

FENG

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A TEMPORARY MIND

Throughout the past few and fleeting years of my adolescent life, I have witnessed the evolution and change in my perceptive growth and intellectual being. Something I've found interesting is that change begins with death; just like a habit or memory must fade before the birth of something new takes place. At birth I was given the name *Li Feng*, which means *phoenix* in Chinese. The phoenix is the bird of fire and power that recycles its own life. When the phoenix recognizes its impending death, it consumes itself in flames and is reborn from the ashes, transformed, and bearing even more power than before. Thus this cycle continues. While *Li Feng* is now my middle name, I have traced the significance of the name throughout the course of my life in hopes that I can discover a relationship between the fiery phoenix and the young adult that I'm growing up to be. In many cultures, the phoenix is the metaphor that represents the transformation of the human soul and conscious growth.

Two and a half years ago, I got a severe concussion that I believe signaled the "death" of the first seventeen years of my life. A death does not mean that a series of memories will be forgotten or disregarded, a death is a realization that allows the mind to retrieve awareness, find cognitive balance, and tell a new story - a story that is developed from events and lessons of the past. In this painting installation, the box formation represents how I felt during my concussion - I felt trapped inside a box, the walls closing in around me. When standing in the box, it's the allusion of the phoenix wrapping its wings around you. The objects woven into the wings are symbols that relate to myself and my life from the past seventeen years. I did not realize it at the time, but the phase of my concussion signaled the death of the phoenix as well as the growth of the newly born phoenix, hence why I painted the phoenix emerging from the flames.

The end of a phase is usually a good thing, even if it means there's loss involved, it also signals that growth is imminent. While the impact of the concussion forced me to sacrifice familiarity, it taught me to adapt a new awareness to my mind. I can see and understand the relevance and reflection *Feng* has in my life which I think is interesting since I was given the name *phoenix*. The phoenix is the symbol of perceptual evolution to remind people that everything is temporary. The rising of the phoenix symbolizes that a person will experience hard times, but that they conquered and survived. The span of existence is composed of many births and deaths in which a person can develop their own unique perspective on life and their creative processes and endeavors. Choice is the freedom that allows the phoenix (us) to live an immortal life, constantly growing stronger and replacing the old with the new. My project is to stand as a representation of the first phase of my life as it is being consumed by future phases that are approaching. I believe the phoenix is a symbol that everyone should consider and remember, especially during times of hardship. Life will always rule over death, but death is necessary to stimulate growth in life.

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Feng

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This work explores the relationship between the mythological phoenix bird and personal events that I have experienced in my life. I was given the name Li Feng at birth, Feng meaning phoenix. A symbol of death, transformation, and rebirth, the phoenix is a powerful figure in many cultures. This fiery bird represents the growth and change of the human mind - awareness, balance, and sacrifice are the prominent features that are represented within the legend of the phoenix. I have observed the relevance of the phoenix in accordance to my life and have witnessed the death and resurrection of Feng. I've learned that a death of a phase can bring more good than bad, and especially bear more hope and confidence for the future. I am curious in studying the phoenix because I believe that it is a significant symbol that will help me understand the evolution and conscious growth of my own life and mind.

I. risen

Sparks die; the dominating flames settle to a mere flicker here and a flicker there, among the ink black patches of coal and dying embers. It is the beginning of another end to a revolution. Underneath, in some place vast, norms are forgotten, new stories are being told, an original era is being formed. From the ashes rises the rebirth, renewal, and longevity of *Feng*: the phoenix - transformed, resurrected, and very much alive.

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At birth, I was given the name Li Feng. While it is now my middle name and has been for seventeen years, I have traced the significance of the name throughout the course of my life thus far and witnessed how the symbol stands important and true to who I am. In Chinese, *Feng* means *phoenix*<sup>1</sup>. The phoenix is the bird of fire and power that recycles its own life. After living for several hundred years, the phoenix recognizes its impending death and consumes itself in flames. It is then reborn from the ashes, transformed, and bearing even more power and confidence than ever before. Thus this cycle continues. The phoenix is a metaphor that represents the transformation of the human soul and conscious growth. Each individual must undergo multiple life chapters, lessons, and deaths in order to accomplish what they want out of life. When we fall into a deep hole and fear or hopelessness is barricading the way out, we have the choice to die a weak death or forge on and prevail - this is the phoenix inside, sensing its imminent death. The truth is that we don't have a choice; confidently or cowardly, we will make it out alive, but gaining strength and confidence in the process - this is represented through the phoenix igniting itself into a blazing flame. From the ashes of the past, surfaces a new person who is more conscious, matured, and transformed - the newly born phoenix that is re-emerging from the dwindling flame and embers. It is said that this process is inevitable and unavoidable in a person's creative endeavors. Death is not always physical, for the ego will experience many deaths in one lifetime.

