

Fragments of Retrospection

Zhao Gang

When I began an introduction for a publication of an artist friend's work, memories from my youth returned to me. He and I lived in the same neighborhood when we were children, though we did not know each other back then. As I wrote for him, the landscape of our pasts unfolded across the page.

The peacefulness pond was located just outside the Beijing City Wall towards the northwest, next to the Qing Dynasty cemetery where some of the Manchuria warriors were buried, also named The Little Heaven.

On the west edge of the pond stood the steel mill. Sometimes, in the end of the day, the steam covered the red sky, which gave you a sense of industrial hope and constantly reminded you of the future of New China. The shadows of the chimney gently laid over the tranquil surface of the pond.

However, during the Cultural Revolution, the legendary pond became a death place. Many people couldn't bear the purge and the harsh treatment, and chose to hang or drown themselves. Maybe because the sleeping pills were not available at that time, the eternal peace of the pond became their ultimate destiny. They hung themselves in the dark wooded area, or walked into the pond after night had fallen. One of them, a celebrated playwright, Lao She, walked into the center of the pond in the night, and never came back.

Later the city government decided to build a subway repair station in that place by filling it up with demolition debris from the West Gate, where the Guomindang government relinquished power to the Communist Party.

Ma Jie grew up by the pond, and like many others persecuted during this time, moved from the center of the city to this place. His father was a Guomindang policeman, but his ultimate wish was to become a Communist Party member. His dream never came true.

It was 1972. I could see clearly see my friend on the edge of a tomb that was ten meters deep. I also saw water and rotting woods. I had heard stories that Manchurian warriors were buried there. One head was missing from its corpse; the legendary golden cast of the head was never found. As I walked beyond that grave, I saw more graves. The tombs stretched across the West part of Beijing. I found them endlessly fascinating.

One day there came word that we were being attacked by enemies. We had to dig tunnels underground to carve out shelters for ourselves. While digging underneath my elementary school, I found bones. When I came home, I told my grandfather what I had seen. Tears rolled down his cheeks. Only some 20 years later did I realize that I had exhumed my own family's graveyard. At a family gathering I learned that my father sold articles from the graves to make a living.

We lived in a courtyard, behind which there was a cliff overlooking farmland. In my memories of the landscape, the sky always seems wide. When looking along the horizon's extension, I often wondered what was beyond the fields of crops. A neighbor of mine told me that, at one point there were many pine trees, several hundred years old, rooted in the soil of my family's graveyard. My grandfather had sold this land to farmers. The money for it bought opium.

1983, when I first visited Paris: I spent most of my days walking through the city's Père Lachaise graveyard. I was drawn to the landscape of tombs and simulated temples, where I found the Western world I strove to imagine throughout the years. As I became a painter, I often wondered how I could paint such a landscape. I think back to the landscape whenever I listen to Wagner, imagining him playing in that graveyard. I think back again wherever I see white powder as I alternate between thinking of it as ashes and as snow.

I felt so melancholic during my stay in Europe, which extended beyond a year. I often looked at the swans swimming along the river in Maastricht. For a long time, I didn't know where I was. I didn't have enough money to buy myself a drink, to see myself through the loneliness. I felt that the city was made of spaces that did not relate to each other as they floated around me, as if I were submerged in a dream. I didn't know how long I would stay. Holland was gray, flat, and dark. Nothing else.

In the summer of 1976, we were at a party with my sister and father, by the woods. Many friends came, and the party carried on very late. It was hot. Fine rain hung in the air like a mist. A friend of my father had a bag of frogs, and he chopped their legs off, from the waist down, then cooked the legs for us. The top halves ran away into the woods. Even though 3:00 AM had passed, no one seemed to want to leave the party. I finally went to sleep. Then I heard a loud sound, so loud it was like a bomb had dropped, like the bomb we waited for while digging shelters under my school. Everything shook. The wall next to my bed fell down. I ran out of the house. I looked up at the sky toward the east. It was dark red across the top, yellow red along the horizon. It seemed the entire sky was burning. Sound was coming from underground. Soon, I started to hear people scream.

Then came the light of day. All of the buildings I had seen just yesterday had disappeared. The land was flat, just flat. I saw other houses that had been demolished, beaten into the ground. As I walked, people said hello to me, but no one said what had happened. I saw a pile of black sand with a hole in the center, from which water flowed. I tasted the water; it was very bitter. I saw dead horses and other animals lying about. Suddenly, there was nothing to eat. The only thing I could find were apples from the tree. Two days later someone cooked a dead horse, the first time I had tried horse meat.

I saw a woman change her tampon in public. She was the wife of a Peking University literary scholar, who was interned for allegedly stealing meal tickets. A lot of the criminals married women who were challenged in one way or another. No other women would marry them because they were subject to persecution, so they found women in remote areas. There was a clear shortage of women in the camp.

In the evenings after dinner, a group of people gathered to play guitars. One woman was the sister of a notorious spy in Manchuria, or so they said. She commanded the Manchurian army, and my grandfather was one of her colonels. She was later persecuted by the Guomindang. Years later I made a painting of her.

We tried to escape and find a way home as we walked along the railroad tracks, twisted like spaghetti. I saw gaps, miles-long, in the ground as we walked. They were burying dead bodies, piling them in. In the gaps they layered limestone powder, then sprayed chemicals. The atmosphere turned fuzzy, like steam.

