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GULANGYU

'Drum Wave Island' off the south coast of China, Fujien Province. I've taken a ferry across the Egret River to get here.

Beethoven 'was always in love' in 1799, the year he wrote his Sonata *Pathetique*, from which I'm requesting the adagio movement for my funeral, music to mourn by.

Sunlight Cliff. 'The highest place we have,' my Gulangyu friend says. I'm standing on it. Having climbed so high I've earned the right to look down and back at the mainland. Distance is what I've spent my life trying for. Behind me, in the Lotus Flower Nunnery, there are no nuns on view, only the traffic of the human world far below.

Beethoven, at the end of his life, heard differently, was deaf. I haven't lost my hearing yet, just my breath.

As if by request, a piano is playing, somewhere in the distance, a classical piece I recognize but can't name. The notes are giving themselves away like family secrets—the proudest houses—in the island streets. The heady air of the South China Sea has dizzied me. I still don't know what my need is.

On my way up Sunlight Cliff I passed a small cemetery. The stones rose suddenly up. It was there Beethoven took me by surprise, has kept me company since. The stones were unreadable; the lives they marked, forgotten.

But desire is not gone. Beethoven loved his mother beyond measure. She died too soon. He never married. I'm with my wife on Gulangyu.