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A Pinch of Sweetness

Yufei Qu

F or as long as I could remember, I had never seen real snow in my hometown. No matter how much I dreamed of the soft touch every winter, all I could recall was the dull sting when I was holding an icicle. Whenever I heard my parents talking about past winters with snow, I always wished what happened back then would happen again this year. Maybe because my curiosity about snow was too obvious to ignore, my parents decided to take a trip to the village closest to the northern border of China, which people called the Snow Village.

We decided to go in early February, when supposedly the coldest days have already passed but all the activities were still open. When I stepped out of the airport terminal, however, the cold wind made me suspect that we instead caught up with the coldest time of the year. We were not even close to the Snow Village, but the frozen air was already poking my face without any mercy; and by sneaking into my sleeves, the air crawled up along my arms and gave me a sharp icy touch. I shivered as I realized my jacket was not thick enough, and I felt shame as I recalled my complaining while a snowball about wearing something unique heating features. When the heater was not yet invented, people were accustomed to sleeping on a bed made of bricks called "Kang." It was built like a stove, hollow with an opening on the side and a vent connected to a chimney. People could add wood to the opening where it was burned, but the smoke would go out through the chimney: the bed can therefore be gradually heated and kept warm. People would then put slate on top before adding a mattress, sometimes putting extra layers to make it softer.

Since I grew up in the south, I was amazed by everything I had seen so far. I saw a room with a Kang, but it was only for display because of its nearer use nowadays. But when I saw the room, I could imagine hearing the sound from the sparkling wood, laying on the warm bed, and watching the snow falling outside—that was my fantasy for winter.

We loaded into the tour bus the next day in the early morning, prepared for a long drive heading north. Our tour guide was a young local man, short-haired and energy-charged, who lived in the Snow Village. As we hit the road, he started to talk about rules in the village. Some of them were standard, such as do not throw garbage on the ground. Others sounded unique, such as do not go into some special yards because the beautiful natural outdoor snow scenes were protected. "Pay attention," he warned as he shook his finger in the air, "you might be charged quite a bit if you are not careful with your steps." When he was about to sit down, something else must have suddenly come to his mind. "Oh, one more thing. Do not dig out food that was buried in the snow. I know it sounds funny, but, hey, you know what, it might be a village's storage. We are blessed to have a huge natural refrigerator." Someone chuckled, followed by some small talk here and there. A girl older than myself, sitting somewhere behind me, suddenly raised her voice as she spoke of a famous Chinese movie scene that had been captured in the village. I soon turned my attention to the view outside the window, as I was fascinated at how delicately the snow decorated the branches.

When we got off the bus, the air was almost frozen. Although I was slowly getting used to it, I was not getting much feedback from my senses: the icy air scratched through my nose and made me unwilling to inhale. I completely lost my sense of smell after a few minutes. The white clouds made from my breath caused little pieces of ice to congeal on my eyelashes, which made them stick together and took away some of my vision. Sometimes when my nose could not bear the roughness of the air anymore, I had to breathe through my mouth. It felt like I was drinking a full cup of refrigerated water, which evaporated as soon as it touched my tongue, though the coolness remained.

My curiosity did not allow me to forget to look for food in the snow. But the young tour guide, preventing me from searching too deeply, pointed out an outdoor market ahead of us set up by the villagers and opened to visitors. "If you want to try something special here, like the villager's food storage I mentioned on the bus," he smiled and showed the direction again, "that's the place to get it. I recommend frozen fruits, one-hundred-percent natural. My favorites?" Frozen fruits? I turned and looked at my mom who was standing beside me. She smiled, so we started walking. There were not many choices, considering the time of the year. But they had what I loved the most: persimmons. It is a type of fruit that looks similar to a tomato but has a honeyed taste. Its sweetness is similar to an over-ripe cantaloupe, but there is a tangy aftertaste. Its texture, on the other hand, is similar to dates but more melted. It's honeyed taste. Its sweetness is similar to an over-ripe cantaloupe, but there is a tangy aftertaste. Its texture, on the other hand, is similar to dates but more melted. It's

"Do you like it?" My mom asked. "Um...It's good, very special. Here, try a bite. I think it's not as sweet though." The texture was different. Instead of the creamy smoothness it had mixed with poking ice crystals, leaving the tongue to grind. The water that was absorbed while the fruit was buried blended with its natural richness, which diluted its flavor. At first, I didn't like it as much as I thought I would, but later I started to appreciate it in another way. It was closer to the flavor of a persimmon smoothie, if such a thing exists, but made with double the amount of ice.

We needed to walk through the village in order to start our main activity of the day: climbing. The protected snow scenes in the village were not normally open. The snow on the roof looked like soft white pillows, fluffy and adorable. Sometimes I thought about the snow as descending clouds, not only because they are similar in color and shape, but also because snow comes from the sky. Our young tour guide led the way to the mountains, and after he took a short cut between the villagers' houses, we kept walking for a while until we reached our destination. We were standing near the entry of a forest—a blend of some dark ink green, some pale wooden gray, and some bright feather white. I saw multiple lines of footprints heading up along a comparably clear path between some trees, which had much shallower snow and vague footsteps maybe because of the tourist season. But even so, it didn't seem easy to walk on.

The weather was cruel. We were slowly beaten up by the wind as we were climbing higher and higher. Panting
Beneath the moon, I lay on the park bench, feeling mischievous but still very certain of who we were. Just friends, thirteen years strong. Closeness intact. Succumbing to his eyes, but resisting the rest. This wasn’t strictly passion. I craved his soul more than his body. As our lips met my senses exploded with years of growth and change and wonder, but I feared the shift. We were in an open space, vulnerable, alive. Both physically and otherwise. I stopped it there. He could have insisted as they always do. I could have collapsed as I always do. But our history doesn’t push. It doesn’t urge or force. As such, my boundaries have grown slowly but organically toward him. No further that night though. “The high school sweetheart who never was,” he calls me. I can still see his face above me.

We were supposed to talk about it at the bar the next weekend. Confused and complicated, but still in one piece. As yet unadulterated. I hoped to find us there. “Us.” Instead, we found fingertips. And other tips. Wandering eyes and wandering hands. A type of foreplay that neglected the original reason for being there. History dictates that we would find ourselves in a bed, gazing into each other’s eyes, fingertips grazing over soft skin, inspecting and exploring with virgin lips, free of intoxication. Bodies close, hearts closer. But nothing further. History has been wrong before.

We departed from the bar, leaving behind empty glasses and thirteen years of tension, both intellectual and sexual. Entering into a tiny room in a familiar house as unfamiliar people. I think we believed that we were picking up after our abbreviated time under the moon. But having seen each other through life and death and everything in between, we rushed into un-nurtured passion. Sloppy, drunken bodies collapsing on the bed. It felt… artificial. I morphed from lover to performer. I searched for my heart in his eyes, while unskilfully executing these acts, and unsuccessfully finding it. “I don’t feel as close,” he said. Oh, there it is. The heart. It was unfamiliar there, by the door. Our closeness shifting, not dying, as he explained, but shifting none the less. “Come to New York because I love you.”

So I went to New York and he told me he didn’t love me anymore. This was not a pain I consented to. Paid for with our years. I receive his beautiful words on a tiny screen as I exit the plane: “Can’t wait to see you create your own world. I’ll write you soon.” I have been discarded. I check the mail daily, but I swear on his love I’m not waiting. Alone in my room now I trace over the marks of an unforeseen memory. Eyes closed, a surge shifting none the less. “Come to New York because I love you.”

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Phage’s Affair

Ana Laura Grazziotin

Once upon a time...

Phages integrate into the host for generations when the established life cycle is lysogenic. Expressed viral genes may bring innovation, giving the host a phenotype more pathogenic.

Given this intimate obligatory relationship, phages abound where their hosts exist. Estimated 10 phages per cell for courtship, depending on the environment in which they subsist.

Countless interactions between these mates have promoted these partners’ coevolution, genetic mosaicism, adaptation – diverse fates, for every ‘acquired’ surprise, a new solution.

Thus, cells developed adaptive immunity. CRISPR systems interfering with invaders, but some phages found an escape opportunity.

Above all, this is nature! A silent wise trader. This is just a small piece of a fascinating story, from which hidden affairs are yet to be revealed. Exciting times for biologists in the laboratory, seeking for surprising phages in this field.

You’re already familiar with prokaryotes, Bacteria and Archaea that live everywhere. Now pay attention and take your notes, ‘cause this is the story of their virus’ affair:

Once upon a time...

In a forgotten part of the globe, unforeseen viruses make their home, take advantage of unwary microbes, and shape our planet Earth’s biome.

In this microbial driven world, viruses play good and bad guys, whose mission has to be unfurled to reveal the strategies they apply.

When prokaryotes are the hosts, their viruses are named phages. Their association, first and foremost, leads to host death or a viral latent stage.

A host population dynamically changes depending on the environment in which they subsist. Estimated 10 phages per cell for courtship, when the established life cycle is lysogenic.

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DuPage County

Katherine Hauck

There’s an old adage in Kentucky that you can always tell the wealth of the farm by the fences. They can either be three-board, four-board, or five-board, double or single. Because of this, many farms will put up double five-board fencing in the front and leave the three-board fencing for the back. Double fencing means that, in addition to weed-wacking around each fence post, someone has to weed-wack the two-foot space between the two fences, all the miles of it. Oldham has five-board double fencing throughout.

If you have never been to or driven by a farm, it may be difficult to tell you what one is like. The first thing to know about the thing is the size. In Kentucky, one farm may stretch all the way to the horizon. They seem even bigger than they are because they are largely unbroken green, exquisitely kept. In fact, the word farm itself may be misleading, if you think of a place with bare dirt and chickens. But farms are what they are called. In practice, no one calls them stables unless they are trying to be snooty. One calls them farms: one does not build a farm; one inherits it. The next thing to know about these farms is that they are unusual. Neither the fence, nor the house knows how to do it.

Inside the house, the ceilings are high, the windows large, and the crown molding nine inches wide. The house was originally built for ten children. Houses like this have a real library, the likes of which you rarely see in the world today, and Oldham does not disappoint: leather-bound Durants and The Audubon Society Encyclopedia of North American Birds and Ingrid Klimpke’s biography rub elbows with your mother’s college chemistry textbooks and the collected works of Lewis Carroll. Cut geodes serve as bookends. There’s a marble fireplace that burns real wood, and the wood floor around it has a few scorch marches. Over the fireplace hangs a painting of your mother as a young woman, dressed in a fox hunting costume. A greyhound sleeps in one of the leather chairs and drools on the arm.

Oldham is a house with a sundial. It peeks through the ceiling of the gazebo is painted light blue with clouds. After dinner, you can lay on your back with your ankles crossed and gaze up at the roof of the world. Your grandmother and her aunt painted it in the hot, sultry summer of 1948.

Outside, though, is the real magic. Even before you get to the farm itself, the gardens around the house are extensive. Oldham is home to the sorts of trees you can’t buy, only wait for them to grow that old. Next to the house is the vegetable garden with twelve beds: six of peas, one of asparagus and spinach, two of beans, and three of tomatoes. There’s a small greenish lake behind the house with a dock and a raft; a willow tree weeps over it. In the middle and wooden bench set well into the flowers: a real library, the likes of which you rarely see in the world, stuffed to overflowing, either. They look lived in. They are lived in.

The farm itself consists of five small barns, three large arenas, and more land than you can see from any one spot. The five barns, each painted red and white with Dutch doors, house approximately eight horses each. Each has a radio in it, and each is set to play a different sort of music based on the clients that live there: classical in the Arena Barn, jazz in the Silo Barn, pop in the New Barn, and two different country stations, one for the Adult Barn and one for the Pony Barn. The chalkboards on each of the horse’s stalls to indicate their feed are always out of date; the manure dump is covered by a trellis with flowers growing on it (courtesy of the employee named Fausto L); most of the stalls are different sizes; everyone is constantly stealing each other’s leadropes; ribbons are tacked up on stall doors and then never bothered to be taken down, so they collect dust and get chewed on by mice; there’s a rat snake named Hector (name courtesy of Fausto L, as well) that lives under Houdini’s stall in the Silo Barn and eats the mice.

