

# Stolen Language in the Womb Hon Lai-chu

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# Stolen Language in the Womb

“When I was eighteen years old, I forgot to have a baby.” This was what Vide had planned to say to the staff of the Fertility Auditing Centre. But instead, she just looked down at the pair of hands resting, palms up, on knees that were squeezed together. The fingernails were never allowed to grow past the ends of the fingertips — whenever they reached a decent length, she gnawed them back down. Suddenly, a bird struck the window. The window was shut tight, and the bird fell; but there was no sign of its body. This got her to thinking: when she spoke, she mustn’t grovel like someone who had done something wrong. The chirping of birds outside grew louder and more unruly, as if losing a companion was a common occurrence for them.

Many women were there already, waiting; the few men scattered among them were escorts, holding a wife’s or lover’s droopy handbag. The men wore the trapped expression of someone comforting a helpless child; or maybe it was pity — the difference between the two wasn’t always obvious to her. She was careful not to look too closely at the other women’s faces, lest she discover that she shared with them the same puffy faces and bloodshot eyes that made them look like they’d been crying; but in fact it was only a sign of chronic sleep deprivation.

The wait was much shorter than Vide had expected, so when she stepped up to the registration window she couldn’t help feeling flustered. But the clerk

simply asked for her name, swept her gaze over Vide's face, and found nothing there. It all happened so fast that Vide never got a chance to tell her that many years had passed and the forgotten child had grown up, growing so big that if anything, it was a bit too big. The clerk gave her a form to fill out — they wanted an address where she could be located and a number sequence verifying her identity. Lastly, she was supposed to sign her name underneath a declaration, written by others and printed in bulk. The declaration stated that a large number of the women of Y city (roughly 15% of the population) between the ages of twenty-seven and thirty-nine were guilty of the crimes of indolence and greed. Although they were in their childbearing years, they were squandering their ovaries and wombs and thereby missing out on the opportunity to nurture new lives. This, in turn, was causing a steady decline in Y city's birthrate, which led to large-scale school closures and a shrinking labor force and it was estimated that in twenty years' time, the aging population was going to become a serious burden. As a conscientious citizen of the municipality, one had certain rights; but one had obligations as well, such as paying one's fair share of taxes and bearing one's fair share of children. An evaluation of her income and background led to the determination that Vide was required to have a minimum of one child and she was granted a generous three-year term in which to fulfill this duty. If, at the end of that time, she had still not increased the city's population by one child, she could be fined, jailed, and possibly be stripped of her citizenship. There was no option to check "Accept" or "Do not accept."

The truth was that it rarely occurred to Vide not to go along with things. Since childhood, she had been good at doing what her elders directed her to do; and acquiescence had all sorts of benefits. Besides, she'd stopped feeling young a long time ago; you might say that well before she became officially old, she had made all the right preparations for old age, thereby sparing herself undue panic in the future. A fortune-teller had warned her early on that unless she was willing to act like a halfwit, she wouldn't be able to find a suitable partner in this life. But she was used to maintaining a calm and composed smile, whatever the situation. This engendered in her the feeling that she was in no danger of bolting on a whim or of wandering too far. There was a cavity inside her body that urgently needed to be filled, and for the past year she had sensed it growing larger. Ultimately, people make mistakes every day, just as inevitably as they generate garbage. She didn't realize that her eagerness for punishment was akin to the city's ever-growing need for crematoria. For many years, she had been molded by all sorts of admonitions: these had guided her voice, her wardrobe, her facial expressions and conversations — even her vision of the future. But she'd never really thought about it.

She stepped out of the Fertility Auditing Centre that day, official certificate in hand. It said she was required to bear just one child (the one she'd forgotten but that was getting bigger by the day, a fetus stronger than she was) and the stipend amount on it was less than what her female friends were receiving. After rigorous investigations of their family backgrounds, employment and education histories, incomes and health, these contemporaries had been told that they would be required to have between three and five children. The corners of her mouth tilted happily upward, just as they had many years ago when she'd

been tested on her smiling ability during the elementary school entrance examination; for the first time in her life, she'd felt she was at least minimally qualified to be alive. Her mother and uncle often exhorted her: "You need to smile more — even when there's nothing to smile about, smile." It was just like the apparently tacit agreement they had to keep reminding her to straighten her back when she walked. By the time they finally stopped reminding her to smile, it had been a long time since the expression on Vide's face had anything to do with Vide herself.

Rewards and punishments can be hard to distinguish, a point that was usually lost on her. But she didn't know she was missing anything.

