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10-1-2017

Writing Sample

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Extract from the novel [Treasure Island Hotel]

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Recommended Citation

Yan, Chung-hsien, "Writing Sample" (2017). *International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work*. 979.
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YAN Chung-hsien 顏忠賢

Extract from the novel [Treasure Island Hotel]

Dreamwalker

Though I long for death I just can't seem to die; probably this 'hundred-beast bed' has something to do with it. After this Grandaunt would then with a long sigh always add: those legendary woodcrafters of Lugang, the ones who helped build my majestic hotel, the Grand Takarajima, told me the day they delivered it that there's a beast for each year of life. To me this sounded like a curse! That antique bed with its horde of intricately carved animals coming out of its frame has haunted my memories for as long as I can remember. Just like the precariously slanted eaves outside the sandalwood framed attic room of the old house on Longlife Street next to the Deity Temple where I used to go visit Grandaunt, it was altogether too ornate and too mystical. Steeped in old superstition and eccentric ostentation, it compelled the onlooker to behold its blinding grandeur with a brazen scrutiny that bordered on the impertinent

Above the posts of the old bed were cascading eaves and wooden paneling painted full of gilded animal forms that seemed to hover over it like a roseleaf bramble of tangled arching bodies. No matter the aspect this cornucopia of vivid flowers, birds, bugs and beasts, a synthesis of east and west that was seemingly beholden to neither, evoked an exaggerated sense of enchantment and yet at the same time an overwhelming feeling of eeriness. The bed's body had the typical contours of a traditional Chinese layered-eave bed, but its curvy railings traced eccentric lines that were infused with so many baroque elements as to resemble the ornate gabled walls of a western cathedral. The strangest totem of all, however, came out from the bed's center or what might be called the bridge of its nose in a writhing coil: a monstrous python ensconced amidst the throng of beasts. Scales flowed across the old bed's eaves much like a teeming river that seemed to consume the entire canopy and inner sanctum; monstrously frightening and yet ravishingly breathtaking. I still recall how that antique bed was extraordinary to the point of the near impossibility of breaking every rule in its confounding amalgamation of all manner of carved birds, flowers, beasts and bugs; only years later did I come to realize how that bed, which displayed an excessively complicated amorphous mass of animal shapes bursting out of its wood, exhibited a number of inconceivable-to-be-seen-together anomalies. There were too many layers of seemingly endless door hangings, eaves, and railings. From top to bottom, including even the face of the step up, it was adorned in all manner of carving (spherical, relief, incised, reticulated), exhibiting such virtuoso so as to resemble the rococo of a gifted soprano's stirring aria rendered in wood. Thinking about this some years later, that remarkable display of highly skilled word-working, which defied logic and broke all the rules, was as much praiseworthy as it was lamentable, much as was all of Grandaunt's painstaking and tortuous work put into the erection and simultaneous annihilation of the Grand Takarajima Hotel, and as too were all those strange gossip tales replayed with abandon during the days of the Hotel's construction.

The ornamental designs of that antique bed were just way too complicated. There was also way too much gild splashed over the carvings covering the too many layers of eaves. Atop the bed the layers ran from front to back suspended into what seemed like a single colorful eave. They each used only the finest assortment of gildings and pigments, such as gold leaf, crimson cinnabar, green malachite, copper blue and yellow ochre. Those ancient pigments had already begun to fade but matched together as they were it was hardly discernable. Protruding fancifully out of the mostly gold and cinnabar design at the very top, and carved with a strange and splendid intricacy, was a romantic depiction of countless butterflies in various poses fluttering amongst scattered gourds that had at the center a golden pheasant, frolicking with parlous abandon amidst the glory of hibiscus blossoms. It was a most

