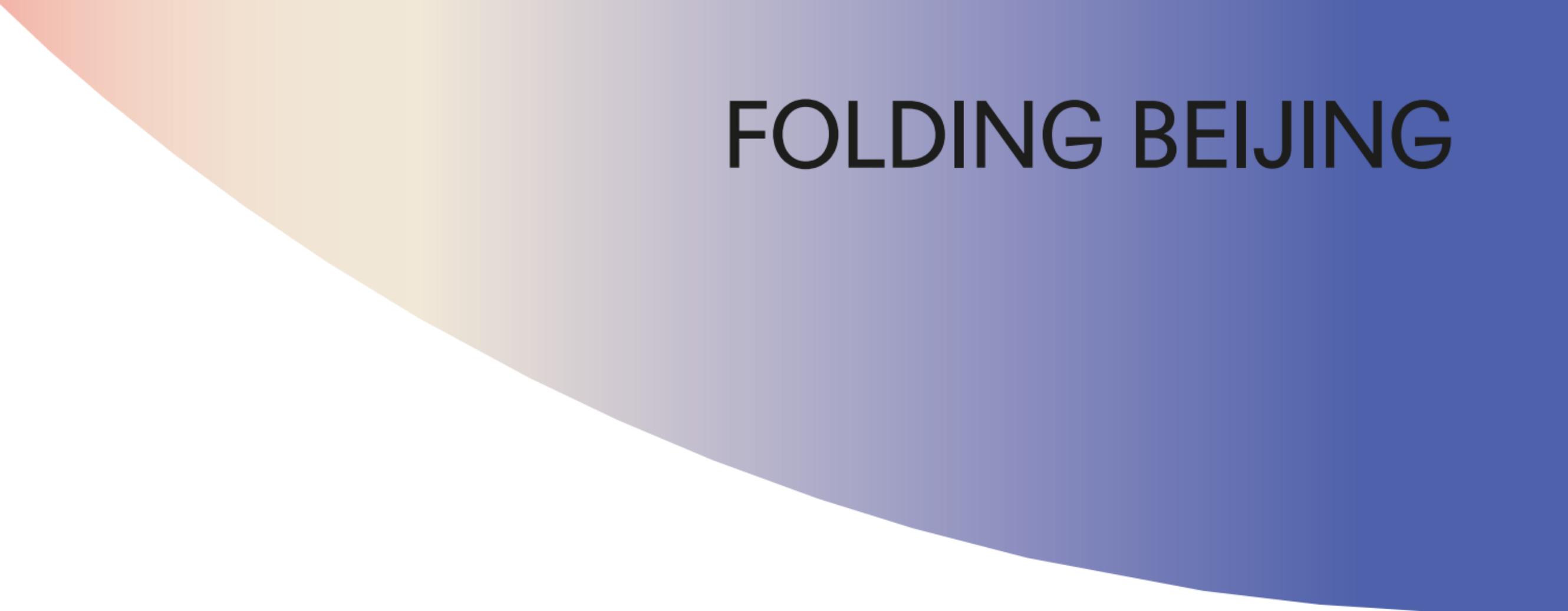


The background features a large, curved yellow shape that overlaps a grey shape on the left. Several other grey shapes, including triangles and rectangles, are scattered across the yellow area. The overall composition is abstract and modern.

