

Red Nation Weekly

Collection IV by Xiaowu Zheng

Monday, June 5, 1989

頭七 The First Seven



頭七，通常是指在人往生的 7 天，親友們必需為親人往者超度，以助亡者累積福報。

"The First Seven" refers to performing the rituals 7 days after the deceased passed away. In this period, relatives must procure salvation for the deceased, to help them to accumulate blessings.

1 I can almost taste the ocean water in my mouth. But I can't seem to remember when was the last time I've been to the ocean and why. All I could see are the blurry figures in my dream. Some voices too, I can feel the vibration from those white noises that are hovering above my head. There were shouting and screaming as well, but the sounds are all subdued, as if there are filters between my eardrums and the outside world. Do I know these people or are they strangers? The texture of their voices are so familiar to me but I still can't seem to put the pieces together.

A soft whisper then stands out from all the chaotic noises. So gentle, so beautiful, but fragile, like a soap bubble about to break under the warm sunlight: "You are going to be alright..." He says.

Slowly, I open my eyelets. The ocean and figures are gone, all that has remain is me playing dead in my off white linen bedsheets. I tend to stare at those old school embroidered running horse pattern on my beep brown canvas covered headboard for a while before I fall asleep when I was a child. To the others this might be just an antique Victorian style king size bed, but I vividly remember how many times I slept here alone in the dark while my father came home drunk every single night. As a boy who couldn't feel anything, I imagined myself to be running free with the horses, heading nowhere in particular. Just keep racing in the dark forest until I'm out of breath sounded good enough for me, better than where I was.

So that's sort of what I did. When I was 16, I left the RN (the Red Nation) for oversea education on Painting, thought that would be my forever farewell to the RN. However, forever came too soon. 7 years later, a red envelope came into my mailbox, what it follows was a traditional Red funeral back home to the RN. Alcoholism killed someone I barely know, but I guess sometimes blood is thicker than alcohol itself.

Ocean water is not the residue in mouth, it tastes more like an overnight cigarette smoke. The worn out wooden floor creaks with excitement, as I drag myself to the white oak study table in my room. Correction, this entire two floor penthouse apartment is actually my "room" now, yet I don't want any piece of it. Nowadays, people call this privileged arrogance, my therapist and I would like to call it clinical depression.

Dear friends:

I hate to break to you, but if you are reading this letter that means I'm probably gone.

I don't really know what to say but simply the fact that I'm not happy.

In Red culture, there is this phenomenon I observed: All a man's sins and flaws are so easily to be forgotten by people after death, all there is left are his memories enshrined in a halo of glory. And I can't wait to step into that glory, maybe that will stop all these rumors surrounding me and my work.

If not, tell me what's left here to lose. Please use my freshly dead body to vent your anger and express your hopes, however you would like.

Best,

What's next are two simple steps: Sign the signature and bottom up that seemingly excessive sleeping pills.

"Live fast, die young", that how the young hippies in the western country like to say isn't it?

I can see those tiny dust particles floating in the air through the ray of bright sunlight that penetrated the long rectangle rusty metal frame window behind my back. I swore I will never become

like my father, a loser swallowed by his own misery. Ironically, the lines are getting blurry, I'm scared of my own reflection, the resemblance.

A series of loud door banging noise broke the silence and urges me to stop. All I know is

whoever the person might be is not my friends, not after what I did two weeks ago.

2

Windows are usually closed shut here in my apartment, because the wind can get ruthless from time to time on the 29th floor and my limbs are so easy to get cold. The laughter of elementary school kids and ringing of school bell sneaking into the living room from the half open balcony slide door as if they are mixtures in the soft morning breeze, I think I forgot to close it last night after I finished my bedtime cigarette. My knees bumped on the short oriental style walnut color coffee table in the middle of the living room when I was rushing towards the front door. What a lousy morning.

The medium build man who looks few years older than me on the other side of my door is looking rather nervous through my peek into the peephole. Though the red pin is still highly visible on the left side of his wrinkled short sleeve white button down shirt form this distance. Swiftly, I unlocked the safety door then the main door, just want to get this over with.

"Hey, I know you are from the student liberation group. I already apologized enough time for my action, so why don't you get the fuck out and tell whoever sent you to stop harassing..."