This is DuPage County, where the land dwarfs the people. ...
Cry of the Automaton
Andrea Caceres

The last one flew away, liberated like a child's balloon in summer's haste, so I decided to make a new one.
It was easy, trimming feathers off of the past one's remains, gluing each moment together with a sloppy hope.

But as I paused to hear its song, it let out a staggered cry. Its cogs crusted with dried grease. Every attempt at kindness and goodwill, every gift, every bribe, it scrambled to farthest edge and trembled. I grabbed some twine in desperation and wrapped it tightly around its foot as its wings flapped frantically. I dissected its vocal cords, filed them and threaded them to register the perfect song I once heard.

I ignored the burning song because it warmed me like a blanket. I kept fixing and building the little thing. Precise stiches into and out of the cracked canvas that became its skin. Masterful, ugly, pure, dirty. I was committed. Tweezers plucked out the mold that started growing between its tufts of feathers, replaced mechanical minutia with biological scraps.
Perhaps that would make it sing the beautiful song I once heard. With every procedure the cry became a little less energetic, a little less willful.

It endured this pain as it changed a lyric or two, seeking the less painful note. How alluring the process was. Days blended seamlessly as the fixation devoured my being. Each tool replaced, every method erased as years slipped through my skin. I realized that my life had passed, seeing the suffering of my trembling creation. Its ivory bones now yellow, stuck ostentatiously through sunken, putrid skin, I decided to open the door and it left me.

It teetered around clumsily, the crippled, dirty thing frantically searching for an exit. As it flew unevenly on its better wing, it reached the ledge and looked at me. Its eyes hollow little bullet holes, it flew off without a sound. I remained staring where it vanished in the sky, resenting what it stole from me.
Echio is a city that forces knowledge onto its townspeople. Hidden in the hills of a forest no one knows exists, live the people of Echio, alone in their constant state of knowing. At the end of each day, the townspeople are taken over by an unseen force and stopped completely. Whatever they’re doing, whoever they are, whatever their age, every action they’re making is frozen in place, and they are shown the knowledge of the world. A mother and her child are paused in their every day, as the day seems to end, and always last what seems to be an instant. Each person in the town lives within his or her own knowledge, and through their knowledge lives the knowledge of the town.

Every day, there are new things to learn, and every day as the knowledge of the world grows, so does that of the Echio people. They know everything about another, though it hardly matters, as they know everything about every person the world has ever known. The gossips of the town rarely focus on the mundane. The townspeople’s technological advances and lead to a portion of the knowledge that the townspeople are exposed to at the end of the day coming directly from their very city.

Others, however, despise the invasion of their minds every day. Of these, some even attempt to leave the forest in the hills as a way of escaping the knowledge that is forced upon them. It’s been discovered however, that these people who try and leave can never make it off the hill. One could climb the tallest tree and see the outside world, but could never reach it. The forests, they say, seem to grow around them in every which way, never ending. These people, in their travels even outside of the towns walls, still experience the buckets of knowledge poured into their minds, and believe that the only way to escape is to escape through the trees, and to find a way past the home of Echio they are trapped in.

These two groups of people—the explorers and the competitors—are in the minority. Most of the town has accepted the information as a normal way of life. They expect the knowledge. None dread what’s to come, nor anxiously anticipate it at the end of each day. They simply expect its arrival. These are the older citizens who’ve lived with the knowledge their entire lives and expect nothing less. The younger townspeople have also come to accept the information, but they haven’t yet lost the ability to marvel at the amount of knowledge the world has to give like their elders have. During this phase of wonderment in a young townsperson’s life is also the time when they realize how much of the world they will never experience anywhere other than in the confines of their minds. This discovery is one every generation comes to at various times, but once a child thinks it, at the end of the day, every other child knows the same truth.

This discovery is the main factor in the town receiving its various categories of people. Explorers attempt to seek out the outside world not only in an effort to get away from the town’s constant source of information, but also in an attempt to realize what they know with their own eyes. Competitors attempt to create an impact on the world by adding their own information into the void of knowledge they’ve been given, even if they can never experience the rest of the knowledge themselves.

There are few who know about Echio outside of the town’s walls, and there is no proof such a place truly exists. But those who speculate find themselves wondering: if every person within the city knows and understands all the wonders of the world, what importance is placed on such wonders? What good is knowing the secret to world peace if every person you encounter has the same knowledge and you have no one to share this information with? What if the people of Echio are so used to this transfer of knowledge that at a certain time in every citizen’s life they simply ignore the information they receive? After the unseen force releases its hold on them, they simply go back to whatever mundane action they had been in the middle of before they were taken aloft of Echio must be a city of the utmost of technological, social, and agricultural advancements, and yet it’s the one place in the world where knowledge has as little importance as sunlight does to a blind man and thus the one place every person hopes never to find.\end{document}
A s a child, Rosemary had smashed her violin. Mrs. Wallstead had told her there was a little point, on a violin, on which Rosemary must never, ever drop it, or it would shatter into a thousand pieces, and her musical instrument would become only shards of kindling. Mrs. Wallstead had seen it happen, so she said, had watched the wood split straight up the body like ripping paper, and would never she forget it.

At this point, Rosemary had liked the violin in neither the general nor the particular sense. In fact, the violin was a truly obnoxious instrument, and Rosemary was not quite sure how no one had noticed. Rosemary could not tune its pegs to her liking, nor could she coax it to produce sounds that matched the tones that rang in her own head. Her small hand splayed on its neck, scrabbling helplessly, and her fingers ached afterward for no reward of music.

As an adult, Rosemary teaches violin lessons. Her students are largely children. Rosemary likes children like a sword at the music stand. Daisy resumes. It’s clear she has not been practicing.

When Daisy leaves with her mother seventeen minutes later, Jane gets up from the chair she had perched on and digs around on Rosemary’s shelves until she finds a beaten-up Scrabble box. It was underneath a Clue box, and the Clue box had left a square of brightness against the rest of the cardboard, stained by dust.

“Saw this when she was playing, “ Jane says. “Thought you’d mysteriously have an emergency and just couldn’t possibly see anyone today—so sorry, just had a breakthrough on the symphony, another time—”

Rosemary cuts Jane off with laughter. “Alright, alright, let’s play.”

Today is Friday and Rosemary is laying on her back on the couch with her head stretching down to the floor. The pull of her hair in the opposite direction feels nice on her scalp. She flops her hand about idly on the carpet until she pulls of her hair in the opposite direction feels nice on her scalp.

The cracker Rosemary pulls out is square with little grid lines baked into it like the plows of a field. It’s sandpapery to the touch. Rosemary stuffs it whole into her mouth so as not to increase the number of crumbs on her floor and then immediately regrets it as the little sharp corners stab at her mouth.

The cracker is very fibery, and Rosemary absent-mindedly reads over the box as she chews. On the back of the cardboard box is a cardboard square with the words **GROW ROSEMARY** printed on it.
apparently GROW ROSEMARY! She flips the right way up on the couch and retrieves the box to read the instructions. The square needed to be soaked in water for two to four hours prior to planting. Rosemary glances toward the desk, on which there is a mug she hasn’t bothered to take into the bottom of the mug. It doesn’t quite fit, and she derives some pleasure from forcing it to fit where it doesn’t want to. Satisfied, she smiles down at it, and then realizes she has to four hours before she can do anything with it.

Rosemary will need dirt. Wayne Park has dirt. The box recommends an eight-inch pot, which Rosemary obviously doesn’t have, so she braves the kitchen to get a bowl. It’s white ceramic with two blue stripes around the rim. Rosemary will also need a trowel. That is something else she doesn’t have, so she grabs the metal serving spoon she uses for pasta out of the drawer of extraneous cutlery. Rosemary sticks it like a flag in her bowl of dirt. "A different sort of bird, then. Wok for thirty-two." "Spaghetti." "What’re you making?" "Spaghetti." "Wait, you’re actually making dinner?" "I did say so," Jane tells her. "I’m not actually one of your students, you know, Principal, and I hardly think a forty-six-year-old woman hiding out at her sister’s apartment because she doesn’t want to see her husband has any room to talk about healthy and normal," Rosemary snaps. Jane looks down at the table. She nudges her fork a little on her plate. "I don’t want you to be normal," she says quietly, "I’m sorry. Forget I said anything!"

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fissures spreading across her heart like a climbing vine up a pane of glass.

GROW. ROSEMARY! The little flag on the plant shouts, mocking her.

“Daisy!” Rosemary says slowly, “Have I ever told you about the certain, particular spot on the violin? You must never drop it on that spot or it will shatter. I would know; I’ve seen it done.”

At the window, Rosemary alternates between scratching staccatos across a lined sheet of fresh parchment and flicking the violin bow against her leg. She stares out the window and watches the Chicago slide by. There are stars, she knows, but they are snuffed out by light and pollution. The sky is just a great maw of emptiness, of nothing, filled with tiny points of meaningless light.

“Hey, looks like you’ve got a little shoot coming up!” Jane tells her. She’s bent over the bowl of dirt on the windowsill. “You are trying to grow plants, right?” She grins at Rosemary, who waits until Jane wanders away to inspect the bowl of dirt.

Rosemary follows her to down the steps of her apartment building to her perky little SUV parked out front. Rosemary hadn’t bothered to put on a coat, and she wraps her arms around herself as she stands on the pavement.

“You could’ve worn shoes,” Jane says dryly.

Rosemary doesn’t dignify that with an answer. Instead, she picks up three of the plastic sacks from the back of Rosemary’s car without looking at them and marches back inside. Dropping them on the stairs, she turns back to get another load, and runs into Jane.

“That’s all of it,” Jane says. Her face is pink from the wind. “The rest is stuff for Jessica’s soccer game.”

“What is all this, anyway?” Rosemary demands once they get the bags into her apartment. She pokes into the bags, crinkling the plastic.

She’s met by the sight of two dozen brightly colored packages of seeds: carrots, marigolds, turnips, pansies, lettuce. She freezes.

“I saw how much you liked that little plant you have, so—”

Jane stops there, perhaps recognizing the complete stillness of Rosemary’s body. Jerkily, she turns away from the pile of plastic bags on the couch and picks up her violin, clenching her knuckles so tightly around the neck that the pain can ground her.

When Jane breathes in again to speak, Rosemary starts to violently scratch at her violin. She plays a very spirited rendition of “Ragtime Annie” as loudly as she can, pretending something with it.

“Oh, am I?” Jane raises an eyebrow, but she’s smiling.

Rosemary heaves a sigh and flops bodily down onto the couch. “Yes, Jane, you are,” she says. She tips her head into the pillow so Jane can’t see her smile transform into something sincere.

It’s Saturday again, and Rosemary sits on the couch reading as the clock ticks passed eleven thirty, and then eleven thirty-five. At twelve fifteen, she smiles and closes her book. She picks up her own violin and plays out a spirited rendition of “Ragtime Annie” as loudly as she can, pretending something with it.

While you wait for the water to boil, you end up wasting more oil packing everything into twenty plastic bags hanging from the handles bar than you would have if you’d just gone in a car.

Grad school is shopping for macaroni and cheese and picking the box with Spongebob™ on it because if you’re going to ingest enriched wheat flour, you might as well enjoy yourself.

Grad school is not making your mac and cheese until two weeks later because you don’t have butter and you don’t have time to go to the grocery store to buy butter since CVS doesn’t sell it and the gas stations need the space for beer. Walmart sells it, Walmart sells everything, even pillows that smell like bacon, but it’s far (1.4 mi), you only have a bicycle (no basket), and the return trip is all uphill (131 ft).

