

## **SOMEONE ELSE'S MEMORIES**

by Lowry Pei

As a child I, like all children, loved small worlds. Model railroads, the fantasy of life lived on a small boat, tide-pools seen on rare visits to the ocean, or a world that came and went on one warm January day when a layer of ice melted in the alley behind the house, making a whole geography of rivers and tributary streams, down which a twig could sail an epic journey narrated by me. I loved a world I could see in one gaze, a world that would fit whole into my imagination, one in which nothing could make me suffer. A world too small for me to enter in my physical form, but into which I could transport my awareness as I would transport it into a book later, when I had to go back indoors. In the world of the melting, nothing terrible had to be present; it did not include what was waiting inside my parents' house – no loneliness, no silent seething, no criticism, no disappointment. Just the journey, magically accelerated, from winter to spring.

So it still is today when I'm reading a novel I like, or am lucky enough to be in the middle of writing one.

A novel presents itself as a prodigious feat of memory, especially when it is narrated in the first person. Who, in life, could actually recall every word of every conversation, every gesture, every day's weather, keep all the chronology straight, never forget to include the small but crucial scene? The story is complete to an unreasonable degree of perfection – no matter how incomplete it is artfully made to seem. If we notice perfection less in a third-person narrator, it's only because we expect third-person narrators to have superhuman powers, to range through time and space at will, to peer into the souls and secrets of

human beings and find them more transparent than a human being ever could.

When I write the novel myself, my gazing into the tide-pool is so deep and so enormously prolonged that it becomes a better way of life. The view is best when as little as possible of my own shadow darkens the pool, when my silhouette does not loom over it, when my face is not reflected there. It's best, too, if the tide of today does not wash into the pool, because these are pools of the past. Not "what could have been" for me (a suspect notion in any case) but *someone else's memories*, not of what could have been, but of what did happen – within the world of the tide-pool.

Whatever else the novel is about, it is invariably, and mostly, about remembering and telling. None of it can begin until the someone else comes, or more precisely, the voice of the someone else, he or she who will do the remembering. It is not quite accurate to say "I write": I resolve to write, I sit down to write, I begin in a hesitant and uncertain way to put words on paper. But what actually writes writing is something else not explained. In the world of fiction that something is the voice of the narrator. I invite it to come and I shape what it writes, after the fact, but it makes the crucial utterance without which there would be no story.

It seems to me that what attracts or repels a reader is the emotional tone of the voice that remembers, which surely has a good deal to do with the author, yet is no more a reproduction of the author's entire psyche than plot is the story of the author's life. I mean qualities like the bitterness in the work of Jamaica Kincaid, the hot anger and warm sentiment in Dickens, the astonishment and amusement of Faulkner's narrators, the outrage-yet-detachment in Toni Morrison's novels, the self-irony in Walker Percy. The novel's voice says, in some characteristic tone, "I have lived, I continue to live, I remember," and behind those words others reverberate for every reader: "and so shall you." The tone of that narrating voice subliminally conveys *how* another human being has lived, how I might live.

The liberation of inhabiting the someone else, of leaving myself (but going home to my best self, the creator), is my reason for writing novels. Or my best hope when I am in the process of writing one. Not that the familiar silhouette ever entirely ceases to loom faintly visible in the novel's sky – and probably it cannot help but do so, detectable to one who cares to look for it; but in a successful book my silhouette, my shadow, comes to seem part of the natural world of the tide-pool itself, a world existing on its own, a world not constricted by the boundaries

of me. I cannot explain the alchemy by which this happens, but I know that it must.

Whitman said “I am large, I contain multitudes.” That was his picture of the imagination, or to say it better, that was his imagination, because imagination creates itself. I, on the other hand, would create a world that is not within me but outside me. I channel a voice that remembers it.

It is the aspect of memory that makes the created world a lyrical one. By “lyrical” I mean, with apologies to any dictionary, that it has a quality of sustain – a note tuned to a true pitch and held in all its fullness. Its vibration is unbroken, from the instant when it is struck to the imperceptible moment when its reverberations sink below the threshold of silence – and beyond that moment, the note continues into the ensuing silence. The lyrical is so because the mind has taken its time, has refused to be hurried, has quietly exercised its sovereignty of stopping to look, and to keep looking, until it sees. The voice of the book is not only remembering, but *has stopped to remember*; and memory has no deadline. Contemplation does not come to its fullness on time. A lyrical world is a world unfolded and dwelt upon as willingly as a love letter, with an attention that never glances up at the clock.

But life is not all love letters; it holds meanness, ignorance, cruelty, frustration, failure. It includes the daily unkindnesses, and all that inspires dread at three in the morning. It includes the unhappiness waiting at home. This being the case, can the lyrical exclude the terrible? The temptation is there – but if the terrible is omitted, one has created a confection, a candy world whose inhabitants are made of marzipan.

There is no such thing as a literature of innocence, and can be no such thing. The narrating voice must know more than it once did, often more than it wants to. What innocence the protagonist has at the beginning will be to some degree, if not entirely, lost. It can't be otherwise, because the only way to remain innocent is, at first, to refuse to live, and then when one lives anyway in spite of one's refusal, to retreat into willed illusion.

So the terrible is not omitted – but which terrible finds its way in? Like everything in the tide-pool, it is someone else's. Not quite mine, not quite the terrible from which I always have to look away, and it is the looking away which explains the blind spots in my novels: why protagonists in them have parents (especially mothers) who are off stage, ignored whenever possible, pushed to the background, poorly

realized. I have to struggle to get that part of the created reality to seem halfway real.

One mark of maturity as a writer, should I ever attain it, would be to encroach further and further upon the territory of what I must omit – to follow someone else’s memories deeper and deeper into that realm where my own are reluctant to go. The realm of art is a realm of freedom; in the creation of an art work I would hope to make a journey into the parts of life that my historical, biographical self can only feel as oppression, and experience the journey as a form of freedom. And if the reader can do likewise, that makes the reading into something far deeper than an escape.

What I must omit, what I must speak of only indirectly, what I must always leave room to disavow, so that I can always deny that I ever meant it...this, the unwritten, the half-written book, is also what I must try to write – or perhaps it is *why* I must try. Beneath the book that I do write lies the book that I dare not and in any case probably cannot write. That is the one that I secretly hope some reader will contrive to read – my accomplice reader, my unknown soul-mate, closer to me than best friend or wife would want to be, closer to me than I dare to be to myself...I confess that in long moments of weakness I write to this impossible reader who understands better than any of us are ever understood. I write sometimes dreaming that I could be known the way a third-person narrator knows the characters in a book.

What to do with such writing, written in such a spirit? If all I offer the reader is the opportunity to watch me wrestle inarticulately with torments I can’t name, hadn’t I better wise up and throw it on the pile of Writing That Didn’t Work? The goal is entirely other: to create something of value for a reader with a life of her own – a reader who wants to know what’s in it for her to read this book, when there are groceries to buy and phone calls to be answered and children to be put to bed.

There is no point in writing the book, or even the page, about how I was always so much more admirable and sensitive and above all excusable than anyone else ever realized. But should someone else – not me, but the remembering voice, or some other denizen of the tide-pool – turn out to be all of those things, so that the reader might find in that character an implicit acknowledgement of her own best self – then we might be getting somewhere. Leave me out of it. People don’t read novels to find out about the writer; they read them, I think, to enter a self-contained world where, magically enough, they stumble upon themselves.