

West 4th Street Review



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SPRING 2022

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Front cover: A Moment in Time, Courtesy of Maggie Liu

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A
Mercifully Brief Note
FROM THE
FACULTY EDITOR / ADVISOR

Long ago, I came across a quotation from Vladimir Nabokov which has stuck with me longer than any memory of where it came from:

“...Everything is something trembling on the brink of something else.”

I have always loved that observation, and it feels especially resonant in our current strange, half-exultant, half-ominous era. Maybe, we are trembling on the brink of growth and change and beauty; maybe we are trembling on the brink of gloom and disaster. Maybe both.

It is, I have always thought, through art that we most perceive this trembling, this brink. Poetry, fiction, memoir, artwork, these are the elements which lift us toward that brink, which help us define the trembling, which help light the way to the something else we yearn for.

I believe that the authors and artists represented here intuitively grasp this, and are determined to show that vile war, devastating illness, rampant stupidity are not the only truths available to us, that our world and our lives continue to hold the promise of something else, something more beautiful, something more true.

I invite you to tremble through this collection, to see the many versions of something else offered here, and to be, at least momentarily, as proud as I am to witness the efforts of our amazing students.

Thanks to the many who submitted to the magazine this year—we had soooo many submissions, it was unusually hard to whittle them down! Thanks to our large and energetic editorial and design team. Thanks to Emily Bauman for help with the Elaine Kuntz Prize, to Leah Guarino and Billy Helton for administrative assistance, and of course to Dean Julie Mostov for her support of this ongoing project.

For any further information, please contact me at sp1@nyu.edu

Onward!

--STEPHEN POLICOFF

Spring 2022



Fatigue (2020)

Courtesy of Adja-Fatimata Seck

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This Essay was the Winner of the Elaine Kuntz Prize 2022

NOTES TOWARDS A HISTORY OF CAGES AND BIRDS

Aria Young

1

Autumn is the best season in Pennsylvania. On weekends that I spend in Ethan's quiet small town, our favorite activity to do is curling up on the couch in front of the balcony glass doors, savoring brief moments of peace before they are intruded by fumbblings in the kitchen or a little brother coming home. Like Ethan, the grey parrot in that big white cage on the balcony seems extra lonely in a household of five cats, three dogs, and five humans. The close yet unreachable distance from the cage to the sky, a brutal irony. How does the caged parrot feel watching oak tree leaves in the backyard fade from a delightful smell of liveliness into the flaming color of red? Does he observe the cloud of swallows return to their branches at dusk and blend into the sky? Or does he perhaps find the cage quite spacious and the sound of talking humans entertaining after all? When Ethan talks about the unbearable boredom and hollowness that traps him in this comfortable small town, I tell his longing eyes that I understand. Perhaps I get drunk a little too often in those sad brown eyes. I never learned the bird's name.

2

Cage /keij/

Noun.

- a box or enclosure having some openwork for confining or carrying animals (such as birds).
- a barred cell for confining prisoners.
- a framework serving as support.
- an arrangement of atoms or molecules so bonded as to enclose a space in which another atom or ion (as of a metal) can reside.

The definition of a cage is, for the most part, straightforward and universal. But being the troubled over-thinker that I am, I like to play the self-invented game of "Cage Or Not?" with random threads of ideas I encounter during the spiraling unrests of my consciousness. Since a cage is an enclosure used to confine animals and I myself is not so much more than an animal, is my room not so much less than a cage? My other half of the brain then judges the poor logic in this statement because my body is capable of walking out of the room at any time, thus declaring the enclosure not a cage. But the question then arises—if the bird chooses to stay in the cage like I do in my room on Sunday afternoons, does that make the birdcage not a cage after all? If the qualification for an enclosure to be a cage is solely the consent of the object in it, then should there not exist an empty cage at all? If the cage is comfortable enough, does it become a home? If home is made of barbed wires and cold metal bars, is it a cage?

“KILL ALL SPARROWS.” said Chairman Mao. After the Chinese Communist Party rose to power, sparrows became a target of the “Four Pests” campaign. To Mao, the filthy little brown creatures eat too many grains to be spared in the ruthless yet glorious march of Chinese economic growth. In drums and bells, every good Chinese citizen with even the slightest fear (often in the form of love) for Mao hunted sparrows. The massacre did not stop until millions of them started dying of famine—revenge of the fist-size feathered demons. My grandmother survived the disaster, but the starvation never left her body or soul. Since then, sparrows have developed a Darwinistic instinct to fear humans. Growing up in the shining red land of Shanghai, I never once walked near a breathing wild sparrow without it immediately flapping its wings to flee my terrifying presence. Chinese sparrows are extremely difficult to capture, and impossible to tame. Farmers will tell you that within hours of its captivity, a sparrow will flutter hysterically in its cage until death comes in distress and exhaustion. A cage is a sparrow’s coffin.



Photo of a Friend (2019)

Courtesy of Adja-Fatimata Seck

In middle school, my friends started calling me “雀” (què), meaning “sparrow” in Chinese, because of its phonetic similarity to my name Qinyuè. As I grew older and became increasingly concerned of who I was to myself, the name developed some made-up meanings and forced itself into my identity. A boy I did not love back once told me that I was, after all, not a house bird but a wild sparrow that refused to be tamed. Maybe it’s a cosmic coincidence, or maybe my nickname inspired the character I scripted for my teenage self to play—I started hating my country.

Twelve Core Socialist Values: Prosperity, Democracy, Civility, Harmony, Freedom, Equality, Justice, Rule of Law, Patriotism, Dedication, Integrity, Friendship.

Learn your core values. Learn it by heart. Memorize it better than you can memorize your mother’s number. Recite it confidently when the visiting officers from the bureau

ask you to. Make your school proud. Be grateful you are a Chinese citizen. Be useful to the Party. Make your country proud.

In the classroom on the seventh floor, I watched a sparrow ascend from her tree gracefully as the shrieking noise of propaganda poured out of my educator's mouth. Does the sparrow ever feel trapped? Does she fly down the streets of Shanghai wondering if she could ever break free from the giant blue dome that shelters her inside? This 3.7 million square miles of a cage. I was hopping up and down hysterically in it.

5

Some birds are never meant to be caged, some will try to bend the bars and cut the chain. During the Cultural Revolution, hundreds of Chinese intellectuals committed suicide every day just in Shanghai alone. Thursday, 1968. A school teacher jumped out of the room he was confined in. Next to his body, the Red Guard wrote, "Good riddance, traitor! Even death cannot pay for your sin." The paint on the ground, more red than his blood. Monday, 1974. A Botanist returning from the University of Pennsylvania was immersed in stinking slime in a locked basement. She managed to tear her clothes into strips and hung herself. When living becomes a cage, death is always one way out.

December 8, 2008, 11 p.m., Liu Xiao Bo heard the pounding on the door. Before he could answer, the police barged in and confiscated his books and computers as "weapons he used to sabotage the Party." The bird was immediately under arrest for "inciting subversion of state power." In a less-than-three-hour trial, the defendant was unsurprisingly not permitted to present any evidence. Two years later, at the Nobel Prize ceremony in Oslo, the Peace Prize laureate was represented by an empty chair. To kill a sparrow, you simply put it in a cage. Blood dried in Tiananmen Square, pages torn from lying books. In Liu's prison cell, plucked feathers covered the floor. Not a single dent was made.

6

Some birds die in their cells, some learn to love their cages. At Catholic school, faith is accepting what you cannot understand, and fear is the heart of love. So don't question the "abortionists = terrorists" T-shirt because good Catholics only follow. I bit my tongue when the vice principal told me that she was a supporter of women, but my feminist club was not what Catholic girls needed here. Among the long list of terms we could not use in school, the f-word ranked high on the list, alongside "gender equality" and "reproductive rights." When the blonde boy saw my friend at the stadium though, the f-word he used was nowhere near punishable. "We are Catholics," the supporter of women told me, and Catholics do not think for themselves.

St. Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle. Be our defense against the wickedness and snares of the Devil. May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly hosts, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan, and all the evil spirits, who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen.

The empowering prayer came up at my favorite time of the day—end of the last period. For thirty seconds every day I would ponder the glorious Catholic battle, and who Satan was to my god-fearing teachers and classmates, how their humanity seemed so far from mine. Being a queer, agnostic f*minist, I am the ruin of souls and the wickedness and snares of the Devil, persecuted by some ordinary and unimpressive souls. Such thoughts

entertained me, made me feel like I was somehow a misfit toy in an imagined holy land where I did not belong. Oh, just like Lady Bird, my self-importance said. Maybe I was like Liu too, after all, a liberated sparrow pecking at its cage from the outside, crying for the other ones to get out.

7

Some cages you inherit, others you build on your own. When my father walked out of our lives, he took the ropes with him so my hands and feet were no longer tied. At age 3, I failed to be his obedient, well-behaved daughter and cried for the man that shattered my mother's heart. When she silently put away his cold dinner on



Warmth

Courtesy of Maggie Liu

nights he didn't come home, I felt the barbed wires and cold metal bars growing inside my little body too. Eighteen years later, my mother lives in her cage alone. Mine followed me overseas and armed itself with achievements and filled schedules. When I heard the phrase Mother Wound, I felt a crack in the cage, exposing my raw and tender flesh. My mother's pain leaks out of it. I think I know what it feels like.

