

"Diary of the Artist as a Young Man (Tentative)"

-short story by Joo Han

<1>

This issue will be on the theme of "identity"

J opened up his diary and jotted these words down.

17/6

Three Kinds of Being

It was an immensely consonant, penetrative note that went on to strum a cluster of strings in his mind. Such was a reaction when one admits a vibration of the same frequency, or *sympathetic*.

"Identity. Being."

The words brought together what he went through in the past few days; discovering a most hair-raising intruder, cockroach, which turned his night into a vain hunt of the quick-skidding creature; retaining his political right to stay in Hong Kong as his student visa expires in July, while his graduation is only in December; and most essentially, coming to terms with graduation, a discharge in disguise that seemed to abandon him into the world as "jobless".

He felt his mind's strings thus vibrating. The sounds were yet to be arranged, but it was their vigour that was inspiring.

"That will do", he closed his journal. It was rather firm, the way he closed and grasped his journal.

The elation did not last long; three minutes later, he was still in his room in a frantic search of his missing wallet. He poured out his bag onto his bed, shoving hands into the pockets of yesterday's trousers. It was a terrifying sight to see how small the pocket was.

Yes, terrifying. The way fear works in J's brain, it evokes and solidifies the worst possibilities: That he was on the phone when he got off the minibus, that he has no recollection of seeing his wallet ever since, thus no place to start looking for, and that he may now have no cash, no credit card, no Hong Kong ID.

Awkwardly sitting in the corner of his studio, his eyes confronted his sky-blue jacket and its bulging chest pocket.

He could not help but sigh.

*

The sigh was more than one of a relief from J's worst nightmare.

It was a sickening sense of displacement, of his mind soaring one minute in its flight fuelled by a *sympathetic vibration* and plummeting the next minute and gasping for survival—his buoyant “genius” being violently held back by reality's anchor and now drifting on water—that shed a sigh from him.

He opened up his journal and added:

(Three kinds of being...) what was I going to write? How?

*

In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Joyce's Daedalus ends his diary in a remarkably resolute manner. One can almost hear his valiant closing of the diary and the subsequent march. “Honorable Daedalus, the wing-maker, welcomes life and goes at it.”

J is not a committed believer in names. Not to mention, the English name he held (for the sake of his terribly stiff-tongued American teachers) he threw away a few years ago.

But what remains more quizzical, frustrating even, than the nomen-teleology is the paramount ending. The curiousness of it now appears simply irresponsible; J realizes how often unattainable, better yet *unsustainable* the dignified “closing of the book” is. What becomes of his excited mind, all too prone to find elation at the hint of an inspiration, conjuring up illusory company of golden trumpets resounding?

More importantly, J could imagine Daedalus himself abandoning the diary behind. What does his diary mount up to? Is April 27th actually the last entry?

J wants to look back. He wants to trace *his own diary* and see the less-than-linear projections. They will be the coordination of suspending anchors and uplifting airs, and perhaps wrestlings on water in between. Would it even have an identifiable trajectory?

What about brushstrokes on his pages? Would they be amply propelled ones, imitating van Gogh's striking currents of impastos, or very fine and smooth like those in Cezanne's Mont Saint-Victoire that, for reasons unfathomable, soothe his eyes and mind?

J wonders. There must be a point in returning to one's diary. What will it show, how will it speak to the now-aged owner?

<2>

Flipping through the pages, J came across entries that appeared vaguely familiar. Bodies of oblique lines were made up of some that were punctuated and others scurried; there were underlined words and also inserted-with-an-arrow ones. This was a period of his first fascination with fountain pens, he remembered.

Looking back into his diary proved to be utterly shocking, at least for J himself. It was as if the diary was alive, encapsulating J's self within. Its language was in all candor, its contents self-consciousness.

#1: November 2009

Just like the chilly weather out, so it is cold in my heart. It is miserable coldness here.

I want to blossom a flower with someone, to receive warmth from her.

***"In a manner that fits my hue and scent...
That one suitable puzzle-piece of someone that would
So warmly, brightly gaze upon
This twisted, ugly flower of mine."***

Company.

**Someone to grow old with
Spend daily routines together
(And yet) it'll be so interesting talking. Walking.
sharing our views.**

Ah. Where art thou?

*Next to it was a note-to-self appended:

They say that you can fool your brain. So smile. ☺

Time was senior year in high school, a year plagued with hagwon and stress of university admissions. Pity was too easy an emotion to take at this. J felt something like awe at the vividness at this short entry: That is, at how unsparing the descriptions of coldness, how hopeful his aspirations sound. (and at the end he left a message to himself!)

Sections are divided and distinct, suggesting each one as an expressive breath. He could tell that, although in one sitting, he went for cursive horizontal streams, then recomposed himself for another vertical column to the right—but the column did not retain its dignity for long.

Above all, (un)surprisingly, J recognized the voice as the more or less equally lonely and self-conscious as himself a few months ago.

#2: Second Week of March (Spring Semester Reading Week), 2014

@Teahka, Sheung Wan

Maybe I've become a complete anonym.

By no means this is my first diaspora

But to be statically alienated, to be deprived of a membership, or any signs of assimilation...

I wrote that I would want to contribute to communication, that I stand at a vantage point.

But critically, ironically I find myself alone.

...

my sustained alienation is a quotidian one, structural one.

(embedded in the structure of HK, HKU)

Every day I negotiate my standing (usually by highlighting my difference).

A typical conversation script would read:

They: (look at me and perceive my race) Hi 你好

Me: umm*

****Here I have to conspicuously sound foreign. This one sound alone defines the ensuing conversation to be in English, not Cantonese.***

One South China Morning Post / Sushi Set A.

****But obviously, no formality or structural elements are required. Conciseness is key.***

The interaction continues... and I hear an alienating pidgin speech like

"you need a bag?"

