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CHENMEI XU

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PERCEPTIONS: A PEEK INTO SELF-KNOWLEDGE

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By

Jonathan Stalling, Chair

Rilla Askew

Catherine John

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## **Introduction**

I am interested in exploring the nature of self as an emergent property that arises at the intersection of individuals and their cultural environments. Cultural forces provide potential resources for agency when internalized but they also confine our experiences within a set of space and time. Human behaviors are of different quality within the space and along the border: within, we are often open and cooperative, while along the border between self and other, conflicts, power struggle, and violence often occur; and our psychology and perceptions change accordingly. I choose to write in fiction because I wish to use a personal journey to unravel this invisible yet intimate process and our potential for expansion, which is embodied by and can only be shown through our individual life. Works such as *Siddhartha* have been useful as an inspiration for they show such a process. However, I wish to examine trauma – its corresponding psychology and perception – more thoroughly so as to explore why those great thinkers such as Nietzsche or the Chinese philosopher Wang Yangming and colonial writers such as Glissant and Fannon have gazed into the darkness and come back with extraordinary insights about humanity.

## **The Story**

The story is about a Chinese woman, divorced at forty and childless, who has an acute self-awareness that enables her to turn her experiences into materials for self-knowledge. The story starts with her at a transitional stage where her old meaningful path centered on her gender expression has failed and she has to make new meaning in order to go on with her life. This crossroad provides a view to a past that is already ended, and to a future that is yet to start. So this state is full of possibilities even though it is traumatic. There is potential for self-creation. And if one truly creates a self, it can be a very mindful journey. This journey may shed light onto

the past, and the past can in turn inform and even determine the future path so as to be incorporated into the ongoing life narrative again.

The past and the future can be within different timescales: a person's individual life, a person within a culture, a person within our species, or a person within a geological timeline. Each timescale shifts our sense of "where we are from, who we are, and where we are going," and a corresponding meaning system. It is not objective knowledge or natural laws that ultimately determine our meaning; rather, it is our subjective perception of and our relationship with them that create the meaning. There are many perceptions and many relationships. It is worthwhile to look into what kinds of perceptions and relationships can fragment our space and leave our contact more along the borders.

Self is intimately connected with one's meaning system. Self is a dynamic process through which meaning is formed, while meaning is often contingent with culture. This journey of self-creation may illumine what self and sense of self are, how they can be formed and destroyed, the function of the affective (feeling, mood, emotion, and aesthetics) and the cognitive (language, logic, reason), and the process of interaction between our biological drives and the environment.

Even though the story explores the nature of self and its process, it is driven by characters. The nature of self and its process are invisible but can be revealed through characters' psychology and their perceptions.

### **Self and its Process**

I use the protagonist's failed gender role (divorced, 40, childless, a perilous situation for a Chinese woman) as the entry point to explore self. Women's historical role is very interesting to

me in that the relationship between a man and a woman can dance along the full spectrum from devotion to power domination, open-hearted love to selfish exploitation, and even indifference. It is a relationship occupying both locations: within and along the border, both self and other. It can be used to explore how human connection can be made and why it is so hard, and how power struggle is manifested and why it is so common. Another aspect is that woman's role can be a lived experience, that a woman can internalize it and make it her expression and grow with it.

In order to examine those issues, I move beyond our anthropological universe to reconnect us with an ongoing natural process, to propose that our mind and self are the products of a form of evolution – cultural evolution, driven by a fundamental desire that connects all living things.

The central tenet remains the same: evolution is about adaptation to an environment. The two essential parameters are: organism and environment. It is what we are as organisms and what our environment has become that need reexamining.

Our environment is an unprecedented one. It is no longer organic nature; rather, it is mostly human societies, so our environment is our fellow humans. It is among human societies that we gain our livelihood. Culture is the major character in this environment. It defines how we live, how we express ourselves, how we associate with all those around us, and who we are. Here, the basic biological drive for survival and reproduction becomes channeled into human societies, and gets redefined in its specific cultural context, out of which arises a corresponding psyche.

An individual in human societies is not just a biological being, but more a cultural being; therefore an individual's boundary is not only skin, but also the cultural boundaries, so we may have multiple boundaries contingent to circumstances. The central aspect of an individual is the concepts of self and the sense of self.



Self emerges from our experiences. It is a system of knowledge including a cosmic view and a worldview; the composite relationship we have formed with ourselves, our environment and others; the fundamental criteria for our judgment and how we make a meaningful life; and the location we occupy (unconsciously) in this knowledge system. It is usually in our unconsciousness. It might correspond to “me.”

The sense of self can be enhanced, confirmed, solidified, diminished, or weakened during real-time execution of self in contact with the environment. This might correspond to “I.” If a situation is so beyond comprehension of self, the sense of self can collapse. Having the sense of self doesn’t mean we know ourselves. The sense of self might be a defensive mechanism and a membrane where information can be filtered to facilitate or stunt our growth.

If we regard the basic drive for survival and reproduction in a more general lens, survival and reproduction for a biologically straightforward species belongs to a more general form of self-preservation, self-expression and self-growth. This drive is universal and amorphous, and it has to be shaped and fulfilled in an environment. For humans, it is mostly a cultural environment. From this basic drive, there are limitless manifestations.

However, when this basic drive has to be fulfilled in a cultural environment, some situations can happen: culture may be toxic or one can’t find meaningful expression in a specific cultural context so this basic drive cannot actually be fulfilled or fulfilled fully. It can vex all three most fundamental aspects regarding human existence: where we are from, who we are, and where we are going. Vexation on any of these three aspects of our existence can lead to psychological disturbance and perceptual distortion, so psychology and perception can reflect the cultural structure, the environment.

## Psychology: Discontinuity and Continuity

Culture is a space, and when we express ourselves and grow in it, self is formed through time. Self is constructed in space and time within a cultural context. But I start the story at the point when one's meaningful path of life is truncated, and one is thrown into a state of spiritual limbo, where one is discontinued from the familiar sense of time and space. My logic is that if I want to write self, I should write from non-self, otherwise one would be too buried inside the self to see its shape. Psychology and perception from this state can be very different from a normal state of continuity. In the story, the protagonist experiences both states: discontinuity and continuity, and her psychology (moods, motivation, primal emotions, aesthetics, etc.) and perception shall drive the story forward.

An incoherent state lacking continuity is an extremely disturbing but fascinating state. It offers a lot. Fictions such as Hermann Hesse's *Siddhartha* have glimpsed into it. However I haven't seen a fiction that has unraveled and given enough consideration to this state. So I wish to stay with it a while longer, to have a more thorough look into this traumatic yet creative space, for great thinkers such as Nietzsche or the Chinese philosopher Wang Yangming have gazed into the darkness and come back with extraordinary insights about humanity.

Discontinuity and continuity are manifested as mental states. Compare these two states:

Glissant in *Caribbean Discourse* comments that Martinican people are in need of “‘a return to the point of entanglement, from which we were forcefully turned away; that is where we must ultimately put to work the forces of creolization, or perish.’ The individual self has no future without a collective destiny. The ‘unhoused’ wanderer across cultures must be ‘rehoused’ in the fissured history, the exposed sands, before the surging sea” (Glissant xx). An individual sense of self is in danger of perishing, if it is without entanglement, isolated, and in discontinuity.

His belief is that the individual self has to exist within a cultural and historical context and its continuity, which implies the continuity in time and space. Fanon echoes this sentiment of discontinuity and isolation to explain the necessity for a colonized intellectual to return to his unknown roots: “This painful and harrowing wrench is, however, a necessity. Otherwise we will be faced with extremely serious psycho-affective mutilations: individuals without an anchorage, without borders, colorless, stateless, rootless, a body of angels” (Fanon 155), a nihilist existence. As the sense of continuity cannot find actualization in the society, the emotional responses become mere immediate emoting. Glissant finds that Martinique Creole is “of speed, shrillness, of physical excess” (Glissant xxvii).

Whereas in the same book, Glissant mentions Joan Didion’s heroine in *A Book of Common Prayer*: “Child of the American West, she had inherited from her parents a faith in certain family values, the virtues of land cleared for cultivation and well irrigated, abundant harvests, thrift, industry, judicial system, progress, learning, the ever-ascending evolution of Mankind. But she was untouched by History, innocent of politics. She knew that there was always something happening in the world, but she believed it would all end well” (Glissant 70). This feeling of being shielded from history, shielded from the political tribulations of the reality comes from a sense of continuity, solidarity, fecundity and security by occupying space and continuing in time which has become natural and unconscious.

These are the two ends of the spectrum of self and their corresponding psychology. They are manifested in our daily encounters, but proportions vary. Within the border we feel secure, and we can explore freely, create, and grow; while along the border, we face the danger of being confronted or even annihilation of the self (in both physical and psychological senses), and we could engage in violence within and from without. We might regress from our finer aesthetic

feelings back to primal emotions. It hinges on where our spaces are and where our borders are drawn internally or how they are forced upon us externally.

It appears that we strive for a coherent narrative of our life. This coherence is the coherence of space and time. When this coherence is disrupted, psycho-affective symptoms appear. Psychologically, discontinuity is a traumatic state and could lead to suicide.

But philosophically, it is a vantage point for perception and can be a productive space, if one is curious enough and has some self-awareness so as to have some protection from being completely drowned in the misery. That is why I attribute curiosity and intelligence to the protagonist with a desire to write. Writing forces her to focus on understanding human behaviors and the relationship between the internal and external worlds. She shifts between affect and cognition, providing us glimpses into the nature of affect and cognition and how they are manifested, self and its space and time, where we reach the limit of our reasoning especially in the social realm, and how our psyche, perceptions and behaviors change when our sense of self changes.

### **Perception: The Device of Eye**

In the story, I use a device: eye. It means perception. It can be directed inward or outward; it can be expanded globally or restricted locally; it can be concrete or abstract. This eye has versatile purposes. It is subjective so it is tied with characters and can only be manifested through characters. It also reveals our relations with others and ourselves, for the eye generally doesn't look without a reference point or an attitude, unless our meaning system is so destroyed that we lose our reference point. Either way it exposes our psyche: discontinuity or continuity; in discontinuity eye is pure perception which is likely to turn inward to enable a journey to self-

knowledge, while in continuity, what this eye is focused on and how it perceives are likely tied with our meaning system. The following quote shows its various locations:

Ethnology shows us that primitive tribes usually are gifted with an extraordinarily sharp perception of space. A native of these tribes has an eye for all the nicest details of his environment. He is extremely sensitive to every change in the position of the common objects of his surroundings. Even under very difficult circumstances he will be able to find his way. When rowing or sailing he follows with the greatest accuracy all the turns of the river that he goes up and down. But upon closer examination we discover to our surprise that in spite of this facility there seems to be a strange lack in his apprehension of space. If you ask him to give you a general description, a delineation of the course of the river he is not able to do so. If you wish him to draw a map of the river and its various turns he seems not even to understand your question. Here we grasp very distinctly the difference between the concrete and the abstract apprehension of space and spatial relations. (Cassirer 50)

This quote again illustrates that being embedded one can't see the shape of one's space. When one's interior is so intertwined with the exterior, an organic whole is formed and the eye becomes sensing and the time flows in a linear way. But what can a hovering abstract eye see? From a distance it can see a shape. But in reality we generally don't stop at seeing a shape. The shape has to be judged, exploited, destroyed, or be probed and become known, or loved. Many relationships can be formed, running from hostility to intimacy, depending on where our borders are drawn.

The question is: Can we expand and become more open so as to invite this shape into our space instead of regarding it as a threat? After all, this shape can be our past, our fellow humans, or our earth. It can be anything that falls into our perception.

To explore this, I put my protagonist at her transitional stage. There she loses her logic and reasoning, her bias and judgment. Without the old references, everything is new and catches her attention, and she has to reexamine everything. At the beginning of this stage, she is unable to connect dots and is very miserable, but she will be guided by professor Sparks (a professor teaching creative writing), Joe Kenzie (an evolutionary biologist), Chen-Chen (a child just

entering life), her ex-husband, and her other experiences, to understand life in a new light, to reach a larger structure. But understanding alone doesn't bring her heart to bloom. Understanding is important in that it brings the previously unknown space or more general knowledge about humanity into her perception. It provides an expanded space for finding meaning, through which one's life can be reestablished and one can have an ongoing personal narrative, to bloom and flow in time again.

