

Feather Coat

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Abstract

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I take up the ancient Chinese folk story “Zhu-Qing,” told to me by my mother when I was a child and its story of a magical robe that I imaginatively came to remember as a feather coat. Whoever would put on this black feather coat would leave behind their earthly limitations and become a crow, flying high into the sky. I translate “Zhu-Qing” into American English and create two sagas of contemporary Chinese women who are transformed by the feather coat,” Celery Seed and Carrot Blossom” and “Flower with No Fragrance.” In “Underneath the Feather Coat,” I recount my research into “Zhu-Qing” and the volume of “strange” stories in which it was initially collected and consider the transformative effects of magic and fantasy.

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I . *“Zhu-Qing”*

Lord Wu's Temple

About four hundred years ago, a young student in his twenties was heading west. It was a rainy day.

Raindrops were throwing on people's faces vigorously by the wind. Bleached bamboo green hat, worn-out off-white robe stained with mud on its edge, straw braided sandals, he carried a cloth-wrapped bundle that is nearly empty. It has been months since he left home for a test being held in the capital, and he failed. From an impoverished family, and made living as a fisherman, he did not have much money since the beginning of his journey, and now he was completely broke and starving, yet shamed to be a beggar.

He was famished and exhausted in the rain, soaking wet, tottering like someone replaced his legs with two walking sticks.

Raindrops blur his sight and fall into his eyes, he struggled to keep his eyes open, looking for somewhere to rest, anywhere with a roof that he can stay. All doors were closed, vendors were gone, the empty stone pavement was occupied by the rain, and this lost young man. It is like he was trapped by this infinitely raining infinite street that both directions lead to the same place that he simply does not belong to.

He could not see far in the rain. He could barely see anything in the rain, just moving forward, "swimming" forward in the downpour; until he saw a half-opened wooden door appears right in front of his face, so close that he almost hit his head. The antique gate was made of nearly black wood, perhaps it was because it has been soaked by the rain.

Pushed the door open, his fingertips were too cold to feel the texture of the wet wood, as if the wood is softened and smoothed by the moisture. Instead, he smelled the wood immediately, the smell of the rain did not cover the old, moldy smell, the mixture of dirt,

mushrooms, rotting leaves, tree branches, and small animals like rats and squirrels, and birds; perhaps bird-like crows that eat meat.

As he walked through the door, the rain was blocked by the roof. He was standing in a covered corridor that leads to both his left and right and a courtyard in the front that traps the rainstorm in a cubical shape. Walked to the other side of the courtyard, he found himself in front of the main hall of a temple, there was a figure statue bigger than life-size, in the shrine.

The statue depicted a tall man dressed in general's clothes back to the Three Kingdom period, holding one halberd in each hand. The tips of the halberds were so sharp that it looks like the blades were glowing in the dim room. The general is wearing an ancient style black hat with a fluff of bright red feather decoration sticking out from the forehead part of the hat, which also was decorated with elaborate golden embroidery and white silk scarf stripe on the bottom edge that was tied to a knot on the back of his head. White neck scarf tucked in a set of thick yellow padded cloth armor with golden embroidery and a belt set with engraved jade pieces. His pants were in a drapery kind of fabric, plain off-white, with a pair of black boots with pointy tips that tilt up like the tip of a halberd, and the tips and back of the heels are in off-white.

The statue looked so bright and vivid, yet the surrounding was almost colorless, as if the statue were visible, but existed in a separate time and space. The young man looked up to the plaque as he stepped into the main hall. He saw it said: "Lord Wu Temple", engraved with gliding, but he tripped on the doorsill. Tumbled in the hall and still grabbed his small bundle tightly, he started to tremble out of chilliness and pain. He hobbled to the statue, kneeled, and prayed to Lord Wu's statue.

Black-Robe Troop

He came out of the temple, laid down under the eave outside the side hall. The corner of the eave tilts up pointing towards the sky like it is trying to poke through the rain curtain. Suddenly, there came a middle-aged man dressed in a black robe. He is tall. The man told him to follow up. Walked around the corner of the corridor, there stood Lord Wu. Not the statue, but the real one.

While the fisherman was in shock, the man in black robe kneeled to Lord Wu, said: “The black-robe troop is still missing a soldier, we can have him fill the spot.” Lord Wu said: “Yes.” Then the man gave the fisherman a black robe. As he put on the robe, he was turned into a crow. He flapped his wings and fly out immediately. He saw other crow friends gathered on the near trees and he flew towards them.

Crows landed separately on top of the masts of the boats in the river. The passengers rushed to throw meat up in the air, and crows would fly to catch and eat the meat. The fisherman mimicked other crows and filled his stomach very quickly. After he was full, he flew to a treetop to rest, felt satisfied with his life.

About two to three days later, he met a female crow called Zhu-Qing. When they are together, they were deeply in love and close to each other. The only problem is that whenever the fisherman went to forage food, Qing would tell him that he was not vigilant enough. Even Qing warned him all the time, but the fisherman just would not listen.

One day, a group of Manchu soldiers passed by on a boat, they shot the fisherman on his chest with slingshots. Luckily, Qing held him with her beak and carried him back so that he did not get caught by the soldiers. The other crows saw the scene, got furious. They all stretched their wings and created waves on the river. At that moment, the appeared roaring waves in the

river ran high and flooded all the boats that carried the soldiers. Qing kept feeding the fisherman, but he was injured too severely that he died the next day.

The fisherman felt himself like awoken from a deep dream, found himself still lying in Lord Wu's temple. Earlier, people in the temple found him dead but did not know who he is. They touched his body and noticed his body was still warm, so they constantly had people checked on him. they saw him awaked, so they asked the fisherman what happened to him. People gathered some money for the fisherman to travel back and sent him on his way home. After three years, the fisherman passed by Lord Wu's Temple again. He prayed to Lord Wu's statue and prepared food. He called the crows to eat the food and asked: "if Qing is here, please stay after finishing the food." The crows finished the food, and all flew away.

Later, the fisherman passed the exam and became an *Advanced Scholar*, he went to pray in Lord Wu's temple again and offered a hog, a lamb, and other oblations. After the ceremony, again he prepared lots of food for the crow friends to eat, and just like last time he asked his question again.

Zhu-Qing

That night, the fisherman stayed in a small village next to a lake. He lit some candles. As he sat down, suddenly, it looked like a bird flying down in front of the small table. He looked up and saw a beautiful woman in her twenties was standing in front of him. He saw her smiled and asked him: "How are you since we separated?" The fisherman was shocked and asked her who she is. The woman said: "Don't you remember Qing?"

The fisherman was incredibly happy and surprised when he heard it and asked her where she came from. Qing said: "I am now the goddess of the Han River, so I rarely come back to my hometown. Crow friends sent messenger twice to me to tell me about how you miss me and your love, so I come here to meet you specially." After hearing what she said, the fisherman was even more moved and happy. They were like a deeply loving couple who has been separated for a long time, had infinite love to tell each other.

The fireman wanted to head south with Qing, go back home together, yet Qing wanted to invite the fisherman towards the west. They had different opinions and cannot make their decision.

When the fisherman woke up from his dream, Qing was already up. He opened his eyes and found himself no longer sleeping on the boat, but in a spacious room. It was bright in the hall with many lighted candles. He was shocked and sat up, asked: "Where is this place?" Qing laughed and said: "Here is West-Han. My home is your home, why must going back to south!" As morning gradually dawns, the servant all came in the room, brought in warmed wine. They laid a low table on the wide bed and displayed the feast. The couple sat face to face and slowly enjoyed the wine. The fisherman asked: "Where are all my servants right now?" Qing answered him: "They are on the boat." The fisherman worried if the owner of the boat cannot wait for him

for too long. Qing said: “It doesn’t matter. I will pass the message to them for you.” The fisherman was eased so they had a good time and enjoyed the feast day and night.

The fisherman was so happy that he forgot about going home.

When the fisherman’s boat owner awaked from his dream that day, he found the boat arrived at West-Han. He freaked out. The servants found the fisherman was missing and looked for him everywhere but found no information. The boat owner wanted to drive the boat to other places, but the cable knot cannot be untied, so everybody stayed and guarded the boat.

After more than two months, the fisherman suddenly wanted to go home. He said to Qing: “I live here, cannot hear anything from my family and relatives. We live like a couple, but you won’t go to my house, how does it make sense?” Qing said: “I cannot leave here. How about I stay here, as another home for you, isn’t it better?”

The fisherman worried that the distance was too long so he cannot come here very often. Qing took out a black robe, said: “The old robe you used to wear is still here. Later whenever you miss me, put it on and you can come here. When you get here, I will help you to take it off.” Qing planned a feast to say goodbye to the fisherman. The fisherman got very drunk and passed out. He woke up found himself already in the boat. He opened his eyes and looked around carefully; the boat was still parked at the lake where it was. The boat owner and servants were on the boat, they were very shocked when they found the fisherman slept on the boat.

They asked him where he went, and the fisherman pretended that he was surprised too. He found a bundle next to his pillow. He opened it and saw new clothes, new socks, new shoes, and the black robe Qing gave him, well folded; and he also found an embroidered small purse tied to his pants. When he touched the purse, he noticed that it was filled with gold. He told the

boat owner to head south. When he shored, he paid the boat owner a good sum of money and went back home.

After a few months back home, the fisherman started to miss Qing a lot. He secretly took out his black robe, put it on, and two wings came out from his ribs on both sides, quickly rise high and fly in the air. After a little more than two hours, he arrived at the Han River.

He glided around in the sky and looked down, saw a building in the middle of a separated island, so he flew down towards there. At that moment, a maid saw him, and yelled: “The master is here!” After a while, Qing came out. She told the maids to take off the black robe for the fisherman and he suddenly felt the feathers were all gone.

A Baby? Or an Egg?

Qing and the fisherman held each other's hands and walked into the building. Qing told him: "You are here right on time; I am about to give birth to our child." The fisherman joked: "Is the child a baby? or an egg?" Qing said: "I am a goddess now. My skins and bones are harder than before, supposedly it should be different from before."

A few days later, Qing indeed gave birth to a child. A thick layer of membrane-covered the small baby, like a giant egg. When the membrane was broken, it appeared a boy inside. The fisherman was happy, named the boy Chan.

Three days later, all the other goddesses of the Han River came to visit and brought lots of clothes, food, and treasures like pearls to celebrate. They walked to the side of the bed, pressed their thumbs lightly on the baby's nose, said it will "add ages" to the baby. After they left, the fisherman asked Qing: "Who are those people?" Qing said: "They are all my friends." Lived there for few months, Qing sent the fisherman back with a boat that did not need any sail or paddles. The boat floats back by itself. When he landed, there was already someone waiting for him with a horse on the side of the road and send him back home. Since then, Qing and the fisherman visited each other very often.

A few years later, Chan became even better looking. The fisherman liked him a lot. The fisherman's mother wanted to meet Chan very much. The fisherman told Qing his mother's idea. Qing prepared the luggage herself for them, sent the fisherman and Chan back home. The fisherman promised to send Chan back after three months. After the fisherman and his son went home, the grandmother loved Chan a lot. They lived together for more than a dozen months and still cannot bear letting Chan go back.

One day, Chan got sick and sudden death happened to him unexpectedly. The fisherman's mother was so sad that she almost died with Chan. The fisherman flew to the Han River immediately to tell Qing this terrible message. As he entered the room, he saw Chan was lying in bed with no shoes.

The fisherman was happed and asked Qing what was this about. Qing said: "It was you who break the promise for so long. I missed my son, so I called him back." The fisherman said it was because his mother loved Chan too much to let him go, that took so long for them to send Chan back. Qing said: "Wait until I have another son or daughter, then I will let Chan go back with you."

Reunion

After a little bit more than a year, Qing gave birth to a twin—a boy and a girl. The boy was named Sheng and the girl was named Jade.

The fisherman took Chan with him and went back to his home. Since then, the fisherman traveled three to four times every year between the two places.

As time passed, he found this very inconvenient, so he moved his whole family to West-Han.

When Chan reached twelve years old, he earned the title of *Scholar*. Qing called Chan back and arranged his marriage, then send Chan back after. The name of Chan's wife is Zhi. Zhi is also a child of another goddess of the Han River.

Years later, when the grandmother dies, Sheng and his sister went to the funeral. After the funeral, Sheng stayed in the fisherman's house in West-Han too.

The fisherman only took Jade with him and moved to Qing's house, and never came back since then.

II. Celery Seed and Carrot Blossom

Celery Seed and Carrot Blossom

Many times, we cannot tell the story of a girl without including the story of her mother, grandmothers, and maybe even her great grandmother. It is like the mother planted a celery seed, and the seed ends up being a carrot blossom. Looks so different, yet so similar.

July's Drawers

July hated study when she was a kid, and she still hates study when she turns fifty.

In their old apartment in Harbin, Black-Dragon River Province, July got her small bedroom. In her bedroom, there was a twin-size bed, a desk, a chair with drawers, and a small closet, just like any other typical bedroom, almost like a school dorm. In the top drawer, there was her homework, pencils, sketch paper, and other student stuff, but under it, the lower and the bottom drawers had two secret fantastic mini worlds hiding down there. Small figures made of hard cardboard, with delicate dresses made of different kinds of candy wrappers and jewelry made of melted candle wax.

