

劉慈欣：詩雲

## The Poetry Cloud

By Liu Cixin

Translated by Chi-yin Ip and Cheuk Wong

THEY ARE on a yacht, Yiyi and two others, sailing across the south Pacific Ocean on a poetry composition cruise. Their destination, the South Pole. If all goes well, they will arrive in a couple of days' time and then pierce through the Earth's crust to see the Poetry Cloud.

The sky and ocean are crystal clear today, much too clear for poetry composition. The American continent that's usually hidden from view can now be observed plainly floating above in the sky, forming a dark patch on the eastern hemisphere that envelopes the world like a giant dome. The continent looks not much different from a patch of wall left exposed when the sheathing has fallen off ...

Oh, by the way, people now live inside the Earth, or to be more exact, people now live inside a balloon. That's right, the Earth has been turned into a balloon. It has been hollowed out, leaving behind only a thin crust about a hundred kilometres thick. The continents and oceans still remain exactly the same, however, except for the fact that they are now on the inside. The atmosphere is still there but it has also moved to the inside. So the Earth is now a balloon, a balloon with continents and oceans stuck to its inner surface. This hollow Earth still revolves on its axis, but the effect of the spin is very different: It now provides the Earth's gravity. The mass of the thin crust is so small that the gravity produced by it is not even worth mentioning. Gravity is now mainly generated by the centrifugal force caused by Earth's rotation. This gravity is, however, not evenly spread across the world: it is strongest at the equator—roughly equivalent to 1.5 times of the original gravitational force on Earth—and decreases as the latitude increases, until it becomes zero at the North and South Poles. The latitude that the yacht now sails on has exactly the standard gravitational force of the original Earth, but Yiyi still finds it very difficult to regain the feelings of the old world, the feelings that one would have felt on the now disappeared solid Earth.

A tiny sun hovered at the core of the hollow Earth, bathing the whole world in brilliant mid-day rays. The sun's intensity changes constantly in the course of twenty-four hours, gradually dimming from maximum brightness till it extinguishes completely, giving the inside of the hollow Earth days and nights. On some nights, it also casts the cold gleam of the moon, but as the light only shines from one spot, one cannot see the full moon.

Of the three on board, two are not actually human. One is a ten-metre-tall dinosaur named Big-tooth, who rocks the yacht left and right with his every movement, causing much annoyance to the poet standing in the bow of the yacht. He is an old bony man, with snowy white hair and beard that mingle together in the breeze. He is wearing a wide ancient-style robe, like those of the Tang dynasty, with an immortal air about him, much like a character written in a wild cursive style with the sky and ocean as backdrop.

This is the creator of the new world, the great Li Bai.

## **A Gift**

IT ALL STARTED ten years ago. At the time, the Devourer Empire had just ended its two-century-long plunder of the Solar System. These prehistoric dinosaurs directed their gigantic Ring-world, which was 50,000 kilometres in diameter, away from the sun and glided towards the Cygnus constellation. The Empire carried away with it 1.2 billion humans, which the dinosaurs planned to raise like poultry. But just as the Ring-world was about to reach the orbit of Saturn, it suddenly began to decelerate, actually turning back along its original track and re-entering the inner Solar System.

A Ring-world week after the Devourer Empire began its return, Ambassador Big-tooth set off from their world in a spaceship shaped like an ancient boiler, carrying in his pocket a human named Yiyi.

'You're a gift,' Big-tooth told Yiyi, his eyes peeping through the porthole into the dark space outside, his deep voice vibrating so hard that it turned Yiyi numb from head to toe.

'For whom?' Yiyi raised his head and shouted out loudly from within the pocket. From the pocket's opening, he could only see the dinosaur's lower jaw, which looked like a giant rock protruding from the side of a cliff.

'For the gods! The gods have come to the Solar System, and that's why the Empire returned.'

'Are they real gods?'

‘They’ve mastered unimaginable technologies, and exist in the form of pure energy. They can jump from one end of the Milky Way to the other in a flash. That makes them gods enough. If we could but master one-hundredth of that super technology, the Devourer Empire would have a bright future. We are completing a grand mission, and you must learn to please the gods.’

‘Why me? My meat is of very inferior quality,’ Yiyi asked. He was more than thirty years old, and compared to the fair and juicy humans carefully raised by the Empire, his appearance was much more haggard.

‘Gods don’t eat bugs; they just like to collect them. According to the breeders you are quite special, and it’s said that you have many students?’

‘I’m a poet. I teach classical literature to the humans kept in the breeding farms.’ Yiyi pronounced the words ‘poet’ and ‘literature’ with some difficulty, as these were very rarely used words in Devourish.

‘A boring and useless learning indeed! But the breeders have turned a blind eye to your teaching activities as the contents seem to be mentally helpful to you bugs, and thus improve the quality of your meat ... I’ve noticed that you think yourself noble and pure, and others to be beneath your notice. Very interesting feelings for a little fowl from a feed-lot.’

‘Thus the way with all poets.’ Yiyi straightened himself in the pocket, proudly holding his head high, though he knew that Big-tooth could not see this.

‘Were your ancestors in the Earth Defence War?’

‘No,’ answered Yiyi, shaking his head. ‘My ancestors from back then were also poets.’

‘A most useless kind of bug, very rare on Earth even then.’

‘He lives in his own inner world, and does not care for the changes happening around him.’

‘Good-for-nothings ... Ah, we’re nearly there.’

Upon hearing this, Yiyi poked his head out from the pocket and peered through the porthole. There were two white, glowing objects floating in space before them, one a square plane, the other a sphere. As the spaceship drew level with the plane, the plane suddenly disappeared for a second into the backdrop of the starry sky, which meant that it had almost no thickness. The perfectly shaped sphere hovered above the plane, both of them casting off soft white glows, their surfaces so smooth and even that nothing distinctive could be seen. They were like two elements drawn out from a graphic database, two simple and abstract concepts within the mess and confusion of the universe.

‘Where are the gods?’ asked Yiyi.

‘Those two geometric shapes. Gods like to be concise.’

As they drew near, Yiyi saw that the plane was about the size of a football field. The spaceship landed on the plane, the flames from the engine touched the plane first, but left no marks whatsoever. It was as if the plane was nothing more than an illusion. Yet Yiyi felt the gravitational pull and a tremor as the spaceship came in contact with the plane, which meant that it could not be an illusion. Big-tooth had obviously been here before, as he opened the cabin door and jumped out without hesitation. Yiyi's heart churned when he saw Big-tooth simultaneously open both doors on either end of the airlock cabin. However, he did not hear the swoosh of air gushing out from within. As Big-tooth stepped outside, Yiyi could even smell the fresh air as he stood in the pocket and felt the cold breeze brushing past his face ... This was a kind of wondrous technology that neither man nor dinosaur could comprehend. Its gentleness and effortlessness astounded Yiyi. This astonishment pierced even deeper into the soul than when humans saw the Devourers for the first time. Yiyi looked up; the sphere was hovering above them and, behind it, the galaxy glittered and shone.

'Ambassador, what little offering have you brought me this time?' inquired the god. He spoke in Devourish, his voice low, as if echoing from the depths of an abyss in the infinite distance, and for the first time, Yiyi felt that even this coarse dinosaur language could sound pleasant to the ear.

Big-tooth dug his claw into his pocket and grabbed Yiyi, then put him down onto the plane. Yiyi felt its elasticity with his foot. Big-tooth began, 'My venerable god, we know that you like to collect little creatures from various universes, and I have brought you this interesting little specimen, a human from the Earth.'

'I only care for perfect little creatures. Why have you brought me this filthy little bug?' asked the god, the glows of the sphere and plane flickered twice, a probable sign of disgust.

