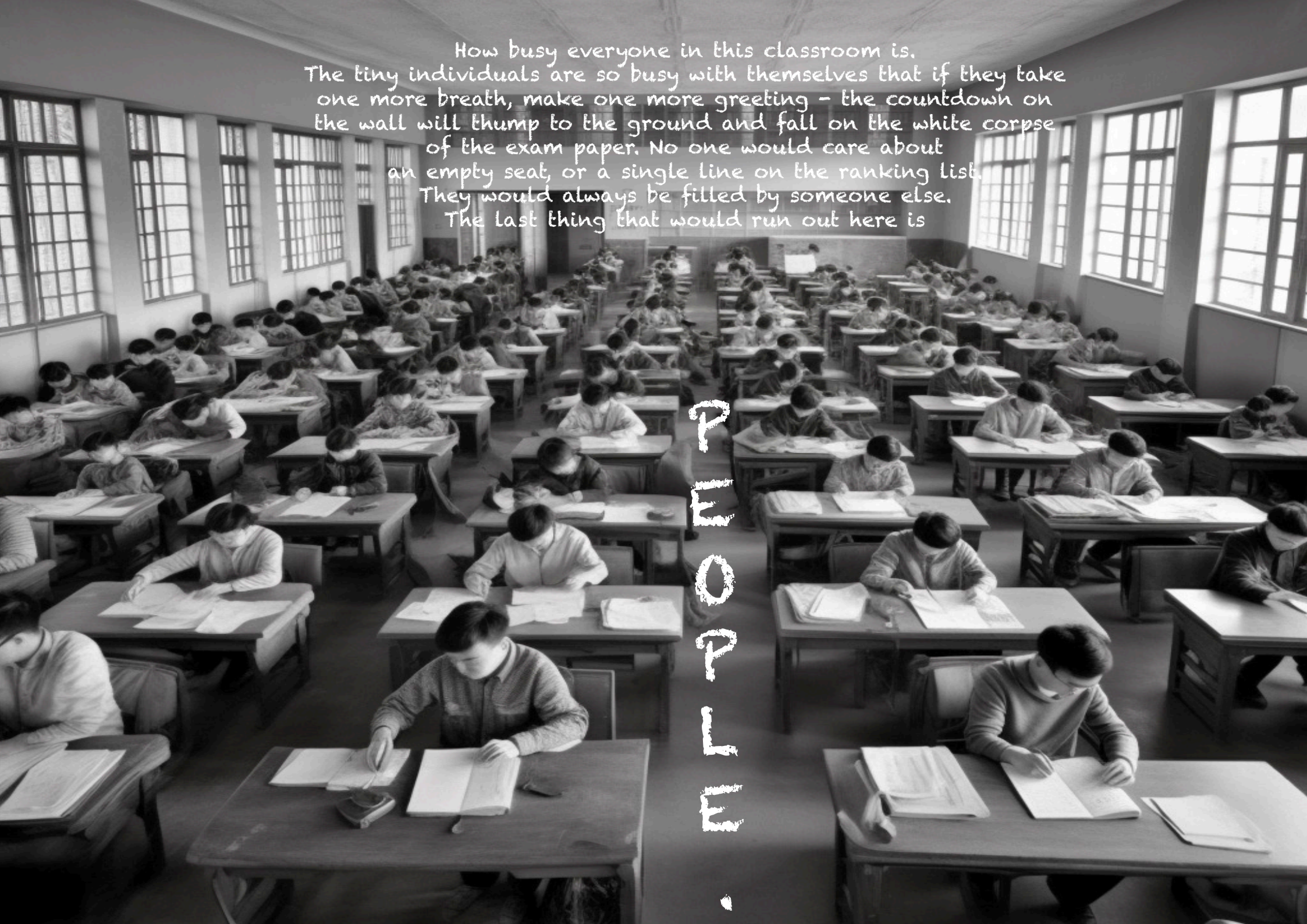


How busy everyone in this classroom is.  
The tiny individuals are so busy with themselves that if they take  
one more breath, make one more greeting - the countdown on  
the wall will thump to the ground and fall on the white corpse  
of the exam paper. No one would care about  
an empty seat, or a single line on the ranking list.  
They would always be filled by someone else.  
The last thing that would run out here is