absurd yet typical folk motif used to portray festive delight. The next eave contained a scene showing a multitude of birds flocking around a phoenix and peony. At first glance it appeared to depict the glorification of the empress of the birds and foremost ruler of the flowers, but upon closer inspection it seemed transformed into a harrowing siege where the birds were attacking a cowering phoenix with folded wings on the verge of tears. On yet another level was carved an allusion to blessings from heaven represented by the auspicious symbol of bats, yet when viewed up close the entire section looked to be covered with large malevolent bats having human faces much like a vampire in the midst of transformation; moreover its latticework and high relief carvings had an eerily lifelike quality. The next level suggested an enclosure sealed off by a railing. The gilded inner walls had a cracked ice pattern forming in the center a vase with plum blossoms, orchids and bamboo, the "three friends of winter", depicted in ornamental latticework of rarely seen intricacy. When viewed with more scrutiny, however, it seemed to portray a kind of pitiful bonsai aggrieved by the onset of a fierce ice storm. Down further were a hundred Qilin unicorns bearing gifts. Seeming far too pretentious was the legendary image of the Qilin coughing up the jade tablet. This mythical beast had the head of a lion, scales of a fish, limbs of a horse and the tail of a phoenix: a magnificently beautiful creature yet also perhaps the strangest of strange beasts described in that compendium of myth and lore, the *Classic of Mountains and Seas*. I can't forget how as a youngster no matter how I looked at a Qilin it always seemed monstrous. What sticks in my mind even more about Grand aunt's eccentric antique bed, however, is how the antechamber had an equally strange desk with another hundred beasts carved in it. Its sides were also decorated with overly intricate wood-working having all manner of moon-gates and four-pillars whimsically incorporated into the ornate pattern. All and all the illustrious coterie of one hundred beasts carved across the entire bed appeared both raucous and rebellious, resembling in this way the wild beast lurking within every auspicious creature. Inexplicably Grand aunt had placed beneath the antique desk a large aquarium filled with loads of tropical fish radiating intense beauty in both manner and appearance.

At some point in my childhood I saw rather unexpectedly in a dream that all those fish in that aquarium had their faces morphed into a human form. Their bodies were much like those of goldfish having shimmering scales along with arced fins and tails that fluttered gracefully through the water not unlike an exquisite kimono. But their heads had taken on facial features that resembled to my astonishment those of Grand aunt and me! Most extraordinary of all, however, were the fearsome fangs filling their mouths, making them look like piranhas darting around getting ready to devour me. What horrified me most though was the sudden welling up of a revelation from the deepest depths of my heart that those hundreds of human-faced fish were the abominable spawn of Grand aunt and me, conceived in some kind of magical intercourse during a peculiar state that bordered between the human and the bestial. While feeding them human flesh and watching their gnashing teeth my heart began to fill with the most unfathomable mix of dread and delight.

Over the course of all those many years sitting upon that antique bed of my Grand aunt's and listening to her stories, I had been filled with a similar kind of indescribable dread and delight. It was as if she existed independently from the old family clan. She would constantly say to me how "your aunt" or "your mother" loved to watch Yang Li-hua in her Taiwanese operas: *Hsueh Ren-kui's Western Conquests*, *Mu Guiying Takes Command*, *The Seven Heros and Five Gallants*, *Case Records of Judge Shi*, and *Case Records of Judge Peng*, which were all performed off-the-cuff such that the stories written in the books were nothing like them. At times when her mood permitted she would read a section or two in Taiwanese from one of the original thread bound novels. I still remember her favorite scene from the stories of Fan Li-hua's uprooting of mountains and emptying of oceans, especially the part about her coming to the rescue of her estranged lover General Xue Ding-shan in the midst of a routing. She would read it out loud to me between fits of laughter, saying how it was the legendary sorceress, Priestess Li Shan, who had taught her magic in dreams. She had mastered as a child the conjuring of troops from scattered beans and the commanding of bird and beast. Then there were the enchanted artifacts such as the Sword of Vengeance, the Divine Whip, the Board of Transformative Chronology, the Talisman of Shrouded Identity, and the Ring of Cosmology: treasured gifts bestowed upon her by the Priestess. However Grand aunt said that in time she had grown old and lacked the energy to summon the power of wind and rain to move mountains and transform oceans; otherwise the great flood of 1959 would