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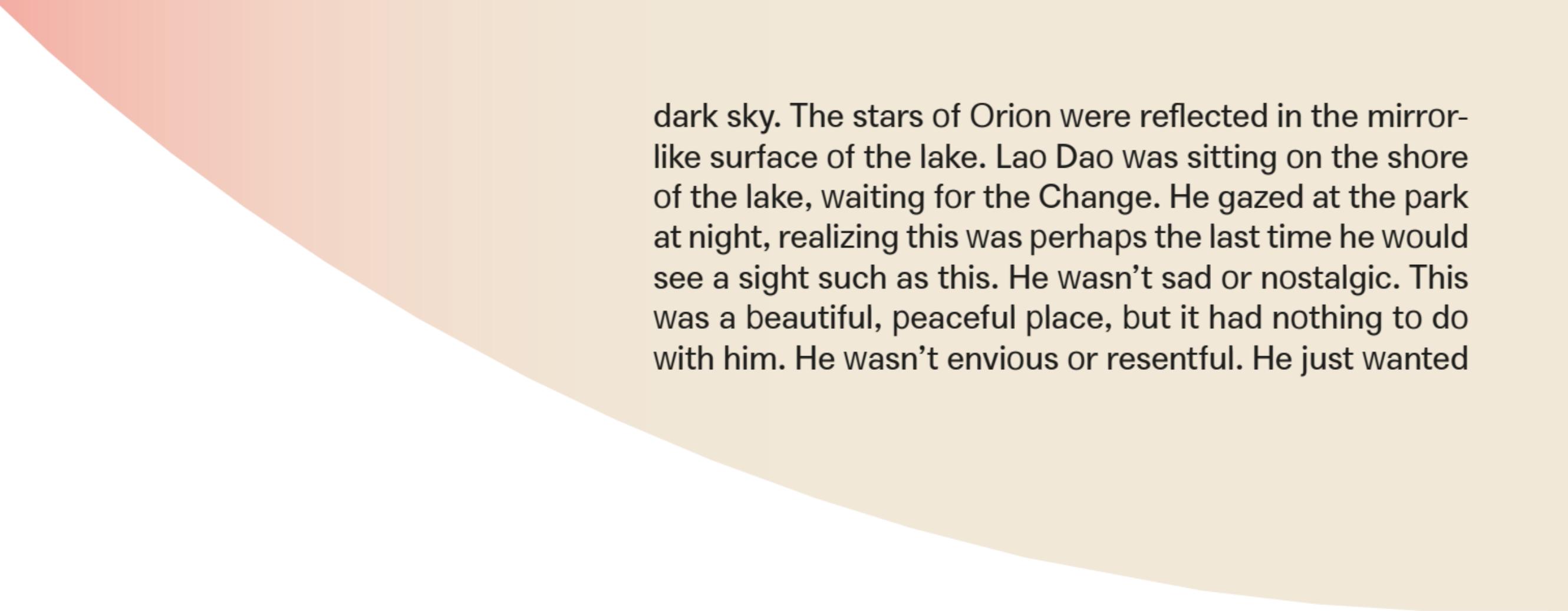
# FOLDING BEIJING

The silver-haired speaker returned to his office after the banquet to deal with some paperwork, and then got on a video call with Europe. At midnight, he felt tired. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose. It was finally time to go home. He worked till midnight on most days. The phone rang. He picked up. It was his secretary. The research group for the conference had reported so-

something troubling. Someone had discovered an error with one of the figures used in the preprinted conference declaration, and the research group wanted to know if they should reprint the declaration. The old man immediately approved the request. This was very important, and they had to get it right. He asked who was responsible for this, and the secretary told him it was Director Wu