P  
E  
O  
P  
L  
E



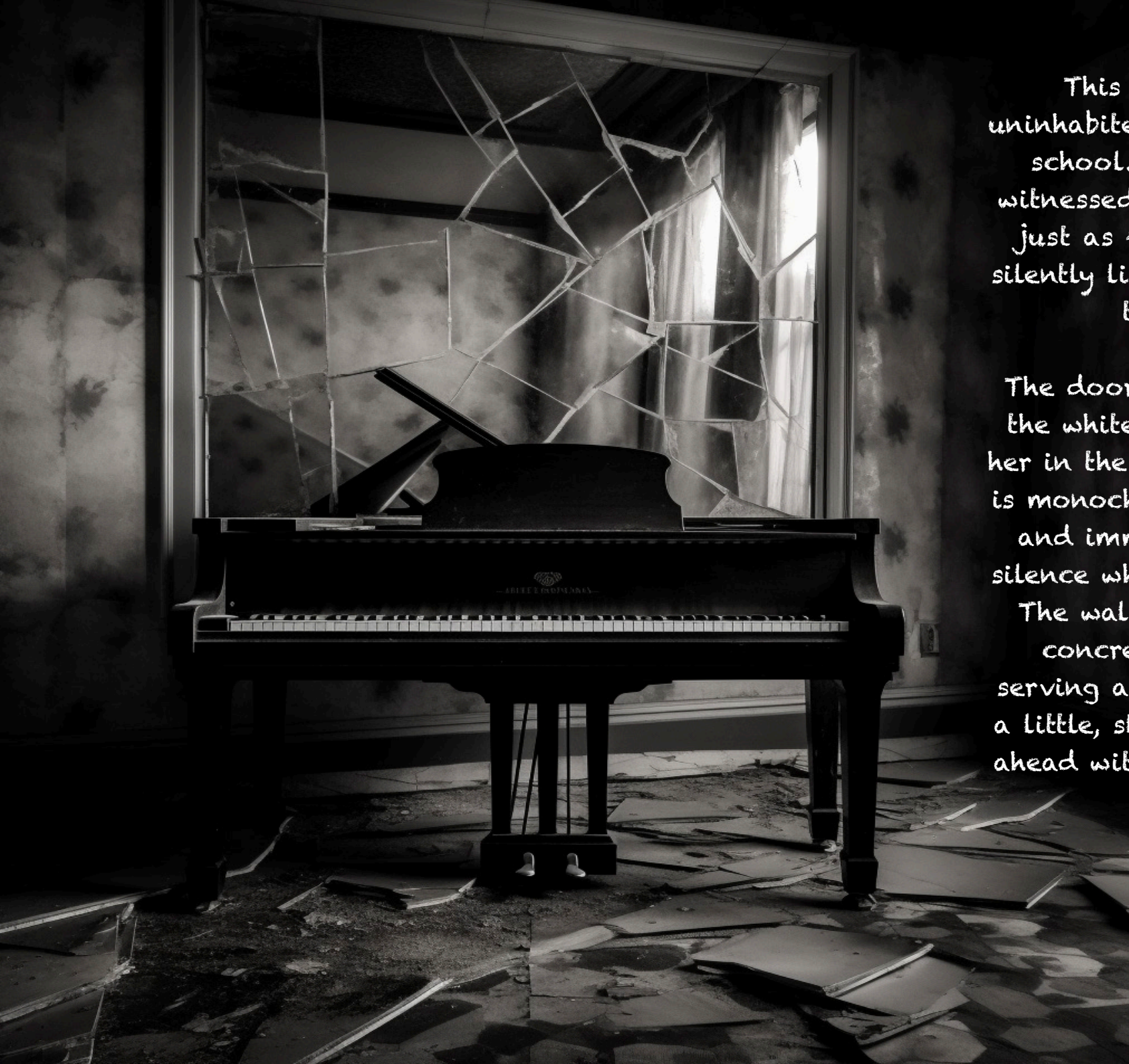
It doesn't matter, she thought.  
Our uniforms are so plain, as  
if they are mourning clothes.  
Everyone is so silent, as if it is  
a solemn funeral. The school is  
so grand, as if it is a wordless  
tombstone.

We used to be so afraid of  
being forgotten, but living like  
this is more like being forgotten  
compared to death. We are the  
best at forgetting - forgetting  
yesterday's grades, ranks,  
achievements, and compliments.

