

Hu Fang
**Dear Navigator,
Part I**

Lìchūn: Start of Spring

The cat is too clean to want to be human.

Dear Navigator,

I don't know your real name, but I'm sure "Navigator" is an appropriate substitute that both reflects the place where I hold you in my heart and conveys the respect I've silently maintained for you these many years. If you permit, I'd like to continue addressing you by this name. Actually, I hear we're almost the same age, and this makes me all the more eager for us to share a sustained correspondence.

Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Xie Delin. My parents met working for the Party in the Soviet Union, and when I was born they gave me what was then a popular Soviet name, Vladimir Ilyich Xie Delin.

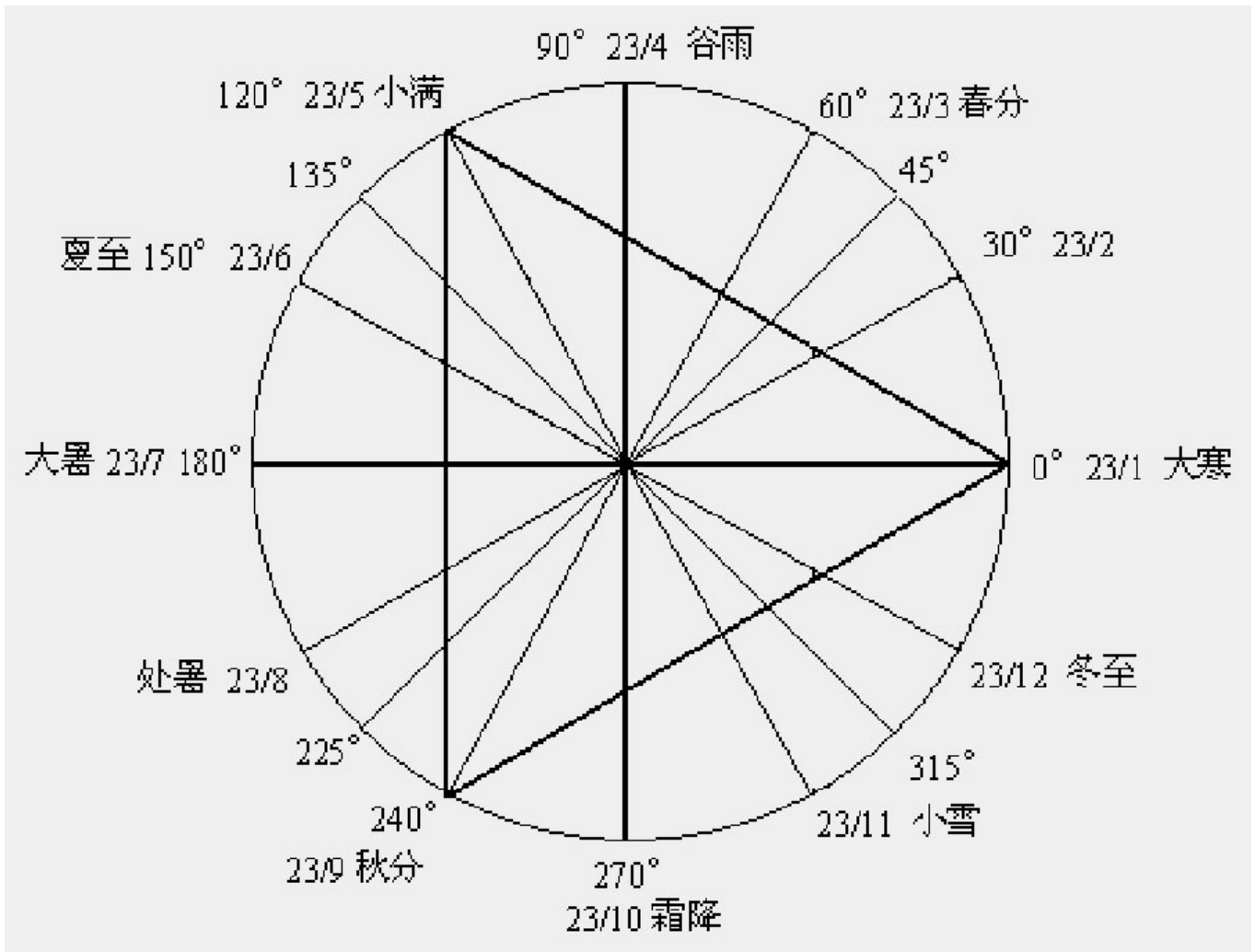
At the time, the Soviet Union was known as "Soviet elder brother." My parents diligently studied Russian, because it was the key to unlocking the future of International Communism. But quite soon China ushered in an anti-revisionist movement, and to avoid sabotaging my prospects, no more mention was made of my Soviet name. I still remember how melancholy and plaintive were the Soviet folk songs my mother would softly sing to herself at night. It's possible to find even more details about my parents' story in the archives of the Chinese Communist Party, and the reason I mention this is because I've recently resurrected my formerly short-lived Soviet name, which is directly related to the experimental project in which I am now involved.

