



## Listening to Jay Chou on the Radio

Black road like black  
Ribbon, these badlands rasping

Like tongues under our tires.  
On the airplane from Beijing, I watched

A movie where a man plays the piano and places  
A Scotch at his feet, his features no less

Than a husk of muslin, a rash  
Of air, where the glow of the screen scratched

Red cloth against my eyes. Air drowning  
The empty passenger seat, where Ba

Lifted his suitcase and told me  
To grow taller when he came to America. I don't know

Where you are, Ba. When you will come home, either.  
In the silence of this car, the first time I see Mother

Cry, California screams below our bodies & paints  
the Atlantic opaque as caution tape & black

As nicotine and nitrate. Mother twists a knob  
And the radio flares into my air. This car filling

With sweet static, & then voice,  
My hands moving across the piano in a pale ripple —

Rain dripping on leaf-like umbrellas, the white stones  
Of bared teeth, laughing, flesh  
Of dragonfruit excised with spoon.

In the white-tiled elementary school, angled bodies  
Brush up against my desk & whisper,

As if I were a swimmer in the darkness, *rat-tat-tat*  
Like the rattle of a rope.

## Field Hunt for the Unknowable Self

Cornfields scream under waxwings. Skyfall  
& coin, burning. Grandmother, where is?where is?

—I shudder,

open my eyes like an infant,  
clutch your palm & skin.

The field is sun-white and crowded  
with poppies that bare their teeth at me. Here,  
a girl slipped on a rock and drowned in the river.

My father was born too late to know her.

The rest of my family cries remembering her:

*She was so young. She was eight.*

*She was kind, pretty, smart.*

I have heard that somewhere before. Is everybody  
the same type of kind? The field raises its hackles,  
the barley pressing in on the two of us. Does my hand feel like a moth  
when you brush it? *Look. In the distance, a water tower  
and a blank road sign.* As furnished and articulate  
as a movie set.

Your face stirs, a screen of sweet,  
empty milk. *Lovely, how lovely,  
touch your hair here &  
here.* When you pull me closer, I hear  
the black tide pounding from the inside of your neck,  
the drone of your unmoving mind.

\*

To a snarl of poppies, unfolding, and I return to 1969,  
rattling in a subway that is dark and warm like  
a mouth. A steel factory exploded in the countryside,  
trapped hundreds and hundreds under debris, & Grandmother  
takes her child and rushes underground,  
towards the capital, Beijing.

In rememory, she is only the collage  
that I make her, a crude Picasso sketch,  
a frozen reed wobbling on the edge of relief.

\*

When I tell you this, I am not really telling you  
*this* story, but *a* story, while you listen & rub  
circles on my wrist, whisper calming words

from an angle I cannot see.

Naturally, there are blind spots  
in the peripheral vision of self-proclaimed predators,  
including the shore between glass neck & body.  
Reddened poppies sit back on haunches &  
lick themselves, like us, eyeless but searching for a way  
to look at themselves.

## production notes on organic chemistry

*the observer effect in quantum theory states that observing the trajectory of an electron will alter its pathway. when it feels eyes fixed upon it, the electron decides whether to act as a wave or particle.*

molecular resonance occurs when one compound exists  
in multiple structures at once, vibrating  
forward & back        & back, &

who could cleave to one body  
when so many are soluble

to the touch? stashing stained glass in pocket,  
ready to lop off hair, we lurch toward the window & wink

at the acidic skateboards on the street  
without their riders, broad-chested & proud  
against the backdrop of  
apartments, buildings sagging sans light

of camera lens, & here stumbles mother into frame:  
    lips twinned to still-developing screen on  
    downstage sinks to the floor pleading  
    as wraith as creator as pain as  
    long as she is alive she loves  
    this reflection in my eye, large enough  
    to break every bottle & window  
    & mesh screen between her own audience & her  
    self where we both

wish we could film ourselves & watch it on replay

## **Vitruvian Man**

In Italy, I lie between two lovers  
who call me an offering. They search me

like they'd search a lamb's belly for  
the empty stone, an anti-cornucopia

which weighs four pounds and sweats intimacy.  
So I become a socket. It's cold outside

when they open me up, blind if not  
for the lens of my skin. I become the mouth

where mouth-to-cave resuscitation buds  
stone in a belly.                      How didn't

I know this, watching either one  
lie flat and fill the wingspan

of an eagle.

## Sleepswim

*After Aldous Huxley*

Around this time, Yvonne X starts to slip. I'm not complaining. She's gaudy and unoriginal, and I've had enough of her. (She wears knock-off necklaces for their thrifty aesthetic, even though her 40 minutes on the Stream probably earned her enough to buy a dozen houses. She even smokes her pixie dust like another rapper from Hour 4 — looping the crumbly shoestrings into an infinity symbol. Tacky. Copying's just about the cheapest way to go.)

Still, I take meticulous notes on her and graph the curve of her Stream engagement data. She rose fast: 27 seconds on the up-and-coming, and then straight to the upper echelons of the Stream. That's passing the three-billion-threshold in 27 seconds. You do the math. The public liked it.

