

Curated Memories
By
Emily Liu

General Preface

This collection is not chronological. It is arranged the way memory arranges itself: selectively, tenderly, and spontaneously.

Memory, I've learned, is not an archive, it is a curation. We return to certain moments not because they were the largest or loudest, but because as we change, we develop a new sense of the significance each memory holds to us. They change shape each time we revisit them, and in doing so, they change us.

These pieces sit at the edge of certainty. What connects them is the attention to impermanence, and the attachment to things that cannot be kept intact.

This is not a record of who I was, but a record of what stayed with me, and how memories, even when they don't change, constantly change me.

CONTENTS

General Preface

Chapter 1: My Seasons

- **Warm Winter**

Chapter Preface:

I remember my life in seasons. Not because seasons are reliable, they aren't, but because they change. They arrive, peak, soften, and disappear, without pretending otherwise. In the same way, my memories attach to these seasons, as if emotion needs a climate to exist.

These pieces are about learning that beauty is inseparable from impermanence.

Chapter 2: My People

- **The Opposite of Loneliness**

Chapter Preface:

I remember life in people. Not because people are stable, they aren't, but because they change. They enter, linger, grow close, and eventually leave, without pretending otherwise. In the same way, my memories attach to these people, as if belonging needs a face to exist.

These pieces are about learning that connection is inseparable from impermanence.

Chapter 3: My Place

- **Autumn of Beijing**

Chapter Preface:

I remember my life in places. Not because places are permanent, they aren't, but because they ask something of me. They are embraced, learned, inhabited, and eventually departed, without waiting for readiness. In the same way my memories attach to places, as if becoming needs a setting to begin.

These pieces are about learning that arrival is inseparable from departure.

Chapter 4: My Song

- **Another Song**

Chapter Preface:

I remember my life in what remains. Not because loss ends things—it doesn't—but because it transforms them. What stays is reshaped, carried forward, and learned again in quieter forms. In the same way, my memories attach to what endures, as if love needs continuation to exist.

This piece is about learning that presence is inseparable from absence.

Epilogue

Chapter 1: My Seasons

Chapter Preface:

I remember my life in seasons. Not because seasons are reliable, they aren't, but because they change. They arrive, peak, soften, and disappear, without pretending otherwise. In the same way, my memories attach to these seasons, as if emotion needs a climate to exist.

These pieces are about learning that beauty is inseparable from impermanence.

A Warm Winter

People are often nostalgic for things out of season, as though happiness is something we realize only after the fact.

In the heatwaves of California, the relentless sun presses upon me, yet strangely, it is Asia's winter that I long for more. For a girl who grew up in Beijing, snow is the very symbol of winter itself. Without snow, winter feels incomplete, like a story left untold.

Every year, I eagerly await the first snow—those delicate flakes that settle on the lines of my palm, their symmetry almost too immaculate for one to believe. The coldness of the snow doesn't last long; in the warmth of my hand, it melts into water, as fleeting as my happiest memories — moments that dissolve before I can truly grasp them, becoming little more than a whisper of the past.

Hokkaido • 2019

The only word I can find to describe it is 'breathtaking'. Shiroy Koiito's biscuits and the snow of Hokkaido are among the few things I adore the most about Japan. We left Sapporo station, heading towards some small town I can no longer name. Our family of four decided to ring in the New Year in Hokkaido. My sister and I had both learned to ice skate and ski since we were kids—she excelled at figure skating, while I just played along. Hokkaido's winter was surprisingly mild, the temperatures just below freezing, with continuous snowfall each day. The snow was soft—whether you stepped on it, lay in it, or rolled it into snowballs. To me, warmth was never about temperature, but about the feeling in my heart. If the snow in Beijing was cold and stiff, then calling Hokkaido's snow warm certainly doesn't feel like an exaggeration. When we visited Hokkaido in summer, it never once rained—almost as if the place were born solely for winter.