The phoenix not only represents the rebirth of a new life and ideas but change in perspective. A person will always hold a certain consciousness, but what contrasts one person's awareness to the next is the lens or filter they use to perceive experience. The level or dimension of awareness will differ among the individual, but for everyone, there is always room for improvement and change. This is the change in perspective that will come with the resurrection of *Feng*. The phoenix documents the growth of a person's mindset and the choices they make in which filter they choose to view the world through. Perception falls on the individual's responsibility to recognize that a personal perspective is a form of independence and creativity. This is the foundation of the mythology of the phoenix - the evolution of the human mind.

The phoenix is a significant symbol that I hold onto and reference, not just because it was the name given to me, but because I can see and understand the relevance and reflection it has in my life. The rising of the phoenix symbolizes that a person will experience hard times, but that they conquered and survived. The span of existence is composed of many births and deaths in which a person can develop their own unique perspective on life and their creative processes and endeavors. Choice is the freedom that allows the phoenix (us) to live an immortal life, constantly

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<sup>1</sup> origin: from Old French *fenix*, via Latin from Greek *phoinix* 'Phoenician, reddish purple, or phoenix.'

growing stronger and replacing the old with the new. I am studying the mythology and philosophy of the phoenix in hopes that it will help my understanding of my life and the cycle of my mind. Risen from the flames that devoured the past, the phoenix represents the victory of life over death, as well as the human mind and spirit.



## *11. born: a death*

### *a narrative*

I remember the hollow sounds of the rubber making contact with the hard maple-wood gym floor: *slap slap slap* ! the echoing reverberations bouncing off the walls and rafting in the ceiling. It was an environment that made my muscles tense and my heart clench up into a knot; it made me flinch every time one of those balls landed close or whipped overhead, skimming the heads of everyone in the room. I am not afraid to admit it: I am now, after the incident, deathly terrified of sports that involve flying balls and unwatched and uncontrolled kids. Orchestrated solely by the performers, the scene was a depiction of a rogue circus:

*Forced to play, I stand in the middle of the court, supposedly in the rowdy game of basketball, but I'm not actually participating. I avoid eye contact with the keeper of the ball so that I won't be passed to and expected to toss it on or worse, take a shot. I timidly trail behind the players on the outskirts, not wanting to get caught in the fray. It's becoming a rough tackle for the ball, and people are getting aggressive. I watch the substitute teacher on the sidelines. She's talking and laughing with another teacher, not giving one ear or eye to the game that's escalating in chaos (and danger). Someone chucks the ball straight into the air, aiming for nothing in importance; it smacks the metal rafters with a loud clang and pummels to the floor. Laughter erupts. People whiz around the room throwing the balls, not heeding those who do not wish to be in the line of danger<sup>2</sup>. I begin to feel uncomfortable and a bit bored. It is no longer a game of basketball, but a game of who can throw the ball the furthest across the gym. I wince at the deafening sounds of the hoots and hollers of the rambunctious group, for this new "game" stirs the players up even more. Somehow there are more basketballs on the court than there are people. I zone out and blurrily watch the "fun". Even though I'm dead smack in the middle of the gym, I feel like a spectator observing the scene from a distance. I trace the balls flying overhead with my eyes. I'm feeling a bit nervous, but not claustrophobic yet. Even still, there is no way out of the frenzy. I know that I will dodge a ball if it comes my way.*

They say everything happens for a reason. If someone had told me that during the early stages of my concussion, I would have cried out in confusion and frustration. Unfortunately, I was not able to extend my attention in a full three-sixty around me in that gym; it was just my (bad) luck I got in the way of one of those flying basketballs out on the court<sup>3</sup>. The strangest

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<sup>2</sup> However, danger did not occur to me in the moment. I only say that because I know now I should have sensed the flashing red danger signs. It was a situation that made me not so much frightened, but anxious. I was definitely alert to the flying basketballs around me, but I was more concerned about my lack of physical competence.

