

Butterfly

A novel

by Julie O'Yang

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*There were hints of sunrise on the rim of the sky, yet it was still dark, and
the traces of morning color were like goldfish swimming in ink.*


Truman Capote, *The Muses Are Heard*

*Time to gather lotus in the Yangtze Valley,
As lotus leaves are fair and lusty.
Fish frolic amidst the lotus leaves.
Fish frolic to the east of the lotus leaves,
Fish frolic to the west of the lotus leaves,
Fish frolic to the south of the lotus leaves,
Fish frolic to the north of the lotus leaves.*

A *Yuefu* poem from Han dynasty (206 BC-220 AD)

Life,
Love,
our Country,
our Liberty.

Dedicated to a past and a future

*My thanks go to everything under heaven, to my
parents who bear with me, to P & D, "a nation of three",
to all my (non-) virtual friends for your love. And thank
you, Robert Masterson for your generosity with your
time and your friendship. *

Part I. *Une passion Chinoise*

Part II. Chasing butterfly: Confessions of a murderer

Part I. *Une passion Chinoise*

第 1 章

Dr. Reigan walks down the corridor that smells of antiseptics. *The odour of death.* He prefers it more to the bottles of scents Alice lined up this morning on the breakfast table. “We are taking this into production. I need your opinion,” she said pushing the unscrewed flasks over in front of his rice porridge. Little spheres of white porcelain. Curved zeros, lonely. Alice pushed them one by one with her long fingers, trimmed, deep scarlet nail polish. “What was the name of this one again?” he asked while taking a guarded sniff from the bottled fragrance concocted by his wife. “*La mémoire,*” the scent composer answered in dreamy tones. “Shush!” she added quickly in thrilled undertone, her cheeks rosy. She looked like a doll. “Perfume is like happiness. As soon as you try to explain the magic it’s gone,” said the doll with beautiful long fingers and scarlet nail polish.

True, you can’t argue with the science of scent just as one cannot cancel out the question of life, Dr. Reigan ponders. In fact with this whole bolded capitalised Q, the quiz still kills him every single day, and there are nights that it really gets to him. Him, a human male in his early thirties, already a veteran in this work, walking down the passage that smells of death in his bouncy, quiet paces right at this moment. Like in real life, the journey through the hospital can be tragic, painful or

sometimes just plain funny, although the professional protocols do not allow virus-related humour like computers; as a medical doctor you aren't supposed to be bored with your patients. The distance of no more than a hundred metres which he walks daily – he knows every inch of it, every detail is as he imagines it could be – but which would transport him beyond these grey walls to alight on an eternal path paved with childhood dreams and flying machines! He *feels* happy. Perhaps this was why he opted to study medicine many years ago, although his father rather saw him becoming an architect, Reigan recalls. As a child he showed a gift in drawing, and his father had a fascination for ancient Roman concrete buildings.

“They hold the spirits of people who once lived in them. Buildings don't rot away like human flesh. Concrete lasts; love does not. Love is a star in dark sky: in the end all stars DIE.”

His father's words. He died last summer; Reigan hadn't had the chance to prove he was wrong about love.

Concrete.

Reigan repeats the word voiceless as he walks down the cement corridor. Darkness, coldness, and cruelty. Just like our existence, but nothing more. He wonders why such material was ever created, except that you could find in there some proof badly needed for this evanescent, day-to-day life, a metaphor perhaps, in an attempt to hold onto that which you believe is the hard copy of reality. Polished concrete, decorative concrete, concrete lace. He recalls the ad he sees every morning along the highway to work. “Build something great. Luminex Concrete is your triumph over life's threats and calamities.”

Concrete. Concreto. Com, together. Cresco, to grow. Latin. Memory made of rubble, that was the secret of Pantheon, a temple for the illustrious dead honoured for the wars they fought. War, the undying temptation. War. And love.

War is concrete matter, solid with certain components, love by contrast is but a delicate, elusive song we sing. So Dr. Reigan thinks while meandering his way to the

morgue. Corridor, then another corridor, parallel, like two luminous lines taken from an haiku, with the interval of the lift. This afternoon he has to check on a case of brain death. It came a bit out of the blue, but it does happen, and Reigan said he would. After all, he is in charge of the neurological department of the hospital.

He remembers the day he got the job.

"We could use some young daring brains. I believe it's time for us to make our dreams come true. Give it your best shot and make us famous, Dr. Reigan!" the hospital director said at his job interview. He said he had read Reigan's article in the renowned medical quarterly: "Most *intriguing*." When he was up and started walking towards the door, Reigan heard the deep, clear trombone voice speaking behind him.

