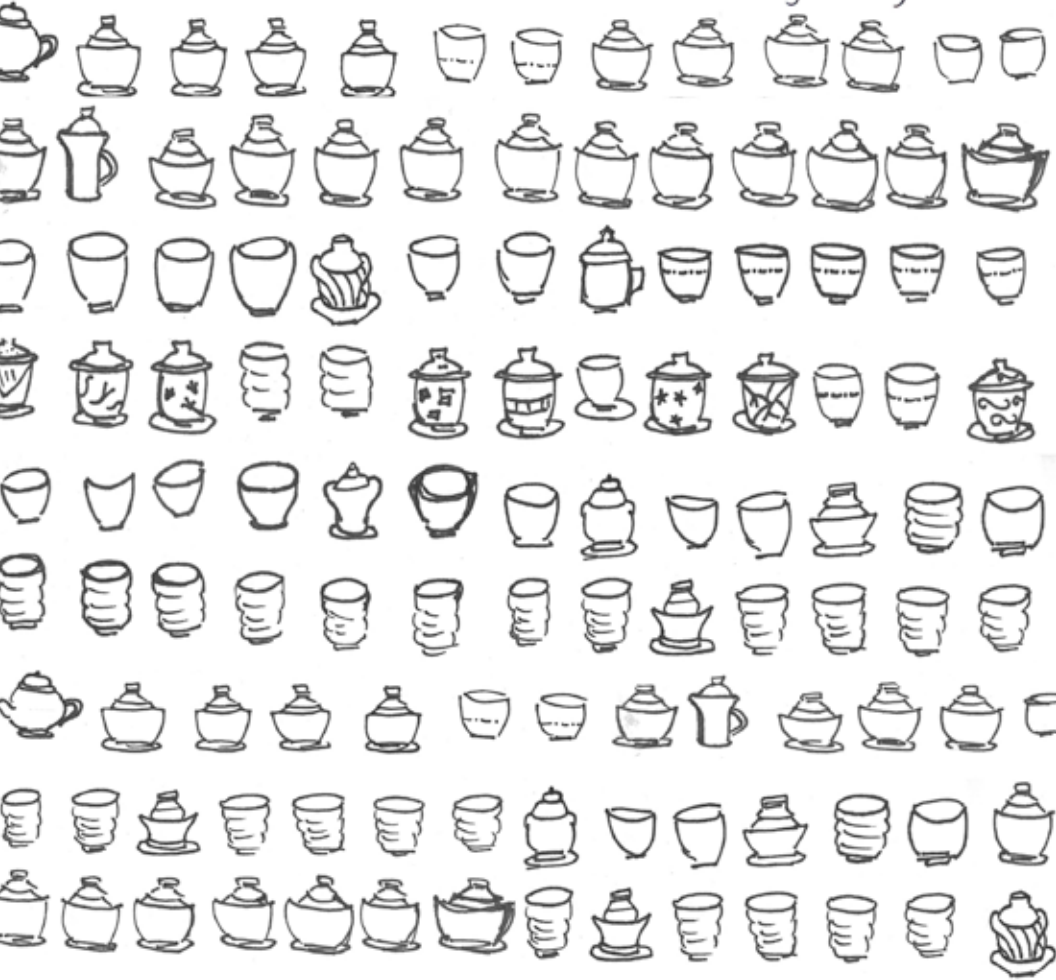




**INFORMANT**  
*amy zhang*









**INFORMANT  
AMY ZHANG  
2012-2013**

<b>THE INFORMANT</b>	<b>09</b>
<b>A HOSPITAL VISIT</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>A MATTER OF SCALE</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>A YEARLY TRADITION</b>	<b>31</b>
<b>BEIJING DIARIES</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>THE INFORMANT II</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>LOTUS</b>	<b>42</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>49</b>



*To my parents, for believing in me and giving me the life that I put  
down into words.*





*“Then you begin to give up the very idea of belonging. Suddenly this thing, this belonging, it seems like some long, dirty lie...and I begin to believe that birthplaces are accidents, that everything is an accident. But if you believe that, where do you go? What do you do? What does anything matter?”*

—Zadie Smith

*“At the time I could not more believe my eyes than I can now trust my memory.”*

—W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*





## THE INFORMANT

My family in China never asks me what America is like. They think they already know, they've seen the TV shows and the movies. They can get all ten seasons of *Friends* for less than fifty US dollars. And somewhere in their Chinese readers digests and magazines, the American lifestyle is not only displayed, but dissected. My mother's best friend told me gravely: "Don't get married to an American—half of their marriages end in divorce!"

When I think I know better than my cousins, I am usually proven wrong. Out of curiosity, and in the least patronizing way possible, I asked my cousin what she thought about the great firewall. Doesn't it annoy you, I said, that the government restricts your Internet freedom? I expected indignation, some fiery rhetoric on how annoying it was to be a teenager without Youtube or Facebook or Google.

Instead, she said: "Not really. We live in a different society. We have Weibo, Renren (Chinese version of Facebook, complete with identical font and blue interface) and Baidu. Yes, they are controlled by the government, but it has to be that way. There are too many people in this country—we need safeguards."

My uncle, who came into the bedroom to help us with the heat, joined in the conversation. At the risk of putting words into his mouth, I will avoid quoting his explanation on the differences between Chinese and American society, at the risk of putting words into his mouth—but I do remember him saying to me: "*You* don't understand." I sat in my pajamas with my cousin on the hard bed, and tried to let their mindset sink in. It was true for them; it was such a logic that any further attempt to persuade them to think differently seemed feeble, weak, abstract.

There are some things I can definitely be informative about though. When my eleven year old cousin Zeze asked me if it was easy to bump into NBA players on the street, I felt okay telling him no.

## A HOSPITAL VISIT

My grandfather's breath is being sucked out by a horrible monster of a tube. It is sucking life out of him. His face is yellow like decayed paint, his hands splotched with purple bruises, shaking. I stare at the monitor, trying as hard as I can to not look at this defeated version of my grandfather, World War II jet fighter pilot, calligraphy master, the one who'd sneak me away to buy sweet yogurt past bedtime. I concentrate on the hills of the green squiggle that holds him together.

Ma looks at my Nana who looks at my grandfather's face. The sucking in and out sound of the tube is too loud, too automatic.

A man I don't know is slumped in the chair beside the bed, asleep. Is he another relative I haven't met?

Ma looks at me.

"Why don't you read something? Didn't you bring some books to read to your grandfather?" Her eyes are sharp and warning.

With everyone's eyes on me, I reach into my purple sequined bag, a bag that is flimsy and ridiculous next to these IV tubes and steel rods. I pull out a packet of English homework that I had stuffed in my bag, foolishly thinking I could be productive on the train ride over. The blocks of text leap to me in comfort.