Vide lay down on the rubber pad that had been spread out on the floor, and an assistant from the Fertility Partnering Centre chalked an outline around her head and body. When the outline was complete, Vide stood and stepped over the pad while the assistant wrote Vide's name and case number on the section of the pad where she had lain. It was still warm. Each registered Pregnancy Candidate (this was the Fertility Auditing Centre's designation for a woman who had yet to repay her debt of fertility) could select the Fertility Partnering Centre of her choice, provided it was certified by the Department of Health. Vide permitted the Centre's clerks to enter her personal information into her computer file — but only because the woman who sat at the desk next to hers at work had described the testing and matching process to her. They had collected a sample of her coworker's breath and snipped a lock of her hair, but the coworker told her that everyone who came to the Centre could expect to be treated differently.

Vide turned and examined the outline the assistant had traced around her body. She couldn't believe it had come from her, but just as she always had done, she would prune herself, trimming away anything extraneous, until she conformed to the desired shape.

"Are you ready to become someone new?" the staff member who'd performed the procedure asked, just as Vide was leaving. The woman's tone was intimate.

"Is that what's going to happen?" Vide was at a loss.

"A newly created person is about to emerge from inside you." The staffer pointed at Vide's utterly empty belly. To prepare for the physical examination, she had been fasting for over twelve hours. Perhaps because she was feeling weak, the staffer's smiling face left her with an inexplicable sense of shame, the origins of which she had no intention of probing. All she wanted was to cover herself up as quickly as possible, as if she were concealing the secret parts of her body.

The first time Vide felt she wanted to tell Liszt about the unconceived and forgotten baby, he was sitting right across from her, absorbed in the task of cutting up a medium-well-done steak; he intended to mince a quarter of it into tiny bits and deposit it in Vide's bowl. The Partnering Centre had selected them for each other and had reserved a table at a restaurant; the restaurant manager had chosen the music that accompanied their meal. The music plugged up the

silences that might accompany a meeting of total strangers. They didn't have to converse; they merely needed to follow the Centre's regulations governing first dates. She knew that this first meeting was not her responsibility, but the expression on his face as he put food in his mouth was so nice it was almost cruel. This inspired in her an unprecedented desire to tell him everything. She wanted to describe her tortuous progress, from the very beginning, through all its twists and turns, until it arrived at yet another beginning. Her journey had taken her over peaks and valleys, but she had kept to that path until at last it brought her here, to him.

She waited expectantly for him to look up from the meaty redolence of his steak — she was going to describe for him the chalk in the hand of the Partnering Centre assistant, the way it traced around her hair, her neck, her shoulders, ribs, elbows, waist, hips, thighs, lower legs, feet, and crotch — the assistant had made a full circuit, allowing her to read the map of her own fate. She exchanged that map for a certificate, and as a result, on a dull gray Monday morning, she walked into her supervisor's office and asked her for three months' pre-maternity leave. She wanted to tell Liszt that despite the fact that she made all kinds of mistakes at work, her supervisor kept her on for the simple reasons that she never made waves, had a wardrobe limited to grays and blues, and didn't ask too much of life. Her workplace only had room for people like that.

She yearned for Liszt to raise his blue-gray eyes and ask her how many women in this town would, like her, wake up one day and be struck by the feeling that the soul of a child that had never become an embryo was still inside her body? But this wasn't likely to happen; she fundamentally lacked the ability to take the words hidden inside her and combine them with his language to form a complete sentence. The words they spoke to each other amounted to nothing more than a pile of shredded lists, verbs and intransitive verbs, coating her viscera. When she returned to her one-person apartment and lay down on her double bed, her arms around her belly, she sensed that the child who had never been born harbored deep malice toward her; and in the gaps between her dreams, it repeated over and over her faulty syntax and broken grammar; no one had heard any precisely pronounced or native-sounding utterances issue from her mouth. As the smile gradually faded from her face, he realized that this was a kind of shyness, which prompted him to chew up his big mouthfuls of sweet meat with even more confidence. At last the server approached and politely informed them that dining hours were over. Liszt began wiping his greasy mouth with his napkin, and, in accord with the Partnering Centre's instructions for first dinner dates, he happily took his wallet out of his overcoat.

They walked out of the restaurant side by side, and all of the things she'd found too hard to say came out as "Thank you," "Everything was great," "Goodbye." Then, as was customary in his home country, they hugged goodbye, gave each other a light kiss, and went their separate ways.

She felt that the unconceived fetus was bound to be satisfied with these results. The Partnering Centre had sent her an e-mail with suitable matches; there were ten names on the list, and only Liszt had been born in a distant city — he was living here on a temporary work permit. She located his hometown on a map. It was shaped like a boot or a swooning woman, and this

made her think about how sometimes a person is like a piece of string, which has to be tugged on and fussed with before the tight knot — there for who knows how long — can be untangled.

