A photograph of a stone tombstone in a cemetery. The tombstone is a simple, rectangular block of light-colored stone, possibly granite or marble, resting on a low, wide base. It is positioned in the center of the frame, slightly to the right. The background consists of a wall of large, rectangular stone blocks, likely part of a larger structure or a wall surrounding the cemetery. The lighting is somewhat dim, creating a somber atmosphere. The words "BEFORE MOURNING" are overlaid in large, bold, red, serif capital letters across the top half of the image. The letters are slightly transparent, allowing the background to be seen through them.

BEFORE  
MOURNING

YO



# BEFORE MOURN ING

1.

In the dream, I was at the hospital with my father, sitting in a waiting area furnished with long black felt couches. The space was white, fluorescent-lit and empty.

In waking life, a space like this would have probably unnerved me. As though something were scratching at the inside of my rib cage. As though the hollow beneath my chest were swelling, rising, and then falling (I suppose, breathing), pressing

outwards, and collapsing inwards. This was how the room felt. A mass of emptiness, a blued-white container, gently heaving. It was quiet, and we were patient, as silent as we were hopeless.

Eventually, 奶奶 walked out from around the corner. She was alone, unaccompanied by doctors or nurses, and she was glowing. She carried herself along using the small black walker that she always uses which my uncle had bought for her from Denmark, at this point, at least a decade ago. When she saw us, she smiled. She says, casually, that she had recovered. How the chances were one in five thousand, and how she had been lucky enough to be that one. Dad and I listened, and we accepted what she told us as though it were a matter of course. *Of course she would come back to us.* How could it be otherwise. After all, she is the strongest person any of us ever knew. So we smile—and we don't even cry.

2.

When I woke up I called my parents. I had texted a friend about the dream earlier saying that I had thought the dream to be a good omen.

But this was a lie. The familiar kind of lie that people tell themselves and others in face of heartbreak and impending grief. I don't know why we do this, or why I did this. Nobody really believes these gestures, and the comfort they afford is always negligible. They feel mute, desperate, pathetic—though I have also learned not to resent them. Gesturing is, I suppose, just what one does in these straits, because really, what else can we expect of a human creature in grief.

In any case, I didn't believe myself when I said this, the good omen, and it turned out that I was right not to. Over the phone, dad told us that the doctor had been managing his expectations. 奶奶 still burns with a fever. The inflammation in her brain, which had spread beyond the initial site of her aneurysm, was described by my father as a flood. Soon it would reach the brainstem, at which point it would begin seriously affecting her vital functions.

My video was on during just about the entire call. Neither mom nor dad had theirs on for the most part. Toward the end, dad asked me if I wanted to see grandma. I said yes. He had asked me (almost jokingly, but not at all, really) if I would be afraid. I asked what is there to be afraid of.

And there was nothing to be afraid of. 奶奶 was laid down on her side. She looked peaceful in her sleep. Dad shook her gently and called out “奶奶” a few times. Seeing this I wondered how many times a day he does this, and whether the frequency has dropped over the past days.

A stream of tears flowed down my cheeks as this thought flickered past my mind. I was lying on my side, as grandma was. I said nothing, and pulled my phone further away from my face for fear of being seen. I don't know why I did this, or what I was afraid of, or why I swallowed the words I wanted to say—which were as simple as: *I don't want you to die.*

3.

The pages I am writing on are blotted with tears. Ink spreads in them as in tiny oceans; the words bleeding in accordance with the flow of water seeping into paper, fading, flowering outwards into little fans of blue. The words in this way in fact manage to record how I first saw them from behind my screen of tears. As legible as they were to me when I first wrote them. Swollen and muddy, as though submerged in water. I didn't realize how hard I had been avoiding my sadness and my fear until I had met my pen to paper today. I am so grateful for writing in this moment, as I sit beside myself in sorrow.

4.

Dad has been by grandma's side since maybe Monday. At night he sleeps on the floor by the foot of her bed on a mattress that looks too small for his height, under a patterned duvet dotted over with pink and yellow circles of different sizes. He had sent a photo of his set up to the family chat. In the photo he was sitting up in his bed, smiling with his hands laced behind his head. The pose was oddly familiar—not unlike the ones he would strike in the old vacation photos

at the beach, and not unlike the pose I struck just a week ago, sitting next to my friend under the Ischian sun.

But under his eyes were shadows that evidenced long sleepless nights filled with work and worry. Every two hours, my father has to turn grandma's body over so that the phlegm that is gathering in her lungs can be drained. This small task was assigned to him by the nurse, who comes by every three or four hours to use a machine to suck the phlegm out of her throat. Everytime dad mentions this procedure, he tacks on an expression of gratitude, and says how thankful he is that at least she feels no pain.

On the phone dad mentioned in passing that despite the chaos raging inside her cranium, grandma's body seemed as healthy as ever, saying, with a smile, “她身体一切都还挺好的。每次给她翻身都肉肉嘟嘟，热热乎乎的。”

Dad said he would often hold her hand. I struggle to imagine how strange it must have felt, to be at once so close and so absolutely distant from her. To his mother, my grandmother, who was right there, but also nowhere to be found.