We can probably go through two stages of life. In the first stage we are shaped by the environment, and who we are is connected with other people and the external world, so we react to them. In the second stage, we plow into our own psyche to gain self-knowledge, and with this knowledge we can create our independent inner landscape, where we gain our true autonomy and get to redefine ourselves. It might be through trauma the second stage can be brought about. The second stage doesn't necessarily happen, but it is our potential, for we are more than our cultural identities.

Fear develops the proximity sense aspect of *la facultad*. But there is a deeper sensing that is another aspect of this faculty. It is anything that breaks into one's everyday mode of perception, that causes a break in one's defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one's habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception. This shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people. (Anzaldúa 61)

The story is a journey that might lead to self-knowledge. It tells and sees from a transitional state. This state has a double meaning: it can be nihilism or it can be full of possibilities, depending on how one employs the eye. The story attempts to explore our relationships with others and with ourselves in this fragmented world.

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Sections from  
Perceptions: a Peek into Self-knowledge  
A novel



## Part I: The Eye Raw

### 1

I am back in my hometown when the Year of the Goat is around the corner. But even here in my own room I still often feel like a phantom floating in an in-between, directionless space. Everything seems to have broken loose: sights, sounds, movements, even memories, spreading out in front of me. Disembodied, yet I am at a vantage point for perception.

Out of the next room, in drifts the gurgling laughter of my nephews. An intermittent conversation tosses between them, like a spring compressed and released, whirring through the quiet of the winter morning. Just a moment ago, Chen-Chen sprang over and asked me, “Is *Spirited Away* a Hayao Miyazaki animation?” I said yes. He was pleased and sprinted away. He disappeared through the door. No trace is left.

Down in the neighborhood, doors open and shut. Birds perch on the electrical lines chirping. A sudden wave of commotion: iron gates clang, footsteps rush, and dog barking erupts. A woman’s voice shrills, “Goddam beasts, always fight at this hour, break it up!” A shaggy black dog from the next neighborhood must have come. It has taken to challenging its kind in my neighborhood. As soon as it appears, every dog here rushes out of its house to meet this common enemy. The fracas is charged and swift.

Our neighbor across from the front door, Mrs. Wang, is rasping importantly through her kitchen window to another neighbor, Mrs. Liu, who, from the direction of the voice, should be sitting on the stone slab at the corner, “My daughter sent me a package yesterday. She phoned me ‘Ma, you should eat more seaweed. It can cut down your cholesterol level.’ I don’t know what cholesterol is about, but that was what my daughter said, and this seaweed was what I

received. I am cooking a hot pot with pork rib and seaweed. Well, I am gonna add some tofu too.”  
“Oh, yes, tofu is good,” the woman on the stone slab murmurs her agreement.

“Shut up!” barks a man’s voice. “Daughter! Daughter! Daughter!! Only you have a daughter?! You have to tell every tiny bit thing about her every hour every day, huh?!” It is Tang, who gambles in the night and sleeps in the day.

My mother is cooking lunch too. I can hear the ventilator hum downstairs. Mrs. Lu asks my mother through the kitchen window while standing in front of her own house, “Mrs. Ye, how about we call up a table of Mahjong this afternoon and play eight rounds?” My mother says, “I better pass. May-May is home for Spring Festival. For fifteen years she has not had one. Americans don’t celebrate Spring Festival, you know. Mahjong can wait until after she has left.”

I listen. It feels as if I am swerving into houses, into the town. It is eavesdropping and voyeurism. For many years, I had been an element of the town’s rhythm without knowing it, for I was born here. But now my town has reduced into a shape in my panoramic vision: girdled inside a ring of hills and mountains, it sprawls on the basin floor like a footprint. This hovering view discomforts me. It is a distant gaze.

Last fall when I was still in the USA, a literary festival took place in the university where I was taking classes. German writer Jenny Erpenbeck gave a speech in the library about how she started writing.

“I was in my early twenties when the Berlin Wall fell, and the country where I grew up disappeared in the course of just a few weeks. ... I guess since then there has been a border between the two halves of my life, a border made of time between the first half which was transformed into history by the fall of the wall and the collapse of the East German state; and the second half, which began at the same moment. Without this experience of transition from one

world to the other, I probably would never have started writing. My writing began with the relationship with borders: how we change over the course of our life, voluntarily or involuntarily, what identity is and how much it can lose without losing ourselves. ...”

It was at the hour near sunset. I was writing on my notebook computer at my usual window seat, with my back to the speaker. When I overheard the talk, I took a quick glance around, as though to make sure everything was still there. A windowpane reflected the sunlight onto the burgundy-colored desk where I was seated. Along the avenues in campus, oak leaves flickered off a spectrum of shades from yellow to red. People were sauntering about. A group of boys were flying a Frisbee on the lawn. It was an ordinary good day, but it somewhat shrank, less real.

I moved to a seat in the audience who was drawn to her stories about Syrian refugees.

“One of the refugees I spoke to has suffered a mental breakdown after years of wandering around Europe without being allowed to work. A long odyssey included incidental violence. Another was granted the temporal paper, but when the boat carrying his two children capsized he killed himself. ... They often died when their family arrived, the psychological strain being so great that when tension loosens their life loses as well. We get stories like these, from a parallel world, from these blind spots in the happy world we live in. If only we are willing to look and listen ...”

Willing to look and listen? I suspected if willingness was enough to make one truly look and listen. But she had been tossed into the field when she transitioned between worlds. She had seen. While sitting in the audience listening to her, I envisioned her vividly as a girl in her twenties standing on the same spot but the context of her existence was suddenly stripped: she became an exile from her old life in her own land, a stranger in a familiar space. It was a singular

moment of divide, a halt of history, a discontinuity. At the fault line, she could look back and see a past that was disappearing. It meant loss. It spoke to me.

For this in-between state is where I have been. This chaos, this uncertainty: it is terrifying, it is raw, yet it is fascinating. I have toggled between terror and wonder. And I am curious.

Not long ago I returned to China from the USA. On my way home I stopped at a provincial hospital in Hangzhou to visit a friend who was diagnosed with cancer. In the oncology inpatient ward where he stayed, there was a gaunt man with scant whiskers and swollen eye bags, and a pale lusterless face that seemingly never excreted sweat. He had the carriage of an intellectual from a village, a thinker in the guise of a Chinese medicine doctor by heritage.

“Have you thought of our conditions?” he asked my friend. “When I was diagnosed with such a dreadful disease this year, I thought there was no way for me to come back. I would leave no trace in this world, just like being blown away by wind. What’s the point of life then? What’s the point of having children? I have asked people what their grandpa’s names are. Many of them don’t know. Those who know can hardly describe the characters or the deeds of their grandpas. My grandson might not know me. You see how fake life actually is.”

I am fascinated by the sort of questions that arise when a crisis threatens our fundamental existence. My question started at such a time in my life, in the winter when I lived in a rented apartment on Parsons a year ago, in a small town in the USA, a divorced woman of forty, childless, suddenly alone in the world.

The winter last year was harsh. Often for days on end, I planted myself at the desk in my living room, a pen and a notebook in front of me, staring at and cloaked in the hibernal mood. A petrified stillness was framed by my window: bald oaks and peeling birches, frigid brown lawns with spots of exposed hard earth, under snow-laden roofs icicles hanging along eaves growing longer by the day, and a pale imprint of the sun just over the top of the roof across, between the chimney and the lightning rod. I felt my inside vacuumed hollow.

The TV hummed on a low table behind me, in and out of my hearing. The local news channel was taken over by weather watch, running nonstop twenty four hours, with information rolling and updating along the bottom of the screen: “Highway 11 closed; Methodist Church on Madison Avenue closed; Interstate 44 at Jefferson section reopened temporarily...” A voice was babbling, “We have never seen so much snow in one winter”, lamenting the city’s lack of preparation and acknowledging the reality that “we are accustomed to milder winters. We simply have not equipped ourselves for such severity.” And the weatherman babbled on excitedly about the coming ice storm, “imminent”, “historic”.

Occasionally someone phoned in to the program. “This talk of global warming is just a theory,” he claimed, “or some fashionable hoax circulating about. One cannot honestly take it seriously while witnessing such a winter. One can’t be so removed from reality to claim such a fantasy.” Another voice, sounding patient, probably of some sort of expert, explained, “...kinetic sense; temperature may rise only half a degree, but the energy stored would make the weather more volatile, more violent. When extreme weather becomes more frequent, more damage will surely be on the way.”

It was eerie when dusk fell, as though a cold net of wet darkness was closing in. I hurried to turn on the light.

In the evening, I took to imagining what was going on inside my neighbors' homes. Christmas lights still twinkled in some front yards, and Christmas trees still stood at the corners inside some houses. Cars lined both sides of the street down below, more swerved in and parked. People got off carrying bottles or pies for a party. I could see people moving about behind windows, and if I stayed still, I could even smell the pies and the meaty fragrance of a roasted turkey, feel the warm intimacy flowing through family and friends alike, hear their laughter, humming voices, and ringing glasses, like a tableau from a life lost where all senses were filtered through a looking glass.

Happiness was theirs; I had none. Gloom wrapped me like a cocoon inside this two-story four-apartment building, all vacated in the season of merriment, except for my corner on the second floor, illumined by a lone light.

“The winter is bare, bare to the bone, bare to the soul.” I scribbled on my notebook. “Bare, too, are these words: coming into being without substance. No context, no music, no meaning –” The heavy dash was like a sigh heaved into the page.

No flow. No creative spark. All gray, the sky a canopy of blankness. I could not muster another sentence.

Occasionally I reached for the mug of tea that was always by my hand. Often a stew was simmering in the kitchen. But the tea turned cold quickly. I had to run it in the microwave oven a minute or make a fresh one, a deed I sometimes welcomed: walking toward the kitchen with a purpose (no matter how small it was), squeaking of the cabinet along its hinge when I fetched the tea tin, rustling of the tea bag while retrieving tea leaves, beeping of the microwave oven or

hissing of the teakettle, somehow spurred a moment of liveliness that sparked frailly. It dissipated as soon as I palmed the mug and took a hot sip. The hotness stung my lips and tongue, my eyes dazed watching green tea leaves rising and falling in my mug. Fog spread and lodged in my brain and chest. I had become so lonely and isolated.

I wandered about the rectangular space that was my apartment, passing its three sections enclosed in the whitewashed walls: a living room, a kitchen and a bedroom, with the kitchen flanked in between. From one end I could see all the way down to the other, everything drooping mute and draped in winter grayness. I shivered at the sight. My fingertips were cold even in touch with the hot mug.

It was startling how quiet the room and how dull the world suddenly dawned on me. Their presence invaded, and everything assumed a strange distinct stance. A corrosive sense of doom wrapped me, spreading, depositing lead heaviness over my torso and limbs, freezing me.

Disbelief at how on earth I could have ended up here flit by, shooting up a paralyzing fit that ran through my nerves, humoring me mirthlessly as if it was a huge absurd joke, while beating up a hysterical turmoil that erupted soundlessly in me. I had to halt in front of the bookshelf, clutching the middle shelf to steady myself.

The bookshelf was a solid mahogany structure with six stacks, packed tightly with books. I skimmed over my books, reflecting on how they were my actual possessions and companions in my fifteen-year marriage. All those nights when I was gnawed by something I could not dare or was inept to unravel, I had perused those pages, and been moved and rueful at how I could eventually fathom some meaning of certain sentences and how much more I might never know.

Writers' mentality fascinated and maybe somehow sustained me. I speculated often what kind of talent they must possess to be able to pour words into pages in such a marvelous fashion,

by which I could encounter and enter an alien world so removed from mine, yet still so real and accessible. I wished I could write, and be good at it. I anticipated the spring semester to start and the university to open, where I had registered myself for a class: ENGL201, Creative Writing I. Then I could actually begin to write. What to write though? My writing practice had been futile so far.

