

First Lives

by Wah-Ming Chang

There are some, I am told, who never see the dead, though I am as yet unable to believe it. We go to sleep with them as with an ex-lover, for familiar, wordless embrace, and when we wake the parting is unhurried, a gradual readjustment towards morning. Myself, I admit that in my first days in the city I was no more attuned to them than the blind is to a mirror, yet over the course of several weeks I've come to absorb, like a mirror, without thought or comment, the weight of Mule's departed.

Their habit of kneeling before me is an embarrassing display of prayer, or of supplication—I can't tell the distinction between their offer of relief and the seeking of it, overwhelmed by the nauseating sensation of stepping into a void whenever my feet pass through their figures. They cup their hands to their mouths, a gesture made more curious for the workings of their throats as though they are chewing and swallowing air. Until this morning, I was not clear on why this gesture seemed so suited to them; when I came across an illustration of a band of Buddhist monks called the *hui he shang* in Professor Yu's book of ancient folk tales, I was electrified. The *hui he shang* have the ability to subsist on nothing but air and water during times of distress. That the figures who accost me daily resemble these vigorous monks cannot be coincidence—the monks are literally the “gray monks”—and that I finally recognize them, that I've discovered the connection between themselves and me, is illuminating. It is a necessary goal, then, for them to seek out nourishment in the air. Indeed the air in Mule City has a thick, oppressive quality. We are a half mile from the river, and with the sediments being disturbed by preparations for the dam, with various mechanisms of cranes, shovels, and scaffolding clouding the horizon, my patients (as I now think of them) suffocate in this contaminated air. I see their suffering constantly. Here, they press hands to mouths not to eat the air but to keep from eating it, and because of this starvation, they are dying.

The saying goes, *If not me, then somebody else*. Our duties towards man and spirit must remain constant, our resolve, steadfast. Only our bodies are subject to change, from new skin to old, from a perspective of clarity to one of fog, only the corporeal embodiments with which these duties are performed can be altered—but when breath is no longer needed after our bodies break, what remains is the insubstantial essence of us who were mere things, and the essence, mutated into another form perhaps but no less sentient, needs looking after. *If not me, then somebody else*. My experiences from the past few weeks in this city, whose quiet yet energetic design once lured monks and monkeys alike to its riverbanks, has forced me to emend the saying: *If not me, then surely me*.

When I was a year old, my father pulled our family up the side of Golden-Haired Mountain, a region known for its mudslides that ran in yellow strands into the river, and at the peak, he sat us down in a gazebo and waited for rescue from the typhoon that was rounding out the southeast. We waited four days, during which the three children, hungry but not yet comprehending our fate, would suck rainwater from grass blades. We did not know that we were already dead, because the water sustained us, kept the weight of our bodies steady. It was the most believable of illusions. When the ground split open beneath us on the fifth day of the storm, my mother and my two brothers clung to one side of the divide, to the melting mud, while the man who'd led them there watched helplessly from the other side, clutching the third son, me, safe, alive, and alive for many more years afterward. The second life that he created in the unfamiliar landscape of Mule City had been a diminished one, made fussy and distracted by having to raise me. Having always sensed the depth of his self-lacerations, I never thought to ask him about his past, not even about the life he'd shared with my mother before I'd been born. But on the day he died, he finally relieved himself of guilt. We had an unusually frank discussion that morning—about our week on the mountain, about how many of the last pills to feed him, about my future after

university. Today I think about this conversation every time I help my patients, every time one comes limping toward me with its hands cupped to its mouth or pressed together in prayer. Their first lives—and their second, their third, and so on—require firm guidance. To deny the dead, I repeat daily, is to deny life itself.

