Xinyue Selina Xu

Professor Homi K. Bhabha

ENG 90CNC

May 2, 2018

Preface

While this short story is a synthesis of the ideas that jumped out at me throughout the course, it responds to the concerns of a few texts in particular: the themes of writing in *The Enigma of Arrival* and memory in *The Childhood of Jesus*.

Like Naipaul's *The Enigma of Arrival*, the very act of writing is the protagonist in this story. I am fascinated by the idea of the separation of the writer and the person into two selves, of the tension existing within the diasporic writer. Yet, while much of the twentieth century has been dominated by writings on the dissonance that occurs when the colonized arrives at the metropole, the contemporary networks of global movement across former colonial lines and current cultural spaces are no less complex. Hence, set in the present day, this short story is about an assimilated, Westernized writer returning to a distinctly Asian world that she had rejected as part of her writing identity. The narrator's inability to write without artifice in a literary tradition she couldn't reconcile with her own experience as a migrant is a rethinking of the myth of belonging in a postcolonial world. In hints is also an engagement with the repression of humiliation that Fanon set forth in *Black Skin, White Masks*. The narrator's identity is constituted by the outside world—her corporeal scheme crumbles, taken over by a more insidious schema of cultural hegemony and racial discrimination. The crippling effect of this schema is less of an

imposition by an external force than the internalization of the indelible remnants of colonial hierarchy. So thorough is this internalization that the narrator instinctively exoticizes and others herself in her own writings, wishing to stay within the boundaries that the Western world has drawn for her. This concept of shame, which runs through Conrad, Morrison and Naipaul's novels in different forms, has a certain doubleness for the narrator in this story: on one hand, she feels shame at her past; on the other hand, she feels shame for her inability to become a writer. Here lies the tension: the former is what causes the latter. If she cannot come to terms with herself as a person, her writing self will never be complete.

I tried to create a palimpsestic time structure of overlaying vignettes, to function like cinematic memory. While the present is narrated linearly, the past occasionally intrudes in an irrational order. This disruption of a linear, teleological notion of time serves to underline the narrator's own flimsy, elusive grasp on her personal history. The narrator embraces the same precept that Novilla is built on in Coetzee's *The Childhood of Jesus*: to be well-assimilated, one has to cut off the past. The narrator rejects her own past, wanting desperately to become part of the New York writing scene. It is only when she decides to embrace her past does it become clear to her that the literary tradition that so eluded her is an opportunity instead of a debilitation. The far bank she seeks to arrive at is not New York, but an open plain for experimentation, self-discovery and self-creation. Thus, she arrives ashore.

Ashore

Exit the gleaming train station through its marbled walkway, turn left around the towering office building with the glassy exterior, yes, spot the beige-colored mall seven stories high, cut through the swaths of people and brands to the back entrance and emerge on the other side, do you see it? A row of two-story shophouses, Chinese-Baroque style, with the ground floor sitting back from the narrow tarmac road you're on, and overhanging verandas supported by a brace of columns. The footway with its glazed ceramic tiles is five feet wide. Once you pass the hardware shop, the porridge joint, the old men with hooded eyes lazily smoking and grumpy aunties gossiping in threes, stop before an iron-grilled door.

In the years after, I traced that route. In my mind, the iron grilles weren't locked and the doors would be flung wide open. There would be a stooped figure sipping tea behind the counter, with stacks of drawers rising up behind her like library shelves, like dusty archives. She would hear the sound of my soles on the creaky wooden floor and look up through a veil of steam. She would say, eyes crinkling, Girl, you're back.

When I actually made that trip, after an even longer one before that from New York to Frankfurt to this tiny island, the door was unforgivingly closed. I stood there.

There was a spurt of pain from something digging into the soft moistness of my palms.

Someone piped up from the porridge joint in a raspy voice, Miss, that shop has been closed for months. Swee Mui's in the hospital.