I brushed aimlessly over books across the stacks, pulled one at random, and it was an American anthology of short stories. I flipped its pages, and browsed a few sentences. *A Rose for Emily* by Faulkner. I had read it several times. Miss Emily always stimulated a particular impression: how this character was like a frozen lake, with black debris buried in the cold cement solidity of the body and mind, neither innocent nor lovely, sealed in time in her pitiable stiffness – “frozen in time,” someone had left a comment along the margin of the used book. Why did Emily no longer move forward along the temporal line – instead of growth she bloated? A walking dead of the past, wasn't she?

Time. Such an elusive element. John Eton and Joe Kenzie had been poring over it. For some time (a year or two years or maybe longer than that?) they had been talking about the space and time of consciousness, or self in particular. “Self is a structure formed in space and time”. I had been amused at their seriousness in such an abstruse matter. But I also sensed that for John and Joe it might not be so abstract; these words actually meant something for them. “Maybe there are two fundamental states underneath most phenomena related to the nature of self: continuous and discontinuous, being and nonbeing.” I heard it in passing. I found I was sometimes aware of it while reading literary characters, like being reminded by the faintest fluttering of the tip of a bird wing: frozen in time, discontinuity, Emily the living dead.



This used to be what I secretly coveted, alone writing and reading with a stew cooking on a stove, when I was still John's wife, living in our spacious, airy house on the top of a hill that overlooked the town. Even now in winter, the house appeared sunny in my memory, bright, somewhat hallowed, by retreating into the distance of the bygone.

It was as if my ghost was still walking up its armour stone stairs, with rocks lying among various ornamental grasses of zebra and fescue on two sides; gnarly old-growth oak forest in the valley to the right, extending all the way up to the ridge, rolling hills to the left as far as one's eyes could reach. The front door opened to a giant vase where I had arranged grasses of varied colors, a scroll of a Chinese door god painted by my father hung on the wall. Having passed the hall, I turned to the left into my kitchen; radio on the granite countertop sometimes was on, and I could hear my own voice narrating scientific stories, written by John for a general audience; my voice sometimes quickened, and quivered, electrifying the peace at the hour of dusk, mingled with the clanking of pans and the sizzling of sautéing. ("You make a cute couple", it was said of John and me). I could see through the French door the familiar scene of people clustering around the back porch by the Japanese garden, by the water lily pond where koi splashed lazily about; John was in his usual seat by the rustling bamboos, listening, nodding, and reserved. One day while I was sitting in the veranda reading my dictionary, Joe Kenzie had come to me asking how I could just read through a dictionary.

Now I had landed here, in an apartment all by myself. Everything was duller, insignificant, containing no lucidity I had imagined. The stew did not have the appetizing vigor, instead, it was more a reminder of what was actually lacking by doing a poor job of mimicking a home, through a monotonous rhythm of bubbling, bubbling.

It was an illusion; all was cheating. I was stuck. And this was real. I would never get out of this.

Never. Never. Never. I understood now. A scream inside ascended in its pitch.

For a moment, I was not disturbed. I was calm, letting loose this ultra-clear sense of ruin that exploded and atomized me: everything else became small while this sense alone loomed larger and larger, with an ever increasing clarity, raiding steadily every inch of me. An eye, incorporeal, rose inside me, staring at everything all at once, through and through. The eye looked on immovably, at a field of ruin that had yet to touch me, and at my interior that was shrunk and maimed. “What has become of me?” I thought. Detached, all detached. It was like someone just awakened to a reality that had not had the time to sink in. There was even a tinge of humor, or absurdity, as if I could now look at myself with honesty: though bleak there was something so new in this utter detachment – the strange fact that I was still here but not here as me, so I could actually look back at my own self objectively by way of pure intelligence at a distance. The gaze was metallic, echoic, sparkling like diamonds.

But it collapsed, like shards falling onto the ground, all broken. I faltered. A conviction more grounded, a gut feeling, shrieked out, blinding because all was shattered. All was lost. This was me, utterly alone in this world, childless, divorced, forty, squeezed inside a naked apartment on Parsons Street. The question exploded inside me and knocked me dizzy: WHY AM I NO LONGER MOVING FORWARD ALONG THE TEMPORAL LINE? HOW COULD THIS BE POSSIBLE?

I stood there transfixed by the enormity of something that was settling in, something so ineffable but so tangibly felt as the essence of my own existence, impregnated with an alarming instinctive knowledge, every bit of which validated its nature of nothingness. I was overwhelmed

by a sheer sense of terror, like a mouse being trapped in a cage into perpetuity, which was the reality I was just awakened to, its lucidity exploding and vanquishing my sanity in a blighted instant. Between the past and a suspicious future, this moment was undefined, broken, and I was alone here. Void. Nothing flowed, so silent it shrieked.

It was a powerful glimpse at life in its raw, the self's loneliness exposed at its pure essence. An inward gaze.

I fled.

Outside, the festivity of the New Year still hung in the air, made shabby by a lackluster sun. I hurried toward downtown.

As usual, Washington Street was almost empty with few pedestrians, but more deserted now because of the grayness pressing down. I wandered aimlessly. A blackboard stood slightly off the center of the path, outside of a shop, indicating by handwriting in chalk that today's special was pan-seared salmon in hollandaise sauce. Through the shop's window, I saw a middle-aged woman lying on a sofa at the corner, with a book in her hands, a wine bottle chilling in a tin bucket of ice on the coffee table beside her, by a plate of panini with chips and an almost empty champagne flute. The cover of the book, erected vertically at the moment, indicated it was one of *The Hunger Games*. A uniformed waiter stood by, on his hand inclined a wine bottle. He appeared to be introducing it to the woman, who was looking up from her book, surveying the wine with interest.

So many times, I had been sitting on that sofa, my face buried in books, engrossed in reading, a pot of hot tea on the coffee table. But I could not remember how I had sat there reading, and how I had enjoyed the acrylic paintings hung around the walls, which as I saw now were rather bizarre and extremely ostentatious, a lump of color here, a lump of color there, chaotic and repulsive, stinging my eyes.

I watched the scene. It was as if I watched it through a veil. I stood there, certain of my invisibility, while mesmerized by a dazed sense of nostalgia. The waiter, while turning back, noticed me and waved at me. I was startled, feeling exposed. Hesitantly I waved back at him, and walked on.

At that moment a door to my left opened. A young couple came out of it, laughing. The scent of sizzling bacon and the din of voices spilled through, and then the door shut. The moment washed over me, my body tingled. I stopped.

The diner was an elongated rectangle, with a narrow entrance squeezed in, barely noticeable. A metal plate inscribing “Since 1959” in bronze was fitted into the outer wall. A couple of years ago, Leo Finch from Culinary Network filmed this diner for its award-winning burger (“The secret was in the sauce, from a recipe handed down through generations”), which he attacked with fanfare gusto, rich dripping of sauce running down his chin. I had tried the burger once. Too rich for me. But the diner served nice French toast – coated with butter, crispy; and hash browns and eggs, the breakfast stuff I liked.

I entered. The diner was filled with people at lunchtime in its cramped space. One row of tables set against its plank wall, on which hung the photos that witnessed the proud history of the family-owned restaurant which had started small and expanded to claim a national fame, and a poster of Leo Finch devouring a burger while the owner was watching, smiling reservedly. Pink neon light sketched the shape of a beer bottle. The buzz of the inside overwhelmed me: customers conversing, clanking and sizzling on the stove, and waitresses’ hurried and clear tones as they took orders. The warm greasiness mingled with coffee aroma created a tangible presence. Entering, I inserted myself into a packed humanity, a thing I might have craved. An immersion, I sensed a tinge of something liquid lapping about me. It was comforting.

A waitress was cleaning the table next to a large assembly of people sitting at the far end. She then ushered me to the table, and asked me with a real nice smile, “What do you want to drink, tea, coffee?” I looked at her for a while, understood, “Hot tea please.” To compensate for my slowness, I brightened up self-consciously, speaking in a high-pitched tone, hastily, “I am

ready to order. I would like to have the breakfast sampler 4, with hash brown and bacon.” The waitress, most likely a young college student, whose big clear eyes were now puzzled, asked, “I beg your pardon, which sampler did you say?” I calmed down, somewhat deflated but eased, spoke curtly in a monotone, “Number 4,” and put four fingers up. The change was dramatic, and the waitress might have noticed it, as when she left, her smile was quizzical. Disengaged at the moment, I was awash with the humming sound in the background; the sound hit somewhere inside my brain, bounced back, and caused a rippling effect that made me nauseous.

Everybody’s face seemed to glimmer with light. I observed one face at a time. They were aglow, alive, and intimate. But there was an invisible shield all around me, locking me inside and preventing anything from penetrating me. Deserted? By whom? Then the waitress brought out my food. She gingerly laid it down on the table. “Thanks,” I said, but I regretted having said it. My voice was too tiny, hidden mostly in my throat and failed to make it through. I was so conscious of being completely out of place. I stiffened up, started to chew uneasily but could not taste my food. I was almost in tears when an elderly waitress, short and plump, carrying a pot of hot coffee, asked me in a voice tender and smooth, naturally affectionate, “Care for some coffee, kiddo?”

The voices around me rose and fell, sometimes blended into a consonant hum, sometimes as distinctive as one single wave, falling in and out of my hearing.

“... they got big money to map the human brain. There was this article I sent to you, an editorial in Nature. One of the PIs said that the dirty little secret in this trade was nobody knew what they were doing, they just dissected things then mapped them. They didn’t have an overall idea,” someone nearby said. It came from the group occupying the only table that could seat more than four people, next to me.

And someone else even nearer, “There are highly accomplished engineers who devote their lives to their professions. They choose to mute their feelings, which have caused great trouble in their personal life. But that might be a necessary sacrifice for one’s career.”

I glanced at the man who was talking. He was in his thirties, cleanly shaved, crew cut, a narrow poised face, and an even toned voice. His white shirt buttoned to the top. He was introducing himself to the woman sitting next to him, as an electrical engineer doing circuit design. There was a certain pride in his voice, monotonous as it was.

The woman chuckled. “Mute their feelings? Probably they are incapable of feelings.”

“Even toward my family, I would adopt a way to agree or disagree with them, such that I would say I agree with you 80%, or 30% ...” The man said.

“You moron!” I heard my own voice. It was like hissing, furious. I looked around sheepishly, but the whole setting continued without the slightest stir, as if I didn’t exist. It was creepy.

The woman asked the man, “By what do you judge them wrong or right?”

When the group stood up to leave, a man stopped two steps away from me, appearing to answer someone’s parting inquiry of his son:

“Oh, Tommy? He got this book on invertebrates. He is so fascinated by it, and he has found this coolest thing, a little worm called planarian. Do you know about this worm? Ah! Flat, it has an arrow shaped head, two eyes on the top. The cool thing about it is if you cut it in half, horizontally, the head would grow a tail and the tail would grow a head. They will be just fine. You cut lengthwise, right side would grow left side, left side would grow right side. If you just slice the head part, but not the body part, longwise, it would grow two heads. Tommy asked me to get this worm for him. I am going to the biology department to see if they have any.”

I sighed, remembering Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* John bought for me, for I had been terrified and fascinated by another book of hers *A Wizard of Earthsea* and hesitating over I should read more of her stories. I then paid my lunch and left. Walking out into the street, I lingered. The hush of my pale apartment appalled me.

I passed the lawyer's office. Not much had changed except now the trees were all skeletons. I still remembered vividly the last time I had stood here, right after I signed the divorce paper and stepped out of the lawyer's office. The summer sun was baking me. The heat was vulgar, but my mind was clear, clear in a way only when devastation was so complete so final that all emotions were dead and a mind emerged curiously unburdened.

Across the street, there were a jewelry shop with a plate over its dark quietly recessed entrance inscribing their proud service of sixty years, a chic restaurant with a wreath hung at the door, and a wall of window displaying intimate lingerie of a sex toy shop, and a casually disarranged pawn shop with Spanish words brushed in red ink on its outer wall claiming that they spoke Spanish 93.876% of the time (a joke?). Cars streamed by in an orderly way. Everything was still the same, basking in its own history and personality. Nothing actually changed, so orderly it flowed; then and now. Continuity, wasn't it?

