

During a summer almost ten years ago, I became periodically obsessed with a set of public benches.

These benches have sat outside Shanghai Center and the Portman Ritz-Carlton Hotel on West Nanjing Road since the early 2000s. Two, three, or four in a group, they hug the trees by the pedestrian. They are hard not to notice. Their curved shape was probably intended to maximize utility at their time of making, but for the passers-by who feel tired and seduced to take a seat they also offer a promise of choice. You can either sit on the side facing the Shanghai Exhibition Center, or take the other side towards the hotel, which allows you to observe the tourists walking in and out of the luxury stores changing hosts at a speed parallel to seasons in fashion; it's either neoclassicism or neo-futurism.

Throughout that summer, I meticulously calculated my daily calorie intake, took long walks around the French Concession every morning and afternoon, and piously returned to the City Shop located on the B1 Floor of Shanghai Center for lunch salads, which I always consumed while sitting on one of those benches. With every bite of arugula and celery, my brain translated the crunch of those fibers and the smell of their juices into a euphoric signal of well-being, which was then digested, blended, and confused with the physical sensation of the back of my thighs against the bench, the color of its pale white surface, and the feeling of sweat oozing from every pore of my skin in the hot air.

After the summer, I moved to the States for school, and the benches stayed there.

Of course, the physical and psychological experience I am recounting here had, to some extent, to do with what was essentially an episode of self-imposed diet. But that does not make the experience less valid—not in the least. It belongs to a spectrum of diets and disordered eating that perhaps no one living in today's world is confident to say they are—and always will be—entirely immune to; health and well-being as a popular desire always gets exploited by the capitalist system before re-entering the market as seductive products and lifestyles. While that is all true, what really struck me in retrospect is how, in that summer marked by my feverish desire for physical transformation, the bench became something like an attachment. Facilitated by the smell, taste, and other sensations in those moments of intimacy, I came to embrace the bench as an object of desire which, through my return and attachment to it, offered me a sense of optimism in becoming what it promised.

As I returned to those benches for a visit the night I finished these lines, they had turned all rusty and were no longer in those groups as I remembered. I guess they too move in their own worlds, and at certain moments of chance, our worlds converge