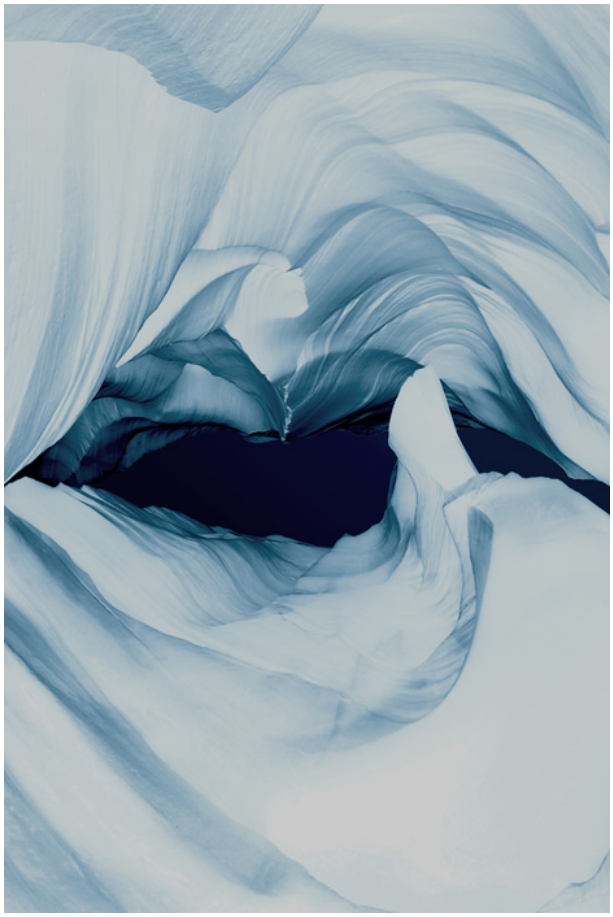
SHORT STORY

The River

by Jingshu Yao



"A Cell's Best Effort To Keep Its Host Alive" by Jury S Judge

Tint Journal, no. (), www.tintjournal.com

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I wish our hearts were one,

So the river never ends.

– Li Zhiyi (1103)

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“Guess what? We are in the same class again! Isn't that great? I never thought I would see a familiar face in middle school.” Your voice sounded so excited through the speaker. My hand was shaking the phone slightly. We were in the same class since grade 3 but never actually close.

We started as a drop of water,

from the ice sheet,

on the top of the mountain.

We traveled on our own,

till the confluence.

You were one of the tall and beautiful girls sitting in the back of the classroom. Coming from Shanghai, where the Yangtze River joins the sea, you had the confidence of a girl from a big city. Teachers adored you, girls admired you, boys wrote love letters and snuck them into your notebooks. I, on the other hand, was a short tomboy sitting in the front row. Boys pulled my hair while I tried to kick their bottoms. I screamed and chased them around, fell onto the dusty ground and tore my clothes. Teachers and parents sighed at the sight of me.

“When will you stop being so childish and start to act like a girl?” Coming from Sichuan for my parents' job commission, I clearly had an accent that didn't belong to the East Coast. I spent my younger years not that far from the Tanggula Mountain, where the glaciers give birth to the spring that will later become the longest river in China.

A rough muddy brook joined a clear stream.

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They merged and went along the creek.

We were as different as the two sides of magnets, the new environment of high school becoming the magnetic field that drew us together. We were the unlikely friends that no one had expected. I felt so lucky to walk with you arm in arm, to sit beside one another in the cafeteria and during the bus ride home, to do our little talks between girls. We talked about the books we read, the shows we watched, your cat and my plants, teachers, classmates, the boy who sat next to you and always made you angry...

When the river bed widened the water slowed down.

The dust and mud sunk and the clear liquid ran.

The future had no limit and life was long.

The creek flew leisurely with a burbling sound.

I stopped swearing because I couldn't face your amber colored eyes filled with blame. I yelled in public no more for you frowned every time I let my manner slip. I grew my boyish hair to my shoulders and hoped it would be as elegant as yours. I changed thoroughly for you.

The rocks and logs blocked water on its way.

But water couldn't reject.

For the obstacles are in its heart.

Growing up, you became more attractive, changed boyfriends several times; girls crowded by your side but said negative things behind your back. I thought myself as your most loyal friend but there was always someone cooler around you. Great tides were raised in my feelings. Jealousy splashed everywhere when you walked hand in hand with a boyfriend or sat in the center of the girls in the cafeteria.The spray of anger overwhelmed and scared me. I carefully hid my thoughts, fearing that you would distance yourself from me for what was on my mind.

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Only fools would attempt to hold the movement of the river.

A fool or someone desperate.

One day on the bus, you told me with excitement that your deskmate, the boy who always made you angry, said that he liked you. This was not your first boyfriend, but you still blushed. Your face lit up, more beautiful than ever.

You whispered: “If one day, you meet someone you like, tell me first, okay?”

I smiled and said nothing. I tried the best a 15-year-old could to maintain my dignity and pride.

The next day you saw me, my hair was above my earlobe again.

The creek kept flowing while the water sang along.

The river joined together but also separated,

they might split to form an island,

or they came to the bifurcation

where the joint journey ended.

“How long since we last met? Three months? Five?”

Six months and a week. I didn't say it out loud because I didn't want you to know that I'd been keeping track of our separated days, one by one.

