

# *THE LAST HARBOR*



TO MAC  
— SOMEWHERE IN MEXICO —

INSTEAD OF DYING HE  
DREAMED OF A PEYOTE SMOKING  
DONKEY WHO TOLD HIM  
TO BUY A MOTORCYCLE  
AND RIDE SOUTH

Now we are frightened over petty fears, now  
disheartened and dismayed over some great terror.  
Now the mind flies forth like an arrow from a  
cross-bow, to be the arbiter of right and wrong.  
Now it stays behind, as if sworn to an oath, to  
hold onto what it has secured. Then, as under  
autumn and winter's blight, comes gradual  
decay, and submerged in its own occupations,  
it keeps on running its course, never to return.  
Finally, worn out and imprisoned, it is choked  
up like an old drain, and the failing mind  
will not see light again.

— Chuang-Tse

AND  
TO MY BLUE-EYED GRANDMOTHER  
WHO WILL NOT SEE LIGHT AGAIN

Daled was coughing as he stretched his arms into the cold black, grasping for something to hold onto. The coughing sucked a viscous mass of mucus into his mouth. Unwilling to swallow it, he spit. When his left hand reached solid, he pulled the luminescent watch off the night-table. The faint echo of a cuckoo struck the quarter hour.

He couldn't see Selma because the opaque shades had exiled all light from the room and his left eye hadn't yet acclimated. He had installed the shades himself, believing that shadowless sleep was essential for dreaming. Lately, though, he had had only few dreams and of those, most were un insightful.

He turned on his stomach, braced his right hand under the mattress, and reached across the black separating their beds. The cracking of an infrequently used shoulder joint accompanied creaking bed springs. But his arm was too short. The clean white sheets were warm, and he was unwilling to leave the bed. He retracted his arm and turned to stare at the ceiling which he couldn't see.

Falling, he clawed the mattress until he realized he had drifted into sleep, and was only dreaming.

He pulled his left leg from under the linen and

thrust it into the darkness. The fat along his side fleshily folded into itself, and, as his left leg stretched, the sheet pressed tightly against his member.

Selma wasn't there.

With a concerted effort, he sat up, lifted himself from the bed with a grunt, and began walking toward the bathroom. His feet dragged along the floor, making a shuffling sound.

-- Lift your feet old man, you aren't dead yet.

He opened the shades and a white wave of light washed the blackness from the room.

\* \* \*

*Into the center of the sun, a line is drawn, and that character,  
plus the character of an altar, is God.*

Daled sat reading the notes of his lecture, which he had written in large letters so that his good eye could more easily distinguish the words. As he was reading, the sun passed from behind the clouds into the doughnut shaped center of a thick white cloud and cast an intense light on Daled and his lecture. Automatically he reached for the opaque shade because the glare was too bright and the heat made him uncomfortable. He became conscious of his action, and watched the ash-white of his skin become buried in the shadow of the curtain. He closed his eyes and took a few slow breaths. He saw darkness on his closed lids, and realized that he was creating more and

more darkness. First he had removed the blue sky and the cloud ringed sun from his sight for his momentary comfort. Now, he had just removed the rest of the room.

For a brief moment, there was an intensity of emotion that surprised even him. He wanted to crumble the speech. He thought of leaving the air-conditioned, well-lit room to walk into the mountains behind the house; or to cross the suspension bridge to the rocky promontory and listen to the interaction of land and ocean beneath April's budding maple leaves.

But when he started to pull up the shade, he imagined seeing the sagging willow, Selma's bras and girdles hanging from the clothes line, and the unused bird-feeder where there were once redbirds.

He returned to his notes.

"In the West, the Japanese haiku is probably the most widely known expression of Zen. Rather than give historical background leading to its present 5-7-5, 17 syllable form, let me quote one which I translated many years ago during a Japanese tea ceremony -- the characters were wrapped around my cup. This haiku was written by the seventeenth century wandering traveler and poet, Basho. There is a beauty of sound and form which is nearly uncapturable in English:

Breaking the silence  
of an ancient pond  
a frog jumped into water --  
a deep resonance

On the surface this poem is an objective description of observable reality: a pond and a frog which sends vibrations rippling through the pond. But the pond is also a mirror held up to internally reflect the author's mind. The resonance in the ancient pond is the writing of the poem.

\* \* \*

Daled ignored the cuckoo as it stuck the half hour and continued reading to himself.

One of the questions I'm often asked, is, if Zen Buddhism is a philosophy of action, and, to quote myself 'the word lives in living,' then what am I doing teaching Zen Buddhism?

"We try to understand water: its component parts, its history, its relationship with land. But we don't try to find the history of drinking. Yet we are all very thirsty. Zen Buddhism, the historical subject, is a fitting discipline for academic study. But 'Zen' is not historical but living. Thus my classes have emphasized more than book learning: they have attempted to encourage creativity and self-understanding: through sumiye painting, Buddhist chants and meditation, haiku poetry writing, and tea ceremonies in the mountains.

"The Japanese word to learn, narau, comes from two Chinese characters. The first is a nose, which means self. In the West we point to the chest to indicate self; in the East they point to the nose. Above the nose are two wings. We have a similar idea in the West, embodied in the Greek legend of Icarus trying to fly to heaven with wax wings. To learn is to seek to have the self soar."

\* \* \*

He tried to continue reading but his left eye was unable to focus. He blinked it several times, shook his head rapidly from side to side, and rolled the dark brown pupil around the corners of the eye. Then he readjusted his left lens and the letters, though still blurred, became readable.

"If knowledge doesn't lead to understanding and wisdom which help you to better relate to nature, yourself, and others, then it is empty and worthless.

In order to relate, we as humans need to give meaning to our experiences. Before we can act, we must feel as though there is some order to the universe--even if that order be non-order or indifference.

Students today do not wish to just accumulate knowledge found in books. They are looking for something relevant to their lives. Like Kohelet in Ecclesiastes, they realize of making books there is no end, ruin in a flood of words.

I have thrown out nearly all books of fiction. What have I kept. Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*; Hesse's *Siddhartha*; Joyce's *Portrait and Ulysses*; and Kazantzakis' *Zorba*. These books reveal the effect of my western education and upbringing.

The East believes that the path to understanding lies in not being

“caught” by our thoughts and emotions, seeing them as mere mind moments, stars in the night sky.

Yes, and...

I also want to feel and cry and laugh and dance and search and seek. I admire as the most gifted artists and writers those who have the power to life words from their cold impersonalness and cause people to respond in their hearts.

Otherwise we misuse the East’s teachings, and justify our lack of ability to love or feel anguish....calm and peaceful acceptance can be a mask for apathy and indifference.

\* \* \*

Daled stopped reading and stared at the dark green, almost black door which led to the glassed hallway, where Selma must be, doing something to pass her day. He put down his notes and closes his eyes feeling a self-satisfied inner smile at what he’d just read. “Very well crafted, old man, you’ve still got it. And what a meaningful, important, interesting life you’ve lived.” His mind then wonders, behind his closed eyes, to the last time he danced—literally—or even metaphorically. The last time he felt truly at peace. The last time he cried. Then he thought of the lecture “understanding and wisdom which help you relate to nature, yourself” What does that even mean?” Stop, he shouted inwardly. “Too many thoughts. Let them go. Stars in a night sky.” As he took a slow, even breath.

He picked up his notes again, but his thoughts once again returned to Selma. He found himself looking forward to their afternoon tea ritual with greater anticipation than normal, hoping that the ceremony would give flesh to the words.

-- Soon, my wife of thirty-nine years, I'm going to give you a passionate kiss. And tomorrow night, after the lecture and after we've added another year to our marriage -- (he was sure she had expected him to forget) -- you'll realize that the kiss was only a very small pre-anniversary present.



He chuckled at the adolescent-like implications of his joke. Continuing his ruminations, he looked down at the lecture notes, but didn't see them. Over a week ago, he had remembered to order a half dozen of Selma's favorite flower, an exotic Malaysian variety. She liked the way the yellow pistil emerged like a rising sun from the midst of five thick purple petals. He planned to pick a few violets, with their almost sheer petals and sunken yellow center. The violets would be easy to find, because they grew wild on the promontory, just past the suspension bridge. Tomorrow

he would arrange the two different flowers, and place them on the table in the tea room. Daled became aware that his thoughts had drifted from the lecture, and turned his attention back to the task.

The letters had again blurred, but Daled had memorized this section of the lecture and, speaking aloud, he was not even aware that he could no longer see the typed words.