*"One morning, when Gregor Samsa woke from troubled dreams, he found himself transformed in his bed into a horrible vermin. He lay on his armour-like back, and if he lifted his head a little he could see his brown belly, slightly domed and divided by arches into stiff sections. The bedding was hardly able to cover it and seemed ready to slide off any moment. His many legs, pitifully thin compared with the size of the rest of him, waved about helplessly as he looked."*

My mind goes cold. The sound of each word rises above the tubes, my reading rhythm unexpectedly steady for something I have never glanced at before.

*"What's happened to me?" he thought. It wasn't a dream. His room, a proper human room although a little too small, lay peacefully between its four familiar walls...."*

My voice is too high, too casual, why am I bothering to portray his voice? The attention circulating around me is shallow: nobody understands what I

am saying. I don't even really understand what I am saying; I am just thankful for these words as they form in my mouth, for this paper that my eyes are glued to.

*“Gregor then turned to look out the window at the dull weather. Drops of rain could be heard hitting the pane, which made him feel quite sad. “How about if I sleep a little bit longer and forget all this nonsense”, he thought, but that was something he was unable to do because he was used to sleeping on his right, and in his present state couldn't get into that position. However hard he threw himself onto his right, he always rolled back to where he was. He must have tried it a hundred times, shut his eyes so that he wouldn't have to look at the floundering legs, and only stopped when he began to feel a mild, dull pain there that he had never felt before.”*

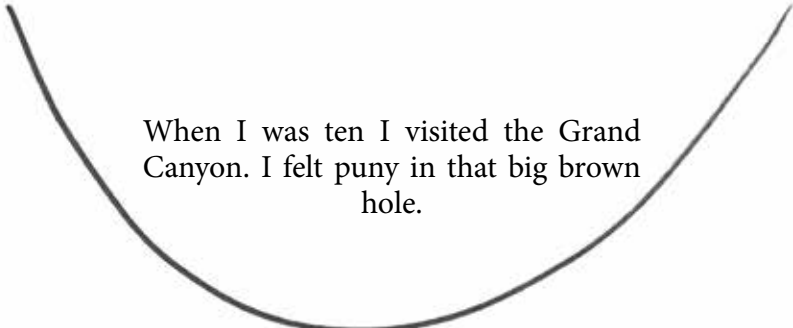
The words run through my body but not my mind, my mind is floating, hiding. I take a moment to breathe, and slowly lift my eyes from the page.

Ma pushes me forward, the cold steel rod of the bed presses against my thigh. The purple, splotchy fingers of my grandfather slowly curl in to form a thumbs up.

“Integrate “Chinese Dream” study and propaganda and theorists [of the “Chinese Dream”] with the grassroots and the common people’s self directed educational activities. With “My Dream, the Chinese Dream” as the theme, continue to deeply expand “The Party in the People’s Hearts” propaganda work. Cater to the grassroots, deeply excavate, and widely promulgate the true stories of people from all walks of life and from grassroots Party organizations who, under the Party’s leadership, stand on firm ground, take real action to reinvigorate the nation, contribute novel ideas, and tirelessly struggle in order to realize complete individual development, to push social progress, and to enact the “Chinese Dream” of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. Create and present to the public a series of short films [based on] those stories in order to build a positive, healthy, progressive, and harmonious social atmosphere... Set up a group of major philosophy and social science projects to interpret the “Chinese Dream”...Rely on “Weekend Community Lecture Halls,” “Beijing Social Science Week,” and similar activities, and vehicles such as “SpeakersNet” and the “Capital City Microbloggers Community of Social Science Experts” to strengthen the “Chinese Dream” propaganda and dissemination.

—excerpt from a follow-up to General Secretary Xi Jinping’s speech on the “Chinese Dream,” published in the April 5th, 2012 edition of *People’s Daily*, China’s state-controlled newspaper

