

Liqiu: Start of Autumn

The sight of her turning around is as beautiful as someone suffering from melancholy.

Dear Navigator,

She once helped me make the bed. During an exhausting, tense journey, what could be more generous than a glass of water, a bowl of rice, and a bed in the midst of hunger and thirst?

By the quiet light of the table lamp, the sight of her making the bed was unforgettable: taking clean sheets from the cabinet, she contemplatively adjusted their position on the bed, occasionally stepping back to look, as though viewing a painting. Seeing her absorbed in this way made me ashamed of my wickedness.

The table lamp illuminated her silhouette, her black hair swaying with her movements around the bed, as though in some quotidian dance. Enveloped in the stillness of the room and the fragrance of the freshly dried sheets, there was an urge to die right then and there.

Gazing out the window of this lonely room, one could always see the church steeple. In the evenings, when the lights went out indoors, the far-off church, lit from below by floodlights, would float out of the darkness, tantalizingly within reach.

A lamp, a song, a bed sheet – each can give this completely characterless, isolated space an air of inhabitation. In the Chinese view of the universe, although humans are not its center, neither have they been ruthlessly expelled to its margins. What makes humans human is precisely that, as the part of nature that is full of sympathy, they mutually complete the other things that exist in this world. Even if Hua_Sheng_Lai's mortal body no longer exists, she still has merged with my life; even if my colleagues appear to be sleepwalking apparitions, they still share with me their cravings for good food and their thoughts of home.

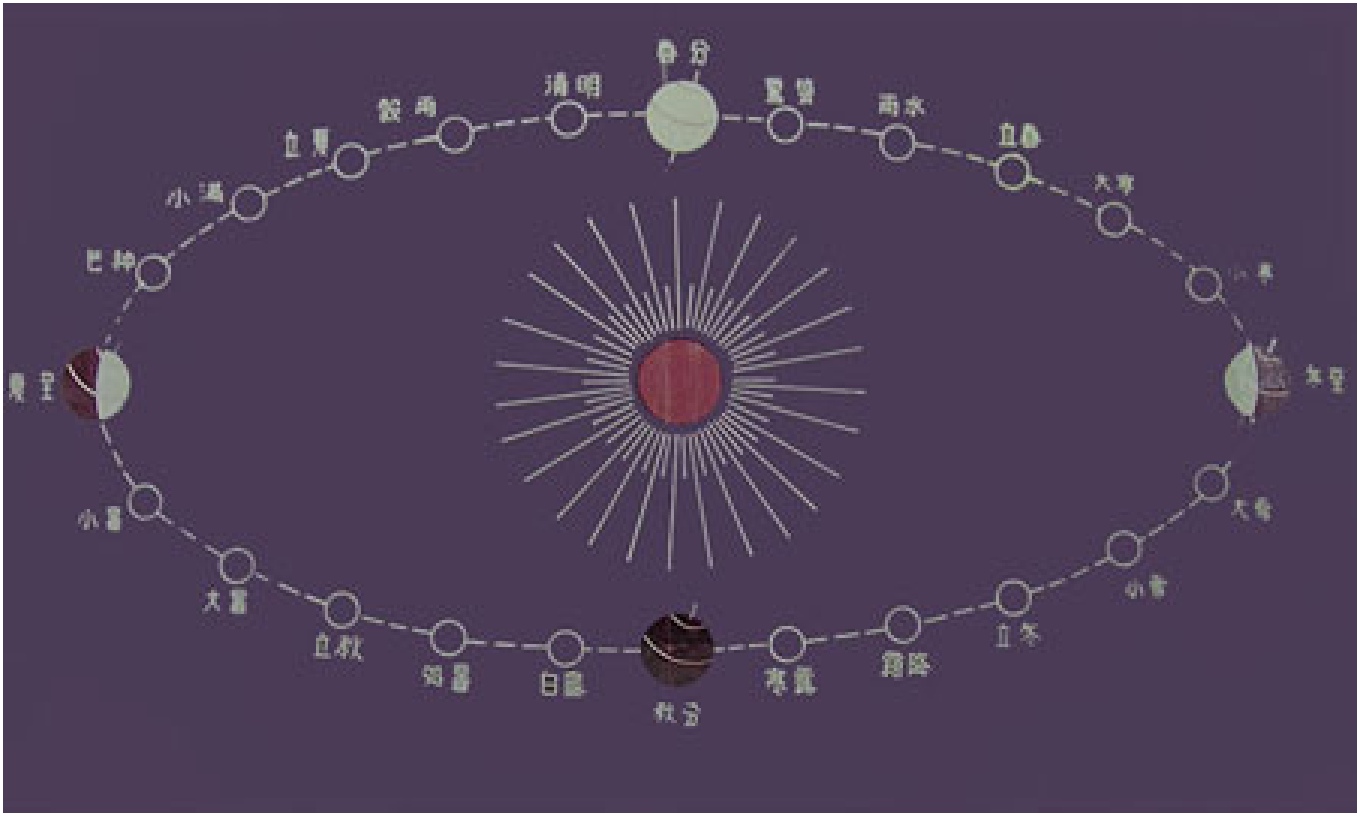
Our feelings are necessarily connected to everything that happens in the universe, only the reactions carried by those ripples spread at differing frequencies. For example, when we heard the news about Steve Jobs's death, it was like learning of an incident from another planet. Separated by a fixed distance, there are certain things that are hard to feel sad about, and others to which I'm even more sensitive.