never have caused such devastation and all those poor souls drowned on Longlife Street would have been saved. My young self in those days never doubted the stories she told, just as I had never doubted in a childhood of hearing them the words she spoke to me at the end of each one: your life is hard, but to resist fate is futile. Or was that something she just said to herself. She had after all in her day eloped to Japan with a Japanese man, deserting her home, a fate not all together different from that of Fan Li-hua. In those days such an act was a betrayal of both family and nation and she had done it merely because of her own obstinacy and unsettled destiny. It had been done in much the same way as Fan Li-hua who had followed from her earliest childhood the powerful esoteric Taoist teachings of the Priestess Li Shan and in the course of her life opened the frontier that brought down the Tang Dyanasty. Li-hua had betrayed her father, Fan Hong, her elder brothers, Fan Long and Fan Hu, and all those defending the Han River gates of the Western Liang Kingdom, killing their allied general, Yang Fan, who had also been betrothed at birth to her. She went on to marry a general from the armies of her enemy the mighty Tang Nation, the useless Xue Ding-shan who had been defeated at her hand. At this point she often said to me: dare I tell you, dare I continue to remind you that you are nothing but a tiny creature who shouldn't think of being a man. How could she have had such confidence in someone as small as I was then? It was just like a senior monk instructing a foolish novice or a noble lord admonishing a clumsy servant. Actually after I had grown I gradually came to the realization that my Grandaunt, who was at times compassionate while at others malevolent and who had always been known to be difficult, had perhaps in those years been filled with paradox and regret, but, just like all the disciples under the patient tutelage of her Master Sorceress, such as Fan Li-hua of the old fables, she had eventually learned the lesson of how to escape into her life.

That little me of childhood had a penchant, however, only for the strange tales she told and the strange food she prepared. Everything she cooked smelled funny, both savory and sweet, and was never piquant though it always brought tears to my eyes. I cared little that she often assisted people to exorcise their demons, or on occasion interpreted their dreams, or in an even more amazing fashion entered others' dreams to rescue the distressed, banish a demon, or vanquish a villain.

But then I was too small to distinguish a dream from reality or to differentiate a good man from a bad in a dreamscape. Just like when once in a dream I had been tied up and immobilized, but kept in a state of extreme sensitivity to pain through an injection of adrenaline that prevented my passing out. I knew that there was no hope for relief. What terrified me about that scene was how I could clearly see with my own two eyes myself as a helpless animal being cruelly assaulted. I watched as a female butcher cut me into 20 or 30 pieces, hacked off my limbs and placed the pieces of me in a pile either for the meat factory or the garbage dump. Oddly hung from the meat wall of her shop were various models of hard to put together mechanized flying machines, tributes to an incongruous avocation. But it was that wild-haired crazy looking butcher lady that terrified me most. I told myself that it wasn't real, that it was all just something out of a horror movie. But I had already born witness to how heartless her brutality could be when she had jerked me off until my penis stiffened and shot out the sperm that she licked from her fingertips as she chopped up my member, all the while merrily singing a Japanese nursery rhyme: "Lost little foolish bird quickly come back. But don't talk to strangers no matter how they ask. How I now despise you since you disappeared from sight!" She cut up my carcass and then sold the pieces of flesh at her stall in the old market to patrons who took them home to cook. The viscera she discarded in an open sewer in the deepest recesses of the old market. That butcher lady worked her knife with uncanny skill while all the while saying to the all-sliced-up-yet-still-erect me: so you think you can hide? After having awoken I realized that the butcher lady who in my dream had abused me as an animal was none other than my Grandaunt. Just as in my childhood I had heard my relatives rebuke my Grandaunt for being a sorceress that none could stop because had she wanted you dead you would most certainly die. It was like how all the stories started: all beasts and humans before their transformation each had their doubts and calculations, perhaps, in this vein I had never morphed from beast into human. Perhaps it is like I had never run across Grandaunt in my childhood, and this horrible dream much like the horrifying story of the Grand Takarajima Hotel, would perhaps never at all come to pass.

Near the end Grandaunt promised to take me out for some fun as reward for my helping her to burn all the old stuff in her old house: all those things that seemed to make up the memories of a lifetime like the old letters written in Japanese with elegant Chinese calligraphy, or those books that had aged much too much, or the many gorgeous kimonos, or still yet the boxes full of old photos. After it had all been cleared out, Grandaunt, feeling a pang of sadness let go a final sigh as she asked me in a soft voice, do you really want to change into a human, and do with a life what I have done to mine? She then said, perhaps with too much delight or maybe too much grief, in a manner that was strangely tragic: changing from an animal into a human is so painful, I have never had the means to say that I know who I am, so I haven't the need for any of the things from this life to remind me.

