

「倫敦這種大都會像洗衣機的一千四百轉速…」

“The London metropolis was like a washing machine spinning at 1400 rpm.”

Take Care of Yourself
(Spoken to a Teochew Rhythm)

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(自己顧自己)

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一年前，疫症在歐洲開始大爆發，撤僑成風，機票難求，留學英國的朋友搶到三萬港元的單程機票下星期啟程回港，他憂心地問我：「盧好你走不走？」我說不走。

實情是我能去哪？我對他的提問感到愕然，好像問香港人會不會說廣東話一樣多餘，或許我在他眼中同是過客，但我怎會一樣呢，有家能回的人才能夠作離開的打算，而我不。

我在英國六年了，那時候挾持住青春來追求自由和獨處的時間。香港的生活空間之小，人際關係之緊密，對於年輕的我非常窒息。我來到沒有縱向系屬的國家，六年來，橫向的關係增又減，直至封城之前，我最後如家人般的好友 (Friendmily) 也趁脫歐前搬到了歐洲大陸，所有我曾經以為會長久的存在都敵不過倫敦的洗禮。

倫敦這種大都會像洗衣機的一千四百轉速，水份受不住離心力的挑戰就離開衣物到排水口去。而我則像大毛巾內的水份，總是沒法在洗衣機內扭乾，頑強地糾纏，雖然不是甚麼驕人的成就，卻成了我唯一可以炫耀的事情。

封城之初我其實非常雀躍。春夏交替，空氣中洋溢着的並不是恐懼而是勃勃生氣。我的兼職工作是服務行業，政府發放薪水讓我們停工。我乘着疫症大條道理推卻所有社交活動，曾經有四個月，我回復到大學時期時常躲在自己的小宇宙中探索文學和電影的妙想世界。我雄心壯志地想要讀完書架上所有被遺忘的書，還有一列長長的電影清單都要在這個「暑假」完成。夏末，我十

萬字的小說書稿連結局都有了。每天讀書寫字，外出散步，生活從未如此穩定美滿，還有了全職寫作的錯覺。

但有一陣子我連一星期一次的搜購活動也省去。亞裔人士被打或因戴口罩被傷的新聞跟着感染數字節節上升，一直以為發生在別人身上的事情也不止一次落在自己身上，雖然只是言語上的冒犯，然而已足夠消滅掉我的活動空間。雖然有時會生出「不怕歧視」的念頭，或者預演了反擊的戲碼，但最終甚少戰勝懦弱的自己。那些情節一如大部分事情，只有在我腦內上演。

但是強制在交通工具和室內戴口罩頒令後，歧視的新聞也再沒有聽到了，媒體把興趣轉到肺炎後遺症上。我又外出了，但迷人的夏日亦將盡。

封城政策夥拍英格蘭的天氣，就好比納豆配腐乳，越食越難啃。氣溫驟降，日照縮短，已經沒有事情能令我產生愉悅的感覺。每一種生活只要不斷重覆，就是百無聊賴的開端。我想念與人面對面的交往，哪怕他們沉悶和欠深度；想念在咖啡店的戶外座抽煙，哪怕消費高昂又人來人往；還有苦悶時去海邊城市逛逛。儘管英倫的海岸總是冷凍的石灘，我想念一切前正常的喧囂城市生活，而這又是失去了才明白的硬道理。

政府努力叫大家遵守規則，說封城的政策會盡快消除。但時間沒有帶來開脫。我們以為是短暫的停頓，在十二月聖誕節之前，封城的類別因為變種病毒而升級，政府重新奪取曾經有過的活動

範圍：食肆不能堂食，朋友之間見面只能在戶外（一、二月約攝氏零至五度），政府「阻止」國民離開英國之餘，連出城都禁止。第二次封城好像回頭的麻煩顧客，只能唯唯諾諾等他離開。

自由很脆弱，一聲令下，在這種民主社會都可以瞬間失去。營商的自由也沒有了，餐廳、酒吧、戲院、所有「非必要」的店無了期地關閉。有一家小鎮賀咭店因為開業而被罰款一萬八千英鎊（約港幣廿萬），小報更說這對店東夫婦行為異常，東主的說法是：「我們有上帝給予的權利，誠實地謀生。」但上帝老早死了，虛無主義橫行了至少百年。

英式荒謬繼續上演，我的眼界每天擴闊，例如是自由的銀碼。

同屋的愛爾蘭人原本在一個活動場地工作，現在投閒置散。他每月收一千五百英鎊，每日看電視或球賽，吃兩片多士作午餐或叫外賣，已經這樣生活將近一年了。他揚言不介意一直封城，因為不勞而獲最好。有些人渴求正常生活，有些人得了工資的八成就寧願被豢養，自由絕對有價。

