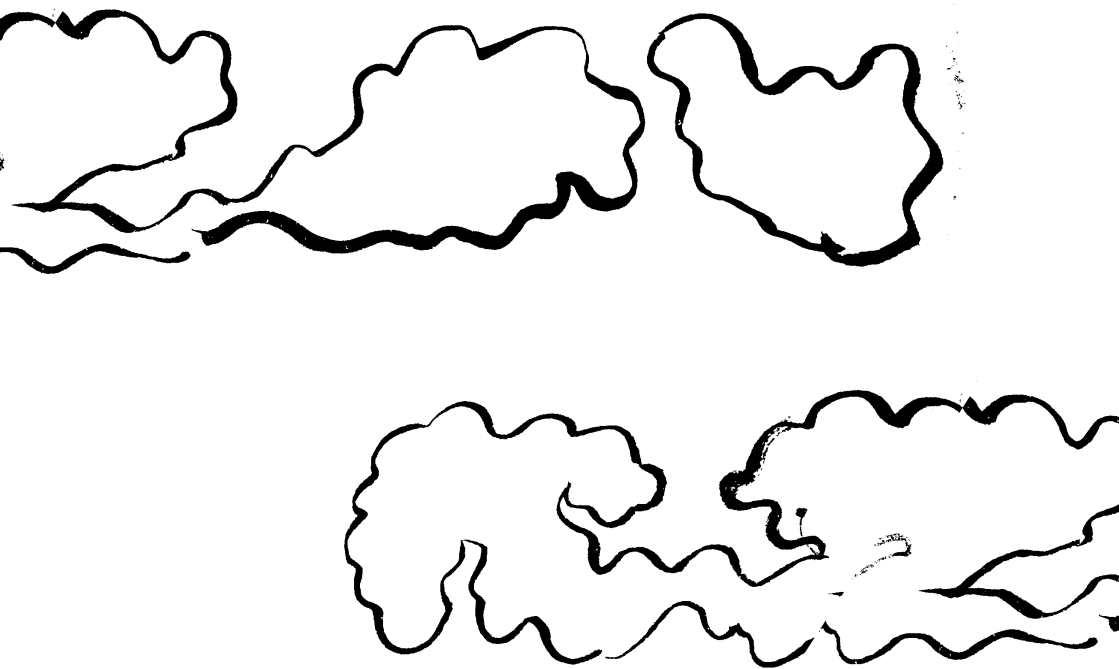


Travelling While Laying Down



We Went Out After the Rain at Dusk

We went out after the rain at dusk
We went out after the rain at dusk

chasing sky for clouds.
The mountains
moved
with the weightless pace of their own time.

 We walked down the hill,
 stopping above the running water.
Shrubs blocked our view.
 We thought of
 Leopardi's solitary hill and hedge
the dead seasons meant nothing in that eternity.
The white clouds still surged, in an encompassed silence deeper than the quiet
itself.

You asked: *do you see violence?*

The deep blue outlines
carried out a battle
soundlessly,
as if they had never trembled in fear,
nor ever tasted sweetness.

We climbed another hill
(the one we often look at from the kitchen window),
and looked back -
the city shimmered

below us,

and those white mountains were still unreachable,
larger than the city,
light enough to float

Geologists once said that mountains form when the
huge force between tectonic plates collide, compress,
and rise; then they collapse under their own weight.
I asked AI about their height -
it inferred from a photo that they were around ten
thousand meters.

Dark clouds slowly approached from the other side of the hill,
yet we couldn't resist climbing higher,
until fine rain blocked our path,
soaking the heavy concrete road
into an indistinct summer scent.

We began to retreat.
Walking in the rain, we kept talking about painting.
The drizzle soaked my coat,
dark spots blooming one by one on the cotton fabric - in our damp steps, the
words spread, dissolving,
until they were unrecognizable.

Like those paintings
that face me in the studio
late at night.

Holiday Afternoon, Four O'Clock

In the interval from exhausted and hesitant painting
I sit in garden,
rolling a cigarette
scrolling through my phone,
thinking about violence in abstraction - *conjured*, like clouds

The cigarette burns my throat dry.