In the summer when I had stopped here, the flow of the world had created an odd scenario such that my ruin was excluded or too insignificant to be worthy of noticing. Standing outside the lawyer's office I had puzzled at its strangeness: "Why am I feeling so dead, so dead? Why am I still here? Why has everything become so vivid? Why?" Even the thought was so vivid that I cocked my head to study it a little. It appeared to be a detached entity. It was strange and new and real.



Then John had come out after me. He paused by my side. Civilized as he was, he intended to hug me and maybe say a few generous words about my future. I just watched him. He was as strange as everything. Then in his face emerged that peculiar expression of his, guarded, looking down upon me with his remote azure gaze. I could read his silent eloquence accusing me for the failure of the marriage, “it’s all your fault. You are a hard, arrogant woman”. This conviction would carry on perpetually. But what did I care? He was irrelevant, pretty much like the trees lined along the two sides of the street, the permanence of the jewelry store, the feminine fuzziness of the restaurant, and pinkish gaudiness of the sex toy store. What did the world, in its orderly otherness, have to do with me?

This sense of not being in the world and those questions rose again while I stood outside the law office. The air suddenly chilled. That pale white imprint of the sun disappeared. It started to drizzle, sharp and feathery ice coming down sporadically. I was curious. And somehow besides the questions, I was aware of my curiosity. Maybe —, I thought, my curiosity could help me find the path to myself. Wasn’t it Joe Kenzie who had said his strongest drive in life was his curiosity?

The day the university opened, the sun was dazzling. It was the first definite sun after a long period of gloom. I stepped out of my apartment into the brightness outside, as if plunging into a vast openness from a long cavernous existence. Elated, almost dizzy.

The semester eventually started after being delayed twice by the weather. Students with their backpacks bounced past me on the sidewalk. Melting ice dripped down from twigs. Fallen branches, topped with a thin sheet of partially melted ice, soaked dark by the continuously dripping thaw, were piled high along the edge of front yards. A green truck was picking them up with its long angled arms, advancing staggeringly and stopping every few steps, puffing and grumbling. I walked toward the university, to my first class, surprisingly hopeful.

The classroom had a rectangular wooden desk in the center with chairs around it. We could all be seated along the desk. Silver-haired professor Sparks called the roll. "I am glad everybody has survived the weather and made it to class safe and sound," he said.

"Barely," a boy said. We laughed and eased into the class.

"This semester we shall experiment with writing an autobiography and a short story. There is something particular I want you to pay attention to, since this could be the beginning of your writing career," professor Sparks started. A pensive man, somewhat frail and slightly stooped, he might be in his seventies or even older. He had scintillating thoughtful eyes. And they were those rare eyes that appeared naturally receptive, calm and deep like an ocean. Meeting those eyes was like an encounter.

I had seen this kind of eyes. Among my earliest memories was a repeated scene in which I stood looking up at my grandpa, at his eyes, those fluidly shimmering eyes that seemingly always contained many mysterious things, and while watching me there was a hidden smile just

on the verge of breaking onto the surface. Even as a child with no clear idea of beauty or sublimity and with no capacity to interpret, I was, nevertheless, involuntarily piqued by them as something unfathomable and endearing, wrapping me in his securing kindness, which held, as I realized much later in life, my understanding of the world: safe, continuous, and limitless. Even when I grew into my thirties, I would still sometimes stop to be captivated while encountering those eyes, murkier then and buried under bushy white brows in a much worn body.

It was cozy inside the classroom.

“Since this could be the beginning of your writing career –,” professor Sparks repeated, “I want you to ponder what constitutes good writing, pay attention to it when you are engaged in your writing. The ability to discern good writing from bad is as crucial as writing itself. They shall grow on each other –”

The professor spoke deliberately and enunciated clearly. He paced around in a meditative sort of way. The class followed him in hushed wonder, hanging onto his words that vibrated the sunlit afternoon quietude.

“Voice, style, form, choice of words, structure of sentences, and construction of atmosphere are intertwined. Is there a better style or form? Are short sentences better than those long meandering ones? Is Hemingway who liked to tell as little as possible, better than Dostoyevsky who liked to tell everything? What are the criteria to judge? And how are those components, after all, tied with authorial intention and horizon – what he wants to convey, what she wants to impress, consciously or unconsciously, within the scope of the author’s understanding?”

Though I couldn’t understand most of what he was saying, I sensed an electrifying vibe in this opening, and its implied complexity of an organic whole. The short speech was like a

blunt force that opened the floodgates of my mind. Many vague ideas that had once tentatively appeared in my thinking tried to elucidate themselves all at the same time, and to connect each other into clarity.

There was something more essential than plots and wording, something invisible and ineffable that dances behind the physical manifestations of a literary work. Plots were carriers. I didn't know how to describe this essential thing; or if it was even describable.

Chinese poetry, with just twenty or thirty characters, could create worlds, enabling readers to enter and experience a cosmic order. It was not merely words. It was first and foremost the writer's capacity in arranging a few simple ordinary characters into something ineffably sublime and deeply worldly. It was the architecture of a mind: the shape and form were already there, while carefully chosen words revealed them.

My classmates, young and hopeful, sputtered with energy talking about their ideas of a good writing, their favorite books and why they were good.

“... use verbs and nouns instead of adjectives or adverbs ...”

“My favorite book is *Moby Dick*. The first line is catching: Call me Ishmael ...”

“I would prefer Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*,” a boy said, laughing. “It is so hilarious that the Heaven turns out to be so much like the Hell. I wish one day I can write something of the sort that turns everything upside down. It would be very satisfying to me.”

The girl sitting next to me asked, “Can I say something that might be incorrect?”

“Trust your instinct, Megan. ‘Incorrect’ interpretation could be a more interesting one,” professor Sparks said.

“I took a reading class last semester. One of the books was Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*. We had an in-depth analysis on it. But no matter how much we got from the book, I

could not dispel the impression that Thomas Hardy has erected a huge edifice, but his characters cannot fill the space and prop it. His characters, Jude and Sue, and especially Sue, seem too thin in their personality structures. They are more like echoes in Hardy's overstretched space."

Professor Sparks nodded encouragement.

Megan waved a few stapled pages, her hoop earrings dangling. "Then this short story you sent out before the class, titled 'Encounter', is a story about human connections: a man and a woman meet and fall in love. The idea is fine. But it is so flat and stoic in feeling. Everything is isolated. The author stands at a faraway spot and picks up a few superficial facts, then uses the word 'smitten' to sum up those facts to dictate how we should view the relationship between the characters. It feels wrong. It is as though we don't know human connections any more. Reading it makes me sad."

There were several murmurs of agreement. I had a similar feeling about the piece, but I could not articulate it. Only through Megan's words could I see it clearly. I smiled at Megan appreciatively.

At the end of the class, professor Sparks summarized: "We have covered some important aspects about writing. I think Megan touches upon an essential issue: the relationship between authors and their characters. Let's admit that authors are the true soul of their stories. In fictions, they create characters, but not all characters are created from the same depth. They might be for the purpose of ideology, or for understanding humanity. The former is often a closed system, while the latter can be open, but it depends on individual authors.

"What is really an author's role in a piece of writing? The best metaphor I can give is that an author should be a mirror, but this mirror is subject to interpretation. No two authors, though both can be mirrors, have the same angle, width, or depth. An author's width and depth of

reflection can be small or large, shallow or deep, determined by his horizon acquired through his own experience and understanding. Hypothetically he can stand at the origin or a certain end of deconstruction, and see all phenomena rise and fall in front of his eyes and understand their inner intricacy. Phenomena need to reflect something more universal, otherwise the writing would be flat, one dimensional.

“An expansive writer would have a great understanding about myriad phenomena and their implications. He would have a great freedom in choosing his prism of observation, creating and orienting his characters. A tiny mirror may only reflect some facts, but does not know what is really behind those facts; he may resort to use his judgments, then readers may feel the reading experience is manipulated. This demands a deep understanding about how the world works. So to write is a life-long learning journey. Bon voyage.”

So concluded my first class, a start of a journey.

I woke from a fitful sleep to the pattering sound of rain, pa-da, pa-da, its monotone vexing me. Friday, as usual, became difficult for me. It was probably already 10 o'clock. But I did not want to get up. There was nothing to do. I was exhausted even before I could drag myself out of the bed.

Downstairs, a door was shut with a loud thud. "Oops, I am so sorry!" Zackary Fisher who lived in one of the bottom flats cried, thumping down the stairs, the whole building vibrating with his steps. Even in my room I could see the wide grin and smiling eyes on his chubby face. An easy smile, like that of an idiot, wholeheartedly and no guile, erupted directly from the soul then settled down in one piece on his eyes and brows.

I pulled my robe draping over the chair by my bed, taking time to get up.

Four weeks into the class I was certain I waxed and waned in a weekly cycle. I would be energized by my anticipation for the class on Monday, then peaked in mental clarity on Wednesday – my last class in the week. On Thursday, I would be absorbed in my homework and reading through online communications. After all was done, my energy evaporated, mental clarity disappeared, that dreadful foggy came back heavy and sure-footed, and I was at a loss.

I preferred spark; I could have fantastic thoughts even though it felt like madness. The spark shone too blindingly, and I could extract a silver thread of inspiring thought. It was too charged with energy to be comfortable, agitating me with a rapid onslaught of thoughts, like a full-speed freight train that could not be stopped. It deprived me of my sleep. But this foggy was the real disease, a cloak that muted all the liveliness in the world such that I lost sight of a better time. Life was not worth living.

“You should be aware, you have a bipolar tendency, not full blown yet, but you oscillate.”

John’s breath tickled my ears. I swirled around. Nothing there certainly.

I had hated him for that. It was a couple years before our divorce, on a return flight from San Francisco. After that we never flew together. I didn’t remember what had led to it. But it had flooded me at that moment, every cell in my body alarmed, alive like a hive with millions of headless bees, who just found out that they were headless but not dead. It was as if the most intimate part of me was being forced open, exposed, the idea sinking in, shuffling through and realigning me. Emotions had run amok: indignation, aversion, disbelief, but mostly, sorrow and a bone-chilling understanding. Incapacitated and spell-bound by John’s lack of sensitivity and god-like certainty in labeling me, I had imagined a scene: someday when I was struggling with my death, John would come over, observe me, and declare: “You should be aware, you are going through death.” So no fuss. But what rattled me even more was the suggestibility and vulnerability my mind had experienced, and how completely off-guard I was when I was stamped so ruthlessly by someone I had trusted.

It was an implant. It gnawed at me now. A menace.

My stomach grumbled, but I had no appetite. Outside the rain was falling. Barely any car or person or animal passed by. It was the spring rain outside and the earth might soon bud with the promise of life; but inside me was the utter blandness of a barren ice land under a gray sky, sameness everywhere, with no shadow to make a contrast. I could not remember how it felt to be happy.

I wanted a respite most of all, a respite away from this constant onslaught of the mental unrest, active or passive. I didn’t care for either mental brilliance or sluggishness. I just wanted to curl up somewhere, wrapped inside something soft, to have a real solid rest, just like when I



slept in my bedroom in the attic of my childhood house, my grandma's footsteps echoing around when she came up to tuck me in in some winter evening. I probably would never have it again.

It was Wednesday again. The sun was out. The winter chill seemed to have lifted. Lawns were starting to turn green, and oak trees were dotted with pastel reddish brown buds. I could feel the vigor of the approaching spring. It was pleasant. I started a new routine: when the weather was good, I explored the campus before my class at 3PM.

Tents were set up on the lawn. Student organizations were recruiting, passing out free long-sleeve shirts and water bottles. A girl of Latino origin stood by a tent with a poster board erect in front of her: "Brown Lives Matter." A white boy stood a few steps away from her: "Blue Lives Matter." Then a tall white boy inserted himself in between, carrying a seemingly improvised poster: "My Life Matters." It added a comical look to the scene, and the girl, apparently his friend, appeared to be scolding him, as I caught some of the girl's high pitched voice: "Chris, I am serious." A bearded man in his sixties holding a poster that said "Evolution = Racism    Abortion Causes Breast Cancer" stationed himself silently at one end of the avenue. When I passed him, he pushed some printed material into my hand. I folded it into my bag.