Liszt thought that quite possibly the only reason he was put here on earth was so he could see through the surface of things and draw a perfect perspective drawing.

At first, he'd believed his eyes would guide him; soon thereafter, he thought it was the mouse or pencil in his right hand that was leading him. However, when he graduated from architecture school, he realized he'd merely become better acquainted with the smooth and shiny surface of things and no more. He could quickly and accurately draft an architectural perspective drawing — the key was not to try to make anything too clear. Sometimes he wished he could close his eyes and keep them closed for a long time, but this world never afforded him such opportunities: the ever-changing traffic lights, the hurried sound of footsteps, the honking of horns, the cries of passersby, and the announcements broadcast inside bus shelters — all of this compelled him to keep his disappointed eyes fixed on his surroundings.

The sunlight pouring in through the floor-to-ceiling windows of the seaside restaurant made him narrow his eyes to two slits: all he could see was a woman sitting across from him, her hair like dark storm clouds that would never clear, and beside him an undulating multitude of different shades of deep and pale blues. Afterward he had an epiphany: at the very moment that he was experiencing these things, he had already experienced them; by the time it was taking place, it was already in the past. Not long after, all of this took on a forgotten shape, which took up permanent residence in his brain.

That night, for the first time, he drew a perspective drawing that was unrelated to his work. As he placed a final stroke on the white drafting paper, the last line of his consciousness's defense collapsed, and he fell back onto the bed, lost to the world.

Awakened by sunlight shining on his face, he saw the desk sunk in shadow. A sheet of drawing paper rested there in the gloom, and he peered at the sketch on it. It was a tree, some of the leaves had fallen, exposing its twisted and spindly shape. But before long he realized he'd been mistaken — it was a building, oval in shape, and the random holes in it were windows. But quite soon, he saw that he was wrong again, it was merely a dejected overcoat. He closed his dry and scratchy eyes and rubbed his sore eyeballs. Only then could he bring himself to admit that the drawing was a human figure, although it was hard to say whether it was male or female, adult or child, Vide or himself. He had even drawn the fine webbing of lines in the skin, but the excessive detail made it hard to tell it was skin. He saw a person, wrapped around another person, and that person in turn was wrapped around someone else, and so on. His eyes were still clamped shut, and in a very short period of time and without forewarning, he thought of absolutely everything.

Vide got an e-mail from the Partnering Centre letting her know that she had successfully completed the first stage of matching; what's more, the Centre

was sending them on a two-week holiday. The last section of the notice contained a helpful tip that sounded a lot like a threat: the unreal quality of the sojourn was meant to enhance the chances of conception and result in a live birth.

She felt she ought to let Plank know about this but decided that keeping him in the dark was a better way to deal with him. She would let him into her empty room, just as before, and he could pilfer things to his heart's content, pocketing the items she'd left out for him like gifts: books, a shirt, a wallet, a scarf, maybe some antique dining utensils she'd collected, a piece of porcelain given to her by a friend, a pair of jade earrings inherited from her mother, postcards in a drawer, or a bottle opener.

She remembered the first time she'd opened up his closet and discovered a pair of high heels, a handbag, and a fountain pen that had mysteriously vanished several months before. It was like hearing him lie to her or watching him cheat on her — she shook uncontrollably, and she couldn't speak. Before she had time to think about how she was going to cope with her mounting fury, he'd figured out what had happened. Grabbing her forcefully by the upper arms, he said: "Don't think you're always the victim." He drew her to him in an embrace and went on, both pleading and cursing: "These things only happen because you're not capable of giving me much else. You don't even come close to satisfying my most basic needs."

She never thought about arguing with him, because there was no requirement for honesty between them. She stuck to this principle: being together was a gift they gave each other; but in his view, mutual exploitation was unavoidable.

"People always have their differences," he said. With that, her sadness was replaced by a concrete annoyance. In order to satisfy his capricious raids, whenever she went shopping she took into consideration his likes and dislikes — the coffee he had to have every day, the toilet paper he was getting low on, the magazines he had to read every week, the brown rice and apples; and then she waited for him to come over and steal them. She savored the fruits of compromise, for when she discovered that the items had predictably vanished, she experienced an indescribable sense of solidity. It was like the first time he had taken her hand and led her through a menacing pack of stray dogs, but there were also times that she couldn't help noticing that some of the things he'd taken without permission were things that she had wanted to keep for herself: a ring, a couple of letters, her diploma, the collar that belonged to a cat that had died. At times like those, she hurt as if a piece of one of her organs had been cut out. This led her to thoughts of the unconceived fetus — it demanded her attention. After much torment, she at last understood what he'd been unable to express in words: stealing was a pact of intimacy. They could never leave each other.