'You know this species of bug?' Big-tooth raised his head in astonishment.

'I've heard travellers from this spiral arm mention them, but I do not know much about them. In these bugs' relatively short evolutionary history, the travellers have often visited Earth, and they were all disgusted by the bugs' dirty thoughts, low behaviours, and the chaos and filth in the course of their history. Hence, till the Earth's destruction, no one had bothered to establish contact with them ... Throw it away at once!'

Big-tooth grabbed Yiyi and turned his huge head around to see where he could dump him. 'The rubbish incinerator is behind you,' the god's voice interjected. Big-tooth turned and saw a small hole suddenly appear on the plane, with eerie bluish lights flickering from within ...

'Don't you say that! Humans have created great civilizations!' Yiyi shouted in

Devourish at the top of his lungs, his face turning blue.

The white radiance of the sphere and plane again flickered twice and the god's voice sounded in a sneer, 'Civilization? Ambassador, tell this bug the meaning of civilization.'

Big-tooth raised Yiyi to eye level, and held him so close that Yiyi could even hear the gurgling sound of his eyeballs turning in their sockets. 'Bug, the uniform measurement of how civilized a race is in this universe is the space dimension that it has entered. Only those that have entered the sixth dimension or above can be regarded as having met with the basic criteria for joining the circle of civilized races. The race of our venerable god already possesses the ability to enter the eleventh dimension. The Devourer Empire is able to, on a small scale limited to laboratory trials, enter the fourth dimension, which means that we can only be regarded as a primitive tribe, while your race is nothing more than weed or moss to the gods.'

'Throw him away this minute! Such filth!' the god pressed, already out of patience.

Big-tooth ended his speech and marched towards the incinerator holding Yiyi. Yiyi struggled with all his might and several sheets of white paper fell from his clothes. As the sheets floated in the air, a thin ray of light shot out from the sphere, hitting one of them, suspending it in mid-air, and scanning it in a flash.

'Wait! What're these?'

Holding Yiyi suspended right above the incinerator, Big-tooth turned towards the sphere.

'Those ... are my student's homework!' Yiyi answered, struggling hard inside the dinosaur's claw.

'Those square symbols are very interesting, and so are the little matrixes they create,' the god muttered, sending out rays and swiftly scanning the other sheets of paper that had already landed on the plane.

'Those are Chinese ... Chinese characters. These are classical poems written in Chinese characters!'

'Poems?' the god asked in amazement, and withdrew the rays of light. 'Ambassador, you are no doubt familiar to some degree with this bug script?'

'Of course, my venerable god. I lived in their world for a long time before the Earth was consumed by the Devourer Empire.' Big-tooth placed Yiyi on the plane near the edge of the incinerator, and bending down, picked up one of the sheets. Raising it to his eyes, he with great difficulty tried to make out the words. 'It roughly means ...'

‘Don’t bother, you will only misinterpret it.’ Yiyi stopped Big-tooth with a wave of his hand.

‘Why?’ the god asked with a good deal of interest.

‘Because it is an art that can only be expressed in classical Chinese. Even when translated into another human language, it still loses the better part of its meaning and beauty, and is transformed into something quite different.’

‘Ambassador, do you have this language’s database in your computer? And all knowledge relevant to the Earth’s history too? Fine, then transmit them to me. Use the channel we established during our previous interview.’

Big-tooth hurried back to the spaceship, mumbling to himself as he fumbled with the computer aboard. ‘The classical Chinese part is missing and will have to be downloaded from the Empire’s network; there might be delays.’ Yiyi could see through the open cabin door the changing colours of the computer screen reflected in the dinosaur’s giant eyeballs. When Big-tooth exited the spaceship, the god could already read the classical poem aloud in perfect Chinese.

*‘Behind a mountain the day fades, the Yellow River uniting with the ocean.  
Scenes a thousand miles away, one may survey from a higher floor.’*

‘You are a very fast learner!’ Yiyi exclaimed in amazement.

The god took no notice of him, and remained silent.

Big-tooth explained, ‘It means a star has fallen behind a mountain on a planet, and a river called the Yellow River flowed towards an ocean. You see, both river and ocean are formed by compounds of one oxygen atom and two hydrogen atoms. And if someone wants to see further away, he should climb higher on a building.’

The god stayed silent.

‘My venerable god, you have, not that long ago, honoured the Devourer Empire with your presence; the scenery there is very similar to the bug’s world portrayed in this poem. There are also rivers and mountains and oceans, so—’

‘So I do know the meaning,’ the god said, and the sphere suddenly moved, stopping right above Big-tooth’s head. Yiyi thought that it was like a giant eye without a pupil, glaring fixedly at Big-tooth. ‘But do you not feel anything at all?’

Big-tooth shook his head in bewilderment.

‘I mean, things that are hidden within the apparent meanings of this simple matrix of symbols?’

Big-tooth became more puzzled still, and so the god recited another poem.

*‘I see none that have come before, nor any who might follow. Reflecting on a world  
so ancient and vast, my tears fall in lonely sorrow.’*

Big-tooth at once eagerly offered an explanation, ‘This poem means: Looking



forward, one cannot see the bugs that lived long ago on this planet; looking back, one cannot see the bugs that will later live on this planet. So one feels the vastness of time and space, and so one cries.’

Still perfect silence.

‘Um, crying is how the bugs of the Earth express sorrow. When this happens, their visual sense organs ...’

‘Do you still not feel anything?’ the god interrupted, the sphere lowering a little more, until it almost touched Big-tooth’s nose.

This time, Big-tooth shook his head with great firmness and said, ‘My venerable god, I believe there is nothing more to it, just a simple short poem.’

The god recited a few more poems, all short and simple, all on transcendent themes, including poems like Li Bai’s ‘Going down to Jiangling’, ‘Night Thoughts’ and ‘Seeing Meng Haoran off from Yellow Crane Tower as he took his departure for Guangling’, Liu Zongyuan’s ‘River Snow’, Cui Hao’s ‘Yellow Crane Tower’ and Meng Haoran’s ‘Spring Dawn’.

Big-tooth said, ‘There are quite a number of long epics in the Devourer Empire, some are millions of lines in length. My venerable god, I will gladly present them to you. The bugs’ poetry is, by comparison, so short and simple, much like their technology ...’

The sphere suddenly flew away from Big-tooth’s head, floating in random curves in mid-air, ‘Ambassador, I believe that your greatest wish is for me to answer one question: Why is the Devourer Empire still struggling in the atomic age after its 80 million years of existence? I now have the answer.’

Big-tooth looked at the sphere with the keenest interest, ‘My venerable god! The answer is everything to us! Please ...’

‘My venerable god,’ Yiyi raised his hand and spoke out loud, ‘I too have a question, if I may?’

Big-tooth glared angrily at Yiyi, looking as though he would like to swallow him whole. But the god agreed, ‘I still despise the bugs of Earth, but those little matrixes have earned you the right.’

‘Does art exist everywhere in the universe?’

The sphere trembled a little in mid-air, as if nodding, ‘Yes, I myself am a collector and researcher of the art of the universe. I travel between nebulas and have made contact with various art forms of numerous civilizations. Most are complicated and obscure. But this, with such few symbols, making up such tiny matrixes yet expressing such complex layers and subdivisions of feelings, all composed under such strict, almost brutal, restrictions of style, metre and rhyme is, I admit, something I had never seen before ... Ambassador, you can now dispose

of the bug.’

