

Sincerely Yours

——A Plea for a World Not of 曖昧, But of I/Ai

by Harper Shen



Cherry blossoms are blooming now in New York. My friend Mary never liked this city when she first came here. Everything was restless, overflowing, and turbulent; everywhere, all the time, vivid sensations were being intensified then diminished rapidly, like a tireless twitter, a garish flicker, which entered her closed eyes every three or eight or five seconds like a buzzing bee, shoving her to the center of a waking, chaotic life. She grew tired of traversing the endless bumping of bodies, the shoving of heavy shoulders, the hitting of warm and sweaty hands, the hammering of hard joints, the knocking on closed doors, the hubbub of high-speed cars and flapping birds, and the relentlessly moving and varying crowd.

Everywhere she went, she saw the temporality of contact. Even when surrounded by people, she was constantly reminded of the vast distance between them. The fleeting intimacy she shared with people only brought her further from them - the more bodies brushed past her, the more powerless she felt, as her pleas for retention blended into the air. Because one could never fully understand of another person, which is to live in their mind and body, the space in between remained, but she always yearned for permanent closeness. A proximity so immense and fiercely embracing that it could link all beings together, tenderly, eternally. Like a fluid space. Like the sea.

But New York was clashing, never gentle, always incongruent; it was a strange amalgam of irregular substances. The city bewildered Mary with confusing encounters and ephemeral figures, always putting her in places she couldn't belong.

She hated it that each moment of exchanging body heat and words only made her feel more alone and wobbly. Mary was like a mute spinning top, wanting to cut off from others because her spinning edges kept colliding with their edges—it seemed that she would eventually fall over from all the violent contact.



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“But you can’t make everyone into one unity. A unity of lives meshed altogether is incredibly violent,” a friend said to Mary when they were at a bar, “where there’s no self-identity anymore, all boundaries lost.”

They had just watched *The End of Evangelion* at the theater that night; in the end of the movie, everyone fused together into a shapeless, amber-colored sea of bodies and souls, comically resembling fresh OJ. Without single units, there’s no conception of an invasion of body and heart, only the perpetuating extension in all time and space, of every body and heart. An ever-extending sea of orange juice.

The friend believed that a kind of violence lies in the act of unifying lives in order to give rise to some eternal hyperobject. It was a cruelty, an attack, a brutal destruction of the human nature that abides in the Self. The Subject is just so important, ever-present, carrying within it all raptures and torments, heartachingly yelling its own name to everyone around.

A beast shouting “I” at the heart of the world. The friend sat across the table facing Mary; behind Mary was a mirror hanging on the wall.

“Okay,” Mary asked, “but what if their ‘I’s attack mine? I already have nowhere to go except inside my own shell, within my own border, but the intensities of other beings’ egos can easily wreck that safe space at any moment. What about the moments when people never fail to let you down, because they simply can never know what you want, and feel like how you feel?”

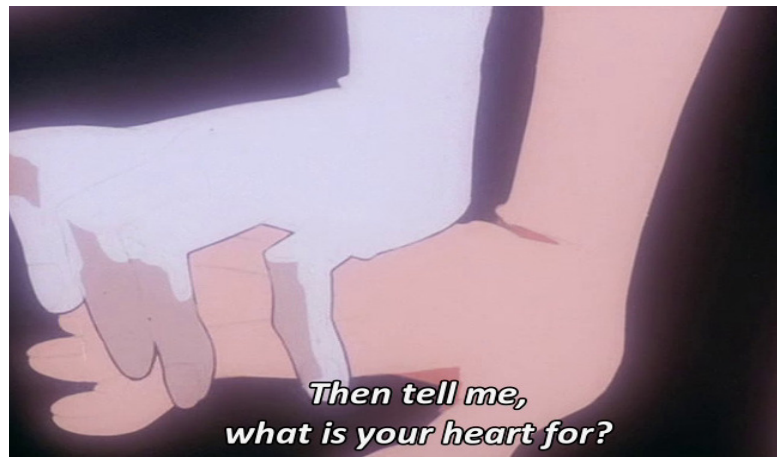
She feared the kind of violence of bodies colliding with bodies, or the distinction, the separation, the clash from person to person. So she turned to a world of complete joining, where she is the friend and the friend is her, also a world of mutual annihilation, where everyone’s egos don’t diminish but grow ever so immensely over each other, like a great flood.

The friend replied, “but ego doesn’t matter anymore in an ambiguous world, where everything is matter and nothing is. All undistinguishable.” The exact words spoken by someone from the movie were “曖昧な世界”, an ambiguous world without identities and boundaries, where limbs do not touch but penetrate one another, where lips do not kiss but melt into one another—a world of timeless and spaceless ambiguity, with all possibilities merging into one, thus uninhabitable. Mary ordered another screwdriver drink, her mind fuzzy and estranged.



