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From A Traveling Daughter: A Photographic Memoir

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From A Traveling Daughter:
A Photographic Memoir

Lily Murnen

Honors Project

Submitted to the Honors College
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the requirements for graduation with

UNIVERSITY HONORS 2017

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“World sits outside the door
A voice in your heart is calling
The ends of the world await
Traveling daughter
Feel the sunshine on your face
Starlight guides your feet
Earth and Sky will carry you
Journey after journey
One mountain to the next
Voice in your heart is calling”

-Abigail Washburn
“Song of the Traveling Daughter”
translated from Mandarin Chinese

My family keeps me safe, but it is this safety that protects me from the discomfort that is necessary for growth. Like Abigail Washburn’s “voices,” my discontent and my curiosity call me to venture far beyond what I can see from my parent’s porch. Yet, those familial roots will always keep me grounded. I am a traveling daughter—carrying my family, my upbringing, and those values with me wherever I go.

Inspired by Abigail Washburn’s “Song of the Traveling Daughter,” I have adopted the title, “From A Traveling Daughter,” as a reminder of why I embark on a journey across the Pacific to grapple with the struggles of life and aging and to cherish shared moments of kindness and thoughtfulness. Really, I am a daughter of the human race, and I hope that I can continue to learn from the rest of my human family—the people that I meet along my life journey.



开始
kāishǐ
beginning

It's difficult to be home, now, after six months in China.
I am very tired, now, from trying to balance different worlds.
I am very quiet, now, trying to find the words to tell my story.



Where do you begin when you tell a story? What was the beginning, anyway? Should I work backward? But our thoughts don't necessarily arise in a linear way; we can't force our minds to organize chronologically—with a rewind, fast forward, pause.

It feels like a long time ago that I embarked on a journey to the other side of the world. I am already forgetting—something that seems almost impossible when you are living certain moments of your life. I thought that the images of China would be forever ingrained in my brain. But time is strange. Our memory is lacking and distorted. And our adaptability to new surroundings is efficient. It's easy to forget the past. Maybe this is a human survival technique—to be able to move on so quickly to new things. It's good and bad—like most things in life.

When I returned from China, I didn't know what to think of my life in the United States; my feelings were all jumbled. I was glad to be home because life in a different culture is exhausting. But I couldn't just jump back into old routines. I felt separate and slightly angry. Why is life so easy for me here? Why do I have so much stuff? Why do words seem inadequate to explain what I experienced in China? Seemingly simple questions like, “How was your trip? Is it good to be home? Would you go back? What was your favorite part?” became burdensome and empty. I needed to focus feelings into words as the next part of my journey.

This photographic memoir is my first attempt to fight back at those feelings of anger and frustration and bitterness at returning home to the United States and being unable to explain what happened to me in that place that seems so far away. I need to explain this to you because my experience was so raw and emotional and beautiful and difficult and meaningful. I need to explain this to you because that place really is not so far away from us; we have just never really noticed it before. And though my memory is flawed, I can attempt to explain how my life has been forever redefined by opening my eyes for the first time and seeing more of what it means to be Human.



In September 2016, I went to China to study Mandarin. In November 2016, I visited a Chinese nursing home for the first time and met an uncle that I never knew existed. By the wintertime, I spent my Saturdays getting to know this uncle who cared for me and relied on my visits. And by February 2016, I had to say goodbye to this uncle, this adoptive father, whom I grew to love.

The following pages are pieces of our story.



Early morning, Xiang River, Changsha, China

外婆和外公, 俄亥俄州
wàipó hé wàigōng, Éhài'é Zhōu
Nana and Papa, Ohio

My grandfather, Papa, used to say “Gravity is one tough hombre.” I’ve learned now, from stories my mother told me, that he would talk about the importance of learning physics, how everything—from the Earth’s rotation to shooting a lay-up—had to do with physics. But, for me, that phrase has always been associated with getting old. Old people are hunched over. Old women get saggy breasts and thighs. Old men get saggy jowls and bags under the eyes. Gravity compresses our bones. Gravity is that force that erodes us the way that wind and water erode mountains stronger than bones.