As a child, I never liked sunscreen, so when I peeled off my heavy ski gear, you could see a chubby little face with bright red cheeks. Yes, sunburned. Exhausted from skiing, all I wanted was to lie down in bed, but my mother and sister, ever eager, always insisted on taking photos. My mother bribed me with hot chocolate, and so I went along. The cold outside only made the hot chocolate more comforting, and I held it like a hand-warmer, puffing out little clouds of breath like a penguin as I trailed behind my parents and sister. And so, we captured what became

the most precious and beautiful family photo in my eyes. My sister always carried a camera wherever we went, though I've forgotten whether it was a Sony or a Kodak film camera that she used that day. She documented many moments of joy.

I try to reach for more concrete memories, but the photos have faded, and the Polaroids yellowed with time. Yet, I know that snow will forever be one of the most vivid impressions of my life—my most beautiful snow.

Milan • 2018

If you are a diligent stalker, or perhaps you've read this far and turned the pages back, you'll find that the very first post on my WeChat Moments is a picture of snow in Milan. That was the final stop on our European winter tour, in a small town in Italy, though it wasn't Milan itself, where I witnessed the first snow of 2018. The weather was not terribly cold, and the snow melted almost immediately upon touching the ground. We wandered through narrow alleyways, originally in search of a bakery, only to accidentally stumble into a shoe store. What I remember most vividly is an elderly woman, selling what seemed to be leather shoes. In Asian customs, you never kneel unless on special occasions, but perhaps there was not such an idea in Europe. This woman, with such earnest enthusiasm, knelt down to show us the shoes, which shocked me. She helped each of us try them on. The shoes weren't quite my style, but I bought them anyway. When my mother asked if I liked them, I didn't answer, only nodding repeatedly. And yet, I've never worn those shoes to this day.

Perhaps because they were more a souvenir, a tangible memory, than something to be actually worn.

That winter, that snow, I began journaling my travels in a notebook. It's a shame, though. I've forgotten which corner of the room I left it in, lost to time.

Beijing • 2022

It feels as though it was the last snowfall I saw in Beijing.

The snow came late that year, on March 18th—long after my birthday and when I received an offer from the Thacher School. We rushed out of class, seeing the white accumulation in the grass, on the ground, a rush of joy and excitement filled the air. We knew, without speaking, that this would be the last snow we saw together, the four of us in the same school, at the same time. Emily, Sharon, Stella, Lucia—together, we drew hearts and wrote the four characters in the snow. Sometimes, when one person posts merely a photo or a song, it doesn't seem particularly romantic. But when you combine the two, it begins to feel like something more. It becomes difficult to locate the romance, whether it lives in the image or in the melody. Perhaps romance is not in either at all, but in the person who frames the photo, who writes the music. Romance, then, is not the object, but the way we look at the world.

In truth, the real romance is in the words we wrote, in the photos we took, in the moments we felt together. It was us who were romantic. It is us, and us together, that was my most heartfelt romance.

Though we are now worlds apart, my heart longs for that moment, for the you that I can no longer touch. If only I could hold a time capsule, I would fill it with that grand snowfall, the most romantic snow of all. ✱

As I write this, I feel the winter anew.

It is a warm winter, I want to say.

So I surrender to my emotions: "My dear Nini, I miss you so much."

Nini (妮妮) was the Chinese nickname my friends and family have always called me. How long has it been since anyone called me Nini. How long it has been since I've felt such pure happiness.

My dear Nini, this letter of mine is sent to you in words, and I, I patiently await in the winter snow for your reply from the past.

With love,

Emily Yuxi ♥

Chapter 2 - My People

Chapter Preface:

I remember life in people. Not because people are stable, they aren't, but because they change. They enter, linger, grow close, and eventually leave, without pretending otherwise. In the same way, my memories attach to these people, as if belonging needs a face to exist. These pieces are about learning that connection is inseparable from impermanence.

The Opposite of Loneliness

I've wanted to write this short piece for a long time, but I never put pen to paper. I blamed it on the fact that deep down, I simply didn't want to face the passage of time and the bittersweet nature of growing up. It took me over a month to finally finish this.

