

FRAGMENTS

VOLUME I - THE COMPOUND

01 EMBRACING SKELETONS

Fragment: Four Hundred and Twelve Bones Rubbing Against One Another
Time & Location: Summer 2020 · South Bank of Houhai, Beijing

Beijing.
The south bank of Houhai.

I could not hear their words.
What I heard instead was the sound of four hundred and twelve bones rubbing together inside two human skeletons.

The boy was young.
His skin was pale.
Leaning against the trunk of a tree, he released small sounds from his throat, not unlike the cries of a bird.

The woman pressing against him wore a pale green cotton dress.
Her hair, streaked with gray and white, looked dyed.
From behind, she appeared at least forty years older than the boy.
Her hands moved across his body.
One thigh pressed firmly against him.
She swayed her waist and hips with measured rhythm, like a model pacing the length of a runway.

Two black N95 masks lay beside the boy's shoes.

People passed by.
Their faces were hidden behind masks.
Their pulses were not.
Neither were the hormones turning in their blood.

Unlike most people, I had spent my life listening to the body.
The shifting of joints.
The celebrations of organs.
The slow, viscous movement of glands.
The disordered pulses running through blood vessels.

In a previous life, I had been a crow.

It left its hearing behind.
It planted that hearing in me.
Dusk settled over the lake.

The woman continued her slow movements.
Little by little, she began to resemble my childhood neighbor, Granny Yang.
The tremor that escaped her lips reached across fifty years and pulled me backward.

A flock of crows arrived.
Each calling to the next.
Like old wanderers meeting on a distant road, they greeted the crow that still lived
within my blood.

One of them swooped down.
It dropped a black hairpin at my feet.
Five centimeters long.

The sound of it striking the stone pavement was like an electrified needle.
With a single touch, it pierced a memory long sealed away.

A few minutes later, I found myself standing in Pocket Alley.
The hairpin remained clenched in my hand.
The courtyard was still there.

Fifty years had passed.
The doorway seemed lower than I remembered.
I stepped beneath it and discovered I could no longer straighten my back.
I found it difficult to imagine how Father had passed through that doorway again
and again.

The smell of damp wood remained.
The moss carried a faint scent of water and earth.
I reached out and placed my hand on the old wooden door.
I did not push hard.
It was locked from within.
No sound came from the courtyard.
My hand stayed there.

For a while.
Then I withdrew it.
Turned away.
Left the alley.

Before I had fully settled into the back seat of the Lexus, I said to the driver:

"Renmin University."

02 THE CROW NEVER FORGETS

Fragment: a Fatal Bang | Bones Fighting Each Other in Rage and Fear
Time & Location: Autumn 1969 · Compound No. 7, Beijing

At dusk, Longevity Hill looked like a traditional Chinese painting soaked through with water.

Every patch of color.
Every line.
Blurred.

The Red Guards of Compound No. 7 were struggling against my father.

Far away, I crouched beneath an old pagoda tree. Behind me stood an abandoned building. I often sat there listening to crows sing.

The songs were always interrupted by noises as hard as steel.

My eyes grew dry again. Then suddenly painful.
I put on my dark glasses.
The white glare still poured in.

I could no longer see branches.
Could no longer see grass.
I could only see countless tiny particles dancing wildly inside the light.

Each produced a faint sound.

Dry.
Metallic.
Like endless miniature explosions.

A boy approached carrying a slingshot. In his other hand hung a dead crow.
He pinched his throat and mocked me in a strange voice.
The same old insults.

My white hair.
My weak eyesight.
And my father, who had lost his power.

His name was Gao Yong.

Our neighbor.

For some reason, as he turned to leave, he let out a laugh I had never heard before.

"Heh-heh."

The world before me turned white.

No lines.

No shapes.

No colors.

A faint acoustic trace entered my ears. My fingers stiffened. My toes cramped. The monkey-faced boy across from me became increasingly blurred.

Twisted.

Broken apart.

Until he was nothing more than a black dot.

The sacred bird sleeping deep inside me suddenly awoke.

Fragments of images shattered before my eyes. They fell faster than a flock of startled crows taking flight.

In my previous life, I had worn white feathers.

An albino crow.

A monster among crows.

Mocked.

Rejected.

Humiliated.

Until one day, a black feather touched mine.

A brief touch.

Its metallic sheen flashing in the sun.

Then came a fatal bang.

From the slingshot of that child.

The female crow who had always stayed beside me exploded apart.

Puff.

A streak of dead-black crossed the air. A tiny whistle followed.

Then she fell.

Three-year-old Gao Yong jumped with delight. One shoe flew off.

And he left behind that laugh.

"Heh-heh."

The figure.

The laugh.

Both were carved forever into the memory of the crow clan.

I rubbed my eyes.

Gao Yong had become a pale ghost.

I sprang to my feet, my fists clenched tight.

From my pelvis.

Through my chest.

Through my throat.

Through my grinding teeth.

A low-frequency vibration burst out of me unlike anything I had ever produced before:

"Ekhig-Chini-Arakh!"

Clatter.

The slingshot hit the ground.

Clatter.

The dead crow hit the ground.

Then came the sound of running.

Gao Yong bolted.

His rubber soles scraped against the concrete, trying to sound brave.

There was even a faint smell of urine.

Wham.

My father's heavy hand struck my left cheek and pinned it in place.

The smell of tobacco rushed into my nose.

The blow turned the whiteness of my vision into a dark red haze streaked with blood.

I heard my father's knuckles crack.

It sounded like bones fighting each other.

Rage against fear.

"What did you just say?"

03 FATHER'S NICKNAME

Fragment: as if He Wanted To Chew Every Word to Pieces | Striking Match
After Match

Time & Location: Autumn 1969 · Compound No. 7, Beijing

My father's voice was low.

So low it sounded as if he wanted to chew every word to pieces. Those eyes, trained by a lifetime of reading people, were fixed on the white glare behind my dark glasses, trying to see the shape of the monster living inside me.

I said nothing.

I did not even rub the half of my face still burning from the slap.

He grabbed me the way one might seize a bird.

His heart rate shot up to one hundred and thirty-six beats a minute.

After checking the surroundings, he dragged me behind the building.

His voice became a length of rusted wire.

Again and again, he ordered me to pretend I could neither hear nor speak.

Otherwise, he said, they would pierce my ears.

I did not know whether he was lying.

But I could hear him using sheer muscular control to suppress the abnormal trembling inside him.

He talked for a long time.

His heartbeat was chaotic.

Then he said something about being terrified that my Mongolian heritage might be exposed.

The expression on his face made me shiver.

Back then, many revolutionaries in Compound No. 7 were still hunting down the bloodlines of the distant grasslands.

And my voice—whether it came from the steppe or from a crow—carried the scent that would draw the revolutionary hounds.

It was the first time Father had spoken so much to me.
My mother had died in childbirth.
The instinctive warmth of a mother's love never existed in my world.
For ten years, Father had raised me alone.

Sometimes he loved me.
Sometimes he hated me.
Sometimes he called me a monster and blamed me for the death of the woman he loved most.

He loved his work far more than he loved me.
Even while cooking or washing his feet, he talked endlessly about "work."
Whether I understood or not never mattered.

In private, I gave him a nickname:

“Work”.

I never liked calling him Father.
I crouched against the wall, curled into a ball.
He leaned against the opposite wall, striking match after match.

Our family had been forced to leave the ministerial residence inside Compound No. 7 and move to Pocket Hutong in Houhai.

Deep inside the alley stood a small courtyard.
The newly built red-brick rooms were low and crude, like four matchboxes lined up side by side.

Father was six feet tall.
I had never seen him bend his back.
Yet every time he stepped through the wooden gate of that courtyard, he had to lower his head.

"Get up. Come home with me."
His growl was heavy.
But there was softness hidden inside it.

04 CLOTH BUTTONS

Fragment: an Obviously Fake Tremor in the Voice | the Sound of Cloth Buttons
Slipping Free
Time & Location: Autumn 1969 · Pocket Alley, Houhai, Beijing

O h my. The leader's home.
Grandma Yang's voice seeped out from the room on the eastern side like a damp snake.

She was the only neighbor in our new home.
Not long before, she had moved into the two eastern rooms.
She had been chosen by Gao Yong's father.

The same man who, during the early years of the Cultural Revolution, had stirred up zealots to remove my father from his position as vice minister.
This residence, and this neighbor, had both been arranged by him.

Grandma Yang was not yet sixty.
There was not a trace of revolutionary spirit about her.
Instead, she carried a thick scent of powder and perfume.

Her dark-gray blouse fit tightly.

A row of cloth frog-buttons ran diagonally across her chest toward her left armpit.
In those years, Zhongshan suits filled the streets. I had grown accustomed to women appearing flat-chested.

She was not.

Her breasts were full. They swayed when she moved.
And I often found myself wanting to sneak a look at the large hips that twisted from side to side.

Not long after we moved in, the skinny old man who played the erhu near the alley entrance quietly told me:
"Kid, that old woman used to be a famous prostitute.
Know what that means?
Hahaha."

I was only ten.
I did not know what a prostitute was.
But I could hear something.

Whenever she swayed her waist, those cloth buttons rubbed against the fabric.
They produced an extremely faint sound.
A tiny rhythm.

Zzz—pop.