As for myself, the entertainment programs on my desktop are superfluous, as I prefer to reap in quiet the remorse brought by the slowing of time. More than once I have recalled how, behind Hua_Sheng_Lai's outwardly happy-go-lucky personality, there was a kind of self-

01/08

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part II

Hu Fang Dear Navigator, Part II



destructive urge, while I am the opposite, in that I would never be willing to destroy my one and only hope; I would turn her death drive into my lust for life.

Is there anything better suited for meditation and penitence than this journey to Mars?

– Vladimir Xie, August 7

Chūshū: Limit of Heat

In everything I do, I always work to avoid results, avoid beginnings and endings.

Dear Navigator,

Some days later, I discover that I am working with *time bandits*, that I myself am one of them, making off with other people's time, while my own time is stolen without my realizing.

Shares, futures, banks: the *time bandits* sell watches to those without time, and after they've bought their watches, these people believe they actually possess time. Nor is there anyone who can stop the *time bandits*; even this isolation module flying to Mars cannot prevent them from consuming our lives in advance, because it is they who are the backers of the Mars project.

Just as how an idealist and sadist are only one step removed, the *time bandits* have used humanity's desire for immortality to steal the time necessary for eternal life.

Perhaps under the influence of my father, I feel the only thing distinguishing me from the *time bandits* is that I have no care for my physical body, bravely going to further extremes than they in testing the limits of humanity, becoming a secret liaison for contradictory forces. I only want to experience extreme acceleration in flight, accelerating to the point of lightspeed, where our biological clocks slow down, and we can head toward the opposite side of materiality.

This is a form of atonement, yet also a kind of pretension, since I won't experience any fundamental change, and there's no way I could become a humble penitent. Anyone living in this world has his or her own rationale. If divinity could be shared out at every moment of every hour, then it could be a corporation, school, or church, take any form at all, which ultimately is only a support – "Moonlight plays before my bed, / Could it be frost upon the ground?"¹ – but as long as it can be shared, then it is divine.

Dear Navigator, please excuse me, my remaining pride keeps me rattling on at you, and sometimes I end up not making any sense ... I am so thankful for your generosity.

– Vladimir Xie, August 24

Báilù: White Dew

Being with the elderly, reining in arrogance

and rashness, you can live cleanly.

Dear Navigator,

Through the windows of the craft, I can almost see that massive diamond floating in the air – is this the ring that promises humanity and stars to one another? Crystallized time, diamonds are the polar opposite of humanity's attempts to steal time, condensing time, concentrating destiny. We are all children of stardust, perhaps originating from some explosion that happened in the remote past, as it is precisely the remnants of stardust that produced life. Our real mother already dead, we are all residues, our hearts burning as fiercely as the massive thermonuclear core of the sun, although necessarily under the cover of strangely cold exteriors, until the fires inside burn to exhaustion, and slowly go cold.

After its hydrogen is consumed, a star dies, growing colder, with the entire space around it returning to blackness. The age of stars will end, while dark matter continues expanding. When the galaxy dies, we will arrive at the winter of the universe.