I never wanted to come back. If I did, I never wanted to return in this way. Many things had led me to this moment, this standstill between a woman and a door, a past she rejected but

now faced her. The international long-distance phone call, the ceremony, the urn, the papers, the key. The key was now clenched tightly in my fist.

It slid easily into the keyhole, I turned it, and the grille swung open.

There were some mutterings behind me as I stepped into the shop parlor and closed the door. Who is she? Swee Mui's syunneui? Then the room drifted for a moment on the receding tide of sound before sinking into silence.

I had been writing in New York for ten years. Before that, I studied Creative Writing in a small liberal arts college in Clinton for another four. In those fourteen years, I had stayed resolutely in the Americas. There were occasional getaways with one or two college friends to Puerto Rico or Cancun or Guatemala, but that dwindled into nothing as they built their lives—a banking job, a partner, a family—while I stayed in my apartment, writing, still trying to become a writer.

The journey that seeded all the others was the very first one I made to America. It was to be my first pilgrimage to New York City, the first trip that would take me out of Asia, and the beginning of a true writer's career. I had just turned eighteen and had received a full scholarship to study writing in an American college. My parents had protested, but Popo was the one I grew up with and the matriarch of our family. She gave her stamp of approval and that was it.

In the cool shaded corners of the shophouse, I had grown up reading James and Salinger and then Wharton and Fitzgerald. My idea of a writer was stuck resolutely in a faraway universe—an obsolete picture, I knew—but endlessly alluring: a woman wrapped in a blanket, typing away on a rusty typewriter or scribbling on a thick notepad, a glass of wine beside her, or even better, a fireplace while the world snowed outside. It didn't matter who she was. With just a pen or a typewriter, the woman could evoke the sheer extravagance of the glittering parties and

the vain hollowness of the lives of the privileged to a wide-eyed, scrawny girl in Asia. The woman could step into the skin of characters with last names like Abbot and Chadwick, know them inside-out, and live a thousand exciting lives. Under a whirling rickety fan, surrounded by the smell of herbs, I devoured those books. The ambition was born and it also offered me a personality I wished to assume. I wanted to become a writer—the cosmopolitan, worldly writer.

My conception of writing was an immensely private idea, apart from all the school compositions and creative contests for high school students with prompts such as 'Imagine the world in 2050'. The first story I wrote at fifteen was about a girl who realized she had a long-lost twin. Their names were Emma and Rosalind Montgomery. It was set in Manhattan, a place I had never been to. They looked and sounded nothing like me and my friends. It was the beginning of the gap, one between the person and the writer.

I knew I had to go to New York, the nexus of my literary universe. I could not truly become a writer when my senses were engulfed by the heat, the utilitarian checkboxes of my education, and the dull routine of island-life. In New York, I imagined, I would finally have first-hand material that would befit a writer's experience. More than that, simply being *there* would offer the assurance of continuity, of inheriting a tradition and succeeding a long line of writers, who in turn had treaded in the footsteps of the continental greats.

Until that phone call came, I had been unwilling to extract myself from the idea of becoming a writer, fourteen years in the making. By most measures, I had become the kind of person I wanted to become. During college, I started working at a middling literary magazine as an unpaid copy editor. After graduation, I assumed the role of the sub-editor before rising to fiction editor after the position became vacant. The job involved getting pitches, going through the slush pile, and hours of networking at book launches, reading parties, and personal gatherings.

Little by little, I had embodied the kind of worldly persona I aspired to. I now spoke like the characters I wrote—gone without trace were the sharp bark and yo-yoing intonation of my accented English. I occasionally scored an invite to a lunch at a place in the Tribeca or some art gallery opening thronging with women and men drinking wine and munching on hors d'oeuvres—if I closed my eyes, they could almost pass for the fictional parties that so enthralled me in my youth. I could effortlessly toss around names of editors, publishers and rising literary stars as though I knew them personally. Yet, in the weekends or before dawn, I would sit at my desk in my one-room apartment with its stained walls and pretend to write, only to draw up nothing. The blank document with the blinking cursor was terrifying. What prose I could get onto the page was forced and unnatural. All my adult life had happened in a foreign country where I was a stranger. To be true to that social experience was to write about things that I had refused to embrace—not the wider world, but the smaller, more confined world that I came from which did not exist on the pages of literature. But, I was adamant or almost obsessed with writing about the world I now lived in. To write about the claustrophobia and humanity of the island I grew up in was to acknowledge my inability to become part of the New York cultural milieu. I witnessed the artifice of my own charade, but could not and did not write about it. The gap between the woman and the writer grew.