It is just like how as a child I had often asked Grandaunt about, or constantly quarreled with her over, some of those strange objects, like that impossible three-headed monkey, the flying car, the mysteriously glowing toy, or the family album lost for such a long time that everyone had begun to doubt its very existence. She'd often say, you've made me think of those black and white photographs taken by your father or even more so by your grandfather in the old family album of childhood on Longlife Street. But if you can see those incredible objects then it just might mean that you are without a life, just like this crazy old lady who could at any time be without a life herself.

Grandaunt had perhaps said afterwards that no one could avoid that which comes in the very end. Betrayal has no return, whether it be about beast changing into human or from close intimate relations turning into despised enemies; the cruelest part comes at the end of each tale when we finally turn into strangers. It is the kind of cursed ancient fable where a person returns home but is no longer able to recollect the old house, so much so that they merely pass by it unaware and carry on down the road. That was her, and quite possibly me too, people perhaps who had come to forget their own kin or maybe even their own selves.

It was all just like how the architectural plans for the Grand Takarajima Hotel weren't for the sole use of construction, because one only need recite the incantation to make those drawings heat up and glow, emitting in the process a bewildering fragrance. Perhaps those plans were a kind of talisman and even the structure itself might not have been built merely as a destination to house the living, after all so many stories eventually surfaced about the strange goings on there, but rather as a place destined to encase the living buried alive.

Just as each of those stories had to be viewed in their reverse order to make sense, the architectural drawings of the Grand Takarajima Hotel might themselves have been a charmed artifact requiring an even more serpentine route for activation. Perhaps they needed to be unfurled from front to back and back to front until the means could be discovered by which the epic tale contained therein would roll out like a scroll. From its inception that blueprint had never been a mere two-dimensional drawing for the conversion into physical reality of a three-dimensional Grand Takarajima Hotel, but appeared rather to be a Thangka, having locked inside it all manner of supernatural beings associated with the practicing ascetic, and that would reveal itself to be the universal Daturic Mandala of a cosmic dreamscape.

That talisman, which looked like a simple blueprint, was packed with esoteric knowledge and contained within it a cryptic Taoist record that held the unrevealed secrets of the cosmos. In this way it was not at all unlike an occult drawing in scale of the 28 constellations that divine the descent of fortune or calamity upon the earthly realm or like the automaton writings of Taoist priests who can only commence their harried scribblings following the inspiration of a talismanic script that focuses their prophetic portents. That chaotic drawing seemed full of imperfections yet at the same time to be as perfectly impregnable as an immortal vajra body.

Just like as with the sort of perverse tantra required from a paradoxical asceticism where something that had been uncorrupted had to be corrupted because there was no way of knowing what was illusory, a person had to first deal face to face with that part of themselves suffering slow defilement or decomposition before they could be allowed to grow or attain enlightenment.

Precisely because a person's life is so fragile, the invulnerable vajra body had to be an illusion. Humanity resembled the life of an ascetic who day and night from dawn to dusk worshipped before the altar but still could not keep from being corrupted. It was probably only by getting this close to the possibility of possible enlightenment that a certain void could in this way be filled with the arcane truth of esoteric knowledge.

It was just like the kind of arcane Tibetan teaching mentioned before by Grandaunt that had been whispered to her in her travels around Japan. A senior monk, who had piously practiced religious discipline all his life to the point that he had attained profound erudition, could shut himself away for seven days and if he recited the incantation correctly while sitting on the scroll of the proper sacred Thangka would gradually shrink in size. By the last day he would have reached a height of a mere seven inches. Those disciples who had assisted him in this necromantic practice would then be able to enter the secret chamber and by curling the scroll into an arc could carefully slide that now seven inch senior monk who had chanted for seven days into a sacred Tibetan vessel. After having attained his tantric goal, he could then avail himself of those occult arts while on the inside of that constructed realm. In this way he could be deemed to have completed the work of this life and start on the search for the reincarnation of the living Buddha in the next.

Because this type of tantra was used for the purpose of facing the corruption and impermanence of the corporeal world and because no state could evade the process of the cruel brutality and aftermath of "the killing of this by that," it was necessary first to extinguish one's breath before starting the ritual. It was necessary to shut tight one realm before opening up another. This march toward the perfect construction had its origins in the very imperfections of the flesh. It was as if there had to be something missing, it wasn't important what, the lacking is what mattered. There must be a need in nature if something is to unite with it. It all seemed like the divine hall of a sacred shrine, or like when she placed those seals in those majestic architectural marvels designed by Moriyama, her Grand Takarajima Hotel and the Taiwan Pavilion in the Tokyo imperial gardens. There was the definite need for the incantation, just like in the use of ancient ceramics in the making of a god-sealing black box: a charm was required to open it, but after opening a charm was again needed to reseal it.