"There is a suspension bridge in our yard. Once a student asked me who built it. I told him I didn't know, and that 'It was here when I arrived. I only walk on it.' Then he asked, 'Is it safe?' to which I replied, 'You have to trust that the bridge will not collapse, even if you don't want to.'

We on earth are on the bridge. Yet, we forget that. We need to remind ourselves that the quest must be ever renewed. The worst danger is comfort.

you slowly slip into it, like warm sheets on a cold night, until you are trapped without even realizing it. The quest fades, but you don't miss it because you think you've already arrived -- or because you don't know where else to search. You like the security of a foothold amidst so much flux, and you greedily hang onto what you've grasped, rationalizing and putting up with its faults, building illusions about its security and importance to your own well-being and, of course, your family's.

"But then one afternoon you awaken. You realize how long you've been hiding in an illusory sleep. The Quest again appears. By the painful, gnawing creative energy within you, you realize how dead you've been.

"Seek until you must rest; but don't find the last harbor where the quest ends. Satori is the search.

"If the quest seems buried, it is you who are covered with dirt. It is always alive, like the ocean, ready to fill you with its agony and beauty.

"Don't let the search be buried beneath waves. For then, even if your life continues, it has ended.

"Until you jump in and catch hold of it again."

\* \* \* \* \*

-- Black or white cup? If it's black then he wants to see his reflection and won't want cream. Eighteen more minutes.

Selma walked to the cabinet and, taking down a glass tray, placed two black tea bowls on it, then sugar and lemon. As she went to the sink to put three and one-half cups water into the tea kettle, she glanced out the window and was surprised to see Daled sitting under the bird feeder trying to arch his pear-shaped back.

She looked towards the dark blue bedroom door behind which she had expected him to be working on his lecture. It annoyed her that every afternoon he used the bedroom as a study, exiling her to the kitchen.

--But after tonight's lecture, no more. His final farewell talk to his colleagues and students. Professor emeritus. Maybe then I'll have more freedom in my own house.

She had asked Daled many years ago to put his study next to the kitchen, but he had adamantly refused. He felt that they had to have a tea room. "A tea room," she thought, "which we use only once a day. It seems such a waste."

The cuckoo struck a quarter hour. She turned the automatic pilot and flame burst beneath the stainless steel kettle.

--Lemon squeezer, sugar spoon, two stirring spoons, three cookies...and my toast, butter, and honey. He still won't admit to himself the real reason he eats those mushy rice cookies.

The kettle whistled; she lowered the flame and slipped two bags of Lipton tea into the blue glazed pot next to the kettle.

Walking to the mirror, she checked her hair and smoothed it down. Folding back her right cheek with the second finger of her left hand, she inspected her molars. Then her left cheek. She was proud of her teeth for they were all still hers. Satisfied, she smiled, remembering that today was their anniversary.

-- Years ago. God it was glorious. The rains came and we only loved more. We could encompass everything in our love -- rain, mosquitoes, the four dirty walls. I hadn't washed the clothes in a month: that worthless modern washer -- it had to be filled with buckets and would explode unless I watched the water level.

-- We spent whole days huddled under the blankets, watching our wet clothes become wetter in the rain. We ate and read and talked and made love.

The tea kettle became overheated and whistled again.

-- Twelve more minutes. Not yet time to steep it. She turned the gas down.

-- Memory is a funny thing. It weaves in and out of dreams so that while the weft is real the warp is only imaginary. Perhaps that day was only one of our unfulfilled projects. Or maybe we did try it -- our

bodies bumping in a too small bed, mine warm and his invariably cold; the mattress covered with crumbs, making us prickle and itch; the mind stupified with reading, our ideas used up; even our bodies boring between sheets sticky with love.

She brushed impatiently at a strand of hair lying on the corner of her mouth.

-- Memories of what once never was. Or was. The question is as dry as his lecture.

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Carrying a small journal, Daled walked absent-mindedly past the bird feeder and to the edge of the bridge. The rope which formed the guard rail was frayed in several places. With overly deliberate motions he withdrew a pipe and pouch of tobacco from his baggy pants' pocket.

-- Selma told me it was childish to feel I have to keep proving myself.

He smiled somewhat self-consciously and stuffed the tobacco into the emptiness of the hollow bowl but did not light it. Instead he took off his shirt and sat down next to the birdfeeder. His shadow merged into its wooden base.

The back of Selma's pink-and-blue flowered blouse, framed by the kitchen window, reminded him of a myriad of simultaneous multicolored sunsets. Far above the kitchen window, hanging between the birdseed box and the water feeder, he saw a large spider web. A dark spider was suspended on the sheer grey

mountain towering behind the house. The shadow of a thick cloud traversed the lower part of the mountain, and it soon appeared to Daled that the spider was resting on a bed of soft white.

The one-dimensional images aggravated his sensibilities, so he crawled around the wooden pole until his back was to the mountains. Unseen, the shadow of the cloud climbed the mountain and merged with its form.

Puffing deeply on his pipe, he exhaled slowly.

As he watched the wind carry the smoke towards the sea, he was reminded of his once earnest attempt to master yoga. Straightening his back, he tried to twist his legs into a half-lotus position. The tobacco smoke dissolved into the air over the cliff.

Daled exhaled, slowly contracting his diaphragm, and counted to fifteen. The black lines of the spider web lay in curbed folds over the fleshy fat of his breast and stomach. Unnoticed, the cuckoo struck a quarter hour.

Feeling his left leg fall asleep, he untwisted himself to massage it. As he bent down, his breasts grew flabbier like a swelling wave and crashed foam of black shadow over his stomach, engulfing the spider web.

Ignoring the tobacco which had long since burned itself out, Daled reached for his journal and opened it. He began to read the front piece which he had copied from the writings of Chuang-tse:

Once upon a time, I, Chuang-tse, dreamt I was  
a butterfly, fluttering hither and thither, and  
to all intents and purposes, a butterfly. I was  
conscious only of my happiness as a butterfly,  
unaware that I was Chuang-tse.

Soon I awakened, and there I was, veritably my self  
again. Now I do not know whether I was then a man  
dreaming I was a butterfly, or whether I am now a butterfly  
dreaming I'm a man.

Today was the thirteenth day this month he had been unable to  
remember his dreams. He went through the journal and counted  
nineteen entries for the month, four of them written after naps. It  
interested him that on days when he had dreamt in the afternoon, he had also  
had dreams at night.

His last entry had been three afternoons ago, when he had  
dreamt of Nancy. He was sure it was she even though the face had been  
unusually blurry. "Perhaps it was blurred," he thought, "because she  
was still an unborn child in the dream."

His hands had entered the dream and sought to meaningfully and artistically  
shape the face into focus. But the face had continued to blur still more, until it was  
totally unrecognizable. Beneath the dream he had written:

In the beginning you want to do only what is right. But rightness is  
ambiguous and the fulcrum subtly shifts until the issues of safety  
and well-being are blurred and the focus becomes questions of  
pride and authority.

He was glad Nancy said she would bring Johnny and Claire by this afternoon to see him. How he spoiled those grandchildren--human bonsai--and how they loved him for it. He wondered absently if he spoiled them to atone for the mistakes he had made in raising Nancy. Then he laughed: "Sin and forgiveness. Life is like the sumi-e painting... no mark is ever lost."

Had she forgiven him his faults as a parent? Had he ever apologized? He made a mental note to tell her this afternoon he was sorry for any shortcomings he had as a parent. Looking up from his dream journal, he saw three of Selma's white girdles and two of her bras, hanging from the clothesline, all roughly blown by the wind. Daled imagined that the rope was the top of a sail, running free, bellowed by the full wind blowing from the mountains. The bird-feeder mast bent and creaked under the wind's power as the ship sailed out to sea.

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"I'm ready for tea." Selma saw Daled's flushed face as if it were a picture framed by the kitchen window. Above and to the right of his head was a sagging willow tree. There was a glow around his hair from the sun, coloring it yellowish grey.

"You're ten minutes early. Wash outside and then go sit down." When Daled removed himself from the picture, the sun struck her face directly and caused her eyes to water.

Turning off the automatic pilot, she poured the water into the tea pot, and pushed her bread into the toaster.

-- Two minutes to steep. Then I'll walk in calmly as if this were the easiest and most natural thing I've ever done. While his fingers fray the tattered remains of his blue chair, he'll also try to look calm.



Daled washed himself by the garden hose and then walked toward the tea room. He looked back at his imaginary ship, and then opened the door to enter. His shadow entered the room before him. As he shut the door, the sun was blocked from sight, his shadow disappeared and he stood alone.