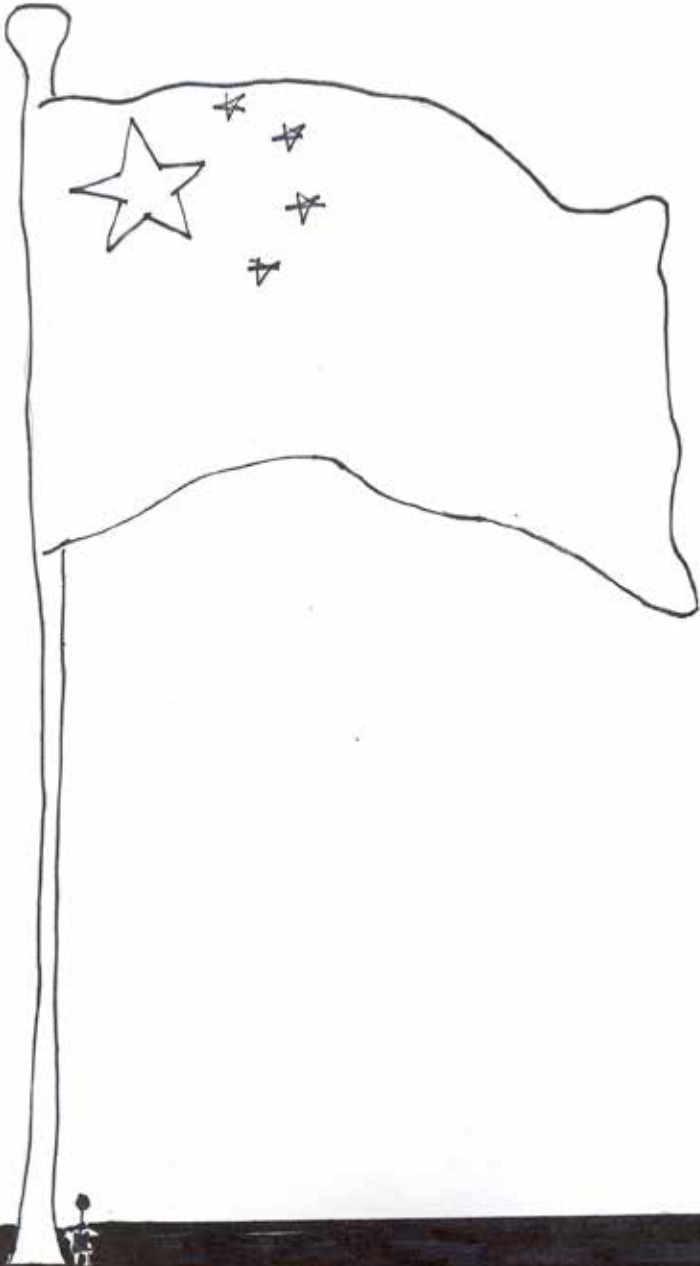
## **A MATTER OF SCALE**

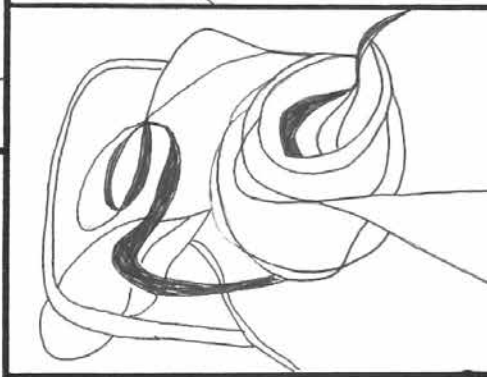
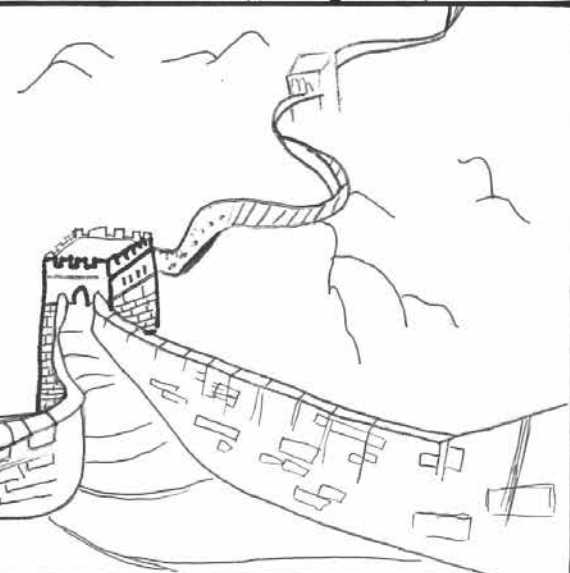
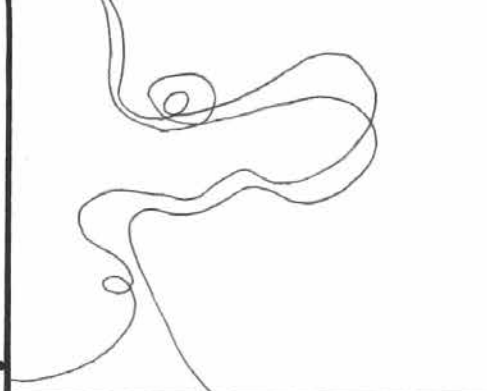
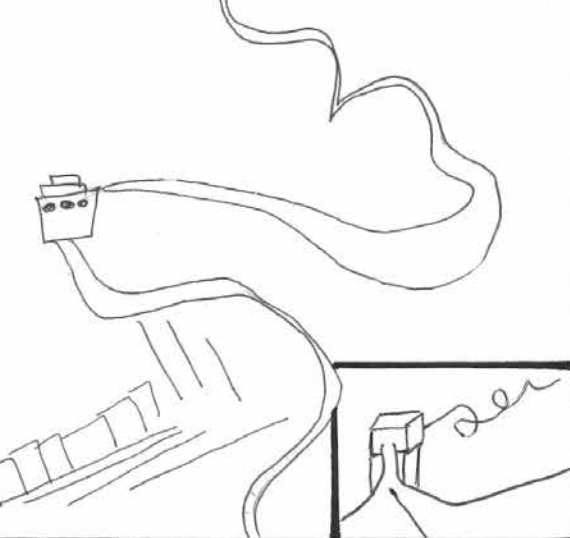


When I was ten I visited the Grand  
Canyon. I felt puny in that big brown  
hole.

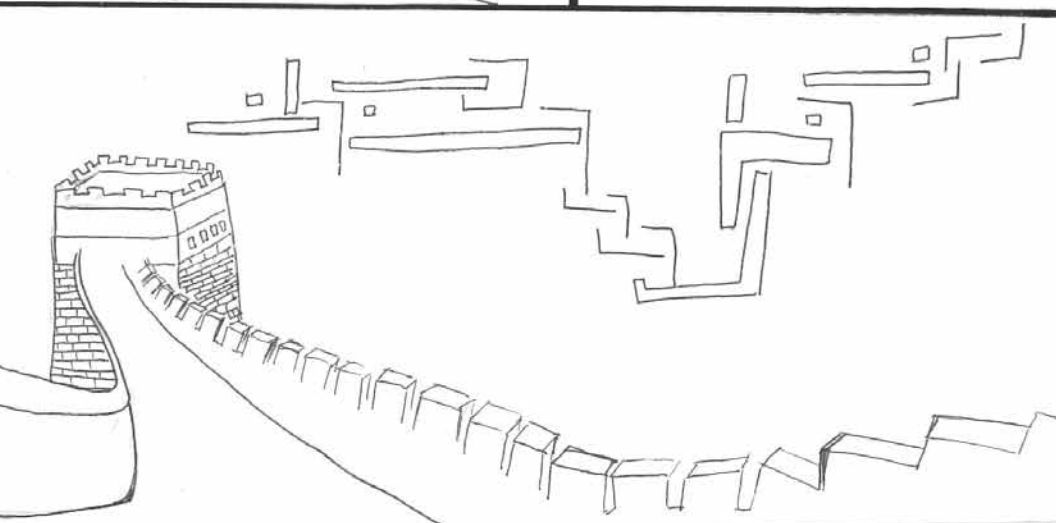
I was awestruck that nature could make  
me feel this way. There was an immensity  
to marvel at.

China strives to grasp this power of nature.





From the Great Wall of China...





To the sight of constant  
crowd control around  
you...

You live in a reminder of  
your own smallness.



Tiananmen Square freaks me out.

The ground is so flat and stretches on for so long that the only things  
you can look up to are

the security cameras,  
the Chinese flags,  
and the portrait of Mao Zedong.



\*his mole is repainted every four years.



There lies a strange tension  
between beauty and egotism.

Beauty came to mind when I saw the exhibition of four long classical Chinese scrolls at the National Museum of Beijing.