Zzz—pop.

"Leader, the coal stove isn't hot enough.
How about your little sister here gives it a poke?"
The tremor in her voice was obviously fake.

Father struck another match.
Scratch—

hiss.

The match head flared violently, as if it too were in a temper.

I crouched in my room against the wall.
Using the White Crow's hearing, I listened to the sound patterns beyond it.

Grandma Yang was undoing those cloth buttons.

Pop.
Pop.
Pop.

The sound of cloth buttons slipping free from their loops was soft.
Muted.

I lay down and turned from side to side.
The image of those heavy hips would not leave my eyes.

05 THE HANGING GHOST

Fragment: the Tiny Tremors Brought by Insects | a Bohemian Melody
Time & Place: Summer 1970 · Pocket Alley, Houhai, Beijing | Summer 1982 ·
Volleyball Court, Renmin University of China

I wanted to avoid that woman.
I would rather play with the "Hanging Ghosts."

Whenever Dad was away, she wandered in and out completely naked. Two sacks of flesh hung from her chest, lifeless and unattractive. But when she turned around, the view was something else entirely.

With a dry cough, the naked figure emerged, swaying gently.

I hurried outside and crouched in a shallow pit beneath the old locust tree. Picking through the half-dried leaves, I buried myself among them.

As dusk approached, the world turned white.
I put on my dark glasses and continued my game.

Ssssss—

That was the sound of a Hanging Ghost descending.

These pale green caterpillars released transparent threads and lowered themselves one by one from the dense canopy overhead.

To most people they were disgusting.
To me, each carried its own frequency.

Plop.
Plop.
Plop.

They landed everywhere.
In the pit.
On my body.
On my sunglasses.

I closed my eyes and quietly assigned them numbers.

Number 17 was chewing through a leaf vein on my left.
Number 42 was attempting to crawl across my toes.

I arranged and rearranged their tiny movements, turning them into arithmetic problems inside my head.

The minute vibrations created by the insects lulled me toward sleep.
The endless stream of numbers inside my mind woke me again.
Then came the strange cry of an erhu.

A villain's aria from one of the Revolutionary Model Operas.

The horsehair bow scraping against steel strings sounded almost demonic,
accompanied by the faint noises of a dry throat swallowing phlegm.

Disgusting.

The Hanging Ghosts, however, remained indifferent and carried on with their business.

That afternoon, shortly after soldiers had taken my father away, a sticky voice arrived with perfect timing.

"Come here, young man. Grandma will scratch your back for you."

Her pale hand toyed with the row of cloth buttons across her blouse. The movement carried traces of cold cream and an old bodily scent. Small hairpins glimmered among her neatly arranged hair. I shuffled toward her.

The sound of her fingertips brushing against skin was softer than an insect crawling across a leaf.

Heat rushed through me.

Then she suddenly turned away and returned to embroidering the red bird she seemed destined to stitch forever.

Behind her delicate reading glasses, she worked one stitch at a time, so slowly that time itself appeared to solidify.

Later, whenever Father was absent, she would sit upon that large bed layered with quilts.

And those silken physiological noises would tighten themselves around my adolescence, thread by thread.

06 I'D RATHER SLEEP IN A PIGSTY

Fragment: the Sound of Fingertips Brushing Skin | a Hoe Striking a Child's Back
Time & Place: Winter 1970 · Pocket Alley, Houhai, Beijing | Summer 1982 ·
Behind Tanzhe Temple, Beijing

Father never came home.

One day, his bodyguard woke me before dawn and put me into a military jeep. The road was rough.

When I opened my eyes again, we were parked in front of Tanzhe Temple. Its gates were locked.

The monks had been driven away by the revolutionaries.

The Buddha statues, incense burners, and great bell were all dead.

I followed two soldiers along mountain paths for what felt like hours.
At last we arrived at a small village.
They handed me over to a group of men who had once worked under my father.

They had already lived there for quite some time, undergoing what was called "re-education."

Back then, people usually found me adorable.
Perhaps because I did not look entirely Han Chinese.

My round eyes sat deep in their sockets.
My unusually large ears tilted backward.
My cheeks were full.
My curly white hair made me look like a doll.

But in a mountain village made entirely of stone houses, that sort of cuteness quickly became a target.

I shared a crumbling side room with them.
Twelve people slept on a single kang, the heated brick bed common in northern China.
I was small enough to curl up in a corner with my hands over my ears.
I did not interfere with anyone's sleep.

But I increasingly interfered with their food.
I could eat more than most grown men.
For that, I was often beaten and cursed.

Once, I climbed up and raided a swallow's nest.
One of the uncles summoned a villager.
The man swung a hoe at me.
The blade split the skin across my back.
I have long forgotten the pain.

But I never forgot the sound.

Pa—shhh.

In front of other people, I never cried.
I hated human voices.
I often wandered into the ravines outside the village, searching for wild fruit and edible plants.

I preferred talking to insects, birds, and squirrels.
Playing games with them.
The only thing missing was crows.
I had not seen a single one.

The Chinese junipers on the hillsides kept me company.
Their cold, pungent scent became part of me.

When I returned to the village, I would rather sleep in the pigsty.
A small fly might land on my face.
I would let it stay.
I listened to the faint brushing sounds made by its tiny legs as it walked across my skin.

The smell was awful.
Yet somehow we felt like companions.

When winter winds howled through the mountain gullies, my ears would begin to itch.

I would lie flat upon the frozen earth and let the deep vibrations beneath the ground fill my ears.
They were thick.
Sticky.
Tinged with rust.

Above the mountains hung a reddish star.
I wanted to fly there.

07 "GO AWAY"

Fragment: a Nearly Imperceptible Low-Frequency Tremor | a Hiss Like a Snake Testing the Air
Time & Place: Spring 1972 · Pocket Alley, Houhai, Beijing

I spent three years in that mountain village before being sent back to Pocket Alley.
The Spring Equinox.
My thirteenth birthday.

A humid morning so oppressive it made me nauseous.
I dreamed of the ribbonfish Dad used to grill for me.
I had just put a piece into my mouth when a loudspeaker exploded somewhere outside.
I woke with a strange dampness between my legs.

My mind filled with white sacks of flesh, the pounding of an old woman's heart, and the low growls of a trapped beast rolling through the darkness.
The sticky stain startled the White Crow awake.

Its despairing resonance flooded my ears—a shrill scream of humiliation.
Just then, footsteps sounded outside the courtyard.

Leather shoes grinding against gravel.

Cha. Cha. Cha.

I stumbled out of bed, straightened the blanket in panic, and rushed outside.
His arm was held by two soldiers.
His clothes were covered in dust.
There were tears in the fabric.
A scab had formed on one of his hands.

He looked up at me.
"Son, why is your face so yellow?"
His voice was soft.
There was none of the authority of a senior official.
None of the authority of a father.

Instead, there was a faint low-frequency tremor beneath it.
Almost impossible to detect.

I could hear it clearly.
For the first time in my life, I felt sorry for him.

I had not felt sorry for him when he came home exhausted and still cooked for me.
I had not felt sorry for him when he was released and immediately sat beside me to help with my homework.
I had not felt sorry for him when he secretly wiped tears away while looking at Mother's photograph.

But now I did.

I could hear the disorder in his heartbeat.
The restraint.
The helplessness.

I lowered my head.
Rubbed my hands together.
Stepped back twice.
Afraid he might smell the scent clinging to me.

"Come inside."

Father gently touched the top of my head.

I wanted to cry.
I wanted to call him Dad.

For the first time, I heard something inside the voice of that iron-hard man.

A frequency called tenderness.
Like a fine needle piercing through all that sticky filth and shame, lighting a fire
somewhere deep inside me.

While Father was there, I did not cry.
But the moment he disappeared from sight, tears burst out of me.

I bit down on my lips.
My whole body trembled.

A laugh drifted from the eastern room.

Soft.

Like a snake testing the air with its tongue.

Then came a deliberate cough.
That evening she brought me a plate of freshly cooked dumplings.
The scent from her fingertips came with them.
"Grandma came to celebrate your birthday."

"Go away!"

I shoved her toward the door.

She froze for a moment.
Then quietly left.

I swallowed the dumplings.
And the tears.

Together.

08 A CLASSIFIED FILE

Fragment: a Clear Metallic Resonance | an Unusual Tenderness at the Corner of
her Eyes

Time & Place: Spring 1972 · Pocket Alley, Houhai, Beijing | Autumn 1945 · Yan YanAn, Shaanxi

The barber's large iron tweezers rang out again from outside the courtyard.
Weng—
Weng—

Back then, almost every month, a barber would come to tend Grandma Yang's hair.

Before the man himself appeared, the instrument known as a huantou—a large iron tweezer struck against a nail—would announce his arrival with a bright metallic vibration.

Weng—
Weng—

The barber washed her hair.
Combed it.
Dyed it.

He also performed what people called "threading."
Taking two strands of cotton thread, moistening them with his lips from time to time, he twisted away every fine hair along her temples and forehead.

Even her eyebrows were trimmed into perfect order.
When that was finished, the activity moved indoors.
The barber began massaging Grandma Yang's back.

I liked watching.

Grandma Yang touched my cheek.
At the corner of her eyes hung a tenderness I rarely saw.
"Good boy. Go play outside."