We come out of the pigsty,  
scrambling for food at the  
narrow canteen window, fighting  
like trapped animals in the  
arena of knowledge and using  
our pens as swords.




An impulse made her stand up and wander through the classroom  
like a ghost. No one looked up at her, it was a luxury to look up  
- time is money. Her legs knew where she was supposed to go.



This place was the most uninhabited territory in the whole school. A day ago it silently witnessed my vanish and rebirth, just as for many nights it was silently listening to the echoes of this living soul.

The door closes behind her and the whitewashed walls approach her in the bloody dusk. The world is monochromatic at this moment and immersed by a deafening silence when no music is flowing. The wall is like a disoriented concrete eye, a photograph serving as its pupil. It has faded a little, slightly obscured, staring ahead with an out-of-focus gaze.



Memories begin to creep in over the cracks and wounds of this room. The concrete walls fell into a tempestuous wave and swept over the room, the thick monochromatic tone broke through the restraints and plundered the splashes of colours of the afterglow. Every tiny space in the room shuddered and trembled. From the moment that photograph appeared, the surrounding landscape seemed to change its protagonist, and merely served as the bass line of this concerto. They pierce through the day and the night like an inexorable torrent, all restraint and confinement crumble before them until they tear a rift in the seventeen years of time, allowing the fragments of memory to sweep in and envelop her.

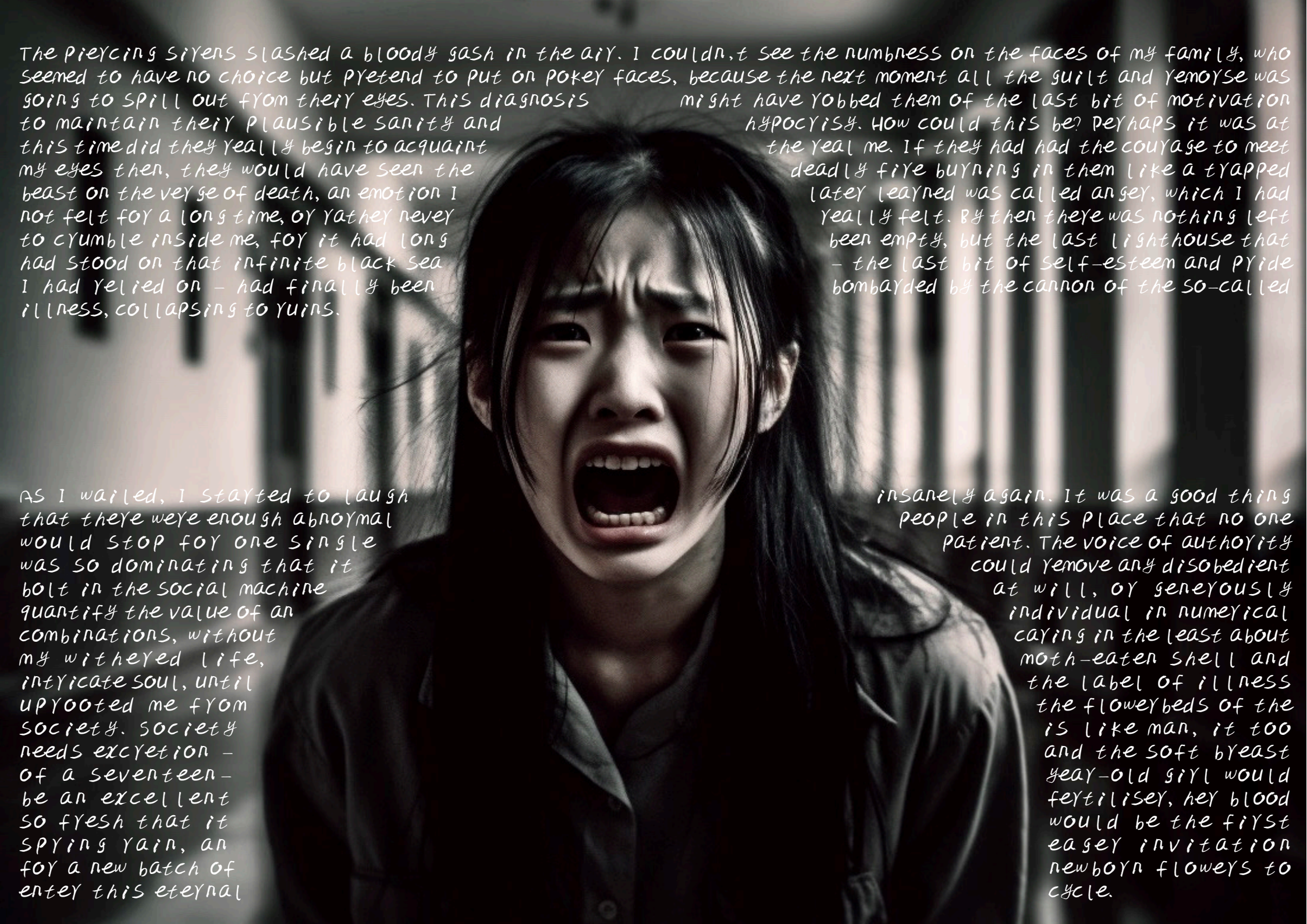
The world moves away,  
leaving her and my past stand alone.