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After two minutes Selma took off her watch, laid it on the vinyl sink, refilled the kettle and turned on the automatic pilot -- just in case. Then she put the toast and the blue glazed pot on the tray;

rechecked for lemon, squeezer, sugar, three spoons, two black cups. Finally, picking up the tray, she walked by the mirror and, satisfied with her smile, entered the tea room.

Seated in his blue chair and wearing a yellow shirt, Daled reminded her of Bhushakertas, her favorite flower.

On the top of the tea pot was a glazed yellow sunburst which rose as Selma began to pour the tea.

Although her hands were old, Daled still found them lovely, the fingers long and straight, the wrists so delicate he could enclose them between his thumb and second finger. And how those fingers and wrists could dance across the piano keys.

The liquid poured out in a thick brown-golden stream and splashed slightly about the edges of the cup as it hit the bottom. She flicked her wrist expertly and the flow of tea stopped. The sunburst hovered in mid-air. Daled imagined it illuminating her hair, which, gray since she turned fifty, was knotted behind her head in a bun. Long wisps had disengaged themselves and curled

Her wrist flicked again, raising the sunburst still higher, and causing tea to flow into the second cup.

As she followed the arc of the strong, thick tea, Daled studied the very slight wrinkles which curved round her eyelids like folds of a Buddha's robe.

Her wrist flicked, the robe's folds merged like a closed fan, and Daled sat facing two blue eyes.

"When you were pouring the tea I couldn't tell whether you were looking or not."

"Because I spilled so much?"

"No!" Daled admonished her in a whisper, then continued, "Why so defensive?" He could feel a reflexive anger, as the thought filled his mind "All I was thinking about was how beautiful her eyes were." That thought made him even angrier---"I'm just trying to be nice, and she gets defensive. She's always making assumptions that cast me as a critical, judgmental person."

Daled thought about pointing out how wrong she was. He remembered the paraphrase technique their therapist told him he should use more. "Sounds like you're feeling upset because you thought I was accusing you of spilling the tea." The words sounded stilted to him. Just as he told the therapist so many years ago.

He looked over at her, and saw her face tighten. He held up his hand to keep her from responding and escalating, trying to keep her from responding to his rhetorical question. He closed his eyes to turn inward and breathe, and collect himself. Yet his first thought was she will see this as shutting her out. I can't win.

Daled remembered so many similar conversations. What does she always say? "You always respond to me with anger and attack. This is what you're like after nearly forty years of meditation? Ha, big help that meditation was." Then he would say, "Just imagine if I hadn't meditated." Of course she wouldn't be amused. She would turn away, become silent and look hurt.

The dance would begin again, and not a joyous Zorba dance. His eyes still closed, he thought, if I paraphrase and do all the work, maybe I can deescalate this time a little bit, but why should I have to do all the work. In retrospect, he wished he hadn't responded so quickly, but had first taken a breath. Now what to do?

He did take a gentle breath from his diaphragm. Better. He decided not to engage, feeling pride at how he was able to rise above her petty reflexive responses. In fact, he decided not to wait for reply at all, but instead simply said, "No, because your eyelids, like

Venetian blinds, conceal the blue. I've never known anyone else with such fleshy eyelids. When you look down, you resemble Amidha, apart from all worldly cares."

"You've been doing too much work on that lecture. Soon you'll begin to think I'm a figure carved in wood."

She smiled vaguely. Daled supposed she was showing off her teeth. Often he had surreptitiously poked his head out of the bedroom and caught her looking in the mirror,

tapping her teeth. She would blush guiltily and pretend she was scraping a speck of dirt from the glass. He didn't begrudge her her vanities, although he still teased her. He wondered absently whether he did so from habit or boredom.

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There was a long silence. Neither looked at the other; both quietly sipped the tea.

"Very good tea."

"Thank you."

Daled looked around the nearly objectless room: only one large seashell which lay on a small, blue velvet-clothed table beneath the shadow of the willow leaves. The table had been used for flower arrangements before he found the shell.

He delicately set his tea on the straw tatami floor and walked over to the shell. The conical, yellowish-pink object was his means of bringing the ocean to the house. Many years ago, each evening after tea hour, he used to sit on the beach in a lotus position and watch the sun set into the water. But it had long ago become to walk the mile and a half along the path which led under the suspension bridge, and then to cross the slippery wet rocks of the gorge and pass through the hole in the promontory .

He picked up the shell to hear the surf and imagine the white foam of blood floating under the whiplash of

a breaking wave.

The silence continued.

Since the shell had been removed from its source, the echo had died.

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He had the feeling she was watching him; although because of her half-closed eyes, he couldn't be sure. Was she as calm as she looked? Her movements seemed too calculated and smooth as she almost motionlessly picked up the cup and sipped it.

-- Now, Daled thought to himself, -- the shell can be thrown away -- without remorse. And tomorrow it will be replaced by Selma's anniversary present.

He took a piece of rice meal cookie and placed it in his mouth. The cuckoo began to strike the quarter hour. He swallowed the cookie too fast and it lodged awkwardly in this throat. His coughing drowned out the sound of the clock.

Selma set her tea down on the tatami and made a motion towards him, but he raised his hand indicating that everything was fine.

She sipped her tea. Daled cleared his throat and spit the crumbs and saliva into a once-white handkerchief which he returned to his shirt pocket. He took a tentative sip of tea.

"Selma."

"Yes."

"Did you know that in ancient China seashells were

thought to resemble female genital organs?"

Her eyelids raised, revealing angry blue eyes under arched brows. "I hate sitting like this...like two sterile mannequins trying so hard to make it perfect....confined to guidelines and rules and rituals like robots. Why don't you act human? Why don't you complain about the tea or demand cream because I gave you lemon or call the cookies stale?"

Daled took out his handkerchief and blew into it. Then he carefully folded and replaced it.

"But the cookies are very good."

"You're snivelling and choking and reswallowing your mucus and the cookies are very good. This ceremony is like a grave... and your detailed prescribed form is... the... the --"

"Coffin?"

She didn't answer.

"I'm afraid, Selma."

Selma picked up her tea cup and raised it to her lips. Normally she could see her reflection in the tea, but the quivering of her hands caused the tea to crack her face into hundreds of small disjointed pieces.

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Several minutes passed with no sound other than the sipping of the tea. Daled wondered if he Selma had even heard him. Perhaps he had just whispered it, or maybe it was just an unspoken thought. He stirred another spoonful of sugar

into his tea.

"An interesting thing happened when I went to the store this morning to buy the rice meal cookies."

"Did you go to the usual store?" Daled didn't

look up. He was glad she had changed the subject, and was falling back into usual chatter. Normally that annoyed him, but at this moment it was a welcome filling of the void.

"Yes, it..."

"Was Jane Foreman behind the counter?"

"Daled, don't interrupt. I was talking. You know I hate that."

"Sorry, you were going to say...."

"No, Jane wasn't behind the counter. Thursdays are her day off. Peggy Higgins was working at the store today."

Daled sat still, sucking a decaying tooth.

Moments passed in silence. "Aren't you going to respond?"

Daled put his finger to his lips, then said "I was just following your orders, and not interrupting. How was I to know there wasn't more you wanted to say. But if you want to say I'm sorry, I will. It is fascinating that Peggy was there today."

As he finished speaking Selma was certain he was practicing his condescending half smile on her.

She thought about remaining silent, but decided it wouldn't make any difference; for she knew he would only retreat further into himself and continue that smile as if nothing were wrong.

Instead she continued:

"She didn't wrap the rice meal cookies but instead put them in a brown sack. I felt slighted. Yet every other time, when Jane wraps them for me -- you know, with the blue paper and yellow bow -- I become impatient and think how worthless the wrapping is."

"It seems that you've trapped yourself in an insoluble dilemma."

"I'm not alone."

Daled searched through a sheaf of papers. Finding the one he wanted, he pulled it out and read:

"The second manifestation of Zen's influence in Japanese culture is Wabi, the way of tea. Each Japanese temple has a teahouse. Outside the teahouse is the rack where samurai warriors once hung their swords. The ceremony was designed to give the warriors a refuge from the constant strain of daily battle. They were allowed to enter the teahouse only after they had taken off their swords and washed themselves.

Daled thought of looking up to see if Selma was listening. He wondered if she could understand the deep message he was sending her—that this tea ceremony—that he had had to fight so hard to get her to agree to--was their opportunity to take off their swords, to cleanse themselves, to enjoy. He was afraid to look up, for if she weren't listening, or was looking out the window, he might lose his focus and his equanimity. So, he kept reading:



"But the real cleansing took place during the ceremony. In the quiet of an uncluttered room their senses awoke to the birds and tea singing; the smell of flowers and incense; the slightly bitter taste of tea; and the garden revealed and framed by sliding doors.