Before I could finish my sentence, he interrupts me with his raspy voice, catching out of breath.

"They are after me! The Red officials! You have to let me in, please!" His pupils are dark as the raining midnight sky, being framed in those long shape orbits. Right now, the expression of them are letting me know he is extremely serious.

"Alright, quickly come inside!"

As I heard the crispy ringing from the opening elevator, I shut the doors immediately, quite and smooth.

Silence never felt so loud. While he is gasping for the breathable air that has left in my tobacco smelled apartment doorway, I'm focusing on even the slightest movement on the building hallway behind my door. The footsteps and middle age male rambling voices are getting closer each time the man in front of me takes a deep breath. Almost, I could sense his heartbeat, chaotically jumping in his chest just like a ticking time bomb about to burst, or I'm still just a bit hangover.

Few minutes later, the elevator sound appears again then gradually fades away like my failed suicide attempt. Before I gathered my thoughts together,

the man sends a comforting look at me and forces a smile, finally no longer panting.

"Sorry for dragging you into, I'm Feng, a local newspaper journalist..."

"... And a member of the Student Liberation Group, I assume." My turn of interruption and pointing towards that memorable small metal pin.

He looks down at those tattered canvas sneakers of his, ashamed maybe. No additional words needed because we both know some inevitable things went wrong out there, outside that imperial city.

"Why don't you kick those off and get yourself on that couch, I'll pour some water for you."

One glass of water, one glass of chilly white wine. We all need a little bit of fun to get us through the day don't we. He opened his shirt, standing in front of the balcony door, letting the wind caress his sun kissed skin and run through that short black curly hair. I hand over the water to him, then we both are standing still underneath the diffused mid noon sun, its' warmth shines through random white clouds and lands on my feet. A solemn school bell tolls peacefully across the clear sky, the children are taking their lunch break.

"They are going to send in Red army to the Square, I was about to tell the students that... But now I'm trapped here. There definitely will be more RN officials surrounding this neighborhood guarding every day and night since they know I'm around, there is no way I can leave your apartment in this week. And I'm sorry about that."

Let's go lay on the coach, I say, that's enough sun for today.

Feng looks at me again as we are sitting on two separate ends of the distressed chocolate brown leather coach, I think he expect me to say something. Some spots of his white tank top are still a little wet, the back of his shirt is even more obviously soaked with sweat. He sits cross legged, head slightly tilted back on the soft leather. He looked taller than me when I first saw him by the door, not so much when he is sitting down like this. He seems a bit tired, probably from the cat and mouse game he just been through. I have both of my legs bend on the couch, back against the couch arm.

"I tried to kill myself this morning before you started banging on my door like a maniac, so I don't really care how long you want to stay. In fact, it's a congratulation! You can stay here as long as you want as long as I'm dead. So if you are not going to kill me, I think it's best for me to get back to my room and get the party started." I got off the couch, trying to walk back to my unfinished plan.

Meantime, Feng holds up a piece of folded torn out paper from his jeans back pocket. Hesitation kicks in my head first, then came clarity. Simultaneously, he stands up and blocks the way to my room.

"I'm not going to tell you not to kill yourself because that's your freedom of choice. You choose to end your life? Great! I have no problem with that. However, there are thousands and thousands of people on the Square right now, right in this moment, doing a protest for liberation without knowing what's going to happen to them. So don't you fucking die on me, because there will be more death happening in 7 days, because that's around the time when the army will get there. I'm a journalist, and there is no way

I can report that many deaths in only one week, please don't add on to my already extremely heavy workload." There he is, shredding my letter of last words into pieces of snowflakes.

"When did you take it?" Not much anger in me, more of a question out of curiosity and confusion.

"I saw it on the table in your room when I was on my way to your bathroom, it's not my fault that your bathroom is in your room and your room door is wide open. I flushed all your sleeping pills so don't even think about it, boy."

He walks past me, throws all the paper pieces into the small garbage bin by the coffee table, not smiling, but the proud expression on his face means he knows he has won the last argument. I decide to retrieve back to my corner on the couch, like a child whose parents just told him the Disney trip was canceled.