Grad school is refusing to buy a car because you truly care about the planet, so much so that you somehow always forget the reusable bags you brought from Brooklyn, and you end up wasting more oil packing everything into twenty plastic bags hanging from the handles bar than you would have if you’d just gone in a car.

While you wait for the water to boil, you contemplate the tiny shapes of enriched wheat flour and realize they only include the male characters. You turn off the burner, dump water down the drain, and throw the box with SexistBob™ on it in the trash.

Grad school is a fine line between morality and hypocrisy.
How to Grow a Tomato
Megan Henry

Congratulations! You’ve taken the leap and committed to growing yourself one tasty tomato. This process is laborious and long, but we are certain that with our detailed guide and a pinch of patience, you most certainly deserve. Good luck, and may your tomato soup be prosperous!

Step 1. Location

As we’re certain you know, location is everything for the fruit of paradise. You will want plenty of sunlight, not too much water, and friendly neighbors to check up on your workings while you are away. For these reasons, we recommend the Midwestern United States. With its hot summers, seasonal spring rainfall, and history of thick glacial till, it will be the perfect pad for your fruity future.

The next step will be locating your crops’ ideal soil. Tomatoes are best in a soil that is just a tinge acidic, not too wet - but moist, well aerated, and containing rich and vital nutrients like Phosphorus (P), Potassium (K), and Nitrogen (N). We know that you wouldn’t want to purchase processed chemicals from dirty factories to suppy-your innocent tomatoes. Don’t worry, we have you covered. Your plants will do best in land native to the tall grass prairies of the Midwestern US. Unfortunately, most of the remaining .1% of tall grass prairie exists as small patches along highways. We wouldn’t want you putting yourself in danger from fast driving cars, nor worse: putting your plants in danger of endemic “trucker grazing.” So we recommend that you purchase a small area of old corn-and/or soybean-field – it will be easy to find as it now covers 99.9% of what was once the tall grass prairie. This is where your work begins!

Step 2. Soil Preparation

Unfortunately, what with mono-cropping that has occurred since the John Deere tractor, the biodiversity of your newly purchased land is less than ideal. The deep black soil that your tomato so yearns for is only about a quarter in depth of what it was two centuries ago. For this reason, you will need to do some preparations. Your tomato needs vitamins! It needs a soil that is full of nutrients, so your first step of soil preparation will be creating that perfect soil with some other plants. We have some good news! Because of the extreme temperature variation and the extensive range in water levels that created the prairie, the herbaceous perennials you will need to cultivate grow and reproduce at lightning speed. They will grow those deep below ground root systems perfect for a thick luscious soil. With some light pruning, access to the right nitrogen(s), and that fast decomposition of this vegetation, your soil will be ready for spring planting in no time.

Step 3. Pruning, Nutrients, and Aeration

One of the most vital steps for creating your perfect tomato home is a heavy dose of TLC. It can be expensive and time sucking to go out with the shears every day, purchase fertilizer, and impact tons of meter-deep aeration. For these reasons, we recommend you follow more native practices and acquire a bison. We should note here, that you’ll want to make sure you have a significant area - around twenty hectares – of land for its feeding and roaming needs. Once arranged, however the hassle is over! Your bison will roam your small patch of paradise munching on shoots to encourage vegetative regrowth as well as the deepening and extensive branching of root systems. He will release his nitrogenous waste over wild alfalfa where it will fixate in for nutrients, and his intermittent stomping – perhaps accompanied by a dozen prairie dogs if you are feeling motivated - will aerate better than any pull-behind or spike sandals could dream. As a keystone species of the prairie, your bison is the easy fix to an otherwise exhausting problem.

Step 4. Organic Deposit, Pest Prevention, and Other Spring Preparations

Speaking of lightning (see step 2), another central concept to ensuring your tomatoes success will be flash fires. As the harsh cold of your first winter desiccates the foliage where your tomato plant will soon thrive, the dead dry shoots will need to be burned hot and fast in order to encourage seed deposit for the spring. We recommend lightning. If none can be found, light a match and drop it. This simple action will ensure not only that you avoid invasive trees from polluting your tomato space, but also that the regrowth of this biodiverse landscape is tasty and appealing for your bison next spring.

Though your prairie dogs will be safe under the moist soil, make sure to round up your bison during this stage to avoid potential medical costs.

Step 5. Patience

You are just one step from where the real fun begins. Get those tomato seeds ready! The only thing left to do is grab a stool, twiddle your thumbs, and sit down for some good old fashioned waiting. You want your new soil to be able to handle the tomato plants responsibly and with stability. Like a toddler, your prairie needs some roosting time before it earns adult responsibilities. We recommend about a decade for intermediate results – the findings are controversial, but perhaps only five decades for top results! In no time your prairie soil will become that rich beautiful black you are dreaming of, and you can start the planting process!

Next time: I Have My Soil, What Now? Acquiring clean, pesticide-free water for your tomato patch in the unregulated streams of the Midwest. 
Beyond: the Surface: Rethinking Masterpieces

Andrea Caceres

A n individual’s affinity to a work of art is instinctual, yet this bond is exquisitely difficult to dissect. There is the undeniable question of bias that surrounds an individual’s judgment on what is a masterpiece. Even if unintentional, the bias can challenge the legitimacy of the claim. Others may rely too much on how iconic or well known a certain piece is. This claim can be applied to American Gothic, and even remarkable pieces like Da Vinci’s Mona Lisa, which may be considered lackluster and countered by the explicit beauty of The Last Supper. The background of a piece may elevate well known a certain piece is. This claim can be applied if unintentional, the bias can challenge the legitimacy of an individual’s judgment on what is a masterpiece. Even other works of art, Nike of Samothrace, Las Meninas and Q. it transcends time to capture the attention of the audience. A true masterpiece does this so effectively that it effortlessly express the artist’s intellectual and emotional intentions. A true masterpiece does this so effectively that it transcends time to capture the attention of the audience throughout human history. Although not as iconic as other works of art, Nike of Samothrace, Las Meninas and Q. And babies? A. And babies exemplify all the qualities of a masterpiece in their distinct depictions. Standing at nine feet tall, the Parian marble sculpture Nike effortlessly dominates the grand staircase at the Louvre (Kekicheff et al.). Found in Samothrace, Greece in 1863, Nike of Samothrace (a.k.a. The Winged Victory of Samothrace) dates back to the late Hellenistic period roughly 2,200 years ago (Bradley). Although the name of the artist is unknown, his vision is obvious. Nike, the winged goddess of victory, was highly praised in ancient Greek and Roman culture, appearing on anything from coins to trophies (Cartwright). Her cultural significance is fitting for an empire famed for its competitions and military strength.

Nike’s powerful stance immediately demands the viewer’s attention. Her outstretched wings and dimensions assert her dominance. Positioned on a marble pedestal, the tallest human in the world would fail to come close to the height of her missing feet. The description from the Louvre states that, “The right foot was just alighting on the ship’s deck, while the left was still in the air. The Victory was not striding forward, but rather alighting on the ship, barely skimming the base” (Kekicheff et al.). This emphasizes her unearthliness as an entity superior to humans. Nike’s confidence and decisiveness are further complimented by a dynamic forward stance. When “affixed to the bow of a battleship,” Nike would have been the first thing enemy ships would have seen, almost appearing like the ship is an extension of Nike (Kekicheff et al.). The mastery taken to portray Nike as the embodiment of victory surely lies in both the design of the form and the precision of the cut marble.

The marble’s texture evokes an elegance that juxtaposes the strength given by the pose. The delicate layers of draping cloth across Nike’s body indicate the artist’s skill in carving marble. The loose tunic tugs at Nike’s skin allowing the viewer to imagine a strong wind thrusting it away. The taunt fabric, loose folds, and delicate drapes show the control the artist possesses over the material. The smooth reflection of light at the front and shadows made by the folds in the back add contrast, stressing the lightness in “barely skimming” the ship’s deck. The frailty of the tunic being swept by the wind emphasizes Nike’s strength and beauty. Texture adds realism by showing Nike’s relation to her surrounding. The artist creates a distinct force pushing her back, while the presence of sky and ground are shown by her wings extending in flight and her delicate feet grazing the ground (if they are present). There is a diminuation of details as the viewer moves to the back of the statue, emphasizing the forward thrust of Nike.

One characteristic of a masterpiece is surpassing the scope of others. As mentioned above, Nike of Samothrace is able to concurrently be a fearless warrior, and a graceful goddess of victory, was highly praised in ancient Greek and Roman culture, appearing on anything from coins to trophies (Cartwright). Her cultural significance is fitting for an empire famed for its competitions and military strength.

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One exception to this norm is Nike of Paionios, which succeeds in balancing these two aspects, yet fails to evoke the dynamic emotion and detail found in Nike of Samothrace. Nike of Samothrace immediately offered a new version of the Nike figure. Statuettes imitating her pose were found in Europe and dated to shortly after while modern copies of Nike of Samothrace stand in various public buildings and private collections. Modern art like Unique Forms of Continuity in Space by Umberto Boccioni, an abstract depiction of a man moving through space is heavily influenced by Nike of Samothrace. In all cases, it is apparent that Nike has made a distinct and lasting impression throughout time. Nike of Samothrace possesses all elements that compose a masterpiece, enabling it to outshine other works despite its age and missing appendages. Whereas Rume has fallen, the memory of its victory and the allure of its triumphs, remain tenable in the form of Nike of Samothrace, destroyed and reconstructed through time, yet accepting reality with pride and dignity. She stands damaged yet strong, speaking to the generations of admirers yet to come.

Las Meninas by Diego Velázquez is another piece that immediately captivates its audience. It does not take long to appreciate Velázquez’s irrefutable skill in “capturing the form.” Beyond the surface, Las Meninas is a painting to be read, thought about, and experienced. The painting was made in 1656 for the private collection of King Philip IV (Jones). The deep admiration King Philip the fourth had for Velázquez’s work “almost monopolized his production for the rest of his life” but enabled him to take more liberties in his paintings (Honour and Fleming 588). Now residing in the Museo del Prado in Madrid, the 10 ¾ x 9 ¾ inch oil painting depicts Philip’s daughter and her maid servants attending her (Finaldi). The background creates complexity of story with reflections, doorways, and darkened corners full of additional figures.

Amidst the choreographed clutter, this is a painting of subtlety. Whereas Nike draws its energy outwards, Las Meninas draws spectators into the piece. Every human and object is placed with precision to cater to the theme of attendance. Velázquez’s theme has depth and ingenuity, expressed through his details and complex play on perspective. The piece is bustling with activity, yet feels suspended in time. Velázquez’s “expressionistic handling of paint, his exploitation of its materiality, and his tendencies toward abstraction [surpassing] the boundaries of Baroque” enable the movement to look more like vibrations: energetic, yet frozen under light (Konstantinidis 10). The echoes of movement trapped by stillness reflect the conflict between the thoughts of the people in the piece and their roles in society. Each character has their eyes transfixed on the object they are serving, with the majority gazing at King Philip IV and Queen Mariana. The use of white clothes on Margaret and the maidservants against a dark background grabs attention. Margaret shows the friction between societal roles and inner thoughts. Her face is transfigured to look like she has just accepted a task to do. One maid’s body language conveys anxiety while the other poses cautiously, almost as if they feel judged by the implied king.
laid between the road and fields with the phrase “Q. And babies? A. And babies” in red typeface. The photo is of the My Lai Massacre of 1969, where hundreds of unarmed villagers were killed by U.S. soldiers (Sayre 281). The lithograph exposes the atrocities of war through its use of medium and innovative fusion or art forms.