You've probably already heard about the spaceflight research facility on the outskirts of Moscow, where six volunteers from Russia, Italy, France, and China will enter an isolation module and embark on a 520-day simulated space mission to Mars; of the six volunteers, I am indeed the one from China. One of the objectives of this experiment is to gauge whether humans can physiologically and psychologically endure the round-trip journey from earth to Mars. If everything goes well, we will arrive on the 250th day, and possibly even have time for walking around outside, before using the remaining 240 days for the return.

I never doubted the incredible significance of this mission for humanity. Not only is this what motivated me to participate in the experiment, it's also my primary reason for accepting any challenges that arise in the course of it. But I still faintly sense something which, for reasons I can't articulate, perturbs me, makes me distracted and restless, gives me the foreboding sense that what I am going to confront is exactly the same predicament from which I am escaping.

01/09

e-flux journal #48 — october 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part I



I'm even afraid that at a certain moment during the journey I could fall into an eternal state of vertigo.

I really had to think it over before deciding to write you. I sense a connection between us. I sense that it is only this intimate dialogue between us that can truly help me pass the coming days of extreme loneliness and tedium. I have knowingly risked violating the nondisclosure agreement in order to write you, but I have no alternative. Only our connection can save me from mental chaos.

Though the city before me is somber and ashen, the spring streets have suddenly burst forth with excitedly walking youths, who even manage to reveal hardened smiles from amidst the dense fog. If you are open, I believe you will support me in my preparations for embarking on this odyssey.

– Vladimir Xie, February 5

Yǔshuǐ: Rain Water

Behind every door I open, there is only nothing.

Dear Navigator,

The primary task here is to comb through the historical clues while constantly following the central axis northward through the uniform darkness, otherwise I will completely lose my way. There's a good possibility that this axis already exists in our pineal glands, although right now I know nothing of it. The primary task also includes: bidding farewell not only to my relatives, but also to humanity, in entering the one-person isolation module.

They say my activities in the isolation module will actually be recorded twenty-four hours a day, and I will live entirely under observation. This is exactly the means for developing relations with others to which I need to adapt: an indirect means of contact through video or some other medium – the hybridization of democracy and networked society, which fills my heart with a dull pain.

About 3.6 meters wide, twenty meters long, with six tiny sleeping compartments, a living room, a kitchen, a workspace, a toilet, a lab, and a greenhouse – truly an extravagant space, whether considered from the perspective of capital investment or of personal living. It seems that as long as I have the blessing of all humanity, I can consume without a second thought these resources, these lives, along with my own life. I always felt my life had been undervalued, but perhaps it is precisely because of this that I was charged with penetrating certain mysteries of the universe. It looks a little comical, but this mission was actually launched

in the name of all seriousness, in the names of political groups and of nations.

Before entering the isolation module, I strained to catch a glimpse of the world outside. Rain was falling from the sky, and the damp cement ground reminded me of some supermarket parking lot, or a listless afternoon during middle school. The materiality of the world is ever so frank, vividly exposed before me, just as the isolation module itself announces, through its precise, flawless materiality, how humans must adopt extreme measures of artificial control before they're able to realize hypermateriality and understand nature.