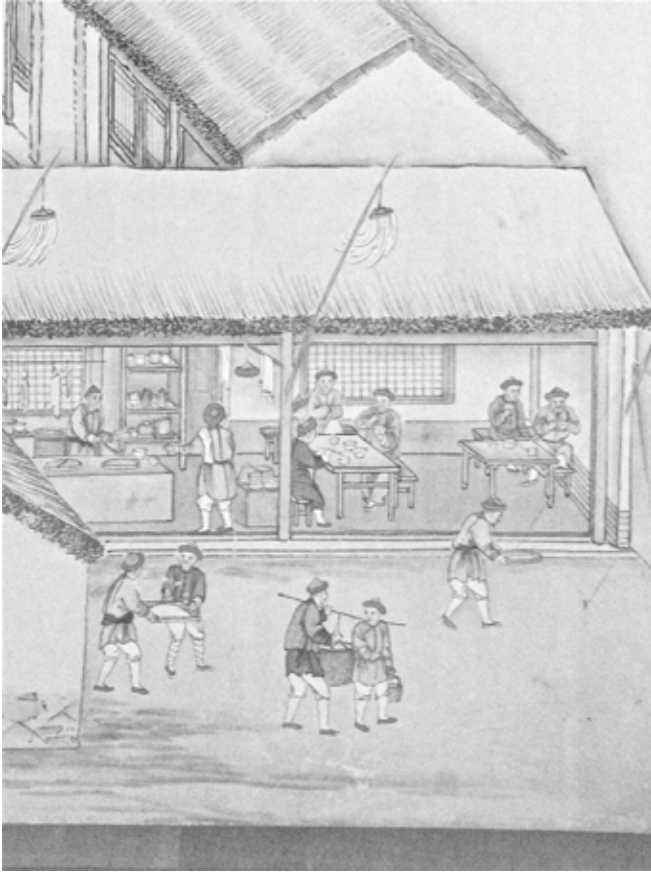
The royal court artist Xu Yang was asked by Emperor Qianlong to  
Each scroll is at least



record, through painting, stops on his Southern inspection tour fifteen feet long.



I can only imagine how long it took him to capture a moment in such detail, drawing each figure of the Emperor's entire court and the local population.



People in their homes, out on the streets, joking, laughing... everything down to rags hung up in the noodle shops.





Why did the Emperor want these paintings?  
Is it creepy, how well he captures life from a bird's eye?

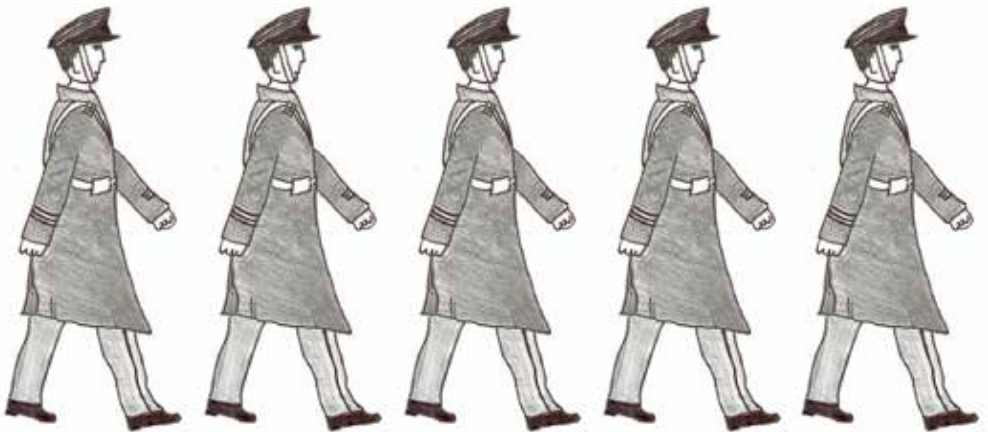
For the same reason there are security checks  
in all the subway entrances in Beijing?

And the guards with their fut hats and  
dark green uniforms, ubiquitous as smog?



You are constantly reminded that you can't trust anybody  
and that the government doesn't trust you.

Your power can only exist in harmony with others.



My friend Nick and I, while strolling in Tiananmen Square, saw a vagabond walking outside of the white fence in order to cross the road.

A guard was yelling at him to come back.

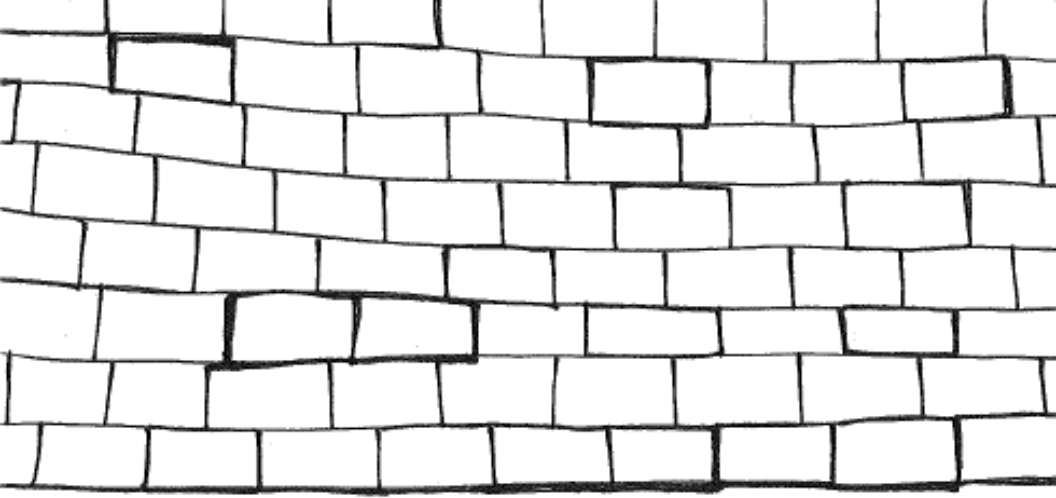


It sounded like he was scolding a dog.

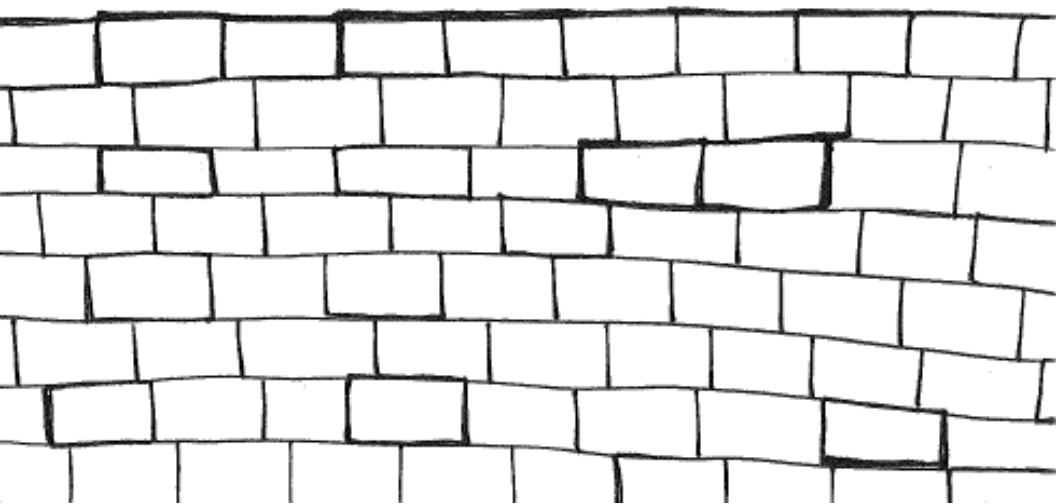
The vagabond was an old man, with a bindle over his shoulder.  
He looked straight at the guard, and, without  
breaking his gentle stride, kept on walking.