"One more thing..."

Reigan halted and spun around, more sharply than he had intended.

"Please, Sir?"

"Oh nothing. I was just thinking...Your name, young man. Doesn't it mean something like "magic remedy"? If I'm not mistaken, *Rei* stands for the mind or magic – yes, only in a language like ours you can say two things using the same ideogram, from which I could but draw one conclusion: our mind is magic, and *Gan* suggests a small, medicated candy. You are meant to be a champion, I imagine!" *Yeah, well, what's in a name*, Reigan remembers he thought at that moment, since he knew his new boss' family name was Lai. Lai is like a Pandora's box full of goodie gifts from a hug to a lazy dragon. But it can also mean an illness and has a hint of "eczema" in it. Dr. Lai studied dermatology in his younger days. He treated the "treeman", one of the most peculiar cases of skin disease ever recorded in medical history. The patient grew gnarled, root-like extensions on his limbs, so many of them that in the end he looked like a tormented Were-Willow!

Five years have passed since that job interview. War and love. Love and war. Reigan has seen plenty of the odd pair in action over the years as he contended with the jealousy of his peers, managed blade-to-blade combat for every attack on his irregular approach towards each individual case. He found the one thing the world is consequent about is its tight-fisted kindness. Therefore, love seems an alien creature from outer space.

"Hello! My name is Romeo. I'm green, I'm from Mars. We come in peace – shoot to love! Dr. Tender Warrior, you are brilliant! You are a GENIUS!" His wife Alice would poke fun at him for being a dreamy egghead. All's fair in love and war. In time, the neurological research centre Reigan leads has risen to be one of the most influential institutes in the field. He won his war. Now people say: I knew it. They say it in a way as if he owed that to THEM.

Reigan pushes the button. The lift starts with a jolt, and soundlessly descending like a cold snowflake into the "blind world", one of Dante's quizzes packed with metrical queen bees and lusty lover. The world runs on guilt and pains plus some medicine. He clenches one icy fist as the lift halts. The door opens with a smooth shuffle. He steps out into the desolate, grim space. The door behind him shuts. Drawing a deep breath, he resumes his unperturbed pace towards the heavy metal door at the far end of this particular corridor. Overhead a moth thrashes about an electric light tube flickering on and off. Except for the pinging sound and delicate beating wings that are the only sign of life, the entire floor is so deadly quiet that it feels like a subterranean vault, even the air has that curious, sterilised reek of eternity. "It's the smell of Afraidium, son," his father once explained fear to him when he was little. "It's yellow and tastes like chicken."

Reigan hesitates a second. Reaching out to type the access code, his other hand floats to turn the stainless steel handle. A quick blast of frigid, icy air slinking across from deep inside, caressing his cheeks. He swallows, a sensation in his belly like a tickling, sharp talon. Princess Barefoot is not taking her day off from duties. He is

struck by a wave of anxiety he knew ever since he was a child when encountered with the unfamiliar. The effect of death never seems to wear out. Even in the morgue of a hospital, death put under clean, white sheets, death fixed in ice cells, it's the old death brand new each time. Awkward. Foreign. Like death.

Clearing his throat, he approaches the stretcher cart. He pulls the sheet with one quick tug. Starched quality cotton, rustling. The woman's face shows. Very normal. So normal as if nothing had happened, and she would sit up at any moment and smile to him and tell him that she is happy, and that the answer is one single word; the four letter word we all try to find in our lives, with the little magic fishing rod "I" in the front – and sometimes, quite sometimes, it's burning. The essence of life has fled her nostrils like a trail of smoke drifting into the darkness, mesmeric and shiny. *Like a goldfish*, Reigan whispers.

Normality bothers Reigan every time he visits the morgue. He expects drama where there is none. Waiting for him is only the silence; loss doesn't have much to say. All the bickering and algebra and tragic and suicidal film stars you either like or dislike, every bit of self-importance seems pointless. Death doesn't make one feel proud. In his department, though, loss is ever active and noisy, giving him the illusion that he could help. Help those who have lost the vital part of life: the mind. And Reigan *wants* to help. He recalls the day when he came down here to check on his dead father. For a moment he caught himself expecting a miracle, that his father would suddenly split open his eyes and speak in his good-natured but stern voice: "We can't afford to make mistakes, can we, my boy?" He wants hope where there is none. Hope. His drug.

