

Butterfly

A novel

by Julie O'Yang

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"Butterfly is a tour de force...James Joyce of the Orient."

Leanne Delehanty, author and visual artist

"A passionate piece of prose full of unexpected wonderment"

Ma Jian, author of Beijing Coma

"...this is nothing like I've read before. The writing style is "different" , somewhat a la Haruki Murakami."

The Vault of Books

"...one book I really enjoyed...a mesmerising literary work which melds fantasy with reality and past with present, to weave a story of love and forgiveness...with powerful and original imagery."

Dionne Lister, Australian writer

"...Scratching, tearing. We tear with it as it tears at us -- wounding, destroying even, but never devastating, for amidst everything there is laughter." Jeremy Fernando, author of various publications. He works in the intersections of literature, philosophy, and the media and is Jean Baudrillard Fellow at The European Graduate School.

"Highly recommended!" Bibliography Masters, Brooklyn, NYC

"[Butterfly] has all the essential ingredients that makes a bestseller. There never seems to be a damp moment with the right choice of words. The book moves at a smooth pace throughout, and ends beautifully on the bank of the Yangtze River." Creative Ecstasy

第 2 章

“Come in –

Good morning, Dr. Reigan! I was just thinking about you – ”

Director Lai sits at the Gispén desk in a larky mood, a teacup clutched between two hands, steaming. Reigan has always wondered how the man does this. Somehow holding a burning hot teacup without a whimper is a skill lost to all younger generations. “You guys never knew suffering,” his father used to say when he was in a clouded mood. “You guys don’t know that people have to really suffer before they can risk doing what they love.” Nowadays kids prefer chilled ice tea from BK, Have It Your Way®. Sooner or later holding a burning hot teacup will be a legend.

“I was just thinking about you, Dr. Reigan. Sit.”

The director points to a chair across his desk.

“*Reigan*, please.” Taking a seat, Reigan requests in his vivid, kindly voice. “You are my boss and I would like to learn from you.”

“You know, Dr. Reigan. You are one of those people who have won my admiration over the years. You and I, we can fix our nation and our world together.”

“You said you were thinking of me, boss?”

“It’s something I read at breakfast. Usually I forget the stuff written in the newspaper. It’s always the same old story about Mr. Hu has become the president and Yu Stin Ki died in a place I never knew existed. Truth usually is the same old story. Why do I care? But one sentence gets stuck in my head, I keep asking myself to whom can I turn with my question. Then I thought of you.”

“What is it you read?”

“‘The soul is like a diamond’. Six words, printed in black on white. You are the one who looks into the house of the soul every day, Dr. Reigan. Brains, muscles and tissues that are given significance by the bunches of garlands of nerves. You are an archaeologist of the heart. So answer me this. Have you ever found a diamond in there?”

“I’m still a poor man.”

“No diamond? Are you sure?”

“None whatsoever. Nor glass or metal – if you are brought in “healthy”, that is, and in one piece.” Reigan raised both his hands to make air quotes.

“So why do they write such nonsense?”

“It is a wish I suppose. We want our soul to be like a diamond, shiny, robust, and forever, but instead the soul is dark, fickle, transitory and unreliable. The soul is more like...”

“A summer pond full of lotus flowers?”

“I beg your pardon?”

The director turns away in his swivel chair to face the window view overlooking the lotus pond painted fiery pink and red by the morning sun.

"I wonder why we need these pretty things everywhere we look. To hide something from our eyes I'd say, but what exactly?"

Blowing tea leaves around the teacup, he takes a silent, bird sip.

"One must take a deep dive to the bottom to explore the secrets. Treasures, lost charts, long-forgotten yarns, and ephemera. Only then he will know if it's only useless mud or there is something else –"

"Something else? Like what?"

The director doesn't speak for a while, silently looking out the window on a perfect day. Dragonflies dart in the cool of giant, inky leaves, dilly-dallying, their wings flushing flimsy. His back turned towards Reigan, suddenly he mutters in a low voice curiously highlighting every word.