As they lay in bed one winter night wide awake, Plank inspected her body from head to toe, like a member of law enforcement searching a suspect. Finally, he grew tired, and his breathing rose and fell, as even and regular as the tide, and he spoke as if in a delirium: "Someday I will want your kidneys, and your lungs, your esophagus, your trachea. . . ." Anxiety engulfed her like

a dense fog — only in a state of semiconsciousness could he speak so frankly and describe in such detail the desires she couldn't fulfill. As daybreak approached, her thoughts about the child she had refused to bear changed, and she resolved to have it: that way, there would be something else in her home for Plank to covet and steal. Of course, the child couldn't be his — he only felt compelled to steal what didn't belong to him. Comforted by this thought, she fell into a deep sleep.

Vide was lying on a piece of rice paper. They maintained their silence; in five days of constant companionship, they only rarely conversed. Liszt had lived in Y city for many years, but because of the multilingual environment there he'd never been forced to learn the local language. At the same time, his native language was so completely foreign to Vide that she could never learn it. Although they barely spoke to each other, they gradually came to understand the meanings contained in each other's expressions and gestures, and they had no more miscommunications than they would have had if they'd spoken.

The hotel was on a beach in the town where Liszt had been born. When he was a child, on weekends his father would drive the family to this beach in a jeep, and they would sunbathe. Six hours after he and Vide set out from Y city, they arrived at the hotel. It was the first time in his adult life that he had plunged back into the damp scent of the ocean, and he couldn't help grasping Vide's icy hand and excitedly telling her all about his childhood. But he spoke too fast and slurred his words, so while she wore a rapt expression, she understood just a tiny fraction of what he was saying. When they were out shopping, when the waiter in a restaurant spoke to them, when a tourist approached them for directions, or when he ran into friends he hadn't seen in many years and they chattered on and on about all that had happened in their lives in the intervening years, Vide would venture to say something in their language, attempting to cover up her slips, but her tongue couldn't twist and turn with the same agility as theirs, and she began to take on the tentative look of a lost child. She felt incredibly awkward, as if he were being somehow forced to share in her foreign identity. In spite of himself, he became disoriented and suddenly he felt unsure of where he was from or where he was going.

As the daylight slowly retreated, Vide's sense of safety was extinguished along with the color of her face; Liszt noticed her gradually turning as pale as a flimsy piece of rice paper. Following the directions of the hotel staff, he drove to the only shop on the island that sold art supplies and bought a stack of fine-grained rice paper.

The floor-to-ceiling windows of the hotel left both of them feeling disconcertingly exposed, but he hadn't been planning to use the delicate paper as a temporary window covering. However, Vide stood up and, looking mutely out the window at the place where sea and sky met, she meticulously blocked off the piercing rays of light until Liszt felt he was standing in the cool shade of trees. Spreading some of the paper on the floor, he gestured to her to lie on top of it. Then he waited patiently until fatigue overwhelmed her and she fell asleep. With a soft artist's pencil he traced around her body, setting down a rough outline. By the time she woke up, the world outside the windows was inky black, and the



windows reflected sharp images of the two of them and the interior of the room. He was cutting her outline from the rice paper. She motioned with a hand for him to lie down on a section of rice paper on the other side of the room, picked up his pencil, and traced a line that could bind him completely. Heads down, they took up the scissors together, and without a word got to work; bit by bit, the rhythm of their breathing and their gestures converged. She was the one who first covered the floor with a layer of paper and lay down on it, imagining as she did so others lying there before her — she traced around her mother and uncle, Plank and the newborn baby. Meanwhile, Liszt walked over to a corner of the room where there was a blank expanse of paper and drew a perspective drawing.

By the time the first ray of light broke the sky, they had filled the windows with everyone's outlines, blocking out the sunlight that would have engulfed them, blocking the days and nights to follow.

They weren't at all hungry and they didn't need to exchange any information, so they just sat on the floor with their arms wrapped around their knees and took a rest. In her mind, Vide had related to Liszt her entire story — she'd abandoned the experiment of verbal communication. In the course of this, she discovered that the person she most yearned to talk to was in fact herself. Liszt closed his swollen eyelids, and in the pitch darkness he felt he could pass through the structure of the walls, the cracks in the pipes, and all of the blood vessels and nerves in his and Vide's bodies. They had no idea that there, in the murk of the room, their vision could penetrate everything, and their lives up to that point, along with the child submerged in the darkness, died once again. In the end, would people like them — people who had seemingly already died — have the strength to welcome a new life? This question was not addressed in the fertility handbook issued by the Partnering Centre. The handbook said only this: The Centre is not responsible for any accidents, injuries, or deaths incurred by participants in this program.

