The poetics, politics and writing of memory

Robert Keith Percival

Southern Cross University
The Poetics, Politics and Writing of Memory

Bob Percival
Masters in Curating and Modern Art, (with Merit), University of Sydney (2008)

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

School of Arts & Sciences
Southern Cross University

20 August 2015
Thesis Declaration

I certify that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

I acknowledge that I have read and understood the University's rules, requirements, procedures and policy relating to my higher degree research award and to my thesis. I certify that I have complied with the rules, requirements, procedures and policy of the University (as they may be from time to time).

Robert Keith Percival

20 August 2015
Abstract

This composite thesis is a union between the creative, imaginative, and theoretical aspects of writing. The overall aim of its elaboration has been the creation and critical examination of the extended role of the ekphrasis in literature, particularly in the sphere of the poetics and politics of memory. The creative work draws on theoretical elements from Debord, Deleuze, Lefebvre, and Baudrillard and their concepts of the dérive, rhizomic structure and alienation, as a key to understanding the processes associated with memory, the pain of disconnection, and the need for belonging. Memory (in terms of its politics and poetics, and its negation and recovery) acts as a metaphor for political and personal repression, and finally as an agent in the process of reconciliation, redemption and, spiritual and physical healing.

The creative work *A Strange Chinese Tale*, is an extended ekphrasis of the post-modern political and cultural landscape of contemporary China, and is concerned with the individual’s search for identity and sense of belonging. The critical exegesis, *The Poetics, Politics and Writing of Memory* is an analysis and history of the ekphrastic project, specifically related to the poetics and politics of writing memory in the creative work *A Strange Chinese Tale*. The exegesis argues for the extension of the ekphrastic project into the domains of the photographic image and the ‘space of memory’. The creative work and the exegesis have their hope in “pinpointing ... the forgotten” (Maloney, 2006:88); those events, people and memories that have been excised from public knowledge; the ‘forced amnesia’ perpetrated by mechanisms of state propaganda and censorship.
Acknowledgements

Many thanks to principal supervisor Dr Grayson Cooke, and former supervisor Dr Baden Offord and for all their assistance, insight and understanding in the writing and formulation of this thesis. Their professional and personal guidance made the completion of this thesis possible. A special thanks to supervisor Dr Janie Conway-Herron for her incredible support throughout this five year project, and the extreme generosity shown in the sharing of her deep knowledge on the art of writing. This story of *A Strange Chinese Tale* would never have been told without your guidance.

Thanks also to the School of Arts and Social Sciences staff, especially Sandra Guthrie and Wendy Broome, for their friendly and always helpful administrative support.

Thanks to friends and family for keeping me on track and giving me the belief that all is possible; my son Josh, my daughter Gina, and my dear friends Virginia Hyam, Terri Eagle, Shane Forrest, Jane Naylor, Rowan Matthews and Stacey Miers.

A special dedication to Maddie Dong Yue, a very special person who made a very special journey from China to Australia as a young child, to be with new parents in a new homeland.

Finally I would like to dedicate this thesis to all my dear friends and colleagues in China, without whom there would be no story.
# Table of Contents

## 0. Introduction

- **0.1 Introduction to the Creative Work**
- **0.2 Introduction to the Exegesis**

## 1. A Strange Chinese Tale – A Novel

- **1.1 Notes for a Strange Chinese Tale**

## 2. The Poetics, Politics and Writing of Memory – An Exegesis

- **2.1 The Ekphrasis and Poetics of Memory**
  - **2.1.1 The Ekphrastic Project**
  - **2.1.2 Ekphrasis and the Awakening**
  - **2.2.3 Ekphrasis and the Photographic Image**

- **2.2 The Creative Work – A Strange Chinese Tale**
  - **2.2.1 The Form of Writing in a Strange Chinese Tale**
  - **2.2.2 The Fox-Spirit and the Studio of Pu Songling**
  - **2.2.3 The Strange and the Other – The Dissident Outsider**
  - **2.2.4 The Protagonists**

---

Page 1
2.3 The Politics of Memory: Narrative as Cultural Memory 351

2.3.1 Of Tiananmen 355

2.3.2 The Political & Artist Dissident in Contemporary China 359

2.4 The Pain of Disconnection: The Agony of the Everyday 363

2.4.1 Henri Lefebvre & The Alienation of the Everyday 363

2.4.2 Jean Baudrillard & The Agony of the Everyday 365

2.4.4 Guy Debord & The Layers of the Dérive 370

2.5 Ekphrastic Writing Of Memory From The Photographic Image 375

2.5.1 Roland Barthes & The Moment Of The Studium 375

2.5.2 The Photograph And Its Relationship To The Ekphrasis 377

2.5.3 Witnessing Memory & Writing From The Photographic Image 384

2.6 Conclusion 391

2.6.1 The Belonging 391

2.6.2 The Argument 393

2.6.3 The End 394

2.7 Notes For The Poetics, Politics And Writing Of Memory: The Art Of Ekphrasis 395

3. Bibliography 397
0. Introduction

Another fragment unfolds from memories that belong to the body of earth on which the city resides.

This composite thesis is a union between the creative, imaginative, and theoretical aspects of writing. The overall aim of its elaboration has been the creation and critical examination of the extended role of the ekphrasis in literature, particularly in the sphere of the poetics and politics of memory. The writings of Debord, Deleuze, Lefebvre, and Baudrillard and their concepts of the dérive, rhizomatic structure, and alienation, are utilised within the thesis as keys to understanding processes associated with memory, the pain of disconnection, and a need for belonging. Memory (in terms of its politics and poetics, and its negation and recovery) acts as a metaphor for political and personal repression, and finally as an agent in the process of reconciliation, redemption and, spiritual and physical healing.

The creative section of this thesis is the novel, A Strange Chinese Tale, an extended ekphrasis of the post-modern political and cultural landscape of contemporary China. The critical exegesis, The Poetics, Politics and Writing of Memory (The Art of Ekphrasis), is an analysis and history of the ekphrastic project, specifically related the poetics and politics of writing memory in the creative work, A Strange Chinese Tale. In the exegesis, the ekphrastic project is defined as the continuing expansion of literary ekphrasis to incorporate any object, event, or physical and psychological space. The exegesis argues for this definition of the ekphrastic project, and its extension into fresh domains, in particular, that of the electronic photographic image, and the space of memory with its associated traces, chords and fragments of reimagined memory. The creative work and the exegesis have their hope in ‘pinpointing … the forgotten’ (Maloney, 2006:88); those events, people and memories that have been excised from public knowledge; the forced amnesia perpetrated by mechanisms of state propaganda and censorship.

The thesis utilises contemporary techniques of qualitative research. The methodology incorporates traditional elements of literature review, primary and secondary research, analysis of individuals and groups (particularly in contemporary China), analysis of the author’s creative writing process, as well as of
texts, films, images and music relevant to the creative work's plot, narrative, and its theoretical and philosophical underpinnings. The creative work draws on theoretical elements from literary theory, Marxist critical theory, postmodernism, feminism, and the moment of French philosophy between the early forties (Sartre) and the early nineties (the last writings of Deleuze).

The methodology includes an experiential component critical to creative work (creating an authorial space), as the novel's literary and theoretical aims are to offer an insight into the current cultural and theoretical spaces of the nation state of China, and the axiological issues confronting individuals and government in contemporary China. As part of this methodology the author 'embedded' himself in China for three years, living and researching in the small village of Baisha in Yunnan, as well as travelling extensively to key narrative geographical loci across mainland China. This 'immersion' aspect of the methodology incorporated the 'writing in' of key ontological experiences of the author; the most relevant being five years of intensive psychoanalytic examination, and a prolonged philosophical engagement with Tibetan Buddhism.

The research component of the methodology utilises the concept of spiralling research as proposed by Nicola Boyd in her paper, ‘A Creative Writing Research Methodology’. In this process the author and researcher ‘starts with an area or a broad idea and through a spiralling process of experience, reading, writing and critical thought moves toward a single idea or set of ideas to create both scholarly and creative works’ (2009:9).

0.1 INTRODUCTION TO THE CREATIVE WORK

*A Strange Chinese Tale* is a work of contemporary historical fiction, being the account of a Chinese sister and brother, Yue and Shen, reborn from a fox-spirit tale written three hundred years ago by the Chinese scholar, Pu Songling, in his *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio*. The brother and sister, plus the third protagonist, the old Chinese dissident poet Rong, seek to comprehend the significance of their 'outsider status' in a psychological and physical journey across space and time. The creative work is concerned with each protagonist's search for identity and sense of belonging. It is a search for
a self that is free from the ever-present pain of disconnection that each of the protagonists feels. *A Strange Chinese Tale* is set in the post-modern political and cultural landscape of contemporary China. Memory, in terms of its politics and poetics, and its negation and recovery, acts as a metaphor for political and personal repression, and finally as an agent in the process of reconciliation, redemption, and spiritual and physical healing. As the novel proceeds, Yue works to establish her own story, independent of the numerous narratives that threaten to subsume her. All three protagonists seek a form of redemption from a moral judgement that each has imposed on her/himself. In their individual responses to their pain of disconnection, each of the protagonists attempts to create a unique space in which a personal sense of belonging can be attained.

*A Strange Chinese Tale* explores the themes of memory, place, language, and transcultural experience, and ranges across a complex matrix of geographical, psychological and social spaces in contemporary China. The role of the ‘strange’ and the ‘dissident and different outsider’ in contemporary Chinese society is a major theme. The fictional narrative takes the form of a dialogue between Yue, a Chinese Born Australian who has returned to Beijing to be with her brother Shen after a lifetime separation of space and memory. This dialogue takes place in a series of scheduled fortnightly meetings in Rong’s studio over the space of one year. Rong could be imagined by the reader as a trusted friend, processing Yue’s life of repressed and collected memories, or, as the embodiment of Pu Songling the original author of *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio*. Yue’s repressed memory in the story is a metaphor for China’s manipulation of memory and its historical amnesia for key social dissident events, such as the Tiananmen ‘89 incident.

The form of the novel is a combination of first person diary entries written by Yue, over the course of the twelve months that the novel takes place, and a third person adaption of Yue’s diary by the implied narrator Rong. Within this narrative are numerous ‘gleaned’ memories, which enable the three protagonists to have complete freedom to shift through time and space, and across a matrix of geographical, emotional and cultural borders. This
extended dialogue within the novel, with its reinterpretation of Yue’s memories and diary entries by Rong, facilitates the telling of numerous ‘border’ and ‘outsider’ stories set in contemporary, urban and rural China. The third person adaption of Yue’s diary by the narrator forms the backbone of the novel and is Rong’s interpretation of what Yue sees, in light of what Rong knows. This narration acts as the narrator’s confessional, his attempt at redemption in light of his perceived transgressions as a result of his increasing alienation.

The focalisation of the narrative of *A Strange Chinese Tale* takes place through Rong, but he is not the direct narrator of the story. Rong talks of himself in the third person, thus placing himself outside the story, looking at Yue through her diary entries and through his own actions as one of the protagonists. This is a very complex narrative structure that opens the narrative up to multiple layers of time, place and space.

*A Strange Chinese Tale* and its exegesis examine the witnessing of the ‘pain’ of disconnection. When memory is relinquished, whether as a consequence of trauma, or by its denial from those institutions and regimes who control the alterity of historical events, its loss is capable of bringing about an amnesia in the individual capable of effecting alienation and disconnection. The resulting pain of disconnection creates a source of ‘unhappiness’ and an associated need for belonging within the individual and community.

### 0.2 Introduction to the Exegesis

The themes examined in the exegesis are the politics and poetic of memory, the writing of memory and its relationship to the concept of the ‘ekphrastic project’, and the concept of ‘belonging’ and its relationship to the pain of disconnection experienced in the modernity of contemporary China. Through engagement with literary theory, the philosophy of the poetics and politics of memory, and current academic literature on China as a postmodern state, these themes are theoretically unpacked. The relationship between creative writing and theory is shown to be complimentary through the analysis of the creative piece.
These themes of the exegesis are unpacked through an engagement with literary theory, and academic and other writings on the poetics and politics of memory. The exegesis argues for an expanded boundary of the historical fiction, especially with regard to the expansion of ekphrastic process into the domain of the ‘writing of memory’ from primary source materials such as photographs. This is done through a process of a close creative reading in the form of reimagined ontology within the fiction narrative.

In this exegesis the history of the ekphrastic project is examined in detail, especially with regard to its role in shaping the poetics and politics of writing memory. Its three major aims are to: examine the novel’s major themes and their associated ontological speculations and underlying philosophies; explore the author’s writing processes, and the underlying structures within the novel; and to enhance the critical discourse relating to the processes of the ekphrastic project in the ‘writing of memory’. The examination of this critical discourse takes place through unfolding the ekphrasis of the creative work, *A Strange Chinese Tale*.

The focus of the exegesis is the nature and form of memory and its ekphrasis, especially in its form of expression in the ‘writing of memory into literature’. The form of memory is more metaphysical than scientific, more imaginary than structural, more emotional than objective. It is a form that is both poetic and political. The argument of the exegesis is an argument for the continuing and expanded role of the ekphrastic project, with its inherent potential to elicit an *awakening* both in the author and in the reader. Barthes states that ‘the lover’s discourse is today of an extreme solitude’ (2002:1). This exegesis argues that the discourse of the writing of memory and its ekphrastic representation in literature is one of ‘an extreme awakening’. It is said that the ekphrasis brings something to the reader’s mind’s eye: ‘a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes’ (Webb, 2009:1). The writing of the ekphrasis may also bring something to the author’s mind’s eye, a certain clarity and vividness. The author may have the intent to affect the reader in the same way. There comes the possibility of an ‘awakening’. Without the receiving of memory there can be no awakening.
A STRANGE CHINESE TALE FROM A BAISHA STUDIO
Now, people consider what they see with their eyes exists, and that what they don’t see, doesn’t exist. They say, ‘This is normal.’ And what suddenly appears and suddenly vanishes amazes them. As for the flourishing and fading of plants, the metamorphoses of insects, which suddenly appear and suddenly vanish, this does not amaze them; only divine dragons amaze them.

But the whistling of the wind, which sounds without stimulus, the currents of the rivers, which move without agitation — aren’t these amazing? But we are accustomed to these and are at peace with them. We are amazed only at wraiths and fox-spirits; we are not amazed at humankind.

Tang Menglai (1627-98)
Preface to Pu Songling’s Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio
Memories are like echoes, reimagined and transformed
the further they travel from their original source, picking
up and dropping off fragments of smell, taste,
light, sound, touch and time.

Memories take on their own life;
they belong to a world of impermanence and change.
Yue lived in the village of Baisha, not that long ago. She was born in Beijing, but had spent most of her life in Australia. She had moved there with her Chinese parents when she was about a year old. Shen, her older brother, had been left behind in Beijing with his Uncle Li. As brother and sister they had loved each other very dearly. Soon after arriving in their new homeland, Yue’s father had died from pneumonia. And then, seven years after, Yue’s mother and new Australian partner were killed in a house fire. It was a strange and tragic set of events. Yue was also in that fire. After being dragged from the flames by a passer-by, she stood at the edge of the fire, screaming and sobbing, and, in a way that only a child can, she made herself totally responsible for all that had happened.

***

In September of the year before last, Yue had sat quietly in her Baisha studio. The first autumn cold seeped through the cracks of the mud walls that enveloped her. She felt relaxed, holding pen to paper, writing in her favourite journal with the Mao red cover. The Tibetan stove that she had struggled to bring down on the bus from Shangri-la was smoky and inefficient, barely able to overcome the winter coldness that surrounded her. The outside air was full of the smell of pine forests, wild mushrooms and rich earth. The mudbrick studio where she sat was built from this same earth. She saw her home as some kind of romantic image.

In the red journal she was recording everything that had taken place in her meetings with a man called Rong who lived a thousand miles to the north in the country’s capital. Rong had also made his own sanctuary, a traditional scholar’s studio with a beautiful garden in the centre of Beijing. Since March of that year, Yue had been meeting with Rong every fortnight in this Beijing studio. Rong was trained as a doctor but was better known to the public as a poet and writer, a man who had not been afraid to speak out against the government. The Chinese written character for Rong’s name possessed a number of meanings, some of which were, ‘to return home with honour’, ‘emeritus professor’, and also ‘to care nothing for worldly glory and honour’. It was not that long ago that Yue had indeed thought Rong an honourable man.

Yue was writing in the journal for her own safekeeping, as well as for that of her
brother, Shen. Writing acted as a therapy. She always wrote in English, though she had been taught Mandarin by her mother, and after her death had learnt to write and speak it fluently, both as a memoriam to her mother and to her estranged brother. Through writing she was able to make connections with the myriad of complex events and occurrences that had come to surround her. Her life had become a landscape filled with fox-spirits, ghosts, and everyday men and women.

Twelve years ago she had come to China to reunite with her brother, whom she had not seen since their separation. Her search had been unsuccessful, and after a few months spent in Beijing she had continued on to Paris to commence her studies in Philosophy at the Sorbonne, where she had won a prestigious scholarship. The years she had spent living in Australia had forced her in one direction only, away from her hometown of Canberra. It was an escape from the empty suburbs and planned streetscapes of her childhood, the circles upon circles of manicured lawns and hedges.

Then, only two years ago, she had returned to Beijing, in another attempt to reunite with her brother. It was during this time that she had been told that Rong would be the one person whom she could trust. It was a trust bestowed on him by Shen. Past events had forged a bond between Rong and her brother. She was still unaware of this part of their history. Now, after seven months of sharing her own and her brother's memories and thoughts with this man, she felt he could no longer be trusted. Rong had made her feel secure and safe. He had made her believe that she was capable of overcoming the pain and alienation that had come not only from her estrangement with Shen, but also the loss of her parents. There was also the matter of the inheritance of a fox-spirit belonging she shared with her brother. In Rong's garden studio she had talked through the complex feelings and myriad of thoughts and images that Shen had sent her during the last twenty-five years. There was a freedom of thinking in the floating space that Rong's studio had become. Her talking with Rong was a therapy through memories, trying to connect with her pain of disconnection. It had become her reason for being. Lately, the conversations had become more difficult.

As for Yue and her brother's fox-spirit belonging, this was born from a strange chuánqi tale written over three hundred years ago by the great Chinese writer Pu
Songling. Yue had heard of her *chuánqi* origins from the crow, when she was eight years old, living in the outer suburbs of Canberra. She had been sitting in the branches of a mulberry tree in the furthest corner of the backyard, eating the soft luscious fruit that exploded in her mouth, tattooing her fingers black and purple. This tree was her private citadel, a hidden world of emerald and blue, a space that did not yet possess memories; a space that acted as a shield against the storm that had recently broken over her fragile life; the incident she called ‘the accident’.

The huge black crow appeared on a bright summer’s day; the citrus trees in the backyard were laden with oranges that spilt down onto the long grass. The crow’s name was Wuya. He worked his way into the branches of Yue’s mulberry tree, slicing through the soft jade leaves that were lush and bright. He pushed his way into the cool interior where Yue was sitting; his black feathers glistened, sparkling like small diamonds. When Wuya spoke he opened and closed his beak in a motion that seemed so slow that everything in sight melted into a slippery fusion of colour and sound. He made Yue feel part of a world that was completely in balance; his words came to her as pure thought.

As she sat there, crouched in the branches, with mulberry-stained hands and lips, Wuya, perched at arm’s length, told Yue her story, his beady eyes level with hers. He spoke gently and clearly.

‘I’m here to tell you that a part of you comes from another time and place, from a story written in China long ago. The story is called ‘Lotus Fragrance’, and the writer is Pu Songling. The story tells of an ordinary man who falls in love with a fox-spirit, Lotus Fragrance. They live together and have a beautiful son who is half fox-spirit and half human. His name is Hu-er. Lotus Fragrance dies and the husband remarries a close friend of Lotus Fragrance. Her name is Li. She is a ghost spirit. They live together happily as a family but they all miss Lotus Fragrance. One day a young girl appears at their house. She is the daughter of a milkman; but really she is the fox-spirit, Lotus Fragrance, born again as a human child. They adopt the girl, and now they are able to all live together in peace as one family. When Lotus Fragrance died many years later, her spirit passed through time and space and eventually came to rest in you, at the moment you were born. At that moment you became a fox-spirit child. What I have to tell you is that you have a fox-spirit belonging. You are the new Lotus Fragrance.’

Yue was spellbound with the beauty of Wuya’s voice, and what he was saying. She
wanted to move closer to him, to touch his shiny black beak and rest her head against his black feathers.

‘Your life will never be ordinary,’ Wuya went on. ‘Life for you will always be full of wonder and guàidàn, strangeness. Remember, life for you will always be different; you will never be like those around you.’

Even though Yue was young, this all made sense to her. What Wuya was saying, could have been terrifying, but instead his words made her feel warm inside, as though the morning sun had touched her soft brown skin, lingered for a moment, then departed as a warm loving friend. Yue crouched there, wonderstruck, imagining the original Lotus Fragrance as a wild and wonderful being from another country, maybe like in Where the Wild Things Are, but not so wild. Not ‘roaring terrible roars’, just whispering magical words that were strange and a bit frightening. As an eight-year-old child sitting in an Australian backyard that’s what fox spirits were.

When Wuya finished his story he tilted his head slightly to one side and let out a loud squawk. He scrambled back through the branches and then flew off, his wings flapping loudly against the silence of the early morning. Yue was left sitting there in the mulberry-filled branches, now xiao hulijing, a fox-spirit child.

Over the next thirty-five years she discovered that, with a fox-spirit belonging, life was definitely full of strangeness. She found herself forever on the outside. Nothing was normal. Her brother had the same belonging, born from the same chuânqi tale, born from the spirit of Hu-er, the son of Lotus Fragrance. Wuya had told Shen about his fox-spirit belonging when he was a young child, before Yue was born. Yue's fox-spirit belonging meant that she was able to read the memories of other people from the very moment the memory was being recalled. Shen, in his belonging, was given a different power, the power to collect and store memories, both his and other peoples. The two of them could share their thoughts with each other, no matter how far apart they were.

Yue had started writing in her red journal in the spring of last year, when her talks with Rong began in his Beijing studio. She had come to feel, that in many ways, she was recording her own strange tale. She hoped that this writing would become a new reading of the strange tale that had shaped her life.

***
My story is told primarily from the writings in Yue’s red journal, which she gave to me as a gift before finally departing China. She told me that she had no further use for it. I thought it best to tell her story, not mine, using extracts from the journal as well as my own knowledge of what had happened over the year of her talks with Rong and her search for her brother. Some of her entries I have copied directly, word for word from the red journal. Her longer speeches to me were more of a soliloquy, talking by oneself to oneself. In the journal she had given these longer fragments of speech a title, in bold letters, as if they were a separate story. Even though I have kept these original titles, I have transposed these longer fragments, as well as some shorter ones, into my own words. I hope I have given them the justice they deserve.

The story is one that belongs to Yue. Her story begins with the smells of magnolia and tobacco.

27 April 2013
(i) huí – return

立春 lìchūn (beginning of spring)
4th february – 18th february

I am writing in the red leather journal. Again last night I dreamt of the young Chinese girl, dressed in ebony black, her hair coloured white. It’s been the same dream all week, in which she suddenly appears stepping out from a crowd of shoppers down at the Village, and passing by without saying a word, just giving a quick smile. The scent of her hair is the smell of the forest. The sight of her is somehow reassuring, like when you discover a friend, once in danger, has safely made her way back home, when anxiety and worry transform into a present calmness. In the dream I never have a chance to speak to the girl before she disappears back into the crowd of shoppers. Her body is tall and reedy, her face tapered and slim. It makes me think she might be a fox-spirit. It’s hard to know. Maybe she’s a ghost; nothing is surprising in these times. What I need to do is focus. Soon, life will be completely taken up with Rong and the memories of Shen. There’ll be no time for ghosts, spirits and daemons.

I’m looking through the red dust of the window and it’s early spring. The first blossoms on the peach trees have burst open along the Avenue. How marvellous the pink is against the green and the blue; pink’s a colour I hate anywhere else but in nature. Soon the cold chill of winter will be gone. I hope the warmth of summer will bring Shen with it. It’s been too long. Every blossom reminds me of him, his sweetness and love. The bees working inside the blossoms gathering pollen, also holding a poison barb, ready to sting and die so as to protect the hive. So be it. Is there anything more wonderful?

Yue arrived for her second meeting with Rong in his Beijing studio: it was the beginning of spring. Their first meeting only two weeks earlier had been tentative. They had been two people walking on the fragile ice of a thawing spring. For three hours they had expressed their shared longing for Shen’s safe return. He was missing. Both of them knew the pain and suffering he had endured under the hands of the government. His life had been tumultuous, but Yue and Rong both felt a strong need to connect with one another, to feel the warmth and safety of each other’s company.
She had known about Rong for more than ten years. Shen’s praise of him had been remarkable. It was enduring and strong, much stronger than she could have imagined. Rong was best known to the Chinese public through his poems and occasional essays. For forty years, those who knew there was more than one history had read the words he’d set down on paper. His poems spanned the recent years of Chinese history: the hidden years of the Cultural Revolution, the opening up of China, the lost years of the 80s, and the decade of ‘scientific development’ leading up to the present. His poems talked of love and dissent. They were untamed words scattered from a distant mountaintop. He did the best he could to gather his thoughts and shape them into knowing characters on the page.

It had been good for Yue and Rong to talk. There was a natural affinity between them. They saw themselves as confidants and friends in a world which had made them both outsiders; Yue, because of her fox-spirit belonging, and Rong, because he had taken the path of writing words not supposed to be written. By the end of their first talk together they felt they shared Shen as a brother in common, a brother of blood and spirit.

On their second meeting, the moment Rong opened the studio door he began to apologise. He was old, and tried his best to be humble.

‘I’m sorry for the room being hot. The windows have just been opened; the room’s not properly aired yet. There should be the smell of magnolia drifting through the window to mark the return of spring. I’m sure the ayi has been smoking again. Now the room’s a mixture of magnolia and tobacco. Such a confusion of perfumery.’ He laughed again.

He had prepared a pot of Yunnan coffee for her, and a ten-year old pu’er tea for himself.

‘I have another surprise, chocolate and tiramisu biscuits, all the way from Guangdong, from a close friend. I’ve been hoarding them for a special occasion. You know my addiction to chocolate is famous; it’s an unrequited love, as is tea of course. Repent, and we will all be saved!’ he exclaimed with a restrained glee.

‘Thanks Rong, I’m sure you’ll be the one who’ll be saved,’ Yue replied, ‘and I’m sure those who are doing the saving will surely share your passion for chocolate. You really are an urban legend. On the way here as I was crossing the street, I heard an older man and young woman discussing you at length. I was dying to join the
conversation.’ They both smiled, then Yue continued, ‘And at dinner the other night, your name came up again. We were all sitting around the table talking about ghosts and spirits. A woman quoted from one of your poems. It was a cold and windy night, and the tree branches were even knocking against the windows. The ghosts were nearly at the door! I didn’t dare mention I knew you. I know how much you value your privacy these days.’

‘Thanks,’ Rong said, ‘I think it’s best to be wary. Beijing is a city where people’s homes should stand as a place where one can shelter and remain private. Instead, the city seems like a streetscape of carapaces, illuminated even in the bright light of day; exposing the inner thoughts of old men like myself. It’s dangerous, or at least it appears this way.’

‘Drink your coffee, I’ll wait for the tea to cool.’ Rong spoke in the manner of a man who had seen a lot of life, perhaps too much. ‘In our last talk together you started up a conversation about Shen; about when you finally met him for the first time last year. You were waiting for him in downtown Beijing, in some pizza place. You said you would rather have been at Tuanjiehu Park, which is my favourite park as well.’

‘Yes. I love Tuanjiehu.’ Yue leant towards Rong. The studio was soaked with the smell of coffee and tea. Then she told Rong of her love for the park and all it held.

\[
\text{a writing, which leans towards a tang poem}
\]

She had wanted so much to be down in Tuanjiehu. She loved watching the old men painting the strokes of water onto the pavement with their oversized calligraphy brushes. They held the stems with the same ease as a studio brush. As the water hit the hot concrete the writings became spring breezes stroking the surface of the pavement. The large characters faded away slowly in the early morning sun, retreating from the first heat of the day. The writings diminished and retired into seclusion, all worries eliminated, all sadness dispelled. She could stand there for an hour watching them write their poems. She was sure the characters remained in the minds of all who were looking on, as an imagined writing leaning towards the beauty of a Tang poem. She read the poems in her mind.

The park was a place for people to escape to, to connect in the first hours of the day.
They were a generation of people who had experienced a shared comradeship of hardship and humiliation. Nowadays there was time for peaceful contemplation. They no longer had to endure.

In another section of the park, men proudly carried their songbirds in covered bamboo cages across the stone bridge; their presence acted as soft trophies of peace. The cages were hung like lanterns on the fragile branches of trees already laden with pink blossoms; the birds, trapped in their private spaces of raw bamboo, were framed against a rare Beijing blue sky. Each cage was uncovered with delicate precision by its owner, the task having been done a hundred times before. The captive occupants, now freed from their darkness, sang across to one another, carrying on endless conversations Yue imagined were about light and dark, and heat and cold, even love to a degree. She wished it to be this way. The men sat close to their birds, talking and playing games of cards on the cold stone tables spread out along the edge of the lake. There was an enthusiastic air of competition; the cards slamming down on the table, and the shouts of glee from easily won victories.

Off to the edge of the lake in a bamboo-fringed square there were groups of men and women congregated in crowded circles. In the crisp morning air they clapped their gloved hands, slapped their legs and arms, and rotated their wrists and ankles. They stretched their legs backwards and forwards then raised their arms towards the sky. They laughed and smiled in their common union. Yue often wondered if this joy was a result of their shared history of survival, or just a sheer delight at being away from their cramped and noisy apartments. The park was a skin enveloping the body of Beijing people, protecting their hearts and souls from modern day life. For Yue, the park protected her heart from its emptiness. During this time in her life, Beijing was a lonely place. She had walked down to the park every morning to connect with the living.

*laowai never have a shortage of girlfriends*

Tuanjiehu was where she had wanted to meet Shen, but instead she had waited for him at the pizza hut in the centre of the Xidan quarter. The place was full of teenagers. They sat around tables, laughing, gossiping, and holding each other’s hands. She sat there, watching the girls suck their milkshakes, playing over and over again with the twisted plastic straws. She could see the bored looks on their faces as
they stared into each other’s eyes, fluttering their eyelids, giving each other sexy looks. She knew the game well; it was all about being a teenager. She had done it many times in Canberra, hanging out with her non-Chinese friends, filling in endless hours at low cost and maximum indulgence.

The boys in the pizza hut were loud and rude. They slumped over the tables, falling into and all over each other. She knew in a few years these same girls would think the single-child boys incompetent and spoilt. Now all the girls could do was find them stupid, or at best, amusing. There was no choice really. When the girls were older they’d have the option of laowai foreign young men who would seem much more interesting, and dangerous. These foreign men never had a shortage of girlfriends. There were always strings of Chinese lovers waiting for them, young women hoping for a better life, or just a different one. The laowai men were usually arrogant, getting their love far too easily from girls who were much too attractive and sexy. She thought so anyway. She never told Rong of the deep attraction she had held to these girls she always felt more comfortable with. Even now, after all these years she was still unsure about these feelings. All she could do was act on them with an instinct she had no choice but to trust.

Sitting in the pizza hut she was bursting for Shen to arrive. It felt like such a failure. The two of them had never talked one-on-one. Shen had been sending his thoughts and memories to her for nearly nineteen years, but she had always yearned for his physical contact, and the warmth and the touching of their skins. In the early days, his messages and fragments of thought acted like magic beams of light piercing her murky and confused world. This was the time just after the accident. His waves of imaginings gave the precious hope and meaning she had no chance of capturing herself. Over the years, his thoughts had filled her life with people, places, fears and desires; things she could never have dreamed of. She didn’t think of them as memories; they were more like a series of echoes reflecting back his life and thoughts; musical notes rippling through time and space, eventually coming to rest like a series of octaves completing a strange loop. Even when she was young, his messages seemed perfectly natural to her. She took it as a thought transmission of some kind. Like when Wuya the crow had opened his beak when she was sitting in the mulberry tree, his gentle words had rushed into her mind. Wuya was not really talking and neither was Shen. She was a fox-spirit child. This was how things were.
In those early years, these echoes acted as a golden bridge between their two worlds though they remained far apart. Over the years, the two of them had come as close as was possible to being one person, in spirit and emotion; she was a full moon rising in his clear autumn sky. His echoes were capable of intense pain and sublime beauty; at times the messages were irreconcilable. What remained was anguish between the two of them. They had never actually talked. The thoughts he’d sent her had always remained unanswered. When she was much older she’d learnt to send messages back to him. Everything shared between them remained suspended in its own space, unable to reach a solid base, floating off in the distance, unconnected to the main story. There existed in their communication the free fall of a floating world, devoid of craggy peaks or plummeting waterfalls that might have acted as an anchor.

What Yue had been left with after all this communication with Shen was a form of pure memory, which had no opportunity to be labelled as worthy or unworthy, useful or useless, bad or good. They were images without reason or judgment. They elicited feelings but no dialogue. It occupied the same space existing between lovers just before their first touch; now after many years of needing to talk, her unrequited feelings towards him bordered on a lover’s frustration. Their upcoming meeting represented a need to know how and why their lives were enveloped and entwined in this never-ending strangeness.

She asked herself, what was actually happening in his life? Was he going to live his life with her or without her? There was a promise she made to herself. The anguish she felt needed to change into emotion belonging to both of them.

***

In the studio, Yue stopped talking for a moment. The concentrated sharing of her thoughts with Rong was difficult and exhausting. The studio did possess a natural quiet and calmness, which made things easier. It encouraged thoughts to drift more easily into unknown spaces, but talking was still hard for her.

Her attention fell back onto Rong, this man who was so important in her life. She saw him as charming, astute, elusive, and amusingly awkward. He always sat in the same leather chair, the largest and most comfortable in the room. It was placed just to the left of the writing table. A wooden framed window lay behind, causing him to
be partially silhouetted against the morning light. His legs, which were long and thin, crossed themselves right leg over the left. His pants, always too short, made his white socks seem even more unfashionable and nerdy than they already were. In his hands he held an old black leather notebook. It seemed to never fill. His notetaking was sparse and cursory. He wrote with an old pencil he held like a calligraphy brush. She guessed it came from his many years of practicing the art.

His thick glasses pressed back into the sockets of his eyes, making the black frames seem an integral part of his face. His teeth were stained brown, not from tobacco, as he never smoked, but more as the result of a certain absentmindedness with regard to his hygiene. Whenever he spoke it was with a measured manner, accompanied by a slight stutter coming from a mind whose thoughts and words raced far ahead of their present destination. His voice was without malice, surprising for a man who’d been through so much physical and mental hardship at the hands of his enemies.

Shen had told her it was Rong who she must go to when things became dangerous. At the time, she doubted anyone could or should be held in such trust. On her first meeting with Rong those fears vanished. His eyes were too full of empathy and clarity. They shone with a kind of inner glow, like a Van Gogh painting. At times they hinted towards a certain confrontation, but this was quickly dispelled. He was capable of transmitting a warmth and love to his interlocutor that was impossible to refuse.

Rong’s idiosyncrasies fascinated Yue; each eccentricity acted as a humorous punctum. They were small things, like how he wore his socks; they rarely matched and often had tattered holes easily seen. At times in the midst of their talks she would stop to wonder if there might be another person in his life who was close enough to care about such eccentricities; a person who, with a certain tenderness, was willing to lovingly mend such intimate wear and tear, or occasionally buy a new pair of socks to replace the old ones. Was it possible this imaginary other person could be so devoted to Rong that she loved him all the more for possessing such mundane imperfections. Yue was unsure whether Mei, the housekeeper, was this person.

On this day, Rong was wearing one short white sock and a longer one, cream coloured. Neither sock had holes in it.
Rong leant back in his leather seat and took in a rushed breath. There was a slight wheeze. ‘It must have felt strange for you to be in Xidan in a pizza place? This was your first opportunity to see Shen, and there you were in a space, not inhabited with a history of fox spirits, ghosts or strange tales, but instead with fast food, fluorescent lights and teenage kids.’

‘Yes, the little emperors and the precious snowflakes.’ Yue was only half-listening to his words; they were white noise in her thoughts. Her body tightened as she leant towards him. ‘I can’t help but hold this terrible anger for everything they’ve done to Shen over the years, and for everything they’ve done to people like him. I had no choice but to come back to Beijing to find him.’

Rong didn’t react. He checked his notes. ‘Can you recall the images he sent you the night before you first met? You told me at our last meeting you thought these received images recalled the past but at the same time connected with the present.’

For Yue, Rong’s speech was often elliptic; he seemed only to speak in idioms. Most of the time it amused her. She told him of those impressions she had received from Shen the night before their first meeting in the pizza hut.

*a grinning mao with gleaming white teeth*

The images that Shen had sent were the echoes of photos he had collected, then discarded into the corner of his Beijing art studio years ago. They were rough and faded. Captured in black & white, they were snapshots of the Democracy Walls movement that had spread across the cities and countryside of China in the winters and summers of ’78 and ’79. This was the time of the Beijing Spring; the outpouring of people’s dissent, brought on by Deng Xiaoping and his political attack on the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four. The ‘big character’ dazibao slogans, slapped on the Democracy Walls, were unrepentant. They were revolutionary visual bullets, shot not just at the Gang of Four, but also at Mao and the devastation of his Cultural Revolution. One of the slogans in these photographic images read:

‘We must emancipate our minds, and seek truth only from facts.’
This slogan was taken straight from Deng Xiaoping’s mouth. Who knew what was to come? Deng and his new gang thought they could strip the walls of their meaning. The pizza hut, in which Yue was waiting for her brother, stood on the exact place where one of those walls once stood, the Xidan Democracy Wall. She was sure this was why Shen had chosen this place for their first meeting. The wall had recently been torn down. The demolition sign, 拆, chai suddenly appeared one night on its crumbling mortar; its demolition was reported in the local newspaper the next day, probably as a cynical opportunity for free publicity. No one dared to protest, either out of fear of recrimination, or more likely, from complete indifference. The destruction of the wall was another piece of history tumbling into the ditch of Beijing’s expanding loss of memory.

She counted through each of the fragments. Shen remained absent, both from the images and from her life,

yi 一 / There is a long stone wall stretching south. It hugs four young maple trees which follow a line to the east ... the wall is in the countryside ... there are two men squatting on the ground, arms locked tightly over their knees ... they look out across two black tarpaulins covering the bare grey earth ... there is another man standing nearby, dressed in black trousers and a white cotton shirt, his hands are clasped behind his back as he examines the democracy wall, looking, thinking ... of what ... of the words of freedom, of the girl he is being asked to marry ... of the other girl he has feelings of love which cannot be acknowledged ... of the heat of the day and his need for a drink with friends.

er 二 / it is the winter of ’78 ... there are three men, all in long-sleeved work shirts staring at typed manuscripts pasted onto a Beijing wall ... on the wall there is a poster of Mao who grins with white gleaming teeth ... smiling children hold pink roses which surround his image ... large, hurriedly drawn black crosses are scrawled across each of the roughly typed manifesto pasted on the wall ... obviously not fit to be read ... the marks speak for themselves.

san 三 / a young Ma Desheng is delivering a speech to a large crowd of Beijing citizens at the wall, he looks as young as his art ... the date on the photo is typed
October 1, 1979 ... the crowd is staring in disbelief, as though Ma just arrived from another planet ... he raises his hand to a group of young children with short-cropped hair who sit cross-legged directly in front of him on the white concrete ... further back in the crowd stand old men in Mao caps ... a square empty space lies directly in front of Ma, waiting to be filled with answers to simple questions ... is art dangerous, and can the Stars shining in the northern sky be extinguished this easily? ... do the citizens want to wear the drab uniform of the revolution forever?

si 四 / the Beijing Spring is about to end ... the newest poster is stuck on the wall ... it reads: ‘if you close the people’s mouths and let them say only nice things, it keeps the bile inside’.

These images given to her by Shen were from a time when he was only a boy; things got much worse ten years later. Yue still felt an anger and bitterness. She was eleven years younger than Shen and did not experience the Beijing Spring and all that came later; her sense of injustice though, towards these events and their repercussions for Shen, was strong and deep. She didn’t want to forgive those who had inflicted this pain on her brother and she didn’t expect Shen to. She saw his suffering as longer and deeper than hers, stretching out as far as the Democracy Walls that had carried the slogans of his heroes. His recent silence was alarming; for all she knew he could be dead, or more likely rotting in a prison. There was no way of knowing.

***

In the studio, Rong edged forward onto the edge of the seat, a sign he was about to talk and Yue should observe a silence. This is the way it had become.

‘I’m sure there are forces at work beyond our knowing. When I was young I thought old age would mean sitting in a park with good friends, playing chess and listening to songs. Now this seems far away. Sentimentality is dangerous. I think it’s time to finish our talk. Next fortnight you can tell me more about what happened on your day with Shen.’

He sighed deeply. It was rare for him to talk of anything personal; everything was so well hidden – a mountain hiding its shadow. Rong looked upon Shen and his sister as exotic flowers budding on a rare tree; their relationship was mysterious and hard
to fathom. The danger surrounding their lives caused him great concern. There’d been days when he’d sat in his studio with barely enough strength to write, anguished over their fate. He would take up one of his loved guaishi stones, it would be cold to his touch, and try to imagine the three of them, on top of a southern mountain dipped in warm mist. There they would rest, away from the politics and conflict. He was certain that it was still possible to attain some kind of a peace, probably in a way that none of them could ever imagine.

I left the studio exhausted and did not say goodbye. I caught a bus to the apartment. There were two lives to be lived, one inside and one outside the studio. The Beijing smog suffocated the city. I no longer took any notice. It’s what Beijing was. It was the continuous present of China.

I’d arranged to meet up with Lily. How to describe Lily? She’s a filmmaker of sorts, the kind of underground filmmaker who uses cheap digital-cameras and as many friends as they can find to help. Her documentaries capture the strange events occurring around China, every minute, every hour, every day. I first met Lily in a bar at Sanlitun. We were both very drunk.

In her other life, Lily’s a singer in a punk-rock band. When I first saw her, she was up on stage wearing black tattoo tights, yelling ‘fuck, fuck, fuck’ at the top of her voice. And that’s what we did last night. We turned up the music to eleven, jumped up and down on the lounge, screamed at the top of our voices, laughed ourselves stupid, drank rough red wine, and smoked cheap 555 cigarettes till we were sick. I wore my stupid flannelette Chinese pyjamas and my favourite panda hat with the big black ears. Lily had on an outrageous pink dress, completely backless, and some dangerously high heels, Japanese style.

Whenever we get drunk, Lily wants to play our memory game. She knows about my fox-spirit belonging. For her, my power to read memories is a kind of party trick, and for me when I’m drunk, it’s a chance to let go. In the game, she tries to fake a memory and I have to guess whether it’s true or not. It’s our fox-spirit drinking game!

Lily’s clever, elegant, glamorous, strong and sensuous; a Susan Sontag dream girl. To be with her is to forget. At the end of the night, I collapsed on the floor, and fell asleep.
with my head on her chest, listening to her heartbeat, wrapped in the softness where anything is allowed. The heat of her body rekindled all that was good in me. Lily is a temporary escape.
(ii) huí - return

雨水 yǔshuǐ (rain water)
In the last week, there've been no dreams; only beautiful deep sleeps next to Lily on the rare occasions she stays over. There was one strange happening. Perhaps strange isn’t the right word. The strangest things can be ordinary and the most ordinary of things can be strange. The Tang poets knew this and so did Bashō.

Lily and I were out shopping. It was Saturday morning. We came across a woman in the Village plaza, standing near the water fountains where all the kids love to play, just below the giant video screen. She was in the middle of the crowd holding her hands up as if praying. Her eyes were wide open and glazed, staring up at the images on the screen. She wore a sari of some sort and a loose gingham shirt, her feet bare and blackened with the dirt of the city. A kind of white paste was streaked through her hair and dabbed on her face in rough circular patterns. The scene would look more in place at Varanasi than in downtown Beijing. People walked straight past her not bothering to take notice or too scared to, you can never tell.

I stopped and asked whether she was all right. She ignored me and kept looking up. Lily took some photos with an old 35mm camera she carried around with her. As we walked away I looked back but the woman had disappeared. I’m sure I’ll see her again.

Fox-spirits appear and disappear with ease; if she’s a fox-spirit, that is. Their ability to change forms is legendary. I wish I could do the same. It would make the search for Shen much easier. Then again, if I had the powers of a fox-spirit I would probably have a tail between my legs as well. That would be too much! Yesterday, we got the photos back from the lab and all the shots of the woman were totally black. That happened to me only once before, in the Australian outback at Ernabella, a mission town that had become desperate through an epidemic of petrol sniffing amongst the teenage boys. They saw no future in their lives. I’d taken some pictures of an old Aboriginal man sitting in the shade of an abandoned shop. He asked me to give him money but I’d refused, thinking money shouldn’t be important. When we got the film back months later, the negatives of the old man were completely clear. It was the first time I’d realised there were others with powers similar to mine.

On the way back from the park this morning, down near Mao House, I saw two mops propped up against the wall. They were upside-down, their wooden handles on the
concrete sidewalk, and the black rubber-strips at their head, leaning against the red wall, dripping wet. One of the mops partially covered a yellow ideogram stencilled on the wall. It read, NO. Black against yellow, wet against dry. It only reminded me of Shen.

——

Sitting in Rong’s studio in early February, Yue felt rejuvenated. The warmth in the air signalled an early return of spring and a taste of the summer heat to come. The light streaming through the studio window gathered up Rong’s collection of scholar stones on the desk. The morning sun transformed the guaishi into the five sacred Taoist mountains rising up to the heavenly sky: Nan Heng Shan in the south, Hua Shan in the west, Bei Heng Shan in the north, Song Shan in the east, and the most sacred of all, Tai Shan, in the centre. For a brief moment there existed a vast mimetic landscape of Buddhist sacred geography; the clouds came down to root themselves in the foothills of the earth. Rong loved these rocks. He saw them as his children.

***

Earlier, on her way to the studio Yue had sat quietly at the rear of the bus, looking out at the struggle of the people on their way to work. She thought of all the messages Shen had sent her over the years. Yue had felt alone in the days following the fire; on the morning after the accident there was emptiness. She was eight years old and had thrown herself down on the ground sobbing, smothering her face in the smell of the warm earth that lay beyond the grass. She wanted to look into her mother’s face, to see herself in her mother’s eyes, to hear herself in her mother’s voice. Her mother was the one who’d defined her, her mother and the fox-spirit belonging she’d inherited from Songling’s strange tale. Neither the story of Lotus Fragrance nor the voice of Shen could replace the loss of her mother; both dwelt only in her imagination.

In the weeks after the fire, the one face she could look into was Sylvia’s, the mother of her dead stepfather. Sylvia’s face was tough and hard; her eyes dull against the bright light of a Canberra day. When Sylvia smiled, it didn’t come easily. There were terrible arguments with her husband. Late at night his shouting and smashing of furniture forced its way into Yue’s bedroom - along the shag-pile carpet, over the old wooden chairs, down the long corridor and across her quilt-covered single bed. The
last defence was a pillow pulled tightly over Yue's head. It smelt of dust and old cats. Despite Sylvia's outer hardness, Yue knew she had to connect with her; she was to be her new life. Sylvia was all she had.

A few years later she would have Shen, by way of the messages he sent her through time and space from Beijing. The two of them were getting to know their powers, learning what was possible. It was said that the child of a fox-spirit retained only human qualities, often accentuated through strength and agility. But there were times when a fox-spirit mother would chose to give qualities to her child of a more existential nature. Lotus Fragrance had given to Shen and her powers of transmitting thoughts, and storing and retrieving memories.

It was only through chance they had discovered their powers. Shen had longed to make contact with her. They were like twins separated from each other at birth. It happened when Shen was in his late teens and in trouble. In a last desperate attempt to contact her, he had imagined the two of them in a forest of fox-spirits at night, with the fire providing the power of magic and transformation; the flames throwing shadows onto the cold black wall of the trees which surrounded an abandoned clearing. He imagined himself soaking in the heat of the fire, the smoke and smell of ancient wood crackling with the heat. He had himself dance with the other foxes, male and female, old and young. He imagined a very old fox, a transcendental fox with the power to send messages across thousands of miles of space. It was through this imagining that Shen had sent his first message.

Yue had been sitting by the fire in Sylvia's lounge; it was a freezing Canberra night. Sylvia's husband had gone away for a few days. The house was peaceful and quiet. She could hear Sylvia cooking in the kitchen, humming a tune as she worked. The whistling of the kettle, the rattling of the dishes and pans, the hiss of the fire, all combined into a song of Sylvia's happiness. The song worked its way through the house – the cluttered lounge room, the dusty bedrooms, the corridor full of boxes of old cooking books and romance novels, eventually reaching the ramshackle veranda at its furthest extent Shen's first message was melded into this song. His thoughts sang the same tune. The harmony filling the house also filled Yue's thoughts. She could hear Shen words as notes falling from a universal harmonic. They formed a language she could understand; it was like the sweet sound of wolves crying at night in the forest, transformed into images and words of daily life. Shen communicated to her as a brother with a shared fox-spirit belonging.
In his first message he told her he was in trouble, but everything would be all right. He was sorry he could not tell her the whole truth. He loved her and she should always remember this, no matter what happened in the future. The important thing was they'd made contact. Across time and space they managed to connect. Yue no longer felt alone.

There was such an urgent need for her to experience the depth within these messages; there was a fear that too much had been lost in their transmission; between the playing out of the first experience and its storage, retrieval and final recollection. Memories could slip across all dimensions; they were echoes travelling across the borders of geography and emotion. Shen’s thoughts and memories shaped her identity just as powerfully as her belonging. She didn’t want his memories to be capable of deception and deceit. Rong had reassured her that she should trust and believe these echoes and fragments of his, that one day they would become part of her story; a story separate from the one delivered by the Wuya, the crow; the past was capable of being re-imagined, a new story could and would be told.

***

In the studio, she took her usual seat. Rong told her he needed to go and collect some important papers from the house and would be back in about ten minutes. He orchestrated this departure so Yue would have time to explore and make sense of the studio in her own way. It was the first time she’d been left alone in the room. He wanted her to find some of the stories stored there, stories that might be of help to her.

She sat for a while. The stillness of the air became uncomfortable. She stood up to examine the space around her. The studio was spacious and well ordered. A lifetime of work and study filled the room. Three of the studio walls were lined with massive bookshelves. The spines of the books marked the age of Rong’s collection: string-bound, cloth, leather, hardcover, and softcover. In the shelf closest to her, four books lay on their side in a small pile. She scanned their spines. The titles of the books read like lines from a yuanyou poem, whose poets wrote of inner transcendental journeys: Du Wan’s *Stone Catalogue of Cloudy Forest*, Lin Youlin’s *Stone Compendium of the Plain Garden*, Li Rihua’s *Diary of the Fragrant Water Studio*, and Zhao Xigu’s *Record of the Pure Registers of the Cavern Heaven*. She flipped through the *Stone Catalogue*, the
recorded names of legendary *guaishi* stones fell out from the pages: *Whistling Stone, Storm Cloud Peak, Late Cloud, Cloud Ravine, Stone Bridge, Punctured Cloud, Ink Mountain, Morning Cloud, Graceful Clouded Peak, Flowing Cloud Raft, Dancing Dào.*

On the far wall of the studio, away from the light of the window, hung a connoisseur's collection of Chinese prints and artworks, and on the far side of the room sat a large wooden table displaying Rong's collection of Chinese magazines and comics. She gathered that these were Rong's escape from the intense world he inhabited. She walked over to have a closer look. Placed to one side was a neat stack of the *lianhuanhua* comic books. She remembered when her grandmother had given her a gift of these little picture books on one of the rare occasions she visited Australia. They were filled with intricate drawings of mythical stories, and rough storyline photographs of the latest Hollywood movies. They smelt of her homeland.

Towards the centre of the room was the wooden desk holding Rong's prized *guaishi* collection. To its left again, and next to Rong's chair, was the calligraphy table on which there were a number of glass paperweights, two writing seals, an inkstone and brushes, and an armrest for Rong's calligraphy. A vase of fresh chrysanthemum flowers stood on the outer edge of the table, almost toppling over the side. She thought the flowers hastily placed, as Rong would never allow such disorder. A charcoal brazier in the corner of the room held an old cast-iron kettle simmering in readiness for his beloved tea.

Rong re-entered the room. She waited till he settled. His socks were showing below the trouser cuffs. There was a small ragged hole she hadn't noticed before near the left ankle. He caught her looking, smiled, and then prompted her to talk. As they sat there in the final stages of winter, there was still a feeling of trust and friendship between the two of them.

She talked about her one meeting with Shen, in the summer of the year before last.

---

**the bastards are still running this country**

Yue sat there in the pizza hut waiting for her brother to arrive. An unrequited love flowed through her body. It had been a long time. Now she would see him at last. She sensed a movement on the edge of her vision and looked up; Shen was at the door. It was not the image of her brother that had been forming in her mind all these years.
This man was over six-foot tall; square jawed and broad-shouldered, his hair closely shaven, around a dark, sun-tanned face. His muscular arms were folded across his chest, his right hand was adorned with a string of red meditation beads; a heavy silver watch loosely rested on his left wrist. A yellow sash broke through the red saffron robes that loosely folded around his body. His thick eyebrows framed deep-brown eyes. He looked out beyond the physical space he found himself in. The ironic look on his face held a warm, embracing smile. Shen had finally arrived.

Yue looked at him with a mixture of wonderment and surprise. Now they were face to face. Here at last was the complete image she had desperately waited to see for so long. It was not what she expected. He appeared to her like a mirage from an exotic landscape, a Buddhist monk adorned in saffron robes, complete with red beads of sanctity. He exuded a sensual and spiritual energy, which seemed all the more radiant for being framed in an aluminium doorway set against the background of dirty Beijing traffic and smog.

He walked towards her with a grace and dignity that brought back a memory. A 1940s Hollywood movie she’d seen as a child with her grandmother. Huddled next to her, she’d gazed up at the cinema screen to see Katherine Hepburn walk across the ballroom in a long silk gown, her dress flowing behind her, people turning as she walked by; the serene smile on her face held a sophisticated confidence. Shen possessed the same presence. People in the pizza hut gazed at him in silence.

Then something unexpected happened.

The closer Shen came towards her, the more distraught she became. She could not believe this was the angry and tortured man she had so long imagined; that this was the person who had gone through all that suffering and heartache, and pain and isolation. He was not supposed to look like this. He was supposed to be dishevelled, bohemian, war-torn, hardened, and angry at all the injustices he had endured over the years.

She felt her soul being stabbed in its inner heart; not pierced with a sharp knife but instead with his intense compassionate smile, held with such ease. Where was her partner in anger and loathing? Where was the outraged brother who would stand by her in their bitter fight for revenge? All she’d imagined and hoped for disintegrated. A sense of isolation and betrayal engulfed her; a storm erupted across a darkening cloud of emotion, ready to burst with lightning and thunder, ready to
spill its guts out over a vast and empty landscape.

Shen stood there like the sun radiating warmth. He could see her confusion.

He moved towards her and whispered, 'Hold me. Talk to me. Your eyes are full of anger. I didn't expect this. The only feeling I have for you is love.'

He could see the rain welling up inside her, the tears rolling down her cheeks; tainted water pouring from a clear spring. 'I didn't think it would be like this,' she let out, 'I've waited so long! You're here, look at you, strong and tall and loving. I can't believe it. Everything you've been through. I'd made a promise that if you ever experienced any hardship, I would share that pain. I missed you, Shen. I needed you.'

She cried. He leant towards her and held her hard, enveloping her with his orange robes. She melted into him, sucking in his warmth and love, soaking in the luxuriance of the intimacy she had been denied. She felt his strength and love. She wanted to submit to all that he offered, but instead found herself pushing him away, trying to escape his tenderness and warmth.

'No, it can't be like this. I can't accept all that's happened and forget what they did to you. Those bastards are still running this country!'

The young students in the restaurant were shocked to hear her words. Shen stepped back. He showed no surprise at her anger and kept talking with calm assurance.

'Let's go; let's walk away,' he said.

As she left the table she glanced down at the uneaten pizza lying next to the carefully folded paper serviette; everything was neat and orderly.

He took her hand as they stepped outside into the Beijing air. The sky had shifted from an early morning blue to a grey-brown of dust and fumes. Yue cleared her eyes and wiped the half-dry tears in a smudge across her cheeks. Shen remained centred and calm, sensing that everything happening between them was a consequence of the years of talk that had never taken place.

wild lovemaking with total strangers

She broke away from him and ran across the morning traffic of cars, buses and office workers. She stepped onto the sidewalk, and stood motionless, looking back. He remained where she'd left him.
His gaze was fixed on hers. A light rain swept across the city.

As the first drops of water brushed her face, a feeling of warmth and love welled up inside her. Waves of rapture washed through her as a series of punctuations and rhythms, forming verses of unspoken words. It was a Buddhist chant, *Om tare tuttare ture svāhā*, and an incantation to Green Tara. Shen was transmitting this floating verse to clear away all the traces of pride, delusion, hatred, envy, fanaticism, avarice, lust and doubt within her. There were wondrous images accompanying each of the vestiges sent; there were lions, wild elephants, forest fires, snakes, robbers, floods and demons. These fantastic images were projected onto the city and the people around her. Elephants and tigers stampeded and ran though the lanes of morning traffic; they leapt in packs from one car rooftop to another, and trampled through the bicycle ways in their hundreds, out onto the road. Spouts of water cascaded from the towering skyscrapers, shattering and exploding glass windows, plummeting down hundreds of metres. The surging waterfalls plunged onto the sidewalks below.

Shen piled one image on top of another: thieves and murderers appeared from alleyways and threw themselves onto unsuspecting businessmen on their way to work in their stylish suits; fires raged from shop-front windows and leapt across traffic, engulfing cars and trucks, erupting as spot fires on every street corner. Panic took hold amongst the on-looking crowds. People normally reserved and restrained, shouted at the top of their voices, and fought with loved ones. Mothers screamed at their children. In the crowd, total strangers initiated a kind of wild lovemaking in the bare light of the morning sun; passing office workers screamed fanatical doomsayings at anyone who would listen. Finally, the great deluge of water pouring from the buildings caught up with all that was happening. The raging torrent swept down through the Xidan, gathering up all the tigers, lions and elephants, quashing the raging fires, and silencing the hysterical screaming of the innocent bystanders.

In the sky above, a manifestation of Green Tara appeared, looking down upon the anarchy and destruction below. She laid down her vajra, bell, arrow, and wheel of dharma, her sword, her bow, her rope and finally her conch. All that appeared before her gathered together, and out of the confusion and chaos arose a stillness and silence. Yue was centred in its vortex. Her body trembled; her eyes glazed over with fresh tears. The mantra massaged the years of pain and sorrow she held inside her body. She was being asked to cross to the other side, to leave behind all that had gone
before.

It was impossible. There was a refusal. She could not and did not want to cross the barrier she’d built. She wanted to remain shipwrecked on the sharp and deadly rocks that stood as a memorial for all she held toward her brother.

He crossed the road and stood beside her.

‘I’m sorry you feel this anger. Between us, there’s only ever been warmth and understanding. There’ve been times when I’ve been angry as well, angrier than you could ever imagine. Those people force you to make decisions that go against everything you believe in. There’s so much out of balance; it has to be reconciled. There has to be some kind of peace.’

‘I don’t want to know!’ she shouted, refusing to listen.

She grabbed Shen’s arm and forced him to walk with her along the crowded sidewalk. She wanted to walk with him all day, along the boulevards, down the streets, and through the hutong lanes, travelling without any plan or thought, like lovers who’d just met. She wanted the city to take hold of them, to rediscover and reimagine their memories. She wanted the city to soak up their pain and take its turn at healing.

***

In the studio, Yue became silent. She could no longer talk about this memory. It exhausted her. When Shen walked across the city, no words were spoken on matters of the heart. There had been no intimate conversation about the love that ran between them; this conversation remained unrequited. The illusive nature of their discourse escaped them once again. There’d only been a series of continuing stoppages, with Shen choking at the bottlenecks of emotion.

Yue desired both the absence and the presence of Shen; she needed him and she resisted him.

Later that night in bed with Lily, I talked of all the messages Shen had sent me over the years. I told Lily how much these messages meant to me. How they’d filled my imagination with possibility and meaning. There was a certain aesthetic between the
two of us. There were many times when I’d dreamt of stealing away for a complete winter to a snowbound hut in the mountains. There, in the damp softness of the country, I would spend all day and night uncovering the poetics held within those messages. In the blanketed quietness, the fragments of our belonging would painstakingly be pieced together; a huge jigsaw puzzle mapped out across a plane of shared awareness. I wanted Lily to know how these messages had the ability to connect me to a world I’d always felt separated from.

Of course, Shen’s memories were not the only memories.

I told Lily of all the memories I’d been able to touch; they were part of my becoming. When young the memories collected were quite simple: memories of hate, of love, of happiness, of sorrow. As a teenager there came a complexity and subtlety, there were traces of desire and sexual pleasure, of nostalgia, of beauty, of the body, of the visual. After adolescence, love expanded, and pleasure had infinite sources; the memories received expanded into those of repetition, of coincidence, of insignificance, of degree, of banishment, of idolatry, of ecstatic pleasure, of the haptic, of emptiness, of permanence, of difficulty, of persuasion, of obsession, of transparence, of subjugation, and of course my own memories of becoming. I was sure other layers remained.

I kept talking. Lily relaxed into me, and my body accepted graciously. I told her about the day I discovered that memories could also be gleaned from books. It was early autumn, in the grounds of the Sorbonne as a student, relaxing on the grass, reading out loud the words of Flaubert’s Madame Bovary,

‘... the breath of love had passed through the mesh of the canvas ....’

As I spoke these words I could feel the love woven within those stitches. I sensed the silken material that lay across Emma’s lap, the fabric that caressed her body with unspoken passion. I found myself capturing the memory that belonged not to the book but to its author; a memory that the ordinary reader would certainly be denied. The memory belonged to Paris and to Flaubert.

... Emma sits in an elegant drawing room opposite the Marquis d’Andervilliers, the man who introduced her to all that was fine in life. The Marquis is facing the fire as
he recites a poem; his back is to Emma,

‘It was for him, for him whom she loved like a god,
For him, callous to all human sorrow, uncouth to women.
Alas, she was poor and had little to give
But all gifts are sacred that incarnate a soul.

Well! In a novel of travelling-salesman style,
As nauseating as a toxic wind,
He mocked the gift in a flat-footed phrase,
Yet kept the fine agate seal.’

(It is the poem that Flaubert’s lover, Louise Colet, wrote in anger towards Flaubert, for using her private life in his story of Madame Bovary).

Emma takes out the green silk cigar case that she has hidden from her husband, the case he found when he had gone horse riding at Thibourville, the case that belongs to the Marquis d’Andervilliers. Emma stretches out her hand towards the Marquis, offering him her gift. Her words are soft.

‘I love you, take this and remember me by it.’

The Marquis turns to face her, but it is not the face of the Marquis, it is the face of Flaubert. He speaks to her,

‘A memory is a beautiful thing. It is almost a desire that you miss. One day we will be together. There will be no poison to separate our love, only a fire that will join us forever in its flames.’ ...

This was the quality of memory collected while reading. I thought it curious at first, but it is what happened. Those memories were a soft blanket of words that provided comfort. They took away the pain the moment they were remembered.

Before I could finish talking, Lily fell asleep across my stomach. She too found comfort in the memories.
(iii) wài - outside

惊蛰 jīngzhé (awakening of insects)
Outside the window is an old apricot tree, possibly in its last years. It’s perfectly framed by the inner darkness of the studio. The thick black boughs are layered with broad patches of yellow-green lichen with added daubs of white. The old growth frames the younger saplings laden with white and pink blossoms. I admire the tree in the feeding of bees, ants and a myriad of other insects reliant on its flowers’ nectar. It’s a moment that you forget still exists.

Last night I had a dream of a pine forest high up in the mountains. It had rained recently and the ground was soft and full with water. A complete silence lay along the path. Clumps of mushrooms broke through the damp earth, red, pink, grey, speckled white, some fresh, others rotting and blackened. There was a thick glade of oak trees ahead. The darkness was threatening. A small opening appeared at the verge of the forest. Within it lay a narrow path bordered by ferns, leading toward a faint light burning deep inside the glade.

I followed the path. It opened out into a clearing of lush grass scattered with abandoned graves. About a dozen foxes danced around a bonfire. The flames lapped up into the pitch-black sky. There was no moon. The foxes seemed oblivious to my presence, and in the shadows of the bonfire was a woman. The woman I’d seen in the crowd the other day with Lily; her hair was streaked with the same white paste. What was she doing there? She turned around and stared at me, her eyes were burning blood red and she held out her hand, as though asking for help, her face was a moon reflecting the light of the fire, producing no light of its own. I went to reach out for her hand and the dream ended.

Wuya, the crow, had told me about these secret fox gatherings deep within the forests, the drinking and the dancing, the foxes celebrating their ability to transform themselves into humans or any variety of beings. I’ve never seen a real fox-spirit gathering. Lotus Fragrance would have danced in those deep wooded glades. Did she dance even after she had met her human lover, when she carried her fox-spirit child? Did she ever feel a duty to get married or was she beyond such Confucian obligations? Her heart was with her lover, which was enough.
By the beginning of March, Yue had organised a studio in the small village of Baisha not far from Lijiang. This way she could be close to the memory palace that Shen had created in the Old Town. Shen’s idea of creating this ars memoria had astounded her. She had come to accept her own power of being able to glean people’s memories. It had not occurred to her that Shen would have been given a different power of storing and transmitting memories; and she would never have guessed the space he would choose to create this memory palace would be the Old Town of Lijiang.

Shen had also walked the cobbled-stoned streets and alleyways of this old town. A town once ruled by the Naxi Mu family during the Ming and Qing Dynasties, an important stopover on the tea-horse trade route from southern Yunnan, up to Tibet, and onto India. The Communists arrived in the mid-twentieth century and an earthquake almost destroyed the town fifty years later. Then the old town held around sixty thousand Naxi people, living as traders, shopkeepers and farmers. After the earthquake the town was cordoned off from the new city, restored to a new rustic beauty and designated a world heritage town, full of inns, bars, guesthouses, tourist shops and hotels. A few Naxi people still remained living inside the old precinct. It was here, in what was now called Dalian, the Old Town, that Shen had chosen to leave his memories. He stored them beside canals, alongside alleyways, and other spaces where there was a connection with place. He had the power to store memories and his fox-spirit sister had the power to retrieve them. As to why these memories were being left for her? This was something Yue would have to discover for herself.

***

Yue first read about the origins of the Memory Palace at the Sorbonne. It was a story she should have already known. Everything came into focus. She studied day and night. Every waking hour was an opportunity to realise her past. The study of memory became an obsession. In the first days at the library she came across Cicero’s De Oratore, where the ‘art of memory’ was first related. The tale was comforting to her.
Cicero told the story of how Simonides of Ceos, the ancient Greek lyric poet, attended a dinner at the request of Scopas, King of Thessaly. Simonides’ task at the event was to compose and recite a poem extolling the king’s virtues. Everyone at the court, including Scopas, was seated around a huge banquet table. Things didn’t go smoothly. Simonides made the mistake of including the demi-gods Castor and Pollux in the king’s poetic adventures. Simonides reckoned this as a compliment to Scopas’ bravery and courage. It proved to be a mistake. A commissioned poet should only praise the virtues of one’s benefactor. After Simonides delivered the poem, Scopas called him to his side and punished him by giving only half the payment due to him; the other half would be paid to the demi-gods Castor and Pollux.

Shortly after this altercation with Scopas, Simonides was called out of the banquet room to receive messengers waiting for him outside. As soon as Simonides left, the roof of the great dining room collapsed, killing everyone at the table. The damage to the bodies was so serious that not one of the corpses could be properly identified. The corpses lay in the exact position in which each of the guests was seated.

Simonides achieved fame by remembering the exact location of every person sitting at the table, thus solving the dilemma of correctly identifying the dead; this method of remembering became known as the ‘method of loci’, part of the greater tradition of *ars memoria*. The method was simple. Create an architectural space in your imagination, walk through that space then assign individual objects or locations to each fact that needed be remembered. If a person needed to recall the facts, all they had to do was take a second walk through their imagined ‘memory palace’, and pick up the facts as everyday objects; simple and ingenious.

During her time of study Yue had no idea this would be the method Shen would choose to store his memories; that he would create his own memory palace in Old Town Lijiang. Here he would store the memories that Yue needed to receive, memories that would provide her with indications of past events. Yue would not have to remember the memories Shen stored. All she had to do was find them in the labyrinth of the old town’s alleyways. To find them she would have to feel them through Shen’s presence.

In her studies Yue learnt of another connection with regard to the memory palace. It was with her homeland. In 1596, a Jesuit missionary to China, Matteo Ricci, wrote his *Treatise on Mnemonic Arts* in Mandarin for the governor of Jiangxi Province. He
was committed to teaching Chinese people the ‘method of the loci’, so as to impress them enough to take interest in his Christian teachings. He reasoned they would find the method invaluable when taking the notoriously difficult Confucian exams, the same exams that Pu Songling, the author of Yue’s story and belonging, would discover first hand as an examination hell.

***

Yunnan was an opposite world to Beijing. In Baisha, Yue could sit in the studio looking north to Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. The mountain stood snowcapped and jagged against the grey sky. As she put pen to paper, the air around her smelled of young wheat and flowering rapeseed, of snow melting on the ridges, and mists flowing down into the valley. She loved this newly built space, this studio at the back of an old café in the middle of the main street of Baisha village.

The studio was built in the interior of a disused Naxi barn; it was an inner living chamber, like a freshly spun cocoon, raw pinewood lying against aged timbers. At night the studio froze, filled with the wind blowing down the valley from the mountain. A Tibetan stove stood in the corner, surrounded by large baskets of split pine logs to feed its fire. When the flames roared and the kettle whistled it was the home Yue always wished for.

*

Yue and Rong had arranged to meet every fortnight in the Beijing studio, that’s how they both wanted it. There was easily enough money for travel; her recent work translating a catalogue of French philosophical texts into Mandarin had paid well. It felt safer for her down in Baisha, far away from any surveillance. In Beijing, she would stay in her Tuanjiehu apartment.

She arrived at the entrance to Rong’s studio garden. It was soaked from a sudden afternoon rain. Rong was in the middle of overdue spring-cleaning. On the veranda were books with split bindings, comics with covers torn off, broken baskets, boxes of loose papers, old herbs gone mouldy, cracked teapots and cups, and to her surprise, a magnificent stuffed fox, mangy and rotten, with a half-chewed ear and a glass eye dangling from its socket. She joked to Rong that hopefully it wasn’t one of her
ancestors.