Big-tooth again grabbed Yiyi, ‘Yes, throw it away, my venerable god. There is enough data stored on the Devourer Empire Central Network on human culture, and you now have all these stored in your memory. This bug, on the other hand, probably only knows a few simple poems.’ With that, he again marched towards the incinerator with Yiyi in his claw. ‘And those papers too,’ the god added. Big-tooth at once turned back and began collecting the sheets of paper with his free claw. Yiyi started to scream wildly from within Big-tooth’s grasp,

‘God, please keep those sheets of paper as relics of human classical poetry! You have collected an unsurpassable art form; transmit it to other parts of the universe.’

‘Wait,’ the god again stopped Big-tooth, even as Yiyi was dangling above the incinerator; he could feel the heat of the blue flames below him. The sphere floated near, stopped and hovered just a few centimetres away from his forehead. He now was under the intense gaze of the gigantic pupil-less eye just as Big-tooth had been.

‘Unsurpassable?’

‘Ha ha ha ...’ Big-tooth held Yiyi up and laughed, ‘This poor little bug dares to say this in front of this mighty god! Hilarious! What do humans have left? You’ve lost everything on Earth, and have forgotten most of your scientific knowledge—the only thing you might have taken away. Once at the dinner table, I asked a human this question before I ate him, “What was the atomic bomb used by humans in the Earth Defence War made of?” And he answered, “Atoms!”’

‘Ha ha ha ha ...’ The god was amused by Big-tooth, and the sphere shook so much that it turned into an ovoid, ‘there could not be a more correct answer, ha ha ha ...’

‘My venerable god, these dirty bugs have nothing left but those few short poems! Ha ha ha ...’

‘But they are unsurpassable!’ Yiyi insisted, squaring his chest in a most dignified manner.

The sphere stopped trembling, and murmured in almost a whisper, ‘Technology can surpass all.’

‘This has nothing to do with technology! This is the essence of the inner world of the human soul, and is unsurpassable!’

‘You say this because you are ignorant of the power that technology could eventually bring. Small bug, insignificant bug, you do not understand.’ The god’s voice was silky, like that of a loving father, but the cold murderous notes buried within made Yiyi shudder with terror. ‘Look at the sun,’ the god said.

Yiyi did as he was bid. They were in between the orbits of the Earth and Mars,



and he had to narrow his eyes before the sun's brightness.

'What's your favourite colour?' the god asked.

'Green.'

Before the last syllable fell, the sun turned green, a bewitching, seductive green, as if a cat's eye had suddenly appeared in the abyss of space. Under its gaze, the whole universe turned profoundly and eerily mysterious.

Big-tooth's claw quivered, dropping Yiyi onto the plane. After they had regained their senses a moment later, they suddenly realized a more shocking fact than that of the sun turning green: it would have taken more than ten minutes for light to travel to the sun from where they now were, yet all this took place in a flash.

Half a minute later, the sun returned to normal, once again casting off its customary dazzling white rays.

'Did you see that? This is technology, the kind of power that enabled our race to rise from slugs in the muddy ocean beds to gods. Technology is the real God. We worship Him with our whole body and soul.'

Yiyi blinked his eyes, still dazzled, 'But even gods cannot surpass that kind of art! We too have gods, imaginary gods, and we worship them too; but we do not believe that they can create the kind of poetry written by Li Bai or Du Fu.'

The god sneered, and said to Yiyi, 'You are the most stubborn kind of bug, which makes you even more repulsive. But, just for fun, I will surpass your art form.'

Yiyi also sneered, 'Impossible. For one thing, you are not human, and cannot feel human passions. Human art is to you merely a flower carved in stone, and you cannot overcome this obstacle with technology.'

'There can be nothing simpler than overcoming this "obstacle". Give me your genes.'

Yiyi was at a loss. 'Give a hair to the god!' Big-tooth directed. Yiyi raised his hand and pulled out a hair. An invisible force sucked the hair to the sphere then let it fall to the plane. The god only took some flakes of skin from the hair root.

The white glow within the sphere surged around then slowly turned transparent. Clear liquid then filled the sphere and a string of bubbles floated to the surface. Yiyi then saw a small yolk-like ball in the liquid. It appeared a light reddish colour under the sunlight, and seemed to give off its own light. The sphere grew quickly, and Yiyi realized that it was a curled up foetus, its swollen eyes tightly shut, with red interlocking blood vessels running all over its huge head. The foetus continued to grow, its small body finally stretching out, then began to swim in the liquid like a frog. At that point the liquid gradually turned opaque, and the sunlight that shone through the sphere revealed nothing but a vague shadow. The shadow rapidly grew bigger, finally turning into a fully-grown, human-shaped

form swimming in the sphere. The glowing sphere had now turned back to its original white opacity, and a naked man fell from the sphere onto the plane. Yiyi's clone staggered up, with sunlight reflecting off his wet body. His hair and beard were very long, but he appeared to be only about thirty to forty years of age, and looked nothing like Yiyi except for the fact that they were both stick-thin. The clone stood stiffly, gazing lifelessly into the distance, looking as though he knew nothing about the universe that he had just entered. Above him, the white glow of the sphere dimmed, then extinguished altogether. The sphere itself disappeared as if it had evaporated. Then, Yiyi saw something light up and realized that it was the clone's eyes. The dull empty gaze had suddenly been replaced with a light radiating intelligence. Yiyi later found out that this was when the god had moved all his own memories into the clone.

'Cold, this is cold?!' A gentle breeze blew over them and the clone wrapped his hands around his soggy shoulders, shivering all over, but his voice was filled with delight, 'This is cold, this is pain! Delicate, perfect pain! The sensations for which I've wandered the galaxies searching so painstakingly: it's as sharp as a ten-dimensional string passing through time-space, as crystal clear as the pure energy diamond at the hearts of quasars, ah—' He stretched out his bony arms and raised his eyes to the Milky Way, *'I see none that have come before, nor any who might follow. Reflecting on a universe so ...'* A bout of shivering made his teeth clatter, ending his natal speech; he rushed to the incinerator to warm himself.

The clone held his hands above the blue flames, shivering as he said to Yiyi, 'What I am doing now is in fact ordinary enough. When I research and collect any art form from a civilization, I always invest my memory temporarily into a member of that civilization, thus ensuring that I truly and wholly understand the art form.'

The flames in the incinerator suddenly flared up, sending multi-coloured radiances across the plane. Yiyi thought the whole plane was now like a sheet of frosted glass floating on a sea of flames.

'The incinerator has been turned into an output window. The god is making an energy-matter transformation,' Big-tooth whispered to Yiyi, and seeing that he was still perplexed, he added, 'Idiot! Making matter from pure energy. God's work!'

The output window suddenly spurted out a ball of white stuff, which unfolded in mid-air as it fell. It was a piece of clothing, which the clone caught and put on. Yiyi saw that it was in the ancient style of the Tang dynasty, snowy white, and made of silk, with broad black trim. The wretched looking clone was at once transformed into a divine looking figure. Yiyi could not imagine how this piece of clothing could

be fabricated from those blue flames.

More things were being fabricated. Out from the window flew something black, which landed with a thud on the plane like a rock. Yiyi ran over to pick it up; he could hardly believe his eyes: what he held in his hand was undoubtedly a heavy ink-stone, and it was as cold as ice. Something else fell onto the plane with a clang. Yiyi picked up the black, strip-shaped object and it was indeed a Chinese ink-stick. Some writing brushes were then created, followed by a brush-stand, a sheet of white rice paper (imagine that coming out of the flames!), a few antique-looking desk ornaments, and finally, the biggest object of all, an ancient writing desk. Both Yiyi and Big-tooth hurried over to straighten the desk and arrange the little objects on it.

‘The energy that was transformed into these things is enough to blow a planet to dust,’ Big-tooth whispered to Yiyi, his voice shaking a little.

