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Walking Two Harbours
Chew Yi Wei

It is spring in Hong Kong. The weather is mercurial. On this mid-March day, the evening is windy, chilly. Yet the harbour at Tsim Sha Tsui is peopled with tourists, mostly from the Mainland, armed with their digital SLRs, sharing the promenade with celebrities who have been monumentalised, immortalised in bronze. Bruce Lee, the most recent addition to the Avenue of Stars stands in all his sculptured iconicity, beckoning one for a fight, his unmistakable, vociferous kungfu holler echoing, resounding around the harbour and the Kowloon Peninsula. Other stars like Sammo Hung and Jet Li, in their burnished metallic stillness, are a persistent reminder of Hong Kong’s long-standing and remarkable film industry, its transnational celebrities, the ‘Hollywood of the Orient’. A director sits regally on his chair, unmoved, as his cameraman operates the device that would send reels of Hong Kong film around the world. Almost strategically, the director sits by the sea, beside a harbour – a convenient and decisive position of access, a place where his art is bound for travel.

From left to right: The Bruce Lee sculpture and the statue of a director seated on Avenue of Stars at Tsim Sha Tsui

I am here this evening to catch a film at the Hong Kong Space Museum, located on Tsim Tsha Tsui’s waterfront. Just as Hong Kong films have come and gone in times past and times present, the sea propelling them forward into other continents, other worlds, the wind has escorted me here today for the Hong Kong Film Festival, where an assortment of films from around the world land at the harbour’s adjacent buildings to be screened. I decide to come a little earlier just to wander, to walk around a waterfront in a city to which I do not belong to but feel so at home in.

‘Walking Two Harbours.’ Chew Yi Wei.
Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.
Today, in fact, is my second day here. There is something about this place, this harbour that keeps me captivated. Perhaps it is the sea, the boats that bob up and down the little currents, the sound of the cruisers, the smell of salt, the spray, the foam and the wind, the stunning cityscape lining Hong Kong Island, opposite. I came last night, too, and was quietly awed by the iridescent candelabra of lights illuminating the nightscape, extroverted, flamboyant. Truly, Central by night, seen from Tsim Sha Tsui is a visual spectacular, flamboyant, boisterous, bright. The water between Tsim Sha Tsui and Central serves only to buttress and extol the city’s vitality, connecting each peninsula, each isle. Bright, dappled lights emanating from the buildings ricochet off the water, embellishing the night sky, escorting one into a reverie. Yes, I am, without any doubt, a tourist, a recalcitrant urbanite soaking in the classic postcard view of this vivacious, fiercely competitive Asian city.
Accompanying my infatuation with this harbour and this city however is something a little more intimate, a little less superficial. There is another city with a harbour not too far away that is, so uncannily similar to this without exception of coincidence. They are inextricably tied to each other by the winds of trade, the exchange of currencies, the entrances and exits of ships, the co-mingling of tongues.

Due to its pointed façade and its waterfront facing, The Esplanade – Theatres by the Bay is a building that has become something of an architectural icon in Singapore. Surrounding it are svelte buildings with shiny surfaces, a confident reminder of the brimming success Singapore has worked herself up to. The reflection of the bay and the river are imprinted daily on the impeccably polished glass windows of the office buildings and hotels that stand amidst the Central Business District, architectural mirrors reflecting the porosity of the city, its contact with the world.

I often walk along the promenade after a performance or after a meal. Many others like me – tourist or local – are consistently drawn back just to sit by the stone benches or to watch the daily laser display shooting forth from the newest architectural icon rooted in Singapore’s urban landscape – Marina Bay Sands, or MBS, for short. Stationing itself firmly on the roof of the skyscraper triplets is a ship-like structure, waiting almost, to sail off onto a highway in the sky, an aerial ornament brazenly bearing its imprint atop the three towers and the city-state. Housed in the interior of one of the towers is a newly-built theatre mainly staging performances with high production values. The Lion King, Wicked, Annie and Avenue Q are but a few of the musicals that have been staged there so far since its opening in 2011.

‘Walking Two Harbours.’ Chew Yi Wei. 
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As if to hide its penchant for order and paternalistic statehood, Singapore constructs on its urban surface, architecture that is daringly sensational. The Esplanade Theatre nestled for a good ten years now by Marina Bay is a building one can either find admirably audacious or haplessly hideous. Slicing the air with its shark-fin-like metallic shade awnings, the rounded roof of the Esplanade comes across as more inimical than inviting. Even its curvatures fail to soften the chiseled, pointed look of the building. Yet, in the past ten years, the Theatre has managed to secure itself as a chosen performance venue for a multitude of acts both local and international.
The tripartite confluence of harbour, business district and art seem almost inevitable when I think about both cities, Hong Kong and Singapore. As I walk down the promenade at the Avenue of Stars, not only does the wind carry my thoughts back to my home city a little down south, but the words of Edwin Thumboo drift resonantly, swiftly, into my mind as well. Through a peripatetic weaving of words along this promenade, across the seas, Thumboo makes a transnational connection between the two harbours. In his poem aptly titled ‘Two Harbours,’ Thumboo articulates with much perspicuity the fates and comparability of the two harbours. He says,

For us, tides are destinies. They brought hopeful
Eyes that built and bred a Tao whose unfolding still
Proclaims, still travelling with cool audacity; flows in
Cutting edge stuff; dare caress global twist and spin.
We too house the world’s stage, ever shifting rock
And hum, spliced mass media, traditions redesigned.

The unremitting pulsations of trade, the aggressiveness of economic activity are shaped by the movements of tides, the direction of the wind. What blows into our tiny shores makes or breaks our futures. We are two harbours interconnected by the whims of the wind and the turn of the tides. Aspiring eyes of migrants, the diligent trudge of the fisherman and coolies who form the perambulatory course of our history have transformed our rivers, harbours and cities into the ceaseless hubs that they are today. Embodied in the organic word ‘Eyes,’ these seeing glasses, these lenses that project themselves into our present and future still persist in creating a vision, a transnational Tao that unifies the unfolding and enfolding of harbours, of cities. That Thumboo chooses ‘Tao’ reveals a universalising principal behind his words, an intimacy and likeness of relation between the histories, presents, and futures of the two harbours – a trajectory ‘spliced,’ aquatically connected. Almost like a dance – a ‘global twist and spin’ – both harbours’ dalliance with imports and exports, render a daring environment of industry and enterprise. With iconic performance venues located there, the two harbours and their cities become a ‘world stages’ where the arts and its global audiences gaze and strut. Most starkly then, what characterises the similarity of the two harbours is their sense of invitation for the arts. Indeed, the harbours of Singapore and Hong Kong are

More alike than we care to know, we compete,
Yet share creative get-up-and-go, vie to be tops,
How tickets sold, count good reviews.

In the poem, the tension between the triptych of relations – harbour, business district and art is evident. While the harbour ushers in the arts, profit must be of firm consideration, too. Which harbour makes an arts hub? Can the economy, patently emblematised by the central business districts of Hong Kong and Singapore, afford a greater stake in the arts? Maybe that which keeps the city economically vibrant is not so much art existing for its own sake, but art that receives rave reviews, art that makes itself for an adoring audience. How can these two harbours afford it, otherwise? Just
like the ships at the harbour, the arts only ‘arrive to depart’; they are made of tos-and-fros, of impermanence, of movement, of mobility. Thumboo, being one of Singapore’s pioneer poets, has seen the nation develop from a backwater to the affluent city it is today. However, being a poet, and as such, one who stands in the interstices of society and art, he does not seek to moralise, but questions the tensions inherent in this triangular relationship. He hopes, but does not insist on any high ‘truth’. He celebrates the energy and hive of economic activity of the two harbours, but concomitantly wonders about their compatibility with the arts.

Indeed, the sculptures at Tsim Tsha Tsui tell a greater story; a story about how far the Hong Kong film industry and the cinematic creativity of Hong Kong have travelled on their transnational journey. Having them positioned by the sea, at the harbour, is revelatory of the ‘creative get-up-and-go,’ the dynamism of the artistic process. However, all is not so simple and romantic; cast in bronze, these sculptures are also a staid reminder that artistic success and profit are inexorable bedfellows, be their relationship tense or comfortable.

I pause to take a picture of Bruce Lee’s statue. There is still a little time left to walk around before the film starts at the nearby Hong Kong Space Museum. As I circle the waterfront, the salt-tinged breeze ruffling my hair, I remember the harbour back home. I remember ambling along the half completed Esplanade in 2001; back then, its spikes had yet to jab the sky, the harbor, its present promenade a construction site cluttered with cranes, sticking their necks of steel into some distance above, beyond. I wondered then how the finished product would turn out, how it would change the way Singapore is perceived, how it would mar or enhance the city’s skyline, whether or not it would pave the way for any sort of renaissance the city-state was aspiring to.