As she entered the studio there was the smell of roasted coffee beans and popcorn. Rong was cooking a few of his favourite delights. He loved spoiling her. He’d even prepared pancakes she could have with her coffee. It was the season of Longtaitou; the time the Dragon raised his head. It was Rong’s favourite time of the year, when the farmers reconnected with the land, carrying out ceremonies celebrating the king of all insects, so the land would be blessed with plentiful water.

‘This is the time of the year when at least one of the four Dragons must be appeased,’ Rong said, ‘I should also get my hair cut to bestow some luck. The rains will fall and the garden will flourish!’ He raised his hands in the air. ‘It’s also the season of Jingzhe, when living things are startled out of their winter sleep by deafening thunderstorms. It’s when the insects are awakened. The weather should become warmer now.’

He handed her a towel and sat her beside the warm stove in the corner. He placed a freshly brewed Yunnan coffee in her hand. She smiled. She knew Rong was acting out an ancient tradition, when royalty humbled themself to cook for the peasants and soil their hands in the fields. Despite all that had taken place in the previous days, she felt at ease. For the moment she simply wanted to enjoy the present. The fear within shifted to a resigned calmness.

Yue could now tell Rong her nightmare, and of Old Peach Blossom and the magical island of Penglai.

**the nightmare and the promise**

Whenever Yue left the safety of the Beijing studio she was like a child who possessed a shadow, darker than any child should know – a shadow that flittered around the edge of one’s consciousness. She was afraid of that shadow, it had been with her a long time.

When she was young, after she moved into her stepmother’s house, the shadow was a lion. She lay in her bed in the most isolated room of Sylvia’s home, with the trauma of the accident still hanging in the air. The lion was always there, lurking in the darkest crevice, sleeping above the ceiling, ready to pounce in the deepest hour of the night, in the loneliest seconds, in the empty spaces between minutes. When the lion did pounce it let out a long deafening roar, its golden mane flowing around its
enormous black eyes, its breath exploding with anger and fire.

When the lion pounced it filled Yue’s vision with a darkness of impending doom. She would jolt awake and sit bolt upright in her darkened bed, sweating, her heart pounding, tears streaming down her cheeks. She sat there, stiff and frozen, unable to utter a single sound, and promised she would never share this nightmare with anyone. She was convinced this horror had to be endured and remembered by her alone. The reason for this promise was unknown even to her. She knew the nightmare was to remain a secret.

Now the nightmares were recurring. She became immersed in a black empty space of not knowing. It was a terrain of light and dark, a heaviness of being; at times the sense of not knowing felt liberating. This blankness of not knowing, bore the seeds and awakenings of a new life, an opportunity to create a new fiction, an identity belonging to the part of her existing only in the present.

* 

Yue stopped talking. She stroked the soft leather of the chair; it was a softness that comforted. She was ready to tell Rong what happened the previous morning; it belonged to the same shadow, the same blackness. For the first time the nightmare allowed itself to appear in the light of day, without the cover of night.

The light in the studio shifted away from the guaishi stones, and across to the far corner of the room, where a silver-and-gold gilded statue of a Tsong Khapa Buddha sat. The statue glowed in the sunlight. Yue sat back in the chair, with the shining Buddha behind her. She found the courage to talk.

*in the streets of beijing with old peach blossom*

She was walking towards the Dong Yue Taoist temple. The heat of the day radiated from the pavement like a secondary sun. She stepped off the curb onto the road. A bicycle sped past. It clipped her leg, knocking her backwards onto the concrete. As she picked herself up, an older woman gave Yue her hand. She was a traffic warden. Yue hadn’t noticed her before.

‘A fat flying pigeon just knocked you down,’ the warden yelled against the sound of the traffic. ‘The man on the bike’s in a hurry to nowhere; everyone’s in a hurry.'
People loaded up with expensive clothes, young girls in shorts. It’s shameful.’ After her outburst, the woman laughed, ‘I’m sorry for being old and cranky. Are you all right, you poor thing?’

“Yes thanks, I’m okay’, Yue replied. ‘I don’t blame you for being cranky. It’s hot. The sky is burning up. Even the birds are complaining. Hold me up for a while, I can’t breathe.’

“Yes of course, lean on me. You can call me Old Peach Blossom if you like. You remind me of my daughter. Take your time. The traffic can go to hell.’

Yue was in shock and struggled to keep standing. From the moment she’d woken up that morning she felt vulnerable, as though open to harmful forces. She asked the warden to take her into the shade, to sit down away from everyone. Old Peach Blossom gave Yue the name of ‘strange one’ and guided her to a bench under the trees. She told Yue to drink water and to rest; Old Peach Blossom assured her she would come to no harm as she stroked Yue’s hair and dabbed the sweat from her forehead with a rough cloth tied around her arm. Then she promised Yue she would come back soon.

Yue sat on the bench, and a memory started to form. It was disturbing and familiar. There was a deep breath of recognition. Shen was in the memory. He could not be seen or heard but he was definitely there, and out of this realisation came an acute anxiety. She could not accept the memory. There was no focus, only a gradual disassociation from the people and buildings surrounding her. The initial memory became lost. All she was left with was the shadow. As the anxiety took over, there was only a view from the outside. There was no return, only the abyss. She was no longer part of the world that existed minutes before. An overwhelming sense of guilt swept over her. It was as though a bird carrying a thousand sharpened knives in its feathers was ripping at her soul.

She felt herself responsible for a terrible unknown crime that needed to be kept secret forever, locked away in a deep unremembered promise. It was a crime that was on the verge of being discovered. Not knowing what the crime was, her body shook, desperate to escape the guilt, to separate itself from the unknown transgression. There seemed no possibility of living in this world again. The fear crept deeper inside. A fear of being exposed at any moment for the fraud she’d discovered herself to be. Her body grew rigid, unable to move or escape. Her heart collapsed with emotional and physical exhaustion. A feeling of paranoia spiralled in
the background.

In a light of recognition she realised she needed to slow down, control her breathing, be convinced of an escape into another world; a space free of what was crashing in around her, a place that lay on the other side. She thought of Rong, and imagined how he would cope with this hell. Her first thought was his stupid mismatched socks. She found a moment to laugh. What would Rong do? He would escape to the Taoist homeland he so often described; the mythical island of Penglai off the Jiangsu coast in the southeast - the island which was carried across the Eastern Sea on the back of a giant turtle.

_The mythical island of Penglai_

Yue entered this cherished Taoist homeland of Rong’s. She found herself on that same Jiangsu coastline, listening to the sound of the wind blowing through the island’s forests, grasses and water lilies. It was a memory belonging to Rong. The breeze swept across the island’s vast lowlands and marshes, and on to the wetland’s bullrushes, until it settled, gently stroking the quartz-white waterbirds sheltered in their protective cover. Overlooking this landscape was Penglai’s jagged mountain, its peak dipped in the elixir of immortality. It reached up to a clear blue sky, through phosphorescent clouds. The whole island was covered in a blanket of white mist, except for the spires and towers of platinum and gold belonging to the palaces hidden deep below.

Yue saw the Eight Immortals arriving by sea from their pavilion on the mainland. They disembarked on the pristine shore, unafraid of the encroaching dense forests peopled by ghosts and ancestral spirits. She went down and joined them as they started their journey across the beautiful Blessed Land of Yuliu Shan to attend a grand banquet. As they arrived at the banquet, she found herself sitting down beside Anqi Sheng, the legendary immortal – the seller of medicines all along the east coast. Sheng told her that he wanted to be known as the Thousand Year-Old Gentleman, and boasted of how he’d been sought unsuccessfully by the Emperor Qin Shi Huangdi and after him by the Emperor Han Wudi, for the herbs he could obtain from Penglai; herbs that could deliver longevity and immortality. He told Yue how Xu Fu had also been sent from Mount Lou (where the Emperors ascend to gaze on Penglai) to find
him, and how Fu was stopped in his quest by a huge fish living in the Eastern Sea that separated the spirit mountains from the mainland; and how four years after Xu Fu’s expedition, Master Lusheng was also ordered to search for him, and after that three other Taoist masters; all in search of his knowledge of the herbs which promised escape from mortal death.

Anqi told her how the Taoists were the ‘masters of methods’, expertly practiced in the esoteric arts. They knew of the Immortals and the Three Spirit-Mountains, and were specialists in assembling the ingredients needed for everlasting life. They understood the paths to transcendence. The Taoists knew where to look for magic Penglai mushrooms which could equal any alchemic elixir in providing immortality. These could be found growing on top of rare mineral deposits of malachite (the mallow stone used as a green paint pigment), as well as soft orange realgar, ruby arsenic (which produced a bright white in fireworks), cinnabar (the red mercury used in Chinese carved lacquer ware since the Song Dynasty, its pigment powdered into vermilion), and gold. The radiating light of the magical mushrooms could be seen from thirty metres away. As Anqi talked with Yue, he chewed on jujubes as big as melons. He finished, by telling her how the Taoists, and all others, eventually failed in their attempts to find him or his herbs.

The banquet proceeded. Freshly plucked gourd leaves were boiled and eaten, cups of wine were filled, and pledges promised; rabbits were baked and roasted; and zithers played at every opportunity. Plates and meat stands were at everyone’s service. Eight dishes of grain and fatted ox were placed at the feasting tables, as well as sauces, pickles, and roasted meat with cheek, viands and tripe. At one of the tables Yue could see Dongfang Shuo, the Immortal banished from heaven – he was also known as Buffoon because of his odd and playful relationship with the Emperor Han Wudi. Dongfang was holding and eating one of the three Peaches of Immortality that he’d recently stolen from the Queen Mother of the West. He’d travelled all the way from the sacred Kunlun Mountains in the West.

She walked away from Shuo and came to rest beside Magu, one of the few women Immortals. Magu had lived for such a long time that she’d seen the Eastern Sea rise and fall, and the mulberry groves and fields come and go. Despite her long life, Magu was young and beautiful, and looked eighteen or nineteen years old. She was lying on an enormous divan, covered with hand-woven cloth, scratching her back with her fabulously long fingernails, as she feasted on wild unicorn. Magu and her family were
hosting the banquet. Organising moving banquets was their specialty. They were practiced in a cuisine ritual, which included getting drunk on copious amounts of heavenly wine.

Yue witnessed the final act of transformation. Magu scattered rice amongst the crowd. The rice turned into cinnabar. For this ritual to take place in the proper manner, all the three immortals, Wang Yuan, Cai Jing and Magu, needed to be present. After she’d done this, Magu took Yue in her arms, enveloping her in a healing warmth. Magu confided that as a mortal she’d lived in Nancheng, not far from Magu Shan, and it was here she’d achieved immortality by concocting her own elixir from the mystical herbs. To conclude, Magu leant over and fixed her eyes on Yue. In a voice that spoke of all the languages that had ever been uttered, she told Yue it was now time for her to leave, that it was safe for her to return to her homeland of Beijing. She just needed to concentrate and once again focus her mind. She needed to feed on the light of the day available to her and draw on this light for strength.

Yue was now ready to return to the everyday physical world. The nightmare had been overcome. She focused on an intense single point of light radiating from a jewel worn by Dongfang Shuo who sat next her. She drew its beam of light outward so that it took up her whole vision. The streets, trees and buildings of Beijing falteringingly took shape – flickering and flashing from dark to light, slowly moving forward, background through to foreground. The streetscape pulled softly into focus; an old man, a bus, a bed of vermillion and chrome yellow flowers. Her surroundings were complete with light and colour. She had let things be and allowed life to continue in its own way.

***

As Yue told this story to Rong, in her the retelling of the nightmare, her thoughts drifted to Lily. What would she make of this? Lily’s world always appeared to be in the present, a river that forever seemed to flow forward. It was not like Joyce’s riverun; it did not run back on itself; it was not repeating. It was like China, a country that only surged forward, leaving its history behind. But Lily was not China. Lily was capable of always reinventing herself. Lily was in so many ways what Yue wished to be.
I arrived back at the apartment. Lily had already let herself in. She welcomed me home with a smile and a hug. It’s enough just to see her there standing at the door. There’s been too much time spent alone over the years, so much waiting, and so much filling in of time. Waiting for life to catch up to where it should be. Lily is a sign. A bright yellow flare telling me everything is going to be okay, that life can be normal.

But it isn’t normal. The other side is always present; the side that Lily knows nothing about, the side that even I don’t understand.

‘I went to Ikea today,’ she yelled. In the small apartment she moved like a wild cat, jumping from one space to another; her hair black against the white walls, her skin white then brown, changing with the light.

I saw her but didn’t really hear her. I was still half in the memory I’d tried to abandon in Rong’s studio.

‘That’s nice,’ was all I could say.

‘It was hilarious. There were people sleeping in the beds.’ Lily laughed; her teeth white ivory, her eyes brilliant.

‘What are you talking about now?’ I loved her confusion.

‘There were people lying all over the beds in the display rooms. One guy was having a sleep. Others were eating or just resting and reading. They’d settled in for the day. It was like they’d all decided to have a picnic,’ she said.

‘That’s so funny, but what a wonderful thing to do. Like John and Yoko in the 70s. Peace and love in Ikea!’ I replied.

‘Exactly. We’re going to put it in the doco, ‘Strange Happenings in the Department Store’. We should go there some time. Take a day off and put our feet up, read books and eat chocolate. You could relax and take it easy for a change,’ Lily said.

‘We’ll do that one day, I promise. When all this is over.’ I wanted to believe this. I stepped up and kissed her.

She wrapped me in her arms. They’re strong, and her wrists so thin. The warmth of her body filled me with an assurance that this maddening life was worth living.
(iv) wài - outside

春分 chūnfēn (vernal equinox)
A couple of nights ago, Lily and I went out drinking. We ended up at an upmarket club near Sanlitun. The place was full of girls who love girls. In a dimly lit corner of the bar was a woman dressed in black. She was gorgeous in a short, tight black skirt, stretch top and a red beret tilted to one side, as the French are meant to do. I was very drunk, trying to forget Shen and the nightmares. Lily understood it was best to let me go. I moved closer to the woman. She was talking Shanghainese to a Chinese girl who was only about eighteen.

When the light shifted across the woman’s face she appeared grotesque. The skin wrinkled and pitted, that of a ninety-year old. As the light shifted back, her face returned to its former beauty. The young girl didn’t seem to notice. I was in complete wonderment. I thought of Lotus Fragrance, shifting forms between a beautiful young woman and a seven-hundred-year old fox, not in seedy downtown bars, but in deep forests and a scholar’s intimate garden; Lotus Fragrance, intelligent within and beautiful without - a fox aloof from the laws of nature. I could stare for only so long. Confused and feeling faint, I retreated. As I turned to go, the woman swung her body around as if to stand up. It was then that I saw a foxtail splay out from between her legs, the tip, jet-black and shining. I told Lily, who laughed and chided me for having far too much to drink.

Maybe I have heard the stories about foxtails too often. They’ve become a traveller’s tale. The mind needs room to soar from material things, to roam beyond this universe. It’s a space where I feel comfortable, resting alongside the ghost of Pu Songling.

Rong greeted Yue at the door of the studio, ‘It’s my birthday. Quick, come inside and celebrate, I’ve been given a gift of beautiful peach wine from Lijiang.’

‘You’re a marvel, Rong,’ she replied, always happy to share in his passions.

‘You do drink, don’t you? Anyway it’s just wine, not whisky or baijiu. An old friend in Kunming sent it to me. I was overjoyed.’

It was the time of the equinox, the balancing of day and night. To celebrate, Rong had cooked spring pancakes. They should have been made during Spring Festival but he was never one to keep to tradition. His love of wine and food knew no bounds. He was capable of turning even a simple pancake into a delicacy.
This is the time of year I love,’ Yue said, ‘I think Baisha during spring will be a time to cherish. There’s the most beautiful garden at the back of my studio. It’s showing off all its new blooms. Tourists call Baisha a dirty farming village, but I love it. The Naxi people are warm and generous, and there, hugged by the fields and the small villages, is Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. It looks down on everything with such grace.’

‘Yes, the mountain is rich in substance, and graceful in style,’ Rong replied. ‘I travelled to Baisha years ago. The famous Dr Ho resides there, doesn’t he? I remember him pulling me off the street and into his shop, before I even had a chance to introduce myself. He didn’t know who I was. I had to drink at least five cups of his famous tea before we had a chance to talk. I was informed of all his celebrity visitors, and plied with reams of newspaper clippings. He’s an amazing man. He’s certainly no slave to material comfort. He leads a very simple life.’

‘That’s exactly right,’ she laughed. ‘That happens to me every day. I’m always someone new to Dr Ho.’ She drew herself up and smiled; a smile that Rong loved her as a daughter for. ‘Right now I want to tell you about a special moment that happened there recently. It’s a kind of present for you, Rong.’

the butterflies arrive home

It was the week before the beginning of spring. One of those magic days when the mist and light rain drift down the valley from the mountain towards the village. Everything was in balance, a moment of Zen satori. Yue was standing in a yard at the edge of the village. There was a small orchard of peach trees; in the yard lay hundreds of freshly made mudbricks lying across the ground stacked neatly in rows; the bricks the same colour as the earth they sat on, a rich deep brown. To the right of the mudbricks, bundles of dried cornstalks were propped up against a timber-rail fence; they stood tall, tilting to the mountain. Behind the corn, fields of green pastureland stretched west to the rounded hills. To the left was an old haystack of pine needles, rounded and worn down from the long cold winter.

The peach trees filled the southern end of the yard, their branches laden with early spring blossoms, pure white. It was dusk, and the fading light seeped into the gathering mist. Yue watched as a cool wind blew in from the south, pushing the fractured blossoms off their branches. The flowers were snow held up in the sky. As the breeze strengthened, the petals were released. They drifted down onto the dew-
laden mudbricks. There they settled, white on chocolate brown, snow on earth, butterflies arriving home.

She had cried with this simple moment of beauty, when things that we spend all our life separating, come together as one; when the other side of living is unexpectedly revealed. It was a time when subtleties became obvious. It connected with her fox-spirit belonging, which also lay on the other side. She loved these moments when she was deep in nature, fully immersed in the rhythms, taken up in the wind that blew across borders. It was a wind that allowed fox-spirits to appear from deep within the forests where fires burnt and foxes danced in shadows. Yue was born out of this nature. She understood the beauty that belonged to the blossoms fallen earthwards.

***

She shared this moment with Rong. The season was now deeper into spring; a need to love and protect welled up inside.

‘Thanks,’ he said. ‘I need to be reminded of these things. Lately, what is natural and balanced seems an infinite distance away. Life’s become full of obsession and attachment. I feel as though I’m travelling through a fog that lifts only occasionally.’ He sighed, ‘But forgive me for this self-indulgence of talking about my worries. We’re supposed to be sharing your concerns, not mine.’

Yue could see the sorrow in his eyes. ‘This is our fifth time together,’ she said. ‘This place feels like home to me. It’s safe and comfortable, a refuge from the battle going on out there. You’ve made it feel that way, Rong. Don’t dare leave me. I need you. I want you to be around for a long time. I remember you telling me you wanted to plan your death so that you’d pass away on your ninety-third birthday with all your friends around you. There are still thirty years to go. At your final farewell everything will be in harmony. We can relax and drink tea, and listen to the cicadas fighting each other for attention. They can take charge of the battle for a change.’ She laughed.

‘Don’t worry, I am not going anywhere,’ he reassured her as best he could. ‘Right now, it’s the moment of the equinox, a time of balance. A good time for us to return to talking about just after the accident.’

She stood up and walked towards the window. It was starting to rain; the sun was breaking through the clouds. A rainbow stretched across the horizon, arching back
towards the edge of the city. It slowly dissipated, replaced by gathering storm clouds. Rain sprayed onto the window, running down the glass in fine rivulets, catching the Beijing dust, forming a brown film. She wished on the night of the accident there’d been a storm that might have washed away the deadly flames.

‘I’ll never forget,’ she said, ‘the whole house being swept up in the fire. I stood there screaming, my lungs filled with smoke. A woman raced over to comfort me. All I wanted was to be in my mother’s arms. I couldn’t stand the thought of her disappearing in those flames. I needed her next to me, comforting me, telling me everything was okay.’ Yue moved to the table and picked up one of Rong’s stones. It felt solid, and immutable, as though nothing could ever destroy its strangeness and beauty.

‘My mother was everything. I followed her every step, I never let her out of my sight. She was my world. In that burning house there was another man being swept away as well, a man who wasn’t my father. I had to give up the bed I shared with my mother for that man. But she loved him. I stood there in the light of the fire thinking everything was my fault; that my father had died of a heart attack because of me, which forced my mother to be alone so she had to find another man. I blamed myself for the fire that took her away.’

She stopped talking, and turned one of the stones around in her hand. She knew this stone. Its name was Lone Pine. Its crevices and jagged ridges were the isolation and loneliness of the high mountain country. Rong had recently acquired it. He’d become increasingly obsessive about these stones. She couldn’t understand how he could afford to purchase them. They were almost priceless. The stone was carefully placed back onto its position on the table. Rong was silent. He was looking at the stones. He seemed far away. Rong was the one person she could talk to about Shen. She wasn’t ready to talk about these things to Lily, wanting their life to sit to one side on a separate shore. There was so much that was unresolved.

***

In the studio, the stone in Yue’s hand remained cold. It refused to warm. She turned back towards Rong, ‘After all that’s happened I am still an outsider,’ she said.

‘Try not to feel your strangeness too heavily, Yue. Try to see it as an illusion which
one day might shatter into a million pieces. When Chuang Tzu had his dream about the butterfly, he was unsure what was the true reality. Was Chuang Tzu a butterfly, or was he dreaming he was a butterfly? It is the same with you. Have you a fox-spirit belonging, or is it just dreamt out of an old strange tale? These are real questions. I’ve always believed in these tales and have had too much experience in this world to doubt the existence of spirits and ghosts. There are scholars who treat these stories with contempt, a plaything of the elite or the superstitious fear of the poor. But they are more than that. These stories are people’s beliefs. It is how the ordinary person sees the world. It’s through these stories that people make sense of the world. Your life changed forever after that first visit from the Wuya. That’s something that cannot be changed.’

Yue answered him as best she could.

the memories of others

Her belonging had become such an integral part of her life, even with all the strangeness that it brought. It was a sense of the ‘other’. Something she lived with all her life. Wuya was right when he said she would always be an outsider.

How did it change her life? She knew that her fox spirit needed to be embraced and nurtured. She wanted to enjoy this new belonging inherited from Songling’s story. When she was young, her belonging was often playful and spirited, at other times it was frightening. She became aware she could sense certain moments very clearly. Not in the sense of an exact recall of events, but more in an ability to glean people’s memories, complete with emotions. She thought it normal. It was not as though she could read people’s minds. This was not possible. It was only at that moment of recall, when a person triggered a particular physical and psychological response in their body, the instance of recovery, that she could read the memory. This was the power she had received.

Once, when her new grandmother, Sylvia, asked her what she’d learnt at school that day, she found not only could she recite every line of the poem the class had learnt that day, but also how each person in the class had been affected by the meanings that lay within the poem’s lines. It was the poem, My Country, by the Australian poet Dorothea McKellar. Yue was able to tell Sylvia that her best friend, Mary, on hearing the poem’s words ‘the cattle die’, remembered her father, who
passed away only the year before, and that Mary wished he was safe and living peacefully in heaven. Mary hoped one day her father would magically talk to her in her sleep and then she would never miss him again.

Jim, another classmate, when he heard the words, ‘sapphire-fisted mountains,’ remembered a dream he had the night before, where he travelled to the other side of the world to a place called South America. There he led a group of black people with fuzzy hair to a secret mountain covered by jungle; he dug up sapphires the size of footballs, and gave all the money from their sale to his mother. He gave none to his father because his father beat him every day.

Another pupil, Jane, started laughing when she heard the poem’s words ‘homing thought will fly’ because she remembered her pet pigeons, and imagined them carrying people’s thoughts inscribed on little notes, and delivering them to the aviary in her backyard. There she imagined herself reading every one of them, and finding out everything about everybody in the whole world.

When the new girl Frances heard the words ‘sunburnt country,’ she started to cry, as she couldn’t bear the thought of her family’s land suffering such pain and maybe dying from the sun being so hot.

To Sylvia’s surprise, Yue also revealed that the teacher on reading aloud the words ‘the steady soaking rain’ experienced a sudden rush of warm love through her heart and across her soft white skin, as a memory resurfaced of her running with her new boyfriend through yesterday’s rain, hugging and kissing, as the water soaked through their clothes and onto their bare skin.

Yue thought this was how all children saw the world. Whenever Sylvia listened to Yue’s words she did not see her as a bedevilled child needing to be exorcised of troublesome spirits. Instead, she did her best to understand. Sylvia enjoyed Yue’s eccentricity. There was one thing that Sylvia was certain of; Yue could not stand the thought of being the same as everyone else.

*as pigeons made love*

At other times Yue’s power to glean people’s memories was terrifying. There was one afternoon when she was coming home from school. She was ten years old and still living in Canberra. She’d taken a shortcut through a eucalyptus forest that cut a swathe between her home and the school. She came across two teenage boys. They
were rough looking, dressed in dirty clothes, wearing sandals and old jeans. There was only one narrow dirt path through the thick scrub, and the boys stood side-by-side blocking the way. Yue looked completely out of place, a young Chinese girl tramping through the Australian bush. They glared at her, their eyes full of anger. The words that came from their mouths were foul. She bowed her head in fear, trembling. Tears rolled down her face; she was sure the boys would be cruel to her. She kept staring down at the ground, waiting to be grabbed or thrown onto the dirt, but nothing happened. She managed to gather enough courage to look up. She saw both of the boys staring at each other, transfixed in a gaze that somehow linked them together. She received the memory they were sharing. The memory was a recent one, ...

... The two boys were in an abandoned building in an old warehouse. There were bits of scrap metal and old machinery spread out across the cold concrete floor. Light shone through grimy glass skylights high up in the roof. Pigeons were fighting for their place on the few steel beams directly above the boys’ heads. The place smelt of bird shit and gasoline. The boys were there to steal copper wire off an old generator, which they could sell for a few dollars to a friend. There was a loud smashing noise; the two boys heard the corrugated iron doors scrape open and heavy footsteps approaching through the darkness. The light streaming through the skylight highlighted the body of a large man wearing a black leather jacket and jeans. In one hand he was holding a kind of weapon, a thick piece of wood, its end covered with blunt metal nails. In his other hand was a lit cigarette.

The man started to shout at them; the same foul words that the boys had been yelling at Yue in the bush. The man commanded the boys to kneel down on the floor and strip off their shirts. The boys were terrified and lowered their bodies, shivering with cold and fear. The man threatened he was going to teach them a lesson; that he would brand them on their backs with his cigarette until they yelled and cried like babies. The boys crumpled with fear. They looked down at the floor, tears welling up in their eyes. One of the boys started to wet his pants. In their fear, all they could hear were the pigeons cooing and flapping, as the males mounted their mates. The man started laughing, loud and rough. The sound echoed through the empty shed.

He shouted at them, ‘Just fucking piss off and never come back here again!’

The boys struggled to their feet, grabbed their shirts and ran towards the open door. They kept running until they collapsed, bending over, gasping for breath, and
retching their guts out ...

The memory ends, Yue could see the boys still staring at each other. They slowly turned to face her; they could see the fear in her eyes. In unison, with strained voices, they yelled, 'Fucking piss off and get out of here!' They allowed her to pass, and she stumbled away trembling.

* 

Rong leant over and touched Yue's arm. 'We have plenty of time to talk.' he said, 'We want this strangeness to become part of your story, one that embraces the tale where it came from. Maybe we should go back and talk about Songling. It might help us. Have you ever been able to receive his memories?'

'Rong, of course, I've a fox-spirit belonging!' she let out jokingly, wiping away her tears. 'Songling is a father to me. I receive his memories when I’m writing in the studio. They appear from between the lines, in those moments of reflection. I’ll tell you one of his memories. Like all memories, they are in the present.'

*the studio of pu songling*

Throughout the year, across Songling's desk, scents and fragrances drift silently in from the window, mingling with the ink and words of his writing. They are the scents of life-giving chrysanthemum in autumn, rose and mooncake lotus in summer, narcissus in the new year, the ten thousand flowered tree peony in early summer, the clouds of plum flowers lying across the snow in winter, and azaleas banked against surprising blue skies. They are the sights of flowers welcoming early morning sun, hollyhock leaning on brown mudbrick walls, begonia breaking into flower in late November, hydrangea, epiphyllum, orchid, lilac, upright cymbidium, peach, apple, wisteria, pomegranate, tulip, lilac, lily, magnolia, marigold, tangerine, orange, pansy, citron, poppy, violet, carnation, amaryllis, dahlia, buttercup, dandelion, daisy, carnation, hyacinth, hibiscus, azalea, and the rare goat horn flower. Beyond the garden, embracing and protecting, are clumps of rustling bamboo, forests of pine laden with hot sweet scent, copses of autumn maple crying soft golden leaves, rows
of poplar whispering with the passing winds of summer, banks of willows bowing to a primeval pond, and stands of ancient cypress.

Standing in his garden, Pu Songling connects with the Tao; he is in harmony with the songs of the locusts in summer, and the silence of white snow in winter. The stones placed across the landscape, refuse any definition; bringing to life the five sacred mountains of Buddha, and the four sacred mountains of the Tao. The life and death of all that the garden holds, reminds him of his own fragile mortality and the subtle possibilities of transformation and reincarnation.

He sees the garden’s wholeness and totality; he breathes in its energy; the smell of the earth below and the scent-filled air above, united in the connectedness of what cannot be said; he soaks himself in the garden’s complex matrix of life and its unquestionable completeness of death. He strolls through the outer groves of bamboo grass, talking to those who are not there to listen. He quotes from Zhuang Zi, on the nurturing of life, ‘We can point to the wood that has been burned but when the fire has passed on we cannot know where it has gone.’ And, ‘The oxen can be cut up in perfect accord with the Tao.

His garden is designed and divided with perfection, not with a dualism, but more with an evocation of beauty and balance. The garden is a suggestion, leaving room for imagination and wonder. In memory of Bai Yuli, the fishpond is full with white koi that are strengthened by the presence of the white lotus flowers and quartz stepping-stones that surround them. Songling likes to contemplate the wu wei of the garden: it is the perfect balance to the endless Confucian exams and the petty bureaucracies that he has had to endure. His failings in the outside world of officialdom ultimately become successes in this inner world of writing and gardening. Songling’s heart flowers in spring and sheds its leaves in autumn …

***

Yue sat back to rest. She knew Rong thought it good for her to talk about Songling. He encouraged this enquiry about the story in which she gained her belonging. Rong knew she felt trapped within her chuánqi tale origins; that she felt like she was caught in an historical moment, a moment when Songling had put pen to paper to in his garden studio three hundred years ago.

She had experienced the same feeling when she’d arrived in Paris as a young
woman at the Sorbonne University. She had arrived from Beijing where her brief affair with the artist Zhang had given her a liberation of spirit after living in the stifling conservatism of Australia. She had just turned nineteen. As she walked the Boulevard St Germain, it was heaven for her; she would stroll down from the Sorbonne in the afternoons to relax on the embankments of the Seine. There she had realised that the beauty and freedom of Paris was balanced by this same oppression of history. The city was unable to move forward and conquer its cultural past. Paris was a living museum of countless dead heroes competing for a place in the discourse of the present. In reality, the city’s future was an ever-increasing number of American stores taking up residence along the Avenue des Champs-Élysées.

In the early nineties, in Beijing with Zhang, it was different. Despite the country’s cultural and political legacy, anything seemed possible. There existed an unstoppable push forward into history, as though a billion citizens needed to establish a certainty that a new history must be created. It was not a call for democracy, but rather a demand that liberation from past oppression must be delivered. The oppression that tried to erase Chinese people’s memory of its absurd history had created paradoxically a nation unfettered by the past and inspired to see its future.

Yue, of course, had felt a stranger in this cultural milieu of radical Beijing. She possessed her own metaphysics of remembering which was different from that of these artists she mixed with who were struggling to reawaken memories that had remained dormant and repressed for so many years. These artists used the physicality of their bodies to release memories. Pain and anger acted as agents of change.

For Yue, the memories she received from Shen over the years had been dissipated, reimagined and transformed the further they had travelled from their source. These memories had their own life that belonged to a quantum world of impermanence and change. Like echoes, the memories had travelled across many surfaces. On each reverberation they’d picked up and dropped off minute pieces of information – a smell, a taste, a reflection of light, a sound, a variation of touch or an altered perception of time. Yue was made of these memories.

‘It’s time to go, Yue,’ Rong prompted.

‘I know,’ she replied, ‘It’s difficult to leave. I have to go down to Baisha and Lijiang to collect the memories Shen stored there. By the next time we meet too much will
I went home to pack for the next day. I would fly to Kunming, catch the overnight train to Lijiang, and then catch the local bus out to Baisha. When I arrived at the apartment, Lily was busy boiling the rice for dinner and stir-frying dishes of chicken, pork and vegetables, all topped up with copious amounts of oil and chilli. Whenever she cooked it was a stage show of constant talking and throwing around of the wok. The orange and blue flames leapt up in the kitchen as the oil splashed onto the gas burner. The whole apartment filled with clouds of steam and pungent smoke. The windows fogged up and I could hardly breathe. I joined in with my own dance amongst the confusion.

‘I was on the net this afternoon,’ Lily yelled above the mayhem, ‘I came across photos of a girl who’s been breastfeeding her puppy on webcam.’

‘Really, she must be bored. I guess if it’s her breast milk, she can do what she wants with it.’ I replied.

‘I tracked her down online and rang her up,’ Lily shouted. ‘She said she’s okay for an interview. What questions should I ask her?’

‘You could ask whether if she’s having any teething problems or whether she thinks dogs make better boyfriends, or you could ask her what the hell is she doing breastfeeding a dog, anyway.’

‘Maybe she just loves dogs,’ Lily said.

‘Maybe. I have a friend in Baisha who loved her dogs so much she kept them in the freezer after they died. A friend told her she might be able to bring them back to life one day; the miracle of science, you know. When she moved house she took them out and buried them. She’s looking after fourteen dogs now; she picks them up from the side of the road whether they like it or not. Sometimes she rides around with eight dogs on her bike; two in each of her carry bags. She thinks its quite normal. I just think it’s hilarious.’

‘Would you breastfeed a puppy?’ Lily urged.

‘I might suckle a baby fox, but not on webcam. I do have my limits you know,’ I replied.
奇

(v) qí  -  strange

清明 qīngmíng (clear and bright)
Fox-spirits don’t like rain, and they don’t like dogs. This is certainly true.

It’s been raining for the past three days. The local farmers tell me it’s unusual for this time of year, the wet season doesn’t usually come until June. The rain makes me uncomfortable. When my hair’s wet it feels like it’s covered with oil. I’ve learnt to wear a wide straw hat to keep the water off. Foxes hate the rain.

The dogs are getting worse here, roaming around in packs looking for trouble. They terrified me at first, especially riding home at night through the dark lanes of the small villages. I had to reassure myself, ‘I am a fox-spirit child with a fox-spirit mother! Old fox-spirits would laugh at these dogs.’ Now, whenever the dogs chase me, I stop and hop off the bike, then howl at the top of my voice like a hound from the Baskervilles. They’re the ones that are terrified!

Last week I went out looking for fireflies with a friend. They’re extremely delicate and fragile, just a faint glow pulsating in the heavy darkness of the pines. A full moon rose up over the hills and took away most of their light. I felt content there on the dark verge of the forest; that liminal space where you know you can hide if you have to. I wanted to curl up and lie alongside them, keeping them company, guarding each other through the long cold night ahead. My friend thought I was mad.

As Yue stepped up to the veranda the day was full of sun. Rong was ready at the door, coffee in hand. A look of relief swept across his concern, the present and the past resolving itself. He welcomed her back from Lijiang. She had not contacted him for two weeks and he’d been thinking the worst.

‘You look exhausted,’ he said, ‘And it’s the time of the Qing Ming. You look like you’ve been sweeping your own grave instead of those of your ancestors.’ He tried to hold onto his sense of humour. ‘So much has happened since you left. My writings are again under the scrutiny of the Public Bureau. I’m afraid there’s yet another faction. They see themselves like the Anti-Spiritual Pollution Campaigners of the 80s; artists and writers beware! You don’t have to tell me what’s happened right this
moment,’ he continued, ‘Just sit quietly for a while. The look on your face tells me that Lijiang may have become a broken palace of memories.’

She looked down at her coffee, warming her hands around the cup. He was right; Lijiang had been a broken palace. Shen’s palace of memories proved to be vast and uncompromising. She had walked for hours and not managed to locate a single memory he’d left behind. Lijiang was a place she had come to both love and hate. Out of the corner of her eye she saw Rong cross his legs. Her present train of thought was extinguished, taking attention away from Shen and back to Rong.

‘I was thinking about Simonides and the original palace of memories,’ she told him.

Rong replied with keen interest. ‘Simonides said that the city is the teacher of the men. I’ve no doubt Lijiang will be a learning place for both of us. I’ve always admired Simonides, especially his love of spring … the blithe angel of the perfume-breathing spring, the dark-vested swallow. Simonides’ swallow is in perfect harmony with a love poem by Bécquer:

\[
\text{The dark swallows will return} \\
\text{To your balcony to hang their nests} \\
\text{And again with their wings at your window} \\
\text{They will call as they play.}
\]

\[
\text{But those who stayed their flight} \\
\text{While contemplating your beauty and my happiness;} \\
\text{Those who learned our names,} \\
\text{Those…, will not return!’}
\]

‘So you see all things connect,’ he said, ‘I’m glad you weren’t like the overstaying swallow and were able to return safely from Lijiang.’

‘Yes, I’m the prodigal daughter, returning home to her father,’ she replied. ‘There are a number of memories Shen left behind. I’m sure within them there are kernels of truth the both of us need to connect with, those that are concerned with matters of the heart. I know Shen truly believes it is only in the heart where truth and peace can be found. On his chest he has a tattoo that reads ’broken heart’. He had it put there the very first day he entered prison after Tiananmen.’ She went on to tell Rong about
her latest visit to the Lijiang.

outside gold fish

At the entrance to the old town, Yue stood solid to the earth, her body supported by the mass of centuries-old granite cobblestones underneath. A sense of déjà vu reassured her. Looking out across the narrow alleyway toward the newly rebuilt Buddhist temple, a remnant of Mao’s period of madness, she allowed herself to be soaked wet in the spring rain that swept across the town. The rain melted as it fell onto the stone. With each shower that brushed against her face, an acute feeling of the past was experienced. A series of memories was released into her consciousness, particular instances which belonged to a time of her younger self. With each splash of water, these moments resurfaced at random, releasing the freedoms contained within them:

... I am a young woman stripped bare, high up on a mountain plateau, plunging deep into a snow-dappled stream which traverses an alpine meadow lined with twisted gums. Next to me is a young boy, a friend’s son. He can see a blue lake in the distance, resting below a granite slope. He knows this lake is deeper than anyone knows. He wants to run away from me and swim in its cold depths. The lake could kill him but he doesn’t care ...

... A shy young girl eats vanilla ice-cream against a hot ocean sky. She laughs quietly as the screaming seagulls attack from all directions. The hot chips burn in her hand then float in an arc across the brilliant grass. The largest of the gulls squabble at the centre. The weakest, those with one leg or a twisted beak, stand off at the edge, their heads slightly turned away...

... A group of old men drink outside a pub, leaning against cool rock walls. For the first time they notice the beauty of the adolescent girl, which until now had been hidden behind a screen of awkwardness. The girl picks up on their stares. She feels uncomfortable and quickens her step. She wants to be home with her grandmother, talking and laughing, making life simple ...
Yue embraced the drifting veils of rain; the stones beneath her were a slate grey. Beside her was a wooden sign, built for tourists. She read the faded words on the peeling wooden board: *White Horse Dragon Pool - It is an ideal place for leisure. In the lower section of the spring are the three pit wells, which is a scientific creation of the local residents. The upper well is for drinking, the middle for washing vegetables and the lower for washing clothes.* The words stuck in her mind.

The first stone pool, directly in front, was flanked by four carved stone dragonheads. It held the purest water used for drinking, and contained a dozen goldfish drifting lazily in its lower depths. The sight of the fish made her think of Chuang Tzu. She wondered if these fish were ignorant of the beautiful rain, just as the fish in Chuang’s story were unable to discern the beauty of the women who passed by.

There was fresh spring water gushing from a small hole in a rock just above the pool, and she guessed an underground stream must pass through and under the Buddhist temple that lay beyond the wall. On the edge of the second pool, rain-soaked restaurant workers hurriedly washed green vegetables; a couple of old Naxi women rinsed crockery bowls. The water then flowed into a third pool that stood below as an abandoned patch of soapy water used only for washing clothes.

At the first well, suspended in silence, drifted eleven large koi; nine were coloured gold, two were white, and another was a mixture of gold, white, and black. This fish had positioned itself deeper in the clear water, away from the main group that had aligned themselves with the flow of the incoming spring water; all the fish lay at slightly differing angles, fanning their fins to keep themselves fixed in the one spot. A small offering bowl had been placed in the mouth of one of the stone dragonheads that looked down from above. Yue felt the greatest empathy with the solitary fish. It seemed to exist outside the others, relaxed in its isolation. The variety of its colours expressed a complexity, obvious to all who were willing to look. Yue felt as alone outside the pond as the fish was inside. The rain connected the two of them in a watery diffusion.

She looked again at the series of wells with increased intensity; there was a small stone channel that had been designed to take the excess water away from the three ponds. The middle well was asymmetrical; the other two wells were square. She thought of the top pool as being *yin*, receiving the nourishing water, and the next pool
yang, giving back the water to others for washing. The granite stone was flushed with the beautiful pink of a ripe peach; the stones which made up the wall behind the stone dragons were exact-fitting shapes of four and five-sided trapeziums, displaying a mastery that could still be seen in the stonework of newly built Naxi houses. Moss lined the curved interior of the stone just above the waterline, and the dull weed below partially covered the pool’s base. Above, there was a jade willow spreading out over the wells, feeding off the watery oasis. In sharp focus to the soft foliage, drops of rain punctured the pond’s surface, sending ripples away from Yue and back towards her. The ripples acted as the beating heart of the spring rain.

Light reflected through gaps in the stone wall; a vast space lay behind. To the left was an entrance gate to the Buddhist temple. Yue carefully walked around the curve of the first pond, and stepped through the darkened archway. At her right a huge white horse reared up, frozen. To her left, a heavenly king leered down, with two horns rising from the top of his skull. Offerings of fruit and flowers were littered at his feet. A line of prayer flags cut across the way. Bending down, she passed through the narrow passageway afloud with water and came out into a cavernous grotto. In the centre of the grotto was another stoned-lined pool, probably thirty metres across. Its circular granite wall rose at least two metres above the waterline. The pond’s surface was a bubbly mass of white and gold liquid that captured delicate flashes of ambient light from the temple lanterns swaying above.

**gold koi & fox tails**

Stepping closer to the edge of the pool Yue saw hundreds of yellow and gold koi massing at a point on the surface. In the shadows was a human form, barely discernable through the spray of light rain. Her eyes adjusted to the dim light; an old man appeared, dressed in a traditional dark-blue Mao suit. He was holding a small Buddhist prayer book in one hand, and with the other was throwing food to the frenzied fish. He was curiously stooped, leaning slightly to the left, but at the same time tilting dangerously forward as though he too could soon be offered to the ravenous carp.

His voice floated out across the pond. ‘Hello! The fish are greedy, they’d eat each other if they had the chance.’
She was unsure whether she should talk to him. The fact that he was there at all, on the edge of this pond in the rain, made him a strange attraction, not a man whom she should necessarily trust. ‘Fish, they’re just fish.’ she replied, giving away as little as possible.

‘You, are you …’ he began to mutter, slowly shuffling closer, moving around the edge of the pond. ‘You look as though you’re searching for something. Something that’s important to you.’

She wondered whether she should tell him of her quest to collect Shen’s memories.

‘I’m here for my brother,’ she said. ‘He left things here in this town, things that need to be returned to him. I’ve come here to collect his memories, memories of the heart,’ she declared, as he moved closer. She thought of how Lao Tzu’s journey of a thousand miles had started with a single step.

The man stopped for a moment to collect his thoughts. He looked at her with an intense focus in his eyes, and then laughed; not a cruel laugh, more a laugh of exasperation and relief combined.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said. ‘The reason I’m laughing is that I, in contrast to you, spend most of my time trying to forget memories, to wipe my mind clear of all that’s happened in my life. The thought of actually wanting to collect and retrieve those memories is beyond imagining. I’m in no doubt that memories can be collected, I’m just bemused by why you would want to do such a thing.’

Again he moved towards her, seeming almost to float in the light rain. He said he wanted to share a strange story, a story that had been given to him a while ago by a man who had arrived in town from the north. The man was in his late twenties. It was a story about his girlfriend, a woman called Lumei who had run a guesthouse in Lijiang. He told her his memory, the story left to him:

‘The young man had met Lumei when he’d booked into her guesthouse one night after returning from the bars in the old town. It was too late for him to return home. On meeting Lumei he found he could see his future. Her spirit was like a beam of light that grew stronger as it moved through the night. He was a man who was hiding his past, a wanderer. Both of them fell quickly towards love and thoughts of marriage. Lumei was from a local Naxi family. The Naxi were the local indigenous group, once poor and rural, who were now enjoying the fruits of a tourist boom in Lijiang. Lumei’s family had leased a portion of their land to a developer from Shanghai, and with the
money had bought a small guesthouse for their daughter.

The young man arrived from the north, alone. He’d been forced to start a new life after being in trouble with the police and the government, and had spent years locked up in prisons that didn’t officially exist. His affair with young Lumei was proving to be just as dangerous. An enemy of the man, already known to have been responsible for his imprisonment, had tracked him down, all the way to Lijiang. He wanted to cause him further harm. This time by ruining the new love with his girlfriend.

His enemy planned to discredit Lumei. He had made it known to everyone that Lumei was in fact a fox-spirit and that she was only marrying the young man for his money. This accusation, if believed, would make the prospect of marriage impossible. The news of this slander horrified the young man.

He was certain these rumours were false. He had never noticed anything strange about Lumei and they had not yet slept together. The young man however was steeped in suspicion and insecurity. He’d had previous connections with fox-spirits, he did not tell me in what way, and because of this he needed to be absolutely sure about Lumei before he could trust her with his love. He hungered for an everyday life. He decided he would have to make his own inquiries about Lumei. He thought it best to enlist the help of his closest friend, a young woman called Xuni. His plan was to ask Xuni to befriend Lumei, and after an appropriate time plan for them to spend a night sleeping together, as friends. The young man could then be certain Lumei was not a fox-spirit.

Even though Xuni thought the request strange she agreed to his plan and over the next couple of months made sure that she and Lumei became close friends. They spent much time together, going for long walks in the park, shopping in Seven Star Street for clothes, and occasionally going to the local cinema. They were both enamoured with romance movies and found themselves swooning whenever the couples kissed on screen. They held each other’s hands when they walked and hugged each other with great enthusiasm whenever they greeted. After a time, Xuni told the young man that she’d come to love Lumei and her effervescent spirit. Lumei was a strong-willed, risk-taking country girl. This was the spirit that first attracted the young man to Lumei. Xuni was the complete opposite, very feminine, polite, and softly spoken; the type of woman that every respectable family would approve of.

After a number of months the moment finally came when Xuni and Lumei had the chance to sleep together. They had celebrated a friend’s birthday at a local bar; they
both had a lot to drink. Rather than Xuni travelling all the way home to the edge of Lijiang, Lumei invited Xuni to stay at her courtyard guesthouse in the middle of the old town. Their warmth and love towards each other was strong. As Lumei prepared for bed she removed her blouse; Xuni found herself blushing with embarrassment and excitement. She lay down next to Lumei. Her fragrance was a natural as the forest; there was no evidence of her being a fox-spirit, and there was certainly no foxtail. That night they became lovers. The feeling between them was too strong.

The next day Xuni and Lumei revealed the news of their coming together to the young man. He was full of hurt. Seeing his pain, the two women suggested that they could all live together as lovers under the same roof, but for the young man this was impossible. His hopes were for marriage, children and a sense of normalcy; he desired a life far less strange than he’d previously known. Sharing his love with the two of them was not an option in a town like Lijiang; his future would be full of vicious gossip and ridicule. His only option was to withdraw, in silence and heartbreak.’

When the old man finished the story, Yue felt great sorrow for the young man. She could see that his heart had been completely broken. The old man stood quietly in the dark as the wind swept across the courtyard. Yue was overcome with a deep sense of nostalgia; a kind of knowing, a longing for a time when it might have been possible for this young man to have embraced his two lovers, his heart open to their love, warmth and nurturing. It was a time that seemed close and familiar to her.

‘What was the name of the young lover, this man who found and lost love?’ she asked the old man.

‘I never learnt his name,’ the old man replied, ‘I’ll never forget that after he told me his story, he took off his shirt to show me a tattoo on his chest; it read in red ink … broken heart.’

As she stood in the rain the old man walked away into the mist, drifting back into another world. The words of his story ran back through Yue’s memories and down into her heart like toxic waste.

***

All Rong could do after hearing Yue’s story was to hold her hand. Again she had
allowed herself to experience the pain and the sorrow of Shen’s story. This is where he’d gone after his first imprisonment. He had tried to begin a life he hoped would be simple and pure.

She left Rong’s studio, empty.

At the bottom of the stairs I could already hear the music. The song was ‘Beijing Power’. We’d heard it two nights ago at the Old What Bar. Lily had got up on stage and screamed along with the band. It was fun. Last night I wanted only silence. As soon as Lily saw the look on my face the music was gone.

‘Hard day at the office?’ She loved to mock the seriousness I held after the sessions with Rong.

‘Yes, hard work at the office. Who knows what’s real these days. I have no idea what the truth is. I need a drink. Gin and lime … please,’ I said.

Lily jumped up onto the sink to retrieve the bottle from the top shelf. She poured in the gin, adding a half a lime and a few chunks of ice. I was handed the glass, making sure Lily took a gulp first.

‘You’re lucky you’re not a goose fancier,’ she said. ‘I’ve heard that down in Guangdong once they’ve butchered the ducks they shove the hearts into the top of their head to make them look like geese. Then they flatten their bums on a hot plate to give them a wide arse; there you have it, a double-the-price goose. We’re going down for an interview in a few days. A diploma can be faked, a driver’s license can be faked, pork can be turned into beef, sugar into honey, ducks into geese. In Nanchang even a virgin can be faked with a bit of pigeon’s blood. It’s truly a wonderful time,’ she shouted with delight.

‘You’re right; I’ll lie here quietly and try to appreciate what a wonderful time we’re living in. How lucky I am to be part of it; one hug for you, and a partridge in a pear tree, a fake one of course. I have to see Shen’s memory as a gift, the first piece of a jigsaw. I’ve handed over my life for them.’

‘And you will get a new one back,’ Lily added.

There was only Lily’s breathing in the following silence. I took a mouthful of gin and closed my eyes. Lily’s fingers stroked through my hair.
（vi）qì - strange

谷雨gǔyǔ (grain rain)
Four nights ago there was another dream. I was walking through Baisha, up the main street towards the town gate. I turned down towards the old stone bridge across the riverstream. The banks were lined with willows, flushed with a new growth that spilled into the water. An abandoned house stood further back below a small cliff. A small orchard of apricot, peach and plum trees stood to one side of the house. Tufts of bamboo bordered an old stone fence, partly demolished. At the edge of a courtyard was a barn, rundown and crumbling. Numerous straw bales were strewn across its floor, and rotting corn hung from the rafters.

Out of the shadows of the barn an old man appeared. He was strangely short and slightly crooked. Light from the full moon spilled out across the broken ground. The man held a white walking stick in his left hand. He wasn’t Naxi, more likely Han. He asked where I was going, in a dialect that seemed to belong more from the North, towards Shandong. I told him I was looking for fireflies, and that dusk was a good time, despite the moon being full.

He nodded and said, ‘Come inside and drink wine with me. It is a special night. A good time for us to celebrate.’

We walked into the barn and I found myself at the entrance to a cave. The old man held up his lantern and we were in what appeared to be a vast room that expanded into an infinite soft darkness.

In front of us stood an enormous wooden table, laid out with wine and fruit; on it were two golden goblets and numerous porcelain bowls full of oranges and cumquats. I took a seat and turned toward my newfound host. He was a peculiar man, full of the exuberance you’d expect from a young traveller who’d only recently returned from a long journey. He drank his wine with great gusto and went on to tell a whole range of stories full of wild goings-on, and laden with copious amounts of risqué jokes. He did this in a most flirtatious manner. He was a ribald character for sure. I didn’t feel the least bit concerned for my safety. He asked me whether I knew anything about fox-spirits. I laughed, and told him that I had been one once. He didn’t seem the least bit surprised and just nodded his head in recognition.

The old man stood up and once again held his lantern high in the air.

‘Let me show you around,’ he said, ‘This is a house of some opulence.’

The light from the lantern uncovered what lay ahead; it appeared to be a complex of
luxurious rooms and apartments, complete with elaborate decorations and plush furnishings. There was a vestibule full of statues and even a fountain. Corridors on either side seemed to stretch on forever. Chandeliers hung from a tiled roof. The old man moved forward to show me the way but at that very moment a cock crowed outside. At the last sound of its crowing there was a sudden explosion of light and a puff of acrid smoke. All that remained lying on the dirt floor where the man once stood was a pile of clothes and a stalk of wheat. It was only then that I realised the old gentleman must surely have been a magic fox. They often took up residence in abandoned houses and rafters of old barns, or in caves and the openings of haystacks. The old foxes delighted in creating the illusions of magnificent mansions. This was surely one of them. I walked out of the cave, back into the barn then began the long walk home to the studio. The next morning I woke up and found a tiny stalk of straw in my hair.

I know it was a dream, but I’ve come to believe more and more that there must be a fox den somewhere on the outskirts of the village, maybe near Yanjiao, at the foot of the cliff where the wild mushrooms grow.

On her way to the studio when she last met Rong, Yue was sure that she had been followed, at first by car, and then on foot. She had done all she could to shake them off. A sudden rainstorm had made things easier. This was not the first time she felt she was under some kind of surveillance. The police and their goons were after her because of Shen. She herself had done nothing to antagonize them. Shen had been jailed after Tiananmen, and then imprisoned not that long ago. Yue had no idea of how strong Shen’s dissent had been towards the government. Because of this, Yue had decided to abandon her apartment in Tuanjiehu and take another in the seedy area of Sanlitun.

She felt strangely at home there among the drug dealers, sex shops and tattoo parlours. In the mornings she would walk down the six flights of steps and make her way to the local dumpling shop for breakfast, usually ordering a dozen pork dumplings and some beef noodles. The breakfast cost was only ten kuai. The woman who ran the shop was always joking with her husband who was in charge of cooking in the tiny cramped kitchen. After the morning rush he would come outside into the
laneway, wearing his dirty white singlet, and prop himself against the wall beside the steaming dumplings stacked outside the front door. He luxuriated with what looked like his first cigarette of the day, drawing back the smoke long and hard. He was like a hero from a cowboy movie, standing at the doorway, his arms gleaming with perspiration.

Yue would linger there, sitting in the cluttered corner of the shop, enjoying the simple comings and goings of the place: the arrival of the uniformed assistants from the nearby clothing market; young couples in love, huddled on the small benches, trying hard not to show their public display of affection; and the migrant workers enjoying a cheap hot meal. The restaurant filled with the sound of hurriedly slurped noodles, plates clattering as they were taken away to the kitchen, and car horns blaring in the alleyway outside.

As she sat there taking it all in, nothing felt strange. Everything seemed to effortlessly fit into its common place. This was her everyday oasis. It represented an honest family business that had not yet turned into a fast food outlet. In her ideal world it would have survived as a simple noodle shop, with a husband and wife trying to make a living without too much stress; a couple doing their best to survive in a big city. The dumpling shop had not yet been replaced by a branded franchise that would employ cheap unskilled labour. In this shop, the dough was still mixed on site, the dumplings carefully shaped by hand and steamed in traditional bamboo containers; there was no cutting open of plastic packets of frozen goods, or reheating of processed food as part of a mechanised production line. She had grown to like very much this couple who owned their means of production. The harder they worked, the more customers they had; the more money they accumulated, the more able they were to give their children a good start in life.

Did desire and pleasure reside in this noodle shop that she escaped to? Possibly. She attempted to reconcile the emptiness of her own life by examining the everyday existence of this husband and wife. Who was suffering most from alienation? When she looked at this couple she did not sense any isolation and estrangement in their lives. The couple could be seen as workers at the mercy of the new capitalist economy, or of the regime; but it was not that easy. Each morning the husband and wife lit the incense in the shop’s altar as a blessing for good luck and fortune; Yue had no idea what happiness they expected or received from this gesture. She wondered if their happiness derived purely from seeing their business thrive and prosper.
This space she walked into each morning became for her the space of the everyday, a meditation on the present, capable of negating the future and momentarily forgetting the past. The husband and wife did not seem like outsiders to her. They were inside a system that for the present sustained and nourished them. The couple knew what would take place each morning, noon and night; they represented for her an idealised existence where everything was known. In the morning when they arrived, the key would open the door, they would make their dumplings and fresh rice noodles, the gas would ignite, the bamboo containers would fill with steam, the dumplings would be ready to eat as customers arrived one by one to order and eat, most often with grateful smiles and occasional private sighs. The couple knew that groups of workers from the silk market would arrive at lunch, and hungry street workers would call in at the end of the day, that money would be counted and a slight profit made. She was sure there were hidden desires and pleasures consummated in the brief moments allowed to the couple within the noodle shop; a smile and quick nod of the head, a soft touch of the hand on the thigh, a puff of air given to the partner across their face.

She imagined that if the couple were asked for their ideology or their beliefs, they would answer, ‘It is the need to work, so our children can succeed and the family continue to thrive, and that the debts are paid.’ If she asked them whether they thought China was now capitalism with Chinese characteristics, they would reply, ‘This is China now, and tomorrow it may all be different.’

The week before, Yue had noticed another couple that ran a food stand outside the nearby teacher’s college. The roadway and footpath next to the stall was packed with students who could afford just a few kuai for a snack. The cart sold deep-fried chunks of potato skewered on a stick. The man and woman had just finished packing up their stall; it was the end of the day. They were starting to make their way home. All their equipment was piled up on the back of the tricycle that towed the stall. The woman was peddling, with the man pushing behind; the sight of their cooperation and intimacy had struck her deeply. She’d turned to a student beside her and asked whether she thought the couple were in love.

The student, slightly taken aback by the question, offered an emphatic, ‘Of course! I see them almost every day. Once the woman told me how happy she was with her husband. She said the most important thing was that he was a good father, and that
he was kind to her.’

Yue knew there needed to be love in her own life, that she longed and desired for the everyday; that this desire grew stronger every day. She seemed to be forever on the outside, just as the Wuya had predicted.

***

Yue arrived at the studio, sure that she was no longer being followed. Why Rong’s studio was not under surveillance she could not understand. As she walked up through the garden a last flush of rainwater was falling down the studio’s drainpipes into two large ceramic pots placed at either corner of the building. The smooth currents of fresh clear water flowed across the cobalt blue and emerald lips of the jars. She held her hand across the cool stream. The liquid passed effortlessly through her fingers. She slid her hand deeper into the water, then back out again into the warm afternoon air. It was time to see Rong.

She pushed open the wooden door and walked into the studio.

‘Those goons have been following me again,’ she said, without saying hello. ‘I had to shake them off on the way. I don’t understand why they just don’t stake out this place. They are like monkeys on typewriters.’

‘That’s one hiding place those fools haven’t managed to find. When you were last there it was such a difficult time,’ Rong replied.

‘The garden after the rain is beautiful. All the water reminds me of your mountain hut.’ Yue wanted the thoughts of the goons out of her mind.

‘I love that hut,’ he said.

She thought of the wooden hut, thatched with straw and nestled into the base of the towering cliff. She took a sip of the steaming coffee that Rong had placed beside her, and felt relaxed enough to talk of that time.

\[ \text{the woman who became a tree} \]

Yue remembered the fragrances of mountain pines and ancient magnolia trees that swirled together in the hot late-winter afternoon and filled the room where she rested. In the room was a simple bed and a single chair placed under an antique
writing table. On the table were papers, pens, old books and a simple oil-bean lamp. There was a waterfall nearby. She could hear it breaking and splashing over the huge boulders, falling into what must have been a smaller lake below. There was also a painting on the wall. The azure water of its mountain stream had turned to sepia; the watercolour brushstrokes flowed evenly over the fine handmade paper. A washed-out moon hung high above, shining through the mist. The house in the painting was more extravagant than Rong's mountain hut. It was decorated with a tiled roof and a long spacious veranda. Its solid wooden piers rested on massive boulders. The hut sat directly adjacent to a larger waterfall.

She had no doubt about her presence in the mountain hut. She could remember the sound of the wind rushing through needled branches. She’d lain on the bed beside the large wooden windows that looked out to the forest. Waking up from a deep feverish sleep, she’d seen Rong and Shen through the window. They were sitting quietly on the veranda, looking out towards the stream. Rong appeared deep in thought. He was dressed in black. Shen was admiring the landscape that surrounded them. Soft noises drifted in from the adjoining room; there were two or three people talking, all male.

Yue had looked out past them towards the waterfall, she was half-awake. It was the middle of the day and the sun was high in the southern sky. The sound of the cicadas filled the air; they were as loud as the water that crashed onto the rocks below; their rhythms pulsated in the heat and bounced off the steep sides of the gorge. There was also a small bamboo cage hanging on the veranda post. Inside sang a lone cicada, trying to compete with its fellow mates outside. The sounds of the cicada made Yue think of her Grandma Lao. The times when she had come to visit in Canberra, not long after the accident. Grandma Lao had loved telling her stories about the cicadas back home on the mainland. They were her favourite insects.

Grandma Lao had told Yue how she and her friends had gone out to the forest with long bamboo poles. At the end of the poles they placed a sticky substance made from the gum of trees, so they could catch the cicadas. After one was caught, Grandma Lao would wrap her hand around its body and shake it furiously. She would compete with her friends to see whose could make the loudest noise. There was another sound the cicadas made, a song that was far quieter. It was only when Yue was older that she realised that this song was one of pain and sorrow.

Grandma Lao and her friends went sticking for the cicadas during the fifth and
sixth months of the year. One boy, who she said was an expert at this, used to be able to place five pellets at the end of each stick. The pellets were made from the sap of pine trees. That boy could catch anything. For Grandma Lao to catch them she had to stand as still as a tree, with her hand outstretched as far as possible, holding the stick. She became a tree. The cicadas would smell the sticky sweet gum and fly towards her. She couldn’t move her head one bit to the left or the right. She could only glimpse at the wings of the cicadas as they flew into their trap. They added glutinous rice to the bait to make it even stickier. Once the cicadas had flown onto the pellets they had no chance, flies in a trap! Grandma Lao’s brother used to cage them and sell them at the local market.

Grandma Lao told Yue that her father had a saying, ‘Cicadas drink but never eat, and silkworms eat but never drink.’

Yue loved the way that fathers could say things like that. She wished that she’d also had the good fortune to hear her father speak words so meaningfully. She was lucky to have had such a grandmother. Grandma Lao thought cicadas were magical, even spiritual. She compared their life to the reincarnation of humans; she would say, ‘We, as humans have no memory of our past lives, just as cicadas have no memory of their former incarnation as a nymph.’ She would always quote the great Chinese writers: ‘To refuse to believe what one has not seen is like the cicada refusing to believe that snow is solid,’ said Huan Kwan. She also quoted Kou Hung: ‘A cicada prefers to starve to death and be clean rather than to be satiated with the droppings of a dung beetle.’

Yue was never quite sure of the meanings of these sayings, but it impressed her that cicadas were such virtuous and noble creatures, and made her respect them even more.

There was one story Grandma Lao told, that she did understand: ‘There was a cicada sitting on a branch being watched by a praying mantis who was just about to kill the cicada; at the same moment, the praying mantis was being watched by a bird who was just about to kill the praying mantis, and behind the bird and the praying mantis was a boy who was just about to shoot an arrow to kill the bird. All of a sudden the boy realised all that was taking place, the killer taking aim at the killer. The boy was so shocked by this realisation that he rushed inside his house and stayed in his room for three days, thinking about what he had just seen.’

The story still haunted Yue after all these years.
Yue had lain in the hut in a half-fever, listening to the cicadas. Rong entered the room and started to talk. Rong, Shen and Yue had decided to rendezvous at the hut, deep in the ravines, safe from surveillance. It was to be her first contact with Rong, and the second time that Shen and she had met. He had just been released from prison for the second time, but now she was too sick to talk to him. All she could manage was to rest deeply in the haze of her sickness. Shen became a series of passing glances though doorways and windows.

She knew that he must have travelled days and nights by car. He would have arrived exhausted. In the brief glimpses she did catch, she hardly recognised him. He appeared gaunt, and carried the body of a much older man; his skin was a pasty white, and when she spied him once in the hallway his head was bent down, as though humbled by some greater force. During those last months in prison they had kept him in harsh solitary confinement. The authorities had not released him without bidding him a cynical and cruel farewell.

She sensed that Shen wanted to share knowledge with her that until then he had feared to let go. This never happened. At the hut she had fallen gravely ill. Her spirit completely abandoned her. It was as though she was not ready to hear what he had to say. As the cicadas sang, she wanted to leave her body and join them, to become part of their chorus, to sing and beat the same rhythms they did. Her fever became intense. She lay there, heavy in the bed, sweating, desperate to escape the suffocating heat. Her body floated through the walls, past the bamboo and forest groves and out in an ever-expanding arc across the river, towards and above the waterfall, into the memory of a dream,

... She transformed into an eagle and soared up to the open sky, to the white space, beyond a blue that stretched back towards a false horizon. A thin black line trailed behind her, marking her ascent. She broke through the colour white, then the pale green. She crashed against the boundary of a vaulted heaven and was thrown back towards earth, spilling through the air, tumbling and plummeting downwards, battered and bruised. Angered by this failure she lifted herself up again and again,
and ascended to the tipping point. She was jolted away from the arc of the vault at every attempt, her body was bruised and scarred; blood ran down her fingertips and out across her hand. She scraped the blood against the celestial ceiling that revealed itself as a gaping endless black hole. She clung to the edge of the sphere, and just as the swirling black mass threatened to envelop her, the heavens opened up; beyond, there existed limitless open space. She now felt free to descend. With glistening black wings she drifted and glided down to the firmament, past the craggy outcrops and barren, mountain ridges, over the gorge and into the next valley filled with green yak meadows and ripe cornfields studded with brilliant sunflowers. She was Wuya the crow, luminous in the radiant summer light, searching steep cliffs for food, diving down into the cool shadows of the mountains to drink fresh clear water.

Rong appeared to her as a fox creeping through the tangled undergrowth, his silk coat shone in the morning mist, his eyes gleamed with a knowledge that transcended his surroundings. As he spoke, his fox jaw was powerful, with needle-like teeth that appeared more comforting than dangerous. As a fox, he stalked closer, the saplings of a willow tree brushed against her. She perched on the banks of a small stream where Wuya landed. Rong had come to her as an old man and as a fox, connecting her with her past and present, an acknowledgement of her strange belonging ...

When she finally collapsed from fever, it was Rong who had caught her and held her securely in his arms. He gently covered her with soft blankets and laid her head to rest on the pillow. She held Rong’s hand briefly before she drifted into unconsciousness.

***

Rong’s studio fell into shadow as the sun turned further to the west. The drenching darkness took Yue away from the memory of the mountain hut and she fell silent.

‘I’ve found an old apartment in Sanlitun,’ she said after a long pause. ‘It’s noisy and dirty but it’s safe. I registered with the police under the name of my fox-spirit mother.’ She laughed. ‘I have to go back to Lijiang tomorrow. I’ll catch the train. It will keep me away from the airport security and give me plenty of time to think.’

Rong looked at her in the manner of a father. ‘Look out and be careful. Try to practice the art of not being seen,’ he said. ‘The next time we’ll meet it will be the
I love the nights when I go home to the new apartment and Lily is there. She transports me to another place, far away from the search for Shen and the talks with Rong. To go to Lily is to go to another land. She might just as well be the keeper of the Taoist Fairy Isles in the mythical Bohai Sea. Lily is my escape from the gravity of emotion. Her sense of the strange belongs to all that is weird, humorous and ironic. Hers is not the strange of the elaborate chuánqi tales from which I was born; it’s closer to the traditional zhiguai stories that recorded the wondrous and brief anomalies occurring every day throughout China.

‘Tonight we’re having my most special dish, Thai chicken with coconut milk and grapes, all served on a bed of fresh jasmine rice,’ she boasted, as I settled down on the couch.

‘You sound like a TV cook show host, Chefs for the L.A. Celebrities,’ I replied in my worst Californian accent.

‘Well, you are my celebrity,’ she said, ‘and I am your chef for the night. Relax and enjoy.’

‘I will. I will imagine myself in my dream, twelve hundred square foot Californian bungalow, complete with a woman cave. You will have your own cave for band practice. You’ll be able to yell, ‘fuck, fuck, fuck’ as loud as you wanted.’ We both laughed.

‘Speaking of love, we have another story for the documentary. There’s a girl downtown that wants to sell her first love of virginity for one hundred thousand kuai. She’s been singing in the underpass near Xidan. There are people who think she’s fake, others who think she’s real. They’re calling her Panhandling Lil.’

‘That’s a good name for a son...’ I said. ‘She’ll have to use pigeon blood. The pigeons must be getting very nervous by now with all this virginity breaking across the country. These rich Chinese men are definitely not after good sex, that’s for sure. What about Panhandling Lil?’

‘She reckons her father died and she needs the money to look after her ill mother,’ Lily replied.

‘Ah, the dead father, and the sick mother,’ I said.
‘A son of a rich coal miner has offered to give her the money for nothing,’ she said.

‘How nice,’ I said, ‘Coal mines are such a nice business.’

‘Anyway, most people are on her side. They think she’s brave and has lofty ideals. I like the coalmining angle though. Maybe we can go and interview the son as well. Ask him what he thinks of his dad.’

‘And whether he drives a red Ferrari,’ I added. ‘Come and sit next to me. You can even pretend to hug me. I have to leave tomorrow.’

Grapes in hand, Lily walked over and sat down next to me. She hugged me, and didn’t let go.
记

(vii) jì - remember

立夏 lixià (start of summer)
It’s the beginning of summer, the time when foxes go into the forests to celebrate and renew their energy.

I’ve just come back from a walk along Sanyuan lane, past the cypress trees and the lantana hedgerows and cornfields. It was raining, and the moon full. After I’d reached the end of the lane I crossed over towards the cliff where there’s the tall copse of oak trees. They’ve only escaped being cut down because of the small Buddhist temple nearby. Behind the grove is a small embankment that’s perfect for a fox den. I’ve become obsessed with there having to be one. To my delight, I spotted a soft glow at the foot of one the trees, in the shadows. At first I thought it was a firefly, but the colour and shape wasn’t quite right; the light was white and translucent, around the size of a tennis ball.