Sunlight scrubs the ground with force
like a smudged page with fibrous debris, where erased words remain visible.

Across from me, a plant with pale purple
blossoms
and gray-green leaves
droops almost to the soil
like a low-flying, grounded cloud

I've looked at it many times,
in gaps between conversations,
between screens and smoke.
Each unthinking glance
lets me brush against something -
still as a glass of water,
shattered at the slightest touch.

Today I noticed
the long stems burst from the center, falling, unable to bear
their own weight.

An uncertain declaration,
an obscure,
self-opposing thought looping back,
almost landing,
a twitch of breeze -
then the earth again.

This and the clouds I paint -
just the same blankness in two different shapes,
moving,
like the things that were never seen.

About Clouds

Empty cabin. Across from me, a boy sat by the window,
chin resting on his hand, gazing out.
In the dimness, I couldn't see his face clearly.

Our bodies trembled carefully
in the silent climbing of this humming boat
the horizon tilted gently.

*His profile appeared in a short blue line -
followed the rising-and-falling clouds outside
it crawled across his cheekbones,*

*his chin,
throat,
then returned to the cheekbones.*

I looked where the line pointed -
a glance of the infinite plateau of clouds beneath on which we didn't cast a shadow.

I thought of the soundlessness of painting

a futile, strenuous effort to contour

the gaze he held,

the ceiling of clouds that we were about to touch

the index finger swiping quickly through the phone's album, searching for that
one image
that holds this memory

the plane sank into the clouds

Some Thoughts

Recently, at Mauritshuis in The Hague, I encountered a painting of Itamaraca Island in Brazil by Frans Post. Four figures stand on the seashore, gazing across the water towards the green island. The sea stretches outward in quiet stillness, reflecting the island's foliage in a hue so close to the sky that one merges into the other, a faint beige-blue continuum. Clouds drift low, veiling the sun, and the light takes on a strange radiance: a still luminosity that settles over everything, untroubled.

What struck me first was this serenity. The painting seemed to generate a force of absorption, as if I might be pulled into its world. My eyes resisted, circling instead over the details. Then, almost belatedly, I noticed the figures more carefully. Two dark-skinned men, bare-chested, wearing white trousers, facing the water in silence, one stood with an enormous basket balanced above him. Beside them, two Europeans - one mounting a horse, one pointing outward - stood in broad-brimmed felt hats and loose linen shirts, their doublets trimmed with decorative slashes. No violence takes place here: no clash, no blood, no resistance. Instead, colonizers and colonized share the same horizon line, equally absorbed in the serenity of the scene.

But we know violence is everywhere in this history. Violence of conquest, of enslavement, of extraction. By depicting Brazil in the same way as the Dutch homeland, Post transfigures the colony into an image of peace, possession and familiarity. What could be more violent than the erasure of violence itself?

I have never been to Brazil, never seen its sky with my own eyes. And yet the painting persuades me. I almost believe the sky of Brazil is exactly as depicted, that this serenity belongs to the land itself. I guess in a way this is the power of landscape painting, to shape and to define our expectation of a place, of what it should look like, how it should feel, without ever having been there.

As I lingered before the canvas, I felt a strange sensation: a belated shame at the serenity that had already reached me, instantly, without resistance. This serenity has accompanied the birth of Western landscape painting. It has been naturalized into the very representation of nature - arriving faster, more seductively, than the recognition of history's brutality. It takes reasoning, a pause of a few seconds, for critique to surface. So I began to picture the colonial machinery behind this serenity and innocence: the imperial structures that enabled painters to travel overseas, the wealth extracted from colonies that shifted taste toward sentimentality, the privilege of contemplating nature as something to be possessed and cherished. But in front of the painting, I could not conjure anything concrete - only the vague sense of knowledge that violence must be there, behind it all, behind the golden light and the calm expanse of clouds.

I raised my hands to frame out the figures, to crop them out, leaving only the sky. Without its surroundings, the serenity dissolved. The clouds became something else: grey-beige, fibrous, no longer sentimental. Like a smudged page, the trace of erased words, marks that refuse to disappear. The abstraction unsettled me: the clouds lost their role, became just themselves, or less than themselves, stains of paint.