Reigan points the thin pillar of penlight into one eyelid. The woman feels supple and soft, her body must have been brought in a minute ago. He examines her other eye. Pulling back the sheet to re-cover, his hand stops in midair. He stares at the stranger's face. Big lashes skirting the delicate, china-like eyeshells, a vivid mouth, and a pert nose which he can't resist to touch. He lays a finger to the perfect arch, a

touch so brief as if only to tap air. He never knew death could be so sensual and tender. All of a sudden he feels like crying –

But then, Reigan shivers. At first he thinks it was the arctic climate. He thinks he hallucinated, like the madmen he deals with daily. Schizophrenics who speak in word salad to warn him of the dead who are not dead, to caution him in low sound that Chairman Mao has returned to earth with horns and wings. Back home, Reigan tried to catch the image on Xuan paper. He had never thought of the Chairman in that quirky sort of way. In the margin of the grainy paper he wrote *Black angel*, like an ancient Chinese painting. Alice said it was his best artwork yet. She said tattered minds are original because they don't care they are ridiculous. She said she wanted to add the black angel to her upcoming autumn/winter line of fragrance and clothes. "Shakespearean" is the word Alice uses to define her midnight sweetheart chic made of ripped black satin and laces. Breezy laces, as if one is watching a dash of black ink taking flight in clear water. "'Give me my robe, put on my crown, I have immortal longings in me,' " she recited the other night in a loud and clear voice when Reigan came home from late shift to find her atop the blue velvet couch, naked from head to foot waiting for him. The impish queen threw back her curly, dazzling head, a series of short-breathed laughs made her breasts flutter like young birds. She seduced him, and he let himself be seduced. Reigan remembers he fell in love first with the laugh of the woman, then the woman. Love is like fishing, and you throw out your heart as bait –

...immortal longings... Of the dead. Of the living.

Reigan shivers. The light overhead trembles, and dims. He makes sure this is not some neurological trick. In front of him the white wall is slowly drenched in a vile liquid. He gawps at the bleeding hollow. From the overflowing, aqueous grave, small and large drops of cinnabar seep out, thick strings of blood pearls trickling down, washing off a freshly painted lotus field like a hellish summer shower. Hissings of a huge white-hot iron bar pressing through a warp in time, the

purest red, shot with torrid tar gold. Reigan listens to the faintest sound. Then, with a shudder, he realises it is a whispering voice. An evil corpse that jaws and swears just like in bad horror movies. *We are here to work; we don't run away*, he tries to convince himself. Riveted to the spot with terror, he keeps his eyes fixed on the wall losing so much blood volume. Black, scarlet pools gather around his feet, the smell of it makes him feel a little light-headed. Through the wobbly sound of murmurs, a giant pale expression reveals; a grin without a cat, vanishing into a blindingly radiant light. Somewhere, something stirred. Somewhere, something incredible is waiting to be known. From the bottom of black invisible water, Rorschach ink blots start to float to the surface of the large bare wall. Gaudy wings arise, gently unfurling from an indefinite glowing stupor, squirming and twisted, charred by their own intensity. A ghostly apparition thaws out to fill up the edges with new shades of phosphorescent and inky blue and green. Then, like an imploding star, the grisly, spangled shadow condenses to dotting zero. In the vacant field of a memory, Reigan discerns a familiar shape surfacing, shiny and mesmeric. *Death, like a goldfish. Or a goldfish, like death.*

The overhead light tubes brightens again. Rushing to the entrance, Reigan moves towards the adjacent room hidden in the gloom. The black fat padlock emerges, winking at him. Rusty iron, like blushing shame. With beads of moisture upon his white face, he hurriedly presses his ear against the wall oozing the last drops of liquid light. "Help me..." The voice fades in a frothy sound thick with swarms of air rising from the faltering, feeble lips. Somebody is drowning inside these corridor walls! Completely bewildered, his eyes pursue the strange orange halo swelling under his feet, his hands seeking to break the large butterfly twist latch on the sealed door. Reigan

never bothered to ask why this sickroom was forever kept empty and locked. “*Funny*,” he had merely thought. In fact this wouldn’t annoy him if something hadn’t happened this summer.