Selma continued to drink her tea, only partially listening to Daled's words. She was used to his stopping in the middle of a conversation and turning his attention to his studies or his books. The last few weeks she had become increasingly annoyed at the frequency with which he would interrupt their conversations to read various parts of his lecture to her. She thought that perhaps she should be patient with him today, however, as he was probably nervous about the night's lecture. She decided to try to listen more carefully to what he was saying.

"The ceremony's ritual is prescribed to the smallest detail: the powdered tea is stirred with a bamboo whisk, and heated over a charcoal hearth

situated in the room. Even the receptacle for left-over water is prepared beforehand. This form does not vary from day to day, but remains rigid and defined. For Zen believes that although we do the same action every day, it is different -- because we are constantly in the process of changing.

Selma wondered if Daled were reading her this passage in an effort to prove that he was right about the Tea ceremony, and that it was only her "unenlightened ways" that kept her from appreciating it. "A funny man," she thought. "He has to try to speak to me through his writing, even when I'm sitting right next to him." She reached for a piece of her toast, while Daled continued to read.

"Within the proscribed and defined form, the tea ceremony seeks to transcend itself -- not into some abstract metaphysical reality, but on earth, in the every-day, trivial motion of pouring tea.

"Let me illustrate with an etymological example. The Japanese word Wa (harmony) is one of the four

intended results of the ceremony. This word illustrates the 'practical' orientation of the Chinese mind, for Wa is taken from two Chinese characters: one meaning rice stalk and one meaning mouth. For the metaphysical Indian philosophers harmony was the merging of non-self into the unity of non-being. For the Chinese, harmony was a mouth eating rice.

Selma looked intently at Daled, pretending to pay attention to words she had heard dozens of times before, dutifully eating her rice cake, on cue, in case he looked up. How long will this go on; why does he read this, when he knows it by rote? She dared not look away, though she longed to gaze out the window, to the world beyond. Once these words—and yes, even they as a couple-- were fresh, and exciting. But she felt somehow they had both become trapped in the rigidity of unchanging daily life. It wasn't harsh by most of the world's standards, she was well aware of that—yet there was a sadness to it...the slow decaying end of life, from which they could not escape—of which the tea ceremony was one example.

"The garden, framed by the sliding doors, is intended to give a feeling of spacelessness: the small twigs are beautiful as small twigs, and at the same time the embodiment of mighty trees; hillocks have meaning both as mounds of dirt and as lofty mountains; and the pond is both itself and the ocean.

Selma smiled. He really does have a first rate mind, and sometimes even an enchanting poetic side, she thought despite herself. I loved the way he would learn from different cultures, and then try to compare, contrast, and put them together in a way that made sense to him. He was a very good teacher, too, attentive. Even often to me

"The ceremony is likewise intended to convey a feeling of eternity in the midst of time, a quiet moment

of timelessness apart from and part of the everyday world.

Daled looked up from his notes for the first time, and spoke directly to Selma.

"There is another Japanese word, *Chanomi*, which I'm not going to discuss in the lecture. It means two old cronies sitting during tea ceremony, futilely trying to recapture past 'happiness.'"

"Is there a prize?" Selma asked.

"For what?"

"For them."

"Why?"

"For trying."

As the sun continued to set, the shadows of the willow leaves, like arched eyebrows, rose imperceptibly along the white wall of the tea room. Neither of them heard the cuckoo as it struck the quarter hour.

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Daled arose from his chair, with some effort, and walked the few paces toward Selma. She eyed him warily. He reached his hand out, gently, toward Selma's shoulder, and began to massage her favorite spot, the soft area of the back of her neck.

"Wa" Selma puckered her lips and let the ah sound sensuously emerge.

On the wall behind the chair, the shadows of two people merged beneath the arched eyebrows of a willow tree. Neither of them heard the cuckoo as it struck the half hour.

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"How strange it seems, Daled, to be sitting here talking and cuddling. I was thinking of how many people we'd met, loved, and left. How did we fit enough to still be here drinking tea? Still in love? Still holding each other in our arms?"

Daled continued massaging the soft area of her neck, saying nothing to interrupt the mood.

"It must have been fate," Selma purred, somewhat hoarsely.

Daled stopped massaging with a panicky jerk, walked back to his chair, and began leafing through his lecture. "This mind...I've already forgotten that part...I've...let me...."

Selma sat back on the tatami, with resignation. As she buttered her toast, she tried to remember how long it had been since he'd actually massaged her neck, since they'd cuddled. She poured honey on her toast, but before she put it in her mouth, she unobtrusively reached to her lips, and felt along her tongue and upper palate. She carefully withdrew a wiry gray hair and dropped it to the tatami.

The Chinese word for fate comes from two characters.  
Heredity and social milieu. To talk of absolute freedom  
is to talk of death. Our human freedom is based on limitations

of fate. Like the river bound by its banks, we are bound by our bodies. The river which has no bank is not a river.

If we flood our banks and ignore our body, we will soon cease to be human. Freedom can only exist within the confines of the banks' non freedom

Daled looked up from his reading, expecting a nod of approval from Selma.

"What about limitations other than physical?"

Daled was annoyed. "Should I mention my mind -- how it's decaying and can no longer retain the words of different languages; and should I mention the heart's imperfections," even though angry and speaking rapidly, he paused, groping for a word, "Sanskrit klesas: depravities of the heart due to anger, greed, stupidity. Should I mention these, is that what you mean?"

"Yes," Selma said, ignoring his tone.

"How does that fit into the lecture: I'm trying to show that, within certain prescribed physical limits, man can and must accept his fate."

"Yes."

"A decaying mind is not acceptable."

"Why don't you just say that?" Selma paused, then added, "and also, careful of sexist language dear.... Why just 'man'? How about 'humans'?" She tried to say it with an even tone knowing how sensitive Daled was to being corrected—even as, ostensibly he was asking for feedback.

She say that Daled was indeed trying to mask his annoyance at having his language questioned. When he spoke, he ignored that part of

her comment, and replied with more force than he needed to, "Because I'm a teacher, not a destroyer. Students need to look up to someone, a *person* (he emphasized the word) whom they feel

has made it and still retained his integrity. I am not going to expose my life's flaws to them." He put his face close to the notes to continue reading, but abruptly raised his head and spoke. "Should I

also say that if you're blind in one eye and half-blind in the other you should accept it as part of your freedom?"

Selma knew this was not the time to again correct him for his slippage back into masculine terminology. She took a deep breath, as she had long ago learned to do when the situation became too vulnerable, too close to the abyss.

Selma looked down at her wooden zori and observed her big toe. It had always interested her that the big toe didn't serve as a counterforce to the other four toes as it did for monkeys. Human toes had very little ability to grip rocks or ground. She wondered if her big toe -- a few light-colored hairs below one big wrinkle, a rounded nail with a white sun setting into the cuticle, pinkening the flesh under the nail -- was really an evolutionarily higher stage than the monkey's. She remembered that lately Daled had said the same thing about consciousness. She moved her toe so that it barely touched the tip of his sandal.

Then she crept along the brown leather until she found a toe.

Daled withdrew as if an exposed nerve in a decayed tooth had been drilled. "What are you doing?" he demanded.

Selma looked at the six inches of straw tatami separating her toe from Daled's sandal. "Trying to apologize."

"Later, later, after the lecture." Daled gave her a quick wink and tried to look as coy as possible. "After the lecture, I'm going to sneak into your bed, and we'll both apologize." But now..." He held up his notes in explanation and began to read to himself.

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Coughing interrupted Daled; and, as he began to shiver, drops of moisture glued the yellow shirt to his chest. In a bitter tone he whispered, "The mind won't accept, but the body doesn't let it forget."

Selma couldn't hear his words and asked him to repeat.

He replied almost flippantly, "I was thinking about all the push-ups I used to do."

"I hated it when you would jump out of bed so early in the morning. I'd be sitting snuggled in the blankets." As she said this, she moved onto the arm of his chair and put her hand on his shoulder. "Warm and comfortable, dreaming luxuriously. But then you'd boom out, 'Down one, down two,' with your body

raising and lowering like some mighty piston."

She could tell her words were soothing and comforting him, which pleased her. She could never tell. Sometimes he enjoyed hearing how strong and powerful she found him; other times, he'd criticize her for reminding him of how much he had decayed. She continued, offering herself as a counterpoint to his strength, again, in hopes of making him feel more peaceful and happy in the present. Her self-deprecation, she thought, was a small price of pay for his well-being.