What about the clouds in paintings where such figures are absent altogether? Vermeer's skies, or Ruisdael's vast cloudscapes above Haarlem - landscapes of the homeland, where no colonized bodies appear at all. Are their skies innocent? Or do they also carry something invisible, hovering above Delft, Haarlem, any Dutch horizon? Masters of light and sentiment, their skies orchestrate feeling, lifting the paintings above topography into sensibility. But can this celebration of God, nature, civic pride ever be separated from the colonial world that sustained it? Or are even these clouds - beautiful, weightless, endlessly reproduced - already contaminated by an afterimage of violence, a soft veil stretched across the surface.

There is a weight in them, though I cannot grasp it. Their relationship with me is vague, unresolved, more sensation than knowledge. A lingering illness, following me in every sigh I cast. A vague imagination of the colonial violence that has been, that I never lived myself in the time depicted in the picture. Nevertheless I am

living in a world shaped by it. It comes to me as a faint nausea, as if being in the early stage of fever on a sunny day - an illness that haunts even the bluest sky and the brightest light.

When I was living in Florence, there was a debate about whether to allow a McDonald's restaurant to open in Piazza Duomo - the square considered the most representative of the city's spirit and tradition. People were quite enthusiastic when the McDonald's opening was denied, seeing it as a victory: the triumphant preservation of tradition's dignity against an industrial, standardized "American monster" invading the church square. As a friend spoke of McDonald's lack of tradition, no culture, and therefore, no warmth, I wondered actually how this American fast-food supplier had accompanied a great part of my childhood and adulthood. As a child, eating at KFC or McDonald's was a special treat, happening only once or twice a year with my family. Later, when I left home to study in big, expensive cities far away, KFC or McDonald's were among the few affordable options for a satisfying lunch or dinner. So, when I first tasted McDonald's here in Europe, it somehow felt like home. It became a site of memory, a taste of childhood, and it never betrayed me, no matter when or where I was.

Perhaps the sense of belonging and memory isn't necessarily tied to where traditions are laid, but to where an experience is lived through time. Just as the

most globally standardized production of burgers and fried chicken from the USA can evoke the taste and memory of childhood for a Chinese artist, I also find a sense of familiarity and a home-like rest in my intervening travels, moving from one place to another. I like to take pictures of these moments and paint them, as a sort of exercise of remembrance. The subjects of these images were often so insignificant that it made my process of painting them like a sort of self-mumbling. I tend to begin painting out of a sudden impulse, as the image reveals a trace of some vague sense of meaning and fragments of feelings. But these futile sensations fade fast, like a conversation exhausted of its words, nothing left - except the paintings themselves.

But what are these paintings? Residues of remembering, attempts to capture meanings in their ephemerality, they are static images to be later hung on the wall, to be looked at from a distance. And one might be able to own some of them as well, since they are also objects that have been assigned values.

When I walk in a museum full of paintings, it often makes me wonder about the nature of paintings and exhibitions. The Latin origin of the word 'exhibition' - *exhibitio* - is composed of *ex-* ("out," "forth," "from within toward the outside") and *-hibitio* ("to have, to hold, to keep, to handle"). It meant to hold something outward, or to extend what one has outwardly. But the key here is that one must first "have" the thing before holding it outwards. But what are the things one can have or possess? One cannot possess people, objects, places, ideas, or emotions - they are too abstract to be owned - but one can own a painting or an image of them. In this way, painting something feels like a technology of taxidermy - trying to hold on to something that is already dead, reducing the complexity of lived layers into a flattened image, then carrying them with you - objects existing solely to be viewed, silent and passive, stripped of subjectivity.

Isn't this a kind of violence then? Perhaps that's what museums do as well - lovingly, carefully, but still violently. They keep things still. They make them legible, visible, and safe to look at from a distance of two meters. The light is even, the labels are precise, the wall is white, clean enough that everything receives equal attention. I often wonder if this desire to clarify, to show everything clearly, is really a kind of violence - the violence of first claiming possession, then dispossessing it into an image for others; to strip it from its time, use, and intimacy, turning it into an image for others.

Am I dispossessing my own memories?