After quite some time, the iron tweezers sounded again.

Weng—Weng—

The Hanging Ghosts around me scattered in fright.

Many years later, I came across a file stamped:

TOP SECRET.

The final update was dated October 1945.
It recorded the first half of Grandma Yang's life.
Inside was an old photograph.
Brown with age.
Carefully preserved.
Almost untouched by wear.

It showed Grandma Yang as a young woman.

She wore the uniform of the Eighth Route Army.
There was a heroic confidence in her face.
Compared with the woman I had known in old age, her eyes were astonishingly pure.
Like a pair of stars.

Her full lips curved like a crescent moon.
Only one thing had not changed:
the faint dimple in her cheek.

The file contained more than a dozen documents.
Yet the essential information occupied only a few lines.

Name: Yang Zihe

Date of Birth: March 1922

Place of Origin: Mizhi County, Shaanxi

Family Background: Major Landowning Family

Party Membership: October 1938

Sponsor: Deputy Director Luan, Border Region Security Department, Yan'an

Education: Anti-Japanese Military and Political University, Class of 1939

Occupation: Shaanbei Folk Singer, Anti-Japanese University Song and Dance Troupe

Organizational Affiliation: Second Bureau of the Central Military Commission

Codename: Red Sparrow

One document contained only four lines.

Beiping.

Shaanxi Alley.

Shanglin House, Qingyin Performance Class.

Public Name: Nalan Qianhe.

The woman described in those files felt entirely mechanical.

But Grandma Yang of Pocket Alley—
though long dead—

still seemed to breathe from time to time inside my world.

09 THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE

Fragment: the Tangshan Earthquake | Mao Zedong's Death | Like a Massive Sheet of Ice Cracking Apart

Time & Place: Summer 1976 · Pocket Alley, Houhai, Beijing | Autumn 1976 · Mainland China

I was awakened by the trembling of the earth.
I rolled out of bed and ran into the courtyard.

Father was not home.

Grandma Yang was still asleep.

I pounded on her door until she finally woke up.

When she appeared, she was already dressed. Her right hand was fastening the row of cloth buttons across her chest, while her left hand smoothed her hair.

"Child, it's an earthquake. Don't panic."

She looked up at the gray sky.

Then suddenly froze.

"Oh my. Your eyes and ears are bleeding."

She touched my face with unusual gentleness.

"Don't be afraid, child. I'm here."

Then she ran.
Almost flew.
Out of the courtyard and toward the telephone at the entrance of the alley.

Not long afterward, a military jeep carried me away to the Public Security Hospital.

I remained there for more than a month.

When I finally returned home, I found myself trapped beneath an endless sea of mourning music.

I did not notice at first that Grandma Yang had become unusually quiet.
The music was slow.

Low.

Repetitive.

Like enormous slabs of cold stone descending from a gray sky.

September 9, 1976.

A little after four o'clock in the afternoon.

I put on my dark glasses and ran into the street.
There was no one outside.
From inside the houses came the sound of people crying.

Weeping.
Sobbing.
Wailing.

Yet I could hear that almost none of it contained sorrow.
Or grief.
Or even emotion.

I returned home.

The green wooden door stood half open.
The room was saturated with the bitter smell of tobacco.
I had not called him Dad in a very long time.

"You're back?"

His voice dragged against resistance.

His tall frame had collapsed into an old hardwood chair, as though some central support had suddenly snapped.

Only a few days earlier, my physics teacher had explained the meaning of acceleration.

At that moment, I understood that despair also had acceleration.

Dad did not look at me.

His eyes were fixed upon the spotless portrait hanging on the wall.

Inside his broad chest, something was breaking apart.

Like a massive sheet of ice cracking.

"He's gone."

The words rolled through his throat, carried by an air stream so dry it almost rasped.

All my life, Dad had spoken of that man in a restrained tenor touched by something sacred.

Again and again he described his greatness.

His holiness.

As though the elderly figure in the portrait was not a human being at all.

But the atmosphere.

Gravity itself.

The fundamental frequency upon which their breathing depended.

His fingers gripped the back of the chair.

Creak.

Creak.

Gravity had suddenly vanished from his world.

I could hear the chaos in his heartbeat.

One hundred and thirty beats per minute.

Then a sudden emptiness.

A pause of two hundred milliseconds.

It sounded far more desolate than the mourning music outside.

Far more desolate than the wailing of an entire nation.

At last, the funeral ended.

So did China's endless crying.

10 A FERMATA

Fragment: a Beast-Like Growl | Mao Zedong's Death | the Sound of Cloth Buttons Coming Undone

Time & Place: Autumn 1976 · Pocket Alley, Houhai, Beijing | Autumn 1976 · Mainland China

I kicked stones and clumps of dirt as I walked home.

Everywhere, doors were being pushed open.

Pots and bowls clattered.

Inside some houses, men and women flirted in low frequencies not unlike the sounds Grandma Yang used to make.

Dad was still crying.

Not as openly as before.

But during those days, his was the only voice of genuine devotion I heard.

It sounded like shattered bones sinking into a deep well.

I placed my hand on his back.

For several minutes.

Then I stopped and quietly left his room.

The moment the door closed behind me, Dad began gasping for air.

Deep.

Heavy.

Animal-like.

At that moment, the soul engraved with the word loyalty finally shattered before the portrait of his leader.

I lay down on my narrow wooden bed.

A dense, fishy odor drifted in from the eastern room.

Strange.

I could not hear Grandma Yang breathing.
Her room remained silent for a very long time.
I went over and looked through the crack in the door.

She was lying on her bed.
Several hairpins held her dyed-black hair perfectly in place.
Her arms rested straight at her sides.
The embroidery frame beside her pillow was neatly arranged.
So were the scissors and sewing needles.

Even her delicate reading glasses seemed to be resting inside their tiny coffin.
Her pumice stone for rubbing her feet had been washed clean.
It lay beside the bed.

Instinctively, I looked away.

Then I noticed one of the rice sacks.
Without the support of life, it hung from the opening of her blouse.
I crouched down.

My palm rested against the cold gray brick floor.
I touched decay in its chemical form.

Pop.
Pop-click.

The sound of cloth buttons coming undone.
It was writing a fermata beneath the funeral that had just ended.

One week later, the truck arrived to carry away her body.
Its engine roared through the alley.

At the entrance of Pocket Alley, the gaunt old erhu player began performing *The Moon Reflected on the Second Spring*.

He was not mourning a blind musician's sorrow.
He was seeing off a piece of neighborhood gossip.

11 TEACHER'S SPIN

Fragment: a Spiral Sound Field Edged With Gold

Time & Location: Summer 1978 · Beijing No. 13 Middle School

I arrived at school early that morning.
It was the day the university admission letters were being distributed.

No.13 Middle School had once been known as Fu Jen Boys' School. Decades earlier, it had been converted from the residence of a Qing prince.

Time had preserved the aristocratic frivolity.

The gardens.

The pavilions.

The carved corridors.

All remained untouched.

Only the stone steps of the main hall had surrendered to moss, and no one dared repair the doors or windows.

I went to Teacher Su's office.

He was not there.

Outside, a kettle hissed on a coal stove.

I sat down and waited.

"Ah! There you are."

Teacher Su was breathing hard.

"I've been waiting for you at the school gate."

His back was perfectly straight.

Nothing about him revealed the years he had spent being crushed because of his family background.

I stood.

"Sit. Sit."

He handed me an envelope.

Behind those thick lenses was a smile I had never seen before.

"Department of Journalism, Renmin University."

"You've been admitted!"

He hurried outside again and returned carrying the hissing kettle.

He poured me a cup of hot water.

Then left once more.

Telling me to wait.

I carefully tore open the envelope.

The sound of kraft paper splitting apart crawled across my forehead like a hanging ghost.

"Incredible. Simply incredible."

"White Eagle, you're the top humanities student in all of Beijing."

Teacher Su came back and dropped into the chair opposite me.

His posture was still that of a teacher.

Correcting.

Instructing.

But his expression had become that of an older brother.

He was twenty-eight.

The only son of a wealthy landlord family.

My homeroom teacher.

Whenever Father was away, I often stayed at his home—a mud-brick room barely six square meters in size.

Sometimes I slept on a pallet he had built for me in the teachers' office.

I do not like describing those years as shared misery.

But I will always remember this:

A man who had been suppressed for years.

A schoolteacher forced to teach political doctrine.

Could love a student he worried about with an affection so intense it seemed impossible.

He removed his glasses.

Lowered his head.

Wiped them slowly.

The sound of tears striking the brick floor broke open my own tear ducts.

I stepped forward and wrapped my arms around him.

"Thank you, Teacher Su."

"Hahaha."

"What are you thanking me for?"

"You should thank Heaven."

"Thank Earth."

"Thank your parents and your ancestors."

Teacher Su was never a man of many words.

But that bright, awkward laughter continued for a long time.

There was no calculation in it.

No flattery.

No temptation.

Only a pure, almost sacred, high-frequency resonance.

He walked me to the school gate.

Then suddenly began to spin.

One turn.

The heels of his cloth shoes brushed across the sand.

Shhh.

Two turns.

The hem of his faded Zhongshan suit lifted in the wind.

Rustle.

He looked like a child who had just discovered that gravity no longer applied to him.

Three turns.

Five.

Eight.

