

SPRING 2010

KARTIKA REVIEW

SEARCHING FOR NORMALCY

PETER TIERYAS LIU

Dedicated to Neej Gore

I.

My obsession was listening to other people's phone calls. A single voice dwelling in a park on a swing, an auburn morning fading into the purple oblivion of pollution. I peeled away my sensations, musing about the way skin withered off, silicon plastics embedded in my forehead like nails torn through my brows in a painful masquerade. I spent my mornings thinking about all the things that would never be, life being that series of conversations over coffee and coke and phone booths. Past subway rails and empty picnic tables and torn school books. All the other stuff was filler, never the fulfillment of one's ravenous lust that consumed like a Neanderthal run amok. I stood and listened to people screaming into their cell phones, lonely whispers outside phone booths, pressing my ear against a glass box or waiting in line for unwanted calls. I didn't try to remember names, a john or a jake or a jenny or a jane. Heard a girlfriend asking a boyfriend why he no longer loved her and a boyfriend asking a girlfriend why she no longer loved him. I traveled from street to street, waiting next to obsolescent phone booths, collecting what people said like a connoisseur of eclectic conversations.

It all began with moments. There was a day I woke up late cause I'd received a phone call telling me an old friend had passed away. My wife of four years was sleeping in a separate room. In the morning, I slept through the alarm, eventually got up and showered. The living room sofa had been neatly set up. Even though my wife had been out of a job for a year, she was gone. There was a phone call. I picked up expecting my boss. Someone asked for my wife.

"She's not here. Who's this?"

He remained silent. Then hung up.

Later, during dinner, I remembered a time as a teenager when I'd gone to a friend's house. As her parents ate, they didn't say a single word. The mother served the food, the father read the newspaper. It was an act that played out every night, same time, same place without variance. I swore I would never

be like them. But here I was, my wife reading some obscure cookbook, me, mute. When we'd met, we were like two sailboats in a fleet of ocean liners, our sails torn asunder, anchored together by the stratifying mishaps of ritualized tedium. Routine was the breeze that drove us forward, cynicism tethering our hulls together. Even after thousands of conversations, I was struck by how little we actually knew each other. The poverty of dialogue and the inability of our words to sate either of our appetites for companionship left us famished and lonely. It was hard for me to filter through the present coldness to one that had once smiled, lit up at the sight of me. Her expression when we made love or chatted about ancient history and music till four in the morning, damning fatigue and exhaustion.

The following day, I went on a business trip for three days. When I came home, there was a note that read '*good bye.*' I never spoke to her again.

I tried to lose myself in work. As a marketing guy, I dealt with people everyday, selling them things they didn't want or need. I'd tell them the exact same lines in the exact same way with the exact same pose and the exact same smile. People would lie to me and we both knew they were lying but it was okay. It was all within the rules, the boundaries of pleasant deception.

One day, while wandering through the city, a phone began ringing. I blinked, saw it was a payphone. Not sure who it was for, I picked up.

"I'm gonna rape your fucking ass and cut off your legs and tie you up and bitch fuck you all day," a coarse female voice said to me.

I stared blankly, shifting awkwardly. "Excuse me... Do you know, this is a public payphone?"

"Of course I do you fuck. You think I don't know that?"

"But-but-you don't know me..."

"I'm watching you right now."

I hung up and immediately left. For two days, I gave into all my conspiratorial paranoia and isolated myself, refusing to pick up the phone or step outside. Only when it was over did I realize something- I felt alive.

And it began. I noticed there were moments when a person thought nobody else was around and they were completely alone on the phone- a few minutes, thirty seconds, an hour- I heard something in their voice. Honey, I'm

going to be home a little later- no, don't wait for me. The inflection, the subtle drop, the quivering in the throat, the unconscious hair sweep. Meaning under meaning, watching from afar, confirming something even if it was a vulgar reality, bare and viciously raw, unpolished, unprepared, unpresuming. It was pure in an adulterated way. I began with small steps. Sometimes, people would dial the wrong number and reach me at home. Instead of hanging up, I asked questions, encouraged them to talk. And they would start telling me things about their life. Others would hang up. But many wouldn't, instead, doing something I'd never understood. Like an age of confession. Obsessed with one's own drama. Describing things miniscule as grand. One's self-absorbed pain being the most traumatic, a stranger to another. They never asked me any questions. It was almost like I wasn't there, just a broken mirror hanging invisibly in front of them.

Watching people, trying to partake in their phonecalls. I wanted to know if they knew what I did. I wanted to hear the truth in their voices. At work, I couldn't focus anymore. I'd be given assignments to contact this person or that, and then I'd hear them talk in the same jovial bonhomie that meant nothing. What was the point of talking if everyone said the same thing but knew it meant nothing? So, I stopped speaking. People would talk to me and I wouldn't answer them. They'd be confused, upset. They'd ask if I was sick, ask me to respond, a desperation in their tone. Sometimes, I could hear a residue of truth, a trace that reminded me they were real. But most times, it was only frustration and false morality. It wasn't long before I left my job. Left my home. Left my career. My family. I grew tired of not hearing them.