Compounded on the physical deterioration caused by gravity, getting old is even tougher when your brain doesn’t work the way that it used to. When you tell the same stories over again. When your life becomes a series of vignettes, scattered memories of identity.

My grandmother, Nana, tells stories from her childhood. It seems like these are her most vivid memories—pulled from the recesses of her Dementia-ridden mind. Or perhaps these aren’t her most vivid memories, but are simply the result of questions that most grandchildren ask about their grandparents. “They’re so old, how could they have ever been a child!”

Maybe most interviewers always ask the same questions, so we give the same answers.

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This project began as moments of conversation with my 87-year-old grandmother, Nana. Born and raised in Defiance, Ohio, she’d tell me stories about getting chickens from down the street and killing and butchering them in the backyard. She’d tell me about her crazy brothers, who seemed like they never did any chores—though they did bring home animals they’d hunted for supper. She’d talk about eating food from her mother’s garden and canning those vegetables and fruits for those hard winter months. She’d mention her mother, working at the clothing store downtown, breaking-in other people’s shoes for extra pay when she got off work—suffering the repercussions in her feet during old age. Often, I forget that Nana grew up during the Great Depression. She never mentioned it outright; it was usually just hinted in stories she told.

Just last year, I would go over to her house in the mornings, get her up and moving if she wasn’t already, make coffee and breakfast, and sit down to eat with her. She’d read the paper while I read articles for school. Then we’d talk for a while. At that time, Nana’s dementia was slowly clouding her mind. Some days would be lovely and jovial—like old times when I was a little girl. Other days would be painful—she’d fight to not take a shower, and she wouldn’t remember who came to visit or if she had taken her medicine.

Papa had died a year earlier, and that changed Nana and her family—my family—in profound ways. The family had moved her to a condo, afterward, where I would visit and care for her. Today, she lives in a nursing home. It’s the same home where Papa lived—but she doesn’t remember that now.