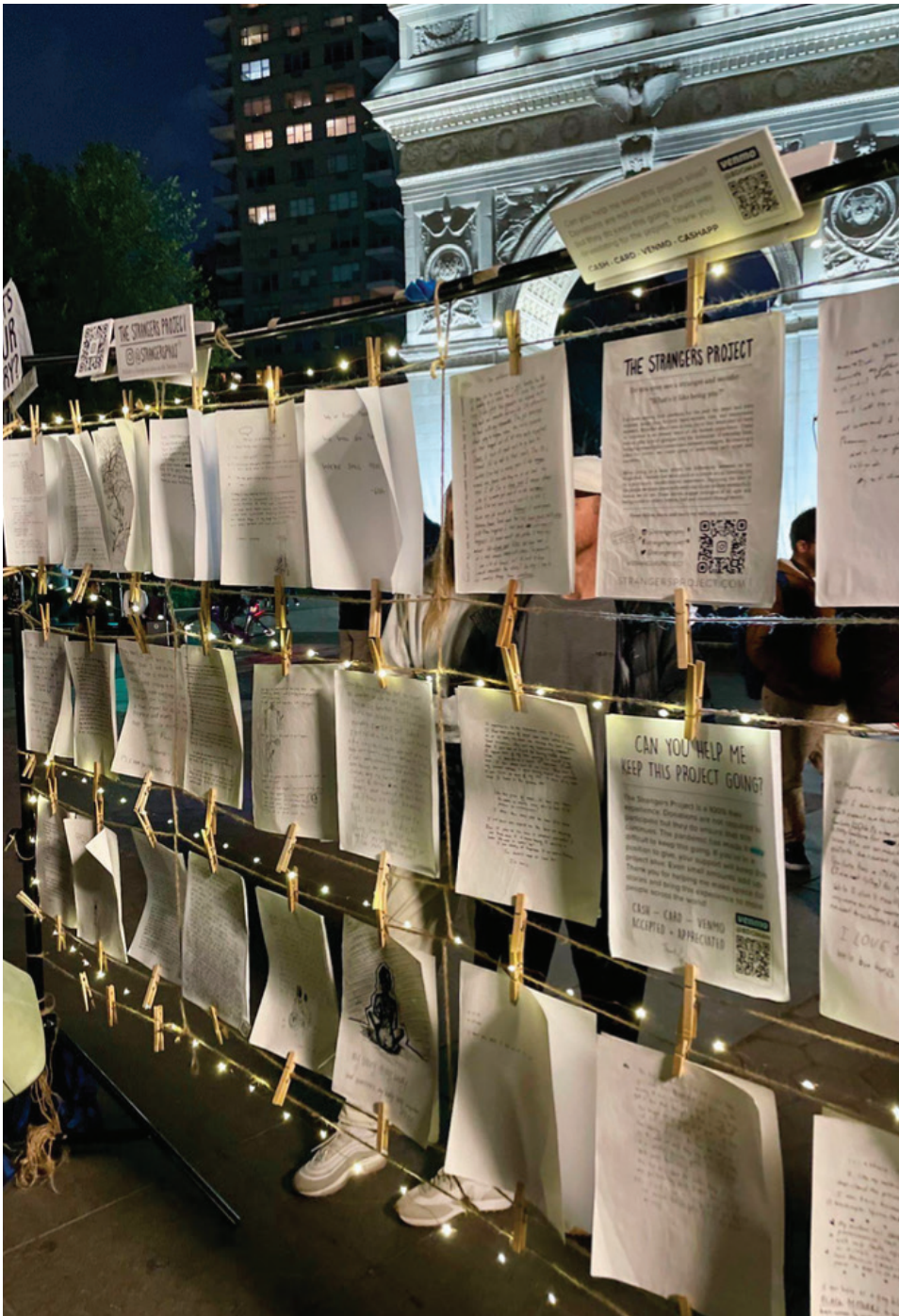
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“How does that make you feel?” My therapist asked, like my eighth grade math teacher who used to put me on the spot. Her questions always hit me like a reading quiz I did not prepare for, yet answers still tickle

at the bottom of my throat. My heart is a cage made of strings. Feelings often get caught inside and come out twisted and tangled. Threads and threads of thoughts fill me up and clog at the throat. Words never have the right meaning, I know. But I still trap my head in the cage of language. Pages and pages of ink pointlessly searching and grabbing, stumbling and falling. What if I don't feel? What if the child inside me has been dead for too long. What if my problems are so deeply rooted in myself that to take them away is to partially kill me?

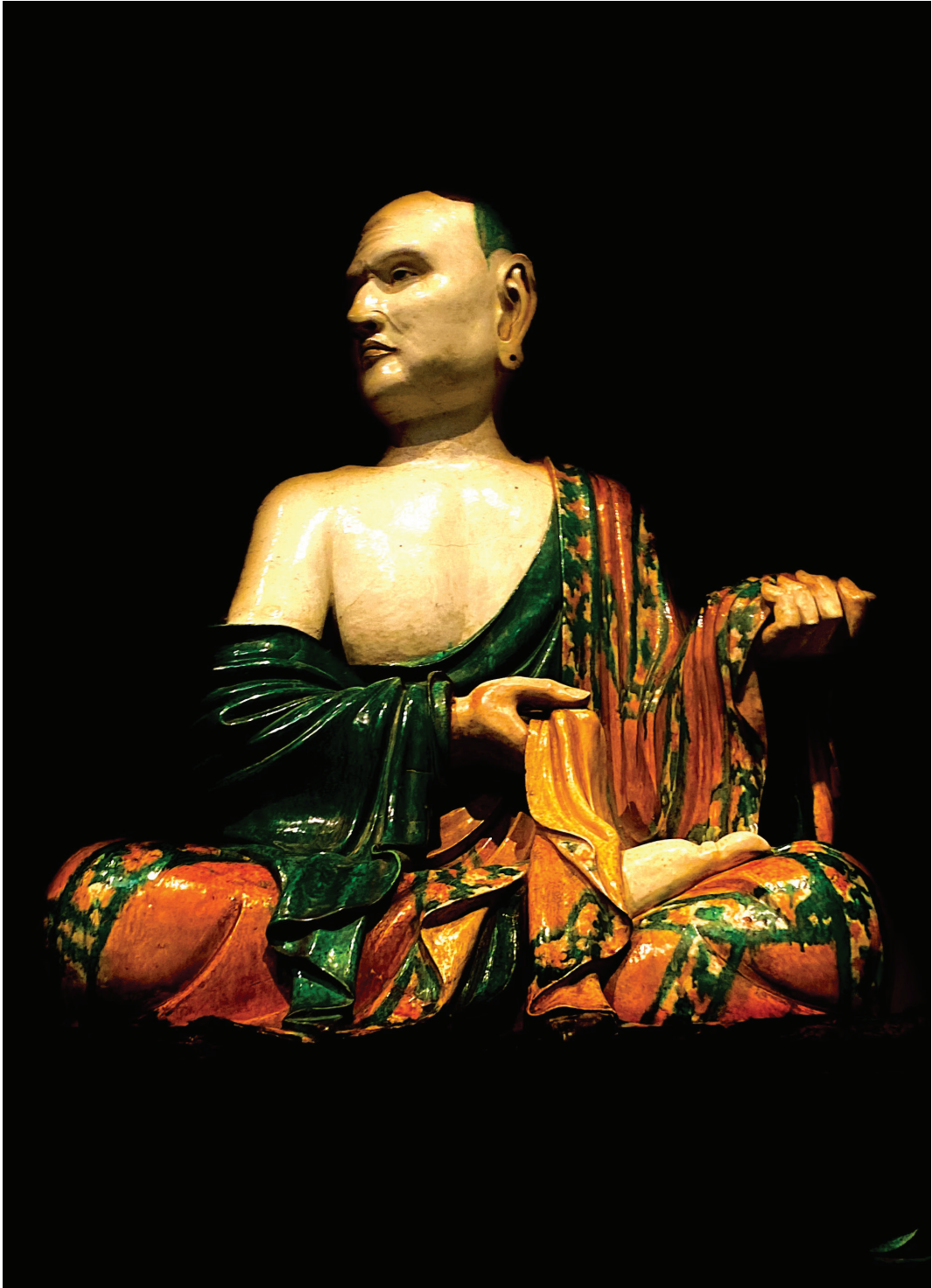
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Cages. I have spent two decades moving from one to another. If being trapped is the only form of existence you know, is there really a cage at all? Or is the thought of being in a cage that really puts us in one? Maybe the cage door has always been open, but the bird just refuses to leave. Am I the bird? Or am I the cage?



Dear World

Courtesy of Patricia Romero



Buddha (2021)