But the real obstacle is that, once you know that no matter the hypothesis, you're still carrying out your experiment in a familiar material environment, you have to confront a kind of split consciousness: you are controlled by the experiment, and are also the one in control. I'm not sure whether all this data monitoring is really about observing me as an individual, or observing my performance as an individual, and perhaps there's no way to even separate the two, and this is an experimental deviation that we simply have to accept. Similarly, I'm entirely unsure whether my perseverance here is for the sake of finding my inner voice, or for the sake of my performance before the instruments.

What I do know is that my career is destined to unfold in a claustrophobic, artificial environment with exaggerated lighting and big-budget effects, in an attempt to capture the attention of an unresponsive box office. Maybe the content of the performance itself and the real issues we are facing have become confused.

Dear Navigator, I feel so deeply that as long as we can maintain our intimate connection, I will be able to find my true reason for seeing things through. And in that last glance before entering the module, I had a premonition: that patch of rainy cement would become a reference for the measurement of my evolution.

– Vladimir Xie, February 18

Jīngzhé: Awakening of Insects

If I can decide to buy that pair of shoes, I can also decide whether to live or die.

Dear Navigator,

Everything in this isolation module simulates an actual space capsule; the only thing that could not be simulated is weightlessness, which is about as disappointing as a bride not showing up for her thoroughly planned luxury wedding.

When we try to reinvent ourselves in this world, what we really want to do is cast off gravity; it is only when we float through the air

03/09

e-flux journal #48 — october 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part I

that all daydreams really begin; and now, walking in summer clothes through this wooden cabin, it's like we're at a resort. I once thought this isolation module could at least be a kind of retreat, but after just a few days, I realized that the tests we have to perform daily will keep us as occupied as office drones.

Every now and then, when I want to do a test on brain circuitry, I put on my hat (it's actually covered with a mesh of electrode wires), and once the foam on the crown has absorbed the saline solution – growing abnormally heavy and settling tightly on my head – electrical currents begin to prick my nerves. For the better part of each day I am glued to the readout monitors, responding to all kinds of test protocols flashing across the screen, while constantly receiving photoelectric prompts that force me to react rapidly.

Most of the time, I feel that instead of being about science, these tests are just a puerile way to kill time. Only in the dead of night can I finally extract myself from the grind of this routine, only then can I recall a sense of reality that is not so removed: night in the Moscow suburbs, rain still moistening the birch forests – all I have to do is push open the door of the module, and I can fall back to that damp cement ground.

It's not that I'm afraid of true solitude, the deepest solitude, the kind you experience among a group of boisterous people; on the contrary, that kind of unconditional solitude is exactly what enables me to stay here without any regrets.

Dear Navigator, they actually shouldn't keep me so busy. Instead, they should make me so lonely I go mad. That's the only way to truly find the path to Mars. Just as right now, it's only in the dead of night that I can return again to our connection.

– Vladimir Xie, March 7

Chūnfēn: Vernal Equinox

Every night I strain to fall asleep, strain until my heart is squeezed with pain.

Dear Navigator,

I constantly wonder what time it is where you are. In day after day of high intensity tests – especially after the frequent photoelectric stimulations and the screen exercises with flashcards – I experience a kind of post-orgasmic exhaustion, and then everything becomes detached, such that I even detect my own bitter smile: in this completely isolated and prophylactic environment, it seems that all impure thoughts must be kept outside, and all unhappiness, all guilt thoroughly eliminated.

Food also aggravates this “sense of purity”

that I have: everything we eat is either powder, liquid, or in capsules. The form of the food no longer has any significant material distinction, nor is there any difference, in the biological sense, between meat and vegetables. The only thing indicated on the packaging is the general flavor: for instance, whether it's chicken or beef flavor. The original form of the food appears only as an association in our heads.

Beyond all doubt, the tone of the media is optimistic: these volunteers are enduring a loneliness that would be unbearable for ordinary people, they are throwing themselves into an enterprise that will benefit the future of humanity. Family, friends, lovers, they all exist in the form of a blessing on the other side of the screen, while I wave to them from inside. Usually at this point, shadows of things neglected in the past emerge, just like the trivial incidents that great enterprises never care to mention.