The emotional root of this image lies in the fact that the content could only be captured by a camera and the composition only created by a true artist. Thus, while art circles claim that photography is lazy and lacking in creativity because the camera is the artist, there is no question this mixed media image is a masterpiece. The shocking, graphing content is difficult to accept as truth. The background of the image depicts a quaint road in the countryside with a rustic fence. However, the sense of calm and quiet is distorted by the inclusion of the victims set against the background. These are obstructions on the road to American ideals because the bodies taunt viewers by asking the implausible question of who is to blame for their death. The image forces its audience (at the time the American public) to admit that the perpetrators of this atrocity are U.S. soldiers. The shame and anger the image magnifies ultimately calls for the violence to end.

The addition of text calls for a second look at the image. Due to the lithograph being an anti-war propaganda image in a magazine, combined with the fast paced culture of the twentieth century, viewers likely happened upon the image without fully comprehending what they were seeing in the room. Since the couple is missing, is this a depiction of what they are seeing in the room? This qestion this mixed media image is a masterpiece. The negative space composed of the ceiling and walls invites the spectator into the room, yet are repelled by the portrait indicative of the couple’s position there. The fact that the canvas in the image seems to be of the spot either the king and queen are or the viewer are, gives a new meaning to the painting. Is this portrait of the monarchy hidden to show the difference between the royal couple’s presentation and perception their subjects view them as? Is the spectator a person, or a god-like entity that sees all? Velázquez is the only one who faces the front completely. One eye is actually on the viewer while another is on the painting, implying a duality or even hinting to several perspectives volleying between each other. Much like the subjects rely on a king, a king relies on his subjects.

Las Meninas has influenced a variety of professionals working in different mediums from Picasso’s Las Meninas series, to texts describing the piece. It is through an ingenuous concept, technique, and legacy, that Las Meninas becomes a masterpiece despite changing times. Beyond the technique, expression, and influence of Nike of Samothrace, Las Meninas, and Q. And babies? A. And babies there is a distinct allure that is able to hold the attention of so many. An object of art is a means for an artist to speak to the audience, but a masterpiece imprints a message an individual’s mind, making the individual share a personal emotional bond with the work of art. A masterpiece has a timelessess and universality that enable it to be appreciated in various cultures regardless of its origin. Most masterpieces are of Western origin, likely due to widely accepted conventions of art. Is this omitting worthy works of art? Beautiful mannade masks are categorized as religious artifacts, while minimalist, ink paintings such as Six Persimmons by Muqi Fachang get widely overlooked due to their divergence from the norm, yet these are able to move an audience. The names of many artists have been lost in time, and the existence of many works of art extinguished, but the masterpieces that remain still demand a pause to at least taste the thick narrative unraveling beyond the surface.}

References
Donald. Shouted. “You cannot play golf on a plastic surface!”

Bart, dressed in blue coveralls with thin black vertical stripes replied, “The Super Bowl is played on artificial turf!”

Donald was wearing a suit and tie. He’d come to the bar after work to wind down and found himself staunchly defending the GOP position in the coming national election. He got sucked into the argument because the damn liberals, intent on being mindful of fresh water, had been singing about finally having a swimming pool to have enough water to reopen. They didn’t mind if the referendum requiring golf courses to use artificial turf passed. The liberals believed the golf courses and cemeteries used too much water. The GOP had nibbled around with the Liberals to keep the cemeteries out of mind and off of the referendum. Donald slammed his nearly empty beer mug onto the table opposite his antagonist, Bart, and yelled, “American Football, my naïve drinking buddy and yelling, “Is an astro-phobe, as you say I am, a subcategory of nature-phobe? I mean in the science of liberidgid?”

Bart replied, “Hey if you promise to be civil maybe you could come over and hang out for a bit tonight with the wife and Tom and Mary? We’re their standby’s.”

“Hold on. In liberidgid they’re parent standbys, but they’re really Godparents. Yeah I guess I’ll come, but I do not want to leave Joanna out—keep the peace and all.”

“It’s settled then. We’ll all get together about seven tonight. And I’ll buy you another beer to celebrate this hard won truce—in a paper cup.”

They sat quietly at the high concrete table on the wheeled barstools and listened to a story on NPR about wasps enslaving spiders. When his beer was gone Donald said, “Thanks, I’ll be civil and left. Bart put his beer cup in Donald’s and flagged the bartender for another.

Bart got home before his wife. They had a lot at stake in the election because they both wanted the municipal pool to have enough water to reopen. They didn’t mind quickie showers. There were unspoken things they hoped for as the national referendum process rolled forward. He and Joanna had reached for a bottle of beer. Joanna glanced at each of the group and said “Hi, Joanna, said, “I have my civil regulator with me.”

The four of them had finished with their hellos when the door chime in the reality set sounded. Donald stood in front of the table with both hands in his pockets fiddling with some coins in his right hand. He turned to his drinking buddy and said, “Is an astro-phobe, as you say I am, a subcategory of nature-phobe? I mean in the science of liberidgid?”

Bart replied, “I got another one anyway, astro-phobe!”

“Ha ha ha. I got another one anyway, astro-phobe!”

The bartender walked up to their table with a 40-inch widescreen held across his body and a headset. It was just really a large phone with a blinking light to tell users a 360 degree camera was in use. On the other end of the phone the caller could see everything. The bartender spoke into his wire while standing near Bart, “Let me see if Bart Morningstar is here.”

Bart waved at him and said, “I’m here.”

The bartender set the screen down on the table and Bart activated the 360 camera. He said to Gina, his wife of ten years, on the screen, “Welcome to my new drinking place.”

“Hi babe. You didn’t tell me your bar had air hockey.”

Bart replied with a rising tone, “They do? I hadn’t noticed.”

Gina replied, “Yeah, it’s in the corner next to the waist-high climbing wall. And am I seeing your favorite verbal sparring partner, Mr. Donald?”

He grinned widely, showing too many perfectly straight teeth, and said, “Liberals!”

Bart pushed the button on the top—turning off the camera and light—and leaned closer to the screen and said, “His bark is worse than his bite—uh at least I think it is.”

Anyway will you be home soon?”

Gina said, “An hour or so. And hey you remember we have a virtual reality dinner date with Tom and Mary tonight right?”

“Yeah I just remembered it—and I’ll be sure to get the kitchen ship-shape.”

While Bart talked to Gina the Bartender he stepped up to Donald, pointed at his mug, smiled and said, “Ten bucks for the mug and five is the handling fee, Donald.”

He reached for his wallet and handed over a twenty and said, “Keep the change. I know you need it.”

“No problem Donald—you’re green is always welcome.”

On the screen Gina blew Bart a kiss and he returned it. The Bartender picked up the screen and walked back to the bar.

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Bart turned and with his hands dripping wet grabbed her hand and said, “Now, now, we don’t wanna drink for that little one that might be in you right? How about a nice cold cranberry juice. I got your favorite—Dom Perignon.”

She took the bottle from his hand and stared at the pile of receipts sliding off. “I’ll drink this, but if I am carrying and we win then you don’t get to go to the bar and drink anymore either right?”

“Yeah, it’s kinda’ hard to forget when I have to pick glass out of my beard—but he’s such a good actor—I love the theatrics.”

Gina walked over to the oven and felt the door. “You forgot again!”

Bart dried his hands off and started waving his phone in the air and said, “Tom called and they’re going to have Chinese delivered!”

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Gina smiled and glanced into the dining room where the dinner party virtual reality system was setting itself up. Bart came up alongside and squeezed up against her and said, “No, I mean, but when we can, we can have great playoffs without leaving home!” Then Bart reached into a cabinet for a set of plates and set them on the table in front of where Gina sat down in the dining room.

Salesmen and flaggers of the virtual chime and Tom and Mary’s images coalesced. Jarod, now two and saying, “No,” incessantly squirmed in Mary’s arms while she looked at the camera and said to Jarod, “Say Hi to your standby’s.”

Jarod looked into the screen and said, “Hi.”

Gina and Bart said in unison with enthusiasm, “Hello Jarod buddy!”

The four of them had finished with their hellos when the door chime in the reality set sounded again. Donald and Joanna came into view as two more screens popped up out of the dining room table. Donald, pointing to Joanna, said, “I have my civil regulator with me.”

Joanna glanced at each of the group and said “Hi, I’m so glad to meet you rather than hearing about you vicariously!”

Everyone laughed, Donald too.}

Vertical Rise

Devin VanDyke
It was a horrid mid-summer day when I got off the train. The white designer shirt I was wearing was soaked through sweat. My father had given it to me the day before departure as a farewell present, saying he wore this very shirt in his youth whenever he needed to dress formally. My father was confident that this shirt would help me make a favorable first impression as polite and reliable. Yet he had it put on only twice in his life, once for his wedding, the second time for my grandpa's funeral. “Keep in mind, Zhao. When in Rome, do as the Romans do,” my father said as he waved to me in a Shanghai railway station. I nodded at him.

That was in 1972. I was sent from my hometown Shanghai to a remote rural town X. According to the central government policy, I needed to be reformed by the poor before departure as a farewell present, saying he wore this white designer shirt for me. Only then did I realize that all the men in the factory were shirtless.

The first night, I could barely sleep. My shack burnt like a stone’s throw. My two wolf-like eyes glared fiercely as he came to take my nose and mouth with both hands.

“Savage Zhao, you make me sick. Put down your hands. Take this off, or they will beat you,” Chen whispered in my ear.

“Savage,” echoed the short man with a scar. He pointed two dirty fingers towards me. “Still, you’ll find his wicked ideas fairly useful,” they told me, half smiling.

The next day I was assigned a job in the local factory, which produced magnets, working along with Chen. The factory was a two-storied gray house located beside the largest septic tank in X town. I could not help but cover my nose and mouth with both hands.

“Savage Zhao, you make me sick. Put down your hands. You can’t work that way,” said Chen.

I put down both my hands, and began to cough forward, raised his fist, ready for a fight.

“Savage Zhao, didn’t I tell you yesterday? You should take off this disgusting shirt!” Chen fumbled to take off my shirt into a ball and threw it into the cesspool nearby. They murmured, “Watch out, Savage Zhao.”

“They fixed their eyes on my white designer shirt, which I had washed the night before, and I could see flares burning in their eyes. Among them, there was a man shorter than others wearing a scar on his left eyebrow. He took a step forward, raised his fist, ready for a fight. “Savage Zhao, didn’t I tell you yesterday? You should take off this disgusting shirt!” Chen fumbled to take off my shirt for me. Only then did I realize that all the men in the factory were shirtless.

“Take this off, or they will beat you,” Chen whispered in my ear.

They did not walk away until Chen rolled my white shirt into a ball and threw it into the cesspool nearby. They murmured, “Watch out, Savage Zhao.” “Savage,” echoed the short man with a scar. He pointed two dirty fingers towards me.

At least the job was easy enough. I was to pour chemical liquid into a metal mold. I stroved to work hard, running to fetch another metal bucket right after finishing the one at hand. Chen laughed at me and called me savage.

“Savage Zhao. No one can sleep on a bed in summer. “ I took his advice and lay down on the cement floor. I immediately cooled down.

“Sleep tight. Tomorrow we have to work,” Chen said as he went out, leaving the door open.

The day after I was assigned a job in the local factory, which produced magnets, working along with Chen. The factory was a two-storied gray house located beside the largest septic tank in X town. I could not help but cover my nose and mouth with both hands.

“Savage Zhao, you make me sick. Put down your hands. You can’t work that way,” said Chen.

I put down both my hands, and began to cough heavily. The people there soon clustered around me like a shoal of fish, laughing.

“What the hell’s with this guy?” one of them asked.

I did not know what was so funny. I just echoed them. “Diao yangzi. Dogs diao yangzi.”

All the women and Chen burst into laughter.

“What does diao yangzi mean?” I asked.

“I did not know what was so funny. I just echoed them. “Diao yangzi. Dogs diao yangzi.”