A year later in November 2002, I went for my first performance, the very first performance at the Esplanade – the musical Singing in the Rain. By that time, the thorns were fully constructed, indignantly and determinedly proclaiming to the world the theatre’s entry and its presence. The performance was full of spectacle but mediocre: to my mind, it was more a show of the technical capability of the theatre, more braggadocio than art. I wasn’t provoked, as it were, by the performance’s content, but then again, I could not expect a popular musical to ask any sort of probing question that addressed the nuances of human nature. I was proud of the new theatre, but I wondered why the inaugural performance had to be a popular musical, performed by an international cast. Need this maiden performance go down in the annals of Singapore’s history as the one that opened the new theatre? But then, I came to a realisation, when I saw water being poured down from the stage ceiling drenching the performer below. He continued to sing, to sing in the ‘rain’ no matter how stylised, how artificial this ‘rain’ was. His insouciance articulated a certain, perhaps sobering truth. In order for a city to gain global recognition, it needs to have its arts scene injected with international currency. That’s how hubs function; that’s our destiny, brought about by the ebb and flow of confident tides. And that’s one of the reasons I am here at Tsim Tsha Tsui this evening: the Hong Kong Film Festival is not a free event, but a ticketed, sponsored international one and I am, indubitably, a part of this massive transnational exchange of cultural products.
Fortunately, against the reality that art need not merely be made for its own sake but for profit as well, can be set another more optimistic truth. Thumboo concludes with a very powerful ‘But’ – a conjunction on which hope is predicated:

But the Arts
Conclude to start again, to shut doors so open others.

I am certain that the film I am about to watch will tell me another truth: a truth that will be less pragmatic; a truth which exists on the other side of art; a truth that emerges from another door, another harbour, somewhere. I do not want to be naïve, nor do I want to be cynical; it is indisputable that art is in large part, a mobile product in today’s transnational ambit; but it can, despite its economic obligations, be a beacon in the dark, no matter where it is viewed.

The drizzle is setting in and I run into the museum, just in time for the film.
Creating Ceremony: Healing the Spirit of Suicidal Veterans
John Farrell Kelly

The only cure
I know
is a good ceremony,
that’s what she said.
—Leslie Marmon Silko, Ceremony

I hit a moose.

I was riding a Honda Sabre 700 motorcycle around 60 mph one night, eight miles south of Pinedale, Wyoming, and I took my eyes off of the road, for just a moment, in order to watch the red, flashing airport lights in the distance.

I wore black Navy flight deck boots, grey wash jeans, a white T-shirt, a black leather jacket, and a black, full-face Shoei Z-100 helmet that saved my life. When I looked at the road again, a large moose was directly in my path. She had emerged from the willows on the right side of the road and was moving slowly across to the left. You’re not getting out of this one, I thought to myself.

In the moment before we hit, I felt her presence, and our spirits merged. Then my right side hit her left side, and I was flooded with information about her life. I bounced off of her body. My left side hit the pavement, and the gas tank of the motorcycle folded around my left knee. The momentum threw me forward, and all of my weight pressed into the front of my helmet, as I slid along the road like a free diver entering deep water, my face an inch from the pavement. I relaxed my body almost completely. Instead of contracting the muscles on the back of my neck to raise my head, I lengthened my neck, lightly firmed all of the neck muscles, and lightly pressed my face further into the pavement to stabilise my neck, allowing the helmet to protect my face. Then I lost consciousness.

When I regained consciousness, I looked around and assessed the situation. I noticed that I was lying on a paved road in motorcycle clothes. Something’s wrong, I thought. I must have been in an accident. The last thing I remembered was standing at the head of Pier 12 on the Norfolk Naval Base at 4 AM, taking one final look at the aircraft-carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower (CVN 69), before I turned to ride to a new duty station in San Diego. Three years of memories flooded my mind – the scream and fire of jet engines during night flight operations, the smell of jet exhaust and nonskid, and the water – so much beautiful water.

A man approached me on the pavement. ‘Are you still with us, buddy?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘Where am I?’
‘By Pinedale,’ he responded.
‘Pinedale, I’m from Pinedale,’ I said.

A semi approached, and the man stood in front of it and waved until it stopped. A short while later, an ambulance came and took me to the Pinedale Clinic.

They quickly decided to send me to the hospital, seventy-seven miles away in Jackson.

In the ambulance, the pain was significant. My abdominal muscles contracted and froze, as if to protect me from further trauma. I felt like I had been hit by a wall-sized sledge hammer. I am accustomed to high levels of pain, but this level was new. I gathered my energy at the base of my spine, and then I flowed like a river of wind up my spine, through the top of my head, and out of my body. I rested outside of my body for a moment, and then I entered again. I visualised a thermostat and linked my pain to it. As I turned the thermostat down, I turned off my pain. Then I turned it back on a small amount, so I could monitor my body.

In the hospital, they moved quickly and performed emergency surgery. My most significant injury was internal bleeding from a lacerated spleen. I was fortunate—the medical team was exceptional. The surgeon wrapped my spleen with a portion of omentum and saved it. I was left with a scar from just below my sternum to a few inches below my navel.

Six days later, I was out of the hospital. It took me over a month to walk well again. The first time I drove afterwards, my body shook steadily for over an hour. Then it simply stopped shaking.

**And a Moose Hit Me**

*And in the belly of this story*

*the rituals and the ceremony*

*are still growing.*

—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*

Years later, I was walking one summer night in Kincaid Park in Anchorage, Alaska, and I misread the mood of a young male moose.

I had parked in the Jodhpur parking lot and walked for about an hour to a favorite spot on a cliff overlooking the Cook Inlet. On the way back, I noticed a moose ahead of me on the trail. I backtracked and waited for a few minutes to see if he might move on, but when I looked again, he was still there. Then he started to walk slowly toward me. *This moose is going to charge me*, I thought in surprise. I backtracked quickly, but he kept coming. I stepped behind a tree, and he stopped about five metres from me. Then I accidentally stepped on a stick. The noise startled him, and he turned and ran away.

I resigned myself to walking the long way around and adding another hour or so to my journey, and I turned to go in the opposite direction. After a few minutes, I glanced over my left shoulder and noticed he was charging me at full speed. There were no trees around, so I made a futile attempt to outrun him.

Then I was on the ground, and a painful wave of disorientation overwhelmed me. When it calmed, I assessed my situation. The moose was standing about ten metres away, looking down at me. Fortunately, he was not in a mood to stomp me or finish me off. As I moved my left arm, the bones scraped in my humerus below the

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2 Silko 2.

left shoulder, and I realised that it was broken. Other than that, I felt fine. (I later
discovered a nice hoof-print bruise on the back of my left thigh.)

The moose calmly walked back to his original spot on the trail, and I calmly
stood up and walked in the other direction. I discovered that if I held my left hand
carefully with my right hand, I could control the movement of the humerus, and
prevent most of the bone scraping. There was significant pain.

After a two-hour walk, I reached my car, and managed to drive home. The
next morning when the VA (Veterans Affairs) Health Clinic opened, I went in for
assistance. I informed staff that my arm was broken, and after three hours, I was
finally seen. I explained my story calmly, and without examining me, the doctor
insisted that my arm was not broken. I suggested an x-ray anyway, which he finally
agreed to. The x-rays revealed a major break below the head of the humerus, and also
revealed multiple breaks in the head itself. Suddenly, I was given head-of-the-line
privileges to see another doctor.

The new doctor examined the x-rays and gave me his assessment. ‘If we put it
in a cast, you will lose all mobility in the joint,’ he said. ‘I would like to pin the bones,
but we can’t do that, since the head is also fractured. I’m also concerned that the
attachments of the muscles will pull off the fragments of the head. I would like to put
in an artificial joint.’

I felt an emotional shock — a break is one thing, but an artificial joint is
another. ‘Can I have five or ten minutes to think about it?’ I replied.
‘No problem,’ he said, and left the room.
When he returned, I asked a single question. ‘How long does a bone typically
take to heal?’
‘Six weeks,’ he replied.
I thought for a moment. ‘I do not want an artificial joint,’ I said. ‘I can hold
my arm in place for that long.’
He looked at me like I was crazy, but he seemed busy, so he didn’t argue. He
looked me in the eyes and asked clearly, ‘Are you sure?’
I returned his gaze and replied, ‘Yes.’
‘Okay, then,’ he stated.
I left, holding the arm in place by controlling it with my right hand, careful to
maintain complete relaxation of the muscles of the left arm. At night, I would sleep
on my right side with an assortment of pillows to hold my arm in place. When I moved
in my sleep, the bones would scrape and the pain would cause me to wake up, but it was
manageable.

After about a week, I did lose almost all mobility in the joint. My theory was
that the body forms a natural cast for the arm. After two weeks, the bones stopped
scraping. Over the next few months, for the most part, I simply relaxed completely
and trusted my body to do its work.

After six months, the VA asked me to return for x-rays. ‘I don’t know what
you did,’ the doctor stated, ‘but the bone has completely healed.’ After another six
months of gentle motion, mobility returned completely to the joint.
High Fever

_Tayo didn’t sleep well that night._
—Leslie Marmon Silko, _Ceremony_ 3

When I was on shore duty in Seattle, I had a series of nightmares. In the first dream, large, rusty pipes on the side of a mountain were pouring toxic water into a glacial lake. I woke up sweating and shaking.