To my amazement I could only guess it was a fox globe. I’d heard stories about them but never seen one. They are usually very closely guarded, hidden deep within a clan cave or a den. I moved my hand closer to the light to feel if there was any heat. The globe was solid and cool, soothing to touch in an odd way. I stood up to see if there was anyone around, I was alone. When I looked down again, the globe had gone. I stood there for a while waiting for something to happen, but there was nothing. All I could do was walk home, thinking on the meaning of such an event.

The taxi worked its way through the stifling Beijing traffic. Yue looked over her shoulder for any sign of trouble. She’d called Rong to say she was running late. Her voice trembled with the memory of what just happened, and at the thought of having to relive the whole incident again, explaining it to Rong. She was hot, and fine drops of sweat collected around her temples. Her hair and clothes remained perfectly in place.

Her body stiffened as she walked up the garden path to the studio.

‘Quick, come inside,’ Rong beckoned from the veranda. ‘I’m glad you rang. I was worried about you. Sit down, you’re shaking.’

‘Those bastards!’ she exclaimed. ‘The train had just pulled out of Kunming. Three
guys crowded me in the corridor and shoved me into an empty compartment. They put a fucking gun to my head! Can you believe that? On a train! They shouted at me not to move or I'd be dead. They wanted to know about Shen. They kept shouting at me, ‘Where is he, where is he?’ I kept yelling, ‘I've no fucking idea!’ Then they mentioned your name. That you were part of all of this?’ Yue asked.

‘I never thought they would go to these lengths. I’m not surprised they mentioned my name. Whatever Shen’s done, they’d love to implicate me,’ he said.

‘When the biggest guy said your name the other guy told him to shut up. Then they put a gun to my head. They were trying to scare the shit out of me. I started yelling for the police, just to make a noise. The train attendants came and opened the door, saw what was happening, and then slammed it shut and went away. I kept on yelling, then a laowai came to the door and shouted, ‘what the fuck is happening!’ she said.

‘A laowai?’ Rong asked.

‘Suddenly the goons had a laowai yelling at them. They didn’t know what to do, the three of them sitting there with a gun in their hand. They just froze,’ she replied.

‘Then what happened?’ he asked.

‘One of the goons got out a knife, leant over me as though he was going to slit my throat, and slowly cut off the top button of my blouse. Then they looked over at each other, got up, and walked out the door, shoving the laowai aside,’ she said.

‘How was he?’ Rong asked.

‘He was fine, but shaken,’ Yue said, finding it hard to believe what had happened. ‘He didn’t have time to think.’

Yue forced herself to keep talking. She wanted everything to remain fresh in her memory. She told Rong about the man who had saved her. That his name was Mark; that he’d once lived in Lijiang, and was now living in Beijing, doing business out of Seattle; that he’d already had trouble in China, getting scammed by dodgy businessmen, and having to deal with local Party officials. That he was shit-scared having to deal with three goons on a train, with a gun. She told Rong of how afterwards they had talked for hours as the train railed through the countryside, the sound of steel wheels screeching against the rails in the middle of the night, neither of them knowing whether the men would return. What she didn’t tell Rong was that when they finally arrived in Beijing in the early morning, they had gone back to the man’s hotel in a taxi, holding hands and hugging each other in silence; and then to his
hotel suite where they had they made love for hours, before her coming to the studio. The two of them had melted away from the dirty city into a space that both of them had forgotten even existed. She cried to have him inside her. She wanted to keep him there, to hold him so tight that he would never leave. His kisses held a warmth that was deep and secure. She had wanted to feel again, to get lost in love and passion, to empty herself of everything obsessive, her need to know every reason for her actions. As he let go inside her, she felt his heat; her heart flooded with their existence.

When she left the hotel room she’d gathered her thoughts. She realised their love had not been safe, and most probably he was not a safe man. He was the very laowai she’d always thought dangerous; he was experienced, over-confident, and completely at ease with Chinese women; in their lovemaking, this knowledge had been abandoned. She had become a stupid woman, and he had made stupid love; her Grandma Lao would have thought her granddaughter bu hao, no good.

***

Yue sat facing Rong, forcing down her coffee. Despite all that had happened, she still felt the need to talk about Lijiang and her most recent attempt to collect Shen’s memories. She sat back and talked of the smaller moments, needing to register all that was good about the life she was living down south, a life which was close to the rhythms of the seasons and crops; a life which carried with it some assurance.

*a man carries his dog on his own ship*

It was always difficult for her to leave the quiet everyday life of Baisha and travel into the old town of Lijiang. As she cycled into the old town, a warm wind blew in from the south. The sky was the bluest she’d ever seen, the same thick cold blue that she’d seen in the Australian desert, set against the red outcrops of iron mountain ranges that broke the country’s back. Here in Baisha, the wheat fields were lush and green, and the crops lay in long bountiful rows with bare strips of dark-brown earth in-between. In the field a group of Naxi women were bent over, weeding, their blue bonnets and jackets tilted to the sky. In the distance, a man and a woman, both tethered to a ragged brown horse, ploughed in the last stubs of corn from the
Another group of Naxi women was picking the remnants of clover that would be used as feed for the cows and horses over the coming months. The women bound up the crop into small bundles, which were then tied together by twisted stalks of wheat. The bundles were stacked neatly into small run-down trucks used for transporting the feed. The soft bundles rested delicately against the bare steel of the old rusted vehicles. The trucks seemed a natural part of the countryside until they were started up, then they belched large puffs of black smoke from their dirty petrol engines. They sounded like they were ready to explode and expire with one last gasp. In the distance, the newly picked fields left a deep brown scar of dirt that stood bare against the surrounding fields of chrome yellow wheat ready for harvest.

At the far end of the valley, Jade Dragon Snow Mountain rose grey and naked, with jagged outcrops of snow on its topmost ridge. A vast cloud, attracted by the mass, formed on the mountain’s western side, laying itself over the highest peak, a soft curve embracing the hard surface, trapped. As Yue rode toward the city, the breeze felt fresh and filled with mountain oxygen, like the air of a cool rainforest. Lijiang stood out as a dark raincloud in the distance.

Further along the road, she came upon an old tricycle being peddled towards the city. It was piled high with recycled rubbish; plastic bottles and glass bottles, cardboard, bits of wire and scrap metal, all tied together with tattered rope; everything and anything. The ramshackle pile stood about two metres high, completely obscuring the rider. Beside the tricycle a brown mongrel ran lazily along in the shade of the cart, connected to it by an umbilical chain. This moving caravan was made complete by another dog perched high up on top of the rubbish where it happily balanced itself against the warm wind they were moving into. The old tricycle was a ship of the valley heading for its home port. Yue laughed out loud with joy at such a sight. She rode along behind for about ten minutes, loving the everyday moving sculpture; the dogs, the rubbish, the wind, the freedom, the unknown rider; nothing else really existed. The clouds above, puffed themselves out, bright white, reminding her again of a virgin Australian sky.

With the sight of the clouds, a simple thing from the past came to mind; a Peanuts cartoon that she had loved as a child. In the cartoon, Charlie Brown lies on the grass with his friends Linus and Lucy, looking up at the clouds. They start having a deep discussion regarding what the clouds remind them of. Lucy thinks the clouds look...
like big balls of cotton, and Linus suggests they might be a map of British Honduras or the Stoning of Stephen. Lucy then kindly asks Charlie Brown what he thinks. He says that he was going to say the clouds reminded him of a ‘duchy and a horsey’, but now after all that had been said he might just change his mind. The memory made her smile. It made her wish that the world was just like that, a ‘duchy and a horsey’, just a weeding of the fields and a ploughing of the ground.

When she finally rode past the tricycle she saw its rider. He was a small tough Naxi man. He looked poor, with a stubbled dirty face and a distant unhealthy glazed look in his eyes. He was tough and resolute, single-mindedly riding his cart to the city to exchange the scrap for a small amount of money. She smiled and waved, but the man was unflinching. He barely acknowledged her; there was just a slight shift of his eyes. The small dog perched high up on the scrap cardboard continued to look straight ahead, its curly hair blowing ragged in the wind; he and his companions were a caravan going nowhere and everywhere, travelling slowly across a desert. For that brief moment Yue forgot the heavy weight of Lijiang. When she saw the darkness of the rider’s eyes she realised that she and the rider both shared the same destination, though probably a very different fate.

*mao girls with bayonets*

Thirty minutes later Yue arrived in Lijiang. She would try to collect the first of Shen’s memories. It was early morning, and the laneways of the old town were deserted. She locked and stored her bike just inside the south entrance, and walked towards the Square. The local Naxi women labourers had started to cart loads of rubble and cement to one of the many guesthouses that were constantly being renovated; it was always the women who carried. They sang traditional songs as they worked, singing loudly in unison; a family of friends sharing and enjoying a common task, their tones were comforting. Each woman carried a cane basket on her back to hold the heavy load. The baskets were held around their shoulders by cotton straps or sashes tied to old wooden yokes placed on their necks. The sash was strapped across the forehead to take the weight of the load. As the women shuffled past, their heads were bent down, eyes covered by baseball caps or floppy cotton hats, hands squarely braced on hips, or arms crossed against their chest. One woman looked up at Yue, her dark
brown skin completely dusted with cement powder. She smiled, then quickly lowered her head and continued singing. The women had come down from Wuyi Street and were heading towards Delamu Inn, where Yue first stayed when she came to Lijiang. The woman who owned the inn had become her mother for the time she was there, even though she was five years younger. Today, Yue did not stop to give her the usual hug.

She kept walking north, past an abandoned board game of Go that the men had been playing under the shade of a gnarled willow tree. Yue turned right and came up to the artist’s house that she’d passed by numerous times. She admired the artist who lived there with his raggedy band of companions, even though she’d never let herself get to know him too closely. His house managed to transcend the sanitized tourist shops nearby; he’d carved himself out a radical presence that reflected back with irony towards the tourism of the Old Town. He’d created a parallel world to the Disneyland that Lijiang had become. The red metal-framed windows on the outside of his studio were plastered with bits of paper full of ink-drawn portraits, caricatures, cartoons and slogans. There were ironic pictures of cute Mao girls with bayonets, satirical sketches of tourist photographers hunting around corners, and a drawing of an enthusiastic crowd looking up, spellbound, at a giant projected image of a Red Guard. Also pasted up were covers of the artist’s video documentaries; one was a Debord-like prank which the artist and his friends had carried out through the streets of the old town, singing and conversing with townsfolk as they walked along; the other video presented a beat generation foray to the Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. The collage plastered over the artist’s front windows created a patina of anarchy and visual mayhem.

Yue had always wanted to ask the artist whether he knew Shen. Their artistic and political ways of seeing seemed too similar not to have crossed paths. She ended up not asking him because she wanted to keep Shen to herself. As she stood on the rounded cobblestones, the mountain water slid down the stone channel alongside the artist’s studio, away from Black Dragon Pool and down towards the Whispering Pools. There was a sense that Shen had been here. The connection of the artist’s drawings, and the sound of the water resonated like the taste of madeleine cake. It released its recollection of the past. She stepped into the narrow alcove of the studio, away from the heat and into the cool shadows.
The first memory, the first belonging of Shen’s memory palace, was collected,

... It is the kind of day when the sky takes over and the land falls to one side. The clouds simmer in the heat of the day. The sun shines blankly across the city of Beijing. Shen stands alone on the edge of a dirt road. He is staring at a metal street sign where the words ‘Dashan Village’ have been painted over and replaced with the words ‘Beijing East Village,’ in Mandarin and in English. Beyond the sign is a line of scattered shabby dwellings clumped around an open area of bare earth and piles of garbage. Behind the shacks reach up a few tall trees that provide no shade, and beyond the trees rise newly completed hotels and apartment blocks. Directly in front of Shen is a tricycle cart loaded up with planks of old wood and a couple of large cane baskets.

Shen looks emaciated. His body no longer seems to belong to him. It has become detached and ethereal. His thoughts are scattered and sparse. He had arrived in Beijing that morning, after a long road journey from the studio hut, high in the mountains. Rong had told him about this new community of artists who’d just set themselves up in east Beijing amidst an impoverished living area of itinerant migrant workers. They had come to the city to sell vegetables and their own cheap labour. Shen’s mind is flooded with the memory of how years before he’d stood as a groom next to a black hearse, a brief encounter into an art world, where he’d helped hold up a coffin in an artist’s mock funeral. It was the freedom and dissent of that event which made him want to return to these people.

He walks up the track towards the artist village. He stumbles more than strides, his physical sensibility lost in the moment. Beyond the dwelling, he notices a group of people gathered across a stretch of concrete pavement. At the centre of the group are two middle-aged laowai dressed in light brown suits. The taller one is bald and wearing large black-framed glasses; the other is comically short, with a patch of black hair clinging to the top of his head. They are both wearing brightly coloured ties.

A young man comes up to Shen and informs him that these men are the English artists, G & S; they have made a special trip to the village to support the local Chinese artists. Shen hears a commotion nearby and tilts towards the noise. A young Chinese man is running across the yard. His body is as lean as his surroundings, his hair long and black, almost beautiful; it shines against the drab greyness of the sky. In one
hand, the beautiful artist holds a wooden chair, in the other, a plastic bag full of dark liquid. The bag sways from side to side, threatening to burst apart. The beautiful artist stops at a table on which rests an old beat-up cassette player. His hand scrambles across the table to find a music cassette that he quickly inserts into the player. He presses the button and a Pink Floyd track starts to play. The artist resumes his trajectory, and heads directly to an open space in front of the two English artists. He slams down a chair that he has grabbed on the way, and stares at the two suited men. He climbs up on the chair, stands perfectly erect, and strips off his shirt.

The young man raises his arms and punctures the plastic bag carrying the dark liquid. Red paint slowly oozes from the bag and pours down onto his body, carrying with it his glistening sweat. The two English artists stand frozen, completely in the character they have created for themselves. They act as though nothing has happened, or as though what has happened is just an everyday mundane event. The artist strikes another pose; the blood-like liquid continues to pour over him like a botched transfusion, his chest now a monochrome red. The two suited men remain impervious to the young man’s display. After ten minutes the performance stops.

Shen looks closely at the beautiful young artist, and wonders whether he is a man or a woman. He is delicate and sexually ambiguous. After being in prison for four years, a performance like this amazes Shen. He senses this man will also go to prison one day. As he stares at the artist, he realises his own identity also remains ambiguous; his transgressions from the past do not match with his perceived future. Fear races through his heart, and he forces himself back into the immediate present. The artist is now talking to the two suited Englishmen. They have blank looks on their faces, and refuse to participate in the artist’s imagination.

Shen walks away. He heads toward an adjacent run-down dwelling where a shaven-headed man is standing in front of a half-open door. The man appears strong and muscular, and his dark handsome face holds an intense look. His nose is flat and wide, and his lips full. His hair is pulled back tightly into a knot. There are fragments of red colour scattered through his hair. Shen already knows who this strong artist is. Just two days ago, he was shown a colour photo of the artist’s performance. The strong artist had climbed the steps of the national art gallery, spread out a large white cloth, stripped off his clothes, raised a large jar over his head, and then dropped it, smashing it onto the concrete. The jar was full of red liquid and plastic doll parts. The strong artist had smeared the red liquid over his body, and assembled the doll
parts to make an angel.

Shen senses that the man now standing in front of him has had much trouble in his life; that he has always been an outsider, a stranger in his own country. In the course of the last year, the strong man has shaved his head, dressed himself for long periods in black clothing, and been bashed up for being different. The strong artist feels his pain and identity through his body. The skin that covers and clothes him is the receptor for his memories and his pain. His body is his language. It is his immediate and direct connection with the outside world. His body is in a constant state of fear and panic. He has come to the conclusion that to torture the body, to cause it outside pain and pressure, will in fact calm it; self-mortification had become a personal way of life.

He looks at this young man standing in the doorway, and sees a lot of himself. The sun is now touching Shen’s skin. It makes him remember those brief moments in the prison yard where he had sucked in the outside world, the fresh air, the warmth and heat of the day, the intense light of a horizon that had stretched forever. The strong artist beckons Shen inside the ramshackle house and points to a corner of the room. Shen can see a small altar. On the altar sits burnt-out incense sticks and a small black and white photo of the Dalai Lama wearing dark sunglasses. The strong artist tells Shen that he’s become a Buddhist on the inside and an artist on the outside, and even though most people in China think he is crazy he believes that what he does is art. He tells Shen that art is a religion, a way to experience the world and find out who you really are. The strong artist is creating a dream to live by, a dream that relieves the pain and suffering he cannot stop feeling everyday.

The strong artist laughs, and goes on to tell Shen how once he had sat in a public toilet nude, and let himself be covered with flies in the heat of summer, that in this way he was able to lose himself and forget his life. He was brought back to reality when the flies started to bite him. This was his way of transcending his suffering. He laughs again, and says, ‘One day I would love to do it as a public performance, then people would really think I was mad. I want to change people’s thinking through my art, but in the end I don’t think it’s possible.’

Shen remembers that he also has for many years wanted to change his thinking so that he can enter the world again; that he, like the strong artist, has created many dreams to make his life bearable. In prison he had also sat above the filth and stink of an open toilet, in the company of his fellow prisoners, and made his mind work.
towards another world of dreams where he could escape. The strong artist leans
toward Shen and takes his arm. He leads him into another room spread out with old
clothes, bits of paper dashed with ink scrawls, and unwashed eating bowls that have
been hurriedly emptied.

Up on the paint-scarred walls are stuck large pieces of paper filled with exquisitely
pencilled drawings of a flat-topped mountain. The strong artist explains to Shen that
his next project is to make that mountain one metre higher, with he and five of his
friends lying on top of each other, naked. After they leave, the mountain will go back
to its original height, as though nothing had ever happened. Shen imagines the artist
and his friends, cold and bare on top of the mountain with the earth beneath them. He
feels as though he is the artist laying at the bottom of the pile, hard against the rock,
the lowest layer of anamnesis...

***

‘This is the memory that Shen left for me at the artist’s studio,’ said Yue to Rong. She
did not need or want to say anything more. She wanted to go home, and not to tell
anything to Lily about what happened on the train. It would mean she would have to
tell her about Mark. It would be a betrayal of what was held between them.

‘Don’t look so sad,’ Lily announced across the lounge as soon as I got home. ‘There are
jobs going in Shanghai for girls in bikinis to wash luxury cars. What do you think?’

‘Think? I think the world has gone mad. I’ve nearly had enough. Car wash? Maybe I
can do car shakes as well. It’ll give the great leaders a chance to get out of their offices.
Their secretaries and wives will be wondering what they’re doing washing their cars so
often. I wonder if they offered our favourite TV celeb, Sister Feng, a job. It might clean
her act up a bit,’ I said.

‘Sister Feng is shameless. You know that. She would jump at the chance. It’d be just
another reality show for her,’ Lily replied.

‘Maybe they can all wear dark sunglasses like Blind Chen, and the leaders can
fantasise they’ve all just escaped from prison. I could try to get a pair to Shen. Dark
sunglasses, crimson robes, shaved head ... very cool.’ There was only sarcasm in my voice.

‘Yes, a bit of light relief for him on the run. Come on Yue, cheer up, let’s sing Ai Wei Wei’s ‘Mud Horse Song’. That always makes you happy.’ Lily began to sing, and I quickly joined in at the top of my voice.

In the vast desert beautiful muff cabbage,
There’s a group of mud horses,
They are lively and intelligent,
They are naughty and sensitive,
They are free to live in mud muff cabbage,
They tenaciously overcome difficult circumstances.

Oh, lying fuck mud horse!
Oh, crazy fuck hard mud horse!
They are for the fuck grass not to be eaten, defeated the crab,
Crab disappear from muff cabbage since then

dong, dong, dong, dong, dong
fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck
fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck
oh fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck!
Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck, yeah!!

We both fell on the floor laughing.
(viii) jì – to remember

xiăomăn (grain full)
Earlier this week I came across a man who was experiencing ‘koro’, fear of his genital shrinking, or ‘suo yang’ as the locals call it.

He lives in a village not far away from Baisha that’s built on a massive stone outcrop looking down on the Yangtze. I had wound my way down the old stone stairs towards the old wall that once protected the villagers from Tibetan raids. The man was in his small yard, feeding pigs. He greeted me as I passed by and invited me inside. He confided that he was under great stress. He seemed desperate to relieve himself of his anguish. For the last month, a female ghost had been tormenting him. The ghost told him that outsiders had disposed of her body improperly. She had died as a result of their rape. The rapists had shown no respect for what would happen to her in the afterlife. By dumping her body in a nearby cave they had denied her a proper funeral. The ghost told the man she would not stop tormenting him until her remaining bones were located and she was given a ceremonial burial. Only then could she rest in peace.

The man had previously lived in Guangzhou, where there’d been a koro epidemic in the 80s. He had seen hundreds of people come down with the disease. The mass sickness had been initiated by a fortune-teller who predicted a female fox-spirit would come to the area disguised as a beautiful woman so as to steal the genitals of the local men. This had created a great panic. The symptoms of koro had quickly appeared; the village men believed their genitals were retracting inside their body, as were their nipples. They started to experience a shortness of breath, as well as extreme anxiety and an intense feeling of impending doom. The koro epidemic spread from village to village all the way to Guangzhou, affecting thousands of people. Now, this man was experiencing the same symptoms. He was not in the least embarrassed to talk about it. He felt relieved just to share his story. He wanted me to write a letter to a doctor he’d been told about in Kunming who might be able to treat him. I wrote a detailed letter for him outlining his concerns, pleading for the doctor to take the situation seriously.

The man was determined to locate the bones as soon as possible and give them the proper burial they warranted. The ghost could then be appeased and the man would no longer have to be tormented. I wished that my torment could be so clearly resolved.
Yue walked up the stone path to Rong’s studio, past the rhododendron’s icy flowers and the pink azaleas. The bamboo grove stood upright, an overpowering verdant green against the miraculous Beijing blue sky. She stopped short at the base of the three wooden steps leading up to the narrow veranda. A feeling of transformation and fecundity enveloped her; recently her body had gained a lightness of weight that couldn’t be measured in grams, only by way of some metaphysical unit expressed through quality rather than quantity. It was a quality of contentedness and maturity. She felt heavy with responsibility; there was contained within it a certain sense of righteousness, a reimagined sense of who she was, a feeling rapidly turning into a knowing. She was certain she was pregnant.

She thought of how she and Mark had made love in the hotel room, she’d never felt so wanted. Her last Chinese boyfriend hadn’t kissed her. He had seen it as an unwanted and unnecessary intimacy. With Mark, she stopped thinking. She died when they finally came together in an emptiness of forgetting. This is what she wanted, a death that came in making love. She had put the knowledge of Lily to one side when this happened. This was the part of herself she could not control.

Yue knew she was going to have a child. Would Mark want to be in love with her and the baby? She didn’t really care. She knew the raising of the child would have to be done alone; she had expected this, and it would be better that way. She was capable of being a single mother.

Yue climbed the three steps to Rong’s veranda; they were stairs to her refuge. The door was open. Rong was standing at the table with the scholar’s stones. He turned around and smiled.

‘A new piece, recently acquired,’ he said with a childish glee as he held up the magnificent stone. ‘It’s exquisite. You can feel the strength of the mountain in it, you can hear the winds rushing through its empty grottos.’

‘Rong, your collection continues to astound me. It seems to outgrow the table, as well as your means,’ she said cautiously, not wanting to offend him.

‘It’s nothing, really. Don’t worry. I live well within my means. I am a shrewd buyer, they cost much less than you think,’ he replied.

‘I believe you, Rong,’ She said it in a tone that spoke of doubt.

‘Sit down; I’m delaying our talk by giving far too much attention to these objects. Do you think Songling would have had stones on his desk?’ he asked.
Yue sat down, centred herself, and went on to answer him. She liked entering the world of Songling; he continued to reassure her.

*a second visit from pu songling*

Yue’s belonging had been reincarnated from a tale written down by Songling. Maybe this was why the action of writing brought her and Songling together. The Lotus Fragrance story held the creation of her fox-spirit belonging. Songling was an absent father; only through the action of writing could Songling be part of her life; it was through her writing that she had the opportunity to know him.

From the time she was a teenager she kept a diary. On her first diary there was a lock. She’d kept the small key safely hidden, even though the lock was fragile and easy to break. At first she wrote about herself; her coming to terms with being a Chinese child in a strange land, a child who had received a fox-spirit belonging. Songling had made his first appearance when she was sixteen. She’d been writing for hours in her new green journal. Out of nowhere, he wrote himself into existence across the lines of the page. He appeared on the page as the author Songling, writing about himself,

… In the early morning of a winter’s night Songling sits at his table in the middle of an almost empty studio. The air is frozen and there is no heating. The only light available comes from the flickering of an old oil lamp that sits on top of sheets of writing. Songling drinks wine to keep himself warm, so he’s able to make the pen move to the next line of the story. He writes about himself,

*Midnight finds me*
*here in this desolate studio*
*by the dim light*
*of my flickering lamp*
*fashioning my tales*
*at this ice-cold table.*

*I drink to propel my pen,*
but succeed only in venting
my spleen,
my lonely anguish.
Is it not a sad thing,
to find expression thus?

Alas! I am but
a bird
trembling at the winter frost,
vaingly seeking shelter in the tree;
an insect
crying at the autumn moon,
feebly hugging the door for warmth.

Those who truly know me
are in the green grove,
they are
at the dark frontier.

Songling has named his studio liao, which isn’t really a name at all. He has never written down the ideogram that belongs to this word. In this way it’s meaning can never be clearly defined. The word liao is a word that has to be imagined, not spoken or written. This allows the word and the studio to have many meanings.

Songling picks up his brush and begins to transcribe the multiple ideograms of the liao onto paper. He starts with the character liáo, representing ‘hut’ (he imagines the thatched hut in the mountains of Shandong where he at times escapes to write). Adjacent to this he brushes the liáo for ‘wind in high places’ (he remembers the whistling of the wind through the tall pines that surround his studio garden). Below this he places liáo, ‘the clear crisp sound of the cry of cranes’; this unites the two ideograms above in the sound of the breaking spring. To continue his theme of spring, he brushes the two characters ‘eastern wren, and ‘bright and clear’. To continue his theme of spring, he brushes the two characters, liáo, (the eastern wren) and liǎo, (bright and clear). He continues writing down the page with his ancient brush; his hand remains steady and strong. First comes the character liáo, ‘to stir up
emotions by provoking’, then the ideograms ̄liáo  for ‘empty and lonesome’ and ̄liáo ‘to cure, and then finally ̄liáo, ‘to know and understand’. This is his knowing of liao. These ideograms make up the gestalt that is his studio. He picks up the piece of paper and brings it to the flame of the oil lamp. Wet with ink, it burns slowly in his hand and disintegrates into ash.

Songling’s eyes adjust to the loss of the burning light and he stares into the darkness. The night is thick with fox-spirits and ghosts. The studio is surrounded with night and the personages of a hundred strange stories. He picks up the oil lamp and walks across the room to a small Buddhist statue. He lights an incense stick lying at the altar, waves the stick three times in the air, and then places it carefully in the brass holder in front of the statue. It is a ritual not for any religious sake but for good fortune.

He thinks of the dream his father had at the time of Songling’s birth. In the dream his father envisaged an old Buddhist monk walking towards him, the monk appeared calm and graceful. The monk knew he was on the verge of dying. He had done everything expected of him with regard to his duties and actions in life. He stopped a few feet away from the father and gave him a curious and whimsical look. He then removed the robes from around the upper part of his body, exposing a large circular plaster attached to his chest. In the dream, Songling’s father threw himself down on his knees and prostrated three times before the monk. When Songling was born, late the next morning in his impoverished home in Pujiazhuang Village, the father was astounded to see a heavily stained birthmark, the colour of ink, on the centre of his son’s chest. To his father, this was a sure sign that Songling was the living reincarnation of the old Buddhist monk in the dream.

Songling steps away from the altar and heads back towards his writing desk. He will not allow himself to be a slave to his father’s premonition even though he has become a firm believer in karmic retribution; it is hard not to believe in such a thing, with so many wars raging across the country and the large number of natural disasters taking place. He thinks that surely those who suffer must have a better next life, and those who cause the suffering must surely be punished. He has to believe his continuing failure in the nightmare of the imperial examination system is in the end, good karma, as it has allowed him to live the life of a scholar and writer that otherwise would not have been possible.

As he sits down at the table, Songling laughs. He knows that, in the end, he is a
fatalist. He picks up his pen, and in his simply bound journal writes:

*I am but the dust in the sunbeam, a fit laughing stock for devils. For my talents are not those of Kan Pao, elegant explorer of the records of the Gods; I am rather animated by the spirit of Su Tung-p'o, who loved to hear men speak of the supernatural.*

*I get people to commit what they tell me in writing and subsequently I dress it up in the form of a story; and thus in the lapse of time my friends from all quarters have supplied me with quantities of material, which, from my habit of collecting, has grown into a vast pile.*

*I stitched the bits and pieces together into a garment and claim to have written a sequel to Liu I-ching’s ‘In the World of the Shades,’ but my clumsy endeavours, heated by drink, have only resulted in a work that gives vent to my private grief and indignation.*

He puts his pen down and stares into the metaphysical space of the studio. It’s a space that he has created so that he can re-imagine the strange tales and stories collected in the teahouses and street corners of his village. These tales were added to stories already written, those he’d found in his library of curiosities and wonders. His life has been consumed with these stories of ghosts, fox-spirits, and strange happenings. He is comfortable with the strange borderland territory of these creatures and spirits that exist outside the Confucian world that has tried to rule his life, but which he’s always resisted.

Songling’s last thoughts rest on the irony of his writings; they are in the lyrical classical style, the opposite from that of the colloquial style in which they were told to him: these tales, once written, were almost impossible to read by those who held the original memory of them. His love of classical language was too great. He was in love with the nuances of the Chinese language, its subtleties and double meanings, and the endless literary references that can be drawn on. As he sits in his chair, the ghosts are at the door and the fox-spirits stand by his window ...

This was how Songling had imagined himself to Yue; this is how the memories of
Songling had come to her when writing. Whenever she wrote in the journal, he was always next to her. There was, however, a part of her that wanted to be free of the story and its author, to have an identity outside of Songling and his ‘Lotus Fragrance’ tale. Yue didn’t want to remain forever an outsider. She was becoming ever more determined to come in from the outside.

*I

‘I understand how you are feeling, not wanting to remain forever an outsider,’ Rong said, breaking the silence of the studio. ‘I’ve lived my whole adult life as a dissident in this country. I am tired of being on my own. There’ve been many times when I’ve wanted to come back to the inside, to enjoy life, but these days it’s ever harder to know where the inside really is.’

She had never heard Rong talk like this, and was not sure of his meaning. He seemed unsure of himself. ‘You are tired, Rong, is that what you mean?’

‘I mean it is a difficult, seemingly endless struggle. I feel outnumbered and the rules of engagement seem to constantly change. I don’t want to leave my country, to become a naked official with no homeland, but I know I am not wanted, that I am in fact despised and denigrated by many of my former peers. The country that I loved has rejected me. Not the country exactly, but the ruling brothers who govern it. These are the people with whom I went to school, brothers I once shared a common goal with. We’ve drifted so far apart that the filial duty we once felt for each other is no longer respected. I have grown to despise the people I once loved.’

Yue could not comprehend Rong’s feeling sorry for himself. ‘It’s been harder for Shen,’ she replied in frustration. ‘He’s had to spend years in jail. A jail disguised as a psychiatric hospital, years of being mentally tortured. He’s had to fight all the way, and he’s never given in. I was furious with him for his acceptance of all they’ve done. Then they threw him into prison again.’

Rong was surprised by her anger and slumped into his chair. ‘You take me the wrong way; I was not comparing myself with Shen. We have our own separate struggles. We’ve tried to fight in different ways, that’s all.’

‘You need to be careful, Rong,’ she replied. ‘These are dangerous times, as you always remind me. I have to trust you. There is no one else to trust. Our relationship is too critical, too important.’

Rong rose up in his chair. ‘You’re right, these are dangerous times, Yue,’ he said,
before walking out of the room to collect some notes he’d left in the house.

Yue walked over to the table that held Rong’s magazine collection. On the top of the stack lay a copy of Shanxi Huabao from the year 1958; it was the time of the Great Leap Forward. On the cover was a coloured illustration of a ‘freedom train’ arriving in a country town. A local band was greeting the train, with people drumming, the clashing of cymbals and the waving of bright red flags. Small children ran alongside the train, waving and smiling. The garlanded engine, with an old man and young child at the window, towed carriages full of steel ingots and coal. In the nearby pond, ducks swam under a stone bridge holding up an old tree. In the top branches of the tree a child, dressed in white shirt and red necktie, waved a long stick with firecrackers attached to its tip. On a nearby veranda a crowd of townspeople gathered to look on at the spectacle; young women with bright red parasols, young men in Mao caps, and a photographer captured the triumphant scene with his camera. It was the Great Leap Forward, a time that was supposed to mark a great future, full of hope and unbounded progress.

She opened the magazine, revealing another brightly coloured foldout. This scene was of a village utopia. Horses pulled carts laden with freshly cropped wheat, chimney stacks belched pure white smoke, orchard trees bent under the weight of ripe apples, pumps moved water from one newly built terrace to another, handmade smelters poured out hot new steel, and a young baby rode a sheaf of wheat across the clear blue sky. Everybody was happy and productive.

Yue reflected on what she knew of the Great Leap Forward, the vast collectivisation of China’s human resources; a mass movement of over nine hundred million peasants that would transform the economic and social fabric of China. It was Mao’s dream. Within three years, up to forty million of these country workers would be dead, due to killings, starvation and famine. Living in a political and cultural apartheid, the rural workers were punished for their ‘failure’ to provide resources to their urban brothers and sisters. Their punishment for failing the system was torture and beatings.

Over two million people suffered retribution for their economic crimes to the country. The happy smiling faces of the magazine foldout had been replaced by another parallel world where people were beaten and hanged from those picturesque trees, tied up and drowned in the duck ponds, their bodies mutilated.
There was a dystopia of forced eating of human shit, of heavy stones dropped onto citizens’ backs, the smashing of spines, the branding with hot irons, the scorching of flesh, of hair being ripped from its roots, victims scorched in boiling water, ears and noses severed from bodies that were afterwards buried alive, forced starvation, citizens poisoned, and on rare occasions, compatriots forced to eat their own dead comrades. The saddest death of all was to die of pure grief. Mao’s comforting words to the nation had been, ‘When there is not enough to eat, people starve to death. It is better to let half of the people die so that the other half can eat their fill.’ These words echoed through history.

She replaced the magazine on top of the pile. She felt sick, and wanted to vomit. There was so much disgust in the gap between myth and reality. She thought of everything that she’d read in the West about this fracture in history that was not allowed to exist in the very space in which it occurred. This fracture floated in a vacuum yet to be filled with logic or truth. It was a memory denied by those that owned it.

Rong walked back into the room. Yue looked at him with a blank stare. She knew that he and his family had lived through all of this.

‘I was looking at your magazine,’ she said, ‘The Great Leap Forward.’

‘Oh yes, that magazine came from our family home. It’s travelled a long way. I was ten years old when I read it. Despite everything that happened it actually brings back fond memories,’ he said.

‘I can’t believe you can say that.’ She was incredulous. ‘It makes me feel sick and angry.’

‘I lived through it from the beginning. I was a young teenage boy; all I knew was Mao and the new republic. Mao was my whole world. When I first held that magazine it amazed me. I had never seen colours like that; it was like the magazine had arrived from outer space. It felt special to be part of a movement creating a new way of life for our country.’

‘Did everybody believe it would come true?’ she asked.

‘Of course,’ Rong replied. ‘At that time we knew nothing else. People had not been sent to the country yet. We had not heard of all the atrocities. I wanted to believe. I stared at the pictures and imagined myself on that golden sheaf of wheat flying through the sky, or at the wheel of the tractor or train. We saw the life of the peasants
as miserable. This new dawn was bright and clear.

‘As clear as the blue skies over Baisha,’ she said sarcastically.

‘The life of my family was very good. My father had a job high up in the
government; he’d even spent time overseas, training. I dreamed of being a painter. I
showed early promise at home and school. Painting was an option for me, but
obviously not for the peasants I felt sorry for. I wanted them to have a better life so
they could have the chances I had. In the end I became a doctor and was duly
punished. As a child I wanted everybody to share in this brand new world,’ answered
Rong

‘Or a world gone wrong,’ Yue replied, ‘walking starry eyed into a valley of death,
where people had to eat their own brothers.’

‘We knew nothing of this. Our world and their world were like two different
planets. It’s like that today. The Beijing bubble of embassy parties and Party
banquets, while one-hundred million people live on two thousand kuai a year,’ he
said.

‘Yes, but there aren’t thirty million people starving or being beaten to death,’ she
retorted. ‘And what memory is there of this? What will they have in the new National
Museum, one line, ‘the project of constructing socialism suffered severe
complications,’ thirty million deaths reduced to one line!’

‘You’ve every right to be angry, but today you are angry with me. Each talk we
have, each fortnight that goes by, you’re getting more hostile to me, and to China,’
Rong explained.

‘Life is full, Rong, words are like the ebb and flow of an ocean. There’s a giant
storm blowing in my life. You and I seem powerless to stop it. I’m pregnant and I’m
being harassed by the secret police, Lijiang is full of painful memories, Shen has
disappeared, and all you seem to be able to do is stare at those rocks!’ She exploded.

‘I am the person you’re supposed to trust,’ he replied, ‘I guess I’m also the rock that
the wave crashes against. Please don’t doubt me, especially at a time when I doubt
myself. Our need for each other gives us our strength.’

‘You’re right. I have no choice but to say you’re right,’ Yue replied as she walked
out of the studio and into the city of Beijing.

———
‘I feel like shit,’ was all I could say when I got home.

‘You look like shit,’ Lily replied. ‘Rong’s certainly getting a lot out of you these days, isn’t he?’

‘It’s Rong. It’s Shen. It’s the fucking belonging inside me. It’s everything. I keep on seeing things, hearing things. I feel like my life’s been invaded.’

‘The aliens attacking the alien fox. Watch out!’ Lily refused to accept my darkness.

‘Now I’m going to tell you my good news.’ I sidled up to her and placed both hands around her waist. ‘Guess what, I have a little fox-spirit growing inside me.’ I pulled up my top. ‘Just there, safely tucked away inside. Feel her, there’s no bump, it just feels a bit warmer.’ I felt the same warmth towards Lily.

‘That’s wonderful! And the father?’ Lily hesitated to even mention this.

‘I could say it was an immaculate conception, but it’s not. The father’s Mark, a laowai. He’s busy disappearing at the moment. It’s not his fault. Totally mine. I got carried away on a bad day, a fox-spirit moment. Now, I’m happy. This is the one sane thing happening in my life. Maybe things will start to shift now, back towards earth rather than somewhere up in the heavens. It already feels like the world is beginning to turn that little bit slower. It’s not just me against the world,’ I said.

‘Be careful what you say in front of Lily, she might get hurt,’ she replied.

‘And there’s you, of course! Hit me, Lily. Hit me hard. I’m a cold-hearted bitch.’ I hugged her hard. ‘Do you think the baby will spoil my perfect figure?’

‘Well, strange that you ask, you might be just in time for the Global Beauty Contest they’re holding down in Guangzhou. But you’ll have to be quick, they’re looking for a nice Chinese girl, under fifty kilos, and you also have to be a virgin, of course. All you’ll need is an extremely premature birth and some pigeon blood, which as we know, is in pretty high demand at the moment,’ she said.

‘There was a bunch of pigeons above the stairwell as I came in,’ I said.

‘They’ll do. And your prize if you win the contest will be one of a select group of eleven multimillionaires. You have to be totally natural though. No boob jobs, the right personality, a college background, the right facial features, the right horoscope and most important of all, you have to be sincere,’ Lily explained.

‘Ah, that sounds like me. And what does he have to be?’ I said.

‘Oh, he will be divorced, under fifty, worth at least ten billion kuai, will love golf, and be very strong. Sorry, you don’t get to see a photo of him,’ Lily replied.
‘Well, we can both wear Chen style sunglasses. It won’t matter. Is that all?’ I asked.

‘Oh, I just remembered. You also have to be under twenty-eight, and not have cute double chin,’ she said.

‘It looks like I will have to be happy with being a single mother,’ I said. ‘And Lily, I want to call the baby, Lotus, from the Pu Songling story. I am sure we’re having a girl.’

We hugged again. I soaked in Lily’s love. It was a love that didn’t need to be confessed in words. It was always present, always hidden and remarkable, like the patches of sky seen through the branches of a tree, or the sound of blood rushing through your body in almost total silence.
境

(ix) jìng - place

mángzhòng (grain in ear)
Dylan is singing from the laptop, ‘Once upon a time you dressed so fine, you threw the bums a dime, didn’t you ... how does it feel ... to be on your own, with no direction home ... like a complete unknown.’ It feels strange – the sightings, the dreams, the appearance of fox globes, and the memories of Songling – a new intensity.

This morning was remarkable. A woman walked past me on the street, not far from the Beijing apartment. She was Chinese, around thirty. Her tight dress clung to her body like skin. She ached with beauty. As she passed by I gleaned a memory. She was recalling what had happened to her a few nights before,

... there is a hotel room. A man lies on a bed alongside a young dark-skinned woman, probably in her early twenties. A video camera sits on a nearby table, directly facing them. They are both naked, sprawled across white bed sheets. The woman enters the room – the same sensual presence she held in the street. Her lips are lightly coloured with purple lipstick. She takes off her clothes, meticulously folding each garment as it leaves her body. Each piece of clothing is stacked perfectly on a chair next to the bed. She moves with complete confidence and ease. Going to the bed she kneels on the sheets, gently resting her body against the man. He presses forward against her. She turns her head away and stares directly at the video camera, signalling to the young woman to come to her. The woman becomes lost in the rapture of her two lovers giving pleasure. She wants to die ...

The memory abruptly finished. The woman had taken a call on her mobile phone, and the memory was interrupted.

Yue sat in the studio waiting for Rong. Her stomach was bloated, and her breasts were slightly swollen. She was now eight weeks pregnant. It felt wonderful. Even though Yue had begun to doubt Rong, she found herself wanting to share with him aspects of her life that previously she would have been too ashamed to. She
suspected Rong’s temporary fall from grace had made him more human; when someone is found capable of weakness, they can be brought closer, in the knowledge they are not perfect.

‘Yue, it’s good to see you!’ said Rong with genuine excitement, ‘Every time you step back into the studio I know you are safe again, I can stop worrying. Sit down and have your coffee, and tell me about Lijiang.’

‘Before I say anything, Rong, I want to tell you what’s just happened. A memory I received in the street. It was from a Chinese woman around thirty, very beautiful. I’m sorry, I have to do this, I cannot get it out of my mind.’ She told Rong the memory. ‘I don’t need this, Rong,’ she said. ‘This woman has completely got under my skin. The look on her face, the need to video herself; she was so self-assured. There is a part of me that hates her, and another part that totally envies her.’

‘You envy her? I’m surprised,’ he said.

‘Why wouldn’t I envy her? She has complete freedom and control. I never have this. She loves herself entirely. I can understand why she wants to die. I’ve never met anyone before who has understood that. I didn’t want her memory to finish. It’s never like this. Memories are things I experience then let pass, not get obsessed with.’

‘And now?’ Rong asked.

‘And now, I have to ask myself why this woman has had such an effect on me. I’ve even thought of how exciting it would be to have a copy of her video and be able to watch the whole scene over and over again. I want to know what happens next, how much pleasure she really experienced, how long she was able to withstand that pleasure. You would never understand. You know who you are, where you’ve been and probably where you’re going. There’s danger in your life but you have it under control, don’t you?’ she asked.

‘If only it was that simple,’ he replied. ‘You’re right, I don’t have to deal with a missing brother, and a belonging, and I’m not pregnant, and I certainly don’t have to deal with all that’s happened to you, but life is capable of driving you in many directions, throwing up choices you never thought you’d be faced with. The past drives everybody, and it’s the least likely circumstances that come back to haunt you; not like Songling’s ghosts, more like Shakespeare’s ghost.

‘Ghosts?’ Rong said. ‘I have my ghosts that haunt me in the middle of the night,’ he added.
'But don’t you have someone to look after you?’ Yue asked.

‘There is no one; you should know that, just my housekeeper. This studio is my home. I find solace and comfort in my collections; my guashi stones are like my children, the books have their own special place,’ he replied.

‘You feel alone?’ she asked.

‘I’m often lonely,’ he said. ‘Many of my friends have died or disappeared over the years. No one ever knew whether the truth you chose to hold onto would land you in jail or into the arms of the Party. The truth slides in and out of a fog that shifts across a changing landscape, sometimes it’s just impossible to make your way through; other times the truth is as clear as a mountain against the sky.’

‘It’s a landscape we all share,’ she said.

‘It is, I agree; but the truth resides in some borderland between the moments of reckoning. It seems like the woman with the video camera is now part of your landscape. She’s like a reflection on the lake. Her truth can be wiped out with the splash of the smallest pebble if you wish. I’m sure one day you’ll throw that pebble,’ Rong said.

‘I’ll have to find it first,’ she answered.

‘Let’s go back to your meeting with Shen. The two of you were about to start walking across the city,’ he said, trying to centre their conversation.

‘Yes, I wanted to walk all day with Shen, along the avenues, streets and the old hutong lanes. I wanted the city to take the two of us wherever it wanted. I wanted to reimagine Beijing. I was convinced the city could help heal both of us. We knew there was a landscape of memories lying beneath the concrete and rubble of the city, an underground memory, a rhizome of history. We wanted to dig up what was beneath, deeper and deeper into the roots that lay below. We were hoping to find our past,’ she said.

Yue then told Rong how she and Shen had crossed the city.

**walking across beijing**

As they walked the city, she held tightly onto held Shen’s arm. The first and oldest of the memories rose up from below,
... It is December 5 in the winter of 1978. A middle-aged man hops off a bus; he works his way past others queuing on the sidewalk and walks a short distance over bare dirt towards the Democracy Wall. Wearing a white cloth mask over his face as protection against the cold, he joins a line of men who are huddled along a stretch of grey wall.

Everybody is wearing padded overcoats and Mao hats to keep themselves warm against the bitter winter chill. The men are reading the dazibao, big character notices critiquing the government. The middle-aged man clasps his hands; fingers interlocked, tucking them into the long sleeves of his overcoat. His shadow casts itself onto the wall, projected on the newly pasted up writings.

He starts to read the poem written by a local high school student named Wang Juntao. The man carefully examines each character in the poem as if to decipher their meanings more clearly.

In my grief I hear demons shriek;
I weep while wolves and jackals laugh.
Though tears I shed to mourn a hero,
With head raised high, I draw my sword.

The middle-aged man knows who the wolves and jackals are – Hua Guofeng, Wang Dongxing and Wu De. Two years ago he had watched from the edge of Tiananmen Square as thousands of people were cleared away, roughed up and beaten. He and his comrades had come to mourn the death of a man they respected, to sweep the grave of Zhou Enlai. These jackals were responsible for the sacrilege of renewed violence.

The man rubs his hands together to stay warm, and adjusts his facemask; the crowd is silent. It is dangerous to talk. Only close friends and family can be trusted. Mao has recently died. The man walks south along the wall, to a spot where another group of people has gathered. Here the men talk excitedly, seeming to forget their long-felt fear. They are looking at a poster pasted up the night before. It is wet with homemade glue. It reads:

We want to be masters of our own destiny. We need no gods or emperors. We do not believe in the existence of any saviour. We want to be masters in our world and not instruments used by autocrats to carry out their wild ambitions. We want a modern
lifestyle and democracy for the people. Freedom and happiness are our sole objectives in accomplishing modernisation. Without this fifth modernisation all others are merely another promise.

The man’s heart begins to race and a feeling of elation fills his body. He spontaneously hugs the old man beside him and starts to utter the thousand words that have been trapped inside him for so many years ...

The memory of the middle aged-man dissipated, and a new echo reached Yue and Shen from the history below,

... It is January in the winter of 1979, and three men can be seen perched high on top of a grey brick wall. The wall is just wide enough for them to squat down and organise the stacks of pamphlets and roughly made magazines that lie at their feet. On either side of the wall, people are shoving against each other; hands outstretched with small change trying to buy a copy of what the young students are selling.

What the men on top of the wall are selling is history, the history of the fifth modernisation that has been omitted by the elder party statesmen of their country. The words from the titles of the pamphlets fall down on the crowd like leaves of an autumn tree after a Beijing summer: Exploration, Fertile Soil, People’s News, April Forum, Beijing Spring.

And there, deep within this memory is Shen, standing at the edge of the crowd, watching. His Uncle Li has brought him here as part of his education. Shen is a young boy of ten years. His hands are sunk deeply into his trouser pockets, in a non-understanding of what is happening. He feels resentful at being brought here in the cold. He can’t help, however, being struck by the excitement and eagerness of the crowd. He has never seen a group of people so passionate to read. He wonders what is inside these magazines.

His Uncle Li stoops down on his knees and whispers to him, ‘Life is about to change. The dark days of Mao and the Gang of Four are over, and soon China will come alive again, like the spring blossoms on the peach trees.’

The young Shen thinks of Mao and the Gang of Four only as names; he has been taught to believe that Mao saved China from corruption and decay. He remembers having to denounce the Gang of Four at school. Shen replies to his Uncle, ‘I remember
all our class had to stand around cardboard boxes we made. Each box had a drawing of one of the Gang of Four. All of us were made to raise our fists in the air and point to the drawings. We screamed out all the evil things these people did.’ He adds, ‘I’m glad these people have gone.’

Another young man strides past Shen nearly knocking him over. It is Wei Jingshen; he walks over to the wall and pastes up a poster. It is another large dazibao proclamation. It reads:

*Our explorations shall be based on realities in China and world history. In other words, we do not recognize the absolute correctness of any theory from any person. All theories, including current theories and those that may soon emerge, shall be the themes of our discussions as well as tools for analysis.*

Yue stood on the Xidan, and turned around and looked at her brother. At the time of this memory she had not even been born, both her parents were still alive. As she looked at Shen she wondered if this moment with his uncle acted as a seed for his imagination; a dream of what could be.

‘I only have a brief recollection of that day with Uncle Li,’ Shen said, ‘but years later when I saw the students marching through the streets on their way to Tiananmen, Uncle Li’s words echoed in my mind, that China would change, that it must change. I rushed into that crowd like a young kid.’

‘I was a child when Tiananmen happened,’ Yue replied, ‘you’d just started sending me your memories. Let’s keep walking.’

As they walked across newly laid flagstones they received the next memory from the Beijing’s depths,

... Winter has thawed and it is the spring of 1979. The dappled light spreads through the plane trees and spills out onto the layers of paper stuccoed onto the high concrete wall; the colours of spring run down and across the wall, from pink to brown, then white through to black. The handwritten demands for reform and freedom merge into one expansive proclamation for change. It is early morning. A young man casually leans against a tree, propping himself up with one hand; his skin receives the
indented patterns of the rough cool bark. He is lightly dressed in a long-sleeved cotton shirt and light black trousers. He stares at the writings that the protagonists have left on the wall. They have been pasted up as *xiaozibao* small character notices.

He recognises the style and form of the oratory. He too had been a Red Guard, sent out to country areas during the years of the Cultural Revolution. He had learnt the same lessons in formulating messages that demanded change, in extolling the rights of the people and the aspirations of a new country. His fellow brothers and sisters were utilising these lessons in these posters. Ultimately, Mao had betrayed them; the one person who they’d looked up to as their father. The man contemplates what could have been possible. He wonders what he could have become if he’d been allowed to blossom into just one flower.

Another splash of light bursts through the branches. It takes the shape of the character for ‘fire’. Its flaming shadow falls onto the two ideograms that have been painted onto the wall in large black writing; these characters read *fēn jiàn*, ‘feudalism’. The man knows there are people who want to throw his country back into an intellectual and spiritual wasteland where all mistakes are forgotten.

The air is fresh and full of the warmth of spring. The man is unable to contemplate such a corrupt and dark future. It is almost unthinkable. He holds a black cloth bag in his right hand. It is tucked behind his back. In the bag are letters from his father, the last letters written before he’d been sent away for reform. As the man looks at the rough script hurriedly scrawled across the large sheets of paper on the wall, he thinks of his father’s beautiful elegant script, written under such inelegant conditions not that many years ago. He is sure his father would approve of today’s demands, and hopes this flowering, like all those of the past, will not be cut off at its first budding.

He continues to read the poster, wondering if things will really change. The sun retreats behind a cloud and the light pink of the poster turns towards a shade of red…

Yue and Shen kept walking through the streets of Beijing until they found themselves at the site of the old Beijing Municipal City Hall. She knew this place. It was in one of the images that Shen had sent her the night before. The memory drifted up and through space,

... Ma Desheng, the artist and activist, stands in front of a huge crowd in the autumn of 1979. To his left is Huang Rui who is reading out the demands of his group. The
crowd looks on in amazement as Ma shouts out the words: ‘Every artist is a star. Even great artists are stars from the cosmic point of view. We call our group The Stars in order to emphasize our individuality. This is directed at the drab uniformity of the Cultural Revolution!’…

***

Yue was exhausted looking back at this time with Shen and their crossing of the Xidan. At the time it had been a breath of fresh air to be out in those streets, drawn through the contours and currents of Beijing city. All she had to do was let go. It was very different from sitting in Rong’s studio, talking. The encounters they experienced that day in Beijing had been exterior, as opposed to the interior conversations held with Rong where she only responded, a part of some predictable grand story rehearsed and acted out on a thousand platforms across the world.

For Yue, even Rong’s artworks had the capacity to be dangerous; within those exquisite objects lay a beauty that could lull her into a certain laziness and complacency in thinking. She was sure Rong was also aware of this danger; after years of hardship at the hands of his enemies he probably thought himself entitled to such luxuries, the spoils of war. These art pieces were his TV, and the studio his lounge room.

The studio however, did create a safe place for her, a place where her most dangerous and feared memories could be reimagined. The experience of talking with Rong was the antithesis of walking with Shen through the streets of Beijing. In those streets there was no illusion of security. In that exterior city landscape, an archaeology of memory was laid out in fragile layers; each footstep was capable of releasing a specific moment captured in ontological time. She and Shen were never certain how those memories would be re-remembered, or what events and emotions might be realised with their disclosure. The memories were not subject to any grand narratives, doctrines, dogma or prejudice; they were dangerous in their unpredictability and their clarity.

In the studio with Rong, she was cut off from this outside world of thunderstorms, snowfalls, summer winds, wildflowers, plains and rivers. Sitting in her comfortable armchair, she was a memory machine plugged into an energy force that was Rong. She did not resent this. She knew she was in need of shelter from those that attacked
on the outside, as well as the shadows that threatened from within.

The kettle simmered to a dry heat on the brazier. He got up to refill the kettle in the outside kitchen. Yue went over to the stove, picked up some charcoal with the metal tongs and replenished the fire. The sky outside remained a cobalt blue. The day was growing colder. The windowpanes softly fogged over in condensation. Rong shuffled back into the room and replaced the kettle.

He looked at the clock. Yue looked up as well. The session was finished. They shared their cups of tea in silence. She said, ‘goodbye’ and ‘take care’, and walked out into the garden, leaving the humid air of the studio behind.

Instead of going straight home, I took some time walking around Beihai Lake and the nearby hutong. Many of the traditional courtyard houses have been pulled down, but enough of them remain for there still to be a strong sense of community. Grocery shops, small noodle and dumpling restaurants, bike repair stops, fruit vendors and vegetable stalls filled the alleyways. People rang bells on their bicycles as they rode home after work, and small toddlers managed to push their way along the edge of the road in their bright pink and blue plastic walkers, their grandparents hovering close by. There were even a couple of boys rolling hoops along with sticks. It was an old game that Shen told me he had played in the hutong as a kid. I breathed in the smell of barbeque meat roasting over the coals, and the pungent aroma of chilli being stir-fried in woks by cooks who had migrated to the city from the southwest. It was the part of Beijing I loved, a momentary escape from the pressure of looking for Shen.

I walked on to the southern perimeter of the lake where I could catch a taxi back to the apartment. And there, further ahead in the centre of a small crowd was Lily, talking excitedly, throwing her arms around in the air, and pulling her long hair back across her bare shoulders every time she made a mark in the conversation. The motley collection of young artists, filmmakers and friends who surrounded her, laughed and shouted in reply. It was another reminder of how beautiful and passionate Lily was. Rather than interrupt the show, I decided to head home, leaving her happy with friends. I stepped into the taxi and closed the door; the noise and confusion of Beijing disappeared. The space in the taxi became a modern day temple, a place to meditate and reflect.
(x) jīng - place

xiàzhì (summer solstice)
21st june – 7th july

Attempts to deceive a human can be a killing offence for a fox-spirit. That’s what I was told by Wuya. The fox doesn’t have to be killed, but if she is, the human who does the killing is never punished. That’s how it is. For me though, different rules apply. I can’t shift shapes. I can’t take the form of a fox. I come from a fox-spirit mother and a human father. I’m not a fox, that’s not my natural form. In Songling’s time they would have had a hard time punishing me. What could they have done? Cut my hair, or get me drunk in the middle of the night on wine, then strangle me?

Who does the killing these days, I wonder? Maybe nowadays the punishment is a karmic one. What would the Party do if I hurt one of their thugs trailing me? Why am I even worrying about this? Is it because I woke up this morning with this deep feeling of foreboding? The threat feels far away, somewhere far to the north.

Yue was standing on the corner of Dongjian Avenue. The day was already hot; she checked her watch, it was ten o’clock. A rare sound of cicadas filled the crack of the morning, beating broken rhythms across the city. The air was humid and thick, the smog already clouding the sun in a dirty haze. She hated the dirt and noise of the cars and trucks. With her pregnancy the smell of petrol made her gag; she felt more nauseous than usual.

The pregnancy had exerted its own will. Her jeans were too tight, her breasts had become tender and swollen, and her back ached; the heat of the day mocked her condition. The traffic was clogged, making it almost impossible to cross the road. She wanted to reach the coolness of Rong’s studio. The freshness of Baisha’s rain was far away. She could never have anticipated what was about to happen next.

it’s all just a road to hell

A large black van with tinted windows drove up and screeched to a halt in front of her. The back door flew open and a man grabbed and yanked her into the car. She cried in pain from her hair being ripped. Another man held his hand over her mouth
so tightly she could hardly breathe. She gagged, and started to vomit. He let go; she threw up all over the back of the front seat. The acrid smell of the vomit made her want to choke, she vomited again.

The two men in the back seat shouted ‘fuck,’ over and over again. She yelled ‘go to hell, fuck you!’ back at them. The largest of the men slapped her across the face and tied her hands behind her back, then again told her to shut up. She decided to be quiet. The smaller man grabbed a cloth and began to wipe away the vomit, swearing the whole time. The large man started to speak; she yelled back, ‘I don’t speak Chinese.’ She did not want him to know she understood Mandarin.

He spoke back in fluent English. ‘You know where Shen is! Tell us! He’s your brother. You must know where he is.’

‘I have no idea where he is. I’m looking for him; you’re looking for him! You have no fucking right to do this!’ she shouted back.

‘We have every right to do this,’ he replied with an attempt at authority, ‘You are disrupting social order!’

She said nothing. The car sped along the back streets of inner Beijing and pulled up outside an old government hotel. The two men pulled her out of the car and dragged her into the rundown foyer of the hotel. Three plainclothes thugs stood at the hotel counter. The place looked deserted. One of the thugs came up and untied her hands, then did a body search, ripping open the pockets of her jacket and shoving his hands down her jeans. He took her mobile phone and wallet. In a strong Beijing dialect he muttered they were ‘going to take care of her for a while.’

She yelled back in English, ‘Leave me alone, you bastards!’

He shoved her up the stairs. At the top landing there was a long dimly lit corridor with piles of rubbish strewn along its walls. The doors on the rooms were of iron and carried barred windows, except for the first room where a wooden door lay open. As she stumbled past she could see four men seated inside, talking, drinking beer and smoking cigarettes. They looked back, wanting to be relieved from their interminable boredom.

The man opened the iron door of the next room and shoved Yue forwards onto the floor. The man left, locking the door behind him. In the room were two older women sitting on a small single bed. They looked like they had recently arrived from the countryside. Beside them stood two uniformed women guards who began to tell Yue they were going to strip off her clothes to make sure she didn’t have anything that
could hurt her. She knew they were going to beat her if she resisted. She thought of the baby and didn’t bother to put up a fight. One of the guards went to grab her jacket. Yue pushed her away, glared at her, stood up, and slowly stripped off her clothes.

When she finished undressing, the two women guards snatched Yue’s jeans and coat and searched through the pockets then threw them in the corner. One of the women took Yue’s hands and twisted them behind her back. As Yue struggled, the other woman slowly passed her gloved hand down Yue’s body, starting at the face, then across the breasts, along her stomach and pubic hair, and finally down the length of her thighs. Yue spat at the woman’s head. The guard immediately slapped Yue across the face. Both women then left the room, locking the door behind them. Yue hated them. She made sure that each piece of clothing she put back on returned to her a kind of dignity.

Yue turned to the two women sitting on the single wooden bed. The younger one stood up and beckoned her to sit down. Without saying a word, Yue went and sat next to the older women, she was probably in her forties. She looked distressed and seemed unable to focus, rhythmically moving her head from side to side. Yue caught the woman’s flickering memories. She had also been bundled into the room, stripped, and had her belongings taken. The guards had then violently thrown her onto the concrete floor, beat her about the head, and kicked her naked body until it was bruised and bleeding. She had no chance to resist. She sat silent, too traumatised to speak.

Yue placed her hand on the woman’s knee and stroked her hair.

‘My daughter was murdered by the son of a big land developer in Henan,’ said the woman. ‘He got drunk and jealous and knocked my daughter onto the ground. Her head was cut open and started to bleed. She died on the way to the hospital.’ The woman started to cry.

‘What happened then?’ Yue leant over and stroked the hair away from the woman’s wet cheeks.

‘We went to the police. They said they would investigate. They said they would charge the son, but nothing happened.’ She bent back into herself and slumped onto the bed.

‘They couldn’t give a shit,’ said the other woman angrily, filling the sad quietness of her friend. ‘They were bought off by the father. Qiao’s been coming to Beijing for two
years, trying to get a judge to hear her case. They tried to buy her off but she refused. Now they’ve dragged her here to this black jail, this hell hole.’ The woman paused, ‘My name’s Nina.’

‘I’m Yue. This is a black jail? Those bastards shoved me into a car, on the main fucking road!’ She felt sick again and wanted to vomit, but nothing was left. She stepped over to the corner of the room; all she could do was dry retch. Nina walked over and touched Yue’s forehead as a kind of answer to the wretchedness.

‘You’re sick?’ she said.

‘I’m pregnant,’ Yue replied.

‘I’m sorry. This is no place for a pregnant woman. This is a place for people who won’t give up, people who want justice. It’s a road to hell. Maybe they will give you a price to pay and you can leave. If they think you’ll give up and go home, they’ll release you,’ Nina said with contempt.

Yue retched again and walked slowly back to the bed. The air in the room was stale and hot. There was one small window slightly ajar; the iron bars crowded any open space that remained. There was one bare fluorescent light flickering above. Yue felt like they were fragile insects trapped in the glare of a light box.

Nina shuffled over to a painted-red wooden chair and propped it up against the grimy white wall. She sat down, exhausted, and allowed her gaze to drop to the floor, noticing for the first time a small scrap of rotting carpet softening the concrete. The smell of dampness released the memory of her daughter Suni. Yue had no choice but to receive Nina’s memories,

... Suni is playing by the edge of a river, within sight of her family home. Nina watches her from the veranda. She knows Suni must be feeling happy; there is no school today and she has done all her early morning chores. Suni is her one child, and she can happily watch her for hours, doing what children do. Her seventh birthday was celebrated last week. All the family had come for lunch. The celebrations stretched out till the next day. Relatives came from all over Hunan. A few even stayed the night, as they’d travelled so far. One favourite uncle came from as far as Hubei.

Nina notices the glimpses of winter sunlight catching the ripples of the flowing water. She sees the murky stains that skim the surface of the stream. When she was a child the river was clean enough to drink. Gradually over the years it had muddied, only good enough for drinking if the water was boiled. In the last two years, people
had stopped using the water altogether. A huge chemical factory had been built upstream three years ago; people heard stories of poisoned materials being discharged into the river from the factory. Now Nina only let Suni play in the river for short periods of time, just to be careful ...

Nina stopped. She struggled to pull her thoughts together and started to remember again,

... Nina sits by the hospital bed and strokes her daughter’s hair. Suni has been diagnosed with cancer. The doctor says she will have six months to live. Nina promises herself that if Suni dies she will devote her life to bringing the chemical company to justice, even if it means travelling all the way to Beijing to prove her case. She would not leave until her promise was fulfilled ...

As Yue looked at Nina, she could see that Nina was a woman who could never be broken; that this black jail was a small obstacle in her mission to pay back those who had killed her daughter. ‘These bastards get paid for keeping us here!’ Nina spoke up. ‘The local government back home pays them two hundred kuai a day to teach us a lesson. The bastards are in no hurry to let us go.’

‘We are sharing in China’s growth,’ Yue replied sarcastically. ‘I’m sorry I didn’t mean to make fun of it.’

‘It’s okay, this whole thing is a sick joke,’ Nina said.

The door opened and the two men came back into the room. They grabbed Yue’s arm and led her out, pushing her against the wall on the other side of the corridor.

‘We’ll find Shen and we’ll deal with him!’ one of them shouted. ‘We know he must be in a monastery somewhere.’

‘Remember we can bring you back here anytime!’ shouted the other man. ‘Now get out of here and fuck off!’

He took Yue by the arm and shoved her down the stairs. Another man pushed her back outside the building. Standing there alone, in the middle of the street, she felt like the people inside the building had raped her. They had got inside her body. She held her hands tight against Lotus and wished she, the baby, and Shen were safe somewhere far to the south.
Yue waited on Rong’s veranda.

She sat down on the bamboo wicker chair and looked out at the garden. In midsummer it was full of flowering wild rose, pink gardenia and chrysanthemum. In front of her, in full bloom, stood a ten-thousand-flowered tree peony. It was over fifty years old. The flowers were a vibrant purple; the whole bush pulsated in the midsummer heat.

Shaken, her soul and body longed to vibrate in harmony with the intensity of the peony, in a rhythm of immanence and transcendence; the anger seduced by the softness of the sweet peony; virtue lay beyond the body. There was little choice at the black jail that morning. All she could do was acquiesce and share the experience of the two women trapped in that hell. The limits of her freedom had been two guards, an iron door, a roomful of thugs, and the risk of losing her baby.

The sound of the water bubbling in the pond percolated into the summer air; a myna bird whistled and sang in its bamboo cage. Its gurgling call was interspersed with the sound of the bird scooping in water from an old ceramic bowl at the bottom of its cage. The bird ruffled its black shining feathers and started to call out ‘ni hao’. The bird looked quizzically to each side, its orange beak curving away from its jet-black eyes.

In the pond the lotus plants rose high above the water, their spindly bulbous heads catching the afternoon light like candyfloss. The bubbles in the pond broke the water’s surface, exploding light and oxygen into the thick humid air. A speckled koi split the skin of the water and swam into the bubbling maelstrom, flooding itself with oxygen. The wooden roof of the pavilion stretched out over this watery world; the fish had their own heaven on earth. The light from the pond bounced back from the wooden beams above, the reflections pulsating across the leaf surfaces below. It was a world of images and matter that existed in its own private universe. It existed together and apart.

Yue’s stomach was bloated; she stood up, breaking her connection with the pond, and walked across to the window of the studio and peered in, all she could see was one painting, highlighted by the afternoon sunlight. It was a work by Mu Xin, an ink drawing rather than a painting. She had admired it many times while sitting in the
studio talking to Rong. She was always drawn to its calmness and humanity. *Spring Brilliance at Kuanji,* such a fitting title. Rong had told her its history; it was painted around thirty years ago. In spirit it referenced Wang Xizhi’s *Preface to the Orchard Pavilion,* a piece of calligraphy painted over sixteen hundred years ago in Kuanji. The landscape of the drawing was peopled with milk-laden clouds and mountains floating in ink-soaked gouache. After years of study and dedication under his female master Wei Shuo, Xizhi was capable of composing calligraphy that transcended everything before it. His strokes connected with the clouds, the wind, and the river. He achieved alchemy between ink, brush, paper, and what lay before him. He had invited twenty-six friends to compose poetry at the foot of Kuanji Hill. After drinking and writing impromptu poems, Xizhi, satiated with wine and friendship, grabbed his brush and created a preface to their poems. The three hundred and twenty-four characters he wrote breathed in everything around them.

Yue continued looking at the painting. She was aware Mu Xin was also honouring the outsider artists of the early Yuan and Qing periods. These artists refused to capitulate to the invasion of their Mongol and Manchu outsiders. They instead chose to become outsiders themselves, the ‘leftover people,’ and called their paintings ‘silent poetry’. Their art was an art of traditional values and beauty, and stood as a sentinel against the new culture imposed upon them. Beauty and nature had suddenly become reactionary.

She thought of how Shen was probably playing the same role as a Tibetan monk. He was also seen as a reactionary. Traditional religion and a belief in statehood were seen as rejections of new Chinese law. The invading barbarians now came from within the borders of the state itself. The Chinese people had become the new leftover people; their silent poems represented by a handful of artists, poets and lawyers who refused to relinquish their ideals.

Xu Min’s ink painting was a landscape of memory; one held from the past so the future could be seen as a passing of history. When the present was unbearable, memory recollected what went before, reimagining it in the present. This was not a memory of events, people or matter. It was a memory of a certain feeling and attitude towards life; it was a memory of a temporal spirit of the soul which had shifted out of phase, an entity that for the moment attempted to hold power over a collective mind and body.

Xu Min had been inspired by the actions of the *yipin* artists of the ninth and tenth
centuries, who had been willing to experiment and explore the freedoms of being outsiders. They had covered their naked bodies with paint and rolled over their art paper, leaving marks they would interpret as parts of the natural landscape. These artists also dipped their hair in paint, which they then flicked over their artwork for further interpretation. These avant-garde actions were not repeated for another nine hundred years, in Beijing by the group of artists Shen had befriended. When Xu Min was imprisoned in the early seventies for 'education correction' he had written prison notes, smuggled out in the padding of his clothes. Standing there, embraced by Xu Min's ink and poetry, Yue felt love for Shen, her mother and father, and her fox-spirit belonging. She knew the memories and feelings belonging to her tragedy would ultimately shift from hate through to love, from exclusion to immanence, as she brought forward the past to tame the present.

A large koi splashed in the pond, the shards of light exploded across the veranda. Yue could hear footsteps coming up from the lower garden. Even though she knew the footsteps must be those of Rong, fear ran through her body. The sound of the koi breaking the water surface made her tremble.

Rong appeared from around the verge of rhododendron shrubs. ‘I'm sorry I'm late. How long have you been waiting?’ he said.

‘I don't know. Today has been terrible for me. I got picked up by government goons and thrown into some black jail. I can't believe I'm standing here. Not long ago they were throwing me against walls!’ she broke out.

Rong was shocked. ‘The bastards,’ he tried to shout. ‘What did they do, what did they say?’