"Fair enough, you've won this. After all, the army is going to be in the Square murdering protesting students and workers in 7 days. But like you said and also from my personal experience, yes, there is no way you can leave my apartment safely within a week. So I guess for you to temporarily save one person's meaningless life is better than none." I swallow my cup of white wine in one gulp, not caring if my eye contact to him is too aggressive, he provoked me first nonetheless.

He sits back down on the other side of the couch again, head down, both elbows land on his open legs.

"I think you are pretty cool actually. I mean, a young painter who appears out of nowhere, pissed off the Red Nation Government and the Student Liberation Group at the same time,

simply by spilling buckets of paint on the founding father's portrait in the Square. Isn't that fascinating?" He smiles at me, puts his head down soon after as if nothing happened.

The stillness in the air was like the stillness in the room. Until he spotted the piles of newspapers that I stupidly bought, the ones hidden under the coffee table. I thought if I could buy as much newspaper as possible, less people will know about this. Apparently, I also happened to be foolishly drunk during that day.

"Do you know the guy who took your photo is my colleague? he told me you were a Student Liberator too, but you quit the group before you flew away 7 years ago. Why? You thought you can escape the RN forever? Because right now you are kind of that guy who is hanging on the edge of the cliff. RN and the group are both on two separate ends of that cliff but no one is going to save you on this. Again, you choose to stay in the Nation during this very special time even after the incident blew up. Why?" Feng's questions are like bullets, too strong for me to catch, too fast for me to dodge. At least he is taking enjoyment out of this, someone is happy in this burning hell hole.

"Fuck off. I don't remember ever inviting you to my press conference, so go do whatever you like. Drinking, smoking, or you taking a shower. My dead father's room and bathroom on the second floor are all yours, for now. Please don't bother me for the rest of the day."

I got off the couch despite the heated conversation, takes my cigarettes and wine bottle off the coffee table, consciously avoiding bumping into it. Speeding towards the empty bedroom that I turned into my painting studio, on

the first floor right by the living room. Nevertheless, I give Feng one last look before I slams the beige wooden door shut, signal him to go to his second floor and leave me alone.

3

Not everybody takes pleasure in painting, especially oil painting. Unlike acrylic, oil takes days or weeks to dry down and the supplies are more expensive. Fortunately, I have always been a slow painter from the start, deliberate and cautious. My oil paintings will outlive my weak human shell for hundreds and thousands of years, if they are not going to be destroyed by the Red Nation for their distinct political viewpoint of mine. And I love that idea, how my existence will be transformed into something else, soon take off on exciting adventures that me, merely a human being will never be able to imagine.

The aroma of oil paint is the most addictive drug to me than anything I've ever tried. It could take me to anywhere my heart desires. I can feel the ocean weaves racking me like a baby in cradle. Where am I going? One bell rang, the kids were getting off school. One bell rang, the kids were going to sleep. One bell ringing, the kids are starting their morning reading. I don't smell ocean nor the painted canvas, so I start pressing my fingers against the surface.

Touches like soft linin fabric and the warm morning sun. But wasn't I working on the ocean painting that has been reoccurring in my dreams? I tilt my body so it's facing upwards, rubbing my face with both of my hands until sobriety cut in. My eyes are a bit swollen, probably got it from drinking. Is it May 29th or 30th? Guess it's not that important.

Rolling is the how I'm getting off my bed. Without even opening my eyes, I expertly got myself landed by the bedpost. There it is, the first thing jumps into my eyes is that piece of torn out letter. The will I wrote yesterday is quietly laying on that study table, intact and unsigned.

I forcefully grab that piece of paper on my right hand, as though I'm afraid of someone might take it from me. In full speed, I'm making my way to the second floor to keep my sanity in check.

Walls could talk through their outlook, the color of the white walls here are uneven and rough just like everything else in this apartment. If the walls here could observe the stories in this place, then they certainly have seen too much and should crumble down to nothing but ruins already. They would set themselves on fire.

Light brown oak stairs that goes up to the second floor is on the right side of the kitchen, black steel bars intertwined with each other, support the round spiral wooden stair rail. The stairway and the short hallway on the second floor are usually covered in shadow, because the natural light from the first floor balcony can only reach to the decorative medium height wood plank behind the couch, a small boarder between the living room and the kitchen.