[Translated from the Chinese by Andrea Lingenfelter]

# 遺腹語

## 韓麗珠

「十八歲那年，我忘記生下一個孩子。」空打算這樣告訴生育審核處的人員。然而，她看到併攏的膝蓋上放著一雙手掌，掌上的指甲全都無法越過指頭，長至合適的長度，就被她的牙齒啃掉。一隻鳥突然撲向玻璃窗。窗子嚴實地關著。牠倒了下去。但窗外並沒有牠的屍體。那促使她想到，不應該用一種卑屈的態度去說那句話，就像幹了一件壞事。窗外的鳥鳴愈來愈猖獗，彷彿，牠們失去了同伴是司空見慣的日常風景。

許多女人已在那裡等候，只有零落的幾個男人，作為陪伴者，替他們的妻子或情人，抱著萎靡的手袋，就像在安撫一個無辜的孩子，臉上帶著被困的神情，或許那其實是悲憫，有時候，她無法清晰地區別兩者。她避免仔細打量在那裡的女人的臉，以免發現自己跟她們同樣面目浮腫、雙目佈滿紅絲，就像剛剛哭過，但其實，那只是長期睡眠不足的結果。

輪候的時間比空所想像的短促太多，當她走到登記的窗口，不免感到一陣慌亂，可是，窗口內的職員只是要她說出自己的名字，視線在她的臉上掠過，卻沒有看到什麼，以致，空並沒有機會說出，經過這麼多年，那被遺忘的孩子，已長大了，長得更大，甚至有點太大。職員遞給她的表格，只須填上一些個人資料，一個可以追蹤的地址，一串可以證實她身份的號碼，最後，她必須在一段由他人撰寫，而且經過大量印刷和複製的聲明下方，簽署自己的名字。聲明的內容，關於Y城的大量女性（約佔總人口

百分之十五)，年齡介乎二十七至三十九歲，都干犯了懶惰和貪婪的罪行，在適合懷孕的年期，卻白白浪費了身上的卵巢和子宮，錯過了孕育生命的機會，釀成Y城出生率逐年減少，大量學校接連關閉，勞動力降低，預計在二十年後，老化問題便會成為沉重的負擔。作為城市裡盡責的公民，得到權利的同時，也必須履行義務，例如繳交足夠的稅項，以及生養足夠的孩子。經過收入和背景評估後，空只須生下至少一名嬰兒，而且得到三年的寬限期，要是限期屆滿，她仍然無法為城市增添一名新的人口，將會被罰款、監禁，甚至褫奪公民的資格。聲明的下方，並沒有「同意」或「不同意」的選項。

其實，空絕少生出不同意的念頭。從小，她就擅於聽從長輩的暗示：接受一切的安排，可以得到最大的益處。而且，很久以前，她就感到自己不再年輕，或，在正式衰老之前，她就作出了變老的妥善準備，以免經歷不必要的驚懼。雖然，命理師早已警告過她，只有作出徹底失去理智的打算，才有機會在本命年到達之前碰到合適的伴侶，可是她早已習慣在任何時刻，保持鎮靜的微笑，這使她感到自己無法肆意地奔跑，或走到太遠的地方。在她身體的中央有一個急需填補的空洞，一年下來，她可以覺察那個洞又擴張了一點點，畢竟，人們每天犯下的錯誤就像製造垃圾那樣無可避免，她並不知道，自己亟欲得到懲罰，就像城市需要愈來愈多的焚化爐。多年以來，各種訓誡塑造了她的嗓音、穿著裝扮、表情和言談，以至對於未來的想像。但她從沒有認真地想過這一點。那天，當她步出審核處，證明書上寫著她只需生養一個孩子（就是那個被她忘掉了，卻日益壯大，比她更強韌的胚胎），以及所獲得的資助金額，並不如她的一些同齡女性友人，經過嚴謹的家庭背景、職業、學歷、收入和健康狀況審查之後，得到必須生育三個，甚至五個的結論。她的嘴巴便愉快地上揚，就像許多年前，她通過小學入學試中的笑容測驗，那是她在人生裡第一次真切地感到，自己擁有活著的最低資格。她的母親和叔叔時常告誡她：「要多笑，即使一點也不好笑，也要笑。」就像他們鏗而不捨地矯正她走路時微駝的背部，直至某天，他們再也不說這樣的話，空臉上的神態也早已跟她各不相干。