‘They said they were looking for Shen,’ she replied, ‘They warned me that they could find me anytime and throw me in jail. They are bastards.’

‘Are you okay, is the baby okay?’

‘Yes, I’m fine. They didn’t beat me up like they did to the other women who were in there,’ answered Yue.

‘It would be unthinkable if you or the baby were hurt. I would never forgive myself,’ said Rong.

‘Why talk like that Rong? It's not your fault.’

‘I know. Let's sit down. I'm sorry. Do you feel like you can talk?’

‘No, I can't, not right now. I just wanted to come here for reassurance after what
happened I wanted to smell the flowers and soak in the softness of the garden. It makes me feel sane again, a touch of what's normal, if there is such a thing. We can talk next time,' she said.

‘All right, take care. They are becoming more brazen, and acting with more determination. They're getting closer to Shen. He may be much closer to us than we think. Do you have any sense of where he is?’ Rong asked.

‘I have no idea.’ She gave her farewell and left.

I heard Lily’s words but could hardly feel them. The smell of the locked room, the sadness and anger of the women trapped there, the female guard’s hand travelling...
across my body. It filled the pores of my body like the stench of a dead animal.

‘I’m listening. You’re my sweet pancake person,’ I muttered back.

‘I’m serious, Yue. All this shit you’ve been through today, and me spending time on some dumb idiot playing video games to show up his girlfriend,’ she said.

‘Somebody has to do it, Lily. This country is crazy in lots of ways. You’re just showing another way,’ I said.

‘Anyway. Forget it,’ replied Lily. ‘If we had a bath, I’d run it for you. I’ll run the shower instead, at the perfect temperature. Then I’ll get you another a drink, and once you’re clean you can eat the beautiful meal I’ve cooked for you. After all that, you can sit down and relax with your favourite perfect pancake.’
嗜

(xi) shì - obsession

xiǎoshǔ (minor heat)
I was right to have been worried. The threat did come from the north, and I’m sure there will be more threats to come. Shen is far from being found and I’ve only been able to collect one of his memories from Lijiang. At least Lotus is safe, and Lily is an anchor in my floating world.

The Baisha winds have blown the dust and leaves up under the eaves and into the studio. This space seems to have no boundaries between the inside and outside. It’s made me think that the studio deserves a name. Songling had settled with the name liao for his studio. The naming of a studio should be seen as a serious matter. What can I call this Baisha studio? Pi might be appropriate, obsession and addiction all rolled up in one – a force that’s driving Shen, Rong, this government, and myself.

And for Rong, there is the added obsession for his guaishi stones. Du Wan, in his book Stone Compendium of the Cloudy Forest, understands the power these rocks can hold. He says, ‘the purest energy of the heaven-earth world coalesces into rock. It emerges, bearing the soil. Its formations are wonderful and fantastic ... within the size of a fist can be assembled the beauty of a thousand cliffs.’ Rong beware!

Feng Menglong, in Aid to Conversation, warns that obsession is really about the self-loving-the-self. In my case this might be true, the vagaries of self! As for the studio, I might follow in Songling’s footsteps and settle on the name without ever writing it.

Yue’s stomach was heavy and tight. She didn’t want to see Rong. Her body was flushed with the heat of pregnancy. The father of her baby had disappeared. It was not a surprise. She thought of Lotus, now the size of a small cherry, her eyes about to close once again, her heart opening up, every day becoming stronger; Lotus’ soul filling with the elements of suffering, attachment, impermanence and mindfulness.

Despite all her misgivings about Rong, she had decided to travel to Beijing. She wanted to talk about her walk through Beijing with Shen. When she arrived, Rong was warm and welcoming. He sensed her need to talk and sat in silence, waiting for her to speak.
After walking across Xidan, she and Shen had travelled north along Xisi Street. The crowd eddied and flowed around them, like mercury travelling across the palm of an open hand, silver rivulets running down furrowed channels, skimming across smooth skin. They reached Xi’anmen Street and walked on towards Beihai Lake. They kept moving east, to the north gate of the Forbidden Palace, on to Wusi Dajie, and then past the National Art Gallery. They found themselves in a small park on the corner next to the National Art Museum.

The echoes of memories flowed through from beneath the surface. The first came from a time not that long ago,

... It is February in the winter of 2009. A Nepalese horn orchestra appears from around the corner; six men and two women are dressed in black, with silver trumpets and red drums, their hats tipped with red wooden cones that look like spinning tops frozen in time; the cacophony of discordant notes breaks a tense silence.

A black station-wagon hearse pulls up outside the art gallery. The hearse is garlanded with pink, red, purple and white chrysanthemums. Inside the hearse lies a black coffin complete with silver rails. The casket carries inside it a living bride, clothed in red wedding dress. The lid of the casket is slightly ajar. A gold ring is worn on each of the bride’s index fingers; her face is heavily made-up in white, her lips are painted a bright vermillion. Beside the hearse walk six men, three on each side, wearing formal black suits, white shirts and black sunglasses. The men scatter white chrysanthemums across the footpaths as they move along the road. The art-bride lies motionless, breathing heavily in the stifling semi-darkness.

She is remembering a time twenty years before when she had fired two gunshots at her work of art; this is the event the mock funeral is celebrating. She was twenty years younger then, striding into the vestibule of the art gallery, gun in hand. She had raised the pistol level with her chest, her arms outstretched. Her hands shook; she had never used a gun before. She had taken aim, hesitated, taken another deep breath, and then fired. The gunshot exploded through the noise of the on-looking
crowd. The bullet ripped through the mirrors of her installation, shattering glass across the marble floor. She fired again. The after-silence was deafening.

She knew that the shots she’d fired were aimed not just at her, but at others as well, at those citizens who dared not talk, at those that could not talk, and at a government that refused to engage in any dialogue at all. She had wanted her gunshots to explode the myth of modernity that isolated the everyday communal citizen. After the gunshots were fired, her art installation still stood – two adjacent telephone boxes and a dummy in each booth, separated by a phone dangling off the hook.

As the bride lies in the confined coffin she thinks of how the new direction of China was promising smooth clean lines and mirrored surfaces, a history cleansed of all that had gone before. She knows that the recent renaissance of learning and opening up is just an illusion of enlightenment and freedom. The shattered glass that had spread out across the cold marble in the gallery was razor sharp and non-malleable. The violence of hers, twenty years ago, had pre-empted the clothed bodies that would soon ooze under the weight of sixty-tonne tanks. The art-bride’s act of shooting took place four months before Tiananmen. As she had walked back towards the entrance of the gallery, the police had arrived and moved to close down the exhibition, marking the death of the blossoming of another new spring.

The art-bride takes another deep breath inside the coffin. It is a twenty-year breath of thinking, of what should and could have been. The six men carrying the coffin feel hot and stifled in their black suits. One by one the faces of the men become clear. The last man, supporting the rear of the coffin is Shen. He is immersed in his task. Shen has never heard the sound of gunshots.

A flash of white-hot lightning strikes the art-bride’s imposed blackness; her memory ceases to exist …

As Shen and Yue stood silent in the small park adjacent to the Gallery, the two of them received another echo, another memory,

... It is February in the winter of 1989; the same day the art-bride’s two gunshots were just about to pierce the cold air of Beijing. Another artist, a dada artist, is selling prawns on the ground floor of the gallery. The crustaceans are costly and have become putrid, justly reflecting the art scene – the dodgy middlemen, the cut-throat
dealers, and the submissive curators selling goods in the temple of culture that was once avant-garde art. On the gallery's wall hangs a painting of a gridded Mao; he is grey and dour. He could be looking out at his captors, or inwards at the spectacle he has become awaiting judgment. Directly in front of Mao swarm the art intellectuals dressed in suede-brown Godard jackets, plaid scarves and metal-rimmed glasses.

In another corner of the gallery lies the messy artist's soggy pile of newspapers that have been recycled through a washing machine and clumped together to represent the reptilian rebirth of the cultural life of new China. Nearby is the waterbed artwork of the fish artist, (the messy artist's wife). The plastic mattresses are filled with water. Inside are a dozen goldfish, committed to a graceful but deadly swim. The fish are meant to mimic all those citizens who stroll through the new shopping malls of Beijing. The fish swim around in their plastic coffin. They are able to glimpse the language artist's immense work hanging from the ceiling above. Even the fish seem to realise the exquisite beauty of the massive unfolding book that floats above in the sky. The unfolding book is releasing a cloudburst of ideograms that fall like rain from an ancient heaven …

As Yue and Shen stood outside the National Art Museum, there was one more memory to collect from the strata below. This archaeology of memory did not consist of perfect chronological layers containing the city's and people's history; it was comprised instead of a series of nodes, occasionally split and ruptured, spread out as mnemonic roots; powerful and weak. There was no centre and there was no beginning or end. Each node, each memory, had its own importance, its own portent. Each node related to a multiplicity of people, events and emotions. The memories were fixed by a powerful sense of place capable of being fractured if the fault line experienced any form of trauma. The last memory received rose up from the twenty-seventh day of September in the autumn of 1979,

… A self-portrait of the dissident artist, Zhang Xiaogang, rests lightly on the iron railing fence separating the museum from the corner park. The park is filled with curious onlookers. The self-portrait is a bold statement, with charcoal black outlines encasing the artist's profile in a solid form. In the drawing there is no mistake regarding the presence of the artist. He is not going to be intimidated into silence. He is here to stay, an intellectual and spiritual chrysalis of an emerging 80s generation.
The early morning sun begins to burn the paintings. As the sun rises higher in the southern sky, a man in the crowd raises his left hand to shade his eyes. He wants to be certain of the paintings staring back at him. The avant-garde artists, the Stars of tomorrow, wander around in the crowd talking about their self-taught works, trying to explain how the old guard of the art academy can only see the past, and how it is up to the youth to see the future ...

***

These were the memories of Beijing. Back in the studio, Rong settled himself into the soft leather of the armchair. He tapped the pencil on his writing pad. ‘The artists were trying to save the city. Beijing is sick and ailing,’ he said. ‘Beijing is a city whose walls and old buildings have nearly all been destroyed: the walls built to protect and strengthen, have mostly been demolished and turned to rubble. Not just the Democracy Wall, but also the Great City Wall itself, the wall that represented centuries of culture; pulled down not just by Mao but also by the city’s bureaucrats; a salute to modernity. The ring road that encircles the city is like a cancerous cell, all for the sake of the car. This demolition of the city has caused more damage than the Cultural Revolution ever did.’ Rong sighed, ‘This new era of destruction provides even less chance for imagination to thrive in this city. The city’s capacity to heal, lessons each day. This is how I see Beijing. You received all these memories but. What made you believe this city could heal you?’

Yue felt a trepidation about this period in her life. She answered Rong as best she could.

*bald heads and holes in the walls*

She did believe Beijing had the capacity to heal. She also knew the darker side of the city. On her first return to Beijing she was only eighteen and had come searching for Shen, having no idea where he was or even if he really wanted her to find him. She was on her way to study at the Sorbonne; everything seemed new, exciting and dangerous. Not long after she arrived she became infatuated with the angry artist. She had first heard about him after reading in the paper that a random series of strange signs, *guài wu*, and holes, *guài dàn xìng xiàng*, had been appearing in
abandoned walls around the city. She found him within two days. The angry artist was knocking holes in the walls of abandoned buildings that had been marked for demolition; the rough holes took the shape of a human head. He did his work at night; occasionally Yue joined him. It was fun. First, the angry artist spray-painted a large profile of a head on the wall, and then carved out a hole with chisels and hammers. His art practice was another outlawed use of walls; just as the dàzībāo large slogans had been on the old Democracy Walls. His works appeared all over Beijing, from the inner city, right out to the third ring road. Everybody wanted to know who was responsible. It made the newspapers in a big way.

The police searched for two years looking for who was responsible. One day they finally knocked on the angry artist’s door and demanded he tell them everything. The artist handed himself in. In the papers the next week, the people of Beijing found out that the man they had labelled as an urban terrorist was in fact a professional artist who’d been trained at the Central Academy of Art and Design. What a surprise! The authorities saw his work as anti-government graffiti; the artist saw his walls as giant screens capable of projecting the destructive changes Beijing was going through. He wanted a dialogue and he got one. He saw his work as a statement about the physical destruction of the city. He marked the walls with the tag AK-47; it was a word and sound image that came from a local gang’s name. Whole communities of hutong were being ripped down. He saw this as cultural vandalism, the new religion of progress. He also tagged on the walls, 18K, the name of a radical Chinese artist, just to make the message clear.

After Yue and the angry artist worked on a wall, they would go back the next day to see the results. The outline of the head looked smooth against the rubble of bricks and mortar; the image of the bald-headed man waiting to speak, his big fat lips half open. Through the massive hole they could see what remained of the Beijing landscape. Often there was empty sky; once they saw golden spires rising up from the Forbidden City.

The angry artist considered traditional Chinese painting a thoughtless, empty style; street art had real meaning, yú yì yì. His art was capable of becoming part of people’s lives. He knew that although Asian people were able to express themselves, they always kept their thoughts trapped inside. He wanted to show his feelings on the outside, for everybody to see. Yue understood this. The artist called these feelings biǎo qíng; he had made them appear on the walls as an empty man’s face.
‘Human beings leave their signs,’ he would shout to Yue during their discussions. He wanted to create a dialogue between the image and the real person. His work was living art. He had such a bleak view of Beijing. There was so much demolition and construction going on in the city, and it was making everybody insecure and edgy. There was a lot of negative energy. Yue couldn’t get enough of it. She loved smashing the walls. She had her own anger and frustration to get rid of; for her it had acted as a healing.

***

‘You can see, Rong, even in those early days I was desperately searching. I thought Beijing could provide the answers. Shen had completely disappeared from my life. In all the time I was with the artist, he never let me know he’d been a friend of Shen. He always called him by another name, Ma. What I didn’t know was that Shen had already left Beijing before I got there; there was never a chance of meeting him. I don’t know why the artist covered up his relationship with Shen. There’s so much of that time that’s unclear. Where was he for those years when he was out of contact? On our day in Beijing, why didn’t Shen just tell me everything he knew?’ questioned Yue

‘Lily, what do you think of Beijing?’ I asked.

‘I love Beijing ... I hate Beijing ... I love Beijing. It’s like the weather. Clear blue skies one day, foul putrid air for the next five. I love the music ... I hate the cars ... I love the food ... I hate the way they are demolishing everything around us. When I’m up on the stage at a gig, Beijing doesn’t even exist,’ answered Lily.

‘Why don’t we have our own walk across the city one day, just you and me?’ I said, ‘We could go all the way out to the Three Shadows Gallery, and walk along the railway tracks. Then we could go and make fun of 798. Sit and drink coffee like tourists. Talk about fashion, drop in at a blind-massage place on the way home and get our feet done. Drink beer and margaritas.’

‘That’s a long crazy walk. You’re sure the baby would handle it?’ she asked.
‘Lotus loves a nice stroll. You never know, she might be hanging out for a drink. After the walk we can get some take-away spicy-sour noodles, and after that eat bowls of fudge ice-cream. What do you think?’ I said.

‘I think you’re pregnant,’ Lily replied.
嗜

(xii) shì – obsession

dàshǔ (major heat)
Last night I re-read the Lotus Fragrance story so as to enter the belonging once more. I feel there is a non-knowing rather than a knowing. After all these years, uneasiness remains despite all that’s happened. It shouldn’t be like this. I should have fully embraced the strangeness. There should be an acceptance. There is a refusal to become part of my story - the separation between the belonging received from Pu Songling’s tale, and what exists now, between the story and the narrative. Is Shen really the only other person who is part of our fox-spirit belonging; is he enough to make it real?

Here is the Lotus Fragrance story, one more time:

‘A mortal man, Sang, falls in love with a fox-spirit, Lotus Fragrance. He also falls in love with the ghost, Li, who at first is jealous of his love for the fox-spirit. A love between Li and Lotus Fragrance develops; the three live together happily. Li then disappears but is reincarnated not long after as the young woman, Swallow. Swallow turns up at Sang and Lotus Fragrance’s house and they invite her to stay. After a time, Sang marries both Lotus Fragrance and Swallow. For a short period all three are once again united and happy.

Lotus Fragrance goes on to have a son to Sang. He is called Hu-er. Soon after the birth, Lotus Fragrance dies. Sang and Swallow continue to care for Hu-er. Lotus Fragrance is then reincarnated as the young daughter of the local milk vendor. The young daughter, who is never named, comes and lives with Sang and Swallow. They are again reunited. The original ghost, Li, is now Swallow, and the original fox-spirit, Lotus Fragrance, is now the milk-vendor’s daughter. The milk-vendor’s daughter’s becomes my belonging and Hu-er’s spirit becomes Shen’s belonging.

A complicated story, with little explanation!

A hundred years after Pu Songling composed his story, a commentator added to the original text. He wrote, ‘how dull it would be if the author explained the details of Lotus Fragrance’s reincarnation!’ How wise the commentator is!

I never tire of reading the story. I love the way Lotus Fragrance continually harasses Sang, her lover, taking on the role of caring for his health and welfare. It’s such an ironic twist to the conventional tale of the fox-spirit endangering the life of her mortal lover, or even sometimes killing him. Lotus Fragrance even chides Sang for overindulging in sex with his ghost lover, Li, warning him that once every three nights is
enough! Sang is often love sick towards the ghost; he rubs and fondles Li’s slipper to ensure he sees her again. What a wonderful metaphor. Lotus Fragrance also demands that the ghost, Li, presses her cherry lips against Sang’s lips and drops her fragrant saliva into Sang’s mouth so that he may be cured of his sickness; such subtle eroticism!

The snippets of advice by other commentators to Pu Songling’s story still ring true today: … ‘how can you use love as a weapon of hatred’ … ‘mortals hurt themselves’ … ‘if ghosts and foxes are like this, what harm can they possibly do?’ … ‘what a fine person was Lotus Fragrance! I have seldom encountered a woman of such rare quality’.

I can only hope that I’ve inherited just a smattering of Lotus Fragrance’s fine qualities. This is the strange tale that has continued through till today. Pu Songling is always somewhere in the background. It’s a story that I’m sure is not yet finished.

Yue was certain that Lotus was now at an age where she could feel pain. She wondered if Lotus shared the same pain she felt for Shen. Lotus’ heartbeat was like that of a small bird; one hundred and seventy beats a minute. Soon she would start to make sucking movements. Her body was exploding with nerve cells and synapses. She was being connected, her precious consciousness forming. She was one and many – baby, child, daughter, and fox-spirit.

Yue’s heartburn caused the excess acid to rip along her throat, forcing her to cough. Her hand moved down onto her stomach. There was a slight bump. Her body was changing, alerting people she was no longer just one of many. She was a pregnant woman, a vessel carrying a precious object. People viewed her with a new gaze, one reserved for a mother, a gaze belonging to pure memory. She was wearing the mask of pregnancy. Standing outside the studio, Yue unfolded the umbrella in defiance of the flaring sun. There was a rustling sound; Rong appeared from a garden that was awash with thulian pink. Covered in sweat, he struggled up to the veranda with laboured breath.

‘Rong, are you okay?’ Yue asked.

‘I’m all right. I came all the way from Baihai. I was drinking with old friends. I hurried the last bit of the way after the taxi dropped me off,’ Rong said.

‘You look terrible, sit down. I’ll make you a cup of tea,’ Yue offered.

‘Thanks, you know how much I love pu’er,’ he said.
Yue went into the studio; the water was boiling on the stove. She walked over to the cupboard and picked out a box of fermented *pu’er*. Its label stated the tea was an official gift of the Chinese government. On the lid was an illustration of two men playing croquet. She opened the box. The cake of tea inside was carefully wrapped in fine handmade rice paper, resting on gold silk lining. The paper had an intricate geometric pattern around its edge and a red seal stamped in its centre.

She walked over to the table carved from a single bock black walnut. She lifted up a burnished clay pot from its stand, and lit the burner underneath with one of the long matches held in the adjacent carved wooden box. The kettle was carefully raised and lowered as the boiling water was poured into the pot, then placed back onto the hot stove. She carefully twisted it back into position on the hot plate and refilled it with the cold water stored nearby.

Yue lifted a small sharp knife from its bamboo container, sat down at the small table in the corner of the studio and carefully unwrapped the rice paper. She lifted the cake out of its box and turned it on its back, carefully pulling the folded paper away from the centre. The concertinaed folds fell away and the strong sweet smell of the tea escaped; the fragrance was one of dried summer flowers. The teacake had a small well that held in its core a small piece of crumpled paper. Small specks of tea fell onto the table. Yue placed her hand under the cake and pulled out the inner piece of paper. The label read, *Pu’er Chi Tse Beeng*. There was another scrap of paper on which was printed a guarantee: the tea would relieve hotness and thirst, improve appetite, lose weight, reduce blood pressure and blood fats, and prevent and conquer attacks from cancer. She smiled. They were such grand promises.

The layers of leaf were prised apart from the tightly compressed round of tea. A thin flake about three centimetres round was lifted out and placed on a small saucer. She then rewrapped the teacake and sat it back in its container. The flake of tea was placed into the clay pot of steaming water and the lid replaced. Rong liked his tea stewed. It was the way people in Yunnan preferred it. He had fallen in love with *pu’er* when he’d been down in Baisha and Lijiang on his visit to Dr Ho.

Yue took out two cups for her and Rong to drink from. She chose the two larger ones; the aroma of the tea would be enhanced. The cups had a blue pattern on the outside rim, and white on the inside so as to better appreciate the rich *pu’er* colour. The empty cups were set down on the walnut table. The tea was ready to be poured.
The liquid flowed from the brewing pot into a smaller more delicate cream pot. Yue swirled the pot around as she poured. She replaced the lid on the cream pot and wiped its foot dry with a clean cotton cloth then poured the rich red tea into Rong’s cup, moving the pot in a circular motion. The remaining tea was poured into her cup. Rong sat at the table, took a large sip from his cup and swallowed. He took another deep sip and this time swirled the tea around in his mouth.

‘Beautifully smooth and sweet, just as it should be,’ he said, ‘I feel better.’

‘You looked terrible, at least you have a semblance of colour now, just like the tea,’ said Yue.

‘I’ll soon be back to my normal self. Let’s have a few more cups and then you can tell me about the memories you collected in Lijiang,’ he said.

---

Yue had headed north from the artist’s studio near the south entrance to Old Town. She turned the corners she knew so well; left, right, then left again, following the small laneways of the old town, all the time heading north. The water channels were full. On her left she came to a laneway that twisted back up the hill towards the temple. It was cold in the shade of the buildings. She walked up the lane and stopped next to an old waterwheel turning rapidly with the flow of icy water rushing down from Black Dragon Pool. Standing by the wheel, she listened to the rhythms of the water slapping against the wooden spokes, and knew that one of Shen’s memories must be hidden there. The combination of cold air and flowing water formed a conjunction capable of releasing an echo of Shen’s past,

... Shen is living in Beijing. His life is amidst the poverty of his grandparents. His memory is that of his parents abandoning him. The strong bond of love he has with his grandfather is not strong enough to overcome the loss of his parents. The anger and resentment he feels towards life is marked on his face. To escape this situation Shen has taken on a child’s obsession. He has to have his own business, the same business as his Uncle Li, the person he now feels the most warmth towards. He will be the proud owner of an ice-cream cart.

He begins breeding rabbits in makeshift hutches in a small section of his family
courttyard. The sale of the rabbits will provide the money to buy his ice-cream cart. To build the rabbit cages he uses planks of wood he has found under the snow in the narrow alleyways that run through the hutong. The old man living next door has given him a couple of his weaker rabbits to breed from. On bitterly cold mornings, before sunrise, he lights a small fire outside his grandparent’s kitchen and kills the weakest of the breeder’s offspring; he skins and guts their warm soft bodies, then rushes on foot to the local marketplace down by the lake. He sells them for a couple of kuai each. He never forgets the sight of the steam rising from the freshly killed carcasses.

By the end of the first year he has at least fifty rabbits ready for market at any one time. It’s tedious work but it makes him feel less desperate towards life, but no less angry. Shen’s world is slowly moving forward but he still feels trapped in his wretched situation. He hates school and has no chance of understanding what is being taught. The numbers and the characters drift before him like thick patches of early morning fog. The strokes of the endless ideograms are impossible to hold onto. Poverty stifles his wisdom; the one thing he knows is that something has to change, to relieve him from this impossible situation. He has very few friends he can ask for help, there are only a few who are still patient and generous enough to sympathise with his bitterness and anger.

One of these friends, Han, offers him a job at his father’s small bicycle repair shop. It quickly becomes apparent that Shen is more adept at working with his hands than his mind. When fixing things, it’s easy for him to see the myriad of separate components coming together, falling into place like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. This new life at the bicycle shop makes sense to him. He leaves school. He earns fifty kuai a month doing work he loves; fixing flat tyres, cleaning and oiling old bikes, repairing smashed and dented tricycles. Fifty kuai is good money. He’s allowed to keep his job only because he is so good with his hands. At work he is angry and rude to the customers, and cruel to the younger boys he works with.

Shen hands over most of the money he earns to his grandparents, but he saves what money’s left. By the end of the year he manages to save enough to buy his ice-cream cart; but then an unexpected event takes place. One of the boys Shen has mistreated at work discovers the secret hiding place behind the rusty bike racks where Shen stores his money. He comes in to work one morning to find everything he has worked for stolen. He’s left bitter and broken. He walks out the door of the shop,
promising he’ll never trust anyone again.

Weeks go by and Shen’s Uncle Li eventually hears about his nephew’s misfortune. Seeing his pain Uncle Li asks him to work with him on his ice-cream cart on the weekends. Shen says yes. If it had been anyone other than Uncle Li, Shen would have rejected any offer of help.

The Beijing summer is sultry and humid, holding a searing heat that pierces the languid air. Uncle Li and Shen take their cart to the local markets, parks and lakes, even out as far as the Summer Palace when it’s especially hot and busy with tourists. Shen embraces the new job. The business is simple, just a wooden cart full of ice and paper-wrapped blocks of ice-cream. To grab everybody’s attention the cart has bright red stripes painted around its white sides. Nothing ever goes wrong. Birds squawk by the side of the lake, kids yell, and the bells of the passing bicycles trill sharply in the Beijing air. Shen remains an angry person on the inside, but his Uncle Li is a constant source of joy for him. Everything is a joke with Uncle Li. Uncle Li treats every customer as one of his family. He never comes close to being angry, no matter how exhausting or stressful the situation.

Not long after his first summer working, Shen discovers Uncle Li has a sickness that makes him ache with excruciating pain. Uncle Li never complains. The hospital has decided there is nothing to be done except to give Li a vile smelling brew of traditional medicine to gulp down everyday. Li sees each day as an unexpected tomorrow, each day is an ancestor’s blessing. Life goes on for Li and Shen. The children who buy the ice-cream are still scared of Shen but their love for Uncle Li continues to grow. They run up to his cart, their feet burning on the hot stones, shouting out his name and jumping up and down on their skinny legs and bare feet. They dance in the heat, laughing and screaming; their hands stretch out eagerly for a cold ice-cream.

At the end of each long summer day Li and Shen sit under the shade trees on a couple of small wooden stools. There, Uncle Li drinks a cold bottle of beer, and Shen a soft drink. Both sit there looking out at the lake as the wind blows across their hot skin. Even though Li wants life to always be good, the sickness continues to crush him; Li is a moon-cake about to be squashed underfoot. The day comes when Li allows himself to cry. He doesn’t sob; instead, the tears rolls down his now cavernous cheeks. He has had enough. Shen is fourteen. The birds soar above in the wind, and after what seems hours, Li puts his arm around Shen and whispers to him that now
the ice-cream cart is his, that he should make sure he looks after it with care. With these simple generous words Shen’s anger towards the world concedes its first gentle melt.

Li is taken to hospital the next day, his body rotten with the sickness that has spread through his lungs and blood. He has smoked nearly all his life. In the last weeks of Shen visiting him in hospital, there is always a crowd of people filling the already cramped room. Everyone cherishes Uncle Li. The funny thing is, that many of the visitors bring ice-cream to him as a get-well gift. He relishes the ice-cream, as this is the only food he is able to eat; his throat is red raw.

The last time Shen sees his uncle, his face is one huge smile. The hospital room is full of children celebrating with him their mid-autumn festival holiday. He dies two days later ...

‘That was the memory that Shen left me by the waterwheel,’ Yue told Rong.

‘Tonight, I’m cooking ban ban mia. That’s noodles! No more going out! No more takeaways! I have Dan Dan wheat noodles, Huy Fong Sriracha Hot Chilli Sauce and, if you want to make it extra hot, a few fresh Szechuan peppers. I got them at the local market at Tuanjiehu. There’s also fresh shrimp.’ Lily was in good form.

‘I think Lotus could do without the Szechuan peppers,’ I said, ‘no matter how much I like them. By the way I have a story for you, for a change. I was wasting my time on the internet today.’

‘Really, tell me. I’ll cut up the vegies and you talk,’ she said.

‘The story’s about some pigs down in Guangdong. It happened earlier this month in a suburb of Shenzhen. A farmer by the name of Mr Zhou owned a large piggery with about two hundred pigs. There was a ferocious storm. They found out later that one hundred and eighty-eight lightning bolts had struck around Mr Zhou’s farm. Early in the morning, at the height of the storm, one of the bolts struck Mr Zhou’s barn. There was a loud explosion. A four metre long crack ripped through the roof of the barn. Mr Zhou came running out of his house. He found that the lightning had killed fifty-three of his pigs. He told the newspapers that after the flash of blue lightning he’d heard his pigs let out a series of terrible screams. The pigs died instantly. Apparently Mr Zhou had
hooked up a lot of illegal electric wires in the barn but had neglected to set up any lightning protection. He had to bury all the pigs straight away in a deep trench at the side of the barn,’ I explained.

‘He dug his own grave. What’s the real story?’ Lily asked.

‘That’s not enough for you?’ I said.

‘You know that’s not enough. This is China!’ she exclaimed.

‘Well, all this information about Mr Zhou got onto the internet. Most people were sympathetic to Mr Zhou, as you would expect. There were a few people who accused him of insurance fraud but you’d expect that as well. It was found out later that he had no insurance at all. But what you wouldn’t expect, and here’s the story, is that our netizens on the blog likened the photos of the bloated dead pigs to that of the cadres, our faithful Party Members,’ I said.

Lily let out a laugh from the kitchen, and shouted, ‘You’ve made me cut my finger!’

‘They did make a distinction though between the pigs and the cadres, that the cadres usually wear clothes, except of course when they are whoring underage girls,’ I continued.

‘You’ll make me cut my other finger,’ Lily yelled.

‘One netizen suggested that God’s lightning should have struck the office buildings of the cadres, and then no matter how many pigs were killed the grassroots would have still cheered and waved,’ I explained.

‘Stop. I will have no fingers left,’ she joked.

‘Isn’t it good to know that the cadres are in the thoughts of the everyday people?’ I remarked.

‘Yes, Yue, it certainly is. We can all sleep peacefully in our beds tonight. Will you light the stove? I’m ready to cook,’ Lily concluded.
xing

(xiii) xing – sexuality

liqìū (start of autumn)
It’s the start of autumn. The leaves on the apricot trees are shifting to chromium yellow. It’s been raining all night. The studio’s warm and dry. For the first time this winter I’ve lit the Tibetan stove, there’s lots of smoke and not much fire.

I’m sure the video woman who gave me the memory is no good; she could even be a fox spirit in disguise. When I asked a monk the other day whether there was such a thing as good or bad he said that it was all bad, that we’re all suffering. I can’t argue with that. I know with Lily I’m trying as hard as I can.

Does the video woman think herself bad, or is she content in knowing the power she holds. If she were a fox spirit she wouldn’t think about these things. Does she know what it means to love, or does she only hold a kind of physical self-love; a desire that’s in need of fulfilment. What I need to do is rid my mind of these thoughts. I’m here in Baisha without Lily; the space feels empty without her. My thoughts fill the page and the smoke fills the room!

It was early morning. Rong prepared the usual cup of coffee. The Beijing weather had turned cold; made worse by a strong westerly wind blowing in from the desert. The maple leaves fell across the windows in a sprinkle of vermillion rain.

‘Here’s your coffee, Yue. Tell me about down south,’ said Rong.

‘It’s usually so quiet down there, people working out in the fields during the day, and at night maybe playing mahjong or cards, or a bit of peaceful baijiu drinking. That’s what I love about it; you work during the day, and sleep when it gets dark. It’s simple. But this time Baisha was alive with the fire festival,’ replied Yue.

‘Oh yes, I remember. I have seen it too. Was everyone dancing? Did they make you get up and sing? I was so embarrassed when they did that to me,’ said Rong.

‘I danced all night. We went from village to village; they’re only a few minutes apart. I think we went to four all together. Whoever was in charge bullied us in a friendly way to get up and sing. All I could think of was Waltzing Matilda, which felt very corny. I could only remember a few verses but it was enough, it didn’t really matter. Another Italian guy sang loud opera from Verdi. Everyone loved it,’ she said.
Yue went on to tell Rong about the night of the festival.

*dancing to the gods of fire*

There was a beauty about the place. The men lighting the fire in the main square, the flames rushing up to the stars; the young children running around, filled with excitement, to light their delicate small bundles of pine wood decorated with freshly picked flowers and ferns, from the large central fire. Then they carried them like torches to their parents and grandparents. The older boys lit firecrackers and scared the young ones; other kids were lighting sparklers and waving them like wands, or pretending they were swords. The young teenage girls handed out cigarettes, sweets and sunflower seeds to whoever would take them, and the middle-aged Naxi men moved around the crowd, pouring out *baijiu* from large plastic containers into small paper cups, offering them to whoever was in sight. It was barely drinkable.

It was the thirty-seven and forty-nine year old men of the village who were handing out the alcohol. They told Yue this was their special time. It was their job to organise the three nights of dancing and music, and host the big dinner held in their honour. This was the age when many Naxi men died through the pressures of just surviving. To be there on that night, to be with their wife and children, was worth celebrating. The men were very drunk and very loud.

The Naxi women danced to the traditional music blaring from the loudspeakers. The dancing was simple and elegant, everybody moving around in a circle, perfectly in time with each other. Hands held tight, bodies close together and controlled, arms swinging forwards then backwards, feet moving sideways then kicking forwards towards the fire like a giant female centipede dancing to the gods. There were around thirty dancers locked together, a community of women shrunk into just a few, the world collapsed into a small ball of earth and water. When the music stopped everyone broke apart and burst out laughing and shouting.

It was the most intense sense of belonging that Yue had felt for a long time. If all these women had been her fox-spirit sisters it would have been perfect. It was liberating for her to be part of a group and not be alone. She couldn’t stop hugging the women and falling into their arms. They were cheeky, with their rude jokes about
their husbands and boyfriends. She didn’t know their language but she understood. She wanted to tell her own dirty jokes, but just laughed instead. The last village she went to was the best. As she approached from the dark laneway, she could hear the natural sound of a flute filling the night air; fires lined the cobble-stoned street with a flickering primeval light; a dozen or so Naxi women swung their bodies around as if in an English folk dance. Children were asleep in their mothers’ arms. Even the dogs lay silent.

* 

‘It sounds like reverie,’ Rong said, ‘I can see how much you loved it. I hardly ever hear you so excited. Baisha’s a place that’s thick with layers. Being within sight of the mountain makes it a poetic space.’

‘There’s no doubt,’ Yue agreed, ‘when I’m writing in the studio the words almost blow onto the page. The writing flows like a warm breeze drifting down from the foothills. Sitting in the studio, it’s easy to fill the gaps with imagination. I can’t wait to be with Lotus there. I want to see her grow up inside those mudbrick walls, see her fill that space with her dreams.’

‘I can see you’re both healthy.’ Rong sounded like a proud grandfather. ‘You are enjoying each other’s company.’

‘Lotus is fine. We saw the doctor this morning. Everything’s normal. Nothing strange,’ she laughed. ‘We came here from the hospital through the back streets of Tiananmen. It made me think about Shen. I haven’t finished telling you about that day.’

Yue continued her story of the one day the she and Shen had spent together in Beijing.

memory of tiananmen

Shen and Yue continued to walk across Beijing drawing the memories out from what had gone before. As they walked through the streets and laneways, the first traces of those memories started surfacing. The memories were piercing and sharp,
... Shen is standing behind the university fence looking onto the main road that leads to Tiananmen. It’s night and there are thousands of protestors heading towards the square. The protestors chant slogans condemning government corruption; the crowd, made up mostly of students, is buoyant and inspired. There’s an overwhelming feeling of hope and expectation that there might be a possibility of change. Shen remembers experiencing the same feeling as a child, standing with his Uncle Li at the Democracy Wall, the excited crowd reading the proclamations of change written up on the large posters and printed on the pamphlets being handed out. Now ten years later, there are thousands of people marching with the same spirit.

He is afraid to join the march. Shen’s already heard gunshots in the distance and there have been rumours of killings by the army. But he also knows that over a million people have gathered in the square over the last week and that over three thousand students have been brave enough to go on a hunger strike. A number of the students in the passing crowd yell at him to join the march, a thrill runs through his body. He wants to be part of this movement. He craves a worthwhile cause ...

As Yue received the memories from below she realised there were emotions much deeper in Shen’s thinking, emotions that have been blocked from her. She turned to him; his feelings towards her still could not flow. He looked at her, passive, almost serene, in a way that she could never comprehend. The shards of memory they were receiving continued to pierce deeper,

... Shen is empowered by the demonstration. He climbs the iron fence and joins the crowd of protestors. The crowd marches defiantly towards Tiananmen ...

On the street Yue looked across at Shen. She’d never imagined that he had been so lonely and desperate in the years before Tiananmen. This wasn’t a part of Shen that she knew. He’d never shown her this side of himself. She realised for the first time the pain he must have felt growing up in Beijing with his grandfather and grandmother, without their parents, without money. He gazed back at her, giving nothing away. The traces kept on coming,

... Shen and the crowd hear a gunshot very close. They can’t believe this could be real shooting. He knows people in the army and he can’t imagine them firing on their own
people. The crowd keeps moving forward and further shots ring out, people start falling. Shen looks around; men and women have been hit in the arms and legs by bullets. He grabs a young woman who’s been shot in the knee and drags her towards the hospital. Another young man yells at him, that it’s not safe at the hospital, they are shooting people there as well; instead Shen carries the woman to a nearby house in a small laneway at the edge of the street. He pleads to the old couple inside to take care of the girl, and races back to the protestors. It’s dark, but he can make out the silhouettes of the dead bodies lying on the edge of the street.

The shots ring out again; His instinctive reaction is to scramble along the edge of the nearest wall for cover. He quickly realises his mistake; the army snipers can pick him out too easily. Not far away there are soldiers lying on the ground taking trained positions for killing. He’s stunned they’re doing this, his own country’s army. He edges away from the wall to hide himself in a sheltered alcove along a small lane out of the direct line of fire. The army is now shooting tear gas into a crowd that’s yelling and screaming in disbelief. The tear gas drifts towards him, the noxious cloud creeps along the narrow alley, clinging against the stone walls. He realises this is a bad situation; if the gas reaches him he will begin to choke, which will force him to stumble back into the line of fire. Suddenly, at the very moment the gas is about to envelope him, a breeze picks up, and the fumes gradually blow back towards the soldiers.

Shen hurls himself out of the lane, back into another side street. He finds himself at the entrance to an old deserted building where all the dead and wounded have been taken. He balks at what is before him, over two hundred men and women lie on stretchers spread out across the floor; many of them appear dead. A doctor comes up and asks him to help; all he can do is look down, he is covered in blood. He is in shock; without hesitation he rushes away from the dead ...

Yue looked across at Shen, trying to see the pain in him; they were standing very close to where these killings had taken place. ‘It was not that long ago,’ he said, ‘you’re seeing what happened,’

... Shen runs down the street, away from the crowd. The turmoil suffocates him; a hand grabs his neck, he lurches backwards and his legs give way. He collapses to the road, his head cracking on the hard surface. A sharp object jabs into his stomach;
extreme pain runs through his body. His head explodes into darkness and flashes of light race through his brain. He feels thick viscous blood collecting in his mouth, and fears he’s going to choke. Throwing his head sideways he coughs out as much of the blood as he can. A heavy kick explodes into his side and he screams with pain. Somebody stamps on him like a sack of rice and drags him across the ground. Two soldiers pick him up and throw him into the back of a truck. He stares through the darkness and wonders what will happen next ...

Shen grabbed Yue’s hand and kept her walking through the streets towards Tiananmen. She wanted to hug him and hold him, to connect to this pain that seemed impenetrable. His orange robes flapped against the strong Beijing wind that blew through the grey concrete buildings. The orange of Shen’s clothing did not belong in this city. He did not belong in China anymore. His presence had become an insult to a Government that could no longer tolerate such independence of thought. Shen’s walking through the streets of Beijing was an act of defiance.

With added strength she kept holding Shen’s hand; they walked closer to where there were more memories, layered even deeper in the strata of that place. They walked into the Square and looked across to the giant portrait of Mao that guarded the Forbidden City. There were security guards and secret police placed right across the breadth of the square. They stood firm, staring directly at Mao. Memories flooded up in a continuous stream, seamlessly collecting together in a matrix of events that had been separated through time, not by intent. As Yue waited in fearful wonder, the first images filtered through,

... It is in one of the days just preceding the massacre, the sun is an hour from setting in the Beijing summer sky. A group of young men perch on bamboo scaffolding that cradles high around a ten metre white statue. The statue is the goddess of democracy. Her hands are raised, clasping a torch; she refuses to be the statue of liberty. She is the new China, she is modelled after a young female student, shaped in Shanghai and brought to Beijing, in the end transported by dozens of tricycles to Tiananmen, to her final resting place. She has been built to be destroyed, an act of suicide perpetrated around her beliefs. The goddess stands directly facing the portrait of Mao, her chiselled face holds a defiant stare. She has her back turned towards the Monument of the People’s Heroes.
The young men and women are putting the last touches of white plaster to her outer skin. With the presence of this goddess there are now six monuments in the square, the Gate of Heavenly Peace ... the Mausoleum ... the Museum of National and Revolutionary History ... the Great Hall of the People ... the Monument to the People’s Heroes, and now the Goddess of Democracy.

The young men and women know their goddess will have a transitory life. They also know that for now, she is alive. The other monuments surrounding her appear dead, standing for an ideal that has perished, if it ever existed at all. The students know that on the following day the goddess will greet the thousands of people who will gather in the square. The crowd will look at her with awe. Shen will also be in the crowd ...

The images continued to arrive one after another like bullets,

... A man in a white shirt and grey trousers pushes violently against a young girl’s neck. She is wearing a white dress with green polka dots; her hair is tied back in a neat ponytail. The girl is holding a small instamatic camera that is just about to topple to the ground and smash at her feet. The man attempts to push the girl backwards into the precise line of army personnel dressed in immaculate green khaki uniforms. They are protecting Tiananmen. They appear as shocked by the man’s actions as the girl is. One young soldier, whose hand the girl is holding to keep from falling over, smiles with embarrassment at the intimacy of the girl’s touch. Four people in the civilian crowd try to hold back the man, to stop him from hurting the young girl.

Behind the rows of young soldiers stand thousands of Beijing citizens who have come to show their support for the hunger strikers. Who is this man roughing up this girl, is he from the secret police? Is he angry at having his photo taken? Apart from this man, everyone in the scene looks clean and youthful. On any other day before this day, any number of people in the crowd could have been sitting in Beihai Park, having a picnic, laughing and joking with each other, except for the violent man of course; his anger has already destroyed him ...

And the next memory,

... It is the main avenue leading to Tiananmen. In the background stands a line of
army tanks, turrets pointed towards the scene. In the mid-distance, a crowd of onlookers stands on the pavement of a street corner. They look like they might be waiting for the pedestrian lights to turn green. But there are no lights, and there is no traffic. This small assembly of citizens is attempting to conform to the behaviour of everyday life in spite of their present surroundings. Off to their side is a group of young men who have chosen to step though this barrier of civility and stand instead in the middle of the road, a few holding up their bikes, others walking along wearing white medical masks. All the people on the street corner and on the road are staring intensely at the same moment.

Directly in their foreground is a pile of broken bikes, thrown down onto the road and lining the gutter. On top of these bikes lies a pile of broken men, as lifeless and useless as the broken machines below them. One of the dead men appears to have his arm missing, ripped off at the top shoulder joint, another man’s head is cradled on his arm as though he is just about to sleep. In the background there is a young man running towards the bodies. He is the only person moving in the scene ...

Yue asked herself: Why are their bodies lying there? Who has dumped them on this spot? Where are their friends, family and lovers who should be tending their fragile bodies in their time of death?

Another fragment unfolded from these responses that belonged to the body of earth on which the city resided,

... Spread out in the middle of the square are shattered pieces of white plaster. There is a blue-sky dusk. In the background, lit up, is the Monument to the People’s Heroes, and directly behind this stands the Mausoleum of the Great Leader Mao. Everything lies in a perfect symmetry of destruction. Behind the lumps of broken plaster are a number of tents. They look like flattened space capsules that have found themselves on another planet, in the midst of a ruined civilisation.

On the third day after the building of the goddess, the tanks had rumbled into the square, crushing the tents filled with young students. The tanks then moved onto the goddess herself, toppling and smashing her into a thousand pieces. She was not meant to last in this physical form. Her memory will continue to reconnect in an endless chain of events leading to a place and time we cannot even imagine.
Now, there are just five monuments remaining in the square.

Another fragment uncovers itself,

... A young woman in a blue and white summer dress sits on the back of a bicycle, holding onto her boyfriend’s waist. Her head cradles into the back of his neck. The man clutches at the bike with both hands to steady their combined weight. The bike is parked under a road overpass. These two young lovers are sheltering from the storm. Directly above are two army tanks, supported by the tons of steel that lies between the heavy machines and the two delicate bodies below. The two images, the tanks and the lovers, are like a montage from two disparate films. The young couple, from a French summer-holiday movie where lovers discover the depths of what is possible when people first meet, and the tanks from a B-grade war drama where forces of differing ideologies clash against the backdrop of a modern Chinese urban landscape. What is seen is an echo, a living piece of cinéma vérité played out live in 1989 Beijing and on television sets around the world. Was Gorbachev watching this theatre played out on his TV screen back in the Kremlin? ...

Neither Shen nor Yue wanted to receive the last memory but they had no choice in its coming,

... A man stands on the pavement stones of the square, hands on hips. He looks away from what lies behind him. Beside him, a woman in shorts and bright blue top stares into the far distance where she can see a park, full of green luxuriant trees and carefully trimmed low shrubs. What they refuse to look at is a giant swathe of shining coagulated blood that curves behind them off into the near distance. The swathe of red has been outlined with yellow chalk, and has the appearance of bright red paint shaped by a giant calligraphy brush. In reality it is the remains of a citizen, now unrecognisable, who has been crushed by an army tank, then dragged along for twenty metres under its tons of weight, the flesh meshed into the treads of the tank. Death hangs heavy in the air. There is no body left to recognise, just a scrap of clothing and dried blood, no one can look, the sight is beyond comprehension ...

To accommodate the shock of this last image, Yue imagines the sound of a string
quartet in the scene. She allows the music to play along the edges of the yellow chalk and off into the verdant green of the nearby park.

*

Yue sat back in the chair, trying to focus on Rong, trying to take in all that had happened that day. ‘I cried for days. There were parts of Shen’s life I could never have imagined. The dark sides of him and of China. I’d always seen him as tender and positive, no matter what hardships he’d suffered. There was a darkness that I had never sensed before. As though he was holding this heavy secret that couldn’t be released.’

‘You think he’s not been honest?’ Rong asked.

‘I’d never thought that possible of him before, but yes, I’ve come to believe that there are two Shen’s. It’s that other side of him, the shadow side, which these memories are about. I’m sure it’s through the memories he’s allowing me to see this other side. I used to think the memories were only for his safekeeping, now I realise they’re also for me. This time in Lijiang, I started reading the memories in a different way,’ she replied.

‘Shen once told me that the truth lies within memories,’ Rong said. ‘He said he could not bear that his own country had put so much effort into forgetting its history. He wanted memories to have the power to heal, rather than be held in a coma of not knowing.’

‘Shen’s palace of memories.’ She felt a sadness uttering those words. ‘He certainly chose a bucolic space to store his memories, amongst the waterwheels, canals and mudbrick houses, with millions of tourists trampling through, no idea of what lay hidden in that old town. It certainly fits with his love of irony.’

I headed straight to Beijing airport. There was no time to go back to the apartment and see Lily. Instead of catching the plane to Lijiang I would stay overnight in Kunming. I booked into a hotel near Green Lake at the centre of the city. I loved the seagulls there, they reminded me of Australia. It seemed strange to see them so far inland, no waves and sand, no fish and chips.
In Kunming everything felt immediate and fresh. I stepped out into the streets. A mild breeze picked up and worked its way through the plane trees. Their leaves already belonged to autumn. Kunming was polite and graceful, almost old-fashioned, after the rush of Beijing. I enjoyed the freedom of nothing to do.

As I walked along, the images piled up on top of one another, cinematic images: the bare-chested old man squatting on the side of the footpath, smoking from a large bamboo pipe; food vendors roasting sweet baked potatoes over large forty-four gallon drums; the steaming of unshelled peanuts; stalls of fried tofu sprinkled with chilli powder, steamed whole corn and pancake rolls; the roasting of sweet-smelling chestnuts in steam-punk machinery, the kernels turned over with large metal spoons and scooped into plain brown paper bags; old men sitting in lottery shops with zigzag lines drawn red and blue across rows of numbers, as if divining a secret formula.

Further down the road were women browsing in fashion shops, a tricycle packed impossibly high with cardboard cartons, twelve men sitting around a single chess table on the sidewalk, an old white-tiled building with red iron window-bars in the shape of waves, and seven-storied apartments with verandas full of washing and plants. There were small mahjong rooms in the backstreets, men and women playing in a quiet silence, with just a smattering of polite talk, and a dog, cigarettes, tea bottles, the shuffling of tiles, and other men sitting outside, talking as they sat on their small wooden stools, women arriving with food, happy, relaxed and sociable. Out of this confusion, an old man walked down from a back lane, cane in hand, with the grace of those older people who loved the city. Those who had survived all that they’d had to endure.

I continued down onto the broad path that circled the lake. There was a man with a white coat and bad teeth, massaging another man’s shoulders, both of them sitting on low canvas seats; a woman holding an umbrella, driving a blow-up plastic toy cart along the concrete path; the leaves of plane trees turning to autumn; two men on fold-up chairs, all smiles, each man’s leg stretched out bare, feet being manicured by women wearing red caps and bright pink face masks; the roots of pine trees being filled with new soil in preparation for next winter; grandparents with grandchildren; a circle of thirty Han Chinese dancing, accompanied by the sound of Naxi music; paddle boats drifting serenely across the lake, families relaxing; crinkle cut potato chips deep-frying in dirty oil; a young child playing the game where you bang the head of Yang Yang the happy sheep as he suddenly pops up; a woman police officer at a ticket box; men with
calligraphy brushes painting water onto the pavement; a pond of lotus flowers, a metre high; young couples in love, and teenagers with Marge Simpson hairdos; groovy young boys with black jackets and pink sandshoes; mothers with their children; old ladies hand-in-hand, wearing old silk jackets; sticky rice in green bamboo, and polished coconut shells and steamed vanilla custard offered up in freshly cut banana leaf.

Turning the corner, there was the magician. I’d seen him once before at the grand opening of a shopping centre. He was standing on a stage at the edge of the lake. His mouth was full of white powder that he’d grabbed from a tattered red bag hanging from his waist. He shook his head, as he waved an old pink fan around with flair. He wore old black shoes with a gold buckle, grey pants, a blue and a white striped shirt, blue cardigan and a dirty black hat. The magician danced one step backwards and one step forwards to the blaring music. With a stick, he poked a hole through the powder in his mouth, then breathed sparks and fire; he spat out what remained, shook his head, then drew out a long ribbon of multi-coloured crepe paper. The magician looked relieved when the act was over. The large crowd stood still, with amazed smiles, there were no cynics in the crowd. It was a promotion for a phone company. After the act, another man with silver suit, microphone, and trendy mohawk hairstyle, handed out a few small prizes of stuffed pink bears. Everybody was polite; there was no grabbing or jostling. I looked up above the crowd. All I could see were two kites far off in the distance, flying high and strong against the grey sky.
性

(xiv) xing – sexuality

chǔshǔ (limit of heat)
It came to me as I was lying in bed last night, me as a teenager sheltering under the bed sheets, reading Homer’s Iliad and Odyssey. It was a Hero’s journey. I’d titled my journey, ‘Young Girl Sets Out On Odyssey, Determined To Find Truth, Justice And Redemption!’.

As I lay in that house on the outskirts of Canberra, the white linen sheets became silky white clouds patterned against a Grecian blue sky. I had discovered the story of the Twelve Labours. I was the Female Heracles, with her own set of Labours.

The First Labour was my own recurring nightmare – sitting up in bed, late at night, terrified to sleep lest the Nemean Lion leapt down from the ceiling. I would beat Him off with pillows and Heracles’ Sword, the sword held high, stabbing Him directly in the heart, night after night, year after year.

The Second Labour was the hydra, the suffocating smoke of the house on fire, each flame extinguished replaced by two more. As I held the handkerchief to my face, my tears tried to extinguish the grief. Each flame was given its own name so as to take away its power.

The Third Labour, me the innocent doe-eyed deer, the years before the accident. I was Artemis demanding those innocent years be returned.

The Fourth Labour, the Erymanthian Boar, my unrequited anger at what had happened.

The Fifth Labour, the cleaning of the stables, the washing away of all the sadness piled up around my life.

The Sixth Labour, the Stymphalian Birds, transformed into the black and white magpies, attacking me as I walked through the Canberra Bush as a young child heading off to school, their hard black beaks turning to bronze, shitting on my shoulder as they flew overhead; the birds ripping chunks of hair and flesh off my scalp. To conquer the birds the Little Girl trundles off to school with a yellow bucket on her head.

The Seventh Labour, the bull. I was Taurus. How could Heracles have strangled the bull? His violence must have been like that of a God, striking down men with lightning, as in the Gospel of John.

The Eighth Labour, the stealing of the Mares. As a child I loved these horses – Deinos the Terrible, Xanthos the Blond, Podagros the Fast, and my favourite, Lampoon the Shining. The Shining Prince gallops up ready to save me, to be taken away to the Citadel.
The Ninth Labour, the Girdle of Hippolyta, was too difficult for a teenager. All I could do was dream of being Queen of the Amazons, Queen of the Fox-spirits.

The Tenth Labour, Geryon the Giant with Three Heads, or was it three bodies. Heracles finally captures the Cattle, despite Hera and her endless harassment. I loved Hera. I'd never seen cattle, only been chased by a cow on our neighbour’s farm. I was no Hero. All I could do was run across the dandelion and clover fields, more worried about being stung by a bee than being beaten by a Giant.

The Eleventh Labour, stealing the Apples of the Hesperides. I admired Heracles for Holding up the World. The Apples belonged to my childhood, in the backyard picking apples from the tree and throwing them over the fence, so that they would smash onto the neighbour’s iron roof.

The Twelfth Labour, to capture and bring back Cerberus, the Three Headed Dog. It was easy to imagine Heracles’ journey into the Underworld, into Hades. It was my imagined journey back into the Fiery House to rescue my Mother from the Flames of Hell. Every night, when I wasn’t fighting off the Nemean Lion, I was beating down the flames, crossing the thresholds, room to room, to finally come across Her and her Partner and drag them out to safety.

The Final Labour is Shen. All Labours completed, except the Last.

* * *

It was hot in Sanlitun, and only eight o’clock in the morning. The air was thick with Beijing, its cars, people, and factories. The remnants of the night before lay thinly scattered across the morning pavement below. The sweepers worked steadily along the street. The last customers of the night market still shouting to each other, unaware that it was now tomorrow; that others were heading off to work. Yue was to meet with Rong later in the afternoon.

The previous morning Yue had been walking along Gongrentiyuchang Wei. Out of the crowd a woman appeared, the video woman who’d given her the memory. Just as quickly she disappeared. Yue hurried after her as best she could, shuffling with her pregnancy. The woman halted at the entrance to the subway station, Yue caught up
with her.

Gently touching her arm, Yue spoke the first words. ‘Hello, I’ve seen you before, about a month ago, in the street.’

‘Really,’ the woman said, ‘I don’t remember you.’ She looked Yue up and down and smiled. ‘You’re pregnant; you have that glow about you, like the world is all yours, full of love and energy.’

Yue laughed awkwardly. The woman seemed a goddess. ‘Energy, I have in abundance. When I first saw you I thought you might be a fox-spirit.’

‘A fox-spirit, what a strange thing to say, I’ve heard they enjoy themselves too much,’ remarked the woman.

‘I don’t know much about enjoying themselves too much, but they’re certainly attracted to whatever’s strange. They are outsiders, like Gypsies, they don’t belong to this world.’

‘Do you want to know what I’m thinking?’ the woman asked.

‘Yes.’ Yue longed to hear the woman’s private thoughts.

‘I think you can give me what I need, and what you really want,’ she said.

‘I know I want to be with you,’ said Yue, barely able to speak, at the thought of them being together. ‘I live nearby. We can go there now if you like.’

‘No. We’ll go to my place,’ the woman answered, ‘I’m staying at the Mandarin, just around the corner. It’ll be better there. Let’s go. Give me a minute to ring a friend. I’m Yaya.’

Yue waited for her to finish the call, half expecting her to change her mind. Yaya took her, arm in arm, and led her to the hotel, smiling and chatting as though they were best of friends. Yue held her hand across her stomach as they went.

They reached the hotel. Yaya opened the door to the apartment. It was as it had been in the memory, a spacious sunlit room with a large bed at its centre. Without saying a word, Yaya walked over to the window, shut the curtains, and carefully started to undress, meticulously folding each piece of clothing, placing each garment neatly on a chair next to the bed. In real life her body was even more beautiful.

Yaya went to the cupboard and brought out a video camera and placed it on the table, pointing it directly at the bed. Taking Yue’s hand, she led her to the edge of the bed. She slowly pulled up Yue’s dress. It clung tight and secure around the baby. She sat Yue down. Yue lay back on the white sheets. She was naked under her dress. Yaya pressed her tongue against Yue. Yue let go. Yaya fed on Yue’s energy, each breath
taken was a breath for Yaya. Each movement was a movement in Yaya's direction. The inhibition triggered a sense of nostalgia within Yue. She felt a profound longing for another time and place.

Yue felt herself being turned over onto her stomach. She lifted herself onto her knees to accommodate the baby. Yaya wrapped her arms around the both of them and covered their bodies with hers. All Yue could feel was warmth and flesh. The woman stroked and caressed her from behind. The apartment door opened, the sound was like another caress. Yaya rolled away. Their bodies were flooded with moisture. Yue sensed a movement from behind, and a whisper from Yaya, 'You will enjoy this.'

Yue felt two strong hands take hold of her hips. There was a man. She was now in the memory that she had not been able to release. She struggled out of the dream, out of the memory. She pushed forward and fell face down on the bed, rolling away from both the man and Yaya. She pulled down her dress and rushed towards the video camera, picked it up and threw it against the wall. The black plastic fragments exploded across the white room. Without looking back, she scrambled out from the apartment. She had been searching for something to fill her imagination but there was only emptiness.

* 

The next day she was once again in the safety of Rong's studio. She could not share with him what had happened the day before. She was still in shock. Much was hidden within what had taken place.

Outside the studio, the cicadas' singing signalled the limit of the heat. The pauses amidst their chorus hung in stifling silence. She would forget the hotel room. Instead, she would tell Rong what had taken place in Lijiang the week before; it was another fragment from Shen’s broken palace. There was now in existence one more story of strangeness. Rong sat silent as she talked.
Yue had headed through the market to the centre of the old town, working her way through the guesthouses, teashops and coffee bars. The crowds thinned out. She found herself next to a short stretch of water flowing out from under an old stone wall. A wooden sign read *Murmuring Pool*. She sat down on the narrow bench, in the shade of a sweeping crimson bougainvillea. The water passed in and around the stones, breathing in the air above. Its proximity, its closeness and intimacy, awakened a memory,

... Shen tries to drink water from the rusted tap. The trickle of water is green, with a foul taste and smell. He is in a courtyard surrounded by high brick walls topped with broken glass and razor wire. It is a hospital. Spaced out along a veranda are a number of small rooms crammed with iron beds. All the beds are empty except for one, which is occupied by a young man lying on his back, his hands and legs are strapped to the metal frame. The man and Shen are both wearing a uniform of blue-and-white striped top and pants.

The place Shen has found himself in is a psychiatric hospital. It is a state prison mental unit. This is where the secret police had brought Shen after Tiananmen. He is a political prisoner. The sign on the brick wall of the main building reads, *Beijing Public Security Bureau Hospital for the Custody and Treatment of Mentally Ill Offenders*.

Shen appears confused and disorientated, as though still trying to take in his surroundings. He shuffles lopsidedly to the veranda of the dilapidated building. He’s aware that he is drugged. The nurses have been giving him antipsychotic tablets every day for months. He’s discovered from other patients that the drug is chlorpromazine. Today, for the first time, he’s kept the tablets in his mouth; he spits them out. As he walks, the buildings are out of focus. He is just able to hear the dim noise of the workroom close by. He works in that room all day, every day. He goes through the schedule in his mind. Get up at six, breakfast at seven, roll call, off to the workshop, lunch, more work, dinner, more drugs and back to bed. Every day is the same for Shen, except for the days when he is punished.
He stands on the edge of the building’s shadow. He doesn’t know why he’s being tortured. He imagines that it’s for an obscure crime against the state. The times they punish him they never explain why. The days and weeks are a daze. He remains certain that in the end he has done nothing wrong. Two men in white coats come up and lead him to another room adjacent to the sleeping dormitory. Shen complies with a learnt passivity. He is resigned to his fate. The only power he has left is to assert powerlessness, to show no reaction to circumstances is the strongest protest he can make.

He’s led to a leather-covered bench, stripped of his clothes and dressed in a surgical gown. He lies down. There is no struggle, his muscles tense, and his heart races. He has learnt to go to an image belonging to his childhood, an old cracked photo his Uncle Li once gave him.

... A dog plays haphazardly on the shore of a vast sepia ocean. Cascading waves crash against each other, throwing up huge sprays of white foam blown by the wind. One of the waves reaches the sandy shoreline and eventually falls at the feet of a jet-black dog. The hound tries to bite into the silk-white foam with his powerful jaw. His tail is pointed up, towards the storm-laden sky ...

This is the scene Shen escapes into, a landscape peopled with his imagination and memories. Acupuncture needles, attached to electrodes, are inserted in his chest, groin, and along his arms and legs.

... The seagulls circle above the hound, as he bounds away from the surf, along the sand towards his master. In the distance a sailing boat drifts towards the coastline, escaping the horizon ...

Two doctors, one old, one young, walk through the door into the fluorescent-lit room. The older doctor gestures at the young intern to strap Shen’s legs and arms to the bed with leather ties, and walks up to his listless body. He twists each of the needles deeper into Shen’s flesh until he flinches. He methodically works his way across Shen’s bare flesh.
... The boat is now at the edge of the breaking surf. The dog runs up to its owner and jumps up onto his torso, chrome yellow. On the yacht, a woman moves up onto the bow and waves towards the shore. In the same fragment of time, a child falls off the stern of the boat into the churning water. The sound of the mother’s desperate cries cannot be heard above the screaming of the wind and the groaning of the surf ... 

The old doctor walks toward the machine and flicks two switches. He glances back towards Shen and twists the black dial clockwise. Shen twitches in response, then jolts violently to one side; his body completely seizes up.

... The deafening wind crashes to a halt, and the Trojan crests collapse into an absent space. The churning sea falls flat against the burning sun. Six gulls drop, screeching from the sky. The figure turns its back on the ocean and jogs towards the jagged cliffs that jut up to the beach. The boat is now metres from the shoreline. It explodes and is engulfed by flames. A fire rages out across the calm water, forming a thin line of cadmium red along the barren shoreline...

The memory of Shen and his dream ceased. Yue sat in silence, keeping her eyes fixed on the water flowing across the murmuring pool. An elderly Naxi lady ambled over and sat beside her. Without turning her head Yue put her hand on the old lady’s and squeezed their fingers tightly together. She started to cry.

***

Yue stood up and walked to the window of the studio, wanting to see clear blue sky, to somehow connect with the outside world. She thought again of the memory, and felt the shock of realisation.

‘Rong, it was you I saw in the memory, I am sure it was you,’ she managed to say.
‘What!’ replied Rong, shocked at her observation.
‘The young intern, it was you,’ she said.
‘I did not do these things,’ he struggled to say. ‘Please ...’
There was a long silence. The kettle boiled on the stove and the cicadas beat their rhythm across the garden. Rong raised himself from the chair and walked over to the desk. He picked up the most elegant of the *guaishi* stones from its wooden stand and turned it in his hands.

‘I love these stones. This is my favourite.’ Rong toned softly, ‘I cherish this one the most, *Punctured Cloud*. It’s named after the original stone in the Jiansong Ge collection. It shares many of the qualities of its namesake. It appears to float on its stand, as though a portion of an exquisite mountain has set itself free and shrunk itself into one stone. It’s a *lingbi* stone from Anhui. It was brought up from the far reaches of a subterranean cave. As long as nine hundred years ago they thought these stones had been mined out, but there have always been collectors who believed. Over the years these collectors ventured further into the caves and finally, five years ago, they found this stone. Two men died on the expedition. Till that moment, this stone had never seen the light of day, let alone a blue sky punctured by satin-white clouds. And now, here it is, perfect in its form and structure.

*To remain whole, be twisted!*

*To become straight, let yourself be bent.*

*To become full, be hollow.*

Laozi could have been writing about this stone. The hollow punctured through the rock makes the cloud, which then makes the whole. This stone is pure *qi*. It holds all the weight of the mountain, the emptiness of its passages and hollows, the strength and leanness of its muscles, the touch of its skin, and the cavities and gaps of its body. It brings the clouds back down to earth for us to see and feel. It connects the form and the void.

This stone was lost for two years. It was stolen from my studio not long after I acquired it. It finally turned up in a New York auction. It was never our fate to be separated. We belong to each other like the desert and the rain. Your brother Shen and you belong to each other in the same way.’

‘So you were in the memory,’ she repeated.

Rong kept touching the stone, almost caressing it.

‘Rong?’ she persisted.

‘Yes, I was there, I was the young intern at the table,’ he replied.
When she heard Rong's answer her mind tried to escape to another place.

‘You were one of them,’ she repeated.

‘Yes, but a very unwilling participant. I had been transferred to the hospital against my will. I had fallen victim to crimes against the state, daring to question the Party. Their punishment was to send me to the very institution I criticised.’

‘You were there when Shen was being tortured.’ She could hardly speak, his explanation remained empty to her.

‘Yes, I was there. What you couldn’t know is that Shen and I had formed a special bond during our talks together in the sessions where we were supposed to reassess our beliefs. The supervisor, who was supposed to oversee these sessions, would always leave early, to drink beer and smoke cigarettes with his colleagues. During our time alone, Shen and I found common ground.’

‘You were there at the table!’ she shouted in protest.

‘I had to be at the table, I did not put in the needles, or turn the dial. I had no choice, Shen understood that.’

‘It was torture!’ She refused to comprehend.

‘It was torture. I hated those sessions. Shen and I would talk for hours afterwards, trying to piece together the fragments the treatment was there to eradicate. There was an irony in it.’

‘I’m glad you can find some humour in it,’ she replied.

‘They were abnormal times, Yue. Both Shen and I shared a space that was a private hell. To find amusement in its very perversity was a path to sanity for us, a very fragile one.’

‘You never dared to talk about this before,’ she said.

‘What could I have said so you would fully understand? Shen and I talked into the depths of the night, trying to reconcile what was happening. Afterwards he would go back to his room and sit in the silence. He told me he would count every object in the room just to make sure nothing was missing, to reassure himself there was some semblance of stability and constancy in the nightmare he was enduring each day. He would examine every object in the room, its shape, its size and colour, its width, breadth and depth, its texture and density. Instead of contemplating wholeness, he forced the world back into its separate parts. This made it real for him. It made him feel secure. There existed tangible objects he could hold onto.’

‘I have my nightmares too,’ she replied, not yet willing to absorb what he’d just
shared. ‘In Baisha, this last summer, I often woke up with the sound of thunder and storms crashing down from the mountains. The first thing to rush into my mind was Shen. He was my nightmare, and my security in that nightmare was you. I transformed the sound of pelting rain into comforting words of yours, to be reassured that all would be well with Shen. Your words always reached me.’

‘And now?’ Rong asked with a faltering voice.

‘Now, I feel I’ve been cut loose, abandoned and betrayed,’ she said.

‘You think I wanted to harm Shen?’ he said.

‘I don’t know what to believe. Shen told me to believe in you. Maybe that hospital prison was where he first learnt to trust you. But now I can never erase the image of you standing there beside him as he suffered, thrashing around like a fish thrown into the putrid hull of a boat to die,’ she said.

‘I’m sorry, Yue, I really am. I was hoping Shen would never tell you of this time. You have to believe that I wasn’t in control of what was happening. These people have very powerful connections. They intimidate. They were the fox and I was the rabbit. And you have to realise, it’s not just Shen’s memory, it’s my memory as well. I replay it every day of my life. There are situations where every choice you’re handed out is one you want to reject, where every decision you want to make can only be seen as leading into some blind alley. You can reload the cartridge, and point the gun in a different direction, but it’s still a gun, and the bullet still kills. In my reloaded memories I imagine myself lunging at the old doctor, knocking him down, his head smashing onto the concrete tiles, blood oozing across the floor. I untie Shen, rip out the needles, lift him off the table, and arm in arm we scramble across the courtyard to freedom. But, right at the edge of our escape, searing hot metal rips through my shoulder, and I fall to the ground. I look around for Shen but all I can see is a field of a deep red blood. All the alleys lead in the same direction.’

‘Rong, I want to understand. When I was taken to the black jail, I went in by myself and left by myself. Those two women are probably there right now. What can any of us do? I’m hot, I’m exhausted and I’m pregnant. I’m sitting here in front of you with a baby in my stomach. All these terrible things have happened, and still, my baby has been able to grow. Miracles can happen, even without a god. I’ll walk away today and try to remember all the good that’s happened between us. When I walk out into your garden, I will try to feel its beauty, knowing that it’s as much your creation as it is its own.’
The apartment was my refuge.

‘Lily, I need a drink – gin, lime and soda, and gin again,’ I said.
‘Do you want to talk about what happened?’ Lily replied.
‘No, our life here is separate. Nothing to do with what happens out there. Rong’s studio, anywhere, and anybody!’ I demanded.
‘Here, in our Sanlitun cocoon, two soft worms preparing to spin their silk, to do their magic in the Heavenly Kingdom. Is that right?’ Lily asked.
‘Yes Lily, that’s right,’ was all I could say.
叙

(xv) xù - tell

bái lù (white dew)
**8th september – 22nd september**

Yaya, I am talking to you. Whatever went on in that hotel room, I made it happen. In the Lotus Fragrance story, Shan rubbed and fondled Li’s slipper to bring alive his lust and desire for her as a ghost. I did the same with you, by continuing to re-enter your memory until you too came into being. Was it my lust for you or my narcissism, wanting to step into the dark side of my belonging, into the shadows that flitter at the edge of the clearing where foxes dance around bonfires? I’ve always wanted to enter that darkness but have been too afraid. I was searching for something to fill my lack of imagination. All I found was emptiness.