It is the kind of candles that came with the cake, usually, a small pack of five or six, about two inches long, came in pale red, yellow, and baby blue with thin white stripes on the sides. July would draw the sketch of the jewelry that she pictured in her mind, and carefully lit the candle and let the wax drip on the sketch patten, then cut off the wax dot or strips and sew together with needle and thread. She made complicated earrings like mini chandeliers, and all her paper dolls are beautiful girls with glorious dresses and glossy jewelry. Besides decorating the dolls, she also designed their room, which is the drawers. There she made mini furniture with cardboard and finished with paint. Bed, dressing table, closet, nightstand, etc. Just like her own room, only better and prettier.

She would even make mini seventeen-century Chinese blue-and-white porcelain to decorate the room and made a tiny bunch of plum flowers with small wire and pieces of toilet paper painted red. The body of the porcelain is made of cardboard as well, covered with white wax, but before the white wax settles, she melted blue wax together and drew a pattern with a toothpick. You got to be quick to pick the right time, otherwise, the white layer will be solid, and

it will be covered with a dollop of blue wax, or when you make the pattern with the toothpick it will leave scratch marks if it settles too quick, and you also do not want them to blend too much since it will just turn into a lighter blue. It is something very unimportant, unnecessary for a school-age girl like July, but also something surprisingly hard to accomplish. In some way, she is talented, but not appreciated by her parents.

July's Essay

Drawing and writing were the two things she was good at back in her school years. Even though her mother quit school at an early age because of migraines, she was still strict with her children when it came to studying. The harder her mother pushed, the further she escaped, unlike her hardworking younger brother.

July was indeed good at school writing, she won regional writing competitions many times. Because they live in the factory neighborhood, where almost all adults worked in the factory, and all kids went to the factory owned schools, elementary school, middle school, and high school, whatever happened in the school, or the factory, then everybody knows. July's mother was an engineering assistant, and her father was a local policeman who oversees the factory region. Whenever July won a writing competition, the school would pose the certification of merit in the billboard outside the schools, and when the adults got off from work and head home, they all passed the schools, then everybody will see the post, and her parents would be happy and proud of her, for few days, until the next time they see her transcripts of other subjects, any other subjects.

It is funny that her younger brother was the opposite, an almost standardly good student, good manner at home and school, good at all subjects including Chinese, except the Chinese writing section. No teacher would question his honesty, unless when he turned in a good essay. The teacher would ask him if the essay were done by his elder sister; but if he turned in not-so-good, basically bad essays, the teacher would say things like: "Why is your writing always terrible, yet your sister is so talented? Why don't you go ask her for help?"

With most of this family's attention on the boy because of ankylosing spondylitis and some other diseases, she grew up with her aunt and grandmother. They had good times together. July's

aunt would never ask about her school, just asked her where she wants to go or what does she want to do. They would go to the cinema and spend their food money on movies for the whole day, her aunt would buy her watercolors and drawings tools and taught her how to sew and do papercut...

When she was at home, she would be in her room reading, updating the mini worlds in her drawers, telling stories to herself and her dolls. At the end of each semester, after seeing her transcripts, her mother would search her room and dump out all the “useless” works she did—the two treasured drawers, and she would cry. The same thing happened again and again until she went to college for an associate degree in business secretary.

She wanted to work in a silk factory, draw and design patterns, but her parents told her to study law and eventually ended up working in a bank. She listened to her parents. For years she kept studying and working on things she does not like, does not understand, or does not even want to give it a chance because that was not her decision. She wants to draw or write something, something that can be considered a serious piece of work, but she never started. She just keeps reading and reading.

July’s parents did not live a peaceful life. Her mother was not from a rich family but had enough food and clothes to raise the three girls in Harbin city. On the other hand, her father was from the countryside, from a big family and he was the seventh child who was considered dead after he was born and tossed in the hog lot. He got lucky that it was the day his elder sister came home from school and picked him back and pushed the clogged blood out of the trachea and brought him back to life. One of his elder brothers was the teacher in the local school. Even though his family was broke, the children were well educated.

Father was a romantic man if we pick a positive word to describe. He and his female friends caused quite some family issue for years until July's mother passed away. It was not that he did not love July's mother; he loved her a lot, but the same emotion, similar love applied to too many women.

July does not want to be like her mother, but sometimes she cannot help but see herself and her mother overlapping. The older she gets, the more she understands her mother. They are so similar, yet so different, just like almost all mothers and daughters.

She gave birth to a girl when she was twenty-four, called Febe. She taught this girl to recite poems and doodle.

The Gallery and Mr. Lee

One day when Febe was four years old, after picked her up from the kindergarten, they passed a small gallery where was holding a printmaking relief show. The show caught her attention and they walked into this gallery. The girl was not even tall enough to that much of the artwork. She just follows her mother.

A middle-aged man who walks out from the back room of the gallery started to talk to the mother. After a while, he bent down and asked the girl if she likes printmaking. She does not know what printmaking was, but her mother was watch and she seemed interested in printmaking, so the girl said yes. Then he asked if she wants to study printmaking. She looked at her mother and nodded.

Later the day Febe learned that the man at the gallery is an artist, called Mr. Lee, a woodcut printmaking artist who makes living with oil painting. They went back to the gallery on the weekend and this time the girl gets to see the prints and how they were produced. There were other “students”, but she was the youngest one. Her mother was always there with her because she wanted to learn too. The mother was always focused on her work, other elder kids talked and laughed together, and the four years old girl was by herself. She could not understand their talking, could not understand her mother’s artwork or the artists, but she knows the basic method of woodcut and drawing, so she just draws and carves and draws and carves...

She always sits by herself, barely talks unless someone talked to her, even then she gave short answers. She just did not know what to say. They went to the gallery almost every weekend, or maybe even more until the girl was seven years old. One day the mother told her that Mr. Lee left Beijing to somewhere that is cheaper to live and make some oil paintings for living because he ran out of money. They went back to the gallery to meet the owner, who is the

daughter of a famous traditional Chinese printmaking artist. The gallery owner introduced this girl to the artist. It was a short meeting, and she did not remember much, just adults' talking and smiling.

In the following years, the mother tried to find the girl a real "teacher" with professional background, and they met three artists total and had few classes with each of them. The mother always told the girl that her works look great, and she is talented, even the gallery artist, the gallery owner, and her father said so, but she started because of her mother and kept doing it because she did not want to be lonely or bored.

Right around the time of changing teachers, entering elementary school, growing up little by little, the mother started to tell and yell at the girl that she was not making prints "right", her works were too childish and immature. The mother stopped making prints long before this, instead she helped the girl print after she did the drawing and carving parts, and yell at her because of the bad works and ugly signatures. The girl asked her mother how she could make the works not bad, but the mother said, "How am I supposed to know, it's your work, not mine." The three teachers did not help much other than drew on her drawings and carved on her boards to "fix" her works. She did not learn much and just hated the "fixed" pieces because they are not her works anymore. She still gets yelled at when she was making prints or even doing other things. Whenever the mother remembered, she would yell at the girl— "useless, waste your talent, lazy, always give up..." "If you don't want to keep doing this, just go away." "I don't want to look at you. Get out."

So that was the last year the girl did printmaking in her childhood. She put all the tools, material, and prints in boxes and did not open them no matter how she gets yelled at, until twelve years later.

Febe

As the girl grew older, she looks like the mother that she startled her father once when she was in the student military uniform. Her father was so shocked that it took him almost five minutes to finish a complete sentence. Even their voices are similar. Sometimes she answers phone calls for her mother and people would just start to talk or her cousin would call her aunt. One thing she did not stop doing is reading. Out of boredom and not wanted to look like a lonely kid, she started reading probably just a little bit later than she started printmaking. Her mother has a great collection of books, different kinds of books. If she is reading books from this selection, nobody will say things like “You’re not reading this book in the right way.” Or “You spent too much time reading.” Somehow reading is considered as a good habit and likes to read is good quality, especially for a girl, which avoids many potential arguments between her and her mother.

Reading supports her, it was the only thing that keeps her living day after day, home to school, school to home, being a good daughter, good student, good classmate. The more she behaves like a good kid, the more space people would give her. Lonely is not the most ideal mood but it is still better than having to deal with people. Whenever she was by herself, it would be her reading time, especially after she stopped printmaking.

Reading was her escape, it was like she could enter the secret worlds and meet her secret friends any time anywhere if she has the book with her, or any book would work. Plus, people tend to not bother someone when that person is reading. She wears headphones without sound or music for the same reason. She stopped doing printmaking but her mother still in contact with some artists and art teachers.

The only one she remembers is teacher Chi. Unlike other people, she talked to the girl like talking to an adult and introduced other kinds of craft arts to the girl and her mother. The girl likes teacher Chi, but she still did not have much to say. She barely knew anything about art or how to talk about art. She was also scared, scared of being wrong or get yelled at because she says wrong things about art or talks about art in the wrong way. So, she was quiet.

Way Home

Raindrops sliding down the car window and blends the gloomy sky with the black trees like smudged brushstrokes forming an impressionism painting. It is the end of the summer. A day like this always has a subtle and sultry kind of melancholy scatter around spontaneously, which perhaps comes from the wind, the moisture in the air, or simply nowhere, and eventually deliveries to all living creatures. Even the heartless leafless trees seem saddened.

A black car has been stuck in traffic for nearly an hour. If you look at the road from a bird's-eye view, you will see one side a string of red tail lamps, the other of white headlights, both elongate to the horizon like two blazing dragons that cannot be soothed by the rain. The noise from the engine blends with the sound of the rain, together slowly corroding people's patient and covered their chatting and silence.

About two hours earlier, swallows and dragonflies were flying lower and lower as if they were pushed by the lead color clouds, perhaps cumulonimbus, perhaps nimbostratus. Outside of a glass building in this city, which looks just like any other big grey glass buildings in any other city, two persons were rushing towards an ordinary-looking black car parked on the side of the street. The slightly taller person was carrying an umbrella and the slightly shorter one was wearing a dark purple backpack that was slightly too big.

Right when this car entered the main road, a monster-big thundercloud occupied the sky, like a sweaty giant stumped across an invisible floor high up in the air and swallowed the nearby cumulus clouds. The sky was greyish blue, a rich and chaotic color, yet simple and clear. Bright violet lightning lacerated the sky and illuminated the darkness. Followed by thunder that was loud enough to wake the dead and a heavy downpour. If the sky can be cracked, this would be the noise it makes and the scene it looks like.

It has less than two miles to go when the little black car got stuck in traffic. The ring road becomes a linear parking lot. Cars are like sluggish metal caterpillars trying hard to wiggle forwards. Driving is now slower than walking.

Windshield wipers add new elements to the rainy-day traffic jam symphony, as well as some faint jingles and talking noise coming from the black car. Raindrops knocking the car windows as if mysterious phantoms are calling: “Let me in! Let me in!”

A young woman sitting in the driver’s seat turned on the radio. She is probably thirty-six years old; her short hair’s color is a little darker than roasted chestnut shells, round face and small nose make her looks younger than her real age. Let us call her July because she was born in July. The girl sitting next to July on the passenger’s seat is her daughter, most definitely twelve years old if her mother is thirty-six; her long ponytail would be in warm chestnut brown in sunlight, but right now, her hair is just like her mother’s, as well as her small nose. Let us call her Febe since she was born in February.

After another bunch of advertisements and jingles, a woman’s soft, almost cheerful voice coming out of the radio: “Customer whose phone number ends with 8673 texted us that he’s famished because he’s been stuck in traffic forever. Saturday rush hour is always the worst. He is currently on North Ginko Street bound to the Old Paper Factory direction...”

“Mom, I’m famished too.” Says Febe

“Check the grocery bag. Eat something.” July answers.

Febe crawls to the backseats, drags out two big grocery bags, and soon surrounds herself with food she considers eating. She finishes a curry bread by herself, shares steamed corn on the cob with July, and they each have one apple and one banana. After all these foods, Febe is still digging for something else to eat like a raccoon half in the shopping bag.

“Stop! Darling, stop!” July pulls Febe out of the bag by grabbing the back of her collar, “You can’t force-feed yourself because someone else is starving!”

“No, I’m not...” Febe mumbles.

They both sink back in their seats quietly.

Raindrops are stretched into strings and pushed to an angle by the wind and reflect the warm shine when passing the dim streetlights, like many small pieces of copper wires falling from the sky. On the left side of the street, a security guard is leaning towards the gate of a mansion, the light of the door lamp coming from behind. He looks like one of those figures in Franz Masereel’s woodcut prints. Some other people are running across the street, holding their backpack or jacket overhead.

“It feels like we are laying deep in a tomb, peeking at the outside world.” Says July.

There is a short silence in the car. Febe decides not to take over the tomb idea, instead, she asks: “Where do you think all the crows go on a rainy day like this?”

“They take off their black robes, turn into a human, and probably sitting in coffee shops,” July says with a quick laugh.

“Black robes?”

“Zhu Qing’s black robe.”

“Zhu Qing?”

“Well, I will find you the fairytale book I read when I was your age. It’s a heavy old book with a blue fabric cover, my aunt bought it for me.”

There is a quiet moment in the car. At this moment, they are already back in the parking lot at home. It is completely dark outside. Raindrops still tapping the car windows, become water

streams, look like tree branches, or pale ghostly hands with elongated fingers, and eventually absorbed by the surrounding darkness.

