my father. Why is there a nice gazebo at the far top of the hill, I ask. That is some famous actress' tomb, my mother answers, when I die, just spread my ash out into the sea so that you don't have to go through all this work every year. I know she doesn't mean it. So I try to chuckle lightly as we continue walking in silence, hands loosely clasped together. I think about how death sentences us all to solitude, and how we are together, on this very day that we sweep tombs.

The City Is a Song You Know Not How to Sing

Always the candid afternoon sun
makes the sky look long. Always
out on the long, flat sky
the triangular shadow of a hill.

California, land like its own country,
your colossal nothing —
there is no use in talking to you
about rivers, its turns, hesitation,
so much unspeakable in its racing
like my way home I am lost
on my way home plodding over you.

Only I, dragging no shadow
but myself through a patchwork
of stained streets and parking lots,
familiarize myself with the indifferent
stillness of the afternoon.

Metallic structure of more buildings
unfinished, like bare bones sticking out
mid-air, mid-day. At their feet, bus benches
host dreams like scars that rip open
reality. And I know, then, that the pain
of unmooring is worn well
on everyone like a nicely fitted belt.

But at *golden hour* —
in the bright flame of everything
fanned by a wind like the last cosmic wind,
the relentless thoughts of this moment
are forgiven, even the foolish hope. If
all stillness of waiting falls into place
in the intense, fiery orange...

In the sky now dark and deep,
a tree sways like a patient pendulum —
 an old man's slow pacing at sunset.

I sit, islanded
like a far cloud over the sea.

Epilogue: Burying Fallen Petals

“On one dreary winter afternoon, I skipped classes and walked in the run-down alleys near school — now these alleys are lined with chic pubs and sophisticated eateries catering to expats and tourists.” In her memoir, Yiyun Li, Chinese-born writer now residing in the U.S., recalls Beijing. Alumna of the same high school, I know exactly what she’s talking about, a habitual truant myself. Although, growing up two decades later, I aggressively frequented those pubs and eateries as a teenager. There is something both eerie and comforting about seeing your own memory narrated on page by someone else as theirs. The much-trusted linearity of time, and the line between self and others, seem to collapse at that instant.

My friends and I read Yiyun Li religiously. How painfully similar we are, growing up in Beijing, moving to the US during young adulthood, forming an identity in a second language, being therefore culturally diasporic, being therefore mentally unstable, feeling certain that your mental illness is not an illness but a perfectly coherent logic of living from which there is no escape... In fact, one friend cannot bring herself to Li’s writings without having a nervous breakdown. As if only in seeing ourselves in others’ stories that our private memory confirms to be real.

Yiyun Li is a very quiet writer. Rarely does she let her feelings about her past interrupt with the ongoing writing, even when the writing is about herself. When she must insert a personal anecdote, she ensures its necessity, and it can be as humble as a parenthetical. Sometimes, this reticence in the second language is rooted in the same urge in running away from the first language.

On reticence, we reserve the right to review and revise. A thought is not final as long as it remains in one’s head. We rehearse it again and again to ourselves as if dancing in an empty theater (the cost, though, is one’s self bordering a ghost).

Therefore, this silence is not a barren field, but one's own battlefield. If we take a step back and reexamine language's arrogance — the assumption that language always has the last word — it is only natural to ask: who says silence cannot speak for itself? Often times, this refusal to speak serves oneself perfectly. Disturbed is the *listener*, now being put on the spot. Vivian Huang, when analyzing Yoko Ono's performance *Cut Piece*,³ aptly points out that the artist's silence on stage "amplifies the sounds in her audience and draws attention to the uncontrolled nature of audience members' reactions to her and to one another." Across time and space, Li resonates, that reticence does not result in one's own loneliness but a distance from others. But after all, who's to say that reticence precludes connection? "[O]ftentimes it is shunned memory that connects one to another." If anything, the reverberation through a charged, silent space is thereby strengthened.

Years ago, when I was drafting my college application essay, I insisted on writing about my "tragic aesthetic" against all advice otherwise — that tragedy grants life meaning, accompanied by a therapy-couch self-disclosure of my personal traumas. My application counselor, a white man from Wisconsin, after a loss of words, commented in his polite American way that writing as brutally candid as I did required immense courage, and asked whether I had considered the moment when this courage runs dry. I was struck silent. A proud teenager, I responded defensively and instantly decided to repress the feeling of abashment his comment instilled. The truth is, I had not thought about it. The fervent urge to express myself overruled any consideration of consequences or implications.