I turned out Chen was the guy selected by the local authority to help me reform, although he was only four years older than me. I stayed in a shack that just behind his one-room slum. Chen was a man shaped like a brown bear. He had a long nose and a barrel chest. Sometimes when he did not say anything at all, I could still hear heavy grunts from deep inside him like rumbles echoed in a cavern. But all the local people said he was a very kind and funny man, except for his wicked ideas.

“I still, you’ll find his wicked ideas fairly useful,” they told me, half smiling.

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I put down both my hands, and began to cough heavily. The people there soon clustered around me like a shoal of fish, laughing.

“What the hell’s with this guy?” one of them asked.
magnets, I mean. They just stack them in the warehouse.”

I did not reply. He continued babbbling, saying we were here only for the sake of lunch. He told me that I was lucky because it was mid-summer—so much to eat in summer.

At noon with a ringing sound of a bell, Chen and I went to the canteen to have our lunch. “Whatever you see, remember—don’t say anything,” whispered Chen. I nodded.

Soon I realized what Chen was referring to. The stinky tank nearby attracted swarms of flies to the factory, especially in the canteen. They weaved a thick black carpet on the table, sucking on the grease. I tried not to frown or pucker my lips. Chen asked me to take his lunch pail for a second. He didn’t sit down. Instead of fanning away the flies, he banged the table with both hands. A cluster of black bodies crushed under his huge palms, while the survivors flew away, forming a black funnel to the ceiling.

Chen took his seat, put down our lunch pails. He dunked the dead flies into the green vegetable soup. Then he bit the flies with a snap.

I heard the bangs and snaps now and then, and witnessed black funnels here and there. Chen scooped the flies into a spoon, and bit one of them said.

“You really think we can live on the food provided by the canteen?” he frowning at this lunch: a bowl of vegetable soup, and another bowl of rice.

“Take these. They’re nutritious,” he said. “You’re lucky to have these supplies in summer.”

I was reluctant. Several young men banged and sat beside me. They stared at me with a smirk.

“Savages cannot appreciate the wonderful side dish,” one of them said.

“Then stay hungry, savage,” it was the short man with the scar. When he said this, he did not bother to look up. He buried his head into his vegetable soup. He had pored dozens of flies into the soup.

I poured a full spoon of flies into my mouth, and bit them with a snap.

“How do these taste, Savage Zhao?” asked Chen.

“Great!” I murmured and tried not to spit anything. I swallowed and felt the urge to stand up for Chen and say, “Woman, surely you had your husband diao yangzi, you are just like a bitch in heat.”

Then I would laugh wildly and run away. I did not ask again what ‘diao yangzi’ meant, fearing that they would laugh at me again. I guessed it had a sexual connotation, and I was content with this thought.

After October, it was okay to sleep on the wooden plank bed. But I still had a problem with sleep, not because of the weather, but because of hunger. Flies died in groups. Sometimes we were lucky to scrape a pile of black bodies when having meals. Other times we could only watch the black carpet drown in the cesspool nearby, helplessly. In late October, when we scraped the flies’ bodies from the switch rope of the electric lamp, we were sad to see they were already dead. They clustered around the switch rope for warmth, yet that was not warm enough to save their lives. They stuck there only because of the static electricity. Since flies were nowhere to be found, we starved.

“Autumn is the cruelest and most unbearable season in X town,” said Chen. He sounded as if he felt sorry for me.

“I felt sorry for Little White. He came to me every night, but I could hardly shit anymore. He waited quietly as my face wrinkled and I groaned. I was also aware that the cesspool did not stink as much as it did in summer.

Little White showed no disappointment. He lay beside me, let me tickle his belly and listened to my Shanghai nursery rhymes. He would then start to play with the children outside at night, whistling for a dog to come to my side and eat my stool, just like the locals often did.

“Human shit is nutritious for dogs, just like flies are nutritious for us.” Chen once said to me. “Why do the dogs here grow so strong? Dogs were born to eat shit.”

I had a white dog eat my shit almost every night, and I called him Little White. He was a male dog covered with snow white, which was rare to see in X town. Sometimes when he was enjoying the fresh food I provided, I talked with him in Shanghainese. I was so afraid that I would one day forget my dialect, forget that I was once a Shanghai boy. But to remember these things did me no good. Maybe I would never get back to my parents, never get back to Shanghai in this life. Still, talking in Shanghainese with Little White was comforting. He remained meek and silent when eating. After having his midnight snack, he would lay beside me for another five minutes, listening to me talk.

I sang Shanghainese nursery rhymes to him.

“Yao A Yao! Yao Diao Hai-Po Qiao
Diao-Po Jiao Wo Hao Bao-Bao
(Row a boat! Row a boat to Grandma’s
Grandma calls me her dear babe.)

Little White blinked at me. Sometimes he would even snuggle up to me and sleep with me outside under the starry sky till morning broke.

“I dare ride side by side with Little White in Shanghainese with any local people. They might mock me and complain that the reforming work was not carefully done. They might even write a report to the local government, and send me to an even more unimaginably horrible place. I faithfully copied the ways they spoke, despite the fact that I did not always understand their words. I copied their dialect and accent. When we got up early and went to work, Chen said to the first female neighbor he saw as a greeting, “You had your husband diao yangzi yesterday?”

Sometimes the woman would laugh in a flirty way and pretend to kick Chen’s crotch. At this very moment, I would feel the urge to stand up for Chen and say, “Woman, surely you had your husband diao yangzi, you are just like a bitch in heat.”

I did not ask again what ‘diao yangzi’ meant, fearing that they would laugh at me again. I guessed it had a sexual connotation, and I was content with this thought.

The kids ran after the dogs. Dogs were pulling and being pulled all the way around, groaning and grunting. In the end the male dog seemed exhausted. It collapsed eventually in a street corner and pulled out its huge sausage-like penis, now soft.

Autumn in X town was a dog carnival. Almost every day I heard cries and shouts from the children. I saw energetic male dogs running and pulling female dogs all the way along the streets like racing cars. I saw Old Wang’s Little Brown, Old Li’s Little Yellow, Young Sun’s Young Black. Strangely, I did not see my dear Little White. Indeed, I had not even come at night when I whistled for him to take my shit.

I sang the rhyme all alone.

“When have you seen Little White recently?” I asked Chen.

“You mean the white dog raised by Old Zhang? Oh, that is a strange dog,” said Chen.

I patiently waited for him to continue, but he said I was too tired that he was going to take a nap.

In autumn, the workload broke our backs. We hoisted all the magnets on our shoulders from one warehouse to another, because the authorities said they needed one more empty warehouse to stack ripe grain from the farm. We moved magnets every day until the warehouse was cleared. But they told us that crops were short this year.

All the workers were angry and agitated. They showed their fists and teeth, but they had no strength for a fight—they struck from hunger and fatigue.

“They’re fucking with us!” I said to Chen in a whisper.

“Sure they are. But we have no choice. They’re the leaders—great, glorious and correct. They play the same trick every year,” Chen said with a half-smile. “Gin and bear it, Savage Zhao. Soon I’ll show you something truly spectacular.”

What’s so strange about Little White?” I asked Chen. “Why did you bring him again? Another two weeks had passed and I still hadn’t seen the dog. I couldn’t reveal to Chen how much I missed Little White.

“His wife is pregnant and he is so nervous, I can’t show you what a father is like yet.”

He’s in mating season. Strange dog, isn’t he?” whispered Chen.

“Why?” I asked.

“He never goes after female dogs randomly in the streets like other dogs. He grows a weird temperament. About two years ago, Old Zhang took him to mate. It took three weeks for him to grow intimate with his partner. Then he
mounted the female and mated with her successfully. Afterwards, Little White was forced to leave the female dog. You know what, he was like a lovesick boy, and he refused to eat or go out. Maybe that was his first time. You know what they say—the first time is unforgettable. But he’s only a dog, right? Even humans can fuck women we don’t love. It’s sex. Having sex is like having a meal,” Chen drew a figure with a sharp rock in front of our shack.

I shrugged. Luckily he didn’t see.

“He began to eat after a whole month of heartbreak. And for two years, he refused to mate with any other bitch. He would imprison himself in spring and autumn. An infatuated dog, isn’t he? Hey, come and see what I’ve done.”

Now I could see he had drawn a naked woman, chubby and full-breasted, without a face.

“That’s great… Um… But why don’t they let the female dog stay with him?” I asked.

“Like a marriage? Don’t be silly. Marriage is not for dogs. Besides, you know which female dog he was doing? The White Beauty. We need the White Beauty. You don’t know how important the White Beauty is, do you?”

I shook my head. Chen smirked. “You’ll see. This time we’re going to use the white beauty strategically. She is one of a kind. We used Little Flower to replace her in the last two years, but it didn’t work well,” he said. “Wait and see, I’ll show you something truly spectacular,” he said again, while adding two huge breasts between the doodled naked woman’s crotch.

“Does that make your thing itch?” Chen turned back and smiled. I nodded at him.

By late November it was freezing. Chen said winter in X town came earlier than in other parts of China. We were all hungrier than ever. The trees were leafless. Two weeks after, Little White was so disappointed that he was not fat enough. My heart was numb, our private parts wet.

On the last day of November, Chen said to us that it was about time. I did not know what he was referring to, but I had learned it was better not to ask.

“Today, we’ll lead those horny dogs into a beauty trap,” Chen said. He told me this practice was faithfully conducted every November. Before the long and bitter winter swept X town, they needed something to warm their stomach.

“Savage Zhao, you are a lucky dog. This time we use the white beauty. You’ll see with your own eyes how glamorous she is,” said Chen.

There were four of us, Chen, I, Zhou and Liu. Both Zhou and Liu worked in our factory. Zhou and Liu were also the ones who had threatened to rip off my white shirt on my first day of work. Liu was the short man with the scar on his eyebrow.

“You were a savage then,” Zhou said.

“Still a savage,” said Liu.

“Don’t mess it up, Savage Zhao. If you don’t want to stay hungry and cold for the whole winter season, then do what we tell you to do,” Chen ordered.

“I will,” I replied.

“Watch out, Savage Zhao,” murmured Liu.

We stole the White Beauty from Old Wang’s shack to the local ancestral temple which was windowless and dark as night. It was the perfect place both for worship and for a trap. Liu had given the White Beauty a bowl of fresh shit to keep her busy, satisfied and silent. When we chained her neck on the wall, she started to grunt. Chen urged us to climb the walls and squat on the beams, holding clubs in hand, and wait for the male dogs to come.

The White Beauty grunted in the most sexy and alluring way. Although we were not dogs, we got hard listening to it. Chen was happy with her sound, saying the White Beauty was a real bitch. Chen had told us already that even if the White Beauty were locked in a remote ancestral temple, located at the far end of X town, all male dogs would smell her female odor from miles away. He had told us nothing could stop the male dogs from tracing the odor all the way here—the heaven as well as the hell. Then all we needed to do was to wait for the right moment to get the fattest dog in X town. He was right. Soon we heard a fiery mix of steps. We smelled the male odor of these dogs. I could imagine their drool dripping, their tails wagging, and their things itching. There must have been scores of them. In a moment we saw their heads gathering at the doorsteps. We held our breath.

The dogs seemed to know that we humans were playing a trick on them. They waited there, keeping a safe distance, and watched the White Beauty swaying her hips on the floor. No dog dared to sidle in. Chen gestured to us to have patience.

We waited and waited, listening to male dogs groaning at the White Beauty and the White Beauty grunting back at them. We waited and waited, until our legs were numb, our private parts wet. Eventually a dog was brave enough to step in. We were so disappointed that he was not fat at all. My heart was nearly pounding out of my chest, because I saw he was all snow white.

“Damn it. Little White, you fool, you’ve screwed things up,” Chen said in a whisper.

“Should we do it again? That dog is so scrawny,” I wanted to say. But I did not.

Zhou and Liu were disappointed too. They flared their nostrils and were about to jump down.

“Hold on. We’ll catch him, the foolish dog,” Chen said. My heart was thumping with sadness. We remained where we were and held our breath.