My experience of watching my grandparents age and slowly deteriorate has deeply affected me. It made me sad every time I would have to leave from visiting them to go to school or work or home. I was sad because I was leaving them alone, because I couldn’t spend all of my hours keeping them company, because I tried to imagine what they thought or did when no one was there to visit.

~~~~

My decision to go to China was surrounded by feelings of guilt that I was going to leave my Nana alone. But I was at a moment in my life when I felt that I needed to step out of my small and safe life in Bowling Green, Ohio. For some reason, if I didn't go then, I felt that I would never leave. When my mind told me I needed to leave, my heart told me that I should stay. Needless to say, I left. And other people took care of Nana. And I don't think it bothered Nana, who soon forgot that I used to visit.

But even though I left, I carried that experience with me everywhere—observing very elderly people walking, cleaning, singing, doing everyday mundane tasks. I tried to be helpful and kind with open mind and heart, that I might learn from people's experiences with living life. This new observational power made me want to visit Chinese nursing homes.



Nana at the hospital, Ohio.

Nursing Home, USA

Nursing homes aren't necessarily terrible places—through in many peoples' minds that connotation does exist. But they are certainly not exciting or joyous all the time—with stool to clean up and frustrated residents to placate and the occasional death to mourn.

Nana's mid-level nursing home has bingo and baking competitions, exercise classes and movie nights, Sunday drives and lunch for residents' families. There are skilled nursing staff on duty, and everyone receives routine and timely medical care. She has an apartment to herself, complete with bedroom, bathroom, living room, and kitchenette. The cost of her room per month is more than this poor college student can imagine having on a regular basis. And the walls of her room are covered in photos and paintings—the signs of many daughters fighting over room decoration...among many other things.



Yao Bobo in his room, talking.

姚伯伯
Yáo Bóbo
Uncle Yao

1

The white walls are bare. The paint peels. Whole chunks are missing from the drywall. Decay is nothing so delicate. A few hand scrawls decorate the perimeter—like the inside of a holding cell where someone else used to live.

The circular heat lamp is aimed toward the bed. What light that enters the open window is not warm enough. Sometimes the wind is the only thing that travels through that window. The sound of air passing my ear—an empty sound. Can my voice recorder capture that?

Wrappers lie scattered across the surface of the desk. Uncle never uses that desk anyway.

I was never good at any skill that required a desk.
Only for storage—
for those precious few photos that weren't burned in fury,
in anger,
in sadness.

Those drawers contain his savored memories of youth.

It's strange how life is circular—
the family feud
the question of who would care for our aging mother.
And here I am—
aging
in a place essentially the same
as where my mother was condemned.

Life seemed so hopeless then.
Taking a life—
my life—
seemed a reality.
An ex-army man
with no prospects,
and a fighting family
falling apart
without a cure.



敬老院
jìnglǎoyuàn
Home of Respect for the Aged

Yao Bobo, Uncle Yao, is 56-years-old—only a few years older than my parents. When he was 45, he suffered a stroke that paralyzed the right side of his body. That year he moved to the nursing home—known in Chinese as a “Home of Respect for the Aged.” Yao Bobo is one of the youngest residents; some people are over ninety-years-old. He tells me that he feels too young to be there, even though I am the young one now.

The home of respect for the aged is a large courtyard surrounded by three-story buildings on three sides. Laundry lines border the balconies on each floor. Yao Bobo’s room is small and undecorated. The toilet is a porcelain hole in the floor, and a green plastic bucket poured over the head serves as a shower. This is nothing out of the ordinary. Many people in China live this way.

In the center of the courtyard there is a small gazebo. And in front of this gazebo is where the old folks sit to watch university students sing and dance on weekend mornings. This is their only programming for elders—mediocre, yet heartfelt entertainment from dedicated students.

Yao Bobo bought a TV to keep him occupied at night when he couldn’t fall asleep. He also plays mahjong every afternoon. Determined not to stay cooped-up in the home, he makes the slow, arduous walk down the street to the mahjong house.



When I first went to the home of respect for the aged, I was excited and uncomfortable. I walked in, trying to keep myself calm. I could feel my heart racing. I won’t be able to understand. Will they want to talk to me? What do I say? I waved and smiled as people stared back at me. I nodded when my two Chinese friends, Jack and Tingting, translated who I was and what I was doing in China. They did all the talking for me.

