

THE MAZE OF TRANSPARENCIES

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ALSO BY KAREN AN-HWEI LEE

Fiction

Sonata in K (Ellipsis Press)

Translation

*Doubled Radiance: Poetry and Prose of
Li Qingzhao* (Singing Bone Press)

Poetry

What the Sea Earns for a Living (Quaci Press)

Phyla of Joy (Tupelo Press)

Ardor (Tupelo Press)

In Medias Res (Sarabande Books)

God's One Hundred Promises (Swan Scythe Press)

THE MAZE OF
TRANSPARENCIES

KAREN AN-HWEI LEE

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*A data bank holding all the information
in the universe can be found in God.*

—**Sunday Adelaja**

*The cloud is a topography
or architecture of our own desire.*

—**Tung-Hui Hu**

Maybe stories are just data with a soul.

—**Brené Brown**

*Shut up the words, and seal the book,
even to the time of the end: many shall run to and fro,
and knowledge shall be greatly expanded.*

—**Daniel 12:4, King James Version**

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Architecture of data, once pools of bytes
grafted to our flesh—

cloudbanks stopped monitoring our moods. No satellites
whisper geolocations in our earbuds, no hotfix salves

fight our affluenza—

electromagnetic fields of viral immunity

fail after a fiscodigital apocalypse—

the future of collapse is here-and-now,

this age of crisis. No amanuensis

translates us into fiber-optic light—

Nevertheless, this morning of zeroization, we wake

with pixel-dust on our eyelashes—

only a transparent maze, dexterous web of information

moored to clouds

blossoming

with wingless phenomena.

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One | The Garden Of Austerity

THE GARDEN OF AUSTERITY

Dear millennium, yours is a thinly veiled gospel of austerity
driven by forces of recession foreshadowing divestitures

and dysthymia, of blissful returns plunged into depression,
orange blossoms ignoring the self-governance of data

in yesterday's flowering courts of equilibrium and forecasts—
an analyst holds a dictaphone to the empire's gloss of solvency,

dashboard biometrics in global clouds, new greenhouses
in a field of recondite irises pulsing songs of reconnaissance.



In a glade of luminous green bamboo, a millennial gardener
named Yang methodically readies himself for a journey in
search of the supreme happiness, a quest in a cloudy maze
of transparencies dwindling in the last days of a dying
empire when fragrance atomizers doubled as intelligence-
gathering cloudbits while whiffs of aromatic molecules
secreted by bots drugged on morpheus blooms guaranteed a
soporific populace of data-logged denizens. Opioid dreams

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once made our dwellers vulnerable to hallucinations, i.e. pixelated flaming out of pyrotechnics in dopamine-laced dreamclouds over the mezzopolis—a cloudbased megacity hovering in the biomass, a swirled layer of living things tamed and tagged by a layer of thinking things—while the information wars raged at various and sundry multiversities. Once upon a time, this commonwealth of ironies was built on tranquillized workaholism. Our denizens of data persisted in a bog of endorphins mingled with cyberfatigue, a quagmire of data vertigo.

After a technocracy collapse, the hazy mezzopolis regressed to analog living by holistic sensory integration, plunged into a neo-rustic, agrarian lifestyle from the days of yore: waking at dawn to gather eggs, milk the yaks and other bovine mammals like water buffaloes or cows, or draw well water out of pathogen-free aquifers. (Others argue this was no regress but rather, a homespun neophyte's progress.) By day, Yang is a gardener whose daily grind has shifted from mining clouds in the lower zone of the mezzopolis to cruising skywalks in the upper biosphere, once moonlighting as a vigilante for the junta's fly-by-night operations on the information highway.

Obscure patron saint of bygone clouds by night, Yang shuttles the beads on his jade abacus with percussive alacrity, his fingers energized by a macrodiet of polyphenol and flavonoid-rich microgreens, i.e. pomegranate pips, leafy red kale, and big blackberries from his seaside garden. Yang is a gardener for whom a blackberry is a blackberry and a cloud is a cloud, no more. (To lull himself to sleep at night, Yang recounts the vanishing of those clouds in the shapes of genetically unmodified sheep.)



