

FOG ALERT

濃霧特報

* 2024 Golden Tripod Award

Award-winning author Yang Limin returns to the literary stage after a multiyear absence spent building a career in Taiwan's civil service. In Fog Alert, her second published work, Yang sharpens her acerbic pen on the everyday minutiae of life and explores the relationships among youthful ambition, reality, and literature.

An impassioned author working a low-level civil service job finds herself trapped in a bureaucratic machine's soulless grind. Her dream of writing while earning a regular paycheck is shattered when she finds her life's new stability and predictability have dulled her literary ardor and sensibilities. She only finds her stride when starting to write in pensive, world-weary terms, about the landscape of everyday life. Mirroring Kafka's keen fixation on the absurdities and rich emptiness of life, Yang re-finds her penetrating literary insightfulness and recaptures her lost passion for writing when she begins picking apart and making sense of the farce and foolishness in her everyday existence.

Weaving her lived burdens into the narrative, the author writes of convoluted family secrets and city neighborhood legends that put the lie to an everyday life that, while deceptively normal and pleasurable, is emotionally and spiritually toxic. In gray-cast, dispassionate prose, inner truths and coveted hopes shine through her dreams of overseas travel and memories of her parents, hinting somewhat expectantly at true hope for redemption.

Yang's latest work explores the struggles involved in balancing family, friends, reality and aspiration as well as the frustrations, apathy, and exhaustion wrapped up in everyday life and work. Writing may indeed be the author's respite from the fog-bound pressures of life, or perhaps writing is the breath of fresh air just strong enough to part the



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fog and let a little sunlight through...just enough to reenergize, regroup and press on ahead again for a while.

Yang Limin 楊莉敏

Yang Limin, born in 1985 in Taichung City, holds a bachelor's in Chinese Literature from Tunghai University and currently works as a civil servant. As a student, Yang earned multiple domestic awards and recognitions for her literary works and essays. She sees writing as a vehicle allowing her to stand up to her own shortfalls and weaknesses. Her works include the essay collection *Wild World* and *Fog Alert*.

FOG ALERT

By Yang Limin

Translated by Catherine Xinxin Yu

Fog Alert

On my way home from a driving lesson, just a bit past eight in the morning, the fog lifted quickly, leaving my field of vision so clear that even a dead rat crushed by car tires on the asphalt was glaringly visible. As the fog cleared, the cramped and chaotic streets near the morning market appeared in front of me. Crowds swarmed out, looking utterly bored and exhausted. I didn't want to see this too well, so I pressed my scooter's throttle to speed ahead.

I bought breakfast on the way, arrived home, ate, and then it was time to go to work. On days that began like this, my mood was usually awful, with the cumulative effects of lack of sleep, the driving instructor's foul temper, and the tiresome triviality of work sinking my mood to the rock bottom. Nothing could be done about it though. These days were neither calamitous nor unpredictably eventful, just itty-bitty minutiae, drip-drip-dripping along the eaves. Life wouldn't get broken through, only riddled with invisible punctures.

For instance, at lunch break around the end of the year, when I scrolled through social media on my phone, I would see people posting their annual lists of top songs or best movies, which wrapped up their interests throughout the year. This always gave me a jolt, because I knew practically nothing about them, and I wouldn't make the effort to look them up. I would swipe past, and that was that. They just existed, but I no longer attached any meaning to them. I felt strange because, in the past, through the things I liked, I had faith that the world still held something precious and unique, something worth seeking, and some vague unknowns waiting for me to distill or destroy. But now I was impassive. I would read the words, absorb the information, and move on.

Whenever I opened the door, I wouldn't necessarily hit the wall, but the short passage leading to that office desk was indeed narrow. Then I would sit in the cubicle, work, eat, and that was pretty much all.

At dinnertime, when the home phone rang, it usually was for my mother. As soon as she found this much-needed outlet, my perennially fretful mother would dish up all the worries and fears in her heart and, no matter who the caller was, she would always go on for an hour or two about the recent troubles in my older sister's husband's family, or her two grandsons who would never speak, or my older brother who didn't have a stable job. These dramas, according to her, were the reasons for her nightly insomnia. She would ruminate and lament over her lot in life, so unfavorable that she could never dispel the fog of misery in her heart. At this point, someone would always try to offer a solution – *this ritual master in such-and-such a temple works wonders, it's pay-what-you-want, and who's to say if you won't get a pointer that'll solve all your troubles?*

These narratives were also repeated in a loop to me over dinner or before bedtime, as if my mother feared that others might mistakenly think she was happy, or forget about the immense distress in her heart. By weaving these unhappy discourses, she was conveying her *raison d'être* to those around her; that the weight of the whole world fell upon her alone and so she must constantly remind all the blithe souls out there that someone was still suffering.