In a later dream, I was kayaking on the surface of the water – the lake had become completely toxic. In the final dream, I was swimming in the toxins. I inadvertently opened my mouth, and toxic water flooded into my body. I spit out a chicken bone. A large wooden sign in the middle of the lake read ‘You’ve been warned.’ A large, booming voice spoke the words out loud.


A few nights later, my body started shaking slightly, and I felt an energy rise up my spine. It formed an ocean blue color as it went up my spine, and when it reached my head, it changed into sun gold. It was a deeply blissful feeling.

A while later, my thinking process changed dramatically, and I felt waves of horror and debilitating panic. I lay in a ball on the floor, and my brain and my solar plexus seemed to contract and squeeze, like a sponge. The waves of horror subsided temporarily and returned periodically.

What I felt was a thousand times worse than hitting the moose.

My thinking performed like a large symphony. Slowly, instruments withdrew from the song, one-by-one, and my sense of self narrowed to a single instrument. Then the final instrument withdrew. What remained was the feeling of music with no musician. Then the instruments returned and withdrew randomly in waves. The music was fragmented, but harmonic, and almost seamlessly smooth, with no continual melodic line.

In moments of clarity, I called friends for help, and as I spoke with them, a self took shape briefly, but then collapsed afterwards. There was no continuity in expressed music, only music in the heart.

_Something’s wrong,_ I thought, as I was drowning in unknown waters that nearly ended me.

Experience and Thought

_The different voice I describe is characterized not by gender but theme. [...] My interest lies in the interaction of experience and thought, in different voices and the dialogues to which they give rise, in the way we listen to ourselves and to others, in the stories we tell about our lives._
—Carol Gilligan, _In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development_ 4

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3 Silko 5.
4 Carol Gilligan, _In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development_ (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982) 2.

Soon after this experience, I spent two weeks on the mental health ward of the Naval Hospital, Bremerton.

In an interesting and telling treatment methodology, patients were assigned to wear pajamas, and rewarded with clothes for doing ‘good work’ or demoted to pajamas again for ‘not doing good work.’ Good work entailed conforming to the expected cognitive behavior, and conformance was equated with health and recovery. All discussion of symptoms or possible causes was aggressively avoided.

In one group session filled with multiple layers of irony, the staff used an educational module that they did not understand. They read a series of statements that we were directed to identify as true or false. One statement read, ‘You can’t not communicate.’ The staff decided that it was a faulty statement with a ‘double negative’ that they should discard.

I said, ‘I think the statement is trying to suggest that we always communicate – that we cannot stop communicating. Even when we stop talking, our bodies communicate endless information – our age, gender, ethnicity, emotions, and even thoughts. Therefore, I would say the statement is true.’ The staff looked at me like I was crazy. I was clearly exhibiting inappropriate cognitive behavior.

Then, later, it hit me. I was wrong. I realised that the statement is false for me. I can ‘not communicate.’ Like Ralph Ellison, I had become an invisible man.

Richard

     Ellison had accepted the Aristotelian view that, as a novelist who had produced a work of art, especially a tragedy, he had released ‘magic’ capable of cleansing and purging dangerous and troubling emotions.
     —Lawrence Jackson, Ralph Ellison: Emergence of Genius

Then Richard arrived.

He was a hospital corpsman third class, assigned to serve on the ward. He was a slight man – short and slender, with short, grey hair. His body was covered with tattoos, and on his right hand, he wore a silver ring with the head of a ram, with piercing, ruby eyes. He was a combat veteran from Vietnam and an ex-convict. He embodied an apotheosis of a warrior – and its transcendence.

His style arose from his own particular experience and was impossible to duplicate. He interacted with patients in the group with a masterful grace. He would push people without abuse and immediately adapt and jump to an appropriate approach, based on their response. He would mask himself in the intensity of curt, almost adversarial discourse that he delivered without a hint of arrogance, in a strange tone that concealed the unfathomable depths of his compassion.

Then in one group, he briefly glanced at me. My eyes glazed for a moment, like an Afghan girl, and then softened. There was a moment of silence. The sound of that silence cracked like the heads of bighorn sheep on a distant mountain, and travelled for decades into the past and the future.

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‘This guy belongs in pajamas about as much as I do,’ he declared and leapt to his next approach.

The cognitive behavior of the staff on the ward indicated that they did not have the faintest understanding of what they had just witnessed. And they were not learning.

**Water**

> *Then after a long empty time he [Kiowa] said ‘Take it slow. Just go wherever the spirit takes you.’*
> —Tim O’Brien, ‘The Man I Killed’

A few days later in another group, Richard directed his attention to me again.

‘Did you mean what you said the other day about this group being a circle?’ I asked.

He sat silent and still.

‘Take your glasses off,’ I stated.

He sat silent and still.

‘What? You want me to come around?’ I asked.

He sat silent and still.

I moved fluidly to him and gently held out my hand.

He took his glasses off, grasped my hand, and allowed his eyes to pool with water and overflow.

Then he shifted his attention to other patients in the group and immediately leapt to another approach.

The cognitive behavior of the staff on the ward indicated that they did not have the faintest understanding of what they had just witnessed. But they were beginning to learn.

**The Feminine Feeling**

> *It is important to note that when working qualitatively, it is not always necessary to have a theoretical framework to start with.*
> —Heidi Hjelmeland, ‘Cultural Research in Suicidology: Challenges and Opportunities’

In the next group, Richard leapt from one ledge to another, and landed perfectly flush with the edge of a cliff, grazing a thousand foot drop and sudden death.

In a ten-second commentary on the previous day, he held his hand in the air and stated calmly, with the slightest hint of disregard in his tone, ‘the feminine feeling.’ Then he leapt to another approach.

The cognitive behavior of the staff on the ward indicated that they did not have the faintest understanding of what they had just witnessed. But they had just been offered a significant lesson.

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Navy Psychiatrist

‘Oh, man, you fuckin’ trashed the fucker,’ Azar said. ‘You scrambled his sorry self, look at that, you did, you laid him out like Shredded fuckin’ Wheat.’
—Tim O’Brien, ‘The Man I Killed’

After two weeks on the ward at Bremerton, I sat in pajamas at the end of a table of Navy psychiatrists who were evaluating my future.
‘How do you feel about the Navy?’ one asked.
‘I will return to my command and do my duty,’ I stated, ‘but I feel that they do not relate in a nourishing way.’
Filling his words with a toxic sadism, he shouted, ‘you don’t deserve to wear the uniform.’
The board promptly discharged me for atypical psychosis.

VA Psychiatrist

Out on the road today
I saw a deadhead sticker on a cadillac
—Don Henley, ‘The Boys of Summer’

I moved to Santa Fe to attend a year-long massage therapy course, and the VA in Albuquerque eventually contacted me.
The VA psychiatrist wore sandals, a ponytail, and an authoritarian attitude.
‘What happened?’ he asked with experienced hostility.
I mourned the need for reductionism and stated, ‘My thinking stopped working normally, and I was flooded with waves of horror and the need to kill myself.’
‘How is your energy,’ he later asked.
‘Ah,’ I said. ‘One of the issues I’m working with is that when I close my eyes, sometimes I feel the energy of other people, including the color and texture.’
‘You realise those are delusions,’ he declared.
‘They’re real to me,’ I stated.
‘That’s the nature of delusions,’ he shouted. ‘I’m the expert – not you.’
_Not in this, I thought to myself. Not in this._

Civilian Psychiatrist

We estimate that PTSD-related and major depression-related costs could range from $4.0 to $6.2 billion over two years.
— Terri Tanielian and Lisa H. Jaycox, Editors, _Invisible Wounds of War: Psychological and Cognitive Injuries, Their Consequences, and Services to Assist Recovery_
A few years later in Alaska, I experienced another major psychotic depression. After nightmares about a historic trauma, I had a seizure, passed out, and was taken by ambulance to a local civilian hospital. While I was strapped in the stretcher, the waves of trauma flowing through me were so powerful that they would have absolutely moved me to kill myself if I had been free.

I spent another two weeks of inpatient care, moving in and out of psychosis and depression. The civilian psychiatrist immediately prescribed a common drug for depression. He saw me once a day for one or two minutes.

In one interaction, I stated, ‘I’m having frequent nightmares and shaking.’ ‘That’s the drug kicking in,’ he stated, and left, well within his two-minute maximum interaction time.

In the two weeks that I was there, he might have spent twenty total minutes with me. He billed around two thousand dollars. The profitability of the interaction was telling.

Distant Shores

_They started crying_
_the old men started crying_
_‘A’moo’ooh! A’moo’ooh!’_
—Leslie Marmon Silko, _Ceremony_ 11

I relaxed into my illness and accepted my path. Other assistance arrived.

