

Reincarnation Waiting Room

by Angie Sijun Lou

When I died, my aura exited my body through my nostrils. Everyone was so busy with the commotion of my dying—reciting prayers, cleaning my body with saline, adjusting my expression so I looked peaceful instead of dead—that nobody noticed the small amber beam floating slightly above my nasal passage. My aura struggled to get back inside the container it had been evicted from, but the portal was closed forever. There was no way to express how dejected I felt without my eyes to radiate tears.

As my body was lowered into the bowels of the earth, a voice beckoned me. Come this way, it whispered. The voice sounded neither young nor old, belonging to neither a man nor a woman. Something about it was neutral, even universal. The voice led me down a bright hallway. I marveled at how silent I was as I floated, with none of my huffing and puffing, no thumping of my feet, no tinnitus in my ears. I was having my first unadulterated experience of reality. It was as if I'd lived my life inside a car wash, with its anarchy of mops and soapy spray, and finally come out the other side with sparkling lucidity.

The hallway ended at a revolving door which opened into another hallway with more doors. Some were sealed with bright yellow caution tape. The voice asked me to excuse the mess, they were upgrading their security infrastructure. I entered a lobby with a mobile stand with a TV and VCR. I watched a brief tutorial, a colorful pixelated animation set in a prehistoric era. A long time ago, the video explained, auras could easily find new bodies to inhabit by attaching themselves to whatever was being born nearby. An aura entered the mouth of a fish sprouting legs in the claying swamp. An aura entered a dragonfly through its compound eye. An aura entered a nameless organism—a tube with a dark streak running down its spine—through its anus, which was also its mouth. An aura flexed its new body in a lake, bashing itself against a rock. There were so many new species waiting to be animated, sprouting like mushrooms after rain.

Then the video became an ominous black-and-white film, representative of our dimming world. When the extinction events began, auras had fewer places to go. Auras began to make their homes inside tiny bits of trash and individual pomegranate seeds. Auras attached themselves to empty pill capsules, and bacterial spores, or worse: multiple auras shrunk into a single body, each of them reigning over a lone aspect, one leg staggering after the other, one eye with an unsettling twitch. One aura entered a giant inflatable of Open-Chan, the 7-Eleven mascot in Taiwan, a winking rainbow-headed space dog dressed in a purple jumper and yellow pants. Inside those 7-Elevens, auras occupied wasabi peas, lotto tickets, cubes of lychee jelly, and pale wads of bubble gum. It

was not sustainable. To accommodate the sudden influx of auras seeking bodies, they had no choice but to build a waiting room.

The TV flickered off, the static collapsing into a white line. I wanted to ask the voice who or what “they” was composed of, but then I realized it was prerecorded, an automated message projected over an intercom system. The doors to the waiting room beyond slid open slowly, giving me time to adjust to the fluorescent lights.

When I was alive, I was the kind of person who was late to almost everything. I was never subject to long durations inside waiting rooms because other people were always waiting for me. The reincarnation waiting room was like other waiting rooms I’d seen. White plaster walls, white linoleum floors, and a wire rack full of lifestyle magazines featuring women with platinum hair and linen shirts in expansive, ecru kitchens. Their dermal fillers radiated a glacial sheen. But unlike the waiting rooms on earth, there was no bullet-proof glass, no receptionist fighting on the phone, no one asking to speak to the manager. I began to worry this was not a reincarnation waiting room but instead a shallow circle of hell. I had sinned so blandly that instead of being licked by infernal flames, I was sentenced to an eternity at the DMV. The voice asked me to complete a one-question survey about what I would like to be reincarnated as. We will try to take your preferences into account, the voice said. I realized I didn’t have to be a human anymore; I could come back as anything. The endless selection of host bodies made my aura blurry. It had taken my lifetime to see the black mole growing on my earlobe without thinking it was a beetle, to accept my short legs and deep overbite, to learn how to love someone without making them a receptacle for my rage. To do it all over again would be like being held back a grade in school, learning the same lessons, watching the teacher’s mouth moving in the same deliberate motions.

I thought of the alternate forms of sentience I had encountered in my life. I had only one pet as a child, a sleek white cat named Xiyatu, whose death I carried with me like a spirit. She always mewed at the door when I came home from school, pawing at my plaid wool skirt, looking up at me cross-eyed until I’d open a tin of sardines with chives. One afternoon, when there was no sign of her, I made a louder coming-home sound by slamming myself against the screen door. I ran into the prairie behind my house to look for her, but she wasn’t in her usual spot by the milkweeds, watching the school of minnows in the pond. Then I heard the shriek of coyotes in the distance, saw the hot puddle of blood on the stones. It was the only trace of her left.

