

Stuart Cooke

## Jilin

He was slowly going mad in that hotel, but otherwise the fortnight had passed more or less without incident. Each night he would see them at dinner, and their conversation would be pleasant enough, if not hopelessly guarded. During the afternoons he walked in rings around the hotel compound, counting the remaining time until the next meal while the lawns choked in the low light. As he walked he would think back to earlier residencies, which were the closest experiences he'd had to something like this. Did he always feel this same sense of isolation, like he had been quarantined, somehow, from what was happening? It felt so precarious. Everyone was very friendly and smiled when he sat down at the table, but he could say the wrong thing, or he could not say enough good things, and no doubt it would be all over soon enough. Whatever he thought might happen here was all hidden now beneath layers of routine and awkwardness, and any attempt to retrieve it would only result in disappointment.

Partly, he felt, it was because there were too many of them. In addition to the five international writers, there was a veritable entourage of translators, assistants and photographers, along with some thirty local writers. Wherever they went, they went in droves. He felt like he couldn't feel anything, travelling in this way. So much energy and attention were spent on the dynamics of the group that he had little left to think about the landscape. "Paradoxically," he said to one of the other guests, an older poet from Texas, on a stroll after dinner, "I only feel comfortable writing about a place if I have experienced it on my own. When I'm introduced to it with locals and all their knowledge and context, it's as if I haven't any access to it, like whatever it is that I'm

after has been hidden.” But the Texan poet had little time for axioms or theories and only smiled, and looked up at the stars.

So mostly what he wrote was for a deadline back home, something which could have been written anywhere, at almost any time. Other than that, he wondered what more he could do, where life was to be found, how to write about something other than being a writer. Because for a while now he had seemed incapable of writing about anything else. After breakfast one morning, with a playwright from Panama, he discussed the ingredients of a good memoir, though he had hardly read any. In general he liked to decry writing that was so focused on the self. Yet all that seemed to interest him these days was his own experience of the world—not just his own thoughts and feelings, but the world as it presented itself to his body. Virtually all of his recent stories had featured only one character, a nameless male who was as forgettable as possible so as not to get in the way or impede his record of the encounter of light with objects. In the same way, all of his poems were accounts of moments, of intense sensations, and the body—his, anyone’s—was but the vehicle for their description.

Indeed, he wasn’t even sure if he had anything new to say anymore; sometimes it seemed to him that all he enjoyed was the act of writing itself, the vibrations of a slicked ball-point as it glided across the page, the looping notation of his cursive like a kind of sketching, a graphic confirmation that something had happened, that beauty was being formed. If nothing else, writing by hand demanded a patience and attention to detail that had started to evaporate from other parts of his life.

These were the thoughts with which he was preoccupied as the days went by—the same thoughts, really, that he might have had back home, or anywhere else, for that matter. But he had flown thousands of kilometres to get here, as had the rest of the international contingent. He almost scoffed to himself when he thought of the vast sums of money involved, of how little any of it had been put to good use. After a tour to a local volcano on the first two days, during which everyone was too jetlagged to take much in, they had moved to another city for the beginning of ‘the program’, which consisted primarily of occasional meetings with the local writers in a large room deep inside the hotel, with plush, cream carpet and ostentatious wooden panelling. But the local writers couldn’t speak English, and those from overseas knew nothing of Mandarin, so conversation was a dull, stilted affair that had to be channelled entirely through one exhausted translator.

Much of his focus in the meetings was on trying not to look insufferably bored. It wasn't that he didn't recognise the incredible privilege of having been invited here, of having been flown across the globe to attend and to share his ideas, but rather that the distance between what the program *could* have been and what it *was* frustrated him. Indeed, when this distance was overcome, when life realised or surpassed his expectations, then he seemed ready to write, he was brimming with the desire to tell. Otherwise, there was the beautifully blank page, which promised so little but, when filled with even a modestly coherent piece of writing, suggested a near-miraculous evolution of form against the overwhelming probabilities of the void.

What if it was all little more than a relationship between absence and presence? On the way out for another afternoon stroll, he decided to go to the gardens by the lake, with their concentric circles of paths and plants. On such occasions he imagined that he would discover something—some form or colour or conjunction—that would inspire more work. But so far he had come up short. This time, he came upon one of the local writers down by the edge of the water. He liked the look of her, she seemed very calm and self-aware, and he had enjoyed what she'd said in the meetings, albeit as it came to him through the translator. But when she saw him, he noticed how she paused a moment, as if, like him, she felt exposed in the open air. But with little other option than to try and talk, they smiled and said hello.