Consciousness of time is what allows us to survey the past. If we lived long enough, we could see far enough – much further into the past than now – not like the fleeting span of our current temporal consciousness.

If we lived long enough, perhaps until 110,000 years from now, we could reach the next closest star to us, Proxima Centauri, but the cruel part is: subjective morals do not determine what gets to survive – firstly, this is a pitched battle, those that survive are those with relatively durable stores of energy, but this also entails gradual stabilization and death – if its own density is too great, then a star must simultaneously generate its own dynamic force while forming external relationships, repeatedly settling and then moving again in chaos.

If the planet's core is dead water, then there's no way for it to gain energy, because energy can only be gained and converted in reciprocal motion. This is like the way people obtain the means for inner peace in the recurring contest between centrifugal force and gravity, although the energy that flares out from it is different, taking different life courses.

The effects and energy of objects, matter-antimatter: all destructive forces proliferate from or are already impregnated within objects; energy, the moment it obtains material form, produces consciousness, and vice versa; what we finally fixate upon is the sustainability of energy, its sustainable duration and intensity. This also means that energy accumulates and seeks out energy, and is not merely exhaustible, otherwise we'd have no way to explain why our form of life began right from birth to head in the

03/08

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part II

direction it's heading.

Dear Navigator, my whole body revolves around all these energies that inspire and disturb me. You are forever the central axis of my heart, keeping me from losing my bearing in this boundless space, and releasing the visions inside me.

– Vladimir Xie, September 9

Qīufēn: Autumnal Equinox

I was a complete fool in front of the monitor, first crying, then laughing, then crying again.

Dear Navigator,

Ultimately, what is time during insomnia? What is it that is consumed during those hours, or returned to oneself?

In this dark weightlessness, my face has rapidly transformed, become liquid, illusory, just like the mind, inside of which float fragments of form – but when they ultimately converge, what kind of space will they create?

Borderless, infinite, I must focus my concentration, and this makes me all the more conscious of that irrational excitement swallowing up every last nerve ending, echoes surging in my brain, while in the approaching dawn, an endless haze envelops my line of sight. I've already forgotten the texture of light in reality (in the earth's atmosphere). What I confront is always only the lighting in my cabin, and the perpetually calibrated temperature.

Once, I was able to capture the beauty of the light switching from afternoon to evening, the clouds suspended against the fading sky as it turned a deep blue, the street lights flickering on one after the other, having the effect of desk lamps--both condensing space, and yet infinitely expanding it into the gradually shifting colors of the skyline.

Sitting on the bus, a small girl who was sunk into the backrest of her seat watched her reflection in the window. And after a day's work, even more people were drifting to sleep in the bumper-to-bumper congestion, the city emerging from evening like a submarine surfacing from the ocean depths.

You come to a city in a rush, and just as hastily depart.

When you arrive, the people are bathing in the setting sun, a girl on a bicycle majestically straightens her back: it is the most serene time of day. Sitting on the bus, you take in the smiling faces, troubled faces; passing the theater, people are excitedly discussing the new performance program; passing the canteen, the glowing overhead lights have been switched on in succession, everybody seeking their fix of the raw oysters in season. You come just in time to see the ecstatic expressions of people savoring

their delicacies.

Yet where you want to go, a haze covers the land, repression overlaying, aggravating, oppressing people's nerves – what is ultimately sacrificed is still the hoard of commoners with no place to run. The sky darkening, before setting off you try your best to appreciate the fresh air and free laughter here, even engage in a useless debate about the future of humanity, the only problem being that it develops after getting drunk, like the routine passion that follows intoxication, which is the major distinction between our love and that of our parents.

Staring at the stars outside my window, I have unconsciously passed through my time of insomnia. Dear Navigator, you emerge so vividly from my "unconscious," like the mid-autumn moon.

Good night!

– Vladimir Xie, September 22

Hánlù: Cold Dew

No, no, no, if only I could speak the language of plants, they are our true best friends.

Dear Navigator,

Starting from what point is it possible for us to measure time? The passing of this moment immediately affects the past and future (at this moment, having already entered this moment, everything around me has changed, is changing): is it not the case that starting from this moment, perpetually starting from this moment, every single moment in time is a new beginning? Precisely because it will never renounce the past or fantasize the future, precisely because I exist in the immediacy of this moment, I am able to produce the penitence and hope for my own salvation.