The clone walked over to the desk, nodded in approval at the ornaments placed on top, and using one hand to stroke his now dried beard, he said,

‘I, Li Bai.’

Yiyi scrutinized the clone and asked, ‘Do you mean that you want to become Li Bai, or that you think you are already him?’

‘I am Li Bai, the Li Bai who can surpass Li Bai!’

Yiyi smiled and shook his head.

‘What? You doubt me?’

Yiyi nodded, ‘It’s true enough that your technology is way beyond my understanding, and is to a human no different from magic or divine power. There are things that make me gasp with wonder even in the realm of poetry, that given such huge cultural, time and space barriers, you can still grasp the true significance of Chinese classical poetry ... but to understand Li Bai is one thing, surpassing him is quite another. I still believe that what you face is a transcendent art form.’

An unfathomable smile appeared on the clone’s—Li Bai’s—face, but it was gone at once. He pointed his finger at the writing desk and commanded, ‘Prepare the ink!’ He then walked away, stopping near the very edge of the plane, and gazed at the distant galaxies in deep contemplation as he stroked his long beard.

Yiyi picked up a Yixing-ware pot from the writing desk and poured a little water onto the ink-stone. He then picked up the ink-stick and began grinding. It was the first time he had ever done this, and he tilted the ink-stick sideways, clumsily grinding its edges. As the ink got thicker, Yiyi began to comprehend that he was in vast space, 1.5 astronomical units away from the sun, on an infinitely

thin plane (even when matter was created from pure energy a moment ago, the plane still had no thickness when observed from afar) that was just like a floating stage in the abyss of the universe. On this stage was a dinosaur, a human who had been raised for meat like poultry by the dinosaurs, and a god of technology in an ancient Tang-dynasty robe who was preparing to surpass Li Bai. Actors in a truly bizarre stage play, thought Yiyi with a bitter smile, shaking his head.

The ink more or less ready, Yiyi got up and stood waiting together with Big-tooth. The gentle breeze had ceased to blow on the plane, and the sun and the stars glimmered silently—it was as if the whole universe was waiting. Li Bai stood quietly at the edge of the plane, and as light did not scatter in the air above it, his form was distinctly divided by the sunlight into lit and shadowed parts. If not for the occasional movement of his hand stroking his beard, one would have taken him for a stone statue. Yiyi and Big-tooth waited and waited. As time soundlessly flowed by, the writing brush on the desk that had been soaked with ink had already started to dry. The sun's position had changed a great deal without anyone noticing, casting long shadows of the desk, the spaceship and of themselves onto the plane. The white rice paper laid flat on the desk seemed to have become a part of the plane. Finally, Li Bai turned around and walked slowly to the desk. Yiyi at once dipped the writing brush into the ink again, and handed the brush to Li Bai with both hands, but the latter raised a hand in dismissal and simply sank again into deep thought, looking at the paper on the desk. Something new appeared in his eyes.

With considerable satisfaction, Yiyi saw that it was uneasiness and confusion.

'I need to fabricate a few things, they are ... fragile, so be careful when you go catch them.' Li Bai pointed to the output window. The blue flames that had grown weak flared up again, and Yiyi and Big-tooth had only just reached the window when a stream of blue flame spat out a round object. Big-tooth was quick and managed to catch it; he saw it was a large jar. Three large bowls followed, but Yiyi only caught two of them, with the other smashing to pieces on the plane. Big-tooth carried the jar in both arms to the desk, then carefully opened the seal. A strong scent of liquor gushed out, causing Yiyi and Big-tooth to stare at each other in astonishment.

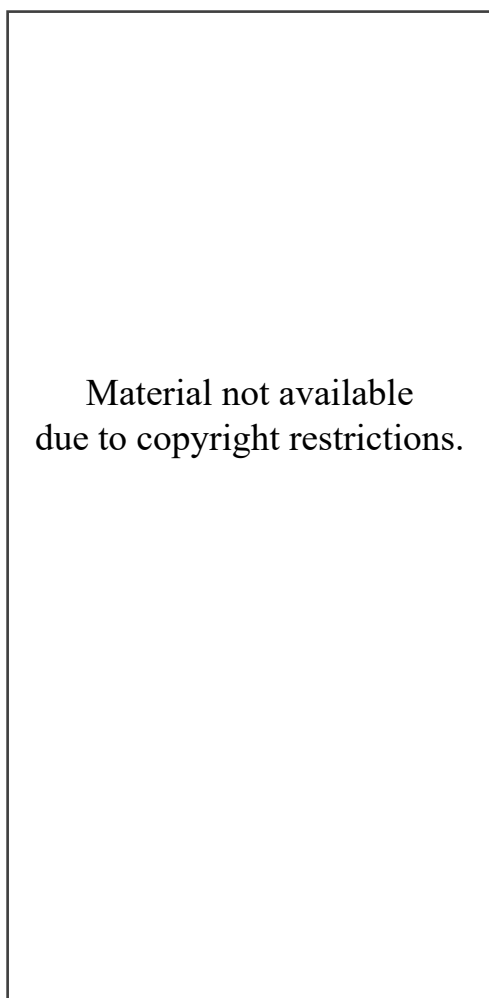
'There was not much information on liquor making by humans in the Earth Database that I received from the Devourer Empire, so this may not be exactly correct.' Li Bai pointed to the liquor jar and motioned to Yiyi to try it.

Yiyi scooped out a little with a bowl and took a sip. A burning sensation passed from his throat to his stomach, and he nodded, 'This is indeed liquor, but much stronger than the kind we take to improve the quality of our meat!'

‘Fill it up,’ said Li Bai pointing to the empty bowl on the desk, and after Big-tooth had filled it with the strong liquor, he drained it in one go, then turned again to walk into the distance, sometimes taking uneven, dance-like steps. Once he reached the edge, he stood there again facing the galaxies in deep meditation. But this time his body swayed rhythmically from left to right, as if in unison with an unheard tune. He did not take long to meditate before returning to the desk with dancing steps the whole way. He grabbed the brush that Yiyi handed to him, and flung it into the distance.

‘Fill it again.’ Li Bai stared dully at the empty bowl.

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Li Bai with a Wine Pot 酒缸公——李白 by He Yan  
何炎 dated early 20th century. Courtesy of the  
Hong Kong Museum of Art

An hour later, Big-tooth carefully laid a hopelessly drunk Li Bai onto the cleared writing desk with his large claws. But Li Bai turned over and tumbled down, muttering in a language neither man nor dinosaur could understand. He had already thrown up a huge and colourful mass (no one knew when he had eaten anything), and his wide ancient robe was now a complete mess. The white glow of the plane shone through the vomit, forming a highly abstract painting. Li Bai’s mouth was stained black with ink, because after his fourth bowl of liquor, he had tried to write something on the paper, but had only ended up jabbing the brush onto the desk very hard. Then he had tried to smooth the hairs of the brush with his mouth, just like any child starting to learn calligraphy.

‘My venerable god?’ Big-tooth bent down and asked cautiously.

‘Wayikaah ... kaahyaiwa,’ Li Bai answered with a thick tongue.

Big-tooth stood up, and said to Yiyi with a sigh and shake of the head, ‘We’d better go.’

## The Alternative Route

YIYI'S FEED-LOT was on the Devourer equator, an area that used to be a beautiful grassland between two large rivers when the Devourers were still in the inner Solar System. As the Devourers travelled beyond Jupiter's orbit, harsh winter had descended, the grassland disappeared, and the rivers froze. The humans being reared there were moved underground. Later, the Devourers were summoned by the god and returned to the inner system. As they drew nearer to the sun, spring returned to the land, the rivers thawed, and the grassland became green once again.

