

STEALING TIME

1981 光陰賊

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The doors of life seem to be closing for the protagonist of this story and for his lover. He is a high school senior on the verge of taking his college entrance exams and constantly feeling pressure from his parents to study abroad. She is a literary editor, a lover of poetry and fiction who acceded to her sick mother's demands that she lead a "happy" life by marrying a doctor and moving to America. Both wish desperately to escape realities they had no hand in choosing; both seem to see each other as their only way out. Meanwhile, the external pressures bent on driving them apart only strengthen their resistance, driving the situation to a point at which something has to break.

Author, historian, and public intellectual Yang Zhao employs a highly rhythmic, fluid prose in this narrative of secret passions and public repression, in which time and space themselves are a palpable medium, a conduit for emotion. Readers who open the book will assuredly fall headlong after the main characters, who are at best controlling their descent through the chasms of the heart.

Yang Zhao 楊照

Originally trained as a historian, Harvard-educated author Yang Zhao ended up at the editorial helm of news publications like Taiwan's *Tomorrow Times* and *The Journalist*. Now a popular host on classical music radio, he has lectured and appeared as a commentator on stages all over the island, all the while penning stories, essays, criticism, and guides to classical texts.



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By Yang Zhao

Translated by Michael Day

Time

M spent all Saturday afternoon and Sunday afternoon at my house – with me, in my room, in my bed.

Time seemed to have bent, to no longer follow its smooth, regular course. Time branched into different paths, with different densities and rhythms. The thickest, stickiest times were times of desire, in which our bodies entangled, and with each low, frenzied call she seemed to drift further into trance, as if floating toward the mouth of a whirlpool; she held me tight to avoid being sucked in, to avoid this whirlpool from which there might be no escape, and I too embraced her with all my might. But this embrace stirred in me an even stronger impulse to explore her body, repeatedly and patiently probing her in every way I knew, pushing her ever deeper into trance, spurring her on into peril, toward that whirlpool that might swallow her forever, and she could only hold onto me tighter, tighter with vanishing hope.

We spun ourselves into a swirling whirlpool of time. I knew time had passed, and when I lifted my head I saw the room with its drawn curtains growing ever darker, but time had weight, swirling heavily around us, the seconds and moments densely packed, so that time seemed to form not into seconds, but into dense lumps.

I took off my watch and placed it on the nightstand, and glanced at it periodically as we intertwined amid the shifting currents. Of course I was too busy to reach out and grab the watch to check the time, but I felt that if I did I would see that the hands no longer moved, that the second, minute, and hour hands were frozen in place – not stopped, but frozen, their movements restrained by some overwhelming, oppressive force that froze time, held it back for just an instant; and then in another instant the force slackened, and the second, minute, and hour hands abruptly turned many revolutions, jumping madly forward.

After a while, the tides of passion ebbed, and time's viscosity thinned. Time stretched out into long bands, but creases still marked its surface. After a while, a wave of drowsiness approached, and time grew flatter, turning gradually from a solid to a nearly two-dimensional plane, and we drifted on time like a translucent white sheet, nothing but a pure void beneath. Before this delicate sheet of time descended, I woke with a start, and turned to make sure she was still there beside me, my hand stroking her thick, curly hair, and passion rose again very rapidly, time again growing thick, beginning again to bend like a metal plate in a foundry furnace, like something neither solid nor liquid, flowing yet not flowing....

In ordinary time, she would speak to me. Or perhaps, when she could speak without gasping, without screaming and shouting, time was restored by her to its ordinary condition. When she spoke, she spoke nearly always of her family.

She spoke of her father. When her father was at home, by force of habit they closely watched his every move. When he rose from his seat, someone would invariably follow. They'd light the lamp in the hallway before him, then turn back and extinguish the one in the study. When he entered the bathroom, they'd close the door behind him. With his first step across the threshold of the dining room, they'd ask if he wanted dinner. If he nodded, one person would go to the kitchen to prepare the meal, and someone else would call the children to the table. From early morning to late evening, a kettle of hot water and a pot of soup were always on the stove, and two plates of food were kept ready in the cabinet, so that