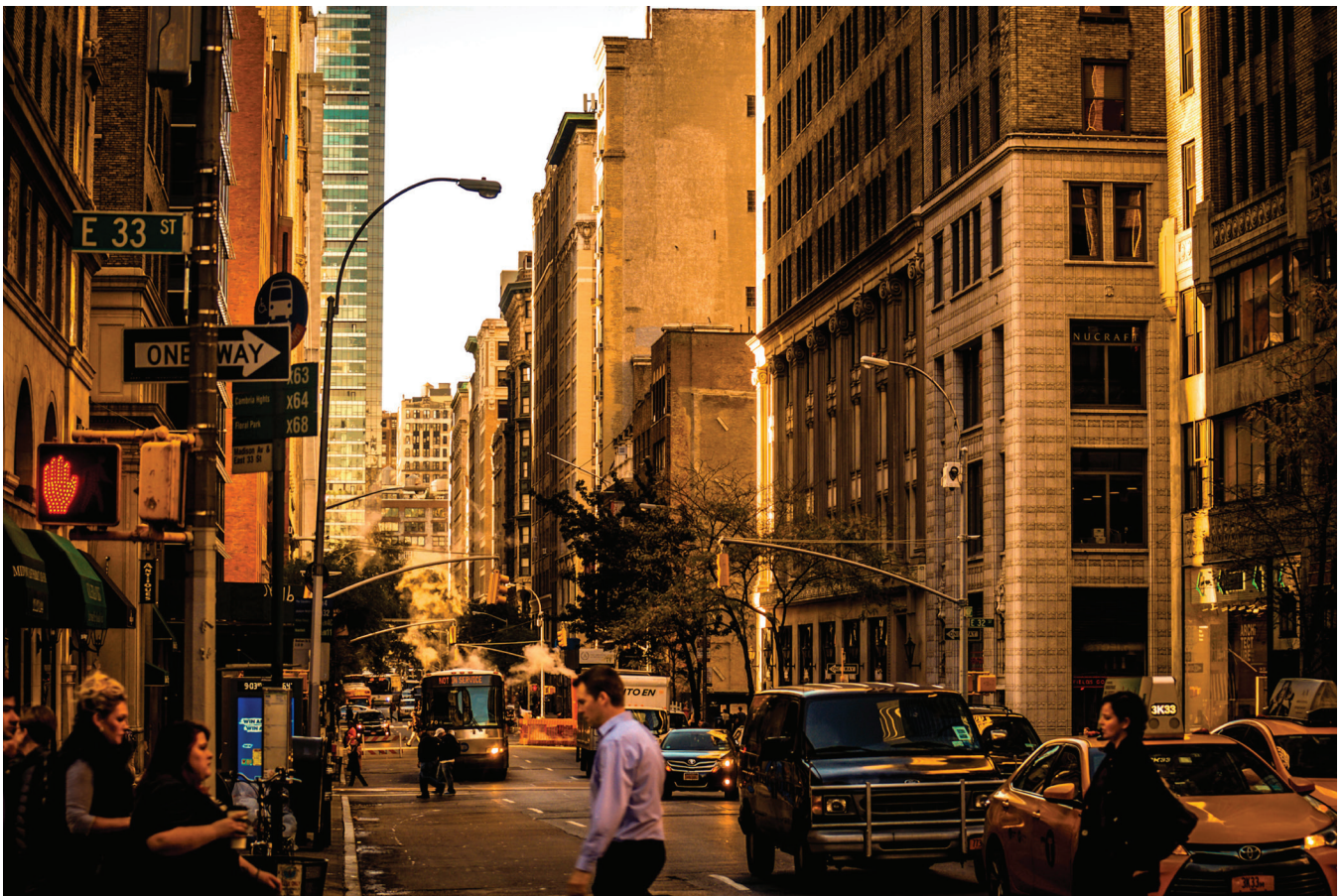
Courtesy of Adja-Fatimata Seck

THE HALOS

Joy Li

Lights slipped out from the door frames
From laughter-filled greenhouses
Out into the dark hallway
Into the boundary of two worlds
The transition
Of two extremes happiness and warmth.

But the boundary was cold.
Dark alley spiced with incandescent gold,
Laughter,
Propelled by halos of yellow
Burst into my ear
Tearing up the black backdrop
Tearing myself up.
How is it not ruthless?



Before the Storm (2019)

Courtesy of Adja-Fatimata Seck

THE FLEAS

Hafsa Safdar

The sounds were muffled
I can't hear
Nor did I care to hear.

I escaped into my own greenhouse.
Brightness filled my eyes
But there was no laughter.
I felt dark,
And I heard the sneer of sharp-edged halos piercing
through the wall
Repeating:
You are left with no place but the boundary.
I have somehow managed to carry
all that I used to be(all that I am)
across the mountain range and the sea
I thought and thought of what I will say
when I saw you again
but the words were already floating around
mocking me
I apologize
I am sorry , what did you say
It's the masks you see
all I ever really hear
are the fleas
So I made friends with them
they laugh and call me
queen bee
I didn't even bring the diaries
the same old monotony
of I am tired, I am tired
in ink, you see?
I will go to the bakery today
And try the cookies!
but the days turn to tomorrows
and my room smells like burnt black sugar
nevermind , the fleas have already
made a home out of me

SPAGHETTI WESTERN
(cowboy bandit love poem)

Jalen Fein

this week's crimes have
been tender.
my gun
points your direction.
my love
is a shameful thing
slithering, showing teeth
to my innocent limbs.
it coiled. it bit. its venom
is agave-rich, sweeter
than cactus water.
and you, dear,
become my favorite vision.
the dirt of your spurs.
the crack of your lips.

chase me down,
spaghetti western.
you put the dust in my holster,
you make my boots feel better.
i'd hold up every saloon,
riding high,
waiting for you.



Reading Room

Courtesy of Patricia Romero

TO START FROM DESSERT

Ailyn Song

*Song's Family Secret Recipe of Homemade Tofu Pudding (or Douhua),
A Traditional Chinese Dish:*

Step 1: Process 100g soaked soybeans into soymilk by a grinding machine.

Step 2: Filter out the soymilk residue (to make tofu with a better mouthfeel). Boil.

Step 3: Add 200ml water and 30g of tofu coagulant. Stir.

Step 4 (We call it the most challenging step, it usually involves lively debates and sometimes, loving arguments): Decide on the seasoning.

A: SALT, chili oil, cilantro, vinegar, peanuts. (You have angered the people of southern China.)

B: SUGAR, honey, red dates, wolfberry, fruit. (Now it's northern China's turn to be annoyed.)

A distance of 5,500 kilometers burdens us Chinese with thousands of ways to draw a distinct line between North and South. From the Internet to reality, people bicker over everything from precipitation to traditional customs to defend their southern or northern position, and often go nowhere. But I, inspired by the weekends' breakfast arguments between my northern father and southern mother, have discovered a unique thing that creates a clear, perfect separation of northern and southern cultural identities: Tofu.

My father is a typical tall, strong, aggressive northern authority figure with gravitas. Being stubborn about food choices, he insists that only adding salt to Douhua acknowledges tofu's value as a meal. On the other hand, my mother's hometown is on the south bank of the Yangtze River, whose culinary creations include various traditional Chinese desserts represented by sweet tofu pudding and glutinous rice cake. In any case, the only thing my parents have in common is their enthusiasm for food, but even that usually goes in different directions. The majority rule for a family of three relies on my swing vote most of the time.

For a long time, I thought my father, with my secret support, had won the war of Douhua. A little chauvinistic, my father doesn't often cook, but I enjoy his strong-taste, salty, tangy Douhua. Sometimes I suspect that his obsession with intense taste is just an extension of his personality. He was born with a sense of heroism, which forced him to come out of a poverty-stricken village through hard study, and also forced him to quit a well-paying and stable job in order to pursue his capitalistic ambition in the free market. During most of my adolescence, I strived to be more like him, to do something bold. Whether I was creating a new media platform with my peers at my own expense or signing up for my first marathon, I always found the love of spice and salt in me, peppering myself to conquer the unknown and difficulties full of zeal. My father's extreme rationality was another thing I inherited, as he always described society's development objectively in economic and political terms. When my interest in law and social sciences prompted me to buy a large number of books on criminology, the ethics of euthanasia, and the history of capital punishment, my father, unlike my mother, didn't forbid me to talk about death and blood. On the contrary, he enjoyed discussing the very different views between China and the West on how "the death penalty violates the right to life," or teaching me to look at the advantages and disadvantages of the legalization of positive euthanasia from an economics point of view. My father supported me and left me free to explore my academic interests, whether that included self-studying criminal law, Russian, or organizing

fellow linguistics enthusiasts to interpret Tibetan codes in China.

“If you cook a lot—I don’t, but—you know that people add salt to almost every dish, right? That’s why sweet Douhua doesn’t count as a dish. Because salt is the base for all flavors. Life is the same. Eighteen. Be salty. Be bold. Be wild. Be yourself, my daughter.” A bowl of salty tofu was placed on my 18th birthday table. It was the last dish my father cooked for me before I left home for college. He put so much chili on it that I couldn’t stop sobbing.

“Your father’s only half right since he’s totally wrong about the Douhua’s thing,” my southern mom cut in, “Salt makes people SURVIVE, but sugar and honey give people LIVES. Don’t forget that you’re also mother’s girl, especially in college.”

I laughed. How could I forget? As more people started to describe me as an emotionally sensitive person, I became fully aware of how my mother’s sweet tofu pudding had shaped the other side of me. This soft-spoken southern woman, who asked me to do nothing more than being kind, filled my childhood with sweet songs and touching stories. On weekends, I usually worked with her to make honeyed bean curd jelly or sweet mung bean soup to give away to the community, as well as to the orphanage and nursing home where I volunteered. Encouraged by my mother, I taught myself simple psychology and worked as a school psychological counselor and peer tutor. I wiped away the tears of one of my LGBT schoolmates when she told me that in the past 17 years,



Fish Wearing Camouflage

Courtesy of Patricia Romero

she had never shared her pain so sincerely with anyone else. It was the moment I prided myself on having learned my mother’s exceptional soothing and comforting skills. “Reason and power made Homo sapiens strong. But it’s emotions and morality that ultimately make us become human beings.” My mother’s indignation at social inequality led me—who had been a staunch supporter of the school of empirical analysis—gradually to the school of natural law, which advocated idealistic humanity and absolute justice. She gave me, as a social journalist and legal lover, another perspective to interpret social issues and a new meaning to my hobbies, transforming them from mere academic interests into dreams, passions, and beliefs that I can and must do something to change my community.

My family is full of debates, often pitting sweetness and salt, sensibility, and reason. Together with my dad, I told my mother from a more objective perspective why legal reforms that impose the death penalty on all traffickers will further harm the interests of

victims; When father coldly pointed out that it was in the long-term interest of the company to give priority to male employees who did not have to take maternity leave, I always stand with mom to analyze the social benefits of gender equality and positive impacts of social progress in the long run. It's mathematically correct that the opposite ends always cancel each other out. It's also true that adding salted chili and honey to a tofu pudding at the same time might be gross (or not? I haven't had the guts to try this. But use common sense). Yet in my family, you can always enjoy the two extreme tastes, sweet and salty, in a perfect combination.

So, what kind of tofu am I? As a child, I liked to take sides in my parents' arguments (whether about tofu's flavors or something else) until time taught me the complexities of life. I may be able to divide Chinese into two groups by the taste of Douhua, but there are people like me with their self-identities that are not always at the north or south pole. Am I sweet or salty? I'm neither, or both. I'm a mixed child with a sweet and salty taste. Not more, not less. Because that's exactly who I am——

In where I'm from, southerners who prefer sweet Douhua and northerners of salty Douhua always quarrel. The same thing happens to cat people and dog owners, coffee drinkers and boba lovers, and also various groups with distinct political and social views. But no matter how much people curse their adversary in a fight, at the end of the day they still need to admit that the existence of their opponents is important. Confrontation and coexistence create harmony, just like what the Yin and Yang of tai chi in our traditional Chinese culture have suggested.