It happened on an almost drowsy autumn day. I knew from that day onwards that fate had played a joke on me. Until then, I thought I was a wheel, spinning endlessly forward, never knowing where I was going, but at least making some progress towards the whirling future ahead - that's how I consoled myself. But later I realised that I was just spinning in circles. Everyone was spinning in circles. We are just tiny bolts in a ruthless socialist machine, and what's absurd is that we have accepted all the expectations imposed on us without reserve, beautified and idealized every single of them, and then carried them on our shoulders silently in a frenzy of anguish at our fragmented goals. The pain is like the bass line in the melancholy song of life, so imperceptible and obscure that we rather felt uneasy when this pain was suddenly brought to a standstill.

I was only vaguely aware of my mistake when I confronted my diagnosis. At the time, I seemed to be just expressionless, probably still thinking about my finals, maths tuition and the student council election, like a wound that had not yet gushed blood after a sudden stabbing. Back then, my world and I were operating like two separate islands, acquiescing to each other's existence, each functioning smoothly and orderly, because the grand machine simply didn't care about one little bolt. Until a small yet overwhelming piece of paper put me to a halt, killing the last seventeen years of me.

I read the words of the diagnosis line by line, carefully turning the pages, as if taking bites bit by bit, but only like a small child eating a biscuit, no matter how hard I tried, more pieces always fell to the ground than those I ingested. It was printed in my favourite colours, the black and white of keyboards, but why had it become so alien to me? The corpse of the printout lying in my hand was still slightly warm and emitted a vague aroma, a familiar smell that was as seductive and malignant as a poppy.

I heard a shrill howl echoing down the corridor, and looked around in perplexity through the membrane of tears before realising that it was coming out from my mouth. I had not experienced what the adults call "adolescence" - I was often seen as the quintessential model of precociousness and sanity - but ironically, the throes of youth, had sharply invaded my body on the eve of adulthood.



The piercing sirens slashed a bloody gash in the air. I couldn't see the numbness on the faces of my family, who seemed to have no choice but pretend to put on poker faces, because the next moment all the guilt and remorse was going to spill out from their eyes. This diagnosis might have robbed them of the last bit of motivation to maintain their plausible sanity and hypocrisy. How could this be? Perhaps it was at this time did they really begin to acquaint my eyes then, they would have seen the beast on the verge of death, an emotion I not felt for a long time, or rather never to crumble inside me, for it had long had stood on that infinite black sea I had relied on - had finally been illness, collapsing to ruins.

As I wailed, I started to laugh that there were enough abnormal would stop for one single was so dominating that it bolt in the social machine quantify the value of an combinations, without my withered life, intricate soul, until uprooted me from society. Society needs excretion - of a seventeen - be an excellent so fresh that it spying rain, and for a new batch of enter this eternal

insanely again. It was a good thing people in this place that no one patient. The voice of authority could remove any disobedient at will, or generously individual in numerical caring in the least about moth-eaten shell and the label of illness the flowerbeds of the is like man, it too and the soft breast year-old girl would fertiliser, her blood would be the first eager invitation newborn flowers to cycle.



A road comes to an end. The crumpled paper clutched in my hand carried me as I wandered out of this space that smelled of disinfecting water, and only one thought remained in my mind then: I could finally defy the odds. I could be reborn.



All the efforts I have made from childhood, as a teenager and up to the present day have been to avoid being a mediocre person.