My affection for the nostalgic pleasure of eating fried wings with greasy fingers, the stunning cloudscapes I contemplated during my repetitive crossings between countries in the sky, or the silence of sitting in front of a newly finished painting in a late-night studio - these moments feel personal, and yet they're all part of something much larger. Are these acts of nostalgia? Of refusal? Are they simply

residues of a global system that has already passed through me?

Sometimes they feel like small rituals of holding on, but other times, they feel like complicity - intimate gestures that can't escape their own conditions.

I paint almost exclusively from images captured on my iPhone. This small black box has become my device for memory and for sensing the world. Isn't that strange? It's an object designed for speed and efficiency - yet it can be also used to slow down, to look at things again. It represents the highest refinement of modern technology: millions of identical copies scattered across the planet, each one the endpoint of a vast, invisible mesh of extraction and production - rare earth minerals dug from the ground, labor outsourced across continents, container ships crossing oceans, patents, treaties, tax shelters, surveillance protocols. And yet, all this collapses into something so intimate I keep it in my pocket, fall asleep beside it, use it to remember my mother's face, or the light through a train window.

It was made to connect - but sometimes I wonder if it deepens the distance. It holds the world and flattens it. I scroll endlessly, image after image, forgetting what I'm seeing. And still, I return to it, mining it for fragments to paint. It's strange to think that the banal photo of a hallway, a parked bus, or a half-eaten meal can carry a vague trace of a feeling, a quiet moment I hadn't realized I wanted to hold onto. I paint from these fragments. Not because they are significant, but perhaps because they're not.

People often say technology is neutral, that it depends on how we use it. But I'm not so sure. If my tool of remembrance is itself a product of forgetting - built to erase its own origins - what does that make my paintings? If my device of remembrance, pleasure of tracing childhood memory, or places of rest are also products and systems of erasure, designed without visible history, optimized for forgetting its own making, then what does that say about my lived experience through them?

Historically, beds in ancient China incorporated screens as integral components, enclosing three sides while leaving one open or movable. When beds served as centers of social interaction, individuals found themselves surrounded by painted landscapes whether conversing or resting. In the late Tang dynasty collection of ci-poems, *Among the Flowers* (花间集, 970 AD), expressions like "among the flowers," "in the screens," or "within the screens" frequently describe being in bed. Within the liminality of poetic rhetoric, the images on the screens become folded into lived experience, making the distinction between reality and imagination increasingly unstable. This method carries a profound poetic resonance, engaging with landscape through imagination rather than detached contemplation.

However, The term 卧游 (wo you), translated as "traveling while lying down", likely originates from the Southern Dynasties scholar Zong Bing' (宗炳, 375 - 444). In the text "Introduction to Landscape Painting (画山水序)." He wrote: "When old age and illness converge, fearing it might be impossible to visit famed mountains, one should clear the mind and contemplate the Dao, embarking on journeys through imagination while lying down." Within the dim candlelight and the flickering of screens, personal introspection and worldly adventures intersected freely. Through the bed-screen structure, one could travel vast journeys across mountains and rivers while laying down the inner stillness of solitude.

I'm writing my thoughts on an airplane flying from one foreign country to another. As the interval between sleeping and waking blurs the window's oval frame, I find myself floating above the sea of clouds. I wonder if this is not 卧游 rewritten by modern technology? While our bodies physically traverse alien skies; our minds rootless and find nowhere home.

People often described homesickness as the company of traveling, the more one lasts, the stronger the other grows. But homesickness is a strange idea for me. Not because I don't have a home. I just don't feel sick for wanting to go back home. Maybe my understanding of home isn't right, I'm still trying figure out what this means, what home means to me, a place that I'd be sick longing to go back.

When the flight attendant passed by, I ordered a can of Pringle's and Coca Cola. Onion-cheesy flavour and Zero, seven-euro in total. I enjoyed my chips and gassed drink, while watching the infinite plateau of clouds beneath. Even the humming of the engines and the light smell of fuel residue in the air had become pleasant. What kind of luxury it is. I wonder. My Chinese ancestors would have

never imagined this could be possible, flying in the sky while savoring food, only immortals could live like that. But in our legend, immortality has a great price to pay. When Chang'e decided to swallow the elixir and to ascend to the moon alone, eternity itself became an illness - endless time pressing her bright moon palace like the cold mist that never fades. Immortals are condemned to solitude, and their hearts are emptied of feelings.

