

**CONJUNCTIONS: A Web Exclusive**



*Adventures in Shangdu*  
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**OF LUCKY HIGHRISE APARTMENT 88**

The contractors were in such a hurry to catch up with the rest of the world that they rushed off before they finished building Highrise 88. So here is my apartment without its last wall, gaping out to a panoramic view of Shangdu's river, the soda barges that creep past my building like brooding islets braided with a riot of seagulls. Across the river, all the white tiled factories hum anxiously. This hum of two thousand factories can inspire or drive you mad. Yesterday, a drunk man and a suicide used 88's unencumbered views to fall to their deaths and now there are ads for new roommates. I am one of the few without a roommate since there are not enough women anymore to share a room. My last roommate married as quickly as she moved in with me. I see her in the neighborhood, pregnant and gloating, with men who fetch her footstools.

**OF LUCKY HIGHRISE APARTMENT 88's COURTYARD OR EPITHALAMION**

A gale of wind lifted the guile of newsprint, a feast of smoked quails stanching the stench of our wretched units, and a throng yearned and followed. Yearning for wedding songs of bells against the river shore, they excitedly followed the smell until they saw the age difference between the betrothed couple. An old, haggard widow and a young fresh-scrubbed boy of twenty: she, stoop-shouldered in carnation red, he in crisped blue suit. When the couple kissed, the mob made their presence known and heckled their ritual wedlock. Not rice they threw, but spit. Yet still, they watched while cackling, wistful as

the Fried Prawn vendor who turned his surveillance camera towards the rising and setting sun.

#### OF THE MILLENNIAL PROMENADE ALONG THE RIVER<sup>1</sup>

Vendors line along the promenade to serve passersby—they sell pinwheels, pancakes, and roast meats of all kinds, even sticks of prickly little sea horses. One female vendor keeps peeled apples under her armpit until they are saturated with her scent and then she sells them so customers can luxuriate in both the scent of fruit and her ripeness. Along the promenade, the rabble is enraptured by the new tower across the river but the vendors grumble of slow business. Officials installed cameras behind the vendor's umbrella fringes to catch conspirators. Today, there is no drama so the vendors gossip.

It is true that the Fried Prawn vendor tilted his surveillance camera so it caught nothing but the sun. Officials executed him after they watched the useless footage of a sun bobbing up and down for one hundred days. Why did he do such a stupid thing? He was a saboteur! Said one. We should all destroy the cameras. Everyone knows about them and it takes away business! Said a third, It was for personal reasons. He was stupid in love and his lover walked out on him for—and the vendors stopped short for the cameras were recording.

#### OF THE OLD COLONIAL DUTCH QUARTERS

When I imagine this city, it is not the city that I want but the city that I fear. But I too have an obsession. He is one of the painters who works in the Rembrandt factory. He paints five Rembrandt self-portrait paintings a day which I hear are sold to rich town houses and hotels in a place called Florida. He is renowned to be the fastest painter in Shangdu and he has completed ten thousand Rembrandt self-portraits. In the mornings, I walk past him when he is on his smoke break. Today, I catch him sniffing his hand.

#### OF THE STREET OF XIAOS

There they are, squatting all in row. Stick stick soldiers. Unmarried migrant men who wander in from the rural provinces. If a scooter were to crash into a poultry truck, they would be the first to rush and gawk at the accident, without lending a hand. If a foreigner were to sit at a café, they would gather around the foreigner and gape until the foreigner left the café from self-consciousness. While others are active verbs who *do,do,do*, Xiaos are the true helping verbs. Sometimes, they sponge white over graffiti briar, pave potholed roads, or scrub the sauna's drained tubs until there is enough dirt and dander in their pails to make another Xiao. Here, another foreigner arrives and sits outside and the Xiaos crowd around to stare. When the foreigner speaks the language, they are delighted.

They ask, Are you Jewish? When he says no, they are disappointed and walk away.

#### OF THE NEW STAR SAUNA AT MERCHANT ROAD

An anchorman met his new assistants for lunch and asked if they knew how famous he was. As if on cue, two people came and shook his hand. A waitress poured him his English tea and he told her to wait by his tea until it was fully steeped. She stood quietly and then he laughed and told her it was just a test. Later that day, she visited the newly built sauna. Everywhere around her, people exfoliated themselves with coarse pads, shedding delicate shades of skin to forget their harrowing day. She left the sauna tingling and tender, ready for her date with her soldier boyfriend. When she met him, he said, There is no time for rest, a soldier risked his life to sneak out for a bowl of noodles and when he was caught, he shot himself. The soldier asked her to continue waiting.