“You stay there.” July sighed, told Febe: “I will walk to your side and pick you up since this is the only umbrella we have.”

“Sure,” Febe answered, gave a glance to the black umbrella in July’s hand, and grabbed the two grocery bags from the back seats.

July got off the car and as soon as she opened the umbrella, the strong wind made her standing at a similar angle as the rain-strings. She walked to the other side, opened the door, and took one bag from Febe. Immediately Febe felt the moisture in the air and the rain felt so sharp and cold when hitting her on her face. The cold air was so abrupt that her lungs shrink so tight she could barely breathe.

It made her laugh even though there was nothing funny. She just could not control herself, and they started to laugh together and ran towards the apartment building. Their laughter in the darkness sounds like when a glass beads necklace got ripped and all beads dropped and bounce in all directions.

Summer Break

When they finally got home, they were all soaking wet and shivering. July found a towel for them to dry their hair and started the hot bath while Febe putting the grocery away and when they finally sat in the hot bath, let the warm water pull the coldness out of their bones through the skin, it was eight o'clock at night.

"Mom, can I get the book tonight? I promise I will read it after the final exam." Febe asks.

"You can read it during the summer break when you're with my aunt." July has her eyes closed but staying awake.

"What? Why?" Febe stopped shaking off the water drops that are hanging on the tips of her hair, looked confused.

July opened her eyes and looked at Febe as if she asked a question and waiting for a positive answer.

"My aunt, you never met her, but I told you about her many times. We've been kept in touch for years since your grandparents passed away. I'm going to be away for a business trip in Cloud-South County and I can't take you with me. She's a great person, a little bit weird, but a nice person. Don't worry." July says.

"Okay..." Febe mumbled, did not pay much attention to what July said other than when she mentioned her grandparents. She missed her grandparents. If this lady she is going to meet is the sister of her grandfather, she is probably a nice person, so Febe accepted her mother's plan for the summer.

That night Febe fell asleep thinking about her final exam, the mysterious black robe from the story, her grandparents, and July's aunt, whom she never met.

Rushing Through the Storm

She sees an eye, in the gloomy night sky. It opens and stares at her until she wakes up tremblingly.

“Did you have a nightmare, darling?”

“No, just a weird dream. I’m fine.”

Febe’s heart is beating fast. It feels like the eye is still staring at her, through the dream, peaking into reality, hiding somewhere near her.

Sitting on the passenger seat, Febe is scribbling on the frosted window and wiping it off again and again as if she is having fun. July is driving and occasionally glances at Febe’s writing. July is focused on driving and Febe soon falls asleep.

They are going to visit Febe’s Grandma, which is July’s aunt whose house is at the foot of a mountain and facing the south ocean. July will head to the airport for a business trip after drop Febe there and Febe will spend her summer with this grandma that she has never met. Mid-summer weather is like a child’s mood, swings from a laugh to tear in a blink. One second it was perfectly bright with a nice breeze, next second the air gets moist and heavy. It starts with the wind. Trees on both sides of the road are shaking their heads and waving their arms like they are trying so hard to scratch their itchy heads. Dust and small garbage are flying around in the shapes of miniature tornados.

Grey clouds occupy the sky as someone knocked over a bucket of dirty mop water. Coming from the edge of the sky, they seduce other innocent clouds to the dark side on their way and swallow them whole. The rain starts, like the sky suddenly decides to cry. Maybe the sky is still a child. Raindrops like tiny fists, knocking on the windows and moaning. Nobody hears so they unwillingly drip down and blend back into the rain.

The car turns onto the highway and speeds up despite the rain. Trees run even faster than the car like they are trying to catch up or catch the small car.

“Are you hungry?” July turns to Febe, “Want a sandwich?”

“Sure.”

Febe eats while staring at the raindrops fighting each other and mad trees waving at her through the blurred window.

Someone is standing on the highway. As the car rushing through the storm, Febe only sees the person at a glance, but the scene is so clear that it’s like a snapshot saved in her mind, and she can see all the details if she zooms in.

It was an old lady clothed in skins of brutes. She was wearing a furry hat, a furry scarf, a furry long coat, and even a pair of furry boots, fur stripes on her clothes like raccoons’ tails, or maybe cats’ tails. All her clothes stayed dry. Holding a large furry bag in her left hand and a rusty metal hook in the other, she jumps around and avoids the rushing cars so fast and flexible like a spirit. Every time she sees a dead animal flattened into the asphalt, she peels it off with her hook and puts it in her bag. Then a transparent milky blueish-green color spirit gets filtered through the bag and joins the other ones that are following her.

When their car passed her, one of her eyeballs rolls up and looked at Febe while the other one was rolling around searching for more dead animals. Her eye is just like the eye in Febe’s dream. The sky is just like the sky. The nightmare is sucking Febe away from reality even she is still awake. Is she?

Febe feels dizzy and hears loud noise in her brain. She feels herself spinning and spinning. The noise gets louder and louder. Febe thinks she is going to explode but the car suddenly passes the clouds and covers by the sunlight.

“Are you okay? Darling.” July turns to Febe: “You look pale.”

“Just car sick,” Febe says, does not want July to worry about her.

July stops the car and starts to take out Febe’s luggage from the trunk. Febe is checking her purse.

Febe puts the leftover sandwich in her pocket and looks around making sure July did not see it. Instead, she sees an old lady standing in front of a lovely gingerbread house-looking cabin with a beautiful garden. It looks like she is taking a closer look at the flowers when she bows down, but Febe sees that she is petting the animal spirits around her.

One of her eyeballs rolls up and looks at Febe.

“Auntie!” July yells to the old lady and ran towards her like a chirping baby bird. Febe never saw her mother like this before. “Mom seems happy to see her.” Febe thinks.

“Febe! Come say hi!” July turns to Febe and waving her hands.

Febe walks to the house and the old lady gives a big hug that encloses both Febe and July and an almost glowing warm smile on her face as if all the strange things were just Febe’s hallucination.

July's Aunt

July left soon after she introduced Febe and her aunt to each other to catch her flight.

Febe and Grandma are now standing in the yard, staring at each other. Febe is looking at her eyes to see if they will roll around as they did before.

“Come in, you must be tired. Let me show you your room and we can come downstairs to have some tea.” Grandma said, “Oh, don’t forget your suitcase.”

Before Febe gets to answer, Grandma keeps talking: “Your room is upstairs, the one on the left. It used to be your mom’s room. You’re gonna like it. And you can use the bathroom next door. The room on the right side is my room and the bathroom I use in my room, so don’t worry about staying too long in the bathtub. Take your time. The room in the middle is for my collection. There will be weird noise from this room sometimes, but it’s always locked, so no worry. Now, just leave your stuff there and come downstairs. Rose or jasmine?”

“What?” Febe looks at Grandma with confusion, “Jasmine? I guess?”

“Tea.” Grandma said, “Give me the thing in your pocket, my crow will eat it.”

“What?” Febe is even more confused now and puts her hands in both pockets and trying to remember what she has in her pocket. It is the leftover sandwich. “How did she know the sandwich? Does crow eat sandwich?” Febe thinks, not sure what to say, but still takes out the sandwich and passes it to Grandma.

Grandma pokes the ball shape sandwich, says: “Oh I remember the food July makes, poor girl. Hey crow! Wake up!” She knocks on the big wooden door between the kitchen and the laundry room and turns the doorknob. As she opens the door, Febe sees a beautiful library room and a big stand next to the ladder that is attached to the bookshelves that covered all the walls of this room. A monster big crow is on the stand, eyes closed.

“I said WAKE UP!” Grandma yells, “got some food for you.” And she throws the sandwich ball to the crow. The crow catches the food with its claws, rips off the wrapper, and swallows the food. It starts to flap its wings vigorously and screams: “It’s July! Where is July?” and glides around the room. “Yes. July made it.” says Grandma, “Let go.” She grabs Febe on her forearm and takes her out of the room. She closes the door, but Febe can still hear the noise of the crow. For a second Febe does not know if she feels bad for July or feels worse for the crow. July is a good mother, but not a good cook. The sandwich is just about edible.

Febe and Grandma finally sit down in the garden. Maybe it is because she is too tired, the steam that coming out of the teapot seems glowing to Febe. She blinks her eyes and finds the steam still looks glowing. Grandma pours Febe a cup of tea and tells her to wait there as she makes some food for her. The tea is shimmering grey. Febe remembers she said Jasmine and she has never seen any shimmering grey jasmine flower or grey tea. As she is reaching the teacup, she sees a red leather cover notebook under the tray. She pauses for a second, looks in the direction of the kitchen, she decides to take a quick look at it.

Grandma's Notebook

The leather cover looks used, but no special marks or labels. Febe skims through the writings and sees a section about weird things like otter's marrow and mermaid fabric.

“Poet Wu Rong from Tang dynasty (618—907A.D.) used to say: People would ask a fisherman by rivers if they wanted the marrow of the otter, and if they want to get the fabric made by mermaids, they will find fisherman near the sea.

Back in Three Kingdom Period (A.C. 220-280). In the folk story, the first Lord of country Wu (among the three kingdoms) is Quan Sun, and he had seven sons. The third son is He Sun and he had a wife and two concubines. One concubine is called Lady Deng. He Sun favored Lady Deng, always let her sit on his lap. One night, they were in the courtyard, He Sun was waving a crystal ornament under the moon, and he accidentally hit lady Deng's cheek. Bloodstained her pants and she complained about the pain. Wiped the wound in person, He Sun commanded the imperial doctor to make medicine for Lady Deng. The doctor said: ‘Go get white otter's marrow, mix with jade powder and amber powder, the mixture will heal her wound and leave no scar.’ Immediately, He Sun offered a hundred golds as a reward for people who were able to get white otter's marrow. After they get the otter marrow, He Sun commanded the doctor to make the medicine cream. However, the doctor used too much amber powder in the mixture, so that when Lady Deng's wound recovered, there was a small red spot remain, but it only adds to her beauty. He Sun's other concubines saw it and they all drew red dots on their cheek. Then this became a custom at that time.

To find the mermaid's fabric, you must find where mermaids live first.

People say Water-er, which is mermaids come from the south sea, and they live in rooms under the water. They weave the fabric under the sea and the fabric is called Dragon Gauze. In ancient times one roll of mermaid gauze worth more than a hundred golds because clothes made of mermaid gauze are waterproof and the texture and color of the fabric are as light, as soft, and white as frost. Back in sometime between paleolithic to 221B.C.), people found mermaids called Di people, where their country locate west of Jian Mu, and their people have the face of human and fish body, no feet. In Inland-North, there was Ling fish that has a human face, hands, and feet, fish body, live in the sea. It seems back in ancient times mermaids were considered fish, instead of human-ish creatures.

Later in Han Dynasty, people found mermaids that look like a human, live in water like fish, always weaving fabric when they cry there will be pearls come out of their eyes. length around 23.5 cm. Not edible. Its skin is sharper than sharks, able to cut into woods. There are small holes on its neck, where the air comes out. They live in the East Sea, Tai County nowadays. Mermaids would come out of the water, rent houses from humans, and sell their fabric for days. Before they leave, they ask the house owner for a container, cry until the container is full of pearls, and give it to the house owner to pay the rent. Even later in Tang Dynasty, mermaids became 5 feet and 0.4 inches to 6 feet and 0.5 inches, with eyebrows, eyes, mouth, nose, hands, and head all like beautiful man and woman, all have feet. Skin pale like jade, no scale, thin hair that are in five colors, soft, 3.07-6.14 cm in length. Their hair is like ponytails and if their height. Many widows

and widowers who live near the sea will catch mermaid and keep them in a pond. They do not attack humans.

In records from 202B.C.—A.C.8, it says When the first emperor of China enthroned, he managed to cut into mountain Li and dig deep holes. Until he ruled the whole country, he sent more than 700,000 criminals there, dug deep until they found water, poured in melted bronze to reinforce the foundation then put down his coffin shell. Models of palaces, hundreds of pottery figures, and all kinds of treasures fill the room. He made craftsmen make mechanism crossbow that will automatically shoot arrows at people who get close to his tomb. Used mercury as rivers and oceans that connect and keep flowing because of the mechanical structure. In the tomb, there are stars and different weathers on the ceiling, all kinds of geographical features, and creatures on the ground. Lighted candles that are made of mermaids' fat, which last a long time.”

It seems like Grandma is interested in some weird almost sorcery material. Is she looking for mermaids? Is it the fabric, or pearls she wants? Or she wants to make candles! Does she have scars that do not heal? Febe even sees few hand-drew maps with marked spots with the research result. “Maybe that’s the reason why she lives here next to the south sea?” Febe thinks, and quickly puts back the notebook and pretend sipping on the dust-color jasmine tea. It is surprisingly good.

“The tea is better than it looks, isn’t it?” Grandma says, pass Febe a small wood plate with two pieces of white pastry in it. Febe notices the food is warm as her finger touches the plate.

There are two pieces of white square steamed rice cake with a dollop of candied sweet olive tree flowers on top in the middle. The floral aroma is sweet, soft, gentle, and intense.

“It’s made of rice, picked lotus seeds, pearl barley, white poria cocos, sticky rice, dried Chinese yam, and dried gorgon seeds; called Spring Sunlight Snow,” Grandma says.

“THE MORE YOU EAT, THE LONGER YOU LIVE!” The crow suddenly pecked on the glass window of the library room, which is facing the garden, and screams.