對生活之不滿是轉變的開端，人需要調節心理以適應艱難生活，但同樣需要保留對扭曲的事情的觸覺。有時我不懂得，到底該正向地想，還是對生活充滿抱怨，才是推進生活的燃料。

八月時，倫敦市曾經開放過一個月，政府甚至資助市民十英鎊上餐館，刺激消費帶動經濟。因此我認識了一個新的香港朋友

作飯腳，我們一同去了幾次日本餐廳，還一起過了聖誕假期，看起來真像摯友。但她是我不認識的人當中最缺內涵的一位，我們的共同興趣只有亞洲食品和《全民造星 III》節目。所以當那個真人騷完了，飲飽食醉後，我們也沒有任何可以聊的事了。

她是我的救生圈，而我似乎是她的字紙簍。沒有見面的日子，她在通訊軟件給我連續發十幾條生死無關的短訊，隨便舉例：她外賣的菲律賓食物圖片，或黑色長方體的電視盒圖片……（不在此贅，免得讀者抱怨我浪費墨水）我只能對她不了了之。

在團體裏感到孤獨一般被認為是孤獨之最，但實情是，在一對一的相處中覺得孤單更見難受。因為沒有讓人分心的事情，而且沒法選擇跟誰去開展乏味的話題。我們往往以為他人能給予答案，尤其是沒有深入認識的人，但他人永不是答案，只會是更多的問題。

我想念在香港的時候，較容易相交興趣相近的朋友。人的孤獨除了有階段之分，也有層次之分。比如在英國，是跟自己的語言族群失聯，跟公共失聯，當我嘗試找尋說同語言的人時，就是跟精神寂寞靠近的時候；我也想念肌膚之親，而這疫症令我們對陌生人小心翼翼，更甯想要滿足情慾，秉持無比的信任，或者喜愛，才敢冒着患肺炎的險去親吻。

最後我又回到長篇小說的書稿，回到自己。唯有跟自己相處從不叫我沉悶或氣餒，聽起來實在自戀，但是跟自己對話，跟自

己筆下的角色相處，我反而更願意坐到書桌前每天細細耕耘。我其實沒有喜歡寫作，寫作也沒有讓我快樂，於我而言，那是無論如何都得繼續，我不可分割的部分。唯獨通過寫作，我思考，梳理生活中一切繚亂。而小說這種載體，是可以不受自身真實經驗限制而表達作者感到好奇的事。我利用小說主角的愛情關係來描述身處兩地之間的游離狀態，因為這個奇特的時期，反而看清角色的掙扎。

畢加索說：「沒有獨處怎出得了佳作。」這個疫情成就了我的孤獨。雖然獨個兒在異鄉，沒有事業，沒有金錢，沒有房子，也沒有伴侶，很容易察覺自己的一事無成，不過我還在寫。在這些困苦的日子裏，至少可以寫下去，作為存在的唯一寄託。

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A year ago, the pandemic erupted in Europe. Departures became a regular occurrence as foreign residents left. Plane tickets were difficult to find. A friend studying in the UK spent HK\$30,000 for a one-way ticket back to Hong Kong the following week. Worried, he asked me, “Yin, are you leaving?” I told him I was not.

The truth is, where was there for me to go? I was shocked by his question, as unnecessary as asking if a Hongkonger speaks Cantonese. Perhaps he saw me as someone like him, a sojourner here, but how could I be? Before you can make plans to leave, you have to have a home you can return to. I do not.

I have lived in the UK for six years. I leveraged my youth and came in search of freedom and solitude, my younger self suffocated by the tiny living spaces and intimacy of interpersonal relationships in Hong Kong. I came to a country that has no vertical affiliations. Six years came and went, horizontal affiliations increased, then decreased again until just before the lockdown, when my last friendmily (a friend like family) left for the European continent before Brexit. Everything I thought would endure forever was no match for London’s baptism.

The London metropolis was like a washing machine spinning at 1400 rpm. Unable to withstand the centrifugal force, the water in the wet clothes was forced out and down the drain. I, however, was like the water in a big towel that couldn’t be wrung dry. Hanging on with such tenacity was not an impressive achievement, but it became the only thing I had to put on display.

At the start of the lockdown, my spirits were actually quite high. Spring had turned to summer, and far from being full of panic, the air was saturated with exuberant vitality. I had a side job in the retail industry, but the government

was subsidizing our wages so that we didn’t have to work, and I took advantage of the pandemic’s severity to justify declining all social events. For four months I went back in time to my university years, hiding in my own little universe as I explored the fantasy worlds of literature and film. My lofty ambition for this “summer break” was to finish reading all the books sitting forgotten on my bookshelves as well as to cross off all the films on a long list. By the end of the summer, I had even finished the ending of my novel’s 100,000-word manuscript. I was reading and writing every day, going outside for walks—life had never been so calm and blissful. I had the illusion of being a full-time writer.

There was a brief period, though, in which I didn’t do even my weekly shopping. News reports of Asians being assaulted or injured for wearing a mask had been gradually on the rise. More than once the incidents felt like an attack not just on some other person, but on me as well. Even if the assaults were only verbal, it was enough to destroy the space in which I felt free to operate. Sometimes the idea of not fearing discrimination would take hold of me, or I would rehearse scenarios in which I fought back, but in the end, I rarely overcame my cold feet. Like most things, those scenes played out only inside my head.