"Watching you, I'd be admiring, but also begin to feel guilty lying in bed. And then, after you had finished, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't recapture the same warmth and comfortable dream." She put her arm around his neck, like a schoolgirl sitting on her boyfriend's knee, and Daled thought to himself: -- I'm sure she would have lain beneath that thick blue quilt and dreamt forever if I hadn't roused her. I sometimes wonder if I didn't love her most when I saw her suffering and struggling to awaken. So pure, so innocent, so cute, so unthreatening."

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Selma saw Daled's eyes close as he felt his leg disappear beneath the greenish grey waters of an onsen, a hot-spring bath. The sulfur which filled his nose smelled like stale hard-boiled eggs and made him cough. The straw thatch covering the ocean-side half of the roof had been blown away by a strong wind. Only the



form -- crisscrossed bamboo poles -- was left; and it offered no protection.

He crouched deeper into the Japanese style bath, allowing the steaming hot water to run over his body, which was completely tan. Long ago he had decided that swim suits were a man-made immorality.

A slight chill ran through his body and he immersed himself completely in the water's warmth. He imagined that he was sitting in Bloom's chalice. His flower disappeared beneath the surface, and in the water he could see only the criss-crossed bamboo poles. He stirred the greenish grey liquid and the poles writhed like brown vipers. As he stirred more violently the vipers spit and disappeared into their own poisonous white foam.

-- Santiago battling mango sharks is the Jow cuckold Bloom living one day in Irish Catholic Dublin.

He felt chilled as his body rose slowly from the bottom of the bath and sought to float on the surface. The sulfur again made him cough. Into the midst of crisscrossed bamboo form a pinkish-yellow flower, slightly erect, seemed to be falling from a purple sky.

"I'm ecstatic to think I can still arouse you."  
Selma was laughing as she pointed to the enlarged

section of Daled's dark blue shorts. Is this our anniversary present, she thought to herself. She tried to regain her poise, smiling somewhat shyly and demurely at her own words and thoughts.

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"Didn't you have a good nap this afternoon?"

"I must not have. It's been so hard for me to concentrate today."

"Is that why you were sitting under the bird feeder?"

Daled motioned for her to be silent; thirty seconds passed before he spoke:

"I just recalled a dream I had -- perhaps last night, I don't really remember when." Selma nodded and looked at the way in which her blouse overlapped the long blue calico dress.

"As the dream began I didn't know where I was, but I was shouting, 'Why don't you answer me, voices? You lured me here.' Only a foghorn interrupted the silence. Since my arms were painful I knew I had been swimming a long time. Then I saw a light, and of all things to do when I needed to conserve my strength, I laughed. I laughed at the light which was the Star of Bethlehem and my rescue ship and a golden palace reflecting sunlight (although it was dark).

"Yet, even though I was laughing at the light, I involuntarily shouted, 'I'm coming.' I knew there was

nothing in the fog but I was compelled to shout.

"A gangplank was extended -- which caused me to laugh harder; and my stomach began to cramp. I swallowed water and gagged, but all the time laughing and thinking to myself, 'The gangplank leading to reality -- whichever reality I choose.'

Selma felt a stretching in her throat and a sharp intake of air through her nose. Oh, no, she thought. A yawn is coming. Dear God, why now? She actually was enjoying the images of his dream. Please God let me stop it, or at least don't have him look up and see me. She clenched her teeth and jaw tightly, squinting her eyes with a bit of a grimace. Should she cough and put her hand to her mouth to hide it, or might that cause him to look up? The moment passed. He continued his dream recitation, as if nothing untoward had occurred.

"A hand, with long curved fingers, slightly hairy between the second and third joints, and well-manicured fingernails, emerged from the darkness at the end of the plank.

"I reached. Against my will. I reached. And the plank receded. I laughed angrily and thought I heard a mocking echo.

"Intertwined rainbow-colored streamers were cast over my head, followed by the low moaning of a foghorn. I couldn't tell where the sound originated, or if the streamers were thrown from ship or from land.

"I heard three shrill screams. Maybe I shouted them. But I imagined that the screams were a signal for the ship's departure. The gangplank was pulled in. Unseen cables were cast into the water. The rainbow confetti began to stretch taut, and finally snapped. The tattered fragments of a broken blue streamer landed near me.

"Nothing was left tied to its moorings."

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Selma arched her eyebrows pensively, and Daled believed she was considering the dream. He noticed that the willow leaves were no longer over the sea-shell, but had continued moving diagonally along the wall and were now resting above his wife.

As she watched Daled, she was aware of a small smile forming on her lips. "Why was I wanting to yawn?" she asked herself. Ah, even she had become trained by his constant self-reflection. She realized she was remembering his many – so many - talks to her in the past about free will. How much choice do we have? How much control over our life? And in this case, over our yawns? She noticed how even the smallest upward curve of her lips—less than a quarter inch--created such a pleasant feeling.

The smile quickly turned to resentment as she wondered why should she have to stifle a yawn if that was what she was feeling. It's as if he was trying to

program all spontaneity out of her. He calls it spontaneity when he rushes in to tell me a new idea, and feels that's fine. I'm to be there at his beck and call. Yet I'm forbidden to enter his office when he's working, and my spontaneous actions are criticized as impulsive and not thought through sufficiently.

She then looked down at her dress, and saw how frayed it was. It annoyed her that she had bought into his view that clothes were not important, and she was frivolous for buying anything pretty and beyond basic needs.

"I need another dress. This one is as tattered as your chair."

From his expression, Selma could tell that what she said annoyed him. But that didn't bother her. Shouldn't she have a right to express her needs? Was she merely a puppet having to dutifully sit and listen to his meanderings...first a lecture, now a dream?

It was always his career. I even took classes for him, she thought, writing copious notes, so he could graduate early. She fell into bitter the reverie easily and naturally for it was well worn. Yes, I got some "Thanks to Selma" credits for proof editing, and "without whom this would not have been possible." Damn right! But where was *my* career? Did he even notice the secondary role I had? Did I then? Would I now, without the cultural shift of the last decade?

She continued, even somewhat pleased at his silence, and what she perceived as his condemnation.

"We have two different view points. And contrary to what I used to believe,

that doesn't mean you're right. Because you think there is nothing but a utilitarian use for clothing, that doesn't mean... that doesn't mean..." She became confused and hesitated.

"Externals you call them. Shields for hiding. No. Dressing yourself is art. Each morning I create myself by what I wear."

At first, Daled was stunned. Why is she responding to my dream by talking about tattered clothes? But as he entered into and began to understand her non-sequitur, confusion changed to a mixture of annoyance and amusement.

"You're right, dear. In fact, your maidenform bra and girdle not only create you, they reform you. After a pause he added, "That, plus your rouge, mascara, face powder, and moustache dye..."

Daled broke off a small piece of rice cooky and began chewing it. Selma's eyes were concealed by the wrinkled curves of her eyelids and when she spoke her voice was quiet and controlled.

"During the tea ceremony in the Japanese temple there was a cup -- a pale blue cup with soft white figures. It was unfortunate when, in the middle of the ceremony, you pulled out a paper and pencil and began to count the characters."

"It was a seventeen syllable haiku."

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"You couldn't feel the cup's beauty, could you?"  
her eyes looked at him with an accusing compassion,  
"without dissecting it."

"No." Then he added phlegmatically, "It was a  
famous seventeenth century haiku by Basho."

"As if you still remember it."

"Do you care?"

She nodded almost imperceptibly and her eyelids  
again lowered.

Daled recited it.

Breaking the silence  
of an ancient pond  
a frog jumped into water --  
a deep resonance

Selma smiled and immediately responded, "I  
like it."

Daled was unwilling to be pacified

"Do you understand it?"

The smile disappeared. "Do you mean have I  
analyzed and dissected it?"

"Yes."

"No."

To avoid looking up, Daled stared into his cup  
and unseeingly watched his reflection in the motionless

tea. There was a long silence, interrupted only briefly by the cuckoo striking the half hour. Both felt tired and unwilling to continue.

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After several moments of practicing his breathing, Daled began to feel restless, and picked up his notes. Over the edge of the paper he saw Selma busily pushing honey-covered toast into an awaiting mouth. Her two rows of white teeth mercilessly crushed the crust ends, forcing honey and butter over the sides. With her fingernails she scraped the saliva-drenched crumbs of crust caught in her teeth; and her tongue, smoothly and with precision, squirmed through the mouth, capturing the clinging remains from the palates.

Selma looked up from her toast and saw Daled surreptitiously watching her. She let out a sigh of exasperation, but said nothing for a moment. Finally, she shook her head. "Let me wait until you give it officially, Daled. I can't concentrate now. And maybe you'd better make some note cards." She did not believe he could possibly memorize the lecture by seven o'clock: he still had to shower and shave and, because he could no longer see well enough, she knew he would ask her to trim his excess nostril hairs.