I crouched down and tilted my head.

Listening to that spiral sound field edged with gold.

"Teacher, be careful."

I spoke softly.

But he kept spinning.

Throwing off years of slogans and doctrines delivered from classroom podiums.

The twelfth turn.

Exactly twelve.

Matching the rotation I had heard inside Compound No. 7 when I was twelve years old.

The sound of something returning from the dead.

I could hear the faint ripples of fluid moving inside his balance organs.

His breathing became rapid.

His heartbeat approached one hundred and fifty beats per minute.

There was even a sweetness in his throat.

Suddenly he stumbled.

His body tilted backward.

I rushed forward and caught him.

At that moment, I touched his arm.

Not the cast-iron hardness of Father.

Not the soft, sticky warmth of Grandma Yang.

It felt like a willow branch in early spring.

Flexible.

Alive.

“Bai Ying...”

"You don't still blame your teacher for being too hard on you all these years, do you?"

Behind those thick lenses flashed a trace of guilt.

I said nothing.

He leaned against my shoulder.

In his breathing remained a tiny tremor.

A tremor of overwhelming relief.

12 THE ROAR SMELLING OF BLOOD

Fragment: an Almost Imperceptible Crack of Knuckles | a Flood Held Back for Seven Years

Time & Location: Summer 1978 · Pocket Alley, Houhai, Beijing

The Hanging Ghosts were dropping from the old pagoda tree in clusters.

I handed the admission letter to Father.

He did not take it.

His thin hand stopped in midair.

The fingers opened.

Then curled back.

A tiny crack sounded from his knuckles.

Almost inaudible.

All the strength in his body seemed to be gathering there.

"Inside."

He took the envelope.

Turned.

Bent down.

And disappeared into the matchbox-sized room whose ceiling could be touched with an outstretched hand.

I did not follow.

I leaned against the doorframe.

My dark glasses facing the rough red-brick wall.

I began to wait.

Sixty seconds.

No sound came from the room.
Yet I could hear the metal buckles of his heavy leather shoes striking the concrete floor.
One step.
Two.
One step.
Two.
He was walking in circles inside those few square meters.
Each footfall landed directly on my eardrums.

Three hundred seconds.

He sat down.
The wooden chair groaned beneath him.

Then came a silence so complete it felt unnatural.
I held my breath.
The White Crow sampled everything.

Deep inside his windpipe, I heard a rasping sound.
Like a rusted saw blade dragged back and forth.
He was forcing every breath downward.
Refusing to let it become crying.

The pressure grew.
Expanded.
Filled the tiny room.
I could even hear dust loosening from the cracks between the bricks.
Falling.
Softly.

I waited.
For the stone that had been suspended above him for seven years to finally hit the ground.

Six hundred and twenty-two seconds.

Then it happened.

First came a brief sound.
A torn piece of flesh.
A trapped syllable.

Uh.

And then the flood.
Held back for two thousand five hundred and sixty-four days and nights.
Burst through the gate.

"Ao..."
"Ao—..."

It was not human weeping.
It was an old beast.
Imprisoned for years.
Suddenly seeing open grassland again.
A roar carrying the smell of blood.

He collapsed over the table.
His forehead struck the wood.
Thud.
Thud.
Thud.

The blows were dull.
Yet filled with a terrible pleasure of destruction.

The crying was thick.
Heavy.
It pressed against my eardrums.
Thousands of needles seemed to be pushing inward.

I fled into the courtyard.
Letting the sunlight dilute the despair.

Gradually the roaring weakened.
Became hoarse.
Then became sobbing.

The next morning Father shook me awake.

"My son."

It was the first time I could remember him calling his own flesh and blood that way.

"Wake up."
"We're moving back to Number Seven."

13 THE BLACKOUT DANCE

Fragment: the Secret Sound of Fabric Brushing Against a Rising Chest | a Slow Dance Melody

Time & Location: Summer 1981 · Renmin University of China, Beijing

For the first time in my life, I appeared before the world with my hair dyed black.

I pedaled my bicycle hard through the crowds.

No longer unusual.

No longer conspicuous.

Like a Japanese ninja.

It felt wonderful.

The wind rushed past my ears, cutting through the thick infrasonic hum of power that forever lingered around Compound No. 7.

The dormitory erupted in laughter the moment I arrived.

Everyone wanted to talk about my hair.

"The White-Haired Girl has finally returned to the human world."

The line came from one of the revolutionary model operas everyone had known during the Cultural Revolution.

The seven other men in my dormitory seemed intoxicated by the imported Japanese dye.

Dopamine overflowed.

One moment they mimicked the accents of the "Great Leader."

The next, they copied the lecherous laugh of the Southern bullie.

Then they invented stories about hemorrhoids on the Long March.

I filtered out the noise.

My instincts were occupied elsewhere.

I was waiting for the dance that night.

At ten o'clock, the event students jokingly called the **Blackout Dance** began in a large classroom.

Bed sheets covered the windows.

Desks were pushed against the walls.

A Sanyo dual-cassette recorder started playing Western dance music.

Da Guo entered first.

Several young women followed him, each from a different university.

He was my roommate, an eccentric character.

Keeping an exaggeratedly serious expression, he introduced them one by one.

The last girl was of medium height.

A ponytail.

Slightly parted lips.

A courteous smile.

She wore a plaid blouse and dark trousers.

The overall impression was one of dignity touched by pride.

“Lights out,” Da Guo shouted.

I remained seated.
I tried to focus on the melody.
But I could not shut out the sounds around me.

Fabric rubbing against skin.
Kisses.
Hands squeezing flesh.
Girls brushing away wandering hands.
Every sound floated clearly through the darkness.

A light suddenly came on.
The girl in the plaid blouse had slipped free from Da Guo's wandering embrace.
She walked directly toward me.
“Would you like to dance?”
“A quick waltz?”
I looked into her eyes.

At the same time, I heard the mysterious whisper of fabric brushing against the rise and fall of her chest.

The recorder began playing The Blue Danube.

Around us, every dancing couple folded into the shape of parentheses.
For the first time in my life, my enormous feet attempted to follow dance steps.
My partner and I kept a careful distance between our bodies.

Together we turned and turned, following the faint scratching rhythm of magnetic tape passing beneath the recorder's head.
Occasionally I stepped on her polished red leather shoes.
She only smiled.
Head tilted upward.
Looking at me.
Her ponytail slowly coming loose.

The lights went out again.
The music changed.
A blues number.

The surrounding noises multiplied.
Muted breathing from the boys.
The friction of hands against skin.
The silky sound of girls stroking backs.
Soft laughter escaping unwanted kisses.
And somewhere in a corner, a moan like a cat calling in the night.

The slow melody softened everything inside me.
At first I kept my arm straight, touching only her back.
A few steps later she moved closer.
Her cheek rested against my shoulder.
Chest against chest.
Leg against leg.
We swayed together.

Then the thing I feared most happened.
When my knee brushed the inside of her thigh, that softness, that elasticity,
triggered the hunting rifle hidden inside me.

I released her immediately.
Stepping backward, the rifle brushed against her abdomen.
I bent over at once and hurried back to my seat.

She followed.
“Are you feeling unwell?”
“No, no. I'm fine. Go dance with someone else.”

She said nothing.
Instead she sat beside me and took my hand.
She would never know how long that hunting rifle remained at attention.
I forced myself to think about geometric figures.
Physics formulas.
The silent darkness of the universe.
Anything that might cool my body without betraying what was happening inside it.

She continued holding my hand.
I heard the irregular rhythm of her heartbeat.
I heard the subtle movement between her thighs.
I heard the tightness in her throat.
Something slightly sticky.
Something slightly restrained.

The lights came on again.
“My name is Bai Ying. Mongolian. What's yours?”
“Tong Tong. Class of 1980. School of Political Science and Law.”
She tilted her head slightly.
“Manchu?”
“Yes. Tonggiya Clan. And you?” she laughed. “You look more like some foreign
mixed-blood than a Mongol.”
She lifted her face and brushed back her hair.

We fell in love.
At least, I thought it was love.

We met often.
I took her to restaurants.
I gave her fountain pens.
Red ribbons.
Gold-embossed notebooks.

I began visiting home more frequently.
Not to see my father.
But to search through the drawers and cabinets connected with his “work,” hoping to discover suitable gifts.

I found nothing.

14 THE WHITE CROW WAKES

Fragment: the Doppler Effect | a Mocking, Arrogant Laugh
Time & Location: Summer 1981 · Renmin University of China, Beijing

For many days, Tong Tong stopped answering my calls.
She no longer replied to my letters.
I returned to the dormitory defeated.

Da Guo leaned over from the upper bunk.
“Heartbroken?”
How could he know?
Of course he knew.
He had already slept with Tong Tong.
The third day after the dance.
The brutality of human affection nearly crushed me.

The White Crow awoke.
Man and bird sharing the same body, we began tracking Da Guo's movements, his words, his sexual exploits, searching for anything that might allow the authorities to classify him as a hooligan.
Any evidence.
Any mistake.
Any weakness.

Then I overheard Tong Tong nestled in his arms.
She called him a *real man*.

Bai Ying, she said, was merely a timid imitation Mongol.
A fake.

The wavelength of that feminine contempt struck me like a weapon.
Darkness flooded my vision.
I was taken to the small hospital inside Compound No. 7.