At a recycle bin, I pulled out the material to throw it in. But I caught a familiar face on the poster. It was Joe Kenzie's! I sat down on a bench to read it. It was indeed the image of Joe Kenzie, along with those of five other professors from the department of biology, the "lazy overpaid ideologues who openly bash Christianity and force their atheist 'religion' upon naïve vulnerable students", as the poster accused. Along with each image were listed the salary of each professor and the number of the students currently in their classes. The poster called out to students to expose them by making recordings of their lectures, and to name them.

I studied the bearded man. He still stood silently, carrying his enlarged poster that had two sides, erect and determined like a statue. Now I could see the other side was the same six images I had seen.

Then I saw Joe Kenzi walking toward the man! I gasped, bolted away from the bench. But Joe just passed him, and the bearded man pushed some material into his hand.

When Joe came near me, I asked, "Have you seen the poster? It has your photo in it!"

"I know. My friend Mildred told me about him. The guy has been going around with those posters. He was in the rally several days ago at the state capitol. He told Mildred that I was the evilest of all. Mildred told him that he was telling her about her friend. She sent me some photos."

"He didn't recognize you just now?"

"No. But I recognized him."

I frowned. This impersonal hatred was too creepy.

"How are you?" Joe said. "I saw someone that looked like you a couple weeks ago. Rebecca and I have thought you might have moved away. I am glad you are still here."

I stammered. Things flooded back to me. Joe being so close frazzled me. "I am fine," I said. "I am taking a class this semester. It's about to start. I have to go. See you later?"

I hurried into a building nearby.

I wondered why I had to flee from Joe. There was something repulsive in him being so physically close. It brought John too close to me. The past started to grab me. But those summer evenings Joe had walked from his house in the valley to ours and sat with us in our room where a bay window faced the hill ridges and the oak forest were pleasant hours. Joe was our friend. I served him water before I retreated to my lazy chair and left them to their reminiscence and

fancy. Joe came for John. They all came for John, while I made the space amicable and pleasant. That had been my position, a strange position, and I had lost it.

The building belonged to the department of philosophy. An old building, the window could still be opened to let the air in. There were desks piled with used books with a sign “Free Books to Go” along the shadowy hallway. I randomly picked one after another, until I saw this small book by someone named Ernest Cassirer. The pages had yellowed and crisped; the binding had become loose so a layer of transparent tape had been applied. Inside the cover signed in blue ink “R. Ray, Jerusalem, 1971”. I sat down on a bench by the desk and opened the book, and was immediately enchanted:

That self-knowledge is the highest aim of philosophical inquiry appears to be generally acknowledged. In all the conflicts between the different philosophical schools this objective remained invariable and unshaken: it proved to be the Archimedean point, the fixed and immovable center, of all thought.

It was underscored, probably by R. Ray.

It was a strange reaction from me, being enchanted by an apparently pedantic piece of work. It was more like something John would read, instead of me, but I sat there as if I had turned over a stone and discovered a cave of an unfathomable secret for the first time, its intriguing depth gazing back at me: something about self, about me. Why was I still here but I felt so dead? My thoughts had been floating around it vaguely, but with the book I sensed some sort of landing, like my random thoughts could be contained inside a theme that could indeed be studied, rather than being vain and empty pipedreams. The tender afternoon sun splayed a square of golden rays by my feet; there was something inexplicable and unexpected, a sort of joy, rising inside me, at a philosophy book.

So someone had written about this elusive self. Many people might have peeked into this self, like Ernst Cassirer, who recorded his glimpse in this book, and R. Ray, who had an interest

in what Cassirer had seen. It was as if I now stood among a group of spelunkers coming down through ages, a kinship bound by each individual glimpse toward a common cave. For the first time in a long while, I felt company, a belonging.

Then I came upon this paragraph:

Ethnology shows us that primitive tribes usually are gifted with an extraordinarily sharp perception of space. A native of these tribes has an eye for all the nicest details of his environment. He is extremely sensitive to every change in the position of the common objects of his surroundings. Even under very difficult circumstances he will be able to find his way. When rowing or sailing he follows with the greatest accuracy all the turns of the river that he goes up and down. But upon closer examination we discover to our surprise that in spite of this facility there seems to be a strange lack in his apprehension of space. If you ask him to give you a general description, a delineation of the course of the river he is not able to do so. If you wish him to draw a map of the river and its various turns he seems not even to understand your question. Here we grasp very distinctly the difference between the concrete and the abstract apprehension of space and spatial relations.

This paragraph was so powerful. Instantly I saw two sets of eyes: one concrete and embedded, navigating the canal through senses and body memories; the other set, abstract and hovering, watching over a great expanse of space, in which, this primitive man navigating through the canal was just one concrete spot in a larger field of perception.

And my inward looking eye that rose in such a lucid way, so unnervingly calm and stand-alone, might not be just my madness. It was real. It was impersonal, abstract and hovering.

I slid the book into my purse, and left for my class.

In the class Professor Sparks passed out reading materials, one of which was about the authorial mentality T. S. Eliot delineated. A sentence caught my attention: “The progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality.” In the class there was a general confusion about how a continual self-sacrifice could be envisioned in an artist. It was hard to imagine, as the class claimed. The discussion brushed past it, and the professor didn’t press on it.

But it aroused in me an acute anguish. “The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passion which are its material,” Eliot stated. Where would Eliot get this idea if he had not experienced it? At least he might have glimpsed it. It was not an idea, it was a mental state. The schizophrenic quality of this mental state pierced me, and like a traumatized person who could be aroused by the slightest cue, I reentered the days when I had been stranded in my apartment, and the walk I took downtown like a floating element without connection. I shuddered at those words. Was this mind nihilistic? To be a writer was to train for a nihilistic mentality? Wasn’t I already nothing at this moment? A living dead?

Or would Eliot actually suggest that an artist’s mind could become more objective, more perceptive and transparent, so less mired by his own biased judgments confined by his localized personality? Like Professor Sparks’ mirror metaphor?

After class was let out, I sat there alone, still puzzling over the material.

Faulkner Hall was calm at this hour of the day. Most classrooms were empty. Occasionally some sound could be heard behind the closed doors of a couple of classrooms where classes were still going on. From the next room flew out Professor Cashea Johnson’s robust voice. It was an infectious voice, mellow, soothing, and delightful to the ears. One could envision its deep source like lava, hot, energetic, candid, yet vulnerable. “White people think we write too much rhapsody, and too little intellectuality.” It cut into the afternoon calmness like an exclamation mark, but ever so natural, and blended.

A thinner voice responded: “That’s interesting. As I told you last Friday, I attended the banquet at the end of the conference. One of the keynote speakers, a poet, happened to sit beside me. What’s his name? No matter. He asked me what I was doing. I said I was a PhD student in

literary criticism. He positively stared at me, ‘so oh you are studying literary criticism’, and proceeded to equate my study with killing kings, killing animals, and killing poetry. Then he turned to the girl next to me. She was an undergraduate double majoring in literature and medicine. He told her first not to go to medical school, because he was a radiologist before he became a poet. He cherished so completely the artistic part of his life that he actually told me that I was digging myself a hole right now.”

They chuckled. The building was lulled by those sporadic leisurely conversations. Space. It was easy to see. Everybody spoke from somewhere.

It seemed I had no voice or stance, but I was absorbing things that came to my perception. I wondered if being enchanted by a philosophy book was a loss or a gain. They had been too convoluted to appeal to me in the past, but now they were able to illuminate me. I felt like a ghost floating around, completely detached, yet intellectually sound.

The weather was getting better and it was comfortable being outside. I resumed my jogging. Somehow I found there was much to see outside. I even could sit down with Joe Kenzie when we ran into each other, which was often, for he taught on Monday and Wednesday afternoons.

I asked him, “I remember once you said your strongest drive in life is curiosity. What does it do to you?”

“About curiosity?” he asked me, surprised at my question. He thought for a while. “You should have seen that faded, enlarged black and white photo print I have on the wall of my study, right? It is a baby wobbling on a winding path inside a forest, looking up in wonder.”

“Yes, I remember it. What about it?”

“It is my favorite photo print. I found it many years ago in a record shop. The baby is so tiny, a fresh new thing, surrounded by the immense forest. I can almost see the unsteady wobbles of the baby, pausing at a certain moment, taken by the sight and sounds – the rustle of leaves, the chirping of birds, the wind on the skin, and the gurgling of a stream behind the scene. Yes, behind the scene, I sense it. Isn’t cool? Imagine how much he is taking in, and how fresh and new everything is to him: every sight, every sound, every scent, and every sensation on his skin. Is the forest pristine to him just as he is pristine to the world? Or are they pristine because he mirrors it from his pristine perception? The child, carried by his own little chubby legs, is explorative. His arms stretched out, his head tilted toward a certain direction as if something catches his attention. That is curiosity. It drives us to explore the unknown, and nature is an immense space full of the unknown. There are endless mysteries.”



I could detect a touch of wonder in his voice. It filled me with joy. Joe's path seemed to have no start and no end, full of possibilities.

After Joe went to teach, I sat on a bench reading a book. A man walked over to the lawn across the avenue. He was in his thirties, well groomed, slender, crew cut, attired with a coat, a suit and a tie. He laid down his carry-on sized bag against the trunk of a maple tree, on top of the bag he meticulously folded his coat, and on top of the coat he placed a book. All set, he paced along the sidewalk back and forth for a while, stretching his neck and shoulders. Afterwards he appeared to start a monologue accompanied with some hand gestures. All of a sudden, he jumped and swirled three hundred sixty degrees. His voice grew louder. I could pick up some words: homosexual, Bible, marijuana; and sorority girls had sex with the whole football team, and if one started marijuana they would surely move on to heroin. Some students stopped to listen for a while, moved on. A stout young man, apparently a student, remained, head inclining a bit forward to balance his bulky backpack, listening intently.

Eventually he asked the orator, "What are you doing here?"

"What am I doing here? Are you a homosexual?" the orator asked back, moving closer toward the edge of the lawn.

"I am not a homosexual, but thank you for assuming."

"Do you claim to be a Christian?"

"I do claim to be a Christian."

"What kind of church do you go to?" the orator pressed on.

"I go to a non-denominational church."

"OK. So what's your problem here today?" the orator tossed back the question to the student.

“What’s my problem today? You are a bigot. You are spreading hatred. You are not accepting people as they are. You call them morons, whores.”

The orator made another swirl, clapping his hands. “I believe even a whore could stop whoring; they could become a ho-no-mo. And if you are homosexual, you could become ho-mo-no-mo.”

“This can’t be, can’t be!” a girl exclaimed. Crowd started to form now that a debate was underway.

“What’s wrong with being homosexual? Why can’t people choose what they want to be?” the stout young student asked.

“The Bible says it’s against nature.”

“The Bible is written by man.”

“By holy men!” The orator tilted his head, assessing his debater. “You seem to be a homo sympathizer to me.”

“Sure. I am a homo sympathizer. I can wear that label, loud and proud. Give me a nametag, a T-shirt, I would wear it. I would say to the homosexual people: you are loved, you are valued.”

“Oh, then you are telling them lies. They are sinners. The Bible says to warn them. You are spreading fake news.”

“You do not represent Christianity. You do not represent Jesus Christ. I am going to ask you to stop doing what you are doing.” The student raised his voice.

“Then tell me how is homosexuality good for humanity?” the orator asked.

“It doesn’t matter. Somebody loves somebody else. It is not your business.”

“It reduces over-population,” someone shouted from the crowd.

The orator nodded at the direction of the voice. "That's true. The homosexuals infect themselves with AIDS. And they are suicidal also. It's a very dangerous life style."

"They are suicidal because of people like you. It's dangerous for them because people like you exist and hurt them and threaten them. You are the problem," the stout debater cut in again.

"Oh. I hope you don't have any kids."

"I hope I do, so as to get rid of people like you."

"You don't like people like me." The orator sighed audibly.

"Change the way you speak and think, and gather and learn some correct information. You can still do that."

