

Six

By Charles Jian

It was, it is, it will be April 2nd, 2021. Time and tense don't matter really, since this is a place where time does not exist. No time means all time, I thought-think-will-think. I went-go-will-go out for a walk in the neighbourhood. The sky was-is-will-be grey, as the clouds strove-strive-will-strive to squish all of the blue out of the planet.

"I'm not grey," the clouds said-say-will-say, "'Tis called cloudy-grey."

"Just because you say 'Tis' doesn't make you Shakespeare." I replied-reply-will-reply slowly to the sky.

The pedestrians looked-look-will-look at me strangely, as if they were-are-will-be looking at Godzilla chewing gummy-bears: Scary, weird, but not life threatening.

"I probably look like a harmless, innocent psychopath to those pedestrians." I said-say-will-say to a maple tree on the sidewalk.

A carpet of green leaves speckled with black tars barely hooked-hook-will-hook onto the desiccated branches, swaying with the wind. Is it a tree? I wondered-wonder-will-wonder. If a tree must have-have-have-must-have-have green leaves, then what should we use-use-use to refer to a tree with leaves that were-are-will-be not green?

"The Form of Tree has green leaves, but no physical tree has leaves that are absolutely green," the clouds laughed-laugh-will-laugh at me, and said-say-will-say, "Your philosophy teacher just talked about this tomorrow."

I don't-didn't-like Plato because his name sounds like potato. I love potatoes, and I hate anything that tries to copy or mimic them. That was-is-will-be why I burned-burn-will-burn all books about him in my parents' bookshelf. The clouds stopped-stop-will-stop talking this time. I won-win-will-always-win the debate. Haha!

I walked-walk-will-walk a step closer to the tree, and the tree also jumped-jump-will-jump a step closer to me. We kept-keep-will-keep walking towards each other, until a loud and annoying noise pierced-p-w-p into my ears. My head just hit-will-hit the trunk of the tree.

"bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonnerronntuonnthunntrovarrho unawnskawntoohooorderenturnuk-----!!!"

I saw-see-will-see some white flash shooting down from the sky the moment before I hit-will-hit the tree...was-is-will--be it a tree? No, those clouds were-are-will-be wrong, as this thing in front of me was-is-will--be not a tree, but a trigger for flash and thunder. Since I could-can manipulate the environment so easily by hitting a tree, did-does-will-do this make me a God?

I didn't-don't know. I will---

"This is not an essay," she said after a deep and long sigh.

?

"You can't just type me three letters 'six' and say it's an entry for a writing contest."

Why not? For some reason, my English teacher is trying to prevent me from submitting an entry to the OutCite writing contest. What a confused logic she is using... 'You just can't'? I don't understand.

"You are supposed to give me pages of writing relevant to the topic. If it asks you to write something about 'the year after,' write something about that."

"This is about the year after," I said, still not getting the point that she's trying to communicate, "see, I wrote 'six' on the paper."

"So?"

"...6=2+0+2+2. Six represents 2022, which is next year. It also represents 1023, which was the year after Otto, Count of Savoy, was born. There are also many years with important events that this number represents, and these years are all very different from the year before them. Using one word, I can describe so many different years, each being 'the year after.'" I took a very deep breath, and continued my glorious speech, "I don't understand what problem you have with it. It's one of the greatest pieces of artwork in human history, I believe."

The faint light from the window disappeared, leaving a clear and bright shadow on the floor.

I went-go-will-go back from the past to the timeless place. I opened-open-will-open my eyes under the trunk that I hit-will-hit, started-start-will-start walking along the sidewalk. The clouds went-go-will-go away, convinced that they were-are-will-be defeated and wrong. They were-are-will-be. As I walked-walk-will-walk for another brief moment, approximately 365 days and 6 hours, another tree appeared-appear-will-appear in my sight. Well, this one indeed looked-look-will-look like a tree, I thought-think-will-think. It had-has-will-have green leaves made of tissue papers, and a brown trunk of used car tanks.