Nick and I cheered him on under our breath.  
“He doesn’t give a fuck,” Nick said.





If only it were that easy.



## A YEARLY TRADITION

My grandmother,  
pulpy eyebags and jagged white hairs  
Leans close and says *eh*  
She has my attention.

The Pepsi commercial flashes red and blue around this apartment  
The dark umber chairs, the glass doors housing a million little teacups  
My yeye's ashtray  
The floating smell of fresh pork from the wet market.

*Eh*, she says.

*What do you remember from your childhood in Changsha?*

Her eyes are clear hopeful liquid, swimming in memories  
Of me.

I say,  
“I remember when someone stole uncle's motorcycle, I remember the feeling  
of urgency I had. I was sitting here in the living room and I watched you pull  
the phone off the wall—yes that one, with the white cord, and I think you  
called the neighbors. You called a lot of people.”

*Anything else?*

I say,  
“I remember uncle taking me to go buy candy on the motorcycle.”

She smiles and chuckles, *Oh, your uncle and that motorcycle!*  
Her gaze slowly turns back to the TV  
The smile slackens  
and I feel the holes that I just burned through  
As I let down the two year old me, the one photographed  
snuggling into her shoulder in the bed two feet away from us  
The one that she took to the morning market,  
Greeting all the neighborhood nanas with handshakes and smiles

Her memory of me is a full, blossoming projection  
but she is almost a blank slate to me  
And to me I am that to her.

## BEIJING DIARIES



December 20

I'm sitting in my favorite Beijing restaurant, NOLA. It's right across the street from the diplomatic compound that I call home, a little too conveniently located for my frequent food cravings. Especially in this frigid weather where going anywhere farther than walking distance is a serious undertaking.

I've been at this table since 3 p.m. Diners are starting to trickle in for their early meals. You get quite an eclectic group here: a few European tourists, with their thick accents and Goretex jackets; the diplomats and journalists from around the corner; some very well-dressed Chinese scrolling through their iPads and Blackberries as they eat, and a few American families that seem like regulars, talking and joking with the waiters in Chinese. The restaurant is made of dark wood and rustic furniture, a black chalkboard with swirly white typography hangs above the brick bar: NOLA Burger,



Choice of Salad or Fries, With Beer (PBR, Brooklyn) or Coffee or Juice, ¥80.

The owner is sitting at the table beside me. We make eye contact as he exits the kitchen but nothing more. I'm not sure if he remembers me from last summer, when I came in for brunch every other Saturday. He looks exactly the same. The flannel shirt, the straight line of his mouth carrying his calm demeanor. Even the amount of scruff around his chin is how I remember it. Lanbo has a crush on him and so do I. Last time we came here for dessert, he totally mistook Lanbo for a regular and pointed at him and said, "Hey! Can I get you anything else? You good?"

I can't help but wonder how he started this New Orleans restaurant. Where does he even get the ingredients for jambalaya? Note: Google him when I get home. I've never had food from New Orleans before so I can't say much about the authenticity but the tater tots, shrimp and grits, and chicken and waffles are delicious enough to keep me coming back. The cooks, who sometimes walk outside to smoke a cigarette, are all short and stocky Chinese men. The owner disappears into the kitchen a lot. I imagine him watching the cooks like a hawk, making sure the balance of ingredients is exactly the way he wants it.

The young Chinese waitress who brings me my coffee is wearing white tennis shoes with a long-sleeved black dress and a white apron—mimicking a Southern maid's costume. It's the only aspect of this place that slightly oversteps.

May a sip of this mocha start a productivity stream. It's a silly idealistic vision I know—the writer sitting at a café, slowly stirring and sipping on her drink as inspiration flows through the ink of her pen and onto the paper. But I need that vision to put pressure on me. I catch myself daydreaming sometimes, staring out the window at the diplomatic compound across the street, watching the guards march in perfect unison. I imagine their military precision and discipline dictating the rhythm of my fingers as I type.

December 22

Dad and I were watching a game show last night. The show consists of two presenters trying to convince a panel of experts that their own historical artifact is genuine. In actuality, only one of them is. In this episode, one presenter had a huge jade dragon, and the other had a small medicinal ball. The question and answer part of the show got pretty heated. In the end, the

ball was real—the dragon presenter exited the stage sheepishly.

Ever since I got home I've been watching the news and other random TV shows, repeating the words that I hear, trying to get the tones and words back. It's as if the Beijing winter has frozen them in my chest. Today I had dinner with my cousin Lingzhi, her boyfriend, and Lanbo. My cousin speaks both Chinese and Cantonese, her boyfriend only speaks Cantonese, Lanbo and I speak English and Chinese. My translation skills were put to the test—and I sadly failed.

Lingzhi even remarked that she noticed how my Chinese had 退步 *taken a few steps back*.

December 27

I was playing on my old piano for old time's sake (it's horribly out of tune) when my mom put my grandma's face in front of me. Her face filled up the screen of the laptop and a voice erupted: *LAI MIIIII your mom told me you're writing a book!*

I didn't want them to know.

*I can't wait to read it! Your mom said you're writing about China!*

I tried to play it down, saying it was just a bunch of silly stories and musings.

*Your Grandpa has some stories about you when you were little if you want to use them!*

For the next twenty minutes I listened to my Grandpa tell random anecdotes about me when I was four. Apparently, I hid in the corner eating stolen pastries a lot and shook random people's hands when I got on buses.

I don't know if I want my extended family to read the book. It's not like I write anything bad about them, but it's going to be weird for them to realize that all this time I have been observing and analyzing them. That sometimes I'm not texting on my phone, but trying to get down tidbits of conversation that I'm overhearing. They're not some sort of case study! I'm scared that they're going to see me as even more of an outsider. And it's not the most helpful thing to have my grandparents in mind when I'm trying to write a piece on Lingzhi and me talking about sex.

And even if they do read the book, it'd have to be translated—is my Chinese even good enough for that? I guess I could always translate the nicer

pieces (definitely NOT the Kafka piece, they wouldn't understand it) and send them over.

December 30



I went to church yesterday in a theater being used for a Chinese production of *Cats*. I hadn't been to church since the eighth grade, when I decided to leave my youth group. But I pushed those feelings of guilt aside so I could see what a church in Beijing was like.

There were two or three weird things. One, only foreigners were allowed in, so I had to bring my Hong Kong ID for them to check at the door. Two, there were way more people than I had predicted. I was shocked to see the theater more crowded every time I turned around during the worship songs. And it was a very diverse congregation. Inside the welcome pamphlet were listings for the different bible study groups: Korean, Cantonese, African-American, and Japanese.