In where I'm from, every Saturday, my parents still engage in their ritual battle of sweet and salty. Here, I learned two kinds of ways, both sweet and salty, to cook Douhua, zongzi, tangyuan, and all other cuisines that have disputes between North and South. Our family is used to having briny, spicy Douhua with deep-fried dough sticks in the morning and enjoys honeyed tofu pudding at teatime. When my father's standard Mandarin casually takes on my mom's southern accent, or when my mother inadvertently hums the northern folk song she has learned from her husband's family, I know our home is just a bowl of salty, sweetish, messy, often quarrelsome, but always contented Douhua.



Rainbow City

Courtesy of Patricia Romero



Angelina (2019)

Courtesy of Adja-Fatimata Seck

THIS HOUSE IS NOT A HOME

Ali Cioffi

Before you,
I was a house,
abandoned and tumbling down.
My roof caving in,
my windows, shattered,
and my foundation, crumbling.

Nobody ever knocked to enter.
They always came barging in,
graffitiing my walls,
breaking my windows,
tearing me down
as if it were only a game.

I sat there.
There was nothing
I could do to resist.
I sat there,
never thinking someone would find me-
find me beautiful again.

But
there you were,
standing,
staring at me.
And instead of
testing how hard you can jump
on my floors till you fall through,
you stood still,
and you saw my beauty
that I thought no longer existed.

You wanted to help me,
you really did.
You wanted to show me,
that I could be beautiful again.

I told you,
that I didn't want your help.
I didn't want you to be the one
who my roof would cave in on.
I didn't want you to drown
in the puddles of the past years' storms.

But
you didn't mind.
You cut the vines choking my pillars.
You tore down the wallpaper,
and painted me like a work of art.
You watered the weeds,
and out came flowers.
I felt beautiful once again.

You made me whole again,
And I became a home again.

THE COMEDOWN

Claire Gartner

Transitioning off my years of a strong dose of antidepressants is how I would imagine it feels to wake up from medical sedation. Perhaps from some sort of surgery in which a stranger has changed something crucial, but you don't realize it yet. It happens little by little as you regain feeling in your limbs. It is only later, when you start crying over some minute tragedy do you notice your mind has fundamentally changed. Chords have been struck within you that had been sealed away a lifetime ago. You blink in surprise as the tears fill the previously desolate fields, ones that have been dry with neglect.

It is as if you have been forced out of the stagnancy of the womb and into a harsher reality. Helpless, blinking in the glare of the lights, how can you not start to wail? My lack of defenses against this new world continues to take me by surprise.

When I was in my final year of elementary school, I was forced to grapple with the changes health class had tried to warn us of. It seemed so improbable, watching that grainy film on the nature of development, that our bodies would betray us. Yet no one is spared. My mood would dip and buck, a raging bull. Everyone around me could only dive out of the way of its hooves tearing up the grass.

Now I am going through a second puberty, another metamorphosis this time self-inflicted but still completely out of my control. This one is not universal. Something is stirring and it will not be ignored, a monstrous sensitivity. Uncharted territory looms before me. Behind is the familiar oblivion, a shroud that dulled life's edges. Each step away from it jabs the soles of my feet.



East River Tattoo

Courtesy of Devin Speak

ALAN

Isabella Masone-Wall

“Surely love had to be something more generous than this high-spirited egotism-à-deux?”
- Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia*

March 19, 2021

During one of our many nights talking endlessly over the phone, Alan asked me if I thought I could ever fall in love. I said, “probably not.” The other end of the line became quiet, and I knew that he was waiting for me to break the silence. He believed in love, he believed that he could be in love, and he couldn’t imagine that anyone would consciously believe in the opposite. I collapsed onto the bed behind me.

“Well, you know, maybe I could, just not in the sense of Romeo meets Juliet where they’re fated to be together for all of eternity. Real romantic love is so temporary, I just don’t see the point in committing to something that’ll never stick around.”

“You only say that because you’ve never had a boyfriend,” he teased, laughing to himself.



strangers who know each other very well

Courtesy of Sara Gomez-Zuniga

“I have.”

“But you never even liked him to begin with. Your relationship was fated to end before it even began,” he remarked.

“That’s true,” I admitted, “but I have never met anyone who loved one person consistently. I mean, do you really see yourself dating Laure in college?”

There was an unexpected pause in the conversation as he hesitated to speak up. I was watching the sky beyond Belledonne turn into a bluish haze.

“Maybe you’re right, I stopped loving Laure for a while now,” he suddenly confessed.

“Oh...I don’t really know what to say.”

Laure was nearly all Alan ever spoke about. I thought that surely, with his idealistic view of the world, he would just roll his eyes and tell me: “Why yes, of course I do! What a silly question!” They were an inseparable pair, tied to the hip like Bonnie and Clyde. Laure was in all his pictures, hell, he had even put an image of them kissing as his WhatsApp profile photo. I cringed at it every time he called. He skipped class just to walk Laure home or to take her out for lunch.

They had the same friends, wanted to study the same things, and spent almost every waking (and occasionally dormant) moment in each other's arms.

"I just don't have the heart to tell her, I don't know what to do."

"Be honest with her, you're leading her on, that's not fair," I advised him. "Waiting is only going to make things more painful."

"Don't hang up. I just need to get Elies' opinion really quick."

"Come over tomorrow and we can talk more, I've got to go," I said, ending our call.

Though my intentions were innocent, I couldn't sleep that entire night. Alan was right, I didn't know the first thing about genuine romantic relationships so who was I to tell others how to deal with theirs?

April 12, 2021

Over spring break, Alan had asked me to come downtown with him to hike up the Bastille. I waited for him near the mall entrance, listening to some playlist he had sent me the day before. He arrived late, as usual, running out of the tram in his black zip-up and sweats, shouting at me from across the station to hurry so that we could catch the A train in time for lunch. Miraculously, it wasn't going to rain. It had been raining every day for the past two weeks but finally, as if keen to see what would happen with Alan, the sky had cleared.

We walked along l'Isère towards the garden path. The alternative was taking les bulles. But we hiked, climbing past dilapidated stone walls, stopping every few minutes to admire the view and to cool off because we were both sweating in the coats we were too lazy to carry.

"I wonder what it would be like to be a pigeon," I said randomly. "If I were a pigeon, I'd nest right here."

We were currently sitting on a bench across from the souvenir shop at the peak of the fortress, watching a pigeon circle around a group of tourists picnicking by the rusted railing. I rested my head in his lap, squinting against the abrasive sunlight.

"Why would you want to be a pigeon?"

"They're so dumb, it would be nice to not have a single thought passing through my mind. You wouldn't have to worry about anything besides finding enough breadcrumbs to get through the day."

He gave me a puzzled look and then burst into raucous laughter.

"You're strange."

April 14, 2021

Another sunny day had blessed us. Alan sat beside me in the bus, carrying my tin of strawberries as I watched the mountainous landscape whisk past us through the window. We were returning from Casino back to Alan's house in the quiet suburbs.

Sophie was waiting for us in the kitchen, rapidly sorting through the mail, tossing it aside when she noticed our arrival. I don't think Sophie liked me; she was the sort of mother who was too involved in her sons' love affairs. She still spoke to and about Laure as if she were her daughter-in-law which I thought was so unbelievably weird.

“Ok, I’m off to work.” she said, scurrying out the door.

Alan put the tin of strawberries down on the counter as I went to grab a plate and a packet of white sugar from the pantry.

“Sorry she’s like that.”

“Don’t be sorry. Does she think we’re dating or something?”

“I don’t know. I mean we sort of are, aren’t we?”

I opened the screen door and walked out onto the patio, already digging into the sugar-coated fruit. I wasn’t really sure what we were or in what direction we were headed. Whether we actually did become anything serious or not, it wouldn’t have really mattered since it was all going to have to end by the time May rolled around. I was moving back to the states, and he was going to stay in Grenoble where he’d lived his whole life.

“Laure asked to come over,” he said out of the blue. “I don’t want to see her, but she wants to talk.”

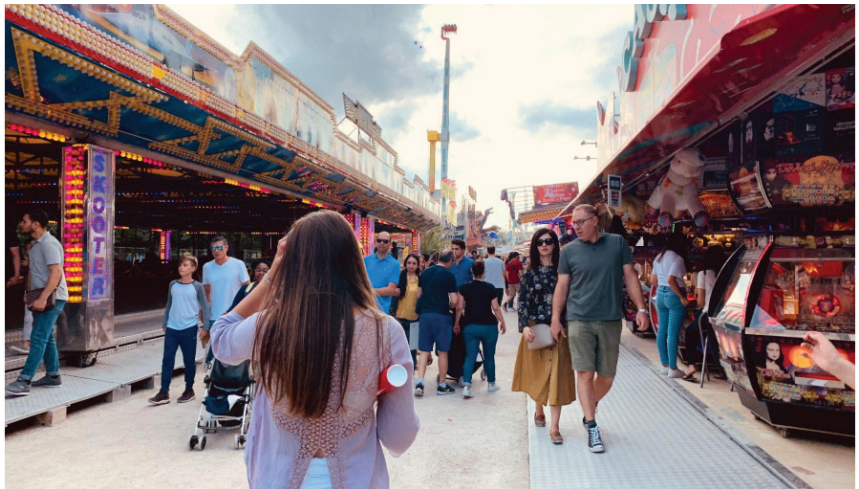
“Today? Should I leave?”

“No, no. I said I’d meet her at the park behind the lycée next Tuesday.”

I pressed my lips together and carried the now empty plate back into the kitchen.