When the weather was favourable, Yiyi usually lived alone in a thatched hut he built himself by the river and grew his own crops. This was forbidden for the general run of people but since Yiyi's lectures on classical literature at the feed-lot had a tranquilizing effect, producing a special flavour in his students' meat, the dinosaurs left him alone.

It was an evening two months after Yiyi and Li Bai's first meeting. The sun had just set on the flat horizon of the Devourer Empire. The two large twilight-lit rivers joined together at horizon's edge. Outside the riverside thatched hut, a gentle breeze carried the faint sound of joyful dance songs from the distant grassland. Yiyi was playing *go* by himself when he looked up to see Li Bai and Big-tooth coming along the bank. Li Bai had changed a lot. His hair was tousled, his beard terribly long, and his face much tanned by the sun. He carried a rough-cloth bag on his left shoulder and a large gourd in his right hand. The traditional garb he wore had become tattered and the straw sandals on his feet were worn beyond recognition. Yiyi thought Li Bai actually looked more human now.

Li Bai came over to the *go* board, and, just as he had the several times he was there before, set the gourd down heavily on the table without so much as a glance at Yiyi and demanded, 'Bowls!' He uncorked the gourd after Yiyi brought over two wooden bowls, filling them to the brim. He then fished out a paper-wrapped package from his bag which Yiyi discovered contained cooked meat, already sliced. As its aroma reached Yiyi, he automatically reached out, took a piece and started chewing.

Big-tooth was standing two or three metres away, watching them in silence. Based on previous experience, he knew that they were going to discuss poetry again, a topic that he was neither interested in nor qualified to join.

'Yummy,' Yiyi nodded with approval. 'Is this beef also transformed from pure energy?'

'No, I have long since embraced Nature. You may not have heard but I have a



farm quite a distance from here where I rear beef cattle from Earth. I've made this dish myself, using the recipe of Shanxi Pingyao Beef. The key lies in when braising the beef you should add—' Li Bai leaned over and whispered in Yiyi's ear, 'urine salt.'

Yiyi looked at him, confused.

'Oh, that's the white stuff left when human urine evaporates. It creates a nice rosy tint in braised beef, making it tender and the texture just right without being too greasy or too dry.'

'This urine salt ... it's not made of pure energy either?' Yiyi asked in trepidation.

'I just told you that I've embraced Nature. I've gone to a great deal of trouble to secure this urine salt from a number of human feed-lots. This is true folk culinary art that had been lost long before the Earth was annihilated.'

Yiyi had already swallowed the piece of beef. To keep himself from throwing up, he picked up the wine bowl.

Li Bai pointed to the gourd and said, 'The Devourer Empire has built a few distilleries under my guidance. They can now produce most of the famous Earth liquors. This is the authentic Bamboo-Leaf-Green wine they made by infusing bamboo leaves in *fen* liquor.'

Yiyi only then noticed that the liquor in the bowl differed from the one Li Bai had brought previously. It had a fresh green tint, with a sweet herbal taste.

'It seems you've already gotten to know human culture inside out,' Yiyi was moved and told Li Bai.

'That's not all. I've spent a lot of time experiencing things for myself. As you know, the landscapes in many regions of the Devourer Empire are quite similar to those on the Earth where Li Bai had lived. In the last two months, I've been wandering among the mountains and waters, enjoying the beautiful scenery, drinking under the moon and reciting poetry on mountain tops. I've also had a few amorous encounters in human feed-lots all over this world.'

'So you must be able to show me your poetic creations by now?'

Li Bai quickly put down the wine bowl, stood up and began pacing uneasily, 'I did write some poems and they're sure to astound you. You'll see that I've become an excellent poet, outdoing even you or your forefathers. But I still don't want to show them to you because I'm equally sure that you'll think they have not surpassed the work of Li Bai, and I ...' He gazed afar at the waning glow of the setting sun, his eyes hazy with distress, '... would agree.'

On the distant grassland, the dance was over, and the jolly people started their sumptuous dinner. A group of young girls ran towards the river bank, playing in the shallow water at the shore. They each wore a coronet of flowers and a light

chiffon gown reminiscent of clear morning mists, composing an intoxicating image in the twilight. Yiyi pointed to the girl nearest to the hut and asked Li Bai, 'Is she pretty?'

'Of course,' Li Bai answered, giving Yiyi a puzzled look.

'Just imagine: cut her open with a shape knife, take out her internal organs, gouge out her eyeballs and brains, pick out each of her bones, separate all the muscles and adipose tissues according to their original locations and functions, then tie all the blood vessels and nerves into two bundles, and finally spread out a large piece of white cloth and lay out everything on it in anatomical order. Would you still regard that as pretty?'

'How can you think of such things when you are drinking? It's disgusting!' Li Bai's brows knitted.

'How's it disgusting? Isn't it the technology you are so devoted to?'

'What are you getting at?'

'Nature in the eyes of Li Bai is the girl you see now at the riverside. The same nature in a pair of technologically-oriented eyes is the bloody components lined up in an orderly fashion on the white cloth. In other words, technology is anti-poetic.'

'It seems you are ready to give me some advice?' Li Bai commented thoughtfully, stroking his beard.

'I still don't think you have any chance of surpassing Li Bai, but I can point you in the right direction for your efforts: technology has clouded your eyes, concealing the beauty of nature from you, so the first thing you should do is to forget all about your super technology. Since you were able to transplant all your memories into your current brain, you must be able to delete a part of them too.'

Li Bai looked up and exchanged a glance with Big-tooth, and both of them burst out laughing. Big-tooth told Li Bai, 'My god, I warned you about these devious bugs, it's easy to fall into their traps if you aren't careful.'

'Ha ha ... devious but fun,' Li Bai replied, turned back to Yiyi, and said sneeringly, 'You really think I'm here to admit defeat?'

'You haven't managed to surpass the pinnacle of human poetic art. That's a fact.'

Li Bai suddenly lifted a finger and pointed to the river, 'How many ways are there to walk to the river bank?'

Yiyi stared at Li Bai for a few seconds, baffled, 'It would seem there's ... just one.'

'No, two. I can also walk in this direction,' Li Bai pointed in the direction opposite to the river. 'If I set off straight ahead that way, I can reach this shore after circling the Devourer Empire's outer ring and crossing the river. I could even take a round trip of the Milky Way and get back that way. This is easy with our

technology. Technology can surpass all! I am now compelled to take the alternative route.'

Yiyi thought long and hard, before finally shaking his head in puzzlement, 'Even if you have the technology of the gods, I still can't imagine what the alternative route to surpass Li Bai is.'

Li Bai stood up and said, 'It's simple. The two ways to surpass Li Bai are: 1. to write poems that surpass his; 2. to write every possible poem!'

Yiyi felt even more confused, but Big-tooth, standing to the side, had a look of dawning comprehension.

'I will write every possible pentasyllabic and heptasyllabic poems, which were Li Bai's strong suit. I'll also compose all possible lyrics to the common classical tunes! You still don't understand?! I'm going to try out all the possible combinations of Chinese characters within these prosodic frames.'

'Oh, great! A great project!!' Big-tooth cheered in excitement.

'Is that difficult?' Yiyi asked dumbly.

'Of course it is. Extremely difficult! Even if we use the largest computer in the Devourer Empire for the operation, it might still not be completed before the universe ends!'

'There shouldn't be that many ...' Yiyi said doubtfully.

'Of course there are that many!' Li Bai nodded smugly. 'But with the quantum computation technology which your people are far from fully grasping, it can be done within an acceptable time frame. I will then write all the poems, both those already written and those that might be written in the future. Mark my word—all that might be written! That will certainly include poetry that surpasses the greatest work of Li Bai. In fact, I will bring an end to the art of poetry: any poet thereafter, till the end of time, will become a mere plagiarist. No matter how highly regarded their work is, it will definitely be found in my enormous storage base.'