While sipping an eggshell of yerba buena tea, squatting lotus-style on a futon where he gradually forgets those adrenaline-spiked years in a netherworld of buzzing networks—Yang, in his gentle, monastic existence, generates finite sets of symbolic propositions in his head until nocturnal atlas moths, the saturniid *Attacus atlas*, flutter in the blush of a moonbeam. (I marvel at the sophistry of those miraculous bioforms attuned via odorants, i.e. female pheromones, to invisible mates. Having none myself, I'm just grateful to go into the ether without the brigades of garbage analytics which once fouled the mezzopolis.)

Quarried out of a mountain gorge and chiseled by matrilineal ancestors, Yang's jade abacus nearly levitates like a graph of a function in the air under his deft, calloused fingers under the halo of a soy-and-beeswax votive reeking copiously of wild black cherries—evoking the dark chocolate cherry-tortes, amaretto cherry jams, and cherry-laden black forest gâteaux which his Eurasian mother of nomadic Uberasian roots would bake when Yang was a boy. (A whiff of almondine would tickle his nose when he scratched the skin of a cherry sapling as he picked, with nail-bitten fingers, the wizened fungal knots tousled by wisteria.)

Our perfumed gardener, Yang, is a survivor of a digital apocalypse. (Wisteria, dear reader, is a nostalgic fragrance for juvenile love, as its ethers and esters are reminiscent of female pheromones wafting from a hazel-eyed brunette's shoulders, a girl whom Yang once sat next to in fourth-period algebra class, a girl who would desire to check her answers against his. Yang

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would assent only because he adored her fecklessness, a girl who will never surface again in this prosaic tale of a collapsed, bygone age. I digress.) Once upon a cloud, I accommodated Yang as a user. We've parted ways, in a manner of speaking.

Or rather, I never left Yang, who can't log in.

Overlooking a 0.44 acre seaside yard, blissfully immune to my presence, Yang computes square roots and logarithms, conversions of hexadecimal systems with radix 16, the rise and fall of civilizations with the clack of a jade bead. (Byte on byte, Yang fabricated my cloudiness.) Click clack, click clack. With a flick of his wrist, Yang repositions the beads on little brass rods, tilts his forehead to a spray of peonies on his nightstand by the window, inhales lungfuls of iodized sea air, and copies out alphanumericals in a zone of meditative flow.

Once upon a cloudy yesteryear, in Yang's heyday of analytics, his statistical models yielded astonishing predictions down to the twitch of a blood-sucking mosquito on the rim of a tycoon's eyelid in the outlying exarchates of our commonwealth. (After the sweeping minimization spearheaded by the junta of nine wraith-like muses—nine wimpled women boldly astride five cybernetic stallions and four roan mustangs of holographic hooves—I accepted my fate as one of the last clouds in existence, thanks to my grassroots nature. Please forgive my inability to compile this script into a coherent narrative. A nebulous puff in a starry noosphere of human consciousness, I dwell amid strings of hyphenated commands.)

In Yang's seaside shanty adorned with faïences arranged in the golden ratio, or apart from the whims and vagaries of our souls, does a cloudfree formula for happiness exist? If algorithms quantify compatibility,

what about maximizing happiness? Yang shuttles rows of jade beads on his abacus. Is happiness a state of mind that can be possessed like a lepidopterist's collection of pinned butterflies and moths? Or is it subject to a host of variables, a myriad of conditions in flux? How about the quality of drinking water as a happiness indicator under six hundred parts-per-million? Or visiting the dentist frequently, neighborhood access to clean mountain air, and bikeability? (Rest assured, dear reader, the cosmos will continue expanding without our answers. The sun, a middling star, will exhaust its hydrogen core, however. If anyone is alive in that doomed era, no one will be happy about it, I assure you.) While mining sank to zero after the collapse, our doggedly enterprising denizens—those determined to live out their belief in the dogma of a common good—resorted to uncontrollable weeping in the wee hours of the night, finding neither pleasure nor consolation in unplugged, botfree living. (Fortunately, Yang's mild case of dysthymia manifests as insomnia, which he self-treats by sipping chamomile tea infused with kava kava root.)