Each averted the other's glance. Selma did not move, and several more moments passed in awkward silence.



Daled stared into his tea cup. He admired how still he was able to hold his hands, though he almost didn't recognize the reflection of the old man staring back at him. He remembered his father once telling him that when he looked into the mirror and saw his old reflection, he would look further, at the eyes, and could still see a little joyous kid dancing around. Daled peered more intently at his own reflection in the cup.

"How much longer do I have to endure this tea ceremony" Selma thought. Yet to leave before the prescribed time had passed would feel like admitting defeat....both for Daled, and if she were completely honest, for herself. Just then she heard the cuckoo strike the quarter hour, and it sounded like a temple bell to her, waking her, shifting her mood. She thought of the haiku he'd just read and wondered what she could do to break the silence of their ancient pond.

Selma picked up a sugar cube and slowly lifted it toward Daled's cup. As it fell, the tea splashed outward against the sides, shattering his reflection; some spilled over into the saucer and the cube clinked echoingly against the cup's bottom.

Daled was startled, his reverie disturbed. He looked up angrily only to see Selma's smiling face, and hear her say "Wa" for a second time this tea ceremony. And with just the same sensuous intonation. Harmony, he thought. She's reaching out to build a bridge. She's really much stronger and wiser than me. Anger gave way to gratitude.

Selma continued, "I saw you practicing yoga today." She thought of his blue and purple varicose veins which had seemed to be discolored extensions dripping from his shorts.

"Yes, my breath isn't as bad as I had expected. And the old legs are still pretty limber." He stretched his right leg and gave Selma a kick on her backside, which thrust her into motion.

"Lustful old man, you stop that."

"Be careful what you say, dear. The dirty old man's in trouble when he believes he can no longer get a piece."

"A what!?" Selma reacted with obviously feigned anger and accusingly pointed her middle finger at Daled.

"A piece of rice cooky. I'm just about to eat my last piece. Would you be so kind as to get me another?"

"You need more than a piece of rice cooky to chew on, dear." Selma ran her hands playfully through Daled's bush of grey hair, then winked as her backside began to gyrate in large arcs towards the kitchen.

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Just as she reached the door's exit, Daled called to her and said in a deep authoritative voice, but with a cheerful gleam in his eyes:

"Selma, do you know the most painful experience man encounters?"

Selma felt the tone didn't match the joy they were just experiencing, and was caught off guard. Why doesn't he just let me leave the room, without calling me back like a yoyo. "I don't know," she replied with some annoyance as she turned back to him, looking down.

"You must try."

"To give you the satisfaction of telling me I'm wrong?" She smiled ambiguously.

Daled still felt cheerful, but noticed some frustration at her unwillingness to play along.

"You must try."

"To give you the satisfaction of telling me I'm wrong?" She smiled ambiguously.

"Exactly." Daled was waiting impatiently.  
"Well...?"

"Man's most painful experience is being forced to answer pseudo-intellectual koans with precise, non-intellectual answers."

"Wrong."

"Satisfied?"

"Man's most painful experience occurs when he is lying in bed on a moonless night in which nothing is visible. His eyes are filled with soft sandman pieces of comfort and his eyelids are shut like heavy steel gates. He has several more luxurious and comfortable

hours left to sleep. But one thing stops him. From the depths of his stomach he feels a pain. It surges and pounds against his intestines, like existential anguish, crying to be freed. He knows it will not be stilled and will give him no peace, for the pain continues to throb and demand release.

"Groping into the black nothingness, he is forced to raise his tired aching body and with slow, painful steps to seek an outlet. Finally, laboriously, he reaches what he hopes will give him temporary relief from his inside's agony. With a last exhausted effort he withdraws his penis and urinates long and gracefully."

Selma understood that this long winded story reflected Daled's sense of humor and was his version of a joke. She gave a small nod, smiled delicately, and wordlessly made her exit.

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Daled thought he could take a few moments while she was gone to go over the final passage of his lecture. But just as he started to pick up the notes, he remembered a dream from the night before. It was such a strange dream. When was it? 3:15a.m? It woke him, and he had looked over at Selma, who was still asleep. Or was that part of the dream? Chuang-tzu? He remembered walking outside and onto the suspension bridge. Below, he could hear the waterfall rushing into the gorge, and could see the moon, up a half-hour,

and nearly full, reflected in the water. The Chinese Sisyphus--  
the man in the moon -- was chopping down the symbol  
of eternal life: a cassia tree. All the time he was  
chopping he knew the tree would regrow and he would  
have to begin again. The moon went behind a cloud,  
and when the man reappeared, I could once more see  
my shadow.

"He chopped, accompanied by the waterfall which  
plunged into the ravine and crashed painfully onto  
the rocks. From its pain came the white foam,  
reflected in the moonlight. Man and water were one.  
There was a beauty in the water's fall over the abyss."

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He got up to find Selma, He wanted to share this Chuang-tzu like  
experience with her, and didn't want to wait until she returned. He even wondered  
whether she noticed anything unusual last night about this presence—or lack  
thereof—in bed.

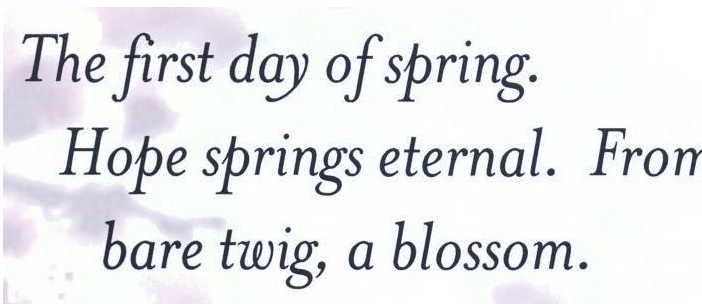
But he realized there was something else he wanted to share. About their  
relationship. It was an inchoate thought, or feeling-- that their relationship with a  
bit like Sisyphus. They both tried, really tried, to push the rock of their  
relationship up the mountain. And that it kept rolling down was not just her fault.  
He felt he needed to apologize to her for his shortcomings, too. He felt a mixture of  
regret, sadness, guilt, even devastation that this is what their reality was. Too  
strong, he thought, don't go there. There is something noble in our effort. That we  
keep trying. And remember, Camus' Sisyphus ends with the line "One must  
imagine Sisyphus happy."

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Glass covered Li Sung's Sung Dynasty painting which hung on the wall between the two beds. On the other side of Selma's bed, on the night table, lay a brown sack containing extra rice cookies and a present which she had bought him for their anniversary. On Daled's night table the luminescent watch was still lying face down.

"The prototype of the absent-minded professor." Standing in the entrance to the bedroom, Selma smiled sadly to herself. "I'm not even angry that he didn't remember our anniversary today."

She entered the room to pick up the brown sack containing her present for him for their anniversary. She had thought of wrapping it prettily, but hadn't because he would just say "Zen simplicity—no fancy wrapping and bows needed." Next to the brown sack was a poem she had written a few weeks ago.



*The first day of spring.  
Hope springs eternal. From a  
bare twig, a blossom.*

She wondered whether she should give it to him as part of the present? As she was debating, she looked up and saw the dark outline of her form reflected in the Sung painting. Her features were indistinguishable and merged with the picture, toning it one shade darker.

She stared at the picture, and noted particularly the man with yellowish green skin sitting on a brown thatched chair and hunched forward over his bamboo stick. Above, the trailing vines of two willow trees twisted into dark ravens with hunched shoulders and mouths hanging greedily. The trunks of the trees seemed to her like coiled serpents which grew into the vulture's talons.

The man's greenish brown robe emerged from the willow's shadow and flowed over his shoulders and stomach, revealing wrinkled lines of flesh tissue on his chest and a faint trace of muscle in his bent right arm. She noticed that the man's face was etched into a brown circular setting sun and that he was looking past two men who, though in the foreground preparing tea, were one-quarter his size. He was oblivious to their actions and to the pale brown lotus leaves lying in the green dirt which, although firm, looked like the scum of a muddy river.

He seemed to be looking at something coming towards, or going away from him; and, either through bitter defiance or resignation, he was determined not to express his emotions.

She saw herself in the picture, superimposed on Daled.

"Admiring Li Sung's Arhat?"

She bent across her bed, picked up the brown sack and tried to hand it to him.

She couldn't understand the intensity of emotions the picture had produced in her.

“Hey, precious girl, you look like you’re going to cry. What’s wrong?”  
Selma said nothing and set the sack on his bed.