"Feng!" I shout out his name as I'm walking up the stairs.

On the left side of the short hallway, Feng opens his door fully dressed in his stander attire, tank top, unbuttoned

white shirt, small Student Liberation pin and faded straight leg blue jeans. The white cotton fabric loosely drops on his shoulder, seems too big for him.

"Good morning. I borrowed your dad's shirt if you don't mind since mine was soaked. Why look so grumpy?" He grins at me lightheartedly; two dimples emerge on his cheeks.

I hand over the letter to him, give him a concerning look.

"Didn't you torn up my will yesterday?"

Feng's face went blank for a few seconds; he puts the letter into his back pockets then puts his right index finger in between his lips. Before I can say anything, he grabs me by the wrist, drags me into his room and shuts the door. He is somewhat looking down at me, griping my wrist so tight, I thought he probably could easily strangle me with only one arm.

The long rectangular window sits right across the room door, bright sunlight shines through behind my back, rests on Feng's face, like an overexposed film picture. The red bed set was a gift to my parents by my late grandmother for their marriage, it symbolizes fruitfulness and happiness. My father kept them even after my mother remarried, and I felt the obligation to do the same. But I did take down the dusted frame family photo on the left wall, a block of cleaner wall paint is a dead giveaway to where the photo once was. Didn't feel the necessity of keeping it, it was never mine to keep anyway.

He moves his left hand to my right shoulder, pulls me closer to him, softly whisper in my ear: "You think you know where we are but that's not the case anymore. If you don't believe me, look at all the mirrors in your apartment and you will know what I'm talking about. They are monitoring our every move through that thing, so the best move for us right now is to act like you and I know nothing about this."

Carefully, Feng opens a tiny crake of the closet door with his right hand. I see it now. That's not a dressing room mirror on the back of that door, it resembles like a normal mirror but not the reflection, there is nothing in there. I close it up after I realized all the mirrors in my apartment are now monitoring devices for whoever is behind the other side of this show.

"Ok, so there are some sick fucks who are watching us through the mirrors they replaced in my apartment without me every notice, and my will magically reappeared like nothing happened, and I remember I was drawing in the other room yesterday but somehow I woke up in my bed this morning. What's going on, Feng? How do you know about the mirrors? Are you taking part in any of this?"

His hands are rougher than mine, controls my arms so I won't be able to rush out of this room all of a sudden. The shadows on his cheekbones look even more prominent when half of his face is under the contrast of the sunlight that's sinking in.

"Well... I did move you to your bed last night, because I thought you would feel more comfortable being passed out drunk in your own bed. Nice ocean painting by the way. The will was never gone, in this place things are never gone like what I said, and I cannot tell you where we are since that going to break the rules. You are not in Red Nation anymore, and I know this place looks like your apartment but it's not. In fact, I know all the answers

but unfortunately, I can't tell you all at once."

Pacing towards the end of the bed with me and sits me down as he speaks. There are sincerity in those eyes that I believe I can trust. Rationalists will say it's stupid to believe a stranger purely base on instinct, but I will say I never listened to that advice.

The red bed sheet still feels silky and alive after all these years of terror. One hand on the bed, Feng moves his left hand behind my back, like I'm a wounded rabbit waiting for his comfort, and he is fishing me with a carrot that's too essential for me to not run for. He continues on speaking.

"You know how people say if someone is sleepwalking, you can't wake them up right away. You need to wake them up extra patient and very gradual. Otherwise their soul wouldn't be able to return to their body in time. All you will get is a shell, a shell that looks like that person, sounds like that person, but there is no one in there. And that is how much I can tell you so far.If we don't act normal after we leave this room, we are going to be facing bigger trouble than being dead."

What's worse than death? My mind wonders. When the founding father lost control of the revolution he started that might be worse than death, how it turned into a war of all against all. Before the Red Nation leaders moved to the imperial city, they had lived with the peasants. That's what they called fish cannot live without water. Now the water could no longer find the fish during the drought, painfully drying up without a sound.

