

GRASP
THE
SPARROW'S
TAIL

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For my Father and his family

You never did the “horse” like I do now but walked
straight down the aisle of the Diamond Grill
and kicked the kitchen door with such a slap
all the way up to the soda fountain
I know it’s you.

You played “timber” with your eyes and voice
and laughed always as you closed your hands on the
coins deep secret pocket jingle and sudden thrust
hard out on the arborite counter no chance
they try to get past your bluff.

You moved your body on the go even when you stood
head and shoulders arms too swing with the talk
rhythm to hardworking feet (I loved to shine
your alligator shoes, special, for going out)
and then you died dancing.

July 28

In Vancouver just before trip to China and talk of ways the writing could get done. J's birthday.

Aug 1

Over Pacific between Honolulu and Japan. Dream last night about a poem of me sitting on a bus-stop bench in L.A. but of course I couldn't remember it in the morning, the poem that is. Just now while napping on the plane I dreamt of the words I missed but even now I can't remember them.

The notes to what I could do rather than doing are always like that, thinking it out ahead of time. Obviously I'm in my mind too much and that enters dreamland too. But I say to myself keep the ears open for possibilities. The two oriental languages on the plane are Korean and Japanese.

Her a daughter's birthday think China book out linked
to poetry each day something new apparent each word
capable of total Chinese character baggage really gain
sight of word's imprint to pose itself as action on
the world in the context of the journey somewhere get
ready for the Canton poem

Thought of making part of book Family can be known
by initial as in J and E and Lh but anyone else by full
name could mean group caste imprint also later I get a
chop with schwa for sign others choose various designs
personal selection, definition, red ink, a spot either on
the body or not.

Japanese female language so light nearly a giggle or
think of R. and his defiance the other night now gram-
mar how to question verb over noun equals situation
picture how to staccato Japanese and something on
colour in dream too or just before or after.

Aug 2

Wake up in Kimi Ryokan after arriving during typhoon in Tokyo last night. We had difficulty finding the place but from Ikebukuro station had the help of young Japanese student, in the rain and sweating with the heavy bags. Walked through the Pachinko neon and narrow back streets. This syntax, have to reverse the English to fit, like

and think of different voices but I'm sore and tired this morning from that adventure last night.

Aug 3

Dreaming in Tokyo. The margins of the page, the limits the "boundary walker" and Duncan's Shinto gate, the arche, the architecture, the "roof beam" (?). Buildings are low, not many skyscrapers as P. points out because of the earthquake possibility and she reminds me of Frank Lloyd Wright's waiter with the tray idea. Getting into "time" now. Thinking a lot of sex, literal sensation. Plastic food in the windows image for each meal. I like the narrow streets with all kinds of small shops like the long last night stroll with P. after meal in the "O, O".

Tokyo
windy is
wind out in the ryokan courtyard
all night noise in the trees is

The others' voices in their poems sharp, his and hers,
P.W.'s clean b.p.'s narrative thought then in the calm of
the writing in the morning also the Tosa Diary and my
own journey the danger of focussing on the particular
then of the very narrow stairs at Kimi stones set into
the large hardwood floorboards like tile the blueprint
and architecture of our six mat room here

Orient last night before and after supper and remember
"information" w/ new Sony Nude plugs in ear stereo
surface to skin technology also colours and green sheen
tiles futons flags on balconies for wind and sunny day
sort of clamps to hold them on the railings her clean
flat and shining black hair in front of me is so far away
distant untouchable strange that should be

Aug 4

Travel today to Narita airport then to Seoul, Taipei and Hong Kong. Now wait in airport transit lounge in Taiwan for flight to continue. In Cantonese language territory I feel more comfortable with the more familiar sounds. The corridor is lined with an exhibit of beautiful mainland calligraphy, painting and ceramics brought over by Chiang. Western piano music. I watch bald-headed nun or monk and dark ethnic Chinese maybe Tibetan. P. reads a novel by Patrick White, goof plot she says. Eyes are tired from what, body just tired.

Aug 5

We tour Hong Kong today. I take notes re places I've seen my father since he died. I think of him here 60 years ago. See first statues and full of colour (white is death, red for marriage) numbers too, 9 for longevity and active life, 8 for wealth.

Aug 8

In Canton (Guangzhou) now after train ride out from Hong Kong. I see my father everywhere. I realize that he was only five years old when he arrived in China.

Numbers in everything said
clatter each block commerce tooled
fronted with “doing” some piece or all of it
“lucre” personal contrivance shuttle
family woven decades ahead first
his father and even him and his son
place attribute magnetic magic
like that tailored jade street single
attempt to move made so that “generation” gets
skyline to 1997 after direct incant from
latitude Cantonese genocide nil hope stalled not
to edit out immigrant identity cancel
head count not really meaningful money exchange
added up with calculation mind counts the years
abacus clicks in the market stall can't wait
for seasonal switch typhoon number late
afternoon maybe a winter somewhere in his mind
but far away, far away.

