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BLUE SKIES, WHITE CLOUDS, STARS, RAINS, SEAS, BOATS, TRAFFICS, FLAT WHITES

Eva During (Ding)

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BLUE SKIES, WHITE CLOUDS, STARS, RAINS, SEAS, BOATS, TRAFFICS, FLAT WHITES

Eva During (Ding)

From audio script for a 35-minute audio narration accompanying *Under The Bridge* (2025), presented at The Arts House Trust, Pah Homestead (Tāmaki Makaurau) in November 2025; and for a 40-minute moving image work, *That Was Their One Tree Hill* (2025), exhibited at Slant Art Project Space (Ōtepoti) in December 2025.

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Shall we begin?
Yeah.

*

Have you ever thought about having the ability to time-travel? I wish I could. I want to go back to the day I was born, to smell my mother's cheek for the first time, the smell of her skin mixed with the sweat that carried the pain to birth me, will forever be my safe space.

She must have been so exhausted. I would have been, too. It was never easy to make it to this world through the last 40 weeks in her womb. Then she looked at the tiny me with tears of joy, picturing my first eye contact, first smile, first hold of her finger, first call of Mama, first crawl, first step …

I want to remember her face when I first locked my eyes with hers, and her laugh when I first recognised her and smiled, then I would call her mama, she answered with her whole heart as if that was the moment she had waited for her entire life. Then I want to go back to the day that I learned to talk, I want to ask her in my mother tongue: "如果有一天，我决定离开你到另一个陌生的国家生活，妈妈，你会同意吗？ (What if I have decided to leave you to live in a strange country one day in the future, will you, Mama, let me go?)"

That little girl in her arms was so little that she would never think we would have to say goodbye to each other one day. She would look at me with blended sorrow and anger and say: "How are you so sure that you will leave me one day to live in a strange country in the future?" I could sketch her face out in my mind.

Oh, I am sure, Mama, that one day, when I grow up, I will have to choose to leave. I hope you can understand that the day you abandoned me to chase your new life was the day you should have foreseen my departure, after I had lived with Grandma for twelve years.

*

I left China for New Zealand when I was 27 years old, an age yearning for a new life different from the past.

It was a rainy night. I walked out of the airport with my suitcase at 11 o'clock and got into a taxi heading to a hostel. The driver kept me entertained with his accented English that I couldn't understand fully, "Look, that's One Tree Hill, a place lots of Chinese love to go to." I nodded, turned around, looked through the window, and it was the darkness beyond the highway, disappointed by not knowing what he was trying to describe, at the same time picturing what it looked like in my head—a hill with one tree on top of it.

There used to be a park in my hometown called Western Lake Park, which I believed was a place that restored my childhood happiness. Indeed, the giant elephant slide, the climbing snail, the bumper kart, the cherry blossoms, the lake, the bridge and the zoo. I would always watch animals for hours until it was time to go home. For quite a while, this was the safe place for me to escape my family's chaos. It was a small town; I could hear the lion roaring every night when the little town was winding down. Somehow, I felt the lion was talking to me, and I could understand him. He must be so lonely, as he was the only lion in the zoo.

With the map I got from i-site, I started my exploration of the city that I had just arrived in. Of course, the first station was the One Tree Hill. Out of my mind, it was not a small hill with a tree on top of it at all; it was a preserved park with cherry blossoms. People were taking photos under the trees that had witnessed generations of Chinese; some were tourists, some were born in this country.

Then I went to the zoo, which was located behind Western Spring Lake Park. Oh, was this a coincidence? I asked myself. I stood in front of the lake, taking in the vast contrast of the landscape, which evoked memories of the hometown lake in my mind, yet also held similarities. I was lost in a moment of geographic and mental overlap, a nostalgia, a connection, a rediscovery of the safe place where I could hide from my childhood memories.

*

Blue skies, white clouds, stars, rains, seas, boats, traffics, flat whites, laughs, belongings, consensus moments, driving licence, visa tickets, work, work and more work, 9 pm washing dishes, 3 am baking scones, lunchtime breathe, afterwork walks, pay days, day offs. Shopping days, grocery days, laundry days, One Tree Hill days, Zoo days.

I fell in love with this country and my new life; it was full of busyness that I had momentarily forgotten the hometown's Western Lake Park. How could one know if it was the right choice to migrate to another country? I wanted to stay.