賞賜和懲罰總是難以區分，她是少數精確地掌握了這個道理的人，但她並不自知這一點。

空躺在以膠布鋪墊的地面上，生育配對中心的助理以粉筆勾勒出她頭部以及身體的形狀，然後她站起來，跨過留在膠布上的身體邊界，讓助理在她剛剛躺過，仍然留著餘溫的部分，寫上她的名字和檔案編號。所有已登記的待孕者（審核處這樣指稱償還生育債項的女人），都可以選擇生育配對中心，只要那中心在衛生署認證的目錄之上。她推開了這裡的大門，讓他們把她的個人狀況逐一記錄在電腦的資料夾裡，只是因為，坐在她鄰桌的同事曾經對她描述檢驗和配對的過程。那一次，他們採集了那同事的氣味，又剪下一縷她的頭髮。那同事對空說，每個人在那裡都會得到不同的待遇。

空回過頭去，檢視助理所繪下的她的身體線條，並不真正相信那來自她自己，可是就像以往的每一次，她會把自己剪裁，削掉多餘的部分，直至切合某個形狀。

「你已經準備好要成為另一個人嗎？」空快要離開那中心時，辦理手續的職員以親切的語氣問她。

「我會變成另一個人嗎？」空不禁感茫然。

「一個新造的人將會自你的內在誕生。」職員指了指她空空如也的腹部。為了進行身體檢查，她已經禁食超過十二小時。或許是因為虛弱，職員的笑容令她感

到沒來由地羞恥，但她並沒有打算追尋羞恥的原因，只是想要迅速地掩蓋，就像遮蔽身上所有隱密的部分。

當空想告訴李斯特，關於她故意忘記那從未成形的胎兒時，他正坐在對面，專心致志地切割一塊七成熟的牛排，打算把其中的四分之一切碎，放進空的盤子裡。配對中心為他們挑選了彼此，再給他們預訂一家餐廳，餐廳的店長決定他們吃飯時播放的音樂，音樂充塞了陌生帶來的靜默，他們並沒有交談的必要，只須遵守由配對中心為初次約會訂下的守則。她知道，他們的相遇並非她的責任，可是他進食的神情溫柔得接近殘忍，使她生出了一種從不曾有過的和盤托出的欲望，要向他描述一根蜿蜒的曲線，從起點一直往前，就會到達另一個起點，那裡，時而高峰，時而低谷，她就是沿著那條路線，一直走到他的跟前。

她期待他會從肉香四溢的牛排中抬起頭問，那是一條怎樣的道路，那麼她就可以描繪配對中心助理手中的粉筆，那根粉筆沿著她的頭髮、脖子、肩頭、肋骨、手肘、腰間、臀、大腿、小腿、腳掌、胯下，繞了一圈，使她讀到一幅關於命運的地圖。那地圖為她換來一張證明書，使她在天空灰暗的週一早上，走進上司的辦公室，向她申請三個月的懷孕預備假期。她還要告訴他，即使她在工作上不斷犯下大大小小的錯誤，那上司仍然讓她待在那裡的原因，是她像個從來不會泛起漣漪的湖，衣櫥裡只有灰色和藍色的衣服，對於人生，也沒有多餘的盼望。她工作的地方，只能容納這樣的員工。她渴望李斯特會抬起灰藍色的眼睛問她，在他們的城市，像她這樣在某天醒來，突然感到，那個從未結成胚胎的孩子靈魂仍然留在身體內的女人，究竟有多少。但這是不可能的事，她根本無法把藏在胸腹之間的言語，以他的語言，組成一句完整的句子。它們只是一堆支離破碎的單字、動詞和不及物動詞，遍佈她的每一個內臟，當她回到獨居的房子，睡在自己的雙人床上，抱著自己的肚子並感到從未誕生的孩子對她懷著深重的惡意，便會在夢和夢之間，反覆練習各種錯誤的句型和不完整的語法，只是那時候並沒有任何人能聽到從她口中吐出的準確而地道的發音。當失落的微笑在空的臉上蔓延，他理解那是一種羞怯，於是更胸有成竹地大口咀嚼鮮甜的肉排，直至侍者走到他們身旁，禮貌地說出，用餐時間已經完結。李斯特使用餐巾抹了抹油亮的嘴巴，依從配對中心的指引，在首次聚餐之後，愉快地從外套的口袋掏出錢包。

他們並肩走到餐廳的出口，她把滿腹難以啓齒的話約化成「謝謝」、「一切都太好」、「再見。」然後，他們按照他家鄉的習慣，道別時擁抱，輕吻對方，接著分道揚鑣。

她認為，尚未成形的胎兒，必定會滿意這樣的結果。配對中心以電郵通知她合適的人選，名單上有十人，只有李斯特在另一個遙遠的城市出生，以工作簽證暫居此地。她在地圖上搜索他的城市，那形狀像一隻皮靴，也像一個昏厥的女人，使她想到一個人有時也像一根線，必須通過拉址或調整，解開不知在何時形成的死結。