Yaya, last night I dreamt of an ocean tide retreating after a full moon. It swept back along stretches of white-sand beach, across rock platforms of an Australian coast, through deep pools and soft edges of weathered sandstone and out along the estuaries, ripping through collapsing sandbanks into the sea, into the ocean to rest until the next waxing. Is this me retreating from you? Is your energy one that can only take? I thought the darkness I saw in you was something I could share, a space where we could meet, a place where we could uncover the goodness that had to lie on the other side. But you, there is no good in you. Beyond the edge of that darkness there is only more darkness. You’ve taught me to refuse a space that only reflects shadows.

So, what do I have to say to you? I say to you that I feel wonderfully pregnant, that Lotus is my sweet fruit, that she is inside me, frowning and squirming, trying to wake up in her watery world, her body moving into place, shifting into its final position. I sit here in my Baisha studio not alone, gently stroking the fullness of my baby. She has survived, despite all that’s happened between you, me, and all those unable to share a belonging.

Yue stood on the southern edge of the Old Town. A summer storm had broken over Lijiang and was now sweeping across Elephant Hill, heading east. The stone channels burst with water; the Naxi wells were awash with shop assistants cleaning and preparing vegetables, happy to have a momentary escape from the noise and heat of their restaurants and guesthouses. She should have been in Beijing, talking with Rong. For the first time, she had chosen not to go, not to share her thoughts, memories and feelings with the one man Shen had told her to trust. The presence of
Rong in Shen’s memory had thrown all she believed in into confusion. She had walked away from the Beijing studio not knowing whether she could ever trust him again. Would Rong really have been shot if he’d tried to help Shen escape, was he that much under their control that he couldn’t have saved Shen? Had Rong only been thinking of himself, was his befriending of Shen genuine? For all she knew, Rong might have been a government spy, placed there to get information from her brother, with a promise that he would be spared further punishment.

She knew Rong would deny all this. Over the past few months he had been acting increasingly contrary, disconnected from their mutual project with regard to Shen. Rong was the one link to her brother. Until the time Shen reappeared, she was forced into this bond with Rong. Of course, if she chose to believe Rong, the problem would cease to exist. She wondered if Shen’s memory was a true recollection of what had actually taken place, extracted faithfully from its original source; or could have Shen knowingly placed Rong in his dream, in his memory, so as to send a message, to warn her about Rong. She knew there could be no guarantee of truth.

She decided not to go back to Beijing. She thought of Rong sitting in his studio, fretting about what might have happened. He would either be extremely concerned about her safety, or have decided that the revelation of last week had finally broken her trust in him. It was onerous to have to think in such a way. She would have to make a choice, a decisive one. Her dealings with Rong needed to be very clear if she was to uncover the whereabouts of Shen. In her heart, she felt that she was still capable of trusting him.

*

She remained in Lijiang. She wanted to stroll through the laneways of the old town, to empty her mind of Rong and Shen. She would allow herself to drift through its byways. After twenty minutes of walking, she found herself in Sefang Square, at the centre of the Old City. Groups of tourists were flooding in from the new town for their end-of-day shopping. She crossed the Square and walked towards Wuyi Street, the east-west axis of the old town. She had it in her mind to commit to memory the completeness of walking along her favourite street. It was, on her part, an act of nostalgia, a need to absorb every moment that appeared before her.
a stream of consciousness in wuyi street

It was a memory that belonged to the present,

... Yue enters Wuyi Street. Her first sighting is the Natural Spirit Shop, at the entrance is a Japanese sales assistant unable to speak Chinese; next is the pu’er tea shop, cakes of fermented tea stacked high like river pebbles, the tea cakes wrapped with red ribbon, imitating the bow of a young girl’s hair, the man behind the tea table says that coffee is like a modern woman, you have to keep a distance and be wary, and that tea is like a lover you spend time with, get to know, get closer to. She imagines tea grown from three hundred year old trees, and the tea horse road past Shaxi town, horses stumbling along the high mountain passes, tea packed tightly in leather bags, kept dry from the heavy summer rain, the horses now carrying overweight and happy Chinese tourists in coloured skirts and leather cowboy hats; then, the Yunnan Yak Meat stall, the smell of dried dead carcass drifts down the street, twisted and dried bits of old leather, pink tape spirals above the bowls of meat as the listless Naxi girl leans over the dead carcass, dreaming of her lover’s bare flesh, the girl’s dreams might be of young laowai, half-way to Paris with spring blossoms falling on perfect green grass, the girl raises her head and smiles, she looks sixteen, Botticelli’s Venus Rising. A Dalmatian trips in front, Joyce’s dog, black and white specs on the ocean borderland, bounding to its master ...

... In Lijiang the dogs are the status symbols, Huskies, Alsatians, Tibetan Mastiffs, even Alpacas. The Dalmatian is confused as it darts through the crowd, as though hunting for rabbits. There are walnut cakes for sale, a dozen for ten kuai, the aroma is sweet, freshly baked by the young girls standing next to their machines. There is a memory of baked bread, lying in bed in a cosy white apartment at the foot of Montmartre, the Sacré-Cœur floating white on the hill above, cleansing itself with its own marble, the church bells ringing, the baguettes and cigarettes being tucked under arms, to be rushed through the narrow lanes, back to other lovers waiting in other rooms, the smell of coffee and sex. The stone bridge has to be crossed, more tourists snapping away with camera lenses that every day get longer, and thicker; the sound of hip hop blasts up from the canal, young girls with tambourines, and boys
with bouffant hair. Everybody in Lijiang seems lazy, the laziest town in China. Lijiang is not punk. Stride across the second stone bridge, the old smooth stone under foot, laid down before the earthquake, slippery when wet; the tambourine music rattles on like an old train; the Burong Bell store comes into focus, the young girl, a Vermeer portrait, melting out of the window, wanting to escape the boredom of ringing a bell every two minutes, every hour, every day, every year, the poor girl is almost dead …

... Musou Clothes For Sale, Musou women supposedly take lovers whenever they want, the father caring for the child, another tourist myth, back there at Lugu Lake, paddling in a dugout pig canoe, blue sheet-glass water collapsing in on itself, reflections of windblown clouds, the lake centred by an island, with a grand eucalyptus tree sixty years old, the water of Lugu Lake, endless, down, across, up, strips of weed bleeding green from sky blown depths. The Museum of Classical Education Toys, a strange combination of words, two nouns, two adjectives, Wittgenstein loved nouns, he said that the world could not have a world without them, then he betrayed the Rationalists with his sixth intention, ‘the only truth lies in that which cannot be said’, there are no nouns, nouns were the problem after all. More pu’er tea shops, drinking tea and conversing with friends, tea is talking, tea is beauty, tea is money, tea is setting off for walks late in the night on cobblestone lanes, the moon crashing into the Naxi night. The Bai Weaving Shop, Bai, Naxi, Musou, Dai, Zhang, Yi, a Lijiang friend wants to sleep with a girl from every minority group. The second stone bridge is crossed, that song again, Darling Darling Da, the song of Lijiang, every day, all day. More painted wood carvings, more pu’er tea, bright summer dresses, the Shuhe Traditional Fur Shop, more Chinglish, a silver shop, Dongba Art Pottery, stinking yak meat, pu’er tea, drums and horns, Dongba Lucky Bells. There were Naxi love suicides in the not too distant past, when the mountain meadows were the last destination of lovers, drinking poison, after which there only existed the possibility of a silent scream; the street becomes crowded …

... the night is falling, the earth is rising, the mountain melds into the guesthouses that straddle Lion Hill, melding into summer lights. Stars wander back into their black enclosure, the sadness spills one’s loneliness. she feels alone, life taken up with a brother and a belonging, and now there is Lotus, but Lotus is not a lover, Lotus is the loved, and there is Lily. Cigarettes and Drinks, the storekeepers sit all day in the
womb of their shop, sheltered from the storm, riders in the storm, a fox hole,
sheltered from the world, immune from death and danger, smoke returns memories,
memories return dreams, dreams disappear to smoke. Real Naxi Snacks, there is a
story that Naxi women don’t bother if their men are lazy in the day, as long as they do
there thing at night, a Naxi snack, small snatches of Naxi language, hello, a lala lala
lay, thanks, jor bay say, goodbye, lay der door, the rest can be mimed, two more steps,
Lijiang Local Pickle, the most favourite Naxi lady, Shen should have left a memory
here amongst the pickle bottles, remember the rhyme, Peter Piper picked a peck of
pickled peppers, a peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked, if Peter Piper picked a
peck of pickled peppers, where’s the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked, and
replace it with the Chinese rhyme, sì shí sì, shí shì shí, shí sì shì sì sì, sì shí sì shí sì, sì
shí sì zhī shí zhì zi sì de, four is four, ten is ten, fourteen is fourteen, forty is forty,
forty four is forty four, at forty four, one of the stone lions died ...

... the old Naxi lady laughs, a sunflower turning to the sun, one day old age will
come, it will be a time to laugh, laugh with a fox-spirit daughter on the edge of a
forest ceases to exist, telling stories handed down by scholar father Songling; this
liminal world is not peopled by ghosts and spirits, but by goons and police, at times a
Hades, a Hell, and one must be Orpheus, travelling to the underworld to retrieve a
brother, turning back at the last moment, or Heracles, fighting on the bones of the
dead, bringing back Alcestis to the once proud and arrogant Admetus, Rong the
modern Admetus. Here is another tea shop, and another Lijiang dog, the head is tilted
to the starry sky looking for Hydra and the Crab; Yunnan Arabica Coffee, be careful of
men who drink coffee, shallow compared with men of tea; Dongba Language Hand-
carving, there are shamans in the hills, deep in the forests that are no longer deep,
they have labours too, the labour of surviving in the tsunami that is sweeping across
the landscape. Japanese Sushi, a strange shop in a strange land, in another laneway
there is a sign above a doorway that reads ‘No Japs Allowed’, one hundred thousand
women raped and killed, the nation cannot and must not forget, but what has sushi,
or Murakami, or Ozu, or Miyazaki, or Roppongi and Shinjuku girls, got to do with
Japanese soldiers who raped and murdered in Nanjing ...

... a honeymoon couple swings by through the crowd, each trying to erase the
memory of a wedding night with red sheets and a thousand whispers of 
grandchildren, of security, success, luck, fortune, family, talk, tradition, envy, 
conscience, duty, fate, history, father, everything except Romantic Love, there were 
four hundred people at the wedding but only one person could be told of the sadness 
of not loving, of having to give up the one that was loved. Drops of rain start to fall, a 
shower of umbrellas appears, pink, green, purple, popping up as mushrooms. At the 
next store a woman is sitting at an old sewing machine making leather bags; at the 
next, wire men are being tied together, they fall over each other, a mother screams at 
her young child, rain falls, umbrellas burst. At the Yoghurt Shop, young lovers look 
into each other’s eyes, scooping in mouthfuls of creamy liquid, sticky notes scatter 
the walls, professing love in ice-cream colours of blue, pink and yellow, Love is found 
easily. The rain sweeps down the street, the tourists scatter into the shelter of the Tea 
and Silver shop, a few children splash in the liquid rain, the light runs and flows into 
the falling mist. Lover’s Nest Guesthouse, Garden Inn, Keith’s house, the squawking of 
the garbage truck as it squeezes through the stone alleyway. Keep on walking to the 
end of the street, head east, head away from the setting sun, towards the falling night, 
and hope for one more memory …

I woke up this morning with an energy I had not felt for months

‘Lily, I think the morning sickness is over. Lotus has decided to give me a rest,’ I said.

‘According to Yang Yiyong you’ve probably recovered by about sixty-two percent,’ 
replied Lily in a mock informative voice.

‘Yang Yiyong?’ I asked.

‘He’s the Director of the State Development and Reform Commission’s Macroeconomic Research Institute for Social Development,’ replied Lily.

‘And … ‘ I prompted.

‘He was on the news, reporting that our nation has achieved sixty-two percent of its task in rejuvenating the Chinese civilisation. Now, ask me how could such a thing be measured?’ she said.

‘How?’ I asked.

‘By using the Great National Revival Process Monitoring and Evaluation Indicators,’ said Lily, again in that mocking tone.

‘Of course!’ I agreed.
‘It is a great thing, surely. To know exactly how healthy our nation really is,’ Lily stated emphatically.

‘Yes, indeed. I now realise that I have, in fact, recovered exactly sixty-two percent from my morning sickness,’ I agreed.

‘A blogger on the net said Yang Yiyong wasn’t game to use sixty-four percent because that figure would have been blocked,’ she said.

‘Yes, we mustn’t mention Tiananmen. That’s like crying at your own Party,’ I said.

‘You seem a lot happier these days?’ said Lily, a gentle tone in her voice.

‘It was great to spend time down south, relaxing, walking the streets, riding the bike through the countryside; taking in the sunflowers, and corn, and chilli peppers hanging out to dry; the country full of yellow, green and red. No Shen, no Rong, no goons, no police. It was a beautiful present to myself,’ I said.

‘Did you miss me?’

‘Did I miss you, Lily? You were there by my side. You never left me. Tell me more news.’

‘Really? Well, someone told me a story about an old lady down in Shandong. This auntie had had enough of cars and trucks speeding down her street. She complained to the authorities, but they did nothing. Auntie got angrier and angrier, and more and more frustrated. Then she came up with a brilliant idea. She strapped a life-size blow-up sex doll to the tree outside her house, and covered it with see-through red lingerie,’ she said.

‘The traffic slowed down?’ I asked.

‘Almost to a standstill. Auntie understands human nature. She has wisdom. Auntie understands customer demand,’ she said with a smile.

‘Instead of Lei Feng Day, where we extoll the virtues of a hero soldier who probably never existed, they should have Auntie Day. That would be something to celebrate,’ I answered.
叙

(xvi) xù - tell

qiūfēn (autumnal equinox)
It’s harvest time. The Naxi women are in the fields cutting cornstalks with scythes. In the afternoon they’ll wheel the crop back to the village in wooden carts. They will hang the cobs up to dry on the tall wooden racks that stand at the edge of each courtyard. It’s the time of ‘harvest home’; soon it will be ‘harvest moon’. My harvest rests within.

There’s been no sign of fox-spirits. They have gone into early hibernation let them hide deep in the forest. My nights have been filled reading translations of the ‘Guideways through Mountains and Seas.’ It tells of many foxes. One of them lives deep in the South Mountains, near an unnamed mountainous peak, full of the purest jade and the cinnabar. Her name is Jiuweihu, the fox of nine tails. Her howl is like that of a baby crying. She’s capable of killing and eating humans. If any person were brave or stupid enough to eat her, evil forces would take hold of them for the rest of their life. Years ago, in Lumbini village in Nepal, I spent a whole night lying in bed listening to the cries of the local foxes. I wanted to rush out into the dead of night and comfort them. What would they have thought?

The ‘Guideways’ goes on to describe how, in the East Mountains, there resides a fox called Longzhi. He also has nine tails, and nine heads, and claws of a tiger. The colour of Longzhi is not given, but it is said that the sight of any fox that is white, especially those with nine tails, is counted as an auspicious sign of success. The white fox is a symbol of abundant offspring. The ‘Guideways’ lists other foxes that can be found in the Outer Regions. There is Zhuru, who is bestowed with the fins of a fish, Bibi, who has wings and makes a sound like a goose, and is commonly seen as an omen of the coming of a great drought, and Siland, who is more a wolf than a fox, and has a white tail and long pointed ears. A sighting of Siland is seen a sure omen that chaos is just around the corner, a fox to be avoided for sure.

That is enough foxes for one night. The studio is full!

Yue was filled with a sadness of no longer being able to Rong as she once did. The sky had turned overcast and there was a slight coldness in the air.

Rong arrived and they both sat down, ready for their talk. Rong said nothing about her absence from their last meeting. He remained silent and waited for her to talk.
She did not look at him directly. She was sure that he was looking away as well. She talked of Old Lijiang, walking through its streets, searching for another fragment of Shen’s memory palace.

*the wind in perfect balance*

Yue reached the top of Wuyi Street and then turned right, down Wenzhi Alley, to escape the rain-soaked tourists. She walked past the small bars and cafes, the sound of folk music rolling out the windows in typical Lijiang rhythms, strings plucked lazily on electric acoustic guitars. A cool afternoon wind trundled up the alley, carrying with it the smell of the countryside, full of wheat and new corn. She looked up and saw the clouds huddled together in black confusion, gathering for an evening storm. A soft breeze calmed the stored heat that radiated from the hand-cut stones of pink granite.

She walked past Number Eleven Inn, and Poe Café, where three glass bowls of water sat outside on a small wooden stool, petals drifting quietly in the sun. Opposite the café was an old courtyard house; it was one of the few traditional houses left standing after the earthquake. On its entrance wall remained a number of scrubbed red characters that floated across the crumbling plaster. The characters could be translated as: ‘*One Must Work Harder.*’ She let the hill carry her down the slope, and turned right at the Floating Landscape Café. She found herself in a small alley that had a smaller canal flowing along its edge. The path was lined with luxurious cool elm trees; the leaves struggled to escape the strengthening wind. She continued on, up to the entrance gateway of a traditional Naxi house. There, in the quiet and shade of the wooden portico, was the presence of Shen.

Opposite the gate, she sat down on the stone steps that led down to the canal water. She cupped her head between her hands. She could hear the water breaking across the rocks that lined the canal. There were ten steps that leaning down to a landing, lapped by the flow of water. She imagined that on these same steps, a Naxi woman, maybe preparing vegetables for dinner, might have met Shen here and invited him home to eat with her family, a Buddhist monk in a Naxi household.

Along a thin slip of autumn air, a memory drifted in from the semi-darkness,
Shen sits in a darkened room, alone. Cigarette smoke fills the air. The walls are stained with brown tar. He looks young, about seventeen. It is a time after his school days, and before Tiananmen. He is thin and sickly, and appears stressed, as though he hasn’t slept in days. A thin stream of light filters through from the outside. The sound of busy traffic can be heard, the sound of a large city. Shen is sweating in the sweltering heat. He draws heavily on his cigarette, blowing smoke out in long drawn-out puffs. In front of him lies a traditional mahjong table, the wood stained and chipped. The tiles are scattered haphazardly across the table, a mixture of bamboo and bone.

The door to the room opens, letting in more light, and four men enter. Two of them are large and overweight. They shuffle as they walk. The other two are muscular and thin, one tall, the other short, almost too short. They are all Han Chinese. As they enter the room, Shen’s demeanour completely transforms. He draws his body up, and pushes out his chest, confident and capable.

The large men, wearing a black leather jacket, comes up to Shen and talks loud and animated. ‘This is it Shen, today we settle scores. Have you brought the money?’

‘Of course,’ said Shen, ‘I promised, fifty thousand kuai. But remember Lao, you have your promise too, one last game, the four of us. Bo sits out.’

Shen sits with his back to the window. Shafts of light hit the chipped lacquer tabletop, forming an irregular triangle of ruby red. The other three men take their seats. There is a sound of chairs scraping the wooden floor that is littered with cigarette butts and scraps of paper. The heat of Beijing continues to leak into the old rundown building. Shen wears a white short-sleeved shirt, black cotton trousers and sandals. Over his shoulder is slung a brown leather bag. He sits erect and confident, beads of sweat pool around his temples.

The fat man, Lao, sits directly opposite him, and to his left sits the old man. To Lao’s right is the short thin man, smoking, alert and tense. He is waiting for something to happen. He wants something to happen. The old man looks relaxed, his hands placed flat on the table. He takes in the whole room, breathes in its ambience, absorbs all its bits and pieces, as though preparing for battle, a general surveying from the hilltop. The room smells of smoke and cooking oil, a space above a busy restaurant in downtown Beijing. The sound of crashing plates can be heard from the kitchen. The smoke fumes seep up from groups of men partying below.

The mahjong pieces are spread across the table. The four men scatter the tiles.
The mahjong walls are built, strengthened, and broken. Shen opens. The game moves fast and unspoken. There is only the sound of bone smashed down onto the table – bamboo, circles, threes, fours ... Shen lights a cigarette and draws heavily, he almost swallows the smoke. Five points, fifteen points. Double, triple. Shen forfeits five thousand kuai. Lao and the short man stare at Shen, smug and confident, full of contempt. The old man smiles openly with his eyes.

‘You play as you always play, Shen,’ provokes the short man, ‘like a person who has lost his most prized possession and is in a desperate hurry to recover it.’

The old man looks to Shen, then across to the open door. Lao rolls the whiskey glass in his hand, then spits on the floor with a loud drawn out hack. He gulps his drink.

‘You are a fool Shen,’ he boasts, scattering the tiles for the next game. ‘You may look like a man, but you carry the anger of a teenager. You carry it like a wild dog.’

Shen makes no reply, takes another draw on his cigarette, stubs it out on the leg of the table, and throws the butt on the floor. New walls are made and broken. The dice are thrown. The old man opens the next game. Shen continues to sweat; his body is rigid. He holds the tiles in one hand, fingering them, turning them rapidly, hot pokers burning into flesh. His eyes are piercing red, ruptured vermilion capillaries exploding in a sea of dull white. The old man plays on, caressing the bamboo and bone like he’s collecting butterflies ready to be laid out on the table for all to admire. The thin man slams the tiles onto the black lacquer. Lao grunts and coughs. The fat man lays down a final combination, – mahjong.

‘Another five thousand,’ shouts Lao, filling the room with his anger and hate; Shen’s body slumps. They each make their own judgment. The fat man gets up and slams the door. Shen can feel the heat flowing through the louvers of the shuttered window behind him; he can hear the sound of traffic below. There is no glass behind those shutters, just empty space ten feet below. Lao draws himself up, his hands firmly on the table. He stares at Shen. His face is flushed with alcohol.

‘We have told you what will happen Shen, if you do not pay. We are very serious in our threats. There are dire consequences. You are young, you’re life can be ruined.’ His threats are precise. ‘Will you keep playing? Your satchel is getting lighter, and your life is getting shorter.’

‘I know what I’m doing and where I’m going, Lao. I can’t take your threats seriously. You speak like a man certain of himself, but you carry yourself like a
poisoned dog limping home to die,’ chides Shen.

Lao spits across at Shen, his face is exploding, his ears red against greasy black hair. Shen lunges the table against the three men, swings around and throws himself into the window shutters. They splinter and collide around him as he falls into the empty space outside. It is a space of light and noise ...

________

After telling Shen’s memory of the gambling house, all I wanted was to go home and see Lily. She was a golden chord wrapped around the floating cloud of my uncertainty.

‘Welcome home Yue. I’ve missed you! I know you think Beijing’s a dirty, polluted place, not worth living in, especially now we have the baby, but I wish you were here more often. Lily needs you. She is a selfish little bitch.’

‘I need you too. Don’t forget. What can you do when your whole world falls apart? When everything you believe in becomes a whirlwind, sucking everything into its centre. And in that centre is a terrifying knowledge of not knowing. Every time I collect a memory from Shen, I’m torn apart.’

‘My world fell apart too because of Tiananmen, you know that,’ Lily replied. ‘I became an orphan, like you. My parents were young students, and I was their love child. They’d only been married a year. My aunt didn’t tell me what had really happened until I was eighteen. How they were shot down, my father trying to protect my mother in that last moment. I swore, and yelled, and stamped my feet like a spoilt child. I was shattered.’

‘I’m sorry Lily.’

‘I didn’t speak for two weeks. I didn’t eat. I didn’t sleep. I hated my aunt for waiting so long to tell me the truth. She’d told me they’d died in a car accident. That made sense to me, but Tiananmen didn’t. I know how you feel, the truth shifting like quicksand,’ Lily said.

‘And it never stops. I promised you I wouldn’t bring this pain into the house. Give me time, Lily.’

‘You have all the time you want. Lily is very patient. One day we’ll run away. When we reach the forest, we’ll find luck. When we reach the mountain, we’ll find riches. When we enter the next province, we’ll want to move on, and when we finally have the river in
sight, we’ll stop. We will be the Outlaws of The Marsh!’ she exclaimed.

‘Your knowledge of the classics astounds me, Lily. And you’re only a singer in a punk band.’ I laughed. I felt only love for her.

‘It takes a lot of learning to yell ‘fuck, fuck, fuck!’ Come here, and be nice to me,’ she replied.
放

(xvii) fàng - let go

hánlù (cold dew)
The first autumn leaves are falling from the apricot trees into the courtyard. It’s a casual kind of beauty, the leaves drifting lazily down in a dance already learnt. Under the trees the chickens are scratching at the leaf litter with a wired determination. I feel closer to Shen here in Baisha. I’m sure he’s somewhere up near the Tibetan border, probably at Kirti monastery, where soldiers had put down the protests. Thirteen Tibetans died. Shen would see Kirti as his spiritual home.

Last night in bed I was reading lines from the ancient folk song, ‘North Wind’. It’s a love song.

Nothing redder than the fox, nothing blacker than the crow.
If you are kind and love me, take my hand and we’ll ride together.
You are modest, you are slow, but oh, we must hurry!

The poem reminded me of my first visit from Wuya. I thought of Lily and wrote thi,

Take my hand, if you love me,
We’ll ride together, ‘cross the border,
Down south, where the forests turn to jungle,
Take my hand, if you love me,
Past the shadowland to the river,
Through the defiles to the delta,
Out to sea ...

The Beijing studio had its own warmth. It was a space that existed by itself and for itself. Despite all her misgivings of Rong and the wariness that she now held towards him, Yue still felt the need to talk.

‘Rong, before we start I want to tell you a story. It was when I was at high school, in Canberra as a teenager. The girl’s name was Madeleine. It was my first awakening to what it meant to have a belonging.’
the sickness of madeleine

At school Yue felt certain about who she was, and where she was going. She was a teenager adrift in her own world. Her guardians and teachers thought her strange, and they were right of course. She was capable of things they were not. Her ability to read memory, a secret still kept, set her apart from others, and she was young. Her belonging often led her into strange territory.

She liked Madeleine, though like is not really the right word. Yue was seventeen years old and very confident; she knew Madeleine was attracted to her. Yue also knew the power of her own beauty. Seducing those who liked her had become a defence for her being an outsider. Yue tapped into the power of her belonging. She had learnt that the love lost as a result of her parent’s death and brother’s disappearance, could easily be taken from others.

On their first meeting, she had discovered Madeleine’s memory. It was a memory of pleasure that Madeleine kept solely for herself and Yue, a fragment of imagining that Madeleine replayed over and over. It was a recollection of Madeleine’s making. In the memory, Yue was imagined as a 1930s Shanghai waitress, slim and elegant, in a clinging red and black cheongsam, her hair pulled back tight with a white bone hairpin, black shoes, red lipstick, and black mascara eyes. She had imagined Yue working in a bar, in the downtown Bund area, welcoming guests to their tables and taking orders. In the memory Yue never directly smiled at Madeleine, there was just the glance of the eye, the amount of time it took for Madeleine to want her.

The series of images Madeleine chose were exotic and clandestine, making it more likely for them to remain vivid in her consciousness. The replaying of this imagining increased its veracity. Madeleine needed their love to be unrequited, one that she could take home, lay next to and luxuriate in, finally drifting off to sleep. It was a love that lingered like a full moon on fresh snow. The fragments could be stored and put back on at any time. This was Madeleine’s imagining, this was her memory,

... Madeleine sits a table, at the back of a darkened smoky room, sipping a drink, listening intently to the music being played in the bar. The entertainment changes with each fresh remembering. On one night the band is made up East Indian musicians, at other times, Filipino, Indonesian or Russian. Each band plays its own
style of music, popular 30s Shanghai tunes. The drink that Madeleine orders from Yue varies in each reimagining, martini, champagne, cocktails of Gin Fizz and Pink Lady. The effect is always the same, the exotic mixture of alcohol and foreign rhythms evokes in Madeleine an intoxicating feeling of desire and love. Madeleine embraces this passion and nurtures it in her heart. With every drink, Madeleine’s desire grows. There is never talk between them, everything is left unsaid, filled with Madeleine’s imagined dialogue, a dialogue that remains speechless ...

Once this memory of Madeleine’s had been captured, Yue had the choice of leaving it safely stored in its site of origin, or using the memory for her own vicarious pleasure. Her need for love remained unrequited. In this fever of adolescence Yue chose to act out Madeleine’s phosphorescence of longing. Each day she would come to school dressed up in a fragment of Madeleine’s visual incantation. One day she would wear the imagined hairpin, the next week the black shoes, another day the red lipstick. On each occasion the look on Madeleine’s face was a mixture of shock and yearning. Yue bathed in this mixture of excitement and horror. What she had not noticed was Madeleine’s increasing anxiety, in the realisation that her hidden desires and fantasies, were being played out in the everyday world of rational thought and reason. Each betrayal of her private imaginings made Madeleine lose confidence in her understanding of the world. Each item of clothing that Yue wore, each movement stolen from Madeleine’s memories, marked a downward spiral. The extreme objects of her desire, now on daily display, steadily robbed Madeleine of her spirit. It was as if one of Pu Songling’s fox-spirit stories was being re-enacted in a high-school classroom.

Yue was not fully aware of what was happening; the truth lay too close to her own needs and desires. In morbid fascination, she viewed the drama from a distance. Madeleine disintegrated before Yue’s eyes. She rapidly lost weight, her body stripped of its form, a tree shedding its leaves in autumn, robbed of its beautiful colours, her spirit sapped by the public mocking of her hidden longing. After a month, Madeleine could hardly walk. The students were shocked at her deteriorating health, wondering whether she had contracted a fatal disease.

There needed to be an ending. Yue’s brutal finale was to wear the brilliant red and black cheongsam to class. This was the pièce de résistance of Yue’s mocking of Madeleine’s reimagining. The cheongsam epitomized all that was erotic and sensual.
For Madeleine, every fold and stitch of silk in that dress was an entrée to the flesh and passion that lay beneath. Being faithful to the stolen memory, Yue wore her hair in a chignon, the nape of her neck exposed, a small butterfly lay tattooed in blue and green.

With overwhelming grace and beauty Yue had entered the classroom, the sighs and whispers of the students followed her as she walked toward Madeleine. Madeleine took in Yue with a long, unbelieving stare. Weakened by months of intrusions, she fainted, falling to the floor, a fragile bird exhausted. The doctors were called. The sound of the ambulance soon punctuated the silence that hung in the room.

Madeleine was taken to hospital and committed to a month’s rest, with strict orders not to see or have any communication with Yue. Yue was held directly responsible for Madeleine’s illness. This was a concrete and tangible crime they could accuse her of. Her behaviour had often been seen as strange, in this affair the damage she had caused to another pupil was seen as inexcusable. An illicit sexual relationship between Madeleine and Yue was also inferred.

Madeleine recovered, and she and Yue never spoke again. Yue’s remaining time at the school was torturous, despite her academic success.

* * *

This remembering of the Madeleine’s story, and its telling to Rong, reminded Yue how far she had come in accepting her strangeness and the responsibility that came with her belonging. It also reawakened the confusion she held about her future, the continued questioning with regard to Rong, Shen, and herself.

She went on to tell Rong of her most recent walking through the old town.

_transcendence in a crowd of rolling r’s_
The late afternoon sun was out, and so were the tourists. Two large tour groups had managed to run into each other in front of where Yue was standing. One guide blared instructions into his small megaphone, the other, with a more modern headset, relayed her information to a speaker attached to her waist. Both were relating the same history. The group from Beijing rolled their r's and wore bright red baseball caps and yellow t-shirts, the other group, a motley collection of Koreans dressed in brightly coloured shirts, carried even larger camera lenses than the Beijingers.

As she worked her way around the confusion, a young girl attached to the Beijingers looked up at her, smiled, and said ‘ni hao’. Her hair was tied back in three small knots, all with different coloured ribbons. She reminded Yue of a child from a Cultural Revolution poster, bright-eyed and enthusiastic for a glorious future, full of hope and optimism. Yue offered a ‘hello’ back, and asked her name. She replied confidently, ‘Lifen Liu’. Yue’s heart melted, the child’s demeanour captured that perfect moment when everything is possible, that time in childhood when every object is full of wonder, and every new person is an intoxicating replication of one’s own parents, yet slightly different. It was a time when butterflies turned into magic spirits, and pet dogs and cats sat down and shared tea with you to talking to for hours on the most trivial of matters, a time when a small rivulet of water could be the mighty Yangtze, or a toy soldier possessed the strength of the whole Chinese army.

For Yue, that perfect moment of possibility was the time when she first found out about her belonging, just after the accident. It was a time of her adopted mother, Sylvia, sitting Yue on her soft enveloping lap, and telling her stories of her childhood life in Canberra. Of, how when Sylvia was a child, the bread had been delivered by horse and cart to the small fibro house she lived in, in what was then the outer suburbs of Canberra, how the baker, dressed in a white coat, jumped off his cart to deliver bread, as the old draft horse continued to amble down the street without its driver. The baker would walk up to the front door and lift up the muslin cloth draped over the thick wicker basket he carried, the smell of the bread wafted in her face, and drifted into the front room of the house. The basket was full of fresh loaves of white bread, and on rare occasions a bundle of cream buns, the red jam oozing out from their sides. Sylvia would carry the loaves to the kitchen, the white dusted flour getting all over her clothes. If she was alone in the house she would rip off the end of the still warm loaf and dig her hands into the bread, ripping out large soft chunks,
gulping them down as quickly as possible before anyone came home.

Yue loved Sylvia’s stories; they gave her another past, with new memories, replacing those that had been extinguished by the fire. Sitting there on Sylvia’s lap, she had sucking in all those stories so as to fill the empty spaces. Sylvia had told her about the old icebox that was in the kitchen, and how once, when she was sitting at the dinner table, a giant man dressed in a black leather apron had suddenly burst through the door carrying a block of ice in-between two huge metal tongs. Her mother had rushed to the icebox and lifted the galvanised iron lid, just in time for the man to let go of the ice, which crashed down into the metal box below. When Yue had quizzed Sylvia about what food was inside the ice-box, Sylvia had struggled to remember, maybe bits of devon meat and blocks of yellow butter, possibly even bright red tomatoes, and large glass bottles of fresh cow’s milk that sat next to small jars of thick cream.

Sylvia had told Yue of how milk was delivered by cart, pulled by a horse that was much older than the one that delivered the bread. His name was Smokey, a grey draught horse, with a long straggly mane that reached almost down to the road. On the days when the milkman was in an especially good mood, Sylvia would be allowed to hop onto the back of the cart and squeeze amongst the milk crates, gently bumping along until the horse reached the end of the street where there was a much busier main road. The milkman would then lift Sylvia off the cart and set her down beside the horse, she would stroke its mane, taking in the smell of sweat.. The old horse would neigh in approval. This would always frighten her, and she would run back along the street, excited and happy, back into the arms of her mother who remained standing outside their house.

As a child, each Sunday morning, Yue was allowed this reverie of things past during the taking of tea and cake, which Sylvia indulged in after arriving home from early morning church. Sylvia would first change from her Sunday dress, into a casual floral frock that looked to Yue like a summer garden. She was always granted a forbidden sip of Sylvia’s hot sickly sweet tea, and one bite of the tart lemon sponge that always seemed ready to topple over the edge of the plate.

Standing in the middle of Old Lijiang, Yue soaked herself in these memories of Sylvia. She heard the clinking and rattling of the milk bottles, and the smashing of the ice. Sylvia’s memories had become her memories. She had inherited Sylvia’s sights,
smells, and sounds. All this, as she stood there in the crowd, gazing at the young girl. The girl smiled and turned back towards her mother, who gathered her up in the confusion and walked away.

Yue moved deeper into the old town. It was late in the day and the Naxi parents and grandparents had gathered outside the school gates to collect their children. The tall wooden gates were locked to check the energy of the crowd, the *ni ni* and *ye ye* were the most enthusiastic, the grandmothers and grandfathers. It was a reflection of the family arrangements, the grandparents carrying out the majority of the childcare during the long hours the parents needed to work. The *grandparents* crowded up against the gate, as though ready to storm the school. They stood there, dozens of them, shoulder to shoulder, talking loudly about the day’s events with their neighbours, or patiently standing alone looking anxiously, waiting to be allowed in.

At the edge of the crowd were the street vendors, selling fried potatoes, steamed corn, and tofu cakes topped with pink icing. There was even a man selling balloons. Yue couldn’t actually see him, behind all the inflated heads of Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck and Yang Yang, the happy Chinese sheep. The gates were finally opened and the flock of carers poured into the playground that lay within. She could see the love and attention that rested in the hands of those old men and women as they proudly carried the children on their backs and shoulders. The children were precious objects to be cherished, nurtured, and indulged until the time they would marry, then the grandparents would be rewarded with another generation of grandchildren. This devotion never ceased to amaze her. On the local bus she would see old people, or once, a woman carrying a baby on her back, stand up and give their seat to a young child, who would be caressed and pampered by those around them. The child received the attention as an every day occurrence.

Yue moved away, feeling slightly jealous of all this attention being given so readily. Attention that she herself had been denied. At the same time, she knew that her life as an outsider had given her the strength and resilience that she found hard to believe these children would ever possess. The schoolchildren gone, and the laneway was now empty except for the shopkeepers who were having their early dinner. They squatted on low stools as they watched the daily soap operas being played out on small television sets placed in the far corners of the shops. Yue decided to head towards the eastern section of the old city that was mainly traditional courtyard houses, and a few inns and shops.
She walked for an hour, through narrow laneways, past abandoned gardens and empty canals, out to the far edge of the town where the old city seemed to collapse into rubble and confusion. Yue could find no memories. Instead, she found herself thinking that the time had come when she would have to act in new ways, that she would have to let go if she was ever to find a way through what lay ahead.

When I arrived back at the apartment, Lily was already dressed, ready to go out. ‘You look sensational, the tights, the tights, AND the tights. I like the tights!’ I laughed

‘I’m glad you noticed. I put them on to celebrate our anniversary, remember. You thought my legs were tattooed when you saw me up on stage. What kind of girl did you think I was?’ Lily asked with irreverence.

‘A nice girl, obviously. I like the idea of an anniversary present. Where are we going?’ I said.

‘Down to the Temple. Our band’s playing on the same gig as Jack Danny. You know their song, you love the lyrics.’ Lily jumped on the lounge doing her impersonation of thrash air guitar. ‘It’s my anthem!’ she yelled, and began to sing.

We are the noise we are the sound and voice from the 80s
We are no toys we are the girls and boys from the 80s
We have no choice but we have fun and joy from the 80s
C’mon, we’re from the 80s.

I jumped onto the lounge with her and joined in. Shouting louder. Yelling louder.
放

(xviii) fàng - let go

shuāngjiàng (frost descent)
I'm short of breath, and when I get up in the morning my body aches. Despite all that I am set at a warm inner glow. Lotus is moving around, kicking and jabbing me. If she were born right now, she'd be okay.

I've just found out that Mo Yan’s won the Nobel Prize. That sends out mixed messages for what it means to be a dissident writer, or for that matter, any writer in this country. Is Mo a pragmatist or a party apologist? He's a member of the Party. I’m guessing he stands at the far liberal side, and that’s being very kind to him. The mantra is, ‘to foster Mo is to promote and encourage writing within China’. The Nobel Committee is doing its best to appease the Heavenly Kingdom by picking the Party laureate. God knows. The Party has surely paid enough money to get his name to come up.

I don't trust men like Mo, reconciling the role of the collaborator. To be in the Party is to support the Party. How can it be any other way? Mo’s been adopted by the Party because his satire belongs safely in the past, before Deng, in a fictional landscape where the main characters bear no resemblance to present leaders. Mo did take on Tiananmen in his early writing, and got banned for it, but he never went to jail. His novels are set in a world that's remote for all those born after the 80s. I saw photos of Mo attending a lavish lunch, hosted by local Party officials in his hometown. Why does he want to dine with these people … these people are happy to get drunk and laugh at themselves, because they know his writing is absolutely no threat to them. Mo knows where the lines are drawn, and he doesn’t go there.

Which brings me to Ai Weiwei. He has his own brand of absurdity. Imagine Mo releasing a video of himself singing the Mud Horse Song!

To travel up to Beijing on the train and see Rong was an ordeal. For safety of the baby, Yue had chosen not to fly. By the time she arrived at the studio doorstep Yue was exhausted. Beijing was cold and dirty. It was times like this that she thought the city should be shut down.

All her efforts to find Shen had failed. She knew she had to find a way to communicate with him again. She could no longer fully trust Rong, and the
surveillance was increasing; the thugs did the work of those above them. The Party was no longer credible. When Yue had talked to some university students on the train trip to Beijing, she had found them enthusiastic about the future, but at the same time, dispirited. The students could not understand why those above did not listen to the generation below, whose eyes and hearts were open. They wondered if these people knew how much the youth of this country hated them. The students despaired at the inertia of the government. They believed that even themselves would be corrupted if they entered those upper echelons of power. In the end, all Yue and the students could do was laugh.

* 

Through the window of the studio, Yue could see two men talking with Rong. This was the first time she had ever seen other visitors. Rong was shaking hands with the taller of the two men. Both wore casual black suits, the shorter man wore sunglasses. Rong was holding a package under his arm. It was wrapped in crimson paper, with a red seal at the top. Rong was smiling, and talking with great gusto. Yue opened the and walked in.

Rong stepped forward as though about to chide her, instead he gave her a weak smile.

‘Yue, come in, I didn’t hear you arrive. These men are from the Bureau of Security Affairs. Actually, they are old friends. We went to university together in Beijing many years ago. Every few months we catch up and talk of the days we were classmates. Today we have talked for a bit too long. I am sorry.’

‘That’s alright. I’m exhausted anyway. I’ll just sit down and rest my tired body; Lotus is making herself known in a big way. Hello gentlemen, I hope you have enjoyed your stay with Rong,’ she said politely.

Both of them glanced down at the package. ‘Thank you, yes of course,’ they replied

Yue was too exhausted to think. She took in what was happening, and placed her hand on her back as she carefully lowered herself into the soft leather of the chair. She closed her eyes. Rong said his final goodbyes to the men and thanked them for the gift. He walked back over to his armchair and sat down.

‘They work for the Bureau,’ he said, ‘We’ve known each other for a long time.'
We’re almost brothers. They are like family. It’s unfortunate they followed the path of the Party. They have been very good to me, especially in recent years when as I’ve gotten older and become more isolated. My garden is crowded with plants, not people. Over the last few years there’s been a loneliness that’s enveloped me like a fog, it’s a cold and uncomfortable feeling.’

She pulled herself up in the chair. Piercing jabs of pain shot down her back and into her left leg. Her body stiffened. She sat on the very edge of the chair to relieve the pain.

‘I thought you had many friends, Rong, people talk about you often.’

They know me through my poetry and writings, and what little they’ve seen in the news, but they don’t know me, they are not my close friends, ‘he replied.

‘And these men, do they know you?’ she asked. ‘These are the same people who are trying to kill my brother.’

‘These men are not after Shen,’ he said defensively, ‘They have their own opinions about where China should be heading.’

‘Oh come on, Rong, there is only one opinion when it comes to this government. There’s no discussion, the history has been written. Their actions are inevitable.’

‘Your fatalism destroys you, Yue,’ he replied. ‘Your polemic divides China into the two extremes, of political activists and a reactionary regime. There’s much that lies between, even within the Party. These are the things that I can’t write about. It’s not just Jiang Zemin and Hu Jintao, other factions exist.’ he said.

‘Well, you might know these people but I don’t. As far as I’m concerned the Bureau is the Bureau. These are the same people who locked me up that day. I hate them,’ she replied, frustrated with Rong’s beleaguered optimism. ‘And the package?’’ she asked abruptly, ‘a present from the Party?’

‘No, a present from my old friends, it’s a stone, a very special one,’ he replied timidly.

Yue could not comprehend the full meaning of what was being said. She had no reply for Rong. All she could do was absorb what was happening, and return to another time.

‘I came here to tell you about a memory I collected from Shen, last week in Lijiang. Would you like to hear? Do you want me to tell you?’ she said, losing confidence.

‘Yes, I want you to tell me. Tell me what happened.’ Rong’s voice waivered as he
struggled for empathy.

*the dream of seven sages*

Yue had decided to go into the old town, late at night, when it was cool and quiet. She thought she might have a better chance of picking up Shen’s memories. On her last visit she hadn’t managed to collect any, maybe because of the pregnancy, maybe because she had felt so dispirited with Rong – the connection between he and Shen in prison.

She had entered the old town from the north, there was a small group of drunk men returning from bar street, and a couple of young girls running along the edge of the canal, laughing and screaming. The cold had settled in, and it felt like there was going to be a morning frost. She passed by the empty bars that were being boarded up by the young Naxi girls working there, and then walked further down into Sefang Square. It was strange to see the square so completely deserted, no Naxi women dancing, no horsemen, and no crush of Chinese tourist groups. Even the eccentric old man, an eagle-hawk always perched on his arm, ready for a ten kuai photo, was missing. All that remained was the faint smell of walnut cakes, baked at the edge of the square earlier that night.

Yue pulled her coat tighter, crossed the square to the first stone bridge, and turned left along the small canal, to the three hundred year old bridge. She walked slowly, trying to sense a memory from Shen, everything felt cold and hard. She went past the old bridge, walked straight ahead, and turned left. She’d never been this way. It was a narrow lane with a small canal on one side. It led into darkness. There were no lights or people. She could almost imagine what the old town must have been like before the earthquake and the tourists, when the Naxi people actually lived and worked there. She looked up, the narrow alleyway and its buildings acted like a telescope, magnifying the stars in the night sky above, they shone like quartz crystals under the sun. She stopped for a moment, staring into the night. She wanted to imagine Shen looking up at those same stars, standing in an empty courtyard of a monastery, high up in the mountains near Tibet, looking up, with the sound of monks chanting in the background. In the old town, the distant sound of a guitar played in the background, the stars lay far away. She wanted to see the same identical patterns, with Shen, their same placement in the night sky. She was sure that wherever Shen stood, the same
stars would be shining more intensely, through a pure thin mountain air.

Yue walked further into the darkness. The only sound was her feet scraping the cobblestones. The cold followed her along the path. In the distance was an old lantern above a doorway, struggling to light up the entrance to a courtyard. As she drew closer, another smaller laneway opened up on her left. She knew this was the way. She could feel Shen. She could feel his warmth and love. She went deep into the darkness, barely able to make out the cobblestone path, brushing her hand along the mudbrick wall to keep her balance and direction. A white cat appeared and made a path for her. She followed it instinctively. The cat gracefully led, and she clumsily trailed behind.

To her right, opened up a garden courtyard. A small lamp shone on the trellis of wisteria that hung above some wooden benches. The cat jumped up on the nearest bench and turned around towards her, purred, and rocked its head from side to side. She sat down beside it and stroked its white fur. It purred, and jumped down onto the cobblestones, then ran off into the darkness. She was left alone with Shen’s memory. The memory surrounded her with pure conversation,

... Shen is sitting cross-legged in a concrete cell. On the floor is a thin dirty mattress lying against the wall. In one corner is a hole for the toilet, and in the other corner, a single wooden chair. The walls are bare and filthy. On the concrete ceiling, not far above, an electric light bulb burns behind a rusted metal grill, steel bars fill up the only window in the cell. There is no glass lying between the bars and the outside world.

Shen looks dissipated and drawn, his body covered with sweat, and spotted with black pieces of grit and infected sores. He sits there, immovable. He is completely devastated by his situation. He can only just remember the time when he was thrown into this prison ...

This memory of Shen’s was from a time not long after he and Yue had walked across Beijing. Yue felt a chill run through her body. This was why she had not heard from Shen for such a long time, he had been there, in that prison. How could she have doubted him. She drew her coat close to her body, trapping the heat inside.

... In the cell, Shen remembers how the police had gathered him up, just as he was
about to go down the steps to the subway at Tiananmen. He wondered whether the police had planned it that way. As the crowds of people looked on, curious that a monk would be treated in such a manner, the police had bundled him into the back of an unmarked car; everyone looked away. No one really wanted to see, no one really wanted to know. They had taken him to the nearest black jail for questioning. ‘You’re being charged with causing a serious disturbance’, they’d shouted at him, ‘You’re picking arguments and provoking trouble, you’re a political hooligan!’ They finished their sentence with as much venom as they could spit at him. Not long after, they had thrown him in a cell. No more words were said, no more questioned asked. All his demands for a lawyer or outside help had been ignored. He realised he was now beyond the law and beyond help. Before they’d placed him in prison they’d stripped him of his scarlet robes, replacing them with blue striped prison pyjamas.

As Shen sits in his cell he tries to ground himself. He thinks about what had he done to be treated in this way. He had talked privately about the crimes that were being committed against his fellow monks. He had criticised the government’s refusal to acknowledge Tiananmen, how, the hundreds or thousands that had been killed were in danger of being forgotten.

He had spoken publically in a small Western bookshop in the heart of Beijing. The authorities also knew that he’d spoken in an even wider circle. He had had many discussions with radical lawyers and intellectuals within Beijing's universities; he’d even talked with foreign embassy diplomats resident in the country's capital. There were many instances when he knew he’d taking risks. He knew there was a good chance he was being taped and put under surveillance. He had spoken out because he had to, he’d seen his fellow monks being killed and tortured. He was committed to telling his version of the truth.

Now he is rotting in a cell. They torture him and beat him. He contemplates bashing his head against the wall, so it will end. Another prisoner had half joked to him, saying, ‘That’s not a very good way to do it, better to stick a nail in the wall with the point sticking out and then shove the side of your head against it, works every time.’ He decides to travel the path of least resistance and go into long periods of deep meditation. The world of meditation becomes his real world; his life of isolation and torture transforms itself.

... He is deep within a bamboo forest near a mountain hut. There is a sense of having
been here before. The bamboo groves sway, a sea of shuddering colour surrounds him. The blue sky breaks through an empty space of cloud; a cracking sound cuts the silence. He sits in the middle of an unbroken patch of luxuriant grass, a calm meadow in a turbulent forest of bamboo. On all sides of the clearing a deep blackness lies beyond. 

Shen is in lotus position, holding a guitar. He is about to sing a folk song that he’d learnt in his youth. Sitting around him, in a large circle, are friends from the past, mainly from his time at East Beijing art village. To his left is Ma Liuming (the beautiful artist, happily drinking from a glass of wine, whistling a song between sips; beside him sits the shaman artist who is also playing guitar, left handed, just like Shen; next is the angry artist, who’s drinking straight from a wine bottle, he looks hung-over and gaunt, and is naked except for a towel wrapped around his waist; to his left lies the strong artist who is stretched out on the soft grass ready to sleep, a bottle of wine at his side; next is the art-bride who is holding a flute in her hand, in her posture she looks serene and beautiful; beside her is the photo artist also drinking, and holding a camera, ready to take a photo of the group; last, and sitting to the right of Shen, is the urban artist who lazily scratches his back with a long bamboo stick.

The angry artist lowers the bottle from his mouth and staggers to his feet, yelling proudly, ‘We are the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove! We drink in memory of the ancient sage Liu Ling and his love of wine and drink, let’s all raise our glasses and bottles to the seventh sage of the bamboo forest, may we all find peace and happiness in this lifetime, if not in the next,’ he laughs. ‘Let me recite Ling’s poem in praise of wine,

There is Mr Great man:
He takes Heaven and Earth to be one day,
Ten thousands years to be one moment
The sun and the moon are his windows;
The eight barren places are his palaces.

He travels without tracks or traces
He lives without room or cottage
Heaven is his curtain, the earth his mat
Self-indulgent, he does what he pleases...
No worries, no brooding,  
He is content and well pleased.  
He becomes intoxicated without moving;  
All of a sudden, he awakens from his drunkenness...

He doesn’t know the feeling of flesh hurt by bitter cold or searing heat,  
Or the sensations of covetousness  
Gazing down, he watches the rest of the world  
Agitated and unsettled like bits of duckweed borne on the Yangtze and Han rivers.”

In this meditation of Shen’s, the angry artist staggers and falls to the ground. He slowly raises himself and pulls off his towel, proclaiming, ‘Here is my body, I give it to Liu Ling, to do with whatever he wants, or to anyone else who wants it,’ he laughs loudly ‘The world is my home, all the way out to the edges of its universe, past the planets, moons, comets, asteroids and the furthest stars, this beautiful forest and bamboo grove is my clothing. It covers me in soft grass and warm green leaves to protect me from the cold and rain, to shelter me from my enemies. You, my friends, are now sitting and drinking in my pants!’ He swaggers, and collapses back onto the grass.

‘Well said,’ announces the beautiful artist, ‘I’m very happy to be inside your pants. We are your friends. I hope there is room enough for all of us, you are so skinny and gaunt. Maybe you have another pair of pants that can accommodate us. I would like to drink to Shen! We have all come here to see him, to celebrate his release from the stinking sweat hole of his prison. We love you Shen.’ He leans over, with his frail feminine body, and gives Shen a long kiss on his lips. ‘We will never forget when you first came to the Village to visit us. We thought you were a naïve young man but we were wrong. You had already lived a much larger life than us.’

The beautiful artist continues, ‘By the time you came to us, you had already gambled and lost, you’d walked the streets of Tiananmen, where blood flowed and tanks crushed our hopes of justice; you suffered the pain of a thousand needles in the mental hospital. Then you then turned up at the doorstep of our humble artist village. Let’s all raise another glass to Shen, may he continue finding his way, through the Way!’ He rises to his feet, and the group, except for the strong artist who is sleeping, all raise their drinks and gulp down their wine.
The shaman artist puts down his guitar, and stands to his feet, glass in hand. ‘Beautiful artist, may the Way always be your way. I dedicate my tongue to you!’ he blurts out with a loud raucous guffaw, as he throws his long black ponytail back over his shoulder. ‘You believe in the Way, and I believe in the harmonious spirit that connects all things. My tongue is now wet with wine, and I am slightly drunk. This tongue has connected with the Great Wall, the Coliseum, the Temple of Heaven, and even Big Ben. It’s been to Norway, Japan, Singapore and Sydney. This tongue has travelled. When I lay down on the pavement of Tiananmen Square, and licked the hot concrete, I felt pain, and I thought of you, Shen. The thought of you made me smile. I was happy because I realised that people are the most valuable things. I am a person, and you are a person, and nobody can take that away, no matter how much pain and sorrow they cause us, no matter how much they threaten and persecute us. We are people. Men and women, all of us are equal in our precious existence. Even our beloved strong artist who manages to sleep above all this noise and laughter!’ He gives the strong artist a raised glass. ‘May you sleep in peace; may we all sleep in peace.’

‘Hear, hear shaman artist, and you too, strong artist,’ proclaims the artist-bride, who remains seated. Dressed in pants and a Mao hat, she looks like a farm worker from the countryside, ‘Shaman artist, may I say that your guitar playing is a bit like the clouds and mist passing before one’s eyes, my drunken ears hear notes out of tune, or maybe it’s just the wrong melody, no matter, it is the spirit with which the music is played that is important.’

The art-bride places the flute to her lips and plays a beautiful melody that is as sweet and pure as the grass they are sitting on. ‘I think these might be the notes you were aiming for,’ she says jokingly, ‘Anyway, I am happy to be here with you Shen, and with all my fellow artists; it’s better to be carrying a flute than a gun, the sound is much sweeter, don’t you think?’ She points the flute at him as if she is going to shoot.

‘Put that flute down,’ shouts the photo artist ‘You’ll hurt us with that bittersweet melody.’ He stands up and raises his bottle ‘I drink to Shen as well. I drink to his courage and his stupidity. Does he really think his actions will change anything in this country? He’s now been to prison twice, and I know he’s contemplating more drastic action. I can see it in those immutable eyes of his. He is not content to rest on his legacy of suffering in his stand against the state. He has to push himself further, he seeks redemption for sins he has committed in the past, whatever they may be. I am sure he will never tell us;
we are merely his friends. Shen, we sit here drinking not just to the virtue of wine but also to your virtue, though we hardly know you. You are the inscrutable Chinese man,’ the photo artist mocks, ‘At the Village, in those days of avant-garde, everyone sacrificed their bodies for art, they did it so that all could see, either through the public space that surrounded us, or through the photos we took. The blood, the sweat, the bare skin and the pain; we wanted to shock, we wanted to be noticed, and where has it gotten us?’

‘Yes, it’s all changed now,’ interrupts the urban artist loudly, too tired to stand up. ‘In those early days of the Village I was accused of lacking seriousness. I didn’t want to sit around with the boys, drinking and talking philosophy. Well here we all are, drinking and talking philosophy!’ She laughs. ‘Not quite clear conversation, but conversation nonetheless. Shen. Cheers! I empty my glass to you. I’m like the photo artist; I can’t believe things can change, not unless the whole system falls apart. Maybe it’s because he and I are photographers. We observe and capture moments; we are voyeurs trying to frame in pictures what’s really happening, trying to understand visually what others are explaining through their body and mind. There is memory in the image and in the body. Maybe we accept things just as they are presented, maybe we don’t want to change things, just capture them. Like collecting ugly butterflies!’ She raises her glass, and drinks more wine.

The strong artist begins to stir from his sleep. He kicks over a bottle of wine as he stretches his legs to sit up. The bottle falls against one of the glasses strewn across the grass, smashing it.

‘Ah, the sleeping dragon has awoken,’ exclaims the urban artist, ‘the strong artist has decided to join our mortal company. Maybe you might want to add to this conversation. We are all judging Shen and his actions in life. Would you like to comment?’ she asks with friendly sarcasm.

‘What can I say?’ The strong artist starts up. ‘Is this a wake or a celebration, are we here for the beginning of new life or the end of all that has gone before? As Li Shang Yin would say, Sunset is so beautiful, but it is close to dusk. I’d like to think that not only is the sunset beautiful but the dusk is beautiful as well. Shen has made his choices. He sits there like Buddha but I know he’s also full of sin. I’m sure he’s going to turn that sin into beauty, just like the urban artist turned my performances into beauty with his photos, the flies, the fish oil, and a Chinese toilet, transformed into the sublime, and then into riches. It can only happen in China, or, maybe only once you leave China. Shen is an example to all of us. He never gives up hope. He adapts to his situation like a chameleon.'
But he will not compromise, which many of us have chosen to do. Maybe adapt is a better word. Do what you have to do Shen. There is no place in China for our like, we are outsiders and strangers in a land that now belongs to the new princes.'

He pulls himself up, knocking over more glasses and bottles. 'Maybe your future actions will be able to redeem what has gone before. Me, I've always been able to talk my way into redemption, but you, Shen, you act, and you act on your own. I admire you for that.' His voice fades away as though he has run out of energy. He sits back down on the ground.

'Thank you for your words of wisdom,' chimes in the urban artist, 'Maybe you would like to go back to sleep now?'

Shen sits passively on the grass, showing no emotion on his face except a kind of distant calmness. The noise, laughter and heavy drinking, surrounds him but does not penetrate. He just sits, holding his guitar, as though about to play. On seeing the strong artist fall back on the ground, Shen finally manages to give out a smile. He strums a few chords of his favourite tune and begins to sing its melody. The others, having given their valediction to him, sit back and remain silent, as they listen to his singing.

After finishing the song Shen lowers the guitar and leans over to the beautiful artist, kissing him tenderly on the forehead. He holds the beautiful artist's head firmly between his hands.

'I love you dearly,' he says to the artist, 'ever since that first day at the Village when I saw you run across the yard, half naked, and explode that red paint all over your body, playing Pink Floyd, what a show! And those Englishmen weren't shocked, those mad Englishmen in the hot midday sun!'

'I should have poured the paint all over them,' replies the beautiful artist, 'maybe then they would have taken notice. They called themselves G & S. I would rather have them been Du Fu and Li Bai. Shen, I will miss you when you go, I am always with you. Tomorrow the mountains will separate us. After that, who can say? I will always hold you in my heart, Shen. Drink from my glass, so that we will always be united. To Du Fu,

“It is almost as hard for friends to meet
As for the morning and evening stars.
Today then is a rare event,
Joining, in the sunlight.”
The beautiful artist laughs at his own paraphrase of the text.

‘Here we all are in the country, away from the dirt and dust of Beijing where the princes play in their castles and shop for their princesses; we are the people, we will serve ourselves. I have tried to change things too, Shen, but now I have given in to the way of the Tao, and the way of the drink. I’ll now go on a journey to the remotest part of the country and let the roads and dirt tracks take me where they want. I’ll wander aimlessly, yet with purpose. Maybe I’ll never return. The people in power are causing anger all over the country with their rudeness. They’re like one long fart that makes the whole nation stink. They are riding the clouds with their self-satisfaction, snubbing their noses at the people in the street without concern. One day the cliff that they dare to stand on will fall and collapse underneath them. The high and mighty will find themselves in the valley below, maybe the same valley that I’m walking through, then maybe we can have a clear conversation about the meaning of the world.’ The beautiful artist laughs and takes another drink.

‘Thank you for those words, I love you and always will,’ Shen replies, ‘I love everyone who has come here today to say hello, and to say farewell. This escape to the bamboo forest has brought happiness to me. To see and hear my old friends.’

Shen senses a strange smell wafting across the grassland. It wasn’t the sweet luxurious smell of a flowering bamboo forest; it was an odour that did not belong in this landscape of love and pure memory. It belongs to another memory, another time. It was the smell of death. The grass that surrounds him starts to burn to a crisp brown, then to a vacant black. His friends put down their drinks and look towards the burning forest. The smell intensifies, and the emerald grassland slowly dissolves into stark grey …

In the cell, Shen can once again see the grimy walls of his imprisonment. The foul odour is the stench of human shit, coming from the concrete hole in the corner of the cell. He does not know how long he has been in his meditation, he has no way of telling, there is no natural light coming into the room, except for the light from the bare bulb that hangs directly above him. He closes his eyes again to hide them from the electric glare. He tries to recollect his friends, trying to gather them around him, but it is no longer possible …
Yue felt a soft warm body jump onto her lap. The white cat had returned. It purred loudly and licked its rough tongue against the smooth skin of her hand. It purred again, and rubbed its head against her pregnant belly. Lotus moved, kicked her legs, and rolled over. Yue tried to regain the memory that she had just been part of, but it was gone. What she had just received would remain in her heart and soul, as had all the memories before. No resentment remained from this remembering.

The apartment always grounded me in the everyday existence of the love that Lily and I shared.

‘I want one large hug every ten minutes!’ I cried.
‘You and the baby, or just you?’ Lily asked.
‘One for me, one for the baby,’ I demanded softly.
‘Ok, you two try to sit down, I’ll get the timer.’ Lily placed the egg-timer on the table.
‘I’ll let you look after the schedule. I’m sure I can cook and hug you two at the same time. We’re having pasta.’
‘Come and feel the baby?’ I asked.
Lily came over and rested both hands on my stomach. ‘My god, I can feel her leg. There’s another person inside you, it’s a conjurer’s trick. A life inside another life, a Russian doll. It’s like that photo you showed me from Burma. The large Buddha built around the smaller Buddha, cradled in his spiritual womb. Not only that, there are other eggs nesting inside you.’
‘You have eggs too, you know,’ I said.
‘I know, but I don’t want to be bouncing my baby around on stage yelling, fuck, fuck, fuck. He might get the wrong idea.’ She smiled, and hugged me as hard as she could.
‘That counts as a ten minute hug!’
‘Hug me as long as you want Lily. I love that. I’m worried about Shen. His dream played out like a long farewell to his friends. It was a kind of valediction. I’m not sure what it meant. Everybody loves him so much, but he’s determined to make his own path, and to keep that path hidden from everyone, including me.’
'There's nothing you can do now until you contact him. And even then, all you'll probably be able to do is listen. He loves you, and he's single-minded. Sit down and relax. Ten minutes is nearly up,' she said.
(xix) yi - justice

lidōng (start of winter)
There’s a fox shaman who’s still practicing fox-spirit worship up north, in a place called Bolou. My friend, Mei, has just been to visit him. It’s her hometown. The fox temple is over a thousand years old. The shaman calls himself ‘fox thunder.’ His father was also a shaman. There are lots of old ruins in the area, a perfect haunt for fox-spirits. Inside the temple, there’s a large effigy of the Bolou Fox, who also goes by the name of ‘Old Master of the Golden Chan’. The shaman divines people’s health and fortune by drinking strong baijiu, then spitting into his hand.

Next week I’ll be doing my own divining, conjuring up the dream that will hopefully make it possible to locate Shen. I’ve struggled with how this can be done. This morning, I found the answer in the most unlikely of places. I came across these words of Deleuze, ‘The world of judgment establishes itself as in a dream. It is the dream that makes the lots turn (Ezekiel’s wheel) and makes the forms pass in procession.’ In his own fantastic way, Deleuze had conjured up his dream through the Old Testament, he has drawn from the image of ‘Ezekiel’s Wheel’, the wheel of feathers and eyes that drove god’s chariot, Merkabah.

In Deleuze’s world of judgement, it is the dream that dives the wheel. Now I can see how it’s possible to conjure up my own dream, so I can reconnect with Shen. The eternal energy of the same wheel will be harnessed, so Shen’s memory can be captured in the present, the ‘lots can be turned’.

Yue sat in lotus position at the edge of Rong’s veranda. A thin pillow protected her from the cold wooden boards beneath. Rong was sitting in an old wicker chair behind her. It was early morning, tendrils of frost still lingered in the shadows. The sun’s rays broke through the tall cypress pines that bordered the garden, layering gold on green. Her stiff limbs soaked up the warmth.

Yue knew weeks ago that there would have to be a change of direction, that instead of collecting Shen’s memories from a distance, she would have to communicate with him directly. She needed to dream Shen, dream him into an existence that belonged to the shared world of their belonging.
Yue evoked the words of the Old Testament so as to recall Ezekiel’s vision. She spoke the words aloud, reading them from her Bible.

_The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl: and they four had one likeness: and their appearance and their work was as it were a wheel in the middle of a wheel. When they went, they went upon their four sides: and they turned not when they went. As for their rings, they were so high that they were dreadful; and their rings were full of eyes round about them four._

She visualised the bronzed metallic wheels, five of them interlocked like Olympic rings, racing across a washed blue sky interspersed with midnight stars.

_And when the living creatures went, the wheels went by them: and when the living creatures were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up. Whither so ever the spirit was to go, they went, thither was their spirit to go; and the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels. When those went, these went; and when those stood, these stood; and when those were lifted up from the earth, the wheels were lifted up over against them: for the spirit of the living creature was in the wheels._

A red cloud hung in the foreground; a set of wheels with golden wings around their circumference, beat across the heavens. The inner rim of each disc was embedded with sixteen sets of black and white eyes that stared into infinite space.

_And the likeness of the firmament upon the heads of the living creature was as the colour of the terrible crystal, stretched forth over their heads above. And under the firmament were their wings straight, the one toward the other: every one had two, which covered on this side, and every one had two, which covered on that side, their bodies._
The vast wheels emitted a high-pitched, screaming sound as they spun. The sky opened up. A blurred image of Shen sharpened into deep focus. Time slowed down. All that remained was the moment of pure time itself, the immediate memory. The lots had turned. Yue was now in the dream, the dream as memory present,

... Shen stands smiling, in the middle of a grey dirt road that leads endlessly up to what looks liked a monastery. He is wrapped in thick red woollen robes. All that Yue can see of him is his tanned, weather-beaten face. His eyes look downward to the road, not quite ready to stare directly into the foreground; whitewashed clouds that stretch across a pure light blue sky, frame his head.

To his right, a woman approaches from the distance. She wears a white Tibetan-style hat. A black scarf is wrapped tightly around her head, and covers her mouth. She carries a small camera in her left hand. Thick, warm clothing protects her against what is a cold day. To her right an old truck is parked, its load is covered with grey canvas. Off in the distance are the monastery buildings, which include a large, white stupa capped in gold paint. Beyond the buildings is a steep grass-covered mound. The woman walks up to Shen and stands alongside him. Next to Shen she appears diminutive and fragile. She is anxious; in contrast to Shen, who wears a carefree smile ...

There was a familiarity about the woman that Yue could not quite recapture, maybe it was the way she held herself, or maybe it was her easy familiarity with Shen.

... ‘It’s time to go, Shen,’ the woman says in a voice that mimics her small stature. ‘You’re no longer safe here. The authorities might arrive any day. We have no idea anymore what they are up to, or how much they know.’

Shen gives a deep broad smile; he could disappear into that smile.

‘I am staying here, where I belong,’ he replies with assurance, ‘this is my spiritual home; this is where I belong. Too much has already happened here at Kirti; blood has flowed. Kirti is a place that has its own destiny. Don’t worry. It’s early, and the young monks are just about to start their debating. There is plenty of time to worry, but little time to enjoy the day. We are lucky, the rain has stopped and wind has left us. The young men are very lively; they will be loving the sunshine.’

The two of them walk slowly back up the road. Shen holds the woman’s hand,
relaxed and casual, as though they have been friends all their lives. A tiny blue-tailed wren follows their journey up to the monastery. It flies up ahead of Shen and the woman, wagging its tail as it waits for them. Just when they have caught up with it, the small bird flies ahead again.

Shen and the woman pass through the monastery gate, and enter a large courtyard surrounded by high walls that are coloured goldenrod yellow. An old woman is walking along the wall closest to them, her body framed against the stucco, like a modernist Picasso. The colours overtake any meaning. The old woman’s body is bent over with age and tiredness. She is just able to support herself with a bamboo cane that at its base is wrapped a piece of old white cloth. At the curved top of the cane there is a matted piece of sheep’s wool, tied with a small scrap of vermilion silk cloth. The old woman clutches the cane with her gloved hand. She wears a simple white cloth hat that is tied with a bow at its back. It is spotted with dirt and looks older than its owner. Her overcoat top is Persian orange, two bright cotton scarves are wrapped around her neck, one fuchsia pink, the other cobalt blue. Her skirt is thick wool, dark brown with green trimming at the base. She also wears a long brown apron and black cotton shoes. In her other hand she carries a set of Tibetan prayer beads – white, red and blue ...

Yue was captive to the sublime beauty of the old woman. She wondered how far she had travelled, and what she had seen in her long hard life. How many years had she worn those clothes? Where had she travelled to get those scraps of wool and cloth that were now part of who she was? Who had given her the prayer beads? Had she seen the killing of the monks at Kirti? Had she ever had the chance to talk to Shen, had she seen Shen earlier, on this same morning?

... Shen and the woman stand in the square courtyard. The young monks are dressed in carmine-red robes and wear elaborate head-covers, most of which are coloured yellow, others are in different shades of orange. The monks are seated in double rows of around twenty, positioned back to back. There are five large groups seated like this, spread across the cold white concrete of the courtyard. All the young men are in good spirits, jostling with each other as they rock from side to side.

‘They are excited that the debating is about to start,’ says Shen as he leans closer to the woman. ‘This is the best part of the day. When I was training I loved this time,
after all those dark hours of meditation and studying the sutras. We’d get up at three in the morning and go to bed at eight in the night. After all the study, our chance to debate for two or three hours in the middle of the day was heaven, or should I say nirvana,’ he laughs. ‘It was a time to practice all that you’d learnt. There, look! The questioners are standing up to play their role.’ He shouts with youthful excitement.