"The. Truth," he says. "The. True. Splendour. Of. Our. Being."

The lotus pond existed long before the war. It's more like a resort where they work rather than a hospital – Reigan ponders – hidden in the lush greenery and breezy on hilltop during *autumn tiger* (Indian summer for the locals). Down the slope runs a brook that joins the Yangtze at one point. The big river, after skirting Shanghai, empties into the Pacific Ocean, carrying dirt and fatigue of the journey behind to finally become a sun-glazed shadow on the horizon.

When the first high-rise buildings rose among these hills – so Reigan was told by the eldest nurse of the hospital – it was 1948, one year before Chairman Mao proclaimed the founding of the People's Republic, the nurse was not yet fifteen. The engineer who drew up building plans kept the lotus pond. He didn't allow it to be closed off with cement. Because pretty flowers can inspire good Feng Shui, as she reasoned. For her, Feng Shui is looks plus a bit of Alice in Wonderland. In the years to come, people forgot all about flowers for nobody cared about anything except his own hungry belly in those days. However, the pond seemed to live another life on another planet. Like a crazed spirit, the lush field of flowers survived all those who perished during the nation's largest, most violent insanity exhibition that still makes people laugh and cry until this day.

"I'm sorry if I made you confused, young man." Spinning around in a semi-circle to face Reigan, the director speaks in his warm, metallic voice. "This is how I start my day, a little mental gymnastics is best cure for AD and the other old age disease. To let the fancy roam. Feel *free*. After that I can handle life –"

What's up, champion? I see something is bothering you?"

Reigan tells. He deliberately left out the crucial part, only arguing that they will need extra sickrooms pretty soon because the Indian summer has taken its toll blah blah blah. Isn't he supposed to take care of those who hear what is not there to be heard, who build castles on stilts of fancy? They are called: patients. And they trust him, the kind of trust only an old blind cat would have for the world since there is not much

choice left. But Dr. Reigan is seeing cobalt in the wall himself! To let the fancy roam, easy said, but whoever takes that kind of risk is either a moron or will win a Nobel Prize.

“I need the key,” Reigan says in the end.

The director lets a few long seconds pass, fixedly watching him out of a pair of austere eyes.

“All right. I want to know what the hell is going on in there. You know me, boss. If I want to be in that room, I will be in that room.”

The man doesn't move a muscle, silently studying Reigan with a fatherly expression, choosing his words with care.

“Knowing is prison. Are you sure you want to know, Dr. Reigan?”

“The answer is: YES.”

Reigan clears his throat husky of heroism.

“Then sit tight, for I have a story to tell.”



“During the Cultural Revolution, I was sent to work in the countryside together with many others. “Sending down” was the terminology. I was young in those days, and like you I wanted to do great things and change the world. I was sent down to Wuan.

“It's a small village not far from here. Sitting on the bend of the river, protected by its geography, Wuan stayed for a long time an unnoticed paradise. That's the place where I was going to reform my counter-revolutionary mind through labour for the next ten years. People thought I was lucky. Some colleagues went to the Gobi and other terrible places – not that the places were terrible, just we city boys and girls weren't made for that sort tough life. Many of them never returned home. Horrible stories. I suppose I was very lucky indeed. At any rate, I saw it for the first time in Wuan, the small fishing village on the curved shores of the Yangtze. In the beginning I thought it was an illness. Then I realised it was not. Not EXACTLY.”

Bending to blow on the tea he holds with saintly demeanour – blow, and sip – he looks at Reigan through a parting veil of steam.

“Dr. Reigan, do you remember the treeman?” Chewing on a tealeaf caught between his teeth, he asks abruptly.