Febe was startled that she bounced from the chair and hit her knee on the edge of the table. For one second, she swears she sees Grandma’s left eye rolls to the crow and the crow stopped making noise, while her other eye looks at Febe’s knee.

“Are you okay?” Grandma asks, as she puts her left hand on Febe’s knee. Weirdly, her hand is warm and “furry”, even though there is no visible hair on her hand, it just feels furry, like a cat’s paw, or a fox. The minor pain goes away right after Grandma pats Febe on her knee. Febe feels cold and warm at the same time, sweat because of the summer heat, as well as the strange thing that happened here.

“Enjoy the snow cake, I’ll be back soon. Be careful if you see a black cat. It’s a grumpy little furball. Don’t get too close in case she scratches you. The paint is hard to clean, and the paper worms.” Grandma says, pulls her chair, and walks into the library room.

“Paint? Paper worm?” Everything here is just more than weird to Febe.

Paper Worm

“It’s not a real cat.” Grandma says, it’s a picture, the longer it lives, the weirder ‘diseases’ it will catch. It’s normal, paper stuff is rather weak.”

“Did you make it? Or drew it?” Febe asks.

“No, it’s from my old neighbor.” Grandma answers.

“Tell me about it, grandma.”

“One day, a middle-aged woman wearing a pair of tiny shining golden earrings is standing in front of the window of an art supply store. She is staring at the merchants, as well as the reflection of herself on the shop window. “When was the last time I paint?” She thinks. Her husband is seven years older than her, they got married right after she graduated from college. She thought she would be a painter but ended up being a housewife and a mother of seven years old girl. She remembers the days when she used to be happy when they were just married: Her husband would sit next to her and read while she painted, he would stay in the kitchen and watch her cook, and there was one time he ate all the toasted walnuts before she even started to make the brownies, and he used to come home early to spend time with her and their lovely baby.

She smiles while diving into the memories but then she thinks about how he started to blame her for spending too much time reading and painting, and he complains about everything—the house, not clean enough, the food, not tasty enough, same dishes day after day, their child, not smart enough, herself, the wife, not hardworking enough.

He disappears in bars after work, gets drunk, comes home, and yells at her: “I make it you spend it! MY TIME MY MONEY MY YOUTH. Gone because I made a bad decision”

glaring at the woman and under his breath “but I guess that’s my fault...”. She did not react. She looks neither scared nor curious. She is just quiet.

Later when she is back home, instead of cooking dinner, as usual, she goes downstairs to the basement to take out her old painting supplies. She sits there, thinks about what to draw. She outlines her childhood best friend Eve. A black cat she found on the street one evening. The second she starts to paint she realizes how much she missed the feeling as the paintbrush goes across the canvas and the “stinky” smell of the linseed oil. In the evening, her daughter comes to her asks if she can keep the cat and she hears her husband’s yelling at the same time: “Put that thing back out on the street where you got it, or I’ll be the one to throw it out the window!”

“What’s happening?” she asks while walking to the living room, and Eve is lying on the floor, blinking its eyes, and waving its tail.

She stares at the cat and tells her daughter: “Yes, you can keep her. Got a name yet?”

“Eve, I want to call her Eve for the evening.”

The next day, instead of going shopping, she painted some groceries. Her daughter always has her dinner at school so her husband will be the only one to eat this “Daily Special”. She is excited, just imagine his reaction, but he does not seem to notice the difference. Since then, she fed him her “paintings”. He sleeps longer and longer, gets skinner and skinner, so skinny that he looks like a sheet of paper.

One day before her daughter gets back from work, she finds her husband napping. She rolls him up like rolling a life-size figure painting and stacks him on the shelf with her other old works. The room is quiet unless you listen carefully, you can hear the slight sound of snoring coming from one of the paintings on the rack. Then she paints another husband, one that would

do whatever she says and never yell at her. She never wanted to be a housewife and now her life is surreal: a nice husband, a quiet kid, and freedom.

This evening, her daughter sneaks into the “forbidden basement”, her mother’s studio. Her mother is at the downtown gallery for her first exhibition in years. Her paintings are popular. When she returns home from the gallery, she investigates the mirror. Checking herself, she notices that her figure somehow does not look right. The person in the mirror does not move the same way she moves or does the same gesture she poses.

Suddenly, the person in the mirror sticks her arms out and drags her in. It happened so quickly that no scream gets to come out from her throat. The lady in the mirror fixes her hair and walks out of the mirror, left the real one screaming and hitting the mirror surface from inside, in silence.

Her daughter is sitting in her room, the door closed.

A beautiful big crow is pecking on her window.”

A short silence.

“The end?” Febe asks.

“The end,” Grandma says.

“What about the crow?”

“It’s my crow, isn’t it beautiful?”

“No. Yes! That’s not what I mean. Why’s your crow there?”

“I sent it there to ask the little girl if she can give me her cat. Aren’t you curious about the cat?”

“Yes. Where is it? Um... Eve?”

“Wait here,” Grandma says and walks back into the house.

The Crow

Febe is sitting in the chair thinking about what kind of worm is Paper Worm.

“Paper worm...” she mumbles.

“You don’t want to deal with that. A soft women’s voice coming from outside the fence.

“You must be Febe. Grandma got a phone call the other day that July is going to send her daughter Febe here for summer.” It is the crow talking, in a very different voice from its previous bird-ish scream.

“My mom is on a business trip, can’t take me with her. You can speak!?” Febe is shocked.

“Yes, I can, so do Eve.” The crow answers, blinking its eyes.

“I know Eve, grandma said it’s a black cat. So... you two are friends?” Says Febe.

“We are friends now. She’s friendly, but don’t let her scratch you. The paint is annoying. Plus, the paper worms.” The crow says,

“Doesn’t matter. Do you mind if I sit here? It must be Grandma’s jasmine tea.” The crow asks, as she already sits next to the table.

“Sure...” Febe says, “Grandma also made snow cake, do you want some?”

“That’s perfect!” The crown sounds happy, and it reaches the snow cake across the table before Febe gets to pass her the plate.

A Letter to My Cat

As the crow is talking to Febe, Eve walks in.

“You’re July’s daughter,” Eve says.

It is the first time Febe hears Eve speaking, she nodded.

“Ah, I remember something interesting about your mother.” Eve says, licking its paw, it clears its throat and continues: “It was...many years ago, the last year of July’s junior high school, the year July need to prepare for the *Beijing Senior High School Entrance Examination*, it was not as hard as the *National University Entrance Examination*, but still stressful and competitive. It was after her (maternal) grandfather passed away, and he was the last one of his generation in her family.

Her birthday was after the funeral and one of her classmates at school gave her a diary book. She never writes a diary before because She did not want anybody to have any chance to see her...not secret, she has no real “secret”, just some thoughts that she doesn’t want other people to know. She wanted to talk to someone, someone “trustworthy”, but not her parents, because they were trying to handle their sadness too, plus, they are just not the people she could talk to. She didn’t want to talk to any classmates because she didn’t want them to know anything about her family. She had nobody to talk to. Even if she had, she still couldn’t. So, she decided to write to me, a cat. Of course, she thought cats cannot read. She just used my name in case anyone saw it so they wouldn’t know that she wrote this because she wishes she could talk to her grandfather.

She was going to just rip it off from the notebook and burn it the next time she goes to the graveyard. However, of course, however, about four months later, after the *Beijing Senior High*

School Entrance Examination, she cleaned her room and found this notebook still “hidden” under the mattress but moved to the other side.

She opened it from the front side, saw the letter I “wrote”. When She flips through the pages, I saw some writings on the other side of the notebook. At first, she thought the classmate who gave her this notebook left her some “surprise”, then she realized it was her mother who wrote her back using my name.

She was upset but didn’t say anything to her mother. Since then, she would not save any “thoughts” or “memory” kind of notes or have any messages or pictures saved on her phone. She ripped the letter she wrote into the tiniest pieces possible and flushed it down the toilet, but she used a blade to cut off her mother’s letter and saved it.

Later I saw her put another book’s cover on the notebook and hide it in the books. Together with a mini bunch of dried wildflowers from her grandfather, a box of soapstone chalk, the skull of an old pet turtle, a painted hog knuckle, and a small Tibetan knife.”

Eve looks happy when talking about the old times, but Febe missed her mother.

Nightmare

At night Febe had a dream of herself walked through the woods: “she saw the crow perched on a branch staring at her with its glossy, beady eyes. It had shiny black feathers and its yellow beak opened: ‘Febe, Febe, take my coat and fly to the moon.’ Febe was scared, she turned around and ran as fast as she could. She was tripped by a root and fell on her face. Too scared to look up and her whole body was trembling, which made her look more like a desperate mouse. Nowhere to hide and no way to escape, Febe heard the loud noise of flapping wings and a layer of goosebumps rose on her neck as the big claws grasped her shoulder and carried her away. High up in the air, crossed mountains and rivers, they finally landed in a cave and the crow took off its black feather coat and turned into a woman.

Stood in the middle of a dirty cave, the woman looked like she was a priest standing on a stage in a dust color shabby robe. She was tall and skinny in an abnormal way as if she walked through a carnival mirror. Sharp-looking face and pointy nose. Her eyes were yellow, almost like they could glow in the dark. Febe rubbed her eyes to see if the woman’s eyes were glowing. She swished out like a breeze. Febe was left alone in the cave in shock and countless questions bubbling in her mind that did not get to ask. Is that woman the crow? or a stranger crow? Where is mother? Or Grandma? Where did she go?

Febe tiptoed towards the opening of the cave in case the woman was hiding in the night watching her. It was so windy outside that she thought her head would be blown off her neck when she peeked out. Underneath roaring ocean waves were trying to pull the skerries apart, white foam-like dancing flame. Febe saw no sign of the woman and found herself trapped here. She receded into the cave.

The black feather coat on the ground was still shiny and clean like it is still on a living animal that takes care of it all the time. Febe wanted to touch it but was too scared, so she sat down across from the coat and stared at it. She waited to see if anything will happen or perhaps anyone will appear, even the woman with yellow eyes. She tried to stay awake, looked around the small dark cave, and paid attention to any possible danger, but her eyelids got heavier and heavier, and she finally fell asleep seeing the woman's yellow eyes floating in the darkness.

Woke up by the cold air from outside, Febe kept her eyes closed, thinking she must be laying on her bed like every morning and had a bizarre dream about a monstrous crow turned into a woman last night. Where else could she be? Why so cold? Must be she kicked the blanket off the bed in the middle of the night, happened sometimes. But the ridiculous dream just felt so real, almost too real for her to open her eyes.

Mumbling and hoping to not see the feather coat, Febe carefully squinted her eyes to take a quick look, dark. She wanted to go back to sleep but it was simply too cold, so she took a deep breath and tried to get up from the ground. Because she slept with such exhaust that not even one finger of her was moved when she was asleep, half of her body was numbed. It felt like she was glued to the unforgiving cave floor and became part of it, petrified.

She was scared, her heart skipped a beat and hit hard. She tried to stand but fell back on the floor. Rubbing her arm and leg, Febe saw the feather coat was still sitting in front of her. It was such a rich and smooth color of black, like obsidian or waxed leather. When Febe was finally able to use her leg, she reached the coat and carefully stroked the feather, does not want to get hurt by anything that could be hiding in the feather, as well does not want to leave any scratch mark on this perfect feather coat.

Carefully looked around even though there was no one or nothing around her, Febe decides to put the coat on. Not knowing the time or how long he had been there, Febe stretched her wings and stepped out of the opening of the cave. She could not breathe in the storm, she tumbled and passed out in the howling wind. Ocean water mixed with the rain. Waves were like flames licking the clouds. Febe was carried further and further away.”

Before she wakes up from the nightmare, she saw words flying in the air like a bird.

Overheard

The next morning, they all sit next to the big table in Grandma's kitchen, Febe, Grandma, and the crow, eating toasts and fresh pagoda flowers scrambled eggs. Eve curls up on a chair in the corner, staring at the crow who is completely focusing on its food.

After breakfast, Grandma goes back to her library room, and Febe sneaks under the library room window. She can hear Grandma talking to the crow.

“Ah-ya-ya. Look at the eyes. Do you like inari sushi? Braised fried tofu pocket cut in halves and stuffed with sushi rice. The worms in the eye sockets look like the sushi rice of an over-stuffed tofu pocket, and all the rice pieces are wiggling in and out. Or finger lime, look like half a zoom-in finger lime that's cut vertically, and its flesh is whiter instead of clear.

Look at the thighs and legs, they're all half-dried like frosted dried persimmon or prosciutto.

That one's head looks like a candied plum. These worms are quite big! Like instant noodles.

That one's torso is bitten open, look at the inside, like congee. There, you see? There are small worms, like toasted white sesame seeds. Do you see the white thing in the hair? That's also

worms, a pile of worms looks like over-whipped whipping cream or loose homemade butter.

When they eat and reproduce, they create foam, caramel, honeycomb, or bubble tea color liquid

or foam, sometimes white foam like the parmesan cheese foam on spinach ravioli. That one is

bloated! You see the worms swimming in the liquid? Looks like the chamomile petals floating in

tea. That one's ribs are cover by worms, like pan-fried white sesame seeds covered lamb rack...”

“Maybe grandma is not talking about corpses?” Febe says to herself, “Maybe I'm still dreaming.”