What my counselor and I didn't talk about was what haunts me years later: that I would have never been able to write about

³ Artist instructs each viewer to take a pair of scissors and cut off a piece of her clothing, while sitting on stage in silence.

what I did the way I did — my grandparents' deaths and my mother's illness — in my native tongue. In this estranged landscape of the second language, I have no personal history, no strings attached. What I write can be so arbitrary: every acquaintance becomes a character, myself a persona. The perfect distance English holds from the tip of my tongue and the rawness I taste when I speak it exempts me from any mental liability and is thus liberating. How I avail this freedom, though, is not to reinvent, but to be honest, the harder thing to do. In this game of pretend, I speak about myself without having to be vocal. My writing needs only to be signed by my preferred name, which almost had been Mophie instead of Alice, for no significant reason. In elementary school, we were handed out English names in English class as if they were nothing different from boxed lunches from the school cafeteria. "English is my private language," Li writes. "In my relationship with English [...] I feel invisible but not estranged." Perhaps Li and I cross paths in our own escape trajectories: the distance we each posit in front of us, the safe muddledness, overlaps and connects. Perhaps, perhaps. I like the way the word sounds when it starts a sentence, or ends a thought.⁴

In elementary school, I used to make my friends play pretend with me using characters from *红楼梦*.⁵ Most of them had not yet read the book and therefore lacked interest. I explained the story: Baoyu is the main guy, Daiyu is his cousin. The two of them fall deeply in love, but Baoyu ends up marrying Baochai, who is always well-behaved and personable, emotionally intelligent but not expressive, unlike Daiyu, a sentimental soul who

⁴ Yet to project is to intrude. Here I will remind you of my own inconsistency, having started this essay with a personal anecdote. One is only entitled to interpret oneself. But where does this thought begin? Where does the self end? Other people become characters in our own story, and us theirs.

⁵ Cao, Xueqin. *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

weepingly buries fallen petals, and eventually dies young from a lifetime of melancholy. I would always choose Baochai for my own character for a gut feeling, but the reason is now clear: the bigger melodrama than being sorrowful and lonely is not being able to express that sorrow at all.

“Is it difficult to feel heard in a second language?” A friend once asked me. Yes, but not any harder than struggling to be heard as a woman, I will now answer. I was only able to slip so comfortably and skillfully into this shadowy position in a second language, because the feeling of being on the margin is not foreign. I have gotten good at it from doing it all my life.

In *红楼梦*, while roaming the Land of Illusion in his dream, Baoyu picks up a book in which are inscribed verses that tell the fate of important women in his life. Daiyu and Baochai, in fact, are the only two who share the same verse. Are Daiyu’s melancholy and Baochai’s reticence not two sides of the same coin? “English is my private language” — meaning that there is no audience that matters in this empty theater but ourselves, meaning what we do in the realm of the second language is merely the intaglio of silence etching in from the native tongue, meaning that if you listen closely, between every word on page, you will hear the sound of me burying fallen petals.⁶

⁶ Intaglio printing: the opposite of relief printing, where the print results from ink below the surface of the plate.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to the editors of *Cutthroat Magazine* for the publication of “Last Hour of Twilight,” which was selected as an honorable mention for the 2022 Joy Harjo Poetry Award.

My deepest gratitude for those I owe my thoughts to:

Nancy Hartsock, "The Feminist Standpoint."

Wallace Stevens, "Re-Statement of Romance."

Hans Christian Andersen, "The Little Mermaid."

Kimiko Hahn, *The Narrow Road to the Interior*.

Yiyun Li, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*.

Vivian Huang, "Inscrutably, actually: hospitality, parasitism,
and the silent work of Yoko Ono and Laurel Nakadate."

Cao Xue Qin, *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

To the University of California, Los Angeles, English Department and to the Undergraduate Research Center for the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences for your kind support and education.

To my thesis mentor, Brian Kim Stefans, for inspiring me to write generously in a second language and for making this collection happen.

To my UCLA creative writing teachers, Fred D'Aguiar, Karen Kevorkian, Justin Torres.

To all my Chinese and English literature teachers who have validated my self-expression as I grew up. My high school teacher, Stephan Johnson.

To Beijing and Los Angeles, cities that have nurtured me through various times.

To my friends.

To the boy with red hair.

To Jianwei Lu and Sizheng Song. Thank you for being my family.

To my mother and father.

To us afflicted.