Not gonna lie, I've always looked forward to summer break each year. After months of studying and grinding, I would always dream of meeting friends I'd only ever talked to online, and finally getting some restful sleep. But this year, I think, was an exception.

What is growth?

I think growth is learning to cherish.

I've never really had a strong sense of time. When I was little, I always wanted to grow up faster, blowing out candle after candle until the eight-inch cake could no longer hold the number of candles matching my age. I'd doze off or zone out during class, calculating how many more fifteen-minute intervals were left until Calculus ended. I'd use markers to cross off past days on the calendar, eagerly counting down to Thanksgiving or Christmas.

And just like that, I grew up. Somehow, slowly and suddenly, I grew up. At some unknown point, time shifted from moving forward to counting down. I wanted to flip the calendar backward, only to find it was already too late.

Mid-December:

Amid cheering and laughter, my two closest Senior friends Amy and Annabelle, received offers from their dream schools. I was genuinely happy for them, but there was a pang of bittersweetness. When they asked me how they should format the name and location of their new schools in their Instagram bios, I suddenly realized — they were really leaving this time. What we used to imagine together had become real. And in that moment of reality, I became more aware that our shared path was coming to an end: I was a junior and they were leaving soon. We were approaching a fork in the road — and inevitably, they would take the first steps ahead.

Mid-March:

My 17th birthday — or as I call it, my last teenage year — might have been the birthday I cried the most on. But they were tears of gratitude, I'd like to say. The overwhelming love I received from my friends and family made me realize how lucky I am to be able to love & to be so loved by the ones around me. But I also realized how just like this is my last teenage year, it will soon be the last full year before going to college, the last full year to spend with my Thacher friends,

and the last full year of me as a “kid.” I often talk about how in life it is so easy to take things for granted — and I often do that — too easy to overlook the preciousness of time & too easy to forget to cherish, but no matter how much I remind myself, I could never cherish enough of the connections I have, the connections I am so fortunate enough to own, the connections that make my life a life, a life worth a living.

Mid-May:

At our dorm banquet, the evening sunlight filtered through the maple leaves and fell softly on our cheeks. Everyone was smiling with joy, but I couldn’t stop myself from crying. Even after the tears, I still had to pose for pretty photos with puffy eyes. I leaned on Bea’s shoulder and quietly watched my friends. I felt incredibly, incredibly happy — but also incredibly, incredibly reluctant to let go. I wished time could pause — pause in that golden hour, pause in the closeness of our hearts and hugs, pause in that moment.

I read this quote from a book called *White Noise* and found it extremely inspiring, so I want to share it right here:

“I think it’s a mistake to lose one’s sense of death, even one’s fear of death. Isn’t death the boundary we need? Doesn’t it give a precious texture to life, a sense of definition? You have to ask yourself whether anything you do in this life would have beauty and meaning without the knowledge you carry of a final line, a border of limit.”

I’m not really talking about death — I’m talking about separation. I think it’s these moments of parting that teach us how to cherish. These separations are what give our fleeting moments meaning and infinite value in a finite space and time. I think I’ve learned to cherish. I just don’t know if it’s too late.

I think growth is learning to take responsibility.

Freshman year summer, I looked forward to finally not being one of the underdogs. Sophomore summer, I was excited to become an upperclassman. But this summer, I realized I’m going to be a senior. This title feels so heavy — maybe because when I first came to school, I always saw the seniors organizing activities, guiding us, talking to us, comforting us. In the blink of an eye, I’ve transformed from the little sister into the big sister. I feel like I’ve grown a lot — yet also feel like I haven’t changed at all. I often wonder: does growth prompt people to take on responsibility, or does responsibility make people grow? I still don’t have an answer. Maybe you do.

I think growth is learning to accept.

This year in English, we studied the idea of post-modernism.

The core of it is that there is no universal truth — just like this piece I’ve written, each of you may take away a different understanding.

To be honest, I’m not a huge fan of the concept of post-modernism. I think it’s way too cynical. But if I were to follow its logic, I believe I should cite and explain a quote from the book once again:

“We’re not here to capture an image, we’re here to maintain one. Every photograph reinforces the aura. An accumulation of nameless energies. Being here is a kind of spiritual surrender. We see

only what the others see. We've agreed to be part of a collective perception. It literally colors our vision. A religious experience in a way, like all tourism."