*

Blue skies, white clouds, stars, rains, seas, boats, traffics, flat whites, cries, loneliness, misunderstood moments, work, work and more work, 9 pm washing dishes, 3 am baking scones, lunchtime exhaustion, after-work soreness, pay days, day offs.

Couldn't remember when I stopped going back to One Tree Hill, or the Zoo. Did I make the right choice to migrate to another country?

*

I want to time-travel again, to the moment I remembered my grandma was singing. That was the only memory I had of her singing, but I couldn't recall or repeat the song.

I burst into tears every time I watch Haka. There's something I feel familiar with. For years, I was curious what this familiarity was. I think it was this cultural practice, passed down generationally, that reinforced collective spirits, as did many other cultures.

Those collective singings, collective dances, collective reading out loud in classrooms, collective vows and salutes under the national flag have completely imprinted my childhood in China, where I always felt I was one of them.

Audio of children reading this poem together in the classroom in Chinese:

游子吟 - (唐)孟郊
慈母手中线 / 游子身上衣 / 临行密密缝 / 意恐迟迟归 / 谁言寸草心 / 报得三春晖

Repeat, slowly fading out…

(*Song of the Wanderer* by Meng Jiao (Tang Dynasty), translation: "Thread in the hand of a compassionate mother/ clothes on a wandering son/ just before his departure, she sewed closely/ in her mind worrying about his late return/ Who would say that the heart of inch-high grass/ could repay the sunshine of deepest spring?")

*

Growing up with my grandma gave me the chance to learn her crafting skills. She had never deliberately taught me how to sew; in my memory, she was always sewing. I asked, "Why don't you buy them from the market?" She said that the commercial clothes were never as fit as the tailored ones.

She was always decently dressed, not for fancy clothes, but always nicely fit and tidy. She didn't like vibrant colours; her clothes were always dark tones with or without subtle patterns. Women's clothes were simple. After the Cultural Revolution, there was only one style left for older women to wear: the Chinese tunic suit style in navy blue, dark green, grey or black.

I grew up wearing cotton-padded clothes she hand-stitched since I was an infant, as my mother loved fashionable clothes; hence, she never really learned how to sew, but was always proud of her daughter wearing the fittest cotton-padded clothes made by her mother-in-law, compared with other kids'.

She tried to learn, my mother. I remembered she was kneeling on top of the unsewn quilt stitching, vigorously, impatiently, even I could tell the difference she did from grandma. Instead, Grandma's stitch was so gentle and neat that she could quietly sit there sewing for a day. Maybe that was her peace, after all she had experienced through wars, famine and the Cultural Revolution.

*

Blue skies, white clouds, stars, rains, seas, boats, traffics, flat whites. I was pushed into the corner of the kitchen, I was laughed for my accent, I was middle-fingered by turning to the wrong lane, I was mocked of my Ching-eye, I was thrown a plate while serving a meal, I was checked purse while walking out of a store, I was yelled at my colour, I was questioned at my ability, I was refused from opportunities, I was isolated from social topics.

Every story had turned into a stone stored in my heart, cold, hard, heavy.

*

I looked up at the sky and asked the white cloud, why did I make this choice to migrate to another country?

Fear, anger, vulnerable, lonely, I cried while chewing on steamed rice: "奶奶，我好想你啊。(Grandma, I miss you so much.)" Then she would look at me with her loving smile and say: "Shall I make some cotton-padded clothes to wear? Then you won't feel cold anymore."

I want to time travel again, to once again hold her wrinkled hands, and ask her to sew it for me, a cotton-padded clothes, a suit made of love and care, a shelter I could hide in when I felt upset. She had passed away years ago before I came to New Zealand. For a decade, every time I looked up at the sky, the white cloud would remind me of her. Her name in Chinese is 祥云, "propitious cloud" in English.

*****

Years later, I packed everything into the car and drove all the way from Auckland to Dunedin, where I began my art journey. Colder, drier and more beautiful at coastlines with sea lions, penguins, seals and albatross, this city has the dynamic colours of the sky, as well as the colours of the sea. This is a place constructed from preserved historical colonial architecture, as well as the energy and vitality of university students; a place where I met many artist friends, read New Zealand history, developed my sculpture skills and deepened my critical thinking.