Another voice shouted from the audience, "Don't do the devil's work in God's name!"

"I am Christ like," The orator muttered. "I used to sin. I used to be like you people. I used to get drunk. I used to smoke marijuana. Worst of all, I used to hang around a woman who loved sex. But not anymore."

"You should start to smoke marijuana again. It would do you good," a girl suggested.

"Jesus is against people like you," the stout student debater said.

"No, no, no. I used to be like you. I think you should stop watching CNN. You watch CNN, right?"

"CNN is very factual."

"Okay." The orator made a hand gesture to surrender, and moved away from the debater, scanning his audience that had swelled. "Is there anyone else who has meaningful questions about the homosexual?"

"They are born gay," a boy shouted from the crowd.

“Nobody is born gay. It’s a choice. I know the popular saying is that sexes are socially constructed but gay is genetic. Listen to yourself, what kind of logic it is!”

“What’s this about?” A tall thin boy just passed by, surprised at seeing such a big gathering, and stopped to check it out.

“You can also choose not to be a hateful bigot. You can choose to shut up your mouth and do some research,” the stout student debater said.

“What do you study?” The orator moved closer to his debater.

“Political science.”

“Oh my goodness! A waste of money, I hope nobody is paying for that.”

“No, I am paying for myself.”

“Oh, thank God. Don’t blame yourself if you don’t get a job, for it is some dumb degree. You are just a freshman, so you don’t know much. You will learn.”

“I know much more than you.”

“Why don’t you turn normal just like me?”

“Normal? Why are you normal? Because you are hateful? I turned from someone like you because I realized what I did hurt other people. You should learn too. Well, I am going to class. I hope someday you learn what you are doing, and you learn to stop what you are doing.”

The debater walked away from the crowd.

“You are not going to class. You are going to hell!” the orator shouted at his debater.

“See you there.”

“I am going to heaven. I am going above, and most of you will go to hell.” He gathered himself back to his audience, and asked, “Where was I?”

“You are going to hell,” the crowd shouted.

“You can become renewed. You can become born again. Some of you people who have lost virginity can become born-again virgins.” The orator resumed his monologue. Then he caught someone in the audience.

“Are you a man or woman?” he asked the person.

“I am a woman,” the voice drawled.

“A woman?” The orator eyed the person with suspicion.

“I am sexually identified as a helicopter,” another voice volunteered.

“Who are you?” the orator pressed upon the drawling person.

“You want to come here check?” the voice drawled a challenge.

“No, I don’t want to check. I am just kind of suspicious about you.”

“Good. Good to be skeptical.”

“I am gay,” a boy said.

“Students, we have a gay person in the crowd,” the orator declared.

“You have a lot of gay people in the crowd,” shouted several voices.

“I think the gay are starting to come out of the closet.”

“I just came out of a class,” the boy said.

The clock from the tower tolled half past one, and the crowd started to disperse, into different classrooms. The orator receded to his spot by the maple tree, and resumed his monologue.

I watched the whole debate. I heard so many voices, each distinct, each more or less carrying a trail of history behind them, packed with information. They clashed with each other, but they belonged to a larger theater of humanity.

In that theater was my favorite author, Cao Xueqin, the 18th century nobleman who experienced an irreversible downfall of his clan and later wrote *Dream of Red Chambers*. It was as if I was encountering him for the first time. I seemed to see him standing there weaving everything together. He took nothing for granted. His perception might be both horizontal and vertical, both embodied and hovering. There was an arch that propped the architecture of his story, and that was his mind, a mind that could encompass a vast stretch of space and time in its unique rhythm, where he reflected like a mirror the three hundred plus characters who were all circling along, each in a unique orbit, coming into contact and creating a dynamic web of interactions that influenced and unfolded each person's fate in their world. He was a shapeshifter, entering his characters through empathy.

But I had no arch to prop, no view to organize anything. I could see, but could not weave anything into coherence. I felt again an embryo yet to grow a shape, a potential yet to be fulfilled. Everything was raw to me now. I needed to relearn and recreate. But I remembered that I once had in my possession something whole and good. I wanted to know how May-May had disappeared along with her wholeness and purity, her linear and sunny assurance, and how come I, May-May's phantom and perception, came to hover in this rootless, amorphous state.

## Part II: The Eye reflective: time

1

“How about you come with me to check the old house?” my mother asks me.

She is still eating lunch, always the last one to the table. When we are all seated for a meal, she wanders off to the balcony on the rooftop to start a new washing cycle or gather the dried clothes off the clothesline, or go out to her vegetable patch to remove the yellowed stems and leaves. If she doesn't do anything, she stands by the table, casually watching us eat, solicitous about what we like, rearranging dishes so that the favorite dishes of her favorite family members are close by. Chen-Chen and I are usually her favorites, with Chen-Chen slightly outcharming me, but seldom my father. After everyone else has eaten and left, she sits down in front of the leftovers, to have her meal alone in quietude.

I am about to leave the table when my mother asks. My heart skips a beat at her request. A “no” almost blurts out. But my great-aunt steps into the house. She says she is stopping by on her way to a seminar on health at the nearby community center. She shows us a dietary pill she has been taking.

“This Krill oil, you see the bottle, is imported from the Antarctic. A very good product, I can attest to it. I eat well, sleep well, even my joints don't hurt these days. Little Wang says that he will give me a discount and a free trip for two to Suzhou if I buy half a year's supply. I am gonna make my old Liu take it. He coughs all the time. I have asked him to take some nutritious pills, he rejects them as if I am trying to poison him. Look at me, I am healthy, all thanks to the pills I have taken these years. But he is so stubborn.”

She does look healthy, bustling almost. She is in her 80s now, but doesn't look her age. She speaks with conviction, and walks like wind. She sets down a bottle of Krill oil on the table.

“Try it yourself. If it’s good, you can get more from Little Wang. He is a sweet young man, very agreeable.” Grabbing her bag, she takes her leave.

My mother picks up the bottle, examining it. “How would she not be robust? Tumble around the town all day, playing mahjong, going to this seminar or that, pampered by salesmen, pampered by her daughters. All her three daughters give her money. Now she doesn’t complain she has only daughters. Anyway as long as those things don’t poison her, she can do whatever with her money.”

She turns to me, smiling. “Let’s go check the old house. What do you say?” She finishes the last morsels of her rice, stands up and gathers the dirty dishes.

I still swim in some kind of blankness, but I nod curtly, as casual as possible, while bending my head down to apply the double-sided tape on Chen-Chen’s fingers. He has just come up to me, clad from head to toe in his spider-man costume, asking me to stick his fingers with tapes. If I won’t go, my mother is bound to ask why. Me being 40 or 18 makes no difference to her. She would see through me the same as when I was 18; from a little clue of a small key, she could piece together a correct itinerary of that afternoon when my boyfriend and I ran away to a nearby village, and came after us. “I still fear her,” the boy would tell me, years later when he was already a man who had his own family.

The old house, or the old street, or the old town, for whatever reason, worries me. It appears dislocated, not in space (I know where it is), but in time: it has become a memory and I have buried it to relieve myself of it. With my mother’s brusque suggestion for a visit, the place is thrust forward as reality as if by a brutal force. It irritates me. Now it intrudes on me like something long dead brought back to life preternaturally, without a proper ritual.



For ten years I have not set foot in it. Every time I get to that part of town, I pause at its entrance, peeking into the alley. It lies there like a dream I dare not disturb, its material presence surprising me. The quick glance is fantasy-like. Startled like a bird, I always take a more tortuous route to circumvent it.

But my mother has been talking about the old town restoration since an unusual editorial made its appearance on the cover page of the local governmental newspaper during the summer months, campaigning and soliciting townspeople's sympathy for starting a new project to repair and renovate the old street. She photographed the article, sent it to me through WeChat.

“What shall we do with the old house?” she asked expectantly. She had been waiting for this to happen, she said. She had believed that this would happen, despite the fact that for some years, the old street was deserted and gradually declined, from being the only street of the town throughout its long historical heyday, to being a back alley, with sparkling modern buildings and wide roads sprung up at a hectic pace all about it, truncating its vein-like alleys, leaving only a few elderly to wander about its decaying space like specters.

The general belief had been that the old town would eventually be demolished to clear up the valuable acreage for lucrative real estate business, to erect a brand new town purged of any trace of its backward bygone. Several years back when I renewed my passport at the local security bureau, the officer studied my identification card, lingered at my address that indicated my origin in the old town. “Who would live there now? All ramshackle, no modern sanitary system, no place to mount an AC, no young people,” she scorned. “They are building a luxury apartment complex at the southern side of the town. It overlooks the river Ou. If you have money ...”

I read the editorial while on Parsons. Scrolling down the article on my Vivo phone screen, I detected a different voice in it. Devoid of the high-pitched stridency and authoritarian hardness usually innate to such an article, the voice was restrained, deeper, nostalgic, and lingering, so measured as to appeal to sentiment. It was more poetic than rhetorical, yet more effective. It invited the echo of personal emotion and provided the space for it.

The voice traced the history of the old town back to 2000 years ago, with the old street serving the vibrant commercial center throughout all its existence until recently, the wooden houses on it destroyed and rebuilt through several bouts of fire and uprisings. The article mentioned real people of the present day, and I knew some of them. Almost lovingly, the article exalted the old street as the heart and soul of the town, without which, we would become a shell without substance, with only featureless concrete skyscrapers and asphalt roads that spoke no history or our distinctive personality. To preserve the old town was to preserve ourselves. Its conviction was irresistible.

“Let me dress then.” I finish applying the tape on Chen-Chen’s fingers. He runs out all excited. I follow him out of the room to go to my floor to change, apprehension rising like sickness in me.

Chen-Chen spreads out his arms and legs against the wall, in motion as if trying to climb up like a spider-man. “Chen-Chen, this tape isn’t going to work. It’s too weak,” I tell him. He stops moving about, his mouth pouting, crestfallen.

“We need to come up with a plan,” my mother says, “a design, about how we would renovate the house. Let’s also see how other people have done with theirs.” She is in high spirits, the new project invigorating her. I am speechless, almost dumbfounded at the suggestion.

At the bus station, several elderly people are waiting. A chorus of voices is around me: “Master Wu, how did your wife’s operation go? Can she start to speak?” “ ... Farmer’s market has ribs on discount today. Maybe we should go there.”

Another woman hurries toward us. There is a sort of excitement about her. She gasps. “Oh, my! I just met Old Wu. He was dressed nicely, all neat and buttoned up and everything. I asked where he was going. Old Wu didn’t want to tell me at first, but there was something amiss, so I pressed on. He eventually said that he was going to hang himself in the pavilion in the hospital; he could not continue living; life is too miserable. He then broke down, saying that he had spotted two good places to hang himself, for he could not do it at home, to have his wife and children face the ghastly situation. Old Wu has always expressed such a sentiment. He is always so unhappy, you know. But this time it didn’t look like just talking, it was real, him being dressed up and having scouted out the places. I managed to persuade him and walked him back to his house, and got his daughter to watch over him. I am not sure if he is really stopped.”

“It’s hard to say,” a woman sighs sympathetically. “His wife looks down upon him, hardly talks to him. The children are good-for-nothing. The daughter goes out with hooligans. The son, I just heard, has lost a large sum of money to open a pawn shop that has failed. Could this be the trigger?”

I stand there saying nothing, for I don’t recognize the woman or know old Wu. After a while my mother turns to me and there is a hint of puzzlement in her tone: “You don’t want to say hello to Lin Shu’s mother? This is Lin Shu’s mother. Lin Shu was your elementary school classmate.”

I stammer. Of course I know Lin Shu’s mother: her shining black hair used to be braided into a pair of long strings, her body robust and movement graceful, pumping water from their

patio well with agility. But the woman in front of me is much wrinkled, shortened, with some teeth gone so her face is distorted, hair grayed, trimmed, and thinned to the point that some bald spots are visible. I don't know how to regard her: is she an acquaintance or a stranger? I have left the town for too long, and my visits brief, the traces in between erased for me.