When I returned to school, I noticed that the girls around Da Guo changed constantly.

One word freed me completely:
Dirty.
Rumors followed.
Tong Tong had left school.
Had undergone an abortion.
Had abandoned her studies and married a minor official.

The divinity of the White Crow awakened an almost pathological curiosity within me.

I spent increasing amounts of time in the university library.
I sat beneath the dim lights of the reading room, turning pages no one else bothered to read.

Old paper crackled softly as its fibers broke apart.
Dry.
Fragile.
Dead.
Physical formulas filled the pages.
Boring formulas.
Dead formulas.

I stared at them and suddenly laughed.
A cold laugh.
A ridiculous laugh.
An arrogant laugh.

“Hmm.”
No one was better than me.
No one.

Those acousticians hiding in laboratories behind thick glasses spent their lives measuring decibels and hertz.
Decibels.
Hertz.
Numbers.
Numbers.
Numbers.
That was all they had.
They could measure sound.
But they would never hear the erotic overtone hidden behind a row of cloth buttons.

They would never calculate the half-hertz drift of hypocrisy buried inside Gao Yong's magnetic baritone.
That tiny distortion created by arrogance.
By power.
By self-importance.
They studied waves.

I heard destiny.

Human beings, in front of me, were nothing more than carbon-based sound machines.
Two hundred and six bones supporting a vibrating mass of flesh.
Every friction.
Every tremor.
Every collision.
Every hidden mechanical movement.
Nothing escaped my ears.
Nothing.
The circulatory system.
The digestive system.
The nervous system.
The reproductive system.
I heard everything.

The White Crow's gift for stripping away background noise, combined with its absolute instinct for cause and consequence, turned human beings into radios made of meat.
At any moment I could change channels.
A different voice.
A different body.
A different secret.

The surveillance teams inside Compound No. 7—hundreds of listeners working together—could never reach what came naturally to me.
Never.

No crow was better than me.
Not one.
The black birds screaming in the old locust trees could hear courtship calls.
They could hear danger.
They could hear the wings of predators.
That was enough for them.
Not for me.

All I needed was the right medium.
Then I could hear a cigarette butt landing on a Persian carpet several kilometers away.

I could hear Tong Tong.
I could hear the lingering echo of a vocal cord called *Dignity* snapping inside her at the height of desire.
I could hear it long after the sound itself had died.

I closed the book.
The White Crow trembled somewhere deep inside my spine.
No one would ever understand what I was.
No one.
They thought I was a half-blind cripple surviving under my father's shadow.
A weak boy.
A dull student.
A pale face hiding behind black hair dye.
They were wrong.
All of them.

“Hmm.”
I touched my ears.
My miraculous ears.
I removed my sunglasses.
Light flooded in.
The sampling overload returned immediately.
Pain.
A thin red haze.
The familiar burn behind my eyes.

I took a deep breath.
For a moment I almost felt grateful to Gao Yong.
And to Tong Tong.
Without them, I might never have recognized myself.
Without them, I might never have understood who was truly superior.

15 THE ROAR AGAINST MY EARDRUMS

Fragment: a Voice With the Woody Fragrance of a Cello | the Pure Frequency of Flowing Blood
Time & Location: Summer 1982 · Volleyball Court, Renmin University

From Pocket Alley, through Yangfang Hutong, Deshengmen Inner Street, and the Third Ring Road, to Renmin University, was only twelve or thirteen kilometers.

During rush hour, however, it was one of the worst traffic bottlenecks in Beijing. "Boss, it may take two hours," the driver said.

The silence inside the Lexus had nearly hypnotized me.
Before my eyes, the swaying hips on the south bank of Houhai continued to move.
Then, without warning, the volleyball court of forty years ago began to cover my vision.

The afternoon sun turned Rowan Lee's spiking form into a swan taking flight.
Many of the boys around us watched the temptation radiating from her body.

I only wanted to scan her voice.
The physiological melodies and explosions that no human ear could hear.

Yet Gao Yong's monkey-like shrieks constantly disrupted the soundscape I guarded so carefully. By then he was already my classmate.

He walked over and pinched his voice into a mock greeting.
"Hey, buddy. Still thinking about math and physics?"

My fist had already tightened into a block of iron.
Then Rowan's contralto voice arrived, carrying a faint resonance from her nasal cavity.

My fingers loosened.
Behind her, the reading room door kept opening and closing with a creak.
It sounded like her accompaniment.

Two months earlier, it was there that I had picked up a black hairpin from the ground and spoken my first words to her.

"Classmate, you dropped your hairpin."
"Oh! Yes, yes. Thank you."

Her voice carried the woody fragrance of a cello.

The letters she wrote to me were filled with tiny, meticulous handwriting.
Nothing about them suggested the six-foot-tall outside hitter of the university women's volleyball team.
Yet those gentle sentences accompanied one beautiful dream after another.

We went to Zizhuyuan Park.
The bamboo and flowers around us carried delicate fragrances.
Lotus blossoms floated across the water beside clusters of small round green leaves.
The lake seemed to be performing a nocturne.
The world had never smelled so pleasant.

Or sounded so beautiful.

As we walked along the gravel path, Rowan moved as though she were dancing.
The soft crunching beneath her feet was light and gentle.
I hesitated.

Then hesitated again.
At last, I wrapped my arms around her.

In that instant, I heard the most sacred single-track recording in the world.
The rise and fall of a young girl's clear breathing.
My body stood on the verge of exploding.

Yet suddenly, I lacked the courage to kiss her.

The moment my arms encircled that soft waist, I heard my own blood roaring wildly
against my eardrums.

Grandma Yang's row of cloth buttons.
The slime-soaked red-brick rooms of Pocket Alley.
They remained a curse I could not cross.

Beneath Rowan's warm skin, waves of pure blood frequencies knocked against my
soul.

I felt like a container filled with formaldehyde and corpses.
Facing something sacred while emitting foul, primitive biological noise.

The instant she closed her eyes, I gently pushed her away.

Then I began talking endlessly about academics and politics.
There always seemed to be a lump of phlegm lodged in my throat.

I asked her:
"What are you planning to do after graduation?"

16 HER HEARTBEAT EMPTIED BY ASTONISHMENT

Fragment: Hormones Rising Thick in the Throat | a Bohemian Melody
Time & Location: Summer 1982 · Volleyball Court, Renmin University

She barely paused.

"Of course I'm going to graduate school, my great journalist. I don't intend to
waste my youth."

I felt crushed.

I wanted to marry her immediately and spend my life beside her.

But her certainty about graduate school meant I would have to wait at least another five years before marriage.

I could not help calculating how much weight I truly carried in her heart.

The more I thought about it, the darker my mood became.

My steps faltered.

I nearly fell into the lake.

She laughed so hard she could barely straighten her back.

I turned my face toward the water.

I did not dare tell her that I had been trained, from a very young age, to be a lustful monster.

The sound of her footsteps remained slightly unsettled until she boarded the bus.

The tires rubbed against the pavement with a dry, abrasive screech.

Like steel wire dragged across glass.

Back at the volleyball court, Gao Yong hovered beside the sidelines like a Hanging Ghost trapped inside an iron loudspeaker.

His eyes never left Rowan.

His mouth never stopped moving.

Whenever Rowan leaped for a spike, hormones seemed to ooze from his throat.

"Beautiful! Absolutely beautiful!"

Only I knew that coarse, unchanging wavelength.

It had already become Gao Yong's signature back in Compound No. 7.

After we became classmates, Gao Yong took surprisingly good care of me.

Once, during a football match, an international student deliberately stepped on my head after I made a save.

Gao Yong immediately grabbed a wooden stick.

With a monkey-like shriek bursting from his throat, he charged at a Black player half a head taller than himself.

The fight ended the match.

It also earned him disciplinary punishment.

Whenever Rowan practiced, I sat in the stands.

The campus loudspeakers often played Dvořák's Symphony No. 8.

Its Bohemian melodies suited her perfectly.

After a spike, Rowan landed.
Large beads of sweat rolled down her translucent neck and disappeared into the
mystery of her jersey.

She looked at me.
Breathing hard.
A victor's arrogance glowing in her eyes.

"Hey, Bai Ying."
"What do you see?"

The answer escaped before I could stop it.
"Your pelvis produces almost no lateral oscillation when you land."

She froze.

Her heartbeat emptied itself in pure astonishment.
A half-second void opened inside her chest.

Laughter erupted around us.

Ha ha ha.
Ha ha ha.

The laughter of humanities students, mixed with dry frequencies of self-importance.

"A perfect answer to a gravity-and-acceleration problem. Absolutely perfect."

I muttered the words and lowered my head.

Ignoring the puzzled looks of her teammates, Rowan walked over and crouched in
front of me.

"My little scholar," she said softly.
"Are you trying to tell me I'm beautiful?"

"According to the laws of physics, you're exceptionally beautiful."

Silence.
Her face darkened.
Then she smiled.

She gave me a light push.
"Go get some rest."

Gao Yong appeared as if he had fallen from a tree.

Silent.

Sudden.

A thread of phlegm hung in his voice.

Pretending not to notice, he brushed against Rowan while she wiped away sweat.

"That white hair of Bai Ying's will always look fake, no matter how hard he dyes it black.