There is a glimpse of familiarity in Feng's face that I sensed, that desire of salvation, like there is still a dim spark at the end of that perilous abyss of unknown. His passion towards saving the nation through democracy and modern science turns into the wanting of becoming a savior to my hopeless future.

"There is no choice, you have to trust me on this, I will never hurt you, I promise." His quiet voice sounds so delicate, like a floating soap bubble about to breakdown.

Pretending is what I excel at, the quick fix to every problems. It's impossible to see the woods for the trees if people refuse to step outside of this forest in their brains. Things that are left unsaid to my father, the forbidden words that remains uncovered on his death bed. I can't force people to see the truth if they are not willing to explore the possibilities. What's the difference between that and what's happening now?

"Fine, Whatever. If we really are not in the RN and this is not my apartment, then I'll still be in 'my room' painting, if anything you know where to find me."

Feng calmly walks behind me as we are heading down to the first floor. No talking, there is only the sound of creaking wood floor and children's laughter lingering in the air.

The white wine I drank yesterday is now sealed and filled, standing on the kitchen tabletop waiting to water my thirst. Part of the dates on the oil stained cream white calendar hanging on the kitchen wall is circled out with red ink. May 29th to June 4th. And both dates on May 29th and 30th are crossed out in red.

4

My now called painting room at first was my nanny's bedroom, she started taking care of me when I was 3 years old, the same year when my parents got divorced. Sadly she passed away in this room the year I went to middle school. Soon, it became an empty guest room, collecting dust over the years.

Nanny couldn't read very well, as a women, she was seen as second class citizen in the RN back when she was a girl. Her family could only afford one child's tuition money, and it went to her brother. She was never bitter about it though, because she was allowed to follow her brother to school every Monday morning to see the weekly flag-raising ceremony. That to her was the most mesmerizing event in that tiny rural town.

I remember she used to sit on this red wooden chair that I'm sitting right now, practiced reading newspapers every Monday morning. Whenever she flips a page, a creaky noise would emanate from one of those chair legs. After she finishes reading, she usually would place them nicely on the table. If she thinks the news is too disturbing or inappropriate for me to see, she would place that paper under the back of her chair.The chair is the only furniture I kept in this room, it gives me company when I'm in self-isolation in this place.

Why there were those white noises hovering above my head by the ocean? Where was the vibration coming from? I have been repainting the unknown object in the sky over and over again. Tried it with a spaceship this time because I thought the dream might be related to alien abduction. Especially with all the strange things that's been happening after Feng came along. It wouldn't be surprising if that dream was an erased memory prior to me being taken by aliens and all of this is a high tech simulation for their research on human behavior.

As I'm bending down try to grab my painting knife that's laying on the paint covered floor, the chair creaks again. A piece of crumped yellow newspaper drop on the floor from the back of the chair, shaken down by my sudden movement.

The paper feels dry but it seems to be soak in water once before. The inks are defused to the point of unreadable, however, the headline is somewhat visible: Red Nation Weekly, June 5th, Firing Convoys Roam the Capital Square.

Now it's after midnight, which makes the newspaper to be 5 days later than today.

"Hey, want to go grab a cigarette with me on your balcony?" Feng knocks on my door and opens it before I could answer.

"Okay." I put the paper on my chair then step out of my painting room after a long day of fixation on those unclear mysteries in my ocean dream.

Me and Feng are standing by the half circle shaped indoor balcony, the superficial economic prosperity unfolds in the form of endless city lights before our eyes though the gaps of those iron bars on the other side of the window, echoes with the brilliance of the lonely stars in the moonless night sky. Hard to believe our freedom of speech is actually in danger under this beautiful façade, or maybe the beauty made it harder for people to notice the man who should drop dead are still alive, yet the man who should be alive is dead.

“You were in my dream.” I let out the last bit of the smoke in my mouth, under this dim moonlight, it does feel like a dream to me.

5

"Isn't bleeding what we want to see? When the government starts to turn their butcher knife again the civilian, and when the Square turns into a river of innocent blood. That's the last dying moment, when the entire Red Nation people can truly awake from this long hibernation, and truly be united." I still have that piece of newspaper in my back pocket from yesterday, the words we couldn't get out in time. There is no way to appease the crowd now.

I can almost taste the ocean water in my mouth.