“Come on, let’s go upstairs,” he dragged me away from the sink towards the creaking staircase.

We laid on his bed, not saying anything for what felt like an eternity. He was humming along to a series of trendy pop songs that were playing from his desktop computer, but the hums abruptly stopped when he noticed that my eyes were shut.



Lost in Plane Sight

Courtesy of Patricia Romero

“Don’t fall asleep,” he shoved my side to wake me, sitting up against the wall.

I shot him a dirty glance and shoved him back, nearly knocking him off the bed. Wide-eyed, he got back up and lunged at me. I swatted my leg at him, trying to make my escape.

“Stop trying to kick me, I will literally bite you,” he threatened, pulling me back into his chest.

“What?!” I scoffed, thinking that that was the most ridiculous thing he could’ve possibly said. Though, when I finally stopped giggling, a wave of sheer panic washed over me because now, his face was inches away from mine, and he seemed determined to strike.

But, instead of biting me as he had promised, he kissed me.

May 21, 2021

We were in front of the admin's office, coming out of a two-hour long exam. I was waiting for Alan to finish speaking to Evan, twirling a dandelion between my fingers.

"Don't you have flowers like that up in the countryside?" he scoffed, ditching his friend to join me outside.

"Yes, but they're all yellow."

"What are you even going to do with that?"

"I'm going to make a wish."

I blew the top of the weed, and the seeds began to lift, intertwining with my hair and Alan's teddy coat. He scowled and I tossed the stem aside as we stepped past the school gates.

It was finally beginning to feel like spring again, the air was dry and warm, and a light breeze had begun to pick up. I was debating whether to take the earlier bus and just leave or to wait another hour and walk with him throughout Échirolles. I decided to wait. After all, this was the last time I would ever see him in person. I wanted to stretch time out or erase everything from September to May completely so that I didn't feel so depressed.

"So, are you taking the tram?" he inquired, pointing to the approaching vehicle.

I shook my head in response and lied about my bus schedule.

"Well, if you're not looking to linger around the plaza, I'll go," I began walking towards the edge of the tram station.

"No, I can stay, I don't have any plans. When is your bus anyway?"

"My bus isn't until five," I smiled coyly.

"I couldn't imagine waiting that long everyday just to get home..."

The suburbs were filled with shutdown storefronts and abandoned car parks left behind by the pandemic. I wanted to stay and watch time bring back life to them. An hour felt too short to say goodbye.

"You know, I got accepted into this program in Lyon," he began, "they have a study abroad option in New York."

"Oh, then we would both be in New York."

"Yea."

"I'm probably just going to stay in Grenoble though," he continued.

We weren't as close as we had been in previous months, perhaps we distanced ourselves subconsciously in fear of what was to come in May. Alan was seeing another girl now, a very recent endeavour. Meanwhile, I was packing my bedroom away in boxes. He was the first boy I had ever genuinely liked, possibly even loved. I had always been adamant that romantic love didn't exist because love was supposed to be undying and romantic love always seemed to end but now, things were different. I was willing to let Sartre be right; love doesn't necessarily need to be immortal or long-lasting, maybe love is as simple the desire to possess and to be possessed, a temporary "high-spirited egotism-à-deux."



Double Vision

Courtesy of Patricia Romero

Epilogue — December 18, 2021

Spilled sangria stains the hardwood floor and clear, plastic solo cups pile up on the desk by the entrance — a bittersweet reminder of last night’s holiday party. On the wall across from me, Cat’s projector displays a still image of Elio crying by the fireplace. I take a seat on the white shag carpet with my legs outstretched, leaning back against my dresser, observing his picture remorsefully. Phoebe Bridger’s “Smoke Signals” is playing faintly over the speakers in the background.

“I didn’t know you then and I’ll never understand why it feels like I did.”

I suddenly have the urge to call Alan. It was in moments like these that we’d find each other: when the rest of the world seemed to disappear, when the crowds scattered, and the lights dimmed. The only ones still awake in the quiet ‘after’ of it all. I reached behind me and grabbed my phone from off the top of the dresser. I thought about it for a second. Calling Alan felt too intimate now, we hadn’t spoken since the summer. I logged onto Snapchat instead and scrolled down to find his name spelled out in bold print: Alan.

“And you, you must’ve been looking for me, sending smoke signals, pelicans circling.”

I pressed the little camera icon and found myself filming and re-filming myself repeating the same lines until I felt that my voice had reached the perfect pitch: “Hey, I know this is a little strange...to be getting a message from me of all people. I was writing a piece about Grenoble and...I don’t know, it made me think of you and then I wondered how you were doing. Basically, this is all an excuse to say hi so...hi.”

“Just checking out to hide from life and all of our problems.”

I reluctantly hit send. If my friends knew what I was doing, they’d probably call me an idiot. It was four-thirty in the morning in Grenoble, he would never know I sent it if I erased it now. I opened the chat to delete the videos, but he had already viewed them. With a sharp inhale, I launched my phone across the carpet, quickly getting up to pour myself a glass of leftover appetiser wine. I could hear my phone chiming with Snapchat notifications.

“The future’s unwritten, the past is a corridor. I’m at the exit, looking back through the hall, you are anonymous, and I am a concrete wall.”

Bending down, I crawled towards the edge of the carpet. Now directly under the image of Elio in tears, I picked up my phone and played Alan’s response out loud: “Aha, oui, non je m’attendais pas à recevoir un snap de ta part, mais ça me fait plaisir de te revoir. Alors comme ça t’es vraiment à New York! Tellement le rêve...raconte-moi tout.” The final

instrumentals of “Smoke Signals” begins to fade into Bridger’s “Motion Sickness,” drowning out the sound of his voice.

“I hate you for what you did, and I miss you like a little kid.”

Alan had a beard now, and his hair was much longer than it used to be. At first glance, he was almost unrecognisable, but his expressions were the same as in my memory; the way he held back his laughter with a twisted smile and how he squinted his eyes when he was trying to remember something specific. We spoke for a while, sending videos back and forth about school and about the holidays. Small-talk spliced with our old banter.

“Sorry that it all went down like it did, I have emotional motion sickness.”

“So, are you going to come back to Grenoble?” he inquired.

“Maybe someday, I’d like to.”

“Bonne nuit, Alan,” I continued. “You should get some rest.”

“Bonne nuit, Isabella.”

His last video response didn’t include his face, but a view of his bedroom. The same chipped grey paint covered the walls, and his sweaters were still all hung neatly on a wheely rack in the left-hand corner. The blinds of his window were drawn back, revealing a strip of light from the streetlamp outside. I wondered how a place and a person who used to feel so familiar could suddenly become so foreign to me. Perhaps I had mixed up fact with fiction. I missed the idea of Alan, loved the idea of Alan but neither particularly missed nor particularly loved Alan himself.



Tahoe

Courtesy of Sara Gomez -Zuniga

SET ME FREE

Aaron Wang

I remember where I am from
A little island with a hundred trees
I laughed and jumped like nature's son
When the leaves hadn't fallen on me
Under the shower of the silky sun
Where I taught the birds to dance and sing
Set me free, feather wind
Set me free

I've traveled all around
To some places you may have been
The valley of truth and glaciers of vows
And poured my love to fill the sea
Over the sweet scent of evergreens
Sure, they're all gonna fade
Set me free, feather wind
Set me free

I don't know why I'm here now
Locked inside this freezing white cage
They tied me up with tubes and belts
It shouldn't be the betrayal of my fate
I'll promenade along the shore on tides
Where the sun gone off with azure waves
Set me free, feather wind
Set me free

I'm flying away on this bright sunny day
Last night's rain can't even stain
Gentle flames shall purify glories and pains
While the birds glide beside my shade
The past is the present and the future's the same
Well, I guess that's my way
Set me free, feather wind
Set me free

UNCOMFORTABLY SOFT

Sara Angela

The realization came slowly
Not as a surprise or a shock
But an acceptance Like a stingray moving gracefully in shallow waters
When you are swimming in the ocean you know of the stingrays' presence Splashing joyously forgetting quickly
of the danger Until you are hit by the burning poison
That same realization you may never love me back The sting feels as though you are being punctured a thousand
times
Each new painful shock as searing as the last The possibility of the pain I couldn't think of anything else Making
my heartache in waves between the numbness
I knew this was going to happen
Yet I still plunged into you



Blossom

Courtesy of Maggie Liu

SILENT CONVERSATIONS

Elsa McElroy

The summer before my sophomore year of High School my brother's best friend dropped out of college to pursue modeling and started working part-time for my dad.

He was much taller than me and for someone who looked like he could be in a museum, he walked around with his limbs sort of flailing. His golden-brown curly hair would bounce when he laughed, or turned, or walked. In most ways, he reminded me of a puppy - jumpy, playful, sweet.

I'd come home from school and see him sitting cross-legged in the dining room typing on a MacBook. Maybe this is just imagination getting to me, but I can picture him sitting there glistening in the early evening fall light that streamed into my house. I liked the way he sat in that light. Despite his intimidatingly good looks, the way he had one leg over the other, almost compacting himself, made me feel completely equal to him in space.

When we first met I slinked around him. I'd grab a glass of water and a snack and eat in the other room while trying to remain quiet. I was hyper-aware of his presence in the next room. I listened to my breathing and paced it trying to not be too loud.

As time passed I started sitting in the dining room with my water and snack and our quick hellos became longer conversations. I started looking forward to telling him about my day or, really, just being around him. I liked who I was around him - so authentically myself. Sometimes, when I spoke, I'd start smiling and almost as if it was contagious he would smile back. It's funny though, my face probably looked strange because most of the time I was trying to hold back the smile, attempting to prevent myself from giving away anything about how I felt.

At this point, C was becoming a part of our family. His weekday schedule with my dad moved to spending weekend dinners at ours. My dad loved C too. Having his two sons and C meant that Fridays were steak nights. They all would stand outside, holding beers, grilling in any weather. C would wear his blue and white striped shirt over a Goodfellas t-shirt. He was different from my stereotypical "lax" bro friends and still was incredibly boyish.