He's a part worn down by the friction of history.

He isn't light.

He's shadow."

His voice carried a lazy magnetic vibration.

And a sticky undertone from deep in his throat.

"Oh? He was born with white hair?"

Rowan's handkerchief froze in midair.

I had not yet walked very far.

I wanted to turn around.

To tear apart the mouth that had exposed my secret.

But my legs refused to obey.

They kept moving forward.

17 INFRASONIC RESONANCE

Fragment: a Nearly Imperceptible Click of the Tongue | an Infrasonic Resonance Carrying Destructive Force

Time & Location: Autumn 1982 · Gao Residence, Compound No. 7, Beijing

Rowan had never known what I looked like before I dyed my hair. Until my third year at university, I had never altered the color of my white hair.

Nor could she have known that, because his father's rank was not high enough, Gao Yong had never enjoyed the privilege I took for granted—free haircuts at the government compound barber shop.

His father had no access to the imported Japanese hair dye kept there either.

I still remember the first time Gao Yong stared at my black hair.

The sound he made was almost inaudible—a tiny click of the tongue.

Who could have imagined that such a minute flicker of jealousy would pry open the sealed world Rowan and I once shared?

Before Gao Yong took Rowan away, there had been little reason for hatred between us.

His father had humiliated mine countless times, but after 1980, the government's campaign for "Emancipation of Thought" had encouraged the younger generation to forget the blood debts of their parents' era.

My father rarely mentioned the persecutions he had suffered during the Cultural Revolution. Instead, he threw himself into work with remarkable energy.

In two days, I would become a journalist.

At that moment, I was crouching beneath a stand of cypress trees inside Compound No. 7, using the crow-like hearing I had been born with to sample, in real time, the soundscape inside the Gao residence—a world filled with the scent of rosewood furniture and the strains of a serenade.

My heart hammered against my throat.
Then I heard Rowan's voice.

The cello had become a sparrow's cry, splitting apart little by little beneath the combined pressure of alcohol and power.

Then came the frequency that finally drove me beyond reason.

Pop.

Gao Yong unfastened the first plastic button on Rowan's blouse.
There was no coercion. No violence.

Only a slow, deliberate invasion—charitable in appearance, joyful in its cruelty.
I heard Gao Yong's dry hands close around living flesh.
Skin sliding against skin produced a sticky, sizzling friction.

His counterfeit breaths of passion sounded like the clipped grunts of a wild dog.

Boom—

The White Crow within me mutated completely.
Its response to the theft of a mate was far more violent than any human emotion.
It was instinct.

A law of nature that recognized only destruction.
The world collapsed inside my ears.

I surged to my feet as if preparing for flight.

From the depths of my throat erupted twenty-three years of accumulated fury—a subsonic resonance carrying raw destructive force.

The power hidden within me exploded without restraint.

My father's discipline was gone.
Only the uncontrollable self remained.

“Ekhsig—Qini—Arakh!”

Dust rolled from the roof.
Chunks of plaster loosened and fell.
Leaves abandoned their branches.
The world froze inside the deepest chamber of my rage.

The Gao family's maid was the first to run outside, nearly stumbling.
An old man thrust one leg through the doorway, then immediately withdrew.
Gao Yong's mouth hung open as if a tooth were being ripped from his jaw.
Clutching at his face, he backed into the shadows beneath the eaves and collapsed onto the ground.

My voice—or rather, the merged voice of myself and the White Crow—had torn through the human mind's armor.

One might have called it Mongolian throat singing.
It seemed to descend from the horizon itself.
Or perhaps it was better described as the Crow's Sword of Sound, plunging from the sky.

Rowan emerged from the Gao residence.
There was not the slightest hesitation in her stride.
Her breathing still carried the fading resonance of her earlier moans.
She lifted her chin.
Her fingers slid through her long hair.

Then she bent and climbed into a battered Beijing 212 jeep whose body rattled in every direction.
The streetlights dimmed.

Gao Yong followed behind her, still resembling the monkey he had been as a child.

The Pierre Cardin logo on his suit sleeve was beginning to fray.
That furtive hand fumbled with a loose button, trying to force it back through the hole.

The scraping sound reminded me of Grandma Yang undressing herself.

18 THE HEAVY SCENT OF PERFUME

Fragment: the Soundscape of a Paris Fashion Show | High Frequencies Carried by High Heels | the Sinister Rustle of Ten Thousand Bamboo Leaves
Time & Location: Autumn 2002 · Champs-Élysées, Paris | Winter 1992 · Bamboo Garden, Beijing

In a distinctly Chinese corporate coup, I was stripped of my positions as President and Chief Executive Officer.

Not long afterward, I went to Europe alone.
Charles de Gaulle Airport was chaotic.

After a long struggle to find a taxi, I headed straight for the Marriott on the Champs-Élysées.

At dusk, I sat at a table by the street.
A plate of oysters.
A plate of shrimp.
French fries.
A Coke.

I took out a Seven Stars cigarette and was about to light it when a heavy cloud of perfume drifted over from the next table.
It was Chanel No. 5 lingering on a French woman.

Not nearly as wild as the scent Rowan carried ten years earlier.

The next morning, I wandered through the École des Beaux-Arts de Paris without any destination.
Rowan had once told me she studied there for a master's degree in art history.
She never mentioned anything else about the place.

The day we met again ten years earlier had been too short.
I only had enough time to store her audio.

Eight o'clock that evening.

After a gathering with former classmates, Rowan arrived at Bamboo Garden as promised.

I remained seated behind my desk.
I did not stand up.

My expression was difficult to describe.
Perhaps anticipation.
Perhaps happiness.
Certainly a little awkwardness.

"You're still the same."

Those were the first words she said when she saw me.

She seemed about to reach out her hand.
Then withdrew it.
"May I sit down?"

The voice was unchanged.

Still carrying the woody fragrance of a cello.
Still rolling upward from deep within her chest.

Primitive.

Heavy.

When she unfastened the buttons of her black coat and settled gracefully into the chair opposite me, an overwhelming scent burst into the small room.

Dense.
Warm.
Powdery.
Alive with body heat.
Suddenly, I felt hungry.

The atmosphere between us remained much as it had been in Zizhuyuan Park years earlier.
Neither of us guarded against the other.

She spoke quietly about her years in Paris.
About graduate school.
About the fashion world.

I hardly listened.
I studied her face instead.
The angle formed by her jawline and the bridge of her nose gave her the look of a Greek sculpture.

Photographers at the time had a phrase for it:

"exceptionally strong bone-shadow definition."

I wanted to touch that face.

But she could not hear the request inside me.
She spoke casually about Paris, fashion shows, and life among artists.

I was curious about her relationships during those years.
Yet what filled my ears was something else entirely.
The soundscape of a runway show inside the Carrousel du Louvre.

The high frequencies of camera flashes.
The metallic ringing of hangers striking one another.
The distant roar of industrial blowers backstage.
Her deep-set eyes rested on me through a thin layer of mist.

My thoughts drifted elsewhere.
To a chair.
To a woman ten years older than Rowan.
To the eyes of a large cat.

Rowan never mentioned Gao Yong.
I knew they had married in Paris several years earlier.
I knew Gao Yong had placed an expensive diamond ring on her finger during the ceremony.

Now I saw no ring.
Not even the faintest trace a ring might have left behind.
Only the ordinary micro-vibrations of her finger joints.

Silently, I said to her:

Although you are married.
Although I no longer ache for you.
Although I know that pulling you into my arms and making love to you would be nothing more than an improper fantasy.

I still like sitting quietly across from you.

In Bamboo Garden, once part of Kang Sheng's former residence, the sinister rustling of countless bamboo leaves slowly turned all those self-indulgent "althoughs" into cigarette smoke drifting from my mouth.

"Shall I drive you home?"
I asked the question without much sincerity.
I was embarrassed by my aging Santana.

"Thank you.

But there's no need.
I can call a taxi myself."

When she left, her high heels struck the stone path with crisp, impossibly high frequencies.

Outside the courtyard, a Toyota Crown taxi started its engine immediately.

19 THE SOUNDSCAPE OF CROSSING A BORDER

Fragment: Barbed Wire Tearing Through Flesh | Leeches Covering my Face and Body

Time & Location: Summer 2022 · Alumni Chat Group | Yunnan Borderlands

After returning from the volleyball court to my apartment in Chegongzhuang, I immediately offered a reward of one thousand U.S. dollars in the alumni group, hoping to find Rowan.

An entire night passed.

All I collected were fragments.

She had lived with a Moroccan man in Paris.

She might own a modeling agency.

She might have converted to Islam.

She returned to China from time to time.

But every trail pointed toward the same fact:

she had never divorced Gao Yong, who was now serving a prison sentence in Qincheng.

No one could produce a recent photograph.

I split the reward into dozens of small red packets and scattered them through the group.

The result was a burst of cheers.

And a flood of jokes accusing me of behaving disgracefully for a man my age.

A few days later, I quietly checked into a small hotel in a border town in Yunnan.

Night had fallen completely.

A motorcycle carried me through the darkness.

Its exhaust sounded like applause from the Statue of Liberty.

We passed checkpoint after checkpoint and eventually arrived beneath a mountain as black as forged iron.

After climbing more than a thousand meters, I collapsed onto the ground. Ahead of me stretched a barbed-wire fence running along the border.