whenever he felt a twinge of hunger, dinner could be on the table in no more than ten minutes. She recalled that her father rarely did anything on his own. In his study, when he wanted to take down a particularly heavy book, he'd simply clear his throat twice, and her mother or the maid knew to come ask what he needed. In the parlor stood a wooden shelf lined with record albums. Her father would stand before it, inspect it, pull out a record, and place it on the top edge of the wooden shelf, and whoever was in the parlor would know he wanted to play it. Once, her father picked up a record and set it down on the shelf, but when her mother came over, she put a different record on the turntable. Her father's eyes widened. As the record began to play, he furrowed his brow, staring at the tile floor at his feet; then, without saying anything, he got up and left. The next time, the moment her father took his seat, her mother took the very same record to the turntable. As the music began, her father straightened his back as if to rise, and gripped the armrests of the wicker chair with force; moments later, he gave up, and sank back down again. After several attempts, he finally rose to his feet, and for perhaps the only time ever, made his way to the turntable and lifted the needle – at which point the music abruptly stopped, leaving only her mother's sobbing to fill the parlor.

She remembered crying with her mother. She didn't know what had happened, but the atmosphere in the room scared her into crying. When her father rose from his seat, she was certain he was about to throw a fit, let loose a rage-filled rebuke that would shake the heavens, and she sobbed in anticipation.

Her father was often angry at the children. When his rage boiled over, he would fold his arms across his chest and deliver a scolding in booming tones so loud she could never be sure what he was yelling about. She could make out only two words: "Beat him!" He yelled with such insistence that it slurred his diction, leaving the instruction only barely comprehensible. Her mother was the one meant to deliver the beating, and she would hold the ruler in one hand, grabbing the child with the other and smacking the ruler hard against his calves. Her carefully combed hair would fly free, whipping across her face in unkempt strands as she snarled, baring her gritted teeth. It was a terrifying sight. Even if she wasn't the one being beaten, seeing her mother like that set her quivering with fear.

Her father did not beat the children; in fact, he hardly ever touched them. She recalled only one time when her father had slapped her little brother. He'd yelled over and over, "Beat him! Beat him good! Beat him good!" Her mother had cooperated as best she could with the beating, until she'd used up all her strength, and her little brother slipped away. In the struggle, her mother tripped and fell, and as she lay motionless on the floor her brother went charging off in the other direction, only to nearly collide with her father, who slapped him across the face.

In this case, of course, she did recall the reason. Her brother had told someone that their father was a *benshi*, and he had become the butt of jokes among the neighbors. Her father was irate. Her father was a *bengoshi* – a lawyer, one of the first in Chiayi, whereas a *benshi* was a narrator of silent films in the Japanese colonial era. For her father, it was a disgrace to be referred to by his own son as a *benshi*.

Her father the lawyer insisted that his son had to be a doctor – no, he couldn't be anything else. For as long as she could remember, she'd heard her father tell her mother and her brother that there were people in the world who disrespected lawyers, and even made fun of them, because they might go their entire lives without needing a lawyer, or even crossing paths with one. But nobody dared disrespect a doctor, because everybody got sick, everybody needed one eventually.

Since it was impossible for his daughter to become a doctor, the best she could do was marry one. According to Japanese custom, a doctor's home always had a second-floor parlor with a piano, where friends gathered to listen to Beethoven. Studying music was the best way to ensure one became a doctor's wife. A doctor's wife was in charge of the nurses, the waiting room, and the medicine. Who dared disrespect her?

"But you didn't become a doctor's wife." I meant it in good fun, but regretted it as soon as the

words left my lips. Having no desire to hear her reply, I ducked my head and kissed her almost violently, pulling her onto her side and rolling her on top of me, until her weight and her breath aroused in me a new wave of desire, and again time was curved, sticky, and dense.

Walking Away

She no longer remembered to cast off her clothes in a neat pile. When she had to go to the bathroom, she first searched the floor for her underwear, but couldn't find her chemise. I handed her the sweater I'd hung on the back of the chair, and she hesitated for a moment before reaching out and grabbing it. I took back my hand, and summoning my courage, said softly, "I'll help you put it on." She hesitated again, then turned her back to me expectantly.

As I pulled the sweater over her head, she pulled her hair through the neck hole, and I couldn't help myself from giving her a kiss on the back. To my surprise, as soon as my mouth touched her skin, I felt fine goose bumps rise between my lips. I moved my lips up and down, left and right, finding everywhere newly risen goose bumps. It was great fun.