"I like what you say," she said, "that it's—it's important to think about the nature, and—and climate change—and not to just say pretty thing—only pretty thing—yes?"

"Yes, exactly!" he said, maybe a little too eagerly, "Nature is very beautiful, but it is also very serious."

Even though he was smiling, she didn't seem to relax. "You are always—very—very serious!" she said, "Never smiling."

If his laugh sounded hysterical, it was because he wanted to render her comment unbelievable. A little earlier, back at the hotel over lunch, he had had the other international writers laughing about his obsessive hygiene habits; of their group, he was the one they'd turn to for comic relief. But something about her comment thrust him immediately into his childhood body, to the back of a car, to his angry mother telling him to stop moping about, to be grateful for what everyone was doing for him. He was repulsed—whether by this writer or by the memories of his self, he couldn't be sure—and he needed to get away. Her eyes, which before he had considered compassionate, had grown tense and flashed sharp spines. As the two bodies bowed and backed

away until they could be swept up in the anonymity of light, he was reeling, already searching desperately for somewhere else to rest his mind.

Of course, he knew that she had exposed what is most vulnerable in the traveller, his relationship to his home. It was all very well to explore new places but, given the superficial level on which he understood most of them, exploration could do little more than coat over a deeper question: *why did you leave home?* Only with other travellers, smiling in their mutual acceptance, could he avoid the turn, and encounter newness as if he were at the beginning of another world so glorious that it consumed time and erased any trace of the past.

And so he returned a little more eagerly than usual to the hotel and the impending dinner hour. There they all were in the dining hall again, a lethargic flock slowly pecking through their food and of what they could see of others' thoughts. Already two of the women writers had become quite close. They touched each other in consolation, held each other in happiness. He watched them laugh. *Why won't they hold me?* On one of the first nights he had thought that one of them liked him, but in the morning she had forgotten his name. He was aware that it was something to do with his demeanour, with the way he frowned as he ate, how he appeared aloof or self-contained, when really it was a shield for his shyness. One of the photographers told him that he looked like a soldier. If individual moments seemed to flare up like shooting stars before disappearing into time's inky flow, it was because their lives had been compressed onto train tracks: beyond one horizon, what they had left behind; beyond another, what appeared to be the future but would, ultimately, bend back into the past. In between there was only this preposterously large hotel, and successions of buffet meals, and circles through emerald woods. The challenge of dealing with it seemed as great as trying to craft it into some kind of story. For what purpose was he here? To what end?

What was most perplexing was that the absence of obvious answers to these questions didn't seem to have any impact on the weight of his own being—as much as the difficulty of the questions seemed to imply that his life, even if temporarily, had become unmoored or unstuck, or that he had lost hold of what was most necessary or compelling, he was still left with the raw facts of his body and its complete immersion in the events of his surroundings. And nothing in the expressions of others suggested that he could manage to be any deeper inside the place in which he found himself or, indeed, somewhere else on another timeline altogether.

The task, then, was to identify a way in which it could all end, or to order events into a sequence that would suggest a plausible logic for his movements through the world, a teleology which could explain whatever it was he was doing, whatever he wanted to do, by situating it as a cog or a cell or a step in a larger mechanism. So he kept returning to the fold, to the dining room and its worn carpet, to the polite chatter of people who cared little for one another but nevertheless cared more for each other than for solitude, or the possibility of destitution. Who was applying for which residency? Whose book had been published with the most mistakes? If he tried to focus on any moment in particular, all that emerged from the examination was a conviction that the story was not being told.

Certainly, if he had been content to remain a poet then none of this need have been of concern. He might have kept drifting, perfectly happy, to be caught by whatever temporary foothold the world might offer him. But his determination to write stories kept pressing him up against a troubling realisation: no matter how long the string of events leading to the present moment grew, he was completely incapable of combining them into some form of impetus, of imagining how things might from here on unfold. All he could do was hope to be able to catalogue and assess the information as it came to hand as quickly as possible, and to narrate it to himself while life took place in real time, live. He could only observe, not postulate.