Reigan has studied the medical case files of the patient in detail, he knows the entire history. Back in the 1960s, Dr. Lai, at the start of his career, took on a rare medical case. “The man who grows roots on his limbs”. Except, of course, they were not roots but extensive verruca growth. Warts mushroomed from a virus in the blood and grew little by little into lumps the size of small, burnt out pine stumps. Wild, raw

shoots thriving on human flesh. In the end, after all the shavings and trimmings, there was no man left. He became his own Eliotesque jungle! However, newspapers at the time reported that the twenty-five-year Dr. Lai had probably found a way to track the virus. He had started developing a potential treatment for the patient tortured by severe physical pain. Meanwhile, the Cultural Revolution was in full swing. The “treeman” became the reason for Dr. Lai’s future persecution. The hospital was disbanded. Doctors and nurses were sent home. The young skin specialist was sent down to work on land just so somebody like him could learn from the farmers how to fertilise rice paddies, castrate a cow and slaughter a pig, which were considered far more important tasks than finding a groundbreaking cure to save a human life. What a human life is worth is perhaps not a scientific issue. Human lives are worth less than a fly in this country. Flies can make noises as much as they like, when they like, the Chinese endure in silence. This is a nation that regards silence as the highest music!

“The other day I was in the archive to look for some old pictures. I thought he looked rather revolutionary. The Eco-mutant strikes back. Fashionable,” Reagan tries to crack a joke. “He could play the Ent in a Lord of the Rings movie. Tagline: “Made-in-PRC”, truthful, no lies, what a stupid joke!”

His boss doesn’t laugh, looking past him at something invisible.

“I met her by accident. No, she was not a talking tree and didn’t grow a beard. It’s even better or worse. You decide after we finished our story. In the morning – it was one of those ordinary mornings – so, in the morning, I went to the water tap in the village to wash myself. As I was having so much fun brushing my teeth up and down and taking my time to enjoy the scenery of the Yangtze Valley at sunrise, I heard the swishing footsteps. In the corner of my eye I caught a shadow approaching. At first I didn’t realise why she looked so glassy, she was chased behind by a whirlpool of purple and gold stars. She carried a pitcher in her hands, unglazed terracotta. That moment changed my life, mornings are never the same again!”

“Don’t tell me she was the River Empress and asked you to marry her?”

“It was the Indian summer, she came for some water to have a shower behind the bushes. She walked past me – I’m not sure how to describe the way she moved herself. Amble? Swim? Skulk? I think it’s skulking, you know, like a fire fox gambols about the looming shadows, the sort slinky, shrewd, cool treads. *I mean*, she walked like a fish if only they had legs. As if she felt my eyes on her, she swirled around and smiled at me. Then I saw her bared arms: they were *completely* covered in fish scales! I was STUNNED. I was speechless, thunderstruck by her magnificent beauty. It was absolutely a work of mad genius. She looked like the daughter of a mermaid who made love to a goldfish. An extraordinary picture, wonderfully weird, a statement I should have sympathised with during those dark years of our history. And yet this other man in me who never forgets to be a doctor said I should stop her and figure it out.”

“Did you?”

“She told me that sometimes the symptoms would abate. But every month after the full moon, the patterns would grow back exactly the same way in exactly the same golden orange hue. Her skin was glowing, dense and cool to the touch, no unevenness at all, smooth as silk bejewelled with tightly packed little sequins, gold, pearly and precious slivers. Oh! Such gorgeousness, I didn’t *want* it to be a fatal disease. She told me she was not the only one, all the way down the river there were hundreds of them just like her. Some girls may have a patch of flaked skin hidden under her armpit or in other intimate places. But only they would know the truth.”

“What’s the truth?”

The director heaves a sigh and shakes his head in uncertainty.

“Hard to say. The truth is hardly ever pure but always simple. I must say that the story puzzled me back then. It still does today.”

Looking briefly in his teacup, blowing but not drinking this time, he raises a pair of haunted eyes.

“Once upon a time there lived a young couple on the bending shore of the river Yangtze. The husband was a salt inspector, which means his job was commissioned by the emperor to control the quality of table salt. He was responsible for the distribution of good, safe salt. Every controlled ration must be given to every household in every small village along the long, long river, from tail to head. So all year round the husband had to travel, and every time he had to leave his bride behind.

“The young couple had been married for a while. On the wedding night they were delighted to find that they belonged to one another and were not meant to separate. But all year round the husband had to travel to do his job.