#### OF THE MILLENIAL AQUARIUM BUILT NEXT TO THE OCEAN VIEW SEAFOOD RESTAURANT<sup>2</sup>

The seafood is so fresh it is alive. The new aquarium is so realistic it looks like a glass tunnel suspended inside the ocean. The parents and child stand on a moving walkway and gawk at a narwhal rapping its tusk against their shoes, a stingray casting a vampiric shadow above their heads, and vermilion ballooned plankton drifting down around them like celestial matter. Then all is dark and the only source of light is the blind-man eyes of an ancient-faced angler fish. Afterwards, the parents bring the child to the restaurant and suck out the eggs of a dancing shrimp or offer the distressed child to drink from a cold soup of live darting minnows. Everyday, the restaurant offers challenging specials. A man tried to devour a whole writhing octopus as it suctioned around his face and head, his teeth struggling to masticate this all-too-living body, but he gave up in exhaustion.

#### OF THE ZOO ON 6 CHRYSANTHEMUM ROAD

The farmers used to worship the giant one-legged pelican which would open its pouched maw to drop down rain. Writers worshipped brown spotted little men that would whisper fantastic plots in their ears while they slept. All travelers feared the basilisk whose glare caused you to grow tumors. We now worship animals that exist. The porcupine. The civet cat. The snake. Even the ant. Our forests are vast empty chambers. Hike to the deepest heart of our mountains and you hear nothing except for the wind's hiss of all that has shamed you. The zoo is the most popular attraction. One zookeeper cares for the only two sea turtles in the world. They are both one hundred years old. Everyday, he snaps on gloves and then he gently massages the male turtle so that he may one day seed.

## OF THE OLD UKRAINIAN EMBASSY THAT WILL BE TORN DOWN FOR THE HANGER FACTORY

Boomtown is Shangdu's brand name. How do you like Boomtown Shangdu? Everyday, two thousand more people flood into Shangdu to work in our two thousand factories. Do you know why? Shangdu is booming! Guides will say that twenty years ago, there was nothing but a gas station and a few scattered pig farms along the river. I was one of the few born in Shangdu and it is true what they say about the farms but the guides don't mention how Officials used to dump all the cripples from the Capital into Shangdu. Now that Shangdu is booming, they have rounded all the cripples and exiled them to a remote outpost up north. That outpost is also beginning to boom.

## OF THE EXPRESS BUS ROUTE TO THE CAPITAL

Impulse is rehearsed to desperation because we cannot act on our first impulse. Yesterday, I almost collided into Rembrandt as the bus sighed its doors open but my mouth was zipped. So I take the same route now, ten minutes earlier, hoping to catch him and sit next to him. But even if I did sit next to him, what would I say? We are not of a culture where curious strangers can strike up a conversation. Love is background checked, set up by services. I tried a service but left once the woman began adding up my worth on a calculator. She still leaves messages on my phone: You are twenty points too short for the foreman but if you return, I'll give you the foreman for half my price.

## OF THE WORLD'S LARGEST MULTILEVEL PARKING GARAGE

Last year, when Officials ignored their strike, the crane operators decided to be more aggressive. They worked all night. The next morning, train carriages, municipal buses, limousines, bicycles, boats, and even helicopters swung lazily in the wind, magnetized by cranes. Negotiate, they cried, and we will free your vehicles. Finally Officials promised to bargain but when meeting day approached, the army rushed into the bargaining room and all the operators conveniently disappeared. Until Shangdu finds a new generation of qualified crane operators, no one knows how to work the cranes and release the vehicles. The magnetized vehicles sway in the breeze, rust in the rain. One driver was drunkenly passed out when they lifted his taxi up into the night. He has lost his voice, hoarsely calling out to the shuddering city.

## OF FUTURE WIRELESS HIGHRISE 110

For a whole week, I wake to one lone farmer protesting in front of a new construction site next to 88. He wears a sandwich board and shouts into his bullhorn while sound speakers blast the recording of a cheering crowd. I flick on a soap on TV and a starlet weeps operatically and drowns out the recorded crowd. Then I hear the police sirens which drown out the starlet and the recorded crowd. Cut to the next morning, when the starlet weeps again on the radio, but it is a rerun, and the construction site is empty.

#### OF THE GAMBLERS' DEN IN THE BACK OF 4 TURTLE ALLEY

Once, Officials praised the first enthusiastic student who signed up for the revolution. But then the student said, I noticed that the Agriculture professor is on your hit list. I will hunt him down and murder him! They cautioned against his choice of word "murder" and encouraged him to be more inclusive with his targets. As it turned out, the student's wife ran off with the Agriculture professor and the student was obsessed with revenge. The revolution was quite convenient for him.