You would have had to learn Cantonese just as you
acquired Canadian prairie world view age 5.
Must have hurt to have to find new boyhood lingo
(so silence)
then at 19 to relearn English Swift Current
Elite Cafe sufficiency. What tax on your life
left you with all that angry language world inside
and from China too (silent)

There is all this tangibility to my life here, things I can touch base with. I don't let myself feel "foreign" here even with my funky expectations of their political life which I find so mysterious. I look at the red soldiers in the train station with awe, and the workers in the streets become some sort of generalization about themselves from the real imagination, e.g. the streets are full of "masses". But the person is what one sees so should pay attention to "ontogeny" here.

So what have I got going besides this "father" list. I watched painter at calligraphy last night, watched him, looked for his "chi" rising to the surface. quick very intentional moves. I like the actualization of the intent which was not an intent but an inclination a "tropos" which got paid attention to. I've misplaced the family information my mother gave me so I can't check out actual connections still here in Canton. I talk about the fact my father was a child here with the guides and the others in our group.

Don't let valour go with the name chiefly in the
accumulated value of the family a prize within the state
strength is bondless unless the heart carries this
calculated boldness outside so to account many such
things about ourselves such as the relative colour
inside me or you.

You were part Chinese I tell them.
The they look at me. I'm pulling their leg.
So I'm Chinese too and that's why my name is Wah.
They don't really believe me. That's o.k.
When you're not "pure" you can just make it up.

Many notes here in Canton and later in the trip resulted in the following prose extract:

About a year after you died I saw you. You were alone in a car and passed me going the other way. You didn't look at me. Over the past fifteen years this has happened maybe once or twice a year. I catch a glimpse of you on a street corner or disappearing through a doorway or gesturing to someone in a cafe. What always gives you away is your haircut, your walk, or the flash in your eyes. You haven't seemed to recognize me or said anything to me. In China you overwhelmed me with your appearances.

One morning you were doing tai-chi in a park in Hong Kong. I saw the side of your head and the steadfastness of your face as you moved through "Grasp the Sparrow's Tail". You wore a white sleeveless undershirt and khaki shorts and your brush-cut was shorter than usual, probably because of the extreme heat and humidity. I watched you for a few minutes, from a distance. Your technique seemed forceful and you did your forms alone, out in the open.

After that I knew I would have some strong sensation of you in Canton. The very first morning on the street in front of our hotel I saw you riding your bicycle in a large crowd of bicycles moving into town from the outskirts. You had something in your mouth, scowl on your face, head down in private thought. Your face has always been very animated and usually says something. Later that same morning I caught a brief glimpse of you through a window in a roadside eatery gesturing to someone across from you with your chopsticks. Your

body still moves with emphasis and decision. I was quite excited about seeing you so frequently that day.

We visited a commune about 20 km outside Canton and I imagined you and your sister Ethel working in the rice fields and living in this same small village when you were a boy. As I stepped into a courtyard I saw you ride by on a bicycle, again with a frown on your face. I could tell you were very concerned about something.

During the trip I saw you often and, curiously, more so as we went north. Near the Yellow River you looked so relaxed as you leaned out the window of a truck being loaded with red bricks. I recognized your stocky frame as you bent to plant your fist of rice shoots in a field just outside Zhengzhou. Whether you were pushing your bike up a small hill in the late afternoon in Taiyuan or walking briskly along the street in the coal-mining town of Shensi it was always your black crew-cut hair which most stood out.

Perhaps it was only the insinuation of youth from your ruddy cheeks but here in northern China you became younger and the redness of your complexion became more pronounced. To me you had always been older and now suddenly I was the older and watched you through this slick time-warp.

You are a father

I am a son and a father

and you were a son

so

Aug 10

Flying into Zhengzhou—stomach last night—turquoise seats on C.A. A.C. Trident plane . . . over rice paddies again—incessant agriculture wherever possible—huge river plains—symmetry of fields and irrigation channels—clouds—look for voice—what has happened to colour—now voice comes over P.A. about to land, etc.—the 9 tones of Cantonese, the 4 tones of Mandarin.

Friday Aug 13

In Taiyuan. Arrived yesterday morning after all night long train ride from Zhengzhou. I find the tour demanding so haven't been doing much writing but even this morning in the hotel before leaving I find the writing very relaxing, dialogue set up with mind. Try old-fashioned pen nib and ink supplied in room—stop to go to the inkwell to get more ink with thought of schooldays memory synapse which allows the mind to gather the cloud head of thinking residue and push it out, every strand. The writing during the day has no form or direction except for Father notes. I've been reading Engle's edition of Mao's poems, good with lots of background notes, so have that floating around as I look, and look.

Aug 14

The caves at Datong were a central feature of our journey and it is at about this time when the following prose-poem was written.

I finally realized the full “truth” of these meetings at the Buddhist caves near Datong. There is a temple and a courtyard there, in front of the caves. I was about to leave and on a path alongside a wall you brushed me. Yes, brushed. I could see it was intentional and our eyes met for an instant as you turned and glanced over the head of the baby boy you were carrying. Though you didn't say anything your face still talked to me.