Three, the worship choir sang against the backdrop of a dirty urban theater set, with dilapidated apartment buildings, rags, and cobwebs in the background. Pastor John from Virginia said that the morning sessions would have to be pushed back to accommodate the needs of the *Cats* rehearsal.

Dad said the Chinese government won't let the church have a permanent building, which forces them to rent out this theater space. An An-

drew Lloyd Weber musical and a Beijing church—almost laughably incompatible but forced to share the same space. The funny thing is that you'd think the church would be the odd one out, but its services have been held there for so long. It's more established than *Cats*, which has just started tech rehearsals.

January 1

We had New Year's Dinner with some of my dad's old college buddies and their families. There were only two other kids there: one sixteen-year-old boy who goes to boarding school in England and a thirteen-year-old girl who lives in Beijing but spent a year at a public school in Minnesota. The girl was much more talkative than the boy, and willing to excuse my broken Chinese.

There were at least thirty people and two big round tables in the room we booked, and somehow it was decided that we should split by gender. I sat next to the girl.

It was an uncomfortable dinner, for reasons beyond the stilted, introductory politeness. These wives were all pretty wealthy, and they seemed to look at me and my mom with a sense of curiosity and contempt. They knew we had lived in America and Hong Kong, and the conversation throughout the whole night seemed slightly charged, as if they were saying: *You think you're better than us?* Perfectly cordial conversation of course, marked by only this light tidbit:

ONE OF THE WIVES: "How did Amy get so tall?"

MY MOM: "I think it's the American diet. She eats a lot of cheese."

The nice girl I was talking to had an iPhone and an iPad, and was playing some sort of dungeon game on the latter while leaving voice messages on the former. The appetizers came—pickled turnips, cold cucumber salad, ham slivers—and the soups, and finally the vegetables and main pork dishes, and this girl's eyes never left the set of screens. Her mom didn't say anything.

One mom asked another: "Do you have Weibo?" And the other mom replied "Yes I do! What's your username?" And suddenly all the moms were whipping out their bejeweled iPhones and adding each other. My mom, who uses an old Motorola, sat there slightly bewildered.

The moms showed each other pictures of various cute things (pets, purses, children) while my mom and I took turns spinning the lazy Susan. They start talking about how it's a sign of maturity and social prowess for young people to be active on networking websites. One of the moms looked at me and said: "Everyone here is really into blogs now. The young people, especially. Do you have something like Weibo in America?"

...

I was so incredulous that I couldn't even form a real response. "Um.. yeah... we have something like it..." I nudged the girl next to me. "You know, right?" She doesn't look up from her game.

What I really wanted to say to the mom: "China copied the US! You're on a super controlled version of Twitter!" Instead, I let a sudden thirst for glutinous rice wine take over me, and drank all the way down to the bottom of the glass, mind buzzing.

January 2

Today another taxi driver asked me if I was Korean today. And after I told him I was Chinese, he said "But you don't sound like you're from around here." Is my Chinese really that bad?

Yes. Even I can hear how bad it is. The tones are all flat, plateaus instead of peaks. My mouth can't naturally form certain sounds anymore, like a machine that's been left gathering dust for too long.

I've prided myself in my Chinese always being a little better than what people expect, especially my family. They're always shocked when I can carry on a conversation with a family friend, or do a lengthy toast to my grandparents at Chinese New Year dinners. Now that it's slowly slipping away from me, no one really seems that surprised. What's worse? That they had such low expectations for me, or that I've slipped down to meet them?

January 5

I just read an interview with George Saunders in which he talks about how the inability to feel follows from the inability to communicate. Maybe this explains why I've been having so much trouble writing. The unfortunate paradox is that I don't want to hear how bad my Chinese is, so I'm silent a lot, and I don't get to practice. Things between me and my mom have

been tense because we both get exasperated easily when explaining things to each other.

I feel like something has clammed up, stuffed itself in a box, and closed the lid. To be constantly reminded that I can't communicate with the world right now, with taxi drivers and family friends and shopkeepers, is making me feel like I can't communicate at all. I stared at a blank page for two hours today. All the English I typed out was artificial and disjointed, not what I wanted to say at all.

## THE INFORMANT II

My mother, my cousin Lingzhi, and I visit the National Museum of China in Beijing, where there is a temporary exhibition called *State Gifts: Historical Testaments to Friendly Exchanges*. It is full of gifts Mao Zedong received from various foreign dignitaries when he was in power. As I walk through the assembly of sculptures, figurines, and paintings, I wonder if Mao Zedong actually liked the set of porcelain swans that President Nixon gave him, or the carved wooden walking stick from Mozambique with his face etched on it. Did he even remember which country gave him what? What did he give back?

Lingzhi takes us to the permanent exhibition room of the museum. She gestures towards two large oil paintings, ones she had pointed out in the museum guide. “These are very famous paintings. I wonder if they are the originals,” she says. At first glance, they are the exact same painting: Mao is shown giving a speech on Oct. 1, 1949, the inauguration of the People’s Republic. A group of state leaders are clustered behind him, as he looks over Tiananmen Square, his speech in hand. Both paintings are entitled “The Founding of the Nation.” But Lingzhi points out that there is a person missing in one of them, and I see that she is right: in the painting on the right a bespectacled man in a dark blue suit has been replaced with a chrysanthemum potted plant. “He later criticized Mao so he was painted over,” Lingzhi whispers to me.

I am intrigued, and look up more information on the paintings when I am home. It turns out that the artist, Dong Xiwen, had to do four versions of the painting altogether. The name of the bespectacled man is Gao Gang; he committed suicide after being purged from the party. Another man, Liu Shaoqi, was painted over when the Cultural Revolution started. In 1973, the government ordered that Lin Boqu, a man with whitish hair standing at the very front of the group, had to be taken out because of his opposition to Mao’s new marriage.

For posterity—that is what Dong Xiwen was told when the government commissioned the paintings. I wonder how he felt, having to return to his mammoth of a painting three times over the course of twenty years, ordered to recreate a scene of the past to reflect the sentiments of the moment. The Chinese Communist Revolution, like many other revolutions, was

a series of contradictions and counteractions—but if the flaws are constantly painted over, their consequences can't be fully realized. How do we genuinely reflect on events in the past if in one brushstroke, they can be changed? Who should we rely on to recount history, and how do we agree upon their legitimacy?

The latest version of the painting was ordered after the Cultural Revolution had ended. Another artist took over as Dong Xiwen had died. In the painting, the group is fully restored—Gao Gang, Liu Shaoqi, and Lin Boqu allowed to re-enter history. A new version nevertheless, and the eighth. This version of the painting is the one that tourists can buy copies of in front of Tiananmen Square.