I would feign sleep, not responding to any of my mother's words or sighs. After a spell of silence, she would return to her room, play the *Heart Sutra* on her phone, lie down and try to fall asleep. At this point, I could no longer pretend I was still fumbling through a smog of unhappiness. Fate had given me a lot, and beyond the fog lay the shape of life. Misfortune and pain, these overly dramatic words only made me uneasy, as if I was undeserving of their heft.

One day at work, I received a text from Sunflower saying that she wanted to give me a call. If memory serves, we hadn't been in touch for almost four years. The last time we'd seen each other was at her wedding banquet. I rushed there to give her the wedding gift and, as I was about to leave, she suddenly asked whether I could stay and help her out as her bridesmaid. I was shocked that she, despite being a popular person, had no one to help her on this important day. But I also found the request rather abrupt, so I declined and went back to the office for overtime. Life went on as usual. A year later, she gave birth to a daughter. I received the news during a government ministry review meeting. After sending a brief message to congratulate her, I went back to work and we pretty much lost contact thereafter.

That long phone call was the next time I heard from her. After her marriage, she had moved north close to where her husband's family lived and, apart from caring for her child, she often read books from a nearby library. One day, she saw my article in a literary magazine and was suddenly reminded of her friend...me, who had written in a book about conversations that didn't resonate with her at all and our fading friendship. That was why she wanted to get in touch: to tell me she hadn't noticed my feelings back then and was sorry about that. Faced with her sudden frankness and apology, I guess I was a bit flustered. I skirted around the issue, as I was prone to do, and changed the topic. We chatted about her family and her child, and I probably talked about some trivial things in my life to fill in the blanks over the past few years. In the end, we bid each other goodbye and ended the call.

How should I put this? It was just a performance in words. I wasn't even sure, in this act of self-baring, if I had exposed my genuine pain or even truly thought and lived as I had written. Why had those words made her feel sorry? Perhaps her friend was just a self-indulgent fraud.

After the fog dispersed, those girls were no longer there. That was all.

Dead-end conversations eventually became the everyday norm. The dense fog no longer obscured the itinerary of words. Rather, the sun shone bright and I should have been able to clearly see my path forward. But, I just felt tired, stripped of even the pretense of ambition; neither wind nor rain, dry and exposed to the point of being barren.

A message from my boyfriend popped up: a screenshot from an app that recorded the distance and route of his late-night run. Usually, I wouldn't see this kind of message until the morning after waking up, and after he had just gone to sleep. Our different routines meant our

conversations were often postponed until noon, when our schedules finally synched up. Other than what I was planning to eat for lunch, I was generally unsure what to talk about. Most discussions drifted to topics like how the cat was or my experience with a recent stomach ache. Then we would end these routine chats, both of us returning to our respective work.

When we met up, I probably mentioned Sunflower had gotten in touch with me. But, more often than not, conversations about my life ended quickly, followed immediately by my boyfriend's endless outpours and anxieties. Our time together revolved around his state of mind. Sometimes, meeting up for a meal, with a bowl and chopsticks in hand, before taking even one bite, he'd launch into a lengthy account of every last detail about himself, including the contents of his various classes, conversations with others, books he'd read and movies he'd watched, and self-affirming or self-hating speeches. He would repeat himself multiple times without skipping a beat. He would just soldier on, regurgitating his recent experiences at torrential speed, as if he were opening the floodgates to let everything out. Even after I reminded him to eat first, he'd hold his untouched bowl and keep saying the same things.

At times like this, I always felt like I didn't exist. His eyes never truly met mine. Instead, they would look past me and gaze at some unknown void. I was just his reflection, and looking at me was a convenient way to project himself. My function was to let him keep repeating himself. All of those words, rather than conversing with me, worked to obliterate my existence, and replace it with his.