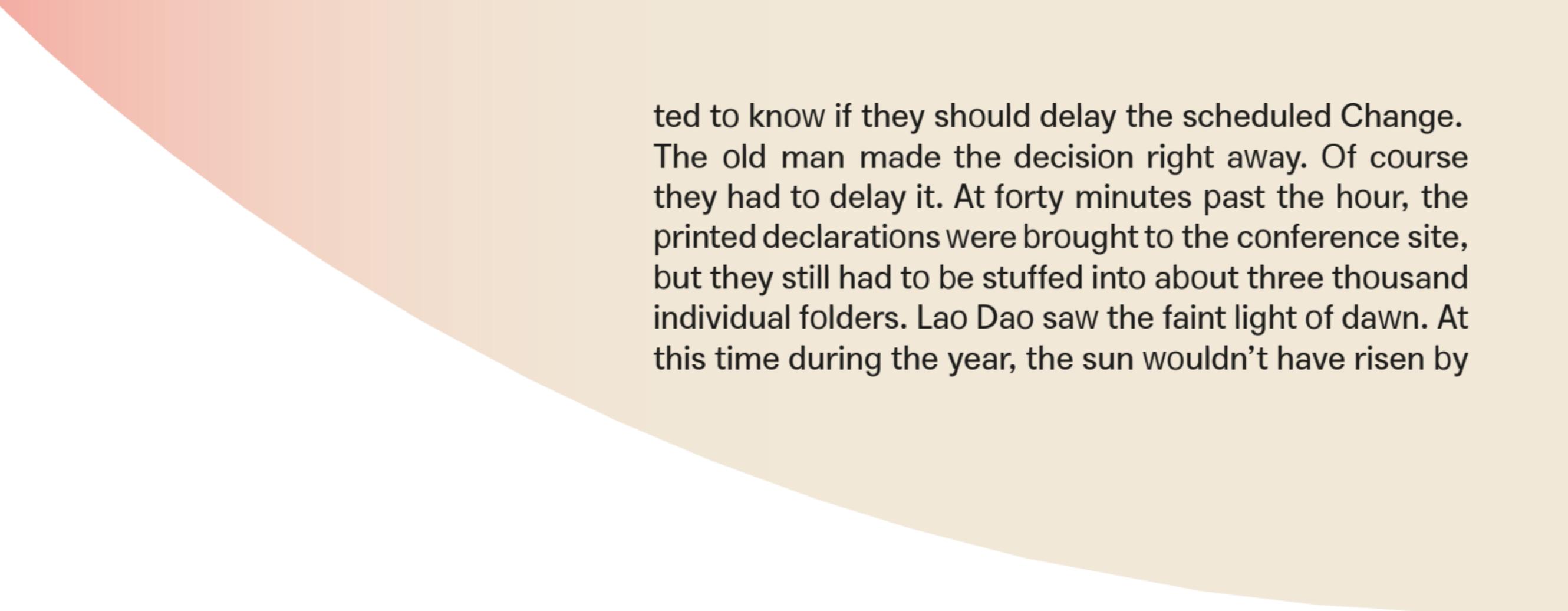
Wen. The old man sat down on his sofa and took a nap. Around four in the morning, the phone rang again. The printing was going a bit slower than expected, and they estimated it would take another hour.

He got up and looked outside the window. All was silent. He could see Orion's bright stars twinkling against the



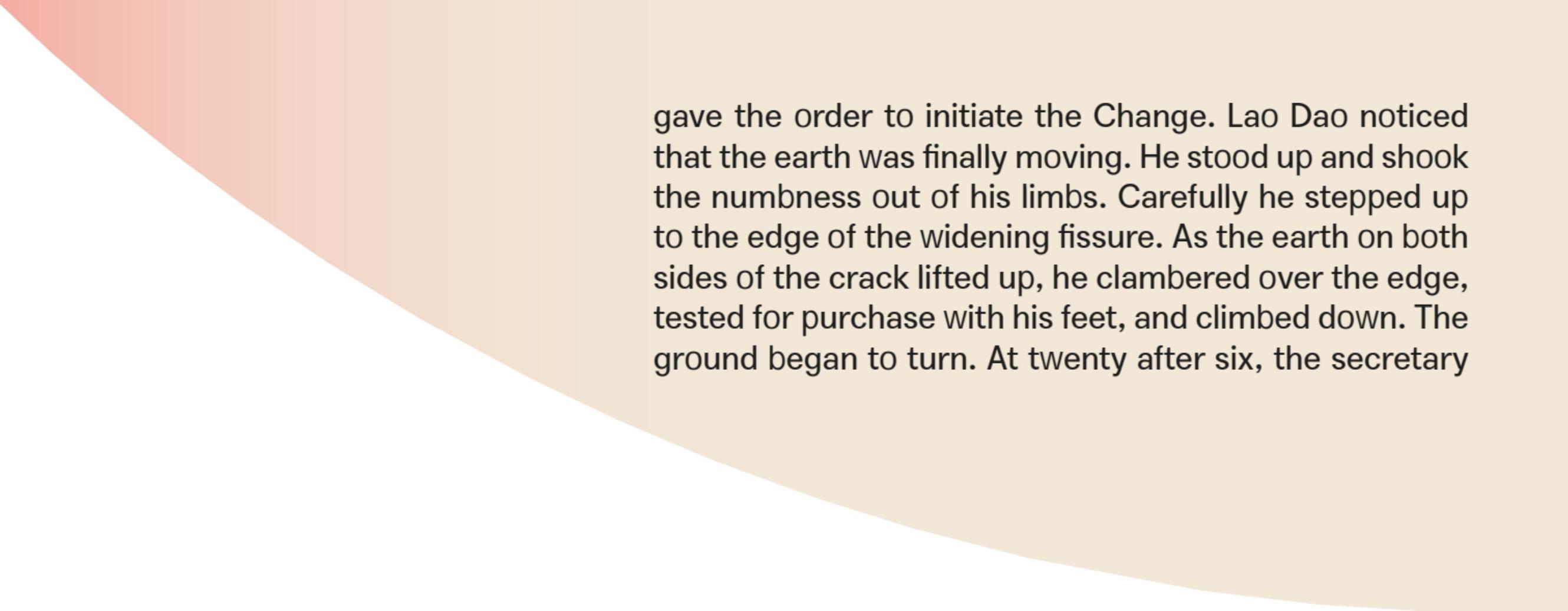
dark sky. The stars of Orion were reflected in the mirror-like surface of the lake. Lao Dao was sitting on the shore of the lake, waiting for the Change. He gazed at the park at night, realizing this was perhaps the last time he would see a sight such as this. He wasn't sad or nostalgic. This was a beautiful, peaceful place, but it had nothing to do with him. He wasn't envious or resentful. He just wanted