Insects sang from every direction.
The barbs reflected cold moonlight.
The silence of the human world felt terrifying.

Without warmth.
Without mercy.

I heard the two villagers whispering.
They complained that I was too tall.

Too heavy.

That the smuggler was paying them too little.
I was exhausted.
There was no way back.

I pulled out the last two thousand yuan I carried and handed it to them in the dark.

They lifted me.
Then pushed me through a hole that had already been cut into the fence.
The barbs sliced through the synthetic fabric first.
Rows of fibers snapped apart.

Sharp.

High-pitched.
Then came my thigh.
The flesh split open.

Rrrrip.
Rrrrip.

The sound was so horrifying that I lost all control of my body.
Thud.

My shoulder struck foreign soil before the rest of me.
I clenched my teeth.
Controlled my breathing.

The same way I had done years earlier inside a prison cell reserved for violent criminals.

"Move."

One of the villagers growled.
The frequency was so low it seemed to rise from hell itself.
They lifted me again.

Like a log.

Step by step, they carried me downhill.
My feet slipped constantly.

Several times I nearly disappeared into the silent abyss beside the trail.

My ears filled with sounds.

Insects crawling.
Insects flying.
Drops of water rolling along leaves.

Bones and organs struggling against one another inside the villagers' bodies.

When we finally reached safety, I collapsed onto a rock and lost consciousness.

A shaft of morning sunlight woke me.
My face was covered with leeches.
My body was covered with leeches.
They had buried themselves into my flesh and were drinking my blood.

As I peeled them away one by one, I felt something strange.
The devil was not the leeches.
The devil was my will.

Or at least, whatever drove me forward was no longer entirely human.

After removing them all, pain flooded back into my leg.
My hand came away black-red with blood.
The bone was intact.
Only flesh had been torn.
Yet I still could not stand.

My throat was so dry I could not speak.
I reached toward the grass and wiped dew onto my lips.

One of the villagers handed me a dry branch.
I froze.

Its shape resembled a wooden toothbrush.
Without thinking, I recoiled.

20 A TOOTHBRUSH

Fragment: Bone and Plastic Were Trying To Destroy Each Other
Time & Location: Winter 1989 · Fourth Ring Road Detention Center, Beijing

Heh-heh. Tough journalist, aren't you?
The cell boss shook his small head and glanced behind me.

Before I was thrown into that cell of barely a dozen square meters, I had already lost my hearing.
I had also lost my hearing aid.

Several large men rushed forward and pinned down my legs and right arm.
Someone grabbed my left hand and forced apart my middle and ring fingers.

A toothbrush was shoved into the gap.

Twisting.
Then accelerating violently.

The toothbrush jammed deep between the fingers.
The joints emitted a series of creaks, like a rusted hinge being forced open.
Bone and plastic were trying to destroy each other.

I stared at the mold stains on the ceiling.
I nearly bit through my back teeth.

My entire body trembled.

In my ears remained only that raw grinding sound produced by extreme pressure.

Again.
And again.

I could hear the bones reaching their limit.
Like dry branches on the verge of snapping.

The air froze.
Everyone was waiting for the crack.

I refused to make a sound.
My body drew tight like a crazed bow.

"Stop! Stop!"

The cell boss suddenly stood up.

Buzz.

A dull concussion split the sky.
My hearing returned.

"Oh my. The journalist really is tough. Nobody stays quiet when we use this thing."

The cell boss pinched his voice into an ingratiating tone.
He even stroked my bleeding hand.

Then he launched into one of his favorite subjects:
himself.

He had eight murders on his record.
Recently transferred back from Xinjiang.
Soon enough, he would face a firing squad.

That very night, I learned the backgrounds of the other sixteen men in the cell.
The least serious offense belonged to a man who had photographed nude women.

"Hooliganism."
Life imprisonment.

The others were murderers.
Or armed robbers.

Yet these devils showed me an inexplicable friendliness.
Especially when the conversation turned to my defiance of authority.
They never seemed to tire of it.

I had no idea when I would regain my freedom.
So I began learning how to survive among them.

With my hearing fully restored, I played the mystic.
The madman.
The fortune-teller.
Before long, I held the psychological advantage.

The man imprisoned for nude photography seemed unconvinced.
He wandered over.
"The journalist's voice sounds pretty good," he said.

"You sing?"

Before the sentence was finished, the hard leather sole of his three-section dress shoe was already grinding down on my fingers.
Laughter erupted around the cell.

Buzz—

The khoomei rising from inside me suddenly vibrated.

Crash.
Clatter.

Bang.

Objects throughout the room toppled over or fell to the floor.

Everyone fell silent.
Even their breathing became controlled.

21 SHOCKWAVE

Fragment: Khoomei Vibrations | the Thunder of Every Bump in the Road |
March of the Volunteers
Time & Location: Winter 1989 · Fourth Ring Road Detention Center, Beijing |
Summer 2022 · Yunnan Borderlands | Marina Bay Sands, Singapore

A few days earlier, on a winter morning in 1989, I had just arrived at the newspaper office when a squad of soldiers dragged me from my desk and delivered me to a detention center for violent offenders near Beijing's Fourth Ring Road.

Several slaps knocked my hearing aid to the floor.
The soldiers left.

A veteran policeman took over.
"What was that noise? Huh?"

The old policeman rushed over.
Nobody spoke.
Nobody looked at me.

His leather shoes trembled constantly against the concrete floor.
It was this same old man who interrogated me on my first day.

Before I could say a word, he picked up a file and began listing my crimes.
"Bai Ying. Male. Thirty years old. Native of Beijing."
"Well? Is that right? Speak, damn it!"

His eyes resembled those of a hanging ghost.
Green light seemed to leak from them.
He continued reading.

I could not hear a thing.

No doubt the usual charges:
organizing illegal demonstrations;
delivering reactionary speeches to martial-law troops;
publishing counterrevolutionary articles in newspapers.
The final accusation was especially bizarre.
Apparently, I was also suspected of drugging and raping a Tibetan female journalist.

After changing into prison clothing and being photographed, I was shoved into a low-ceilinged cell.
Before leaving, the old policeman gave the inmates a look.

They understood immediately.
A gang of criminals rushed forward.
My head was shoved into the toilet.
The blows came down like a collapsing mine shaft.

The day martial law was lifted in Beijing, I heard the old policeman calling my name.
His voice floated through the corridor.
"Bai Ying!"

"Present!"
By then, I had already learned the proper way for prisoners to answer.

"Well, well, Journalist Bai.
Get out here.
Your old chief has come to pick you up.
Pack your things."

Father handed me a pair of dark glasses.
And a hearing aid imported from Japan.

Then he gently patted my back.
"Get in the car."

"We can't afford any more delays.
We have to keep moving."

The villager had already urged me several times.

I picked up the branch, slightly thicker than a toothbrush, and continued downhill.

The mountains of Phongsaly stretched endlessly before me.
Streams cut through the valleys.
Behind me remained traces of blood.
And footprints.

My legs suddenly gave way.
I fell hard.

The sharp edge of a rock drove upward into me.
The pain was unbearable.
I reached back.
My hand came away covered in blood and excrement.

The first stage of the journey ended on the back seat of a Honda motorcycle.
The wound near my anus began to burn with unbearable pain.
The motorcycle bounced along broken mountain roads.
Every impact exploded through my body.
For two hours, each bump was a nightmare.

The second stage placed me in the narrow gap behind the driver of a cargo van.
I waited for hours before I found a chance to clean myself.
The third stage unfolded inside the trunk of a Toyota SUV.
Four hours.

The friction between tires, asphalt, and concrete became a high-frequency vibration that sounded like an execution order.
Checkpoint after checkpoint fell behind us.

Eventually, we reached Luang Prabang.
There I met the brother who had arranged my escape.
I ate eggs fried with chili peppers.
And drank Coca-Cola.

Two weeks later, I checked into Marina Bay Sands.

The room cost more than eight hundred U.S. dollars a night.
I was happy.
I was no longer the doll bullied in a mountain village.
No longer the timid student who had lost his first love.
No longer an ordinary citizen trapped beneath the power of political bosses.

My Citibank account still held plenty of U.S. dollars.

The bed beneath me was larger than the wooden platform where eighteen prisoners once slept together.

I spread my arms.
Spread my legs.
Forming the shape of a Chinese character.

Without realizing it, I began humming:
"Arise, ye who refuse to be slaves..."

Space feels different when it belongs to freedom.

Freedom is never cramped.

22 THE FEMALE GO PLAYER'S PROBE

Fragment: Metal Grinding Against Gravel | "Could We Stop Eating Dog Meat?"
Time & Location: Summer 2022 · John F. Kennedy International Airport, New York
York | Autumn 2006 · North Shore of Houhai, Beijing

As I walked out of John F. Kennedy International Airport, I headed straight toward Prince Ankh.

He stood there like a statue.
His hands gripped my shoulders tightly.
Tears streamed down his face.
His voice struggled to maintain its old heroic strength.

What I heard instead was the noise of decay spreading through a body more than ninety years old.

The sound reminded me of metal being sharpened against gravel.
I had heard the same sound beside my father's bed.

"Hello, Grandpa."
The girl beside me reached out and touched his arm.