In irreversible time – and here irreversible does not mean that time is linear, as the consequences I have suffered imply that I have also been suffered by others, while what I have suffered is also fed back from the others, forming the mysterious retroaction of time – in this process, why should there be hurt and regret between self and other? Why tears and separation?

It is precisely because time is *not* outside the external reality of human emotions that the labyrinth of time is molded by our emotions even as it molds them, and in the end we can only find our way through this labyrinth based on what is sensible.

Waking up in the middle of the night, seeing the room filled with starlight, it took a long time for me to realize it was the blinking of indicator lamps on the computer and other electrical appliances.

I thought of those nights in Beijing when,

04/08

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part II

from my bedroom window, you could see the revolving advertisement on the opposite rooftop, and, following the angle of rotation, make out each of its English letters, over and over, with the brand name formed by those letters slowly seeping into your head, accompanying you into deep sleep.

Everything around me seemed to be stock still, except for those turning letters radiating heat into the air. Amid the first glimmers of dawn, even the building's two or three lit-up rooms appeared exceptionally profound, blank advertising lightboxes inlaid against a light-blue background. It's hard to imagine people passing their entire lives in such lightboxes, but seen from here, they are truly the dwelling place of humanity. As soon as you turn on the light switch, your room, too, will become a lightbox beaming signals at other people. There is no predetermined dwelling place for humanity, only the results of construction, and that endlessly turning advertisement.

From where the sun rises there arose the theme of resistance; from where the moon rises there arose the theme of healing; so what arose with Mars?

This red planet reveals only its dry, cold face, its red reminding me of the red planet we once lost and the convergence of red energy we once had. In that case, will our lost fervor make a comeback?

Dear Navigator, are humanity's deliverance and afterlife already hidden somewhere in space?

– Vladimir Xie, October 8

Shuāngjiàng: Frost Descent

Holding a lemon in my hand, I have grasped my only sense of security.

Dear Navigator,

Right when day after day of testing has exhausted our spirits, we've finally received news that we'll soon arrive on Mars. This means that three among us will have the chance to leave the module and walk around on Mars. On such a long and tedious journey, you can imagine how exciting this news is. With everybody anxiously awaiting the announcement from mission control as to who can leave the capsule, our Italian colleague N. has almost reached the point of breakdown. "If I can't go, I'm really going to lose it," he says over and over.

The most tortuous thing for me is the experiment we constantly repeat throughout the journey: every two days, the monitor displays an endless stream of images related to life on earth, like landscapes, scenes from city life, portraits of people and animals and so on, and in response I have to use Chinese and English to describe as

quickly as possible what I'm seeing, while also recording it. It makes me indescribably sad and miserable; so many times I want to give up mid-experiment.

But overall, my mental state is not so unstable. The abnormal, artificial climate here makes everything sluggish, as though we were on the edge of winter while our body temperatures remained in a midsummer night. Sunlight gives the leaves about to fall their last dazzling glow, and then a ceremonial guard appears in my head, every last detail of their heavily ornamented dress uniforms so vivid that I even suspect I am among their ranks.

My place in the entanglements of my self-imaginings becomes obscured, disconnected from distant lands, with no worries for parents and lovers, which means there are no dates, no suburban fields. I will suddenly recall a friend who always traveled alone – we would say goodbye as soon as we met; I will recall those friends living in seclusion outside of the city: Are they trying to escape the world's catastrophes in advance? If I held you as tight as I could, would you leave or not? "Fighting for your peaceful life," you say, but even if you say it, and repeat it, I still can't get that kind of peace.

Then I finally had a clear understanding of the *time bandits'* secret. Before, everyday the delivery boy with the words "Live to Deliver" emblazoned across the chest of his uniform would pass the piping hot express delivery pizza to me, shackled to my work behind the computer. And now, I still spend everyday in front of the computer, only I'm eating even faster, even more flavorless vacuum-packed space shuttle food. Everyday, my life becomes more and more unbelievable.

Dear Navigator, I once expected – and even now still expect – that I could be the kind of person who enjoys the sunshine and the rain, someone who discovers truth from simply looking at the dust particles suspended in the sunshine and the fish in the stream, for in the clarity and warmth of light and stream, it is impossible not to be lucid, impossible not to feel love for the world.