Some nights, when my parents went out, C and my brother would cook. I'd hang around with them before going out with my friends and one night when I was standing under the stove light, he said my pupils were so big they looked like bowling balls. My face flushed. I worried that they were so big because I was looking at him - is that even possible?

I'd come back at curfew, kiss my mom goodnight, turn all my lights off, close my door, and tiptoe downstairs into the backyard. There he and my brother would sit illuminated by the fire they had made. Here we would talk for hours. C started getting into photography so he started taking pictures of me. When he would pull out his camera and snap a photo of me I felt pretty. It was like he was seeing a moment of beauty that I couldn't. When it was overcast at the lake in Vermont he took photos of me swimming. I was sitting in a cafe when I got the notification that he posted those photos on his Instagram. Was I beautiful enough to be shared? My heart was pounding when I commented back with a red heart. One day after school he told me that a girl he was working with thought I was his girlfriend. I didn't know how to respond but I blushed red and laughed. He laughed too and went back to work.

On my birthday, October 1st, he bought me a copy of *Women* shot by Annie Leibovitz and Elliot Erwitt's Paris. I had told him I liked photography and he said he thought of me when he saw them at some book store in Bushwick. I flipped through the pages slowly as he hovered over me. My brothers hadn't even got me anything yet. Sometimes we would point out the same ones. I flipped to a naked woman sitting in a chair. I felt awkward but didn't want him to think I was immature so I lingered on it as long as I did for the other photos.

He was asked to go to Milan for a month that year. I didn't know what was going to get me through school. What was I going to look forward to at the end of eighth period? The last few months I felt like he'd become one of my closest friends, and my relationship with my brother was stronger than ever. I couldn't help but feel that my brother and I would drift away. A few days before he got on the flight I told him "I'll miss you when you're gone." He seemed surprised - but flattered - and sweetly responded with "I'll miss you too." A week or two later I added the song "I Miss You" by Blink-182 to my playlist. Embarrassing, yes. A controversial move that I asked my best friend Hudson about for days. Was he going to see it? If he does, is he gonna think about it? Two days later he added it to his playlist.

Now, only a few years later, a month feels like nothing. But when he got back I tried to collect all the stories in my mind about how I'd been when he was gone and what I did. Instead, I told him about how Jake, the boy I joined the philosophy club to meet, talked with me about Spinoza for a few hours at a coffee shop down the road. I knew nothing substantial about Spinoza and I'm sure neither did Julian, but somehow I thought telling C this made me seem like I had matured substantially over the past four weeks.

C came to our family friend's annual Christmas party in Brooklyn Heights. When we arrived my brother handed me a glass of red wine, which I refilled a few times throughout the night. C and I talked to each other for most of the party. I'd take little sips of the wine, overthinking each time the glass touched my lips. Was I holding the glass right? Was that too big of a sip? I watched as he nervously approached conversations. I could always tell when he did or didn't like someone. We could communicate silently, sometimes one little smirk gave away everything he was thinking.



California in March

Courtesy of Sara Gomez-Zuniga

He came to Montauk in the summer with our family. It was about to storm out when he, my brothers, and I decided to play in the waves. I got hit hard by one and was spitting up on the sand for fifteen minutes. He came out to check on me and just started laughing, so I laughed too.

We saw our family friend Olive on the beach. She had short blonde hair and a gold nose piercing. She didn't shave and she graduated college with a photography degree. When we left the beach he said "Olive is cool." I agreed and then to my surprise he said: "you are cooler though." I held on to that for weeks.

The fall of my junior year of high school had just begun when C said he was moving to Bushwick, Brooklyn. He quit working for my dad out of impracticality. He didn't want to commute out to Larchmont from Brooklyn and my dad understood that. More than the commuting issue C was just ready for something entirely new.

The day C came to say goodbye I forced a smile despite the sadness I felt in my gut. He was going to move to the city and meet hundreds of people and maybe meet a girl. My brother would leave too. C would stop coming on vacations with us. Why would he come to Christmas parties? He stopped working for my dad. The worst part was that I had no say

whether or not he came or left. C was seven years older than me. He needed to get on with his life, and I was incapable of leaving mine.

While most of my thoughts from that day seem dramatic now, I was in some ways right. He stopped coming to birthday dinners and on vacations. For the next few months, I saw him occasionally when he would come back to our house on long weekends with my brother, but it was different. Our conversations were shorter and it started to feel like he knew less and less about me. I was right that he met a girl. I knew it was serious when he told my brother “I’ve never felt this way before.” I thought about how lucky she must feel knowing how he feels all the time, or how beautiful she must feel when he stares at her. Then, Covid hit. C’s occasional trips back home ended, and it seemed strange to keep in touch with him over text. Had my worries become real? Had I really lost him?

It has been two years since C left, and in that time I haven’t met anyone that makes me feel the way he did. In my senior year of high school, I met Matt. A mutual friend had set us up when he told her he thought I was pretty. I was hesitant at first, but I liked the thought of being with someone after months of Covid lockdown. Someone to talk to. Someone to touch. Matt had been recruited for college lacrosse during our Junior year, and everyone knew him. I liked going to his games when everyone would cheer out his name because in some convoluted way it felt like they were cheering for me too. I liked when girls would hit my arm when he made a nice play as if I hadn’t seen or in a “he looks good Elsa” kind of way. Matt and I shared awkward moments and some intimate ones. I told him things about me few people knew and I knew things about him, but I didn’t push down smiles with Matt. We didn’t communicate silently. When we went our separate ways midway through summer, I didn’t get that empty gut feeling.

I didn’t think about C for a long time. Then, while working out one afternoon, I saw him playing basketball by the Hudson River and my heart started pounding in my ears. Before I had time to remember that I was in sweaty clothes I called out to him. I saw his eyes light up when he saw me, but I let him continue playing and shot him a text - First C sighting in NYC! Before I had time to overthink whether or not I should have used two exclamation points instead of one he responded - ahhh the second I heard your voice I couldn’t believe it. I was just thinking about how I keep expecting to run into you in the city. I told him we should get together with my brother and some friends soon, he agreed, and we left it at that.

A few days later I went back home for the night. I needed to get away from the car horns, construction, and never-ending new faces on the streets of New York City. I needed something slower. I had met a boy in the first few weeks of school that I really liked. He didn’t make my stomach drop, but I liked how he held my hand and showed me his favorite parts of the city. I stopped talking to him when he disappeared for a week and then asked me what I was doing at two am on a Wednesday. In part, I wanted to go home to hide from it all. In High School, I didn’t tell my mom too much about my love life. She felt too close to the people and the situations and I was embarrassed by it all. But when I came home I told her everything. I told her Matt texted me asking how school was going, and that he said he was having a hard time. I told her about the boy that booty called me and how disrespected I felt. I could see the disappointment in her eyes when she reassured me “you deserve more than that.” I told her I saw C and how my heart started pounding. I told her that when I was young a part of me thought we were going to end up together. She looked at me and said, “I think a part of him thought that too.” I was taken aback. Our bond wasn’t something I made up. Did she see the smiles and conversations? Did she see my pupils dilate? Did she know when I snuck out to the fire pit? Could she capture the moments between C and I in a picture? I asked her if she thought you could love someone without ever being together. “Absolutely. When you are young, love is so different and new that it feels overbearing. You can have all these expectations for who you are going to love and when you are going to love, but the more you expect the more surprised you will be when you do feel love.”

I couldn’t help but wonder if things would be different if C didn’t move to the city, or if the pandemic never hit. Although, maybe we were meant to lose contact. Now, months later that first C sighting was also the only one I’ve had. I suppose when I was younger our relationship didn’t really have any hope of going anywhere. I know now maybe it didn’t need to. A seven year difference, not to mention I was legally a minor, he worked for my dad, and was my brother’s best friend. But, C showed me what I want love to feel like one day. I want love to feel childlike and overbearing. I want love to be simple and sweet.

SEWING NEEDLES

Margaux Trexler

You are in love and coming to the United States because you are being told you must. It is not only your husband who is telling you this, but it is also your mother and sisters and cousins and your heart. Because even though you feign composure whenever you are asked about the move, you are painfully excited to leave Santiago and discover what Owings Mills has to offer. The repetitive plurality of the town makes you think of abundance. You hold your first daughter so close to your chest you fear she may fall into you as you board the plane and take your first step into multitudes.

The ocean is wide and endless, and as you soar over it, you imagine what your life will be like after you descend. You picture blue dresses with white trim and cinched waists that rise and crash over the floor as you twirl to Elvis Presley and the Beatles and other American music that you have heard occasionally. Of course, you can never understand what the singers are singing, but you will pretend, and possibly you will learn. You are excited to learn what is possibly possible.

When you land and exit the airport, the night air is colder than expected. You are in a summer dress that is nothing like the one in your mind. It is simple and white because you had to make it yourself, but you are looking forward to not pricking your fingers on sewing needles anymore because you never liked to sew anyway. The cold is a crisp awakening that invigorates you.

You get into a car, moving slowly because you are holding your daughter, lifelessly slumped over your shoulder, and several pieces of luggage that your husband did not offer to help carry. Still, you are fine with this because he has brought you here, which is gift enough.

The car moves forward into the darkness. You peer out the window and try to make out your surroundings, taking note of where you very well might be in the future. Your husband is in the front of the car, speaking to the driver, and you are in the back.

Eventually, you arrive at a small plot of empty land. There is nothing there. Your husband does not offer to help with the luggage, and this time, his abandonment frightens you.

The cold is piercing now. Like sewing needles.