One man sat on the bench facing university students singing songs. He wasn’t paying any attention, instead asking Tingting some questions at rapid speed. I was busy soaking in the sights and sounds when he called me over. He held out his hand for me to shake. “Wow! Your hands are cold!” “I know. They’re always cold,” I shrugged.

Yao Bobo was the person that I remembered most after that first visit to the nursing home. At the time I didn’t know anything about him. I didn’t know that he’d had a stroke. I didn’t know that he was a father, a husband, and ex-husband. I only knew that he wanted to talk, and that I wanted to listen.

When I went back to the home for the second time, I had forgotten about him to a large extent. I was happy to talk with anyone, as long as they wanted to. But he sought out my friends and me every time. And soon we would spend half or more of our time there with him and the people immediately around him. Only later would I learn that it was not a simple stroke that crippled him and sent him to this home in the first place.



Yao Bobo walks. Nursing Home, Changsha, China.

姚伯伯
Yáo Bóbo
Uncle Yao
2

There is no cure for what ails me now.

The cause?

A policeman's fist to the brain—
sending me into fits of seizure.
*The corruption of power
that enabled that fist in the beginning?*

The result?

The loss of my body—
my only gift in life.

*Son of farmers
a laborer
party member—
in service of his country.*

My dreams—
of being part of something bigger
something that meant more than
my individual life—
were beaten from my limbs and chest

Beaten from the brain, from the very soul.

And I wanted to die.

But I learned to walk again—
poorly,
with the help of a cane,
shuffling along.

Swinging his body to keep momentum—to make the slow progress a little less stalling.



Nursing home bedroom.

我明白。
wǒ míngbai.
I understand.

Yao Bobo called out to me from across the courtyard. Ah! Lili! He greeted me with a smile. He spoke quickly and fervently. I couldn't understand. I asked him to repeat it more slowly. He repeated it the same way. The pair of college girls that I walked in with came to the rescue. "He says that he waited for you in the morning but you didn't come. He didn't think that you were going to come today. He was worried."

Oh. I tried to explain. *Tingting had a school event in the morning so she couldn't come until later. She is on her way now.* He didn't understand my poor Chinese. My tones were all wrong. I used the wrong verbs. I didn't know how to express all of my English verb tenses into this language that was without verb tenses. He shook his head at me, in a vague gesture that meant, *I'm trying, but I can't understand you.* I shook my head and waved one hand in a spastic gesture—like a Jedi knight waving to a comrade while also trying to plant a thought into someone's mind. "Forget that. I am here now." "Good, good." He smiled.

I asked how he was today and if he had eaten. I told him that I had walked all the way here today. But my language skills were so poor, my vocabulary so limited, that I struggled to find words to make any more conversation than that. I asked about mahjong today, and he said yes they are playing now. Can we go look? Sure, let's go. He motioned for me to follow, crossed the courtyard, and started on the stairs. I took his arm. He leaned on the railing. We went slowly. I felt bad for suggesting that we walk up the stairs.

At the top, in the first room, three men and one woman sat at a mahjong table. The table had electric lights, and a center area that opened up for you to push the tiles into. The tiles would be arranged inside the table by engineered mechanisms, and they would appear on all four sides of the tabletop from trays that opened and pushed the tiles up from inside the table. I thought it was pretty cool, and I'd never seen anything like it—though it seemed very commonplace to everyone else.

The players acknowledged us watching in the doorway when Yao Bobo said he was showing the American friend. I would have liked to have watched the game and had Yao Bobo explain what was happening, but I wouldn't be able to understand. We walked into the room and watched for another minute or so, standing up. Then I asked Yao Bobo if he wanted to sit down. He walked into one of the bedrooms off of the small center room and sat down on the bed.

I hesitated. I wasn't sure if we were allowed in this other person's room to sit on his or her bed. I pulled my phone out to translate a question, but my phone kept freezing, the app crashed, and my phone data plan was also the cheapest possible. I was so frustrated. I needed Tingting! I looked up at him half apologetically, half distraught.

"It's ok," he said.



View of the courtyard from the balcony. Nursing home, Changsha, China

唱歌
chànggē
Sing a song

One day, Uncle Yao introduced me to Auntie. Auntie was stocky and lively and had her hair permed and dyed a reddish color. She had lived at the home for only a few weeks. She'd be leaving when her broken hip was mended and functioning. When we walked in, she was lying in bed watching a movie on her laptop computer.

"Hey, I brought Lili to hear you sing."