– Vladimir Xie, October 23

Lidōng: Start of Winter

I never dared scrutinize my parents' faces, as though one look would speed up their decline.

Dear Navigator,

The descent was extremely dangerous, the ship violently rocking as we sat intently in the landing module, everything unfolding so slowly until the moment the landing cushion touched down, and we all broke out into blissful smiles.

Embracing and congratulating each other,

05/08

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part II

we had arrived on Mars. Through the module windows everything outside was a strange red color, as if bathed in the glow of neon light at night (recalling the neon sign I saw from my bedroom window). N. was frantically tapping at the keyboard – along with me, he would be staying inside. The three selected crewmembers began to emerge one by one on the planet’s surface. In their bulky spacesuits, every jerk and movement resembled those of a bear cub made to dance before an audience. Frankly, I was a bit relieved not to be subjected to such a comical undertaking.

The Russian, W., carried the flag representing the Earth Federation, and attempted to plant it in the surface of Mars. But perhaps because the surface was too hard, no matter how he tried he could not do it, and he was left staggering around with the flag in his hands.

From where I was looking, I suddenly noticed a beam of light seeping through the dark Mars background: a half-open door, and a group of figures peering over each other to see everything taking place before them. The distance between W. and the figures and the door was so short, had he wanted to he could have walked through and returned to earth.

Almost losing control, I cried to him, “W., look behind, to your left!” As W. slowly turned his body, the door quickly slammed shut, and he found nothing.

“Have you lost it?” W. shot back at me.

There was no way to prove whether what I had seen was a hallucination or not.

I simply had to refocus my attention, double-check and operate the relevant equipment. W. and the rest continued moving about the surface of Mars. Their movements appearing smoother, they had begun to hurriedly gather rock specimens. All of us had the same hope: when we turn over those rocks, what a sensational discovery it would be if there were some fossils with traces of life etched into them!

Dear Navigator, if we could find remnants of life on Mars, would it do anything to reduce the despair of humanity seeking eternal life in space?

– Vladimir Xie, November 7

Xiǎoxuě: Minor Snow

Even if you’re okay with being an insect, it still doesn’t matter, because this world and melancholy have already died.

Dear Navigator,

After the excitement of landing on Mars, and after thoroughly comprehending the limited extent of its surface (about ten meters long by six meters across, covered with reddish sand

simulating the terrain of the Gusev Crater), we all realized our formerly important division was no more: this truly is just a simulated journey to Mars, which means the return trip will be twice as tedious and long.

At the thought that we are like fish in a fishbowl, and must spend the remaining time doing experiments day after day, a sense of suffocation spread throughout the module.

Perhaps choosing six men to form the crew was a sensible decision, since otherwise some kind of incident would have probably happened by now.

According to NASA regulations, under unavoidable circumstances male and female crewmembers are permitted to enter into sexual relations, the only condition being that private relations should not affect work responsibilities.

Without a doubt, this is the fallout of the Lisa Novak incident, although it’s also a classically capitalist way of thinking: permit sex, but not love, as sex is supposed to be therapeutic, but love destructive.

If people have enough self-control to come all the way to Mars without hurting each other, then I would propose: the future property of Mars should first be freely given to those who can embrace humanity, and not those seeking to run away from it.

Using Hua_Sheng_Lai’s voice, she would probably phrase it: The way to make people on earth understand love is to give them a free trip to Mars.

And the crux is: the return trip is not easy, we need to wait for the orbits of Mars and earth to converge upon a specific angle, perhaps even wait for eighteen months.

Maybe when we return to earth, heavy snows will have already covered the north, and then your one and only hope is that when you push open the door at home, the stove will be nice and hot.

– Vladimir Xie, November 22

Dàxuě: Major Snow

If it’s possible before I die, I’d definitely wash my socks, to have that feeling like in TV ads of being so fresh people can’t help sniffing.

Dear Navigator,

On the monitor, the color of Ophelia’s red hair is so dazzling that, in addition to its extreme sexual titillation, it reminds me of a red flag fluttering in the wind, and maybe both are one and the same thing.

Dear Navigator, in this highly-controlled environment without any natural climate, temperature, or humidity, my writing letters to you according to the rhythm of the seasons and the twenty-four solar terms is in itself a little

06/08

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part II

silly, with a hint of obsessive-compulsiveness, but for me this is the only way to preserve my fundamental sense of earth time, so that when I step back on land, I won't be overwhelmed by that fierce sense of strangeness.