APPARENT SOLITUDE

Martina Graña



a father's air to him
his creased skin, calloused hands
his head hangs by his neck like a strong
sign of tenuous strain
his body leans with the direction of
the train
being pulled towards his home
or at least i imagine him to be
his coat imitates the warmth he needs
but the hug he heads towards is the
true heat desired

Courtesy of Martina Graña

Runner-Up of the Elaine Kuntz Prize 2022

THE SEA, EVERCHANGING: THE OCEAN AND ITS MANY TALES ACROSS DIFFERENT CULTURES

May Qiao



playing

Courtesy of Sara Gomez -Zuniga

On a wet, cold evening, a small village in Iceland bustled around preparing a banquet dinner. It was not the sort of bustling filled with laughter and chit chat but a somber one, where people shuffled about on heavy feet, acknowledging each other's grief while trying to accept their own. This is a funeral dinner, for a fishing crew that had perished amidst the fog of the sea. Their ship washed ashore with their catch, but not a body or any other sign of her men. Heavy-hearted, the people of the village were about to sit down and commemorate their memory with a final meal, when the sound of soggy shoes dragging across the wet rocky beach stopped them in their tracks.

Emerging from the fog was the entire crew, their clothes ragged and each one of them dripping with seawater. They seem to have paid no mind to the astonishment of their fellow villagers, but simply sat down at the table, and demanded to be fed.

The people were ecstatic, unable to fully make up their minds between confusion and joy but not really willing to question a happy reality. Families raced to embrace their loved ones, holding their cold bodies like they themselves have reclaimed these men from their watery death. For the rest of the evening they celebrated and made much merriment, but amongst the drinking nobody seemed to notice the crew slip quietly back into the fog.

The subsequent evening the tables of the banquet sat quietly on the beach, waiting to be put away. It is not known who, but somebody that lived close by must have seen them coming and notified the others, and before long most of the village were gathered to watch a horrifying scene unfold in front of them. The crew from yesterday walked towards the tables, and behind them trailed a list of unfamiliar visitors. Bloated and deformed, their bodies showed the purple-red bruises typical of corpses left to drift in the sea, their appendages dangling flesh half eaten by marine life. With their hair matted to their skin by seawater, their grotesque faces left no question that these are dead men, and therefore left little to the imagination of the state of their companions that the villagers had dined with the day before.

No efforts by mortals could turn them away or deter them from coming, and subsequently a mysterious disease broke out in the village. To protect the living from what must have seemed like this terrible curse, the elders of the village agreed upon one surprising solution: to call the corpses to legal court.

One by one the living passed judgment on each individual corpse, and listed the reasons that they could no longer keep coming. Interestingly, this was an effective tactic. Each stood up and said with a heavy heart that they had stayed as long as they could, and headed off back into the ocean. Lastly went the captain of the ship, who looked around the room and declared that he and his men will finally leave, since they are no longer welcome. With the same heavy, waterlogged steps that brought him back to the living, he headed out towards the shoreline, until eventually his head disappeared below the inky waves of the sea, under indifferent stars. (Hay 13).

This story comes from the Eyrbyggja Saga, one of the Icelandic Sagas by an anonymous author from around the 13th century (Hay 13). The reanimated corpses of the drowned crew are known as Sea-Draugrs, sentient and often malevolent reanimated corpses that come from the depths of the ocean, appearing often in Scandinavian mythology. The story above depicts them in a more harmless light than their usual reputation, but why has the sea been fashioned into this place that births such fearsome creatures?

True, the ocean is horrifying, with its violent storms and horribly mysterious depths, but folklore and mythology are entirely man-made. This begs the question of the thought process involved behind these tales, and exactly what purposes they serve. The tales themselves are also very telling about a specific culture's relationship with the ocean, whether they view it as benign and giving or angry and violent. By examining Icelandic, Celtic, Japanese, and wider African tales, this essay will strive to understand the significance of ocean folklore within different cultures, and how they are influenced by unique spiritual, geological, and historical proponents unique to that culture.

Sea-Draugrs

Returning to the Sea-Draugrs, Alexander Hay in his essay "From Beneath the Waves': Sea-Draugr and the Popular Conscience" argues that, "the Sea-Draugr... demonstrates a recurring reckoning with guilt and its consequences" (12). The story from the Eyrbyggja saga portrays remembrance and more importantly grief, as the sea takes away a loved one. Their memory returns in the form of unwanted pain, symbolically reanimated corpses, and plague the inland villagers. The surprisingly effective way of dismissing the corpses in court objectifies their memory, thereby reducing their humanness to the villagers and helping them deal with their grief by downplaying these men from family members and friends into a wrongdoer and a problem (Hay 13). Another interpretation might be that the court dismissal is humane, compared to some of the other ways that Draugrs are typically vanquished: "being decapitated with their own sword... being staked through the heart, and incineration" (Hay 12). The act of simply dismissing them with words may be a metaphor of the villagers learning to process and let go of their grief, rather than forcing away the pain and anguish through a violent or unsustainable means. This is supported by the corpses' willingness to leave once the villagers express clearly that they can no longer stay,

allowing the villagers to heal and let go.

Although this story portrays benign Sea-Draugrs, one must acknowledge that often Draugrs are portrayed as violent and evil creatures. Land-Draugrs are probably better known as zombies, now in popular culture often used to personify the mindless public enslaved to mass media and capitalism according to Vox article “How the Zombie Represents America’s Deepest Fears” by Zachary Crockett and Javier Zarracina. But before that, the zombie came from a representation of what the public feared the most, ranging from voodoo and black culture at first to nuclear radiation during World War II (Crockett and Zarracina). Of course, the concept of Icelandic Draugrs is much older, but by the same logic perhaps one can speculate that they arise from the same place: the personification of fear. It could very well be of death itself, foreign and unconquerable to humans. This viewpoint can also support why Land-Draugrs are often more malevolent than Sea-Draugrs. Death occurs in many forms on land, many of which are preventable through medicine or a simple awareness to avoid accidents. Death at sea, however, takes only one form the majority of the time: drowning. If a ship sinks, the ocean is such a large and powerful force that little can be done to prevent drowning, especially back in the 13th century. While one may experience anger or regret at the natural death on land of a loved one, there is a special kind of melancholy and grief in the powerlessness of human life against the ocean, perhaps resulting in the slightly less violent and more symbolic Sea-Draugr.

Another similar Sea-Draugr story actually comes from Scotland, as the folk song “The Wife of Usher’s Well.” The aforementioned wife sends three sons to sea, all of whom drown but reappear at their mother’s door. After a night of food, sitting by the fire, and “flirting with ‘the bonny lass’ who tends their mother’s fire,” they reluctantly leave the morning after despite the mother obviously wanting them to stay (Hay 16). Although this time they were not dismissed by the grieving, the dead still have to move onto their final resting spot, away from the living. As noted by Hay, this story and the one from the Eyrbyggja Saga deals with strikingly similar themes: “loss, guilt, heartbreak, mourning, and an inability to let the dead go... [the dead] must all be laid to rest or at least sent on despite the regrets they feel” (16). For the creators of these tales from both Iceland and Scotland, the sea is a place of resignation and loss.

Selkies

However, in other parts of Scotland and the nearby Ireland, ocean folklore takes on a much different form. From Ireland the most famous ocean story is perhaps the selkie, half seal half human creatures that transform by donning or shedding their outer seal skin. Horace Beck, the author of *Folklore and the Sea* as well as a well-traveled seaman for seventy some years, explains that, “there is something about the seal that kindles fire under the imagination of man” (234). Perhaps, he speculates, it is because out of all the creatures native to Ireland and Scotland “the seal most closely resembles the human” (239). They breastfeed their young, cradling them the way a human mother cradles a child, have round heads and curious eyes somehow very similar to a human child, and cries like one as well (Beck 240). However, despite this resemblance to children, the most famous stories of selkies are actually those of selkie women, captured by men who, by stealing their seal skin, can forcibly take them as wives.

A tale from Orkney, Scotland goes as such: a man walked by a secluded area of a beach one day at dusk, and saw a large group of men and women dancing naked. He knew they were selkies from the large pile of discarded seal skin nearby. Because the women were beautiful, he took one and hid it away. When all the selkies put on their skin later and dove into the ocean, one girl was left behind frantically searching for hers. He picked her up and forcibly carried her home, where in just two weeks she learned the human language and way of life. Despite being kidnapped, “sheu deudna seem to bear him ony bad will,” and the two fell in love and got married (174). The man always took great care in keeping her away from her seal

skin, and she herself claimed that “it wis better tae keep her selkie days oot o’ her mind” (175). However, many years and children later, the wife found her selkie skin one day while the husband was out. When he returned, the skin was gone and the only trace of his wife left were the clothes she hurriedly discarded onto the floor. The narrator, however, does not believe that she had wanted to leave her family, because sometimes when their children walked by the ocean a large seal would swim up to them, and “they wad hear her greetin’ like tae brak her hert” (Orkney and Shetland Miscellany 175).

Most selkie stories go as such, with the kidnapped selkie woman marrying her kidnapper, but upon finding her seal skin immediately returning back to the ocean, whether she wanted to or not (Winters). Several speculations are made about the origins of the selkie. Beck recounts that Celtic seal hunters used to kill seals for their skin by hitting them on the nose or kicking them violently, but such methods were usually insufficient in actually killing the creature which, regaining consciousness after being skinned, would “[utter] terrible cries” and drag itself into the cold ocean to die, streaking blood across the rocks (240). Beck claims the locals must have thought that, “if a seal can come to life and crawl back to sea



City Skies

Courtesy of Patricia Romero

after being kicked in the face and skinned, why shouldn’t it do that of its own accord on more auspicious occasions” (241)? Another theory comes from David MacRitchie,

Scottish folklorist and antiquarian, who believes that the selkie stories are inspired by marriages between early white settlers in Scotland and indigenous Sami women, who often wore seal skins (Silver 97).