After mask mandates were enforced on public transportation and indoors, however, I stopped hearing about discrimination on the news. The media turned its attention to the after-effects of the lung inflammation caused by the virus. I began to go outside again, but the summer’s enchantment was nearly exhausted. Lockdown policies went hand in glove with England’s weather, and much like the pairing of fermented soybeans and pickled tofu, became increasingly difficult to swallow. The temperature plummeted, days grew shorter, and nothing gave me any sense of joy. Every aspect of life was on endless repeat, and utter boredom set in. I missed interacting with people face to face, however

dull and yawn inducing they might be; I missed sitting outside a café, smoking, however expensive and swarmed with people. I also missed heading to a seaside town for a stroll when I was feeling low, even though beaches in England are always freezing cold shingle. I missed the normal, pre-pandemic clamor of city life, but the undeniable reasons for this weren't clear until it was all gone.

The government did their utmost to get everyone to comply with the rules and said the lockdown policies would be lifted with all due speed, but time brought no absolution. We assumed the stoppages would be brief. Shortly before Christmas, the lockdown alert was increased a level because of the virus mutations. Once again, the government imposed restrictions. No eat-in restaurant dining, and friends could meet only out of doors (in January and February temperatures of 0–5°C). The government “banned” nonessential travel for UK citizens. Even leaving the city was prohibited. The second citywide lockdown was like a tiresome customer who has come round again and can only be told “yes” to this, that, and the other thing until he finally leaves.

Freedom is fragile. With a single order, our ostensibly democratic society was gone in an instant. Businesses were no longer free to operate—restaurants, bars, cinemas, and all “non-essential” shops shut down indefinitely. In one small town, a card shop opened for business and was fined £18,000 (approximately HK\$200,000). The short news article said the husband-and-wife shop owners had flouted normal behavior. One of the owners was quoted as saying, “We have a God-given right to earn an honest living.” But God has long been dead and nihilism spreading for at least a hundred years.

The British farce continued. My eyes were being opened daily, the cost of freedom being one example.

My Irish flatmate used to work at an event venue but was now at loose ends. He collected £1500 each month, watched TV or football every day, ate a couple slices of toast for lunch or ordered carryout. This had been his life for close to a year. He claimed not to mind the ongoing lockdown because getting something for nothing was brilliant. Some people longed for normal life; others preferred handouts at 80% of their regular wages. Freedom absolutely has a price.

To feel dissatisfied with life is the onset of change. People need to mentally adjust by adapting to the difficulties of daily life, yet they must also hold on to their sense of how distorted things have become. Sometimes I really didn't know if I should stay positive or complain to keep myself going.

August: London had been open for a month. To encourage spending and stimulate the economy, the government was even offering a £10 discount to eat in restaurants. As a result, I made a new Hong Kong friend who became my dining companion. We went to the same Japanese restaurant several times and spent the Christmas holiday together. Although we appeared to be quite close, of all the people I knew, she had the least substance. Our only shared interests were Asian food and the reality TV show *King Maker III*, so once the show was over and we had eaten our fill, we had nothing left to talk about.

She was my life vest, and it seemed I was her wastepaper basket. On the days we didn't get together, she would send me a dozen unimportant messages in a row. Some random examples: pictures of her Filipino takeaway order, a black television cable box... (I'll stop there to avoid reader complaints about wasted ink.) The only way I could handle this was to do nothing.

Feeling lonely in a group is generally considered the worst kind of loneliness. Really though, feeling alone in a one-on-one interaction is far worse,

because there's nothing to distract you and no choice of partner to engage you in boring conversation. We frequently assume others will provide the solution, especially people we don't know well, but others are never the solution. Only another set of problems.

I miss how relatively easy it was to make friends with similar interests in Hong Kong. A person's loneliness can be divided not only into stages, but levels. In the UK, for example, there's losing touch with other people who speak your language and losing touch with the general public. Whenever spiritual loneliness closes in, I look for someone who speaks my language. I miss physical contact too, but this pandemic has made us so wary of strangers that we are less willing to satisfy physical desire. Absolute trust—or love—is required to risk Covid-19 for a kiss.

Finally, I came back to the manuscript of my novel, came back to myself. The only interactions that have never resulted in feelings of depression or discouragement are my self-interactions. That sounds like narcissism, but the conversations I have with myself, the character interactions that come from my pen, make me more willing to sit down at my desk every day and keep my nose to the grindstone. I don't actually enjoy writing. The process gives me no joy. From my point of view, writing is something I must keep doing regardless, an inseparable part of me. Only by writing do I stop to reflect, am I able to sort out all of life's confusions. The novel is a medium that frees me from the limitations of my experience and allows me to express my writerly curiosity about things. In my novel, my protagonist's relationship describes the disconnect of being between two places because these peculiar times have in some fashion made this struggle more apparent.

Picasso said, "Without great solitude no serious work is possible." The

pandemic has given me solitude. It's easy to see myself as a failure, as I am alone in a foreign land, with no career, no money, no house, no life partner. I still have writing, however. During this miserable time, I can at least go on writing—the only possible way to give meaning to my existence.

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