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“Then why are you afraid of change? If uncertainty and unpredictability are what make a life livable, why fret over them?” asked Mary’s therapists. She thought humans all do. We fear because it hurts, and we seek to run away from what causes our pain, even when the same thing that is hurtful could also bring us love and joy. Mary feared farewells, declining years, and decompositions, and in the end, she thought what she feared was time, for time is all about changes and responses, everything the heart is capable of.



Perhaps that’s why she disliked New York. She only wanted everything to stay the same, but New York has never been a content city. It incessantly demands immediacy in all things. It walks briskly and then stumbles, gets up in a second, shouts loudly, eats, vomits, throws tantrums like a child, and then flies into the sky like a bird.

Yet, this immediacy is actually an intimacy, the ego’s constant demand for connection with oneself and others—a profound longing. It says, I want to love you right now. I want to sob right now. I need to see you right now. The next train is here, so I have to leave right now.



A friend who is obsessed with urbanism once told Mary about New York's transportation system. Its vast, sprawling network links the entire city together, like a tumultuous yet impenetrable spiderweb, a web of human relations. Unlike the suburbs, where people need to traverse long distances in cars to meet each other, the city's twenty-eight lines extend from all directions and converge, in the shape of a fern and a lightning flash, immediately bringing people together. Embedded in connections, no matter how distant one may be from each other, people can always come together, their hearts proximate to one another.

The friend remarked with a love for the city, "it is one giant, volatile, and complicated collective, always making new fortunes and accidents, much like a living thing itself." Then her eyes unreasonably grew moist.

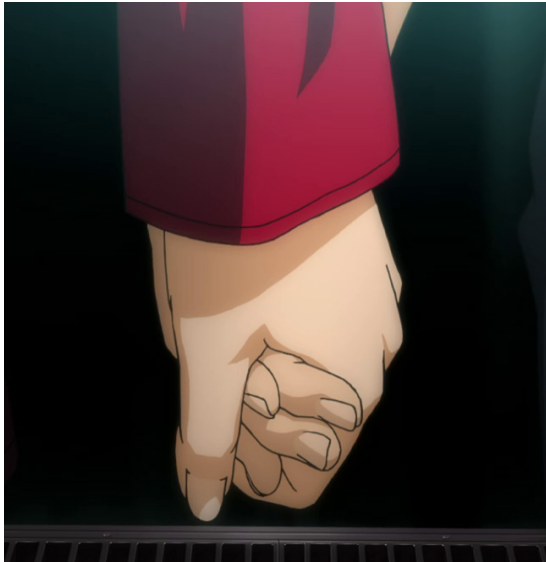
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The Hedgehog's Dilemma is Schopenhauer's effort to metaphorize human relations, comparing us to creatures with spikes. We can never be too close to each other, or one of us will get hurt and one of us will cause the pain. So we stay never too close, pretending that we're not interested in others. But when we don't walk near to one another, we subsist with insufferable loneliness.

The truth is, we're already deeply entangled in each other's lives, not as strange knots to untie or trapped beasts wishing to break loose, but that we awfully depend on one another, need one another like a leaf craving carbon dioxide, like one hand aching for the touch of another hand.

Like snails pining for the humid embrace of the rain. Like a person's soft sole touching the firm ground and needing to stay with it. Like mammals needing warmth in blood. Like humans wanting sincerity. Like me needing air.

Yet tirelessly one penetrates another; all one ever does is try to tear apart each other's boundaries, longing to gaze upon the fragile, bare wound underneath which lies the streaming blood and the pulsating flesh, just to confirm that one is made of the same substance. A heart that aches and yearns.



