

# THE RITE OF RED DUST

By Jie Wang

**WHY WE LIKE IT:** *Even if you don't 'understand' this story—and we're not sure we do—you can't help but respond, in some capacity as a reader, to what's going on here. Are we being asked to see how languages—the molecules of language—change meaning and symbol capture through social evolution, the impact of reason/science and cultural osmosis? Maybe. For us, 'The Rite of Red Dust' explores the shamanistic power of words and their relation to material transformation. In the end, all languages are one in the way that all birds have wings. And if none of this makes sense just read it for the lyric impact. A powerfully conceived modernist short where poetic arabesques elope in a democracy of freefall word play. Quote: 'A dragon pillar. A huabiao. A pagoda.' said J, 'Mr White, we can't pin names on things any more. Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose... Even if we say it a thousand times, it will just become a meaningless sound.'/Semantic satiation', said W. Five stars.*

## The Rite of Red Dust

Two Martians, Mr White and Jazz Pink, walked into the Rite. An enormous circle of people were dancing around a towering ancient artifact.

'It's a vertical bullet train.' said Jazz.

'It's Noah's Ark.' said Mr White.

'Charon's boat.' said J.

'Achilles' spear.' said W.

'Jacob's Ladder.' said J.

'An obelisk.' said W.

'A phallus.' said J.

'An ego.' said W.

'A titan boy's toy.' said J.

'Tower of Babel.' said W.

'Everest.' said J.

'Leviathan.' said W.

'Caduceus.' said J.

'A totem pole. A caryatid. A spire of a Gothic cathedral.' said W.

'A dragon pillar. A huabiao. A pagoda.' said J, 'Mr White, we can't pin names on things any more. Rose is a rose is a rose is a rose... Even if we say it a thousand times, it will just become a meaningless sound.'

'Semantic satiation.' said W.

'Names are fading, like a morning dream.' said J.

'Names are evaporating.' said W.

'It looks like it's going to snow.' said J.

The dancers stamped their feet, clapped their hands, and chanted 'Algorithm!  
Algorithm!'

'Look, snowflakes!' Jazz pointed to the sky.

A few snowflakes fell onto the red waste land, and vanished like words.

'A graveyard of snow.' said J.

'A graveyard of names.' said W.

'Languages disappearing like species.' said J.

'Mass extinction.' said W.

'Do you remember the time, when words were written on bones, stones, turtle shells, metals?' said J.

'Then on skins, silk.' said W.

'Then on paper.' said J.

'In the end on dust, water, thin air.' said W.

'Look, the cloud is writing a word!' said J.

'Your brain is writing a word.' said W, 'The interlock between a word and a thing only exists in brains, and brains are becoming post-brains.'

'Words are losing their habitat.' said J.

The dancers spun and leapt, leapt and spun, then with a final leap, they left the ground. They flew higher and higher, spinning faster and faster, till they started to shed their skins and flesh like scarlet scales and feathers, swirling and falling in a rain of rubies and garnets. After a while there were only their brains floating aloft. They disassembled into strands of nerves, which weaved a stupendous double helix. It kept twirling and vibrating at such a speed that in the end there was nothing left but a red mist.

'It is... beautiful. Do you think so, Mr White?' said J.

'No.' said W.

The mist was whirling and churning like a starling murmuration. It wrote in the sky:

nirvana

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The vertical line of symbols suspended in the air for a while, then dematerialized into the unfathomable emptiness.

'What does it mean, Mr White?' said J.

'I don't know.' said W.

'Symbols without meanings.' said J.

'Shadows without bodies.' said W.

'Husks.' said J.

'Bark.' said W.

'Cocoons.' said J.

'Slough.' said W.

'Hide.' said J.

'Pelt.' said W.

'Kidskin.' said J.

'Sheaths.' said W.

'Wrecks.' said J.

By now the snow was pelting down. The surface of Mars was being eroded by an endless whiteness.

'Look, the eternal white foam on the eternal red dust.'

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:** *I was inspired by Stravinsky and Nijinsky's ballet The Rite of Spring, Buddhism, and SpaceX. I wanted to explore how language and literature would survive and change in the age of science. The literary influences on this story include The Waste Land, Russell Edson's 'Clouds', The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, Gertrude Stein, some contemporary Chinese poets, and other sources embedded in my subconsciousness.*

**BIO:** *I am a flash fiction/short story writer. I was born in a northern city in China in the '80s. I've been living in the UK since I was 23. I am interested in the interaction between literature and science. My twitter: <https://twitter.com/JieWang65644813>*