In the contract that we signed for the mission, after all the technical clauses, I wrote down a line of poetry from Tao Yuanming¹ – “What is there to say after death? / Entrust my body to the mountain” – along with the following “testament”:

Gǔyǔ: Grain Rain

To celebrate my birthday, I bought clothes online without even checking the prices.

Dear Navigator,

I noticed the girl named Hua_Sheng_Lai one day when we were doing backend monitoring of the PP Time Machine's user rate. Her name leapt off the screen, her data revealing that she liked to use Time Machine's delay function to schedule the release of her Weibo messages, as though she enjoyed playing temporal games of hide-and-seek with everybody.

I took a liking to her Weibo feed, its brightness, humor, narcissism, self-deprecation:

I feel sorry for the time, because it cannot kill itself.

If there's time before I die, I'd definitely wash my socks, get that feeling like in TV ads of being so fresh people can't help sniffing.

It's pretty good to be an insect, because you'll die before this world can make you melancholy.

I fell a little in love with her.

At the time, across the whole company and around the clock, everybody was working on perfecting Time Machine's functionality, especially me. As the person in charge of its development, I dreamt that PP Time Machine

would become a breakout product, proving my brilliance. At the time, my only diversion each day was to read her Weibo. Checking out how she was using PP Time Machine was also without a doubt the most exquisite task of all when it came to the product.

In those days of round-the-clock, intense work, which were also the days when everybody was captivated by Time Machine, it seemed as though we could skip forward and rewind time like a tape player. In the days leading up to that fateful day, we were immersed in an almost festive atmosphere.

If only I had noticed your signs then, maybe I would have fewer regrets now. Maybe I could fly untroubled into that pure, starry space. But in reality, I have set out on this long and winding journey, which will truly, profoundly allow me to understand your teaching, and accept the turbulence of time, wherein the order of things is upended, wherein we meet again what has already passed.

– Vladimir Xie, April 19

Lixià: Start of Summer

If you truly like me, why can't I put my hands on you?

Dear Navigator,

The isolation module has an air of sadness. Everyday upon waking I take a sample of my urine, which always makes me wonder whether I'm not in the sterilization unit of a hospital.

And everyday I'm so eager to see that red-haired girl on the monitor – Ophelia, the Austrian mental health specialist who everyday records my facial expressions in a dossier, while I, too, inspect her facial expressions through the monitor. She is the only link we have to the outside world, and the only member of the opposite sex we get to see every day. Frankly speaking, my desire to see her is just like my desire to confide in you.

It's strange how even though I spend every day with my comrades, they seem to be nothing more than my avatars and shadows; I have no sense that they are any more substantial than the images on the monitor. Perhaps because we're all so professional, we get along the way that professionals are supposed to in civilized society, each with his own responsibilities. Probably because we're all under pressure from the outside, a collective mentality exists among us, such that there is none of the friction that occurs in ordinary interactions.

However, among the six of us there have emerged two different convictions, neither of which is capable of swaying the other: one group believes we're actually on a space mission to

Mars, while the other believes we're only conducting an experiment inside a ground-based isolation module. For those who believe the former, time is spent worrying over whether everything is proceeding normally with the flight, time exists in a state of tension, and accordingly is relatively active; while those who believe the latter are just as actively engaged in killing the endless time.

The only consensus is: we ultimately have to leave earth in order to appreciate all the small gifts it provides us.

Dear Navigator, I must maintain this intimate connection with you – just like how on a retreat one must maintain the central axis in one's head – so that in this endless interstellar journey I do not lose my bearing.

I will hold your hand!

– Vladimir Xie, May 5

Xiāomǎn: Grain Full

In my moment of confusion, I breezed through the next minute. It's time for bed.

Dear Navigator,

My brain has swollen, like in oxygen deprivation. Have the summer winds already blown across the Kunming Lake, are the pigeon calls already spiraling in the air above the drum tower?

In any case, in this process I must accept how, under the gaze of the media, I have let my body become a tool for export and import, for probing, at the intersections of different times, the possibility of humanity extending its longevity. Under general conditions on earth, this would be related to religious experience, but I am using an interstellar voyage to verify the possibility. In the process of approaching light speed, my time will slow to that of myth, suspended somewhere, just as reality can be preserved indefinitely in people's memories, where we can connect with time that has already passed.