Library

Another two days pass, it is a Thursday morning, they are having breakfast at Grandma's house as usual, except the crow.

"She's back." Grandma suddenly says, "Crow."

She said it before Febe gets to ask "Who?", instead, she asks: "How do you know?" Of course, no answer, until the crow vigorously pecking on the window breaks the silence. "Help! Help!" the crow screams. They go out and sees the big crow laying in the yard, its feathers look worn out.

"Are you okay?" Febe asks.

Again, nothing and no one answers.

Grandma picks up the crow and pulls its head back as if she is going to rip its head off. Febe's scream is almost out of her throat. Instead of any violent bloody scene, Grandma is holding the weak bird in her arm. The crow is now awake.

"What happened? Where did you go?" Febe steps up and asks the crow.

The crow fell back asleep that day before telling Febe what happened to it, but Febe guessed what it did must relate to the possible corpses in the library and the weird records in Grandma's notebook. Maybe she is dealing with mermaid corpses.

Febe decides to sneak into the library this time, early in the morning, when Grandma is still in bed.

It is still dark outside, early in the morning, Febe carefully opens the library door. It is not locked. Probably because Grandma was not expected to be awake at this time of the day.

As she steps into the library, the old wooden floor makes terrible noise as if it were not Febe stepped on the floor but an elephant. In the room, she found Grandma sitting on her couch, eyes open, same as the crow standing on her shoulder. It is quiet in the room.

For one second Febe thought she will never be able to meet her mother again, alive, for no reason.

A Story within a Story

“You’re up too early for someone in your age,” Grandma says.

“I...I had a weird dream.” Febe made it up.

“Tell me about it.” Grandma asks, “Bad dreams won’t come true.”

“Um... In my dream, I was collecting candy wrappers.” Febe starts to make up a dream on the fly, “I collected candy wrappers in a photo album, and it smells so warm and sweet every time she opens it. Sometimes one will fell out when she took the album off the shelf, and the candy wrapper would fell slowly like an autumn leaf or a butterfly. I fell asleep in my dream next to the opened album, and I had a sugary dream within my dream in my dream: all the candy wrappers were suddenly wiggling, escaping from the album, and became countless sparkling butterflies. The butterflies all swished toward me and surrounded me with the cloying breeze. I slowly floated in the air, carried by the butterflies through the window and up to the summer night sky.

There was a big redfish that jumped up when they were crossing a river and I was swallowed by the fish. Slid down to the fish’s stomach and saw a tiny pearl there. The pearl was glowing, slowly turned into a blurred picture and the picture started to move.

There is another girl who is living in a tent on an endless grassland. The grass is rich summer green and flows like water when wind passes. She finds an empty old clay jar in the grass and takes it back to her tent. The next morning, she finds the jar is filled with freshwater that comes from nowhere. She is confused but used the water. It repeats every day and night, and she decides to stay up and see where the water comes from. Right after midnight, there is water starting to spring out of the bottom of the empty jar, she gets closer and closer. The jar is almost filled, and a water drop bounces on his nose and drags her into the jar.

She finds himself turned into a redfish. Once there was a girl who ran to her riverbank. She was crying and holding something tight in her hand. She jumped into the water, swam around until all her tears mixed with water and she left, but left the ting shiny thing at the bottom of the river, the pearl. Redfish swallowed the pearl and tasted her tear.

The girl wrote a story of an imagined world and when she stopped writing, time was frozen, and all characters were trapped in the imagined world. She abandoned the story, ripped the writings, but accidentally cut her finger with the paper. Her blood was absorbed by the script as well as herself. She found herself in her imagined world, but only everything slipping backward.

At the end of the dream, it turned out all of them are the same person, just me. It was in a quiet room. An opened empty photo album is sitting on the table and ripped papers in the trash can, but do not tell anyone, it is going to be bustling again soon...”

Febe's Feather Coat

The summer eventually ends, and July is here to pick up Febe.

On their way home, Febe says: "I think the idea of the feather coat is great, but I don't like some other parts of the story."

"Which part?" July asked.

"Like... I think it should be the fisherman met Zhu Qing after he joined the crow group, and they fall in love with each other instead of assigned as a couple by Lord Wu, and I don't like that the fisherman had a wife at home. It would be nice if he's unmarried, or Zhu Qing is the secret second identity of his wife. And I don't like when it mentioned all other Han River goddesses, they're all beautiful young women under thirty. It sounds like... I don't know how to say this, but it just makes me feel upset when I hear this part. I would write this part as women of different ages and different appearances. It would be more interesting and... and so the Han River goddesses don't sound like a bunch of strippers." Febe said.

July laughed, "Why not write your own feather coat story?"

III. Flower with No Fragrance

Flower with no Fragrance

Have you ever seen Pagoda trees' flowers?

Outside the apartment where April grew up, there are pagoda trees on both sides of the road. Leaves in rich green, the small flowers with four or five petals. The pagoda tree flowers are not like cherry blossoms that fall from the trees like snowflakes. One day you see them on the tree, the next morning they will be all over the ground. People steps on the flowers, mash them with dirt and the bottoms of your shoes get sticky. No distinctive fragrance, but when a soft, mild, light yellowish green breeze caught you or follows you on the street, it is neither floral nor grassy, nor a little bit of both, it is probably the pagoda flowers.

Under the trees, there are a couple of benches where people will sit for a short break or have some small talk if they see someone they know. It was a Sunday because it was the time before evening but after lunch nap. The sky was just starting to get dimmer and dimmer but still enough light to see the surrounding. No sharp burning sunlight. The warm, cozy, but clear breeze brushes against your face, and finally your hair can be dry and still soft; not the kind of dry in winter—too crispy, “floating” in the air and makes your face itchy. It was probably August or September.

April and May

April's Chinese name means hidden virtues or having virtues with modesty—made a meaningful and proper name for a proper lady. She has always been a proper and optimistic girl, at least that is what she looked like at that time, a little bit boyish but that was probably because of her exceptionally short hair. She was on the school swimming team, and they had training every day after class. So that we can only imagine her parents' thought was "Short hair is easier to handle for an elementary school girl". The pool water bleached her hair light brown and caused acne problems on her face. Her face, that always had a big smile behind all the red pimples, and her hair was shiny like very thin copper wires in the sunlight.

Her skin is neither too pale nor too dark, just the typical yellowish tanned color of an Asian. Neither too tall nor too short. Neither too skinny nor chubby. Neither too smart nor stupid.

Her close friend May was a quiet girl, with long black hair, pale skin, chubby, but similar height, and always got similar scores on tests as she did. This girl's name includes two characters, one means a lake that is deep and wide, and another means foggy rain, unclear, and naïve.

They were always together, during class breaks, lunchtime, went to the bathroom...

May

Two years ago, summer, May's bedroom, two girls sitting on her bed playing computer games, and one of their phone rings.

It is a phone call from the other girl's middle school classmate. May said the voice sounds familiar, and it turned out the girl who called was May's elementary school best friend, April.

The next day, they met in a Hong Kong-style dessert place. April was skinny, no makeup, wrapped herself in old dark color clothes, quiet, and looked like she was daydreaming about something serious and sad. A few months later May got a text message from April asking about studying in the U.S., basic things like housing, food, transport, culture, class registration...etc. Simple questions, but lots and lots of questions. Polite, almost awkwardly too polite for a not-so-close old elementary school friend.

April's Rambling

April was there early, but not too early, stood next to a bench, under one of the pagoda trees.

The bench was covered with flowers, so she would rather stand. A brick red beret hat, medium length chestnut color curly hair, wore makeup but the foundation melted like a mottled wall, red lip, black eyeliner and mascara, no eye shadows, no jewelry, a basic white T-shirt and a white tweed jacket with thin red and black outlines, a vintage-style dark brown leather crossbody purse on her right shoulder, a short, pleated skirt in red tartan, white socks, and shiny black Mary Jane shoes with about an inch heel.

Very skinny. She has changed a lot in the past eleven years. It was her. Still the same face with fewer red pimples, but behind heavy makeup with a quick awkward or nervous smile. She went for dinner with May, but she barely ate. She moved the salad around her plate, kept stirring the soup, and looked quite anxious, or disturbed. They talked about the weather, news, her clothes and makeup, everything that can be considered as "neutral" topics, or not directly related to anybody. Eventually, she said she is having a hard time finding a job. She graduated early this year from the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign with a master's degree in economy and a 3.5 GPA which means, in her word, not qualified for any Ph.D. program application. May did not ask many questions, just listened, and listened. April said she has no future—could not find a job, neither good enough to enter a Ph.D. program.

May tried to change the topic and they started to talk about their old classmates since they are both from Beijing: *“Do you remember this girl in our class? She liked that guy, but he liked the other girl in class 9th...”* *“you remember Maggie? I met her in New York last year, my friend from high school Rachel took me to her birthday party. Yeah. She rented a rooftop in Jersey City.*

She went to NYU and her boyfriend was in Columbia. They graduated at the same time. No, she did not tell me, but I saw the pictures she posted after graduation. She was wearing the NYU purple robe and he was in the Columbia baby blue. Oh, her dog is a teddy called Purple.”

“Wait, Rachel was your high school friend? Really? The three of us were in the same class in middle school!” “Three?” “Rachel, Maggie, and me.” “You remember that tall girl with a strong accent in our class? Her ex-boyfriend went to Harvard. No, I don’t know. I heard it from the other person.” “Oh, you know he’s still trying to text her, not her, her best friend, her hair is longer, yes, but she deleted him.” “Him? I met him three years ago. No, not at all. He asked me out for a movie and insist to buy a large popcorn, for me, cuz quote from him “I don’t eat these.” And he ate all of it. I could not hear anything but him chewing popcorn the whole time. And he asked me “this is so good, why don’t you have some?” He said his parents spent quite some money to put him in a community college in northern California. And by the time I met him he already spent a year at the required English program. He asked me: “you’re so quiet, you’re not good at talking. You must have very few friends, right? I was like that before, but I got better since high school “And he said he’s gonna ask me out again, but I blocked him right after he left.”

April looked much better after nearly two hours talking in a bubble tea place. They spent almost an hour in line talking about food, places on-trend, this new dessert place, that brunch restaurant, this bar’s owner is some girl’s uncle whom she met in college, that chef used to work in the other sushi place... April finally decided that she wants red bean green tea, no boba, no ice, no sugar, and almond milk.

They lowered their voices when they were in the line because the big city is always small, any name you mentioned, any comment you made can catch other people’s attention and

spread around. The person in front and behind can be anyone. The rush hour traffic was finally gone, and the street became quiet again. They walked to the subway station. April tossed her beverage in a trash can with two-third left before she left. "I don't want to gain weight." She shrugged. May said he understands.

After May left, instead of went back home, April walked down the street that was covered with a layer of pagoda flowers, she could feel how soft and moist they are. The aromatic breeze blended with the cerulean color air in the evening.

April texted May when she got home, apologized for being sad, probably ruined the mood of her day, did not eat much food, probably ruined her dinner experience, but she is happy to see her.

Summer Again

The next time they meet each other is the following summer. They watched a cartoon at an incredibly old community movie theater with limited selection, and April picked the movie. She seemed not to enjoy the movie, could not sit still on her chair, and said she needs to go for a walk right when the movie ended. As they stepped in the sunlight, you can see how pale her face is. They just walked and walked, to nowhere, said nothing.

There is a question or question May did not ask that is still in its unclear form, and April had the answers to every possible question that May could come up with but did not know where to start. April asked May if she wants ice cream about five minutes after they passed an ice cream shop, so they walked back to that empty ice cream shop on a hot summer day. Do people nowadays just prefer to eat ice cream in winter? April got a mini scoop of raspberry sorbet. It took her so long to pick a flavor. She started to talk when the ice cream warmed up, formed a smooth, glossy surface that slowly drips down into a red puddle.

April apologized for the movie that she picked as it was the only cartoon available there. She said she does not know where to start and perhaps May already noticed that she was not doing so well. She has been struggled with depression and anorexia for years since high school. All her friends left her because of it, so she stopped trying to make any friends or telling people about her problems since then. It is a family problem. May nodded.

Family problem. Family is always a problem.

April's father tells her every day that if it was not her mom's insistence, he had never wanted to have her. He always tells her she is stupid and useless, did not get into a good high school, did not get into a good college for bachelor's and master's degrees, and still cannot find a

job. Her mother just ignores all this for all these years and agreed with her father in all circumstances. Guess keeping the child was her only rebellion.

May texted her middle school friend before she came back from Shanghai and asked her if she knows about April's depression problem. The other girl said no but she could invite April to their Saturday lunch in the new Thai food place.

The Other Girl

April was there early, played with a ufo-catcher machine. The other girl drove May there because they live in the same building, and she is always a little late when they see each other, “fashionably late”. April was quiet and barely touched any food. It was just May and the other girl talked and ate the whole time. They tried, but April still looked uncomfortable and left right after lunch. The other girl was annoyed because she canceled her appointment for two at a popular afternoon tea restaurant to include April. They went to another afternoon tea place instead and the other girl never contacts April again.

April texted May when she got home, said she feels sorry but did not know how to act, or talk, almost everything external would make her uncomfortable and asked if they can go out again, only the two of them. Right before May fly to the U.S., they met again.