“Some journeys took longer than others. This time months passed. One evening at home, the wife felt lonely and sad. She cried for a long time in front of the house altar where Bodhisattva Guan Yin was venerated. After she had finished crying, she put the bowl filled with teardrops in front of Guan Yin’s feet. The Goddess of Mercy of a Thousand Arms was very touched. She loves drop, drop, slow tears. It’s her favourite sacrifice with which she will water her garden of most beautiful heart-shaped blossoms! ‘If you wish, I will change you into a goldfish,’ Bodhisattva Guan Yin spoke to the young wife, rising slowly from her gilded seat. ‘You can swim after your husband’s sampan every time he embarks on a journey. But I can do this only if you are certain. Are you certain?’ The wife nodded YES. ‘Then listen carefully,’ the Goddess of Mercy went on, her countless arms brandishing in the gloom to form a formidable maze. ‘In the hills near your house there is a lotus pond. On its edge there is a well. Drink from the water and you will change into a goldfish. It’s important that you don’t forget to take enough water from the well with you to catch up with your husband. When you have found him, drink the water you have brought and you will change from a fish into a beautiful woman. Then you can love your husband as much as you like. There is a price though for this pleasure. What is love worth without suffering and endurance?’ said Bodhisattva Guan Yin in her calm, cruel, slightly weary voice, crisscrossing her limbs. In each of

her hands she was holding a different charm. 'Because, young wife, every time you drink from the magic water, you will become another woman. Every time you visit your husband, you will witness his disloyalty. You will suffer. In the end, you will see that your man has forgotten all about you. There is another thing. You MUST swear this is a secret between you and me. If anyone, anyone at all ever comes to know of your change, you will stay a fish forever, and it's not my business to interfere with gods. I'm unable to give you back your human flesh. Do you consent?' The wife swore secrecy. 'There is no way back after I speak the incantation, do you understand?' Bodhisattva Guan Yin warned her for the last time. The wife understood. 'Well then, bid yourself farewell.'

"The Goddess of Mercy waved the lotus leaf expanding to become a gigantic umbrella concealing the most horrible secrets of the world. As white lightning flashed, accompanied by dull, rolling thunders, a vulnerable little creature materialised in the dark, with pretty, fanned fins. And so, the wife was to make acquaintance with all kinds of women, willowy or luscious, tall or tiny-footed, graceful lady or starry-eyed girl, a vast and encyclopaedic set of types. But never, ever was she to see herself again!"

"Whoa..." Reigan lets go a small sound.

"You are not convinced, Dr. Reigan. You don't believe that one could love so much that she is ready to give up being human."

"How's that?"

"Of all the tasks in the world, love is the most difficult. For one human being to love another is the ultimate; the last test and proof of our humanity. And most of us fail."

Reigan ponders for a minute.

"Carry on," he says.

"The wife became a goldfish. She went with her beloved husband on every voyage he undertook. She followed him as far as she could. She took risks in ferocious floods and the shallow mountain rills, said goodbye to monsoon and greeted icy Himalayan downpour. But at night, she would turn up at the inn where her husband stayed and make passionate love to him. Every time she was a different woman than the last."

"Did he know who they were? Did he find out that they were but one woman who loved him deeply?"

"No, he didn't. He made love to them, and he forgot about them just like he forgot her. But she did bear children for him."

"And she was a fish! She must have born him a spawn of offspring!"

"Hundreds of them, half fish half human."

"Mermaids?!"

"And they still walk around out there," the director affirms, nodding. "I saw many of them in the villages along the river during my clandestine investigative travels."

Reigan is flabbergasted, but not because of what he heard. There is a candid warmth in the voice, slightly mocking but magically spellbinding with its “hope & belief” youthfulness, a voice infused with a nostalgic ache that almost brought tears to his eyes. He remembers that his father spoke in the same way.

“That was what you saw yesterday in the morgue, didn’t you? The light and everything?”

“You knew?!”