One time I noticed my father had removed every piece of our finest dishware from the house. He took them to the back and started smashing them. Soon there was a small mountain of porcelain at the back of my house. After he came back, he took out all his worn out shoes and chopped them up. Three days later, a bunch of upperclassmen from my school stormed my house, looking for everything. I wanted to protect my toys, but I couldn't. They smashed them, smashed my truck. From that point on I wanted to kill someone. For the next 30 years I constantly got involved in fights, always thinking about the guy who smashed my toys, always wanting to kill him.

They threatened to shave my sister's head because she was pretty. They had shaved the head of my elementary school principal, Madame Don, taking off all of her naturally curly hair. They made Madame Don wear a man's uniform as she swept the floor of the elementary school, and they made her drink water out of a pissing jar. They could have done the same to my sister, I thought.

I moved with my family to a huge courtyard, where we had a slew of neighbors. It was summer. I saw many kids in the courtyard. Many of the girls wore bloomers, to my delight. Mothers were topless as they washed clothes and cooked around the courtyard, chatting all the while. They all seemed like one big, happy family. I wandered into the next courtyard and found the same. There were miles of these courtyards, a sort of ghetto of them. We lit fires in the public toilets. The boys loved to play in the public toilets. They smelled good when they burned.

In 2001 I came to Beijing to look for where I had once lived. The places were no longer there.

Munich, 1991: The city lay under a blanket of snow. I stayed in the apartment for three months. Every day, I looked out from my window onto the snow, and from the snow to Munich's opera house. A roommate talked to me about visiting a concentration camp as a way to locate the origins of Nazism. As I read stories about the concentration camps, I looked at the snow, thinking of ash. There were many chimneys in my apartment, and they surrounded the room in a circle. I often wondered how they burned humans to ashes. Every time I walked along the alley toward the Munich opera house, I thought of Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* and of the German landscape. To this day, every time I go to Germany, I take a walk and think about three things: ash, snow, and symphony.

April 4, 1976: Many people gathered in Beijing. They wore blue suits with a black armband, others wore red armbands. They stormed the square. They quickly became a mountain of people. To this day, I can see the blue hill, spotted with black hair and yellow faces. A few days later a ringing pervaded the square. The trees were soaked with water. All the streets had been sprayed clean. Here and there were bloodstains—evidence that something had happened.

I've often heard about the gardens in Suzhou. If there is a heaven on earth, it can be found in Suzhou, as they say. Before finally visiting Suzhou, I often wandered around the Summer Palace in Beijing. When I tired of that, I went to the Yuanmingyuan to wander the imperial garden that had been burned down by foreign invaders. How the place was torched was a mystery. There, I started to associate the landscape with "The Wasteland," the poem by T. S. Eliot. There was always hope at the end of the day as the sun set over the Yuanmingyuan. The darkness sometimes lit up my imagination.

In 1979, I visited Suzhou for the first time. I was deeply disappointed. I didn't understand what I saw. I returned to the Yuanmingyuan and to making paintings of its wasteland. Red sky and green grass always appeared in my paintings. Some years later my psychiatrist told me those were early signals of my depression.

On the west side of Beijing is the Purple Bamboo Park. I went there to make paintings of its lotus pond and willow trees. There I met many other artists and poets, like the No Name Group and Bei Dao, some of whom I had also seen at the Yuanmingyuan. In the spring, everyone came to paint the flower blossoms, but I could not paint them. In the park, my life as a painter began.

A handful of years after I left China, I started to retrace my memories of that era, making vague references to what came before. I had become an alcoholic, often

drinking till four or five in the morning. One morning in 1989, I was hanging out on the streets of New York with other alcoholics. I picked up a copy of the New York Times and read the headline on the front page, but I could not continue reading until the next morning...

Two years ago I took the time to thoroughly explore Suzhou. I found the architectures so intriguing. Every corner I turned seemed to have a story, and every time I found myself wondering what had transpired at each one. I glimpsed specters of salacious stories and political discussions. I explored mazes with water and rocks. This time I took black and white photographs that stripped the gardens of their colors. For their hues I deferred to my memories of that era. The color faded, perhaps into the past or perhaps toward the future. I have often found watercolor to be pregnant with the possibility of blocking thinking beyond.

I am delighted to show my paintings in the Suzhou Art Museum's old wing, which once was the headquarters of the Taiping Rebellion during the Qing Dynasty. The Taipings were a Christian sect who rebelled against the Qing, then established themselves in Suzhou with an authoritarian decree of heaven and peacefulness. This decree is rather incongruous, though, since Suzhou served for centuries as both a psychological battlefield and a secluded retreat for the ex-civil servants who built gardens there. This dual purpose for Suzhou's gardens reminds me of how Daoism was born from Lao Tsu's retreat from political turmoil into bamboo forests.

The ex-civil servants who designed Suzhou's gardens were among those who retired without penalization by the government, whereas others lived in misery. The gardens are wild materializations of the their imaginations, constructed with their happiness, sadness, desire, and lust. Across their gardens there are myriad extensions that terminate in dead ends shrouded by bamboo. These dead ends leave veiled in mystery the stories the garden designers told through their construction. Perhaps these elusive appearances were meant to invoke the aesthetic principles of Chinese landscape, which values cultivation over representation. Likewise, Chinese landscape painting pursues what is beyond the physical presentation of the landscape. Its painters deliberately interweave graceful forms of nature and mysterious atmospheres, opening the question of what have you lost.