Both of these theories revolve around one point- the disruption of a regular relationship with the ocean and the ocean as a being’s natural state. The selkie wife’s strong desire to return to the ocean could be based on a desire to return to the predisturbed state- living in the ocean for the seal, and before the arrival of the settlers for the Sami people. And either way, the ocean is being viewed as a sort of home. Perhaps this also speaks to the immovability of the ocean, how despite having a family and living for years away from it, it will still be there, as powerful and mysterious as it ever was. The ocean has a thrall, and once you’ve made a life with it you can never truly leave it. Any seasoned sailor will tell you that.

The Aquatic Bride, Among Other Gifts

The Celts were not the only group of people marrying beings from the ocean. In Japanese mythology (widely influenced by Buddhist and Taoist stories from China), bodies of water are often occupied by dragons that rule over it as their domain, and they live in lavish palaces built underwater functioning just the same as a human court on land. In essence, they are sea gods similar to the function of Neptune from Greco Roman mythology. Many Japanese narratives often document a human hero who is invited to the underwater palace after saving a fish or some other sort of marine life, and given a gift in return (Fay 138). This gift has ranged from being “a hearing aid to hear animal languages, a golden clock, a wishing hammer, a magic ring, dishes for festive occasions, an inexhaustible wine bottle, an inexhaustible rice bowl, or an inexhaustible purse” (Fay 136). Sometimes this gift can also take the form of a bride, some marine life like fish or clams who can take the form of a mortal woman. However, no matter what form the gift takes, it usually comes with some sort of hidden rule, that once broken will take away the gift (Fay 137).

One such tale is titled Hamaguri Nyobo, or “The Fish Wife,” from a set of stories collected by Japanese folklorist Hiroko Ikeda. A man saves the life of a fish and a beautiful woman comes to marry him. She is a wonderful wife, and always prepares delicious soup. Her husband becomes suspicious of her, and one day spies on her as she is cooking. He discovers that she urinates into the soup and reveals himself, clearly outraged and disgusted. The wife responds that she is actually a fish of magic origin, but now that he has discovered her identity she can no longer stay with him, and she leaves (qtd. in Fay 141).

Another more famous story of the ocean’s magic gift-bringing tells of a poor fisherman, who one day caught nothing on the sea but a small fish with glimmering gold scales. Some part of his heart is moved by pity, and he releases the fish back into the sea. The fish actually begins to speak, and tells him that in order to thank him for sparing its life it will grant him any wish. The fisherman doesn’t know what to ask for, so he goes home to his greedy wife who asks for a proper house instead of the broken shack they live in. He goes back to the beach to tell the goldfish, and when he returns in place of the shack is a house. But his wife isn’t satisfied, and demands a mansion. He goes back to the beach to tell the goldfish, and when he returns he finds that it is done. Yet his wife still isn’t satisfied, and demands a palace. When the fisherman goes back to the sea a storm is brewing and the goldfish warns him against his wife’s avarice, but when he returns he finds the palace granted to them. But his wife wants more- to be the queen of Japan. When the fisherman returns to the beach a fourth time, a huge storm was racking up the waves, and the goldfish was nowhere to be found. When he walks back to his house he finds his wife very much upset, sitting in the broken shack they originally lived in.

Confucianism is a very prominent school of thought in Japan back from when it was largely influenced by China, and one of the most important Confucian morals is moderation (Watt). Nothing should be lacking, but at the same time nothing should be in overabundance. The goldfish story clearly illustrates the danger in an overabundance of greed and desire, but the story of the fish wife and others like it speaks on this in a more subtle way. The taking away of a gift given by the ocean implies that in order to benefit from the ocean, one must adhere to a not completely tangible rule.

The first thing that comes to mind is fishing. Japan has a long history of relying on its coastal nature for food, and throughout much of its early history fishing and trapping shellfish have been the main source of its people’s diet (V. and T. Bestor 52). The “invisible rule” that comes with the ocean’s treasures could very well be a warning against overfishing, and other forms of harming the ocean such as polluting it. By overfishing many species could be seriously impacted or even go completely extinct, as abruptly as the Hamaguri Nyobo has to leave. By not respecting the ocean’s boundaries, hard to grasp and intangible as they might be, anyone seeking to benefit from the ocean can very quickly find their benefits taken away. The installation of the dragon’s palace underwater also supports this by presenting the underwater as a different, spiritual realm. It offers the

viewpoint that underwater there is as much of a world as there is on land, with perhaps even greater and superhuman authorities ruling over it that demand respect. These tales speak to Japanese people how bountiful and giving the ocean could be, but at the same time how the people must maintain a healthy relationship with it through respect and protection.

Mami Wata

The dual nature of the ocean is not an uncommon motif, far away another form of it can be found in West, Central, and Southern Africa, as well as within the African diaspora in the Americas. But instead of being either giving or taking, the sea is often portrayed as either a caring mother, or a cruel goddess that can easily take away more than what she gave. A large number of different water deities are worshiped across Africa, many of them having constantly shifting dual natures in being either benevolent or evil, human or animal, man or woman (qtd. in Akyeampong 161). However, the most prominent of all water deities is usually Mami Wata, depicted most often as a woman. And although she has many varied images across different cultures, the word “mother” rarely seems to leave her name. She is regarded as



The Still Puddle

Courtesy of Patricia Romero

Watramama in Guyana, Mamadjo in Grenada, and Mamalambo amongst the Zulu people (Van Stipiraan 327). Perhaps this speaks to how much life is found within the ocean, how it bears and sustains them like a mother. But a more common and specific comparison seems to often be made between the rhythm of the ocean and the amniotic fluid within the uterus. Babatude Lawal, the author of the book *The Gèlèdé Spectacle: Art, Gender, and Social Harmony in an African Culture*, quotes this passage from a Yoruba story, an ethnic group now living mainly in Nigeria, “The pot-breasted mother... As a big body of water, she is: the inexhaustible sea... Vibrations from the deep” (qtd. in Fay 106). Lawal believes that the vibrations mentioned here are “related to the mysteries of the female reproductive system” (qtd. in Fay 106). Another case illustrates it more clearly, from *The Epic of Jeki la Njambè* from Cameroon, “The earth vibrates/drunk with rhythm and sounds/the sonorous and liquid uterus/of the seas” (qtd. in Fay 107). Regardless of the root of the ocean mother motif, it is clearly there.

Very often Mami Wata is pictured as a benevolent and giving goddess. Various tales on both sides of the African coast tell of her chancing upon people swimming or boating, and bringing them to her spiritual realm. When the people leave, they are often granted a deep spiritual understanding, and they tend to return to the mortal world more physically attractive and more likely to succeed in their endeavors (Van Stipriaan 325). However, she can just as easily be enraged, and destructive in her rage. In popular

Nigerian stories she will sometimes appear to her male worshippers and demand sexual fidelity. While acceptance brings good fortune, rejection can mean the ruin of his family, finances, or job (Bastian). While it may be simple to deduct that this is reflective of how capricious the ocean is, it can also stem from the African tradition of giving a duality to nature deities in their personality and behavior.

However, despite this sometimes violent nature, Mami Wata and the ocean itself has been somewhat reclaimed in more modern African accounts as a powerful and healing force that helps African peoples find empowerment and agency against European forces that may bind them. A popular example of this comes from a spiritual called “Titanic Toasts,” dating back to around 1920 (Course). It is a comedic piece, speaking of a fictional overworked black laborer named Shine aboard the Titanic, and the only black person aboard because the Titanic was advertised to be “lily white”- completely without black presence (Course). This just makes the setup of the spiritual all the more comedic and powerful, because in the song Shine is the only person who knew that the Titanic would sink, and he jumped out and began to swim towards shore. Many powerful white people on the ship came out and begged him to carry them to shore as well, including the captain’s wife who promised him sexual favors, the captain’s daughter who promised to name her son after him, and the captain himself, offering him endless riches. But Shine refused them all for the same reason every time, “to save you would be very fine/but I got to first save this black ass of mine” (Sparling et al.). Shine ended up making it just fine to New York, and was getting drunk in Harlem when news of the Titanic’s sinking reached the states (Sparling et al.).

The reason for this spiritual’s popularity undoubtedly has to do with reclaiming black agency. It is clear that from where the Titanic sank anyone would have little luck swimming to New York, and so this premise was probably done to put Shine in a position of power over the white people, who plead and bargain with him. In this case the ocean acts as a tool to aid Shine, in helping him escape while simultaneously vanquishing his previous white bosses that overworked and abused him. Shine’s refusal is another demonstration of his power, prioritizing himself even if he was being offered riches. This could be the same reason why Shine’s response has an emphasis on his blackness. Alan Rice, author of *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic*, further remarks that at the time of the Titanic’s sinking there was a widespread belief amongst the African American community in that God had willed it to happen, bringing down the unsinkable ship representative of white supremacy and invincibility (34). Although it is not an exact parallel, this story touches on the same themes as Mami Wata, claiming the ocean as an entity that empowers heroes and looks after them, like a mother does.

Conclusion

Stories are formed to serve their communities. “Titanic Toasts” offers a tale of black power over previous oppressors, but it doesn’t stop there. From the cautionary tales of Japan to the symbolic ones of Iceland, the passing down of these stories are for the benefit of the community. Mami Wata is a powerful female figure, and demands respect for the ocean the same way that Japanese ocean folklore does, to protect the ocean’s resources and allow communities to keep living off them. The selkies of Ireland and Scotland remind people that perhaps there is a little bit more human-ness in nature, and it is closer to us than we might think. The sea-draugrs tell grief-stricken families that death is permanent, and no matter how much of an effort is to be made to bring them back or hold onto their memories, the dead must be let go. These tales are specifically tailored to their communities- Japan as a largely fishing culture is the only one with cautionary tales about taking resources from the ocean, the Celts with their habits of seal-hunting are the only ones with stories trying to grapple with and understand their relationships with these creatures, and so forth. What these stories are in essence is generations of wisdom, morphed into easily passed down stories that ensure important community values be passed on. These tales are a less tangible part of a culture, but they tell us what our ancestors struggled with and celebrated, and are as deserving of preservation as any other tradition.

Contributors

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