The dread of failure plagued me. I purged all remnants of unsophisticated Asia from my life. My mother would call me once in a while to tell me about Popo, Still running her pharmacy, rain or shine… Bought three new tins of tea… Celebrated her eightieth… She misses you.

I didn’t have words for that feeling that ate at me. I couldn't face any of them. The girl who wanted to become a writer could not write even when her life depended on it. The closer I got to the altar of the literary circle I worshipped, the more self-conscious I became. I couldn’t

listen to the gentle words of those who loved me when what I felt about them was something akin to shame. There was no place for them in my life, just like there was no place for the island and its people in the pages of my writing.

In *The Enigma of Arrival*, V. S. Naipaul described eating a roasted chicken over the wastepaper basket after arriving in New York, acutely aware of the smell and the oil. *The writer of the diary was ending his day like a peasant, like a man reverting to his origins, eating secretively in a dark room,* he wrote. I would rather have starved till the hunger devoured me than to have succumbed to the pull of a previous life.

The anxiety I felt towards my writing might have indicated an awakening awareness of the gap between the person and the writer. The incongruence between the two selves had existed throughout my fourteen years. I refused to eat the roasted chicken because I, like Naipaul, saw embedded in that act the bead of shame.

In my final weeks in New York, I started trying something different. I attempted to include traces of my identity—the island I came from, its colonial history, its newfound prosperity I saw online in news and heard from my mother—in a story I was conceiving, but the act was distinctly uncomfortable. My first major character that bore some semblance to myself was a woman called Kristen Song—the most generic, palatable name I could think off that could pass off as Western. Almost unknowingly, I was exoticizing her character. She was elegant, with a Western pedigree and way of speech as well as the exquisite Oriental features and tics so often fetishized. In doing so, I was justifying her reason for existing on the page.

The week before the phone call came I was sacked from my job. The magazine I worked at had at last found a major patron, whose office reviewed the journal operations and set forth some recommendations. Among which was the recommendation that the magazine find someone

with more writing experience as their fiction editor, and the patron's office had just the right person in mind for the position. I found myself up in the air. Now what? I toyed with the idea of returning to the island. Had I exhausted all my options of becoming a writer? They had taken me in and spitted me out. I had failed to make myself anew.

When the phone call came, I was ironing my clothes.

From the other end of the phone my mother's voice sounded low and cracked. She left you the shophouse, she said, so come back.

When the call ended, the screen showed that it was only 3 minutes 53 seconds long. Popo had passed away.

I tasted sea salt and vaporous sawdust in the glutinous air when I came out of the airport terminal. There was a construction site across the road. I couldn't remember what used to be there, what expanse of steel, glass or granite.

What was familiar was how *hot* it was. A wave of heat assailed me with each step I took further away from the air-conditioning behind the sliding glass doors. It almost mockingly mimicked the journey that I made fourteen years ago, a sequence in reverse, of emerging from the stifling hotness into the crisp coolness of the departure lounge—seeing it as portal of transition, a shedding of old, sweaty skin, the bridge to the far bank where the calling of the writer had some meaning.

Returning was a much more sobering affair. I had surrendered. There was no romance left in New York for me. I did not know how to reconcile the person and the writer. I didn't want to acknowledge it yet, but I was ready to give up the writer. I had lived without grief for as long as I could remember, but, all of a sudden, too much grief appeared at this one point in my life.