<sup>3</sup> The incident happened in the beginning of October at the start of freshman year. I was in PE class and unlucky for me, I became the accidental target of a flying basketball which not only knocked my head, but knocked me out of the first half of freshman year.

parts were the events following the accident. It was impossible to discern how hard of a hit I got from the basketball since the doctor could not look directly inside my brain. I did not fall down or blackout on the court. I did not even develop a nasty bruise or any such marking on my face<sup>4</sup>. At first, the doctors believed the physical trauma was only minor, for my symptoms were very slight in the beginning. But then days turned into weeks which turned into months of lying in a dark room, alone with only my thoughts as company.

*October. I spend ninety percent of my time sleeping most days now. Even when I'm not asleep, I'm still lying in my very dim lit bedroom, eyes resting or staring at the ceiling. Any kind of light or noise will shatter my brain, I can feel the pain even in the dark. Boredom would be an understatement, I just feel empty. Somehow I am exhausted; my brain feels drained like I've been working for hours and hours on an Algebra test. Thoughts should drift in and out of the mind naturally, but it takes mental effort to be able to focus and comprehend a thought, let alone multiple at one time. The gears in my brain have shut down and fatigue has even spread to the rest of my body. I have no appetite, and not just for food, I don't even feel the need to be entertained by my favorite TV show or music playlist. Time is nothing to me now. I can picture myself lying here forever, enveloped in darkness.*

I really do not remember the first month of my concussion, but I know it consisted of sleep and the occasional eating<sup>5</sup>. I do recall feeling physically and mentally exhausted more than anything. My body felt like I had run a thousand mile marathon; my head soon adjusted to the headaches and dizziness that did not let up. Physical pain consumed most of my body; it wasn't until later I realized it would be my mental and emotional state of mind that would take the longest to heal. Time became a distorted unfamiliar face that I could not recognize; it did not exist to me. While the temporary damage to my brain would mend itself, my mind fell into a trance. For all I knew, it could have been four seasons or four weeks that had passed. I did not see daylight or witness the red landscape fade to brown outside. I did not see anyone or any place other than my parents, closest friends, and the inside of my house. Thanksgiving came and went. The days ticked by, but my recovery was still a slow ascent.

*December. Even though I cannot be exposed to the blinding sunlight for too long, I am now able to stand up and slowly walk around the house. Unfortunately, despite the sunny days, the bitter cold and the three feet of snow blocking both the front and back porch doors limit me from the outdoors. But while my head may feel better, my mentality has shut down. Hibernation has made my mind groggy and lifeless. My thoughts have become bare and frozen icicles, like the ones hanging outside the windows. I am not even slightly excited that I'm on the road to recovery because the truth is that I feel more dead than alive inside than before. My mind has been torn open and exposed, it's shivering in the cold and recoiling from the sunlight. My senses are turning numb. Emotions are washed away and I'm left with nothing. I would rather feel any type of emotion - anger, sadness, envy - than pure nothingness. I am still a living and breathing human being, but my spirit has been stripped away from my body like there's a distance between me and the earth. Feeling nothing is the most pain I've experienced during these last couple of*

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<sup>4</sup> While the basketball technically hit my head, it hit my head on a diagonal which got part of the right half of my face and my cheekbone. I, and the doctors are still baffled to why I showed no sign of visible injury since basketballs are hard and unforgiving objects.

<sup>5</sup> My mother fills in most of the blank gaps for me today.

*months. It's worse than the headaches, worse than the physical throbbing when exposed to light or sound, worse than the thought that I will be a good four months behind in my life when I fully recover. Numbness is not when you sit on your foot for too long and your foot falls asleep. Numbness has no tingling sensation. Being numb is hollow and empty. It's like drifting in space. There's nothing I can do except wait. But the question is, wait for what?*

Something I find interesting is that change begins with death; just like a habit or memory must fade before the birth of something new takes place. The end of a phase is usually a good thing, even if it means there's loss involved, it also signals that growth is imminent. However, it took me until now, three years after the incident, to understand the meaning and importance of time and change.