My cousin is not a casual receptor of history; she isn't satisfied with the one sentence her history teacher uses to bypass the entirety of the Cultural Revolution in class. "People don't want to talk about it," Lingzhi says, "But the information is there—in books, if you search for it."

As we walk from the museum to meet my father for dinner, we pass Tiananmen Square, its deep red walls standing resolutely in the thick smog. As I look at the walls, I realize how little I know about the founding of the People's Republic. I ask Lingzhi to give me a quick chronology of the events leading up to the inauguration day depicted in the painting. I don't know Chinese history very well but my cousin, as she demonstrates on our twenty minute walk through Beijing's political square, has dedicated herself to knowing quite a lot.





Memories lie slumbering within us for months and years, quietly proliferating, until they are woken by some trifle and in some strange way blind us to life...And yet, what would we be without memory? – W.G. Sebald, *The Rings of Saturn*

Next to a park stands the diplomatic compound in which I live—or live for at least one month of a year, in an apartment where I don't have a bedroom but consider home. The embassy of North Korea is one of my neighbors, as are Baskin Robbins and a gigantic mall of fakes. Fake DVDs, fake clothing, bags, shoes, pearls, perfumes with fake boxes and tags and inscriptions; there is even a gelato shop that seems somewhat questionable. Busses of tourists roll into this mall everyday, every hour, even; I find a sort of guilty pleasure in the fact that there are so many enthusiastic bargainers like me worldwide. British, Indian, American, Chinese—we all appreciate the good, satisfying struggle of getting a Tory Burch wallet for one fifth of its asking price. When I am alone for too long and want to be amused, I sometimes walk through this mall with no money in my pocket, through the endless maze of rectangular and square shops in which battles of wit and heightened patience take place. The large board next to the store directory at the mall entrance asks all shoppers to help China with their copyright and fake goods problem, and to please contact this authority at this number to report any goods not up to par.

I do not go to this mall often--I don't get bored too easily and my mood usually becomes hyper but also more irritable there.

I am thinking about the absurdity of the mall as my father and I are walking to the park after a long brunch at NOLA. The sunglasses I am wearing are from another mall of this type, one of the many copies in Beijing.

It is called Temple of Sun Park (日坛公园). Beijing is hot in the summer; I wear pink shorts and white tennis shoes on our excursion. The park is only a five minute walk away from NOLA, but beads of sweat have already formed around my father's bald spot before we get there. I have a quick argument with myself over if wearing my sunglasses to shield my pupils is worth the sweat that the bands are making on my upper cheeks.

The park is centered around the sun altar, where one of the Emperors of China's many dynasties worshipped. Thick walls of concrete and a chained door surround the altar; I peek through the chains and see a flat, gray expanse of gravel that ends with a slightly raised platform.

My father is insistent on walking the entire circular path of the park, promising that we will end at an enjoyable destination. I like seeing this side of my father—exploratory and almost playful, he walks alongside me in a polo shirt and ruffled hair, laughter easy. We pass a series of benches, a rock climbing wall, and a few teahouses and art galleries. A runner glides past just as I am thinking that it is a shame that the weather is too hot to run, and that the ground is too uneven with stones and steps.

We pass a deserted playground. With its bumper car rink and baby carousel, it feels like a halfhearted attempt at an amusement park for small children. The paint is chipping off of the animal figurines and rink railings, and a feeling of enormous sadness and empathy wells up in me for the good-intentioned person who came up with the idea to have a place for children in the park, only to have it rust.

My father quickens his pace. We walk on patterned shadows, as the light filters through the droopy willows that surround us. There is a sweetness saturated in the air; it reminds me of the feeling I have when I'm sitting on the Star Ferry in Hong Kong, and we glide past the skyscrapers, the sunlight flickering on the glass, the ripples of the water, and I have to wince in order for my eyes take in the overpowering scene. The ferry rocks from left to right but I have an ironclad stomach that has never fallen prey to seasickness and so I enjoy the slight drop of my stomach, one fifth of the adrenaline I feel when I come down from a rollercoaster loop. The ferry tips, the waves sigh, a spray of sea salt fills my lungs, I bob along Queen Victoria harbor. I am thinking about the next time I'll be in Hong Kong when my father slows his steps.

We have approached a clearing, and I see the sliver of a body of water behind a tree trunk. As I make my way into the full bath of the sunlight, the body of water reveals itself to be a large green pond encircled by willow trees and wide, flat stones lying on the shore. I am enraptured by this pond; I realize that growing up on a peninsula and waking up to the sight of mountains and blue waters everyday mellowed my mood. I have missed this feeling. I am so enraptured that for a few seconds I fail to see what lies beyond the pond: little creases of green that could simply be part of a grassy field, but as my father leads me closer, transform into the tops of lotus leaves.





It is a sudden flood of green, of earnest green: the leaves gently cupping themselves, stems surging from the depths of the pond below. I can feel my breath shortening. The lotuses themselves have not yet opened; it is still a few weeks early for that. I like them just as they are now: blushing pink bulbs, bulging with growth but not yet released. I wish I could somehow sweep the entire surface of the lotus pond with my hand, feeling the openness of the leaves.

I know why my father brought me here—it's not just for the beauty of the place. I can imagine the Emperor, a philosopher and writer, walking along this lotus pond and pausing to stare out at the expanse of green for long periods of thought. Every garden and park created by high officials and Emperors during the dynasties is laid out in a meditative path—they wanted people to restore and renew themselves through a walk, to have contemplative space. I feel a sense of lightness, almost as if there is air between my thoughts, floating and loosened in a sequence that stretches as far as the pond.

My father brought me here because ever since I was young I've loved eating the less visible parts of the lotus: the root and the seed. One of my first real memories of China took place when I was eight years old and had come back to Changsha for the first time since age three, and my great uncle arranged for my two cousins and I to take a raft down a huge lotus lake with a few farmers. The size of this pond is doll sized compared to the lake we rafted through, and I remember the farmers handing us leaves to use as umbrellas to shield us from the sun. We sat on the bamboo raft and the farmers let us try to tug seed pods out of the ground; but they held surprisingly firm, our young arms no match for the dense interlocked roots in the lakebed. In the end we just sat, floppy leaves hanging over our shoulders. I still remember the sound of the farmer's long wooden oar entering the stillness of the lake behind me, as another farmer in the front pushed away the leaves to make a path. I still don't quite believe this happened to me—it feels like something out of a dream. At the end of the afternoon, the farmers sent us home with rice sacks full of seed pods, their stems cut off.

Around the month of August, farmers and workers start appearing in the city with their double-ended basket poles full of seed pods. Buying the pods is much cheaper than buying a bag of shelled seeds. The tearing of the pod and shelling of the seeds does take more time, but there is something gratifying about the process of getting your fingers slightly dirty with a filmy white residue (especially if the pod is hard to tear because it's small and the

seeds are close together), cracking open the shell, and gently plucking out the white meat. One would think that the bigger the seeds, the more delicious, but I know from the experience of summer after summer that the medium to small seeds are the sweetest, holding a watery nectar that tastes like honey-suckle. Sometimes it is hard to guess the size of the seeds by their pod. I have frequently reached for a small pod thinking that the seeds would be small, only to be disappointed by their firm roundness.