Perhaps the corruptions of this world are too real, but what we are seeking is not in fact reality. It is something even more difficult like the works we might do on the journey or the constant possibility of total rectification: would it be better to accomplish more or to obscure more. It was much like all Grandaunt had said, that Grandaunt of old age: the deficiencies of the body grow ever more apparent in our waning years. Just like the time she used sleeping magic to seek out a spirit that had invaded her dreams on a stealth attack. In her advanced age the demands on her body were too great, and unable to fully regain her strength her physical condition suffered persistent decline. Worse yet this wasn't mere old age but rather some kind of decomposition: a complex physical transformation progressing in the manner of chemical deliquesces. After convalescing for some time in the Longlife Street nursing home she moved back into the old house on Longlife Street. At first there was some small improvement, but old-age doesn't have a light at the end of its tunnel and all that it offers is a dim bed in a dead-end room. The body slowly withers away, shrinking with ever-grimmer severity. In the beginning her injury was a mere inconvenience that only slowed her down but eventually her legs atrophied to the point that she had no strength to walk, even to the extent that she lost all movement in her lower extremities. After a while she got used to the occasional wheel chair bound trip around that antique desk in her room, the one that had the aquarium of human-faced fish under it. Later the paralysis began to climb up her body so that eventually her shoulders could not even be shrugged and her hands did nothing but hang limp from her wrists. But that wasn't the worst of it, and towards the end she awoke one day to discover her four limbs dropping in temperature and stiffening until they resembled rigor mortis.

That kind of excruciating process of slowly losing oneself is extremely cruel. Her whole body became paralyzed, losing all movement except an ever so slight nod of her head. After a while, however, even her neck froze up so that all she could manage was a barely audible whisper and the swallowing of

food.

Throughout that part of her decline her eyes continued to function, although a hazy film had appeared over them that later turned into cataracts. She hadn't yet gone completely blind but her natural vision had deteriorated into a state of extreme near-sightedness. As time went by, though, her situation worsened until the inevitable result of total blindness; just as she had lost all movement in her body she had now lost all sight in her eyes. Surgery was an option but meant accepting a certain degree of pain with no guarantee of corrective success. In the end she gave up on the idea, saying that she was already so old and since she could no longer move in her body she also no longer had the desire to see with her eyes!

While I continued to watch with ever widening pupils the daily process of her gradual disappearance as she kept on telling me her stories, there finally came a time when even speech failed her.

It was well into the eve before she lost her speech, while I sat with her on that antique bed in her room on Longlife Street, so exhausted that I could barely hold my head up, when in that dim and deathly chamber I suddenly heard a strange laugh. At that moment Grandaunt's voice changed into that of a three year old little girl who in her sickroom loudly declared her wishes: I insist that on my third birthday there be a magnificent party where all will be invited to a dance at the hotel I will build, my Grand Takarajima. I'll have on a purple kimono with a gold embroidered snake for the occasion and celebrities will be included amongst the invitees. The senior officers of the Japanese Governor-General's staff and their aides, clever admirers of the fairer sex, will be decked out in their finest dress uniforms, and hidden amongst the crowd glad-handing the powerful with thick Cantonese accent and furrowed brow and having on a western suit will be the inscrutable Sun Yat-sen, moreover the extravagant young Meiji Crown-prince looking lecherous in his heavy make-up will be seen entering the hall with a contingent of samurai escorts, and then there will be Taiwan's legendary Robin-hood figure, Liao Tianding, with his shabbily dressed band of gaiter wearing Tang-suited ruffians sizing up the crowd, but I'll ask him to show me a little respect by not making trouble and I'll call over my coterie of kimono wearing sisters, in their youth more beautiful than faeries, to be their sweethearts.

And just like that, in addition to all those guests, I'll bring along my Japanese lover, the architect Moriyama, as well as my younger bachelor brother, your grandfather, who I will also help to find a woman. She will give birth to your father and seven siblings and afterward your lot, full of shortcomings and fated to short-lives, will be born on Longlife Street.

Translated from the Chinese by Scott M. Faul