II.

I was on a long street with cars, some with headlights on even though it was day. Business suits and suitcases blended into the massive billboards selling trends and beliefs, acolytes and disciples of the corporate church that gave you something to live and die for.

Standing next to the phone booth, I was eating a piece of a bagel someone threw away. A man in a blue business suit furtively entered the booth. He had half a mustache, curled oily hair, a suave veneer in his aquiline face that meandered between confidence and fear. He didn't close the door, just took out a bunch of quarters and dialed random numbers. I could hear voices on the other side asking, *hello? Hello? HELLO????* He didn't answer, just stood there, listening. He repeated this about forty times. Men, women, children. I could hear them quizzically wondering who it was. Some cursed. Others hung up, terrified by the silence. When he used up all his coins, he came out, ready to leave.

I approached.

“What do you want?” he demanded.

“What were you just doing?” I demanded back.

“What is it to you?”

“I just saw what you did.”

“And?” he asks.

I stared at him without saying anything.

He laughed amusedly. “Walk with me through the park.”

III.

“It’s silence I want to hear,” he suddenly said. “That single instance where a person is bare and pure and doesn’t know how to feel. The silence that follows. That’s all.”

IV.

“What do *you* get out of this?” he wondered.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“I can tell that wasn’t the first time you’ve listened in on a conversation.”

“I don’t really want to talk about it,” I replied.

“Why not?”

“Words can cheapen an experience,” I said, “misrepresent a truth, especially when you try to describe it exactly.”

He laughed.

As we walked along, I asked him about himself- why he started doing what he did.

He answered, "I got tired of losing things because I wanted them so badly."

"I don't understand."

"You've never lost anything?"

"What'd you lose?"

He hardened his eyes. Then said, "They say that people only have a few motivations for anything they do. You think people ever do anything without any reason?"

"Love, hate, jealousy, what real reason is there for any of it?"

"The disease is existence," he said.

"What?"

He grinned. "I've never thought nature beautiful. I always thought people made up the word beautiful just so they can look at something forever. What if they discarded the words beautiful and ugly? Would any concept of physical judgment disappear?"

"No," I answered.

"Then words don't really mean anything."

"Why?"

"Because they're just symbols for what we really mean," he said.

"Symbols are important because they give things meaning when they normally wouldn't have sense of anything," I said.

"Maybe," he replied. "Let me tell you a story. I once met this woman by random chance. We were both looking for champagne in the supermarket. She'd just finished graduate school and wanted to celebrate. We exchanged awkward laughter, and I asked her with who she was celebrating. She frowned. No one. I remember she was wearing a black frock and a pair of jeans. Her hair was short, cut off right above her shoulders- and her eyes-

they were like embers doused in a field of honey. Her skin was really pale and touching her was like running my fingers through a burning desert. You know in Morocco during WWII, the soldiers would heat up eggs on their tanks cause the armor plates got so hot. They'd sizzle sunny side up or scramble it with a canteen but you never used your gun cause you didn't want gunpowder mixed in with your eggs. A little spark and everything would go boom. That was her. I wanted that moment so badly. She was sad to be alone. I insisted I would do something for her if no one else would. She pretended to be shy, refused initially, but I broke through all the barriers. Back at her apartment, she told me how she'd been studying hard for the last few years. After a few drinks, we made love on her bed. I know most people like to sleep right after sex, but I can't. I have a hard time with anyone next to me. She was happy cause she thought I wanted to talk. This was her most intimate of moments. She told me about her ex-husband, how they'd been together for three years. One night, she came home and found him with another woman. He didn't apologize even though she would have forgiven him. Instead, he cut off contact and refused to speak to her again.

"It was dark but I could feel her. I could feel all those lost moments, regret, pain, innocence shattered. She'd lost something pure. And I don't mean her virginity. A man can fall in love just as easily in the span of a second as he can in ten years. She continued talking about her ex, describing what a scumbag he was, how he went from girl to girl. All I could think about was her wasted love. She'd be suspicious, reluctant of me after a while. We'd probably have a scene a few weeks into the relationship, she'd ask for space and time, demand that I prove myself trustworthy. It was already written. I didn't want to play my part. So when she fell asleep, I left and never looked back. Truth is, if she had shut up, I would have loved her. But in this case, as in most cases, the truth wasn't worth knowing."

"But the truth is what makes her interesting."

"What do you mean?"

"I love people for their scars," I replied. "No scars and they're a bore."

"Self-induced scars are signs of stupidity."