If our high school experience is just like that — the accumulation of nameless energies forming a collective perception — like how my initial intention and goal in coming here was to get into a good college. And if you were to ask me what I created — what I created uniquely my own, or maybe not precisely my own — amongst this aura, I would say it's the connections. The love, the friendships, the bonds — these are the things that are vaguely abstract, but that feel utterly real to me more than any concrete object. Utterly real. Utterly genuine.

Or maybe I did make something out of this aura, something uniquely my own. Who knows? Nevertheless, deep down inside, I know that these connections are where all my heart goes to. Mr. Conway's Vespers talk was one of my favorite things this year. Although cloudy and chilly, I found myself mesmerized by the charm of language and the beauty of thought. I asked Mr. Conway for his script and he generously shared it with me, so I want to share it with you all right here:

"We don't have a word for the opposite of loneliness, but if we did, I could say that's what I want in life. It's not quite love and it's not quite community; it's just this feeling that there are people, an abundance of people, who are in this together. This elusive, indefinable, opposite of loneliness. This feeling I feel right now."

Honestly, who cares about growing up if this is what it means to be a teenager. "This elusive, indefinable, opposite of loneliness," I hope to experience this for the rest of my life.

& to my seniors, not just to my seniors, but also my best friends — I love you, I love you forever, & thank you for making my life worth living.

This year, I still cry when I encounter hardships, but more and more, they are happy tears.

Nini, I've sent this letter again — but the envelope has no address. If it did, I think it would go to all the people I love, and all the people who love me.

With love,
Emily

Chapter 3 - My Place

Chapter Preface:

I remember my life in places. Not because places are permanent, they aren't, but because they ask something of me. They are embraced, learned, inhabited, and eventually departed, without waiting for readiness. In the same way my memories attach to places, as if becoming needs a setting to begin.

These pieces are about learning that arrival is inseparable from departure.

Beijing in Autumn

Late Autumn drags along nostalgia, scattering it in every inch of my palm's lines. My memories of autumn are vague, for it falls in between the extremes of summer and winter, never reaching a distinct temperature, as if it passes in the blink of an eye. Yet, if asked to recount autumn, there is so much that I can tell you.

I remember Autumn's colors

Autumn is when the leaves start to turn yellow and orange, warm tones that bring a touch of warmth to the unstable chill in the air. Walking in the park near my home, the river hasn't frozen yet, and as the sun begins to set, the water reflects a dazzling array of colors — glimmering gold matching the orange of the leaves. My little dog accompanies the afternoon stroll, frolicking in the dusk before darkness falls. She loves to play, shaking her furry head and stomping on the leaves, as if she, too, is enchanted by the crisp sounds the leaves make, grinning and panting as if laughing.

I remember the taste of autumn.

Autumn is when the weather turns cool, and my mom starts reminding me to wear my winter coat and scarf, while I ask daily if the shop downstairs has begun selling chestnuts. I love chestnuts, and so does my dog Sisi, so every time I come home, my mom would have already peeled chestnuts prepared for me — steaming hot, sweet, and just right. If I can't finish them, I share it with Sisi. Roasted sweet potatoes are another favorite of mine. Every day after school, I see vendors calling out their wares, but it's hard to tell which ones are good. I'm picky about my food, so each time when my mom picks me up, she would bring her own baked sweet potatoes — small, sweet, and so red that they look like they've been drenched in honey.

I also remember the people of autumn.

My mom especially loves the Summer Palace; she says that five or six o'clock is the best time to capture the golden light shining through the Seventeen-Arch Bridge. So you might see a little girl, just out of school, skipping her tutoring classes to stroll in the park with her mom. She holds

a heavy camera on her left hand, while the right is clasped tight with mine, our hearts light as air. Mom loves taking photos – of landscapes, and of me. Unfortunately, no one took photos of her, so those beautiful transcendent memories remain only in our minds. It is truly gorgeous; I'm talking about the golden light, about my mom, and about the autumn in my memories.