My mother had an almost insane desire to manipulate me, with suffocating expectations acting as the strings of her puppet. As a child, I never realised that I was being held in chains named love, but it was only when people around me began to spontaneously alienate me did I become aware of the sword of Damocles hanging over my head. I was drowned in her profound familial love, and I was praised for my precocity. By the time I was a toddler, I was already sitting on the piano bench confronting Chelney and Kramex, sweat beading on my head, my neat nails quietly scratching on my arms, trying to impress my teachers and parents. I was desperate to play pretty, running recklessly barefoot the piano competitively while keeping my grades in the direction she had led me. Our happiness was built on music trophies, science fair ribbons and immaculate report cards. I thought this would give me the right to choose, or at least to be close to freedom, just a little bit closer - it turned out the greater the responsibility, the greater the responsibility. I understood how burdensome such an ability was, how they were neck, slowly and gently tightening

It was like boiling frog in warm water, gentle and numbing, and when I finally realised that I was imprisoned in the cage of others, I was so deep in the marsh that I could no longer pull myself out. It was too late, like my belated adolescence, when the emotion known as rebellion finally broke out after years of repression, bearing a malignant fruit. The care that I had relied on as a child from my mother had turned into a deadly poison. The reassuring voice that I had so longed for was not there to guide me at the fork in the road of my life, but instead forced me back onto the right track right after I had been prematurely rushed and made up my

mind to take a step.



Despite that the deafening sound had almost ruptured my eardrums, I could still hear the collapse of my broken heart.

# SAID THE VOICE: NO MORE PRACTICE!

Like an untimely and tempestuous applause followed immediately after the second movement of a piece. I looked back to the source of the sound and met the clock on the wall. Oh, an hour and eight to be the time I had to revise for my exams. To practise the piano. For someone who was any slight deviation was fatal. I stammered, phrases in my head, but before I could bullets of authority had rained down on me,

All for the bright future that will  
it's up to you to make it through. I  
other self in my heart, to the  
fought so hard to protect, the  
personality. It was the only  
amid the twilight of my life  
glows faintly, and a young  
inside. I meditated, wait until  
will free you. I continued  
three short, three long and

my mother's beady eyes. My eyes swept to seconds overdue, which was supposed yes, I was taking longer and longer being commanded to walk a tightrope, trying to organise the fragmented stammer out a complete sentence, the drenching me in blood.

eventually come. As for seeing it,  
believe in you. I spoke to my  
precious self that I had  
remnants of my mangled  
lighthouse I had left  
At such times, it always  
girl waves at me from  
the day it comes and I  
to count its flashes,  
three short.

Suddenly alarm bells went off in my mind.

"STOP PRACTISING THE PIANO BEFORE THE FINAL EXAMS. IT'S USELESS NOW SINCE IT'S ONLY COUNTED AS YOUR EXTRA-CURRICULAR. YOU SHOULD LEAVE NO STONES UNTURNED FOR YOUR FINALS." SUCH A SOFTLY SPOKEN PHRASE DISSIPATED INTO THE AIR ON THE TAIL OF MY ABRUPTLY ENDED NOTES, THAT FOR A MOMENT I THOUGHT I HAD MISHEARD IT. I COULDN'T HELP BUT SUBCONSCIOUSLY RESPONDED, WHAT? THE RISING TONE HOOKED HER WORDS THAT WERE ABOUT TO DRIFT AWAY.

SO SHE REPEATED IT AGAIN, IN A MORE IMPATIENT TONE. THIS TIME I HEARD IT CLEARLY, I UNDERSTOOD, CHEWED AND INGESTED EVERY SINGLE WORD, BUT TOGETHER IT BECAME DEFAMILIARIZED. MY UPPER AND LOWER LIPS FOUGHT AGAIN, SHIVERING, AND TENTATIVELY STAMMERED OUT A SENTENCE. BUT I THOUGHT YOU GAVE ME PERMISSION TO APPLY TO MUSIC CONSERVATORIES. THESE TWO WORDS WERE WORTH A THOUSAND POUNDS. MUSIC HAD BECOME MY ONLY SUPPORT IN MY MONOCHROMATIC LIFE, IT WAS MUSIC THAT FORMED THE BASE OF MY LIGHTHOUSE. WHO WAS THE PERSON IN FRONT OF ME TO TAKE MY LIFE AWAY FROM ME?