It was the same when the spring haze had dispersed and summer had come. We were strolling together on a clear and sunny day, and he would still mention how a novelist he admired had passed away at the age of thirty-nine, and how he was already thirty-eight, leaving him only a year left...and so on and so forth. That was when it dawned on me. Come rain or shine, whether the fog lifted or not, deep down he knew clearly that it was only he who existed, and that the whole world and all its sufferings were but his own projection.

On the other hand, I was just plain worn out. All I wanted was to plant my feet on the ground and live an ordinary, effortless life.

After my father passed away, my family slipped into vacation mode, idle and peaceful, the days easy to get through. But the old house, seemingly set on following my father into demise, began showing signs of decay. The strong monsoon brought humidity, breathing its watery breath into the house's walls and porous foundations. Cracks became larger and more numerous, like wild creepers invading the innards of our house, replacing its skeleton with some sort of living organism, crawling inside parasitically, growing wild and strong.

I kept feeling fed up, utterly uninterested in old things, unable to read their historic significance and the traces of time. I felt nothing for them. They were just extra hassles. For instance, my father had repaired the drainage ditch in the bathroom many times, but holes of varied sizes quickly began to appear in the concrete wall, one after another. At first, I had no idea what they were, simply assuming concrete should naturally crumble as it turned brittle. Then, one rainy day, I found a centipede crawling in the bathroom, rapidly scaling the wall then quickly descending, as if in pursuit of something. I took a closer look, and then I realized it was hunting a

cockroach. Maybe sensing my human presence, it quickly abandoned its prey and slipped inside a hole in the ditch. In its wake, the hole seemed dark and dead, as if the chase that had ended only moments ago was just a hallucination.

So I took all the insect repellent left in the house and sprayed it at the hole, unsure if it would work or not. Unlike my father, I had no plans to patch these new holes up. I would let them multiply wildly, let them eat away at this house until it crumbled. This way, it would cease to be a home, no longer something supposedly precious. It could then be disposed of without a qualm, like an alien object; no need to look back or care for it anymore.

Towards Happiness

I saw on a television program a flightless bird like a chicken or a heron living in a jungle in some faraway country. It was all alone, running around in its forest. The narrator said it was an endangered species in heat, so it ran and squawked, looking for a companion. But days and nights passed, and still no member of its own species had responded to its call. It hadn't even come across another male bird agonizing as he was about finding a mate. It kept running and squawking. Time flew, and there wasn't even a ghost of a mate in the whole forest. It was a lone bird.

So, I thought, maybe there was something to write about here. It couldn't even fly, stumbling around clumsily; so, why perpetuate the species? But this thought was soon replaced by the fatigue of work. Then I thought, maybe I'd write when I had a day off. But once I was on leave, a holiday languor washed over me; invitations to dine out, shop, and hike as well as other material distractions multiplied thanks to having a stable income; so, the matter of writing was once again postponed. In the end, as time lapsed, I no longer felt the need to write.

I used to imagine that once I had secured a good livelihood, I would perhaps be able to write more freely. With this naïve thought in mind, I chose a job that had nothing to do with literature. As I saw my account balance go up every month, and my parents no longer blaming each other or fighting over money, I felt joy. I had suddenly become a provider. I even gained a certain confidence, as if I had a better understanding of the gap between life and living, the impossibility of stitching together ideals and reality, the lack of choice, the fact that the rest of my life would be nothing more than the product of compromise. In this way, I thought having work experience was tantamount to broadening my life and horizons. It would allow me to comment on literature unabashedly, write without feeling constrained – everything would be perfect.

Once I no longer had to fret like a fool over my livelihood, I would work diligently every day within limits, and at night would lie in bed without a single thought and quickly fall asleep. I thought this was life, that it was getting better, and that once it was “good”, everything else would also improve. So I kept waiting, waiting for my imaginary self in literature to improve as well, to catch up and move forward with me.

But what was it, after all?

One night, I lay in bed worrying about trivial issues at work, and also finding such worries utterly meaningless. Bureaucratic systems are always rife with trifles that, while seemingly urgent, are in fact pointless and illusory. They would flatten people just to fit them inside the folds of this mundane world. Don't think, just roll with the days...that was all it took. I was suddenly panicked by the realization that my days had morphed into an unexpected shape, so I quickly began to ponder how I used to live, and about the future I had once envisioned. Yet even the starting point was uncomfortable to remember.