"Then I'd be the stupidest man alive."

He laughed. "It's curious how normalcy seems so abnormal when surrounded by abnormalities."

“Then it’s normalcy you’re searching for?”

“Or the lack thereof,” he replied.

We conversed for a few more minutes. He excused himself to go use the restroom. An hour later, I realized he wasn’t returning and was filled with a pang of regret. I wished I could have at least said farewell.

V.

As a nine-year old boy infatuated with imagined histories and treasure coves of lost fortunes, there was no moment more exciting than when my mother brought home twelve boxes filled with old telephones. Her younger brother, my uncle, died in a motorcycle accident and left them to her in his will. We set them up all over the apartment, oblong ones, and coldly metallic ones. There were phones I thought carved from dead dinosaur bones, others from ancient Egyptian ceramics buried with resurrected pharaohs. There were cords made from the leather of old British armor sets and hides from sharks that struggled violently with fishermen for weeks. Many of the cases had been constructed from frozen plastic secretly harvested from the moon. It was a laboratory for the senses, all the phones hooked up so that one ring would result in a chaotic opera of discordant ringtones vying for domination. I’d run to pick up, curious who it was. I’d hope for a sword swallower, a piano virtuoso with cerebral palsy playing with her tongue, an eco-terrorist that poured strawberry ice cream inside fuselages. Instead, it was almost always, “Is your mom home dear? This is JC Penny,” or some anti-climactic bore of a voice wanting to talk about bills and ‘special offers.’

My adulthood would be different. I’d meet a million different people, holding conversation parties with the entire world. My ear would be a permeable vessel for the turbulence of their thoughts, a balloon brimming with the hydrogen of inspiration and the volatility of revolutionary musings. We’d chat about a world without smell or a metropolis where people only spoke in musical chords. We could plan a city made entirely of vegetables, Carrot Lake, the Celery Towers, Radish Hall. Ardor had a thousand permutations and we’d discuss the ramifications of dissecting each. But to my disappointment, no one ever really wanted to talk about anything except their problems. That’s when they wanted to talk. At the end of our relationship, I couldn’t get my wife to say anything no matter how hard I tried. I called her from all over the world and all that ensued was a rote, automated conversation that could have lasted one minute as easily as three thousand. I wondered how many passionless ‘I love you’s,’ had been carried across the transatlantic cables, how much lusterless joy and rueless savagery that blended apathy with

hatred and bliss. My words felt like a dulled rifle blowing holes into my kidney until my spleen was overfilled with the gangrene of suppressed bitterness and verbal martyrdom. Even my hatred felt obtuse over the phone.

Many had their destiny invisibly carved by phones, ones with the musty smell of disuse and dirt, or the lean fragrance of congealed honey and ketchup stains. I knew a man who killed himself cause his girlfriend left him, not realizing she would call him eight minutes after his suicide, confessing her mistake and expressing her desire to return. One woman stopped to take a wrong phone call for 12.33 seconds. On her way to work, the delay caused her to run a yellow light as it turned red, resulting in the car on the other side ramming her from the left. I knew of an uncle who could never forgive himself for missing his wife's phone calls as she lay dying in a hospital because he'd turned the ringer off to take a nap.

I grew up surrounded by his phones.

VI.

I often strolled through the park alone. This particular morning, I noticed a young woman playing chess by herself. She had light blonde hair that undulated into a field of cherry freckles scattered across her dapper cheeks. Thick glasses launched daintily in front of her small nose and she had wispy lips to offset her vanishing chin. She possessed an airy posture as though she were floating, continually swaying her body from side to side, gripping her seat so that she wouldn't fly off. I sat across from her and asked if I could join her.

She nodded her head without expression.

I noticed she was several moves into her game, playing herself.

"Who's winning?"

She didn't answer, absorbed into making her moves.

I stared as she moved her pieces, retreating or defending appropriately. The rook took bishop; pawn, the knight. After a few moves, the game was over. She set up and started again.

Some time passed before a man came by.

"Excuse me, what are you doing?" he asked.

"I was hoping to get a game of chess."

"And?"

"She hasn't really said anything to me.. I'm sorry- is she your-" I hung on the 'your.'

He dutifully completed it for me. "My patient. She's deaf and mute... I think it'd be best if you leave now," he said.

"Does she come here every day to play chess?"

"Sir."

"Maybe she wants some competition."

"She's been doing this every day of her life for the last ten years. I don't think she wants any company."

I looked at her. Then got up. She was still absorbed into her chess game. As far as she was concerned, I was never even there.

VII.

But I couldn't just walk away.

VIII.

She wasn't there the next day, or the one after. But she was there on the third day. No one was around and I sat across from her. She said nothing, kept on playing. I thought about the conversations I'd heard earlier that day. A couple of guys asked some friends out to play croquet on donkeys. A young lady dressed in expensive clothes called in sick as her male friend waited outside the booth. A teenager was telling someone about a problem.