Little White raised his head and looked up. I knew he had seen us. He must have known what would happen to him but he was not afraid. He strode directly to the White Beauty. His snout nudged heavily on the White Beauty’s neck, then moved slowly to her back, her belly and her hip. She rubbed against him too, kissed him and even bit him. Eventually he smelled her vulva and took deep breaths within, like a man kissing a woman.

I almost shouted “run” to Little White. But I dared not. They three were absorbed in this view, yet they were sober. Chen had told us that we needed to wait for the moment when the dog would “diaoyangzi.” We waited and waited. The White Beauty seemed to hesitate. She refused several times when Little White was about to mount. I knew she refused because she could not stand to see him die.

At last, though Little White was thin, he was still a male, and he was strong enough to climb on her and insert his penis into her vulva. Chen, Zhou and Liu’s faces glistered ecstatically. Liu and Zhou wanted to jump down but Chen gestured to us to wait still, wait for the moment when both glands of Little White’s penis swelled like balloons. At that moment, he would be unable to pull it out, which was what we called “diaoyangzi” in the dialect of X town.

Both the dogs granted. Even the scores of male dogs grunted in a chorus outside. It was almost time. Chen gingerly fingered the door closed in a very skilled maneuver. On hearing the door closing, the four of us jumped down simultaneously from the wall. We started to beat Little White with our clubs.

“Stupid dog, you bastard, you have messed things up,” Chen shouted when beating.

“Now you have taken the bitterness of love,” Liu said with a smirk.

I watched for a long time with my club in my hand. I saw Little White’s expression. He didn’t look surprised, and he wasn’t going to bite us either. He was ecstatic, enjoying making love with the White Beauty up until the very end of his life.

Chen carried a knife with him. After Little White was dead, he peeled off the dog’s skin right away in front of the White Beauty.

“I’ll go get a cloth to cover her eyes,” Zhou said. “Otherwise we won’t be able to use her the next two years, like before.”
"No need to do that," said Chen, still cutting. "She'll be too old next year anyways. We'll find another White Beauty." The White Beauty shuddered like an autumn leaf. She saw us flay Little White, take out his bowel, stomach, liver, heart and cut him into pieces. Zhou took several logs of firewood and a wok out from under the sacrificial altar and began to make a fire.

"You should have a taste, Savage Zhao, this was really good. Dog meat, supreme," said Chen.

Liu went out to fetch some water from the well. I was supposed to do this, but they told me to stay here, because my hands were shaking with terror.

"First time you killed a dog, right?" said Chen. "You'll get used to this. We'll catch some old female dogs a month later, after they gave birth to pups. Not so delicious though. Their meat is tough and sour.

"Savage Zhao, sing a song for us. Chen likes listening to songs when cooking dogs," suggested Zhou. "Liu used to sing Cantonese songs for us. He came from Guangzhou. A-ha, Savage Liu. You've done a two years ago."

I shook my head, astonished.

Liu was back in a moment. Zhou laughed at him, saying "Yu A Yu/ Yu Dao Wu-Pu Ju

"I can't. I can't speak Cantonese anymore," Liu said, "Beautiful songs you used to sing."

"Sing us a Cantonese song, Liu," Zhou implored.

"Sing, Savage Zhao. We'll let you eat one more piece if you sing a pleasant song," Zhou said.

"Sing, please. It is a wonderful song," Chen said.

The tantalizing aroma filled the air. Drool trickled down from my mouth.

"Yao A Yao/ Yao Dao Wai-Po Qiao Wai-Po Jiao Wo Hao Bao-Bao."

When I was singing, I could feel the Shanghaiese running out of me one word after another. Shanghai seemed like a distant dream in a previous life.

"Yu A Yu/ Yu Dao Wu-Pu Ju Wu-Pu Qu Wu Hu Belle 2"

"Come and eat, Zhao. Save this song for the next time," Chen offered me a chunk of Little White's steaming leg. It did not make me sick this time. I was able to disconnect this heavenly flavored food with Little White. It was chunky, thick and firm. And I craved another bite.

Chen offered me a taste. Savage Zhao, this was really good. Dog meat, supreme," said Chen.

"Not so delicious though. Their meat is tough and sour."

"No need to do that," said Chen, still cutting. "She'll be too old next year anyways. We'll find another White Beauty." The White Beauty shuddered like an autumn leaf. She saw us flay Little White, take out his bowel, stomach, liver, heart and cut him into pieces. Zhou took several logs of firewood and a wok out from under the sacrificial altar and began to make a fire.

"You should have a taste, Savage Zhao, this was really good. Dog meat, supreme," said Chen.

Liu went out to fetch some water from the well. I was supposed to do this, but they told me to stay here, because my hands were shaking with terror.

"First time you killed a dog, right?" said Chen. "You'll get used to this. We'll catch some old female dogs a month later, after they gave birth to pups. Not so delicious though. Their meat is tough and sour.

"Savage Zhao, sing a song for us. Chen likes listening to songs when cooking dogs," suggested Zhou. "Liu used to sing Cantonese songs for us. He came from Guangzhou. A-ha, Savage Liu. You've done a two years ago."

I shook my head, astonished.

Liu was back in a moment. Zhou laughed at him, saying "Yu A Yu/ Yu Dao Wu-Pu Ju

"I can't. I can't speak Cantonese anymore," Liu said, "Beautiful songs you used to sing."

"Sing us a Cantonese song, Liu," Zhou implored.

"Sing, Savage Zhao. We'll let you eat one more piece if you sing a pleasant song," Zhou said.

"Sing, please. It is a wonderful song," Chen said.

The tantalizing aroma filled the air. Drool trickled down from my mouth.

"Yao A Yao/ Yao Dao Wai-Po Qiao Wai-Po Jiao Wo Hao Bao-Bao."

When I was singing, I could feel the Shanghaiese running out of me one word after another. Shanghai seemed like a distant dream in a previous life.

Yu A Yu/ Yu Dao Wu-Pu Ju

Wu-Pu Qu Wu Hu Belle 2"

"Come and eat, Zhao. Save this song for the next time," Chen offered me a chunk of Little White's steaming leg. It did not make me sick this time. I was able to disconnect this heavenly flavored food with Little White. It was chunky, thick and firm. And I craved another bite.

Chen offered me a taste. Savage Zhao, this was really good. Dog meat, supreme," said Chen.

"Not so delicious though. Their meat is tough and sour."

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"No need to do that," said Chen, still cutting. "She'll be too old next year anyways. We'll find another White Beauty."

"No, let's play," Blake announces. "Stop fussing about in
our kitchen, Mrs. Norton; come and play Clue.

“WELL,” huffs Mrs. Norton, not bothering to sound particularly affronted.

The little table next to Sam's chair is pulled between his chair and Blake's, and Blake sets a wooden chair at it with a flourish. There's a lit candle on the table he puts unceremoniously on the floor. Half the candles they'd put out for Christmas are freshly store-bought; the other half makeshift amalgamations of candles past, wads of wax melting slowly inside old jars, flames poking out of multiple burned-down wicks. The light inside the house makes the outside appear even darker, muted.

“Mrs. Norton!” Blake snaps, but his hand is gentle when he absentmindedly settles it on her back to guide her to her chair, and Sam has to turn away to cover the painful tenderness he knows is visible on his face.

When they've got the game set up—Mrs. Norton protesting that she's forgotten the rules, Blake curling up in his chair, chin on his knees, with his bare feet tapping on the leather as he frowns in concentration at the little figurine of Professor Plum, and Sam not even bothering to hide his fond smile in his Scotch glass—Sam settles back in his chair. Christmases had never been much of an event in his childhood, and he knows without a doubt that this is the best one he's ever had. He doesn't know how to tell Blake how much it means to him to live in this apartment again, not without telling him too much. He's happier than he'd ever thought he would be. There was a time when he never expected to be anything but bitter.

After Blake had set his violin away, Mrs. Norton had put a CD into their decrepit CD player, and now Frank Sinatra's “The Tender Trap” is playing, the soup of his brown, smoky voice swirling through the apartment, echoing the swirl of the snow outside the dark window.

…I'd trade that whole Manhattan skyline, shimmering steel and chrome For one old fashioned Christmas back home…

“Your turn, Sam,” Mrs. Norton tells him. Guiltily jerking back, Sam realizes he'd been unabashedly watching Blake: the way his long toes curl against the dark leather. Judging from the amusement on Mrs. Norton's face, she, at least, had noticed the direction of his attention.

“’ve got,” Blake whines, branding his pencil.

“You have to wait for your turn—oh, go on, then,” says Sam, attempting to be irritated and falling spectacularly short. “’ve got?” Grinning, he kicks his socked feet at Blake's bare ones, and to his surprise, Blake scoots short. “What’ve you got?” he asks, and his voice comes out hoarse and cracking.

Blake blinks, tucking his head into his cards. “Colonel Mustard, in the Library, with the dagger.” Mrs. Norton pulls the answer cards out their envelope in the center of the board and flicks through them. “Colonel Mustard … with the dagger … oh, Blake, it's the Kitchen.”

“What?” demands Blake, snatching the cards from her hands. “That can't be right. Colonel Mustard wouldn't pick the Kitchen—give me your cards.”

“Well,” says Mrs. Norton, smiling conspiratorially at Sam, who gets up and follows her back into their own kitchen. His cards are on the table for Blake to sort through. “We’ll just leave Himself to it,” adds Mrs. Norton as she starts to wipe down the counters. Sam leans his hip against the table and watches her tidy.

“I’ll just do a little. I’m not your housekeeper,” she reminds him. “Do you want some more of this cake? Well, if you change your mind….”

Sam catches sight of Blake's reflection in the window opposite. The black pane captures and multiplies him in ghostly doubled lines: his profile, the curve of his cheek, the line of his jaw, the red shadow of his mouth. The image imprints itself vividly in Sam's mind, startling.

“’m happy to have you living here again, Sam,” Mrs. Norton tells him in a stage-whisper, dragging Sam's attention back to her. “I can’t tell you how much he missed you.”

Sam smiles rather weakly. “Well, I’m sure he got on just fine without me,” he says, shifting.

“Oh, you,” chides Mrs. Norton. She stops cleaning their kitchen to put her hands on her hips, one hand still holding a sponge. “Blake has lines around his eyes from time spent smiling more than he expected. “She fixes Sam with a very pointed look. “I wonder just who’s responsible for that.”

Involuntarily, Sam makes a stuttering half-noise from his throat. He looks away from her, unseen to the windows over Blake's head. The ice patterns in the window—has put him on edge. Blake turns to him, grinning, and, for a second, Sam's heart falters; it's a strange, slippery moment before Sam coughs to silence him.

“Well, I—” Sam starts, but Blake holds up a hand to cut Mrs. Norton off. “Mrs. Norton, stop that.”

Blake appears at Sam's elbow, removing the sponge from Mrs. Norton's hands and snatching a biscuit from the platter still on the counter.

“I was just telling Sam how nice it is to have him back here again,” Mrs. Norton remarks.

“Yes,” says Blake rather stiffly, and nothing else. Mrs. Norton gives an exasperated huff. Arm settling around her on the counter, Blake stuffs another biscuit into Sam's mouth, eyes sparkling.

“’s so nice to have the place decorated again, not like last year…” Mrs. Norton is back to cleaning their kitchen again. “This is so much more festive: the lights, and the wreath above the mantle… I think we ought to get a tree next year, but I put up some mistletoe this morning—”

“Goodnight, Mrs. Norton,” Blake says pointedly, using the arm around her to guide her forcibly toward the door.

“WELL!” huffs Mrs. Norton, not sounding put out in the slightest. “Sam, make sure to wrap up that cake before you go to bed. You know he won't.”

“Sorry, thank you,” Blake says as he attempts to push her out the door.

“Merry Christmas. Be good,” Mrs. Norton tells him gently. Sam can't hold back his soft, doting smile as Blake stops a little so she can kiss his cheek even as he continues to shut the door on her.