My father was here to pick me up. He had flown back from Thailand, where he had spent decades working in an agribusiness conglomerate when I was a kid and now spent his retirement days. My mother, he told me, had to take care of the guests for this afternoon's funeral. I stared at the lines on his face.

We're glad you are back, he said.

There was an awkward pause before we moved to hug each other. It was both unfamiliar yet assuring at once. The bristly ends of his hair rubbed against my cheek. When I pulled away, the concentration of white hair by his wrinkled ear startled me. My father was someone who diligently dyed his hair.

He didn't mention a word about my writing in the car.

Why don't you take a long break and see what you can do with Popo's shop? he said. Stay for a bit longer before going back to America. How long of a vacation did you ask for?

I looked in the rearview mirror at his hopeful eyes. I had not told anyone about my recent state of unemployment.

When our eyes met, he blinked a few times and hastily looked back at the road.

I will stay, I said. For however long it takes.

For as long as I could remember, the drawers had always been in the ground floor parlor. There were ten cabinets of varying sizes made from empress tree wood, some built into the walls, some still portable. Each cabinet had fifty to several hundred drawers. In their previous life, they used to carry herbs, minerals and animal specimens. Leaves, roots, stems, flowers and seeds, painstakingly grinded into powder, extracted into liquid, rolled into granules, made into capsules, shelved and slotted into these drawers. Popo's snowy hands pinching, twisting, tossing, weighing,

feeling between the thumb and index fingers the coarseness of leaves and the texture of each particle of powder. A reel of seasons and then, those hands turned gnarled, like the shriveled, shrunken leaves they had healed life with.

Growing up, I never thought that I might someday touch these drawers, decipher them and own them. Most of the drawers were empty since Popo had closed her pharmacy when her health started failing. Across the Pacific Ocean, I was so thoroughly consumed by the idea of writing that the rest of the world fell away. I saw now that I was pretending to be something I perhaps could not be. In a fervent eagerness to become someone other than what a person of my background could be, in placing the writing personality above all else, I had turned my back on Popo and the shophouse. I had just assumed that she was always going to be there.

But.

I began a clean-out of the contents of the occupied drawers. A few cinnamon bark that felt sticky to the touch, one ginseng that had mold on its tendrils, clumps of wolfberries that had turned from red to brown, a box of peeled peony roots which filled my mouth with a bitter, salty and cold flavor when, on impulse, I gave it a tentative bite. I threw everything away except for two things. One was a sealed container of canker roots, which despite their highly flattering name of goldthread resembled a mass of dried worms. By her scrawl on the label, they were supposed to help with inflammation, a feeling of stuffiness in the chest and insomnia.

There was something unexpectedly calming about sorting out dead plant parts. Each time I cleaned a cabinet, I brought my hands to my nose, sniffed them, and felt a jolt. It was a smell of age, of things dying and then—

Something sprouting beneath. The scent, against all odds, of a wisp of life budding from withered veins and dried flesh.

The other thing I kept was the consortium of tea. It was everywhere, in tin cans, silk pouches, jars, and wrapped in brown paper. I disposed in sequence the expired ones, but there were many more, brand new and unopened. I picked up the habit of drinking tea again, after years of drinking coffee and alcohol. It wasn't an easy habit to cultivate. The first few cups I made confused me. The taste was not especially unpleasant but I couldn't understand what the point of it was. It was so numbingly hot that my tongue swelled in my mouth and I couldn't taste anything.

Two weeks into my cleanup, I found a tea set, complete with a tea tray, teapot, four narrow cups, and four wide cups with lids and a motley tool kit of brushes, tongs, sieves, funnel and tongs. Using the set, I started making tea step-by-step, tool-by-tool. I watched my hands grow pink with sweat, steam and spillage, clumsily grappling with the rims of the porcelain and clay which were almost scalding. Gradually, as the hotness abated into a comfortable warmth, the taste of the tea mattered less. The ambience and the lull became everything.