A curious fish stall

Every year death rates spike during the torturous Dog Days. Elderly persons especially don’t survive The Furnace – Nanking’s nickname for the season – or The Inferno – Alice’s brand name for Shanghai. The densely populated region of well over 20 million inhabitants depends on the service of one public hospital. However, after the critical term passed peacefully, an Indian summer phased in at once. Like the lingering ghost of a dead lover that wishes to clear up an old debt, for weeks the heat wave kept on, refusing its delayed leave. Within a month, the hospital is flooded by people of all age groups, debilitating migraine is the most significant shared symptom. As the mysterious epidemic flare across the metropolitan area, identical nervous disorders manifest on all victims without exception. Patients suffer from acute nausea, including heavy, foamy vomiting similar to epileptic seizures. A nine-year-old girl repeatedly banged her head during an attack. Unspeakably terrified of light, the child shouted and cried in a shrill, piercing voice. She insisted that she saw a malicious, winged creature swimming around her fairy nightlight, luring her with most appalling gestures. She screamed her head off in sheer, unadulterated panic

before passing out for 24 hours. During the night observation, Reigan listened to her jumbled grunts as if the little girl was possessed by a slighted banshee speaking with her sugar sweet tongue – which stupefied the doctor.

Suddenly, and without intent, his mind floats to the fisherman from the Yangtze.

On Friday on his way home, Reigan would stop at the fisherman's shop for a couple of loaches from the river Yangtze. "Brew a wonderful soup with tofu for your wife. She will be pregnant soon!" The fisherman has the most curious stall he has ever seen. In the fan-shape front of painted red latticework, a square is cut out for the fishes, alive and jumping, to be handed to clients. Every time Reigan feels he is peering into the old days, into an ancient painting he has grown part of, and that – Reigan has discovered – is how the fisherman keeps his fare fresh. "You ever saw food go bad on an ink painting, doctor?"

...immortal longings... Of the dead. Of the living

"Returning to earth is not the black angel but something more harmful and dangerous," the fisherman from the Yangtze proclaimed, raising an index finger covered with scales. "It is the return of the butterfly fish! This time, no-one is safe," the old man wheezed inexplicably.

"*The butterfly fish?*" Reigan heard himself repeat in a quiet but darker tone.

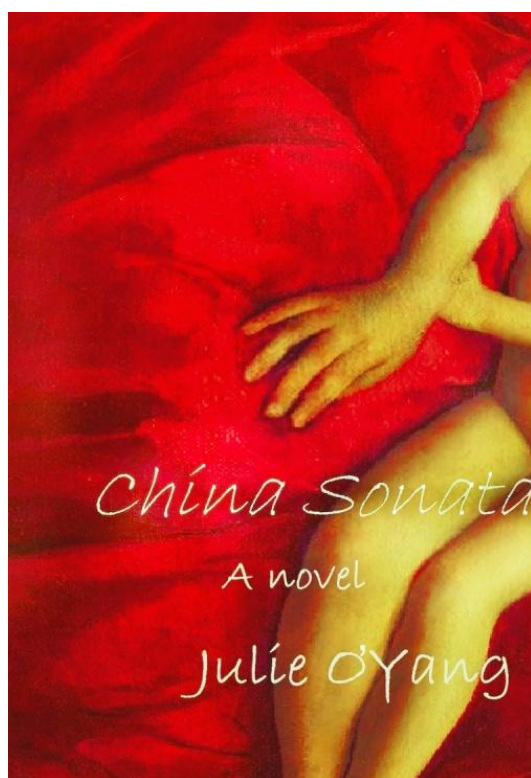
The fisherman narrowed his eyes on him, a crack running from ear to ear on the parched, lined face as if he had brought some euphoric news to all mankind. Reigan found himself at a loss for words: Fear was one of the things he learned as a child.

"Wo shi ai." **My name is LOVE: forgive me!**

Trapped inside the grieving silence, the reedy, flitting voice speaks again. Reigan gawks at the halo, outstretched, unfolding its liquefying fringes, and

mounting. A lucid shape rises to its breathtaking, final symmetry, burnt into his retina. Two mesmeric satin wings clenched around a warped body and her slender throat: pure light, fire and water.

>>>>>>>>> *Continue to next page*



An astonishing story of Linden, Kai and Lana, their hellish love triangle in the summer of 1989, shortly before the 4 June Massacre took place on the Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Twenty years later, Linden wakes up one morning to find Kai, carrying his cello, at the doorstep of her apartment in a North-European city. Obviously, her childhood love has hunted her down. As Kai enters her life again, together they open a hidden door in her wardrobe; the secret entrance leads to their heart. They peer into their shared past where there is a secret garden, “the smallest and most intimate of gardens”. The mystery around Lana’s death slowly drops veil...

China Sonata is available on Kindle in autumn 2012