On her current livestream, where she and her boyfriend are smoking in a recording studio, her viewer count ticks down six thousand.

To be honest, I'm relieved to be done monitoring her. I leave her page to find someone more relevant.

### 5:31

While I let the week's up-and-coming videos babble away on my wall projection, I sift through queries in my inbox. The most recent ones include a violinist who started a foundation for other violinists, a radical feminist, and a slew of indie dessert stores with ice cream rolled into physics-defying styles.

The violinist gets deleted. The public only cares so much at a time, and there is already a community service kid right now. Then I delete the ones about food and the ones about workout products. To successfully weed out submissions, you have to realize that the Stream has no room for excess.

While scrolling through, I pause on the email of a graffiti artist. Her art samples are good: bright, galactic spreads of spray paint on walls. Her sample video is good: a skinny, freckled Chinese girl saying how she wants to destigmatize street art, how it's her form of expression, and explaining the hierarchy behind the graffiti community.

The pF—phenomenon factor—is high enough; I find the information about the community fresh, which means the public would too. It's worth looking into. I can gamble on something like this.

I call her, wait for the fuzzy static of the line connecting. It comes. “Renaissance Consulting speaking. Is this”—I pause, glance down at the name of the sender—“Elliot Zhang?”

“Yes.”

“Ms. Zhang, I believe your Stream profile has potential.” And on, and on. “Would you be available for a quick interview so we can determine whether you're a suitable client for our services?”

**5:34**

“I'm Elliot,” she says, “as you most likely already know.”

“Right,” I say, shaking her hand. “Theodore Newark, from Renaissance. It's nice to meet you.” I can feel callouses on her fingers, maybe from pressing on the sharp ridges of nozzles.



It took me three minutes to get to Lower Alta when it should've been two and a half. There was a pedant-rights protest in the Tick station, and my bag was jostled off my shoulder, costing me the 5:32:30 ride. I'm late — and to our first meeting. Embarrassing.

I apologize, and she tells me she doesn't mind, she understands. We sit down, and I flick on my recording device. "Let's start off with stating your name and background."

"I'm Elliot. I'm a graffiti artist. I like re-defining art and the way it works. There's a common misconception about street art, how it's for delinquents," she says, softly.

In-format answer. "What's your favorite subject matter to depict, and why?"

"The resilience of humanity."

She'll have to go deeper than that.

It must have shown on my face, because she begins adding more details. The graffiti community. Living in Lower Alta itself, the stigma surrounding it.

"That's good, thank you," I say. Elliot bites her lip. "Can you show me some more of your art samples and talk me through them?"

She pushes her tongue into her cheek, now. She's going to need to slim down her repertoire of idiosyncrasies — she *just* bit her lip. "Sure. I have photos of them. I'll go grab them." She disappears into her room.

**5:36**

While waiting at the table, I hear Lina Trostyukov's distinctive voice bobbing from somewhere in the house. I follow it, peer through the narrow slit of a doorway.

A short woman is watching the window-television above the sink, rhythmically applying layers of jelly to bread. She's compact, hardened, like Elliot, her hair coarse grey wires.

"...*What? Too scared to kiss me?*" taunts Lina on the window-television screen, her hair whipping around her latex mask.

Lina is a classic actress, like the ones that adults laugh about over wine and poker, from two days ago. In this movie, she acts a superhero who's fallen in love with the villain. But this particular story is original, because one of them isn't white, and the background visuals are better than its predecessor's.

Elliot's mother relaxes under the leathery hum of Lina's voice. I relax, too.

I've worked on movie sets before; I know the real reason Lina sounds so good is because of audio-smoothing technology that manipulates her sound waves to release serotonin in the audience. It makes your eyes half-lidded, your mind one-tracked.

A gutting scrape sounds. Elliot's mother bends down, tries to pick up the knife she dropped. Her fingers sag and scrabble against it.

Awkwardly, using only the muscles in her palms, she scoops white pills from her pocket and downs them. Some slip through and clatter to the ground.

Pill bottles are a trademark of self-prescription, which means she knows what disease she has. The public would consider her a pedant. She's part of the old generation who attended physical school and worked to become an in-person human doctor. Now the Azalea Education Code allots every child over the age of 12 one (1) rudimentary EdUSB to be inserted into the surgically-fitted mesh in the nape of the neck. I wonder which route Elliot's mother chose for her daughter.

In a few moments, Elliot's mother is able to spread her fingers. She reaches into a cabinet and carefully re-stocks her pockets.

Then she returns to her work, sliding the knife back into the thick black jelly, Lina still crooning above her. I feel invasive. I look away.

## 5:41

When Elliot returns with a fistful of low-res photos, I look for the flash of metal in the skin underneath her ponytail, of her EdUSB port. It's there.

While I look at her art samples, just to fill the time, my phone pings with an approval message from the aesthetics department, which determines whether someone's objectively beautiful enough to make it on the Stream. It's a 92% match to previous Chinese Stream entrants.

I set the photos down. "I just have a few more questions for you, and then we'll be good to go."

"Ask away."

I can't tell if her earnestness was part of her act, or if it was really her. Though there isn't much of a difference between the two nowadays. "What are your biggest challenges?" I ask.