[...]

... and there were several other pages on which he grounded out grains of his self-consciousness. Most of the times the entries were made up of less than complete sentences. In fact he liked abusing full stops to render his texts choppy.

#3 April 27, 2013

**Gymnopedie. Rainy day. Train ride from nowhere to nowhere.
I am exposed to the anonymous stare and glare that in effect strip me. Render me vulnerable.
(What am I writing. This is rubbish.)
I suppose I fail to see, after two months' effort, where all this is heading.
It was a fairly unbestimmte journey. Adventure.
I remember that moment in Lyon when I felt so happy. To be fully engaged in what I deeply long for.
That moment. That exhilaration that enabled me to overcome any nostalgia, any annihilation and indeed turn it into a motivation.
Is not to be found here.**

J noticed that this “heightened self-consciousness” recurred, and he found it comforting. The experience of encountering his past selves, uncannily, comforted him, because it confirmed something substantial and constant. “Containment” and “encapsulation” may suggest disconnection because they seem to leave the object behind us. In fact, his diary showed that certain points in his life resonated, exactly like in the case of a sympathetic vibrancy. On an imagined sine wave of his life, all of these specific moments would be solution values extractable with a bestimmte input.

<3>

Perhaps he had foreseen this resonating connection, but at a different, somatic level. It started in his first semester at university when he was first forced to make visits to the library in the evening. University life effectively un-coordinated him; physically he was awfully tired—he could only afford a short nap after a long day—but mentally he was required to be awake. On one specific day he felt that the seams were admitting gaps, as if his mind were let loose from the fatigued body. While he was still yawning every now and then, he felt incredibly refreshed. His mind sought to jot down whatever the electrons in his brain were firing, and I imagine they must have been unusual firings.

These were states attained scarcely and only briefly.

Recently J eagerly tried to give an account of his favorite state that he writes in:

#4 (May 20 2014)

<Pieces of Summer (Time now: 01:34 AM)>

I used to enjoy this state

–it is one that rarely visits,

having just woken up from an evening's nap,

it's late now. your body seems a bit drowsy, your mind sound.

I used to write a lot. Somewhat like <Kubla Khan> now. Haha.

I wonder if you can empathize with me. When you close your eyes your eyeballs feel still moist, joints in your limbs like knees a bit stiff. But your mind is clearer than ever.

I believe it is a feeling that comes from being in between consciousness and sleep.

I read that many writers choose to work in the morning. Perhaps it's at times like this when the body's dominion becomes a bit loose? When we get a glimpse of what is beyond our physical being.

So let me write a piece.

<Trivial Moments: Sunset in Hong Kong Island>

[...]

After an attempt at a Romantic description of the sunset he saw earlier, he announced the submission of his mind, i.e. the reign of his body:

I think I'm almost awake now.

*

Maybe for J writing in this state was like experiencing jet lag. Those were moments of conflict in which he was governed by a different clock in him, and he resisted what the incumbent hour imposed on him.

...

#5 June 20, 2013

<Jet Lag>

Part 1. Morning

It's almost always dark, this time you pass in silence. (Unless you have a 17 hour flight maybe.) Having woken up ahead of others, you are now hopelessly waiting for the day to start. The pressing sense of fatigue—tired joints and knees, moist eyes, frequent yawns--is there. But you are not waiting to fall asleep.

Maybe the difference is the stronger sense of agency and will in starting a day. Insomnia would have more to do with finishing your exhausting day and slipping away from the conscious memory of it.

That jetlagged project, unfortunately, was never brought to completion.

...

*

One thing that's so intriguing in our lives is our finite relationship with things. Regularly I discover my camera rolled halfway and halted at the count of 23, the new Virginia Woolf book I've been intent to read with its 77th page's corner folded, an email thread with my friend who just moved to Paris discontinued as of last March, and so on.

And this unforeseen discontinuation is perhaps most common and most compelling with diaries.

We never seem to know that *that* would become our last entry, until we make that belated return to it and see the month, the year already behind us.

It is indeed deeply self-contradictory that diaries are left overdue; so easily are diaries left as dead memorabilia.

We treat them as bittersweet Prevert-ean autumn leaves—les feuilles mortes that all but briefly sprinkle life over “the days when the sun was brighter”. This retrospective, un-gratifying consumption of listening to “les feuilles mortes” is described a generation later as reenactment of the death of our past love:

*Each time the autumn leaves revoke my memory
Day after day, the dead loves*

Never finish dying.

...

*As the song, "autumn leaves"
finally is effaced from my memory
That day, my dead loves
Will have finished dying.*

<4>

In defiance of fossilization of diaries, I present a diary entry addressed to J himself (with a pseudonym 'Wanderer'). Very plausibly this will count as narcissism of atemporal kind. In all bizarreness, it speaks for the underlying connection between moments of diary writing—be it a social, psychological kind of "heightened self-consciousness", or a somatic, physiological kind of "wiggly joints, moist eyes and too frequent yawns"—and it suggests how they make up an organic whole. It speaks for a diary that beckons to be revisited as we go along.

#6: Mar 22n 2014

Dear Wanderer,

**Perhaps I am writing a letter to you.
to a period in my life. of heightened loneliness. found expression in
this diary. in writing.**

**What I want to say with decent level of confidence is that I am well. I
have indeed much meaning of you. of that period of uncertainty.
sustained darkness. of solitude.**

(obviously this is falling apart quickly.)

**but this is an expression of gratitude, gratification, great amazement
at my narrativity.**

**It's possibly a very organic one, inspired by the Augustinian notion of
simultaneous, permanent presences.**

**so again, essentially. I am reflecting upon and reaching out to other
periods, other presences in this immortalizing act of writing.**

So I write.

<The End>