Assessing the Situation

_Cultural research in suicidology is crucial in order to develop our understanding of the meanings of suicidal behaviour in different cultural contexts._
—Heidi Hjelmeland, Cultural Research in Suicidology: Challenges and Opportunities12

_Sensitivity and specificity of the Veteran status information on the death certificate were 93.1% (95% confidence interval [CI] 90.7, 95.2) and 91.7% (95% CI 90.5, 92.8), respectively._


11 Silko 257.

12 Hjelmeland 34.

Before I was stationed on the aircraft carrier, I went to submarine school for two
months. (My eardrums were damaged trying to equalise in the pressure chamber, and
I was sent to the aircraft carrier.) During one drill at the school, we were assigned to a
wet trainer, which was a life-sized model of a section of a submarine, complete with
numerous water-filled pipes. During the exercise, we had to patch the holes in the
pipes before we were submerged in water.

Before the exercise started, a sailor from the fleet rapidly assessed the
situation, anticipated leaks from the apparent holes, established priorities, made
assignments, and took on the largest holes himself. When the exercise started and
water flooded the space, I focused on a small hole in one pipe and tried to patch it
perfectly. Our group patched all the holes and set a record time. Afterwards, they
good-heartedly made fun of me for wasting time on a small leak.

In the next group, the water quickly rose to their chins, and the exercise was stopped.

This is not a drill – veterans are dying.
Quantitative research is a small patch – ‘evidence-based’ treatment is a small
patch.

It is essential to listen to the diverse stories of suicidal veterans in order to
begin to understand the complex problems that we signify.

Journeys

One can only wish these young people well.
—Kazuo Ishiguro, An Artist of the Floating World

After I finish a year of massage therapy school in Santa Fe, I move to Maui and get a
job washing rental cars.

A few months later, I have a dream. In this dream, I meet a group of eight or
nine diverse people from around the world. I feel a longing to meet them again
someday and hear their stories. We are standing outside in an unfamiliar, desert
landscape. We are young – in our twenties. One man is older – in his thirties. He says,
‘This is your time,’ and stands watch. We all know what he means, so we lie down,
close our eyes, and journey.

In my journey, I am on board an aircraft carrier. The senior medical staff ask
for my help. They have an epidemic of suicides onboard. Men are waking up,
screaming, and killing themselves. I go on another journey. When I return, I say,
‘Every molecule of the ship has spirit. Together, they form the spirit of the ship. The
ship is angry because of her assigned mission. She is screaming her anger, and the
men hear her screams in their sleep. To heal, you must change the mission of the ship
and give her a new name.’

I tell them the new name that she wants.


‘Creating Ceremony: Healing the Spirit of Suicidal Veterans.’ John Farrell Kelly.
Transnational Literature Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.
Ceremony

*Research is ceremony.*
—Shawn Wilson, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*¹⁵

I sit in my favorite spot on the edge of a cliff overlooking the Cook Inlet. I often sit here for hours at a time, gazing at the water and absorbing the sunlight. A large eagle has a favorite tree about twenty-five metres away, and we often sit here together.

After a while, I feel tired, and I lie back and sleep for a while. Later, I hear a rustling, and I slowly sit up. A calf moose is grazing peacefully, two metres in front of me. I gently turn to look for her mother. She is grazing calmly, two metres behind me. I sit for a moment and gaze at the water. Then I slowly recline and sleep again.

Dedication

*Sunrise,*
*Accept this offering,*
*Sunrise.*
—Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*¹⁶

For Richard,

Who served suicidal veterans with the highest possible distinction.

Thank you.

¹⁶ Silko 262.

They have been walking for weeks now, or has it been months? She has lost count. She can’t tell what day of the week it is. Each day, as she weakens, her bag feels heavier. She tries hard to hide her exhaustion. As time goes on she feels less and less hungry. Some figs or berries that they pick here and there, along the way, last her for a while. At least it is summer and they don’t have to worry about the cold weather, though the nights are still chilly. One of her shoes has a hole in it. Sand and gravel are getting in, making walking more difficult. Now and then she stops and stuffs the shoe with some grass to cover the hole.

She is the only woman in the group. In fact they are the only couple. All the others are single men, some from other countries. Most of them are only in their teens and twenties. They have left their loved ones behind. Only a few of them speak her language. She can hear them telling stories about their ordeals. She can hear the fear in their voices. Their shoulders are hunched over with worry, from loss and uncertainty. Fear and a common goal is what they all share, what unites them, what brought them together.

They have to stay out of sight as much as possible. By day, they hide in the woods or crouch below whatever foliage they can find and wait for nightfall. Then they set out again. It is risky to be on the road in daylight. They are taking a mountainous track, far away from the main roads, from the army patrol vans and the police. They try also to avoid the mountain villages, by following remote mountain trails. Some of the villagers are hospitable, offering them water or bread, some even fresh figs, apricots and walnuts. But others are unfriendly and suspicious of strangers and can turn them over to the local authorities at any time. They shot at a young Hazara man travelling with them the other day for picking some apples from an orchard. They have to tread carefully.

The one in charge knows the way and he bargains their passage through the different countries. He promised to get them across the final border. They sold everything they had for this journey – their plot of land and her dowry.

The old man, at the bazaar back home, arranged their passage. He was the one who managed to hide them from the militia. He assured them of a safe passage. They had nothing to fear, he said. Once they were over their border a new guide would lead them. He is trustworthy; he won’t betray them. But he warned them that the travel across borders was to be on foot and would take days, weeks, maybe months, depending on the routes available along the way.

It had been heart-breaking leaving home. Many a night she felt like slipping out and finding her way back home, no matter whether terror was still awaiting, lurking behind every corner, behind every knock on the door.

How people’s fortunes change, she thinks. One moment you are home with your loved ones, the next you are at the mercy of others. As a child she felt safe and happy inside her large family compound. The mud walls ran all around, enclosing their house, the yard, the cherry blossoms, their apricot trees and the garden with the well. Beyond, in the distance there was the desert, hazy and burning. Large,
tumbleweed balls flew in the wind, rolling and dancing. Heading for the desert; the desert was calling them. In summer, dried figs and peaches were spread out on the roof tops. In the courtyard, her old great-grandfather, sitting cross-legged on a rug, would play his tambur. The music reverberated throughout their neighborhood. In those moments they were all wrapped up in a silk cocoon of melody, of warmth and closeness. Now trudging through this foreign terrain towards the unknown she tries to hold on to that memory a moment longer.

Will this journey take them to safety? She doesn’t know. Everything is kept secret from her and from the others. No one from the group knows the exact plan. The less you know the less you can tell, if you are captured, they have been told. Only the guide leading them seems to know. They have to trust him; they are all at his mercy. She also knows that women are unwelcome. Some of the men don’t feel comfortable with her around but neither does she. She tries hard to keep out of their way and they keep out of hers, as much as it is possible under the circumstances. But as time goes on, they are too exhausted to worry about her presence. She becomes part of the group and they get used to her. The further away they go from their homeland, the closer they all get to each other. Slowly she becomes like family to them. She is the sister they have lost or left behind, or their aunty, as most of the young men call her.

They are still high up in the hilly area, but descending little by little every day. Far down in the valley she can see minarets rising above the roofs of the villages, covered softly in the morning mist. Sometimes the breeze carries a faint Allah Wakhbar up the mountain ridge.

Some mornings, at the break of dawn, she walks to the edge of the ridge, from where they are camped, to look at this new countryside so far away from home and to get a sense of where they are and where they are heading. Down below the sleepy villages spread out in twisting alleys, encircled by garden plots and slithering waterways. On rocky cliff faces nearby, mountain goats perch fearlessly; hawks and eagles glide gracefully across the sky, scanning the waking land below. She and the eagles together, looking down at a world below coming alive.

Yet, amidst the fear of being caught, there are moments when she is overtaken with the beauty of this new landscape, which is not dry and barren. The desert and the dust storms have all been left behind. This is all so different to her homeland. Being part of a venture like this has given her new purpose. Part of her, secretly, enjoys every moment of this journey, no matter how weak she feels, no matter how hard and dangerous it is. In a way it feels like breaking free, like breaking out of prison and there is freedom waiting ahead. This and only this is enough to make her forget her exhaustion, to keep her going.

‘There is the river,’ Ikmat points out to her one day, ‘We should be there in about a week, God willing.’

Far away, the river uncoils hazy and grey in the heat and then gradually vanishes into nowhere. Beyond the river is the promised land. That is their destination. They will be safe there. People have a better life there. That’s what they have been told. Only one more week and the worst will be over, she tells herself. This mood of hope gives her a burst of energy. Back home there was no future. They didn’t know whether they would be around tomorrow. When we have children, she thinks,
our parents will be pleased and their spirits will rest in peace.

The idea of having a family warms her heart. Ikmat is a good husband. He cares for her. And he is young, not like those old men in the village, who wanted her for a wife. She is lucky to be married to a young husband.

When she first met Ikmat, she liked him immediately. His large, dark eyes looked kind. His smile was generous. She knew, right then, that she would marry a gentle man, though he tried to hide it. She knew that for a man to look tough, to be unyielding was a matter of honour, of pride. Yet from her woman’s point of view too much pride often got in the way of things and the women-folk had to pay the price for it. She knew that well and she didn’t like it.