"Welcome, National Champion."
The old prince smiled through his tears.
"We meet again."
The old Mongolian prince smiled through his tears.

"Bai Ying."
A Shanghai accent burst from the telephone.

Bright.
Powerful.
Full of energy.

"General Zhou? You're in Beijing?"
I remembered his voice from the year Macau returned to China.
Back then, he sounded like a battlefield conductor.
Even more commanding than now.

"Haha. Came back to report in person.
Then I'm heading out again.
Too dry over here."

"Do you have time? We should meet."
"Your Go isn't bad, if I remember correctly."
"Only amateur level. Three or four dan at most."
"Good.
I'll introduce you to a real player."

"Wonderful."
"Tomorrow, then."

The national-level player turned out to be a girl.
She had just turned eighteen.
Thirty years younger than I was.

About one hundred and sixty-eight centimeters tall.
A headband exposed her smooth, rounded forehead completely.

Her face was full as a harvest moon.
Willow-leaf eyes.
Willow-leaf eyebrows.
Everything looked painted.

The corners of her mouth lifted slightly, revealing a row of perfectly aligned white teeth.
Her heartbeat was steady.
Strong.

She looked so beautiful that she completely overturned my long-held belief that there were usually more unattractive women than Go stones around a Go board.

General Zhou introduced her.

Yehenara Orchid.

A professional player from the Chinese Go Association.
A distant relative of Empress Dowager Cixi through Mrs. Zhou's family.
Fresh from defeating several of China's strongest players.

"Please, sit down.
Miss... I mean, National Champion.
General Zhou."
I found myself stumbling over words.

"Hello, President Bai."
A trace of Beijing softness lingered in her voice.
No one had called me "President Bai" in a very long time.
Strangely, I felt flattered.

We chatted for a while.
Although she was the same age as my daughter, I never dared treat her like a junior.

When General Zhou mentioned Go, neither of us responded.
We both understood.

The difference in skill was simply too large.
I took them to the north shore of Houhai for dog-meat hotpot.

When we parted, Lan Hui leaned lightly against my shoulder.
Then she spoke in a soft voice.

"President Bai."
"Yes?"
"Could we stop eating dog meat?"
"Okay?"

I froze.

To me, it felt no different from a probing move in a complicated endgame of human nature.

The silhouettes of the General and the young Go player disappeared into the evening.

I crouched beside the railing.
Like I used to as a boy.

I picked up a few flat stones and spun them across the water.

Pop.
Pop.

Pop.

Ring after ring spread across the dark surface of Houhai.

23 THE SOUND OF A PEN SCRATCHING PAPER

Fragment: the Tiny Breath of a Pen Crossing Paper | Flatulence During the Qigong Craze

Time & Location: Autumn 1982 · China Youth Daily, Beijing

I reported for duty at *China Youth Daily*.

The compound looked like a miniature government ministry.
Three-story red-brick buildings stood on the left.
An eight-story concrete headquarters faced the entrance.
The courtyard was bare.
Grains of sand rolled across the cement.

Inside every office came the faint breathing sound of pen tips moving across paper.
Telephones never stopped.

Click.

Whirr.

Clatter.

Click.

Whirr.

Clatter.

The rotary dials spun endlessly.
The noise tightened every muscle in my body.
Made my head ache.
Made my vision blur.

Some people even flicked the dial with pencils.
The graphite scraped against plastic.
The sound was pure evil.

A pair of fleshy hands reached toward me.
Warmth performed for effect.

I stood.

The man was three inches shorter than I was.

Chen Dashan.
Thirty years old.

Transferred to the newspaper four years earlier.
A veteran by newsroom standards.
I had heard he had never attended university.
Before joining the paper, he had worked as a forge operator in the Tangshan Iron Works.

I was the top humanities student in Beijing.
A graduate of Renmin University's journalism department.

He worked hard to project humility and goodwill.
I worked hard not to listen to the broken fragments of envy being swallowed deep inside his throat.

After lunch I fell asleep at my desk.
He woke me.

A mountain of wrinkled papers and envelopes landed before me.
Hundreds of readers' letters.
Dozens of articles submitted by local reporters.
All related to the Qigong craze.

The senior editor spoke with solemn authority.
"Bai Ying."
"Read every one of them."
"Carefully."
"Very carefully."

His stomach strained against his shirt.
I could not help laughing.
Beneath that fabric, biochemical warfare was already underway.
The rumbling grew louder by the second.

"Editor Chen."
"You had a good lunch, didn't you?"

"You little bastard. Get to work."
"University graduates love showing off."
"Uh..."
"Uh..."

Pff.
Pff.

A foul smell erupted.

I grabbed the papers and fled.

Back then, reporters and editors often joked about the nationwide Qigong fever.

The most memorable line was this:

"Hundreds of people gathered together."
"Either they're inhaling in unison..."
"Or secretly farting."

It took me forever to finish reading the material.
When I returned it to Chen Dashan, he pulled me along to meet a woman in her thirties.

Not tall.
Large eyes.
Large breasts.
A Zhongshan suit tailored with unusual care.
Perfect Mandarin.

"This is Sister Rong."
"Our department director."

Sister Rong was efficient.
Within minutes she had explained everything.
I immediately understood what my job would be.

"Bai Ying..."
"You have a good voice."

She smiled and walked us to the door.

Standing in the corridor, I replayed her final sentence.
There was something smooth about it.
Something slightly sticky.
Yet I could not quite hear the meaning beneath it.

Over the following weeks I rode my bicycle through every corner of Beijing.
The editorial department supplied clues.
I followed them.

At each location I stayed only a few minutes.
I showed my press card.
Stood quietly.
Listened.
I rarely even opened my eyes.
Then I left.

Every qigong master sounded different.
Every organizer used different words.
Every gathering had its own rhythm.

Yet I was certain of one thing.
Not a single sentence was true.

I could not hear that smooth, stable frequency which accompanies truth.
Not once.

Perhaps lives sustained by so-called ideals and beliefs always sounded false to me.
Most people were terrible performers anyway.
Their singing never stayed in tune.

I wandered through the primitive fields of energy shared by birds and humans.
Sound fields.
Magnetic fields.
Invisible currents.

The background noise of humanity could be muted whenever I wished.
Why waste too much attention on charlatans and their followers?

My mind drifted.

The bicycle slammed into a willow tree.
I flew over the handlebars.
Landed hard.
And burst out laughing.

The final stop was Guozijian Street near Yonghe Temple.

Before I even entered the courtyard, Gao Yong was already bubbling inside.
His passionate voice overflowing the walls.

24 THE STICKY QUESTION MARK

Fragment: Slightly Hollow Breathing From the Lungs | a Lion Trapped Inside the Throat

Time & Location: Summer 1983 · Guozijian, Beijing | Beijing–Shanghai Railway

The arrogant frequency that lived deep inside Gao Yong's nervous system still sent a chill through my spine.

“Heh-heh.”

After graduation, Gao Yong had been assigned to one of those institutions responsible for regulating thought and language.

Now he stood on a stone staircase as a division chief, accompanying several elderly scientists whose hair had already turned white.
He wore a carefully tailored navy Zhongshan suit.
The collar button was fastened perfectly.
A narrow strip of white shirt showed beneath the jacket.

Behind a row of cypresses stood a wooden sign painted in red characters on a white background:
Institute of Human Science.

From a distance, I heard the slightly hollow breathing in Gao Yong's lungs as he whispered to an old man.

"Professor Qian has already expressed his support."

"This may be the key we've been looking for."

"The key to the future."

The old man leaned away from Gao Yong's breath and nodded.

Heh-heh.

There he was again.

Smiling.

Behind the expression of sincerity hid a physiological pleasure derived from playing with other people's intelligence.

"You're coming to Shanghai with me."

Sister Rong did not sound as though discussion was possible.

We boarded a green train packed with passengers.

She showed her green press credential.

Within minutes she had persuaded the conductor to find us space in a hard-sleeper carriage.

Bodies pressed against bodies.

The sounds of digestion and immunity rose and fell around us.

Very little of the irritability that originated from the reproductive system.

At dusk the train raced south along the Beijing–Shanghai Railway.

Villages.

Wheat fields.

Scattered trees.

All slipped past the window.

I occupied the upper bunk.

Sleepy.

Half dreaming.

Below me, Sister Rong softly hummed *Bengawan Solo*.

The melody flowed upward.

The voice of a young girl.

The rhythm of a mature woman.

They traveled through my body and gathered in my lower half.

On the journey back to Beijing, we rode the same train.
The same hard-sleeper carriage.

The moment we boarded that morning, before I had even climbed into my bunk,
she placed a copy of *Three Hundred Foreign Folk Songs* on the small folding table
by the window.

"Sing a few for me."

Her large eyes blinked.
A sticky question mark.
One button on her blouse had pulled slightly apart.

We sang from the songbook.
One song after another.
Until the lights in the carriage finally went out.

She suddenly wrapped her arms around me.
Her lips brushed my cheek.
Then my mouth.

My breathing stumbled.
So did hers.

Something inside my throat was struggling to break free.
A lion.

Just as it was about to roar, she covered my mouth with her hand.

She held me tighter.
Her breathing lost its rhythm.
The tone in her throat dropped lower.

Her fingertips lingered where they had stopped.
Softly.
Lightly.

Every muscle in my body tightened.