A number of the young men rise to their feet; each of them is standing in front of their partnered monk who remains seated. The questioners slowly lean forward, bending towards their opponents.

‘See, the questioner is trying to take the defender off guard by introducing himself. The defender is sitting down in humbleness and humility, but he’ll have a few tricks up his sleeve as well. He’s trying to defend what he’s learnt. They’re both clever and young, and they both want to win. First, the defender has to put forward his thesis. He’s probably very nervous, but he’s enthused. He has less experience than the questioner. Maybe like a young inexperienced lover with an older mate.’ Shen laughs.

The sound of loud shouting and clapping of hands begins to echo around the courtyard; there is much jeering and encouragement from the novice monks looking on.

‘See those two at the end of that line?’ Shen gestures with his hand, ‘The questioner has his robe over his left shoulder, he hasn’t beaten his defender. He’s trying his hardest. He’s clapping his hands like a madman. He’s like a young bull in a meadow of cows.’

The young monk that Shen points to shouts again and stands up, clapping his hands together with great gusto. Then, with his right hand he circles the young novice’s head, once, twice, three times. The questioner stands tall and proud, and with a great flourish, grabs his robe and wraps it around his waist, baring both shoulders. He draws back his right hand, away from the sitting novice, and smiles.

‘Ah, he’s won!’ he half-shouts to the woman, ‘So quick; they will go on like this for hours.’

The woman has been listening to Shen intently, enjoying the theatre of it all. She corrects herself with a concerned look and takes Shen by the arm.

‘This is no good Shen. You have to leave. You can stand here all day pretending nothing is happening but the fact is, you are in real danger; this place could be swamped by the army and police any moment, just like last year. There’s no amount of debating and hand clapping that’s going to stop that.’
‘I’m left with my own fate, I’ve accepted that,’ he answers calmly, a hint of coldness in his voice. ‘I will not run any longer. They’ve put me in prison twice, they’ve tried to brainwash me, and they’ve made it impossible for me to see my sister for fear of them hurting her like they’ve hurt me. I’m staying here.’

‘We’ve organised a safe passage for you out of the country,’ the woman persists. ‘We can get you through the border at Thailand then fly you to India. We have a truck fitted out to smuggle you down to the border. Everything is planned.’

Shen keeps on watching the novice monks. ‘Xuni, I understand what you are saying. I appreciate all that has been done, but it hasn’t been done in my name. It’s been done in the name of the Dalai Lama. I can no longer even answer to him.’

The woman steps back and almost whispers, ‘Shen, do you know what you are saying? He has requested your move to Dharamsala. He sees it as a just and beneficial move for you. There can be no argument with regard to this.’

‘No argument,’ he smiles. ‘Look at those novice monks, hundreds of them. What are they doing, questioning and defending? Am I a heretic if I go against his word, or are we having our own friendly debate without words? It might appeal to his sense of humour.’

‘You do sound like a heretic, Shen. It’s not supposed to be just about you. I have my job to do. You have your job to do. The picture is very large, it stretches all the way to Dharamsala and back to Tibet,’ the woman sighs. ‘We have until tomorrow to leave.’

‘As you please Xuni, you won’t be held responsible. I’ll take all responsibility. It rests on my shoulders easily, like the first strokes of the sun that come to us here at the courtyard in the morning. My intention is clear. Hundreds of monks have been killed over the years. My life is insignificant.’

He puts his left hand forward, like one of the young novice monks, and wraps his upper robe around his waist. It is a sign of his understanding and control.

‘Shen, we’ve known each other a long time. Since we first met in Lijiang. I just can’t let go like this.’ She wants to grab Shen, and pulls away at the last moment ...

Yue, now realised that the woman in the memory was Xuni, Shen’s friend in Lijiang who he’d asked to search for the truth about Lumei; the Xuni who had fallen in love with Lumei.
‘Xuni you’ve been good to me.’ He places his arm around her shoulder, ‘To run into you again in Beijing, when I was with Zhang, was such a blessing for me. I’d lost my way and you were there to show me that life could be good.’

Xuni laughs, ‘It’s strange for me to see you dressed in monk’s robes instead of jeans and t-shirt. I’ll never get used to it, making love to you in Beijing. I feel embarrassed talking about it, but it is how I will always remember you. I didn’t think it would drive you to being a Buddhist monk!’ She laughs again.

‘Maybe the love-making was so good I had to go into retreat for ten years to get over it,’ jokes Shen, ‘You opened up my heart again; opened it up so that I could see. You and Zhang turned everything around for me.’ ...

Yue wondered if this is why Zhang had never told her about Shen’s friendship with him in Beijing. Maybe Zhang had thought that she wouldn’t be able to accept Shen’s relationship.

‘Turned everything around, maybe?’ Xuni replies. ‘You were angry, Shen. No wonder you and Zhang got along so well. I think both of you could have knocked holes in those walls with your bare hands. I was sad. I never thought that Lumei and I would ever break up.’

‘The three of us had no chance.’ said Shen, ‘From an unrequited ménage à trois to Buddhist monk, it’s a long journey, and before that an even longer one. You knew about the gambling and the drugs, but nothing about the one event that’s caused all this blindness. It’s the reason why the two of us are here at this very moment. It’s the reason for me staying here, and doing what is needed.’ ...

The wheels kept turning against the blood red sky. Out of the silence, the sound of metal ripping against metal filled the air. It was the machine, the Chariot of God; the wheels driving the memory were grinding to a halt.

Yue centred herself, drawing on her qi to restore the energy required to keep the wheels turning. She needed to keep Shen in the present. The qi flowed freely through her. The sky turned in on itself, red folding in on white, and white folding in on blue. The wheels regained their momentum, the feathers again spun in pure white, the eyes opened to crystal black. The terrifying sound of the grinding wheels retreated
gradually into silence, the sky became a bleached blue. The wheels turned freely and
the memory was restored. She could see Shen and Xuni in the middle of the
courtyard. There was the sound of clapping, and shouting from the young monks.
Xuni continued her conversation with Shen.

... ‘I loved you Shen. When you left Beijing, I never thought I would see you again. You
took all that I had and then you disappeared. You say I gave you back your heart, but
you took mine. It’s fate, that in the end we both chose the same direction.’

‘To find each other again at Kirti,’ he says, ‘but now we’ll go our separate ways.
Now’s the time we will let go.’

‘I understand that,’ she says.

‘Yue’s the one person, though, who needs to know everything. She must know. I’d
hoped that the memories I left for her, would be enough,’ he says.

‘I’m sure she will see the truth. Tonight, I’ll ring whoever needs to be told, that you
will not be returning, that you will stay here in Kirti. Events will sort themselves out.
We are mere sentient beings holding onto this one life. Am I right?’ Xuni smiles.

‘We are going our own way,’ Shen replies with good humour.

Xuni looks off towards where the monks are debating.

‘The ground’s fallen out from under our feet,’ Shen says. ‘Soon, I’ll leave behind my
belonging. It will be a great relief. I have to go now. Have a safe journey back to
Dharamsala.’

Shen walks away. Neither of them expects any further conversation. Each step
takes Shen a thousand miles from where she’s standing. Xuni looks towards the
novice monks who are clapping and shouting their way through their arguments. She
takes her mobile phone from her pocket and starts dialling.

Shen heads over to an expanse of chrome yellow wall in the near distance and sits
beside an older monk who is watching the novices. The monk has silvery-black hair.
He wears a pair of oversized black-rimmed glasses, which magnify his eyes
somewhere into the viewer’s foreground. The monk, in ceremonial red robes, wears
prayer beads around his neck, and an unusual cowhide glove over his left hand. His
right hand is bare, exposed to the Tibetan coldness. It holds a wooden cane that is as
weathered as the old man’s face ...

Yue continued to gaze at the memory image. Her brother conversed with the old man
as a son might confide with his father.

...‘The time’s come, Rinpoche. I hope you understand,’ Shen said calmly.

‘Do I? I can’t fully comprehend what you are planning to do,’ the elderly monk says. ‘You know I cannot condone this. It’s beyond anything I have had to deal with. There is a tradition to what you are doing. We both know that. I have to respect your intention in doing this.’ His voice is full of a melancholy sadness, his weary eyes intensify the feeling.

‘The Dalai Lama wants me to return to Dharamsala,’ says Shen. ‘I have sent word, through Xuni that I will not be returning; she’s stood by me through all of this. Her support has helped me survive all that’s been thrown at me, but it’s now time to cut our ties. Will you make sure she’s looked after?’

‘Of course, she is part of our family. She will be kept safe. There will always be a place for her. I am sure she’ll do much good.’

‘I must go now. I have to talk to Phuntsog. There is much to do, and very little time.’ Shen is totally focused on the task he is to carry out.

He strides away from the old man towards the main assembly hall ...

*

The loud piercing sound resurfaced and the wheels ground to a slow and final halt. The images of Shen and the monastery flickered like an old TV screen; the memory image was filled with static. The sky turned back to blood red; the images and sounds withdrew into an emptiness of eerie silence.

Yue could again sense her body. Her limbs ached with stiffness and tension. She could feel her skin touching the pillow beneath. There was the chirping of birds from the garden, the natural light of the day streamed into her consciousness. She straightened her legs across the wooden boards. Rong remained sitting behind her.

‘Yue, are you okay?’ he said, with a mixture of concern and expectation.

‘I’m fine,’ she said, ‘I connected with Shen. He’s alive and well, and not far from here. He’s safe, and there are good people looking after him.’ She avoided telling the truth, both to Rong and to herself. ‘They’ll have a hard job finding him. He’s well protected.’

‘Good. We have get through this. Do you think we should go and see him? Is he far
away?’

‘No definitely not, we are sure to be followed. He said that he would contact me again, no matter how difficult it would be for him.’

‘You don’t think we could go to him, if we are very careful. I think he needs to talk. He is consumed with such righteous indignation. There’s much that we can tell him that might help him,’ Rong insisted.

‘Rong, I said no! I don’t want to argue with you.’ She tried to make it sound final.

‘Yue, I need to see him. It’s critical for the both of us. It might save his life. How can you be so sure what is and isn’t good for him. I’ve known him a long time. It was me that he first trusted.’ There was frustration in voice that she had not heard before.

‘You don’t believe that I know what’s right when it comes to Shen, is that what you’re saying? We share a belonging. You will never understand, Rong,’ she had lost her patience. ‘I can’t believe you would go against me.’

‘I’m listening to you, Yue. I hear what you’re saying, but I know things that you don’t know. I understand these people who are after him. They are ruthless. They will do anything to keep themselves in power. You have to let me see Shen,’ he shouted, as he strode across the veranda.

‘I don’t have to do anything Rong! I’m leaving now. I won’t discuss this anymore. Tomorrow I will leave to go to Lijiang. I will come back in a fortnight. Hopefully by then you’ll see reason. You’re anger over this shocks me. I hate having to argue. I have a baby inside me, and I have a brother who is about to act in a way that will change things forever.’ She stopped, having gone too far.

‘What do you mean? What is he planning?’ Rong asked.

‘Shen is who he is. I have no idea what he is up to. I have a feeling that’s all, a gut feeling. I am sure he will let me know when the time comes. I’m leaving now. Take care, Rong,’ She had finished talking, and walked away from the studio.

Lily was lying on the bed, reading. I went over to her. She put her book down and rested her hand on Lotus.

‘You’re a brave woman. I’m proud of you. You’ve never wavered in your devotion and loyalty to your brother, always aroused by righteous indignation, that’s our Yue.’ Lily is full of love as she speaks. ‘You two have an affection for each other that’s even stronger
than family. You’re like lovers. If I wasn’t such an unselfish and wonderful person, I’d be jealous.’

‘Yes, it’s your modesty that makes you special,’ I reply with a smile. ‘It’s only shy girls who join punk rock bands.’ I place both my hands on top of hers. ‘You’ve gone through this journey with me, never questioning where it might end. You’ve always believed in me. You really are crazy.’

‘I don’t have to believe in you, I know you. From the very beginning, you knew that. I could never have imagined someone like you existing before we met. I love my friends because they always try so hard to be who they are, but you’re different. With you, it’s like you’ve been here before, but you’ve somehow forgotten,’ Lily said.

‘Yes, you’re right, not knowing whether to dance in the fox-fires, or crouch in the shadows, or just be with you, playing in the park on a sunny day. I feel like I’ve been here before, but it seems a hundred years ago,’ I said.

‘Poor Yue, old before your time. I’ve always wanted a mature and experienced woman.’

‘Seven hundred years old?’ I offered.

‘Maybe not that much experience, or I’d have nothing to offer you, I want to give something to this relationship, even if it’s me not having anything,’ Lily replied.

I laughed. ‘Oh life, why can’t it be simple.’

‘Nothing’s simple, you know that,’ she said.

I fall back into Lily’s lap and look up at the bare white ceiling. As I drift off to sleep I fill my thoughts with both our imaginations.
义

(xx) yì - justice

小雪 xiǎohán (minor snow)
I’ve just come in from the veranda, trying to find my body again after another sleepless night. The morning air has soaked in last night’s fresh snow from the mountain. Lotus is being her usual self; she’s kicked me a dozen times already. I feel like a giant panda. I have to push my chair back from the table just to get pen to paper. It’s not easy to escape the weight of her. She relentlessly falls to earth. She has locked herself in, head down and feet up.

I’ll stay in Baisha this fortnight rather than take the long journey back to Beijing. There’s a deep silent undertow between Rong and me, and events are moving fast, Shen’s almost certainly at Kirti. The black clouds piling up against Jade Dragon Snow Mountain make me think of him, and what he might do. I miss Lily so much.

They say that fox spirits belong to the borderlands between the natural and supernatural, the space where the chaotic and the unpredictable overlap with the natural order of the world. It’s where the Tao confronts Confucius, far too dangerous a place for Mao. He banned such feudal superstition during his time, along with most writings related to the ‘strange’. Foxes lie in-between the divine beings and the demons; as Ji Yun wrote, ‘Foxes and humans are different species.’ Songling, I miss you too.

———

memory and place

The next morning, Yue walked through Baisha on the way to get the bus to the Old Town. Strong currents of icy water rushed down from Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. The fresh early winter snows had begun to fall high up on the plateaus and peaks. The snows melted quickly in the mild winter sun, feeding the mountain streams that fell into the Naxi-built channels used to irrigate the fields. The drains were blocked with rubbish, sending streams of water flowing across the cobblestone road. Yue worked her way through the flooded water. An old Naxi man had told her that the water had once been used for drinking but now because of all the pollution from upstream, it was only good for settling the dust and watering the gardens.

She scrambled onto the local bus and headed towards Lijiang. Winter was
approaching fast. Outside, the fields were bare, with just the stalks of autumn-cut corn rising as stubble from the brown leached earth. The fields further out towards the hills were already planted with wheat, and small irrigation ditches had been cut open, allowing the mountain water to spread across the earth in a flood of nurturing moisture. In the distance, she could see the new military establishment, painted in pale green to blend in with the countryside. On the hill directly at the rear of the base lay a small Buddhist temple. The crown of the hill was once decorated with hundreds of yellow prayer flags that had cascaded down the slopes in ribbons of colour. A few weeks after the base was built the flags disappeared.

Yue entered the old town from the south, and thought back on how many times she’d travelled these lanes over the past year, gathering Shen’s memories. The reading of these memories had enabled depths of meaning not previously thought possible. But she had not been able to uncover the origin of the darkness that resided deep within her brother’s thinking. She loved him, and he loved her. It should have been that simple. She wanted him to be at Lotus’ birth, to be the brother, father and uncle of her child.

Standing in the middle of the old square, she was filled with a sense of belonging. She had come to know and love the people here. They had done their best to make her feel at home, especially the local Naxi women who she had a special affinity with. Their beliefs had a strong resonance with her belonging. They held a shared belief in the strength of women.

She walked beside the Naxi wells, past the school where the grandparents waited outside for their precious children, and across to Zhongyi market, which she loved for all the energy and life that was contained within it. At the entrance to the narrow alley that led to the market, the Naxi women were lined up against the mudbrick wall, selling their fresh ripe produce. The fruit was packed up in shallow cane baskets, pomegranates, peaches, grapes, green apples, and yellow plums. A tourist was bargaining over the price of a pound of succulent grapes that would have come from the south. It was hard to argue with the wooden and steel scales that the women used so deftly. The women sat relaxed and mindful, as though they had seen everything there was to see. She loved their strength, the way they sat there all day, everyday. Once they knew she was living as a local, they quickly made her part of the family, allowing her to join in on their gossip and risqué jokes. Behind the women, lay black spray-painted mobile numbers spread out across the walls; she had laughed when
first told that these numbers, which are found plastered over every town in China, were often advertising the sale of faked government documents.

The local farmers barged through the markets with their goods, carrying their produce in their sun baked hands and arms, or in traditional Naxi baskets strapped across their back. Even in the brief time she had been living there, the bamboo baskets had gradually been replaced with those made of plastic, in colours of pink, blue, green and white. She passed the green-and-pink sweet rice cakes steaming in the cookers, a delicacy for early morning shoppers. Along the alley she stopped to sit down, feeling heavy with Lotus. She watched the Naxi women cutting away at the fresh walnuts that were in season. Their patience and skill amazed her as they chopped around the hard shell with large steel knives, meticulously extracting the twisted nut that lay inside. All this for twenty kuai a pound. The women saved the discarded shells for the garden or feeding of fire at home. Nothing was wasted. After their work they sat back and relaxed, eating a simple meal of rice and vegetable pickles, chatting to whoever passed by. Across the alley sat a young Naxi man sipping green tea from a plastic bottle. Next to him sat a young woman on a low wooden stool, washing clothes in a pink plastic washbasin with a block of yellow soap.

Further down the walkway was the store owned by Madame Li. Yue loved visiting this small cramped shop which sold every conceivable product capable of being dried – endless varieties of mushrooms, giant tree fungi a foot wide, sea cucumber, bark from a dozen trees, fruit pods, larvae, starfish, locust shells, saffron, jujubes: and, flowered teas of chamomile, chrysanthemum, rose and jasmine, marigold, amaranth, orange, and peony with colours of purple, yellow, orange and white. There was dried lemon, rosella, seaweed stems, roots, medicinal baijiu and all the black, red and green teas, especially the pu’er teas. Madam Li would sit there all day, gossiping and laughing; sharing tea at her massive teak table with whoever was passing by. Today they only chatted briefly.

Yue walked deeper into the markets, enjoying the bustle of the cafés, shops and restaurants of the Old Town. There was fresh honey and beeswax from the hills around Lashi Lake, local copperware from Baisha, stalls of fresh rice and egg noodles, large yellow and grey rounds of local jelly made from bean, chunky potatoes frying in woks of sizzling hot oil, and piles of freshly wafer thin potato chips. Added to this was an unusual sight of a Naxi woman reading peoples palms for two kuai. Onlookers laughed at her predictions. Further down the alley was her old friend Yang, selling
fried potatoes. Yue wrapped the potatoes up in some flat bread. This was her version of a chip sandwich.

Even deeper in the market were mounds of unwashed brown potatoes piled up in front of vendors who sat on old ramshackle lounge chairs waiting for a sale. Dried salty pork hung from wooden frames nearby. Below the legs of pork were dozens of beef-carcass ribs spread out for display on old wooden tables. In the next shop, a young woman wearing a Playmate pink apron, stir-fried three separate meals in three different woks, while at the same time talking on her mobile phone. The woman heated the rapeseed oil to a smoky high, then threw in the ginger, red chilli, garlic, capsicum, water, tofu, then more oil, chicken, chilli mix, capsicum, fungus and spring onion. She was completely at ease as she cooked.

Further along, Yue came across shadowed stalls of fresh vegetables, sellers of freshly picked mushrooms, a woman washing pigs gizzard in a bucket overflowing with intestine, fresh buns and dough-sticks, early morning noodles, a vintage crushing machine with iron wheels and rubber straps that clanked loudly as it pounded silently into a bucket of crushed chilli, a woman sleeping with her head lying next to a pillow of fresh enoki mushrooms, a man meticulously laying out fresh matsuke mushrooms, peanuts being steamed in their shells, roasted chestnuts, sacks of sunflower seeds, bunches of artificial bright flowers for sale, and at the very edge of the market, a group of Naxi women, crowded around a female hawker. The woman was demonstrating the tying of intricate hair clips on a Western-style mannequin, complete with long-flowing black hair.

Yue came to the exit of the market. As she walked out onto the main road there was a realization that she would probably never see this market again. It made her want to capture every moment, every sight and smell in intimate detail. She wanted to remember every detail. Soon she would have to leave Lijiang and the sanctuary of the Baisha studio. She wanted to give birth to Lotus in Beijing. Her apartment there would be more comfortable and much warmer. She would feel safer, protected by the anonymity of the city, and by the presence of Lily.

After Yue left the market she travelled north through the Old Town. There was a need to look for one last memory. She sensed that Shen might have stored a memory in the Taoist temple, high up on the slope of Lion Hill, in the grounds of the Mu Palace, the residence of the last Naxi king. She walked up the steps to the temple and entered the darkened sanctuary where Taoist priests divined their fortunes.
The silence and the aroma of the sassafras incense, rapidly gave up Shen’s memory of light and water.

**how butterflies dream, and fish see beauty**

... Rong and Shen are at the mountain hut. Yue is there also, to see Shen for the first time, but she is sick with fever. She is lying down in the bedroom, only half conscious. Shen has just been released from prison for the second time.

Rong and Shen sit on the veranda looking out to the bamboo forest and the nearby waterfall that plunges down from the mist-covered cliffs above. Shen is gaunt and fragile looking. This is how Yue remembers him in her haze of fever. She sees his strength, and his weakness. The determination can be read in his posture. He sits cross-legged on the bare wooden floor. His body is taut. He leans forward towards Rong with action and decisiveness.

‘Rong, how am I to know what you are thinking?’ says Shen defiantly, ‘I am determined to pursue justice and I am not going to turn back.’

‘I called you here because I wanted to talk,’ replies Rong seriously, ‘Do you really think you have to choose honour overall else; you’re a reasonable man. For many years I believed that events had to take their course; that non-action was the only action one should take, but in recent years I’ve tried to take a more active role. This has brought me much grief and anguish. I’m trying to reason with you, I’m not trying deny you your free will.’

‘I’m listening, Rong. Only yesterday I was in prison. Now, I’m sitting here in this wilderness, with you opposite me, and my sister only metres away in the next room. I’m trying to take in all that’s happening. Yue is very ill. It should be the three of us talking here, our closeness lies beyond blood relations. This was to be the first time for us to be together since she was a baby. I wasn’t able to see her growing up. I had always imagined her strong, dark and tanned, with long thick hair, not delicate with pale skin, her hair cut short. She is a true fox-spirit.’ He looks towards where she must be lying. His expression is one of love and loss.

‘Rong, what is it you want to say?’ he asks.

‘I want you to stop what you are doing. I want you to come to a halt. It is getting far too dangerous. I’ve been told that you are to be put under heavy surveillance. There
are people in the Bureau that I am still close to, old school friends who maintain the
pretence of brotherhood. Their politics are not mine. These people are my friends,
and my enemies.’

‘Enemies, and friends, a strange resolve,’ replies Shen with feigned amusement, ‘I
would have thought that when it comes to the Bureau it would have to be one or the
other.’ He claps his hands together, as one of the young monks would have done
debating at the monastery. ‘It’s hard to be sitting next to the devil and not be
influenced by him. I trust you of course, but these are strange bedfellows you’re
keeping. I’m sure you’re right that they will do their best to track me down, but I will
not rest, and I am in great debt to my sister. I have to go soon. I’ll send a message to
Yue later, when she’s well. I will tell her that you’re the one person she should trust.
Look after her well. In the time that you have with her, make her aware of how the
butterfly dreams, and how fish can see beauty in their own way. Teach her. She will
teach you about our belonging. I may not see you again.’

The cicadas start their loud singing in the summer heat, and Shen’s voice becomes
a distant sound in the noise of winged insects awakening ...

The smell of the incense drifted away, and with it the memory. This was an old
memory. Yue wished that she’d received it much earlier. Here were the first warnings
towards Rong. Here were the first sign’s of Shen’s determination to take action. The
temple was empty. She lifted herself up from the floor, and began to slowly descend
the stairs. Lotus was heavy.
圆寂

(xxii) yuán jì – death

dà xuě (major snow)
Lotus is playing games, pushing and kicking her legs, reminding me she’s here.

The other night was a dream about Shen. He took the form of a very old monk living in a monastery, deep within the mountains of Shandong. The dream began with Shen confessing to another senior monk, admitting to him that even though he had the form of a human, in reality he was a fox-spirit living his five-hundredth lifetime, a punishment he’d received for having dared to say that, ‘the laws of karmic reckoning could not affect a person who was in a state of enlightenment.’ Shen was requesting the Rinpoche to release him from his suffering. To do this, the Rinpoche would have to speak to Shen a phrase so powerful that it would shock him into seeing the truth once again about karmic reckoning.

The Rinpoche clapped his hands loudly, and uttered the necessary words. Shen instantly became aware, and was once again human. The next day, Shen and a few of the novice monks found the carcass of a dead fox nearby at the edge of the forest. They took the carcass back to the Rinpoche who gave the dead fox a proper burial with religious rites. Shen then thanked the Rinpoche for his exorcism, and promised he would never again commit such a lapse in moral thinking.

After waking, I realised where the dream had come from. Before falling asleep I had been reading an old Buddhist folktale called, ‘Miss Ren’, which had a very similar story. In my dream, the master Pai-chang, from the ‘Miss Ren’ story, had become the Rinpoche, and the fox-spirit monk in the story had become Shen. And what were the words that Pai-chang had spoken in the original tale to shock the monk into awareness? They were: ‘Does even a person of great cultivation fall into causality, or not?’ And what was the monk’s response after his realisation? … ‘Such a person does not obscure causality.’ The fox-spirit monk and Shen had both seen their mistake.

There was another saying in the old Buddhist folktale that I liked: ‘The emotions of supernatural beings reflect the meaning of human existence.’

The morning was frozen. Overnight, the bad weather had swept in from the west, crashing across the desert plains, down into the city. Yue had to force herself out
from the warmth of her bed and into the cold. Her legs were cramped and her back ached. The two-day train trip from Lijiang had been hard. Outside, Beijing was blanketed in snow. The courtyards, streets and rooftops were a single sheet of silence and poetry. It was the deep snow of winter.

*a trepidation of metaphysics*

In the afternoon, Yue travelled to the studio with a trepidation that held the physicality of Lotus and the metaphysics of Shen. Rong’s garden was pure white except for a few patches of green azalea breaking through occasional empty spaces. The sound of fresh snow surrendered underfoot.

This meeting with Rong was to be unlike any other. It was critical to connect with Shen again, she needed to be with him in the immediate present. Today she wanted to talk directly to Shen, not observe him from a distance. She wanted to have a pure conversation, to hear the music of both heaven and earth.

Yue and Rong had discussed in detail the arrangements for the day’s session. Her chair was to be placed at the centre of the room and Rong’s chair about two metres behind. Rong’s role was to act as emotional support if needed, their mistrust to be laid aside. She did not want Rong in her direct line of vision. Rong’s teachings of the previous year were going to be put into practice. He had taught her much regarding Taoist practice, especially in the teachings of the School of the Inner Alchemy. Here, the thought processes were tamed and sublimated. Yue had kept extensive notes of these teachings in her separate blue journal.

Rong had prepared an intricately carved bronze talisman for her. He had learnt this skill as a Taoist master. This talisman would give her extra protection and strength in the inner journey that she would have to take. Across the two sections of the talisman were carved the four hundred and forty-four characters of the *Huangdi Yinfujing*, which contained descriptions of body-spiritual techniques. Rong had cut the talisman into two sections. One half he would hang around Yue’s neck, the other half would be placed in front of a photo of Shen as a Buddhist monk. The photo sat on a small red lacquer table facing Yue. The two parts of the talisman would ensure a contract of faith and trust between Shen and her during the journey.

In the studio, the tension was brittle with the recent past. Rong stepped over to the
corner of the room to stoke the fire. The snow was weighted and heavy outside, the windows misted with the condensation of their Yue and Rong's presence.

‘I'll be right here behind you,’ he said. ‘I won’t interrupt unless you ask. You have been a good student. Your belonging has brought you a long way in your teachings. You have great control over your qi, be comfortable with it.’

‘I've loved your teachings, Rong. I know it was one of your promises to Shen that you would pass this knowledge on to me. Now we can put it to use,’ she said.

Yue picked up the three incense sticks that were beside Shen's photo and walked from the room to the edge of the veranda. She set each of the sticks alight then blew them out, one by one. The incense smoke drifted upwards, across and over the cold snowbound garden, the ashes falling gently to the ground – the pure would rise, and the impure fall – heaven meeting earth. Yue returned to the studio, comforted by its warmth, and held her hand softly on Lotus as she shuffled to the centre of the room. The snow surrounded the house with silence. She took the warm tea from the stove, and sat down in front of Shen’s photo. Rong took his place behind her.

**a golden flower growing**

In the meditation she would reverse all those processes that acted as the cause of one’s death; she would harness the life forces. This would lead herself to the sacred embryo that lay within. The sacred embryo that was the soul, others would call it god, the collective unconscious, the being. It was who she was; it was what made her human.

She began to meditate. As she straightened her back, she forced her legs flat to the floor, and set up a cycle of breathing, inhaling all that was pure, exhaling all that was impure. She visualised Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, so as to channel its strength and energy. As her breathing grew stronger and more regular she felt the channels of inner circulation begin to open. She was completely relaxed. The rush of qi travelled from the heart, down through the abdomen, completing itself in the kidneys.

The ‘ocean of breath’, the place where the qi would collect, was focused at a point just below the navel, in the lower ‘field of cinnabar’, the *tan-t’ien*; it was here that the qi became concentrated; this was where the sacred embryo resided. Her breathing continued into a deep meditation, the qi entered the *shen-t’ai* and travelled back through the inner circulation up into her mouth. Here the qi had to be quickly
swallowed so that all the energy gathered could be stored. It was in the shen-t’ai that she would connect with Shen. This was the part of the self that remained after death, and travelled to the next body. It lay adjacent to her other embryo, Lotus.

As the qi rushed through her body, she could sense her physical organs in minute detail – the liver, the intestines, the kidney, the capillaries, the corpuscles, the individual nerves and neurons, the mitochondria, the synapses. Within the lower cinnabar field, the inner qi, the essence and the ching blended. The three forces came into focus. The visualisation of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain dissolved into white light.

Yue half-opened her eyes. Through the soft light she could distinguish the windows of the studio, the table littered with Rong’s stones, the books, and the photo of Shen. They existed without meaning or association. The room and its objects no longer contained memory, there was only an acute sense of the present, a present that possessed no boundaries or horizons, only a fullness of being, Yue was the world. She was the universe that stretched out to infinity and folded back on itself, a pure glass ball without edges. There was a sense of calmness not thought possible; all that was left was acceptance. Into this pure space, Shen appeared,

... He sat, fully clothed in monk robes, surrounded by the trappings of a prayer room, deep within the walls of Kirti monastery. Yue was beside him. Shen looked directly into her eyes. They were able to talk to one another in the same space.

‘You’ve brought us together again, Yue, it’s been more than two years. You are an every day thought for me, my heart is always filled with you.’

‘You are right beside me, Shen, it’s wonderful. I want to cry. I want to hug you. To keep you close. Rong is in the studio but he can’t hear us. I no longer trust him. It’s so sad for me to have to say that.’

‘I’ve known from the time we had our meeting in the mountains that he was no longer to be trusted. I had to tell you otherwise. I took that chance. I knew there was still a part of him that wanted to help us. His flaw lies between his past and present.’

‘You knew about Rong, but you didn’t tell me?’

‘You had to find out for yourself. If I’d told you earlier, you wouldn’t have trusted him at all, things would have been different. I don’t know whether betrayal is the right word for him. He is caught up in his own dealings. He has a weakness that I’m sure they are happy to exploit.’

‘I understand what you’re saying, Shen, but what about you? You are in Kirti. In the
last memory, I heard you talking with Xuni, and with the old monk. I am sick with worry.’

‘In my heart you’ve never been far away, Yue. It’s good that we are together now. It is pure thought and mind, a clear conversation without the wine of old friends. I am out of the bamboo forest. We need to talk of the past.’

‘We should be celebrating that we’ve found each other again. I’ll do anything for you, Shen.’

‘You shouldn’t. What have you learnt from the memories I’ve left?’

‘What have I learnt from you. I’ve learnt that you had to make your own way when you were young and angry. I’ve learnt of your love for Uncle Li, and of your anger at being left alone. I saw your fall into drunkenness and gambling. I know of your torment at Tiananmen, and your pain in prison when they tried to break your mind and spirit. I saw how you tried to restart your life with the artists in the Beijing Village, and how those people became true friends. I know about your search for love in Lijiang, and how that love was destroyed. I know that for years you went into retreat. I know I was proud when you emerged as a monk, willing to speak out on injustice, even though it led you once again into prison. I know how much you wanted to see me at Rong’s mountain retreat, and that when we finally met in Beijing you were full of love, when I was full of anger.’

‘All those things are true, Yue. You have tried so hard to understand. I love you for that. But, what I hoped for is still missing. There were clues in the memories, fragments of truth that I never had the courage to tell you directly. I thought the memories would suffice. I was wrong. It was a flawed plan, and I gave you an impossible task. I’m sorry.’

‘Never be sorry, Shen. I understand what you’re saying. I knew there was something missing, a darkness that I feared like the lion that leapt down at me at night when I was a child. I guessed that whatever it was, it was countered by everything that was good in you. This part of you scared me. And Rong, did you place him in your memory at the prison to warn me, or was he really there?’

‘He was there. He’d been sent to that prison for speaking up against the state. We became friends, united in our contempt. But he was never there at the hospital table; he never took part in what you saw happening. We did have long discussions, trying to replace the thoughts they had tried to erase. I placed Rong in the memory because I knew it would plant a seed of doubt; that you would be so shocked that you would
start to doubt him. You would notice the deceits he had been driven to. He became a flawed man. I forgive him for that.’

’S Shen, I never fully believed in Rong after that memory. It opened my eyes about my trust for him.’

‘You had an unquestioned trust in Rong; like the trust you have for me; a trust that’s taken for granted. Like day following night, but today might be the very last day. Do you remember the dream I had in the prison?’

‘I remember that you escaped into that old photo given to you by Uncle Li, so that you could cope with the pain. There was a dog running along the beach and a boat out at sea that burst into flames. There was a man and a woman on the bow of boat, who must have died, and there was a child who jumped off the stern. I couldn’t work out if the child had survived or not.’

‘Yue, I have to tell you, that child was you, and the woman on the boat was our mother.’

‘That dream was the house fire?’ she said.

‘Yes, Yue, and I was responsible for that fire.’

‘Of course you were, Shen. The memory was a way to turn your pain into another person’s pain. Don’t feel guilty about this. I saw the fire as part of a dream. An incident to match your own hell in prison,’ she said.

‘Yue, you’re not listening; try to look at me. It was me who caused that fire to be lit that killed our mother, and nearly killed you. It was my actions that made this tragedy. I killed our mother. This is what I’ve been trying to tell you in the memories I left for you, this is what’s been driving me all these years, it’s the truth that you’ve always feared.’ …

The immediate memory of Shen abruptly ended. Yue’s body broke into sweat and a series of convulsions. She collapsed to the floor of the studio. Her body had ground to a halt; the wheels of Ezekiel had crunched metal against metal. Rong rushed to her and laid her on her side, placing both his hands above her heart. He prayed that she would be all right.

Once she had regained consciousness, Rong helped her up into his chair and made her long cups of tea. After a few hours Yue felt she could go back to her apartment. Rong called Lily and arranged a taxi for her to get home.
When I arrived back at the Sanlitun apartment, Lily was waiting outside.

‘Here, put your arm around me and let me help you up the steps. Rong told me what happened. You’re home now. Everything will be okay,’ she said.

‘I’m okay; it’s a shock to hear those words from Shen. It’s like being slammed against a wall. I hope Lotus is all right. I’m sure she’s tough enough to get through it,’

‘You’ll both be all right, don’t worry, Yue. And I’ll be here for both of you. I don’t know what Shen’s words were, but at least they’ve been said. Maybe now you can find some kind of peace.’

‘Peace seems a long way away.’ I stopped to catch my breath. ‘Just getting up here, will be enough for the moment.’

‘Pushing the panda up the stairs!’ Lily laughed, as she pushed me from behind with both hands.

‘Nothing will be the same again. I loved him so much. I still love him. And we haven’t come to an end,’ I said.

‘Nothing ends, Yue. You know that. Grab my hand, just one more flight and we can get you into the hot shower and a soft bed.’

As I reached the top landing, I could hear the pigeons cooing and fluttering, scrambling for a place on the ledge of the stairwell window. It was comforting that some things didn’t change.
圆寂

(xxii) yuán jì - death

dōng zhi (winter solstice)
22nd december – 5th january

I’m sitting here, at night, drinking tea and stoking the fire. The snowflakes quietly crunch against the window; some of them even blow under the eaves onto the floor. They melt instantly in the heat. I can feel a slight contraction, or is it my body rewinding from the memory? Earlier in the night, as I wrote in this journal, another memory of Songling emerged.

... He is sitting at his desk, writing. The ink flows over the fine rice paper that lies flat and secure against the smooth teak board underneath. Through the window, he can see clouds of plum flowers floating across the banked snow. A copse of bare maple trees frame the sky. Beside him, is a stack of one hundred and ten sheets of paper, the ‘Liaozhai zhiyi’, his record of strange stories that he has meticulously written, under the flickering of his oil lamp in his simple studio. He is now composing notes for a manuscript, ‘On the Events in the Life of Madame Liu’ – it will be a memoir for his wife. He jots down the fragments that belong to the early years of their marriage,

the gossip and blame ... the chatter and arguments ... the constant fighting ... the sisters-in-law banding together against Liu

the father and his sons breaking apart all that one family has owned and shared with love ... setting aside the broken bits

I am standing there full of the anguish of separation ... she stood by in silence, disconsolate and resigned, as it was all divided up

Pu Songling goes through in his mind, why his brothers’ wives had attacked Liu so bitterly, thoughts that would never be written in the final manuscript. Liu had been with another man, the affair had been brief. She had tried to keep it secret. The two lovers had become obsessed from the time of their first meeting. Her lover was a very close friend of Songling’s, a local magistrate who had just passed his final examinations. His name was Dan Minglu. They met in his house. Liu would go there on the pretext of doing business regarding family affairs. One day, Songling’s younger brother’s wife also went there for a legal matter. She discovered the magistrate and Liu embracing in the
corridor that separated the main house from the office. This was enough to uncover their secret. From this moment on, life had been hell for Liu and for Songling. The family became divided. The father and brother were willing to reconcile, but the sisters-in-law were totally unforgiving. The conflict caused the family estate to be broken up. Songling, Liu and their son Pu Ro were given a small piece of land, and a run down house. The family was thrown into poverty.

Pu Songling did the best he could, earning money from tutoring the children of well-to-do families, and writing inscriptions for temples and sites of folk worship. Even though he had passed the first examination needed to become an official, he was never able to pass another. The pain of the affair hung deeply over him. The water was too close to home.

Songling now finds solace in the company of ghosts, fox-spirits, demons and the myriad of other strange events told to him by local farmers and tradesmen. In these stories of uncanny tales and dreams, obsessions and karmic retribution, he finds a reason for living. The anomaly of his wife's affair becomes just another part of his world that is filled with strange happenings. He sees his fate as a karmic force outside his sphere of control. When the ghosts come knocking at his door, they come as friends, not as something to be feared.

Songling looks at the poem that lies beside him:

Travelling, with nothing to do, we talk of ghosts
On the boat, carried away like immortals ...

_____

*a flame of consciousness*

Earlier in the night Yue had sat at her desk writing in the red journal. She had received a memory from Pu Songling. It had been two weeks since she had talked with Shen. She had travelled to Lijiang by train, to make final arrangements before returning to Beijing to have the baby. It was freezing outside. There had been another heavy snowfall on the mountains. She stoked the struggling fire of the Tibetan stove. Lotus was safe inside, sleeping, waiting for her becoming. It was nearly Christmas.
Yue had completely lost contact with her brother. The shock of his confession lay ripe and rotting within her. When she had woken up in a haze of suffocation and confusion on Rong’s studio floor, her world had collapsed. She and Lily had spent all that night picking through Shen’s memory, trying to carefully piece together the shards of what was said. Shen had made his confession, he was to blame for the fire, he was responsible for the death of their mother and partner; Yue had almost died. It was inconceivable for her to blame Shen for this tragedy. She did not want this to be part of her story; to acknowledge Shen’s truth was to be exposed to impossible pain.

There was no choice however. Shen would have to be contacted again. Yue was certain that Shen was about to do something that would have lasting consequences for all of them. She got out of bed and walked over to the photo of the Dalai Lama that had been placed on the bookshelf near the writing desk as reminder of the part that he played in her life, of whom she was, and how she’d chosen to live. Yue lit three sticks of incense and placed them in the holder that lay beside the photo. The scented smoke drifted upwards towards the rafters, as the incense burnt, the ash fell quietly onto the wooden shelf of the bookcase, she remembered the photo of Shen that Rong had placed next to her in the Beijing studio. All the elements combined. Again, the pure had risen and the impure fallen. There in the Baisha studio, she began to disassociate from all that was around her; heaven and earth met. There was enough time for her to sit down at the writing desk. She steadied herself, holding her pregnancy, letting herself enter what was to be the last fragment of Shen’s memory,

... Shen is sitting in the centre of Kirti monastery courtyard. It is dawn and the first light of the day warms the gold helmet of the stupa. Next to Shen is his friend Phuntsog, a novice monk, around twenty years old. Between Shen and Phuntsog sit two small containers of petrol. ...

This fragment of memory numbs Yue’s body, it burns through the veins of her consciousness with blinding terror.

... Shen sits motionless. His eyes are open, not flickering, staring into the space beyond. Everything has been carefully planned, he does not need to think, his mind is
where it needs to be. He is no longer part of the physical world. He looks more peaceful than she has ever seen him.

Phuntsog stands up and carefully lifts one of the containers. He unscrews the lid and methodically pours the amber liquid over Shen’s body, then over his shaven head. Shen remains perfectly still, his arms, shoulders and head glisten in the first rays of the sun. He is bathed in the soft light of dawn, in the refracted colours of the liquid petrol.

There are others present. Shen’s old teacher sits to one side, deep in prayer, chanting loudly with a small number of novice monks and a few elder Rinpoche. Off to the left, at the far end of the courtyard is Xuni, who has returned from Dharamsala. She is dressed in black. She stands, holding onto a red wooden post at the entrance to one of the smaller prayer rooms; the look on her face is a reflection of Yue’s. The monastery gate is firmly closed, and secured by thick wooden doors. On the other side of the gate, a squad of riot police arrive in an old army truck.

There is an odd mixture of heightened tension and spiritual calmness that hangs in the air. For a short moment the chanting of the monks ceases, and the monastery falls into silence. In this instant Phuntsog strikes a light against the rough edge of a tattered matchbox. The match struggles against a small gust of wind, then flares into life. Phuntsog throws the flame towards Shen. It spins through the air and hits Shen’s robe, at his shoulder. The chanting of the monks restarts. There is a small explosion and Shen’s body bursts into fire. The flames are bright yellow. As the flames grow higher the colours turn to molten orange and then into clouds of black smoke. Inside the flames, Shen feels no pain. His thoughts travel at the speed of light, as the last memories unfurl around his physical death,

... Yue my beautiful sister ... fragile and pale ... the flames are piling up around me ... they are warm, unburning ... my body is escaping this sentient world ... it is to be given for other sentient beings ... feeling everything ... the senses ... the consciousness ... hearing the chatter of people who wanted truth ... a thousand times a thousand ... the sound of chanting ... om tuttāre tare soha ... all I see is light ... the path has been chosen ... redemption ... for others ... for Buddha ... for my crime ... relief from the suffering ... non-attachment ... impermanence ... compassion ... for other monks who have given their bodies ... against the state ... the three pillars ... non-attachment to my fox-spirit belonging ... to my sister and mother ... compassion to those that burnt my mother to
death ... impermanence of my body and my family ... impermanence of Kirti itself ... for all the time that this monastery will stand ... many will die ... the flames are warm ... the warmth of gutted rabbits on cold Beijing mornings ... warm as the love of Xuni ... our mother in the flames of burning petrol and wood ... not warmth ... just terror and pain ... I thought they were empty threats ... I was young and stupid ... drinking and gambling ... the debts had to be paid ... the debt was paid with the death of our mother ... the sound of vultures overhead ... screaming into the flames and smoke ... they threatened to kill our family if I did not pay the debts ... everything was lost ... their whispers carried across oceans and deserts to arrive at that house ... the winds of the mountains ... the spirits of the underworld ... restless and malevolent ... son of a fox-spirit ... the gift that turned into a nightmare ... I was dark ... Yue was light ... ying and yang ... heaven and earth ... Yue could collect memories ... all I could do was store them ... in my shattered palace ... kernels of truth shed in the shadows of night ... ready to be picked up in the light of the next day ... Songling created us ... his act of reincarnation ... our spirits passed from the pages of his story ... to those that read ... to others who dreamed ... we became fox-spirits in a world where fox-spirits no longer exist ... except in the imaginations of the few who dared to believe ... or those who wanted to fear ... koro made everything weak ... my heart ... my courage ... my manhood ... leaving a broken man ... Xuni gave back my heart ... I could never really love ... escape to the monastery for ten years ... heal thyself ... being one with all sentient beings ... just love expanding ... strangled by the crime ... killing the mother ... matricide ... killing a sister ... fratricide ... the flames ... where are the flames ... they've gone ... something is wrong ...

The police and soldiers break through the monastery gate and driven their truck into the courtyard. They scramble out; a few of them race over and suffocate Shen’s flames with army blankets.

sheets of dark space ... spoiling the light ... feeling the pain ... the air rushing in ... scraping my bare red flesh ... these men ... they are stealing the warmth ... stealing the light ... all is gone ... daylight rushing in ... the figures are blurred ...

The police start to beat him, kicking him with their boots, and beat him with their batons. He screams in agony with the exposure of raw flesh to the fresh air.
Unable to bear the violence any longer, Xuni and a group of young monks race over to Shen, desperately pushing the police and soldiers away. They are surprised by the aggression of the monks, and retreat back to the truck. Xuni and a few of the monks, wrap Shen up in blankets and rush him to a nearby dormitory ...

* 

The memory, the thought, slowly dissipated from Yue’s’ consciousness, then opened again,

... Shen lies in a hospital bed, covered in blankets, untreated. His skin heavily scarred and blistered. His eyes are closed and scorched. The few monks who remain with Shen are yelling and fighting with the hospital staff, who shout back that they are unable to treat Shen until they have permission from the police, that the permission has not been granted. It is now three o’clock in the afternoon. One of the monks looks across at Shen and falls silent. The other monks and staff also fall silent. The youngest monk starts sobbing ...

The memory fades. The smoke from the incense drifted across Yue's face and through her hair. Her brother was lost. She sobbed, just as the young monks had. She placed her head in her hands, and cried for his death and for his love. Her body was wracked with the pain and sorrow of every moment, every thought, and every memory that they had shared in their belonging.
命

(xxiii) mìng - life

xiǎohán (minor cold)
6th January - 19th January

I’m in Beijing at the Sanlitun apartment. It’s five o’clock in the morning and the food stalls on the street below are packing up. It has been a long night. My body is telling me that Lotus is ready to arrive. I am full with her. Last night the contractions lasted nearly two hours, and she is still two weeks away. I’m warm on the couch, with Lily in the next room. It’s snowing outside but the flakes are a dirty brown as they brush up against the window. Down on the street, the snow has turned to sludge; a trail of black footprints leads off towards the city.

I am writing in the red leather journal. The book feels like part of the family now, it’s stained cover, half-broken spine, the earmarked pages. The journal is like a grandmother sitting in the corner, ready to tell her story at any moment. It remains a written history of my journey with Shen. I’ve cried every night since that last fragment of memory played out in front of me. There have been moments where I’ve hated Shen. Hated him for his part in the murder of our mother. Hated him for thinking he would win when he could only lose, for believing that the threats promised would not be carried out. I ran from that fire and blamed myself. I stood there at the edge of the crowd, watching the flames explode through the rain-soaked night. Standing there on the edge of that suburban darkness. I had promised myself I would tell no one that this tragedy was my fault, that I was a child, that I must have been responsible, that the fire, this tragedy, was my responsibility. It was my secret and I was going to keep that secret forever.

Shen, you have finally taken this burden away from me. In the last two weeks I berated you for taking your life, for robbing all the people who loved you of sharing any future with you. I went to the photo of the Dalai and cursed him for taking you away from us. I threw his photo against the wall and watched the shattered glass scatter across the floor. Then, as I bent down to pick up the pieces, I began to understand, the photo of the Dalai Lama, the plastic frame, the broken glass, none of them are real. They are all an illusion.

You still exist. We both know that. In the memories, in the dreams, in the brief space where death is one long breath. You exist in the embryo that will pass on to another sentient being. All these moments are true. I realise now that you had to act to restore the balance, between heaven and earth, between night and day, between life and death. Your world was out of balance. You reasoned that through setting yourself on fire, the
crimes of your youth would be redeemed, that your belonging was balanced with the mortality of being human. I understand you Shen, and I love you for what you chose to do, more than I have ever loved you.

Today I will go to the studio to see Rong, probably for the last time.

_________

the poetics of space

Rong’s garden was blanketed in soft silent white. The only colour that penetrated the quiet was the bright yellow of lemons that hung like Christmas baubles from branches, they shouted across the garden. A month ago it had also been snowing; then, Yue had lain on the floor stiff and broken. Today she arrived a different person, no longer feeling like a child, more as a pilgrim who had travelled along rugged trails populated with demons, spirits and ghosts. There was no fear of Rong. Her search for truth with had dissipated into acceptance. She had reconciled with Shen. Her thoughts were now for the baby. Lotus embraced her every thought and movement. She was tired but content.

Rong opened the door. He held Yue by the arm and helped her to the chair, as a father would do for his daughter.

‘Can I get you a cup of green tea?’ he said. ‘It’s very good for the baby, especially for inducing her out of that safe, warm womb she’s become accustomed to.’

‘Thanks, I would love that,’ she replied.

‘I picked this tea myself, last year in the hills of my friend’s farm in Menghai, down in Xishuangbanna. I’ve visited his place every year for the ten years. Today, I wanted to give you a treat. The season is now xiaohan, the time of the minor cold, the coldest days are yet to come. You must take care of yourself,’ he said.

Rong poured the second cup of tea and placed it beside her. She smelled the fresh aroma and took a small sip. She could taste the red earth of the southern borderlands.

‘You’ve heard what happened to Shen?’ she asked.

‘Yes, I am very sorry, for him and for you,’ he replied, ‘my friends informed me, and I read the version in the newspaper. Did he receive a proper funeral?’

‘Everything was done properly in the end,’ she replied, ‘not without a lot of
pressure. It wouldn’t have been worth the trouble for them if it had been done otherwise. I wasn’t able to attend, but Xuni rang me and told me everything that happened.’

‘There was no mention of the police beatings in the paper,’ he said, a sadness and anger in his voice, ‘and of course all the blame was put on the monks themselves. Accusing them of delaying Shen’s hospital care so that they could use his death as publicity for their cause. It breaks my heart. The lies and deceit around the death of a person I loved so much.’

‘But these are your friends,’ she said to him with a sarcasm she could not escape, ‘These are the people you trusted and were swayed by.’

‘You think they were the same people who put Shen in an impossible position, and refused him a death with the dignity and grace he deserved?’ He was defensive and angry.

‘Rong, I know you’ve been influenced and cajoled, and Shen knew as well. Weren’t you? Are you telling me, you were beyond reproach with these people?’

Rong stood up and walked over to the fire and stoked the wood. He walked slowly over to his stone collection, and scanned every rock as though he was admiring each of his children, appreciating all the special individual traits that made him love them. He picked up two of the most handsome and beautiful stones and held them tenderly in each hand. These were the ones he loved the most, his favourite son, his favourite daughter, the youngest, the eldest. He was as loving and giving to each stone as any father could be. The look on his face was one of pride and satisfaction, then to shame.

‘You are right Yue. I was compromised. I allowed these stones to take over of my life. These two rocks were gifts from my friends. I could never have afforded such exquisite stones on my meagre savings. In the last few years, I’ve allowed these objects to become my life. They filled the emptiness. Their beautiful forms and poetic names gave meaning, when life seemed without purpose, when all the words and images of my writings slipped into a void. My world had become a floating world. I was a poet, an author and provocateur, but I was alone. I was a man who thought he could adapt, and accommodate those in power. My comrades chose to be intellectuals and agents of change, but at the mercy of the government. I refused, and was left a solitary figure in my own generation.

I cared about Shen. I loved him and I loved you as well. He represented all that I was
not brave enough to be. I retreated into my private failure. You grew into a strong proud woman, willing to remain an outsider, ready to be challenged; in your politics, your sexuality, in your determination to find out the truth, not just about Shen but also yourself. Do you understand, Yue?’ Rong finished.

‘I understand’, she replied.

She went to stand up, then doubled up in pain

Rong rushed over, ‘Are you all right?’

‘I’m fine. I think Lotus is in a hurry. She must think this world’s a wonderful place, despite all that’s happened.’ She stopped, rested and regained her breath. ‘Rong I don’t think I can ever forgive you. You were my father, and my teacher, and you betrayed that trust. You gave information to those that could have had Shen killed at any time; it might even be because of you that the police arrived in Kirti. They wouldn’t even let Shen die the way that he wanted. They had to hunt him down and punish him right up to his last breath!’

‘I don’t know whether I was responsible for Shen’s beating or not,’ Rong said, ‘I gave them as little information as I could, just enough so that they would give me what I wanted. All I can do is tell you the truth. Admit that I betrayed your trust. Maybe by confessing this it might help you understand and heal. I don’t expect to be forgiven. You’ve done nothing wrong. I have to live with what I have done.’

There was another sharp contraction. Again Yue bent over in pain. She shuffled to the edge of the seat, her legs apart. The pain became more intense. She felt a surge of movement through her uterus, followed by a flood of liquid down her legs. Rong rushed over. She looked up at him, embarrassed to be sharing such intimacy. He was relieved to be plucked from his personal despair.

‘Help me up Rong; I need to telephone the doctor and hospital. I have to ring Lily. She’s the closest person I have.’

Rong grimaced at the words. He bent over, placing Yue’s arm over his shoulder and helped her up. Her muscles ached as they started to cramp. Halfway across the room there was another contraction. Yue collapsed onto her knees. Her hands fell to the floor. There was another contraction. She pushed into the pain, slowed her breathing, and gasped for air.

‘It’s too late Rong,’ she said. ‘Lotus has decided. Ring the hospital. Tell them to send a doctor straight away.’ Rong scrambled to the phone.

Yue breathed heavily into the next contraction. Again she pushed. She pulled off
her underwear.

Rong came back in from the other room, towels and sheets in hand. He spread them across the floor. Yue crawled across to them. Rong knelt next to her, holding her hand as her fingernails bit into his skin. She vomited.

She screamed, as she gave way to one last push. Her cervix stretched, and ripped. The baby ripped through her body. There was a blank moment. She looked down and could see the head. It was blue. One more push and the baby flopped into Rong’s hands. There was Lotus, bloodied and healthy. Yue pushed again, the afterbirth fell onto the sheets. Her whole body was blue, the umbilical attached. Yue swung her body over so that she faced Rong. Holding the baby, he looked at her with an uncertain pride. The baby spluttered and coughed; life breathed in and Lotus turned a delicate pink. Rong smiled, and turned the baby around to Yue. He handed her the child. It was a boy.

Yue laughed. ‘Thank you Rong,’ was all she could say. She took her boy into her arms and held him against her breast. She turned him around to look into his eyes.

His eyes were open. They were a deep brown. She could only see one person, in and beyond those eyes, Shen. The child had a red birthmark etched on his shoulder.

——

I have decided to call him Pu. I want to say thanks to the man who has given the both of us our belonging.

‘He’s beautiful,’ Lily exclaimed, as she bundled Pu up in her arms. ‘He looks like me!’

‘Yes, you must definitely be the father, he’s got your double chin, and when he screams he definitely has your voice,’ I replied. ‘He’s got the makings of a punk singer.’

‘Look, he’s dribbling and farting at the same time! It’s his special power, his name suits him.’ Lily pretended to push Pu away from her.

‘What would Songling think, making fun of his name like that, he would turn in his grave,’ I said, as I took Pu from her arms. I leant towards her and kissed her on the lips. ‘I’m going to change him and give him a feed now. I feel like a cow.’

‘From a giant panda to a cow, I’m not sure if that’s an improvement. They say that old cows like fresh grass. Maybe I have a chance,’ Lily said.

‘Lily, you are wonderful, you know that. Shen did as much as was humanly possible to
make peace with his life, and now we have Pu. We should enjoy the moment.’

I sat down in the chair near the water heater, and put Pu to my breast. The milk flowed freely as he sucked greedily at my nipple.

‘He’s hungry for life, like someone who has a fox-spirit heritage should be. I wonder if there is anyone else who shares our belonging, or is it just going to be the two of us? It would be far less strange if there were more fox-spirits to be found.’

Lily did not answer. She’d fallen asleep on the bed. I looked down. Pu had fallen asleep as well.
(xxiv) ming - life

dāhán (major cold)
In the Baisha studio, Yue sat down at the desk and began to write in her red journal.

**the strangest loop of all**

The train trip from Beijing was long and difficult. It was the first journey that I’d made with Pu. He’s only ten days old. I wanted to get down to the south as quickly as possible, to get away from the major cold, and be in clean air, away from the cars and factories. Lily would fly down a few days later, making all the arrangements to move out of the apartment, saying goodbye to her friends. Xuni and Lily both came to the train station to say goodbye. Rong wasn’t there. I’d thought it best that we did not see each other again. It was good that he’d delivered the baby. It had brought us closer together, but there was still too much sadness and shame between us. Rong will have to redeem himself in his own way.

The train was filled with students returning home to their families in the winter school break. There were two girls and a boy sharing my compartment. They were first-year university students, full of energy and ambition. The youngest, Angel, aspired to be an actress, the older girl, Lucy, wanted to go into business, and the boy, Yang, dreamed of being a drummer in a rock band. Yang was very cool, quietly sure of himself, in that Chinese one-boy-child kind of way. Angel was beautiful, with thick black curly hair falling down over her fine-boned shoulders, dreamy silken eyes, and a smile that went from blankness to sensuousness in a split second. Lucy was the one I liked the most, she was confident and quick-witted, with a sure conviction that she would be one of the richest people in China by the time she was forty. I was certain she would.

To pass the time while Pu was asleep, I decided to allow myself the luxury of reading the students’ memories whenever they happened to emerge. I loved the way trains brought out people’s memories. I don’t know whether it’s the rhythm of the wheels crossing the tracks that lulled one into such a relaxed state, allowing memories to flow freely; or was it the landscape flashing by like the frames of a 16mm film, setting off some kind of nostalgic longing for past events, or maybe was the smell of the carriages and compartments, hundreds of departed passengers, each with their own story left behind, a brief trace of their body, a scent containing the collection of all that’s gone before.
On a train, each passenger is trapped between destinations, between departure and arrival, unable to escape. A space where there are no commitments, no specific time and place; inside a metal carriage, a carapace hurtling through space and across the countryside. The people outside in the fields unable to recognise whom it is gazing out, there’s no history or judgment. All travellers are sealed from the outside world. Memories are allowed the freedom to seep into our consciousness, through the synapses and nodes of meaning and emotion, through the rhizomes of smell, taste, sight and time to gather, there on the train.

The memory of the Yang surprised me. It came as he noticed some clouds standing along the horizon; there was the sharp intensity of a thin white line, shimmering across the edging of a cirrus cloud far in the distance. This connection brought forward a moment in his life when his Naxi grandfather had taken him out in the fields to pick corn. This fragment of the past talked about love. Yang had just met a girl, a young Naxi woman from his own village in Lashi Lake. There in the field, last summer, Yang had looked up to the sky, and seen the same wispy cloud reaching out into space. He had asked his grandfather, ‘What is love?’

This was Yang’s memory,

... His grandfather has a peculiar face, it is like Dobell’s painting of Joshua Smith, more a caricature than a portrait; dark brown leathery skin, pointy chin, an impossibly elongated face, a bulbous forehead and mop of black hair, all combined to form a handsome proud man who stands tall beside his grandson. His answer to, ‘What is love?’ is told with this story:

‘Love is when your grandmother and I first met; I was twenty and we were very poor; we lived here in this village. She was eighteen. In Mao’s time, even if you had cash you could not buy rice, you had to have a special piece of paper, all the grain went to the Soviet Union. This was just before the time they now call the Great Leap Forward. There was no waste. Before the Great Leap Forward each person had five mu of land, our family had forty mu. Here in Lashi Lake, one mu could support one person. We were able to sell excess food. Then things changed and the Party said you couldn’t sell food any longer, so we buried it. In the end we had to have reform. If we didn’t have reform
we would be like North Korea, the government was embarrassed about how many people died in North Korea, they still give food to them. China was like a dog with a mouse, getting involved in that was, that was a cat’s war. Vietnam attacking China was the same dog stupidity. It’s good we did not have a war with the USA. It was good even to support Chiang Kai-shek against Japan. I don’t dislike the Japanese, we’ve had no direct experience with them here. It can be a burden for young people because of the history but I like meeting Japanese visitors. I met a man from Hiroshima the other day.

‘If you don’t fuck with me, I won’t fuck with you’, I said to him!’

The grandfather finished with a big laugh, then continued to answer Yang’s question about love.

‘Your grandmother and I first met when she had just enough money to buy one square of cloth. She used that last kuai of hers to make me a pair of trousers. She wanted me to look good. This is love. Now she scolds me for smoking. I never scold her but I’ll continue to smoke. That’s how it is after forty years. You have to control your temper, there’s no reason for conflict or jealousy. We are in a full cycle from young to old, with family taking care of each other. We had to go through all our life and accept this and be properly social. If you went the other way and followed desire and jealousy, your life would end in a love suicide. This is what happened to your grandmother’s sister. She ran off with the wrong man when she was twenty, she had to kill herself. Your grandmother and I, we didn’t get married until I was thirty. We did it all the right way. This is love.’

Yang replies with a simple, ‘Thanks grandfather.’ ....

The train entered the blackness of a long tunnel. As it emerged back into the light, Yang’s memory disappeared.

The next memory gleaned was from Angel. In the corridor of the train she saw a young boy trying to scratch at the window with his father’s keys. This action recalled a recent visit she had made to her aunt in the old town of Xiangyun, not far from Dali,

... Her aunt stands in the courtyard of the old house, hands on hips. She is dressed in grey slacks and a long silk red jacket with five frog-button ties down the front. On her head she wears a hand-knit woollen cap, old style. Her hands, used to great effect as she talks, are small and strong. She is trying to explain to Angel how happy she is. ‘I’m eighty-two. I’ve lived here all my life. There used to be all my whole family her, my
husband, my son and his wife and two children, our mother and father, and my father’s
parents. Now I’m alone. My son used to stay here with his family but I told him to go live
in his new apartment; that I would be all right. This house is very old. Parts of this place
have been here two hundred years.’

Angel looks intently at her aunt as she talks. She notices her aunt’s missing teeth, the
kindness in her eyes, and the love that so easily emanates from her. She loves her aunt.
She is nothing like her own mother whom continually cajoled her to do better, to stop
dreaming of being an actress, to settle down, always reminding her that it was time to
look for boyfriend, and to marry and have children. Angel’s father did not even talk to
her. He stayed out at night drinking and gambling with cards. He talked to her mother
as though she was a servant. Cigarette smoke always filled their house.

‘Angel, you are beautiful, like my daughter when she was your age. I’m very happy
here. I have my plants, and I watch TV. I even have a cat that comes in trying to catch
the small birds. He is fat, from all the neighbours feeding him. He’s never caught
anything. He’s embarrassed to be a cat.’ The old aunt laughs, exposing the gaps in her
teeth. ‘I’ve been to hospital just once and that was two years ago when I had a stroke. I
was lucky my brother found me here and got me to the hospital in time. Now I have this
mobile phone.’ She shows Angel her new pink mobile with bright tassels hanging from
it, the kind that teenagers like. Angel laughed with her grandmother.

‘See there, Angel,’ the aunt points to the old wooden doors she is standing next to at
the entrance to the courtyard. ‘See how they are all scratched and marked. The high
school kids did that in the days when the whole of China went crazy. They would come
here every day and destroy anything that was beautiful. Those beautiful carved flowers
and birds on the door they hacked off with knives and machetes. See, they also smashed
that wooden grate up there above the door.’ She points to the broken bits of timber that
were once part of an intricate wooden carving. ‘They were even younger than you. After
a few months it stopped. Now everything is peaceful, but the government wants us to
move into new apartments. They want to build new houses here. I’m not going.’ The
aunt smiles again and appears perfectly happy.

Angel wandered over to the cat that is ferociously purring around her aunt’s legs.
The swallows fly in small circles around the courtyard, feeding on any insects that
are available …

The train jolted and Pu woke up, giving a short cry. Angel stopped remembering and
leant over to Pu and stroked him as if he were a cat.

It was Lucy’s turn to remember. She was looking directly at me, across the compartment. After Angel and Yang’s remembering, I’d been trying to work out what event would trigger Lucy’s memory. She had continued to stare into my eyes. Her face contained a half-smiling, half-curious look. I could sense a shard of a memory, an echo, growing within her, but was fragmented and transitory. All I could make out within the confusion was an image of Shen. I couldn’t understand why Lucy would be thinking of Shen, how she could even know my brother. Then I recognised an image of myself in the memory. I was sitting in our train, looking at my reflection in the carriage window.

The memory disintegrated. I turned around. Lucy looked back at me.

The memory now became Lucy looking at me, and me looking back at Lucy. The images bounced forwards and backwards, reverberating, playing off each other in a strange loop - Shen, Lucy, me - me looking at Shen - Lucy looking back at Shen. The images contracted into a semblance of a known perception, then quickly dissipated into a jumble of confused projections. I was thrown into a stream of knowing and not knowing. I had no way of comprehending what was happening. It was as though Lucy generated an energy that interfered with the very alignment of my belonging.

Through all this, Lucy’s face maintained a composed look of humour and curiosity. I cradled my head in both hands and covered my face. I concentrated on Lucy’s pool of memory; I found myself looking into my own hands. There was a time lapse of perception, a split-second delay between what I was experiencing and what I was receiving as the memory. There existed no differentiation between what I was remembering and what Lucy was remembering. We both existed in our own strange loop. We were one person.

I lifted my head and opened my eyes to gaze at Lucy. Our belonging had been embraced. Lucy and I had connected in a fragment of time and space. In the cramped confines of a train carriage compartment hurtling across the countryside, the two of us had shared our belonging. We had allowed our thoughts, images, and memories to merge into a pool of nascent awareness of our fox-spirit belonging.

I gave Lucy a curious smile then let go, willing to accept what previously had been thought impossible.
Yue wrote the very last entry in her red leather journal, in the village of Baisha in the southwest province of Yunnan:

*This will be the last entry in the red journal. It is now the middle of winter, the nights are long and cold, but the days are filled with brilliant bursts of sunshine and warmth. Soon we will leave and head south. I will give the journal to ______ . He can do with it what he wants. The story’s written and it needs to be left behind.*

*The studio is filled with the smell of burning pinewood. The smoke leaks from stove’s cracked joints, and the water simmers in the kettle at a rolling boil. Pu is tightly swaddled in his bright Naxi blanket, his black hair poking out in all directions. He looks as wild as a Tibetan yak. He’s sound asleep, a splinter of light has fallen across his face. In the distance, the peaks of Jade Dragon Snow Mountain are again blanketed in snow. Past the mountains, and north of Szechuan, lie the bones of Shen’s body, picked clean by vultures, and bleached white by the sun, the colour of his bones are now the same as the whites of Pu’s eyes.*

*Lily is stoking the fire. ‘Are you going to see Lucy again?’ she says.*

*‘There’s no need, it’s enough just to know she’s here. It’s a wonderful feeling,’ I reply. ‘And Shen?’ she asks.*

*‘He is here as well.’ I answer with only love in my heart.*

*‘I guess that leaves three of us, underneath this roof and this blue sky, in the dead of winter, a long way from the cities where the dogs still run free,’ replies Lily.*

*‘We probably need to travel again, even further south. I want us to wake up to a new morning. A few months ago I wrote you a poem, about heading south down to Burma. It relates to an old Chinese poem. It’s here in the journal. I’ll read it to you.’ I recite the poem to Lily.*

*‘If you love me take my hand,*

*Let’s ride together across the border,*

*Down south, where the forests turn to jungle.*

*Take my hand if you love me,*

*Past the shadowland, to the river,*

*Through the defiles,*
To the mosquito delta, to the sea …’

‘Ah, that is beautiful, but do you think I love you that much, I hardly know you.’ Lily laughs.

She comes over and gently strokes my hair with her slender fingers, pushing it to one side across my forehead.

‘Look, Pu is waking up!’ She jumps up on the wooden stool and pretends to be an eagle flying high above Jade Dragon Snow Mountain. Looking down at Pu.

Lily is reflected in Pu’s eyes.
1.1 Notes for A Strange Chinese Tale

p. 46: ... the breath of love had passed through the mesh of the canvas ...

p. 47: ... It was for him, for him whom she loved like a god ... 'Madame Bovary – Amor nel cor', Web: [http://www.madamebovary.com/madame_bovary-amor_nel_cor.htm]

p. 80: ... The dark swallows will return ... Bécquer, G. A., Web: [www.recmusic.org/lieder/get_text.html?TextId=29146]

p. 115 ... In the vast desert beautiful muff cabbage ... ‘Ai Weiwei sing grass mud horse fuck song for his lenders’, Web: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Nsk-KgD0aOM]

p. 117: (detail) cover illustration, (1958) Shanxi Huabao, 8.


p. 124: ... I am but the dust in the sunbeam ... Pu Songling (1922) Gems of Chinese Literature (trans. Giles, H. A.) Shanghai: Kelly & Walsh, Web: [http://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Gems_of_Chinese_Literature/P%22E2%80%98u_Sung-ling-Authors_Own_Record]


p.143: (image) Mu Xin, Spring Brilliance at Kuaiji, (accessed from) 'Landscape of Memory: The Art of Mu Xin', Web: [http://sites.asiasociety.org/arts/muxin/]


p. 157: ... the purest energy of the heaven-earth world coalesces into rock ... Du Wan’s Stone Compendium of Cloudy Forest (c. 1127-1132) in, Little, S. (1999) Spirit Stones of China, Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, p.16


p. 230: ... We are the noise we are the sound and voice from the 80s ... ‘Jack Danny: From the 80s’, Web: [http://jackydanny.bandcamp.com/track/from-the-80s]


p. 247: (image) Ezekiel’s Wheel in St. John the Baptist Church in Kratovo, Macedonia. Fresco from the 19th century (public domain) Web:
p. 250: ... The appearance of the wheels and their work was like unto the colour of a beryl ... King James Bible, Web:
[http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/Ezekiel-1-16/]

p. 272: ... four hundred and forty-four characters of the Huangdi Yinfujing ... Huangdi Yinfujing also known as The Yellow Emperor's Scripture on 'Unconscious Unification'

PHOTOGRAPHS IN A STRANGE CHINESE TALE

All photos by the author except those noted above.
2. The Poetics, Politics and Writing of Memory: The Art of Ekphrasis

– An Exegesis
I dreamed of the time when memories would not matter anymore. For even though they had such power they always held such a strange fragility. I dreamt instead that they turned into mist and were blown gently and softly away to their own world, which was separate from mine. How often do we think that we owe a particular memory a certain amount of love, or commitment, as if it was a real person, as though memory had somehow become a living thing. If we could give the memory a name, what would we could call her, *A Love That Comes Too Quickly, When Sadness Overcomes Anger*, or even *Your Smile Fills My Soul With A Thousand Lies*.