李斯特認為，他來到世上的唯一目的，很可能，只是把視線穿越事物的表層，繪出一張完美的透視圖。

最初，他以為眼睛會引領他，不久後，他以為握著滑鼠或筆的右手會引領他，可是，當他自建築設計系畢業，他知道自己只是比從前更熟悉事物光滑的表層而已。他總是能迅速而準確地繪出一份設計圖紙的透視圖，要訣就是，他從不試圖真正弄清什麼。有時候，他渴望閉上眼睛，一段更長

的時間，可是這個世界並不會給他這樣的機會，不斷轉換的交通燈、急促的腳步聲、車子的警號、路人的尖叫、車站內的廣播，全都迫使他以無望的眼瞳緊盯四周。

在海邊的餐廳，落地玻璃窗外的陽光使他的雙目收緊成了兩道縫，他只能看到，坐在他對面的女人，頭髮像一朵無法散去的烏雲，許多深深淺淺的藍在他們身旁蕩漾。他便關閉了耳朵和嗓子。然後，他忽然發現，正在經歷的一切，他早已經歷過，當它仍然在進行的時候，便已成過去。不久之後，這一切將以遺忘的形式一直存留在他的腦袋。

那個夜裡，他第一次手繪了一張跟工作完全無關的透視圖。當他在白色草稿紙上完成最後一筆，意識的最後防線便完全崩潰，倒在床上不省人事。陽光曬在他臉上的時候，他才醒過來，看到書桌埋在陰影裡，一張畫紙停留在陰影之上，他注視畫紙上的繪圖，本來，他看見的是一棵樹，葉片掉落了一部分，成了佝僂的形狀，不久，他發現自己看錯了，那是一幢圓椎體的樓房，不規則地分佈的孔洞是窗子，但很快，他又否定了自己的想法，感到那只是一件悲哀的長大衣。他忍不住閉上乾澀的眼睛，安撫隱隱作痛的眼球，那時候，他才願意承認，那是一個人的身體，不一定是一個女人，或男人，那是成人但同時是孩子，那是空，也是他。他甚至繪出了皮膚的網狀表層，由於過於精細，並不容易發現那是一幅皮膚。他看到一個人，包裹著另一個人，另一個人又包裹著另一個人，一個人，一個人和一個人。他仍然緊閉著眼睛，在很短的時間之內，毫無先兆地想起所有的事情。

空收到生育配對中心的電郵，通知她配對的第一階段成功，並且將會給他們安排一個十四天的旅程。通知書的最後一段為他們作出了像警告那樣的體貼提示：假期的不真實狀態有助一切結合誕下生命。

她覺得應該要讓木知道，可是，對他來說，蒙在鼓裡無疑是更適切的做法——就讓他一如以往地進入空無一人的房子時，能心無旁騖地偷竊，掠取她為他預備的、打算像禮物一般獻給他的書、襯衣、皮夾和圍巾，或她收藏的古董餐具、朋友送她的陶瓷、母親留給她的一雙玉耳環、抽屜內的明信片或一個開瓶器。她記得，第一次在他家裡的衣櫥發現幾個月之前不翼而飛的高跟鞋、一個皮包和鋼筆時，就像聽到他對她撒謊，或看見他背著自己偷了另一個人，她整個身子不斷顫抖卻無法說話，在她還沒有洞悉也不知道如何安置逐漸膨脹的憤怒時，他已經懂得，而且用力摟著她的肩膊說：「別老是以為自己是個受害者。」他抱著她，像哀求同時也像咒罵：「會發生這種事只是因為，你無法給我的這麼多，遠遠無法填滿我最基本的需要。」

她從不打算反駁他，因為在他們之間並不存在必然的真理，她堅守的是，共處是一種互相餽贈，但他認為彼此剝削是無可避免的事。

「人和人之間不免有著各種差異。」他說。於是她的難過便被實際的煩惱取代，為了滿足他心血來潮的突襲，購物的時候，她總是先考慮他的喜好，他每天必需的咖啡，快要用完的衛生紙、每週必讀的刊物、糙米和蘋果，然後等待他前來偷取。她確實嚐到妥協帶來的好處，當她發現為他預備的物品一如預期消失了影蹤時，心裡便感到難言的踏實，就像他第一次牽著她的手，經過一群兇悍的野狗，但她有時，也難以避免地發現，他不問自取的是她想要獨自保有而無法分享的東西，一枚指環、兩封信、畢業證書、已過世的貓留下頸圈。那時候，她就會感到像某個器官被分割了一部份的痛苦。這令她想起那個從未成形的胎兒，它向她索取注意。經過長久的