I loved-love-will-love tissue papers. The soft feelings that they gave-give-will-give were-are-will-be the true sensations of heaven. Trees should all be converted into tissue papers, I thought-think-will-think.

A loud and monotonous noise blared-blare-will-blare out from a car. The sound was-is-will-be sharp and metallic, spinning around liked-like-will-like a bullet---

I was-is-will-be shot. A police car emerged-emerge-will-emerge from thin air. The noise gradually disappeared-disappear-will-disappear, turning into a conical copper inside of my body. Air condensed-condense-will-condense outside of the car, forming a man with a pistol.

"What's that...?" I murmured-murmur-will-murmur like a piece of six.

"You're not a piece of six," the man said-say-will-say with a soft and comforting tone, "You are a criminal who cut down all the trees on earth for making tissues and paper towels. And by the way, my voice is not soft nor comforting, and I don't know what makes you think that way."

My consciousness started-start-will-start to fade as the beautiful green tree started-start-will-start to spin around me. Lime, pear, crocodile, pine... Leaves disappeared-disappear-will-disappear and reappeared-reappear-will-reappear every second, giving one new colour each time.

Air is the arche. Anaximenes was-is-will-be right. If one thing was-is-will-be in common, it was-is-will-be to be found in all the trees; it was-is-will-be air. Some trees had-have-will-have thicker trunks, some had-have-will-have larger leaves, but they all liked-like-will-like to fight each other, as if the discolouration of their leaves were-are-will-be caused not by fungus but by each other. Some trees refused-refuse-will-refuse to use chitinase against fungi, just like how some humans did-do-will-do not wear facemasks. Some others loved-love-will-love to digest insects though. A bright wheel of light also spun-spin-will-spin with them, 365 times around me. 365 of 365 of 365...cycling endlessly.

The clouds went-go-will-go back again, as another sharp noise, totally different yet surprisingly familiar to before, broke-break-will-break into the pandemonium of silence.

And---

“husstenhasstencaffincoffintussemtosemmdamandamnacosaghcusaghhobixh atouxpeswchbechoscashlcarcarcaract-----!!!”

I sat up in a white-sheeted bed. Everything in the room was white: the ceiling, the walls, the desks and the chairs. Surrounded by a subtle smell of antiseptic, I suspected that I was in a hospital. I tried to remember what happened: debating with my English teacher that morning, arrested the afternoon for hitting a tree with my head...then a police car came to send me to the station, but it crashed with a truck, and my consciousness then shut down.

“...A police officer has shot...” lethargically, I found a radio next to the bed, one with a grey top and green sides. The sound was fuzzy despite the clear azure sky. Next to the radio was a note with a vigorous calligraphy.

“Oh!” a woman with a brown blazer opened the door---my mother.

“It’s been a year now...!” she cried, surprised with joy. She said that I was unconscious in the hospital for a year, and excitedly told me about all the events that happened during the year.

Familiar. I started to remember the dream that I had before I woke up: the one with clouds, trees, and everything. All the events in the “real” world also happened as abstractions in my dream. It was a dream of the year 2021, a gallery of human history, a map of the world, and a gate connecting illusions and reality. Douglas Adams said the answer to the universe is 42---I say it’s 6. $4+2=6$. Both necessary.

The hospital room was both a nutshell and the universe. I was bound in the small space for a year, seemingly unaware of the outside---yet I also knew it all through my dream.

What is a year? What is after? Is time real, or just illusion?

A year is neither a real object nor just an abstract measure. Before and after are of the same origin, but after indeed has its uniqueness. The difference between

reality and illusion is vast, yet they are all one in nature. The way up is the way down is one and the same. Air is the arche; Fire is the arche. Some call it Dao.

“By the way, what did you do to your English teacher? She seems kind of strange since that day.”

“Well, I showed her this.”

I looked towards the window and pointed at it. It was white, but its frame was poorly painted. My mother turned her eyes towards it.

Silence.

Outside of the window was the sky. Clouds, thunder, and flashes were all present. It was-is-will-be there: it can become clouds, thunder, flash, air, fire, and even the year after.

It is the year after, but it is also much more than the year after. I call it six.