I don't know why I acquired such a strong taste for these seeds; my mother told me that from the age of four I'd ask for *nianzi* even though it is pronounced *lianzi* (蓮子). I only eat them fresh in the summer; during other parts of the year, I eat them through the lotus nut paste of mooncakes, the dried seeds my mom puts in soup, and the chopped up roots that can be pickled, dried, fried, or sweetened into syrup. I remember in the late summer of fourth grade, my aunt visited Hong Kong and I asked her to bring as many bags of lotus seeds as possible. She brought enough to fill the bottom vegetable shelf of our refrigerator. But the seeds only stay fresh for so long, and by the time I brought them to school a week later, they had dried up into brown stones with a slight odor. My mother ended up having to throw most of them out.

I am thinking about the next time I'll have fresh *nianzi*. My father is standing a few feet away from me, beckoning me to come towards the teahouse that is situated to the left of the pond.

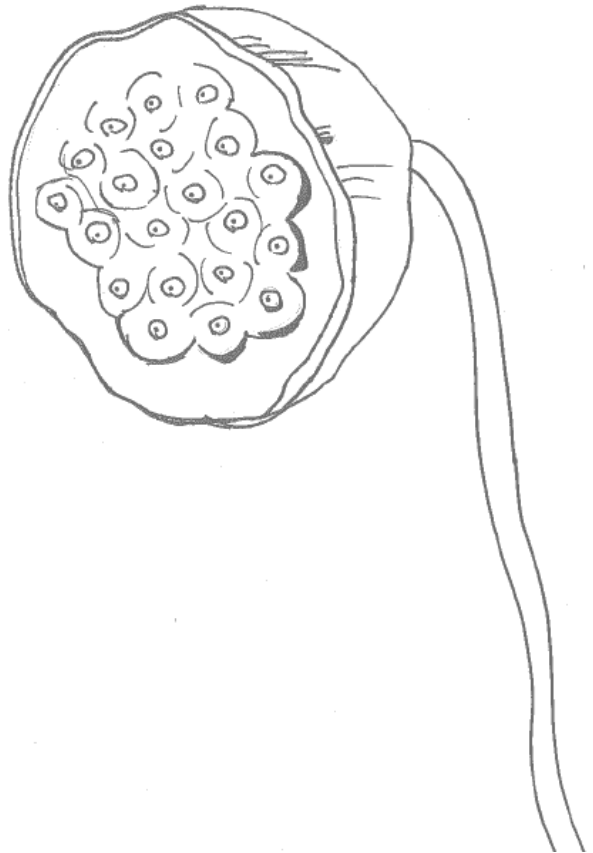


Three weeks later, it is a hot fumed July day in Changsha as my cousin Dongdong and I make our way through my grandparent's apartment complex to the Starbucks a five minute walk away. It is one of the only two Starbucks in the entire city, but I would not be surprised if the next time I returned it is one of many. Even though each drink is priced the same as a reasonably sized lunch, the Starbucks is always full of people wanting to get a taste of frappucino. Sometimes it feels not very much different from a Starbucks I go to in New York City: there are a lot of young people plugged into their iPhones, flipping through a magazine or a book, and huge families or groups of people who obviously have made a trip out of this somewhat special occasion.


Dongdong and I are about to cross the street (a feat in itself, as there are no crosswalk lights) when she pulls my elbow and points to a man

in the corner with a double-ended basket pole. The baskets are filled with recognizable green. We can't believe that the pods are being sold this early in the summer—he must be the first farmer to emerge from the lotus lakes. There are only a few other people buying from him, Dongdong and I leave with an entire basketful. We take them to Starbucks and happily tear, unshell, and pop the seeds into our mouths as we sip on caramel frappuccinos, which Dongdong is trying for the first time. She takes pictures with her phone and immediately messages them to a boy she recently met online.

I decide to go back and buy more, as I am only in Changsha for a few more days and it is not likely I'll find another seed pod seller. Dongdong chips in a few RMB, and I take the money and go outside to find this wonderful man, thinking about how he'll be taken aback and undoubtedly happy that I'm about to buy his whole share. But he is not there anymore. Maybe he moved to a shadier spot, I think, and decide to walk a few blocks up and down from the Starbucks. But he is nowhere to be seen, and I can only conclude that he has finished selling all his lotus seed pods—I return to the air-conditioned Starbucks slightly burnt from the sun and disheartened that I may never eat fresh lotus seeds again that summer.







## Acknowledgements

Writing is a hard and solitary process, which is why I'll be ever grateful for the help and support I've received. This book wouldn't be the way it is if it weren't for the following people:

All of the writers and editors of Stethoscope Press—such talented and dedicated people. The amount of creative energy I felt when I worked with the group made me a braver writer. Peter Myers, editor extraordinaire, for giving me enough space to freak out sometimes but then always calming me down with a few wise words on the writing process. Thank you for reading drafts upon drafts, and giving me insightful comments along the way. Piers Gelly, a true Renaissance man, for his calm leadership. He not only oversaw the production of all five books, but the securing of the funds we needed to do so. Alahna Watson and Sam Maldonado, for their patience while helping me navigate through InDesign and for staying in the CFA lab with us for way too long.

Daniel Plafker, for showing me what adventure means in China, and establishing himself as my book's number one fan from the beginning. Julianne Green, whose eyes were the first to look at many drafts—I felt her support all the way from Madrid. Laura Cohen, my mustard picking and CocoRosie cohort. For those late nights at Earth House.

Rachel Corrigan, for being there for me through thick and thin this year.

To all my friends, at Wesleyan and beyond, who have expressed enthusiastic interest in my work—thank you. If lotus seeds could stay fresh I would bring some from China to share with you.

For provoking thoughts and connections—the works of Maira Kalman, Marjane Satrapi, Anne Lamott, Franz Kafka, Haruki Murakami, David Sedaris, and W.G. Sebald. Prof. Vera Schwarz's Chinese history class, Prof. Ulrich Plass' philosophy class, and Prof. Shengqing Wu's Chinese film and literature class have also been sources of inspiration.

Most essentially, my family in Changsha, who I spend at least one month out of a year with. Even though communication can be difficult, some things can be understood unsaid, like how much we treasure our time together.

To Mom, who I can count on to find positivity in every moment, and for always gently pushing me to keep on writing and drawing. To Dad, for all our long walks, and that time in the third grade when you took a story I wrote to the office to have it printed and bound into a book.







Stethoscope Press