*Silver Diary, 17 January (Percival, 2011)*

And *awakening* is the great exemplar of memory – that occasion on which we succeed in remembering what is nearest, most obvious (in the ‘I’). What Proust intends with the experimental rearrangement of furniture, what Bloch recognises as the darkness of the lived moment, is nothing other than what here is secured on the level of the historical, and collectively. There is a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been: its advancement has the *structure of awakening*.

*The Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999:883)

Barthes states that ‘the lover’s discourse is today of ‘an extreme solitude’ (2002:1). This exegesis argues that the discourse of the writing of memory and its ekphrastic representation in literature is one of ‘an extreme awakening’. Without memory, the body and its being reside in a never-ending present; a space where there is no history, only a momentary present that possesses no past or future, a few seconds of cognisance that belongs only to now. When memory is relinquished, whether as a consequence of trauma, or by its denial from those institutions and regimes who control the alterity of historical events, its loss is capable of bringing about an amnesia in the individual capable of causing alienation and disconnection. The
resulting pain of disconnection creates a source of ‘unhappiness’ and an associated need for belonging within the individual and community.

2.1.1 The Ekphrastic Project

The ekphrastic project is the continuing process of unfolding the ekphrasis so as to incorporate any object, event, or physical and psychological space. This exegesis argues for the ‘object’ of the ekphrasis (the source of ekphrastic description) to be extended beyond the traditional limitations of the target art object, into fresh domains, in particular the electronic photographic image, and, the space of memory and its associated traces, chords and fragments of reimagined memory. If the aim of ekphrasis is to place the ‘object’ before the eyes, so that it may come alive (to create an affect in the reader), then the ekphrastic project hopes to further its territory, so as to effect an: ‘intense experience that goes beyond the limits of both words and pictures’ (Tiffany, 2000:3) an experience that hopes to expand the opportunity of realising an ‘extreme awakening’ in the reader. The ekphrastic project has its hope in: ‘pinpointing ... the forgotten’ (Maloney, 2006:88); those events, people and memories that have been excised from public knowledge; the forced amnesia perpetrated by mechanisms of state propaganda and censorship. It is in the continuance and persistence of the ekphrastic project that the ‘awakening’ may take place. The centre of the ekphrastic project is the moment of perception, the instance of the ‘extreme awakening’.

* 

The Oxford Dictionary defines ekphrasis as: ‘an extended and detailed literary description of any object, real or imaginary’ (1989). Its etymology is from the Greek, ‘before’ + ‘exercises’. In ekphrasis, an object (commonly a work of art and most commonly a painting) is described as a poetic and rhetorical figure. The description is meant to be vivid; a description that brings the object to life. The Oxford Dictionary definition of ekphrasis, cited above, limits the focus of attention of the ekphrasis to that of an object, but at the same time opens it up to the imagination. The Mirriam-Webster Dictionary defines ekphrasis as ‘a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art’. In contemporary times, it is within this domain of the ‘art object’ that the definition of the focus of ekphrasis has come to reside.
J. A. W. Heffernan, in *Museum of Words: Poetics of Ekphrasis*, states: ‘we have no other word for the mode of literature that ekphrasis designates: the mode of literature whose complexity and vitality – not to mention its astonishing longevity – entitle it to full and widespread recognition’ (1993:2). Heffernan tells us that it’s only been twenty-five years since Murray Krieger argued in his essay ‘The Ekphrastic Principle and the Still Moment of Poetry; or Laokoon Revisited’, for the elevation [liberation] of ekphrasis from: ‘the classic genre to literary principle’ (1993:2). Mitchell states in his essay ‘Ekphrasis and the Other’, that the language of the ekphrasis: ‘tries to become an object with as much substance as the medium of the plastic arts, the words thus establishing a plastic aesthetic for themselves, sometimes using the ekphrastic object as their emblem’ (1994:154). Through its sheer brilliance of exposition the technique of ekphrasis attempts to become a work of art in itself.

The literary technique of the ekphrasis has inherited its own stylised restrictions. Its mode of presentation and imposed focus is limited more by its definition than by its use. Both Mitchel and Heffernan restrict the domain of the ekphrasis to: ‘the literary representation of visual art’ (Heffernan, 1993:1), where a work of art remains the favoured subject. If however we return to primary sources for the definition of ekphrasis (in this case the sixth-century Latin translation of the second-century Progymnasmata by Hermogenes), we can see that in ekphrasis’ origins there exists a wider frame of reference: ‘Ekphrasis is an account with detail; it is visible, so to speak, and brings before the eyes that which is known. Ekphrases are of people, actions, times, places, seasons and many other things … the special virtues of ekphrasis are clarity and visibility; the style must contrive to bring about seeing through hearing. However, it is equally important the expression should fit the subject: if the subject is florid, let the style be florid too, and if the subject is dry, let the style be the same.’ (Hermogenes, 1915:43-46).

The Greek *progymnasmata* was a set of fourteen rhetorical exercises laid out in steps of increasing difficulty; the easiest exercise was a simple paraphrase, the telling of a fable; and the most difficult was the judicial, the defence and prosecution of the law. Ekphrasis was twelfth on this hierarchical list, with only the exercises of ‘thesis’ and ‘judicial deliberation’ standing above it. The *progymnasmata* allowed the orator to deal with place, people, events and time. As a classical sub-genre, the *progymnasmata* remained popular until the late seventeenth century when education in the three
classical genera of poetry, drama and prose: ‘began to lose relevance and the systematic development of Latin themes through imitation and amplification began to lose favour’ (Enos, 1996:562-563).

The work of the poet Alcaeus was rich with ekphrastic description. Himerius, in his *Orationes*, spoke of his admiration for Alcaeus: ‘when Alcaeus led Apollo away from the Hyperboreans ... with summer bearing forth ... the poet’s lyrics about the god took on something of the lushness of summer. Nightingales sing to the god, as birds are likely to sing in Alcaeus’ (Himerius & Penella 2007:262). In Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, at the commencement of Book II, Phaeton ascends the steps to the Sun’s Palace. He is confronted with a magnificent artwork, a relief, on the portals of the palace, which displays the wonders of the world: ‘the oceans encircling the central earth on a detailed map of the world, with the Sun’s great canopy ... Embossed on earth are the men in their cities and beasts in their forests; the water-nymphs next to their streams and the other rural divinities’ (Ovid & Raeburn 2004:47). Ovid gives a detailed ekphrasis of the artwork through his own eyes, not those of Phaethon. Phaethon was not capable of being ‘awakened’ by the beauty of the artwork, as this was the very earthly world he would soon descend back to on his chariot and destroy. Ovid makes us realise the dire consequences that result when there is no ‘awakening’, no realisation of the beauty of people, places and many other things. From this ‘awakening’ also arises a ‘visual vividness’.

Theon’s definition of ekphrasis can be translated as: ‘a speech that brings the subject matter vividly before the eyes’ (Webb, 2009:14). Theses speeches and writings were meant to hold an *enargeia*, a ‘visual vividness’. The object, place or season being described needed to be conducive to this vivid visualisation (Purton 2011:1). It would be the advent of postmodernity and the recognition of the everyday that would ultimately allow common objects and occurrences such as a bowl, a dog, a family snapshot, and a walk down the street, to be open to the ekphrastic exercise.

Harden (2000) argues for an extension of ekphrasis to include not just the art object but the [erotic] gaze itself. In his examination of *Europa*, the short narrative poem by the second century BC Greek poet Moschus, Harden states that the poet: ‘uses the motifs and techniques of ekphrasis to explore the erotic gaze’ (2000:87); it is the
viewing of a flower basket that is the object of desire. In *Europa* the action of viewing ‘appropriates the very narrative function of the poem’. The ekphrasis is the narrative. The three frames within the basket, the visual *mise en abîme*, become the three frames of the narrative, the literary *mise- en abîme*. It is the ‘vivid quality’ of the description that is critical, not the actual target of the viewing. The erotic gaze becomes the target of the ekphrasis. It is the visual framing which defines the ekphrasis:

> What pictures want, then, is not to be interpreted, decoded, worshipped, smashed, exposed, or demystified by their beholders ... What pictures want in the last instance ... is simply to be asked what they want.

(Mitchell, 2005:48)

Wolff (2012:13-14) continues this extension of ekphrasis, highlighting that the objects have a power within the social context (again the object of desire), and it is this power that can be described so as to complete the ekphrastic project that is capable of being extended outwards to any object or physical and psychological space e.g. the photograph (Sebald, 1996) (Sontag, 2002) (Barthes, 1977a, 1977b, 2000a) (Al-Joulan, 2012) (Hermange, 2000), the cinema (Reber, 2010), and architectural space (Whitby, 1985) (Bachelard, 1994) (Benjamin, 1999). On the furthest borderlands of the ekphrasis lie such motifs as the ‘object of desire’ and its associated ‘erotic gaze’ (Wolff, 2012).

W.J.T. Mitchell (1994) in his essay, ‘The Ekphrasis and the Other’, attempts to raise the status of the ekphrasis above its definition of ‘the verbal representation of the visual representation’, to a disciplinary principle that encompasses a social interaction not just between the object and the literary viewer, but also others, the otherness of visual representation, the relation: ‘of political, disciplinary, or cultural domination in which the self is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject’ (1994:157). Marcelin Pleynet describes it as: ‘A discourse that will not be found in the text’ (Mitchell, 1994:157). Mitchell assures us that: ‘when the impossibility of ekphrasis is overcome in imagination or metaphor, this is when we discover a ‘sense’ in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do: ‘to make us see’” (1984:v).
The interpreter of the ekphrasis, the writer interpreting the original object, in his/her verbal and written interpretation, is also open to: ‘being altered by the encounter’ (Holly, 1996:12). This is part of the social interaction. Not only is the writer capable of being altered in the alchemy of the ekphrasis, but the writer is also subject to her/his innate: ‘difference [from the] alien visual object of verbal representation’ (Mitchell, 1994). This distance can be a causal consequence of gender, historical distance, alienation, political difference, the disjunction between the epic narrative and the everyday. Mitchell (1994) explains this as the: ‘nonhistorical order of human life and the actual physicality of the object/event being revealed’ (1994:181). Mitchell gives a vast array of visual representation able to be put under the focus of ekphrasis, such as: ‘photography, maps, diagrams, movies, [and] theatrical spectacles’ (1994:181), thus ever-widening the fragmented targets of the ekphrastic project.

More recently, Ruth Webb (1999a)(1999b)(2009) has argued that ekphrasis should be liberated from the contemporary constraints of sculpture and visual art and its definition returned to ancient Greek conception of people, actions, times, places, seasons and many other things. The description has an obligation to make the viewer ‘see’. Webb (1999b) stresses that the effect of the ekphrasis is more important than the actual physical description; that the reader or listener’s imagination must come into play, forming something greater than the mechanical parts of the object or scene being described. The viewer needs to feel as though they are in the midst of the place, or feeling the essence of the object. Webb notes that in Classical times ekphrasis fell somewhere between description and narration; as long as the audience could ‘see’, then any object or event could be described. There did not have to be an interruption in the passage of time. The ekphrasis was anything but static. In her examination of ekphrastic writings of Byzantine churches and the aesthetics of sacred spaces, Webb sees this ‘writing of sacred spaces’ (1999b:64) as more of a challenge in trying to make the subject come alive, compared with the writing of an event such as a battle. The challenge is in the ability to evoke the absent: ‘to express the intelligible meanings implicit in the material sights ... the authors of the ekphrases seek to convey the experience of sacred space in which the seen and the unseen, the tangible and the intelligible are equally real’ (Webb, 1999b:73-74).
This primacy of the effect of ‘the constituent parts’ (1999b:1) of ekphrasis that Webb talks about, aligns with Wittgenstein’s change in thinking, from a belief [in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*] that all language could be codified: ‘The world is determined by facts, and by these being all the facts’ (1922:25), to a belief that we have to accept that the mechanics of language (and existence) is beyond comprehension:

But if someone wished to say: ‘There is something common to all these constructions -- namely the disjunction of all their common properties’ -- I should reply: Now you are only playing with words. One might as well say: ‘Something runs through the whole thread -- namely the continuous overlapping of those fibres’.


For Wittgenstein, the definition of ekphrasis was undefinable. He believed in attempting to do so, one was ‘only playing with words’. The essence of the ekphrasis is the overlapping of its constituents that creates an effect, which is incomprehensible but very real.

2.1.2 Ekphrasis and the *Awakening*

In this exegesis the term *awakening* is meant to be read as the ‘seeing through hearing’ that Hermogenes and his fellow historians, Theon, Aphthonius and Nicolaus refer to in their *progymnasmata*, where the focus of subject matter is brought ‘vividly before the eyes’. It is also Walter Benjamin’s ‘extreme awakening’, the: ‘great exemplar of memory – that occasion on which we succeed in remembering’ (Benjamin, 1999:883).

Cunningham (2007), in her paper ‘Why Ekphrasis?’, proposes a series of questions to the reader: what is really going on in ekphrasis? What are all these pauses for thought really about? What is the meaning of this interruption to the linear narrative? Her answer is enlightening:
I think, to resolve this ancient and continuing doubting by pointing at an allegedly touchable, fingerable, thisness. It lays claim to the absolute thereness of an aesthetic object, the thereness writing is (rightly) so doubtful about, and seeks to corral that evident (or claimed) empirical, real, truthfulness for itself and its own doings.

(Cunningham, 2007:61)

I would argue that this ‘thereness’, this touching of some empirical truth in regards to the ekphrastic focus, lays open the possibility of an ‘awakening’ in the reader. The ekphrasis is capable of imparting to the reader a new memory of the object (or place, event et. al.), a poetic moment that the reader has never imagined. With the ekphrasis, the reader is given a presence of the object, or event, or memory, which brings with it an ontological integrity. Barthes called it the: ‘the effect of the real, l’effet du réel’ (1986:141-148). The ekphrasis has the potential to bring the reader closer to a truth and an ‘awakening’.

Cunningham states that it is the: ‘tension between the realist, presencing, logocentric desire and the counter-pressure of absence’ (2007:71), the tension between the real and imagined, which keeps that tradition of ekphrasis vital. This ekphrastic moment is both needed and desired. The reader inherently and instinctively knows there is something more than meets the eye, that there are hidden layers behind the object or event that has the opportunity re-awakened; a space where the reader, author, and narrator, combine to create a new knowing, a new awakening.

Foucault describes his ekphrasis of the painting Las Meninas (1656) by Diego Velázquez, as: ‘the relation of language to painting is an infinite relationship . . . it is in vain that we say what we see; what we see never resides in what we say’ (Foucault, 1990:9). For Foucault, Las Meninas was a painting about the representation of representation, a painting about painting: ‘a point to which, even though it is invisible, we, the spectators, can easily assign an object, since it is we, ourselves who are at the point . . . of representation . . . whether in the service of pleasure or of knowledge . . . was posited as a form of repetition: the theatre of life or
the mirror of nature’ (1990:4). Las Meninas, was not just a painting of members of the Spanish royal court, it was an artist’s statement about reality and illusion, about how reality can be represented, and what part the artist plays in this representation. In Las Meninas, we see the artist, the artist’s subjects, and the back of the canvas that he is painting. It is only the viewer that can see the radical perspective that Velázquez is presenting. Las Meninas acts as an ekphrasis of the act of painting. Foucault’s essay presents a detailed sketch of how Las Meninas places the viewer both inside and outside the frame of the painting (as does Velázquez by painting himself into the picture), and makes clear the critical importance of ‘point of view’ in the work. Shapiro (2007:13) states that what Foucault is proposing with this statement is: ‘an analysis of the relationship between words and images, and so of the genre of ekphrasis itself. What is seeing? What is saying? What is the infinite relationship?’ (2007:13).

The Stoics called this mental image, visualisation of the subject, the phantasia, and as Salzman-Mitchell (2005:4) notes, it is deeply linked with the ekphrastic project. This visualisation creates a situation where the speaker is:

... carried away by enthusiasm and passion, you think you see what you describe, and you place it before the eyes of your hearers. Further, you will be aware of the fact that an image has one purpose with the orators and another with the poets, and that the design of the poetical image is enthrallment, of the rhetorical--vivid description. Both, however, seek to stir the passions and the emotions.

Longinus, De Sublimitate 15.1 (Salzman-Mitchel, 2005:4)

The ekphrasis derives from the phantasia, which the writer has imagined in her/his mind. It is then up to the reader to create their own phantasia, to ‘see’ the mental image as they have constructed it; the phantasia is a memory fragment of the object/event that has never been physically seen by the reader. In addition, the articulation of the ekphrasis closely relates to the aesthetic quality of the sublime as outlined by Longinus. The five sources of the sublime: ‘forming great conceptions ... vehement and inspired passion ... the due formation of figures, first those of thought and secondly those of expression ... noble diction which comprises choice of words and use of metaphors and elaboration of language ...and dignified and elevated

319
composition’ (Longinus, *De Sublimitate* 8.1) and its resultant ‘elevation of style’ are all essential qualities, if the verbal representation of the visual representation hopes to succeed in making the listener/reader ‘see’ as he/she has never ‘seen’ before; if there is to be an ‘awakening’.

With the giving of memory, the individual is able to regain a personal and cultural history that may have been previously denied – an identity and space where the individual holds the possibility of ‘happiness’ and sense of belonging. The witnessing of memory and the regaining of memory can act as a healing agent in confronting the pain of disconnection. One technique for the witnessing of memory is ekphrasis, an extended and detailed literary description of ‘people, actions, times, places, seasons’ or any number of things, real or imaginary; extracted from the shadows of blindness, the moment when the event is brought to light – the *progymnasmata* of the Greeks. This is the *awakening*. The rhetorical and poetic figure of ekphrastic memory has the potential to awaken the reader, to see what has been lost or never imagined.

It must be noted that from this point in the exegesis, *A Strange Chinese Tale* will be referenced as a point of comparison with other literary texts. That is to say, the argument and themes of the exegesis have a direct relationship to the narrative practice carried out in the creative work. The creative work is an expression of the exegesis.

In Proust’s first volume of *In Search of Lost Time, Swann’s Way* (1913), the Narrator, on the taste of the madeleine cake, experiences a ‘shudder’ (2003:50) that runs through his whole body; within this shudder is the memory of an early childhood experience in The French town of Combray. It is a recognition that great changes are taking place, that visual memory could be linked to taste and the everyday object. The realisation that: ‘when nothing subsists of an old past, after the death of people, after the destruction of things, [we are] alone’ (2003:49), but there is the capability to bring back the memory from ‘the vast structure of recollection’, simply by the taste and smell of a piece of cake, a ‘tiny and almost impalpable drop’ (2003:49) of all that’s gone before. It is Bergson’s *mémoire involontaire*. 
Aristotle precedes Proust by over two millennia, in the knowledge of the ‘madeleine moment’ and is one of the first writers to express an ekphrasis of memory. In his treatise on Poetics (c. 335 BCE), Aristotle analysed the different ‘species’ of Discovery, and noted that it was through memory that: ‘a man’s consciousness [can be] awakened by something seen or heard’ (1920:59). Aristotle affirms this proposition, citing Dicaeogenes’ The Cyprioe (1920:59), in which the sight of a picture makes a man break into tears, and in the Tale of Alcinous (1920:59) where the sound of a harp reminds Ulysses of the past and causes him to weep. This ‘proximity of memory’ is also referenced in In Euripides’ Alcestis, where Admetus tells Heracles, that it was a woman who took his memory back: ‘to her of whom we spake’ (2003:KL324); and in Plato’s Laws (c. 360 BCE), or Athenian and Cleinias, it was the ability to: ‘stir in us the memory of youth’ (1975:49), by delighting in the sports and merrymaking brought into proximity by the young men they surrounded themselves with.

Without the receiving of memory, there can be no ‘awakening’. Through the act of writing and its reading, a succession of ekphrastic responses are elicited in the reader. These responses may be rejected or received with ‘deadened acceptance’, as is the case with Dorothea in George Elliot’s Middlemarch. She is overwhelmed by the: ‘weight of unintelligible Rome’ (Elliot, 1994:161), where the city’s images: ‘succeed each other like the magic-lantern pictures of a doze’ (1994:161). She is left with a dull forlornness in her memory of the city. This is reflected in A Strange Chinese Tale when Yue walks the streets of modern Paris:

There she had realised that the beauty and freedom of Paris was balanced by this same oppression of history. The city was unable to move forward and conquer its cultural past. Paris was a living museum of countless dead heroes competing for a place in the discourse of the present.

(Percival, 2015:74)

There exists this possibility that one or more of the literary text’s ekphrastic phrases may indeed awaken the reader. It is this possibility of ‘awakening’ that has the
ability to create a sense of danger and risk, both for the reader and the author. This risk may lie with the extremes of pain or pleasure. In the domain of pain, a phrase, word or description belonging uniquely to the experience of the reader, may in combination with other events elicit a traumatic memory, a resultant disassociation. It may be a phrase in Jonathan Franzen’s (2001) *The Corrections*, or a brief conversation in Evan S. Connell’s (1969) *Mr Bridge*. The traumatic memory becomes another permutation of Bergson’s *mémoire involontaire*. In reference to Franzen (2000) and Connell (1969), I personally suffered acute and prolonged anxiety attacks, by reading specific passages of text, where ekphrastic associations elicited the memory of the sexual assault by my mother as a teenager. The resultant anxiety attacks took the form of ‘extreme disassociation’, a complete lack of connection with my natural surroundings; a frightening space that could last for hours, or a day; a space where you are never sure whether there will ever be a way back; a definite *mémoire involontaire*. In the passage below, the main protagonist of *A Strange Chinese Tale* experiences this same ‘extreme disassociation’ when a memory comes to her from Shen:

> She could not accept the memory. There was no focus, only a gradual disassociation from the people and buildings surrounding her. The initial memory became lost. All she was left with was the shadow. As the anxiety took over, there was only a view from the outside. There was no return, only the abyss. She was no longer part of the world that existed minutes before. An overwhelming sense of guilt swept over her. It was as though a bird carrying a thousand sharpened knives in its feathers was ripping at her soul.

(Percival, 2015:57)

In the opposite realm of pleasure, the ‘awakening’ may present itself as a memory belonging to euphoria, an epiphany of the aesthetic sublime, which approaches the understanding and comprehension of *satori*: ‘the Zen experience of “awakening”’ (Watts, 1957:22).

Yue experiences such a moment, in her village of Baisha:

> The peach trees filled the southern end of the yard, their branches laden with
early spring blossoms, pure white. It was dusk, and the fading light seeped into the gathering mist. Yue watched as a cool wind blew in from the south, pushing the fractured blossoms off their branches. The flowers were snow held up in the sky. As the breeze strengthened, the petals were released. They drifted down onto the dew-laden mudbricks. There they settled, white on chocolate brown, snow on earth, butterflies arriving home.

(Percival, 2014:67)

Such moments belong to the sublime. In Japanese literature, this balance of complexity and simplicity produces a transient beauty given the word shibusa. This can in turn be complemented with the aesthetic of wabi, where the qualities of transience and imperfection give their own sense of austere beauty (Parkes, 2011). Both of these aesthetics hold potential for the heightened experience of satori, which results in the individual experiencing the: ‘first sight of Truth’ (Kapleau, 1989:25). This could be perceived as an extreme awakening:

But now I have seen thee, housebuilder: never more shalt thou build this house. The rafters of sins are broken, the ridge-pole of ignorance is destroyed. The fever of craving is past: for my mortal mind is gone to the joy of the immortal NIRVANA.

_The Dhammapada: The Path Of Perfection_ (Mascaro, 1973:56)

The awakening can also be one of the everyday. This realm of the everyday lies closer to the Japanese aesthetic of wabi. The ekphrastic project, the extended use of the ekphrasis, holds the possibility of making the unfamiliar familiar; of showing the sublime beauty of everyday objects and occurrences; the teacup at the edge of the table, the family photograph stored in the attic, the women cutting wheat in the fields, the old man sitting in the corner of the noodle shop, a walk down a familiar lane, or the rubbish collector cycling his load down the country road towards the city. The transcendent grace of the everyday, where the smallest action and the most mundane of objects can become a stage for a wonderlust found, not in the exotic, but
in the everyday social spaces where we spend the majority of our ordinary lives. Literature has the ability to soak up the everyday. *Don Quixote* led the way, followed three hundred years later by *Mrs Dalloway* and *Ulysses*. The ekphrastic project has given us the essence of everyday objects, from the shield of Achilles in Homer’s *Iliad* to a simple everyday bowl sitting on the shelf, as in Ann Beattie’s *Janus* (1985). It is in the everyday that the ekphrasis is able to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary.

Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zahng explore this notion of the beauty of the everyday in their book *Ten Thousand Things: Nurturing Life in Contemporary Beijing* (2012) with their examination of the everyday practice of *yangsheng* (nurturing life) and all the forms it takes in the public parks of Beijing; such as the early morning practise of *tai chi*, communal singing, dancing and exercising, playing chess, and the practice of calligraphy, with the large brushes on concrete; ‘the ten thousand things that life is, and is becoming’ (2012:14). It could be said that the man riding the tricycle, in the passage cited above, is practising an enforced form of *yangshen*, he has no choice, but the beauty in the movement and rhythm of his activity is still present if one chooses to see.

The ekphrasis of memory circles a ‘strange loop’, spiralling down through time and space, picking up that which has been left behind, This can be compared to Hofstadter’s strange loop, a: ‘phenomenon [that] occurs whenever, by moving upwards (or downwards) through the levels of some hierarchical system, we unexpectedly find ourselves right back where we started’ (1979:10). Nicola Boyd used the Hofstadter’s strange loop meme as a metaphor in her paper: ‘A Creative Writing Research Methodology’ (2009), to conceptualise the methods of creative writing researchers, spiralling in to a single idea or argument. Memory can work in much the same way, and in the ekphrasis of memory the author plumbs the depths of personal and political history, spiraling down into layers of memory, which, like the rhizomatic structure of Deleuze & Guattari (2004:7), charts the: ‘ceaselessly established connections between semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles’. Here, there is no linear narrative, only an open map of influences with no ‘beginning or end’; here,
there are the layers in the underground history of memory’s traces and fragments. In these layers lie the dissidents, the outsiders, and the ‘others’. Here in the foundation of China’s memory are the dead citizens, the forgotten citizens, and the disgraced leaders; the fallen militia in the war of poetics and politics.

It is here, in the subjective spaces of memory that will be found the ‘people, actions, times, places and seasons’ reimagined in *A Strange Chinese Tale*:

She didn’t think of them as memories; they were more like a series of echoes reflecting back his life and thoughts; musical notes rippling through time and space, eventually coming to rest like a series of octaves completing a strange loop.

(Percival, 2015:27)

In this strange loop, the ekphrasis of memory creates a poetics of space (Bachelard, 1994), where the ghosts can settle and the healing can take place; a space enveloped by the quietness of the snow, a soft blanket sheltering the body and the soul from the pain of separation and alienation, where there is space for an *awakening* of sorts from an enforced amnesia. Where for the first time one can see the possibility of what could be and what it is to belong:

His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

‘The Dead’, *Dubliners* (Joyce, 2014 [1914]:194)

This is the ‘form of cosmic negation’ caused by snow as it covers a house, described by Bachelard in his *Poetics of Space* (1994:41). It is a space where one can experience: ‘all the qualities of intimacy with increased intensity’ (1994:41):

There, in the damp softness of the country, I would spend all day and night uncovering the poetics held within those messages. In the blanketed quietness,
the fragments of our belonging would painstakingly be pieced together; a huge jigsaw puzzle mapped out across a plane of shared awareness.

(Percival, 2015:46)

This poetics of space is crucial in the writing memory, its ekphrastic representation in literature. It is in this ekphrastic space that an *awakening* can take place.

### 2.2.3 Ekphrasis and the Photographic Image

The photograph, whether its origins are in the domain of fine art or the informal snapshot, has traditionally been excluded from the history of the ekphrastic project. For Heffernan (1993), an acknowledgement of the postmodern extension of the ekphrasis into the domain of photographic image remains absent.

There is a contention that the photographic object does not lie within the art domain. This debate (Prodger, 2012) has essentially been resolved with the acknowledgement and acceptance of terms such as ‘art photography’ and ‘fine art photography’ (Christopherson, 1974). A central argument of this exegesis, however, is that the ekphrastic project should be further extended to include objects other than traditional art objects; this includes the photographic image, whether it is a family snapshot, a documentary/press photo, or a fine art photograph. The ekphrasis of the photographic image is the ‘writing from the photograph’. In this writing from the photograph, a memory of the photograph is re-imagined (re-remembered) by the author and transmitted to the reader. In this act of writing, ekphrasis and memory are inextricably linked.

In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, the ekphrasis of historical photographic images enables the reader to revisit significant events in Chinese cultural and political history, events that have been exposed to the ‘vulnerability’ of public memory, capable of being manipulated, altered and deleted by the State apparatus; occurrences such as the Beijing Spring (Tanari, 2009) with its outpouring of people’s dissent brought on by Deng Xiaoping and his political attack on the Cultural Revolution and the Gang of Four (Goldman, 1999), the Democracy Walls movement that spread across the
Chinese countryside and cities from the spring of 1978 to late 1979 (Goldman, 1999) (Brodsgaard, 1981)(Paltemaa, 2005); and the formation of an avant-garde artist collective at Beijing East Village in the early 1990s (Minglu, 2005)(Zhang Huan, 1999)(Asia Society, 2014). This ekphrasis of the photographic image has the potential to rupture the mainstream dialectic and make it ‘come alive’ with form, colour and ‘sweat’. Within these photographic images are memories frozen in emulsion as traces of light, given a fragile and empowering permanence. These images are writings of light, elegiac art, folded time, a presence, a captured moment, a secret about a secret, *memento mori*. They are the: ‘ghost in the machine’ (Ryle, 2002:27).

These memories, captured in photographs, are able to be eternally replayed, never repeating, always unique - the event remains unchanged however, the focus of memory, the focus of the ekphrastic project is unwavering. In the photos of Tiananmen ‘89, the dead body remains mangled across the road no matter which way the spectator chooses to look. Memory’s locus is Barthes’ *punctum* (2000:26-27).

Benjamin surmised that a photograph, due to its mechanical reproduction, somehow lost the ‘aura’ that a work of art (re: painting) was capable of. For Benjamin the foremost question was not whether photography was art, but ‘whether the very invention of photography had not transformed the entire nature of art’ (2009:14). Barthes, by way of Proust (2000), was able to state that the photograph’s aura was one of lost memories, and time; that the punctum was the ‘prick’ or realisation where time would never be recovered: ‘From now on, I could do no more than await my total, undialectical death’ (2000a:70).
2.2 The Creative Work – *A Strange Chinese Tale*

In my research for *A Strange Chinese Tale*, a comprehensive survey was undertaken of academic papers addressing key socio-political issues in post-1979 China, a time when the country opened up economically to the West. A number of these academic papers were adapted and reinterpreted as ‘reimagined experiences’ and placed within the multiple frames of *A Strange Chinese Tale*. These papers, Marinelli’s (2004) ‘Walls of Dialogue in the Chinese Space’ and Emily Chao’s (2003) ‘Dangerous Work - Women in Traffic’, are then juxtaposed with the: ‘remembered, perceived, and imagined’ (Sutton, 2010) experiences of the novel’s characters, as well as the literary imagination of the author. This results in a semi-fiction of ‘reimagined experiences’. It was critical that these texts [academic papers] had relevance and integrity to both the narrative of the novel. An authenticity from these texts is crucial in terms of the credibility of the protagonist’s perceived character, and the dramatic structure of the novel.

*A Strange Chinese Tale* is a work of contemporary historical fiction, being the account of a Chinese sister and brother, Yue and Shen, reborn from a fox-spirit tale written three hundred years ago by the Chinese scholar, Pu Songling, in his *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio* (2006). The brother and sister, plus the third protagonist, the old Chinese dissident poet Rong, seek to comprehend the significance of their ‘outsider status’ in a psychological and physical journey across space and time. It is a search for a self that is free from the ever-present pain of disconnection that each of the protagonists feels. *A Strange Chinese Tale* is set in the post-modern political and cultural landscape of contemporary China. Memory, in terms of its politics and poetics, and its negation and recovery, acts as a metaphor for political and personal repression, and finally as an agent in the process of reconciliation, redemption, and spiritual and physical healing. As the novel proceeds, Yue works to establish her own story, independent of the numerous narratives that threaten to subsume her. All three protagonists seek a form of redemption from a moral judgement that each has imposed on her/himself. In their individual responses to their pain of disconnection, each of the protagonists attempts to create a unique space in which a personal sense of belonging can be attained.
*A Strange Chinese Tale* (2006) explores the themes of memory, place, language, and transcultural experience, and ranges across a complex matrix of geographical, psychological and social spaces in contemporary China. The role of the ‘strange’ and the ‘dissident and different outsider’ in contemporary Chinese society is a major theme. The fictional narrative takes the form of a dialogue between Yue, born in China but raised in Australia from when she was a year old, who has returned to Beijing to be with her brother Shen after a lifelong separation of space and memory [Shen feels a deep guilt because his mother was killed in a fire due as a result of his gambling debts. The trauma for Yue in the first instance is because she was there and escaped the fire]. This dialogue takes place in a series of scheduled fortnightly meetings in Rong’s studio over the space of one year. Rong could be imagined by the reader as a trusted friend, processing Yue’s life of repressed and collected memories.

The novel combines first-person diary entries written by Yue over the course of the twelve months in which the novel takes place, and an adaptation of Yue’s diary by the implied narrator who I have constructed as Rong. Within this narrative are numerous ‘gleaned’ memories, which enable the three protagonists complete freedom to shift through time and space, and across a matrix of geographical, emotional and cultural borders. This extended dialogue within the novel, with its reinterpretation of Yue’s memories and diary entries by Rong, facilitates the telling of numerous ‘border’ and ‘outsider’ stories set in contemporary, urban and rural China. The third person adaption of Yue’s diary, forms the backbone of the novel.

The two protagonists, Rong and Yue, act as mediators in the historical narrative offered to the reader, by way of their own stories and through the stories gleaned from others. The author of *A Strange Chinese Tale*, ‘the I that writes’, is a narrator who is ‘twice removed’ from the authenticity of the original experience (Wilson, 2005:5). In a sense, the two narrators act, both as readers, through the readings of the real author, and as storytellers, through their own stories (imagined and fictionalised), as well as through other people’s stories (also imagined and fictionalised). The novel seeks a topophiliac journey of the imagination, in the sense that it constantly reaffirms the strong emotional relationships between individual and collective identity of one’s sense of place.
2.2.1 THE FORM OF WRITING IN A STRANGE CHINESE TALE

The Qualities of Memory

In the discipline of cognitive psychology, memory can be categorised as true or false, imagined or actual (Lampinen, Odegard & Bullington, 2003). These true and false memories can be further reduced to the confines of perceptual detail, associated thoughts, emotions, contextual information, and kinesthetic detail (Lampinen, Odegard & Bullington, 2003:1). This complex debate concerning false and true memory has been contested in the law, regarding the innocence or guilt of perpetrators of sexual assault. This true and false dichotomy of memory, this dialectic of memory, is situated in the locus of institutional power. Foucault wrote on the institutionalisation of madness in *Madness and Civilisation* (1988); a similar history could be written on the institutionalisation of memory.

This is the objective and scientific domain of memory. In this construct there is no room for aesthetics. Science seeks an objective truth; it is not concerned with the metaphysics and poetics of memory. The aesthetic domain of memory lies within the disciplines of Art, Literature and Philosophy. It is in this aesthetic and philosophical domain that memory holds within its construction a notion of the other, that which lies outside the mechanics and physics of the body; the other of memory has a close relationship to the ekphrastic project. This other belongs to literature and metaphysics; it belongs to the philosophy of memory.

I want to argue for the 'other side of memory'; the metaphysics of memory, which thrives within literature and art. It is the memory that belongs to Marcel Proust, T.S. Eliot, and Jorge Luis Borges, an unreliable memory that gains power and credibility through its uncertainty.

When T.S. Eliot (1959) was asked about his unfinished poems, he answered that it was better for him to leave them in the back of his mind rather than on a piece of paper in a drawer: 'If I leave it in a drawer it remains the same thing but if it's in the memory it becomes transformed into something else'. For Eliot it was in the
transformation of memory that creativity lay. What is memory’s final form, where
the ekphrasis of the unconscious takes place? For Norman Mailer (2007), the ‘vapid
young American’ he met in Paris, was stored in his memory, then ‘became Leroy
Hollingsworth’ in his novel Barbary Shore. Aldous Huxley (1960), when referring to
his drug experiences, commented that although there was ‘always a complete
memory of the experience,’ he could only relive this ‘direct experience’ to a slight
extent, that this was enough to touch this: ‘transformation of the outside world ...
which certain privileged people [such as Blake and Van Gogh] have moved in and
out of.’

Jean Cocteau (1964) found himself: ‘inhabited by a force or being—very little known
to [him].’ Cocteau suggested a link between this ‘marriage of the conscious and the
unconscious and memory’, asking the question: ‘Is genius an at-present
undiscovered form of the memory?’ (1964). Cocteau surmised that the poet didn’t
invent, he listened, but added that the ‘messages of creation are received even
against the artist’s will and again asks: ‘To what do we listen?’ (1964).

For Carlos Fuentes (1981) his Artemio Cruz was a ‘novel of voices’. When the voice
of Artemio uttered: ‘I am dying in this present. I am a body and I am losing my
existence. It is draining out of me’, it was Artemio’s memory and past that was dying.
Fuentes added an additional voice, the collective voice [that] said: ‘We will outlive
this individual and we will project a world of words with language and memory
which will go on.’ It is telling that Fuentes talks of a ‘literary space’ where these
voices meet and ‘demand their incarnation’; this is the metaphysical space that
contains the other of side memory. Jorge Luis Borges (2000:12) imagined a world
without memory and time. In his short story ‘The Aleph’, he writes: ‘perhaps for
[Argus] there were no objects, but a constant, dizzying play of swift impressions’. In
poetry, imagination is able to rule over truth, and memory is capable of
that he had learned from poets ... that infects everything with falseness. Memory
gladly sacrificed for a wealth of detail’ (2000:17). In narrative fiction, imagination is
also able to rule over truth: Peter Carey’s True History of the Kelly Gang (2000), an
imagined history of Ned Kelly, is an excellent example. Borges, talking about this
imagined space, where memory is sacrificed for the act of fictional writing, is also
talking about the ekphrasis of writing. It is this space of the other, the ekphrastic
The Mosaic & Fragmented Form of Writing

In the writing of *A Strange Chinese Tale* the literary and visual writing of memory favours a mosaic form. For Lamberti this mosaic translates into a: ‘conceptual form based on fragments … whose assemblage creates a figure which acquires meaning through the interplay with its own ground’ (2012:42). This collection of memory is reassembled into a pattern: ‘something which transcends their sum [that] makes us progress towards a meaningful overall effect’ (2012: 42). This transcendence is also an element of the *awakening* held in the ekphrasis. There is no strict linear narrative: ‘it is associative, repetitive, subjective and porous’ (Spiotta, 2011). In the writing of memory, fiction shifts through time and space, and across geographical, cultural, and emotional borders. This non-linear narrative attempts to mimic the physical components of memory - its storage, retrieval and recollection. Memory is a matrix of highly charged personal and emotional responses. Like the ‘discontinuous mosaic form of writing’ (McLuhan, 2011:xii), practised by Marshall McLuhan in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, memory is capable of ‘overcoming linearity and opening the phonetic form to new potentialities … the mosaic can be retrieved as an objective correlative of a new cultural and critical discourse’ (Lamberti, 2012:115).

Memory is ‘open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformation, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, and susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived’ (Nora, 1989:8). The non-linear mosaic nature of the writing highlights this ‘vulnerability’ of memory to the processes of manipulation and alteration. Barthes says: ‘ … It is not on the level of the sentence that the subject seeks his place … Underneath the figure, there is something of the ’verbal hallucination’ (2002:6). Memory seeks its own place both in the retelling and the re-writing. The writing of Yue and Shen’s thoughts and memories, the giving and receiving, are constructed in this fragmentary manner. In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, discontinuity is an essential mechanism in the writing of memory. Cultural memory is expressed in its poetics and in its fiction. Rigney states that: ‘literary texts play a variety of roles in the formation of cultural memory and
that these roles are linked to their status as public discourse, to their fictional and poetical qualities, and to their longevity’ (2004:361).

*The Ellipsis*

In the writing of *A Strange Chinese Tale* the literary and visual writing of memory also favours the use of the ellipsis. Kundera (1984) talks of the ellipsis and polyphony: ‘in order to make the novel into a polyhistorical illumination of existence, you need to master the technique of ellipsis, the art of condensation. Otherwise, you fall into the trap of endless length.’ This condensation and fragmentation into smaller fragments of information, equates with the rapid shots of memory received by the protagonists, Yue and Shen in their *dérive* across Beijing. The memories of politico-historical Beijing are gathered as fragments in quick succession; they are open-ended and unresolved. For Barthes (1977:80) the use of the ellipsis is disturbing due to its ‘dreadful freedom of language.’ The use of ellipsis and polyphony in *A Strange Chinese Tale* exemplifies the freedom that memory is capable of. This is the liberating aspect of memory.

Barthes sees these fragments as: ‘so many stones on the perimeter of the circle’ (2002:i.x). But memory works within a more rhizomatic structure, spreading out from the original source, interconnecting and multiplying, not in a fractal sense, where each new memory is exactly the same, but more as a transformational account of the original. Deleuze & Guattari, in *A Thousand Plateaus* (2004) might call this the ‘thousand plateaus’. When the memories of a city are released from its hidden underground history it arrives in fragments, originating from the single event but through different sources. What happened in Tiananmen in 1988 contained a series of events, each event containing a number of sources: photographs, media articles, oral accounts, paintings, poems, fictional writings. Each of these sources is capable of transferring a memory. The photographic sources are ‘frozen in time’ and only transform themselves through their interpretation. Oral accounts change with each retelling. The fragments of memory in *A Strange Chinese Tale* are not what Barthes calls a ‘thought sentence … a fantasy of discourse, a gaping of desire’ (Barthes, 2002:92); instead, each written fragment is the ekphrasis of the photographic image.
The final sequence of *A Strange Chinese Tale*, inside the train carriage where Yue meets her fox-spirit sister for the first time, is in the form of *mise en abyme*, a term that André Gide first coined in 1893 (Gide, 1948:41). Its original meaning was ‘placed in the abyss’ but is now a formal technique where an exact frame is placed within the next exact frame, capable of recurring infinitely. It is like the construction of Russian Dolls; the mirror image within the mirror image, where we see ourselves repeated infinitely smaller. Gide was referencing the heraldic sign, where the leif is repeated within the frame; in *A Strange Chinese Tale*, it is the memory bouncing back and forth between Yue and her new-found fox-spirit sister, Lucy:

The images bounced forwards and backwards, reverberating, playing off each other in a strange loop - Shen, Lucy, me - me looking at Shen - Lucy looking back at Shen. The images contracted into a semblance of a known perception, then quickly dissipated into a jumble of confused projections. I was thrown into a stream of knowing and not knowing.

(Percival, 2015:301)

In his *Paris Review* interview, Alain Robbe-Grillet (1986) commented: ‘Descartes [in his *Meditation on First Philosophy* (1639)] wrote: “If I dream of something with enough power, when I wake up I don’t know whether it was a dream or reality”’. Descartes confers the truth-status to a dream; he has dreamed with enough power to turn it to reality. Yue’s experience in the train carriage, presented in a *mise en abyme* frame, confers a ‘truth-status’ to her fox-spirit belonging. There is enough ‘power’ in her interaction with Lucy to turn her belonging into a reality. This interaction creates an effect of indeterminacy between the two characters, creating what filmmaker Chris Marker calls a ‘collective fictional narrative’ (Kear, 2005:57), a liminal space between fiction and fact.

Multiple Frames and the Subversive Nature of Narrative Structure

The dream sequence held within Shen’s memory collected by Yue when Shen is in
prison is a frame within a frame within a frame. Yue receives fragments of her brother’s memories while he is in solitary confinement. Within this memory there is a dream sequence where her brother escapes into the image of a remembered photo. The photo elicits memories pertaining to itself. This layering and multiple framing of the written form, reflects the very nature and essence of memory. Shen is trying to dream an intensity that transforms memory into truth. In the fragmented images of the dream sequence Shen is attempting to make his sister realise the truth about who is responsible for the death of their mother. The person guilty of this matricide is himself. In the dream sequence he enacts a descriptive narrative of a boat burning and exploding at the edge of a shoreline, an ekphrasis that he has reimagined of the fire that killed their mother:

... The seagulls circle above the hound, as he bounds away from the ancestral surf, along the sand towards his master. In the distance a sailing boat drifts in towards the coastline, escaping the horizon ...

... The boat is now at the edge of the breaking surf. The black dog runs up to its owner, and jumps up onto a torso that is clothed in chromium yellow. On the yacht a man and a woman move up onto the bow, and wave towards the shore. In the same fragment of time, a child falls off the stern of the boat, into the water. The sound of the parents’ desperate cries cannot be heard above the screaming of the wind and the groaning of the surf ...

... The chromium-yellow figure turns its back on the ocean, and jogs towards the jagged cliffs jutting up to the beach. The boat is now metres from the shoreline. It explodes, and is engulfed with flames. A fire rages out across the calm water, forming a thin line of cadmium red along the barren shoreline...

(Percival, 2015:196)

This entering of the dream sequence by Shen, on the imagined death of his mother, sets up a relationship between what O’Neill calls ‘story-time (erzahltZeit), measured in temporal units (days, moths, years) and discourse-time (Erzahlszeit), measured in spatial units (words, lines, pages)’ (1996:42). The dream space of Shen is a ‘discourse-time’ measured by fragments of thoughts and impressions, as are all the memory components of A Strange Chinese Tale. The structure of the novel, i.e. its
chronological chapter headings and overall plot narrative, belong to a 'story-time', measured in hours, days, months and seasons. This device is used throughout the novel, not only in the repeated written fragments of recalled and reimagined memories by the protagonists but also from ‘narrative interruptions’ within *A Strange Chinese Tale* by Pu Songling (the author of the original intertext *Strange Chinese Tales from The Studio*). The presence of a compound discourse within *A Strange Chinese Tale*, where one protagonist, Rong, is narrating the story from the personal diary of another protagonist, Yue, further complicates the narrative structure of the novel.

O'Neill states that: 'the transformation of actors, place and story-time into characters, setting, and discourse time is evidently always at least potentially subversive' (1996:56). The use of ellipsis, polyphony, multiple frames, *mise en abyme*, multiple points of view, discourse-time, and compound discourse within *A Strange Chinese Tale* all act to subvert the traditional nature of the narrative structure of the novel, i.e. ‘character and point of view’ (1996:56). This subversion is carried out to further correlate the style and structure of the narrative text, with the qualities of memory. The writing of memory seeks to emulate the experiential qualities of memory.

*Chinese Written Characters and Intertextuality*

The methodology of writing in *A Strange Chinese Tale* utilises a major characteristic of Chinese written language – its capacity to form numerous semantic meanings when two or more characters are used in combination. The Chinese written character represents an idea, rather than a group of letters; it is said ‘that on the day the characters were born, Chinese heard the devil mourning, and saw crops falling like rain, as it marked the beginning of civilization, for good and for bad’ (Zhou Zhen, 2014:85)

This associative lexicographical power of Chinese characters constitutes a major role in constructing the narrative of the creative work. The creative work is divided into twelve sections, each consisting of two chapters. The formal meaning of each of the twelve characters, as well its lexicological relationship in combination with
other characters, is used as device to affect the narrative of each of the twelve sections of *A Strange Chinese Tale*.

As an example, the first chapter is driven by the character *qí* 奇 (strange), which in combination with other characters, is capable of over fifty distinct semantic relations. In the extract below, the ideogram *qí* 奇 (strange) acts as an intertext for the narrative. The term ‘urban legend’ is used because its Chinese translation, *dù shì chán qí* (urban legend: translation of recent western term - story or theory circulated as true) contains the ideogram *qí* 奇. The narrative in the above extract, included such phrases as, ‘odd mixture of magnolia and tobacco smells’, ‘surprise gift of tiramisu chocolate biscuits from Guangdong’ and ‘ghosts nearly at the door’, as they all reference semantic relations pertaining to *qí* 奇 (strange), through the ideogram’s general meaning of ‘odd’ and ‘surprise’. The phrase, ‘Spring breezes stroking the surface’ (*chūn fēng fú miàn*: a spring breeze strokes the face) is also used due to its reference to spring. In juxtaposition, the phrase references the wet paintbrush stroking the concrete path:

奇

*qí* (strange)

lichūn (beginning of spring)

... On their second meeting, the moment Rong opened the studio door he began to apologise. He was old, and tried his best to be humble.

‘I’m sorry for the room being hot. The windows have just been opened; the room’s not properly aired yet. There should be the smell of magnolia drifting through the window to mark the return of spring. I’m sure the *ayi* has been smoking again. Now the room’s a mixture of magnolia and tobacco. Such a confusion of perfumery.’ He laughed again.

He had prepared a pot of Yunnan coffee for her, and a ten-year old pu’er tea for himself.

‘I have another surprise, chocolate and tiramisu biscuits, all the way from Guangdong, from a close friend. I’ve been hoarding them for a special occasion. You know my addiction to chocolate is famous; it’s an unrequited love, as is tea of course. Repent, and we will all be saved!’ he exclaimed with a restrained glee.
‘Thanks Rong, I’m sure you’ll be the one who’ll be saved,’ Yue replied, ‘and I’m sure those who are doing the saving will surely share your passion for chocolate. You really are an urban legend.

... She had wanted so much to be down in Tuanjiehu. She loved watching the old men painting the strokes of water onto the pavement with their oversized calligraphy brushes. They held the stems with the same ease as a studio brush. As the water hit the hot concrete the writings became spring breezes stroking the surface of the pavement.

(Percival, 2015:24-25)

This device of utilising the lexicographical power of Chinese characters is also used in separating the novel into the twenty-four traditional Chinese calendar solar-terms, two for each chapter. The story of *A Strange Chinese Tale* starts at commencement of *lichun* (beginning of spring) (4th February) and ends at the completion of *dahan* (major cold) (3rd February), thus completing the annual cycle.

This methodology in the writing *A Strange Chinese Tale* defines and shapes the narrative by utilising the inherent dynamics of the written Chinese written language. This adds an authenticity to the text, embedding the idioms and thought of Chinese language into the English text. It is an attempt to subvert the structure of English language with the intertextuality of Chinese writing, a form ‘colonisation of the dominant text’.

2.2.2 The Fox-Spirit And the Studio of Pu Songling

The ‘fox-spirit’ component of *A Strange Chinese Tale*, in which both Shen and Yue possess inherited fox-spirit powers, enables the protagonists to transverse the borders of what is and isn’t possible in terms of human and non-human behaviours. The novel’s approach to memory becomes its central means of representation. Yue and Shen’s ability to retrieve and store memory, both from people and from places and objects, represents an individual’s power to control and source information in a
social-economy that has strict controls over media content and usage. The fox-spirit is both metaphor and allegory for ‘the outsider’ and ‘the stranger’.

Pu Songling and his *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio* (Pu Songling & Minford, 2006) was the original inspiration for the novel. *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio* acts as the primary intertext for the structure, style and content of the numerous short stories that unfold and are framed within *A Strange Chinese Tale*. The critical discourse relating to *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio* (originally published in 1766) has been extensive and wide-ranging (Shishuo, 1988; Zeitlin, 1993; Barr, 2007; Chang & Chang, 1998; et al).

Pu Songling’s *Strange Tales* is a masterpiece of 17th century Chinese writing (Zeitlin, 1993). It is the first literary work to successfully combine the two narrative genres of the ‘strange’ (*zhiguai* 志怪) and the ‘marvellous’ (*chuán qi* 傳奇) (Luo Hui, 2009), using vernacular fiction (Barr, 2007) in a classic Chinese literary style (Zeitlin, 1993). Pu Songling’s stories are concise, satirical and open-ended and involve ghosts, fox-spirits and all things ‘strange’. The stories do not follow the traditional Western structure of ‘dramatic arc’ storytelling. This same open-endedness is utilised in *A Strange Chinese Tale*, and well suits the style of ‘writing memory’.

Similar to Pu Songling’s *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio*, recorded events in *A Strange Chinese Tale* will be fictionalised and ‘filled with the author’s imagination’, hopefully creating a unique perspective of the recent ‘strange’ that exists within post-1979 Chinese social and political history.

*Pu Songling’s Studio & Library*

... the visionary experience arises from the black and white surface of printed signs, from the closed and dusty volume that opens with a flight of forgotten words; fantasies are carefully deployed in the hushed library, with its columns of books, with its titles aligned on shelves to form a tight enclosure, but within confines that also liberate impossible worlds. The imaginary now resides between the book and the lamp.
The Studio was a place of gestalt: 'This 'studio world' was a very special space. It was a physical space, often a pavilion set apart in the garden, screened perhaps by bamboos, a place of seclusion and privilege, where the literati could elaborate their fantasies’ (Minford & Pu Songling, 2006:xx). It was a place where the fox-spirits and ghost can be both conjured up and tamed. It is a place of healing from the pain of disconnection. It is where the scholar must confront both himself and others. Pu Songling’s studio is also the studio of Rong, a place of loneliness and comfort. Pu Songling is comforted in the writing of his strange tales, and Rong is comforted by the stories of Yue and finally by the writing of his memoir which makes up the novel, *A Strange Chinese Tale*:

The Studio is a creative space that can exist as the name of a writer, the physical location of a myriad of cultural pursuits, a shifting abode of no fixed address, or an imaginary retreat from the world ... This 'studio world' was a very special space ... [a place] where the literati could elaborate their fantasies ... it denoted a whole cultural, spiritual, aesthetic and sensual world.

‘Studios and Identity’ (Minford & Roberts, 2008)

It is only in this symbolic and metaphysical space of Rong’s studio that a true dialogue can take place, where a spiritual and cultural healing is able to occur. It is a space of transformation.

He puts his pen down and stares into the metaphysical space of the studio. It's a space that he has created so that he can re-imagine the strange tales and stories collected in the teahouses and street corners of his village. These tales were added to stories already written, those he'd found in his library of curiosities and wonders. His life has been consumed with these stories of ghosts, fox-spirits, and strange happenings. He is comfortable with the strange borderland territory of these creatures and spirits that exist outside the Confucian world that has tried to rule his life, but which he's always resisted.

(Percival, 2015:124)
It was in the library of the scholar’s studio that both Pu Songling and Rong kept their books. Chapter 25 of *A Strange Chinese Tale* is a list of all the books contained in their combined imagined library, what Weinberger (2011) called ‘The Cloud Bookcase’. It is the contents of these books that make up the gestalt that is the source of their writing. In the early Qing (1644-1912) period the writers of the ‘unofficial histories’ made compilations of narratives based around certain themes, whether it was love, obsession or lunacy (Zeitlin, 1993:2). Pu Songling and *A Strange Chinese Tale* explore similar themes in their inquiry into the outsider and investigation of the other. There is,

... no important difference between real characters and fictional ones; once fictional characters are created and enter the public domain, they take on a real existence in the minds of the readers ... there is a continual blurring of literal and figurative truth ... the semiotic operation that uses ghosts, foxes, dreams, and the like as signs for the generation of texts.

(Zeitlin, 1993:165)

In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, the character of Yue, often crossed the border territory between fox-spirit and human, and also between her everyday story and Pu Songling’s Lotus Fragrance story from which she has been ‘reborn’ three hundred years later. This ‘blurring of literal and figurative truth’ enhances the sense of the other, and also acts as a metaphor for the Chinese government’s control of how Chinese history is to be told.

2.2.3 The Strange and the Other – The Dissident Outsider

*Strange Chinese Tale* is the story of three individuals’ searches for identity. Their witnessing through memory is an attempt to heal the pain of disconnection and incorporate the strange into the life of the everyday. Guo Po, a prominent scholar, neo-Daoist, and a personal friend of Pu Songling, wrote a commentary for Songling’s *Strange Tales From A Chinese Studio*, as well as a preface for the ancient book of geographic marvels, *Classic of Mountains and Seas* (Zeitlin, 1993:17). Guo had this to say about the strange and its existential relationship with the self:
We do not know why what the world calls strange is strange; we know not why what the world does not call strange is not strange. How is this? Things are not strange in and of themselves — they must wait for me before they can be strange. Thus the strange lies within me — it is not that things are strange. What human beings know is far less than what they know. Nothing is impossible.

*Classic of Mountains and Seas, Guo Pu [276-324] (Zeitlin, 1993:18)*

Guo Po believed that ‘nothing is impossible’ (18). It is this belief for that which lies outside the empirical and ordinary, which makes the magical realism of the fox-spirit possible in *A Strange Chinese Tale*.

In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, the three protagonists, physically and psychologically traverse the liminal borderland of the dissident outsider. Zeitlin emphasises that the concept of the ‘strange’ is ‘a cultural construct, created and constantly renewed through writing and reading’ (1993:45); that there is no specific, objective reading of the term strange. In the writings of Pu Songling the concept of the ‘strange’ is expressed across a broad semantic range of differing ideograms. The ideogram *guài* is used in the shorter stories of strange tales (*zhī guài* 志怪), the ‘accounts of anomalies’ (1993:4); *qí* is used in the longer and more artfully narrated ‘marvellous tales’ (*chuán qí* 傳奇); and *yì* 異 is used when combined with *guài* to form *guài yì* 怪異, ‘weird tales’ (1993:5). Pu Songling’s writings are part of an alternative literary world of the Ming and Qing [1644-1912] dynasties. Zeitlin highlights the themes of obsession, desire and gender dislocation, a metaphysical world where boundaries are blurred, a liminal borderland between illusion and reality.

A number of authors have noted the ‘outsider’ aspect of Songling’s *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio*. Chang & Chang (1998) affirm that Pu Songling was engaged in a history of alterity that challenged traditional historiography. McMahon (2006) recognised the liminal and borderland nature of Songling’s tales, as did Zeitlin (1993) who saw ‘the boundaries between the real and the illusionary’ as the heart of the text. It was Zeitlin (1993) who reclaimed the ‘strange’ as the book’s major
discourse (as an unofficial Communist ban on all things ‘superstitious’ existed up until the late 1970s (Shishuo 1998)). Zeitlin (1993) states that *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio* ‘deliberately straddles the border between fictional and historical discourse’. The boundary between the strange and normal is never fixed. There is a constant boundary crossing between the realms or worlds. This liminal world of the outsider is constantly altered, erased, or redefined. The outsider ‘betrays a strong desire to transcend the human condition’ (Kao, 1995:543).

A number of commentators have recorded this liminal world of the outsider in contemporary China. Their writings have acted as intertexts in the writing of *A Strange Chinese Tale*. Maurizio Marinelli’s (2004) ‘Walls of Dialogue in the Chinese Space’ and Emily Chao’s (2003) ‘Dangerous Work - Women in Traffic’, both deal with the politics of place and memory in modern China. In *A Strange Chinese Tale* these writings are adapted from an academic style to a semi-fictional narrative genre. The distinctive ‘dissident’ subject matter of these two articles made them excellent resources for adaptation. Marinelli’s (2004) study of the avant-garde artist Zhang Dali, is the source for Yue’s friendship with the ‘angry artist’, and Chao’s (2003) article provides much of the ethnographic research behind Yue’s retelling of a young man’s story of a failed engagement with a Lijiang taxi driver accused of ‘fox stench’. In *A Strange Chinese Tale* these resources act as source material for ‘recent stories of the strange’.

The concept of the ‘dissident outsider’ is very closely aligned to the concept of the ‘strange’ (Zeitlin, 1993), and these contemporary strange events and the people who inhabit them, represent that which is ‘different’ and on the ‘outside’. In *A Strange Chinese Tale* the ghosts, fox-spirits, unusual events and marvellous acts of Songling’s *Strange Tales From a Chinese Studio* are transformed into the avant-garde artists, dissident activists, political protests, repressed memories and altered histories of contemporary post ’79 China - the protests of the Democracy Walls and Tiananmen, the incarceration of Beijing petitioners in black jails, the self-immolation of monks in protest of religious and cultural persecution, the avant-garde artists of the Beijing Spring and Beijing’s East Village, as well as the everyday strange events of customers bedding-in at their local Ikea store, pigs being struck by lightning, rich entrepreneurs advertising for ‘virgin brides’ and taxi-drivers being accused of fox-
stench, all attempt an ekphrasis of the strangeness and dissidence of contemporary China.

2.2.4 The Protagonists

In referencing Jean Baudrillard’s writings, Marc Guillaume talks of ‘strange attractors’ describing them as ‘the points of regions where the trajectories of complex, chaotic systems subject to variations in the initial conditions are forced to converge’ (Baudrillard & Guillaume 2008:16). The protagonists of A Strange Chinese have been brought together in much the same way. Their trajectories converge at a number of loci, the studios of Rong and Yue (in Beijing and Baisha respectively) and Shen’s ‘memory palace’ of Old Town Lijiang. In A Strange Chinese Tale there is an attempt to resolve the chaos of each individual’s existence, for the protagonists to be able to escape from their singularity of alienation, towards a plurality of shared memory. These ‘points of region’ are not contested spaces. They are loci of healing, where loss can be confronted, and the pain of disconnection transformed into a solace of ‘becoming’ and belonging.
At the far end of the valley rose Jade Dragon Snow Mountain, grey and naked, with jagged outcrops of snow on its topmost ridge. A vast cloud, attracted by the mass, formed on the mountain’s western side, laying itself over the highest peak, a soft curve embracing the hard surface, trapped. As Yue rode toward the city, the breeze felt fresh and filled with mountain oxygen, like the air of a cool rainforest. Lijiang stood out as a dark raincloud in the distance.

(Percival, 2015:108)

It is not only the force of ‘strange attractors’ that is at work, but also the force of attraction to strangers; the ‘remarkable relationship [where] the person farthest away also becomes the closest’ (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 2008:26). This is the strange attraction that Yue possesses for the scholar/poet Rong, which enables Yue to share her existential crisis, to share the pain of her disconnection. They meet in the transcultural borderland between the Old West and the New East. This special relationship with the ‘other’ is simultaneously close, and distant. Guillaume calls this phenomenon ‘artificial strangeness’ (2008:27). Even though Guillaume’s study refers primarily to strangeness resulting from the interaction with technological devices, this artificial strangeness can also be applied to the alienation affected by the forces of globalisation and its associated commodity-based ‘satisfaction of desire’.

In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, Yue enacts this force of ‘strange attractors’ with an old man [ghost] by the temple pond in Old Lijiang; the man who relates the story of Shen’s stay in Lijiang:

She was unsure whether she should talk to him. The fact that he was there at all, on the edge of this pond in the rain, made him a strange attraction, not a man who she should necessarily trust. ‘Fish, they’re just fish.’ she replied, giving away as little as possible.

(Percival, 2015:84)
It is this ‘singularity of the stranger’ that allows Yue to explore the other. The stored memories she is to collect in Old Town Lijiang have the same singularity. They are at a distance of strangeness that allows Yue to approach and experience them.

In the novel it is memory acts as the agent that allows the outsider protagonists in the novel to connect. The protagonists are out of balance, as is the contemporary China that they inhabit. The antagonist is the Chinese State Apparatus, which continually stands in the way of the resolution of this alienation. The fragments of memory being collected are utilised to restore this balance. The memory experiences may be imagined or real. The memories belong to the fox-spirit world of Yue, the Buddhist world of Shen, the Daoist world of Rong, as well as the literary world of the original author Pu Songling. The focus of the narrative of *A Strange Chinese Tale* is on the pain of disconnection – the gaps that are the source of pain and conflict; these are the wounds of alienation that need to be healed. These gaps have created a flaw in each of the protagonists, flaws created and fed by loneliness and alienation. Rong is obsessed with a love for guàishi stones, over and above any feeling for the people around him; Yue is ruled by a fox-spirit belonging that for most of the novel is in conflict with her everyday life, and Shen is consumed by guilt and shame, blinding him to connecting with his inner spiritual self.

**Yue** is a mortal person who is possessed of human feelings but has also residing within, the soul of a fox spirit – a spiritual and magical entity that is unrealised. This is the Other that she is forced to accommodate as she grows up – it is an other that she is not comfortable with, which becomes a dilemma for her, this dichotomy between the Western Reason that she has been brought up with, and the traditional Chinese philosophy (a mixture of Buddhism, Daoism and Confucianism) which she has come to know through a three-hundred-year old connection with Pu Songling’s writings. Yue needs to realise her own identity. This transformation sets up a tension. Is there an ability to overcome her disconnection? Is she fated to fail? Is her journey tragic and predetermined? She is haunted by the ghosts of her past, the belonging that has been passed to her from Pu Songling’s ‘Lotus Fragrance Story’:
There is an existential struggle that takes place over what is to be her true self, the overcoming of her other. Is she accountable for actions not in her lifetime? Can memory be both healing and damaging? Is there a time when memories need to be jettisoned, when the known present and the imagination of the future join as one into a new belonging? It is a philosophy of memory that exists only in its affirmation.

As Roland Barthes writes: ‘In order to compose this amorous subject, pieces of various origin have been put together (Barthes, 2002:8). Yue’s fox-spirit origin and her mortal-birth origin run opposite to each other for most of A Strange Chinese Tale, until in the last chapters, where these origins, herself and her other, are finally put together.

In his physical absence, Yue is elaborating on Shen’s fiction: ‘The lover who doesn’t forget sometimes dies of excess, exhaustion, and tension of memory … ‘ (Barthes, 2002:14). Barthes is stressing the need to ‘let go’ of being love and outlines the dangers if the love becomes obsessive and cannot be relinquished. Yue is incapable of forgetting and is ‘dying’ in the tension of Shen’s memory. This is the ‘death’ she is facing; the issue that has to be resolved for her to ‘live’ and be released from the memories of both Shen and Pu Songling. Barthes writes that ‘Woman is faithful (she waits), man is fickle (he sails away, he cruises). It is Woman who gives shape to absence, elaborates its fiction’ (2002:14). The gender bias in Barthes statement can be negated through Yue and Shen’s conviction not to be restrained by the feminine/masculine dichotomy. The characters are to be read as two aspects of the same person.

Rong is an old and trusted friend of Shen, a poet, scholar and activist, practiced in calligraphy and a connoisseur of collecting art and guaishi stones. He has a studio in Beijing and in the mountains. He is under surveillance by the government, we do not really know why. He is slowly losing the trust of Yue over the time of their sessions together. His betrayal of Shen and Yue is driven by his obsession and love of the guaishi rocks, brought on by his isolation and loneliness at being an outsider, and the pressure and threats exerted by the Party. Rong is a noir character. Instead of the traditional scenario where the femme fatale exploits the male protagonist’s ‘weakness of desire’, in A Strange Chinese Tale it is the Chinese Communist Party that exploits Rong’s weakness; it is the Party that is the femme fatale.
desire, his obsession, are the rare guaishi stones that are meant to encapsulate the spirit and beauty rugged mountains. Rong is alienated, paranoid and cynical. He is a man in existential crisis, making questionable moral choices, and with: ‘an outlook that begins with a disoriented individual facing a confused world that he cannot accept’ (Porfirio, 1996:118).

Rong’s moral landscape is in ruins and his ‘will to power’ has been lost. He is a man whose concept of being, has been exposed as fiction. Nietzsche says: ‘Man projected ... the will, the spirit, ego, outside himself’ (1968:60); all three of these ‘inner selves’ have been found lacking in Rong. In A Strange Chinese Tale we are looking at Rong’s gradual disintegration, at an individual whose flaw is being exploited by the State apparatus.

Rong has lost faith, lost the belief in his poetry and imagination. He is surviving on artifice. He has become impotent and has a diminishing belief that he is able to create a true sense of belonging at the hands of his persecutors. The exact identity of his persecutors is never known; they are ubiquitous, hidden behind the Great Wall of China, the wall of censorship, secrecy and authoritarian control. Rong’s search for a balance of his own, and his country’s, qi [spiritual energy] is what drives Rong. Rong is the silent unknown author of A Strange Chinese Tale, [this fact is never disclosed to the reader] the final manuscript in his redemption – a confession of St Augustine. Rong was a poet who knew ‘the wisdom which governs the world down to the leaves that tremble on the trees’ (Augustine, 2008:117).

SHEN is a figure dissolving in space and time. He stores and transmits memories like musical notes on a ‘golden bridge’. He captures the spirit of a human being, a sense of what people are. Shen represents the repressed individual. He is repressing the guilt of his involvement in the tragic death of his mother, and is consumed by his hatred towards the Chinese Communist Party regime.

For Shen, memory is a repressed historical artefact; its awakening can only be obtained by Shen’s creation of the ‘memory palace’, a place where he can store memories for Yue to collect. It is an attempt to ameliorate his repression and guilt, to
overcome ‘the machinery of his repression’, associated with the guilt of having been responsible for killing his mother. The memory palace is a place that is capable of ‘awakening Yue, through her reading of Shen’s stored memories.

Benjamin (1999:402) believed that one needed to create a space for the realisation of ‘awakening’, the conscious knowledge of what has been. This is what Shan attempted to do with his memory palace. Benjamin talked about the awakening: ‘a not-yet-conscious knowledge of what has been: its advancement has the structure of awakening’ (1999:883). In his Arcades Project, Benjamin cites psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, one of Freud’s first students, who links the concepts of repression, and memory:

> The machinery of repression ... occurs when the ego is unequal to meeting certain demands made upon the mental mechanism. The more general process of defence does not cancel the strong impressions; it only lays them aside, the function of memory ... is to protect our impressions. Essentially memory is conservative ... (*Der überraschte Psychologe*).