to remember the experience. There were few lights at night here, nothing like the flashing neon that turned the streets of Third Space bright as day. The buildings of the city seemed to be asleep, breathing evenly and calmly. At five in the morning, the secretary called again to say that the declaration had been reprinted and bound, but the documents were still in the print shop, and they wan-



ted to know if they should delay the scheduled Change. The old man made the decision right away. Of course they had to delay it. At forty minutes past the hour, the printed declarations were brought to the conference site, but they still had to be stuffed into about three thousand individual folders. Lao Dao saw the faint light of dawn. At this time during the year, the sun wouldn't have risen by

six, but it was possible to see the sky brightening near the horizon. He was prepared. He looked at his phone: only a couple more minutes until six. But strangely, there were no signs of the Change. Maybe in First Space, even the Change happens more smoothly and steadily. At ten after six, the last copy of the declaration was stuffed into its folder. The old man let out a held breath. He



gave the order to initiate the Change. Lao Dao noticed that the earth was finally moving. He stood up and shook the numbness out of his limbs. Carefully he stepped up to the edge of the widening fissure. As the earth on both sides of the crack lifted up, he clambered over the edge, tested for purchase with his feet, and climbed down. The ground began to turn. At twenty after six, the secretary

called again with an emergency. Director Wu Wen had carelessly left a data key with important documents behind at the banquet hall. He was worried that the cleaning robots might remove it, and he had to go retrieve it right away. The old man was annoyed, but he gave the order to stop the Change and reverse course. Lao Dao was climbing slowly over the cross section of the earth when eve-

rything stopped with a jolt. After a moment, the earth started moving again, but now in reverse. The fissure was closing up. Terrified, he climbed up as fast as he dared. Scrabbling over the soil with hands and feet, he had to be careful with his movements. The seam closed faster than he had expected. Just as he reached the top, the two sides of the crack came together. One of his lower legs

was caught. Although the soil gave enough to not crush his leg or break his bones, it held him fast, and he couldn't extricate himself despite several attempts. Sweat beaded on his forehead from terror and pain. Have I been discovered? Lao Dao lay prostrate on the ground, listening. He seemed to hear steps hurrying toward him. He imagined that soon the police would arrive and catch him. They

might cut off his leg and toss him in jail with the stump. He couldn't tell when his identity had been revealed. As he lay on the grass, he felt the chill of morning dew. The damp air seeped through collar and cuffs, keeping him alert and making him shiver. He silently counted the seconds, hoping against hope that this was but a technical malfunction. He tried to plan for what to say if he was cau-