When I told my parents about what happened to Xiyatu, I heard relief in their voices. As they

feigned sympathy, their expressions contorted, the corners of their mouths warped in the opposite direction. I knew they secretly hated having a cat. But we don’t have mice, they said blankly when I said I wanted a cat. To them, Xiyatu was a symbol of my frivolity, to own an animal for sentimental purposes instead of functional ones meant I had been inoculated into a distinctly American wastefulness. If she hadn’t succumbed to her injuries, we wouldn’t have been able to afford the veterinary bills.

My mom gave me a mochi creamsicle and assured me that everything dies, and Xiyatu had died of “natural causes.” I should be grateful there was no suffering. But what about the moment when the tooth first pierced her neck? Or when her blood first rushed in to fill the hole, only to spill from its depth? She said that suffering must be prolonged, something experienced over time, so that night I went to sleep imagining Xiyatu’s pain stretched into an oblong shape made formless as soon as her blood dripped onto the stone. Whenever I brought up my pet grief, my family remained unaffected before changing the subject. Because nobody else was crying over Xiyatu, I eventually stopped crying too.

Maybe I could be reincarnated as that stone, I thought, or I could be reincarnated as the blood that dripped on the stone. When I finally managed to scribble something down, a machine spat out a slip of paper with a number printed on it. The voice invited me to please have a seat.

Auras hover on plastic chairs, condensed into their elemental selves. Spheres of orange light, violet specks, incandescent pink puddles, heavy black cubes, translucent prisms. Some auras are so undetectable that they go unnoticed until a bigger aura sits down, making a splat sound. Others radiate outward, inspiring envy in the ones more reserved. It’s terrifying to be without containment like this. A strip mall psychic once said my aura is a pale blue fire, and now I know she was lying to make me feel better. My aura is actually yellow and viscous like a raw egg yolk.

The color reminds me of the final hazing ritual my college boyfriend completed on the night he was inducted into his fraternity. To become brothers, the new cohort of boys had to transfer a raw egg from mouth-to-mouth without breaking the yolk. They sat in a circle, cross-legged on the beer-sticky linoleum floor. It took a full carton of eggs before they finally got it right. The first boy cracked an egg into his mouth, then put his mouth over the second boy’s, slowly sliding the yolk over with his tongue, an excruciating process that took several minutes. The room was silent as the egg was passed down the line. When my boyfriend gurgled the unbroken yolk out into his hands, the orange predawn light was coming up over the

New England landscape. He texted me a picture. The white had been replaced with a yellow, bubbly film of saliva. Eww, I said, to hide that I secretly found it poetic, that something could pass through seven mouths and exit without being ruined.

Weeks later, my boyfriend asked me to please stop writing poems about the egg.

Why? I asked.

Because you're going to get me in trouble. I wasn't supposed to tell anyone about it.

I'd forgotten he was sworn to secrecy because at the end of each day of pledging, he had called me to tell me he had just eaten a live goldfish or sorted hundreds of Skittles into piles by color while his friends had chased him around, beating him with a bar of soap stuffed inside a sock.

You weren't supposed to tell anyone about the egg, or you weren't supposed to tell anyone about the hazing? I asked. He rolled his eyes to indicate he was unwilling to be taunted.

That night, I went through and crossed out every mention of the egg. When I reread the poems, I realized they were even better than before. There was something inscrutable about them, a presence-absence. I went into the kitchen to find my boyfriend, who was fixing himself a protein milkshake during his anabolic window, which lasted only thirty minutes after he flexed his last muscle at the gym.

Listen to this, I said, and then I recited a poem about the nothingness that fell from his mouth to the floor, intact and gleaming.

Every few minutes, the smooth-jazz elevator music pauses and plays a prerecorded announcement. Our memories must be expunged before reincarnation. They will begin with something innocuous, such as the shape of a certain vowel in my nondominant tongue, the secret location of my emergency cash, or the answers to my password security questions. Then they will move onto more formative memories, like the architecture of the house I grew up in and the names of the people who raised me, how they grew old so I ironed their chinos and became their connection with the world. The word *memory* refers to both part and whole, a distinction I feel suddenly aware of as I imagine them disappearing one by one. The deletion process is not something to be afraid of, the voice assures us. It doesn't hurt, although it's better to not resist because accidents can happen. You don't want to be one of those auras who remembers their past lives.