She was so excited to sing! "Of course," she said. "Hold on, eat something first!" She scooted to the edge of her bed, grabbed a crutch, and pulled herself to her feet. On her desk was a large bag of snacks and fruit. "The children brought these, yesterday. You must try some." I nibbled a cracker and an orange while she situated herself on the bed. She and Yao Bobo talked with great excitement, and I had no idea what they were saying. I was content nevertheless; they were laughing and happy and so was I.

Pretty soon, Yao Bobo encouraged her to sing one song by beginning it himself. His voice was gruff and off-key, but he sang with gusto. Auntie just joined in; her operatic soprano was quite a contrast. Yao Bobo drifted off, leaving Auntie to take over the tune.

The room filled with sound, and I felt myself wrapped in the melody and the rhythm of the words. It was wonderful to make noise in this place that was usually so quiet. Auntie stopped a couple of times to chuckle and say that she forgot the words. Yao Bobo reminded her.

When she finished her first song, she told me that they've been singing every night this week. "Everyone thinks that we are crazy!" I looked out the window, and sure enough, some of the residents were walking by and peering through the window of the room. We all started laughing hysterically.

"Please, sing another song!"



Auntie. Nursing home, Changsha, China.

Trust

It wasn't until almost my tenth visit that Yao Bobo told about how he had suffered the stroke. I had decided that I would try doing some more formal interviews with some of the residents that I visited regularly. Of a home of about 85 people, I had really only gotten to know 15 or 20 of them. Naturally, I wanted to start with interviewing Yao Bobo. I had designed a series of questions, and Jack was helping me ask them.

We got to one question: "What is one of the greatest challenges you have faced in your life?" and I was unprepared for his answer. He started calmly. "I owned a restaurant with my best friend, and one day I was working in the dining room when I noticed that a man was starting to leave without paying. I confronted him."

"He started yelling and getting upset. My voice started rising too. And soon punches started flying. I was just trying to defend my restaurant, my work. Someone called the police and were taken to the jail. It turns out that he was friends with a lot of policemen, so they let him go free. But they kept me in jail!"

Yao Bobo's voice had continued to escalate during this explanation. I stopped being able to hear words; Jack stopped trying to translate for me, and he just listened. This is what I came to understand after the interview.

"One day I didn't do anything at all and they just started beating me and beating me! Those corrupt cops! They beat me in the head until my brain started breaking. I writhed and started having seizures. I can't remember anymore. I woke up and I couldn't move; I couldn't talk. My wife had already left me a year before. Who would take care of me now? So I moved here, back to my hometown and into this depressing home."



姚伯伯
Yáo Bóbo
Uncle Yao

3

For ten years I have lived in this place.
For ten years I have eaten this mediocre food.
For ten years I haven't been able to sleep.
For ten years I have watched
old souls and shells of people come and go.
And I am still here.

And now you are here,
my American friend.
Fate brings us together
for this short time of our lives.
I couldn't allow your arrival to come and go passively.
Too much of my life is passivity
is routine
is contrived of events beyond my control.

You wanted to hear our stories.
You wanted to make our photos.
You wanted us to like you.
You wanted to understand.

And so,
I sang poorly.
I taught you words of my Changsha language you would never remember.
I showed you my few photos tucked away in the desk drawer.
I tried to teach you to play mahjong.
For some reason you continued to visit me,
and when you didn't come,
I'd wait for you.
I'd worry.
I'd call you.

You are like a daughter to me.
Even though I am an old man with a grown daughter of my own—
a police officer.
She can't come to visit me very often.
So, one familiar face in a sea of strange visitors
is the closest thing to family.
Maybe better than blood family—
a family of choice
a family of necessity
a family of human connection



Money

During the end of my time in China, during the Lunar New year, I needed to find another Chinese student to interpret for me at the nursing home because Tingting and Jack had gone home for the holiday. I really wanted to conduct video interviews, but I needed help asking for permission. After a series of failed contacts, I finally found someone. Freya was her English name. I had never met her before, but she was a friend of a friend and sounded sincere and understanding. And at that point I didn't have much of a choice; I was running out of time to continue visiting the nursing home.

We met up; Freya had brought her mom along. Together we went to the nursing home. Freya said that if the manager didn't let me do interviews, her mom was pretty good at persuasion and she could do the talking. We said hello to all of my familiar friends on our way up to the office. They were all pretty quiet. We chatted with a 70-something year old woman whose room was next to the office. She said something about being worried about money all the time. Freya conveyed her message to me: that even though she knows we are students, she is asking us for money. Freya's mom gave her 100 yuan without hesitation. And a younger female resident asked them to bring her some clothes, like a coat. Freya's mom said, Of course!