I heard people say this about the birth of a literary work: when inspiration visits, the heart becomes more perceptive and guides the author to a brand new realm. But I had never experienced it. When I first began studying literature, reading and writing came side by side. There was an abundant desire to showcase myself through words, so I wrote quickly. I had zero metacognitive awareness, yet deemed my work flawless once I had finished. I rarely edited, couldn't tell good work from bad, and always felt underappreciated. Reading was rather insipid too. I just kept chewing over the few books I liked, quietly copying down some quotes, job done. I never considered whether literature could be my vocation or profession. In fact, I thought about nothing, did nothing, and yet kept feeling rejected by the whole world. Thinking back now, maybe that kind of posturing was my way of convincing others I was taking a serious stab at life despite the hindering hurdles.

Lackadaisical, I idled away each day, but it seems that literature still adopted me. Even now, I don't know when the pivotal moment happened; but in any case, after entering graduate school, I finally learned to understand what I read. Thanks to systematic academic thinking, my previously overloaded brain finally began to see a direction forward. I understood theories and frameworks, figured out what I didn't like and didn't want. When I revisited my works, they seemed like infinitely distended circles composed of words, as if stuck in a labyrinth, unable to position the self, just bursting with ego and emotions, harrowing to read.

I finally understood literature has inherent limitations, and cannot fully achieve everything the world wants. The important thing was to work within its constraints and make space for what I wanted to grow into, which was also a starting point. Once I realized this, I finally relaxed a bit and shifted my focus back to life. I confronted my mediocrity and limitations. There was actually very little I could achieve, so I had to mold life into a regular shape, slot the act of writing into it, and practice daily at a set time. This way, writing became just as dull as my life. I had to train repeatedly. It would take days of reviewing and revising to craft one sentence, and yet, when I finished a section and reread it, it often felt like I could never create what I set out to achieve or what I had imagined. Sometimes I would start over but, more often than not, I would keep writing, pressing on while bearing with my frustration and inexperience. When I reached my limit, I would pause and read other people's works to distance myself because I wanted to borrow their vision to see how restricted my writing was, to the point of cornering myself into dead ends.

I couldn't help regretting my choice. Writing turned out to be so tiring and dry, all that striking and smithing and repeated scrutiny. It was the most exhausting task in the world.

Compared to this, reading was heavenly bliss. Even theoretical books rewarded me with the joy of acquiring knowledge. If I could read forever, it would be the happiest thing in life. But meanwhile, the fruit of my hard labor began earning recognition in writing contests. During my student days, their monetary awards were practically my main source of income. Prize grants motivated me, and I rarely wrote of my own volition or contemplated how to craft style or draft writing plans. I didn't even think literature had much to do with me. It was just a means to earning my allowance. Once I had a stable source of income, I felt, there would probably be no reason to continue.

Thus, it was rather foolish to continue just because this was my only talent.

I didn't see myself clearly. I thought finding a job that had nothing to do with literature would make my writings purer and unencumbered by outside influence, completely free. But what is the point of such purity? It's dead boring.

One time, a movie crew came to scout for a filming location, and I accompanied them around the complex, looking for suitable settings. This so-called complex was just a cluster of old houses abandoned after their one-time residents had moved away. They were dilapidated, crumbling and coated with green moss. Further on, an area probably already scheduled for demolition was completely overgrown, its corners and courtyards crowded with construction waste. Trees and bushes erupted through the rubbish, growing ever so freely, as if they were animate and would tolerate no intrusion. We went back and forth through the deserted alleys. After the crew had selected a few houses, they went indoors to check their condition and layout. I waited in a safe spot most of the time, checking messages on my phone while answering their questions from outside, letting them go in to take photos and explore by themselves. Finally, I was learning to live safely, to seek fortune and shun danger, coast along in a stable and comfortable mode, no longer hurting.

After conclusion of this operation, I returned to my brightly lit office and byzantine tasks, all the while wondering what I would eat for dinner. Once home, I showered, browsed some foodie news online, watched a bit of drama and anime, and then went to bed. Living like this should be considered happy, right? But I suddenly felt like I didn't need literature anymore. I could no longer imagine my relationship with it and, consequently, no longer felt the need to write. In finding my way towards happiness, literature had disappeared, and I didn't even feel any regret. I just went on living, heading qualmslessly into tomorrow.