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111. inside

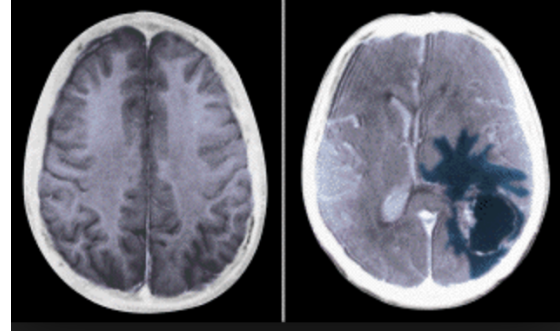
Sparks die; the dominating flames settle to a mere flicker here and a flicker there, among the ink black patches of coal and dying embers. It is the beginning of another end to a revolution. The flames that devoured my life in the winter of 2015 did subside. It took vast amounts of strength and exercises to rebuild and refuel my brain so that I was able to concentrate, analyze and comprehend information, and feel “normal” once again⁶. Regaining my balance in order to walk was the most frustrating process. Everytime I stood up I would have to clutch onto my surroundings to stop the world from tilting and falling away from me. It was the sensation of spinning uncontrollably fast on a tilt-a-whirl. All I could do was hang on and have patience. A concussion will affect each and every person in a different physical and psychological way. Depending on the blow, some people will only experience minor short-term effects while others will undergo a process that can take a year to fully heal. In some cases, the repercussions can still affect a person years later, though usually mentally/emotionally not physically. Returning into the “real” world from my bubble was a jolt back into reality. I shy away from change, but I'm always able to adapt to a new environment and routine quickly. However, that was not the case after my concussion. My self-confidence, sociability, and outwardness plummeted. Upon returning to school, it was hard to take people's sympathy because I felt as if no one could truly understand the roller coaster ride I had just experienced. It was not easy hearing things like, “Oh my gosh I am so sorry, that sounds awful!” or “Well I'm glad you're back now, you look all better!” Of course I appreciated their concerns, but I also felt completely misunderstood. I realized people did not actually know what a concussion is and the lasting effects it can have on a person's mentality. A concussion is caused by the impact of the hit:

Concussions occur as the result of a traumatic blow to the head that causes the head and brain to move rapidly back and forth in a whiplash-like fashion. The sudden movement

⁶ I religiously and rigorously worked with an occupational therapist on a weekly basis to help with brain strengthening exercises. When I was better enough to start being active again, I immediately wanted to jump right back into school and my daily routine for fear that I had already missed out on four to five months of my life. However, I soon learned that the recovery process didn't quite work that way. My brain was physically and mentally not able to sit down and process information. I had to take very little steps. Twenty minutes of doing homework here, reading ten pages from a book there, and regaining my balance.

causes the brain to bounce and twist around inside the skull, stretching and damaging the delicate cells and structures inside your brain. This damage can cause physical and chemical changes in your brain to affect how it functions. (Concussions)

A concussion cannot be seen. If I had gone out in the world when I was still concussed, heads would not have turned in my direction. It's not like I had sprouted a third ear, there is no visible bruise or fracture. The brain sits enclosed and protected by the skull. When a person gets a traumatic blow to the head, the brain sloshes around inside the skull damaging neurons that, while they can recover from the injury, cannot be fully restored. Concussions become severe when the inflammation of the brain continues to increase to the point when the neurons die and the brain cannot compensate for the wrecked tissue. While the brain can function with the loss of some of the neurons, they're gone forever and the damage will leave a permanent scar (Jacobson)⁷. I remember my occupational therapist explaining to me that a person who gets elbowed in the head can have as just a serious concussion as a soccer player who gets hit in the head with a soccer ball. What causes the physical trauma or disturbance to the brain is the angle at which the blow hits the head and how it causes the brain to "bump" up against the skull walls. Concussions can actually be quite easy injuries to get, however, it's the long-term effects on the mind and behavior that can be influential.