"I'm obsessed. I can't stop drinking shampoo and cologne. I get so caught up with the idea of violating and destroying all the disgusting smells inside me. It's like taking my hand, sticking it down my throat and ripping out my larynx and splattering it all over the floor cause my shoes and shirts stink so bad. It runs through my head a million times. You're at work typing fifty billion words about nothing and giving people change and you're thinking about your bad breath and everyone else too, especially your five-hundred bosses who have no clue what they're doing. You try to think about this lady's nice

Tiffany necklace and how much her husband spent getting it for her and there's all the beautiful people in the world and all of them stink to hell when they die or take a shit or wake up in the morning. All I'm thinking is, when is work over so I can go and chew on soap. I can't stop myself. I know it's going to screw me badly but even then, I just think, one more time, one more time. It can't hurt. I need relief. I'm so tired of bad smells. Everyone else gets the real deal, real happiness, the hot wife with the nice car just cause they sold a ton of fungus. All I want is to swallow perfume. One more bottle, one more can."

The chess player waved her hands at me. I startled, looking up. She was making a writing gesture with her fingers. I checked my pockets, found a pen. She ripped out a piece of paper from her notepad and wrote, "am i here?"

I stared at her. "Uhh. I-" But she shook her hand and gestured that I write it out for her.

"Yes," I wrote.

"how can you tell?" She had very pretty writing.

"Because you are sitting across from me."

"how do you know im not just part of imagination."

"You're playing chess."

"touch my face."

She grabbed my hand, and then directed it to her face. When my palm pressed against her cheek, she closed her eyes and held it.

Abruptly, she let go and wrote furiously on the paper. When she finished, she pushed the paper across to me.

It read, "i am disappearing everyday. no one wants to talk to me. my parents stopped coming long ago. eventually, i will be gone. i cant speak or hear anything. nothing exists for me, just like this chess game. i play and play everyday but no one remembers, no one can tell you who died on the battlefield and who sacrificed their life for victory. i collected feathers to try to see, marbles and crayons from countries you've never heard of and colors that no longer exist. but none of them convinced me i was real. even you dont exist. i cant tell that you do. i feel your touch but i could be imagining it.

sometimes, i pretend i can hear people but i know i cant. if you cant hear people and they cant hear you, you dont exist."

"I don't exist either," I wrote back. "No one hears me and I don't hear anyone else."

"symbolic deafness and muteness dont count."

"How do you know I'm not really mute or deaf?" I wrote. "You can't hear me and you can never tell if I've heard anything you said." I wondered if that last line would provoke her but I decided to give it to her anyway.

She laughed. "thats true... why are you here?"

I thought about it, thought about it for a good long time.

"i'm here because i can no longer hear myself, i cant hear anything-everything's so distant and alien... but i'm hoping i can remember my voice by listening to others."

"any luck so far?"

I sighed and shook my head. "all i hear are echoes that faded long time ago."

She held my hand again. "at least you can hear the echoes," she wrote with her other hand.

I gripped her fingers. Then in a moment of inspiration, reached across and kissed her softly. Her lips felt like dead peaches. She was shocked, her eyes dilated wide. She broke out into an awkward giggle, her fingers nervously tap-dancing across my face. A few minutes later, her guardian arrived.

"Tomorrow?" I wrote.

She nodded.

When I returned the next day, she wasn't there. I searched several more days for her. But she was nowhere in sight.

Maybe like she said, she'd finally vanished.

Unfortunately, my essence too was just a shard, a sublimation of everything I'd wanted.

It was evening and I found a hidden area in a park where I could sleep. I guess it was possible for me to find a home again, possible for me to try to get a job-try to live a 'worthy' life. I remembered one night shortly after my wife left me, I was sitting in front of my computer surfing the web. There was a mosquito flying around which I tried to crush with my hands. I walked to my bathroom and on the way back, noticed a dead butterfly on the floor. I picked it up and realized it was actually just a leaf cut into pieces. For no explicable reason, I smashed the wall and threw my CD's and DVD's and flung plates at the glass table my ex-wife had purchased. Death was the normal end for everyone- there and only there, would my search for normalcy end. With the slither of a warm liquid down my numbed forehead as I felt nothing other than the voice of someone yelling in misguided desire that would eventually climax in another false set of emotions that really were a facade for pure bestiality.



Peter Tieryas Liu has recently had short stories accepted for publication in the *Binnacle*, *Prism Review*, *Quiddity International Literary Journal*, *Yomimono*, and *ZYZZYVA*. He's worked as a technical writer for Lucasfilm and is currently a character technical director for Sony Pictures on Tim Burton's, *Alice in Wonderland*.