But bafflement aside, I clearly see the hand of time working behind the scene, never showing its face, except for the marks of its work everywhere, like water dripping on a stone and drop by drop the stone eventually penetrated through, while you are not aware of it; only when you become conscious of it, the distinction makes you shudder. There is no fuss or farce in the process; it is all matter-of-factly and absolute.

We get off the bus at the entrance to the old town. The pre Spring-Festival cheer is palpable in the air. It is red everywhere: column after column of red lanterns galore, in oblong shapes, in round shapes, in square shapes; the couplets in golden or black ink on red slick papers; red gift boxes piled high in every shop. It is a sunny winter morning. Festoons swing slightly in the breeze. We walk through throngs of people stopping here and there selecting their goods. Every day is market day now. People from nearby villages bring their livestock, herbal medicine, ornate plants, pots, and sundry other items. Electrical bikes are laden with live chickens or ducks contained inside netted bags. Rice cakes steam on roadside stalls.

At the entrance, a giant 2-D rendition of "City Plan" fills one side of the wall of the three-story office building of the Bureau of Environmental Protection. Its colors are dashing in the sun: green for vegetation, blue for water, yellow for roads. Several people are studying the painting, pointing at the locations where the high speed train station will be, where the river park will be, and how many luxury apartment complexes are planned. "All those villages on the other side of

the river will be expropriated. The houses in this part will increase in value. The apartment in Happy Home costs 13,000 yuan per square meter now. Can you believe it? What a crazy world!”

My eyes are riveted on a giant camphor tree, the ancient camphor tree standing at the entrance to the old town. There used to be a creek and a stone bridge, with the camphor tree standing tall among wild bushes and berries on the bank. Now the creek and the stone bridge are gone, a paved crossroad in their place. The tree is still here, a lone oddity out of context, fenced in for protection. It is said to be 500 years old, an antique. I remember it since my memory starts. Every time I see the tree, I know I am home. I stare into the alley.

My gaze again is fantasy-like. There is the old street, and there is the rest of the world. To enter it is to traverse time. It is so intense and unreal.

While I still hesitate at the entrance, my mother brushes past me. I feel a comical jolt so completely in contrast with my near panicky state. She passes me. There seems no divide for her at the camphor tree between the ever expanding space and the old town. The transition I feel she doesn't experience. I imagine my mother at this point, her past continuously running to the present, and her space full of vibrant activities connected with townspeople which has created a rhythm that accords with her own, with no breaking points, no fault lines. It consoles me.

I don't know how another person who has not seen their childhood street for ten years would meet it again. I am timid, apprehensive, and hesitant. If the years are counted more accurately, I left my street at nineteen, and all the visits afterwards were brief, then completely stopped ten years ago. It stopped being my street ten years ago.

The cement road has been dug out and replaced with slab stones. Red lanterns are raised along the two sides of the street, indicating the street is old and traditional. When I was a child it used to be a cobblestone street. It then became cement road when I was still in elementary school. The first day when the street's cement was dried but still blocked from public use, we children had a test run on its smooth surface. We had a blast, and there was an accident. Now it is slab stones.

But things here and there echo back to me. The old well, now chained with a brass lid, obviously no longer in use, recognizes me. Our gaze unveils those scenes in summer evenings: people bathing by it, hoisting buckets of well water over their heads, water poured down and splashed off their bodies, they yelling or laughing with pleasure; women washing clothes and vegetables; my grandpa filling a bucket of water, slipping through a carrying pole, with me at one end, and him at the other, carrying the bucket to water our vegetable garden past the camphor tree, near the stone bridge. From a narrow alley whose end used to disappear into a crop field, I can hear children's running steps and laughter reverberating around from many years ago; it was us who were playing hide and seek.

Strangest are those elderly people. I can trace back to their younger looks, but just like Lin Shu's mother, there exists a blank gap of time. I don't know how to relate to them: are they acquaintance or strangers?

Old Liu, who used to be the ticket seller at the cinema near my old house, took some time to recognize me. “Oh, uncle Dajin’s granddaughter! That little wispy girl. I remember you. Wasn’t it you who accused me of stealing your dog, and came to cry at my door, insisting I return the dog to you. I had to find yours for you.”

“May-May, are you May-May?” Grandma Wang holds my hand, her eyes looking up at me but seemingly unseeing, milky and cloudy. “Do you come back for good? If your grandma were alive, she would be so glad.”

“How are your eyes?” I ask, squinting at her eyes. Almost thirty years ago, my grandma told me in a hushed tone that Grandma Wang would lose her sight someday, and it was Doctor Cai who told her. She admonished me never to tell, for it could not be helped as Doctor Cai said, so it was best that Grandma Wang would not be made to worry about it. I didn’t believe that boring and gossiping Doctor Cai of the street clinic could predict something so far away; anyway I never took it seriously. But seeing Grandma Wang’s eyes brings back the memory of that afternoon, my grandma’s telling, my little thought, and my slight about Doctor Cai. The gap of time seems filled.

“You know Liu Qiu passed away last year? He fell down, just like your grandma,” Grandma Wang mumbled about her husband. It perplexes me. I don’t want to hear.

Then my old house appears in front of me. More than anything else, it feels like a soulful thing staring at me, reserved and somber. It doesn’t appear to welcome or reject me, doesn’t approach or withdraw, just stands in its naturalness regarding me. It is as if our gaze is locked, present and full of intent.

The sunlight shines on the old paints left on the wooden door. My grandma used to brush the extra paint off on the door after she oiled lanterns to be sold. Many years’ application had left

an obscure texture and color that resembles an oil painting at a closer look. I seem to see our lantern shop. The old green iron mailbox is still mounted on the outer wall, a part of my grandpa's name still on a piece of paper glued onto the mailbox, his handwriting in ink. So many years later their traces still persist. But the awning on top of the second floor window is broken, gone also is a pane of glass. With large cracks between sunburned and chipped wood planks, and dust on the window sill, the house is dilapidated and ancient, but weathered and steeped in its soul, serene, secure, and silent.

I stare at my house while waiting for my mother to unlock it. The past glides so easily into the present in a continuous flow, as if my grandparents were about to come out of the door, and I have never left my town. All those years in between are moot, and don't count. I feel something hovering and abstract finding its way to my body. A gentle liveliness exudes, oozing through my body. Even the people passing by me start to assume the old intimacy, something belonging to the old street, and the transition of time becomes secondary. I am May-May again.

My mother unlocks the door. I peek into the shadowy recess. Apprehension starts to grab me again. A small opening above the chimney in the back wall and the second floor window admit some natural light into the cramped space. The house is so tiny, a sparrow's nest. My grandparents and I had live here for many years, and I had never noticed how small our house was, until one day I returned from my university in my twenties.

While I am peeking, that shadowy recess becomes bottomless; I see my grandpa entering it, into the long night of loneliness, the hollow space swallowing him. He had entreated me, "Can I just stay out for the night?" He was afraid of the space; he would rather sit outside in the street all night than go inside.

I have to close my eyes to shut out the image.



I follow my mother into the house, closing the door behind me. Now the inside is even darker, but it is just natural to me. By the faint light passing through the small opening, I, about four, had retrieved my first graphic book from a drawer in the sideboard and read it sitting astride the sill between the kitchen and sitting room. Now the sideboard still stands against the plank wall, its screen broken and partly missing. I open the drawer, empty now.

“Nobody would use this sideboard. It only takes up space. If it were not for you, I would have already let great-aunt take it and break it into firewood,” my mother says.

“When I move back for good, I can use it.”

She glares at me, but I know that glare isn’t really at me, but at my divorce, about which she has been mostly silent. My moving back means a failure. Suddenly I am aware that I might be the one who would bring grief into her life.

“This stair needs to be moved,” she comments

“It’s not rotten, only a few chipped places that can be easily repaired.”

“If we tear down this wall, we can unite two spaces. We can erect stairs at that corner. But the beams need to be reinforced.”

“Do we have to change it so much?” I am impatient.

“It’s hard to talk to you,” she snaps. “If it’s all up to you, the house will crumble. It needs fixing. And since we are going to fix it, why not make it good at one go? You won’t know how to do it. You won’t even do it. I shall make it comfortable for you before I also have to go.”

Silence falls upon us, air seemingly still. A rickshaw rumbles past outside.

We get to the second floor. Sunlight slants through cracks between planks, dust particles floating in the sheet of light. More than everywhere else, the sight exposes that the house has not been inhabited for years. I look up at the ceiling, astonished at how low it is. But I feel like the

child again, maybe two years old, looking up at the ceiling, marveling at its immense height, a cicada sung outside my window. This past and the present impose on each other. I can't hear my mother's plan for this floor.

I walk into my grandparents' bedroom. A skeleton of a bed is in the corner. I look down at the street from the window where a pane of glass is missing. "Watch the world?" my grandpa had joked. I can still hear it.

Across the street, the blacksmith posing to strike a piece of metalwork, three photographers are telling him, "Stop, stop, when I say one, two, you start to strike." So one two, a beautiful strike erupts, sudden and forceful, fire splashing about, cameras clicking, and light flashing. A perfect photo from the old street is born.

Someone calls downstairs, and my mother hurries down, while I climb up to my childhood bedroom in the attic. As soon as I loosen the latch and open the door, my grandparents' black and white photo comes into view. They watch me with the usual solicitude. It's all so vivid so present. I can even hear my grandma say, smiling at me, "May-May, you come back?"

My legs buckle. I kneel down in front of the photo. My head touches the dusty floor.

I sense my grandpa sitting across from me, repeatedly falling into a doze during the meal. Suddenly he wakes, chuckles lightly, "Oh, I slept, didn't I?" then starts to take a morsel of rice or a sip of rice wine, then his head nods and he falls asleep again; then wakes again. The circle repeats itself. I watch him, waiting, without awaking him; when he wakes we resume eating. A meal takes forever.

It was the last time we were together. I cooked for him, since my grandma had passed away. He was much shrunk, scrawny, out of shape, with a hollowed cheek, floating like a specter, and falling into sleep during meals. "Could I come to live with you in the USA?" he asked. I was

surprised, disbelieving, because he would not even move out of the old street. I could not imagine him taking buses, trains, airplanes, and living in the USA. He was so tied with the street. While I was thinking, he said, “Just a thought. How can I live anywhere else?”

But it was not the USA, it was not anyone else; it was me who he wanted to be with; it was me who he could have a world with ... but I brushed him off ... and he fell into his sealed doze ...

A cold truth. I know. Maybe I have known it in my dreams, and that’s why I no longer dream now. I sit on the floor, starting to rock myself, my mind blank, until my mother comes to collect me, and wipe my forehead clean of wet dust.

While we leave the house, I watch my mother close the door. Again, I see my grandpa enter the bottomless darkness of a long lone night, and me, so full of life, untouched by sorrow, running away to life, leaving him alone with the night.

A year ago on Parsons, I entered the dark pit of a void. I know how it is. I had opened that to my grandpa.

It's getting colder as the Spring Festival approaches. The wintry current from Siberia has brought heavy snow. Again, I sit at the desk in my study, looking out at the roofs of my neighbors, a notebook computer in front of me. My winter days on Parsons last year come back to me. Similar days, but here in my hometown it lacks a sharp edge. It is more dissipated, gently suspenseful. I am often at a loss, and don't know which way to turn. On Parsons, the whole world seemed to have collapsed, and I was an element adrift, nothing tethering me, isolated. But here, I seem to stand apart from an ocean of intimacy, familiar with its current, its texture, its temperament, except that I can't swim in it.

"Auntie?" Chen-Chen opens the door ajar, thrusts his head through.

"Yes?" I try to smile at him. Yesterday he complained that I didn't smile, that I looked stern. "Like I have done something wrong," he protested.

He opens the door, comes to me, and shows me a fluffy bear. "Grandma says you are not well. This is for you."

I study the bear. "But this is your favorite toy. You sleep with it. You really want to give it to me?"

He hesitates. A faint uncertainty passes through his chubby baby face before it breaks into a bashful smile. He withdraws the fluffy bear, says, "Not this one," and runs away.

A moment later, he comes back with a hanging monkey. "This is your present. This one is so much fun, you can carry it on your back, you can hang it on the door, you can feed it, ..."  
Again uncertainty passes through his baby face.