As I dragged my lips playfully across her back, she smiled and writhed, at last finding the armholes and pulling on the sweater, and as she pulled back her arms, the sweater fell to cover her back. The momentum sent me rocking backward, but I recovered and embraced her. I rested my chin on her shoulder, and she kept completely still. We stayed that way for a long time, a minute, maybe two, and the silence and stillness pressed down on me, as if to squeeze something out from inside. Before I could open my mouth, she sensed it somehow, and said, in a hushed voice, "Don't say anything, please, just don't say anything." Imitating her hushed tone, I replied, "Okay, I won't say anything, I just won't say anything."

The atmosphere had grown overly serious, and I had to relieve it by moving my hands. I burrowed my hands beneath the sweater, my fingers creeping upward until they reached the lower edge of her breasts. I realized she was wearing nothing beneath the sweater, and that this was the first time I'd reached my hands inside her clothing to caress her, and I again became excited, feeling more attracted to her now than I had been a moment ago when she was completely nude.

She rose hastily to her feet, and fled from the room. A few seconds later, she appeared again on the threshold, the door halfway open, stuck only her head inside and said, smiling, "No joking around, now. Tell me where the bathroom is." I was sure hers was the most beautiful face I'd ever seen, that in that moment, I'd discovered for the first time what beauty was. How could she be so gorgeous?

She prepared to leave, feeling about in the darkness for her clothes. I swept open the window curtain. Lamplight from outdoors spilled through the frosted glass, and instantly threw her silhouette into relief, particularly the line that jutted subtly from her collarbone to her breasts, the slight protrusion of her nipples, and the gentle slope back down. In this dim light, she turned all about as she gathered her clothes, facing left, facing right, bending her arms, craning her neck, like a dancer moving to a silent rhythm, expressing through very simple movements the ambiguous instant of a lotus preparing to open its first blossom, and I observed intently, thinking, how could she be so gorgeous? It was a beauty I could never fully capture with words.

As always, she put her clothes on and left, casting not a glance in my direction. I stared at her walking away, immersed in an emotion I can't describe, wondering at how I'd just been in such close proximity to such a gorgeous person, a human being of such staggering beauty. Still entranced by her beauty, I forgot the pain of parting and simply watched as she walked away.

That was Saturday evening. On Sunday evening, when she walked off again without looking back or uttering a single word, I remembered that feeling of being torn apart, that feeling that some unnamable thing inside me that I'd gotten used to having had been forcefully taken. I felt some power pulling me toward her, and suddenly an image appeared in my mind: I saw myself sitting up in bed, and as suddenly

as a spring recoiling I was in the living room, and I embraced her tightly from behind, and she cried out, “No, please, not now.” I insisted: “Don’t leave, I won’t let you leave, I love you.” She covered her ears, and continued stubbornly toward the door, and I felt a great strength well up within me, like an ocean wave pulling every stone as it recedes, and I pulled her back, pulled her onto the porcelain floor of the kitchen, where she landed with a loud bang.

I had startled myself. I never knew I had the capacity for such violence. I lay in bed, in shock, eyes closed, too dazed to watch her figure recede into the distance.

Sunday

I closed my eyes, and kept them closed for a long time, but I didn’t hear the sound of the door opening and shutting. I opened my eyes slowly, dreading what I might see, and the first thing I saw was her face, no more than a meter from my eyes.

“What are you doing? Did you fall asleep?” she asked, wearing the same stunning smile.

How could she possibly be so gorgeous? How could she launch this surprise attack on me with such nonchalance? How could the sight of her walking away one minute ago have turned so quickly into a smile? And how could she ask me this?

I tried my hardest, I really, truly did, and thought the corners of my lips twitched upward a few times, the reply just wouldn’t come out. It was the tears, the damn tears that came first, flowing in twin streams from my eyes and down to my lips, as my mouth said something I hadn’t planned to say: “I can’t stand to see you leave!” The words came between gasps of air, and even I couldn’t hear clearly what I’d said, so it’s no wonder she couldn’t either. “Every time...you do this to me every time...you leave without looking back...you don’t even look back...you don’t even say goodbye...every time the same...I can’t take it!”

Eyes fixed on my tears, still wearing that gorgeous smile, she wiped my cheeks, and said, “Hey, I did turn back. I looked back, and I asked, ‘Would you like to go out for dinner?’”