I will lose the visits to the village my grandma was raised in, how we slept together on a wooden slat in her no-bedroom house. When my friend roundhouse kicked me for no reason at a party, slicing me open with her toenail and leaving a crimson gash just above my eyebrow. My diary I, my real I, and the I that translated between them. My confusion over why we had to pledge our

allegiance every morning at the American school, as if our allegiances could change overnight. How to brandish a knife at a vegetable. Sleeping, eating, dreaming. Astro turf. Babies. December. I could never remember the name of the girl who gave me a concussion during a kickball tournament in fourth grade—when the ball bonked my head, what fell out of me was her name.

Toward the end of my life I had grown increasingly, maybe disconcertingly complacent with my solitude, never marrying or having children—my life comfortably circumscribed within a five-mile radius of my house. When I went on my evening walks, I saw through my neighbors' windows and glimpsed the lives people said I was missing out on, replete with its soccer practices, TV dinners, holiday cards, and screaming matches. When I walked past those houses I wondered if this is what love was supposed to be like, two dogs separated by a chain-link fence, barking into the echo of the other, barking each other to death.

Sometimes auras who have spent their lives together meet again in the waiting room. They apologize profusely for every bitter insult, every possession they hurled at each other in the heat of an explosive fight, every time they neglected household tasks. Their colors blend until they become nothing but ugly brown smudges in the recesses of the room. I will find you in my next life, they promise, and we will do it over again. When the voice says their new bodies are ready, the auras are sliced crudely down the center, remnants of themselves still clinging to the other like plastic wrap. There are shrieking sounds, police sirens, and a pool of light the janitors have to clean up afterward.

One winter the environmental stewards in my hometown conducted a series of controlled burns to manage the underbrush in the prairie behind my house. The stewards said that less than one percent of the prairies that were in this area two hundred years ago still existed, which was a very effective statistic. If they said there were no more prairies left, I would think there was no point, but one percent made me hopeful that prairies could someday be resuscitated, that we could go back to a preagricultural epoch when all of this was oceans of grass. The stewards drew a line in the dirt and told us we could watch from this very safe distance. Dozens of people stood behind the line to drink beers and cheer them on. The burns were so controlled they were almost undetectable, a small red flame in the expansive darkness. I hadn't thought of Xiyatu in a long time, but traces of her DNA were somewhere in that fire. I read once that dried blood can last on surfaces for thousands of years, which is much longer than I expected given the rain and the elements.

That night, I dreamed I was a stone in the prairie. There was a year of heavy rainfall that

created an atmospheric river. It carried me twenty feet from my original location, an experience that was at once terrifying and revitalizing. I saw animals sinking their fangs into each other. I watched two whitetail bucks headbutting until their antlers were interlocked. In a panic to detach themselves, the bucks thrashed wildly for several hours, falling into a creek and drowning together. Their bodies floated downstream in a diptych. I saw a world in which a girl with green eyes used me as a piece of chalk to draw a smiley face on another stone. When the girl was done with me, she screamed and threw me in the air.

When a new aura arrives in the waiting room, we huddle around them to learn about what's happening on earth. They say the weather keeps getting more erratic, and the heat drives everyone crazy. Men shoot at the sun with machine guns, flailing toward it when it's low on the horizon, cursing as they load their ammunition. The waiting room keeps getting more and more crowded, all of us squished against each other, the line spilling out into the hallway, into the other hallway, out the door, and back onto the planet.

One day, a tropical cyclone rips through Taiwan and untethers the rope that kept Open-Chan suspended in front of Taipei City's premier 7-Eleven. Everybody takes out their phones to record the beloved mascot rising into the stratosphere with a wink on his face, metabolizing like light from dead stars. He ascends until he reaches a certain altitude, where he bursts into many small pieces of cold latex that sprinkle back onto the city like rain, fragments of him landing on shopping malls, museums, night clubs, wet markets, luxury condos, and shrines for all those martyrs of the revolution. When I see that aura in the waiting room again, it looks very sad.

When the voice finally chooses me from the lottery, the other auras glare with envy. And then, in the blink of a figurative eye, I find myself on the shore of a deep blue pool of water. Inside its cold indistinction is the form I've always wanted, and I run toward it, my memories decalcifying like tears. I want to be more eternal, I say, and I remember how I used to believe the word *eternal* was written with a dash—*e-ternal* like *e-cards*, *e-waste*, *e-commerce*, *e-signature*. I remember that Nietzsche believed in the idea of eternal return, that time goes around and around in an infinite loop, that everything that happens has happened before and will happen again. Things would lose their sense of urgency, like when you realize the burning bush is always on fire.

Honestly, I've never heard anything dumber. Listen to the moment when the future transforms into the present, and the present transforms into the past. It's happening now, and now, and now, and now.

Angie Sijun Lou has a PhD in Literature and Creative Writing from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Her stories have appeared in ZYZZYVA, FENCE, Joyland, and elsewhere.