I guess that was the first time I really thought seriously about the residents' economic plights. I had always thought that some conversation was enough, but now I realize that it's not. People need money to live at that place. They need money to eat. They need money to go to the doctor. Money is power over your own life.



Nursing home. Changsha, China.

In Contrast

Along noisy and crowded city streets
with motorbikes and cars honking
with students and grandmothers
walking and talking
Mandarin
and Changsha language
float by my ears
sometimes into my brain for processing
sometimes in
and then nothing.

Accustomed to wandering for hours—
in the bustling
in the exhaust
in the endless apartment buildings
in the summer heat
in the in the winter wetness
that chills your bones—
I ached to walk
the mere two miles home from work
in Bowling Green, Ohio

In Bowling Green,
rectangular lawns
borders of bushes and picket fences
brightly painted front doors
and porchlights
invite us home
to the safety of our small spheres of
existence.

In Changsha,
a small patch of something
green and alive
is a luxury
and a necessity
for fresh food and oxygen
in diminishing air quality.

Changsha—
Farming village of old
Land of new subway construction
and giant shopping malls
that hope for someone to fill its rooms

with unnecessary plastic objects
and for the newly rich to spend their money.

In contrast with the local markets,
where chickens run the streets
along with children
crooked alleys and the smell of cooking food
the rooms behind garage doors filled with
wholesale-priced products
shipped overnight
from the factory across the province
the factory that no one sees from within the city
the factory where those farmers' children moved
to find work as migrant labor
for a few yuan a day.

Contrast
across borders
countries
cultures

Contrast
within borders
a living dream
a living nightmare
and everything in between
a part of human experience
Why do some of us have more luck than others?



Street-side garden. Changsha, China.



My parents' house. Bowling Green, Ohio, USA.

Camera

There were many moments during my time in China when I felt that the camera was a burden. I was trying to be both the photographer and the person engaging people and having conversations. At the nursing home, I wanted to give people my undivided attention. And I also felt like perhaps I was just taking people's images without giving anything in return. And yet, I also wanted to take their photos; I wanted to preserve their images with a visual meaning that can only be captured through the framing of a photo.

When I chose not to capture something with my camera, I tried to describe the scene in words. Without worrying about if it's ok for me to take a picture, my eyes could just soak it all in. I know that I won't remember everything, but sometimes this fleeting beauty has more power than capturing an image.

In some senses, writers and photographers are alike. They are observers. They can't help but document the world around them. Even if they document in different ways. They strive to capture or create the feeling of a place. All its quirks and similarities in comparison to other places, other lives. And each craft has its own language.

But, really, my practice with using the camera to see has made me a better observer in general. Learning the camera and the language of a photograph provided a new literal and metaphorical lens with which I could view the world. I took the camera into my hometown and explored. I found new places and objects and people that I had not seen during all of my years in Bowling Green. I examined familiar places and activities with new eyes, appreciating each place or activity or person perhaps for the first time in years.

The most fundamental type of camera is the "camera obscura." "Camera" in Italian means "room," and "camera obscura" means "darkened room." In a darkened room, one small pinhole of light allowed to enter from a window can project the image outside that window upside-down on the opposite wall. This behavior of light is fascinating in itself, but then you start to examine the image projected from the outside. What is happening in this image? Who is walking by? What are they thinking? How hot is it outside? Can you hear the birds today?

I know that I am most comfortable as the observer of things. As a photographer, I can be an observer; I don't necessarily have to truly engage with people. But without engagement, you never get the full story of the images that you are seeing. The image is unfinished; the meaning is missing.

Taking photos in China really forced me out of my comfort zone. To create images, I had to engage my new and unknown world. I had to leave my safe apartment and use what little Chinese that I knew to try to understand the images that I was seeing. I had to become the center of other people's attention as my camera and I called attention to my act of observing the people around me. Taking photos in China enhanced my whole experience and provided a tool for me to communicate when words alone seem somehow inadequate to express our lives.