"Family," answers Elliot. "My mother's a pedant, my father's janitorial staff. Low income."

"Pedant mother," I say, as if surprised. "Really. How might you respond to those who question whether or not you've been influenced by the often elitist worldview of the pedant class?"

“I haven’t.” She pauses and fixes what she thinks is her mistake, watching my face. “I love my mother, but I am my own person. I’m heavily influenced her in all other aspects, but I am someone who forms her own life philosophies.”

She draws a breath, ready to continue, gauging my reaction, my silence.

“That’ll be enough,” I say. “Thank you for your time.”

Elliot sits back. She makes her nervousness show. “Really? Have you made your decision already?”

“No.”

She pauses. “When will I be notified of your decision, then?”

“In—thirty seconds.”

Closes her mouth, still staring.

If she was plunged into the shallow, faceless waters of the Stream world right now, she would know what to say. Maybe blindly, like everyone else, a tadpole pushing against the soft slime of its membrane. Who knows. The possibility of the alternative is what makes me want to sign her.

I fish out a contract from my briefcase and slide it across the table to her.

**5:45**

There is a Japanese woman with marigolds coming out of her hairline. Our videography team examines the alley wall. Under the woman’s neck lies a fat slab of garbage.

Elliot re-sprays a her hair while the videographer jerks the camera up and down, shifting the focus in and out, while our actors hiss, swear, clink glass cans of beer. The edited video looks tastefully shitty. It's exactly what the public wants.

A few seconds after we upload it, Elliot's on the up-and-coming page. They like her badass, they like her graffiti flower punk, they like her pastel soft swan disadvantaged emo. Her mother also keels over that minute.

### **5:49**

Our agency's van drives Elliot and her unconscious mother to the hospital. When we get there, a flurry of white-clad nurses spirit Elliot's mother inside, trading medical diagnoses over the gurney. Her disease is acting up, and it isn't the first time, according to Elliot.

As the rest of my videography team turns to drive back home, I stay. Elliot and I walk to the waiting room. "How are you feeling?" I ask her.

"I could be better," she says.

"You really are something," I say.

"Yeah." She flashes a smile and then lets it slide off her face.

I calculate, briefly. I could touch her cheek right now. I could coldly storm out and let her chase after me. I could lay my hand over hers, like a tender, shy schoolboy. There are multiple ways I could carry on this cheap romantic subplot. It's how I'd test if she realized what we had all become.

### **5:52**

We spend too long in the hospital. Elliot had a real shot at getting on the Stream. I gambled right. It was the unexpected occasion of her mother's medical activity that cost us the time necessary.

In the waiting room, a girl comes up to Elliot and asks for her autograph. She'd seen Elliot on the up-and-coming. Elliot signs her notepad with a quick flourish and grins.

After the girl leaves, I tell Elliot she's going to drop.

"Why?" she says. "I thought I was doing well."

She's either still acting like she's in front of a camera or she's just naïve. "I'm sorry, Elliot. It's the Stream."

She sighs like she's trying to fit as much air into her mouth at once. "Damn. I wanted to get my family a better house."

I wince. Public cameras in the corners of the rooms are still swiveled towards the two of us, but I know they're trained on me, not her.

**5:55**

I do it then, as we're standing by the hospital's sole vending machine. She bends down and grabs the bag of chips she bought. She's talking about how she knows her mother will make it through.

When she stands up, I kiss her. Elliot steps back, and she looks like she actually believed it, and that's how I know it didn't work.

I knew you would do this, you're the Stream consulting agent who makes a move on all the girls, she says, you're in the tabloids every day, how could you betray me like this. (and on, and on.)

A stiff crinkle of aluminum bag in her palm. She is flustered and convinced that I like her.

She thinks: rich Stream consultant boy in love with his poor girl client. This story is original, though, because one of us is not white.

"I can't do this, Theodore," she says. My mind's already running permutations of the possible things she'd say, the selections from the script that we follow.

I consider telling her but decide against it. It would be cruel. While driving home, I masochistically flick my radio station to the Stream.

**6:00**

They try to make the Hourly flush subtle. Now the radio blasts about the breakup of the Jyrion family and Lina Trostyukov's old costar, Dimitri. The pixie-addict rapper from last Hour has been replaced by a Korean immigrant named Hanla, giving commentary about the *notes of aged Orwellian alcohol* in some slab of meat. Then a Lower Altan political scandal, and then Theodore Newark *lost* and *doesn't know his role in the grand scheme of things*. That's fair. I have to give them that. The real meat of the Stream is the visuals, which are programmed to be projected ahead of me in the windshield. Looking at them makes me sick, but it's my job.

My tears, embryonically stubborn, don't want to be straightforward. Elliot is texting me, maybe trying to give me a second chance.

The car lurches to a stop. I get out, never wonder where the car came from, and stare at my office building, trying to recall where exactly the entrance is.

The ambiguity is one of the pitfalls of Upper Altan architecture. All of these pixie steel buildings roll and curve, one single optical illusion that makes you feel like you're always moving so fast, all the time. Really, you're probably just kicking in your sleep.