

Excerpt from the Novella "Iron Butterfly"

by Richard Lutman

The Chinese philosopher Shooing Chou used the butterfly to illustrate more than one of his teachings. For example, in one story to describe the happiness which goes with marriage, he tells of a young student who, while pursuing a butterfly, unwittingly entered the garden of a retired magistrate. There he saw the daughter of the house. So enchanted was he by her grace and beauty that he left determined to make good and marry her. His zeal and hard work were rewarded for not only did he obtain everlasting happiness, he rose to high position.

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Did I knowingly choose to enter Gloria's garden and the warm, dark, hollow spaces she offers? Or is it something else that draws me? She dances by my fingertips, free to swirl against the wind like a fragile butterfly. If I sit quietly, as it were holding out my hand, she may come and perch, hover, dip down and light, with a flutter of wings. I imagine I have finally caught her, body quivering between my fingers, her silent screams disappear into the late day shadows of bamboo. I must take her with me as I find my way back to the moment of entry, to discover the path where everything went wrong, if that is what really happened.

I am no longer sure of these words and the shifting memories that are the record of my soul and my time on Centipede Island.

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The first time I came to Centipede Island five years ago was late at night from the detention center dock on the neighboring island of Lantau. The last of the ferries had stopped running for the

night and other arrangements had been made for me to be met and taken to the island.

The taxi driver didn't want to bring me there because he was afraid that one of the prisoners might escape and attack him. I gave him an extra twenty U.S. dollars, which satisfied him. The lights were on in the stark white buildings, but I didn't see anyone in the rooms. The main road was empty, very clean and well lighted. The driver dropped me off at the last building by a small sandy cove, quickly unloaded my bags and sped off as I made my way to the long cement pier that jutted out into the dark shimmer of water. I heard the throb of an engine and saw a boat, silhouetted by the center's lights, glide toward me. A figure ran forward and tossed a line around a piling, then hurriedly motioned for me to board. A shadow grabbed my bags. I jumped on, nearly losing my balance. No one said anything. I found a place to stand near the stern.

The man in the bow pushed off and the water churned as the boat backed gracefully away. Plankton glowed and flashed like tiny jewels on the surface of the night sea as they tumbled eerily in the wake of the launch.

Leaning over the side, it seemed to me that I was looking down into an endless pit. I stepped back into the shadows and felt my stomach knot. I wondered what lay ahead of me on the island I had never heard of before, and about Leighton its overseer.

The launch picked up speed and passed several island villages, their lights reflecting off the flat black sea. Moths and stray butterflies, all doomed because they had strayed too far from land, flickered across the deck and battered themselves against the launch's lights.

One of the crewmen pointed and I saw the dark irregular mass of Centipede Island loom ahead. At once both my future and my past seemed to merge. Whether or not I'd consciously meant for this to happen, this would be the place where I'd make my stand.

Perhaps I could save the island and myself from a lifetime filled with failures and disappointments. I hadn't realized until now

as the boat thrust away from the pier how much was to be pinned on the wings of butterflies.

The launch slowed as it passed the marble statue of a Chinese woman in flowing robes that guarded the entrance of the small, rocky harbor. A large white porcelain vase full of joss sticks had been placed at the statue's feet. In an island legend the statue was heard singing in a March fog to warn a passing fishing boat of the rocks ahead. One night after I'd arrived, Leighton told me he tried to record the strange moaning sounds that came from the harbor, but the tape machine jammed. He never attempted the taping again.