BY VIRTUE OF THE FACT THAT THIS NEXT MOMENT SHE DID SAY IT.

"I GOT MARRIED AND HAD TO WORK ME FROM ACHIEVING MY DREAMS," LOUD, "AND YOU'RE DIFFERENT. I HARD FOR YOUR DEVELOPMENT. YOUR PLANS, YOU'RE JUST DON'T WANT YOU TO BE LIKE A RESPECTED DOCTOR, A

EACH OF THESE WORDS HOBBY PLANNING, IMPOSED ON ME, I MORE OPTIONS THE RUNNING FROM ONE THE PROCESS.

AT THAT MOMENT I ME THAT I HAD NEVER AS MY MOTHER HAD FELT SOMETHING SMILE. UNUSUALLY

THE CORNERS OF LEFT THE ROOM,

LIFE IS MINE TO GIVE. IT WAS AS IF I HEARD HER SAY, AND THE

IN THE MOST MUNDANE JOB, AND MY HUMBLE BEGINNING DOOMED SHE GLAYED AT ME AS IF I HAD JUST CONTRADICTED HER OUT FOUND WAYS TO NURTURE ALL YOUR TALENTS. I'VE WORKED SO YOU'RE A PERFECT CHILD NOW, YOU CAN'T GO WRONG WITH MISSING THAT FINAL KICK." HER EYES GLINTED SHREWDLY. "I EVERYONE ELSE. YOU WANT TO EXCEL, TO BE DIFFERENT, TO BE LAWYER, A TEACHER."

SHOOK MY FALTERING MIND. DOCTOR, LAWYER, TEACHER? AFTER ACADEMIC PLANNING, NOW CAREER PLANNING? WITH EACH YOKE DESPERATELY TRIED TO CONVINCE MYSELF THAT I WOULD HAVE DAY I MADE IT ACROSS. BUT I NOW REALISED THAT I WAS JUST CAGE TO ANOTHER. I HAD LEARNED TO DISCIPLINE MYSELF IN

SUDDENLY FELT A STRANGE, OVERWHELMING FEELING RISE UP IN FELT BEFORE. THE WORD "ANGER" WAS STILL FOREIGN TO ME, ALWAYS SUPPRESSED ANY OF MY INTENSE EMOTIONS; I SIMPLY IN MY HEART BEGIN TO CRUMBLE AND DISINTEGRATE. A FLAWLESS BRIGHT "SURE, MOM."

MY STIFFENED MOUTH WERE STILL HIGH ON BOTH CHEEKS UNTIL SHE SLAMMING THE DOOR BEHIND HER.

How hard I wished I could also be comfortable enough to forget the melody and the long-entrenched muscle memory in my head, when such an attempt was destined to never end. It was as if my mind was an iron needle suspended by a thin wire, and what I was trying to forget was a strong magnet; I tried my best to turn the needle in another direction, but as soon as this effort slackened, the needle immediately returned to its original location. I slowly realised that I was used to thinking of music as a refuge from the world, of this piano in front of me as a last port of call. My mistake had been to be convinced that everything was as simple and pure as a monochromatic music score, that the well-tempered clavier would wipe away all the scars like a neat handkerchief, that the veiled beauty of impressionism would surely blur the sharp pain.

Why couldn't I immerse myself in the sea of exam papers and textbooks like my peers? Why couldn't I immerse myself in this bloodless hunger game with such fervour? Why couldn't I force myself to enjoy this process of unification and metamorphosis, to enjoy this mental yapping? Hadn't I always been a conformist, hadn't I always enjoyed the binary opposition established by the society, the winning and the losing, the killing and the surviving, "the survival of the fittest" - a slogan that virtually preempted all debate?

It wasn't until then that I realised how this sense of ambivalence ran through my life. To be compliant and docile, but also to have confidence and character. To paint compassionately, but also to calculate differential integrals and permutations meticulously. To be kind, to be righteous, but to fight in exams and trample the corpses of your opponents. It is true that this life is a tightrope walk, but how can a human being be a tightly woven machine? No matter how hard I tried to calculate, I could not come up with a solution. When I deviate at all - when I am finally no longer an emotionless machine - when I have even the slightest emotion that I can call love for something - it will be strangled in its infancy with a swift hand.