In the intervals between waiting for orders and confronting life-threatening dangers, I fall back into a momentary state of hibernation. In the unending void of space, I produce the delusion that I have been banished into a black hole, and then life and death are no longer important. There is only endurance.

Enduring others, enduring one's self. Enduring the increasingly messy environment and rancid air accumulating in the module. Enduring the dejection and massive emptiness that comes after masturbating. Enduring the orders from the command center constantly prompting me to deal with different issues, turning me into an instrument, an instrument for doggedly completing a variety of tasks. I think a major part of my forbearance is inherited from my revolutionary parents, and from my socialist education.

I see myself passing through a blackened street when a truck loaded with prisoners speeds by; a rough, forceful hand pushes at the base of my neck, and I stumble into a crowd that seems to come out of nowhere.

The vague crowd appears blue, the faces of the people indistinct; I can only make out their endless writhing, like rice gruel coming to a boil. I am informed that this group of prisoners will be shot. Stuck to each of their backs are labels on which are written their names – spears waiting to be flung.

I am completely despondent inside: I was only pushed into the crowd by accident when I happened to pass this dark road, and yet I suddenly think about all my previous sins, which may have been minor, but having fermented with time, can not necessarily be lightly pardoned. Reflecting carefully, I realize it was more or less already decided that I would be pushed into this group by a large, forceful hand.

My head is heavy, anticipating the moment it will be pierced by the bullet, my brains splattering like an erupting volcano. Then I hear a battle cry, voices welling from all around, surging to surround the execution squad, and a voice announces amid all the confusion: "The riot has started."

A warm trickle suddenly gushing from my nose, I sense a happiness I've never felt before. This warm trickle dyes my white pillowcase red. The color is so brilliant even I can't believe it's real, nor can ground control believe it's real – they're staring dumbly at the monitor.

Ophelia, the red-haired lass on the monitor, continues chatting with me, worried that my

condition will become the spark that triggers collective panic, and I continuously reassure her, tell her: "I will not forsake humanity."

More than once, when I rejoice at waking, I am in a placeless place, cut off from the world. In this unending journey, everything that was once familiar has become abstract, but I seem to have more clearly realized that I am approaching the place where I want to go.

Dear Navigator, if everything that has ever happened to humanity cannot be echoed in this empty universe, then in the end, to where has the vital energy emitted by the human body been dispersed?

– Vladimir Xie, December 6

Dōngzhi: Winter Solstice

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

Dear Navigator,

We still have not received the order to return.

Staring at the computer monitor, I think my desire to inhale a breath of fresh air has already reached its limit. All of us have started to crazily search the module for even a cockroach or traces of fleas.

On this homeward voyage, we probably still won't be able to get back our human life rhythms. Due to the distance between us, the mysteries of human sentiment have been abstracted into a dark void, and the concrete ground that I glimpsed through the rain before entering the module has been transformed into an infinitely expanding gray background.

Having only our crewmates is not enough, we need to see are our lovers; but what we desire is not only being able to spend time with our lovers, it is also being able to freely get along with all life-forms beyond humanity: plants, animals, microbes, everything ... frail, endearing, tenacious life.

Dear Navigator, it seems we no longer want to grow up, no longer want to truly step out of earth's cradle.

If I set foot on land again, I will definitely kiss the earth, kiss the grass and leaves, kiss my future lovers; as long as I can remain in this world, no matter what direction I take, it will be a good, a wonderful choice.

Dear Navigator, I am certain we will meet again, meet quite soon, and when we do, we should use the purest vodka to celebrate our new lives.

– Vladimir Xie, December 21

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Translated from the Chinese by Andrew Maerke

07/08

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 Hu Fang
Dear Navigator, Part II

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08/08

1

A famous verse from the poem “Jing Ye Si” (*Thoughts on a Still Night*) by the Tang dynasty poet Li Bai (701–62). The complete poem is as follows:

Moonlight plays before my bed,
Could it be frost upon the ground?
Head raised, I gaze into the moonlight,
Lowered now, remember home.
(*trans.*)

e-flux journal #49 — november 2013 [Hu Fang](#)
Dear Navigator, Part II