

# Element of Surprise

by Mengyang Zeng

*When I was assigned to write a “covid diary” in mid-April, I knew people had an expectation of what they would find in such a thing—victims and their lives: friends on a screen, sleepless nights, anxious parents, bills, gloves, groceries, etc. These are the things that I would write about if I were someone who was suddenly dragged out of their daily lives by the pandemic, only I wasn’t. I came to America from China in late January—I experienced that once, already. When the virus had its outbreak in New York, I was numb to seeing people doing the same thing that my parents and friends did three months ago. It was like seeing your neighbor screaming because their kitchen is on fire while your own house had already burnt down years ago. This means I couldn’t write about victims. “Victim” is a very fresh word—their wounds are still fresh, dripping blood. I am mummified.*

*I had to write about something else. I wanted to write about those who are “not victims.” By that I mean I wanted to write about the ones who made memes out of Covid in January, or the guy who spit at my Asian friend for wearing a face mask. You get the idea.*

*But as the writing progressed, I realized those people are also victims—they are also struggling to get their lives going. (I am slightly happy about that. Can’t lie.) The ones who cause pain also experience pain. Ultimately, we are the same person. I came to realize that the ones who needed to be written about are not the victims or the non-victims, but the humans. People are human despite how fresh their wounds are or whether they are wounded at all. A cake is still a cake, in whatever way it is sliced. It is easy to forget that.*

*At one point the celebrities all gathered and sang John Lennon’s Imagine: “Imagine all the people . . . living for today . . .” but I don’t think people need to be imagined. People exist. We just need to remember that. And I wanted to write something as a reminder. The writing felt the most sincere when doing this. This essay is not the best in the world, not even the best on this street, but if anything makes it slightly valuable, it’s this sincerity.*

—Mengyang Zeng

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Today is April 27th, 2020. I spend my day in a poorly ventilated bedroom. This place looks and smells like a hamster's cage. On days like this, I spend more time asleep than awake; there's no room for surprises in my reality. I go through the motions: I am not seeing, I am not listening, nor am I thinking. My life is a pre-recorded tape: I switch from dreaming to daydreaming, from side A to side B.

I'd like to tell you a story, one about loneliness, racism, isolation, politics, irony. I'd like to tell you about tragedies, only I can't. Those stories have been told by someone else.

February 13th was my birthday. I remember someone gave me a cake. I opened the box and the cake was shattered; they had dropped it. They thought it would be fine. It wasn't.

## 1

On January 19th, 2020 the first case of COVID-19 was found in Guangdong, the province I live in. At that time it was still just called "coronavirus." The patient was in Shenzhen, a city eighty miles from my home. I didn't know what that meant. A few days before that, the news had reported some new lung disease that had been discovered in Wuhan. I thought it was a scientific discovery, like "new species of rabbit found in Greenland."

I went out that day, as usual. School was about to start.

I was on the subway and I thought, "Braised noodles! Braised noodles!" I was going out to eat braised noodles. Some people in the subway wore face masks, but in China, people wear face masks all the time. The television in the station was broadcasting something about the new disease, so I pictured a new species of rabbit: big, fuzzy, blue, squatting on the barren plain of Greenland.

While I was eating my braised noodles my mom called me. She said I should avoid crowded places and if possible, come home, because it would be hard for me to get on the plane back to school if I got sick. I said okay, I was just out to eat braised noodles anyway.

## 2

On January 22nd, my mom said that I should probably wear a face mask on the plane, because the government suggested it. We couldn't find a face mask in the house. At last we found a tiny one on the bottom of a drawer. It was meant for babies: it didn't even cover my face. I thought it was funny and I posted a selfie of me wearing it. Someone in the comment section was worried: "That thing is not going to work."

I secretly threw the mask away before I got on the plane. I didn't like how it felt.

### 3

On January 27th, my mom asked me if I could buy some face masks in New York and mail them to my aunt, who is a doctor, because her hospital was running out.

### 4

On January 29th, my dad got a fever. On January 31st, my mom got a fever. They both tested negative. It was just the flu.

### 5

My google search history on January 31st: "conventional urn."

### 6

In an assignment for my writing class in early February I wrote: "The virus is here . . . It's not in New York, not yet, but it's here, in us, in the people, it's not in our bodies but it's in our mind, in the phone calls from home, in the conversations, in the news, it's in the blood. It's a knife hanging above our heads, it's here."

### 7

On February 6th, I sat at the front of a classroom. Everyone was asked to introduce themselves. The goal was to break the ice.

A boy stood up and told us he was from China. "But Not Wuhan!" he added. He was so proud. An expression emerged on his face, somewhere between that of an Olympic champion and a soldier.

Then he laughed. Then everyone laughed. Everyone—the teacher, the students, the TA. It was grandiose, a moment of celebration: no one in this room was from Wuhan. We reached a consensus: *We are not the ones dying, we are not the ones locked up; we dodged a bullet.*

Thus the ice was broken.

For days after that, I had a delusion that I was a character in a sitcom, the laughter from that moment floating around my head as if a laugh track had been merged with my life.

But apart from the laughter, there is another voice stuck in my brain, one from a video filmed in Wuhan. I watched it on the same day of that class—a middle-aged woman chasing after a hearse. “Mama!” She screamed, over and over, just as a toddler would.

I thought that woman was me. How am I not her?

How is anyone not from Wuhan?

But those people laughed. I wanted them dead. I don’t believe in a god, but every night before I slept, I prayed for *something* to happen. I wished upon the stars for Godzilla or alien invasions, for a giant flood to swallow the whole of Manhattan. I thought it was unfair. When Mount Vesuvius erupted, only the people in Pompeii were buried—others simply looked out their windows and were amazed by the unusual sight. For me, that thought is insufferable.