“Goodnight!” Sam laughs as Blake finally gets it closed. All he can think of is how easy it would be walk over to Blake and wrap his arms around Blake's waist, press his open lips to the side of Blake's silky throat—

But of course, it wouldn't be easy at all.

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But of course, it wouldn't be easy at all.
suddenly strikes Sam that Blake had pulled off his shoes and socks and jacket after Katie and Michael left: armor removed for Mrs. Norton and for him. The thought makes him smile, secretive. He hesitates a moment, hovering and awkward, and then sits down across from Blake. Picking up his Scotch, Blake kicks at the feet of the table until Sam shifts it back to the side.

They sit in companionable silence, though Sam restlessly moves his feet around until they end up nearly in Blake’s lap. All he wants is for Blake to rest his hand to rest on Sam’s ankle, just that little sign, but Blake slumps down nearly horizontal instead, regarding his Scotch as though it’s a chemical experiment. Blake drinks, the long line of fire stains individual curls copper, the ends glowing embers, giving everything both a sharper contrast and a dusker flavor.

“I told Michael he ought to propose,” Blake mutters airy, Sam turns his head to look at him as he continues, “She thinks he’s not serious—it’ll be his second wife, after all—he thinks he’ll scare her off moving too fast. Tédious.” He sighs dramatically, but his voice holds no heat.

Sam clears his throat. He knows he’s staring in wonder.

“That was nice. Of you to do. For them.”

“Could’ve deduced it himself if he wasn’t so incompetent. He’ll do it tonight: ring’s in his sock drawer. Typical.”

The alcohol slides through Sam, lazy and honeyed and sweet. The Scotch is open on the floor in front of them, but Blake’s glass has been long since abandoned. The majority of the mostly empty bottle has gone to Sam, which might explain why his head is lolling back on his chair, tipped toward Blake with an infinitely tender half-smile on this face. He can’t hold back the warm looks, the pure vulnerability. He just worships and loves, and it seeps out of every pore.

Eventually Blake rises, and Sam starts a little, but Blake merely disappears into the kitchen to snatch up the ginger biscuits he’d been eating earlier and secret them away in his lap.

As he passes back by Sam’s chair, his long fingers fiddle absently with the ribbing on Sam’s sweater and then fall away. Blake plucks Oscar up off the floor and curls him into his lap, where the puppy stretches to snap up the leftover Chinese off Blake’s abandoned plate. Unconsciously, Sam’s eyes grow even fonder.

Every single thing about this moment, thinks Sam, is absolutely perfect. He has to try.

“She thinks he’s not serious—it’ll be his second wife, after all—he thinks he’ll scare her off moving too fast. Tédious.”

Blake glances at him out the corner of his eye and then looks back into the fire. “Disciplinarian,” he says carefully.

Sam’s eyes prick. It’s the very best thing about Blake, the thing that drew him in immediately, that Blake knows what he’s like. Sam doesn’t have to try to hide how utterly screwed up he is. He can’t. Blake knows.

Blake has seen Blake a hundred times announce his deductions of people’s personal lives and bring them to their knees: his boss, his brother, several of Sam’s ex-girlfriends, even Mrs. Norton or Michael or Katie on occasion. Never once has Blake humiliated him like that. Sam’s never considered it before: have there been things of every pore.

Blake knows. He clearly knows.

Blake’s own small version of tact?

Sam has seen Blake humiliate people with style before, but Linda … doesn’t really give a shit about …

Blake can’t feel, and anything else is an illusion. Sam doesn’t feel things like that—

He doesn’t love you.

Against all reason, Sam goes to the floor next to his right foot. “New York, even.”

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Blake hasn’t told Sam about his two ex-girlfriends, even Mrs. Norton or Michael or Katie on occasion. Never once has Blake humiliated him like that. Sam’s never considered it before: have there been things about him. Blake has refrained from deducing, Blake’s own small version of tact?

Because Blake knows.

Because Blake knows.

“Linda … came out the Christmas I

It’s just … my whole life, I’ve lived my whole life the way you’re supposed to. But it didn’t really work. With Mary, but … ever?” Sam has shrunk back into his chair a bit, making him look smaller. “I’ve never really felt all that much. You love murders and experiments and Clue.” His eyes are focused on some point on the floor next to his right foot. “New York, even.”

“I’m not like that. My daughter. I didn’t, ah;” he swallows, “love her.”

Sam can feel Blake’s gaze on him, but he doesn’t look up to meet it. Still looking at the floor, Sam confesses, very low: “It’s not like that, when I’m around you.”

There’s a pregnant pause.

Please, Sam begs. Please, Blake.

“We, I do try to offer some utility,” Blake says lightly. Sam’s head snaps up in time to see Blake gesturing airily as he gets to his feet.

You knew, Sam thinks, you knew; you knew—he doesn’t feel things like that—

This is not a conversation Blake is willing to have. All Sam’s carefully spun castles come crashing down; no matter how warm and intimate and perfect this moment had felt to him, Blake doesn’t feel things like that. He doesn’t want the same things Sam does. They are what they always have been: Sam loves Blake, and Blake can’t feel, and anything else is an illusion. Sam had known that going in. His eyes prick. He doesn’t love you. 
‘Tis the Season for Holiday Spirit

Marci Clark

A n example of ideology in which an “imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence” occurs during Christmastime. There are common sights, sounds and feelings associated with Christmastime that are given direct correlation to the holiday. People are also generally happier and friendlier around Christmas because of the common signs of Christmastime; a behavior that is driven by the belief that Christmas is a “happy holiday” because of “holiday spirit.”

The “real conditions of existence” in the context of Christmastime are the common and cliché things you are likely to observe in December. Red and green everywhere, gingerbread cookies, presents, a manger scene, and pine trees decorated with ornaments are all “real conditions of existence” during Christmastime. You also hear and smell things that are not tangible, but still are a reminder of Christmas. The scent of Balsam, peppermint, and fresh snow are common encounters. The sound of upbeat carols softly playing in the background and bells ringing for the Salvation Army are examples of the “real conditions of existence” you would expect to hear around this time of the year. The frigid cold of the wind along with the warmth of the burning fireplace are “real conditions” of this time of year that you can feel. When you experience these types of sights, smells, sounds and feelings, you receive the sense of Christmastime.

These aspects of Christmas are represented through an “imaginary relationship to the real conditions of existence” because “Christmastime” is not tangible; it is only a feeling or sense. Of course, the correlation between the typical aspects of Christmas and the imaginary relationship that is “Christmastime” cannot be explained purely in the “real conditions of existence.” This is because no one informs you that these things represent Christmastime; instead you learn it through experience and observation.

Furthermore, Christmastime creates a specific sense of happiness tailored to the holiday. People present themselves as more “merry” and “jolly;” two words that do not necessarily have the connotation of Christmas in their name, but by the imaginary relationship that we give them. The imaginary relationship of “Christmastime” and the overall happiness and excitement of people tailored to the holiday are represented through the hype of Christmas by tangible and materialistic objects. Christmas Day is widely known as “The most wonderful time of the year” and “The happiest season of all;” an ideology that it has probably always carried with it. This ideology may exist for many reasons. For religious people, Christmas is a time of celebration of Jesus being born. For kids, Christmas is a time of anticipation before opening a present. For college students, Christmas is a time of relaxation and the comfort of home. Whereas for adults, Christmas is a “happy holiday” because families interact more with friends and family. The sense of “Christmastime” therefore, can carry many meanings, each unique to one another.

The feelings of happiness and friendliness associated with Christmastime serves the interest of all who celebrate Christmas whether they celebrate for religious reasons or not. This ideology may exist because so many people celebrate and observe the day in one way or another whether it’s with a traditional huge dinner or by attending church. Since so many people celebrate, it is an event we can all be joyful about. Christmas might even cause some people to act against their own interest when they “become” happy purely because it is Christmastime and they feel being unhappy is not part of the “imaginary relationship” of the weeks leading up to December 25th. This once again reinforces the belief that Christmastime is perceived as a “happy holiday” when individuals engage in “holiday cheer,” an imaginary relationship we assign to the time frame.

The “real conditions of existence” during this time of the year create the “imaginary relationship” of happiness and cheerfulness specific to the holiday that stem from the exciting once a year event. It would be hard to argue that Christmastime is not an exciting and joyful time of year considering all the “real conditions of existence” pointing us to all the reasons to be happy. Red and green lights, songs about Jesus, and a big man dressed in red with a white beard may create a “holiday spirit” within you, but that feeling is purely imaginary. 
There are two universal truths about lying: everyone hates being lied to, and everyone lies. Sit back and eavesdrop on a conversation for a few minutes and you’ll probably hear each person say two to three lies, with half being easy to catch. Why would someone lie if they A. dislike lying, and B. are probably going to be caught? We often ask this of others yet fall helplessly into the habit ourselves. Regardless of purpose, lying effectively can significantly impact your quality of life. You do this on a daily basis, so why not embrace your imperfections and exploit them? Lying starts young. At age two it first emerges, and floats out like a bubble very soon to be popped. It’s a reaction and an experiment. A child only thinks of one thing at they reach out to the cookie platter: the delectable constellation of crumbly cookie goodness marking their face like a warrior. Depending on the child’s imagination and intelligence, the realization that their thoughts differ from everyone else’s could come earlier or been postponed another year.4 As the child tests these barriers, they start noticing clues indicating what a person is thinking about and begin to realize they don’t know the child’s thoughts. As the child tests how many cookies they can fit into their mouth, the cookie fatality count doubles, devoured one loves him like he loves himself. Comparing himself to a small town girl fearless as she takes on the world in style. A casual time with a few of her celebrity friends. Everything from her childhood, symmetrical face, to her common, girl-next-door look screams “trust me.” She’s just an average small town girl fearless as she takes on the world in style. A decade of fame passes, and she is well aware of her clean cut image, and make no mistake, she would do anything to protect it.

Person 2, “Paul”: On the other side of the ring, consider her opponent, a self-proclaimed “genius.” His slogan: no one loves him like he loves himself. Comparing himself to anything from Gandhi, Shakespeare, Nike, Jesus, and even Google, this celebrity builds his image on the extravagant and controversial. It isn’t that he’s heartless, it’s just such a burden to carry such power and fame. He recently said of himself, “I’m like a vessel, and God has chosen me to be the voice of the connector.”

The situation hasn’t been stated and already each of these “completely anonymous non-celebrities” has a background that probably allowed you to make up your mind about who is the liar in this situation. You most likely would suspect “Paul” to be the liar, even without hearing the statement in question. On the other hand, you may proudly declare “Penny” the liar because you can see this twist coming, and that is an example of lying to yourself dear. Are you confident you would think that in real life circumstances? The fact of the matter is that even among the self-proclaimed “unbiased”, everyone has preconceived notions about who can be trusted and who cannot.

For example, let’s assume an acquaintance believes you aren’t lying. It may be because there is virtually no reason to lie (is this a hobby for you?); it may be because of circumstance, or perceptions for one or both of you. Either way, congratulations. You have the privilege of making small mistakes, having fun with your story, and potentially add an ally. Even if you are caught, your inherent likeability and positive background will allow you to suffer fewer consequences than others less lucky. If “Penny” was exposed for using lies to cover up her mistakes (while subtly insulting her enemies), she can simply redirect, distract, cry, and lay low until the drama dies down. Had she been someone that didn’t have such a charitable image (such as “Paul”), her career could have potentially ended in a situation like this. Quotes such as “I didn’t mean to say this, I meant to say…” or “it was a mistake but it definitely won’t ever happen again,” are often claimed by many guilty people.