It’s midday and they are all resting under some large oak trees. Their branches are heavy with green acorns. The men have finished their prayers and are asleep. It’s quiet, and only the cicadas break the silence. A small lizard crawls out from some brown leaves and gazes sleepily at her. Some ants are still going about doing their work. In the crevice of a rock, next to her, a scrawny plant with small lilac petals is hiding. In the summer heat its scent claims the space. She is impressed by how this tiny plant turns its hardship into such greatness, this wonderful scent. She suddenly feels in awe of it. Nature is blessed with so much wisdom, she thinks.

By dusk they are on the road again. The bare mountain ridge is completely transformed in the full moonlight. The craggy edges of the mountain peaks look menacing. They remind her of peaks back home that flamed red in the sunset or emerged like giant dragons from the clouds of dust. They were the only loved thing that had remained standing, after everyone had gone, standing upright over the rubble and the bodies. Always defiant, so that one doesn’t lose hope. She remembers the wooden gate of her family home, riddled with bullet holes, half standing, still resisting, hanging from one hinge, a ghost among the ruins. Guarding...what? Her family gone. Her mother and her loom burnt, the loom weights and spinning whorls poking out from the ashes.

To carry on walking, she tells herself that none of this has ever happened, that it is only a bad dream. She grips onto to her bag for support. It’s the only thing she’s got left from home. Her fingertips feel its texture, her mother’s neat weave, their home-spun yarn, dyed to perfection. Mother was most meticulous about the colour of her dyes; her crimson medallions and intricate floral borders were matchless.

No, we mustn’t lose hope, she tells herself.

‘It doesn’t help to dwell upon the past,’ Ikmat tells her, hearing her sigh. ‘You only make matters worse and become weak.’

They can’t afford to weaken. They have a long way yet ahead. They know if they are caught here, they would be sent back and that would be the end of them.

They are almost down in the valley now. Woods are thinning out and further down, ahead of them, spreads a patched quilt of cultivated land, all the way to the riverbank. The border is not very far now. She can sense an air of restlessness and fear amongst the group. The men huddle together planning. They are to split into smaller groups, so they look less conspicuous. The younger men are becoming more and more impatient and nervous. She can hear the anxiety in their raised voices as if they can’t wait for this march to end. It has already taken far too long, they say. Some of them seem to
disagree with the guide as to the manner and point of crossing. They believe they are too exposed. Others dismiss the danger of being caught and want to cross the border in daylight. They are eager to arrive. Arrive where exactly? The thought of arrival suddenly starts to unsettle her. What will happen once they cross over the river? There is a knot in her stomach.

Ikmat is silent.

‘If we perish today, who will know of our fate? No-one,’ Ahmed tells him. He looks worried. He has lost a lot of weight since they started their journey and looks much older with his beard long. ‘We are nothing, brother. Just some unwanted trespassers walking through other people’s homelands. They don’t even know our names.’

‘Don’t lose hope now, Ahmed. We are almost there, Allah is merciful,’ Ikmat tells him, patting him on the shoulder.

‘Is there something wrong?’ she asks Ikmat.

‘No,’ he tells her.

Once they cross the open strip of grassland that lies ahead of them, they will be able to find cover beyond in the cornfields, near the river, and then they can head straight for the border.

That is how things were, up to the last day, the day they were all together. Now she is all alone with a deep gash on her left arm. She cuts a piece from a handkerchief and bandages the wound. She feels no pain. She feels nothing.

After the explosion she lost sight of the others. Everyone scattered in different directions. Did the others desert her and Ikmat or were they scared to come to their aid? She can’t tell. It all happened suddenly, as they were crossing the open grassland. They had just left the shelter of the woods. How did they end up in a minefield? She can’t tell that either. Why didn’t the guide warn them? Didn’t he know?

Before she closed Ikmat’s eyes, he murmured faintly, ‘Sima...’ and as she tried to read his lips, ‘You must cross the river...must cross the border’, he said. These were his last words. Ikmat’s last words. His eyes were staring at her. His body covered in blood, shaking, and then nothing. She put her head on his chest. No sound. Shocked, she could not utter a word or a cry. Her voice was gone.

After a while she catches herself digging the earth fast, with her bare hands. The soil is hard and dry. She finds a piece of wood from some dry shrubs nearby and goes on digging frantically. From afar she can hear indistinct voices getting louder and closer. She stops to listen; it’s another tongue. They are coming for her. Terror overtakes her. Quickly, with hands shaking, she takes off her headscarf and tenderly covers Ikmat’s head, his beloved face and upper body with it. She pushes him gently into the hole she dug, though her arms resist letting him go, and desperately she tries to cover him with earth. Is this herself or someone else she is watching? Far down the road she gets a glimpse of figures coming up the slope. Reluctantly, she abandons Ikmat, nearly covered in earth, and terrified she runs away into the tall cornfields beyond, to take cover. She feels weak and confused. She is very thirsty. She cuts a cob of a silky corn, husks it and starts eating it fast. It tastes sweet in her mouth; its milky juice running down her chin and her fingers, mixing with Ikmat’s blood and the dirt. That’s all she has of him now: his blood on her, on her clothes.

‘The Border,’ Martha Mylona.

*Transnational Literature* Vol. 5 no. 2, May 2013.

For some time now she has been hiding in the cornfields, curled up, her body trembling. Broken verses of the Koran, now and then, float around in her mind and she tries to murmur them without success. She has difficulty pulling herself together. The only thing that stands out in her mind is that she is in danger, hiding in a strange country. The river is not far away; she can feel its moisture; she can smell it.

The sound of a galloping horse reaches her ears, becoming louder as it approaches. Alarmed she tries to flatten herself on the ground. Her heart is thumping loud, against her chest. The smell of fresh earth fills her nostrils. The grass prickles her nose. Through the cornstalks she catches sight of the legs of a white horse. The horse slows down and stops in front of her hiding place and snorts gently towards her, as the rider, oblivious to her presence, urges it on. She realises the horse senses her. It is greeting her. Something stirs inside her. This is her only contact with anything live for days now. ‘Be blessed,’ she says, silently, to the animal. This exchange startles her and shakes her back to reality. She has to cross the river, now, before it gets dark.

Thick foliage of drooping willows and plane trees cover the river bank. She crawls all the way to the bank through what feels like endless cornfields and dense undergrowth. Dangling creepers, fronds and fallen branches make the passage difficult. From there she catches sight of the sentry tower on the other side of the river, uphill. Soldiers are pacing up and down, in front of it, guarding the border.

‘Don’t worry,’ Ikmat had told her. ‘We’ll find a log, a branch to get across; you mustn’t worry. Once we are over the border they have to protect us, they’ll give us asylum.’

The river looks wide and deep. She enters it hesitantly. She cannot swim. The cold water on her body shocks her. Instinctively she takes hold of a branch next to her. Patches of light are shimmering on the water, swaying up and down. It’s good there is still plenty of light around. She doesn’t like the dark. But where is she going…?

She can hear cicadas singing, loud, all around her. She feels surrounded by trees, their leaves full and moist and she thinks of the silkworms back home. Is she about to weave her cocoon now? She takes another step deeper into the river. Everyone she loved has gone. She tries hard to keep her balance against the current. She needs to be strong, she tells herself, to get through this.

But what is the point of it? To end up a stray dog in the streets of some other country?

She lets out a long cry. The echo brings it back. Can this be her voice? Some shadows move on the other side of the river. Some birds screech and flap away. The strong flow takes her in and down the river. Her shoes are the first to leave her. She can see Ikmat smiling, calling her. She lets go of the bag containing her clean tunic that she was to wear on the other side of the border. She can see herself at home playing hopscotch with her sisters, under the old mulberry tree. The force of the current tumbles her over, and she gasps for breath.
I am Tanzan.
In my forty-seventh year I gave my modest home to my wife and set off to lead the wandering life of a monk. The twenty years that have come and gone since are travellers, like me. My home is now a long road that has no end. Along it are the places I have lain my misshapen head, the minutes and days but stone markers along the side of that narrow path. The people I have encountered, the Wonders of Nature and moments bestowed upon me are more precious than the gold and jade of Emperors.

I had spent a few weeks in the generous company of the monks of Matsue Castle Town. One of the younger Brothers, Ekido, expressed his wish to join me in my pilgrimage to the Holy Shrine of Ise. It had been my wish for many years to complete this journey of faith to serve our Lord Buddha. A younger companion would ease the loneliness and allow me to share joys and privations which might well last more than the Four Seasons.

And so, having prepared a coat of paper, a cotton yukata for summer and a tatami straw cape to keep off some of the rain, we set off on the Twenty-Seventh day of The Tenth Moon, in the Thirty-Second Year of Genroku.

We left just before dawn, with the autumn sky as soft and misty as the shores of Lake Shinji in rain. We must have looked a comical pair, both in black robes, with shaved heads; his head smooth, like a mushroom, mine bumpy like a Summer melon left till Winter. He, tall and handsome as a bamboo, I, short and gnarled as a neglected old plum tree. My companion, thirty years my junior, was more heavily laden. He wanted to be prepared for anything that Fate might throw at him. We can never be thus prepared.