I laugh. “This is such a fine present. How about I play with it this morning? When you come back I give it back to you. I am a grown-up, so I only need to be with it for a little while then I will feel better.”

He nods, holding the monkey out to me. He then frolics away. From downstairs my mother is calling him to breakfast.

I place the monkey on the window sill. Maybe this is enough? This is home, this is my family: warmth, kindness, and love. But why do I feel I can’t find my way back? It is as if I am surrounded by good intentions, but I know it as knowledge and watch it through a tunnel, most of me still buried somewhere dark, fuzzy, and confusing.

My mother has not mentioned the old house since we inspected it three days ago. She takes to preparing for the Spring Festival. She is soaking and brushing *Indocalamus* leaves, washing the bamboo steamers. Two of her friends have just arrived, patting the snowflakes off, laughing, “Can’t believe you would take trouble to steam sugar cakes yourself. Not so many people would make it themselves nowadays.”

“It is true. What’s the difference between the New Year Day and every other day? We can buy everything any day. It is too much trouble to make a feast but not much gets eaten. People are spoiled. I am not going to make the New Year’s Eve dinner this year. We have made the reservation for it in the New Century Hotel. You need to hurry up if you want to do it too. The private rooms are all taken; you can probably reserve a table in the lobby.”

Everyone laments that the festivity is so diluted now. But stories, photos and videos of our vast nation mobilized on the most important trip home flood the evening news and websites. There one sees the most forceful motion of the Spring Festival, people coming home, by air, by train, by motorcycle, or even by foot.

I am drawn to the spectacle. Why do they have to come home? Maybe the anticipation of an ideal home is the high point of it. Maybe nobody wants to be left out in loneliness at this sentiment-laden moment. They look so happy coming home. But is there such a home?

The stars belong in the deep night sky  
and the moon belongs there too,  
and the winds belong in each place they blow by  
and I belong with you.

I used to recite those lines by M. H. Clark to John with pleasure, but now I fall silent at those simple words, at the solid assurance conveyed by them. I don't believe it. It is only a fantasy, an ideal. We may at some point meet it but we can't hold it for long. These small oases, those illusions of certainty and permanency in the vast changing world are what we try to preserve; sooner or later they will slip, and we will try to clutch it with desperate or even heroic effort.

This line of thinking has visited me again and again, since the first terrifying moment on Parsons last year when I entered its essence, the void. It was a lightning moment, piercing me with a blinding energy. It had reached the depth of pure existential loneliness. I have been long enough with this loneliness, repulsive at first and still raw and terrifying now, but I am more rational and I feel sad rather than terrified and so full of self-pity. I am in its territory now.

It is surrender.

Somehow it is not so scary. Snow is still falling. It reminds me of funerals, with trumpets blaring, paper money burning, and men chanting in a lingering tone. The soaring sound and the flying burnt paper pieces signify the disintegrating and transcending of a soul. I feel my inner world crumbling. I am so exhausted from trying to hold it together. It gets emptied out, it becomes quiet. It is like a blank sheet of paper, or a whitewashed room, or somewhere

completely rid of any clutter. I am light, empty, and mute, like a dead person resting on earth, eventually accepting the fate. There is a strange sort of comfort.

From downstairs, my mother and her friends' voices still find their way to my ears. It is as if they are on the other side of a transparent wall, but the wall divides life and death. I am in the realm of death, settled, untouchable. It's earthy, a gentle embrace. A respite eventually. The women's voices drizzle down on my land, otherworldly but intimate, like bubbles floating in front of me, illumined by snowflakes.

A realm of emptiness.

In the past year, it was nihilism, void, isolation, so completely wrong that I tried to jostle myself away from it but never succeeded; now it has become a field. I have gingerly placed myself in it and merged with it. It is okay. This place is steady. Not a half-way place, but a place beyond attachment, beyond weather, free. I am nothing.

Somehow I remember a question professor Sparks asked. It was about the first short story I had ever written "Cocoon." It was a mysterious question: "Oh, she doesn't know?" About what wasn't known to my character, I may never know. But the question pops up now and then, and I have wondered what my character didn't know, what he saw in my story that she should have known.

Now I wonder if he meant for me to get out of the cocoon, to go beyond the cocoon, to have a view up there at the cocoon. "I view every character as a site where external environment interacts with the inner mental structure. The inner mental structure contains the elements enabling us to be shaped by the external conditions, and the elements that give us the potential to transcend," he said. What if one transcends to a void?

The thought interests me. I find myself studying the story again while caring for the fire for my mother in the evening while she enters her intense mode of preparing for the dinner of the eve of Spring Festival. She is determined to make it into an abundant occasion, leaving nothing out, for me, the daughter who has not had a Spring Festival for fifteen years. In the kitchen, chicken, duck, fish, pork, seafood, bamboo shoots, freshly made tofu, all sorts of things, are all in their places. She is chopping, while I am tending the fire, and thinking of my cocoon and what is beyond cocoon ...



It could be owing to another bout of Siberian wind howling outside that inside the house it is particularly warm and perfect. It is a dry wind. Each burst quakes the house. The house shrieks sometimes, water tubes humming. I read *Monkey King* to Chen-Chen in an orange pool of light cast by my bedside lamp, his left leg on my thigh and head cuddled on my stomach, like a cat sprawling cozy on a heated bed.

My voice sounds to me like an ancient river flowing all the way into the present age: tender, tinkling, seemingly echoed by the wailing wind. I am content. Occasionally Chen-Chen utters a gurgling laughter or an exclamation, or lifts his head to appeal to me to repeat a passage. An illusion comes to me like a true belief that I have been reading to the child like this since the Stone Age, by a camp light burning in a stone pit on a leafy bed in a cave, shielded from forbidding elements lurking outside.

The sensation is hard to describe. It is as if I am in the moment, but meanwhile I watch the moment from a vast span of time, deeply conscious of its transience. This moment surely will not last. But at least we have such a deep moment in life that can prompt a sense of permanence. It is joy filled with pity.

After reading, Chen-Chen and I lie there listening to the wind.

I caress his ear. He likes it. “You walked too close to the ditch this evening,” I tell him. “It was getting dark. You could have fallen into the ditch and injured yourself. Be more cautious next time, okay?”

Chen-Chen squirms. “You always watch me, like I am a baby. I am six. I am grown.”

“But will you be careful?”

Chen-Chen seems to have a sudden enlightenment. “Auntie, you are not worried about anything else, like, grandma worried if I eat enough, mama worried if I am cute. You are just afraid that I might die.”

I stare at him, half appalled, half in awe.

Probably my stare makes him sheepish. On his face flickers his bashful shifting smile, but he doesn't want to give in, so he retorts somewhat defiantly in a singsong tone: “Why, aren't I right? Aren't you just afraid that I might die?”

After a while, he asks me what I write in my computer.

“Whatever comes to my mind. There are passages about you.”

“Me?” His eyes open widely.

“I can read some to you.”

He nods, smiling.

I fetch my computer, open the file. “Here is one. When you were four –”

*The school will start in a few days. This afternoon when I turned the corner, I heard Chen-Chen shouting urgently, “I am a sprinkler system! It's supposed to be like this! Don't you understand?!”*

*Then I heard my mother, half coaxing half demanding: “This is well water. It's too cold. What if you get sick!” The pitch in the “sick” became shrill. Then her voice got sterner, “I will come to drag you away if you don't stand up right away.”*

*I entered the front door. My mother stood on the porch while Chen-Chen sat on a plastic tube fixed on the ground. The well water splashed out of the tube. The hose attached to the tube was disconnected, hanging some feet away atop Chen-Chen's tortoise bucket. Beside him stood Pangpang the dog. Both were drenched from head to toe. Pangpang's head hung and she*

*trembled at my mother, dripping water all over, seemingly suddenly checked in the middle of a blast of fun, gasping. Chen-Chen was wiggling his butt defiantly but hesitantly. Obviously his wiggle directed the direction for water to spray, his target being the flower bed in front of him. He tried to avoid his grandma's stare, but his askance glances fully revealed to him that the dark clouds on his grandma's face were gathering fast, and she was about to charge toward him.*

*He stopped moving, his mouth pouting, his brows furrowed, his nostril contracting and expanding, his breath heaving, his whole shape bristling. But grandma didn't budge. She glared at him and waited for him to move away. After a while, he stood up reluctantly, mumbling:*

*"The sprinkler system is supposed to be like this. Don't you understand, don't you understand?"*

*I asked, "Chen-Chen, what are you up to?"*

*"I am the sprinkler, I am watering the flower, but grandma doesn't allow that." Now having company other than his grandma, he was full of grief at being wronged, his child's tinkling voice mingled with a desire to cry. But he walked to the second floor living room with me.*

*While he was searching through his toys, grandma came up to get him changed. She hoisted him on the bed, stripped off his wet clothes that clung to his body, dried him with a thick towel. Chen-Chen stood naked, his head sticking out from behind his grandma, speaking in earnest: "I want to play that rolling wheel –" He pointed the wheel to his grandma.*

*Chen-Chen giggles.*

I scroll up and down the file. Chen-Chen has morphed into many shapes: sprinkler, monk, tortoise, newspaper man, mechanics, the person who wanders the streets collecting used

appliances and old papers, etc. It seems every role he plays he enters the logic of it. It's so interesting.

When he sprawls on the ground carrying a round stool on his back as carapace, he is a tortoise who moves slowly and doesn't speak. He can remain in that position for a long time. When I speak to him, he has to stand up. He takes off his carapace and informs me, "I am a tortoise, not supposed to speak." It is the same when he is a sheep: he only bleats.

When he is the person who collects wasted appliances and papers, my mother drills an aluminum basin so that strings can be threaded through and he can carry it on his neck and shoulder, calling out for people to give him used stuff while beating the metal loud, just like the person who has come to the neighborhood collecting those things.

When he was younger, he collected stones and leaves, and was so enchanted by a cow that he had to go to see it grazing in the crop field every morning.

Isn't he exploring the forms that come into his perception, which expand and constitute his world? For every form or role he enters, he also enters its logic as he perceives it. A child as he is, he is showing me some fundamental aspect of the human being. I feel I am discovering Chen-Chen.

But I read on –

*I bought Chen-Chen some packs of firecrackers. Today the weather brightens up, and the sun is warm. Chen-Chen plays with the firecrackers at the corner outside of the house. He doesn't merely light a match or ignite the firecrackers to see them explode. Rather, he tears open each of them, pours the black powder onto a pile of wooden pieces, then uses a magnifying lens to direct the focal point onto the powder, suddenly, a small fire flares up.*

*"Where did you learn the trick?" I am amazed.*

*“I saw it on TV.” He is making three more piles. “I have learnt many things from watching TV. But you often forbid me to watch it.”*

He is seeing nature’s phenomena, maybe not its laws. He is learning the world in his own way. Not long ago when he started to learn counting, he could not put together 5+3, but if we asked him how many apples he would have if we gave him five of them then gave three more he knew right away it was 8.

Very soon, he glides into sleep. I read Camus’s essays on Sisyphus into the night. But I observe Chen-Chen occasionally in his sleep and am attracted by it. He is the opposite of absurdity, so affirmed in life and its vibrancy. He slumbers in such a peaceful way only a baby is capable of, with each complete breath. The breath is even and continuous, certain of the coming of the next one, and the next, ongoing into perpetuity. I can sense him wrapped inside his skin, all together, all radiating through: ethereal, formless, pure, and whole; it is open and cannot be otherwise; such a natural and fresh openness only belongs to a species that includes animal puppies or newly blooming flowers, scintillatingly tender, and innocently strong.

I’ve heard another kind of sleeping breaths that sound like husky sighs or murky whimpers, like that of my grandpa’s. Sometimes it is so heavy that leaves a trail that lingers into the next one. There is so much reluctance and ineffectual resistance. Sometimes the breath would stop, going silent like death. When the next one eventually comes, it carries so much reassurance and one sounds so relieved even in sleep. It is sad.

*Chen-Chen comes to me carrying his light, like a filtered sun shining on my frozen pallid land. When he runs away, he takes the light away with him, and I remain in my untouchable state. Is his mimicry a way to enter the world? I make my note.*