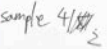
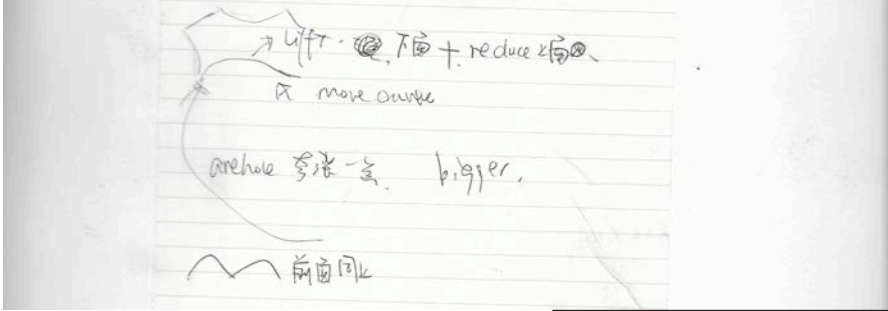
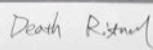
6

Feng doesn't care is any of this is worth the struggle, even in the

netherworld he remains an atheist.

I jumped, diving deeper into the water, until I can breathe again.

- END -



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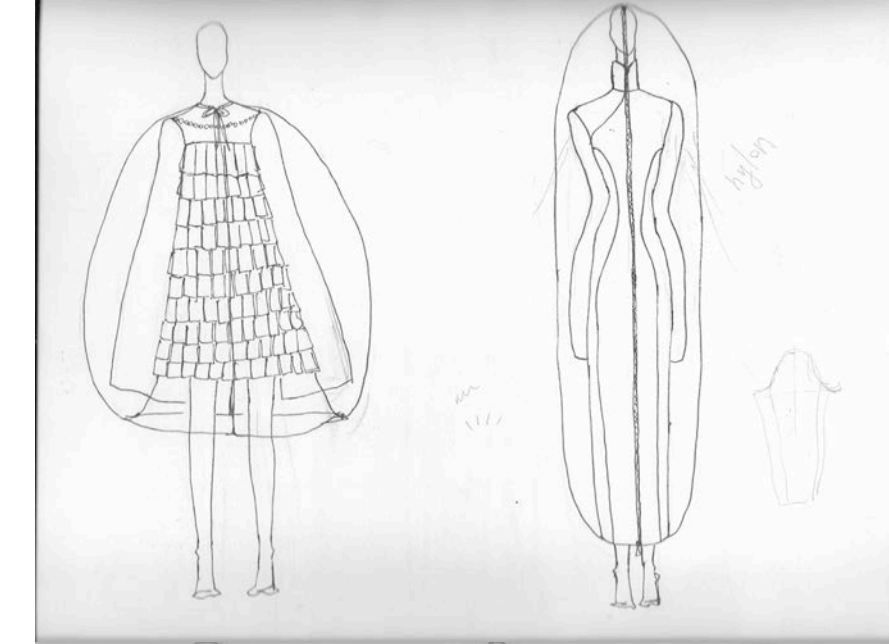
Process Journal

灵魂与肉体的分离性
The detachability of the body & the soul
(then on different layers of soul)
multiple.
Hair - power
Craftsmanship - Sorcery "I" = the remain (the body)
Pain - a deep cleansing process
半隔 (Bard): the intermediate existence between death & re-birth



Process Journal

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Comment 3:
Beautiful garment, maybe
wavy along the side, make a textile or use a different fabric
if separate, need two patterns.
[make in real fabric]

Comment 4:
Two pieces together might be too much.
Think about re-styling later.
add some elegant moment.

1768:
(China which burnt)
Soul stealer: burn a piece of yellow
paper in front of each temple to file on
indictment to earth god. Some women
write the name of the living person on
a piece of paper and stick it on top of the
wood pile.
separation of the soul & the body

outer layer - body } the relationship of
inner layer - soul } the body & soul
紙錢 (paper money)
紙人
紙衣
pearl - universe (Buddism)

Qing/Tiananmen - silhouette, inspo
HK horror movie - color/mood.
peak of freedom
They are ~~back~~ coming back, it's the First Seven.
You killed their bodies, not the Souls.