Dinner

I’d never met M on a Sunday, and I’d never eaten dinner with her, not even once.

That made for two firsts.

Just outside my apartment building, in the alley, there was a stir-fried seafood stall. Let’s go there, said M; I didn’t agree right away, but I couldn’t think of any reason to refuse, so we went.

I didn’t want to go because I was sick and tired of listening to the owner’s wife blabbing away. Each time I opened the window in my room, the noise of it would drift up from below. The clearest voice was that of the owner’s wife as she pushed her wares, boasting of “only the best ingredients”, or shouted abuse at her husband. Her voice was throaty and coarse, with a touch of coquettishness. When there were no customers, her conversations with her husband mixed heaping doses of that coarseness and coquetry. They must have thought that even if they raised their voices a bit, in the empty expanse of the alley, no one would hear. They couldn’t have known that, in this narrow lane lined with tall buildings, their voices would drift up with perfect clarity, and float right in through my window.

When a squabble broke out between them, the husband would fall back on this retort: “Go get fucked like the whore you are!” The wife would respond, laughing, “So what if I sleep around? You should consider it an honor. If I’m a whore, that makes you a pimp.” The husband would shoot back with the classic Taiwanese insult, “Fuck your mother! That’s ridiculous!” Again, the wife would respond with a laugh, “Well, if that’s how you want it, I’ll sleep around and you can fuck my mom. But you’ll be getting the short end of the stick.” The husband would fume, “You’re horny as a bitch in heat!” She, in a deliberate imitation of a wife’s tender tone, would respond, “That’s right. It took you that long to figure it out? I’m

your wife, and you're supposed to keep me satisfied. It's your problem, you're the one who never wants to get it on, so of course I'm horny!"

When M was there with me in my room, there was always a brief moment when I would glance through the window, whether open or closed, and my thoughts would drift inevitably to the salacious talk of the hawker's wife in the alley. It disturbed me. Surely the thing she spoke of in that tone couldn't be the same thing I did in my room. No two things in the world could be more different. I hated the way she spoke of it so coarsely, as if to implicate M and I in her and her husband's vulgar acts. Why did she have to drag me down to her level?

Also, though I knew well it was impossible, I was always tortured by the thought that the noise from my room would drift down to her in the alley just as her vulgar talk of private things drifted up to me. This made me feel still dirtier.

As we sat at the seafood stall, I tried to take my mind off the disturbing presence of the hawker's wife by filling every crevice of silence between me and M.

I told her that before we moved to the Minsheng neighborhood of Taipei, we lived on Xinyi Road. It was close to the present-day American Institute in Taiwan, originally the barracks of an American military advisory group. Americans were in and out of it all the time, and nearby there even stood a general store and a bar serving only Americans. The store had a small selection of books and records. The books were originals, but the records were bootlegs, and the front covers always said "Hot Hits", a new one coming out every month or so. I scraped up enough pocket money to buy every one of those bootleg records, and I brought them home and played them over and over, poring over the lyric sheets, listening until I knew every note.

I couldn't afford the books, but because I bought so many records, the store owner would let me stand at the shelf and browse through the book selection. I treated it like my personal library. Standing there, I read through Snoopy, Superman, and even a comic book version of Sherlock Holmes. I read enough books that I started to build a decent English vocabulary, and learned basic English grammar, so when high school entrance exams rolled around, maybe I was just lucky, but that year the English section was especially hard, with a lot of example sentences that weren't in the textbook, and while everybody else bombed the exam, my high score on the English section helped me gain entry to a highly prestigious school.

As I spoke, I began to blush. I'm not sure if M noticed. I'd recalled another book I read in that store, one I'd spent countless hours poring over, huddled in the corner away from prying eyes, in that desolate stretch of winter when school let out for New Year's. It was called *The Joy of Sex*, and each page featured skillful pencil sketches depicting male and female bodies in painstaking detail.

I couldn't go on speaking because I was blushing so badly. M picked up the thread: "You're better suited to go the United States than me. My English is awful, and I've never read a single English book." Then she leaned in and said to me, deadly serious, "What am I going to do? To tell the truth, I'm afraid to go to America." A response leapt from my gut to my lips; I swallowed it back down. What I wanted to say but didn't was, "Then don't go."