But the professor was wiler than the student and immediately went into hiding with his wife. Throughout the year, the student searched obsessively for the professor. A craftsman carved him a wooden pistol, dyed indigo, but that was more for show. His true weapon was a haycutter. His heart twitched in his ribcage as he knocked on every home, brandishing a photo clipping of the professor holding a potted acacia plant. None of the villagers knew who he was but they promised to promptly kill the enemy once they spotted him. No, he begged, if you see him, just keep him hostage until I return. It wasn't until early autumn that he found him in Shangdu, which was then a remote outpost. The professor was bearded and gaunt and worked as a latrine cleaner. It was said that he was so weak that he keeled over before the student nicked him with the cutter. By that time, the revolution was already a month past. The Officials decided that the professor was no longer an enemy but an asset and had planned to reinstate him for a government position. They arrested the student and convicted him of murder. As he faced the firing squad, the student realized that he didn't even think to ask what happened to his wife.

The wife is my mother. When she is feeling angry, she will tell me my father was the student. Other days, when she is sad, she will tell me my father was the professor.

#### OF ALL THE HIGHRISES

Every highrise lacks something. Highrise 11 has no heat, Highrise 22 lacks floors, Highrise 33 has no spigots, Highrise 44 lacks windowpanes, Highrise 55 lacks a stove range, while Highrise 66 is lopsided. Highrise 77 is right across from 88 and it is dark as a tomb. It temporarily has no electricity. Sometimes, I see a flicker of candles, roaming flashlights. 77 watches us in the sullen dark, we with our brazenly exposed units. They watch us eat, quarrel, make love, sleep. They watch us watching them. Lately there have

been more residents leaping to their deaths out of 88 and spooked 88 residents have been moving to 77, preferring the dark. Some residents of 88 have wrapped a weave of laundry twine in a frail attempt to create a guardrail. Someone has chosen to wall himself in with stacked urns.

#### OF THE MEGA C-CITY SUPERMARKET

Whenever I am in the grocery store, I see an old man in a wheelchair who weeps in front of a whole aisle of energy drinks. He is a resident of lopsided Highrise 66, where for some reason, they have placed all the octogenarians. Old man, I asked one day, why do you weep? The old man choked down his sob. That's me, he said and pointed to the one hundred or so energy drinks, each with the same iconic illustration of a young soldier in epaulettes raising his fist. *Power up!* the energy drink is called. That's just an illustration, I said. No, he said, those are *my* epaulettes. I was a young soldier during the Campaign and I found and hunted down all the surviving archaeologists. As a top honor, the leader gave me iron epaulettes. But when the revisionists took over, they sent me to a reeducation camp. Since then, I polished those epaulettes with my tears and buried them. And now, they're trying to remind me of my ways. Why must they remind me so many times?

#### OF THE CENTRAL LANGUAGE RADIO HEADQUARTERS

Rembrandt only smokes Mild Seven cigarettes. He is remarkably tall, a head taller than the average Xiao, and his head is roughly shaved with a nick or two where the razor may have bitten skin. He has a birthmark on his neck, a blue stain intricately shaped like an old-fashioned bicycle where the front wheel is larger than the back. I have imagined this birthmark many times. On a beautiful day in May, when the sun burns through the carbon haze like blood jets from civic posters and white magnolias shoot out like flags from toy guns, we will ride our tall unwieldy bicycles together.

There is a talk show hostess who I listen to every night. Every night, people confused by love call to complain and she listens and counsels them with her soothing voice. Usually, it's women who seek her advice about the economic worth of men they have found through a service. But lately, it's been men who call because their wives have left them for richer men or men who complain of their unbearable loneliness. Sometimes, they will propose to her and she will laugh until they begin to break down.

Rembrandt no longer smokes his Mild Seven cigarettes in front of the factory. The first day I didn't see him, I was mildly worried. Then a week passed without his presence. My concern became an obsession. Finally, I had the gall to go inside the factory, up to the foreman's office. I pretended I was his cousin and asked for his whereabouts. The foreman sighed with disappointment and said, He was my best painter. But he's gone on to the next city to work at the Renoir factory. He is sick of self-portraits. He wants to

paint beautiful women.

## OF THE SPORT STADIUM

I sniff my hand and I smell the unfailing scent of Shangdu. How hot it is, and then how moist, when the monsoon zithers down and we are all bonded with our umbrellas. The citizens are driven. I only work when I don't sleep and now experience eludes me. Experience eludes me yet somehow, I am full of shame. A simple glance from a stranger will shame me and I will drop my head. Shame is not individual here but collective. I drop my head. Then it happens one after another. The legions of factory workers, the foremen, and the project managers drop their heads. The model citizen who announced on TV he will have as many children as possible to generously spread his genes, drops his head. The man dressed as a giant blue hedgehog in front of the electronic mall drops his blue hedgehog head. The genetic scientist who claimed to have cloned the endangered lizard drops his head. Even the most famous basketball player drops his head. Even the crooked mogul who has designed his estate to look exactly like the Maison-Laffite mansion drops his heads. Even our transitional leader drops his head. A field of dropped heads. My poppies, my poppies!

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<sup>1</sup>Image inspired by Walid Raad.

<sup>2</sup>Image inspired by Park Chan Wook.