You were taller, your face had lost the chubby of a girl and grown the charm of a woman. You were still beautiful, but different.

The river left the mountains and ceased to be limited.

With great enthusiasm it ran toward the boundless plain.

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The first year after graduation we were still best friends. We met regularly on the weekends and went on trips together during the summer. We texted each other good night before going to bed, no matter how busy we were. My heart raced every time my phone vibrated and I smiled at the green message box that had your name on it. I had your photos on my lock screen and stared at your face every time I felt down. I kept talking to you, in my head, in my dreams, and in my writing. I could feel your presence during all the days we were separated. You were always with me. I wrote poems for you but never gained enough courage to show them to you. The lines only talked about trees, flowers, birds, and rain but I was afraid that someone as smart and sensitive as you would do well to see through the hints.

With a heavier course load and my parents taking away my cell phone to avoid distractions, we couldn't stay in touch as often. But my mind wandered to you whenever it could.

No one ever steps in the same river twice,

for it's not the same river and one is not the same one.

We talked until our coffee got cold. High school, new people and a new life. You were in Mathletes and got great marks. I was writing a story about spaceships. Once again you were the top of your class, while my grades rose and fell, like a drifting boat.

You said you didn't like science fiction and you didn't have much time to read because of the heavy schoolwork. You said you need to get into a good university and that was your focus right now.

The riverbed went on in two different directions.

The water split with a part of one another among each other.

Eventually, you said you were dating a boy from your high school. Tall, handsome, and as smart as you. You were so happy.

“Have you met anybody yet?”

“No, not really.” 17 years old was a perfect age to lie, the words slipped out of me without any difficulty.

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“I'm sure you will soon. By the way, if you're going to the classmates reunion next week, can you bring this letter to my ex? I don't feel like seeing him.”

I held up the piece of paper; it was as thin as a knife.

Water never gets hurt, for you can't cut water open, with any weapons.

The land opened up,

but the bank was steep,

and the watercourse creeps.

It was a long way for the river,

to travel through the meander.

“I'm sorry to wake you up but please listen to me.”

You called me at midnight and said that you felt isolated. Nobody around you seemed to understand what you were going through. You went to a university in Chongqing, where the Yangtze is still in its upper course. It's a good school but you didn't want to study what your parents chose and you didn't need your boyfriend to tell you what to do from the other side of the country. You didn't care about what others thought of you anymore; you hated the feeling that you were living a life for someone else.

The river has no fear for water is its heart,

transparency stands for honesty,

shapelessness means invincibility.

I sat on my bed in the dorm of my nameless university located in Suzhou, the last watertown nourished by the Yangtze before it enters the modern craziness of Shanghai. I listened to you talking on and on until you calmed down and said you were fine; you just needed someone

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to talk to. You asked me if I understood.

“I don't have to understand. I just want to listen.”

You remained silent for a long time but neither of us hung up.

“I just don't know if I will ever make some impact, even a tiny little one.”

The river leaves no mark, for water has no color or smell,

But the river remembers where it washes through,

And what it washed through remembers the fondle of water.

You already did, in my life. The words are just on the tip of my tongue but I swallowed it down as you started to talk again.

“You know, you're such a good friend. I lost contact with most classmates in middle school. I'm glad that you're not one of them-- were you saying anything?”

“You should go back to sleep.”

I listened to your light laughter and you said good night.

The river flows away quietly, same as the sleepless night.

The river was a river no more when it entered the sea.

It lost its clearness and took on bitterness and salt.

“You look so different.”

We didn't talk for a whole year before you called again. This time through video so we could see each other. Indeed, I was different and so were you. My hair grew longer again and I stopped wearing T-shirts and sport pants all year around. I became mild and gentle again but this time, not for you. Your hair was gold, your lips were red, your eyebrows stretched and

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darkened, your lashes thickened and lengthened. I looked at you as if you were a stranger.

But the river never regrets,

for all the rivers meet at the sea.

I was happy to see you but the level of excitement and anxiety was not what it used to be. We caught up over WeChat like any old friends would. You broke up with your high school boyfriend and found a new one at university. You said that young love is always silly. You were in an exchange program in Nebraska and I lived in Toronto for one year. You said that Americans are loud and lazy but they provide better education so you have to be there. I liked the diversity and inclusive environment in Canada but my financial situation as an international student troubled me. We talked and laughed. The uneasiness at the sight of you in middle school, the shivering upon hearing your voice over the phone in high school, all the feelings that overwhelmed me every time I thought about you over the years had disappeared. Time changed you as well as me. I entered another stream, one that was more steady and calm.

The river ended.

We eventually met at the sea.

“So what's new?”

“I met someone.”

“What's he like?”

I paused. Proud month, rainbow flag, her smile the first time I asked her out. My heart raced as your familiar amber eyes looked through the screen, filled with curiosity. It took a long time for a drop of water to reach the ocean, but it did, eventually.

“She's nice.”

You cheered and leaned toward the screen, “I knew it, you like girls. That's so cool, tell me everything!”

I started to talk about my girlfriend while you smiled and listened, as I used to do when you describe your boyfriends. I met her at a writing circle and exchanged numbers, both aware of

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the mutual feeling and started dating. It was a rather short story compared to the story that I chose not to tell, the story about you.

More water continued to flow,

tracelessly from mountain to ocean.

“I am so happy for you. How about your writing, are you working on something right now?”

“A poem. A poem about a river.”

The river never ended.

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