Such as that day Hua_Sheng_Lai casually wrote on Weibo:

Been dealing with depression so long, I've got to give myself a break. Don't feel sad about my going. Bye-bye.

A chill rushed down my spine, and then I immediately experienced a strange excitement, like when a beast springs out at you from some dark recess. It rapidly engulfed me. Then a voice told me: The moment you have been dreaming of has arrived, PP Time Machine will become the center of everybody's attention. I could not bear the double shock that this inflicted on me, and I turned to the company for help, but the managers demanded that we maintain our

05/09

e-flux journal #48 — october 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part I

composure and not leap into reckless action.

By then, posts of consolation from the online community had already flooded her Weibo thread, and someone contacted the local authorities. Her body was discovered in the women's dormitory. One end of a colored nylon rope was tied to the upper bunk, the other tied around her neck. She committed suicide in the same place where she liked to log into her computer, only her computer was switched off when they found her body. Her parting Weibo message had been posted using Time Machine's delay function.

Dear Navigator, how can I describe to you the feeling I had then, the terror and the excitement of passing through the loss of innocence?

Because of Hua_Sheng_Lai's suicide, PP Time Machine garnered the popular recognition I'd been dreaming about. Schooled in crisis management, the company publicly apologized for the unforeseeable tragedy, while critics angrily denounced the company. As later market surveys confirmed, PP Time Machine gained users from the ordeal.

"Nobody was at fault. Nobody could have ever imagined that PP Time Machine's delay function would bring about this tragedy." The psychiatric counselor hired by the company continued, "Moreover, since the incident, PP Time Machine has been updated with an information monitoring system, which we believe will effectively watch out for this kind of situation in the future."

In truth, I was powerless to make any decisions or exert control over anything. With my colleagues looking at me enviously, I was transferred to a top-secret department, with twice the salary, and twice the responsibility.

Dear Navigator, what I want to say is, if I didn't have your guidance and protection, I'd probably be eternally, apathetically repeating the same injury against the innocent.

– Vladimir Xie, May 20

Mángzhòng: Grain in Ear

How I long to talk up the good things in this world, since it's all my fault.

Dear Navigator,

Hua_Sheng_Lai's Weibo account is still online, forever frozen on her last message.

Everything she wrote, the cloud maintains for her, as if she'd only left temporarily to attend to something. I wouldn't be astonished if some new content appeared on her feed one day, for it's far easier to extend one's life in the cloud world than in the real world.

In the real world, there are too many

encounters that stir our emotions. Once, when I was sitting by the door of a snack shop, facing out onto the street, my boiled tea eggs still steaming, the street light across from me seemed to become a studio stage light, and the movements of the passersby took on special significance, such that you could almost guess each person's story, each person's preoccupations.

From the ATM near where I was sitting there came the clear, sharp sound of keystrokes, as I ate up the piping-hot noodles. How does time compensate one's sorrows? All your friends, your mother (the mother you said on Weibo that you both loved and hated), how will they bear this pain? When I glimpse a girl on the street in a miniskirt, I think of you.

Enveloped in countless dark nights, I sense in the dimness a certain kind of impulse that comes from dark matter; if you stay still and quiet, you can sense the impulses generated by invisible material.

My parents believed that martyr's blood could be exchanged for today's blissful living, and their energy shaped the future and afterlife for which they hoped. But we have already been dispersed from the powers of the collective, atomized into scattered and aimless particles, returned to chaos.

As such, dear Navigator, however much I need the delicate impulses of your dark void, they unthinkingly, and incrementally, propel me along the trajectory of fate.

– Vladimir Xie, June 7

Xiàzhi: Summer Solstice

Even when I wake up, I tell myself to go back to sleep, because after all there's nobody waiting for me.

Dear Navigator,

Because of Hua_Sheng_Lai's suicide, I was transferred to New Star's top-secret M500 software engineering section, which I later learned was the branch developing software for the Mars project.

