ILLUSTRATED SHORT FICTION

明天的化石

Fossils of Tomorrow

地底的石頭藏著可能發生的未來。人們燒掉它們，換取今天的電。

人們在地底挖到一種石頭，稱為「前石」。觸碰它，就能看見某件可能發生的事。保留石頭，事情仍有機會發生；燒掉它，那一種未來便永遠消失，同時釋放能量。人們先拿不願遭遇的未來當燃料。後來，城市越來越需要電，連看不懂內容的前石也被送進爐裡。沒有人知道，他們每天究竟燒掉了多少東西。

People mine stones called pre-stones. Touch one and you can glimpse an event that might happen. Keeping it leaves that possibility open; burning it releases energy and makes that particular future impossible. At first, people burned futures they feared. As the city needed more power, it began burning stones whose contents no one understood. No one knew how much was being lost each day.

保留，只留下可能。燃燒，就永遠失去其中一種。



01 把明天燒成電

沈禾是供電爐的工程師。每天，她看著運礦車把前石送進城市，再核准燃燒。爐火供應街燈，也供應醫院。內容能被看懂的石頭，有人願意付錢保留；看不懂的，就被列為「空白」。沈禾一直把它們當作最便宜的燃料。

Tomorrow Fuels Today

Shen He is an engineer at a power furnace. Each day, ore cars bring pre-stones into the city, and she authorises their burning. The furnace powers streetlights and hospitals. If a stone reveals a future someone understands, they may pay to keep it. Unrecognised contents are classified as blank. Shen He has always treated those stones as the cheapest fuel.



02 女兒的一種未來

沈禾的女兒杏生病了，需要供氧設備。醫院保管的一塊前石，讓她們看見長大的杏坐在火車窗邊，身上沒有管線。沈禾每月付費，避免這塊石頭被燒掉。它無法治病，也不保證康復；她只是捨不得失去看見過的那一種希望。

One Possible Future for Xing

Her daughter Xing is ill and needs oxygen equipment. A pre-stone held at the hospital shows an older Xing at a train window, without any tubes. Shen He pays each month to keep it from the furnace. It cannot cure Xing or guarantee her recovery. Her mother cannot bear to lose this particular hope.



03 石殼外的細根

礦工羅在最深的「空白層」敲開一塊前石。白色細根已經伸出石殼，纏住他的手套，緩慢收縮。沈禾原以為，前石只能讓人看見未來。但眼前的根真的碰到了羅。她立刻關掉切割器，伸手觸摸石頭，想知道根從哪裡來。

Roots Outside the Stone

Deep in a blank stratum, the miner Luo cracks open a pre-stone. White roots extend from its shell, catch his glove and slowly contract. Shen He thought these stones only let people see possible futures. Yet these roots are physically touching Luo. She switches off the cutter and touches the stone to find out where they come from.



04 被叫作空白的生命

她看見一座沒有人的森林：樹冠像肺，微小生物沿著礦脈交換光與水。那些細根來自這裡。分類系統認不出這種生命，才把整片石層叫作空白。沈禾明白，繼續燃燒，就會讓這個世界失去發生的機會；而它的根，已經開始碰到今天。

The Life Classified as Blank

She sees a forest without people. Its canopies resemble lungs; small organisms exchange light and water along mineral veins. This is where the roots come from. The classifier cannot recognise such life, so it labels the whole stratum blank. Burning it would make this possible world impossible, even as its roots have begun touching the present.



05 停爐也會傷害人

沈禾翻查檔案，發現許多燃燒許可都是自己簽的。她要求停爐。主管傅工指著電網圖：杏的供氧設備、其他病人的治療，也靠這座爐供電。立刻停下，眼前的人會先受傷。她帶走一塊未知生命的標本，卻還沒有找到讓醫院繼續運作的辦法。

What a Shutdown Would Cost

In the archive, Shen He finds her own signature on many burning permits. She demands a shutdown. Chief Fu points to the grid: Xing's oxygen equipment and other patients' treatment depend on this furnace. Stopping immediately would harm people already here. She takes a specimen of the unfamiliar life, but has no plan yet to keep the hospital running.