It took me two months before I realized that I could finally put New York behind me. Despite the disappointment and panic associated with that city, there had always been a thought at the back of my head. Not "When should I go back?", but "Can I write again?". I had stopped writing since I returned. I didn't know how to start.

Three months in, I decided to open the ground floor parlor again as a shop. A teahouse.

Unexpectedly, the heaviness that weighed on my writing lifted when the desire to fill the drawers struck. There were close to a thousand drawers of all sizes. I had tried counting them several times, but inevitably lost count half way through. Opening each drawer was like pulling out a window, an archive, or a cell. They were overwhelming in their emptiness, like a metaphor

for something. While I didn't have physical items, words were an economical way of taking up space. A single word could permeate the whole parlor, the entire two-story house, this island, this world.

I began writing letters to people who could no longer receive them.

Dear Popo, I wrote, I am here.

I wrote and wrote, all the words I repressed over the decades, the hazy and carelessly forgotten details that needed to be fleshed out, the unspoken sentences buried in the scrawny girl who always gazed outwards instead of at the multiple worlds contained within her. I wrote about the shophouse in the late sunlight and quiet moments, about the uncles and aunties sitting outside with cigars and kopi-o, and about Popo's hands. I wrote about things that I was surprised I could remember—the swallowing of words in a seminar because I didn't know how to pronounce them the right way, the mix of embarrassment and affection toward my three-syllable Chinese name, and the circuitous path my writer self took to find her way back to the person I was. It was not much, but, quite suddenly, the heart of life had opened itself to me. It was as though I had only been preparing to become a writer in all these prior years—I had refused to eat the roasted chicken not knowing that a starved soul could not create. In this moment, when person and writer started becoming one, I could finally write.

A few days after I opened the teahouse, people started wandering in. Some of them bought tea while some came to talk the afternoon away. The conversation with these customers inadvertently converged on the furniture in the parlor.

So many drawers, just like Swee Mui's pharmacy, commented an old man with incredible sideburns when he peeked around the doorframe. His head was in the shop while the rest of his body was still firmly out in the five-footway.

He waddled into the shop to the upholstered bamboo pod at the corner and very naturally sank into the curved cushion.

Girl, he said, Swee Mui said you were a writer in mei guok.

Oh, I said. Oh.

What do you write about? Do you write about our island? he asked.

In my fourteen years away, my narrow conception of writing, my anxieties and my ambition had suppressed most of my memories of growing up here, even expunging them from my personal history. After the original impulse of writing letters had run its course, I found writing difficult again. The day before opening the teahouse, I had wanted to visit my neighborhood library opposite the beige-colored mall, two streets away from the shophouse, but in its very spot was a brightly lit supermarket. While I was gone, the island had continued evolving—demolishing and erecting. Much was unrecognizable. The writer may have come together with the person, but the person was adrift.

I have been away from this island for fourteen years, I said to the old man. I don't know it as well as I want to. I sometimes feel like a stranger outside the walls of this shophouse.

Instead of answering, he eyed me through slits.

You sell tea? What kind of tea do you have?

You can choose, I said, gesturing to the tiny glass jars on the shelves and behind the counter. They are all here. I have the classic Puer, Oolong, Longjing, Tieguanyin and green tea.

How about a cup of tea for a story? he offered calmly.

We gazed into each other's eyes. Since I first came into contact with English literature, I had doggedly tried to follow the sensibilities and aesthetic forms born in a different hemisphere at the turn of the twentieth century. But, as these words roll out from between the old man's two rows of gleaming gold and yellowed enamel, I suddenly saw the far bank that I was looking for. Unfolding before me was a plain. Empty, curiously still, deceptively barren, its peaks and dips still unknown, no pattern or path carved out in its earthy brown and brilliant green, no road sign erected, no owner that laid claim to the land. But there was beauty in the wild, unruly, budding growth. There was something deliciously new in the blend of the spontaneous and the scripted.

Yes, I said, a story for a cup of tea, of course. Do you mind if I write it down?