We divided the mochi and daikon that our farewelling brothers had given us. On his back Ekido had a rather larger pack than mine and extra clothing.

It seems to me that I have had many advantages by dedicating my life to God later in life. I was blessed with children and a good wife. I had made a good deal of money to provide for my wife and grown children. A life of celibacy and poverty is not to be entered without much thought.

Young Ekido was little more than a youth. He was hard-working and devout, but had little tolerance for others who were not. He had taken vows of celibacy at a time when his body yearned for the flesh of another. Perhaps this fuelled his occasional flashes of anger. There were times he would go off into the forest and I suspect, though it is not for me to judge, spill his seed on the ground.

As we headed generally south, the rising sun warmed our left cheeks on that first morning. Yet Ekido was testy. He wanted to put as many ri behind us as possible by nightfall. He became impatient with my old bones. He would surge ahead, angry that I couldn’t keep up, then wait, annoyed that I wasn’t there yet. He rarely spoke, but his deep sighs and clicking tongue spoke to me loudly. I suppose at his age I too grew frustrated by old men.
In the afternoon we passed through The Forest of Giant Bamboo That Talks. This forced my friend to slow his pace. Perhaps he was less experienced at stepping through the roots and choosing the Path of Ease, which is often not a straight line. The weight of extra possessions brought droplets of sweat to his brow, which resembled a paddy-field before planting. His pack was wider than his shoulders and turning sideways did not help. Twice he misjudged the space the bamboo so that his belongings were a double-burden, causing him to fall heavily.

I recited old waka and sang folk songs to cheer him. The poetry failed, but my singing voice was so bad that he began to laugh. Then a breeze sprang up. The leaves over our heads washed like the waves of the Inland Sea and the bamboo trunks hit together, clattering the xylophone music of Nature.

Soon we came out of the bamboo to a clearing with a small stream. God had provided. Following the twitterings of small finches, we found berries we could eat with our mochi and bamboo shoots and bountiful water beside which we camped.

I awoke, refreshed. My makeshift bed of bamboo leaves had taken me some time to collect the previous evening, but rewarded me with a good night’s sleep. Ekido had been irritable at the end of our first day and too tired to gather leaves. This morning, he didn’t complain aloud, but I noticed that he limped all morning and his eyes were as red as those of a fox at night.

I remembered there was a hot-spring onsen along the path to the valley. I thought it may help Ekido’s aches, so we sought it out. We found the onsen. Alas, the Earth had moved over the Seasons and the water had been poisoned. Hot, poisonous vapours spewed from vents, smelling worse than the monks’ latrine after Onion Festival. Dead bees and moths carpeted the barren volcanic sands around the spring.

I have always felt that it is better to offer Long Life to everything – except Disappointment. Is there anything to be gained by regretting the past? Why kick the thorns that scratch you? What is simply is.

Perhaps God has a purpose in poisoned hot springs.
People say the mosquito is useless and a blight upon the Earth.
But the frog, the bat, and the dragonfly may disagree.
Perhaps Ekido would learn this one day.
This was not the day.

Downwind from the springs we came upon a copse of magnificent pines with raised roots. It was as if the soil had been washed away to the height of a man and exposed the roots of these old giants. They appeared to be standing on the tips of their toes to gain a better view.

I saw then that poisonous onsen do have a purpose. These pines had been sculpted by the hand of The Master Gardener. On one side of each tree the new tips had been pruned by the toxic mists, like windswept cliff trees moulded by salt winds. The shapes produced were pleasing, like the curves of a beautiful woman.

Soon the path became even narrower, wending into a valley engulfed by dark pines. It was cold in here. Dew dripped from the mosses growing on exposed roots and trunks.

It was clear that we could not get through this vast forest before the sun fell to earth. We needed a dry place for the night. The path continued to narrow. I judged it to be rarely used except perhaps by the occasional hunter or woodcutter. Ekido began
to predict that we would die of the cold or starvation this very night.

‘Yes, we might,’ I replied. ‘Or we may not.’

When it appeared that our path might peter out completely like a guttering candle on a dark night, we turned a corner around a large smooth boulder and our tiny path intersected a wider road. Not more than fifty paces ahead stood an old cottage, falling down in places. A curl of blue woodsmoke welcomed us like a beckoning finger.

This was not an inn, but the poor owner would not turn us away as the evening air chilled and he warmed us with hot *miso* soup. I noticed the bowl was cracked. I would give him my begging-bowl before I left.

It was indeed a poor and wretched place. After our soup there was thunder without and a heavy downpour. Inside there were fleas, mosquitoes and the roof leaked. Ekido was complaining about our luck so I gave him my corner, which seemed a little drier. I was so exhausted from our day’s walk that I fell asleep immediately.

Some hours later I awoke – although at first it seemed it was a dream. The rain had eased and a full moon shone on my face from the slatted window-opening. The frogs were singing. There were voices drifting through the rice-paper *shoji* screen to the only other room. They were the voices of young women. The voice of an older man – perhaps the kind owner – mingled with theirs. These guests must have arrived after we had fallen asleep.

I gathered they were ladies of pleasure. They had the practised, girlish giggles of *geisha*- or *maiko*-san. I fell asleep, their chatter forming part of my pleasant dreams.

In the morning Ekido’s spirits were low. Water had leaked in during the night, leaving a puddle on the earthen floor which seemed to be restricted to Ekido’s corner of the room.

One of the young women approached us. ‘We are lost. We know not the way. We wish to pray at the Holy Shrine of Ise!’

I smiled and told them we shared their destination.

Ekido blushed and scowled.

‘Please extend to us your priestly Mercy and Compassion so that we too may be blessed by The Buddha! All we ask is to follow you at a discreet distance.’

It is not for me to judge.

I nodded.

Ekido almost choked on his radish.

We left after a simple meal of boiled rice. I gave our kind host a bowl and my summer kimono.

The young ladies kept their promise, following about fifty paces behind, although Ekido looked behind often, to be sure. They would not have made good hunters. Even in the denser parts of the *momiji* forest their voices could be heard carolling like the dawn chorus. When we stopped for water they almost stumbled over us and covered their nervous giggles with their white-gloved hands, overtaking us in an arc to avoid conversation and embarrassment.

At the next bend in the road it was we who surprised them. The girls had reached the intersection of two well-trodden paths. The tracks had turned to rivulets...
during the night and their confluence was now a small lake. The first girl had braved the depths. She waited forlornly on the other side, taking off her muddied geta and white toed-stockings, now soaked and filthy. The second girl, in the fine silk kimono the colour of wisteria, looked across through tears that pooled in her eyes. These tears seemed destined to join the huge puddle below.

‘Wait!’ I yelled. I ran and scooped her up, wading across in my sandals which could become no muddier in any event. Her waist reminded me of my own daughter’s, so many years ago. She had almost no weight at all. Perhaps her weight had been transferred to Ekido. He seemed to carry a great burden for the rest of the day.

By fall of night we had reached The Temple of the Burning Bower.

It was then that Ekido gave me his lesson in morality. ‘We monks don’t go near females. Especially not young and lovely ones. It is dangerous. Why did you do that?’

‘I left the girl there,’ I said. ‘Are you still carrying her?’

Ekido flushed hotly.

I could have added that a young celibate and pious monk would not even have noticed that she was young and lovely.

But there was nothing to be gained.

He will be cured of his intolerance.

All he needs to do is wait thirty years.
POST-SCRIPT

This story is a retelling and elaboration of the traditional Japanese tale *Tanzan and Ekido* which is usually related in one or two brief paragraphs. Many apocryphal stories still circulate of Tanzan who was a popular Buddhist monk and later Zen master and Professor of Philosophy at the Japanese Imperial University during the Meiji Period.

My own interest in Japanese Folk Tales – and much of the detail in the narrative – came from living in and travelling around Japan in 2008 and 2012 when I was teaching English to high school and community university students in Himeji.

Rob Walker
12/4/2013
As Sri Devi and Jack find their seats in the cinema, the lights go down and in comes a couple who sit the other side of Jack. Sri Devi doesn’t see the man until later because he’s sitting on the farther side of the pair, but the woman is noticeable. She must be feeling cool because after a minute or two she picks up from near her feet a black leather jacket that she’s placed on top of her bag. She unfolds the jacket and puts it on. About twenty minutes later, once the main feature has started, Sri Devi watches the woman put her right foot, her foot closest to Jack, up on the back of the seat in front of her. The foot is bare, with red painted toenails showing starkly as a contrast against her pale skin, in the faint light thrown off the cinema screen.

The foot comes and goes from Sri Devi’s view as the film, a political comedy, picks up pace. Sri Devi has her arm snuggled along Jack’s underarm and midriff, as is usual for them at the cinema … until some dramatic point in a film when she often snatches back her arm into the psychological safety of her own body’s heat.

About halfway through the film Jack slowly moves his right leg to cross over his left, balancing his knee near Sri Devi’s thigh and extending his left sock-covered foot so that it’s a smidgen away from the woman’s bare foot. Sock-covered? Since when does Jack take off his shoes in public – or even at home for that matter? When he’s going to bed, is all, Sri Devi thinks.