But just like the unpredictable autumn temperatures, autumn doesn't last forever.

Afterwards, there was no Autumn for me. I am not sure if it's because I have grown tired of chestnuts or if I have lost someone, but my memories of autumn seem frozen in that fleeting moment of childhood. California does not have distinct seasons, nor are the maple trees with their vibrant leaves ever present here. My impression of autumn then remains forever restrained in memory. I wonder if I will ever return to Beijing in Autumn, and with the gentle autumn breeze rising, who can tell whether the fallen leaves signify the beginning of autumn or a tangible longing? In such a way, that longing builds into a season of its own.

Later, around the same time, I saw a familiar Autumn in New York, but it was already different. I ask myself where my Autumn is, where my home is. It seems I haven't found the answer yet. As I reflect on these reasons, my heart seems to reach its inner peace once more. My Autumn, just like my memories and my longing, belongs to my heart. So does my home. My life has no endpoint, no destination; if I can, I want to see so many different autumns and visit so many different places. I feel that I belong to this world.

Chapter 4 - What Remains

Chapter Preface:

I remember my life in what remains. Not because loss ends things—it doesn't—but because it transforms them. What stays is reshaped, carried forward, and learned again in quieter forms. In the same way, my memories attach to what endures, as if love needs continuation to exist.

This piece is about learning that presence is inseparable from absence.

Another Song

My mother was sick. It was cancer that really killed the last cell of her and every single part of our family. I remember her struggling in chemotherapy, in pain and torture, and the moment she lost her once glorious raven hair. I remember her trembling as she walked down the street and the times she took our dog for a walk, even when we told her not to. Yet, her passing was not the end of our family, nor the end of our legacy. The memories I recall now and forever are of her brightest smile. Every piece of her was extraordinary, both as an individual, and as my mom.

Memory has a perennial presence. I can remember coming back from school and slipping my backpack down underneath my shoulders. I didn't even have to ask. From the intermittent coughs, I knew my mother was there. I would go into her room and see her sitting on the rocking chair, either crocheting, knitting a scarf, or reading a book.

"Mommy! I'm back," I would have exclaimed.

She would have smiled back and, with her most tender voice asked, "Oh honey, how was school?"

I would lay down next to her. I recall her fluffy pajama pants were as soft as a pillow. Her hands would float down, and her fingers would cross over mine, as she told me any updates and addressed my concerns. She listened attentively and offered the most thoughtful support.

No matter the day or what was occurring, Mom was always there for me, waiting for me in the very same spot. I knew her room was my shelter – she was my shelter. She was the best counselor and friend.

But there were also times when she was not there at home. The hospital was the second place I remember seeing her all the time. She would lie on the hospital bed, reading her books per usual, but with needles attached to her skin and bottles of pills scattered across the table. The doctors considered treatments for cancer: surgery, chemotherapy, radiation, hormonal therapy, laser therapy, and hyperthermia — and we tried every single one. There were times when the cancer marker decreased, and she would suddenly become rejuvenated. In those moments, she leapt at

the chance to become more involved in my schoolwork and take me around with her. But, I knew these moments were always short lived. When the persistent coughs came like huge and constant waves, our hope faded. But it never disappeared.

Regardless of her health, my mom never said she was not okay. I cannot count how many times I rushed to the hospital to see my mom there, weak and feeble, her face yellow like a moldy lemon. I would immediately start crying and the tears would run down my face like an inexhaustible stream. But she never cried herself, even though her crystal-clear eyes would glisten with tears. She would hug me with her frail limbs, like I was the one who was dying from pain, and I would cuddle in, powerlessly hoping for her to heal. She would whisper into my ear, "No matter how painful or sad it is, honey, never forget to smile. As long as you smile, as long as we stay optimistic, then there is no pain. I want you to remember that -- I want you to always smile." I nodded as I wiped away the tears that had fallen over my cheeks, but it was my mom who truly wiped them away. I would look into her eyes and raise a smile to mirror hers. She was strong, adamant; she was my superwoman, and the model of the woman I wanted to become.