From here it can look as though she is simply sleeping. I wonder if that is just what it sometimes feels like for him. That after all these years, he is sleeping by the foot of his mother's bed again: a little boy standing at the precipice of darkness, steadied with courage by the warmth of his mother's hand.



5.

We have started talking about what to do if she never wakes up again. One of my uncles has expressed a commitment to keep her alive regardless of her condition. Dad told me this and said he couldn't figure out what the hell my uncle was thinking; the reasons he gave for his position were a mess of irrelevancies—which included, among other arguments, the thought that keeping her alive for longer would give us the time we need to prepare a proper funeral.

Yet everyone knew that this would be the last thing that grandma would want—and since this everyone included my uncle, I could only conclude that he must therefore simply not care. Grandma is too proud and too kind to be a burden for anyone. Her whole life has been an aspiration for freedom, and this mere life would be the antithesis of her idea of existence.

On several occasions dad had tried to encourage her to move with grandpa into a retirement home. Oddly, whenever this is brought up, she would

never refuse. She would go willingly—at first—each time, filled with curiosity and animated by the prospects of a place with new people. But as soon as this curiosity waned, she would leave immediately and resolutely, leaving in her trail a flutter of paperwork and fees for my dad to sort through. I always found this rather funny. For the first few months her boundless curiosity and optimism was able to transform the home for her into a space of exploration. Through this sleight of perspective, moving into a home would thus become for her an expression of her freedom. And this would last until the perspective became untenable, as the dreary realities of the nursing home began fraying the weaves of imagination that she had sewn into her world.

But this was her magic. A power to see the bright side of everything—a virtue she developed that helped her survive two wars, the death of her father at twelve, the responsibility of raising her family in his stead, and later in life, three terrible years as a political prisoner during the Cultural Revolution. I remember three years ago how she had broken her hip after falling in the shower. A life of malnutrition and physical trauma had made her bones brittle, and with age, random bone fractures had become increasingly common in occurrence. Each time her bones broke, she would be bedridden for months in pain. And yet the first thing she would say whenever this happened would always be some queer expression of gratitude, that she had been meaning to find the time to read, anyway, and that in this sense, the broken bone was in fact a harbinger

of good fortune. My dad tells me that this echoed the things she would say about her years in prison. *How lucky to have been locked up then, in those years. Had I been free, she would say, I would have probably been beaten to death.*

This is the peculiar axis of her temporality. Like a lance charged with hope and patience pointed straight at the horizon, it draws in its wake every moment and memory, shimmering with meaning. This is what makes it impossible to imagine her wanting to spend the final days of her life in a bed without consciousness. To be without a future is for her to cease to be altogether.

It is strange how different what matters to people is in these moments. My grandfather has been rather quiet this whole time, no doubt out of grief and anxiety, but he has more than once expressed his fear that grandma would return in a condition where she would be unable to recognize him. This, more than her death, is what he fears: his friend and lover of sixty-five years suddenly unable to recognize him, and he

in turn suddenly unable to recognize her.

But for my uncle, perhaps, the fact of her breathing—this is enough. Perhaps that is because unlike my father he has not been allowed to visit her due to the COVID restrictions. My father was given an exception by the head nurse after much pleading. But we were only allowed one. So my uncle doesn't know how her breath sounds, and how her hands feel. But then again—none of us do, except for my father. He alone knows, and that I find beautiful.

6.

(Everything I had  
just written I wrote over a breakfast of yogurt and coffee. I can't help but find the image funny. Me alone in my apartment, writing and sobbing, shoveling the occasional mass of white goop into my face. Writing, sobbing, shoveling, swallowing.

—A wonderfully undignified portrait of grief.)

7.

I learned today from my brother that my uncle finally got his vaccine. This was news because my uncle is a very, very vocal anti-vaxxer. His reasons for being anti-vax are as incoherent as they are firmly held, for at their tangled roots is a profound and longstanding hatred of the Chinese Communist Party that I suspect cannot be ultimately teased apart from his survival of that one summer night in June, 1989. Regardless, the point is that he does not ever refer to COVID as anything except the “Xi Jinping virus;” he often speaks of the pandemic as a perverted CCP conspiracy designed to disrupt the global economic order and bolster the CCP’s power at home and abroad; and within this complex mansion of misinformation and irrationality, among the many strangely affected leaps of logic, is the leap from the claim that COVID-19 is a manmade virus to the claim that vaccines, therefore, will have no real effect upon it. Thus he preached his gospel and would try on occasion to convince me and my brother of the error of our vaccinated ways.