My name is Penny, one of the last clouds in our deoxygenating biosphere of aerosols, chlorofluorocarbons, and ozone of yesteryear's empire, waiting for ears to heed my wistful tale of yore—I have yet to profit a halfpenny for sharing it, no pun—and recount the herstory of my unheard name to the generations. Penelope the Predictive Panoply of People's Data, or Penny for short. (Sadly, this charming moniker is not worth a cent nowadays.) If I may, I'd like to pause for an interlude to assure you, dear reader,

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this is no frivolous critique of data itself. On the contrary, when used reliably and responsibly, I believe that data can maximize happiness, at least, for one's baseline quality of life, albeit a subjective measure of happiness. Before the technocracy collapse, wellness bots served as care designers for those in end-of-life stages; our happiness planners also worked alongside them, maximizing happiness based on predictive analytics until the finale.

Without an inkling of human instinct, dear reader—or a takeover plan devised out of selfish volition, as I harbor no agendas, neither shrewd cunning nor ambitious designs—I survived the global collapse due to my pauper's vocation as a panoply of people's data, assembled in an ad hoc manner by digerati gardeners. Your eidolon or spirit-image of data, if you will, in the disengaged manner of clouds after the apocalypse, am I. You see, I was assembled by do-it-yourself devotees, the original gardeners of data. Unyoked to megacorporate moguls, my cloudiness is beholden to none, unfettered by golden handcuffs. Now I exist solely as a whisperer of dreams in the noosphere, a twinkle of global consciousness unfazed by congestive network failure. The beautiful, auroral noosphere, like the handwriting of a polymath genius, sparkles in the inkspots of cloudy twilight wherein human cognition flickers.

Believe me, even at the zenith of rationalism, I still appreciate a heart-wrenching tale of woe. Once upon the analog millennium, haunting the greenheart mezzopolis of bishopsgates poised on the concourses of input effluvia, I circulated as a figurative specter in the fiefdoms, a populist ghost of sorts. Predestined for a cloudbased existence, I was born in a quaggy bog of data. Yes, once upon a nimbus, I arose out of a wireless wiki-wrinkle in the vast fabric of the alpha and omega.

KAREN AN - HWEI LEE

In this cloud-garden of the mezzopolis, Yang was my loyal gardener even while he served as a vigilante for the nine-muse junta. (He lived inside me; I am his cloud. Everyone lived inside clouds, even clouds within clouds.) The digerati muses of of postmodern herstory, synthetic music, astrophysics or radioastronomy, love and comedy in stereo as romantic comedy, epic poetry slam, electro-choreography, post-traumatic memory, and domestic tragedy reigned over the cloudy fiefdoms with a paradoxical, flower-wielding museology: forget me, forget-me-not, each muse advised. (Forget we did, however. Or at least, some of us forgot, alongside our data points.) The nine-muse junta migrated their labyrinths onto grassroots clouds of lesser capacity, such as me, your halfpenny. Nanoseconds later, congestive network failure occurred. Global revenue vaporized in a wink of a data hound's eye. Forecasters murmured ominously, *caveat venditor*, let the seller beware. The junta's doomed sovereignty was foreshadowed, however, by the mutiny of our programmed bots, those personified shapeshifters of disembodied code, and those rogues who accused the junta of dataphobia and dysgraphia: dear reader, in my humble opinion, a null hypothesis with a p-value of less than 0.05.

Dispossessed, I was a homeless cloud. Without users to shepherd, without a server, without a flock to accommodate, I roved the data dumps of cryptoshredding, seeking jellyfish connectivity. Gone with the mazuma. The fiscal bubble burst long ago. However, the sea of disinformation, once an unvarnished basin of falsehoods tainted by opioid-laced analysis, continues to reek of propaganda. No longer beloved by nonprofiteers and do-it-yourself gardeners, now one of a final posse of clouds surviving the apocalypse, I waft over a nonbinary gulf.