“Everybody knows but nobody speaks. Nobody asks why. ‘Why?’ is a question rarely asked in this country. I have been told that the light forebodes heartbreaks and misfortune. Last time people saw the orange shining under the door was in a night over forty years ago. I remember it clearly because the next day the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution broke out officially in Beijing.”

“I still don’t see how these things connect – ”

“Under that room there was once a well. *Exactly*. It’s the same well whose water *cured* the wife and transformed her from fish to human. As time went by, finally the wife too forgot why she was doing all this. But she did remember what Bodhisattva Guan Yin said to her. One day, she went back to the well to drink water directly out of it. So – ”

Arching his back, the director bends deeply to finish the last tea. He stares blankly into the emptied cup for some time, lost in thought.

“What happened next?” Reigan urges.

“In the water, she saw her past rolling and rolling in front of her eyes like a movie. She saw how it got started, what she looked like before the day of judgement. She remembered how she suffered over and over again, but yet she never gave up loving her husband. I think in the watery shadows she saw her soul, playing like a movie in front of her eye, more brilliant and amazing than Koh-I-Noor. By strange coincidence – or rather it was the tuning fork of order of things – I discovered that the village where I was sent to work was named after the well. Wuan: *forget me not*.”

“You have been to the room. *Haven’t you?* Why didn’t you tell me?”

“What is there to tell? That I’m losing it and I can join Dr. Reigan’s Timmy Tammy Tommy in La Tofu Nutty Teahouse? No, thanks. I think I made other plans for life.”

The man laughs shortly. “When you are young you are easily tempted. So to answer your question. Yes, I was tempted once.”

“Did you find something?”

“Not much I’m afraid. A bed, one of the old-fashioned ones we had in the hospital, creaking like hell. White, clean sheets folded in a square as if waiting for the patient from long ago to return. I found some trails left haphazardly on the dusty floor, no human footprints, though. Have you ever seen loaches struggling for life on dry land before snapped up by a crane, Dr. Reigan? It’s a beautiful spectacle, beautifully cruel. Well, there were these crimson gingery shiny little pieces all over the place. I came from a fisher’s family, I scaled fish since I was four. I fancied fish skin as a child and collected scales of all kinds of strange fish washed ashore. From

the thin round crystal plates I would make my own phantasmagoria lantern. But the strangest thing was the floor. It's not the common cement floor. Instead, it was entirely covered in mats."

"Mats?"

"Stone-grey tatami, large and comfortable, like from a trendy home magazine – I know, it is too good to be fiction."

"What else? Did you see more weird things?"

"That's all I believe. Oh, there *is* something. I don't remember why I took them. Perhaps for the sake of remembering now I come to think of it, like a souvenir –"

The man colours from embarrassment. Rising from his place, he walks to the cupboard. A grimy box appears with well-worn, old-style record sleeves lined up inside, tinted from a remote era. The box lands between them with a thud. Reigan leafs quickly through the old gramophone records. Smart covers with pretty girls in pretty clothes only seen on pretty pictures like these. The roaring night life of roaring clubs in roaring Shanghai in the Roaring Twenties.

"Jazz?"

"Music of the body. I think all doctors should listen to jazz. It reminds me of a healthy, strong heart pulsing in the night."

He is talking about the EKG, the electrocardiograph used to detect heart abnormalities and diseases.

The director turns to choose a dark pink sleeve from the box, inspiring shots of the old dust. He paces off to turn on the record player he has sitting on top of a shelf. A rasping female voice suddenly flows out to fill the gloomy space with a sundrenched song:

*Summertime
And the livin' is easy
Fish are jumpin'*

...

Pensively, Reigan stands up to leave. He feels even more puzzled than before he came, but completely hooked on the idea to get to the bottom of things. A phantasmagoria indeed. Which ghost is so picturesque and fantastic? His mind dwelling on the bizarre story, he walks down the long corridor past the curve when he hears the warm trombone voice rising behind him above the raspy tune from the ancient album:

"It's time you write medical history, *little bastard!*" Playfully mocking, fatherly.

...

So hush little baby