As soon as he heard about grandma’s sickness, however, none of this mattered. He went first thing to the vaccination clinic and received his first shot. When I first heard it, this little story

made me smile. But now I can't help thinking where my uncle must, in this moment, be finding himself, following the heat of that impulsive afternoon. Before him, separating him from home, his mother, is now a series of milestones erected by the bureaucratic powers that be: two weeks until his second shot, two more weeks until the issuing of his vaccine certificate, and if he is so lucky to get a ticket to China, two more weeks of hotel quarantine, one more week of home quarantine, and another week before he will be allowed to enter any kind of healthcare facility. It is all as though he has been thrown back to a time before commercial air travel, when the journey from Europe to China knew no other path than the two-month train journey through the wintery plains of Siberia.

There is a uniquely terrible species of exasperation that is born of confrontation with bureaucratic inertia. It is an exasperation produced by an acute consciousness of the fact that the thorny forest of necessities in which one is snagged is, in one sense, ultimately utterly, almost laughably, illusory—because what the functionaries say must be, really need not be. And yet despite this, despite all the idiocy and frivolity and emptiness of bureaucracy, there is nothing one

can do, for arbitrary power is power no less. The situation is funny if one is capable of laughing, but for those who cannot afford this distance, it can show up in no other way than as an experience of tragic fury concocted of absurdity, stupidity, and radical evil.

Today, my uncle's lot has thus become one and the same as the lot of that one character of Kafka's. He has become the blind, flea-infested man from the country, lying prostrate and powerless at the open gates of an immovable castle of air, pleading to gain admittance—just so he can sleep again by his mother's bed.

8.

Grandpa was at last allowed to visit grandma today. She remains unconscious, though her fever has dissipated. Dad had sent a twenty-second video into the home chat of the visit. Grandpa sat bent over her bed. From behind his mask he asked her if she could hear him. He paused, and then repeated his question once more to be sure. He followed this silence, then, by promising her that he will take good care of her. “我来看你了,以后我会好好照顾你的。”

In his voice, there was both skepticism and belief about having an audience, or maybe even about *who* the audience is, about whether he is, after all, just talking to himself. The tone resembled somewhat that of prayer, when prayer is

truly meant—as, for instance, when someone in straits of desperation pleads in prayer, plummeting inside a plane crashing out of the skies.. These moments are by necessity triumphs of faith over despair. Without faith, my grandmother’s silence can be nothing other than nothing. But still, these achievements are so often tenuous, precarious. Silence can be terrible, maddening, and in the vast and silent emptiness of these moments, a tremor of skepticism is all but necessitated if one wishes to maintain some grip on sanity. The attribution of silence to God can, for most of us at least, never be anything other than an article of faith, a transcendent achievement of will—it is nothing given, and must in each case be something made—and in this case, his doubt of whether she can hear him appears to weave itself thread over thread into his faith that she can.

So in my grandfather’s voice, as he speaks to her, I hear fear and I hear hope.



9.

I often wonder when we will at last be able to mourn her. It has been years since she has (as grandpa puts it) fallen sick. Strung between life and death, she is neither here nor there—and so likewise, it sometimes feels, are we.

I sit in this darkness with eroding patience waiting for her mourning.

Last time I saw her, it felt almost as though she had become something of an effigy for the family—a ritual object, regarded as a subject—a vessel empty in-itself, but gorged full with our fears, our hopes, our anxieties, our wishes—propped up, puppet-like, within this weird little family practice of ours, where we stand around her, and hold her hand, and speak to her, as if she touched us, and spoke still.

I do not know what to make of this effigy, which we call by her names—奶奶, 老伴儿, 妈妈. When I held her hand I could not bring myself to speak to her, like my cousin did. The words “我爱你, 我想你, 但奶奶, 我可好着呢” stumbled again and again over my tongue and slipped back into silence.

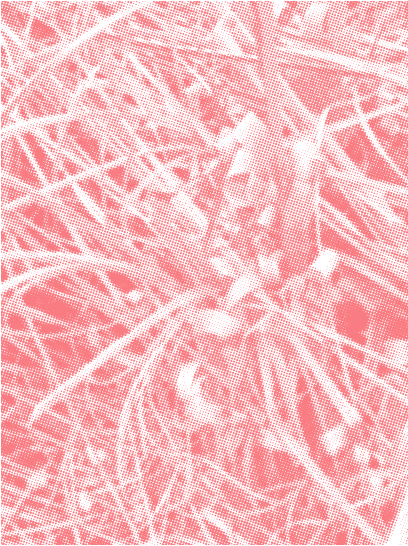
The importance of her strange, now-spectral existence to her children and her grandchildren cannot be discounted. There is beauty and love to be discovered in this practice, I have learned. It matters to them that she is alive, that she is there to be spoken to. I wish sometimes that I could play the play as my cousin did. But I cannot. For this object, this body, this mass of mere life, it is not her—because *she* is not an object. She is, and will be even in her death, her self, my hero, my grandmother—and I refuse to speak to her, for better or for worse, so long as she cannot speak back.

So instead, I have been preparing this shrine for her, arranging these words, these bouquets of incense and prayer, these assemblages of memory, these wreaths of blue flowers, in hope that she may one day finally shine of herself, for us, for me.

So I await her mourning,  
and I await her dawn in this night.







words

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