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## So what have I been doing with my life?

If all I had to do was listen to the and let the sheepdogs drive destination, I couldn't and I began to feel exhausted. It took all hold on to the last bit of and not become a complete machine, and now that little was desperately trying to maintain was sweet future that I envisioned. The sense I had always thought that the opposite was too naive. Its opposite was a flowing unknown, a hope that good days were ahead, wall of life gradually knocked me down and its last colour, with no difference whether I shut my eyes or not.

Yes, it is always harder to break open the door than to hide the fire inside your heart. My days were like endless nights, and I walked through them in a daze until the piece of diagnosis split my night like lightning.

words of authority  
me to a preset  
see the point  
overwhelmingly  
my strength to  
my individuality  
slave to the social  
bit of individuality that I  
dissipating along with the bitter-  
of nihilism slowly overwhelmed me.  
of depression was happiness, but I  
vitality, a curiosity about the  
despite the darkness of the present. The  
my monochromatic life was reduced to

I, m not really sure how she appeared. was  
afternoon in the corridor of the mental  
was it the day when my life was finally left  
darkness? Or was it one of those nights when I  
into the school piano room despite being  
playing? The only thing I know for sure is that  
lighthouse in my heart had collapsed.

One day I closed the  
considering how  
examined the  
termites due  
make me  
I yanked my  
crimson  
ambulance,  
on and off,  
all they

lid of the piano once  
ending my life now  
open window, the pane of which had all been gnawed by  
to disrepair, so that the heavy pull of reality could  
thump down onto the ground just by stepping on the frame.  
hair tied down, looking as normal as ever, as I imagined  
blood serpentineing, teachers panicking and calling the  
me being rushed into the operation room, lights coming  
doctors pushing open the door and sighing that they'd done  
could.

I  
pleasure  
head I saw  
me, as if

envisioned it that way, a little bit of long-lost  
even bubbling up in my heart. As soon as I turned my  
head sitting in a chair at the back of the room, examining  
she had been waiting for a long time.

it that  
hospital?  
with endless  
was sneaking  
banned from  
it was after the

again in a sneak, suddenly  
would be a good option. I

again in a sneak, suddenly  
would be a good option. I  
open window, the pane of which had all been gnawed by  
to disrepair, so that the heavy pull of reality could  
thump down onto the ground just by stepping on the frame.  
hair tied down, looking as normal as ever, as I imagined  
blood serpentineing, teachers panicking and calling the  
me being rushed into the operation room, lights coming  
doctors pushing open the door and sighing that they'd done  
could.

who are you? I asked warily. Being caught practising in secret was as humiliating as looking at the grade rankings posted around after a failed exam. Strangely enough, I couldn't see her face clearly. No matter how hard I tried to identify, I couldn't make out her features, only a vague hint of her long, slender hands. Maybe she played the piano too, I thought. No wonder, no one else comes to this place.

But if that was the case, why did I never know of a second person in this school who "screwed her future" to play the piano? I didn't have time to think about it before she spoke again.

It doesn't matter, she said. I have you to thank for freeing me.

I said, Thank you for what? I've ruined my own life, and probably my family's, and I don't know if I'll ruin anyone else's lives. You'd better stay away from me too, if you believe, like most of the idiots in this school, that mental illness is contagious. But I didn't put that out there. (Or did I?)

She looked like she couldn't help it, shuddering slightly and letting out a small string of giggles. I frowned at her, not understanding what she was laughing at.

You have two choices in front of you right now. Now listen to me, I know that making a choice is a very strange thing for you to do because you have been planned to the letter for the last seventeen years of your life.

BUT DO YOU REALLY NOT KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS? YES, A PART OF YOU IS DEAD, AND THAT'S WHY I'M HERE. (HEARING THIS I FEEL AN UNKNOWN FIXATION PINNING ME IN PLACE.) BUT AS LONG AS YOUR BODY EXISTS, YOUR SOUL WOULD GLOW ENDLESSLY, AND REBORN ENDLESSLY.