Big-tooth suddenly emitted a low howl of alarm. His gaze at Li Bai turned from excitement to shock: 'An enormous ... storage base? My venerable god, you aren't really saying that you are going to ... to store every single poem composed by the quantum computer, are you?'

'What's the point of deleting them after composition? Of course I'm going to store them! It'll be one of the artistic milestones my race leaves to the universe!'

The shock in Big-tooth's eyes now turned to horror. He extended his huge claws, his legs crooked, as if he were falling to his knees in front of Li Bai. He sounded on the verge of tears too, 'Don't ... My venerable god, you shouldn't do this!!'

'What struck such terror in you?' Yiyi looked up and asked, astonished by Big-tooth's reaction.

‘You idiot! Don’t you know that atomic bombs are made of atoms? That storage device will be made of atoms too, and its storage cell cannot be made finer than the atomic level! Do you know what atomic-level storage is like? It means all the books by humankind could be accommodated within the size of a needlepoint! Not that tiny stack of books you have now but all the books on Earth before it was devoured!’

‘Oh, this does sound possible. I heard that the number of atoms in a glass of water is larger than the number of glasses of water contained in the Earth’s oceans. So? He can take the needle with him after the poems are composed,’ Yiyi said, pointing to Li Bai.

Big-tooth was mad with rage. He paced rapidly back and forth for a short while before regaining a slight bit of equanimity, ‘Fine, fine, let me ask you: How many characters do you think there would be in total, if all the poems that fit the pentasyllabic and heptasyllabic metres as well as the common lyrically tunes are written out, as the god plans?’

‘Not many, maybe around two to three thousand. Classical poetry is the most concise form of art.’

‘Fine. I’ll show you, you idiot bug, just how concise it is!’ Big-tooth said as he walked to stand by the table, pointing with his claw to the *go*-board on it, ‘What do you call this stupid game? Oh, right, *go*. How many intersect points are there on the board?’

‘With nineteen rows and columns, 361 intersect points in total.’

‘Very well. On each intersection, you can put either a black piece, a white piece or leave it open, so altogether three states to choose from. This way, you can see each *go* game as a nineteen-line, 361-character poem made up of just three Chinese characters.’

‘This comparison is fantastic.’

‘So, if you exhaust all the combinations of these three characters in poems of this format, how many poems will you have in total? Let me tell you: 3 to the power of 361, or rather, hmm ... let’s see, 10 to the power of 172.’

‘Is that ... a lot?’

‘Idiot!’ Big-tooth spit this word out a third time, ‘The total number of the atoms in the whole universe is just ... argh—’ He was too angry to continue.

‘How many?’ Yiyi still wore his dense look.

‘Just 10 to the power of 80!! You idiot bug—’

Only then did Yiyi show a hint of surprise, ‘You mean if one atom stores one poem, there’s still no way of saving all the poems composed by the quantum computer? Not even if we exhaust all the atoms in the universe?’

‘Far from enough! Insufficient by 10 to the power of 92 to be exact!! Besides,

how can a single atom store a poem? The number of atoms required for one poem in a storage device made by human bugs may be larger than your total population. As for us, the technique for storing single-digit binary data within a single atom is still in the experimental stage ... Alas ...'

'Ambassador, your views on this matter are too shallow and lack imagination. That's one of the reasons for the slow development and advance of technology in the Devourer Empire,' Li Bai said, smiling. 'A quantum storage device built according to the Multistate Superposition of Quanta can save those poems with just a small amount of matter. Of course, quantum storage is not very stable, so in order to permanently save the poems, it still has to be combined with traditional storage technology. In spite of this, the mass required for producing such storage device is very small.'

'How much would that be?' Big-tooth asked, looking as if his heart was pounding in his throat.

'Approximately 10 to the power of 57 atoms—a tiny amount, tiny.'

'This ... this is just about the mass of the whole Solar System!'

'Yes, including all the Solar planets, and, of course, the Devourer Empire too.'

This last line of Li Bai's was said matter-of-factly, but in Yiyi's ears it was like thunder in a clear blue sky. On the other hand, Big-tooth, surprisingly, seemed to have calmed down: Having been long tormented by an inkling of impending doom, one actually experiences a sense of relief when disaster finally strikes.

'Aren't you able to transform pure energy into matter?' Big-tooth asked.

'You should know how much energy would be required for such an enormous mass. It is unthinkable even for us. We'd better make use of what's readily available.'

'It would seem His Majesty's concern wasn't groundless,' Big-tooth muttered to himself.

'Oh, yes,' Li Bai said, delighted. 'I made it clear to the Devourer Emperor two days ago that this grand Ring-world empire will be used for an even greater purpose. All dinosaurs should be proud of this.'

'My venerable god, you will see how the Devourer Empire feels,' Big-tooth answered darkly. 'There is another question: Compared with the sun, the mass of the Devourer Empire is negligible. Is it necessary to destroy a civilization that has been evolving for thousands of years for this infinitesimal fragment of matter?'

'I completely understand your doubts. You have to bear in mind that to extinguish, cool down, and dismantle the sun would take a long time. The quantum computation of poetry will have started before that and we will have to save the results in real time, so as to free up the operation memory of the quantum

computer for further computation. Thus, the matter immediately available from planets and the Devourer Empire for producing the storage device is essential.'

'I understand. The last question, my venerable god: Is it necessary to save all the combinations and results? Why not install a decision-making program at the output end to eliminate the poems that are not worth keeping? To my knowledge, classical Chinese poetry has to follow strict prosodic rules. If we eliminate all the poems that do not fit the prosodic schema, the end quantity will be much reduced.'

'Prosody? Pffft ...' Li Bai shook his head scornfully. 'It is a constraint against inspiration. Ancient-style poetry in China before the Southern and Northern Dynasties was not bound by prosody and even for the strictly regulated new-style poetry after the Tang period, a lot of renowned classical poets departed from the prosodic rules and came up with outstanding mixed-style poems. So in this ultimate poetry composition exercise, I won't consider prosody.'

'But, you still have to consider the content of the poems, don't you? Ninety-nine per cent of the computation output will be utterly meaningless. What's the point of saving such random matrixes of Chinese characters?'

'Meaning?' Li Bai shrugged. 'Ambassador, the meaning of a poem does not depend on your approval, nor mine, nor anyone else's. It is determined by time. Many works of poetry that were meaningless in their own times later became unparalleled masterpieces. Many of the current or future masterpieces must also have been meaningless once upon a time. I am going to compose all poems. Who knows which one of them will be selected by the great passage of time as supreme billions and billions of years from now?'

'This is ridiculous!!' Big-tooth roared, his hoarse voice startling the few birds in the distant shrubs. 'If it goes according to the Chinese character corpus of the human bugs, the first poems produced by your quantum computer will be like this:

Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah  
Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah  
Ah Ah Ah Ah Ah  
Ah Ah Ah Ah **Alas**

'Are you telling me that this will be chosen as a masterpiece by the great passage of time?'

Yiyi, who had remained silent all the while, exclaimed in delight, 'Wow! This has no need of being selected by the great passage of time! It's already a masterpiece now. The first three lines along with the first four characters of the last line express a sense of marvel at the magnificence of the universe, while



the last character is the “eye”, the focal point, of the poem, containing the poet’s lamentation, after appreciating the vastness of the universe, at the fleetingness of life against the infinity of time and space.’

‘Aha ...’ Li Bai stroke his beard and chuckled with delight. ‘Well done, Yiyi bug! It’s a wonderful poem. Haha ...’ As he spoke, he picked up the gourd and filled Yiyi’s wine bowl.