My mom never let her sickness define her; she was wonderful, enthusiastic, and exuberant. Music and art were her obsessions and her intricate sketches and drawings were endless. She took me to musicals, operas, symphonies, and ballet shows as much as her health permitted. She exposed me to my passions – singing and piano. She was my very first teacher and guide.

Seemingly despite logic, the sicker she became, the more she devoted her energy to my sister and me. I practiced piano every single day, knowing that once the melody started to flow, my mom would hear and come to the music room. Sometimes, she walked to me with drugs brimming over her coffee mug. Other times, she had to be wheeled in.

"Honey, can you please play another song for me?" she would ask in her quiet voice, "It's the only thing that makes me feel at peace."

And I would. Again and again, I would play symphonies, the songs she loved listening to. She loved every single piece of me and every single thing I loved — she loved me more than she loved herself. Up until now, it is still my biggest regret that I could not play or sing one more song to her.

For, it was my mom who exposed me to the world. From a special family cruise trip to the time we went skiing in Japan, she was never absent. Regardless of the numerous objections and oppositions my dad held out of concern for her health, she was the one who planned all of the trips that now live as core memories of my childhood. The world I know was formed by her.

Oftentimes, I ask myself: Who would I be if I did not have my mom? The answer is, undoubtedly, I would not be "myself." I would not be here without my mother. She is the best mother I could have asked for.

Cancer never beat my mom, and neither my mom nor our family ever surrendered to it. Through the struggles, her coma, and the complete silence when my dad, my sister, and I were sitting outside the operation room, we held out hope. We never gave up on measures to erase the vicious cells from her body. And we had grounds for such hope, the devastating, tortured, yet desired hope. Because every time she would return, back from the doors to the underworld. She was still there, and after six years of fighting cancer, I assumed she always would be.

I clearly remember August 3rd, 2021, the night before she passed away. The doctor talked to us, saying that it was a very serious situation, that there was only a slight chance she would survive. I remember my sister cuddling towards me and my dad's jaws quivering as he tried to stay strong and not cry. I sat in between them, reassuring them that Mom was going to be okay, as she always was. But she was not. The exact feelings that hit me when I learned the news were shock, undefinable grief, and helplessness. The whole week after she passed, I would gaze at the wall and start to cry. But, I did not cry at her funeral. It was something too abrupt and distant to encompass all that she was to me.

After then, it was the moments of normalcy that saddened me the most: walking into the room and seeing the empty chair, playing the piano with no request for another song. Realizing she would never be there in those moments again, the moments she previously took part in became forever memories. To begin to heal my heart, I started journaling to her, looking through our messages, and talking to her about the things we would have spoken about. As the months went on, I experienced grief and the ups and downs of emotion. I came to realize that through my memories, she would always live on and be with me. To honor her memory, I will always stay strong, just like she did. I will never surrender, just like she never surrendered.

I cannot count the things my mother taught me, for the list is infinite. And her life, even with its challenges, is never a sad story to tell. In fact, it is a happy one as every single fragment of her I remember of is happiness, tenderness, and warmth. And I know that even though I cannot speak or talk to her anymore, she is always with me, especially when the melody of the piano flows through my fingers.

Today, as I look at the dazzling stars in the sky, every twinkle is like my mother's smile, telling me that she will always and forever be with me. Whether she's been transformed into the particles of the air surrounding me or somewhere unplaceable in the galaxy, I know she is with me. Forever and always.

Dear mother, here's my *another song*.

Epilogue

To curate something is not to trap it in a glass and have it shown on a table, but to accept what cannot be shown. In writing these pieces, I learned that memory often blurs when interrogated, and softens when pressed. What it offers instead is continuity. These pages do not arrive at a single conclusion. They end where memory often does: mid-thought, mid-feeling, mid-becoming. The seasons continue to turn. People continue to change. Places continue to ask something of us.

Some things are not meant to be finished.

They are meant to be remembered: again, and differently, each time.