折騰之後，她才明白他無法用言語表達的話；竊取也是一種親密的信任。他們再也不能離開對方。

那個冬夜，他們躺在床上，睡意久候不至，木忽然像執法者檢查疑犯那樣把她全身上下搜索了一遍，然後，他終於累了，不久，鼻息便像潮汐那樣均勻，像夢囈那樣吐出：「終有一天，我也要你的腎，也要你的肺葉、食道和氣管……」她的擔憂便像濃霧那樣聚攏，只有在意識模糊的時候，他才能比較坦率地表達，她根本供不應求的事實。接近黎明的時分，面對那個被她拒絕多時的孩子，便生出了決心養育它，如此，家中便有更多可以讓木需索的人和事，當然，那必不可以是他的孩子，只有不屬於他的，他才有偷取的必要。她帶著這個念頭，像安慰自己那樣沉沉睡去。

空躺在一張宣紙上，他們保持靜默，在五天的共處之中，他們絕少交談。李斯特在Y城居住多年，但多語言的環境使他從來沒有迫切的需要學習Y城語，而他的母語，卻是空從來無法得心應口的外語。他們幾乎沒有發出任何語音，但漸漸熟悉對方的表情和動作所蘊含的意義，當中不免帶著過於主觀的解讀，但不會比語言溝通帶來的誤解更多。

旅館在一個海灘上，位於李斯特的出生地。孩提時期，他的父親在周末便開著一輛吉普車，把家人載到那個沙灘上進行日光浴。他和空自Y城出發，六個小時後抵達旅館，成年後，他首次再度進入潮濕的海的氣味之中，不禁握著空冰冷的手，激動地傾吐童年往事，但他說話的速度太快語音太混雜，她雖然表現心領神會的表情，但只能聽懂很少的部分。在商店購物的時候，在餐廳的侍應跟他們閒聊時，在迷路的旅客向他們求助時，當他在路上重遇多年不見的友人滔滔不絕地交換近況的時候，空嘗試說出他們的語言，並掩飾所有可能出現的破綻，但她的舌頭卻無法跟他們同樣敏捷地轉動或捲縮，臉上便出現了一種無家可歸的徬徨。這使他感到非常尷尬，彷彿他已無可選擇地分擔了她的外來者身份。他便不由自主地走了神，忽然不能確定，他從什麼地方來，或將要到哪裡去。

日光慢慢地褪盡時，空的安全感隨著臉上的血色逐漸消滅，他看到她漸漸脆弱像一張容易戳破的宣紙。他根據旅館服務人員的指示，駕車到島上唯一的美術用品店，買來一疊不堪一擊的宣紙。

旅館內的落地玻璃窗使他們不約而同地感到被過度曝露的失措，但他並沒有打算以宣紙製成臨時窗簾，只是，空站在窗前，呆看著海和天空的交接處，剛好阻擋了窗外扎人的光線，使他感到彷彿站在樹下的陰涼。他便把宣紙鋪在地上，示意她躺在上面，然後耐著性子等候她不堪疲倦而入睡。他用素描筆沿著她的身體，留下了一道鬆弛的路線。她醒來後，窗外已成墨黑一片，清晰地反映了他們和房間。他正在剪裁她留在宣紙上的身影。她以手勢要求他平躺在房間另一端的宣紙上，拾起他的筆，畫下一根可以把他完整地網起來的線。他們低著頭，一起拿著剪刀，不發一言地幹活，呼吸的節奏和勢態便漸漸趨向一致。是她首先把宣紙鋪滿整個房間，俯伏在紙上，擬想那些人就那樣躺在她跟前，她畫下了母親和叔叔、木和新生兒，他走到房間的另一個角落，在空白的紙張上繪下透視圖。

天空破開第一道亮光之前，他們已把所有人形密鋪在玻璃窗上，阻擋即將淹沒他們的陽光，以及隨之而來的白天和黑夜。

他們並不飢餓，而且再也沒有交換訊息的必要，只是各自抱著膝蓋坐在地上休息。空已經在心裡完成了對李斯特的完整敘述，但也放棄了把話宣之於口的嘗試，而且發現，渴望訴說的對象只能是她自己。他閉上

腫脹的眼皮，在漆黑中，感到可以穿透牆壁的結構，水管的裂縫，自己和空的每一根血管和神經。他們並不知道，在那個幽暗的房間裡，他們同時洞穿了，自己以往的人生，那浸沒在黑之中的孩子，反覆地死去。像他們這樣的人，究竟有沒有足夠的力量，恍如徹底死亡後迎接一個全新的生命，配對中心的生育手冊中，並沒有提及這一點，那上面只是寫著：參加本計劃而引致任何意外或傷亡，本中心概不負責。