(Benjamin, 1999:402)

Augustine was taught by Manichees that ‘it is not we who sin but some other nature that sins within us’ (2008:103), but as Goldman states it ‘was both Platonists and Manichees ... that ... lacked ‘the tears of confession’, the imperative for repentance which alone can generate the experience of redemption’ (1998:156). It is these tears of confession that Shen seeks in his final act of redemption, his self-immolation at Kirti Monastery. It is the phenomenological experience that is critical. Shen cannot ‘think’ redemption - there is no theory. For Shen it can only be through the physical act of the body, his self-immolation, that the pain of disconnection be healed.
Politics attains primacy over history. Indeed, historical ‘facts’ become something that just now happened to us, just now struck us: to establish them as the affair of the memory.

*The Arcades Project* (Benjamin, 1999:883)

If the wavelengths of meaning, and of historical memory and time around the event are shrinking, if the wavelengths of causality around the effect are fading, it is because light is slowing down (and, today, the event has truly become a wave: it does not simply travel ‘on a wavelength,’ it is a wave which is undecipherable in terms of language or meaning; it is only, and instantaneously, decipherable in terms of colour, tactility, ambience, in terms of sensory effects). Somewhere a gravitational effect causes the light of the event(s), the light that transports meaning beyond the event itself, the carrier of the messages, to slow down to a halt; like the light of politics and history that we now so weakly perceive, or the light of celestial bodies we now only see as faint simulacra.

*Fatal Strategies*, (Baudrillard, 2008:37)

Memory covers a diverse set of cognitive labels; Tulving (2007) provided an impressive list of two hundred and fifty-six memory related memory terms. Memory is capable of social, political and literary construction. The study of memory is enabled through a number of disciplines, the primary ones being philosophy, science, psychology, education and literature. More recently there has been an attempt to reconstitute a traditional multidisciplinary approach into a new interdisciplinary field of memory studies (Hoskins, Barnier, Kanseiner & Suttton 2008).

In *A Strange Chinese Tale* the repressed memories of the protagonist, Yue, are meant to act as a metaphor for the repressed social and political memories of post-Mao China citizens. The damage resulting from the ‘forced forgetting’ imposed by the

In the novel this cultural malaise is examined through the eyes of a single ‘outsider’, Yue, both in terms of her ‘strangeness’ (a reborn fox-spirit child who possesses special powers around memory) as well as her quasi-laowai status (an adopted Chinese child who has spent most of her early life overseas). History has to have meaning, its events cannot be ignored and repercussions cannot be swept away from examination. Jean Baudrillard writes on the dangers of forgetting history:

The event without consequences is like Musil’s man without qualities, like [Deleuze & Guattari’s] body without organs, like [Bergson’s] time without memory.

‘Simulacra and Simulations’ (Baudrillard, 1998:195)

In the context of literature, the ‘writing of memory’ is open to constant transformation once it passes through the process of recollection. As the writer/storyteller constantly re-imagines her/his individual past, the narrative attains an ever-closer resemblance to a creative work of fiction. 

A Strange Chinese Tale concerns itself primarily with ‘cultural memory’ and its formation. Assmann (1995:14) argues that the fixed points, or ‘figures of memory’, around which cultural memory revolves ‘are fateful events of the past, whose memory is maintained through cultural formation (texts, rites, monuments) and institutional communication (recitation, practice, observance)’. These figures of memory, and their political and poetic permutations, are examined in the novel. The protagonists of A Strange Chinese Tale constantly construct narratives around these figures of
memory. Agnew warns us, that it is these very narratives that ‘are both central to memory and the most likely means of its abuse’ (2009:328), and Pierre Nora writes of memory’s susceptibility to co-option:

Memory remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformation, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.

‘Between Memory and History’: Les Lieux de Mémoire, (Nora, 1989:8)

Nora (1989) is emphasising that memory is political, in the sense that it is rarely separated from the social sphere and hence open to biased interpretation, manipulation and repression. We first realise this when a family member, friend or colleague remembers an event differently from us. There is a slippage, a discontent, an unsettling; a disagreement on how the remembered event is recalled occurs. For a disagreement to take place there must be the involvement of more than one person, i.e. two sources of power. This is the beginning of the politics of memory, a tension between history and memory that creates a constant movement between the two, where memory and history proceed in unison and tension (Wang 2004:3).

There is strong connection between globalisation and the threat to memory. Globalisation has two faces: ‘Economically, it is capitalism’s expanding cycle of development in the regions outside the capital concentrated metropolises. Politically, it is the continued exercise of imperial domination by the capitalist nations over other nations and regions’ (Wang, 2004:2). Both the economic and the political forces of globalisation provide a fertile ground for alienation and domination of individual and community, threatening both individual and collective memory. This ‘acceleration of history’ (Nora, 1989:7) has ruptured the traditional role of memory to safeguard culture and provide social continuity. The individual and community are ‘condemned to forget because they are driven by change’ (1989:8). Wang compares modern China to Europe at the turn of the twentieth century when Bergson, Jung, Freud and Proust ‘delved into memory to locate some anchoring amidst the swift changes’ (Wang, 2004:5). The protagonists in A Strange
Chinese Tale are enmeshed in the consequences of the rapid globalisation that has taken place in their homeland since Deng Xiaoping’s opening up of Mainland China. The ‘pain of disconnection’ that is felt by the protagonists could be represented as the failure of the political state in its role to safeguard its citizens rather than to achieve the state’s its ideological ends. An aspect of this safeguard is for the state to retell the ‘truth’ of its country’s history to its citizens; but truth is most often ideologically mediated. The multiple pains of disconnection felt by the protagonists stand as the reverberations of present intellectual and political climate of subversion of truth in China.

Politics attains primacy over history. The conqueror gains the unchallenged right to tell the ‘true history’ of their country, erasing the crimes, errors and the unimaginable from its past. In the recently renovated National Museum of China in Tiananmen Square, the history of the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, which resulted in the deaths of an estimated 20 million people, was reduced to ‘a single photograph and three lines of text’ (Johnson, 2011). This is an organised forgetting. Foucault perceived this as a history ‘in which all political struggles gain meaning by conforming to a single end, by an exploration of the multiple meanings of specific, particular histories’ (Kear, 2005:55). This singular history becomes the official history. Despite this, other histories manage to survive: in the stories that women tell to their children, in the songs that marginalised ethnic groups sing at festivals and ceremonies around the fire, or truths told in the privacy of laneways and local bars. Although politics conditions the primacy of memory, it does not completely replace it. The memories of the outsider lie dormant, ready to blossom. Even if there had been a false spring, eventually memory will be revealed.

One role of the artist is to make the politics ambiguous, to reclaim past memories, through the unexpected incursion of the avant-garde. Stan Brakhage transformed the politics of memory into light. In his work 23rd Psalm Branch (1966), Auschwitz is not negated; instead it is altered and re-appropriated. Brakhage disfigured history, so that even the worst acts of humankind became bursts of colour and layers of light. He disempowered the murderers by reclaiming the bursts of life that lay in the layers below the atrocities (Miller, 2005:193). Part of the avant-garde project is to shock the viewer into remembering, not through the grotesqueness of the images
but through the unexpectedness of their presentation. This new way of seeing memory is a political act; it is one more example of the ‘extreme awakening’.

2.3.1 OF TIANANMEN

Shen and Yue continued to walk across Beijing drawing the memories out from what had gone before. As they walked through the streets and laneways, the first traces of those memories started surfacing. The memories were piercing and sharp.

(Percival, 2015:179)

The Fourth of June 2014, marked the 25th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. The Tiananmen event is a pivotal scene/frame within *A Strange Chinese Tale*, the time and place of Shen’s politicisation and empowerment. For the first time, Shen realises there is not only an existential other but also a political other. He is already an outsider by way of his fox-spirit belonging, leaving him lonely and angry. With his arrest at Tiananmen, and his subsequent imprisonment, he becomes further disembodied in his status as an outsider citizen in his own country. He is defined by an event that will always be denied as a part of his country’s history. As a response the 25th anniversary, Chinese novelist Ma Jian wrote: ‘every person in the crowd [of one million freedom protesters who had assembled in Tiananmen Square in late May 1989] was a victim of the massacre’ (2014). In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, Shen’s experience of Tiananmen is told by means of an ekphrasis of a story told to me by the artist Australian-Chinese Guo Jian, one night in a Beijing bar in 2009. Guo Jian’s story reads like a series of photographs, with the inclusion of sounds, smells and emotions. His memories are vivid in the retelling. In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, Guo Jian’s spoken ekphrasis is re-presented as a written ekphrasis.

On the 2 June 2014 a colleague in Beijing informed me that Guo Jian had been ‘taken away’ by police in Beijing, following the publication of a story by Mitchell (2014) in the *Financial Times* on 30 May 2014, which had the by-line: ‘Now an artist creating work out of minced pork and litter, the former soldier and Tiananmen Square protester recalls the horrors of that night in Beijing 25 years ago’. Guo Jian was to be
'returned' on 15 June 2014. The Australia Government’s, Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, released a statement on 3 June 2014 stating: ‘The Australian Embassy in Beijing has contacted Chinese authorities to seek further information on the reported detention of Mr Guo Jian and to underline our strong interest in the matter. The Australian Government stands ready to extend all possible consular assistance to Mr Guo’.

Timothy Brook states: ‘The power of silence is strong, but so too is the power of memory. Tiananmen will remain an unexploded mine in the battlefield of Chinese politics until it is properly defused’ (2004). A politics of memory is a politics of denial and attrition. The Party demands that economics should rule over justice. Their inability to reconcile this dialectic necessitates a continuing denial of memory from the Party, an officially mandated amnesia, in which the only truth is that the ‘mass movement for democracy in the spring of 1989 ... did not happen’. That it was ‘nothing but ‘counter-revolutionary turmoil’ instigated by a handful of ‘hooligans’ or another incarnation of the Red Guards ‘ (Swwarz, 1989:120). This suppression of memory is a stoppage in the ‘awakening’ of Chinese citizens from their pain of disconnection. The denial of memory creates a vacuum, a silence of amnesia. Great events and great ideas are not inherently good or utopian; they do not hold their own sense of moral value or inherent justice.

When Nietzsche in, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, writes: ‘The greatest events – they are not our noisiest but our stillest hours. The world revolves not around the inventors of new noises, but around the inventors of new values; it revolves inaudibly’ (1969:153), the silence, the inaudibility, can be deafening in its denial of the truth. Deng Xiaoping's great idea in regards to his violent resolution to Tiananmen was the deadening of thought. When comparing great thought and events, Nietzsche may very well be talking about memory when he writes:

... generations that are their contemporaries do not experience these sorts of events – they live right past them. The same thing happens here as happens in the realm of stars. The light from the furthest stars is the last to come to people; and until it has arrived, people will deny that there are – stars out there ... How many centuries does it take for a spirit to be comprehended?

(Nietzsche, 1969:207)
In this instance, the memories and fragments of time stored in the physicality of our bodies (able to retransmitted in synaptic connections) have been blocked. These memories, once belonging to the citizens, are taken away; it is the Party that is denying their existence. How long will it take for the memories of Tiananmen and the Cultural Revolution to be fully comprehended and realised by the generations that follow? When will the victims be publicly commemorated?

A consequence of the sublimation of historical memory is that the survivors of these great events – whether they be China’s Tiananmen, Cultural Revolution and Great Leap Forward; or Australia’s Myth of Terra Nullius and Stolen Generations – are left to suffer their pain, grief and anger in collective isolation. In the case of Tiananmen, the Chinese state: ‘suppressed public and collective mourning and commemoration’ (Henning, 2009:26). This suppression, however, is always capable of being subverted by those being suppressed. In 1984, the Chinese ethnologist, Zhang Chengzhi, was introduced to Sufism, through his meetings with a small population of Muslims living in northwestern China. In collaboration with this Sufi community, he wrote History of the Soul (1991), a translated collection of written and oral Sufi histories. History of the Soul was written directly after Tiananmen. Zhang wrote of how: ‘Bloodshed and terror can change history . . . when this monster [the state], [is] pushed against the wall, [and] raises the butcher knife against its citizens, its capacity for producing terror is unfathomable’ (Henning, 2009:495). Those who read these words knew that the events Zhang was referring to were Tiananmen.

Stephan Henning (2009), in his article ‘History of the Soul: A Chinese Writer, Nietzsche, and Tiananmen 1989’ outlines how, through the use of literary allusions, Zhang was able to break the taboo of writing about Tiananmen imposed by the Chinese state: ‘Zhang offered urban readers texts that mourned victims of state violence in China . . . ‘ (2009:26). Through his writings Zhang was able to ‘console’ those who were silenced, and help them to ‘mourn’.

Tiananmen continues to be a taboo subject in China, and a vast army of paid and volunteer censors ensure that the event is blocked on all social media sites and web searches within the mainland. Despite official censorship, a plethora of dissident chat boards exist inside and outside the Great Firewall of China. The shutdown of memory imposed on the anniversaries of the Tiananmen ‘incident’ is affectionately known in China as Internet Maintenance Day. On June 4, Beijing remains silent. The
key words blocked read like a form of dissident poetry: campus upheaval, between spring and summer, tank man, river elegy, rebellion, victoria park, nostalgia, flower of freedom, goddess of democracy, do not forget, blood is on the square, operation yellowbird, the wound in history, this day, red terror, all people topple communism (Ng, 2014).

In addition to the official censors there are an additional 280,000 to 300,000 commentators known as the ‘Fifty Cent Party’ (individuals who are supposedly paid fifty cents for each comment) who reconstruct memory and shape public opinion (Wang, 2012). In 2009 Beijing authorities were reported to have sought an additional 10,000 volunteers to censor website content (Hille & Waters, 2009). The Chinese state reported in 2013 that it employed 2,000,000 people, paid by government and private sectors, to monitor the Chinese internet (The Economist, 2013). Sina Weibo, the principle Chinese social media website has over 500 million registered users, with up to 100 million messages posted each day (Dong Le, 2013).

Tiananmen and its violent suppression marked the end of an era in China. The period from the death of Mao up to Tiananmen, and the rise of Deng Xiaoping, has been called the New Era (xin shiqi), and what followed up to the present, the Post-New Era (hou xin shi). The period after Tiananmen marked the rapid rise of popular culture and an expanding consumer society (Hsiao-Peng Lu, 1996:140). Lee (2009) calls the New Era period, ‘China’s Lost Decade’. Lost, because the intellectual renaissance that occurred in those years has been suppressed and nullified in the official histories of the Post-New Era. The economic miracle of Deng Xiaoping’s reforms has created a ‘silence’ of intellectual thought and any critical examination of the negative repercussions of those reforms. The greatest loss was the opportunity for major social and cultural change (Lee, 2009:8).

Milan Kundera believed that eternal memory and rectification were both shams, that there was nothing solid in history:

… most people willingly deceive themselves with a doubly false faith; they believe in eternal memory … and in rectification … Both are sham. The truth lies at the opposite end of the scale: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be rectified. All rectification (both vengeance and forgiveness) will be taken
over by oblivion. No one will rectify wrongs; all wrongs will be forgotten.

(Kundera, 1982:245)

For Kundera, there ultimately comes a time when: ‘everyone has completely forgotten everything’ (1980:10). This may be true, but Lee in his conclusion to *China’s Lost Decade: Cultural Politics and Poetics*, reminds us that: ‘Despite the official policy of ‘Forgetting History’, witnesses still abound’ (2009:52). These witnesses, whether they be the original eyewitnesses, or the storytellers of these witnesses, or the photographers and curators of the events of these histories, or the writers from these photographs, are all what Pierre Nora calls the ‘lieux de mémoire, sites of memory’ (1989:7). The written ekphrases from these sites of memory ensure that memory can be ‘promoted to the centre of history’ (1989:24).

2.3.3 The Political & Artist Dissident in Contemporary China

The contemporary Chinese political dissident is an outsider in his/her own country. The political dissident and political protestor in many instances becomes the political prisoner. Torgeson’s edited collection of the prison writings of the leading dissident Wei Jingsheng (1997), who during the 1978-79 Democracy Wall movement famously declared the need for a ‘fifth modernization’ of democracy and was then incarcerated for fifteen years in a number of Chinese detention centres and labor reform camps, are important both for their ontological dimension as well as for their historical relevance in connection with the 1989 democracy protests. Both protests failed in their inability to gather support from democratic forces within the CCP. Paltemaa (2005) examined the Democracy Wall movement, through the lens of the ‘individual and collective identities’ of its participants. Paltemaa focused on the complex politics in the formation of these identities.

The ‘political dissident’ can be examined through the lens of generational change, with its associated cultural dissidence. Cherrington’s (1997) case study of the 80s generation of young intellectuals, some of whom became the young dissident leaders of the ‘89 Tiananmen Square democracy movement, offers critical insights into what contributed to the mass-movement of protests that ended in the bloody massacre of Tiananmen ‘89. Yang’s (2003) study of China’s 1990s *zhīqīng*
generation’s cultural dissidents (the educated youth who were sent to work on farms during the Cultural Revolution) examines the wave of nostalgia that swept over the zhīqīng generation after this generation’s viewing of the 1990 Beijing based exhibition titled *Our Spiritual Attachment to the Black Soil—A Retrospective Exhibit about the Educated Youth of Beidahuang*. This flood of nostalgia was in direct contrast to this same generation’s literary response, ‘the literature of the wounded’, which flowed after their return to the cities ten years earlier. Yang explores the reason for this dissimilarity in response. Yang sees this nostalgia as a form of collective cultural resistance at a social and cultural micropolitical level, rather than as a mass political campaign that occurred in Tiananmen ‘89. Yang’s identification of the numerous cultural products of this zhīqīn nostalgia acts a rich source of material for *A Strange Chinese Tale*.

In a broader context, Wasserstrom (2003) attempts to extract contemporary Chinese protests from what he sees as the restrictive prism of Tiananmen Square, where the presence of a repressive CCP regime is seen as the only causal factor. He details other continuities that are in place. There are over 6000 reported ‘incidents’ each year, ranging from riots in Tibet and Xinjiang, to a sit-in by members of the Falun Gong sect. Some of these ‘incidents’ are fictionalised in *A Strange Chinese Tale* as ‘strange events’, incidents that are instigated by those ‘outside’ the official CCP discourse. These incidents portrayed in *A Strange Chinese Tale*, include the daily criticism and satirical comment expressed towards unpopular government policy by China’s ‘netizens’ on websites such as Weibo, the petitioning of the central government by citizens’ discontent with their treatment at a local administrative level (and their subsequent imprisonment and interrogation in Beijing’s notorious ‘black jails’), and at its most extreme, the continuing practice of self-immolation by Tibetan monks as a protest against their cultural and religious persecution.

The artistic (ekphrastic) responses of Chinese dissident artists such as Zhang Dali, and the avant-garde Beijing-based artists of the late 1980s and early 1990s, presented in *A Strange Chinese Tale*, reflect the sense of disconnection and disembodiment experienced by outsiders in contemporary Chinese society. The axiological issues confronting these artists is symptomatic of globalized modernist society where tensions exist in the liminal borderland between the democratic
alterity of the dissident individual and the imposed ideology of increasingly secular and restrictive governments and regimes.

The artist Zhang Dali, who is portrayed in A Strange Chinese Tale as the ‘angry artist’, recently completed an art project entitled A Second History (2010), which was undertaken to examine the falsification of history and alteration of memory carried out by the CCP during the 1960-70s. His detailed study of over three hundred images published in the country’s semiotic propaganda magazine China Pictorial is a genealogy of the image. He deconstructs the official narrative discourse of the People’s Republic. The official historical ideology of the Party is exposed as a literal ‘airbrushing’ of what actually took place. His project is a historical and social criticism of the ‘First History’, the history put forward by those in power. These images of his youth were a ‘memory tunnel’, a closed system of images and signs, filtered, screened and altered for mass consumption by the people. It was the ‘fog’ of a propaganda war waged by the machine of the apparatchik. Zhang had read Milan Kundera’s The Book of Laughter and Forgetting in 1993, and was aware early on about the image’s ability to be manipulated (Kundera, 1984).

Inside this ‘memory tunnel’ created in the pages of China Pictorial, decrepit houses are transformed into modern buildings with happy tenants, extra pigs are pasted into farm scenes to enhance economic success, and counter revolutionary politicians are airbrushed from historical events. Zhang attempts to reclaim history through reinserting the fragments of memory that have been erased. Commenting on the work A Second History, Bao Dong refers to Barthes: ‘What is altered in [the majority of] these images is only studium (the broader socio-cultural reading of the image) and not punctum (its poignant, personal detail)” (2012). He uses as an example one instance, where in the original image a person in the crowd is in direct gaze with the lens of the photographer, rather than with the marching soldiers who are supposed to be the real subject of the photo, the studium. In the photo published by China Pictorial, this person has disappeared. Bao comments: ‘Puncta such as these, having nothing to do with the ‘source of strength of the people's war’, have been mercilessly expunged’ (2012)

Through this re-examination of history, Zhang attempts to heal the pain of disconnection. Zhang said: ‘I felt so depressed when I found that things I had seen
with my own eyes might not be true. Like being manipulated by something or somebody for years and one day, you suddenly feel it in your soul: ‘I live a fake life’ (2009). In the exhibition he did not set out to criticise China, just to make it aware of its true history: ‘We can still trace answers for today’s China in those photos. Why we are so cocky but blush at our own mistakes and poverty?’ (2009). Zhang, once a marginalised performance artist in early 90’s Beijing, is now revisiting the politics of memory that existed at the time of his youth when he expressed his pain of disconnection through street graffiti. Now he: ‘seek[s] fulfilment through something more complicated, more magnificent, like A Second History’ (2009). He seeks to rehabilitate the cultural memory of China’s contemporary history by reclaiming the puncta of photographic images, expunged by the Party’s project to control the memory of its citizens. To reclaim these puncta is to lay open once again the possibility of an ‘awakening’ from this organised amnesia.
2.4 The Pain of Disconnection: The Agony of the Everyday

2.4.1 Henri Lefebvre & The Alienation of the Everyday

Lefebvre's work (1991) is a lens through which to examine the concept of alienation. He identifies the pain within human existence. He saw poets and philosophers as people who denied life, and created a subterfuge and facade around the truth of everyday existence. For Lefebvre, alienation deprived everyday life of any real meaning or happiness. People are not just impoverished in the workplace but also in the home and its environs, both socially and politically. Lefebvre's philosophy backgrounds a close examination of the everyday objects, people and places. A Strange Chinese Tale attempts to show the specialness of the everyday. The writings of Lefebvre remind us that the familiar, just because it is familiar, is not well known.

Lefebvre (1991) examines the social, political and cultural spheres of the capitalist worker, not only that of the workplace (Elden, 2004:110). Lefebvre identifies the pain within human existence: 'Alienation – I know it is there whenever I sing a love song or recite a poem, whenever I handle a banknote or enter a shop, whenever I glance at a poster or read a newspaper. At the very moment the human is defined as having possessions' (1991:183). Lefebvre saw poets, and especially philosophers, as people that denied life, who created a subterfuge and facade around the truth of everyday existence: 'it appears merely as everyday life turned inside out' (1991:123-124). Little wonder that he is denied an entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, gaining only one mention under the entry of philosopher Jean Baudrillard (Kellner, 2007).

Lefebvre wanted to undertake: 'a vast survey, to be called: How we live' (1991:195), which would at long last: 'supplant the rumbling of philosophers or novelists (including those that get emotional about beings and harshly lucid about existence) with solidly established human truths' (1991:195). He surmised that once
examined: ‘a trivial day in our lives ... would have nothing trivial about it at all’ (1991:196).

In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, Yue carries out her own examination of her favourite noodle shop in Beijing; the ‘human truth’ belonging to Lefebvre is the same truth that Yue is seeking to discover. She is searching for the origin of ‘contentedness’ that she experiences in her favourite space, a momentary relief from the pain of disconnection and associated unhappiness. She also seeks the source of the perceived happiness of the man and woman who run the noodle shop. She intuitively senses that there must be something deeper that resides there. Unlike Lefebvre, Yue does not contemplate the notion of a formal survey. Her survey is one carried out by the poetic mind (the novelist’s mind). Yue’s survey relies on a continued close observation. Lefebvre might say that the protagonist, Yue, is creating an illusion of what everyday life might be like. Would it be anymore true than if the shopkeepers had been asked an exhaustive list of questions:

This space she walked into each morning became for her the space of the everyday, a meditation on the present, capable of negating the future and momentarily forgetting the past. The husband and wife did not seem like outsiders to her. They were inside a system that for the present sustained and nourished them.

(Percival, 2015:94)

The writings of Lefebvre remind us that: ‘the familiar just because it is familiar is not well known’ (1971:15). Through the literary poetic of *A Strange Chinese Tale*, the reader is given the possibility to rediscover the extraordinary in the ordinary; the sublime beauty of the everyday, where the smallest actions and the most mundane of objects become a stage for a wanderlust that can be found not in the exotic, but in the everyday social spaces of our ordinary lives.

Lefebvre (1971:112) makes his claim that it was Joyce who first established the idea of daily life in literature; but one could go back a step further to Miguel de
Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* and his legendary struggle against the ordinariness of the everyday Spanish landscape and cultural mind-set at that time. Modern literature foresaw the wonderment of the everyday with James Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Virginia Wolf’s *Mrs Dalloway*, both of which incorporate the stream of consciousness technique, a way of mapping the second-by-second flow of everyday life – the continuous present. This was the beginning of Baudrillard’s anthropological revolution, the tapping of Bergson’s ‘*elan vital*’, the pulses and rhythms of an increasingly industrialised and urbanised lifestyle. When Yue walks the streets of Old Town Lijiang and Wuyi Street, she is channelling the present, finding beauty and truth in what is directly and immediately perceived. She is searching for the truth of the moment; it is a meditation on mindfulness:

... a mother screams at her young child, rain falls, umbrellas burst. At the *Yoghurt Shop*, young lovers look into each other’s eyes, scooping in mouthfuls of creamy liquid, sticky notes scatter the walls, professing love in ice-cream colours of blue, pink and yellow, *Love is found easily*. The rain sweeps down the street, the tourists scatter into the shelter of the *Tea and Silver* shop, a few children splash in the liquid rain, the light runs and flows into the falling mist. *Lover’s Nest Guesthouse, Garden Inn*, Keith’s house, the squawking of the garbage truck as it squeezes through the stone alleyway. Keep on walking to the end of the street, head east, head away from the setting sun, towards the falling night, and hope for one more memory ...

(Percival, 2015:210)

The healing from the pain of disconnection can be realised in this process of ‘slowing down’, of becoming. The only thing that exists is the present. It is here that the *awakening* can take place.

2.5.2 Jean Baudrillard & the Agony of Power

Jean Baudrillard understands the pain of disconnection. He calls it the *Agony of Power*. He asserts that the general population have become voluntary and involuntary hostages to the hegemony of world power, and that domination cannot
be overthrown from the outside, and can only ‘be inverted or reversed from the inside’ (Baudrillard, 2010:34). He argues for a rethinking of ecology and warns us that natural resources are limited and that we may no longer be able to reinvent a finite universe (I84). Baudrillard states that ‘we are already dead’ and that we will be consumed by capitalism. He is the ecological conscience of the creative work, demanding that the need for a reimagining of our future on this planet (2010:112-116).

For a healing to take place there must be a negation of power, a neutralisation of the hegemony, which has surpassed the relationship of master/slave. Lotringer (2010:24), in his excellent introduction to *Agony of Power*, defines this relationship as one of voluntary servitude. He states:

> The people’s love for their own subjection became the well-hidden secret of domination. We have become ‘denatured’ and lost the ‘remembrance of our original being.’ Why do we do this? Why do we promote this blindness?  

(Lotringer, 2010:23)

To differing degrees, individuals are given identity, security, privilege, even pleasure, but there is nothing real in this. The simulacrum of happiness and freedom has the ability to enslave and trap the individual in a legitimisation of power. In the end the individual must abolish power, as it only gives us agony and unhappiness. The individual can refuse to: ‘be dominated and to dominate’ (Lotringer, 2010:29). There is nothing beneficial in power. The common slogan ‘knowledge is power’ could be read as ‘knowledge negates power’ or ‘knowledge without power.’ There is a need for a paradigm shift in how power is perceived and interpreted.

So what can the individual do? Lotringer (2010) interprets Baudrillard’s answer to this question as ‘zero work’ and the reintroduction of ‘cottage industries’ (2010:15). If capitalism has a death wish, it would be the death of its workers and the death for the planetary object on which they took residence. To live, the citizens have to negate the mechanisms of capitalism’s death wish. Baudrillard tells us: ‘hegemony brings domination to an end’ (2010:34); that the hegemony of world power is no
longer a perceived or real form of domination but the domination ‘of networks, of calculation and exchange’ (2010:34), that domination cannot be overthrown from the outside, and can only ‘be inverted or reversed from the inside’ (2010:34). One of the first warnings of this failure to bring about change from the outside were the Paris student riots of 1968, when, once the students won a position of power, they were unable to consolidate that power.

Guillaume called May ’68 the ‘end of revolution’ (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 2008:28), the last time that people embraced a social reality, when people ‘physically gathered’ on the streets to show their solidarity. Guillaume is comparing these traditional physical acts of protest with new social media networks, where people are in a spectral mode of being and communicating. Guillaume (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 2008:30) sees this traditional form of solidarity as one that can be easily controlled by the media, and manipulated in the mainstream press through propaganda and misinformation. This is what happened at Tiananmen ’89, but only within China. The Chinese state-controlled media portrayed the students as hooligans and subversives attempting to undermine the economic success of the Chinese state. The official memories of events are easily controlled in the physical (non-spectral) media of newspapers, TV and radio. To highlight how things have shifted in recent years it is interesting to quote from Guillaume regarding the role of political transparency:

“Today, everyone has gained the privilege of going incognito [spectral presence on the Internet] while the ‘princes’ — at least those in the government — are kept firmly under the eyes of the people by the media and consigned to a certain transparency. (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 2008:29)”

This certainly cannot be said to be true of the USA under the Cheney/Bush regime, and it is certainly not true of the government officials in the Chinese state. In China the children of these government officials are the: ‘so-called ‘red princes and princesses’” (Lim, 2003) – the reverse of what Guillaume described:
'Here we all are in the country, away from the dirt and dust of Beijing where the princes play in their castles and shop for their princesses; we are the people, we will serve ourselves.

(Percival, 2015:244)

We are living in a time of an anthropological revolution, where human activity and decision-making is increasingly being taken up by machines and technology: ‘not only have we lost our freedom but also our imagination’ (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 2008:80). Workers are being relieved of their duties of labour by machines, but Guillaume surmises that we have ‘nothing left to do with our lives’ (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 2008:80).

Baudrillard (2010) stated that: ‘Capital’s coup de force is to make everything dependent on the economic order – everything else becomes unintelligible – the displacement of all problems into economics and performance is a trap’ (2010:86). This is occurring in China, where economic success has been at the sacrifice of catastrophic environmental damage, loss of personal freedom and expression, and massive displacement of people from the countryside where it was once possible to manage a sustainable lifestyle. From 1979 to 2009, China’s urban population grew by about 440 million, ‘340 million of which was attributable to net migration and urban reclassification’ (Chan, 2011:1). Even if only half of that increase was migration, the volume of rural-urban migration in such a short period is likely the largest in human history. Labour has shifted to the city where the worker becomes dependent on the industrial system and its inherent mechanisms of consumerism, and economic inequality:

The tension between desire and fulfilment, between need and the satisfaction (the source of all historical conflicts and protests) has been replaced by immediate consumption, to the power of those that make sovereign decisions about our well-being.

(Baudrillard, 2010:87)
A consequence of this tension between desire and fulfilment is alienation of the individual and its association pain of disconnection. Baudrillard wrote: ‘we are already dead ... consumed by turbocapitalism’ (2010:61), a point where power cannibalises itself. Baudrillard’s solution is that hegemony can only be broken: ‘by anything that irrupts as an unchangeable singularity. An event therefore, that targets systematic deregulation under the cover of forced conviviality’ (2010:75-76). Can this needed ‘irruption’ be equated with spiritual enlightenment, or a secular extreme awakening?

Guillaume writes: ‘mass consumption allowed a disconnection between social reality and social roles’ (Baudrillard & Guillaume, 2008:29); the spectres that walk the Guillaume’s city are lonely and disconnected. John Cage conjured up the perfect text-image of this post-modern world when he was quoted as saying: ‘The world is a giant collage. A bus filled with people who don’t know each other passing in front of a gothic church and a bright advertisement for cigarettes’.

In A Strange Chinese Tale, Yue has a sexual encounter in a hotel room with the woman whose memory she has become obsessed with. This woman, Yaya, is also a spectre walking through the city. She is a ‘sign’ that demands to be read; an exchange between the two women has to take place. Yue is living the agony of the everyday. Their eventual encounter in the room of a Beijing hotel is a spectral communication, an encounter that signifies Yue’s alienation and disconnection from her fox-spirit magical-realist belonging. Yaya represents the final moment of Death, and the endpoint of Yue’s pain of disconnection. Yaya acts as the antithesis of the sublime beauty of the everyday. The pain of betrayal in this inevitable encounter is the pain of Yue’s disconnection with here fox-spirit belonging, her other. By means of this forced exchange, Yue is able to experience her ‘awakening’, and begin her healing to realise her genuine belonging:

[Yue] struggled out of the dream, out of the memory. She pushed forward and fell face down on the bed, rolling away from both the man and Yaya. She pulled down her dress and rushed towards the video camera, picked it up and threw it against the wall. The black plastic fragments exploded across the white room. Without looking back, she scrambled out from the apartment. She had
been searching for something to fill her imagination but there was only emptiness.

(Percival, 2015:194)

2.4.3 Guy Debord & The Layers of the **Dérive**

Debord’s (1967) *Society of the Spectacle*, and his associated theories of dérive and psychogeography, provides a strong philosophical and theoretical springboard for insights into traditional Communist Party propaganda methods, and the more recent state-driven commodification of Chinese urban society. It is the processes of the dérive and psychogeography that propel Yue and Shen’s walk through Beijing in the first chapters of *A Strange Chinese Tale*, as well as their psycho-cultural journey across China throughout the creative work.

*The dérive ...*

The dérive is meant to be a distraction, a ‘technique of displacement without any
aim’ (Debord, 1954:53) - to walk carelessly about the city without any preconceived plan, route or express purpose. The dérive was the ‘transformation of the psychological into the political’ (Vidler, 2006:13), a psychological drift through the city that refused to ignore the politics of place. Debord’s radical map of Paris entitled *The Naked City* (illustration above), literally pulls the city apart. It destroys the straitjacket structure of grid and explodes over the page like the spatial opening of Pandora’s box. It becomes a matrix of interconnected psychological spaces where movement is not ruled by a geographical route but by a psychological wandering, where the walker, the subject of the dérive, responds to the emotional moods of the city and its intimate spaces. Debord’s own words are worth quoting in full, as the concept of the dérive is often misinterpreted and appropriated with little knowledge of its initial meaning:

One of the basic Situationist practices is the dérive [literally: ‘drifting’], a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances. Dérives involve playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects, and are thus quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll:

... In a dérive one or more persons during a certain period drop their relations, their work and leisure activities, and all their other usual motives for movement and action, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there.

‘Theory of the Dérive’ (Debord,1958)

It is this construct of the dérive that the protagonists, Yue and Shen, undertake in A Strange Chinese Tale. Chtcheglov (1953) hoped that this drifting through the city would bring about a total disorientation in the individual. In A Strange Chinese Tale the protagonists are disorientated through a series of interruptions and disjunctions caused through memories being released from the strata of history below, Beijing’s psychogeography. Instead of seeing this underground space as a ‘closed landscape whose landmarks constantly draw us toward the past’ (Chtcheglov, 1953) the protagonists instead drew on these fragments of past memory as a way to heal their pain of disconnection. The gestures of their walk would not ‘grow stale’ and ‘leave the realm of direct experience for that of representation’ as Chtcheglov had proposed. Instead, the gestures of their walk across the Xidan and Tiananmen, two
areas of contested space, would create an ‘awakening’ through the ekphrasis of the memories arising from below. The protagonists possessed an exploratory spirit driven by a need to heal their pain; it was a drive for a belonging:

‘I wanted to reimagine Beijing. I was convinced the city could help heal the both of us. We knew there was a landscape of memories that lay beneath the concrete and rubble of the city, an underground memory, a rhizome of history. We wanted to dig up what was beneath, deeper and deeper into the roots that lay below. We were hoping to find our past,’ she said.

(Percival, 2015:135)

If the memories that lie below the surface of the dérive are said to be of rhizomatic structure, then according to Deleuze & Guattari’s the first principles ‘of connection and heterogeneity, any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be’ (1988:7). The memories (the image-fields) have no set structure, and hence have a freedom of association and meaning. They float under the surface, forming their own map that has no correlation to the streets and historical mapping of Beijing’s physical surface. The rhizome of Deleuze & Guattari is ‘a map and not a tracing ... The orchid does not reproduce the tracing of the wasp; it forms a map with the wasp, in a rhizome’ (1988:14); the memories of Tiananmen do not reproduce the tracings of historical events; they form a map with the historical events, a rhizome.

This rhizomatic map constructs an unconscious space, where blockages (stoppages) are freed and connections previously denied are now made possible. It is a map of Tiananmen that can be entered from the multiple points of the original photographs, from the viewpoint of lovers under a bridge, a girl being pushed back by the army soldier, spectators of a mangled and crushed citizen, the gaze of the Statue of Freedom. There is no one exit-point, no defined viewpoint. Each ‘object itself,’ each original photographic image, has marked out its own territory separate from the historiography of the event. For Deleuze (1990:63) the ‘open totality’ of images is capable of changing our perception of the event itself – the images are first internalised as a whole (fragments containing maps) then externalized as linked
images (fragments read as maps), not as a representational map but as a 'becoming', an 'extreme awakening'.

The writing of memory from the photograph, onto the political and social map of Beijing, utilises a process of language similar to that of cinematic language. The fragments of memory, like the fragments of film, are individual image-fields woven into a fabric, the line and fibre of the universe, as articulated by Deleuze & Guattari:

[A] fiber stretches from a human to an animal, from a human or an animal to molecules, from molecules to particles, and so on to the imperceptible. Every fiber is a Universe fiber, a fiber strung across borderlines constitutes a line of flight or of deterritorialisation.

(Deleuze & Guattari, 1988:249)

Like the ‘fibers’ of Deleuze & Guattari, which are no longer constrained by their borders, in A Strange Chinese Tale, the memories that had once belonged solely to Tiananmen ’89, have been liberated from the constraints of historiography, to be realised in multiple locations placed at a metaphysical distance from the original source. The space-time relationship of the Tiananmen events has been weakened. At the same time, the intensity of the events are heightened through the technique of ekphrasis:

... A young woman in a blue and white summer dress sits on the back of a bicycle, holding onto her boyfriend's waist. Her head cradles into the back of his neck. The man clutches at the bike with both hands to steady their combined weight. The bike is parked under a road overpass. These two young lovers are sheltering from the storm. Directly above are two army tanks, supported by the tons of steel that lies between the heavy machines and the two delicate bodies below.

(Percival, 2015:185)
The totality of the memory images presented in the fictional narrative becomes a cinematic cartography, a ‘topographic projection that locates and patterns the imagination of its spectators’ Conley (2007:1). The ‘language’ of *A Strange Chinese Tale* is inspired by the acts and photographic images of Tiananmen ‘89 through a reinterpretation and reintegration into the narrative. The memory map of Tiananmen, a consequence of the dérive undertaken by the two protagonists, infiltrates the imagination of the reader, creating a ‘fictional territory’ that the reader can inhabit. An alternative viewpoint is created through the use of photographic images/texts, a viewpoint that has ontological integrity. By the repeated and rapid insertion of memory fragments into the linear narrative, the reader is exposed to a constantly moving focus. The reader is forced to reflect on the mutability of history and the vicissitudes of being - on what is truth and what is propaganda – on what are the politics of memory, forced forgetting and forced recollection.

In film, the fibre that: ‘tie events together gets frayed and events become indifferent to themselves’ (Conley, 2007:10). In the ekphrastic mode, however, the opposite is true, in that the fragments of memory projected towards the reader have the ability to actualize the events and intensify the emotional and imaginative response of the reader. The photographer who took the original photographs was not wandering the scene of Tiananmen as a *flâneur*, aimless and disembodied; she/he was actively engaging with the scene, desperately wanting to connect, trying to make sense of the tragedy that was unfolding. The image-text fragments in the Tiananmen memory-sequence of *A Strange Chinese Tale* are not without meaning, despite their paratactic presentation.
2.5 Ekphrastic Writing of Memory From the Photographic Image

2.5.1 Roland Barthes & The Moment of the Studium

Roland Barthes is a provocateur of memory and the image. His writings in *Camera Lucida* (2000a) announce the concept of what have termed, ‘writing from the photographic image’. The literary form laid out in *A Lovers Discourse: Fragments* (2002) provides a template for the ‘the writing of memory’ - an ekphrasis of memory. Barthes lays the foundation for this form of writing in *A Strange Chinese Tale*. It is a style that is fragmented and elliptic, liberated from the confines of traditional rigour and structure:

What is proposed, then, is a portrait – but not a psychological portrait; instead a structural one that offers the reader a discursive site: the site of someone speaking within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak.

(Barthes, 2002:5)

In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, Yue is ‘speaking within herself’; the ‘loved object’ is both her brother and herself.

Barthes (1977b:17) states that a photograph is ‘a message without a code’, that the photo is objective, as a result of its mechanical reproduction. Barthes (2000a) presents the photograph as possessing a second-order meaning. He divides this meaning into two components. The first is a broader response called the studium. Here the photographer attempts to predict the response in the viewer, in her/his choices made in regards to the framing and subject matter of the image.
In the photo above, the photographer attempts to capture the evidence of a massacre in Tiananmen Square in 1989, so as to create an emotional and political response, or a very least a document of the event. The second component presented by Barthes, the punctum, relates to the personal response of the person viewing the photograph; a response the photographer is unable to predict. It is interesting to note that Barthes places studium in the past tense: ‘that-has-been,’ and punctum in the present tense: ‘there-she-is’ (2000a:26-27).

Barthes (2000a:9) identifies the photographer as the ‘operator’, the viewer as the ‘spectator’, and that which is being photographed, the ‘target’. For Barthes, photography is a pure mechanical action. He questions why a photographer chooses one particular object or moment over another [with the Tiananmen photos the answer may seem obvious]; this is despite his insistence that he himself has: ‘desperate resistance to any reductive system’ (2000a:9). Barthes also tells us, with a fine dramatic touch, that the each and every photograph is in actuality: ‘the return of the dead’ (2000a:9); this is particularly appropriate for the Tiananmen photos, where those murdered in the massacre are able to return, like Hamlet’s ghost, to haunt the Father/Party who has murdered his Children/Citizens. Through these photographs the dead will always return, no matter how much the Party attempts to control the process of ‘forgetting’. Death is the image.
Barthes talks of the photograph as: ‘the advent of myself as the other: a cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity’ (2000a:12). It is this otherness that both the photograph and the ‘writing from the photograph’ try to overcome. The ‘target’ of the event being witnessed is so grotesque and full of horror as to refuse the spectator/viewer/reader the advent of becoming the other. To whom does the photograph belong? It could be said that the photograph belongs to the domain of truth in history, memory and remembrance.

Barthes writes that: ‘what the photograph reproduces to infinity has occurred only once. [The event] could never be repeated existentially’ (2000a:4). It may be true that the event of that exact army tank, running over that exact everyday citizen, can never occur again in that exact same manner, time and place. It is also true that the reproduction of the photograph, and the ‘writing from the photograph’, with its audience of millions of citizens, does bring the exact event into a new imagined existence. The memory of the event is recolonised into the citizen's consciousness. It is this re-remembering, this new imagining, that becomes part of the healing process; this is the case in recent Tiananmen 25th anniversary events. The ‘writing from the photograph’ is part of this remembering, whether it be a fiction or a non-fiction writing. It is a re-witnessing of the event, bringing the event back into existence.

2.5.2 THE PHOTOGRAPH AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THE EKPHRASIS

The photograph is able to act as the actor or subject of the ekphrasis. Plato in ‘Book X’ of The Republic (Plato, 1994 [360BC]) eulogised the real object. He believed in the epitome and embodiment of that object, that objects were ‘invariable, fixed, permanent, unchanging’. He did believe that the painter could at least capture the appearance of the reality of the object: ‘And yet there is a sense in which the painter also creates a bed?’; the poet however he deigned as a mere imitator: ‘thrice removed from the King’ (Plato, 1994 [360BC]).

The painting is an object. It is three-dimensional, it has texture and colour and mass, smell and light. Van Gogh’s Harvest in Provence is said to possess 'la luminosité de
brûlure de la vague de chaleur’ [the burning brightness of the heatwave] (Barrielle, 1984:120). The ekphrasis traditionally would not be written from a copy of a painting, only the original; but what about the epitome of the photograph, the embodiment of ‘photographness’? It is not the photograph itself, the actual three-dimensional object that the ekphrasis is written from; it is the image of the photographic object. In the age of digital technology there is no original photograph, only the original raw data file. In analogue photography we do have the original negative on film, or a glass plate or polished surface of the silver daguerreotype, but digital photography has negated this.

There is sparse material, in the public and the academic domain, on the subject of the ekphrasis of photography, the ‘writing from photography’. In Casey N. Cep’s (2014) article in The New Yorker, ‘A Thousand Words: Writing From Photographs’ a number of negative issues are raised; that writing from photographs can ’deaden prose,’ as though it is some kind of ‘cheap trick’ for amateur writers to use; and James Wood (2008) in the same vein states that it is only the apprentice writer who attempts such strategy, producing clichéd wooden prose: ‘an aspic of arrest’ (2000:96). The technique, Wood says, is seen as a ‘crutch for writer’s block’ (2008:96). According to Wood (2008) prose writers can be deadened by such a strategy, but journalists can use it to be made precise. Cep (2014), in a more positive note, surmises that writing from the photograph is capable of producing the effect of: ‘sharpening the way we convert experiences to prose’; it is not what we write but how we write it. Cep (2008) states that ‘photography engenders a new kind of ekphrasis’, an excellent entrée into academic literature on the subject of ‘writing from photography’, seen through the academic lens of ‘the ekphrastic’ and the ekphrastic project.

Horstkotte & Pedri (2008) in ‘Photographic Interventions’, provide an excellent introduction to the subject of photography & literature. They state: ‘photography can serve as a constructive principle for literature’ (2008:10). Probably the most relevant reference (2008:10) is to Micke Bal’s (1997) monograph on Proust, The Mottled Screen: Reading Proust Visually, mentioning the mise en abyme relating to the literary device of the ‘frame story’, the frame within the frame (already referenced in the exegesis in regards to the writing style, but worth raising again in regards to the relationship between photography and the ekphrasis). Bal states:
the photographic mechanism can be seen at work in the cutting-out of details, in the conflictual dialectic between the near and the far, and in certain ‘zoom’ effects (1997:201). This dialectic of the near and far influences the style and form of the ekphrasis of ‘writing from photography’.

Liliane Louvel, in ‘Photography as Critical Idiom and Intermedial Criticism’, proposes a ‘poetics of the visual’ or ‘poesia’ (2008:44). Louvel states: ‘My ‘pictorial thirds’ designates the in-between image conjured by a ‘pictorial reading’. That is, one in which ‘word and image, combine and intermediality fully plays its role’ (2008:45). Louvel appears to be searching for a classification order system for ekphrasis, based on literary proximity from the original photograph, towards an endpoint of pure imagination:
To explain this reticence in placing photographs within the text, Adams (2008:177) cites Jane Rabb (1995: xl), who supposes that: ‘perhaps they felt their presence might imply that the words were insufficient or their readers verbally unsophisticated.’ Adam (2008) challenges this now anachronistic argument that illustrations and/or photographs act only as a cheap prop for writer, and that this undermines the integrity of ‘good literature’. Where earlier novelists imagined that photographs would compete with their descriptive abilities or add to the verisimilitude of their writing, post-modernist novelists have come to believe the opposite, using photographs as the reverse of representation.

In this context Adam is talking of the ‘mock fact’ where the photograph may be included as a misrepresentation of the truth, the cynicism and irony of postmodernism. This is the opposite of ontological integrity that is aimed at by new modernist writers, including this author, in which the photographic image may be included: ‘as another way to provide authenticity for the purpose of having something authentic to undercut’ (Adam, 2008:180).

One of the seminal works in contemporary literature, in regards to the inclusion of photographs within the novel, is W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* (1999), a fictional autobiography that included pictorial documentation such as photographs, tickets, paintings, and postcards. Adam discusses the novel in detail and concludes that:

Sebald’s *The Emigrants* strikes many readers as overpoweringly authentic, hardly an example of trickery, and the beginning of a new way of writing. Despite the fact that Sebald makes clear within the text that the documentary power of photography is both invaluable and suspect, no controversies have arisen over his novel’s basic truth-value. Sebald’s works continue to provide an especially authentic feel, despite their open admission of generic confusion.

(Adam, 2008:193)

*The Ekphrasis of Photography in Literature*
Authors have written about photos, with regard to their construction and methodology but it is only in recent times, especially in the days of post-modernism, that writers have ‘written from photographs’, and even more recently that academics have taken up ‘writing from photography’ in the domain of literature, as a subject of enquiry. The most notable is Trussler’s (2000) groundbreaking essay, ‘Literary Artifacts: Ekphrasis in the Short Fiction of Donald Barthelme, Salman Rushdie, and John Edgar Wideman’, published in the *Contemporary Literature* in 2000. Trussler’s examination of Wideman’s fiction story ‘What He Saw’ (1992) is a brilliant exposition on ekphrastic process of ‘writing from photography’, encompassing literary theory and socio-political analysis.

W.S.T. Mitchell has described ekphrasis as the ‘verbal representation of visual representation’ (1994:152). Trussler suggests that the ‘ekphrastic project is undergoing changes’ (2000:252), with the target-object playing a more active and immediate role in the prose narrative. He uses as an example, Ann Beattie’s short story *Janus*’ (1985), in which a simple bowl becomes the symbol of the protagonist’s inability to move on from an existential crisis; the bowl is a visual representation of the protagonist’s conflicts in personal relationships. Other short stories examined by Trussler are Donald Barthelme’s ‘The Balloon’ (1981), Salman Rushdie’s ‘At The Auction of the Ruby’ (1994), and John Edgar Wideman’s ‘What He Saw’ (1992). His examination acts to historicise the ekphrastic project.

In all the texts that Trussler (2000) analyses it is only in Edgar Wideman’s short story ‘What He Saw’ that the ekphrasis of ‘writing from the photograph’ is propagated; here the photo image is the ekphrastic target. Trussler first of all introduces the reader to a photograph taken by Yunghi Kim entitled ‘Soweto, South Africa’ so as to embody it in the ekphrastic mode. He examines the subject matter of the photograph, the ethics of displaying the photo, and Barthes’ punctum that he discovers within it. Trussler’s examination of ‘Soweto, South Africa’ is an ekphrastic description, not a prose narrative. Trussler then returns to Wideman’s use of the photo within ‘What He Saw.’ The narrator of the story presents an interpretation of the photo of a black South-African man who has been shot in the stomach and is being supported by two women. The photo is not printed for the reader to see. The narrator can only briefly describe the photo, he cannot commit to an interpretation of it; he is ‘mute’ in his emotional response. The narrator is unable to ‘read’ the
photograph; his inability to ‘read’ the photo becomes an essential part of the narrative. Andy Grundberg (1990:172) states that: ‘photography’s distinction has always been its connection to work outside the imagination’, but this can be challenged, to read that photography must also be allowed to work inside the imagination.

Mitchell (1994:156) states that: ‘the mute image [must] be endowed with a voice.’ But what if the author, by means of the third person omniscient narrator or limited third person narrator, does not want to remain mute. What if the author wants to incorporate the ekphrastic ‘writing from photography’ as an essential active element in the prose narrative. It is then that the photograph, through the narrator, has the ability to work inside the imagination. If ‘first order’ ekphrastic writing is defined as describing a photo outside a narrative, and ‘second order’ ekphrastic writing is defined as describing the photo within a narrative, then this exegesis argues that it is possible to define a ‘third order’, ekphrastic writing; one that embeds the ‘vital essence’ of photographic image wholly within the narrative text. This is what can be defined as ‘writing from the photographic image’.

In this ‘third order’ ekphrastic writing, the photograph is not placed within the written text, nor is it acknowledged as a source for the text. The photograph is
entirely absent from the narrative text except for the resultant ekphrastic writing that derives from the original photographic image. This ‘third order’ writing is no more or less aesthetic; it has its locus within the imagination of the photograph [see above]:

... A man in a white shirt and grey trousers pushes violently against a young girl’s neck. She is wearing a white dress with green polka dots; her hair is tied back in a neat ponytail. The girl is holding a small instamatic camera that is just about to topple to the ground and smash at her feet. The man attempts to push the girl backwards into the precise line of army personal dressed in immaculate green khaki uniforms. They are protecting Tiananmen. They appear to be as shocked by the man’s actions as the girl is. One young soldier, whose hand the girl is holding to keep from falling over, smiles with embarrassment at the intimacy of the girl’s touch. Four people in the civilian crowd try to hold back the man, to stop him from hurting the young girl.

Behind the rows of young soldiers stand thousands of Beijing citizens who have come to show their support for the hunger strikers. Who is this man that is roughing up this girl, is he from the secret police? Is he angry at having his photo taken? Apart from this man, everyone in the scene looks clean and youthful. On any other day, before this day, any number of people in the crowd could have been sitting in Beihai Park having a picnic, laughing and joking with each other, except for the violent man of course; his anger has already destroyed him ...

(Percival, 2015:183)

Reiterating Trussler’s point on how one photograph is capable of signifying ‘something as multifarious as Soweto’ (Trussler, 2000:281) this could also be said of the 1988 Tiananmen murders. In A Strange Chinese Tale the ‘third order’ ekphrastic writings from the Tiananmen photos represent a series of ‘memory snapshots’ or ‘fragments’ of the historic event. The fragments join together like stilted frames of a damaged film. They are bullets fired from the gun of collected memories that have been stored below the surface of allowed memory, to be released to reveal a truth of
what happened in June 1988. All these photographic images are in the public domain. Their authenticity is not under dispute by those who participated in the event. The photographic images, reimagined by the author, pass Trussler's test of ontological alterity and integrity. In his essay Trussler concludes that in Wideman's short story 'What He Saw' (1992) there is ‘a disavowal of ekphrasis [with regard to the photograph]’ which places the reader in an: ‘intermediate position’ (2000:285). Trussler argues that this is a positive outcome as it: ‘ensures the reader’s contribution to the ekphrastic enterprise’ (2000:285). This is the reader being able to fill in the gaps with their imagination.

Pedri (2008) in her essay ‘Documenting the Fictions of Reality’, argues: ‘that the photographs in life writing invite readers to look beyond what is imaged to their own private experiences rather than some sort of universal reality ... the photographic documentary does not do away with the real; on the contrary, it is born as the real intersects with the imaginary’ (2008:155, 168). What Pedri is highlighting is that the ekphrasis should retain a certain incompleteness, to act as an agent for the reader to exercise their own ekphrasis, to complete the ekphrastic project. On the inside jacket of Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes, Barthes (1994) states: ‘[what follows] must all be considered as if spoken by a character in a novel.’ He demands that the autobiographical photos be read as fiction. He wants to leave room for the reader. Pedri writes: ‘Born of an interaction between photographic document and reader, the documentary comes to be that uncertain mixture of fact and fiction that moves readers to belief’ (2008:170). In A Strange Chinese Tale, Rong, the third-person narrator, is constructing a biography of Yue, and simultaneously his own autobiography.

Baudrillard & Guillaume (2008:9) write that when a photograph is taken, the subject of the photo is made into an object and thus gains the status of ‘the other.’ The process of ekphrasis, the ekphrastic project, attempts to bring this object back to life, to breath vitality into the object, so that ‘the other’ becomes once again integrated into the ‘thereness’ of the subject and target.

2.5.3 WITNESSING MEMORY & WRITING FROM THE PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE
Memory is created in the ‘writing of the photograph’. The author is unable to witness the event she/he wishes to record, so instead she/he carries out a ‘close reading’ of the photographic image of the original event, the ‘target’. The photo acts as a substitute in the author’s fictional reimagining. This reimagining is an attempt to create a memory for the reader. The writing acts as a caption that gives both the image and the event a meaning. The author has a belief that the photo contains a truth that is capable of being shared with the reader.

The inclusion in the text of historical and personal photos, whether it is the image itself or a writing from that image, seeks to elicit an ontological query from the reader. The author is asking the reader: Are these memory fragments real? How much have the images been fictionalised? Is the author inserting her/himself in the narrative? Can the author be trusted? Is the narrative an unreliable autobiography disguised as historical fiction?

In *A Strange Chinese Tale* a photograph of a child in an old baker’s cart [the author’s brother] is inserted in the text. An ekphrasis of this photo is written from the photograph. It is the time when Yue first finds out about her fox-spirit belonging, just after the ‘accident’. It is a time when her adopted mother, Sylvia, sits Yue on her soft enveloping lap, and tells her stories of childhood life in Canberra:

Of, how when Sylvia was a child, the bread had been delivered by horse and cart to the small fibro house she lived in, in what was then the outer suburbs of Canberra, how the baker, dressed in a white coat, jumped off his cart to deliver
bread, as the old draft horse continued to amble down the street without its
driver. The baker would walk up to the front door and lift up the muslin cloth
draped over the thick wicker basket he carried, the smell of the bread wafted
in her face, and drifted into the front room of the house.

(Percival, 2015:227)

Experience The Holocaust*, states that memory cannot be transferred from one
generation to another, that the trauma of the holocaust cannot be carried on to the
next generation, the children who did not live this history. Hirsch (2008:115), in her
paper ‘The Generation of Postmemory’, disputes this argument and states that
photographs ‘function as ghostly revenants from an irretrievably lost past world.
They enable us ... to reanimate [the past] by undoing the finality of the photographic
‘take’”. Marianne Hirsch (2008) references Raul Hilberg who wrote *The Destruction
histories and testimonies as an inaccurate means of recording histories, in his later
life deferred to the power of storytelling and narrative. Hirsch (2008:115) states
that: ‘Hilberg is recalling a dichotomy between history and memory (for him,
embodied by poetry and narrative) that has had a shaping affect’: poetry and
narrative are accepted as an effective way of transmitting history and there are ‘now
numerous and better-funded testimony projects and oral history archives, the
important role assumed by photography and performance’ (Hirsch, 2008:115), all
part of the new repertoire of knowledge that makes up the historical archive.

For Hirsch, photography has become a ‘primary medium of trans-generational
transmission of trauma ... and the phenomenology of photography ... [a] crucial
element in the concept of postmemory’ (2008:114). Photography allows access to
the initial event and cannot be dulled or skewed by the passage of time. Its
technical and mechanical means of reproduction ensures a certain truth. Of course
this truth can only be assured through the knowledge that the photograph has not
been manipulated. The truth lies both with the original negative and also with the
technology that can examine photos for such manipulation. Hirsch states that
photography is capable of solidifying ‘the tenuous bonds that are shaped by need,
desire, and narrative projection’ (2008:111). Photographs are the ‘ghosts’ that outlive their subjects and the initial event as well as those who may choose to erase the evidence of that event from the memory of its citizens. The photograph and its inhabitants can be brought back to life not just with the reproduction of the image but also through its ekphrasis. If there is to be irony it should not be in the cynicism of postmodernism but in the revelatory irony that the photograph can bring back to life those who were so violently put to death. Like Hamlet’s ghost, like the Marx’s ‘spectres of Europe’, the photograph and its ekphrasis can be part of the healing and the belonging the photograph’s power to ‘reinforce the living connection between past and present, between the generation of witnesses and survivors and the generation after’ (Hirsch, 2008:125).

In A Strange Chinese Tale there is a memory ‘written from a photograph’ taken at the Tiananmen Massacre. The author has seen the photograph and transforms it, but the reader does not see it. The photograph (below) was not inserted into the text of A Strange Chinese Tale. Instead, a ‘third order’ ekphrasis of the photo is presented as one of a series of written images/frames:

All the people on the street corner and on the road are staring intensely at the same moment. Directly in their foreground are a pile of broken bikes, thrown
down onto the road and lining the gutter. On top of these bikes lies a pile of broken men, as lifeless and useless as the broken machines below them. One of the dead men appears to have his arm missing, ripped off at the top shoulder joint; another man’s head is cradled gently on his arm as though he is just about to sleep. In the background there is a young man running towards the bodies. He is the only person moving in the scene ...

(Percival, 2015:184)

In the ‘writing of the photograph’, the author renews the task of the photographer. In the writing above, the author presents a version of the massacre as affectively as he can. He presents the reader with the writing of a memory. In this ‘writing of the photograph’, a fictionalised historical moment is created. The memory is complete with sight, sound and smell. It has been imagined from a photo that the reader has never seen, and an event that neither, the reader, nor the author, has ever witnessed. The reader is most probably not aware that the author made use of a photograph in his writing. The writing from the photographic image is a studium of an untold history; a truth shared by the author with the reader. The author is unable to predict whether a punctum is reached in the reader, or whether the reader will retain the memory as truth. This is the metaphysical unknown quality of the ekphrasis.

The author’s ‘writing from the photograph’ is a regeneration of the agency of the original event, an ekphrastic reminder of that which has been banned from the citizens’ historical memory (Field, 2006:31). Photos of atrocities captured during the Vietnam War were never shown in the United States because: ‘there was ideologically no space for them’ (Sontag, 2002:18); this foreshadows a parallel response experienced in China. The accuracy and authority of the Tiananmen massacre photos have never been in dispute outside China. This is not true inside China.

When photos of the Tiananmen murders [of which there were more than two hundred] are seen by everyday citizens in China, there are two common reactions; the first is a complete denial of the integrity of the photo, that ‘the photo is obviously
fake and the massacre definitely did not happen'; the second, is an immediate
recognition ‘of the horror of the images’ and an inability to continue to look at such a
horror, which the government and its army had perpetrated on their fellow citizens.

The ‘writing (and witnessing) of the photograph’ acts as a contribution to:
‘regenerating the agency of survivors and descendants’ (Field, 2006:31), through
the transformative power of the narrative; this healing is not about forgiveness; it is
about recognition. The ‘writing (and witnessing) of the photograph’ acknowledges
the very existence of the event, in this case the murders that occurred near and in
Tiananmen Square during June 1988. This witnessing acts to lift the blanket of
amnesia that has been thrown over the memory of Tiananmen by the Party’s policy
of forced forgetting. The continued witnessing of event through photographs, oral
stories and written narratives makes certain that when we re-remember there can
be no denial. Strauss (2005) emphasises that this ekphrastic witnessing will also
include a transformation of the event:

To represent is to aestheticize; that is, to transform. It presents a vast field of
choices but it does not include the choice not to transform, not to change or
alter whatever is being represented.

Between the Eyes: Essays on Photography and Politics (Strauss, 2005:9)

It is critical that the target of the photo be revealed and exposed. Whether through
the presentation of the photo itself or through its writing, Sontag was concerned
whether the photo [of a crime against humanity] should be shown at all, that: ‘the
problem is not that people remember through photographs, but that they remember
only the photographs,’ (Sontag, 2003:89); that it ‘cannot help but nourish belief in
the inevitability of tragedy …’ (Sontag, 2003:63). Sontag writes from an intellectual
distance that dangerously negates the power of photography to transform and
liberate; an argument that the Party would gladly co-opt within their propaganda.
The Tiananmen photos taken by everyday citizens and journalists were not
manufactured to misrepresent, unlike the photos published in the China Daily, days
after the murders, of troops cleaning up the mess of ‘dissident troublemaking
students’, who were ‘abusing the privileges of the State’. With regard to the ‘writing
of the photograph’, the author makes a choice of which photo to write from, based
on some notion of what Tussler (2000:259) describes as ‘ontological integrity’. This ontological integrity is open to abuse of course. The Tiananmen photos are the chords of memory. They are war photos, and what we are witnessing is a war crime. These photos act both to prove and to reveal. This is the power of photography to witness, through the agency of ‘writing from the photograph’.

The ‘writing from photography’, like the taking of the photo itself, constitutes a politics of representation. The roles and responsibilities attached to that representation are twice removed, that is, the relationship between the photographer and the subject has been distanced. The moral responsibility of the writer to the subject has been diminished. The writing has become a poetic simulacrum of the original event. It has become an aesthetic event. The exegesis argues for ‘writing from photography’ to be an essential extension of the ekphrastic project.
2.6 Conclusion:

Globalisation is a contested term with multiple meanings. Its definition usually involves global economic relations that refers to the transnational transfer of commodities ... such as services and goods across geographical boundaries. Central to globalization is the capitalist market discipline as a neo-liberal ideology ... that valorizes core values of autonomy, independence, competition and conspicuous acquisition and consumption.

(Carolissen, 2012:630)

2.6.1 The Belonging

With every potential 'awakening' from the ekphrasis there is a reconnection, a re-anchoring into the physical; this is part of the process of belonging. Consciousness is constructed from all those people, objects, events that surround around us; these are the vessels of memory. This sense of belonging can be compared to Husserl's concept of Lifeworld:

In whatever way we may be conscious of the world as universal horizon, as coherent universe of existing objects, we, each 'I-the-man' and all of us together, belong to the world as living with one another in the world; and the world is our world, valid for our consciousness as existing precisely through this 'living together.'

(Husserl, 1970: 108)

It is the interconnectedness of these things that binds us together. The 'living together' that Husserl describes is the belonging of togetherness; the 'belonging together to bodies which exist together ... that which binds their being to their being-such' (1970:30).

The need for a belonging from the individual may arise from the existential alienation caused by the effects of globalisation (Hale, 2013:45-60); the individual needs to reconnect and re-remember, so as to heal. Globalisation has the capability
to rupture psychological and geographic connections from culture and family. The ekphrasis of writing and witnessing memory is a means of healing the pain of disconnection caused by this rupture. The ‘awakening’ precedes the need for a belonging. The witnessing of memory is essential in erasing the cultural and historical amnesia perpetrated on individuals by regimes and authoritarian governments. In this witnessing the individual is given the imagination to see her/himself as part of a global community whose stories and memories can be shared.

The ekphrastic project, whether it is the ekphrasis of a work of art, an everyday object, a photograph or memory, creates a poetics of space. A space where the ghosts can settle and healing can take place; a space enveloped with the quietness of the snow, a soft blanket sheltering the body and soul from the pain of separation and alienation. This is a space for an awakening of sorts, where the individual and community can awake from an enforced amnesia and see what could be, and what it is to belong. From the ‘awakening’ comes awareness, and from awareness comes the ability to heal the pain of disconnection, and from the healing of the pain of disconnection follows the need for belonging.

The act of re-remembering is essential in the process of healing the pain of disconnection. The tyranny of forced forgetting can be overcome through the liberation of the memories that are held in the rhizomatic underground of cultural amnesia. The writing of memory is one way of restoring and healing the trauma imposed on the individual by the authoritarian state, with its systematic denial and alteration of the verity of historical memory. The act of belonging, the reaffirming of belonging, is the individual reconstituting the past and present into a series of moments; each moment brought alive by the ekphrastic project.

The belonging surrounds itself with place, mobility, agency, migrancy, transnationalism, hybridity, language, culture and memory. In *A Strange Chinese Tale*, the belonging is the transcendent moment that envelops Yue and her unknown fox-spirit sister Lucy, on the train journey from Beijing to Lijiang. In this moment, everything is shared in a common belonging, there takes place a pure conversation where language ‘disappears into an extreme intimacy.’ (Baudrillard & Guillaume,
Here in the final meeting of two people who share the same belonging, there is no differentiation, only a commonality of being. It is in this space that the genesis of healing can finally take place:

I gave Lucy a curious smile then let go, willing to accept what previously had been thought impossible.

(Percival, 2015:301)

2.6.2 The Argument

The exegesis argues for the ‘discourse of writing memory’ and its ekphrastic representation in literature. It presents a politics and poetics of writing memory. This is the art of ekphrasis. The ekphrastic project is defined as the continuing expansion of literary ekphrasis to incorporate any object, event, or physical and psychological space. The exegesis delineates the methods for the extension of the ekphrastic project into the fresh domains of the electronic photographic image and the space of memory. It is in this space of witnessing memory where the forced amnesia of events and public memory can be wrested from the shadows of blindness and be brought ‘vividly before the eyes’ (Webb, 2009:1), a space where the reader may see again. The exegesis has called this the ‘awakening’, where the reader regains what has been lost or never imagined.

The exegesis has emphasised the critical role of ekphrastic ‘writing from photography’, the witnessing of the image and its subsequent witnessing of memory, in prose narrative. It is in this literary space that the photograph and memory, through their ekphrasis, have the ability to work inside the imagination. The exegesis argues for the possibility of a ‘third order’ ekphrastic writing of the photographic image where the ‘vital essence’ of image is wholly embedded within the narrative text. This is what can be defined as ‘writing from the photographic image’. In this ‘third order’ ekphrastic writing, the image of the photograph is not placed within the written text, nor is it acknowledged as a source for the text. Instead, the photograph is entirely absent from the narrative text except for the
resultant ekphrastic writing that derives from the original photographic image. This ‘third order’ writing is no more or less aesthetic; it has its locus within the imagination of the photograph.

The fragments of ekphrasis that comprise the writing of memory equate with ‘so many stones on the perimeter of the circle’ (Barthes, 2002:ix). They are the rhizomatic structures and thousand plateaus of Deleuze & Guattari (2004). This open-ended totality of images, the aesthetics of transformation (Strauss, 2005) is changes the perception of the event itself; with the giving of memory, the individual may regain the personal and cultural history previously denied. The exegesis highlights the power of the ellipsis: ‘the art of condensation’ (Kundera, 1984); how small fragments of information, condensed into the ekphrasis, equate with the rapid shots of memory received from the witnessing of an event. The extended use of ekphrasis in *A Strange Chinese Tale* is meant to exemplify the freedom that writing from memory is capable of; and that his aspect of memory has the potential to liberate the reader, so that an *awakening* may take place.

2.6.3 The End

... most people willingly deceive themselves with a doubly false faith; they believe in eternal memory ... and in rectification ... Both are sham. The truth lies at the opposite end of the scale: everything will be forgotten and nothing will be rectified. All rectification (both vengeance and forgiveness) will be taken over by oblivion. No one will rectify wrongs; all wrongs will be forgotten

(Kundera, 1982:245)
2.8 Notes for *The Poetics, Politics and Writing of Memory: The Art of Ekphrasis*


**Photographs in *The Poetics, Politics and Writing of Memory: The Art of Ekphrasis***

All photos by the author except those noted above.
3. BIBLIOGRAPHY

3.1 WORKS CITED


<http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/sitheory.html>


Percival, B. *A Drive To Hillsong With A Very Angry Guy Debord* (unpublished)

Percival, B. *A Strange Tale From A Chinese Studio* (unpublished)


Situationist International Online. ‘Potlatch #1 (web.) <http://www.cddc.vt.edu/sionline/presitu/potlatch1.html>


3.2 Works Consulted


Honig, E. (2003) 'Socialist Sex - The Cultural Revolution Revisited', Modern China


Kang, X. (2009) 'Two Temples, Three Religions, and a Tourist Attraction - Contesting
Sacred Space on China's Ethnic Frontier', *Modern China* 35:3 pp 227-255.