Still, he was aware of a slowly building pressure, a sense that something, soon, must happen and, if it did, then a direction between this point and the next, future one could at last be established and time, presently slumped like a dirty cloud around his head, would be extended into a long, smooth lie like a thread pulled from a ball of yarn. It was the final piece of the railway track, the one that would join the future to the past. Steadily enough, the possibilities dissolved until it seemed most likely that something singular from the present would need to emerge which, with its striking uniqueness, would signal a significance, or a shift in tone or structure, any of which might then be harnessed to forge a dam or disruption, a trip large enough to disable the circuit for a moment, to introduce asymmetry, to induce the close.

Would it be today? he wondered over lunch during the final week. They were comparing how many languages they spoke. How many do you speak? And you? There was French, German, Russian, Arabic, Spanish, Italian. He had Spanish but everyone else did too, so he felt bland, and inadequate. Next thing,

everyone was competing for trauma. His father committed suicide when he was 20. He had been a political prisoner. Her mother was dead. It all slipped by like a river, it all burned out into darkness like so many sparks.

For his walk that afternoon he felt like he needed to get out. He snuck from the hotel grounds and walked into the city centre, where he had hoped to find some souvenirs for loved ones. But the enterprise was largely fruitless. As he circled block after block, his anxiety slowly grew. How he could actually enter a store? What would he say? And everyone would turn and stare at this strange, pale man. No, better to find things at the airport!

But while returning to the hotel he was also conscious of how this anxiety had prevented a story from taking hold, had stopped his search for some kind of drama, for an opera of forces that would knot together all the trajectories and leave the story with enough energy only for the end. As if, in looking too closely, he pushed the world away with his sight. He re-entered the hotel compound via a path that skirted the lake. A small boat was tracing a line across the water; another of the foreign writers, a novelist from France, was watching it come towards her. He waved, somewhat reluctantly, and she stood there waiting and squinting.

“Having a break?” she asked.

“It’s more that I can’t get started.”

She looked back out across the lake, and in so doing seemed to take part of his own being and spread it over the water.

“Maybe you just need to stop,” she said. “Only then can you determine what’s essential.”

They started to walk slowly along the shore.

“Are you writing?”

“Yes, I can’t seem to stop. Nothing seems to be about this place or what we’re doing here, but so much is welling up from the past, and now with all this time I can fashion it into anything I want.”

“But don’t you find that because of the sheer weight of it all it just gets stuck? How do you know where to begin?” A chilled wind came barrelling over the lake.

“I try not to speak for the whole,” she said. “I try to find a thread and pull on it gently. If you lose focus, you’ll flounder.” He could feel her about to drift away, as if she were able to float across the water.

“What about big ideas, then? Do stories always have to be so modest?”

“I suppose,” she said, “that the question is about time. If you can’t wait, if the forms can’t grow slowly and then keep growing after the story’s over, then maybe you shouldn’t write it. Maybe some other kind of prose would be better.”

“Or perhaps the ideas could use the story as a vehicle, like ticks on the back of a dog.”

“Perhaps,” as she watched the boat, “but already we are in the realm of speculation, not story.”

“There’s a difference?”

“Yes, but it’s to do with feeling, not language. If you can’t feel it move then you probably aren’t telling a story.”

She had become hazier, her face long since subsumed by her thoughts. Even as he focused on her careful, measured steps across the earth, he could see her humanity disappear like wisps of her hair into the wind, until what remained was a collection of warm symbols—some even scalding—whose meanings he couldn’t discern but whose shapes were as clear as the twigs and pebbles on the ground. She was not a person but a character, and barely a character at that; he saw only what she pointed to, but the world inside of her remained hidden.

But at that moment she paused and looked back to him. Sunlight poured over her face. He hadn’t moved, but his sight had followed, and now it collided with her own. There were no sounds, no more colours—it wasn’t like that, there were no signs for interpretation. There was only a sense of rushing toward her body and crashing against it like a wave, spray flying into the air, her orange-flecked eyes, strands of hair like flickers of fossilised time.

But this wasn’t happening, at least not outside of his head, and as the day grew brighter—the sun released from behind frail clouds—her entry into the world was recovered: she had waited for him long enough. As she turned to walk away, he could feel the threads between them stretch, and begin to tear. And although he started to follow after her, he had become a butterfly in gusts of wind, struggling for purchase in a medium that suddenly blustered, and hurled; he was flying, or thrown away, or breaking free.