I was staying at an Airbnb in St Clair for my first ten days since arriving. The house was sitting on the hill, newly renovated with large windows facing the sea. There was a little island in the middle of nowhere off the shore, they call it *Ponuiahine*, or *White Island* in English.

It's a strange feeling, seeing things from the bird's-eye view from the window; houses were so tiny, seas were patchy, waves became white lines that repeatedly appeared and disappeared on the surface of the blue, as if they were some unsolvable code given by nature. The island was so small. From a distance, it looked like a little mound that was only allowing one person to stand on top of it. I always wondered if anyone had lived there before; whoever it was, that person must have been so lonely.

*

Life was an ongoing, busy mix between work and study. I was putting all my energy into absorbing knowledge and skills, feeling a sense of loss and grieving for the artistic dreams that had been delayed by years of hard work. At the same time, I was excited to find myself in the realm of art, where I could freely express things that I couldn't address well with my limited English.

Perhaps we were never meant to communicate solely through language. The little girl in her mother's arms didn't need to talk; yet, she was understood if she was happy, sad, cold or warm, if she was feeling safe or scared. The little girl didn't need to talk to her grandma either; to feel the care and love, she was holding her grandma's hands, she also memorised her smile and her sewing.

What if there had never been a language developed within human history? Could we understand each other? Could we become more caring? Could we become less hurting? Could we be more patient with each other? More connected with each other?

I went back to St Clair again, sitting in the car parked at the beach, looking out at the Ponuiahine island through the beaded windscreen in the rain. It was so tiny, as if only allowing one person to stand on top of it—it was my One Tree Hill in Dunedin.

The rain was gentle, reminding me of my first night arriving in this country. I stood there, letting the millions of threads drooping down from the clouds reach my skin. What if I kept pulling the thread? Could I pull a piece of cloud into my arms?

That thread was the tie between my identity and my cultural memory. I time-travelled again, sitting next to my grandma, looking at her sewing hands, at the same time sharing my immigration journey to her: "奶奶(grandma), it was so hard!" Then she would stop her stitch, look at me and say: "Of course it's hard, but you are not alone. There are many first-generation immigrants whose stories are just like yours, and there were many first-generation immigrants whose stories were harder than yours."

*

Who were they, the people who first came to New Zealand from China? When did they come? Why did they come? Where did they stay? What did they do? Did they live well? Did they stay? Did they have children? Did they return to China? What did they eat? Did they have rice and dumplings? Did they have green tea and soy milk? Did they have spring onions and coriander? What did they wear? Did they make their own clothes? Did their mother and grandmother make their clothes? Did they have cotton-padded clothes to wear in the middle of winter in the valley of Arrowtown? Did they have a hand-stitched quilt that protected them from the harsh nights? Did they miss their family in China? Did they get rich mining gold? Did they ever think of giving up? Did they make it through? Did they pay off the debts? Did they die? Did they have gravestones? Did their gravestones face their hometown in China? Did their ash send back? Did their ash sink to the ocean? Did they farm? Did they retail? Did they learn English? Did their kids speak English? Did their grandkids speak English? Did they cook shepherd's pie? Did they celebrate Christmas? Did they join the New Zealand Army? Did they read George Orwell and Virginia Woolf? Did they believe in Darwinism? Did they believe the theory of relativity? Did they support the women's suffrage movement? Did they learn Māori? Did they know the Treaty?

Oh, and have they forgotten their mother tongue? Have they lost the ability to write Chinese calligraphy? Have they adapted Marmite on toast? Have they altered the taste of the sweet-sour sauce? Do they buy retail clothes? Do they buy quilts from the shop? Do they fly to China to revisit their ancestors? Do they see themselves as New Zealanders? Do they see themselves as Chinese? Do they see themselves as Chinese-New Zealanders? Do they understand their great-grandparents' choices? Do they work as hard as they used to? Do they become the leaders in their fields? Do they run a business? Do they participate in politics? Do they do research in quantum physics? Do they celebrate the rainbow's rights? Do they paint abstractions with oil paint? Do they make sculptures with sewing skills learned from their grandmas?

*

I drove along the Clutha River to Lawrence and Arrowtown, retracing their immigration journey that began 160 years ago.