On the other hand, if your acquaintance has a lurking suspicion of you, prepare by looking more trustworthy before speaking a word. A light smile is ideal (unless of course you find yourself in a realistically terrifying situation, smiling next to a dead body may give off a different impression). Make yourself presentable—just like in an interview, you want to make sure you are putting your best, most innocent face forward. You might not be gifted with the features of our dear “Penny”, but you can always try covering up any scars and blemishes, possibly removing facial hair, and of course, wearing that “natural”, interested smile. This might invoke a sense of detachment to yourself—unlike if by putting on a face, you are giving up your own. Over time a thought will lightly tap at the corners of your mind: do people not trust you because you aren’t trustworthy? Many times, being told you aren’t trustworthy will push you to fulfill these words, sometimes even immediately. 6 It’s been proven countless times: people change in response to the expectations and beliefs of others onto them. Self-fulfillment prophecy goes for anything else too: give a child a fish and they will eat for a day, tell a child they are a fish and they will dive into the ocean, free, into the sunset with a school of tuna. Either way: don’t prove them right! Perhaps you’ll feel like it’s unfair, having so many things stacked against you and now having to play an honest part without necessarily being all that truthful. Put on your best face and you tell yourself you don’t care. Isn’t a pep talk sometimes a lie in order to encourage success? After all the saying fake it to you make it basically means lie your way towards a sense of accomplishment. Eventually you’ll become what you are after.

Rule 3: Tell Them What They Want to Hear

Famous ad man Don Draper once declared, “I don’t sell products, I sell dreams.” 7 People buy ideas, not products. You need to create an emotional connection with the person you are lying to. In lying, you cooperate with your audience to create an event existing exclusively in your minds. Be it a minor tweak to an actual event or a lifetime, you need to make sure to make what your audience is willing to take. Here is where you have to really think about what you want to get out of this deception. Who gains what if your lie is successful? How severe is your lie? Are you trying to escape punishment, or simply get out of a pinch? In the moment-likes are where a bit of the “little white lies” come from. Those “have other plans tonight” concealments of your pizza and chip loaded binge fest to 2 am, those “I love your—” excuses for staring mindlessly at that gaudy accessory—lies that probably won’t make a difference in the world. Unfortunately, if you can’t keep a straight face, or if you say something wrong, your “good intentions” won’t really matter. You would potentially be losing someone’s trust for saying something intended to be nice.

Just like the ad man, lawyer, or politician, your words need to slip through cracks and win people over. When it comes to phrasing, there are several expressions a seasoned liar knows to avoid, and emotions they can exploit in order to tell a lie. When telling a lie, try to distract, cry, and lay low until the drama dies down. Had those “other plans tonight” concealments of your pizza and chip loaded binge fest to 2 am, those “I love your—” excuses for staring mindlessly at that gaudy accessory—lies that probably won’t make a difference in the world. Unfortunately, if you can’t keep a straight face, or if you say something wrong, your “good intentions” won’t really matter. You would potentially be losing someone’s trust for saying something intended to be nice.
out of that too. It is exactly because he does not fear that he need not fear. For if he has the charisma, the confidence, and the charm, he can (and will) get away with murder.12

You, an average liar on the other hand, fall victim to your body with every lie. Even before a lie is born, your body is racing. It’s instinctual, unavoidable, but not untamable. Within 350 milliseconds, your body has already gone into survival mode.13 Epinephrine, along with roughly thirty other hormones, has flooded your bloodstream and you are trying not to drown in their symptoms.14 Your heart rate, your breathing, drum quickly despite your efforts. If you are really unfortunate, sweat and rigidity will mark your face with the word “liar” more glaringly than a gold sharpie. You open your mouth. It’s been a second—maybe more. Your tongue is a foreigner, your voice a squeaky toy. A stutter, a stumble, or a strange, stifling sound sloppily slips through your vocabulary. Your face stiffens and twitches. It’s the irregularity of it all, the unnatural movements and the painfully obvious doubts that give you away. You, an average liar have unfortunately been caught in a lie.

Do you want to hear an honest confession? Sometimes I don’t call people out on lies because they seem so horrified or embarrassed I think that they will self-combust. If they haven’t they’re probably telling the truth. Your face stiffens and twitches. It’s the irregularity of it all, the unnatural movements and the painfully obvious doubts that give you away. You, an average liar have unfortunately been caught in a lie.

Rule 5: Evidence Can Make or Break You

So you’re getting a hang of this routine. You’ve stepped into the shoes of another person, seen what they want, convinced them of your bravery. You have the power to bring fiction to life be it a magnus opus or Frankenstein’s monster. That’s the beauty of it! It’s a choose-your-own-adventure that delicately balances between comedy and tragedy. Have undeniable evidence that points to something? Tamper with it. Cover your tracks with another person’s big shoes. What if you’re caught? Do you want to hear an honest confession? Sometimes I don’t call people out on lies because they seem so horrified or embarrassed I think that they will self-combust. If they haven’t they’re probably telling the truth. Your face stiffens and twitches. It’s the irregularity of it all, the unnatural movements and the painfully obvious doubts that give you away. You, an average liar have unfortunately been caught in a lie.

Rule 4: Don’t Get Nervous

Imagine a psychopath is ten minutes from getting his victim to comply. This is one of the most amusing parts of the game: the chase. It’s laughable really, how easily his victim has fallen for his story. He caught himself making two contradictory statements within seconds of each other and they just flew past the victim’s head. Despite his words quickly skipping out, his body is loose and relaxed. Lying for him is fun, and he is an expert. After all, if he gets caught it’s simply another game to play, and he can charm his way through your vocabulary. Your face stiffens and twitches. It’s the irregularity of it all, the unnatural movements and the painfully obvious doubts that give you away. You, an average liar have unfortunately been caught in a lie.

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Rule 6: Rewind and Repeat

And as you trot victoriously through the finish line you become aware of a small chasm in the back of your mind. You reflect on how your voice resonated through the thin veil of air, feeling like it was true. Almost. It may zap out of existence in that instant. You would proudly carry on without this nothingness nibbling at your insides. Reward yourself with a juicy burger (vegans—treat yourself to an apple—mmm health) filled with almost as much substance as that lie, or maybe opt for that decadent desert that rolls as sweetly off your tongue as that lie. You are on fire, because hey, you got away with it! This exhilaration, liberation, and relief gives you a second wind, and maybe it’s the adrenaline finally spiking, but you feel like you can conquer the world.

For many others though, worry starts to consume us—ever so slightly. Someone asks a simple question and you let out a lie. A simple one word lie over and over and over again. Just like your thoughts, this question ebbs up into and out of existence. You resent the little lies, but acknowledge they are necessary. It is not the time to reveal your voice resonated through the thin veil of air, feeling like it was true. Almost. It may zap out of existence in that instant. You would proudly carry on without this nothingness nibbling at your insides. Reward yourself with a juicy burger (vegans—treat yourself to an apple—mmm health) filled with almost as much substance as that lie, or maybe opt for that decadent desert that rolls as sweetly off your tongue as that lie. You are on fire, because hey, you got away with it! This exhilaration, liberation, and relief gives you a second wind, and maybe it’s the adrenaline finally spiking, but you feel like you can conquer the world.

References:
Given a name meaning “King of the World” in Persian, the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan was not only a skillful ruler in Indian history, but also a strong supporter of the arts. Although the emperor seemed to be most interested in architecture, as evident by his patronage of the Taj Mahal, Shah Jahan did continue to support the rich Mughal painting tradition his father Jahangir and grandfather Akbar fostered. In addition to generating a practice of creating stunning court paintings, these Mughal rulers also used these pieces as propaganda to win the respect of their subjects and rival leaders. This use of artwork as propaganda by Mughal emperors is exemplified by the watercolor painting, *A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year*, created in the Mughal Empire by the artist Bichitr in 1630 CE. Technically well done, the piece depicts Shah Jahan in a light that goes beyond flattering to extremely idealistic. This portrait of Shah Jahan helps convey the idea that, in Mughal court art, there is a strong tradition of paintings doubling as propaganda by depicting emperors as flawless and god-like.

Used to celebrate the greatness of the current Mughal ruler, *A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year* shows an idealized Shah Jahan with his face and feet in full profile and his body in three-quarters profile. This careful positioning is characteristic of Mughal portraiture, but how delicately the emperor’s features are conveyed is representative of the European influences on Mughal painting at that time. While the back of the portrait has an inscription stating, “A good likeness of me in my fortieth year; the work of Bichitr,” by being shown without any wrinkles or other signs of aging, the actual figure of Shah Jahan contradicts that statement. The unblemished features and rigid posture of Shah Jahan are flawlessly painted, but this perfection is too extreme, and he looks distant and lifeless. This coldness is emphasized by the fact that, by not facing the viewer, the figure of Shah Jahan puts a visual distance between himself and the audience and accentuates how far from the common man he is. Looking at how Shah Jahan is portrayed in *A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year*, it becomes apparent to the viewer that Mughal rulers manipulated art forms to illustrate themselves as flawless.

Wearing an orange, patterned tunic with blue striped pants and red shoes, the affluent Emperor Shah Jahan is dressed opulently in his Fortieth Year propaganda portrait. He is adorned with many jewels, seen in his turban and on his fingers of his clasped hands. Besides the fact that Shah Jahan owns lavish clothing in his real life, the painting of such items is also quite expensive due to the sheer amount
of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year that Jahangiri paintings. Shah Jahan's one can find the motif in numerous court after the sixteenth century, and in portraiture spread from the Mughal An Iranian concept, this use of a halo Emperor Shah Jahan is akin to a god. head expresses his apparent holiness; sun nimbus around the emperor's clothing, the golden addition to the wealth conveyed by a prosperous and faultless ruler. In people see this portrait and are shown that makes it propaganda; the Mughal portrait of the emperor is a patterned frame, which is encompassed by illumination filling the rest of the page. The opulent illumination depicts various types of colorful flowers, and the space in between each plant is filled with golden pigment, another indication of the vastness of Shah Jahan's wealth. The inclusion of illumination around this portrait of Shah Jahan and many other Mughal portraits was supported by the myth created around his kingship. This creation of a sense of awe around an emperor is not a new idea within the Mughul Empire; Emperor Akbar also utilized this propaganda technique. For example, in the piece, Akbar Tames the Savage Elephant, Akbar is shown riding a ferocious elephant, and the painting serves to illuminate his brave nature. Akbar passed down this tradition of using court paintings as propaganda to his son Jahangir, who commissioned many allegorical paintings that showed himself as a military genius although he was not in possession of any great military prowess. However, with wealth unparalleled in Mughal history, Shah Jahan tried more extensively than his relatives to live up to his self-made image, and he dictated all art forms in his court were to manifest the "imperial ideal." The art of Shah Jahan's court was so strictly regulated that it became to be known as "Shah-Jahani perfectionism" and was used to gain the recognition of his subjects and his rival rulers. Because of this "Shah-Jahani perfectionism," all portraits of the emperor that came from Shah Jahan's court were standardized, idealized, and showed Shah Jahan was beyond human; he was not imperfect or subject to change. As time passed in the Mughal Empire, the tradition of using artwork as propaganda grew and became more elaborate as it was passed on from generation to generation, which is culminated in the painting, A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year. An expertly executed piece of artwork, A Portrait of Shah Jahan in his Fortieth Year is a great example of how traditions are passed down within empires. In the portrait, the opulent clothing of the emperor and the bordering illumination, combined with the materials needed to convey such aspects, helps tell the viewer the Mughal Empire can dedicate a large amount of money to art. Yet, by calling the portrait just "good," Shah Jahan hints that he might be dissatisfied with the work and feel as if he is even more affluent and perfect than the artist was capable of depicting. This practice of using court paintings to convey an emperor's ideals was started early in the Mughal custom, and, as generation after generation sustained the tradition within the empire of using artwork as propaganda strengthened.

References
7. Susan Strange, Painting for the Mughal Emperor (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 2002), 158.
10. Ibid., 204.
11. Strange, Painting for the Mughal Emperor, 73.
14. Ibid., 205.