06 救走一塊還不夠

她和羅把標本藏上運礦列車，打算帶它離開採場。快到岔道時，羅停住了。他的兒子也在那座醫院。救走這一塊，下一車仍會被燒；直接停爐，兩個孩子都可能失去照護。沈禾放開逃生梯，轉身走向車頭。她得留下來，把停爐的方法做完。

Saving One Stone Is Not Enough

She and Luo hide the specimen aboard an ore train, planning to leave the quarry with it. At a junction, Luo stops. His son is in the same hospital. Saving one stone will not stop the next load from burning; shutting down without preparation could endanger both children. Shen He lets go of the escape ladder and heads toward the engine. She needs to stay and make a shutdown possible.



07 過渡期間，要燒什麼

他們搬出舊電池，找人操作備援設備。接妥以前，這座爐還得供電。傅工提議先用完車上的燃料，再停爐。沈禾卻已無法把「空白」當成沒有代價。她取回杏的保管盒，向女兒說明：可以繼續燒那些未知的石頭，也可以交出她們一直保留的這一塊。

What Will Power the Transition

They bring out old batteries and recruit people to operate backup equipment. Until it is connected, the furnace must keep supplying power. Fu suggests using the fuel already on the train before stopping. Shen He can no longer treat blank as costless. She retrieves Xing's stone and explains the choice: keep burning the unknown stones, or give up the one they have held back.



08 把決定交還給杏

杏最後看了一次火車窗邊的自己。她問：「燒掉這塊，我就一定好不了嗎？」沈禾說：「我們會失去這一種未來。其他的，我不知道。」杏同意用它支撐最後的切換，又說：「要記得，這是我們選的。」沈禾把石頭送進爐裡，隨後關閉進料閘門。那一幕康復的未來，從此不會發生。

Xing Makes Her Choice

Xing looks once more at herself by the train window. 'If we burn it, does that mean I can never get well?' she asks. 'We lose this particular future,' Shen He says. 'I don't know the others.' Xing agrees to use it for the final transition. 'Remember that we chose this,' she adds. Shen He feeds the stone into the furnace, then closes the feed gate. The recovery shown in that scene will never happen.



09 停爐以後的照護

醫院切換到備援。有人搬電池，有人輪班操作設備，傅工也來接手。杏度過了停機，病仍需要治療。沈禾再也看不到火車窗邊的那個未來；其他可能還沒有答案。她坐到床邊，檢查女兒的氧氣。她們交出一種希望，也仍得把今天過下去。

Care After the Furnace Stops

The hospital switches to backup. People carry batteries and take turns operating equipment; Fu joins them. Xing survives the shutdown, but still needs treatment. Shen He can no longer see that future at the train window. Other possibilities remain unknown. She sits beside the bed and checks Xing's oxygen. They have given up one hope, and still have today to live through.



10 留下生命，也留下問題

春天，一小段採場停止開採，成為保留地。標本被放回石層，杏坐著輪椅記錄細根的變化。那些根，和最初纏住羅手套的一樣，正慢慢伸進周圍的土地。沈禾扶著畫板。她們讓這種生命留下來了，也得開始學習，如何與它共同生活。

Room for Life and Its Consequences

In spring, a small part of the quarry becomes a reserve. The specimen is returned to the strata, and Xing records the changing roots from her wheelchair. Like the roots that first caught Luo's glove, they are slowly extending into the surrounding ground. Shen He steadies the drawing board. They have made room for this life; now they must learn how to live beside it.

餘波

WHAT REMAINS

一年後，其他採場仍在開採。城市偶爾停電，醫院的治療費也沒有下降。杏還需要氧氣，沈禾仍不知道女兒會不會康復。她們繼續記錄保留地的變化。一天清晨，羅發現白根穿過鐵網，爬上了停用的軌道。他叫來沈禾。她們救下的生命，已經走出了替它劃定的地方。接下來如何相處，還沒有人知道。

A year later, other quarries are still operating. The city still has outages, and hospital bills have not fallen. Xing still needs oxygen; Shen He does not know whether she will recover. They keep recording changes in the reserve. One morning, Luo finds white roots passing through the fence onto the disused track. He calls Shen He over. The life they spared has crossed the boundary they drew for it. No one yet knows how they will live together.