"Selma, look at the brown circular nimbus framing the monk's head in the picture: the sign of a Buddhist saint who has arrived."  
Selma remained silent, and Daled turned to the sack on the bed. "Hey, what's in the brown bag? More rice cookies?"

In the glass covering the painting, Daled saw Selma's reflection walk out of the room. He picked up the sack, and opened it as he followed her through the glassed hallway into the kitchen. She had turned the gas up and was standing over the kettle, her back to him.

"What is this. Birdseed. Why in God's name did you..."  
He brusquely turned her around. She buried her face on his yellow shirt which became wet.

"Don't. Wait." Daled fumbled for words as his right hand reached for her head. "Tomorrow I'll refill the water trough and put the seed up above. Don't worry. I bet all the red birds will come back."

The tea kettle's shriek drowned out the cuckoo striking the hour, but only partially muffled her sobs. Daled turned the gas off with his left hand while his right hand continued to pat her hair. He felt confused about what he should say. He looked past the grey bun on her head and out the kitchen window.

"Look, Selma, outside our kitchen window we have our own sacred



Japanese torii." He pointed to the two laundry poles and the connecting rope, and described to her how her bras and girdles were sacred white paper hanging from the torii, and blown by the wind.

"Selma, the characters of the word torii mean 'to be a bird.' Perhaps the one who walks through it is given the gift of soaring to the heavens."

Selma didn't look up.

"Instead of memorizing his extemporaneous non-speech, do you know what your husband was really doing today?" Selma didn't answer. "See the torii." Daled succeeding in turning her around and pointed to the laundry poles and line. "It's also a sail; the water trough on the feeder--that's the crow's nest. Look how the shadow of the bird feeder comes right to the edge of the house, like a mast connected to the ship."

"I'll tell you what. Why don't you go sit down. This time I'll bring you some tea." Daled searched through the cupboards for several minutes until he found the bamboo whisk and container of green powdered tea. "For once, we're really going to do it right," he thought to himself.

He poured the boiling water and stirred the tea into a white tea bowl surrounded with phoenixes. He remembered that to the Chinese the phoenix was the symbol of yang, the masculine forces of nature, the day, the sun. The phoenixes reminded him of redbirds.

He had picked a white cup so they would be able to see the color of the tea and had poured only one bowl so they would have to share.

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As he turned to leave the room, he saw her poem. He read it carefully, and was initially moved by it. Selma conveyed in the poem the same feeling tone that

the white tea bowl, the phoenix, the redbirds, had created in him. He felt indeed they were once again on the same wave length....and actually, despite their differences and challenges, they always had been, at the deepest level, so profoundly connected and so right for each other.

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He read the poem again. The first line was adequate. It set the temporal stage-- a concrete chronos “moment of time”—the first day of spring. The second line uses the root “spring” to “link” to the first, though with slightly different meanings, past and future. “Springs” is an active verb and looks toward the future (hope). Not bad.

He again re-read the second line. Something in it felt off to him, a bit saccharine, even highfalutin. And is that line even true to Zen—which seeks the here and now, not some hopeful future?

Reading the third line, he began to reconsider the thought he’d just had about the second line. She does bring that future hope back to the present in the third line, grounding the “abstractness” and future of line two in the concrete image of line three. “A blossom.” What an evocative image. It’s used here as a noun, but also “blossom” conveys a sense of active verb properties.

He shook his head quickly. There I go again. Just as Selma says, always judging, dissecting. Why not just enjoy the poem and its heartfelt meaning? Am I jealous that she is more creative than I am? I critique haiku. She writes it.

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Daled quietly walked toward the tea room, carrying the white cup and the poem.

When he entered the tea room, he saw Selma sitting in his chair reading the lecture. Her pink and blue flowered blouse harmonized with the blue chair and again reminded him of a multi-colored sunset. He stood, unnoticed, watching her.

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As Selma walked towards the shadow of her body lying in Daled's chair, she saw the form of her head on the far wall. When she sat, shadow joined form.

She picked up his lecture and leafed through some pages entitled:

Is the Valley?

Therefore nothing exists

An Investigation into Sumiye, Sunyata,  
and Buddha Nature as Mirror

Handwritten in red ink in the upper right-hand margin was an insert: "One must insure that calm and peaceful acceptance isn't, in actuality, apathy and indifference." The titles didn't interest her, and as she set the papers on her lap and looked towards the kitchen, she saw Daled. He startled her and she felt a panicky chill as if she had done something wrong. She started to vacate the chair but was annoyed at her instinct.

"Feel better?"

She nodded without looking up. Daled set the tea bowl down on the tatami next to the one remaining piece of rice cookie. Then, after rubbing his goatee in mock pensiveness, he put his hands on the arms of

the chair and shoved his old-fashioned horn-rimmed glasses towards her face. In the thick convex lens covering his left eye, Selma saw the blurry image of her self approaching. As he came still closer, the image magnified and her nose mushroomed, consuming her face. She remembered that long ago he had told

tea bowl down on the tatami next to the one remaining piece of rice cooky. Then, after rubbing his goatee in mock pensiveness, he put his hands on the arms of the chair and shoved his old-fashioned horn-rimmed glasses towards her face. In the thick convex lens covering his left eye, Selma saw the blurry image of her self approaching. As he came still closer, the image magnified and her nose mushroomed, consuming her face. She remembered that long ago he had told

her that when she kissed him, her lips were too slobbery and reminded him of a fish sucking air.

Yet, at that moment, she really wanted to kiss him, and hold him tightly to her. As she tried, her nose started to bump into its image on his glasses. She gently tried to remove his glasses, but, as she did so, Daled pushed her hand forcefully away, causing her to fall back into the chair, and he nearly falling on top of her.

Balanced on one shaking arm he spoke bitterly through clenched teeth. "I've told you before never to touch my glasses."

Selma felt a bitter angry cry welling up with her. But the cry never surfaced, and turned into a caustic, haughty laugh as she pointed to his shaking arm.

"Careful, dear, your muscles aren't what they used to be, and you're grinding your dentures."

Daled's face flushed.

"What's wrong, my passionless Buddha saint: are worldly cares crushing you? Too old to die while living?"

She patted his arm then folded her hands in her lap. Daled's arm gave and, as he fell against the side of the chair, his leg overturned the white tea bowl. They both watched as the green tea was sucked into the tatami.

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"That was careless," Selma said distantly.

"A moment ago, were you searching for yourself in my glasses?" Daled spoke slowly and deliberately. Selma didn't answer and he continued in the same even tone. "Let me be the mirror and show you the sagging

pieces of skin protruding under your chin, the wrinkled cheeks and eyes that you try to conceal beneath rouge and mascara; and, in the mornings, the dried creams which futilely flake from between the crevices around your lips." Because he was coughing, Daled had difficulty saying the last few words.

Selma smiled complacently. "Congratulations. I didn't know you could still see so well." She picked up the white bowl and placed it on the tray with the

two black cups and soggy piece of rice

cookie. "Also dear, you're beginning to repeat yourself. Don't you remember using the terms 'rouge and mascara' just moments ago? Even your barbs lack creativity and are boring and repetitious, just like this tea ceremony. Surely you can be more creatively cruel than that..." After a pause, she added,

"Would you like me to fill the bathtub so you can go swimming?" She laughed, but not joyously.

"It no longer hurts, Selma. I'm immune." He looked at the cracks between the straw into which the tea had vanished. "Once I could swim with smooth powerful strokes -- and I found the pool confining. Now I can't reach the sides." He rubbed his hands along the slightly wet straw, as if searching. "The pool is infinitely large and I'm contented."

She clapped. "A very fine, academically detached lecture. But your memory fails. You were never strong. Never." Selma picked up the tray and began walking towards the kitchen, but turned before she

reached the door. "And I hate you for making me once believe in you."

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As Daled slowly raised himself onto the chair, he wondered if there were any words left which hadn't already been said. The cuckoo struck a quarter hour, and Daled instinctively looked for his watch. He remembered, according to his own rule, that he'd left it in the bedroom, and he sank deeper into the chair trying to find a comfortable position.

-- The sun is beginning to set later. I imagine it's going to be a long summer, he thought to himself as he watched Selma's elongated shadow disappear into the kitchen.

\* \* \*

Settled into the old blue chair, Daled felt tranquil and complete -- as if, in retrospect, it was inevitable that he now be sitting there. His past choices had been correct, part of the upward spiral whose climax would be the lecture: his moment of communication with people of all ages.