When they plant the rice they bend their backs and fall into the sky of the water they look at all day long look for extension out to other geographical scenes roots and fist down dream of green large human connection a terrain to give colour to the water and the place table it

You are me on a train going north through central China. I don't think you've been here before -I haven't. You hold out a green flag at the rear of the train. You are lounging on top of a pile of hemp rope on the station platform and you look in through the window, into the

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You are me on a train going north through central China. I don’t think you’ve been here before -I haven’t. You hold out a green flag at the rear of the train. You are lounging on top of a pile of hemp rope on the station platform and you look in through the window, into the

coach, at me. From inside I see you look out at the countryside rolling by. As the sun sets over the loess hills you look for remains of the Great Wall on the broken ridges. There is a red star in your hat. Stangers come and talk to you in a foreign language. That lights up your eyes. I think of the house you live in on the Mongolian border with its south-facing door painted bright yellows, oranges, and reds. You hardly ever think of that door but the image is quickly accessible to you and when you talk to a fellow-worker, a comrade, in your own language, the colours of the door imbue your conversation. As the train pulls into a station in the early evening darkness you disappear. You are still me a couple of days later in the caves at Datong. You think you recognize one of the statues, a bhodisatva with leg bent at the knee. It reminds you of one of your parents but you can't tell why or which one. Your parents, in your memory of them, have become one just as you were one in their communal mind. An attempt to separate their image into two separate people won't work. They are now one in this statue which reminds you of the singularity of origins, of the primary, the fundamental, and that makes good sense to you, that somewhere in this stone religion you would find something of yourself. It is this very reflection of oneself in things which accounts for yours and my intersection at the moment. For example, the incredibly brilliant 800-year-old blue paint here reminds you of

Monday August?

We travel out to the grasslands by bus. Through the bus window I catch yet another glimpse of "you".

lapis and the depth you feel akin to in that rock, though I remember you were always hot on jade, more cultural than personal I think. As you sit in the warmth of the August morning sun and write this you have attracted a large crowd of Chinese who stop to watch the language flow out onto the paper. You look up at them and ask them in English if they would like to write something on your paper but they simply smile and ignore you. They are interested in the writing and comment to one another and point to the actual incisions you make on the paper - the calligraphy of the foreign letters cutting also into their minds as they recognize something of themselves there. When you think about it all sorts of connections are lost. Sometime later that day, on the hotel steps, you and I are two old men listening to the jarring brass gongs of a Chinese opera on the radio. They just look into one another's eyes. The gong usually signals a movement on stage.

You might have been this guy in Huhhot - one room, one rooster - or is me skin bone-brown so singular and contained in China eyes deep within the common view connected so that I see what you saw sometimes just to stand in the doorway with cresote eyes imprint death (too, maybe) but certainly to experience any complete person living there is always a mirror how alone can one be ?

In the late afternoon we arrive and I sit and look out of a yurt in Inner Mongolia at the beautiful countryside of long flat rolling hills and prairie horizon. Lovely flush on girls' cheeks very attractive (they say from dairy products and outdoor living). I think of "Pudeur".

Tuesday

Raining this morning but now sun is out. Visited yurt house and had great yogurt, made straight from milk without boiling they leave fresh milk sit for 2-3 days so actually it becomes sour cream but this wasn't sour. Too much riding on our bus through countryside these last few days. Images of our trip, the terrain, and P.

Friday the 20th August in Beijing

Waiting on the bus to go somewhere. Lotus fields everywhere. Looking at the hats they wear. Everything happiness and longevity.

the blush/flush shy guilt blood rush sign which is the
origin of colour from the inner heat we rush outward
(other animals don't blush?) do they these girls sing for
us too shrill voices behind the heat in their cheeks in my
family too when they drink the love my daughters in their
first flush/first guilt so red something of the Scarlet Letter
is why J.C. pointed to the story as the truth which rises
from some depth sensation feeling the deep heat in the
parts of the body moving making yourself so red, they do.

Hue of loess August terrace planted green and heavy
then yellow by mid-September our marriage wanders
again through the millenia of marriages here in the earth
brushing your knee on the bus think of the caves, the
yolk of an egg, the rice.

At the Summer Palace the peach
the symbol of "lucre"
each picture different
from the classics
5,000 - no repetition

Or everywhere, people from New York airing their teeth. I think to try to get to the particular, the minute, underneath the lushness of the ornamental, the specific (therefore simple?), rediscover "decoration" as useful, function.

Saturday 21 Aug

Mao's mausoleum, now the Great Hall of the People. When we walked into the large room just before seeing his body I was struck by the large painting of the mountains in the background because of a poem I had written years ago as I looked out over the mountains of the Kootenays.

Mao, in front of me
the things you cared for too

river, mountain
a town, the whole
blue sky.

This edition of 300 copies of
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November 20, 1982



for Bonnie Susan
best for '03
Fred

Susan -
20 yrs later for the Bonnie
that became Susan - the
re-treat just keeps breaking,
Love Phil