Family

April said she does not like her new haircut. She said she is kind of addicts to shopping and happy ending movies because they drive her attention away from depressing thoughts. May was quiet as usual and nodded. April said her dad tried to send her to the hospital for electric shock treatment, but she refused. She had to take care of her dad's new untrained dog at home since her old dog died, which her dad enjoys bringing up and watch her reaction. Her dad tells her she is so useless that she cannot even take care of a dog, and she should just stay at home until her boyfriend asks her to marry him if it will ever happen.

The pills for depression she got make her nauseous and eat less, but if she stops the pills her depression will get worse. She said she is waiting to see which one kills her first, depression or anorexia.

She said she met her boyfriend at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign. He was working in wall street as an intern, poorly paid, worked overtime every day, lived in a shared small studio in a basement, and eat bread three meals a day. He is from suburb Beijing, not a city kid, and could not get much support from his family. Her parents never considered him as an option, talked about him only when they are joking. She has been waiting for a job offer so she can leave her parents.

She finally got it yesterday, but her parents told her if she leaves for that job, she will not be allowed to step into their apartment again. She wanted to break up with her boyfriend. Even though he is a good person, but he just cannot help her with her problem. She is trapped, hopeless, and lonely. She said she wants to ask the other girl about how she found her job but worried if she was mad at her, so she wanted May to ask.

The other girl, April's middle school friend, May's elementary school friend, got her double major undergraduate diploma from NYU and master's from Columbia University, fancy intern experiences, and current position because she is smart, she studied hard, and she got good family connections. Nobody knows, or everybody knows.

May did not say yes or no, but she told her that the other girl was not mad at her.

Two days before May left, April got rid of lots of brand-new makeup products and clothes, with tags on, that she said she bought and forgot in her closet. May was worried if April had some kind of plan and started to clear up her belongings. May was worried. They texted each other occasionally, May hoping April has not given up and April hoping May would still be able to reach her. April checked on May if she was living her life carefully and happily, but cannot be too good or happy, otherwise, it might hurt her feeling. Early this year. April's boyfriend is back in China and moved to the city part of Beijing. They both found a job, and she is still with her family.

Everything just calms down and back to normal in a blink. Life and time are so powerful, that no matter how painful, how extraordinary the moment was, how self-conscious or over-confidence we were, eventually will fade and vanish to nothing. Give up, commit suicide, or live with it. There is no third choice. It is like an exciting adventure movie with a common ending, a hero no longer able to save the world, the glory star stepping down the stage.

She is like the pagoda flowers.

Mother's Day

April bought a pair of gold earrings for her mother as Mother's Day gift, but she does not want to stay at home with her parents on Mother's Day, it is a Sunday. She texted May and her boyfriend if anybody can go out spend the day with her, but only her boyfriend texted her back said he will be with his parents. April left the gift to her mother and left the apartment.

She quit her job about three weeks ago, but she did not tell anyone. Instead, she pretends to go to work every day with her backpack filled with her knitting stuff and take the train to her old college friend's apartment and spend her day there. It is Sunday but her friend is at work in a restaurant, Mother's Day is a busy day for restaurants. April has the backup key of her apartment, so she heads to the apartment building.

At first, she was lying in bed, later she lays on her side on the floor, a tear drips from one eye into the other, mixes with another teardrop, together with drip down her face, form a little puddle on the floor. More and more tears come out of her eyes, soon becomes a stream and the little puddle gets a little bigger. She cannot stop the tears, or her eyes where the tears are coming from, or somewhere in her chest, where she feels the pain and sorrow that create the tears. All these organs get their minds and simply decided for her that she is going to be sad without letting her know when this will end.

Foxed

Outside the building, there is a fox. The fox is sitting in the bushes, head towards the moon, and keep breathing in and out a red marble-looking bolus. The red marble-looking bolus just floats and swirls in the air. The fox has been refining this red marble-looking bolus for like a hundred years. All she needs is a human body, or just the skin would work too, so she can put it on and experience human life.

The red marble-looking bolus is the key to her transformation, which allows her to turn into a human and able to turn back. It is made of a pinch of the fox's soul and the essence of moonlight. Every time the fox blows out and breathes in the red marble-looking bolus, it absorbs more moonlight essence, and the fox gets more control of its magic. It waited and waited, for many years, to find a body that fits it and weak enough for it to take over.

Normally, foxes will take over children's body who is extremely sick or seriously injured in accidents, so that the family can have their beloved child back and the fox can live an almost complete human life with only a few years missing. The fox will take over the body before the original spirit fully evaporates, cure the body with its magical red marble-looking bolus, and starts a new life. Meanwhile, the price is the fox can never be a fox again because it used its red marble-looking bolus which contains most of her magic power.

That is why this fox sitting downstairs is so different. Fox is not sure if it wants to be a human being for the rest of its life yet. Fox wants to try it first and therefore it is all by herself for all these years. All its family and friends either already finished their journeys as human beings or failed to form their red marble-looking bolus and die as foxes. Either way, they all left the fox decades ago. This picky and indecisive fox lives a hundred years and sees how the world and human beings keep changing each other. Sometimes it wonders if this world and this peculiar

dominating species still worth the waiting and effort, but the thought would normally be gone after it fills her stomach with silly rats and succulent courgettes.

The fox sneaks into the room and touches the yarns with its paws.

The girl does not notice the fox, she never notices the fox. She stays in the room almost all the time. When she tries to reach the shining happiness, it burns. She cannot move, cannot breathe, cannot stop crying, cannot eat... She is dying, slowly and quietly, curl up into a ball just like the fox's dinner, a fragile, delicate, nearly dead rat.

The fox traps itself in the knitting stuff and made a mess.

The girl hears the rattling noise, looks up, and accidentally, destined, looks into a pair of warm brown eyes. She stares at them like time freezes, then realizes the eyes belong to a fox, though they very much resemble human eyes.

April is startled, but she still helps the fox out of the tangled mess.

Sunset has the perfect dim atmosphere that covers everyone's face while you can still see people around, and you would not be able to tell if the person who just passed is ghost or a genie in disguise.

"Why are you sad." The fox asks, with great certainty.

"I...I don't know what happens to myself, and my life." April answers, surprisingly calm, like bewitched, answers, or more like mumbling to herself: "Am I living my life? Or it is just running by itself now. I want to set myself free while slowly built a cage that encloses me. The cage gets smaller and smaller because I took the space away from myself, panicked for no reason, and feared failure before I even started.

Maybe I am scared of life because I have never lived life. I have been living in a fog for all these years. Wherever I go, whichever direction I pick, it's always a dead end. I cannot see

the future, the potential, the existence of the future, my future. I want a corner to just be by myself. Does a lonely life not count as life?

Nothing can stay the same when time is involved. It does not matter what you step in, river, story, small ponds after a rain, anything, and everything, was/is/will be different for every single smallest time unit.

We all bounce back and forth between the fear of death and life, of everything we are afraid of, and a short peaceful moment when we can convince ourselves there is nothing to be afraid of; or we already did what we can.”

“And what is love?” She suddenly raised her voice as if it is an important statement, or she made a big decision of her life, but she just continues mumbles: “If love is the final rescue, the medicine, the only way to the intellect, how do I find love? Love from others, family, friends, lovers, are real treasures, virtues.

This may sound arrogant or ungrateful, but they are love towards me, upon me, coming from outside, like a shield that I can hold in my hand, defense myself against my “fear and trembling”.

Without a weapon, I’m still going to die, die from the inside, just a matter of time, sooner or later. Only if I can find the love of myself, fall in love with myself, love myself, I will be able to survive, live a life, with a reason not will.

When I look at myself in the mirror, I look into my eyes, I confuse myself, the face starts to twist and turns into a creepy mask that I am not familiar with. Please let everything sink. It will be a relief if I can just vanish into the air, dissolve in the dark ocean.

Death is always there, for us, with us. Death would never abandon any of us but happily accept everyone, anyone, no matter who you are and what you did...” Her eyes look big when

she rambles, maybe it is because of the pills she takes, maybe it is part of her depression symptoms, maybe it is just her personality.

On the other side of the room, the fox is very patient. It just listening to what she says quietly.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” the fox asked, few minutes after April stopped talking.

Walk in the Woods

They step on dry leaves. Leaves are crushed like crispy potato chips. The sounds and textures are very satisfying, even addicting, in an obnoxious way.

“Stop it, let’s go. You said you want to come back before it gets real dark, right?” The fox asks.

“Yes...” April answers. They walk into the woods and blend in the trees and bushes. The girl looks back, and she sees the trail disappearing. It is like they are entering another world, a wonderland, a fairytale. Plants in weird postures and invisible small animals chittering around. Berries waving their spiky branches and they look so much like gemstones, shining and glittering. She has never seen this many mushrooms, all different shapes, sizes, and colors.

The girl lights up a cigarette and offers one to the fox. The fox does not react.

“No?” the girl asks.

“No, thank you. Do I look like I can hold the cigarette with my paw?” The fox says.

“I don’t know.” She shrugs, “Fox normally doesn’t speak.”

The fox tells the girl that cats can talk too, but normally they do not because they do not like to.

It is already dark.

“When you see a hairy moon, the fuzzy-looking ones that blurred by thin clouds, don’t wander outside in the dark, or you might bump into some ghost.” The fox says.

The evening is April’s favorite time of the day, and she likes to go out, enjoys the wonderful world all by herself, and comes back before it gets too dark. Especially when she sees a hairy moon, she would try to get back as fast as she can, but carefully too, make sure she does not bump into someone or something; and when entering her room, she does it quick and quiet,

so hopefully, nothing follows her back, take over her body when she is asleep, and walk out of the room the next morning to live her life while she becomes a floating ghost who can only come out when there is a hairy moon in the sky.

Instead of commenting on what the fox said, April says: “You know, I like planning, scheduling, rescheduling things—my daily schedule, weekly plan, monthly plan, the goal of the year, my future...etc. I work on them, edit due to the reality, my feelings, people around me, the information I absorbed. There is always a time, occasionally, I would believe I know what my life would be like.”

Fox asks: “Do you remember your first “plan”?”

“It was when I was in kindergarten, I wanted to be a kindergarten teacher until one day I wanted to be a bus driver because they got to stay on the bus all day and every day! That was the first time I took a bus ride. About a week or two later I felt regret because I lost my glue stick on the bus and missed the small flower sticker from the teacher for that day, and I can never earn it back. Kindergarten teachers look immensely powerful until I went to elementary school.” April says.

“What happened after you went to elementary school?” fox asks.

“Oh, I wanted to be an elementary school teacher instead. The same old story when I moved to middle school, then high school.”

“Do you still want to be a teacher?”

“No. Children are mean.”

Walking through the wood at the midnight is nice, but also makes April a little bit nervous. Her breath is so loud, yet the trees are so still. They count the bunnies on the trail— “So many bunnies, one, two, three and four and five...That’s not a bunny!”

“GRAHHHHHHHHH! GO AWAY!” She shouts at the coyote as loud as she can. The coyote disappears in the bush. Fox laughed at her.

A dim orange light is in front, but too dark to tell if the bridge-tunnel is still far. April thinks about the homeless person who always rests under the light. She gave that person a bag of food once, the person took the food and nodded to her.

Another bunny shoots across the trail.

April’s back pain and neck pain rush back as soon as her thoughts get interrupted. She looks up to the sky, but the moon is not there.

Her stomach is tumbling. She is famished.

She thinks about Danish apple cake. Ground-up breadcrumbs or old puff pastry, toss with sugar and bake till crispy, homemade apple sauce, put pastry crumbs and apple sauce layer by layer, stay in the fridge overnight, serve with fresh whipped cream. Scrumptious!

Thinking about apple cake, a smile appears on her face. Not even the drizzling rain that starts a minute ago can ruin her mood. Her farmor is from Denmark. Farmor means grandmother in Danish. The apple cake she made is sublime! And the prune filling Æbleskiver, which is small ball shape pancakes with fillings. Medallion cookies, basically sandwich two pieces of sugar cookies with vanilla custard in the middle, the icing on top, and a dollop of red currant jam in the middle, leave it overnight in the fridge so the cookies absorb the moisture from the custard filling, and becomes little bit cakey, not too cakey. Roast duck, red salad, brownie...anything her farmor made is April’s favorite food. She misses her farmor and farfar. (Farfar means grandfather in Danish.) She feels like the little match girl.

The drizzling rain continues, like thousands of tiny creatures beating drums. The rain in early autumn reminds her of an old-world dry Riesling, the moist, cushy breeze, the smell of leaves when they just starting to rot, the taste of a ripe apple, maybe honey crisp.

Crow Trail

She eyes front and see the “crow trail” getting closer and closer. It is not called “crow trail”. April named it because there are countless crows quietly resting on the trees at this part of the trail, every night. As she runs past the trail, the crows on both sides would be startled awake, scream, and flap their wings vigorously, fly away, or fly along with her. She feels like a dark witch every time it happens.

The fox walks faster, “Let’s go see the crows.” Fox says.

As she gets closer to the crow trail, she notices it is not as quiet as usual, instead there is a loud noise of bird screaming, wings flapping, and branches cracking. They slow down and reach closer to where the noise coming from, carefully, try not to make any noise. Peeking up from behind a tree, April sees two big crows fighting on top of a tree, and all other crows are awake too, beady eyes and beaks glow in the moonlight, feathers falling from the air. They are all so excited like people watching football games, pace left to right, right to left on the branches, waving their wings, and screaming for the fighting birds. April had never seen such a scene; a layer of goosebumps rose on her neck. She keeps watching.