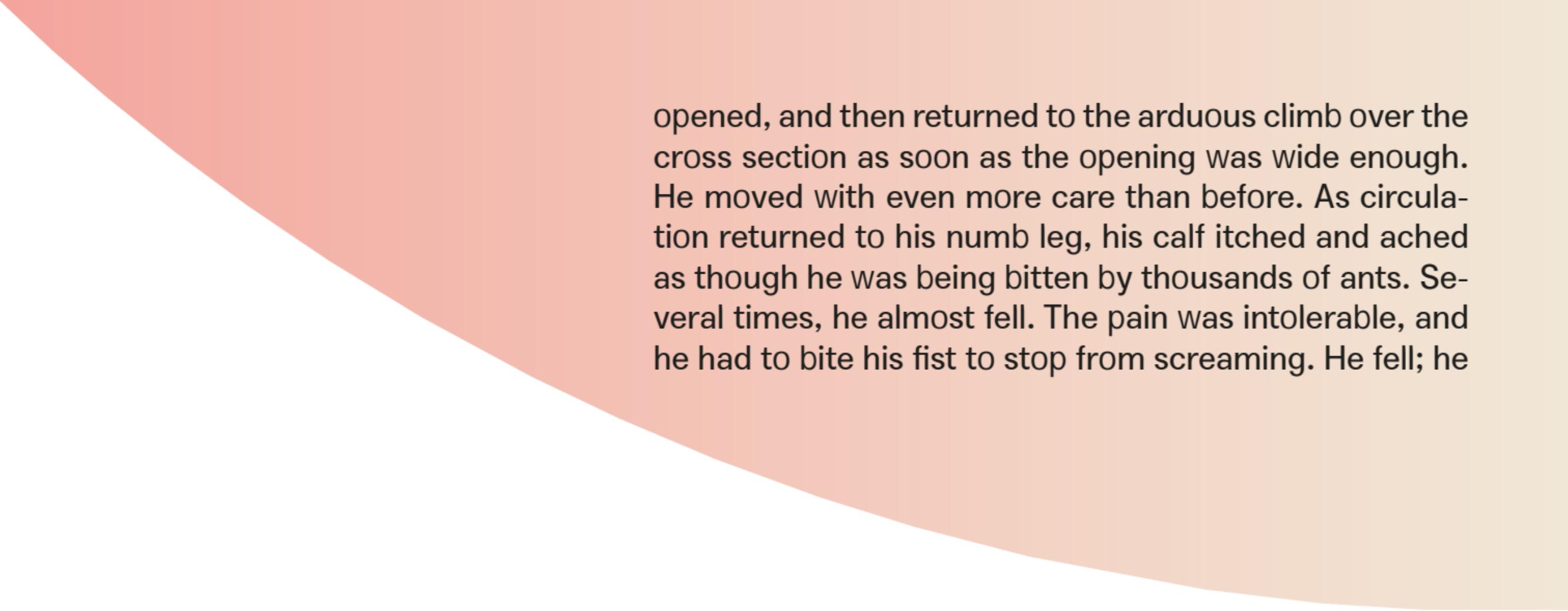
ght. Maybe he should mention how honestly and diligently he had toiled for twenty-eight years and try to buy a bit of sympathy. He didn't know if he would be prosecuted in court. Fate loomed before his eyes. Fate now pressed into his chest. Of everything he had experienced during the last forty-eight hours, the episode that had made the deepest impression was the conversation with Lao Ge at

dinner. Lao Dao felt he had approached some aspect of truth, and perhaps that was why he could catch a glimpse of the outline of fate. But the outline was too distant, too cold, too out of reach. He didn't know what was the point of knowing the truth. If he could see some things clearly but was still powerless to change them, what good did that do? In his case, he couldn't even see clearly. Fate

was like a cloud that momentarily took on some recognizable shape, and by the time he tried to get a closer look, the shape was gone. He knew that he was nothing more than a figure. He was but an ordinary person, one out of 51,280,000 others just like him. And if they didn't need that much precision and spoke of only fifty million, he was but a rounding error, the same as if he had never existed.

He wasn't even as significant as dust. He grabbed on to the grass. At six thirty, Wu Wen retrieved his data key. At six forty, Wu Wen was back in his home. At six forty-five, the white-haired old man finally lay down on the small bed in his office, exhausted. The order had been issued, and the wheels of the world began to turn slowly. Transparent covers extended over the coffee table and the desk,

securing everything in place. The bed released a cloud of soporific gas and extended rails on all sides; then it rose into the air. As the ground and everything on the ground turned, the bed would remain level, like a floating cradle. The Change had started again. After thirty minutes spent in despair, Lao Dao saw a trace of hope again. The ground was moving. He pulled his leg out as soon as the fissure



opened, and then returned to the arduous climb over the cross section as soon as the opening was wide enough. He moved with even more care than before. As circulation returned to his numb leg, his calf itched and ached as though he was being bitten by thousands of ants. Several times, he almost fell. The pain was intolerable, and he had to bite his fist to stop from screaming. He fell; he

got up; he fell again; he got up again. He struggled with all his strength and skill to maintain his footing over the rotating earth. He couldn't even remember how he had climbed up the stairs. He only remembered fainting as soon as Qin Tian opened the door to his apartment. Lao Dao slept for ten hours in Second Space. Qin Tian found a classmate in medical school to help dress his wound.