-- Ladies and gentlemen, fellow colleagues and students: The literal translation of the Chinese characters for Ch'an, or Zen, Buddhism is simple cloth. Therefore, in keeping with the Zen ideal of simplicity and spontaneity, I prepared no talk but rather drank several glasses of wine, toasting my honorary last supper. To continue in the Christian ecumenical image, if there be any betrayers among us, would they please stand.

Daled chuckled at the irony of this last line, for when he gave the speech, he would be the only one standing. Then, he mused, he wondered if by the end of the talk, he might receive a standing ovation. Oh, vanity, vanity old man. The ego still rises. I guess at least now I can notice and even smile at it.

-- When I was a young man just out of college, I felt superfluous, as the world seemed to function without my slightest intervention. Everywhere I turned someone had already been there, and everything I was interested in studying had already been learnt.

-- I was about to receive a kwat from a Zen Buddhist master. His diaphanous white robe quivered as his arm raised the stick above his closely shaved head. The candle next to me magnified his shadow

on the ceiling of the zendo, meditation hall. After he hit my shoulder, we both bowed.

-- All was still in the hall except for the sound of raindrops striking the roof. Before my closed eyes I saw the white sand of the rock garden which lay outside the zendo. The sands were carefully raked to appear like the ocean. The rain mixed with the ocean of sand; and out of the union of the two bodies of water an embryo was formed."

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Daled sat back in his chair. It was all once so clear. The new beginning. The unity. Such peace in the moment, such hope for that little baby embryo.

Ding a ling. Pause. Ding a ling.



He heard Selma pick up the phone and break into laughter. A moment later, she struck her smile head into the tea room. He didn't even mind the interruption. A little laughter would be a wonderful respite.

"It's too bad we great big adults don't have some of children's honesty. That was Nancy calling to say the reason Johnny and Claire didn't come by today was that they'd rather watch television than talk to old boring grandparents. By the way, Grandad, it's getting late. You'd better hurry."

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Daled sat back in his chair and closed his eyes. Images of his daughter and grandchildren flickered rapidly like a fast forward video of their time in his life.

Just as well, he thought, I'd have been pulled between trying to work on my lecture, and spending time with them. I'm sure it will all work out. Maybe they'll even surprise me and come to my final lecture. But his thoughts were belied by his hands, which were tearing at the stuffing of the chair which the tattered blue threads no longer concealed.

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He awoke with a start. How much time had passed? He wondered if he'd slept through his talk. He rose as quickly as he was able from the chair, pushing off from the arm rests, picked up his notes, still slightly damp from the spilled tea, and walked into the kitchen. Selma had washed the utensils and the blue

glazed tea pot was turned upsidedown in such a way that he was not able to see the yellow sunburst. Next to the white and black bowls was the brown sack containing the bird seed.

He thought of giving her a little pat on her backside, or a tap on the shoulder, or even a quick massage on her neck. Maybe even offer her an apology. Even though the cuckoo clock showed he still had plenty of time, he felt somewhat rushed, and didn't want to get into another long engagement with her. Also, Selma seemed busy, preoccupied and she was as prickly about being interrupted as he was so it was probably for the best not to bother her. Even as he thought this, he also felt a nudge of anger. She espouses spontaneity, yet becomes upset every time I engage in it. For both of them spontaneity had long ago gone out the window, he thought. That's why structure like the tea ceremony and agreed upon times—even for cuddling—were so important. *To both of them.* Anyway, there would be plenty of time after the lecture for more words and more touch, a joyous celebration. The after lecture cuddle was a pattern that was well worn and a lot of fun, he thought, and noticed a smile forming as he quietly

picked up the sack, placed his notes in it, and went outside to scrape the spider-web down from the feeder. The wind from the mountains, chilly now that it was dusk, blew out to sea.

As he walked along the sunken shadow mast of the bird feeder, he saw the bridge suspended in white silky threads. He passed the feeder and went to the edge of the bridge. The twisted strands of rope

coiled upward and into the first sign of evening fog which would soon blow in from the sea, causing the

fog-horn to moan at fifteen minute intervals. The wooden planks rocked under the pressure of his step. Halfway across the bridge he turned to look back at the house. It was almost totally veiled in mist -- only the dark form of the mountains behind was visible. The cold wind caused the bridge to sway, creaking the already taut ropes. The gorge below echoed the noise with its rushing current.

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Selma walked into the glassed hallway with the back of her bra exposed under a half-zipped dress. Daled had recently told her several times that he enjoyed fastening her dress and that he still found it sexually arousing to watch her brown nipples setting into the bra cups like two dark suns.

A bright light flooded the hall. Selma looked through the glass and saw a large cloud which had been concealing the setting sun. The sky was very cloudy and the sun quickly disappeared beneath the

mist which was coming in from the ocean. Selma thought the mist looked like shadowy curtains, behind which some great drama must be unfolding.

She laughed at her idea when she saw Daled standing in the middle of the bridge, which was half buried in mist.

Laughter turned to anger as she heard the cuckoo strike five-thirty. "He has to be at the University in an hour and a half, and he goes walking." She started to open the sliding doors and call to him, but decided that she'd done enough nagging for one day.

-- Maybe he's seeking some last minute inspiration before delivering the lecture.

She turned back into the room to apply some finishing touches of make-up. She was surprised how difficult it was to fasten her dress.

\* \* \* \* \*

Although the sun hadn't yet set and was barely visible through the sharp pine needles on the promontory, stars, like ships' lights, shone through the clouds.

Daled didn't hear the cuckoo strike the half hour as he walked past a lone maple tree and lay down on a large flat stone. Far below him, he heard the echoing of the interaction

of water and rock as sea and land continued to exchange places. He felt himself hanging from a ceiling and looking down at a banquet. The stars were candles unsystematically arranged on tables. They beckoned him to cease clinging to the rock and to fall freely into their nocturnal celebration.

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For some reason Selma's poem entered his mind: "The first day of spring...hope springs eternal...from a bare twig, a blossom." She did have a gift for words, a much more creative person than he was. He made a mental note to tell her that.

Then he thought of the Zen story of a person chased by a tiger, who reaches the edge of a cliff. Far below him are craggy rocks and churning ocean. He clings to a vine, on which two mice, one black one white, start to gnaw. He sees a strawberry nearby. How sweet it tasted.

He remembered how he'd once given a talk on this story—that it is ostensibly about living in the moment, tasting the strawberries of life even amidst existential chaos. But it's not so simple, because to live in the moment, you have to be aware, you have to choose what inputs to focus on. And you cannot be blind and in denial to that which is impinging upon and threatening to harm you.

He wondered if there would be space to add that story to his lecture. Then he laughed! Selma is right. This mind is always dissecting, analyzing, parsing. Why can't I just enjoy a strawberry! Maybe I should add a strawberry to our next tea ceremony. He smiled and felt full of hope.... like Selma's blossom, like the phoenix on the white tea cup soaring.

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Watching the nocturnal celebration below, a multitude of images and thoughts filled his mind....the stars are Zorba dancing, the old man dreaming of lion cubs friskily playing, Stephen Daedalus from the moo cow to soaring beyond the confines of family, religion, country. He felt Molly Bloom's "yes"; Siddhartha's "others call it magic. But I can think, wait, fast." And as he looked for the not yet risen moon, Sisyphus pushing the stone up the mountain and cutting down the cassia tree.

All random, all interconnected.

He recalled the last lines of his lecture, his unitive experience at the Zendo, "the rain mixing with the ocean of sand, and out of the union of the two bodies, an embryo was formed." Now this embryo had grown up. And was on a ceiling looking down. All that was needed was more rain, to purify, to cleanse. Perhaps now is the time to offer and ask forgiveness. A time for a new embryo to emerge....a time for rebirth.....a time for a new merging to refind the lost unity.

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Although a hundred and eighty degree skyline was exposed, a small, dark, circular smudge on the left lens of his glasses made a hole like a black void in the sky and blotted out half the sun.

By its contact with the water, the wind produced lulling, harp-like sounds and white spray, the spittle of hungry ghosts of the drowned. Daled's body shook in a cold damp shiver as an unbearable pain filled his chest. Standing, he felt unformed words -- also painful -- welling up in his heart.

Swirling in pale blue, the reddened waves reflected the clouds. He felt himself suspended between two mirrors. The pain in his heart and chest flowed together and became trapped in his mouth. He

saw the flimsy petals of a violet; and, as he reached for the sunken yellow, his mouth uttered an inaudible cry of mucus and poetry and his foot slipped from the rock. He felt the two mirrors become one as he merged with his reflection.

Although the tip of the sun was still barely visible above the horizon, it began to rain. Waves and rain merged as they washed over his drifting body.

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