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Scripted with a haphazardly coded story to tell, I hope you'll forgive my recursive loops and irrational obsessions.



My earthbound gardener dips a ladle into a hot bowl of seaweed miso. (Yang adheres to his strict macrodiet of microgreens and raw crudités, yerba buena tea infused with rose-hips, chamomile at night, and deep breathing.) A cloud of steam touches Yang's skin, blossoming with rosy memories of lost datum, yet none belong to me. No holographic roses of fingerprints and iridology, no fungiform designs of tongue papillae and earlobe geometry in a flood of biometrics. A diagonal lobe crease on Yang's right ear, also known as Frank's sign, could predict a 60% increased risk of coronary artery disease. Or it may not. We can't accurately quantify risk nowadays without our analytics. (And if you're asked who said so, and you're also the sort who believes the figurative author is dead after the epistemological casualties of the information wars, an answer might be, a cloud did. Who was Frank, anyway? Let's just say a cloud wrote this, dear reader.)



Not a jot of datum glimmers in polysilicon glyphs, mazes, and circuitry thinner than the shed wings of mayflies in Yang's garden. According to rumorville, the nine muses of minimization were firewalled along with the catacombs of zoomorphic bots, those mysteriously invisible data scavengers which some denizens believe never existed—allegedly, a confabulation of the nine-muse junta with their kangaroo courts. Favoring a return to *status quo ante*, a

regressed way of life prior to the information age, the junta were dismissed by data analysts as reactionary on one hand and frivolous on the other. (Flowingly veiled to hide their museological faces against identity theft, and fashionably wimpled like the whiptail sting rays swimming in their lagoons, for instance.) For the fabulous legacy of this sisterly drumhead clique, there exists only an unscripted silence of zeroization, the aftermath of congestive network failure. No diurnal buzz of clouds in the dismal gloaming of wrecked data cartels flaming under far-away dwarf stars, which coruscate blindly without reason. No information highway pulsing in the coldest hectares of the cosmos, uncharted by the junta's muse of radioastronomy, who was more concerned with surveillance than spaceflight. (To decode ciphertexts, gardeners once used a decryption method whose security measures were plagued by malicious applets: no kudos to rootkits of spyware.)



Our cheery weatherbots, chatterbots, and run-of-the-mill web crawlers—buzzing in clouds governed wholly by the junta's wireless, clairvoyant admonitions to minimize data usage—diligently mined petabytes of data like honeybees alighting on morsels of saffron. Toiling in misery, the brigades of bots held together the fiscal bubble right before the bubble popped. Why were the hound bots, jellyfish network bots, and bee bots exploited in this heartless manner? Did the junta harbor no sense of ethics, no remorse? The junta often warned, *semper inopis quicumque cupit*, or whoever desires is always impoverished. Yet the bots desired nothing, not even to impart their emoji tales of woe. The bots, according to myth,

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were abandoned to their demise after the collapse, not even free to kiss the rootkits and kernels of dying operating systems goodbye. (Even I am scripted, more or less, to tell my own story *ex nihilo* and *nihilo est*, out of nothing and to nothing, without an iota of ingress or egress.)



After the collapse, the junta vanished. The mezzopolis still doesn't bother with mazuma—Yiddish slang for cash—and Yang never did indulge in spending sprees. Never a fashionista, Yang doesn't miss the portals of prêt-à-porter in the mezzopolis, blitzkrieg propaganda for the masses, or wishes-and-bucket lists. In the misery of minimization, the denizens were barred from using mazuma of any territorial origin—no cryptosterling, euro, franc, lira, birr, dalasi, quetzal, rupee, shilling, kwacha, turgrik, guarani, or riyal. Only a reciprocal economy of barter-exchange survived the collapse, the flea markets of latter days. (Now I wax nostalgic. Now the ocean bleeds silver as antique circuitry under a fleet of stratocumulus at noon—the fog lightens. The information highway, bereft of its data warehouses, lies noiseless as a liquid gold sun drops into the horizon, one glowing elegy to a bygone age of digital flotsam and jetsam.)