So there they are, those two odd feet: one clothed in a sock, a male white sports sock with a red cap covering the toes; the other a bare white-skinned female set of toes, displaying a red cap of nail varnish. Both distracting in contrasting red and white, viewed from within the darkness of the low shifting light of the big screen.

Sri Devi knows this surge of feeling within her so well. Some long-forgotten spasm of fear that another woman’s sexuality has caught the attention of her lover. A dormant feeling sprung into primitive life again, that familiar vice of jealousy searing her senses.

How many times has a similar scenario played out between them over the ten years they’ve been living together? Sri Devi knows she should have adapted to Australian society by now – recognised and accepted the dominance of men, their tough emotional distancing when matters of commitment and loyalty are raised, their individualism, their male mateship – but her South Indian background serves little use in these harsh emotional circumstances. She only has herself to blame, she thinks, being so blinded by her attachment to Jack, smitten by the enthralling quality of his cavalier behavior and his exotic culture. He was her first and only lover after she left her family and home culture to study in Sydney. In going her own way, believing she was an independent person in a new age of opportunity, her experience of the support of her powerful mother, matriarch of an extended family back home, had proven so little use to her now.

Sri Devi consciously tries to clear her head as she feels the blood in her veins rush with heat. What to do? Will she sit out the movie, distracted by thoughts of footsie, by imaginings of the thrill of an electric arc between bare bony flesh and cotton polyester garment? She tries to play with words such as ‘podiatric poaching’
and ‘toe-ing and fro-ing’ to distract her passion, with visions of rising instep under fallen arches. Now she grasps at her thoughts, which are attempting to make a calculation of the fraction of space that separates the clothed from the naked.

To take stock of her mind Sri Devi takes stock of the sock. Leaning across Jack’s chest, she swiftly grabs his toes, holding them firmly.

‘Why aren’t you wearing shoes?’ she asks in a level voice. The woman’s naked foot whips back into darkness, recoiling with speed as if from snakebite.

‘What?’ Jack hisses as he glares at Sri Devi, his leg suspended horizontally.

Still leaning across him, ‘It’s just that I wondered why your foot and this woman’s …’ she whispers, maintaining a monotone.

Jack turns to face Sri Devi, who momentarily touches his chest and feels its pounding to match her own, as the other woman slinks down in her seat, hidden now behind Jack’s rage, and the man leans over the woman to find out what is going on in the dark.

A dense black fog hits Sri Devi’s chest and her mind simultaneously, as if bursting from Jack’s body in a shock wave. An ugly overpowering black fog, it penetrates Sri Devi’s rib cage in a flash, invades her heart as poison, seeping through to its centre, then sweeping along the veins of her chest and arms, pumped through her body as adrenalin, even surging into her thighs and calves. Then, in an instant, her overheated blood has turned to ice.

‘What are you saying?’ Jack’s voice rasps.

‘I just wondered what was happening,’ Sri Devi croaks, her head, her thoughts, her weakened voice barely clear above the frenzy inside her, now turned frozen and fractured, a weight in her lower body.

‘Nothing’s happening.’

Jack and Sri Devi stare at the screen while she struggles to concentrate on its large and noisy characters. After a few minutes she tucks her arm back along Jack’s, surprised that it’s accepted. She’s decided to make light of the episode and use Jack’s raging body heat to recharge her own body temperature, through a façade of ‘making up’.

Over an hour later, as the credits roll, Jack directs Sri Devi outside with a curt, ‘Shall we go?’ He indicates the direction of the exit further along the row, turning his back on the couple. He’s steering her away from any unseemly incident, she realises. No time to savour the film and check the names of director of cinematography and best boy, as the lights come up.

Outside on the footpath a torrent of words gushes from Jack’s mouth. ‘Oh no, my girl, you won’t be able to pass this one off, not this time. Let me tell you, I feel absolutely fucking furious about what happened in there. What the hell were you doing? What in God’s name were you on about, making accusations about me in the middle of a movie?’

‘I would have been happy to discuss it then and there, Jack, but what’s the point now? It’s over.’

‘Okay, so I’m used to scenes in public where you seem to have absolutely no regard for anyone else and just start screaming about whatever delusions you have at the time. But there was no way I could deal with it then. The woman’s husband must have thought you were stark raving mad. What’s this mad woman on about, he must

‘A Footnote on Footlights.’ Christine Williams.

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A Footnote on Footlights.
Christine Williams.

This is the first time Sri Devi has had the thought that Jack might have been scared that the man could react violently and make a physical assault on him, there in the cinema. This possibility hadn’t entered her thoughts, until Jack now points it out. Clearly a very male reaction, and part of the male psyche, she sees. She had been oblivious, she now knows, and this realisation causes a little crack in the walls of her ego, to think that she could have underestimated someone who seemed to have a minor role in a situation and overlooked his possible reactions. Not that that would have stopped her, anyway. But she won’t let the walls protecting her ego burst now … won’t allow herself to indulge the floodwaters of her emotional self and be pushed to launch a detailed accusation, to be intimidated into creating a dramatic scene with an uncertain result, especially not here in the street, where there is no evidence of any wrongdoing, when some of the main characters are dispersed and all is now in the realm of the memory.

‘It was hardly a scene, Jack. I just wondered why you had your shoe off.’
‘What sort of accusation is that? I mean what did you think was going on?’
‘It’s not an accusation. It was a question. But it’s over anyway – and we can’t relive it now.’

They’re already at their car, parked very close to the cinema entrance tonight. Sri Devi takes out her keys. She has to drive, as Jack had a bit to drink earlier in the evening. Into the front of the car from opposite doors, they move in rhythm. Now, silence.

She turns the steering wheel, and accelerates as she swings the car out into heavy traffic.

‘You’re driving like a mad thing. Watch these people – you’ll hit someone,’ Jack directs Sri Devi, as if he’s in control of both of their lives and fateful actions.

A policeman on a large brown horse, looming above Sri Devi’s soft-top sports car, is attempting to control the stragglers from a crowd emerging from a nearby football stadium as they dart across in front of the traffic.

‘It’s dangerous here,’ Sri Devi thinks, as she cuts back her speed and decides this is no time to inflame Jack further by rejecting his overbearing driving advice fired at her inches from her face.

Silence returns and lasts all the way home.

Now in the kitchen, Jack is whistling and fondling the cat as he tries to project a feigned invincibility … as a prelude to a second blast. ‘I want to say again that I’m very angry about what happened tonight. I’ve been falsely accused many times in my life and in this case the accusation is laughable … just preposterous. And I want an apology.’

‘What accusation? There’s no accusation,’ Sri Devi tries to cut in.

‘Let me finish. I haven’t said even one tenth of what I mean to say, whether you like it or not.’

Before the raving gets under way in full voice, Sri Devi pipes up that she’s got something to say too, once he’s finished.

And so Jack’s ranting takes over: about Sri Devi’s insane jealousy; about his innocence in flirting; about her exhibitionism in public; about her complete disregard for other people’s feelings.

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When he’s finished Sri Devi says that she’s sorry that he’s so angry. No, that’s not enough, he says. He wants the accusation withdrawn. But there’s no accusation, so how can it be withdrawn?

‘It wasn’t dealt with at the time so any attempt to bully me now we’re at home on our own is not really going to change that,’ is the stroke of brilliance Sri Devi puts forward as her next gambit.

A faint expression of self-doubt flits across Jack’s eyes and forehead. Bullying: now that’s a new word in the jaded vocabulary of their verbal wars. Shaky ground for him, perhaps? Sri Devi can see he wants to think about her interpretation some more, in the hope of refuting it later.

‘What do you think? That I was trying to seduce that woman by rubbing her foot with mine? I’m not such a fool.’

‘I’m not saying you consciously set out to seduce her. Perhaps it was an unconscious response to her.’

‘Oh, so this is the great ‘cover-all-situations’ claim now, is it? Unconscious. And if I was acting unconsciously, don’t you think I would have quietly touched her higher up her leg, groped her thigh in the dark, maybe, as it rested in the seat beside me? You wouldn’t have seen any of it. I’m not so stupid that I would have touched her foot stuck out there in the open, where you and her bloke could have seen it all, am I? Am I that stupid?’

Well, no, he’s not stupid, but IQ is not a major factor in the workings of the unconscious, nor of the male sex drive, particularly after a few beers. Sri Devi thinks this but dares not say it, out of fear of further provocation. She’s alarmed that the hypothetical scenario has taken an unexpected turn with visions of even more groping in the dark than she had imagined.

‘And I think I deserve … at the very least if you won’t withdraw the accusation … that you say you’re sorry. Sorry for the public mess that you and your insane jealousy and wild imagination create, over and over again. It’s just another typical example of your madness and self-centredness and I’m supposed to put up with it, am I? Well, I want an apology.’

‘I’ve said I’m sorry you’re so upset, and that I’ve caused it. What more can I say?’