Now I sit above the clouds, opening a can of Pringles. To me, the perks of immortality cost eighty-two euros for the ticket and seven for the snack. It comes salted and greasy, accompanied by a humming engine and a faint smell of fuel. We are not gods, but technology grants us a strange kind of transcendence: to fly, to scroll, to order food at midnight, to preserve memory in metal and glass. What did we trade for these? Our modern immortality is counterfeit, but illness is still its twin. Because we know that behind all these gestures are heavy works - resource extraction, labour exploitation - not nature's gifts, not divine breaths. But we prefer to pretend otherwise.

Illness lingers like invisible violence, present even on sunny days, when everything outside appears bright and prosperous. When I first looked at Post's painting, beauty arrived instantly while violence arrived late - like symptoms only noticed after the body is already altered. Illness haunts the idea of movement, whether across seas or through screens.

Perhaps this is why 卧游 begins from illness and confinement. The bed becomes both a site of limitation and of imagination, whether journeys unfold in screens lit by candlelight when the body cannot move, or in the flickering blue light of endless scroll when the mind is too exhausted, brain rotting. The sickroom folds into the mountains, the confined body opens into rivers. Illness and travel, far from opposites, are entangled ways of being carried elsewhere.

A couple days ago I re-installed Instagram to repost some promotional posts with my works. The next morning I woke around six. In the fog of half-sleep my hand reached for the phone. A sudden flare of light. Gaza. Death. Hunger. Marches. Police. Violence. The residue of sleep swept away, only to return in waves. Wakefulness itself felt like a stubborn sediment clinging to the body, like those flickering images on the screen: sacks of flour, stained with blood. Although it all felt almost too much to handle, I suddenly realized forty minutes had passed - finger scrolling, eyes fixed. I put the phone down and lay back facing the ceiling, nausea hovering in me, a sense of emptiness tacking.

I left the apartment for the gym. The morning air was cold and sheer and the sky pressed low with a mixture of dark clouds and slight stirps of dawn light. The street was empty and I pressed the button waiting for the green light in silence. Thoughts surge and fade in my mind, again and again, like fierce undercurrents beneath the calm river of this street. Exhaustion follows. Before images of absolute violence, does invisibility of violence elsewhere mean escape? Or only a different form of complicity? I tried to shake these thoughts by counting the bricks of the house

across the street, but they stayed.

At the gym I lifted the weight. Put it down. Lifted again. Repetition drained the body, layer by layer. Exhaustion seeped into thought until it blurred. The body faltered, as though pressed into a cloud - a silent, suffocating whiteness. And yet, I felt lighter. Blankness in thought became almost reassuring: no anger, no grief. Only this gym, inside a converted church. Only the white clouds drifting above Maastricht. Only the painting I would finish in the studio later today.

Sometimes I wonder what that emptiness brought on by exhaustion really means. Lifting, sweating, suffocating - the body forces the mind into silence, as if rinsing away the excess of thoughts and images. That silence brings a moment of lightness, even the illusion of feeling better. But I know it is not truly "better." It is simply a form of self-protection, a relief purchased by not looking, not thinking. The actions in the gym and in the studio are not so different: both are ways of keeping myself going. The only difference is that here, above me, the clouds over Maastricht drift calmly across the sky, while elsewhere the sky is filled with fire and smoke. This contrast makes it clear that what I call peace is inseparable from distance and privilege. The quiet I find through art or through the body is not innocent - it carries its own suspicion. For while I slip into temporary blankness, violence continues, and people keep on dying.

Then I picked my phone and deleted Instagram again.

Xiao Zhiyu

Travelling While Laying Down
2025

Presented for Open Studios 2025
Jan van Eyck Akademie

@ xiaozhiyu_
info.xiaozhiyu@gmail.com

Special thanks to Dylan Colussi, Ron Bernstein, and Margriet Thissen for their support in the realization of this work. Further thanks to Racheal Rakes, Bruno Alves de Almeida, Aude Christel and Youngjoo Cho for their insightful conversations and contributions to the development of this project.

