Peter Bo Zhang
Excerpt from *Between Glass and Code*
Winner, 2026 RBC/PEN Canada New Voices Award

Between Glass and Code

I have been thinking about glass: its quality of appearing to be nothing while being something, of letting you see while preventing you from touching. What I've been thinking about is what glass teaches. The posture it trains you into. You learn it young, if someone takes you to the right building, and you carry it with you into rooms that have no glass at all but still operate on the same principle: you may look, you may be moved, you may come back as often as you like, but the terms of the encounter are not yours to set.

The question I keep returning to is not whether institutions take. It is how they teach you to feel about the taking. How the feeling comes to seem like your own. And how that training, once internalized, extends well past the institution that began it.

I should say at the outset: I am writing this on a machine that runs on the principle I'm describing. The irony is not lost on me. It is, in fact, the subject.

My father brought me to the British Museum when I was eight. We'd come from Hangzhou to London because he believed a child should see the place where Chinese history had been collected, preserved, and—though he wouldn't have used this word—arrested. He is a journalist. He speaks in sentences that arrive already edited, which I say as an observation but am beginning to understand as an inheritance. On the train from Edinburgh he read the Guardian with his glasses on his forehead while I fogged the window and drew characters in the condensation that vanished before I could finish them. I remember one: 家, jiā, home. Dissolving as the train passed through a tunnel.

At one point he looked up from an article about repatriation claims (I know this now; I didn't know the word then) and said, "You should see what they've done with our things."

Our things. I didn't yet know the weight of that pronoun. But the phrase enlisted me in an anger I hadn't earned. He was recruiting me. Not cynically. He loved me, and this was how he loved: by making the wound legible, by editing the pain into a sentence clean enough to carry on a train, through customs, into a life lived in a language that wasn't the one the wound was in. His gift to me was a grievance I could hold without bleeding. That is also a kind of glass.