Big-tooth slapped Yiyi with his giant claw and sent him hurtling. ‘Damned bug. I know you are happy now. But don’t you forget. If the Devourer Empire is destroyed, your kind can’t live either!’

Yiyi had tumbled as far as the river shore before he finally managed to pick himself up, his face covered with sand, his mouth wide open, from both pain and joy. He was really happy. ‘Ha ha, this is great. This universe is damned unbelievable!’ he yelled heartily.

‘Any other questions, Ambassador?’ As Big-tooth shook his head, Li Bai continued, ‘So I’ll leave tomorrow. The day after, the quantum computer will activate the poetry writing software and the ultimate poetry composition will commence. At the same time, the operation to extinguish the sun and dismantle the planets and the Devourer Empire will also start.’

‘My venerable god, the Devourer Empire will complete the preparations for battle this evening!’ Big-tooth stood at attention and announced solemnly.

‘Good, very good indeed. The coming days will be interesting. But before all this happens, let’s finish up this bottle,’ Li Bai nodded, pleased, and picked up the wine gourd. After pouring his liquor, he watched the great river now shrouded in the dusk as he savoured, ‘A wonderful poem, the very first one, ha ha ... the first one is already a wonderful poem.’

### **The Ultimate Poetry Composition**

THE POETRY composing software was actually very simple, it would require just two thousand lines of program code in the human created C language, plus a not-too-big database storing all Chinese characters. When this software was activated on the quantum computer (a giant transparent prism suspended in space) in Neptune’s orbit, the ultimate poetry composition began.

Only then did the Devourer Empire realize that Li Bai was just an individual member of that super-civilization, which went against the former assumption by the dinosaurs that a society evolved to that technological level would have melded into a single consciousness. The five super-civilizations encountered by the Devourer Empire in the past 10 million years had all been like that. Li Bai’s

kind had retained the existence of individuals and this partly explained their extraordinary understanding of art. When the poetry composition started, many other individuals of Li Bai's kind leaped from all over outer space into the Solar System to start the storage device production project.

Humans in the Devourer Empire could neither see the quantum computer in space, nor the newcomers from the godly race. From their point of view, the process of the ultimate poetry composition equated to an increase or decrease of the number of suns in space.

A week after the poetry composing software was activated, the godly race successfully extinguished the sun, so the number of suns in the sky was reduced to zero. However, the termination of nuclear fusion inside the sun led to a loss of support for its outer shell; the sun quickly collapsed into a nova, whereby the dark night was soon relit. The thing was that this new sun was a hundred times brighter than the original one, which burnt the plant life on the surface of the Devourer to fumes. The nova then extinguished itself too, and exploded again after a while, so the cycle of extinguishing and exploding came and went, as if the sun were a cat with nine lives, struggling on and on. Yet the godly race was actually quite proficient in killing off stars, so they easily extinguished the nova over and over again, maximizing the fusion of matter into the heavy elements required for making the storage device. The sun finally breathed its last when the nova was extinguished the eleventh time. By then, the ultimate poetry composition had already been going on for three Earth months. Prior to that, when the nova showed up for the third time, other suns had appeared in space. These suns lit and went out one after another at different spots in space, with as many as nine new suns in the sky at one time. These suns resulted from the power released by the dismantling of planets by the godly race. Since the glare from the sun gradually faded, people had problems distinguishing the real sun from the others.

The dismantling of the Devourer Empire started five weeks into the poetry composition. Before that, Li Bai had put forward a suggestion to the Empire: The godly race could relocate all the dinosaurs to a world at the other end of the Milky Way where a civilization much more backward than the godly race lived. That civilization had yet to achieve existence in pure energy form, but it was a lot more advanced than the Devourers. Once the dinosaurs arrived, they would be reared as domestic fowl, living a jolly life with no want of food and raiment. The dinosaurs, however, angrily rejected this idea, preferring to perish with dignity than to submit to a humiliating existence.

Li Bai then made another proposition: Let humans return to their mother planet. Actually, the Earth had been dismantled too, most of it being used on the

storage device, but the godly race had built a hollow Earth for humankind from a small portion of the leftover matter. The size of the hollow Earth was more or less the same as the original planet but its mass was only 1 per cent of the latter. It was not exactly the case that the Earth had been hollowed out, since there was no way that the layer of fragile rock on the original surface of the Earth could be used for the new crust, whose material probably originated from the Earth core. In addition, the intersecting lines on it, which looked like latitude and longitude lines, were fine but strong reinforcement rings made from degenerated neutron matter produced when the sun collapsed.

It was heartening that not only did the Devourer Empire agree to Li Bai's proposition immediately, letting all humans leave the great Ring-world, they also returned the sea water and air they had raided from Earth. With these materials, the godly race then restored all the continents, oceans and atmosphere inside the hollow Earth.

After that, the brutal Great Ring War of Defense took place. The Devourer Empire launched nuclear missiles and Gamma-ray laser beams at godly-race targets in space, but these were useless against the enemy. Spurred on by a strong invisible force field launched by the godly race, the Devourer's outer ring revolved faster and faster, finally disintegrating from the centrifugal force caused by the high-speed rotation. By this time, Yiyi was on his way to the hollow Earth and witnessed the total destruction of the Devourer Empire from 12 million kilometres away.

The disintegration of the Ring-world took place very slowly, as if it were a mirage against the backdrop of pitch dark space. The giant world dispersed like milk foam floating on a cup of coffee, with the debris on the margins gradually disappearing into the dark as if it were dissolved by space. Only the sparks of explosions every now and then made them visible again.

This great virility-exuding civilization from the ancient Earth was thus annihilated. Yiyi was grief-stricken. Only a small proportion of the dinosaurs survived and returned to the Earth with the humans. Among them was Ambassador Big-tooth.

On the way back to Earth, most of the humans were quite depressed, though for an entirely different reason from Yiyi's. Once back on Earth, they would have to open up the land and cultivate their own food. For people who had been farm-raised and were thus weak-limbed, who could not tell one grain from another, this was indeed a nightmare.

Yiyi, however, was full of confidence for the future of the world on Earth. No matter how much hardship lay ahead, human beings would be their own masters again.

## **The Poetry Cloud**

THE YACHT on the poetry voyage has reached the coast of Antarctica.

The gravity here is small and the motion of the waves sluggish. It is like a dance describing a fantasy. Under the low gravity, the water splashes more than ten metres high when waves hit the coast, with surface tension creating countless balls of water in mid-air, whose sizes range from as large as a football to as small as raindrops. These balls of water drop slowly, so slowly that you could draw a circle around them with your fingertips. The balls refract the glare of the small sun, bathing Yiyi, Li Bai and Big-tooth in a glittering light as they go ashore. The Earth's revolution has slightly distorted and lengthened its axis along the North and South Poles, so the polar regions of the hollow Earth have retained their freezing climate. The snow in the low gravity environment is most unusual, puffed up and foam-like. Its depth varies from waist-deep to places where Big-tooth would be completely submerged. However, they can breathe normally even when immersed! The whole of Antarctica is covered in such snow-foam, giving off an uneven whiteness.

Yiyi and the others take a snow sledge to the South Pole. The sledge is like a jetboat speeding across the snow-foam, parting waves of snow as it goes.

The next day, they arrive at the South Pole, which is marked by a tall crystal pyramid, a monument to remember the Earth Defence War of two centuries before. No words or images are inscribed on the solitary gleaming pyramid which silently refracts the sunlight on the snow-foam at the top of the Earth.

The entire Earth-world can be viewed from this vantage point. Surrounding the small dazzling sun are the continents and oceans, as if the sun has drifted there from the Arctic Ocean.