At Arrowtown's historical Chinese gold miners' camp, golden sycamore carpet underneath my footsteps, with the combination of beech red and oak brown. I walked back and forth, feeling the roots under the ground breathing out of the soil, echoing their after-work chats in their mother

tongue about how their day was. As I walked into the preserved huts, I could almost picture their enamel basins in the corner of the huts, their ceramic bowls on the shelves, their thin quilts, their worn-out shoes, their paid receipts folded carefully under the pillow, as well as their cheques; rice, beans, wheat and barley restored in the weaving bags under the bed, spades and ropes on the floor.

The hut was so tiny, as if it was only allowing one person to live in, yet it was for at least four people living together—it was their One Tree Hill.

Lawrence's historical Chinese gold miners' camp has preserved two historical buildings. The camp used to be a bustling Chinese village where over a hundred Chinese people lived. Now it is only a giant cabbage tree standing in the middle of the ruin, observing the golden tussac hills in the distance. Visiting the local museum, where it displays archaeological artefacts, has brought me back to their living scenes, and the stories were quietly told through the ceramic shards.

Pan Fah Ancestor Hall is one of the two preserved architectural sites; it used to be a place for commemorative events and worship. People came together to practice cultural activities, tied by their collective cultural memories. For these miners who stayed in Lawrence, it was their One Tree Hill.

*

As I drove back to Dunedin with a car loaded with fallen leaves and branches that I picked up from these two sites, I came to St Clair, once again looking at my One Tree Hill off the shore in the middle of the sea, an idea of responding to their stories echoed 160 years had jumped in.

I remembered I had often played a game called 丢沙包 (Throwing sandbag) in my childhood. It is a kids' game every Chinese child remembers. A small hand-sewn pouch, filled with rice, beans, corn, wheat or even sand—anything to give it weight. Two people stand on either side, tossing it back and forth, while the one in the middle dodges. If you're hit, you're out.

I was often the one hit—not only feeling the physical sting but also the quiet shame of being removed from the game. I remember once, someone's *shā bāo* was filled with kidney beans; it hit my arm and left a deep bruise. I went home crying to my grandmother, angry and hurt. I begged her to make me a stronger *shā bāo*, too—something heavy, something powerful so that I could hurt them back. She listened gently, then said if it hurt so much when they hit me, then why would I want to hurt someone else just by imagining how painful it would be? That moment stayed with me far longer than the bruise.

I want to once again time travel back to meet my grandma, ask her to make another softer *shā bāo* for this time, as it is so soft and so light, that when someone threw a hard stone to me, I would throw this softened one back, because after years I finally understand, love remains a shared, universal force. Then she would look at me with her proud smile and say: "Why don't you make it out yourself? Haven't you learned how to sew from me for these years?"

I have, indeed. I am now holding the thread from the cloud, sewing this story out. Grandma, did you see it?

*

Ponuiahine Island, off the St. Clair shore, is quietly witnessing this city with stories; some are mine, most are others. Blue skies, white clouds, stars, rains, seas, boats, traffics, flat whites, it was never my One Tree Hill, it is everyone's.

奶奶，妈妈，我决定离开你们到另一个国家生活，我知道，这是我的选择。

(Mama, Grandma, I have decided to leave you to live in a foreign country; and I know, this is my choice.)

Afterword:

When I set out to write an autobiographical narrative recounting my migration experience, I spent two afternoons drafting it in two parts: one set in Auckland and the other unfolding years later, following my move to Dunedin and visits to historical gold-mining sites in Central Otago. After completing the draft, I made no further revisions, choosing to retain my most direct and unfiltered voice rather than refining it into polished English. As a result, you may encounter my habitual but incorrect grammar, as reflected in the title itself—*traffic(s)* and *flat white(s)*.

The imagined, cross-temporal dialogue between myself and my grandmother, and between myself and the first-generation Chinese gold miners, represents a process through which I metabolised and integrated memories of my past with my present experience as a migrant. At the same time, I sense that this story may not belong solely to me; it may resonate with, overlap with and echo the experiences of many first-generation immigrants.

Eva During (Eva Ding) (ORCID iD: 0009-0005-3477-0833) is a Chinese-born, Ōtepoti-based artist currently completing her MFA at the Dunedin School of Art, following a BVA (Honours) in Sculpture and a Diploma in Ceramics. Her work is deeply rooted in the quiet tensions of migration and memory, moving between softness and weight—between what is inherited and what is chosen. Weaving personal experience with broader cultural histories, her practice explores themes of identity, tradition, gender and belonging.