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I have relinquished music, sex, and literature that misleads me to believe in needing things other than myself to encounter the most optimistic conditions for my flourishing. I am yet to decide if this is some sort of wisdom that comes with saying goodbye to young adulthood.

When I was a teenager living in Shanghai, I felt an intense romanticism for ruins—decaying houses of high colonial style, long abandoned, that were about to be torn down for real estate redevelopment in the former French concession. At the age of 15, I convinced myself that I had been born in the wrong generation, tragically untethered from the most glorious part of history. And my future had yet to arrive; its making, in the far horizon, on the edge of spiraling out of my control, ignored much of my input. I desperately wanted to be 35—I still do—as that age felt invested with agency and capacity for transformation. Far from being 35 in 2010, I shed many tears, dutifully following my unearned nostalgia and obsession with curbed potentials. Today, I have forgotten most of my teenagerhood, forced amnesia about the embarrassment of being overly affected. My psychoanalyst teaches me that freedom is located at the end of mourning, but I am yet to decipher the meaning of such forgetting and map it onto the processes of mourning. Today, I am well-adapted for judicating relations and trafficking affects, and my analyst suggests that I have the kinds of literature and cinema I used to consume—to compensate for my lateness to all pasts and futures—to thank for.

There is unfreedom in love and in revolt. My friend Jo, with her unique position of being a beautiful mother well-versed in the language of fortunes and expectations, theorizes that rebellious youth is a site of radical potentiality, saturated with cruel innocence (that will bite them back) and absorbed by uncaringly doing it for the love of the game. Jo once relayed to me that, living in New York, a city that engulfs one with a special speed of the everyday, she envies the careless youth, those who are not interested in the world and allow the world to bypass them. After all, being of concern to the world sometimes is a burden. I tried to push back, giving an account of how youth have not freedom, but the most authentic aura of freedom. Let them enjoy. Jo says, lovingly photographing their endless disappointments and hopes. Photography as the appearance of proximity, however the actual distance is.

I wonder what these teenagers Jo encountered twenty-something years ago are doing today. Have they completed the classic playbook, triumphing over parents they swore were no better than dead ones and regaining deferred obedience upon realizing family sometimes is the only fence against the naked world?

Qingyuan Deng is a writer and curator based between New York and Shanghai. Time, love, and mythologization constitute his medium.