He suffered massive damage to his muscles and soft tissue, but luckily, no bones were broken. However, he was going to have some difficulty walking for a while.

After waking up, Lao Dao handed Yi Yan's letter to Qin Tian. He watched as Qin Tian read the letter, his face filling up with happiness as well as loss. He said nothing.

He knew that Qin Tian would be immersed in this remote hope for a long time. Returning to Third Space, Lao Dao felt as though he had been traveling for a month. The city was waking up slowly. Most of the residents had slept soundly, and now they picked up their lives from where they had left off the previous cycle. No one would notice that Lao Dao had been away. As soon as the vendors

along the pedestrian lane opened shop, he sat down at a plastic table and ordered a bowl of chow mein. For the first time in his life, Lao Dao asked for shredded pork to be added to the noodles. Just one time, he thought. A reward. Then he went to Lao Ge's home and delivered the two boxes of medicine Lao Ge had bought for his parents. The two elders were no longer mobile, and a young

woman with a dull demeanor lived with them as a caretaker. Limping, Lao Dao slowly returned to his own rental unit. The hallway was noisy and chaotic, filled with the commotion of a typical morning: brushing teeth, flushing toilets, arguing families. All around him were disheveled hair and half-dressed bodies. He had to wait awhile for the elevator. As soon as he got off at his floor, he heard

loud arguing noises. It was the two girls who lived next door, Lan Lan and Ah Bei, arguing with the old lady who collected rent. All the units in the building were public housing, but the residential district had an agent who collected rent, and each building, even each floor, had a subagent. The old lady was a long-term resident. She was thin, shriveled, and lived by herself—her son had

left, and nobody knew where he was. She always kept her door shut and didn't interact much with the other residents. Lan Lan and Ah Bei had moved in recently, and they worked at a clothing store. Ah Bei was shouting while Lan Lan was trying to hold her back. Ah Bei turned and shouted at Lan Lan; Lan Lan began to cry. "We all have to follow the lease, don't we?" The old lady pointed at the

scrolling text on the screen mounted on the wall. “Don’t you dare accuse me of lying! Do you understand what a lease is? It’s right here in black and white: in autumn and winter, there’s a ten-percent surcharge for heat.” “Ha!” Ah Bei lifted her chin at the old lady while combing her hair forcefully. “Do you think we are going to be fooled by such a basic trick? When we’re at work, you turn off

the heat. Then you charge us for the electricity we haven't been using so you can keep the extra for yourself. Do you think we were born yesterday? Every day when we get home after work, the place is cold as an ice cellar. Just because we're new, you think you can take advantage of us?" Ah Bei's voice was sharp and brittle, and it cut through the air like a knife. Lao Dao looked at Ah Bei,

at her young, determined, angry face, and thought she was very beautiful. Ah Bei and Lan Lan often helped him by taking care of Tangtang when he wasn't home, and sometimes even made porridge for him. He wanted Ah Bei to stop shouting, to forget these trivial things and stop arguing. He wanted to tell her that a girl should sit elegantly and quietly, cover her knees with her skirt, and

smile so that her pretty teeth showed. That was how you got others to love you. But he knew that that was not what Ah Bei and Lan Lan needed. He took out a ten-thousand-yuan bill from his inner pocket and handed it to the old lady. His hand trembled from weakness. The old lady was stunned, and so were Ah Bei and Lan Lan. He didn't want to explain. He waved at them and retur-

ned to his home. Tangtang was just waking up in her crib, and she rubbed her sleepy eyes. Lao Dao gazed into her face, and his exhausted heart softened. He remembered how he had found Tangtang and her dirty, tear-stained face in front of the waste-processing station. He had never regretted picking her up that day. Now she laughed and smacked her lips. Lao Dao thought he was fortuna-

te. Although he was injured, he hadn't been caught and had managed to bring back money. He didn't know how long it would take Tangtang to learn to dance and sing and become an elegant young lady. He checked the time. It was time to go to work.