Unpredictable and fantastical events often prove to be a part of the world's normal process, like the way the Mars project originated from an audacious vision: all the world's investors should get together to develop extraterrestrial property. And I, just an insignificant speck swept along in all this – what I end up colliding with depends on fate.

Just think about it. The lives of my parents' generation were almost entirely cut off from the cloud world. Their lives exist in my head or in the files of the Party archives, but they are outside of the cloud world that, today, is shared by all. The

cloud world – I can't think of a more reassuring way to extend life.

I also forgot to tell you about my dreams, which are becoming an ever more vivid part of my waking life. After spending the whole day as a test subject, I fall into a deep depression. I become indifferent to everything around me, and usually it's on these nights that my dreams appear incredibly real.

I dreamt my earwax bloomed like coral.

I dreamt of mountains and valleys, which seemed to have once been the site of fierce guerilla fighting, and forests, which once harbored the soldiers, and wild fruits, which once moistened the soldiers' cracked lips; but then what appeared before me was an ecological park built for tourists, with mountaintop villas and swimming pools.

As I dream, I suddenly feel I have been here before, so familiar are the roads, the terrain, the ridges of the mountains, the plant life. Breathing in the fresh air, gazing into the distance from the mountainside, the agony of the first time I was shot dead abruptly comes to mind: seeing myself fallen there, bleeding profusely, life index rapidly falling, completely paralyzed, helplessly watching myself go. Yes, my comrades and I have already rehearsed this war hundreds of thousands of times in our hypersimulation computer games, learning how to adapt to local conditions, how to guard ourselves – so it is no surprise that each blade of grass and each tree feels familiar, even elicits a queer sense of intimacy and excitement.

Frightfully lonely here, with only a faint breeze rustling the treetops, the landscape is so beautiful that it could hardly have anything to do with war. This gives me a supernatural sense of relaxation. Reality will quickly prove that this war is anything but a fiction, that the imagined enemies will not appear as they did in the computer game, that the feverish anticipation my comrades and I felt for their appearance was only for the sake of validating, should any of us get hit, that the blood we spill and the bodily pain we suffer will be equal to that of our enemies.

There is no need for me to imagine dying anymore – compared to sitting in front of the computer and imagining over and over the agony of getting wounded and dying, to be killed in action here would perhaps be liberating.

Liberation.

I dreamt that before I left this room, the ground was already crawling with insects, everything falling apart, walls flaking. It was amazing how rapidly it deteriorated, but now I am moving to another place, where the ringing of Sunday church bells can be heard in the distance.

Dear Navigator, I urgently need the tolling of church bells, or temple bells, to feel the blessings of the masses.

– Vladimir Xie, June 21

Xiāoshǔ: Minor Heat

In the entire galaxy, my existence amounts to nothing more than the addition of a minor blemish to the Pisces constellation.

Dear Navigator,

I don't know whether the six pills I swallow every day are actually necessary for replenishing vitamins and nutrients and fatty acids and other trace elements, or whether they're just placebos.

My colleagues have begun to hold heated discussions about food, although usually when their visions of a certain delicacy reach a climax, they abruptly stop. As for our three crewmates from Russia, there is an additional topic of discussion – vodka – which always ends in an argument.

As though meant to test our mid-flight emergency response capacity, yesterday there was a sudden blackout in the module: everything went pitch dark, followed by the ventilation system shutting down, and I soon had difficulty breathing. Then came a message from the crew commander asking everybody to remain calm.

I thought of the first time I went diving, and the terror when the instructor let go of my hand. Confronted by the vast ocean floor, I seemingly returned to the chaotic, boundless beginning of the world, completely losing my sense of time and space, the sound of my breath amplified like a voice tearing through my body. The slightest slip in attention would send me plunging into another world – perhaps this is the near-death experience of which people always speak. The space module could also be this kind of place.

Every time I leave, it always looks easy but it's actually hard, there's too much anxiety. In dismal weather, a middle-aged woman carries a plastic bag filled with vegetables, while the people getting off work for the day pour into the bus, signs of depression blackening the lights of the city. The thick of family life is near at hand, as the plump body of a young housewife (wearing pink see-through nightclothes) slowly vanishes from the street corner. I recall your childhood, "What a good and gentle person you are!"