In the TV room after Lunar New Year, Nursing home, Changsha.

奶奶 爷爷 长沙 中国
Nǎinai Yéye Chángshā Zhōngguó
Grandmother Grandfather Changsha, China

grandmothers
carry toddlers on their hips
bouncing with each stride
to lift the next generation

grandfathers
gather plastic bottles from the garbage
modern metropolis recycling system
by the kilogram

grandmothers
sell vegetables and clothes on city streets
bringing in the day's haul on youthful spines
they wake much earlier than I

grandfathers
walk alone
hands clasped behind their backs
still wear the party uniform

grandmothers
gather to dance outside
beneath the winking moon
music drifts slowly

grandfathers
ride motorbikes
delivering people across the river of traffic chaos
need a lift?

grandmothers
don brightly colored floral-patterned pants and jackets
that never match
that always match

grandfathers
yell "hello" to the girl with yellow hair
a smile from the eyes
crinkles crow's feet

grandmothers
tease me about getting married

and share their stories of becoming women
marriage not required

grandparents
like when young folks are close
to share the significance of life
children sing away the passing time



















Would you take our picture? Changsha, China

姚伯伯
Yáo Bóbo
Uncle Yao

4

*Yao Bobo,
that last day
I grabbed your hand
because there were no words.
My silent tears were all the feelings
built up during the short months
of intense change
in my life.
You were always there when I needed you,
but I could not always be there for you.
And now I must go home to my other life
to Nana
to Mom and Dad
to graduation and a career.
I wanted this “project” to help your life,
but I think you may have changed mine
in even more profound ways.*

Lili,
You cried when you had to say goodbye.
I also wanted to cry,
but I tried to stay strong because
the time that we had was not wasted.
It will matter years from now—
even though you can't offer any more of your time
to this broken old man,
even though my memory will someday fade—
because you made these few moments a little bit less lonely
for someone
whom the world has no reason to care about.
And is life really anything more than small moments
of doing something that matters—
one person at a time?



Yao Bobo tells me not to cry. Changsha, China.

A Letter to You

Yao Bobo,

You once described a calm day from your childhood. The wind was gently blowing blades of grass and the leaves in trees. Your family used to have whole orchards of orange trees growing on that mountain. And you remember lying down beneath one of those trees; the grass was soft—only a bit itchy. Just listening to the bird song and the buzz of bees. You had closed your eyes, and the sun—the color of its light—was filtering through your eyelids. At that moment, time stood still. And that snapshot was solidified in your memory with all the potent sensations that you experienced at that singular moment. I love this story because it is such a small and beautiful story of your home and your childhood and your inner thoughts and feelings.

And I was reminded of memories of my own childhood. The light coming through an open window while the smell of freshly-cut grass was carried on the wind. I was sitting on the floor of my parents' house, and all time disappeared.

Time with you has reaffirmed for me the power of listening with an open heart and mind. Life can seem so empty sometimes. When there is no one to share it with. When there is no one to hear your deepest thoughts. To offer comfort. To try to understand your mind, your soul. There is something about real human connection that is another form of necessary nourishment in life, along with food and water and air.

I can't fix all the problems in the world. I can't feed and clothe entire communities. I can't offer endless amounts of money to those who need it. I don't have that power, that money, that ability. But what I can offer—what we all could offer if we take the time—is our time. Our minds, our hearts, our souls to reach out to the people around us who feel lonely, who need that nourishment of human connection to grow healthy again.

We just need to see with a new lens—to be more observant of our everyday surroundings. There is beauty. There is pain. There are people who may feel the same as you or may not be as different as you think. But we have to give each other a chance, and that requires trust.

So I will ask the world. Will you trust me? Will you look beyond skin color and mannerisms and history and tell me your story—human to human—so that we can better understand each other?

Time moves ever on and on. And if we're not careful, it will pass us by without a second thought, and we will wonder what we did with our lives. All that I know is that my time with you, Yao Bobo, and my time spent with my Nana, and my time spent putting my whole self into single moments are the moments that impacted my life the most.

And I don't think that I can ever thank you enough.

With all my love,
Lily