One crow is violently pecking the other, the other one screams like the long whistle you hear when a train is about to start. As it flies down in a swirl, the crow turns into a woman in the air, ripping a black feather coat off herself, and land on the ground. The crow lady has short black hair, a sharp-looking face, a pointy nose, glowing black eyes but no white parts—it is such a rich and smooth color of black, like obsidian or waxed leather.

She is in a shabby black robe, so tall and skinny in an abnormal way as if she walked through a carnival mirror. She looks furious; toss the feather coat on the muddy trail, jumps in the bush, and disappears into the wood, as the coyote April met earlier.

The other crow lands on a branch and staring at the wood where she ran away, tilts its head to one side, does not make a sound, neither does any other crows. It is so quiet that April and the fox hold their breath. Few seconds are slowly stretched longer and longer, eventually passed, the crow flaps its wings and flies away. Other crows make some rustling noise, close their eyes and rest on branches. The wood is back to normal, other than a feather coat laying on the ground.

Raindrops wash off the mud stains and drip down the tips of the feathers. they tiptoe toward the coat while constantly looks up to see if any crow notices them. The fox drags the coat out of the crow zone, April turns on the flashlight on her phone and sizes the coat up under the dim light. The feathers are dry and clean like they are still on a living animal. April carefully stroked the feathers.

“Put it on, and you will be free.” The fox says stares at April with its humanly brown eyes.

April’s mind freezes and follows the fox’s command like a puppet. “I don’t want to be a human being anymore.” She mumbles.

The coat is baggy and heavy, but as she lifts it and puts it on her shoulder, the coat surprisingly shrinks to her size, and she feels warmth. She turns around and she sees the end of the coat tilts up, turns into a crow’s sharp tail and her feet turns into claws. She turns back noticing her arms become wings, eyesight become bird’s vision, and her beak chattering because of excitement and fear.

She cannot tell if this feeling is wanting to scream but the voice gets stuck in her throat or not able to breathe. Her body is still her body, but no longer functioning the same. Her watery beady eyes are blinking in the rain. April’s phone is on the ground, light up a half-dead

dandelion. There is now a crow standing in the dark, a little bit bigger than normal ones, shivering. She looks down but terrified. She finds herself or her body lying on the ground. The fox throws up its red marble-looking bolus, puts it in the body's mouth, and massages her throat with its paw. Right when the bolus goes down to her stomach, the fox becomes reddish-brown smoke that goes into the body from her nose.

April sees herself sits up and the only part that is different now is her eye, looks normal to people who never met her, but looks like a fox to April, the warm glossy brown eye. April was overwhelmed by fear, excitement, anxiety, and other complex emotions, she stretches her legs and flaps her wings. Breezes magically appear under her wings and carry her up—she is flying, wiggly at first, but higher and higher, further, and further disappears in the sky.

IV. Underneath the Feather Coat

Title—Feather Coat

I remember a crow story I heard from my mother when I was in elementary school. The story is about a man who was given a magical black robe and turned into a crow. Later he met a female crow and fly to the other side of the river and live happily ever after. The story itself did not interest me as much as the magical black robe, and for some reason, I stubbornly misremembered the black robe as a feather coat years later.

I realized that many of my daydreaming-like imaginations were generated around the idea of this mysterious feather coat that when a human being puts it on, he or she will turn into a crow. Even though later I found out my mistake, I still think Feather Coat is a much more interesting title for a story with magical elements. I think when people hear the phrase “Feather Coat”, it is something that is visually more interesting in an abstract way in people’s minds.

Stories by Song-Ling Pu

I could not remember the name of the story, so I asked my mother and she found me an old book in her collection. The book is called Chinese Folk/Ghost Stories Collection by Guo-Jun Ma (the editor), published in 1994. The book is a “translated” version of ancient Chinese folk/ghost stories—all the stories were translated into modern Chinese from ancient Chinese by Guo-Jun Ma. The story in the book was on page 523, and I translated the origin story from ancient Chinese to English. A revision of the story is included in the thesis.

The idea of my thesis is based on a traditional Chinese folk/ghost story called “Zhu-Qing” in Pinyin, which means “bamboo-green”, it is the name of the main female character. The story was originally from 《Liao Zhai》, book eleven 《Zhu Qing》, edited by Si Lv. Now I know the name of this story is “Zhu Qing”, which means bamboo-green, or bamboo-black. It could be bamboo-green because bamboo-green is an existed Chinese word which is the name of a color, the specific green color of bamboos. It could also be bamboo-black because Qing (青) also means black in ancient Chinese, as well as the character Zhu Qing, is a crow, who is in black feathers, plus black bamboo indeed exists in An-Hui province, China. The color of black bamboo is not pure black, but a very dark, nearly black kind of green. So that I cannot decide whether it means bamboo-green or bamboo-black.

Zhu Qing is from a book called *Liao Zhai*, which is called *Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio*, also called *Stories of Ghosts and Foxes*, by Song-Ling Pu. Song-Ling Pu is a famous short story writer in Qing Dynasty, China. The earliest printed book of him was found popular dated the years of Kang Xi, Qing Dynasty. The book included a total of 491, other says 494 stories, many of them are “love” stories. I used “love” because I believe Zhu Qing is considered as a “love” story even though I do not see any real “love” in the story other than Lady He’s love

to Han Chan for whatever reason. Other stories depicted the negative effect of the Imperial Examination on the scholars and revealed the ruthless ruler's oppression of people in ancient times.

Song-Ling Pu was born in 1640 and died in 1715. He was from a family of scholars for many generations, but he failed the Imperial Examination many times when he was young and ended up being a local teacher. He was interested in folk ghost stories since his childhood. It is said that to collect ideas, he opened a tea house right in front of his house. People who drink tea can pay with a story instead of money. With the help of his tea house, he collected a significant number of folk/ghost stories. Therefore, he called his library "Talk Studio" or "Chat Studio", which in Chinese is Liao Zhai. Liao 聊 means talk or chat, Zhai 齋 means room, studio. He also got the nickname of "Mr. Talk-Studio". He organized and edited the stories and turned them into the book *Liao Zhai Zhi Yi*—Records of Strange Stories in Talk Studio. Zhi 志 here means records, and Yi 异 means strange stories which are folk/ghost stories. Based on historical records, Song-Ling Pu started his stories when he was 22 years old, the year 1663, first-year Kang Xi, until when he was 40 years old, the year 1679, 18th year of Kang Xi. Even until 1700 and 1707, there was still more work finished occasionally.

I used to fall asleep with these Chinese folk stories being played. I remember those stories were both real and magical. I used to believe in them when I was a kid. It was like when I asked my grandmother why she kept a small red mirror on the window facing outside, she told me so that when monsters and ghosts out there trying to enter our apartment they will be blocked by the mirror or scared by themselves, not exactly her words, but something like that. I honestly believe there are monsters and ghosts out there at night. I was three or four years old. I was not

scared or anything, just would not doubt anything my grandmother told me. “Adults” are always right, right? At least that is what I believed before I entered elementary school.

In one story, two Taoist priests were drinking and chatting at night, just for fun like normal people. One of them said such a good time at night would be a pity without a beautiful full moon so he cut a piece of paper into a disk shape, threw it up in the air and the paper turned into a moon, bright and beautiful. The other Taoist priest complimented on his magic, and he said this night will not make a great memory without seeing the dance by ChangE (the goddess of the moon), so he threw one of his wooden chopsticks to the courtyard, the chopstick turned into a beautiful dancer looked just like ChangE and started to dance for them. Many times, I sat in my small room, stared at the paper on my desk, pictured the fantasy scene in this story. Many times, I sat next to the dinner table or lunch at school, I looked at my chopsticks, thinking how someone could imagine the chopstick turning into a beautiful dancer. I wish I have an imagination like that.

Another story I remember is about a Taoist student, who finally gets to study with a master after many years of Taoist study and searching for a real Taoist master. The master agreed to teach him the magic of crossing through walls only if the student swears that he will never show off to other people or do any evil things with this magic. The magic of crossing through walls, which, of course, can allow people to walk through any walls like those milky-color ghosts in western cartoons I imagined, or at least that is how I pictured it. The student successfully learned the magic and left the master. When he was back in his village, other villagers asked him if he gets to meet any master and learned any magic. He forgot what the master told him and present the magic as a trick in front of people. Unfortunately, since he broke the promise, the magic stopped working. He embarrassed himself in front of everyone. I

remember I was thinking what did he supposed to use his magic on? What kind of situation is the “proper” situation to walk through a wall? When I was six, I wished that I could learn these magics from the stories when I listened to the stories, and I would NEVER break my promise.

The other story, which is the last story that I remembered from those cassettes, is about a pear tree. One day an almost beggar-looking Taoist priest was walking on the street. He saw a pear seller selling pears on a trolley and he asked the seller if he can give him a pear because he was very hungry and thirsty. The seller told him to go away. The Taoist priest was not happy, he said: “You can refuse to give me a pear, but you shouldn’t insult me. If I have pears, I will share with everyone.”. A stranger who passed by overheard their conversation and bought the Taoist priest a pear. The Taoist priest thanked the stranger, ate the pear in front of everyone, and planted the pear core immediately. People gathered and watched him planted the pear core. The pear core sprouted right after, soon grew into a big tree, bloomed, and grew many succulent big pears. He picked all the pears and gave them out to the crowd.

Everybody was so amazed by his magic that even the pear seller left his trolley aside and joined the crowd. After people finish the pears, the Taoist priest chopped down the pear tree and walked away with the chopped tree trunk. People walked away too after the Taoist Priest left. When the pear seller went back to his trolley, he found all his pears and one side of the trolley handle were gone. It turned out the pears were the seller’s pears, and the tree was the trolley handle. The pear seller got terribly angry and tried to chase the Taoist priest but saw him disappeared at the end of a dead-end alley. I remember I felt bad for the pear seller, and that must be the most delicious pear that I had ever imagined in my childhood. Even nowadays when I see pears, I still think about the poor pear seller and the magical pear tree. How amazing it would be to see a seed growing to a tree, petals of pear blossoms falling like sticky snowflakes, and at the

time people enjoy the pears under the tree, they could still see the flowers on the ground and smells the flower in the air.

It is like a secret magical world that my mind. I can jump in, and enjoy all the magical great times by myself no matter what is happening out there in the real world; but why the “real” world is the real one? What is real? Which is real? I can only say something is “real” when I am able to perceive it, but many times what I see only means my experience of seeing the scene was real at that moment. I cannot even say my memory is completely real since my memory can be faked or illusioned. Even I know the magical folk story world is not real, but I still like to “live” there as much time as possible: when I am walking on the streets, taking a shower, doing dishes...

Folk/Ghost Story Research

I started with researching the original story, not trying to prove a folk/ghost story happened in Chinese history, that is an absurd idea, but looking for a historical period and location to fit the story there—if it happened, when and where it should be, so that when I write based on the story, I will be able to write about everything more detailed and hopefully vivid. Since I was never a confident writer, especially in a foreign language, I can only write what I “know” or familiar with, and information like location and date helps me with zooming in the history and finding the fitting traditional way of dressing, weather, local architecture, ways of transit, etc.

At the beginning of the story “Zhu Qing”, the male main character is called Yu (鱼) Ke (客), it could be this person’s first name is Ke (客) and last name are Yu (鱼); but it also could be the person’s job, which is fisherman. The word Yu (鱼) itself means fish. I checked the book of last names, and it appears that Yu (鱼) is indeed an existed last name, not too uncommon. But the problem is the meaning of Ke (客): as a noun, it means guest, passenger, customer, people who attend a certain event or work a certain job, formal appellation in ancient Chinese, the appellation to the offspring of the prior dynasty from people of the new dynasty, the attack side of a war in ancient Chinese, yet sometimes indicates the defensive side too, foreign people, followers, farmers, ghosts or some evil spirits, the past (year or season or time, etc.), and, a last name. It has different meanings when used in different situations, and there is no absolute connection between different meanings. Ke (客) means objective and outside when used as an adjective; it means to receive, migrant, and invade (by illness) when used as a verb; and it can be used as a quantifier.

Among all the meanings of Ke (客), I do not see any logical option to use as a first name. It could be Yu Ke's father's last name is Yu, his mother's last name is Ke so that he was named Yu Ke, but people in ancient times were likely to not have this kind of "equal right" or this kind of "romantic". On the other hand, if Yu (鱼) Ke (客) stands for fisherman—Yu (鱼) means fish, Ke (客) here adopts one of the noun meanings: people who attend a certain event or work a certain job, which is people who make a living with fish (fishing)—fisherman. Yu Ke (鱼客) is also an existing vocabulary that means fisherman in ancient Chinese based on a poem from the Tang Dynasty (618—907 A.D.). The sentence is: "People asked fisherman (lakes and rivers) if they want the marrow of the otter, people asked fisherman (ocean) if they want the fabric made by mermaids." ("獭髓求鱼客，蛟绡托海人。")

On the other hand, Yu (鱼) is at number 335 in the Song dynasty (960—1279) version of the book "Surnames", and there are mainly seven origins.