Tell me, when is it that love and hate become so intensely entangled that people feel they have to kill themselves in order to escape it all? The after-hours career women are still wearing their suit skirts and red heels, the food vendors already ablaze, the striped lamps of the salons turning, and I feel like vomiting, but then I think of you and feel better – even feel the

07/09

e-flux journal #48 — october 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part I

happiness in this world of chaos, so intoxicated I don't want to move another step.

When those blinding lights switched back on, I surfaced drenched in sweat, the monitor before me coming back to life, the ventilation system letting out a roar, everything running again. Calmly fixing the breakdown in the spacecraft simulator's power system, the crew commander had saved our lives.

That fire burning in some dark corner below the overpass – in the post-rain twilight, its outline appeared incredibly sharp, suddenly leaping into sight.

Dear Navigator, I've finally smelled those wafts of incense.

– Vladimir Xie, July 8

Dàshǔ: Major Heat

If I believe in life after death, then I should be able to understand why the people I love must also die.

Dear Navigator,

Aviation is the same as seafaring, it's the science of getting lost, and one of our most important tasks each day is to check the heading and flight coordinates, to avoid getting off course. Although I don't know where we are, my sense of direction is still pretty functional, only I have the vague sense that time has slowed for me. In infinite space, the vacuum enclosing the isolation module seems to have buffered time. Since life inside the module is shielded from the complicated outer world, it's as though my relationship to time has also become purer, and therefore time has slowed. Fundamentally, is there any absolute difference between somebody sitting in prison and me sitting in this isolation module? Having once been tempered by the earthly world, and now being put in this isolated environment for tempering, everything inside the module has taken on a strange sense of freedom. In my parents' time, prison was a national apparatus that had to be destroyed, and they willfully smashed its concrete walls: in restricting the scope of physical activity, prison actually stimulated the free will of the people it contained, while the physical suffering of their bodies only hardened their conviction in the revolution and the future. But what I'm seeking is not some superficial equilibrium between good and evil that can be obtained from already existing national apparatuses. What is important is how to transform punishment into creativity through self-reflection: if prison and the isolation module flying to Mars both use the restriction of freedom as a means of arriving at sublimation and the completion of a more ambitious calling, then the ruminations of the

people in prison and my own ruminations in this isolation module should both lead us to a new consciousness of the misfortunes of the past. Dear Navigator, I think you will agree that ultimately being banished here is in fact my good fortune.

– Vladimir Xie, July 22

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Translated from the Chinese by Andrew Maerke

08/09

e-flux journal #48 — october 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part I

Hu Fang is a fiction writer and curator based in Guangzhou and Beijing. He is the co-founder and artistic director of *Vitamin Creative Space* in Guangzhou and *The Pavilion* in Beijing. He has been involved in various international projects including the *documenta 12* magazines as coordinating editor and Yokohama Triennale 2008 as co-curator. His published novels include *Garden of Mirrored Flowers* and *New Arcade, Shopping Utopia*.

09/09

1
Lived 365–427. The verse is taken from “Ni Wan’ge Ci San Shou” (*Three Poems in Imitation of Coffin Bearers’ Songs*). (*trans.*)

2
Evoking the unusual usernames of members of online communities, this name offers multiple interpretations depending on how its characters are grouped: *huā*, commonly meaning flower, or to spend, but it has other meanings as well; *shēng*, meaning to give birth or to produce; existence, life; raw; *lái*, to come. These can also combine to form other words: *huāshēng*, peanut; and *shēnglái*, by birth, innate. The name thus variously connotes: PeanutComes; Pay_Your_Life; flowersprout; Born Flower; etc. (*trans.*)

3
In the fable, written in 421, a fisherman discovers a utopian community that has remained hidden from the world for centuries after its members’ forebears fled from civil unrest during the Qin Dynasty (221–206 BC). (*trans.*)

4
A fictional name inspired by the famous fish market in Tokyo, Tsukiji [魚市場 in simplified Chinese]. The first character, *zhú*, meaning to build or construct, has architectural connotations; *bō* is the character for “waves.” (*trans.*)

e-flux journal #48 — october 2013 [Hu Fang](#)
Dear Navigator, Part I