The psychological after-effects of such an injury vary extensively from person to person and depends on how severe the actual impact was. Just like a concussion, I soon learned that depression did not have a face either. A smile or laugh is the master of disguise. I became highly adept and used to faking a grin while inside, my mind was screaming. Thrown back into the fray, I was confused with how to go about my life and my priorities. I had done nothing for four months straight. I struggled to pick up where I left off in my life because everyone around me was far ahead in their own lives. During this recovery transition, I became very aware of my actions and motives in order to regain confidence. This was the rebirth of *Feng* and change in my perspective. I realized that in order to become satisfied with my life once again I needed to focus solely on the "want" to get better which required me to have an objective mindset, dedication, and patience. I see this as being the ascent of the phoenix inside me. The rising of the phoenix symbolizes that a person will experience hard times, but that they conquered and survived. Even today, I have not fully regained what I lost three years ago. The legend of the phoenix is one of the myths that expresses what the human ego must undergo in order to accomplish creative endeavors. The stronger a desire is, the harder one must psychologically exert themselves. I've learned that transformations are not quick nor clean - they take time, endurance and work that only I can make happen.

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<sup>7</sup> The picture to the right shows what the brain looks like enclosed in the skull before and after a concussion. In the first image, the neurons are healthy looking and "normal", while in the next image, there is a distinct dark blueish patch and the brain has a strange faded look to it.



## *IV. fire*

From the ashes rises the rebirth, renewal, and longevity of *Feng*: the phoenix - transformed, resurrected, and very much alive. The concussion signaled the death of the first fifteen years of my life. A death does not mean that a series of memories will be forgotten or disregarded; I had some of the best memories in my life during those years<sup>8</sup>. A death is a realization that allows the mind to retrieve awareness, find cognitive balance, and tell a new story - a story that is developed from events and lessons of the past. The rising of the phoenix signifies the growth and experience of perception. Awareness will never change; it's how a person will perceive awareness and use it to build a creative foundation. Our awareness is the ability to choose the lens we view the world through - if we are perceptive to the change in filters, then growth will be inevitable. The mythology of the phoenix represents this psychological process.

The transformation of the phoenix is also the symbol of sacrifice and balance. Because something must be destroyed in order to make room for change, there will be loss. My loss was time and everything in between that I couldn't immediately make up - confidence, happiness, and appreciation. In Chinese culture, the phoenix actually refers to not one bird, but one phoenix and one dragon that are united. This phoenix is called *Fenghuang*, *feng* the male and *huang* the female. Together, they represent the yin yang which symbolizes balance and trust. After my concussion, not only was it physically crucial to regain balance once again, but become emotionally stable. For the past three years, I've felt like I've been staggering along on a tightrope, swaying from side to side and at times, almost falling off. But in the process, I've learned that balance is the key to reestablishment. The yin yang describes how contrasting forces may actually be complementary and interdependent on one another. This is how I picture my life before and after the concussion. While the impact of the concussion forced me to sacrifice familiarity, it taught me to adapt a new awareness to my mind.



## *V. a temporary mind*

*It begins with a death  
An end  
A flame.*

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<sup>8</sup> Exploring Maine's beautiful rocky coast in the summers, traveling with my family, backpacking out west, warm summer nights with friends on the lake, going to my school (I actually really enjoyed school from K-8), my niece being born, and many many more memorable times.

*Shattered fears,  
Let it fade away.  
The ego has levels, dimensions, planes,  
Interpretations may vary  
But awareness will never change.  
Risen from the embers and  
Born from the fire,  
The conscious growth of the mind,  
The victory of  
Life over death.  
From the ashes of the past  
A renewed era is formed;  
It spreads its wings and  
Soars.  
Feng,  
Bearing power and confidence,  
Balance and sacrifice,  
The phoenix is transformed.  
A story never told,  
A tale never ending.  
Feed your desire,  
Feed it with the fire.*



The phoenix is an immortal being and thus will bear an infinite amount of births and deaths - it will never cease in growing stronger. Unbounded by its spirit, the phoenix is an individualistic figure which makes its metaphor so significant in many cultures. To me, the phoenix is the symbol of perceptual evolution. There is not a start or finish line in the process of developing awareness and a creative mindset, for everyone will experience change at different times in a variation of different ways. However, each person will undergo their own transformations in life and discover personal perspective. These are the qualities that shape a person's mindset - experience and change - and that define the rising of the phoenix. The phoenix is a reminder that life is brief and that fleeting moments will eventually die in order to make room for new stories and memories to unfold. Life will always rule over death, but death is necessary to stimulate growth in life.

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