'Can this small sun really shine forever?' Yiyi asks Li Bai.

'At least till the Earth civilization evolves enough to be able to build new suns. It's a mini-white hole.'

'White hole? The reverse of a black hole?' Big-tooth asks.

'Yes, it's connected to a black hole 2 million light years away through a space wormhole. The black hole revolves around a star, absorbing the star's light and releasing it here. You can see the white hole as the output end of an optical fibre that transcends space-time.'

The tip of the pyramid is the southernmost point of the Lagrangian axis which links the North and South Poles of the hollow Earth. It is named after the zero-gravity Lagrangian Points which constituted the two ends of a 13,000 kilometre axis between the Earth and the moon before the war. In the future, humans will

surely launch its various satellites along the Lagrangian axis, and, compared with what had to be done on the pre-War Earth, these will be very easy launches: You only have to transport the satellites to the North or South Pole, by a mule-cart if you prefer, and then kick them skyward with your foot.

Yiyi and the others are looking at the pyramid when a larger sledge comes up carrying a group of young travellers. As soon as they get off the sledge, these people leap up high along the Lagrangian axis, turning themselves into satellites. A great many small black dots, tourists and assorted vehicles, can be seen drifting along the axis at zero-gravity, marking its length. In fact, it is possible to fly from here directly to the North Pole. However, since the small sun is located midway along the axis, some of the tourists who flew along the axis in the past and who could not decelerate due to faulty jet propulsion packs, headed straight towards the sun and were evaporated long before they actually reached it.

On the hollow Earth, it is easy to reach space by jumping into one of the five deep wells at the equator (known as 'land doors'), falling 100 kilometres down (or up?) through the crust and being flung into space by the centrifugal force of the Earth's revolution.

Now, in order to see the Poetry Cloud, Yiyi and the others have to go through the crust too. But since they are taking the land door at the South Pole where the centrifugal force from the Earth's revolution is zero, they will only be able to reach the outer surface of the hollow Earth and will not be flung into space. When they finish putting on their light spacesuits at the control station of the Antarctic land door, they enter the 100-kilometre-deep well. At zero gravity, it might be more apt to call it a 'tunnel', since they, in their weightless state, have to rely on the jet propulsion pack in their spacesuits to move themselves forward. It takes them half an hour to reach the outer surface, way slower than dropping from the land doors on the equator.

The desolate outer surface of the hollow Earth only contains intersecting neutron matter reinforcement rings which, like latitude and longitude lines, divide up the surface of the Earth into numerous rectangles. The South Pole is the juncture for all the longitudinal rings. When Yiyi walks out of the land door, he finds himself on a not very large plateau. The reinforcement rings are like mountain ridges that originate from the plateau and radiate in every direction.

Looking up, they see the Poetry Cloud.

The Poetry Cloud, located where the Solar System used to be, is a spiral nebula 100 astronomic units in diameter, its shape resembling the Milky Way. The hollow Earth is at the edge of the Cloud, as was the sun in the original Milky Way. What

is different is that the orbit of the Earth is not on the same plane as the Poetry Cloud, so it is possible to see from the Earth an entire side of the Cloud, unlike the Milky Way which only offered a view of its cross-section. However, the distance between the Earth and the Poetry Cloud plane is insufficient to allow the people here to observe the Cloud's full shape. In fact, the entire sky of the southern hemisphere is covered by the Cloud.

The Poetry Cloud emits a silvery radiance which casts shadows upon the Earth. It is said that the cloud emits no light of its own and the silvery radiance is caused by cosmic rays. Owing to the uneven distribution of cosmic rays in space, large halos of light often surge through the Poetry Cloud. These multi-hued halos course through the sky, like giant glowing whales swimming in the Cloud. On the rare occasions when the intensity of the cosmic rays dramatically increases, glimmering sheens of light will appear and the Poetry Cloud will no longer be cloud-like: the whole sky will look like the surface of a moonlit ocean seen from under water. The asynchronous rotations of the Earth and the Poetry Cloud allow for an occasional glimpse into the night sky and the stars through the gap when the Earth is in between the spiral arms. The most sensational view is the cross-section of the Poetry Cloud, seen when the Earth is at the edge of a spiral arm. It looks like cumulonimbus clouds in the Earth's atmosphere which transform into majestic shapes that capture one's imagination. These gigantic shapes emerge high above the rotation plane of the Poetry Cloud, giving off a sublime silvery glow, like a never-ending hyperconscious dream.

Yiyi draws his gaze back from the Poetry Cloud. He picks a chip up off the ground. This kind of chip is scattered all around them, glistening on the ground like ice shards in the dead of the winter. Yiyi holds the chip up towards a sky densely covered by the Poetry Cloud. The small chip is half the size of his palm, completely transparent if seen from the front, but by tilting it to one side, one will catch on its surface the iridescent reflection of the Poetry Cloud. This is a quantum storage device. All the texts produced in human history would only take up one-billionth of a chip's storage capacity. The Poetry Cloud is made of  $10^{40}$  of such chips which store all the output from the ultimate poetry composition, produced from the matter that used to form the original sun and all the nine planets, and of course the Devourer Empire as well.

'What a great piece of art!' hails Big-tooth sincerely.

'Indeed, its beauty lies in its content: a nebula 10 billion kilometres in diameter that comprises all possible poems; it's really amazing!' Yiyi looks up into the nebula and says with passion, 'Even I have begun to admire technology.'

Li Bai, who has been in low spirit, sighs, 'It seems we are moving towards each



other. I see the limits of technology when applied to art. I ...' He sobs, 'I am a loser, oh ...'

'How can you say this?' Yiyi points up to the Poetry Cloud. 'That encompasses all possible poems, which of course includes those that surpass Li Bai's.'

'Yet I cannot get hold of them,' Li Bai stamps his foot, leaps a few metres high and curls himself into a ball in mid-air. He buries his face between his knees in foetal position and descends slowly in the tiny gravity of the Earth's crust. 'Since the ultimate poetry composition began, I have been working on poetry recognition software. However, technology met again with that unsurpassable obstacle in art, and a program which can appreciate ancient poetry is yet to be written.' He points to the Poetry Cloud while still in mid-air. 'I have indeed composed the most supreme pieces of poetry by means of our great technology, but I have been unable to locate them in the Poetry Cloud. Alas ...'

'Is the essence and nature of intelligent life really unreachable by technology?' Big-tooth looks up and questions the Poetry Cloud. Having been through all these experiences he had become more philosophical.

'Since the Poetry Cloud encompasses all possible poems, some of them naturally write about the entirety of our past and about all possible or impossible futures. Bug Yiyi must be able to find one that describes his thoughts when he clipped his nails on an evening thirty years ago, or the menu of a lunch twelve years from now. Ambassador Big-tooth should also be able to find a poem that depicts the colour of a scale on his leg in five years' time ...' Li Bai has already landed on the surface as he speaks and hands out two chips which glitter under the glow of the Poetry Cloud, 'This is a gift for you two before I go. These are the trillions of poems culled from the quantum computer with your names as the keyword. They portray all your possible future lives, which, of course, only account for a tiny portion of all the poems that are about you. I have only read a few dozens of them. My favourite is a heptasyllabic poem about Bug Yiyi which tells his love story with a pretty village girl by the riverside ... After I leave, I hope humans and the remaining dinosaurs can coexist with each other; humans should also have good relations among themselves. It will be trouble should the hollow Earth's crust be blown open by a nuclear bomb ... The good works in the Poetry Cloud do not yet belong to anyone and I hope humans can write some of them in the future.'

'How did it go with me and the village girl?' Yiyi is curious.

'You live happily together ever after,' Li Bai chuckles under the silvery glow of the Poetry Cloud.