The first one is derived from another last name—Zi (子), originated from Mu-Yi Zi's (A child of Lord Huang of Song) secondary name—Zi Yu, and his offspring carried his secondary name as their last name, which is Yu, based on the book "Historical Customs Study" (《风俗通》 or 《风俗演义》), by Shao Ying (A.C.153—196), East-Han dynasty. Lord Huang of Song is the 19th ruler of the country Song in the Chun-Qiu Period. Mu-Yi Zi is the elder brother (the child of the prior emperor and a concubine of him, not the empress.) of Zi-Fu Zi, the twentieth emperor of the Country Song during the Chun-Qiu Period in Chinese history (based on the book "Records of the Historian"). From another book "Research of Names" (《姓氏考略》) by Ting-Wei Chen, Ming or Qing Dynasty, it says the same thing, besides it also indicates Mu-Yi Zi's

offspring lived in Feng-Yi, part of Shan (陝) Xi province nowadays and their fiefdom was Yan Men—south of You-Yu County in Shan (山) Xi province nowadays.

The second origin is from Bo Yi, whose last name is Ying. Bo Yi had 14 branches of offspring, and one branch had their fiefdom at Xiu-Yu River, since then they have used Xiu-Yu as their last name. Until the Chun-Qiu period, they simplified their last name and became two branches: Xiu and Yu who used Xiu and Yu as their last name separately. (Records of the Historians by Qian Si-Ma)

The third origin is She-Fu Yang, Chun-Qiu period, Country Jin, whose secondary name is Shu-Yu, and his offspring used Yu as their last name based on the book “Yuan-He Last name collection” edited by Ji-Fu Li and Bao Lin, finished in Yuan-He 7th year, which is A.C. 812. Another origin is from Yu-Jiao Chang, who was a favored minister of Lord Li of country Jin in the Chun-Qiu Period, and his offspring used his name as their last name.

The fifth origin was from the country Yu in the West-Zhou dynasty and people used their country name as their last name. 1986 spring, the archaeology team of Bao-Ji Museum found a tomb group in Bao-Ji city, Shan (陝) Xi province; there found a bronze ware with engravings showed the owner of the tomb group used to be the Lord of country Yu in West-Zhou period and his last name is also Yu. (From “The Book of Zhou” 《逸周书》 or 《周书》, composed in early Qin or West-Zhou dynasty.)

The sixth origin is Xian-Bei people granted with Han last name—for example, Xian-Bei general Ke-Gu Shang in Tang dynasty. Ke-Gu Shang regards a military inspector Chao-En Yu as his foster father and changed his name to Zhi-De Yu with his foster father Chao-En Yu’s last name and his offspring carried this last name. (From book “Tang History” 144-94, edited by Ying Zhao, late Jin dynasty.)

The last origin is from three clans of Manchu people's last name translated into the Han language—Chinese. The first one is Nimaha Hala which means fish—Yu(鱼). The second one is Ukuri Hala which means dace fish with small scales. And the last one is Imaci Mongu, which means fish that swims fast. (From book “General Records of Qing Dynasty-General Records of Clans-Last Names of Manchu Eight Banners” 《清朝通志·氏族略·满清八旗姓》 edited and composed by Qing dynasty authorities.)

Here I came up with the final decision of calling the main male character “fisherman” in my translation. However, more questions about the original story came to me.

For example: “In the first paragraph of the story it says the fisherman is from Hu-Nan province, here I have a general location of his hometown, and the boundary of Hu-Nan province, and almost all provinces in China had been changing as the dynasty changed, so once I know which dynasty this story could have happened, I will be able to know the exact boundary of Hu-Nan province at that time. To locate the time of the story, I need to consider several elements in the story as well as the author. It mentioned the Imperial Examination, yet he is from an impoverished family and probably a fisherman, it very much depends on the rules of the Imperial Examination, which is just like the boundary of the provinces, that depends on the dynasty, meanwhile, the information here can help locate the dynasty. Here is the first time the work “Lord Wu” appears in the story, and it brings the question of who is this Lord Wu? Or which Lord Wu is He? This depends on the location of the temple and the location of the temple will provide much more details of the building structure, decoration, status style of the temple—what is the temple looks like?

In the second paragraph, there appears a river, which river is this river? Where did this tradition of feeding the crows with meat come from? What is the purpose? Again, what do the

crows do other than eat meat and relax? There must be a purpose for people to feed the crows. What was their request to Lord Wu and his crows?

Later it looks like Lord Wu has the right to assign the members of his crow army as partners to each other. The problem here is that this story in Song-Ling Pu's story collection count as a "love" story, the real love instead of the traditional kind of marriage assigned by parents, but this one is assigned by Lord Wu, neither the fisherman nor Zhu Qing has the choice, especially Zhu Qing. She was assigned to the fisherman like an object. It looks so abrupt that they became a couple with a stranger and suddenly "deeply in love". Is Zhu Qing a real crow, or a person turned into a crow, or other kinds of creature turned into a crow? Etc."

As I dig into the research part, I found this process attractive, and probably a little bit too attractive and took me too long. It felt like a kid who found a (possibly fake) treasure map left by a famous pirate and plays the game in the backyard or the wood with friends. In this case, it felt like I'm unfolding a magical part of the history even though it was not at all in history. In my research, I found other interesting magical elements related to the "feather coat", such as mermaids who can make waterproof fabric and cry out pearls, how beaver's marrow can heal a wound, etc. It contains both the magical main idea and claiming the content in the writing includes things other than fiction writing, and to me, the "research" part was so interesting is because it makes the fiction more "real", and the more realistic a fiction story looks like, the more logical it is, the more interesting it will be.

About Translation

To me, translation is something quite new to deal with, especially from ancient Chinese to Chinese-modern-American English. The abstract feature of ancient Chinese language is charming from the reader's point of view, yet hard to translate, even hard to translate into modern Chinese, as well considering the culture difference and English itself is not easy for me.

For example, one part of my writing, where it described a magic red marble-looking bolus of the fox. In the original text, it simply just introduced it as if everybody knows fox got magical red marble-looking bolus, and the function of the red marble-looking bolus is some kind of common knowledge. It was confusing to me when I first read it in Chinese, ancient Chinese. I did not know what fox has to do with a red marble-looking bolus, or how it can breathe it in and out in the air, or what does the fox uses it for. All it said was one short sentence saying the fox refining its red marble-looking bolus by breathing it in and out in the air towards the moon, the rest is just my research and imagination. So that technically I did not do a strict translation, my translation itself is a rewrite of the original story. Since I cannot simply translate what is on the paper without caring about the logic, culture and time background, and context, or it will be very confusing.

Magical/Supernatural Elements

When I spent too much effort on the research, I was off the main track of creative writing. I had to find a way to combine both the research part and the creative writing part—as well as the magical/supernatural elements and the “reality”.

I was introduced to the concept “Magical Realism”. Since the literary concept of Magical Realism in literature was originated from Latin America, I started with Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. In my reading experience of this book, I had more “surprising moment” than I expected, like whenever it smoothly transits from the “reality” to “fantasy”, like how everybody suffered from insomnia and how magically they were cured; as well as one of the most memorable section of the death of Rebeca’s husband, that his blood crawls so far that it reached all the way, or it was more like the blood intentionally crawl back to his mother, avoid the furniture. The magic just happened when it happens, with no explanation and follow no common logic. The plot of the story goes rather fast than other novels that I read before, and the total seven generations are quite some characters to remember and identify, especially some of them partially share the same name(s).

As a non-native English learner, I could not help keeping ask myself that am I reading this “correctly”? Am I mixing the story of two different characters without noticing? Etc. Eventually, I finished the book and I turned to my work; thought I might be able to connect the sections of my work into one by making the characters four generations of one family. It did not turn out great and the relationships between the characters seemed messy. Later I realized that the number of the characters is not the problem, but the necessity—do I need all these characters?

Then I moved to magical/reality writing from other cultures and even mixed cultures. A book called *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston helps me thinking about the connection and boundary between magic and reality, and of course how wonderful, at the same time, how dramatically tragic it can be when they blend. The third chapter “Shaman” is about the author’s mother’s earlier life experience as a local doctor in her hometown and the “supernatural” or ghosts she met. This book is standing in between the western and eastern cultures, stretched back to over a hundred years. The Chinese culture reference brings me closer to the concept of magical realism, as well as her work. Since I am from China and spent nearly a decade in the U.S., I could not help but make a connection to the content and the experience of the author, of more like comparison, yet we are so different, many cases even the opposite. Since the book was written in English, sometimes it makes me forget that she was born 55 years before me.

Reading her work makes me realize how much variety and freedom there are nowadays of writing “contemporary fairytales”, and her book reminded me of the original reason for me to create my version and stories derived from “Zhu-Qing”.

Fairytale/Folk Story Rewrite

In the western world, fairy tale used to start with “Once upon a time”, which indicates “back in the days when magic still exists” (or “back in the days when people still believe in the existence of magic because of their lack of scientific knowledge”). Similar in ancient China, even though we do not have a specific beginning phrase for folk or ghost stories, but you can tell from the content that those stories were written in the time when people still believe magic exists, or from back when magic power used to exist in nature. Both western and eastern fairytales/folk stories were originally told orally, until the collector(s) stood out and decided to preserve the stories, like Brother Grimm from German, and Song-Ling Pu from China; as well as in both culture, these “fantasy-non-sense” was for adults, not children.

When it comes to the topic of fairytale/folk story rewrite, the earliest re-write would also be the story collectors like Brother Grimm or Song-Ling Pu. Before looking at the “purpose” of the rewrite, I think rewrite is inevitable even they were just trying to preserve the story. The story was “rewrite” orally whenever it was retold before being collected. Every time it was retold, it gets re-generated once in a unique mind, and becomes a slightly different story. Do not even mention people who have special interests in fairytale/folk story, they spent extra effort on depicting and polishing the story based on personal tastes, and sale purpose as well.

There was a period, and still nowadays that people rewrite these old stories for political or other specific reasons, like feminism against gender stereotyping, etc. Not until 19 and 20th centuries, the target reader of fairytale and folk stories became teenagers and children; and that caused the adult to rewrite or filtered the story based on their standard of what children can or cannot read.

Nowadays, the purpose and format of story “rewrite” and/or “retold” have way more varieties like direct/indirect self-reflection, the reflection of the environment/culture/society, not only spread around orally or literally but also in formats like TV shows, movies, music videos, broadcasts, etc.

What happened to Chinese ancient folk stories was that they started as “pure folk stories” at first, which is around and before Tang Dynasty and Six Dynasties Period. Stories from then only serve the purpose of spreading odd news and entertaining because people still believed in supernatural ideas sincerely. The reason that the historians came up with this conclusion is that stories from then have merely any logic between the “reality” and “magical” elements in the story—“weird things just happen and it was everywhere”. Magical things sound normal, or common in those stories.

However, after Thang Dynasty, which is the Ten Kingdoms Period and Song Dynasty, people started to use folk/ghost stories as a tool of spreading political, religious, or moral concepts and virtues. The stories still serve the purpose of entertaining purpose, but not “pure” anymore, and that was about the time when children started to read these “educational” stories.

Take the story of Mu-Lan as an example, it was originally a fictional poem from Han Dynasty, and it became famous in the western world because of the Disney movie “My Lan” which depicted the main character as a “Disney princess” or a “Chinese Disney princess”. Interestingly, nowadays, even movies in China, produced by Chinese people, some are still more or less “westernized” probably because of globalization, and others are affected by trendy elements and values in the society.

In the second chapter of *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, “White Tigers”, she rewrote the story that was told by her mother, which is the Mu Lan story, by replacing the

main character with herself and depicted the whole story setting as a daydreaming experience in the first person. Her version of Mu Lan's story rewrite is a very non-typical one, different from the similar traditional ones that follow traditional Chinese morality, or the Disney version of a cliché love story “sugar-coated” with an oriental feature. I think what makes her writing so special is partially her mix-culture growing-up experience. When I read her story, there is one voice that stands on the traditional side saying this is interesting work, but completely non-sense, yet another voice that stands on my side saying yes but this is great, fairytale does not have to make sense, it can be just for ourselves.

Another story rewrite work that inspired me is *Old Tales Retold* by Lu Xun. Lu Xun is a famous Chinese writer. In this book, he rewrites several very ancient Chinese stories. His story rewrite was politically sarcastic. One story he rewrote was a classic love story about the ancient Chinese Moon goddess—Chang E and her human husband, and in his version of the story, the goddess couple became a broke family that suffered from basic living issue, food for example—how the husband had to go hunting but comes home every night with his bag empty and Chang E have to shoot crows to make crow meat noodle. His stories carry his signature dark humor.

When it comes to my writing, I thought about how much I can “rewrite” and how much I want to rewrite the original story, as well as what it means to me to rewrite this story, and other stories inspired by “Zhu-Qing”.

On the “reality” side of my work, I wrote about what happened around me, like family problems, mental illness like depression, or more specifically the difficulties that overcame or experienced/experiencing by my family members, friends, and sometimes even strangers that I met. Even though I have more attention on female characters, but that reveals the world through my lens, whether it is culture-related or not.

On the other side, the magical part of my work, everything started from the black robe or the feather coat that I misremembered. It became a symbol of freedom to me, that whenever I think about this story in my mind, it carries me away from the reality, allows me to escape the daily life that sometimes I don't want to live—many times I imagine I can fly, higher and higher, all the way up to the sky, with the cloud, with the rain, with the wind.

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