There’s quiet. Not a full deadly silence but a quiet after the storm. A stand-off. Sri Devi won’t say a word in case she disturbs this peaceful interlude, which may lead on to a sweet and settled calm. She hopes just such a gentle quietude will follow, as it has on other nights, if the battle lines can be ignored long enough for a truce to emerge within the bounds of domesticity. Sri Devi is thankful that she has had to give so little ground.

She moves her arm slowly towards the refrigerator door, opens it, and takes out a soft-drink. She reaches out for a glass and pours Jack a drink, a routine for him before bed. He turns away, heading for the bedroom in the hope, she thinks, that he’ll soon find release from his rage in peaceful sleep.

Sri Devi is tired. So tired. She checks the medicine cabinet and finds a small bottle. Lethal. In one swift movement she pours a few drops into Jack’s drink then takes a gulp herself, before carrying the glass through to their bedroom.

As the couple lie down to rest side by side – on their backs instead of their usual singly-entwined, twinned-foetal, spooning position – they each wait for sleep to
restore their own and the other's harmony. Clean knocked out. Not a word spoken. What’s there to say, and how many more times could she possibly suffer the playing out of such a pathetic drama, Sri Devi thinks?

She can only hope that sometime during the night their souls may reconnect and lie in unison, as their bare feet petrify into cold alabaster by sunrise. Then Devi Durga Shakti, the all-knowing all-powerful warrior goddess, may swoop down upon them, clutch them in any number of her eighteen arms, and career away with them beyond the darkness, so that together they may merge into an infinity of space and light.
Do people grow to resemble their houses, or is it the other way round?

In the case of Misha’s and Alexei’s family home, there could be no neat correlation between house and occupants, as the brothers could not have been more dissimilar. Misha had a gregarious nature and was a prankster whose party tricks amused and sometimes scandalised staid gatherings of conservative, Russian émigré youth. His elder brother Alexei, taciturn, saturnine, preferred to spend his leisure in solitude by the mud-coloured river, catching catfish which he fed to his tom cat, Bars. It was no party trick, but he had been known to fly into a state of wordless fury or blind frustration, stabbing his catch with a filleting knife, slashing it to slivers.

If the mood of the house resembled either of its occupants, it had to be Alexei. Situated behind a disused cemetery, encroached upon by sombre Chinese elms, it was a place of green gloom. The high windows admitted murky light, absorbed by the walls, which were also greenish and other nondescript shades where the paint had darkened over time with oxidation and grime.

Kitty wondered what the house had been like when Misha’s family had filled it – his parents, grandparents and seven siblings. Surely it had overflowed with vitality then: with continuous sounds of food preparation and chatter, scolding and laughter. The rooms would have been lighter when the paint was fresh, and the curtains laundered regularly, although the crushed-velvet drapes that flanked the rotting cream lace were also a bilious shade of slime green. Still, the table linen must have been white, and there must have been accents and splashes of colour: cushions, upholstery, Oriental rugs, flowers… Now the two brothers, adult orphans, camped in the spaces vacated by parents and siblings. Their presence wasn’t ample enough to compensate for the absences.

Kitty had been invited to dinner because she was Delia’s sister. Delia was friends with Misha’s fiancée, Tamara; so Delia and her fiancé, Nigel, were the intended guests. Kitty had been an afterthought on Tamara’s part. With one eye on Alexei, she now suspected. It was only a matter of months since Kitty had moved to the city from the country town where she and Delia had grown up.

Approaching the house via the old cemetery road for the first time on an autumn evening, with the leaves on the Chinese elms a jaundiced yellow matching the fading sky, was a slightly unnerving experience. The candle light inside dulled the greenish tinge without dispelling the gloom. Kitty felt claustrophobic on entering, despite the spacious, high-ceilinged, sparsely furnished rooms, but even if she’d been handed the car keys she couldn’t have fled, because from the moment she set eyes on Misha, she seemed to have fallen under his spell. She was at a loss to account for the unprecedented effect he had on her, but she also realised she couldn’t muster the least resistance to the peculiar sensation his presence induced in her.

It was hardly Misha’s fault. He had only made eye contact for a moment when he greeted her, but that had been enough to demolish her sense of reality. She moved through the evening as if suspended by invisible strings.

Alexei seemed sociable enough at first, helping mercurial Misha and bubbly Tamara prepare a sort of Russian stir-fry with noodles to accompany the dumplings.
and stuffed cabbage rolls Tamara had made that morning. But once they were all seated at table, the shadows cast by the candles flickering eerily on the walls, he seemed to retreat into himself. Kitty’s attempts to engage him were futile, although she did manage to ascertain that he had a normal, regular job – well, if you could call importing caviar normal. She’d tasted some for the first time before the meal, with a glass of champagne. ‘Russian Vegemite,’ Misha had quipped, catching her eye. Kitty had almost choked at that point, and had to be thumped on the back, mortified.

Alexei, while unwilling to chat, seemed not oblivious to the non-verbal cues passing between Kitty and Misha. As he watched, from under his brows, his brother’s covert appraisal of Kitty, and her attempts to evade eye contact, a sardonic mask slipped over his features. It fitted him well, for Misha always got the girls, but why should Alexei care? Women made him uncomfortable. Still, did he wonder how it would feel to be the one sought after, for once…?

Delia and Nigel – an aspiring academic who tended to take himself rather too seriously – were touching each other’s thighs under the table. Tamara was her usual witty, effervescent self, holding the gathering together with her chatter and anecdotes, her delicate teardrop earrings flashing beside her pert-featured face and tilted green eyes. Her ancestry was not Russian, but Tartar. If she noticed Misha’s gaze straying across the pickled mushrooms and cucumbers, the herrings in brine, to linger on Kitty’s startled features, she gave no sign.

After the zakuski and main course, Alexei, Tamara and Misha excused themselves and retired to the kitchen to prepare the sweets. Before exiting, Tamara had dropped an old LP on the ancient gramophone to entertain them while they waited. It was a recording of a torch singer of the Soviet era. Delia, who had studied Russian at university, translated one of the lyrics for Nigel and Kitty:

Coachman, don’t urge the horses on:
I’ve nowhere else to hurry to,
there’s no one else for me to love,
so don’t whip up the horses...

The melancholy old romance seemed to echo the mood of the house in its evocation of a bleak night and deserted streets pervaded by a sense of stagnation and despondency. Where were the balalaikas, the hectic gaiety she’d been half expecting, Kitty wondered.

Tamara soon returned with Alexei, bearing plates of flaming Crêpes Suzette which they placed in front of the guests with a flourish, in a parody of sideshow magicians.

‘Where’s Misha?’ asked Delia.
‘He’ll be here in a moment,’ said Tamara, changing the record on the turntable. ‘I give you – Vertinsky!’ she announced airily.

As a nineteen-thirties cabaret number struck up, into the room burst Misha, befrocked and bejewelled, his amber-brown eyes elegantly though heavily dramatised with eyeliner and eyeshadow, his faux lashes mascaraed, lips a sultry moue of peony, framed by a long, dark, silky wig with a fringe brushing his high-arched brows. His lithe build and olive complexion were complemented by a slinky black sheath, though the jutting bosom would have to be fake.

Glitzy bracelets and rings caught the light as he minced around the faded
Oriental rug in time to the music, wearing a pair of Tamara’s stilettos. At every pause in the lyrics, he struck an attitude, glancing archly over his shoulder at Kitty.

Kitty was devastated afresh. Aghast yet mesmerised. Tamara looked amused, but she had seen it all before. These antics were already beginning to pall. As one in a trance, Kitty gazed at the silhouette on the wall as Misha thrust out a hip or rotated a naked shoulder. He had never so much as laid a finger on her, other than to briefly clasp her hand in greeting, yet she felt ravished by his presence, by the current of intense energy he was directing at her.

Approaching the table, Misha eased on a pair of elbow-length black gloves, kissed his fingertips to his audience, slid an index finger under Kitty’s chin to tilt her face upward, let his painted lips hover over hers for an instant, gave a brief laugh, then made his exit.

Nigel assumed a patronising expression, as if bored by such cheap theatrics. Kitty flushed with embarrassment that Delia had noticed, as had Alexei.

‘Are you OK?’ Delia asked.

Kitty nodded uncertainly.

‘You mustn’t take any notice of Misha,’ Tamara said kindly. ‘It’s just his way of releasing tension. Just a bit of fun.’

But Kitty felt as if a demon had wormed its way into her consciousness since she’d arrived at this house. A demon whose human form was slim, boyish, smooth-skinned and tawny-eyed, taunting her with the mysterious energy she found so compelling.

During the drive home, Kitty shrank into the back seat as Delia’s and Nigel’s thigh-fondling became more urgent in front, despite the restraining seat belts.

When a few days had elapsed, Kitty called Delia and asked, in what she hoped was a casual tone, for Misha’s and Alexei’s address. ‘I’d like to say thanks for the dinner,’ she said. ‘You know, send an old-fashioned card or a note…’

Delia, after a hesitant pause, dictated the details.

A week later, Kitty’s note was returned with the words scrawled across it ‘No such address’.