DON'T YOU WANT TO LIVE FOR YOURSELF FOR ONCE? SO FAR YOUR LIFE HAS BEEN ABOUT RUNNING FOR OTHER PEOPLE, I SUPPOSE. YOU NEVER REALISED

THAT THE PROTAGONIST OF THIS LONG RUN WAS YOURSELF, AND THAT THEY WERE ONLY WORTHY OF BEING AN ONLOOKER OR A CHEERLEADER. BUT YOU ARE NOT ALONE EITHER, THIS IS NOT JUST A LONG RUN - IT IS A RELAY. YOUR LIFE IS REBORN IN THE PASSING OF THE BATON AGAIN AND AGAIN. AND

I AM HERE TO BE YOUR FIRST BATON.

IN THE MIST OF THE MIST THAT SURROUNDS THE PERSON IN FRONT OF ME, I SEEM TO SEE HER SMILING FAINTLY AT ME.

YOU KNOW WHAT YOU HAVE TO DO - START PLAYING.

WHEN THE MUSIC FLOWS, THE UNDERCURRENTS BENEATH THE SURFACE BEGIN TO FLOW UNCONTROLLABLY.

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I'VE BEEN PLAYING, EXCEPT THAT WHEN A BEAM OF LIGHT PIERCED THE LONG NIGHT, THE DARKNESS INSIDE ME WAS DILUTED. IT REALLY HAD BEEN TOO LONG SINCE I HAD LAST PLAYED LIKE THIS.

"Happy birthday!" She said with a smile. "That's your best birthday song."

Something snaked down both cheeks, gradually moistening my hardened shell.



I hadn't realised until this moment that I had the ability to break away from the flock on my own terms, even though the brand had been so deeply engrained and corroded the flesh. I realised that my greatest fear was still an absurd death, that I would not like to die so imprudently and silently under resonant thunderclap rather than a faint

I realised that my greatest fear was still an absurd death, that I would not like the butcher's knife one morning, that I would like my departure to be a whimper vanishing in the whisper of wind.

I stand up, shivering slightly from breeze, my body as thin reflected in the piano, but full of power.

the my back pain, my fingers stiff and cold due to the morning and brittle as a damp soda biscuit. I was pale and haggard as I had never seen my eyes shine so brightly, so sadly, and yet so

In the last time, known at

moment when my fingers touched these keys again and for the I saw her face clearly, reflected in the piano. A face I had so well for seventeen - now eighteen years, the one who waved me from the lighthouse in my heart, and the one who was now entering this reborn.

The worn piano now sounded as crystal clear, each high note sounding like a diamond breaking, each phrase hitting me in the heart. Memories are flowing backwards, in the direction of my heart.


Hope burns through my body. Something bright grows in my heart and it wraps around me like a cloak. If my life were a film, the scene that had been shown for the past eighteen years would have been monochromatic, but here at the top of the stage, it was in colour, even the black and white keys were glowing with light and brilliance.

I could barely hold back my tears, but a smile appeared at the corner of my mouth. Eighteen years of struggle, agony, hysteria, and finally arrived at such a simple answer. My fingers dance across the keys, leaving behind all scores, rankings, expectations, all constraint, rationality, sanity. The constant tumbling of phrases propels me forward, hurtling way towards my rebirth.

all the

Then I flew off that note lingering in the air and dawn before the day falls.

lightly, that passionately. I ride the last embrace the last glimpse of this auroral

A person's hands are shown playing a piano. The piano is covered in a thick layer of colorful flowers, including orange, yellow, and pink dahlias. The background wall is covered with various framed pictures and documents. The lighting is soft and warm, creating a nostalgic atmosphere.

*The picture she saw in the frame was quite solemn. Except for the black and white colours of the piano, the music room was bombarded with bouquets of flowers. The colours were overwhelming, and even the piano bench and keys were covered with flower petals, like a layer of ink that would not fall off. Throughout my life, I had insisted to my parents and teachers time and time again that I should always keep the view of this place. No matter spring or winter, rain or shine, it was always dominated by black and white, without hue or purity, and I was submerged in it. Then the first time I could see colour in my life, was at dusk yesterday - she remembered.*

*She turned the photograph over and it read:*

*This is my rebirth.*

*She smiled slightly, not surprised, and suddenly felt carefree. She still had to go back to the classroom, still had to enter the social machine, and no one would remember that the bird had been here after it had flown away. But what does that matter? I had been transformed, reborn in the downpour of notes and the storm of colors. Replacing me, she will still witness the rebirth of this individual at every future point in her life, the breakdown, the questioning, the splitting, the struggle, the doubt, and finally, the rebirth of many more to come.*