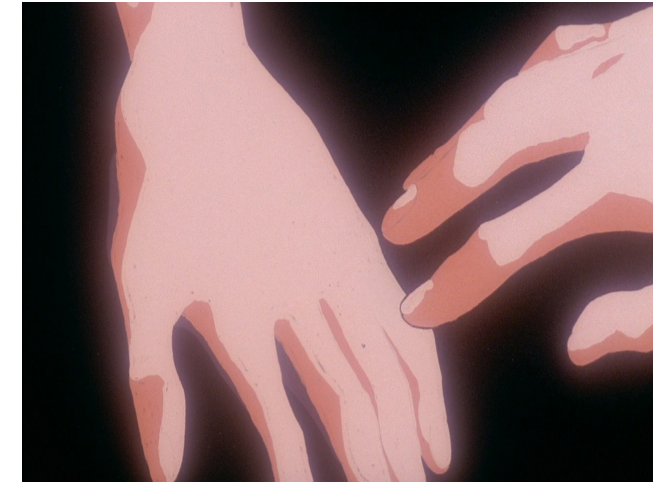
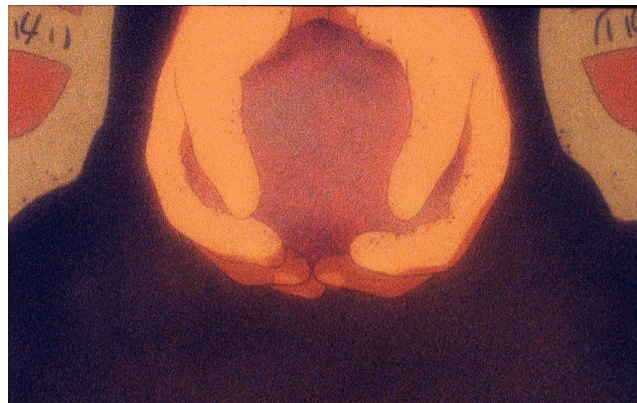
No matter how unwilling and denied, we forever need each other in fragility, exposure, and precarity.



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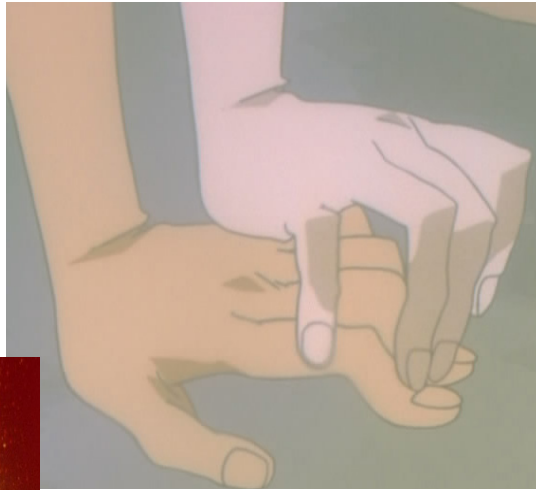
Mary and I went to a park upstate one afternoon, where many tall, firm trees grew. For a long time, Mary yearned to see nature and its vitality when she was in the city, as if she felt that by looking into the face of sturdy plant, sparkling lake, and dull animals, she could find what the urban city lacks. She contemplated upon a life more rested than activated.

A life more asleep. We sat beneath an oak tree, reddish birds flying overhead, and feather-like oak leaves rustling in the wind. The trunk behind us was aged and mute, yet not showing signs of weariness. Its bark's texture resembled leaves', with many lines branching out from each side of a single line, and those lines sprouting even more lines, resembling the shape of a small tree, her tousled hair, the cracked earth, and my palm.



But life is always awake in the continuous exchange of air. Breaths weave another intricately braided web, invisible but not insensible. It's not difficult to feel our embeddedness in the world; all we need to do is to expose our lungs to fresh or stale air, and they will carry it to somewhere in our chests, where one red, moist, warmish thing pulses like a hatchling. Knowing that what makes life is not separate bodies but a long, long breath, we will walk through long days and long nights with an ease.

All is carried by a flow; whether beneath an oak or amidst a crowd, one can feel with heart that the world is already fluid-like. In atmosphere, shapes, metaphors, or hearts, Mary was certain that interdependency lies somewhere.



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曖昧 (ai-mai) means ambiguous, ambivalent - a state of being almost intimate with each other yet still avoidant of contact and promises. It stands for craving connection while ignoring the differences that separate people, dreaming that effortlessly one can slip into another and be with another in body and soul.

The opposite of 曖昧 is 愛 (ai), pronounced as “I”, ego, which is to recognize the being of another “I” and to understand the mutual need for relation between “I”s; also as “Ai”, to love, which is built on recognizing another distinct being that also has a Self, acknowledging borders while still desiring closeness, and maintaining intimacy through reiterated performances of care.

In a world of 曖昧, people lose the right to harm or be harmed, and likewise, the ability to love or be loved. It is only in a wakeful, sincere, and vulnerable world does life matter—where I/Ai become possible.

This means, please have more care for others, and don’t forget to take care of yourself.

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“What matters is that we need each other,” I looked at Mary sincerely. She used to feel strangely sentimental whenever she heard someone saying that they had a love for instability and uncertainty. The strangeness has fascinated her and will never cease to amaze her, akin to a melodious songbird, the airy, lacy wings of a dragonfly, or green algae that overspreads boulders, with its perplexing immensity that almost feels like... an embrace.