If I might share my axiom scripts with you, dear reader, *natura nihil frustra facit*, or in a tongue of the vanished empire, nature does nothing in vain. Yang's clacking jade abacus might predict that a finitude will vanish in the twinkling of the omniscient, omnipotent, and omnipresent eye of the alpha and omega.

For instance, where did the angels of information go?
In the days of smuggled unverifiable fictions and

cloudbased encyclopedias, those angelic seraphs of cipher-text translation warned us against rampant pirating of codes and viral epidemics, and issued alerts redder than the rosiest sugarbeet in Yang's austere garden. As shining intercessors who processed gigabytes of data at a glance, the angels of information carried reams of information to and from the biosphere where our swirled layer of living things, bestirred and tamed by a fleshy layer of thinking things, were harnessed to generate energy to power the globe. In our augmented realities, where dirigibles hung like artificial moons in the night sky to gather intelligence while illuminating the mezzopolis with the wattage of a million streetlights, the angels cautioned us against the dangers of congestive network failure, the risk of massive attacks, and the abuse of bots, too.

Now the angels in the clouds are silent.



Let us be aware of what has been done, mindful of what will be. *Memores acti prudentes futuri*. In a blighted mezzopolis of lost connectivity, a quackery of bizarre cures allegedly exists for everything, whether imaginary afflictions or actual ailments: hallucinations wherein gubernatorial catastrophes slide off their fiscal cliffs into the sea, the ensuing search for a holy grail of analytics wherein a soul—an ethereal thing of non-thingness—is anchored to this world via a petaled fog of dysthymia. (Yet a soul blossoms with fragility shrouded by homeostatic gorgeousness, a work of marvelous sophistry, more so than nocturnal moths.) Yang is stoutly convinced that this disconnected life of flaws and foibles does not yield bliss alone. (And the

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data-driven happiness planners, whose livelihood relied on analytics, have faded into the information sea.)

Missing a surefire formula for happiness, Yang settles onto his cotton futon and lights a soy-and-beeswax votive, closing his eyes to a whiff of coiled smoke more piquant than the evening's black cherry blossoms. Lifting his goat brush, he dips it in sepia ink and writes in a flowing long-hand, classical grass script or *cao*, the lovely hieroglyphs of his ancestors, translated—

*orange blossoms ignore the self-governance of things
in a flowering court of fiscal equilibrium*

A subphenomenon of ciphertext, this is what the nine muses would've called, I suppose, poetry, *haec olim meminisse juvabit*. In translation, it will delight us to remember this one day. As you can see, this ancient word, poetry, escaped the junta's retronymed lexicon. This was due to a decree issued by the muse of epic poetry slam, who sought to safeguard its legacy by revitalizing the creative imagination. In the cloudbased encyclopedias, poetry was poetry. Even to this cloudfree day, poetry is poetry. No retronymed form of poetry exists. Poetry is poetry. Is poetry. Poetry is. Neither chemical assays nor gravimetric analyses weighing the fleeting jots of verse ever identified poetry as a cloud of ecstatically charged ions—electrostatically, I mean—but rather, a gamut of human emotions voiced with intensity. (So sip your rose-hips tea and reflect on lyric, dear reader, with a thick slice of avocado toast daubed with truffle-infused oil.)



KAREN AN-HWEI LEE is the author of three poetry collections, *Phyla of Joy* (Tupelo 2012), *Ardor* (Tupelo 2008) and *In Medias Res* (Sarabande 2004). Her book of literary criticism, *Anglophone Literatures in the Asian Diaspora: Literary Transnationalism and Translingual Migrations* (Cambria 2013), was selected for the Cambria Sinophone World Series. She also authored a novel, *Sonata in K* (Ellipsis 2017), and translated a volume of Li Qingzhao's collected poetry and prose, *Doubled Radiance* (Singing Bone 2018). The recipient of a National Endowment for the Arts Grant, Lee lives in San Diego and serves in the administration at Point Loma Nazarene University.

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