## 8

On March 1st, the news said someone in Westchester got the virus. I panicked and told my suitemates that we should go to Whole Foods and start hoarding things now. They looked at me like I was on drugs. But we still went to get groceries, because I insisted, really *insisted*. We had masks and gloves on. We ran into our RA in the elevator and he looked at us as if we were celebrating Halloween in the wrong month. We told him we thought we might be forced to quarantine in the near future. He tried hard to hold back whatever thought he had. He said, “No!”

Two weeks later he sent everyone an email about the dorm closing.

## 9

Cindy and I walked out of the library. She was wearing a face mask. I wasn’t, because I had been harassed so many times that I decided not to until the self-defense knife I ordered from Amazon was delivered. Cindy said when she walks, she walks with her head down so people don’t see her face and thus can’t tell if she’s Asian or not. I said, thanks for the tip.

It was a nice day, a sunny day—the flowers were blooming. Girls with nice legs were wearing skirts. Spring was in town.

We walked by Washington Square park. People were lying on the grass like vegetables. They grew so well on their land. Sun shined upon them while they kissed and hugged, their heads filled with a new species of rabbit in Greenland. I imagined the flood sweeping them away, as easy as putting on a sock.

Cindy tugged my sleeve and asked me to take another route. When she saw the crowds, she saw hives of the virus.

## 10

My roommate and I didn't get along. We were polite to each other, but under that thin ice of politeness lay a fiery pit of rage. I hated her. Her boyfriend smelled like a bloated dead whale. She had too much sex. Every night at 2:00 a.m., I had to bang on the door to sleep in my own room. She hated me too.

But she cried when I was leaving. We were standing in front of my parents' friend's car. They came to pick me up. I was ordered by my parents to go to Foxboro, MA, where things were less tense. It looked like a scene from a war movie.

She hugged me tightly, hurting my lungs. She said it broke her heart that I had to leave. She said she loved me and that I was the best roommate ever. She said she was sorry that she had been annoying. A single teardrop ran down her face.

So I hugged her back and I said, no, you are not annoying at all. I've never met anyone as good as you. I will miss you dearly.

On any other occasion those words would be nothing but lies, or worse, sarcasm, but in that moment, I was sincere. I forgave her so naturally. In the same second, I also forgave the others: the boy who was not from Wuhan, the hall manager, the sunbathers in the park, even the people who gave me reason to carry a knife around. I forgave them because they are humans. If I didn't forgive them, no one would.

I wished for a flood and the flood was delivered. Now I have to build an ark. . . .

## 11

I was told that my roommate celebrated my leaving. Movies have their bad sequels.

I thought of an egg. There are a series of curse words related to poultry in Chinese, but this had nothing to do with that. My mother says, "Fetch me some eggs from the fridge," and I do so reluctantly. Eggs. I am afraid of eggs. They are not light or heavy. I don't know what to do with them. Mother, should I hold them with my palm or with my fingers?

Hard. Fragile. Containers of what could have been lives. But those could-have-been-lives are like snot. Lives that are disgusting. Slippery things that could have been. . . .

Haruki Murakami said (please imagine a soft Japanese accent): “Between a high, solid wall and an egg that breaks against it, I will always stand on the side of the egg. . . . Each of us is, more or less, an egg. Each of us is a unique, irreplaceable soul enclosed in a fragile shell.”

Murakami discussed eggs in the context of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. I am also living amidst a war. At least, that’s what they say. A war, a war, a war. Funds, corpses, jobs, China, Trump, statistics, a war is going on, a war, pay, someone’s going to pay for this, someone’s going to pay, someone, someone, someone. . . .

Who?

I look into the fridge. Which egg shall we end tonight, mother?

What’s the difference? Me. Him. Her. Us. Them. . . .

I met with my class on Zoom. The boy that was not from Wuhan is still in New York. The boy, a son of a millionaire, bragged about his COVID-19 financial aid. No one reacted. His camera was not on.

My hands went through the screen, cupping his face, like Juliet to Romeo. His head is round. If you knock on his forehead with just the right amount of strength he might crack and die. But maybe he won’t—maybe instead, you’ll hear echoes of the liquid inside. Could’ve been snot, could’ve been blood, could’ve been his life. Oh, he is another egg! Don’t, don’t blame the eggs. . . . Given time, he might become something else. Oscar Wilde wrote to his lover Bosie: “The supreme vice is shallowness. Everything that is realised is right” (15). Maybe if we put him amidst the vegetables, under the sun, then he would grow along with the others. . . . Aren’t eggs a type of seed?

His egg-head in my egg-hands. I said, O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou human?

## 12

I dreamed about the PE classes I took at primary school.

I was the worst student in that class, always the slowest in track. I broke my knees a few times. Too many times.

I was afraid of running. My classmates decided to prank me—they would run leisurely behind me, on purpose, for the first half of the race, to make me think I miraculously outdid everyone. They offered me a false sense of happiness, one that they would break a few seconds later as they passed me one by one. Then they turned around to

enjoy my face: a face of anger, shame, and disappointment. I was scared of that. I would run so fast that I thought my knees would break, lying to myself that they wouldn't be able to catch up. They always did.

Soon I wasn't scared of being caught up to anymore—I learned that it was destined to happen. I feared what happened *before* that, where I ran with nothing and no one in front of me, panting, breathing heavily, sweating, feeling the ache from my knees, knowing that I was being chased and under attack, but unsure of when it would actually happen. The uncertainty hurt the most. . . .

The virus didn't catch me in China. It caught me in New York. It turned its face toward me—I imagined it to be yellow and round—and it said, “surprise!” but I wasn't.

I was not surprised.

## 13

April 27th. I want to eat braised noodles.

### Works Cited

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